

From Painting to Politics: The Life of David Alfaro Siqueiros

In 1940, David Alfaro Siqueiros was again exiled from Mexico, this time due to his participation in an assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky. At this time, he had recently returned to his life as an artist following his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, in which he fought for the Spanish Republic against the nationalist and fascist ideals of the Spanish State and then-general Francisco Franco.

Before beginning his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Siqueiros was a relatively unknown artist and activist outside of his home country of Mexico. However, due to his unwavering loyalty to the opponents of fascism, as well as the experience he had from the Mexican Revolution, he flourished as a soldier and quickly rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. After the war's conclusion, he returned to Mexico and his life as an artist, and was designing murals for the headquarters of the Electrician's Union in Mexico City in 1939 prior to being exiled. His time in Spain was ultimately short-lived, but not inconsequential.

Fundamentally, Siqueiros' contributions to the fight against fascism in the 20th century are valuable, not only from his artwork but also from his unwavering loyalty to the communist party and relentless desire to fight against the far-right. In his own words, "My art is a personal thing, but my party is a duty."¹

Born on December 29, 1896, in Chihuahua, Mexico,³ to wealthy parents, Siqueiros was exposed to communist ideals at a very young age. Originally baptized as Jose de Jesus Alvaro Siqueiros, Siqueiros later changed his name to David in allusion to the 16th-century sculpture by Michaelangelo. He was one of three children and lost his mother at the age of four. He was raised in Irapuato, Guanajuato, primarily by his father, Cipriano Siqueiros, and his paternal grandparents. While his father - a devout Orthodox Christian - attempted to raise him as a

Christian conservative, Siqueiros embraced syndicalist ideals after reading the works of various political theorists, such as writer and artist Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo Coronado), an active supporter of the pro-union constitutionalists during the Mexican Revolution. He became interested in the arts and was eventually sent to the Academy of San Carlos (part of the Mexican National Academy of Fine Arts) in Mexico City, to study art and architecture.² It was at the academy that Siqueiros' relentless activism would first materialize.

At the age of fifteen, Siqueiros organized and directed a student strike at the Academy of San Carlos over the school's teaching methodologies and the corruption of its director.² The strike was successful and garnered Siqueiros the attention of leftist activists all across Mexico. Throughout his time at the academy, he would participate in many other student-led strikes, many with the aim of improving the lives of Mexican workers. These pro-union exploits led him to become affiliated with the Mexican Constitutionalist Party, a social liberalist political party. At the age of eighteen, Siqueiros joined the constitutionalist-affiliated Mexican Revolutionary Army, which fought in favor of future president Venustiano Carranza and the constitutionalists during the Mexican Revolution.

As Siqueiros grew up, cracks began appearing in Mexico's decades-long dictatorship under right-wing general Porifio Diaz.¹⁵ The economy was failing, living conditions were worsening, and the country was being exposed to record-high levels of foreign investment, particularly from the United States. Thus, in 1910, Diaz's regime was overthrown by a left-wing coalition led by the constitutionalist party and Francisco Madero, who established a democratic-socialist state in 1911. However, this new government faced resistance from conservatives and foreign investors, and the tensions eventually evolved into a full-scale war.

In 1911, Siqueiros joined the army of revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, who fought for the rights of agricultural workers.² He would quickly rise to prominence, winning key battles including in the town of Cuautla, a stronghold of conservative forces. He would eventually earn the rank of captain (though his time in this role was ultimately short-lived).

While Siqueiros and the constitutionalists fought valiantly, they were eventually defeated by the right-wing coalition following the assassinations of left-wing leaders such as Carranza and Madero.¹⁵ Siqueiros, along with many fellow communists, left Mexico after the war and eventually found his way to Europe. While in Europe, Siqueiros learned more about the events of World War 1 and the geopolitical state of Europe following his conclusions, which further enforced his commitment to leftism. He eventually found his way to Paris, where he met Diego Rivera, a fellow Mexican painter from Guanajuato. The two shared communist ideals, and got along well. Eventually, in the early 1920s, many Mexican artists - including both Siqueiros and Rivera - were invited back to the country after the end of the revolution. Siqueiros returned to Mexico City in 1922 and began work as a propaganda artist under the revolutionary government of General Alvaro Obregon.

