NICARAGUA: CAPITAL DEL MURALISMO EN LOS AÑOS 80 |

David Craven

El triunfo de la revolución es el triunfo de la poesía. Esta fue una pinta en una pared de León cuando triunfó la revolución... Nicaragua se fue llenando de murales... La revolución produjo un pueblo nuevo que creó una nueva cultura. O creó una cultura que produjo un pueblo nuevo. El hecho es que hubo un gran renacimiento cultural con la revolución... el más importante de nuestra cultura.[1]

Ernesto Cardenal

AS PART OF THE BROAD SET OF HISTORIC CULTURAL CHANGES it triggered, the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 inaugurated the second most important mural movement in the 20th century after that of the Mexican Mural Renaissance. Not surprisingly, the Nicaraguan mural movement was at once indebted to the Mexican precedent and also a notable departure from it. The overall significance of this Central American mural movement, though, was linked less to individual artists than to the distinctive public locus and dialogical process embodied by these murals, as well as to how these images were a key component of the nation's larger process of popular self-empowerment in the arts.[2] In that sense, the Nicaraguan mural movement indirectly took up a challenge voiced by José Clemente Orozco about how the Mexican mural movement had not always succeeded in its aim to "socializar el arte".[3]

There were many important muralists from Nicaragua —notably Alejandro Canales, Leonel Cerrato, Róger Pérez de la Rocha, Antonio Reyes, Julie Aguirre, Manuel García, Hilda Vogel, Olga Maradiaga, and Leoncio Sáenz— but few of these painters ever rivaled the technical skill or imaginative sweep routinely accomplished by "los tres grandes" from Mexico, each of whom inspired diverse wall paintings of the Sandinista Revolution. The various responses by Nicaraguan muralists to earlier wall paintings by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros will of course be discussed below. Interestingly enough, the less internationally famous murals of Nicaragua were actually more visible to the popular classes, than were the less physically accessible murals of the Mexican Mural Renaissance. Nonetheless, the photographic circulation through the mass media of images of the Mexican murals, particularly via the photos of Tina Modotti, did, however, permit a greater popular access that equalized somewhat this disparity between Mexico and Nicaragua.[4]

A basic dissimilarity between the mural movements involved the divergent media employed for wall murals in Nicara-

[1] Ernesto Cardenal, *La revolución perdida*, vol. III, *Memorias*, Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2004, pp. 353, 360.

[2] The centrality and originality of the "dialogical process" to the Nicaraguan Revolution is a topic that I have discussed at length in a short monograph and two lengthy books. See: David Craven and John Ryder, *Art of the New Nicaragua*, Ithaca, New York Council on the Humanities, 1983; David Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua Since the Revolution in 1979*, Lewiston, New York, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989; and David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, Chapter Three.

[3] José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía* (1945), México, Ediciones Era, 1991, pp. 66-67.

[4] Maricela Gonzalez Cruz Manjarrez, *Tina Modotti y el muralismo mexicano*, México, UNAM-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1999. Other primary sources from the period make clear just how prominent the murals were through such newspapers as *El Machete*. Any serious look at the reception of these murals by the popular classes must discuss the vital role played from the 1920s through the 40s by the "age of mechanical reproduction" in broadening access to these images.

gua versus those in Mexico. With very few exceptions, the Nicaraguan murals were done by means of acrylic paint especially made for the outdoors, not classic fresco or synthetic pigments like piroxilina. This means that the major Nicaraguan murals, which were often done on the exterior walls of public buildings, were more ephemeral in character, than those in Mexico for the interiors of buildings that were painted in the more durable and also more technically exacting medium of fresco. Even more long-lasting still were the few Mexican murals done in glass-based mosaic on the façades of public buildings, as was the case with *El teatro en México* on Avenida Insurgentes (1953) by Diego Rivera or *El pueblo a la Universidad, la Universidad al pueblo* at UNAM (1956) by David Alfaro Siqueiros.[5]

