

# Anti-fascist mural by US painter Philip Guston restored in Mexico after 90 years

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A two-story-high mural, “The Struggle Against Terrorism”—alternatively known as “The Struggle against Fascism and War”—by the well-known Canadian-American painter Philip Guston (born Philip Goldstein in Montreal, 1913-1980) has recently been restored to public view at the Regional Museum of Michoacán, about 200 miles west of Mexico City.

The Guston Foundation, in collaboration with Mexico’s Ministry of Culture and the National Center for the Conservation of Artistic and Architectural Heritage, undertook a painstaking renovation of the work, censored and left to decay behind a false wall for nearly a century. In addition to the mural’s historic and artistic significance, its pressing relevance in today’s political context is unmistakable.

The newly restored 1,000-square-foot mural, unveiled in January 2025, now looks much as it did when it was completed in 1934. A kaleidoscopic depiction of the struggle against repression throughout history—from the persecution of Jesus in Biblical times, through the Inquisition of the 15th century up to the rise of Nazism and the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th—it abounds with tumbling bodies, instruments of torture and symbols of oppression, including crucifixes, swastikas, nude bound figures and hooded tormentors.

It was an extraordinary accomplishment for the 21-year-old Guston and his friend and fellow artist Reuben Kadish (born Chicago, 1913-1992). Commissioned by their mentor, the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, the pair drove the 1,700 miles from Los Angeles to western Mexico in an old car and completed the mural in six months.

The mention of Siqueiros, later involved in a dastardly assassination attempt on exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky in May 1940 in the Coyoacán area of Mexico City, should indicate that Guston’s life and career were inextricably bound up with some of the principal triumphs, tragedies and traumas of the 20th century: the 1917 October Revolution in Russia (and the Mexican Revolution 1910-1920), the rise of fascism and Nazism, the emergence of Stalinism and the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet workers’ state and the Communist Parties.

Using Siqueiros’ technique of polyangularity [a multifaceted perspective where a scene or figure is depicted from multiple angles and viewpoints] to simulate a cinematic effect, the restored mural bears the hallmarks of Mexican muralism, as pioneered not only by Siqueiros (1896-1974), but, above all, by Diego Rivera (1886 –1957) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), known as

“the Big Three.” Influenced by Surrealism, Futurism, and the frescos of European Renaissance, the Mexican muralists employed national iconography to tell the story of Mexico’s indigenous past, colonial oppression and anticipated its revolutionary future.

Nor was it accidental that the Mexican Secretary of Education commissioned a mural decrying authoritarian oppression in the 18th-century Baroque summer palace that once belonged to Emperor Maximilian. This Austrian archduke had been installed in 1864 with the backing of French Emperor Napoleon III to prop up the weak Mexican monarchy in a short-lived Second Mexican Empire. Maximilian’s reign lasted only three years till the restored Mexican Republic executed him by firing squad in 1867, a key incident in Mexico’s struggle for full independence, famously depicted in a series of paintings by French painter Édouard Manet at the time.

In its heyday in the 1920s and ‘30s, Mexican muralism was an inspiration to many, particularly left-wing artists and movements. Several of the Mexican artists were commissioned to create murals in the United States. In 1932-33, Rivera painted his masterful work devoted to the auto industry, *Detroit Industry Murals*, which remains central to the Detroit Institute of Arts. The series of frescos comprise one of the most powerful, evocative works of art created in the 20th century. Rivera was at the time sympathetic to Trotsky and cause of the future Fourth International.

With its most overt political content toned down, Mexican muralism influenced the Works Progress Administration’s public art projects in the US, resulting in murals in post offices and municipal buildings across the country. It continues to inspire Chicano and other public art projects to this day.

The heightened relevance of the restored Guston mural in the present political context has been underscored by many, including by the artist’s daughter Musa Mayer, who said, “I am deeply grateful to all those whose diligent work has brought this extraordinary early work back to life. Its message is as relevant today as it was 90 years ago.”

Then as now, fascism is the response of the ruling elite to its ever deepening economic and social disaster, the rising opposition of the working class and the prospect of socialist revolution. It is an “an attempt to perpetuate its existence by means of the most bestial and monstrous measures,” as Trotsky wrote in his last essay, “Bonapartism, Fascism and War,” found on his desk when he was murdered on August 20, 1940, in Coyoacán by the Stalinist

assassin Ramon Mercader.

