

# Orozco "explains"

Author

Orozco, José Clemente, 1883-1949

Date

1940

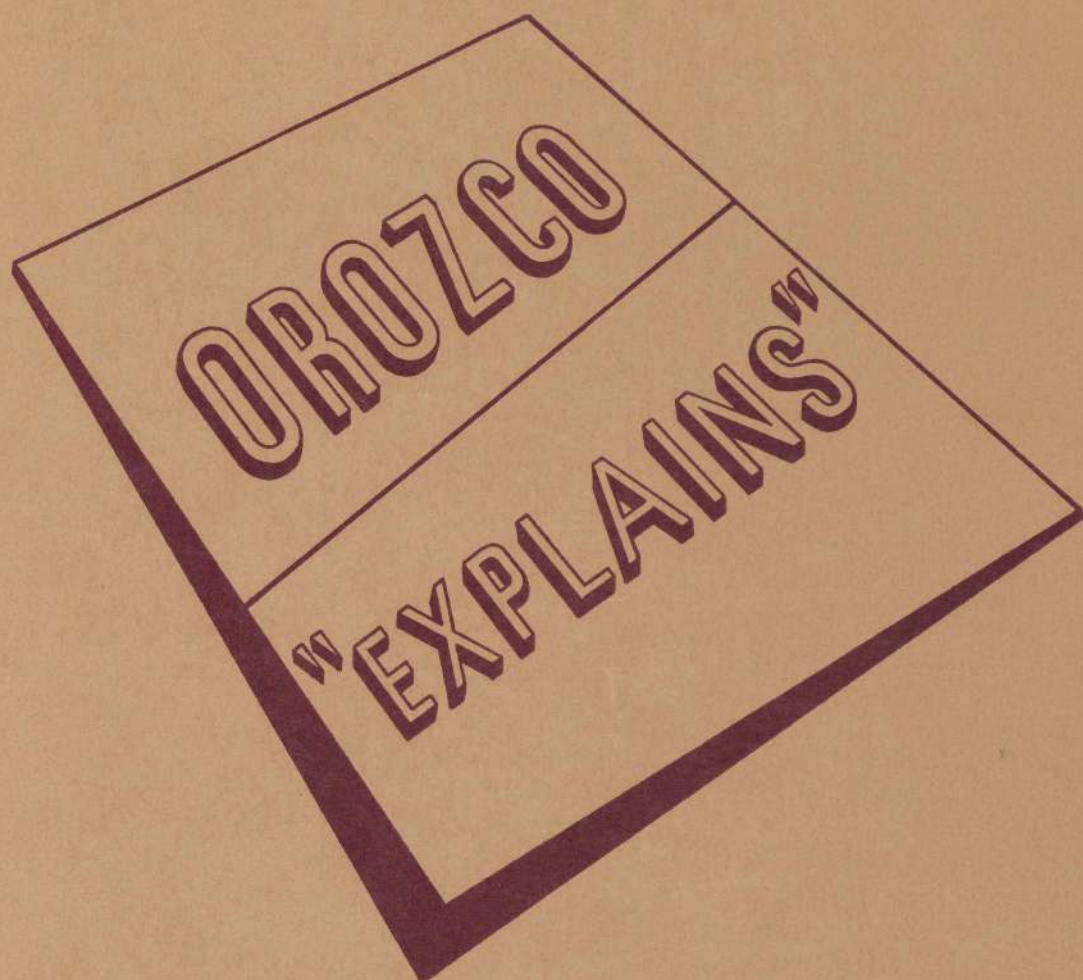
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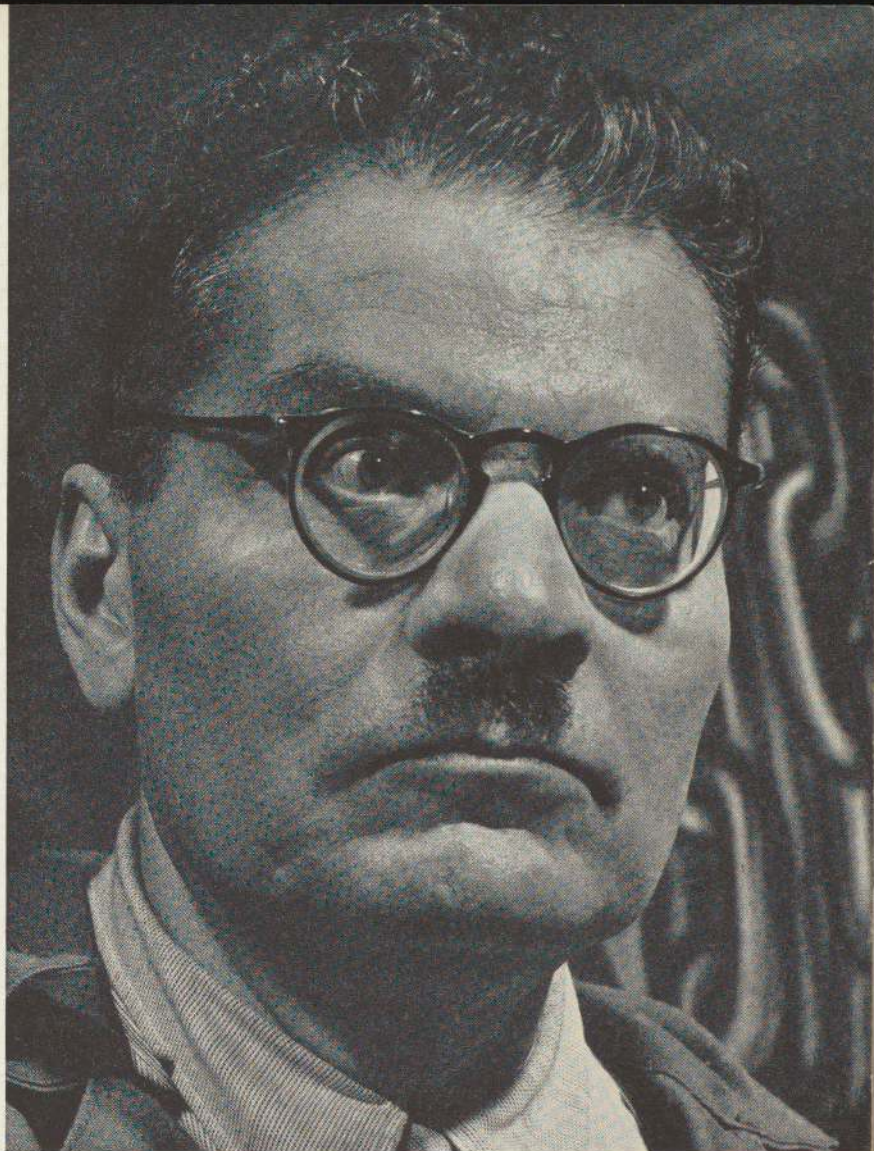
