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Visual motifs

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The Atlántida of Capitalism. The murals of Sert in the decorative programme of New York's Rockefeller Center

Abstract

New York's Rockefeller Center is one of most symbolically rich places in the world, although few of its millions of visitors stop to reflect on what its images of power really mean. In the form of an Atlantean mythological allegory, Rockefeller Center was conceived as symbolic propaganda for capitalist, liberal values implicit in both the 'American Dream' and the ideology espoused by the Rockefeller family. It embodies the utopia of progress and science that promotes the freedom of the individual and the free movement of capital. Due to ideological clashes –or the vagaries of fate– the Catalan José María Sert was the artist to ultimately complete the most eloquent mural in the main building, a mural which had formerly been painted by Diego de Rivera, and entitled *Man at the Crossroads*. Sert was a muralist who had previously worked on the scenographic illustration of Manuel de Falla's *Atlántida*, capturing some of the motifs that inspired that great *cantata* based on poetic texts by Jacint Verdaguer. That earlier work is reflected in the lobby of Rockefeller Center's main building. While Diego de Rivera's censored frescoes have been studied prolifically, little attention has been paid to Sert's paradoxical reading of the same subjects. In this article, we analyse the history of the Atlantean Mediterranean literary myth in relation to Spain, the use John D. Rockefeller Jr. made of them in his emblematic urbanistic ensemble, and also the peculiar reading that the Catalan muralist made of these themes of Atlantis in relation to capitalism.

Keywords

Atlantis, mythology, Rockefeller Center, Aesthetic ideology, José María Sert, Manuel de Falla.

1. Introduction: from Mythology to the *Atlántida* of Manuel de Falla

And Night bore hateful Doom and black Fate and Death, and she bore Sleep and the tribe of Dreams. And again the goddess murky Night, though she lay with none, bore Blame and painful Woe, and the Hesperides who guard the rich, golden apples and the trees bearing fruit beyond glorious Ocean. (Hesiod, *Theogony*, vv. 213–215, in Heinemann, 1914, p. 95).

Somewhere between history and legend the philosopher Plato wrote stories about Atlantis that even today inspire archaeologists to continue their search for the lost city. He

said in *Critias* that the Atlanteans were a warlike people who sought to expand their empire to the Greek world. Yet their attack on Athens was unsuccessful, and they were expelled to the other side of the columns of Hercules (the Strait of Gibraltar). Whether it was due to the intervention of Hercules himself, who with his club opened the way connecting the two great seas, or due to a confrontation of the Titans with the gods of Olympus, the last thing known about Atlantis was that a great catastrophe befell the island and “there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night of misfortune all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea” (Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, Chapter 2, p. 167).

The Greek philosopher placed Atlantis in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, an island as large as all North Africa and Asia Minor combined, and of which no trace of either the city or its wonders remains. According to Plato's description, in the centre of the island was a hill upon which stood the fantastic palace of the regents, built by Atlas himself, son of Poseidon, and first great king of the lost continent. The palace was decorated with valuable materials and the most sublime art. But Atlas' successors were not to be outdone; each one added new ornamental and architectural elements to the palace, surpassing the previous kings until they made of it an astonishing residence for its magnitude and the beauty of its art¹. Plato did not finish the story of the end of Atlantis, and book VI of *Critias* was interrupted at the very point where Zeus had gathered the gods to carry out the exemplary punishment of the Atlanteans.

In these stories from Plato's *Critias*, the mentioning of Gades (Cádiz) has, since ancient times, linked Atlantis and the Garden of the Hesperides to Spain. After defeating the bull of Geryon, Hercules married Hesperis, the widow of Atlas, and their offspring gave rise to the different regions of ancient Iberia. In the sources handled by Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902) for the writing of his epic poem *Atlàntida* (1877), Spain then began its preparation for the arrival of Christianity. He recounts that Hercules accepted the ancient religion of Tubal, the father of Pirenne, who worshipped a single God without a name and without temples. Although Hercules was buried in a Phoenician temple in Cádiz, the rites and priests who attended him were Jews, a monotheistic religion in the midst of the idolatry of the time. And the first of the olive trees in the garden of Gethsemane came from an olive branch of Hercules' temple.

According to Verdaguer, Spain played an important role in the messianic connection between Europe and America. In *Atlàntida*, Columbus encounters an old man who speaks to him of where the island of Atlantis once lay. Following his encouragement to search for it, Columbus discovers the new Atlantis, America, to which he can then bring Christianity². Thus, in his patriotism, Verdaguer sought to combine Mediterranean mythology, the Christian religion and the history of the discovery of America. In the *Atlàntida* he highlights this in Isabella the Catholic's premonitory dream of the epic discovery, and her subsequent sponsorship of Christopher Columbus to carry it out. The *somni* (dream) of Isabella is also considered the most poetic moment in the *cantata* composed by Manuel de Falla, which was based upon Verdaguer's *Atlàntida*.

Manuel de Falla was a Cádiz native whose mother's family was from Catalonia. In 1927, Falla was dazzled by Verdaguer's epic poem, prompting him to turn it into a great scenic *cantata*, with choir and soloist texts written in Catalan except for the final *Salve Marinera* (Hail, Lady of Sailors) written in Castilian Spanish. It should be remembered that Verdaguer's

¹ At the heart of the palace was the temple of Poseidon, a building in which the kings met to make laws. According to Plato, the building was covered with silver, and the pinnacles that topped it shone with gold. Inside, the ceiling was made of ivory inlaid with precious materials, and the walls, columns and floor were covered with copper. As will be seen, this description is somewhat reflected in the Art Deco style of Rockefeller Center itself.

