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Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros Art and Politics

Though politics have influenced the visual arts throughout history in many and different ways, most notably under the Ancient Roman Empire and during the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary years of the nineteenth century, they have seldom played so prominent a role as they did during the 1920s and 1930s. Relations between Communism and the arts were close, though they followed a zigzag course both in Russia and in western Europe (see pp.765-6); Fascism and Nazism were also actively concerned with art as propaganda; and the period closed with one of Picasso's major works which is also his only explicitly political painting. However, it was in Mexico that the relationship between politics and art during these years was most fruitful, partly because the Mexican artists themselves formulated much of the theoretical base on which their program for a new public art was erected, and partly because it was combined with the quest to rediscover their national identity. By the time Rivera painted his *The Making of a Fresco, showing the Building of a City*, the revolutionary fervor of his early years had relaxed, but it continued to inform all his work and it is in this context that his paintings and also those of his sometime companions Jose Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1894-1974) should be seen.

Mexico had thrown off Spanish colonial rule in 1821 and there followed a turbulent century marked by the loss in 1848 of New Mexico, Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona and parts of Colorado and Wyoming to the USA. Twenty years later Napoleon III made his disastrous attempt to take over the country and install the archduke Maximilian as emperor (15,36 and see p.629). By 1910, when the Mexican Revolution began, 90 per cent of the peasants had been dispossessed of their land and were forced to live under an iniquitous system of debt peonage to their oppressive landlords, not all of whom were Mexicans. A decade of civil war ended in 1920 with the election of Alvaro Obregón as president and the installation of a revolutionary nationalist, rather than a full-scale communist or socialist regime. It immediately and actively promoted an ambitious cultural program for which Siqueiros (whose most remarkable works were painted much later) drew up a formal 'Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles' in 1922, from which the following extract is taken.

The noble work of our race, down to its most insignificant spiritual and physical expressions, is native (and essentially Indian) in origin. With their admirable and extraordinary talent to create beauty, peculiar to themselves, the art of the Mexican people is the most wholesome spiritual expression in the world and this tradition is our greatest treasure.

Great because it belongs collectively to the people and this is why our fundamental aesthetic goal must be to socialize artistic expression and wipe out bourgeois individualism.

We repudiate so-called easel painting and every kind of art favored by ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property.

We proclaim that at this time of social change from a decrepit order to a new one, the creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people; art must no longer be the expression of individual satisfaction which it is today, but should aim to become a fighting, educative art for all.

(D. A. Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution*, London 1975, tr. S. Calles)

Before Rivera had completed his first great cycle of murals for the Ministry of Public Education, he painted another and only slightly less ambitious series for the National Agricultural School at Chapingo just outside Mexico City. Agrarian and land reform issues had been central to the Mexican Revolution ever since 1910 and in devoting this entire cycle to them Rivera was able to realize more completely than in any other work his two great didactic themes, that of the social and political revolution and that of Mexico's national identity. Mexican Indians and peasants had begun to figure increasingly in his murals as personifications of Mexico and at Chapingo they naturally took a central role together with the land itself, to which the whole cycle was conceived as a hymn based on Emiliano Zapata's words, 'here it is taught to exploit the land not the man'. There are panels devoted to The Partition of the Land and to Good and Bad Government, the latter recalling, if only in name, the frescoes by Lorenzetti at Siena. In the former chapel of the Agrarian School buildings two carefully balanced series depict in complementary manner the revolutionary transfer of the ownership of the land and the biological and geological evolution of the earth, thus conveying Rivera's vision of the one as a counterpart of the other. The whole theme is summarized in two panels on either side of the chapel entrance, one depicting *The Agitator* (20,13), the other *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*.



