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Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945

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Exhibition schedule: Whitney Museum of American Art, February 17, 2020–January 31, 2021

Curated by: Barbara Haskell, with Marcela Guerrero, Sarah Humphreville, and Alana Hernandez

Exhibition catalogue: Barbara Haskell, ed., *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, exh. cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Yale University Press, 2020. 256 pp.; 139 color and 57 b/w illus., including two gatefolds. Cloth: \$65.00 (ISBN: 9780300246698)

For more than a generation, since the arrival of former director David Ross and curator Elisabeth Sussman in 1991, the Whitney Museum of American Art has been trying to get Mexico in through the back door.¹ This was never easy, for powerful forces—historical, curatorial, and financial—fought to preserve the museum’s focus on the United States at a time when curators, academics, and collectors were increasingly redefining America as a hemispheric instead of a nationalist category, and as the Museum of Modern Art, El Museo del Barrio, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and other New York institutions were dedicating greater attention to Latin American (and Latinx) art. Many scholars and artists—most famously, Alfredo Jaar—have dealt with the problem of restricting the term “America” to describe only the United States, but the Whitney Museum of American Art has remained rather invested in policing boundaries, albeit without the reactionary xenophobia of that infamous red baseball cap.²

It ultimately took Barbara Haskell—one of the most accomplished and powerful of the Whitney’s curators, backed by a strong circle of deep-pocketed patrons and collectors—over a decade to bring the current exhibition, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, to fruition. (The exhibition opened on February 17, 2020, for a three-month run but then went into lockdown along with the rest of the city; the New York presentation was extended, but the tour to the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio was canceled). In the foreword in the catalogue, Whitney director Adam Weinberg thanks Haskell “for letting it marinate, knowing that its time, the right time, would come” (10). Indeed, *Vida Americana* reflects a historical moment when transnational and transcultural dialogues have become urgent, when museum audiences and their expectations have shifted, and when the field of “American” art is no longer defined by the uncritical adulation of locally born white-identified male artists, from John Singleton Copley to Donald Judd.

Haskell’s contention that Mexican muralism was more important than French modernism to the development of art in the United States from the mid-1920s through the Second World War is perhaps overly reliant on the anti-formalist bias of certain 1930s artists and critics, and it fails to acknowledge that Parisian ideas lurked behind a lot of modern Mexican art (consider, for example, the impact of the *retour à l’ordre* on Diego Rivera).³ Nevertheless, at a time of reinforced borders and immigration controversies, this important project joins a broad scholarly effort to correct the Eurocentric narratives that have long constrained the histories of art and culture in the United States.

Vida Americana includes around two hundred works—mainly paintings, drawings, prints, and a few fresco panels—by sixty artists, about a quarter of them Mexican, generously installed in a series of galleries painted a crisp white. Relatively open divisions allow the galleries to be experienced in varying orders; the following overview is based on a visit in late February, as well as an in-house checklist (the catalogue does not indicate which of the objects illustrated were included in the show).⁴ The strongest sections focus on the specific impact of the most prominent Mexican muralists, all of whom famously worked in the United States: José Clemente Orozco (1927–34, 1940), Rivera (1930–33, 1940), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1932, 1936). After an introductory gallery focused solely on Mexico that will be discussed further, the exhibition follows these muralists’ temporal and territorial trajectories.

The first artist to leave Mexico for the United States was Orozco, and “Orozco on the Coasts” shows how his expressionistic, myth-busting *Prometheus* at Pomona College (1930), and subsequent murals at the New School for Social Research and Dartmouth College, inspired Jackson Pollock as well as Charles White and Jacob Lawrence.⁵ Siqueiros trailed both Orozco and Rivera, and the section “Siqueiros in Los Angeles” features a large, although not life-size, black-and-white photo mural of his *Tropical America* (1932) in Los Angeles, a work that in both scale and iconography inspired later Chicano muralists—excluded by the narrow temporal parameters of the exhibition—far more than it did Siqueiros’s contemporaries in Los Angeles (fig. 1).⁶ The exhibition here unites dynamic tondos by Philip Guston and Fletcher Martin, although these works actually reveal greater debts to Orozco, if not to Renaissance and Baroque masters.



