
Bennett Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy*: A Case of Mistaken Identity

James Oles

For many scholars, times of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged the resolution of unfinished projects; in my case, I turned my attention to a faded pink folder of photocopies that I had kept close at hand through various long-distance moves for more than a quarter century. Reviewing and reconsidering those documents has generated a close reading of a forgotten painting and its checkered history, in which a failure of connoisseurship is offset by historical recovery. At the heart of the matter is a case of willful misattribution—rather than fakery—substantiated by documents both falsified and misleading. This is a problem that still plagues the field of Latin American art, where the need for scholarly authentication can overwhelm the small number of trained experts. But behind this “crime,” for which there was neither trial nor confession, is an uplifting detective story of rediscovering the truth, of bringing to wider attention a neglected artist’s career, and of analyzing his most important painting in its own context for the first time. My recuperation of motive, means, and opportunity may be speculative in parts, but the story can be told thanks to a wonderfully rich dossier that was assembled decades ago to give Mexican gravitas and compelling provenance to a forgotten painting by an artist from the United States.



In the early 1990s, then a doctoral student at Yale University, I was fortunate to curate my first exhibition, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, which opened in September 1993 at the Yale University Art Gallery. This project explored, for the first time in depth, how Mexico generally, and Mexican art more specifically, shaped the work of US American artists between the end of the Mexican Revolution and the beginning of the Cold War. (Today I wouldn’t be so quick to use the term *American* to mean only residents of the United States.) The show featured paintings, prints, and photographs by artists such as Henrietta Shore, whose oil painting *Women of Oaxaca* (1928) graced the catalog cover, and Robert Motherwell, whose *Mexican Notebook* of pen-and-ink drawings and watercolors (1941) closed the show. Along with folk and decorative arts, and books and postcards, the exhibition checklist included

works by Mexican muralists in order to demonstrate the profound impact that their iconography, styles, and politics had on their contemporaries.¹ More specifically, I included Mexican paintings and prints that revealed particular points of contact with the United States: works made in the US or connected to it through subject matter, prior ownership, or even exhibition history.

The exhibition included four major paintings by Diego Rivera and, as I recall, none were particularly difficult to borrow. Finding relevant works by his colleagues David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco was more complicated. Late in the curatorial process, the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros in Mexico City denied (probably for conservation reasons) our request to include Siqueiros's *Birth of Fascism* (1936), and the Museo de Arte Moderno informed us they would only lend Orozco's *Prometheus* (ca. 1944) to our first two venues: Yale and the Phoenix Art Museum.² As a novice curator, I struggled to find replacements, especially a signature painting by Orozco, for our final venues, the New Orleans Museum of Art and the now-defunct Museo de Monterrey in Mexico.

I was under time pressure, rushing to fill gaps with last-minute loans, when Pilar García, now a curator at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, introduced me to two museum patrons in Mexico City with a spectacular collection of works by Dr. Atl, Joaquín Clausell, and Carlos Mérida.³ In their house in a quiet neighborhood near San Ángel, in the south of Mexico City, I was shown a large and brilliantly colored canvas measuring 150 by 90 centimeters (fig. 1). Although the work was unsigned, a shiny brass label affixed to the frame listed both artist and title: José Clemente Orozco, *Norte Sur* (*North South*). Apparently, I had found what I was looking for.

The oil painting in question consists of a montage of different geographic and social spaces rendered at different scales: meaning is generated through their abrupt juxtapositions. Montage was a compositional strategy employed by several muralists in the 1930s, including Thomas Hart Benton and Rivera, but in this painting, the use of rigid lines and overlapping elements brought to mind similar features in Orozco's mural cycle from 1930–31 at the New School for Social Research in New York. In terms of iconography, the painting juxtaposes an ancient and traditional Mexican “south” with an industrialized US “north,” much as Orozco does in his *Epic of American Civilization*, painted in the Baker Library at Dartmouth College in 1932–34 (figs. 2, 3). In the painting, the contrast is arranged vertically, and thus geographically, with north above south, rather than horizontally. The stoic expressions and massing of the four men wearing the white cotton clothing typical of Mexico's agricultural peasantry, who march in profile at the lower-right side, resemble figures in Orozco's early frescos from 1923–26 in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico City, and in the mural cycle at the New School. Most directly, however, they evoke the muscular bodies of the Indigenous figures in *Migration*, the opening panel of the Dartmouth cycle, albeit clothed and transported from an ancient context to a contemporary one (fig. 4).

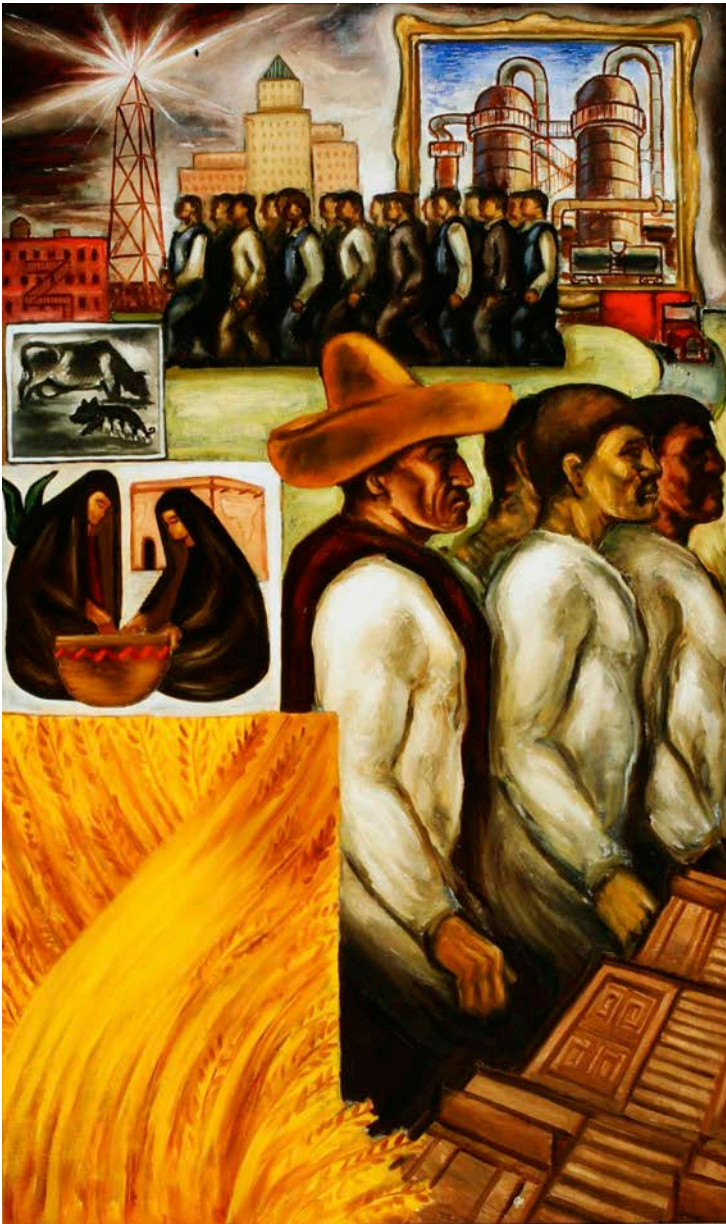


FIG. 1. — Bennett Buck (US American, 1900–1982). *Good Neighbor Policy*, 1938, oil on canvas, 150 × 90 cm. Private collection.

The pre-Hispanic pyramid shown in an oblique view in the lower-right corner of the painting surely symbolizes the modern nation's ancient roots; its architectural details, however, seem imagined rather than based on known structures such as the Castillo at Chichén Itzá (which was abstracted by Orozco in his panel *Struggle in the Occident* at the New School) or the pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan (which appear in Orozco's Dartmouth cycle). The tightly cropped field of wheat in the painting recalls a similar depiction of wheat in the *Anglo-America* panel at Dartmouth,



FIG. 2. — José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883–1947). Panel 13, *Anglo-America*, from *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, fresco, 304.8 × 261.6 cm. Hanover, New Hampshire, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, P.934.13.15. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College.



