

Diego María Rivera: from Cubism to the revolutionary murals (1912-1924)

*Guadalupe Rivera Marín **



Diego Rivera on his 70th birthday, with his grandchildren and daughters Guadalupe (left) and Ruth (right).

Education of a painter

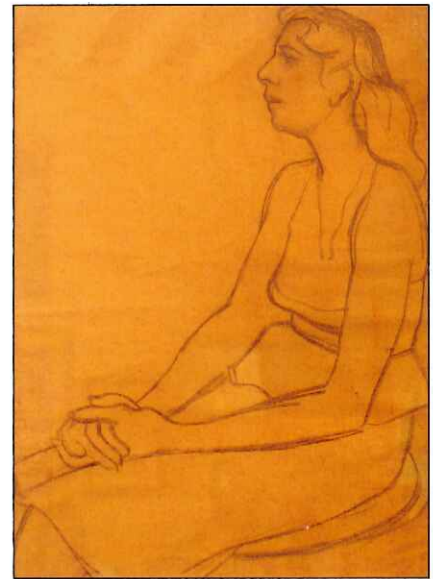
In Mexico, the beginning of the 20th century was marked by constant social and political unrest. The regime of Porfirio Díaz had brought economic stability, through opening the country up to foreign investment, which was concentrated in those sectors which yielded the highest

profits—railroads, electricity, mining and the textile industry.

But Díaz's long term in office had caused discontent among political sectors which were pushed aside by the "scientific" group, as Díaz's circle called itself. These sectors found themselves blocked from participating in administration at the state and municipal levels, and from joining the upper levels of the Porfirista government, which maintained the



Sailor at lunch (oil on canvas, 1914).



Portrait of Guadalupe Rivera Marín (charcoal, 1947).

Yvonne Venegas.

nation's capital as a private reserve for the eternal president's yes-men.

Meanwhile, the people lived in misery; the mass of day laborers in the countryside and the cities lived in conditions of extreme poverty, with no opportunities for overcoming their social marginalization.

This situation set the stage for the first political organizations which gave voice to discontent against the established order. The Anti-Reelection and Liberal clubs, which brought progressive intellectuals together with natural leaders of the rural and urban

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Portrait of María Félix (oil on canvas, 1949).

poor, became a source of constant protest. A key role in these groups was played by students from the National School of Fine Arts, who—in addition to calling for innovations in art instruction, which they considered overly academic and backward—protested against the continuation of the Díaz regime, which they characterized as oppressive, dictatorial, and highly injurious to the interests of the people.

In 1904 the Guadalajara-born painter Gerardo Murillo, who had studied at the Academy of San Carlos at the turn of the century, returned from a trip to Europe imbued with revolutionary ideas in both the political and artistic fields.

He believed that it was time to leave conservatism behind, in art as

well as politics, in order to fully enter the modern age. Murillo held that the “scientists” had to be overthrown, giving way to a government that would be in favor of the workers and peasants; in the field of art, revolutionary thinking meant embracing the innovative style of Modernism.

Murillo surrounded himself with artists such as Roberto Montenegro, Jorge Enciso, Saturnino Herrán, Alfredo Ramos Martínez, Francisco de la Torre and Diego María Rivera. He convinced them that the theme of their art should be the landscapes and people of Mexico, to capture their way of life, with its own local spirit. Rivera was the most convinced of all, and became one of Murillo’s revolutionary followers.

To advance their views, Murillo and Rivera joined with the poets and writers who founded the journal *Savia moderna* (Modern sap)—Alfonso Cravioto, Luis Castillo Ledón, Rafael López and Alfonso Reyes, who had decided to continue the artistic movement begun in 1898 by Bernardo Couto and Jesús E. Valenzuela in the journal *Revista moderna* (Modern review).

But Murillo—who by that time was known by his artistic name, Dr. Atl—was not only responsible for introducing Rivera to Modernism and revolutionary theory. He also aroused Rivera’s interest in the idea of recreating, in Mexico, the marvelous art of mural painting, known as the “art par excellence” in Italy, where Atl had come in contact with pre-Renaissance and Renaissance painting of the great masters—among them Giotto, Michelangelo and Raphael.

