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Diego Rivera's mural work in America was nothing if not controversial. After working for months on a commissioned mural depicting the progress and technological advancements of the human race in the Rockefeller Center in 1934, it was torn down for including themes unfavorable for publicity. His work was a commodity in America, because of his talent and success as an artist but also because of his ability to portray the progress in America as in conjunction with the involvement of other races. So, his success was based on the fact that he reconciled local and universal cultures, which is the main tenant of critical regionalism, an architectural style that attempts to mediate localism and modernism. Critical regionalism employs new styles that draw on the history and culture of certain regions, and rejects both globalization and intense regionalism. However, the general school of thought that has emerged in alignment with Critical Regionalism is more of a belief that both local community and universal culture are important and relevant in the consideration of the world. Originally, it would seem as if Rivera supports the ideas associated with critical regionalism. With his 1931-1932 piece *Allegory of California*, he presents a positive view of industrialization and advancement in California, while also presenting themes from Mexican culture. He brings Mexican style and modern American themes together, while still maintaining the identities of each culture. However, if we view critical regionalism as proof that individual cultures can be

modern without modernism, Rivera's work sits in stark contrast. When you consider two facts – that Rivera is a socialist, and that his work in America glorifies the industrial and progressive craze – you realize that *Allegory of California* is nothing but another manifestation of Rivera's dream of a totally unified and region-less world under socialism. ▼

Discourse on the ideas behind Critical Regionalism has been varied and shown many contrasting viewpoints. A few of the points brought up in these arguments are useful in discussing how Rivera's mural treats the ideas behind critical regionalism. In an article about contemporary disregard for regionalism called "What Happened to Regionalism?", the author Alison Calder makes reference to what has been called a "Post-Prairie world." This describes the present world as a place in which small, idyllic communities no longer exist on a relevant scale. She argues against this, claiming that it is actually vital to include these communities in our interpretation of the world around us. (Calder) In another article by Keith L. Eggener called "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism", Eggener discusses the various effects of critical regionalism as an architectural genre, using the work of Mexican architect Luis Barragán as an example. Eggener's analysis of Barragán's architecture and critical regionalism in general is very critical. He points out that this movement became a contradiction, and Barragán's attempt to counter modernism "depended on, and to some degree sympathized with, universal modernism, even as it worked against it." (Eggener 229) He also insinuates that it is impossible to represent cultures accurately on an international or national level without misrepresentation. He mentions a specific point about the ability of cultural regionalism and regionalist works to erase individual cultures within a sort of umbrella culture, "flattening" the cultures within. (Eggener) ▼

Rivera's mural displays both of these. His work was so large scale that is obviously depended on the approval of cultures outside of the ones he depicted. His success made that so. He spent large amounts of time outside of his home country, socializing with the American elite. This hypocrisy makes it impossible to really view his mural work as nationalist or even as bringing pride to his own culture. It also defines exactly what Calder describes as a "Post-Prairie" world. *Allegory* seems to immediately portray the changing of what used to be an idyllic, rich natural environment into a diverse, buzzing urban culture. ▼

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. *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. This location suggests that it probably wasn't seen by the lower-class backgrounds that so many murals aimed for. Rivera painted this work as an appeal to the spirits of the rich.

The exploitation of Mexican-Americans and the forcing of Native people from their land was a direct effect of westward expansion that led to the development of California in the early 20th century. The gold rush in the 1800s, which is directly depicted in *Allegory* prompted a massive influx of foreign workers. This cheap labor made the expansion and industrialization economically possible, as well as the construction of major railroads. The American progress that Rivera depicts was come to as a direct result of the labor of native and foreign people. His murals do include this part of the story. In *Allegory*, a man on the right side can be seen squatting, panning for gold with his head down. His dark features and thick beard indicate a

foreign (to California), possibly Mexican, ethnicity. However, right above him is another man, this one of lighter complexion, standing with a gold pan but not doing any work. Instead, he simply looks straight ahead with an air of importance and rests his hand on the working man's shoulders, reaping the fruits of this man's labor. Throughout the whole fresco, people of color are seen lower down, doing the manual labor and obscured by various other objects. ▼

