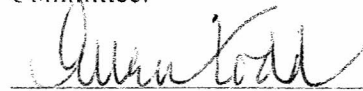


THE WRITING ON THE WALL: MOMA, DIEGO RIVERA, AND THE AMERICAN
MURAL MOVEMENT

by

Kristen Korfitzen
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts
Art History

Committee:

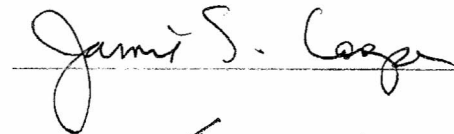


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Date: January 15, 2014

Spring Semester 2014
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Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2011

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DEDICATION

To Paul, because you asked me to dedicate it to you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my friends and family for supporting me throughout the duration of this project. Thank you for kindly reading my frantic emails, for being understanding of emotional outbursts, and for reassuring me this was something worth doing. Thank you to Dr. Todd and Dr. Greet for all their help over the years and for encouraging me to be a better writer and a better scholar. I hope I have not let you down.

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ABSTRACT

THE WRITING ON THE WALL: MOMA, RIVERA, AND THE AMERICAN MURAL MOVEMENT

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George Mason University, 2014

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This thesis takes a closer look at the American mural movement of the early 1930s. While scholars have begun to re-assess the federally commissioned murals of the great depression, little work has been done on the years directly preceding the relief programs when the idea of the “American mural” was still being formed. This thesis discusses a series of events and works of art that were key in shaping what would become the standard iconography of a federal mural. These include Diego Rivera’s 1931 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, and Diego Rivera’s 1933 mural *Man at the Crossroads*. In these three years the debate over the function and form of American murals came to a head. This thesis argues that the dialog surrounding these three events lays out the basic theoretical structure of 1930s American murals including; appropriate subject matter, location and access to the public, and methods of production.

INTRODUCTION

This Thesis examines the relationship between the Mexican and American mural movements and how their methods of production, aesthetics, and politics influenced and defined one another in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By examining the discourse on American and Mexican murals of this period, I argue that the American mural movement was heavily indebted to the practices of the Mexican muralists while at the same time limited by the ever-present specter of Mexican radicalism. Mexican mural production was born of a communist approach to art production and consumption, and its subject matter unabashedly announced its Marxist views to the world at large. The mural's ability to be used as ideological propaganda and its close association with Marxism, created tension in the American mural movement between those artists, critics, and administrators who wished to use muralism in America to reconnect art with everyday life and private patrons who felt threatened by radical politics. This tension manifested itself in the whitewashing of controversial murals and tight control over government commissioned works.¹ Such conflicts resulted in what many came to view as a

¹ My thesis focuses on the work of Diego Rivera in the United States, though he is not the only Mexican artist to court controversy in his public commissions. In 1932, David Alfaro Siqueiros' Los Angeles mural *América Tropical* sparked considerable outrage. The mural's theme of American imperialism and violence against its native peoples, was deemed unfit for public decoration. The mural was attacked and finally whitewashed in 1938. Due to the scope of my project, *América Tropical* is not used as a case study in this project. The circumstances surrounding the mural's controversy and its eventual destruction are part of the larger story of American artists and critics struggling to come to terms with the proper form and function of American muralism.

stylistically limited and thematically stagnant body of work whose aesthetic and social politics and conflicted discourses have only recently begun to be revisited by scholars.

The debate over the function and form of American murals came to a head around three events that occurred in quick succession. These events which succinctly illustrate America's relationship with the Mexican Muralists and make up the main focus of this thesis. They include the little discussed 1932 Museum of Modern Art Exhibition (MoMA) *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, and two events featuring the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, his 1931 MoMA retrospective, and his 1933 commission for Rockefeller center. Because of its critical failure, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* has been largely ignored by scholars, but the circumstances surrounding MoMA's decision to launch this exhibit so quickly after the success of Rivera's 1931 retrospective and the announcement of Rivera's Rockefeller Center commission deserve reconsideration. Indeed, I want to claim that this sequence of events and the interactions between artists and institutional patrons had far reaching effects on both the Mexican and American mural movements.

Murals by American Painters and Photographers (MAPP) has received little to no attention from scholars even though it was the largest exhibition of American murals to be held by a museum at the time.² Forty-nine American painters and photographers submitted work to the exhibition including well known artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe,

² Museum of Modern Art. "EXHIBITION OF MURAL PAINTINGS BY AMERICAN ARTISTS ANNOUNCED BY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART." Monday, Feb. 1, 1932.

Charles Sheeler, Reginald Marsh, Edward Steichen, William Gropper, and Ben Shahn among others. It was launched at the height of the “Mexican invasion” when murals and mural production were a constant topic of discussion in newspapers and art publications. Yet the circumstances surrounding MoMA’s decision to hold the exhibition (largely influenced by the overwhelming popularity of the Mexican muralists), its critical failure and the subsequent political controversy it spawned have not captured the attention of scholars in the field.

By contrast, there is no shortage of scholarly works on Diego Rivera. For this thesis it is beneficial to revisit two particular events. In the early 1930s Diego Rivera was championed as the face and voice of Mexican muralism in America. Backed by influential patrons such as the Rockefeller family and Henry Ford, Rivera secured a number of high profile commissions including two murals for the San Francisco Stock exchange in 1931 and a large mural series at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932. His retrospective at MoMA in 1931 was the museum’s first solo show of a contemporary artist, and at the time the museum’s highest attended exhibition.³ While all three of “Los Tres Grandes”⁴ received critical acclaim and notoriety in the United States, Rivera’s success in particular sparked more comment and reaction than either of his compatriots, David Alfaro Siqueiros, or Jose Clemente Orozco.

³ Over 50,000 people attended Rivera’s retrospective during its short run.

⁴ The Three Greats: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco.

The American murals of the 1930s, specifically those sponsored by Franklin Roosevelt's various relief programs, have a reputation for being sterile and uninspired works. Due to the overwhelming volume of government commissions, murals of the 1930s are often lumped together as "WPA art," whether or not they were funded by one of the many federal agencies that supported mural painting.⁵ Social realism, the chosen political aesthetic of many American muralists, has come to be conflated in contemporary usage with Section art, the art produced under the auspices of the government regardless of the artist's financial need, and the art produced under the government relief programs.⁶

The reputation of Section art in particular and federal murals in general is poor. Karal Ann Marling's opening paragraph for the sixth chapter of her book *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History Post-Office murals in the Great Depression*, colorfully addresses Art History's treatment of depression-era murals and Section art :

History has brought in a negative verdict on the post-office pictures of the '30s... They're awful murals! Poor art for poor people! When the long-awaited American renaissance finally burst upon the post-war world, it was the firebreathing anarchists who set off the aesthetic bomb. The modernists - the Abstract Expressionists and their numerous progeny - won the battle of styles. From the serene perspective of hindsight, Section

⁵ Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 5.

⁶ The mural commissions during Roosevelt's New Deal programs came from a number of agencies including The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) which ran from 1933-1934 under the direction of Edward Bruce; Federal Art Project (FAP) 1935-1943, the main visual arts division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA); the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, often known as "The Section in operation between 1934-1934; and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), which operated independently of the FAP and WPA between 1935-1938.

art looks pretty dismal, and Section policies seem preposterously wrongheaded.⁷

Marling's book is one of several published in the last thirty years to re-examine the murals produced through Roosevelt's relief programs. Other notable contributions to the subject include Barbara Melosh *Engendering culture : manhood and womanhood in New Deal public art and theater*, and Marlene Park's *Democratic vistas post offices and public art in the New Deal*. Rather than judging depression-era murals and muralists against their more avant-garde and "revolutionary" contemporaries, scholars such as Marling, Melosh and Park, have begun to consider the social, political and artistic motivation behind the creation of murals and social realism as an aesthetic movement of the 1930s.

Marling's book was one of the first to thoroughly reexamine federal murals, and scholars have expanded on that work, but these projects have largely focused on only federal murals. The American mural production of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the effects of the Mexican muralism on American artists is still neglected. Two books which touch on this early period of mural production and its relation to Mexican muralism are: Joan Saab in *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the War* and Andrew Hemingway's *Artists on the Left*. Saab discusses government commissioned murals as a tool used by artists and officials to "link art and democracy,"⁸ a tactic adopted from the

⁷ Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 292.

⁸ A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

Mexican mural movement. Hemingway broadens the discussion of mural production to include works produced outside of federal relief programs. Hemingway's book devotes the majority of mural discussion to how communist artists' political ideology affected their work for the federal relief programs, influenced their subject matter and their general thoughts about the government sponsorship of artists. This discussion naturally includes the influence of Mexican artists and their political activism in America. While most of these works touch on the Mexican muralists and their activities in the United States in some way, there is a lack of critical analysis of the relationship between the two countries.

I argue that a closer examination of the relationship between Mexican and American artists will provide a better understanding of the works that have come down to us as Section art. There is no shortage of literature devoted to the accomplishments of the Mexican Muralists, including the movement's greatest artists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Literature that examines the Mexican artists' work produced in America has only recently begun to be published. *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (1999), by Anthony W. Lee, and *Mexican Muralism without Walls: The Critical Reception of Portable Work by Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (2009) by Anna Indych-Lopez, and two exhibition catalogs *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947* (1993) ed. James Oles and *Mexican Modern Art 1900-1950* (1999) ed. Luis-Martin Lozano, are among the small handful of significant

works on Mexican-American artistic relations published in the last few decades. And while not strictly an art historical text Helen Delpar's *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico 1920-1935* (1995), is essential for my topic. Delpar's complete analysis of Mexican-American relations during this short period sheds a completely new light on the conditions under which the Mexican muralists were introduced to American audiences. What is beginning to emerge from this scholarship is the fact that American artists did not blindly follow the Mexican example of mural production and fail. Rather, the complex idea of the mural as formed in the popular American consciousness, forced both American and Mexican artists to modify their artistic values and practices to produce "American" murals.

This thesis continues the discussion of how social, political, and artistic concerns dictated the course of mural production in 1930s America, and uses as its case studies the two MoMA exhibitions and the controversy around Rivera's commission for Rockefeller Center. This last event can be understood as the beginning of the end of America's love affair with Rivera and Mexican muralism. By focusing on this early period of mural production and controversy, this paper attempts to provide a historical framework from which the later aesthetic decisions of artists and federal agencies can be evaluated.

