

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO (1883–1949): Formative Years in the Narrative Graphic Tradition*

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Recent criticism of modern Mexican art has generally ascribed the expressionistic quality of Orozco's oeuvre to international stylistic influences such as German expressionism, postimpressionism and fauvism.¹ These international stylistic affinities are equated with the universal or modern aspect of the mural movement in contrast to its local, Mexican, iconographic and stylistic aspect.²

The thesis of this essay is that the earliest examples of Orozco's work—his graphics—show expressionistic qualities that relate, not to European influences, but more logically to the narrative tradition of graphics in Mexico. The continuity of early stylistic and thematic elements in his later work, therefore, argues more strongly for local development than for foreign influence. This analysis does not deny the dual aspects of universality and locality in the mural movement, it merely suggests that in the case of Orozco, the local influences were probably primary. This conclusion represents a major revision of our view of Orozco, which would have implications for a reappraisal of the mural movement as well.

All of the evidence supporting the notion that Orozco's expressionism was imported is visual (he did not visit Europe until 1932). We use the same type of visual evidence, viewed historically, to suggest the opposite possibility. To perceive the influence of his early graphic work, we will first examine briefly the narrative tradition of graphics.³

The nineteenth-century graphic art in Mexico can be dichotomized as either popular or academic. Popular graphics included plates in travel and costume books describing Mexican life, illustrated news and commentary, and penny handouts on topics of immediate concern—death, hell, the latest songs. After 1860, the medium served as a political

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forum, unique in its caustic humor and spirited satire. These varied themes and styles in popular prints created a narrative tradition in printmaking that corresponds, in Mexican intellectual history, to the concept of *lo mexicano*. In terms of sheer number, distribution, general comprehension, and inventiveness, the narrative graphic tradition was the dominant expression. Yet the government-sponsored Academia de San Carlos recognized only those printmakers who worked in a neoclassical style, copying European prints and paintings.⁴ Despite their designation as the official art form in graphics, the academic lithographs and engravings were inaccessible to the general public and would have, at any rate, been incomprehensible. Printmaking as an artistic medium was not encouraged by the Academia, although the copying of European lithographs was de rigueur in the drawing classes.⁵

In the twentieth century this emphasis was reversed: the academic tradition found few supporters and the narrative tradition in printmaking was elevated to national prominence. The reasons for and the circumstances surrounding this elevation are complex, but in Mexican art generally, nationalism has been explained as (a) a return to native roots resulting from the Revolution of 1910, or (b) a return to native roots based on the Mexican artists' experience with cubism in Paris from 1910 through the early 1920s, or (c) the influence of Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo) in raising the consciousness of Mexican artists.⁶ None of these standard theories is applicable, however, to popular printmaking. Rather, there appears to be a continuity in attitude, imagery, and composition from the middle of the nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Charlot hints at this in his discussion of the antecedents of the mural movement in Mexico.⁷ His treatment of printmaking reaches back only to José Gaudalupe Posada (1851–1913), but the tradition itself, as current research has shown, dates to a much earlier period in the 1850s and 1860s and was an integral part of a nationalistic trend, which had its genesis in that century.⁸ A recent investigation of the European influence on the satiric aspect of the narrative graphic tradition revealed such influence to be minimal before 1861.⁹

The visual evidence of the continuity and elevation of the extant narrative tradition is confirmed by the printmakers themselves in the annals of the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* (1937–1949):

Re-examining the graphic inheritance of the first century of the United States of Mexico, our artists discovered the magazines of the liberal and anticlerical movements such as *La Orquesta*, *El Ahuizote*, and *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, as well as the popular editions of the publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. It was in these publications, that Hernández, Manilla, Villasana, Escalante and José Guadalupe Posada served their native Mexican dishes.¹⁰

In leafing through these magazines, the members of the Taller would have reviewed the published prints and sketches of José Clemente Orozco, whose work, the members claimed, had the greatest influence on them. Orozco, who, since his death has been an inspiration to contemporary artists, began his journalistic career in 1910 as editor of *Testerazos*.¹¹ Shortly after the Revolution broke out in November 1910, he was employed as an artist for *El Ahuizote*. His zinc relief etching (*cinco-grafia*), *La Prensa Libre* (fig. 1), published on 19 November 1911, confronts one of the major issues of the day, freedom of the press. A barefoot woman wearing a red gown represents the free press. She is pulled by the rope binding her wrists into the jail as the jailer says, "The ten minutes of sunlight . . . are over." The expression of horrified dread, her extended arms, and powerless, clasped hands, her stubborn block-like feet are a critique of governmental censorship and the oppression of a right guaranteed by the Constitution of 1857. The same expressionistic treatment of hands, reflecting the anguish of oppression, is seen in his lithograph, *Grief* (fig. 2), executed in 1930. In both, scratchy lines surge along the forearms towards the hands, underscoring the intensity of the scene. The lithograph is taken from a detail of the artist's mural, *The Trinity*, in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico City (1926).¹²

