

DIEGO RIVERA: CONSTRUCTING A MYTH

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# DIEGO RIVERA: CONSTRUCTING A MYTH

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2011

## ABSTRACT

Diego Rivera was a master of creating visual languages to express his ideas and beliefs. Throughout his life, he actively sought to define Mexican culture and his life through his art and his writing. Much of how he is remembered today: visionary, rebel, lover; and how Mexico is known to the world: exotic, colorful, cultural, was carefully crafted through Rivera's artistic efforts.

Rivera created a visual identity for Mexican culture by cultivating a mythology for the nation that in many ways became synonymous with his own life. He fostered a sense of *Mexicanidad*, or pride in one's Mexican identity by looking to his country's pre-Columbian heritage as well as its indigenous population and working classes for inspiration. Rivera's work referenced these groups in both style and subject, and in his murals, the ordinary people of Mexico were made extraordinary, modern heroes through the eyes of Diego Rivera. The language he created, however, was meticulously crafted to serve both his artistic and political agendas. Even as he incorporated ancient pre-Columbian imagery into his work, Rivera created a visual and cultural identity for a new, modern Mexico.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Diego Rivera: Constructing a Myth” presented by Hilary Nordholm, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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This thesis is the result of my great love of and interest in Mexican culture and the Mexican people, and a vast network of support of which I am the extremely lucky recipient. I first became aware of the true enormity of Diego Rivera's mythic status while living in Mexico 2002 – 2005. I was fortunate enough to live in Guanajuato, close to Rivera's birthplace, and my curiosity about this art world giant was piqued. During my time there I traveled extensively visiting sites and museums associated with Diego Rivera and his work: the Museo Casa Diego Rivera in Guanajuato, the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera in San Ángel, the Museo Diego Rivera (Anahucalli) the Museo Frida Kahlo in Coyoacán, the Museo Nacional de Arte, Teotihuacan, and the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Additionally, The National Gallery of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Getty Museum, and The Museum of Modern Art and its archives provided insight into the artist's work and life, and ample inspiration for the writing of this thesis.

However, this thesis would not have been possible without the unconditional love and support of my parents, Alison and Bradford Nordholm, who have helped me and supported me every step of the way; my husband, Adrián Hinojos, my partner in life, my travel companion, and fellow "citizen of the world"; Dr. Geraldine Fowle, whose enthusiasm and spirit will always serve as an inspiration; and the brilliant Dr. Frances Connelly, whose kindness, patience, and superb editing, saw me through this process, and whose teaching I will strive to emulate. It is an honor to be counted amongst her students. I would also like to express my gratitude to Mr. Julián Zugazagoitia, and to The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art for its institutional support of this academic endeavor.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Diego Rivera was a master of creating visual languages to express his ideas and beliefs. Throughout his life, he actively sought to define Mexican culture and his life through his art and his writing. Much of how he is remembered today: visionary, rebel, lover; and how Mexico is known to the world: exotic, colorful, cultural, was carefully crafted through Rivera's artistic efforts.

Diego Rivera created a visual identity for Mexican culture by cultivating a mythology for the nation that in many ways became synonymous with his own life. It has been said that "To see the paintings of Diego Rivera is to see Mexico."<sup>1</sup> He fostered a sense of *Mexicanidad*, or pride in one's Mexican identity by looking to his country's pre-Columbian heritage as well as its indigenous population and working classes for inspiration. Rivera's work referenced these groups in both style and subject, and in his murals, the ordinary people of Mexico were made extraordinary, modern heroes through the eyes of Diego Rivera. The language he created, however, was meticulously crafted to serve both his artistic and political agendas. Even as he incorporated ancient pre-Columbian imagery into his work, Rivera created a visual and cultural identity for a new, modern Mexico.

The messages and motifs Diego Rivera depicted in his murals still resonate today, more than fifty years after his death. On the vividly-colored walls of the Ministry of Education, his first large-scale mural commission, Mexico's history and cultural heritage come alive: cinnamon-skinned *campesinos* in crisp white shirts and high-crowned sombreros bend their backs in hard manual labor; graceful indigenous women in multi-colored skirts,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip N. Youtz. "Diego Rivera." *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* (1932): 100-101.

hair plaited in thick black braids, carry fruit and sell flowers; men and women come together in celebration of the Day of the Dead and the Maize Festival; all traditions that celebrate the persistence of indigenous tradition in the face of hundreds of years of European Catholicism. On these walls, the ordinary people of Mexico were made extraordinary, modern heroes through the eyes of Diego Rivera. It is also where he expressed his political views, illustrating Mexico's economy and class systems in murals of market scenes, mines, mills, and Communist gatherings, forging the idea of the peasant and the modern, and underscoring the notion that by embracing the past it is possible to create a new future. It is on these walls that Rivera speaks to his countrymen and the world of the fundamental cultural values of Mexico, and it is on these walls that he gives these ideas power, and it is on these walls that he demonstrates how they can shape Mexico's future.

Today Diego Rivera's name has become synonymous with Mexican culture and heritage, as evidenced by the crisp new 500 peso bills that feature his image, an honor reserved for Mexico's most revered heroes and presidents. Recently I attended a gala dinner hosted by the Hidalgo Society of Kansas City in honor of the anniversary of Mexican Independence.<sup>2</sup> The keynote speaker was charged with delivering a summation of Mexican history for his audience, both Mexicans and non-Mexicans alike. His Powerpoint presentation began with Cortés, and spanned Mexican history all the way through the

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<sup>2</sup> I first became aware of the true enormity of Diego Rivera's status while living in Mexico 2002 – 2005. I was fortunate enough to live in Guanajuato, close to Rivera's birthplace, and my curiosity about this art world giant was piqued. Throughout the last few years I have spent time traveling extensively throughout both the United States and Mexico visiting sites and museums associated with Diego Rivera and his work. The National Gallery of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art and its archives, and The Getty Museum in the United States, as well as the Museo Casa Diego Rivera in Guanajuato, the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera in San Ángel, the Museo Diego Rivera (Anahuacalli) the Museo Frida Kahlo in Coyoacán, the Museo Nacional de Arte, Teotihuacan and the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico provided insight into the artist's work and life, and ample inspiration for the writing of this thesis.

Revolution. What struck me, however, was the fact that he used images of Diego Rivera's work to illustrate nearly every major event of his country's history: the Conquest, Spanish colonization, the rise of the Revolutionary movement, and the struggles of the people throughout his nation's history; and that Diego Rivera's work today is still such an intrinsic part of the national consciousness and identity. But this is no accident; Diego Rivera chose to portray themes inspired by Mexican history, often placing himself within the scope of the narratives he displayed, and furthermore executed his paintings with unsurpassed skill—otherwise we would probably not be talking about him today. He chose to literally paint himself into history, his bold strokes and decisions forever cementing his place as part of Mexico's cultural heritage. It is in works such as *Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* (1947) where Rivera demonstrates where he envisions his proper place in Mexican history: in this sweeping mural with an encyclopedic cast of important Mexican historical figures, Rivera stands at the center (figure 1). There could be no other greater affirmation of his carefully engineered status as “a man of the people” than this, further reinforced by the addition of his quote “*Se ha dicho que la revolución no necesita al arte, pero que el arte necesita de la revolución. Eso no es cierto. La revolución sí necesita un arte revolucionario*” [It is said that revolution doesn't need art, but that art needs revolution. That is not true. Revolution needs a revolutionary art].

Today Rivera's name occupies the same arena as those of other important historical figures such as Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Miguel Hidalgo and Benito Juárez. Born Diego María de la Concepción Juan Nepomuceno Estanislao de la Rivera y Barrientos Acosta y Rodríguez on December 13, 1886 in Guanajuato, the artist's birthplace was already home to several legendary figures still alive today in the popular imagination. It is there that

key events in the War for Independence took place, including the legend of *El Pipila*, a poor miner who rose to greatness when he singlehandedly stormed the Spanish barricades to set them on fire, carrying a heavy stone on his back to deflect their arrows, fighting for freedom. It is also there that, according to legend, one of the most famous spirits in Mexico, *La Llorona*, “the weeping woman” wanders the twisting cobblestone streets and tunnels below the city at night, wailing for the loss of her children. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Diego Rivera, born in this place of fertile imagination and larger-than-life characters, would also seek to establish a legend of his own.

In her preface to Diego Rivera’s autobiography, *My Art, My Life*, Gladys March writes: “Rivera, who was afterwards, in his work, to transform the history of Mexico into one of the great myths of our century, could not, in recalling his own life to me, suppress his colossal fancy. He had already converted certain events, particularly of his early years, into legends.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he was the ultimate mythologizer, for according to him, his childhood was studded with successes and triumphs, all accomplished before the tender age of eleven. In his autobiography he outlines the various roles he had taken on in his youth, all with great skill, of course. He was at once “the Little Engineer,” as he loved mechanical toys and befriended the railroad workers who let him ride the trains from the Guanajuato station; “the Little Indian” because he spent two years in the Sierra with his indigenous nanny, Antonia, roaming the forest with animals, “free from human dirt,” “the Little Atheist,” because he had made an iconoclastic stand on the altar of a church in Guanajuato denouncing religion; “the Little General,” because he had demonstrated a brilliant strategic mind as a child and the military academy attempted to recruit him; and “the Little Don Juan,” because he lost his

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<sup>3</sup> Diego Rivera and Gladys March. *My Art, My Life* (New York: Dover, 1991), vii.

virginity at the age of nine to an eighteen-year-old girl.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the only thing that may not have been embroidered in his account of his early childhood years was the fact that he had a curious mind and a vivid imagination, and that, from an early age the boy could draw, and draw well.

However, the public and the art world eagerly believed the myths that Rivera generated, both about his life and his nation, reinforced by repetition in so many publications. These myths not only concerned the events of his own life: Diego Rivera the exotic, mixed race, artistic genius, and his country: Mexico, fertile land of the indigenous Indian, whose traditions, ways of life, and intrinsic artistic genius conjures a simpler, truer time; but also the link between the two: Diego Rivera as representative of Mexico. Diego Rivera's construction of these myths was picked up early on in his career by museum catalogues and art reviewers of the day. The 1931 catalogue for the first retrospective exhibition of Diego Rivera's work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York includes an introduction that reads like the beginning of some mythic story, outlining Rivera's (presumed) ancestry: "Diego Rivera's paternal grandfather, Anastasio de la Rivera, was born in Russia of a Russian mother. His father was Marquis de la Navarro, General in the expedition of Spanish troops sent against Russia by Marquis de la Romana as allies of Napoleon during the reign of Charles IV of Spain. Diego's paternal great grandfather, de la Navarro, was born in Italy of Spanish Neapolitan parentage. At the time he went to Russia he was a widower. He married a Russian who died when Anastasio was born. The Marquis returned to Spain bringing with him his infant son Anastasio de la Rivera, who, educated in Spain became a powerful figure in the life of the period. The last three generations were known for the success with which they had

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<sup>4</sup> Rivera, 3-15.

conducted their personal and business affairs. Always on the liberal side, only their great intelligence and personal magnetism saved them from disaster, the inevitable penalty of a too-liberal or revolutionary belief. The Marquis took part in the First Republican Revolution in Spain in 1838. Upon its failure he determined to go to Mexico and settled in Guanajuato where he became interested in the famous silver mines of that district. Within the year he married Ines de Acosta, a Portuguese Jewess. They had nine children, the eldest of whom was Diego Rivera, father of Diego.”<sup>5</sup> The account goes on to highlight the family’s advanced intellect, sympathies towards the indigenous populations of Mexico and even the various roles Rivera described taking on in his youth in his own autobiography, “the Little Indian,” “the Little Engineer,” and “the Little General”....

When the same exhibition traveled to the Pennsylvania Museum of Art later that winter, Philip Youtz reinforced all three of these notions in his article for the Museum’s *Bulletin* in February 1932. He wrote: “To see the paintings of Diego Rivera is to see Mexico. These are story pictures as were the great paintings in the churches in the days when men had no books wherein to read. Such great pictures are more powerful than printed words. Rivera’s work is a modern epic of Mexico. His murals particularly are more than a personal expression; they are the silent voice of a people. The epic story which Rivera tells with such vigour and directness has to do with an American people. The proud Indian race has vanished from the United States, leaving only a sad remnant on the reservations—creatures too often made over in our own image, with our clothes, our education, our mores. But in Mexico the Indian race has survived.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say: “In the paintings we see the land vivid under a sun that gives light generously. The village harvest is plentiful. The up and down of the

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<sup>5</sup> Frances Flynn Paine, *Diego Rivera: Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Plandome Press, 1931), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Philip N. Youtz, “Diego Rivera.” *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* (1932): 100-101.

landscape, the nearby jungle with its varied life forms, the red and yellow and dazzling white of flowers that bloom forever are background for the Indian, at home amid such beauty. Such pictures seemed “exotic” to the French who had welcomed Rivera’s earlier attempts at cubism and pointillism. They are not exotic for the Mexican. They are a part of his life, placed where they share his daily work on the walls of the public buildings of Mexico.”<sup>7</sup>

In his 1935 article for *Parnassus*, “Mexican Murals and Diego Rivera,” Sam Lewisohn echoes these ideas “Everyone loves a well-told story whether in words or in paint. Both the character and history of the Mexican people have made it the logical country to satisfy this craving by reviving the art of plastic story-telling on a grand scale. For something in the psychology of the Mexican Indian has made his customary expression visual rather than verbal.”<sup>8</sup> He continues: “Genius is an elusive term. To those who appreciate the delightful pluralism of life it is not a rigid phrase but includes many varieties of excellence. The genius that Diego Rivera possesses is of the type which includes the capacity for taking pains and the ability to bring into a coherent whole all his efforts.”<sup>9</sup>

The same themes and stories were repeated over and over, though these were firmly cemented with the publications of two works by friend and biographer, Bertram Wolfe: *The Life and Times of Diego Rivera* (1939) and *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (1964). In his review of the latter, historian George Kubler pointed out that “Twice-told biographies by the same author are uncommon. In them the same event has different meanings at separate times.”<sup>10</sup> This appears to indeed to have been true. Patrick Marnham asserts in his book

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<sup>7</sup> Youtz, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Sam A. Lewisohn. “Mexican Murals and Diego Rivera.” *Parnassus*. (1935), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Lewisohn, 11.

<sup>10</sup> George Kubler, “Review, The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera by Bertram D. Wolfe.” *The American Historical Review* (1964): 1103.

*Dreaming With His Eyes Open* (1998) that Wolfe must have realized that he had relied too heavily upon Rivera's word in the first book, and that he needed to address the "labyrinth of fables" that had mired his first effort; by adding the word "fabulous" to the second title, he attempted to acknowledge the difficulty in discerning the truth with Rivera.<sup>11</sup> Kubler however condemns Wolfe's second effort by adding, "In the title the word "fabulous" refers to Rivera's lifelong habit of distorting the facts about his life. The choice of this adjective imposed upon the biographer a duty to prove and verify and document every assertion from the lips and pen of his subject. But there is no apparatus of this sort in the book. The chronological sequence is often unclear. Sources are rarely specified. Discrepancies are left unexplained."<sup>12</sup> Rivera's own autobiography, *My Art, My Life*, originally published in English in 1960, three years after his death, has proven to be equally difficult to verify. Dictated to Gladys March, a young American writer, the book not only includes his characterizations of the various roles he took on in childhood, but some of the more fantastic tales of the artist's life—most notably his stories of repeated cannibalism while a student in Mexico City in 1906. Because of his reputation for embroidering the truth, it is impossible to determine whether these tales were based on reality, or were merely the result of his "fantastic" imagination carrying him away in an attempt to impress an attractive young woman.

The fact that so many scholars accepted the myths generated by the artist requires more examination. Not all of the implications are negative, however, since it has brought more recognition to the Mexican painters and their place in Modernism. In recent years more

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Marnham. *Dreaming With His Eyes Open* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 329.

<sup>12</sup> Kubler, 1103.



challenges have been made to the artist's efforts to quite literally construct an identity, both for himself and his nation, and this will be examined more closely in this study. Recent scholarly works about Diego Rivera have included the catalogues for exhibitions held within the last twenty years including *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, (1986 – 1987), sponsored jointly by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes de México and the Detroit Institute of Arts, and *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*, (1999-2000) only the second retrospective of his work, an exhibition sponsored jointly by the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. The contribution of Ramón Favela to the latter publication provides in-depth art-historical research regarding Rivera's early and Cubist works. One of the foremost Rivera scholars in the world, Favela is largely credited with bringing Rivera's Cubist years to light. It is noteworthy that the catalogues for two recent exhibitions on Rivera's Cubist works, *Diego Rivera y El Cubismo: Memoria y Vanguardia* (2004), [sponsored by the Consejo Nacional Para La Cultura y Las Artes, the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington], and *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Portraits* at the Meadows Museum (2009), both mention Favela's scholarship in this specific area. However, both catalogues also frequently cite Bertram Wolfe's *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* and Rivera's own *My Art My Life* when referring to events from the artist's past.

The artistic persona that Diego Rivera made required a contradictory and cunning mix of egomaniac, devoted painter, patriot, and outsider. In this thesis I will attempt to peel back the layers and examine how it was that this great artist was able to achieve his mythic status, "a man of the people" synonymous with Mexican art and culture, and the ways in

which he used his experiences, relationships and surroundings to craft his image, seize a moment in history, and create a truly revolutionary art.

Foundational to the development of Rivera's style was his education in Europe, and chapter one will explore this time period in the young artist's life. As much about studying different styles and techniques as the notions and ideas he learned from his various relationships with European artists and thinkers, Rivera's time in Europe proved to be a pivotal time in his life. His experiences abroad gave him a new perspective on his Mexican heritage, seen through a European lens. Through Rivera's contact with his European contemporaries, Pablo Picasso, Fernande Léger, Amedeo Modigliani and Élie Faure, Rivera learned of the notion of the "primitive," which first inspired him to take on a Cubist style and later to incorporate it into his own artistic vision. The distinctive style for which Rivera became known was forged by a deliberate regression, combining pre-Columbian motifs with the large, simplified forms of the great Italian fresco painters, especially Giotto. Chapter one will discuss Rivera's decision to return to basics by fusing a variety of so-called "primitive" influences and emphasizing both peasants and the working body, a bold move that would come to define his style.

