

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

FOR RELEASE WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 1940

MUSEUM HOURS: May 15 through May 29, 1940

Weekdays, including Saturday, 10 A.M. to 10 P.M.

Sundays, 12 Noon to 10 P.M.

Admission price 25 cents, includes admission to motion picture program every day at 4 P.M.

Admission to concert of Mexican music, 2:30 P.M. and 8:45 P.M., May 19--May 29, \$1.00 (includes admission to Museum).

TWENTY CENTURIES OF MEXICAN ART OPENS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Mexican art ever assembled in this or any other country opens to the public today (Wednesday, May 15) at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street. It will be on view through September 30.

The Honorary Committee for the exhibition is composed of the Honorable Castello Najera, Mexico's Ambassador to the United States; and the Honorable Josephus Daniels, United States Ambassador to Mexico. The Executive Committee consists of General Eduardo Hay, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico; and John E. Abbott, Executive Vice-President of the Museum of Modern Art. The Organizing Committee comprises Dr. Alfonso Caso, Chairman and Commissioner General of the exhibition; Prof. Manuel Toussaint; Roberto Montenegro; Miguel Covarrubias; John McAndrew, Curator of the Museum's Department of Architecture, who is in charge of the installation of the exhibition; and Monroe Wheeler, Director of the Museum's Publications Department, who supervised the preparation of the catalog, printed both in Spanish and in English.

The catalog, in addition to articles by the Mexican authorities who assembled the four different sections of the exhibition, has an introduction by Antonio Castro-Leal, one of Mexico's foremost art critics. Mr. Castro-Leal writes in part:

"For the first time in the history of art exhibitions there has now been brought together in one building an authoritative and systematic collection of Mexican art, from the archaic cultures to the most recent schools of painting. The exhibition is divided into four sections. The first, Pre-Spanish, has been assembled by Dr. Alfonso Caso, internationally known authority on Mexican archaeology

and Director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. The second, art of the Colonial period, has been entrusted to Prof. Manuel Toussaint, Director of the Institute of Esthetic Research of the National University, a man of unsurpassed knowledge in the field. The third section is devoted to Folk Art and has been organized by the distinguished painter, Roberto Montenegro, former director of the first museum of popular art founded in Mexico (1934). The fourth section, modern art, has been arranged by Miguel Covarrubias, famous caricaturist and painter, who has understood so well the restlessness of our time....

"Pre-Spanish Sculpture: Pre-Spanish art in Mexico served a religious function. It was not content to copy the external world, whose visible forms were for it no more than an outward testimony of great inner forces. It created original compositions, using real elements with an almost musical freedom. It is not a crude art.... The ancient Mexican artist was deliberate and skillful.... One marvels at his plastic feeling and at his powers of decorative composition....

"Colonial: After the Conquest, the Indian worked under the direction of the Spaniard. In cutting stone he instinctively sought simplifications of form, or elaborated decorative compositions. When, as building increased, the indigenous artist was given greater freedom, the classic architectural orders, for example, began to lose their purity. There appeared, either rudely or subtly, a distortion of traditional forms, and they became the vocabulary of a new kind of expression.

"An ability to compose with richly complicated forms is shown in the more extreme expressions of the Mexican baroque. Church facades, altarpieces and the decoration of interiors reveal in their exuberance of carving, gilding and accents of color a perfect idiom for the new Mexican spirit. But over this rich profusion, a coherent order dominates.

"Folk Art: All peoples embellish their objects of daily use and evolve similar types of designs, combinations of primary colors, simplified straight-line textile patterns and stylizations resulting from a primitive inventiveness or imposed by the use of similar materials or tools. All this is found in Mexico, and whoever knows the folk arts of Europe will not fail to discover similarities between certain Mexican objects and their equivalents in Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Sweden.

"But one is astounded not only by the abundance of beautiful objects that the Mexican people make, but by the quality of esthetic achievement in so many of them. The simplest jar surprises at times with its beauty of proportion; in the decorations of Guadalajara pottery the poetic sense of composition and line reminds us of Persian prints; and a softness of tone and happy decorative inventiveness make the Talavera of Puebla akin to the ceramics of China.

"To this feeling for beauty, at once naive and refined, the Mexican adds an abundant resourcefulness and an almost Asiatic capacity for minute detail. He has also a certain ironic subtlety and a strange pleasure in the macabre, surprising to the foreigner but inherited from the days when the idea of death was a constant concern for both the Indian and the Spaniard.

"Modern: During the greater part of the nineteenth century, Mexico dedicated all her energies to consolidating her independence and seeking new forms of social justice. After the Liberal flood had swept away Maximilian's Empire and

the Conservatives, it subsided, and its residue acted as the breeding ground for the pollution of the Diaz dictatorship. In 1910 the people rebelled, and after a ten-year struggle, won again the right to feel truly Mexican. Art rebelled also; far from the academic tradition, painting tried new paths and found new tasks worthy to perform.

