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2. Between Nationalism and Communism

Diego Rivera and Mexican Muralism

Diego Rivera arguably is one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Measured in terms of art historical attention, Pablo Picasso and other modern artists might have been more successful, but the impact of Rivera's murals both on professional artists and amateur street artists worldwide is unparalleled. Rivera explored new paths in the creation of political images for a broad public that were complex yet pervasive. His creativity in the field of composition, perspective and visual narrative brought him a large number of followers worldwide.

Rivera is universally recognized as the most prominent representative of Mexican mural painting. In the 1920s and 1930s he accomplished a large number of murals on the walls of public buildings, most famously the National Palace in Mexico City, and he worked on commission for Edsel Ford and Nelson Rockefeller, among others, in the United States. However, Rivera also was a member of the Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM), the communist party of Mexico, and considered himself a politically engaged artist.

Rivera's remarkable career provokes a series of fundamental questions about the relationship between art and ideology. This communist artist received his most famous commissions from a series of anti-communist Mexican governments and a number of American businessmen. Did he squander his integrity by accepting these commissions or

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did he somehow manage to remain true to his convictions? Why was it that this convinced communist was expelled from the Soviet Union and celebrated some of his greatest successes in the United States? Rivera's story offers a fascinating perspective on the complex relation between artistic intention, critical reception and political interests in the world of art.

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During the decade between 1910 and 1920, an extremely bloody civil war raged in Mexico. Porfirio Díaz, who had risen to power as the result of a *coup d'état* in 1876, had governed the country in authoritarian style for 34 years, with a four-year interruption between 1880 and 1884. Under public pressure he called elections in 1910, which he was able to win after discrediting or arresting all of his rivals. This strategy led to a civil war that saw constantly changing factions and leaders seizing power and murdering each other.[21]

The death of President Venustiano Carranza in 1920 paved the way for General Alvaro Obregón to demand the presidency. He proved remarkably successful in restoring peace and order. Although most historians view the Obregón administration as moderately conservative, Obrgón presented himself as a revolutionary leader, fulfilling the promises of the Mexican revolution.[22] To this aim he launched a propaganda campaign focused on national unity and pride. José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education, used radio, literature and mural painting as the prime media in this campaign.[23]

There were good reasons for the government's use of mural painting. Images had the advantage over written pamphlets because they could also reach the illiterate,

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and applied to the walls of government buildings they became part of public space. Moreover, mural paintings had a venerable tradition in the region. They were already in use by the Aztecs and had been further developed under the Spanish colonizers since the sixteenth century. In a manifesto published in 1906, the painter Gerardo Murillo, who called himself Dr. Atl, had advocated a renaissance of mural painting as the national art form.[24] Some fifteen years later the Obregón administration supported this renaissance through state sponsorship. By depicting scenes from Mexican history and society, the murals had to convey a fundamental sense of cohesion in a society torn by civil war. National unity was at the heart of Vasconcelos' political vision. In 1925 he published his book *The Cosmic Race* (*La Raza Cósmica*), which describes the unique power of the Mexican nation as directly resulting from its ethnic diversity, in remarkable contrast to ideas about racial purity and degeneration that were on the rise in Europe at the time.[25] Many painters got involved in the state commissions during the 1920s and 1930s, the most famous being José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, the protagonist of this essay.

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At an early age, Rivera recognized painting as his vocation. In 1907, when he was twenty years old, he traveled to Madrid to receive a European art education. During the 1910s he mainly lived in Paris. Initially he was impressed by Picasso's Cubism, whose influences clearly show in his works from this period, but gradually he started to doubt the potential of modern art, with its focus on formal experimentation, to produce works of art that are socially impactful.[26] In

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1920, Vasconcelos personally invited him to contribute to Mexico's program of national mural painting. On the advice of the Mexican ambassador in Paris, he first traveled to Italy to study Renaissance frescoes first-hand.

In 1922 Rivera became a member of the PCM, and one year later he joined the socialist artist union *Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*. Its founding manifesto was written by Siqueiros, the communist hardliner among the Mexican mural painters. According to the manifesto, art must have social relevance and contain a message for the people. Paintings for private collectors and museums are unjustifiable; art has to reach out to the larger community, preferably in public space. The manifesto also stipulated that artists are workers who should earn no more than an average worker's salary.[27]

Being able to work in public space implied that artists had to accept commissions from the not-so-communist government. Rivera recognized the problem but did not care too much: when the painter is a revolutionary, he will produce revolutionary art, no matter the circumstances and the character of his commissions, he thought.[28] The big question is, however, how this works out in practice: how much pressure is exerted on the artist to convey, or avoid, a certain message? On the one hand, the Mexican government could not achieve its goals without the help of mural painters; on the other, the painters would risk their commissions if they refused to make any concessions, and that again would mean they could not share their political ideas with the public at all. Opinions differ about the intensity of political pressure on artists in the 1920s, but art historians generally agree that the artists were left relatively free in the realization of their ideas.[29]

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5. Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico*, 1929-30, fresco, National Palace, Mexico City

In accordance with the founding manifesto of the artists' union, Rivera painted his murals for an average worker's salary. But contrary to the spirit of this manifesto, he also accepted commissions from private collectors, for which he received considerable sums of money. For this 'treason' he was heavily criticized by his communist friends and colleagues.[30] Rivera thus came under attack from two sides: while conservative critics viewed him as a dangerous left-wing demagogue, many communists considered him mendacious and bourgeois.

