

# What Role for Promotion Of Culture and the Arts?

Alvaro Rodríguez Tirado\*

I think we must begin by acknowledging the rather annoying fact that, to many people, the cultural links between two countries—any countries—are last on their agenda. They think cultural links must come at the very end, if at all, on the list of priorities. “How can we compare,” they ask, “an exchange of exhibits between two countries—say, the exhibition *Diego Rivera: The Master at His Easel* (presented last year at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C.), and the *Masterworks of the National Gallery* (until very recently on display at Mexico City’s Anthropology Museum)—with any *real* trade issue, cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking or the migration problem?”

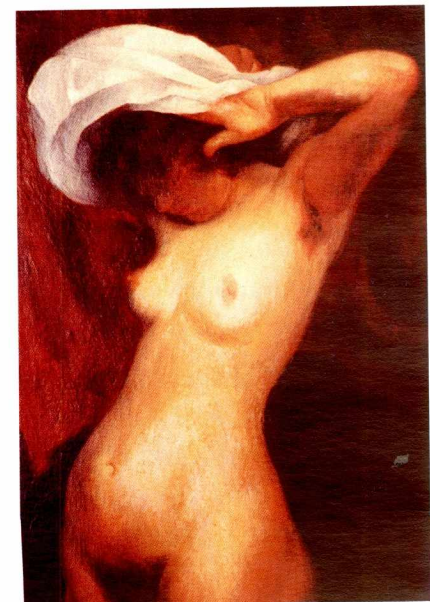
Many reasons might explain the reaction toward cultural cooperation that I’ve just described, but there are two fundamental ones with which I would

like to take issue. First, one tends to view the items in any specific area of bilateral cooperation as if they existed all on their own, that is to say, without a real and serious consideration of what happens in other areas of bilateral relations, and of the many ways in which all these areas interact and influence one another. Secondly, underlying the tendency to make light of the cultural links between two countries is a simplistic and, hence, distorted, view of what culture, the culture of a given country, is all about. Let me explain.

If we are asked what “culture” is, there is very little we can say apart from a quite general definition of the word, that is, what the concept “culture” is. We could say it refers to everything related to the human spirit. This, although true, says both too much and too little. In particular, it says that without appealing to a given culture, you would encounter some difficulty in defining a nation and all that comes with it: the concepts of nationalism, national character, traditions, history

and patriotism, for example. This cannot be stressed enough, especially in our time, when globalization and international flows of capital and information have made nations across the world seem like an endangered species.

Thus, the culture of a given nation is a *sine qua non* to define its identity: the stronger the cultural ties among the

