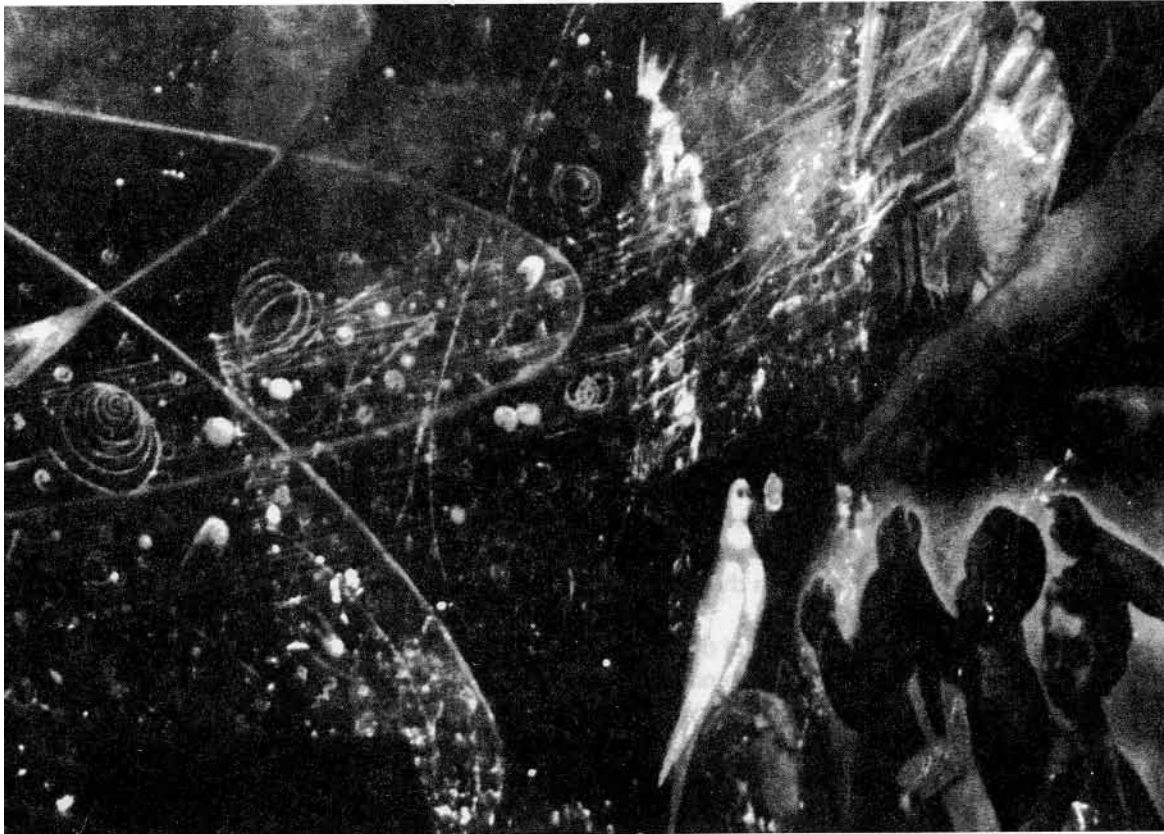


...the people moved to the east... the German Democratic Republic (DDR)...



THE MEXICAN LESSON IN EAST GERMAN |

Carsten Schiefer

...the demographic population with data... the German Democratic Republic (DDR)...

...the German Democratic Republic (DDR)...

INTRODUCTION

NOT ONLY IN MEXICO HAS WALL PAINTING been considered an art for the people instead of an art for the elite. In socialist countries therefore it ought to have found ready acceptance. Taking the example of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Mexican impact on the national mural art development shall be examined. To begin with, I shall have a look at the political framework and the theoretical-aesthetic approach that was prevalent in the GDR and compare it to Siqueiros' positions, since he was the most prolific theoretical writer in the Mexican wall painting movement.

I then want to give examples how the Mexicans were perceived in early GDR art literature after World War II. In addition, the first practical steps in East German wall painting and their conditions shall be shown.

In the next step I intend to scrutinize muralism as a well established art sector in the GDR. Particularly one mural shall exemplify the reference to Mexican models.

Finally, the departure from political motivation in muralism and the short period following will be mentioned.

110 | Wall painting in the GDR gained much attention in the leading visual arts journal of the country. A monographic work on architecture-related art was only published six years after the wall came down.¹ Surprisingly, Guth states, "In spite of formal stimulation from Mexican muralism shortly after World War II, painterly solutions [for art in GDR architecture, CS], for instance Rivera's, Orozco's and Siqueiros' mural achievements, only played a minor role in the GDR".² I want to prove Guth's statement a misjudgement.

