



Photo by Stew Stryker.

ART

Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College.

Violent Visions in a Silent Space

by Jacquelynn Baas

In 1768, the founder of Dartmouth College, the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, sent “a small specimen of the produce and manufacture of the American wilderness” — a pipe, tobacco pouch, knife case and several other articles — to the College’s benefactor, the Second Earl of Dartmouth. From its very beginnings, the remote location of this New England College fostered an active commitment to providing students with examples of the “natural and moral world,” as museum and library collections were thought of then.

One of the most notable manifestations of this ongoing commitment is “The Epic of American Civilization,” the mural that, in the spring of 1932, the Mexican artist José Clemente Orozco was commissioned to paint in the lower-level reserve reading room of Dartmouth’s Baker Library. Orozco would take advantage of the division of Baker Library’s reserve reading room into east and west wings to portray what he called America’s “two cultural currents,” the indigenous and the European.

José Clemente Orozco was born in 1883 in Ciudad Guzmán, a provincial city in the Mexican coastal state of Jalisco. When he was 15, his parents sent him to the countryside to become an agricultural engineer, but he contracted rheumatic fever and returned home with a heart condition. He then studied architecture at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. In 1903 his father died of typhus, and Orozco was forced to leave school and begin a series of odd jobs to support his mother and two siblings. He worked as an architectural draftsman and hand-tinted postmortem portraits. When Orozco was 21, an accident while making fireworks to sell on Mexican Independence Day injured his left hand and eye. Due to the holiday, he was not attended to at hospital for several days. Gangrene set in, and his hand and wrist had to be amputated.

After the accident, Orozco devoted himself to painting, drawing, printmaking and eventually large-scale fresco murals — something that cannot have been easy for an

artist with a weakened heart, damaged eyesight and only one hand. Orozco's injuries did, however, protect him from active engagement in the Mexican Revolution. Instead, he drew political cartoons and caricatures for leftist newspapers. He seemed able to depict his reaction to Mexico's decade of revolution as an artist only after 1920, when he returned from a bleak three-year stay in San Francisco and New York. In 1923, Orozco was one of the founders of the "Union of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Engravers of Mexico," and was commissioned to paint murals in the National Preparatory School in Mexico City.

By 1927 mural commissions had dried up in Mexico, and Orozco moved to New York, where he would live off-and-on for eight years before returning to Mexico in 1934. The last time Orozco returned to the U.S. was in 1945. In the throes of midlife crisis at the relatively late age of 62, he told a friend, "I need to do it to renew myself." But the much-anticipated creative renewal did not materialize, and after months of struggle and soul searching, Orozco returned home. In his final years, Orozco continued to climb the scaffolding, although his heart condition forced him to stop and catch his breath every few steps. He completed his last fresco less than a month before he died in his sleep of heart failure at the age of 65. Today, there are major Orozco frescoes in Mexico City, at Pomona College, at the New School for Social Research in New York, at Dartmouth College and in Guadalajara. His house and studio in Guadalajara are now a museum-workshop under the jurisdiction of Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts.

A taciturn individualist, highly sensitive and utterly inept at self-promotion, Orozco had a sharp tongue and mordant sense of humor. Described by a contemporary as "the only tragic poet America has produced," Orozco was first and foremost a public artist whose greatest achievements were the murals he created not for individual patrons but for the whole of society. Yet, in comparison with his colleague and rival Diego Rivera, until recently the name of this preeminent public artist was little known to the public. Orozco's work was marginalized as complex and controversial, while Orozco the man has been considered as something of an enigma.

"The Epic of American Civilization" proved to be a pivotal work in the career of one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. Many of the students who witnessed its creation never forgot the experience, and its impact is still palpable 75 years later.

To understand how this inflammatory work by a Mexican artist came to be created at Dartmouth College during the depths of the Great Depression is to understand something both about Dartmouth and about Eleazar Wheelock's successors as stewards of student cultural life. Orozco arrived in New York in December 1927, the start



Photo from the Dartmouth College Library.

Orozco paints Quetzalcoatl.

of his second long visit to the United States. The idea of bringing him to Dartmouth to execute a mural seems to have occurred to members of the art faculty around the time their new building, Carpenter Hall, was completed in 1929. The following year, the department's chairman, Artemas Packard, supported by a young member of the art faculty, Churchill Lathrop, began a campaign to realize their vision of obtaining for the college the services of one of the two important Mexican muralists then working in the United States: Diego Rivera or José Clemente Orozco. According to Lathrop, Orozco was their preferred choice from the beginning. Quite aware that the gregarious Rivera had better name recognition, Packard and Lathrop organized several exhibitions of Orozco's prints and drawings in the galleries of Carpenter Hall in order to make his work better known in northern New England.

The persistence of Orozco's New York dealer, Alma Reed, was an important factor that may have helped offset a tendency to favor Rivera among potential supporters of the project. Chief among these was the Rockefeller family, with



their Mexican oil interests. Nelson Rockefeller, Dartmouth Class of 1930, had been a student of Lathrop's, and a tutorial fund for special educational initiatives set up by Nelson's mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, would ultimately make the commission possible. Churchill Lathrop later recalled,

Early in 1932, we had a brilliant revelation, an idea that might move the stalled project off dead center. The department had a small lecture budget; so, why not invite Orozco to give a lecture-demonstration on fresco painting? Such an unusual lecture, by a scholarly artist, would attract considerable student and community attention, and it would produce a few square feet of fresco: a small sample mural. Work-in-progress on even a small mural would have educational value. Also, the presence of Orozco would give the community the chance to observe his skill and judge his character.

