

# Diego Rivera In Paris<sup>1</sup>

Guadalupe Rivera\*

**T**he dramatic results of his love life plunged Rivera into inertia and hopelessness. Separated from his explosive lover and the rest of his Bolshevik friends who left Paris to join Karensky in Russia, he ended up sinking into another wave of depression. He did not leave the house; he was hunched beneath the shell he had put up around himself, communing with his own misery. It was in this forsaken condition that his friend Amedeo Modigliani found him on a visit to the home Diego was once again sharing with Angelina.

Diego's cohort said to him affectionately, "Listen, *mexicano*, I heard that Lenin has contacted the Petrograd rebel groups from Zurich. Thousands of workers have died under Cossack fire and Gregory Karensky has offered

a change in the political situation. What do you say we go to Russia to join our friends?"

"If we made it Modi, I think I'd come back to life. I'm trapped in a swamp, like a skinned fox caught in my own traps."

Hoping to change his life, Diego had a talk with Angelina that night.

"Angelina, Modi and I are trying to get visas to Russia. Not participating in the Mexican Revolution has pained me deeply; I'm not going to miss Lenin's. I can't stay on the sidelines of another great revolution and put up with the loneliness of Montparnasse, an important invalid. This place has become just a big cemetery, not only populated by war dead but also somewhere the shadows of the departed prowl."

"What sad thoughts you have, Diego Diegovich!"

"Well, it's true, Quiela. Frustration has taken away my feeling for life."

"I know, darling."

"Look, Angelina, what's been keeping me going throughout the war years

has been political struggle. My art has only brought me grief. I'm sick of my failures and poverty. It hurts me that you are the one who pays the rent on what passes for a home and that I can't earn a penny. I can't do anything, even to support our son. I've lived more dead than alive."

"To a certain extent," answered Angelina, "but I also think your unhappiness has to do with your dissatisfaction with your own painting. Right now, you're unhappy about all three things: art, politics and money. Besides that, your emotional problems have nearly driven you crazy. You've had neither time nor love left to give our son."

"Angelina, you're right. You're also generous. I've acted like a pig toward the child. You've given him everything. You are a great friend. Besides being smart, you know how to make my life easier. All of this drives me crazy, but especially not being able to be a good father."

"But Diego, I don't always act as I should. Sometimes I commit unfor-

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givable idiocies. I hope I wasn't wrong to take you back and let my friends the Zettlins take care of our son. It has separated us more."

"But Angelina, we don't have the money to take care of him, or even buy coal to heat the house. Besides, our friends are truly fond of the boy. When things get better, I'll do everything possible to accept him in this house, and we'll bring him here."

"You know, Diego, your rejection of our little boy isn't natural, even though I do understand it. You already told me about your mother's aversion to you. Don't you think you're just trying to take your revenge because of your anger at her neglecting you?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. Maybe."

"Besides, our very poverty is probably reminding you of how your family lived in Mexico City, making you relive your bitter childhood. That's why you're so touchy, and you can't even stand the child's crying."

"When you look at it like that, Angelina, you're right. The Zettlins are taking my parents' place. Just look at me, Quiela! I'm 31 years old and I can't even support my own family. What a failure I am!"

"Don't look at it like that. I'm sure that if we try, we can change things."

"You truly love me, and I have not been able to return your tenderness and love. I have to be brave and stay in this crazy country. Going to Russia would just be running away, carrying my old burdens on my back, my parents, my aunts, my sister. What I really have to do is the opposite: think about what has happened and change

my life. I don't even paint now; I do anything to earn a few cents, but it's never enough. I can't even earn enough as a carpenter to eat."

"Darling, let's stop the lamentations. It's a bright morning outside. Some fresh air would help us think more clearly about our problems. Why don't we go out for a little walk?"

"All right, Quiela. Let's go to that exhibit of the Constructors Group paintings that opened yesterday. You know, they're all friends of Elie Faure, the art historian. I don't even know him, but he asked Kasimir Malevich to include my work."

The exhibition promised to be a great success. Malevich was sure that some of the canvases would be sold and he told Rivera so.

