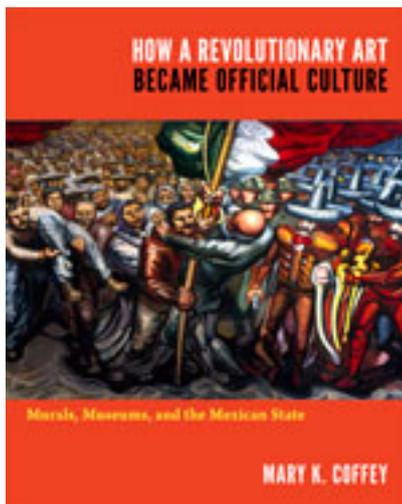


## ***How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* by Mary Coffey**

Christopher Fraga | NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Coffey, Mary K. *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012. xiv+234 pages.



In this, her first book, Mary K. Coffey weaves a vivid account of the political and professional campaigns through which mural art was incorporated into three of Mexico City's premiere public museums. Supplementing art history's traditional object analysis with a sociological focus on the material conditions within which mural art was made available for public appreciation, Coffey charts a methodological course designed to avoid the theoretical pitfalls that characterize earlier studies of Mexican muralism. Rather than assume that the meanings of federally commissioned murals are ideologically overdetermined by the circumstances of their production, she prefers to conceive of both murals and public museums as "discursive sites that produce truth effects" (20). Drawing on the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault, Toby Miller, and Tony Bennett, Coffey contends that "through the institutional apparatus of the museum, mural art became a technique of didactic museology and, as such, a technique of exercising power" (20).

Coffey substantiates this argument with an elegant comparative framework: each of her three main chapters treats the formative years of a single Mexico City museum – the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the Museo Nacional de Historia, and the Museo Nacional de Antropología, respectively – which doubles as a spectacular coliseum wherein artists, curators, and state functionaries struggled to advance their individual agendas, competing for institutional resources and public attention. Taken together, the museological strategies developed in each of her three primary sites serve as indices of their presidential patrons' cultural policies. By ordering these strategies sequentially, Coffey is able to elaborate a coherent historical narrative

of "how a revolutionary art became official culture."

The initial impetus for her narrative comes from painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, who responded to the re-creation of Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* (1934) at the Palacio de Bellas Artes by issuing a polemical call for a second phase of mural art. After a dramatic public dispute between the two artists, both came to agree that "muralism's mandate was to reconcile the aesthetic with the political avant-garde for the socialist liberation of Mexico's peasants and workers" (41). Siqueiros maintained that such a reconciliation could be effected through the use of innovative techniques and materials, collective modes of mural production, and a kinetic form of polyangular composition, and in 1944, a Palace commission of his own afforded him the opportunity to showcase his artistic strategies before a national audience. Coffey reads the resultant mural cycle critically, demonstrating that Siqueiros's triptych "confirms and reconsolidates heteronormative gender relations" (49) no less than did Rivera's or José Clemente Orozco's mural cycles at Bellas Artes. So, although it "succeeded as a demonstration of innovations in medium, form, and technique," his first Palace mural failed "as a radical work of revolutionary art" (49).

Subsequent commissions at Bellas Artes would conclusively disabuse mural art of its revolutionary pretensions. Dissatisfied with the exclusions and contradictions that had come to characterize the established 'Mexican School' of painting, a younger cohort of artists, curators, and critics set about re-casting muralism in purely aesthetic terms, re-framing it as Mexico's unique contribution to the international landscape of modernist art. In this regard, Rufino Tamayo's "mytho-poetic" treatment of national subject matter offered a particularly powerful alternative to the didactic allegories of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. Supported by the critical discourse of Octavio Paz and the patronage of Bellas Artes director Fernando Gamboa, Tamayo's success "authorized the depoliticization of Mexican art necessary for an official culture" (72). In Coffey's account, the last mural to be commissioned at Bellas Artes was also the final nail in muralism's revolutionary coffin: lacking a critical impulse such as those that had animated earlier Palace murals by Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and Tamayo, Jorge González Camarena's *Humanity Freeing Itself* (1963) subscribed wholesale to a depoliticized vision of Mexican modernism. At the "national mausoleum" of Bellas Artes, murals had effectively become fine art.