MURALISM AND THE MEXICAN VOGUE

While the American mural movement of the 1930s has often been neglected by critics, the Mexican mural movement has been lauded as one of the major accomplishments of 20th century modern art. The Mexican Revolution of 1911 ended with the semi-stable regime headed by General Álvaro Obregón in 1920.⁹ Obregón positioned himself as a champion of the Mexican people. His new government, in an effort to assure those tired of fighting that they would be the regime of peace, used art to promote “a vision of a government that would take care of its citizens, educate them, raise their standard of living,” and most importantly “distribute land to peasants and relieve the urban worker from centuries of oppression.”¹⁰ Murals were to play a central role in the propaganda campaign devised by the Minister of Public Education, Jose Vasconcelos. The murals he commissioned were used to visualize Obregón’s politics as well as the post-revolutionary Mexican populace. The Obregón regime realized that

⁹ The end date of the Mexican Revolution is debatable. Venustiano Carranza assumed the presidency of Mexico in 1914 but was continually challenged by outside groups and was assassinated in 1920. Obregón assumed the presidency after Carranza but would continue to be troubled by challenges to his administration.

¹⁰ Leonard Folgarait, *Mural painting and social revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: art of the new order* (Cambridge And New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

public murals, acting as a form of mass communication, could be used to constitute “a national citizenry through the governmental apparatuses of heritage.”¹¹

In 1934 American artist George Biddle published an article in *Scribner's Magazine* titled “An Art Renaissance Under Federal Patronage.” In his discussion Biddle advocates for government sponsorship of mural commissions to be modeled on the program instituted by Obregón. For the purposes of my thesis I have defined the “Mexican Model”, as a government program of propaganda aimed at visually codifying the “identity” of its people through art. Obregón was attempting to assume the guise of a new champion of the “true” Mexican people, and to distance himself from previous leaders of European descent under European influence. For this new leader the project of visually constructing the population he claimed to represent was integral to his legitimacy as president.

Mexican artists sympathetic to Obregón and his government “of the people” were eager to participate in this mural program and take advantage of the opportunity it presented Mexican artists to participate in a movement wholly their own. Diego Rivera left Mexico for Europe in 1907, and remained there until 1921. During this time Rivera was an active member of the French avant-garde circles, and created a number of works in the new cubist style. Eventually Rivera became disillusioned with more formally experimental avant-garde movements in Europe. Towards the end of his tenure overseas,

¹¹ Mary Katherine Coffey, “Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico,” *The Communication Review* (January, 2002), 10. DOI: 10.1080/10714420212350

Rivera was joined by David Alfaro Siqueiros who criticized the European avant-garde for being too concerned with “aesthetic trivialities.”¹² Siqueiros stated that he could not find a “common philosophical or political ground with the French avant-garde.”¹³

It was Europe that introduced Siqueiros and Rivera to the Leninist-Marxism which would ultimately form the ideological foundation for Mexican Muralists. In France Siqueiros briefly worked in an iron factory, where he came into contact with organized unions formed and modeled on Soviet unions. And after a trip to Italy in 1920, Rivera and Siqueiros became ardent supporters of the mural as a form of art more in touch with human experience. The mural, as a form of marxist art would more fully develop after Siqueiros and Rivera returned to Mexico. In 1921, Siqueiros published *Three Appeals for the Current Guidance of the New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors* in which he calls for art to “restore the lost values of painting and sculpture as well as endowing art with new values”.¹⁴ Siqueiros calls on artists to create a universal art which connects with our present “dynamic age”, by embracing the machine and construction which are the things that make up “the contemporary aspects of our daily lives.”¹⁵ The

¹² Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 32.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Three Appeals for the Current Guidance of the New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors,” in *Inverted Utopias* trans, Mari Carmen Ramierz and Hector Olea (New Haven: Yale Univeristy Press, 2004), 458-459.

¹⁵ Ibid.

1933 manifesto of the *Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors*

further elaborated the form and style of the new murals stating:

Our primary aesthetic aim is to propagate works of art which will help destroy all traces of bourgeois individualism. We reject so-called salon painting and all the ultra-intellectual salon art of the aristocracy and exalt the manifestation of monumental art because they are useful. We believe that any work of art which is alien or contrary to popular taste is bourgeois and should disappear because it perverts the aesthetic of our race.¹⁶

In these essays Siqueiros theorized that art which focuses on national culture, daily life, and the people, will simultaneously revolutionize the state of art as well as the state of society. Mural art could literally move art out of the gallery, making monumental art available to the general public instead of being the sole possession of the privileged bourgeois class. The early murals of the Mexican movement celebrated the working class and the poor, attacked the ultra wealthy and promoted an fully integrated communist society.

Unlike Mexico, America had not undergone the same kind of monumental political or social change in the early 20th century. From its very beginnings, the Mexican mural movement was part of a larger government program enacted in part to legitimize Obregón's regime through the creation of an idealized "national citizenry" which was heavily influenced by Jose Vasconcelos' theories of a "cosmic" mestizaje race¹⁷. As argued by Ana María Alonso, the visual arts were an integral element of creating

¹⁶ David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors" In *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, Patrick Frank, 33-35. (New Haven And London: Yale University Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁷ Mestizo is a term used to refer to people of both European and Indigenous decent.

“national imaginaries,”¹⁸ the set of values, laws and symbols of a society. The government needed sympathetic artists to help them visualize their ideal Mexican society. This same need did not seem to exist in America. Working largely for private patrons there was no call for the same type of racial politicking in American murals of the early 1930s. Consequently we see very little interest from mural painters in the United States in depicting native peoples. What American mural painters did identify with was the Marxist influence on mural art. The focus on the poor and working class, and the attempt to enfranchise the working class through better visual representation spoke to American artists and became a central theme in American muralism.¹⁹

Muralism in 1930s America essentially began in the radical leftwing journals and art circles. The Mexican muralists were very vocal members and supporters of the Communist Party in Mexico and through the party their work was introduced to Communist American artists. In 1928, Hugo Gellert completed a large scale mural project for the cooperative cafeteria of the Worker’s Party on Union Square East (fig. 1). Gellert’s massive 8ft x 80ft mural was composed of a frieze style design of laborers holding signs reading “Workers of the World Unite!” The mural’s figures are interwoven

¹⁸ See Ana María Alonso, “Conforming Disconformity: “Mestizaje,” Hybridity, and the Aesthetics of Mexican Nationalism”, *Cultural Anthropology* , Vol. 19, No. 4 (Nov., 2004), pp. 459-490.

¹⁹ In an interview the artist Phillip Evergood described the moment he realized that his art could be used to help publicize the plight of the working class during the early years of the depression. He stated “We talked and sat around the fire and then I got a brain wave. It seemed to me that I should be involved with ... my work so I told them that I would be back so I walked to [Evergood’s apartment] and got some drawing materials, came back and sat with them and drew all night long until dawn.” Stories similar to Evergood’s, of artists deciding to use their art as a sort of activism, can be found in Patricia Hills, *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century*, Prentice-Hall Inc. Upper Saddle River NJ, 2001.

with stylized hammer and sickles. An adjoining wall featured portraits of leftist leaders including Vladimir Lenin (fig. 2). A review of the work in the *New Yorker* stated that “The Gellert Murals are the only ones on this continent except those of Rivera in Mexico that are really contemporary.”²⁰ Historian James Wechsler calls Gellert’s mural “the first example of muralism’s physical manifestation in the United States.”²¹

Some clarification is needed surrounding the term “muralism”. The mural movement of the 1930s was not the first of its kind to take place in America. A previous movement took place in the country during the late 19th century. It was during this period that large scale projects such as the decoration of the Library of Congress, and the Boston Public Library were completed. The first major wave of mural production undertaken in America was influenced largely by the work of French muralist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes who was instrumental in marketing the mural as a decorative item. Puvis choose not to refer to his own works as paintings or canvases, but rather as a “panneau decoratif” a decorative panel. Art historian Baily Van Hook, argues that the word panel “implied that the works’s function was to decorate an interior space.”²² By frequently employing the term “panneau decoratif” Puvis “continued to exhibit his canvasses in that

²⁰ James Wechsler "Beyond the Border: The Reception of the Mexican Mural Movement in Soviet Russia and the United States," in *Modern Mexican Art, 1900-1950*, (National Gallery of Canada, 1999,) 48.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bailey Van Hook, “The Virgin & The Dynamo: Public Murals in American Architecture 1893-1917” (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003) 13.

way in order to signal their decorative not narrative intention.”²³ In the contemporary discourse of this first wave of mural painting, the word “mural” is almost always followed by the the word “decoration” and the idea of the mural as an element of interior decoration persisted in the American consciousness well into the 20th century.²⁴

In contrast, the word muralism first appears in the discourse specifically referring to the Mexican movement. The first instance of muralism that I’ve found in criticism is an article published by *The Baltimore Sun* on October 13th, 1935 titled “Art - Surveying the Museum’s Mexican Show: Painting, Sculpture, Prints.” From that point onwards, muralism is used almost exclusively in reference to the Mexican movement. Even today a dictionary definition for muralism from the Random House Dictionary states “an artistic movement identified chiefly with the Mexican painters José Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siqueiros and exemplified by their grand-scale, narrative murals on humanitarian, social, and political themes.”²⁵ Muralism, as Wechsler and other scholars use the term, refers to the politically motivated public art movement based on the previously discussed Mexican Model. From its early days, this new form of mural making in America was embraced by artists on the left and championed as an art movement which could reconnect art and society.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ A search for “mural decoration” returns over 3,000 results in the Library of Congress’ newspaper archive Chronicling America. The archive contains thousands of digitized newspapers from all 50 states spanning a period between 1836-1922. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁵ Random House Dictionary, Random House, Inc. 2013.