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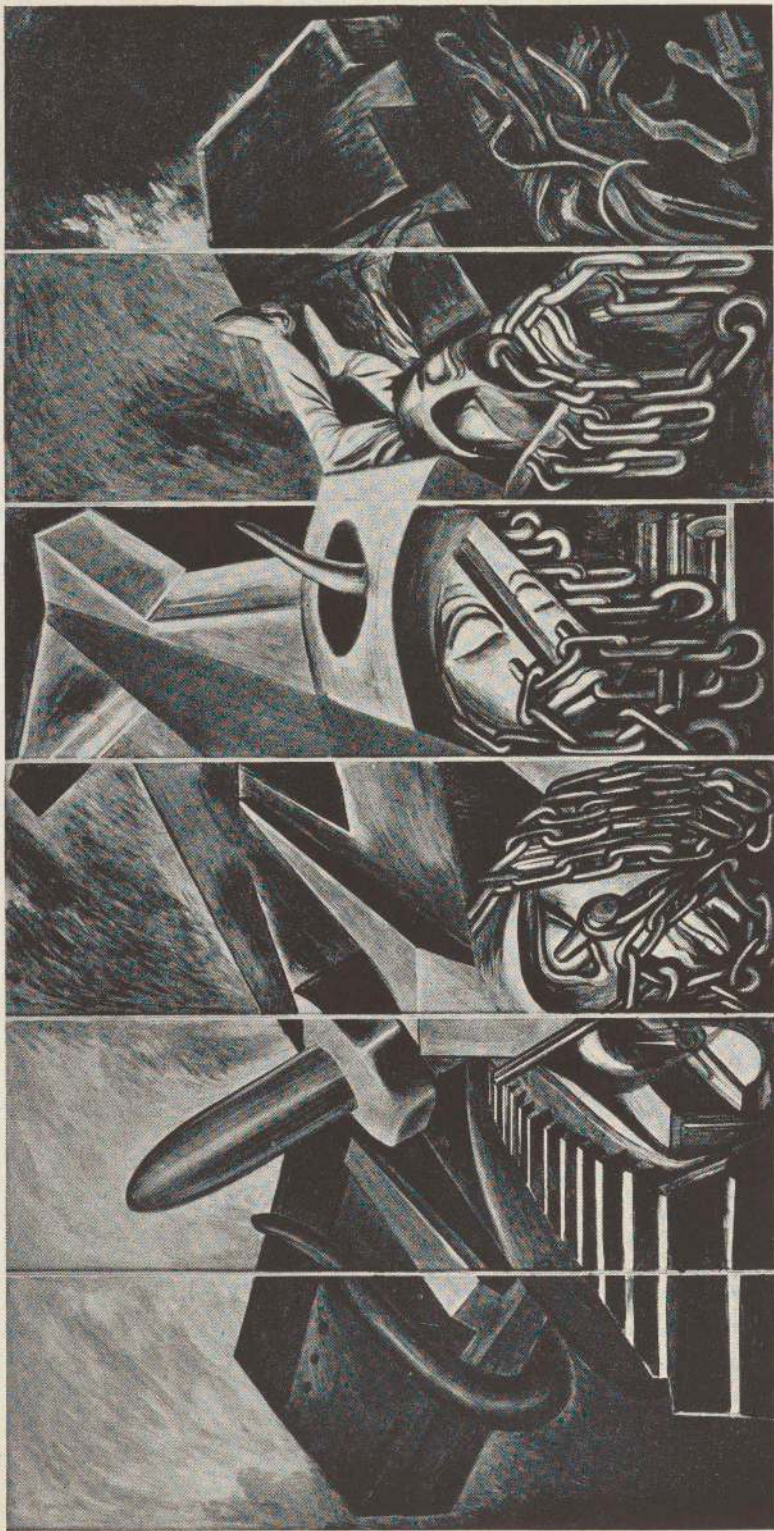
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OROZCO  
"EXPLAINS"



