Eighty years of the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts

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2013 marks 80 years since the completion of the *Detroit Industry Murals* at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) painted by the great Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957). These are works that should be seen in person, if at all possible.

The murals, first viewed by the public in March 1933, consist of more than two dozen panels that magnificently cover the four walls and ceiling of what is known as the Rivera Court. They depict, first of all, automobile production in all its stages, with the activity of the workers in the forefront.

Other panels treat fertility, birth and the processes of nature. Rivera introduces numerous additional themes, including the use of technology for improving humanity's condition or, alternatively, for its destruction. He also painted four massive female figures representing the different races, who hold iron, coal, limestone and sand in their hands (ingredients of steel), respectively.

The murals at the DIA represent an artistic coming to terms with modern life and its implications that is perhaps without parallel.

For a panoramic view of the murals please click here. The DIA also has its own tour.

Great art is a living, continuously unsettling presence. Works created under the particular circumstances that surrounded the painting of the Detroit Industry murals in 1932-33 doubly so.

Rivera was a socialist and drawn to Detroit by its concentration of automobile production. His work was dedicated to and has always meant a great deal to the city's auto workers. In recent years, the car manufacturers have closed many plants, destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs, and savaged the wages and benefits of new hires.

As part of the social counterrevolution under way in America and globally, the Detroit Institute of Arts, which houses the Rivera Court, is threatened. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and his accomplices have brought in Christie's, the auction house, to calculate the value of the DIA's collection, or some of its most prized pieces, with an eye to helping pay off the bankrupt city's debts to wealthy creditors. Could the Rivera murals themselves be sold or destroyed? Nothing is beyond the realm of possibility.

The museum and its ability to display its collection (65,000 works of art, reportedly the second largest collection in the US held by a municipally owned museum) to the public have been under assault for decades. After the state of Michigan and various city administrations repeatedly cut their contributions to the DIA, voters in three metropolitan Detroit counties were asked in August 2012 to approve a ten-year property tax to support the museum.

The WSWS opposed the millage proposal (which eventually passed), not out of indifference to the fate of the art collection, but because, we wrote, "the millage campaign is part of a larger pattern playing out across the country of denying public funds to vital social and cultural services and then demanding that the general population pay higher taxes to make up the shortfall. … What is required is a socialist response. Rejection of the millage has to be accompanied by a broadening of the struggle in defense of jobs, education, housing, health care and cultural institutions."

We commented, prophetically, "There is, moreover, no basis for the claim that passage of the millage will solve the problems of the DIA, let alone the other cultural institutions that are being starved of funds."

In the museum's monthly newsletter for September 2013, DIA director Graham Beal asks, "Will the DIA have to sell its art?" He goes on, "It seems to have become the story that just will not die, covered by news agencies as far apart as Hong Kong and Warsaw … We have no intention of breaching the most fundamental tenet of the art museum world: that art in the collection can only be sold to acquire more (and better) art."

Beal may be sincere in his opposition, but the methods he and the DIA's officialdom choose to employ in their efforts to defend the art—behind-the-scenes negotiations, bluster and, if necessary, court action—cannot be relied upon to stave off the financial barbarians. On the contrary, the DIA's appeasement and timidity merely whet the voracious appetites of the billionaires who would like to profit from the art or add it to their own collections.

The defense of the DIA and the Rivera murals falls to the social force with whose existence and history they are thoroughly bound up: the working class. A little history will deepen and strengthen our argument.

German-born William [Wilhelm] Valentiner, who would serve as director of the DIA from 1924 to 1945 and who would commission Rivera to paint his murals, was assistant to director Wilhelm von Bode at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin prior to World War I. Bode recommended him to J.P. Morgan to become Curator of Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. When war broke out, Valentiner returned to Germany and was mobilized in the army.

The revolutionary upsurge during and following the First World War, which reached its high point in the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 and spread to Germany in November 1918, proved a decisive experience for the brilliant art historian.

Valentiner participated in forming a group of artists and their supporters into the *Novembergruppe* (November Group, named after the month of the German revolution) of 1918 in Berlin, which sympathized with the revolution and advocated opening museums to the masses. That organization merged with the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers Council for Art) in December of the same year.

Under Valentiner's administration at the DIA, the latter was the first major museum to establish substantial collections of pre-Columbian and African art. He was intimately familiar with the German Expressionists, and was able to collect an unparalleled selection of their works.

In 1931 the opportunity arose to retain Diego Rivera. Valentiner worked for months to convince the arts commission to hire the Mexican artist. Edsel Ford, son of Henry Ford, then president of the commission, offered to give the museum $10,000 for the project. Valentiner suggested the two large panels in the museum's garden courtyard. For the proposed area to be covered, the normal fee for Rivera and his staff would be double what

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had been offered. Ford agreed to the increased fee.

Rivera arrived in Detroit in April 1932 in the depths of the Great Depression. One out of four workers was officially unemployed in the US. A month earlier, Ford Motor Company thugs had fired into a March of some 6,000 hungry workers in the Detroit area, killing five and wounding two dozen more. Some 60,000 workers joined the funeral procession and sang the Internationale at the graveside.

The revolutionary artist was inspired by the highly charged situation in this most powerful industrial city and, one must add, by the remarkable space set aside for his frescoes. He offered to expand the project to cover all 27 panels in the courtyard, effectively reducing his own compensation per square meter by 75 percent. Ford's contribution was consumed in sustaining Rivera, his wife (the painter Frida Kahlo), and his staff for the next 10 months. The murals represent, therefore, in every sense, the gift of the artist to the working class.

