
Worldwide Emotion: Interhemispheric Dialogue in David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*

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The crucified Indigenous peasant at the center of *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism), an outdoor mural from 1932 by David Alfaro Siqueiros, has often attracted the attention of commentators (fig. 1).¹ The figure takes pride of place in the mural when it is beheld frontally, and Siqueiros apparently added it with a dramatic flourish at the last minute, the night before the mural's unveiling on the second story of what was then known as the Plaza Art Center in Los Angeles.² Reports of an audible gasp from the crowd gathered on the adjacent roof at the moment of its debut neatly seals this account of the mural's reception, suggesting that it had exactly the intended effect of shocking and titillating the assembled audience, which included Siqueiros's student collaborators, sympathetic artists, and critics.³ Also present were the project's patrons, who likely expected something quite different—the artist's official remit had been to create a pleasant, tropically themed landscape.⁴ In what follows, I make a case for understanding the mural differently, attending to influential factors in its production process, the phases of its censorship, and the pair of figures at the mural's top-right corner.⁵ Rather than examining the mural from the ideal viewpoint shared with the select group invited to the roof for its debut, I argue that the perspective of the pedestrian on Olvera Street looking up at the mural from an oblique angle deserves more attention (fig. 2). I will build on scholarship that analyzes Siqueiros's intensifying experimentation with photography and perspective in this period.⁶ If his manipulation of viewpoints in *América tropical* hailed its audience in an intentionally provocative way, I argue for a closer consideration of the interhemispheric character of the cause into which Siqueiros sought to recruit the mural's viewers. This approach continues the line of inquiry opened by art historians David Craven and Tatiana Flores in their respective scholarship on avant-gardist dialogues between Mexico and Peru.⁷ Drawing on documents from the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute in which the artist critiques the ideas of his contemporary, heterodox Peruvian Marxist



FIG. 1. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism), 1932, fresco applied with Arium on cement, 5.5 × 25 m. Los Angeles, Italian Hall, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument. Art © 2026 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City. Photograph courtesy Thomas Hartman, IQ Magic; photo composite: James Jackson.



FIG. 2. — View down Olvera Street in Los Angeles showing a street-level perspective of the second-story exterior wall where Siqueiros would paint his mural, ca. 1930. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Security Pacific National Bank Collection, L.A.-Plazas-The Plaza-Olvera Street, 00008434.

José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), I interpret the two riflemen in the mural in light of what they threatened to inspire in their audience: agitation and solidarity toward a subversive, transnational revolutionary cause.

Siqueiros's commission for *América tropical* came only two years after the reinvention of Olvera Street as a landmark meant to evoke a sanitized version of the city's Spanish colonial past. Styled as a restoration by its chief proponent, socialite Christine Sterling, the establishment of El Paseo de Los Angeles involved, according to art historian S. Janelle Montgomery, an effort to transform the old central Plaza from a rough-and-tumble "free speech zone" frequented by left-wing political organizers into a quaint so-called Mexican market lined with Anglo-operated shops and populated with *puesteros* (market vendors) mandated by Sterling to wear sombreros and serapes.⁸

This proposed substitution was celebrated in *Southern California Business* magazine in August 1929 as “bringing back our yesterdays.”⁹ The whole undertaking belonged to the Mission Revival phenomenon championed by real-estate developers and the Chamber of Commerce that went back to the 1910s, which urban theorist and historian Mike Davis has termed “boosterism” in Los Angeles.¹⁰ As historian Sarah Schrank notes, the city boosters’ historical revisionism intensified during the United States federal government’s repatriation campaign of Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans, which had sparked protests in the adjacent plaza.¹¹ Sterling orchestrated the district’s redevelopment by pulling strings among the city’s business set, including the *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler. Upon the project’s completion, she reveled in her success: “Olvera Street holds for me all of the charm, and beauty which I dreamed for it, because out of the hearts of the Mexican people is spun the gold of Romance and Contentment.”¹² Constructing this imaginary, idyllic past was also a key part of the city’s public relations campaign as host for the 1932 summer Olympics. Siqueiros’s mural would contest such expressions of historical amnesia in the strongest possible terms. *América tropical* responded to the civic mythologizing—and to the parallel phenomenon of Indigenismo, which proffered competing representations of the Americas’ Indigenous past—by pushing colonial genocide to the foreground, countering the erasure of the mission revivalists’ nostalgia with an image of the violence they disavowed. Documentation of the commissioning process is scarce, so it is difficult to ascertain how much was known by the mural’s patrons about Siqueiros’s final concept before it was complete, or if there was any oversight during the painting process. However, a preliminary drawing among the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute suggests that the artist may have strategically left out the controversial figurative elements in the planning stages (fig. 3). None of the figures featuring in the completed mural appear in this sketch, which seems to map out the seamless incorporation of the various doors and windows on the supporting wall into the composition.