Since it is neither part of traditional art history nor popular at present, and due to a tendency to neglect the East German legacy to the united country, GDR wall painting takes only a marginal position in the current academic discourse. Political circumstances give little reason for hope for a revival soon.

POLITICAL BASIS

Although reportedly as a reaction to Diego Rivera's 1927 visit to Berlin³ the first serious monographic publication with black and white reproductions of his frescoes was published as early as in 1928 in Germany,⁴ I am not aware of any impact of the Mexican painters on the German ones before World War II.

After liberation from fascism in 1945, the conditions for the emergence of progressive political monumental art differed significantly in both German states. One must remember the

¹Peter Guth, *Wände der Verheissung – Zur Geschichte der architekturbezogenen Kunst in der DDR*, Leipzig, Thom, 1995.

²*Ibidem.*, 48.

³Andrea Kettenmann, *Rivera*, Cologne, Taschen, 1997, p. 95 (endnote 15).

⁴*Das Werk Diego Riveras*, Berlin, Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1928. The publishing house was closely related to the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and had a branch office in Moscow. The captions in the book were bilingual: German and Russian.

completely different political directions these states took after the war. The GDR in the East opted for the socialist path, whereas the Federal Republic of Germany in the West became a front state of the western block. Both were heavily influenced by the great powers—Soviet Union and USA respectively.

It should be obvious that political conditions have a strong impact on the design of public spaces, particularly concerning political propaganda, be it in art or in other ways.

Thus in socialist GDR any art approved as non-elitist and directed to the people found support, and both Rivera and Siqueiros were received there as honored guests.

The theoretical foundation for fine arts was adapted from the Soviet Union: socialist realism. It was first defined in the field of literature and declared obligatory for revolutionary prose in 1934 by Andrei Zhdanov, Cultural Commissar of the Soviet Union and secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]:

In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as "objective reality", but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remolding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in belles lettres and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism...

We say that socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet *belles lettres* and literary criticism...⁵

Although not always pursued in practice, theoretically this concept was basis of the officially desired and fostered art production in the GDR throughout the state's existence.

In 1976 the governing Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) characterises this art as being

...based on deep inner attachment to the reality of socialism and the people's life, on determined partisanship for peace, democracy, and socialism; against imperialism, aggression, and reaction. Through means of its artistic strength, its closeness to the people, its width and multitude socialist realistic art production is able to have a lasting effect on the people's lives, and to mold socialist convictions, attitudes to and views on life, and the sense for beauty and the ideals of the working class.⁶

⁵Andrei Zhdanov, 'Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers' (1934), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford UK-Malden, USA, Blackwell, 1998, p. 411.

⁶*Programm der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, Berlin, Dietz-Verlag, 1984, pp. 58-9. All translations from German into English were done by the author.

Perhaps not by direct adoption, but rather by the congruence of political backgrounds, the concepts of socialist realism intersect with Siqueiros' Manifesto for the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors where it demands a "fighting educative art for all".⁷ The partisanship for the working class is clear in the Manifesto, inspired by the Mexican revolution, which at that time was conceived as class struggle by the signatories.⁸ For Siqueiros, like the theorists of socialist realism, appropriating art as a weapon of class struggle seems self-evident. He demands methods which "serve the immediate needs of illegal political propaganda which the proletarian revolution requires".⁹ For him as well realistic painting is the only suitable way:

Public painting, in its expressive effect, cannot be anything other than realistic figurative painting, thus making use of the whole range of its potential instead of only touching it in a constrained purely pictorial meaning. It is an art whose fundamental interest is rooted in transmitting ideas as exact as possible, and these can only be spread through objective truths. It is painting which seeks to give life to its figures, brightness to its landscapes, materiality to its objects. In a nutshell, it is [an] eloquent art.¹⁰

112 | Despite the theoretical closeness between the socialist realism theorists and Siqueiros, he had another opinion of the way to work practically, as his *Open Letter to the Soviet Painters, Sculptors and Engravers* demonstrates.¹¹

FIRST STEPS

Due to Lázaro Cárdenas' liberal politics on hosting political refugees during the reign of fascism in Germany, many German intellectuals, writers and artists found asylum in Mexico. These were usually part of the progressive cultural vanguard, and after the World War II, most of them preferred to settle in the anti-fascist East Germany rather than in West Germany where many of the Nazi elite remained in office or even made careers.

In Mexico of course they got in touch with local Communist intellectuals, artists and their art. When they returned, East German cultural politics came into effect which aimed at making art accessible to a broad public, an aim which the socialist government shared with the theorists of the Mexican muralist movement. Hence the conditions for an active and positive perception of the Mexican experience were quite favorable.

