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### Prometheus: The Timeless Symbol of Enlightenment

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FYS Ancient Worlds

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### Prometheus: The Timeless Symbol of Enlightenment

Throughout modern history, artists have drawn inspiration from Classical mythology. Mexican muralist Jose Clemente Orozco is a prime example of this. In his first United States mural at Pomona College, located in Claremont, California, Orozco pays homage to the Greek god Prometheus. In his fresco, *Prometheus*, created in 1930, Orozco depicts the Titan bestowing the gift of fire upon humanity. Orozco's formal training coupled with a Greek cultural revival in the United States led by the Delphic Circle, a group of intellectuals, were his primary inspirations. Through the Circle, Orozco was reintroduced to Classical art and culture including Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, written between 479 and 424 BC.<sup>1</sup> The sympathy and admiration for *Prometheus* invoked by Aeschylus can be seen in Orozco's mural at Pomona College. Like Aeschylus' portrayal of Prometheus in *Prometheus Bound*, Jose Clemente Orozco depicts the Titan turned fire-bringer as a champion of human knowledge and uses Prometheus as a symbol of hope and progress for future generations.

The earliest preserved account of the myth of Prometheus comes from Hesiod's *Theogony*, which recounts Prometheus' first deception of Zeus, on behalf of humanity, and gives

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<sup>1</sup> The author responsible for *Prometheus Bound* and its creation date is widely disputed among scholars but many credit Aeschylus for its creation.

Flintoff, E. "The Date of the Prometheus Bound." *Mnemosyne* 39, no. 1/2 (1986): 82–91.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4431467>.

context to Aeschylus' telling of the myth. In Hesiod's *Theogony* Prometheus acts as an agent for humanity as he carves up a bull and splits them into two portions with intentions of "deceiving the mind of Zeus".<sup>2</sup> The first portion set out by Prometheus is "the hide the flesh and the entrails rich with fat" which Prometheus cleverly hides within the bull's stomach".<sup>3</sup> The other portion are "white bones of the bull which Prometheus attractively conceals with shining fat".<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, Zeus chooses the seemingly appetizing bones concealed in fat, as hoped by Prometheus. Zeus' choice results in the "the reason that the tribes of men upon the earth burn the white bones to the gods on the smoking altars."<sup>5</sup> Although when Zeus discovers that he has been duped, he is overcome with rage and to exact revenge he fails to bestow the knowledge of fire on humans. This results in Prometheus intervening again as he steals "the far-seeing gleam of untiring fire in a hollow stalk of fennel" and gives it to mankind.<sup>6</sup> This act of defiance results in Prometheus' punishment which Aeschylus portrays in his play *Prometheus Bound*.

Aeschylus' portrayal of Prometheus exalts the Titan as a god who truly cares for humanity and a bringer of progress. *Prometheus Bound* begins with Prometheus being chained to a rock by Hephaistos, the god of craftsmen and metalworking, as commanded by Zeus and enforced by Power, the god of Power. In this interaction Power continuously mocks Prometheus for his actions, remarking how mortals cannot save him. Prometheus stays quiet and does not rebut Power's remarks. Finally, when Hephaistos and Power exit, Prometheus calls on the forces of nature to bear witness to his suffering:

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<sup>2</sup> Hesiod. *The Poems of Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, and The Shield of Herakles*. Translated by Barry B. Powell. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017, lines 430-431. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1xxt93.9>.

<sup>3</sup> Hesiod 432.

<sup>4</sup> Hesiod 433-435.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod 446-447.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod 452-453.

