

# SOUTHWEST REVIEW

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## Juan O'Gorman

By Gibson Danes

**O**NE OF THE most familiar sights to tourists in Mexico City, outside the Cathedral and the Palace of Fine Arts, is the striking modern house and studio of Diego Rivera. Most sightseers remember the pink-and-blue dwelling surrounded by tall organ cacti, but few know the name of the architect who designed it. They might be surprised to learn that it was the work of a twenty-three-year-old native of Mexico whose mingled heritage is well indicated by his name: Juan O'Gorman. Serious students of architecture in this country know O'Gorman as one of the leaders in experimenting with contemporary methods and materials in building. Few North Americans, however, realize his importance as a painter and a muralist. Because of this dual aspect of his career, which has involved solid achievement in two usually distinct fields of expression, he should be better known outside Mexico than he is.

Even though one cannot make definite pronouncements about a man who is not yet forty, Juan O'Gorman's work in both architecture and painting is extraordinary. When he was still in his early twenties, he built the first modern "functionalist" houses in Mexico (1928-1932). Last year he completed one of the most important fresco mural decorations produced in Mexico since the beginning of the revolutionary movement led by Orozco and Rivera two decades ago. He is not only an accomplished muralist, having thoroughly mastered the arduous technique of true fresco, but is one of the most engaging easel painters and portraitists in Mexico. He is also one of the few Mexican artists interested in painting landscapes, a genre of painting that has been almost entirely neglected in Mexico

since the time of José Velasco in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, he is keenly interested in city planning and is teaching a course in that subject at the present time. Such a diversity of interests, combined with such a level of accomplishment, is rare in any time, but is especially remarkable in our own age of almost fanatic specialization.

Juan O'Gorman's talent appeared at a very early age. He received his first instruction in art as a boy from his father, Cecil Crawford O'Gorman, who is himself well known as a meticulous and sensitive portrait painter. Even more important than the early training Juan received in drawing is the fact that he grew up in a lively intellectual atmosphere. The O'Gorman family is a very interesting and a genuinely sophisticated one. Juan's father is a remarkable personality. A native of Ireland, he was educated in England, and came to Mexico a half-century ago as a mining engineer. He married a woman of mixed Irish and Mexican descent and decided to settle permanently in Mexico. After suffering from tropical diseases contracted in the course of his work, he gave up mining for chemistry. For the past decade or so he has devoted all his time to his life interest, painting.

Juan was born in Coyoacán—now a fashionable suburb of Mexico City—on July 6, 1905. Since his father was working in the mining industry in the picturesque silver town of Guanajuato, Juan went to primary school there. Then he attended the National Preparatory School in Mexico City and subsequently studied architecture at the National University, from which he was graduated in 1927. The years when Juan was attending the Preparatory School and the University were exciting ones for anyone interested in the arts. This was the epochal period of the twenties, when Vasconcelos as Minister of Education secured governmental recognition and support for artists by inaugurating the famous plan of having the best Mexican painters undertake murals on public buildings. The era resounded with declarations, pronouncements, manifestos. A social revolution was carried into the realm of the arts. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros, and other young members of the group

brought to the new movement the vast talents which have since become internationally known. At this time, Juan met Diego Rivera, who had just returned from Europe, and was painting his first big mural in the auditorium, *Anfiteatro Bolivar*, of the Preparatory School. The friendship that began at this exciting time has been a formative influence in Juan's career.

The famous French art critic and historian, Elie Faure, came to Mexico while Juan was still a student. Juan met him through Diego Rivera and served as his guide during Faure's stay. They spent much time together, traveling to the pyramids at Teotihuacan, going through the museums, and studying the murals that had been recently finished by the Mexican painters, including the superb Rivera frescoes at Chapingo. This experience, too, has remained as one of O'Gorman's treasured memories; he says now that he learned more from Elie Faure in the conversations they had together than in many of his years of academic training.

