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David Alfaro Siqueiros and “Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva:” Four Principles to Create Revolutionary Artwork

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Keywords

Mexican Art, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Communism

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As one of the most distinguished Mexican muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros played an important role in Mexican political and artistic history in the twentieth century. Despite the violence that took place in the first half of 1900s in Mexico, art flourished during this period. Inspired by the democratization that characterized the revolution, political art became common during the early twentieth century, and as Mexicans grappled with post-revolutionary identities, many artists, including Siqueiros, turned to communism as the way forward. In his speech "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva," delivered in 1932, Siqueiros delineated how to meld revolutionary ideology with the artistic process to create subversive art. Siqueiros's speech underscored four main principles needed to produce subversive art: art should be the expression of a collective, demonstrate a political statement, use modern techniques, and be available to the public. Siqueiros used the four principles presented in "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" to align painting with the social and scientific nature of the time in the hope of creating revolutionary art and techniques that would inspire the rejection of bourgeois artistic values.

Introduction and Context

In the twentieth century, Mexico witnessed decades of turbulence in forms of growing political repression, a violent revolution, the Great Depression, and two World Wars. The years of instability fueled the revolutionary ideas of Mexico's people as the nation transformed and modernized throughout the early decades of the 1900s. These revolutionary voices took root in the arts as the Mexican art scene began to boom in the 1930s. The Mexican artists' revolutionary ideals sought to inspire change in their nation as Mexico continued to rebuild its identity and political system in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and the emerging global threat of fascism. David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the most distinguished Mexican artists in history, used his art to propagate social-political advancement in accordance with his communist ideals. To understand the subversive ideology of Mexican artists like David Alfaro Siqueiros, one must first understand the historical context in which he, and other artists of the time, lived through.

The Mexican Revolution had a significant impact on Mexican culture and identity in the twentieth century. Beginning as a call for democracy, land redistribution, and decreased foreign involvement with the national economy, the revolutionary ideology stemmed in response to the despotic rule of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled between 1876-1911 in a time known as the *Porfiriato.*[1] During his time in power, Díaz drastically weakened state powers and local identities throughout Mexico by substituting internal progress with foreign investment.[2] Fed up with the lack of effective suffrage, a rebellion against Díaz's regime developed across class lines in 1908 as the issue of another election came to the public's attention. The changes made under the rule of Díaz shifted the nation away from state autonomy to a more centralized government, leading to unrest

[1] Rafael Barajas and David A. Auerbach, "Caricature and Revolution in Mexico," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 26 (2010), 82.
[2] Michael J. Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution 1910-1940,* (Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico University Press, 2002), 10-13.

and turmoil in the lower and middle classes. Previously built on a foundation of strong local government and autonomy, the *Porfiriato* used cronyism to wrestle power out of the hands of the people to increase Díaz's political control over the entirety of Mexico.[3] With a strong emphasis on "modernization," the *Porfiriato* possessed and repurposed agricultural estates which worsened the working conditions and repressed the rights of the peasant class throughout Mexico, leading to proletariat repression and exploitation.[4]

The Mexican Revolution saw the rise and fall of numerous revolutionary leaders throughout the conflict against the oppressive and exploitative upper class. The subsequent years cast Mexico into a decade-long period of political instability characterized by immense bloodshed between competing factions. Led by Emiliano Zapata, the Zapatistas were a considerable *campesino* force that fought vigorously for land reform since the *Porfiriato* had resulted in foreign influences taking much of the land of Mexican peasants. Although the Zapatistas focused on a more locally based revolution, land distribution was of major importance for the entire Mexican Revolution. In addition to land reform, many revolutionaries fought for decreased foreign influence, economic modernization, and a more hands-off government that reflected traditional structures prior to the *Porfiriato*. Art depicting Zapata, issues of modernization, and distribution of satirical art became popularized during the Mexican Revolution, especially by José Guadalupe Posada. Born in the mid 19th century, Posada combined humor and art to ridicule the corruption present during the early years of the revolution.[5] Considered to be one of the founding fathers of political cartoons and Mexican art, Posada supported the dispossessed through his lampoons. In addition to satirical pieces, Posada

[3] Gonzales, *The Mexican Revolution*, 13.
[4] Nora Hamilton, "The Mexican State and the Revolution," in *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, (Princeton University Press, 1982), 40.
[5] Jean Charlot, "Mexican Prints," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 8, no. 3 (1949), 83.

popularized the image of the *calavera*, or skeletons engaged in lively activities. [6] The popularization of the *calavera* and his political art provided a national art identity and inspired muralists and printmakers for years to come, including Siqueiros.

The Mexican Revolution had a profound impact on all areas of life during the first half of the twentieth century and deeply influenced Mexican artists. Throughout the Revolution, newspapers were flooded with political cartoons as art became a revolutionary tool.[7] Siqueiros himself shouldered a gun and partook in the Mexican Revolution in the army of General Carranza while only 18 years old, which inspired his revolutionary outlook and dedication to the proletariat.[8] In a speech in 1948, Siqueiros asserted that the Mexican artistic culture "originated from the Mexican Revolution," truly highlighting the importance of the revolution to both Siqueiros and Mexican artists in general.[9] As Mexican identity transformed during the tumultuous years of the first half of the twentieth century, artists like Siqueiros responded to radical change in Mexican politics, developed art that embraced communist ideologies, and sought to continue the subversive activity that originated in the Mexican Revolution.

