

Art and Artists at UNAM.

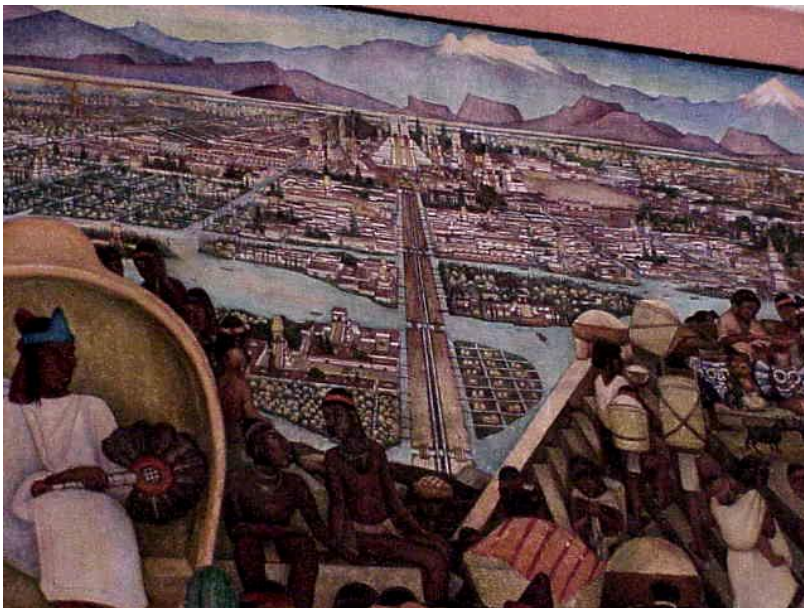
A picture show by Erik Somer based on lectures given at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Copenhagen in 2002.



UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico) is America's oldest university. It has recently held its 450 years anniversary being established only 30 years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. It has about 250000 students and a staff of 100000.

This picture show will tell about the wonderful decorations of UNAMs facilities and about the artists who created them. It will also show pictures from other institutions of higher education in Mexico City.

This picture shows UNAM's landmark: the library tower covered by mosaic on all sides. More about it later on.



This picture shows one of Diego Rivera's frescos in the National Palace in Mexico City. It is a southward view over Tenochtitlan, as Mexico City was called before the conquest.

It is shown here to indicate where UNAM's facilities are situated. We are on the central Mexican plateau about 2000 m above sea level. In the background the 5000m high volcanoes Itza and Popocatepetl. The centre of the town with its big temple is situated on an island in a large lake which today is nearly dried up. It is also the centre of the town today with government buildings, the cathedral and UNAM's oldest buildings.

UNAM's new campus of about 6

sq.km is situated in lava fields – the *pedregal* – resulting from activities of the lower, now extinguished volcanoes in the background. The distance to the town centre is about 20 km. The agricultural faculty in Chapingo with many of Diego Rivera's frescos is situated close to the remains of the large lake off the left of the picture about 40 km from the city centre..



In Mexico there is a long tradition for the decoration of structures with murals. The picture shows the inside of a Maya temple at Bonampak in Chiapas province. It dates from 790 A.D. At the bottom there is a procession of priests and noblemen playing different musical instruments. At the top noblemen in discussion. The mural is made *al fresco*, a technique where the paint is applied to still wet lime plaster. The picture shows a copy of the mural in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.



Here are two of the persons instrumental in reviving the use of murals from about 1920. To the left José Vasconcelos, at that time Minister of Education and one of Mexico's most important cultural personalities. After the Mexican revolution between 1910 and 1920, which left the country in chaotic conditions, he wanted to establish a national ideology based on what he called the cosmic race – the *mestizo* – the mixture of Indian and Spaniard. He wanted the Mexican to become aware of his national identity and among other means he thought that this could be done by large illustrative paintings on public buildings. For this purpose he gave scholarships to young artists for studies abroad and he also took groups of artists around the country to get them inspired by folk art.

