

## “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit,” at the Detroit Institute of Arts

# In defense of Diego Rivera’s Detroit Industry frescoes

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*“Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit,” at the Detroit Institute of Arts, March 15-July 12, 2015* The current exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit,” treats the 11 months the famed Mexican artists spent in the city, between April 1932 and March 1933.

The exhibition contains much that is fascinating and even sublime. However, the overall approach taken by the curators, which exalts art concentrated on the “self,” is troubling and, in some places, wrongheaded and even reactionary.

Rivera (1886-1957) and Kahlo (1907-1954) were married in August 1929, and spent much of the years 1930 to 1933 in the US, in response, in part, to an anti-communist witch-hunt in Mexico. A socialist and supporter of the October Revolution, Rivera had been expelled from the Communist Party of Mexico in 1929 for speaking out in opposition to Stalin.

While in Detroit, Rivera painted his magnificent *Detroit Industry* frescoes, which remain the centerpiece of the DIA. The murals depict industrial production in all its facets, with workers at the center of the imagery, as well as the natural and social processes that culminate in modern human life. This complex work directs the viewer to many of the great dramas and dilemmas of the 20th century.

The DIA show contains full-sized cartoons, the preparatory drawings for the murals, as well as documentary videos, paintings and drawings by both Rivera and Kahlo from before, during and after the time the artists spent in Detroit. The cartoons, in particular, are spectacular, but fragile. They have not been seen for thirty years.

A brief video of Rivera at work is riveting. The great care, precision and enthusiasm with which he and his collaborators carried out the mural work are evident. Often working eighteen hours at a time, the Mexican artist lost a great deal of weight in the course of the Herculean physical and mental effort.

Another video clip shows workers in soup lines, and then, on March 7, 1932, Dearborn police and Ford company thugs attacking the Hunger March of 3,000 unarmed, unemployed people as they approached the Ford Rouge Plant. Four workers were shot to death in the infamous incident, a fifth died of his injuries three months later and 60 more were wounded in the bloody attack.

The funeral procession five days later, estimated at 60,000 people, shook the city’s foundations as chorus after chorus of “The Internationale” echoed for miles. That took place only weeks before Rivera and Kahlo arrived.

A series of works illustrates Rivera’s art prior to his stay in Detroit. There is the iconic portrait of Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary peasant

leader, and a lithograph of a peasant, “Boy with Dog,” from 1932. The unforgettable paintings “Flower Day” from 1925 and “Flowered Barge” (1931) in his mature, glowing, monumental style, appear as well. “Sawing Rails,” done in Moscow in 1927, and “Soviet Harvest Scene” are also on display.

Frida Kahlo’s “Portrait of Eva Frederick” from 1931 is appealing and shows the influence of Rivera. Her painting “Frieda and Diego Rivera, 1931” uses a flattened, primitive approach. Kahlo’s “Window Display on a Street in Detroit” (1932), the first painting she completed in Detroit, is quite touching.

Rivera’s pieces, “Juanita Rosas,” “Self-Portrait” and “Nude with Beads,” all from 1930, and “Friend of Frida,” from 1931, along with Portraits of Edsel Ford and DIA director William Valentiner, responsible for Rivera’s coming to Detroit, are included as well.

On May 24, 1932, Valentiner wrote in his diary with deep respect and admiration: “Today Rivera made a sketch of me in profile, with finest red and black chalk. While other artists usually waste a lot of paper, he used only one sheet. With the greatest assurance he drew the outlines with fine and even lines. It was at its best after half an hour, when the sketch was finished... Contrary to other great artists, he immediately brings out the likeness between the portrait and the model. With his mathematically inclined mind he immediately hits upon the right proportions.” (Margaret Sterne, *The Passionate Eye, The Life of William R. Valentiner*)

Unfortunately, as noted above, the remarkable character of many of the works in “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit” does not compensate for the exhibition’s real and significant weaknesses, which tend to compromise and undermine its important material.

At the center of the difficulties lies the organizers’ unjustifiable attempt to elevate Kahlo’s artistic stature and, more generally, to make the case for art that primarily explores the individual artist’s “anguish and sense of suffering,” in the words of a DIA press release. This effort is in line with contemporary identity politics and upper-middle class self-absorption. This inevitably involves, implicitly or explicitly, diminishing or dismissing the significance of the *Detroit Industry* frescoes and its subject matter.