FIG. 3. — José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883–1947). Panel 14, *Hispano-America*, from *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, fresco, 304.8 × 302.3 cm. Hanover, New Hampshire, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, P.934.13.16. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College.

though there the grain is directly tied to the United States rather than Mexico (see fig. 2). A small inset image of two rebozo-clad women flanking a ceramic vessel before a windowless house and small maguey resembles the melancholic paintings and

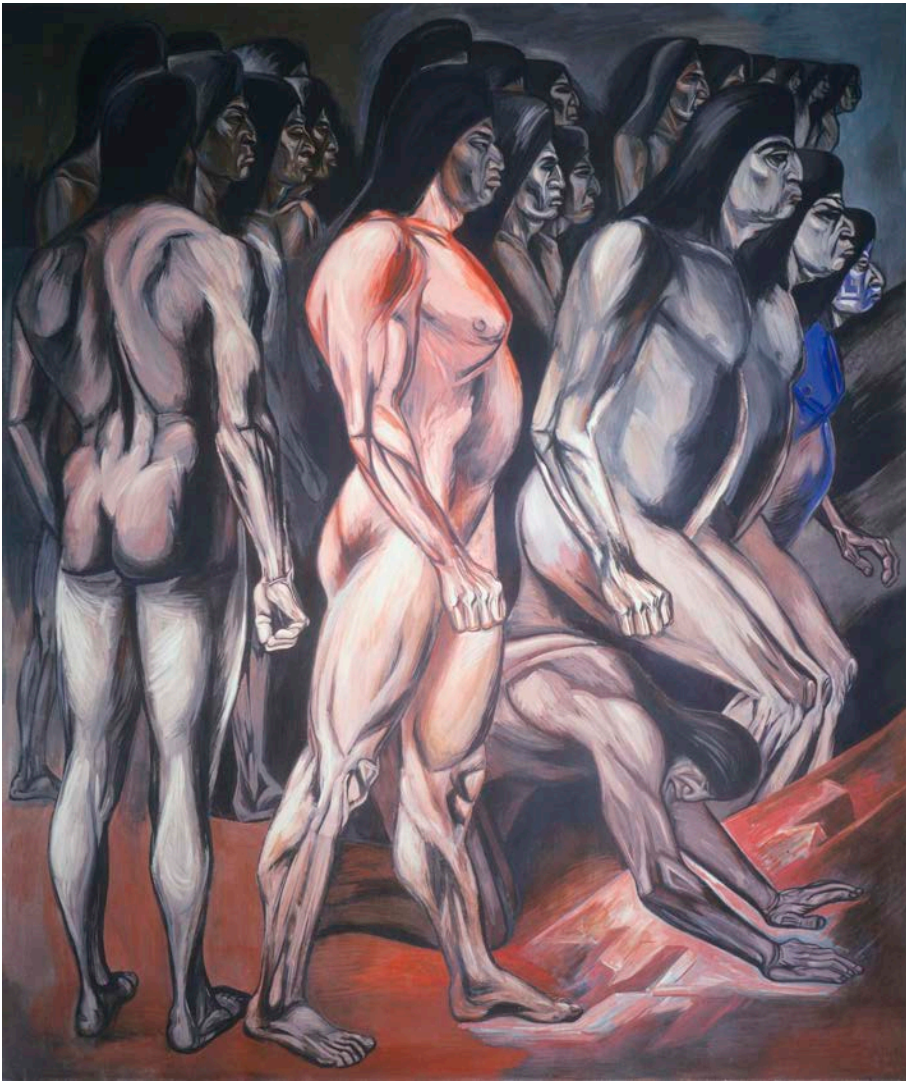


FIG. 4. — José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883–1947). Panel 1, *Migration*, from *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1932–34, fresco, 321.3 × 266.7 cm. Hanover, New Hampshire, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, P.934.13.1. Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College.

lithographs showing scenes from rural Mexico that Orozco created during his residence in the US between 1927 and 1934 (fig. 5).⁴

The upper third of the composition refers to the modern United States. The striding Mexican figures are echoed by a larger crowd of workers in blue overalls who march in the opposite direction above, past a skyscraper or apartment block toward a steel tower that radiates beams of light or electrical energy, and a red-brick tenement at the left edge. To the right, a red truck turns along a paved road. Strangely, as if hanging against the dull gray sky, a curvilinear picture frame surrounds an industrial landscape, featuring a pair of crude-oil storage tanks and a rail tank car. This second painting within a painting may reference the precisionism of artists in the United States such as



FIG. 5. — José Clemente Orozco (Mexican, 1883–1947). *The Maguey*, 1928, lithograph, 25.1 × 40.5 cm. Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, INBAL, Mexico City. Courtesy Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil / INBAL / SC. © Heirs of José Clemente Orozco, 2025. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2024.

Charles Sheeler or Elsie Driggs, or the machine-age imagery of Rivera’s US murals. An image of a grazing cow and suckling sow is rendered in black and white and delineated with a white border, as if to mimic a gelatin silver photograph.⁵ Despite the implied depth of the overall composition, fashioned with loose brushwork and a rather thick application of oil paint, the rectangular vignettes, overlapping forms, and sharp divisions emphasize the flatness of the pictorial surface.

Even for a budding scholar, it was clear that the painting’s formal qualities and iconography, as well as its somewhat awkward title, were closely related to work Orozco had completed during his extended residency in the United States.⁶ To me, *Norte Sur* seemed to be a suitable and perfectly portable example of Orozco’s interest in “American” civilization. Even more importantly, the painting proved, in bold visual terms, a main thesis of *South of the Border*: that an idealized rural Mexico served as a constant counterpoint to the anxieties of the industrial nation to its north.

On that first visit, the owners showed me a sheaf of documentation related to the painting, which I skimmed through all too quickly, and flipped open a German book on Orozco to show me a full-page color illustration of the same work.⁷ They mentioned that the late art historian Raquel Tibol—who had written more than one book on Orozco—had seen the work and given it her approval. I declared an end to my search and wasn’t bothered when, at the very last minute, the loan of *Prometheus* completely fell through, for now the spectacular painting from the collectors in Mexico City would be featured in all four venues—a curatorial victory at the start of my career. *South of the Border* opened,



FIG. 6. — Installation view of *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914–1947*, with works by Bennett Buck, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Isamu Noguchi (reproduction), September 1993, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

and the entire gremio of Latin Americanists came up from New York to see it. No one said much about the “Orozco” hanging in one gallery alongside works by Siqueiros (fig. 6). The exhibition catalog circulated widely at a time when there were relatively few books on modern Mexican art, but I had found *Norte Sur* too late to illustrate or discuss in the book; if I had, this story might have been told long ago.⁸

After the opening of the exhibition at Yale, I turned to my dissertation. That November, I was working at the Archives of American Art (AAA) in Washington, DC, searching through their copious files for information on the US muralists who worked in Mexico in the early 1930s.⁹ I remember rich conversations with art historian Andrew Hemingway, who was then researching his book *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (2002), and have a sharp memory of some low file cabinets that—today using the AAA digital catalog to jog my memory—held its “Miscellaneous art exhibition catalog collection, 1813–1953.” My immediate focus was on the radical public art of artists such as Philip Guston and Isamu Noguchi, but as I surveyed the wealth of ephemera without really knowing what I was looking for—often the best way to find things—I came across a small stapled pamphlet for a show called 1938: *Dedicated to the New Deal*, held at Herman Baron’s American Contemporary Artists (A.C.A.) Gallery in New York City, then the leading space for what has been called social or proletarian art (fig. 7).¹⁰ Flipping through the pages, I was shocked to find an illustration of the same painting hanging back at Yale (fig. 8).

It wasn’t by Orozco. Instead, the painter was an unknown figure named Bennett Buck, and the title of the work was *Good Neighbor Policy*. It wasn’t a fake; it was an



FIG. 7. — Cover of 1938: *Dedicated to the New Deal* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1938). Miami, Florida, The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca and Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2014.03.1.9

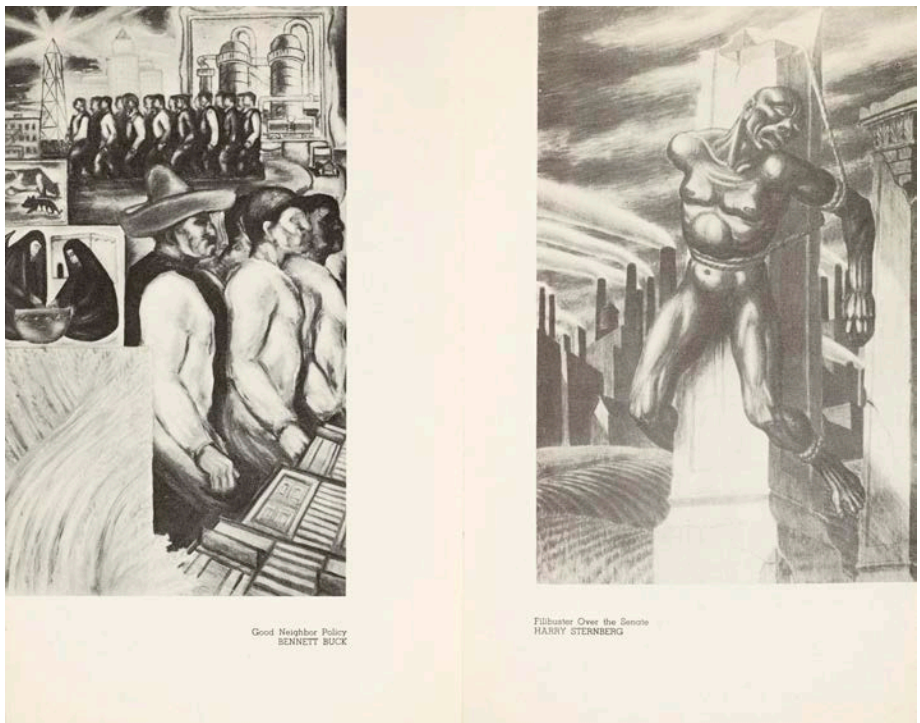


FIG. 8. — *Good Neighbor Policy* (1938) by Bennett Buck (US American, 1900–1982) and *Filibuster Over the Senate* (ca. 1938, now lost) by Harry Sternberg (US American, 1904–2001). From 1938: *Dedicated to the New Deal* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1938). Miami, Florida, The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca and Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2014.03.1.9.

homage to Orozco, and a rather good one at that. As Hemingway has astutely noted, for leftist artists in the United States, “it was Orozco, the most politically equivocal and pessimistic of the [Mexican] muralists who offered the least problematic exemplar.”¹¹ This was aided by several factors: Orozco’s murals in New York and Hanover, New Hampshire, were easily accessible, and his prints and paintings were widely exhibited and published; his uncompromising, expressionist style was considered deeply modern; and his themes—especially his skepticism about war, ideology, and the machine age—resonated with the concerns of many of his younger contemporaries.¹² In fact, Buck’s painting would have served the thesis of *South of the Border* even better as an homage to Orozco painted by a US American artist, had I only known.