“But I cannot keep silent, or not keep silent, about what has happened to me; because I gave prizes to mortals, I bear this yoke of compulsion in my misery; I hunted out and stole in a hollow reed a stream of fire, which has proved to be for humans a teacher of every craft and a great resource. For such ‘offences’ I am paying the penalty, pinned down and chained in the open air.”<sup>7</sup>

Prometheus’ feels that his only option is to help humanity, that he has no choice in the matter. He bears the burden of being the sole caretaker of humanity amongst gods who do not care about the well-being of humans. Prometheus feels so strongly that he not only gives humanity fire but makes the effort to “hunt” it down on their behalf. His commitment to humans demonstrates a fierce love that he believes is not worthy of punishment. The true crime for which he is being punished is his disobedience of Zeus as demonstrated by Power’s commentary: “Such are your rewards for your human loving ways. For you, a god, did not cower before the gods’ anger, but bestowed privileges on mortals beyond what is just.”<sup>8</sup> Prometheus does not adhere to the accepted notion(as expressed by Power) that humans are not worthy of knowledge. His disobedience shows that Prometheus believes in the potential of humanity, and he continuously tries to promote their progress. In an interaction with the Oceanids in the play, he recounts all the positive things he has done for humanity in the past to help them progress, such as how to use numbers and language, how he harnessed and tamed the first animals so that the humans could use them for labor, how he introduced medicine, and showed humans how to draw metals from the earth.<sup>9</sup> The order in which he lists his gifts to humanity mirrors the progress which he has helped them achieve and therefore this extensive list strongly portrays Prometheus as a proponent of human advancement. Furthermore, through expressing that he is speaking not out

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<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound*, Translated by Anthony J Podlecki. Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2005. lines 106-113.

<sup>8</sup> Aeschylus 28-30.

<sup>9</sup> Aeschylus 442-471.

of spite but rather wants to simply explain his devotion to humanity, he is portrayed as a selfless character who genuinely cares for humanity.

Jose Clemente Orozco began his artistic career in Mexico as a leader of the Mexican Muralist Movement but in the late 1920s, moved to the US. During his stay in America from 1927 to 1934, Orozco was represented by Alma Reed, a journalist, and through her and her circle he was reintroduced to the world of ancient Greek culture and arts. Greek art and culture were not completely foreign to Orozco before he came to the U.S. From a young age, he was classically trained at the Academy of San Carlos where the Classical figures of ancient art were a central part of the vocabulary of young artists.<sup>10</sup> Greek, Roman, and Renaissance subjects with heavily muscled bodies and dramatic gestures were used as models for the students. A similar style can be seen within Orozco's mural *Prometheus*. Orozco dramatizes the human form through intensifying the muscles of the figure with harsh lines and intense shadows.

This familiarity with Greek art was revived during his stay in the United States thanks to Alma Reed who introduced Orozco to Eva Sikelianos, the wife of Greek poet Angelo Sikelianos. The Sikelianoses founded a group known as the Delphic Circle, through which they sought to restore "order, rhythm, and authority" to society through "mobilizing the elites to remedy the world's chaos."<sup>11</sup> The Delphic Circle was made up of intellectuals and elites who together held initiations, rituals, and festivals. Orozco regularly engaged with the Circle and was eventually initiated, although the exact date of his entrance is unknown. Through his interactions with the

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<sup>10</sup> Scott, David W. "Orozcos Prometheus: Summation, Transition, Innovation" in *Jose Clemente Orozco: Prometheus*. Claremont, CA: Marjorie L Harth. Pomona College Museum of Art, 2002: 17

<sup>11</sup> Mello, Renato G. "Orozco in the United States: An Essay on the History of Ideas" in *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in association with W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2002: 37-38.

Sikelianos and the Circle, he was undoubtedly influenced by their knowledge of Greek myth and culture. As part of the Circle's practice, Eva Sikelianos organized "Delphic festivals," a series of events held at the archeological site of Delphi commemorating ancient Greek culture. The first festival, in 1927, which Orozco was likely involved in, to some degree, included a production of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.<sup>12</sup> The link between the Circle and the Pomona fresco is further strengthened by Alma Reed who confirmed the influences of the Delphic interests and activities upon Orozco's selection of the theme in a correspondence with art historian David W. Scott.<sup>13</sup> Orozco's experience with Greek art in his formative years and his revived interest in Greek culture contributed to his subject and portrayal of *Prometheus*.

