

Diego Rivera at the Museum of Modern Art: Then and now—revolutionary art for revolutionary times

By Clare Hurley
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Diego Rivera murals for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City

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The Museum of Modern Art's curators could hardly have known that Occupy Wall Street protesters would be evicted from their encampment in downtown Manhattan the same week that their exhibition of Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) opened in November, but the coincidence has been widely commented on.

Rivera's name has become virtually synonymous with epic murals of social revolution in the first decades of the 20th century. Given the appropriate update, his image of a soldier lunging, sword drawn, across a woman and child to attack a crowd of workers in *The Uprising*, might have been drawn from today's news.

In this context, the modest scale of the exhibit at MoMA might be a disappointment, especially when compared to the exhaustive retrospectives that the museum regularly awards to major artists from the modernist canon. (Coinciding with the Rivera exhibit, a much larger show of Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning took up the museum's entire sixth floor.)

However, the impact of the Rivera murals, under conditions where the first significant social struggles in several decades are erupting in the United States, is not diminished by the exhibit's size.

It has been an ongoing challenge to show murals outside of their original physical context. MoMA's current exhibit reprises the solution arrived at in 1931 when the newly founded museum proposed to feature Rivera in its second one-man show. Rivera devised these "freestanding murals," painted on movable slabs, to reproduce frescoes that were impossible to move—literally embedded in the walls of the Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) in Mexico City and other municipal buildings constructed in the early 1920s by the Mexican nationalist government of President Álvaro Obregón. Indeed, the very conception of the murals as a structural part of cultural life for the Mexican population—secular, revolutionary responses to church frescoes—was the antithesis of a travelling art show.

By the late 1920s, Mexican muralism was at a decisive juncture—just reaching the peak of its influence as an art movement internationally, which no doubt was one of the attractions for the new museum in New York, while the political currents that it was bound up with were in fact turning.

Something of this contradiction comes across in the exhibit itself, though it is beyond the organizers to address these issues adequately. The powerful appeal of socialist politics following the Russian Revolution was felt by broad layers of the population, especially with the economic collapse of 1929, and could not be ignored.

Furthermore, Rivera's connection with socialism was more than just a

vague "sympathy with [Leon] Trotsky," which is the exhibit's only note of the relationship. The power of Rivera's work was integrally bound up not just with the radical nationalist Mexican Revolution, but more fundamentally with the establishment of the first worker's state in Russia in 1917 and the sharp political struggles that arose in the subsequent decade. [See Trotsky's comments in the accompanying article.]

It is not a secondary matter that Rivera came out in support of Trotsky and the building of a new revolutionary international in opposition to Stalinism, before succumbing to the pressures of the bureaucracy later in life. The Mexican painter's independence from the Stalinist orbit allowed him to treat life and society in a dynamic and fresh manner in the 1930s, unlike those who were following the dictates of "socialist realism" and other suffocating doctrines.

The Museum of Modern Art's first curator, Alfred H. Barr, met Rivera while in Moscow in 1927, where the already renowned painter and member of the Mexican Communist Party was a guest of honor at the festivities honoring the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. (Rivera's marvelous sketchbook from the event is also included in the exhibit.)

Some have found it ironic that Barr, who represented not only MoMA, but its founding patrons, wealthy socialite Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and her husband industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. invited—all expenses paid—an artist known for his Communist views to come to New York to paint murals for the museum.

In addition to the fact that the American ruling elite no doubt had more enlightened artistic views than its counterpart today, figures such as Abby Rockefeller still had the confidence to associate themselves with what they considered the most progressive artistic trends of the time—to a point, as we shall see. Today, such an association would not be so much ironic as inconceivable.

Rivera, always known for his prodigious artistic output, produced five "portable frescoes" for the MoMA exhibit in the course of just six weeks in November, working with a team of assistants in an unheated space in the museum. (The lack of heat was to keep the plaster slabs on which the murals were painted from drying too quickly.)

These panels reproduce images from Rivera's well known fresco cycle in Cuernavaca, Mexico, which depicts Mexican history in sweeping breadth: *Sugar Cane*, *Liberation of the Peon*, *Indian Warrior*, and *Agrarian Leader Zapata* were included. But instead of trying to recreate their original scale, Rivera indicated that these images were lifted from the much larger work through close cropping.

For example, *Indian Warrior* is no larger than a traditional painting, and seems almost too small to contain its subject: a peasant in a jaguar suit straddling a fallen Spanish conquistador. The large impassive eyes and white fangs of the mask emphasize the brutal determination of the man

inside the suit as he plunges a knife into the armored man beneath him.

Rivera was not only a productive but also somewhat unpredictable artist to work with. The original number of panels agreed to may have been eight, maybe six. In fact, the MoMA show opened in December 1931 with five panels, but Rivera continued working after the opening to produce three additional panels of New York scenes.

Perhaps feeling he had given the museum the Mexican panels they wanted, Rivera turned his attention to what he considered his real subject and intended audience, in this case the American population.

Inspired by his experience of New York City, these panels show a modern metropolis at the height of a building boom made possible by the legions of available labor during the Great Depression. The skyscrapers that came to define the city's iconic skyline all went up in a staggeringly short period of time. The Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world at the time, went up in just over a year, and was completed in 1931 while Rivera was in the city.

