

Isabella Jacoby

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WRIT5 Section 28 – Cultures of Place

Project 1 Final

Perspectives on Progress:

Diego Rivera's Relationship with Critical Regionalism

Mexican painter Diego Rivera's mural work in America was nothing if not controversial. In the early 1930s he was commissioned to paint a mural in New York City's Rockefeller Center. It would depict the progress and technological advancements of the human race, and glorify the American industrial movement of the time. Rivera painted a vibrant fresco pulsing with detail and energy, but there was one small problem. When he added a portrait of Vladimir Lenin, the commissioners halted its progress and soon after tore down the huge unfinished piece, fighting media claims about anti-capitalist propaganda. (Anda) Rivera's work was a commodity in America, because of his talent and success as an artist but also because of his ability to portray progress as symbiotic with the involvement of other races. His success was based on the fact that he reconciled local and universal cultures. This is also one of the goals of *critical regionalism*, an architectural style that attempts to mediate localism and modernism. Critical regionalism employs new building styles that draw on the history and culture of certain regions. It

rejects both globalization and intense regionalism, and attempts to give power back to local communities in a contemporary context. The general school of thought that has grown from critical regionalism rests on a belief that both local community and universal culture are important and relevant.

Originally, it would seem as if Rivera supports these ideas. His work includes many cultures shown working together for universal goals. In his 1931 mural *Allegory of California* (Fig 1), he presents a positive view of industrialization and advancement in California alongside themes from Mexican culture. He brings Mexican style and modern American content together in an accurate portrayal of the world as he knew it. However, the main idea behind critical regionalism is that to create work that acts as a mediator between the traditional and the modern. It attempts to close the debate between the two by proving that both local and universal cultures can exist together *as they are*. Rivera's *Allegory of California* is an example of why his work does not fit within this goal; instead of accepting modernism and tradition together, he rejects them both in favor of a new conglomerate communist society.

