

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHINESE ARTISTS AND MEXICAN PAINTER DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS

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(Renowned Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros was invited to come to China for an official visit in October of this year. Last year, on a visit to the Soviet Union, he delivered “An Open Letter to Soviet Artists” that was later published in the US progressive publication *The Masses and the Mainstream*. On October 23, Siqueiros delivered a speech entitled “The Mexican Modern Painting Movement” to an audience of Chinese artists in Beijing. On the 24th and 30th, Chinese artists and Siqueiros engaged in two discussions concerning issues such as Siqueiros’s speech, his “Open Letter to Soviet Artists,” and his views on Chinese art. The participants of these conversations included: Ye Qianyu, Wu Zuoren, Cao Ruohong, Shao Yu, Ni Yide, Dong Xiwen, Wang Xun, Wang Qi, Zhang Wuzhen, Li Zongjin, Li Hua, Ye Fu, and others. Below is a brief summary of these two discussions for our readers’ reference. The speakers have not reviewed this article, and any misrepresentations of the discussion are solely the responsibility of the reporter.)

OCTOBER 24, AFTERNOON AT THE CHINESE ARTISTS’ ASSOCIATION

Siqueiros began by expressing his hopes that the Chinese artists would honestly and frankly share their thoughts on his speech and open letter. He expressed willingness to continue to discuss Mexican painting, the

Paris school, Abstraction, the Soviet style, etc., in order to supplement the speech from the day before.

Siqueiros: “Mexican artists oppose the Paris school [the European avant-garde]. I believe that realism (*xianshi zhuyi*) isn’t a stagnant style but rather keeps progressing forward. In the past, many artists did not fully realize the potential of realism and they didn’t develop it to its utmost. But, simply, each era has its own contributions and characteristics. As the times kept moving forward, artists came to discover the problem of representing space (for example, in the Middle Ages, Christian art was a flat, depthless representation). [They also came to] acquire [the skills of] perspective and chiaroscuro. Later, Raphael emerged, and then came the Renaissance. This is an even better period. I think the era of realism has not passed. Rather, it is more fully developed. I think the era of realism has only just begun.”

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Speaking of Chinese painting, Siqueiros said, “Right now there is a popular belief that Chinese painting is two-dimensional, not three-dimensional. This kind of thinking exists in Europe, but I think it is a mistake. I went to the Palace Museum and looked at many classical Chinese paintings. Even at that time painters were already experimenting with depth and shadows. These paintings were made five hundred years before perspective was discovered in Europe.

“In eras of decline, art does not develop. No matter how skillfully artists try to imitate the great works of the past, when it comes to creativity they fall far short. The abstract school says, ‘We have already reached the perfection of realism. Nothing further can be done to improve on it.’ So they changed direction. They no longer concerned themselves with problems in objects and instead looked for subjective problems to solve. Artists in that time thought ‘the sleeping world is more important than the living,’ as if sleep were not also part of life. The abstract school said: the essence of painting is color. It doesn’t need to ‘describe’ anything, as long as the colors are well balanced, that is enough. A painting is just a bunch of lines, it doesn’t need to be about anything. Starting in 1922, Mexican artists began opposing this kind of thought. We said: ‘Realist painting is still developing. It can create a richer and more complete art.’

“There’s another group [of artists] who think that ‘realism’ is just wholesale repetition. They use art to express the decisions in their hearts. They think that classical styles are fixed styles. [As a result] their

works bore audiences and become meaningless. This is the reason why I whole-heartedly criticized the Soviet style of painting.

“Soviet painters think that realism is [Gustave] Courbet and [Ilya] Repin. Of course these two artists were very good. But if they were alive in the 20th century, their style would have progressed further.

“It is difficult to find new forms (*xingshi*) [of representation]. This can’t be expressed with words. This has to completely rely on an artist’s talent.”

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[Next,] speaking of specific issues regarding the production of realist painting, he [Siqueiros] emphasized the following points:

“First, when painting human figures, one should observe the subject’s expressions and color, understand [his] inner feelings, and examine his everyday gestures and movements from many perspectives. This is direct realism.

“Second, when painting deceased figures, you can’t directly paint their likeness. You have to examine photographs and sculptures of them from after they’ve passed away. Furthermore, you have to study [their] materials and political concerns. This is the objective method. . . .

“Third, there’s realism of the spirit [*jingsheng*] (but not imitative landscape). . . . China has many large-scale works of this kind. Landscape paintings’ subject isn’t what you can see right in front of you. [You have to] look from every possible angle (i.e., diffusive perspective). Good landscape paintings surpass what we can see. Chinese painting is very consistent with these principles.

“Fourth, realist imagination. Imagination in realism is not the same as imagination in abstract painting. A fantasy painting without a realist foundation is inauthentic [*bu zhenshi*], it’s pure madness. But our fantasies are about things that could happen. For example, when Da Vinci painted a flying machine, people said that he was mad, but now we recognize that this was the first artist to dream up an airplane. This is [what I mean by] the realist imagination. Here’s another example. Twenty years ago, I painted an imaginary atom bomb explosion. That was a possible reality. So why can’t I imagine urban buildings in a landscape painting?”

