Orozco's Serpientes: Contextualization and Visual Analysis

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José Clemente Orozco's talent for capturing universal human experience and tragedy spanned several media. Although, through the duration of his career, his most iconic projects have been murals, Orozco expended considerable effort developing drawings and easel painting — two of the media for which he received formal training at the Academy of Fine Arts, San Carlos. Several of his most famous mural cycles, including the *Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College, precipitated collection of printed works containing scenes or elements from the murals themselves. Prints such as *Serpientes*, which invokes the *Epic*, were targeted toward patrons who either had not seen the murals, or had seen them, and wished to consume them privately. These prints however, were of no minor significance in Orozco's oeuvre. By analyzing the relationship between *Serpientes* and the *Epic*, we may unravel the complexities imbued in the print as a consequence of its shared content with the mural.

The relationship between formal properties and subject matter used in Orozco's mural at Dartmouth College and *Serpientes*, produced only a year and a half later, adds layers of significance of each work, a tool that exemplifies Orozco's great expressive power. From the start of his career, Orozco's perpetually unstable patronage demanded that he tailor his creations with salability in mind. Finding early on that commercial contracts were more lucrative than public ones, Orozco entered the graphic arts market at several points in his life, producing a variety of political cartoons for *El Machete* and *La Vanguardia* in the 1910s, and prints for the New York art community in the early 1930s (*Orozco: An Autobiography* 53). In spite of the profitability of these efforts, Orozco also expressed a keen interest in the cartoon form for the sake of its artistic value (stated explicitly in his Letter to Charlot, 1928). After returning from the United States in June of 1934, Orozco continued to hone his skills in smaller media relevant to cartoon-making and the favor of his other private patrons. In particular, he engaged in the
challenging practice of drypoint etching, an intaglio printmaking method that requires the artist to hand-chisel groves in a copper plate. With his mural at Dartmouth recently finished, he spent the next fifteen months producing on a series of prints in addition to his mural, *Catharsis*, at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, which he completed in late 1934. This venture into new media resulted in ten lithographs, three drypoint engravings, one etching with drypoint, and one drypoint with aquatint. Compared to watercolor and oil, these media allowed Orozco to rapidly produce works for mass consumption — making a single physical, copper engraving and running several prints at a time from each, maximizing output. In this sense, the decision to move into engravings was as much pragmatic as artistic. From his experiences marketing art in the United States, Orozco found that printed works were easier to sell than oil paintings. He could also make them at a lower cost than oil paintings. These two factors primarily motivated Orozco’s interest in the art form.

Patrons' tastes in Mexico were, however, different than those of patrons in the United States. During the 1930s, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros worked largely in fresco, creating images with overtly nationalistic, social, and political messages for display in public areas — a style deeply related to the painters' and sculptors' “Manifesto” signed some years earlier (“José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera”). In Rivera's case, ancient Mesoamerican culture took on a significant iconographic role; it served as an idealized model for true Mexican identity, defining Rivera's rather well-known *indigenismo* impulse (Earle 197). He, Orozco, and to a lesser extent Siqueiros incorporated Aztec and other native subjects into their work, though for differing reasons. Rivera and Siqueiros tended to promote political revolution and social reform in their public works using Mesoamerican content, like Orozco, allegorically. Yet Orozco's art rarely made unambiguous political statements. For that reason he could not market
his work toward those seeking a visual statement of political ideology. Orozco recognized that Mexican patrons did not view indigenous topics as favorably as American patrons, who generally enjoyed representations of the *indigenismo*, *hispanismo*, maguays, general social critique, and other stereotypical motifs from Mexican art (Philadelphia Museum of Art).

