

The Epic of Civilization

José Clemente Orozco's mural, located in the basement of Baker-Berry Library, was not always embraced by the College. After its completion in 1934, many students, faculty, and alumni called for its removal, citing a number of concerns with the piece, including its harsh critique of capitalism, religion, education, industrialization, and New England life.

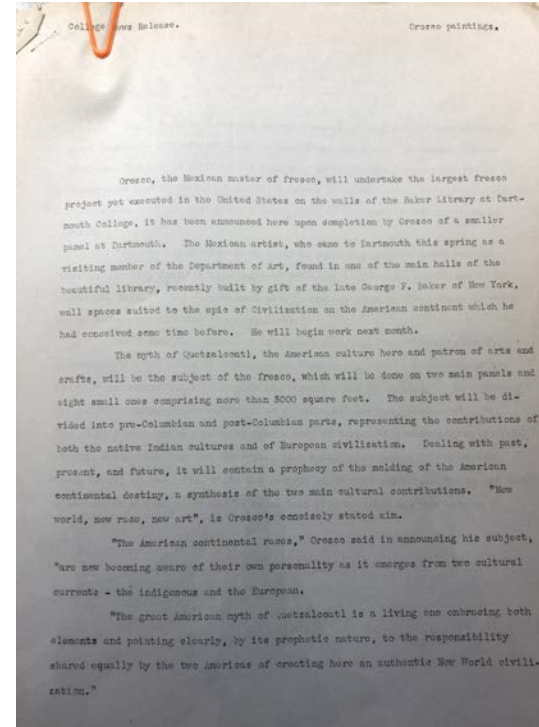


Boston Sunday Post: April 22, 1934

Commissioning

Artemis Packard, head of Dartmouth's Art History Department, urged College President Ernest Martin Hopkins to hire Orozco to bring out "matters which have been hitherto confined to the rarefied atmosphere of the classroom." Hopkins consented, hiring the famous Mexican artist as a visiting professor of the art department in 1932

"Orozco, the Mexican master of fresco, will undertake the largest fresco project yet executed in the United States on the walls of the Baker Berry Library at Dartmouth College, it has been announced"



College Press Release in 1932

Construction Years

“In spite of the pronounced aversion of Orozco to talk about his work and his projects, we managed to extract some words from him on what he intends to do at Dartmouth College...His brush will rest [the myth of Quetzalcoatl] from pre-columbian mythology to bestow it to the magnitude of a Homeric poem with continental scope

-North American Newspaper Alliance, J. Mendez, May 28, 1932

“Dear Mother,
That afternoon I went to the library where we learned how to find ourselves arounds. It is certainly a very beautiful place. A fellow is still working on the mural paintings downstairs”

- ‘George’, Sept. 29, 1933



Orozco working on murals (1932-1934), courtesy of Rauner Special Collection; People were shocked when the mural was finished as they were expecting it to be an idyllic tribute to America

Prof. Stacy May, Lauding Orozco Mural Project, Calls Frescoes Something of Permanent Worth to Future College Generations

The Dartmouth: May 10, 1932

"It seems to me that this arrangement which you made with Orozco is one of the most significant things which has been done in connection with art in America"

-Letter from the Advisory Committee to Treasury on Fine Arts sent to Packard's in 1934

"If every generation must recast the history of the world and interpret it according to its lights, we have been especially fortunate in witnessing in the murals of Orozco here at Dartmouth"

-Professor Jose M. Arce, professor of Spanish at Dartmouth, The Dartmouth 1934

Orozco gradually educates his watchers. A Dartmouth trustee, editor of the *Lowell Courier-Citizen*, looked over part of the West Wing work last year and tore into Orozco. Now he devotes two columns to him with illustration, in which he admits: "Much to my surprise, I have found myself swinging to a position of doubt, like one who came to scoff but who may yet remain to pray."

Steeplejack, NH: Nov. 16, 1933



Remnants of the Red Scare?

Many criticized the mural as sympathizing with Communist ideology. These critics tended to point to one specific fresco, which depicts a Mexican rebel, resembling the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, standing over a wealthy capitalist, greedily pocketing gold

“The walls of Dartmouth now contain as savage an attack upon American civilization as ever issued from the councils of the red revolution. Orozco has shouted forth in paint the Communist Manifesto”

-Lewis D. Stilwell, professor of Industrial Society

By **LEWIS D. STILWELL**

(Department of Industrial Society)

The walls of Dartmouth now contain as savage an attack upon American civilization as ever issued from the councils of red revolution. Orozco has shouted forth in paint the Communist Manifesto. He has laid on the indictment without mercy, subtlety, or humor. What he says seems bitter and surprisingly naive.