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, Indigenismo—the history of which extends back to the sixteenth century—became a locus of intensifying ideological contestation and cultural mediation between the emerging modern state, modernist intellectuals, and the popular demographic constituencies of campesinos and workers.¹³ The crucified peasant in *América tropical* forwent the romanticization of pre-Hispanic life that typified certain strains of Indigenismo by focusing on a moment of suffering under colonial attack. In the aftermath of *América tropical*’s debut, however, Siqueiros expressed regret about having employed the crucifix motif. “The only error,” he wrote of the mural, “stems from its use of the cross because this, even though double, lends itself to an ideological confusion.”¹⁴ This comment may refer to the fraught nature of Indigenista appropriations of Christian symbolism.¹⁵

The specific source for Siqueiros’s use of the crucifixion motif, however, is almost certainly not religious at all but rather the result of an increasingly global circulation of photographic images. Conservator Tomás Zurián and journalist Adriana Malvido

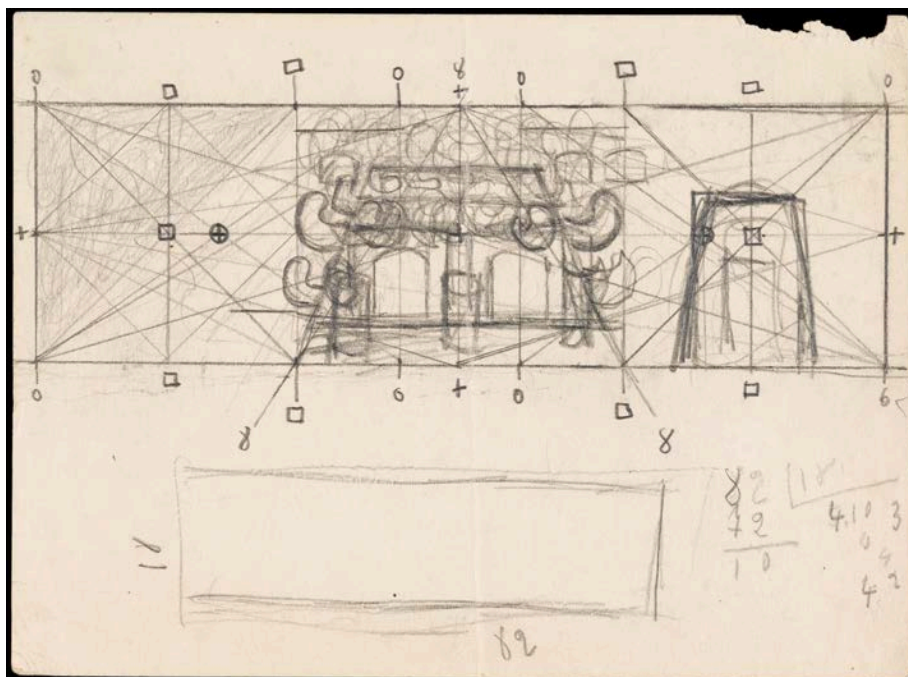


FIG. 3. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). Preparatory sketch for *América tropical oprimida y destrozada por los imperialismos*, 1932, graphite on paper, 21 × 29 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 960094. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City.

suggest that Siqueiros was quoting directly from a photograph taken in 1865 by Felice Beato, an Italian-born British photojournalist.¹⁶ The image in question, known as *Executed Sokichi*, depicts the grisly fate of a Japanese servant involved in a botched robbery. The resemblance to the figure in *América tropical* is unmistakable, including the tilted head and twisted torso and how the feet are bound to the lower cross member. Siqueiros's use of photographs as source material and for what researcher Laura González terms "preparatory sketches" goes back to his early artistic education.¹⁷ Siqueiros's exchanges with Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein—whom he had met earlier that year in Taxco, while the muralist was living under house arrest in an abandoned chapel—only intensified his thinking about the application of photography as part of the mural-making process.¹⁸ Art historian Shifra Goldman argues that their dialogue reinforced Siqueiros's notion that "the spectator, rather than passively receiving moving images, substitutes for the active role of the movie camera."¹⁹ The camera, in other words, not only aided the pictorial design of a mural but could help conceive perspectives capable of dynamically engaging viewers in motion through space.

