

**(re) collection, June 16–September 7, 2011**  
**Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery**  
**Sheila Johnson Design Center, Parsons School of Design**  
**Curated by Silvia Rocciolo, Eric Stark, and John Wanzel**

## **Disruption, Deaccession, Dislocation (Excerpt)**

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The paths of José Clemente Orozco, Thomas Hart Benton, and Camilo Egas intersected in the early 1930's when all three artists were commissioned by The New School for Social Research's president, Alvin Johnson, to create murals for the university's new International Style building designed by Joseph Urban. Johnson sought artists whose practices were contemporary, international in scope and spoke to the school's humanistic and socially progressive ethos. The trajectory of these three artists' commissions, from the 1930's to the present, with their tales of disruption, deaccession, and dislocation, address the shifts of institutional identity and memory as well as transitions in art historical and pedagogic perspectives.

When the building was inaugurated, the murals were met with mixed reviews. Orozco, the great Mexican muralist and most famous of the three, was panned by critics. Orozco chose to depict contemporary revolutions in the East and West and utopian ideals of universal brotherhood. The enigmatic murals surprised critics who expected a less abstract and more "readable" Orozco, in keeping with American perceptions of Mexican muralism.

Thomas Hart Benton's audacious, jazz-age, pro-labor *America Today* murals were an immediate hit. They were accessible crowd pleasers, positive and celebratory at a moment when the grim realities of the Great Depression were beginning to surface. New Yorkers loved Benton's vivid, colorful depictions of bustling industry and contented workers engaged in a full-throttle dance of activities.

Camilo Egas, the first director of the Fine Arts department at The New School, conceived *Ecuadorian Festival* for the wall facing the dance studio where Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham collaborated in the building's basement. The mural received positive critical reviews. When initially asked about the subject, Egas stated that his intention was to depict a celebratory moment of a generic indigenous dance festival, and focused solely on the theme of cultural identity. Art historian Michele Greet, however, asserts that it was Alvin Johnson who promoted a highly subjective and politicized interpretation of the mural, placing Egas in the context of a larger avant-garde movement that blended a radical social realism with Pan-American indigenismo.

What happened to the murals in the intervening years?

Orozco's murals suffered neglect and disrepair, as well as periodic reassessments of their artistic and sociopolitical relevance. During the McCarthy period, the university administration covered the panel depicting Lenin and Stalin with a yellow curtain. Sympathizers both inside and outside The New School repeatedly waged passionate campaigns for their preservation. In 1987, New York Mayor Ed Koch personally intervened to stop the sale of the murals to the Mexican government. Soon after, a significant conservation effort was mounted to restore the murals to their original condition.

The New School sold the Benton murals to the Equitable Life Assurance Society in 1984. They can now be seen in the lobby of AXA Equitable at 1290 Sixth Avenue. As part of the negotiations, Equitable funded a grant toward the restoration of the Orozco murals.

*Ecuadorian Festival* languished in the basement after Egas' death. At one point, a wall was erected in front of the mural to "protect it" from damage. Recent scholarship, in particular the illuminating work of art historians Michele Greet and Anna Indych-Lopez, and various museum exhibitions on the impact of Latin American artists in New York during the early twentieth century, have resuscitated Camilo Egas' career and placed him in the context of a greater global discussion on modernism and contemporary art.

At the closing of (re) collection, *Ecuadorian Festival* was reinstalled in its original home at 66 West 12th street.

Given the many claims on the university's resources, what is our responsibility for the preservation of its artistic legacy?