

# English Summary: Photomurals.

## Photographic Murals in Transnational Processes of Negotiation between Mexico and the USA

Research usually dates the start of the global triumph of US art to the end of the Second World War in 1945, with the advent of Abstract Expressionism. However, another medium that has long been overlooked by researchers had been seen some years earlier as the epitome of US art – the ‘photomural’, a blend of two media with mass appeal: photography or photomontage, and the mural. This book is the first detailed art-history study of the photomural as a nationally specific medium. The term made its appearance in the USA in 1930, when large-format photographic paper was marketed by the Eastman Kodak Company. In the years that followed, the photomural initially became a decorative medium for the general public, and eventually a national art form. What greatly helped to enhance its artistic stature was the largely unresearched *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1932 (Figs. 57 and 63). This show, it was hoped, would offer an alternative to Mexican Muralism which was then so prominent on the walls of many public buildings in the United States. In Europe there was still much talk of the ‘photo fresco’ developed by El Lissitzky for the international press exhibition *Pressa* in Cologne in 1928 (Fig. 5); but in the USA the MoMA exhibition in 1932 was the key event in the rise of the photomural. Whereas the painted murals presented there were slated by contemporary critics, the monumental photographs were unanimously praised as innovative. The exhibition is symptomatic of how the photomural came to dominate the US discourse on representative art and became established as a counterweight to Mexican Muralism. This book examines the emergence of the photomural as a US art form and to what extent this can be seen as a result of a process of transnational negotiation between Mexico and the USA, involving not only ideas about national identity and discourses on modernity, but also competition between media. It then looks at how new devices developed from competition between media, and which stature-enhancing strategies came to be used here. The dynamic negotiation process also set traditional medium-specific codifications in motion. As Diego Rivera’s exhibition at MoMA in 1931 shows, the mural itself was also redefined as a ‘portable fresco’, independent of the wall as the image carrier. Research

has so far almost entirely overlooked the fact that *fotomurales* eventually also made their appearance in Mexico in the late 1940s. The return of the medium to Mexico is described here for the first time as a cross-border 'entangled histories' process. The book makes a major contribution to perspectives on entangled histories in US art history by shifting the main focus to inter-medium and transnational negotiations, as well as to gender aspects – for although women were sidelined in the field of wall painting, two female photographers, the American Margaret Bourke-White and the Mexican Lola Álvarez Bravo, came to the fore in the case of photographic mural design.

The book begins with a definition of the term, and points out that transcultural negotiation processes and stature-enhancing strategies were already reflected in terminology. It shows for the first time that the neologism 'photomural' was used in the US press as early as 1930. The term 'photographic wallpaper' was abandoned in favour of 'mural', a term that at the time was strongly associated with Mexican Muralism. In contrast, El Lissitzky had chosen the likewise stature-enhancing term 'photo fresco' – a term more evocative of Italian Renaissance art – to describe photographic murals. The medium he used was photomontage, in order to make the art form accessible to a wider audience. As regards entangled histories, the emergence of the term *fotomural* in Mexico in the late 1940s is also noteworthy. Although back in 1942 the Mexican Muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros had described 'photographic Muralism'<sup>1</sup> in the USA as being in what he considered an embryonic stage, a native Spanish term for photographic murals became established in Mexico just a few years later: *fotomural*, seemingly a literal translation from English.

The book shows that the emergence of the photomural in the USA was closely connected with Mexican Muralism, seen as a model to be both emulated and eschewed. Chapter 3 therefore looks more closely at Muralism, which, in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, emerged from 1921 onwards as the central instrument for creating national identity. In technical terms, Muralism, with its recourse to encaustic and fresco, differed fundamentally from the likewise revolution-inspired Russian avant-garde. Whereas El Lissitzky's photographic murals were in keeping with the transience of temporary exhibition architecture and were intended to convey a sense of modernity through the choice of medium, Diego Rivera in particular was explicitly pursuing a technique that would, he hoped, give the image long-term validity, and also suggest stability in post-revolutionary Mexico's search for identity. Unlike David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rivera clung to the fresco technique throughout most of his career; only the composition of some of his murals, such as his large-format historical panorama in the National Palace, Mexico's seat of government (fig. 13), accords with modern principles of montage.

1 'muralismo fotográfico' in Spanish. David Alfaro Siqueiros, Antonio Quintana (1942), reproduced in Raquel Tibol (ed.), *Palabras de Siqueiros*, Mexico City, 1996, pp. 177–179, specifically p. 179.