Orozco, with the help of Pomona's faculty, chose the subject of Prometheus as a representation of Pomona as an institution devoted to enlightenment through education and because of its message of enlightenment and hope. In this sense, one can relate Pomona College to Prometheus, and fire to knowledge. Catalan art historian Jose Pijoan, then employed as an art history professor at Pomona College, was partly responsible for the classical theme. Pijoan chose the subject largely due to its relevance to the institution but also for its universal relatability. Existing documentation and correspondence between Pijoan and Orozco, as well as a portrait of Pijoan surrounded by flames painted by Orozco, suggest that Pijoan himself felt a close identification to Prometheus.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, David Scott suggests that Orozco saw himself, the

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<sup>12</sup> Mello, Renato G 39

<sup>13</sup> Reed, Alma. Letter to David W. Scott. 1955. David Scott Gift, Jose Clemente Orozco Materials Collection, Box 4, Folder 4. Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>14</sup> Reiman, Karen C. "Prometheus Unraveled: Readings of and from the Body: Orozco's Pomona College Mural (1930) in *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in association with W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2002: 103-104

isolated artist consumed by the very gift he brings to man received by a hostile crowd, mirrored in Prometheus.<sup>15</sup> Scott continues with this idea bringing attention to the parallels between Prometheus with his flaming hands near his anguished face and Orozco, who in his early teens lost his left hand and damaged his eyesight as a result of a gunpowder explosion.<sup>16</sup> Prometheus was ultimately chosen as the subject due to the multiple levels of signification and interpretation the myth provides.

Visually, Orozco's fresco depicts Prometheus bringing the live flame from heaven to the masses and the varied reactions of humans, gods, and mythical creatures in a series of four panels in a large niche: a large central panel set into a pointed arch, two rectangular panels framing it to the east and west, and a ceiling panel. The main central panel depicts the nude figure of the Titan bestowing the gift of fire upon a mass of onlookers below. Orozco shows the varied effects of the gift on different groups as indicated by their gestures. The varied reactions include acceptance, indifference, and rejection represented visually by outstretched arms, averted eyes, and turned backs. The crowd could symbolize students and their reactions to a higher education: some pursue it, more are indifferent, and a few reject the opportunity.<sup>17</sup> The central panel is framed by a pointed arch which Orozco contorts the Titan to fit within. Prometheus' hands reach out in an Atlantean gesture that is hidden at the point of maximum drama due to the overhanging arch which partly covers the mural. From first glance, one cannot see the adjacent side panels, on the west and east, and ceiling panel. This hidden quality forces the spectator to come close, under

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<sup>15</sup> Scott, David W. "Orozco's Prometheus: Summation, Transition, Innovation" in *Jose Clemente Orozco: Prometheus*. Claremont, CA: Marjorie L Harth. Pomona College Museum of Art, 2002: 15.

<sup>16</sup> Scott, David W. 15

<sup>17</sup> Scott, David W. "Prometheus Revisited" in *Jose Clemente Orozco: Prometheus*. Claremont, CA: Marjorie L Harth. Pomona College Museum of Art, 2002: 27

the overhang, and enter the mythical world of *Prometheus* to see the entire mural and its complexities (see fig 1). Once enveloped, the viewer can see the west panel which portrays Zeus, Hera, and Io—another victim of Zeus’s cruelty, depicted as a horned bull with arms outstretched in agony-- gazing up at Prometheus above an abstract mass of colors (fig 3). On the opposite side, the east panel depicts a more chaotic scene of centaurs in attitudes of despair and agony. A female centaur in the coils of a large serpent reaches for her baby while above them two male centaurs hunch over in pain. (fig.4). In an interview with *The Student Life*, a student run newspaper for the Claremont Colleges, Orozco explained that the centaurs represent “the ancient times that Prometheus is upsetting by giving knowledge to man” but commented that they are “only a part to the universal mythology” and to not put too much meaning to them.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, the ceiling panel depicts a symbol of interlocking, flame darting rectangles. This abstract symbol is Orozco’s representation of the source of the flame stolen by Prometheus. David Scott notes that originally Orozco planned on painting the head of Zeus in the ceiling panel as it was from him that Prometheus stole the fire. But as Scott explains, Zeus represented the old order that was to be destroyed.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, upon further thought Orozco replaced him with an abstract symbol allowing the viewer to give their own interpretation.