² The last line of Verdaguer's *Atlàntida* describes how the old man “[He] sees grow again in another hemisphere, together with Spanish vigour, the tree of the Cross, and the world flourish again in its shade; the celestial wisdom is incarnated in him; and he says to the one before him: ‘Fly, Columbus... now I can die in peace!’” (*Atlàntida*, v. 311).

Atlántida also inspired some of Gaudí's most important works in Barcelona. Both Finca and Parc Güell were conceived as the garden of the Hesperides, and *La Pedrera*, Gaudí's most famous house, features doors and balconies of undulating forms with seaweed-shaped wrought iron railings. From its rooftop terrace, giant Atlantean 'Titans' appear to watch over us³.

Given that Atlantis was a popular theme in the Catalan Mediterranean *Renaixença*, it is not surprising that Falla commissioned another Catalan, Josep María Sert, to paint the scenography for his *Cantata*, which was first conceived as an Oratorio or religious "Misterio"⁴. Since the very beginning of the conversations between Falla and Sert at the end of 1927, *Atlántida* was intended to be a project to unite the different Iberian nations at a time of crisis, as described by Ortega y Gasset in his essay *La España Invertebrada (Invertebrate Spain, 1921)*. The *Atlántida* would serve to remind all Spaniards of the common roots of Hispanity and its link to the discovery of America, a feat that was not only the common heritage of the various Iberian nations but of all Christianity. The *Atlántida* was planned as a spectacular artistic celebration for the Universal Fairs of Seville and Barcelona. Although Manuel de Falla was unable to finish his work for the Hispanic festivities of 1929, he continued working on it until his death in 1946. And he did so in spite of the conflicts during the Second Spanish Republic and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, an atmosphere which was in complete contrast to the aspirations for unity symbolised in his *Atlántida*.

According to Jorge de Persia (2014, p. 113), the religious persecution unleashed in Spain during the Second Republic and Civil War seemed to announce the prophecy of the Titanic deities who rebelled against the Olympian gods and were punished for it⁵. The destroyed Atlantis was now Spain itself, and soon thereafter it would be the whole of post-war Europe. Given the unrest, before Falla died in exile in Argentina leaving *Atlántida* unfinished, he had already planned a change of venue for the premier of *Atlántida* from Spain to the Americas. He was fascinated by the ruins of Machu Pichu, and photographs of the recently discovered site reminded him of the remains of the temple of Atlas. He considered it therefore an ideal place to perform his great scenic *Cantata* (Weber, 2002, p. 638).

2. Sert and Rockefeller Center

Jose María Sert had made the leap across the Atlantic in 1924 with the prestigious *Wildenstein* Gallery, which introduced him to American high society. Sert made the most of his talent for public relations and in 1931 returned to New York to install the murals commissioned for the dining room of the Waldorf Astoria hotel, now called the Sert Room. At this stage Sert's aesthetic continued to be inspired by both Tiepolo and a *costumbrismo* Goya. For Sert, Atlantean inspiration will come later. Even so, while working on the Waldorf he wrote to Manuel de Falla, encouraging him to take his *Atlántida* to the United States, even thinking of having it performed in the new opera house that was planned to be built in Rockefeller Center. In February 1932 he wrote to Falla:

³ The most comprehensive biography on Gaudí is by Gijs van Hensbergen (2001). However, even there nothing is mentioned about the relation between Atlantis and La Casa Mila, called La Pedrera. This link is explained in (Latorre, 2014, p. 131).

⁴ Jorge De Persia (2014, p. 105) shows an epistolary dialogue of Falla with R. García Carrasco (Letter from Guadix the 30 January 1929), in which Falla explains the relationship between the *Book of the Prophecies* by Columbus and biblical texts, the focus of Falla's studies, to the point that he keeps this letter in a copy of the *Bible*. A Latin chorus makes the link between the end of Somni and Columbus and his companions, guided by a star, the first one he introduces into the work, with a biblical text from Isaiah (13:6).

⁵ In fact, as Jorge De Persia studies, "After the joy of the establishment of the Republic, difficult times followed for Falla: the burning of the churches, health problems... In 1932 he observes how the church of San Nicolás in the Albaicín burns irredeemably; his illusion begins to crumble, and he discusses with the minister and friend Fernando de los Ríos the injustices suffered by the people, the contradictory role of the Church and his own Christian convictions. For him, tradition no longer resides in the human but is valid only in the transcendent, and in this conceptual change *Atlántida* will enter a stage of dialogue with reality and of profound search. Men are rebelling against God and, as with the Atlanteans, this is a bad omen" (De Persia, 2014, p. 113).

I gave Stokowski your answer and he agreed to perform *Atlántida* in Philadelphia in May 1933 but he says he needs the part in January—he will almost certainly perform the play in New York as he will more than likely direct the new Opera House in Radio City—what a premiere⁶.

This letter coincides with the commission for the mural paintings for the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, currently called *Comcast* or *Rock* building. Sert and the English artist Sir Frank Brangwyn were to do the walls where the lifts are located, while the Mexican Diego de Rivera was to do the main wall in the entrance lobby. The terms of the contract were very clear: the theme was to be hope for a better world; only black, white and grey were to be used, and the Rockefeller family were to approve the sketch of what was to be painted beforehand (Pliego Quijano, 2012).