In his lithographs of this period, Orozco offered scathing indictments of post-revolutionary Mexico. His portrayals of Mexican life in *Wild Party* (1935), *Women* (1934), *Proletarians* (1935), *Parade* (1935), and other prints brutally characterized modern conditions, invoking the chaos and depravity of indigenous peoples, the grotesque face of certain Mexican female identities, the desperation of the forgotten poor, and terrifying anonymity of individualism in the advent mass society. His drypoints, by contrast, eschewed polemical themes entirely. While the lithographs Orozco produced in 1935 offered direct social commentary – and argument often more nuanced than those of his contemporaries – Orozco’s drypoints frequently served only as visual excerpts from his earlier works. Of the five drypoint engravings Orozco produced in this period, four were displayed in the Galería de Arte Mexicano's second exhibition in 1935. Three of these four drew content directly from past mural projects, while the fourth was an independent study. Titled “*Head and Hands,*” this last engraving saw Orozco return to a traditional academic painting subject: the female model. Despite drawing on different sources for inspiration, Orozco's prints at the Galería added little to his repertoire of social commentary. They reproduced scenes directly from earlier works: *Catharsis* (1934), *Prometheus* (1928-9), and the *Epic of American Civilization* (1930-4), which themselves bore tremendous intellectual weight, but as frescoes, could not easily be moved and presented for consumption.

To understand the relationship between *Serpientes*, in particular, and its parent mural, *The Epic of American Civilization*, we can compare it to the other prints and their respective
sources of influence. From *Catharsis*, Orozco reproduces a grotesque prostitute's face in *La Chata*, one of the drypoints exhibited at the Galería de Arte Mexicano. Her has been reversed from the original — a consequence of the printmaking processes — and some minor background details disappear: Orozco omits the action of a gun, the texture of a person's clothing, and, naturally, the vivid palette of *Catharsis*. Otherwise, the print adds little in overt meaning to the mural as a whole, like a preparatory sketch, but done after the fact. With the subtler background details removed, Orozco focuses his efforts toward exploiting the properties of the new medium, applying his classical training to the distinctive and recently revitalized process of drypoint engraving. Where his fresco defined the woman's facial features through color contrast, *La Chata* employs line weight and pattern exclusively as the modeling tools for surface definition. These techniques evoke a draftsman-like quality in the print, the sense of its purpose as an exercise to achieve the ideal *disegno* of the early-modern period. Crosshatches provide shading; sparser, individual strokes define the edges of forms and details of the woman's face. In both the mural and the drypoint, Orozco uses the unique capacities of the media to create expressive caricatures of the prostitute; yet he still favors traditional illusionistic modeling techniques over ones from abstract movements, like Cubism and Surrealism. *La Chata* replicates the mural's formal and thematic qualities in drypoint. It reproduces a part of the mural without changing or adding to the meaning of the mural itself.

Although *La Chata* and *Catharsis* generally characterize Orozco's engagement with drypoint, the degree to which the two works mirror each other does not similarly describe the relationship between *Serpientes* and The *Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College. The “Departure of Quetzalcoatl” panel of Orozco's *Epic* informs significant iconographic and compositional elements in *Serpientes*, just as *Catharsis* does for *La Chata*. *Serpientes*, however,
draws directly from another area of the mural as well; figures from the pantheon of Aztec deities in the “Coming of Quetzalcoatl” reappear in *Serpientes*, with forms closely mimicking those in the mural — namely, Tezcatlipoca and Mictecacihuatl, gods of dark magic and the underworld, respectively (Heyden, et al. 51). In the “Coming” scene, these primitive gods stand behind Quetzalcoatl. Their ominous figures pose against a deep blue sky, faces scowling, suggesting the inescapable human condition of misery and the brutality from earlier panels. Under the guidance of Quetzalcoatl, a vaguely Christian-like god, humankind rises from its previous intellectual and productive slumber. Where *La Chata* and *Catharsis* are analogous images — one sampling from the other — *Serpientes* and “The Departure” are complements; each visually manifests a different part of the same theme.