What interested American artists was the call to create art that “mattered” or had the ability to affect change. The introduction of Mexican muralism is more recently seen by scholars, critics, and artists, as giving American muralists the idea of a proactive art. Published anthologies of WPA memoirs such as Francis V. O’Connor’s *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, and *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930’s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* expose the rhetoric which claimed that the Mexican muralists introduced a new form of socially conscious and radical art. In his essay “The Development of American Mural Painting, Geoffrey Norman wrote:

[I]n the early 1930s a brief incursion into the United States was made by the Mexicans who had rejuvenated mural painting in their own country. They opened our eyes to the possibilities of mural painting by demonstrating a simple return to the methods of the old Renaissance masters, that of painting in strong but simple terms a simple message of universal interest. Public imagination was caught and held.²⁶

But in reality the call for art to concern itself with change had been introduced in American publications as early as the nineteenth teens. Leftwing newspapers such as *The Liberator* had begun advocating for “Proletarian Art” before murals in Mexico had begun to be painted. Max Eastman, Don Brown and Michael Gold all wrote extensively on proletarian art in which “everyday subject matter and the untrained critic were given

²⁶ Geoffrey Norman “The Development of American Mural Painting” in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930’s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed., O’Connor, Francis V. (New York Graphic Society, 1975) 51-52.

credence.”²⁷ Virginia Marquardt sums up the basic tenets of proletarian art as “the self-deprecating demeanor of the unschooled critics; the unsophisticated worker viewed as a genuine appreciator of art; and the elevation of direct, forthright character as the fundamental criterion of art.”²⁸ Also present in the discourse of proletarian art is a strong anti-bourgeois sentiment and the introduction of the artist as propagandist.

American artists had developed a conception of the function and purpose of modern art but lacked a concrete form which the work of the Mexican Muralists provided. Like Siqueiros and Rivera, a move away from the style of the European avant-garde was being advocated by some artists. In 1927 an informal exchange between Hugo Gellert and Ezra Pound in the *New Masses* made the leftwing position on art very clear. Referring to artists who continued to produce formally experimental and abstract art during the first world war, Gellert condemned the avant-garde for failing to use their art to display empathy with those experiencing the atrocities of war. In the piece Gellert “threw down the gauntlet against modernist formalism which had no clear social message.”²⁹ Aesthetically the Mexican muralists adopted a formally traditional style which could be easily read by the general public. They eschewed allegory for scenes from everyday life, celebrating Mexico's “masses;” the peasant, the laborer and the Indian.

²⁷ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “Art of the Political Front in America: From the Liberator to Art Front.” *Art Journal*. Vol. 52, No 1. (Spring 1993): 73.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ James Wechsler, *The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert: Embracing the Specter of Communism*. (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2003), 107.

Their murals praised modern technology while condemning unrestrained capitalism and the excesses of wealth. The figurative style of the Mexican muralists provided audiences with an alternative to the more experimental “isms” promoted by the avant-garde, but its radical subject matter, formal simplification, and strong social message, ensured that Mexican muralism was as every bit new and revolutionary.

The discussion of socially conscious modern art continued into the twenties as the work of the Mexican muralists began to filter into the country. Joan Saab argues that for 1930s Americans, there existed a firm belief in the power of art to change society for the better. Taking the stance that art should take a more active role in society, Lewis Mumford argued for a similar approach to art as Siqueiros. Essays like *American Taste*, *The Poison of Good Taste*, and *Does America Discourage Art?* published by Mumford, denounced 19th century artists for failing to produce art which engaged with the everyday, and sticking to antiquated conventions that not only perpetuated an elite art form but also kept that art from evolving. Mumford argued that America is not represented by grand allegorical works of European influence, but rather (America) can be found in our roadside diners and mom and pop shops. Mumford asserted that art should live firmly in the present, look towards America rather than Europe, and should concern itself with “usefulness.”³⁰

Historian Wechsler argues that the most important legacy Mexican muralism left America was an ideological art rather than a strict formal style to follow. He modifies

³⁰ Joan Saab, *For the Millions*, 2.

this, stating, “however, as important as the contribution Mexican artists made to the formal language of artists in the United States is, the social issues embodied in the Mexican mural movement were of even greater importance. Ideas regarding patronage, class, audience, and the political role of the artist entered the United States from Mexico during the 1920s, shaping the thinking of the small but active community of radical artists.”³¹ It becomes apparent in later criticism of American murals that artists took very different lessons from the Mexican movement than the critics. Specifically, these radical artists were the first and most vocal group to embrace muralism as a form of art in which process, location, and audience, were more important than formal techniques and subject. Here lies the disconnect between the artists and critics, who insisted on evaluating mural art by traditional aesthetic principles. In the early 1930s, both groups were creating and evaluating murals by two different sets of standards, further complicated by the marketing of Mexican muralism and specifically Diego Rivera in the United States.

Mexican muralism began to circulate in American publications in the late 1920s on a wave of renewed interest in Mexico in general. Both mainstream and avant-garde publications began featuring reproductions of Mexican murals in the mid twenties, but muralism was not the only form of art being imported from Mexico. In her essay *Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940*, Karen Cordero Reiman states that “if we can speak of an official art of the Obregón-Vasconcelos period, however, it would not

³¹ James Wechsler, “Beyond the Border”, 47.

be the varied muralism of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria but the decorative style, based on selective use and recontextualization of motifs of popular art...³² The end of the Mexican Revolution and the relative safety and political stability which followed, allowed Americans to start traveling freely to the country. Travel begat souvenir shopping, and decorative arts and goods flooded into America.

Mexican decorative arts, ceramics, textiles, silver work, and tiles among other items, became immensely popular in America. Popular art motifs, promoted by the artist Best Maugard, were motifs borrowed largely from Indigenous art, and indigenous and popular were frequently conflated in early 1920s literature.³³ Traveling exhibitions such as *Mexican Popular Arts* in 1922, and *Mexican Arts* in 1930, were organized by both Mexican and American governments as a means of promoting travel, trade, and general Mexican-American relations.³⁴ With these exhibitions, a collection of museum curators and government officials, promoted the narrative that Mexican heritage and culture was American heritage and culture. That the two countries shared a continent was frequently emphasized to gain American interest. Even the recent Mexican Revolution was related to American audiences using familiar historical analogies. At a public lecture, Mexican consul Leandro Garza Leal, stated “The ideals of the Pilgrims were the same in basis as

³² Karen Corder Reiman “Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940” in *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* ed. James Oles. (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC 1993) 21.

³³ Ibid 23.

³⁴ *Mexican Arts*, was organized in part by Dwight Morrow the U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1927-1930. Morrow was also responsible for Rivera’s mural commission for the Palace of Cortez.

those of the Mexican Revolutionists, first against the Spanish in 1810, against the French in 1863, against Diaz in 1910, and against Huerta in 1913. Like your ancestors, the Mexicans were fighting for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as they understood it.”³⁵

These exhibitions were numerous and well attended. *Mexican Arts* traveled to a number of museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. In addition to the “popular arts” these exhibits included woodcuts, illustrations, and photographs of the work of the Mexican muralists. For many Americans their first exposure to the work of the Mexican muralists were through these large popular arts exhibitions, linking the work of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, with indigenous “popular arts”.

As Reiman notes, the tendency to conflate “indigenous” with “popular” and the effort to actively promote the popular arts in America, led to Americans viewing Mexican arts as somehow innately authentic and “pretty”.³⁶ A review of *Mexican Arts* in the New York Times referred to the decorative arts on display as picturesque and “attractive examples of all these forms ... now becoming available in our shops that cater to the new and unusual.” The review also makes notes of the “authenticity” of Mexican arts stating

³⁵ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995) 136.

³⁶ Reiman, “Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940,” 29.

“Here at our southwestern doorstep is a world of handicraft that is distinctive and still unspoiled.”³⁷

Books such as *Idols Behind Altars: Modern Mexican Art and Its Cultural Roots*, by Anita Brenner and *Mexican Maze* by Carleton Beals published in the early 1930s helped to create and promote this image of Mexico as a country untainted by western culture, in tune with nature and beauty in a way that America was not. Early in her work Brenner asserts that “nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the national longings, full the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for the nation and the unit.”³⁸ She begins her chapter on the Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors (the muralists), stating “There is an epic quality about the Mexican artists that pulls at the imagination. They arise out of a long series of conflicts, testifying that nowhere as in Mexico has art so intimately been linked to the fate of its people.”³⁹ *Mexican Maze* is as equally grandiose in its discussion of Mexican art. Beals is particularly enraptured with the work of Rivera, who provided the illustrations (fig. 3). Of Rivera’s murals he writes “Here [Rivera] depicts *Mexico*, not of the Conquest, save by historical reference, but the teeming Mexico of today. Here is

³⁷ Emphasis added. “Native Crafts of Mexico Come to Us: A Current Exhibition in New York...” *New York Times* October 26, 1930.

³⁸ Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars: Modern Mexican Art and Its Cultural Roots*. (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2002) 32.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 244.

Indian Mexico. Here is life in the Raw.”⁴⁰ The illustrations Rivera provided for *Mexican Maze* are simple outline drawings featuring Indians and peasants working the land, participating in political discussions, and also landscapes and abstracted city views. They fit nicely with Beals’ image of authentic Mexico as the Indian Mexico.

This type of authenticating and also primitivising rhetoric is present in all types of publications during the 1920s through the early 1930s. Writing about his visit to Mexico for the left-wing magazine *The New Masses* in 1927, author John Dos Passos elaborated on the natural beauty of the country stating “Your first morning in the City of Mexico. The sunlight and the bright thin air, the Indian women sitting like stone idols behind their piles of fruit or their bunches of flowers, the sculpture on old red colonial buildings and the painting on the pulque shops, all tie you up into such a knot of vivid sights that you start sprouting eyes in the nape of your neck.”⁴¹

All of this is to say that at the beginning of the 1930s, when the Mexican muralists started actively to seek mural commissions in America, Americans had already formed a conception of Mexican art, and by extension Mexican muralism, as something innately beautiful and truthful which connected with a larger historic American tradition from its own colonial and revolutionary pasts. But the images reaching Americans were different than those being painted on the walls of Mexican buildings. What the general public was seeing, and what was being exhibited were small scale works, prints,

⁴⁰ Carleton Beals, *Mexican Maze*. (New York: Book League of America) 1931, 279.

⁴¹ John Dos Passos, “Paint the Revolution”, *New Masses*, (March 1927).

drawings, and oil paintings, and occasionally photo reproductions of murals that could not convey the size and magnitude of originals. By contrast, artists who were traveling to Mexico, were exposed to the murals in person, viewing them as they were meant to be seen. There the political message could not be mistaken for something mild.