"Diego, very few cubists brought their work, and there are even fewer in the realist style you're painting in now. I hope to sell something. I'll let you know."

"That still life with the limes that I just painted, the one with a certain Cézanne-like air, looks very good on the wall. It just might sell. You have no idea, Kasimir, how grateful I am for your efforts. You have no idea how much money I need. My pockets are empty."

When they left the exhibition, husband and wife, in rather a different mood, headed for the maze of little streets around their favorite open air market, full of growers, peasants and farmers who brought their products to sell directly on the square. Every morning they came from different places around Paris. The colors of the produce always impressed the painter.

The way the fruit and vegetables, the meat, the fish and fowl were arranged reminded him of his old neighborhoods in Mexico.

"Look at that, Angelina. It's marvelous, just like the markets in La Merced, where I began painting. I don't know why I was such an idiot. I've forgotten about real things, colors and shapes, the things that taught me to see and appreciate nature, especially what I saw in Guanajuato and then Xichú, where I grew up."

"Don't forget, Diego, we've already talked about the distortions in your painting and how it has hurt you to break with your Mexican roots."

"That's true. I've tried to act like a Spaniard, a Frenchman or a European and deny my real personality. That has done me great harm. Look, Angelina, it's enough to just compare the beauty of reality with the silly, superficial, intellectual posturing of the cubists."

"Of course, their coldness makes them the losers. If the observer doesn't understand and appreciate geometric forms, they seem cold and foreign compared to whatever they represent."

That's true, Quiela. You can't consider something that needs interpreting art. Art is reality transported into the realm of aesthetics."

Diego María walked over to a fruit stand piled high with freshly picked peaches, plums, pears and apples. Voluptuously, he began to caress them.

"I'll buy these peaches. Their velvety skin have aroused my sensibility. I'm going to paint them; their smell and colors will stimulate me."



Back at the studio, he put the peaches on a platter and carefully added the other fruit he had bought to make a harmonious composition. He felt the texture and forms again, looked carefully at the colors and decided to begin to paint. Over and over, to the point of exasperation, he drew the lines.

"Dammit, Angelina!" he cried furiously, "I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't paint what I see and like. Cubism has corrupted my way of looking at reality. Just like Posada said, I need to paint what I know, what I can touch and feel, not only imaginary things or abstractions. Those cold geometric forms, product of the intellect, are definitely unreal; they are just offshoots of a false situation. I have worked and lived for a deception."

"Calm down, Diego. You will recover your abilities little by little. You haven't lost them; you've just put them away for a while so they can emerge again, stronger and more solid."

Diego had finished his first treatment of his new realist painting, a large still life with the windows of the workshop in the background, the very place where Soutine and Modigliani would drop in unannounced. At that time, the three were good friends and both painters were Rivera's partners in art and revelry, despite Amedeo's difficult personality.

"*Mexicano*, I see you are trying to forget Braque and company. You seem to have turned toward Paul Cézanne, haven't you?" asked Modigliani rather mockingly.

"Have you abandoned Cubism?" attacked a decided Soutine.

"That's right, comrade. I have decided to leave behind the Parisian avant

garde to do my own kind of painting. In fact, I'm trying now. And even though my handling of form and color still leaves a lot to be desired, it's the price I have to pay for having painted those flat cubist surfaces for years. Like Marcel Proust, I'll start by recovering things past."

"You have to do it before Rosemberg starts to sabotage your own painting. I heard that Juan Gris told him about your critique of your painting and your intention to abandon Cubism. The 'little shopkeeper' was furious and threatened to break your contract if you changed your style."

"I already know what that son of a whore said, but Modi, I'm willing to risk it. Frankly, I just can't continue in this deceit. Cubism is not the way to get my art across to ordinary people. Quite the opposite: I consider it art for the bourgeoisie."

"Do you think so?" asked Soutine.

"Of course, friend. Anyone can have an opinion about and get aesthetic sensations from that platter of fruit. But just look at that portrait of *The Navy Fusilier* on the wall. The only people who like that kind of thing are pompous art lovers and snobs who practically come when they see one of Picasso's, Gris' or Braque's cubist paintings."