The serendipitous discovery at the Archives of American Art led to a feeling of curatorial remorse, a sense that, through the gallery presentation and exhibition checklist—but fortunately, not through an illustration—I had deceived not only myself but also my audience. Rather than pull the work from the show, which was about to close at Yale, I simply corrected the wall label for subsequent venues. I was not able to convince the collectors to remove the brass plaque from the frame, but if the conflict between the labels bothered any viewers, I received no word of it. After *South of the Border* closed in Monterrey in late November 1994, Buck’s painting returned to the collectors’ home in Mexico City, and I’ve not seen it since.¹³

I had done a bit of research on Buck in the fall of 1993, but a focus on my dissertation, and then my career, left the project truncated, if not forgotten. Then, at my desk in Mexico City during the pandemic in 2020, I decided to reexamine the contents of that pink folder and write an essay about Buck’s painting. This was possible, of course, because research methodologies had changed so radically since the early 1990s. Thirty years ago, travel—or at least moving through a building—was the only way to gain access to books, archives, or museum collections, and discoveries generally required painstaking hours spent looking through the stacks, archival boxes, or storage, to sometimes find nothing. Today, while there is still no substitute for hands-on research, digitization has facilitated everything; even the rare A.C.A. catalog in which Buck’s painting first appeared is now available online through the Wolfsonian Library at Florida International University. We may rely too much on Google in all its manifestations, including Gmail, Search, and Scholar, but they allowed me to write the first draft of this essay from my home in Mexico.

The 1938 exhibition at the A.C.A. Gallery included twenty-one paintings and prints, several by major leftist artists, including Philip Evergood, Harry Gottlieb, Eitarō Ishigaki, Joe Jones, Walter Quirt, and Harry Sternberg. Each artist was asked to submit a five-by-three-foot vertical panel; together, the mural-sized works would have echoed the slightly larger scale (seven by four feet) of those in the Museum of Modern Art’s influential, albeit less radical, exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, held in 1932.¹⁴ Although not all artists complied with the format requested by the gallery, Buck’s painting hewed to the required dimensions perfectly. Some artists, such as Jones, Julien Levi, and Sternberg, portrayed individual workers as heroes or martyrs (fig. 9),



FIG. 9. — Joe Jones (US American, 1909–63). *A Worker Again—On WPA* (Self-portrait), ca. 1938, oil on canvas, 68.6 × 83.8 cm. From the collections of the St. Louis Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

while others crowded their compositions with as many figures as possible, employing dramatic shifts of scale and breaking the laws of perspective.

Hemingway provides the most complete analysis of 1938: *Dedicated to the New Deal*, arguing that while it demonstrated support for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s social agenda, it also “inadvertently revealed the ambiguities of the Democratic Front,” given that several artists created images deeply critical of conditions in the United States.¹⁵ Indeed, some referred directly to pressing themes of the day, including Arthur

Emptage's *Half-a-Million Protests*, Quirt's *One-Third of a Nation*, and Max Weber's *The Forgotten Man*. Some works employed irony, such as Gottlieb's *Strength through Joy*, which depicted a bacchanal of capitalist excess, while others enlisted horror, as in Sternberg's *Filibuster over the Senate*, which shows an African American man tied to a column as a victim of lynching, which was a crime of urgent and intense concern to those on the left (see fig. 8).¹⁶

Baron, who organized the show, noted in the introductory essay for the catalog that the works shared a concern for "social implications" but then suggested that not all might meet the requirements of quality demanded by New York City critics:

The creative impulses of American art have been greatly stimulated by the W.P.A. art projects and by all the progressive forces which made the project possible. Those who claim that the W.P.A. is responsible for too much bad art, are needlessly worried. "Bad" art is an elastic term and history supports the contention that future masterpieces almost invariably are included in that class. As for the real bad art, good quality eventually will reduce it to its proper place. To advocate placing artists in the professional category of doctors or architects is to fail to understand the social service rendered by art.¹⁷

Judging from the black-and-white illustrations, communicating a political message (what Baron refers to as a "social service") was sometimes more in evidence than formal elegance or expertise. At the same time, Baron's comment about the label of "bad art" foreshadows the shifting political realities of the Cold War, when the disdain for didactic social realism, in favor of seemingly apolitical abstraction, would cast a long shadow over the work of radical artists of the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁸ Today, when the concerns of these same artists regarding racial and economic inequity resonate deeply with current debates, they may merit renewed attention, if not archaeological recovery, however they are judged on aesthetic grounds. Yet despite increased critical attention to this period of US American art, only Evergood's *The Artist in the New Deal* has been the subject of close study: apart from those by Buck and Jones, the paintings from the 1938 exhibition are lost from public view, some surely destroyed or painted over (as was the case with Evergood's submission), whether victims of Cold War politics or just cumbersome and unsalable items.¹⁹

Buck (1900–1982) is one of several artists included in 1938 who have left scant traces in the historical record, along with Hy Cohen, Emptage, Margaret Lowengrund, and Abram Tromka. Born Henry Bennett Buck in Syracuse, New York, he studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, then under Charles Guérin at the Académie Colarossi in Paris, before acquiring blue-collar credentials back home by spending "two years in the steel mills, doing his art work evenings and at odd times."²⁰ Buck returned to Paris in the late 1920s, taking courses in etching with Jean Antonin Delzers and briefly studying with Fernand Léger and master printmaker Stanley William Hayter. He returned to the United States "wholly preoccupied with what he



FIG. 10. — Bennett Buck (US American, 1900–1982). *Untitled (Hitch Hikers)*, 1935, drypoint, 16.3 × 18.2 cm (image). Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 2008.115.1096. Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams.



FIG. 11. — Bennett Buck (US American, 1900–1982). *Bar Room*, 1935, drypoint, 16.3 × 18.2 cm (image). Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 2008.115.1097. Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams.

called the international scene in its labor aspects.”²¹ He taught etching in 1934–35 at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, where he produced several small prints featuring episodes in the life of the working class (figs. 10, 11). A solo show at the A.C.A. Gallery in 1936 presenting drawings done on a trip to Puerto Rico further revealed a concern with social justice through works that sometimes veered into caricature (fig. 12).²² He was elected treasurer of the American Artists’ Congress and around 1940 participated in the Federal Art Project in New York, under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), when a few of his antifascist paintings and drawings also appeared in the press.²³ After serving in World War II as a designer of camouflage patterns, he settled in Connecticut (fig. 13). Like other artists of his generation, Buck eventually abandoned socially concerned figuration for abstraction. A show in 1966 featuring his recent “Hard-Edged Cubist style” garnered minor and lackluster reviews, and then the record trails off into oblivion, even after Buck’s death in 1982.²⁴

The best indication of Bennett Buck’s aesthetic interests emerges from his donation of almost one hundred works on paper, mainly prints, to the Everson Museum of Art at Syracuse University around 1977, by which time he had retired to St. Petersburg, Florida. This eclectic gift included forty-nine of Buck’s own works, including several of the Puerto Rico drawings and some explicitly leftist or antifascist images, along with prints and drawings by a wide range of European artists, such as William Blake and André Masson. Buck also gave the museum works by William Gropper, Levi, and Louis Lozowick, all of whom had participated in the A.C.A. exhibition in 1938, and a copy of Orozco’s 1929 lithograph *The Maguey* (see fig. 5).²⁵ The donation also contained prints by Mexican artists Leopoldo Méndez, Roberto Montenegro, Gonzalo de la Paz Pérez, Everardo Ramírez, and Siqueiros.²⁶ Buck also gave the Everson an ink-wash drawing

