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Diego Rivera as a Pure Artist

Diego Rivera is a painter renowned for his mural work in Mexico and the U.S. - huge frescoes that stretch sometimes hundreds of feet from beginning to end, full of bright colors and bold political statements. The publicity and scale of these works no doubt contribute to their popularity and influence. So too does the political tension contained within them. But so often, Rivera is written off as a politically confused communist rather than seen as an artist with depth and breadth to his work. His murals and large-scale works are wrapped up in contradictory political statements and stories that suggest a hypocritical revolutionary compromising his ideas for Capitalist money. However, a consideration of Rivera's mural work alone leaves out crucial parts of the story. It would be silly to demand that the public fully understand Diego's life, ideas, and full body of work. Nonetheless, an introduction to his other compositions provides a much-needed context for making sense of his later work. Rivera began as an easel painter, and from a very young age his paintings showed a modernist tilt which was further influenced by his time in Europe in the early 20th century. The cubist paintings he made while in Spain and Europe are perhaps the most clear examples of his modernism. However, this aspect of his work is present

throughout most of his pieces. While Rivera was a Mexican painter, he was also a modern artist in the early 1900s, and this part of his identity sheds a great deal of light on his later works. In particular, it can reveal the impetus for elements of both his *ideology* and his *aesthetic style* that influenced his work's meaning and place in culture. Furthermore, a wholistic study of his life can show that while Rivera was a revolutionary, he was not a political figure but an artist. With this understanding, we can come to appreciate his statements rather than scouring them for a clear political message.

A study of Rivera's life starts at a very early age; he started producing noteworthy paintings at ten years old. He was born in December of 1886 in Guanajuato, but his left-wing family moved to Mexico city when he was six to escape conservative political tension against their ideas. Diego started taking art classes at the National Academy of San Carlos at age 10, and his early works were laden with artistic sensibility and "psychological probing" beyond his years. (Craven 9) A year later, he began attending the academy full-time on a scholarship, four years younger than the typical age of their incoming students. Thus began his life as an artist - likely before puberty even set in.

Even in Mexico, Rivera's training was influenced by European techniques. At the time he was enrolled in the Academy, the country was still in the hands of president Porfirio Díaz, whose administration idealized European culture under a centralized state. At the National Academy, Diego studied within a French academic training [*modél*] *a la bosse*, which involved drawing or painting from a plaster cast and encouraged the mastery of expression of light, shadow, and spatial relationships. This method of learning produced work that mirrored a 19th-century neoclassical style, and this is one way in which Rivera's painting may have gained some of its

crisp, “lapidary surface texture and highly nuanced tonalities” that can be seen in murals like the ones at Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca (11). (Figure 1)



Figure 1 - *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos - Crossing the Barranca*, 1929-30, by Diego Rivera, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca, Mexico

In a more ideological sense, Rivera was also forming his beliefs early on. In 1903, the sub-director of the Academy of San Carlos was replaced by a painter named Antonio Fabrés Costa, who introduced a new method of drawing that emphasized the importance of objectivity by drawing from reality (photographs or life) rather than from plaster casts. This change represented a shift in the ideals of the academy, and Rivera revolted against this method with his colleagues. Objectivism was parallel to the “official positivism” of the Porfiriato, and functioned to repress the artistic freedom of expression that was becoming so important in modern art. No longer did painters want to represent the world exactly as it was; this was confining and not only limited the artist to reality, but it also limited society to what already *was*. The growing popular ideology among revolutionary thinkers of the early 1900s involved the people’s freedom to

create their own *new* reality by changing society. For modern artists, an integral part of this freedom was the ability to represent reality without pure fidelity to nature.

Rivera's painting has been noted for its especially "modern" quality as early as 1904, in his painting *La Era*. (Figure 2) This composition has been called 'frankly modernist' by art critic Justino Fernández for its "lucid color and *mexicanist* theme" (14). When Rivera painted *La Era*, modernism was emerging in Europe and beginning to spread to the rest of the Western world. Artists in Mexico at this time had to answer many questions. *How would "modern"*



Figure 2 - *La Era*, 1904, by Diego Rivera, Mexico City

would be defined in Latin America? To what extent would this new art emancipate Mexican people from their past? Or could it instead chain them to European culture? Rivera was a living example of the modern in Mexico. He was a revolutionary painter, using new styles to speak loudly about the world around him. But he struck a "delicate balance between [his] attention to formal problems and his focus on extra-aesthetic identities." (14) His use of traditional, developed techniques to approach and describe new and relevant subject matter was crucial to his development as an artist who could speak to both sides of society. In addition, at this time Rivera was influenced by the works of José Guadalupe Posada, whose popular engravings and politically themed cartoons helped develop the young painter's beliefs surrounding Mexican social strife and the impending revolution. (13) This Mexican struggle was crucial to Rivera, and would become a theme of his art as his career progressed.