As Siqueiros's appropriation of Beato's photograph demonstrates, the camera also enabled contemporary viewers to witness people, places and events they otherwise could not. In his speech to the John Reed Club in Los Angeles, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting: Experience of the Block Painters (Los Angeles Section)" (1932),

Siqueiros might well have been referring to the Beato image when he wrote, “Without the photographic document [the painter] shall never know, from a plastic standpoint, about the every-day bloody repression directed by the exploiting classes.”²⁰ He continues: “Without a photographic sketch, in a word, the painter shall continue to be a mystic static, i.e., a parasite of beauty.”²¹ By this reckoning, photography allowed a salutary fusion of form and content. A later example of Siqueiros’s photographic sketching technique is demonstrated in the portraits of the artist by Colombian photographer Leo Matiz (fig. 4), which provided the basis for the lithograph *Latin America* (1945). In the same shoot, photographic studies of the model Victor Arrevillaga naked, bound, and hanging from a tree became source material for the background figures in the mural *Patricios y patricidas* (Patriots and parricides; 1971). A decade after *América tropical*, Siqueiros was still integrating the camera into his artistic process even as he continued to grapple with echoing images of crucifixion.



FIG. 4. — **Leo Matiz (Colombian, 1918–98).** David Alfaro Siqueiros posing for the photographer, Mexico, ca. 1945–46. Mexico City, Archivo del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros. Photograph © Alejandra Matiz, Leo Matiz Foundation.

Siqueiros’s arrival in Los Angeles opened new technical possibilities through the proximity to Hollywood, and he eagerly availed himself of any and all photographic and cinematic equipment that his Los Angeles students could procure. The execution of his first L.A. mural at the Chouinard School of Art, *Street Meeting* (1932), incorporated acute

perspectives enabled by the camera, and its production was hastened by projecting sketches onto the wall rather than manually drawing out the whole design at scale. To realize *Street Meeting* and *América tropical*, Siqueiros assembled a crew of artists, some of whom were studying at the Chouinard School, that he designated the “Block of Mural Painters.”²² Although there is scant evidence as to whether Siqueiros and his team projected the crucified figure for *América tropical* like they did for *Street Meeting*, he did work with a photographer to explore the layout of the supporting wall for it.²³ In addition to being compositional tools, photographic and cinematic technologies served as time-saving devices. The technologies allowed the artist and his collaborators to bypass the cartoon and pouncing processes for *Street Meeting*, speeding up the mural’s creation by greatly enhancing productivity in contrast to the more time-consuming and labor-intensive buon fresco technique. As a result of these advancements, Siqueiros boldly claimed that it would take only two weeks to complete *América tropical*, which turned out to be overly ambitious. While the process ultimately continued for just over a month, considerable time was saved.

Scholars often discuss Siqueiros’s innovative use of photography and perspective and the anticipation of mobile viewership in his work.²⁴ Invigorated by his exchanges with Eisenstein, which centered on their shared ambitions for a dialectical approach to artmaking, Siqueiros began to articulate these ideas in words and in pictures.²⁵ During his short tenure in Los Angeles from April to December 1932, in political exile from Mexico, he wrote of his desire to chart a new path for muralism away from what he now deemed its failures of the 1920s: “It is not possible to produce revolutionary music, psychologically subversive, with the organ from a church.”²⁶ In other words, it was no longer enough for muralists to depict the concerns of the proletariat in the archaic medium of buon fresco. Production techniques had to be revolutionized accordingly. A comparison between *Street Meeting* with his contemporary Diego Rivera’s mural from 1931, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, exemplifies how the two painters’ approaches began to diverge. Using trompe l’oeil in the fresco, Rivera draws back the curtain on the labor involved in the painting process, showing the artist himself from behind with his legs dangling from a scaffold, surrounded by assistants laying plaster and otherwise occupied with the mural. *Street Meeting* also depicts workers perched on a scaffold illusionistically, but rather than simply representing a collaborative artistic process while employing the traditional buon fresco technique as Rivera did, Siqueiros’s incorporation of nontraditional tools such as cameras, projectors, cement guns, air brushes, and blow torches demonstrated an interest in revolutionizing the production of art itself—not only changing its content.

