

CALENDAR

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They've barely scratched the surface

Under layers of paint and structural work, a 1932 mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros is found. Will it ever see the light of day?

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A STOCKY FELLOW with an open shirt baring his powerful chest stands on a makeshift podium, raising a fist and extending a hand as he appeals to his ragtag audience. A black man, transfixed by the soapbox orator, stands to one side cradling a child in his arms. A downtrodden white woman, also holding a child, watches from the other side. Above the speaker, dark-skinned laborers crouch on scaffolding and hang over the edge of a roof as they devour every last word of the message.

This is "Street Meeting," a 24-by-19-foot mural painted in 1932 by Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros at a now-defunct art school near MacArthur Park. It's one of Los Angeles' most important public artworks, and it vanished soon after it was created.

Some artists who assisted Siqueiros have told historians that faulty materials were to blame. Others have said that the painting was obliterated because of objections to the subject matter. As time passed and memories dimmed, the school — established as Chouinard School of Art and later known as Chouinard Art Institute — evolved into CalArts in Valencia. In typical L.A. style, the old building became the home of one Korean church, followed by another, and the mural was all but forgotten.

Until now. A small group of Siqueiros and Chouinard enthusiasts, bolstered by a team of professional paintings conservators, has discovered that the two-story work is at least partly intact. Its condition is unknown, and large areas may have been lost or damaged. But preliminary tests indicate that "Street Meeting" did not flake off or wash away, as often reported. It is buried under several layers of paint, on a wall that has been divided by a roof, partly tiled and roughly patched. Indented lines in the upper wall conform to contours of images in the mural. Nail holes and small excavations reveal vivid color.

"This is mind-blowing," said Dave Tourje, an artist, contractor and executive director of Chouinard School of Art in South Pasadena, a 2-year-old re-creation of the original institution. He discovered the location of the mural last summer but didn't go public with the news until he had discussed the situation with current owners of the building and engaged conservators who could verify the existence of the painting and assess its condition. The conservators completed their first round of tests Wednesday.

The project faces enormous challenges. But if "Street Meeting" can be saved and put back on public view, Tourje said, it will restore "something very culturally significant" to the community.

A TURNING POINT FOR THE ARTIST

Siqueiros painted three murals in Los Angeles during a six-month sojourn. His only outdoor wall paintings in the United States, they mark a turning point in his development, said Los Angeles-based art historian Shifra M. Goldman, a Latin America specialist who has written extensively about his work.

The masterpiece of the trio, "America Tropical," stretches across the second floor

of a historic building on Olvera Street. Painted over within a few years of its unveiling because of its political content — though not before it had faded badly — the 18-by-80-foot mural is the subject of a massive conservation effort that has dragged on for nearly two decades. Another Siqueiros mural, "Portrait of Mexico Today," an 8-by-32-foot painting commissioned for the patio of a home in Pacific Palisades, was restored to nearly pristine condition and moved to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 2002.

