

# Beholding Chicano History: Iconography and the Chicax Movement

Héctor Ramón García

The *Chicano History* mural (Figure 1) is the first chicanx mural produced for a university.<sup>1</sup> *Chicano History* was painted for the University of California Los Angeles Chicano Studies Research Center Library (UCLA-CSRC). At that time, located on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor at Campbell Hall. The mural was completed in 1970, about a year after the CSRC was established, and just about two weeks before the August 29<sup>th</sup> Chicano Moratorium of East Los Angeles. The mural was taken down and put in storage in 1990 when the CSRC was moved to Haines Hall. *Chicano History* was intended to relocate as well but unlike the large walls of the original location of the library at Campbell Hall, Haines Hall is too small to contain the mural so it remained in storage for 28 years.<sup>2</sup> Until 2018 *Chicano History* mural was taken out from the storage, and it was installed at the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA). The mural traveled with the Crocker Museum's exhibit *Testament of the Spirit: Paintings by Eduardo Carrillo*, since Eduardo Carrillo was one of the collaborators for the mural.

I consider *Chicano History* an ideal mural to expand on the analysis of *form* and *content* considering that it reflects the time in which it emerged: a period of civil disobedience and social unrest in which art, and art making was utilized for social mobilization and people awakening in order to effect social change. According to Ramses Noriega, one of the painters collaborating on *Chicano History*, the mural was intended to be read as a chronological timeline from left to

right as the “four eras in la Raza’s history” unfold.<sup>3</sup> Starting at the far left with Eduardo Carrillo’s hand one can observe that the landscape that he painted is full of life. Symbolically depicting the spiritual and fantastic landscape of Aztlán informed by the landscape from Baja California that Carrillo was familiar with since his grandmother was from San Ignacio and he spent much of his time in there.<sup>4</sup> One can observe that Carrillo filled the landscape with endemic species for the American Southwest. On the lower left corner there are various types of cacti as well as reptiles. Above them a river runs through from a waterfall depicted on the middle ground. There are fishes swimming in the river. At one section of the creek towards the middle of the river there is a rabbit jumping across the creek. Opposite to the rabbit there is a deer by the bushes. There are many large birds flying across the open blue sky. I think that all of the particulars for the landscape that Carrillo painted are symbolical of life for the pre-Columbian landscape of Aztlán. There is also the image of a pyramid-like construction towards the center of the composition on the middle-ground. This contrasts with the opposite end of the mural where Saul Solache paints depictions of violence and death. With the details of the endemic species I believe that Carrillo symbolized Aztlán as a consecrated place for life versus the desecration of the landscape after Colonization and Manifest Destiny. Chicanxs found inspiration from diverse Codexes written by the Franciscan monks as narrated by the natives they encountered, such as the Codex Florentino (Sahagún) and the Codex Boturini in which there are accounts for when the Aztecs left the island of Aztlán as commanded by their god *Huitzilopochtli*. They emigrated south changing their name to Mexicas to finally settle in Tenochtitlán in the cycle of the ‘new fire,’

1 When I use the term *chicano* is in regards of the context of the time in which that concept empowered politically aware Mexican Americans, specifically during the 1960 Chicano Movement -such as in the title of the mural *Chicano History*. When I use the term *chicanx* is to bring awareness to gender heteronormativity and an attempt to remain inclusive. The power of being able to identify oneself is the most important aspect of this concept. *Chicanidad* is politically charged and socially aware. See Charlene Villaseñor-Black keynote address “Teaching and Writing the Art Histories of Latin American Los Angeles,” at the third Pacific Standard Time: Latin America and Latino Art in Los Angeles, 2017. <https://youtu.be/gUxOqJJVRPg>

2 During archival research at UCLA-CSRC on summer 2019 I visited Campbell Hall and the space where the library was seems greater. The space was sectioned into separate offices for the Linguistics department. The CSRC Library affirms that “the sheer size of [the mural] makes it difficult to display in the current CSRC space” <https://guides.library.ucla.edu/csrc/murals>.

3 Ramses Noriega in Macías, Reynaldo F, and Carlos Manuel Haro. “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.” Ramses Noriega explains the different hands that worked on each section representing the different eras of the mural. Sergio Hernandez, another painter for *Chicano History* walked me through the different hands that produced the mural during *Testament of the Spirit* at PMCA.

