

# The Conservation of *América Tropical*: Historical Context and Project Overview

*Leslie Rainer*

Presented at  
The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving  
the Artist's Monumental Murals

October 16–17, 2012  
Getty Center, Los Angeles



The Getty Conservation Institute

© 2013 J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved.

The Getty Conservation Institute works internationally to advance conservation practice in the visual arts—broadly interpreted to include objects, collections, architecture, and sites. The GCI serves the conservation community through scientific research, education and training, model field projects, and the dissemination of the results of both its own work and the work of others in the field. In all its endeavors, the GCI focuses on the creation and delivery of knowledge that will benefit the professionals and organizations responsible for the conservation of the world's cultural heritage.

The Getty Conservation Institute  
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 700  
Los Angeles, CA 90049-1684 United States  
Telephone: 310 440-7325  
Fax: 310 440-7702  
Email: [gciweb@getty.edu](mailto:gciweb@getty.edu)  
[www.getty.edu/conservation](http://www.getty.edu/conservation)

# The Conservation of *América Tropical*: Historical Context and Project Overview

Leslie Rainer

**Abstract:** In 1932 David Alfaro Siqueiros painted the mural *América Tropical* on a second-story exterior wall at El Pueblo de Los Angeles, a historic district and the heart of Los Angeles. The artist, commissioned to paint an idyllic scene of old Mexico, instead depicted an indigenous figure on a double cross, surmounted by an American eagle, and revolutionaries with rifles crouched on a nearby rooftop. The highly controversial mural was whitewashed soon after its completion and then largely forgotten until the 1960s, during the rise of the Chicano mural movement. Since that time, efforts to preserve the mural have been ongoing. The Getty Conservation Institute and the City of Los Angeles have recently completed a comprehensive project to conserve, protect, present, and interpret *América Tropical*, the artist's only mural that is accessible to the public in its original location in the United States. This paper presents the story of *América Tropical*—its censorship, its rediscovery, and the efforts to preserve it.

**Resumen:** En 1932 David Alfaro Siqueiros pintó el mural *América Tropical* en el muro exterior de un segundo piso en El Pueblo de Los Ángeles, una zona histórica en el corazón de dicha ciudad. El artista, comisionado para pintar una escena idílica del viejo México, dibuja en su lugar una figura indígena sobre una doble cruz, coronada por un águila americana, mientras revolucionarios armados con rifles se agazapan en una azotea cercana. El mural, sumamente controvertido, es cubierto con agua de cal poco después de terminado, para luego ser prácticamente olvidado hasta la década de 1960, cuando surge el movimiento mural chicano. Desde entonces, los

esfuerzos por preservar el mural han sido continuos. The Getty Conservation Institute y la Ciudad de Los Ángeles han terminado recientemente un proyecto bastante exhaustivo para conservar, proteger y presentar *América Tropical*, el único mural del artista que aún permanece abierto al público en su ubicación original en los Estados Unidos. Esta ponencia presenta la historia de *América Tropical*: su censura, redescubrimiento, y los esfuerzos hechos para preservarlo.

## Introduction

In 1932 David Alfaro Siqueiros came to Los Angeles for approximately six months. During this time he painted three murals—the first, titled *Street Meeting*, at Chouinard Art Institute; the second, titled *América Tropical*, commissioned for an exterior wall of the Plaza Art Center at El Pueblo de Los Angeles, in the historic heart of downtown; and the third for the residence of filmmaker Dudley Murphy in Pacific Palisades, known as *Portrait of Mexico Today*.<sup>1</sup> Each of these murals was innovative, using new materials and techniques that Siqueiros discovered and developed in Los Angeles. All of the murals were also controversial, and two of the three were censored shortly after they were completed.<sup>2</sup> The body of work the artist made in Los Angeles laid a foundation not only for Siqueiros's later work but for future generations of artists in L.A. *América Tropical*, the largest and the most controversial of the three murals, has had a tumultuous history since it was painted in 1932. This paper presents the historic context in which the mural was painted, its history, preserva-



**Figure 1** *América Tropical* shortly after it was completed. An associate of Siqueiros, Roberto Berdecio, is seen in the foreground. Getty Research Institute, 960094. Photo: Getty Research Institute; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

tion efforts, and an overview of the collaborative project carried out by the Getty Conservation Institute and the City of Los Angeles to conserve, protect, interpret, and present *América Tropical* to the public.