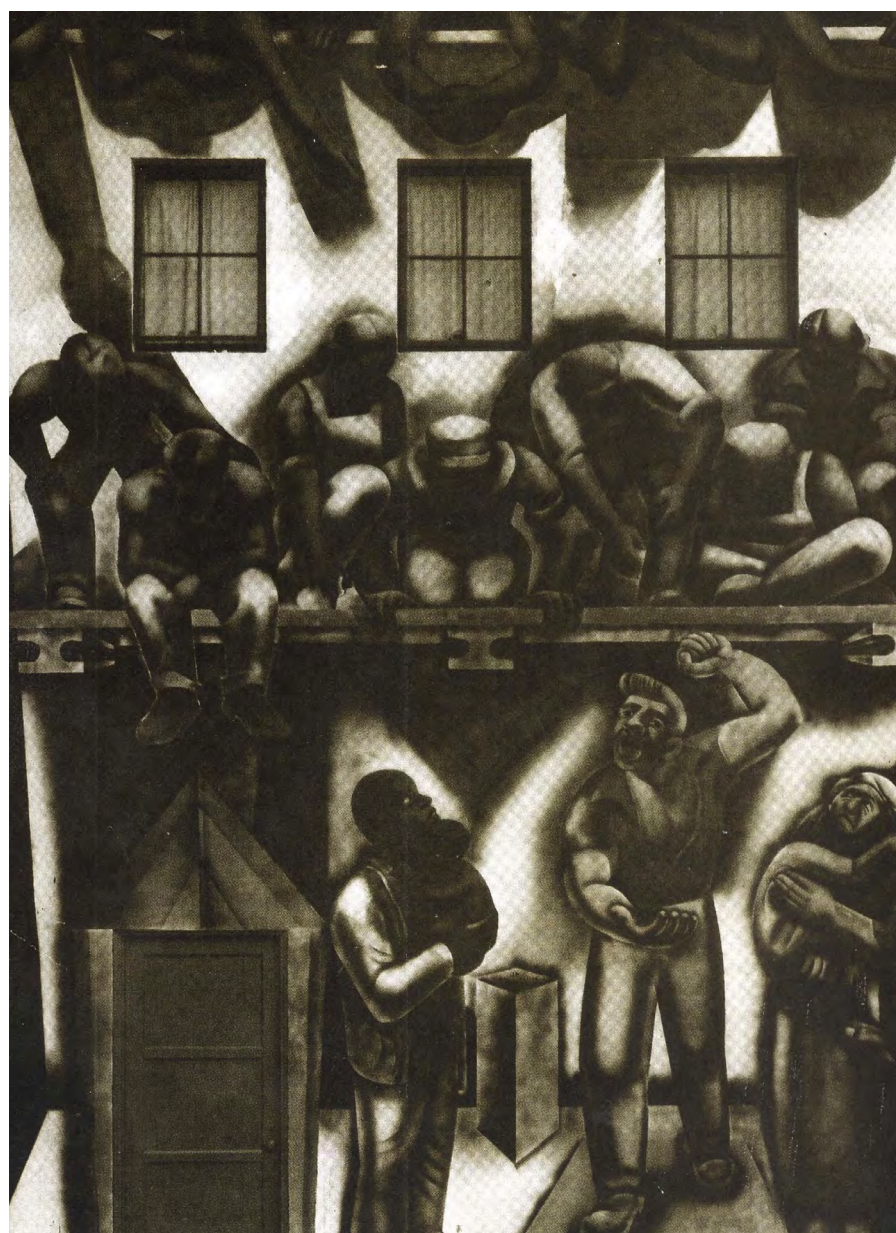
The Chouinard mural, the first of the L.A. works, is a seminal piece, Goldman said, representing his search for an expressive style attuned to revolutionary ideals and illuminating his experiments with airbrush painting on cement.

Conservator Leslie Rainer, a veteran of the Olvera Street mural project who heads the team studying the Chouinard painting, called it "a great find" for the city and the art community. "If we are able to recover it," she said, "it will give scholars and conservators an opportunity to learn much more about Siqueiros and his mural painting technique in Los Angeles. It will also give the city one more potentially great example of his mural work."

Siqueiros, who died in 1975, was an influential figure whose work throbs with revolutionary fervor and aesthetic muscle. Allied with Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco and best known for fiery murals in Mexico City, he promoted large-scale wall painting as a public forum for social justice. He found his political voice as an art student, helped unionize fellow artists and concentrated on Communist Party affairs from 1925 to 1930, when he was imprisoned for his political activities and confined to Taxco, in southern Mexico.

Siqueiros traveled to Los Angeles in 1932 — perhaps at the invitation of Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, founder of the art school — and reportedly got help across the border from film director Josef von Sternberg. While in Southern California, he painted portraits and murals, gave lectures and spent a few weeks at Chouinard, teaching a class in mural painting and producing "Street Meeting." It was unveiled July 7, 1932, to a crowd of 800.

Uncovering and preserving the mural is a long shot. The conservators must do additional tests to determine how much of the painting might be saved, formulate a plan and establish a budget. If the project appears to be feasible, money must be raised, and not just for art conservation. A protective structure would have to be erected over the exposed top half of the mural. A roof, probably added in the 1940s, enclosing the bottom half of the painting in a room now used as a kitchen, would have to be removed or cut back. To accomplish all that, the building probably would have to change hands.



A GREAT FIND: One of Los Angeles' most important public artworks, Siqueiros' "Street Meeting" vanished soon after it was created. Most of the mural is seen here in a photograph taken decades ago.

But Tourje and Moses Cho, pastor of New Times Presbyterian Church, which has owned the old Chouinard building for the past 10 years, say the mural may be the key to both men's dreams.

Tourje — who became intensely interested in Chouinard after purchasing a fixer-upper house in South Pasadena that turned out to be the former home of the school's founder — approached Cho in 2001 about buying the building that houses the church before he suspected the mural was there. Cho and the church's elders wanted to find a larger space, but they weren't ready to sell and the Chouinard group secured a building in South Pasadena.

The mural has raised the issue again, with new urgency, and the climate seems to have changed. Tourje and Cho are talking about relocating the church and hoping to devise a mutually agreeable plan that would let the Chouinard group take back the school's former home and restore the mural.

"Art belongs to the community," said Cho, who was born in Korea, educated in Philadelphia and moved to Los Angeles 16 years ago. "I love this city, but this area does not have special art and we want to help. I hope the mural will be restored. It would be good for the community."

