

Three Extra Bonuses and Another Brouhaha Two of Diego Rivera's Aesthetic Decisions¹

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THE BONUS: THREE 1933 PANELS

The texture of a wall prepared for a fresco is something like the skin; even though it's cold—in the mornings, icy—it retains a burnished humidity. It's not like touching a dead body, but more like an unusual reptile. The grayish color of recently mixed plaster is only barely discernable in the deep white it takes on once dry. If you put your tongue to it, the devil takes hold of it; you have to paint it first.

Diego Rivera was part of romantic modernism. With certain variations, his way of describing progress was through historical materialism; that is, he experienced the liberalism which reigned in his day—*laissez faire* and *laissez-passer*—as a rebel. He was a member of that vanishing breed, the intel-

lectual resistance. Diego idealized two contemporary historic situations from a distance, but despite having the opportunity, he did not participate: one, the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the other, the Soviet struggle of 1917. During these great struggles, Diego “took refuge” in Europe and fate decreed he would arrive in both countries at the time of the 10-year commemoration of their initial battles.

Immersed as he was in the period and customs of the School of Paris European artists, Rivera developed his work in periods, or to be more direct, in modes, since some of these ways of understanding and conceiving of artistic endeavor frequently reappear in cycles. In one of these periods, perhaps the longest, Diego constructed a dichotomous world, especially in his murals, handling the same way the national symbolisms of Lenin and Zapata, to which he gave a similar moral value. One image is distinguishable from the other because the works involving the Mexican hero and his con-

text illustrate a non-Western world view using Western systems of expression, such as perspective, realism, drawing, etc. That is, Diego painted in the European manner, giving his work the appearance of *mestizaje*.² On the other hand, the works on Soviet topics depict a Western world in Western terms. This is why the first are the archetypes for a new manner of art, the Mexican School, and the second are part of absolutely Western realism.

The first panel I will describe is entitled *The Russian Revolution* or *The Third International*. It is actually a simplified version—a detail, in fact—of the fresco *World War*. The story of this small piece dates back to March 1933 when Diego Rivera began a commission which would turn out badly, the fresco *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision* to

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¹ This article and the photographs were originally published in *Los murales del Palacio de Bellas Artes*, Sandro Landucci Lerdo de Tejada (coord.), Américo Arte Editores-INBA, Mexico City, 1995, pp. 42-49.

² *Mestizaje* means mixed blood, referring to the mixture of Spanish and indigenous peoples typical of the Mexican population. [Translator's Note.]



The Carnival of Mexican Life, "Mexican for the Artsy-Craftsy and the Tourist" (panel I), 1936.

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the Choosing of a New and Better Future for the RCA building at New York's Rockefeller Center. When Nelson Rockefeller realized that the mural would include a portrait of Lenin and the painter refused to eliminate it, he decided the fresco not be finished, ordered the work stopped and paid Diego his full fee for the mural. Some stories say the mural was later destroyed and others that it was covered with a layer of paper.

With the money Rockefeller gave him, Rivera decided to protest by working on a series of 21 mobile panels for the New Worker's School, *Portrait of America*, which he painted between July 15 and December 8, 1933. Thirteen of the twenty-one frescoes were sent to Pennsylvania and later destroyed in a fire in 1969. The rest are scattered in public and private collections. When he finished, he still had a little of the money paid by Rockefeller, which he used to do two small pieces, both including Lenin, which he gave to the House of Trotskyism and another, practically a miniature, for Frida, which at this writing has not been catalogued.

These three panels were conceived based on *Portrait of America*. The smallest, currently in the Frida Kahlo Museum, is a scene from panel F called *Civil War*. The second, *The Fourth International*, is a version of panel S, *Proletarian Unity* (I do not know the current whereabouts of this work). Finally, we have the piece which is today on display on the second floor of Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, a detail of panel K, *World War*.

World War, now part of Luis Echeverría's collection, was number 11 in

the catalogue prepared in New York for its sale together with the last four frescoes. The catalogue reads:

Panel II - *World War*. Wilson in the center, Lenin and Trotsky at the top right. [This is where the fresco I am describing is taken from.] The foreground features realist portraits of the rich Americans who schemed to get the United States into the First World War. On the left is John D. Rockefeller, with a cadaverous face, and Clemenceau asking him for money. Behind Clemenceau are Coronel House and King Albert of Belgium. In the center is Tsar Nicholas and at his side, Lloyd George, taking money from J.P. Morgan. Other faces are those of the [sic] Mikado, DuPont and Bernard Baruch. Above all of them are Italy's [Prime Minister] Orlando and the Munitions King, Sir Basil Zaharoff.