OCTOBER 30, AFTERNOON AT THE CHINESE ARTISTS’ ASSOCIATION

[First] muralist **Wang Qi** delivered his talk on Siqueiros: “Comrade Siqueiros’s intention is to create a synthetic, comprehensive art that encompasses all the characteristics of the plastic arts. This kind of art

should include monumental social themes. It should create never-before-seen forms of art [*yishu xingshi*] that have great social significance and can encourage and invigorate the people [*guwu renmin*]. Therefore [he is] not satisfied with the old modes of expression [*biaoxian fangfa*] of the past. [He thinks] we must pursue revolutionary innovations, oppose academicism and formalism, promote realism, and march unceasingly toward the future [*xiangqian fazhan*]. On these key points regarding the artistic question I fundamentally agree.

“... With respect to synthesizing the special characteristics of many plastic arts, I can see Comrade Siqueiros’s efforts in this area. For example, in his painting *Fascist Process* the content is rich and complex, with many small vignettes. There are also many styles—Fauvism’s color, Cubism’s combination of shapes, and so on—as well as the multiple-perspectives theory that he [Siqueiros] created. From this we can see the artist’s efforts to make a breakthrough in style. However, there’s another issue: It would not be so easy for the masses to understand a work like this. Only after much explanation from the artist or a third party would the masses understand the content.

“Painting is unique in that it can, in a very simple and direct manner, communicate directly to the audience through sight and make itself understood. It cannot rely on rational explanation. It is different from literature and theater. . . . The minimum requirement for art is that it preserve its integrity and harmony. When the special characteristics of Cubism or Futurism were applied to their own works, the results were harmonious and unified (even if that unity is different from the unity we seek in realism). But if we mechanically take the stylistic characteristics from different schools of art and combine them into one painting, then we will have destroyed each of their essences, since each painting school’s essence stems from the style’s purpose. Besides, a painter’s creative act is fundamentally a way to comprehend the world. As [his] knowledge deepens, his [artistic] requirements also deepen (especially for progressive artists). It is not possible to get to know the objective world purely through concrete means—you can’t just put everything indiscriminately into the painting. [You] have to choose what is important, what gets to the quintessential meaning, what is appropriate for the specific characteristics of that painting.”

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Next, the painter **Dong Xiwen** shared his opinions:

“... I agree with what Comrade Siqueiros said: ‘We should discuss

the question of form [*xingshi*]. Discussing the question of form does not make us formalists.’

“When Soviet painters consider the form of their representation [*biaoxian xingshi*], they invariably follow the methods [*fangfa*] of their old masters. This has its strengths—it can carry forward and promote their traditions. But on the other hand, because their paintings frequently take on the styles of the great masterpieces of the past . . . they are often restricted. The emotion and style in the artworks have also been restricted. When it comes to art, if we repeat the art of the past again and again, people will grow tired of it. I believe that if we think of any great master, although their original works were flawless, still if we copy them too often, people will tire of them. Repin and [Vasily] Surikov are like this. Certainly we can’t use past artists’ [*guren*] feelings in place of our own feelings, or use past artists’ styles to limit our own. This is the problem with Soviet painting. The path they are walking is not wide enough. A Soviet painter might say: ‘if you look closely, you will find many profound and wonderful things.’ But if you look at the big picture, the road they walk is not wide. I’m not commenting on whether Soviet painting itself is good or bad, but if every other country also paints this way, then I agree with what Comrade Siqueiros said: This is [just] another form of ‘globalism’ [*shijie zhuyi*]. When it comes to painting, we can share the same themes, but the style cannot be the same. Each race or nation [*minzu*] has her own distinct style [*fengge*], just as they have different faces and looks. Therefore we in China must also develop its national traditions [*minzu chuantong*].”

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“[On his visit to the Mexican art exhibition] without discussing themes and content, just from looking at the style [*biaoxian xingshi*], one can tell that they are pursuing something new. You can tell by looking at them that what they are trying to portray is not simply the surface reality [*biaomian de zhenshi*]. But looking at the works, I still felt unsatisfied. Maybe it’s just me; maybe others also felt this way, but I couldn’t understand it. On this point I agree with Comrade Wangqi. Comrade Siqueiros went over the essence of each school of modernism, and I agree—I experienced what he described. The realism that is exemplified by the Mexican paintings has synthesized the strengths of these painting schools and supplemented their weaknesses. After listening to these talks, I am left with an even deeper impression from the Mexican paint-

ing exhibition. At the same time, I feel more strongly that some of the works (oil paintings) were rather pieced together. I agree with Comrade Wangqi's opinion—isn't there a problem here with reconciling (*tiaohe*) and unifying (*tongyi*)? I felt like the style of these works was overly complicated, chaotic and messy, and not sufficiently natural [*zhenshi*]. The spirit of synthesizing [different artistic styles] is right. But this kind of piecing together is too restrictive on an artist's style [*biaoxian fengge*]. Artists should have their own style, their own individuality and feeling. These works were to some extent influenced by their predecessors. But more important is the attitude of these painters toward nature [*ziran*]. Different artists see things differently. I think that paying attention to an object's nature [*zhenshi*] and depicting it objectively—that is the right way.”

