David Alfaro Siqueiros

A presentation for Creative Tools for Social Justice (Celeste Espinoza de Verderosa)
1896 - David Alfaro Siqueiros is born in Chihuahua, Mexico.

1911 - Siqueiros participates in the student strike at Bellas Artes; he goes on to comment that this "marked the beginning of the Mexican movement of modern social painting.

1913 - The artist takes a key role in the organizing of a worker/student coalition against then president, Victoriano Huerta.

1918 - Organizes the Congress of Soldier Artists - an organization composed of left-wing artists serving in the revolutionary army.

1923 - Siqueiros is elected general secretary of the Syndicate of Revolutionary Mexican Painters, Sculptors and Engravers.

1924-31 - Develops the publication "El Machete" as a vehicle for the Syndicate of Revolutionary Mexican Painters, Sculptors and Engravers. He also begins to take more roles in the labor movement at large, including organizing the miners' union and directed strikes of workers against the government. He is jailed for his political involvement and his links to the communist party. His jail time in Taxco leads him to produce an overwhelming amount of easel paintings depicting social themes.

1932 - Expatriated to the United States, he paints two outdoor and one indoor mural: Tropical America, the Workers' Meeting and Portrait of Present Day Mexico.
David Alfaro Siqueiros:
An Abbreviated Timeline

1933 - Expatriated to South America, produces his first mural with pyroxlin paint titled Plastic Exercise. It is a mural produced in an arch that leads to a private bar in Silicate Keim's home.

1934 - Cardenas becomes president and Siqueiros is allowed to return to Mexico. He becomes president of the National League Against Fascism and War.

1940 - Siqueiros leads an unsuccessful assassination attempt of Leon Trotsky. He takes refuge in the hills of Jalisco, but eventually he is found and taken prisoner. Trotsky is murdered a year later by Ramon Mercader.

1959 - Siqueiros is jailed by president Lopez Mateos for "social dissolution." An international campaign ensues to drop the charges against him, but he is not released until 1964.

1967 - The artist receives the Lenin Peace Prize.

1974 - Siqueiros dies three years after completing work on the Polyforum Siqueiros.
"An art without an ideological function, in spite of the genius of its creator - or more specifically its maker - changes the artist progressively and inevitably into a juggler for the society of 'ladies and gentlemen' inasmuch as the generator governs the force of the current."

"Liberalism transformed the private forms that were complementaries, into special forms almost exclusively used for the pleasure of society. It substituted the wealthy gentleman, the art market that before belonged to the state, that is to say, to the masses. There one must localize the source of transformation from the traditionally social art into an art for society, into an art which is an aesthetic compliment to the furnishings in the private homes of the wealthy elite. And there is no man, however genial he may be, who can escape this reality sooner or later."
Lithographs:
In this series of lithographs cut from wood, the subject material is workers and the downtrodden. Siqueiros would expand his work in later years to depict with great ferocity the conditions of these people.

The Slave, 1931

The Wives of Deportees, 1931

One Recourse: Prostitution
Experimental Materials:

Siqueiros is admired artistically for his push to use materials that had otherwise never been used to create art. This includes the use of the spraygun, the innovation of the new fresco (cement and sand vs. lime and sand), electronic projection, pyroxylin and other plastics.

Portrait of Eugene Jolas, 1936
Oil Paint on Plywood
The style known as action painting popularized by Jackson Pollock is seen here in its early experimental stages. Pollock was a student in Siqueiros NYC workshop and would eventually take the idea of "intentional dripping of paint" to a different and unique level.

