

# The Getty Conservation Institute Project to Conserve David Alfaro Siqueiros's mural *América Tropical*

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## I. Introduction

The mural *América tropical*, by David Alfaro Siqueiros, painted in 1932 and white-washed soon thereafter, is considered to be an early masterpiece by the artist, and it is the only mural by Siqueiros in the United States accessible to the public in situ in its original location (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> However, its complicated history of artistic experimentation and censorship, as well as decades of harsh environmental exposure, resulted in significant deterioration. From the 1960s on, art historian and social activist Shifra Goldman's work to preserve *América tropical* eventually led to an interest in its preservation by El Pueblo Historical Park and curator Jean Bruce Poole. Their efforts led to a collaborative project, initiated by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and the City of Los Angeles in 1988, to develop and implement a comprehensive plan to protect, preserve, interpret, and present *América tropical* to the public. Conservation of the mural included documentation, scientific study, treatment, and long-term monitoring and maintenance. The aim of conservation was to stabilize and conserve the mural in order to preserve the authenticity of the artist's hand and to tell its tumultuous story, and to reinstate the legibility of the composition; both the iconography and the history of the mural are intrinsic to its appearance. To protect the work, a canopy was designed, consisting of a fabric-covered steel space frame supported by two columns that allow for an unobstructed view of the mural from a viewing platform on a nearby rooftop (fig. 2). Side shades are incorporated into the design to further protect the mural from direct sunlight, and a roll-down screen can be lowered when the site is closed to the public.<sup>2</sup>

The comprehensive project also included the design and installation of an interpretive center.<sup>3</sup> The *América Tropical* Interpretive Center houses didactic exhibits and interactive displays that tell the stories of the mural in the context of 1930s Los Angeles, the life and work of Siqueiros, the GCI–City of Los Angeles project, and the legacy of *América tropical* for contemporary muralists. To ensure the continued accessibility to *América tropical*, the City of Los Angeles has committed to be the steward of the mural and the site, and the GCI will regularly monitor and maintain the mural over the next ten years.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 1.** David Alfaro Siqueiros (Mexican, 1896–1974). *América tropical*, modified fresco on cement plaster, 1932, digital composite image from historic black-and-white photographs ca. 1932. Photo courtesy of Thomas Hartman, IQ Magic; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

**Fig. 2.** View of *América tropical* and canopy from the viewing platform on the second floor of the América Tropical Interpretive Center. Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

## II. History and Condition

Painted in 1932, *América tropical* was met with critical acclaim when it opened to the public. Siqueiros, already a well-known artist at the time, had created a massive work, experimenting with an innovative technique of fresco on cement and using new technologies, including pneumatic tools, airbrush, and projectors to prepare and execute the painting.<sup>5</sup> However, he had also depicted a powerful and controversial scene of a peasant hanging on a double cross with a menacing eagle looming above and revolutionaries with rifles aimed at the bird—all in an overgrown jungle and amid ruins of a Mesoamerican temple. In response to this provocative imagery and incendiary political statement, the mural was whitewashed shortly after its completion (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> For nearly three decades, *América tropical* was covered over and left exposed on the exterior second story of the Italian Hall in downtown Los Angeles. By the 1960s, exposure to the elements and deterioration of the whitewash began to reveal the mural underneath (fig. 4). At this time, a group of interested scholars and artists led by art historian and social activist Shifra Goldman began efforts to preserve the mural. In 1971, two conservators from Mexico—Jaime Mejía and Josefina Quezada—examined the mural and determined that it could be stabilized and conserved but that it could not be restored to its original appearance due to the extent of paint loss,<sup>7</sup> which would require extensive repainting over much of the

**Fig. 3.** *América tropical* after partial whitewashing, ca. 1934. Photo: © Los Angeles Times, photo published 22 June 2004; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City





**Fig. 4. View of *América tropical*, ca. 1968, as seen from Main Street, revealing the mural with the deterioration of the whitewash.** Photo courtesy of Shifra Goldman; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

surface<sup>8</sup>—an approach that runs counter to conservation philosophy. Indeed, it would not have been possible to return it to its original appearance because of the overall deterioration of the surface and the lack of color photographic documentation from the time it was painted. Moreover, the traces of all that the mural had been subject to over time were considered integral to its historical significance. Since the early evaluation by Mejía and Quezada, the collaborative GCI–City of Los Angeles project has held the same treatment philosophy to stabilize and conserve the mural without restoring it to its original appearance.