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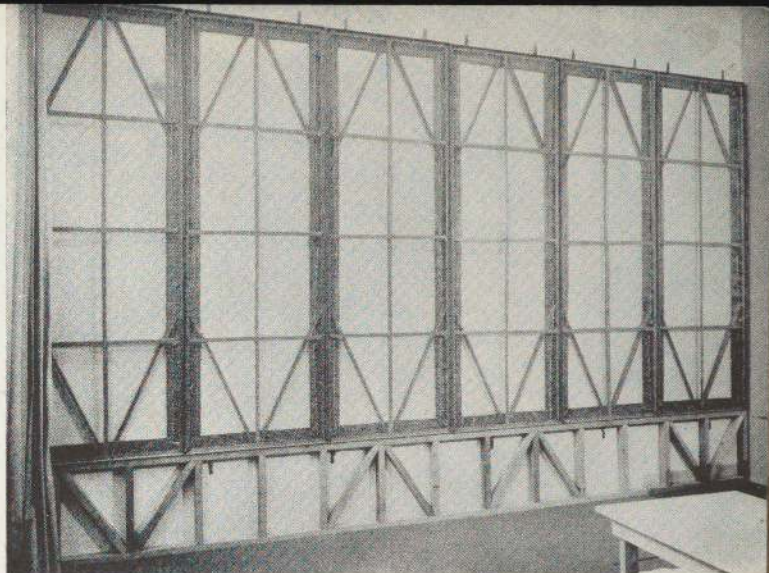


*The Dive Bomber*, by José Clemente Orozco

*In conjunction with the summer exhibition of Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art, Mr. José Clemente Orozco was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art to paint a fresco in six movable panels. He started work at the Museum on June 21 and did much of the painting before the public. The fresco was completed on June 30. Mr. Orozco was assisted by Mr. Lewis Rubenstein, who has supplied technical data for the ensuing captions. All photographs were taken by Eliot Elisofon.*

"Movable panels (each 9 by 3 feet) are made with strong steel frames. The plaster is held by a wire mesh. Panels such as these are too heavy to be really movable without danger to the painting. That is a field where technology may be of great service to art by developing a process for the construction of special panels for fresco painting. They must be very light in weight and at the same time so absorbent as to slow the drying as much as possible. In addition, the plaster for these panels must be less brittle than the ordinary one, probably by adding some new material to the plaster or by any other way to turn it very hard and flexible and as absorbent as before."

J.C.O.



## OROZCO "EXPLAINS"

*This "explanation" was written by Mr. Orozco. The quotation marks in his title indicate his feeling that explanations are unnecessary.*

The public wants explanations about a painting. What the artist had in mind when he did it. What he was thinking of. What is the exact name of the picture, and what the artist means by that. If he is glorifying or cursing. If he believes in Democracy.

