

Donna McRae-Smith

Professor Fink

English 101.0793

20th Century Art in the United States: The “Epic of American Civilization” and “The Migration of the Negro”

Highly significant historical periods and events are often the subject of extensive works of art. “The Epic of American Civilization” by José Clemente Orozco, a Mexican artist, and “the Migration of the Negro” by Jacob Lawrence an African-American artist, are no exceptions. Orozco produced this “26-panel” fresco during 1932 to 1934 (Baas 146). Lawrence’s paintings, familiarly known as the Migration Series, were produced during 1940-41, a mere six to seven years after Orozco’s epic work. This series of paintings consists of 60 panels “no more than eighteen inches by twelve inches each” (Hughes). While Lawrence documents the “exodus of American blacks from the South seeking better opportunities in the urban centers of the North” - “from mediaeval America to modern” (Hughes), Orozco’s work is described as “a blend of aboriginal and European elements” highlighting the accomplishments of the pre-colonial past and those of the white man who followed (Myers 107).

Orozco’s murals depict the history of American civilization as “a traumatic rather than an enlightened inheritance” and recasts it in the light of “a Mexican story rooted in Meso-American civilizations and the devastation wrought by the Spanish conquest” (Coffey 12). For example, in “The Migration” the “connection is made between ancient

America and the Orient and shows the various types of aboriginal humanity” (Myers 108). This panel depicts three groups of ten-foot-high nudes moving with quiet determination “toward their destiny” (Baas 169). The expression on the face of the fallen marcher dramatizes the sacrifice required by this process. The strength of their bodies suggests a constant flow of “humanity ... from one continent to the next” (Myers 108). In this mural, the artist uses a color scheme ranging from browns, grays and blues to pink that seem to suggest different levels of purity.

Myers explains that one group of panels deal with the ancient culture of Mexico and feature Quetzalcoatl, chief deity of the ancient pre-colonial peoples of Mexico, the great teacher, and bringer of the arts, crafts and civilization in general, who arrives to confound the superstitions and barbarism of the old medicine men and offers a new, more civilized way of life. But the people of Mexico soon return to their former habits and witch doctors become popular, causing Quetzalcoatl to depart in anger (on a raft of serpents) with a promise to return in 500 years. During this departure “the return of ancient practices such as human sacrifice is followed by war, sickness and the destruction of civilization” (Myers 110).

According to Myers, the other group of panels represents the modern era and highlights the white man’s major contribution to the development of the United States – ‘the machine’. These murals serve to introduce viewers to several sub-themes. Included among them are Cortez and the church, the age of the machine, the respective cultures of Anglo-American and Spanish America, the drying up of education, the unknown soldier, and the return of Christ to destroy his own cross. In “Cortez and the Cross” the

“wreckage of the older civilization and bodies of the conquered are being fed into ‘The Machine’, ... the arch symbol of the New World” (Myers 111). Orozco confers emotional qualities on the machines “through their coloration, function and distortion” to highlight the dehumanization and confusion created through this process ... the “moral and psychological connotations” (Myers 111).

Viewing Orozco’s work evinces very strong and deep emotions. Many of the works in this mural are laced with pain, fear, violence, brutality and death. The sheer force of his work compels the viewer to stop and “listen” to what the artist is saying. In “Gods of the Modern World”, academicians and other learned people are “depicted as living corpses presiding over the stillbirth of useless knowledge while behind them the world goes up in flames” (Baas 178). This panel is a strong criticism of the failure of higher education to achieve social responsibility. In order to present viewers with his message, Orozco uses birth and death imagery coupled with skeletons very effectively. Mexican caricaturists are noted for using skeletons to achieve pointed social satire (Baas 178). Together, these symbols are very effective in conveying the message that what “the modern world needs is not another generation of educated academics, dead to the burning issues of contemporary life, but more independent thinkers and doers” (Baas 179). How ironical it is that the mural adorns the walls of an Ivy League college!

A sense of peacefulness is conveyed through the panels sub-titled “Modern Industrial Man.” These murals draw attention to the machine following its dedication to the service of mankind, and as a consequence the worker in this new industrial society can now take the time to read a book to improve his mind. Orozco’s image of a young

man relaxing on the ground in front of what could only be described as an industrial complex, symbolizes the triumph of mankind over the destructive elements of the machinery he created. According to Alma Reed, this panel depicts Orozco's future for Mexico and conveys the message that "we have had enough of revolution. We want time now to work and to rest. The people are learning to think" (Qtd. in Baas 183).

Lawrence's Migration Series takes a very different approach to depicting what may well be considered as a critical stage in the history of the development of African-Americans. Throughout the series, the artist uses of a variety of symbols, motifs and emblems including steps, ladders and pyramids. Richard J. Powell suggests that "Lawrence's steps embrace a world of allusions; the literal and formal, as well as the metaphoric and emotional" (n. pag). He further contends that the key to understanding Lawrence's paintings resides in his concepts of tools as symbols of "order and aspiration" (n.pag). In his opinion, the artist's use of steps connotes "ascension and climbing," which are representative of America's "eternal optimism," and simultaneously "attests to black America's legacy of struggle and achievement" (Powell n. pag). This element of his work is indicative of Lawrence's personal philosophy of social engagement, which provides the pathway for him to produce art that focuses on Afro-America but which also informs all American culture (Powell n. pag).

