



Rina Lazo and Diego Rivera at the Lerma Pumping Station.

**Crossing the Boundaries
of Art Practice,
Education, and Gender**

Diego Rivera
and
Rina Lazo
in Context¹

Dina Comisarenco Mirkin*

Since Linda Nochlin famously asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”² the pernicious effect of the male-dominated educational structures has been widely recognized. In the case of the Mexican mural movement, the exclusion of female artists from artistic training has been particularly harmful and pervasive, leading, as stated many times, to an almost complete male monopoly in the field.

In spite of Diego Rivera’s tumultuous and controversial sex life, when analyzed in his own historical context, it becomes evident that, paradoxically, he decisively recognized and supported women’s active roles within society. Effectively, by accepting female artists as his assistants, Rivera crossed the traditional boundaries of art practice, education, and gender, and as a result opened up important, unprecedented professional opportunities for women artists.

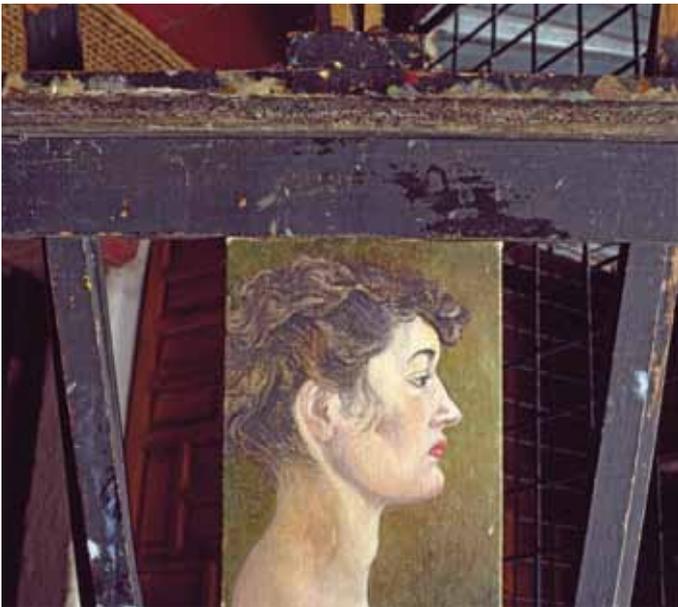
Based on conversations I had with Rina Lazo, one of Rivera’s favorite assistants, his personal friend, and a great artist in her own right, I can argue that the most significant lesson Rivera taught his students was neither his virtuoso fresco technique, nor the lofty hierarchy assigned to mural painting at the time, but his again contradictory but highly enthusiastic political activism, and mainly his profound conviction about the need to create revolutionary art meant to transform society.

Arbitrarily referred to as “collaborators,” “pupils,” or “assistants,” the group of artists trained by Rivera was of considerable size. He is said to have received nearly 20 letters per day from

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Photos courtesy of Rina Lazo.

One of Rivera’s long list of female disciples, Lazo occupies an outstanding place in Mexican art history.



First Self-Portrait, 1946.



Cantaloupes in the Clouds.



Maize Offering, 2001.

Lazo assisted Rivera on numerous projects including his very first fresco at the Del Prado Hotel.

artists from all over the world who wanted to work closely with the internationally famous Mexican master.