The meaning of *Serpientes* as a commentary on human condition lies in its complementary relationship to the *Epic of American Civilization*. In the mural cycle at Dartmouth, Orozco examines humanity's relationship with myth, comparing it to other endeavors of human progress: technology, intellectualism, nation-building, and so on. The story of Quetzalcoatl, elaborated across the mural's west wing, describes the arrival of a deity, his gifts to humankind, and the eventual betrayal of mankind against him. Depicted as a white-skinned, anthropomorphic prophet — in contrast to his representation in the majority of European codices — Quetzalcoatl takes on connotations of majesty and benevolence through hierarchical scale: he visually dominates the scene, giving the viewer a clear focal point and lending the whole panel a sense of rational space. Quetzalcoatl's appearance in the mural signifies the respective start and end of an era where human knowledge, philosophy, and productivity flourish; in his departure, humankind faces the threat of regression — into fear, violence, and ignorance — with only the hope of the ancient god's prophetic return.
Yet, the specific collection of figures we see in *Serpientes* never appears in Orozco's mural in any one panel. Most immediately comparable to the “Departure,” *Serpientes* describes what, in the context of the mural, likely signifies post-departure Earth, a spiritual and moral reality after the fall of Quetzalcoatl. The print's serpent figures closely resemble the mural's, although they are, of course, mirrored. Where Quetzalcoatl, a dramatic, dominant figure in the *Epic* once stood, the serpents now dominate; on the shores of civilization, Aztec deities connoting mortality and vice stand resolute, replacing the cowering humans of the “Departure.”

The reappearance of these figures in *Serpientes* implies a return to ancient barbarism. The raft of snakes now stands with the background of gods connoting death and dark magic, playing with popular western perceptions of the snake as a negative figure. Although Mesoamerican cultures tended to view snakes and serpents positively — associating them with fertility, rebirth, and pro-human gods — Orozco's depictions are ominous. In the “Departure,” the serpents around Quetzalcoatl have ambiguous connotations; they surround a figure of “good,” taking on his positive aura, while also symbolizing the exile of that great figure, which suggests their role in advancing human suffering. In *Serpientes*, the presence of Mictecacihuatl and Tezcatlipoca re-characterizes the snakes. Cast against the print's horizonless background, the serpents now contribute to the sense of danger evoked by the two deities. By synthesizing elements from multiple panels in the *Epic*, Orozco introduces new visual arguments in *Serpientes* that the mural itself does not explicitly make.

The formal qualities of *Serpientes* also differ from the *Epic's*, unlike those in *La Chata* and *Catharsis*. Less an example of draftsmanship practice than *La Chata*, *Serpientes* takes advantage of much sparser shading and detail. It expresses a more dynamic, modernistic sensibility in delineating bodies, using short, jagged marks to create motion and tension which,
given the missing focal point of Quetzalcoatl, contributes to the overall emphasis on instability.

Cortez, the next signpost in the mural's logical progression, indicates the beginning of the modern age: the age of industrialization. The opening act of modern America, and the east wing of the mural, comes as the conquest of native society by Cortez and the Spanish. His dramatic pose and stature suggest power — and enduring influence. Yet unlike Quetzalcoatl, this god-figure arrives with a certain sense of impending danger. Perhaps leaving his predecessor's prophecy unfulfilled, the demigod brings the terrors of modern society to the American continents. Arriving against a background of rubble and flames, beside the mass of mangled flesh of his victims and the false, ineffective efforts of organized religion, Cortez' panel leaves the viewer with a deep sense of ambivalence; his arrival incorporates the visual arguments of compressed space and fragmentation, contrasting in mood against the idealized, commanding physical figure of Cortez that compels the viewer to accept him, and see him as a fulfillment of Quetzalcoatl's prophecy.

