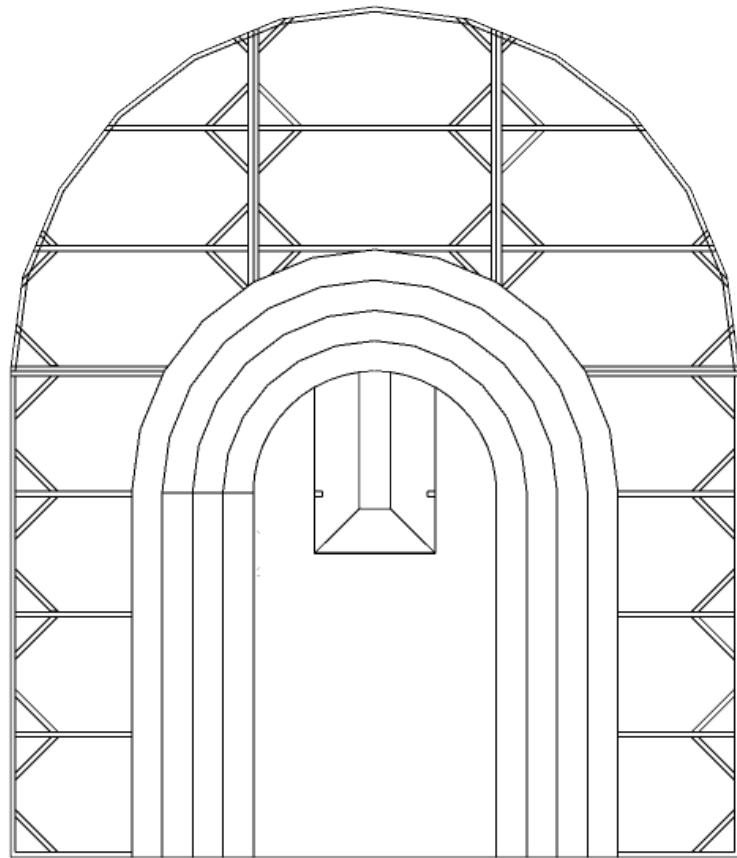


CHAPTER

AND ACCOMPANYING WORKS
AS EXHIBITED AT
ERIN CLULEY GALLERY
DALLAS, TEXAS
7 APRIL - 19 MAY 2018



Wireframe model for
Chapel, top view

THE CHAPEL

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1. From the Romanesque to the present

Francisco Moreno's Chapel, like all great works of art, allows its viewers to experience different points in time all at once, at the same moment, as they overlap and play off one another. As we stand inside Chapel and look around, we can think about the long passages of time that led to this moment.

Consider how often a temple or church is built upon a site whose significance long predates that building. The most famous modern chapel, Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, stands on a hill that was previously the site of several other churches over the centuries, going back past the French Revolution through the Middle Ages, all the way to Roman and Celtic times when Ronchamp was a place of pilgrimage. Being aware of this past, we can see Corbusier's building as partly shaped by it.



The more important the site, the more likely this is to be the case. The Spanish knocked down the Aztec Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan in order to build the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City in its place. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was erected on the site of its fourth-century predecessor, which itself faced an Egyptian obelisk brought to Rome centuries earlier, in time to witness the martyrdom of the basilica's namesake.

This chapel is similarly enriched by its own prehistory. The frescoes in the twelfth-century Romanesque Hermitage of the True Cross

Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France



in Maderuelo, Segovia remained there for 800 years until they were moved to the Prado Museum and reinstalled there after World War II. A few decades after that, Francisco Moreno found them in the Prado and was inspired to begin planning his own project.

These centuries of history inform how we see Chapel, but that is only one side of the story. We could just as well emphasize how modern monuments are more often disconnected and uprooted from their past. That is, for example, the Maderuelo hermitage chapel was removed from its small ancient town, and placed in the middle of an ency-

St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Italy



clopedic museum, among thousands of other artworks from all times and places.