Precocious and intensely alive to everything about him, O'Gorman was deeply impressed by the social implications of the theories advanced by the Syndicate group. He began seriously to question the emptiness of the academic architectural training that he had just completed. These were the years when the "functionalism" of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus group was gaining currency. Le Corbusier's writings were bringing about a reorientation of alert and serious young architects all over the world. O'Gorman saw the logic and rational meaning behind this new concept of building, and also saw its relation to the rebellion that had taken place in painting. He remarks now, more reflectively and frankly than he could have then: "Modern architecture was for me at that time a form of romantic anarchism." But his concern with "functionalist" architecture in the 1920's and his success in putting these ideas into practice involved much more than a mere spirit of rebellion. From the outset his work was based upon a clearer and sounder, if still romantic, conception of all the arts.

The youthful architect (he was only twenty-three) built his first "functionalist" house for his father—and for Mexico—in 1928. The

following year, O'Gorman built the famous pink and blue studio and house for Diego Rivera. From 1930 to 1932 he built a number of dwellings and studios for various clients, among them the painter Julio Castellanos and the collector Frances Toor.

In all of these early works, the architect was carrying out the doctrinaire program of the modern group and was building in terms of their concept of "functionalism." The "Function" of the 1920's was conditioned by the materials that the innovators were interested in exploiting—poured concrete, steel, and glass. In addition, O'Gorman did some very interesting experimentation with color in architecture. He arranged simple planes of blue, red, yellow, or brown, to contrast with the great expanses of glass. He sometimes finished window sash in orange or vermilion. The poured concrete construction lent itself to very flexible, plastic shapes. O'Gorman took advantage of this characteristic of his material by using cantilevered projections and spiral staircases to contrast with simple wall and window surfaces. He used color and textural qualities in order to relieve the extreme simplicity of form in his buildings.\*

Along with his own projects during these early years of modern building, O'Gorman was working in some of the most active architectural offices in Mexico. Between 1927 and 1932 he worked for Obregon Santacilia, Villagran Garcia, Carlos Tarditi, and Carlos Contreras. He served as draftsman, supervisor, and later as contractor.

Then, during the years 1932-1935, he was in charge of the Department of Construction in the Ministry of Public Instruction. While he was directing this governmental office, he built thirty new schools and rebuilt many more. This was one of the most salutary programs that a government could embark upon, but unfortunately it was curtailed. The position, nevertheless, gave O'Gorman a chance to work with a problem that he has always been interested in, that of building with a clear social purpose. And in the schools that he built, O'Gorman faced the problem squarely by designing school

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\*For illustrations of O'Gorman's work in architecture, the reader is referred to: *The New Architecture in Mexico*, by Esther Born. William Morrow & Co., New York.

houses that were built as economically as possible, but at the same time effectively served the needs of the school.

In the same year that he began directing the new school-building program, O'Gorman helped organize the architecture school in the new Polytechnic Institute. This institution, which is still a very active part of the educational system, is fundamentally opposed to the academic teachings of the traditional school of architecture, the Academy of San Carlos. In the Polytechnic Institute the teaching is based upon modern engineering and principles of construction rather than upon a historic and stylistic approach to building. O'Gorman still teaches in this school, offering courses in the Theory of Architecture, Composition of Architecture, and City Planning. The variety of his practical experience, coupled with his lively imagination, makes him an effective teacher. The basic precepts of the Institute still make it a center of rebellion against the conventional tastes and ideas of the older Academy; and O'Gorman has enough Irish blood to make him enjoy a pitched battle now and then.

Throughout all of this lively activity in various building programs, planning for the government, organizing a new school, and teaching, he was also able to keep up his painting. When I asked O'Gorman how long he had been painting, he said that he had always been working at it, even when he had but a little spare time to devote to it. But it was not until 1935, after he had finished with building the schools, that he was able to set about seriously developing his ideas.