The last invocation of divinity in the Epic of American Civilization occurs in the “Modern Migration of the Spirit” panel, at end of Cortez' era. Christ stands open-chested with stigmata prominently visible, holding the axe by which he felled his own cross. Here, he has abandoned hope for humankind by rejecting his sacrificial destiny. For the second time, humanity has betrayed its savior, though the outcome of Christ's unshackling remains uncertain; the viewer is left to speculate about the future for humankind.

The scene depicted in Serpientes, then, complements the ideas in Orozco's Epic. Shown only in the very beginning of the mural, the darkest periods for humanity take place when no benevolent — or in Cortez' case, merely ordained — leader guides progress. But notably absent from the cycle are scenes between the fall of one leader and the rise of the next. Presumably, the
physical divide between Quetzalcoatl's departure and Cortez' arrival, marked by the physical space housing the information desk, reflects the gap in time between the ancient and modern worlds. One can speculate about a stagnant, repressed period between the fall of Quetzalcoatl and the rise modernity with Cortez, where humanity abandons civilization, returning to the horrors of human sacrifice and constant war; yet Orozco leaves such a visual to the imagination. Similarly, after Christ's renewal and rejection of humans' historical mockery, no panel follows depicting judgement, heaven, or hell. Orozco, yet again, chooses not to depict the consequences of human failings and loss. Since the viewer never sees the “future,” Christ's return remains ambiguous. We are left unsure as to whether he liberates humanity, or signals the beginning of the apocalypse.

All but the mural's first chronological panel show humanity in struggle against its animalistic, immoral, primitive natural state; humanity strives toward an ideal of enlightened civilization — not without occasional success — though ultimately to little avail. The threat of loss, of abandonment, always looms over human progress, undermining it, offering to demolish it and create a flaming heap. The consequence of this implied downfall appears, not within the mural itself, but in Serpientes. The raft of snakes, visually subordinate to Quetzalcoatl in the mural, becomes the dominant interest in the print. The serpents, though mirrored, shoot out of the water at the same angles, but have grown in size; in the drypoint, they consume almost the entire space of the image. Abstract qualities of the print, as well, add to its meaning. Tezcatlipoca's face, painted carefully on the walls of Baker Library, is hardly recognizable in Serpientes. He and Mictecacihuatl, two negative figures representing fear and mortality, control the planet in the absence of a wise, benevolent leader. The dangerous serpents and vague background, unadorned with human figures, contribute to the sense that this scene shows what is
left. In the vacuum of wisdom and virtue left by Quetzalcoatl, there is no real humanity on earth, only terrifying powers of fear and violence.

While partially overshadowed by the showmanship and overt political activism of Rivera and Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco remained, in the words of Siqueiros, “faithful to his traditional hermeticism and misanthropy, succumb[ing] to apolitical passivity at the same time that he drowned in the empty symbolism of pseudo-revolutionary art” (Herrera). Although he failed to achieve universal appeal, Orozco did take interest in universal experience. The panels of his *Epic of American Civilization* explore the perpetual struggles of humankind against a gamut of destructive forces, some wholly external to human agency and others of our own misguided confection, punctuated only by the most veiled, transient moments of meaningful progress. *Serpientes*, then, serves to further express the artist's complex message and inform our understanding of his remarkable visual-communicative skill; what appears superficially as an artistic exercise — adapting to a renewed, difficult medium — provides a thoughtful synthesis of the *Epic's* raison d'être, compelling the viewer beyond an academic-level engagement with his work, into a sense of spirit-draining empathy for the emptiness of a world absent philosophy and truth.
Textual Sources


Visual Sources

*Serpientes*, José Clemente Orozco, Drypoint Engraving, 1935.

*La Chata*, Orozco, Drypoint Engraving, 1935
Portion of *Catharsis* replicated in *La Chata*, Orozco, Buon Fresco, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico, 1934

“The Departure of Quetzalcoatl” from *The Epic of American Civilization*, Orozco, Buon Fresco, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 1934
“The Coming of Quetzalcoatl” from *The Epic of American Civilization*, Orozco, Buon Fresco, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 1934