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Studio Art Lessons Based on Latin American Arts and Crafts

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Puerto Rican students in the New Haven schools are usually introduced to art through traditional Western Art. For the teacher who is interested in a chronological approach, either Far Eastern Art or Ancient Egyptian Art might be the starting point. If the teacher believes in a stylistic approach, the Impressionists, the Abstract Expressionists, or even the work of a single artist are typically shown as paradigms of great art. But all of these are not as easily identified with by the students as is the art of Latin America.

Because middle school art in the city of New Haven is geared to introduce the children to various media and their artistic possibilities, the art that is shown to them should be of an inspiring nature rather than of an historical one. Although the monuments of the Ancient Mexicans are awe inspiring, works that give children a sense that they can use art media to express themselves is the goal of the art teacher. It is with this goal in mind that the examples in this paper are to be selected.

This goal of improving the Puerto Rican student's self image while introducing him/her to art would be ideally best served if Puerto Rican art alone could be shown to the students. But the art of Puerto Rico is too often derivative of the very art that is foisted upon our students. Latin American art of the highest quality and crafts that are most attractive to modern and youthful sensibilities should be shown to the students. It is with this as the premise that the following works and projects are to be discussed.

As the middle school student goes from subject to subject, he or she sees each discipline as isolated from all the others. By introducing students to painting, sculpture and crafts of their own history they can also learn about history, social studies, science and to employ math skills in the execution of art projects. By discussing these subjects in art, and art in other fields, students can learn about the interconnectedness of all fields.

Each work of art that is shown to the students should be discussed for its iconography and for its place in history as well as for its visual impact or its aesthetic. In this way, each work will be appreciated for its historical message as an artifact or as a personal artistic statement.

It is hoped that the brief discussions of a few works of painting, sculpture, and crafts will encourage teachers who are not necessarily trained in either studio or art history, to feel comfortable presenting Latin American works in their classes to enable students to improve their artistic skills.

A Lesson in the Basic Principles of Design by Making Molas

Background for the Teacher

The basic principles of design are taught to students to help them develop an aesthetic sense and to learn how to create attractive as well as expressive works of art and of craft. These principles, such as using balance in compositions, contrasting values that complement the composition as a whole, and expressive line, are often taught separately or in pairs, through the use of cut paper, or through graphic techniques that enable art students to go on to the more ambitious art form of painting. An exciting way to introduce some principles of design is to use the traditional Latin American craft of appliqué of *molas*.

It would be ideal to be able to show the students an authentic *mola* such as the one reproduced below. This piece comes from Puerto Rico and is typical of the craft as it was executed about thirty years ago and more. The colors of this applique are primarily red, with the three layers of outlines in green, bright yellow and denim blue. Purple, lilac, pink and white are repeated in the decorative vertical hyphens that are scattered throughout the surface forms.

Molas are made out of fabric remnants that are cut into designs (such as the ones on the following pages) based on traditional Latin American animal and flower motifs. Many of these works are made up of three layers of fabric, and the basic shapes are cut out of these. Both the positive and the negative of the cut shapes are retained in the design as the layers that are closest to the viewer are given wider hems in order to reveal the lower layers. The local colors are inserted between the layers and are seen as vertical lines in the broader planes. Although the design here illustrated is perfectly symmetrical, most *molas* are made of asymmetric forms that virtually dance over the surface.

In Guatemala and Venezuela, *molas* are used to decorate clothing, bedspreads and walls. Like the early settlers of the United States, these people have few materials with which they can be creative and yet practical, and so both peoples turned to the recycling of fabrics in order to fulfill their needs for attractive and yet useful crafts.

Objective The objective of this lesson is to introduce three of the basic principles of design: 1) designs should create a rhythmic pattern made up of related shapes, 2) colors should be repeated so as to not force the eye to remain with a single part of the composition, and 3) a composition should have a major center of interest and at least one minor one. Another objective of this lesson is to introduce the students to a useful and attractive craft that is a living part of the tradition of several Latin American countries.

Materials Fabric remnants, needle, thread, paper and pencil for preparatory drawings. For a complete paper “sketch” of a mola : three or more different colors of construction paper.