Actually in 1947 Anna Seghers¹² titled one of her first essays after returning from her exile in Mexico about the art

⁷David Alfaro Siqueiros, "A Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles" (1923a), in Harrison and Wood, 1998, p. 388. The text there is heavily abridged up to distortion.

⁸See the Spanish unabridged text: David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Manifesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores" (1923b), in Raquel Tibol (ed.), *Palabras de Siqueiros*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996, pp. 23-26.

⁹David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva" (1932), in Tibol, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 70; translation Carsten Schiefer (CS).

¹⁰David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Retorno al arte mayor", *Artes de México*, vol. 2, No. 5-6, 1954, p. 126; translation CS.

¹¹David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Open Letter to the Painters, Sculptors and Engravers of the Soviet Union' (1955a), in Harrison and Wood, 1998, pp. 672-675 (abridged). For the unabridged Spanish version see 'Carta abierta a los pintores, escultores y grabadores soviéticos' (1955), Tibol, 1996, pp. 397-404.

¹²In 1943 Leopoldo Méndez designed the book cover for her antifascist novel *The Seventh Cross*, published in her Mexican exile. See *Leopoldo Méndez 1902-2002*, México, Editorial RM, 2002, p. 28.

she acquainted there *Painted Time*. That was how she understood the frescoes, which according to her were works "becoming material power which touches the masses".¹³ In 1949, four years after the war, the same Seghers wrote an article about Rivera's *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda* for the GDR visual arts journal *Bildende Kunst*.¹⁴ She must have had a particular relation to the artist, because she first met Siqueiros in 1937 in Spain.¹⁵ In the same issue Alice Lex-Nerlinger raised the mural "the demand of our age"¹⁶ and connected the political atmosphere of departure to an artistic one, "We are at the beginning of a new culture of the mural as expression of a new type of man standing by the human society".¹⁷ It is yet important to remark that contrary to Mexico when the mural movement commenced there, German illiteracy was virtually non-existing.

Deeds followed the words. The first mural *Construction* in a public space was realised as early as November 1948 in the *Friedrichstrasse* train station in Berlin by Horst Stempel. Due to the strong Soviet influence with its aesthetic backwardness criticised so acridly and pointedly by Siqueiros in his *Open Letter*,¹⁸ the mural was denounced formalist and thus whitewashed in 1950.¹⁹

In preparation for the second post-war German art show 1949 to be held in Dresden a discussion about the pros and cons of commissioning collectively painted murals broke out. The painter Gerd Caden, who during his exile in Cuba had had contact with Siqueiros, was a strong advocate of this idea:

I immediately and unconditionally was in favor of them and reported from Latin America about the experiences of the so-called "Painter's Syndicate"... We talked about Rivera's, Siqueiros' and Orozco's results.²⁰

The outcome of this initiative was a worthwhile attempt of collective work, but the paintings suffered from the lack of relation to certain walls. Their predominant motifs were taken from the sphere of material production.

MOVING OUTSIDE

In 1952 Max Lingner designed an untitled 3 x 24 m china tiles mural for the façade of the House of Ministries (*Haus der Ministerien*) in Berlin commissioned by the young GDR government. It shows a panorama of social groups in the GDR, including workers, farmers, intellectuals, and technicians mastering their professional equipment, as well as police forces, a parliament

¹³Cited in Rainer Thuss, 'Über David Alfaro Siqueiros und seine Erinnerungen', in David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Man nannte mich den "Grossen Oberst"*. Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1988, p. 527 (a postscript to the German edition of Siqueiros' autobiography *Me llamaban el Coronelazo*).

¹⁴Anna Seghers, 'Diego Rivera', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1949, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵Thuss 1988, p. 526.

¹⁶Alice Lex-Nerlinger, 'Das Wandbild als Forderung unserer Zeit', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1949, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷Lex-Nerlinger 1949, p. 93.

¹⁸Siqueiros 1955b.

¹⁹Katja von der Bey, *Codierungen abstrakter Malerei: Kunstdiskurs und -ausstellungen im westlichen Nachkriegsdeutschland 1945-1952*, PhD. dissertation, Universität Oldenburg, 2000, <http://docserver.bis.uni-oldenburg.de/publikationen/dissertation/2000/beynat97/pdf/kap04.pdf>, pp. 146-7 (September 12, 2003); also see Manfred Weckwerth, 'Keine Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit', *Unsere Zeit*, vol. 35, January 11, 2002.

²⁰Cited in Thuss 1988, p. 527.



deputy, children and celebrating youth. They all contribute to the reconstruction of the still suffering country. In an odd way the groups of persons seem not to correspond to each other, but instead remain isolated as if simply attached to the wall. It is an indicator for the narrow-mindedness in which at that time the idea of socialist realism was conceived. However, at its unveiling it received much attention and a high recognition.

