

Mexican Art in Lund's Museum of Sketches, Sweden



The Mexican collection at Lund's Museum of Sketches is an unusual and valuable collection both from a Mexican and from an international perspective: the collection was built by Gunnar Bråhammar in the late 1960s, and counts works by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and Juan O'Gorman but also Francisco Eppens, Rufino Tamayo, González Camarena, Raul Angiano, Leopoldo Méndez and Desiderio Xochitiotzin. The article discusses especially "the New Deal" by Rivera, "the Image of Mexico" at the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City by Morado Chavez, and "El Pájaro Amarillo" by Goertiz, and the great stone mosaic at the Central Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico by O'Gorman.

By Linda Fagerström and Elisabet Haglund

DURING the 1960s, when art often was used in political struggles and had many social overtones, Gunnar Bråhammar – head of the Archives for Decorative Art (today Museum of Sketches) in Lund – decided to buy sketches and models of Mexican public art. According to his diary, Bråhammar chose Mexico since "this country represents one of the monumental peaks in the art of the twentieth century" and holds an "art, so full of social pathos, which was enormously influential and had great impact far beyond the borders of Mexico."¹ During three trips he made in 1966, 1967 and 1974 Bråhammar, in collaboration with Swedish artist Rosa Lie Johansson – who lived in Mexico –, collected works by the most famous artists involved in Mexican modern mural painting.

The *raison d'être* and mission of the museum – created in 1934 – were the collection of sketches and models of public works of art. Its founder, professor in Art History at Lund University Ragnar Josephson, considered the moment of creation as fundamental in what he called "the birth of a work of art."² In a time when few artists, galleries and collectors considered sketches a valuable material, when many overlooked the unique possibilities – when it comes to understanding artistic creation – that sketches can offer, Josephson and the museum's personnel realized the importance of such material and decided to visit artists in their studios in order to collect models and sketches: first in Sweden and Scandinavia; then in Paris in the beginning of the 1960s where they collected significant works by Matisse, Dufy, Ozenfant and Sonia and Robert Delaunay.

When Bråhammar showed up in Mexico in 1966, he had the opportunity to bring back to Sweden the work of many famous artists and representative examples from Mexican public art. The Mexican collection gathers works by David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco – three artists often called "the great ones" – but also by Francisco Eppens, Rufino Tamayo, González Camarena, Raúl Angiano, Leopoldo Méndez

and Desiderio Xochitiotzin. In 1966 Bråhammar had the opportunity to take photographs of Siqueiros' studio in Cuernavaca where the Mexican painter was finishing "The March of Humanity" for Polyforum (built in Mexico in the end of the 1960s) – of which the museum acquired some sketches. Bråhammar did not succeed in buying the material he wished to from Orozco's family, but one of his 1924 sketches for the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria is amongst the oldest ones in the collection.

The collection offers various perspectives on Mexican history after the independence in the early 1800s, and on the 1910 revolution. In 1922, when minister of education José Vasconcelos held his speech at the opening of the new building for the Secretariat of Public Education, he presented his plans for a historical and cultural project where the new revolutionary administration would focus on the national by searching and finding the essence in the original Hispanic-American culture. Vasconcelos trusted in art's revolutionary mission. In his speech he mentioned a painting by Diego Rivera which pictures women wearing typical dresses from Mexico's various provinces: this official explicit attention towards the traditions of the People later became part of Mexican public art when it gathered pre-Colombian aesthetics, historical images and modern expression.

The gigantic work Juan O'Gorman executed at the Central Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (1951–1952) is maybe one of the utmost achievements of the union between pre-Colombian esthetic ideals and modern expression. Sketches of the stone mosaics covering the whole building are also part of the museum's collections. O'Gorman provided the museum with almost all the sketches of "Scenes from the Liberation Struggle" (1961–1962), a big-scale wall painting made for the Historical Museum (*Museo Nacional de Historia*) in Chapultepec Castle.