Introduction Show an example of appliqué, or make a simple mola to show the class. The Peabody Museum carries appliqués from various Latin American countries.

Tell the students that it is a *mola*. Encourage them to answer the following types of questions: “Can you figure out how this decorative work was made?” “Are the fabrics all new?” “Are the fabrics all of the same type?” “What do you think the *mola* is used for?” “Can—you think of any other uses for it?” “Does it remind—you of any craft of this country?” (quilting) “Do you know of any European countries that have similar forms of appliqué?” (Poland, Belgium, Russia).

Methodology *The first molas should be made out of construction paper so that the basic concept of positive-negative cut outs can be understood, and so that the more valuable fabric supplies are not wasted.*

The class should either collect traditional Latin American motifs by looking at books and crafts at, for example, the Peabody Museum, or if this is to be a one lesson exercise, the teacher should hand out drawings of typical motifs such as those included at the end of this paper. See the bibliography for books that provide other designs.

Steps for Making *Molas*

1. Choose one or more motifs for your mola.
2. Trace or copy it making several copies in two or more different sizes.
3. Arrange the tracings into an attractive design that is either symmetric or asymmetric.
4. When you have a design that you are satisfied with, place the shapes on what will be your uppermost layer of paper.
5. Trace the outermost line of the shape onto the fabric and cut that shape out and retain the negative shape for the next step. The negative shape is the part that would usually be discarded but for this project it is the most important part.
6. Using the negative shape as a template (a grid from which you will work), draw a second layer of designs within the first one, and close to it by about one fourth of an inch.
7. Cut out the positive shapes that you have just drawn and again retain the negative template.
8. Using the second layer as the new template, draw more related designs within the cut out areas of the second template onto the third layer of your *mola* .
9. If you are working with paper or felt, glue the layers together.
If you are working with fabric, make tiny hems on all the edges and use the overcast stitch to connect the layers.

(figure available in print form)

(figure available in print form)

Double Bird Mola . Mixed cotton fabrics, 24" L., 15-3/4" H. Puerto Rico (c1940)

Author's collection

A Lesson in Pinch Piece and Slip Pottery

Background for the Teacher

Many students insist on making something “useful” when they are handed a piece of clay. Whether this is because of their having made ashtrays or pinch pots in elementary school or because of the common fear that they lack artistic ability, it may be best to go along with the functional approach. Teach the students how to make that pinch pot, but then teach the slip method of applying decorations and even whimsical sculptural elements to their works.

The *Bowl and Alligator Lid* from the Yale Art Gallery was made in Costa Rica in the pre-Columbian period about 1000 A.D. Although the actual bowl is a modest pinch-type (or it may have been thrown), the artisan became creative with the oversized lid, with its abstract alligator, and the applied and incised decorative patterns that integrate the forms. A Janus faced vase is also on display at the Yale Art Gallery.

Dockstader’s *Indian Art in Middle America* is an excellent source for exotic reproductions, including fluted globular bowls with modeled bird-figure legs, stirruped vessels, and creative surrealistic human and animal *tapaderas*.

Objective The objective is that the students learn how to manipulate clay in the following ways: 1) by employing the pinch method of modeling; 2) by employing the slip method of applying surface decorations; 3) by incising the clay with pointed or punch tools; 4) by actually modeling.

Materials Clay; any kind of modeling tools such as toothpicks, nails, plastic utensils, texture producing tools such as strainers, colanders, etc.; newspapers to cover the tables; bowls of water.

Introduction

The teacher should show a reproduction of the Costa Rican vase, or take the children to see it at the Yale Art Gallery. Other inspirational pottery pieces from a text such as Dockstader’s may be shown and discussed.

The students might be asked the following types of questions about the works: “What do you think this vessel might have been used for?” (Their guesses will be as good as ours). “What do you think this thing at the top is?” (In the case of the Yale piece, it is an alligator). “Is it realistic or more abstract?” “How did the artisan make the holes in the side of the creature?” “How were the triangular and the diamond shaped designs made?” “How were the bands of decoration made?” “Do you think that the alligator and the bowl part are integrated, connected visually?” “How is this done?” “What was done first?” “What did the artist do next?”

(figure available in print form)

Bowl and Alligator Lid , Pottery, 4-3/4" H., lid 11-1/2" W.