A brochure was published to document the ideal way of joint planning with the artist and the public commissioner. This "collaboration" was actually a euphemism for detailed demands for changes after presenting the sketch:

114 |

From the beginning the collaboration between commissioner and Max Lingner predominantly concerned content and form.

In his first study the painter had not sufficiently taken into account the significance of the industry—the highest state of technology—for the development towards socialism. The depiction of industries had remained a background staffage. Only in the group of tractors is the new relation of man towards the productive equipment indicated, which he has taken into possession for his benefit and which he is progressively mastering better, which he develops and defends. This fault of the sketch incurs a second one: a sufficient depiction of the heavy industry as first prerequisite for any further success was missing. In addition, the artist correctly recognises the entire people's contribution to the work of peace, but had not represented it with sufficient historical consequence, because a depiction of the progressive principle of democratic centralism was also missing. Finally a lack lay in the important central alliance group. The intellectual stood in its centre. He let the worker and the working farmer join, but actually the working class has initiated and carried this alliance.

In repeated talks with the artist all this was being discussed...²¹

Max Lingner, *The final sketch of the untitled*, 1952, mural at Bundesministerium der Finanzen, Berlin. Foto: Deutsche Akademie der Künste.

²¹Gerhard Strauss, *Vom Auftrag zum Wandbild; Über die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Auftraggeber und Künstler, dargestellt an der Entstehung eines Wandbildes von Max Lingner*, Berlin, Deutsche Akademie der Künste, 1953, pp. 18-19.



²¹Strauss, 1953, p. 28. See also Friedrich Rothe, 'Von der Festapotheose zur Bilderbibel. Die Entstehungsgeschichte des Wandbildes am Haus der Ministerien nach dem Entwurf von Max Lingner', in *Max Lingner*, Berlin, Dr. Erika Lingner and Ladengalerie, 1994, p. 28.

²²Hermann Büchner, *Reflexionen zur Wandmalerei der DDR*, master dissertation, n.p., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, 1983, p. 15.

²³The post-reunification parallel is noteworthy: today it houses the Ministry of Finance (*Bundesministerium der Finanzen*) of the reunited Germany. Whereas the mural did not fall victim to restorative iconoclasm, a flat monument of exactly the same dimensions was lowered into the ground of the little square in its front to commemorate the so-called peaceful revolution of 1989.

²⁴Bodo Uhse was among the exiled German authors in Mexico. Like Anna Seghers, he first met Siqueiros in 1937 in Spain. Thuss 1988, pp. 526-527.

²⁵D. Anthony White, *Siqueiros*, Encino CA, Floricanto Press, 1994, pp. 273-274.

²⁶Luis Arenal, 'Mexikanische Kunst im Dienste des Fortschritts', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1954, pp. 49-52.

²⁷'Boykott gegen fortschrittliche Maler Mexikos', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1954, p. 67.

Only the sixth study found full consent.

Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl had participated actively in its design process, including discussions with the artist about each of his sketches and a visit to Lingner's studio.²² The mural was praised. Strauss' brochure also stressed the adequacy of mural painting as a socialist art. Nevertheless Lingner's work remained a rare example of exterior murals in the 1950s.²³

The conditions for viewing it are bad, because it is semi-hidden behind a row of pillars. Since a fascist propaganda image occupied the same site before, its mere existence there is an immediate symbol for having overcome Hitlerism and having replaced it with a totally contrary political system. It is thus a parallel to the edifice: it was originally the Nazis' Ministry of Aviation (*Reichsluftfahrtministerium*).²⁴

115 |

LEARNING FROM MEXICO

Regarding the House of Ministries mural, the Mexican experience was not directly referred to. Opportunities for viewing Mexican art in Europe were still rare. This changed a few years later. Whereas the first show of Mexican engraving with 50 works from Bodo Uhse's private collection was presented in Berlin as early as 1949,²⁵ Mexican art drew broader attention in Europe only after the country's first participation at the Venice Biennial in 1950 where it was represented by Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros and Tamayo. Siqueiros was awarded the Second International Prize.²⁶ In 1953 a big show of contemporary Mexican engraving, curated by Luis Arenal, traveled the continent. It was discussed in *Bildende Kunst*. In a later issue the artist-curator published an essay about progressive Mexican engravers and wall painters, *Mexican Art Serving the Progress*.²⁷ Later that year the journal reported about a boycotted show of the 'progressive Mexican painter' Orozco in Los Angeles.²⁸

A large exhibition of Mexican painting and engraving attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors in 17 GDR cities

from 1955 to 1957. Naturally, no murals could be exhibited in any of the aforementioned shows. In 1956 Diego Rivera undertook a brief visit to East Berlin during his trip to Europe.