### III. Documentation

In the scope of the project, the GCI compiled relevant information about the mural over time to better understand the technique of execution, history of conservation, and causes of deterioration. Siqueiros’s original writings provided critical information on the innovative technique he used to paint *América tropical*, and the few black-and-white photographs of the original mural were collected in order to comprehend the iconography and the power of the image when it was unveiled in 1932. Little was written about *América tropical* from 1932 until the 1960s. The first known color photographs were taken by Shifra Goldman and others involved in the Chicano mural movement who rediscovered the mural when the imagery was once again revealed after the whitewash that had covered it for decades deteriorated.

Extensive documentation has been carried out over the course of the project, and the GCI compiled a bibliography on Siqueiros’s Los Angeles murals.<sup>9</sup>

Photodocumentation of the mural was performed in 1990 before and after the first phase of conservation treatment. In 1993, a digital photodocumentation campaign was carried out and images of individual sections of the mural were tiled together, resulting in a high-resolution rectified image of *América tropical*.<sup>10</sup> In 1997, 2002, and 2012, GCI conservators performed condition assessments of the mural. In 2012, the designers of the América Tropical Interpretive Center created a high-resolution black-and-white image of the mural as it appeared in 1932 by compositing existing historic photographs from the 1930s. This image was enlarged and forms a central element of the exhibit (see fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> Photodocumentation over the life of the mural proved essential to the conservation treatment as a visual reference of *América tropical* and its change over time.

### IV. Conservation

The GCI has carried out three phases of conservation treatment since the project began. The first treatment campaign, in 1990, included consolidation and cleaning of the surface, reattachment of plaster to the brick substrate, removal of whitewash material, and removal of tar from the base of the mural.<sup>12</sup> In 2002, further plaster stabilization was carried out,<sup>13</sup> and the most recent conservation campaign was completed in 2012.

The aim of the 2012 treatment was to stabilize the mural and to perform limited visual reintegration in order to reinstate the legibility of *América tropical* (fig. 5). The treatment was carried out in steps: the surface was cleaned; discolored surface coatings

**Fig. 5. GCI conservation team performing treatment on *América tropical* in 2012.** Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City



and tar deposits were reduced or removed, where possible; voids behind the plaster layer were grouted; plaster losses were filled; the surface was consolidated to reinstate cohesion of the paint and to create a barrier between the original paint layer and the conservation inpainting; and, finally, the design layer was reintegrated. With minimal intervention—as little as possible but as much as needed—conservation and sensitive visual reintegration minimized areas of damage, connecting dots to reinstate the continuity of the composition without fully restoring it.

## V. Visual Reintegration

### 1. Philosophical Considerations

In conservation, there are many approaches to loss compensation. All techniques share a common ethos:

The aim of restoration is to improve the legibility of form and content of the wall painting, while respecting the original creation and its history. Aesthetic (visual) reintegration contributes to minimizing the visibility of damage [and should primarily be carried out on non-original material]. Retouching and reconstruction should be carried out in a way that is discernible from the original. All additions should be easily removable. Over-painting must be avoided.<sup>14</sup>

Minimizing the disturbance of losses in order to restore the maximum legibility of the image, while respecting the authenticity of the work of art as a creation and as a historical document, is the critical issue of visual reintegration.<sup>15</sup>

Visual reintegration and inpainting (retouching) can be carried out in one of two modes: invisible or visible. Invisible reintegration, or imitative inpainting, aims to completely reconstruct areas of lost paint and match losses so closely that it can only be identified using a trained eye and/or analytical methods. Visible reintegration techniques create an overall visual harmony, yet the viewer can easily differentiate boundaries of original paint from areas of reintegration. These techniques can function as imitative or neutral. Neutral toning is the application of a single neutral color or modulated tone to an area of damage in order to make it recede and, consequently, be less distracting.<sup>16</sup> Some visible reintegration techniques complete the image at an average viewing distance and are discernible only at close range. For example, using a system of dots, or *punteggiato*,<sup>17</sup> or vertical hatched lines (often referred to as *tratteggio*) in carefully chosen colors, a skilled conservator can achieve a nearly mimetic effect from a distance, attaining visual harmony as well as visible boundaries of original paint. The treatment of *América tropical* used visible reintegration techniques. The majority of the mural was inpainted using a system of dots, based on the surrounding hue, to reintegrate areas of loss rather than to imitate original brushstrokes. Large plaster fills were toned with a modulated neutral color that optically recedes and does not attempt to mimic the design layer.

