

## THE WEALTH OF CULTURE

*Diego Rivera in the National Archives*

Patricia Galeana\*

One of any people's greatest riches is its culture. Through the ages, Mexico has always been a land of creators. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the inhabitants of these lands created harmoniously designed urban centers like Teotihuacan, exuberant architecture like Chichen Itzá, sculpture in the monumental Olmec style or the exquisitely refined Chac Mool and beautiful, enigmatic paintings like those of Bonampak.

Those peoples used the concept of zero before the Europeans and could calculate Venus's trajectory in the skies many years before their encounter with the West. The richness of their culture has had a decisive influence on later generations of Mexicans.

During the colonial period New Spain was a cultural pioneer: the first print shop and the first university in the Americas were set up here. The perfect lay-out of the cities, the mag-

nificence of the churches and palaces in New Spain and the sumptuousness of the baroque altars show the cultural wealth and artistic splendor of the creators of that era.

In contemporary times, the Mexican Revolution was a decisive moment for the nation; the first social revolution of our century, it introduced social rights for the first time into universal constitutional thought and produced a myriad of thinkers, politicians, writers and artists.

Out of the revolutionary struggle came the muralist movement, the pinnacle of twentieth century Mexican pictorial art. Its central figures are Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Muralism consecrated the values of the revolution and exalted the people's struggle for social rights, placing the figures of peasants and workers at its very center.

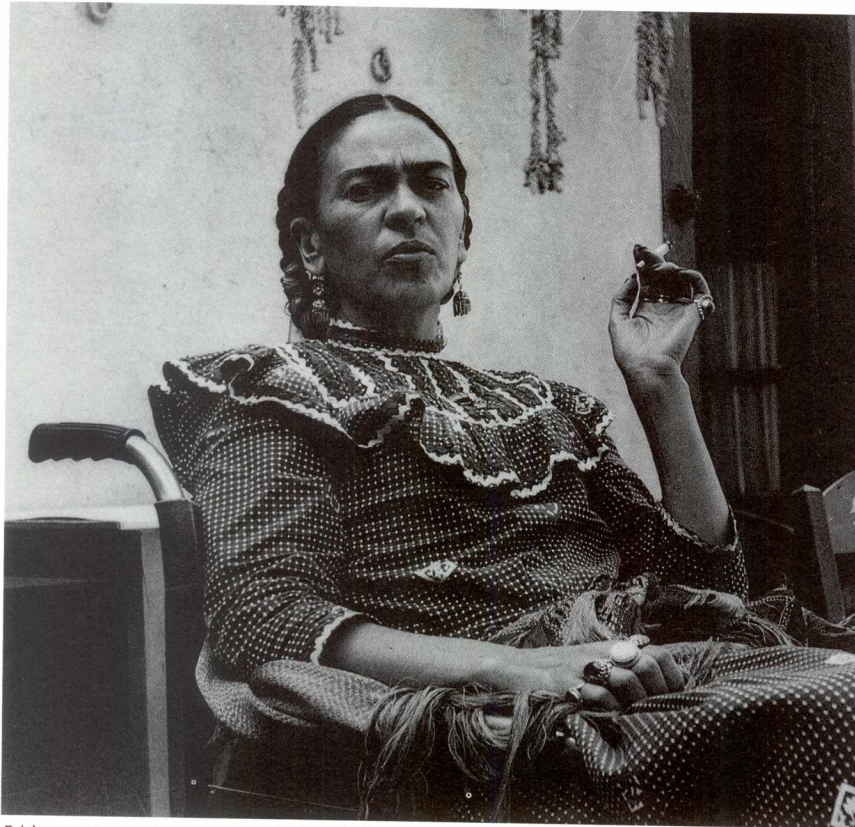
Diego Rivera, a disciple of landscapist José María Velasco, the great painter of the Valley of Mexico, rebelled very young against stiff classi-

cism. He lived through the pictorial revolution of impressionism in Europe. His analysis of Paul Cézanne's forms, Paul Gauguin's intense colors and the different post-impressionist schools undoubtedly had an important influence on his work, particularly during his cubist period.

