

# Diego Rivera's artistic mastery

Tim Tower  
2 September 1999

The exhibition, *Diego Rivera, Art and Revolution*, previously on display in Cleveland and Los Angeles, will show in Houston between September 19 and November 28, before concluding its tour in Mexico City. This major retrospective of the artist's work, the first in more than a decade, includes over 100 images assembled from major collections throughout the world. The works are divided into four parts representing the artist's entire career, but with special emphasis on pieces with which many viewers may not be familiar.

The first group includes academic drawings and paintings done in Mexico and some done after Rivera traveled to Europe on a government grant in 1907. It reveals the early indications of a great talent and includes a number of remarkable studies and transitional works in which he worked with the styles of different masters in the protracted process of establishing his own voice. The second group includes European work from before his return to Mexico in 1921. It shows Rivera in a period of powerful aesthetic growth, in which he combined a voracious appetite for studying the European masters with continuous experimentation in the new methods of the Parisian avant-garde. He devoted himself to mastering every style and technique while, at the same time, striving to express the historic scale of the social and cultural eruptions taking place.

The third selection consists of sketches and studies for the murals that dominated Rivera's work for the three decades beginning in Mexico in 1922 and for which he became world-famous. These pieces seem to play more the role of connective tissue than that of muscle or bone within the exhibition. They tie the easel works in the show to the more famous and familiar murals and also provide the necessary transition between the early and later easel works on display.

The fourth group, overlapping the third chronologically, includes portraits and other paintings from the mid-1920s until the time of his death. Here, along with pieces of extraordinary beauty and expressive strength, are some in which the effects of political, as well as personal, traumas and frustrations seem to have taken their toll on the aging giant.

Applied to Rivera's life and work, the title "Art and Revolution" is certainly justified. His life was bound up as much, or more, than that of any other artist with the great events that shaped the twentieth century. The work of this great artist and supporter of the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution and also, for a period of time, the Fourth International must surely hold a key to one of the great questions of cultural history—the relationship between the arts and social revolution. It seems, however, that the exhibit organizers were not prepared to probe this crucial point, or for whatever reason, were willing to allow it to remain unaddressed. They have posed the question, however, and at the same time have presented a fascinating and forceful body of work. This, after all, is not so little.

Diego Rivera was born in 1886 and died in 1957. He studied at the National School of Fine Arts in Mexico City between 1898 and 1906, where he won several awards and achieved initial public recognition. He then traveled to Europe on a small pension provided by the governor of Veracruz, beginning his studies in 1907 in the studio of Eduardo Chicharro in Madrid. For the next 14 years he traveled and worked in Europe, only returning to Mexico in 1910 to exhibit his paintings.

Rivera's work then reflected the raging aesthetic and political

controversies of the émigré community of artists, writers and revolutionaries. Confidence in man's ability to remake the world dominated in this highly creative atmosphere. In 1917, the year of the October Revolution, Rivera broke with Picasso and cubism. Before returning to Mexico in 1921, he traveled through Italy studying the art of fresco painting.

Beginning in 1922 with his first mural, *Creation*, painted at the National Preparatory School, he pioneered the development of fresco painting into one of the leading forms of twentieth century art. In the same year, he co-founded the Union of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Graphic Artists and joined the Mexican Communist Party.

In 1929 he came into conflict with the Party leadership. Stalin's theory of Socialist Realism imposed strict restrictions on both style and subject. On top of voicing certain disagreements with Stalin's political line, Rivera declined to alter a mural in line with party demands. The Party expelled him.

In 1933 he began work on a major fresco at Rockefeller Center in New York City. When he refused to remove a portrait of Vladimir Lenin from the wall, Rockefeller dismissed him and had the painting destroyed. Rivera responded by using his designs for a fresco in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. In regard to the conflict in New York, he said it was "the only correct painting to be made in the building [as] an exact and concrete expression of the situation of society under capitalism at the present time, and an indication of the road that man must follow in order to liquidate hunger, oppression, disorder and war."

Around this time, Leon Trotsky, leader of the Russian Revolution and of the International Left Opposition and soon-to-be the founder of the Fourth International, was a man without a visa—hounded from one country to another by both Stalinism and imperialism. Rivera played a major role in securing Trotsky a visa and a place to live in Mexico.

In 1938 he collaborated with Trotsky and André Breton in preparing the *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, a document based on the deep connection between authentic art and the revolutionary movement of the working class. Here was the fruit of discussions between the leader of world socialism, the leader of surrealist literature and one of the foremost representatives of modern painting at a moment when fascism destroyed progressive tendencies in art as "degenerate" and the Stalinists denounced independent creative work as "fascist."

