

OF THE PAINTBRUSH AND THE WORD:

RIVERA, NERUDA, SIQUEIROS

The *Canto general* is a set of poems written by Pablo Neruda in the 1940s that expound upon the struggle of the Latin American peoples to gain their freedom from the time of the Spanish conquest to the present day. It contains important series of poems from our Nobel laureate poet, such as “Heights of Macchu Picchu”, “The Conquistadors”, and “America, I Do Not Invoke Your Name in Vain,” among others from a total of fifteen chapters.

Neruda arrived in Mexico City as Chile’s General Consul on August 16, 1940, carrying with him part of the “General Song of Chile”, that was the initial title of the collection of poems that subsequently would broaden its scope to take in America as a whole, in keeping with the poet’s desire for the liberation of all the peoples of the continent. Upon his arrival, he describes his first impressions as follows: “The intellectual life of Mexico was dominated by painting. These Mexican painters were covering the city with history and geography, making their presence felt in civic life, with iron-clad polemics ...” He would stay on in the post until 1943. It is during this period that he met the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, establishing with them lasting bonds of friendship and solidarity.

Stripped of his rights and politically persecuted in Chile, Neruda returned to Mexico in 1948 and again in 1949 for the Latin American Peace Congress, staying on until the end of the year due to health problems. He made clear, along with Siqueiros and Rivera, his interest in the defense of democracy in that country and in all of America. By then Neruda had finalized *Canto General*, and it was published in Mexico for the first time in Mexico in two editions, one by the work’s sponsoring committee and the other by Océano Editions.

Siqueiros and Rivera each contributed painted images to these editions, filling the normally blank pages at the beginning and end of a book, in this way establishing their political-artistic bond with the poet. The illustration on the pages under the front cover is titled “Pre-Hispanic America” and is the work of Diego Rivera. The painting, divided in two, refers to Mayas and Incas, exalting the images of indigenous peoples and the cultures that existed prior to the arrival of the conquistador, in vertically-ordered scenes. A great Sun God gives rise to the two fraternal cultures, accompanied by typically American flora and fauna as well as the animals that arrived with the foreigners. This interpretation through images corresponds to the poem “The Lamp of the Earth,” which says the following with regard to the Maya:

*Chichén, your whispers grew in the jungle dawn
Toil went on shaping honeycombed symmetry
In your yellow citadel
And speculation threatened the blood of the pedestals
Dismantled the sky in the shade
Directed medicine
Wrote upon the stones*

And this about the Inca:

*The south was a gold amazement
The high solitudes
Of Macchu Picchu in the doorway of the sky
Were full of oils and songs
Man had destroyed the aeries of
The great birds on high
The farmer touched the seed
With his fingers wounded by snow*

The inside back cover belongs to David Alfaro Siqueiros and illustrates the poem "The Sand Betrayed" from the series "Lands and Peoples." It shows us a great human figure with its arms extended, emerging from the fire of a volcano. It is the symbolic birth of the American. The work is presented from an attractive aerial perspective with a strong igneous tinge, elements that add force to the composition.

The verses pray:

*And I saw how many we were
How many stood by me
There wasn't anybody
It was everybody
They didn't have a face
They were people
They were metal
They were roads
And I walked in the steps of the spring in the world*

After this first printing, some clandestine editions appeared in Chile and then, in October of the same year, the second edition mentioned, that of Ediciones Océano, was published in Mexico. In this way, the poems hit the street, where the people encountered them, as had happened in the Federated Aztec Republic with the painting that the muralists took from their easels to the walls of the city, displaying their social and political content. Since then, the poems of Pablo Neruda have been published in several languages and countries.

Of the 500 initial volumes, signed by Siqueiros, Rivera, and Neruda in a symbolic ceremony on April 3, illuminated by only ten candles mounted on a pair of candelabras, 300 were for their sponsors in Russia, Italy, Hungary, England, Spain, the United States, France, Czechoslovakia, and of course, Latin America. The funds thus obtained made it possible for Neruda to continue his work.

