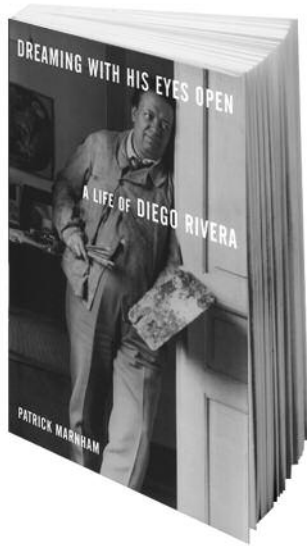


Reviews



Dreaming with His Eyes Open. A Life of Diego Rivera

Patrick Marnham

Alfred A. Knopf Publisher

New York City, 1998, 350 pp.

Patrick Marnham highlights here the masterful personality of Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter of international repute, as a revolutionary muralist of the twentieth century.

In this biography of the controversial artist, the author gives us not only a well-researched testimony of Rivera's life, but also a comprehensive approach to explore modern Mexico's cultural and political struggles. Furthermore a true story that reads like an inspired novel.

The book depicts Rivera's emotional, elusive character since he was a child and the dramatic influence of both reason and imagination in his art. In a context full of action, our painter's life was affected by a peculiar family history that combined a father of liberal ascent with a traditional, thus very conservative, mother he always stood in opposition to. Having started his artistic education at the unusual age of 11, Rivera gradually developed a restless spirit that trapped him forever between his country, rural Indian past and the challenges of industrial capitalism. Paradoxically—as Marnham demonstrates—, Diego was to become a model member and promoter of the Mexican Communist Party in 1922, after having been awarded a government grant to study in Europe

during the dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz, whose rule restored slave labor in Mexico.

Marnham details the relevance of Diego's 15-year stay in the Old World since it was when he consolidated his search for authenticity in painting and also because it broadened Rivera's worldview, personal connections and passionate rivalries. There, he deepened his theoretical skills, moving toward Cubism, and he was touched by El Greco, Cézanne and the masters of Italian Renaissance, among others.

The author shows us a man whose attitudes toward life ranged from indifference to commitment, and explains how this affected his performance as a painter and as a leftist militant. In a persuasive manner, the reader is able to follow the development of Rivera's particularly complex and selfish behavior towards women, especially the core relationship that linked him to Frida Kahlo's dramatic destiny and striking art.

Diligent attention was paid to Mexico, a country of turmoil and beauty, used as a framework within which Marnham gives us a skillful description of Rivera's most remarkable murals in Mexico City, Cuernavaca and Chapingo; a decorous tribute to the genius.

The biography shows Rivera's progressive conversion to the cause of social justice and underlines the explosive impact the popular artisan have; he is seen as a symbol of a forthcoming era where freedom of expression would lead to both civil and human rights. According to the author, if something everlasting characterized this artist's life it was contradiction and change.

In *Dreaming with His Eyes Open* Marnham indeed seems to have captured, from the title onwards, the meaning of Rivera's journey from birth to death. Surrounded by magic, color and diversity, common and critical readers of this volume will approach Diego Rivera as a product of history, a paradigmatic artist but mainly as a maker of history departing from Marnham's sound judgements.

Silvia Núñez García

Academic Secretary of CISAN

This review was first published in *The Journal of American History* no. 2, vol. 88 (September 2001), pp. 713-714. We reprint it with their permission.