"True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models," it states, "but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time—true art is unable not to be revolutionary, *not* to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture."

At his best, Rivera gave monumental form to these themes, combining in his art confidence in the capacities of the working class and mankind with radiant beauty and compassion. Trotsky's assassination, the outbreak of war and its aftermath would soon pose enormous political and cultural problems. Rivera's previous resistance to the Stalinist straight jacket of

Socialist Realism proved to be inadequate as a political inoculation against the pressure to support Stalinism after the war. His disorientation took a toll on his later work.

Among early paintings opening the show is the self-portrait of a gifted, yet self-conscious, and somewhat tentative student. From this and its companion pieces one can see why his academic work secured a modest government pension and later a grant for study in Europe. The drawings are delicate and masterful; the oils evoke strong, consistent moods.

In the picture of a hospital garden entitled *Promenade of the Melancholics*, a shaded pathway between hedge rows in a wood leads from shadow into bright sunlight. Already in this early piece from 1904, the painter succeeds in evoking an unbroken mood of quiet warmth. His palette is richly suited to recreating the salubrious atmosphere of midday sun filtering through tall trees. It is a picture of beckoning optimism.

In Europe a few years later, the viewer will recognize that Rivera hardly required an internal revolution to master the somber warmth typical of contemporary Spanish painting. The soft light of a setting sun shimmers in four panes of glass set in dark wood frames and glows from aging stucco and masonry in the picture of a *House in Vizcaya*. Here Rivera displays his capacity to immerse himself in a scene with such pleasure that one feels invited, or drawn, to join him. Soft shadows and gently curving cobblestone streets impart a sense of tradition, resting like a comfortable saddle, on the landscape. No people, plants or animals appear. Yet Rivera draws vitality and warmth, even personality, from inanimate objects. This canvas from 1907 also gives a hint of the rhythmic compositions he would develop so forcefully later.

In a number of paintings, Rivera blurred the distinction between the study of a classic work and an original one. It is beyond the scope of this comment to compile a comprehensive list of his influences. We can say that such a list would have to include: Posada, El Greco, Velasquez, Goya, Titian, Tintoretto, Ingres, Monet, Cezanne, Renoir and Picasso. He incorporated a wide variety of style, technique and subject, copying schools of painting, until he mastered them, or reworking a traditional subject with a new and opposite technique.

The picture of *Notre Dame de Paris from La Porte de la Tournelle*, done in 1909, is an outstanding example. The sky and cathedral structure demonstrate a technical mastery of Monet's treatment of the sky and church facade. The intensity of bright sunlight is recreated by breaking it up into its component colors on the canvas. For this study, however, Rivera shifted the focus, pitching his easel on the opposite bank of the Seine, below the level of the street and the cathedral. In the foreground shadowy dock workers load huge kegs with a crane onto a barge. Thick figures and rich earth tones are reminiscent of the work of Jean Francois Millet, whose studies of peasants from the mid-nineteenth century hang nearby in the Louvre.

Rivera's candid combination of material from historically distant and seemingly incompatible schools of painting is often refreshing. In both a deep bow, and also a challenge, to El Greco, who painted the same scene some 300 years earlier, he selected a *View of Toledo* for a study in 1912. El Greco had used a combination of serpentine clouds and shadows combined with near surreal color to achieve a sense of the social and spiritual tension in this center of Catholic power during the time that Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake and Galileo was put on trial.

Rivera reversed the artistic process, bathing the landscape in bright pastels of warm sunlight and building the composition with angular geometric forms, unified by dominant diagonals. Rivera seemed to be reaching for the analytical approach of the cubists by working against the mannerism of El Greco. El Greco's town was almost swallowed by the terrain; whereas, Rivera's spires tower over the land and water; and his blocky buildings are encroaching everywhere. His painting is a little hollow, lacking internal cohesion. This weakness, however, was more than compensated by the success of some that were soon to follow.

In a major portrait the next year, Rivera elongated the figure of his friend *Adolfo Best Mougard* in a manner again reminiscent of El Greco. For Rivera, the method strengthens an image of sophisticated urbanity. Mougard appears on an elevated platform, in fact, the balcony of Rivera's studio, made of concrete and steel. Steam and smoke rise from locomotives and factories in the bustling metropolis behind him. A composition of powerful conflicting diagonals portrays the dynamism of Paris as the center of Europe. The Ferris wheel, which dominated the city's skyline at the time, dominates the background of the painting, appearing to spin around the end of Mougard's extended finger. Planes of color bend and wash the churning composition, while the clear distinction between foreground, middle and background reflects Rivera's lingering ambivalence toward the cubist repudiation of classical perspective.