While the more politically scathing murals by Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and others were being reproduced in some journals, the artworks being exhibited in the United States were frequently older pieces, predating the mural movement. In 1927, Rivera held his first solo exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery in New York. The exhibition included oil paintings and drawings ranging in date from 1916-1927. The exhibition included several of his early impressionist and cubist works, as well as his “market scenes”, images of idyllic Indians and peasants posed with colorful produce and flowers (fig. 4). The exhibition was well received and a review in the *New York Times* from January 1st, 1928, notes the monumental qualities of Rivera’s figures and his ability to stay true to his Mexican heritage stating, “A Mexican who has studied in Paris and has passed through the post-impressionist and cubist influences. Rivera has retained his ardent racial sympathies and is now working with a method that takes careful account of actual appearance without degenerating to mere imitation of externals.”⁴²

While American critics praised Rivera’s work, other artists began to worry about the representation of Mexican art in America, specifically the works Rivera was

⁴² Elisabeth L. Cary, “Talent Racially True: Drawings are as Interesting as the Paintings, Rivera A Mexican Who Expresses Mexico”, *New York Times*, (January 1, 1928).

promoting. In a letter to Jean Charlot, Jose Clemente Orozco voiced his displeasure over the direction of Mexican art in America in a sharply satiric piece that mocked the American understanding of Rivera, beginning with his name:

Diego Riveritch Romanoff is still very much of a threat to us. Deeply rooted is the idea that we all are his followers. To speak of "Indians," of "revolution," of "Mexican Renaissance," of "folk arts," of "santos," etc. ... is all the same as to speak of Rivera. . . . Even the "syndicate" (?), "proletariat," "Maximo Pacheco," "agrarians," etc. ... all those terms are synonymous with Diegoff. Perforce, we must with every means at hand rid ourselves of this hot potato of Mexicanism of which Mrs. Paine and Anita Brenner are today the prophets.

I heard that, up to now, people were kindly inclined towards things Mexican . . . but that is all ended with the Art Center show. I rejoice, should it mark the beginning of a new era, wherein each one would be appreciated at his own worth, rather than for the exotic-picturesque-renaissance-Mexican-Rivera-esque.

The Mexican fashion or mode de Mexique, whatever you wish to call it, or more simply this joke, is over. Proof of it is the exhibition they gave Diegoff at the Gallery Wheye, so-called, or Wyhe. It is more like a bookstore . . . a sort of flea market in miniature where one may find some-thing of everything, even old irons. In season, their shows are at the rate of one every three days. You imagine the quality. One show was of Diegoff, and I saw there his cubist follies. One canvas had a toothbrush glued to it. Another was in the style of Zuloaga. Water colors there were, in the style of Cezanne.

Of course, the newspapers reviewed the show kindly. They brought out the Mexican Renaissance, Indians, and the Revolution. They dubbed him "many-sided" and "great man." Renaissance with a toothbrush!!!! I doubt if he sold any.⁴³

⁴³ Orozco quoted in Jean Charlot "Orozco in New York: Based on His Letters to the Author" *College Art Journal*, Vol 19, No. 1 (Autumn, 1959), 48.

In his letter, Orozco voices his frustration over the simplification of Mexican art and the role Rivera and his management have played in promoting it. Orozco not only criticizes Rivera's subject matter but also the quality of his work insinuating that Rivera is turning out hackneyed new compositions and repurposing old ones only for profit. The work Rivera was producing for American audiences and the choices his management was making, seemed for many of his colleagues on the left as a sort of a copout. Instead of devoting himself to creating a revolutionary art, Rivera seemed to be playing to the crowd compromising his own vision for greater sales. While Orozco's letter may seem overly harsh, he was not alone in his criticism. As Rivera continued to work and exhibit in America, critics on both sides of the political spectrum would continue to echo Orozco.

In the meantime, American artists from all backgrounds began to flock to Mexico to study and work. In 1927 the *New York Times* declared that a trip to Mexico should supplant the traditional artistic pilgrimage to Europe.⁴⁴ William Gropper, George Biddle, Paul Strand, and Philip Guston, among others, traveled to Mexico where they studied and created art under the guidelines set up by Siqueiros and the Syndicate. The murals in Mexico were propaganda, painted with the intention of engaging the general population and communicating the ideals of the new left wing Mexican government. The murals were meant to provoke, agitate, and engage the general public, and this is the meaning

⁴⁴ "Chronology: Murals for The Museum of Modern Art" <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/rivera/chronology.php#>

that American artists took away from their time in Mexico. Backlash from the left wing against Rivera and the type of work he was producing in America was already beginning to surface by 1930. When it was announced that Rivera was to complete a mural series for the Pacific Stock Exchange Social Club in San Francisco, the press expressed fears that the murals might be “touched pink” or typical of the overt communist propaganda Rivera had painted in Mexico.⁴⁵ The completed murals included no hint of a political agenda and subsequently outraged left-wing artists who felt that the commission was an opportunity to continue the Marxist dialogue of the Mexican movement.⁴⁶ Hugo Gellert in particular “deemed it disgraceful that Rivera, who professed to be revolutionary, inducted no references in his San Francisco mural to [political activists] Tom Mooney and Warren Billings. To Gellert, an artist of Rivera's stature became complicit in the “Mooney-Billings frame up- by not declaring its injustice in the city where it occurred.”⁴⁷

Karen Cordero Reiman writes that “to understand why Americans, and particularly American artists, were interested in Mexican art and in Mexico as an artistic

⁴⁵ “Will Art be Touched in Pink?” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, (September 25, 1930), 5.

⁴⁶ James Wechsler, “The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert: Embracing the Specter of Communism.” Ph.D., City University of New York, 2003. <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtft/docview/305331828/abstract/13CB010567474BCD282/1?accountid=14541> 144.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The Mooney-Billings frame up Gellert makes reference to, is the controversial conviction of Thomas Mooney and Warren Billings for the San Francisco Preparedness Day Bombing of 1916, a terrorist attack in which 10 people were killed during a parade to celebrate America's entry into World War I. Both Mooney and Billings were well known political activists and labor leaders, and had previous arrests (but no convictions) related to carrying and suspicion of using dynamite. Due to their prior arrests, and the fleeing of the police's initial suspect Alexander Berkman, Mooney and Billings were arrested and denied their right to counsel while in detainment. The two men were convicted in what is largely agreed to have been a show trial and sentenced initially to death which was later commuted to life imprisonment. At the time of Rivera's San Francisco commission the two men were still serving time for a crime it was becoming more apparent that they did not commit. Mooney and Billings were eventually pardoned in 1939.

subject between 1925 and 1950 is not necessarily to understand Mexican art of the time.”⁴⁸ When considering the generally negative reaction to American muralism, we should consider how American audiences conceptualized muralism and the murals being painted in Mexico. The simple fact is that the numerous exhibitions of Mexican decorative arts and small scale works by Mexican artists like Rivera’s market paintings, did not adequately represent the state of Mexican muralism. American artists, particularly left wing artists, following the example of “Los Tres Grandes” were pursuing a form of muralism which was at odds with this more popular and popularizing conception of Mexican art and by extension a Mexican muralism that mainstream critics and the general public had created.

The early mural controversies between 1931-1933, are in part created by artists attempting to create murals which adhered to a standard they understood as being derived from a Leninist-marxist theory of art, and critics reacting within the framework of traditional art criticism. Added to this is the pressure artists put on each other to use their new found public forum as a soap-box for radical politics. Rivera’s participation in the 1931 Museum of Modern Art retrospective was in part to reassert himself as a mural painter.⁴⁹ Hugo Gellert’s mural submission to the 1932 exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, was intended as a protest against the lack of political

⁴⁸ Reiman, “Constructing a Modern Mexican Art 1910-1940”, 11.

⁴⁹ Diego Rivera, and with Gladys March. *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*. (Dover Publications, 1992) 110.

subject matter in mural painting.⁵⁰ And Rivera's 1933 *Man at the Crossroads* can be seen as a return to form partially inspired by his desire not be labeled a "sycophant."⁵¹ Throughout all of this, the critics and the patrons ultimately decided what constituted proper subject matter for American murals.

⁵⁰ Wechsler, "The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert", 146.

⁵¹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 115.

DIEGO RIVERA AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

In 1931 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), held its second artist retrospective and most popular exhibition to date, featuring the works of Rivera. MoMA opened on November 7th, 1929, and the museum's first director was Alfred H. Barr. During his tenure, Barr would dictate the direction of Modern Art in America. By the time of the Rivera exhibition Barr and Rivera had been friends for at least a few years. The two met while independently visiting Moscow in the early days of the newly formed Soviet Union in 1927. It was during this first meeting that "key groundwork for the New York commission was laid."⁵²

While Barr was relatively new to the art world, Rivera was not, and the opportunity to host a large retrospective on one of the most popular modern artists of the period was an excellent chance for both Barr and the museum to make a name for themselves. By the time of his retrospective, Rivera's popularity in America had only expanded. For Barr and MoMA's founders, the opportunity to host a large scale retrospective of Rivera's work, as well as securing custom commissions for the exhibition, was a way to legitimize the institution as the preeminent modern art museum

⁵² Leah Dickerman, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.). *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art : Distributed in the U.S. by ARTBOOK/D.A.P, 2011) 15.

in the country and to quickly establish a “mass audience.”⁵³ The museum was quick to capitalize on America's love affair with Mexico, and used the Pan-American rhetoric common at the time to promote Rivera as America's great modern artist. An early press release stated, “Following the exhibition of Matisse with that of Rivera, The museum of modern art will afford the public an opportunity to compare a modern European and modern American artist who differ remarkably in style and subject matter as well as in their social, political and psychological attitude.”⁵⁴

Rivera was America's alternative to European artistic hegemony. As previously indicated, Americans were not above adopting Mexico's cultural heritage as their own, and conflating the history of Mexico and America as part of a larger American heritage. Rivera's subject matter and his process were unlike anything being produced in Europe at the time, and the constant promotion by critics and, the artist himself, as a true representative of American ideals made Rivera an excellent representative of this new “Pan-American” modernism.

Rivera's participation in the retrospective and his production of the portable frescos in lieu of wall murals, created a number of issues which required the artist to adapt his artistic principles, not least of which was the issue of patronage and the overall function of the revolutionary Mexican fresco. As noted by Leah Dickerman in the opening essay of the MoMA's 2011 anniversary exhibition:

⁵³ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 26.