Through the positioning of Prometheus’s body, Orozco’s fresco depicts Prometheus positively as a bringer of knowledge and an ally to humanity, similar to Aeschylus’ depiction in *Prometheus Bound*. Orozco paints Prometheus with his arms extended up towards the fire and his hands enveloped by the flame. Prometheus and the fire almost blur to become one as the

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<sup>18</sup> D.C. “Orozco on his Fresco,” *The Student Life*. May 17, 1930. *The Student Life* (student newspaper) Collection, *The Student Life* September 1929-June 1930, Vol. 42. Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, David W. “Prometheus Revisited” in *Jose Clemente Orozco: Prometheus*. Claremont, CA: Marjorie L Harth. Pomona College Museum of Art, 2002: 30



viewer is unable to discern his fingers from the fire. Orozco purposely melds the subject and the flame to further this notion that Prometheus himself is synonymous with knowledge and progress. Additionally, the flame touching his hands suggests that Prometheus himself has been burned by the flame. Reminiscent of *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is hurt by the very gift he bestows on humanity. Prometheus' suffering is contrasted by the crowd below him who are lifted towards him and the flame with outstretched arms, whereas Prometheus is brought down to his knees. The kneeling and outstretched hands gives the illusion of weight which Prometheus shoulders alone.<sup>20</sup> As in Aeschylus' tragedy, Prometheus bears the burden of being the sole promoter of humanity. For this, he is forced to suffer the consequences.

The configuration of this mural evokes the theatrical setting of *Prometheus Bound* but Orozco puts his own twist on the telling of the myth and gives it greater meaning in the context of the political climate of the 1930s. Karen Reiman brings attention to this:

“Considering the stagelike format of the niche where the mural is located and recalling Orozco's experience of the rehearsals of *Prometheus Bound* in the Delphic Circles, one might image in the mural as a contemporary dramatization of the classic manuscript, in which it is reinterpreted in terms of the way it sheds light on modern dilemmas with recourse to contemporary aesthetic paradigms, fragmenting time and space...”<sup>21</sup>

Rather than offering a direct or literal rendering of the literary versions of Prometheus myth, Orozco imagines a final lost chapter of the Aeschylean myth. Orozco takes the myth of Prometheus and translates it into the context of the 1930s when fascism was on the rise. He uses the myth as an “expression of hope that the fire of Prometheus would bring enlightenment to

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<sup>20</sup> Reiman, Karen C. “Prometheus Unraveled: Readings of and from the Body: Orozoco's Pomona College Mural (1930) in *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in association with W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2002: 112-113

<sup>21</sup> Reiman, Karen C. 107

mortals before it was too late.”<sup>22</sup> Continuing with this anti-fascist sentiment, Orozco depicts Prometheus as a rebel hero, as supported by Orozco’s anarchist background. Prometheus takes power, represented by fire, away from the tyrannical upper class, the Olympians, and shares it with the lower class or the less fortunate humanity. Thematically, Prometheus as a rebel hero aligns with some of Orozco’s other subjects such as the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, Christ, Emiliano and Zapata. As stated by Reiman, Orozco translates Prometheus into a universal symbol of hope for a better future and a hero to the less fortunate.

Jose Clemente Orozco, influenced by his involvement in the Delphic Circle, drew from Aeschylus’ telling of the myth of Prometheus in his mural at Pomona College. Both *Prometheus Bound* and the *Prometheus* fresco exalt Prometheus as a fore bringer of knowledge and selfless benefactor to humanity. Furthermore, Orozco gives his own interpretation of Aeschylean myth through portraying Prometheus as a symbol of hope in the context of a politically tense time. Orozco’s usage of Prometheus demonstrates how myths can transcend time and culture and how even in our modern society the ancient world lives on.

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<sup>22</sup> Vallen, Mark. “Prometheus: José Clemente Orozco.” Edited by Jeannine Thorpe. Art For a Change, February 9, 2014. <http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2014/02/prometheus-jose-clemente-oro-zco.html>.

