

HOUSTON BAPTIST UNIVERSITY
A PIECE OF THE PAST
UNIVERSITY MUSEUM ESSAY CONTEST, 2018-2019

Humanity Marching Forward:
An Analysis on *Dancing Woman*, 1969 by David Alfaro Siqueiros

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Word Count: 1106

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Among the old master paintings adorning the walls of the Houston Baptist University's Fine Arts Museum there is an unusual treasure. On loan from RedBud Gallery¹, David Alfaro Siqueiros' *Dancing Woman*, 1969 graces the back wall within a niche.¹ The painting is revolutionary due to its creator, its medium of acrylic on paper, and the revolutionary project that it would influence; it represents a small piece of a monolithic work whose focus is a known truth, that man should strive for peace. The eyes travel across expressionist marks of yellow, pink, violet, and black; these form the body of a female dancer vibrating with thick brushstrokes like a gesture that is not quite realism, and not quite abstract, within a standard portrait frame.² It happily sits among the old masters, flanked on the left by Marten Pepyn's medieval-looking renaissance caricatures of *The Marriage of Cana*, 1624-1625 and on the right the nearly perfect plastic *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, 1624-1625 by Anthony Van Dyk. To understand the significance of the work and the acrylic medium, one must look into the past of the artist, as there are no telltale signs or easily readable symbolism within the image like its companions in the museum.

David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) was a great painter, sculptor, and muralist with a career spanning over five decades. He was one of "the big three" Mexican muralists along with Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, all of whom shared socialist sympathies.³ In 1950 he was awarded a top prize in the XXV Venice Biennale of \$500,000.⁴ A prolific artist, he created over 25 murals throughout his lifetime in his native Mexico, as well as California, Argentina, Chile, and Cuba, many of which also had sculptural elements.⁵ Yet, he was also a Marxist, a union leader and organizer who withstood periods of exile from his motherland for his beliefs,

was frequently jailed, and ultimately was found guilty as a conspirator in a failed attempted assassination of Leon Trotsky.⁶

Siqueiros was born to the estate manager of a palatial Mexican family.^{7 8} Twenty years before his birth, Porfirio Diaz had seized power and ruled for the benefit of the wealthy. Mexico had already lost Texas to the United States, and her people were living off of the same wages that they had been for two-hundred years.⁹ In *Art and Revolution*, Siqueiros gives a firsthand account of his experiences in the Constitutional Army with friends from school in 1913. “We came into contact with the Mexican people, the Mexican peasants, the Mexican Indians¹⁰... with the geography and archeology of Mexico, with the whole history of our art... and the whole of Mexican culture.¹¹” The reclaiming of the nation and its culture would be the catalyst for all of his future activities, both artistic and political, as Mexico had already suffered four-hundred years of cultural oppression. Siqueiros stated that “the desire of the Mural Movement artist to bring about a new integration of art and life had its antecedents in the integrated art of their ancestors, the ancient Mayans and Aztecs.”¹²

Before 1930, most paintings were conventionally made with oil or watercolors, and murals were made with either egg tempera *alla secco fresco* or with oil paints.¹³ Not content to stick with traditional methods, Siqueiros was a pioneering artist using and experimenting with new materials. By 1932, Siqueiros was creating murals in Los Angeles using spray-guns (the forerunner of the airbrush) and industrial paints, and, in 1936, he organized “an Experimental Workshop for modern materials in painting” in New York.¹⁴ A young Jackson Pollock attended these workshops, gleaning new techniques and an appreciation for synthetic pigments which would impact his picture making in years to come.¹⁵