One of those artists was Diego Rivera, to the right in the picture. He was born in 1886, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Mexico City and went to Europe in 1907 supported by a scholarship given by the old regime. He spent World War two in Paris influenced by shifting co-artists – such as

Picasso and Cezanne. Around 1920 Vasconcelos gave him and other painters a scholarship to study mural art of the Renaissance in Italy. After returning to Mexico Vasconcelos appointed him to become the leading artist for his mural programme.

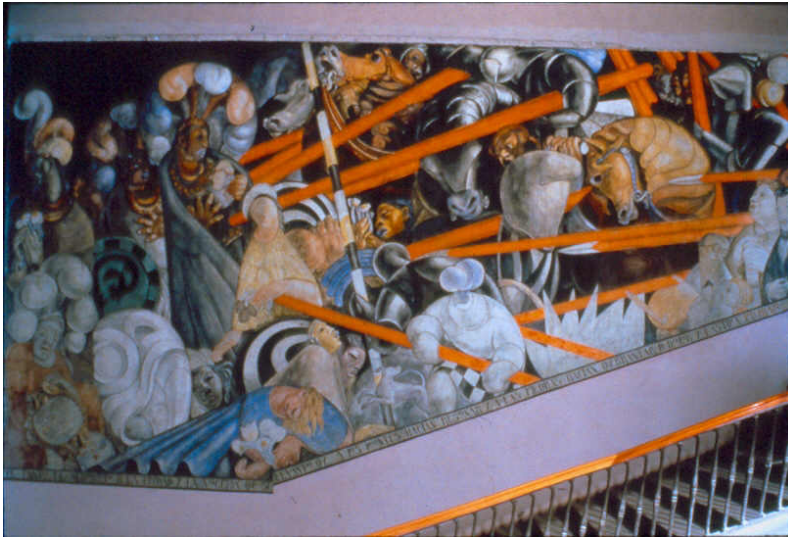
This picture shows a house in Arcueil, a southern suburb of Paris, painted by Rivera. Here lived the Danish sculptor Adam Fischer who became Rivera's closest friend during his last years in Paris.

Here he also met another Danish artist, the painter Georg Jacobsen. He had strong ideas about the construction of a picture and had great influence upon Rivera. Rivera expected to become Director of the Academy of Fine Arts after his return to Mexico and offered Jacobsen to become professor of construction. However, Rivera's directorship was short lived and Jacobsen never came to Mexico, but his influence upon Rivera and other of the painters active in mural painting remained.





Here we see 3 of the most important Mexican muralists. From the left David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and to the right Diego Rivera. They were very different in their art and in their ideas. Octavio Paz, the great Mexican poet and essayist and Nobel prize winner, has described them thus: Siqueiros was stalinist, Orozco anarchist and Rivera opportunist.. They have not always been so good friends as on this picture. Actually, Rivera and Siqueiros once had attempted to shoot each other. Besides these three there were many other extremely good muralists.



One of these was Jean Charlot. Since his childhood in France he was strongly occupied with pre-Columbian Mexican culture. He studied art and after his time as soldier in WW II he went to Mexico and was employed by Rivera as member of the team working on the tasks given them by Vasconcelos. Rivera was a hard master but his co-workers got a careful schooling in construction principles based on Georg Jacobsen's ideas. This is shown in the present picture, called "The Conquest of Tenochtitlan". It is situated at the National Preparatory School in the center of the town, now part of UNAM. It was the first of many frescos at this Site.



It is also influenced by Rivera's experience of Italian Renaissance painting, in particular by Paolo Uccello's "The Battle at San Romano" in Firenze, which you can see here. (A copy of this picture by the Danish painter William Scharff is at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen).



Tired of working together with Rivera Charlot went on an American archaeological expedition to Yucatan. He made drawings of the reliefs and murals at Chichen-Itza. In 1928 Charlot arranged an exhibition of the Mexican graphic artist José Posada, who at the turn of the 20th century produced thousands of satirical and grotesque drawings, often with skeletons and skulls. His favourite figure was Calavera Catrina, seen here. Rivera saw this exhibition and suddenly claimed that he had been inspired by Posada since his childhood. However, there is no sign of this claimed inspiration in any of his earlier works of art.