The mural *América Tropical* was commissioned by F. K. Ferenz, the director of the Plaza Art Center, for a second-story exterior wall of the building, also known as the Italian Hall, on Olvera Street. The mural was to be an idyllic depiction of a land of plenty where the fruits of the land fell into the hands of the people. This imagery went along with the theme of Olvera Street, itself a romanticized version of a Mexican marketplace developed as a tourist destination by Los Angeles booster Christine Sterling in 1930 (Poole and Ball 2002). Siqueiros, a political activist and revolutionary artist, however, painted a very different scene of tropical

America, with, as Siqueiros later stated, “a man . . . crucified on a double cross, which had, proudly perched on top, the eagle of North American coins” (Siqueiros 1985, 32). The scene was placed in an overgrown jungle, amid the ruins of a Mayan pyramid. In the upper right corner of the mural, two revolutionaries took aim at the eagle from a nearby rooftop (fig. 1).

There was great controversy when the mural was unveiled. As recalled by artist Millard Sheets, one of the Bloc of Mural Painters who worked on the Chouinard mural with Siqueiros, “some people really liked it thoroughly in every possible way, others were very much against it, feeling that it had something to do with political controversy or propaganda” (Treviño 2001, 210).

The east end of the mural, which showed the revolutionaries and could be seen from Olvera Street, was

whitewashed within months of the mural's completion (Millier 1934) (fig. 2). By the end of the decade, the entire mural was whitewashed, leaving a blank white wall in place of the monumental mural Siqueiros had painted less than ten years before.

*América Tropical* remained whitewashed, neglected, and all but forgotten for over twenty years on the second-story exterior of the Italian Hall, but by the mid-1960s, the whitewash began to fail. According to art historian Shifra Goldman, “by 1973 the years of rain and sun on the unprotected outdoor mural had taken their toll, removing both the whitewash and finally most of the color beneath” (Goldman 1974, 325). Additionally,

the two upper corners were lost in the Sylmar earthquake of 1971, and a band of tar covered the bottom edge of the mural. The early 1970s also marked the beginnings of the Chicano mural movement. Shifra Goldman spearheaded early preservation efforts to save the mural, enlisting the help of artists, filmmakers, and preservationists. In 1971 filmmaker Jesús Treviño produced a documentary for the local Los Angeles television station, KCET, titled *América Tropical*, which told the story of the mural (Treviño 2006).<sup>3</sup> Siqueiros was interviewed for the documentary, and a team of conservators was brought from Mexico to examine the mural. Their assessment was that because of the overall degradation



**Figure 2** View of the mural from Olvera Street taken by a *Los Angeles Times* staff photographer circa 1934. The east portion of *América Tropical*, which could be seen from Olvera Street, was whitewashed shortly after the mural was completed. Photo: © Los Angeles Times, photo published June 22, 2004; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

of the surface, the mural could not be restored but, rather, could, and should, be preserved and protected from further deterioration.<sup>5</sup> With these recommendations, along with evaluations from additional conservators who examined the mural over the years, Shifra Goldman and the committee to save the mural began to seek funding for its preservation. She asked El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park,<sup>4</sup> the entity overseeing Olvera Street, to join the cause. From the early 1980s on, El Pueblo erected a series of temporary protective shelters over *América Tropical* (fig. 3) while the project was under development and funding was secured for its preservation (Poole and Ball 2002).

In 1987 Jean Bruce Poole, then curator at El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park, approached the Getty Conservation Institute for assistance, and in 1988 the GCI agreed to undertake a collaborative project with

the City of Los Angeles to conserve, interpret, and provide public access to the mural through:

- scientific study
- documentation
- conservation of the mural
- design and construction of a protective shelter and public viewing platform
- design and installation of an interpretive center to tell the story of the mural in the context of Siqueiros's life and work.