For artists like Siqueiros, the Mexican Revolution created an opportunity to reinvent cultural ideals as the nation reconstructed itself and its identity in the wake of the bloody and politically unstable decades that superseded the *Porfiriato*. The 1920s saw a rise of various new political parties such as the right wing *Partido Acción Nacional*, *Partido Popular Socialista*, and the *Partido Comunista Mexicano* (PCM) in 1919. Like Mexico, the Soviet Union had recently experienced a major revolution, and many Mexicans turned to Lenin and other Soviet figures for

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[6] Ilan Stavans, "José Guadalupe Posada, Lampooner," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 16 (1990), 56-65.
[7] Jean Charlot, "Mexican Prints," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 8, no. 3 (1949), 84.
[8] Jean Charlot, *Mexican Painting,* (New York: Parkstone International, 2018), 24.
[9] Stephanie J. Smith, *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1.

guidance in a post-revolutionary society. Siqueiros and his artistic and political counterpart, Diego Rivera, both joined the PCM in late 1922, along with numerous other Mexican artists and intellectuals.[10] The PCM attracted many artists who hoped to continue the revolutionary spirit that had arisen during the Mexican Revolution. Similarly, communism appeared to provide a successful path towards the rapidly modernizing future and would right the wrongs that had been inflicted upon working-class Mexicans for centuries. Members of the PCM, like Siqueiros, found inspiration in Vladimir Lenin's view that "art should be 'imbued with the spirit of the class struggle being waged by the proletariat,'" which Lenin publicized in a speech in 1920.[11] Siqueiros and his fellow artists in the PCM gained a complex understanding of communism which inspired them to create art ingrained with radical political messages that sought to combat oppression and uplift the proletariat struggle.

Although Siqueiros's involvement in the Partido Comunista Mexicano only lasted until 1930 when the party ousted him for his unorthodox behavior, communist ideology remained central in the artist's life. The revolutionary position of Siqueiros remained noticeably present in his art, speeches, and essays. This essay will use a historical approach to analyze Siqueiros's 1932 speech titled "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" and explore what it meant for Siqueiros to align painting with the social and scientific nature of the time. It will also explore whether or not he embodied his Marxist values in his career. In this speech to an audience of fellow artists in Los Angeles during Siqueiros's political exile from Mexico, Siqueiros delineated four main principles to create subversive artwork. He argued that every painting should: be the expression of a collective, demonstrate a political statement, utilize modern technology and techniques, and be readily available to the public. Siqueiros used the four

[10] Stephanie J. Smith, *The Power and Politics of Art*, 3.
[11] Stephanie J. Smith, *The Power and Politics of Art*, 6.

principles presented in “Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva” to align painting with the social and scientific nature of the time in the hope of creating revolutionary art and techniques that would inspire the rejection of bourgeois artistic values.

Historiography

A surge in the cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico began once the Mexican political scene became more stable in the wake of the Revolution, initiated by Mexican art exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1930 and the Museum of Modern Art in 1931.[12] American interest in the works of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros grew as museums began to recognize and acknowledge the talent of Mexican visual arts. The work of the great Mexican muralists and artists of the twentieth century continued to captivate the global art world and remains a significant part of modern art history. Because of this, Siqueiros’s work and the work of his contemporaries provide a window into Mexican life and politics in the transformative period in the wake of the Revolution. Beginning in the 1950s, scholarly texts concerning the pieces of Siqueiros and other Mexican artists of the time became popular in the United States. During this time, academia surrounding the topic of Mexican art in the twentieth century focused on analyzing the themes depicted in the artwork. Over time, scholarly work in the twenty-first century looked beyond the artistic creations of the artist and began to explore the artist as a more complex figure. In the case of Siqueiros, more attention was given to his political views and how his dedication to communist ideals influenced his art.

[12] Joseph J. Rishel, “North of the Border: Exhibiting and Collecting Modern Mexican Art in the United States,” in Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950, ed. Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini and Renato González Mello (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 331.

In 1956, Bernard Samuel Meyers published *Mexican Painting in Our Time*, one of the first texts dedicated to Mexican art published in the United States.[13] Nearly three hundred pages long, the book provided readers with a biography of well-known Mexican artists of the twentieth century. The majority of the book, like many texts dedicated to Mexican art, focuses on the "Big Three" muralists, Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco. Meyers's text underscored the importance of the Mexican Revolution as an influential force on modern Mexican art, arguing that the art of the twentieth century did "not display sacred or literary themes but rather historical themes born of the Revolution."[14] While Meyers dedicated a large portion of *Mexican Painting in Our Time* to the life of David Alfaro Siqueiros, the text glossed over Siqueiros's political fervor that marked his career. Although Meyers addressed both Siqueiros and Rivera's involvement with the Mexican Communist Party, he failed to understand the importance of the Communist rhetoric to Siqueiros's process of artmaking as well as the influence on the art itself, most likely due to the fact the book was published during the Red Scare.[15] As one of the earliest texts dedicated to Mexican art in the twentieth century, Meyers laid the foundation of the academic analysis of Siqueiros's art, but failed to demonstrate the importance of Siqueiros's communist views.