A short time after Charlot's exhibition Rivera painted his famous picture: "A Dream about a Sunday Afternoon at the Alameda-park". We find Calavera Catarina in the center of the picture, holding Rivera as a child and Posada by her hands. Rivera was an enormous mythomaniac. Behind Rivera stands Frida Kahlo, Riveras 3rd wife.



The next picture getting ready at the National Preparatory School was painted by Fernando Leal. It is called "The Dancers in Chalma". Chalma is a place of pilgrimage about 100 km from Mexico City. In a mountain cave Indians were worshipping their gods with human sacrifices. Around 1600 Franciscan monks tried to convert the Indians to Christianity. The monks preached against the sacrifices. When they a few days later went into the cave, there were no remains of the sacrifices. Instead they found a statue of Christ. This miracle is celebrated annually in June with joy and dances. The picture shows the original Indian culture to the right and the conversion to Catholicism to the left. Also Fernando Leal got soon into opposition to Rivera and quitted further cooperation with him.



Rivera's first work as a muralist is also found at the National Preparatory School. It is an allegoric picture called "The Creation". It is inspired by Rivera's studies of Giotto, Gorgione and other early Italian fresco painters. However, it is not painted in *al fresco* technique (in wet lime plaster). At this time Rivera did not know how to paint *al fresco*. The work is made as encaustics, i.e. a technique where the pigments are stirred with hot wax, a lengthy procedure already known in old Egypt. At the top one sees Aton the Egyptian symbol of the creative sun. Below - the creator surrounded by animals in paradise. In the foreground to the left Eva, to the right Adam, looking up to the Muses. All figures were painted after living models. Eva e.g. was Guadalupe Marin, his wife at the time. The picture is influenced by Vasconcelos' idea of the cosmic race, as several of the figures are mestizos.



Also Siqueiros' first picture at the National Preparatory School is symbolic and allegoric. It is called: The Four Elements. Here we see a detail of the picture – the air shown as the angel of wind. The perspective with the figure dramatically flying towards the spectator is typical for Siqueiros.

Also Orozco's first work at the National Preparatory School is symbolic. It is called "Motherhood" and is inspired by Giovanni Bellini.



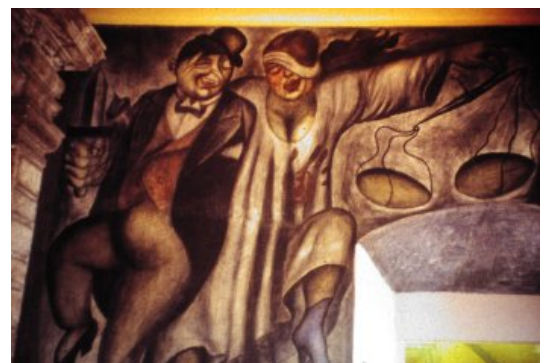
The paintings by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco shown so far were all classic, symbolic and absolutely non-political. But now something decisive happens.



On Siqueiros' initiative a trade union for painters and sculptors is established. Here we see Rivera and Frida Kahlo at a parade of this trade union.

In the course of 1923 and 24 the trade union with Siqueiros as the driving force becomes more and more communistic. And this influences their pictures.

We are still at the National Preparatory School. Here we see Orozco's picture "Justitia" (1924). In a number of frescos he and the others mock the wealthy, the church and justice.



In the course of 1926 Orozco gets milder. This picture shows the conquistador Cortés and his Indian wife Malinche. Cortés tramples upon an Indian. He holds back Malinche, who closes her eyes. We are still at the National Preparatory School.



Orozco's ability to establish a dramatic construction of a picture is demonstrated by this picture at the National Preparatory School.. It is called "The Trench" and describes the sufferings during the battles of the Mexican Revolution.