Costa Rica, Pre-Columbian (after 1000 AD)

Reprinted by permission from the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven.

The students will probably be able to answer all of these questions, and will at the same time get great ideas about how they can make and design their own vessels.

Methodology

The following steps should be listed on the board or pre-prepared posters should be now brought out as the following steps are read to the class:

Clay Preparation

1. Cover the table with newspaper to keep your work from sticking to the table.
2. Roll your piece of clay into a ball that is free of cracks. Wet your hands if the clay starts to dry and crack.
3. Throw your clay forcefully onto a newspaper to get the air bubbles out of it so that it does not explode when it is fired in a kiln.

Steps for Making a Pinch Piece

Remember to keep the clay moist while you work with it!

1. Roll the clay into as perfect a sphere as possible.
2. Making sure that the clay is moist enough not to crack, gently press your thumb into the sphere to form a navel.
3. Keep turning the sphere while you continue to increase the depth of the initial indentation.
4. Use your middle fingers instead of the thumb as the hole starts to get larger. Pinch your fingers gently but firmly together, while you continue to turn the piece in your hands.
5. Be sure that the walls of the forming piece are of even thickness throughout.

Steps for Putting Slip Decorations onto a Piece

1. Roll out a small piece of clay so that it is of even thickness.
2. Cut a shape out of it.
3. Use a toothpick or the prongs of a fork to incise thatched lines onto the back surface of your decoration.
4. Put the same kind of thatched lines onto the surface of the piece that is to receive the decoration.
5. Push the decoration onto the piece so that the two pieces seem to be one.
6. Cover the seams where the decoration meets the larger piece with watery clay (slip) to insure

that the pieces will remain attached.

Once the students are shown a variety of tools for making incisions on the surfaces of their works, they will be happy to experiment.

What will be more difficult for some children is the modeling technique. Some suggestions follow:

Steps for Modeling Figures Out of Clay

1. Roll the main piece of clay into a shape that most closely resembles the desired end shape. For example, a sleeping lion should start as a cylindrical mass on its side.
2. Either pull and pinch the larger masses cut of the original form, or shape smaller masses into the appropriate shapes and connect these to the larger form using the thatch and slip method.
3. Use your fingers to model more details.
4. Use tools to get the desired details that you want.

The slip and thatch method described above should be used to attach the figure to the pottery.

The finished pieces should be allowed to air dry for approximately three days. Clay is dry when it is no longer cold to the touch. If possible, the pieces should be checked a few hours after they are made to make sure that they are drying without cracking or falling apart. The pieces may be repaired easily before they are completely dry by using the slip and thatch method.

The pieces may be glazed with pre-firing glaze, or with glazes that are applied after the piece is fired.

A Lesson in Making Clay Figurines

Background for the Teacher

The ceramic sculptures of Ancient Mexico offer students superb models for making clay sculptures. Sculpture that is carved in stone is too imposing to inspire the young artist, while the plasticity and intimacy of the molded figures of the Mayan, for example, could serve to inspire the young artist.

Numerous ceramic sculptures are in many museums around the country and photographs of these are in all books about Ancient Mexican art. The figures are usually in active positions representing athletes, workers, or family groups such as the Yale Art Gallery's *Whistle Figure*, *Seated Woman with Child in Lap*, and also at Yale, *Figurine*, *Standing Man, with Snake Form Around Neck*, both illustrated below. The two figurines at Yale have the long faces, flat brows, Oriental-like eyes, and strongly modeled lips of the Mayan sculptures and people. Both also have a wealth of applied and incised details that would fascinate any viewer, while the lack of anatomical details (and lack of accuracy) would keep the beginning artist from feeling threatened.

Another Yale Art Gallery clay piece would strongly appeal to the students because of its iconography. The *Group of Ball Game with Spectators* measures only about eighteen by ten inches, yet it contains a total of nearly thirty figures. Five male ballplayers can be seen, wearing belts that they use to throw the ball between them. Some scholars claim that the ball was the skull of the captain of the last losing team. This will surely appeal to the middle school child's fascination with the horrific, but it may also be mentioned that the games may have been played to "solve" political or social disputes that in our society would cause a war. The warm relationships between the spectators, evidenced by the parents and children seen arm in arm, should also be pointed out.