Rebecca Zamora highlights the allure of the Olvera Street location to Siqueiros.²⁷ Both she and Montgomery point out that aside from the adjacent rooftop, clear sightlines to the entire mural at once were only possible from the heights of the nearby civic buildings, including City Hall.²⁸ The appeal of these observations rests not only on how easy it is to picture Siqueiros thumbing his nose at such bastions of civic

authority but also on the idea that an artist would naturally focus on the vantage points from which viewers could see the entire mural. Several factors suggest that Siqueiros was more keenly attuned to how most people would actually experience this mural, which was to be partially hidden on the second story of the Plaza Art Center. Goldman mentions how Siqueiros envisioned an active, mobile spectator in contrast to the stationary, monocular perspective that emerged in the Renaissance. By definition, this concept of viewership dispenses with the notion of a single, correct vantage point from which to behold the entire mural. Indeed, the artist himself recalled how one of his collaborators on *América tropical* followed their colleagues “relentlessly with his machine [photographic camera] . . . tracing the movement of the spectator of the work, photographing [the] wall from every angle.”²⁹ In “Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting,” Siqueiros adds that preparatory sketches can be “transformed in accordance with the requirements of the visual perspective, which must be satisfied through the direct attack on the wall, *depending upon the different standpoints provided by the topography of the corresponding architecture.*”³⁰ Considerations of where and how a viewer might behold *América tropical* were top of mind for Siqueiros and his team, who were moved to incorporate a proliferation of angles and perspectives.

The importance of alternative viewpoints is also emphasized by both formal and thematic cues within the mural itself. Despite the defiant creative energy Siqueiros evinced, his social and political outlook was anything but triumphant at this juncture, as his final mural in L.A. would testify. *Portrait of Mexico Today* (1932), commissioned for a private residence in the Pacific Palisades, depicted the country’s presiding *Jefe Máximo*, Plutarco Elías Calles, as a bandit who hoarded bags of money (fig. 5). Combined with Siqueiros’s meditations on murder and destitution in both surviving L.A. murals, a profound sense of a revolution on its back foot emerges. In *América tropical* and *Portrait of Mexico Today*, only lone soldiers—not armies—remain to carry on the revolution’s liberatory promise. Scholars do not exactly agree about the identity of the rifle-toting sniper who kneels beside the campesino with the broad-brimmed hat in the upper-right corner of *América tropical*. Montgomery argues that this figure resembles depictions of the fifteenth-century Tetzcoacan ruler Nezahualcoyotl in the *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*.³¹ Zamora and art historian Raquel Tibol, however, identify the figure as Peruvian, and I am inclined to agree, given the distinctive chullo hat that he shares with the revolutionary in *Portrait of Mexico Today*, whose headgear is emblazoned with a red star.³² Art historian Laurance P. Hurlburt reproduces a preparatory drawing by Siqueiros in the book *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (1989) in which the chullo is emphasized with polka dots, its wearer cocking a rifle.³³

As Zamora points out, these figures are particularly interesting because they were the first to be whitewashed.³⁴ The censorship of *América tropical* was not immediate but took place gradually, over a period of six years. In March 1934, Arthur Millier, the art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, reported that fifteen feet of the mural’s right side—precisely the part visible to pedestrians walking down Olvera Street—had been whitewashed (fig. 6).³⁵ The rest of the mural would be obscured sometime before 1938.



FIG. 5. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *Portrait of Mexico Today*, 1932, oil on plaster applied to cement, 2.5 × 9.8 m. Santa Barbara, CA, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 2001.50. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City. Image courtesy Santa Barbara Museum of Art.



FIG. 6. — View of the partly whitewashed mural *América tropical* on a second-story exterior wall from outside Casa La Golondrina Cafe on Olvera Street, Los Angeles, ca. 1933, black-and-white nitrate negative. UCLA Library Digital Collections, Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection, uclamss_1429_2667, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

This suggests that the most disturbing aspect for its eventual censors were, rather than the crucified figure, which never would have been visible to most of the mural's viewers, the revolutionary gunmen.

In 1933, after Siqueiros's deportation from the United States, his former pupils Reuben Kadish, Harold Lehman, and Philip Guston (then Goldstein) mailed him a photograph of a portable cement mural that they had painted in support of the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931 and sentenced to death.³⁶ They quoted the opening lines from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: "A specter is haunting

Europe—the specter of communism.”³⁷ I would argue that the revolutionary specter summoned by *América tropical* was not of European provenance but instead emblemized a radical pan-American political consciousness, of which Mariátegui was a key proponent.