Bildende Kunst reprinted Siqueiros' *Return to Major Art* in 1956, borrowing it from a Polish magazine whose name was not given.²⁹ His 1970 visit to the GDR was a big cultural event. The speech he gave to the "overcrowded assembly room" at the Academy of Arts was even documented—in different translations—in *Bildende Kunst*³⁰ and in a literature journal.³¹ It also was in the GDR that German monographs about the "big three" as well as a collection of theoretical texts by Siqueiros were published³² Antonio Rodriguez' *History of Mexican Mural Painting*³³ was made available there, too, whereas the Mexican monumental painting was widely ignored in West Germany before the late 1970s.

On the occasion of his visit Rivera experienced a respectful reception and was immediately appointed a corresponding member of the Academy of Arts. The artists' association invited him for a debate on contemporary art issues. Rivera expressed his astonishment about the multitude of blank walls in Berlin: "Why do these walls have to look like a graveyard when you could give them life?"³⁴ Enthusiastically the artists signed a resolution which proposed the broad use of murals to change the "impression of ruins and graveyard to a colourful place of joy and our great socialist future".³⁵ The artists committed themselves to fulfill this task for a decorative painters wage. Particularly this approach evoked protest. A contemporary saw the jeopardy of a "proletarianisation of the artists' profession".³⁶ Regardless of this the artists' commitment resulted in virtually nothing. More than one year after the resolution was signed and published, one advocate of murals complained about this fact in an article, "Has the Mural been Forgotten?"³⁷

The 1960s brought a change. Large-scale murals were considered a useful element for the design of new urban spaces. In East Germany this had more impact than in many other places in the world: because of the severe destruction inflicted on many city centers by Anglo-American raids during World War II, large-scale reconstruction was required. Due to manifold economical wants this was a slow process, and only 15 years after the war the reconstruction of the central Berlin *Alexanderplatz* commenced. Now the integration of public art in the cities' appearance was elevated to a major concern for the planners.

In the *Alexanderplatz* area alone three monumental murals on exterior walls of public buildings were commissioned. In the early 1960s the Teacher's House (*Haus des Lehrers*) was decorated by Walter Womacka with the mosaic *Our Life* showing scenes from



²⁹Siqueiros 1954; here as David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Rückkehr zur grossen Kunst', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 4, no. 8, 1956, pp. 449-453.

³⁰David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Über mexikanische Wandmalerei', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1970a, pp. 339-343 (abridged).

³¹David Alfaro Siqueiros, 'Mexikanische Wandmalerei', *Sinn und Form*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1970b, pp. 923-934 (the identity of the issue number with that of note 30 is a coincident).

³²Hans Friedrich Secker, *Diego Rivera*, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1957 (different from the Siqueiros and Orozco monographs this was an original contribution instead of a translation and might be considered a reaction to Rivera's 1956 visit to the GDR, analogue to the 1928 monograph; see footnote 3); Raquel Tibol, *Siqueiros*, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1966; David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Der neue mexikanische Realismus*, Raquel Tibol (ed.), Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1975; Alma Reed, *Orozco*, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1979.

³³Antonio Rodriguez, *Der Mensch in Flammen*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1967.



José Luis Jáuregui, *Trabajos del Metro*, 1998. Vestibulo del Sindicato Metropolitano de Trabajadores del Sistema del Transporte Colectivo. México D.F. Foto: Carsten Schiefer. El título de este mural es asignado por mí, ya que no estaba consignado en el sitio.

the field of arts, humanities, and science. It was given the nickname "cummerbund", because it extends all around the high edifice. Among the three works it became the most popular. On occasion of a seminar held by the Association of Visual Artists it was qualified as "...an example of how the Mexican artist's and master builder's method can be applied to our concrete conditions".³⁸

Womacka also conceived a copper relief *Man and Space* anticipating journeys to space for the House of Travels (*Haus des Reisens*). The third one, by Willi Neubert, was located on the front of the journalist's coffee shop at the Press House. Its title indicates its central theme: *Socialist Press*.³⁹ These two were not finished until the early 1970s.

Obviously the artists chose their motifs from the purpose the art-bearing houses were built for. At first glance this idea seems to be quite natural and was applied in many Mexican murals as well, for example in José Gordillo's *The Teacher* at the National Education Worker's Union (SNTE); in Luis Nishizawa's *Air is Life*, originally at the Pulmonary Hospital; in Siqueiros' *Apologia of the Future Victory of the Medical Science Against Cancer* at the old Oncological Hospital; or —to pick a more recent example— in José Luis Jáuregui's work for the vestibule of the Mexico City Transport System Workers Union headquarters. There are many more.