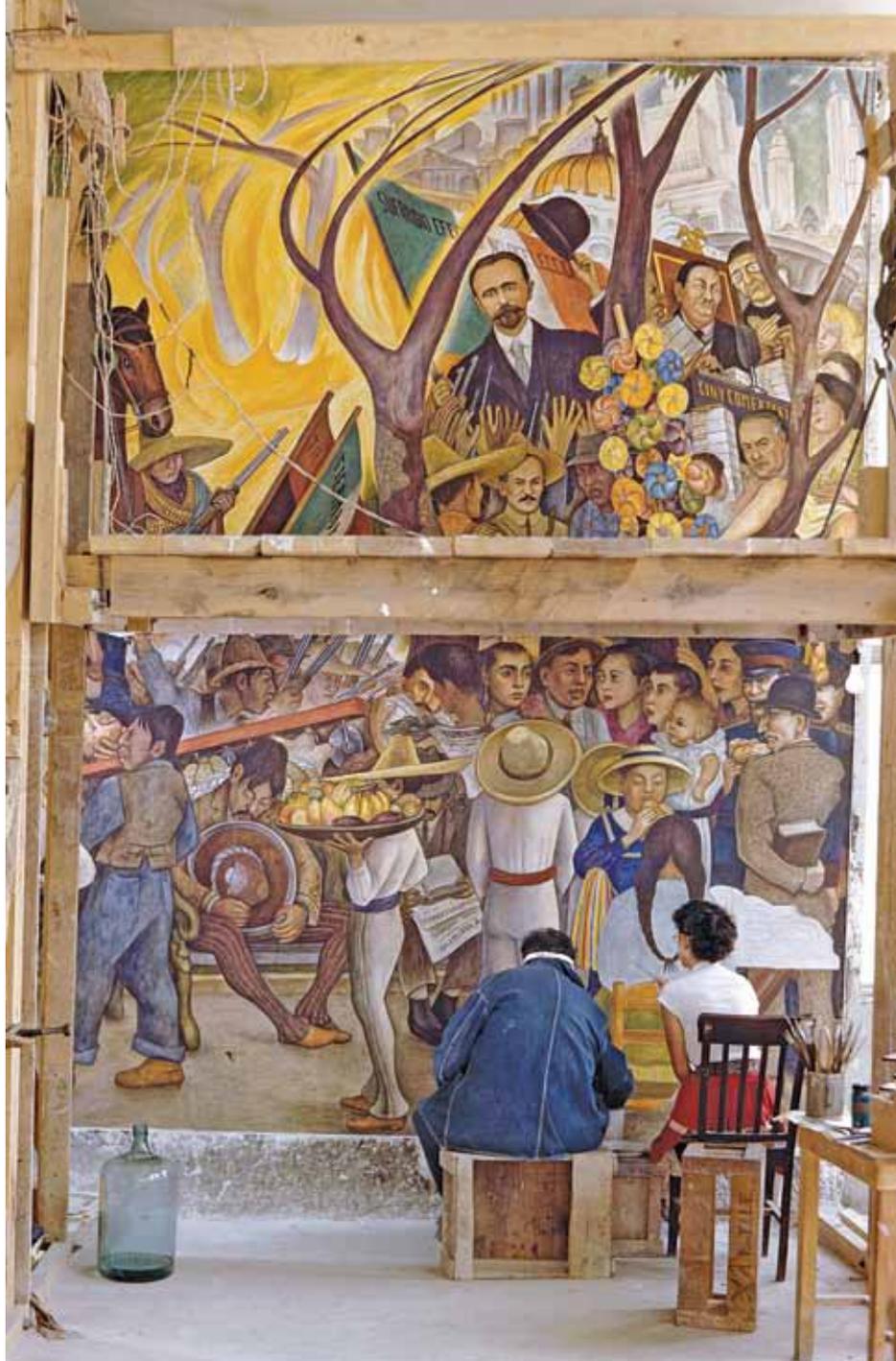
It is interesting to note that the considerable list of artists Rivera hired contains a significant and unusually large number of women. Most were from abroad: Americans like Lone Robinson, Marion and Grace Greenwood, Lucien Bloch, Emmy Lou Packard, Mona Hoffman, Aline Rhonie, and Mercedes Quevedo Bazán; Europeans, like Fanny Rabel (Polish), María Luisa Martín (Spanish), and Nicolette Rouy Dupuy (French); and, finally, Latin Americans, like Ana Teresa Ordiales Fierro (Mexican), Violeta Bonilla (Salvadoran), and, of course, Rina Lazo (Guatemalan). With just a few exceptions all of Rivera's female assistants became active artists—not necessarily muralists—, working in various other artistic media, such as photography, engraving, and oil painting. All of them shared the conviction about the important role of art as an instrument for social liberation.