A well-known scandal was triggered when Rivera incorporated the image of Lenin and other founders of communism into the painting, and the Rockefeller family forced him to cease the work, which was eventually destroyed in 1933. We will return to this controversy shortly. Years later it was decided that Sert, the Catalan artist, would paint the mural on that wall. Sert had already become world famous for the frescoes in the room named after Francisco de Vitoria at the League of Nations in Geneva, which were painted between 1934 and 1935 during the Spanish Second Republic, when Sert was cultural attaché at the Spanish Embassy in Paris. In fact, Sert was a Republican at the time and only later, because of the religious persecution in Spain and the murder of his friend Jaume Serra (Bishop of Vic, whose cathedral with its frescoes painted by Sert was burned), did he support the nationalist military uprising of 1936 (cf. De Sert, 1987). Symbolically, it was during the Spanish Civil War and its extreme clash of ideologies that Sert painted in the place where Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* had been located before its destruction. Later, in 1941, Sert was also commissioned to decorate the ceiling and walls of some of the RCA Building's staircases. This would be the artist's last work in the city of skyscrapers before his death in 1945.

Aesthetically, Sert combines the allegorical mural tradition (from Michaelangelo to Tiepolo), Piranesi's fantastical scenography and the tones of Goya's 'black' paintings and engravings, as will be seen later⁷. The great novelty of his work in the 1930s and 1940s is the inspiration he draws from the Titans of Atlantis. He includes them not only in his work for Rockefeller Center, but also in the works he was carrying out in Europe from this time onwards⁸.

In Rockefeller Centre, the main mural in the lobby was installed in 1937 and is entitled *American Progress* (Figs. 1-4). It was intended to depict the intellectual and active virtues that made the country grow, as espoused by the Rockefeller family's philosophy. As the official Rockefeller Center website states:

Sert's mural, the focal point of the lobby, depicts the development of America through the unity of brain and brawn. The three Graces symbolize man's intellectual activity, while Titans and men working represent men of action. Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Center's skyscrapers also play prominent roles⁹.

⁶ Letter from José María Sert to Falla of 1 February 1932. AMF (Archive Manuel de Falla from Granada). The last letters between Falla and Sert are from 1934. Quoted in De Persia, 2014, p. 113.

⁷ For more information on Sert's aesthetics, cf. Pascual I Rodríguez (1997).

⁸ In addition to the examples of the Francisco de Vitoria Room at the League of Nations in Geneva, between 1930-1934, Sert was painting the murals of San Telmo in San Sebastian with similar aesthetics. cf. Fornells Angelats (2006); https://www.santelmomuseoa.eus/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=items&id=8316&cid=0&Itemid=180.

⁹ Retrieved from: <https://www.rockefellercenter.com/art/american-progress>. Cf. also Roussel, 2006.

Figure 1: *American Progress*. Detail of Abraham Lincoln in the Main Lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza¹⁰.



Figure 2: Past, present and future (Time). Main Lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza.



The architectural integration of the giant figures, with their feet resting on the marble pillars that support the lobby ceiling, offers a powerful impression to visitors as they enter the space. As described in the official site:

[...] This dramatic ceiling mural depicts heroic-sized Titans who symbolize the three aspects of time: Past, Present and Future. By exposing their bodies and making them muscular, Sert implies that time is both part of nature and is powerful¹¹.

However, Sert's portrayal of the new American titans as the protagonists of the future is not entirely positive. Whilst his figures may symbolise the power and progress of America (moving mountains, transporting giant trees, operating machines, chartering ships and looking up at a sky ploughed by planes), the mural's tenebrous overtones and the figures' exaggerated proportions convey more of a threat than an ideal.

¹⁰ The figures are licensed under Creative Commons, except for figures 1-4 and 10, which are taken from the official Rockefeller Center website.

¹¹ Retrieved from <https://www.rockefellercenter.com/art/time>.

The figures are not only colossal: in an almost humorous scene, they play with the world as if it were a football. This parodic aspect is explained on the official website:

Painted three years after *Fraternity of Men*, this work presents a far more pessimistic view of the world. Within those years, Sert saw Europe at war and the world as having given up on the idea of international peace. Symbolizing this sad period, *Contest*–1940 also shows the five races of mankind, here kicking the world around as if playing a game of football. The men are depicted as angry, focused and intent on winning. The contrasting murals and views of mankind were presented just prior to America entering the war¹².

The scene recalls a similar one from Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (also released in 1940) where Chaplin, as Hitler, plays with the globe of the world.

Figure 3: *Contest*. South stairway in the grand lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza.



It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in detail all twelve of Sert's interventions at Rockefeller Center over the course of a decade. For this we refer to Roussel (2006) and the studies by Pilar Sáez Lacave, curator of the major exhibition of Sert held at the Petit Palais in Paris (cf. for example Sáez Lacave, 2012). The present article is concerned with considering these works in light of the influence of Atlantis, as Sert had conceived it, and as evidenced in his correspondence with Falla (cf. De Persia, 2014).

It is not surprising that this vision of powerful Atlantean Titans was already present in the first commissions José María Sert received for Rockefeller Center in 1933. He was asked to paint four murals to decorate the ends of the elevator banks, representing the end of slavery and the union of all races and nations for a peaceful world. The overall theme, as dictated by Rockefeller's art committee, was: "...man's new mastery of the material universe. The third of these four murals, *Abolition of Bondage*, is a commentary on slavery, which, at the time, could still be found worldwide. He [has to] depict[s] slaves toiling or bound to stakes; others are being freed, their shackles broken"¹³.

Sert's fourth mural, *Abolition of War*, was intended to express the elation felt at the end of a war. Once again, however, rather than offering straightforward depictions of these themes, the murals reveal Sert's own commentary on the events portrayed. Beyond symbolising the end of slavery, the figures seem to use their own chains as weapons. They are not simply freed slaves, but titans emancipated from the gods. And instead of celebrating a world without war, they seem to be preparing for it.