We will do well to accept his challenge. Inquire carefully as to whether our industry is a raw confusion, our education a parade of skeleton embryos, our patriotism a whited sepulchre. Clear out such corruption, wherever and whenever we can definitely identify it. Perhaps, if we are wise and steady in this task, the students of another generation can view Orozco's frescoes as historical—“That's a picture of what things were like in father's day.”

The Dartmouth: Feb 17, 1934

“Financial Waste”

The mural was commissioned during the The Great Depression. And the College certainly felt the effects of the devalued dollar. According to the Oct. 15, 1934 Annual Faculty Report, Berry-Baker library was struggling to maintain its expensive collection of book. So, when the College paid Orozco \$7000 (the equivalent to over \$100,000 today), many were irate with the College’s spending decisions

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A Nice Gray Enamel

“President Hopkins has stated,” says Professor Packard, “that he believes that no college has the right to exist unless it feeds directly into the carrying on of world affairs; unless its curriculum is cued to an intelligent realization of present needs. This panel represents dead minds concentrating on futile things instead of live subjects.”

What about the mural as a whole? Can the average mind comprehend, without explanation, the idea that the artist is striving to put across? Well, mine couldn’t. Then there was a painter, busy touching up the woodwork in the room.

“What do you think of the picture?” I asked him.

“Well, I don’t know much about them,” he answered. “But, now, don’t you think that the place would look a lot better if that wall was painted in this nice gray enamel, the same as the rest of the room?”

“Could have done that job for about \$37.50. Suppose the fellow who painted this stuff got more’n that a week.”

Boston Sunday Post: April 22, 1934

Dartmouth Alumni Magazine, March 1934

A light hearted attempt to counter alumni's damnation of Orozco's mural. The most notable alumni critique of the mural was Walter B. Humphry, who perceived it as an attack on both American culture and Dartmouth College. Humphrey later helped commission the Hovey Murals in Thayer Hall as a response

"The vehemence with which Walter expresses himself in regard to what is worthy in the respect in the field of art..."

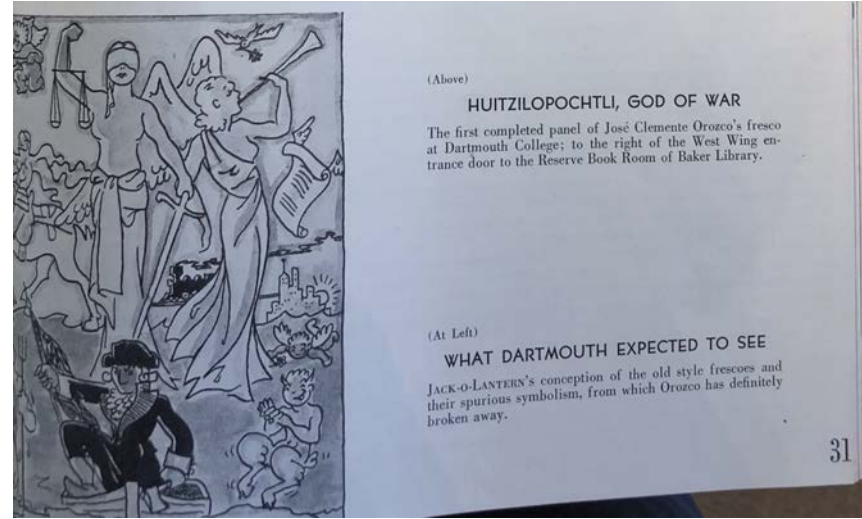
-Aug, 10, 1934 Letter from Packard to "Rollie"



“So What Does This Have to Do With Me?”

Many students seemed to be apathetic about Orozco's mural. According to an excerpt from the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, published in April 1934, one student was overheard saying: “They're just a lot of pictures to me and I don't believe they mean anything to four out five of the fellows around here

“It is at this point that average Dartmouth student enters his often unvoiced objections. Why Quetzalcoatl? Query those who can pronounce this name. Why Aztecs on the wall of Dartmouth College?
-Jack-o-Lantern



**Jack-O-Lantern;
February, 8
1933**

Comparing Past with Present

Once deemed by the National Commission to Advance American Art as “regrettable”, Orozco’s mural was proclaimed a national landmark in 2013. And the College has gone to great lengths to advertise the work. It is open to the public, and the Hoode Museum has created an interactive website for viewers to experience the mural

Potential Topic of Research: What accounts for the difference in attitude? Was the mural ahead of its time? Or was the response triggered because of the students themselves? How did the Depression play a role in the College’s attitude towards the mural



“The public’s initial reaction was one of outrage. One alumnus wrote: “(the frescoes are) a stench in the nostrils of good taste; an impudent affront to the very men who harbor it in their precepts.” Yet, as time wore on, people began to appreciate the murals for their artistic and educational values
-The Dartmouth; Oct 7, 1980