## 2. Theoretical Approach

Since the early 1970s, when Mejía and Quezada first examined *América tropical*, it was determined that the mural could be conserved but not fully restored to its original appearance. Within the tenets of conservation practice, the mural could be reintegrated to a limited degree and with sensitivity, connecting islands of original paint to reinforce the image but not reconstructing forms or figures.

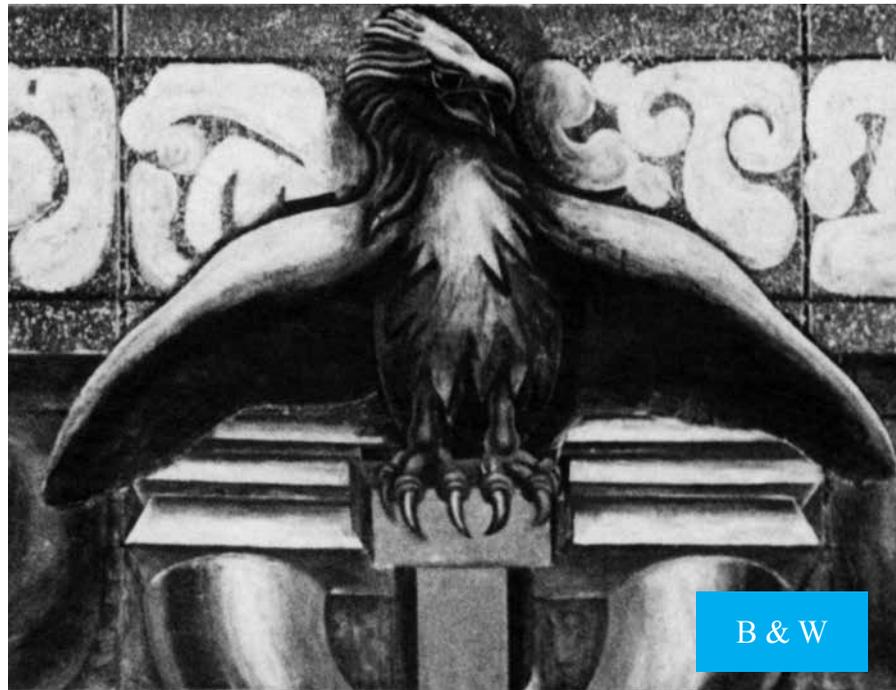
Revealing the iconography once more was vital to the reading of the mural; the powerful imagery is central to the impact of *América tropical*. Just as significant is the mural's immense historical value. The incendiary imagery sparked the political fire that led to its whitewashing, and the effect of weather and time over decades allowed the mural to once again reveal itself with an appearance that was forever changed by deterioration during those years of neglect. Thus, both the iconography and the history are now integral to the mural and its appearance.

The approach to visual reintegration was based on the dual significance of the two values: historical and pictorial. A number of factors informed and guided the treatment: the extent of deterioration, the significance of the mural's history, and the lack of historical color documentation as reference. The aim of the visual reintegration was to preserve the artist's hand and to delicately reinforce the original composition by exclusively reintegrating areas of mechanical damage, permanent stains, and localized areas of wear with surrounding areas of original paint using reversible conservation-grade paints. Because only islands of original design layer surrounded by exposed underlayers of paint remained over much of the mural—leaving an intermittent and fragmentary final design layer on the surface—the imagery of the mural was not reconstructed because this would have entailed painting over large areas of original paint and interpretation of the artist's intent by conservators wherever final design layers were lost. Moreover, no color documentation of the mural from the time it was painted exists; such documentation would have allowed conservators to determine the accurate hues, intensity, or saturation of the palette.