The moveable fresco panel entitled *The Russian Revolution* or *The Third International* measures 0.95 square meters and shows Lenin and Trotsky guiding their people to socialist freedom and well-being. An idyllic work, deeply romantic and manipulative, it presents a mature satisfied Lenin and Trotsky, in front of him, displaying that iron-willed attitude that he is leading a revolution with a clear conscience. The ethical underpinnings of the two figures are implicit in the multitude behind them, thousands of free men who fought for their own well-being and against czarism. This piece is now completely out of context historically and is beginning to be valued only on the basis of its pic-



The Carnival of Mexican Life, "The Dictatorship" (panel II), 1936.

torial value. Many of the visual details used in this fresco, as in the other two in the series and the group of 21 for the New Worker's School, were first done in sketches and watercolors in 1927 and 1928 during Diego's first trip to the Soviet Union. Today, these works are located in Moscow's *Album of May First*.

THE BROUHAHA:
THE FIRST MURALS
FOR THE REFORMA HOTEL (1936)

In 1930, the trip to Puebla took several hours. The highway, paved in some places and unpaved in others, was always surprising, especially because of the scenery linked together by snowy peaks. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were newlyweds, and when their work allowed, they went out of town even if only for a couple of days. Frida enjoyed these trips much more than Diego's previous wife, Lupe Marín. In Puebla they went shopping in the Barrio de la Luz, where they bought brown and black ceramics, pot-bellied little men and clay pots decorated with Mexico's national emblem for cooking *mole* sauce. Later, they would go to the market to see if the potters from Izúcar de Matamoros had set up their stalls. During all this, Diego would be edgy because what he really wanted was to get to the little town of Huejotzingo as fast as possible: it was the week of Mardi Gras, or Carnival.

Huejotzingo began to celebrate the Carnival in the nineteenth century, taking as its central theme the



The Carnival of Mexican Life, "The Dance of the Huichilobos" (panel III), 1936.



The Carnival of Mexican Life, "Agustín Lorenzo" (panel IV), 1936.

commemoration of the Battle of Puebla, in which Zacapoaxtla Indians and Mexican troops beat the French interventionist army. The Huejotzingo Carnival features different dances, among them the carnival, *huejotzinca* and *chinelos* dances. The central spectacle of the whole week's festivity is the representation of the historic event with a parade of the Mexican and French troops. The inhabitants, divided into two groups, usually dress up in masks made of molded and painted leather, decorated with finely woven horsehair, and either "Frenchified" or regional Mexican dress. The "battle" features explosions and skirmishes and a certain amount of confusion; one of the main characters is Agustín Lorenzo, who kidnaps a maiden, supposedly Empress Carlotta. The whole pageant ends with the victory of the Zacapoaxtlas and the burning of the bandit's house.

On those occasions, Frida could be heard to shout enthusiastically, "Damned French, sons of..." while Diego made literally hundreds of sketches of the goings-on. From 1930 to 1935, Rivera developed this theme in drawings, watercolors and on canvas. But in 1936 he had the opportunity to do a mural on the topic. Diego tells us how it all began:

My old friend Alberto Pani, who had helped pay for my trip to Italy, then offered me a commission to paint four panels for the great dining room of the Reforma Hotel, then under construction....Pani promised to pay me 4,000 pesos, almost 1,000 dollars. I decided to use themes from the carnival to



"The Dictatorship" (detail).

go with the decor of the dining room (Rivera/March 1963: 169).

The motifs Diego used came from the Huejotzingo Carnival festivities.