When Rivera returned home from Europe after more than ten years of study, he essentially rediscovered his country, seeing his homeland with fresh eyes. With the opportunity to play a key role in the Mexican muralist movement, Rivera attacked his first large-scale project, the walls of the Ministry of Education, with confidence and forged a style that was truly his own: a marriage of the concept of the "primitive" he had been exposed to in Europe with the themes and people from his own culture. Chapter two places Rivera's European training within the context of major historical events in Mexico. The advent of the

Mexican Revolution inspired Rivera to find ways to incorporate his own culture into his works and ultimately paved the way toward an unprecedented moment in Mexican history: the Mexican Renaissance. The muralist movement that began during this time period would come to mark the formal beginning of Rivera's career as an artist of the people. He seized upon the ideals made popular during this time of hope and resounding nationalism, looking to Mexico's roots and pre-Columbian heritage and creating art by and for the people. Even after the new government crumbled and it became clear that corruption, not democracy, would rule, the ideals of this period would continue and come to define his work.

By painting Mexico's history, Diego Rivera claimed something that had been lost, denied, and neglected in the hundreds of years of Spanish rule and then French rule—a Mexican identity. In essence, Rivera gave form to Mexico's past, rejoicing in the nation's complicated *criolla* blend of cultures, history, and heroes. By doing this he not only forged an identity for the nation but for himself. Not only did he position himself and elements from his own life in his work, but he actively sought to control his legacy through literary works such as his autobiography, and through the establishment of Anahuacalli, a museum that combined his work and Pre-Columbian collection. Chapter three examines the complicated, contradictory career of Diego Rivera, a journey that culminates in the idea of *Mexicanidad*, what it means to be Mexican, a notion Rivera explored through his art and his life—both the one he manufactured and the reality behind the man and the myth.

## CHAPTER 2

### AN EDUCATION: A CUBIST INTERLUDE AND AN INTRODUCTION TO PRIMITIVISM

Like most Mexican artists of his time, Rivera was raised in an environment where European culture set the standard for artistic achievement in the arts. Mexico had spent the last three hundred years under European rule, first under the Spanish, and then the French. Following the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521, the art forms of Mexico reflected a melding of the cultures, the indigenous and the European, with an emphasis on emulating European models.

This trend continued with the French capture of Mexico City in 1863 and their brief occupational rule through 1867. The young Diego Rivera, born in 1886, was brought up in an upper middle-class household during a time when Paris fashions still ruled the day. He had shown an early aptitude for the arts, noting in his autobiography: “As far back as I can remember, I was drawing. Almost as soon as my fat baby fingers could grasp a pencil, I was marking up walls, doors and furniture.”<sup>1</sup> As a boy growing up in Guanajuato, his father encouraged his art making by dedicating a room in their home to his son’s artistic endeavors. When the family later moved to Mexico City, the young Diego was enrolled in the Academy of San Carlos in 1898 at the age of twelve, Mexico’s premier arts academy, where he was taught traditional European styles from post-Renaissance classicism to nineteenth-century naturalism.<sup>2</sup> While Rivera later complained that he was “unhappy artistically” studying at the school, and that “the further I progressed in the academic European forms, the less I liked

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<sup>1</sup> Rivera, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Fletcher. *Crosscurrents of Modernism* (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 45.

them and the more I was drawn to the old Mexican art.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, his time at the Academy proved to be pivotal, for it provided him with solid art instruction from a variety of masters, masters who had themselves been trained in the European aesthetic: José María Velasco, master of landscape painting, Gerardo Murillo, who would later refer to himself as Dr. Atl, and Santiago Rebull, who had been a pupil of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.<sup>4</sup> Rivera graduated from the Academy in 1905, and by 1906 he had exhibited fifteen paintings of Mexican landscapes, volcanoes, mountains and peasant genre scenes with glowing reviews.<sup>5</sup>

As a nation, Mexico was staggering through the first tenuous steps of independence, bearing the yoke of conflict and chaos left behind by their European oppressors. For all of his young life and the history he knew of his country, Diego Rivera’s Mexico had been a country struggling for independence and for its own identity, one free of European influence. It is not surprising that growing up amidst these strong influences the aspiring young artist set his sights on Europe as the next step in his artistic development. As Rivera’s close friend and biographer Bertram Wolfe noted in his book *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, “The sons of Mexico’s “better families” go to Paris for initiation into the elegant vices, to New York to learn “business and confor,” and to Spain for traditional culture.”<sup>6</sup> Aided by a four-year scholarship from the Governor of Veracruz, the twenty-one year-old Rivera embarked for “Mother Spain” and his own *grand tour*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bertram D. Wolfe. *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfe, *Fabulous Life*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

Over the next fourteen years, from 1907 – 1921, Rivera travelled from Spain to Russia, Paris, England, and Italy; he copied works by the old masters including Bruegel, Velazquez, and El Greco, studied Renaissance murals by Giotto and Michelangelo, and studied many of the “isms” including Impressionism and Cubism. His travels exposed him to an array of stylistic, art historical, and political ideas, and Rivera explored them all. However, for a man who would one day be known as the artistic voice of Mexico, with his epic murals of workers and Indians, epic murals and strong political views, his work during this European period reveals an artist struggling to find his own artistic voice, producing images without political import and lacking the expression of an individual artistic style. His struggle to find his artistic voice, however, and his experiences in Europe proved to be defining ones on his road to establishing his own style. In early canvases such as his *Self Portrait* painted in 1907, painted while still traveling in Spain, we see Rivera fancying himself a young Bohemian, seated in a café, dressed in black, the wide brim of his floppy hat dramatically shielding his moody, contemplative gaze from beneath its deep shadow (figure 2). He smokes a pipe and nurses a glass of beer, and his baby face is defined by a thin, wispy moustache and goatee. He is every bit the dashing young romantic, gazing broodingly out at the viewer.

While Rivera would later claim in his memoirs that he had come to Europe “as a disciple of Cézanne” whom he had “long considered the greatest of the modern masters,” he made no effort to view Cézanne’s works until his later arrival in Paris.<sup>8</sup> Rivera’s work until that time is marked by the exploration and emulation of a variety of styles and ideas in his painting, yet not fully understanding the meaning or intention behind the styles and themes

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<sup>8</sup>Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *My Art, My Life An Autobiography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 33.

he emulated. *Portrait of a Breton Woman*, painted just a few years later in 1910, illustrates this idea exactly, revealing a young artist chasing the long shadows of artists like Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne (figure 3). Here Rivera depicts an old woman in traditional Breton attire including a black dress and angular white head covering. In both subject and style he references the older French artists, particularly Gauguin, who had traveled to Brittany twenty-five years earlier to draw inspiration from the people and culture of the region. Gauguin, however, had chosen the people and culture of Brittany as subjects for his paintings because he had been inspired by their “simpler way of life,” and had made the choice to regress in both his style and the way in which he depicted his subjects. While Rivera clearly displays a budding “primitivist” sensibility in this painting, it is clear that at this time he did not grasp its meaning for himself as an artist, or truly understand it. Rivera would later reflect that his work before he settled in Paris “still looks academic and empty. Today it seems like a collection of masks and disguises to me.”<sup>9</sup>

When Rivera finally set up a studio in the Montparnasse section of Paris in 1912, he joined a circle of avant-garde artists that included Fernande Léger, Leopold Gottlieb, Amedeo Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, and Jacques Lipchitz, among others. Rivera wrote of his arrival, “Paris had been my goal. My roving now ended, I set up work and soon fell into the usual routine of the art student, studying the museum collections, attending exhibitions and lectures, and working in the free academies of Montparnasse. At night I joined groups of fellow students in the cafés in warm discussions of art and politics.”<sup>10</sup> Rivera’s time in Paris would prove to be pivotal in the young artist’s development, both for its brief successes and

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<sup>9</sup> Rivera, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 30.

its failures. The events which were unfolding locally amongst his Bohemian peers, and across the ocean in Mexico would forever impact the course of Rivera's future.

His time in Paris was similar to his experiences traveling elsewhere in Europe in that he struggled to find his own artistic voice and continued to study, "borrow," and experiment with a variety of styles, including Cubism. Rivera's arrival in Paris overlapped with the "Golden Age" of Cubism, a style that thrived for a brief period and declined with the advent of World War I.<sup>11</sup> Invented in 1908 by two painters, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who laid out the foundations for the style in their Montmartre studios long before the style became popular amongst its many followers, the style, and its creators, would captivate Rivera.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible to underestimate how influential Rivera's circle of Parisian friends was on him, and 1913 would mark the beginning of his own "Cubist Adventure."<sup>13</sup> While Rivera would only experiment with the style for a short time, it is through his Cubist works from this time period that he began to reveal his awareness of a deeper goal to be achieved through his painting. Perhaps it was his exposure for the first time to several Russian students who had "suffered exile and lived among professional revolutionaries" sustained only by their "Utopian dreams;" perhaps it was the great exchange of artistic theories and ideas taking place amongst his peers from all over the world, or perhaps it was the advent of World War I.<sup>14</sup> Of the period Rivera wrote: "In my painting I sought a way to incorporate my increasing knowledge and deepening emotions concerning social problems."<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case, Rivera found himself in the middle of what Antonio Saborit describes in his essay for the

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Navarrete, *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Portraits* (Dallas: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2009), 15.

<sup>12</sup> John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso 1907-1917* (New York: Random House, 1996), 76.

<sup>13</sup> Navarrete, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



exhibition catalog of *Diego Rivera: Art & Revolution*, as “a bohemian picture album” with major players including Pablo Picasso.<sup>16</sup>

Rivera’s relationship with Pablo Picasso was conflictive. While Rivera would later claim in his memoirs that Picasso was a “great friend,” their relationship was in fact much more complicated and volatile.<sup>17</sup> The two artists both had studios in Paris around the same time, and shared ideas, but by the time Rivera returned to Mexico, he and Picasso were more like enemies. According to his memoirs, their first meeting came about sometime in 1914. Rivera’s friend, Chilean painter Ortés de Zarete came to his apartment and announced: “Picasso sent me to tell you that if you don’t go see him, he’s coming to see you.”<sup>18</sup> Rivera acknowledges that Picasso was his “idol,” and it is easy to imagine the excitement this invitation must have invoked. Of the meeting Rivera wrote: “Picasso’s studio was full of his exciting canvases; grouped together they had an impact more powerful than when shown by dealers as individual masterpieces. They were like living parts of an organic world Picasso had himself created. As for the man, will and energy blazed from his round black eyes. His black, glossy hair was cut short like the hair of a circus strong man. A luminous atmosphere seemed to surround him.”<sup>19</sup>

Picasso’s influence, his Cubist painting style, personal life, and political views, had a profound effect on Rivera. It is not a stretch to observe that Picasso served as one of Rivera’s primary models for how he would go on to shape his own life and image. While Rivera’s adventure with Picasso’s Cubist style was short-lived, Picasso’s “primitive” references in his

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<sup>16</sup> María Ángeles González, *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes Landucci Editores, 1999), 200.

<sup>17</sup> Rivera, 60

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 60.

work, radical political beliefs, anarchist activities and aesthetics, famed sexual prowess and staunch anticlericalism all provided examples which Rivera would echo and emphasize in the construction of his own artistic persona.

Their brief friendship exposed Rivera to the inner workings of Picasso's thought processes and inspirations, and there can be little doubt the young painter eagerly absorbed everything his "idol," who was already an established painter by this time, had to share with him. Many of the ideas Picasso promoted would resonate throughout Rivera's career, beginning with Picasso's references to "primitive" sources for inspiration in his work. By the time Picasso and Rivera were acquainted in Paris, Picasso had been experimenting with primitivism for several years. As William Rubin points out in his essay, this move constituted a "commitment to modernism" which made Picasso responsible for broadening the language of Western art, and eliminating the distinction between the "high" and the "low."<sup>20</sup> Picasso's studio, which Rivera would have seen quite regularly, was littered with a range of "primitive" objects—African and Oceanic masks and reliquaries, and flea market finds (figure 4). Seen through Picasso's anarchist politics, the "primitive" imagery (from the rural peasantry to the African and Oceanic objects he collected) recalled what had been lost in modern society, and by appropriating them in his work he hoped to invoke a different time from humankind's infancy, when society's relationship with the land and each other was simpler and uncorrupted.<sup>21</sup>

Picasso's radical political beliefs also influenced Rivera, who would later join the Communist Party and promote the rights of the indigenous population and farmers of Mexico

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<sup>20</sup> Rubin, 242.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 43.

in his painting. Long before these notions took root however, Rivera found a role model in Picasso, whom Patricia Leighton describes as the “anarchist artist-hero” of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Early on, Picasso began to articulate his political views through his painting, depicting peasants and laborers in moving portraits and domestic scenes. Such works as *The Old Fisherman*, painted in 1895, demonstrate his sympathies toward the working classes, depicting an old man slumped toward the viewer, his body broken by years of hard labor, pain, and suffering (figure 5). From a young age Picasso surrounded himself with like-minded artists, writers and poets, and his first published drawings appeared in the anarchist journal *Joventut*, which frequently published articles disparaging the notion of “art for art’s sake” and works that lacked social consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Picasso continually pushed to make his work more revolutionary, his style constantly evolving, and became increasingly bold in his anti-academicism, a theme that would also later become prominent in Rivera’s memoirs of his own life.<sup>24</sup> Picasso’s anarchist views “helped form [his] view of himself as an artist in society, his ideas about spontaneity and inspiration, and about the virtues of “unsophisticated” primitive art, all of which made an impact on the development of his style and imagery.<sup>25</sup> As Leighton points out in her book, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, sexual freedom was central to the anarchist movement in Paris, thanks in large part to Picasso’s good friend, the writer Guillaume Apollinaire, who espoused utopian ideals and believed that pornography and sexual freedom “constituted an act of moral freedom,” intentionally shattering “bourgeois” moral values.<sup>26</sup> Picasso’s sexual conquests were many, and it is

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<sup>22</sup> Leighton, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 60.

noteworthy that Rivera also makes much of his own sexual prowess and virility in his memoirs.

Not only did Rivera's circle include Picasso, but a dynamic group of artists and writers from all over the world: Russia, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Mexico. The group posed for each other, as evidenced by the many portraits Rivera painted of his peers: Jacques Lipchitz, Élie Faure, Martin Luis Guzman and Oscar Miestchaninoff (figure 6); and the portraits his friends Amedeo Modigliani and Andre Léger painted of him (figure 7).

However, the group Rivera most closely associated with during this time included Jacques Lipchitz, Robert Delaunay, and Rivera's neighbor, Amedeo Modigliani, who had all begun to experiment with Cubism, but utilized more vivid palettes than Braque or Picasso to create greater optical movement in the geometric patterns of their compositions.<sup>27</sup> Rivera also befriended the artists of the Section d'Or, a group inspired both by Cubism and Italian Futurist ideas, which included Marcel Duchamp, brothers Jacques Villon and Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Albert Gleizes, and Jean Metzinger, author of the 1912 work *Du Cubisme*.<sup>28</sup>

Rivera's large circle of avant-garde friends gathered regularly to review and critique each other's work, and also to engage in lively debates about art and theory. In his book about "*Ismos*" Ramón Gomez de la Serna wrote about *Riverismo*: "There in Paris, everyone was afraid of him. I saw him once quarrel with Modigliani, who was drunk; quarrel while he trembled with twisted spasms of laughter. Some coach-drivers listened to the discussion without ceasing to stir the sugar in their coffee. Modigliani wanted to excite Diego... The young blonde of Pre-Raphaelite type who accompanied Modigliani had her hair combed in

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<sup>27</sup> Fletcher, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

*tortillons* on her temples like two sunflowers or earpieces, the better to hear the discussion. Picasso had the attitude of a gentleman waiting for a train, his beret jammed down to the shoulders, resting on his stick as if he were a fisherman patiently hoping for a bite....”<sup>29</sup> However it is clear that Rivera was close with his friends, even standing in as Leopold Gottlieb’s second in his duel with Moïse Kisling in 1914.<sup>30</sup>

Rivera’s early Cubist works from this time period include his 1913 *Portrait of Adolfo Best Maugard* (figure 8). A friend, fellow countryman, and artist, Best Maugard had just arrived from Mexico where he had completed a commission to illustrate the Pre-Columbian archaeological findings in the Valley of Mexico, and was in Paris to paint copies of Pre-Columbian artifacts in European collections.<sup>31</sup> In the foreground of the portrait, Rivera depicts Adolfo full figure, his face in profile, his dark silhouette contrasting dramatically against a smoky, industrial backdrop painted in blues, lavenders and grays and dominated by Paris’s giant ferris wheel, the “Grand Wheel.”<sup>32</sup> While he rendered the image of his friend in a rather realistic fashion, the background is reduced to minimal, geometric forms. The buildings are blocky and angular, and the billows of smoke in gentle spheres mimic the graceful arc of the Grand Wheel. *Portrait of Adolfo Best Maugard* is an important work because it marks the beginning of Rivera’s experimentation with cubism, as evidenced by the disconnect between the handling of the subject and background. In fact, Rivera’s former professor and friend, Dr. Atl wrote in a review of the work: “Rivera—Portrait. The background is rather well constructed and displays a certain grandeur, but the figure lacks

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfe, 74.

<sup>30</sup> González, 200.

<sup>31</sup> Fletcher, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Navarrate, 22.

any relationship whatsoever to the whole.”<sup>33</sup> Another early Cubist work is Rivera’s 1914 portrait of his friend Jacques Lipchitz, *Portrait of a Young Man* (figure 9). Due in large part to his relationship with Angeline Beloff, a Russian artist to whom he was briefly married, Rivera’s circle of friends grew to include Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews fleeing political and religious persecution, many of whom were Bolsheviks and Russian revolutionaries. Including Lipchitz, Rivera befriended poets and artists such as Ilya Ehrenburg and Oscar Miestchaninoff.<sup>34</sup> In this portrait we see a marked transition in Rivera’s style, and a more fully committed Cubist work. Rivera’s portrait utilizes the characteristically Cubist, multi-planar and multi-dimensional views of his subject in hues of brown and gray, also characteristic of the style. However, he has incorporated several striped bands of bold color in bright reds, yellows, blues and *rosa mexicano* pink, reminiscent of a Mexican *serape*—a motif that would emerge in several of his Cubist works. Of the work Rivera would later comment: “It is a well-constructed composition done with warmth and grace.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there is a certain rhythmic quality to the appearance of his subject’s fragmented visage, with cool shades of gray, bronze and warm taupe unified within a rectilinear grid executed in feathery black paint with an almost charcoal-like quality. While it is clear that the events taking place in his country were very much on his mind, he was unable to depict and express these ideas and reactions in his own way stylistically. It is in *Portrait of Young Man* that we see Rivera’s “Cubist Adventure” in full swing, and his “desire to construct the plastic values

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<sup>33</sup> Navarrete, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 58.

of forms, their masses and volumes dematerializing objects in order to draw out the geometric skeleton that supports them.”<sup>36</sup>

Rivera’s relationships with fellow artists, writers, and philosophers in Paris did much to expose him to a variety of influences and ideas, as well as change his perspective about the messages his own paintings could convey, and the sources of inspiration from which they could be derived. However, perhaps the most influential event that occurred during Rivera’s time abroad was the Mexican Revolution, a civil war which would forever alter his artistic destiny by revealing to Rivera, and all Mexicans, a pride in their pre-Columbian heritage and a newfound sense of nationality.

