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Research Paper

Mexican Muralist Influence on the Central Coast

California is known for having a rich and diverse community with an influential Latino base. Latino's, in particular Mexicans, have assimilated to the American way of life particularly well and have contributed in numerous aspects. One can argue that their influence on the art world has been monumental; one can also argue that no one artist has had a greater influence than a few Mexican muralists widely known as "Los Tres Grandes". Edward Weston, a renowned photographer, was undoubtedly impacted and influenced by the abstract expressionism movement that made many of the Mexican murals so powerful and inspiring. Edward Weston spent some time in Mexico during which social realism was ^{becoming entrenched in} ~~setting in into~~ the minds of the Mexican society. Painters like Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco ^{led} ~~comprised~~ a painting revolution of social pragmatism that would have a worldwide impact. The result of the Mexican nationalism movement allowed these Mexican muralists to make social statements which cried for equality and exposed the social injustices of the political state of Mexico. Through the use of abstract expressionism they achieved a revolutionary alteration from a patriarchal system towards a more democratic system of government.

Thoughtful discussion -
well organized, well written -
Serafin

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"Los Tres Grandes" or the Great Three have played an important role in the California as well, especially when addressing the great influence they had on artist and photographers of the Great Depression during the 1930's. The W.P.A. also known as the Work Progress Administration, a subdivision of the New Deal implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, commissioned artists during the height of the great economical downfall in the United States to travel the country and document, through photography, the administration's efforts to promote the establishment of an agency which strived to employ those whom had been misplaced by the catastrophic plummet of the stock market. Photographers that were commissioned by the Work Progress Administration had a simple goal in mind; they intended to narrate everyday life through the use of photography. The W.P.A also included a subdivision commissioning muralist to paint murals in public offices like schools libraries, post offices and airports across the country. According to an article published in the New York Times by Vivien Raynor, Social realism was inevitable in America of the 30's, not only because of the economic conditions but also because of the way artists increasingly saw themselves as society's 'unacknowledged legislators'. With this in mind, artist and photographers saw themselves as the advocates of social inequities and displacement for which they would institute social statements to their murals. The 1930's saw an array of social and communal injustices most of them brought forth as a result of the ^{G D} great depression, but as a result of this calamity we see a style of art that is directly affected by "Los Tres Grandes".

The American scene Genre arose as a direct effect of the influence ^{of} ~~brought forth by~~ Muralists like Diego River, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco. One can venture to say that one of the most influenced by this Mexican movement of portraying social injustices

and promoting social equality was John Langley Howard. John Langley Howard was an American artist ~~whom~~ is known for his austere depictions and study of contrasts between social classes in the United States. We can see the great influence the Mexican style of depicting class differentials in one of his more well-known pieces, *Embarcadero and Clay* (Figure 1), 1936. In this image one can see the absolute social differences in America at the time. His depiction of the man wearing the white suit seems to stand out profanely in part because he seems to be apprehensive of the men exiting the bar midday. It is important to note the difference in clothing and demeanor of the group of men and the man wearing the suit because here we are able to pinpoint an important characteristic in the attitude of the distinct social classes. The everyday man seems to be content with the simple necessities of everyday life, wear as, it seems that the other man, of an obvious higher social class, seems to be overwhelmed by his greed and suspicion of betrayal of the common man. Also worthy to note, is how the man is consumed with his own greed, by which allows him to feel like he is the targeted by the common man. William Wilson's article "*Fanfare of uncommon Muralist*" talks in depth about the impactful influence the politically charged populist murals had on the American psyche. "Their influence did not end with American Regionalist painting and WPA murals. It went underground in the large scale of Abstract Expressionist art..." (Wilson). One of the definitions provided by the online dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*, for abstract expressionism is that it was an artistic movement of the mid-20th century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing especially an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usually nonrepresentational means. Through these nontraditional means we are able to perceive images like that ~~of~~ ^{by} John Langley Howard and realize that they provided a cultural text which was similar

to the social movement by the Mexican Muralists, in that is endeavored to promote the reality of the society. John Langley Howard also spent much time in Monterey where his influence by the Mexican Muralist is seen as well. *Coit Tower* (Figure 3), is another one of his pieces that shows the working man's struggle and can be attributed to this Muralist influence. In this painting he strives to show everyday life and achieves this goal by depicting men in the struggles of an everyday environment.