According to Robert Hughes, Lawrence's work in the Migration series is particularly abstract in the use of color, contains more purposeful distortion and the use of a technique described as cubist angularity. Referred to as "dynamic cubism" this technique gives the series "an Egyptian stillness," even when one knows "that the

subject was moving". The artist's depiction of "In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North to enter into Northern industry" (Panel 3), underlines the social magnitude of the event. Powell describes the message of this panel as follows:

The grouping of Lawrence's black migrators – echoed by the instinctive migration of six birds shown overhead – is in the form of a human pyramid. This fusion of social history, animal behavior and Egyptian allusion demonstrates the significance and far-reaching consequences of the migration of African-Americans from the rural South to Northern cities in search of a better life. The symbol of the pyramid represents the idea of progress both literally and figuratively (n. pag).

Further, the Migration Series is an integration of history and personal reflection that combines both rural and urban genre. The paintings convey the migration story in the most basic terms, and the imagery is presented in a very sober manner. Lawrence's depiction of "They Were Very Poor" (Panel 10) consists of a man and a woman sitting with their heads bowed, at a bare brown table, staring at two empty bowls. To add emphasis to the message of poverty, an empty basket hangs from the wall by an enormous nail. There is "no sentimentality to Lawrence's work, as the nail is reminiscent of the type that one would imagine in a crucifixion" (Hughes). The stark truth and strength of the message conveyed through this panel could be understood even by children. It is the simplicity of the elements coupled with the presentation and style of Lawrence's work that reinforces its significance and lasting value.

Lawrence also effectively portrays violence in the migration series. In “Although the Negro was used to lynching, he found this an opportune time for him to leave where one had occurred” (Panel 16), the artist’s messages of “police brutality and judicial inequalities” are subtly conveyed through a woman’s sorrow caused “by the death of a loved one from racial violence” (Powell n. pag). The pain and suffering are appropriately conveyed by “her curled up, resigned figure” (Powell n. pag). This feature is both “a narrative as well as an emotive ... abstraction” and imparts a clear message to the viewer (Powell n. pag).

Elements of symbolism are common threads in the work of Orozco and Lawrence. Symbols in Orozco’s murals include ancient religious deities and fire, while Lawrence’s panels incorporate more common symbols and motifs such as steps and ladders. On a deeper note of similarity, both artists use the pyramid in their work as a symbol of ascension. With respect to color, while Orozco uses vivid hues to convey the varying strengths of his messages such as in ‘The Machine’, Lawrence’s use of brilliant colors is representative of the cultural and emotional “response of black people to add something to their lives” (Powell n. pag). This response is continually presented by Lawrence’s utilization of the identical colors in every panel.

Orozco’s “Epic of American Civilization” creates a greater visual impact in terms of its size and the high level of detail provided in the murals, but it may be confusing to a viewer who has little or no knowledge of the historical events depicted by the frescos. In contrast, Lawrence’s “Migration Series” while consisting of much smaller paintings, stripped to the barest details, is very effective in depicting the story of the migration of

African Americans. The simple elements and techniques which characterize Lawrence's work, make it easier to understand and therefore more likely to evoke a widespread, quicker and deeper emotional response from viewers than Orozco's murals. On the other hand though, viewers who are familiar with Mexican history and are able to interpret Orozco's highly complex work will certainly experience similar feelings. The major difference in the work of these two artists is in the level of complexities presented. Orozco's work has to be interpreted while Lawrence's messages are clear and simple. The latter's preoccupation with everyday reality and the celebration of common elements made possible through his perception of and identification with the ordinary worker, are basic factors that most people can easily appreciate. It is these qualities which underlie Lawrence's Migration Series, and have inherently created a very effective channel for the communication of his strong social messages.

Works Cited

Baas, Jacquelynn. "The Epic of American Civilization: The Mural at Dartmouth College (1932-34)." *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*. Ed. Dawn Ades, Renato Gonzalez Mello, and Diane Miliotes. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 2002. 142-85. Print.

This article provides an excellent perspective of Orozco's masterpiece through the provision of insights into the creation of the mural, its layout and location, as well as its intricate messages. The author presents Orozco's complex views of the historical process that existed between the United States and Mexico.

Coffey, Mary K. "Towards an Industrial Golden Age? Orozco's The Epic of American Civilization." Hood Museum, Dartmouth College, 2007. Web. 21 March 2009. 12-15. PDF.

Hughes, Robert. "American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America." New York: Knopf, 1999. The Artchive. Nd. Web. 21 March 2009.

This article presents a critical view of Lawrence's work. It covers issues such as the universal themes in art and presents the views of the renowned art critic Alain Locke on "the Great Migration". The article also provides a comparison with the art of Mexican muralists and discusses Lawrence's style and use of color.

Myers, Bernard S. *Mexican Painting In Our Time*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956. Print.

The author provides his interpretation of Orozco's mural. He also explores the artist's extensive use of symbolism and color and shows the linkages between these elements and Mexican history.

Powell, Richard J. *Jacob Lawrence*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications. 1992. n. pag. Print.

Wheat, Ellen Harkins. *Jacob Lawrence – American Painter*. Seattle:

University of Washington Press, 1968. Print.

In addition to providing a detailed chronology and in-depth examination of the work of Jacob Lawrence, this book presents details about his life. Through the use of interviews with the artist and others who knew him well, the author highlights Lawrence's deep concern for poor people, and issues such as freedom and justice and the existence of the Negro in the United States. This information about the artist may lead to a greater overall appreciation of the messages of his work.