4 Carrillo not only painted several landscapes similar to the American Southwest of Baja California he also funded a self-sustainable ceramics workshop in San Ignacio. See <https://museoeduardocarrillo.org> and Celedon, Pedro Pablo, *A Life of Engagement*, documentary on Eduardo Carrillo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vi7QD0Ew-E8>.

or the fifth sun.<sup>5</sup> For scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, the imagery and symbolism of our ancestors is still alive in the work of Chicana artists.<sup>6</sup> This symbolism upon which Chicana artists elaborate is a strategy to overcome the systematic negation of the Mexican and Chicana culture in the U.S. which is not only an act of oppression but also an extension of colonialism.

Towards the two central panels of the mural.<sup>7</sup> On the left side depicted on the foreground the monumental images of two *campesinos* standing in profile looking straight ahead towards the right, or the future as the mural unfolds progressively.<sup>8</sup> These two *campesinos*, a man and a woman are intended to represent, according to Noriega, the “Mexican armed revolution... the warrior and the family as the central focus of our people.”<sup>9</sup> The male figure is holding what seems to be a Mauser rifle on his right hand while a bullet belt is hanging from his shoulder. There is also a Bowie knife hanging from his waist.<sup>10</sup> They both are standing stoic facing the generational genocide towards the natives of the American continent and their descendants caused by Colonization and Manifest Destiny. The female figure, standing next to him instead of holding a rifle she holds a bundle of corn cobs. Right next to her on the background there is the image of a small house and a cornfield which I believe is also meant to represent the family unit and the origins for civilization. The symbolism for corn is widely spread and recognize as the crop for Native peoples: there is the common *sin maíz no hay país* saying in many Latin American countries including México. These two figures seem to have been filled with humanity contesting the de-humanizing efforts from hegemonic practices of colonial rhetoric. Also, next to her and below the cornfield two other *campesinos* appear to bend over towards the land as if they were working it. This image is

very similar to the *Gleaners* painted by Jean-François Millet in the social-realism style, the particular style that influenced the Mexican muralists. However, in this case, these *campesinos* instead of picking up crops they are depicted scavenging human skulls and thus transforming the farming field into a graveyard. The land in itself is very symbolic. The natives, or original proprietors of the land, were removed from their own land and killed or enslaved during the colonial times and later forced to work the land for *hacendados*. In the timeline progression of the mural this represents the period of the 1900 Mexican revolutionary wars.

The image of Emiliano Zapata is depicted unlike in many other murals in existence. The revolutionary hero who later became iconic and a symbol for the Mexican Revolution along Villa, and *la Adelita* who later became institutionalized during the new period of *Mexicanidad* after the Mexican Revolution.<sup>11</sup> Zapata who died fighting for “Land and Freedom” trying to establish an Agrarian Reform is commonly known that he claimed that “the land belongs to those who work it.” He is depicted laying on the ground dying. One can see that Zapata is in an agonizing death by the gesture of his left arm and hand outstretched towards the viewer while his right hand holds tight to the ground as if reaching for the viewer’s empathy.

Right above Zapata’s image there is an anthropomorphic apparition that seems to be consuming with fire.<sup>12</sup> This winged male figure is depicted chained by the hands. A snake-like creature threatens around his body. I had previously interpreted this figure as referential for ancient mesoamerica cosmogony in regards to *Quetzalcoatl* the god of life who sacrificed himself in order to give life, and for corn to grow for the people to have food. In this sense just like Zapata himself. *Quetzalcoatl* as the twin brother of *Mictlantecutli* has the power to bring the spirit of the warriors who died in battle, and who want to visit the realm of the living in the form of a hummingbird. Following this idea, it seems that *Quetzalcoatl* is claiming Zapata’s spirit as the warrior who died in battle. During a personal interview Sergio Hernández said that this imagery was meant to represent the phoenix that emerges from the ashes in reference to the spirit of *la raza* who continues struggling and fighting for equality. Although the iconography seems to conflict the rhetoric of the mural the discourse for *La Raza* inspired by the writings of Jose Vasconcelos included the western and native mixture which is reflected in this section.

On the third panel the period for *el movimiento* is represented “in the spirit of a social revolution exposing the vari-

5 Schele, Linda and Julia Guernsey, “What the Heck’s Coatépec? The Formative Roots of an Enduring Mythology,” in Koontz Rex, Kathryn Reese-Taylor and Annabeth Headrick, *Landscape and Power in Ancient Mesoamerica*. Westview Press: Colorado, 2001., 29-53.; Patrick Johansson, “The Ascension of Mount Coatepetl by Coyolxauhqui and the Centzon Huitznahua: A temple Made of Words,” Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017. <http://www.historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/revistas/nahuatl/pdf/ecn53/1043>. [PDF]

6 I include myself as a Mexican with native ancestry living in the United States. Now, after 10 years I can see myself as well as a chicano, inhabiting that third space that Anzaldúa positions the state of being in *nepantla*, *ni de aquí ni de allá*.