Zamora and Goldman allude to how the military takeover of Peru in 1930 crushed the hopes for political change and economic reform that had been spurred by the anti-imperialist ideologies of Peruvian philosopher and politician Victor Raul Haya de la Torre and the writings of Mariátegui.³⁸ The latter, who died in 1930, ran the influential magazine *Amauta*, which sold around three to four thousand copies per issue and circulated widely in avant-garde circles throughout Latin America.³⁹ While Mariátegui’s relationships with Rivera and other Mexican avant-gardists have been examined separately by Craven and Flores, his connection with Siqueiros deserves closer attention. In April 1932, the month he arrived in L.A., Siqueiros made a woodcut of Mariátegui that ran alongside a memorial tribute to the Peruvian thinker in *Grito* magazine (fig. 7). *Amauta* also published the work of Uruguayan poet Blanca Luz Brum, who was married to Siqueiros at the time of his travels to L.A. The couple addressed Mariátegui as “querido camarada” (dear comrade) in their correspondence with him. On a photograph mailed to Mariátegui that shows Siqueiros and Brum embracing on a beach in Brazil, dated 16 June 1929, a cheeky caption is scrawled in Siqueiros’s distinctive hand: “Symbol of the eternal union of the north and south of Latin America!! Pact between all races of American Indians! To fight!! Against imperialism!” (figs. 8a, 8b). The reference to a union between north and south surely refers to the couple themselves, but it carries an additional significance in relation to Mariátegui’s synthesis of Marxism and Indigenismo.

In a handwritten document of fragmented text (composed sometime after Mariátegui’s death in 1930) that is among the David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers at the Getty Research Institute, the artist rehearses, in halting prose, a critique of Mariátegui’s thought. Siqueiros derides Mariátegui’s “overestimation of the ethnological factor [presumably a reference to the so-called problem of the Indian], which leads him straight to liberal and reformist conclusions.”⁴⁰ At the same time, he laments Mariátegui’s premature death. “Had he lived to this day,” Siqueiros notes, “he would have been the first to modify his entire premonition.”⁴¹ Multiple times, Siqueiros refers to Mariátegui’s “magnificent accumulation of data” within his book *7 ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928; *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, 1971), yet criticizes the book as “seriously damaged by undoubted residues of that literary sociology or rhetoric peculiar to contemporary left-liberal writers.”⁴² This sentiment resonates with the Stalinist denunciation of Mariátegui as a populist and a purveyor of “nationalist romanticism” expressed by Soviet adviser to the Latin American Bureau of the Comintern V. M. Miroshevsky in 1941.⁴³ The muralist’s reservations about the theories of his late Peruvian comrade are clear, although he is quick to extend a certain generosity to Mariátegui by indicating the promise of his social analysis. If, as Siqueiros asserts on the opening page of his text, “Mariátegui’s native

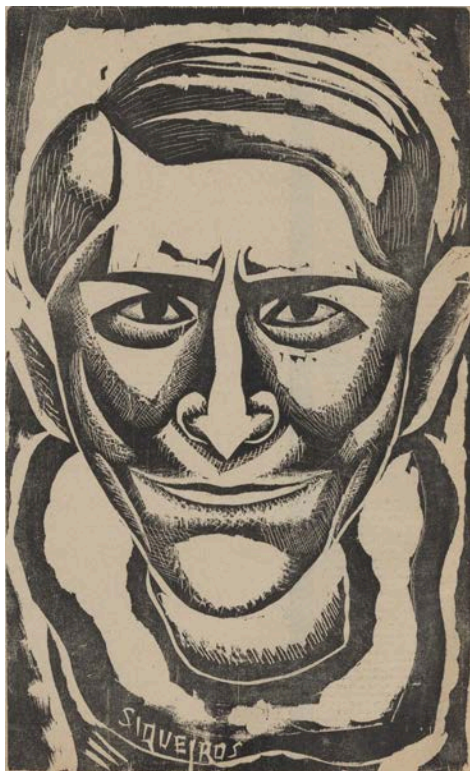
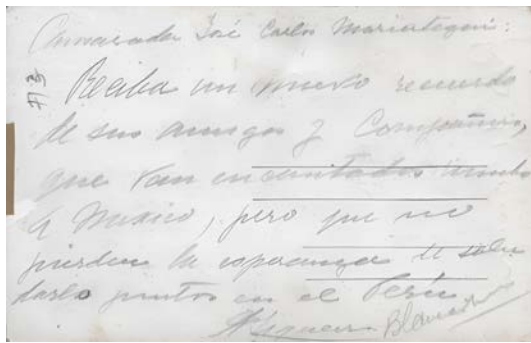


FIG. 7. — David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). José Carlos Mariátegui, woodcut, 1932. From *Grito: Órgano de la Unión de Estudiantes Pro Obrero y Campesino*, 3 April 1932. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University, F1201 .G75 1932 NO.3. Art © Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City.