Like Meyers, Shifra Goldman published foundational works dedicated to David Alfaro Siqueiros in the twentieth century. Goldman, unlike Meyers, had the unique opportunity to visit Mexico City to interview Siqueiros for an article in 1965.[16] With numerous essays dedicated to Mexican art history, Goldman served as a fundamental figure in Mexican art historiography and the Chicano movement.[17] Goldman's dedication to Siqueiros and his art inspired her to assist in

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[13] Bernard Samuel Meyers, *Mexican Painting in Our Time*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
[14] Donald Robertson, *The Art Bulletin* 40 no. 2 (1958), 168.
[15] Meyers, *Mexican Painting*, 86.
[16] Rebecca Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's América Tropical," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 6 (2014), 115.
[17] Shifra M. Goldman, "The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class," *Art Journal* 49, no. 2 (1990): 167-73.

the preservation of *América Tropical*, one of the three murals Siqueiros created during his time in Los Angeles.[18] Goldman's work with Mexican artists like Siqueiros in the late twentieth century was essential to the scholarship and the preservation of the mural *América Tropical*, making her a crucial member of Mexican art history and its historiography.

Scholarly texts about Siqueiros's art shifted away from simple analysis of the works after the turn of the century and began to explore the artist's ties to communism. In 2012, Christopher Fulton dedicated an article to the exploration of Siqueiros's lesser-known landscapes. Through this artistic analysis, Fulton stated that his essay intended to "restore" the "revolutionary position" of Siqueiros, which had often been overlooked by previous scholarly discourses surrounding the life of the artist.[19] Fulton blended the political and the artistic in his interpretation of Siqueiros's forgotten landscapes to reestablish the importance of Siqueiros's radical connections. Like Fulton, Stephanie Smith, another scholar of the twenty-first century, emphasized the influence of Marxism on Siqueiros's life in *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. In the text, Smith criticized the historiography of previous works and stated that "despite the deep ties of many of Mexico's most important innovative thinkers to the PCM, the historiography of this period largely ignores the centrality of the Party within their lives," as Meyers had done.[20] Both Fulton and Smith explored Siqueiros's life and career through a political lens, since the communist ideology profoundly influenced him and his work.

Twenty-first century scholarship regarding Siqueiros's work looked beyond the product of his artwork and into the process of creating the piece. For Siqueiros and many of his peers, the production of the art itself was just as significant as the finished project. Scholarship failed to

[18] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's America Tropical, 115.
[19] Christopher Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 75, no. 1, (2012), 94.
[20] Smith, *The Power and Politics of Art*, 3.

reflect this until the twenty-first century with publications dedicated to the scientific and technical aspects of the artwork. Published in 2013, a study of Siqueiros's use of cellulose nitrate paint explored the technological world of art production.[21] Since the use of new techniques and materials were essential to Siqueiros's artistic and political spirit, the essay published by McGlinchey et al. provided a more in-depth understanding of Siqueiros's career than one-dimensional texts published in the mid-twentieth century, like Meyers's work. The majority of the scholarly work on David Alfaro Siqueiros and the Mexican art movement in the twenty-first century has centered less on basic analysis of the paintings and instead on the influence of Siqueiros's Marxist beliefs on his art and its production. In continuation with this trend, it is necessary to explore what it meant for Siqueiros to align his painting with the social and scientific nature of the modern age, as inspired by his Marxist ideology, and how he put his Marxist beliefs into action to create subversive art.

The Four Principles

Siqueiros gave his speech, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" while in exile in Los Angeles, California, in 1932. Siqueiros's exile began after he participated in a chaotic May Day parade that resulted in his arrest in 1930.[22] Following this arrest, the Mexican artist was found guilty of "incitación a la rebelión, sedición, motín e injurias al señor presidente de la República," which resulted in a five-month stay in prison before he was released on bail and instructed to live under house arrest in the city of Taxco.[23] During the period in Taxco, Siqueiros repeatedly violated house arrest which resulted in the order from the Mexican

[21] Chris McGlinchey, Anny Aviram, Sandra Zetina, Elsa Arroyo, José Luis Ruvalcaba Sil, and Manuel Eduardo Espinosa Pesqueira. "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint and His Advocacy for Innovation, 1931-1949," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 52, no. 4 (2013): 278-89.
[22] Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, "Militancia política y labor artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros: de Olvera Street a Río de la Plata," *Estudios de historia moderna y contemporánea de México*, no. 35 (2008), 119.
[23] Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, "Militancia política y labor artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros," 119.

government demanding that the artist leave Mexico due to his subversive politics or return to reclusion. This ultimatum led to Siqueiros's influential time in Los Angeles from May to November of 1932, where he would go on to give his speech at the John Reed Club in September of the same year.[24] Founded in 1929, the John Reed Club in Hollywood was "una congregación de intelectuales de izquierda… que tenía el fin de crear consciencia social," making it the perfect setting for the exiled artist.[25] It was here that Siqueiros defined his four principles aimed at creating a subversive style of art that would "induce a complete overthrow of bourgeois artistic values."[26] Siqueiros's exile in Los Angeles served as a critical time in his development as an artist and a political figure by providing him the opportunity to explore new artistic techniques and express his political views through his art, as seen in the murals he painted and the speech he gave in Los Angeles.