Participating in the commission for The Museum of Modern art meant that Rivera had to adapt certain principles of muralist practice, resulting in inherent paradoxes and ambiguities. The murals that first brought him to fame were permanently fixed on the walls of buildings representing the institutions of post revolutionary Mexican state and were to be seen .. by its broad citizenship. The panels for the New York exhibition ... were to be temporarily displayed in the space of a modern art museum... the MoMA commission was financed not by the collective pesos of the Mexican government but by the individual dollars of wealthy u.s. patrons... these adaptations have been seen by some scholars as compromises in artistic integrity.⁵⁵

For the exhibition Rivera produced eight portable frescoes, five adapted from previous commissions and three entirely new compositions. The adapted frescos included: *Indian Warrior* (fig. 5), *Sugar Cane* (fig. 6), *Liberation of the Peon* (fig. 7), *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (fig. 8), and *The Uprising* (fig. 9). These five frescoes were completed in time for the December 23rd opening and were on exhibition through out the duration of the show. The three new compositions: *Pneumatic Drilling* (fig. 10), *Electric Power* (fig. 11), and *Frozen Assets* (fig. 12), were not begun until after Rivera had arrived in New York and were ready for exhibition on January 3rd.

Most recently, MoMA's 2011 exhibition attempts a modest re-evaluation of Rivera's portable frescos, reassessing many of the faults claimed by Rivera's contemporary critics as artistic strategies adopted by Rivera to make mural paintings more exhibition friendly. For example, Dickerman interprets Rivera's "cropping" of the Mexican frescos as an artistic strategy employed to suggest that these images were parts

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of a larger whole, invoking the “feeling” of a large scale mural.⁵⁶ The New York frescos, however, do not use this technique. For the most part they appear to be very much contained and complete compositions. In *Pneumatic Drilling* and *Electric Power*, cables extend off canvas, but the figures and action are completely contained within the picture frame. Other than the top of the Rockefeller Center building in *Frozen Assets*, it is hard to imagine of what larger mural this fresco could be a part. And as Dickerman points out, the cropping of the Rockefeller building could very well have been done because the building was still under construction.⁵⁷ Why would cropping be used for Rivera’s Mexican frescos, but not his New York ones? Dickerman notes that the reproduction of the scenes from Rivera’s previous mural cycles has been labeled by critics as “lazy” but also suggests that the cropped Mexican frescos acted as a means to an end.⁵⁸ By quickly reproducing well-known Mexican frescos Rivera gave the audience what it wanted so that he could create what he wanted, American frescoes which celebrated the technological “dynamic age” first articulated in Siqueiros’s *Three Appeals*.⁵⁹

The portable Mexican frescos Rivera submitted for the retrospective were uncontroversial and focused instead on the elements of Mexican art that Americans liked, namely, rich colors, indigenous figures, and ancient motifs. Rivera’s primary themes, the overthrow of a corrupt regime and just a hint of the democratic values America felt they

⁵⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 26.

⁵⁹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 105.

shared with Revolutionary Mexico were also crucial. An early review of the exhibition printed in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* stated that, “The Mexican Indian overthrowing his own corrupt and outworn social and economic system is a universal symbol, as applicable to conditions in Europe and the United States as it is to its immediate inspiration.”⁶⁰

MoMA not only tried to emphasize Rivera’s “Americanness,” it also de-emphasized his communist sympathies. The catalog which accompanied the exhibition included an extensive passage on Rivera’s work and politics written by Rivera’s agent Frances Flynn Paine.⁶¹ In her essay, Paine stated that not only had Rivera left the Communist party of Mexico, but that the overt communist themes in his previous murals “interested him because it was to him a vital part of contemporary life.”⁶² Paine described Rivera as a documentarian including political themes because they were relevant to the current reality of Mexican life. Instead of linking Rivera to any specific political philosophy, MoMA interpreted Rivera’s murals as speaking to universal themes of struggle, and the triumph of good over oppression.

The frescos Rivera chose to exhibit at MoMA engaged with “political” themes without outright reference to his communist past, and in some instances have been

⁶⁰ Helen Appleton Read “Six Murals by Diego Rivera Included in Modern Museums Exhibition of His Work: Leader of Mexican Renaissance Seen in Full Stature at the Modern Museum Exhibit—Frescoes, Oils and Drawings Shown—New York and Mexican Themes” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 27, 1931.

⁶¹ Frances Flynn Paine was a tireless promoter of Mexican arts. Originally from Laredo Texas, Paine travelled extensively throughout Mexico and organized several exhibitions in America of Mexican arts. It was through Paine that Rivera became known to the Rockefeller family. See Bernice Kert. *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family*. New York: Random House. 1993. 346-365.

⁶² Read, “Six Murals by Diego Rivera”.

adapted to present a more audience friendly version of their Mexican counterparts. The most political fresco *The Uprising*, shows a woman with a child and an overalls-clad laborer, defending themselves from a soldier with a saber. The woman's red dress and the red banners in the background associate the people with the communist party, and we can then assume that the soldiers represent some oppressive force. Whether fascism, capitalism, imperialism etc, the choice is left up to the viewer. The soldiers' hats obscure their faces, and their uniforms have none of the discerning marks that would associate them with any particular regime or country. The mural is a general image of the "people" rising up, and its nonspecificity makes the fresco relatively inoffensive.

Indian Warrior, references Mexico's ancient past while still presenting the people overcoming oppression in a forceful way like in *The Uprising*. In this fresco however, the people are represented by the Indian warrior, a man wearing the costume of a jaguar, who slays the oppressive Spanish conquistador. Again the oppressor is faceless, enabling the audience to insert the evil entity of its choice. In comparison to the frescos Rivera had produced in Mexico, which clearly depicted the faces of the "enemy," the MoMA fresco's are like Mexican muralism-lite. There is a sense of social awareness and advocacy but not enough to offend conservative museum viewers or the very wealthy capitalist museum patrons.

Rivera's conscious editing of controversial subject matter is perhaps most apparent when comparing the portable fresco *Sugar Cane*, and the original mural *Slavery*

in the Sugar Plantation (fig. 13), both completed in 1931.⁶³ The original mural is part of a larger series located in Museo Quauahuac, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, which focuses on the extended history of colonization in Mexico and the enslaving of its native peoples. *Slavery in the Sugar Plantation* depicts a number of Mexican slaves harvesting sugar cane under the watchful eye of a European Foreman. In the background Indian slaves pull a heavy cart laden with cut sugar cane. All of the slaves are bent forward under the physical and emotional strain of their labor. Their clothes are old and tattered and their faces largely obscured. In contrast the European Foreman sits up tall brandishing a whip and seemingly taking pleasure in his task. Unlike the slaves his face has character, and his skin is noticeably lighter than the other figures in the scene.

In *Sugar Cane*, Rivera has simplified and lightened the scene. The European Foreman still remains, but his face lacks the same detail giving him a more neutral expression. The slaves harvesting the sugar cane have become even more abstracted, even less human. For the portable fresco Rivera added the three foreground figures, a male peasant holding a basket of fruit, and a woman and child harvesting fruit from a tree. While in essence the same scene of slavery and oppression takes place in the middle ground of the image, none of the foreground peasant figures seem to feel the oppression of their European masters. They stand upright, rather than cowed. Their faces show no sign of concern or anger over their lot in life. Rivera seems to be deflecting the

⁶³ Anna Indych-Lopez “Sugar Cane” in Leah Dickerman, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.). *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art : Distributed in the U.S. by ARTBOOK/D.A.P, 2011) 61.

seriousness of European colonization and slavery by shifting the viewers focus onto the “folksy” peasants, reminiscent of his market paintings.

By the opening of the exhibition Rivera had only completed the Mexican frescos. Early reviews of the exhibit were positive, and critics reacted well to Rivera’s toned down political message. E.C. Sherburne, the art critic for the *The Christian Science Monitor* noted that “clearly [Rivera’s] feelings are with the weak and oppressed,” and that “the indignation in his themes is all the more forceful in that it is implied with restraint.”⁶⁴ Sherburne is especially impressed with Rivera’s technical abilities and he praises *Sugar Cane* as a “a picture to tell a story, with force as well as pictorial charm; art put to use as an interpretation of contemporary life and an explanation of past causes of present effects.”⁶⁵

Sherburne’s description of *Sugar Cane* as an “interpretation of contemporary life” seems taken directly from the exhibition’s catalog, and suggests that MoMA’s re-writing of Rivera’s politics was successful. The apparent “restraint” with which Rivera depicted political subject matter, supports the assertion that Rivera deliberately toned down his political message to better suit the expectations of American audiences, steeped in the early critical vocabulary of American Scene realism.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ E.C. Sherburne, “Diego Rivera’s Frescoes: Power of Organization A Story Told” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 26, 1931.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Indych-Lopez, “Sugar Cane”, 62.

The New York frescos are dominated by the theme of labor and industrial growth, and seem to be more of a celebration of New York's construction boom than a critique of anything in particular. The most obvious contrast in how Rivera choose to depict America as compared to Mexico, is the lack of any reference whatsoever to America's past. Strangely, or unusually, Mexican artists including Rivera spoke at length about celebrating America's ancient past, which included the incorporation of Indian motifs. But this fails to extend to a celebration of "American" Native Americans (with the exception of a few painters, most notably Maynard Dixon, who painted several murals with Native American themes). New York was home to the Lenape peoples before European civilization but there is no hint that New York had any sort of past in Rivera's frescos, let alone a Native American one.

In his autobiography, Rivera related his initial excitement at the opportunity to paint murals in America stating "the United States was a truly industrial country such as I had originally envisioned as the ideal place for modern mural art."⁶⁷ He also stated that his New York frescoes were "representations of subjects I observed in the city."⁶⁸ Like other foreign born artists interested in New York, such as Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Stella, Rivera chose to focus on the present and allude to the future. It's unknown whether or not he was aware of New York's Native American past, or whether or not he wished to paint it. What seemed to interest Rivera about America was its rapid

⁶⁷ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 105.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

modernization and the role industrialization and the working class played bringing it about. When painting New York, Rivera used a non-specific iconography of construction and industry frequently used by modern artists of the time. The resulting murals appear as a shallow representation of life in the city.

Pneumatic Drilling and *Electric Power* are both scenes of labor and progress. The workers are faceless everyman type figures. In both frescos the workers seem to combine with their machines, linking humans and industry. There is little or no conflict or political message in these works. A worker with a large pickax in the background of *Pneumatic Drilling* resembles a sickle and hammer, but otherwise the two works celebrate America's industry and technology. For Rivera, industry and growth constituted America's heritage. We get no sense of the cultural heritage of the workers, their ethnicity, what they believe in, or how they live their lives. They are part of America's industrial machine. Little in this imagery links these frescoes to New York at all, and they could really stand for any of America's big cities. The theme of industrial growth, and the fascination with the city was popular with artists from all backgrounds. From Thomas Hart Benton's 1930s mural series *America Today* (fig. 14), to Georgia O'Keefe's New York paintings (fig. 15), modern America was continuously represented by the industrial city.