In 1924 Obregón was succeeded by Plutarco Elías Calles as president. Initially Calles threatened to nationalize the oil industry and the mines, which were largely in American hands. However, primarily thanks to the strong engagement of Dwight Morrow, American Ambassador in Mexico, the relations between the two countries

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6. Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico*, 1929-30, fresco, National Palace, Mexico City

improved considerably during the late 1920s, resulting in the protection and stimulation of foreign investments.[31] Calles continued to support mural painting and offered Mexican artists more opportunities to depict scenes from national history on public walls; while Siqueiros refused to work for the 'reactionary' government, Rivera accepted the invitation.

Rivera's most famous works are the frescoes for the National Palace in Mexico City, painted in 1929-30, and then again in 1935. The main compositions along the central stairway depict Mexico in the past and present, with sections dedicated to Aztec history and other pre-Columbian cultures, the Spanish occupation of Central America, the Díaz government, and finally 'the world of today and tomorrow.'[32] The sequence seems to reflect a Marxist view of history: from its origins (pre-Columbian Mexico) through

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7. Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico*, 1935, fresco, National Palace, Mexico City

feudalism (Spanish rule) and bourgeois capitalism (Díaz) to the socialist revolution. The 'world of today and tomorrow' depicts farmers and workers with a prominent Karl Marx who, together with three revolutionary soldiers, and against the background of a rising sun, holds a banner with a text on class struggle and socialist society. This last, explicitly communist scene was painted in 1935, when the Mexican

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government under president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) had significantly changed the country's political course to the left.

The frescoes in the National Palace invoke a series of questions. Who visited the National Palace, and were these visitors sufficiently aware of the intricacies of national history to understand Rivera's complex compositions? How many of them would be able to grasp the historical references *and* understand the underlying political perspective of the painter? Were the frescoes mainly understood as legitimization of the Mexican government, as a left-wing critical interpretation of history, or rather as a colorful mixture of more or less random scenes, figures and symbols painted on a wall?

In 1927-28 Rivera went on a nine-month trip to the Soviet Union on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Originally he was invited to paint a mural for the Red Army Club in Moscow, but this commission was never confirmed. Rivera visited Moscow in a politically and artistically turbulent time. He joined the Soviet art group *October*, founded in March 1928. Like the *Sindicato* in Mexico, this art collective advocated a recognizable and accessible art for the people.[33] And although *October* explicitly rejected the incomprehensible works of the Russian avant-garde which had been very successful in the early years of the Revolution (see chapter 4), it also opposed hollow propagandistic art without artistic quality, which was exactly the kind of art Stalin would support from the 1930s. Later in 1928, Rivera was expelled from the Soviet Union due to his involvement in unspecified 'anti-Soviet activities.' In 1937, Rivera and his wife, the renowned artist Frida Kahlo, would become friends with Stalin's rival Leon Trotsky, who had fled the Soviet Union via Turkey and

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Norway to Mexico, where he was later killed by followers of Stalin.[34]

Rivera's relations with the PCM have always been difficult. He became a member in 1922, but decided to leave the party in 1925 because it demanded full engagement and a principled stance in political matters which he felt impeded his work as an artist. One year later he thought the better of it and joined the party again. However, by this time he was mistrusted within the ranks of the PCM because of his acceptance of private commissions and, even worse, his willingness to accept commissions from the anti-communist Calles administration.[35] His expulsion from the Soviet Union was not very helpful in restoring trust either, and in 1929 the PCM decided to discharge Rivera from the party – one of the reasons for the artist to try his luck in the United States. Only much later, in 1955, would the party welcome Rivera back in its ranks.

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Ambassador Morrow, who, as we have seen, was instrumental in improving the bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States, happened to be a great lover of art. He mediated in the assignment of important commissions to Rivera in Mexico and actively promoted his work in the United States. His higher aim was not only to help ameliorate the relations between the two countries but also to help revise the negative stereotypes of Mexico among the American public.[36] Rivera received commissions from, among others, Edsel Ford, Henry Ford's son, for a series of mural paintings in the central hall of the Detroit Institute of Art, and from oil tycoon Nelson Rockefeller for a mural in Rockefeller Center, New York. Rivera felt the need to account

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for his acceptance of these commissions. He stated that an artwork can be meaningful to the proletariat even if it is paid for by a capitalist.[37] Moreover, Rivera had a fascination for modern technology and industry, and believed that the machine would eventually contribute to the realization of a classless society.[38] His frescoes for Ford and Rockefeller attest to this expectation.