According to Siqueiros's 1932 speech at the John Reed Club, to achieve "subversive" art, every painting must be the expression of a collective rather than "el mezquino trabajo individual," in order to align itself with the social and scientific nature of the modern age.[27] Having recently completed the mural titled *Street Meeting*, Siqueiros highlighted the importance of the Block of Mural Painters in the creation of his mural at the Chouinard School of Art. The production of *Street Meeting* lasted the first two weeks of July in 1932 and involved the collaboration of "veinte pintores profesionales del sur de California con el carácter de alumnos," to whom Siqueiros served as a mentor and peer.[28] This group became titled the Block of Mural

[24] Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, "Militancia política y labor artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros," 120-122.
[25] Paulina González Villaseñor, "Dos discursos en tiempos de subversion: Benjamin y Siqueiros," *Revista arbitrada de artes visuales* 40 (2017), 19.
[26] Christopher Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 75, no. 1 (2012), 99.
[27] David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subersiva," (John Reed club de Los Ángeles, California, 1932).
[28] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

Painters and sought to imbue their work, like *Street Meeting*, with a "forma orgánica colectiva."[29]

In order to support the proposal that all subversive art should represent the expression of a collective, Siqueiros admonished the use of easel painting as he considered it to be "mezquina propiedad individual" rather than a representation of the masses.[30] Using the collective work of the Block of Mural Painters on *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical* as an example, Siqueiros insisted that collaborative work was the "único capaz de aportar al proletariado el amplio material de agitación y propaganda" in the fight against the oppressive capitalist system that he sought to dismantle.[31] The Block itself, according to Siqueiros, succeeded in demonstrating the "superiority" of collective work since it worked under "una dirección técnica elegida democráticamente," showing that Siqueiros did not hold himself to a higher level of importance than the other members of the Block, despite the fact that the group consisted of graduate art students.[32] This also emphasized Siqueiros's dedication to the importance of collective work as a form of teaching another generation of political artists who could follow in Siqueiros's footsteps of infusing popular art with radical ideology. For Siqueiros, spreading the practice of creating subversive art was critical to his identity as an artist. To end his speech, Siqueiros reasserted his main points and concluded that any revolutionary painter must possess "amplio espíritu colectivo y de disciplina orgánica dentro del equipo," due to the fact that "el que no sabe tener disciplina corporativa no tendrá nunca, en ninguna ocasión, disciplina de clase," reiterating the importance of Marxist ideology in his principles.[33] Siqueiros's speech at the John Reed Club articulated his

[29] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[30] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[31] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[32] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[33] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

belief that in order for artwork to be dialectical and subversive, it had to be the expression of a democratic collective and that collective work was superior to individual work that the artist considered to be "petty".

Siqueiros lived out his principle that art should be the expression of a collective throughout his career as an artist. While Siqueiros delivered his speech in 1932, his passion for collaborative work existed long before his forced exile to Los Angeles. In 1923, during his early stages as an artist, Siqueiros helped found the *Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos Pintores y Escultores* (SOTPE).[34] This artist syndicate sought to create a form of "arte público, didáctico y propagandístico al servicio de las mayorías, comprometido con los problemas sociales y políticos del momento," goals that Siqueiros played a large role in defining for the group.[35] Many artists dedicated to the PCM, including Diego Rivera, joined Siqueiros in SOTPE.[36] Despite being a collective group of artists dedicated to the production of revolutionary art, SOTPE did not produce collective pieces like those of the Block of Mural Painters. Instead, the group went on to create *El machete*, a newspaper dedicated to Marxist and anti-imperialist ideology that later came under the jurisdiction of the PCM.[37] SOTPE embodied Siqueiros's preposition that artists should form collectives in order to produce dialectical work ten years prior to delivering his speech at the John Reed Club, although it did not produce collaborative work.

Siqueiros's dedication to collective work continued after his exile to Los Angeles, as he upheld his own suggestions to create dialectical-subversive art. In 1936 Siqueiros established a new art studio in New York City hoping to take advantage of the radical politics of the city.[38]

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[34] Azuela de la Cueva, "Militancia política y labor artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros," 113.
[35] Azuela de la Cueva, "Militancia política y labor artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros," 113.
[36] Robert Herr, "'El Machete Sirve Para Cortar La Caña:' Obras Literarias Y Revolucionarias En 'El Machete' (1924-1929)," *Revista De Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 33, no. 66 (2007), 133.
[37] Robert Herr, "'El Machete Sirve Para Cortar La Caña,'" 134.
[38] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 279.

There, Siqueiros founded another artist group titled the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop (SEW). This workshop ultimately fulfilled Siqueiros's desire for a collective, democratic collection of artists that he spoke of in his 1932 speech. The workshop served as a revolutionary space for Siqueiros and likeminded artists to explore the development of political art by building on previous groups that Siqueiros had previously established, including the Block of Mural Painters.[39] Some of the artists in SEW included Harold Lehman, Jackson Pollock, Axel Horr, Jose Gutiérrez, among other famous international artists of the twentieth century.[40] The artists within SEW furthered Siqueiros's proposals delineated in "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" through the experimental and collaborative techniques they developed. The majority of the experimentation done by this collective was through the form of easel painting, despite Siqueiros's claim in his speech that easel painting could only be individual property.[41] Instead, the easel paintings produced by the artists in SEW were done collaboratively. Harold Lehman, a member of the SEW, explained the collaborative process stating that "one person would pour a color, another person would pour a color, then a third would come along with a thinner."[42] Although the extent of collaboration on each work produced by SEW is unknown, it is likely that the majority of the artwork created by the collective had some level of group participation. Through this process, SEW protested against the "ego-centrism that typifies bourgeois artmaking" and instead worked to create collaborative work outside of the capitalist system that had taken root in the art world.[43] The art created by SEW upheld Marxist ideology through its production, transforming the process of artmaking into a revolutionary act. Through

[39] Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," 105.
[40] Laurance P. Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936," *Art Journal* 35, no. 3 (1976), 238.
[41] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[42] Harold Lehman, interview by Stephen Polcari, March 28, 1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[43] Fulton, "Siqueiros's Experimental Landscapes," 106-107.

this, the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop upheld the principle that all art should be the expression of the collective, delineated by Siqueiros in his 1932 speech at the John Reed Club.