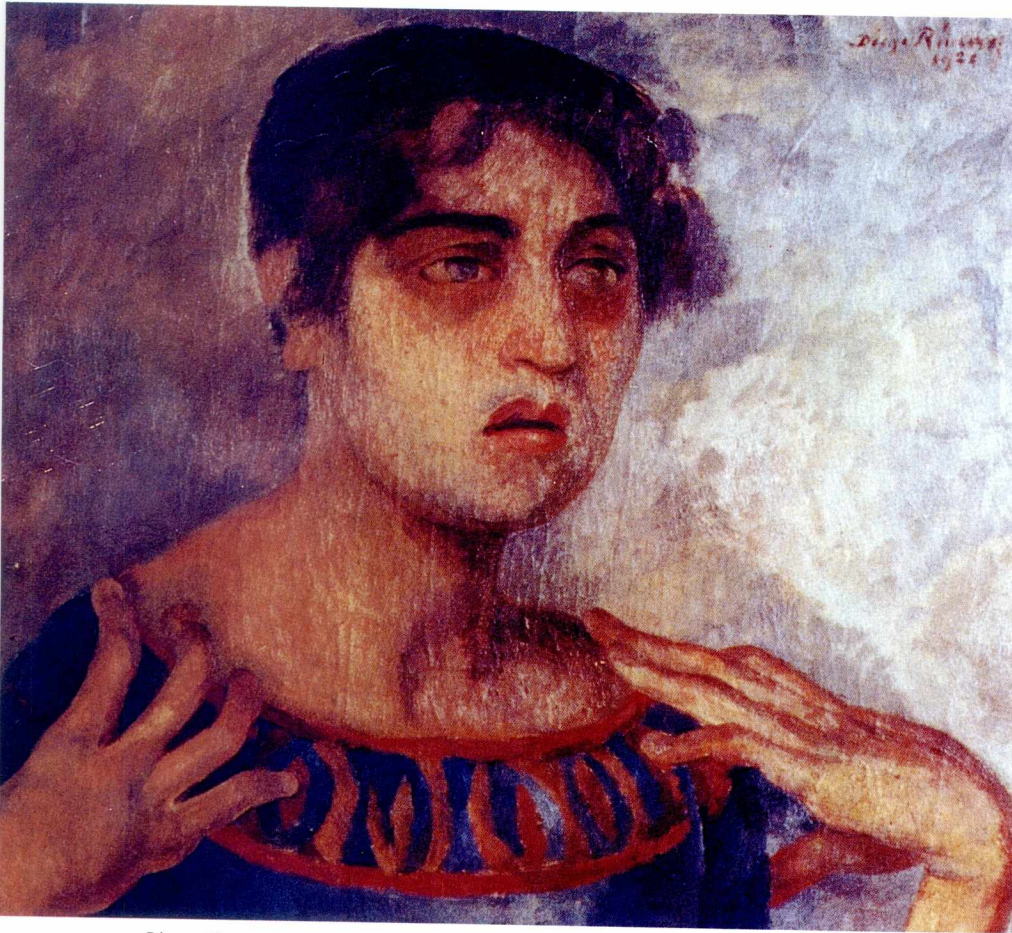


Diego Rivera, *Nude*, 1919 (oil on canvas).

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\* Minister of Cultural Affairs at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., and Director General of the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington D.C.





Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Lupe Marin*, 1944 (oil on canvas).

people of a given nation, the stronger that nation's identity in the world. It is because of the language we speak, the beliefs we hold, the values and myths we share that we recognize ourselves as members of a larger whole, a

society. It is here where we learn some of the axioms of morality; for instance, that the limit of my freedom is precisely where the exercise of someone else's freedom comes into question. Therefore, in a very literal sense, it is because

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we are immersed in a given culture that we become the sort of people we are.

How, then, shall we best ponder the cultural ties between two countries? It is my contention that we shouldn't view cultural links as "one more" set of items on the bilateral agenda, whether we place them in first or second place or last on the list of our priorities. Rather, we'd do best to regard them as *underlying* all our endeavors in the bilateral relationship. The reasons for this are obvious by now, I hope: There is no other way of telling whom you are dealing with, or what sort of people you are trading with or cooperating with against drug trafficking, or what have you, unless you can identify them, unless you can tell what these people are like. But there is simply no way of doing *that* if you have no clue as to what their culture is all about.

