



Painting the Southern Border

New Religions, the Mexican Revolution, and Visual Arts

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Transnational Networks

- ▶ Between the two World Wars, transnational networks of artists and promoters of the arts, sharing a common interest in Theosophy and other NRMs, contributed decisively to how modern art evolved in Mexico and the US
- ▶ Three main events created this unique network: the mandate of José Vasconcelos (1882-1959, right) as Minister of Education in Mexico, the establishment of the Delphic Society in New York in 1927, and the fascination of many artists for New Mexico



Act 1: Revolutionary Mexico



Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico*, National Palace, Mexico City

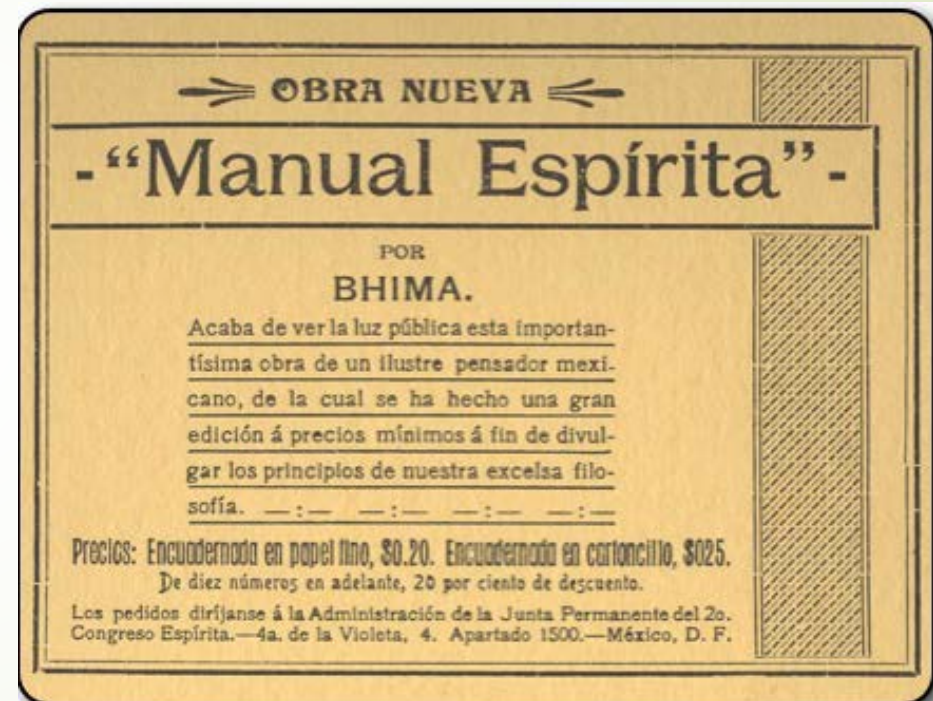
Vasconcelos and Madero



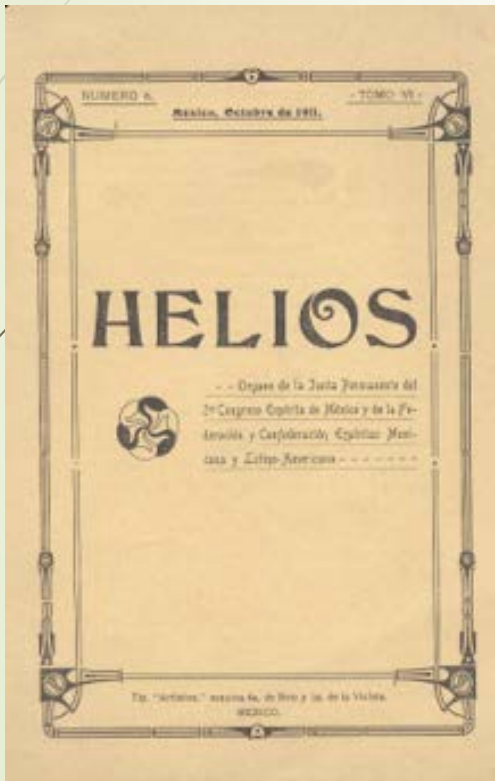
- In 1909, Vasconcelos and other young intellectuals created El Ateneo de la Juventud, with the aim of overthrowing both dictator Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) and the cultural hegemony of positivism
- Their political hero was Francisco Madero (1873-1913, left), who started the Mexican revolution, defeated Díaz and became Mexico's president in 1911, only to be assassinated by a military coup in 1913

Madero and NRMs

- Scholars of Madero increasingly notice the importance of his involvement in alternative spirituality. He was a fervent Kardecist Spiritualist and a member of the Spiritualist NRM Travelers of the Earth. He was guided by spirits in his main political decision, and authored under the pseudonym «Bhima» a popular Mexican Spiritualist manual



Vasconcelos, Theosophy, and the East



- ▶ Madero was a reader of Theosophical and Hindu literature, although he wrote in the Spiritualist journal *Helios* that Kardecist Spiritualism was superior to Theosophy
- ▶ Vasconcelos praised Madero's texts on Hinduism in his *Estudios indostánicos* (1923), but criticized Spiritualism and «Blavatsky's insincere and second-hand eloquence». Later, however, he accepted the reality of Spiritualist phenomena, and was influenced by Theosophy in his theories about races and Atlantis

«Theosophical» Networks?