Fig. 1. Installation view with photoreproduction of David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *America Tropical* and Benton’s *American Historical Epic*, *Vida Americana*, Whitney Museum, February 26, 2020. Photo by author

A third section, “Epic Histories,” explores the impact of Mexican murals depicting historical epics (especially Rivera’s in Mexico City’s National Palace and Orozco’s at Dartmouth)—known firsthand by few, and in reproduction by many—on Aaron Douglas, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff, among others. Unfortunately, the inclusion of spectacular panels from Thomas Hart Benton’s *American Historical Epic* (1924–27; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art) overwhelms a few vintage chromolithographs documenting how Rivera treated Mexico’s own epics. It also muddies the historical waters, since Benton’s little-seen early cycle, as scholars have shown, emerged from local sources: the parallel here merits a more sustained and complicated comparison, but not because of influence—in either direction. The careers of Rivera and Benton instead followed much the same arc, from avant-garde abstraction through popular acclaim to late-in-life hyperbole; they grappled independently with issues of race, identity, history, and the tensions between rural folkways and modern urban life at a time of rapid social change.

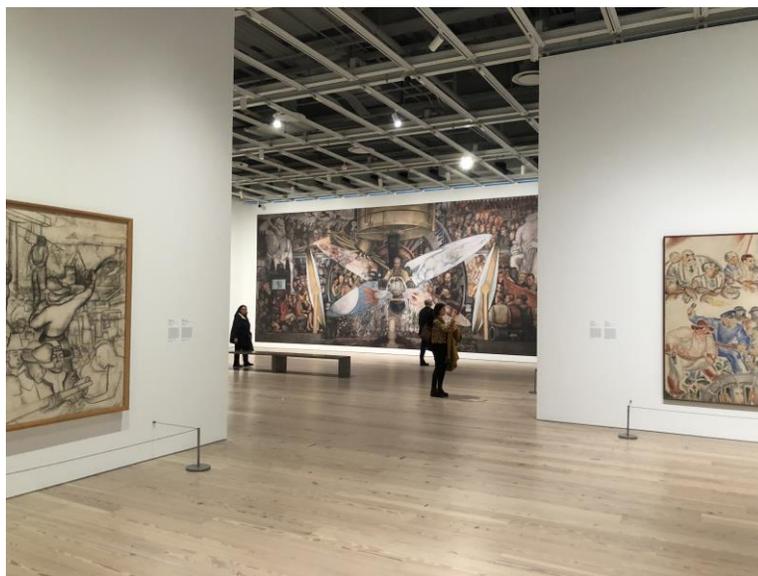


Fig. 2. Installation view with works by Diego Rivera and Hugo Gellert, *Vida Americana*, Whitney Museum, February 26, 2020. Photo by author

“Rivera and the New Deal” is one of the visually strongest sections, presenting Rivera’s mural cycle at the Detroit Institute of Arts (1932–33) as a prelude to the vast number of federally sponsored murals in the United States (many executed on canvas rather than in fresco) depicting muscular workers and busy factories, here principally documented in the form of sketches. That argument is hardly new to students of the period, since George Biddle’s 1933 letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt advocating a federally sponsored artistic renaissance based on the Mexican model is among the most frequently quoted documents in the history of US art. The New Deal muralists included in this section had varying degrees of contact with Rivera: while Ben Shahn, Emmy Lou Packard, and others did work as his assistants, others just watched: none formally studied under him, as one wall text suggests.⁷ The next section, “Art as Political Activism,” spans two galleries. The first again champions Rivera, connecting his two New York City projects—the censored Rockefeller Center mural and his dispersed and partly destroyed *Portrait of America* cycle (both 1933)⁸—to mural sketches and paintings showing workers under assault, martyred, or demanding change, by some of the most radical US artists of the day, including Shahn, of course, but also Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, Joe Jones, Anton Refrigier, and Harry Sternberg (fig. 2).