Begun in 1910, the Revolution raged on until its conclusion nearly ten years later in 1920. By 1915, when Rivera was established in Paris, the conflict was in the midst of some of its bloodiest and most pivotal battles. The year also marked the death of exiled former dictator Porfirio Diaz.<sup>37</sup> As a Mexican abroad, Rivera would have had ready access to graphic images of the battles taking place in his homeland through both the European and Mexican press, and the death of the dictator in Paris would most certainly have not escaped his notice. Through his own writings and comments, it is clear that during this time Rivera very much felt himself to be a Mexican in exile from his homeland, with a growing sense of nostalgia for his *tierra natal*, clues of which are revealed in his work from this period.<sup>38</sup> He describes this time in his life as “agonizing,” writing that “I realized that what I knew best and felt most deeply was my own country, Mexico.”<sup>39</sup> Rivera would later emphasize this in his autobiography: “When I study the paintings of this time period now, I realize that they

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<sup>36</sup> Navarrete, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Marnham, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Ramon Favela, *Diego Rivera the Cubist Years* (Phoenix, Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984), 107.

<sup>39</sup> Rivera, 67.

distinctly show the influence of the pre-Conquest tradition of Mexican art.”<sup>40</sup>He went on to add: “Even the landscapes I did from life in Europe were essentially Mexican in feeling.”<sup>41</sup>

In perhaps the clearest revelation of Rivera’s inner feelings, he completed one of his best known Cubist paintings, *Paisaje Zapatista – El Guerrillero (Zapatista Landscape – The Guerrilla.)* Painted in 1915, Rivera depicts in a Cubist fashion the symbols of the famous Emiliano Zapata, the head of the Revolutionary forces of the state of Morelos, in a Cubist fashion (figure 10). Rivera said the work “showed a Mexican peasant hat hanging over a window box behind a rifle. Executed without any preliminary sketch in my Paris studio, it is probably the most faithful expression of the Mexican mood that I have ever achieved. Picasso visited my studio to see my new paintings... he looked and was pleased, and Picasso’s approval turned practically the whole of opinion in my favour.”<sup>42</sup> Painted in a palette dominated by neutral whites, grays and browns accented with pops of vivid blue, red, pink and yellow, Rivera depicts Zapata’s signature high-crowned hat, rifle, *serape*, and a buckle attached to a strap of worn leather amidst a landscape of angular mountains and desert scrub framed by a sickly, green-gray sky, each object accented by a bold swath of pure white pigment. Completed in Rivera’s Paris studio, the painting which he referred to as “My Mexican trophy,” reveals his interest in and connection to his homeland, yet it is expressed in the latest Parisian avant-garde language, a style wholly representative of European sophistication and aesthetic.<sup>43</sup> It is as though these symbols of Mexican culture, which would have been familiar to his European audience, were assembled and forced through a “European” filter. Indeed, *Zapatista Landscape* was executed in the style of Synthetic

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<sup>40</sup> Rivera, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 65

<sup>42</sup> Marnham, 115.

<sup>43</sup> Favela, 107.



Cubism, the most recent shift in the style's evolution as developed by Picasso and Braque, in which forms are further flattened into bold, geometric shapes with a brighter, more vibrant palette.

*Zapatista Landscape* was a departure for Rivera, and almost immediately garnered him some new success when it caught the interest of one of Picasso's art dealers, Léonce Rosenberg.<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, who had up until that point been purchasing from Picasso, bought *Zapatista Landscape*, securing Rivera with a small but regular monthly stipend. Perhaps because of the fact that Rivera's success as a Cubist artist was growing, or perhaps because he was competitive by nature, Picasso didn't take the sudden change in Rivera's status well. The two had had a complex dynamic during the years Rivera was in Paris, one which had been defined by the fact that Picasso's fame and notoriety overrode that of the lesser-known Rivera, and that Rivera looked to Picasso for inspiration and approval. Whatever the reason, towards the end of 1915, Picasso created a work entitled *Homme accoudé sur une table* (*Seated Man*), a work which, in its original form bore a striking resemblance to Rivera's *Zapatista Landscape* (figure 11).<sup>45</sup> However, following a complaint from Rivera, and a threat to "beat him with his club," Picasso repainted the central section of the painting, eliminating the painting's overt similarities. The feud, however, seems to have continued between the two artists. Rivera had proudly had his picture taken alongside *Zapatista Landscape* to memorialize his achievement; in what Patrick Marnham calls "a sly reference to Rivera's naïve pleasure in his achievement," Picasso also had his picture taken alongside his initial version of *Seated Man*, wearing exactly the same clothes, and standing in the same pose as

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<sup>44</sup> Marnham, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 116.

Rivera.<sup>46</sup> In his memoirs Rivera later wrote: “My enthusiasm for Picasso has not lessened, though today I would qualify it by two reservations. It seems to me that, in every one of his periods, Picasso has shown more imagination than originality, that everything he has done is based upon the work of somebody else.”<sup>47</sup>

While he did garner some success, both financially and critically for his Cubist works, their reception was generally mixed. Of the February 1914 Salon des Indépendants for which Rivera had submitted several works, the art critic André Salmon (who was one of Picasso’s closest friends) wrote, “The room in which Cubism triumphs, is the one devoted to foreign Cubists, indeed quite valid plagiarists whose good faith I don’t doubt at all...Everything else seems a return to beginnings, or, in the best cases, virtuosity.”<sup>48</sup> Fellow Mexican and poet Jose Juan Tablada somewhat jokingly questioned Rivera’s Cubist endeavors in his poem, “The Spheres of Diego Rivera:”

*Diego Rivera’s stomach is a sphere,  
and his buttocks form two spheres as well.*

*The artist has no planes or edges, can he really be a Cubist?*<sup>49</sup>

Rivera’s “Cubist Adventure” would ultimately come to an end with in an event poet André Salmon called “*L’Affaire Rivera*,” a chapter in his book *L’Art Vivant*.<sup>50</sup> Salmon declared that Rivera had departed from Cubism because he had finally admitted defeat, as the style was so completely dominated by Picasso and Braque, and there was no place in the movement for him. While the origins of how “*L’Affaire*” transpired have been debated, it

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<sup>46</sup> Marnham, 116.

<sup>47</sup> Rivera, 60.

<sup>48</sup> Navarrete, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Franck, 264.

essentially defined Rivera's break from Cubism in 1917. According to Rivera, the break occurred because his growing discontent with Cubism, and his newfound desire to "express what he knew best" caused a rift with then-dealer Léonce Rosenberg, who had hoped to make a great deal of money from his Cubist client. Rivera wrote that Rosenberg was disconcerted to see him abandoning "the profitable high-road of cubism for a risky plunge into the unknown."<sup>51</sup> According to Rivera, it was Rosenberg who began to prejudice art dealers and critics against him, resulting not only in Salmon's pointed chapter in his book, but in other public embarrassments, including a somewhat spectacular fight between prominent art critic Pierre Reverdy and Rivera about Cubism at a dinner hosted by Rosenberg at a popular avant-garde café, Lapérouse. An admirer of Picasso, Gris, and Braque's Cubism, Reverdy attacked Rivera in front of all of the other artists present at the dinner, making no effort to mask his contempt for Rivera's efforts with the style.<sup>52</sup> Insulted, Rivera slapped him, to which Reverdy responded by pulling Rivera's hair.<sup>53</sup> The disagreement quickly escalated to blows, and the whole affair ended when half a dozen policemen surrounded the café, a frequent occurrence at the popular spot, for what would become a highly-publicized raid.<sup>54</sup> Of Rosenberg Rivera would later write: "Poor man, he was simply incapable of realizing that I was on the way to doing something whose value could not be figured up in so many francs or canvases or years...."<sup>55</sup> Whatever the cause, *L'Affaire* marked a spectacular end to Rivera's experimentation with the style, and opened the door to new possibilities on Rivera's path to modern painting.

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<sup>51</sup> Rivera, 67.

<sup>52</sup> Franck, 264.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Dan Franck, *Bohemian Paris* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 264.

<sup>55</sup> Rivera, 67

While Rivera staunchly adhered to his infatuation with Cubism until *L’Affaire Rivera*, his time in Paris not only exposed him to new notions of the “Modern,” but to European attitudes and interests in Mexico and its pre-Columbian art and culture. It is not difficult to imagine how stimulating the exchange of ideas and information was for Rivera as a member of the Parisian avant-garde. In addition to Cubism, Rivera was strongly influenced by his contemporaries’ interest in the notion of the “primitive.” While these artists were particularly fascinated with the arts of Africa, “Oceania,” and New World cultures, the term “primitive” was applied to a dizzying array of non-Western and non-classical styles.<sup>56</sup> Many of the artists in his circle who were already stars in the art world had built their careers upon incorporating the “primitive” in their styles, subjects and themes.<sup>57</sup>

In his essay on Picasso, published in the MOMA’s catalogue, *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* (1989), William Rubin describes the movement as an “antibourgeois, countercultural force,” something which would have appealed to the bohemian sensibilities of the Parisian avant-garde.<sup>58</sup> It is important to recognize that at the time, Europeans described and borrowed from a variety of styles deemed as “primitive,” including archaic Greek, medieval, Egyptian and Pre-Columbian art. It was a construct “projected” onto others by Europeans.<sup>59</sup> Amedeo Modigliani, whom Rivera called “Modi,” incorporated African

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<sup>56</sup> Fletcher, 51.

<sup>57</sup> ““Primitive” art, as the notion developed during the eighteenth century, would be more accurately described as a collection of visual attributes that Europeans construed to be universally characteristic of early, or primal artistic expression. The discussion of primitivism in modern art and aesthetics must then begin with the invention of “primitive” art itself, a set of ideas (remarkably consistent and long-lived) forged primarily during the eighteenth century through vigorous debate concerning the origins and development of artistic expression.” Frances S. Connolly. *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725 – 1907*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>58</sup> Rubin, 242.

<sup>59</sup> “As late as 1920, André Salmon, a charter member of “la bande á Picasso,” could mistakenly write that “a number of the most beautiful pieces [of African art] that have come down to us are much older than the Christian era.” He even discerned an “influence of the carvers of ‘fetishes’” upon Egyptian (and through it, upon Archaic Greek) art. Given the modern artists’ concern with the fundamental principles of construction,

masks by rendering his models' faces in geometric planes with hollow, mask-like eyes. Friend and rival Pablo Picasso had long collected African objects and derived inspiration from their forms as well as those of other styles deemed "primitive." In 1907 Picasso had had an epiphany while standing in front of a display of African fetishes and tribal masks at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, later stating that: "At that moment, I realized what painting was all about."<sup>60</sup> Primitivism for Picasso was what Rubin describes as "a journey back in time, to the beginning of art."<sup>61</sup>

In addition to his European contemporaries, Rivera was joined by a small group of expatriate Mexican painters who began to look for the "primitive" in their own shared indigenous culture. In addition to Adolfo Best Maugard, Rivera's circle grew to include Mexican painters Zárraga, Roberto Montenegro, and former professor, Gerardo Murillo. Murillo, who had arrived in Paris in November 1911 and adopted the pseudonym "Dr. Atl" (an adaptation of the Nahuatl word for the water in Mexican rivers) was not only an advocate for Mexican indigenous crafts and Pre-Columbian art, but deeply inspired by them.<sup>62</sup> With his former professor's enthusiasm fresh in his mind, it is not a stretch to surmise that Rivera's 1913 visit to the Salon d'Automne, which prominently featured Russian folk art, would have been an experience which would have resonated with him.<sup>63</sup> Later in 1914, art critic

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Salmon concluded, they were fated "to pass from the Egyptians [back] to the Negroes." This scrambled art history was but the other side of the same counterfeit coin that led certain anthropologists wrongly to speculate that African art had been influenced by Egyptian sculpture. Needless to say, none of the African pieces Picasso saw in his first few years of fascination with "art nègre" were more than just decades old, though the origins of their traditional styles obviously go back several centuries at least. But old or new, the tribal works were associated but Picasso's generation with the earliest phases of civilization, in accordance with a highly simplistic model of world history." Rubin, 243.

<sup>60</sup> Rubin, 242.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Fletcher, 51.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Guillaume Apollinaire wrote a review of Dr. Atl's work praising his Aztec titles and the Aztec collections at the Musée d'Ethnologie du Trocadéro.<sup>64</sup>

Even into the twentieth century, Mexico remained something of an exotic curiosity to Europeans, particularly the French, based largely on their experience of Mexican culture in two recent Paris Expositions, first in 1889, and later in 1900, as well as the brief French rule of Mexico in the 1860s. Thanks in large part to the part-Indian dictator, Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's contribution to the 1889 fair in Paris featured "a restoration of an Aztec temple, the high slate-colored walls rising in impossibly steep steps, and surrounded by strange and forbidding statues of kings and divinities."<sup>65</sup> (figures 12 and 13) The Exposition of that year also inspired Paul Gauguin, who visited and sketched several Aztec sculptures. He expressed his admiration, writing: "I saw in one of the illustrated papers a sketch of ancient Mexican dwellings; they too seem to be primitive and very beautiful. Ah, if one only knew the dwellings of those times, and if one could only paint the people who lived in them, it would be as beautiful as the work of Millet; I don't say in the matter of color, but with regard to character, as something significant, something one has a firm faith in."<sup>66</sup> Folk art and "exotic" foreign objects would continue to inspire Gauguin, particularly the art forms of Oceania.<sup>67</sup> It has also been argued that Gauguin's interest in the "primitive" greatly influenced Picasso, resulting in several "Gauguinesque" works created during his early experimental years with the style, 1901-1906.<sup>68</sup> Of the later 1900 *Exposition Universelle* Mexican contribution a reviewer wrote: "Today, as befits a modern and civilized nation, the

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<sup>64</sup> Fletcher, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos* (Tennessee: Kingsport Press, 1962), 134.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (United States of America: Rutgers University, 1971), 510.

<sup>67</sup> Kurt Varnedoe, "Gauguin," *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* Ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 179.

<sup>68</sup> Rubin, 243.

representative building suggests a modern palace, in the neo-Greek style so prevalent in the Mexican capital, the principal façade on the Seine, having a handsome loggia, three principal entrances opening on the quai, preceded by a *perron* flanked by sphinxes and by luxuriant exotic plants.”<sup>69</sup> While these Mexican contributions raised some awareness of the culture abroad in Europe, they did nothing to dispel the stereotype of an “exotic,” “other,” and mystical “court culture.”<sup>70</sup>

Mexican culture was also brought to the attention of Parisian society with the short reign of the Habsburg emperor Maximilian I (1864-1867), appointed by Napoleon III of France to be the leader of Mexico. During his brief reign, Mexican and indigenous cultures had actually been celebrated rather than suppressed. The emperor respected Mexican culture and tradition and even supported such liberal causes as land reforms, religious freedom, and extending the right to vote beyond the landholding class.<sup>71</sup> As Mexico City was developed first under Maximilian, then under Porfirio Diaz, its architects took their inspiration from the designs of Georges-Eugène Haussman, and the city became known as “the Paris of the Americas.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, Mexico had in many ways become aligned with French culture, and during his years in Paris, Rivera must have experienced the rather odd sensation of viewing his own culture through a European lens.

In many respects, Rivera put a face to this European fascination with Mexican culture. Rivera’s close friend Élie Faure often referred to him as “*notre Azteque*,” a term of endearment from which mythomaniac Rivera no doubt derived great pleasure. In a letter to Rivera, Faure later wrote: “You will never know how important for me my meeting with you

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<sup>69</sup> Charlot, 80.

<sup>70</sup> Rubin, I-3.

<sup>71</sup> Charlot, 134.

<sup>72</sup> Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 40.

was. You were all poetry of the New World surging up from the unknown before my eyes.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed the timing of Faure and Rivera’s first meeting could not have been more serendipitous, for when they met, Faure was in the process of finishing the final volume of his four-volume series the *History of Art*.<sup>74</sup> A proponent of Aztec art and civilization, in his books Faure placed Pre-Columbian art in the same volume as his discussion of medieval art and Giotto, who according to him was one of the finest painters of all time.<sup>75</sup> Faure’s premise was that “a new collective period” would emerge in the twentieth century. The previous collective period’s was the medieval, whose greatest achievement had been the building of the cathedral or the “house of the people.”<sup>76</sup> According to Faure, the role of the painter in the modern collective was to paint the walls of the buildings built by the people, as had Giotto, the defining painter of the medieval collective period. The advent of Cubism, according to Faure, was an indicator that the scales were tilting away from painting toward architecture, and that mural painting, specifically fresco, was the future of painting in this new collective era.<sup>77</sup>

Even with Faure’s influence, Rivera would later acknowledge that he was still “slow and timid in translating my inner feelings on canvas. I worked on my paintings in an indifferent, even listless way, lacking the confidence to express myself directly.”<sup>78</sup> He added, “I have often tried to find an explanation for the incongruity between my understanding of life and my way of responding to it in this period of my painting. Probably the natural

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<sup>73</sup> Marnham, 143.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>75</sup> Élie Faure. *History of Art: Medieval Art* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922), 414.

<sup>76</sup> Faure, xx.

<sup>77</sup> Faure, Élie. “The Art of Cineplastics.” *The Freeman* (New York: The Freeman, Inc., 1921) 610.

<sup>78</sup> Rivera, 30



timidity of youth was a factor. But more potent, though I was little aware of it then, was my Mexican-American inferiority complex, my awe before historic Europe and its culture.”<sup>79</sup>

It is largely thanks to his positive relationship with Élie Faure that Rivera set out for what would be his final sojourn in Europe before returning home, traveling in Italy for several months. In dire financial straits after living in Paris for several years, he had received funding from patrons back home, including Alfonso Reyes and José Vasconcelos, the future Minister of Education. During these five months in Italy Rivera studied the “people’s medium” of fresco painting promoted by Faure. In a letter of thanks to Reyes, Rivera wrote that his time in Italy would provide him with enough material for “a few years” of work, and that in Italy there were “no differences between the life of the people and the work of art.”<sup>80</sup> He continued: “Frescoes do not end at the doors of the churches; they live on in the street, in houses. Wherever you look, everything is familiar and popular. The noblest of painters are the painters of the taverns. Everything is simple, home-made, plebeian and aristocratic. Nothing is old, except the Renaissance and the “Art nouveau” of the 1900s. Basketry mines, and arsenals go wonderfully well with temples, bell towers and palaces. The façades of Sicily are the image of the hills, and the village houses are put up by common bricklayers with the same harmony. Only romantic things are “born old” there e.g.: “futurism,” or the fashions nicely divided into this or that “period:” the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the 16<sup>th</sup>, the 17<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup>, the 19<sup>th</sup>, - -that is, the bourgeois civilization stemmed from notions such as Roman Law—Civil and Domestic Rights—and the piling up of the *pompier* and the masterful—sumptuous rubble. But that’s enough! Italy is magnificent at present—such style, such energy, such sobriety! I saw them at work many times, and what efficacy, decorum and elegance; and what industry!