¹² Retrieved from <https://www.rockefellercenter.com/art/contest>.

¹³ Retrieved from <https://www.rockefellercenter.com/art/abolition-of-bondage>.

Figure 4: Abolition of Bondage. North Corridor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

The fact that many of the depicted slaves wear Mexican hats is not consistent with the official description of the scene on Rockefeller Center website but could implicitly speak of a new form of slavery, that of class differences and the situation of Latino immigrants in the United States. There are, however, many possible explanations for this Mexican presence among the slaves: the proximity of the Mexican Revolution, or the important presence of Mexican muralists in the USA, or the fact that the second MOMA exhibition was dedicated to Diego Rivera (1931). In any case, there has not yet been an in-depth study that would allow us to elucidate these references by Sert to the painting of his then colleague, Diego Rivera.

It is highly probable that these murals have not been sufficiently critically studied because their author was overshadowed by the 'cold war' in art history which censored José María Sert for two reasons: first, his support for Franco's regime, and second, the fact that he painted over Rivera's walls after the destruction of *Man at the Crossroads*¹⁴. Still today, in spite of the 2012 exhibition in the Petit Palais, Sert is considered an independent artist who chose to remain outside the *avant-garde*, an eccentric who has been neglected in historiography for his conservatism in both aesthetics and politics¹⁵.

Yet, as seen above, the 'black Goyesque' depiction of Atlantis offered by Sert was in some way also critical of the new American capitalism that commissioned the project, even if it comes from a different perspective to that of Rivera's socialist ideology. In its own right, Sert's vision deserves a thorough study. It could be compared with Goya's engravings in the midst of the Spanish War of Independence: although Goya was "afrancesado", fond of the enlightenment ideal of Napoleon, he painted a very complex criticism of the violence that brought more darkness than light to the world. Such a study merits its own paper. We will now focus on the contrast between Sert's dystopian, pessimistic vision of the American Atlantis and the positive image of power and beauty that characterises the other examples of Atlantean mythology present in the Rockefeller complex, namely, the statues of Atlas and Prometheus.

3. Greek beauty in the service of propaganda and ideology

Although Sert's aesthetic at Rockefeller Center moves between Goya's black paintings and Michelangelo's gigantism, most of the other symbols of Rockefeller Center follow a Greek

¹⁴ Cf. Ortol & Ramírez de Arellano (2004). Cf. On the disdain for Sert in relation to Rivera, Trujillo (2012).

¹⁵ On the lack of study of Sert from his death until recently, cf. Monnier (2012, p. 194). Monnier argues that not even the Paris exhibition curated by Sáez Lacave has served to put an end to prejudice, and cites as an example the newspaper article of Philippe Dagen, "Pourquoi donc honorer à Paris un peintre franquiste sans envergure?", *Le Monde*, 17 March, 2012.

aesthetic that has been somewhat simplified to suit the popular taste of Art Deco, between *avant garde* and tradition. Art Deco is also the style par excellence of commercial culture and glamour, and thus aptly symbolic of capitalism. It was a natural choice for the decorative program of Rockefeller Center. The complex of skyscrapers and squares built by John D. Rockefeller Jr. between 1930 and 1939 was one of the most ambitious private enterprises in New York, with fourteen buildings occupying an area of 89,000 square metres, between Sixth and Fifth Avenues, and 48th and 51st streets. For a complete analysis of the large decorative ensemble of Rockefeller Center, we refer to Roussel (2006).

3.1. The Art Deco Atlas

Although each artist who contributed to Rockefeller Center was given stylistic liberty, as a whole it was a well-planned urban complex, located directly in front of New York's famous St. Patrick's Catholic Cathedral. Following the Atlantean theme, an enormous statue of Atlas holding the universe squarely faces St. Patrick's facade (Fig. 5). Atlas, according to Greek mythology, was condemned by Zeus to carry on his shoulders the pillars that separate the earth from the heavens.

Figure 5: Atlas in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral.



The sculpture, made in 1936 by Lee Lawrie and Rene Chambellan, features the north-south axis of the great bronze orb which points to the North Star. The twelve constellations through which the Sun passes during a year are represented in one of its rings (as seen from the Earth). On the shoulders of Atlas, a curved beam can also be seen with the traditional symbols of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Neptune.

Its placement in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral, like a new Christ carrying the cosmos on his shoulders instead of the cross, does not appear accidental. It shows John Rockefeller Jr.'s defiant attitude towards the Catholic religion, with which he held no affinity. In fact, the figure of Atlas, a Titan of Greek mythology, has a challenging connotation in modern society. Atlas represents the confrontation between an inferior and a superior being, the struggle of the Titan against the gods. It can be related to the struggle of humanity to emancipate itself from the weight of collectivist religious ideas, which were considered a dogmatic imposition.

This individualistic theory of American capitalism would be expressed, years later, in works like *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by Ayn Rand, an author who was inspired by Rockefeller Center to give the Atlas myth the same political significance as Rockefeller gave it (Caño Diaz, 2018, p. 60). According to the author's own statements at a conference at the Ford Hall forum in 1964, "The story of *Atlas Shrugged* presents the conflict of two fundamental antagonists, two opposite schools of philosophy, or two opposite attitudes to life. As a brief means of

identification, I shall call them the 'reason-individualism-capitalism axis' versus the 'mysticism-altruism-collectivism axis'" (Rand, 2012, p. 197).