From 1907-1910, Rivera studied in Europe on a scholarship from the governor of Veracruz and was exposed to the artistic influences of early 20th century Spain and northern

Europe. He was inspired largely by the works of Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet, as well as Spanish painters such as El Greco, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco Goya. He also immersed himself in the works of philosophers like Frederick Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Voltaire, and Karl Marx. In his own words, “in books, [he] sought ideas....what [he] gained most from Spain was what [he] saw of the Spanish people and their condition.” (21) In Spain, the social strife surrounding the reign of *la Guardia Civil* greatly impacted him. As a consistent theme, the socio-political climate of Rivera’s surroundings shaped his ideology as an artist. During this trip to Europe, Rivera’s paintings reflected a late symbolist quality. In Paris, many of his landscapes showed the somber colors and disfigured, dark forms associated with this movement. But in addition, his work always held a certain personal realism.

Rivera’s cubist period is typically defined as ranging from 1913-1917, and was a vital time in his development as an artist. In fact, in his biography about Rivera, scholar Bertram Wolfe asserts that Rivera “regarded cubism as the most important experience in the formation of his art.” (25) However, in many ways by the end of his experience he was critical of the movement, and his break with the Cubist avant-garde in Paris was somewhat abrupt and tense. (Favela 2) Overall, his experiences with the art form reinforce that he was not a cubist, but that he rather had a cubist experience and took many of the core principles associated with the movement into his later work. Both Rivera’s theory and aesthetic going forward were crucially impacted by this period. In fact, it was during this time that he began to develop his own personal style, which was a synthesis of the old and the new, the traditional and the radical. It was this style from which his “alternative modernism” would grow, shape the Mexican Mural Movement, and shape the country’s new identity.

Diego returned to Mexico in 1910 and left again for Europe the same year, this time stationing himself in Toledo, Spain. Ergo just as the Mexican revolution began, he was off again. Rivera's transition into Cubism and was slow and in many ways hesitant. The dominant forms of modernism in Europe centered around rejecting tradition and breaking classic technical conventions; cubism, futurism, and abstract styles in general shared a deliberate abandonment of accepted and naturalistic forms of representation. Rivera, however, had grown attached to a classical style and revered the technical prowess that he had gained from it. In addition, he was spiritually bound to his Mexican homeland and the "religiosity" associated with it, in particular at a time when the traditional/indigenous was becoming an increasing source of pride. (Favela 41-42) Early 20th century European society, in the face of radical technological development, was becoming rapidly more impersonal and ephemeral. However, Mexico was in the midst of a revolution against the idealization of European culture, which had created such inequality during the Porfiriato. This country strove urgently to become independent yet relevant. Consequentially, it became necessary for the developing Mexican identity to strike a balance between distance from and connection to the European mindset. Rivera's role here, once he began his mural work in the Americas, would be to use what he had learned in Europe and apply it in an entirely new way. He was never committed to Cubism, but his interaction with the art form would profoundly shape his own style and agenda as a painter. In addition, the nuances of his Cubism foreshadow the differences between European Modernism and his eventual "Alternative Modernism".

Rivera's transition into a Cubist style was manifested in the works he completed in Spain from 1910 to 1913. As can be seen in his painting *At the Fountain of Toledo* from 1913, he began to apply geometric definitions to space and form, especially in his "broad sweeping arcs and elliptical and triangular planes" (Favela 45). (Figure 3) While still approaching the conventional



Figure 3 - *At the Fountain of Toledo*, 1913, by Diego Rivera, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, USA

subject of a landscape, he began to break down each aspect of the scene into a simpler form. By paring down and organizing his colors, as well as simplifying his forms into shapes, he was starting to bring a new, more radical perspective to his work.