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<sup>79</sup> Rivera, 31.

<sup>80</sup> González, 206.

And what women my dear Alfonso! Also, I had never known how deeply the precious things made by man can reach inside your innermost self (Ravenna, San Marco, Tintoretto in his city, Etruria and the Etruscans, San Antonio in Padua, Assisi, Paestum and all of Sicily). But we have to get together sometime, and I'll drive you crazy with all my stories. I hope to give you something, perhaps, made by hand thanks to the trip to Italy—that is, thanks to you.”<sup>81</sup>

Rivera was clearly energized by his Italian travels, as well as Faure's ideology regarding fresco and communal art, finding inspiration in the murals of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo. Studying work by these great Italian masters not only introduced him to new notions of composition, color and space that would forever alter his style, but helped him to realize that “an artist who hopes to be universal in his art must plant in his own soil. Great art is like a tree which grows in a particular place and has a trunk, leaves, blossoms, boughs, fruit, and roots of its own. The more native art is, the more it belongs to the entire world, because taste is rooted in nature. When art is true, it is one with nature. This is the secret of primitive art and also of the art of the masters—Michelangelo, Cézanne, Seurat and Renoir. The secret of my best work is that it is Mexican.”<sup>82</sup>

Rivera would never formally acknowledge just how influential Faure's ideas had been to him. When writing about this time period in his memoirs, Faure's name doesn't appear even once, yet many of his premises do. Rivera wrote about the “mass society of the future” and what the needs of the future would be: “A new kind of art would [...] be needed, one which appealed not to the viewers' sense of form and color directly, but through exciting subject matter. The new art, also would not be a museum or gallery art but an art the people would have access to in places they frequented in their daily life—post offices, schools,

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<sup>81</sup> González, 206.

<sup>82</sup> Rivera, 31.

theaters, railroad stations, public buildings. And so, logically, albeit theoretically, I arrived at mural painting.”<sup>83</sup> In fact, the only place Faure’s name does appear in Rivera’s autobiography is in Gladys March’s introduction, where she notes Faure’s quick assessment of Rivera’s character or “dominant quality of the artist’s mind.”<sup>84</sup> “Mythologizer,” Faure said, “perhaps even *mythomaniac!*”<sup>85</sup>

Regardless, Rivera’s assertion that his travels in Italy would provide him with material for “a few years” would prove to be true, and it can be argued that echoes of his studies there reverberate throughout every mural he executed thereafter. Rivera was captivated by the mural medium not only because of what its sheer size and scope made possible compositionally, but also because of its potential for narrative storytelling, speaking to the largely illiterate masses. No medium could truly be more of the people, both in Renaissance Italy, or in 1920s Mexico, and Rivera was a man who was ready to tell his, and the story of his people, a native art for a native land.

Many of Rivera’s early murals such as *Liberation of the Peon*, part of the grand mural cycle he would paint at the Ministry of Education, overtly express just how influential his studies of the Quattrocento were, particularly the work of Giotto (figure 14). In the mural, Rivera depicts a peasant who has been stripped and beaten, surrounded by a group of figures, some on horseback, and some crouched around him tending to his injuries and draping a cloak over his naked form. In the background, set against an angular mountain range of earthy yellow and black sky, a white-walled hacienda burns, smoke pluming in black tendrils, the implication that the wealthy landowner who has committed this atrocity will

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<sup>83</sup> Rivera, 66.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

suffer. However it is not the subject he depicts, but the striking similarity in composition, and the way in which he has handled the paint that is so reminiscent of Giotto's *The Laying out of Christ's Body* (figure 15). He has employed Giotto's same triangular composition of the central group of figures, and clearly derived inspiration from Giotto's flattening of the forms and use of uniform blocks of color. Yet while it is clearly derivative of Giotto's work, it is totally original in its adaptation, a truly Mexican work.

Rivera's education abroad had not only afforded him the time to experiment with a variety of styles, but had opened his eyes to the aesthetic possibilities and inspiration to be found in his homeland. His experiments with Naturalism and Cubism would help to define who he was as an artist, yet it was his exposure to the inspiration his European and Mexican contemporaries derived from the "primitive" and his study of Quattrocento frescoes that would ultimately come to define his career. Perhaps the most important aspect of Rivera's European education was the fact that it had helped him to view his culture as an outsider, through a European lens; however, what would set him apart from other artists who employed "primitive" references in their work was that the "primitive" culture he would choose to use as inspiration was his own. When Rivera returned to Paris in the spring of 1921, he was finally ready to return home, convinced that Mexico was the "promised land" for the development of Modern Art.<sup>86</sup> "Good-bye, Europe," he wrote, "Good-bye, Italy. Good-bye, France. Good-bye, Spain. For a second time, the exile was coming home."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> González, 386.

<sup>87</sup> Rivera, 72.

## CHAPTER 3

### SEIZING A MOMENT IN HISTORY

When Diego Rivera returned to Mexico in the spring of 1921, the Mexican Revolution had ended, and he had spent more than fourteen years working and studying abroad in Europe. He saw his country, in all its colors, subjects, and themes with fresh eyes, writing that: “My homecoming aroused an aesthetic rejoicing in me which is impossible to describe. It was as if I had been reborn; I found myself at the center of a plastic world, in which colors and forms existed in total purity. Everywhere I saw a potential masterpiece—in the crowds, the markets, the festivals, the marching battalions, the workers in the workshops, the fields—in every glowing face, every luminous child. All was revealed to me. The first sketch I completed amazed me. It was actually good! From then on I worked confidently and contentedly. Gone was the doubt and inner conflict that had tormented me in Europe. I painted as naturally as I breathed, spoke or sweated. My style was like a child, in a moment, with the difference that this birth took place at the end of a painful 35-year gestation.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar way, the country had just come through an agonizing conflict, and emerged with dramatic socio-political developments. The changes had primed the nation for a cultural rebirth, a “Mexican Renaissance,” and Rivera’s homecoming he was ready to seize the opportunity to become the country’s artistic voice. Even though he had been in Europe for the duration of the Mexican Revolution, Rivera was about to reap some of its greatest benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Kettenmann. *Rivera* (Germany: Taschen, 2003), 23.

Mexico's history has been marked by a series of uprisings and revolutions, and it can be argued that the ongoing volatility of its political climate was a product of the country's hundreds of years of colonial occupation first by the Spanish, then by the French, and the unstable political climate the empires left behind them. The Mexican Revolution was a conflict that came about as the natural outcome of a people unwilling to tolerate political opportunists, the unfair distribution of land and wealth, and laws that kept many living in indentured servitude on land that should have rightfully been theirs. Its roots, however, and the atrocities the people suffered, can be traced back many years. In fact, it can be said that the conflict was literally one that was hundreds of years in the making, tracing its origins to the Spanish Conquest of Mexico.

With the fall of Tenochtitlán in 1520, Spain firmly established its control over the indigenous populations of Mexico and paved the way for centuries of change and domination with the melding of indigenous and European cultures. Of course the Spanish had only one interest, expanding the wealth of their empire. Hernán Cortés famously said "Spaniards have a disease that can only be cured by gold."<sup>2</sup> This quote speaks volumes about the lengths the Spanish would go to in order to quench their thirst for gold, and all that it represented: wealth and power. When Cortés' ships arrived off of the coast of Mexico and he was greeted by the population as the returning Aztec God Quetzalcoatl, the world he found truly was rich: with thriving metropolitan cities, highly advanced societies, monumental architecture and refined examples of painting and carving.

Cortés' strategy was brutal and deceptive: thousands of Indians were killed, and the long line of great Aztec emperors descended from the ancient Toltecs was utterly destroyed.

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<sup>2</sup> Bradley Smith, *Mexico a History in Art* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 190.

As brutal as the conquest of Mexico was, Spain's approach to colonization was dramatically different than that of their contemporaries—the British, Portuguese and Dutch. In New Spain, education and Christianization of the Indian was the primary aim, and intermarriage was encouraged.<sup>3</sup> George Kubler wrote that “Only the technological conquests of our own century can suggest the scale and rate of expansion of Renaissance civilization which was set in motion by the conquest of Mexico.”<sup>4</sup> However, the legacy Spain left behind also included a rigid class system which placed the indigenous population firmly at the bottom, and rewarded land rights and ownership according to class.

Indeed, the Mexican War for Independence which began in 1810 and ended in 1821 was a long time coming. The years following the War for Independence were extremely unstable ones for the nation marked by the political opportunism of Santa Anna, a man to whom John Crow refers in his book *The Epic of Latin America* as a man who “accomplished nothing for Mexico except to consummate her national debasement, defile the honor of her government, rob and exploit her people, while he himself strutted across the stage like a magniloquent combination of bantam rooster and Lucifer, demanding applause from the victimized and ignorant masses beneath him. Four times the people of Mexico rebelled and threw him out. Four times they found themselves in a dilemma and returned him to power.”<sup>5</sup>

However a brief period of hope was introduced when the national hero and “first Indian President” Benito Juárez came to power. A leader of *La Reforma*, a political movement that took root after Santa Anna's last flight from the country, Juárez's political agenda focused on stripping power from the Church, the owner of more than half of the

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, 172.

<sup>4</sup> George Kubler and Martin Soria, *Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal and their American Dominions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1959), 69.

<sup>5</sup> John A. Crow, *The Epic of Latin America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 649.

productive lands in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> The platform would prove to be divisive, splitting the country into two groups, the conservatives and liberals, groups which still dominate the political climate of Mexico today.<sup>7</sup> While the two factions were engaged in fighting each other, the French were able to seize Mexico City, and place Maximilian I in power as Emperor. Maximilian's brief time in power was never acknowledged by Juárez, and he was eventually captured and assassinated in 1867, ousting the French for good.

Elections followed, and Juárez was officially elected president. However, the next few years were not peaceful ones, but rather were defined by the power struggle between leading members of the Mexican military. Unhappy with Juárez's Presidency and his bid for re-election, in 1871, fellow military general Porfirio Díaz led a revolt against Juárez. While he was initially defeated, he was persistent in his attempts to seize power, and in 1876, at last he succeeded in defeating the military troops of then-president Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, who had announced he would run for a second term. Seeing an opportunity, Porfirio Díaz campaigned for the presidency in 1877 under the slogan "*Sufragio efectivo, no reelección!*" or "fair balloting, no re-election!" and won.<sup>8</sup> However, he was not true to his word, and he remained in power for nearly thirty years, his "presidency" becoming a thinly-veiled dictatorship known as the *Porfiriato*. Unknowingly, Díaz had set a pattern that would come to dominate the Mexican political scene for the next several decades—one in which Revolutionary leaders would suddenly become conservative and corrupt once they had won power, turning the trust of the people into fear.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Crow, 660.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Crow, 667.

<sup>9</sup> Helm, 23.



No successor could have been more different from his predecessors than Díaz was from Juárez or Tejada. A common saying during the *Porfiriato* was "*Pan, o palo,*" literally "bread or club" meaning "bread or a beating."<sup>10</sup> Díaz was a cunning and manipulative politician who knew how to maintain power, and any dissidence was immediately silenced.<sup>11</sup> In an effort to build the country as quickly as possible, he opened the doors wide to foreign investors, primarily Americans, the French and the British, who invested heavily in mining and oil, and also reaped the profits.<sup>12</sup> Haciendas flourished, and once again lands were controlled by the elite few and toiled upon by the exploited indigenous masses.<sup>13</sup> Anyone who opposed Díaz, including rival politicians or journalists was immediately silenced through his network of federal police, who sentenced enemies to special prisons where they were tortured or killed.<sup>14</sup> The *Porfiriato* had been Diego Rivera's youth but, having grown up in a wealthy middle-class family, he had been largely unaffected by the regime's atrocities. Hundreds of thousands of working-class citizens, Indians, and free men disappeared throughout the course of Díaz's nearly thirty-year rule, enslaved on agricultural plantations where they were worked to the point of exhaustion, illness and eventual death. The *Porfiriato* gave rise to the inevitable, a Revolution.

It is difficult to fully define the dramatic impact the Mexican Revolution had on Mexico's history. The conflict which unfolded over the course of ten years, 1910-1920, utterly transformed the nation, taking it from a largely agrarian society to a modernized nation transformed. By 1920, General Álvaro Obregón's supporters had taken control of the

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<sup>10</sup> Crow, 670.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 673.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 667.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 670.

capital by overthrowing the short-lived and volatile presidency of Venustiano Carranza Garza, who had himself seized power in 1917 when Zapata and Pancho Villa were on the run. Obregón pacified Villa with the gift of a large personal property, and Zapata by reaching a land redistribution settlement in Morelos that returned privately owned properties to the people.<sup>15</sup> At last, after hundreds of years of oppression under European rule and homegrown dictatorship, there was peace.

The new government headed by former Revolutionary General Álvaro Obregón ushered in a brief period of peaceful reconstruction and progressive ideals, ideals which established a newfound sense of nationality and pride in the nation's pre-Columbian roots and heritage. As a result, widespread optimism, hope, and a great swelling of creativity swept the nation. Obregón had appointed José Vasconcelos Minister of Education, and one of his first initiatives was the creation of a popular education program to be realized through large-scale murals in public buildings.<sup>16</sup> His vision was that the paintings would act as educational tools, and would be made by the people for the people. The country was at a turning point, and the creation of the mural program marked the beginning of the Mexican Renaissance, a period when not only painting but writing, poetry, science, theatre, music, and anthropology blossomed along with a growing sense of nationality.

Following the Revolution, there was also a growing movement to completely secularize the public domain, and separate church and state.<sup>17</sup> Although Mexican society and politics were in the midst of positive changes, the people were still torn between their habits of submission, the residual scar of the *Porfiriato's* period of dictatorship, and the deeply

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<sup>15</sup> Helm, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Kettenmann, 20.

<sup>17</sup> González, 208.

rooted customs and rituals associated with three centuries of Catholicism.<sup>18</sup> This explains why the “best minds of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century” had invested so much faith in education, the cure for religious fanaticism.<sup>19</sup> It also explains the development of a sort of “cult of heroes” glorifying the accomplishments of Revolutionary leaders, and even the common man. Instead of looking to religious subject matter for inspiration, artists focused on the heroes of Mexican history, their faces taking the place of saints on the walls of public buildings.<sup>20</sup>

After his extensive time abroad, Rivera arrived back in Mexico having missed the conflict entirely, but just in time to take advantage of all that the struggle had made possible. His mind ablaze with Faure’s promotion of fresco and “public art” and the lavish compositions and colors of Renaissance murals, he was ready to seize the moment in history. He had also gained experience in Europe which had made him aware of the fact that Mexico was considered to be “exotic,” its art forms often appropriated as “primitive” by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europeans and Americans, and that to them, the exotic was fascinating. Rivera had had the experience of seeing his culture through a European lens, and the ways in which Europeans had interpreted and drawn inspiration from other “primitive” cultures in their art. Returning to Mexico with “fresh eyes” he now absorbed the popular ideas beginning to percolate in Mexico, among them creating a new cast of heroes to populate the walls of public buildings and combined this knowledge with what he had learned in Europe. He recognized that there truly were “potential masterpieces” in the crowds, markets and festivals, workers, and people of Mexico, and he seized the opportunity presented by this

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<sup>18</sup> González, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

unique moment in history to make his own artistic mark by interpreting these “primitive” motifs from his own culture through his art.

In true Rivera fashion, in his autobiography he placed himself at the center of the muralism movement, stating that “While I was working on my Preparatory School mural, a group of young painters began to collect around me, became my assistants. Soon we were banding together to win acceptance for social art. [...] Scarcely had all this activity gotten under way when passionate discussions about the new art reverberated through all social strata of the city. When the Minister of Education, [José Vasconcelos] who had so far remained uncommitted, realized what repercussions our efforts were creating at all levels of society, he adopted our ideas and—luckily for our work—proclaimed from above the usefulness of monumental painting on the walls of public buildings.”<sup>21</sup> Rivera set about his first assignment, a mural in the Bolívar Amphitheater of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, in a deliberate manner. The composition he crafted, titled *Creation*, would be a marriage of the technical and compositional skills he had learned in Europe and the sense of nationality inspired by his own people. Vasconcelos subscribed to Pythagoras’s idea that the key to the universe can be found through secret musical harmonies, and as a compliment to his employer, Rivera designed the composition with a Pythagorean theme in mind. Not only was the composition built around a stationary organ (now gone), but Rivera placed the allegorical figure for “Music” on the left side of the composition, a dark-skinned woman blowing on golden pipes.<sup>22</sup>

Begun in January, 1922, it is in *Creation* that we see the commencement of Rivera’s ideology of creating art for the Mexican people, inspired by the Mexican people, ideals that

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<sup>21</sup> Rivera, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Marnham, 163.

were in line with those of the new Mexican government.<sup>23</sup> Covering nearly 110 square meters, the mural frames the massive stage of the theater, beautifully illustrating the creation story with vibrant colors and themes from everyday Mexican life (figure 16). A man and a woman are seated symmetrically to either side of a semicircle of sky, while below them groups of regal figures play musical instruments and dance. While stylistically we can see traces of European influences in the draped robes the figures wear, as well as the symmetrical composition of the winged figures above the stage (perhaps in reference to his recent studies of Giotto's murals in Italy), Rivera uses *Mestizo* men and women as his models, and a brightly-hued, distinctively Mexican palette. In the central panel, a male figure with arms spread wide emerges from a jungle of stylistically rendered leaves. Animals including a bull, lion and eagle emerge, as well as the face of a woman framed by the petals of a flower—all in startling contrast to the European and Christian influences the creation theme implies. In this piece we see Rivera reconciling his European training with a more authentic, Mexican voice. Of the work Rivera said: "I presented a racial history of Mexico through figures representing all the types that had entered the Mexican bloodstream, from the autochthonous Indian to the present day, half-breed Spanish Indian."<sup>24</sup>

The mural was unveiled in March of 1923 to a mixed reception. While Vasconcelos praised his work, making it clear that he considered Rivera to be a key member of the mural team, more conservative critics were outraged.<sup>25</sup> A group comprised of wealthy and conservative students at the Escuela mobilized a protest of the work, and Rivera's fellow muralist, José Clemente Orozco, was also not effusive in his evaluation saying of the work:

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<sup>23</sup> Kettenmann, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Marnham, 163.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 168.

