NOTES ON THE NEW SCHOOL MURALS

BY ALVIN JOHNSON

BENTON: *Symbol of the technological era: speed; power.*

In 1930, while the New School building was still in process of construction, José Clemente Orozco, who had emerged into world fame on the strength of his magnificent murals in Mexico City and his Prometheus at Pomona College, sent word to the New School that he wished to donate a mural to the School as an expression of his admiration for the work of the School and its ideals. Shortly afterwards a similarly generous offer was made by Thomas Hart Benton, who had returned to America after long years of study of mural technique in France and Italy, and who had established a solid reputation on the basis of his characteristically American easel paintings. His great ambition was to get command of a wall, to present his art as a mural painter.

These proposals excited great interest in the School. Although the New School had been set up originally to teach the political and social sciences to mature men and women, it had soon become evident that academic specialization in a single field would not answer the intellectual requirements of its students, who desired also instruction in philosophy and psychology, literature, music, art and architecture. The fundamental interest of the mature adult lies in the understanding of his own times; and however essential the social sciences are to such understanding, the movement of ideas in other fields is no less essential. Hence the choice of a modern type of architecture for the New School building. Hence also the interest of the New School in modern types of mural painting.

Joseph Urban, Architect

Virtually the first man to be consulted on the proposed mural was Joseph Urban, the architect of the building, whose incomparable proficiency in the arts and whose vast experience in two continents assured just judgment. Architects at the time were as a rule inhospitable to mural paintings. They wished to decorate their rooms themselves, having evolved the theory that every room should be a complete psychological fulfilment in itself and should have nothing in it to draw the mind outside of the room. If any mural paintings were permissible, they should be such as would stay discreetly within the wall without embarrassing perspectives, like the much admired murals of Puvis de Chavannes.

Mr. Urban, as broadminded and generous as he was talented, recognized that in modern architecture, which aims at the maximum of open air effects, the mural painting that refuses to "stay in the wall" has a rightful place. He not only welcomed the proposals of the artists but agreed that the artist should have a determining voice in the development of the whole room in which his mural was to appear.

A number of other artists had offered to paint murals for the New School. But the combination of Orozco and Benton appeared a pecul-

iarly happy one. The New School had already developed a profound interest in the interpenetration of the two great American cultures, the English-American and the Latin-Indian-American. Benton, in spite of his long sojourn abroad, remained as characteristically American as Mark Twain or Walt Whitman. Orozco represented the resurrection of the traditions of the great American civilizations of pre-Columbian times, tempered by Spanish influences. Each was master of a great historical technique, Orozco of the true fresco, pigments applied to wet plaster, Benton of the egg tempera widely used in ancient and Renaissance times.

As to subjects, each artist was asked to work within the framework of contemporary life. Each was asked to paint a subject he regarded as of such importance that no history written a hundred years from now could fail to devote a chapter to it.

Benton chose to depict the tremendous burst of human energy and mechanical power that characterizes the present phase of economic life in America, and that, with appropriate qualifications, characterizes the ultramodern industrial centers of other countries as well. Orozco chose to depict the revolutionary unrest that smolders in the non-industrial periphery, India, Mexico, Russia.

The two paintings are essentially complementary and are best understood when studied together. The two artists were quite aware of this complementarity as they proceeded with their work. Each was aware that his picture was only one aspect of the common theme, the forward-plunging spirit, industrial and social, abroad in the modern world.

The Benton Picture

Tom Benton is a Missourian, son of a Congressman, grandson of the Benton who lamed Andrew Jackson in a duel, grand nephew of the Benton who figured in Congress at the time of the Missouri Compromise. Incorrigibly native American, Tom Benton's great delight is the American scene, which he views with an eye as clear of reformist color as

Swedish glass. Every summer he set out in his Ford car and made hundreds of sketches, sketches of miners and lumbermen and construction gangs, depressed marginal farmers, chain gangs, Holy Roller religious orgies, saloons and cabarets. It has been urged against him that he has no sketches of intellectuals, of cultivated Americans. This is not strictly true. But cultivated Americans do not fare well with Benton's technique. They did not fare well with Mark Twain's.