(figure available in print form)

Whistle Figures, Seated Woman with Child in Lap, Pottery, 7" H.

Jaina Island, Maya, Western Yucatan, Mexico (600-900 AD)

Reprinted by permission from the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven.

(figure available in print form)

Figurine, Standing Man with Snake Form around Neck, Pottery, 7-1/8" H. Jaina Island, Maya, Mexico, Western Yucatan (600-900 AD)

Reprinted by permission from the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven.

(figure available in print form)

Group of Ball Game with Spectators, Pottery, 17-3/4" L., 10-1/4" H.

Western Mexico, Ixtlan region, Nayarit, (100 BC-250 AD)

Reprinted by permission from the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven.

Objective The objective is that the students freely experiment with using clay to depict movement of the human form.

Materials Clay (ideally, self hardening); any kind of modeling tools from toothpicks to plastic spoon; newspapers to cover the tables; bowls of water; wire hangers.

Introduction

The teacher should show the students Ancient Mexican ceramic figurines such as those at Yale.* To involve the students in a discussion aimed at understanding the figures, questions such as the following should be asked: "What is this figure doing?" "Can you describe the facial features?" "Do you think the artisan was more interested in the action or the decorative surfaces; the emotions or the actions of the figures?"

Once the students have described the physical characteristics of the works they may be encouraged to speculate about the purpose of the figurines: “Do you think that these figurines tell a story?” “What do they tell us about the culture in which they were made?” “Do we have any sports that resemble this one?” “What do you think about having athletes solve political problems?”

Many students should discuss their ideas about positions or actions for their figures before they begin, to avoid mind blocks and other frustrations. They might want to create artifacts of modern sports such as baseball and basketball, swimming and track. Figurines dressed in modern clothing may be more to their liking than emulating the sparsely dressed ancient model. When the children are left purely to their own devices they may too often come up with “I don’t know what to do.”

Methodology

See the sections on clay preparation and on modeling figures out of clay from the last lesson.

* The Yale Art Gallery offers free tours of the galleries as well as free transportation!

A Lesson in Painting a Political Satire or a Nightmare

Background for the Teacher

Siqueiros was one of the three great Mexican muralists, and probably one of the greatest muralists in the history of art. Unlike his compatriots, he was also actively involved with the political revolutions of his country, having fought in the Mexican revolutionary war, and later having quit painting in order to become a union organizer. He then became the president of the National League Against Fascism and War. In 1936 Siqueiros went to Spain to fight in the civil war against Franco. During these years he continued to paint sporadically, first in the United States and then in Mexico, upon his return in 1939. Thereafter, he continued to paint monumental murals while remaining a political revolutionary. During World War II, he was an active anti-fascist, working in several Latin American countries, and as late as 1960, was imprisoned for four years because of his efforts to help union and political prisoners in his native country. ¹

For Siqueiros, art and politics were inextricable. He used art to depict the revolution and to spur it onward. Mural painting was his chosen medium because its monumentality enabled it to be seen by all the people.

In order to make his art vibrant, he embraced any technology that could in any way heighten the impact of his message: he was the first artist to employ the spray gun on cement walls, the slide projector to transfer his preparatory drawings onto the walls, and the first to use silicate paints. Again, the subjects of his art reflected the reality that he experienced, as his murals depicted the horrors of chemical warfare, in the *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (illustrated below), and the amazing and terrifying mechanical eye of medicine (a visionary catscan) in his *Apologia of the Future Victory of Medicine over Cancer* (also illustrated below).

Objective The discussion itself will take at least one period. The objective of this first lesson is to make the students aware of the political possibilities of art and of the fact that it is a powerful expressive medium. After the discussion, each student is to make one or more preparatory sketches for a painting, and to transfer the drawing onto a canvas or canvas board in order to

execute the painting.

Materials Materials for the lecture: The illustrations of Siqueiros' paintings in de Micheli's text are in color and are large enough to show a class of up to twenty children. This text is available from Fairfield University. The writer of this paper has slides of the reproductions.

