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***Corncribs (Los Trosjes)*, by Fermín Revueltas (1902-1935), painted 1933**
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Palm Springs Art Museum
Gift of the Estate of Herbert E. Toor

Mexico experienced a renaissance after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). It was a period of strong national awareness that included a revival of the arts and advocacy for political and social change (Noelle). For inspiration, many artists looked to models from before European contact as well as folk arts and crafts. This was the time of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo (who not only painted but adopted traditional Mexican styles of dress). According to Noelle, Mexican art was primarily figurative during this period between 1920 and the end of the 1950's. Fermín Revueltas came of age at the beginning of this renewal and his art reflects his time.

Biography, Style, and Influences

Fermín Revueltas was born in 1902 (acc. to Reiman. The year is listed as 1901, 1902, or 1903 in different sources) in the state of Durango in north central Mexico. In 1917, due to the continuing Mexican Revolution, he and his brother, Silvestre, were sent to boarding school at Saint Edward's College in Austin, Texas, a Catholic school led by the same religious order as the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. After a year the brothers went to Chicago, where Fermín enrolled at the Art Institute, where he was exposed to avant-garde art styles from Europe and the United States. It was also in Chicago that he learned

about social issues such as labor struggles and union demands (Blaisten Museum). The brothers returned to Mexico in 1920.

The Revueltas family was artistically accomplished. Silvestre went on to a career as a classical composer whose music reflected Mexican culture. The other Revueltas siblings were well known as a writer, painter, and actress.



Fermin Revueltas (1902-1935)

One aspect of the era was a blossoming of mural painting by major figures including Orozco and Rivera. Their works exhibited historical, allegorical, and political themes as well as a celebration of the Mexican people. The artists valued the idea that these public artworks were available to everyone, not just privileged art collectors (Noelle). Revueltas's major mural contribution was the *Allegory of the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1922-23) at the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* in Mexico City (see below), which, while superficially religious, is deeply Mexican (Notimex).

Many trends influenced Revueltas' artistic style. His post-revolutionary works show an awareness of Fauvism, Cubism, and Constructivism (Reiman). He was active in a movement called *Estridentismo*, that combined the ideas of Futurism, Dadaism, Ultraism, and European Constructivism, and exalted technology and transformation of cities (RCMultimedia). In the 1920s, Revueltas was both a student and teacher at the *Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre* (School of *Plein Air* Painting). He was a member of ¡30-30!, an anti-academic group that supported arts training outside of traditional institutions. His left-wing politics were demonstrated by his membership in the Communist Party and the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors. Beyond painting, he designed stained glass, graphic arts, and stage sets.



Allegory of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Fermín Revueltas

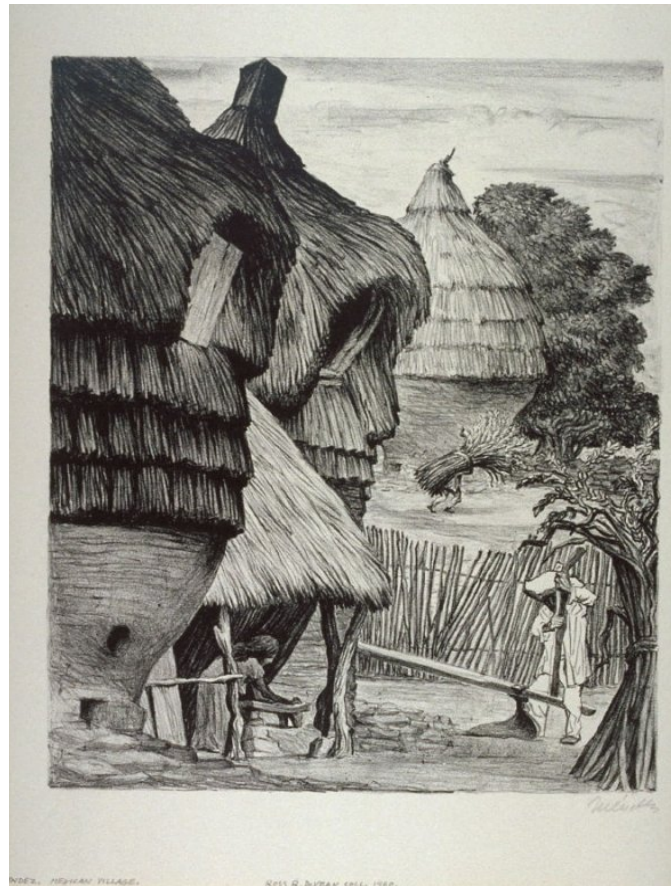
Los Trosjes

Los Trosjes is a depiction of corncribs used by Mexican farmers in the early 20th Century. While these appear to be unusual, perhaps even fanciful, they are accurate renderings of agricultural storage structures used in rural central Mexico. The corncribs are in the shape of an egg or globe, built in stucco on a cylindrical base, open at the top and covered with a thatched roof. The reason for the unusual shape is to deter squirrels and rats from accessing the corn. The steep upside down curve makes it very difficult for animals to cling to the sides and scramble up into the storage bin. See below the photo of corn cribs in Cautla, Mexico (Summer Institute) and the print by Leopoldo Mendez with a similar image.