It was during the 1920s that Siqueiros painted his first well-renowned pieces. *The Elements* (1922),⁶ a large mural, was the first of these. By this point, Siqueiros had fully adopted Marxist ideologies and expressed his political views through his artwork. He was so firm in his stances that he refused to create art pieces that even remotely contradicted his political beliefs, which led him to be primarily employed by the Mexican government, even managing to land a position in the Department of Education⁴ (though he was eventually dismissed from this role in 1925). The mural became Siqueiros' signature method of producing art, and he typically painted in support of unions, students, and fellow leftist activists. Throughout the 1920s, Siqueiros

painted many murals, such as *Burial of a Worker* (1923),⁶ which was created in support of students at the Colegio Chico. Siqueiros' works were instrumental to the post-revolution Mexican muralist movement in the 1920s, and he came to be known as one of the "Big Three" muralists, alongside his friend Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco.¹⁶

Siqueiros would continue to create art in support of labor unions and socialist officials through the 1920s into the 1930s. However, after the ousting of President Obregon's government, many communists were exiled from Mexico. After a brief imprisonment at the Lecumberri prison in Mexico City, Siqueiros once again left his home country in 1932, this time traveling to the neighboring United States and eventually settling in Los Angeles to continue his work as a muralist. He continued creating murals as a form of communist propaganda, including *Street Meeting* (1932),⁶ which depicted workers of mixed ethnicities as a statement on race, and *Tropical America* (1932),⁶ an anti-imperialist piece (as Siqueiros was very critical of American imperialism in Latin America). However, his work was not well-received in the United States, a very right-wing nation at the time with strong opposition to communism. Siqueiros' pieces were often whitewashed or discarded, which forced him to modify some of his methods.⁹

Despite his negative reception, Siqueiros would remain in the United States through most of the mid-1930s (he briefly returned to Mexico after the left-wing government of Lazaro Cardenas gained power, and also spent time in Uruguay and Argentina in 1933), continuing to create pieces about American imperialism in Latin America. In 1936, he opened a political arts workshop in New York City, where he met a young Jason Pollock, and educated him on drip-and-pour artistic techniques (Pollock later went on to become a famous American artist and anti-fascist activist in the 1940s and 1950s).¹⁰ Many of the anti-fascist works that Pollock and Siqueiros produced were showcased by the Communist Party of the United States, with whom

Siqueiros had developed a good relationship. Siqueiros continued to operate his workshop, creating more renowned works of art such as *Birth of Fascism* (1936),⁶ until January 1937 when he left the United States to fight for the republic in the Spanish Civil War.

During his time in the United States, Siqueiros met Angelica Arenal, the sister of Luis Arenal, Siqueiros' translator. Despite already being married to a German and being 14 years younger than Siqueiros, Arenal took well to his Marxist views. The two later ended up being unofficially married, marking a new chapter in Siqueiros' life.

As Siqueiros was working to combat fascism, it was rapidly spreading throughout Europe. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the two main fascist powers of Europe at the time, were beginning to consolidate their powers, hinting at a formal alliance. Adolf Hitler, the fuhrer (dictator) of Germany, had begun mobilizing his armed forces, remilitarizing the Rhineland in direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles, while Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italy, launched an invasion of Ethiopia (then called Abyssinia) in 1935, later occupying the country. In 1936, fears of an alliance between Italy and Germany were realized with the signing of the Rome-Berlin Axis in anticipation of a second European war.¹¹ After allying with each other, Germany and Italy both began to look for new allies across Europe. Amid the unrest and tensions that had dominated the country throughout the early 1930s, they identified Spain as an ideal target.

In 1931, the monarchy of Spain, which had stood relatively unobstructed since the formation of the Spanish Empire in 1492, was overthrown by the Spanish Republic, a left-leaning republican government founded by allies of the Spanish Liberal Party. The government of the Republic, despite initially being popular, had a lot of opposition in the country, which led to a perpetual state of turmoil. The Republic, looking for firm leadership,

appointed General Francisco Franco as the Chief of Staff of the Spanish Army in February 1936.¹² However, unbeknownst to Republic officials, Franco had been working with the right-wing Nationalist Party. In July 1936, the nationalists declared war on the republic, marking the official start of the Spanish Civil War.