Many public works of art were made between 1920 and 1960 in the spirit of Vasconcelos' policy. The artists had started painting political murals on their own in the



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Figure 1. **José Chavez Morado**, *Image of Mexico*, Central courtyard of the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, 1964. Model in bronze for pillar in bronze, 42 cm, scale 1:25.

Figure 2. **José Chavez Morado**, *Image of Mexico*, Central courtyard of the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, 1964. Models in paper for pillar in bronze, 107 cm, scale 1:10. Photos from Museum of Sketches, Sweden



very beginning of the 1920s. In the first years of the revolution, Mexican society underwent heavy changes with important attempts to redistribute land, improve workers and farmers' condition, and provide education for everyone. But, towards the end of the 1930s, the great social project came to stagnation.

Nobel Prize Winner, poet and writer Octavio Paz described how revolutionary artists came to adapt to political circumstances, and how the government, on the other hand, came to adjust to the artists.³ According to Paz, Rivera and Siqueiros can be considered revolutionary artists⁴ but their art was financed by a government which was not Marxist and furthermore had stopped being revolutionary. In that way, the government could give the impression of being progressive and populist; but Paz considered that only a mask. Anyhow, the artists in Mexi-

co had the possibility to work independently – which had been impossible in Russia. In this political context, Paz stressed Orozco's independence and rebel attitude, often more genuine than the others.

Diego Rivera: A Political Site. Place for Change

"The New Deal" by Diego Rivera is not a sketch but a work of art in itself. It is one of twenty-one fresco panels in the great work "Portrait of America" painted in 1933–1934 for the New Workers' School at 51 West 14th street – the headquarters of the Communist Party in New York.

"Portrait of America" tells, in a pedagogic and/or propaganda-like way, the global political situation in 1933 and the struggle between communism, fascism and capitalism. It depicts contemporary recognizable figures

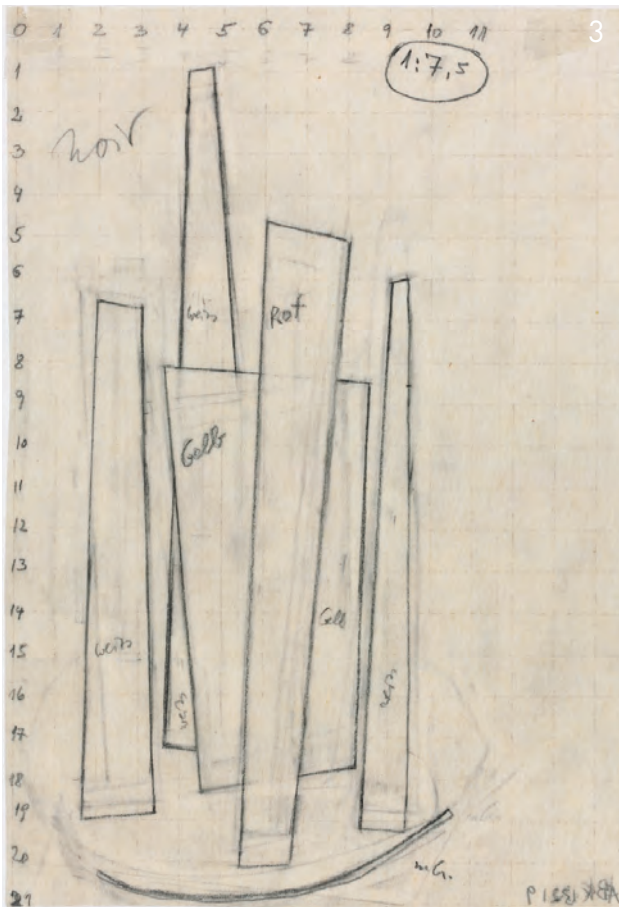


Figure 3. **Mathias Goeritz**, *The Satellite Towers*, Plaza de las Torres, Ciudad Satélite, Mexico City, 1957-1958. Sketch in graphite for sculpture in polychrome concrete, 21 x 15 cm.

Figure 4. **Mathias Goeritz**, *The Yellow Bird*, Jardines del Bosque, Guadalajara, 1957. Sketch in graphite for sculpture in painted concrete, 24 x 32 cm.