(figure available in print form)

Left side of the *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*

(figure available in print form)

Portrait of the Bourgeoisie by David Alfaro Siqueiros Mural, 1939. Permission to reprint requested from the Electrical Workers' Union Building, Mexico City

Right side of the mural

(figure available in print form)

Detail from *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*

(figure available in print form)

Detail from *Apologia of the future Victory of Medicine over Cancer* by David Alfaro Siqueiros Mural, 1958. Permission to reprint requested from the National Medical Center, Mexico City.

Materials for the studio class: Sketch paper and pencil or charcoal; painting materials such as opaque paint and paper, or acrylic paint and canvas; brushes; visual resources such as magazines, photographs of Latin American art, etc.

Introduction

Without introducing Siqueiros, as a person or an artist, show the students a photograph of Siqueiros' 1939 mural, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, and ask them to tell you how to describe the painting with the following possible suggestive questions: "Does this painting have a central axis and is it basically symmetrical?" (yes). "What is on the central axis?" (The mechanical eagle overpowering a non-mechanical one, and a money-making machine). "Who are the men wearing suits and gas masks?" (Politicians who have become part of the war machine). "Who are the men wearing gas masks and uniforms?" (the fascists).

Be sure to point out the patriot-headed orator on the left side. "Is this a human figure?" "Why does it have a screw instead of legs?" "Does it remind you of any political figure?" (Hitler, Mussolini?)

The figure on the right (deliberate symbolic placement?) seems to embody a totally different spirit from most of the other figures in the mural. "How many human faces do we see in this monumental work?" (three). "What do they have in common?" (Only the patriot and the vision of the two concentration camp victims (to the left of the mechanical eagle) are truly human; these alone have faces and street clothes. Only these three are of the proletariat, the people).

If the students know what one point perspective is: "Do all parts of the painting share a single perspective; are they in a single space?" (No, the soldiers march in additive planes and the eagle floats above the whole. The upper part of the composition is a totally different perspective).

The upper part of the painting seems to be a future view of a world that can use technology for the betterment of humanity rather than to annihilate it.

This painting will evoke powerful responses from the students. Even if they have never seen another painting they will be able to understand that it is loaded with symbolism, mixed perspectives, political statements, and critical judgments of politicians.

The mural is painted on three walls and on the ceiling. This is the reason that the dictator and the patriot are distorted in the photograph of the whole. See how many children can figure this out.

By way of summation, and by way of actual introduction to what the students will be doing in the next art class, ask the students questions about their own experiences with government, bureaucracy, principals, and the police. Open the discussion up to other nightmare-like images that they may have experienced. Explain that exactitude in anatomical drawing has little to do with the success or failure of a painting. Discuss the artist's use of color (fire red, steely blue) to convey emotion.

Ask the students to think about something that has upset them, because in the next class they will get the opportunity to draw it.

Methodology

Middle school children have just about enough patience to make a single sketch and to then transfer it to the canvas board (with a bit of teacher's help). Only the most confident and creative children will provide the teacher with both political drawings and personal depictions. But for the students who do so, the teacher might have to help the student decide about which drawing is the best for further development. Unless the student is strongly moved by some political event, he or she will not be able to sustain the effort that is required to execute a painting. That is why the personal horror might capture the students' interests more strongly.

Once the sketch is approved by the teacher and student, the student should copy it onto the painting surface. The colors that are to be used should be either labeled on the various forms to be painted, or preferably, be sketched onto the painting surface with colored chalk, watercolor, or a sketchy application of the paint that is to be used for the complete painting. Only in an actual art class will the teacher have time to teach color theory, but for the teacher who wants to give his or her students some brief suggestions, the following might be of some use:

Suggestions for Color Application

1. Colors of the same or close value (lightness or darkness) should not regularly be placed next to each other because they will appear to blend together.
2. Hot colors (red, yellow, orange, pinks, etc.) tend to project, that is move outward. For this reason, hot colors should only be used as local (realistic) details, or for shapes that are meant to receive a lot of attention because of their importance.
3. Colors do not have to be the same as those in the real world.

