

Reviews

The fabulous life of Diego Rivera

Bertram D. Wolfe

Chelsea, Michigan: Scarborough House, 1990, 457 pp.

The fabulous life of Diego Rivera is a classic. The book that Bertram Wolfe wrote in 1939 and revised in 1963 is still in print in 1993. Although it reads like a novel, there is an immense amount of information skillfully woven into the context of a chronological approach to the artist's life.

The description of Diego Rivera's early years is accompanied by key events from the history of Guanajuato as well as the political and economic environment of Rivera's parents' world during the late nineteenth century.

The narration of Rivera's school years in Mexico City gives the reader the flavor of the Porfirio Díaz regime. Wolfe includes the political history of Spain during the period that Rivera spent in Europe. The time spent in Paris is enriched by a subtle depiction of Europe on the eve of and during World War I. Angelina Beloff, Rivera's first wife, was part of a community of Russian refugees, leading Wolfe to delve into Russian history.

Rivera returned to Mexico in 1922 and became the hub of a group of artists during an intense period of creativity. He contributed murals to the National Preparatory School, the Ministry of Education and Chapingo University. He also provided work for other artists on his murals and participated actively in the Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors.

Wolfe presents a first-hand narrative of key people and events. Many of the artists and intellectuals active during the 1920s in Mexico are fully described, including their

philosophical and political positions. Since Wolfe had the opportunity to revise his text, he was able to present these figures with an eye toward what would become of them later.

The story of Rivera's fabulous life continues with his first trip to the Soviet Union. Wolfe's account of the artist's experience in the Soviet Union is outstanding. The sequence of events

"The single best account of his fabulous life and politics."
—The New York Times Book Review



THE FABULOUS LIFE OF DIEGO RIVERA



BERTRAM D. WOLFE

which led to his return to Mexico, omitted by many who write about Rivera, is well documented in this book. The source of the information is the author himself, who not only witnessed but shared in the adventure.

The same is true of the period Rivera spent painting in the United States. Here, however, Wolfe openly identifies himself as Rivera's friend and advisor. Subsequent periods of Rivera's life are documented with interviews. Wolfe's selection of quotes is excellent. The documentary material tells the parts of the story that Wolfe himself did not participate in.

Each phase of Rivera's life is accompanied by the intricacies of the political and historical context. Rivera's lifespan serves as a framework for the history of ideas before, during, and after the Mexican and Russian revolutions.

Wolfe, who came to Mexico in 1922 to work with the Communist Party, was in a perfect position to tell the story. His biography of Rivera is not limited to the artist's environment. His description of Rivera's work is detailed and clear, a first-rate source of information for the art historian, especially since the book includes 164 photographs.

The reader unfamiliar with Mexico is treated to a full description of the land, its people and its art by a man unable to disguise his love for the country. When Wolfe discusses José Guadalupe Posada's penny sheets or the leftist newspaper *El machete*, he not only mentions the price, but the fact that this was one third of a laborer's daily wage.

Major issues in Mexico, such as oil, land reform and the role of the church, are viewed through Diego Rivera's work from the perspective of a well-informed and sensitive historian. While Wolfe is not an objective observer, the honesty of his approach is exceptional. An example of this aspect of Wolfe's work is his refusal to identify the person "closest

to Frida" with whom Diego had an affair at one time. The author further clarifies for the reader Frida's appreciation of his discretion.

The fabulous life of Diego Rivera is not an analytical, academic book. Rivera's life is presented chronologically in the context of his times. Yet, in his last chapter, Wolfe provides an in-depth analysis of the artist's role in politics. His "Notes for future biographers" explore Rivera's relationship with the Communist Party and the major ideological figures of communism: Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. The contextual framework which precedes this chapter gives the reader the background with which to evaluate the facts. We have the names, the dates, and the events at hand.

Bertram Wolfe documents his own life in *A life in two centuries*.¹ He lived in Mexico and became a scholar of Russian history by an experiential process. He worked for the Communist Party; then rejected the Party and worked for the U.S. State Department. He wrote extensively about Russian history and is best known for his *Three who made a revolution*.² Wolfe died in 1977 in Palo Alto, California, where he worked at Stanford University.

Susannah Glusker

Free-lance writer, working on a Ph.D. on the relationship between U.S. and Mexican intellectuals.

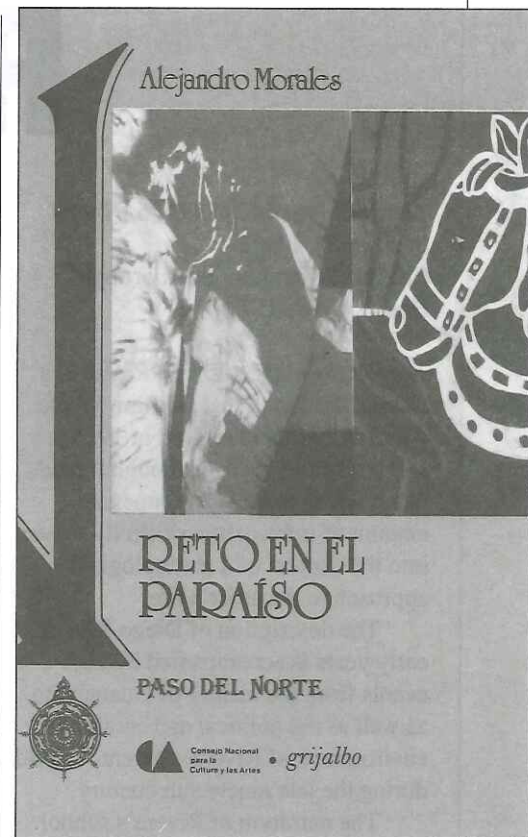
Reto en el paraíso (A challenge in paradise)

Alejandro Morales
Grijalbo, Consejo Nacional
para la Cultura y las Artes
Colección: Paso del Norte
Mexico, 1991, 452 pp.

Alejandro Morales, the author of this novel, is a professor at the University

¹ Wolfe, Bertram, *A life in two centuries*. New York, Stein and Day, 1981.

² Wolfe, Bertram, *Three who made a revolution*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1948.



of California and, according to Gustavo Sáinz, "the most arrogant, complex and angriest of the Chicano narrative writers."

Reto en el paraíso (A challenge in paradise) combines real-life and fictional elements in describing the last 120 years of California history from a Chicano perspective. The author has created a character named Dennis Barreyesa Coronel, an outstanding Chicano architect of Mexican descent, who while outwardly appearing to be assimilated into the American Way of Life, suffers internal moral conflict since he knows he will never be completely accepted.

Dennis plays tennis in a high-society "Anglo" club, feeling enormous satisfaction every time he defeats one of his conceited opponents on the court. Moreover, he is admired for his professional ability as a building consultant, yet at the same time is the victim of discrimination on the part of the