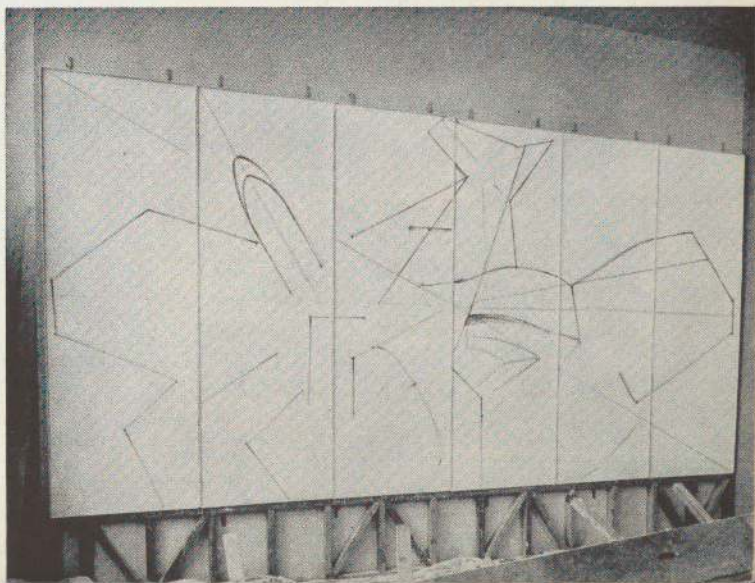
Going to the Italian Opera you get a booklet with a full account of why Rigoletto kills Aida at the end of a wild party with La Bohème, Lucia di Lammermoor and Madame Butterfly.

The Italian Renaissance is another marvelous opera full of killings and wild parties, and the public gets also thousands of booklets with complete and most detailed information about everything and everybody in Florence and Rome.

"Plaster is the same as for regular walls: lime and sand or lime and marble dust. A very small amount of Portland cement may be added if necessary to make a harder material, in certain cases. It is better to avoid it. For the intonaco or final coat upon which the painting is done no cement is used. Proportions: 2 parts sand to 1 lime or 2 to 1½. The number of coats of plaster must be as many as possible to hold a great deal of moisture. The number of coats depends upon the kind of material the wall is made of. The best material is the old hand-made brick because modern machine-made brick is as waterproof as concrete."

J.C.O.

Orozco made no full sized cartoon. The sketch was drawn in pencil to the scale of one inch to the foot. Salient lines were enlarged on the equalizing coat and fixed in light red pigment, ground in water.

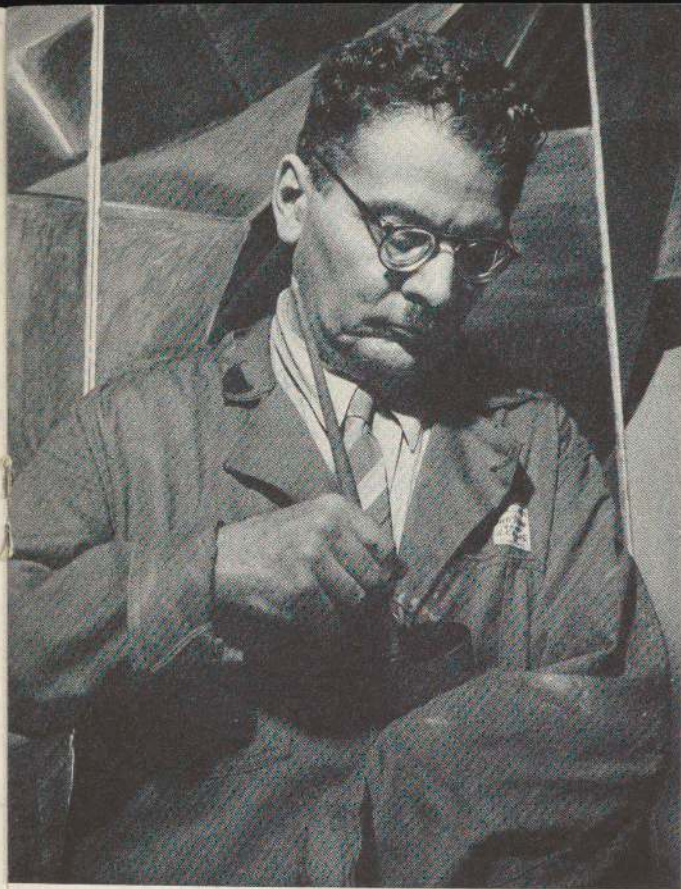




In the early stages Orozco continually repolished the surface with a small pointing trowel in the direction of the brush strokes. This seals the pigment firmly in the intonaco, burnishes and deepens the color. Sometimes when he wanted to make a change he scrubbed out a part with the brush and applied a small patch of fresh intonaco. In one part he applied flashes of lime white with the pointing trowel.



