

Siqueiros's mural in Los Angeles

In 1932, Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) was commissioned to paint a mural on the topic of “Tropical America” as part of the ongoing renovation to Olvera Street (or as it was known then, El Paseo de Los Angeles) in downtown Los Angeles, the site of the city’s historic center. City boosters had hoped to craft a tranquil, tourist-friendly vision of the area’s Mexican history that would offset the continued use of the historic Plaza by various labor and immigrant groups as a site of protest and unrest. Instead, Siqueiros supplied *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialisms), a radical and subversive fresco depicting a central male peasant crucified on a double cross with an eagle, emblematic of U.S. imperialism, perched atop it. Crouched in the right upper corner amidst overgrown vegetation, two guerilla fighters aim their guns at the eagle. Siqueiros subverted the city’s attempts to repress Mexican and Latino history and its present reality, by depicting his own history. The mural presents a chronic state of European and then American imperialist intrusion with the promise of action by the modern warrior. The controversial fresco was quickly painted over by its sponsors with the portion visible from Olvera Street the first to be whitewashed. I argue that in addition to a local intervention, the mural also addressed the larger political and economic strategies of the United States-Mexico relations at the time.

Siqueiros’s cement frescoes in Los Angeles sparked a revolution in mural-painting technique. The artist viewed the outdoor fresco in Olvera Street as a new form of public art for the masses, transformed by the use of modern tools and materials such as the electric drill, airbrush, projector, and cement. He promoted this new art form through a series of interviews and lectures, as seen in the handwritten notes concerning the “Block of Mural Painters of Los Angeles.” For *América tropical*, Siqueiros assembled a group of painters including animators, set designers, students from the Chouinard Art Institute, and other local artists to promote the idea of the mural as a collective work rather than the product of a sole genius or master. This technical revolution would continue to influence muralists for generations in Los Angeles and abroad.