FIGS. 8A, 8B. — Postcard, front and back, from Blanca Luz Brum and David Alfaro Siqueiros to José Carlos Mariátegui, 16 June 1929. Lima, Peru, José Carlos Mariátegui Archive.

[sic] and Americanism marks the romantic, initial stage of the emergence of Marxist ideology in Latin America,” then Siqueiros regrets that the Peruvian visionary’s death permanently deferred his development of that ideology.⁴⁴

This state of deferred potential echoes through Siqueiros's work in Los Angeles. Expelled from Mexico, where he had fought during the revolution, Siqueiros's defiance was tempered in his Californian murals. Per the Plaza Art Center mural's full title, for all the shock the crucified laborer elicited, the individual's fate truly does seem to be the result of a total "oppression and destruction." He hangs from the cross almost completely alone, while the ruins all around him are overrun by the voracious roots and vines of the jungle. At this moment of defeat, with the precarious political situation in Mexico and Peru, it is significant that the figures that Siqueiros chose to bear the revolutionary flame should be a Mexican and Peruvian working together. Siqueiros looked for a way through the current political impasse by routing the Indigenista impulse in this painting through the hypermodern production techniques and formal innovations afforded by the camera. In doing so, he channeled the thinking of Mariátegui. In his 1928 essay, "El problema del indio" ("The Problem of the Indian"), Mariátegui discusses the pre-Columbian economic formation of "Incan communism," rejecting the idea that socialism is an inherently European idea somehow alien to American realities:

Faith in the renaissance of the Indian is not pinned to the material process of "Westernizing" the Quechua country. The soul of the Indian is not raised by the white man's civilization or alphabet but by the myth, the idea, of the socialist revolution. The hope of the Indian is absolutely revolutionary. . . . Why should the Inca people, who constructed the most highly developed and harmonious communistic system, be the only ones unmoved by this worldwide emotion? The consanguinity of the Indian movement with world revolutionary currents is too evident to need documentation.⁴⁵

Despite Siqueiros's disparagement of his comrade's emphasis on "the ethnological factor," *América tropical* demonstrates the artist's own drive to stoke an interhemispheric revolutionary solidarity within which the "problem of the Indian" is thoroughly enmeshed. While Mariátegui may have sought a historical precedent, however, Siqueiros is careful to distance *América tropical* from any pre-Columbian moment. Even as his mise-en-scène incorporates ancient architecture, the jungle vines threaten to engulf and drag its structures into the past. The plight of the Indigenous laborer and the insurgents sitting vigil on their perch thus exists in a suspended, anticipatory moment amid the ruins of colonial history. If he acknowledges that the problem of the Indian emerges historically, then Siqueiros is at pains to highlight the urgency of action in the present. Another typewritten document among the Siqueiros Papers, titled simply "America Tropical," ruminates on the mural's evocation of overlapping temporalities:

It is the violent symbol of the Indian peon of feudal America doubly crucified by the native exploiting classes and by imperialism, in turn, oppressing them.

It is the living symbol of the destruction of past American national cultures by the invaders of yesterday and today.

It is the preparatory action of the proletarian revolution that takes the stage and is already “cocking the trigger” to effectively launch itself into the transformative battle and the construction of a new social order.⁴⁶

The collision of past and present depicted in the mural directly contradicted the sanitized nostalgia that Olvera Street’s renovation was intended to orchestrate. For the mural’s censors, it was probably worrisome enough that the campesino and his Peruvian comrade were armed and ready to fight. Sterling’s Olvera Street project depended on scrubbing the old city center of the reputation it had gained as a gathering place and organizing site for the working class.⁴⁷ If there was one thing less acceptable to the prescribed amnesia of El Paseo de Los Angeles than a reminder of genocide, it was the prospect of downtrodden Indigenous people raising arms. While the image of defeat exemplified by the crucifixion played a role in commemorating a history that some were resolutely trying to forget, Siqueiros’s choice to situate the snipers where he did suggests a cunning propagandist’s understanding that images of terror and injustice may help to agitate, but that recruitment to a cause requires empowerment and inspiration. The decision to whitewash this section almost immediately indicates that Siqueiros’s strategic manipulation of perspectival possibilities in his first completely outdoor commission, and its urgent depiction of interhemispheric solidarity, was not welcomed by the censors, who hastened to remove it from sight.