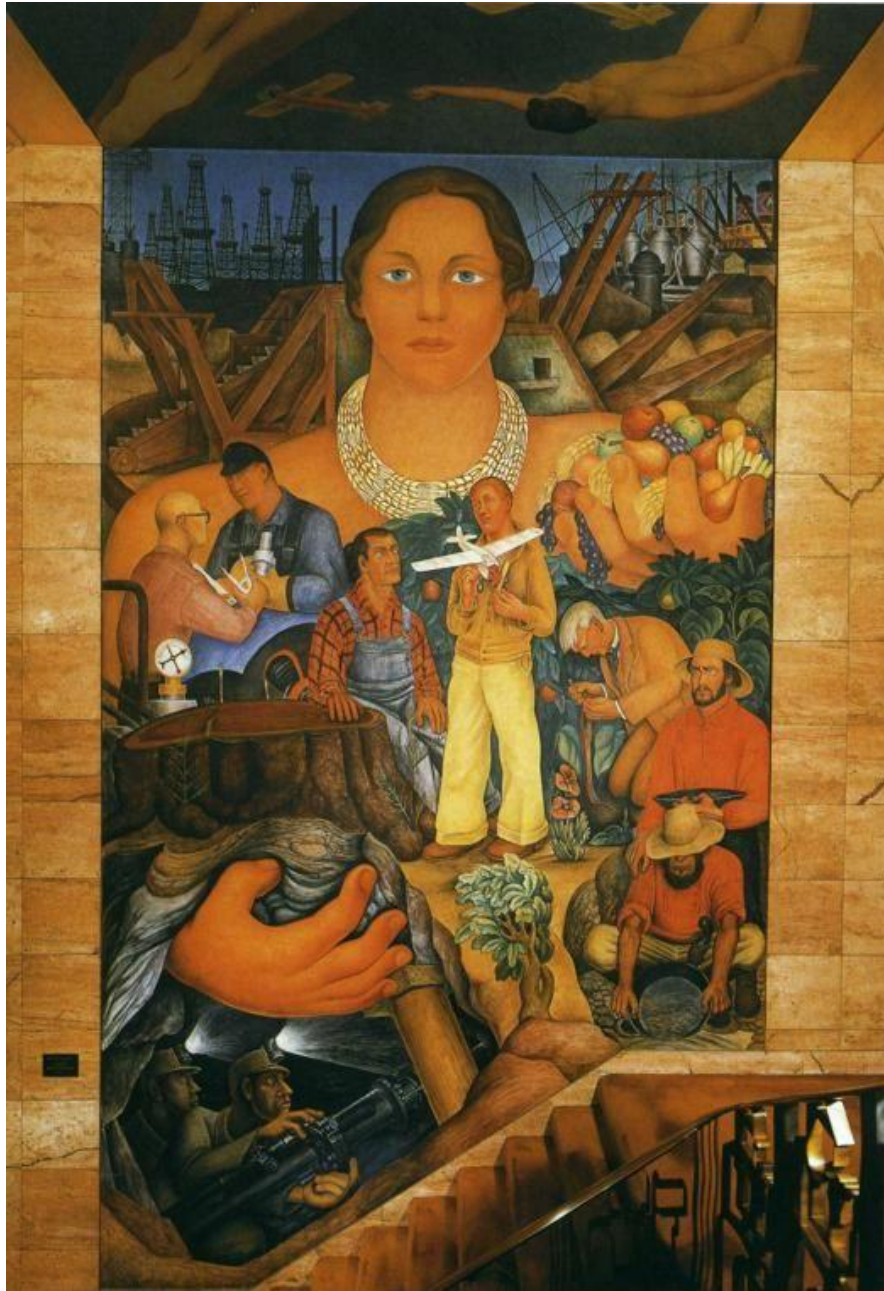


Fig 1: View of *Allegory of California* inside the old Pacific Stock Exchange building.

Discourse on the theories behind critical regionalism is varied and shows many contrasting viewpoints. In an article called “Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism”, author Keith L. Eggener discusses the various effects of critical regionalism as an architectural genre, using the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán as an example. Eggener points out that the critical regionalism movement itself became a “**contradiction**”; Barragán’s attempt to counter modernism actually “depended on, and to some degree sympathized with, universal modernism, even as it worked against it.” (Eggener 229) As artists began creating new genres to depict small cultures, their success often still depended on international approval. In the presence of a universal culture, creating *influential* work that serves *local or traditional communities* is itself an oxymoron. By the early 20th century, art had to be recognized on a cross-cultural scale to have a real impact. Revealing a gap between multiple cultures is an essential part of creating cultural change. To do this one must reach into the universal sphere – into that exact chasm of modernism that is being rejected.

Eggener also mentions that it is impossible to portray individual cultures on an international or national level without misrepresentation. He cites the ability of cultural regionalism to erase the infinite number of cultures that exist within any one community, “flattening” and distorting them. (Eggener 230) Author Alison Calder agrees that ignoring specificities of culture, like micro-regions and individual groups, can harm a region by over-simplifying the cultural experience. In her article about contemporary disregard for regionalism called “What Happened to

Regionalism?”, she mentions that “one of the things that neoliberalism seeks to do is to iron out nuance, to insist that the world is the same for everybody.” (Calder)

Calder also asserts that even in the presence of international culture, small-scale community is not invalid nor obsolete. She makes reference to the term “Post-Prairie world”, which describes the present world as a place in which small, idyllic communities no longer exist on a relevant scale. She disputes this concept, and claims that the world is still individualized, just changing. While a large-scale culture exists as well, small-scale cultures are just as valid in our interpretation of the world today. Ideologies which insist that we must choose between a modern future and an idyllic past do not consider all sides, and are therefore harmful to our view of the world. Both Calder and Eggener point out deviations from true critical regionalist theory that are seen in many “critical regionalist” works. Many of these can be seen in Rivera’s fresco, and these key terms are useful in a discussion of his work’s ultimate influence.

Allegory of California seems to depict California as a Post-Prairie World. Here, a new, integrated world has emerged from a localized one. An industrial society has come to reap the bounty of the rich, once-pure land of California. Rivera paints the natural world under siege; carved-out sections of earth and remnants of felled trees give way to innovation and technological advancement. (Fig 2) Also characterizing this advancement is this land



Fig 2 – Detail of *Allegory of California* – Carved-out sections of earth and remnants of felled trees give way to innovation and technological advancement.

of machines and towers that sits in the background. (Fig 3) Rivera's idea of progress



Fig 3 – Detail of *Allegory of California* – Also characterizing this advancement is this land of machines and towers that sits in the background.

has come into conflict with his idea of the past.

Progress seems to be dominating, and we see

the old, natural world exploited for its use.

This idea contrasts with much of true critical

regionalism, which emphasizes seeing local

cultures as part of a changing world in which

both tradition and development are valid parts

of society. In her article, Calder argues that the idea of a "prairie" is an ideological construction that was imported at a particular moment by European colonizers."

