

**Cultural Identity Through The Mexican Landscape**

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Over a period of one hundred and forty years, between 1840 and 1980, many great painters emerged in Mexico. Mexico's artists have celebrated the identity of their country in the way they have represented the land itself. Among all of these fantastic artists, there are five that truly stand out. These artists have expressed themselves in many genres, but there are five landscape paintings in particular, in which these artists show true representations of Mexican civilization. The connection to the land represented in these paintings is as distinct as the culture it comes from. This paper looks at five paintings by five of Mexico's greatest artists: José María Velasco, Geraldo Murillo, Diego Rivera, Juan O'Gorman, and Frida Kahlo. The paintings are Velasco's *View of the Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Santa Isabel*, Murillo's *The Volcanos*, Rivera's *Zapatista Landscape-The Guerilla*, O'Gorman's *Mexico City*, and Kahlo's *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*. Some of these artists have worked together, others were taught by one another at some point during their lives, and all of them have been exposed to other artistic styles from abroad. Despite these influences, they have retained their heritage. Regardless of any personal preferences, politics, religion, artistic training, relationships, or other influences each of the artists and these particular landscape paintings have held fast to distinctly Mexican traditions. Although each of these paintings do vary from each other, there is no denying that there are key elements that tie them altogether in their representations of national pride and a furthering of Mexican culture. Despite the fact that each of these artists has traveled to foreign countries, studied techniques of European masters, and even professed an admiration for other cultures' artistry, the content, form, style, and iconography of these landscape paintings remains distinctly Mexican in spite of any pressure from the outside world.

Beginning in the last half of the nineteenth century, artist José María Velasco (1840-

1912) a teacher of artist Diego Rivera was at the forefront of a wave of transition in Mexican painting. Although many techniques in this medium had been adopted from European standards of idealism, and his education at the Academy of San Carlos was at the hands of European educators, he chose a more subtle and realistic approach to his subject matter. Author Dawn Ades speaks of his personal style when she writes, "... features of his work distance him from considerably from [European] artists. Most obvious of these was his love of the grand panorama, which involved an attitude to the landscape ... quite different from that of most Europeans of the time" (Ades 101). His work was primarily the genre of landscape painting and his major focus was mainly the valley of Mexico itself. Being that this setting was of a territory much larger than many found in Europe, Velasco used that difference, along with the variety of forms found across his vast horizon, to give his landscape paintings an identity that was reflective of native Mexican painting.

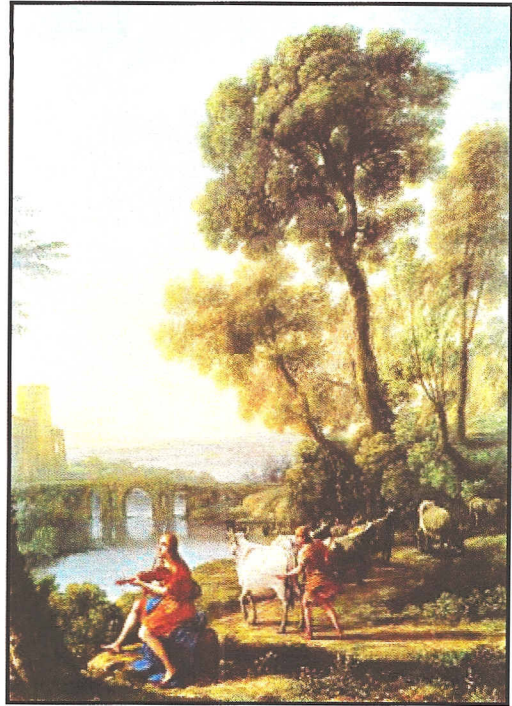
In his landscape, *View of the Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Santa Isabel* [Fig. 1],



1) José María Velasco, *View of the Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Santa Isabel*, 1877, oil on canvas, 22x30 in., National Museum of Art, Mexico City.

Velasco's range of hues and close attention to detail give this painting a more natural feel than the romanticized landscapes produced by European artists such as Claude [Fig. 2]. Rather than attempting to glorify his beloved Mexico by altering the colors or forms he found, he painted with

keen observation to minute details such as rocks and vegetation, allowing the grandeur of the former site of the Aztec empire to speak for itself. Velasco also uses Mexican iconography to further reinforce this cultural identity by placing an eagle and a cactus in the foreground of this painting. These were symbols that would not be fully utilized or even understood by European landscape artists. Author Ira Spanierman explains the context behind the two symbols, "... [These] symbols of the founding myth of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital located where Mexico City now stands. According to the legend ... the wandering Mexican people should not settle down until they reach the place where they encounter an eagle hovering above a cactus..." (Spanierman).



2) Claude Lorrain, Mercury Stealing Apollo's Oxen, 1645, oil on canvas, 21x17 in., Galleria Doria-Pamphilj, Rome.