In a spectacular display of vibrant color, rich texture and playful forms, Rivera captured a sense of exhilaration in the *Majorcan Landscape* of 1914. He was obviously thrilled by this Mediterranean paradise—each sensuous, lively aspect accentuated because of the war erupting in Europe. He painted a vision of Elysian fields, in a sense, expressing the inner needs of man, at the moment when Europe was plunging into a house of horrors.

The glistening beaches, which he applied with a palette knife, form a fragile protective frame for this teaming oasis of life, which seems to well up like a plethora of bacteria in a fragile droplet under a microscope. He loaded on paint with stiff brushes, imparting succulent, plastic qualities to rocks, earth and vegetation. Here a natural rhythm takes over the composition, like a walk on a summer day, repeating the simple forms of a Mediterranean cornucopia. The picture also resembles a bowl of luscious fruit, prepared to satisfy a simmering homesickness for the familiar warmth of sub-tropical Mexico.

Rivera followed in 1915 with *Zapatista Landscape*, which he called "probably the most faithful expression of the Mexican mood that I have ever achieved." In this tightly unified and compact composition of brilliant color and rich texture, Rivera gave expression to the creative forces of the Mexican Revolution at one of its most painful and bloody moments. His novel composition places a cubist portrait against a simplified background done in classical perspective.

Volcanic lava, the blood of the peasantry and a pregnant belly are woven together to create a portrait of the revolution. A rifle, leather belt, blanket, ammunition box and sombrero are silhouetted against old craters and mountains of Mexico. There is dignified humility, combined with a smoldering, volcanic eruption. The very land itself is being disrupted and reformed. Now at the height of his powers as a cubist, Rivera surgically separated line, texture, shape and color, to fuse them into a unified composition. The forms interpenetrate and revolve around each other as if held together and driven apart by great forces, like those operating inside the nucleus of an atom.

*Female Nude* from 1918-19 gives an example of the artist's fascination with Renoir, whom he credited with some of the most beautiful paintings ever done. In recognition of the enduring appeal of Rivera's work, we have to admit that many of his images defy verbal description. Suffice it to say that the rhythmic composition and intense color of this one have the magical ability to transport the viewer from a jostling crowd into a realm of sensual intimacy.

The *Garbage Picker*, a major painting done in tempera and oil on masonite in 1935, provides a beautiful example of the polished, sculptural quality Rivera achieved in many frescoes. Restricting his palette to a few tones, he focuses the knot of the composition on the straining profile of his anonymous subject.

In this context, one can hardly avoid reflecting on the hundreds of pre-Columbian artifacts which Rivera collected over many years. Frida Kahlo said he would spend hours admiring these objects. Striving for ever more universal means of expression, he was constantly reworking and

combining artistic forms. His simple, sculptural forms are among the most moving in modern art.

The stunning *Portrait of Lupe Marin*, from 1938, although quite strong and sculptural itself, especially in the hands, which are thrust forward, creates a very different effect. Here the luminous colors of the sky, reflected in the folds of Lupe's flowing white dress, combine with complexities introduced by the reflection in a large mirror standing behind her right shoulder to convey a beautiful, complex and sophisticated personality.

The enigmatic *Nocturnal Landscape*, from 1947, is one of the most seductively beautiful in the show. A group of peasants lounges in a tree whose trunks weave a serpentine pattern through the darkness. A donkey stares out of deep night shadows. And an eerie artificial light illuminates the group. Expressions are hidden, effaced, as individual figures blend into the landscape. Rivera's brilliant palette creates a quiet, melancholy tone for the scene of modest spectators at what was likely the filming of John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. He loved films himself and, in this picture, reveals his sense of irony. That night's audience of peasants who worked the Sierra Madre would probably never be able to see its portrayal on film.

A decade later the subtlety is gone when Rivera, admittedly broken-hearted and very sick, traveled to the Soviet Union. The previous year he had been readmitted to the Communist Party following an expulsion of more than two decades. *Labor's Day Parade in Moscow*, done in 1956, is colorful, but lifeless.

For his entire conscious life Rivera remained an outspoken defender of the oppressed and sympathizer of revolutions throughout the world. Both artistic and political controversies swirled around him. He fought, often heroically, for his convictions. Under complex and difficult conditions, he may have paid a price for this; but he also gained enormously. He was profoundly dissatisfied with the reality around him and, while faithfully portraying it, attempted to lift the veil to reveal an ideal future.

Modern life is based upon the ever-deepening exploitation of the many by the few, where all means of deceit and superstition join forces to conceal what is essential. Hypocrisy follows violence, adding insult to injury on the collective conscience. Small wonder that crowds line up to view Rivera's work. His paintings are a bandage on the wound, providing true pleasure for those who really look.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**