Frozen Assets brings to the forefront the issue of class and wealth inequality and is Rivera's most left-wing or radical New York fresco. *Frozen Assets* differs thematically and compositionally compared to Rivera's other New York frescoes. Instead of a single scene, Rivera segments the canvass into thirds, providing three views of the city. In the

top register, Rivera painted the growing city of New York, choosing as the center point the as yet uncompleted Rockefeller Center. The cranes at the bottom of the scene hint at the city's perpetual state of flux. The middle register features rows upon rows of homeless men, sleeping in a sort of bunker having no where else to go. At the bottom of the composition wealthy New Yorkers wait to inspect their bank vault. In *Frozen Assets* the ever growing city is shown to be built on the backs of the poor and displaced people of the Great Depression. In this fresco Rivera shows the human cost of building New York, and slyly critiques New York's construction boom and the capitalist magnates that fund it, though there is no obviously indicated (or specifically designated) enemy.

The subject matter of the Mexican frescos and the New York frescos is very different. When painting New York, Rivera thinks only of the present. He lauds America's technological advancements as man and machine are one, almost as if America and industrial production are intrinsically linked. The artist reserves special praise for American ingenuity and advancement, a theme not original to Rivera, but one he would no doubt helped to popularize. And he downplays the American people, their history and culture. The New York frescos tell little of the city's citizens or their daily lives. The Mexican frescos by contrast celebrate the Mexican people, who appear passionate, hardworking, connected to their history and traditions. They present a more human view of the country.

The Rivera retrospective was a successful venture for the museum and was at the time its highest attended exhibition. But the inherent problems of the exhibition did not

escape notice by critics, or by the artist himself.⁶⁹ The critical disappointment over Rivera's portable frescoes has been well documented,⁷⁰ but bears revisiting. Rivera's retrospective was the first attempt by a major artist wanting to reconcile this new "revolutionary" art with the standards of the traditional art world.⁷¹ For the exhibition, Rivera returned his art to the institution from which the Mexican muralists had previously attempted to liberate it. The most damning reviews of the exhibition came from the left wing critics who had initially embraced Rivera and the Mexicans as pioneers of a new art. Robert Evans writing for the *New Masses* claimed:

Rivera's political evolution is recorded in his canvasses and frescoes. The selection now on exhibition reveals three distinct states: the period before the ... revolution, ... in which he lived in Europe and painted in both academic and modernistic manner; the period when he returned to Mexico, entered the revolutionary struggle and drew his inspiration from it; and the present period, when he has abandoned the revolutionary movement and turned to painting for the bourgeoisie.⁷²

It was unsurprising that left wing critics would not appreciate Rivera's move back into the gallery, but in fact critics from all sides found Rivera's latest works at odds with his previous murals and artistic philosophy. There was a sense that Rivera's work for

⁶⁹ In his autobiography Rivera wrote of the exhibition, "... my exhibition was well received. It failed, however, to fulfill one of my hopes for the show - to give American museum directors and architects a grasp of the character and value of mural painting ... The moveable panels which I did for the show gave a fairly good idea of my technique but not of the true uses of the medium."

⁷⁰ see Anna Indych, "Mexican Muralism without Walls: The Critical Reception of Portable Work by Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940" Ph.D., New York University, 2003.

⁷¹ Rivera had previously completed a portable fresco for the Mexican Arts exhibition titled *Market Scene*, but it attracted little notice.

⁷² Robert Evans, "Painting and Politics: The Case of Diego Rivera" *New Masses*, 1932.

MoMA was lacking in social and political investments, and that in creating frescoes without context Rivera had compromised too much of his vision and purpose. This tension was articulated by critic Helen Appleton Read writing for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, who said of Rivera's work, "true they show the typical Rivera color and design, but because they have not been painted to meet any specific problem and because they are variations of themes already more completely expressed takes away from their vitality and validity."⁷³

Read's choice to use the term "validity" is an interesting one, and hints at the functional value of murals that the public had come to understand as being an integral component of the medium. Rivera's frescoes lacked the social critique the public had come to associate with him and the Mexican muralists. Perhaps more troubling for critics was their lack of architectural context. There seems to be a very strong understanding in the criticism that Rivera's frescoes, because they lacked a fixed architectural setting, could not substitute for murals. Like the majority of the critical reviews of Rivera's retrospective Read's full review was a positive one. And like the majority of critics, Read was not alone in feeling that Rivera's portable frescos lacked the same emotional pull of his completed mural series. The reviewer for the *Chicago Evening Post* in particular noted how much of a letdown Rivera's portable frescoes were in comparison to the hype generated by discourse surrounding Rivera's Mexican mural commissions.

⁷³ Read, "Six Murals by Diego Rivera".

Mexico's foremost painter has been a curious case here— famous, and at the same time practically unknown...However, we have had to take this art and this eminence more or less on faith, having had little but the fanfares of writers and the inadequacies of printed reproductions to go on...Grateful as we are for the effort, we must admit that it is not the whole mountain which has moved, but only isolated peaks. For the samples of fresco, torn from their companions and from the original settings, which must mean so much to them, remain "samples," out of place and isolated in their present environment.⁷⁴

Margaret Breuning, of the *New York Evening Post*, Paul Rosenfeld of the *New Republic*, and Ralph Flint of *Art News*, all expressed disappointment in Rivera's frescoes, frequently citing their lack of architectural context as a contributing factor the frescoes' failure to truly represent Mexican mural painting.⁷⁵ Even the lauded *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, a champion of the Mexican Muralists, had to address the issues created by exhibiting murals in a gallery setting. Unlike other critics, however, Jewell saw the lack of architectural framework as a good thing, providing Rivera with new challenges.

What life there is in these beautiful frescoes! True, they are not the frescoes painted upon the walls of the Ministry of Education or the National Preparatory School in Mexico City; but, though for the most part adapting themes previously employed, they seem less copies than utterance freshly coined, meriting independent life. It is reasonable to suppose that travelers who have seen the frescoes in Mexico will find these works at the Museum of Modern Art less eloquent. The Mexican murals cannot but take on a heightened appeal, thanks to their surroundings, to the atmosphere, historical and climatic, in which they were conceived. But to those of us who have not seen the walls in Mexico

⁷⁴ Indych "Mexican Muralism without Walls", 244.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 245-246.

City and Cuernavaca, these frescoes painted in New York may well appear works of art of the highest order. Happily, space requirements compelled the artist to alter, even as he adapted, earlier compositions. This was fortunate, since the necessity thus established forced Rivera into a mood of genuine creation.⁷⁶

Jewell's critique is certainly out of line with the general opinion of Rivera's exhibition, and suggests that Jewell was also struggling with how to view Rivera's portable frescoes. Were the portable frescoes just an exercise in technique? Or were they meant to serve as stand-ins for the monumental mural cycles Rivera was well known for? Rivera's decision to edit his frescoes to be more audience friendly, and the museum's attempts to downplay his political ideology, suggest that Jewell wasn't wrong to view Rivera's portable frescoes as a demonstration of the fresco technique and not as a representation of the Mexican Mural movement.

To reconcile the issue of Rivera's murals which were not really murals, Jewell frequently praised Rivera's technical skill and evaluates them as if they were traditional paintings. As smaller works they had a kinship with easel painting. Although Rivera sought out the medium as a way of liberating art from the gallery in his early days of mural painting, Jewell firmly reestablishes his work as the type of elite art it was supposed to be rebelling against. In his review Jewell states "Here is true fresco painting, worthy to be ranged beside masterpieces of by-gone centuries."⁷⁷ It is clear from reviews

⁷⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, "An Artist Sees Mexico: Two Paintings in the Diego Rivera Show that Opened Last Week." *New York Times*, (December 27, 1931).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

that Rivera's portable frescoes are not true mural painting, but that they have been adapted for the gallery. While the discrepancy of space left an overall negative impression with those viewing Rivera's frescoes, subject matter and style did not. The Mexican frescoes, even understood as "copies", were generally treated favorably. The New York frescoes received even less critical attention. Critics either praised, or simply ignored the softening of Rivera's political voice, his ambiguous good vs. evil message, and his simplification of regional characteristics were either praised or ignored by critics.

Critics were somewhat torn over how to interpret the Rivera retrospective. On one hand, they seemed predisposed to embrace Rivera as America's leading modernist based on his previous mural successes. On the other hand, the free standing portable frescoes confused them. The idea of the mural as a decorative item meant to work within a larger architectural scheme is perhaps partially to blame. The complaint that Rivera's portable frescoes lacked the monumentality of his mural cycles is almost certainly a product of their not being actual murals. Critics wanted more than just big paintings, they wanted a glimpse of the greatness created for the public buildings of Mexico. This confusion between the function of murals, the difference between "muralism" and mural decorations, would be brought to a head over MoMA's next mural exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* with critics, artists, and the museum all weighing in the these issues.

MURALS BY AMERICAN PAINTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

What would become the controversial exhibition *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* was in part inspired by a minor mural controversy surrounding Rivera and commissions for the almost completed Rockefeller Center. While working at the Detroit Institute of Art, Rivera was one of three foreign artists commissioned to paint a mural in the newly constructed Rockefeller Center.⁷⁸ For several decades, the skyscraper had held pride of place in modern art as the ultimate symbol of modernity. Even before completion the Rockefeller Center building was already being hailed as a massive achievement in modern architecture. The decision to contract mural painters to execute its internal decorations added to its aura as a symbol of America's modernity. While Rivera was acknowledged to be one of the foremost mural painters in the world, a minor scandal over the importance that his and other foreign artists commissions were given over American artists erupted. Some artistic circles protested that the Rockefeller Center murals should be an opportunity for American artists to launch their new mural Renaissance.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ The other two being the Welsh Frank Brangwyn, and Spanish Jose Maria Sert. Sert was eventually given Rivera's center panel to complete, on which he painted *American Progress*. Both sets of murals survive to this day.

⁷⁹ "The Mural Tempest," *Art Digest* (February 15, 1932), 5.