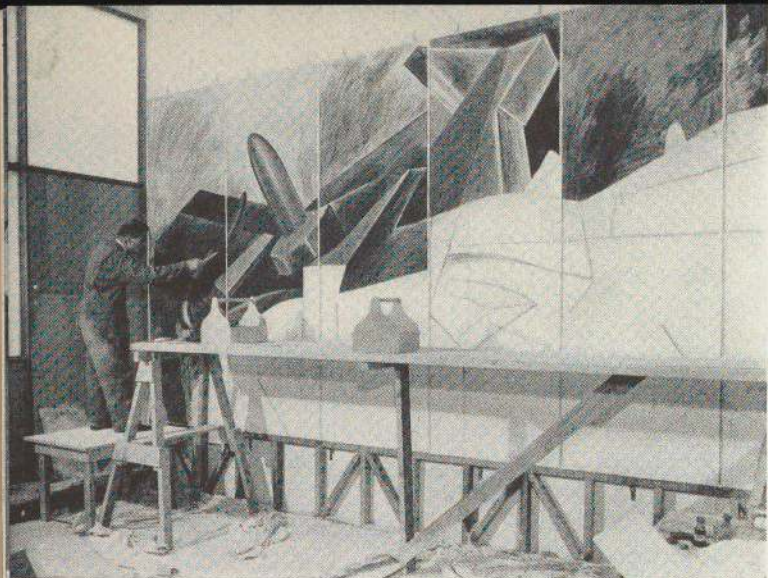
The mortar was smoothed with a finishing trowel at the joints. The joints were cut at night or the following day. They followed the main lines of the design and were sometimes quite intricate.



Pigments were diluted with water only. Orozco planned the final design and color directly on the wall, improvising as he worked. The main lines of the design were painted in Venetian red. The straight lines were brushed along a yardstick. In the first stage of painting, the under-painting was brushed in broadly in transparent red tones. Orozco enlarged the day's section from his sketch to join the lines with the previous painting and with the red lines on the equalizing coat. The points were found by vertical and horizontal coordinates and were painted in small red crosses.

And now the public insists on knowing the plot of modern painted opera, though not Italian, of course. They take for granted that every picture must be the illustration of a short story or of a thesis and want to be told the entertaining biography and bright sayings of the leaders in the stage-picture, the ups and downs of hero, villain, and chorus. Many pictures actually tell all that and more even including quotations from the Holy Scriptures and Shakespeare. Others deal with social conditions, evils of the world, revolution, history and the like. Bedroom pictures with *la femme à sa toilette* are still very frequent.

Suddenly, *Madame Butterfly* and her friend *Rigoletto* disappear from the stage-picture. Gone, too, are gloomy social conditions. To the amazement of the public the curtain goes up and nothing is on the stage but a few lines and cubes. The Abstract. The public protests and demands explanations, and explanations are given away freely and generously. Rigo-



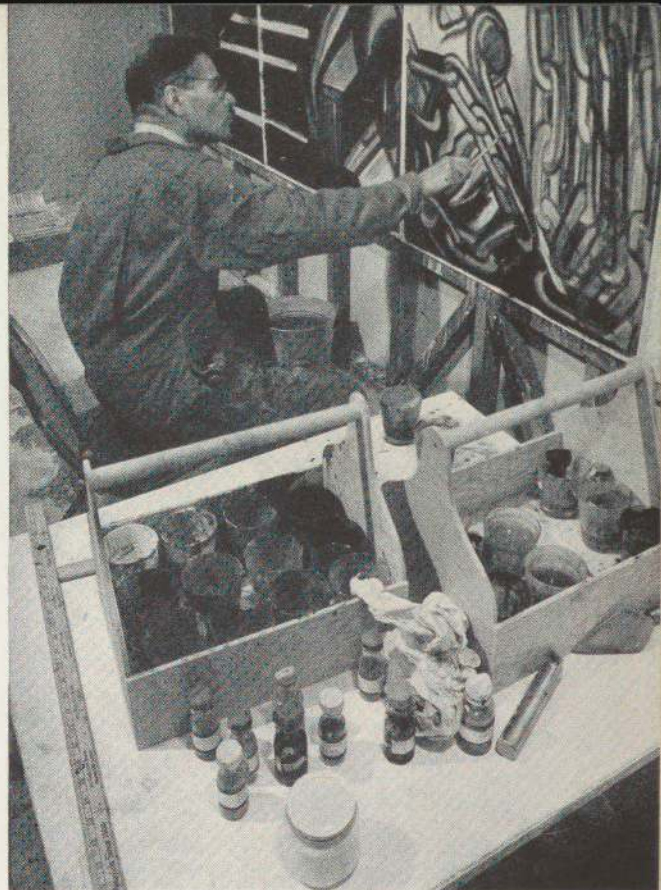
The painting continued with washes or various low intensity colors, usually black or umber, to build up the local tones. Orozco paints with free sweeping strokes, holding the brush loosely on the end. Color washes were applied rapidly, sometimes to the point of allowing them to run down the walls.