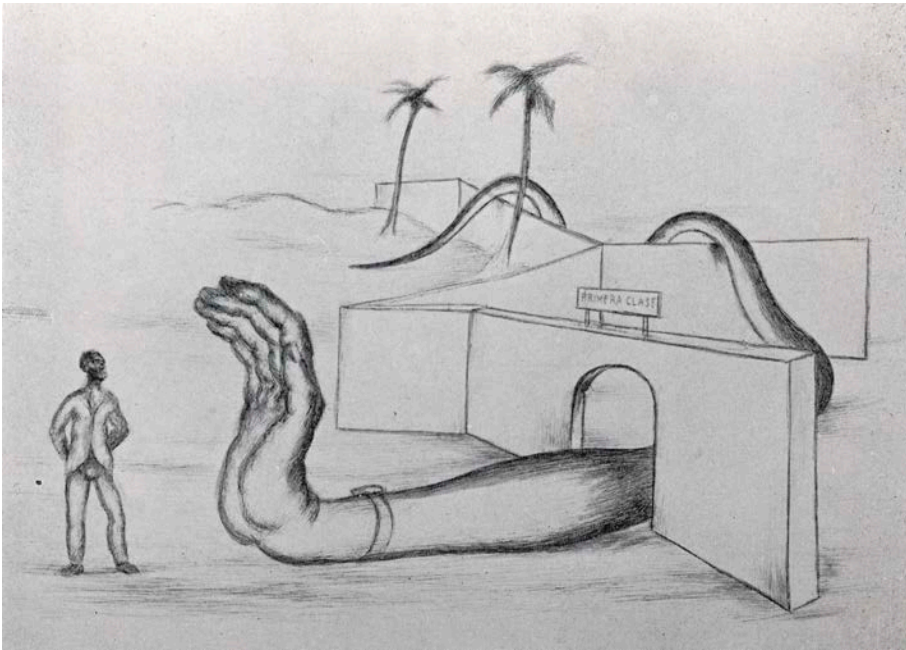


FIG. 12. — Bennett Buck (US American, 1900–1982). *The Color Line*, ca. 1936. From *Puerto Rico: Twelve Reproductions of Original Drawings by Bennett Buck* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1936), 5. New Orleans, Louisiana, Tulane University, Rare Books Collections, Latin American Library. Image courtesy of the Latin American Library, Tulane University.

by Rufino Tamayo titled *Fascism*, one of very few explicitly political works by the artist, perhaps done in New York at the time of the American Artists' Congress (fig. 14).²⁷

Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy* was the only painting showcased in 1938 that directly referenced life outside of the United States. The title refers to an official policy announced by Roosevelt during his inaugural address of March 1933, in which he called for nonintervention in Latin America's domestic affairs. Although there seems to be no strict border between the lower "Mexican" section and the upper "American" one, Buck's painting lacks visual evidence of cooperation or assistance, such as the embrace of a Mexican and US worker that was a common topos in the period. The oil-storage tanks in the background could reference Mexico's nationalization of foreign oil companies in March 1938, since the resulting crisis put the policy in jeopardy, but here they are placed in the upper "American" sector.²⁸ Perhaps Buck's idea of the Good Neighbor Policy was more general or symbolic: as a tribute by a US American painter to a Mexican colleague, the painting revealed a good neighborliness that was artistic rather than political.

Buck's painting is far more conciliatory than any of Orozco's works of this period. The Mexican workers, resting on—or emerging from—archaeological and agricultural foundations, turn their backs on the domestic, feminine sphere; in the upper (or northern) section, industrial workers, equally unified but now separated from nature and the past, surge toward the light emitted from the electrified tower. The representation of Mexico is granted greater space in the pictorial field, but it gives

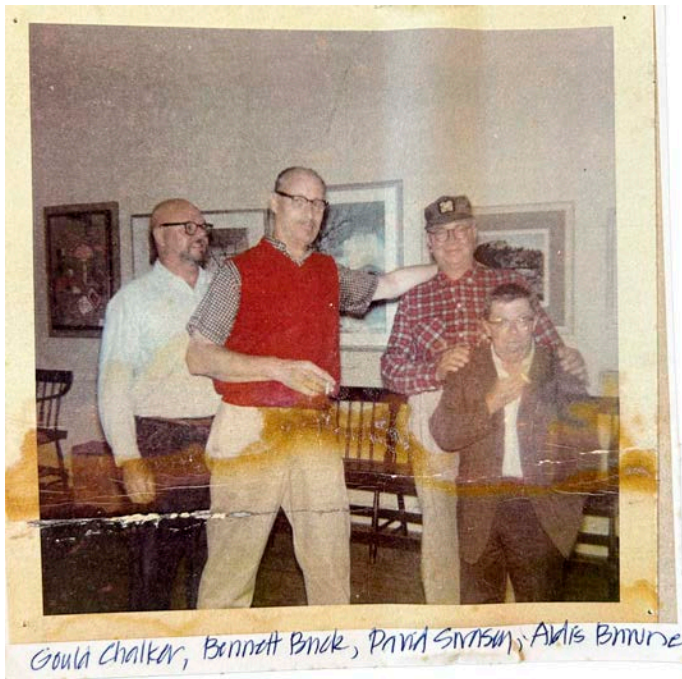


FIG. 13. — Photograph showing (left to right) E. Gould Chalker, Bennett Buck, David (last name illegible), and Aldis B. Browne at the Essex Art Association, Essex, Connecticut, 1960s. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Essex Art Association.



FIG. 14. — Rufino Tamayo (Mexican, 1899–1991). *Fascism*, 1936, ink wash on paper, 22.9 × 35 cm. Syracuse, New York, Everson Museum of Art. Gift of H. Bennett Buck, PC 77.86.40. © Tamayo Heirs / Mexico / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

way to a more modern—though perhaps more tragically alienated—United States. In comparison to other paintings in the A.C.A. show, and to most of Orozco's work, Buck's ideological stance seems muted, even opaque—there is no violence or oppression, no apparent suffering, only an inexorable march toward the future.

Buck was not the only artist in the 1938 exhibition who disclosed iconographic and compositional debts to Orozco, although surprisingly, in his introductory essay, Baron mentions only artists of the past (Francisco Goya and Honoré Daumier) as providing models for expressing “social ideals.”²⁹ The building frames, broken windows, and I beams as well as the dramatic diagonals in Mervin Jules's *Planning & Construction* (fig. 15) resonate particularly with Orozco's fresco panels depicting *Hispano-America* (see fig. 3) and *Modern Industrial Man* at Dartmouth, while Jules's angular figures and dense composition, also evident in Axel Horn's *Unemployed* (fig. 16), recall Orozco's work in general. Indeed, the exhibition confirms the broad impact of Orozco on art produced during the New Deal, as signaled by scholars such as Bram Dijkstra and Hemingway, among others. But while Buck appropriated Orozco's iconography and brilliant coloration, he softened the outlines, avoided dramatic diagonals, and beefed up the muscles of the workers. Overall, his painting is less agitated and less overtly expressionist than his model (or than the paintings by Jules and Horn), which serves to heighten the diplomatic benevolence of his theme.

In fact, when I look at Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy* today, I don't see the evidence of Orozco's hand that I imagined in 1992. This clarity is largely the result of three decades of increasing familiarity with the artist's varied stylistic innovations and extensive production. Buck's message is too optimistic, his paint is too thickly applied, the forms are too rounded, and the collaging of rectangular elements into the composition are too obvious.³⁰ There are unresolved incongruities, such as the framed precisionist painting that hangs strangely against the darkened sky, or the field of European wheat that overlaps a Mesoamerican pyramid. Today it appears to me—and probably to everyone else in my field—as exactly what it is: evidence of Mexico in the (US) American imagination. But it was not simply the iconography and direct references to specific murals that made me think, back then, that I was looking at a painting by Orozco.

Before *South of the Border* opened, I had only summarily reviewed the documents the collectors had shared with me, given that I had not questioned the painting's authenticity. After locating the A.C.A. Gallery catalog for 1938, however, I needed to discuss my findings with the owners, and so I returned to their home to examine the materials more closely (and fortunately, to obtain photocopies). I learned that the owners had acquired this particular work not from an established gallery or auction house but from an informal dealer known in Mexico as a *cajuelero*, someone who sells art without a permanent space (literally, out of the trunk of a car). *Cajueleros* are not prima facie dishonest, but they may be sly and secretive. The works they offer are rarely displayed publicly; their prices undercut those of brick-and-mortar dealers but can also be inflated by unseen intermediaries and agents awaiting a commission. Some offer works of the highest caliber, while others are unscrupulous peddlers of fakes and



FIG. 15. — *Planning & Construction* (1938, now lost) by Mervin Jules (US American, 1912–94). From *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1938). Miami, Florida, The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca and Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2014.03.1.9.



FIG. 16. — *W.P.A.* (1938, now lost) by Theodore G. Haupt (US American, 1902–90) and *Unemployed* (1938, now lost) by Axel Horn (US American, 1913–2001). From *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1938). Miami, Florida, The Wolfsonian–FIU, Gift of Francis Xavier Luca and Clara Helena Palacio Luca, XC2014.03.1.9.

misattributions. The latter are known to pressure even sophisticated collectors to make a fast decision without due diligence, convincing buyers that they are getting a bargain, but only if they act quickly.