The second places Orozco and Siqueiros alongside Seymour Fogel, Eitarō Ishigaki, Hideo Benjamin Noda, and Mitchell Siporin. Here the exhibition’s focus is weaker, for while it is true that many of these artists explicitly acknowledged the Mexican model, they were equally if not more dependent on the legacy of nineteenth-century realism, the Ashcan School, and cartoonists in *The Masses*; on Communist Party rhetoric and guidelines; and on the specter of Soviet socialist realism. The latter debt is particularly clear in Ishigaki’s *Soldiers of the People’s Front* (c. 1936–37; Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, Japan), which looks like it was painted in Moscow rather than New York or Mexico.

The final gallery is devoted to “Siqueiros and the Experimental Workshop,” mainly to highlight the fact that in 1936, Jackson Pollock, that intractable star of postwar painting, was one of several artists captivated by Siqueiros’s technical experiments (using enamels, dripping, and painting on the floor), made in a New York apartment at the service of the Communist Party USA. The enthusiasm with which this discovery was embraced by the initial reviews of *Vida Americana* has been perplexing, if not outright frustrating, for those of us who have long been aware of the New York School’s (more complicated) Mexican roots—a history thoroughly researched by Laurance P. Hurlburt and addressed in exhibitions, among them Jürgen Harten’s *Siqueiros/Pollock; Pollock/Siqueiros* (1995).⁹

Across all these sections, Haskell and her team have assembled an extraordinary range of loans that enrich and enliven the narrative, doing justice to the Mexican protagonists while redirecting attention to radical but less familiar figurative artists such as Gellert and Ishigaki, until now principally known only to specialists in the 1930s and New Deal art. (The equal weight given to African American and Asian American artists throughout the exhibition is one of its finest achievements; the absence of Mexican Americans is one of its greatest lacunae.¹⁰) Less successful are the reproductions of site-specific murals, shown in inconsistent scales and using a hodgepodge of methods, including architectural models, video projections, vinyl replicas, and interactive tablets. The bigger problem, upon which I hope others might expand, is what is lost when complex creative networks are reduced to binary and unidirectional relationships: in other words, when parallel, overlapping, and messy cross-cultural exchanges are pigeonholed into matters of influence. Mexican muralism itself was not a monolithic force led by three men (as the exhibition implies), but a complex web of individual artistic practices shaped by global cultural forces.¹¹ Nor can Mexican muralism be accurately said to have remade American art in general, despite its importance to its more radical and public-oriented wing, not least because realism had already established such deep roots in the United States. In addition, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros had little or no formal or technical impact on some of the most prominent US painters of this period, whether they traveled south of the border (Milton Avery, Edward Hopper) or not (Arthur Dove, Grant Wood). Indeed, by focusing exclusively on the so-called *tres grandes*, the show necessarily elides other artists resident in Mexico—most importantly the renegade Surrealist Wolfgang Paalen—who also shaped the course of art in the United States.

Some degree of streamlining is inherent to any museum exhibition (and even more, to its press release) and necessary in the interest of telling a compelling story. But too much ends up being misleading. The large opening section (“Romantic Nationalism and the Mexican Revolution”) seeks to highlight two aspects of Mexico that triggered interest in the United States in the 1920s: timeless folk culture and radical political transformation. Yet prominent features here—the assemblage of greatest hits, the electric pink entrance wall (à la Luis

Barragán; fig. 3), the exoticizing travelogue filmed in Tehuantepec in the early 1940s, and the images of Emiliano Zapata—are all throwbacks to earlier but now superseded cultural clichés that ignore revisionist scholarship. Several of the works included in this section—for example, paintings by Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo, an undated photograph by Lola Álvarez Bravo—are unrelated even to the specific theme of this opening section, while the strained pairing of Maria Izquierdo’s *My Nieces* (1940; Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City) with Everett Gee Jackson’s *Woman with Cactus* (1925; private collection) relies on nothing more than similar vegetation in the background. Yes, that is how Mexico and its art were often framed at the time, but that is not how they should be presented at this time.¹²