We are now moving from the National Preparatory School to the Ministry of Education, where Vasconcelos ruled. The ministry is generally called SEP (for Secretaría de Educación Pública). Just as the National Preparatory School it is situated in a former convent in the heart of the capital. There are two courtyards.

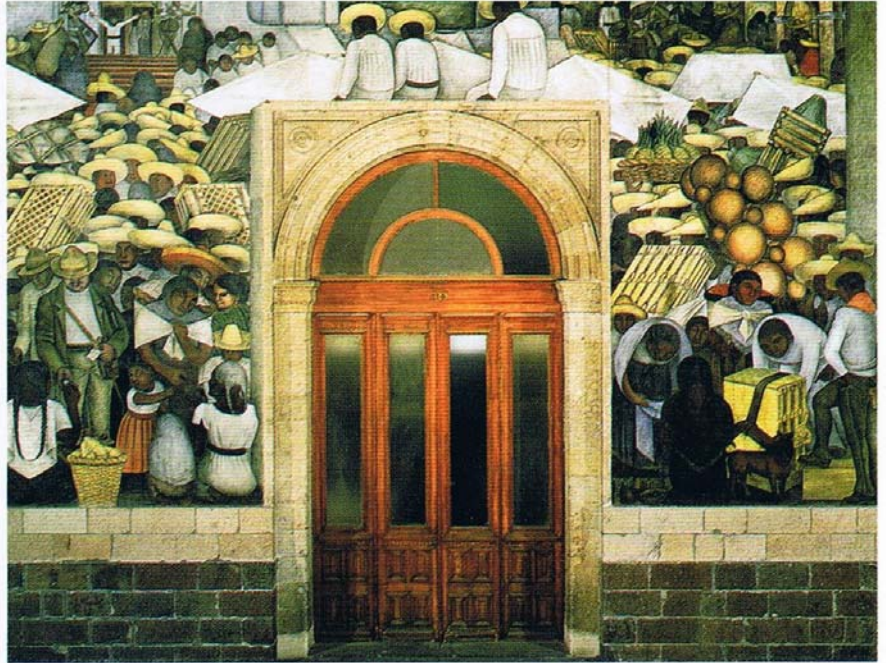
This picture shows one of these courts, called the Court of Labour. The inner walls of the arcades on all floors are covered by murals, often related to work activities.

Here is an example of the pictures from this court. It is as most of the others by Diego Rivera and is called “The Sugar Plant”. It shows to a high degree Rivera’s and Georg Jacobsen’s construction principles which are related to those applied by many renaissance painters, such as Paolo Uccello. Rivera in his pictures in this group applies rather pale and brownish colours reminding of colours on pre-Columbian frescos and in the few existing Indian manuscripts. While Rivera’s first mural “The Creation” was made in encaustics, Rivera now has learned to apply the *al fresco* technique. It was one of his assistants Xavier Guerrero who aided by his father redeveloped the technique used by pre-Columbian Painters. (There is more about Guerrero in my lecture on Tina Modotti).

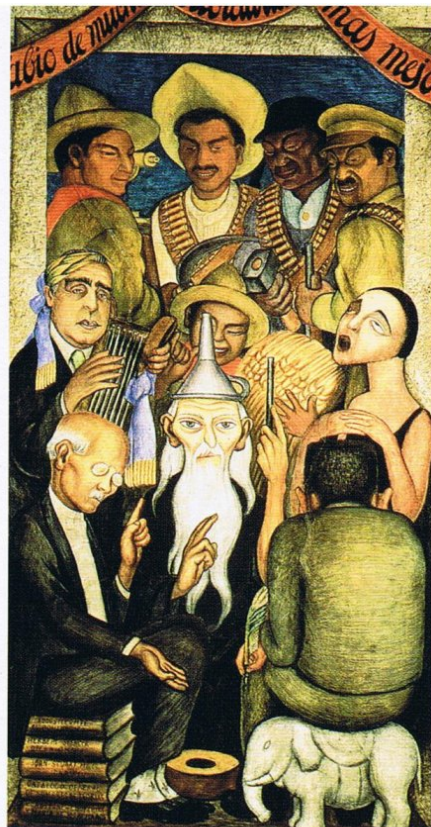




This picture from the same court at SEP shows a miner, who is being searched in order to check if he illegally has taken some silver with him from the mine. Rivera in this and some other frescos uses Christian symbols in a different context in order to arouse feelings. Here crucifixion.



