

Orozco and the Mestizaje Identity

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Considered by many historians to be the most important event of Mexican history succeeding the country's independence, the Mexican Revolution spurred radical social, political, and cultural upheaval that would change the nation's interpretation of its identity to the present day. Following the revolution's end, in 1921, Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos was appointed by recently elected president Álvaro Obregón as the head of the newly established Secretariat of Public Education, rendering him responsible for all educational content and standards, including the manners in which Mexico's history would be documented and presented to the public in academic settings. As the interpretation of the Mexican identity was brought into question following the events of the revolution, Vasconcelos asserted the conception of an ideal "cosmic" man, a patriotic mestizo who transcends the idea of racial division through possession of both Spanish and Indigenous ancestry and culture, as the answer to this crucial issue, and the embodiment of cultural *mestisaje*. His notion of the Mexican future was very positive, believing in a time soon to occur in which Latin America, having merged its various ethnicities into a single "cosmic race", would become a world power, and issues of social inequality and corruption would be eradicated.¹ As part of his program to promote this brand of cultural nationalism, visual artists Diego Riviera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco were hired to create didactic mural work that would express these ideas to all members of the public, literate and illiterate alike. However, making the unusual decision to permit the artists to direct their work and themes as they saw appropriate without great supervision or regulation, the outcome of the work did not typically follow his intended vision, and the interpretations varied

¹ Franco, Jean. *The modern culture of Latin America: society and the artist*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

intensely among the three artists.² These artists become publicly known as *Los Tres Grandes* (“The Big Three”), and continued to produce murals for three years until Vasconcelos resigned from his position in 1924. Though the works were not what Vasconcelos had expected, the question of which artists’ work most accurately expressed the authentic essence of *mestisaje* in relation to post-revolutionary culture that was present in Mexico is a discussion topic that still interests and divides art historians in the present day.

It is my assertion that, out of *Los Tres Grandes*, the work of José Clemente Orozco most strongly embodies cultural *Mestizaje* of post-revolutionary Mexico because the content of his work most overtly reflects the complex internal struggle that *mestizo* individuals were experiencing at this time, attempting to reconcile the Indigenous and European aspects of their ethnic identity whilst simultaneously living in a time and society in which they were continuously being told varying and sometimes contradicting messages about their mixed heritage. Though Vasconcelos withheld the steadfast belief that future improvement would soon come as result of harmonious blending of Indigenous and Spanish heritages, his vision of the representation of *mestisaje* did not seek to address truths of the time that many aspects of society still ran on systems of racial division, acculturation practices, and class, despite the seemingly “liberating” values that had sought popularity as a result of the Mexican Revolution. Despite the government’s encouragement of *Indegenismo*, an official attitude of praising and fostering native values that took form in the standardized presence of Pre-Columbian history in history textbooks for schools, and the restoration of many Aztec artifacts into museums, Indigenous and *Mestizo* individuals, the majority of which followed some form of Indigenous living practice in their day-

² Ades, Dawn, and Guy Brett. "The Mexican Mural Movement." In *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, 151-79. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

to-day life, as during Spanish rule, were, in many aspects of life, still expected to conform with European practices and values. Further contradiction came in the form of Vasconcelos' plan to "assimilate" and "civilize" Indigenous individuals by placing them into state-run schools, under an official statement to remove illiteracy³. Still recovering from the social, and even at times, economic costs of colonial rule exploitation and oppression, the Mestizo individual, facing their present, was unsure how to self-identify when told to embrace the duality of their heritage, while simultaneously feeling pressure from their interactions in everyday life to absorb into one culture, likely that of the European. Orozco expresses this feeling strongly in his 1922 work, "Absorbing the Indian", sometimes referred to as "The Franciscan pitying the Indian." At first glance, the Franciscan monk appears to be holding the malnourished Aztec in an embrace, as though to comfort him. But on closer inspection, one can see their lips touching, and the hollowness of the Aztecs' expression, and the viewer realizes that the monk is actually absorbing the nourishment from the Aztec's body. He is being killed in the guise of comfort from the European, not unlike what a Mestizo individual in 1920s Mexico is likely to have felt more than once in their life. Furthermore, on the ceiling above is a cross, a symbol of European spirituality, with a snake, a symbol of Aztec worship. wrapped on one plank just below the intersections. The cross is slanted in a diagonal direction following that of the monk's kneel, and the snake appears to grip tightly around it, almost as if to fight against the object's push. This symbol of struggle between the European and the Indigenous individual is subtly inserted, but evident and without apology, or romanticization at the notion of conquest.

³ Ades, Dawn, and Guy Brett. "The Mexican Mural Movement." In *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, 151-79. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

The idealization of the Mestisaje having been placed at forefront of national culture by Vasconcelos, mestizo individuals were also naturally provoked into looking at the events of their history in the attempt to understand their identity. Confusion in this regard is also existent, and Orozco addresses this in “Cortez and Malinche”, painted in 1926. Malinche, the woman who was given to Cortez as his guide and servant upon his arrival to the Americas, has endured through history at times as the “traitor” of Mexico, and at other times the “mother of the Mestisaje”⁴, having produced what has been described through written and oral tradition as the parent of first Mestizo child conceived with her conqueror and owner, Hernan Cortez. In Orozco’s work, the pair sit side by side, almost appearing as though they are sitting for a portrait as king and queen with a decorative black cloth framing over their heads. The nudity of the subjects seems to suggest a comparison of the pair to Adam and Eve, being the original parents of the Mestizos. The somber, earth tone colour palette suggests a grim situation, and the dead body below Cortez’ foot indicates that bloodshed has recently occurred. Malinche appears to sit passively, submitting to her conqueror who hold one of her hands with his right in a manner that could suggest affection or familiarity, while he uses his other to try to cover her body, almost as if to communicate to her to remain still, or be reduced in visual importance in the image. Orozco expresses the roots of the Mestizo identity to have come from a union that was likely not consensual, and though some may try to romanticize the idea, with Cortez’ hand in Malinche’s, one should not be easily convinced of this, as Cortez is still more explicitly the one controlling

⁴ Taylor, Diana. "Memory as Cultural Practice." In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2003.

Malinche, with whom Orozco is sympathetic. The scene evokes discomfort, and above all, the complex layers with which this pair is regarded in history.

In essence, Vasconcelos' attempt to transform the meaning and attitude towards the notion of Mestisaje ultimately did not hold enough depth or description to resonate with a broader population, something that can also be evidenced through how all three hired artists interpreted his ideas decidedly different to what he expected. Orozco evidently viewed Vasconcelos ideas as overly romanticized, and looking to educate without substance, he produced the most work depicting violent events in a somber, rather than valorous regard compared to the other two members of Los Tres Grandes. The didactic nature of Orozco's work does not seek to convince the mestizo of a promised future in which all problems are solved by vague allegories of industrial and spiritual entities. Acknowledging the darkness of the past and the present is an important step towards acknowledging, and respecting the mestizo and the Indigenous people in regards to their identity, because their identity, regardless of official patronage or commentary regarding their culture, can never truly be theirs until there is an awareness that they have, and continue to suffer. Believing that art should, above all, be experienced more than explained⁵, in his work, Orozco expresses the complexity of the way in which Latin American history is presented, while seeking to simultaneously encourage the viewer to decide what Mestisaje means to them within all the complexity that forms their identity.

⁵ Orozco, José Clemente. *Orozco "Explains"*. August 1940: Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, 1940.

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