"I agree with you Diego. I always thought your anxiety when you were painting in the cubist style was absurd," said Modigliani. "I swear I thought you did it so as not fight with 'the guy from Málaga' because you sincerely admire him. Isn't that why?"

"You're right. I do consider him my teacher. But why should I stay with him? I'm not going to follow him any more. I'll be myself again. In a word,

I'm free. So much so that I've also broken definitively with Pierre Reverdy and his group of pedantic friends, Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton and Luis Aragón. The only one I still see is Max Jacob, the Russian."

"Now that you've become independent," said Amedeo, "you've become the precursor of the new realist art. It will end up with a highly social content and serve the needs of revolutionary peoples. When that happens, even your enemies will follow you. Geometric Cubism will stop making sense among the avant garde."

"By the way, a few days ago I read an article by Reverdy called 'A Night on the Plain.' I found it odd," said Soutine. "He doesn't deal with anything right."

"Where did you read it? I haven't seen it," asked Modi.

"In the favorite magazine of intellectuals and cultured ladies," said Diego, "*Nord-Sud* (North-South), that has just been founded. All Paris knows that he compared me with wild Indians, jungle felines and large, agile African monkeys, besides calling me a shameful anthropoid with no appetite or virility."

"Was he that furious at you?"

*André Salomón  
wrote an article,  
"L'affaire Rivera,"  
attributing Rivera's  
return to figurative  
painting to his failure  
as a cubist.*



"He sure was. He has detested me since the day I made a fool of him at one of the Zettlin's salons. We had a fight and I pulled off his wig. We were arguing about Renoir and Cézanne; all those precious intellectuals consider them antiquated."

"That epitome of vanity will never forgive you. The old poet doesn't like being contradicted, you can be sure of that," put in Modigliani.

"I agree. Reverdy will continue to wreak his vengeance on you. Be careful!" counseled Soutine.

His friends were right. Diego was ostracized. His only remaining defenders were Metzinger, Lothe and María Blanchard. His change in style affected his relationships with the galleries. Rosemberg himself, furious, asked the poet André Salomón to help him get his revenge. Salomón wrote an article, "L'affaire Rivera," attributing Rivera's return to figurative painting to his failure as a cubist and calling Diego's new work a bad copy of Cézanne.

By that time, the conservatives considered the Bolsheviks enemies of civilization as a whole and included among them the man who, because of his Mexican extraction, was considered a savage. The cubist circles identified Rivera with a figure symbolizing communism in a poster, clenching a bloody knife between his teeth. "How can you not vote against Bolshevism?" was blazoned across the poster. However, Diego paid no attention. His defenders and loyalists warned him that something was in the air. Alarmed, his intimate friend Leopold Gotlieb, with whom he had shared a small studio, paid him a visit.

"Look, Diego, look where your political ideas have gotten you! They say your enemies put out that poster to finish you and make you go home to your country of dirty revolutionaries."

"I thought so. But they won't get their way. I know that Juan Gris and Georges Braque, egged on by Picasso, were furious because I abandoned cubist orthodoxy in color and form. They must be in league with the Saint Denis Quarter anticommunist group that started this ridiculous business."

"Whoever it was, it's a real barrage against you. Signing with the name of an unknown group isn't something real men do. Oh, well. what are you going to do?"

"Just go on. Work. My decisions have made me reassess myself. In the end, the important thing is staying free and independent."

"You've managed that, but there are still difficult days and months ahead. It's hard to break with people who want to monopolize world art."

"I know, but what the hell! I've picked a road, my road to pure Realism, based on colors and topics from real life. First French ones and later on Mexican ones."

In the next period, the conservative "boycott" took a heavy toll. Rivera did not sell a single canvas. One afternoon in the midst of poverty and hopelessness, Malevich came to visit. Obviously in a hurry to reach him, Malevich took the steep stairway to the atelier two steps at a time.

"*Mexicano*, I'm so glad you're here!" he exclaimed breathlessly when Diego opened the door. "Something unexpected has come up. If I hadn't

been there myself I would have a hard time believing it. I spent yesterday afternoon with Professor Faure talking about Greek and Roman art. Suddenly, he asked me if I knew you and when I said yes, he asked me to introduce you to him. He liked your paintings at the Constructors Group exhibition, and he also knows something about your childhood and wants to tell you about it. He wouldn't say any more."