- ▶ Devés Valdés and Melgar Bao (1999) and Navarro-Génie (2009) argued that «Theosophical networks» connected Latin American revolutionaries and intellectuals, including Vasconcelos, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre (1895-1979) in Peru, Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957, right) in Chile, and Augusto César Sandino (1895-1934) in Nicaragua
- ▶ «Theosophical» is used here in a generic sense, as anti-Americans like Vasconcelos (but not Mistral) disliked the Theosophical Society as too American



Sandino and Trincado

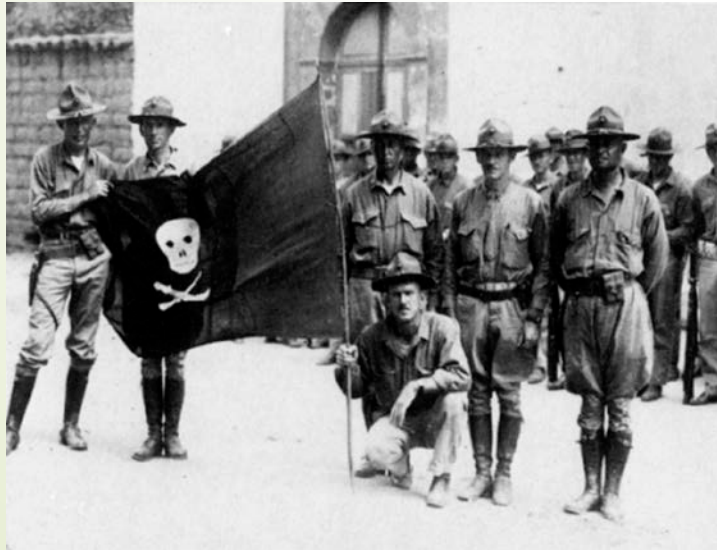


- ▶ Sandino was initiated into various forms of alternative spirituality in Mexico. He became an enthusiastic member of EMECU (Magnetic Spiritualist School of the Universal Commune), a NRM founded in 1911 by the Spanish Spiritualist Joaquín Trincado (1866-1935, left), a mixture of Theosophy, Kardecist Spiritualism, and Socialism



Sandino, a Divine Incarnation?

- ▶ Sandino (right) became persuaded of being himself the incarnation of the Divine announced by Trincado and the «commander of the twenty-nine spirits», incarnated angels who would lead the Earth into a «state of perfection». These millenarian ideas eventually contributed to Sandino's downfall and assassination in 1934



Vasconcelos and the Muralists



- ▶ As President of the National University (1920-21) and Minister of Education (1921-24), Vasconcelos (left) conceived an ambitious program of creating a new educational and spiritual art as an alternative to both Catholicism and Marxism
- ▶ Vasconcelos became the patron of the Mexican muralists, although they were all more or less Marxist. But mural art needs walls, a commodity the Minister was able to provide

Vasconcelos and Rivera



- ▶ Diego Rivera (1886-1957: left, with Vasconcelos) was a Marxist artist who had been exposed to Theosophy during his years in Paris
- ▶ Vasconcelos gave to Rivera some of his most important commissions in Mexico. But in 1927, after the former minister had left office, Rivera painted him in a mural in the very Ministry of Education (right) seated on a white elephant, a Marxist criticism of his «theosophical» leanings



The Esoteric Rivera

- Several scholars (Raquel Tibol, Fausto Ramírez, Renato González Mello, Edgar Vidal) argued that, with all his Marxism, «a good part of Rivera's murals in the Ministry of Education [right – and elsewhere] are clearly esoteric», with a reading of ancient Mexican mythology owing more to local NRMs than to academic archeology



Lady of the Well

- ▶ In 1977, Rivera's *La Mujer del pozo* (1913) was discovered, hidden in the back of his 1915 Cubist *Zapatista Landscape*. The painting associates a Rosicrucian emblem with the Aztec creator deity Quetzalcoatl, confirming that Rivera's esoteric interests dated back to the 1910s



Adolfo Best Maugard (1891-1964)



- ▶ In Europe, Rivera befriended (and portrayed in 1913: left), a Mexican artist (*Untitled*, n.d., right) deeply interested in Theosophy, Adolfo Best Maugard, who would serve under Vasconcelos as director of Mexico's National Department of Art Education. His drawing manuals would achieve international fame



The Creation (1922)



- The very first mural by Rivera, *La Creación*, in the former College of St Ildefonso (another commission from Vasconcelos) depicted (above) the primal cosmic energy flowing in all directions. It is open, again, to both a Marxist and an esoteric interpretation

The Chapingo Murals (1923-27)



- ▶ Mexican scholar Susana Pliego Quijano explained how in the murals Rivera painted in the National School of Agriculture in Chapingo, Marxism co-existed with emblems derived from his Rosicrucian and Theosophical readings

Rivera and AMORC



- ▶ In 1926, Rivera was among the founders of the Mexico City lodge, called Quetzalcoatl, of the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC). He painted *Quetzalcoatl* (left) for its Mexico temple

- ▶ In 1954, when he tried to be readmitted into the Communist Party, Rivera had to justify his AMORC activities. He wrote that he wanted to infiltrate a typical «Yankee» organization, but also claimed that AMORC was «essentially materialist, insofar as it only admits different states of energy and matter, and is based on ancient Egyptian occult knowledge from Amenhotep IV and Nefertiti»

Frida Kahlo's *Moses*

- ▶ Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), Rivera's beloved third wife, was a staunch materialist. Yet, in paintings like *Moses* (1943), inspired by Freud's book on the Jewish prophet and depicting Rivera himself as the infant Moses, Frida included Eastern and esoteric symbols. She later confessed her fascination with the ancient Egyptian religion, probably derived from Rivera's AMORC experience



Frida's Karma



- ▶ In her latest years, Kahlo became interested in karma and reincarnation. In 1946, she wrote the word «carma» at the bottom of a painting representing herself as a wounded deer (left), and created a whole series of «carma» drawings (right)

Orozco and Symbolism



- ▶ José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) was the most mystical (and less Marxist) of the great muralists. *Maternidad* (1922), a commission from Vasconcelos, is a good example of his earlier style influenced by European Symbolism where birth may be interpreted as an allegory of the initiation