The second principle necessary in order to create dialectical-subversive art that aligned painting with the social and scientific nature of the "modern age" according to Siqueiros was the idea that every painting should demonstrate a political statement. In his address to fellow leftists in Los Angeles, Siqueiros insisted that art "sin la convicción proletaria es instrumento muerto, porque la convicción es la vida del arte político," emphasizing his view that all art should represent a political message upholding the voice of the proletariat.[44] To Siqueiros, "modern" art could only exist through "la pintura de agitación *y* propaganda revolucionaria," since the political use of art was completely unavoidable according to his speech.[45] The outspoken artist also insisted that only "los pintores adictos a la lucha del proletariado," like himself, could create sufficiently political works because only they could "producir arte emocionado y trascendentalmente representativa de la época actual."[46] This dedication to artists "addicted" to the proletariat cause dominated Siqueiros's life as the political and the artistic became inseparable to him. Art embodied politics, and Siqueiros demonstrated that throughout his experimental artmaking process and through the subjects of his work. Due to his dedication to blending art and politics, Siqueiros often criticized Rivera's involvement with governmental commissions, highlighting his own dedication to his principles aimed at creating dialectical-subversive art.[47]

The use of art as a political tool was likely familiar to Siqueiros, as Mexican graphic art flourished in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and World War II. In an interview, Siqueiros

[44] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[45] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[46] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[47] Smith, *The Power and Politics of Art*, 88.

himself described the period as "a Golden Age for contemporary graphic art in Mexico… Of those who lived during this time in Mexico, who does not recall the walls plastered with posters featuring our prints, all expressing very clear positions on the concrete problems that affected Mexico and the entire world?"[48] Mexican political graphic arts gained popularity under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, prior to the Mexican Revolution, and remained useful propagandistic tools throughout the early twentieth century, as characterized by Siqueiros's quote.[49] With the Mexican Revolution came a rise in support for democracy and dissident voices were welcomed in response to the *Porfiriato*, making political posters more common. While primarily known for his work on murals, Siqueiros exemplified his principle of creating political artwork through agitprop published in various leftist magazines where he joined other Mexican artists that, like him, possessed "ideología y convicción revolucionarias proletarias."[50] *El machete*, the newspaper founded by Siqueiros and SOTPE in 1924, used caricatures to critique the bourgeoise and governmental officials, as well as art that promoted the cause of the proletariat. The art in *El machete* and other socialist periodicals and magazines, such as *Frente a Frente* and *El libertador* served political and propagandistic objectives that featured the struggles of the proletariat and Marxist ideology.[51] While promoting the socialist publications, Siqueiros also created political artwork to be published in the magazines, upholding his ideal that artwork should be political, even before giving the speech to the John Reed Club. One piece in particular, *La unidad del campesino, el soldado y el obrero* (Figure 1) published in *El machete* in 1924 demonstrated this. The woodcut captures Siqueiros's dedication to the voice of the proletariat

[48] Rafael Barajas and David A. Auerbach, "Caricature and Revolution in Mexico," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 26 (2010), 100.
[49] Barajas and Auerbach, "Caricature and Revolution in Mexico," 81.
[50] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[51] Barajas and Auerbach, "Caricature and Revolution in Mexico," 98-100.

and the creation of political art. The thick lines that characterize the piece recall the influential caricatures of Posada, one of the first political artists in Mexico to publicize work in magazines that gave voice to the dispossessed.[52] The three figures of the farmer, soldier, and the worker referenced the straw figurines popularized by artisans in Puebla, Mexico and were figures utilized by the Communist Party.[53] The united hands and similar facial characteristics of the men depicted in Siqueiros's woodcut for *El machete* invokes a feeling of unity and captures the sense of proletariat struggle that much of Siqueiros's work was dedicated to and upheld his principle that art should serve a political purpose as "propaganda revolucionaria."[54]

(Figure 1) *La unidad del campesino, el soldado y el obrero*.[55]

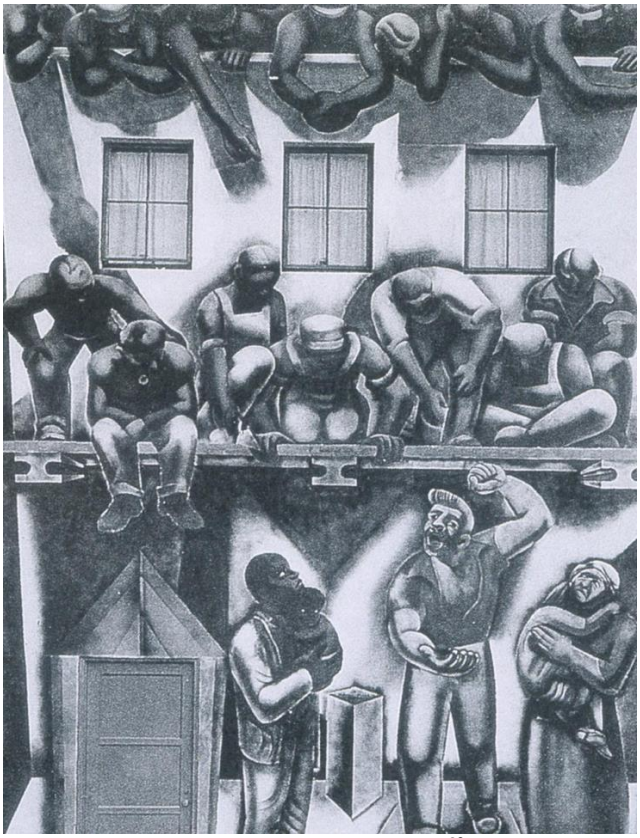
[52] Stavans, "José Guadalupe Posada, Lampooner," 56.
[53] Azuela de la Cueva, "*El Machete* and *Frente a Frente*: Art Committed to Social Justice in Mexico," *Art Journal* 52, no. 1 (1993), 83.
[54] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[55] David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Graciela Amador, "A los soldados, a los obreros y a los campesinos: Los tres somos víctimas, los tres somos hermanos; Farsa en varios actos titulada; La caída de los ricos y la construcción de un nuevo orden social," *El Machete: Periódico quincenal* (Mexico City), April 1924.