In this case, the collectors’ decision to purchase a painting purportedly by Orozco—and my decision to include it in *South of the Border*—was justified by an array of documents and publications that seemed to prove that the work was by the Mexican muralist (fig. 17). These materials—fourteen pieces of evidence in all—fall into two clusters of time—1964–66 and 1979–81—that reveal successive attempts to create a false identity for the painting, each building upon the last.³¹ Authentic letters in Orozco’s hand, published reproductions, typed letters signed by key figures in his biography—Alma Reed and Churchill P. Lathrop—and a certificate of authenticity from an established society appraiser: viewed quickly, the documents seemed to confirm Orozco as the author of the painting. But close forensic and textual analysis—the kind of work purchasers rarely have the time or inclination to conduct, and that art historians and curators aren’t always trained to conduct—reveals numerous imprecisions and

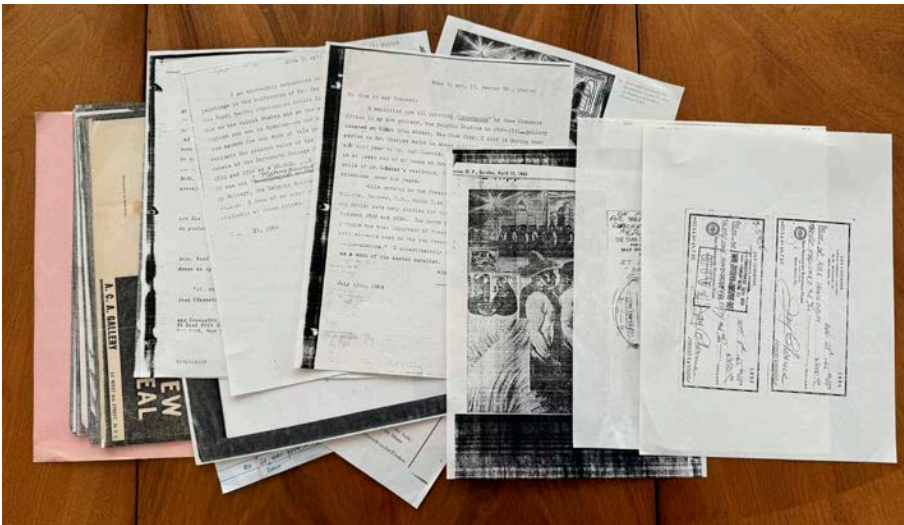


FIG. 17. — Photocopies in the author’s possession from collectors’ provenance dossier (current location of original dossier unknown) supporting the misattribution of Bennett Buck’s *Good Neighbor Policy* to José Clemente Orozco.

inconsistencies that should have cast doubt on the attribution even without access to the A.C.A. Gallery catalog. As in any good con, however, it is not always easy to separate fact from fiction.³²

From what I have been able to glean using the information at hand, the story goes something like this. In the fall of 1938, the A.C.A. Gallery exhibition traveled to the City Art Museum in Saint Louis (today the Saint Louis Art Museum) and then to the newly opened Washington Bookshop in Washington, DC.³³ When the exhibition closed, the painting may have been returned to the A.C.A. Gallery, or to the artist. The trail then goes cold until 11 April 1965, when the painting and a brief description appeared in *The News*, an English-language newspaper published by the Mexico City daily *Novedades*. This clipping—included in the dossier—provides the earliest published evidence that Buck’s painting had already been reattributed: “Another painting by José Clemente Orozco has recently been discovered in New York,” the short anonymous article read, concluding, “The owner of this work painted in the early 30’s is Jay Chernis, one of Hollywood’s best known composers of movie music scores.”³⁴ At that time, Buck was still alive, but his painting had either been mistakenly assigned to Orozco, or—more likely in my estimation—dishonestly misattributed by someone confident that Buck would never see the false information planted in a Mexican newspaper. The article may have launched an effort to doctor the historical record, not unlike the ways in which Dutch forger Han van Meegeren and English con artist John Drewe manipulated archives in order to give forged paintings a more lucrative provenance.³⁵ The move may seem bold, but in 1965, Orozco had been dead for almost twenty years, and no scholars, curators, or collectors—especially in the United States—were familiar with his entire oeuvre.³⁶

“Best known” or not, Jay Chernis (1906–96) was indeed a songwriter and composer, though only scant information appears in his biographies online. He was born in Norwalk, Connecticut, but lived most of his life in and around New York City. He told people that the honorific *Sir* had been granted to him by the Knights of Malta for his writing of their anthem, but “Sir Jay” was just a corruption of his given name, Sergei.³⁷ He was also an art collector and private dealer, with a focus on US American art and postimpressionism; online searches reveal, however, that when paintings formerly in his collection appear at auction, they are often merely “after” or “attributed to” famous artists.³⁸

In the summer of 1965, Chernis acquired, through his Little Terrace Gallery in New Hope, Pennsylvania, a group of authentic Mexican works from Max Honigbaum (1894–1966), who had inherited them from his brother, fruit-packing magnate Alfred Honigbaum (1882–1939), a leading collector in San Francisco. A letter from Chernis to Max Honigbaum dated 22 January 1966—to be trusted, since it is still in the Honigbaum archive—confirms the purchase amount (6,150 USD) and lists sixteen works by Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros (plus twenty prints by Robert Delaunay), but there is no mention of a large mural study of any sort.³⁹ Chernis then used this honest transaction to create a false provenance for Buck’s work, which had already been published in *The News*. In a deliberate act of fraud, Chernis annotated the backs of the two checks (totaling \$6,150) that he had made out to Max Honigbaum the previous summer (and that had been cashed and returned to him by the bank) to imply that the large painting (the one by Buck) had been acquired with the lot. Employing the same capital letters he had used on the front of the checks, he wrote on one, dated 28 August 1965, “On account for three Orozco gouache studies *and panel*,” and, on the other, dated 8 September 1965, “Payment in full for following: (Balance) 12 Diego Rivera watercolors, Delaunay lithographs Siqueiros ‘Mother and Child’ Orozco *panel (mural study)*.”⁴⁰ Chernis also obtained a copy of a checklist for an exhibition at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, to which Alfred Honigbaum had previously lent most of the purchased works, scrawling “Bought by Sir Jay Chernis” or “Sir Jay Chernis Purchase” by several entries.⁴¹ In his dealings with the Honigbaum heirs, Chernis also apparently obtained (or stole) two brief but authentic letters Orozco had sent to Alfred; neither mentions anything like a large “mural study.”⁴² An unsuspecting buyer—or a green curator—might skim through all this and erroneously conclude that Alfred Honigbaum had once owned a large Orozco inspired by his frescos. A skilled con artist takes advantage of the mark’s all-too-willing suspension of disbelief.

Not surprisingly, the dossier also includes letters of authenticity and related documents, typed on suspiciously plain sheets of paper, not letterhead. The first is a letter of authenticity dated 15 July 1964 that purports to be from Reed, Orozco’s biographer and principal dealer in the 1930s. The document references two works: a known oil painting titled *Mannequins* (1930; now in a private collection) and a “large panel owned by Mr. Jay Chernis” that is “perhaps the most important of these studies [for Dartmouth] and depicts all of the main elements used in the two fresco panels,

‘Latin America’ and ‘Anglo-America.’” It concludes: “I unhesitatingly identify [sic] this oil on canvas panel as a work of the master muralist.” This is accompanied by a second letter (25 July 1964), also apparently signed by Reed, that values the first work at 5,000 USD and the “large panel—studies for two fresco panels of the Dartmouth College (Hanover N. H.) murals” at 20,000 USD. This letter concludes: “I know of no other oil paintings by Orozco currently available at these prices.”

The signatures on both letters are similar to Reed’s but are not incontrovertibly authentic.⁴³ Errors in syntax and spelling, as well as one handwritten correction, raise additional suspicions about both documents.⁴⁴ If they were forged, then their dates are unreliable: they seem to authenticate the work before its publication in *The News*, but the letters might have been created anytime, even after Reed’s death on 20 November 1966.⁴⁵ Besides my inconclusive forensic evidence, I believe it to be highly unlikely that Alma Reed—who knew Orozco’s work intimately, surely better than any other critic or art historian in the US—would have been deceived by the painting’s superficial resemblance to the Dartmouth murals.⁴⁶ A close reading of Reed’s letters, the publication of the painting in *The News* in 1965, and Chernis’s dealings with the Honigbaum estate in 1965–66 provide rather convincing evidence that something crooked was afoot.

Mary-Anne Martin, a leading dealer who was then working in the Modern Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture Department at Sotheby Parke Bernet (SPB) in New York, recalls that Chernis tried to consign the large painting in the mid-1970s. She visited his New York apartment to inspect it, but after she found nothing similar in the few available books and sales records on Orozco, she brought it to the attention of the Orozco family in Guadalajara, who rejected it: “I had no context for including it [in the sale],” Martin explained to me recently, “and so I didn’t.”⁴⁷ Deeper scholarship sometimes trumps the negative evaluations of family members, who often have their own blind spots or reasons for denying authenticity. But here, as Martin said, there was insufficient information (or “context”) for the auction house to risk selling what could easily be an inauthentic work. Of course, I knew none of this when I selected the painting for *South of the Border*.