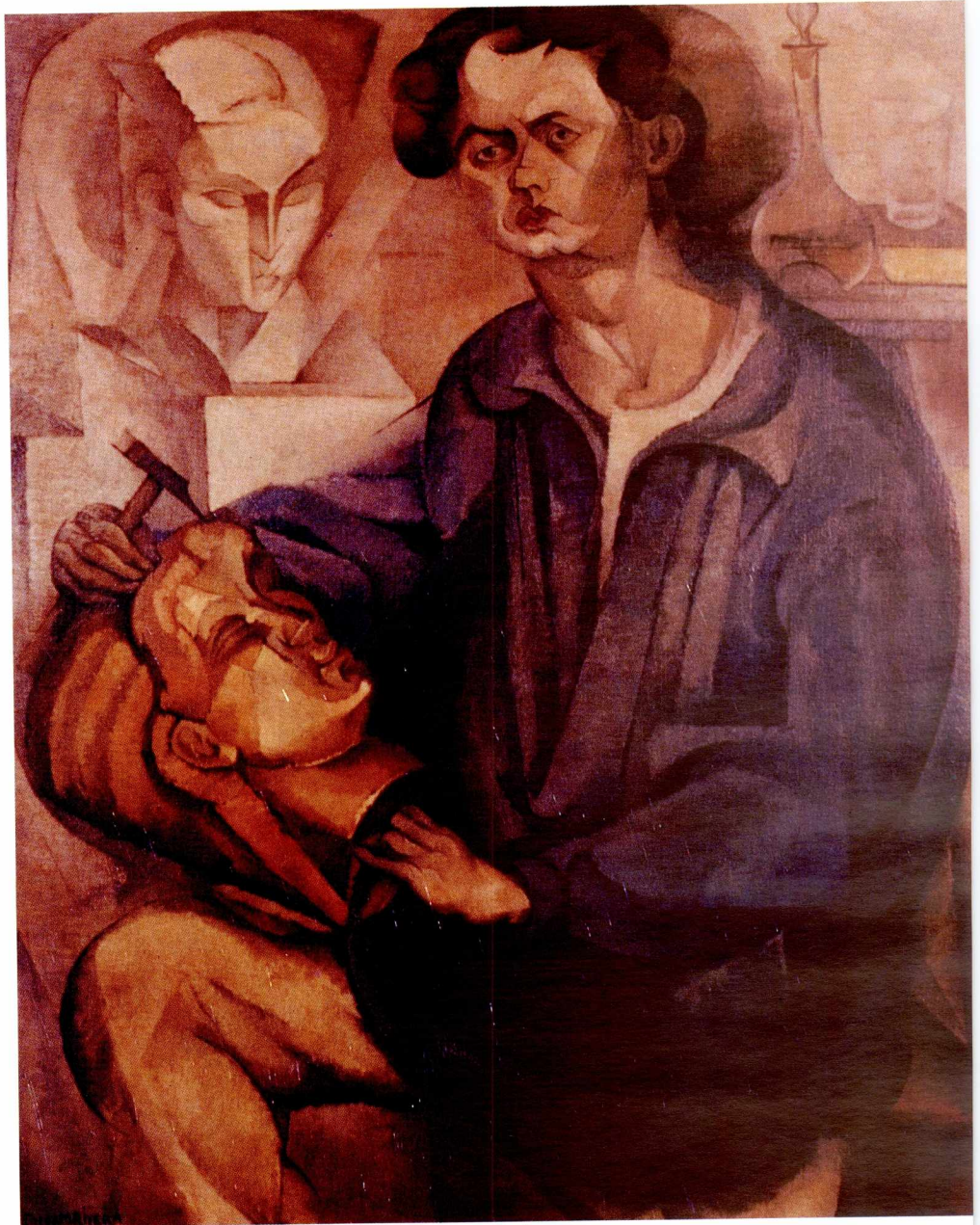
This is, in fact, the predominant view of cultural cooperation that has prevailed in Mexico since time immemorial. And, surely, it is an assessment of this sort, or something close to it, that helps explain the amazing success of Mexico's extravaganza some years ago: I am referring, of course, to the superlative cultural and artistic activities revolving around the exhibit *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, first displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. An exhibit like this was a clear example of the highly effective ways in which the discourse of nationality proffered through art objects can be articulated. Naturally, its unabashed purpose was, and is, to transform negative stereotypes into positive ones and, in the process, to im-



prove the political and economic standing of our country. So, we come to see these exhibitions as intricate, multilayered engines of global diplomacy, which are, truly, the best self-promotion.