Siqueiros remained dedicated to creating art that represented the "dialéctica, agresiva, conminativa y tremendamente optimista" voice of the proletariat during his exile in Los Angeles, as seen in the murals he painted at that time, especially *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical*.[56] The first of the two murals he painted, *Street Meeting*, was completed in two weeks in July of 1932 in the sculpture court of the Chouinard Art School. The mural took up 19' x 24' on the outside wall, and with the help of the Block of Mural Painters, was completed and unveiled by July 7th, 1932.[57] The piece depicted a crowd of workers paused in the midst of their work peering down at a passionate orator, clad in a red shirt, on the street below (Figure 2). On either side of the speaker stands a black man and a white woman, both holding a child. At the unveiling of the mural, Siqueiros received mixed reviews due to the political nature of the piece. Similar to *La unidad del campesino, el soldado y el obrero*, the mural *Street Meeting* highlighted the importance of the "voice of the proletariat" and the laborer. The central figure of the work, the speaker, likely served as an allusion to communism due to his red shirt and emotional speech. As mentioned in his speech, Siqueiros believed that art needed to contain and understanding of "la vida diaria y de las diarias luchas del proletariado" which is what he depicted in *Street Meeting*.[58]

At the time of the unveiling of *Street Meeting*, Los Angeles was a strict "antiunion town" that contained "a police anti-Red squad" dedicated to political conservatism and anti-communist sentiments.[59] Due to the popularity of conservatism in Los Angeles, the pro-labor sentiments in *Street Meeting* and the allusion to communism through the red shirt of the passionate orator stirred controversy in Los Angeles. Within the year, Siqueiros's work outside of the Chouinard Art School was whitewashed and erased from the city as a result of the political message of the

[56] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[57] Shifra M. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974), 322.
[58] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[59] Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 322.

work, and no longer exists. Even so, *Street Meeting* upheld Siqueiros's principle that all art should raise and represent the voice of the proletariat.



(Figure 2) *Street Meeting*[60]

Despite the mixed reactions to *Street Meeting*, Siqueiros's dedication to politically charged art remained resolute, as seen in his production of *América Tropical.* Not long after the production of *Street Meeting*, Siqueiros was given the opportunity to paint a mural at the Plaza Art Center in Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles.[61] In the commission, Siqueiros was asked to depict Mexico "as a land of plenty, where the fruits of the land fell, freely into the hands of the people," a task that would require Siqueiros to temporarily suppress his dedication to revolutionary and subversive art.[62] Rather than abandoning the communist principles, Siqueiros

[60] David Siqueiros, Mexican, 1896-1974. *Street Meeting [destroyed]*.
[61] Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 322.
[62] Leslie Rainer, "Conserving and Presenting Siqueiros's: América Tropical," *American Art* 26, no. 1 (2012), 14.

used the commission to expose the wrongs of American imperialism by creating *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*, the full title of the piece.[63]

Siqueiros began his work on *América Tropical* (Figure 3) in late August, on the wall in Olvera Street that could be viewed by thousands of passersby. Much larger than *Street Meeting*, at 17' x 80', *América Tropical* took over a month to complete.[64] Once unveiled, the mural depicted a grand scene of the crucifixion of an indigenous Mexican who represented the people of Latin America. Twisting tree branches and a Mayan pyramid encompassed the edges of the work and created the setting. Despite the grand geometric shapes of the setting, the eyes of the viewer are brought to the center of the work where Siqueiros depicted the collapsed body of a crucified native. Above the indigenous Mexican sits a screeching eagle with its wings spread wide, paralleling the spread arms of the crucifixion. Above the indigenous Mexican sits a screeching eagle with its wings spread wide, paralleling the spread arms of the crucifixion. The eagle represents both the American eagle and the deathly grip of American imperialism on the Latin American continent as well as the Aztec foundation myth.[65] In the upper right corner of the mural sat two snipers who peered menacingly down on the frail body of the crucified native, still ready to strike despite the weakened state of the central figure. The work emphasized pre-Columbian Mexican culture through the allusion to the Aztec foundation myth with the presence of the eagle, and the Maya-like pyramids while also centering on contemporary political issues.[66] Despite the depiction of the past, *América Tropical* required the audience to focus on the modern-day evils of American imperialism. Due to the nature of the piece, *América Tropical* was considered even more controversial than *Street Meeting*, and the potion of the mural depicting

[63] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's América Tropical," 118.
[64] Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 322.
[65] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's América Tropical," 118.
[66] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's América Tropical," 118.

the snipers was whitewashed shortly after the completion of the work.[67] Just two years later, the entire mural was whitewashed due to pressure from Los Angeles city officials.[68] In fact, there was such a strong reaction to the political nature of the piece on Olvera Street that the U.S refused to renew Siqueiros's visa, forcing him to continue his exile in Uruguay.[69] Even with the consequences, Siqueiros's goal of creating subversive art was fulfilled with the creation of *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical*.