Authentication often depends on the accumulation of evidence, and it seems that the rejection by SPB led to a second burst of activity by Chernis or someone else eager for a sale. First, an image of the misattributed painting was somehow placed in a German translation of Reed’s biography *Orozco*, published posthumously in Dresden in 1979. This version includes many more images than the first edition, published in New York by Oxford University Press in 1956, including a full page dedicated to Buck’s *Good Neighbor Policy*, titled as *Nord- und Lateinamerika* and described as an “idea study for the frescos at Dartmouth College.”⁴⁸ In 1993, when I first visited the collectors, this book provided quite compelling proof that the painting was by Orozco; in retrospect, I should have questioned the reliability of a book on Mexican art published in East Germany, where an inexpert editor might have easily collaborated, consciously or not, in planting Buck’s image.

The dossier contains an additional letter of authenticity, dated 7 July 1981, purportedly from Carroll Edward Hogan, an independent appraiser who had been director of the Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture Department at Parke-Bernet from 1960 to 1965. It is odd that such an important attestation was typed on a sheet of paper with no letterhead, although it does include the signature of a notary public and a detailed narrative: “I was present when she [Reed] inspected the painting at the home of Mr. Jay Chernis in 1964, who purchased it from Mr. Honnigbaum [sic]. She agreed to give a certificate of authenticity at that time but no photo was available. The certificate was written after she returned to Mexico City.” The letter of 1981 thus takes greater pains to authenticate Reed’s certificate of 15 July 1964 than to vouch for the work itself, which Hogan never identifies, describes, or titles (it could refer to one of the authentic works Chernis acquired from Honigbaum). The dossier also includes a Spanish translation of this letter and a copy of Hogan’s CV (the only document in the dossier on letterhead).

It seems unlikely that Hogan’s letter is an outright forgery, since he could easily have been contacted at the time it was written. Hogan, however, was not the most reliable expert. According to Martin, he might have carelessly authenticated the painting without knowing much about Orozco’s work. But there is also the possibility that the letter reveals Hogan’s collusion in the owner’s scheme.⁴⁹ Indeed, shortly after Hogan left Sotheby’s, his name was linked to a famous case involving forged artworks that Algur H. Meadows, founder of the Meadows Museum, had purchased in 1967.⁵⁰

Another typed declaration, this one dated 9 July 1981, was purportedly obtained from Lathrop (1900–1995), an emeritus professor of art at Dartmouth College, who had been responsible for Orozco’s mural commission there in the early 1930s. Despite its cautious tone, this letter implies that Lathrop had actually seen the painting, or at least a photograph: “I do see in this oil painting a number of similarities in subject matter and way of painting to his [Orozco’s] Dartmouth murals: especially the golden wheat; the muscular men marching; and the treatment of hands and faces.” He indicates that he knew Reed, recalls her asking Orozco “for portable paintings to sell,” and that “perhaps this oil painting was such a picture.” He ends by stating that “Alma Reed’s endorsement of the picture is of great importance,” implying that, if Lathrop actually wrote the letter, he relied almost solely on what he believed was the honest opinion of a recognized expert. The letter lacks a signature and instead seems to be a transcription (in both English and Spanish) of some original, typed up on a blank sheet of paper, using the cursive script of an IBM Selectric typewriter, perhaps the same one used to type the Spanish translation of Hogan’s declaration. It warrants review by a typewriter expert.⁵¹

The last dated item in the dossier is a fragment of an article that appeared in the Mexican newspaper *Excélsior* on 19 August 1981 illustrating a panel from the Dartmouth cycle. The text refers to a loan of works to the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) and to the “stratospheric” prices that museums were paying for works of art but makes no mention of the Buck painting. Like the authentic Orozco letters, it is a real document that seemingly supports the attribution without actually proving anything.⁵² The collectors acquired the work sometime between that date and 1992.

Knowing that the painting at the center of this tale is by Buck has allowed me to see the dossier today as a treasure trove of evidence documenting how a trap was carefully laid over a period of at least fifteen years to mislead a future buyer. Based on the documents—real or faked—it seems that sometime before April 1965, when the painting appeared in *The News*, Chernis had acquired a large and unsigned painting that looked like an Orozco. He may have himself been deceived by someone else, or he may have schemed from the start, knowing that it was one of the many New Deal-era paintings that had been inspired by Orozco, a type of art then disdained if not forgotten. Whatever the case, by annotating his canceled checks to Max Honigbaum with references to a painting he had definitely not purchased in San Francisco, Chernis launched a fraudulent attempt to authenticate it. Over the years, he created a dossier that ultimately included documents that were either entirely falsified or ambiguous to a fault. The extent to which others were complicit, including any links between Chernis and the *cajuelero* who ultimately sold the work to the collectors in Mexico City, may never be known. What I can say is that when the collectors generously agreed to lend their painting to *South of the Border*, they had no idea that it was anything other than genuine: after all, they had the documents to prove it.



Bennett Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy* is a compelling survivor from a time when the influence of Mexican modernism on art in the United States was so great that an homage painted by an obscure artist from Syracuse could be mistaken for a major work by a leading muralist from Guadalajara. In the period when Chernis was creating the dossier, a lack of scholarship—both on Orozco and on proletarian art of the 1930s in general—meant that the switch entailed relatively little risk with a rather high chance of economic payout. And for every expert—like Martin—who couldn't be convinced, there was a probably a collector or curator who could be. In the mid-1960s, the Buck canvas was almost valueless; as an Orozco, even if Mexican modernism hadn't regained the prestige that it held back in the 1930s, it was worth much more. Indeed, for whoever has the picture today (the original owners having sold it years ago), the correct attribution is no small matter: the market value of Buck's painting would be a fraction of that of an equally large and compelling work by José Clemente Orozco.⁵³ At the same time, given renewed interest in leftist New Deal art, the visual complexity of *Good Neighbor Policy*, and, admittedly, the content of this essay, who knows how many museums might fight for the chance to own it. After all, the value of a work must also be measured in the tales that it tells.

The positive side of this story is the recovery of an important lost work that reveals the impact of contemporary politics and Mexican muralism on artists of the 1930s; it is also one of the few known survivors of a historically significant exhibition in which it kept good company. Had I not found that twenty-four-page A.C.A. Gallery catalog, I might still have wondered what ever happened to that "Orozco" that I had included in *South of the Border*, but there would have been no reason to bring Buck

out of the shadows.⁵⁴ The negative side is that Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy* serves as a warning that many other fakes and misattributions, sometimes passed from one mark to another, remain at large, contaminating the historical record. Theory and philosophy help little in this regard, for the only effective gatekeeper is the connoisseur—who not only looks hard and long at works of art but at the documents that accompany and purport to authenticate them. These are skills many consider old-fashioned, outmoded, even politically suspect, but they are essential skills nonetheless.

The most egregious fakes are often laughable, but even obvious ones cast doubt, damaging an artist's reputation, as in the case of a pseudoacademic publication that slandered Frida Kahlo a few years ago.⁵⁵ And yet, it is very difficult to talk or write openly about fake or even questionable paintings in an interconnected art world, mainly because in so doing, we risk angering stakeholders whose generosity we may need for future projects.⁵⁶ A broader discussion of this topic or a catalog of problematic works is well beyond the contours of this essay. But I close by noting that although very few false Kahlos or Riveras have actually deceived leading curators or art historians,⁵⁷ the case for Orozco is more complicated, partly because scholarship on his paintings remains comparatively limited, and partly because his expressionist style is rather easy to imitate. The same is also true for late (and sometimes sloppy) works by Siqueiros; by contrast, Rivera's precise brushwork is almost impossible to duplicate convincingly. Besides the younger artists who sincerely copied Orozco's expressionist style—aside from those discussed above, Will Barnet and Arnold Belkin come to mind—and whose work might be mistaken for their mentor's, there is evidence of at least one skilled forger out there whose hand can be seen in paintings that have passed through the most reputable auction houses, and that in some cases remain ascribed to Orozco in both public and private collections. Less ignoble are other cases of mistaken identity, such as a brightly colored drawing of two men in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, dated 1933 and donated to the museum in 2019, that is old but definitely not by Orozco.⁵⁸ I leave it to my readers who jump to the endnote and follow the link to judge if this account of Bennett Buck's *Good Neighbor Policy* might serve, ultimately, as a cautionary tale.

James Oles divides his time between Mexico and the United States, where he teaches part-time in the Art Department at Wellesley College.

Notes

I wrote the first draft of this essay in Mexico City in July 2020 in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank Jeffrey Collins and Bonnie Gossels for their generous and careful comments on earlier drafts, the two anonymous readers for the *Getty Research Journal* for pushing me to refine my arguments, and Lauren Gendler at the Getty Research Institute for her sharp copyediting and fact-checking.

1. James Oles, with an essay by Karen Cordero Reiman, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914–1947*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press,

1993). Some of these ideas were revisited and expanded in Barbara Haskell, ed., *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of

American Art, 2020). See also James Oles, review of the exhibition *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10732>.