After studying the city, its factories and laboratories, Rivera worked nonstop for eight months, often spending 16 hours on the scaffold without a break. He lost 100 pounds and produced a masterpiece of the 20th century.

In her excellent study, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, Linda Bank Downs, head of education at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, who played a crucial role in recovering sketches and life-sized cartoons that Rivera made in preparation for painting the frescoes, explains the fascinating process:

"Rivera's preliminary ideas for the automotive panels began with rectangular, iconic, and hierarchic images. The north wall automotive panel composition focused on the open-hearth operations, where gigantic ladles are used to combine all the ingredients of steel, which are heated into molten metal and poured into ingot molds. Rivera created an iconic image of two workmen flanking the open hearth ladle.

"The workmen are so monumental in scale that they diminish the size of the actual ladle, which, in reality, is at least five times larger than the human figure. Rivera's original intent was to monumentalize the worker.

"As Rivera studied industrial processes more carefully, he abandoned the images of the iconic workers and created an integrated composition capturing the movement of conveyors, workers, and machines. This transformation from static to dynamic can be seen in his sketches." (1)

Valentiner was delighted on returning from an unpaid sabbatical he had taken to ease financial pressure on the museum. Writing decades earlier on the late work of Michelangelo, Valentiner noted a process that had occurred in the work of other great masters.

"The allegiance of the really great artist returns ultimately to the portrayal of those simple and powerful emotions whose appeal is universal," he wrote. "This tendency explains the light esteem in which many of the later works of the great masters are held. It is the result of their simplicity and obviousness, of the purposeful avoidance of all glamour that might detract from reality." (2) These words apply with equal vigor to the mature work of Diego Rivera. And by his own assessment, the best of it is on the walls at the DIA.

March 1933, when the murals were first shown to the public, was the worst month for joblessness in the history of the United States, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Record crowds, as large as 10,000 on a single day, pressed into the courtyard to witness the murals.

For many workers, the Rivera Court had enormous gravitational pull. From that moment on, the museum and the Rivera murals in particular have been tied to the fate of the working class in Detroit. Rivera unveiled the central, revolutionary role of that class in powerful images that remain at the heart of the city's cultural life. The bourgeois establishment could not stand it at the time and never accommodated itself fully to the murals. (During the height of the McCarthy anticommunist witch-hunts in the 1950s, the museum placed a sign above the entrance to the Rivera Court denouncing "Rivera's politics and his publicity seeking" as "detestable.")

Rivera's monumental effort came under vehement attack from the media and the ultra-right during the months he was working in Detroit. The quasi-fascist Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak who issued anti-Semitic and anticommunist diatribes during his weekly radio broadcasts, led the charge against Rivera and his murals. Coughlin, along with numerous other reactionaries, demanded the work be destroyed.

Clifford Epstein wrote disparagingly in the *Detroit News*, "The spectator will look in vain for any indication in the artist's work of anything that smacks of the city's cultural life, of its historic tradition or of its spiritual aspiration." As though the working class and auto production were not at the center of the city's life.

Local churchmen was equally horrified by the murals and their atheism. Epstein continued in the *Detroit News*, "Protest comes today from a Churchman, the Rev. H. Ralph Higgins, senior curate of St. Paul's Cathedral, who charges that the murals portrayed only the utilitarian side of Detroit's growth." For the senior curate too the workers were pariahs, unmentionable. "Mr. Higgins objects particularly to the so-called vaccination panel which he said would immediately remind any observer of a presentation of the holy family. … 'The painting should be washed from the walls, because it inevitably must impress the spectator as a satire of that family dear to religion.' Mr. Higgins said."

Rivera was unmoved and remained perfectly dignified. "I have heard the objection made," he said, "that I have not painted any spiritual thing in these frescoes. Well, I have never seen spirits. Every day I see automobiles and workers. And I can only paint what I see."

"This is not the first time my work has been criticized," he added later. "If these Detroit frescoes did not bring criticism, then I would be worried. I would know that my work is not alive, that it made no impression on people who came to see it."

For Rivera, the decisive refutation of the criticism came in a letter that he read to a reporter.

Dear Master,

Please, give me the permission to express my grateful thanks for the greatness of your feeling and understanding in all your great work, this, your own creation as I stand here and see it with my old eyes that labored for 45 years for others with no other recognition in this corrupt society than just to be called a 'hand.'

Therefore useful workers of the world, for the first time in the history of mankind, shall honor you as the first great artist of understanding, and with your great help the workers of the world will take their place. Wishing you a healthy, joyful life.

Respectfully, Louis Gluck. For 45 years a wood carver.

"That is my great compensation," added the artist. "Anyhow, the $20,000 I received from Edsel Ford for my work is tied up in the First National Bank [of] Detroit." The bank had been shut by the Roosevelt administration for reorganization.

The creation of the *Detroit Industry* murals was the high point of both Valentiner's and Rivera's work. Its real value, and that of the collection gathered around it, cannot be measured at auction. The debt collectors view art as a source of profit, a store of value against the uncertainties of economic crisis, a symbol of status and social power within the personal grasp of the wealthy.

The essential role of art lies in developing consciousness and feeling. As a worker assimilates the wealth of culture, he becomes spiritually richer, more sensitive, sophisticated, and conscious of history and society. He learns to criticize the present and prepare the future. That is what inflamed the city fathers eighty years ago. And it is why the DIA is worth fighting for.

(1) Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera, the Detroit Industry Murals*, The Detroit Institute of Arts in association with Norton & Company, New York 1999, 131-136.

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(2) Wilhelm Valentiner, *The Late Works of Michelangelo*, 1914, 2.

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