To appreciate Rivera's avant-garde attitude in consistently hiring female assistants, it is interesting to note some of the discriminatory images and comments published in the Mexican press of the time. In the 1930s, a satirical drawing published in *Frente a Frente*, the periodical of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR), in the midst of several humorous scenes meant to criticize Mexican Trotskyism, included the figure of a woman stereotypically characterized, by her language and costume, as a simple and poorly educated housemaid. The caption reads "¡Señor Don Diego, I have already finished the painting, come and sign it!"³ Class identities and political accusations of Rivera's hypocritical exploitation aside, the cartoon speaks to a common sexist prejudice, launched against Rivera's atypical professional association with women artists.

Later, in the early 1950s, and now with regard to Lazo's frequent participation in Rivera's murals, let me specifically note that one reporter, in a special article devoted to the master's team of assistants, pointed out that the female



Rina Lazo in Bonampak, Chiapas.



Rina Lazo.

painter always dressed in jeans and “looked like a young boy.” It also stated that as a woman, “she was always in a hurry to go home earlier than her male co-workers” since “she had to tend to her family and her many domestic chores.” The same article pointed out that as a female, Lazo “adorned” the otherwise masculine group with “a gracious and gentle note.”⁴ Lazo and Rivera ignored all these prejudiced comments so typical of their time and were able to build instead a solid and fruitful professional and personal relationship that lasted about ten years until Rivera’s death.⁵

From Rivera’s long list of female disciples, Lazo occupies an outstanding place in Mexican art history, not just because she was one of the artist’s favorite pupils, but mainly because she is both a political activist and a renowned artist, who



Sale of Sweets at the Rally to Celebrate the Nationalization of the Banks.

“The time flew watching Rivera paint, observing everything he did, listening to what he talked about: politics, art, and current events.”

throughout her lifetime produced a significant and socially engaged body of work, on both small and large scales.

Lazo arrived to Mexico in 1946 with a scholarship from the Ministry of Education of her native country, Guatemala. She recalls that just a few months after her arrival, Andrés Sánchez Flores, Rivera’s chemical specialist for many years and her professor of materials and techniques at La Esmeralda, observing the young student’s discipline, punctuality, and reliability, invited her to work with the muralist. Lazo told me that, to avoid the resentment of her classmates, her teacher discretely handed her the invitation in a tiny written note, because in fact most young students, even though they knew of Rivera’s reputation “as a self-centered perfectionist who worked his assistants until they dropped,”⁶ aspired more than anything else to become one of them.⁷

From that moment on, Lazo assisted Rivera on numerous projects including his very first fresco at the Del Prado Hotel; the murals in the Lerma Pumping Station in Chapultepec Park; the natural rock mosaic at the Olympic Stadium at the University of Mexico; the fresco at the La Raza Hospital; and *Glorious Victory*, a moveable piece painted on linen, to which I will return.

Like some of his other disciples, Lazo confirms that Rivera’s teaching method was mainly based on practice. Her first task for *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* consisted of grinding pigments. Later on, she was assigned other minor tasks, such as transferring the sketches onto the plastered walls, preparing the pigments, and placing them on the palette. Some time later, Rivera asked Lazo to see some of her paintings, and, once he was convinced of his disciple’s talent, progressively began to ask her for other more delicate and creative chores: painting the unions of the different working *giornata* (a task in which she was particularly skilled), and painting small details in the mural, such as some of the ornaments on the costumes, the leaves on the trees, the letters in the newspapers, the medals of the so-called “General Medals,” and the shoes and socks of the main central self-portrait of Rivera as a child. When the mural





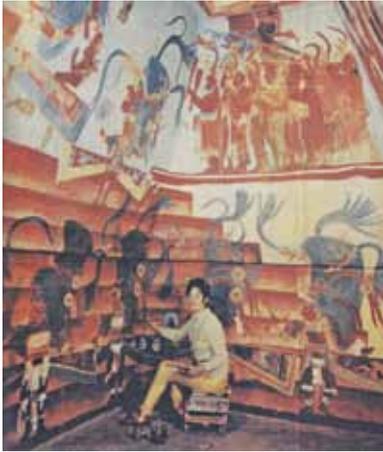
was finished, Lazo witnessed the scandal caused by Rivera's inclusion of the slogan "God does not exist" in it, with the result that the completed work was covered and kept from public view for several years.