The long-term public-private partnership between the GCI and the City of Los Angeles put these different components into place over a period of nearly twenty-five years, in a process that brought together numerous professionals and stakeholders, including architects, archaeologists, conservators, documentation specialists,



**Figure 3** A temporary shelter erected over *América Tropical*, circa 1990. From the 1980s on, a series of temporary shelters was erected over the mural to protect it while funding was secured and conservation plans were developed. Photo: Nancy Kaye, © J. Paul Getty Trust

scientists, engineers, exhibit designers, the merchants of Olvera Street, various commissions, city departments, and others.

## Scientific Investigation

Over the course of the project, the GCI has undertaken numerous activities, beginning with scientific investigation, to identify the materials and techniques Siqueiros used to paint the mural (Piqué et al. 1995), as well as environmental monitoring to determine the effect of atmospheric pollutants and condensation on the painting (Maekawa and Meyer 1993).

## Documentation

During the 1990s, the GCI carried out extensive documentation of *América Tropical*, including photographic documentation before and after a preliminary phase of conservation in 1990, followed by an early digital capture of the mural in 1993, in which individual detail sections were photographed, then tiled together, a process that resulted in a rectified, high-resolution image of the mural (Lange 1996). This image has been used as a base map for the condition recording performed since then,<sup>6</sup>

as the GCI has monitored the mural and developed conservation treatments (fig. 4).

Additionally, an online bibliography of Siqueiros's murals in Los Angeles has been compiled (Greathouse and Rainer 2012), which includes a set of references on this period of time in Siqueiros's life in Los Angeles, as well as a chronology of news coverage, from 1932 to the present, of the murals he painted in Los Angeles.

## Conservation

The GCI has carried out three phases of conservation treatment—in 1990, 2002, and 2012. Preliminary treatment in 1990 addressed surface cleaning and consolidation, reattachment of plaster to the brick substrate, whitewash removal, and removal of tar from the base of the mural (Espinosa 1990; Paine 1990; Stewart 1990) (fig. 5). Further plaster stabilization was carried out in 2002 (Rainer 2002–3), and in 2012, the most recent campaign of conservation was carried out. This treatment included cleaning, additional stain and tar stain reduction and removal, reattachment of plaster, filling of losses, surface consolidation, and visual reintegration (Rainer 2013).

