

IN AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE A BUILDING EXPRESSIVE OF THE
 “COSMIC RACE,” JOSÉ VASCONCELOS INAUGURATES IN MEXICO
 CITY THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE SECRETARÍA DE EDUCACIÓN
 PÚBLICA AND FORMALIZES THE MURALIST PROJECT

MEXICO

I tried, some years ago, when they were not yet well defined, to [give shape to the ideas of the cosmic race] in the new Palace of Public Education in Mexico. Lacking sufficient elements to do exactly what I wished, I had to be satisfied with a Spanish renaissance building, with two courtyards, archways, and passages that give somewhat the impression of a bird's wing. On the panels at the four corners of the first patio, I had them carve allegories representing Spain, Mexico, Greece, and India, the four particular civilizations that have most to contribute to the formation of Latin America. Immediately below these four allegories, four stone statues should have been raised, representing the four great contemporary races: The white, the red, the black, and the yellow, to indicate that America is home to all and needs all of them. Finally, in the center, a monument should have been raised that in some way would symbolize the law of the three states: The material, the intellectual, and the aesthetic. All this was to indicate that through the exercise of the triple law, we in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: The final race, the cosmic race.

JOSÉ VASCONCELOS, *LA RAZA CÓSMICA* (1925)

THUS CONCLUDES the theoretical portion of José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*) and establishes the work for the headquarters of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP; Department of Public Education) as part of a broader search to express the ideas on art, race, and culture that he started developing before the Mexican Revolution. In this building, Vasconcelos would attempt to unify art and architecture to create a complete work of art intended to transform society. The building for the SEP would be the earliest and most coherent example of plastic integration—the



Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City, 1922.

use of murals and sculpture to define and express a political, social, or cultural message—in Mexico. After all, if the revolution was characterized by the conclusion of Porfirio Díaz's regime, it was clear to most artists and architects that the political and social changes should be met with cultural ones reflecting the new ideals. For many, this meant a rejection of the architectural styles associated with the old regime (mainly neoclassicism and imported styles from Europe) and a search for a

new art and architecture that was legible by the population at large and that represented its values and history. Despite these ambitions, the integration of art into architecture would become a highly contested yet distinguishing characteristic of much of modern architecture in Mexico and, later, of twentieth-century architecture in Latin America as well.

Hired as minister of education by President Álvaro Obregón at the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos set out to develop a comprehensive educational system based on his own philosophical ideas. As a young intellectual, he had been critical of Díaz's regime and its reliance on French positivism (and its social counterpart, social Darwinism). Vasconcelos, in various philosophical texts, responded to Auguste Comte's "law of the three stages" by proposing his own "law of the three states," which placed the aesthetic state, the "third period," at the highest plane of the development and interest of humanity (akin to Comte's scientific or positive stage). This would play a central role in his understanding of art's vocation in the educative environment and in the transformation of society. As Vasconcelos's philosophical ideas became clearer (and as he became more influential), he began manifesting them in projects that were under his responsibility and sphere of influence.

As minister of education, Vasconcelos hired artists to decorate many of the public educational buildings. He was responsible, for example, for hiring Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco to paint murals (alongside other artists) in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. There, Rivera painted *La Creación* (*The Creation*, 1922–1923), a work that expressed, among other things, Vasconcelos's philosophical interests in Pythagoras's sense of order. Orozco's murals primarily depicted scenes from the Mexican Revolution superimposed with Christian iconography intended to render them more legible to the largely Catholic and illiterate population.

For the headquarters of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, Vasconcelos wanted to represent the centrality of miscegenation to Latin American culture, an idea that he had been developing and that would eventually find its form in the 1925 publication of *La raza cósmica*. At the center of this was Vasconcelos's notion that, historically, all great works of art and periods of culture resulted from the mixture of various races. Latin America stood to benefit from the miscegenation effected by the Spanish Conquest and subsequent colonization and was poised to be at the center of a new "cosmic race"

derived from the mixture of all of the attributes of the great human races. The architecture of the SEP building represented this, in the first instance, through the combination of the pieces that made it up. The SEP headquarters occupied a structure that was originally a colonial courtyard building built in 1639 that had been used as a convent until the nineteenth century. Under Vasconcelos, it was modified and adapted to its new needs by the addition of a neoclassical façade designed by the engineer Federico Méndez Rivas and his team. The building also included murals, reliefs, and an extensive sculptural program to represent the foundational races for the cosmic race as well as a sculpture to express Vasconcelos's "law of the three states."