Lazo recalls that in assisting Rivera, she also sometimes "held an illustrated book that the artist used to recreate a historical detail, or photographs that he later interpreted in his murals," and other times she "posed for a detail that he needed to observe," an experience that she also enjoyed and made her very proud. According to Lazo, "The time flew watching Rivera paint, observing everything he did, listening to what he talked about: politics, art, and current events."⁸ Lazo remembers that Rivera received numerous very distinguished visitors while he was working on his frescoes, and that he talked to them from the scaffolding, without neglecting his work, telling the most fascinating stories and passionately explaining his highly unconventional worldview. Like most people who personally knew the artist, Lazo attests that Rivera's personal charm and power of persuasion were just remarkable. Through Rivera's conversations with Carlos Pellicer, Antonio Luna Arroyo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Carlos Chávez, Susana Gamboa, Rosa Rolanda, and many other figures of the artistic and intellectual milieu of those years, Lazo became acquainted with the Mexican School's revolutionary ideals, which have since have since guided both Lazo's life and her work.

To understand the depth of Lazo's beliefs, we should recall, first of all, that in the 1960s there was a very important project involving several contemporary artists, including Lazo's husband Arturo García Bustos, for the creation of murals for Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology. Despite Lazo's experience in the field, she was not invited to take part. However, two years later, the museum organized a contest to decide who would reproduce the pre-Columbian murals of Bonampak. Rina decided to participate; she won the competition, and despite the very difficult working conditions



Reality and Dreams in the Mayan World. Magical Meeting between Men and Gods.



of the commission, almost completely isolated in the jungle and with all sorts of limitations, she did an extraordinary job. Regardless of what one might suppose due to of our own contemporary ideas on the value of individual creativity and originality, Lazo feels no resentment whatsoever. She explained to me that on the contrary, she feels extremely proud of her replicas. Because as a true member of the Mexican School, she does not value individual authorship and personal expression *per se*, and because she deeply loves Mexican indigenous art, Lazo is convinced that her Bonampak facsimiles are very probably more important than the creation of a modern mural. I strongly believe that at least in this specific area, the student outdid her master.

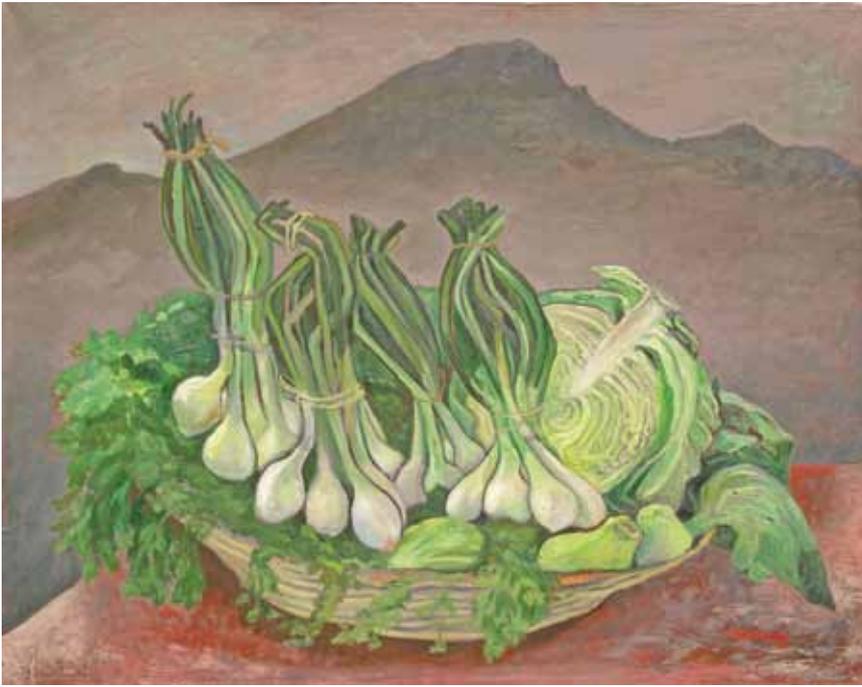
For Lazo and García Bustos, life, art, and politics cannot be separated. They met in 1947 while they were both painting banners for a political rally.⁹ A short time later, the Mexican Communist Party sent them to paint some murals, first for the *ejido* cooperative farm of Atencingo, Puebla, and then for a rural school in Temixco, Morelos, with the main objective of promoting political consciousness among the rural population. Their experiences, particularly the conversations they had with the peasants, the violent repression against the community that they witnessed, and the interruption of the murals due to the personal threats they received, left a permanent mark on the couple.