As such, the Nicaraguan mural movement produced a staggering number of acrylic murals —around 270 in a little over a decade, with 125 of those being put up in or around the capital city of Managua. This number compares favorably with the number of wall paintings done in all of Mexico, a far larger nation, from 1922 though the 1960s. Tragically, though, there was an epidemic of counter-revolutionary mural destruction in Nicaragua by the US-backed conservative Arnoldo Alemán, who was Mayor of Managua in the early 1990s. This belligerent censorship occurred despite the fact that these murals were legally registered not only as national patrimony, but also as world patrimony by the United Nations.[6] Such a successful, ultra-rightwing assault on public muralism has of course never occurred in Mexico, a country that has long guarded its cultural patrimony in the most admirable manner.

Another similarity between the two movements involved the respective roles of international muralists in each case. Several muralists from other countries painted works of significance in Mexico between 1922 and 1940 —such as, Jean Charlot from France and the Greenwood sisters (Grace and Marion), who were from the US, as was the outstanding Pablo O'Higgins (who later became a Mexican citizen). Similarly, there were probably an even larger number of accomplished murals in Nicaragua during the 1980s by "internacionalista" artists from other countries, such as those by Sergio Michilini from Italy, Victor Canifrú from Chile, Arnold Belkin from Mexico, the Felicia Santizo Brigade from Panama, and the Orlando Letelier Brigade, as well as John Weber, Mike Alewitz, Miranda Bergman, and Marilyn Lindstrom from the US. In a few instances with this latter group, however, there was an unfortunate tendency by certain Western apologists to privilege a more Eurocentric figurative style at the expense of local murals by Nicaraguan artists, specifically those by *campesino* painters from the Central Ameri-

[5] See: Orlando S. Suárez, *Inventario del muralismo mexicano*, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972; and Philip Stein, *Murales de México*, México, Editur, 1991.

[6] Raúl Quintanilla, "La unidad del sector cultural frente a un acto vandálico", in *Barricada*, 11 November 1990, p. 1; Gabriela Selser, "Odio a la cultura", in *Barricada Internacional*, 17 November 1990, p. 33; and Jack Rosenberger, "Nicaragua's Vanishing Sandinista Murals," in *Art in America*, July 1993, p. 27.

can nation. The problem posed by a few "progressive" Western intellectuals from Europe and the US seeking "to direct" the mural movement in this resource-poor revolutionary country of the Third World (at a time when the Italian Government of Craxi was heavily funding the national school of mural painting in Nicaragua) is one that the Mexican mural movement never had to confront, at least to this extent.

Among other things, this imperious tendency has subsequently sanctioned a series of false claims about Nicaraguan history by British scholar David Kunzle, now a professor at the University of California in Los Angeles. The latter recently wrote that the leaders of the Sandinista Front, particularly Ernesto Cardenal and Daniel Ortega, were not really supportive of the Nicaraguan mural movement. In fact, Kunzle even implies that the "real revolutionary art" of Nicaragua was almost entirely the result of efforts by "a few good men" like himself primarily from the West.[7] Needless to say, this alarmingly reactionary scholarship and the ethnocentric polemic against the FSLN it harbors have grave consequences for the unity of the contemporary anti-interventionist movement in the US —especially at a time when the ultra-interventionist Bush Administration has repeatedly attacked a resurgent Sandinista movement in Nicaragua as being "bad for the nation" and as a "threat to the region." Here as elsewhere, progressive politics must entail a firm commitment to serious scholarship, which is something that would disallow Kunzle's glib, anti-Sandinista rewriting of history.