The revelation that the mural lives — in some form — was sparked last June by research on another project. Luis Garza, an independent curator who is organizing a Siqueiros exhibition expected to open in September at Los Angeles' Municipal Art Gallery, phoned

leaders of the new Chouinard in South Pasadena. Hoping to find information on "Street Meeting," he and associate Jose Luis Sedano set up a meeting with artist Robert Perine, who graduated from Chouinard in 1950 and spearheaded the school's revival with Tourje. Perine died in November.

"We had started some archeological digs on the mural," Garza said. "We knew the names of artists who had helped Siqueiros with the Chouinard mural, and we hoped to find visuals and background material."

At the meeting, Garza, Sedano, Perine and Tourje looked at photographs of the mural and speculated about where it might have been painted. Perine suggested a wall adjoining the actual site. Then Nobuyuki Hadeishi strolled in. A former Chouinard student and teacher who serves on the new school's board of directors, Hadeishi hadn't previously seen the pictures. When he took a look, he immediately pegged the location of the mural.

"I was very familiar with that area because I taught printmaking next door to it," Hadeishi said, "and I set up a photography dark room in the space behind the windows in the mural. The reason Bob Perine and others who had seen pictures didn't realize where the mural was is that a roof had been built over the first floor. You can't see the whole wall." Floor plans of the building, published in a 1985 book by Perine, proved that Hadeishi was right. A door on the first floor and three windows on the second floor correspond to those in the mural.

Brimming with curiosity, Tourje headed off to the church early the next morning. Above a door in the church's kitchen, he found a nail hole that exposed several layers of paint, including a bit of bright color.

"Then I went up on the roof to see the top of the wall," Tourje recalled. "It was breathtaking to look down and see incised lines that correspond to the design of the mural. You wouldn't notice them if you weren't looking for them, but once you know, there's no question."

After a long talk with Cho, Tourje relayed the news to the curators and his Chouinard colleagues. Pooling resources, the Chouinard group came up with a few thousand dollars and established the Chouinard/Siqueiros Mural Conservation Fund. Then Tourje consulted with paintings conservator Carolyn Tallent, who referred him to Rainer, a mural specialist. She enlisted colleagues Chris Stavroudis and Aneta Zebala, and they scheduled the first of several visits.

In the meantime, Tourje found a loose section in a patch on the exterior mural wall. He covered the rupture with protective tape, but a chunk of plaster came off, revealing bright red paint and shapes that precisely match the shoulder of a laborer in the mural.

That ragged spot remains the most "tantalizing" indication of buried treasure, Stavroudis said. But the conservators have removed paint in several tiny sections, called

"reveals," offering hope of more to come. Bright blue tape covers their tests on the exterior; reveals in the kitchen dot a wall largely obscured by massive refrigerators.

"We are cautiously optimistic," said Rainer, whose team will prepare a report of their findings and make recommendations. "We do feel that something is there. We can see traces of the design through paint and plaster layers. We can see incisions that match the historic images. And we do see color, but some of it may have been scraped before the wall was repainted. We also see big patches of plaster on that upper exterior wall, and we have heard that large pieces of plaster fell off in an earthquake in the 1990s. But we can't know how much has sheeted off or what condition the mural is in until the whole thing is uncovered."

The wall has four zones that would require different treatments, Rainer said. Exterior paint would be removed mechanically, by scraping. Each of the three interior sections — an attic above the drop ceiling, the upper painted wall and the lower tiled segment — probably would call for a specific application of solvents. Devising these systems would be part of the challenge, she said.

But no campaign will be launched for a while — if at all. "When we produce our report, we will advocate for not doing anything more until the building is secured and there is an owner who has a long-term preservation plan for the mural," Rainer said. "The next step would be to do larger tests in every area and find the best, most efficient way to remove the paint. But we want to do the project in a comprehensive way. We don't want to do any more testing on the exterior until it is protected by some sort of covering, and we don't want to work on any one area without knowing about the other areas."

The perpetually troubled conservation of "America Tropical" casts doubt on any attempt to restore "Street Meeting." Goldman tried to stir up interest in preserving the Olvera Street mural in 1969, but work didn't begin in earnest until 1987, when the Getty Conservation Institute joined forces with El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, the city department that administers the site. Progress has been fitful and the Getty has threatened to withdraw the balance of its \$2.6-million commitment if the city fails to raise the estimated \$1.4 million needed to complete the work. The Getty's deadline is July 1. If all goes well, the project will be finished at the end of 2006.

Despite the specter of fundraising, Tourje said that private ownership may be an advantage for the Chouinard project. Undaunted, he and his colleagues envision acquiring the old building as part of a complex that would include the school in South Pasadena and serve as a beacon of Southern California's artistic legacy.

"It's our idea of urban cultural development," he said. "The mural could potentially become an icon, as an identity factor for the larger surrounding community — both Hispanic and Asian, due to Pastor Cho's contribution to the idea — and the larger L.A. art community."

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