In Rand's novel it is the entrepreneurs who rebel and make the world stop working. It is no longer the classic Marxist workers' revolution, but a liberal and individualistic revolution, based on the principles of Rand's objectivist philosophy, which pits subjects against a state that seeks to intervene in citizens' decisions. We are, therefore, facing the revolution of the businessmen, who have in Rand's *John Galt* (who could very well be John D. Rockefeller Jr.) a leader to guide their cause.

In this way, the mythical character of Atlas is identified with the entrepreneurs of capitalism who look only to the future, and despise the collectivist ideas of the times –both Socialist and Fascist– and the religious institutions anchored in values of the past that prevent the development of the individual in all their potential. Something similar occurs with the symbolism of another of the titans of Atlantis, the *Prometheus* of Rockefeller Square.

3.2. The Promethean spirit: between philanthropy and the desire for emancipation and freedom

Together with Atlas, the most iconic sculpture of Rockefeller Center complex is the golden figure of Prometheus, situated in front of the main lobby decorated by Sert and which looks out into Rockefeller Plaza, one of the most popular plazas in the world (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Prometheus in Rockefeller Plaza.



Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/storem/3199090780>.

Created by Paul Manship in 1934, Prometheus brings the fire of the gods to men, surrounded by the constellations of the zodiac. On the granite wall in the background of the sculpture a compelling sentence reads:

"Prometheus, teacher in every art, brought the fire that hath proved to mortals a means to mighty ends."

As seen before with Atlas, the conflict posed by the Promethean myth is, essentially, the rebellion of a limited being (Prometheus) against an unlimited one (Zeus). In the religious origin of the myth, the punishment of the Titan was considered deserved, or at least inevitable. But if we consider the reason why the Titan confronted the gods (in order to give fire to men), the gesture will be understood as a heroic act moved by philanthropy to help the weakest. These two interpretations are present even in Aeschylus' Promethean tragedy, according to Carlos García Gual (1979, p. 12) in the introduction to his study *Prometheus: myth and tragedy*:

His motive for confronting the great gods is no less surprising: his philanthropic character has led him to incur, with full awareness, the tragic fault that is paid for with the most terrible pain. For the ephemeral beings the Titan Prometheus is willing to defy the wrath of Zeus and to suffer eternally [...].

Franz Hinkelammert (2006, p. 2) studied the modern reading of the myth of Prometheus from the anthropocentric cosmovision that begins in the Renaissance:

All the myths built up since the Greek Prometheus have a common feature which distinguishes them all from the Greek myth: in them Prometheus is seen as a rebellious man who stands up to the gods, ceases to be a god and is transformed into a man. The Greek myth serves rather as a quarry for the mythical reconstruction of human rebellion and emancipation, which is carried out by modern society from the Renaissance onwards.

Hinkelammert's warning implies that in addition to the philanthropic pretension, Prometheus' emancipatory role now has a new meaning. It is no longer simply a rebellion against the system, but the vindication of the individual before a superior being, claiming equal rights and freedoms by means of an implicit confrontation. This spirit of liberation, characteristic of humans who do not wish to depend on the gods, is the predominant interpretation in modern readings of the myth, and the one that highlights its heroic rather than tragic nature. In this reading it is necessary to frame the different ideologies of the time in question, both totalitarian (Nazism and Stalinism) and liberal, among which is included the capitalism defended by John D. Rockefeller Jr.

As seen in Manship's Rockefellian sculpture, the handing over of fire to men is presented as a gesture of Prometheus towards the needy, as well as a challenge to the gods. Nazi and Soviet ideologies coincide with this interpretation, both symbolically and aesthetically. For example, Arno Breker's *Prometheus* (Fig. 7), made for Hitler (1935) also embodied a utopia: the Aryan ideal of leading humanity towards a paradisiacal future of racial purity (Featherstone, 2020; Jiménez & Latorre, 2020, p. 87).

Figure 7: Prometheus by Arno Breker, 1935.



Source: Museum Arno Breker/MARCO-VG, Bonn.

This utopian interpretation of Prometheus had older roots in Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as shown in the figure of Siegfried, the protagonist of *The Song of the Nibelungs*. Both Siegfried and Prometheus were considered icons of autonomy and freedom when facing circumstances against all odds. Rüdiger Safranski reminds us of this in his study of German Romanticism, in reference to Richard Wagner: “The figure of Siegfried is for him (Wagner) an incarnation of freedom in line with this pattern, [...] Siegfried is for him a new Prometheus, and also a new Christ” (Safranski, 2009, p. 238). The Nazis also considered the figure of Siegfried to be their own, interpreting it as a symbol of freedom, strength and beauty. Proof of this was the re-release of the first part of Fritz Lang's film, *The Death of Siegfried* (1924) in May 1933, shortly after they came to power. It is not surprising that the figure of Prometheus was attractive to Hitler, and that he commissioned a sculpture of the Titan from his favourite sculptor.

Something similar can be said of the Prometheus of Marxism, both in revolutionary Mexico and the USSR¹⁶. It expresses the ideal of emancipation of the new technological man in confrontation with tradition and the old gods, which had to be overcome in order to build a world without class, religious or racial differences.

It is worthwhile noting the reading that the philosopher Karl Marx gave to the figure of Prometheus. In the preface of his doctoral thesis, Marx gave special importance to the liberating character of the Promethean spirit in strictly human terms. He argued that “In the philosophical calendar, Prometheus occupies the most distinguished place among the saints and martyrs” (1971, p. 7). He asserts that philosophy, as a fundamental expression of human thought, must confront the “heavenly and earthly deities” and enjoy autonomy without submission. Moreover, as Hinkelammert mentions, Marx's Promethean interpretation was the starting point for the atheist-humanistic Prometheus: “The god-titan Prometheus became man, so that men should become Prometheus” (2006, p. 8). This phrase is the key point of the modern and contemporary interpretation of the myth.