In the 1920s and 1930s many Mexican artists went to the USA – a country with which the Latin American states have been in a conflicted and ambivalent relationship ever since they gained their independence from Spain and Portugal in the nineteenth century. In Mexico, government promotion of murals had by then almost completely ceased, whereas in the United States there was still substantial interest in the neighbouring country's artistic avant-garde. Mexico became the ideological and physical refuge for many US artists and intellectuals, who were increasingly coming to deplore a lack of culture and tradition in their own country. Like the vast itinerant *Mexican Arts* exhibition, books such as Carleton Beal's *Mexican Maze* and Stuart Chase's *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* enhanced the romantic notion, even among the American general public, of an authentic indigenous culture. Stuart Chase's description of 'machineless men', for example, was in keeping with the discursive practice of 'denial of coevalness' which, according to Johannes Fabian, serves to fix the imagined 'Other' in a time that is remote from modernity with the help of an exclusionary perspective.<sup>2</sup> However, Mexicans were also prominent, and coinvolved in a self-exoticising manner, in this development. Demand for 'authentic Mexicanness' was willingly catered to by Mexican artists, and so there was no way to avoid a codification of 'Mexican otherness'.

Even when Diego Rivera was honoured with a one-man exhibition at MoMA in 1931, he could not avoid exoticising references. Although the artist did state his own predilection for a pan-American art, the frescoes he produced for the exhibition, on topics associated with his host country, received poor reviews. In contrast, he was praised for the exhibits with Mexican themes, referred to by critics as 'the native Mexican things'.<sup>3</sup> The Mexican Muralist's attempt to establish the 'portable fresco' as an easily transportable art form also failed. Admittedly, as explained in this book for the first time, mobility was a key feature of the exhibition, for in the press coverage of Rivera's MoMA show the procedural became a leitmotif – from tracing the artist's itinerary from Mexico to the USA to describing in detail the process whereby his frescoes were created at the museum. Yet Rivera's 'portable frescoes' did not fulfil the expectations of mobility and flexibility that the term implied. They were heavy and cumbersome, and had to be produced at the museum in order to minimise the distance, and cost, of transporting the fragile works. Unlike photomurals, these were *not* a modern, flexible, economical form of mural art.

Chapter 4 of the book looks at the origins and technological demands of the photo-mural medium. The forerunners mentioned at the beginning, such as the photograph of Cyrus W. Field presented to mark the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable in

2 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, 1983.

3 Rose Mary Fisk, 'Diego Rivera Comes to NY in a Big Way', in *Chicago Evening Post*, 29 December 1931. A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbooks, 13. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

1858 (first mentioned in this book), or George R. Lawrence's mammoth-camera picture of the *Alton Limited* train, show that large-format photography was already considered a particularly good way to highlight technological achievements and express patriotic fervour.

The first example of a photomural in the sense of a photographic image that interacts directly with the wall, earlier than El Lissitzky's 'photo fresco', was probably that of the Taj Mahal, first discovered in the course of my research. It was produced in 1927 – the year of Charles Lindbergh's pioneering solo transatlantic flight – by the Kaufmann & Fabry company for the Chicago home of Mr and Mrs Goodspeed (Fig. 32). In the 1930s US press it was proclaimed 'the world's first photomural',<sup>4</sup> thereby marking the medium as a US invention. In order to enhance its stature, this photographic mural was finally gilded to make it a fixed part of the wall. So the terms 'economy' and 'flexibility', which Julien Levy identified some years later as typical features of the photomural,<sup>5</sup> cannot yet be applied to this specimen. Instead it was based on costly gold-leather wallpaper, while its motif brought it close to exoticising panoramic wallpaper. In terms of its place of display, as well as its size and *raison d'être*, it was an amalgamation of intimacy and monumentality. Although its realistic character suggested to viewers that they might be transported to a distant, exotic place, the gilding eliminated any sense of entering a physical space. The photomural was unmistakably part of the wall, and functioned in the interior as an exotic coating and performative piece of decor that invited the imitation of tourist situations.

The production of wall-size photographs was popularised from 1930 onwards by the introduction of large-format photographic paper by the Eastman Kodak Company, which had already revolutionised amateur photography with its film rolls, box cameras and processing service. From this point on the US press sang the praises of the photomural. 'Whole Walls Become Photographs'<sup>6</sup> was a typical headline. Yet, aside from this illusory effect, the photomural was at first still mainly seen as a successor to traditional forms of wall decoration such as tapestries.

The *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* exhibition, which was organised by MoMA in 1932 and is the focus of Chapter 5, detached the photomural from mere imitation. The announcement of the exhibition was preceded by a public debate on the artistic programme for the Rockefeller Center. Calls in the press for the

4 H. H. Slawson, 'GIANT Pictures From Pigmy Prints', in *Mechanix Illustrated*, August 1938, pp. 52–55, 137, 145–146, specifically p. 54.