(Calder) Considering the world ultimately "universalized" simply because there is now a larger network of culture is unrealistic. Rivera's *Allegory* seems to do just

this. The section of displaced earth in the bottom corner, the remaining stump of a felled tree, and the small bush blowing harshly in the wind all hint at the loss of a

natural world. The mural paints a picture of a Post-Prairie world in which the

pursuit of progress *must* destroy the past. By making this assertion, Rivera's work

denies a core value of critical regionalism, and loses an element of realism and

pragmatism in approaching the growth of world culture.

Other aspects of *Allegory of California's* style also diverge distinctly from other existing genres, chiefly the chaos of the mural work. The entire painting is crowded, teeming with small details and anecdotes relating to different events and phenomena from varying time periods and places. One man kneels down and seems

to investigate the flora of the region. A few more look as if they are discussing important technological innovations, such as the invention of the plane. All the background space is filled - in the lower portion by lush bushes, and in the top of the painting by towers in oil rigs and shipyards. The detail of the scene is infinite.



Fig 4 – *Color Study: Squares with Concentric Circles* by Wassily Kandinsky, 1913

The fresco is filled to the brim with vastly different images, and this creates a tone of energy, excitement and chaos. The nature of the mural is almost collage-like, and includes many different facets of life in one place – California. This complexity sharply opposes most modernist works, with their abstract forms that speak for universal values. (Fig 4) However, it is too chaotic and random to identify with regional/folk art, like the patterned tapestries of Latin culture. What Rivera creates with the chaos of his mural work is a unique, new genre associated heavily with leftist social identity and communist beliefs.

Additionally, Rivera’s work was a contradiction because his success depended so heavily on international approval. His success made that so. He spent large amounts of time outside of his home country, socializing with the American and European elite. Often, his work aroused controversy when his “outspoken, uncompromising leftist politics collided with the wishes of wealthy patrons.” (“Diego Rivera”) Rivera’s work in America was also part of the muralist movement during

that time, which aimed for a wide audience. The goal of the movement was to appeal to both low-income and high-income backgrounds, by providing legible visual content for uneducated people and appealing to the aesthetic tastes of the higher class. (Anda) *Allegory of California* was the first mural Rivera painted in the U.S., and it was created between two floors of the what was at the time the Pacific Stock Exchange building in San Francisco, California. However, it was in no sense a normal mural that would appear on the streets for all to see. It's location in a stock exchange center suggests that it probably wasn't even seen by the lower-class backgrounds that the movement aimed for as an audience. Rivera indirectly painted this work as an appeal to the spirits of the rich.

Despite his affluence in certain social circles, Rivera was a wide-reaching political painter, and his background is important to understanding that. He was proudly Mexican, but throughout his life he lived and worked abroad. He often traveled through America for commissions and lived in the social spheres of his patrons. He was inspired by vastly different realms of society, which created a particular interplay in his paintings between American capitalism and his traditional Mexican heritage. His murals became a symbol of the changing American and Mexican cultural identities, which in the 1930s were charged both with nostalgia for the past and wary excitement for the future. Rivera depicted both sides of this dialogue, describing California as "a transition stage between the industrial east and primitive, backward Mexico." (*Representing Gringolandia*) However, a third element which began to manifest itself in his work came from

overseas.

Rivera's list of friends included Leon Trotsky, who occasionally stayed at his home while visiting Mexico. Rivera was a well-known communist and supporter of workers' rights, sharing ideals with close friends like Trotsky and Frida Kahlo. He was a member of the Mexican Communist Party for a time, and marched with the Party after the controversial murder of Cuban communist Antonio Mella.

(Representing Gringolandia) His background in the communist movement adds a crucial condition to his work, especially in *Allegory*. While he saw the local, native culture and the universal one, he also saw a future in which neither culture mattered. In an ideal communist society, class would be obsolete and all citizens would be equal. But again, this last element is not supportive of critical regionalism. To reconcile tradition and progress, one must have an overall respect for the present without a desire to change it. Rivera, on the other hand, had a dream of a wholly new society in which classes swirled together and both local and universal identity would be second to the shared dream.

Critical regionalists like Barragán held the idea that a balance between traditional styles and modern international style could provide a more realistic view of the world and harmonize the past, present and future. (Eggener 228) While Rivera's work is often seen as a harmonic fusion of industrial development and native, local culture, the core of his expression, as seen in *Allegory of California*, does not actually support this. He does not actually reconcile these two agendas, but presents a new, leftist option that excludes either identity. What his work fails to do

is act as proof that local cultures can be modern on their own, without more developed and global cultures. At the core of critical regionalism is this belief that to be “modern” does not necessarily require being “global”, and that both cultures can exist simultaneously. But Rivera dreams of something different. His visions are of an integrated, communist society that he sees potential for in the industry and innovation America. Rivera’s ideals show through in the complexity, content, style, and context of his *Allegory of California* mural, as well as in many other elements of his pieces and his life. He does not share the motives or concerns of critical regionalism, but instead presents an image of a separate ideal future in which region is obsolete.