In the late 1920s, Rivera's artwork found a mixed reception in the United States. Some American painters were impressed by his work and came under his influence, but many critics disliked his political engagement.[39] This would change in the early 1930s due to the collapse of the stock market in October 1929, which made American artists more aware of their social and political responsibilities. Many of them started to express social criticism in their work, more often than not under the direct influence of the Mexican muralists, especially Rivera.[40] In Detroit, Rivera was invited by Edsel Ford and William Valentiner, director of the Detroit Institute of Art, to decorate the large courtyard of the museum with frescoes on the topic of Detroit Industry, in part based on the Ford factory in Dearborn, Michigan. Rivera painted an optimistic image of modern industrial production, where workers, engineers and business owners work together in the service of the common interest (1932-33).[41] Left-wing critics reproached him for not paying any attention to the social misery of workers since the crisis of 1929, and more specifically for completely neglecting the fact that only a few weeks before he started to work in Detroit, five protesting workers who had been fired by the Ford factory were killed by the police during a demonstration organized by the American communist party.[42]

However, in other works Rivera did express social critique. In an exhibition with seven movable mural panels in

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8. Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, 1932-33, fresco, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit

New York's Museum of Modern Art (1931), one panel showed rich Americans bringing their jewels to a bank safe while a group of homeless people have to sleep on a quay in the open air.[43] In 1933 Rivera accepted the commission to paint a monumental fresco in Rockefeller Center with the pretentious title *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*. The title promises a better future, but does not specify through what ideology it will be reached.

Rockefeller approved Rivera's design, in spite of the fact that it contained some unmistakable left-wing critical details, such as a demonstration by unemployed workers brutally attacked by policemen with truncheons. But in the final version, without acknowledging Rockefeller, Rivera added a portrait of Lenin holding hands with a Russian soldier and an African-American worker. The press received rumors about the fresco and started to comment on the 'red wall of Rockefeller Center' that was in progress. Rockefeller

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was not pleased and sent a note to Rivera, assuring that so far he had been very content with his work and had done nothing whatsoever to restrict the artist in his vision, but that he now kindly but urgently requested him to replace Lenin by an anonymous person. Rivera, who had suffered fierce criticism from his communist friends for accepting this commission in the first place, suggested that he add Abraham Lincoln to the fresco to counterbalance the ideological reference, but he refused to eliminate the first Soviet leader. Thereupon Rockefeller paid Rivera the full amount as agreed in the contract, sent him away and had the complete fresco chalked over.[44] Before it was destroyed, an assistant of Rivera's sneaked in and photographed the frescoes.[45] These photos were used by Rivera, together with his original design, to reconstruct the paintings in 1934, which since then have been on view at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City under the changed but still very pretentious title *Man, Controller of the Universe*.

In December 1933 Rivera returned to Mexico. One year later Lázaro Cárdenas was sworn in as President. He succeeded a series of weak state leaders who had ruled the country between 1928 and 1934, while Calles still pulled the strings behind the scenes. Cárdenas was elected with the approval of Calles as well, but unexpectedly he emerged as a more principled politician who took the revolutionary promises of his predecessors far more seriously. He introduced large-scale agrarian reforms, realized substantial improvements in the standard of living in the countryside, supported unions, realized better working conditions, nationalized the oil industry and allowed the PCM, which was banned in 1930, to reenter the political arena.[46] For leftist artists the presidency of Cárdenas was an important inspiration. It was under his Administration that Rivera, in

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his frescoes for the National Palace in Mexico City, made his first direct reference to Karl Marx.

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The history of Rivera's political artwork reads like a history of incongruities. The communist Rivera worked for liberal or conservative Mexican governments and for major capitalists in the United States, and was expelled from the Soviet Union and banned from the Mexican communist party. Rivera's case is intriguing in terms of the relationship between political artist and client. Did his murals in his home country primarily serve the interests of the Mexican government or did they support his own political agenda? Are his Mexican works essentially nationalist or essentially communist? Or did Rivera succeed in combining these, at least in theory, mutually exclusive ideologies? Clearly, Rivera, in his frescoes for the National Palace, shows a strong affinity with the victims of exploitation and violence, especially with the native population of Central America. But it is also true that only in 1935, under the presidency of Cárdenas, was he explicitly able to reference Marxism and class struggle.

In the United States, Rivera had to balance his own political convictions with those held by his capitalist clients, like Ford and Rockefeller. For his frescoes in Detroit he simply abstracted from the tensions between communism and capitalism, for which he was harshly criticized by his communist friends. In New York, on the other hand, he sought confrontation by refusing to eliminate Lenin from his mural.

Rivera always had to navigate between his political convictions and the demands from the outside world. Without

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concessions there would be no commissions, and without commissions no chance to express his thoughts for a wider public. But too many concessions might compromise these very thoughts. Rivera defended himself with the argument that a revolutionary artist still makes revolutionary art when he works for a conservative government or a capitalist business owner. The mixed responses to his art show that things are not that simple. However, Rivera was not an opportunist. He always remained loyal to his most fundamental principle: making art for the people, always the protagonists and positive heroes of his work.

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