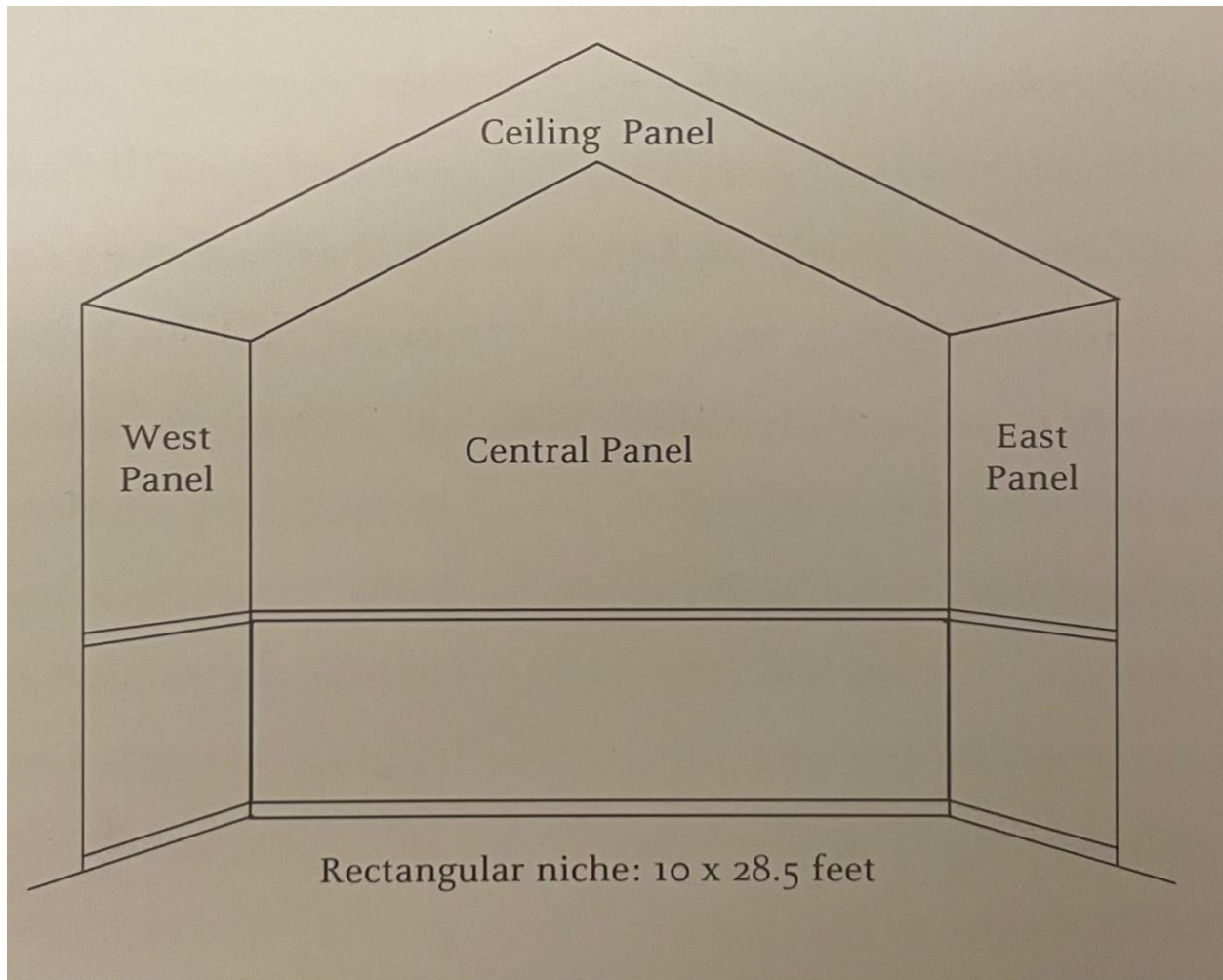


Fig 1. Diagram of Prometheus. 1930, fresco, Frary Hall, Pomona College, Claremont, California, created by Barbara Krieger. In *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States 1927-1934*: 99.