20.13 Diego Rivera. *The Agitator*, 1926. Fresco. 8 ft x 18 ft 2'. Autonomous University of Chapingo. Mexico.

In contrast to Rivera's work in the USA, that of Orozco became more rather than less outspoken, notably in the murals he painted for the Baker Library of Dartmouth College in Hanover, Massachusetts, in 1932. Orozco was in no way inhibited by the fact that Dartmouth College had become a prestigious East Coast bastion of white Anglo-Saxon privilege despite having been founded specifically to provide education for North American Indians. Indeed the College's equivocal past set the theme: that of a continent characterized by the dualities of its conflicting Indian and European historical experiences. Orozco's conception of the American 'idea' centered on the myth of Quetzacoatl and was represented on the two main walls of the library with murals of America's Pre-Columbian civilization confronting post-Cortes America. The final panels in the series show, firstly, a chilly world of puritan conformity with white school-children standing obediently around their straight-laced woman teacher. In contrast, Hispanic or Latin America is represented by a tragic but also potentially heroic world in which the rebel Emiliano Zapata stands as the only upright figure among corrupt politicians and generals (20,14). Orozco said apropos this powerful image that the best representation of Hispanic-American



20.14 Jose Clemente Orozco, *American Civilization—Latin America*, detail of post-Cortesian section, 1932. Fresco, about 9 ft 10 ins x 9 ft 10 ins. Commissioned by the Trustees of the Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

idealism, not as an abstract idea but as an accomplished fact, would be, I think, the figure of a rebel. After the destruction of the armed revolution (whether against a foreign aggressor or local exploiter or dictator! there remains a triumphant ideal with the chance of realization. If there is any need for expressing in just one sentence the highest ideal of the Hispanic-American here, it would be as follows: "Justice whatever the cost"! Zapata is being stabbed in the back by a North American general in Orozco's mural and, significantly, the general is accompanied by some of Zapata's own countrymen as well as by foreign businessmen. In the final panel Orozco delivered his deeply pessimistic judgment on modern America. Echoing Quetzacoatl's condemnation of his people's worship of false gods, he castigated his contemporaries' false knowledge and their worship of money and power and the violence of their blind nationalism. As a final gesture of despair he painted in the background a junk heap, the detritus of an industrial and consumer society.

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Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*, 1995, 85 – 89.

FROG-FACE AND THE WALKING FLOWER

DIEGO RIVERA & FRIDA KAHLO

BORN IN 1886 IN GUANAJUATO, MEXICO, AND
DIED IN 1957 IN MEXICO CITY, MEXICO
(RIVERA)

BORN IN 1907 AND DIED IN 1954 IN
COYOACAN, MEXICO (KAHLO)

Distinguished Mexican muralist and distinctive
Mexican painter

Stormily married to each other

WHEN DIEGO RIVERA and Frida Kahlo were married, he was forty-two and on his third marriage; she was twenty-two and the marriage was her first. He was a national monument; she was teaching herself to paint. And there were plenty of other differences between them.

He weighed three hundred pounds and was more than six feet tall, so large that he couldn't find underwear to fit (she had it made for him, in bright pink cotton). She was ninety-eight pounds and five feet three inches.

People called them the Elephant and the Dove.

Rivera was someone to lean on, with the energy of ten men, capable of working for days at a time. Kahlo was fragile. Childhood polio had caused one of her legs to stop growing, and at age eighteen she suffered severe injuries when she was pierced by an iron handrail in a horrific bus accident. She went on to endure thirty-two operations in attempts to relieve the pain. She couldn't paint for more than an hour at a time and was often bedridden.

Rivera's art covered entire buildings and dealt encyclopedically with the land and people of Mexico. Kahlo's paintings were small—some the size of this book—and most were deeply personal.

Rivera was a messy dresser. He wore baggy overalls (usually paint-smeared), big black shoes, a Stetson hat, and he often carried a large pistol. Kahlo took such exquisite care with her clothes, no matter how she was feeling, that people called her the Walking Flower. She wore elaborate blouses, long skirts of purple or red velvet, and layers of petticoats she embroidered with Mexican sayings. She pulled her hair back tightly, embellishing it with clips, combs, and fresh

blossoms. Sometimes she wore so much jewelry—she was known to wear twenty rings at once—that she clanked when she moved.

He ate a lot (Kahlo would bring him big lunches in baskets covered with flowers and love notes), while she was a picky eater. She could think of only three American foods she liked: malted milk, applesauce, and American cheese.

Rivera could be generous but frequently was unreliable, too absorbed in his work to take much interest in people or money—sometimes he left large checks lying around for years before he cashed them. Kahlo was thoughtful and could listen to people for hours, always wanting to hear someone's life story. She kept scrupulous accounts of her money.

At fifteen Kahlo had told friends that her ambition was to have children with the famous Diego Rivera. By the time they married, he didn't want more than the several children he already had, and after numerous miscarriages, Kahlo sadly accepted that she was too frail to have children.