Finally, when the mural commissions for Rockefeller center were announced, it was reported that the majority of the mural decoration would go to American artists and be decided by competition.⁸⁰ Both the Mexican and American movements had placed an emphasis on murals reflecting the national spirit of the people, and who better to complete that task than one of their own? While the Rockefeller family was extremely keen to have Rivera execute a large mural cycle in the building, and when Rivera refused to participate in what “he interpreted as a competition,” the family extended a personal invitation.⁸¹ Rivera, who had been one of the leaders of the movement to give art back to the people, had thus refused to participate in a democratic selection process and only agreed to complete the commissions when special allowances had been made for his abilities and achievements.

When it was announced that the three largest mural commissions in the building would be going to foreign artists and that this decision had not been made by jury, both mainstream and left-wing artists and critics expressed outrage.⁸² Closed mural commissions threatened to place the mural in the same elite sphere as traditional easel painting, which celebrated the few instead of the many. This threat to the democratic mural was alarming, but the lack of competition was made even more poignant due to the

⁸⁰ “Rockefeller City Gets Alien Artists: Frank Brangwyn, Jose Maria Sert and Diego Rivera to Do Nine Mural Panels. UNUSUAL DECORATIVE PLAN: Paintings Will Be Done on Canvas and Will Be Hung in Main Corridor of RCA Building.”, *New York Times*, Oct 10 1932.

⁸¹ Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 130.

⁸² Hugo Gellert, “We Capture the Walls” *New Masses*, (June 1932).

early years of the depression. Hugo Gellert verbalized the disappointment felt by unemployed artists as these commissions passed them by: “During these years of joblessness, Rockefeller Center with its huge wall spaces loomed big, as a mural decoration possibility for many an artist. They waited the completion of the buildings with impatient expectancy. Then came the news: these walls had been assigned without competition.”⁸³ The murals at Rockefeller Center offered artists not only the opportunity to participate in the new mural renaissance but the desperately needed opportunity of employment.

Responding to the criticism over the Rockefeller Center project, the Museum of Modern Art announced an exhibition of American murals with the promise that entries to the exhibition would receive top consideration for commissions in the completed building. The exhibition would not only provide the artists with the opportunity to compete for jobs, but also help establish America as a major player in this new thoroughly modern movement. A statement released by exhibition director Lincoln Kirstein read, “we feel that mural painting in America has suffered from a lack of opportunity to assert itself ... hitherto, mural decoration had been ... in the hands of Academic painters. This show will attempt to give younger painters a chance to show their work before a large audience.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “Museum to Show American Murals: Modern Art Institution Will Invite Painters to Exhibit Work In April.” *New York Times*, February 1, 1932.

Artists were given a very short six weeks to submit three mural sketches and a completed seven by four foot center panel. The requirement of a full series sketch could have been an attempt by the museum to address some of the criticism Rivera received for showing frescoes without context. The three panels would help to connect the finished center panel within a larger narrative program. Traditionally “modern” artists like Georgia O’Keeffe who had no interest in using the mural to make a political statement, were anxious to assert their technical skill and ingenuity. The theme of the exhibition was “post-war” and the exhibition would also introduce new medium of the photographic mural, a first for the North American movement.⁸⁵

Three panels submitted to the exhibition immediately proved problematic; Hugo Gellert’s *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together* (fig. 16); William Gropper’s *The Writing on the Wall* (fig. 17) and Ben Shahn’s *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (fig. 18). Stylistically and thematically, these works adhere most closely to the examples set forth by the Mexican movement, and consequently they became the most controversial. All three artists included demeaning caricatures of noted capitalists and anti-communist figures and expressed very obvious Marxist sympathies. The obvious critique of financially and politically powerful people sparked a debate within the museum as to whether the three works should be hung in the exhibition at all.

⁸⁵ Photographers submitting photo-murals were only required to submit the finished mural without additional sketches.

In the subjects of their panels Gellert and Gropper attack the United States' mega capitalists. In *Us Fellas...* Gellert aligns Henry Ford, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller Sr., and President Herbert Hoover with Al Capone, equating their "business" and the policies of the Republican Party to organized crime and racketeering. Underneath these figures a western style "law man," a policeman, and soldiers in gas masks stand guard over Thomas Mooney. The inclusion of Mooney is almost certainly a jab at Rivera and his choice to omit the socialist from his San Francisco murals. In Gropper's work J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Mellon eat while employing the National Guard and dogs to stave off protesters. Shahn's mural makes references to the 1927 execution of supposed anarchists Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Accused of murder during the robbery of a shoe factory, their subsequent trials and execution were marred with controversy and accusations of false convictions. All three panels make very strong political statements. They condemn the perceived oppressors of average Americans, highlight the inherent hypocrisy of big capitalism, and criticize American democracy. All three panels align the artist with the common people rather than the bourgeois art world not only in subject matter but also in style. Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn abandoned a more traditional academic aesthetic and instead embraced a highly illustrative style referring to the satirical cartoons published in left-wing journals.

The panels proved problematic on several levels. Alfred A. Barr expressed his fear that in showing the works, the museum would be aligning itself with a communist agenda and he was unwilling to jeopardize the image the museum had carefully

constructed of itself in its opening years by supporting a proven controversial subject.⁸⁶ More troubling was the outright critique of individuals who essentially controlled the museum's future. Gellert and Gropper chose J.P. Morgan as their object of ridicule. The financier/banker's close relationship with the Rockefellers, including Abby Aldrich Rockefeller who was on the MoMA board of trustees, made other board members uneasy with the work. In a letter to Gellert, which was never sent, Barr stated that the museum was not against depictions of "class struggle" but that the museum policy forbade "any representation of a living person which has any malicious intent."⁸⁷ Barr was also worried about offending "personalities that are lampooned, who may be indirectly responsible for the future of the museum"⁸⁸ Barr was so worried about offending the museum's financial backers that he eventually offered a compromise to Gellert, suggesting that he instead submit a panel featuring a portrait of Lenin, which would convey the artist's political ideology without offending so many important people.

James Wechsler suggests that, at least in Gellert's case, the controversial mural panels were submitted with the intent to cause outrage. I would suggest that in part this intent to cause outrage was directed at Diego Rivera himself. After the completion of Rivera's murals *Allegory of California* (fig. 19) and *Making a Fresco, Show the Building of a City* (fig. 20) in San Francisco, artists initiated a "visual" dialogue with Rivera in

⁸⁶ Martin Duberman, "Seeing Red at MoMA" *ARTnews*, May 1, 2007. <http://www.artnews.com/2007/05/01/seeing-red-at-moma/>

⁸⁷ Wechsler, "Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert", 148.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

which they challenged his less political work. David Alfaro Siqueiros and Victor Arnautoff both created murals specifically referring to *Making a Fresco* challenging Rivera's political credibility as well as questioning the "Riveresque language" being formed in his early American works.⁸⁹ Siqueiros's mural *Worker's Meeting* (fig. 21, now destroyed), transforms Rivera's scaffold scene into a labor rally. With a "soap-box speaker" occupying the sole attention of the other figures in the mural the focus returns to political action rather than remaining on the artist. Arnautoff's *Studio Mural* (fig. 22) is a less direct reference to Rivera's work in San Francisco.⁹⁰ In the work Arnautoff makes reference to what Anthony Lee dubs the Riveresque language, with soft rounded figures crowded and layered into a small horizontal space. The political message is coded in the figures Arnautoff chose to depict, members of San Francisco's strong leftist circles.⁹¹

The murals by Gellert, Gropper and Shahn, can be viewed as additional works in this visual dialogue with Rivera. Wechsler argues that the artists were in fact reacting to (or against) Rivera, and his recent commissions for wealthy patrons who had previously been his object of ridicule. Rivera's apparent celebration of capitalism in his Stock Exchange murals was seen as an effort to assuage the patron rather than speak to the people. Now in the same museum for which Rivera had consciously edited himself, Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn held nothing back attacking the very type of oppressors

⁸⁹ Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 120.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 122.

Rivera had included in his early work. All three artists forgo the Riversque style preferring to represent the subjects of their criticism with escalated and scathing caricature along with illustrative qualities such as simplified figures, bold outlines, and flattened space. The mural panels are reminiscent of the ultimate form of proletarian art, the political cartoon. Rivera's retrospective was fresh in the minds of both the public and the museum administration and the works of Gellert, Gropper and Shahn must have seemed like a direct address to everything Rivera had been faulted for by the left. It is not hard to imagine that the mural panels submitted to MAPP were the visual equivalent of exclaiming, "now that's how you do it."

The three artists' reactions to MoMA's refusal to hang their works suggest that these were indeed deliberate attempts to provoke controversy. When told that his work was to be removed, Gropper remarked that he expected such an outcome.⁹² Gellert's refusal to substitute a image of Lenin for his capitalist cartoon figures indicates that simply proclaiming his political affiliation was never the point of the work. Referring to the manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters, and Sculptors, and its calls to actively destroy all forms of "bourgeois art" (which we can interpret as safe, inoffensive and aesthetically concerned art), and the *Liberators* early call for artists as propagandists, the works by Gropper, Gellert and Shahn are a return to the original values of proletarian art making based on a Mexican model. The three panels bring to the

⁹² Duberman, "Seeing Red at MoMA".

forefront a decidedly uncomfortable issue, the exploitation of average Americans by big capitalism during a time of unprecedented economic crisis.

It was not only content that was criticized, but style as well. The majority of artists showing in the exhibition had chosen to interpret “post-war” by embracing the machine aesthetic and the trope of the city as the emblem of modernity. By and large the artists participating in the exhibition stuck to a fairly traditional modernist aesthetic. Mural panels which received praise included Reginald Marsh’s *Post War America* (fig. 23) and Berenice Abbott’s *New York* (fig. 24). Both of these murals focus on America’s industrial and technological advances. Marsh’s mural series is an outright celebration of American industry. His aesthetic is straightforward but dynamic, anticipating the style which would dominate federal relief murals. Marsh uses a speeding train, a symbol of American expansion, to link all three panels. Scenes of industrial activity and construction occupy the foreground while the background is filled with the shiny skyscrapers synonymous with New York and modern America. Abbott’s photomural also features construction extending the theme beyond subject matter by her use of photomontage. Using images of steel girders as framing devices for her city views, she creates a type of scaffold on which the conceptional image of New York can be built.