The impact of muralists like Rivera on communities and artists has been profound and can be attributed to his uncanny ability to illustrate social and political messages through the use of mural art. California has been a haven for artists who want to use this technique to illustrate their political views in the form of art. In the article "*Hombres Y Mujeres Muralistas on a Mission*", Cary Cordova argues that Mural art has given communities contextual meaning through the validation of self-representation. "Local residents turned to murals as a means of invoking a community identity and literally saving the landscape from outsider interests, local speculators, crime, and neglect. As a result, public murals are one of the most visibly powerful and least studied mediums at work in inner city neighborhoods" (Cordova). The social impact that murals have had on inner-cities cannot be neglected and continues to demonstrate the influence "*Los Tres Grandes*" had on American society even to this date.

The influence the Mexican Muralist had on American artists is very apparent not only in paintings but also in photography. Edward Weston's modernist approach on photography was controversial at the time but it is probable that the time he spent in Mexico he was definitely impacted by the socially motivated propaganda of Diego Rivera. Diego Rivera, David Alfaro

Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco are most often referred to as "*Los Tres Grandes*" and are famed for using murals as a form of political adherence and propaganda deliberately aimed at making social statements.

"Weston began to see possibilities for a photographic art in which modernism and primitivism could be synthesized in expressive patterns and monumental icons, in which mundane objects could be transformed into tantalizing abstractions and individual parts could stand in for a greater whole" (Johnson).

Nowhere is it more apparent than in two photographs inspired by his visit in Mexico, both of which are possibly his most famous black and white photographs. *Pepper #30*, (Figure 3) and *Excusado* (Figure 4), are two of the many photographs in a series of black and white abstract representations. However, the particular photograph that has gained the most popularity among critics as a result of its ability to tantalize the viewer with an abstract representation is "*Pepper #30*". The article *Weston returns to that impossible Village*, written by Reed Johnson, argues that Weston gained a greater appreciation for regional aesthetic brought forth by Artists like "*Los Tres Grandes*", in particular by Diego Rivera who spent time in France and was inspired by the French modernist movement. The article also introduces the idea that Diego Rivera, along with his colleagues, elevated the simplicity of their pieces to that of a religious state amongst the region. Now that Edward Weston had paved the road for photography and helped it win a place in art world, photographers like Dorothea Lange would capture the American experience with a conviction.

Among the important interties, when it comes to documenting the American struggle, Dorothea Lange is one of the most significant. Dorothea Lange was photographer commissioned through the Farm Security Administration (FSA), by whom she was instructed to document the destructive effects caused by the Great Depression. Lange is also well known for her Japanese interment photographs taken after the internment of Japanese American on the west coast. Although Lange's photographic range covered a broad surface one of her most influential and world recognized photos is *Migrant Mother* (Figure 5), which was taken at the height of the Great Depression. Through this image Lange is able to accomplish what many others strive to do their entire live, which is capture the essence of human emotion. Dorothea Lange's developed ability to capture aspects of human expression through photography allowed her to use photography as a method of communication and nowhere is it more evident than in this photograph. This photograph is particularly important because she is able to portray an atmosphere of vulnerability and insecurity. In this photograph the woman, Florence Owens Thompson and her children, are placed in a context of poverty and desperation, which they lived through during the Great Depression. Dorothea Lange's uncanny ability to display the elements of desperation is particularly present in this photograph. The woman seems to display a look of calmness which can only be attributed to her inability to control her family's future. The children in the photograph are also an important element due to the fact that they demonstrate the disparity in their lives. Although, one can make the argument that Dorothea Lange was not directly influenced by the Mexican movement, her imagery indisputably allows the viewer an avenue for social comprehension. We can clearly see this comprehensive influence in many of her works. Mexican Muralist like Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco emphasized social awareness

and this without a question had an outstanding effect on photographers like Dorothea Lange in their demonstration of social disparities. Not only was the Mexican social awareness movement felt by photographers and other artists, it was also homogeneously seen in the literature throughout the United States.