"Great mural painting begins in Mexico after the Revolution. Having already given proof of his artistic ability in the delicate lines of Pre-Spanish reliefs and in the religious pictures of the Colonial period, the Mexican was ready for the notable achievements of the mural painting of today....A wave of social fervor, of passionate convictions, and of beauty animates the forms of the great Mexican frescoes....

"These frescoes belong to everyone and were painted for everyone; the artist, bound to portray subjects of national significance, tried to tell in masterpieces what he thought and felt about his country and his people....

"On Mexican walls were written the life of the people and the history of the nation, the silent tragedy of the humble and the sordid ambition of the wicked. Shining above all, was the hope of a better world.

"It was not a vaunting of mere propaganda, or of showy posters vaunting the politicians of the moment. This painting was the perfect union of a strong art and a living thought--art and thought which, as in the great periods of the past, were nourished by the anxiety and the longing of the whole people. Diego Rivera drew the life and the history of the country with a richness of composition, a formal harmony, and a sense of mass and space that no one has surpassed in our time. Jose Clemente Orozco, penetrating yet deeper, painted with a generous cruelty and a rough tenderness the bold and broken symbols of contemporary wickedness, truth everlasting and that innate tragedy that seems to be part of the Mexican soul. With these men, there came a whole new generation of painters.

"Mexican mural painting of the twentieth century is not only Mexico's greatest contribution to the art of our time but one of the most vigorous and original contemporary esthetic manifestations."

The three gallery floors of the Museum and the greater part of the Museum's sculpture garden are filled with several thousand objects of Mexican art.

The ground floor galleries are devoted to Pre-Spanish sculpture, pottery and jewelry of the Maya, Totonac, Olmec, Tarascan, Aztec and other cultures. Most of the sculpture is in the form of ancient gods and ceremonial objects and is carved from basalt, andesite, limestone, jade and other local stones. The smallest of these figures is a tiny silver Aztec owl's head only half an inch across.

In the sculpture garden just beyond the glass walls of this gallery of the gods, is the largest piece of sculpture in the exhibition, the gigantic nine-foot statue of Coatlicue (goddess of the Earth and Death). As the famous original of this sculpture weighs two tons, the figure in the garden is a plaster cast which has, however, all

the monumentality and grandeur of the ancient figure of stone which could not be moved from the National Museum in Mexico City. Near Coatlicue is the reclining figure of an Aztec god, Chac-Mool, with hollowed abdomen making a receptacle for blood used in human sacrifices. There are two dozen other pieces of Pre-Spanish sculpture also displayed in the garden.

At the entrance to the second floor stand two figures in polychrome and gilt wood sculpture--the Virgin Mary and St. John. These are from the Colonial period, as are the paintings--the gold and silver reliquaries, vessels and other objects in gold and silver on the second floor. One unusual exhibit is a pair of beautifully wrought silver sandals for the statue of a saint. There is also a large group of Colonial lacquer bowls and platters, and a gallery devoted to Colonial architecture.

The galleries on the rear of the second floor, overlooking the garden, are filled with a great variety of folk art.

The Folk Art Section continues in the galleries stretching the rear length of the third floor in displays of costumes, masks, toys, musical instruments, textiles, ex-voto paintings on tin and other objects of folk art. The last gallery of this section contains popular painting and leads into the work of modern professional painters of the 19th century.

Following these in the next gallery is an alcove of caricatures and political cartoons. The most important of these are by Guadalupe Posada, who is by some considered the greatest Mexican artist of the 19th century. Because of the vitality and graphic quality of his work he has been an inspiration to many contemporary artists. Among the Posada items are amusing prints he made for postmen and other civil servants who used them as reminders of holiday gifts.

The exhibition continues in a group of Revolutionary painters. The remaining galleries across the entire front of the third floor show the work of contemporary artists. Miguel Covarrubias, who made the selections, has included particularly the work of Mexican artists of the past ten years, many of them as yet little known in this country. In the decade from 1920 to 1930, modern painting in Mexico was concerned chiefly with Revolutionary subjects but during the last decade the subjects preferred by the painters are

of a more general nature: figure compositions, Mexican scenes, and Surrealist fantasies.

One important part of the Modern Section of Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art is devoted to frescoes. Three original Rivera frescoes will be shown: Agrarian Leader, Zapata, 1931; Sugar Cane, 1931; and Liberation of the Peon, 1931. About twenty-five frescoes by other artists, impossible to exhibit here in the original, will be represented by enlarged photographs.

One large gallery in the Modern Section will be devoted to the work of Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera, generally considered the three foremost artists of modern Mexico. The works in this gallery in addition to two of the Rivera frescoes, include such important paintings as Orozco's Zapata and The Sob by Siqueiros.

In addition to Orozco, Siqueiros and Rivera, other noted Mexican artists included in the Modern Section of the exhibition are Tamayo, Merida, Montenegro, Covarrubias, Charlot, and Frida Kahlo.