In 1953, attracted by Jacobo Árbenz's socialist government, one of the few Latin American democracies at the time, the couple traveled to Guatemala, Lazo's native land. García Bustos had been invited to create a print-making workshop, along the lines of the Mexican People's Graphics Workshop, and Lazo, who had already painted an individual mural in Mexico, *The Four Elements* (1949), received her second individual mural commission in Guatemala, a work that she titled *Fertile Earth* (1953-54).

Despite Lazo and García Bustos's enthusiasm and important plans, their Guatemalan adventure did not last long. In fact, a short time after their arrival, a coup d'état ousted the legitimate socialist regime, condemning the country to an atrocious bloodbath.



Bowl with Trumpet Flowers.



The Onions, 2007.

Lazo was also given the rare privilege of painting a whole portion of the masters work, *Glorious Victory*.

The takeover was engineered with the complicity of the CIA, as a response to the socialist government's previous expropriation of the United Fruit Company, an infamous business known for its inhumane, ruthless exploitation of the workers.

As soon as the news of the coup spread through the media, Kahlo and Rivera participated in a public demonstration against U.S. intervention in the neighboring country, where both their students were working as the hideous bloodshed began. Frida went to the protest in a wheelchair, while convalescing from pneumonia, and passed away only two weeks later. García Bustos returned to Mexico immediately after the coup, while Lazo stayed a little bit longer, finishing her mural, and protecting some of her persecuted fellow countrymen and women, disguising them as her assistants.

In 1954, García Bustos produced a series of linocuts, *Testimony of Guatemala*, portraying the condition of the country during the brutal dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, the democracy installed under Jacobo Árbenz, his agrarian reform, and the atrocious military coup that destroyed the democracy that he and Lazo had personally witnessed. Soon after Lazo's return to Mexico a few days after Frida's death, Rivera asked his student to reproduce a part of her Guatemalan mural in his studio.

Later, Rivera began a new monumental work, *Glorious Victory*, depicting the tragic episode of Guatemala's contemporary history that had moved him and Frida so deeply. It is very plausible that this rather infrequent expansion on Rivera's thematic repertoire, moving away from his classical subject of Mexican history to address the realities of another Latin American country, was related not only to the artist's lifelong anti-imperialist stance, but probably was also meant as an homage to his beloved Frida, whose last public political action was precisely her protest against the coup in Guatemala. I believe that the work was also born, at least in part, because, through Lazo and García Bustos, Rivera was able to get a first-hand report that had a deep impact on him. As is commonly the case, the students began to influence the teacher.

Rivera's painting boldly portrays U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles amid bodies and bananas, shaking hands with Carlos Castillo Armas, a Guatemalan officer installed as president by the military coup. The face of by-then U.S. President Dwight





Cantaloupes and Pineapples.

Under Rivera's guidance, Lazo was initiated not only in the art of mural painting, but in the ideological basis for the Mexican School.

Eisenhower adorns a bomb. Lazo, who assisted Rivera during the whole process of producing the painting, was portrayed in the mural as one of the Guatemalan revolutionaries. It is worth noting that she is dressed in a red shirt, just as Rivera had depicted Frida handing out weapons, in one of the sections of the Ministry of Public Education mural in 1928. Lazo was also given the rare privilege of painting a whole portion of the master's work: the prisoners depicted in the upper right of the painting. And she proudly remembers that Rivera even asked her to sign this part of the mural with her own name, thus negating the cartoon's accusation alluded to above.