“A peanut is a peanut, even if it encloses the golden section.”<sup>26</sup> Federico Gamboa, author of *Santa* – wrote of the work: “...painter, modernist, native of Guanajuato, ruined in Paris, posing as a Bolshevik, and member of the circle of flatterers of José Vasconcelos. Poor Preparatoria! Its old and venerable walls, respected for so long, are being profaned –and in such a way!—by the “young and wise painters.” It breaks one’s heart to see what they are doing to the amphitheater, the patios, stairs, and halls of this monumental building, which will end up looking like a low class bar, a *pulquería*. They are not practicing Cubism, no; rather, “circumferencism”, as they paint everything after drawing circumferences with compasses.”<sup>27</sup>

By 1923, the hope and optimism that the Mexican Revolution and Obregón’s new government had inspired were already beginning to fade. Even though only a few years had passed, the ideals of the Revolution had already given way to corruption, and the government had become, for all intents and purposes, a military oligarchy, making it clear that the old wealth of the *Porfiriato* had merely been exchanged for the new wealth of the retired Revolutionary generals.<sup>28</sup> Politically, the country was in for a rollercoaster of upheaval and scandal. On July 20, 1923, Pancho Villa, who had led a quiet life after the Revolution, was assassinated, and it soon became clear that Obregón’s administration was to blame. Adding further fuel to the scandal, several weeks later the United States officially acknowledged Obregón’s administration, sparking a struggle for the presidency between three potential successors: Obregón, fighting to maintain control, Plutarco Elías Calles, and General Adolfo

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<sup>26</sup> Orozco, quoted in Marnham, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Gamboa, quoted in González, 215.

<sup>28</sup> Marnham, 178.

de la Huerta.<sup>29</sup> Amidst the violence and chaos that ensued, Vasconcelos attempted to resign, but was not permitted to do so. As a result, public criticism of the murals in the Preparatoria intensified, the wealthy students now viewing the post-revolutionary artists as the “new establishment.”<sup>30</sup>

In response to the students’ well-organized attacks against them, the muralists, including José Clemente Orozco and David Álfaro Siquieros, who together with Rivera came to be known as “the big three,” joined forces with the Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers, Artists and Sculptors, (which was supported by the Communist Party) to defend themselves.<sup>31</sup> Rivera wrote in his autobiography: “Soon frescoes blossomed on the walls of schools, hotels, and other public buildings, in spite of violent attacks by the bourgeois intelligentsia and the press under its influence.”<sup>32</sup> Even though Rivera was the primary target of the students’ attacks, he made what could be described as a calculated move, and distanced himself from the unfolding drama and his fellow artists. He referred to the vandalism of the other muralists’ works at the Preparatoria as “a minor incident,” and later resigned from the Union of Technical Workers, Artists and Sculptors altogether.<sup>33</sup> Rivera was criticized for this bold move, but ultimately it illustrates what was most important to him: to continue painting. In his memoirs, Rivera only alludes to the attacks through a happy memory, one associated with meeting his future wife, Frida Kahlo: “One night, as I was painting high on the scaffold and Lupe was sitting and weaving down below, there was a loud hubbub. It came from a group of young students shouting and pushing against the

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<sup>29</sup> Marnham, 179.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>32</sup> Rivera, 78.

<sup>33</sup> Marnham, 180.

auditorium door. All at once the door flew open, and a girl who seemed to be no more than ten or twelve was propelled inside. [...] She had unusual dignity and self-assurance, and there was a strange fire in her eyes. Her beauty was that of a child, yet her breasts were well developed. She looked straight up at me. “Would it cause you any annoyance if I watched you at work?” she asked. No, young lady, I’d be charmed,” I said.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the mixed reviews of *Creation*, and the growing political turmoil, it helped Rivera to intellectually define how he wished to proceed with future mural projects, and above all, continue painting. Later in his inaugural speech for the work, Vasconcelos gave him that chance by placing Rivera in charge of his next project, the painting of nearly one hundred seventeen spaces covering more than 17,000 square feet of the brand new Ministry of Education buildings.<sup>35</sup> There, Vasconcelos declared, was to be “a work carved in stone, a moral organization, vast and complex with spacious rooms in which to hold free discussions under high ceilings, where ideas could expand without hindrance.”<sup>36</sup> In preparation, Rivera “roamed the country in search of material.”<sup>37</sup> Of this process he said, “It was my desire to reproduce the pure, basic images of my land. I wanted my paintings to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth, to show the masses the outline of the future.”<sup>38</sup> Rivera, now the lone remaining muralist at work for the government, designed the decorative program around two primary spaces, a small court he called the “Court of Labor,” and a larger court he called the “Court of Fiestas.”<sup>39</sup> Within these two spaces and corresponding overarching themes, Rivera incorporated images of revolutionary ideals

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<sup>34</sup> Rivera, 76.

<sup>35</sup> Kettenmann, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Marnham, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Rivera, 79.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Kettenmann, 32.



including his newfound communist beliefs, and cultural scenes from everyday Mexican life in his “classical” style.

However, Rivera’s ideas were expanding in a different way, setting him on a different ideological course than Vasconcelos and Mexico’s new government. Perhaps in response to this shifting tide, Rivera had become a member of the Communist party, (in the fall of 1922), and for the next nine years would fall in and out of the Party’s favor. As a result, when he commenced work on the Ministry of Education murals, perhaps in response to the feedback he had received about *Creation*, or perhaps in response to his growing interest in Communism, Rivera chose to focus exclusively on the struggles and celebrations of the proletariat and common *campesinos* in scenes from everyday Mexican life.

Before Rivera was able to commence work on his designs however, he faced the practical problem that he did not know how to execute a proper fresco technique. *Creation* had been painted in encaustic—a combination of beeswax and pigment that is applied and sealed with heat, but Rivera had never worked with a fresco treatment before. After several failed attempts, one of his assistants developed a mixture comprised of mortar covered with a mixture of gesso and powdered marble, which Rivera, perhaps in an effort to be more “authentic,” adapted by adding *nopal* juice—a type of cactus. Following his “discovery” the Mexican press ran the news that Rivera had “rediscovered one of the ancient secrets of the Aztecs!” On June 19 the newspaper *El Universal Ilustrado* ran the news that Rivera was using “the same process to decorate the walls of the Ministry of Education as the Aztecs had used at Teotihuacan.”<sup>40</sup> No doubt Rivera deeply enjoyed the popular idea that he had “rediscovered an Aztec tradition,” and may have even supplied the notion himself, as it

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<sup>40</sup> Marnham, 170.

reinforced his link to the past and to something distinctively Mexican. However the success of the technique was short-lived, as the fermented cactus juice decomposed and left blotchy patches of paint behind. When Rivera at last abandoned the *nopal* juice in the formula, he was able to proceed without further mishaps.

The scope of the compositions for the Court of Labor included three murals from the cycle *Political Vision of the Mexican People: Entry into the Mine, The Sugar Mill, and Tehuana Women*, in which we see workers, Indian women and scenes of rural life (figures 17 and 18). The workers are shown as the typical “everyman” toiling in work, their bodies strong and graceful. Their deep brown skin, rounded shoulders, and stylized sombreros used here for the first time would become iconic symbols to the world of the Mexican Indian.<sup>41</sup> Yet Rivera also hints at social injustice in the quote that accompanies the painting: “They defame and despise us because we are common people.”<sup>42</sup> Rivera clearly speaks “for the people” in this depiction, dignifying the worker by showing them deep in concentration, intent, and suggesting a heroism and pride in their work. Rivera here rejects much of his life among the European avant-garde, claiming that he never wanted to become part of “the exclusive and aristocratic taste of a few.”<sup>43</sup>

The figures in *Tehuana Women* offer more of a sense of individuality, though clearly represent the archetypal Indian woman. Depicted in traditional dress, carrying jugs of water and fruit, their forms are columnal, strong, and monumental. Around them a jungle of cool verdant foliage sets off the bright tones of their skin and dress. Their expressions are serene, and they seem at once representative of and a part of the fecund earth around them.

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<sup>41</sup> MacKinley Helm, *Mexican Painters Rivera, Orozco, Siquieros and Other Artists of the Social Realist School* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 46.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>43</sup> Roberto Pliego, *Diego Rivera: Illustrious Words 1921-1957* (Hong Kong: Everbest Printing, 207), 20.

In the Court of Fiestas, Rivera focused on traditional Mexican folk festivals in *Day of the Dead* and the *Maize Festival* (figures 19 and 20). In these colorful, earthy compositions, Rivera again portrayed the individuals as the “everyman” and “everywoman” though clearly of Indian descent. In the *Maize Festival*, again Rivera has depicted his iconic Mexican Indian man in white trousers and shirts and traditional high-crowned sombreros, while the women wear their hair back in double braids. Together they construct the maize altar, celebrating this cultural tradition in unity and harmony. In the *May Day Meeting*, Rivera demonstrates his virtuosity in depicting large crowd scenes. One of the scenes depicted was inspired by a visit Rivera and Vasconcelos had made to Merida in 1921, and depicts a group of people of all ages gathered together. Above the figures in the sky, a banner reads: “Peace, land, freedom and schools for the oppressed people.”<sup>44</sup>

The powerful imagery Rivera depicted on the walls of the Ministry of Education still resonates today. These walls gave the Mexican people something completely new, a mirror with which to see themselves: their traditions, festivals and Pre-Columbian roots; Mexico’s heroes—generals side by side with common *campesinos*; and all they should fight for and never forget: where they had come from and where they were going.

Through these works which depicted his countrymen, Rivera also revealed himself: an artist coming into his own, and a man with budding Communist ideals, empathetic to the struggles and ordeals of the working Mexican man and enamored with the strength and beauty of the Mexican, indigenous woman. There had long been a strong corresponding relationship in Mexico between *Indianismo* and nationalism. For example, during the 1565 Avila-Cortés Conspiracy, the Spaniards leading the movement dressed up as pre-Conquest

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<sup>44</sup> Marnham, 178.

indigenous Indians, including Montezuma and his court, in an attempt to secede from Spain.<sup>45</sup> Later in colonial Mexico, it was common to see symbolic graphic mottoes, coats-of-arms and vignettes which depicted a pair of women: Mexico represented by an Indian woman wearing pre-Hispanic clothing, and Spain represented by a Caucasian woman wearing European clothing.<sup>46</sup> However, in Rivera's work, for one of the first times in Mexican history, the people, the common *campesinos*, and indigenous Indians saw themselves reflected in major works of art in public government buildings.<sup>47</sup>

Gone were Rivera's insecurities and his "Mexican-American inferiority complex and awe before historic Europe and its culture." No longer enamored with the allure of Europe, he commented about artists' tendencies to imitate European models, criticizing "Europe's pseudo-modern fragments."<sup>48</sup> It is clear that Rivera had decided to turn his back on the European, just as his countrymen had done in the Revolution, and embrace the possibilities and potential he saw in his own culture. The contrast between the last canvases he completed in Paris just a few years prior with these first, large-scale murals is truly remarkable. Rivera had at last come into his own as an artist with a unique style derived from the inspiration of the indigenous populations and workers, and a carefully engineered, stylistic regression.

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<sup>45</sup> Charlot, 70.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Marnham, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Pliego, 19.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSTRUCTING A MYTH

By the time of his death, Diego Rivera had established an identity that was synonymous with Mexican culture. However, this image was not entirely of his own making. Pablo Picasso had served as his role model and “idol” during his time in Europe, his influence echoing throughout Rivera’s life in myriad ways: his references to the “primitive,” his strong counter-culture political views, and even the way he himself had mythologized his own life. But there was also another perhaps more profound influence earlier on in Diego Rivera’s life that greatly affected the decisions he made regarding the construction of his image, one synonymous with Mexican cultural identity, his relationship with Gerardo Murillo.

Gerardo Murillo, or “Dr. Atl” as he later became known, was an outspoken activist, painter, and teacher who advocated Pre-Columbian art, celebrated Mexico’s indigenous roots, and believed strongly in a national art for Mexico. His principles and beliefs resonated with many of his students, but none as strongly as with Diego Rivera. A member of the upper-middle class, Murillo was educated abroad in Europe. Upon his return to Mexico in 1907, he became convinced that muralism, especially fresco, was the ideal medium for a revolutionary art. The similarities between Murillo’s life and Rivera don’t stop there, however, for he was also a great storyteller and mythologizer, especially when it came to the story of his life. The difference between the two men, however, is that the older Dr. Atl was the first to believe in and implement these ideals, predating Rivera by many years. In fact, Dr. Atl acted as teacher, mentor, and friend to the younger artist both while Rivera was a student at the Academy of San Carlos in 1904, and later while he was living abroad in Paris.

Perhaps he wasn't as skilled an artist as Rivera, or perhaps it wasn't the "right" moment in history, as the Revolution had not yet occurred, for it was Rivera and not Atl whose name would forever be associated with the "Mexican Renaissance," and creating a national art for Mexico through murals depicting his countrymen.

According to the local folklore about Popocatepetl, a large volcano near Cuernavaca, Mexico considered sacred by the Indians, Dr. Atl had been "born" from the volcano when it had erupted sixty years before.<sup>1</sup> He was said to have lived in the shelter of a cave in the side of Popocatepetl, surviving on locusts and plants. He adopted the Indian pseudonym "Dr. Atl" in part to distance himself from his Spanish last name and all that it stood for, and in part because "Atl" was the Nahuatl word for water, and he claimed to have traveled on all of the rivers of Mexico.<sup>2</sup> In his work he further reinforced his "connection to the land" and Pre-Columbian culture by executing a series of self portraits, placing himself in front of such significant sights as Popocatepetl, Ixtaccíhuatl and the Valley of Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Typical of these works is his 1928 *Self Portrait with Popocatepetl*, now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (figure 21). In the composition, Dr. Atl depicts himself in three-quarter view, the canvas dominated by the dome of his balding head, penetrating gaze, and furrowed brow. The collar of his coat is turned jauntily up, and behind him his form is framed by the angles of the volcano's sides. The dome of his head aligns directly in front of the volcano's peak, visually aligning his image with that of Popocatepetl, and its importance in Indian culture.

Further adding to the myth, many of Dr. Atl's works were created with a pigment he invented called "Atl-color," a mixture of wax, resins, gasoline, and oil color. While intended

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<sup>1</sup> Helm, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Marnham, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Helm, 11.

for use on works on paper, he often worked the medium into traditional oil and watercolor paintings as well, as it could be dissolved in gasoline or melted like wax.<sup>4</sup> When he attempted his first mural in a gallery at the Academy of San Carlos in 1908, it was “Atl-color” he used to bring his vision to life.<sup>5</sup> In the mural, Atl depicted a frieze of rosy nudes in an Impressionistic style. However, not long after the work’s completion it was removed. Atl claimed that the nudes were ultimately “too shocking,” but many have speculated that Atl himself removed the work because the “Atl-color” pigments had begun to flake from the wall.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Atl’s entire image was cultivated to make him appear to be “one of the people,” and “close to his roots,” yet there are many inconsistencies between the image and the reality. Gerardo Murillo was well-educated, cultured and erudite, and had studied and worked abroad in Europe where he had done his own *grand tour*. There is also no evidence to suggest that he was of pure Indian descent, but rather was truly Mexican—a blend of Indian and Spanish ancestry.<sup>7</sup> The name he chose for himself, “Dr. Atl” is also fraught with inconsistencies. By including the title “Dr.,” a Western construct implying a level of expertise in front of the word “Atl,” an Indian, Nahuatl word, in essence he implied he was a “specialist” or “expert” of Indian art and culture. No other image could better illustrate this dichotomy than the way he presented himself in front of Popocatépetl, the Western “doctor” dominating the Mexican, indigenous landscape.

Diego Rivera first came into contact with Dr. Atl while he was still a student at the Academy of San Carlos. In 1904, Gerardo Murillo returned from Europe, adopted his Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Helm, 10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Marnham, 46.

pseudonym and began a series of protests against the leadership and curriculum of the Academy of San Carlos. With the “people’s art” of Renaissance fresco fresh in his mind, Atl recognized its political potential.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Atl took offense at the fact that a foreigner, a Catalonian artist named Antonio Fabrés, had been appointed director of the Academy of San Carlos, and that he led a staff of primarily Spanish instructors, whose curriculum was based on copying European models, with little association with the culture of Mexico.<sup>9</sup> While the public had initially been fond of Fabrés, they soon joined in with Dr. Atl’s organized protests, and Fabrés was forced to retire.<sup>10</sup> Convinced that artistic themes and practices should be inspired by both their own time and the Pre-Columbian past, and eager to share what he had learned of Impressionism in Europe, Dr. Atl began taking a group of young artists at the Academy on excursions to the countryside to paint outdoors in natural light.<sup>11</sup> He also helped to organize student exhibitions, including several with the “Savia Moderna” group which included young Mexican writers, artists, and thinkers. The 1907 Savia Moderna exhibition included works by Dr. Atl and several other Mexican artists, including the young Diego Rivera, who had joined several of his outdoor painting excursions.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Atl “bullied” friends into buying Rivera’s work, and the proceeds from this and other exhibitions helped to pay in part for Rivera’s European travels.<sup>13</sup> Later, when Dr. Atl was appointed director of the Academy of San Carlos, he exerted a heavy influence on David Álfaro Siquieros, yet another painter who would rise to success during the Mexican Renaissance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marnham, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Helm, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Marnham, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Helm, 10

<sup>14</sup> Marnham, 143.



No other individual in Rivera's life up to this point had had such a significant impact on the young artist. In many respects, Dr. Atl served as one of the unrecognized fathers of the Mexican Renaissance and the muralism movement, conceptualizing, promoting, and teaching the ideals that would help to make the next generation of artists stars in the art world. To Rivera, he was a role model, advocate, and hero, but perhaps most importantly, he provided an example of how to mythologize the story of his life.

This influence however, did not manifest itself right away. Carlos Guzmán wrote that before coming to Europe, Rivera was “a man rooted in bourgeois life, devoid of any ideological conflicts, who could still not manage to divest himself of classicism or Mexican religious traditions.”<sup>15</sup> According to Guzmán, his European sojourn was nothing but a premeditated plan to “digest all the forms of modern painting to better eliminate them from [his] artistic idiom. There is a perceivable pain in leaving behind what he loved, and Rivera loved his artistic career, within the framework of traditional conceptions. The old canons had been propitious for him.”<sup>16</sup>

However, by the time Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921, a seasoned and experienced artist, it became very clear that his experiences had helped forge him into a formidable character. His plethora of influences from his studies and experiences abroad in Europe, his friendships with Élie Faure and Pablo Picasso, and even the example of his old mentor, Dr. Atl, all seemed to come together for him as he began to recognize that his own image was malleable, and he could shape his destiny. In Gladys March's preface to Rivera's autobiography, *My Art, My Life*, she wrote: “Rivera, who was afterwards, in his work, to transform the history of Mexico into one of the great myths of our century, could not, in

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<sup>15</sup> Navarrete, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

recalling his own life to me, suppress his colossal fancy. He had already converted certain events, particularly of his early years, into legends.”<sup>17</sup> With the cues provided by Picasso and Atl, Rivera became the ultimate mythographer, and mythomaniac. In his personal life, he accentuated the characteristics, ideas and stories that best fit whatever role or persona suited him best at any given time. In his art, he emphasized his connection to the past by referencing pre-Columbian objects, established an identity for the present but cultivating a living history for his nation, and looked forward to Mexico’s future by providing his vision of a new, modern Mexico.