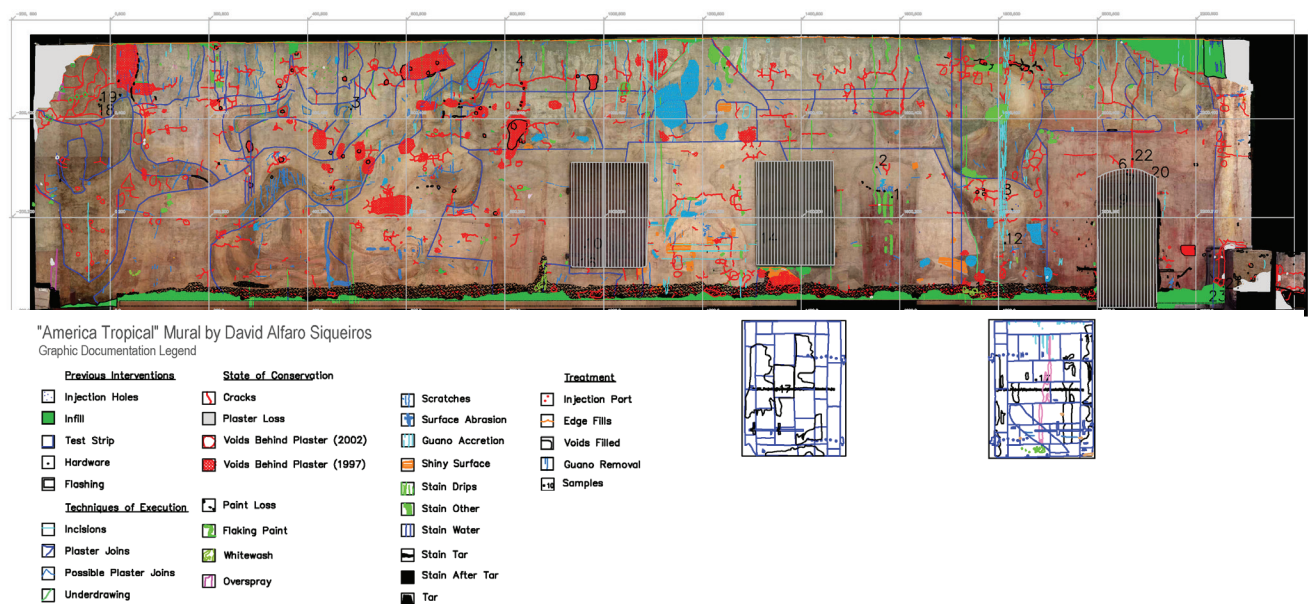


Figure 4 Mural base map with condition-recording layers over it. Mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City



**Figure 5** Conservation treatment of the mural. In 1990 a team of conservators led by Agustín Espinosa performed preliminary treatment, including surface cleaning, reattachment of plaster to the wall, removal of tar, and surface consolidation. Photo: Nancy Kaye, © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

## Shelter and Viewing Platform

As part of the larger project to conserve, protect, present, and interpret *América Tropical*, the Bureau of Engineering of the City of Los Angeles undertook the construction of a protective shelter, viewing platform, and interpretive center (Moore 2013). The architectural firm Brooks + Scarpa (formerly Pugh + Scarpa) designed and constructed a canopy to protect the mural from direct exposure to sunlight, rain, and birds, while allowing an unobstructed view from an observation platform on a nearby rooftop (Buckland 2013) (fig. 6). The platform provides the opportunity for the public to view the mural from this vantage point, much as it was meant to be seen when it was first painted (fig. 7). A roll-down screen is incorporated into the design of the shelter to provide additional protection at times of the year when low light hits the wall, and it serves as

a physical barrier against vandalism when the site is closed to the public.

## América Tropical Interpretive Center

The América Tropical Interpretive Center (ATIC), conceived and installed by the exhibit design firm IQ Magic, is located in the historic Sepulveda House at El Pueblo. The exhibits contained in ATIC present the story of the mural in the context of the life and work of Siqueiros through a series of interactive displays and didactic panels (fig. 8). The interpretive center is divided into sections on the artist's life, the history of the mural in the context of the period during which it was painted in Los Angeles, materials and techniques used to paint the mural, conservation efforts, and Siqueiros's legacy through the Chicano mural movement and later mural painting in Los Angeles (Hartman 2013).



**Figure 6** The mural with its protective canopy, seen from the viewing platform at the opening of the site in October 2012. The canopy protects the mural from direct sunlight, rain, and birds and allows an unobstructed view of the mural from a nearby rooftop. Mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City



**Figure 7** The viewing platform, designed by Brooks + Scarpa Architects, which is accessible from the América Tropical Interpretive Center. Up to twenty visitors can view the mural at one time. A large black-and-white image of the mural positioned on a rail of the platform provides information on the painting's iconography



**Figure 8** Interactive stations and didactic panels in the América Tropical Interpretive Center, located in the Sepulveda House at El Pueblo. They present the story of the mural in the context of Siqueiros's life and work. Mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

