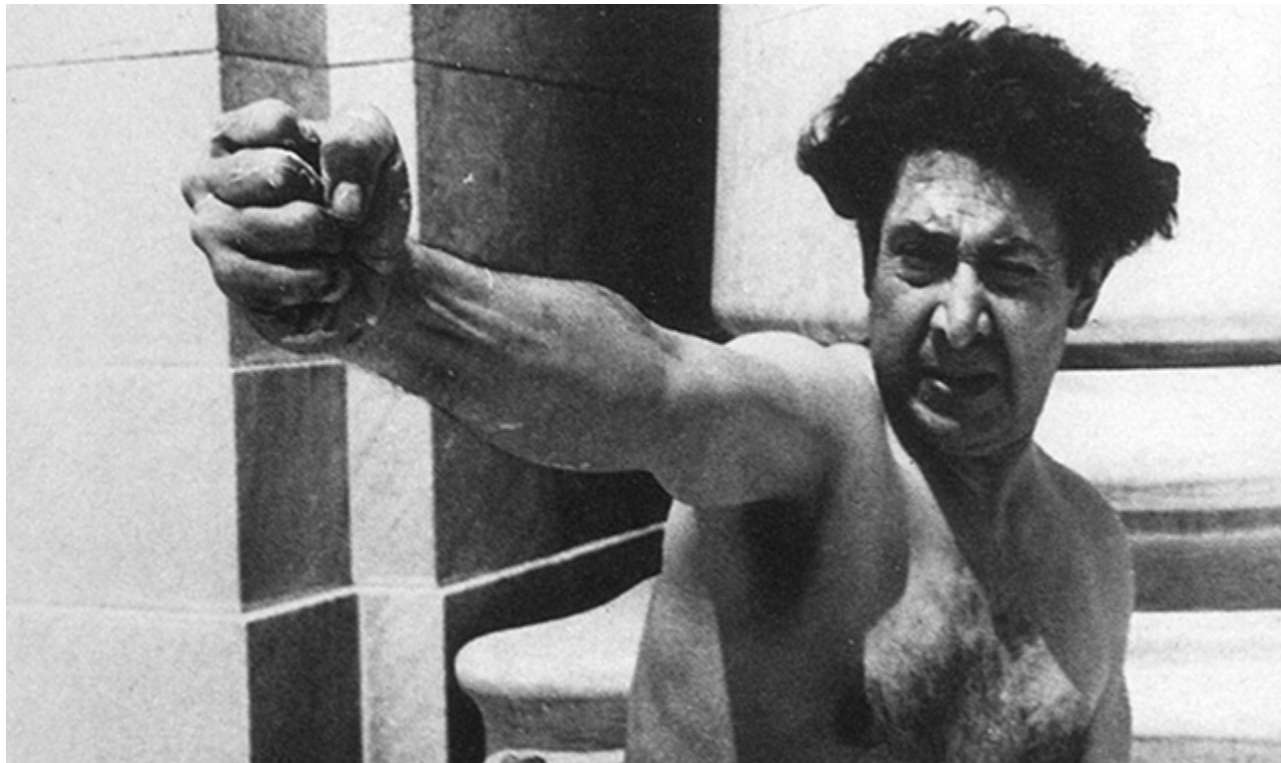


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Will the Rebirth of "América Tropical" Inspire a Mural Renaissance in L.A.?



Courtesy Arte y Galerias

David Alfaro Siqueiros posing at the Palace of Fine Arts

by Reid Singer

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“The mural gods are aligned with us,” conservationist **Isabel Rojas-Williams** said over the phone, somehow audibly smiling as she talked about the unveiling of **David Alfaro Siqueiros’s** painting “América Tropical” (1932) which took place yesterday in downtown Los Angeles.

Coinciding with the 80th anniversary of the mural, whose brash and overtly political message was literally whitewashed in the 1930s, the ceremony signals a reevaluation of mural making as the primary art form of California’s Latino heritage. **Leslie Rainer**, a senior specialist for the **Getty Conservation Institute**, connects the success of the initiative to preserve the mural to the office of **Antonio Villaraigosa** — Los Angeles’s first Mexican American mayor in over 130 years. At the [L.A. Times](#), critic **Christopher Knight** notes the two streets that now “frame” the mural with Spanish language names (**Alameda** and **Cesar E. Chavez**), writing that “better captions to civic history are hard to imagine.”