Alejandro Canales and the Nicaraguan Mural Movement, 1980-1985

Among the most formally innovative, visually compelling, and physically prominent murals were three major wall paintings done in the early 1980s for downtown Managua by Nicaragua's leading muralist, Alejandro Canales (1945-1990). The earliest one, *Homenaje a la mujer* (3 x 38 meters) on a building in Velásquez Park, was executed in 1980 within a year of the Sandinista-led victory over the Somoza Dictatorship on July 19, 1979 and during the spectacularly successful Literacy Campaign of 1980 that saw the rate of literacy rise from 53% to 88%. Painted in acrylic, this stirring mural was commissioned by the new revolutionary government and its Minister of Culture, Father Ernesto Cardenal.[8] As the iconographic theme makes clear, the mural by Canales and his team of assistants (including María Gallo, Genaro Lugo, David Espinoza, Freddy Juarez, and Romel Beteta) celebrated not only the literacy crusade, but also the fundamental role of women as teacher/brigadistas in this

Alejandro Canales, *Homenaje a la mujer*, 1982, Managua, Nicaragua, vista general y detalle.

Diego Rivera, *La maestra rural, patio del trabajo*, SEP. Reprografía del libro Teresa del Conde *et al*, *Diego Rivera y los murales de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, Pinacoteca Editores, 2002, p. 48. Foto: Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint/IIE.

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[7] David Kunzle, "Reviews: Art and Revolution in Latin America", in *Art Journal*, vol. 64, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 110-111. Earlier ethnocentric views are also found in David Kunzle's catalogue raisonné entitled *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

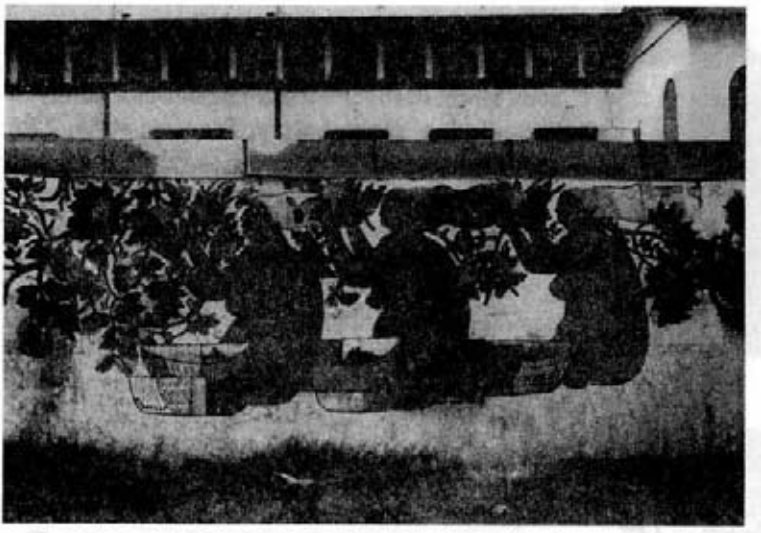
[8] Las imágenes fueron tomadas por el autor, excepto en las que aparece el crédito correspondiente.

[9] James Cockcroft, Mexico: *Class Formation, Capital Accumulation, and the State*, New York, Monthly Review, 1983, p. 132. See also: Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution, Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in México*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1997.

process of national self-transformation. The visual language of buoyant affirmation forged by Canales aptly synthesized formal elements from a variety of periods throughout history: Pre-Columbian, 20th century European (the works by Ferdinand Léger and Julio González), and modern Latin American (especially the distinctive depictions of campesinas by Diego Rivera in the 1920s).