Rivera inspired a sense of *Mexicanidad* and the acknowledgement of *indianismo* in an iconic and meaningful way, instilling in the people of Mexico a sense of pride in their race and origins. However his promotion of these ideals was in many ways self-serving as these concepts ultimately helped to perpetuate his own mythology, one he invented, about his life. Old friend Élie Faure called Rivera “a man of almost monstrous intelligence. This is how I would represent the creators of ancient fables who roamed the slopes of Pindus and the isles of the Aegean, ten centuries before Homer. He told me all about Mexico, of where he had been born, great, extravagant things. A mythologist, I thought, or perhaps a mythomaniac.”<sup>18</sup> Of his friend, biographer Bertram Wolfe said, “His talk, theories, anecdotes, adventures, and his successive retellings of them, were an endless labyrinth of fables.”<sup>19</sup> Rivera accomplished the mythologizing of his life through his painting, his writing and the constant retelling and revising of his history. Perhaps his most potent tool however, was referencing the past in his work and aligning his image with Mexico’s culture and identity.

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<sup>17</sup> Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Dover, 1991) viii.

<sup>18</sup> Navarrete, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In his first mural program at the Ministry of Education, Rivera had sought inspiration in the “crowds, markets and festivals” of Mexican life. However, another key source of inspiration for Rivera was directly referencing the past. Rivera often visited the National School of Fine Arts and the Mexican Antiquity Galleries of the *Museo Nacional de Historia, Arqueología y Etnografía* (National Museum of History, Archaeology and Ethnography) for inspiration, and shortly after his return from Europe, he had also begun to collect Pre-Columbian objects with a passion.<sup>20</sup> His collection ultimately became perhaps one of the best known ways in which Rivera claimed and then redefined his cultural heritage. He was fascinated by the objects, or “idols” as he was fond of calling them, and collected the objects throughout his life. He spent lavishly on his collection, so lavishly in fact that one of his former wives, Lupe Marín, frustrated by his all-consuming drive to collect the expensive objects, famously smashed one of the idols in frustration and served it to Rivera for his dinner, saying that if he loved them so much, he could eat them.<sup>21</sup>

Rivera’s vast collection of stone and clay figures represented nearly every region of Mexico, with striking stylistic variations depending upon their region of origin.<sup>22</sup> However Rivera was attracted to certain types of figures, and figures in specific types of positions. Several “themes” emerged in the collection such as seated men with contemplative expressions, figures carrying water jars, mask-like faces with simplified, symmetrical features, kneeling women and women holding children. These themes and their shared simplified, geometric forms and facial features, would appear again and again in his art as archetypal representations of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico.

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<sup>20</sup> González, 212.

<sup>21</sup> Marnham, 298.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Merioni and Marie-Therese Pinto, *Art in Ancient Mexico: Selected and Photographed from the Collection of Diego Rivera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) IX.

The iconic “types” that Diego Rivera established early on in his career would populate his imagery for the duration of his life. Gestures and themes derived from his collection, and even Aztec gods and goddesses would appear in his later work, including the *Detroit Industry* murals and *Pan-American Unity*. In many ways, Rivera’s interest in pre-Columbian objects was a way for him to both claim and redefine his country’s identity and his own. Until Diego Rivera, the nation had not had any standout artists or artistic movements to rival those of Europe and Asia. Perhaps because he did not sense a strong artistic tradition growing up in Mexico, as a young man Rivera traveled twice to Europe to study painting, spending more than fourteen years abroad emulating European models. In his autobiography he wrote: “I was often depressed by a generalized sense of inferiority. It was a racial feeling, not unlike that felt by many artists in the United States. And like many of them it would finally bring me to Europe. But in my case its roots were not specifically the same.”<sup>23</sup> Rivera grew to admire the indigenous art of the past, and discovered in it a source of inspiration. He often referred to the ideals associated with his ancestors’ ways of life, and the purity of form they were able to achieve through their art. Pre-Conquest, Rivera believed that Mexican-Indian artists had shown “great force and genius”. He wrote: “Like all first-rate art, their work had been intensely local: related to the soil, the landscape, the forms, the animals, deities, and colors of their own world. Above all it had been emotion-centered. It was moulded by their hopes, fears, joys, superstitions, and sufferings.” This emotion, Rivera believed, was what gave the art its power. However, after the Spanish conquest, the feeling of inferiority instilled by their conquerors and oppressors forced them to turn to European models to try and “raise themselves to equality by imitating the accepted models of classical

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<sup>23</sup> Rivera, 19.

European art.” According to Rivera, it was “the response of men reacting to the tradition of defeat, and this tradition was in me too, buried in my subconscious. Yet I was continuously aware of the greatness of pre-Conquest art. Within and without, I fought against inhibiting academic conventions, trusting my emotions to guide me in painting canvases.”<sup>24</sup>

The “idols” served as inspiration through Rivera’s early works in the forms, shapes, actions and subjects they represented. In works throughout his first mural cycle in the Ministry of Education, completed in 1924, multiple references can be found. In the panel entitled *The Maize Festival* a round-shouldered woman in the foreground kneels, her geometric form simplified to basic shapes and modeling, reminiscent of several objects in Rivera’s collection, including the Chalchiuhtlicue stone sculpture *Seated Woman* (figures 22 and 23). References to this “seated woman style” can be found throughout the mural cycle with slight variations. In *The Mechanization of the Country*, another round-shouldered cross-legged woman appears at the center of the composition, holding ears of corn in each hand atop each knee (figure 24). Both the subject of the kneeling woman and the style in which their forms are depicted have undeniable links to these ancient, pre-Columbian objects, elements that would carry through the rest of Rivera’s career and come to be defining characteristics of his style.

In another work from the Ministry of Education, *Friday of Sorrows on the Canal of Santa Anita*, painted in the Court of Fiestas, the women depicted are a direct link to his collection (figure 25). The mural shows groups of *campesinos* gathered along the waterfront of the canal and boating, primarily depicted as faceless and anonymous crowds. However, in the foreground, Rivera has depicted groups of Indigenous women, some kneeling with their

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<sup>24</sup> Rivera, 19.

backs to the viewer selling flowers, and others perusing their wares. While the colors are festive, the expressions of the women are solemn and pensive, and their postures are elegant and strong. It is in the postures and expressions of these women that we see Rivera referencing the past in a very overt way. The kneeling women with their simplified, rounded forms and traditional dress emulate objects from his collection such as *Woman Crouching with Uplifted Arms*, or *Woman with Her Arms Crossed* both from the Tarascan culture in Rivera's collection (figure 26). Made of baked clay, both objects would originally have been brightly painted. Their bodies are solid, earthy and geometric in form yet the artists defined certain details such as stylized strands of hair and jewelry on their arms. Both figures wear similar garments, traditional straight skirts, and their hair is pulled back. Their faces are defined by simplified, smooth shapes with high, angular cheekbones, triangular noses and downcast eyes with oval lids, yet still relay an expression of serenity and quietness. Rivera's women all strikingly emulate these features, their cinnamon skin tones even mimicking the clay the figures were made from.

Rivera's lifelong passion for collecting pre-Columbian objects ultimately culminated in his final major project, Anahuacalli, a museum designed by Rivera to house his vast collection of "idols" and showcase his own work as well (figure 27). By 1942, he had amassed a collection of nearly 60,000 sculptures, archaeological finds and objects, and decided that he needed somewhere to keep them. Just as his mentor, Gerardo Murillo, had chosen the Nahuatl name "Dr. Atl" for himself, Rivera chose the Nahuatl name "Anahuacalli" for his structure. Translated the word means "the house of Anahuac," a reference to the ancient Aztec name for the Valley of Mexico.<sup>25</sup> Rivera chose the site, just

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<sup>25</sup> Kettenmann, 72.

outside Mexico City on a volcanic lava plain, and designed it in the style of a pre-Columbian temple.<sup>26</sup> The imposing, rough-hewn stone structure rises from the ground, fortress-like, its stepped façade and raised crest-like roof an anomaly amidst the houses and small apartment buildings of the Mexico City suburbs. Surrounded by a moat, the main entrance is accessed by a bridge and a stone-pillared gateway. The interior of the building is comprised of dark passageways with very little light. Those windows that do exist are small, slit-like forms fitted with sheets of dark onyx lending the interior a dark mystical quality.<sup>27</sup> Displayed within these dark passages and chambers, more than 60,000 “idols” and objects are displayed in floor to ceiling cases. The main floor is a stark contrast to the rest of the structure. Intended to be a studio space for Rivera, the spacious room is flooded with the light from three-story windows. The massive blank walls would be the only space Rivera would ever have that was large enough to accommodate the huge cartoons of his preliminary mural drawings (figure 28).<sup>28</sup> Rivera had always wanted to manifest his artistic vision in architecture, and in Anahuacalli, that dream was realized in a structure of enduring permanence, fit for an Aztec king, a temple to his art. While construction was not completed during his lifetime, Rivera bequeathed the building and collection to the Mexican people. A plaque in the museum now proclaims Rivera as "a man of genius who is among the greatest painters of all time." The Pre-Columbian objects in the collection served as inspirations for Rivera's work, but he also saw them as a means to legitimize the Mexican peoples' past, and therefore its future by establishing a strong link to ancient cultures. By surrounding himself with these objects Rivera established a tangible link to that past and a visual representation of what and how he

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<sup>26</sup> Marnham, 298.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

was defining himself and his art. His paintings, sculptures, and even architecture reflect the inspiration Rivera derived from Mexico's ancient civilizations. They also reveal an artist focused on perpetuating his own mythology by integrating references to pre-Columbian civilizations and their art forms, essentially creating his own pedigree.

Although Rivera established a strong connection to the past, he was very much focused on the present and cultivating a living history for Mexico. For Rivera, that meant expressing his own political views amidst the continuously shifting political tides of Mexico during the late 1920s. Perhaps one of his most brilliant, sensual, and inflammatory works was realized in his project for the National Agricultural School buildings in Chapingo, painted 1926-7.<sup>29</sup> In 1926 Rivera recommitted himself to the Mexican Communist party with gusto. The next two years would mark his most radically active years in the party, with Rivera heading groups ranging from the National Peasant League, the Workers' and Peasants' Bloc to the Anti-Imperialist League, and heading delegations as the Mexican representative to Moscow.<sup>30</sup>

An ex-hacienda, the new school buildings were comprised of the large plantation-style home and a chapel. To prove his commitment to the Party, Rivera designed a mural program which overtly expounded Communist ideals and symbols. In the mural at the entryway to the school, Rivera painted the words "Here we teach the exploitation of the earth, not of man" in a mural entitled *The Spirit of the Revolution* representing the poor *campesinos* who would soon cross through the doors to learn about cultivating land and

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<sup>29</sup> Valerie Fletcher, *Crosscurrents of Modernism* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 94.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, 52.



improving their lives (figure 29).<sup>31</sup> Never before had Rivera had the opportunity to paint in a rural setting, so close to the common people of Mexico he so admired. Within the walls of the University, Rivera's murals capitalized on this connection which illustrated the theme of "the fertile earth" with indigenous farmers and laborers as the heroes.<sup>32</sup>

In *Good Government* and *Bad Government*, Rivera presents the opposite ends of the spectrum and ramifications of positive and negative leadership (figure 30). In *Good Government*, peasants toil in the fields of a fruitful landscape, heroic and strong. They are depicted farming, bearing arms and holding books to represent their knowledge of and connection to the land. In *Bad Government*, bodies hang from the bare branches of trees in a barren and lifeless landscape. Corrupt officials hold papers revealing their betrayals and shortcomings: "*I defend my masters against my own brothers. The rich made me miserable*" and "*I am the sell-out of the rich that employ me as executioner of the working people. I am the white guard. I am the general of the reaction.*" Rivera's damning words clearly illustrate his opinion of those government officials who do not stand up for the working people and the common man.

In the ex-chapel of the hacienda, Rivera continued with his strong political message (figure 31). As a way to distract from the limitations of his land distribution program, the new president Plutarco Elias Calles had launched a battle against the Church. A tactic that had been employed during the Revolution, Calles hoped to reignite some of the Revolutionary spirit, quickly waning and developing into discontent. Ever attuned to political developments, Rivera seized the opportunity to display his own strong dislike of the

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<sup>31</sup> Raquel Tíbol, *Los Murales de Diego Rivera Universidad Autónoma Chapingo* (Chapingo: Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, 2002) 35.

<sup>32</sup> Tíbol, 35.

Church, thus outraging many of his countrymen whose churches were a part of their everyday lives and the *Cristeros*, a group which had formed to protest Calles' actions. His murals in the ex-Chapel, a once-holy place, were anything but holy. Massive nudes sprawled in twisting, sensuous poses throughout the chapel, yet more conspicuous were the overt Communistic symbols incorporated throughout the once-holy space (figure 32). Despite the criticism from the *Cristeros*, Rivera was so pleased with his work that he had panels from the Chapingo murals reproduced in *El Machete*.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his involvement with the Party, or perhaps because he was able to become so deeply involved with it, by 1928 Rivera had again become disenchanted with Communism, its message and its future. A pivotal event also occurred just as Rivera was beginning to waver in his devotion: Dwight Morrow, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, was sent to Mexico City in 1927 with the goal of stabilizing relations between the U.S. and Mexico. Morrow was incredibly effective at his task. Not only was he able to develop a positive working relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, but he was able to “convert” the Communist Party’s most prominent member, Diego Rivera. It was said that when Morrow entered Mexico, the “life went out of the Revolution.”<sup>34</sup>

Morrow persuaded Rivera to change his position on the “American presence in Mexico” and the American industrialists’ grip on Mexico’s resources in two key ways.<sup>35</sup> First he arranged the 1928 *Mexican Art* exhibition in New York which garnered Rivera international critical acclaim, and second, a major commission, the painting of a series of murals in the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca. As soon as Rivera had officially accepted the

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

commission, the Party once again expelled him, marking a break with the Party for more than twenty years.

The reviews in the United States for the *Mexican Art* exhibition were critically very positive. A reviewer wrote that the exhibition reached its goal of showing “the artistic aspects of the origin and development of Mexican civilization from the Conquest to the present. [...] One sees the sources of national inspiration from preceding centuries, side by side with the noble revolutionary calm of Rivera,” adding “It includes only works of art that express Mexican ideology, characterized by the fusion of Indian and foreign elements.”<sup>36</sup> Rivera’s murals entitled *History of Cuernavaca and Morelos, Conquest and Revolution* at the Palace of Cortés were also extraordinary (figure 33). Instead of being overtly political Rivera focused for the first time on a purely “Mexican ideology” in his murals. Morrow’s tactics not only achieved his goal of swaying one of the Communist Party’s key members, but garnered Rivera international exposure, critical acclaim, and ultimately opened the doors to a flurry of American and international commissions, launching Rivera’s career from ambivalent reviews to international acclaim.

However because Rivera was able to let go of his Communist ideals rather easily, it has to be argued that Rivera “sold out” the Mexican people for the allure of fame, money, and recognition. Rivera continued to paint exactly the same subject matter, however, with the inclusion of his archetypal indigenous Mexican men and women, and later snubbed the American public with his inflammatory inclusion of Communistic symbols in several works of art. In a way, he used the Communist Party to help launch his career, abandoned it to

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<sup>36</sup> Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago, 126.

succeed abroad, and incorporated Communist symbols once again to garner attention and intentionally walk an inflammatory political line.

In 1929, Rivera was acutely aware of what looked like a betrayal of the Mexican Communist Party and his rather contradictory position. He struggled with his desire to paint pictures with messages about social and political reform versus adhering to a strictly Marxist platform. He wrote, “What is it then that we really need? An art extremely pure, precise, profoundly human, and clarified as to its purpose. An art with revolution as its subject: because the principal interest in the worker’s life has to be touched first. It is necessary that he find aesthetic satisfaction and the highest pleasure appared in the essential interest of his life...I searched my soul profoundly in order to see if I had the necessary qualities to attempt that kind of artistic expression in proof of my convictions, and I found that instead of possessing merely a certain amount of residue left from my previous habits and point of view, I had attained sufficient strength to be a workman among other workmen.”<sup>37</sup>

While Rivera’s political views would continue to be an important message in his art, Rivera also had to generate income. Smaller easel works such as *Flower Festival*, painted in 1925 are representative of another prevailing theme in Rivera’s work, the strong, indigenous woman (figure 34). Easel works of this genre were incredibly lucrative for Rivera, and highly sought after by collectors, especially Americans. It is a subject the artist returned to throughout his career, and is defined by the graceful round fluid forms of the women, and the balance and symmetry of the composition. A central figure in the composition carries flowers which have been highly stylized, and the forms have been flattened with minimal shading. Again we see Indigenous women in the kneeling position found in many pre-Columbian

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<sup>37</sup> Lee, 55.

works. However the figure at left carries a child on her back. Many pre-Columbian idols also depicted women carrying children, including *Seated Woman With Child on Her Back* (figure 35). In the center a woman stands with hands clasped, and a bundle of calla lilies on her back. Indigenous women are featured in much of Rivera's work, and it is clear that many of the archetypal depictions he created were inspired by his pre-Columbian figures and the strong link he felt with the indigenous cultures. In his autobiography, *My Art, My Life*, he maintains that his Indian nanny, Antonia, was always more of a mother to him than his own biological mother. As a child he was sickly, and his parents sent him away with his nanny. Rivera said of the event, "Antonia, whom I have since loved more than my own mother, took me to live in the mountains of Sierra."<sup>38</sup> Even as a young boy he admired her beauty, "She had wonderful shoulders and walked with elegant erectness on magnificently sculptured legs, her head held high as if balancing a load. Visually she was an artist's ideal of the classic Indian woman, and I have painted her many times from memory in her long red robe and blue shawl."<sup>39</sup> The Indigenous woman clearly was a figure of beauty for Rivera, and in his art they often take on maternal or motherly roles.