In another relief etching for *El Ahuizote*, Orozco analyzes the character of the flaccid General González Salas, who dangles at the end of a rope attached to the collar of his military uniform (fig. 3). The rope is grasped by the hand of an anonymous arm reaching from the reader's right onto the puppet's stage. The figure is illuminated by the footlights, but his actions are as mysterious and unpredictable as his sinister face and droopy body, waiting to be pulled in one direction or another. As minister of war under President Madero, this puppet general was noted, in the liberal press, for his incompetence. He left his cabinet post to lead the government forces against Pascual Orozco and was defeated in an encounter near Rellano. During the retreat he committed suicide. His obituary, reported in *El Ahuizote* (30 March 1912), states:

His ineptitude hurled the heroic army into adventurous and dangerous manoeuvres (products of his lack of skill) and because of them, the veteran federal soldiers fell one after another. Each man dropped on the countryside was a bloody protest and cry for the commanding general, who, in the rear guard with his eyes out of their sockets in fright, contemplated the terrible hecatomb.

Orozco uses the expressionistic elements of distortion, abstraction, exaggeration, and symbolism to communicate his subjective view of the situation rather than trying to describe an objective reality. He sees González Salas as empty of character or any principles by which to act; the commander of the army was animated only when Madero pulled his



(Fig. 1) José Clemente Orozco, *Free Press*, relief etching with screen overlay (27.5 X 19 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 19 November 1911. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.



(Fig. 2) José Clement Orozco, *Grief*, lithograph (31 X 26 cm), 1930. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Inter-American Fund.

En el Guignol Político



¿Quién lo baila?

(Fig. 3) José Clemente Orozco, *Who Makes Him Dance*, relief etching with screen overlay (27 X 18.5 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 4 November 1911. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

strings. The caption reads, "On the political puppet stage, who makes him dance?"¹³

During this time Orozco was attending classes at the Academia de San Carlos on an irregular basis and notes his admiration for the prints of Posada, who worked in Vanegas Arroyo's print shop around the corner from the Academy. He recounts in his autobiography that Posada first stimulated his interest in drawing, when, as a child attending primary school, he watched the artist engraving plates in the print shop window.¹⁴ The other artists working on *El Ahuizote* also exerted an influence on Orozco. The caption "Who makes him dance?" had been used by Mejía in July of the same year, and the composition of the puppet theater has strong echoes of a print by Dalís published in August, which shows Madero above the puppet stage pulling the strings.

The dramatic directness in style of Orozco's *Ahuizote* wash drawings and prints continues in his later work. In the lithograph, *The Hanged Men* (1930), a contribution to the American Civil Rights Congress in New York, the bodies of black people hang above the burning flames of discrimination (fig. 4). The figures are flat and weightless like the representation of General González Salas and the tragedy of the scene, the psychic torment, is heightened by the stark tonal contrasts. As was his habit, Orozco makes no pretense of polite details whether portraying the puppet general in 1911 or the broiled black men in 1930.

In his autobiography Orozco denies any connection between his work and political convictions.¹⁵ Yet, in the body of his work, he dealt with human realities that often became sensitive political issues. His prints and paintings repeatedly express outrage at the plight of the Indians, the wanton destruction of war, social discrimination, injustice, freedom of the press, and exploitative capitalism. Like the editors of *El Ahuizote*, he saves a special vehemence for Madero, whose policies, in the end, were compared to Díaz' dictatorial practices (fig. 5). In this print, Orozco shows Madero dropping his liberty cap and the mask of democracy, to whip his slaves (José María Pino Suárez, Jesús Urueta and Juan Sánchez Azcona) into shape. Blood drips from the lanky arms of these neo-serviles, references to their misdeeds on behalf of their master. A bat, whose wing pokes Pino in the back, suggests Madero's interest in spiritism. In many respects Orozco espoused a philosophy of human conduct that demanded of political leaders a broad humanism. This humanistic expectation was similar to the aims of *El Ahuizote*: "We will unmask the hypocrites and delinquents, who adulterate the truth every hour, every day, in every part of the country. . . . Our program is very simple and how difficult! to tell the truth, to injure those who



(Fig. 4) José Clemente Orozco, *The Hanged Men*, lithograph (32.5 X 23 cm), 1930. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.