Three years later, Rivera and his friends from *Savia moderna* and the *Ateneo de la juventud* (Youth cultural association), a gathering place for the young intellectuals of the day, had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to fight against the Díaz dictatorship.



Portrait of Adolfo Best Maugard (oil on canvas, 1913).

Yvonne Venegas.



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Fiesta of Santa Anita (encaustic on canvas, 1931).

Rivera had also become friends with a group of young leaders who published newspapers of the revolutionary vanguard, working out of the Venegas Arroyo workshop. One of these newspapers was *El hijo del ahvizote* (The otter's son—the Aztecs considered otters to be an evil omen), founded by Daniel Cabrera, edited, among others, by the staunch anti-Díaz activists Florencio Lastra, Juan Sarabia and Ricardo Flores Magón, and illustrated by José Guadalupe Posada. Another was *Regeneración* (Regeneration), founded in 1900 by Ricardo and Jesús Flores Magón and known for its fierce attacks against Díaz and his minions.

Immersion in Academicism

With his training as a revolutionary still in its initial stages, Diego María Rivera left for Europe in April of 1907. He spent more than two years working intensely at the side of his teacher, Eduardo Chicharro, in Madrid, Avila and Biscay, as well as making short trips to France, Holland, England and Italy. His first paintings, influenced by Zuluaga, Sorolla and Chicharro, are examples of the purest Spanish Academicism; other early works are forays into Impressionism. He returned to Mexico in August of 1910, bringing

with him more than twenty oil paintings as well as the many drawings and sketches he had made in Europe.

It was Atl who encouraged Rivera, after his return from overseas, to stage his first one-man exhibition, at the Academy of San Carlos. On November 20, 1910, as the exhibition was inaugurated by the wife of Porfirio Díaz—still President of the Republic—the first groups of revolutionaries, organized in the

Circles of Free Workers and the Anti-Reelection Circles, heeded the call of Francisco I. Madero, as put forward in the platform of the Liberal Party, and launched the Mexican Revolution.

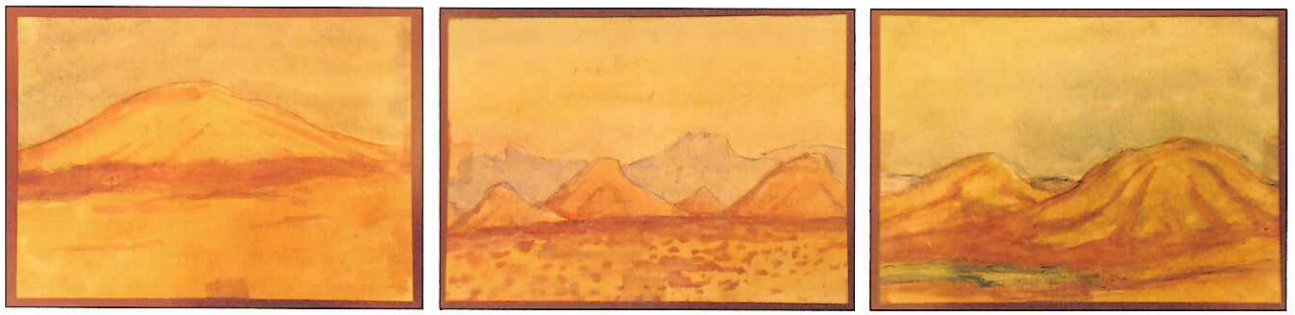
The exhibition was a smashing success. *El mundo ilustrado* (The illustrated world), the journal most highly regarded in the artistic and cultural circles of the day, published several reviews; its art critic lauded the young painter's work, saying he



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Portrait of Lupe Marín (oil on canvas, 1938).

Yvonne Venegas.



Perote, Veracruz (unpublished watercolors, circa 1945).

had surpassed his teachers on their own terrain of Spanish Academicism.

This success led Rivera to ask his benefactor, Don Teodoro Dehesa, to arrange for an extension of the scholarship he had been receiving

from the state government of Veracruz since 1907. Rivera wanted to return to Europe, for two reasons. First because he considered his artistic education still insufficient for his goal of helping create a new

Mexican art, which would serve as an artistic and ideological expression of the people and help educate them for the social changes to come. Rivera had come to the firm conclusion that Academicism could not be a vehicle for these objectives.

