

Diego Rivera in the Soviet Union: An exhibition in Mexico City

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Diego Rivera and his Experience in the USSR, *presented in Mexico City at the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo House Studio Museum (Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo) and the Diego Rivera Mural Museum (Museo Mural Diego Rivera) until April 8.*

Diego Rivera (1886-1957), the Mexican painter and muralist, was one of the most significant artistic figures of the 20th century. The artist 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.

The current exhibition in Mexico City, *Diego Rivera and His Experience in the USSR (Diego Rivera y la experiencia en la URSS*, at the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo House Studio Museum and the Diego Rivera Mural Museum), focuses on the artist's two visits to the Soviet Union, the first in 1927-28 and the second in 1955-56. The exhibition contains materials from 28 collections around the world, including watercolors, paintings, sketches and letters. It also showcases photographs and posters that Rivera acquired in the USSR and kept until his death.

Rivera had a long and complicated history with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, most of which, unfortunately, is not examined in the current show. Absent this context, the viewer would fail to understand the changes that Rivera—and the USSR itself—underwent in the almost three decades between his two visits. However, despite its limitations, the exhibition, particularly materials from his first visit, sheds light on the experiences that inspired Rivera to go beyond the confines of Mexican nationalism and, during his healthiest period as an artist, take up the creation of revolutionary art.

In 1927, Rivera was invited to the USSR to participate in the commemorations of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. He was part of a delegation of “workers and peasants” representing Mexico. Upon arrival, he was certified as a member of the Communist Party and named a delegate of the Mexican Peasant League.

His relationship to the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), however, was already strained. Prior to his first visit, Rivera had resigned (1925) and been readmitted (1926) to the Mexican Stalinist party.

The 10th anniversary of the Revolution was celebrated amid the Stalinist bureaucracy's continued and ferocious efforts to silence Leon Trotsky and what was at the time the United Opposition (including the forces led by Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev). Oppositionists participated in celebrations of the anniversary of the Revolution with their own banners. Their slogans included: “Strike Against the Kulak, the NEPman, and the Bureaucrat!” Stalinist-organized thugs violently attacked Opposition contingents in Leningrad and Moscow. Trotsky's anticipation of reprisals proved correct. He and many Oppositionists were expelled from the Communist Party in December 1927, and in January 1928, Trotsky was banished to Alma Ata in Soviet Central Asia.

The 10th anniversary also took place one year after the British General strike of 1926 and on the heels of the bloody defeat of the Chinese Revolution, both betrayed by Stalinism's rejection of the very

internationalist program and outlook that had guided the October Revolution 10 years earlier.

These monumental events seriously weakened the Soviet and international working class and strengthened the grip of the national-opportunist Stalinist bureaucracy.

However, the 10th anniversary of the revolution also underscored the considerable achievements of the first worker's state, particularly under the terribly difficult conditions of the imperialist-organized civil war and the continued isolation of the Soviet Union.

Rivera witnessed the anniversary festivities firsthand, producing sketches of the serpentine masses of men and women marching through the Red Square. He was deeply touched by this powerful manifestation of the force of the working class. “I will never forget the first time that I saw the march and organized movement of the people in Moscow,” writes Rivera. “Snow was falling in an early morning. The marching mass was black, compact, rhythmically united, it had the elastic movement of a viper, but it was more threatening than any snake I could imagine.”

Rivera interacted with a wide range of Soviet artistic figures during his stay. He met the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and was a guest in the home of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who Rivera had previously met in Mexico. Eisenstein belonged to the *October* artistic group, which, although it pledged itself to “proletarian culture,” was one of the last gasps of the Soviet avant garde. Sympathetic to the group's mission, Rivera joined the collective.

Rivera spoke at several artists' groups and was named an instructor in the Moscow Academy of Fine Arts. The *Krasnaya Niva (Red Field)* magazine commissioned Rivera to paint a picture for the cover of their Paris Commune anniversary number.

Rivera had hopes of encouraging a muralist movement in the Soviet Union similar to the one which he, along with David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, had pioneered in Mexico to portray the cultural and political life of peasants and workers. In November 1927, Rivera was commissioned by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People's Commissar of Education, to paint a fresco in the Red Army Club in Moscow.

Rivera was given several photographs showing “innovative architectural projects, factories, metalworking plants, petroleum fields, technological advances, schools, theater, and general life and Russian culture.” Several of these photographs, along with sketches of the proposed mural, are on display at the exhibit.

In early May 1928, Lunacharsky informed Rivera that he should leave the country to avoid being arrested for “anti-Stalin” activities. Although it is unclear what immediately prompted his quasi-expulsion, it is likely that Rivera's relationship with artists who previously had a positive relationship with the Left Opposition put him in the crosshairs of the bureaucracy. His Red Army mural was never completed, and he would not return to the Soviet Union until two years before his death.

Rivera's first visit to the Soviet Union had a consequential impact on his future work. According to the exhibit, “while he had previously

incorporated workers as the principal element in his prior murals, it wasn't until his return to Mexico when this element began to have a different narrative, always placed in front of machines, factories or next to characters from the Soviet Army."

The time he spent with the *October* group also had a lasting effect on Rivera's compositions. The collage configurations that the group used in their propaganda posters is present in many of Rivera's murals after his trip, according to the exhibition's catalog.

