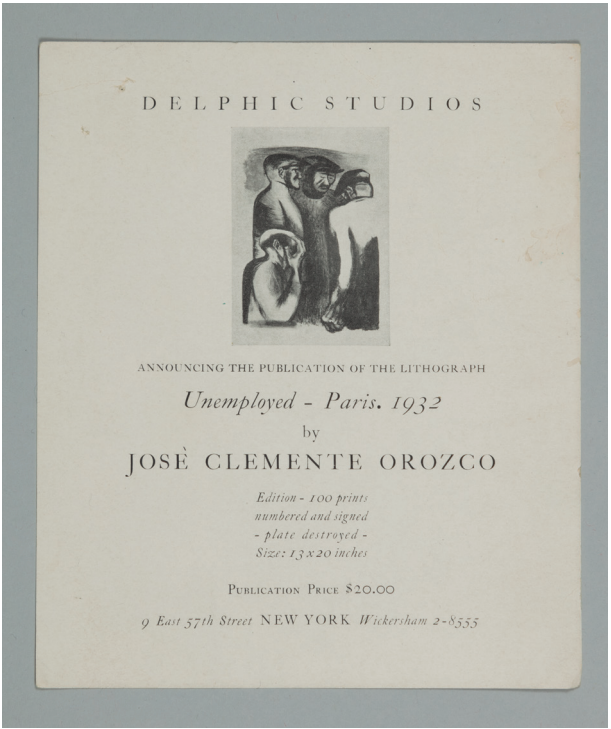


Delphic Festival (document), 1927.
Photo: © Agustín Garza



Invitation card to an exhibition by José Clemente Orozco
at the gallery Delphic Studios, 1932.
Photo: © Agustín Garza



Antropomorphhic male head (reproduction).
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EN BUSCA DE UN MURO

APR. 21 — JUL. 1, 2018

En busca de un muro (In Search of a Wall) brings together a series of works and archive materials, which as a whole bear testament to a specific moment in history taking place between 1927 and 1934 in New York. During this time, schools of thought such as the theosophical movement, esoterism, occultism and spiritism influenced the way of thinking of artists, writers, promoters and intellectuals from different latitudes, which made up the secret society of the Delphic Circle—spearheaded by journalist Alma Reed and intellectual Eva Palmer Sikelianos.

The exhibition attempts to create a narrative separate from rigorous and conclusive methodologies, while at the same time approaching the impact which Greek philosophical ideologies and secret societies—later to become exhibition spaces and galleries—had on certain artistic, literary and cultural practices.

In this conversation with the curatorial staff of the museum, Rodrigo Ortiz Monasterio, exhibition curator, delves deeper into the axes which guided the project.

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With works by: Berenice Abbott, Kenneth Armitage, Mario García Torres, Jacques Lipchitz, Carlos Mérida, Tina Modotti, Nickolas Muray, Ben Nicholson, Georgia O' Keefe, José Clemente Orozco, Alma Reed (archival material), Saul Steinberg, Rufino Tamayo and Joaquín Torres García.

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How does the project *En busca de un muro* arise?

The exhibition takes its name from Julio Bracho’s movie *En busca de un muro* (1973), which deals with José Clemente Orozco’s stay in New York from 1927 to 1934. Shortly after his arrival to the city, the muralist attended, along with anthropologist Anita Brenner, a party at the apartment of the eccentric millionaire Eva Palmer (better known as Madame Sikelianos), the wife of Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos, and it was then that he first made contact with the secret society of the Delphic Circle.

From this reference, and taking as a starting point Orozco’s journey to New York, the idea of the search for a wall works as a metaphor for establishing connections among the philosophical ideologies which influenced various cultural agents, as well as the relationship which, because of these interests, developed among characters such as Orozco, Brenner, architect Claude Bragdon, the Sikelianos couple, poet José Juan Tablada, journalist Alma Reed—and along with her, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, governor of Yucatan from 1922 to 1924, with whom she had a relationship at the time—, and others.



Photograph of Alma Reed, José Clemente Orozco and Kahlil Gibran, ca. 1960.
Photo: © Agustín Garza

The Delphic Circle is one of the main subjects of the exhibition. How did this group arise and which activities did it carry out?

The Delphic Circle was an extension of another project: the Delphic Festivals, organized by Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos between 1927 and 1930 in Greece. These festivals sought a reemergence of ancient Greece through a series of activities such as Olympic contests, concerts of byzantine music, an exhibition of popular Greek art and a staging of *Prometheus Bound* which Palmer directed, composed music, made masks and sewed actors’ costumes for.

On the other hand, after learning that her fiancé Felipe Carrillo Puerto had been assassinated along with his brothers, American journalist Alma Reed arrived in Greece to meet her childhood friend Madame Sikelianos. Not long afterwards they both travelled to New York in order to raise funds for the second edition of the Delphic Festival. Once there, they decided to set up a *salon* in Palmer’s Fifth Avenue apartment, which they called the Delphic Circle—also referred to as the *ashram*.

