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Siqueiros Mural Rediscovered

During his six-month stay in the Los Angeles area in 1932, the eminent Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros created three large murals. The works featured elaborate figurative compositions with dramatic themes spotlighting Socialist causes. The murals were controversial from the beginning. Esthetic merits and historical significance notwithstanding, two of the three were painted over and forgotten not long after completion.

Only one mural remained untouched, *Portrait of Mexico Today*, which was a private commission by film director Dudley Murphy. The 8-by-32-foot, oil-on-cement painting was recently acquired by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and transplanted from its original setting in Murphy's garden in the Pacific Palisades to its new home in a pavilion in front of the museum [see "Front Page," Nov. '02]. The other murals remained lost for many years, but thanks to a mixture of happy accident and scholarly research, both works have now come to light.

Whitewashed soon after its debut and further damaged in a 1971 earthquake, *América Tropical* is an 18-by-79-foot painting on the side of a building on Olvera Street. It is currently undergoing a painstaking and costly restoration begun in 1988 and organized by the Getty Conservation Institute [see *A.i.A.*, May '98]. The debut of the restored work, which will remain in situ, is scheduled for 2006.

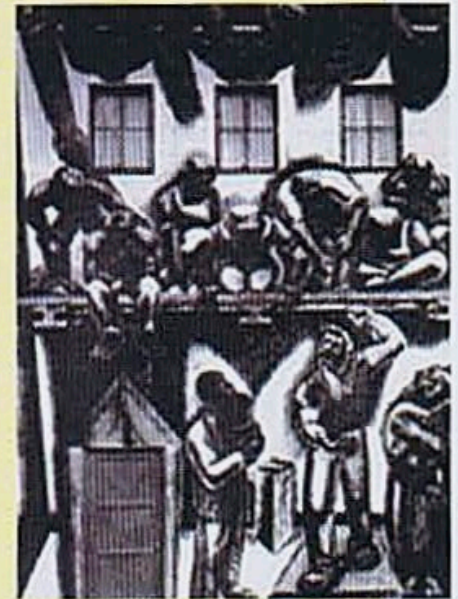
The first L.A. mural that Siqueiros painted, *Street Meeting*, was rediscovered last summer. The news was only recently made public, after the painting was examined by a team of conservators. The two-story, 24-by-19-foot work was painted on the facade of the Chouinard School of Art, then located on Grand View Street near MacArthur Park. (Later the school was known as the Chouinard Art Institute; it subsequently relocated and evolved into CalArts.) The painting shows the monumental, stylized figure of a labor organizer ostensibly expounding the virtues of Socialism to a multi-racial gathering of workers standing beside him or seated on overhead scaffolding.

The mural was rediscovered by Dave Tourjé, an artist who is executive director of the new Chouinard School

of Art. (Founded two years ago, the school models its programs after its predecessor, but it is now located in South Pasadena.) Tourjé knew of the Siqueiros Chouinard mural, but its exact location, or even its continued existence, was uncertain. Researching and exploring the original Chouinard building, now owned by the New Times Presbyterian Church and run by Korean immigrants, he noticed that a ragged nail hole above the door of the church's kitchen was surrounded by bright colors. He summoned a group of conservators and Siqueiros scholars led by Leslie Rainer, a veteran of *América Tropical's* conservation project, who found further evidence of the mural through cracks and crumbling chunks of paint and plaster behind the kitchen's large refrigerators. The kitchen wall, it turns out, was once part of the building's facade, before a wing was added.

While the Siqueiros work is now buried beneath layers of overpainting, Tourjé and his team are confident that the mural is repairable. He is now trying to raise \$8 million to buy the building and relocate the New Times Church, whose pastor, Moses Cho, has acknowledged the mural's importance in the press and is sympathetic to the endeavor. Tourjé hopes that one day the mural will be accessible to the public in situ, and that the kitchen will be converted into a Siqueiros study center. He recently established the Chouinard/Siqueiros Mural Conservation Fund to begin the long and expensive process of bringing *Street Meeting* to light.

—David Ebony



Siqueiros mural, *Street Meeting*, in a 1932 photo.