The use of a colonial building had inherent conditions that Vasconcelos valued. First of all, it was an expression of architectural syncretism, given that the Spanish architecture of the colonizer was transformed by the introduction of pre-Hispanic forms, references, and characteristics by the largely indigenous population that built it. This was something that the architects Federico Mariscal and Jesús Acevedo, Vasconcelos's contemporaries, had established as being quintessential to the formation of a unique and telluric Mexican architecture (see 1914 entry). Second, colonial architecture stood as an excellent model for an educational architecture, as it had been created to fulfill the needs of ideological dissemination required for colonization. Writing in 1926, Vasconcelos noted the relationship between this architecture and its pedagogic intentions, which emphasized the centrality of the arts, in both their production and their integration into the architectural environment:

The hours of the day . . . were used for work in the fields and in the construction of powerful works . . . In the evening or as of nightfall, the mission, which had been a beehive of manual labor during the day, would transform into a school: a school of religion, a school of language, a school of art—since drawing, music, and singing were taught. We can only imagine what those schools of labor and art were like.¹

Third, the fact that colonial architecture was common throughout Mexico also made it recognizable by the population at large despite any programmatic adaptations (such as the integration of modern and secular educational functions) and material changes (including the use of reinforced concrete for its construction).

Reflecting this, the construction campaign undertaken by the SEP produced buildings that relied on the neocolonial style. Examples include Carlos Obregón Santacilia's Centro Educativo Benito Juárez (Mexico City, 1923–1925) and José Villagrán García's Estadio Nacional (1924). As part of Vasconcelos's international campaign to promote his ideas and the importance of the colonial style as expressive of Mexico, his building campaign also included the construction of the Mexican Pavilion for the 1922 International Exposition in Rio de Janeiro (designed by Obregón Santacilia and Carlos Tarditti), an event he attended as Mexico's emissary.²

In most cases, the neocolonial buildings commissioned for the SEP were built with reinforced concrete; used traditional local materials—such as the igneous *tezontle* stone—for many of the architectural details; had a strong decorative program that included murals, sculptures, or both; and offered large collective gathering spaces (similar to the courtyards of the SEP headquarters) that were used for public festivals and performances.

Perhaps the most enduring and prominent characteristic of the SEP headquarters, however, was the decorative program that included the painting of murals throughout the walls surrounding the courtyards, the stairway, and the minister's offices as well as sculptural reliefs in the corners of the courtyards and free-standing sculptures throughout the building (many of which were never realized as Vasconcelos had planned). For Vasconcelos, the task of the building's art was to educate as well as to engender in the user of the building an aesthetic experience characteristic of the "third state" of human development. The radicality of the use of public art (and, in particular, murals that realistically depicted the history, society, and characteristics of the Mexican people) lay in its ability to democratize the experience of art, to communicate to a larger audience (through its collective perception as well as in its accessibility by virtue of being in public buildings), and to educate (as the information is absorbed or perceived not through contemplation alone but through apperception, as the critic Walter Benjamin argued).³

Additionally, for the artists engaged in its production, art had an ideological function. In the *Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors*, published in 1923, its signatories—David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, José Clemente Orozco, Germán Cueto, Carlos Mérida, and

others—highlighted the importance of art to the revolutionary project and the necessity of politicizing art. Like Vasconcelos, their call was for a monumental art that was "useful" by serving as "ideological propaganda for the people . . . something of beauty, education, and purpose for everyone."⁴ The scale and public nature of muralism provided them with new models of artistic distribution and of collective reception. This emphasized art's pedagogical potential and, ultimately, its value as a tool for political change. In addition, by being placed within the public realm, this art became an affront to private art—works such as easel paintings that are individually produced, collected, and experienced—and could also transform the perception and understanding of the spaces in which they were located.

The subjects of some of the murals for the SEP expressed Vasconcelos's early philosophical concerns as well as his interest in Eastern philosophies and in the mixtures of races and traditions. Characteristic of these were the murals painted by Roberto Montenegro for the offices of the minister, assistant minister, and their waiting rooms. In other cases, the murals had direct educational intentions. The Guatemalan painter Carlos Mérida, for instance, painted *Caperucita Roja*, a mural in the children's library depicting the story of Little Red Riding Hood. While its nature was didactic (using both text and the images to convey the story), the paintings maintained an avant-gardist formal complexity as they compressed the space and time characteristics of the narrative into the two-dimensional plane.

