INTRODUCTION

Between 17 February and 8 April, 1942, the Mexico City periodical *Excelsior* published in fifteen installments the autobiographical articles which the great Mexican artist, José Clemente Orozco, previously had dictated to his wife, Margarita. These were his first, and were to remain his most important, pronouncements on art and on his life and times, and, as such, each installment was awaited eagerly by an admiring nation. Subsequently, in 1945, the articles were published in book form by *Ediciones Occidente* under the title of *Autobiografía.* The present publication is the first appearance in English of this vivid document, important alike to the bibliography of modern art and to that of contemporary history.

Orozco was a proud, reticent man whose business was painting and whose life was devoid of theatrics. As he submitted his memoirs he wrote, "there is nothing of special interest in it, no famous exploits or heroic deeds, no extraordi-

nary or miraculous happenings. Only the uninterrupted and tremendous efforts of a Mexican painter to learn his trade and find opportunities to practice it." The drama remains implicit. He does not discuss his professional frustrations or his financial problems; he does not indulge in personal rancor; and his beloved family is not even mentioned.

This is not to suggest that Orozco is noncommunicative. Indeed he is exceedingly illuminating and eloquent, but the tone of the *Autobiography* is formal and impersonal. The complete story of Orozco is not to be read in these valuable pages alone; ultimately one will need to refer to his still unpublished letters, to reports of personal conversations, to family records, and to the often highly colored memoirs of his friends and his enemies.

But despite his lean, even taciturn style, and despite the areas he does not touch, Orozco's *Autobiography* is perhaps the most authentic and telling account of the rise of a new national school of painting, and a tale doubly significant in being related by the greatest painter the Americas have produced. Moreover, it is a moving human document, touching in its modesty and understatement.

Except for its concluding paragraphs the *Autobiography* deals principally with his exhaustive training, his association with the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors, and the frescoes in the National Preparatory School. Orozco first visited the United States in 1917, and again from 1927 to 1934. A considerable portion of the *Autobiography* is devoted to the latter interlude, which saw the creation of the Pomona frescoes, those of the New School for Social Re-

search, and those of Dartmouth College. In 1934 he returned to Mexico to execute in Guadalajara the three fresco cycles which remain without parallel in the western world, and which he refers to only by remarking that he spent four years in Guadalajara "engrossed in intense and fruitful labor." The *Autobiography* thus does not touch upon his most creative years, when his painting was most highly developed and was given an appropriate stage.

We are perhaps particularly interested in his observations about art, and in his political philosophy as defined by the revolutionary epoch he experienced.

Orozco was a rigorously trained artist, a fact unrealized even by his astute biographers until the first appearance of the *Autobiography*. Slowly he developed his powerful individual style, firmly based on academic discipline, without reference to prevailing European theories. Orozco was no fauvist, no cubist, no futurist, in many ways not even a modern artist—except in the German, as opposed to the French, tradition. In this, as in so many instances, he provides a sharp contrast with Diego Rivera.

He describes his severe training at the Academy of San Carlos minutely, with respect rather than with the art student's traditional intolerance and impatience. He had, indeed, little patience with untrained, naive art, dismissing the interest in primitives as "Infantilism," and terming the widely admired Pulque-Shop painting "humbug." As a professional artist he had no interest in the amateur's expression of himself.

Orozco rejected Alfredo Ramos Martínez' re-creation of

Barbizon in Mexico, himself preferring "black and the colors exiled from impressionist palettes." In this he was spurred by the profound influence of the corrosive engravings of Guadalupe Posada, one of the few mentors he acknowledged. It is not the decorative skill or the folk quality of Posada's Calaveras that foreshadow the terrifying passages of the Government Palace frescoes in Guadalajara: it is his trenchant clarity, simplicity, and intensity. And like Posada, Orozco also worked as a political cartoonist.

The 1910 watercolors of brothels, which are among the earliest of his work still existing, are not dissimilar in tonality and style to the Picassos of 1903–1906 (which he could not possibly have seen), but they are less contrived, more biting, and they are untouched by sentimentality. Orozco seems to have had very little curiosity about contemporary art, making no critical comments on either Siqueiros or Rivera, and nowhere does he mention painting in the United States, which concurrently was following an intellectual development not dissimilar to his own. Yet despite his utter independence of European influences, and in particular that of his fellow Titan, Orozco is to speak admiringly of a 1932 Picasso retrospective exhibition in Paris which he saw, and from which he took pains to send a catalogue to his sponsor Alma Reed.

Orozco, like Picasso, uses the human form as the primary expressive agent. He is not so inventive as Picasso in so doing, but fully as eloquent. Orozco was not so sharply concerned with the stylistic manner of his painting as with its

constantly mounting power and conviction. But he held special views on the artist's convictions in the realm of politics and wrote: "No artist has, or ever has had, political convictions of any sort. Those who profess to have them are not artists."

A humanitarian he certainly was, deeply sensitive to man's inhumanity to his fellow man, but he was not a politician nor an active party member for any faction. In painting he had scant talent for individualization; in politics he was unable to express his convictions through the dogma of a party. His painting is devoid of individuals. He creates types, identifies their meaningful gestures, but they remain anonymous and faceless. In this he is most similar to the Goya of *Los Caprichos* and *Los Proverbios,* in which the singular instant, or the specific point of view, is obliterated, and what remains is his anguish that war and murder and injustice occur. Much the same thing can be said of Daumier, for today we have forgotten the exact incidents that inspired his incomparable lithographs—only the always applicable, telling comment on humanity is there. But Orozco is never amusing; his irony is deep and bitter.

World War I, the stock market crash, are no more unique and important than the flea circus, which he describes minutely. Good and evil do exist, and while the one is to be celebrated and the other deplored, they are not personified. Orozco was a formal, reticent individual. However passionately he felt he makes no personal revelations, either in paint or in print. He does not participate in recrimination or

in resentment on a personal basis; his feelings were much more abstract, and he took positions based on principle rather than become involved personally in the issue. Orozco, like Balzac, saw a vast human comedy, gay and diverting, but one on which he takes no editorial position.

This, of course, has nothing to do with Orozco's eloquence and majesty as an artist. The great frescoes in Guadalajara have a scale, a power, and an intensity that in comparison make a large portion of contemporary art seem decorative and mannered. There is much justification for considering Orozco the major artist of the twentieth century. Certainly he is one of that small handful of Titans who have made our century the most creative in modern history.

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