7 Ramses Noriega attributes this section to Sergio Hernandez in Macías, Reynaldo F., and Carlos Manuel Haro. “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.” However, during the closing ceremony of *Testament of the Spirit* exhibit Hernandez and I discussed the mural and he mentioned that the only section he painted is the anthropomorphic apparition of a fenix that seems to be consumed by fire while breaking the chains of oppression as discussed later in this paper.

8 There is a conflicting nature on the word *campesino* because it reflects male dominance but I am leaving it as the rhetoric of their time.

9 Ramses Noriega, “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.”

10 I find this very interesting, and I wonder if the artists knew about the history of the Bowie knife. The Texan James Bowie who designed and commissioned the blacksmith James Black to forge a knife that was later to be known as Bowie Knife or Arkansas Toothpick. What is even more interesting is that James Bowie fought and died at the Texan Revolution in 1830. In his honor the Arkansas Confederate 39<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team depicts a Bowie knife in their insignia to this day.

11 Coffey, K. Mary, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*. Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2012.; See especially Adrian Vargas Santiago chapter, “The Evangelio Segun Diego.” In the book published for the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Rivera’s murals at the Institute of Education. *Los Murales de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*. Secretaría de Educación Pública: Ciudad de México, 2018., 191-230. In his essay, Adrian Vargas elaborates on the creation of the image of Zapata as an icon to institutionalize the Mexican identity for *mestizaje*.

12 This is the section that Sergio Hernandez told me he is responsible for painting during our conversation at the closing of *Testament of the Spirit*.

ous issues of the times.”<sup>13</sup> There is a fortress depicted on the background with a Mexican flag on it. Right below a group of people is represented at protest. They are depicted dressed as revolutionary farmworkers, the protesters hold banners for Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicanx struggles. There is a female figure on the far left who holds a “Crusade for Justice” banner, another male figure holds a machete while from behind him a banner of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee emerges from the crowd. There is also a “¡Viva! MECHA” and “¡Viva! La RAZA” banners next to a “¡UNIDOS VENCEREMOS!” large banner held by various individuals. These group of protesters are the embodiment of “a new spirit [that] emanates as Chicanos come forth luchando for justice, peace and truth.”<sup>14</sup> The embodiment of *el movimiento* representing the struggle and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement contemporary to the time during the creation of the mural. This group of people could be also interpreted as the inner-directed crowd or of free will from David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd*.

In Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd* published in 1950, the U.S. society free will or inner-directed subject was shifting to a new state of conformity or other-directed person. Following this postulate for the other-directed crowd within the composition of the mural there is a diagonal line of terrifying marching militarized police depicted in a style very similar to the 1924 Otto Dix *Storm Troopers* directing the eye of the viewer towards the first plane. Immediately after the section of the mural in which the artists are giving back the humanity to the natives who have been dehumanized by hegemony. This side of the mural de-humanizes the embodiment of hegemony. The detail of the U.S. flag with a swastika next to the Los Angeles Police Department on the monster-like figure is a direct protest against the violent militarized police state. This creature is depicted wearing glasses of multiple lenses, with mechanical arms and devouring a person alive. Liberating the head of the human with its fangs and confronting the viewer on the first plane, next to the lying body of Zapata. One can recognize the icon of the Uncle Sam depicted as the terrifying creature that commands the soldiers marching and eating humans. The line of soldiers who are no longer human can be interpreted as the other-directed individual whose conformity attitudes are subjected in this sense to Uncle Sam. This is a direct protest to the violence against Chicanx in U.S. soil, and against U.S. imperialism and war culture, in specific the Vietnam War representing the Chicano men who were dying in vastly disproportionate

numbers. This section of the mural is prescient of the Chicano Moratorium of August 29, 1970.<sup>15</sup>

Right next to them, towards the left and in between Zapata and the phoenix apparition there is a representation of a *pieta* in which an elder woman is holding the death body of a younger person. The gesture of the hanging limb and the outstretch head hanging backwards confronts the viewer. There is above them a field with several wood crosses on it representing a burial ground, which is the continuation of the cornfields that became a graveyard on the left section of the mural. Right above them two other figures are represented. A blonde female dressed in red and blind-folded is giving a currency bill – the context of the mural indicates that is a dollar – to the women who is holding the dead body. The other figure next to the blond woman is a man dressed as figure of clergy and wearing a mask that is used to symbolize the drama of the theater. The meaning of what these four figures symbolize is a direct condemnation to the capitalist corruption of humanity in which the life of an individual is reified. The death of an individual can be ameliorated by money and the Church puts up on a suffering mask while also being corrupted by capital.