Nonetheless, through limited reintegration, conservators were able to reinstate legibility and reinforce forms by connecting isolated areas of original paint and to reestablish the continuity and iconography of the composition while preserving the artistic integrity of the artist's hand and the traces of history that the mural displayed from suffering eighty years of censorship, neglect, and exposure.

## 3. Technical Approach

Conservators applied dots of chemically stable, reversible, conservation-grade inpainting media (pigments in a resin binder) to connect areas of extant paint in order to reintegrate losses and reinforce shapes and forms, resulting in an increased legibility of the imagery. This sympathetic reintegration gives continuity to the composition from a distance but can be distinguished by the educated viewer upon close examination. Given the overall degradation of the surface, determining the extent of the inpainting was a challenge. The mural's complicated and fragmentary surface created a puzzling



**Fig. 6. Historic black-and-white detail of eagle from *América tropical*, ca. 1932.** Photo: IQ Magic; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

inpainting problem because it was hard to understand where the existing islands of paint were positioned in the original composition—even when looking at historical reference images taken just after the mural was painted. By superimposing current and historical images of details in digital-imaging software and actively adjusting the opacity of the image layers, conservators were able to locate forms and islands of original paint that remained on the surface. This approach allowed the team to accurately connect the dots with inpainting in order to subtly reinforce the imagery of the mural and to reinstate the legibility of the composition (figs. 6–8).

## VI. Conclusion

With the conservation of the mural, the construction of the protective canopy and viewing platform, and the design and installation of the América Tropical Interpretive Center, the GCI and the City of Los Angeles were able to realize the vision of early preservationists to preserve *América tropical* in situ and make it accessible to the public once again.

The project’s holistic approach has protected *América tropical* from the elements with the installation of the canopy, side shades, and roll-down screen. It has also allowed visitors to view the mural from a rooftop platform. And, with the América Tropical Interpretive Center, it has provided a space where the public can learn about the life and work



**Fig. 7. Detail of eagle before visual reintegration, 2012.** Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City



**Fig. 8. Detail of eagle after treatment, 2012.** Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City



**Fig. 9. Overall image of *América tropical*, following preliminary stabilization, 1994.** Digital composite image from individual tiled sections of the mural. Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

**Fig. 10. Overall image of *América tropical*, after treatment, 2012.** Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust; mural: © 2012, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Sociedad Mexicana de Autores de las Artes Plásticas (SOMAAP), Mexico City

of the artist and the mural's original context. The mural itself has been stabilized and its iconography has become more legible. Through research and careful conservation practice, conservators have brought *América tropical* back to life by reviving the clarity of its iconography, which reveals the power of its message. At the same time, the hand of Siqueiros has been retained, and the complexity of the mural's history has been preserved (figs. 9, 10).

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**Notes** The authors would like to acknowledge the individuals and entities who contributed to the preservation of *América Tropical* over the decades; past and current GCI staff and consultants who have contributed to the project and have carried out extensive scientific and historic research, documentation, and conservation; the City of Los Angeles Mayor's Office, El Pueblo Historical Monument, the Bureau of

Engineering, and their consultants, who oversaw the construction project; and El Pueblo Historical Monument, the site steward, who is ensuring that the mural and the América Tropical Interpretive Center are accessible to the public. Shifra Goldman, the group formed in the 1970s to save the mural, and Jean Bruce Poole deserve special recognition for rediscovering the mural and initiating preservation efforts that were finally completed in 2012.

1. *América tropical* was also described by the artist as *América tropical oprimida y destrizada por los imperialismos* (Tropical America oppressed and destroyed by imperialism).

2. The fabric canopy, side shades, roll-down screen, and viewing platform were designed by Brooks + Scarpa (formerly Pugh + Scarpa). Details of the architectural challenges faced in the design and construction of the canopy are described in Mark Buckland, "*América Tropical* as Artifact: Designing a Framework for Its Protection, Viewing, and Interpretation," and Gary Lee Moore, "Sheltering Siqueiros: Complexities of Building in a Historic Site," papers presented at The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals, Los Angeles, 16–17 October 2012. Videos of all presentations at this international symposium, organized by the Getty Conservation Institute, are available at [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/siqueiros\\_symposium.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/siqueiros_symposium.html). Text of the papers are available at [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/pdf\\_publications/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/index.html).