The conservation project, which involved a \$6-million

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commitment from the City and a \$3.95-million grant from the **Getty Foundation**, is 24 years in the making, and involved a litany of mechanical, environmental, and procedural hurdles. Its history, of course, goes back much further, to the years in which the young Siqueiros, exiled from Mexico for his involvement in labor activities while working for the **Department of Education** (and for his outspoken support of **Joseph Stalin**), landed in Los Angeles as a working painter and art teacher.



Siqueiros was in his early 30s when he was recruited for a neighborhood rehabilitation project led by an influential civic booster named **Christine Sterling**. Sterling had been working for years on a project to bring the Olvera Street district in line with its historical precedents (it has been the site of a small Spanish settlement in the early 18th century), and was hoping that someone like Siqueiros could create a mural that would convey the atmosphere of a quaint Mexican village for passing tourists.

A Disneyland rendition of a Oaxaqueño market would probably have done just fine. At the time, “Plaza-Olivera” was furnished with market stalls selling tacos and leather sandals. Guitar players could be seen dressed up in Mexican costume, and in Siquieros’s mural, his patrons were most likely expecting a simple landscape with tropical birds and flowers.

The painting didn’t immediately stray from this bucolic aesthetic when he began working, but the night before the opening, Siquieros told his assistants to leave so that he could finish the central, most visible tableau. There, he placed an Indian peasant on a double cross under a brooding eagle. On the wings, two revolutionaries aimed their rifles at the American national bird — an overt comment on Western imperialism and spirited Latin resistance. In the background, viewers could see a pre-Columbian Mayan pyramid set in an overgrown jungle.

City authorities close to Sterling quickly covered the center of the mural, which could be seen — not by accident — from the recently constructed City Hall. The subsequent chain of events echoed another infamous act of vandalism, the defacement of **Diego Rivera's** mural “Man at the Crossroads” (1934), which followed the revelation that the artist had reverently depicted **Vladimir Lenin** in one corner, holding hands with a huddle of workmen.

Within a year, “América Tropical” was whitewashed entirely, and remained so for decades. Yet in its way, this may have proved a blessing in disguise: Some conservationists have speculated that the whitewash may have served as a protective film until the 1970s, when it began to reemerge (rather mystically) to the visible surface.

Inspired by the work of art historian **Shifra Goldman** and the 1971 documentary film by **Jesus Treviño**, titled “América Tropical,” the mural became a focal point of arts and culture wing of the Chicano civil rights

movement. **Chon Noriega**, a curator and professor of Cinema and Media Studies at **UCLA**, says that he first heard of the mural through Treviño's film.

"The resurfacing of [the mural] from the whitewashing was really taken as an allegory of the emerging Chicano movement itself," he says, "as a social and political movement, and one that's deeply tied to cultural expression." Waves of mural-making styles have since emerged around Los Angeles on highway medians, storefronts, and warehouse walls, leading many Angelinos to proclaim their home city the "mural capital of the world."

It's hard to miss the poetic reversal of the city's authorities having gone from suppressing a work like "América Tropical" to committing millions of dollars to its rehabilitation. And yet the final status of mural-making in L.A. remains undecided. A moratorium on murals in public view has been in place for nearly a decade. In July, when a committee tried to pass an ordinance with the **Department of City Planning** to have the ban lifted, the project was mired in a web of arbitrary rules and regulations.

Rojas-Williams will have her fingers crossed as another hearing on the ordinance takes place this Thursday. If it goes well, she envisions a kind of Golden Age for the art form in her hometown, buttressed by a concurrent project to rehabilitate the murals on Highway 101 that were painted for the 1984 Olympic Games. "Murals were a way for the people who came here and the people who were born here to reflect their ideals, like open air books," she says. "Los Angeles is like an open air gallery."

To see a clip about the history of "América Tropical," (and to get a glimpse of the mural), click on the video below:

Siqueiros in L.A.

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