Although their activities evoked the spirit of the Delphic Festivals to a certain degree (attendees used to wear tunics and sandals) the *ashram* served mainly as a meeting point for intellectuals and artists. In his letters to his friend, artists Jean Charlot, Orozco talks of some of the things which would take place there: speeches by Indian poet and nationalist Sarojini Naidu, recitals by Reed using her translation of Sikelianos’ work *Dedication*, or Palmer’s Greek recitations of excerpts from *Prometheus Unbound*.

What were the effects this “spiritual awakening” had in art and how is this reflected in the exhibition?

Most of the artists that are part of the exhibit were directly or indirectly linked to the Delphic Circle. In plastic and exhibition terms, during the early twentieth century there was a great interest in the occult, from Russian Suprematism to salons and galleries. Alfred Stieglitz’ Gallery 291, for instance, sought other dimensions through museography, while his wife, Georgia O’Keefe, was also linked to the Delphic Circle through her friendship with Claude Bragdon. Other references may be found in Orozco’s letters to Charlot, in which he constantly mentions Bragdon and his theories about the fourth dimension.

In the case of Mexico, which other artists made contact with or belonged to the Delphic Circle? How did this group influence the Mexican context?

In the early 1920s, many Mexican artists lived in the Big Apple. One of the most important Mexican characters abroad might have been Tablada, who had been appointed as cultural spokesperson for Mexico in the USA by José Vasconcelos. In New York, the poet developed a more spiritual side to his work, largely due to his friendship with Bragdon. They both shared an interest in esoteric Eastern ideologies, such as the theory of the fourth dimension put forward by Russian thinker and mathematician Piotr Demianovich Ouspenski, according to which one could come into contact with the fourth dimension through art.

While the *ashram* was scarcely documented, a photograph belonging to the Alma Reed archive—currently kept at the National History Museum, Castle of Chapultepec—shows David Alfaro Siqueiros, Chago Rodríguez, Alma Reed herself, Enrique Riveron, José Clemente Orozco and Julia Codesico celebrating the opening of some exhibition at Delphic Studios.

Orozco, for instance, besides adopting several of the circle’s ideologies, used it as a platform: his first US exhibition was in one of the *ashram*’s rooms, while the second took place in Reed’s Delphic Studios gallery. Shortly after this show, he was invited by Spanish critic José Pijoan to paint a mural on Pomona College’s Frary Hall in Claremont, California. Orozco named it *Prometheus*, in allusion to the Greek myth of the god who identified with mankind. Consequently, and thanks to Reed, he got another commission to paint a mural for the new building of the New School for Social Research in New York.

To sum up, among the Mexican anthropologists, artists, writers, poets and patrons which regularly attended the *ashram* we find: Adolfo Best Maugard, Miguel Covarrubias, Marius de Zayas, Genaro Estrada, Manuel Gamio, Salvador Novo, Orozco, Gilberto Owen, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Diego Rivera, Siqueiros, Tablada, Rufino Tamayo and Xavier Villaurrutia.

The museography, furnishing and distribution of works makes reference to the salons and montages of exhibitions carried out between 1910 and 1940. How do you take up this reference?

The exhibition design alludes to different typologies of the history of exhibitions. The idea was to take up certain aspects of modernist museography: hanging paintings in a *salon-style hanging*, producing pedestals of the same height as certain pieces hang, and juxtaposing archive materials, popular art, pre-Hispanic works and belongings of Reed’s with pieces from the collection of the Tamayo museum. In order to achieve this, we drew great influence from the images and descriptions of exhibitions and spaces from this period, such as Alfred Stieglitz’ Gallery 291, Madame Blavatsky’s salon in New York, Natalie Clifford Barney’s salon in Paris and some MOMA exhibitions curated by Alfred Barr.

The conversations held by figures such as Alma Reed, Tina Modotti, Anita Brenner, José Clemente Orozco, Eva Palmer, among many others, and their meetings in New York which took place without leaving thorough and detailed traces, are also an important part of *En busca de un muro*. How do you take up the challenge of exhibiting these *non-historiographed* anecdotes? Is critical speculation also a motif within this research?

The idea was to trace a series of microhistories, as is the case with the photographs made by Tina Modotti of the murals of the National Preparatory School (ENP), originally taken for the publication *Mexican Folkways*, under the direction of Frances Toor. However, when she learned about the inclusion of her photographs in Orozco’s exhibition at the *ashram*, the American author accused Reed of unauthorized reproduction of the negatives. The mystery surrounding this

event is still ongoing, as there are no (known) documents confirming how Reed came into possession of the negatives, whether Orozco kept any of them, whether Modotti agreed to the reproduction of some of her photographs, or whether this was simply a matter of jealousy of Toor towards the journalist. Whatever the reason, the matter of copyright surrounding these photographs is still inconclusive.

Without a doubt, critical speculation is an important axis for this project; the exhibition set certain questions on the way we read history: how to recount such an important, yet poorly documented, moment? We may take up the case of Reed, a woman who was a key element in so many stories but, on returning to Mexico, eventually died in certain obscurity in her apartment in the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood. However, thanks to the work of writer Michael Schuessler and his extensive research surrounding the journalist, we may have a different perspective of an enigmatic time in the history of art, as well as the influence she had as a cultural promoter of Mexican artists abroad.



Photograph of Eva Palmer Sikelianos, twentieth century.
Photo: © Agustín Garza