Fig. 3. Entrance wall to *Vida Americana*, Whitney Museum, with Diego Rivera’s *Dance in Tehuantepec* (1928; Collection of Eduardo F. Costantini, Buenos Aires), February 26, 2020. Photo by author

The fulsome response to *Vida Americana* in both mass media and social media, in Mexico as well as the United States, reflects an understandable enthusiasm that the leading museum of “American” art has finally acknowledged the importance of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros.¹³ And as the first major exhibition to focus specifically on how these three muralists inspired artistic practice in the United States, *Vida Americana* and its catalogue, with compelling and focused essays by an international array of scholars, will become an essential reference, despite its surprising lack of a bibliography. Scholars, however, have cause to be skeptical of the exhibition’s claim to be revolutionary. Decades of research on both sides of the border have laid considerable stress on interwar artistic exchange between Mexico and the United States, including arguments—such as that of Stephen Polcari on the relationship between Orozco and Pollock—that have been more or less directly transferred to the galleries of *Vida Americana*.¹⁴ In fact, the Whitney show is but the latest of several special exhibitions in New York City (not to mention the Getty Foundation’s sprawling 2017 initiative, *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*) to address these questions, including *In the Spirit of Resistance: African American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (Studio Museum in Harlem, 1996), *Nexus-New York: Latin American Artists in the Modern Metropolis* (El Museo del Barrio, 2009), and *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA, 2011). Indeed, when the two leading textbooks of art in the United States have already embraced the Mexican contribution to US art of this period, it is far-

fetched to declare, as does the opening wall label of the exhibition that *Vida Americana* “rewrites art history.”¹⁵ Or maybe it does, for provincial New Yorkers.

Paradoxically, then, the overhyping of *Vida Americana* reinforces a view of the Whitney Museum as an awakened dinosaur, belatedly contesting a parochial definition of American art at a time when broadly inclusive displays of the arts of the Americas have become the norm instead of the exception. Still, opinion leader that it is, the Whitney has done a real service by drawing wider public attention to these rich hemispheric networks, much as The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s landmark exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* (1990), although following an already outdated model, redirected attention more generally to Mexican art. If *Vida Americana* promotes greater debate about how and why blinkered narratives of US art persisted for so long, if it encourages greater participation of Mexican and Latinx scholars and curators in shaping new narratives and transforming permanent collections, and if it challenges the Whitney Museum to rethink its definition of America, it will have served an important purpose.

Notes

¹ Sussman, famous for her radical Whitney Biennial of 1993, had cocurated *El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart* with the late Olivier Debrouse and Matthew Teitelbaum (now director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston just before leaving for New York, but she soon found that equally transnational projects would be harder to realize at the Whitney Museum. I would like to thank Rebecca Bedell, Maria Castro, Mary Coffey, Jeffrey Collins, and Jennifer Josten for their insightful comments on this review.

² I survey some of the issues and literature in “Art_Latin_America: Filling the Gaps,” in *Art_Latin_America: Beyond the Survey*, exh. cat., ed. James Oles (Wellesley, MA: Davis Museum, Wellesley College, 2019), 8–23.

³ Haskell’s thesis partly rests on critics such as Charmion von Wiegand, who declared that Mexican artists had “a more creative influence in American painting than the modernist French masters”; see Charmion von Wiegand, “Mural Painting in America,” *Yale Review* 23, no. 4 (June 1934): 790–91, 799; cited in Barbara Haskell, “América: Mexican Muralism and Art in the United States, 1925–1945,” in *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, exh. cat., ed. Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Yale University Press, 2020), 14. One must take such period opinions with some skepticism, shaped as they are by leftist disdain for art-for-art’s sake, especially during the Great Depression.

