

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“David Alfaro Siqueiros "Portrait of a Decade 1930 – 1940”

Houston Museum of Fine Arts June 1- July 20, 1997

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What an irony that the first one person museum exhibition of the work of David Alfaro Siqueiros in the United States is juxtaposed and completely eclipsed at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts by "Jewels of the Romanovs: Treasures of the Russian Imperial Court." Banners, tickets, crowds, all flowed toward the Imperial Jewels, to the wealth of the tsars, to everything that Siqueiros spent his life opposing.

Almost hidden away on the first floor, beside the impressionist collection, were about fifty paintings and a few prints by Siqueiros. David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), the youngest of "los tres grandes" of the Mexican mural tradition of the twentieth century, was profoundly committed to calling attention to the injustices of society and government oppression. His most outspoken and comprehensive works are his murals in Mexico City. They include the violently anti-Fascist *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (1939), the dramatic historical overview, *From the Regime of Porfirio Diaz to the Revolution in Chapultepec Castle* (1957 - 1966) and the huge (more than 2000 square meters) and comprehensive *March of Humanity* (1965-1971) in the Siqueiros Polyforum, which is sometimes referred to as the Mexican Sistine Chapel.

The current exhibition, in honor of the centennial of the artist, includes only easel paintings gathered from both public and private collections. The decade of the exhibition, the 1930s, precedes his major mural cycles, and includes many years in which he was active politically, fighting in the Spanish Civil War, or in prison. I expected that to see only easel paintings would aestheticize and distort his career. That, in fact, is not the case. The works are never simply pretty, even when they are portraits of women (frequently his lovers, all women of exceptional intelligence and presence). Furthermore, a superb catalogue places all the work in the context of his political commitments. The show opens with a group of works that Siqueiros produced in Lecumberri Prison. He was able to work in prison because his partner at the time, the Uruguayan poet, Blanca Luz Brum, brought him materials. I found the most compelling of these prison works to be the tiny woodcuts made on fragments of crates. They take from futurist abstraction in their simplicity within the small scale, and yet they clearly convey themes, such as the courageous waiting women, that appear throughout Siqueiros' work. They resonate with the history of popular broadsides in Mexico, traditionally a way to communicate with the illiterate masses, although here they form the basis for a modest collector's portfolio. The small dark oil paintings from prison are pessimistic, showing confinement, isolation, and torture. Siqueiros was imprisoned for Communist activism at a time when the euphoric hopes of the Mexican Renaissance of the early twenties were completely dead.

After his release from jail, Siqueiros lived under house arrest in Taxco, a benign prison. Taxco in the early thirties was a bohemian community with international notables ranging from Josef von Sternberg to Katherine Anne Porter. There he produced a second group of easel works, frequently commissioned portraits. Sometimes on rough burlap with very

thick stretchers, they have an aggressive physical presence. Praying Peasant floats uneasily in a frame of rococo gold, a jarring contradiction between the subject, the materials, and the traditions of the art world. The major works of this period, though, are not commissioned portraits or the peasant children done obviously for sale, but the monumental paintings such as Peasant Mother, 1931(also called the Deported Mexican Women), Proletarian Mother, 1931 and Proletarian Victim of 1933.

These three large, dark, and moving images no longer have any allegiance to modernist abstraction. They mainly concern the oppressed, as simple figures, built up through a somber, close valued palette to an overpowering physicality. Their emphasis is on women as the patient, but victimized, pillars of the society. Proletarian Victim is a huge painting, showing a kneeling, bound Chinese woman who has been shot in the head. Contemporary with the well-known Echo of A Scream in the Museum of Modern Art (not included in the exhibition) it also refers potently to the abuses the Chinese suffered during the Japanese invasion in the early thirties and marks Siqueiros' move toward international subjects. In 1932, the year between the two proletarian images, Siqueiros was in Los Angeles working with American art students to create outdoor murals with experimental techniques such as airbrush and projected photographic images.

He was thrown out of the United States for his political views, but returned in 1936 as a delegate to the American Artists Congress in New York. While there he conducted an Experimental Workshop in which Jackson Pollock participated with obviously profound results: it was here that Siqueiros began to use controlled accident and to throw various types of other materials onto the canvas. His paintings in the present exhibition from 1936 The End of the World and Cosmos and Disaster use pyroxylin on board with ceramic, sand and wood as well as a complex iconography that refers metaphorically to the Luftwaffe bombing of Toledo, at that time the largest civilian population ever bombed from the air.

From 1937 to 1939 Siqueiros participated in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans, the side allied with the Communists, Socialists, and a host of other parties, and the side that lost to Franco allied with the Nazis. When Siqueiros returned to Mexico, he was bitter. The Portrait of the Bourgeoisie of 1939 is filled with his anger about Franco, Hitler and fascism. He saw all the European powers and the United States in financial collusion with the Nazis. In the center of the mural is a huge machine that crushes workers and sucks out their blood in order to turn it into gold coins. It is one of the most potent political images of twentieth century art even as it also demonstrates Siqueiros' ongoing exploration of avant-garde materials, photomontage, airbrush, and moving perspectives.

In the Houston exhibition there was no reproduction of that powerful mural, but that time of disenchantment was represented by two paintings Down But Not Defeated and The Sob, both of 1939. The latter depicts Angelica Arenal, his third wife, whom he married in Spain in the midst of the Civil War. Arenal herself participated in the Spanish agony as a war correspondent and her powerful clasped hands speak of her own agonized feelings. These paintings are compressed statements out of which the large murals come. It is in

their darkness, their monumentality, and their homeliness that they subvert the polite traditions of modernist easel painting and inject it with powerful meaning. It is not surprising that Siqueiros has never before had a one-person exhibition at a museum in the United States and that this exhibition made stops only near the Mexican border, in Santa Barbara and Houston. As an unwavering believer in Communism (not the aesthetic principles of Trotsky, whom he abhorred and was accused of attempting to assassinate) he was certainly not popular here for many years. Moreover, there is, clearly, a passion bordering on ruthlessness in Siqueiros that comes through even in these easel paintings. But that ruthlessness and passion enabled Siqueiros' to survive his own oppression by governments afraid of his Communist commitments. Siqueiros demonstrates, irrefutably, that avant-garde art and politics together are a powerful force.