In his painting, *Dream of A Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, Rivera's fascination with the native peoples of Mexico and their myths and legends is illustrated on an ambitious, autobiographical scale (figure 36). Rivera depicts himself as a young boy, surrounded by figures from Mexico's history and his own life story. He painted himself in the composition amidst a striking triangular relationship with two other figures. Behind him stands his wife Frida Kahlo, dressed in traditional Tehuana clothing, her arm embracing him in a maternal manner. She is also wearing the color palette Rivera used again and again in his depictions of

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<sup>38</sup> Rivera, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Indian women—blue and red, just like his fond memories of his nurse Antonia. Here Frida acts as the archetypal Indian woman, a mother figure to the young Diego. To his left is the Catrina Calavera figure, with whom he is holding hands. Created by José Guadalupe Posada, the Catrina figure represents another maternal figure, as she is linked to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, whose symbol is a skull (figure 37). Coatlicue is the ancient Mother Earth goddess, mother of sun, moon and stars, and goddess of life, death and rebirth.<sup>40</sup> According to legend, Coatlicue gave birth to four hundred Indians called Centzonuitznaua, and one daughter named Coyolxauhqui. One day while sweeping the temple, she was accidentally impregnated by a little ball of feathers that she had found and tucked into her skirt. As a result, she gave birth to the gods Quetzalcoatl and Xolotl. Ashamed by their mother's pregnancies, Coyolxauhqui convinced her four hundred brothers to help her kill their mother. He fell on their mother with their weapons, cutting her open and decapitating her. At the moment she died however, another being emerged from her womb, the god, Huitzilopochtli, fully grown and armed for battle. He massacred many of his siblings, including his sister, whose head he threw into the sky to form the moon.<sup>41</sup>

By painting himself as a young boy trustingly holding the mother goddess Coatlicue's hand, Rivera visually presents his link to his country's cultural history, and portrays himself as a pupil or disciple of that history. Further linking himself to the goddess, the young Diego has a snake in one pocket, and a toad in the other. The snake is one of Coatlicue's symbols, and she is frequently depicted wearing a skirt of writhing serpents (figure 38). These visual cues, and his placement with the goddess at the composition's center, also imply that he is

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<sup>40</sup> Médioni, XVII.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, XVI.

the son of Coatlicue, the young warrior Huitzilopochtli ready to defend his mother's honor, and carry forth a rebirth of the culture through his art in contemporary society.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps one of the most startling and innovative themes in Rivera's later works was his integration of Aztec gods and goddesses into other existing forms, particularly mechanical systems, which look ahead to the future, and his modern vision for his country. The best known use of this integration exists in the Detroit mural cycle where Rivera combined the form of Coatlicue, an Aztec goddess, with the inner workings of a complex machine in *Man and Machine*, (figure 39). Painted on the south wall of the Detroit Institute of Arts, this painting is part of a decorative program which includes over twenty seven frescoes based on Rivera's impressions of the Ford automobile plant.<sup>43</sup> This must have been an exciting project for Rivera, for it afforded him one of the only opportunities to design a set of murals comparable in scale to the Renaissance murals he had so admired as a student in Italy.<sup>44</sup> Of the project, Rivera exclaimed, "I feel the same excitement towards the industrial material of this place as I did towards rural material when I went back to Mexico." Even so, Rivera incorporated pre-Columbian imagery as an organizing force in these modernist murals. At the top of the mural, two large guardian figures sit, watching over the scene below. Combined with the two guardians on the opposite wall, the four figures represent the four races of the North American work force, and hold the raw materials necessary for the production of steel: coal, iron, chalk and sand.<sup>45</sup> The scene below is an elaborate interlocking lacework of gleaming, efficient metal: pipes, pistons, gears and cogs that dwarf the small, anonymous worker figures below. While not immediately apparent, a massive machine-like

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<sup>42</sup> Marnham, 314.

<sup>43</sup> Kettenmann, 50.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

figure emerges from the twisting metal in the right third of the composition. What is striking about this machine figure is its strong resemblance to that of Aztec pre-Columbian figures, especially when compared with figures such as *Coatlicue Figure* in Rivera's collection. Instead of stone however, this industrial figure is comprised of the pumping pistons and turning gears of a mechanized god. By transferring the attributes of the ancient figures to the machine figure, Rivera implies that the technology it is made of makes it a divine object, worthy of worship. During his time in Detroit, Rivera said that the steel industry was "as beautiful as the early Aztec or Mayan sculptures."<sup>46</sup>

This same concept was also used in a lesser known mural cycle, *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and South on This Continent* or *Pan-American Unity* (figure 40). While both murals present the themes of transformation and Rivera's vision of a new, modern Mexico, it is in *Pan-American Unity* that these themes are married with those of his own life story. Presently located at the City College of San Francisco, the mural was originally created for an exhibition called "Art in Action" as part of the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island.<sup>47</sup> More than 1800 square feet, when it was completed in 1939, *Pan-American Unity* represented the largest work spatially that Rivera had created to date. Rivera wrote of the project: "In this mural I projected the idea of the fusion of the genius of the South (Mexico), with its religious ardor and its gift for plastic expression, and the genius of the North (the United States), with its gift for creative mechanical expression. Symbolizing this union—and focal point of the whole composition—was a colossal Goddess of Life, half Indian, half machine. She would be to the American civilization of my vision what Quetzalcoatl, the great mother of Mexico, was to the Aztec

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<sup>46</sup> Marnham, 241.

<sup>47</sup> Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963) 363.



people.”<sup>48</sup> The “half Indian, half machine” goddess does indeed dominate the center of the composition, seemingly caught in the act of transforming from brown-skinned, earth-hued, indigenous woman into sleek, piston-pumping machine. On the left half of the figure, Rivera has depicted a woman’s firm, muscled arm emerging from the body, upraised and bent at the elbow. The palm of the woman’s hand faces the viewer and is embedded what appear to be chunks of turquoise, just like a Tarascan mask. Down the left side of the figure below the arm, Rivera has depicted a woven grass garment or skirt. As the figure progresses from left to right, it slowly becomes less human and more machine, as the solid flesh of arm and garment give way to smooth, bare bones which then morph into hard, gleaming metal parts and gears.

Rivera owned a *Coatlicue Figure* and a *Centeocihuatl* figure and the overall shape in this composition is strikingly similar to these objects, as well as to the Coatlicue goddess Rivera referenced in the Detroit panels. Instead of stone however, this figure, caught in the act of transforming from ancient to modern, or perhaps representing the embodiment of the old and the new, is comprised of both the solid flesh and bones of the ancient Aztecs and the pumping pistons and turning gears of a mechanized god. By transferring the attributes of the ancient figures into a mechanized figure, Rivera implies that the technology it is made of makes it a divine object worthy of worship, to be feared and obeyed, just like Coatlicue, the ancient mother earth goddess: mother of the sun, moon and stars, goddess of life, death and rebirth.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the colossal “half Indian, half machine” goddess of life, in Rivera’s depiction of “the South” he has included references to the sacred land and its culture in all its glory before the destruction wrought by the coming of the Spaniards. Rivera said, “I depicted

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<sup>48</sup> Rivera, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Médioni, XVII.

the South in the period before Cortés. The outstanding physical landmarks were the massive and beautiful snow-crowned Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl. Nearby were the temples of Nahuatl and Quetzalcoatl and the temple of the plumed serpent. Also portrayed were the Yaqui Deer Dancers, pottery makers, and Netzahualcoyotl, the Aztec poet-king of Texcoco who designed a flying machine.”<sup>50</sup> Rivera bridged the gap between time and space between the “North” and the “South” with an allegorical figure of a woman diving, and the Golden Gate Bridge spanning San Francisco Bay. According to Rivera, the central Quetzalcoatl figure “personified the continuity of Mexico’s ancient culture.”<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Rivera parallels the themes of “The Marriage of the North and the South” by also portraying themes from his own life. Beneath the goddess, Rivera depicts himself in a small vignette holding hands with Paulette Goddard, an American tennis star with whom he had a brief affair. From amidst their joined hands, a white tree flames between them, its branches both organic and emblematic of the passion the two shared. Immediately behind Rivera he depicts his wife at the time, Frida Kahlo, dressed in traditional Tehuana costume. Frida gazes out at the viewer, seemingly unaware of the scene behind her, her hand poised holding a paintbrush in front of a blank canvas. According to Rivera, Goddard represented “American girlhood [...] shown in friendly contact with a Mexican man,” and Frida represented “a Mexican artist of European extraction, looking to the native traditions for her inspiration.”<sup>52</sup>

What makes *Pan-American Unity* so exceptional within Rivera’s body of work is that it not only contains multiple references to the ancient, pre-Columbian cultures, their belief systems, and their gods and goddesses, but it also looks ahead to a vision for Mexico’s

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<sup>50</sup> Rivera, 151.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

future, a marriage of the ancient and the modern. Gleaming technology converges with ancient ritual and stone, not only in the amorphous goddess figure, but all around her: a modern city with skyscrapers and airplanes adjoins an ancient Aztec city's stepped pyramids, modern men manipulate glistening machinery alongside Indians utilizing tools. Yet no period in time has more value than another—each time period, each man, is given the same importance, as though Rivera is saying that man has always needed the same things, built the same things, and it is only by embracing our past that we can truly move forward.

This theme was central to Diego Rivera's work and life. Rivera said "It was my desire to reproduce the pure, basic images of my land. I wanted my paintings to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth, to show the masses the outline of the future."<sup>53</sup>

In so doing, Diego Rivera not only established his own Mexican identity, but set a pattern for future Mexican artists to follow. Musical groups such as Café Tacuba, a popular contemporary group reference folkloric music in the melodies and their songs, and artists such as animator Jorge Gutierrez, creator of Nickelodeon's "El Tigre" cartoon, incorporate references to Aztec stone Gods and popular folk tales into his characters such as the Catrina (figures 41 and 42).

In honor of Diego Rivera's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, friend Carlos Pellicer invited Rivera's contemporaries to contribute to a book he was preparing for the occasion. Fellow poet and friend Salvador Novo wrote: "Our century is the century of Diego Rivera. In his amazing seventy years nestles our history, which in his hands becomes race, clamor, color, passion and sweetness; idol and child, maize and flag, jungle, cloud, star. What an honor to have

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<sup>53</sup> Rivera, 79.

lived in his time! To have seen him, even yesterday, hovering like a gigantic and contradictory hummingbird, injecting color into the gray walls of the Preparatoria amphitheater, making the walls flower into the first great example of Mexican painting!”<sup>54</sup> Throughout the span of Diego Rivera’s career as an artist he did indeed embody and portray the history of Mexico, finding his inspiration in Mexico’s pre-Columbian heritage, Indigenous populations and working classes. Rivera realized it was important to honor and maintain the legacy of the Indigenous peoples, and recognize them as an aesthetic force. He also realized that by bringing the art objects of ancient cultures in to his own works that he was aligning his own legacy with that of the great ancient cultures, cementing his place in Mexican culture and history.

While he struggled early on to find his own artistic voice, the time Rivera spent abroad was critically important, and ultimately set him on the path toward his own artistic identity. His exposure to the avant-garde art world of Paris introduced him to a range of new ideas both artistically and politically; and revealed his own culture to him through a European perspective. Most importantly however, Rivera’s time in Europe revealed how the “primitive” inspiration his contemporaries had sought was readily available to him as part of his rich Mexican heritage. Rivera’s incorporation of Pre-Columbian art, however, was driven by a sense of reclaiming and redefining his own culture. It can be argued that, much like his primitivizing European contemporaries, Rivera represented “the indigenous” and “the workers” as faceless masses, and he also fashioned a simple, *campesino* persona for himself that was more illusion than reality. Nonetheless, Rivera’s adaptation of these primitivist impulses was unique because he derived inspiration from his own people, and painted for

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<sup>54</sup> González, 195.

them and his own culture, one he understood, and loved. It also served a dual purpose, both to represent “the people” and to propel his own career, a career which would literally “make the walls flower into the first great example of Mexican painting.” In his art Diego Rivera found a source of pride in his *Mexicanidad*, ensured his place in history, and ultimately forged a new, modern identity for Mexico.

The themes that Rivera explored clearly show an artist seeking to forge a nationalistic and artistic identity, one based more upon the “truth of his convictions” rather than political allegiance. There can be no doubt, however, that Diego Rivera opportunely seized a moment in history in which to make his mark. The fluctuation of Rivera’s “official” political leanings makes it difficult to define him, and difficult to characterize the public reception of his work since during several periods in his career he was simultaneously able to include and alienate many cultural and political groups in Mexico, including the indigenous population which served primary roles in his work. Despite playing the roles of Communist, pro-government artist, and American darling, his artistic vision and the visual language he used to illustrate it never wavered. While much of what he painted was inspired by a foundation in Marxism, his creation of a visual language to describe the cultural history of Mexico and its inhabitants is the sustaining message of his work, for it mythologized Mexican culture and in many ways has become synonymous with Mexican identity. Diego Rivera was a man caught between different worlds, Capitalism and Communism, the ancient and the modern, and the influences of Europe, Mexico, and America. In light of this essential question, for whom his work was actually created, further study is required, and I intend to continue this exploration.

His work is a self-portrait of his multi-faceted ideals and beliefs and the illustration of a nation and its identity. It embodies the man and his nation: their struggle to break free of

the limitations of European influences, navigate the treacherous waters in the aftermath of a major Revolution, establish themselves, and ultimately secure their places in history.

Through his art, Diego Rivera sought to celebrate *Mexicanidad* and *Indianismo*, or pride in one's cultural and national identity. By instilling his work with references to his collection of pre-Columbian objects he sought to prevent the loss of the identity of the ancient cultures of Mexico, fuse the ancient and the modern cultures of Mexico, and ultimately to ensure his place in history. In the words of an anonymous Aztec artist, whose poem was found in the ancient temple of Tenochtitlán: Not only will Rivera's name live on, but the ancient cultures of Mexico will live on through his art.

*Huey in tetl nic tequi*

*Tomahuac cuahitl nic icuiloa*

*Yancuicatl itech onvan in mitoz*

*In canin yaz nocuicamachio*

*Nic cauhtehuaz in tlalticpec*

*In nemiz noyollo zan ca ye nican*

*Ya hualla yecoya nolnamicoca*

*Nemiz in netoyo.*<sup>55</sup>

I am sculpting a great rock  
I am painting a thick piece of wood  
Of my song someday it will be said  
Wherever my song goes  
There my heart will live on  
My memory will be created  
My fame will live on.

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<sup>55</sup> Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Flor y Canto del Arte Prehispánico de México* (Mexico City: Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, 1961), 20. (Translated from the Spanish by Adrián Hinojos Ruiz)

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1  
Diego Rivera, *Dream of A Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, 1947-1948  
Museo Mural Diego Rivera, Mexico City  
Fresco

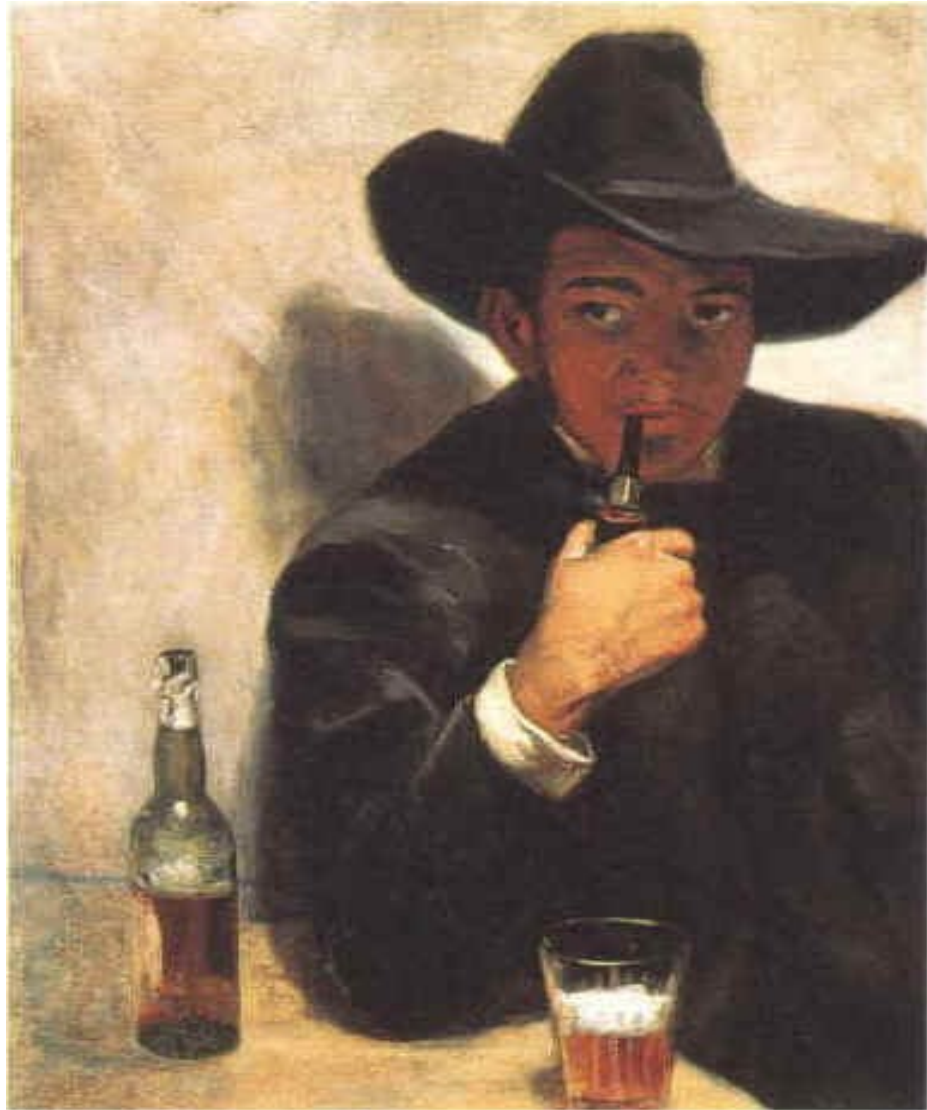


Figure 2  
Diego Rivera, *Self Portrait*, 1907  
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City, Mexico  
Oil on canvas





Figure 3  
Diego Rivera, *Portrait of a Breton Woman*, 1910  
Museo Casa Diego Rivera, Guanajuato, Mexico  
Oil on canvas



Figure 4  
Burgess Gelett, *Picasso in his studio in the Bateau-Lavoir, Paris, 1908*  
Musee Picasso, Paris, France



Figure 5  
Pablo Picasso, *The Old Fisherman*, 1895  
Musée de Montserrat, Barcelona  
Oil on canvas



Figure 6  
Diego Rivera, *Jacques Lipchitz (Portrait of a Young Man)*, 1914  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Oil on canvas



Figure 7  
Amedeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Diego Rivera*, 1914  
Private collection  
Oil on canvas