Figure 5. **Mathias Goeritz**, *The Yellow Bird*, Jardines del Bosque, Guadalajara, 1957. Collage in paper for sculpture in painted concrete, 37 x 52 cm.

Figure 6. **Mathias Goeritz**, *The Yellow Bird*, Jardines del Bosque, Guadalajara, 1957. Sculpture in painted concrete.

Figure 7. **Diego Rivera**, *The New Deal*, Mural painting in al fresco, panel n° 15 from the suite *Portrait of America*, 182 x 178 cm. Made for New Workers School in New York in 1933. Photos from Museum of Sketches, Sweden.

– Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Einstein –, historical characters – Lenin, Marx, Engels, Washington, Lincoln –, but also American communist leaders and workers from industrial companies. (Apart from a group of anonymous textile workers and Rosa Luxemburg, there are no or extremely few women in “Portrait of America”; both past and present are a men’s world in Rivera’s work.)

“The New Deal” panel bears the name of Roosevelt’s reform program in the early 1930s. Rivera represented the NRA (National Recovery Administration) as a blue eagle in the central panel: it is surrounded by a violent battle between coalmine workers and the steel industry agents. The dynamic composition is filled with movement: armed men and police are fighting everywhere. The sign says: “Workers unite! Or the blue eagle will wear a brown shirt. NRA paves the way for fascism!!”

In May 1933, little time before he started working at the New Workers’ School, Rivera had been forced away from his work on a mural named “Man at the Crossroads” for the Rockefeller Center in New York: he had refused to accede to Rockefeller’s demand to take away Lenin’s figure from the original composition. The artist got paid however, and was able to work at the New Workers’ School instead. With “Portrait of America” he wished to arouse unity among the Left in New York and the United States,



but it was – ironically perhaps – Rockefeller’s decision to destroy the unfinished “Man at the Crossroads” in February 1934 which brought together “leftist artists in a way that no other single event of the early 1930s did.”⁴⁵

In 1942 a fire destroyed most of the panels of “Portrait of America”, except eight that were saved: “Modern Industry”, “World War”, “The New Freedom”, “The New Deal”, “Mussolini”, “Opponent of Fascism”, “Opponent of Nazism” and “Proletarian Unity”. Of those surviving panels, Brâhmar had the chance to buy “The New Deal” (today the most important artwork in the museum’s Mexican collection).

Mathias Goertiz:

A Bird of Architecture or Architecture as a Bird

In 1957 Mathias Goertiz (1915–1990) made the sculpture “El Pájaro Amarillo” (“The Yellow Bird”) in Guadalajara: its architectonic form associated with expressive color – reminding abstract monochromatic painting – makes it one of Mexico’s most important abstract public art work of the second half of the twentieth century.

The sculpture, after many years of decay, was restored in 2008. A series of sketches for “El Pájaro Amarillo” is in the collection, and shows Goertiz’s search, starting from the image of a flying bird until he finds a more abstract

form. This tendency is also present in “Las Torres Satellite” – the “Satellite Towers” (1957-1958) – where the artist, inspired by pre-Colombian tradition (especially a group of stone stelae at a cult place in Tula), reached a synthesis between architecture and sculpture. The towers, between 36 and 58 meters high, were designed in collaboration with Luis Barragán.⁶

José Chávez Morado: How to Support a Museum?

José Chávez Morado (1909-2002) created several monumental works in bronze from 1960 onwards. One of the best known, “Image of Mexico” (1964), stands in the atrium of the National Museum of Anthropology and

History (*Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia*) in Mexico City. A colossal bronze pillar supports the ceiling while water flows from its top down into a basin underneath. Chávez Morado covered the column’s surface with reliefs depicting two main themes: the consequences of Spanish colonization in Mexico, and the struggle for freedom and the social and agrarian revolution.

Some drawings for the reliefs, a small bronze model of the column, as well as sketches of Chávez Morado’s great stone mosaic “Life and Death” (made for CIBA Pharmacology Plant in 1954), are also in the museum’s collection.