Of course, if we look at the political sphere, interpretations of the Promethean myth can vary with important nuances depending on whether we are dealing with a theoretical materialism or a more practical and vitalist one: what in Marx was freedom of thought that preceded the revolution, in Rockefeller Center becomes individual and economic freedom to make the world a more prosperous place for all human beings. What can be seen is that all Promethean interpretations along the utopian line are based on the invitation to take the reins of history and make use of a technological power that until then had only belonged to the gods (as written in the phrase behind the sculpture of Prometheus at Rockefeller Center). In other words, the Prometheus of capitalism (thanks to the mastery of technology that material progress granted), the Prometheus of communist ideology and the Prometheus of extreme right-wing totalitarian regimes all manifested a utopian character that liberated the spirit.

These interpretations contrast with the version of the myth defended by Mary Shelley in her work *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Although the title bears the word modern, the interpretation recovers the classical version, since it shows that rebellion against the natural order only brings evil to the world. According to Shelley, the modern Prometheus is Victor Frankenstein, the scientist who uses technology to defy the laws of good and evil and therefore faces inevitable punishment. The monster created by ambition rebels against its creator. Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* features a similar creature (Maria the robot) who turns

¹⁶ An example of this appropriation of Greek myths in the service of socialist realism is the sculpture of Prometheus erected in Pripyat and later transferred to Chernobyl. Originally erected in the city of Pripyat to symbolise the emancipated power of the human being thanks to atomic energy, it was moved, after the nuclear disaster, to the Chernobyl plant, showing that the Promethean rebellion ended up failing because of its excessive ambition (Fernández-Vegue, 2017, p. 373, Jiménez & Latorre, 2020, p. 87). Closer to the context analysed in this article is the *Prometheus in Chains* painted by the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, as a symbol of the martyrs of the revolution against the system. José Clemente Orozco also painted a mural of Prometheus in 1930 that follows this same revolutionary reading.

on his promethean inventors and nearly destroys the city. *Metropolis* makes further allusions to Atlantis and its destruction in its story resembling the biblical Tower of Babel, as well as a subtle reference to a proletarian Atlas, as analysed in a recent article (Jiménez & Latorre, 2020). More recent films such as *Blade Runner* or *Prometheus* by Ridley Scott continue this precautionary reading.

For the founders of Rockefeller Center, however, this myth was not so much a warning as a model to imitate, symbolising the ambition to transform the world of the time, in this case through the global economy of capitalism. The leaders of American capitalism, like the visionaries of the socialist revolution and the leaders of the Nazi and Fascist parties of the time, wished to be associated with the Titan deities who lead the destinies of men in world domination. The utopian visions of capitalism and socialism, whether national or international, coincided in the blind defence of scientific progress as the engine of humanity, even though it heralded such catastrophic events as the Second World War and the Cold War.

4. John D. Rockefeller Jr., Diego de Rivera and José María Sert

Rockefeller Center's *Prometheus* is made of gilded material and follows the gentle forms of Neo-Grecian art. Between academicism and Art Deco, this monumental sculpture shares not only the theme but also the aesthetic of the mythological sculptures of Arno Breker for Hitler or Boris Iofan for Stalin, which were made at the time when Rockefeller Center was built.

Even the grandiloquent architecture in front of which *Prometheus* sits shares the stylised Grecian aesthetic of both Nazi and Soviet buildings, for example, their pavilions exhibited in the 1937 Paris World Exhibition. Although Rockefeller's *Comcast* building was designed beforehand, it strongly resembles the LichtDom or cathedral of light, a term created by the architect Speer in 1934 for the building where mass Nazi meetings were held; an infinite vertical structure, overwhelming in its ascendancy (Fig. 8).

Figure 8: Construction progress of the *Comcast* building in December, 1933.



Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockefeller_Center#/media/File:Rockefeller_Center,_December_1933.jpg.

The common aesthetic and use of the Promethean symbol found in all three ideologies could explain why Diego de Rivera was originally chosen to paint the most important mural for the lobby of Rockefeller Center main building. *Man at the Crossroads* (Fig. 9) was painted and then destroyed, and eventually painted again in Mexico D.F. in 1934, based upon photographs taken of the original (Cf. Herera de Larrea 1990). Much has been written on Rivera's work and the contentious relationship he had with the Rockefeller family¹⁷. Less, perhaps is known about the Promethean sense of what was depicted in the main scene of his mural.

Figure 9: The controller of the Universe, by Diego Rivera, 1934.



Source: Part of *Man at the Crossroads*, exhibited in Mexico City (Wikipedia commons).

In the centre of the mural appears a man who controls the universe with the help of science and technology. The gods have been abandoned in the background, they are no longer necessary. One cannot help but perceive this new controller of the energy of the universe as a new, emancipated Prometheus. Although this matches the philosophy of Rockefeller Jr. as symbolised in the sculptures already mentioned, the commissioning of Rivera was controversial from the beginning. The Rockefeller family was an icon of individualistic and capitalist thought for American society, while Diego de Rivera was an openly communist painter. The Mexican artist's participation in what was to be a group of buildings representing the nerve centre of capitalism surprised and still amazes historians¹⁸. Although Rivera demonstrated interest in working on the mural through his agent, Susana Pliego Quijano argues that his commissioning was due to John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who admired the artist, as well as the fame and recognition Rivera had earned in the artistic world (2012, p. 7).

