

THE MOYA BREWERY MURALS: FROM ACME TO AZTEC

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At the Jose Moya del Pino Library, we celebrate the many works of our namesake artist. As noted in a recent issue of *Brewery History*, his 1935 Acme Brewery murals are fully restored in their original location in San Francisco. In three large panels, the artist portrays the gathering of hops and barley, the brewing and bottling of beer, and the enjoyment of the product at a family picnic.¹ The restoration was conducted by local conservator Anne Rosenthal, who was also directly involved in the award winning restoration of the murals at Coit Tower. Both the Acme murals and Coit Tower, host to a Moya panel in the elevator lobby, are easily accessible to the public and there is no substitute for viewing them in person. While many of his works are in the San Francisco Bay Area, he played an important part in a larger work 500 miles to the south.

The Aztec Murals: creation, rediscovery and restoration

In 1934, Moya was involved in an elaborate project in San Diego, an entire tap room at the Aztec Brewery, often referred to as the Rathskeller. Containing a vivid ensemble of murals, paintings, woodwork and furniture, Moya worked alongside Eugene Taylor and local craftsmen to build an impressive and functional work of art. It is a beautiful piece of history portraying ancient cultures, indigenous peoples and local landscapes from the past. The focus was on the Aztecs, with the central mural portraying a human sacrifice. Other scenes depicting pre-Columbian cultures and Spanish colonization were found throughout the room. Even local landscapes were displayed, with Mount San Miguel featured prominently. Another feature of his work is that the faces of people in his work are often those he knew, from fami-

ly and friends to clients. Further analysis could identify individuals from 1930s San Diego.²

The Commission for Arts and Culture, City of San Diego, documented the specific works as part of a recent restoration and reinstallation, describing them as primary examples of the Art Deco Mexican/Hollywood style.³

The Brewery has an interesting history with its move from Mexico to San Diego. Shortly after the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose platform included the repeal of Prohibition, the company bought the brewery site and planned a modern production facility.⁴ Already successful across the border in Tijuana, this was a bold and successful move. The company produced beer for several years until it was sold to a Detroit brewer in 1948.⁵ A closing of the brewery followed and the Rathskeller was largely forgotten.

40 years after the end of Aztec, a photo of a softball team celebration in the tap room was posted in the *San Diego Reader*, the local weekly newspaper, courtesy of the San Diego Historical Society.⁶ I recently spoke to Salvador Torres, a well-known San Diego artist. He recalled his wife at the time, Gloria, showing the photo to him. He remembered growing up in the area and Gloria had an uncle who once worked there. After some inquiries, he was allowed access to the original building, at that time housing a tire factory. Upon entering the room, he noted the dust and the remarkably preserved art and fixtures. Even today, he speaks of that discovery with reverence and admiration. Sadly, the building and contents were scheduled for imminent demolition.⁷

This began an effort on the part of many artists, residents and community activists to save the building and



Photograph courtesy of City of San Diego Civic Art Collection.

contents, covered extensively in newspapers at the time. Hearings were conducted by the San Diego Historical Site Board and they first voted to protect only the art, but later decided to designate both the building and the art as worthy of preservation. There was considerable debate with some protests along the way.⁸ On 6 June 1988, the City Council overturned the decision in part, voting to preserve the Art, but not the building. Following a series of appeals, the buildings were destroyed in 1990.⁹ But the City did keep the rathskeller collection. One vision was to restore the room as originally built while another effort was made to install the art in a local restaurant. Despite the good intentions, the art remained in storage.¹⁰

Over 25 years after the rediscovery, in 2014, significant works in the collection were installed in the nearby Logan Heights branch of the San Diego Public Library, including the centerpiece mural and bar and individual panels. The public is free to visit during open hours.¹¹

Depression era projects

Moya was a prolific artist, with many of his works still found in the San Francisco Bay Area. Early in his career, he specialized in oils, but his work may be connected to his friendship with Diego Rivera and to fellow Coit Tower artists such as Victor Arnautoff. In 1933, he wrote an article espousing mural art.¹² His most accessible achievement is a panel in the elevator lobby at Coit Tower, a popular San Francisco landmark. In 1933, he completed three panels at the Merchant's Exchange Club. Each detailed a specific period of San Francisco History. Located in the basement, this was truly a rathskeller, with a bar in front of the central mural depicting the city and bay of the 1930s, much like the centerpiece of the Aztec tap room. A more important similarity is that they were also threatened after the sale of the building, but saved and restored through the efforts and generosity of the current owners.¹³ From 1936 to 1941, Moya won commissions to produce murals in Post Offices as part of the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts program, from Redwood City and Stockton in California to the tiny town of Alpine, Texas.¹⁴ He worked on several large works for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. Each of these projects made unique references to historical people and places,

often referencing local landmarks and customs. One of his favorite Bay Area landmarks was Mount Tamalpais, very similar in size to the Mount San Miguel referenced at Aztec.

Family connection

But how does a Spanish painter become a client for what might seem an unlikely patron of the arts? It likely wasn't random chance, but a family connection. Moya arrived in the United States in 1925, exhibiting his large portfolio of Diego Velázquez reproductions in a cross country tour sponsored by the King of Spain. Progressing from the East Coast to the West, the funding ran out while in San Francisco. Finding a home for the art was the first challenge, but making a home for himself was likely just as difficult. As Moya settled in California, he made a modest living, primarily painting portraits for private clients. He eventually met fellow artist Helen Horst and they were married in 1928. In addition, her father was Emil Clemens Horst. Born in Germany, he came to America and made his fortune as a hop producer in California. He invented a hop picking machine, revolutionizing the harvesting process by sharply reducing the time and labor required.¹⁵ He is also notable for his negotiation of an exclusive contract for Oregon growers to supply hops to the Guinness Brewery in Ireland.¹⁶ This relationship and the impact on hop production in the United States and Europe is a fascinating story, not without controversy, but there is no doubt Horst and his family made an impact on brewing history. While Moya had no active role in the industry, the family connection likely helped him obtain the Aztec and Acme commissions. It also wouldn't hurt his ability to portray the brewing industry in a more realistic fashion.

Past, present and future

Today, murals are prominent in many breweries and tap rooms nationwide. There are so many that a recent article in *Bon Appetit* went so far as to rank the top ten in the United States, with locations ranging from California to Virginia.¹⁷ Moya was not a pioneer in placing art in breweries, as this is a time honored tradition, but his contributions are a wonderful link between that past and an exciting present.

In the world of craft brewing, San Diego is one of the most prominent centers of production and innovation. The long and ongoing history is well documented in a 2013 article, 'San Diego's Craft Brew Culture', by Ernie Liwag and Matthew Schiff.¹⁸ It is from the *Journal of San Diego History*, sponsored by the same organization that published that photo of the forgotten rathskeller back in 1988.

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