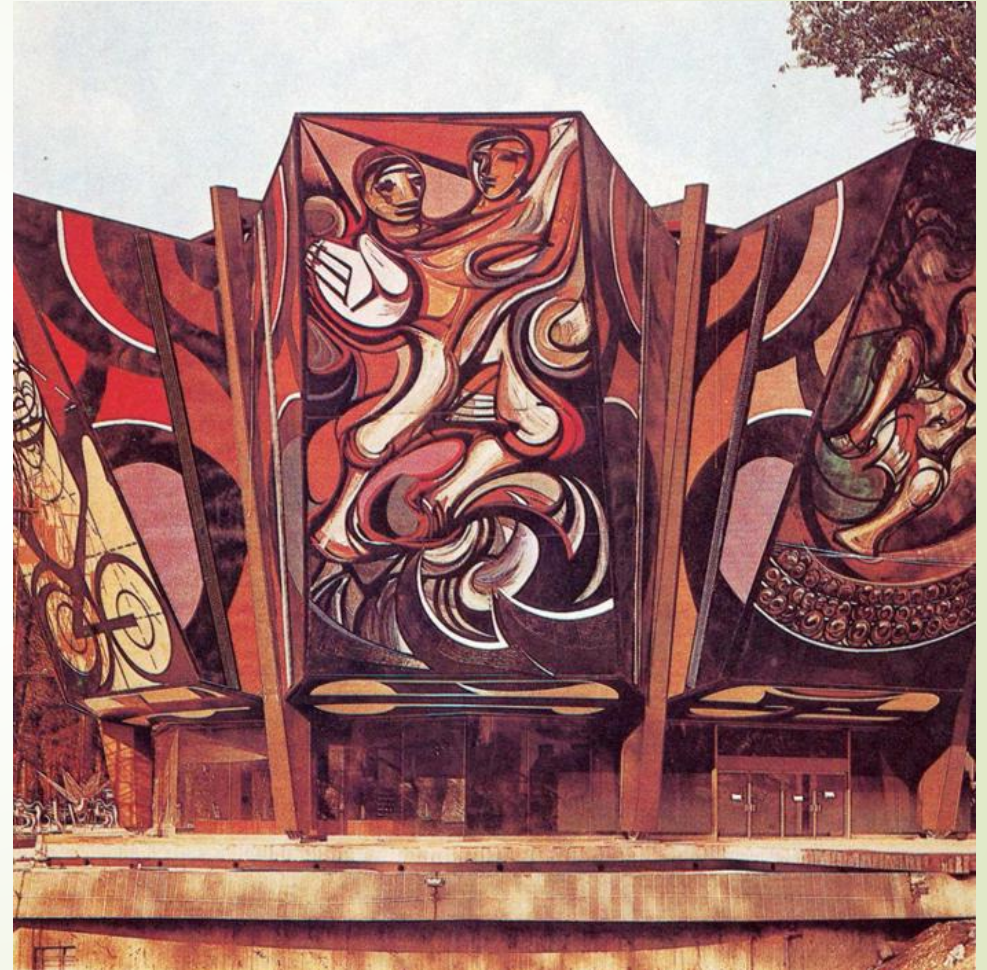
Omnisciencia (1925)



- ▶ In 1925, Orozco painted in the Casa de los Azulejos, then a private residence, what is regarded as his most esoteric mural, *Omniscience*, depicting the spirit rising between the eternal male and female principles

An Esoteric Siqueiros?

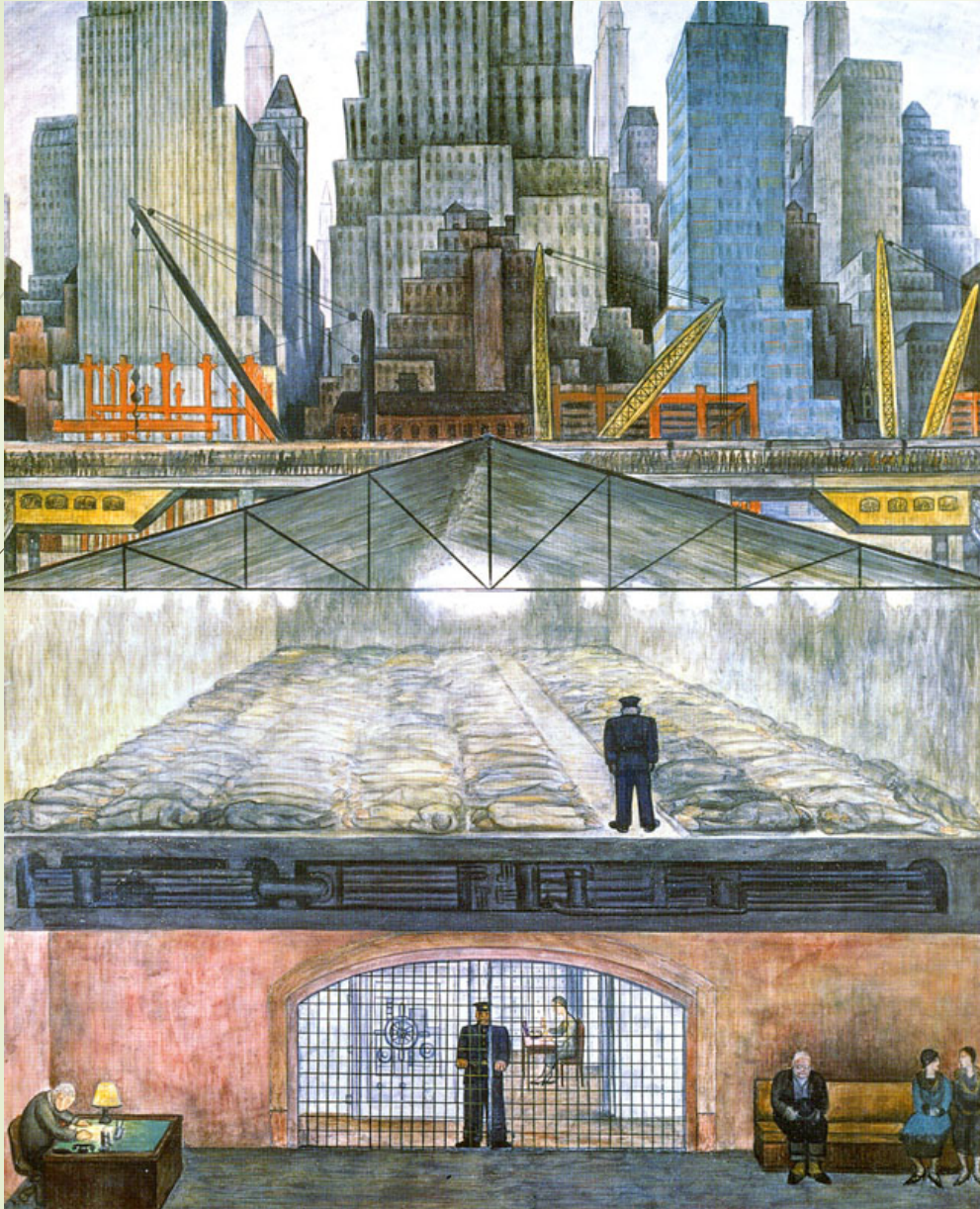
- ▶ The least interested in spirituality among the great Mexican muralists was David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), a strict Stalinist Marxist. Yet, leading scholars of Siqueiros such as Jorge Reynoso Pohlenz detected an «inclination towards esotericism» in Siqueiros' last years (*Cultural Polyforum*, 1971, right)