As we have seen previously, however, the patron and the artist were also united by the same utopian, Promethean vision inherent in both capitalist and Marxist ideologies of the time. In this sense, the problem that led to the final destruction of the mural was not that Rivera did not understand the Rockefeller family's commission of *Man at the Crossroads*, but his expressed disobedience to the patron with the representation of Lenin as a symbol of unity among the workers, a leader who leads "the exploited masses to a social order based on the suppression of classes" (Rivera, 1934, p. 27). This portrait of Lenin, appearing in a key position alongside other socialist personalities such as Marx, Engels and Leon Trotsky, was in defiance

¹⁷ The most comprehensive study on the subject of Rivera in the USA is Paquette and Lozano, 2017.

¹⁸ John D. Rockefeller Jr. was a well-known Mason (as was Diego Rivera, which may partly explain the initial commissioning of a well-known communist painter for the doomed mural). He could also have been influenced by Nelson A. Rockefeller's wishes, despite the controversy that always involves dealing with artists, to become a recognised patron of all contemporary artists, regardless of their ideology. Cf. Ortoll & Ramírez de Arellano (2004).

to Rockefeller himself and was the impetus for the final decision to destroy the work and, years later, re-commission it from the Catalan painter José María Sert.

In contrast with the utopian Prometheus of Rivera and Rockefeller, Sert's interpretation of Atlantean mythology, as reflected in Vergaquer's poetry and Falla's *cantata*, is more aligned with Mary Shelley's reading in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Commissioned by Rockefeller in the spirit of the philanthropic Prometheus which defends human rebellion against the gods, it was intended that Sert's mural *American Progress* look utopically and optimistically to the future. In reality, however, Sert's presentation is far from glorious; its dark, expressionistic tones, exaggerated proportions and parodic scene selection see beyond the rebellion to its somber consequences: the forewarning of divine punishment in the form of misfortunes, and ultimately, the sinking of Atlantis.

5. Sert's *Atlántida* as a forewarning of future evils

As seen in their correspondence (cf. De Persia, 2014 and Weber, 2002), both Sert and the Republican and Christian Manuel de Falla had lived through the consequences of extremist ideology that had led to the Spanish Civil War (and the religious persecution suffered before and during it), and believed that their *Atlántida* could serve as a warning¹⁹. By comparison, Sert's commission for Rockefeller Center was very specific: to celebrate human prowess of intellect and action that contributed to the progress of America, and, like the statues of Atlas and Prometheus and Rockefeller's towering central Comcast building itself, proclaim the glory and power of capitalism.

Faced with this new and bold ideology which once again masked in the rhetoric of freedom the ambition and power of human progress in science and technology to the exclusion of all else, it is natural that Sert would assess it with the same distrust which his experience had generated. Thus, while he complied with the formality of the brief in depicting American leaders and activities of progress –political, technological and mechanical– he used an aesthetic of heavy tones, exaggerated proportions (inspired in his Atlantean work with Falla) and iconographic parody to again convert his work into a dramatic warning.

As already mentioned, Sert's Atlantean interpretation, like that of Falla and Verdaguer, aligns with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, intent on illustrating the dark side of human ambition, and the consequences of placing all faith in scientific and technological creation. Due to the fact that humans are limited and are not God, even though they might desire to be, the very creation made from such boasting turns against its creator and becomes its most serious threat.

Shelley's interpretation in turn reflects the Christian vision of Genesis where humans chose to reject their position as creatures and their subservience to God in the pursuit of the more properly divine knowledge of Good and Evil. Wanting the freedom to decide for themselves, the first humans engage in the very first act of scientific experimentation in tasting the forbidden fruit. Although unspecified in the Genesis account, this fruit is traditionally symbolized as an apple, influenced by Atlantean stories of the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides. In both accounts, the act of taking the forbidden fruit occasions an omen of punishment: the destruction of Atlantis, and the banishment from paradise. Following the Genesis account, all humans carry the seed of excessive ambition and unbridled freedom, and in many instances continue in their choice to put their faith in scientific and technological progress alone.

¹⁹ As Jorge de Persia studies (2014, p. 111), Manuel de Falla, though Republican, saw a metaphor for the destruction of Atlantis in the problems of nationalist division and the anti-religious conflicts of the Second Republic of Spain: "From the perspective of Manuel de Falla –and surely others of his generation including Ortega or Fernando de los Ríos– the decade of the 1930s, with the difficulties arising from the need to build a new state, was extremely problematic from the outset. *Atlántida*, which was intended to evoke a glorious Spain, will therefore also be a metaphor for the crisis."

The murals of Sert in the decorative programme of New York's Rockefeller Center

As introduced before, all these themes are linked together in Verdaguier's poem²⁰, which we know had a strong influence on Sert. The mythological rebellion of the Titans against the gods brought about the destruction of Atlantis. But new hope was born with the prospect of a new Atlantis across the ocean, where, in place of proud ambition, the sacrificial redemption of the Christian Cross would be the seedbed for new life and peace and flourishing. To quote again the old man who counsels Columbus in Verdaguier's poem, we hear of the destruction of Atlantis and its cause, and the hope placed in Columbus as a messenger for the Almighty to the Americas:

Do you see that ocean? where you now see that vast Atlantic sea, now calm but knowing of strong storms and huge waves? there is the submerged Atlantis. In its time it was a beautiful garden with bird music and virgin songs whose king was the mighty Atlas, and where its seven daughters, the Hesperides, lived. Today we see them as a constellation on clear nights. Its inhabitants, the enormous Atlanteans, defiant and moved by excessive ambition, came to question the power and warnings of God, so that the sea buried those lands after a powerful cataclysm. Hercules, driven by divine design, rescued Queen Pirene from the great fire, who was soon to die, leaving her Pyrenees as a mausoleum. He also founded Barcelona, destroyed the monsters that ravaged the land, reached ancient Gades, and finally broke the mountain wall that linked Africa to Europe, giving way to the sea. In this cataclysm, Atlantis would disappear, while the Almighty protected neighbouring Spain, which was responsible for the birth of a new world to which Columbus, his "messenger," was to arrive²¹.

