

# Mexican Murals in Koege, Denmark

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## Mexican Murals in Koege

by Erik Somer



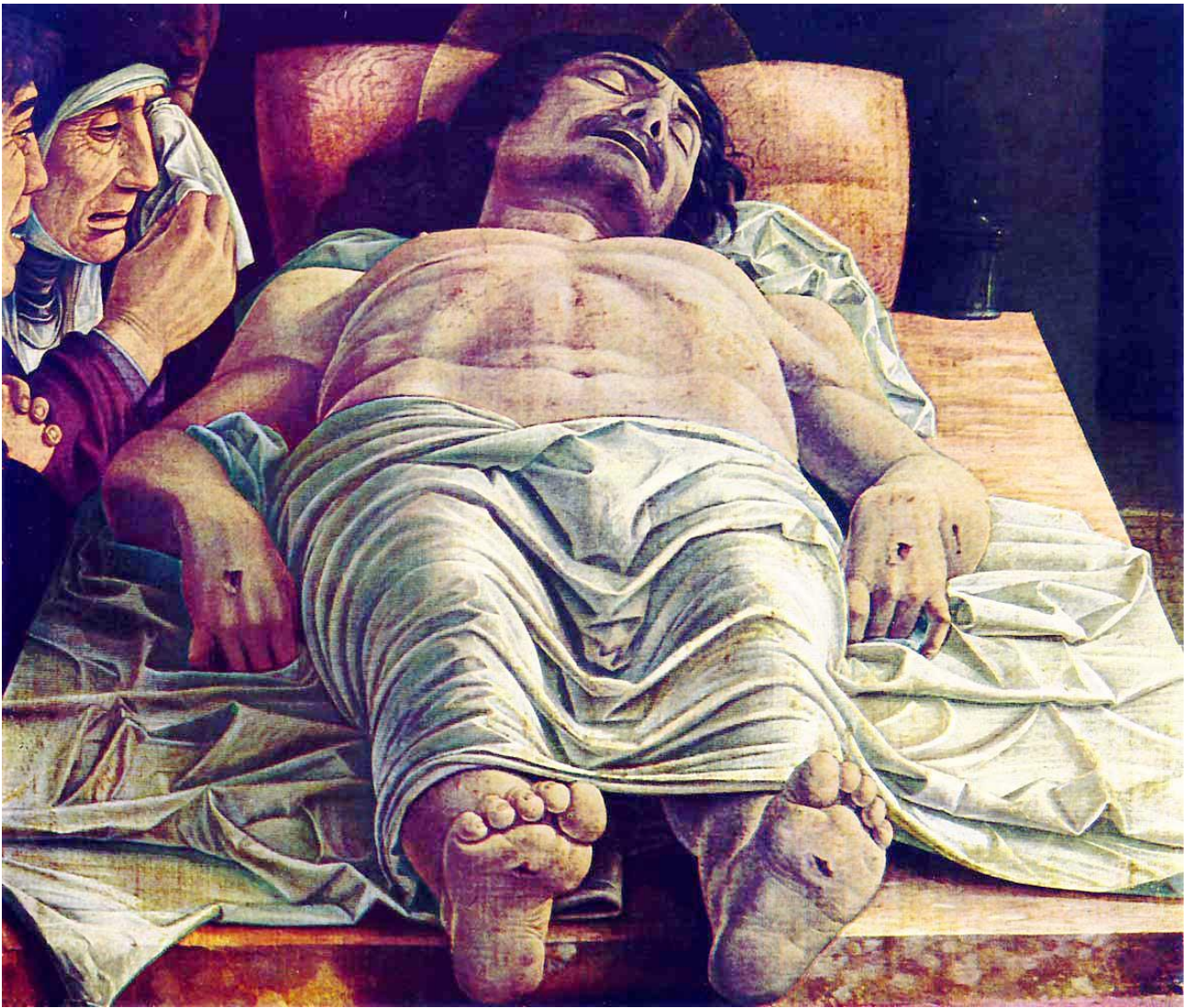
Koege, a provincial town 40 km south of Copenhagen, has a museum "The Museum of Art in Public Spaces" . At present it has a special exhibition of sketches for Mexican Murals on loan from the Museum of Sketches in Lund, Sweden. The picture shows the museum in Koege.

On June 18, 2011 I gave a short lecture and made a guided tour for members of the Danish Mexican Society. Here I will tell about some of the prominent muralists and other artists who were represented .