(Fig. 5) José Clemente Orozco, *Los Neo-Serviles*, relief etching (26 X 18.5 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 16 September 1911. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

injure others, and to be simply on the side of justice and reason" (27 May 1911).

As Cardoza y Aragón observes, Orozco's interest in telling the truth about the human condition extended to the Church. In the lithograph, *The Franciscan* (fig. 6), the artist by his own account, portrays the Church sucking the life out of the people.¹⁶ At first glance it seems that a friar is tenderly embracing a weary Indian. Yet there is no response to the embrace. Is the Indian dead? Why is the Indian so thin and helpless and the friar so bulky and overpowering? Then it becomes clear that the arching shape of the Franciscan presses its weight (of rituals, rules, tithes, land domination) against the frail figure of the naked Indian. The theme and composition are a repetition of Orozco's mural in the Escuela Preparatoria (1922), which, despite the artist's own statements, has been subject to various interpretations because of the subtlety of the presentation.¹⁷ The style and sentiment of the lithograph recall that of the anti-clerical and antiadministration lithographs published in *La Orquesta*, which Orozco surely must have seen.

The mood of the lithographs in *La Orquesta* (1861–77) is more sober, the figures are less exaggerated, situations are not as fantastic as in *El Ahuizote*, *La Casera*, and other, often wildly funny, periodicals. There is an overlay of decorum and seriousness which, in its subtlety, much like Orozco's *The Franciscan*, renders the cynicism of the message more poignant and memorable. In an unsigned lithograph published in 1863 entitled, *Where There are Pleasures, There are Pains*, Napoleon III, ironically portrayed as the Mater Dolorosa, is seated in a niche (fig. 7). One begins to doubt the piety of the scene in noticing that the memorial candles on the dais are two upright cannons with lighted muzzles. Napoleon III shows all the signs of devotion with his feet resting on a cushion, his hands fervently clasped, and his gaze solemn. As the suffering mother, the monarch must bear some of the pains (daggers) of his "pleasures," which, among others, relate to Italy, Crimea, China, and the Fifth of May. The pain (dagger) of the Fifth of May refers to the date of the defeat at Puebla of the French troops invading Mexico. Napoleon III was responsible for the founding of an empire in Mexico under Maximilian, who tried to establish an hereditary Catholic monarchy in 1864. The Emperor was executed in 1867. The same mistrust of domination under the guise of religious piety is expressed in an anonymous relief etching from *El Ahuizote Jacobino* published 26 June 1904 (fig. 8). In the upper register the bishop deceitfully cuddles a starving peon as a baby, representing the dependent situation of the Indians. Below, workmen and curates prepare for one of Porfirio Díaz' rigged reelections. The



(Fig. 6) José Clemente Orozco, *The Franciscan*, lithograph (31 X 26 cm), 1929–32. Private Collection.

bishop tells the workers that on the subject of elections he should be consulted [by the people] first.

