

WORLD MONUMENTS FUND

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Important examples of Mexican Muralist movement were at risk of ruin.

For Immediate Release, March 4, 2005, Mexico City, Mexico—The New York-based World Monuments Fund (WMF), with Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts (*Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, INBA*), today celebrated the completed restoration of *The Feast of the Holy Cross*, an extraordinary mural cycle by Mexican artist Roberto Montenegro (1887–1968). Located in the former convent of Colegio Máximo de San Pedro y Pablo, the mural was painted between 1924 and 1933, and represents Montenegro's most complete artistic program.

World Monuments Fund President Bonnie Burnham states, "The Mexican Muralist movement provides a vivid and compelling portrait of an important period of international artistic, political, and intellectual history. Roberto Montenegro was a pioneer of this movement, yet too few examples of his work have survived. The successful restoration of that artist's *Feast of the Holy Cross* is therefore a reason for great celebration. The World Monuments Fund is grateful to the project's main funders, Friends of Heritage Preservation and WMF Trustee Robert W. Wilson, who established WMF's *Challenge to Conserve our Heritage*."

The Mural

Born of the Mexican Revolution, Mexican Muralism is perhaps best known through the work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros. It was as much a political statement as an artistic one, extolling the virtues of Mexico's indigenous peoples, who had suffered centuries of humiliation; the soldiers who fought for the restoration of human rights; and the laborers who toiled on farms and in factories.

Roberto Montenegro was a central figure in the Muralist movement. Like many of his colleagues, he was trained in Europe as well as Mexico, and was influenced by Surrealism, Symbolism, Impressionism, and Cubism. Yet his work is clearly Mexican in its exploration of folk-art forms and its references to indigenous traditions and lore.

Montenegro's extraordinary *The Feast of the Holy Cross*, a cycle of paintings that graces a stairwell in the former convent, is his most complete artistic program. It was executed in two stages: The east wall, which contains the work for which the entire cycle was named (although it was originally called *The Reconstruction of Mexico by Workers and Intellectuals*) was commissioned in 1924 by José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education of the Republic of Mexico. It depicts the construction of a large neo-colonial building, with scaffolding and half-built walls topped by a wooden cross and colorful banners. The remaining walls present a mural cycle titled *Reconstruction*, painted between 1931 and 1933.

The mural includes images of the hammer and sickle—Communist ideology had begun to permeate the social and cultural fabric of post-Revolutionary Mexico—and portraits of intellectual and political leaders of the Revolution, as well as a self-portrait of the artist.

The Restoration

Many of Montenegro's mural paintings have been destroyed, and until recently *The Feast of the Holy Cross* was at risk. Over the course of decades, humidity trapped in the masonry of the convent had caused large sections of the mural, located at the base of the walls and in deep niches, to detach, and the remainder of the mural cycle to be in dire need of conservation. Between 2001 and 2004, INBA consolidated and stabilized the underlying masonry and carried out a full restoration of the mural cycle, supported by WMF with funds from the Friends of Heritage Preservation and WMF's Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage.

Two mural sections within deep niches were removed for conservation and reinstalled over a waterproof barrier, while those still in place were cleaned and consolidated *in situ*. A basement, rediscovered during the course of restoration and dating from an earlier period of construction, was cleared and opened to improve ventilation.

Inaccessible for decades, the murals in the Colegio Máximo de San Pedro y Pablo—one of the oldest and finest colonial buildings in Mexico City's historic center and the current home of INBA's National Conservation Center—will be available to the public by appointment. Their completed conservation reflects a joint commitment by WMF and INBA to preserve and make available the extraordinary heritage represented by Mexico's twentieth-century mural art.

World Monuments Fund

Since its founding in 1965, the World Monuments Fund, headquartered in New York, has achieved an unmatched record of successful conservation in more than eighty countries. Working with offices and affiliates in Europe, as well as with partners around the world, WMF brings together public and private support to implement a comprehensive conservation effort that includes project planning, field surveys, field-work, on-site training in the building crafts, advocacy, and the development of long-term strategies for the protection of sites. For additional information about WMF and its programs, the public can visit www.wmf.org.

WMF in Mexico

The World Monuments Fund's program in Mexico began in 1985 in response to the earthquakes that devastated Mexico City and damaged much of its extraordinary historic art and architecture. Fourteen Mexican sites, including the Montenegro murals, have been included on the organization's World Monuments Watch list of 100 Most Endangered Sites. Through the list, WMF was able to direct international attention and funding to such masterpieces of Mexican culture as the Church of Jesús Nazareno, in Atotonilco; the Madera Caves dwellings, in Chihuahua; Yaxchilán Archaeological Site, in Chiapas; the legendary ruins of Teotihuacán; and the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City's grandest public building.

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