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Next, the artist **Li Zongjin** shared his views:

“The Mexican painting exhibition has made big waves in the Chinese art world. I overheard two young students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts debating the question of integrating form and content. The first young person said: ‘Visiting the Mexican painting exhibition had a powerful impact on my emotions. This impact is something that you can't get from looking at Soviet paintings.’ The second young person shot back: ‘But after you felt that powerful impact, was there anything else behind it?’ The first student gave further explanation, but the second rebutted: ‘You are getting all of this from theoretical concepts, not from the paintings' surfaces directly.’ This debate made me realize something.

“Here's the real question: Mexican artists work hard to explore new pictorial structures [*huamian jiegou*] in order to create a powerful impact on their audience. But their works lack the lifelike imagery that can enrich the pictorial structure through which people can directly and intuitively understand their meaning. Therefore, further articulation is needed. This gets us to the question that Comrade Siqueiros raised in his ‘Open Letter to Soviet Artists.’ In my view, what Soviet painting lacks is exactly that toward which Mexican painting strives. Soviet painting is insufficient in this respect: it has let go of the power within visual language. The ‘Open Letter’ made it very clear: purposeful, technological portrayal of human figures. But to say that because of this, Soviet artists have a tendency toward Roman academicism, that isn't right. My understanding is this: academic painting lacks purpose; the figures that

it portrays lack of personality and come off as affected and pretentious. But if we agree on this and then apply that to Soviet painting, that would be inappropriate. To say that formalism and academism share tendencies—that they deny nationalist traditions—this I agree with. But we can't put this on Soviet painting. I think that when it comes to painting methods [*shoufa*], Soviet painters are working in the tradition of Vasily Perov and Pavel Fedotov. I think the problem that Soviet painting now faces isn't the one that Siqueiros's 'Open Letter' raised. Rather, I would say [the problem is] that their road is too narrow. Because there is only one road, and debate is rather lacking, there is not enough to stimulate development."

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[Siqueiros's Response]

"... Today, Mexican painting has already returned to the paradigm of national art, returned to the time of Chinese, Greek, and Egyptian antiquity, as well as of the [European] Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Of course, when paintings are made for all the people, our understanding of painting has to change. From here on out, painting is for the people [literally, 'collective'].

"The bourgeois modes of expression can serve as the foundation for modern present-day representation. To those of you who want to promote Chinese painting, I want to say one last thing: You should move in the direction of works like Yungang in order to represent your country. Don't tell me that works that were created by a slave society could not be re-created today.

"In today's socialist countries, even though we frequently talk about the problem of artistic freedom, I don't think that is the real problem. If an artist doesn't want to make art, then don't force him to make art. This isn't a question of free or not free: the important thing is to give [artists] the concepts to advance; give them a measure of strength, encourage them. Give this kind of communitarian spirit to the artists. Of course, today we don't have the same kinds of materials and language of expression as Yungang. If in the future you had a new temple, it wouldn't be the same as [temples] in the past or in the present. Your realism has to be even more real [*xianshi*] than the realism of Yungang, even more bright and promising [*guangming*]. In this way, the question is more complete. The highest form of realism is to use one's own cultural heritage [*wuzhi jichu*, literally "material foundation"] as the foundation on which to build a socialist society.

“[In the Soviet Union] the themes were all plain to see, the human figures and even their clothing were all clearly articulated. When workers walked past they could all understand. But everyone says it isn’t good painting. So what’s going on? Why isn’t it good? Art is a complicated subject. Art speaks to human emotions. If you have two singers, and one sings a political song, but the other has a good voice, then of course the one with the good voice will sing better. This is a complicated question. It’s a question of [artists and workers] mutually educating one another. We have a lot of work to do to make the masses understand that our work is for them. Really this is what it comes down to: ‘simple’ and ‘clear’ has ruined Soviet art. Soviet artists have forgotten how to use emotion to speak, to use the forms [*xingxiang*] of plastic arts to speak.”

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“It’s wrong to confuse globalism [*shijie zhuyi*] and internationalism [*guoji zhuyi*]. Globalism is opposed to nationalism [*fan minzu zhuyi*], while internationalism is a contest [*jingsai*]. Every nation has its own unique national style [*minzu fengge*]. But one shouldn’t overemphasize this, or it will lead us to an ambiguous style. For example, Romania has some quilts that look Mexican, and Mexico has some things that look Chinese. There are some scholars who are looking into mutual influence, but they’ve forgotten that similar societies will create similar results. This doesn’t contradict national character.

“The society you live in is a socialist society. If you use logic to seek out experiences, then of course this will create new works, each one greater than the last. Socialist countries can directly meet people’s need for food and clothing and at the same time give them art. Art becomes the power of representing a new society.”

TRANSLATED BY JING CAO