The first commercially available acrylic paints came out in the 1950s,¹⁶ and Siqueiros was soon to start his work on a mural, *From Porfirio Diaz to the Revolution*. However, he was less than halfway through the project when he was imprisoned for four years for criticizing the President of Mexico, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, known as the first revolutionary president.¹⁷ The same year of his imprisonment in 1960, Siqueiros was approached by a businessman, Manuel Suarez y Suarez, to create a mural for his Hotel de Mexico. This mural would become one of the largest in the world and was then given its own building under the suggestion of the next Mexican President, Diaz Ordaz known as the Siqueiros Polyforum. Inside the building Siqueiros created a mural known as *The March of Humanity towards the Cosmos*, 1971. *Dancing Woman*, 1969 is a sketch for one of the figures in this mural. Today the Siqueiros Polyforum is a large diamond shaped cultural events center housing concerts, performances, art exhibits, and tours explaining the mural.¹⁸

The March of Humanity was Siqueiros' "Sistine Chapel," wherein he "set down the apocalyptic truth of humankind's desperate struggle to survive on earth, as he saw it. A maelstrom of turbulent human action — a swirling mother figure clutching an infant; the mutilated torso of the lynched black man," this was the starting point of the mural in a dome that measured 42 feet tall, 147 feet long and 98 feet wide. Sculpture-paintings of Nahual, the Aztec demon, and a white masked clown torment the enslaved workers as they build their civilization, find themselves under the thumb of military dictatorship, suffer bourgeois revolutions, and, finally, pass through an age of capitalism culminating in the eruption of multiple volcanoes. Before it reaches the finale of communist rockets hurtling through space, the figure of Hope cuts down a poisonous tree. The amatl¹⁹ grows and miraculously blooms, while the male and female figures stand

opposite one another, their hands outstretched, as they join at the ceiling, and peace and love are finally achieved.²⁰

Dancing Woman, 1969, is a small but powerful representation of what Siqueiros felt was beautiful about his culture, the pre-Columbian artwork of his ancestors. He resisted making work that was considered to be stylistically European by not only embracing the new materials, techniques, and politics of his time, but proudly promoting them, allowing a whole new generation of artists to break free from strict adherence to traditional methods and to create compelling new works of art. There is a singular truth in his vision; even though the man, himself, was often an outlaw, he espoused that mankind should live in harmony, that one should not dominate the other, and that peace should be the goal for all.

Endnotes

1. RedBud Gallery is a local Houston Gallery run by Gus Kopriva. He is married to artist, Sharon Kopriva. The Koprivas are valuable supporters of HBU art faculty, staff, alumni, and students.
2. The size looks to be between 20x16 inches to 30x24 inches. This makes sense since the painting is made on paper, it may have come from a standard art pad running within that range from a popular art paper manufacturer like Strathmore or Canson. The size of the painting is not unusual for a standard sketch pad.
3. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994. pp. 82-83
4. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994. pp. 184-185 *At the time this was 500,000 Italian Lira, which is no longer in use. Calculated through coinmill.com
5. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 379-380
6. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 115
7. Chalot, Jean. *Mexican Painting*. Parkstone Press, 2018. Scribd
https://www.scribd.com/read/376071772/Mexican-Painting#n_search-menu_244752
8. “Palatial” is in the literal sense, as the Amor-Escabon Family built a palace in Mexico City in 1910.
9. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 12-13
10. By Mexican Indians he means the people who identified more with their pre-columbian ancestors, such as the Mayans and Aztecs.
11. Siqueiros, David Alfaro. *Art and Revolution*. Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1975. pp. 11
12. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 13
13. Succo-Fresco means to paint on dry plaster.
14. “Siqueiros, David Alfaro.” *Encyclopedia of Painting: Painters and Painting of the World from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, by Bernard S. Myers et al., 4th ed., Crown Publishers, 1979, pp. 451–451.
15. Walker, John. “Jackson Pollock”, National Gallery of Art, Washington. (Abradale Press. Harry N. Abrams, 1984). Pages 614-615.
16. “Company History.” *Golden Artist Colors, Inc.*, www.goldenpaints.com/history.
17. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 262-361
18. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 328
19. A plant known today as “amate” was used to make paper codices like papyrus. It does not actually flower but Siqueiros made his plant flower symbolically.
20. Stein, Philip. *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*. International Publishers, 1994, pp. 331-332

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