The majority of the murals, however, were produced by Diego Rivera. Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, in 1886, Rivera studied at the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City before traveling to Europe and settling in Paris, where he became a prominent member of the European avant-garde. Although strongly influenced by and adept at cubism, Rivera became more influenced by the work of Paul Cézanne, which produced a shift in his work toward a more realist and legible pictorial tradition—a result also of his travels through Italy in 1920. Upon his return to Mexico, Rivera traveled throughout Mexico with Vasconcelos during his campaigns to promote the new federal education department. In bringing painters along, Vasconcelos hoped that they would not only document regional artisanal techniques that were disappearing because of modernization but also record Mexico's varying landscapes, types of labor, and peoples in order to later reproduce them within their works.



Interior courtyard of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City, 1922.

In a speech inaugurating the SEP building, Vasconcelos's vision for Rivera's murals was limited to paintings of the regional dresses of every Mexican state and a mural decorating the staircase that represented the geographical characteristics of Mexico from the sea to the central region where Mexico City was located. Rivera's early production for the SEP, however, did not follow those ideas precisely but more broadly expressed the races, traditions, and labor characteristic of Mexico. In addition, as called for by the union's manifesto, he represented social injustices of the past and present. Although other painters were also part of Vasconcelos's vision and were hired by him, Rivera ultimately became responsible for the majority of the buildings' murals, in some cases, incorporating the work done by others into his own compositions, and in others, repainting them or erasing them completely.⁵

In addition to mural paintings, sculpture was used to depict Vasconcelos's ideas of racial miscegenation. In the "Court of the Races," Manuel Centurión sculpted for each corner allegorical reliefs of the four civilizations that have "most to contribute to the formation of Latin America": Quetzalcoatl, representing the Mexican culture; Plato, representing the culture of Greece; Buddha, representing Indian culture; and, Las Casas, representing Spain at the height of its

colonial power and as the initiator of a new culture.⁶ Under these reliefs, the sculptor Ignacio Asúnsolo was to carve "four stone statues . . . representing the four great contemporary races . . . to indicate that America is home to all and needs all of them."⁷ In the second courtyard, Centurión carved reliefs for the corners representing the branches of the plastic arts: sculpture, painting, music, and architecture.

Clearly, the first patio represented the primary racial and cultural components of the "cosmic race," and the second patio contained the aesthetic components of Vasconcelos's theories. The exaltation of these ideas through their architectural placement also suggests the importance they maintained, symbolically, in the formation of the cosmic race.

Finally, the synthesis of race, philosophy, and art was to be represented in two other sculptures for the building. The first was a sculpture, commissioned for Asúnsolo but unbuilt, to represent Vasconcelos's third state of humanity, based on his "law of the three states," and the developmental process for the cosmic race. The second was a triad of Apollo and Dionysius flanking Minerva that Vasconcelos considered



Mural by Cândido Portinari, Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP) building, Rio de Janeiro, 1945.

symbolic of Mexican culture. Carved by Asúnsolo, it stands atop the main façade of the building. The central figure of Minerva allegorically represents ancient wisdom, the Hegelian will to Spirit, and Mexican culture itself. Apollo and Dionysius characterize, respectively, educational and artistic proposals.⁸

While debates ensued during the building's construction and following its completion about its exorbitant cost and its formal similarities to the works done under the Díaz dictatorship prior to the revolution, the SEP building and its art became paradigmatic of a new relationship and codependence between architecture and the plastic arts. While Vasconcelos's philosophies regarding art and its effects were esoteric, idealistic, and romantic, the aim of the SEP building to be legible by the masses reflected a more accessible educational and consciousness-raising campaign. The public and monumental character of the work and its didactic potential became of interest and extremely valued by artists and architectural patrons throughout Latin America, and, in a way, plastic integration became—and some argue, it still is—a de facto characteristic of its architecture. Examples include the murals by the

Brazilian artist Cândido Portinari for the interiors of the Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP; Rio de Janeiro, 1936; see 1936 entry); *Ejercicio plástico* (1933), a work by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Antonio Berni, and others in Argentina; the National University in Mexico City (UNAM; see 1952 entry); and Mario Roberto Álvarez's Teatro San Martín (Buenos Aires, 1953–1961; see 1953 box), to name a few. While the politics of those associated with the muralist movement became a central concern in the discussions of plastic integration throughout the first half of the twentieth century, others argued for a more direct relationship between art and architecture. This was especially true as architectural forms became more abstracted and internationalized and used a more limited material and formal palette, as we see, for instance, in the work of Mario Pani and Carlos Mérida for the Multifamiliar Benito Juárez (Mexico City, 1947; see 1947 box) or the Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, Venezuela (see 1952 entry).

FURTHER READING

Carranza, "If Walls Could Talk: José Vasconcelos' *Raza Cósmica* and the Building for the Secretaría de Educación Pública," in *Architecture as Revolution*.
Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica*.