**ART REVIEW**

‘Paint the Revolution’ Offers Mexican Muralist Muscle and Delicate Beauty



Diego Rivera’s “Liberation of the Peon” (1931), in “Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950,” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Credit2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art

**By**[**Holland Cotter**](http://www.nytimes.com/by/holland-cotter)

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PHILADELPHIA — Politics or beauty? Take your choice. Conventional wisdom says they don’t mix. But [“Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950”](http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/840.html) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art argues, with reservations, otherwise. The show is the first all-out attempt in the United States in seven decades to grapple with the contradictions of early-20th-century Mexican political art. (The last one was also at this museum.) It has plenty of pumped muralist muscle — all those clenched fists — but offsets it with pictures as pretty as valentines.

Organized with the [Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City](http://museopalaciodebellasartes.gob.mx/), where it will travel in February, the show focuses on pioneers of the Mexican movement for artistic nationalism, following the timeline of revolutionary events. In 1911, the country’s longtime president, Porfirio Díaz, was chased out of office. He had kept peace for decades by pampering the elite, enriching the army, and treating the poor, which meant practically everyone else, like dirt. Finally, dirt said no, and everything changed, including art.



Juan O’Gorman’s painting “Mexico City” (1949).Credit2016 Juan O’Gorman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via SOMAAP, Mexico City; Acervo Conaculta-INBA, Museo de Arte Moderno

The initial changes look mild. Under Díaz, European cultural taste prevailed, and after he was gone it still did for awhile, though with infusions of Mexican flavor, mexicanidad. You see it in soft-textured paintings of peasants by [Saturnino Herrán](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/?p=24519" \o "" \t "_blank) and the young [David Alfaro Siqueiros](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/results.html?searchTxt=&bSuggest=1&searchNameID=15952) from around 1913, though the pictures give no hint of the violence tearing the country apart as rebel leaders like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa fought for control of it.

Soon, however, art did reflect events. In 1914, [Francisco Goitia](http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1068-francisco-goitia-a-product-of-his-times) was turning out horror-show scenes of atrocities that he said he had seen on battlefields. [José Clemente Orozco](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/results.html?searchTxt=&bSuggest=1&searchNameID=17072) tried to outdo Goya in grotesque newspaper cartoons. [Diego Rivera](http://www.diegorivera.org/) weighed in, long-distance, from Paris, with Mexican-accented Cubism. And [Gerardo Murillo](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/results.html?results=9&searchTxt=&searchNameID=14914&searchClassID=&provenance=0&audio=0&searchOrigin=&page=1&action=post), the avant-gardist firebrand from the Díaz years who called himself Dr. Atl, took a dramatic nationalist stand with a self-portrait in which his head and an image of Mexico’s most active volcano merg

By 1921, the carnage had pretty much stopped. It was time to mop up and organize, to turn revolution from a passing event into an institution. Art was very much part of the plan. Mural painting, billboard-big and bold, was designated the official art form. And three artist-workers — [Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/art-between-wars/latin-american-modernism1/a/mexican-muralism-los-tres-grandes-david-alfaro-siqueiros-diego-rivera-and-jos-clemente-orozco) (back from Paris that year) — were its stars.



Frida Kahlo’s “Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States” (1932).Credit2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Colección Maria y Manuel Reyero, New York

For many people, they *are*Mexican modernism: three giants calling from peak to peak. As befits that status, they take up a lot of space in this show, in paintings, drawings and prints. But aside from a pair of portable Rivera murals, and some wall reliefs by Siqueiros, the architecturally scaled art for which they’re famed is here only as digital projections. No surprise. The originals are in Mexico City and elsewhere, and even in reproduction their browbeating dynamic comes through. They’re political church art, designed to overpower, to look superhuman, to confuse you into believing their vision. They’ve shouldered out of the history books almost all other art from the time.

But there was other art. In 1921, the same year Rivera returned to claim a local-boy crown, the Mexican government initiated a countrywide art education program for primary schools. Designed by the artist and art historian [Adolfo Best Maugard](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/238000.html?mulR=1996619260%7C18), the hands-on method blended elements of European-style abstraction and indigenous art, ancient and new.

Best Maugard had studied ethnographic artifacts with the German anthropologist Franz Boas. And he based his own teaching on linear motifs — squiggles, circles and so on — derived from pre-Columbian pottery shards. From those primordial forms, children of any cultural background or education level could compose new images of any kind — Best Maugard encouraged fantasy — and on a personal scale. They could make, from very ancient sources, a modernism of their own.

There’s a 1922 self-portrait painting of Best Maugard in the show. Slender and fine-boned, he’s dressed in a tweed suit, his mustache closely trimmed. He holds a pen loosely in one languid hand. His personal style is exactly the opposite of Rivera’s unbuttoned, space-hogging he-man type. So is his art. In the self-portrait, he poses before a cityscape that looks like a stack of candy boxes. An earlier painting of a dancing woman is equal parts Mexican folk art, Orientalist kitsch and fashion magazine. It’s Pattern and Decoration before its time. He painted as if the Mexican Revolution hadn’t happened, or as if the muralist version of it never had.