Notes

- 1 Gunnar Bråhammar, “Ateljébesök i Mexico” in Jan Torsten Ahlstrand (ed.), *Visionärer och utmanare* (Lund: Skissernas Museum, 1995).
- 2 Ernst Josephson, *Konstverkets Födelse (Birth of a Work of Art)* (Lund: Sweden, 1940).
- 3 Octavio Paz, “Mural Painting” in *Essays on Mexican Art* (Mexico: Fondo de la Cultura Económica, 1987) (English translation 1993): 111-202.
- 4 Octavio Paz, “Mural Painting” in *Essays on Mexican Art*: 132.
- 5 Luis Martin Lozano & Juan Coronel Rivera, “Portrait of America” in Luis-Martin Lozano & Juan Coronel Rivera, *Diego Rivera. The Complete Murals* (Taschen, 2008): 376.
- 6 Sketches will be shown at the exhibition “Beyond Borders: Mexican Public Art” opening in the museum October 10, 2010.

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- Bråhammar, Gunnar. “Ateljébesök i Mexico” in Jan Torsten Ahlstrand (ed.), *Visionärer och utmanare*. Lund: Skissernas Museum (the Museum of Sketches), 1995.
- Josephson, Ragnar. *Konstverkets Födelse (Birth of the Artwork)*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1940.
- Lozano, Luis-Martin & Juan Coronel Rivera. “Portrait of America” in Luis-Martin Lozano & Juan Coronel Rivera. *Diego Rivera. The Complete Murals*. Taschen, 2008.
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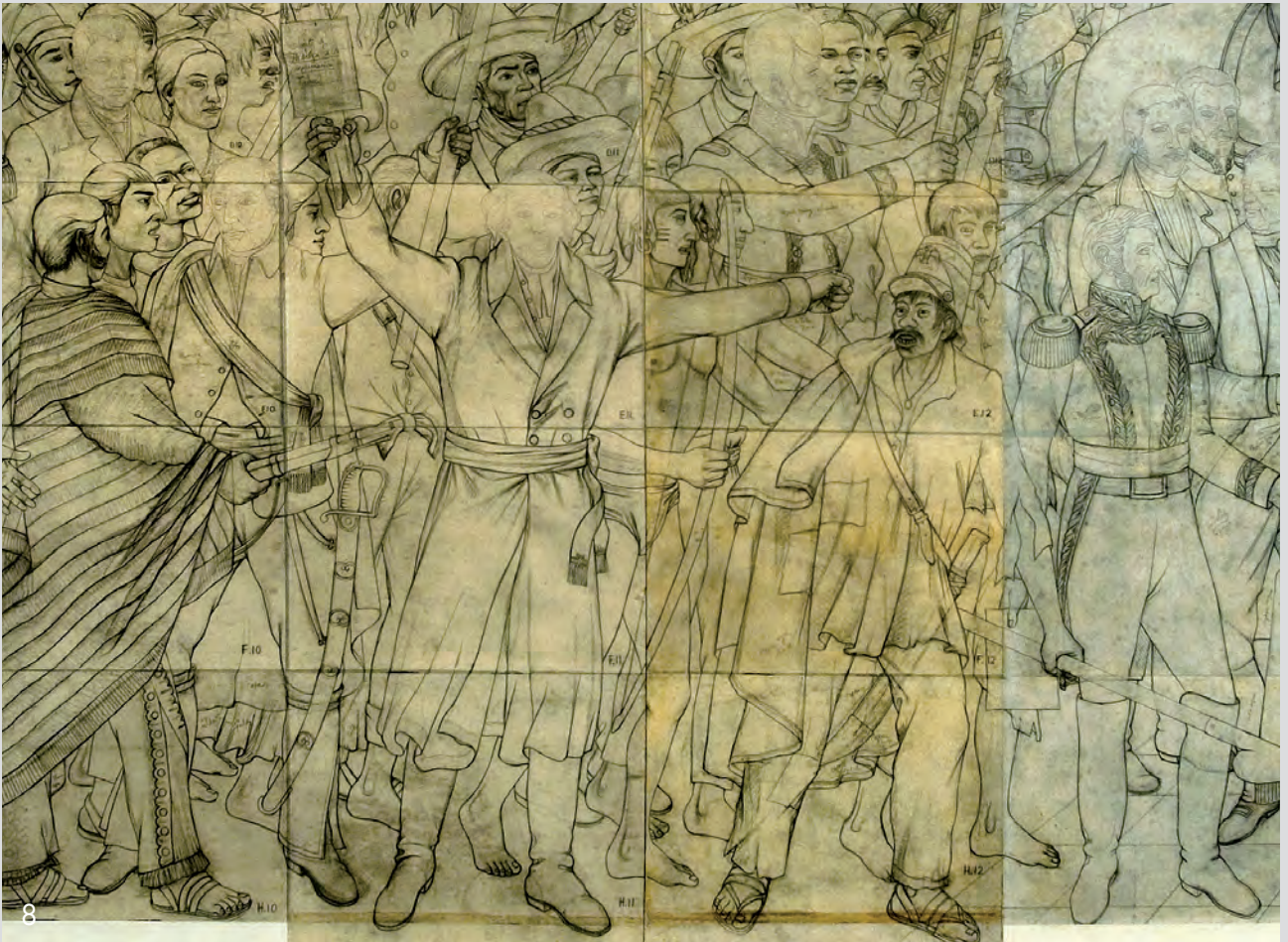
(PhD) is currently working at Lund’s Museum of Sketches. Her interests are: public art, modernism and questions concerning the social histories of art. She teaches Art History and Cultural Studies at Malmo University College, Sweden. They recently published together *Place, Poetics and Politics. Contemporary Art in Public Space* (2010).