But Rivera was responding to more than just the protean feats of modern industry. While American artists of the time, such as Charles Sheeler, painted pictures of factories as though no one worked in them, Rivera's panels *Pneumatic Drill* and *Electric Power*, as well as his preparatory sketches of construction sites, emphasize the essential agency of human labor—man and machine seem as one—to these technological achievements.

However, it has been *Frozen Assets*, an image of the social relations that underlie capitalism's achievements, which has drawn the most attention at the time, and in today's social context.

The painting inventively takes a vertical slice of the city to expose the layers beneath its towering skyscrapers: first, masses of workers lined up on a subway platform, beneath them, a barracks of sleeping homeless people, and, finally, under it all, a guarded bank vault where the wealthy are waiting to check on their loot.

It is hard not to think that the criticism leveled at this mural in particular has less to do with aesthetics than irritation at its accuracy. Who fails to notice the resemblance to today's banks hoarding the trillions received in bailout funds while the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression continues for millions of people?

But, the bluntness of Rivera's criticism has always rankled those who prefer their depictions of social relations to be more "nuanced"—i.e. refracted through the artist's experience into personal, sometimes painful, often enigmatic imagery, found, for example, in the work of the Surrealists and others, such as Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo.

Another section of the exhibition is devoted to the ill-fated mural *Man at the Crossroads*. While at work on the MoMA murals, Rivera received the commission to create one for Rockefeller Center, then under construction, which appears at the center of *Frozen Assets*.

Abby Rockefeller's son, Nelson [the youthful future governor of New York and US vice president], and his advisors determined the mural's subject: "Man at the crossroads and looking with uncertainty but with hope and high vision to the choosing of a course leading to a new and better future." The pompous ambiguity of the theme was echoed by similar verbiage in Rivera's proposal. He then proceeded to design a mural showing humanity's liberation from tyranny and war through what seemed at the time to be fantastical technology. The mock-up for the mural includes cinema cameras, televisions, space ships, etc.

Lest the point be missed that this rational, humane, egalitarian society would be a socialist one, Rivera planned to show a progression from a decadent party scene of millionaires, including a possible likeness of the famously teetotaling John D. Rockefeller, Sr. on the left to one of Lenin leading the working class to victory on the right.

Despite what Kahlo described as "Mrs. R.'s radical taste," this proved too much for Rivera's "enlightened" industrialist patrons to take. There's been debate over which straw actually broke the camel's back. But in his

letter objecting to the inclusion of Lenin, Nelson Rockefeller got to the gist:

"If it were in a private house it would be one thing, but this is in a public building, and the situation is therefore quite different."

When Rivera refused to replace Lenin's likeness with that of an "unknown man", the Rockefellers decided it was time to call a halt to their flirtation with "Red" artists, even as social tensions in the United States entered a far more explosive stage.

In May 1933, Rivera was fired from the project, and mounted police were stationed outside Rockefeller Center to break up the demonstrations that erupted in response. In February 1934, the fresco was chiseled off the wall, only months before a strike wave broke out, spearheaded by the Toledo Auto-Lite and Minneapolis and San Francisco general strikes, led by Trotskyist and left-wing forces.

However, before Rivera returned to Mexico, where he was able to recreate *Man at the Crossroads* in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, he completed twenty-seven magnificent murals in an interior courtyard at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) between April 1932 and March 1933. Apparently Rivera considered these his finest murals.

Rivera's degree of artistic influence was subject to shifts in socio-political conditions. In the 1930s, his conception of large-scale public artwork was absorbed by many artists who were employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to paint murals in US post offices and other municipal buildings, among other tasks.

Stylistically, Rivera's work is quite distinct from Stalinist "socialist realism," with which it is often mistakenly and sometimes maliciously associated. Rivera's work remained free of both aesthetic and ideological rigidity. Its power lies in this—that confidence in the historical process and social revolution flows *freely* through his veins and his brush.

Rivera remained profoundly and unashamedly influenced by the experimentation of the Cubists and the early moderns from the decade he spent in the bohemian milieu of Paris in the 1910s, as well as by the Constructivist artists he met in Russia. While these artistic trends moved toward greater and greater abstraction, Rivera's work maintained its figurative roots, but with a modernist sensibility.

Just as in the early 1930s, the appreciation of Rivera's murals and the struggles out of which they arose have potentially far-reaching consequences well beyond the realm of art.

Rivera's show at MoMA in 1931 set attendance records, even with an admission of 35 cents (\$5 in 2011 dollars) during the Great Depression. The wider layers of the population whom Rivera considered his primary audience would be hard-pressed to pay today's MoMA's admission of \$25 (Fridays after 4 pm are free).

Nonetheless, the present show and the continuing power of the work are a vindication both of Rivera's artistic approach and his orientation to the October Revolution and the possibilities it disclosed.

Photo Credits:

Diego Rivera. *The Uprising*. 1931.

Fresco on reinforced cement in a galvanized-steel framework, 74 x 94 1/8" (188 x 239 cm). Private collection, Mexico

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Diego Rivera. *Indian Warrior*. 1931. Fresco on reinforced cement in a metal framework, 41 x 52 1/2" (104.14 x 133.35 cm). Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Purchased with the Winthrop Hillyer Fund SC 1934:8-1. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Diego Rivera. *Frozen Assets*. 1931-32.

Fresco on reinforced cement in a galvanized-steel framework, 94 1/8 x 74 3/16 in (239 x 188.5 cm). Museo Dolores Olmedo, Xochimilco,

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