After his experience in the United States with the Rockefeller Center mural, from 1933 on and while he worked for the New Worker's School, Diego sought structural solutions so his work would not be destroyed if his patron was unhappy with it, solutions that could also be implemented in Mexico. In 1935, Rivera asked his friend Federico Bach, Assistant Director of Statistics for Mexico's Ministry of Education, to investigate the possibilities of importing materials similar to those he had used to build the moveable panels in New York. Bach wrote to Professor Villeman at the University of Geneva, an honorary member of the Mexican Society of Geography and Statistics, asking him to price the materials. Villeman answered:

I just received an answer from Mr. Lucien Montant, of the Maison L. Montant & Companie, specialized in construction materials (Rue Pierre du Niton 6, Geneva), who sent me the following prices: iron frames or iron bars by the meter (all the prices are for buying the items by the ton), 35 francs per 100 kilograms. White French cement, 9 francs; hydrated lime, 7.80 francs; marble powder, 6 or 7 francs, depending on the quality; river sand, 8 francs per cubic meter....They tell me that distilled water costs 20 centimes per liter, but I think that if you buy hectoliters, you can get a lower price (unpublished original letter).



"Mexico for the Artsy-Craftsy and the Tourist" (detail).

Diego bought his paints at The Renaissance, a store founded by the Frenchman E. Benoit, located in Mexico's downtown area, at Allende #1. These pigments were powdered, sold in 250-gram containers with such exotic names as "Blanc Saint Jean," "Noir Invoire," "Rouge de Pouzzoles."

As my plans evolved, I took to adding touches of satire to my paintings on topical subjects. Given my still recent experiences in New York, where such delicate artistry could provoke a controversy, I made the moveable panels so that if

Pani decided to "do a Rockefeller" there would be no excuse for destroying them....Of the four panels, two are of traditional Mexican festivals, one centered on the ancient god of war, Huichilobos, and the other in honor of the generous bandit Agustín Lorenzo who fought the French and once tried unsuccessfully to kidnap the Empress Carlotta. The other two panels are on more contemporary subjects: one makes fun of the Mexico tourists see and of artsy-craftsy ladies. It mocks urban idiots and satirizes their imbecilic pretensions by having

donkey's ears sprout out of their heads. The other presents the carnival of Mexican life today: men in symbolic uniforms with mask-like faces charging straw scarecrows while street crowds obediently twirl their noisemakers.³ Among them, a general with a pig's face dances with a woman symbolizing Mexico and surreptitiously puts

³ Noisemakers, clappers for example, twirled rapidly to make loud clacking noises, became a tradition at Mexican political rallies both to ensure enough commotion was made in favor of some speakers and to silence others. [Translator's Note.]



"Agustín Lorenzo" (detail).

his hand over her shoulder to steal the fruit she has in a basket on her back. A man who looks like a sheep, symbolizing intellectuals for hire, is broadcasting an official report of the festivities holding up a dry bone.⁴ A gesticulating cleric is peeping over his shoulder. Behind an enormous malformed figure appears the head of a Mexican capitalist. The horrible gesticulating giant who darkens and dominates the panel has the features of Hitler, Mussolini, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the emperor of Japan. In his hand he is holding a flag that is a composite of the colors of Germany, Italy, the United States and Japan (Rivera/ March 1963: 169-170).

Diego brought together these four works under the name *Huejotzingo Carnival*, giving each an individual title: I. *Mexico for the Artsy-Craftsy and the Tourist*; II. *The Dictatorship*; III. *The Dance of the Huichilobos*; and IV. *Agustín Lorenzo*. Each panel is 3.89 by 2.11 meters. Diego painted these pieces for the Maya Room of the Reforma Hotel, although a few days after they were finished, just before the inauguration, the frescoes were altered, and later they were stored in a warehouse. This is Rivera's description of what happened:

Right away the cognoscenti began bubbling with conjecture: the intriguing family features of General Pig looked very much like those of President Cárdenas or his minister of agri-

⁴ In Mexico, the word for bone, *bueso*, also means a sinecure, unwarranted post or a post or funds acquired through influence or corruption. [Translator's Note.]

culture, General Cedillo; the features of the fat prelate were awfully familiar, etc. And also, wasn't there a clear reference in the other disguised figures and their hangers-on to the group in power, the so-called "Men of the Revolution" and the several industries they controlled? (*Memoria* / Wolfe, 1972: 282-283).