2. There are actually two versions of this painting in Mexico's national collections: a smaller one in the Museo de Arte Moderno (dated 1930 by the museum but is certainly later) and a larger one dated 1944 by the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil. Both revisit the central figure in Orozco's mural at Pomona College (*Prometheus*, 1930, Frary Hall), but reduce multitudes to just two flanking figures. For images, see *La colección permanente: Museo de Arte Moderno de México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2006), 54; and Justino Fernández, *Obras de José Clemente Orozco en la colección Carrillo Gil, México* (Mexico City: n.p., 1949), 39, pl. 59.

3. Although my memory of the following events is sharp, my documentation is sparse, and I kept no diary at that time. Doubts throughout the essay are signaled by the use of passive voice.

4. Largely for economic reasons, Orozco moved to New York in 1927, leaving his family behind in Guadalajara. He was the first of the three leading muralists to seek his fortune north of the border. He returned to Mexico in early 1934. The bibliography on the artist has expanded dramatically since the early 1990s: see Renato González Mello and Diane Miliotes, eds., *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927–1934*, exh. cat. (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2002); Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927–1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); and Mary K. Coffey, *Orozco's American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

5. The representation of two paintings and a photograph within the space of the canvas may indicate that the artist wanted his own work to reference (or subsume) multiple media, including prints, frescoes, architecture, and industrial design.

6. Orozco's work was frequently seen in exhibitions in New York and was well reproduced, albeit in black-and-white, in Reed's widely distributed *José Clemente Orozco* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1932).

7. This book is discussed below; see this essay, note 48.

8. The work is included in the checklist but not illustrated. Before the digital revolution, there

was an even longer lead time for sending a final catalog to press ahead of the opening of an exhibition, especially—as in this case—when the book was printed abroad (Hong Kong). Changes to the galleys were marked by hand, sent by FedEx or fax, and often entailed additional costs. When the catalog for *South of the Border* went to press, I already knew that the loan of *Birth of Fascism* had been denied and had signaled this in the checklist, but I still believed *Prometheus* would be exhibited at the first two venues.

9. *South of the Border* emerged from my dissertation prospectus, but the dissertation itself had a tighter focus. See James Oles, "Walls to Paint On: American Muralists in Mexico, 1933–1936" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1996).

10. The show ran from 15 August to 11 September 1938. Baron (1892–1961) founded the A.C.A. Gallery in 1932 at 1269 Madison Avenue; by 1938 it had moved to 52 West Eighth Street. His nephew Sidney Bergen (1922–2001) joined the gallery in the 1950s (it remains in operation as the ACA Gallery). After discovering the catalog, I wrote to Sidney's son Jeffrey Bergen in April 1994, hoping for more information on Buck from the A.C.A. Gallery files. I received no reply, and I did not follow up after learning that their archive had been donated to the Archives of American Art and mainly covers post-1938 activities.

11. Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 28.

12. Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 28.

13. A short conversation with one of the former owners in 2022 revealed that the painting has been sold to another collector, and I have been unable to trace its current whereabouts.

14. *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932). Artists George Biddle, Philip Evergood, and William Gropper participated in both projects.

15. Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 136. See also Helen A. Harrison, "John Reed Club Artists and the New Deal: Radical Responses to Roosevelt's 'Peaceful Revolution,'" *Prospects* 5 (1980): 241–68. For contemporary reviews, see Elizabeth McCausland, "New Deal Hailed in Show of Social Art," *Sunday Union and Republican*, 14 August 1938, 6E; M. U., "Artists Toying with New Deal," *New York Sun*, 20 August 1938, 21; Jacob Kainen, "ACA Show on New Deal," *Daily Worker*, 5 September 1938, 7; and Elizabeth Noble, "Art,"

New Masses, 6 September 1938, 30–31. None discusses Buck's painting.

16. Sternberg made a lithograph with a similar composition titled *Southern Holiday* (1935); Elizabeth Olds also created a lithograph version of her painting *The Middle Class*. For images of the two prints, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 50, 137. An oil sketch for Levi's *Dock Worker* has appeared on the market: "American & European Paintings and Prints," Bonhams, Boston, 11 September 2009, lot 753, <https://www.skinnerinc.com/auctions/2470/lots/753>.

17. Herman Baron, untitled introductory essay in *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal* (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1938), n.p. The entire catalog is available online at the Wolfsonian-FIU Library, XC2014.03.1.9, <https://digital.wolfsonian.org/WOLF040195>.

18. See Bram Dijkstra, "Erasing a Movement," chap. 1 in *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920–1950* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 9–23. This book discusses several of the artists featured in *1938: Dedicated to the New Deal*, but it makes no mention of Buck.

19. Patricia Hills analyzes Evergood's submission in "Art and Politics in the Popular Front: The Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 196–98. I searched as well as I could for the other exhibited paintings but hit a digital dead end.

20. Biographical material for this essay was taken from a short, unsigned statement, possibly by the artist himself: "The Artist," in *Puerto Rico: Twelve Reproductions of Original Drawings by Bennett Buck*, with a text by M. W. Royse (New York: A.C.A. Gallery, 1936), 26; and Peg Weiss, introduction to *H. Bennett Buck: An Artist's Collection*, exh. cat. (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1978), n.p.

21. "The Artist," 26. In the period, many artists in the US padded their CVs with references to their studies undertaken abroad, when what that actually entailed is rather vague. In Buck's case, the impact of Léger's modernism is unclear.

22. See Anne Ziegler, "With an Itch to Etch: The Five Ediths and the Syracuse Printmakers," in *North American Prints, 1913–1947: An Examination at Century's End*, ed. David Tatham (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 134–35. The Puerto Rico drawings had been shown previously at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño in San Juan.

23. When researching Buck in the mid-1990s, I found some images in clippings in his artist's file at the New York Public Library, and though I failed to keep accurate notes at the time, online research has allowed me to fill in some details. A single photograph of a painting (*Steam Roller*, 1940) indicates that Buck was at least briefly employed by the WPA in New York City. Archives of American Art, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, circa 1920–1965, bulk 1935–1942, box 3, folder 47: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/federal-art-project-photographic-division-collection-5467/series-1/folder-3/folder-47>. Buck's *Undeclared* (an antiwar painting) is illustrated in Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notebook: In Galleries," *New York Times*, 19 December 1937. Buck is also mentioned in Isabel Cooper, review of "American Cartoons between Wars," *New Masses*, 25 February 1941, 27.

24. In 1946, Buck was a founding member of the Essex Art Association (EAA) in Connecticut; materials in the EAA archive include exhibition brochures from the early 1960s, but nothing related to his earlier New Deal practice. I am grateful to Sarah Grote, EAA Gallery director, for sending me the relevant digital files. The quoted review appears in a short note in *Art News*, May 1966, 15.

25. See Clemente Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco: Graphic Work* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 42–43. The image included in this essay is a different impression from the same edition, identical to the one Buck owned.

26. This gift was commemorated by the catalog published by the Everson Museum, *H. Bennett Buck: An Artist's Collection*, cited in this essay, note 20. In 1994 I obtained a checklist from the Everson with fragmentary information and several misspellings, but during the pandemic, Gina Stankivitz, former assistant registrar, kindly provided me with updated checklists of the works by Buck and the artists from Mexico as well as a PDF copy of the 1978 catalog. It is unclear when or how Buck acquired these works; they predate his two-year residence in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in the 1950s, where he founded a little-known school called Artes Contemporáneas. Buck owned a copy of Siqueiros's lithograph *Self-Portrait* (1936); see John Ittman, "David Alfaro Siqueiros," in *Mexico and Modern Printmaking: A Revolution in the Graphic Arts, 1920 to 1950*, ed. John Ittman, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006), 166, 169. In a clear sign of admiration, Buck once depicted a studio interior (perhaps his own) showing Siqueiros's lithograph hanging on the

wall. My research folder includes a poor photocopy of the image, but I have been unable to retrace its source.

27. Tamayo's drawing has not been previously published. On this period, see E. Carmen Ramos, *Tamayo: The New York Years* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2017).

28. The nationalization of oil in Mexico was widely discussed in the press. See, for example, J. H. Carmical, "Mexico's Oil Move Hits U.S. Policies," *New York Times*, 27 March 1938, 41. Historians have questioned whether the Good Neighbor Policy was truly operative in the ensuing dispute over reparations. Clayton R. Koppes, "The Good Neighbor Policy and the Nationalization of Mexican Oil: A Reinterpretation," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (June 1982): 62–81.

29. Baron, introductory essay in 1938: *Dedicated to the New Deal*, n.p. Gottlieb's *Strength Through Joy*, on the other hand, makes reference to Orozco's ink drawings from his *Horrors of Revolution* series of the late 1920s. For a discussion of this series, see Indych-López, "Horrores," chap. 2 in *Muralism without Walls*.

30. At the New School, geometric lines and rectangular blocks separate different scenes or figures, but the resulting montage is more subtle than in Buck's painting, especially because Orozco used color to unify the composition and never resorted to such obvious divisions as picture frames or graphic borders. See Diane Miliotes, "The Murals at the New School for Social Research (1930–31)," in González Mello and Miliotes, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States*, 118–41.