The second reason for returning to Paris was that he wanted to continue his romantic relationship with the Russian engraver Angelina Beloff, to whom he was deeply indebted for introducing him to a number of renowned Russian exiles—among them Lenin, whom Rivera would come to regard as his teacher in political theory and practice.

Once in Paris, Rivera exhibited two Academic-type paintings at the Autumn 1911 Salon: these were the two views of Mount Iztaccíhuatl that he had begun during his brief stay in Mexico. The critic Ulrico Brendel wrote about them in an important article published in the *Mundial* (World) magazine. In the same article Brendel made an in-depth analysis of the newly fledged Cubist movement—which Rivera joined at the beginning of 1912, when he moved to Spain.

Joining the Cubist movement

The influence of El Greco, together with the landscape around the city of Toledo, led Rivera to produce a number of great paintings in which, little by little, one sees the increasing importance of “the geometricization and broad faceting of planes”—that is, the Cubist concept of art.



IIE / UNAM.

Flower market (oil on canvas, 1949).



Yvonne Venegas.

San Francisco coast (unpublished watercolor, 1941).

According to Ramón Favela, “the firmly delineated view of the rigid cubes of the buildings and cabins where his characters lived [gave rise to] a growing interest in three-dimensional, geometric and abstract organization, leading Rivera to the first phases of the Cubist style in which he worked during his stay in Toledo.”

Nevertheless, the question arises: was Rivera’s interest in this style a product of the creative process itself, or was he giving expression to long-submerged memories of the old city of Guanajuato where he was born? Armando Olivares argues that the painting *Diego de Guanajuato* shows that the city of Toledo brought back to Rivera’s consciousness the images of his birthplace — memories he undoubtedly carried within himself.

Working with and helping advance the Cubist conception of art over a five-year period, Rivera created a number of exceptional works. Cubism also allowed him to work out structural solutions to problems of time and space, combining geometry, form, ideology and color in what would later become his master works of revolutionary muralism.

In other words, in muralism Rivera was able to express a concept of the universe in which cubes, rhombi, triangles, parallelepipeds and spheres play, rise and fall, turn and hold still, in order to shape a new space. In this new spatial conception Rivera becomes one with the universe while putting forward his political philosophy and his deep-going concerns with the place of man in the cosmos.

Thus, the artist established the humanistic identity which characterizes his murals and his personal aesthetic, his own authentic and original creation, which made him one of the greatest painters of the century.

Revolution and art

In the Paris of 1912, Diego Rivera began to hear first-hand stories from Mexicans traveling in Europe about how the Anti-Reelection movement initiated by Juan Sarabia and Ricardo Flores Magón had won victory. He learned of Madero’s struggle and seizure of power.

Several newcomers joined the group of emigres made up of Angel Zárraga, Enrique Freyman, Dr. Atl and other old friends from Academy days. Among these newcomers, who were traveling on scholarships granted by President Madero, were Roberto Montenegro, Adolfo Best Maugart,

*Nude with alcatraces (oil on masonite, 1944).*



Yvonne Venegas.

Portrait of Enriqueta Dávila (oil on canvas, 1949).

the caricaturist Ernesto García Cabral, and Jorge Enciso, the senior proponent of a Mexican indigenist artistic style. Contact with this milieu intensified Rivera's revolutionary fervor.

It was during this period that Rivera met the Peruvian art critic



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Portrait of Guadalupe Amor (oil, 1949).

Francisco Cosío del Pomar, to whom he confessed that for him, "the revolutionary process is not the revolution which is upheld by Flores Magón and combated by reactionary oligarchies. No, it is an original revolution, which does not yet appear in the annals of sociology."

Cosío found Rivera immersed in two basic concerns: what was happening in Mexico, a land Rivera seemed to carry around with him like a heavy bundle; and what was going on in the world of painting, from Cézanne's keen interest in nature to the daring innovations of the Cubist school. Diego admired the demanding aggressiveness of Goya and his rebelliousness in the face of social injustice. He admired Fernand de Léger's Cubist predilection for panoramic landscapes. These two points of view would later converge in his own art.

