



Curator Amy Galpin

TRANSLATING REVOLUTION: U.S. ARTISTS INTERPRET MEXICAN MURALISM at the National Museum of Mexican Art

Q&A with Amy Galpin, Guest Curator

Following the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), artists began to use the mural format as a platform for political or social commentary. Curated by Amy Galpin, the exhibition references original Mexican murals and displays some of the many cross-cultural works they inspired. Translating Revolution: U.S. Artists Interpret Mexican Muralism will be on view from February 16 to August 1, 2010.



Elizabeth Catlett,
Contribución del Pueblo a la Expropiación Petrolera/Contribution of Pueblo to the Petroleum Expropriation, 1938,
woodcut, 13 1/4 in. x 9 1/8 in. Anonymous gift, collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art, 1998.36.113.

Why did you decide to name the exhibition *Translating Revolution*?

The significance of the title is two-fold. While I was researching this exhibition, I found myself thinking a lot about the process of translation, how interesting it is that no two translators reach the exact same interpretation of a poem, for example. In a large way, the act of compiling this exhibition was a lot like translating. Because the exhibition regards such an expansive topic, I felt as though there were countless angles through which to approach the influence of murals on American art. The word “translating” is intended to reinforce the fact that this exhibition is not the only way of approaching these cross-cultural influences.

Also, I wanted to refer to “Revolution” in the title because Mexican murals were originally reactions to the Mexican Revolution. It is no coincidence that the Revolution ended in 1920, and Diego Rivera started painting politically charged murals in 1921. Following the Revolution, there was a heightened need to define a uniquely Mexican mode of expression, and the mural format was conducive to complex yet accessible statements.

Considering the fact that murals are often site-specific and non-transportable, what was it like to organize an exhibition around murals that could not be physically incorporated?

Because we could not transport any original murals from Mexico, I decided to evoke the murals' original sites in other more supplementary ways. The exhibition contains photographs and preparatory drawings that illustrate the murals' position within their original and often architectural environment. Though it is certainly important for the viewer to have some sense of the murals' original context, I also believe that the murals' underlying themes and fundamental tone are embodied by the non-mural formats included in this show. If anything, the show's departure from strictly mural formats is a reminder that Mexican art does not exist in a vacuum; its influence is widespread and varied.

Do the works in *Translating Revolution* relate to Chicago in any specific way?

Several artists included in this show—Edward Millman, Charles White, brothers Alex and Morris Topchevsky—worked in Chicago at some point during their careers. The Topchevskys are a particularly interesting case; they came to the west side of Chicago as Polish immigrants. As young boys, Alex and Morris took public art classes at Hull House, the learning center established by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Hull House placed emphasis not only on the visual arts, but on a worldly and cross-cultural understanding. Throughout their involvement at Hull House, the Topchevskys were not only inspired to continue their studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but they were also encouraged to travel to Mexico and experience a different kind of art.

Translating Revolution also includes a sketch that Edward Millman had drawn in preparation for his mural at Lucy Flower High School here in Chicago. When Millman first executed the mural, which depicted such influential figures as Addams and Clara Barton, there was much local criticism towards the radical, feminist subject matter of the composition and consequently, the mural was whitewashed. In 1996, however, the mural was fully restored at its original site. That the community was able to realize the importance of the destroyed mural is, in my mind, very uplifting; it is testament to the relevance and potency of the murals' impact.

What do you hope visitors will take away from *Translating Revolution*?

My challenge with this exhibition was to showcase the wide array of works that Mexican muralists inspired. Thus, I decided to organize the show around four thematic categories—resistance, allegory, community, heroism—that I hope collectively will broaden peoples' previously held understandings of the mural movement. Though these themes are all complex in their own ways, each is also extremely and contemporarily applicable. I hope that visitors will walk away from *Translating Revolution* with a clarified understanding not only of the murals' fascinating history, but also of the ways in which their creation is still relevant today.