(Figure 3) *América Tropical* with Robert Berdecio, a colleague of Siqueiros, in the foreground.[70]

Despite the fact that *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical* were whitewashed after Siqueiros's stay in Los Angeles, both of the murals embodied the artist's ideology that all art should be "propaganda revolucionaria" and reflect the fight of the proletariat. These famous Los Angeles murals displayed Siqueiros's political alliance with communism and his desire to stir

[67] Rainer, "Conserving and Presenting Siqueiros's: América Tropical," 14.
[68] Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's América Tropical," 115.
[69] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 278.
[70] David Siqueiros, Mexican, 1896-1974. *Tropical America. Rooftop View, with Roberto Berdecio*.

revolutionary ideology, one of the principles he outlined in "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" in 1932.

Siqueiros's commitment to revolutionary art went beyond the topics depicted in his works and also influenced the production of the art itself. In his speech at the John Reed Club, the artist explained his dedication to "la transformación radical de la técnica pictórica… que esté en consonancia con la naturaleza social y científica de la época moderna" and linked the importance of modern technology to the production of dialectical-subversive art.[71] In this, Siqueiros outlined his third principle that every painting should utilize modern techniques and technologies. Arguing that "modern" elements were "el único vehículo posible para los pintores de convicción marxista," Siqueiros rebuked the use of anachronistic elements such as the hand brush, traditional fresco, watercolor and oil painting.[72] He argued that "solamente los nuevos elementos e instrumentos… pueden resolver los problemas físicos, políticos y estéticos de la Edad Moderna," and proposed the use of more modern elements that he and the Block of Mural Painters had utilized in the creation of *Street Meeting*.[73] In place of anachronistic elements he considered to be "socialmente muerto," Siqueiros suggested the use of the air chisel, white cement, air brushes, blow torches, and other tools for the creation of the "modern" fresco.[74] To Siqueiros, aligning pictorial technique with modern technology was essential for the creation of subversive art because "sólo la técnica mecánica moderna puede expresar integralmente en la plástica la convicción proletaria revolucionaria," which he believed should be the purpose of art.[75] Since art was a revolutionary tool, the production of art should also be political, too.

[71] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[72] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[73] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[74] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[75] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

The political message behind *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical* gave both works an importance in the portfolio of Siqueiros's work, but the two murals also served as experimental pieces regarding the techniques used for their production, further upholding the principles delineated in the speech. The grand scale of *América Tropical* provided the perfect opportunity for Siqueiros to experiment with modern fresco techniques. For example, *América Tropical* was created over a layer of cement plaster, rather than the mixture of lime and sand used in traditional frescos.[76] In "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva," Siqueiros stated that cement should be used "en vez de la mezcla de cal y arena" because it allowed the paint to retain its color more easily once applied to the wall and "la capa de cemento no puede ser perjudicada fácilmente ni con un hierra" unlike the traditionally weaker fresco layer.[77] Producing lasting art was of great importance to Siqueiros according to his 1932 speech, and the cement layer provided the opportunity for longer lasting work. In addition to the use of cement as a "modern" technique used in *América Tropical*, it is likely that Siqueiros also utilized an air brush for paint application.[78] Siqueiros advocated for the use of the air brush over the hand brush because of the speed and ease of the tool and due to the fact it would give the modern painter "un mundo nuevo de posibilidades plásticas."[79] According to Siqueiros, for art to have value it had to be dialectical and subversive, and in order to be subversive the production process needed to utilize modern, experimental technology.

Even after his exile in Los Angeles, Siqueiros remained fascinated by experimental techniques which resulted in his use of cellulose nitrate-based paint. It is unknown as to when Siqueiros began his experimental work with cellulose nitrate, but Fourier-transform infrared

[76] Rainer, "Conserving and Presenting Siqueiros's: América Tropical," 14-15
[77] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[78] Rainer, "Conserving and Presenting Siqueiros's: América Tropical," 15.
[79] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

analysis conducted in the 1990s suggested that "a nitrocellulose binder could have been added to the paint" used in *América Tropical*.[80] His use of cellulose nitrate-based paint became more documented with the birth of the SEW, where experimentation with modern techniques to produce modern art was the central focus of the group. The broad color range, resistance to water and grease, and the quick drying time attracted Siqueiros to the use of this newly developed paint type that became popularized in the 1920s.[81] Siqueiros's use of cellulose nitrate developed in three phases in his career. To become more familiar with the new form of paint, he used the it as an "oil technique modified by fillers, as seen in *América Tropical*.[82] After some time and with the SEW, Siqueiros experimented by using cellulose nitrate paint without any mixers, and then in the late 1930s though the end of the 1940s, Siqueiros added fillers to the cellulose nitrate once again, but this time in order to make the paint thicker.[83] This process throughout his career shows that Siqueiros remained dedicated to changing techniques over time in order to remain experimental and therefore, more dialectical. The experimentation with cellulose nitrate paint went on to inspire Jackson Pollock, a member of SEW, providing one example of the importance of Siqueiros and his desire for new techniques.[84] His dedication to experimentation highlighted his belief that there was a "correlación entre la técnica pictórica y la ciencia."[85] The manner in which he created art was consistently changing in order to reflect modern mechanical techniques. Siqueiros's relationship with cellulose nitrate paint from the early 1930s through the end of the 1940s reveals his commitment to the principle that modern art required the use of modern tools.