**Diego Rivera** (1886 - 1957).

After having studied at the San Carlos Academy of Art in Mexico City Rivera went to Europe in 1906. With a single interruption he stayed there until 1920, most of the time in Paris. There he met a Danish painter Georg Jacobsen, who greatly influenced the work of Rivera and of other prominent muralists. Georg Jacobsen was a master in the construction of a picture based on studies of Italian renaissance painters.

I will tell about two of these painters and demonstrate their influence upon the Mexican muralists. One was Andrea Mantegna. (1430 - 1506). Here are two of his pictures:



The Dead Christ (Milan Bera Gallery)





The Meeting (Castel San Giorgio, Mantua, Italy)

The Dead Christ is shown in a shortened perspective which was used by several Mexican Muralists and painters. Here I show a painting by Frida Kahlo, who learned about Mantegna from her husband Diego Rivera:





The deceased Dimas (1937, Collection of Dolores Olmeda)

Note, how both the boy and Christ have raised their head on a pillow and how they let their feet stick out to the viewer. Mantegna's *The meeting* shows a number of persons young and old together. They actually were not present at the same time. By the way, number two from the left is the Danish king Christian I. Below I show a detail from Diego Rivera's mural *A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda*.



Here one sees young and old persons from different periods of time with a tree in the background. The composition is similar to Mantegna's *Meeting*.

The second artist I will mention is Paolo Uccello (1397 - 1475).



The Battle of San Romano (Ufficy Gallery, Florence)

Note the rythmic and dominant role of the spears, which you also will find in many Mexican murals. Here is a mural by Jean Charlot, a french painter who worked together with Diego Rivera in the 1920's.



The Defeat of Tenochtitlán (National Preparatory School, Mexico City)





In Diego Riveras mural *The Sugarmill* ( *Ministry of Education, Court of Labour, Mexico City*) the laddles used by the workers play a similar rhythmic role as the spears in Uccello's picture. The picture has a strict construction a la Georg Jacobsen.

As you can see, Rivera applied what he had learned from the studies of renaissance painters together with Georg Jacobsen when returning to Mexico and told his assistants and co-workers to do the same. One may call this style of art *realistic constructivism*.



The picture above is an outspoken example. It is painted by the Russian painter Marewna, an intimate friend of Rivera during his stay in Paris. Rivera is in the upper left corner, below him is Marewna, who holds Marika, the child of Rivera and Marewna. Note the line linking these three persons. The central figure is the painter Modigliani, who holds the group together. Usually, these collecting construction lines are only seen in the sketch for a picture painted by Rivera and most of the other Mexican muralists, but in this picture they appear in the final work. These construction lines can be seen on many of the sketches in the exhibition. As seen here on this sketch by **Pablo O'Higgins (1904 -1983):**





Gunnar Bråhammar, the director of the museum in Lund, was in Mexico in 1966 in order to buy sketches for his museum. He saw this sketch when visiting O'Higgins and wrote afterwards: *When I saw this sketch I thought immediately of Georg Jacobsen. I was told that O'Higgins had been assistant for Rivera, who during his stay in Europe together with Georg Jacobsen had studied and analyzed the composition principles in a number of important works of art. These principles were the basis for O'Higgins method of working.*



Here is a detail of the final fresco. It is called *The Liberated Tenochtitlán* and is found at the University of Morelia. (Tenochtitlán was the name of Mexico City in pre-columbian times).

Orozco was born in Ciudad Guzman. A few hours on the road from there will take you to two towns with Franciscan monasteries: Tzintzuntzan and Tarecuato. These two monasteries were established a short time after the conquest by a Franciscan monk: Fray Jacobo Daciano. He believed in total equality between Indians and Spaniards. He even advocated that Indians could be ordained as priests. This idea was strictly against the ruling Franciscans. Fray Jacobo was taken to a religious court, which came to the result that Indians were stupid, unreliable and revolting. Fray Jacobo was fined but maintained his friendly attitude towards the Indians. An outstanding and early example of fight against racial discrimination. Even to-day Fray Jacobo is worshipped in the two communities where he was active. Who was Fray Jacobo? He was actually the youngest son of the Danish king Hans, born in 1483. He became deputy abbot at a Franciscan monastery in Malmoe, a town in Southern Sweden, but at that time belonging to Denmark. During the Reformation the Franciscans were expelled from Denmark. Fray Jacobo (or Brother Jacob) fled to Germany and from there to Spain. In 1542 he went to Mexico. He died in 1566.



