

Suggested Activities in Conjunction with Siqueiros' Mural, *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932*

The following activities meet the California State Content Standards in History, Language Arts, and Visual Arts.

Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932

Social Studies

- Locate the following key places in Siqueiros' life using maps of the United States, Europe, South America, Mexico and California, or use a world map to plot the distances he traveled:

Chihuahua
Mexico City
Taxco
Cuernavaca
Spain
Chile
Paris
Los Angeles
New York

- Siqueiros and the other Mexican muralists used art to educate the public. Often they addressed the problems of poor people who did not have the power to make their voices heard. What problem or inequality would you choose to illustrate if you were designing a mural today? Why? What are some other non-violent ways you can communicate dissatisfaction with the government, or bring social inequities to the public's attention?
- Because of their controversial subject matter, Siqueiros' murals angered some people. One of the murals he painted while in Los Angeles, *America Tropical* (1932), made people so upset that it was whitewashed so it could no longer be seen.
Imagine that someone wanted to whitewash *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932* because they found it offensive. What argument could you make to support removing it? What argument could you make to convince them it deserves to be seen? Use historical facts to support your opinion.
Write a letter to the editor expressing your view.
- Artists such as Siqueiros are often commissioned, or asked, to paint specific works for a patron who pays them for their effort. Siqueiros was asked to paint *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932* by Dudley Murphy, the Hollywood director in whose home he was staying at the time. Murphy did not ask for control over the subject matter, in fact he invited Siqueiros to be as controversial as possible. Such arrangements are not always so pleasant.

When Nelson. Rockefeller, commissioned Diego Rivera to paint a mural for the new Rockefeller Center in New York City, he was not prepared for Rivera's political message. Rivera included the Russian communist, Lenin in the mural imagery which so displeased Rockefeller that he locked Rivera out of the building and eventually destroyed the mural! The artistic community rallied to Rivera's defense. E.B. White, writing in the New Yorker Magazine, composed a poem about an imaginary argument between Rivera and Rockefeller over who owned the wall on which the mural had been painted. It is re-printed below.

I Paint What I See

It's no good taste in a man like me,
Said John D's grandson Nelson.
To question an artist's integrity
Or mention a practical thing like a fee,
But I know what I like to a large degree,
Tho art I hate to hamper,
For twenty-one thousand conservative bucks
You painted a radical. I say shucks,
I never could rent the offices.
For this, as you know, is a public hall
And people want doves, or a tree in fall,
And tho your art I dislike to hamper,
I owe a little to God and Gramper.
And after all,
It's my wall....
We'll see if it is, said Rivera.

E.B. White

“Gramper” refers to Rockefeller's grandfather John D. Rockefeller. Research who he was and then explain why Nelson might feel he owed him something? Why would the inclusion of Lenin have upset “Gramper?”

This poem brings up the question of public art. Who do you think “owned” the wall? Rivera? Rockefeller? The public? Why?

Do you think the person who commissioned and paid for a work of art has the right to destroy it? Why or why not?

How does this incident compare to the whitewashing of *America Tropical*?

- Modern Mexican art, especially mural painting, is closely linked with the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and lasted almost ten years. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, the US had large investments in Mexico. American companies owned mines, oil wells, railroads, farms and many other businesses in Mexico. Labor costs were low, the businesses were for the

most part profitable, and the government of Porfirio Diaz (the dictator hated by the Mexican revolutionaries) was committed to protecting foreign interests.

Research Mexican –American relations during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson –the revolutionary period in Mexico. Use what you have learned to answer the following discussion questions:

1. If you were a Mexican citizen, why might you be concerned about foreigners owning businesses in your country?
 2. If you were a Mexican citizen, why might you want foreign investment in your country?
 3. Some Mexicans have held and continue to hold strong anti- American beliefs. Some Americans, in turn, have held and continue to hold strong anti-Mexican beliefs. What might cause these people in Mexico and the United States to feel this way?
 4. Assume you are a German politician at the beginning of World War I; the United States has not yet entered the war in Europe, but it might. You are aware that there are anti- American sentiments among the Mexican people. How might you suggest Germany and Mexico cooperate? What might each side gain from such a deal?
- *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932* has at its core, the relationship between Mexico and the United States in 1932, when the mural was painted. At the time of Calles' presidency, many Mexican people felt that US Imperialism had penetrated their country with Calles' consent. The American Ambassador to Mexico at the time was Dwight Morrow, a partner in the investment firm of JP Morgan. How does Siqueiros communicate this "unhealthy" relationship between Mexico and the US/Calles and Capitalism?
Research this period in US/Mexican relations. Do you agree or disagree with Siqueiros' portrayal?

Language Arts

- Siqueiros uses visual language to communicate his political opinion in *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932*. Translate his message into words. Which method is more dramatic? More persuasive? Do they appeal to different audiences?
- Murals are a form of story telling. The story of *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932* is dynamic, depicting both events and their aftermath. Construct a story from the images keeping in mind setting, character, plot, sequence of events, and climax. Your story should not correspond with Siqueiros' political message, rather it should be created from your imagination.
- Siqueiros was a great friend of Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize winning Chilean poet. Their lives and their art intertwined, united in giving voice to the oppressed. While Siqueiros was imprisoned in Mexico, awaiting trial for his role in an attempt to assassinate Leon Trotsky, Neruda was a frequent visitor. At that time Neruda was the Chilean Consul and arranged for a visa that would allow his friend to leave Mexico in safety. When Neruda's epic poem of Latin American history, *Canto General*, was first published in the 1950s, both Siqueiros and Rivera contributed illustrations. Much

later, in the 1970's Siqueiros designed a series of lithographs for a new edition of the same poem.

When he was told of Neruda's death from cancer in 1973, Siqueiros described him as "the greatest muralist poet singer of the hopes of all the oppressed people in our Latin America and the whole world."

Read the following passages from *Canto General*.

Cuauhtémoc (1520)

Young brother, never at rest,
unconsoled for time on endless time,
youth shaken in Mexico's
metallic darkness. I read your
naked country's gift on your hand.

On it your smile is born and grows
like a line between the light and the gold.

Your lips sealed by death are
the purest entombed silence

The fountain submerged
beneath all the earth's mouths.

Did you hear, did you hear by chance,
from distant Anahuac,
a waterway, a wind
of shattered springtime?
It was perhaps the cedar's voice.
It was a white wave from Acapulco.

But in the night your heart
fled to the borderlands
like a bewildered deer,
amid the bloody monuments,
beneath the foundering moon.....

The fateful hour has arrived,
and among your people
you're bread and root, spear and star,
The invader has stopped his advance.
Moctezuma is not extinct
like a fallen chalice,
he's armored lightning,
Quetzal plume, flower of the people,
a flaming crest amid the ships.

Pablo Neruda

Why do you think Siqueiros was moved to illustrate this poem?

What sympathies does he share with Neruda?

Who was Cuauhtémoc? What is Moctezuma? A Quetzal? Do you think many people would understand this poem if they didn't know the history and myth of Mexico?

Siqueiros turned Neruda's words into images; try turning Siqueiros' images into words by writing a poem based on the images in *Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932*.