In working out such a mural as we have before us, Benton first goes through his hundreds of sketches and assembles a sheaf appropriate to a particular panel. Naturally, the pose in a sketch is often not appropriate. With indefatigable energy Benton makes rough models of clay, poses them properly and redraws his figure. This done he makes a rough sketch of the panel, and a little garden with all the solid items in clay, which he studies painstakingly to determine his darks and lights. He is now ready to proceed, and he lays on at an incredible rate, massacring dozens and dozens of eggs in the process. There the picture is: like it or not, it can't be changed. Egg tempera is practically imperishable. It is the technique that was applied in the decorations of the tomb of Tutankhamen, and the colors are as fresh today as they were when the sad king was laid away to await his final reckoning.

On the right and left walls Benton depicts great American interests, King Cotton, lumber, oil, coal, steel, construction. Benton had travelled widely through the cotton empire of the South, and the first panel on the right shows his vivid sense of the volupté, as well as the slavery involved in the white fluffy stuff that brings gold—at least a little gold—to ten thousand communities.

The next panel depicts lumbering and wheat, the triumph of felling a century old tree, the triumph of mechanization in the handling of our staple food. The third panel celebrates the triumph of the engineer, determining by his technique the next point to tap a deep hidden anticline.

Turning to the other side, we have coal represented by a miner in the pose of a man who has walked out through a two mile low-ceilinged

BENTON: *Construction: Benton's mighty laborers are no wage slaves but active producers.*

shaft and who for the time considers a bent back as usable as any other. The next panel involved Benton in some trouble. He had never been able to get into a modern steel mill to make drawings. He seemed to the steel men some kind of spy. Happily the New School had among its friends a director in Bethlehem Steel, who opened the doors of the Sparrows Point mill to Benton's violent art. The final panel represents construction in any great industrial city.

It will be noted that in these panels Benton recognizes that modern industrialism rises out of a context of earlier economic forms. The triumphant Negro in the cotton panel must be contrasted with the depressed farmer, the chain gang and the bored and embittered guard with his sawed-off shot gun. The triumphant tree killer in the lumber picture is to be contrasted with the miserable subsistence farmer, with his subsistence hogs. The engineer in the oil picture must be contrasted

OROZCO: *Yucatan: Peon slaves, the great (pyramid); Carillo Puerto, revolutionary flags.*

Russia: poster of Lenin, Stalin and poly-race Russia going to work.

with the residual Indian and beaten white in a low frontier den, and with the last stand of the Yankee cattleman and Mexican sheepman near the buttes. Benton knows that socially something has to be paid for industrial efficiency. Not all of society can come along, and those left out are rather desolate.

But Benton does not look upon modern industry as a horrible martyrdom of the worker amid the clangor and haste and heat of colossal machines. He has seen men at work. He has observed the sense of triumph on the face of the man who handles a great machine, taps a blast furnace, sees a building rising out of the blueprint in his hands. For the strong and fit, the life of big industry is one of victory.

How does our victorious industrial worker or manager spend his leisure time and money? While we were still prosperous he spent them in Great White Ways and lesser Ways, perhaps less white. The city

OROZCO: *India: Primordial slavery; white collar slaves; business beneficiaries of British imperialism*

scenes that make up the panels on the right and the left as you enter are in the large the urban counterpart of the fiercely energetic industrial life depicted in the side panels. Entertainment, rather rowdy, religion of a rather rowdy brand, love, not worthy of Daniel Gabriel Rosetti, but still a realistic fact, speculation, progressive education, a humorous symbol of art in Tom Benton himself clinking glasses with the Director of the School, in celebration of the completion of the picture.