To understand why the frescoes are so offensive to contemporary art museum officials and critics alike, one has to grasp the driving forces in Rivera’s artistic life in the early 1930s, which animated the painting of the murals. The Mexican painter was inspired by great events, especially the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, in the production of his most important works.

It will come as a revelation, and one hopes an inspiration, to many who attend the exhibition that there is a history and tradition of revolutionary

art. It has proved possible in the past to develop the highest forms of creative expression wedded to the aspirations, struggles, sufferings and trials of the masses. Rivera and his work were perhaps the greatest demonstration of this possibility in the field of fine art in the 20th century.

Leon Trotsky, whose supporter Rivera became for a number of years, wrote in 1938: "In the field of painting, the October revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR but in faraway Mexico... Nurtured in the artistic cultures of all peoples, all epochs, Diego Rivera has remained Mexican in the most profound fibres of his genius. But that which inspired him in these magnificent frescoes, which lifted him up above the artistic tradition, above contemporary art, in a certain sense, above himself, is the mighty blast of the proletarian revolution. Without October, his power of creative penetration into the epic of work, oppression and insurrection, would never have attained such breadth and profundity." ("Art and Politics in Our Epoch")

Rivera defended Trotsky against the vicious attacks of Stalinism and was instrumental in the Russian revolutionary's obtaining asylum in Mexico in 1937. They collaborated, together with André Breton, on an important "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art." The omission of Trotsky's name from the exhibition can hardly be an accident.

One of the extraordinary videos on display at the DIA shows a mass of workers battling police, as well as Rivera and Kahlo in front of a banner advertising works by Lenin and Marx in English. "There remained one thing left for me to prove," said Rivera, speaking of his trip to the US. "My theory of revolutionary art would be accepted in an industrial nation where capitalists rule." An overhead view of the DIA courtyard when the murals were opened to the public in March 1933 shows the space packed wall to wall.

Both in the mural work and in the video footage, a powerful sense of the industrial working class in Detroit emerges. Museum-goers perhaps used to the often demoralized and irrationalist outpourings of postmodernism, racial politics, feminism and other trends in recent decades will be struck by the massive and creative force of the working class.

The viewer must also be struck by the striking parallel, despite the changes over many decades, between present-day Detroit and the situation described in one of the videos of growing popular anger over the mass poverty at one pole of society and the immense wealth at the other, in the midst of the Depression. Many must see this and think, "So it remains today!"

The *Industry* frescoes are the greatest draw at the DIA and have always held a special place with the most conscious elements of the population in Detroit and beyond. The threat to the DIA two years ago, in connection with city's filing for bankruptcy protection, aroused popular outrage. On the one hand, DIA officials are obliged to pay nominal tribute to the frescoes, describing the work as a "masterpiece" in their promotional material. On the other hand, the current show contains a sustained and consistent attack on Rivera and his work.

Before the *Detroit Industry* murals were made public in 1933, right-wing forces and religious bigots were howling for their destruction. Rivera's artistic response was powerful and enduring. The frescoes depict the emergence of the working class, drawn like minerals from all regions and races and formed in the cauldron of industrial production into the central creative force of a bright future.

Now, however, a new kind of attack is under way, proceeding from within, as it were, from the DIA hierarchy and the art world.

Along these lines, certain aspects of the current exhibition's organization are significant. The room containing Rivera's breathtaking cartoons, for example, is followed by one almost entirely devoted to Kahlo's miscarriage, or abortion, that occurred while she was in Detroit.

Three weeks before Rivera began to paint his murals, his wife entered Henry Ford Hospital. Evidence suggests, according to the exhibition

catalogue, that Kahlo induced the loss of her pregnancy on July 4, 1932 by ingesting quinine. A few weeks later, with Rivera's encouragement, she made the lithograph "Frida and the Abortion, 1932" to memorialize the event.

The end of her pregnancy figures prominently in Kahlo's work and may have influenced Rivera's decision to replace an agricultural scene, which appears in the exhibition as a full-sized cartoon, with a healthy infant curled in a plant bulb. This remarkable series of cartoons of the images that surround the infant is at the center of the current show. Root systems extend into rich soils and subterranean aquifers. Plowshares cultivate the surrounding terrain.