The official name of the celebration I've just referred to was *Mexico: A Work of Art*. This name reveals the way we Mexicans have learned to think about our country. Mexico's culture and art are the very source from which we derive our sense of pride. This can hardly come as a surprise to anyone. Actually, it did come as a shock to Bernal Díaz del Castillo when he arrived in Tenochtitlan and witnessed what he called "things never heard, nor seen, nor even dreamed." But that was almost half a millennium ago. In any case, Mexicans find it easy in one way or another to trace back their origins to the cultures of Mesoamerica, where the Olmecs, the mother culture of them all, loom large in space and time.

Last year the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., mounted a phenomenal exhibition, *Olmec Art in Ancient Mexico*, the first comprehensive showing of the artistic achievements of Mexico's oldest civilization. More than 250,000 Americans came out of the exhibition with a pretty clear idea of what a portentous civilization the Olmecs were. Those magnificent colossal stone heads from San Lorenzo, the massive altars, as well as the sophisticated anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statues, spoke eloquently to the mystery and the monumentality of their art. And the Olmecs lived and created their art more than 1,000 years before someone came up with the idea



Diego Rivera, *Portrait of the Sculptor Oscar Miestchaninoff*, 1913 (oil on canvas).

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of building what was to become such a symbol of western art: the Parthenon in Greece.

Since the time of the Olmecs, Mexico has never ceased to produce art and thus contribute to the continuous art currents that make up our

human lore. We have always believed that a culture that closes itself off, however rich and varied its own splendors, will soon dry up and eventually vanish. Aware of this, Mexico has traditionally fostered cultural ties and has promoted academic and cultural links

with other countries. I mentioned earlier the role of international exhibitions as superb engines of global diplomacy. Let me now add some other welcome effects of these exhibitions: the promotion of tourism, increased attendance of the public at museums and the development of international business and political connections.

A good example is precisely the National Gallery's Olmec exhibition and the many events organized by the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C. As I mentioned earlier, the institute hosted an exhibition of the celebrated muralist Diego Rivera. This landmark exhibit included Diego's early European paintings, landscapes, portraits, still lifes and the splendid *Kneeling Woman with Sunflowers*. Of course, it would have been wonderful if we had been able to bring to Washington the works that make Diego one of the most famous painters of all time, his murals, but that is simply impossible. Just to give you an idea of this man's amazing strength, we can remember that his series of 124 frescoes in the patio of the Public Education Ministry cover 1,585 square meters, or over 17,000 square feet: the equivalent of a painting one foot tall and over three miles long.

At a very early age Diego managed to travel to Paris. There he met, as was to be expected, Picasso and Juan Gris, Picabia and Modigliani, Apollinaire, Cocteau and all the rest. The influence Picasso exercised on him can be easily detected. Diego is reported to have said, for instance, "I have never believed in God, but I believe in Picasso." The other great influence was



Diego Rivera, *Man Carrying a Turkey* (oil on tempera on Masonite).



Cézanne. Indeed, it is said Diego Rivera was left absolutely speechless only three times in his life while looking at a painting: before a window in Paris when he saw his first Cézanne; when he gazed at Posada's engravings and standing in front of some of Giotto's murals in Italy.

Diego Rivera spent the year 1956, that is, one year before his death, almost entirely in Moscow. He went there because he was convinced that they would cure a cancer he had been suffering from for quite some time. He also wanted to know the latest news about the so-called "social-realist school" and, of course, he spent most of his time drawing and painting. Five of those masterly drawings were included in the exhibit *Diego Rivera: The Master at His Easel* at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C. They are all a humble tribute to the anonymous worker that occupied such a large place in Diego's heart throughout his life.

In conclusion, Mexico has invariably shown a single, persistent determination through an incredible variety of forms, manners and styles. As Octavio Paz said, "There is no apparent commonality among the stylized jaguars of the Olmecs, the gilded angels of the seventeenth century and the richly colored violence of a Tamayo oil; nothing, save the will to survive through and in form." To share and disseminate these forms is none other than the main goal of whoever happens to be responsible for promoting culture and the arts in the international arena. ❧

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Diego Rivera, *Kneeling Woman with Sunflowers*, 1944 (oil on canvas).