The major historical antecedent for the uncommon iconography and affirmative tone of the Managua mural was the unforgettable fresco of 1923-24 by Diego Rivera entitled *La maestra rural* in the Secretaría de Educción Pública, Mexico City. It too was painted during the heroic early phase of a dramatic process of social transformation centered on public education and the mural movement under the aegis of the Obregón Administration. The exquisitely silhouetted bust of the maestra, when coupled with the alert and armed cadre on a horse, conveys a sense of calm militancy and austere sensuousness that are quietly dynamic. The sophisticated simplicity, which resonates spatially because of the stark figure/ground relationship, is not only a monument to popular mobilization, but also a monumental embodiment of epic modernism. Moreover, Rivera sounded an *engagé* note as well through the icono-graphic focus on the crucial role played by rural school teachers in aiding a radical program of land redistribution from the 1920s through the 1940s. As one scholar has pointed out: "Often the peasants' only allies in demanding implementation of agrarian reform were... the schoolteachers, more than two hundred of whom were shot by the large landholders' hired *pistoleros*".[9]

The exemplary mural by Canales in homage to the literacy campaign linked to land reform featured a thematic orientation similar to the one by Rivera, even as the visual language whereby it was articulated struck a novel chord. There was in the Nicaraguan mural an unusual sensual rotundity along with broad flat forms that both evoked a connection to the volumetric peasant women by Rivera and recalled instead the marmoreal sculpture of San Juan de Limay stonecarving in northern Nicaragua, which was linked to a Pre-Columbian past however obliquely. All of these anonymous figures in



Alejandro Canales, *Coffee Harvest*, 1982, Managua, Nicaragua.

the Canales mural were deftly placed on a neutral white ground that allowed the figures to hover vibrantly or to somersault exube-rantly. Symptomatic here was the striking figure of the leaping teacher holding a copy of the literacy primer *Amanecer del pue-blo*, in which is clearly written: "Las masas hicieron la revolución".

This unusual motif of the somersaulting teacher signified "the new woman", as well as the new role of women within a revolutionary society that in some senses seemed to defy gravity during the 1980s, owing to its remarkable achievements —achievements that were all out of proportion to the meager material resources at hand. The net result aesthetically was an airy, almost numinous, composition with heavy figures that existed largely in one plane, while imparting a sense of monumental expansiveness to the whole. *A tour de force* of affirmative art, this mural was without the apocalyptic pall that hung over murals by Orozco or Siqueiros. The Canales mural employed instead the calmly militant charge, the apollonian atmosphere that was a hallmark of Rivera's frescoes. Yet, the thematic issue represented would come to assume more tragic dimensions as the decade wore on, because of the war declared on Nicaraguan educators by the US-backed Contras. By the end of the 1980s, the so-called "freedom fighters" of Ronald Reagan would assassinate at least 189 schoolteachers in Nicaragua, in effort to terrorize the rural populace that supported the revolutionary social programs of the Sandinistas.[10]

Two later murals in the vicinity of this first one were also painted by Canales and his assistants. The first, *Coffee Harvest* of 1982, was more modest in scale for a street mural at 2 x 10 me-

[10] On the horrors of the Reagan-era support for the Contras, see, for example: *Oxfam Report on Nicaragua*, Oxford University Press, 1985.

Canales, *Telcor Mural*, 1985, Managua, Book Cover and núm. 3.1.

Diego Rivera, *Paisaje Zapatista o El Guerrillero*, 1915. Foto: INBA/MUNAL.

ters and it was elegantly concise in treatment. Three campesinas were shown picking coffee, in one of the key agribusinesses that had been expropriated with the Sandinista-led reorganization of the economy. As was true of the "indigenous" figures depicted by Diego Rivera, these three women by Canales are all laborers. Using a neutral ground with a rhythmic repetition of this triad of workers clad in bold, flat variations on primary hues, Canales orchestrated a predominantly two-dimensional composition with clear affinities to peasant fiber arts from western Nicaragua that expanded horizontally, rather than into any illusory third dimension *a la Renaissance* art. The semi-abstract language and "decorative" expanse of the signifier for foliage thus provided the mural with a quietly celebratory framework for representing disalienated labor.