Although many children have a natural sense of design, some need help in this area. Again, a list follows with what might be useful suggestions for the students who need them:

Suggestions for Form Placement

1. Larger shapes tend to attract the most attention.
2. Forms at the point at which perspective lines converge (come together) also attract attention.
3. Generally, shapes on the upper half of the painting plane are seen first and appear to be the largest.
4. When many small forms are placed together, they are either seen as connected or as part of a pattern.
5. To make sure that your composition remains balanced, turn the painting on its side and upside down once in a while. When you look out your work from different viewpoints, you will be able to see what shapes look like as pure visual forms that have no meaning. The best way to look at a work in progress is to hold it up to a mirror. This will remove you from it, so that you can see it more objectively.

Elementary school children usually do not need any of these art principles to be able to boldly approach a painting surface. But middle school children welcome “rules” even if they intend to break them.

The most important thing to be emphasized to the students is that when an artist paints, he or she is ultimately the boss. No one knows better what is best in his or her creation.

Ideas for Some Crafts Based on Latin American Designs

Outside the context of the regular art classroom, it is often difficult to teach art. But because so many curriculum units are enhanced by visual-manual activities, creating things is an invaluable teaching method. For this reason simple crafts can be taught in all classrooms with impressive results. A short list of Latin American types of crafts ideas is included below. The motifs that are so typically Latin American can be used for any of these, and the students can either find other motifs, or design their own.

Crafts Based on Latin American Motifs

Yarn Designs

Draw a design on a piece of cardboard.

Outline each form with a piece of yarn.

Fill in each shape with that color winding it inward toward the center of each shape.

Wooden Pendants

Draw a design on the surface of a small piece of wood.
Use acrylic paint to color it. Spray with acrylic fixative.

Pi-atas

These papier-mâché crafts are often time consuming and messy, but are worthwhile because of the creative possibilities, and because they are excellent as a small group project. Children's craft books provide simple directions for traditional and modified pi-atas. Please see the bibliography.

Sheet Metal Crafts

Sheet metal, or metal foil can be cut, folded incised and hammered to make traditional Mexican-like masks, or jewelry and plaques.

The metal can be worked from both the back and the front for a variety of textures.

Fabric Collages

Draw a design onto a light color cloth. Cut pieces of fabric or paper and glue these onto the various parts of the design in either a mosaic fashion, or in large single shapes.

(figure available in print form)

Latin American Motifs to be Used in Craft Projects. Illustrations by the author.

Notes

1. Mario de Micheli, *Siqueiros* , Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, New York, 1968, p.1.

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers and Students

The following books were chosen because they have reproductions that are of high quality, and readable texts for both students and teachers. They are also available at either local libraries or at the libraries of local colleges.

Bloch, Peter. *Painting and Sculpture of the Puerto Ricans* . New York: c1978.

Good black and white reproductions.

Dockstader, Frederick J. *Indian Art in Middle America* . Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Publishers, 1964.

Many excellent reproductions, most in color, of the ancient crafts including pottery, jewelry, God's eyes, bead

work and more.

Micheli, Mario de. *Siqueiros*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968.

Oversized book with excellent reproductions of Siqueiros' art. Highly informative about the artist's life and work. Available from Fairfield University and interlibrary loan.

Osborne, Harold. *South American Mythology* . Middlesex: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1968.

Same very good color reproductions of ancient arts and crafts including excellent examples of hammered gold. Beautiful black and white photographs of Indians at work, their land and their architecture.

Helm, MacKinley. *Modern Mexican Painters* . New York: Harper and Row, 1941.

A nice blend of art history, history and biographies of the artists. Good black and white photographs. Best of the related books of the same title.

Smith, Bradley. *Mexico A History in Art* . New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968.

An invaluable book for the historian and art historian interested in Mexico or in pictorial history. Large reproductions, high quality.

Westheim, Paul, Alberto Ruz, Pedro Armillas, Ricardo de Robina and Alfonso Caso. *Prehispanic Mexican Art* . New York: Putnam's Sons, 1972.

The best reproductions of art, artifacts and ruins that I have seen. Useful timeline, and plans of the temples. Hard reading.

Wolfe, Bertram D. *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* . New York, Stein and Day Publishers, 1963.

Interesting biography, many good black and white photographs and reproductions. Not the high quality of the Siqueiros but useful to compare the artists' works. I could not find an Orozco text that would complete the Mexican muralist group of greats (Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros).

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