

Bella Jacoby

SPAN 7 - Mural Art in Mexico and the U.S.

Professor D. Moody

22 February, 2017

Final Research Paper (Draft)

Modernism and Diego Rivera

[better title comes later]

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 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. However, 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 more 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 works at ten years old. While he was born in December of 1886 in Guanajuato, 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 ideas. At this time, 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". (11)

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* through drawing from reality (photographs or life) rather than 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 reality. For modern artists, this started with the ability to represent reality without pure fidelity to nature.

Rivera's painting has been noted for being especially modern as early as 1904, in his painting *La Era*. (Fig 1) The composition has been called 'frankly modernist' by Justino Fernández "for its lucid color and *mexicanist* theme." (14) Artists in Mexico at this time that modernism was emerging had to answer many questions. *How would "modern" 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

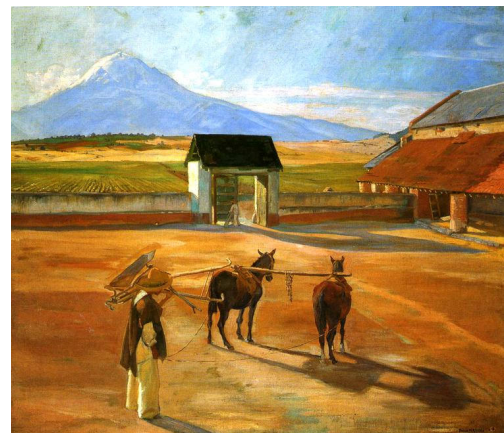


Fig 1 - *La Era* (1904) by Diego Rivera, Mexico City

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 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 once he returned to the Americas after his time in Europe.

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 like El Greco, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco Goya. He also immersed himself in the works of philosophers like Friedrich 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 developed his ideology as an artist. While in Europe at this time, 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, while he was working alongside European artists, he simultaneously found his voice as a Mexican artist and began to incorporate more Mexican and indigenous themes in his work. (38) Some of his most important works include *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard* (1913) and *Zapatista Landscape* (1915). (Fig 3 and 4)



Fig 3 - *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard* (1913) by Diego Rivera, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City



Fig 4 - *Zapatista Landscape* (1915) by Diego Rivera, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City

[An in-depth analysis of Rivera’s cubist works and experiences will commence here. I will begin to use my other books, which more closely examine Rivera’s cubist portraits and other pieces at the time, in addition to the Craven biography which is really the only main source I’ve used so far. I’m looking forward to getting more perspective and looking more closely at individual paintings and experiences he had in Europe.]

Diego may have missed much of the revolution in Mexico, but there's no doubt 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. On a larger scale, this idea 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 assemble to create a new world that was more favorable to them. In this sense, the modernism of Europe and in addition, Rivera's personal Mexican brand of modernism, was always directed towards the future. While Diego later on formulated a more representational style for focus and clarity of communication in his large fresco works, he maintained an aesthetic that took many freedoms with respect to realistic portrayal of form.

The fresco work of this great painter is so often purely politicized, but a further analysis of his *style* can shed a great deal of light on his intention as an artist. Rivera painted most of these pieces 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 Cuernacava and the Morelos - Crossing the Barranca* (1929-30)

at Cortez Palace. (Fig 2) First, the swelling curvature of the forms is an element 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



Fig 2 - *The History of Cuernacava and the Morelos - Crossing the Barranca* (1929-30) by Diego Rivera, Cortez Palace, Cuernacava

addition, the shapes of the leaves and natural forms are also overly 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 leaves 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." (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.

My Questions

- I want to speak not just about modernism but about certain aesthetic qualities of his work that have translated to his ideological statements...
- How should I approach both his *style* and his *ideas* - how they formed, and what they mean?
- Should I give biographical information, or is that unnecessary?
- I'm not sure where I'm going with this yet, but my main goal is to explore how Rivera's aesthetic style was influenced by modernism and cubism in Europe. My next step is delving into his experience with cubists, especially Picasso, while in Spain and Paris.
- What do I have to "say" through this paper? Do I need a clear thesis or more refined research question?

Bibliography (So Far)

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.

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

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

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.

(Bibliography from Initial Proposal)

Rivera, Diego. La Mujer del Pozo. 1913, oil on canvas, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.

This is one of Rivera's more famous cubist works, completed in 1913 around the start of the revolution. He was in Paris at the time, working with some of the avant-garde artists there and exchanging ideas and styles. This work is distinctly cubist, but it includes Aztec-inspired imagery in the bird and the treatment of some shapes. The work shows Rivera's involvement with Cubism and how he fused Mexican and European styles.

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

This mural, which depicts the history of the Mexican people of Cuernacava 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.

Villarreal, Jose. "'Picasso and Rivera: Conversations Across Time' Opens at LACMA." Art Daily. Ignacio Villarreal, n.d. Web. 09 Feb. 2017.

This is an article detailing the opening of a new exhibition at the LACMA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which features works by both Pablo Picasso and Diego Rivera.

It discusses how the exhibit explores “moments of intersection in the formation of modernism both in Europe and Latin America”. This is a possible source on the exhibit, which is interesting commentary on the specific relationship between the two artists and who they were in their field.