Plastic Exercise



- ▶ Siqueiros' less political masterpiece is *Plastic Exercise* (left), a mural he painted in Argentina in 1933 and a celebration of the Eternal Feminine
- ▶ Siqueiros co-operated for the mural with other artists, including Antonio Berni (1905-1981), an Argentinian painter associated with the group of Lelio Zeno («Loz», 1890-1969), a medical doctor who tried to combine Theosophy and Communism



Act 2 : New York

Diego Rivera, *Frozen Assets*, mural for the Museum of Modern Art, 1931-32

Yucatan: Theosophy and the Governor



- «Theosophical networks» within Mexico were particularly well developed in Yucatan, where governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1874-1924) used the local Theosophical Society as a tool for promoting his revolutionary and mystical Mayanism



The Tragedy of La Peregrina



- ▶ In 1923, Carrillo fell in love with *New York Times* journalist Alma Reed (1889-1966), who shared his interests for Theosophy and Atlantis. Carrillo was married, but introduced himself the first Yucatan divorce law. In 1924, before he could marry Reed, he was captured and executed by political opponents

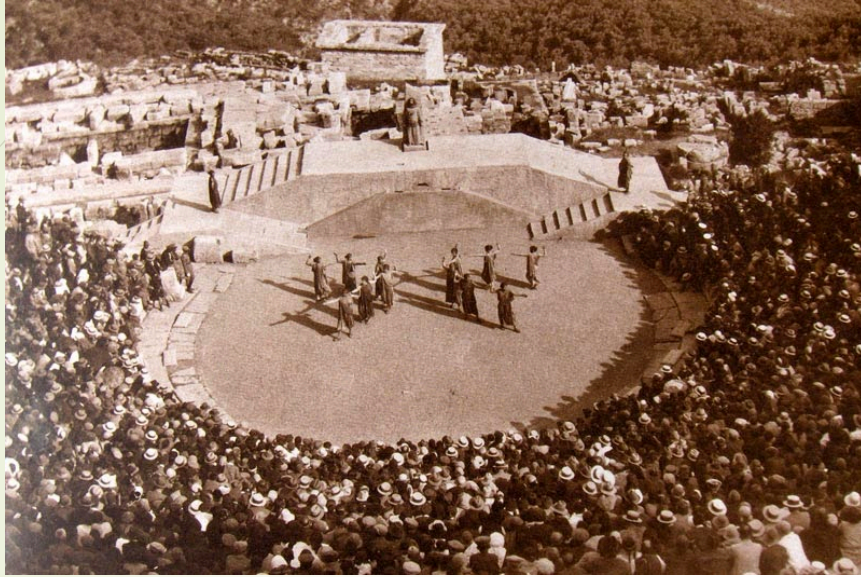
▶ This tragic love story lives in Mexico through the famous song *La Peregrina* (The Pilgrim), created for the journalist at the governor's request by poet Luis Rosado Vega (1873-1958) and musician Ricardo Palmerín (1887-1944)

Reed and Palmer in Delphi



- ▶ In 1927, Reed's interest in ancient oracles brought her to Delphi, Greece, where she was welcomed by an American girlhood friend, Eva Palmer (left, 1874-1952). The beautiful New York heiress had been the lover of Natalie Barney (1876-1972), the militant Lesbian poet who was at the center of a Theosophical circle in Paris, but by 1927 had ended up marrying the celebrated Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951)

Delphic Festivals



- In Delphi, the Sikelianos were busy organizing the first Delphic Festival, featuring music, theater, athletic contexts, art performances, and rituals celebrating both the Greek heritage and the utopian (and Theosophical) ideas of a universal brotherhood
- The festivals expanded into a larger Delphic Movement. It attracted artists and writers, but it also included an inner, esoteric circle believing that the Delphic Brotherhood would eventually include and supersede all religions and creeds