letto and social conditions are still there but have become abstract, all dolled up in cubes and cones in a wild surrealist party with *La Bohème*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Madame Butterfly*. Meanings? Names? Significance? Short stories? Well, let's invent them afterwards. The public refuses **TO SEE** painting. They want **TO HEAR** painting. They don't care for the show itself, they prefer **TO LISTEN** to the barker outside. Free lectures every hour for the blind, around the Museum. This way, please.

"The Artist must be sincere," they say. It is true. He must be sincere. The actor on the stage commits suicide to thrill or frighten the public to death. The actor feels exactly what a suicide feels, and acts the same way except that his gun is not loaded. He is sincere as an artist only. Next week he has to impersonate St. Francis, Lenin or an average business man, very sincerely!

The technique of painting is still in its infancy after ten thousand years of civilization, or whatever it is. Even college children know this fact, for abundant literature about the subject is on hand.

It seems incredible that science and industry have not yet provided the artist with better materials to work with. Not a single improvement through centuries. The range of colors available is still extremely limited. Pigments are not permanent at all in spite of manufacturers' claims. Canvas, wood, paper, walls are exposed to continuous destruction from moisture, changes in temperature, chemical reactions, insects and germs. Oils, varnishes, wax, gums and tempera media are dirty substances darkening, changing, cracking and disintegrating all the time.



The mortar is ground thoroughly for a week before plastering and when applied is the consistency of ointment. The sand for the intonaco must contain no salt or organic impurities; the lime putty used was six years old. This mortar was smoothed with the finishing trowel as applied and was ready for painting immediately.

The colors were mixed in Old Fashioned glasses—one dozen glasses for the palette of pure color, one dozen for daily mixtures. *"Only lime-proof colors are used such as: earthen colors, Mars colors, cobalt, chromium oxide, non-animal blacks and lime white. Good cadmiums may be used also very thinly. The binding medium is the carbonate of lime produced during the drying process of the plaster. A fresco is never varnished."* J.C.O.

Fresco painting is free from the inconveniences of oils and varnishes, but the wall upon which the painting is done is subjected to many causes of destruction, such as the use of the wrong kind of building materials, poor planning, moisture from the ground or from the air, earthquakes, dive bombing, tanking or battleshipping, excess of magnesia in the lime or the marble dust, lack of care resulting in scratches or peeling off, et cetera. So, fresco must be done only on walls that are as free as possible from all these inconveniences.

There is no rule for painting al fresco. Every artist may do as he pleases provided he paints as thinly as possible and only while the plaster is wet, six to eight hours from the moment it is applied. No retouching of any kind afterwards. Every artist develops his own way of



Orozco painted about two square yards a day. He used flat, soft bristle brushes of the type used for oil painting.

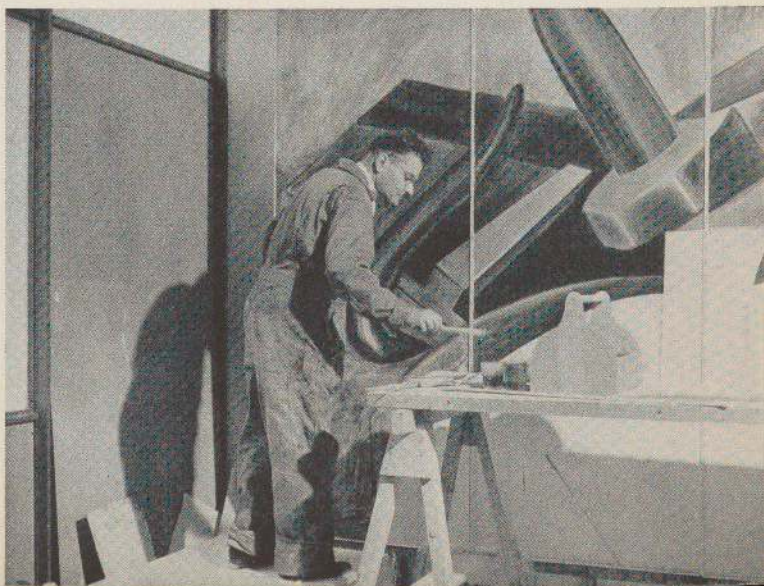
planning his conception and transferring it onto the wet plaster. Every method is as good as the other. Or the artist may improvise without any previous sketches.