Cosío maintains that his friend—finding himself in Paris, far removed from the field of battle—laid the foundations for the syncretistic content and style of Latin American art. Diego put this forward through his attempts to interpret the Mexican Revolution, whether through objects like the serape used in the painting "The alarm clock" or through the Mexican color schemes he reproduced in "Majorca landscape."

From this time forward Rivera developed the central, inner workings of Mexican revolutionary muralism. For him, the new mural painting was to emerge from the Cubist view of landscape, combined with the necessity to bring ideological truth to the masses—a symbiosis which could not be achieved through easel painting.

It was essential to understand that "the right of the revolution [to create this new form of art] is founded on the fact that works of art have become instruments of tyranny and corruption, symbols of exploitation and wealth.... Art is neither the dessert at the banquet of

civilization nor the banquet itself; neither the splendor of truth nor nature as seen through temperament; it is not any of the things that philosophers have sought to establish [sic].... Art is a necessity which realizes the highest pleasure and highest objective of the species. Its essential continuation pits man against everything which exploits and oppresses him in the free exercise of imagination and reason."

Some months after painting "Majorca landscape," Diego painted a new landscape entitled "Zapatista landscape"¹ or "The guerrilla fighter." This picture caused a major debate among Cubists and art critics, since "The wild Mexican"—as Rivera was known in the world between



Yvonne Venegas.

The painter's study (oil on canvas, 1954).

Montparnasse and Montmartre—had finally decided to take on and express his own most intimate truth.

In Rivera's own words: "The most authentic revelation came from a Cubist canvas, 'The Zapatistas,' which I painted in 1916. It showed the *sombrero* of a Mexican peasant hanging from a wooden box, behind a rifle. I did it without making preparatory sketches, in my Paris studio. It may have been my most

¹ Zapatistas were followers of peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata.

successful and faithful depiction of the Mexican state of mind.”

Thus Rivera frankly and openly set out on the path that would take him to muralism. Through the purest Cubist style, he achieved his own interpretation of Cubist painting, together with the synthetic and metaphysical themes he developed subsequently when he depicted key revolutionary figures on the walls of large buildings.

Zapata—whom Rivera met in 1910 while painting—is the central figure on the walls of the Chapingo chapel.

In the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca, Zapata is depicted standing at the side of his magnificent white horse (a figure which shows the influence of Mantegna), while on the



Zapata (fresco, 1931, 2.38 X 1.88 m).

walls adjoining the main staircase of the National Palace in Mexico City, Zapata is the central figure in a group of key personages of the Mexican Revolution. The figures shown in this group range from a peasant and worker, who symbolize those who fought for the Revolution, to Obregón and Calles, who were to consolidate it.

During these years in Europe, Diego expressed his desire to return to Mexico, since he was convinced that “an artist only achieves universality

with the support of his own land, nourishing himself with all the cultures which have been born in that land, starting with the myths of creation, on the condition that they give new life to styles which had heretofore seemed dead.”

He continued: “In pre-Columbian sculpture, art found a form of expressionism worthy of being associated with the art of the present; Toltec masks, plumed serpents, gods and goddesses of blood and death. Ancient Mexican art will enrich the national art of the present with an extraordinary realism.”

On another occasion, Cosío asked Diego to talk about painting and forget about the Mexican Revolution. Diego answered: “In that case I wouldn’t be able to talk about anything at all. The interesting things that I am putting forward are all related to the Revolution.”

After showing Cosío several paintings which the critic regarded as demonstrating an admirable technical ability, Rivera showed him exercise drawings using thick and expressive lines; these struck his visitor as having a different quality, one of strength and vigor, closely linked to the spirit of Mexican culture.

As Rivera himself remarked, during his years in Paris, Madrid and Toledo he learned how to use his artistic weapons, to master European procedures and techniques, to recognize the universal value of art, through the mural painting of Giotto and Benozzo Gózzoli, his favorite muralists. He felt that these two painters had succeeded in establishing a direct dialogue between artist and humanity.

Rivera believed that mural painting could fulfill a basic educational function: to reach the masses with a social message they could apply to the revolutionary struggle—a conception which undoubtedly reflected his Marxist-Leninist training.