In the Berlin case this exclusively inside-oriented approach evoked criticism. As mentioned before, the integration of art into the public sphere had become an important point. This was considered disregarded here. Looking back from the late 1970s, Bruno Flierl criticises:

Ideationally, each of the three murals is related to "their" house only. More or less generalising, they signify the institutions on whose edifices they are located. There is only an accidental ideational relation to the urban life on *Alexanderplatz*. Attached to structurally and tectonically more or less manifest places, they have a primary effect on car drivers. But these rather ought to concentrate on the traffic. From the vivid *Alexanderplatz* pedestrian precinct alone the mural at the Teachers' House —across the street— is visible. So the three *Alexanderplatz* murals do not create the meaningful entity which makes a complex synthesis of architecture and visual arts.⁴⁰

In 1958 José Renau decided to settle in the GDR where he remained till his death in 1982. He both published and worked as an artist in his new country. Having been Siqueiros' comrade

³⁸Herbert Sandberg, 'Diego Rivera und die Initiative', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 4, no. 5, 1956, p. 285.

³⁹'Resolution', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 4, no. 5, 1956, p. 285.

⁴⁰Georg Kretzschmar, 'Eine Antwort', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 4, no. 10, 1956, p. 564.

³⁷Herman Müller, 'Ist das Wandbild vergessen?', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1957, pp. 293-296.

³⁸Cited in Büchner 1983, p. 23.

³⁹Nowadays it is completely covered by an advertisement for the steak house inside. The copper relief has started deteriorating and needs to be decorruded urgently. The Teacher's House mosaic was declared cultural heritage and is being restored at the time of writing.

⁴⁰Cited in Büchner, 1983, p. 31.

and colleague, who in 1940 finished the *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, he brought with him thorough and intimate knowledge of the Mexican artists and their skills as well as the adequate political stance for public monumental art in a socialist country.

When an entire new residential neighborhood in the town of Halle was built Renau was commissioned to conceive and execute several monumental murals on the exterior of buildings in a huge educational center. Departing from the custom to directly illuminate the function of the edifice by the motif, he conceived an ensemble of four paintings in mutual context. The political desires of the public commissioner led to a watering down of the original idea. Furthermore, for economical reasons the project was postponed several years.

Still, the Renau project marks a turn in the GDR wall painting. The mural found its new location outside the city centers and occupied residential areas.

A new kind of location was detected in the late 1950s: state-owned companies decided to commission wall paintings for their premises. Assembly halls or refectories with their relatively large walls without industrial pollution were preferred locations, but also exterior murals were created for plants. For instance, in the early 1970s José Renau painted *Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy* on the exterior of a Halle power plant building.⁴¹ Note that here as in the following example again the motif derived from the function of the edifice.

118 |

PEACEFUL USE OF ATOMIC ENERGY

Werner Petzold titled his 1974 work for the Wismut mining company very similarly: *Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy*. The company had a strategic role for Eastern European civil and military nuclear fuel supply, because they procured the lion's share of the Warsaw Treaty states' uranium. The title here emphasises the use of fission material in power plants in contrast to its abuse for nuclear weapons. We will have a closer look at his piece to exemplify a mural at the heyday of GDR muralism as well as its reception by a critic. In *Bildende Kunst* it was enthusiastically praised.⁴²

Initially a decision had to be made between an abstract-decorative or a picturesque-monumental representation of the atomic energy issue: "Determined by the workers' desire for having the meaning of their highly important labor presented concretely, the decision was made in favor of the latter".⁴³

The Prime Minister was not involved in the process, but political considerations must have played a great part in the conception:



⁴¹Büchner 1983, pp. 31-32.

⁴²Günter Meissner, 'Friedliche Nutzung der Atomenergie', *Bildende Kunst*, vol. 23, no. 5, 1975, pp. 230-233. Most material facts about the work and its coming into being are taken from this review.

⁴³Meissner, 1975, p. 232.



The realisation of the idea was pursued in a noticeably thorough manner from both sides [i. e. the company and the artist, CS]. Along with numerous discussions with workers, in 1972-73 nine drafts were discussed with the management both of the mine and the Wismut company.⁴⁴

16 x 12 meters in size, it occupies an entire front wall of the mine's five storey administrative building in the village of Paitzdorf (Thuringia) with only 400 inhabitants. It was conceived to endure at least 100 years. Given the local industrial pollution and German weather conditions with frequent rain it was executed in enamel on steel. For this work of art a new way to apply the enamel onto the steel ground with paintbrushes had been developed. After being mounted on the wall it has constituted a landmark in the tiny village:

Effectual, even from the distant Ronneburg motorway entrance, as a colorful eye-catcher in the landscape space, at night raised to shining brilliance by lowered spotlights, it constitutes an extraordinarily impressive factor of experience, whose significance in fostering inspiration inside the company cannot be overrated.