By the time Siqueiros arrived in Spain in January 1937, the nationalists had already made significant gains against the Republic. However, the Republicans still maintained control over Madrid (the Spanish capital) after successfully defending it during the Battle of Madrid in November 1936. The war had extended beyond Spain, with the Republic receiving support from socialist nations such as the Soviet Union and Siqueiros' home nation of Mexico, and the Nationalists receiving support from Italy and Germany. Despite the Republic being able to successfully defend Madrid, momentum had shifted in favor of the Nationalists by early 1937. The Republic, lacking unity and a cohesive strategy, called upon foreigners for aid. Shortly after the start of the Spanish Civil War, the Comintern, along with many other left-wing organizations, called for leftists from around the world to fight for the Spanish Republic, resulting in the creation of the International Brigades - an army group comprised of foreigners affiliated with the Spanish Republic throughout the war - in early 1937.¹³ Many leftists from around the world responded to this call, including Siqueiros, who traveled to Spain to begin working as a pro-Republic propaganda artist. While in Spain, Siqueiros was introduced to the Popular Front theory, which called for the mobilization of the proletariat - left-wing and progressive political groups - against fascist authoritarianism. Adopting this theory, Siqueiros eventually took up arms and officially joined the International Brigades.

After joining the Republic army, Siqueiros volunteered to join the Fifth Regiment, led by Italian anti-fascist Vittorio Vidali (under the nom de guerre Carlos Contreras). Siqueiros and

Vidali got along well, due to their mutual ties to communism and time spent in the United States. When the task of delivering a message to forces in Madrid about a siege and potential encirclement came about, Siqueiros volunteered and was chosen for the task. He completed his objective and upon return to his commanders, he was promoted to the rank of comandante (major), due to his experience as a captain during the Mexican Revolution.²

Shortly after receiving his promotion, Siqueiros met Comandante Enrique Lister, who assigned him command of the 82nd brigade, which comprised mainly of Mexican anarchists. Siqueiros was a good match for his subjects, and commanded them well, quickly rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He regularly wrote to his wife Angelica, and she eventually traveled to Spain in March 1937 (with the assistance of a group of American doctors on their way to join the Abraham Lincoln brigade), obtaining a job at the communist newspaper *La Prensa Rojo*, and later landing a position at the government newspaper *El Nacional*. The two would be reunited two months later but rarely saw each other during the war due to their respective occupations.²

While Siqueiros was getting acclimated to the conditions of the Spanish Civil War, Franco and the nationalists were continuing to attack Republic forces all across Spain. Following the May Day riots in Barcelona, which disrupted the unity of Republic forces, Franco's forces were able to gain the upper hand in Northern Spain. The nationalists began to quickly seize areas in the Republic stronghold region of Catalonia, where Siqueiros was stationed, drawing his forces steadily closer to direct conflict. Meanwhile, the Republicans, under Comandante Lister, were able to make minor gains in Southern Spain. In March of 1937, the republic scored a key victory in the Battle of Guadalajara - which took place in the Guadalajara province, northeast of Madrid. The Republican forces defeated the nationalists, primarily comprised of Italian

regiments sent by Mussolini, and stopped them from being able to attempt an encirclement of Madrid, firmly keeping the capital in Republican hands.⁵

Siqueiros was eventually stationed at the front in Estremadura (a province southwest of Madrid along the Portuguese border). It was here that he was finally reunited with his wife Angelica Arenal. Arenal, who was working as a reporter in nearby Valencia, obtained permission to visit the front, upon which she met Siqueiros. After reuniting, the two traveled to Valencia and were officially wed in a military wedding overseen by Comandante Lister. The two would see little of each other in the months after, until November 1937, when Angelica received a message telling her to return to Mexico due to her mother's failing health. After receiving this information, Siqueiros requested to temporarily leave Spain to accompany his wife and - after a brief meeting with Indalecio Prieto, the Spanish Minister of War - was permitted to do so on the condition that he would request the new Mexican government, under General Lazaro Cardenas, for military supplies (it was hoped that Mexico would be able to obtain advanced military technology from the neighboring United States).²

Upon returning to Mexico, Siqueiros and his wife were sent to and housed in Los Pinos, President Cardenas' residence. Cardenas wanted Siqueiros to advise him on his pick for Mexican Ambassador to Spain. Siqueiros suggested that Cardenas appoint Adalberto Tejada, the governor of the Mexican province of Veracruz, which Cardenas ultimately ended up doing. With this aid, Cardenas agreed to supply the Spanish Republic with advanced military equipment, and Siqueiros returned to Spain in December 1937.