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Notes

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1. Shifra M. Goldman emphasizes the crucified figure and cites a similar reading by Jean Charlot in Goldman, “Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles,” *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974): 324. S. Janelle Montgomery also discusses the figure at length in “‘Oppressed and Destroyed’: David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *América Tropical* and 1932 Los Angeles,” *Pacific Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (2020): 549. For a brief introduction to the mural’s story, see Jaime Roque, host, *Recurrent*, podcast, season 1, episode 2, “*América Tropical*: Art, Activism, and Los Angeles’s Hidden Story,”

produced by Jaime Roque, Getty, 15 May 2024, <https://www.getty.edu/podcasts/recurrent/america-tropical-art-activism-and-los-angeles-hidden-story/>.

2. *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Millier is quoted in a personal letter saying, “At 1:00 A.M. that night in a dead Olvera Street I found Siqueiros sweating in an undershirt in the cold air, sitting on a scaffold, painting for dear life the peon bound to a double cross.” Millier, letter to Jack Jones, May 1970, quoted in Goldman, “Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles,” 324.

3. Arthur Millier, "Power Unadorned Marks Olvera Street Fresco," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 October 1932.

4. Arthur Millier, "Art Sheds 'White Scaffold on Collar': Huge Fresco for El Paseo," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1932.

5. My argument builds on an excellent observation by Rebecca Zamora about how the mural was whitewashed in stages, starting with the area featuring these figures, in Rebecca Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 6 (2014): 120.

6. See Raquel Tibol, *Episodios fotográficos* (Libros de Proceso, 1989); Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Las masas son la matriz: Teoría y práctica de la plástica del movimiento en Siqueiros," in *Retrato de una década: 1930–1940*, exh. cat. (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1996), 68–95; Olivier Debroise, "The Vertical Screen," in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramirez and Hector Olea (Yale University Press, 2004), 239–45; Juan Carlos Arias Herrera, "From the Screen to the Wall: Siqueiros and Eisenstein in Mexico," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 30, no. 2 (2014): 421–45; Sergio Delgado Moya, *Delirious Consumption: Aesthetics and Consumer Capitalism in Mexico and Brazil* (University of Texas Press, 2017); and Jennifer Jolly, "Aesthetics of Conflict: Perspective and Anamorphosis in Siqueiros's Art of the 1930s," *The Art Bulletin* 103, no. 1 (2021): 111–39.

7. David Craven, "Postcolonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui, or New Light on a Neglected Relationship," *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 3–16; Tatiana Flores, "Dialogues Along a North-South Axis: Avant-Gardists in 1920s Mexico and Peru," *Third Text* 28, no. 3 (2014): 297–310; and Tatiana Flores, "Art, Revolution, and Indigenous Subjects," in *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, ed. Carlos Manuel Salomon (Routledge, 2018).

8. Montgomery, "'Oppressed and Destroyed,'" 542.

9. "Bringing Back Our Yesterdays," *Southern California Business*, August 1929, 16.

10. See Mike Davis, "Sunshine or Noir?," chap. one in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Verso, 2006).

11. Sarah Schrank, "Public Art at the Global Crossroads: The Politics of Place in 1930s Los Angeles," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 435–57.

12. Christine Sterling, *Olvera Street: Its History and Restoration* (Adobe Studios, 1933), 20,

quoted in Montgomery, "'Oppressed and Destroyed,'" 542.

13. See Flores, "Dialogues Along a North-South Axis," on the contexts for Indigenismo in Mexico and Peru.

14. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "America Tropical," ca. 1932, typewritten manuscript in Spanish, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), David Alfaro Siqueiros Papers, 1920–1991, 960094, box 3, folder 20.

15. On matters of religion, in particular, Indigenista imagery in the work of Mexican muralists was not always welcomed by their audiences. In 1936, an anticlerical mural by the Alianza de Trabajadores de las Artes Plásticas (Alliance of Visual Arts Workers) at a secondary school in Portales angered working-class parents, while teachers in Oaxaca complained about an Indigenista rendition of a Virgin del Perpetuo Socorro at a school in Tezoatlán. See Robin Adèle Greeley, "Muralism and the State in Post-Revolution Mexico, 1920–1970," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (University of California Press, 2012), 26.