The Delphic Movement in New York

- ▶ Palmer and Sikelianos' marriage would not last but Eva would remain deeply involved in the Delphic movement. In New York, she founded in 1928 a Delphic Society, headquartered in a flat Palmer shared with Reed (right, in the flat in 1928) at 12, Fifth Avenue they nicknamed «the Ashram»
- ▶ The two women attracted a who's who of Theosophists, including Annie Besant, to the Ashram. Reed also emerged as a key patron of Mexican artists in the US



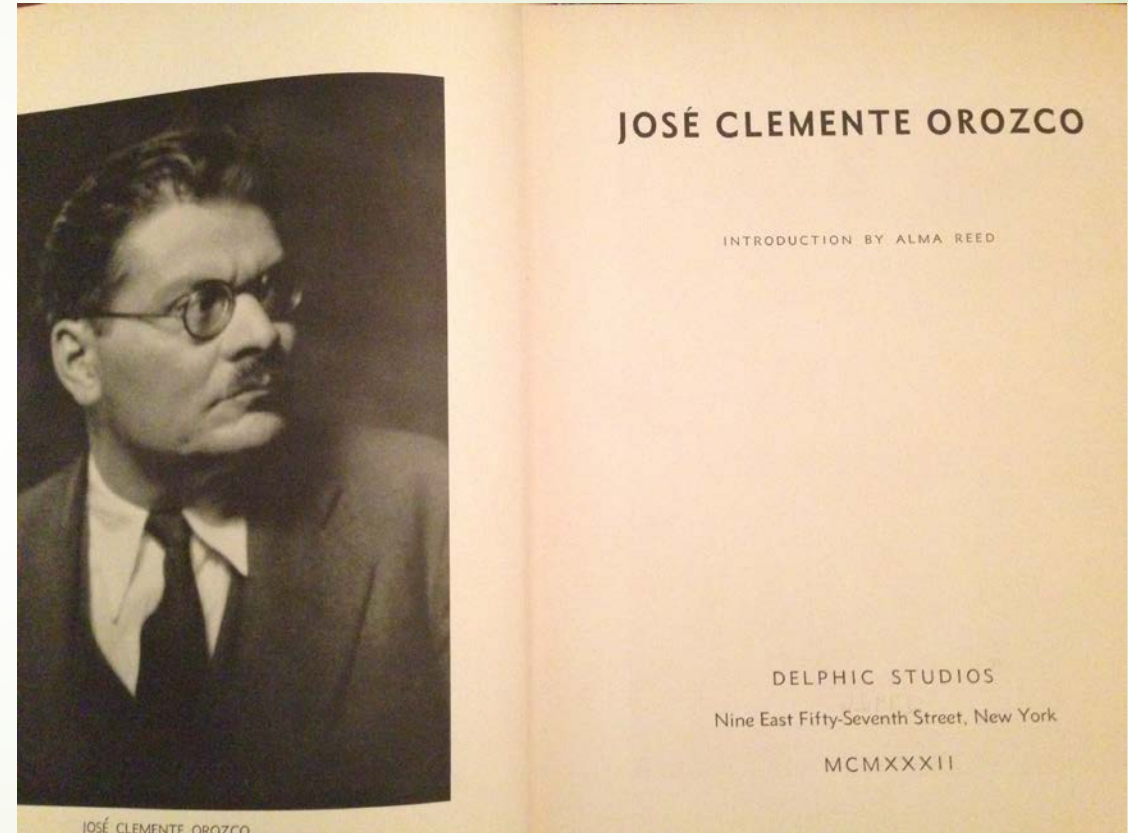
Orozco in New York



- ▶ Orozco wrote to his friend, the painter Jean Charlot (1898-1979), how he came to the Ashram through the Mexican Theosophist and poet Juan Tablada (1871-1945), met another Theosophist, architect Claude Bragdon (1866-1946), and found there «two dozen respectable old ladies, all Theosophical and Greek» (i.e. with Delphic insignia). She called Palmer «an elderly American millionaire» and Reed «a beautiful woman» and «one of my admirers». In a few months, Orozco (1) and Reed (2) became lovers

The Delphic Studios

- ▶ In 1929, Reed added to the Delphic Society the Delphic Studios at 9 West 57th Street, an art gallery that became the official representative of Orozco in the US and helped him secure American commissions for murals
- ▶ Although strongly warned by Orozco against Rivera and Siqueiros, Reed's efforts quietly promoted also their work in the US. While criticized in some quarters for «de-politicizing» the revolutionary artists, her campaign was generally well received



Orozco's Quetzalcoatl



- Orozco's murals in the Dartmouth College, Hanover (NH), including those on the coming and departure of Quetzalcoatl (above), show how in the US the artist returned to some spiritual themes he had developed in Mexico, possibly re-interpreting them in the light of the Theosophical proclivities of Reed's circle

Roerich and the Delphic Movement



- ▶ An important influence on the Delphic New York circle was Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947: *Buddha the Winner*, above), a Russian painter and Theosophist who had visited New York in 1920 and came there again in 1929