O'Gorman's interest in the medium of fresco for mural decoration goes back to the days when he was a student in the Preparatory School. He saw Rivera and Orozco working every day in the courtyards of the school. Such an opportunity would be inspiration enough for any young and sensitive student. Shortly after he was graduated from the University, when he was building the modern houses, he also began doing some murals in the *pulquerias* (Mexican pubs where the national drink *pulque* is sold). This is not as unconventional as it might sound, because a lively form of popular painting had already developed in the *pulquerias*. There were native, untutored

painters who made this work their profession. Many of them had a real talent and a highly imaginative flair for decoration. This bar-room décor gave O'Gorman plenty of opportunity to experiment with fanciful design, and particularly to learn fresco technique. It was in these works that he began to find a personal method for handling large, flat wall surfaces.

The medium of the mural demands more maturity of mind and a more complete mastery of painting technique than any other category of pictorial expression. The forms and symbols that the artist devises must embody coherent intellectual concepts, and at the same time they must be integrated as formal entities. A mural painter must not only know how to express himself well in terms of his pictorial vocabulary, but he must also know what he wants to say. Any disparity between what the artist has to say and how he says it will be fully apparent when his concept is blown up to the dimensions of a large-scale wall surface.

One of the signs of an artist's maturity is that he is capable of expressing himself clearly, that he has developed a style that serves as a cogent means of making himself understood. By the time Juan O'Gorman was given the commission for the murals to go into the new airport building at Mexico City, in 1938, he was ready to cope with a problem of this size.

O'Gorman's education in painting has been principally that of teaching himself, although he was stimulated by close association with his father in his early years, and with Rivera and others later. His first interest in painting frescoes began with Rivera's masterly frescoes in the Secretaría de Educación; he was also deeply impressed with the delightful fantasies of Henri Rousseau. Furthermore, he has always been devoted to the native popular Mexican painting. This taste for art that is highly imaginative, fanciful and decorative has never left him, but has, in fact, matured with increasing experience and study.

Of significance, too, is the fact that O'Gorman is a creative architect and engineer. The training that he received as an architectural draftsman has given him a command of drawing that is positive and



*FRESCO IN THE LIBRARY AT PATZCUARO, by Juan O'Gorman*

sure. He is one of the finest draftsmen, in a painterly sense, who are working today. Since he can draw meticulously and fluently, it is easy for him to concentrate upon design and the delineation of his ideas. Technique for him becomes a direct instrument of his imagination. The result is that he has produced some of the most delightful murals of our present day.

Juan O'Gorman feels that the mural should be a medium for communication of intelligible ideas. His two major works in this field—the fresco at the Airport and the one at the Library in Patzcuaro, Michoacan—illustrate this principle clearly. The historical and intellectual content of these murals is staggering. The title of the Airport mural, *The Conquest of the Air by Man*, gives an indication of the historic scope of the artist's idea. All of the important figures of aviation are there from Leonardo de Vinci to the Wright Brothers and the paratroopers of the present war. The scheme for the painting is panoramic and encyclopedic. All of the facts are represented, but they are integrated and developed with much imagination. The juxtaposition and fanciful twist of familiar symbols gives the storytelling a wry and lively character. The description of the ideas, complete and scientifically accurate though it is, is not a literal transcription, but lends a magic to the whole scheme. Part of this poetry comes from O'Gorman's refreshing formal organization, which is logical and irrational at the same time. Around a simple structural framework he weaves a rich fabric of line, plane, and color.

The same basic concept of mural painting is carried out in his latest fresco (1941-1942) in the building which used to be the old church of San Augustin but has now become the Library in Patzcuaro. This mural completely covers the wall, over thirty feet high, at the end of the room. On this wall O'Gorman has vividly portrayed the whole history of the region of Lake Patzcuaro. This picturesque lake region, the ancient home of the Tarascan Indians, has been the scene of many important historical events since the colonial period. On this single panel, O'Gorman deals with the story of life from pre-Cortesian times to the revolutions of the twentieth century. He portrays here not only the principal characters from

history, but the geography, topography, customs, costumes, and manners of the region, all presented with characteristic vivacity.