Fig 2. Center Panel of Prometheus, Jose Clemente Orozco, 1930, fresco, 20x28.5 feet, Frary Hall, Pomona College, Claremont, California. Photograph from San Jose Museum of Art.





Fig 3. West Panel of Prometheus, 1930, fresco, 15.3x7 feet, Frary Hall, Pomona College, Claremont, California. Photograph from San Jose Museum of Art.

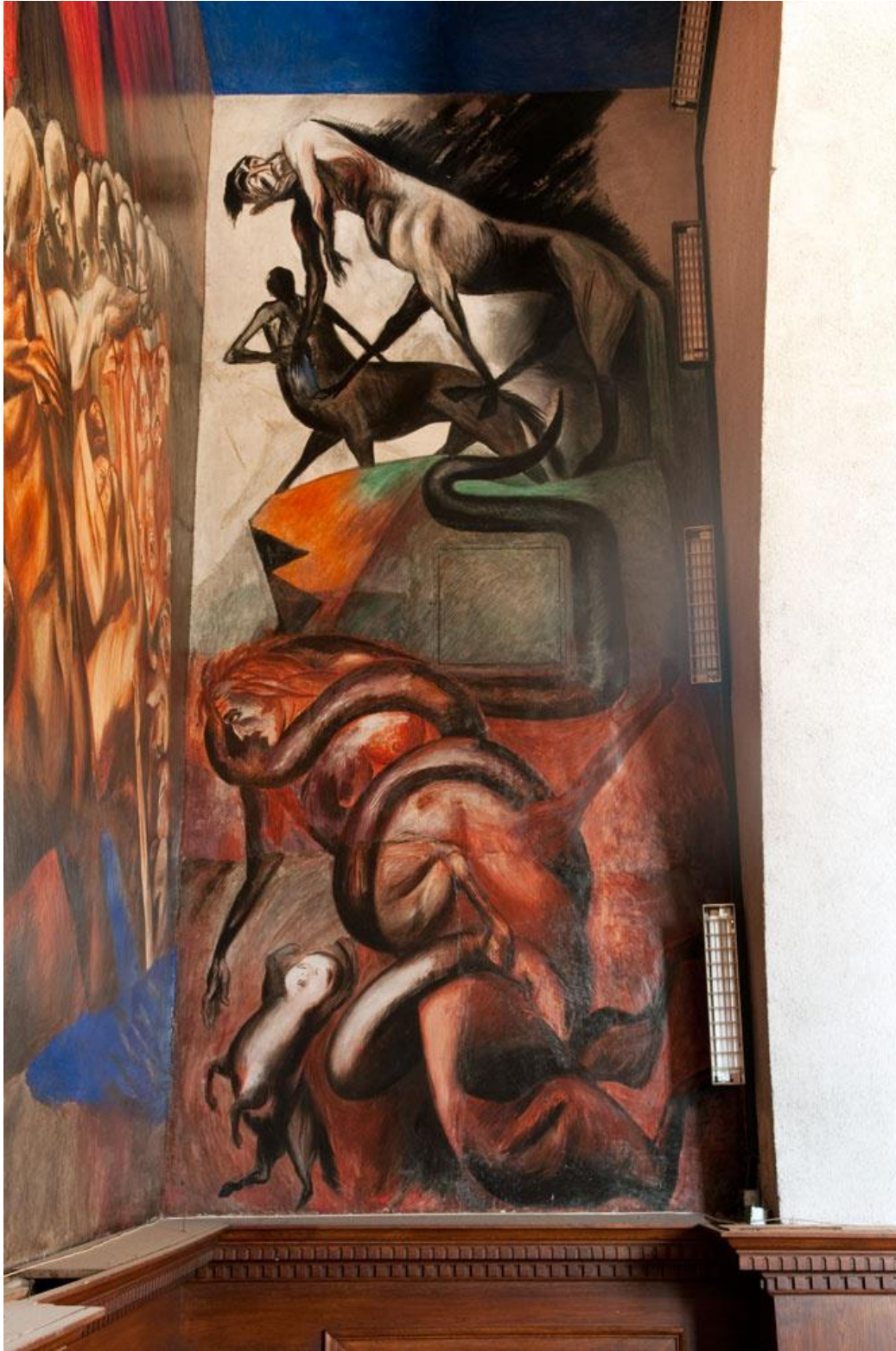


Fig 4. East Panel of Prometheus, Jose Clemente Orozco, 1930, fresco, 15.3x7 feet, Frary Hall, Pomona College, Claremont, California. Photograph from San Jose Museum of Art.