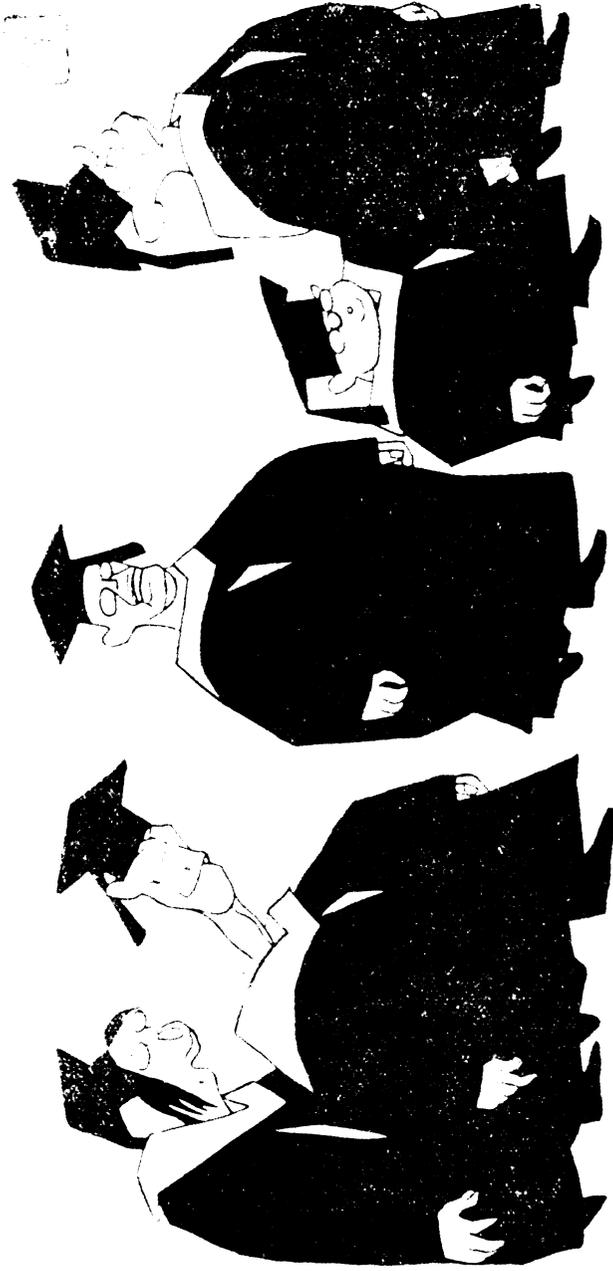
Other attitudes were firmly established while Orozco was working in this narrative tradition. His opinion about the ineffectiveness of academic training because of the driveling lack of real intelligence and imagination on the part of the *Doctors of Learning*, first appeared in an illustration for *El Ahuizote* on 10 August 1912 (fig. 9). The final version of this theme, more powerfully expressed, is included in the Dartmouth College mural in Baker Memorial Library (1932–34). In this passage, towards the end of the fresco cycle, Orozco stations the *Doctors of Dead Learning* behind the birthing scene of a tiny skeleton dressed in a cap and gown. Learning, in other words, has nothing to do with life. His fluid and sardonic style of drawing also had its antecedents in the *El Ahuizote* sketches (fig. 10), where in a few strokes he could lay bare the harsh life of an aging cabaret singer (cf. Cardoza y Aragón 1959, pl. facing p. 42; Reed 1932, p. 142; Fernández 1956).

Another *Ahuizote* image, the people squeezed by the capitalist money machine (2 December 1911), was a recurrent Orozco theme (fig. 11). An earlier version of this theme appeared in *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (1898, fig. 12) in which the monstrous Uncle is shown squeezing concessions (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Filipinas) from the Comisión Español. Orozco's relief etching, *Mexican Suffrage*, shows the people squeezed beneath the iron plate of a block printing press until money spews out of the mouth into the hat of the waiting capitalist sympathizer, Gustavo Madero. The lower caption names the principal officers of this oppressive enterprise, "General Manager: Gustavo Wood; Secretary: F. I. Wood; Treasurer: Uncle Wood" (the Maderos' names are anglicized as "wood" in this caption). Orozco's idea may have served as inspiration for the money machine in the central passage of Siqueiros' *A Portrait of the Bourgeoise* for the Electrical Worker's Union (1939). In the Siqueiros passage the press is being turned by a rapacious metal eagle, representing the military-industrial complex. A bleeding black man, naked and lifeless, hangs by a rope from the neck of the metal eagle. This image of the hanged black man may also have been derived from Orozco's earlier composition (fig. 4).

