Mexican Muralism: The Art of Identity and Revolution

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“*The artist must paint as he would speak. I don’t want people to speculate what I mean, I want them to understand.*” — David Alfaro Siqueiros

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910. For the next 10 years, the country was gripped in a civil war.

When the fighting finally ended, a new government took power. It decided to hire artists to produce large murals, a kind of painting that is painted directly on a wall. This led to an artistic movement called the Mexican muralist movement.
The murals were meant to spread messages from the government and give people pride in their country. They were displayed in public places, where anyone could see them for free. They reached a large audience of common people.

The artists in the movement did not just spread the messages of the government, though. They also included their own ideas. These often challenged artistic and political traditions.

The beginnings of Mexico's traditional murals

Mexico has a long history of mural painting. It goes back to the time before the arrival of the Spanish. For example, the ancient civilization called the Olmecs painted murals. They were some of the earliest known painters in the Americas.

This tradition continued under Spanish rule, when murals were used to spread Catholicism.
Key ideas

The Mexican Revolution was a painful, 10-year civil war. Several leaders were competing for power. They had different visions for the country.

Some muralists were influenced by modern political ideas like socialism. Socialism is the idea that property should be owned and shared by people. It grew in popularity in the early 1900s. Many of the Mexican muralists were socialists. They believed that money and power should be shared with the working people, not just held by the rich.

New ideas were also changing art. Gerardo Murillo, also known as Dr. Atl, was one of many Mexican artists who was rethinking the role that art should play in society. In 1906, he wrote about a desire for a new art movement to speak to the common people. His writing helped set the stage for the Mexican muralism movement a few years later.
A government-backed program

In 1920, Mexico's new government decided to order a large number of public art projects. The government wanted the murals to help spread the ideas of the revolution, bringing together its past, present and future. Many murals were historical. However, they were also meant to show the country moving forward into the modern age.

In order to create these murals, the government hired some of the best Mexican artists of the day. Some, like Diego Rivera, had been influenced by recent European artistic movements. They also brought their own ideas to the work the government hired them to do.

Los tres grandes

There were three muralists at the center of the movement: David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. They became known as "los tres grandes" or "the big three."
Rivera was the most famous of the three. He used modern painting styles from around the world to show the Mexican working class as noble and glorious. Orozco's work focused on the suffering of mankind, the horrors of war and fears about the future. Siqueiros was young and bold, and his murals included visions of science, machinery and progress.

The three men had different political beliefs, but they all agreed that art should play a central part in Mexico's new culture. Together, they formed the Labor Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors. The group helped bring their work to wider attention.

**Mexican muralism in the U.S.**

By the end of the 1920s, the movement was spreading beyond Mexico. Each of los tres grandes spent some time in the United States. Their work became widely known there, leading to new interest in murals.

Back in Mexico, however, the movement started to change. Murals stopped being directed at the poor and working classes. They became more closely linked with the country's growing upper class.

**Revolutionary concepts and styles**

One of the key goals of the movement was to shake up art in the same way that the revolution had shaken up Mexico. The artists were revolutionaries. They were eager to reject traditional ways of making and displaying art.

Their work challenged the way the art world normally worked as a business. Their murals were free to look at. They also could not be sold because they were painted directly on walls.

**Socialism**

Many of the artists in the movement were socialists. They believed in the power of the working classes and in the equal distribution of wealth.

In the late 1920s, the government grew concerned. It started restricting what the muralists could paint. Socialist and communist ideas were restricted, forcing artists to either change how they painted or leave the country.
Industry

The Industrial Revolution had brought rapid changes, as masses of workers moved out of the fields and into factories. Some muralists saw a bright future driven by technology. Diego Rivera painted murals in Detroit, for example. They show men working in harmony with machines.

Others, though, saw technology as potentially dangerous. Siqueiros painted a mural for the Electrical Workers Union that showed electricity powering the "machine" of war, which was pumping out death and destruction.
Quiz

1. One MAIN idea of the article is that muralism was a way for Mexicans to learn about the values of their country.

What is another MAIN idea of the article?

(A) Murals help to spread socialist beliefs across a country.
(B) Murals are best when great artists paint them, like los tres grandes.
(C) Murals can be painted about many subjects and ideas.
(D) Murals are an art form that belongs to all people in a community.

2. What is the MAIN idea of the section "Industry?"

(A) Murals showed the dangerous side of industry.
(B) Murals showed different beliefs about the growth of industry.
(C) Murals showed the bright future of industry.
(D) Murals showed how industry compares to socialism.

3. If this article were organized chronologically, which section would come FIRST?

(A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-5]
(B) "The beginnings of Mexico's traditional murals"
(C) "Key ideas"
(D) "A government-backed program"

4. Read the section "A government-backed program."

Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of the section?

(A) compare/contrast
(B) problem/solution
(C) cause/effect
(D) question/answer