On the right side of the diagonal line formed by the marching troops directs the viewer towards the foreground to a scene of cannibalism; its Saul Solache’s “‘blond Chicano’ eating a mestizo child.”<sup>16</sup> He is depicted feasting on the right arm of the little girl depicted next to him. This imagery represents the generation of Chicanxs, or Mexican-Americans, who have become acculturated to the U.S. capitalist lifestyle and forgotten their roots and the struggle of their people. In words of Antonio Camejo this kind of Chicanxs who think like gringos are “coconuts:” brown on the outside, white on the inside.<sup>17</sup> This imagery functions as a warning for hegemony cannibalizing the native people by means of selfishness and greed.

The side of the mural I called Manifest Destiny meets the Spanish Inquisition is represented towards the extreme right side of the mural where Ramses Noriega depicted the “emasculating spirit that the Spanish conquest brought which indicts the Catholic Church.”<sup>18</sup> This is the most visually engaging composition and a strong condemnation towards Christianity. A white nude male is depicted emasculated on a diagonal that continues towards the top level of the mural. There are two eagles depicted right behind the male figure.

15 Eduardo Carrillo was incarcerated at the Chicano Moratorium of August 29<sup>th</sup> 1970, about two weeks after the *Chicano History* mural was completed. Celdon, Pedro Pablo, *A Life of Engagement*, documentary on Eduardo Carrillo. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vi7QD0Ew-E8>. Also, Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez, *Signs from the Heart*. Social and Public Art Resource Center: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

16 Ramses Noriega in Macías, Reynaldo F., and Carlos Manuel Haro. “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.”

17 Antonio Camejo, “A report From Aztlán: Texas Chicanos Forge Own Political Power,” in García, F. Chris, *La causa política; a Chicano politics reader*. Notre Dame [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974.

18 Ramses Noriega in Macías, Reynaldo F., and Carlos Manuel Haro. “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.”

13 Ramses Noriega in Macías, Reynaldo F., and Carlos Manuel Haro. “UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.”

14 Ibid.

One of the eagles secures the body of the male in its claws while lacerating his chest digging for his heart. The other eagle is depicted at fight against a golden rattlesnake. The white male figure is depicted in a way that his head and his left arm had no flesh, dehumanized. On its left skeleton-like arm holds the scale of justice; it is holding a sword towards the ground and on the middle of the sword there is a scale. Below the handle of the sword the globe is depicted in red, and it shows the side of the American continent. Representing the American continent bleeding, "The New World" suffering from the catastrophes of global imperialism. From one plate of the scale of justice there is blood running down the horizon creating this river-like image that flows towards the foreground. This river of blood flows covering different architectural structures to represent the sacrifice and the struggles for freedom and autonomy that Natives and their descendants, including *la raza* had suffered. Right below the left leg of the emasculated white male there is depicted the architectural complex of the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) *Rectoría* located at the *Ciudad Universitaria*. With this detail the mural informs the recent 1968 Massacre of students. Down between the legs of this emasculated figure there is the Cathedral from Mexico City, depicted showered by the blood of this male figure who seems to be holding on his right hand what it seems to be missing in between his legs. This is the site where *Tenochtitlán* was erected by the Aztecs. Right above this imagery there is represented a pre-Columbian architectural complex as well. On the other plate of the scale of justice there seems to be an arrangement of coins or a sort of minerals, such as gold and silver, referencing the minerals that the conquistadores exploited during Colonial times. Whereas the side of the mural depicting the blindfolded blonde female handling down money next to the clergy hiding their face behind a mask represent the individual corruption by capital; this side of the mural represents the same idea but at a global level in which genocide and material wealth can be put in a scale, the scale of justice. The Catholic Church played a key role for the conquest of Mesoamerica and the establishment of the New Spain. In words of Eduardo Galeano: "*Vinieron. Ellos tenían la Biblia y nosotros teníamos la tierra. Y nos dijeron: 'Cierren los ojos y recen.' Y cuando abrimos los ojos, ellos tenían la tierra y nosotros teníamos la Biblia.*" Many ancient cities where native people and cultures existed vanished because of colonialism and the Spanish Inquisition determination to expand Christianity. This represents an allegory of the irreversible actions and the disasters of imperialism, colonialism, the Catholic Church in the American continent towards the Indigenous Cultures of the Americas.