After a brief stopover in New York City, Siqueiros returned to Spain in early 1938 and was sent back to the Estremadura front. While he was gone, Franco's forces made further gains in Western Spain and were receiving more direct support from Italy and Germany. A short time

after his return, he was called to the headquarters of the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (SIM), a secret service organization affiliated with the Spanish Republic.² He was tasked with seizing a copy of a banned Italian magazine - from Italy, a fascist nation - and bringing it to Spain. As Siqueiros possessed only a Mexican passport, this mission was a serious risk for him. However, he accepted it and traveled to Italy.

Siqueiros' first destination was the Mexican Embassy in Rome. At the embassy, he met Mexican poet Manuel Maples Arce, who was appalled by Siqueiros' mission. In a further stroke of misfortune, Siqueiros was invited to a Mexican Art Set that turned out to be pro-fascist and even had Nazi soldiers in attendance. However, on the way back to his hotel, Siqueiros stumbled upon the magazine he was looking for and was able to return to Spain with the material with the complete operation taking just four days. After returning to Spain, Siqueiros would take a step away from direct military action, and return to his role as a propaganda artist. He would remain in this role until September 1938, when the International Brigades were officially disbanded, thus marking the end of Siqueiros' time in Spain.²

After the disbanding of the International Brigades, Siqueiros was tasked with returning all the surviving Mexican volunteers (including himself) to their homeland. The casualty rate among Mexicans in the war was steep: what had started the war with 533 Mexican volunteers ended with only 52. Siqueiros lamented these losses, and it was with a heavy heart that he officially left Spain. The group faced multiple challenges on their way back to Mexico, including having to wait weeks in England for their ship across the Atlantic to undergo repairs. The trip ended up taking months, and it was January of 1939 when Siqueiros finally arrived back in Mexico City.²

After leaving Spain, Siqueiros settled back in Mexico after multiple years of absence. He resumed his life as an artist, as well as his affiliation with the Mexican Communist Party and various labor unions. He once again found employment with labor unions and other leftist organizations, creating various murals such as *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (1939).⁶ His pieces once again came to serve as political statements for the Mexican left, now with influence from Spanish Republicanism. Siqueiros initially found favor with President Cardenas' left-wing government, but this would change when Leon Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico.

Leon Trotsky was a figure known worldwide among leftists in the early 20th century, primarily due to his ideals of Trotskyism - a socialist ideology declaring that true socialism could only be achieved through the active participation of the working class in governmental politics.¹⁴ Trotsky had gained many enemies during and after his time as a prominent leader of the Soviet Union, including supporters of the Spanish Republic, who supported Stalinism (the policy of the then leader of the Soviet Union and one of Trotsky's fiercest political rivals, Joseph Stalin). Thus, when he was granted asylum in Mexico, Mexicans who had supported the Spanish Republic (including Siqueiros) were infuriated and began to plan an assassination attempt.

On May 24, 1940, Siqueiros, along with fellow anti-Trotskyists, attacked Trotsky's residence in Mexico City. The attackers blew up the house and shot Trotsky's grandson, though he ultimately survived. However, unbeknownst to them, the attack would prove unsuccessful, as Trotsky would survive uninjured, and Siqueiros would be forced into hiding.¹⁷ A couple of weeks after the attack, Siqueiros was found by the police, and charged with attempted homicide and criminal conspiracy. The Communist Party of Mexico also issued a statement that the events at Trotsky's residence were "contrary" to their visions, essentially ostracizing Siqueiros from the

party.² However, despite spending time in prison, Siqueiros never had to stand official trial and was exiled to Chile, where he continued his career in art.

Throughout the 1940s, Siqueiros traveled around the Americas, spending time in Chile, Argentina, and the United States. In light of the events of World War 2 occurring in Europe, Siqueiros painted many anti-fascist murals during this period, including *Death to the Invader* (1942)⁶ and *Cain in the United States* (1947).⁶ Since the Trotsky episode, his ideals began to shift away from those of the Mexican Communist Party, as he felt betrayed by their opposition to his ideals. He stuck strictly to his Marxist ideals but also incorporated aspects of the Popular Front Theory, which he had learned during his time in Spain. In 1948, Siqueiros was invited back to Mexico to teach a course on mural painting in the city of San Miguel Allende. He accepted and returned to his home country after nearly a decade of exile.

