

Diego Rivera's America: A tantalizing exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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Diego Rivera's America, *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: July 16, 2022—January 1, 2023; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas: March 11—July 31, 2023*

"I mean by America, the territory included between the two ice barriers of the two poles. A fig for your barriers of wire and frontier guards."

This 1931 comment by the great Mexican painter and muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was tucked away in a map showing the geographical expanse of his artistic creations in the first of numerous rooms at the recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) exhibition, *Diego Rivera's America*.

Rivera is renowned as the 20th century master at making murals, hundreds of which adorn public spaces in Mexico, and several of which were commissioned and remain available to the public in the United States. San Francisco boasts three Rivera murals, one of which is the centerpiece of the recent exhibition, along with 150 additional works that have been loaned to the exhibition or reorganized from the museum's own extensive collection.

Rivera saw California as the geographical "unity" of North and South "between the two ice barriers," and the exhibition's organizers remind us of Rivera's particular fondness for northern California.

Pan-American Unity, the imposing mural displayed on the museum's ground floor (formally titled by Rivera *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent*), illustrates Rivera's "fig for your barriers and frontier guards," as his title implies. Europe was in the throes of World War II in 1940, the year he created this complex, vibrant ode to the past, present and future of mankind's creativity.

The mural depicts centrally a massive, stylized Aztec goddess of organic sinew, earth and woven snakes, intertwined and blending with a huge stamping machine from Detroit's auto industry. She is rooted firmly, surrounded by figures representing the arts and sciences, engineering and the labor required for their creation.

This mural was painstakingly planned and then created before a live audience at the 1940 San Francisco World's Fair—the Golden Gate International Exposition. While *Diego Rivera's America* exhibition is now over in that city, this monumental work of art will remain at SFMOMA until its rebuilt home at City College of San Francisco has been completed later this year.

Rivera's murals, the works that made him world famous, contain elements of allegory and concrete realism, and are always complex. The recent SFMOMA exhibition presented several of the murals in nearly life-size projections, with ordinary people going about their business in front of a steady camera, so the viewer appreciates their size and scope. Welcoming the viewer to the exhibition's ten rooms was a projection of the first mural Rivera painted, in 1922, on his return to Mexico from

Europe. The work's title is *Creation*.

Rivera had spent over a decade in Paris and Italy, studying the works of the masters, and was clearly influenced in this work by the iconography he had seen in his travels, and certainly by Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. Rivera was an avowed atheist, yet portrayed his materialist view of "creation"—art, music, science—surrounding the symbol of life, the seeds and soil of the earth, as religious icons. The work was commissioned by the new Ministry of Education, established by the Mexican nationalist government of Álvaro Obregón.

Diego Rivera's America focuses on works from that time through the 1940s. The works presented include commissioned portraits, drawings and many sketches and preparatory works for his murals. There are some truly remarkable works here, including *The Flower Carrier* from 1935, originally commissioned by the then San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMOMA, and part of its permanent collection), depicting a peasant woman assisting a man bent over on hands and knees under the weight of an enormous basket of vibrant pink and blue flowers. The forms are simplified, the colors and shapes harmonious. Other well-known canvases include *Woman with Calla Lilies* (1945) and *Nude with Calla Lilies* (1944).

Recognized as an influential pioneer of modernism and having worked in Europe with the Cubists, Rivera flattens perspective in many of his works, with the foreground images nearly emerging from the picture plane itself.

One entire room is filled with some of the most intriguing and vibrant works, all depicting "The Market." Rivera's deep feeling for Mexico, its color and its people are revealed in these works.

Among the lesser-known of Rivera's works are sketches for costumes designed for an avant-garde ballet staged in 1927. SFMOMA commissioned Mexican artist and puppet-maker Toztli Abril de Dios to create life-size figures wearing Rivera's designs. They are beautiful and whimsical. There is also a 1930 proposal for the facade of the Paramount Theatre in Oakland, which he planned as a 100-foot-tall mosaic, an art form he considered "superior to fresco." But his design was not chosen and the mosaic was never produced.

This exhibition, the largest collection of Rivera's work since 1999, encompasses a broad range of works, and that may also be its weakness. The exhibition is organized thematically rather than chronologically, and is not intended as a retrospective. However, because Rivera's career spanned the most tumultuous years of the 20th century, the thematic emphases of the exhibition avoid the development and change in his world view and his artistic vision.

Rivera was possibly the world's most well-known politically conscious artist of his time, and the mural his best medium. During the period covered by the works at this exhibition he painted images incorporating

the Mexican Revolution; the Russian Revolution and its leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky; world war; fascism; Hitler; Stalinism; the Fourth International; the role of labor in society, a theme that appears in most of his murals; the Detroit Industry murals, which are the centerpiece of the Detroit Institute of the Arts; and the famous mural *Man at the Crossroads*, which was destroyed by the Rockefeller family because Rivera refused to delete an image of Lenin.