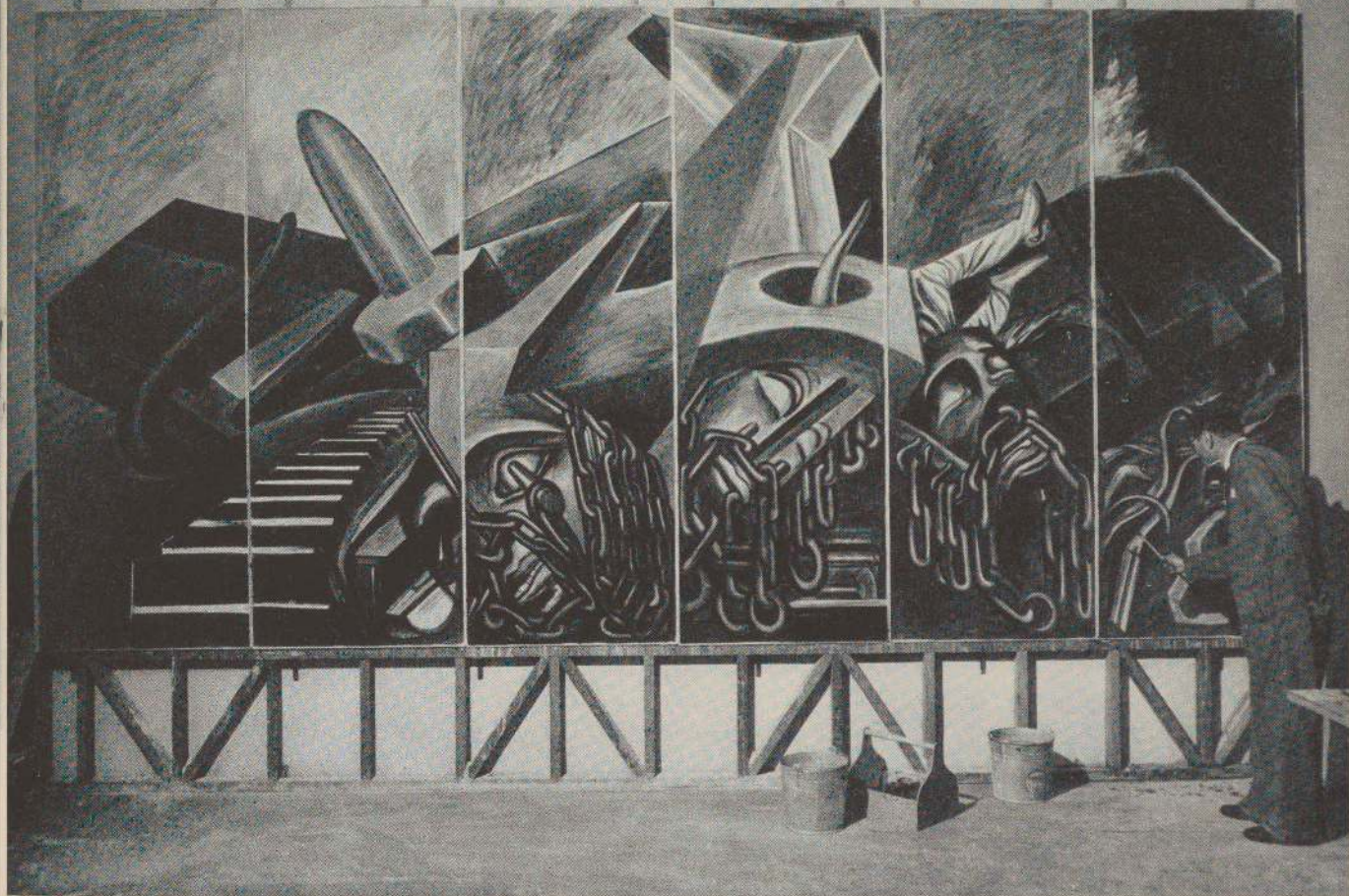
#### **“The Dive Bomber,” or Six Interchangeable Panels**

A painting is a **Poem** and nothing else. A poem made of relationships between forms as other kinds of poems are made of relationships between words, sounds or ideas. Sculpture and architecture are also relationships between forms. This word **forms** includes color, tone, proportion, line, et cetera.