The victory of fascism was not at all the inevitable product of capitalism's death agony. The policies of the reformist Social Democratic parties and the Stalinized Communist Parties paralyzed the insurgent working class in country after country (China, Britain, Germany, France, Spain) in the 1920s and 1930s, opening the door to Hitlerite and other forms of barbarism.

From 1923, Trotsky led the Marxist opposition in the Soviet Union to Stalin and later internationally. Only the struggle for the international unity and independence of the working class against imperialism, on the one hand, and counter-revolutionary Stalinism, on the other, represented the continuity of Bolshevism and a progressive, socialist solution. The "river of blood" between Marxism and Stalinism was a central political and cultural question of the 20th century, as the complex history of Guston's mural reveals.

In addition to painting murals, Guston's mentor Siqueiros helped found the Syndicate of Revolutionary Mexican Painters, Sculptors and Engravers. Differences between Siqueiros and Rivera led to the latter leaving the Syndicate over Siqueiros' attempt to subordinate artists to reactionary Stalinist policies.

The Syndicate's criticism of the bourgeois nationalist Obregon government resulted in Siqueiros' arrest and exile to Los Angeles in the 1930s, where he encouraged the young Guston and his radical artist circle. Deported from the US in 1932 upon the completion of murals that were more politically explicit than his sponsors had anticipated, Siqueiros subsequently went to Spain, where he defended the Popular Front strategy during the Spanish Civil War. Stalin and the Spanish Communist Party shamelessly and murderously opposed the socialist strivings of the working class and strangled the revolution.

Back in Mexico, as a loyal member of its Stalinist party, Siqueiros violently opposed the asylum given to Trotsky by the Cárdenas government in 1937, whereas Rivera initially offered the Russian revolutionary and his family refuge at his studio until they moved to a guarded compound in Coyoacán in 1939. Stalin and his international network of gangsters, determined to eliminate the leader of the Fourth International and the voice of genuine Marxism, made several attempts before they succeeded in assassinating Trotsky in August 1940. As noted above, Siqueiros had led a failed attempt three months earlier.

Stalinism, which falsely claimed the mantle of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, gravely damaged and disoriented generations of artists, as evidenced by Guston's own development. Upon his return to Los Angeles after painting the mural in question, he moved away from the Communist Party into left-liberal circles, in part a reaction to the unprincipled and cynical zig-zags of Stalinist policy.

As the WSWs has noted:

Marxism, or some version of it, gave way to psychoanalysis and not Freudian psychoanalysis at that, but Jungian, with its reactionary "collective unconscious," mythologizing and universal archetypes. There took place, as one commentator put it, a "rush inward."

Interestingly, like a handful of other radical artists who had succumbed to the Cold War atmosphere but experienced a political revival in response to the upheavals of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, Guston later rejected abstraction as too rarified to express contemporary reality.

"What kind of man am I," he notably asked, "sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?"

In response, Guston developed the unique iconography for which he is best known. His blunt, cartoonish heads, feet, fists, bricks, shoes and other bizarre objects communicate something of the violent and thuggish character of the American ruling class epitomized by the cigar-chomping, hooded figures crammed into cars like Keystone cops.

Guston's travails did not end, so to speak, with his death in 1980 at the age of 66. In 2020 a planned Guston retrospective was postponed in a cowardly act of self-censorship by four major museums that apparently anticipated a storm of protest from identity politics and racist critics objecting to a white painter's depictions of "Black pain," i.e., his anti-KKK, anti-lynching paintings from the 1930s. The museums asserted that Guston's work could not be shown "until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice ... can be more clearly interpreted." The touring exhibition finally opened in 2022 in Boston before traveling to Houston, Washington, DC and London.

The restoration of "The Struggle Against Terrorism" is a vindication of Guston's (and Kadish's) artistic integrity and anti-capitalist sentiments. In 1935, Roosevelt's New Deal programs were being implemented, "possible only in a country," as Trotsky observed, "where the bourgeoisie [had] succeeded in accumulating incalculable wealth." Today, bankrupt American capitalism has turned to Trump, a swindler, pathological liar and fascist, as it declares open war on its own heritage and the rights and conditions of broad masses of the population.



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