Rivera's fresco to the right is found in the second court of SEP, called the Court of Fiestas. It shows a market scene. If you look at the hats on the left side you will note that Rivera was inspired for this picture by one of Tina Modotti's photos shown here.

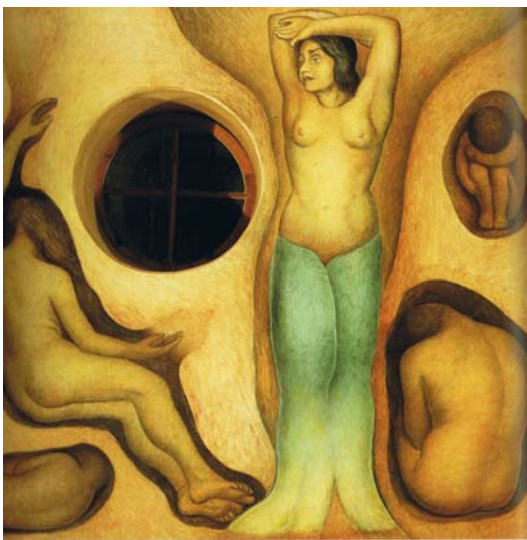


This picture also from the Court of Fiestas is called "The Learned". It mocks the conservative "experts" who want to maintain society as it is versus revolutionary people. The man in the foreground sitting on an elephant is José Vasconcelos, Rivera's benefactor. Vasconcelos who gave the painters free hands became disappointed about their single-minded communist views. For this Rivera wants to punish him. Octavio Paz has described his feelings about this picture with a Mexican proverb: *Cria cuervos y te sacarán los ojos*. Feed crows and they will peck out your eyes.



The campus of the Agricultural University is situated in a former hacienda at Chapingo, about 40 km from the City centre. Here we see the main building. It contains a number of Rivera's best frescos, particularly in the chapel to the right.

This picture is at the end wall of the chapel. Rivera calls it "Technical Man and the Elements". The model for the dominating figure - a kind of mothergoddess - is Guadalupe Marin, Rivera's wife at that time. She is unmistakably pregnant. Her second child with Rivera is expected.



This picture is also from the chapel. It is called germination. A seed's development is symbolized by a child's development into woman. The model for this picture was Tina Modotti. When Guadalupe saw this picture she realized that Diego had an affair with Tina, as he always had with his nude models. She wrote a furious letter to Tina who immediately stopped her relation with Rivera. Guadalupe got a divorce and soon after Rivera marries Frida Kahlo.

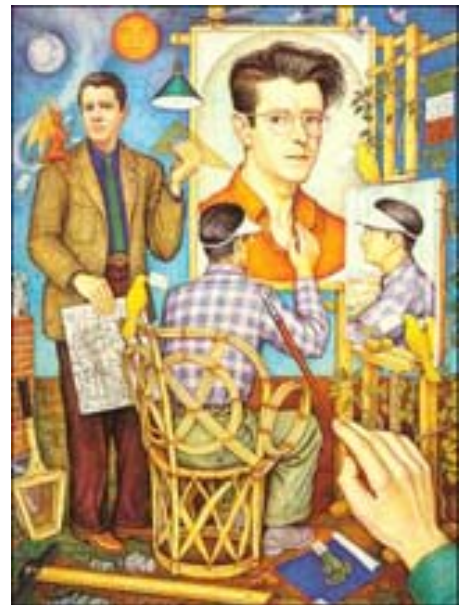


We now take a long leap forward in time and move to UNAM's newer campus south of the City centre.

It is dominated by the marvellous library building which we already have seen. The architect and also creator of the mosaics which cover the four walls was Juan O'Gorman.