Once he moved to Paris in 1913, Rivera's work began to really change and take on more formal Cubist and modernist elements. One of his most important works from 1913, *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard*, he claimed "in reality marked [his] entry into the Parisian art world" (Favela 50) (Figure 4). The most stunning aspect of this composition is its juxtaposition of a mannered, individualized portrait against a background of distinct Futurist and Simultanist influence. The guiding ideas of Simultanism, which influenced the cubism style of Orphism, involve a non-linear concept of time and a belief in infinite states of being contained in every



Figure 4 - *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard*, 1913, by Diego Rivera, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City, Mexico

moment. A well-known example is *Champs de Mars* by Robert Delaunay (1911-1923), which can be seen below. (Figure 5) In works like this, many different versions of a moment are synthesized into one image to give a truer rendition of the moment that is pictured. This could mean the use of more colors, planes, or forms than are actually present in a scene. This stems from the desire to assert that “sequential modes of thought and expression [are] inadequate” to



Figure 5 - *The Red Tower*, 1911-1923, by Robert Delaunay, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA

“represent the interrelatedness of all things” (52). Futurism brings these aesthetic principles into works which glorify the synthesis of all things into a futuristic utopian machine world. The background of Rivera’s *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard* displays the highly impersonal and abstract qualities that characterize both of these genres. In contrast, the portrait in the foreground is rendered in a much more faithful and lucid style. This duality of abstraction and realism would continue to be a key element on

Rivera’s work. The way he chose to accept both and fuse them into a new style would be crucial to defining his position among artists and his standing in the politics of the 20th century.



Figure 6 - *Zapatista Landscape*, 1915, by Diego Rivera, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico

As Rivera worked alongside European artists and absorbed their ideas, he simultaneously found his voice as a Mexican artist and began to incorporate more national and indigenous themes in his work. (Favela 38) Undoubtedly the most important example of Mexican influence on his Cubist work was *Zapatista Landscape*, painted in 1915 (104). (Figure 6) Rivera himself remarked that during a time of rediscovering his identity, “the clearest revelation came from a Cubist canvas, *The Zapatistas*...[it was] probably the most faithful expression of the Mexican mood that I have ever achieved” (Favela 108) The fragmented composition includes a pyramidal amalgamation of objects connected to the Mexican Revolution - the sombrero, the rifle, the *sarape* and *cananas* in particular. In addition, the distant Mexican central plateau is visible in the background, through a haze which is reflective of Diego’s distance from his home country (Favela 108).

As Rivera began to think more about his *tierra natal*, he began to deviate more readily from the Cubism of the Parisian avant-garde community. This earned him the criticism of several prominent figures and stirred up conflict over the purpose and definition of Cubism. Art critic Pierre Reverdy denounced Rivera’s painting for falling short of Cubism’s purpose as an “art of creation not of reproduction or interpretation” (Favela 143). Both Rivera’s and Picasso’s styles were seen as deconstructionist rather than constructionist. That is, they in many ways attempted to define reality through “taking it apart” into pieces, rather than create a new reality through rearranging it. The tension culminated in “L’Affaire Rivera”, a physical fight between Diego and Pierre that broke out in an apartment after a night out (143). This incident polarized the artists’ immediate community, and created quite a buzz. In a letter from Juan Gris to Maurice Raynal, Gris wrote:

“Have you heard about the Reverdy-Rivera incident? During a discussion about painting at Lhote’s, Rivera slapped Reverdy’s face and so the latter went for him” (145).

Soon after, Rivera broke with his dealer and in effect the whole group of artists, over issues of “stylistic freedom”. His later work reflected an “Ingresque” style as an alternative to Cubism. Rivera had always been inspired by painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, from his early days in training in Mexico when he employed a “subtle conveyance of substantial form through the most minimal formal components” (Craven 11) Now he began to come back to this style with intention. With this change, his work became more representational, but he never gave up the quality of manipulated/exaggerated representation in his images, which can be seen in the amplified curves in the Cortez Palace murals and the angular figures in the National Palace frescoes. (Figures 1 & 7) However, rather than disguising his subjects with Cubist abstraction, in these new works “complicated spatial constructions [were] disguised by overt realism” (Favela 145). In this way, he began reconstructing his optical interpretation of the world but legitimizing it through painting in a realistic style. If Parisian Cubism was an attempt to put new ideas of reality into a new visual form, Rivera was putting his new ideas of reality into an old visual form, and in this way finding a more active way to change art and society.



Figure 7 - *The History of Mexico* (Left to right: South wall, West wall, North wall), 1929-30, by Diego Rivera, fresco, National Palace, Mexico City, Mexico

The fresco work of Diego Rivera became recognized first and foremost as a series of political statements. However, attention to these stylistic choices can shed a great deal of light on his intention as an artist. Rivera painted most of his later murals with an emphasis on expression rather than fidelity to life. He mastered representation at an early age, which is evident through the praise and attention he received at the National Academy and in Europe. And so his choices to depict forms and colors in an exaggerated way are clearly intentional, and therefore must hold meaning. A good example of this is a detail in *The History of Cuernavaca and the Morelos* -