It was at the Museo Nacional de Historia, inaugurated in 1944, that murals came closest to operating as technologies of truth. Shortly after opening to the public, the Museum was the focus of a public debate between liberal and conservative interpretations of national history (90ff.): was the Revolution a decisive rupture from the colonial past, or was it merely the latest in a longer genealogy of heroic military conflicts? Beginning in 1948, artists Juan O'Gorman, Jorge González Camarena, and Arnold Belkin were commissioned to illustrate the liberal narrative of national history by producing allegorical murals that contextualized the objects on display in the museum, from Mexica battle dress to the standards borne in the war of

independence. The task of depicting the Revolution fell to David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose historical allegory of social antagonism ran counter to the patriotic ideology of perpetual revolution. Siqueiros hoped that his mural would awaken spectators' consciousness of their political agency and thereby incite them to radical action. His ambitions were thwarted, however, by the Museum's curatorial staff, who did not share his convictions. "Ultimately," Coffey concludes, the murals at the History Museum "would be neither techniques of empirical truth nor radical inducements to action" (126), but rather didactic ornaments of official historical discourse.

In her final chapter, Coffey considers the political and aesthetic consequences of divorcing mural art entirely from the kind of institutional critique that Siqueiros believed it could instantiate. At the Museo Nacional de Antropología, the didactic museology of the History Museum had been abandoned in favor of a strategy of exhibition that presented modern murals "as emblems of Mexico's mestizo modernity and thus contemporary counterparts to the impressive artistic legacy of the nation's ethnographic cultures of origin" (23). After reviewing the historical and political context of the Museum's construction, Coffey surveys the murals that were commissioned to accompany its exhibitions of archaeological treasures and contemporary material culture. Through close readings of murals by Rufino Tamayo, Rafael Coronel, Mathias Goeritz, Adolfo Mexiac, and Leonora Carrington, Coffey illuminates and problematizes Octavio Paz's critique of official culture. She argues forcefully that Paz's advocacy of a modernization powered by myth rather than political reason is no more resistant to institutional assimilation than was the social realism of the first generation of mural artists.

Coffey concludes her book by tracing a genealogical connection between Siqueiros's (failed) revolutionary project and the emergence of a "critical museology" among the generation of curators and museum practitioners whose political consciousness was formed in the wake of 1968. Applauding the sociological reception studies of Rita Eder and Néstor García Canclini, the reflexive museographical strategies developed at the Museo Nacional de Arte, and the formation of Curare, an independent group of artists and intellectuals committed to demystifying institutionalized uses of art in Mexico, Coffey acknowledges the ways in which mural art has been "re-instrumentalized within the museum toward more egalitarian modes of popular citizenship" (192). Affirming that the meanings of mural art are inherently unstable, even for murals housed in the putatively overdetermining venues of the State, Coffey implies that official culture might be made revolutionary once more.

With her conclusion, Coffey attributes an unprecedented critical agency to the curators and museographers who rose to prominence in the final decades of the twentieth century. This is in sharp contrast to their predecessors at Bellas Artes, the History Museum, and the Anthropology Museum, whom Coffey figures as "state actors" (76) – a category she leaves uninterrogated. Given the meticulous detail in which Coffey reconstructs the ideological positions of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Tamayo, it is striking that she would devote so little of her text to considering the professional ambitions, political commitments, and technocratic agendas of such cultural

# EMISFÉRICA

---

administrators as Carlos Chávez, Fernando Gamboa, José de Jesús Núñez y Domínguez, Silvio Zavala, Antonio Arriaga, and Pedro Ramírez Vázquez; i.e., the very men whom she would hold responsible for transforming murals into official culture. Including more of their voices in her account would have lent valuable weight to Coffey's argument for regarding murals as technologies of exercising power. This omission aside, Coffey elaborates a compelling analysis of the historical relationships between murals, museums, and the Mexican State. Cogently written and lavishly illustrated, Coffey's book is a provocative interdisciplinary addition to the existing canon of art historical scholarship on Mexican muralism.

---

**Christopher Michael Fraga** is an anthropologist, writer and translator. His research focuses on the social and political valences of contemporary art in Mexico.