In 1924, state support of his teaching method stopped. It’s easy to imagine a group of government evaluators taking a look at the pictorial delicacies emerging from grade-school classrooms and thinking: “Is this the way we want a national art to go?” Yet by that time Best Maugard’s cosmopolitan, ideologically subtle approach to revolutionary art had already spurred others to give mural painting some competition.

Again in 1921, that very happening year, the poet [Manuel Maples Arce](http://www.uglyducklingpresse.org/archive/online-reading-old/city-by-manuel-maples-arce/)plastered Mexico City with broadsheets announcing the birth of a cultural movement. Inspired by European Dada and Futurism, it rejected a nationalist art based on images of peasants and factory workers in favor of one fueled by urban noise and speed. The name he gave the movement, Estridentismo, or Stridentism, captures its polemical tone, although much of the urban imagery it produced is oddly dark and drab.

Concurrent with this avant-gardist impulse ran another, which took its name from a journal called Contemporáneos. Less a movement than a network of like-minded artists and writers, it espoused the view that art was an end in itself and shouldn’t be turned to political purposes. The group was reviled by muralists and Stridentists alike as counterrevolutionary, and the attacks got personal.

One highly visible Contemporáneos member, the writer [Salvador Novo](https://bookpeopleblog.wordpress.com/2014/04/02/the-erotic-sonnets-of-salvador-novo/), was an out gay man, rare at the time. At least two of its leading painters, Abraham Ángel and Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, were lovers. Female artists, including the wonderful [María Izquierdo](https://www.artsy.net/artwork/maria-izquierdo-our-lady-of-sorrows), were integral to the network. Critics chose sexual politics as a line of attack. A painting titled [“The Paranoids”](https://www.google.com/search?q=%E2%80%9CThe+Paranoids%E2%80%9D+ruiz+painter&biw=1430&bih=746&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjxurTE7PjPAhUI5iYKHSGfAKQQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=NwUD6y23p5C_yM%3A)by Antonio Ruiz depicted Contemporáneos males as limp, rubber-legged dandies. Rivera published a widely read piece titled “Arte Puro, Puros Maricones” — “Pure Art, Pure Faggots” — and repeated the slur in public talks.

In short, the world of modernist political art in Mexico, however inclusive in theory, was something of a shark tank. Individual weirdnesses arose. Dr. Atl, a cultural force before the revolution’s start, ended up peddling Nietzschean schemes of superman rule from the top. As as you walk through the show, the beat of ideological purposefulness grows numbing. You start to search for relief.

And you find it: in Izquierdo’s religious still lifes, unafraid of devotion; in Juan Soriano’s mortuary painting of a dead child surrounded by a choir of praying hands; in Rodríguez Lozano’s fresco of what could well be a same-sex Pietà (Ángel, his partner, had died at 19); in Juan O’Gorman’s astonishingly complex view-within-nested-view of Mexico City; and in[Rufino Tamayo](http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/results.html?searchTxt=&bSuggest=1&searchNameID=15708)’s mural-size 1952 “Homage to the Indian Race,” with its single, dark, sculptural figure presiding over a basket of unearthly, blush-red blooms.

And there’s Frida Kahlo. No one really looked at her till the 1980s; then everyone did and she disappeared into cliché. She’s amazing, worth every bit of attention she gets here.

There are five pictures by her in the show, organized by Matthew Affron and Mark A. Castro of the Philadelphia Museum; Dafne Cruz Porchini, of the Colegio de México; and Renato González Mello of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (both in Mexico City). The earliest, a 1926 self-portrait as a youthful sweetheart, is conventional. A smaller one from 1932, [“Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States,”](http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/840.html)is not.

She stands balanced on a wall between two hard zones: a death-metal realm of surveillance lights, factories and progress on one side, and an organic vista of ancient decay and tropical flowers on the other. It’s clear which she prefers. She’s made her choice; it was easy; she doesn’t look worried at all. As if to celebrate, she holds a cigarette in one hand, a little Mexican flag in the other, and has put on elbow-length white gloves and one of the most beautiful pink flounced dresses in the world.

***Correction:****Oct. 27, 2016*

*An earlier version of this article misstated the length of time since there has been an art show in the United States that has grappled with the contradictions of early-20th-century Mexican political art. It has been seven decades, not four. An earlier version of a picture caption misidentified the work “Mexico City” by Juan O’Gorman. It is a painting, not a projection of a mural.*

“Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950” continues through Jan. 8 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; 215-763-8100;[philamuseum.org](http://philamuseum.org).

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