The painting gives an illusion of space in a traditional landscape format. In the foreground at the bottom, there are vertical rocks, three large animals (horses? donkeys? deer?), and an agave. The background shows a range of blue mountains that extends across the canvas, and a pink sky. The middle is the focal point of the image: six large white corncribs (two mostly obscured) with yellow thatched roofs, two human figures who have climbed to the roofs on ladders to pour in corn from large sacks, and a low, sky blue, round object that could be a well, all surrounded by tall cacti. The corncrib on the left is topped by large green leaves, which may perhaps be stockpiled for completion of the roof. In the center and left of the middle group there is orange open space, showing the field where the structures are located.



Traditional Corncribs in Cuautla



Grinding Maize, by Leopoldo Mendez, 1945
Alternative Title: *Corn Cribs in Cuautla*

The human figures and animals do not have facial features. The gender of the people is also not clear, but the silhouette of the hairstyles suggests that the figure on the left is female and the one on the right is male. Based on a comparison with the height of the people, the corncribs could be 15-20 feet tall.

A sense of distance is created through comparative size, spacial relationships, and the level of detail. The human figures are smaller than the animals in the foreground and the large mountains at the back are essentially the same size as the corncribs. Overlapping forms clarify the location of the objects, with the background being covered by the middle ground and foreground in succession. The mountains are a muted blue and show little detail, evidence of the use of atmospheric perspective.

The image is asymmetrically balanced. Two large corncribs, the blue well, and the highest mountains on the left are balanced by the foreground rocks, animals, and people on the right.

Shadows are almost completely absent. Despite the cloudless sky in the background, there is no sharp color contrast that shows the effect of light. The bases of the corncribs on the right and left sides exhibit some darkening on the left side and a bit of shadow on the ground to their left. Why is the shadow of the corncrib on the far left cast in a different direction than the one in the center? There are inconsistent shadows on the white plaster under the edge of the thatched roofs. It is as if a large cloud is covering the sky behind the viewer, blocking most of the directional light and casting the scene in a soft, diffused illumination.

The color value shows a wide range between light and dark. On a gray scale, the white plaster of the corncribs and clothing are very bright, while the rocks, mountains, plants, and animals are quite dark. The cacti on the edges of the frame approach black. The sky, open field, and roofs are gray. Paradoxically, given all of this contrast, the image does not seem sharp. The details are in soft focus. Perhaps this illusion is enhanced by the lack of facial features and the dominance of pale yellow and white, of similar value, in the center of the painting.

PSAM Artworks for Comparison

Revueltas's *Corncribs* can be compared to any of the traditional, representational landscapes in the collection. John W. Hilton's *Enchantment of Sunrise*, 1960, is a conventional landscape, but it is worth noting that the foreground and background are most prominent, and the image includes a great deal of open space in the middle ground. The crisp details are painted in near photographic reality. In *Corncribs*, the middle ground dominates, details are in soft focus, and the image is, by comparison, very full. See photo below.



Enchantment of Sunrise, John W. Hilton

Thunder Mountain, by William Robinson Leigh, is a landscape that includes human figures but obscures their faces like Revueltas does in *Corncribs*. Julius Shulman's photo *Frey House I (With Additions)*, Palm Springs, California, 1953 also minimizes the two people by turning them away from the camera. All of these figures provide a sense of scale and context along with a hint of narrative, but avoid disclosing any sense of personality. See photos below.



Thunder Mountain, by William Robinson Leigh



Frey House I, Julius Shulman

The museum owns Diego Rivera's *Bathers* (study for *El Baño en Tehuantepec*, mural for *Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City*), 1925. See below. It is an example of the work of one of the most prominent artists of the mural movement, painted soon after Revuletas' *Guadalupe* mural. This painting exhibits the same lack of facial features, diffused illumination, and soft edges as *Corncribs*.



Bathers, Diego Rivera

Touring Questions

- Have you ever had a bird feeder filled with seed? What is biggest challenge for the owner of the feeder? Squirrels are ever-pesky antagonists. They can climb and leap large distances. Owners resort to strategies like slippery PVC pipes around the support pole and long dangling arms that hold the feeder out several feet from the pole. How did these farmers keep the squirrels and rats out of their corncribs?
- Where is the source of light in this painting? How do you know?
- Why do the people and animals not have facial features? What's your theory?
- How tall are these corncribs? How do you know?
- What did the artist want you to know about these farmers?
- If this painting were created today in the Coachella Valley, what image would the artist choose?

Conclusion

Fermín Revueltas was very productive in a short life. He died in Mexico City in 1935, age 33, leaving a legacy of artworks, education, and radical political and social activity. That was his contribution to the Mexican Renaissance.

Works Consulted

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Summer Institute of Linguistics in Mexico. *Mösiehualj*. http://www.mexico.sil.org/es/lengua_cultura/nahuatl/mosiehuali-nhg.