Here we see one of the side walls. At the centre UNAM's coat-of-arms. The front wall shown on page 1 shows the old and the new views on the planetary system. To the left Aristoteles' idea with the Earth as centre and sun and planets circling around it, to the right Copernikus' view with the sun as centre.

Here we see O'Gorman's self-portrait with 4 different versions of himself. He was born in 1905 by an Irish father who had emigrated to Mexico and a Mexican mother. He was schooled both as an architect and as a painter.



This is Diego Rivera's house and studio in San Angel in the southern part of the town. Here he lived together with Frida Kahlo. O'Gorman was the architect. Both UNAM's library and this building show Corbusier's influence upon O'Gorman's architecture. Note that the house is in two parts. To the left Rivera's house and to the right Frida Kahlo's. Only a bridge on the top floor connects the two parts. This should make it easier

for the two and in particular for Rivera to exercise their independent sex lives.

O’Gorman’s own house in the *pedregal* – the lava field south of the town.- was built in a completely different style. It was inspired by the mausoleum, which the French postman Ferdiand Cheval built for himself in the village of Hautrives in France out of cement, shells and pebbles. O’Gorman died by suicide in this house.



UNAM’s rectorate has plastic reliefs on all sides executed by Siqueiros.. They have the common title “The People for the University – The University for the People”. The dynamic style is typical for Siqueiros.

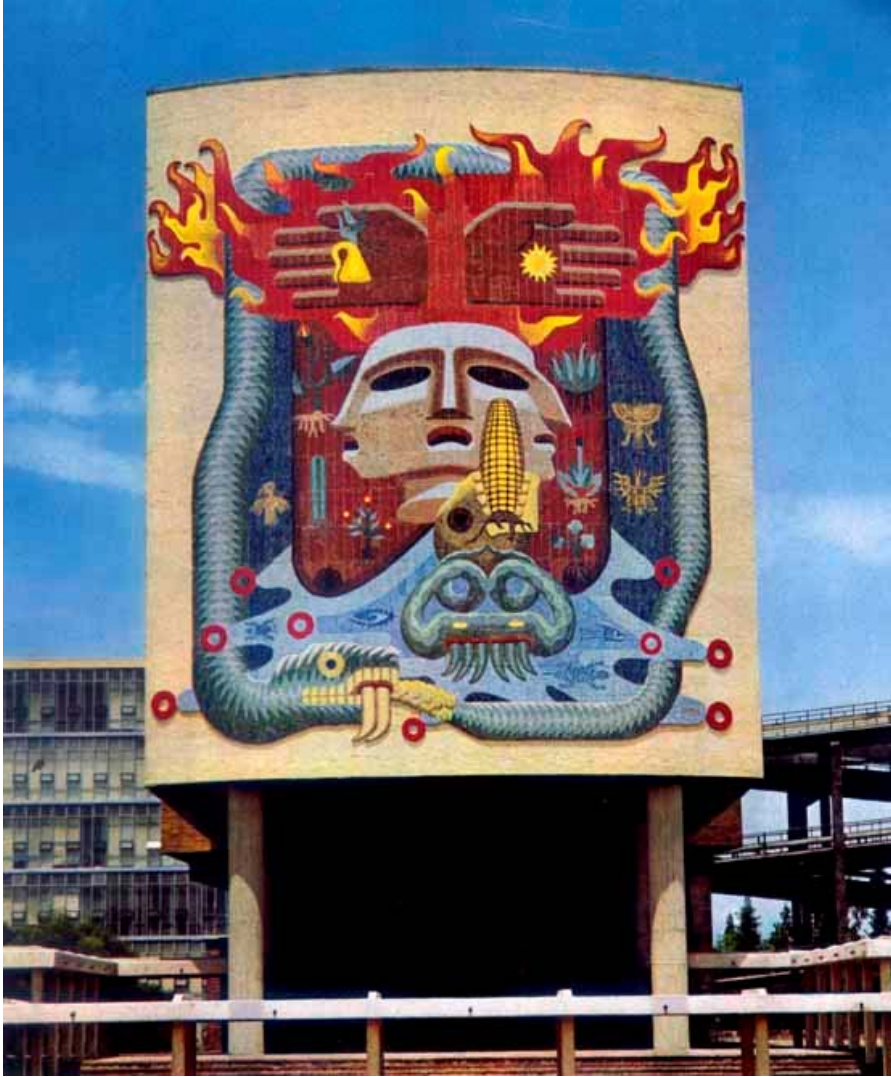
Let us use this opportunity to tell a little more about him. As mentioned earlier he was a devoted communist all his life. Rivera on the other side was expelled from the party late in the 20’s, amongst other reasons because he made frescos for wealthy Americans. Rivera then became Trotskyist. This led to hostility between the two. Trotsky who had to fly from country to country because Stalin tried to kill him found refuge in Mexico in 1936 thanks to Rivera. He lived in Rivera’s house with his wife and his closest assistants.