## Conclusion

The culmination of the efforts of the collaborative project of the GCI and the City of Los Angeles was the opening of the site and the presentation of *América Tropical* once again to the public on October 9, 2012, eighty years after the mural was first unveiled in 1932. *América Tropical* has had a tumultuous history, from its early censorship soon after its completion and the neglect it suffered over decades, to the early preservation efforts starting in the 1960s and, finally, the collaborative GCI–City of Los Angeles project. The vision of a group of individuals—and the dedication and perseverance of a multidisciplinary team to address the complex issues of protecting, conserving, presenting, and interpreting the mural—have brought this comprehensive project to completion with a holistic approach. Through their efforts, *América Tropical*, the only remaining mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros in the United States still in its original location, has been made accessible to the public once again.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the project partners, who, through the combined efforts of numerous departments at the Getty Conservation Institute and the City of Los Angeles, worked together to bring this project to completion. From the GCI, staff from Science, Field Projects, Dissemination and Information, Communications, the Director’s Office, and Publications have participated in this project at various stages over nearly twenty-five years. Particular recognition goes to Tim Whalen, director of the GCI, and Susan Macdonald, head of Field Projects, for their unwavering support and perseverance in seeing the project through to completion.

Thanks are also due to the Mayor’s Office of the City of Los Angeles, as well as to the Bureau of Engineering, led by City Engineer Gary Lee Moore, which oversaw the construction, working with the Bureau of Contract Administration and the Department of Public Works. The steward of the site, the Department of El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, led by General Manager Christopher P. Espinosa, served as liaison with the merchants of Olvera Street and other stakeholders, to ensure the success of the project and its integration into the larger plans for the area.

Consultants Brooks + Scarpa Architects (formerly Pugh + Scarpa Architects) had the vision for the design

and construction of the canopy, the viewing platform, and the América Tropical Interpretive Center, and IQ Magic created the design and content for the exhibits, which tell the story of the mural, the artist, and the legacy of Siqueiros in Los Angeles. For the conservation, Agustín Espinosa, Zebala & Partners, Silverlake Conservation, and GCI conservators deserve special recognition.

Finally, acknowledgments are due to Shifra Goldman, Jean Bruce Poole, and Jesús Treviño for their vision and early efforts to preserve *América Tropical*.

---

## Notes

1. It is possible that Siqueiros painted, or at least began, one other mural, at the John Reed Club of Hollywood (Millier 1932). There are a few accounts of this mural from the time. It was said to represent the international proletariat marching across the walls of the club’s auditorium (Clements 1932). However, Siqueiros himself did not write of that mural, and accounts differ as to whether he painted it or whether it was painted by students and dedicated to Siqueiros. It is not certain whether the mural was ever completed, but it was reported to have been damaged in a police raid on the club at the time (*Los Angeles Times* 1933; Millier 1933). The building no longer exists.
2. The mural *Street Meeting* was whitewashed within a year of being painted; *América Tropical* was partially whitewashed after a little more than a year, and it was completely whitewashed in the next several years.
3. A DVD version of Treviño’s 1971 documentary was made in 2006 (Treviño 2006).
4. El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park, at the time under state jurisdiction, was later transferred to the City of Los Angeles; its name was changed to El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument.
5. The GCI carried out condition assessments in 1997, 2002, and 2012.
6. Siqueiros proposed re-creating the mural on panels to be given as a gift to the people of Los Angeles, but this mural was never completed (Treviño, 2013).

---

## References

- Buckland, Mark. 2013. *América Tropical* as artifact: Designing a framework for its protection, viewing, and interpretation. Paper presented at “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals,” Oct. 16–17, 2012, Los Angeles. [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/designing\\_framework.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/designing_framework.html)