Alfonso Reyes<sup>1</sup> explains quite well both the role that European art played among the muralists and the fundamental importance that it had for the search for their roots: "Our *compañeros* who went to Europe did not go to be inspired by the false tradition of the academies, but to look for themselves at the great works and directly observe the free play of the newest trends; when they returned, they were determined to discover everything about their native land and its glorious artis-

<sup>1</sup> Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959) was one of Mexico's most influential intellectuals and writers at the beginning of this century. The vast body of his work exemplifies the cultural environment of the revolutionary period. [Editor's Note.]

\* Director of Mexico's National Archives.



Photos courtesy of Mexico's National Archives

Frida never gave in to her physical suffering.

tic past.”<sup>2</sup> This was the case of Diego Rivera who, drenched in Mexico’s cultural roots, transcended the styles of his era through great and unique art.

Rivera’s murals put into sharp relief not only his gifts as a master sketcher and a great colorist, but also the development of someone committed to social causes.

Several cities in the United States, like Los Angeles, Detroit and New York, have examples of Rivera’s talent. Unfortunately, his frescoes at the Rockefeller Center were covered over and later destroyed because Rivera refused to accept the suggestion by Nelson A. Rockefeller, who had commissioned

<sup>2</sup> Ignacio Márquez Rodiles, *El muralismo en la Ciudad de México*, Colección Popular, Mexico City Government, Mexico City, 1975, p. 76.

him, to eliminate the portrait of Lenin he had painted in them.

In 1929, Diego joined his destiny to that of an exceptional woman, Frida Kahlo, whose love of Mexico and everything Mexican showed in every act of her life, from her dress to her work, inspired essentially in folklore.

Frida left us works of cascading imagination that express her immense love for Diego but also speak to us of her torment, the result of an accident that left her with a broken body when she was 16.

Her art, introspective, surrealist and of excellent manufacture, has awakened in contemporary generations a singular attraction that has become a source of veneration for this woman of profound sensibility and exceptional personality.

Diego Rivera once referred to her work as “acid and tender, hard as steel and delicate and fine as a butterfly’s wing, adorable like a beautiful smile and profound and cruel like the bitterness of life.”<sup>3</sup>

Frida never gave in to her physical suffering, and she found in painting the way to communicate the strength of her spirit. As one of her biographers said, “The struggle against pain that she engaged in from her sickbed and her heroism would have been a small thing had they not transcended, [but] she transformed that heroic struggle into a titanic battle of will through the supreme radiance of her spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

The lives and work of Diego and Frida are, then, part of a golden age in contemporary Mexican culture. Mexico’s National Archives, the Americas’s largest documentary repository, contains documents which, placed one on top of the other, would be 40 kilometers high. Among them are some touching on Diego Rivera’s political life.

One is the original of an article published by Rivera in the United States and written in collaboration with journalist Stanley Pierce. In the article, the painter states his support for Juan Andréu Almazán, the opposition candidate for the 1940 Mexican presidential elections, and attacks Manuel Avila Camacho. Rivera presents an impassioned defense of Almazán, whom he considers the grass-roots candidate.

<sup>3</sup> Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo. Una vida abierta*, Editorial Oasis, Mexico City, 1990, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Rodríguez, “Frida Kahlo,” *Catálogo de la exposición Pasión por Frida*, Blanca Garduño and José Antonio Rodríguez (compilers), Diego Rivera Studio Museum-De Grazia Art and Cultural Foundation, Mexico City, 1992, p. 30.

*Rivera's murals put into sharp relief not only his gifts as a master sketcher and a great colorist, but also the development of someone committed to social causes.*