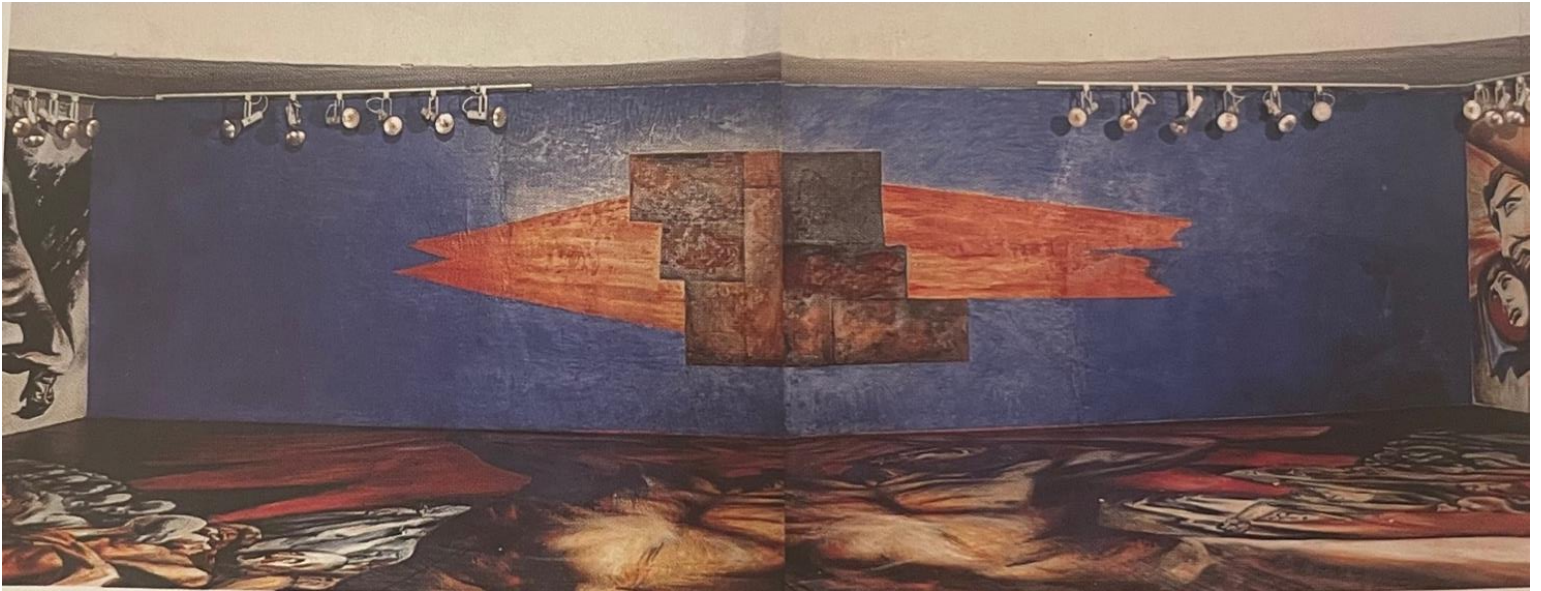


Fig 5. Ceiling Panel of Prometheus, Jose Clemente Orozco, 1930, fresco, 7x28.5 feet, Frary Hall, Pomona College, Claremont, California. Photo from "Prometheus Revisited" by David W Scott in *Jose Clemente Orozco Prometheus*.

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Vallen, Mark. "Prometheus: José Clemente Orozco." Edited by Jeannine Thorpe. *Art For a Change*, February 9, 2014. <http://art-for-a-change.com/blog/2014/02/prometheus-jose-clemente-orozco.html>.