Crossing the Barranca at Cortez Palace. (Figure 1) First, the swelling curvature of the forms is an

example of Rivera's stylization. The bodies seem to expand at important places in their motion, such as the shoulders if they are holding on to something, and the back if they are bending over. The limbs are bent in an unnaturally smooth manner, and the musculature and fleshiness of the bodies is magnified. In addition, the shapes of the leaves and natural forms are also overly



Fig 1 - *The History of Cuernavaca and the Morelos - Crossing the Barranca*, 1929-30, by Diego Rivera, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca

rounded, and seem to bulge with weight. A second element of this stylization occurs with Rivera's color. The hues are brighter-than-life; the tones on the figures' clothing are bold primary hues, and the green of the leaved fades into brilliant, glowing yellows. His value scale is also broad; the whites of the shirts and the tree trunk seem especially bright compared to the darkest shadows. All of these aspects combine to create a profound sense of mass. Rivera excelled at painting form with an exceptional weight. Even in his youth, he evoked "a sense of volume that

would all be developed further into hallmarks of his most famous paintings.” (Craven 9) Perhaps this sense of mass translates into a sense of importance in the subjects he portrays, and an assertion of their right to take up space. Perhaps he draws simply on the stylized and boldly unapologetic culture of the Mexican indigenous people. Whatever it is, his style is wholly unique and became an iconic Mexican aesthetic in the years of his mural commissions.

Throughout his life, Rivera also exhibited an obsession with scientific and pseudo-scientific definitions of the visual world. This *cientificismo* manifested itself in early drawings of trains and other machines, as well as autobiographical tales of crude playground experiments as a child. (Favela 5) Later in his life, he would still base his representation of subjects in his artwork systematic definitions of perspective and visual interpretation. For instance, many of his preliminary sketches for paintings included meticulous documentation of angles, line lengths, and mathematical figures. However, rather than applying known geometric principles, he instead tended to create his own, almost arbitrary, canon of standards for representation based purely on his observations. This “compulsion to fix art within a technical rationalization based on scientific and pseudo-scientific optical research...was of paramount importance for the young artist” (15) However, while Rivera preferred not to follow set rules for representation, he would stick diligently to the ones he devised. This adherence to his own logical principles was part of his aesthetic and ideology. The “manipulated realism” that he worked with was a direct result of this system, and the resulting theory was a manifestation of his belief in carrying conventions into radical new forms. Rivera wanted rules. He didn’t want anarchy. However, he wanted new rules, and the opportunity to create them all on his own. As part of the reconstruction of the Mexican identity, this tone in his work helped carry the nation into a new era while remaining concerned with order and successful civil state.

Diego may have missed much of this revolution in Mexico, but the ideas he brought forth in his work leave no doubt that he was a revolutionary painter. On a larger than national scale, the entire western world was experiencing radical transformation in the early 20th century, and modernism was an agent of this change. Rivera described Cubism in particular as “a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that had previously been said in art.” It shattered the existing world into fragments and rearranged them into new forms and “ultimately - new worlds.” (Craven 27) This art form was, in essence, about the power of the individual to define and build his or her own reality. It was mirrored by an atmosphere of political revolution, in which people began to question the idea that society must be arranged in the way they were told, and began to attempt to create a new world that was more favorable to them. Modernism was always directed towards the future. However, Diego formulated a style that made sure to build the future from the past. He did not blindly reject existing conventions, but instead accepted them and boldly added new ones. His abstraction was fused with a realism that paid homage to Mexico’s past and present, and included all levels of society. He and other mural artists in Mexico would “[bring] back *lost values* into painting and sculpture and, at the same time, [endow] them with *new values*” as muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros put it in his manifesto on the Mexican Mural Movement, *Detrimental Influences and New Trends* (Craven 56).

Rivera’s artistic theory has more to do with the acceptance of the whole world, and a resistance to rejecting any particular limited ideologies. In keeping with the Mexican attitude, he was critical but not judgmental, and his life did not follow strict patterns or dogmas. He was “pretension without substance, religiosity without religion”. (Rochfort) Instead of searching for the absolute truth, he lived in the opportunities he saw. He was rejected from his Capitalist-sponsored Rockefeller commission, as well as from the Mexican Communist Party on several

occasions. Yet if he was “hypocritical” for working with both parties, he was also more credible for the duality of his experiences. The political “agenda” of his artwork was constantly changing. From the Cortez Palace murals, which glorified the Mexican struggle for indigenous identity, to his Detroit Industry murals, which glorified the technology of the human-industrial machine, to his *Man at the Crossroads/Man, Controller of the Universe*, which glorified essentially everything, Rivera loved to include a wide range of subjects in his murals (Rochfort 129).