In fact, for any viewer, it is probably much more common to encounter monuments in the disconnected, uprooted context of a museum or gallery, than it is to make a pilgrimage to Ronchamp or some such place. That is the paradox of museum-going as the paradigmatic modern experience of history: museums preserve and protect the past by removing it from daily life and use. Not just the Prado, but any major museum will possess monuments such as the Fuentidueña Apse (also Segovian Romanesque, removed in the 1940s) at The Cloisters in New York, or the 13th-century frescoes from Lysi, Cyprus, mounted in the Byzantine Fresco Chapel at the Menil Collection in Houston.

The Apse from San Martín at Funetidueña, made in Segovia, Castile-León, Spain, recreated in The Met Cloisters in New York City

Original Sin. The Hermitage of the Vera Cruz de Maderuelo in Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain

Seeing monuments like these, thousands of miles from their “homes,” in the age of jet travel and art fairs around the world, would a viewer think: could this be anywhere? Other chapels by modern painters, for example those by Ellsworth Kelly in Austin, or Mark Rothko in Houston, might lead to such a conclusion. These chapels are not built on references to the past, and they aren't connected to sacred sites or local religious communities, as traditional temples are.

Chapel plays on both sides of this story: its form refers back to the Romanesque style and the centuries of continuity between past and present, while its context, in Dallas today, reminds us of the present-day experience of discontinuity and dislocation.

2. Space and form: Chapel inside and out

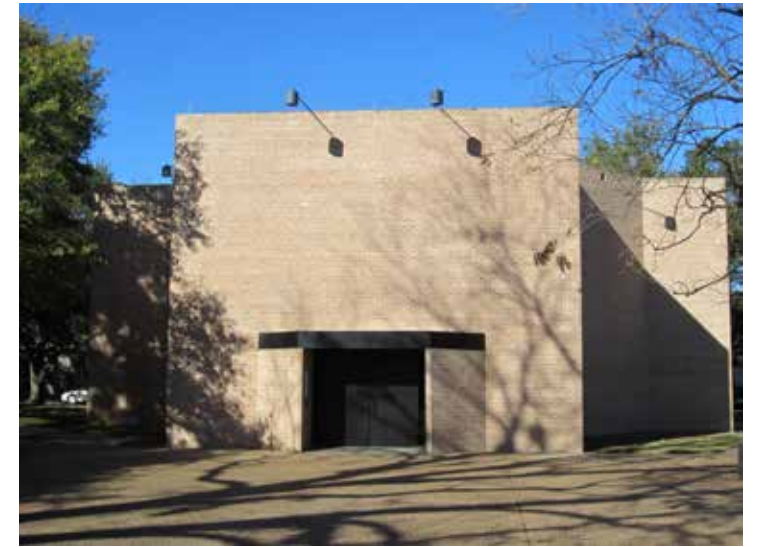
As we approach Chapel and step inside, we can see how Francisco Moreno has explored these questions of history and style in creating the structure itself, and the paintings on its walls and ceiling. Comparing and contrasting each of its elements with historical counterparts can help us develop an appreciation for its contemporary distinctiveness.

Before beginning to paint at all, the artist and his team had to design and build the structure. As we come into the Erin Cluley Gallery

and walk around the outside of Chapel, several cues indicate its modern nature. It is **modular**: assembled from 43 panels that can be disassembled and reassembled as it moves from studio to exhibition space (in contrast to the permanent masonry of a traditional chapel). It is **functionalist**: the structure is visible on the outside, so it can be easily seen and 'read.' This legibility is a cardinal virtue of modern architecture. And, it is **historically self-conscious**: the arched doorway and window refer to Romanesque style as a quotation or allusion (not as a whole-hearted imitation), in the manner of 19th-century historicism (e.g. H. H. Richardson's Romanesque Revival) or 20th-century postmodernism (e.g. Charles Moore). Thus, the exterior structure of Chapel anchors it firmly in the contemporary.