Facing the entrance is Benton's most ambitious panel, a composition symbolizing the speed, the power, the brute excitement of the present industrial era. To center it vividly in reality Benton has presented a

Diesel engine bisected with its fires blazing. Fortunately no critic knows enough about mechanics to nail this piece of nature faking.

And opposite, over the door, appears one of the human consequences: a little drama of hands, hands grasping for money, for stimulants, grasping hectically.

The Orozco Pictures

Just as Benton can paint only what he sees with his two good brown eyes, Orozco can paint only what he sees with the eye of his mind. And to that eye past and present and future are one, or almost one. Almost, for unlike present and past the future is the world of realized ideals. Every day Orozco would ask for nine square feet or fifteen of wet plaster to be available at nine the next morning. The plasterer's work done, Orozco would mount his scaffold and proceed, with the narrowest brushes an artist ever used, to cover the space before the plaster should set. Every square inch in the picture today is exactly what Orozco covered in the first instance.

Beginning on the left as you enter the room you meet a representation of India enslaved: primordial slavery; the well fed slavery of usurer and contractor, their hands tied behind their fat backs; the snobbish slavery of the Eurasian civil service, with chains around their refined necks, all defended by a squad of European soldiers in gas masks and a company of Sikhs under a gorgeous Scotch officer, against a Ghandi decrepit as most human hopes and Mother India, patient, enduring.

Color as a Language

Orozco uses color as a language. What is past or destined for defeat is in grays: as he approaches reality or promise of realization his colors brighten and deepen. In color Orozco asserts with all the fervor of prophesy that ultimately Gandhi and Mother India will win.

We pass to the opposite wall. Yucatan presents itself to us, a homely, ignorant, bewildered but human population dragooned by one of their

own kind, prepared to shoot to kill, without qualm and without malice. Above, the great tradition of Yucatan, represented by the pyramid, the martyred revolutionary leader Carillo Puerto and the revolutionary flags, denoting by their color the triumph of freedom.

Then we pass over sea and sunrise, to a treatment of the Russian revolution. Here are the silhouettes of the old Red Army, marching with a poster of Lenin, their bayonets done *con amore*. Orozco used eleven different whites to give those bayonets their quality of murderous reality. Here is Stalin and the multi-racial Russian population equipped with a conventional tool, going out to work. By Orozco's color language, the old Red Army and the idealization of Lenin were of the past; the zeal for work of Stalin and his companions was of the present and held the hope of the future.

Opposite the entrances is a peace table, with representatives of the various races of man. As a Mexican of mixed Spanish and Indian origin Orozco could not accept a League of Nations virtually limited to the white race. He believed that there could be no lasting peace until all the races joined on equal terms in a world civilization. You see the Nordic, the Chinese, the Jew, the American Indian, the East Indian, the African Negro and the American Negro cooperating in the enterprise of writing reality upon the blank pages of the book of peace.

Between the doors Orozco depicts his ideal of social security: robust workers returning to their well fed wives and little children, to a hearth fire and a table with food and drink and books—an ideal not regarded today as so revolutionary as it was then. Outside in the lounge Orozco presents his view of the conditions of progress, artist, scientist and workman travailling to create a new world.

Opinion on the Murals

From the day of the opening of the New School building down to the present time the murals have been the object of controversy, often violent. Criticism of the pictures has been for the most part of a political

OROZCO AT WORK: *The challenge of Gandhi to British imperialism.*

character. The Benton picture was severely attacked by the Leftists of all stripes because it accepts the world as it is. It was also attacked by representatives of the cultivated classes on the ground that it gives a distorted view of America, ignoring as it does the quiet activity of the poet, the philosopher, the scientist, the philanthropist and the innumerable groups who make up America's cultural elite. Benton's defense is that on a small wall one can never depict totality.