⁴ I thank Marcela Guerrero for providing me with a copy of the final (February 10, 2020) exhibition checklist. Scholars should be aware that some of the works reproduced as catalogue plates were not exhibited, while others illustrated as complementary figures were. The sequencing of images in the book lacks the sharp curatorial eye evident in the exhibition itself.

⁵ The Whitney has traveled light years from the time (over a decade ago, at least) I noticed that a wall label in the old Breuer building credited Gabriel [sic] Orozco for inspiring a work by Jacob Lawrence in the permanent collection. I do not jest.

⁶ The mural was whitewashed soon after its completion and was restored by the Getty Conservation Institute between 1988 and 2012; however, only a pale shadow of it remains today.

⁷ The exhibition discounts the role of Rivera’s principal US-born assistant, known as Pablo O’Higgins, who actually taught Marion Greenwood and her sister Grace the fresco technique.

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- ⁸ The eight surviving portable fresco panels from *Portrait of America*, located in museums in Nagoya (Japan), Lund (Sweden), Mexico City, and Los Angeles, are difficult to borrow, to say the least.
- ⁹ Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Jürgen Harten, *Siqueiros/Pollock, Pollock/Siqueiros*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and DuMont, 1995). While the presence in this section of later works by Siqueiros, such as *Our Present Image* (1947; Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City) helps compensate for more fragile paintings from 1936 that could not be borrowed, it misleadingly implies his continuing impact in the early years of the Cold War.
- ¹⁰ Although assistant curator Marcela Guerrero devotes a catalogue essay to the relationship between the muralists and Mexican American workers in the 1930s, no Mexican American artists are included in the exhibition, although some, such as Edward Arcenio Chávez, created murals during the New Deal.
- ¹¹ This point is touched upon in a quite personal review by Anna Shapiro, “Revisiting a Revolution of Mexican Art in America,” *New York Review of Books* | *NYR Daily* (July 20, 2020), <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/07/20/revisiting-a-revolution-of-mexican-art-in-america>. Her father, artist David Shapiro, published an anthology that was for many years one of the most important sources in this area of American art: *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973); see also Anna Shapiro, “My Father’s Art,” *New York Review of Books* | *NYR Daily* (November 30, 2018), <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/11/30/my-fathers-art>.
- ¹² Several important paintings included here—among them Rivera’s *Dance in Tehuantepec* and both works by Frida Kahlo (*Two Women*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and *Me and My Parrots*, private collection)—are surprisingly not reproduced in the catalogue; perhaps this part of the exhibition was a late addition.
- ¹³ The reviews by Holland Cotter, Jerry Saltz, and Peter Schjeldahl all exaggerated the originality in the project and its role in overturning a prevailing narrative that was, by and large, already rejected. One of the few somewhat dissenting voices in the initial wave of reviews was Barbara Calderón, “The Mexican Muralists Had a Vital Influence on US Art: Can Their Revolutionary Approach Offer Lessons for the Present?” *Artnet News* (February 26, 2020), <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/vida-americana-mexican-muralists-whitney-1786695>. More critical analyses took time to ferment: see, for example, the sharp review (published after this essay was completed) by Tatiana Flores in *Artforum* 58, no. 10 (July/August 2020), <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202006/vida-americana-mexican-muralists-remake-american-art-1925-1945-83300>.
- ¹⁴ Stephen Polcari, “Orozco and Pollock: Epic Transfigurations,” *American Art* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 36-57; republished in *Men of Fire: José Clemente Orozco and Jackson Pollock*, exh. cat. (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2012), 1–19. This historiographic foundation is insufficiently acknowledged in the catalogue: exhibition and book titles matter, more than just authors’ names.
- ¹⁵ Instead of excavating a new history, as implied by the Whitney’s publicity machine, *Vida Americana* promotes, however eloquently, a history that is already established in such staples of undergraduate instruction as Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), now in its third edition; and Angela L. Miller, Margaretta M. Lovell, and David M. Lubin, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008).