When we walk in the front door for a breathtaking view of the painted surfaces that surround us, the situation immediately becomes more complicated. Studying individual elements can point us to specific points of reference, but how can we understand the whole thing, in all of its wonderful complexity?

We can see how the painted program reflects a fundamental difference between modern and traditional painting: while the painter of a Romanesque chapel would be required to execute a specific iconographic program for his patrons in a particular religious community, representing certain saints and stories



for the appropriate religious purposes, a modern artist is required instead to execute his or her own individual creative vision, accountable to no one other than himself or herself. While the traditional painter must submerge his or her own identity into that of the community, the modern painter must

Mark Rothko's Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, founded by John and Dominique de Menil

Ellsworth Kelly's Austin, a building in the collection of the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas



assert his or her own identity as fundamental to his or her work. Thus, having some knowledge of Francisco Moreno's career is a help in understanding Chapel.

Although Moreno did begin by studying architecture (before switching to painting), the more immediate precedents for Chapel might be found in a series of projects that explore how to expand painting into the field beyond the four edges of a single canvas. In Seven Days in America (2011), he took over the walls of the Oliver Francis Gallery with a complex mural program. The same year, he covered the walls of his RISD studio with another wraparound, panoramic mural. The following year, he began work on WCD Project, which ultimately premiered at the

Francisco Moreno's graduate studio at RISD, 2011. Acrylic paint on wall



Soluna Festival in 2015. For this project, he used Emanuel Leutze's 1851 Washington Crossing the Delaware as the basis for an ensemble consisting of a single wall painting, a painted Datsun 280Z car, and a performance combining the two. All three of these projects share a similar grayscale palette in acrylic, and complex, collage-like compositions that incorporate numerous diverse sources. While Chapel bears some similarity to the earlier projects in both of those aspects, we can also note how it departs from them, not only in its greater emphasis

Francisco Moreno's Seven Days in America, 2011. Paint on wall

on historical elements from the Romanesque through the Baroque, but also in its greater use of color.

At this point, having considered the development of Moreno's own wall painting, we can think more about the relevance of the most important modern mural painters: the "big three" of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who reached the peak of their worldwide influence beginning in the 1920s. It isn't only that Moreno has family roots as well as relatives in Mexico City, or that the Muralists' work has been influential in Texas as elsewhere, or that Moreno has cited Orozco's 1932-34 Epic of American Civilization at Dartmouth College as important for him. Rather, the comparison can help us further differentiate Moreno's Chapel from its early twentieth-century predecessors.

Although the Muralists brought the ancient traditions of mural painting powerfully into the twentieth century, certain aspects of their work may still seem remote from the contemporary art world in which Chapel finds itself. The Muralists saw the mission of public education and political communication as essential to their work in the context of the Mexican Revolution; therefore, their work stood as a socialist alternative to the modern canvas paintings that circulated as commodities within the capitalist art world.



This difference in function corresponded to a difference in style. The Muralists needed to compose easily understood, realistic narratives in a clear, consistent way so that the common public could understand them, whereas "bourgeois" modern painters could experiment with difficult forms of abstraction in their works on canvas. Ironically, in this respect, the Muralists had more in common with traditional styles of painting, in spite of their opposition to the church and their identification with the modern socialist program of the Revolution.

Needless to say, the art world of today is far removed from the revolutionary world of the Muralists; thus we can understand

Section of The Epic of American Civilization mural by José Clemente Orozco in Baker Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire



why Chapel is not composed in their style of didactic political realism. Still, its interior composition unmistakably bears the impact of the Muralists' work in certain respects. One such, especially interesting, is the tension between the organic and the mechanical (which is also a hallmark of modern art in general). In the case of the Muralists, this tension is often mapped onto the conflict between labor and capital, so in their work we see countless heroic figures of workers and peasants, struggling against the dominating forces of the state, the landlords

James Rosenquist's World's Fair Mural in New York City, 1963–1964

or industrialists, whose power is expressed through modern machines: factories, railroads, warplanes, and so forth. In their work, the organic and human is fighting with long odds against mechanical power.