Regardless of past influences such as Velasco's formal art training at an academy that not only employed European instructors but also carried on Eurocentric traditions in form and content, he managed to forge new ground in the genre of landscape painting. Even after his travels to Europe, he rarely adopted what he experienced once he returned home, instead he came back to his own style and his precious subject matter of the Mexican landscape. This attitude would come at a high personal price. The Columbia Encyclopedia states, "He deviated from academic standards and in 1907 was removed from a professorship at the Mexican National Academy which he had held since 1868" ("Velasco"). Whether it was his rejection of European

standards or his choice of subject matter it all reflected in his landscapes to help create and maintain a cultural identity for Mexico that only a native could accomplish.

More than a decade before Velasco's death, a young Mexican artist by the name of Gerardo Murillo (1875-1964) began his studies at the National Academy and traveled to Europe on a scholarship to study art. While in Italy, he adopted the nickname "Dr. Atl" which in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, means water. Known as Dr. Atl, Murillo returned to Mexico and was extremely active in exhibiting the art of Mexican painters, which included artists such as Diego Rivera. His love of art was equally matched by his passion for the outdoors. He was an avid mountain climber and especially enjoyed studying volcanoes. This devotion to the geology of Mexico echoes in his paintings.

In, *The Volcanos* [Fig. 3], Dr. Atl shows a sweeping panorama of his homeland and in the



3) Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), *The Volcanos*, 1950, oil on masonite, 54x102 in., Cultural Institute, Patrimonio de Jalisco, Guadalajara.

foreground one of the many volcanoes it possessed. Unlike Velasco, Dr. Atl has retained some of the techniques he adopted while in Europe. Not as detailed or realistic, this landscape has a look that is reminiscent of the landscapes

of the European Impressionists, such as Paul Cézanne [Fig. 4]. Author Tony Burton explains the adopting of this style, "During his stay in Europe, Atl, ... was profoundly influenced by the impressionist and Post-impressionist movements then in vogue in Europe. Art in Mexico at the time was almost exclusively limited to imitations of Old Masters, ... Creativity was stifled"

(Burton). Regardless of this change, following in Velasco's footsteps, he has still rejected the traditional idealized landscape painting and in this work Dr. Atl also uses some of the same techniques used by Velasco, like a lack of framing and a sense of splendor through the vastness of the subject matter. Rather than using soft, romanticized forms, this rendering of one of Mexico's larger volcanoes stands strong in the foreground wrapped in clouds, with its jagged



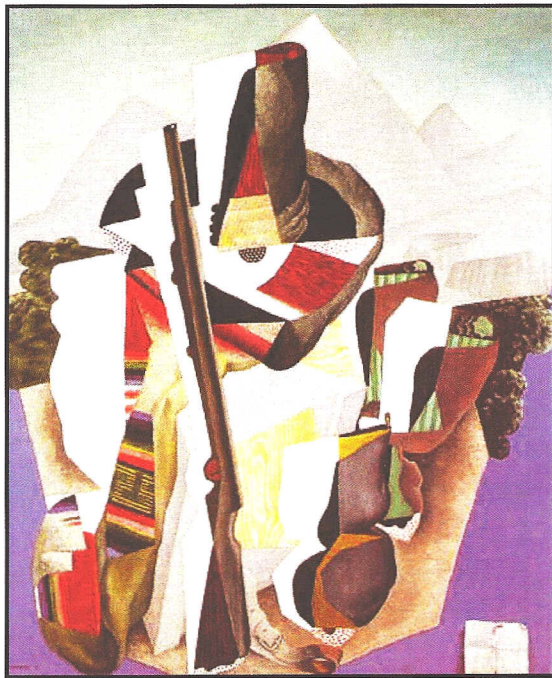
4) Paul Cézanne, *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, 1882-85, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

edges jutting through. This strength, however, does not obscure nor detract from the enormity of the Mexican valley behind it. Regardless of the fact that his painting style is European in nature, Alt still captures an unmistakable glimpse of Mexico and the power of its people reflected through the power of its landscape.

The white smoke that is being extruded from the volcano in this painting is merely a hint of the strength that Dr. Atl saw in himself and his Mexican heritage. Author Charles Cumberland writes of these beliefs, "Gerardo Murillo ... believed in the Revolution—and he understood the important role [the people] could play in that struggle. He also believed in himself ... 'I have confidence in [my] power to unite to our cause workers, students, and middle class'" (Cumberland 288). Throughout his life, he was involved in the politics of his country and used his artistic skills to support his fellow countrymen in their struggles. His political propaganda

and rejection of the artistic status quo caused his suspension as a director of the National School of Fine Arts in Mexico. His revolutionary spirit and his passion for the people of Mexico showed through in paintings such as this. The sense of movement that Dr. Atl put into the clouds in this particular painting mirrors the winds of change that he helped to produce and that he stood behind. Combining all of the passions that he had for his country, its people, and its landscape, he created art that, even though affected by European art trends of the time, helped return Mexico to itself and was at the vanguard of revolution.