16. Tomás Zurián and Adriana Malvido, "Siqueiros: Hallazgo Iconográfico de América Tropical," *La Jornada*, 13 September 1997, 25–26.

17. Laura González, "Siqueiros and Photography: From the Source to the Optic Device," in *Siqueiros: Landscape Painter*, by Esther Acevedo et al. (Editorial RM, 2010), 66.

18. In addition to the artist and filmmaker's exchanges about photography and cinema, González speculates about the potential influence of Eisenstein's drawings from his time in Mexico, which include a crucifixion scene on a similar cross with upper and lower cross members. González, "Siqueiros and Photography," 69.

19. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," 325

20. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting: Experience of the Block Painters (Los Angeles Section)," 12, Los Angeles, 1932, typewritten manuscript (in English), GRI, Siqueiros Papers, box 2, folder 32.

21. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 12.

22. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 1. Siqueiros's collaborators are listed as Maria Andrade, Luis Arenal, Jacob Assanger, Peter Ballbusch, Dean Cornwell, Karoly Fulop, Dorothy Groton, James Hyde, Wiard Boppo Ihnen, Harold H. Jones, John Kehoe, Richard Kollorsz, Martin Obzina, Sanford Pollock, Tony

Revels, Frederick Schwankowsky, Jean Stewart, Ivan Stoppe, Jeannette Summers, Wolo von Trutzschler, and John Weiskal in Millier, "Art Sheds 'White Scaffold on Collar,'" 15.

23. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 546.

24. See this essay, note 6.

25. Arias Herrera, "From the Screen to the Wall," 428.

26. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 3.

27. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 117.

28. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 547.

29. This quotation, which does not appear in the English version (see this essay, note 20), is from a different, Spanish-language version of Siqueiros's typescript speech for the John Reed Club, Los Angeles: David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctica-subversiva," 1932, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, folio 9.1.15.272, quoted in English translation in Anna Indych-López, "Celluloid América: Siqueiros, Hollywood, and Plástica Fílmica," in *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945*, exh. cat., ed. Barbara Haskell (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020), 190. Indych-López notes that various versions of the speech for the John Reed Club by Siqueiros are held in the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros (SAPS) in Mexico City, many of which are analyzed in Delgado Moya, *Delirious Consumption*, 44–57. Indych-López, "Celluloid América," 195n4.

30. Siqueiros, "The Vehicles of Dialectic, Subversive Painting," 11. Emphasis mine.

31. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 550. The portrait of Nezahualcoyotl to which Montgomery refers can be found on folio 106r in Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Codex Ixtlilxochitl*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Mexicain 65–71, n.d.

32. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 119; and

Raquel Tibol, *Siqueiros: Introdutor de realidades* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1961).

33. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Warriors*, study for *Tropical America*, n.d., pencil-and-ink drawing, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, from Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 210, fig. 203.

34. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 120.

35. Arthur Millier, "Brush Strokes," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1934, A8. The UCLA Library Digital Collections erroneously date the image in this essay, figure 6, to 1930.

36. Barbara Haskell, "América: Mexican Muralism and Art in the United States, 1925–1945," in Haskell, *Vida Americana*, 25.

37. Quoted in Haskell, "América," 25.

38. Zamora, "Shifra Goldman and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *América Tropical*," 120

39. See Beverly Adams and Natalia Majluf, eds., *The Avant-Garde Networks of Amata: Argentina, Mexico, and Peru in the 1920s* (Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima–MALI; Blanton Museum of Art, 2019).

40. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1, Los Angeles, n.d., GRI, Siqueiros Papers, box 5, folder 5.

41. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1.

42. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 4.

43. V. M. Miroshevsky, "El 'populismo' en el Perú. Papel de Mariátegui en la historia del pensamiento social latino-americano," in *Mariátegui y los orígenes del Marxismo Latinoamericano*, ed. José Aricó (Cuadernos de Pasado y Presente, 1978), 55–70.

44. Siqueiros, "Crítica a Mariátegui," 1.

45. José Carlos Mariátegui, "The Problem of the Indian," in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Marjory Urquidí (University of Texas Press, 1971), 66.

46. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "America Tropical."

47. Montgomery, "Oppressed and Destroyed," 538.