A few years later, in 1959, two years after Rivera's death, Lazo decided to undertake the theme of the history of Guatemala in one of her own works, that she titled *We Shall Overcome*. She went back in time, to June 29, 1944, when a large demonstration in Guatemala City had been violently repressed by the dictator Jorge Ubico. Like Rivera before her, in her painting Lazo assigned an important role to women, but unlike her teacher, she did not do it in a generic or allegorical way, but through the portrayal of specific real women, like María Chinchilla, a leader of the Guatemalan teachers' union movement and a national martyr for the anti-Ubico movement. On the other hand, Lazo used García Bustos as her model for the dead man hanging from the tree, therefore reversing the more traditional gender role that as a female muse she had frequently played while assisting Rivera.

We can thus conclude that the theme of Rivera as a teacher of female artists very early on in history, in the first half of the twentieth century, is still an important historic debt that has to be paid. In the specific case of Rivera and Lazo, in this brief article I have noted that their advanced social ideas allowed them to overcome some of the pernicious gender prejudices that characterized their time, in order to develop a fruitful professional relationship that had important consequences not just for the student, but also for the teacher. Under Rivera's guidance, Lazo was initiated not only in the art of mural painting, but in the ideological basis for the Mexican School, which she embraced throughout her life and artistic career. For Rivera, Lazo was not just a very helpful assistant and friend, but the main key to opening up his thematic repertoire to address other important contemporary events beyond Mexico.



Tracing in the original Bonampak temple.



In front of the replicas of the Mayan murals of Bonampak.

Exploring Rivera's role as a teacher of female artists can thus reveal yet another facet of his extraordinary, advanced contributions to art and society, dismantling, at the same time, some of our own contemporary prejudices commonly used to judge—or more commonly to miss-judge—the artist. **MM**

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this text has been presented at the conference Diego Rivera and the Mexican Mural Movement at the Art Institute, San Francisco, USA, in July, 2012.

² Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews*, January 1971, pp. 22-39, re-published at <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>.

³ *Frente a Frente*, no. 9, 2nd period, May 1937, p. 11.

⁴ "Los ayudantes de Diego Rivera entre bastidores," *Nosotros. El Magazine de Latinoamérica*, no. 347, March, 10, 1951.

⁵ It is a well-documented fact that, in the name of an alleged preservation of what he called "high standards of artistic quality," Rivera committed some very questionable acts directed at sabotaging the works, and consequently the professional careers, of some of his fellow artists. We can recall the erasing of parts of paintings created by Ione Robinson and Victor Arnautov at the National Palace where they were assisting Rivera; the destruction of complete panels authored by Amado de la Cueva, Xavier Guerrero, and Jean Charlot, Rivera's assistants at the Ministry of Education, who were then given their first individual commissions that did not survive; and the cancellation of the contract signed by María Izquierdo for the creation of a mural cycle at the Mexico City Government Palace in 1945. However, it is also true that on many other occasions Rivera, this extraordinary and contradictory genius and "monster," as he was commonly called, was also capable of significant generosity and of openly recognizing and stimulating the talent of some of his beloved students. This was the case of Rina Lazo and of her husband, artist Arturo García Bustos, who began his career as a student of Frida Kahlo, and who later also assisted Rivera on several of his public commissions.

⁶ Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Dimitroff, "Diego Rivera Assistants Remember the Genius," *Ramona's Repository*, November 21, 2009, <http://ramonasrepository.blogspot.mx/2009/11/diego-rivera-assistants-remember-genius.html>, accessed May 22, 2012.

⁷ Abel Santiago, *Rina Lazo: Sabiduría de manos: conversaciones con Abel Santiago (Yinchuvi)* (Oaxaca, Mexico: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 1998), p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ The demonstration protested the Clayton Plan, which had opened the importation of cotton from the United States, threatening the survival of Mexico's textile industry.



Rina Lazo and Eulalia Guzmán.