The March of Humanity at the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros, 1971
Taking over six years to complete, this mural/sculpture is comprised of over 4000 sq. meters of paint, polychrome sculpture and versikote. This shot is the exterior 12 panels of the building, but the inside is equally intricate depicting a Latin American history towards freedom, justice, well-being and peace.
Experimental Materials:
Plastic Exercise - Siqueiros's first full scale experiment with pyroxlin paint and silicate. It is also his first use of the entire space of architecture (walls, ceilings and floor) for a mural.
Experimental Materials:

Plastic Exercise - Interesting fact: the look of the female forms are unique. Siqueiros took photographs of nude women as they pushed up against glass plates. He then projected their images onto the walls and ceilings to paint the effect of female forms pushing out against the surface.
Experimental Materials:
Plastic Exercise - Continued
Experimental Materials:
Other Examples - A piece developed out of the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop

Collective Suicide, 1936
Pyroxylin, Oil Paint on Plywood
Experimental Materials:
Other Examples - Siqueiros Experimental Workshop

Electric Forest, 1936
Pyroxylin, Oil Paint on Plywood
Experimental Materials:
Other Examples - Siqueiros Experimental Workshop

Intertropico, 1936
Pyroxylin, Oil Paint on Plywood
The Rise of a Social Movement:

Siqueiros used his murals to depict the history and encouragement of social movements in the Americas. An avid communist, his political ideologies often leak out in his paintings.

Echo of a Scream, 1937

Another example of piroxlin on wood, this piece takes its inspiration from Siqueiros' time as a soldier and leader in both the Mexican Revolution and in the Spanish Civil War against the fascists. The child screaming represents the terror present in war everywhere.
The Rise of a Social Movement

Zapata, 1932
The Rise of a Social Movement

Portrait of the Bourgeoisie, 1939 - Electricians Union Hall (Mexico City)

This video is of one of Siqueiros' master works, Portrait of the Bourgeoisie. The piece was commissioned and painted for the Electrical Workers Union Hall in Mexico. The mural measures over 100 sq. meters, comprising three walls and a staircase. It depicts the history of the workers' movement from 1920 to the late 1930's, including subject material drawn from the war against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. It is one of many mural experiments where the artist took advantage of the architectural challenges involved in producing a prolific work to fit the customization of the building.
The Rise of a Social Movement:

The New Democracy, 1944 - Palacio de las Bellas Artes (Mexico City)
The Rise of a Social Movement

The New Democracy, 1944 - Palacio de las Bellas Artes (Mexico City)
This panel is actually titled "Victims of War." A corresponding panel, "Victims of Fascism," is also part of this work.
Owing to various vicissitudes, the mural at Chapultepec takes over six years to finish. The subject matter is such that the artist must install a wall to increase the paintable surface available in the small hall where the mural is to be located to a total of 419 sq. meters. Above, the people rise up in arms to combat the misery, injustice and repression under the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship.
Work in the United States:
First by commission and then due to expulsion from Mexico because of political activities, Siqueiros created work in the United States.

Tropical America, 1932
This piece was the first "public" mural in California and is located on Olvera Street. It was highly controversial at its time because of the imagery of an indigenous person (America) being crucified by a sword on which a bald eagle sat perched above the body (the United States). Tropical America is seen as the firestarter for the hundreds of public murals that would later come out of the Chicano movement of the 1960s. It was recently reopened for public viewing as a collaboration between the Getty Foundation, the City of Los Angeles and UCLA-SPARK.
Work in the United States:
Tropical America - because this was one of the first attempts at using his new fresco technique, the application was faulty. Art historians will be unable to fully restore the mural now or in the future.
Work in the United States:

Workers Meeting - An early photograph of the mural that caused so much controversy that it was whitewashed immediately. The mural, recently rediscovered, is undergoing restoration by CalArts.
Work in the United States:

Portrait of Mexico Today, 1932

Originally this piece was known as Surrender of the Mexican Bourgeoisie to Imperialism. It was painted at the private home of director Dudley Murphy. Not considered one of his best works, it is in much better condition than Tropical America. In 2001, the Murphy family donated the piece to the Santa Barbara Art Museum where it was reinstalled at the front of the museum for public display.
Other Greater Works:
A selection of other great works by Siqueiros with and without political overtones.

Devil in the Church, 1947
The Devil - sitting atop the worshipers with the "Bourgeoisie" descends upon the unknowing people. This is an anti-clerical reference to the Catholic Church’s partisanship in taking the side of the conservative Porfiriato.

It would not be until much later that the Catholic Church in Latin America would practice Liberation Theology. Pope John Paul II's admonishment of LT is notable as a return to more conservative times.
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Woman Sleeping, 1947
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El Coronelazo, 1945
Self Portrait