Only a few hundred meters behind the 1982 mural stood another one by Alejandro Canales from 1985 that towered above Managua near the lakeshore throughout the late 1980s. It was entitled *Communication of the Past and the Present* and was almost seven stories high, covering as it did an entire side of the metropolitan Tele-communications Building (Telcor). This public painting was easily the most physically commanding mural of the entire decade, since it could be seen from a distance of many square blocks in this part of the capital city. Long before the viewers arrived at the site of the mural and it became "readable," this huge mural easily captured their attention. The neo-Cubist collage of competing figurative elements was striking from a far because of the prominent use of primary hues, although these hues were modified in relation to the surrounding landscape to become yellow ochre, bluish green, and burnt-orange.

The compositional logic of the Telcor image itself derived from the "alternative modernism" of Diego Rivera's Cubist paintings, particularly *Paisaje Zapatista: El Guerrillero* of 1915, which obviously served as a forerunner of the mural by Canales. Nor is it unimportant that this painting by Rivera, probably the first one in history depicting a guerrillero, was connected to Sandino, as well as Zapata (a fact I have explored at length elsewhere).[11]

[11]See: David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, op. cit., pp. 9-14.

As such, the Telcor mural was a kaleidoscopic field of considerable visual energy that aptly interwove signs for history, nature, and technology in a series of shifting narrative gambits. For all its epic breadth and dense interpenetration of parts, though, the huge wall painting was an aggregate of elements from daily life that were intelligible to the majority of citizens. Yet, at the same time, this mural hinged on a fast-paced deployment of quotidian references within a framework that connected the familiar in an unfamiliar manner, thus "defamiliarizing" the spectator with these individual parts. In this way, the Canales mural both invited identification with concrete things and triggered critical reflections about the historical interconnectedness of these diverse moments of Nicaraguan history.

Particularly effective in formal terms was the usage by Canales of directional lines with diagonal paths and a loosely centered, but not static composition that propelled the spectators glance, as each section flowed into others as part of the "dialectical" interplay of various components in relation to the whole. Anchoring the center passage of the Telcor mural and surrounded by anonymous workers were three portraits of revolutionaries martyred in the forty-five year long struggle to end the US-backed dictatorship of the Somoza dynasty. These three guerrilleros were Augusto Sandino (assassinated in 1934), Rigoberto López Pérez (killed in 1956), and Carlos Fonseca (shot in 1976). The visual language in this respect, with its boldly flat colors and broadly stenciled outlines, owed more to the famous neo-Pop Cuban posters of Che from the 1960s by artists like Alfredo Rostgaard or Raúl Martínez, than to the earlier portraits of Diego Rivera. In fact, a series of *vallas* or painted billboards from the early 1980s by Antonio Reyes elsewhere in Managua provided the immediate visual precedent for the Canales mural.

Sandino is at the bottom, Fonseca (with glasses) is in the center, and Lopez Pérez peers out from behind Fonseca, all of them having been dead at least a decade before the Telcor mural was painted. These images were hardly meant to advance any "cult of personality" on behalf of a living leader —such as one saw with Stalin in Soviet Russia or Mao in Communist China. During the 1980s, there were no monumental portraits in Nicaragua of Daniel Ortega, Sergio Ramírez, and Ernesto Cardenal or of any other Sandinista commandant. This point about the radically democratic nature of image-making and of institutional power in revolutionary Nicaragua needs to be underscored because of how the US press shamelessly reported the opposite on a regular basis. In 1983, for example, *The New York Times* claimed, when publishing a billboard showing the triad of martyrs noted above, that this image represented the

Antonio Reyes, *Augusto Sandino, Carlos Fonseca and Rigoberto López Pérez*, 1980, manta, Managua.

"actual leaders" of the FSLN and that these cult-like portraits were seen all over the country. (When I personally wrote to the editors of the *New York Times* and corrected their mistaken account of these billboards, they refused to publish my letter.)