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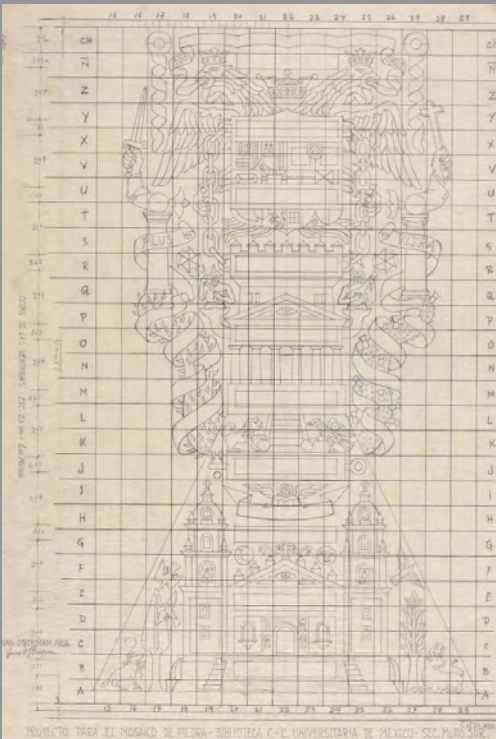
Figure 8. **Juan O’Gorman**, *The Independence*, National Museum of History, Mexico City, 1961-1962. Sketches in graphite for mural painting, scale 1:1.

Figure 9. **Juan O’Gorman**, *The Independence*, National Museum of History, Mexico City, 1961-1962. Mural painting, 450 x 1580 cm. Photos from Museum of Sketches, Sweden