For all their differences, what kept Kahlo and Rivera together?

Both loved to laugh. She had a contagious belly laugh and once wrote, "Nothing is worth more than laughter." She tried whenever possible to deal with her pain by using humor. Rivera was known as a hugely entertaining teller of tall tales and made-up stories about himself. At parties the two of them made friends laugh by pouring powdered sugar all over a table and creating cityscapes.

Both were concerned about improving their country's government. Rivera believed that art could transform society and that murals were the best way for ordinary people to see art. Kahlo joined him in marches and other efforts for social change.

They both had strong opinions—and so had many fights, separations, and reconciliations. Each also had many affairs, but they always came back to one another—each was the central figure in the other's life. When Kahlo was in the hospital, Rivera would rock her to sleep or entertain her by pretending to be a circus bear dancing around her bed with a tambourine. She signed her letters to him with magenta-pink lipstick kisses and did everything she could to make him happy.



Both drew crowds. Rivera at work was considered a must-see tourist attraction; people would buy tickets just to watch him paint. Kahlo and her outfits could stop traffic; parades of children would follow her. Together they were a sensation—he presented himself like a king; she carried herself like a queen. When they entered a theater, people looked at them instead of at the performers on stage. Details of their colorful, glamorous life were written up in the papers, and people the world over addressed them by their first names.

Both were childlike and easily bored with anything except themselves and each other. He preferred her to bathe him (otherwise he wouldn't bathe) and demanded lots of bath toys. She had an enormous collection of dolls (whenever friends left on a trip, she would request, "Bring me a doll") and pets, including spider monkeys, turkeys, and parrots. One parrot named Bonito slept under the covers with her.

They liked each other's looks. Rivera admired Kahlo's eyebrows, which met in the middle, and her mustache—he was furious once when she shaved it off. During especially bitter quarrels, she would wound him by cutting off her long hair. She teasingly called him Frog-Face and Fatbelly, but in truth she adored his Buddha, like appearance.

Above all they respected each other's art. Kahlo thought Rivera was the greatest artist in the world and defended him verbally and even physically—she once jumped between him and a man with a gun. When Picasso asserted that no one could paint like Kahlo, Rivera agreed. "We are all clods next to Frida," Rivera said, and he did all he could to encourage her. Both were successful. Critics lionized him, and she had no trouble selling every work she painted.

They lived in Mexico City in two separate houses linked by a bridge. Her house was blue; his house was pink. Concerned over neighbors' approval of their guests, they simply bought the lot next door to put more distance between themselves and their neighbors. After a long breakfast together, he would disappear to work and she would go to her studio, to Tarzan movies (or the Three Stooges or the Marx Brothers) or to boxing matches. At night they met for late suppers of hot chocolate and sweet rolls.

Less than a year before she died at age forty-seven, Kahlo made herself part of an exhibit of her work. Too ill to leave her huge four-poster bed, she had the bed moved to the gallery, where friends sang songs to her. The last words she wrote in her diary were: "I hope the exit is joyful- and I hope never to come back." After her death friends reported that Rivera became "an old man in a few hours." He soon remarried but died at age seventy-one, within three years of his marriage, after a stroke.

WORKS

Rivera painted more than two and a half miles of murals in his lifetime. The first was a series of 124 panels encompassing the entire history of Mexico. It took him more than four years, working eight to fifteen hours at a stretch, to do all the painting by hand. Upon completing the work he was instantly famous.

Rivera's murals—which always sparked controversy—were vulnerable to attack by mutilation or acid throwing. The most vigorous protest came when Rivera (a "foreigner") worked inside New York City's Radio City Music Hall; his murals were destroyed before he could finish.

The Two Fridas, probably Kahlo's most famous work, was painted during a painful separation from Rivera; they divorced and remarried the next year. Most of her work was autobiographical; when she was bedridden it was convenient, with mirror in hand, to paint herself. Those who didn't find her work shockingly personal valued it highly. *Diego and I* became the first Latin American painting to sell for more than one million dollars; rock star Madonna owns *Self-Portrait with Monkey* and other Kahlo works.

In *Frida and Diego Rivera* (right), the painting Kahlo did for their wedding, he holds his palette and brushes more tightly than he holds her hand, her way of showing that with him art came first. She holds no art supplies, to show that she valued him even more than her art.