(Figures 1, 8, 9)



Figure 8 - *Detroit Industry*, 1932, by Diego Rivera, fresco, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, USA



Figure 9 - *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934, by Diego Rivera, fresco, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico

However, no matter what he portrayed, Rivera painted with a hand that did not show judgement. His aesthetic style was so consistent, and his ideology so wide-reaching, that he really only painted what he saw - how he saw it. The inclusion of old and new conventions in his work began with his Cubist period. What he took away from his time in Europe was a developed modernist attitude, and yet he then returned to apply it in traditional Mexican form. The fusion of past, present, and future into his work may be best manifested in his murals at the National Palace. People, bacteria, plants, land, and even machines were painted with volume as though they were bursting with vitality. This blended and entirely unique style was important because it glorified the world through the depiction of energetic forms brought to life. Rivera melted modernism into a traditional world, reconciled multiple political agendas, married and slept with an array of women. If he had any failure, it was that he never chose an answer. For all of these reasons, it is imprudent to take his politics to heart or to criticize him for any one agenda. Beyond everything else, he was an artist and his job was not to decide right from wrong. His purpose was not to choose, but to see everything with a critical yet enamored eye and then put it down on a canvas, or a wall, for the world to see. This is what he did, and this is what he should be remembered for.

Works Cited (Annotated)

Craven, David, and Diego Rivera. *Diego Rivera: As Epic Modernist*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997. Print.

This book gives a biography of Diego Rivera's life as it relates to modernism. It begins by naming 10 separate "Riveras", each of which have a different function and identity, and which are defined by different people. It attempts, in the rest of the book, to give an account of the artist as he is defined by all of these parts, and as they form a whole person. It gives detailed information about his life and his early years, starting with his training in Mexico City. I hope to continue reading about his life in Europe and the influence those trips had on him.

Delaunay, Robert. *The Red Tower*. 1911-1923. Oil on Canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

[Figure 5] This is an example of Orphic Cubism and of Simultanist theory in a visual art piece.

Favela, Ramón. *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years*. Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984. Print.

This book gives a detailed account of Rivera's time in Europe and his Cubist works. It provides great information about how his style evolved and about his artistic and ideological influences in Europe. The main takeaway is that Rivera gained much from and contributed much to the Cubist movement, but that in the end he was not a Cubist painter and that exact type of European modernism was not for him.

Rivera, Diego. *At the Fountain of Toledo*. 1913. Oil on Canvas. Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit.

[Figure 3] This is an example of Rivera's work during his transition into a Cubist style.

Rivera, Diego. *Detroit Industry*. 1932. Fresco. Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit.

[Figure 8] This fresco is a large-scale mural that depicts the industrial and worker-driven society in Detroit in the early 1930s.

Rivera, Diego. *La Era*. 1904. Oil on Canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts: Diego Rivera, Detroit.

[Figure 2] This is one of Rivera's early works which displays his modernist style before he went to Europe.

Rivera, Diego. *Man, Controller of the Universe*. 1934. Fresco. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.

[Figure 9] This is another large-scale mural work; it is a scaled-down reproduction of the mural Rivera started for the Rockefeller family before it was torn down for political reasons.

Rivera, Diego. *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard*. 1913, oil on canvas, National Museum of Art, Mexico City.

[Figure 4] This is a cubist painting of Rivera's that he identified as one of his best works at the time, and which truly exemplified his grasp of and personal manipulation of the cubist style in Europe.

Rivera, Diego. *The History of Mexico*. 1929-1930. Fresco. The National Palace, Mexico City.

[Figure 7] This is a large-scale mural work of Rivera's that earned great publicity and helped to redefine the Mexican identity.

Rivera, Diego. *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos - Crossing the Barranca*. 1929-30, Cortez Palace, Cuernavaca.

[Figure 1] This mural, which depicts the history of the Mexican people of Cuernavaca in a chronological narrative. The shaping of the figures and the details like bold green leaves and bright clothing contribute to a style that was characteristic of Rivera's work. Many elements seem principally Mexican, and stem from an indigenous history. The influence of Picasso and cubism can be seen in Rivera's treatment of the forms in a less-than-realistic but still very expressive and successful way.

Rivera, Diego. *Zapatista Landscape*. 1915, oil on canvas, National Museum of Art, Mexico City.

[Figure 6] This cubist work, painted after the famous *Retrato de Adolfo*, is an example of the incorporation of Mexican ideas into Rivera's cubist work. It's an important step in his fusion of these different ideas and aesthetics into his own style.

Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. San Francisco: Chronicle, 1998. Print.

This book provides in-depth information about Rivera's mural work, along with other muralists involved in the Mexican Mural Movement.