Hundreds of figures are delineated against a backdrop of native landscape faithfully depicted. Because the content of this mural is so fascinating, the observer may overlook the simple and sensitive structure and design that pervades the whole work. O'Gorman has established a clear relationship between the landscape and the complex groups of figures. In spite of the intricacy of shapes and rich linear movement, he achieves an architectural quality by his consummate control of the wall surface plane. In this mural at Patzcuaro, O'Gorman has fully realized and controlled those qualities of fantasy and formal inventiveness that make his art so individual and so satisfying.

Although the artist's most monumental works are his murals, his easel painting is equally delightful. For the past few years he has been steadily experimenting with egg tempera painting on a gesso panel base. This technique, like his fresco painting, allows him to obtain a purity of color that is impossible in any other medium. His easel works are similar to his murals in that here again he loves to study the detail of objects. Whether he is painting a landscape or a portrait, he designs the whole surface with much care. There are no accidental effects.

The landscape of *The Sand Mines of Tetelpa*, finished in May of 1942 and now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, illustrates his recent work in this field. O'Gorman's interest in landscape is significant because few of the modern Mexican artists have evinced much desire to paint the beauties of the Mexican countryside. This picture shows his technical precision and his ingenuity in reducing complex forms to a simple, graceful pattern on a very intimate scale. For his easel works he prefers small panels; the painting is only  $22\frac{3}{8}$  inches by 18 inches, yet he has successfully realized here something of the majesty of the valley of Mexico, the spatial character of the land. Every object in the picture is faithfully observed, but the result is not copywork. He transforms

the prose of reality by a fresh point of view, delicately brushed textures, and subtle transitions of line and plane.

O'Gorman's portraits, like his landscapes, are particularly revelatory of the quality of his imagery. The portrait of Dorothy Elliot Ward, his most recent work, indicates his brilliance in this too often dull category of painting. In contrast to the usual assumption that portraiture should be a literal transcription of a given set of facial features, he believes that a portrait should be an alive, decorative characterization. Here one can see how forcibly he has delineated the person with his typical clarity and sureness, but he has also filled the painting with animation and spirit. One of the means by which he achieves this effect is his success in giving a quality of hyper-reality to every part of the picture. Objects that are generally inanimate suddenly become alive to enhance the subject. From the standpoint of technique, this work is one of O'Gorman's finest; the luminosity of color, of which some is apparent even in black-and-white reproduction, subtly illuminates all of the textural contrasts and the rhythmic movement of line. The painting fulfills his favorite definition of art as "fantasy and reality contained in one object."

Juan O'Gorman at thirty-seven has accomplished a great deal in many fields. It is not possible to pigeonhole his work or to describe him in terms of any of the contemporary "isms." He has been too busy as an architect, teacher, engineer, contractor, painter, and muralist to join any of the cliques. At the moment he is working, teaching, and painting principally, expanding his theories, techniques, and ideas. He is more concerned with what he is going to do than with what he has done in the past.

As an individual, O'Gorman reflects the same wit and charm that are such a positive and enjoyable part of his art. He is a delightful person and loves to talk, which he does interestingly. His conversation sparkles with ideas—a theory about painting, a comment on politics, his attitudes toward something new in poetry or architecture. He has a gift for irony and satire. He likes to conceive fanciful projects, one of which is to provide the Indians of Mexico with Leica cameras so that they can take pictures of the tourists. He likes to

tell about his experiences in the United States, particularly on his first trip, when he hitch-hiked through Texas and then took busses on up to Chicago. He likes our museums of art and natural history, the factory buildings, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and especially the people. His intellectual curiosity, not only about art, but about society and life, makes him an artist whose accomplishments will be continually interesting. As he says, he has only begun to explore the possibilities of form, materials, and techniques in architecture and painting.