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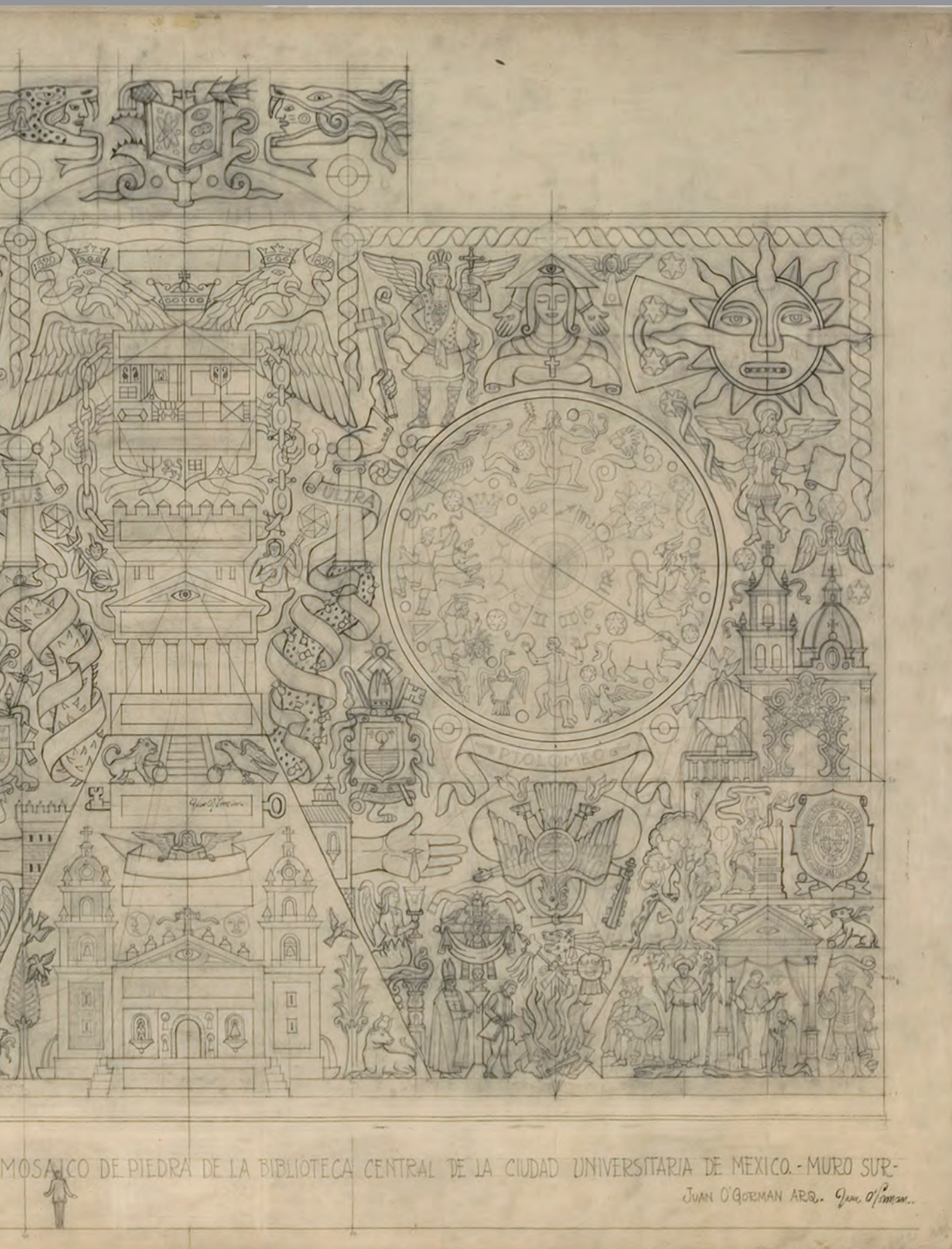
Figure 10. **Juan O'Gorman**, *Three Periods of Mexican Culture*, Mural mosaic at Library of National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, 1951–1953.

Figure 11. **Juan O'Gorman**, *Three Periods of Mexican Culture*, Library of National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, 1951–1953. Sketch in graphite for mural mosaic, 73 x 50 cm.

Figure 12. **Juan O'Gorman**, *Three Periods of Mexican Culture*, Library of National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, 1951–1953. Sketch in graphite for mural mosaic, 94 x 120 cm. Photos from Museum of Sketches, Sweden.



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MOSAICO DE PIEDRA DE LA BIBLIOTECA CENTRAL DE LA CIUDAD UNIVERSITARIA DE MEXICO. - MURO SUR-

JUAN O'GORMAN ARQ. Juan O'Gorman.