The artist said the image represented the museum "as the central organism for the development of the aesthetic culture of the community." ("Dynamic Detroit--An Introduction," *Creative Art*, April 1933). Giant, exquisite female nudes cradle fruits and grain on either side and lovingly watch over the child--the picture of a rich and satisfying future for all.

In any event, the loss of the unborn baby was traumatic for Kahlo and Rivera, but the curators' decision to raise this personal tragedy to the level of a world-historical event strikes a false, tasteless and disoriented note.

In Kahlo's "Henry Ford Hospital, 1932" we are confronted with a stricken woman, in a pool of blood, connected by multiple umbilical cords to a fetus, a snail, a pelvis and several other objects. The curator's argument that somehow this agonizing, intimate experience must supplant the grand conception of a harmonious future for all mankind is deeply disturbing.

This sort of imagery becomes the basis for the claim, for example by the *New York Times'* Roberta Smith, that "Kahlo emerges in the final galleries as the stronger, more personal and more original artist." Kate Abbey-Lambertz headlines her piece at the *Huffington Post*, "How Frida Kahlo's Miscarriage Put Her On The Path To Becoming An Iconic Artist."

One of the foulest efforts to denigrate Rivera, Michael H. Hodges' "Kahlo trumps Rivera in popular fame," recently appeared in the *Detroit News*, a chief organ of Detroit business circles. There is a certain appropriateness here. The new, slightly more sophisticated, assault on the murals is taken up by the newspaper that was at the center of the original attacks.

On March 19, 1933, a *News* editorial argued that the Rivera murals were "psychologically erroneous, coarse in conception and, to many women observers, foolishly vulgar." The *News* further asserted that the work was "un-American, incongruous and unsympathetic," recommended that DIA director Valentiner be fired and concluded that "perhaps the best thing to do would be to whitewash the entire work and return the Court to its original beauty."

Hodges' piece in March 2015 takes a different tack, assembling fashionable and snobbish contemporary attacks on Rivera. The *News* journalist first notes that in 1932 Rivera was one of the most famous artists in the world. "How times have changed," he observes, and then carries on: "Kahlo, the subject of the hit 2002 movie 'Frida,' has morphed into a pop-culture superstar and feminist icon, her fame today easily swamping Rivera's. To explain this, curators and art historians point to changing fashions and the compelling nature of Kahlo's personal narrative, which resonates with our self-obsessed age.

"For Rivera, one-half of the current Detroit Institute of Arts blockbuster... it's been quite a fall from grace," he writes.

Hodges calls on none other than the current, soon-to-retire, DIA director Graham Beal to help make his case. Beal terms Kahlo "an international superstar," adding, "you often have to explain to people--particularly anyone under 40--just who Rivera was and why we should care." (Who talks like this, using terms like "international superstar?")

The *News* article continues: "'When I first visited here in the early 1970s,' he [Beal] adds, 'Rivera looked hopelessly old-fashioned and

wrong-headed--realistic, political, and in a way, propagandistic. Her art is much more in keeping with today--highly personal and intimate, full of pain and uncertainty.”

These comments speak to decades-old processes that are now coming to a head. Wide layers of the so-called intelligentsia, who have become affluent and moved far to the right, no longer feel the need to conceal their social indifference and outright hostility to the working population... and their utter obsession with themselves. It's repugnant.

They latch onto Kahlo because what they read in her art corresponds to their own unease, interpreted in purely existential and individual terms. Rivera's challenging and carefully conceived imagery of people at work or engaged in epic struggles against war and disease, ignorance and prejudice is compared unfavorably to a series of pictures focusing on one individual's physical and psychic injuries.

The attack on art that addresses great social questions is relentless. On the audio guide, for example, guest curator Maria Cotera, a Women's Studies professor at the University of Michigan, asserts that we now know that “the minor is where we find the big ideas” and that “big ideas became deeply personal.” Wall texts celebrate Kahlo's subjectivism and criticize Rivera for advocating and explaining political principles and big historical and intellectual conceptions.

The curators write, for example, “Her [Kahlo's] intellectual and artistic interests hinged on defining and representing herself,” while “Diego Rivera wanted his murals to become part of a dialogue about society that supported his intellectual and artistic agendas.”

The line of the exhibition, never stated in an honest manner, is that Rivera may have had some justification for his social art given the conditions of the 1930s, but we have long since transcended the period when art and politics concentrated on the working class. Kahlo's critique of life is far more profound, “more thorough” than the class struggle conception promoted by Rivera because it is not fixated on changing the external world. Instead, it focuses on the inner being and “deeper” questions such as gender, sexuality, etc.