"Elie Faure wants to meet me and knows something about my childhood? I can't believe it!"

"Yes, Diego. You know, besides being a doctor, he's one of France's best art critics and a renowned university professor. He's become nationally famous for aiding the wounded during the war. He has invited you to tea at his home right away. Tomorrow, if you can make it."

"It will undoubtedly be an extraordinary experience. Of course I'll go. In any case, I want to thank him for considering me part of the Constructors Group."

As agreed, the two friends went to Elie Faure's home. The writer was buried under a mountain of books and papers, busy preparing the second volume of his classic *History of Art*. The walls of his fabulous library were covered with original Matisse and Cézanne: they gave the place a touch of light and color, emphasizing his home's overall good taste and sobriety. Surrounded by originals by his favorite painters, Rivera felt he had been transported to a little piece of the promised land.

"Dr. Faure, your painting collection is magnificent!"

After chatting about the latest in the Paris art world and an exhibit Faure



had recently organized, Diego said openly, “Dr. Faure, I am surprised at your knowledge of modern painting. You have an in-depth knowledge of the work of each of the avant garde painters of Europe. That’s clear from your opinions about the majority of the artists of today, especially my comrades.”

“Rivera, leave that be. It’s what I do every day. It’s my professional obligation, as it were. What interests me, besides your very promising painting, is to ask you if you remember Ernest Ledoyen.”

Paling visibly, Rivera answered doubtfully, “Do you mean my beloved teacher Don Ernest Ledoyen?”

“That’s right. I mean Ernest Ledoyen, who I suppose taught you your excellent French in Mexico.”

“But, sir, how do you know that?”

“Very simple, my friend. Very simple. Ledoyen was a comrade-in-arms of my uncle, the geographer Elisée Reclus during the Commune. The two met again when Ernest retired and returned to France. He told our family all about his life in Mexico, and he spoke of his pupil Rivera, saying he had a great future as a painter and in politics. So, when you came to Paris, my uncle saw your work and remembered the little boy Ledoyen had told him about. Then he told me some strange stories and got me interested in your work. I’m telling you this so you know in what loving memory your teacher held you.”

“I can’t believe this. Professor Ledoyen is the person who has most influenced me in my entire life! He taught me so much about politics, literature and art, and now you bring him back to me!”

“Please count on me as you once counted on him, Diego María Rivera.

He was a very dear friend of my uncle and myself. I’m old enough to tell you that. Please accept my friendship. I assure you, we will be great friends. I also learned about socialist politics and anarchism from my uncle and Professor Ledoyen, and I’m not a bit sorry for it. Quite the contrary, their teaching definitively allowed me to make my way as a humanist.”

Diego had never told Malevich how he had gotten his ideas, and Malevich could not get over his surprise; he could not help but speak up.

“I’m very surprised, Dr. Faure. I never imagined that a man as learned and admired in France as yourself would have old ties of friendship with Diego, who has been ‘the Mexican barbarian’ for all of us.”


“Don’t be surprised, Malevich,” said Faure. “It is not people like Rivera who are the barbarians. Thinking, sensitive beings agree all over the world. Our rel-

atives and friends from the last generation did, and now Rivera and I will repeat the accomplishment in art.”

The conversation was interrupted by an elegantly uniformed maid carrying the tea service: a polished silver samovar, fine Sèvres ware porcelain cups, teapot, creamer and sugar bowl and a selection of pastries filled with chocolate and cream, the delight of demanding intellectuals.

“Dr. Faure, you are an aesthete even in your hospitality. I am not surprised at the penetrating art criticism of Kanisimir: he has learned from the right man. Before I knew how close the two of you were academically, I was surprised by his profound knowledge of aesthetics and art. Now I understand it all.”

“It is not only our being close. Malevich has trusted me, as I hope you will.”

“Not only will I trust you; I’m sure that today is the beginning of a lifelong friendship.” 



Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Angelina Beloff*, 1918 (oil on canvas).