The fact is that the allusions were clear and the caricatures were implacable. For example: panel I. *Mexico for the Artsy-Craftsy and the Tourist* contains a figure disguised with a *chinelo*-shaped hat and a tiger's mask which gives it a clear likeness to General Calles —the *Jefe Máximo*.⁵ In his left hand the figure holds a chicken, on his back he carries a milk can and next to him a servile horse is holding a bag full of eggs: these were all businesses that Calles controlled. In case that did not suffice, the figure is decked out in a golf outfit and is holding a golf club: this sport became fashionable in Mexico because Calles, by that time in exile, played it. The confrontation was made public:

Mr. Alberto J. Pani, an engineer and owner of the Hotel [Reforma], did not want to hurt anyone's feelings and therefore ordered that the polemical murals be put into storage, replacing them with some elegant, attractive

mirrors....On this question, extensively reported in the United States, before ordering the murals be withdrawn completely from his hotel, Mr. Pani said, "I decided to change the murals because Diego Rivera painted some heads of state and other people in an unfavorable light....One figure represented President Franklin D. Roosevelt. I changed that figure because Mr. Roosevelt is president-elect of the United States and a personal friend of mine....Other figures were of General Cárdenas and General Calles. Rivera painted General Calles in the National Palace as a great man, but in the hotel he painted him in a derogatory way. I am a friend of both President Cárdenas and General Calles. The latter is a man who has fallen from grace and I cannot tolerate that his misfortune be taken advantage of....I asked Diego to change the murals and he refused. I made the same request of other painters, who also refused: therefore I made the changes myself, which goes to show that it is easy to paint like Rivera" (*El Universal*, November 24, 1936).

Before leaving the capital [Diego was in Pachuca when the panels were removed], Rivera stated that Mr. Alberto J. Pani and his nephew Mario had changed the murals "to get publicity....The San Francisco Stock Market garnered almost U.S.\$800,000 in free publicity and Rockefeller Center almost a million and a half in their conflicts with me. That's why the Pani brothers decided to do the same thing with their hotel....The way they have changed the murals show they are friends of Calles and international fascism" (*El Universal*, November 24, 1936).

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Diego and Pani went to court over the panels. Rivera called a strike with the support of the Construction Workers Union, which blocked the hotel entrance. With the help of the union's lawyer, he brought proceedings demanding that "the reactionary mutilation and alterations to Rivera's paintings favoring the workers" be repaired, which they were. Besides the U.S.\$1,000 which Rivera had been paid for his original commission, he also received U.S.\$2,000 in damages and the workers had to be paid their wages for the time they were out on strike.

After keeping the murals for more than 10 years, Pani sold them to Alberto Misrachi, the owner of the Publications Central gallery. To get rid of this "hot item," Misrachi put them up for sale on consignment at Inés Amor's Gallery of Mexican Art, where they were finally sold in 1963. They were bought through the Administrative Committee of the Federal School Construction Program, headed up by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. Ramírez

⁵ Plutarco Elías Calles (president of Mexico from 1924 to 1928) held enormous sway over the presidency for years after his administration ended. This period in Mexican history has been called the *Maximato* and Calles was called the *Jefe Máximo* (the Big Boss). [Editor's Note.]

had plans to exhibit them in the National Anthropology Museum, which he had designed. For some time the murals were divided up: panel IV. *Agustín Lorenzo* was in the Anthropology Museum's room "The Synthesis of Mexico," and the other three in the Palace of Fine Arts. Later panel IV was transferred to the Palace of Fine Arts, designed by Adamo Boari, where they are today.

In one of Diego's last autobiographical works, which he dictated to Luis Suárez, he expresses his opinion—not without malice—of the murals there:

All Mexican painting up until today has something positive in it. Even Tamayo's painting may in the long run be attacked, although it has an 80 percent chance of surviving because, even within his point of view, the international—that is, imperialist—manner of expression, Tamayo undoubtedly husbands a great deal of sensibility and a great talent that are genuinely Mexican, like himself, and the undoubted gift of the true mural painter. In the Palace of Fine Arts, which holds works of Orozco, Siqueiros, Rivera and Tamayo, undoubtedly Tamayo's are the only ones which are really adapted to and compatible with the building's architecture. That is not praise for the building's horrendous architecture, but praise, serious praise, for the painter who knew how to make a beautiful painting live in harmony with the abject architecture that frames it (*Confesiones*/Suárez, 1962: 163). **VI**



"Dance of the Huichilobos" (detail).