However, the overall message of *Allegory of California* blatantly counters the importance of Mexican and native cultures, and localized cultures in general. The entire painting is crowded, teeming with small details and anecdotes relating to different events and current phenomena. One man kneels down, seeming 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 leafy, lush bushes and in the top of the painting by towers of oil rigs and shipyards. The detail of the scene is infinite; it's filled to the brim with vastly different images, creating a tone of energy, excitement and chaos. The nature of the mural is almost collage-like, and includes many different facets of life and scene, in one place – California. This is the opposite of modernist works, with their simplified shapes that speak for universal values. However, it is too chaotic to identify with regional/folk art, like the pattern-filled tapestries of Latin culture. What Rivera creates with the chaos of his mural work is a unique genre that speaks heavily of his beliefs in Socialism. ▼ ▼

Rivera sees beauty in the great whirlwind of the Californian-American rush for progress. His backdrop for *Allegory of California* is a large, sheet-like woman staring ahead at the viewer with a serious gaze. She is the personification of Calafia, a legendary character for whom the state was named. Her hair and complexion are dark, but her eyes are light blue, alluding to a racial mix. She seems to be naked except for a large necklace, and could be thought of as the

great vast land that is now being developed, paired with the handful of fruit beside her. This place, California, is bountiful and has existed before its settlement by white Americans. However, the variety of figures and types of people included in the painting create a much more positive tone. Eggener made another point in his article about the dependency of regionalist works and critical regionalism on international approval. Rivera's piece addresses that point and accepts it. From his point of view, all of these regions are mixing to form this one new thing.

Diego Rivera glorified a fantastical, futuristic image of a perfect world in which local cultures and Western cultures formed one, thriving society supported by the work of all its members, whether that was manual labor or technological invention. Within the *Allegory of California* mural, this is best exemplified in the ceiling portion. When a viewer looks up from a position on the stairs in front of the mural, they can see a glowing image of a bright sky, featuring a beaming sun, four flying airplanes, and two figures floating in the heavens. One seems to dive forward within a golden beam of light, and the other sits more like a cherub, floating upside-down with its arm outstretched. Both figures appear to be female, more representations of the idealistic, soft, dream-state of the future.

However, while Rivera represents here the future of progress in the great state of California - the height of Western expansion – he includes the fantasy of local, native communities. In his other murals, as well, he always adds an element of regressive fantasy along with this progressive one. This regressive fantasy takes the form of the exotic, folkloric tones of his native land. *Allegory* is painted in an unmistakably Mexican style. It's full of bold colors, unapologetic lines, and softly contoured figures. The fantasy of the native people comes through in the dense, dark green of the bushes and their waving leaves. It can be seen in the waving of the earth's rocky cross-section, and the adornment of the large woman with her layered necklace and

bountiful basket of fruit. The mural does not serve as a medium between the modern and the traditional, like critical regionalism strives for. Instead, it takes the modern and traditional as they are and fuses them, wrapping them up in a new style altogether - one that embarks on a journey towards the idealistic future that socialism promises.

Allegory of California was painted at a crucial time in Diego Rivera's career. It was his first real work in America, and it exemplifies the changing nature of his style. However, even at this time, his work shows a support of an ideal, socialist future that is distinctly against the beliefs of critical regionalism. 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. While Rivera's work is often seen as a harmonic fusion of industry/progress and native, local cultures, the core of his expression, as seen in *Allegory of California*, actually cannot support this. While he does reconcile these two agendas, what his work fails to do is act as proof that local cultures can be modern without other cultures. This is the basis of critical regionalism, and Rivera's socialist agenda simply does not fit within it.

Works Cited:

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