The depiction of the eagle punishing the emasculated white male and the eagle devouring the rattlesnake references the modern emblem for the Mexican Coat of Arms in which an eagle is depicted devouring a snake while perched on a prickly pear cactus. This imagery is not only popular to contemporary Mexicans, it was an icon that carried significant value that dates back to ancient times. According to oral histories when *Huitzilopochtli* ordered the Aztecs to

walk down south, and later change their name to Mexicas he also ordered them to settle and built *Tenochtitlán* where they found the image of an eagle devouring a snake perched on a prickly cactus. Throughout the history of Mexico dating back to the times of contact in 1492 this icon has been appropriated and changed several times for revolutionary reasons, and ultimately politics.

*Chicano History* is an allegorical work reminiscent of the style of the Mexican mural movement: incorporating pre-conquest iconography and symbolism, and painted with formal qualities drawn from European and Mexican artistic traditions. It depicts relevant issues by reflecting the contemporary struggles for identity politics during times of civil disobedience and social unrest in Los Angeles, and throughout the U.S.A. during the Civil Rights movements. While condemning colonization and global imperialism, the mural exemplifies the Chicano Civil Rights Movement during its early mobilizations and struggles for political representation, civil equality, social affirmation, and justice. Displaying imagery of the early protests of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, the mural was prescient of the Chicano Moratorium by criticizing the Vietnam War in which Chicanos were dying at disproportionate numbers than whites. The mural depicts the times of social unrest in which it was produced. *Chicano History* concerns the history of a group of people in their attempts to recognize, identify, and embrace with pride the pejorative notion that the term at the time, *Chicanos y Chicanas*, was attributed. Controversial in its content, *Chicano History* is visually engaging and confrontational. The mural depicts forms of violence, cannibalism, and emasculation as it proposes "four eras in la Raza's history." According to Tim Drescher *Chicano History* "expresses the pride and determination of Chicanos seeking self-expression, for the first time defining who they are in their own terms, for their own reasons."<sup>19</sup> During Carrillo's time at UCLA his instructor Jack Hooper introduced him to the works of the Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Hooper had studied in México City at the College of the Americas and worked as a mural assistant to Siqueiros. Influencing Carrillo to draw on both European and Mexican traditions. Also, Saul Solache invited his student at UCLA Sergio Hernandez to collaborate with the mural, Hernandez was a student of Eduardo Carrillo when he was at East Los Angeles College.<sup>20</sup> *Chicano History* a mural created during civil unrest reflects the conflicting national sentiment and struggle for Civil Rights of its time.

A contemporary reading of *Chicano History* needs to address first the issues within Chicano artists representing what *Chicanidad* was and how it looked like through the

19 Drescher, Tim, "The Los Angeles Murals," in *Testament of the Spirit: Paintings by Eduardo Carrillo*. 2018.

20 Sergio Hernández also mentioned that photographer Oscar Castillo was there documenting the progress, and in a way, also contributing to the mural process; Also in Macías, Reynaldo F., and Carlos Manuel Haro. "UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary."

symbols and iconography that – at its early stage- these artists were establishing for the Chicano public at UCLA-CSRC. The issue of heteronormativity that continues prevalent well through the beginning of the twenty-first century during the early developments of *el movimiento*; in which the title, and allegorically with the human body, Sergio Hernández depicting, according to Ramses Noriega, “two monumental figures representing the warrior and the family as the central focus of our people,” is dated. In the book *Walls of Empowerment* scholar Guisela Latorre argues that many Chicano artists; working towards the 1960s and 1970s developed a symbolic language that articulated ideas of *mestizaje*, ethnicity, and

culture as strategies to counter racist and oppressive ideologies found prevalent in colonial rhetoric. As early as the 1970s along the frontlines of the women liberation movement up to our present time many Chicano artists such as Judith Baca, Yreina Cervantez, Las Mujeres Muralistas, Alma Lopez, and the contemporary collective of muralists HOOD Sisters, for example, expanded on this idea of *mestizaje* in response to gender oppression to contemporary Chicanos and Chicanas placing historical meaningful figures contesting the stereotypes of *machismo* and rhetoric of heteronormativity.<sup>21</sup> The *Chicano History* mural is an integral part of this history.

University of Houston

<sup>21</sup> Latorre, Guisela. *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o indigenist murals of California*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Figure 1. Eduardo Carrillo, Ramses Noriega, Sergio Hernandez, and Saul Solache, *Chicano History* mural, 1970. Oil on panel, 144 x 264 inches (12 x 22 feet). Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Image credit: Jenny Walters.