5 Julien Levy, 'Photo-Murals', in the exhibition catalogue *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (3–31 May 1932), New York 1932, pp. 11–12, specifically p. 11.

6 Margery Taylor, 'Whole Walls Become Photographs', in *The Pampa Daily News*, 29 October 1931, p. 3.

Rockefellers to provide ‘walls for Americans’<sup>7</sup> conflicted with the family’s own wish to recruit internationally renowned artists for the decoration of the vast project. The *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* exhibition, finally held in 1932 in the MoMA, which Abby Aldrich Rockefeller had helped to establish, was an attempt to make up for this by giving US artists a stage on which to present themselves as suitable candidates for large murals made on commission. It was the first exhibition in the museum’s history to include photographs. The photomural’s first presentation in a museum was to raise it from the status of a decorative medium to a form of high art – in a museum that was just beginning to encourage overlaps between high and popular culture, for instance with its *Machine Art* exhibition in 1934, which presented objects produced by machines.

The US proponents of a ‘straight’ photographic approach dedicated themselves for the first time to the photomural for the show. The photographs on display also reflected a national iconography that had started to take shape in the 1920s. The photographers’ choice of motifs focused on features of modern city life, as well as US industry; yet they harked back to such iconic forms as the triptych to enhance the artistic stature of their mural designs. This was an attempt to resolve the clash between headlong progress and backward nostalgia. At the MoMA show Edward Steichen exhibited a work that was presented in the museum foyer in the manner of a Renaissance pala and was framed by the console cornice of the exhibition space (Figs. 63 and 64). His photomural was the only exhibit to make the reference to the architecture of the museum so clear, something the other exhibits were unable to do. That is why this mural, and the photographic section of the exhibition in general, received such positive reviews, whereas the painting section was slated. In particular, the exhibits by Hugo Gellert, William Gropper and Ben Shahn, which caused a scandal, were dismissed by the critics as poor copies of the Muralists Rivera and Orozco’s series of frescoes in the education ministry and the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* in Mexico.

In the photographic murals (photomurals or *fotomurales*) that made their appearance in the USA and Mexico between the 1930s and the 1950s we can observe, despite their heterogeneity, similar tendencies regarding the relationship between the image and the wall. The photomural and its relationship to architecture are therefore the subject of Chapter 6. Although Steichen’s photomural at the MoMA *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* exhibition was raised in status and clearly linked to architecture by a traditional formal vocabulary, both he and Margaret Bourke-White ignored these architectural references and emphasised the flexibility of the medium as one of its main features in their work at the Rockefeller Center. Unlike

7 Edward Alden Jewell, ‘The Realm of Art: Current Activities Discussed. Outstanding Achievements in the Mural Field’, in *The New York Times*, 7 February 1932, Section X, p. 10.

in the Muralists' frescoes, an ornamentation of the wall was introduced, something modern architectural concepts had originally abandoned. However, the fact that the wall was visually dissolved, dynamised and shifted into an 'in-between', oscillating between image and wall,<sup>8</sup> was ultimately in keeping with the principles of the International Style and the streamlining that was starting to become a national design idiom in the USA.

For the RKO Roxy Theatre smokers' lounge, which was only open to male visitors, Steichen chose a theme with markedly national connotations: aviation (Fig. 95). This can be compared to Rivera's *Detroit Industry* frescoes, although the Mexican Muralist made his ambivalent attitude to technological progress clear. Steichen's photomurals, which are extensively analysed for the first time in this book, express no such ambivalence. At the top end of the room the photographer placed a visual memorial to such US aviation pioneers as the Wright brothers and the aerial photographer Albert W. Stevens (Fig. 96). Other motifs with national references also appear here, such as the planes reproduced on the opposite wall, recalling the air-force squadrons displayed in the press and turning them into a decorative pattern (Fig. 97). The aerial photograph used by Steichen as covering for a door (Fig. 120) conveyed a similar dichotomy between figuration and abstraction. It was this fathoming of the transitional space between the real and the abstract that also led to aerial photographs, as a typical example of modernity, becoming a popular, attractive motif for *fotomurales* in Mexico.

Like Steichen's photographic frieze, Margaret Bourke-White's photomurals for the rotunda of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) fluctuated between abstract/ornamental design and realistic presentation of visual motifs with unmistakably national references (Figs. 1, 130–132 and 135). What had begun in 1858 with a large-format celebration of telegraphy culminated, as it were, in Bourke-White's huge pictures of radio parts on the walls of the NBC, the largest photomurals to be used as permanent wall decoration at the time. The motifs, which showed the transmission and reception of radio programmes using the requisite technical equipment, were thus detached from their context and given an iconic large format. This fetishistic presentation of 'Yankee steel and inventiveness' and 'Yankee mechanisms'<sup>9</sup> was seen by the press as a successful counterweight to Rivera's 'red'<sup>10</sup> Rockefeller Center fresco (Fig. 137), which the Rockefellers ordered to be destroyed because of its communist theme in 1934, shortly after Bourke-White's photomurals were completed.