In March 1932 Orozco finally came to Dartmouth, where he executed a "trial" mural entitled: "Release, or Man Released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life," a subject he characterized as "post-war in theme." During their discussions of the project, Orozco and members of the Art Department became excited at the possibility of a mural in a larger and more accessible location than Carpenter Hall. They set their sights on the reserve reading room on the ground floor of Baker Library, with which Carpenter is linked by a pedestrian passageway.

Once he spotted the reserve room's long expanses of wall, Orozco abandoned his previous concept of Greek mythology for a theme that would retain the universal implications of mythology, but be more specific to America. Orozco's excitement is palpable in the prospectus he wrote during a second visit to Dartmouth in early May of 1932:

The American continental races are now becoming aware of their own personality, as it emerges from two cultural currents — the indigenous and the European. The great American myth of Quetzalcoatl is a living one, embracing both elements and pointing clearly, by its prophetic nature, to the responsibility shared equally by the two Americas of creating here an authentic New World civilization. I feel that this subject has a special significance for an institution such as Dartmouth College which has its origin in a continental rather than in a local outlook — the foundation of Dartmouth, I understand, predating the foundation of the United States.

Traditionally, an epic is a long narrative poem on a heroic theme. Early epics, such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, are written versions of national oral legends. The conventions of the modern literary epic include a hero who founds a new civilization in a mythic time that is continuous

with known history. This hero performs notable deeds, often including a descent into the underworld. The style of the epic is characterized by extended similes in which apparently different subjects are extensively compared. This format, which would have been familiar to Orozco through his affiliation with Eva Sikelianos's Delphic Circle in New York, was well-suited to his mural aesthetic, which found its inspiration in heroic, dualistic themes of conflict, self-sacrifice and regeneration. Both parts of the mural cycle contain a prophetic figure — Quetzalcoatl in the west wing, Christ in the east wing — linked by Cortez, the historical anti-hero.

The 26 panels of "The Epic of American Civilization" are not strictly chronological, either internally (in keeping with a historical order of events) or externally (the order in which they were painted). In any consideration of these murals, one must keep in mind Orozco's frequently reiterated injunctions that no single panel is significant apart from the rest and that any interpretation in words is a restriction of the meaning of the mural to the experience of a single person.

The Dartmouth hero, Quetzalcoatl, is allied thematically with other tragic heroes adopted by the artist during this middle period of his career, such as Pomona College's "Prometheus" of 1930; and the magnificent "Man of Fire" in the dome of the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara. The fate of the "Man of Fire," who rises to heaven in flames, is an alternative to that of Dartmouth's Quetzalcoatl, who departs on a raft of serpents. In another version of the myth, Quetzalcoatl immolates himself, ascending in flames to heaven, where he becomes the Morning Star. Whatever their nominal identities, Orozco's mythic heroes are united by a common mission of self-sacrifice for the sake of the enlightenment and liberation of humankind. For Orozco, whose aesthetic was imprinted by the experience of the Mexican Revolution, this liberation is a painful and tragic process whose outcome is far from secure.

Across from the reserve desk, on the south wall at the center of the room, is a depiction of contemporary American life in five compositions on three panels collectively entitled "Modern Industrial Man." The International Style architecture depicted in these panels is intended to signify a harmony of function and beauty that is no longer dependent on cultural ornament. The "International Style" in architecture was first celebrated as such at the Museum of Modern Art in a 1932 exhibition that Orozco may well have seen. In the American skyscraper, Orozco saw a totally new cultural expression that could serve as a model for the art of the future:

Already, the architecture of Manhattan is a new value, something that has nothing to do with Egyptian

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pyramids, with the Paris Opera... or with Saint Sofia, any more than it has to do with the Maya palaces of Chichen Itzá or with the “pueblos” of Arizona. . . . The architecture of Manhattan is the first step. Painting and sculpture must certainly follow as inevitable second steps.

We know from drawings that the model for the central, reading figure in Orozco’s “Modern Industrial Man” was a Dartmouth student. In the finished mural, he is not only obviously a worker; he also appears to be African American. Orozco offers here a similar ideal to the dark-eyed young man, seemingly of mixed race with both European and Indian ancestry, who appears in the “Release” panel that Orozco painted in the adjacent corridor 18 months earlier. The young man in “Release” rises from the confusion of post-war machinery to reach for the light. The worker in “Modern Industrial Man” rests from his labor to nourish his spirit. Alma Reed relayed Orozco’s sense of the future of his own country, the future of the Rebel, who was his model of change: “We have had enough of revolution. We want time now to work and to rest. The people are learning to think.”

Orozco signed and dated his last Dartmouth panel on

February 13, 1934. Six days later he, his wife, Margarita, and their three children returned to New York and thence to Mexico. The artist’s final statement about his accomplishment was published in *The Dartmouth* on February 17:

Each panel has been a new experience, it has presented new problems. I have experimented with color, and organization of material. I am just beginning to realize what I have done and what all this has done to me.

Orozco was 50 years old when he left Dartmouth. Even greater artistic achievements lay ahead, but his Dartmouth mural remains one of the most developed summaries of his philosophy. It is also, in the opinion of many critics, the greatest mural cycle in the United States.

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A student studies in the shadow of Orozco’s murals, circa 1950.



Photo from the Dartmouth College Library.