This is a sketch for a fresco painted by Orozco called *Prometheus*.  
And here is the final mural



The fresco is situated in the male students dining room at Pomona College near Los Angeles, USA. It shows Prometheus bringing the fire to mankind. But as usual with innovations not everybody is happy. The people to the left welcome the fire, while those to the right are against it. The fresco shows the strong dynamics in Orozco's



painting, which seems to be inspired by his study of Roman and Greek sculptures during his stay in Italy around 1920. See this Roman copy of the *Laocoon group* found at the Vatican Museum in Rome.



**David Alfaro Siqueiros** /1896 - 1974).

This prominent painter also spent the years up to 1920 in France and Italy. Amongst the Italian Renaissance painters it seems to me that Mantegna made the greatest impression upon him. Particularly Mantegna's use of the shortened perspective in *The Dead Christ*. This perspective is used in a majority of Siqueiros' pictures, such as here:



In this self-portrait it seems that his hand moves out of the picture and grabs you.

In the sketch below shown at the exhibition it seems that the man flies out of the picture towards you.



A motive which exists in several versions is shown here as a collage sketch.



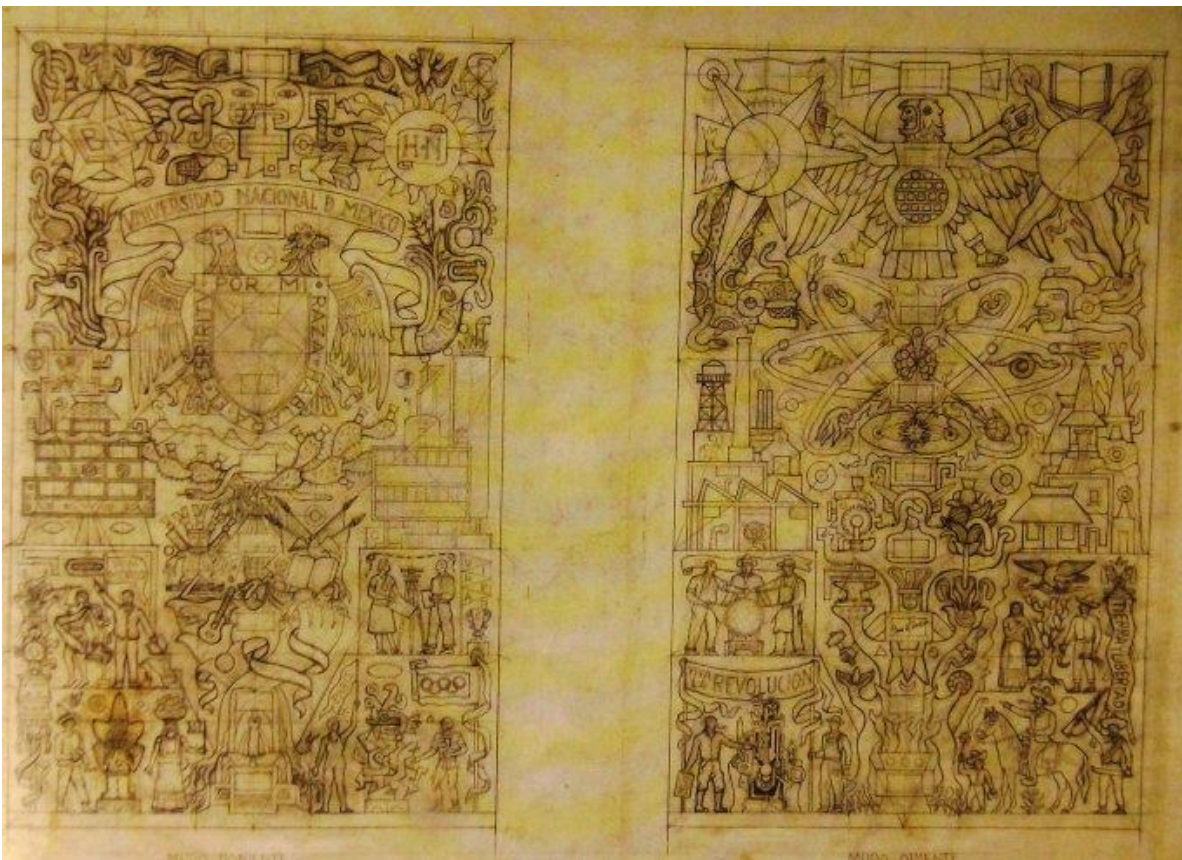
Here you see this motive used in the Siqueiros Polyforum in Mexico City - a multifunctional cultural facility designed and decorated by Siqueiros. The picture was taken during an evening concert.