Cor Ardens



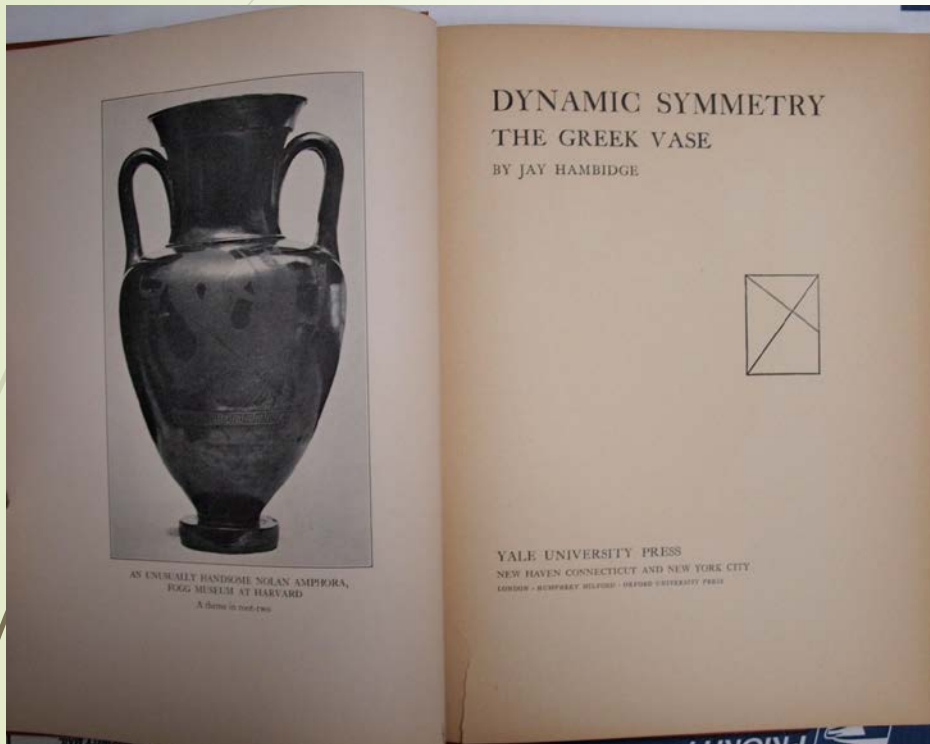
- Roerich's wife Helena (1879-1955) claimed to receive messages from Master Morya that eventually led to a schism from the Theosophical Society, Agni Yoga, and announced Roerich's messianic role as future ruler of a mystical kingdom in Asia
- Several American artists became friends and disciples of Roerich, most of them members of Cor Ardens (Burning Heart), a spiritual-artistic brotherhood founded in Chicago in 1921 by Raymond Jonson (1891-1982: *Rock at Sea*, right)

Swedenborgians

- ▶ Howard Giles (1876-1955), the grandson of Swedenborgian theologian Chauncey Giles (1813-1893) and a painter known for his propaganda art in World War I (right), was a part of the Delphi circle and a teacher at the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, where he introduced several young artists to Swedenborg's ideas



Dynamic Symmetry



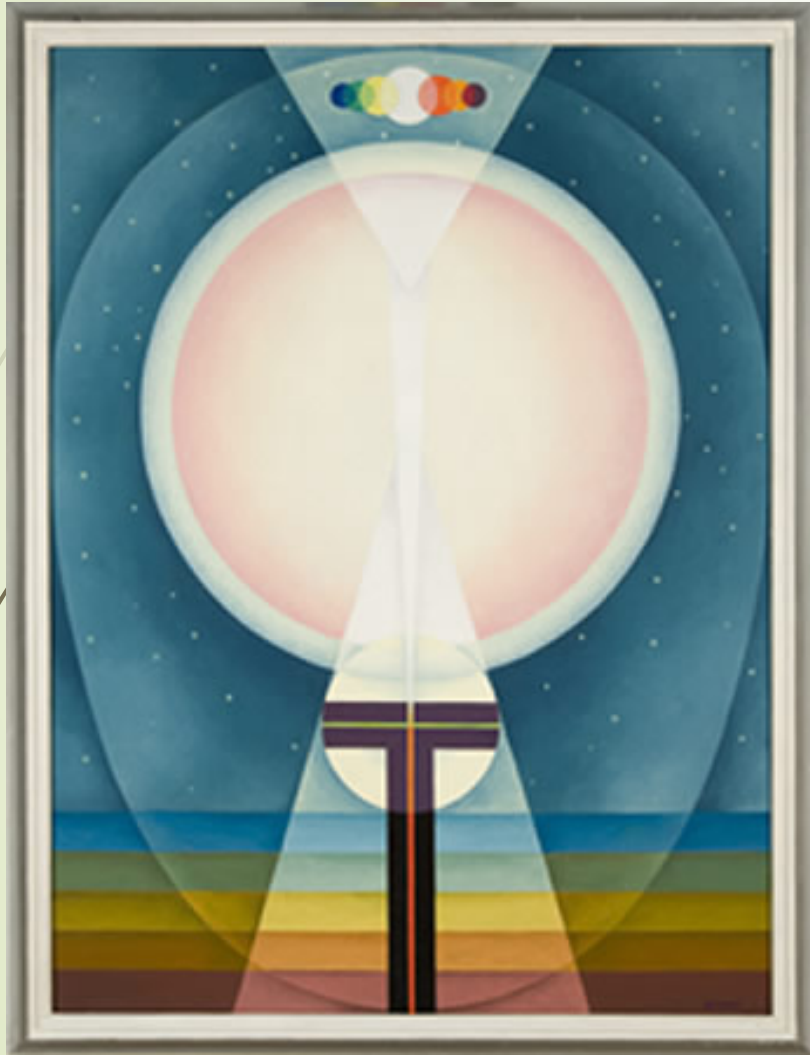
- Giles taught «dynamic symmetry», developed by Jay Hambidge (1867-1924), and based on a mathematical study of proportions in ancient Greek art
- Hambidge's wife, Mary Crovatt Hambidge (1885-1973), visited the Sikelianos in Greece, became a regular of the Ashram, and involved several artists in dynamic symmetry

The Master Institute of United Arts

- Roerich's grand project in New York was the Master Institute of United Arts, a school where all the forms of spiritually oriented art would be taught – including to children (right) – and encouraged
- He involved in the project several Delphic Society regulars, including Giles and his brilliant pupil Emil Bisttram (1895-1976), who became important teachers at the Master School