Although there is so much else to see in Chapel, we can immediately pick out this same tension between organic and mechanical, although here it has a totally different valence. To many contemporary viewers, no doubt, the factory workers in Orozco's murals feel as historically distant as the biblical figures in the Maderuelo frescoes. In Chapel, by contrast, the automobile is the leading figure of the mechanical (clearly marking a direct continuity with Moreno's WCD Project). Although in contemporary American art, we might be accustomed to seeing the car as a rich symbol of enjoyable consumer culture (thinking, just for one example, of Pop artist James Rosenquist, another American muralist), the car is manifested in Moreno's Chapel with quite a different tone. The various aspects of automotive mechanical technology that show up here, poking through and looming up behind the human figures, appear to me far from the enjoyable cruise vehicles of pop-consumer culture. Instead, they look much more threatening, potentially as hostile and deadly as the heartless capitalist machines that we find in the work of the Muralists.

In the Muralists' work, all such themes are laid out in clear, coherent narratives,

whereas in Chapel, they are embedded within a more complex, non-linear pictorial structure. Within this structure, we can see historical references ranging from Rubens, Courbet and Picasso, to the conceptual architect Lebbeus Woods. This wide range of references to discontinuous historical periods and styles, sitting side by side, could be interpreted as postmodernism. (Like the architectural postmodernism of Charles Moore referenced above, postmodernism in painting first arrived in the 1970s and 1980s, and continues through the present day.) Typically in postmodernist painting, visually navigating through the dizzying series of surprising and quickly changing subjects and styles is part of the fun of looking at the work. However, a slightly easier, alternative way of studying Chapel's painting is to see how the artist worked on it, over so many countless hours in 2017 and 2018, in a process whose traces we can still distinguish in the work's final state.

From the first stage of painting, we can see the broad areas of color, delineated by wide, fast brushstrokes (which already set Chapel apart from the earlier works by Moreno mentioned above). At that first stage (as when I visited the artist's studio in late 2017), this layer of painting created an expressive, lushly organic, expressionistic atmosphere in the interior, maybe a little bit like late Monet or Kandinsky. The next stage of painting, layered over these broad areas of color, is in a gray-



scale palette (like Moreno's earlier works) and includes the incredibly complex network of figures (this is where we see the organic-mechanical contrast discussed above). Finally, on top of this is the layer of interlocking, repeated geometric patterns on a grid of squares, which evokes artisanal craftsmanship and unifies everything else into a single layer of shallow visual space. Although the reality of the artist's working process is a lot more complicated than this, thinking roughly in terms of these three layers can help us

Francisco Moreno's WCD Project, 2015



imagine the long campaign that led up to the final finished work.

Yet another way to organize our visual experience of Chapel is to keep track of the path that our eyes might take as we see it for the first time. Looking in from its front door, all we can see is the farthest (rear) wall, with its floral and figural motifs that revolve around the central window. Then, as we walk in the front, the ceiling and side walls emerge, and our eyes can follow a path back to the front wall, tumbling through the tumult of the figure groups on either side. Finally, if we turn around once more, and happen to look up, our eyes might be drawn upwards across the

ceiling, towards the oculus which provides a central focal point around which all its surrounding figures revolve (as in a Baroque or Rococo ceiling). As we linger under the ceiling's great eye, before emerging once again through the front doorway, we might appreciate how much this work achieves a synthesis among its disparate elements. Chapel gives us not the isolated remoteness of a pilgrimage chapel, nor the anonymous crowds of an encyclopedic museum, but a comprehensive, all-encompassing experience at human scale, unexpectedly found in the midst of a modern city.