Perhaps one of the most acclaimed authors of the Great Depression in the United States has been John Steinbeck. John Steinbeck received the Noble Prize of Literature in 1962, after a turbulent and controversial ascend to prominence as a renowned author. As a native of an agricultural community in Salinas, California, Steinbeck developed relationships with members of the Hispanic community which would help influence his societal views. Many consider Steinbeck to have been an advocate for social reform, and many labeled him a villain with communist ideals. Growing up in Salinas, Steinbeck's intuition stimulated his intellectuality towards the apparent and unjust working conditions in the Salinas valley and in California in general. Through his influential writings, like that of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he portrayed the working conditions and environments in California. The book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, particularly helped motivate a revisal of labor laws in the United States. Many, including Eleanor Roosevelt, helped fortify the message found in the book of social imperfections. Although we do not see a direct and immanent intersection between the Mexican movements for social equity and Steinbeck's ideals, we see that John Steinbeck's writings have similar resonating traits founded in that ideology. These similar characteristics between the Mexican movement and his ideologies can perhaps be attributed to his childhood and his fascination with the Latino workforce in California. One can only venture to say, that he was undoubtedly influenced by many of the workers he revered throughout his life. Many attribute the socialist

ideologies found in throughout his books to his upbringing within the Latino community. As an effect of his book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was shunned in his own Town for his portrayal of the American inadequacies. Social realism was a prominent trait in the depiction of the Californian work force which can be closely attributed to have similar traits to those of the Mexican Muralist like “*Los Tres Grandes*”, who were making an astounding effect on the American society.

Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco who were known worldwide as “*Los Tres Grandes*” and influenced a broad spectrum of American artists using their socially infused propaganda murals portraying social imbalances in Mexican society. These artists developed uncanny abilities to use their murals as social medians to protest the apparent social disparities in the Mexican society, post-revolutionary war. In an attempt to shed light on the inequalities suffered by the poverty stricken, who were many times the indigenous population of Mexican society they influenced a large portion of artist around the country. They would also influence the world, in particular California, through the use of social propaganda found in many of their most famous murals. According to the article Mural Gambits by Anna Indych-López, ““portable” fresco was a unique medium invented expressly for exporting Mexican muralism to the United States during the 1930s”, which allows for an influence that was welcomed by many Americans. Indych- López differentiates a Fresco from a mural saying that “a fresco is an ancient (Mexican and European) form of mural painting that involves the application of pigment to wet or fresh plaster on walls.” Although similar in context and appearance, a Fresco is conceived through the usage of a distinct process. This article goes on to describe the first art pieces that were exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art’s in New York.

Diego Rivera's art provided the United States and the American Continent with a distinct and corroborative avenue by which they could join in a "Pan-Americanism" movement. "Rivera glorified an indigenous past in Mexico, which, according to the logic of Pan-Americanism, came to be viewed as a common heritage for the entire continent." (Indych- López, 292). Through this upheaval of "Pan-Americanism", his paintings of indigenous people gave people a notion of justification and resentment, which by effect detached ties to their European ancestry and allowed Diego Rivera to serve as a cultural ambassador demonstrating strong ties between countries. One of Rivera's most famed and controversial mural in the United States has been, *Man at the Crossroad* (Figure 6), in which he depicts many aspects of contemporary culture. He also depicts scenes of everyday life; throughout the context of the painting we see obvious social statements, one of which had astonishing effects. The painting is used to represent social disorder and discriminations, in one scene we see his political ideologies protrude through the image. This scene has been thought to represent unity of the people, in which we are able to see a man grasping a red banner or flag, as a representation of communistic beliefs. Rivera also portrays Vladimir Lenin, a Russian leader with Marxist beliefs, which is thought to represent a social vision of the rich watching the starving poor during times of war. Regardless of how one might interpret these scenes in the now infamous painting, one thing is for certain, the American public disapproved with animosity the depiction of socialist rhetoric. Although artist like Rivera's, Siqueiros' and Orozco's political views were immanent in the construction of their murals, they would become extremely influential to artists around the United States.