[80] Rainer, "Conserving and Presenting Siqueiros's: América Tropical," 16.
[81] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 279-280.
[82] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 279.
[83] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 279.
[84] McGlinchey et. al, "David A. Siqueiros: His Modification of Oil and Cellulose Nitrate-Based Paint," 279.
[85] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

According to Siqueiros in "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversivo," the final component in the creation of modern, revolutionary art was the belief that art should be readily available to the public. The conviction that the public should have access to art dictated Siqueiros's commitment to mural painting since "la pintura mural directa pertenece a las masas, a la humanidad entera" instead of being individual property.[86] Not only did Siqueiros advocate for mural painting over anachronistic oil paintings that he considered to be "mezquina propiedad individual," but he also argued for the "pintura mural hacia la calles… sobre la pintura mural interior oculta" in order to enhance the accessibility of the art.[87] While outdoor murals allowed for more public viewers, Siqueiros also preferred for murals to be painted directly onto walls in order to prevent the work from being removed or sold, like murals painted on canvases and then hung on walls.[88]

In his production of *Street Meeting* and *América Tropical*, Siqueiros painted directly onto the external walls of the buildings, fulfilling his desire for art for the masses. The location of *América Tropical*, on the outdoor wall in Olvera Street, faced downtown Los Angeles near City Hall and a railroad terminal, making it a heavily trafficked area.[89] Because of this, it served as the perfect location for his art to be viewed by the public. Siqueiros's desire for art to be publicly accessible was inspired by his Marxist views; by painting in a public space, he broke the capitalist nature of art as a private entity for a privileged sector of society. Instead, it became public property for anybody on the streets below to experience; it belonged to the masses in the hopes that it would inspire revolutionary ideology in others. Art sequestered inside buildings and

[86] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[87] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[88] Sarah Schrank, "Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010), 440.
[89] Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 324.

museums could not reach the only audience that truly mattered – the proletariat.[90] Painting in public spaces "democratized art" for wider audiences, which was essential in the creation of revolutionary art designed to produce "efectos estéticos trascendentales… correspondientes al momento social actual de lucha de clases exasperada."[91] However committed to the cause outdoor murals to increase public access to art, Siqueiros's murals following his exile in California were both indoor and outdoor works. *The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos*, the last grand work of the artist, mixed the use of indoor and outdoor facing art in 1971, showing that he remained committed to making art for the masses.[92] Even so, Siqueiros advocated for increased accessibility of art, inspiring his desire for producing outdoor murals, so that the proletariat could easily witness his revolutionary works.

Conclusion

Despite the tumult that took place in the first half of the twentieth century in Mexico, art flourished during this period. Inspired by the democratization during the Revolution, political art became common during the first few decades, often in the form of political posters or magazines. As Mexico grappled with post-revolutionary identities, many artists turned towards communism as the way forward and joined the PCM. David Alfaro Siqueiros, having participated in the Mexican Revolution, also supported the growing communist party in Mexico during the early 1920s. Although his union with the party itself ended in 1930, Siqueiros remained dedicated to communist ideology and it deeply influenced the process and subject of his art. Siqueiros's radical political activities resulted in his political exile from Mexico in 1932 where he

[90] Villaseñor, "Dos discursos en tiempos de subversión," 20.
[91] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."
[92] Juan Carlos Arias Herrera, "From the Screen to the Wall: Siqueiros and Eisenstein in Mexico," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 30, no. 2 (2014), 425.

subsequently spent several months in Los Angeles. The artist's dedication to Marxism can be gleamed through his speech given at the John Reed Club in California during his exile in 1932. In this speech, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva," Siqueiros characterized how to meld revolutionary ideology with the artistic process to create subversive art. Siqueiros emphasized four major points in his speech to align visual art with the social and scientific nature of the modern age. He asserted that art should be the expression of a collective, demonstrate a political statement, use modern techniques, and be available to the public. With these steps, one could produce revolutionary art, which, according to Siqueiros, was the only art of value.[93] Through his career, Siqueiros utilized these four principles to create art of revolutionary agitation. The creation of the Block of Mural Painters, SOTPE, and SEW all featured his interest in expressing the work of a collective. Both *América Tropical* and *Street Meeting*, two of the murals he made while in exile in Los Angeles, were whitewashed due to the highly politicized nature of the pieces, since Siqueiros was dedicated to producing art that amplified the voice of the proletariat. Both pieces were readily available for a large audience because they were outside and faced heavily populated areas, adding to the need to whitewash them and their political messages. The public view of his murals was important to Siqueiros, as he sought to challenge the notion of art as individual property and firmly believed it should be readily available to the proletariat. Finally, he reflected his adherence to the four principles defined in his speech in his everchanging use of materials in order to reflect "modern" technology of the time, such as the use of cellulose nitrate-based paint. David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the most famous Mexican artists of his time, aligned art with politics in a seamless manner which sought to bring about the

[93] Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva."

rejection of bourgeois artistic tendencies through the creation of a dialectical, subversive form of art.

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