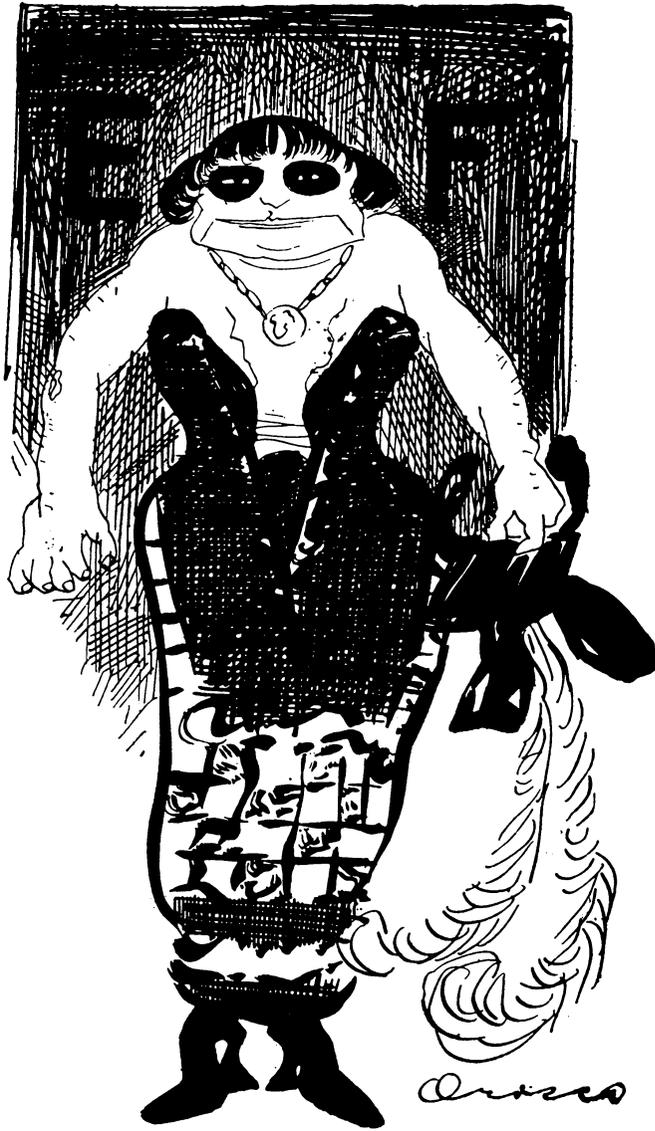
The connection between the nineteenth-century narrative graphic tradition, particularly the satiric aspect, and revolutionary (non-academic) printmaking in twentieth-century Mexico has not been systematically explored, but the interdependence of the two is clear. That the narrative imagery was revived in the works of artists like Siqueiros, who studied in Europe during the first two decades of the twentieth century, may have some credence but for Orozco and the other artists who grew



(Fig. 8) Anonymous, *The Cleric is not a Candidate*, relief etching (25.5 X 17 cm) in *El Ahuizote Jacobino*, 26 June 1904. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.



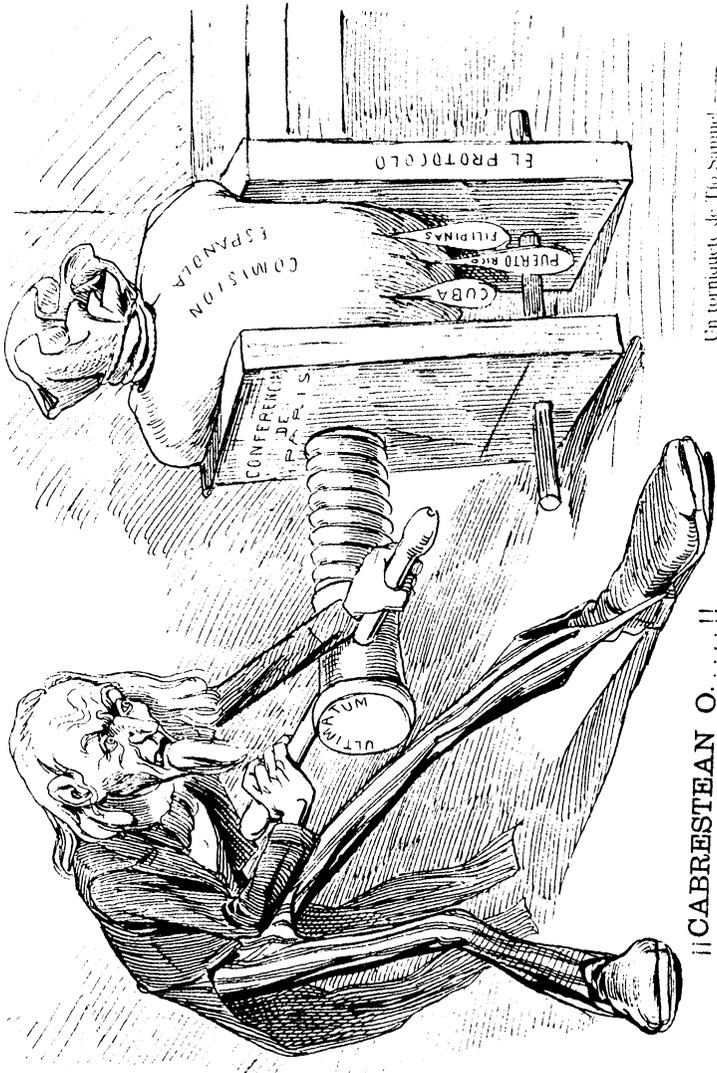
(Fig. 9) José Clemente Orozco, *Doctors of Learning*, engraving (9 X 19 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 10 August 1912. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.