Throughout history we have seen the prodigious influence of artist from other countries on the United States. We are able to see influential traits from artists like Rivera, Siqueiros and

Orozco in photographers like Edward Weston in his efforts to capture abstract expressionism. As a result of Weston's efforts to capture abstract expressionism we are able to enjoy photography with an acute distinction. We are also able to see how photographers commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), like Dorothea Lange, can be attributed to have been influenced by the prominent social realism movement in the 1930's, brought forth by Mexican muralists. Through photographs of social displacement we are captivated and allowed to see the essence of social realism during the Great Depression in the United States. As a result we have had an image imprinted in our minds of the American struggle. John Langley Howard and his American scene Genre can also be characterized as having similar traits for his portrayals of contrast between social classes, which allowed him to venture the social differences within a society. Amongst these photographers John Steinbeck, an American author, can be accredited with having similar ambitions in his acclaimed book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, to portray the social indifferences and mistreatments of workers in the United States. The basis for this revolutionary social movement can be traced to Mexican nationalism and an overall "Pan-Americanism". Artists like "Los Tres Grandes" have had an unequivocal impact on social views and consolidations, which have allowed for perceptual changes in American society over the past century. The imagery and literature that can be connected to social change during the Mexican Muralist social movement can be said to have played an important role in modifying and transforming the American psyche.

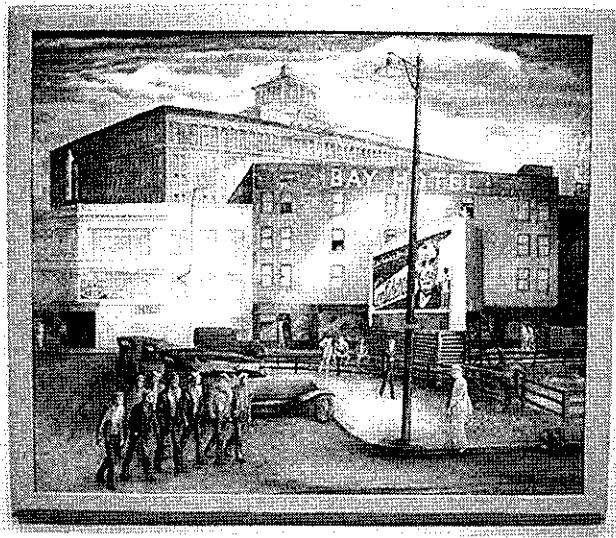


Figure 1: Howard, John Langley. *Embarcadero and Clay*. 1936.



Figure 2: Howard, John Langley. *Coit Tower*.

