



TRES MURALISTAS

The following are excerpts from conversations with three muralists:

Jesús Campusano

Michael Ríos

Luis Cortazar

Campusano: We started negotiations on this mural last November. It took about three months to get final approval from the Bank of America for our design. They thought the devil was sickening and that the prisoner figure was too political, too controversial. Emmy Lou Packard, who worked on Diego Rivera's painting team during the World's Fair, was our consultant and she argued strongly with the Bank about our civil rights as artists to express what we wanted.

Cortazar: They rejected the drawing I submitted. It showed people coming to the Mission from Mexico. It showed the slavery of the Chinese working in California and the Mexicans in the fields picking grapes and lettuce. But it also showed Mexicans becoming aware and getting educated. We have a phrase for what the Bank of America wants us to do: "'Arrolla tu cola' You've got to roll up your tail like a dog and wait."

Rios: We know the Bank is a rip-off from the get-go, but it's a job. This mural is not for the bankers. It's for the people. We know the Bank has other motives. As Diego Rivera said, if the mural serves the purpose of nourishment and enlightenment, it's OK even if it's hung in the Bank of America. Rivera did one in the Pacific Stock Exchange downtown.

Campusano: Who's going to see it is more important than who paid for it. We all know they support the grape and lettuce growers in California and that they're involved in Latin America. I didn't do the mural for them. I did it for all those people in the Mission who stand on the long lines in the bank on Friday afternoon. There are no attorneys or judges up there in the mural, just carpenters and other workers. I want to reach common folk -- young kids, families. I care more about what the old people in all those old folks homes in the Mission have to say than the museums and the art critics.

Cortazar: The way it is now you always have to compete; everybody's on an individualistic trip.

Rios: That's right. You have to compete for material goods.

Cortazar: In ancient times, the Inca grew potatoes and corn and a tax would be paid by them which would go into a fund they could all use in case of drought. The chain with the past seems to have been broken. The spirit of cooperation, the peace of mind that comes from being in rhythm with nature.

Rios: All the murals that are being done now in the Mission seem to reflect this feeling: our mural, the one we're doing in the 24th Street Mini-Park and the one the women are doing at Model Cities -- all going back to this primitive vision. It was a different vision from ours. Today we have too many screens and garbage in front of our eyes.

Rios: Murals are the strongest and commonest way to make everyday people aware of their art-conscious brothers and sisters who are trying to reflect the community experience through their artistic talent. We try to express their hopes, fears and aspirations. In the murals, we are talking about our family.

Campusano: They're community people up there in the mural. They are the people I see every day. They're images I grew up with. Somebody will look at the mural and say: 'Hey, that looks like Uncle Tomas'. Just to have people see it and say, 'I've been there before' is important to me. There are all kinds of people in the mural. I grew up in the Mission with a blood living on one side of me and a Nicaraguan on the other. I'm Chicano. The mural tries to reflect our common experience. I'm sorry we didn't put more women characters in the mural. We've received some criticism from our sisters for that. But we are learning. We are involved in a process.

Rios: I'm Mexican, following in the footsteps of other muralists. But I have to interpret my own experience today.

Cortazar: It's a bigger challenge. You have to say it with the same intensity, but in today's language.

Rios: In this art movement, we're just becoming aware of the power of murals.

Cortazar: I would really like to do a mural for the farmworkers, and do it down south in La Paz. We sent Chavez some slides of our work and he liked them.

Rios: I'd like to do one on an anti-drug theme. We're planning one for Centre do Cambio at Harrison and 24th. It's also important to make connections with our past. The primitive consciousness, the way people need to be in harmony with nature.

Cortazar: We've been used by the Bank. They think they can relate to the Mission by hiring us to do this mural. It's advertising for them. Did you see that poster they did for the mural opening?: 'Meet the San Francisco Giants, Win a Week in a Latin American Capital'. They may own the mural according to the contract. But they don't own me. I never said they could use my picture in that poster. What are they doing to relate to the urban needs of our community? They say they give home improvement loans, but how many Raza own their own homes and if they do, how many have jobs to pay off loans? They're trying to buy out the Mission with mortgages. We should be seriously dealing with the problems of housing and unemployment. We should embellish our cities the way we're used to seeing them back home.

Rios: This mural is a great step forward for the struggling artist. A kind of mural this size hasn't been done in a long time. A lot of young third world artists are getting turned on to the medium of murals.

I is a flat stamp with mythological decoration and was found in Oaxaca. II is a cylindrical stamp found in the state of Mexico and shows an unidentified bird and a human being wearing an animal mask.