Just as the Spanish Civil War marked the end of Sert's dream of a united Spanish people with the common cultural goal that would culminate in the discovery of America, international unrest meant that during the very time that Sert painted the murals of Rockefeller Center between 1937-1941, the prophecy of destruction was reaching beyond Spain to the entire world. Still hurting from the suffering and unrest in Spain, Sert and Falla had looked toward the new Atlantis as their hope and refuge. But the new Atlantis already carried within it the seed of its own destruction, the same ambition and pride that caused the punishment and downfall of its predecessor.

Not only America, but now the whole world came together in a clash of ideologies that – precisely because they all shared the same desire for ambition and power– could not live together in peace. World devastation would soon follow, the buffeting of a football at the mercy of power-hungry men, as Sert foretold in his paintings. Skeptical of the utopias of atheistic humanism which emerged in the late 19th Century and were later described by De Lubac in 1945²², Sert's murals warned of the consequences of totalitarian ideology of any kind: socialism, fascism, and extreme capitalism. After the closing of that troubled time, what remain still today are the bold, dystopian warnings proclaimed to a post-war world, in a

²⁰ Cf. Verdaguier *Atlántida* verse 267 "But she (Hesperia), with longing, always turns her eyes to where, weeping like Eve, she left her paradise; and unhooking the lyre of sad remembrance, swan of other waters, she intones her last song..."

²¹ Summary taken from the original text of Jacint Verdaguier: http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-atlantida--1/html/ff457832-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_42.html.

²² According to Henry De Lubac (1993) in his writings of 1945, at the end of the 19th century an atheistic humanism emerged that was intended to replace Christian civilisation. What Judaeo-Christian society had previously perceived as liberation was now considered by the theorists of atheistic humanism as slavery. Human greatness demanded the rejection of the God of the *Bible*. The novelty of the period under consideration was that it was no longer about isolated individuals unsettling or impressing their fellow human beings, but a whole ideology well developed and with a program to reform the world. In the heart of the darkness that haunted the great tyrannies of the mid-twentieth century, such as communism, fascism, Nazism, de Lubac discovered the deadly effects of a collusion between modern technology and the ideas of atheistic humanism. Atheistic humanism made its own the principles of Conte's positivism (science as the only reliable guide for humanity), Feuerbach and his subjectivism (God is the mythical projection of human aspirations), Marx with his materialism (the spiritual world is pure illusion) and Nietzsche and his radical obstinacy (the will to power is the greatest exponent of human greatness). The breeding ground for the emergence of totalitarianism was perfectly sewn (cf. also Overy, 2006).

similar way to the German Expressionists, urging it not to found its life on ambition and domination, but to seek to build a real community of humankind where peace and unity could sew hope for the future.

6. Conclusions

After the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the utopian pretensions of the Soviet left, it is worth remembering Horkheimer and Adorno's warning against that other dictatorship, capitalism. Being less obvious, they claimed, it could be even more dangerous than the totalitarianisms of their own time (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1998). It is well known that the more propaganda goes unnoticed, the greater its effectiveness. Evidently, the ideology that inspired the building of Rockefeller Center is still displaying its power to the admiring millions, while Fascist or Soviet Prometheus have long been destroyed or removed to museums or 'statue cemeteries', or had their meaning reassigned, as we have seen in the case of the *Prometheus* of Pripyat.

The authors of this paper are not advocating the need to destroy Rockefeller Center, nor indeed, any of the art which opposes it. The destruction of art is yet another manifestation of the clash of ideologies seen in the last chapter. Just as Rivera's mural was destroyed by Rockefeller for including communist figures in the heart of a capitalist paradise, statues of both Spanish colonial and Christian figures such as Columbus and Friar Junipero are being demolished throughout America today. One must ask, however, whether a future founded on annihilation of the past and ignorance of its consequences offers a solid basis for a better future. This paper intends to shed light on the need to both respect such images and submit them to more thorough symbolic study and interpretation. Rather than ideological destruction, what is needed is cultural dialogue.

Indeed, by the time Sert was asked to paint his mural in the lobby of Rockefeller Center he was well familiar with the fear of iconoclasm. Just as he witnessed Rockefeller's destruction of Rivera's work, he had seen how the Spanish Civil War led, among other things, to the burning of Vic cathedral which he himself had decorated. The war had also led to his friend Falla's exile to Buenos Aires, devastated as he was by the murder of his friend Federico García Lorca.

In this light, it is not surprising that when Sert was commissioned to paint *American Progress* in 1937 he brought with him some of the ideas generated in dialogue with Falla about Atlantis, especially those related to the Atlantean Titans and their ambitions to dominate the world. Sert's murals for Rockefeller Center, in addition to fulfilling the commission of the patron, enter into a cultural dialogue with –while narrating a very different vision of– the Atlantean myths evident in the emblematic sculptures of Prometheus and Atlas commissioned for the same complex. Those Titans, in their beautiful academic and Art Deco aesthetics, defend emancipatory and invincible utopias, while Sert's Titans, in all their Goyesque drama, forewarn of the future evils that the clash of ideologies in the Second World War and the Cold War would bring.

Figure 10: General view of Sert's main mural: Past, present, future, at the Lobby of Rockefeller Plaza 30.



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