To fully grasp the most memorable of Rivera's works demands of the viewer an engagement with history and Rivera's own political trajectory, which was that of a man with a profound artistic and social sensitivity—or that encourages such an engagement. His political outlook was shaped by the extraordinary historical period in which he came to maturity. He was 19 in 1905, the year of Einstein's *annus mirabilis* and the first Russian Revolution. Sent to Europe to study art at the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, he returned to his homeland in 1921 a self-proclaimed committed communist and ardent supporter of the new Mexican revolutionary-nationalist government.

In 1927, Rivera was invited to Moscow for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. In 1928 he was expelled from Russia for his alleged sympathy for Trotsky. In 1936 he was instrumental in arranging asylum in Mexico for Trotsky and his wife. In 1938, he collaborated with Trotsky and writer André Breton in writing the *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*. But by the time he sat on the scaffolding in San Francisco creating Pan American Unity, in the summer of 1940, he had broken with Trotsky and was embracing the Stalinist line of class collaboration. This is evident in the mural *Pan American Unity*'s lower middle panel, where an American flag forms the background to the forces fighting against Hitler.

Following his experience in Europe, which included close collaboration with the artists of the Paris avant-garde and extensive work in the Cubist and European modernist movements, Rivera rejected any association with “art for art's sake,” as evidenced by the themes of his murals and the centrality of the oppressed in most of his work. However, he was first and foremost a passionate and brilliant artist. Trotsky, who lived for a time in the house in Coyoacán provided to him by Rivera and Frida Kahlo, was a great admirer of Rivera.

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It is in this regard that the SFMOMA exhibition dissatisfies. Outside of a general appreciation and cursory explanation of Rivera's radicalism and sympathy for the working class, the exhibition organizers appear uninterested (or perhaps merely ignorant) in regard to providing the viewers much historical context or deeper insight into Rivera's own ideological development. However, the accompanying catalog includes essays and additional plates of works not included in the exhibition that address these issues in greater detail.

The curator, James Oles, characterizes Rivera's politically influenced work, including the murals, as “social realism.” This label is often and mistakenly used interchangeably with “Socialist Realism,” the official and stultifying “school” of art approved of and imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. Rivera was hostile to the subordination of artists to state ideology either by Stalinism or fascism.

In June 1938, Leon Trotsky wrote a scathing attack on Stalinist “Socialist Realism” dictates in his essay, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch.” Trotsky wrote, “The style of present-day official Soviet painting is called ‘socialist realism.’ The name itself has evidently been invented by some high functionary in the department of the arts. This ‘realism’ consists in the imitation of provincial daguerreotypes of the third quarter of the last century; the ‘socialist’ character apparently consists in representing, in the manner of pretentious photography, events which never took place. ...”

Further, Trotsky explained why Rivera's murals were the quintessential example of truly revolutionary art: “In the field of painting, the October

revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR but in faraway Mexico, not among the official ‘friends,’ but in the person of a so-called ‘enemy of the people’ whom the Fourth International is proud to number in its ranks. Nurtured in the artistic cultures of all peoples, all epochs, Diego Rivera has remained Mexican in the most profound fibres of his genius.”

That which inspired Rivera in his magnificent frescoes, Trotsky continued, “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. Do you wish to see with your own eyes the hidden springs of the social revolution? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera.”

In the *Pan American Unity* mural, Rivera included a panel depicting the horrors of war and dictatorship. Emphasizing his view that the artist can and must address pressing political issues, the figures of Hitler, Himmler and Joseph Stalin loom in the background, while Edward G. Robinson in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and Charlie Chaplin in scenes from *The Great Dictator* capture the viewer's attention. As with all of Rivera's murals, the themes are densely represented, intertwined, as are the images, and not easily explicated. But the powerful imagery of history, labor and art strikes the audience with visceral force.

The surprising contradiction in Rivera's work is that, unlike the murals, many of his earlier paintings and drawings of people leave one a little cold. He deliberately chose to present his models as “types,” not as individuals. This reviewer found his studies of children particularly clichéd. There are of course, also many exceptions. The more thoughtfully composed images, like *The Flower Carrier*, or *The Embroiderer*, convey the subject's experience, not necessarily their feelings, and reach us on that level.

Later, during his most turbulent relationship with the Trotskyist movement, and even following his break with Trotsky in 1939, Rivera's portraits became more moving and make a deeper emotional connection with the audience. The portrait of his former wife, Lupe Marin, painted in 1938, and his own self-portrait, from 1941, are both striking in their realism and emotional impact.

The exhibition inspires the viewer to learn more about Rivera's art and his place in history. The most engaging works in this exhibition are the mural projections, the *Pan America Unity* mural and the large, preliminary sketches for a number of other works, including the extraordinary, monumental frescoes, *Detroit Industry*, in the courtyard of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The exhibition will open again at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas on March 11, 2023.



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