31. As prices for art increased in the postwar period, the market demanded ever more documentation. Jonathon Keets, *Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 120.

32. Here I should reveal that before I began the PhD program at Yale, I received a JD from the University of Virginia School of Law (1988), which might explain why at times this essay reads more like a legal brief than art history.

33. "New Modern Art Works on Display at City Museum," *St. Louis Star and Times*, 28 September 1938, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/10889490/the-st-louis-star-and-times/>; and Robert Justin Goldstein, "Watching the Books: The Federal Government's Suppression of the Washington Cooperative Bookshop, 1939–1950," *American Communist History* 12, no. 3 (December 2013): 240.

34. Untitled clipping from *The News*, 11 April 1965. I won't gloss the interpretation of the painting except to say that the text includes the phrase "Anglo-America and Latin America," which repeats the titles of Orozco's panels at Dartmouth. For the research in this essay, I used only photocopies of the original documents; I am unaware of the current location of the original dossier.

35. See Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* (New York: Penguin, 2009). The bibliography on Van Meegeren is too extensive to list here.

36. There was, for example, no catalogue raisonné to consult (there still isn't one), and there were only a handful of publications, mostly in Spanish.

37. Email communication between Mary-Anne Martin and the author, 23 July 2020.

38. See, for example, "Fine Art," Stair Galleries, Hudson, New York, 25 September 2010, lots 273–80, 282, and 286A: <https://www.stairgalleries.com/auction/09-25-10/catalogue/201-300/cat-271-280.htm>. A work by Norman Rockwell dedicated to Chernis was recently sold: "American Art and Philadelphia Impressionists," Freeman's, Philadelphia, 6 June 2022, lot 56, <https://hindmanauctions.com/auctions/1736-american-art-and-pennsylvania-impressionists/lot/56>. Future research may or may not uncover more information about this character.

39. On 19 May 1966, Chernis wrote to Beatrice Kirshenbaum (1908–92), who had inherited the Honigbaum estate (she had a long and childless romantic relationship with Max Honigbaum), about having purchased works from Honigbaum and expressing interest in works in her collection to resell at his gallery. This letter too remains with her family. I thank Beatrice's son, Noel Kirshenbaum, and granddaughter, L. D. Kirshenbaum, for their assistance in my research.

40. Emphasis mine. In this essay, absent evidence to the contrary, I assume Chernis is the sole protagonist in the fraud.

41. This printed checklist is not dated, but must be between 1936, when the Fine Arts Center was founded, and 1939, the year of Alfred Honigbaum's death. Chernis's annotations on this document indicate he acquired Rivera's ten watercolors of *Russian Army Scenes*; Orozco's *Head and Heads*, both watercolors; and Siqueiros's *Mother and Child* (now lost). It is difficult to identify the works by Rivera and Orozco. For the work by Siqueiros, see Olivier Debroise, ed.,

Portrait of a Decade: David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1930–1940, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 1997), supp. cat. no. 16. Chernis’s letter of 22 January 1966 to Max Honigbaum and the annotations on the check reference an additional watercolor by Orozco and two watercolors by Rivera that are not present in the Colorado Springs checklist.

42. The first, dated 1 January 1934, includes polite but unspecific news about working at Dartmouth. The other (25 January 1936) was sent from Guadalajara: “As soon as I can I will paint some small pictures and I will send one to you.” This second letter came in a stamped envelope addressed to Honigbaum. Photocopies from now-lost collectors’ provenance dossier.

43. I consulted a photograph of her dedication in a copy of Alma M. Reed, *The Mexican Muralists* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1960), listed for sale on AbeBooks in July 2020.

44. It seems strange that these letters “authenticate” two very different paintings, but Chernis seems to have used real works to lend credibility to other, more dubious works. *Mannequins* (1930; also known as *Manikins* or *Mannikins*) had been sold by Reed to New York lawyer Charles Recht and was supposedly purchased from Recht by Chernis in 1964. An auction sale of the painting makes no mention of Chernis’s ownership. See “Latin American Art,” Sotheby’s, New York, 30–31 May 2007, lot 10, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/latin-american-art-no8324/lot.10.html>. In the second letter, someone first typed the title of another painting—*Two Scholars in Discussion*—which was then crossed out by hand and changed to “Mannequins,” with the initials A. M. R., above. For images of these two works, see González Mello and Miliotes, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States*, 257, fig. 273 (*Mannequins*) and 300, fig. 38 (*Two Scholars*).

45. The dates create a glitch in the chronology. Although Reed’s letters do not actually state that she saw the painting in person, any reader would assume she had; a letter from appraiser Carroll Edward Hogan, discussed below, implies that Reed had seen the panel in Chernis’s New York apartment in 1964. Why, then, were the annotated checks for its supposed purchase from the Honigbaum estate not issued until more than a year later? Fictions are filled with such mistakes.

46. The leading experts at the time in Mexico would have been scholar Justino Fernández (1902–72) and collector Álgar Carrillo Gil (1898–1974), but in the 1960s, I doubt any US

collector would have even contemplated getting their approval. Chernis misattributed the painting while Reed was still alive, but I am sure she was oblivious rather than complicit.

47. Email communication between Mary-Anne Martin and the author, 23 July 2020. Martin told me, however, that the family’s opinion was not always reliable, and so when she saw the work again in *South of the Border* in 1993, she assumed that I had proven that the work was indeed by Orozco!

48. Alma Reed, *Orozco*, trans. Eva Schumann (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1979), pl. 84 and 384 (checklist). Author’s translation from German. Most image captions in this edition simply copy collection information from Reed’s publication on Orozco from 1932 (see this essay, note 6) and were not updated. The German edition also includes a contribution by Orozco’s widow, Margarita Vallardes de Orozco (1898–1990), translated from *José Clemente Orozco: Autobiografía* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1970), though it is unclear to what extent the family—or any scholar—supervised the publication. I thank Barbara Bobak, art librarian at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and Ruth Halvey at the MoMA Library, for confirming information from the German edition via email. There was much interest in postrevolutionary Mexican art from behind the Iron Curtain, but how Chernis—or someone else—managed to get a color plate inserted into the edition of 1979 remains a mystery.

49. Email communication between Martin and the author, 23 July 2020.

50. See Paul Cummings, “Oral History Interview with Ralph F. Colin,” 15 August 1969, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ralph-f-colin-12526>; and Donald S. Vogel, *Memories and Images: The World of Donald Vogel and Valley House Gallery* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2000), 186. I recently discovered that Hogan was named a codefendant in a lawsuit of 1971 filed in New York City by two collectors who had purchased fake works ascribed to Raoul Dufy at Parke-Bernet. The judge found Hogan free of any personal liability: *Weisz v. Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc.* (325 N.Y.S.2d 576, 67 Misc.2d 1077), <https://case-law.vlex.com/vid/weisz-v-parke-bernet-885707231>.

51. Confirmatory evidence might be found in Lathrop’s papers at the Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth. The ambiguous language of both the Hogan and Lathrop “certificates” lends

credence to the idea that they are authentic; a forger would arguably have come up with some more convincing and assertive prose.

52. In fact, such dossiers are often marked by “an abundance of detail coupled with a certain overall vagueness.” Salisbury and Sujo, *Provenance*, 119.

53. The public auction record for works by Orozco remains 1,142,000 USD, achieved at Christie’s in May 2010 for his oil-on-canvas painting *The City* (1929). See “Latin American Sale,” Christie’s, New York, 26–27 May 2010, lot 54, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5316895>.

54. As the years went by, it was increasingly unlikely that any scholar who came across the image by Buck in the catalog for 1938 would have tied it to *South of the Border*.

55. Barbara Levine and Stephen Jaycox, *Finding Frida Kahlo* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009). See also Jason Edward Kaufman, “Finding Frida Kahlo: Controversy Calls into Question the Authenticity of the Renowned Artists’s Work,” *IFAR Journal* 11, no. 3 (2010): 18–25.

56. For legal reasons, curators and other professionals need to tread carefully in maligning works of art, and for that reason, I hesitate to

identify some of my suspects here. See Patricia Cohen, “In Art, Freedom of Expression Doesn’t Extend to ‘Is It Real?’,” *New York Times*, 19 June 2012.

57. One exception—that I am not sure has ever been noted in print—is the *Peasant with Sombrero* that slipped into an otherwise authoritative catalog on Rivera: Linda Downs and Ellen Sharp, eds., *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Detroit: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts; New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 63, fig. 112. Like Buck’s painting, it passed muster as a Rivera because it was related to a well-known mural. When the show traveled to Mexico, artist Jesús Ortiz Tajonar (1919–90) identified it as his own work. I thank Mary-Anne Martin for clarifying this detail.

58. As of February 2025, this work (accession number 2019-123-1) remains listed as “possibly by” Orozco on the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s online collection database: <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/346296>. I notified the museum that, despite an apocryphal signature, the work was clearly not by Orozco, but the attribution sticks.