A signal part of the Telcor mural that encapsulated well the thematic interplay of the entire mural in relation to the contemporary process of social transformation was found in the lower register. Featuring a green tree, the trunk of which terminated in roots that became the antennae of an orbiting satellite, this painting showcased the interrelated-ness of technology and nature, mediated a new by a modern revolution. The iconography here of space-age technology in the context of the Third World had long been a compelling one in Nicaraguan poetry. Among the most famous intertextual references elicited by the Canales mural would have been one to a poem by the Sandinista combatant Leonel Rugama, which was written shortly before his death in 1970. It was entitled *The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon* and included a searing contrast of the poverty in rural Nicaragua with the immense wealth needed to launch the Apollo moon flight. This poem ended with the celebrated, if acerbic line: "Blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the moon".

A subsequent poem by Ernesto Cardenal, the Minister of Culture when the Canales Telcor mural was commissioned, built on the poetic tradition initiated by Rugama. Written in the early 1980s, *Ofensiva final* by Cardenal developed an analogy between the precariousness of the revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua and a flight into outer-space. The famous poem by Cardenal, with its clear link to the iconography of the Telcor mural, began with the lines: "Fue como un viaje a la luna/ con la complejidad y precisión de todos los detalles/..."[12] It concluded with the following verse:

[12] Ernesto Cardenal, *Vuelos de victoria*, New York, ed. Marc Zimmerman, Marknoll, Orbis Books, 1985, p.2.

Fue como un viaje a la luna. Y sin ningún error.
Muchísimos trabajando coordinados en el gran proyecto.
La luna era la tierra. El pedrazo nuestro de la tierra.
Y llegamos.
Ya empieza, Rugama, a ser de los pobres; la tierra ésta
(con su luna).[13]

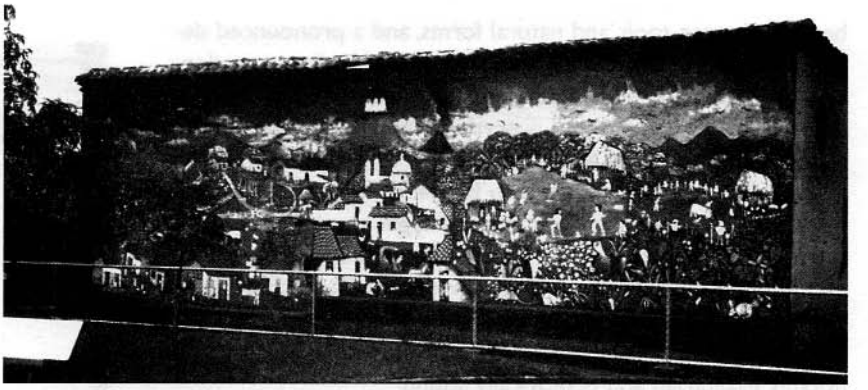
Nicaraguan Murals and "Pintura Primitivista" in the 1980s

Managua's Velásquez Park, which was named after a young FSLN cadre killed by the Somocistas, was the site of two other major murals done in 1980 that showcased quite different visual languages than the one employed by Canales. These impressive and rather divergent murals testified to the "socialist pluralism" that was a hallmark of a deeply democratic revolutionary leadership that repudiated any official "revolutionary style". A theorist of great significance to the FSLN in rejecting any "normative art" for the revolutionary process was the Mexican philosopher Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, who gave seminars in Nicaragua in 1983. The artists and critics of Nicaragua were deeply impressed with Sánchez Vázquez's theoretical reflections on these issues.[14]