3. The América Tropical Interpretive Center, designed by IQ Magic, located in the historic Sepulveda House on Olvera Street, includes didactic exhibits and interactive displays that describe Los Angeles in the 1930s; the life of David Alfaro Siqueiros as soldier, revolutionary, and artist; the artistic innovations developed by Siqueiros; the technique of execution, iconography, and conservation of *América tropical*; and the mural's legacy. A full description of the design and content of the América Tropical Interpretive Center is given in Thomas Hartman, "Interpretive Design for *América Tropical*: Created, Concealed, and Revealed," paper presented at The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals, Los Angeles, 16–17 October 2012.

4. Leslie Rainer, "The Conservation of *América Tropical*: Historical Context and Project Overview," paper presented at The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals, Los Angeles, 16–17 October 2012.

5. Leslie Rainer, "Preserving *América Tropical*: From Original Technique to Conservation Treatment," paper presented at The Siqueiros Legacy: Challenges of Conserving the Artist's Monumental Murals, Los Angeles, 16–17 October 2012.

6. According to art critic Arthur Millier, the mural was partially whitewashed by 1934, covering the east section that could be seen from Olvera Street. It was later completely whitewashed, likely within the decade. Arthur Millier, "Brushstrokes," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1934, A8.

7. Shifra M. Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal* 33, no. 4 (1974): 327n36. Goldman wrote that by 1973, the years of exposure to the rain and the sun on the outdoor mural led to the removal of the whitewash and original color beneath (325).

8. Jesús Salvador Treviño, *América Tropical* (New York: Cinema Guild, 2006), DVD.

9. Valerie Greathouse and Leslie Rainer, *David Alfaro Siqueiros: Murals in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2012). This is a selected bibliography available online at [www.getty.edu/conservation/our\\_projects/field\\_projects/siqueiros/siqueiros\\_biblio.pdf](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/our_projects/field_projects/siqueiros/siqueiros_biblio.pdf).

10. Eric B. Lange, "Development of an On-Site Digital Imaging System for the Documentation of Wall Paintings" in Tony Higgins, Peter Main, and Janet Lang, eds., *Imaging the Past: Electronic Imaging and Computer Graphics in Museums and Archaeology*, Occasional Papers, no. 114 (London: British Museum, 1996), 1–11.

11. Hartman, "Interpretive Design for América Tropical."

12. For more information, see Agustín Espinosa, "Informe de los trabajos de conservación efectuados a la pintura mural 'América tropical' del pintor David Alfaro Siqueiros en Los Angeles, California,

Estados Unidos de Norte América,” report presented to the Amigos de las Artes de México Foundation, 1990; Stephen Paine, “*Tropical América: A mural by David Siqueiros. A Report on Phase One of the Conservation Project, 15 March–22 April 1990*” (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1990); Sophie Stewart, “Report on the conservation of *Tropical America*, Olvera Street, Los Angeles, by David Alfaro Siqueiros,” paper submitted as part of a course in the conservation of wall paintings sponsored by the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Getty Conservation Institute, May 1990; and Rainer, “Preserving *América Tropical: From Original Technique to Conservation Treatment.*”

13. Leslie Rainer, “The Conservation of *América Tropical*. Fall 2002 Campaign Report: Mural Stabilization and Protection” (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2002–3).

14. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), “ICOMOS Principles for the Preservation and Conservation/Restoration of Wall Paintings (2003),” in idem, *International Charters for Conservation and Restoration: Monuments and Sites*, vol. 1 (Munich: ICOMOS, 2004), 162. Available at [http://openarchive.icomos.org/431/1/Monuments\\_and\\_Sites\\_1\\_Charters.pdf](http://openarchive.icomos.org/431/1/Monuments_and_Sites_1_Charters.pdf). This charter was ratified by the ICOMOS 14th General Assembly in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, in 2003.

15. Paolo Mora, Laura Mora, and Paul Philippot, *Conservation of Wall Paintings* (London: Butterworths, 1984), 302.

16. Jilleen Nodolny, “History of Visual Compensation,” in Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield, eds., *The Conservation of Easel Paintings* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 581.

17. Nodolny, “History of Visual Compensation,” 579.