The idea of converting the sober entrance area for thousands of people into a significant space of experience by monumental painting was the artist's.⁴⁵

Werner Petzold, *Uso pacífico de la energía atómica*, 1974, esmalte sobre acero, Wismut AG, Paitzdorf, Germany. Foto: Bildende Kunst.

The motif is divided into three layers. The bottom one shows the sphere of modern mining. In the center two workers study a map in the light of a miner's lamp. Behind them on either side of them three workers form a group. Each consists of two men carrying out manual work and one mastering modern technology, thus combining state of the art industry and traditional skills. On the left the former is exemplified by a computer panel and on the right by a caterpillar vehicle. Tracks, pipes, and non-identifiable linear objects give this layer a dynamic note, particularly as they only seem to be parallel. A closer look reveals that there is not a definite vanishing point.

The middle layer is clearly marked by a red plinth with white margin. Its pointed corner virtually juts out from the image surface. A group of six persons rests above it. Like their companions below they are arranged parallel to the margin of the plinth. The central figure is the one who appears to be nearest to the viewer among all of the total of 15 in the image. Wearing a hard hat he is the only one in the group whose occupation as a worker is marked. Welcoming he reaches out

⁴⁴*ibidem*.

⁴⁵Meissner, 1975, p. 231.

his arms to embrace the viewers, who were mostly miners on their way to work approaching from the right, and draws them into the image. This integration of working class members is highly symbolic in the worker and peasant state. Furthermore, this content is highlighted by the central workers' chest and the space between his right hand thumb and index finger being the very center of the image. He might also be seen as representing the peaceful anti-imperialist state reaching out hands to other peoples.

On the left he is accompanied by a family. The mother breast-feeds her baby while the father takes a protective position from behind them, with his widely stretched out arms recalling a modern Madonna of Mercy without cloak.⁴⁶

His left hand side is occupied by two more men. The one next to the central worker seems to assist him. The outer one loudly calls to the viewer and so supports the gesture of his centrally located companion. His right arm visually connects the middle and the top layers by it pointing to the central element of the latter.

120 |

Above a sun-like spherical stylised atom three persons stand closely together. They are headed by a worker who stretches his hands like being ready to lift and hold the atom, which draws attention as the brightest spot of the picture. He might even want to offer us the source of wealth and warmth.

Behind him a cosmonaut reaches out for a celestial body in space. Very much like Siqueiros in *March of Humanity* in the Polyforum, Womacka in the aforementioned House of Travels relief, or one decade earlier Aurora Reyes in *The Open Book of Space* in the National Teachers Union (SNTE) building theater, Petzold employs space-travels here to symbolise mankind's departure into a brighter future.

The cosmonaut's opposite number is a woman who holds a scarlet banner. The banner, her hair, and the space merge. Flame-like the banner seems to emerge directly from the nuclear fire of the atomic sphere. The flag rises above an electrical transformer station. Lenin's proverbial quote "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" is converted here into the visual.

The red banner is mirrored by a red stripe of space which serves as background to the cosmo-



⁴⁶The frequent perpetuation of conservative gender role models in politically progressive art, be it the European and Chinese socialist realist type or Mexican muralism with its preference for showing maternity or a mystical interwovenness of women and earth definitely deserves an in depth analysis. For the former it is currently being undertaken by Bojana Pejic.

naut's right arm. The smoke from the plant below merges into the stripe.

Traces of celestial bodies' trajectories and, adopting a traditional pathos formula, the exaggeratedly fluttering red banner put dynamism and movement into this layer. The key role of industry for developing a higher quality of life for humans is emphasised here.

On the top margin the infinity of the universe opens infinite chances.

The composition is highly symmetrical along a vertical central axis. A bit stiff thus, the dynamism of the bottom and top layers is weakened.

All persons are depicted as semi-nudes. Even the cosmonaut wears a helmet, but his arm is bare. Except for the couple's, all visible faces bear the slightly artificially heroic and determined expression which was typical of Soviet socialist realism. The bodies are muscular similar to those of protagonists in some of Siqueiros' murals,⁴⁷ he perhaps having been inspired by Hendrik Goltzius' mannerist exaggerations.

The critic puts it gently:

The great example of our century, studied by Werner Petzold, Rivera's and Siqueiros' Mexican realistic wall painting...

Petzold's achievement can be characterised as extraordinary important with its reminiscence to Mexican wall painting, which not least owes its impressive vividness to technological innovation.⁴⁸

Being less gentle, one could judge that Petzold's performance rather lies in a very close adaptation of the Mexican masters' creations than in his own composer's achievement. This becomes even more obvious when his atomic globe — a key element in his composition — is compared to the center of Rivera's *Man, Controller of the Universe* (1934).⁴⁹ However, the majority of GDR workers were unfamiliar with Mexican art, and Siqueiros himself would have liked the invention of a new innovative way of producing an enamel mural.