A Nicaraguan muralist and printmaker who would later see the position of Sánchez Vázquez as a vindication for his own earlier practice was Leonel Cerrato (b. 1946), who was appointed by the FSLN as the director of *La Escuela Nacional de Arte Público Monumental* at about the same time that Raúl Quintanilla (b. 1954) was made director of *La Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Managua*. Cerrato's large 1980 mural entitled *El Encuentro* (3 x 38 meters) was painted on the exterior north wall of the same building in Velásquez Park that showcased Canales's previously discussed *Homenaje a la mujer* on the south side. This energetic neo-expressionist painting was as densely packed with celebratory, multi-colored figures as the Canales mural was leanly composed. The heavily impastoed treatment by Cerrato of the acrylic paint was also quite different as well. There was a strong left to right surge of humanity in keeping with the iconographic theme, which represents the reunion of guerrilleros from the countryside with their relatives from the cities (as if to imply a revolutionary resolution of the country *vs.* city conflicts of corporate capitalism). This abbreviated use of narrativity would qualify as a type of epic modernism in the tradition of "los tres grandes." The elongation of the figures, their urgent forward movement, and the chalky tonality overlaying the broad palette all recall the more chiliastic oeuvre of José Clemente Orozco, such as in *Catharsis* (1934), with an oblique overture perhaps to El Greco.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] See, for example, a very well-received paper from these seminars in Nicaragua: Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, "La pintura como lenguaje", in *Nicaráhuac* (Managua), No. 10, August 1984, pp. 115-125.



Hilda Vogl, M. García y Julie Aguirre, *Paisaje de la vida campesina.*

The shortest of the three murals at 3 x 12 meters on the building in Velásquez Park was *Paisaje con la vida campesina* from 1980. Three different artists produced this painting: Hilda Vogl (b. 1930), Manuel García (b. 1936), and Julie Aguirre (b. 1954). This mural was among the most original of the entire decade, owing to the collective use for it of the rural-based visual language called "pintura campesina" that was peculiar to places like Solentiname in Nicaragua —however much this style supposly "looks like" primitivism or naïve painting from elsewhere. Not surprisingly, this splendid example of popular culture in a high art format, and of rural art in urban spaces, spawned a whole series of murals elsewhere in what had been previously an unacceptable "popular" language for public muralism. Such was the case with the *Paisaje Primitivista* (1990) by Olga Maradiaga that was done for the large retainer wall in front of President Daniel Ortega's private residence in Managua. The considerable interest by FSLN leaders like Ortega and Ernesto Cardenal in this popular-based language (although they were careful not to call it the official "revolutionary" language of Nicaragua) was of course grounded in their understanding of how this visual tradition was created by what Antonio Gramsci termed "organic intellectuals" from the rural popular classes at a time when 65% of the work force came from the agrarian sector. Far from being mere populist images, these "peculiarly" Nicaraguan murals were instead images of popular self-expression that were symptomatic of the revolution's overarching trajectory on behalf of national autonomy.

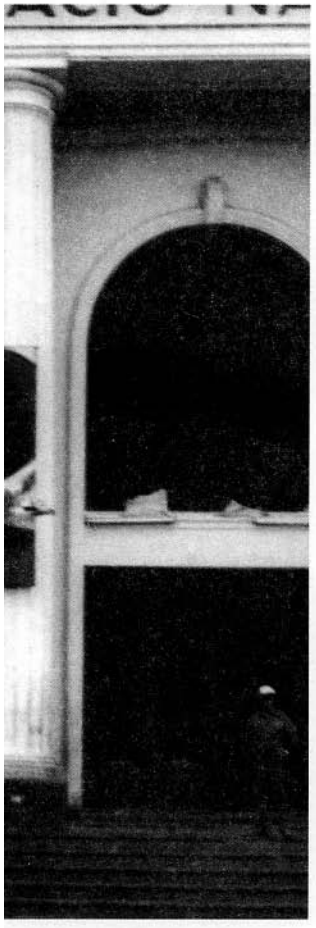
Perhaps most significantly, the formal language of these striking "pintura primitivista" murals, beginning with the magisterial one in Velásquez Park, often embodied the material texture of campesino life in agrarian areas through a distinctive set of traits: bold tropical hues, artisanal shapes that were both rough-hewn and manually improvised, a marked correspondence

between human tools and natural forms, and a pronounced decentering of compositional forces. Moreover, the latter tendency also entailed a non-hierarchical arrangement of figures, a defused lighting that threw everything into equal relief, and a pictorial structure that was characterized by imbricated, as well as interwoven, forms rather than by the standard perspectival organization of space. In short, these images were not so much staged representations of campesino life, as they were textural evocations of it with celebratory overtones. Thus, these *post-apocalyptic murals* signified the prospect of general human fulfillment in the context of an emergent society that would be notably egalitarian and ecologically sound.