Years later, at the request of a New York firm, Neruda and Siqueiros put together a portfolio with a selection of poems from *The Canto general*, in English, illustrated with ten original lithographs by Siqueiros, originally in black and white, that the artist would later render in color as well. The idea came about in Mexico when the poet traveled there to give several recitals at the National Autonomous University. It was originally to consist of a book about the murals that David Alfaro Siqueiros painted in our country [Chile] in the southern city of Chillán, where he settled during his exile.

The publisher was Fernando Mourlot, of the U.S. firm Racolin Press Inc., and the 235 copies of the edition came out in 1968 under the name *Pablo Neruda, Poems from the Canto General*. Of these, only 200 were sold.

The friendship between Neruda and Siqueiros was born in Mexico when Neruda worked there as Chilean consul and the painter languished in jail after having organized an armed assault on the home of Leon Trotsky, who was exiled in Mexico. After five months hiding out in the mountains, Siqueiros was arrested in Hostotipaquillo, a town in the state of Jalisco. Let's remember that the groundwork for friendship between the two was already laid, given their ideological affinity, their artistic and social sensibilities, and their shared membership in the Communist Party.

After six months in prison, Siqueiros was urged to leave the country in the face of imminent threats to his life, which he did, arriving in Chile as a political exile, setting up residence under house arrest for two and a half years in the Chilean city of Chillán. In need of a visa to enter Chile, the painter turned to Pablo Neruda, who secured one for him by arranging an invitation from the Chilean Federation of Visual Artists to teach a course on mural painting. This favor would cost Neruda a two-month suspension from his job as consul. During the years that Siqueiros was in Chile, at the behest of the Mexican ambassador in Chile, Siqueiros would produce a mural for the library of the Escuela México. The work was titled "Death to the Invader" and depicts the Mexican and Chilean wars for independence.

It was not the last time that Siqueiros would be jailed. In 1960, in Caracas, he gave speeches at the Universidad Central and the School of Fine Arts in which he made harshly critical statements about Mexican president Adolfo López

Mateos, who was visiting Venezuela at the same time. Upon return to Mexico he was jailed and sent once again to the Lecumberri prison.

Neruda visited Siqueiros in jail the first time he was imprisoned. The second time he sent Siqueiros these verses from Havana, Cuba:

*I leave for you here, with the light of January
the heart of free Cuba
and, Siqueiros, don't forget that I await you
in my volcanic and snow-covered country.*

*I have seen your jailed painting
That is like jailing a blazing fire*

*And this outrage pains me as I leave
Your painting is the beloved country
Mexico is imprisoned with you.*

During the four years he was in jail, Siqueiros converted his cell into a workshop and produced a substantial body of easel work. Among these are one hundred drawings that he titled "Prints from Jail," drawn with a very free technique and using as material shoe polish that, warmed up, could be used as ink. He used this to paint humans in motion and abstract figures. From these one hundred prints, Siqueiros selected the ten that he would use to put together the plates for the portfolio of lithographs that were published in 1968 to accompany selected poems from Neruda's *Canto General*.

The original black and white lithographs made use of wide and free strokes on each plate, more pictorial than graphic, full of energy and force. They refer especially to the mountain range and to the sea and with that, to Chileans' Andean sensibility. Siqueiros' subsequent addition of color is very simple and generally consists of no more than the addition of one or two colors to the background of each plate.

Mourlot the publisher sent an expert printer to Mexico with all the material needed for the lithography. Siqueiros finished the plates in two months. They were printed in France by the Imprimerie Nationale de Paris. Upon Neruda's death on September 23, 1973, Siqueiros wrote him a fiery letter, "delivered in the hand of his people" that concludes thusly: "Pablo Neruda, you live and will live in the conscience of all human beings that cherish our own sovereignty and a more humane, dignified, and generous life, one that banishes the hunger and affliction of the many."

Source: María Soledad Mansilla Clavel, *Escáner Cultural*, March 12-April 12, 2000. Available online at <http://www.escaner.cl/escaner15/articulo.htm>. English translation by David Spener.