Works Cited

In-Text Sources

Anda, Juan De. "Tourism for Locals: Visiting Diego Rivera's First U.S. Mural: "The Allegory of California"" *SF Weekly*. Foundation, 29 Aug. 2014. Web. 22 Sept. 2016.

Calder, Alison. *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry*. Ed. Jon Paul Fiorintino and Robert Kroetsch Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005. Print.

"Diego Rivera: Mexican Painter and Muralist." *The Art Story*. The Computer Studio, n.d. Web. 05 Oct. 2016.

Eggener, Keith L. "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism." *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)* 55.4 (2002): 228-237. Print.

Representing Gringolandia: Diego Rivera in 1930s America. University of Virginia, May 2002. Web. 05 Oct. 2016.

Image Sources

Fig 1, 2, 3 – Rivera, Diego. *Allegory of California*. 1931. True Fresco. Stock Exchange - City Club, San Francisco.

Fig 4 – Kandinsky, Wassily. *Color Study: Squares with Concentric Circles*. 1913. Watercolor, gouache and crayon on paper. Lenbachhaus Gallery, Munich, Germany.

Reflection on Project 1 Final Version

In class, we talked about making transitions more fluid, making sure the order of our ideas make sense, consolidate similar points. On a more detailed level, we talked about adding transition words, re-stating a thesis multiple times, and in general re-stating ideas and make big ideas clear. I think this really helped me to take all of the information I'd gathered and focus it on my one main idea.

I also realized a bit into this project that I needed to add more background about Diego Rivera and the time period, and to support my claims about historical events. This led to further research and I'm really glad I was able to correct some of my assumptions and provide a clearer background. I also ended up adding more direct quotes and accurate citations.

In terms of grammar and sentence structure, I looked for ways to make sentences flow together more easily by using clearer words, correcting my punctuation, and separating complicated sentences.

I also gained a lot from reading Williams/Bizup, and tried to change my passive voice to active wherever possible. I overall tried to use fewer words where possible, and to use "characters". The best thing I learned in this process, though, was to outline a clear motive and make sure I stuck to it throughout the paper. It also acted as a reason for me to keep revising and improving on my paper – I was actually invested in the topic and idea.

Hi Bella,

Thanks for your work on project 1. I enjoyed reading your account of Rivera's mural. You argue that Rivera's mural seems initially to harness a dialectic favored by critical regionalists...but that his investment in a post-regional socialism ultimately trumps his interest in progressive localism. In so doing, you summarize ideas gathered from a critical conversation and bring them to bear on a new field of evidence—a meaning-making approach you're using again in the second unit. Below, you'll find a few sentences about five categories, which correspond to the goals of the assignment and to the content of our course content during this first unit.

Motive/purpose/thesis

As I mention in the comment on the introduction, you have a clear motive mechanism. That mechanism, and the claim that emerges from it, structures the intro, the body, and the conclusion. You've grasped that idea and worked well with it here.

Structure/organization

Major strides on this front, I think. paragraphs are more focused and easier to follow. Transitions are more explicit. And the document provides a dynamically logical organization that offers a bit of drama/suspense for the readers.

I do think the passage about socialism near the end—so important for your argument—was not as well structured as the rest of the document. You didn't do quite as much work to explicitly foreground claims early in paragraphs there. See the long marginal note on that section for one interpretation as to why that's probably not ideal in this context.

Evidence and Local Claims

You cite more evidence in this draft and do so with greater precision. Your use of the mural's features and some of the features of its context locally and nationally was quite successful. You probably slip into those dangerously broad claims about objective cultural identity a couple of times, still. But those are rare in this new draft.

Audience

A strength. You adapt to a novice audience very nicely, offering accessible definitions of key ideas and useful context about both CR and Rivera. Nice job.

Style

A decided strength. The essay is articulate and graceful. You execute description, argument, and summary with equal poise. Your sentences are easy to understand but varied in shape and length. I think you're demonstrating some exceptional abilities with Style. Great work. As with all essays we produce, there are a few little typos and inelegancies, but they are quite infrequent.

Initial project grade: 94

Workshop Draft (worth 10 points): 10

Conference Draft (worth 15 points): 15

Project Post-Mortem complete? YES

FINAL PROJECT GRADE = Initial Project Grade – 25 + points received for pre-drafting and drafting assignments = 94