Emil Bisttram



- Bisttram (*Oversoul*, 1941, left) was a spiritual seeker who experienced with Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, and the Rosicrucian Association of Max Heindel
- Alma Reed organized his first important personal exhibition at the Delphic Studios in 1933, and arranged for a Guggenheim grant allowing him to study in Mexico under Diego Rivera
- The struggling Delphic Studios closed with World War II, although they had a short-lived revival between 1946 and 1950, when Reed left New York to spend her last years in Mexico

Act 3: New Mexico



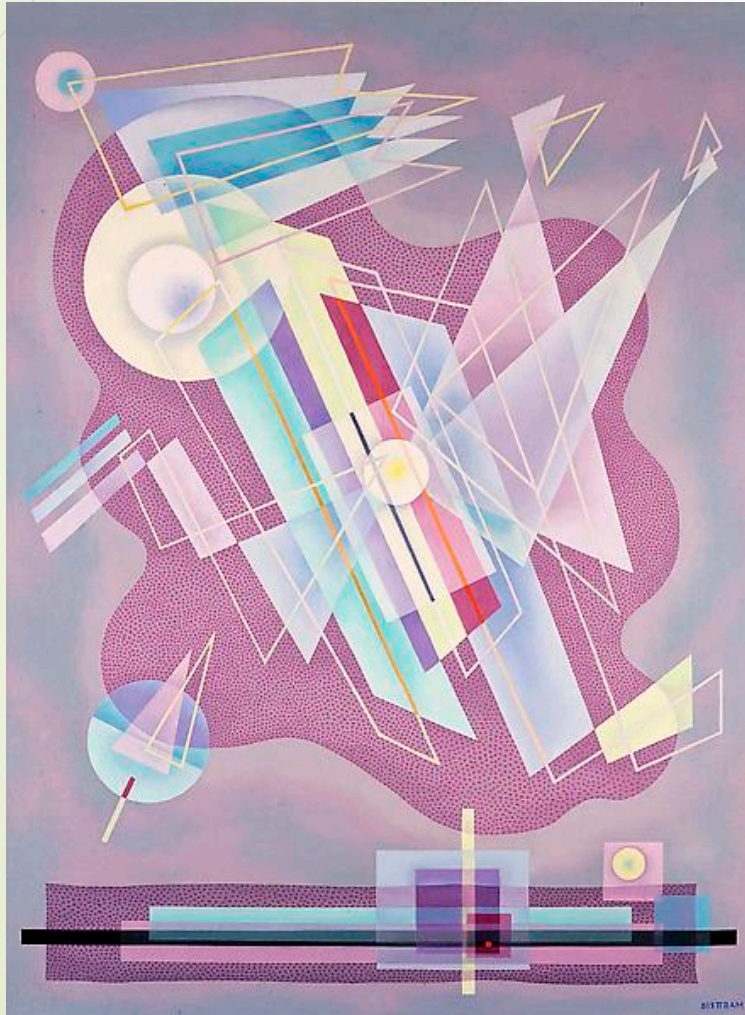
Emil Bistram, *Church at Ranchos de Taos* (1937)

Bisttram's Murals

- ▶ Bisttram learned from Rivera the art of murals, which eventually led to a commission in the Department of Justice, Washington D.C. (1939, right), and several others
- ▶ In 1932, he decided to settle in Taos, New Mexico, which was already home to several artists interested in alternative spiritualities



Bisttram and the New Age



- ▶ The group of artists around Bisttram in New Mexico was among the first in the world to consistently talk of a coming New Age, or Age of Aquarius, which should start in the year 1936
- ▶ Roerich had already indicated 1936 as the year marking the beginning of a new era, although the Russian painter expected visible Messianic events in Central Asia

Bisttram, *Oversoul*, ca. 1940

Encaustics: Mystical Objects

- ▶ The encaustics (1941, right), based on the use of bee wax and pigments on paper, were produced by Bistram between 1936 and 1947, never sold, and shared with close friends only
- ▶ They were intended as mystical objects, aimed at realigning the spiritual forces and favoring the advent of the New Age

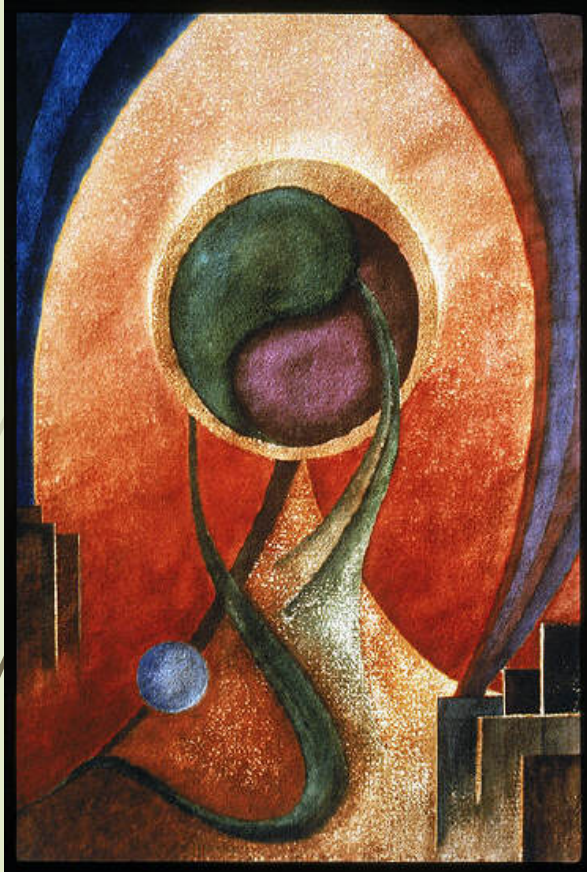


The Canadian Connection: Lawren Harris



- ▶ Lawren Harris (1885-1970: *North Shore, Lake Superior*, left), the best known Canadian painter of the 20th century, was a very active member of the Theosophical Society. In the 1930s, he concluded that true Theosophical art should be abstract (*Abstract no. 7*, right). He spent the years 1938-1940 in New Mexico

