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The History of Mexico

Mexico is a nation that boasts of a very vibrant and yet difficult history. Full of struggle, and tumult, it is also decorated with rich culture and inspiring perseverance. Famed painter Diego Rivera sought to encapsulate this profound and turbulent history in a mural titled “History of Mexico” done for the National Palace. Going through the various periods of Mexico’s past, Rivera paints a complex picture of Mexico being sure not shying away from its faults and exemplifying what its history meant to him.

Painted in virtually every section of the painting, the reoccurring motif of conflict is displayed heavily in Rivera’s mural. From the fighting between the Aztecs and Spanish Conquistadors to figures of the Mexican Revolution of the early 1900’s there is a constant depiction of one side over another. However, hidden among the spectacles of legendary battles is a deeper rooted but less noticeable conflict that is portrayed more than the epic spectacles of Pancho Villa or Hernan Cortez. Woven throughout the mural is the struggle between the ignored and suppressed indigenous population, and their suppressors the wealthy and affluent Mexicans.

Beginning with the positionings of the individuals both Mexican and Indigenous, the power dynamic of the affluent over the humble is clearly laid out. Towering above the natives are Mexico’s leaders and important political figures, as well as many other individuals. They look

down on the natives with smug, disapproving looks. Not only that, but when looking at the left side panel, spectators can see guns being pointed at a small crowd of indigenous men. The indigenous in return gather around in great crowds looking up to the scorn-faced affluent class as if pleading for something but being denied by those they beg to. This dynamic is shown in William Beezley's book *Judas At the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*, where during a pseudo-religious celebration the wealthy and affluent would throw "heated coins" into crowds of the impoverished so that the "ones who grabbed them also burned their hands" (Beezley). This was not a generous offering by the wealthy with a comical spin to it. It was merely for humiliation as the affluent class "tossed coins only to make sport of those who scrambled for them" (Beezly). The affluent were showing off their higher position and power to the lower classes by throwing coins for entertainment. It was done to show how much they see the lower classes below themselves.

Throughout the entirety of Mexico's history, such as sentiment was prevalent. The higher in society viewed the poor and indigenous as so much beneath them and undeserving of any respect or courtesy. Rivera weaves this all throughout his painting. Towering over the indigenous, the affluent look down only with scorn. The indigenous wear the simplest of clothes, some torn and some in only rags. They are looking up to the wealthy for help and support, for change and reform, but no help is ever to come to them from the ones looking down at them in the finest suits and ties and tuxedos with disgust, despite words that they have said or promises they have made.

Within other aspects of the mural, more explicit bouts of exploitation of the indigenous are also seen. To the far right of the main panel, indigenous miners are seen in loose rags mining a silver-like rock with Spanish conquistadors whipping them from behind. Throughout the mural

there are episodes of violence, exploitation, and suffering. There are no instances of heroes posing in inspiring positions. Santa Anna is not seen bucking on a horse, unlike depictions of similar figures Such as Napoleon or George Washington. Legendary figures are bunched up, being cornered by the extravagant scenes of suffering, showing Rivera's animosity towards Mexico's history.

However, among the frequent scenes of violence and suffering, the subject in the middle of the mural stands out. An eagle, the symbol of Mexico, adorned in gold with a snake in its mouth. The eagle is not rusted or dirty, it is unblemished. Surrounding it are lush and vibrant vines full of fruit. This eagle is Mexico and despite his bitterness towards Mexico's history, the golden eagle shows that Rivera believes in Mexico, and the Mexican people. As Fransico Madero says in his "Plan de San Luis de Potosí", the "noble Mexican people...gave the cause of liberty a numerous contingent of martyrs when necessary" showing that the Mexican people are passionate for progress, and their desire for it so strong that they are willing to sacrifice their lives to achieve it. Despite having a brutal past, Rivera believes that Mexico's future is bright.

Works Cited

Beezley, W. H. (2018). *Judas at the jockey club and other episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Third edition.). University of Nebraska Press.

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