8 Fritz Neumeyer, 'Zwischenbilder: in die Wand gesehen', in the exhibition catalogue Margarete Dreher: Weiß-Gelb-Rot-Blau-Schwarz (für M.R.), Mies van der Rohe Haus, Berlin (3 May – 16 June 1996), Berlin 1996, unpaginated.

9 Norman Klein, 'Photographs Replace Rivera's Mural Art', in New York Evening Post, 23 December 1933, Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Special Collections, Syracuse University.

10 Ibid.

Whereas Margaret Bourke-White's photomurals referred to the mass medium of radio and combined imagery based on abstract stylisation with an ideological statement, the Mexican photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo departed radically from a technological aesthetic with her 1949 *fotomural* for the Mexican Institute of Social Security (Figs. 156a–156c). This too is the first analysis of the work as a photographic mural, based on two installation views that I have discovered (Figs. 154 and 159). Álvarez Bravo used photomontage to present the Mexican landscape as a lush and sensuous but also menacing jungle, in which the realistic photographic fragments were associated with geographical places but could not be traced to anywhere specific. The photographer also succeeded in interweaving painting and photography by cleverly incorporating a jaguar photographed from a painting into the tropical vegetation. Hers was thus a photographic interpretation of a theme already adopted in different ways by the Muralists Rivera and Siqueiros: tropical Mexico, a stereotyped image from which Siqueiros's *Tropical America* (1932, Fig. 21) had already departed. In contrast, Rivera's *Creation* (1922–23, Fig. 179) had borrowed from the landscape paintings of the French artist Henri Rousseau. Rousseau's jungle fantasies had left their mark on the European avant-garde's image of Mexico, even though he had never set foot in the Latin American country. The fact that his landscape image was an artistic fiction was discussed by Eva Sulzer in the magazine *Dyn* in 1942. Although in Álvarez Bravo's *fotomural* this fiction had acquired a realistic reference through photography, the jungle was depicted here in such a florid manner that on second glance it also proved to be an artistic construct, as revealed by the added painterly elements. The work sounds out the intermediate space between reality and imagination, and at the same time assumes an ornamental character. The indexical quality of the photographic elements makes the artistic fantasy of Mexico seem more realistic. André Breton's then topical notion of Mexico as 'real Surrealism' was fleshed out by the indexical nature of photography.

In contrast, the US photomurals of the time which took nature as their theme presented the expanse of the landscape as an impressive symbol of freedom. Nature offered itself – in the sense of the 'frontier' – as an untamed place that viewers could conquer with their eyes. At the same time, the landscape radiated a seemingly pristine grandeur. Nature was preserved here in its ostensibly primitive form, as in the US national parks. However, it was preserved within an 'American grid', symbolising man's dominion over nature. Such a grid was sometimes transferred to the photomural in the form of a window frame. This involved suggesting an opening in the wall and an actual view of Arcadian nature that would serve as a refuge and increase the quality of life of people living in crowded cities. The illusion of a window was enhanced by the addition of glass panes and curtains to frame the implied view. In this way the wilderness was domesticated.

Lola Álvarez Bravo also emphasised the illusory effect of the *fotomural* when she wrote of its ability to draw viewers directly into the image and transport them to another



place by means of cleverly chosen perspectives. In the course of her career the Mexican photographer created numerous *fotomurales*, only a fraction of which have so far been the subject of research, owing among other things to the lack of contemporary installation views. Unlike the Mexican *murales* of the 1920s and 1930s, her photographic murals did not focus on indigenous peasants, but on the urban working class. And Álvarez Bravo's murals were no longer aimed at the general public. Instead, they were mainly intended for the offices and conference halls of such businesses as the Chrysler subsidiary Automex or Industria Eléctrica de México, which in the 1950s were helping to boost an image of Mexico as a modern, technologically developed country. Under Miguel Alemán, the Mexican state moved ever closer to the USA. The new definition of national identity during Alemán's presidency blended technological progress with awareness of tradition. This association of tradition and modernism also typifies Lola Álvarez Bravo's work as a wall designer. Her murals achieved a unique combination of painting and photography that is discussed in detail for the first time in this book; and her work also shows that the photomural should be seen as a product of entanglement processes at both transnational and inter-medium level.

Translation: Kevin Cook