**Juan O'Gorman** (1905 - 1982) was both architect and painter. His most outstanding work was the library building at UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México).





The mosaic mural on this side of the library shows the two ideas about the solar system - the old Ptolomean with the earth in the center to the left and the new - Copernican - with the sun in the center to the right.



These sketches of the two side panels show to the left the coat of arms of the UNAM. To the right the present time is symbolized by the atom with the atomic nucleus and the surrounding electrons in their courses. The fourth side, which is not shown here, represents the pre-columbian period.

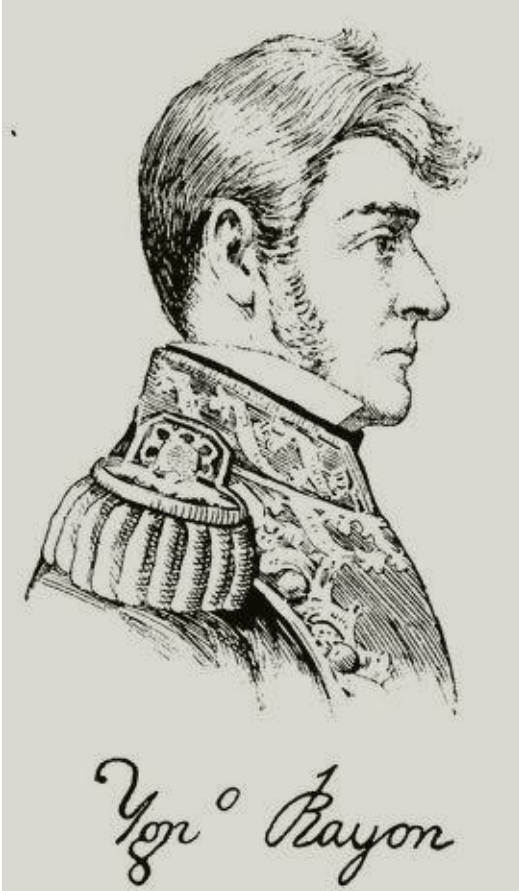
Another of O'Gorman's important works is the large mural in the Museum of History in Chapultepec castle in Mexico City. It deals mainly with Mexico's fight for independence. A detail of this mural seen below shows to the left Father Miguel Hidalgo, whose exclamation from the church of Dolores on September 16, 1810 starts the revolt leading to Mexico's independence. After the arrest and execution of Hidalgo the revolt continued with Father José María Morelos



and the lawyer Ignacio López Rayon as leaders. Morelos is seen to the right with a sword in his hand and Reyon in a generals unifom in the center.



In this mural O’Gorman shows well known persons as they looked alive. He must have used contemporary portraits as his model. Let us look at the portrait of Rayon. Here is a contemporary drawing:



In the sketch of the central part of the mural at the Museum in Koege the face of well known persons is only shown with a feeble line. Here is a detail of the sketch with Rayon in the center:





O'Gorman made detailed sketches of the face of well known persons to be used as model in the final mural.. Here the sketch of Rayon:



It is evident that O'Gorman's mural shows Rayon as he must have looked in reality.

**Raúl Anguiano (1915 - 2006).**

If you have been in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City you will probably have seen Anguiano's mural *The Creation of Mankind in the Maya World*. Here is a detail of this mural made in 1964:



It tells how man was created according to the Maya holy script, the Popol Vuh. While the *Heart of Heaven* and the *Lord of Dead* are onlookers, a series of twin brothers attempt to create man. The first pair makes man from mud, but rain dissolves the creature. The next pair makes him from wood, but he burns in fire, then a set of twins make man from gold, but he is cold and hard. Only when twins make man from Maize they are successful. In the picture you see a maize plant next to the still sleeping man.

Here is a sketch for this mural:



Even if Anguiano belongs to a younger generation than Rivera he still uses the same construction method.