One year after his visit, Rivera was once again expelled from the Communist Party after speaking out against Stalinism. An anticommunist witch-hunt in Mexico the same year led Rivera and Frida Kahlo, his wife and fellow socialist, to spend much of the early 1930s in the United States.

He painted some of his most well-known murals during this period. Rivera completed his breathtaking *Detroit Industry* frescos at the Detroit Institute of the Arts in 1933. His *Man, Controller of the Universe* was reproduced in Mexico City's *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in 1934 after the original in Rockefeller Center in New York City was destroyed for its portrayal of Lenin. These works brought to life the trials and struggles of the working class and depicted socialists—principally Lenin and Trotsky—providing leadership to the masses.

In 1936, Rivera became an open supporter of the movement for a Fourth International and helped persuade Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas to grant Trotsky asylum in Mexico. During this period, Rivera was consciously expressing the need to link artistic endeavors with the advancement of international socialism, making him one of the greatest interpreters of the October Revolution at the time. In 1938, Rivera collaborated with Trotsky and French writer André Breton on "A Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art":

"True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models 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."

Also in 1938 ("Art and Politics in Our Epoch"), Trotsky paid tribute to Rivera's specific contribution to art and society:

"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."

Rivera's artistic effort is indelible, but he was not to prove immune to the immense pressures and traumas of the mid-20th century. Trotsky's assassination in 1940, combined with the betrayals of Stalinism, the rise and crimes of fascism and the horrors of the Second World War, disoriented an increasingly skeptical and pessimistic layer of artists and intellectuals who chose to believe that Stalinism presented the continuity of the October Revolution. Rivera, losing confidence in the working class and the ability of the Fourth International to construct a revolutionary leadership, fell into the trap of confusion and demoralization. He made numerous attempts to rejoin the PCM and was finally readmitted in 1954.

Rivera visited the Soviet Union for a second time in 1955-56 to seek cancer treatment at Moscow's Botkin Hospital. Cobalt therapy—the type of treatment that Rivera received—was more advanced in the Soviet Union and not yet available in Mexico.

Like Rivera, the Soviet Union had undergone profound changes over the course of 30 years. The Mexico City exhibition lacks any discussion of the

Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution or the mass murder of revolutionary workers and youth. Many of the artists that Rivera had met during his first visit had since perished, through the purges or suicide, or been silenced by the bureaucracy. The show's brief discussion of "Socialist Realism" fails to explain why this anti-socialist and anti-realistic dogma arose, let alone its alternatives or consequences.

Rivera's political disorientation is perhaps best illustrated by his continued friendship with Siqueiros, who had led the first assassination attempt on Trotsky's life in May 1940. Siqueiros visited Rivera while he was at the hospital, and several photographs of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Emma Hurtado, Rivera's fourth and last wife, can be seen in the exhibition.

By this time, Rivera was not especially honest with himself or others. In his comments at the time, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate out what was genuine appreciation for the advances made by Soviet society and what was an effort to curry favor with the post-Stalin regime and international apparatus. "I am living in a new society, made up of people that are truly human beings," writes Rivera. "What finesse, what firmness, what clarity of thought, what delicacy in feeling, and what simple and constant friendliness and kindness!"

The exhibition displays many sketches of the doctors, nurses, and fellow patients that Rivera met during his four-month treatment in Moscow. In the outings he was allowed during his recovery, Rivera painted many passersby, particularly families and young children playing in the snow. He witnessed the October Revolution anniversary celebrations for a second time from the Moscow National Hotel.

During his second visit, he paid tribute to the participants of former revolutions by painting *Veteran of 1905* and *Veteran of 1917*. A 20-year-old who had fought in 1905 would have been 70 years old, while a corresponding participant of the October Revolution would now be 58. The *Veteran of 1917* is treated with honesty and, one senses, a great deal of respect and admiration. Looking into the eyes of the *Veteran of 1917*, one comes out with a clear feeling: the Russian working class is not to be trifled with.

With a few exceptions, however, there is a noticeable decline in the quality of the art Rivera produced during his second visit. The depictions of the powerful working class and the Red Army were replaced mostly by individual portraits. He no longer paints the great socialist leaders that he once defended to the point of having his murals censored or destroyed. Rivera's break with revolutionary socialism and capitulation to its betrayers dealt a heavy blow to his ability to synthesize the objective truth about the world around him.

Following Rivera's treatment, Rivera and Hurtado conducted a tour through eastern Europe. They visited the Auschwitz concentration camp and Hitler's bunker in Germany, among other sites. The pair then returned to Mexico in April 1956.

Rivera passed away on November 24, 1957, leaving behind several works he was unable to finish before his death. In Botkin Hospital, Rivera produced fascinating sketches for a new mural for the Faculty of Chemical Sciences at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM). The sketch contains hand-written instructions by Rivera on the themes and materials to be used in the new mural.

Rivera maintained a belief in the planned economy's ability to produce scientific achievements until his death. He closely followed the launch of Sputnik I, the first artificial Earth satellite, in October 1957. "Diego Rivera interpreted the Sputnik launch as proof that communism was capable of leading humanity to a new global order, and, using technology, to a better place in the cosmos," according to the museum catalog.

Diego Rivera and his Experiences in the USSR brings forward a large amount of previously little-known material and is worth a visit, despite its limitations. One hopes that the artists and youth that attend will be inspired to learn more about the Russian Revolution and, following

Rivera's example, turn toward the working class to produce new revolutionary art to awaken the consciousness and feeling of the masses.



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