As was to be anticipated, the fiercest political criticism was directed against Orozco. Down to the repulse of the German invasion by Russia, the best hated part of the picture was the Russian section. The most violent critics were the Trotzky faction of the Communist Party, who saw in the picture not merely a glorification of Stalin but approval of Stalin's repudiation of the ideal of a world revolution and his concentration upon the industrial development of Russia. American conservatives were almost equally bitter, being addicts of the quaint notion that American morale is so weak that any suggestion that progress of any kind may be made under another system is likely to shatter American faith in the American way of life. But now that the fate of the United Nations has turned on the success with which Stalin actually set the Russian people at work, the tide of criticism has turned toward the Indian section and Gandhi obstructing the purposes of the British Empire.

Much criticism of a racial character has been directed against Orozco's peace table, with representatives of the colored races honored equally with the whites. But the idea is gaining currency that some such union of races will be necessary if peace is ever to be established on a firm foundation.

Political criticism of a work of art is seldom injurious. It is at least a recognition of the fact that the artist has something to say. Greek criticism of the work of Phidias on the Parthenon was based on a fancied Fascist tendency characterized as "impiety." Phidias died in prison but his art lived. The criticism of Giotto on his work in the Padua chapel

was based on his pictures' taking sides in a theological controversy. Giotto committed his wall to the doctrine of the virgin birth of the Virgin, a doctrine that never became dogma before our time.

The really damaging criticism is that of the connoisseurs, who pretend to give aesthetic laws to the artist. For these pretended "laws" are derived from what has been accepted in the past, and would suffocate every innovation, all progress. Recall the terrible abuse of the Impressionists by the French connoisseurs, and their violent hatred of Cézanne.

Fortunately America is young, vigorous, political and infected to only the minutest degree with dogmatic connoisseurship. About the only non-political criticism of the Benton and Orozco murals has been that they are not pleasing.

This is not a serious criticism. No honest artist in all history has sought to make his pictures pleasing. He has sought to make them honest, and beyond that significant, competent in greater or less degree to extend the empire of art, either in the field of ideas or in the field of artistic technique. "Pleasing" is an epiphenomenon that comes long after the event. Cézanne became pleasing posthumously; El Greco and Brueghel after centuries. It does not follow that Benton and Orozco will ever please. But time has not said its final say. Both artists gave the best they had, like honest men. If the *vox populi* is against them and continues against them they will admit humbly, *vox populi, vox Dei.*

But how does the *vox populi* stand now? Several hundred thousand people have come to view the pictures, and after ten years the visits continue. Several thousand newspapers and magazines, not only in the United States but in Canada, Latin America, Europe and even in China have asked permission to reproduce photographs of parts of the murals. A reasonable calculation would fix the number of people who have seen the murals and reproduced photographs of them at over one hundred million. The count is not complete. In the next twelve months at least a score of periodicals will ask permission to publish photographs of one section or another of the murals.

Success of the Murals

That the murals enjoyed more than a merely popular success may be indicated by the fact that Orozco was soon commissioned to paint a mural for Dartmouth College, and Benton to paint one for the Whitney Museum. Benton's subsequent career may fairly be described as meteoric. He was commissioned to paint an historical mural for the State of Indiana, first to be exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair and later to adorn the State Capitol. He was commissioned to paint a mural for the new Federal Post Office building in Washington, he was appointed assistant curator of the art museum of Kansas City and was commissioned to paint a mural in the Missouri State Capitol at Jefferson City. From a struggling easel painter he had become one of the most popular and prosperous of American mural painters.

Benton developed a wide following among young American artists. There are acres of mural paintings scattered through the country that exhibit the Benton influence. Benton himself is not altogether pleased with this situation. But the New School accepts it philosophically. America has had enough paintings of the Wabash under the autumn

mists of the Loire and of Susquehanna bridges in the pearly atmosphere that makes an eternal joy out of the Pont Neuf. Benton and Orozco have helped to make artistically possible the mercilessly clear light and the strong colors of America.