Not all Nicaraguan murals were of anonymous figures of the popular classes, as were the three main ones in Velásquez Park. Róger Pérez de la Rocha, one of Nicaragua's major professional artists and teachers, painted a powerful portable mural portrait of Sandino. (Here one is reminded of Diego Rivera's virtual invention of the portable mural in the 1930s, one of which, *Imperialism*, included the *first* mural containing a portrait of Sandino). This giant image of Sandino by Pérez de la Rocha was actually mounted on the exterior of the old Palacio Nacional (now an institute of culture) in a commanding way. Today, fortunately, this portable mural by Pérez de la Rocha has been relocated inside, in the main foyer of the *Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua of the Universidad Centroamericana* in Managua, which is probably the "Harvard or Oxford" of Central America.

The early and mid-1980s saw the proliferation of murals in a wide range of visual languages by artists from other nations, as the Italian contingent led by Sergio Michilini produced such memorable murales as the fifteen part cycle titled *Historia de Nicaragua* inside the Iglesia Santa María de los Angeles, painted from 1982-1985 in acrylic on plywood. Two things in particular are of note about these murals, which are still in very good condition. First, the unusual iconographic program based on Liberation Theology (for which Ernesto Cardenal and Uriel Molina are world famous) was "dialogical" in the most profound sense. It was derived from public discussions between the urban wor-kers in the surrounding Barrio Riguero and the team of painters led by Michilini, who produced the cycle. At this point, we need to recall the challenge by Orozco that mural production be part of a larger effort to "socializar el arte". Second, the visual language employed by Michilini, *et al*, was definitely based on the mural painting precepts —especially the use of "perspectiva poliangular"— advocated by David Alfaro Siqueiros. In fact, one of the two main presses of the FSLN, Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, published an edition of *Cómo*

Roger Pérez de la Rocha, *Sandino*, 1981.



se pinta un mural by Siqueiros in 1985, owing to requests from several European artists that the ideas of Siqueiros be made more accessible.

Among the other murals that stand-out from the late 1980s was one donated to Nicaragua by the Mexican Government in 1987 to mark the 75th Anniversary of the Mexican Revolution and the 5th Anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution. This was the superb and still well-preserved tripartite mural of around 40 square meters named *Los Prometeos* by Arnold Belkin (d. 1992) of Mexico. Done with an airbrush, it is located inside the old Palacio Nacional in Managua. The visual language used is far more original than the one of Michilini, *et al*, despite the fact that Belkin had studied with Siqueiros. In this painting, there is a distinctive combination of Léger-inspired "machine aesthetic" figures with the use of photomontage and some brilliant references to artists like Peter Paul Rubens (whose painting of Prometheus is directly invoked as part of this discursive field). Moreover, the two promethean figures represented on either side of the struggling Prometheus are Zapata and Sandino. These two beautifully painted figures stand like twin specters haunting the contemporary scene in Nicaragua, especially at a moment when the FSLN is again resurgent. To quote Ernesto Cardenal:

> Do not think that because the Frente Sandinista lost an election [in 1990] that Sandino and sandinismo have died in Nicaragua... If a new somocista dictatorship is created, it will bring about a new insurrection and a new defeat of the new somocismo. Because *¡Sandino Vive!* [15]

[15]Ernesto Cardenal, "Prologue," Joel Sheesley and Wayne C. Bragg, *Sandino in the Streets*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. xi-xii.s, 2.