The Transcendental Painting Group



- ▶ In 1938, Raymond Jonson, Bisttram and Harris founded in New Mexico the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG). They were joined by other artists interested in alternative spiritualities, including French astrologer, composer, and painter Dane Rudhyar (pseud. of Daniel Chennevière, 1895-1985: *Dynamic Equilibrium*, 1947, left), a decisive influence on the group's theories on the New Age
- ▶ Painter Agnes Pelton (1881-1961: *Untitled* [1931], right) also joined from California



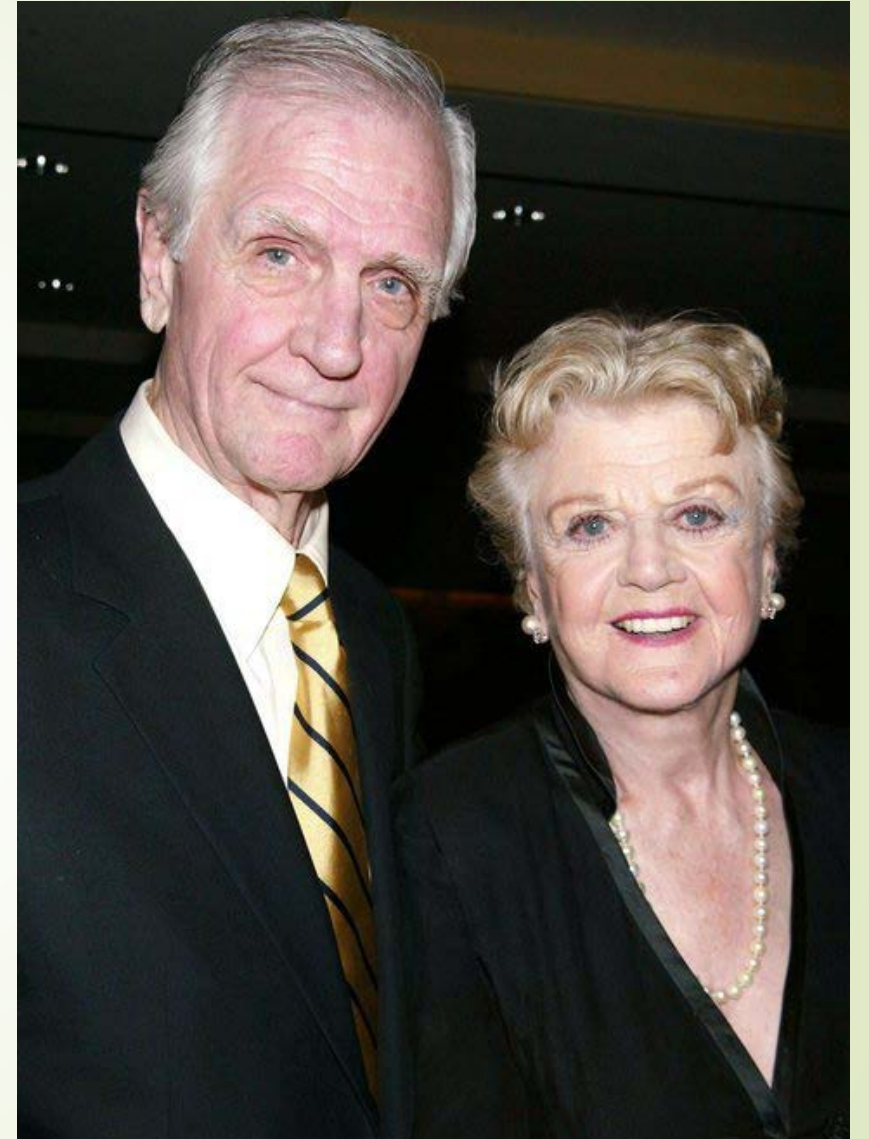
From Roerich to Guru R.H.H.



- ▶ In 1937, Roerich's devotee Ms Clyde Gartner (1900-1967) founded the Arsuna («One Art») Gallery and School in Santa Fe, where several TPG artists exhibited
- ▶ Later in life, Bistram aligned himself with the splinter Agni Yoga group led by Ralph Harris Houston («Guru R.H.H.», 1908-1976, left). Meetings of the R.H.H. group were held in Bistram's home in Taos

Curse, She Wrote

- ▶ R.H.H.'s disciple Burt Wilson recalls that his guru was «literally cursed» by leaders of the «orthodox» New York Roerich circle, including by actress Angela Lansbury (of *Murder, She Wrote* fame), an Agni Yoga devotee and the sister of Edgar Lansbury (with Angela, right), a Broadway producer and the president of the Nicholas Roerich Museum. Relationships between the different Roerich groups are now improving





Gayle Pierce

- ▶ The web of relationship connecting artists and intellectuals, North and South of the border, with several NRMs is perhaps best exemplified by the life of chiropractic doctor Gayle Pierce (1903-1999, left)
- ▶ Raised as a Mormon, Pierce was part of the early Dianetics circle in California before becoming, together with Bisttram, a disciple of Guru R.H.H. Later, she joined a Japanese NRM, Tenshō Kōtai Jingū-kyō, and moved to Japan. At the time of her death, Pierce, who counted several artists as friends and disciples, had become a Tibetan Buddhist



... and perhaps we have better stop here