Although he was away studying art in Europe during the time of revolution in Mexico, artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was still heavily involved in his homeland politics. Upon



5) Diego Rivera, *Zapatista Landscape-The Guerilla*, 1915, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City.

returning to his native soil, he became a major voice for the common people through his art. As a driving force in the Mexican Muralist Movement, Rivera brought a face to the masses of hard working individuals in Mexico. His paintings were inflammatory and revolutionary, but they were a reflection of his country in a time of change. The strength of his convictions could be seen in his work and his messages about the identity of Mexico were evident. Rivera himself remarked about the symbolism in his work in the video [Diego Rivera:](#)

[The Frescoes of Diego Rivera](#) by saying, “If its not propaganda, its not art”.

It is propaganda in his artwork that ties his imagery into the artistic identity of Mexico. In

his work, *Zapatista Landscape-The Guerilla* [Fig. 5], Rivera uses the Cubist style he discovered while in Europe and blends it seamlessly with purely Mexican iconology. The combined images of the traditional peasant hat and the multicolored serape standing before the backdrop of the Mexican countryside gives this work its true identity that no amount of Cubism could hide.

Although similar in form to works by Pablo Picasso [Fig. 6], this landscape makes bold statements with its Cubist figure of a traditional clothed peasant farmer standing before the Mexican landscape with a weapon in hand. This call-to-arms, artistic declaration was made at a time in Mexican culture during severe political unrest under the reign of Zapata. Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, when speaking about these kinds of works, stated it best when he wrote, “In this way we came in contact with the Mexican people, with the Mexican peasants ... at



6) Pablo Picasso, *Woman Playing the Mandolin*, 1910, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

this intensely human time of civil war and social vindication” (Siqueiros 11). That connection shows in this painting as it signifies the working class of Mexico and the struggle to regaining control of their precious lands.

Once more Diego Rivera was one of many Mexican artists that would come to learn, and embrace European standards in art. However, just as his predecessors, he would later reject popular European values of painting, working instead in his homeland muralist genre of art. Even though it would be with his mural work that he could fully express his personal



combination of politics and art, this Cubist painting, done while he was in France, speaks of his concerns of a troubled Mexico. The cultural identity found in this work is as strong and undeniable as the artist himself.

In close proximity to Rivera's time, artist Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982) found not only his own voice through architecture, but also a voice for Mexico in his painting. Much like the three previously named artists, O'Gorman was educated and began his connection to the art world at the Academy of San Carlos. His focus was architecture and it was through his abilities as such that he came in contact with Rivera. In the early 1930's, O'Gorman designed and constructed a house and studio for Rivera. This close contact was a major influence on his painting that shows in much of his artwork. His manner of representing the common worker and the landscape are reminiscent of his friend Rivera.

At the time of this budding relationship between O'Gorman and Rivera, a movement was taking hold in Mexico. The Muralist Movement was at its height in Mexico and these two artists



7) Juan O' Gorman, *Mexico City*, 1942, tempera on masonite, 26x48 in., Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City.

were in the thick of it. Juan O'Gorman's murals combine industrial and political change in Mexico with his skills as a painter and architect. In his mural *Mexico City* [Fig. 7], he makes that social and

political statement about the changing identity and landscape from a native view. Author

Bertram Wolfe recalled the scope of this time in Mexico when he wrote, "... an industrialization of the land such as ... factories, roads, housing and hotel construction, realty developments, enlargements of existing industries and initiation of new ones..." (Wolfe 210). This particular author also makes mention of the troubled labor that made it all possible when he states, "...the Mexican working class ... today it wears the blue overalls of the factory workers ... the unsatisfied sectors of the peasantry..." (Wolfe 211). This wave of change, as well as the price that was paid for it, is captured in this landscape mural. The major point that O’Gorman captures is modernization at the hands of others. He does this by placing in the foreground a set of light-skinned hands holding a map of rural Mexico being overtaken by a cityscape. It is not O’Gorman’s love of architecture that encouraged him to place tall buildings in front of his countries formerly gorgeous vista, but a need to show how the expanse of untamed land was being overrun by the modern world. Yet again, Mexican culture is being forced to change and its identity is being lost. The inhabitant shown is in the process of building a wall that will eventually obstruct the view of the distant, historical countryside.

