

# American MASTERS

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## press information



AMERICAN MASTERS  
is produced for PBS  
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*AMERICAN MASTERS* DETAILS THE BURNING CREATIVE DRIVE OF THE MEXICAN MURALIST WHO PAINTED THE “SISTINE CHAPEL OF THE AMERICAS” IN *OROZCO: MAN OF FIRE*, PREMIERING SEPTEMBER 19 ON PBS

José Clemente Orozco’s Artistic Journey Recreated With Footage Of His Greatest Paintings, Excerpts From His Autobiography And Letters, Interviews With Relatives, Creative Visual Effects, And More

“A disillusioned youth with the soul of an old prostitute,” was one critic’s opinion of José Clemente Orozco and his early portrayals of Mexico City street life. A decade later, in the 1920s, citizens called his frescoes for Mexico’s National Preparatory School blasphemous. And in the early 1930s, his *Epic of American Civilization*, an enormous 24-panel mural commissioned by Dartmouth College, was met with calls for its destruction. But there were other opinions of his work – Jackson Pollock, after a pilgrimage to Orozco’s giant fresco Prometheus at Pomona College in California, named it the “greatest painting in North America.”

From early hardship and toil as a political cartoonist, Orozco became a leading painter of the Mexican Mural Renaissance. His murals would adorn Mexico’s most revered public spaces, inspire African-American contemporaries and move President Franklin D. Roosevelt to put artists to work during the Great Depression. *AMERICAN MASTERS Orozco: Man of Fire* premieres Wednesday, September 19 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Actor Anjelica Huston narrates; actor Damián Alcázar voices Orozco. Significant funding for this project was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

“Orozco was an iconoclast and innovator from the start, with a truly original vision,” says Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*, a five-time winner of the

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Emmy Award for Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series and recipient of eight Peabody Awards. “His legacy of daring works throughout Mexico and the United States and his influence on other twentieth-century giants like Pollock and Isamu Noguchi make him a true American Master.”

**AMERICAN MASTERS’** presentation of **Orozco: Man of Fire** is a co-production of Paradigm Productions, KERA Dallas-Fort Worth and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), in association with Latino Public Broadcasting. It is directed, written and produced by Laurie Coyle and Rick Tejada-Flores.

“We wanted to give the viewer the feeling of standing before a monumental work of art,” says filmmaker Coyle, “and, through visual effects and Orozco’s own words, open a window into the artist’s inner life, passions and convictions.”

**Orozco: Man of Fire** explores the creation of his boldest masterstrokes. In addition to the murals at Dartmouth, Pomona and the National Preparatory School, the program features *Table of Universal Brotherhood*, *Struggle in the Orient* and *Dive Bomber and Tank* in his adopted home, New York City. Commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, *Dive Bomber* consists of six interchangeable panels depicting the tools of modern mechanized warfare and echoing Picasso’s *Guernica*. In Guadalajara, the grotesque *Carnival of Ideologies* reflects the political atmosphere of 1930s Europe, while his magnum opus – *The Man of Fire*, a mural cycle at the Hospicio Cabañas – is known as the “Sistine Chapel of the Americas.” It culminates in the hospice’s immense central dome with a man ablaze, rising into the heavens, which writer Carlos Fuentes describes as an allegory of “the superb possibility of humankind.”

Born in 1883, Orozco’s secret ambition from his earliest years was to paint. Ironically, he viewed the loss of his left hand – amputated after an accident mixing gunpowder for fireworks – as a gift, liberating him from his family’s pressure to pursue a “respectable” career.

But his career as a painter did not take off quickly. On his first visit to the United States

in 1917, U.S. Customs agents destroyed more than half of the 100 paintings he brought with him. Back in Mexico in the early 20s, he watched from the sidelines as his rival Diego Rivera and others launched the Mexican Mural Renaissance. They were commissioned by the new government to create murals on the walls of public buildings – a national history book accessible to even the illiterate. But Orozco, who built his reputation as a political cartoonist during the Mexican Revolution, was not invited to take part.

When he finally was asked to join the Preparatory School murals, Orozco brought the irreverence of those political cartoons to the hallowed walls of the “Prepa.” His portrayals of a leering Christ and bumbling God led to a two-year exile from the project. But when he returned to finish the murals, his tragic and original vision of the revolution inspired critics to hail him as the conscience of his generation.

“True murals are really painted Bibles, and people need them as much as ‘spoken’ Bibles,” Orozco wrote in his autobiography. “To paint on public walls is a great responsibility for the artist. Because when a nation grants one its confidence, the painter will learn, evolve and, in the end, attain artistic dignity.”

In the last year of his life, Orozco created the hauntingly abstract *Metaphysical Landscape*, dominated by a dense black rectangle. His son Clemente calls the work “a premonition of death.” José Clemente Orozco’s heart failed in 1949 at the age of 65.

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To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the

themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site ([www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters)), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

**AMERICAN MASTERS** is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The **AMERICAN MASTERS** film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, a duPont-Columbia and two Grammys, **AMERICAN MASTERS** has won 17 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

Funding for **Orozco: Man of Fire** is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), The Brown Foundation, LEF Foundation, Nion McEvoy, and Nu Lambda Trust. **AMERICAN MASTERS** is made possible by the support of the NEA and by the CPB. Additional funding for **AMERICAN MASTERS** is provided by Rosalind P. Walter, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, Jack Rudin, The Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Lead Trusts, The André and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation, and public television viewers. More information about **AMERICAN MASTERS** can be found at: [www.thirteen.org](http://www.thirteen.org).

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