The forms in a poem are necessarily organized in such a way that the whole acts as an automatic machine, more or less efficient but apt to function in a certain way, to move in a certain direction. Such a machine-motor sets in motion our senses, first; our emotional capacity, second; and our intellect, last. An efficient and well-organized machine may work

In painting over the transparent red tones, Orozco often glazed the surface with a thin wash of semi-opaque grays mixed with lime white, with a resultant low intensity purplish tone. The outlining of the forms was done in Vine black. The basic tonal scheme used was red earth and Vine black combined with blue-blacks, opaque warm and cool grays. Accenting was done toward the end of the painting day in bold strokes of lime white, or in such arbitrary treatment as the strokes of pure cobalt on a black field, or the plastered strokes of lime white in the sky. Orozco often left an expanse of bare plaster in a light area. He used the fresco medium with great freedom.





Orozco worked ten days. His working day was about six to eight hours.

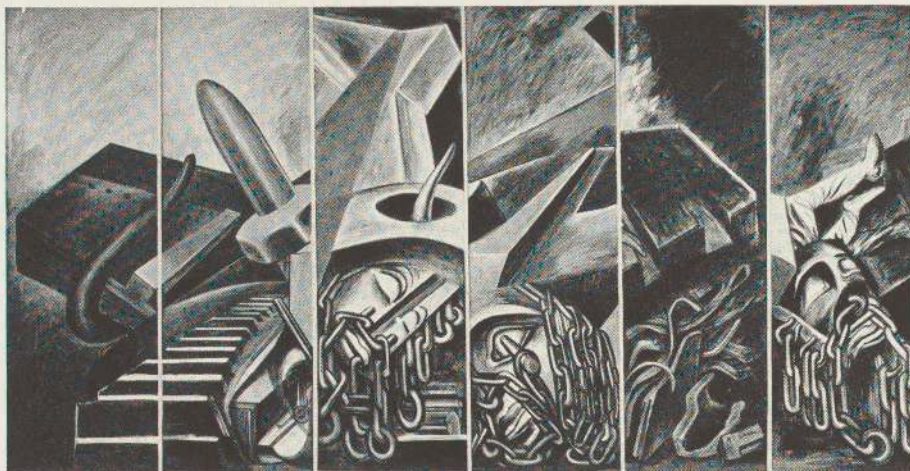
in very different ways. It can be simplified to its last elementals or basic structure or may be developed into a vast and complicated organism working under the same basic principles.

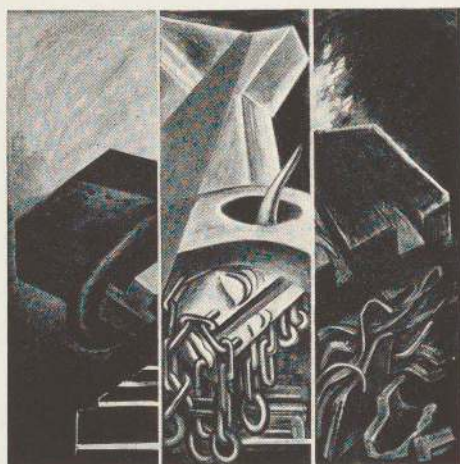
Each part of a machine may be by itself a machine to function independently from the whole. The order of the inter-relations between its parts may be altered, but those relationships may stay the same in any other order, and unexpected or expected possibilities may appear. Suppose we change the actual order of the plastic elements of the vaults in the Sistine Chapel . . .

A linotype is a work of art, but a linotype in motion is an extraordinary adventure affecting the lives of many human beings or the course of history. A few lines from a linotype in action may start a World War or may mean the birth of a new era.

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO

*The following arrangements of the six panels are those preferred by Mr. Orozco.*





## OTHER WORKS BY OROZCO IN THE PERMANENT COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART:

*Nude.* (Study for murals in National Preparatory School, Mexico City.) 1923. Charcoal on paper, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 18"

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

*Feet No. 2.* Charcoal, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17"

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*The Subway.* 1928. Oil on canvas, 16 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

*Peace.* 1930. Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

Given anonymously

*Zapatistas.* 1931. Oil on canvas, 45 x 55"

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*Barricade.* 1931. Oil on canvas, 55 x 45"

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*The Cemetery.* 1931. Oil on canvas, 27 x 39 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

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### LITERATURE ON OROZCO IN THE MUSEUM LIBRARY:

José Clemente Orozco. 247 plates, with introduction by ALMA REED. New York, Delphic Studios, 1932

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A comprehensive bibliography of works on Orozco will appear in the forthcoming second edition of ALMA REED's José Clemente Orozco

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