These views inevitably raise more directly the question of Kahlo's art and career, a subject far too large for extended treatment here. It is evident that the discovery of Kahlo coincides with the emergence of gender politics and postmodern ideology in the 1970s and 1980s.

As “Made in Her Image: Frida Kahlo as Material Culture,” by Lis Pankl and Kevin Blake, points out: “It is certainly no accident that Kahlo's popularity rose with the linguistic and cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences. With a greater emphasis on representation and identity politics, the academy found in Kahlo a perfect subject for analysis. Kahlo's complex ethnicity... artistic autoeroticism, and evident links to gender construction are of much appeal to poststructuralists.”

One cannot place all the blame for the uses to which she and her work are put on Kahlo, but there is certainly some basis in the art itself for the current infatuation. It does violence to the history of art and helps no one to reduce Rivera, a colossal figure who drew upon a profound study of art and conveyed powerfully the impact of the Russian and Mexican Revolutions, to the benefit of Kahlo, a figure identified with extreme subjectivity. Such a readjustment in the artistic-intellectual world's opinion must give one pause.

The victim of a serious accident at the age of 18 that required her to undergo dozens of surgeries over the course of her lifetime, Kahlo was no doubt a gifted artist, but her work is strikingly dominated by considerations of herself and her difficulties. She produced 143 paintings, 55 of which were self-portraits. Why so many? “Because I am so often alone,” she explained, “because I am the subject I know best.” Yes, but did she truly understand herself? An immense focus is hardly a guarantee that one understands a subject all that well.

There is something static, unchanging, in Kahlo's self-portraiture, even immature. Of course, she died quite young and she came under various

influences, not all of them happy or helpful ones. But in the self-portraits of Rembrandt and van Gogh, for example, one feels an unending intellectual and aesthetic development, the result of a bottomless curiosity about the world, history, society, resulting in an intense and compassionate realism.

A self-portrait is more than a picture of an individual. In its psychological depth and rigorous objectivity, a great self-portrait points beyond itself to something about the human situation in general, and perhaps the artistic personality in particular. Kahlo's self-portraits are unusual and distinctive, but they tend to refer the viewer always back to Kahlo and her immediate situation. They seem often to be a reminder of her anguished presence more than a window onto something broader. One cannot help but have the feeling these paintings are intended in part to impress and even to shock.

The subject cannot be removed from art, nor should it be, but there is a distinction between dealing honestly and vividly with oneself and one's circumstances and self-obsession. If a work becomes excessively personal, the universal may be lost in the process.

At a certain point, if the representation becomes too particular, why should anyone else care a great deal? Kahlo was neither the first nor the last person to suffer physical ailments and complications. Pankl and Blake write, “Kahlo's depictions of bodily pain are the most widely explored elements within her work.”

Art also requires a certain detachment, and the most compelling artistic figures have treated suffering, including their own, with restraint and dignity, not self-pity.

Uncritical admirers of Kahlo are miseducating the public and aspiring artists as well when they suggest, by implication, that wholeheartedly embracing one's afflictions or perhaps one's biology by itself is a possible route to artistic greatness. If such were the case, there would be no need for a serious study of art or society, or a concern with the fate of anyone other than oneself. And, indeed, such an outlook helps account for the largely desiccated, angst-ridden and self-centered art that predominates today.

All in all, the DIA's “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit,” a peculiar and contradictory event, raises a host of pressing issues.

Much of the imagery, including video imagery assembled by the curators themselves, tends to direct the museum-goer toward the big events of the 20th century, to the revolutionary role of the working class and, by implication, to a consideration of what point society and the human condition have now reached. After all, the exhibition is being held in an economically devastated city, where tens of thousands of people face the possibility of having their water shut off in the near future!

Yet the show's organizers and museum officials, along with their media apologists, are waging a ferocious ideological campaign in opposition to such concerns—even at the expense of the DIA's own centerpiece—in favor of art, in the words of the *New York Times*’ Smith, suffused with “existential torment.”

The defense of the *Detroit Industry* frescoes falls once again, as it did in the 1930s, to the only social force with an interest in the cultural development of the population as a whole and in art that looks at life and reality critically, the working class.



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