

José Clemente Orozco, a leading figure of the **Mexican mural movement** during the 1920s and 1930s, studied painting at an art academy in Mexico City, but he later described the satirical illustrations of Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) as one of his greatest inspirations. The start of his artistic career coincided with the Mexican Revolution (1910), and the atrocities he witnessed greatly influenced his art and political views. The Mexican Revolution arose in response to the growing gap between rich and poor in Mexico, and was spurred by rebels throughout the country who fought against the regime of the dictator in power, Porfirio Díaz.

One of the rebel leaders was Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919), a peasant from southern Mexico. The charismatic Zapata crusaded to return the enormous holdings of wealthy landowners to the peasants. In 1911 he led an uprising against Díaz's troops and secured control of the southern part of the country. Particularly after his assassination, Zapata became a heroic figure throughout Mexico. Some artists such as Diego Rivera were supportive of the Revolution and its leaders, but Orozco had some doubts about the conflict. Orozco, while supportive of the ideas behind the Revolution, was deeply disturbed by its bloodshed. In the early 1920s, Orozco worked in Mexico on several **frescoes** that depicted mass bloodshed and social upheaval. Strongly attacked by conservative critics, he moved to the United States in 1927 and became a pioneer of the public arts movement during the **New Deal**. During his seven-year stay in the United States, he painted several murals and easel paintings, including *Zapata*.

In the painting, Zapata appears as an ominous figure in the open door of a peasant hut. Silhouetted against a patch of bright sky, he is framed by the intersecting diagonals of outstretched arms and pointed sombreros. Given his heroic status, Zapata is curiously placed in the background of the composition, upstaged by the frightened, oppressed peasants and fierce, stalwart soldiers that dominate the picture's crowded space. It is unclear whether the peasants are beseeching the soldiers for help or to leave them unharmed. Further challenging the conventions of heroic characterization, Orozco placed a sword point just under Zapata's eye. Other menacing details, including the bullets and the dagger, allude to the danger of the Revolution and Zapata's own violent death. The painting's dark reds, browns, and blacks, applied to the canvas in rough, **expressionistic** strokes,

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José Clemente Orozco

(Mexican, 1883–1949)

*Zapata*, 1930

Oil on canvas

198.8 x 122.6 cm (78 1/4 x 48 1/4 in.)

Gift of Joseph Winterbotham Collection

1941.35

evoke the Mexican land and the bloodletting of its people. Rather than merely glorifying the rebel leader, Orozco chose to depict a potentially critical view of the Mexican Revolution and emphasize the cause and community to which Zapata dedicated his life.

THEMES:

**Identity**

**Economics**

**Narrative**