(Fig. 10) José Clemente Orozco, *Eugenia Fougere: Cabaret Singer*, relief etching (15.5 X 8.5 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 14 October 1911. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.



(Fig. 11) José Clemente Orozco, *Mexican Suffrage*, relief etching (26 X 19 cm) in *El Ahuizote*, 2 December 1911. Latin American Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.



!! CABRESTEAN O !!

(Fig. 12) Anonymous, *Cabrestean O*, relief etching (17 X 26.5 cm), *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, 30 October 1898. Private Collection.

out of the tradition, we see more continuity than revival or borrowing. At the time of Orozco's death in 1949, Charlot mentions the lasting effect of this early period in the artist's life.¹⁸ The necessity to ascribe Orozco's style and/or use of imagery to European sources is seriously questioned by a review of his early graphics. The facts of his life and work show a constancy in attitude and in many cases theme and image from his earliest work to his last, which are consistent with his stated artistic intention:

The art of the New World cannot take root in the old traditions of the Old World. . . . Although the art of all races and of all times has a common value—human, universal—each cycle must work for itself, must create, must yield its own production, its individual share to the common good. . . . If *new* races have appeared upon the lands of the *New World*, such races have the unavoidable duty to produce a *New Art* in a new spiritual and physical medium. Any other road is plain cowardice.¹⁹

NOTES

1. See Fermín Fevre, "Las formas," pp. 52–53; Juan García Ponce, "Diversidad," pp. 144–46; Jorge Alberto Manrique, "¿Identidad," pp. 27, 31–32; Jorge Romero Brest, "La crisis," pp. 94–95; Thomas Messer, *The Emergent Decade*, p. 154; Marta Traba, *La pintura*; Seldon Rodman, *The Insiders*.
2. Jorge Alberto Manrique, "La batalla," pp. 2, 8.
3. For a more extensive discussion of the narrative graphic tradition, see Joyce Waddell Bailey, "The Penny Press."
4. Justino Fernández, *El arte*, p. 9. The teaching of lithography was officially established in the Academy on 13 October 1830, under the direction of Ignacio Serrano. The course of instruction could not begin, however, because the secretary of the Academy stated that the lithographic stone was in poor condition. Edmundo O'Gorman and Justino Fernández, "Documentos," pp. 59–63, 65–66.
5. José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiography*, p. 9.
6. Leopoldo Castedo, *A History*, p. 222; Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture*, p. 120; Raquel Tibol, *Historia general*, p. 240.
7. Jean Charlot, *Mexican Mural Renaissance*, p. 34.
8. Sarah Hamill, "Pre-Revolutionary Printmaking," pp. 11–17; Henry C. Schmidt, *Roots of Lo Mexicano*, p. 27; Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *La crítica de arte* 1:168–69.
9. Bailey, "The Penny Press," p. 92.
10. Hannes Meyer, *El Taller de Gráfica Popular*, p. x.
11. Miguel Velasco Valdés, *Historia*, p. 176.
12. Rodman, *The Insiders*, p. 10, states that the clasped hands in the fresco derive from ". . . the Michelangelesque tradition of expressive distortion . . ." and rivals the Tuscan master's great images.
13. For a different view of the career of González Salas, see Stanley Ross, *Francisco I. Madero* and Michael Meyer, *Mexican Rebel*, pp. 68–73.
14. Orozco, *Autobiography*, pp. 8–9.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
16. Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *Orozco*, p. 113; the author quotes this statement by Orozco.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 121, n. 8. Charlot describes this mural as ". . . a public act of faith" on the part of the artist ("Foreword," *The Artist in New York*, p. 13) and Charlot to Bailey, 27 June 1975.
18. Charlot, "Orozco's Stylistic Evolution," p. 148.
19. Orozco, "New World," p. xiv.

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