

Diego Rivera, *Cubist*

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Painter at Rest, 1916 (oil on canvas).

Opposite Page: *The Architect*, 1916 (oil on canvas).

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Diego José María Concepción Juan Nepomuceno Estanislao Rivera Barrientos Acosta y Rodríguez, better known as Diego Rivera, was born December 13, 1886, in the Mexican city of Guanajuato. While still a child, he moved to Mexico City to study painting and drawing at the Academy of San Carlos. By 1896, Rivera was already studying with teachers of the stature of Félix Parra and José María Velasco, pillars of what was at that time a still very rigid nineteenth century art school. Everything indicated that Rivera, whose precociousness earned him the description of “child prodigy,” would be an outstanding painter of the old school.

In 1907, the governor of Veracruz, Teodoro A. Dehesa, awarded him a scholarship to continue his painting studies in Europe. Rivera chose Spain, where Eduardo Chicharro, a renowned realist painter, received students at his workshop. From 1907 to 1913, Rivera emulated the realism of his teacher and other contemporary Spanish painters of the same school. However, it would be El Greco who would become the most permanent influence in the work of the young painter. In those years, Rivera made many trips through Europe. He traveled to England, France and Belgium to observe and take nourishment from different aspects of their art. He also devoured all the secrets of brushwork and the use of color.

Undoubtedly his arrival in Paris in 1911 heralded the beginning of a transcendental change in his work. Rivera took up with an artistic milieu teeming with seductive personalities, in a cosmopolitan France where all artistic proposals found an echo, in a climate of complex intellectual relationships that stimulated, supported and fostered the arts. Rivera was a privileged spectator and actor. Possessed of a singular analytical capability, he scrutinized the avant garde trends. As part of his feverish activity, Rivera periodically visited other European cities to exhibit his work, and the strong ties of friendship he established with important members of the Parisian cultural milieu allowed him to participate in the innovative trends.

In 1913, Pablo Picasso and George Braque began to abandon analytical cubism to develop a new trend, synthetic cubism. Diego Rivera made his first notable incursions into this style after coming into contact with Juan Gris. Gris' synthetic cubism is characterized by his compositions using

the golden section, his uniform smears of color and his gradual use of pictorial textures instead of collage.

Diego Rivera's work took a new turn in 1914 after a couple of encounters with Pablo Picasso (who, incidentally, praised Rivera very eloquently). The two painters talked extensively about the possibilities offered by permanent experimentation with form and spacial representation. Unfortunately, World War I was about to break out and Rivera, Angelina Beloff (his partner at the time), Jacques Lipschitz and other artists left for the island of Mallorca.

In Mallorca, Rivera notably enriched his palette. His painting, which in previous periods had been markedly monochromatic, veered toward a new vein of multi-colored experimentation. Shortly thereafter, one of his greatest stylistic and thematic contributions began to appear in his work: marked elements of regionalism, such as the serape in *Portrait of Martín Luis Guzmán* or the theme and characters in *Zapatista Landscape*.

Throughout the following years until 1917, Rivera would identify himself as a cubist painter. However, a personal reversion to Cézanne's formalism, especially vis-à-vis the plastic organization of space, would gradually lead to new forms of composition and representation. Another determining factor in this change in Ri-

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Portrait of Maximilian Volonchine, 1916 (oil on canvas).



Woman in an Armchair, 1917 (oil on canvas).

vera was his review of the literature on the theory of art. Firmer and more traditional drawing would lead his work to be increasingly characterized by the marked individuality of each of its formal elements.

By 1920, when he left Paris to travel through Italy to study the great Renaissance masters, Rivera's break with Cubism was inevitable. He began a new crusade in favor of formally classic and socially committed art. Mexican muralism had its first, best and most transcendental moments in the 1920s and Rivera was destined to be one of its most important representatives.

Mexico City's Carrillo Gil Museum has seven Riveras that belong exclusively to his cubist period. Alvar Carrillo Gil bought them in Brazil. Just why these canvases ended up in Brazil has been the subject of much speculation, but one thing is certain: Dr. Carrillo was particularly interested in this period because of the formal contribution this work represented,

in a style that no other Mexican painter used with such force and personality.

All seven works are portraits. Strictly speaking, none of them can be considered orthodox examples of Synthetic Cubism since that style sought to reveal the planes of the objects painted with a maximum of precision and with short brush strokes, using a limited range of color; Rivera sometimes broke with these canons. Formally, Rivera's Cubism has elements of the analytical period since the painter simultaneously presented different visual angles of the portrait's subject. However, in this case—and in contrast with Analytical Cubism—the planes become fields of local color, sometimes with the whole spectrum of one color or covered with daubs of another.

On some levels Rivera plays with the appearances of pictorial representation, sometimes inserting elements of realist figures or simulating textures with academic fidelity; creating tricks for the eye between classical realism and cubism; using leitmotifs recurrent in Gris or Braque (instruments, still lifes, printed paper, etc.). Therefore, in *The Architect* we observe a seated figure facing front, possibly posing, behind his work table. In some sections, we see internal structures of the piece of furniture, which are transparent, allowing us to see its forms; in other sections the painter emphasized the wood with certain naturalism in a fashion similar to the synthetic cubist artists who sometimes resorted to gluing original materials on their canvases, like wallpaper or bottle labels. The hands are depicted in multiple images, fanned out to show their different angles and the work tools they hold. The faceted features of the architect's head are perfectly delineated by black lines and changing colors, which tend toward whites on the right and blacks on the left. The background of this work is particularly interesting since the floor blends with the wall in the farthest plane, with the materials and textures. The colors the artist used make the composition slightly dynamic and give it a particularly rich contrast in light.

The series of three seated women, *Woman in Green*, *Maternity* and *Woman in an Armchair*, tend toward sober colors and a taste for straight lines and angles, characteristic of Rivera's work around 1916 when he had his first child with the Russian artist Angelina Beloff. Two of them are

portraits of Angelina: *Woman in Green* and *Maternity*. The former depicts Angelina pregnant and the latter, noticeably tender, shows her nursing the child. In both canvases, the artist was clearly interested in composing a painting around a centered frontal view and a hierarchical arrangement of the weight of the composition compensated by an angular, asymmetrical delimitation of the form, which is also emphasized by the treatment given to the backgrounds.

There are similarities among *Portrait of a Poet*, *Painter at Rest* and *Portrait of Maximilian Volonchine* in the artist's intention of simplifying the expressions even more, as well as in his handling of large chromatic areas where there is a geometrical synthesis of the figures. Both the austere geometrical forms and the neutral backgrounds, which emphasize the characteristics of the figures represented, retreat from the use of vibrant colors and the richness of line that the artist had previously used. These paintings announce Rivera's evolution, interest and exploration between 1913 and 1917 when he made a notable incursion into one of painting's most important avant garde movements. 



Portrait of a Poet, 1916 (oil on canvas).

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