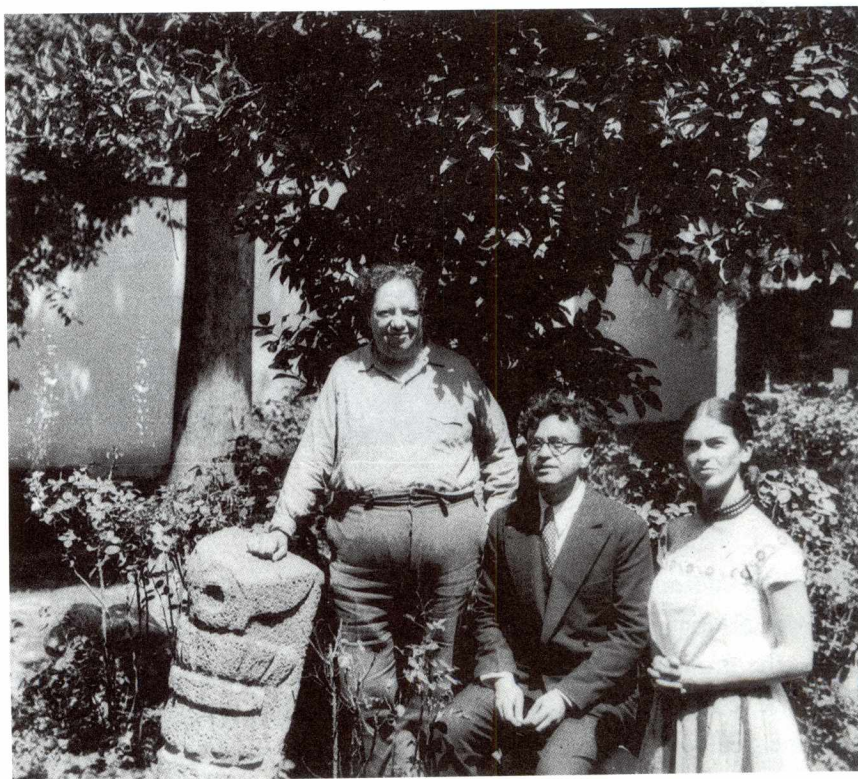


Diego at work.

“The Mexican people,” he writes, “is the most important ally of General Almazán, the discontented general.”<sup>5</sup>

Even when he was abroad, Rivera continued to participate actively in politics. So, for example, as a member of the Mexican Workers and Peasants League he sent President Abelardo L. Rodríguez a telegram on October 3, 1932, from Detroit, Michigan, to request the papal delegate be expelled from the country for having “openly attacked the Mexican workers and peasants,” when he took a political position on domestic questions. On that basis, Rivera demanded the law be enforced and the prelate deported.

Ambassador Francisco Castillo Nájera telegraphed President Lázaro



Diego and Frida with composer Carlos Chávez.

<sup>5</sup> Diego Rivera, “México es una dictadura militar,” July 24, 1940, Mexico City, National Archives, Lázaro Cárdenas Document Group, File 544.1/33.



Diego in his studio.



Frida and Diego with friends.

Cárdenas to inform him that the U.S. press was printing statements from Rivera, the untiring activist, to the effect that actress Paulette Goddard (then married to Charles Chaplin) had helped him escape from Mexico

because he considered his life to be in danger.

“Today, American press sensation-ally reproduces Diego Rivera statements made arrival Los Angeles with film artist Paulette Goddard. Rivera

states forced escape Mexico to save life. Adds escape possible thanks Paulette Goddard.”<sup>6</sup>

The National Archives also preserves the different presidential agreements authorizing budgets for Rivera to paint the murals in the National Preparatory School, the Library of the La Piedad Educational Center, the Ministry of Public Education, the Gabriela Mistral School and the National Stadium.<sup>7</sup>

Among the more than 6 million images kept in the National Archives are practically unknown photographs of Diego and Frida, some of which are reproduced here. Two such strong personalities could not help but have an impact on anyone who met them. Diego and Frida continue to move everyone who sees their work, Mexican and foreigner alike.

The ideology of the Mexican Revolution was the most important inspiration for Diego’s work. As Frida herself says, “The revolution is the harmony of form and color and everything is ruled by one law: life....Anxiety and pain and pleasure and death are no more than a process for existing. The revolutionary struggle in this process is the doorway to intelligence.”<sup>8</sup> ❧

<sup>6</sup>Telegram sent by Ambassador Francisco Castillo Nájera to Agustín Leñero, secretary to President Lázaro Cárdenas, June 12, 1940, Mexico City, National Archives, Lázaro Cárdenas Document Group, File 546.6/77, no number.

<sup>7</sup>Ministry of Public Education agreements of March 31, May 6 and 20 and June 24, 1924, Mexico City, National Archives, Obregón-Calles Document Group, vol. 54, file 121-E-E-52, no number.

<sup>8</sup>Raquel Tibol, op. cit., p. 27.