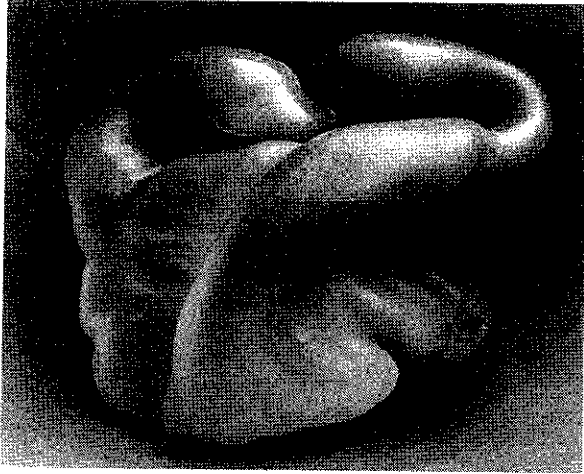


Figure 3: Weston, Edward. *Pepper #30*. 1930

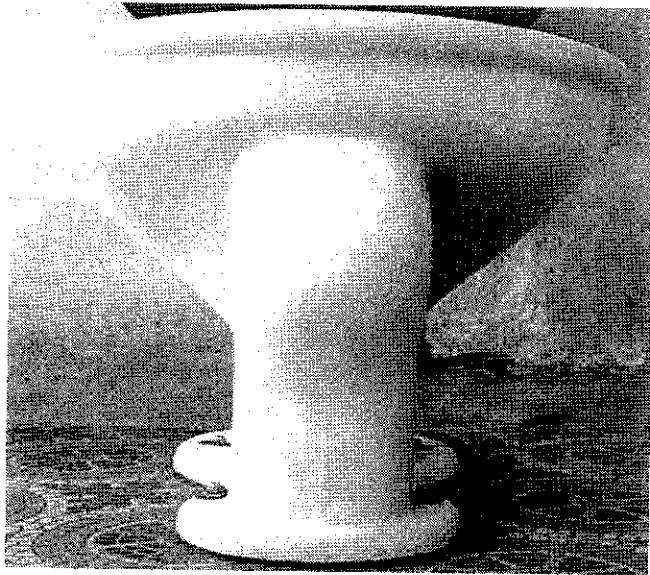


Figure 4: Weston, Edward. *Excusado*. 1925.



Figure 5: Lange, Dorothea. *Migrant Mother*. 1936.

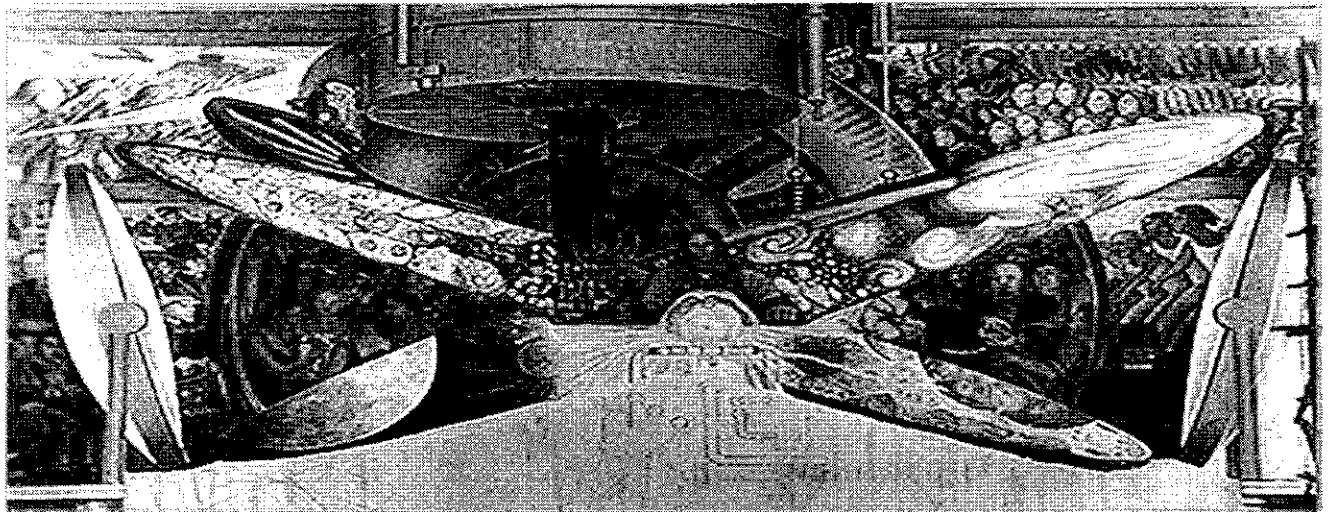


Figure 6: Rivera, Diego. *Man at the crossroads*. 1934.

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