Siqueiros only taught at the academy for a short time, before returning to his occupation as an artist for hire. However, due to the change in his political mindset, he only accepted commissions from organizations directly connected to the Mexican government, such as universities and government buildings. He painted a number of murals throughout the 1950s, including *For Complete Social Security of All Mexicans* (1956)⁶ and *The Revolutionary* (1957).⁶ In time, he re-aligned himself with the Mexican Communist Party and renewed his commitment to the Mexican left. When right-wing politician Adolfo Lopez Mateos was elected to the presidency in 1958, Siqueiros immediately moved to criticize his leadership, labeling him “The Emperor of Mexico.”¹

Siqueiros eventually became the face of opposition to Mateos’ regime and was elected Secretary General of the Mexican Communist Party in May 1960.¹ However, in August of the same year, Siqueiros was arrested by the Mexican government on charges of leading teacher’s

strikes, though most believed the real reason was Siqueiros' consistent criticisms of the president. He was sent to Lecumberri Prison, where he had spent time almost three decades prior, but continued to paint pieces while a prisoner. It was while he was imprisoned that Siqueiros' works sold the best, including *Self Portrait* (1961)⁶ and *Solitary Confinement* (1961).⁶ After being pressured by foreign countries, the Mexican government finally released Siqueiros in 1964, upon which he slowly began to step away from politics.

Siqueiros continued to paint throughout the 1960s, including some of his most famous pieces. *Christ* (1965)⁶ was a depiction of a suffering god due to the events of the Cold War, while *From Porfirianism to the Revolution* (1966),⁶ perhaps his most famous work, was a reflection on the events of the Mexican Revolution during the early parts of Siqueiros' life. In 1971, Siqueiros finished his final mural, *The March of Humanity*,⁶ a story of how humanity had progressed from the past to the present, and would continue to do so in the future. After completing this mural, Siqueiros finally retired to his house in Polanco (a neighborhood in Mexico City) and his wife Angelica.

By the time of his departure from the arts, Siqueiros had gained worldwide recognition for his contributions to both the arts (particularly muralism) and left-wing politics. Siqueiros, along with Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, popularized mural art not only in his home nation of Mexico but also all across the globe. His art served as an inspiration for future generations of political artists, such as Jason Pollock, who had flourished under his tutelage.

But it was not just his art that made Siqueiros' contributions invaluable; it was his unwavering loyalty and commitment to Marxist ideals and anti-fascist activism. Siqueiros was so entrenched in his principles that he refused to paint for employers that in any way deviated from them. He fiercely believed that "the artist must paint as he would speak,"⁸ and this was evident in

every mural he ever painted. Any telling of Siqueiros' story must acknowledge his prowess in all aspects of life, from painting to politics.

Though Siqueiros' spent most of his life in the studio rather than the battlefield, his contribution to various conflicts is also worth noting. He played a significant role in the evolution of the Mexican left throughout the 20th century, from the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to the tumultuous presidency of Adolfo Lopez Mateos. And though his time in Spain was ultimately short-lived, it was tremendously influential on his work. The Popular Front Theory, which he learned during the Spanish Civil War, became a key part of his political ideology for the years to come, and his loyalty to the Spanish Republic led him to not only risk his life to procure information from Fascist Italy but also fight for its principles even after the war's conclusion when he attempted to assassinate Leon Trotsky. Even after leaving the International Brigades, he continued to uphold their ideals for decades to come.

David Alfaro Siqueiros died on January 6, 1974, in the city of Cuernavaca in the Mexican province of Morelos.⁴ He died in the company of his wife Angelica, who served alongside him through the Spanish Civil War and beyond. Prior to his death, he donated his house in Polanco to the Mexican Government, which now serves as an art museum,⁷ symbolizing Siqueiros' legacy in the arts. However, Siqueiros' legacy does not merely lie in the nature of his art, but also in its purpose. His art, throughout the entirety of his career, represented political statements promoting communism and opposing fascism, which ultimately defines the story of his life.

Examples of Art Pieces By David Alfaro Siqueiros



Birth of Fascism (1936)⁶



The March of Humanity (1971)⁶

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