Here we see Trotsky and Rivera together with André Breton, the theorist of surrealism, who came to Mexico to give some lectures. This induced Rivera to paint in a surrealist manner for a period. Living in Rivera’s house led to a sexual relationship between Trotsky and Frida Kahlo. In jealousy Rivera threw Trotsky out of his house. Trotsky moved into a house in the neighbourhood and converted it into a fortress as protection against Stalinist attacks. Rivera again became Stalinist.

Here we see a wall decoration by Siqueiros unsigned by him. As Stalinist Siqueiros hated Trotsky. He gathered 30 fellows and this gang attacked Trotsky’s house with machine guns. One of Trotsky’s secretaries was killed, but Trotsky was not hurt. To-day one can still see the shot holes after this attack in Trotsky’s house. Only shortly after Trotsky was slaughtered by a Stalinist agent. Siqueiros was imprisoned and had to go in exile after a year. He went to Chile where he executed some of his best work. In 1943 he returned to Mexico. His work at UNAM was carried out between 1952 and 56. Later on Siqueiros was again sent to jail for 4 years. He died in 1973 active to his last.





This glass mosaic is on the facade of the main building of the medical faculty. It is executed by Francisco Eppens on the basis of drafts which today can be seen in the Museum for Sketches in Lund, Sweden. It is an allegory of Mexican Man and the four elements. The Mexican is shown in the centre with 3 faces: The Indian, the Spaniard and the Mestizo. Below the element Water with the rain god Tlaloc. A Mexican will recognize this symbol. Here we have a pre-Columbian head of Tlaloc.



A Mexican will also recognize the hands pointing outward as a symbol of the mother goddess Coatlicue reigning over soil and over life and death. A sculpture of her is to the left. To the right in the hand a pollen grain, to the left a germinating maize seed. The brown areas around the Mexican are Coatlicue's breasts which also can be recognized on the sculpture below the skull. The bluish parts with birds on the two sides symbolize the air and the flames at the top fire. The whole is surrounded by a snake biting its tail. This is meant as a symbol of eternity.

This picture shows the facade of the science faculty. It is painted by José Chávez Morado and symbolizes Man's conquest of energy. Chávez Morado was autodidact, He was born in 1909. As a young man he went to California as fruit picker, later he became a fisherman going after salmon in Alaska. Then he went back to Mexico and started to paint.



Also this picture by Chávez Morado is found at the science faculty. It presents Quetzalcoatl's return. Quetzalcoatl - meaning the feathered snake - was one of the pre-Columbian main gods. As the white god he returns on a ship over the sea. It was in this shape the Aztecs believed to see Cortés, when he came for the conquest of Mexico. In this picture we see Quetzalcoatl in his original shape as a snake. He flies over the sea and on his back he carries the

different world religions. Morado believes that they will become united in Mexico in accordance with Vasconcelos' idea of the cosmic race.

There can be found much more wonderful art at UNAM and much more could be said about the artists but here ends my picture show. Thank you for your attention.