Surprisingly, referring to Petzold's example the critic states:

The hitherto frequently observed gap between panel painting and architecture-bound work — often even observable in the oeuvre of a single painter — can close further. Art history — perhaps the reference to the abstraction adequate to the wall's extensive surface — does not give proof for it.⁵⁰

David Alfaro Siqueiros: *El Átomo, triunfo de la paz sobre la destrucción de las masas*, 1964-1971, acrílico sobre cemento, Polyforum Siqueiros, México, D.F. Foto: Polyforum Siqueiros.

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Por una seguridad social para todos los mexicanos*, 1952-1954, piroxilina y vinilita sobre celotex. Hospital de la Raza, México, D.F., detalle. Foto: Carsten Schiefer.

⁴⁷Compare to *Death to the Invader*, 1941-1942; *Allegory of Racial Equality*, 1943; the centaur in *Cuauhtémoc Against the Myth*, 1944; *New Democracy*, 1945; the Prometheus in *For Full Social Security for All Mexicans*, 1952-1954; and the earlier version of the *The Atom: Triumph of Peace over Destruction* on the exterior of the Siqueiros Polyforum dodecahedron, before it was repainted and the figures were stylised.

⁴⁸Meissner, 1975, p. 233.

⁴⁹Maybe due to a lack of creative energy, Petzold did not emerge later. He settled in West Berlin and demoted himself from an artist to a craftsman: he has specialised in portraying horses on commission.

⁵⁰Meissner, 1975, p. 233.

Meissner continues praising Rivera and Siqueiros, apparently ignoring the latter's Berlin speech in which he had emphasised on the difference between both media:

I have always said, and I believe not to be wrong here, that there is at least 70 per cent difference between wall painting and easel painting. It is a matter of two completely different tasks. This regards to the technique... and many further aspects.⁵¹

The contradiction between Meissner's appraisal for Siqueiros and his opposition to one of the artists' central theoretical positions remains unsolved.

CONCEPTS CHANGING

Beginning in the mid-1970s the traditional concept of public mural art was questioned. Büchner sarcastically comments on the Petzold mural:

The question, whether workers have the desire to be surprised by such monumental —regarding the content "Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy" as well as the dimensions— painting, and if they actually consider the encounter with the mural as an improvement of their space of experience, has not really been asked.⁵²

A new thinking emerged:

...the departure from a position which exclusively acknowledged the thematic mural with epochal motifs as valid way to integrate art into human's *lebensraum*...

Particularly at the end of the 1970s among both artists and public commissioners a view prevailed which took the real processes of life and people's needs as a yardstick. It was realised that the illustration of socially important buildings with murals, which in addition ought to fulfill a demanding ideological function, did not work as intended.⁵³

As a consequence the murals also changed:

The city dweller no longer needs the proclamation of the messages traditionally conveyed by a mural in often disadvantageous locations —in the middle of

⁵¹Siqueiros, 1970b, p. 931.

⁵²Büchner, 1983, p. 34.

⁵³*Ibidem.*, p. 35.



Aurora Reyes, *Trajectoria de la cultura en México*, 1960 1961, t mpera, Auditorio 15 de Mayo del Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educaci n, M xico, D.F. Foto: Carsten Schiefer.

Diego Rivera, *El hombre controlador del universo*, 1934, fresco, Palacio de Bellas Artes, M xico, D.F., detalle. Reprografia del libro *Los murales del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, M xico, D. F. Am rico Arte Editores/INBA, 1995. Foto: INBA.

the stream of life—, because they are sufficiently familiar with its contents through other media...

Apart from a few exceptions, they [murals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, CS] have little in common with the socio-political images of the 1960s and 1970s, but they have become more poetic and related to everyday life, or they have withdrawn from the immediate urban space into more advantageous situations for their perception.⁵⁴

123 |

Increasingly the decorative aspect came to the fore, subduing the propagandistic. In addition to professional painters on large-scale projects, citizens started painting in their quarters or on their shared houses. Frequent also were paintings on schools and kindergartens.

After the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the obliteration of the GDR many murals have been destroyed when buildings were pulled down. Others are in poor condition and their deterioration is to be feared. Further ones are withdrawn from public view.⁵⁵ Given the current political situation in Germany, characterised by desolate public finances and the desire to eliminate every positive regard to the East's socialist past, there is little chance for an adequate preservation program.

⁵⁴*Ibidem.*, p. 36.

⁵⁵See footnote. 39.