Woman of Oaxaca (oil on canvas).

In 1920, when he was invited to return home by José Vasconcelos—who was very close to the recently elected president of Mexico, General Alvaro Obregón—he was indeed ready to do so. Before embarking on the trip he traveled through Italy strengthening his knowledge of Italian mural painting. Once back in Mexico he would join with other painters in founding the School of Mexican Mural Painting.

Diego María Rivera spent three months studying the way



Portrait of Lolita Casanelles (oil on canvas, 1948).

Michelangelo applied the “golden section” when he painted his murals. He sought the secret of the formulas Giotto used to achieve the lasting brilliance and depth of his colors, and why it was that Benozzo Gózzoli’s murals had still not cracked, three centuries after they were painted. He learned how art had covered Italy’s infinity of walls.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Gerardo Murillo, Jorge Enciso and Roberto Montenegro, after ten years of struggle and endless requests, had succeeded in getting permission to use the walls where they would create their first murals. Vasconcelos asked them to do a painting on Mexico at the National Periodicals Archive, located in the former college of San Pedro y San Pablo.

In 1910 these artists had asked Porfirio Díaz to authorize them to paint the walls of the former college of San Ildefonso. In 1920 they finally convinced Vasconcelos to allow them to paint the walls of a building only a few yards away from their frustrated first project.

In 1910 Madero’s call to insurrection prevented them from painting San Ildefonso. Ten years later, Vasconcelos, the ideologue of revolutionary Mexico, included them in his project for modernizing the country’s educational system.

It was these three painters who, in 1912, had discussed this possibility with Diego María Rivera in Paris. From that time onwards, the young painter became increasingly conscious that muralism provided the answer to his artistic needs.

As he said: “On those walls we will put forward the objectives of Mexican art, without losing sight of universality. I aspire only to a place among our muralists, to collaborate with them on this ambitious dream.”

The first murals

When Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921 at the invitation of José Vasconcelos, the new Secretary of Education in the government of President Obregón, he already intended to join the muralist movement. In fact, Vasconcelos had invited him to return precisely so that he would do so.

Obregón agreed with Vasconcelos that mural painting would be a good means of educating the people. All that was required were painters to carry out this work, and Rivera was one such artist, already prepared to achieve the goal that had been set.

When Rivera arrived he was assigned to paint the murals in the amphitheater of the National Preparatory School (San Ildefonso), the same location Atl had requested from Díaz in 1910. Rivera’s first mural disconcerted Vasconcelos, who had hoped to see a visual ode to the Mexican Revolution rather than the display of metaphysical concepts that Rivera painted in the purest Byzantine style.

In Vasconcelos’ view, while Rivera had learned how to use space, through

the geometric principles of Cubism, and how to employ pigments and colors according to the encaustic method used by the great Italian muralists, he had grown out of touch with Mexico and was unaware of how the Revolution had transformed his native land.

So that Rivera could see for himself, Vasconcelos sent him on a tour throughout the country; the result was the murals Rivera painted in the building that would house the Secretariat of Education. It was there, in 1922, that Rivera began to realize his dream: to educate the people by showing them their own celebrations and labors, and how the exploiters, as well as the protagonists of the new revolutionary struggle, really lived.

In 1928 he summed up his thinking when he painted, on the third floor of the aforementioned building, the lyrics of a song called the “*Corrido* of the Revolution”: *That is how the proletarian revolution will be. The voices of the common worker are what my lute can give you; this is the deaf and harsh song which comes from the crowd.*

Now the masses of workers and peasants have shaken off the yoke under which they suffered.

According to Antonio Rodríguez, the great critic of Rivera’s work, “with this song Rivera goes beyond the initial proposal. He is the first painter in the history of art to make the working people—the workers, peasants and soldiers of the revolution—the protagonists in his artwork.”

Thus, at the age of forty-two, Rivera carried out the plan to which he had dedicated himself sixteen years before, when in 1912 he got his start in the Cubist movement in order to learn how to fit figures into the limited planes of a physical space, utilizing spatial geometry, and turned his back on the Academic school in order to become an innovator of artistic purity which would be put in the service of the people. ❧



The Judases (oil on canvas, 1931).