Figure 8  
Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Adolfo Best Maugard*, 1913  
Museo Nacional de Arte, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes  
Oil on canvas



Figure 9  
Diego Rivera, *Jacques Lipchitz (Portrait of a Young Man)*, 1914  
Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Oil on canvas



Figure 10  
Diego Rivera  
*Paisaje Zapatista – El Guerrillero (Zapatista Landscape – The Guerrilla)*, 1915  
Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City  
Oil on canvas





Figure 11  
*Picasso with Seated Man*, 1915  
Reunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris

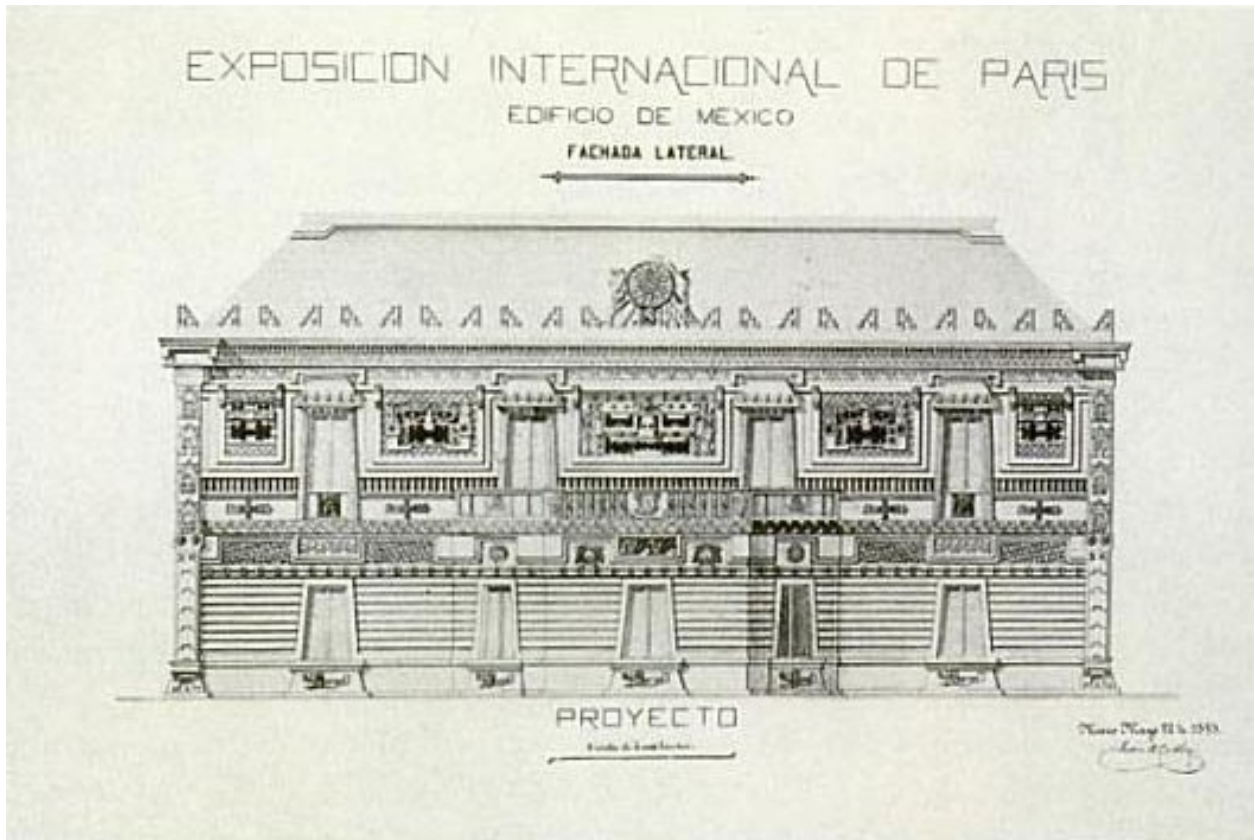


Figure 12  
Plans for the façade of the Mexican palace at the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition by J.M. de Alva  
Secretaría de Fomento *Proyectos de edificio para la Exposición Internacional de París 1889*  
Mexico City, 1888



Figure 13  
Entrance to the Aztec Palace at the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition  
William Walton, *Chefs d'oeuvre de l'Exposition Universelle de Paris*  
Philadelphia and Paris, 1889



Figure 14  
Diego Rivera, *Liberation of the Peon*, 1923  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 15  
Giotto, *The Laying out of Christ's Body*  
Padua, Italy  
Fresco



Figure 16  
Diego Rivera, *Creation*, 1922 – 1923  
Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, Mexico City, Mexico



Figure 17  
Diego Rivera, *Entry into the Mine*, 1923 – 1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 18  
Diego Rivera, *Tehuana Women*, 1923 – 1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco





Figure 19  
Diego Rivera, *Day of the Dead*, 1923 – 1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 20  
Diego Rivera, *The Maize Festival*, 1923 – 1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco

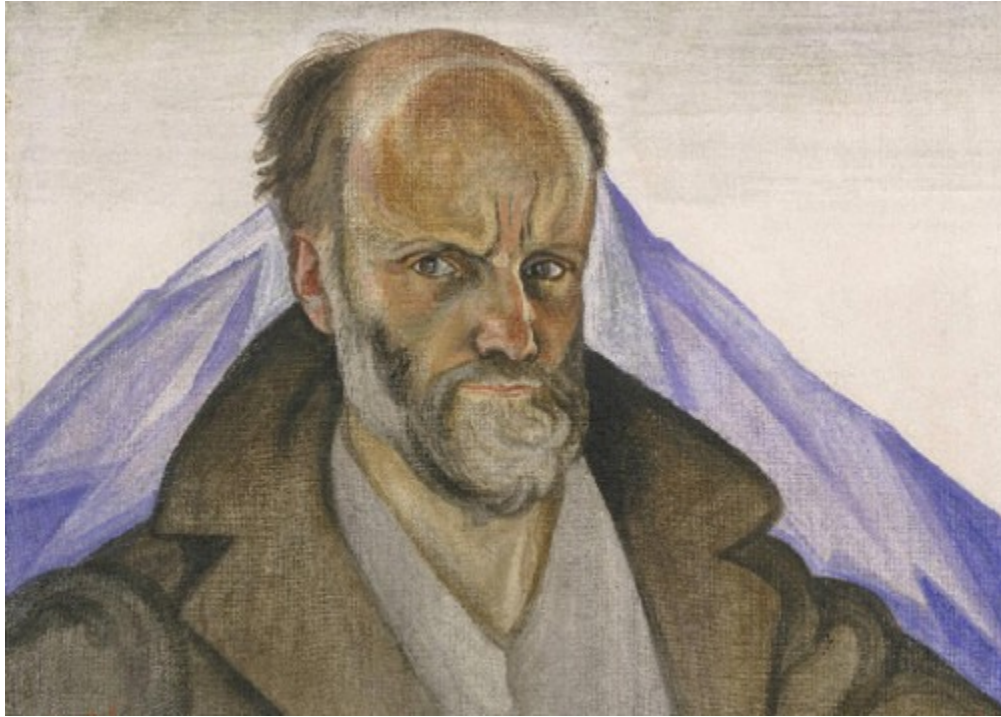


Figure 21  
Gerardo Murillo ("Dr. Atl"), *Self Portrait with Popocatepetl*, 1928  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Oil on canvas



Figure 22  
Diego Rivera, *The Maize Festival*, 1923 – 1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 23  
*Seated Woman* Possibly the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue (Coatlicue) ‘She of the Jade Skirt’  
Stone sculpture, date unknown  
National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

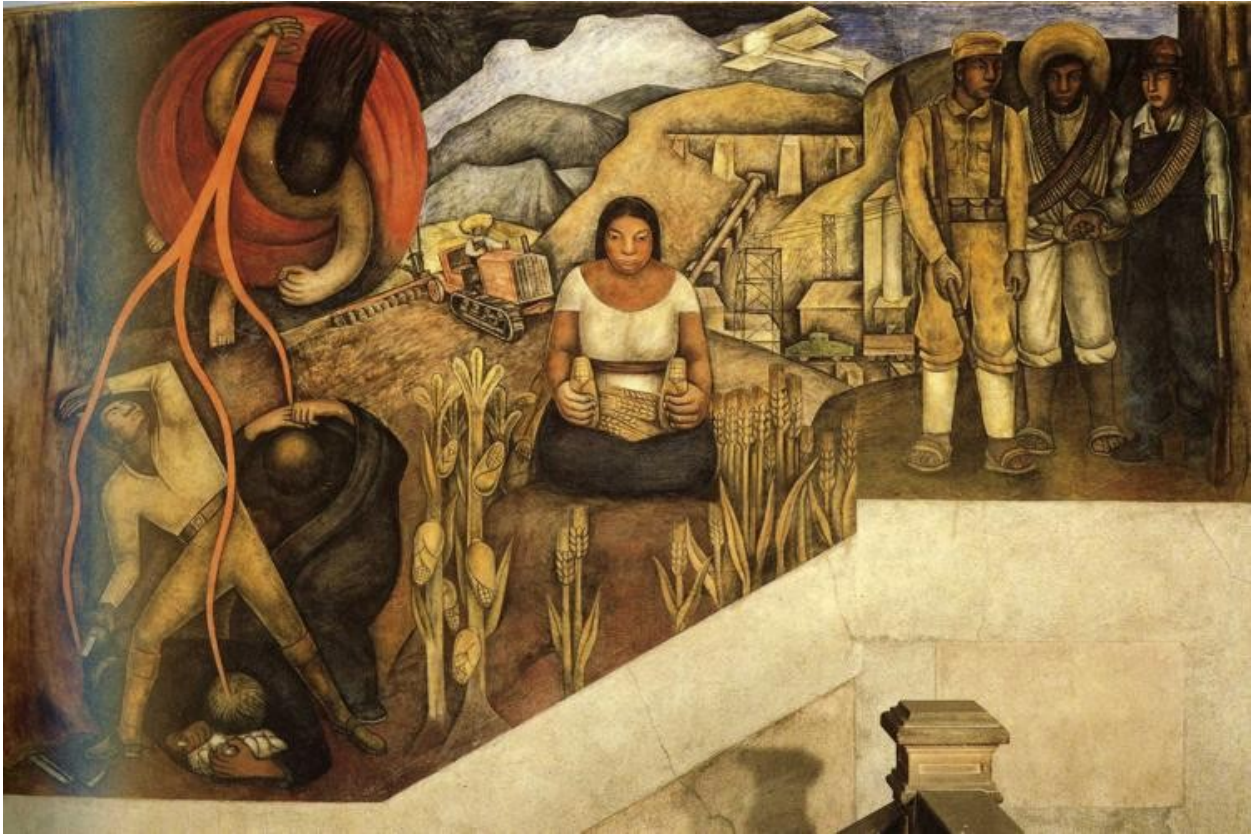


Figure 24  
Diego Rivera, *The Mechanization of the Country*, 1926  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 25  
Diego Rivera, *Friday of Sorrows on the Canal of Santa Anita*, 1923-1924  
Ministry of Education, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 26  
*Woman With Her Arms Crossed*  
Tarascan stone sculpture, date unknown  
National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City





Figure 27  
Anahuacalli



Figure 28  
Anahuacalli



Figure 29

Diego Rivera, *The Spirit of the Revolution*, 1926 – 1927

Universidad Autónoma, Chapingo, Mexico

Fresco

*“Here we teach the exploitation of the land, not of men.”*



Figure 30

Diego Rivera, *Good Government, Bad Government*, (detail) 1926 - 1927

Universidad Autónoma, Chapingo, Mexico

Fresco

Left: *"I defend my masters against my own brothers. The rich made me miserable."*

Right: *"I am the sell-out of the rich that employ me as executioner of the working people. I am the white guard I am the general of the reaction."*



Figure 31  
Diego Rivera, *The Fecund Earth*, 1926  
Ex-Chapel of the Universidad Autónoma, Chapingo, Mexico  
Fresco



Figure 32  
Diego Rivera, *Símbolos del Nuevo Orden*, 1926  
Ex-Chapel of the Universidad Autónoma, Chapingo, Mexico  
Fresco



Figure 33  
Diego Rivera, *History of Cuernavaca and Morelos, Conquest and Revolution*, 1930-31  
Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca, Mexico  
Fresco



Figure 34  
Diego Rivera, *Flower Festival*, 1925  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Oil on canvas





Figure 35  
*Seated Woman With Child on Her Back*, date unknown  
Clay sculpture, Valley of Mexico Culture  
National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City



Figure 36  
Diego Rivera, *Dream of A Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, (detail) 1947-1948  
Museo Mural Diego Rivera, Mexico City  
Fresco



Figure 37  
Coatlicue, Aztec culture, date unknown  
National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City  
Stone sculpture



Figure 38  
Coatlicue, Aztec culture, date unknown  
National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City  
Stone sculpture



Figure 39  
Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry or Man and Machine*, 1932 - 1933  
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan  
Fresco

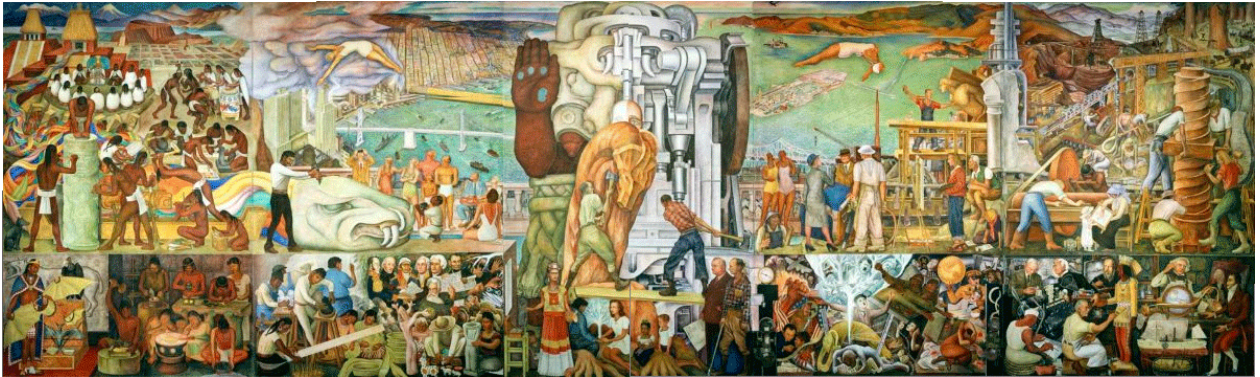


Figure 40  
Diego Rivera, *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and South on This Continent or Pan-American Unity*, 1940  
City College of San Francisco, Diego Rivera Theater  
Fresco

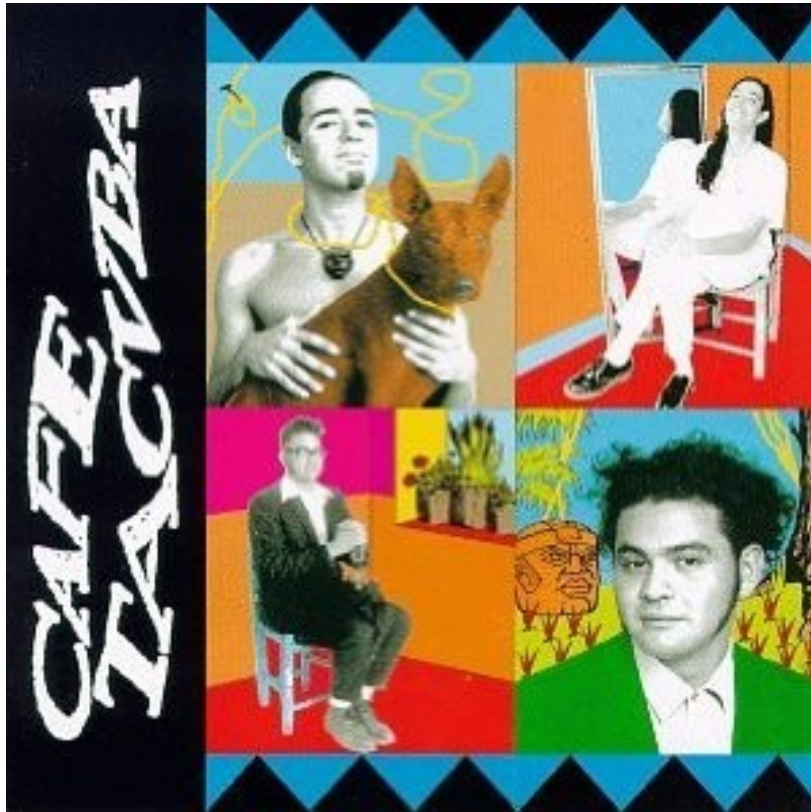


Figure 41  
Café Tacuba, self-titled album cover

## El Tigre Rogues Gallery



Figure 42  
"El Tigre Rogues Gallery"  
Jorge Gutierrez



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## VITA

Hilary Nordholm was born September 15, 1976, a day which also happens to be Mexican Independence Day. Throughout her life she has had an affinity for the arts, and ever since she could hold a pencil she has been drawing and painting. She was educated at The Potomac School in McLean, Virginia, where her talents and interests were honed through Advanced Placement Art History and Studio Art classes, and a variety of internship opportunities at The National Gallery of Art, and the National Museum of American Art.

Hilary went on to receive her B.F.A from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she majored in Painting. During her time at RISD, she attended Art History courses at Brown University, was selected to attend a student exchange in Edinburgh, Scotland with the Edinburgh College of Art, and was one of 12 seniors awarded a position for the European Honors Program in Rome, Italy.

Upon graduating in 1999, Hilary assumed the role of sole Illustrator, creator and designer for Vivian Lives, a teen-oriented website. As the only creative on staff, Hilary had the opportunity to design the site's entire aesthetic, developing animated characters, backgrounds and props, and links for Yahoo, Rolling Stone, and vendors such as Chanel, Guerlain, and DKNY. Hilary's illustrations have been featured in several books, and in countless publications including Elle, MarieClaire, Bazaar, People, Teen People, Women's Wear Daily, and the Kansas City Star.

After working at VivianLives in New York City for nearly four years, Hilary moved to León, Guanajuato, Mexico, where she worked as a teacher and Coordinator for the Boston Academy English School. During her time there Hilary taught dynamic English language classes to children, young professionals, and adults in the immersion method. Hilary

developed, designed and created curriculum and teaching aids, trained new teachers, and represented the school at numerous nationwide teacher conventions in Mexico.

Ms. Nordholm currently works at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art as the Manager of The New Dimensions Program, an innovative program for teens designed to instill deeper, more meaningful learning experiences for students—and build a foundation for greater lifelong enjoyment of the arts. Hilary continues to paint, draw, and freelance, with recent accomplishments including the children's book, *Lester the Lion*.