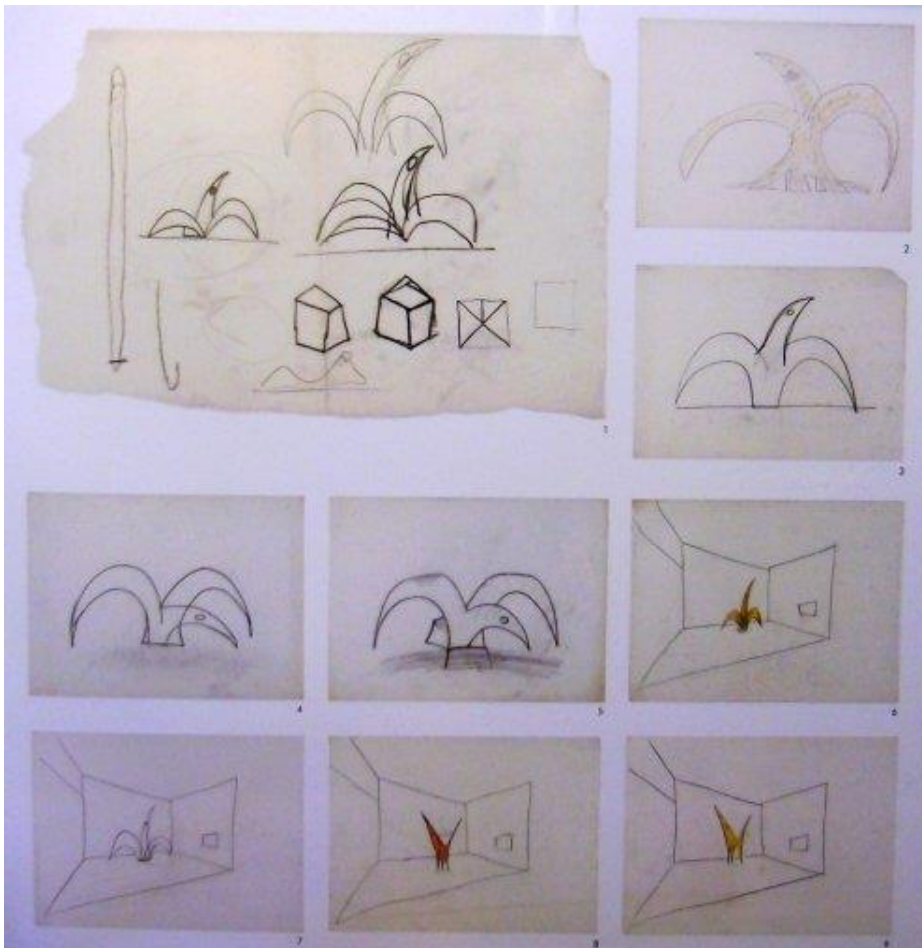
**Mathias Goeritz** (1915 - 1990).

He was born in Danzig, studied art in Berlin, left Germany during World War II and came to Mexico in 1948, where he became professor of Architecture in Guadalajara. He is known for his over size abstract sculptures. In Guadalajara he made a sculpture called *The Yellow Bird* in 1957. Here it is photographed late night. It is situated in a park close to a main road.





For Goeritz there was a long way from idea to final sculpture. This is seen from the many sketches he made. Here are some of them:



### **Carlos Mérida (1891 - 1984)**

Mérida was Guatemalan, assistant to Rivera, went in 1927 to Paris and became influenced by abstract art.

His murals are mainly in a geometric and abstract style, such as this mosaic mural at the Town Hall of Guatemala City.



Here is a sketch for this mural.



### **Rafael Cauduro (1950 - )**

Cauduro is a prove that the art of producing murals is still alive in Mexico. In 2009 he finished murals in the Supreme Court in Mexico City called *the Seven Major Crimes*. These murals are found in the stair case of the building covering three storeys. The crimes are: Torture, murder, kidnapping, rape, imprisonment, oppression, neglected cases. I have no pictures from the finished murals, because they were not yet accessible at my latest visit in Mexico City in 2009, but here is a sketch, shown in the museum:





In several of the scenes you look down from above into a room where the crime is being committed.

Cauduro is active as industrial designer and as architect. I know him as producer of so called *negative glass reliefs*, mainly called *tzompantlies*. In pre-columbian times a tzompantli was an altar made from skulls. Here is one of Cauduros tzompantlis



They are produced by a very complicated procedure. In a fireproof box casts of skulls are placed. The skulls are painted with glass colours. The box is filled with glass powder and then heated in an oven to a temperature where the glass melts. After cooling the box is inverted, the skull casts removed and a negative relief remains. It is taken out of the box and should be viewed from the opposite site. Cauduro has produced many of these glass reliefs. They seem to be popular as room decorations. A typical Mexican worshipping of death.

**This is the end of my story.**