- Clements, Grace. 1932. Fresco as a subversive art. David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers, 1920–1991, bulk 1930–36, 1932, box 3–24. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- Espinosa, Agustín. 1990. Informe de los trabajos de conservación efectuados a la pintura mural “América Tropical” del pintor David Alfaro Siqueiros en Los Angeles, California, Estados Unidos de Norte América. (Presented to the Amigos de las Artes de México Foundation.)
- Goldman, Shifra M. 1974. Siqueiros and three early murals in Los Angeles. *Art Journal* 33 (4): 321–27.
- Greathouse, Valerie, and L. Rainer, eds. 2012. *David Alfaro Siqueiros: Murals in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute. [www.getty.edu/conservation/our\\_projects/field\\_projects/siqueiros/siqueiros\\_biblio.pdf](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/our_projects/field_projects/siqueiros/siqueiros_biblio.pdf).
- Hartman, Thomas. 2013. Interpretive design for *América Tropical*: Created, concealed, and revealed. Paper presented at “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals,” Oct. 16–17, 2012, Los Angeles. [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/interpretive\\_design.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/interpretive_design.html)
- Lange, Eric B. 1996. Development of an on-site digital imaging system for the documentation of wall paintings. In *Imaging the Past: Electronic Imaging and Computer Graphics in Museums and Archaeology*, ed. Tony Higgins, Peter Main, and Janet Lang, 1–11. Occasional Papers, no. 114. London: British Museum.
- Los Angeles Times*. 1933. Council views Reds in clash. Feb. 16.
- Maekawa, Shin, and Jeff Meyer. 1993. Report on environmental monitoring at the Siqueiros mural. Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles.
- Millier, Arthur. 1932. Brush strokes. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 18.
- . 1933. Brush Strokes. *Los Angeles Times*, July 23.
- . 1934. Brush strokes: [Fresco whitewashed]. *Los Angeles Times*, March 18.
- Moore, Gary Lee. 2013. Sheltering Siqueiros: Complexities of building in a historic site. Paper presented at “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals,” Oct. 16–17, 2012, Los Angeles. [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/sheltering\\_siqueiros.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/sheltering_siqueiros.html)
- Paine, Stephen. 1990. *Tropical América: A mural by David Siqueiros: A report on phase one of the conservation project*. Report to the Getty Conservation Institute. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- Piqué, Francesca, Michele R. Derrick, A. Parker, David A. Scott, M. Schilling, and Miguel Saavedra Pérez. 1995. Original technique of the mural *América Tropical* by David Alfaro Siqueiros. In *Materials Issues in Art and Archaeology IV: Symposium Held May 16–21, 1994, Cancun, Mexico*, ed. James R. Druzik, José Luis Galván Madrid, I. C. Freestone, and George Segán Wheeler, 365–71. Materials Research Society Symposium Proceedings, vol. 352. Warrendale, PA: Materials Research Society.
- Poole, Jean Bruce, and Tevvy Ball. 2002. *El Pueblo: The Historic Heart of Los Angeles*. Conservation and Cultural Heritage. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum.
- Rainer, Leslie. 2002–3. The conservation of *América Tropical*: Fall 2002 campaign report: Mural stabilization and protection. Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles.
- . 2013. Preserving *América Tropical*: From original technique to conservation treatment. Paper presented at “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals,” Oct. 16–17, 2012, Los Angeles. [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/original\\_technique.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/original_technique.html)
- Siqueiros, David Alfaro. 1985. *Mi respuesta: La historia de un insidia: Quiénes son los traidores de la patria?* 2d ed. México, D.F.: Ediciones de Arte Público.
- Stewart, Sophie, Courtauld Institute of Art, and Getty Conservation Institute. 1990. Report on the conservation of “Tropical America,” Olvera Street, Los Angeles, by David Alfaro Siqueiros, May 1990. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
- Treviño, Jesús Salvador. 2001. *América Tropical*. In *Eyewitness: A Filmmaker’s Memoir of the Chicano Movement*, 203–24. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- . 2013. *América Tropical* through the Eyes of a Filmmaker. Paper presented at “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals,” Oct. 16–17, 2012, Los Angeles. [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/eyes\\_filmaker.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/eyes_filmaker.html)
- Treviño, Jesús Salvador, and KCET, Los Angeles. 2006. *América Tropical*. DVD. New York: Cinema Guild.

---

## Biographical Note

Leslie Rainer is a wall paintings conservator and senior project specialist at the Getty Conservation Institute. She is the GCI’s project manager for the conservation of David Alfaro Siqueiros’s mural *América Tropical* and has been involved in the project since 1995. She is one of the organizers of the 2012 international symposium “The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist’s Monumental Murals.”