To further support Mexican cultural identity in this landscape mural, O’Gorman places iconographic images in the skyline, such as the ancient Aztec snake god Quetzalcóatl. According to authors Katherine Guardado and David Shindle, "Quetzalcóatl ... seems to play a prominent role in a pantheon of virtually all the other Mesoamerican deities ... [He] was a god of such importance and power that nearly no aspect of everyday life seemed to go untouched by him" (Guardado and Shindle). Also of significance in this skyline is a banner that is colored in the style of the Mexican flag. The banner reads, in English, "Live Through Mexico" and it is a sign of national pride. These indigenous images combined with his use of a non-European, realistic

painting style, give his mural a distinctly native appearance. It speaks volumes about the political and cultural changes occurring in Mexico at the time, but it also serves as a reminder of the long-standing history of the land and its people.

Finally, there is Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954, one of the best-known Mexican artists to achieve cultural identity through art. The on-again, off-again wife of Diego Rivera began her painting career after a horrible accident in 1925, which left her temporarily bedridden. Despite her focus on self-portraits, due to her immobilized state, she still created other works that reflected her homeland. She was so proud of her cultural identity that, as author David Craven writes, “Revealingly, Kahlo lied about her own birth year (it was 1907, not 1910) ... out of a wish to be born in the same year that the Mexican Revolution began” (Craven 44). Even though she was of mixed birth, born to a German father and a Mexican mother, it was her Mexican heritage that would shine through in her many artistic endeavors.

One particular work of Kahlo’s that shows the many levels of her cultural identity and connections to Mexico is *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* [Fig. 8], in which she represents a surrealistic variation of her family tree.



8) Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, 1936, oil and tempura on metal panel, 12x13 in., The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The most obvious symbols of her Mexican identity are, of course, her mother and her mother’s

parents represented to the left of the work. Beyond that apparent connection however is the manner in which Kahlo has laid out her landscape. On the side of her German heritage she has set below her grandparents the open ocean and the shoreline of Mexico, giving them the identity of a foreign traveler coming to a new land. On the other side, below her Mexican grandparents, she has placed the rugged hills and scenic valleys of her homeland. In an interview, done at the same house that is shown in this work, Frida alluded to the connection between her extended family and the landscape in this painting when she stated, “The German grandparents are symbolized by the sea, the Mexican by the earth” (Ankori). For Kahlo the landscape of Mexico in this painting was a connection to her cultural identity.

Just as with the other artists mentioned, Frida Kahlo spent time in Europe expanding her knowledge of painting, but still remained true to her heritage. Although André Breton compared her work to that of the European Surrealists, she gives only a hint of any European influence in her family tree. The greatest portion of this painting focuses on the Mexican landscape and the members of her family that sprang forth from this area. It is the same tough, yet beautiful landscape that Velasco painted, with its vast mountain ranges and prickly cacti. Author Dawn Ades wrote about this visual connection when she stated, “... Kahlo’s painting made an impact on those Europeans who saw it, rooted as it is in Mexico” (Ades 222-224). In spite of the ties she has to other cultures through blood and marriage she takes the subject matter of her mixed family and gives it strong, definite roots in the landscape of Mexico. She makes little effort in this painting to signify her German ancestry and its contributions to her life. Proud of this Latin American identity Frida Kahlo has created a work of art that gives yet another distinctive view of the Mexican landscape and its culture.

Each of these artists has shared a connection to one another in some fashion. Whether it has been as a teacher, a pupil, a friend, a loved one, or an inspiration, these artists all have one thing in common that goes beyond any of that and it is their Mexican heritage. This legacy has been a greater influence on all of their lives than anything else in the world. Through a long history of change, these artists have persisted and came out the other side still clinging to their cultural identity. Through influences ranging from European standards of artistic creation, worldly educations, civil wars, politics, religion, modernization, to kinship each of these individuals has taken all that they have experienced and given it their own Latin American flavor. In the paintings discussed here, as well as other works, artists like Velasco, Murillo, Rivera, O’Gorman, and Kahlo have given the world varied and personal glimpses of Mexico. Whether or not these views are colored by Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism or any number of styles that are not indigenous to Latin America, the subject matter and how it has been presented still rings true to the identity of the Mexican culture. Velasco’s refusal to adhere to classical European idealism, Murillo’s love of his homelands’ volcanoes, Rivera’s politics and propaganda, O’Gorman’s display of modernization, and Kahlo’s bloodline all helped bring to life the distinctiveness of their native soil. In their paintings *View of the Valley of Mexico from the Hill of Santa Isabel*, *The Volcanos*, *Zapatista Landscape-The Guerilla*, *Mexico City*, and *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* each of these artists reflects on changes in Mexican history and culture over a period that spans over one hundred and forty years. A lot has changed in that long period of time, but there is one thing that has remained constant for these artists and that is their connection to Mexico. Each of these paintings is a mirror to the realities of what it means to be Mexican and they each hold their head high in that distinction.

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