But these are not the only murals in the New School. In the anteroom of the dance studio is the mural of an Ecuadorian festival, by Camilo Egas, Ecuadorian, with more years in Paris and Italy than any of us has to spare. Egas combines in himself the blood and the spirit of the

EGAS: *Harvesting food in Ecuador. No profit motive in any face or figure.*

EGAS: *Ecuadorian festival. Mixed pagan and Christian ceremonies. Lower left, the hand of Spain,*

suppressing the Indo-American spirit.

Inca and the Spaniard. He is alive as none of us are to the great problem of Latin America, the amalgamation of the Pre-Columbian civilization with that of Spain. No Anglo-American has cried to Heaven because Egas represents the creative, artistic, indignantly pietistic native American culture in its struggle against the suppressive hand of Spanish

white race arrogance. In the Mezzanine Egas has two more murals, In Memoriam of a great lady who knew the Americas, North and South, before ever Washington thought of a Good Neighbor Policy, Caroline Tilden Bacon, one of the founders of the New School.

The picture by Camilo Egas is a symbol. It is a symbol of a rich and successful life, a life that attained to harvest. Fittingly the pictures symbolize harvest, harvest in Caroline Bacon's native Minnesota, harvest in the Gran Chaco. Do you like it? You should, because it is beautiful, and significant.

One Final Word

One final word—and all final words are irrelevant. In the Director's office may be found a statue in marble. No politics; it is a beautiful statue, fortunately without a head, and the designing face that one would expect to go with so lovely a body.

In 1914, before the first World War, soldiers digging a trench on the site of ancient Cyrene, once the center of culture of the southern Mediterranean coast, struck a marble statue, headless, no doubt beheaded by early Christians—God rest their souls. What survived the Christians was a beautiful body, later determined by Italian ethnologists to be the artistically simplified representation of an Ouled Nail girl who came up from the oases to dance for her dowry, as they still do today.

The statue was beautiful. This pre-Mussolini Romans realized, and after the first World War they gave her a room of honor in the Museo delle Therme, in old Rome the Baths of Caracalla and Diocletian. There the Director of the New School saw her and overwhelmed by admiration, he hunted all over the environment to find photographs of this most human of all the Aphrodites. The photographs were miserable and have long since gone into the waste basket.

But while the Director of the New School was trying to find passable photographs, Joseph Urban, later to be the architect of the New School, recognized throughout the world as one of the greatest masters

Aphrodite of Cyrene—Marble copy of original now in the Museo de la Therme, Rome.

of form and color in our time, encountered the same Aphrodite of Cyrene in the Museo delle Therme. And he announced that he would have a plaster cast of her. He was told that the Museum would never permit a plaster cast.

Then Urban declared that he would have a copy of the statue in marble. He was informed that the Museo had never permitted a true copy. They might permit a miniature, or a heroic representation.

Urban was not morally equipped to be thwarted. He appealed to Mussolini, who saw no reason why a true copy should not be made in Carrara marble by a sculptor chosen by the National Academy.

Joseph Urban had worked with the Director of the New School in designing the building. He had consulted with the Director about every room but one, the Director's office. This, Urban announced, he would keep to himself, because he knew the Director better than the Director knew himself.

In the outcome, the color of the office was to be Byzantine red, because the Director loved Byzantine civilization. Second, there was to be an alcove of curving wall, because the Director loved the so-called Hellenistic decadence. Third, there was to be a noble light in the ceiling of the alcove, and under it a piece of Hellenistic sculpture.

Whosoever will may come to the Director's office and see in Carrara marble the one existing duplicate of Aphrodite of Cyrene. She lacks a head, like many another beautiful body, but the body is beautiful. It means nothing. But the New School, bent on meanings, is broad enough to admit beauty that has no head and means nothing—but itself.

NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH
66 WEST 12TH STREET
NEW YORK 11, N. Y.

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