But Gropper, Gellert and Shahn used caricature to make a political statement. Caricature was used heavily by the Mexican artists to highlight the disparities between the classes. Orozco in particular earned the moniker “Mexican Goya” for his ability to use satire to critique without the “Bohemian indulgence of a ‘friend of the people’ gone

slumming.”⁹³ Caricature as graphic art or cartoon was the preferred medium for left-wing journals and was well suited to the concept of Proletarian art, but it was also highly regarded by mainstream critics as well. A 1922 article in *Vanity Fair*, a decidedly “mainstream” publication, described caricature as follows:

Caricature - that spirituel [sic] and sophisticated offspring of graphic art. . . . is a highly cultivated form of expression which, for its development, requires an atmosphere of philosophic dalliance... it is but partially pictorial: its chief ingredient is intellectual observation. Indeed, technique is secondary. Though an aspirant may have the *facilite de main* of a Picasso, he is not eligible for the select and ancient order of caricaturists, unless he posses a broad intellectual culture with highly developed analytic and critical faculties. His means of expression are relatively unimportant.⁹⁴

As a means of satire caricature was used extensively in both American and Mexican publications, with more technically innovative or formally experimental works being criticized as too “artsy.”⁹⁵

But in trying to translate the more worker-friendly form of satire to large-scale painting, the works of Gellert, Gropper and Shahn were criticized for their use of this low-brow style. Edward Alden Jewell denounced the show for its “class struggles orgies”

⁹³ Anita Brenner, “Orozco: The Rebel”, *New Masses*, February, 1928.

⁹⁴ Willard Huntington Wright, “America and Caricature: Suggesting that in Our Haste to Honor European Artists We Have Unduly Neglected our Native Caricaturists”, 1922, excerpt found in the William Gropper Papers, Archives of American Art.

⁹⁵ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left...*, 29.

and “the childish or generally uninspired way in which they are handled.”⁹⁶ Helen Appleton Read was equally scathing in her review, and while acknowledging that the use of caricature was a reference to the early works of the Mexicans, Read was quick to point out that the Mexican use of caricature was indeed “art”:

The Subject. “Some Aspects of the Post-War World,” and the fact that the Rockefeller name is associated with the museum gave the polemically minded an unusual opportunity for indulging in broadsides against capitalism. In their expression they are nothing more than enlargement of cartoons such as might appear in *The Masses* or *Americana*. Rivera’s and Orozco’s invectives against capitalism painted on the walls of the Secretaria and the High School in Mexico City in which Morgan, Ford and Rockefeller appear as symbols of the system, were probably regarded as artistic precedent for these inexcusable inclusions.⁹⁷

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller who was a great supporter of the Mexican artists objected strongly to the works by Gropper, Gellert and Shahn for engaging in the same type of style and subject as the Mexican artists stating that “she had always considered herself a revolutionary... but she saw no reason why people had to indulge in bad taste, particularly Ben Shahn...”⁹⁸ Considering the long established tradition of caricature in murals this discussion of style and taste seems surely just a means to deflect attention from the real issue; it was not the style of caricature but its subjects, those who shared power with MoMA’s own patrons. Rivera’s murals for the SEP were thousands of miles

⁹⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “Museum of Modern Art is “at Home”: Installed in Commodious Permanent Quarters – Exhibition of Murals Proves How Much Our Painters Have Yet to Learn.” *New York Times*, May 8, 1932.

⁹⁷ Helen Appleton Read “Mural Projects Show at Modern Museum Fail to Reveal Potential Talent” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, (May 8, 1932).

⁹⁸ Duberman, “Seeing Red at MoMA”.

away, out of sight (though maybe not out of mind) of the people he ridiculed. The panels by Gropper, Gellert, and Shahn were displayed figuratively on their doorstep and eventually on their walls.

Works like Abbott's and Marsh's by contrast followed the general iconography of modern America that Rivera used for his New York frescoes, expressing America's modernity through construction and industry. The positive reception of these murals by the critics and public signals an understanding that this is acceptable mural subject matter while the works by Gellert, Gropper and Shahn were deemed inappropriate. Helen Appleton Read summed up her issues with the panels stating "it suffices to say that the panels sent in by Gellert, Shahn... and Gropper had no place in an exhibition purporting to discover material with which to 'enrich the walls of modern buildings.'"⁹⁹ For many critics murals still fulfilled a decorative function. Negativity, leftwing political propaganda, and an unrefined style, failed to make for very enriching material. Images of labor and construction, on the other hand, celebrated the worker as well as American capitalism speaking to the need for a more socially conscious art, while providing a much more uplifting and aesthetically pleasing composition. The works by Marsh and Abbott engage with an iconography of modernity that was in development for decades and

⁹⁹ Read, "Mural Projects Show...".

already accepted by critics as an intrinsic part of American arts visual language.¹⁰⁰

Though the works by Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn may more accurately adhere to the spirit and aesthetics of the Mexican movement, they were not the type of murals critics or patrons were willing to support.

Eventually Gropper, Gellert and Shahn, threatened to organize a mass withdrawal from the exhibition should their work be excluded and promised the commitment of approximately twenty-five of the artists featured. The debate then shifted towards what would be the bigger public faux-pas; the apparent support of a Marxist agenda or censorship motivated by the hurt feelings of the capitalist board members. In the end it was the Rockefellers who insisted that all the works be hung and all three panels were eventually included in the show. As a compromise of sorts, they were hung on the fourth floor of the exhibition, where the smallest number of visitors, would view them and were excised from the official catalog.

Both the press and the public quickly realized that the work of the American muralists paled in comparison to their Mexican counterparts in technical skill and subject matter. The lack of quality work could be attributed to the short amount of time artists were given to prepare. It could have been the museum's desire to showcase young artists for commission, or an attempt to cash in on the success of its previous exhibition of

¹⁰⁰ See Wanda Corn's *The Great American Thing*. In her book Corn traces the origins of the canonical "American Modernism", and argues that the theme of American exceptionalism so present in American modern art of the first half of the 20th century actually stems from the rhetoric of the Stieglitz circle and the New York art scene. Scenes of American industry and technological advancements were often depicted by "modernist" artists.

works by Rivera, that led to the haste with which the museum launched the exhibition. The lack of preparation time showed in the finished paintings. The show was panned by major critics. Read denounced the entire show outright, stating, “But there is scarcely a glimpse of ... talent. The [exhibition] as a whole is marked by an ineptness and lack of creative ideas that is the more astounding when one finds included in the list of contributors artists, of recognized merit.”¹⁰¹

The treatment of Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn, received heavy criticism in the left wing press, with Gellert himself publishing the essay *We Capture the Walls*. There he accused of the Museum of Modern Art with pandering to their elite patrons and also criticizes Jewel for demeaning the artists’ efforts. Lincoln Kirstein claimed the show ruined his professional career leading the art world to label him a “Jewish Bolshevik with shocking bad manners.”¹⁰²

The failure of the MoMA show encapsulates the positive and negative effects the Mexican mural movement had on its American counterpart. The MoMA show was judged against both the formal and political characteristics of the Mexican movement and failed in both respects. On the one hand, murals were meant to be artwork for the people, reasserting the artist as a valuable and functional member of society. The mural, as per George Biddle, was to move art into the core of life. And while the catalog for the MoMA exhibition claimed the works created for this show continued in the great

¹⁰¹ Read, “Mural Projects Show...”.

¹⁰² Duberman, “Seeing Red at MoMA”.

tradition of Mural creation, they were mural studies created for exhibition not monumental public art. As such they lost their value of both decorative (stylistic) and rhetorical function. These works were judged as modern art, rather than art integrated into everyday life, and held up against the technical skill of the Mexican Muralists they stood no chance. Many artists were criticized for being unskilled and submitting amateur work. Even though the discourse for the past few years had been moving towards supporting art made by the people and straying away from overly technical refinement of academic work, this rhetoric was aimed less at elite art museums and more towards art made for mass communication.

In the gallery previous standards of “taste” were maintained. As a tool of revolutionary art, murals produced for gallery exhibition lost the inherent equality of murals painted on public walls. Part of what made the Mexican movement revolutionary was the painting of murals in spaces not usually deemed suitable for art. Place as well as content went hand in hand in creating meaningful works. Up until this time, audiences could reasonably expect that art shown in an established museum like the MoMA would be aesthetically pleasing and while it may have some political leanings, it would not be so aggressive and not so obviously propaganda. Rivera’s exhibition at the MoMA had contained none of his most shocking works, and instead featured more of his tame “Mexican” themed easel-type paintings with portable murals a pale masquerade of the authentic artifact.. The works by Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn in comparison were

anything but pleasing. And while they showed an engagement with current modern art practices, the focus was on content rather than style.

MAN AT THE CROSSROADS

The MoMA exhibition was not the first or last mural scandal of the 1930s. The questions and debates it raised about the acceptability of propagandistic public art would resurface again and again. Shortly after the exhibition Diego Rivera began his mural for Rockefeller Center titled *Man at the Crossroads* (fig. 25). Reacting to both American and Mexican criticism over his last high profile commissions, Rivera used the political rhetoric of the early days of the Mexican movement to assuage critics skeptical of another work commissioned by his supposed capitalist foes. *Man at the Crossroads* would “continue to have aesthetic and social value - when the building eventually passes from the hands of its temporary capitalist owners into those of the free commonwealth of all society.”¹⁰³ In comparison to Rivera’s early murals for the National Preparatory School, *Man at the Crossroads* is a return of sorts to the work outlined in the Mexican movement’s early manifestos. This mural and the controversy surrounding its destruction have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, and it is not my intention to rehash the entire story. I am interested in looking at *Man at the Crossroads* as Rivera’s contribution to this tripartite visual dialogue of mural painters, its relation to the MoMA retrospective

¹⁰³ Rochfort “Mexican Muralists”, 131.

and the expectations of the patrons due to their previously established relationship with Rivera.

In his autobiography Rivera claimed that negotiations for the Rockefeller commission began in May of 1932, though Leah Dickerman insists that the project was first mentioned in July 1931 “when Frances Paine broached the subject with Rivera during a trip to Mexico city to make arrangements for the MoMA exhibition.”¹⁰⁴ After John D. Rockefeller Jr. failed to secure Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse for the project, Rivera was offered the center panel of the lobby for his commission. The theme of Rivera’s mural “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” was chosen by a committee of advisors which included Rockefeller himself.¹⁰⁵

Rivera’s initial sketches for *Man at the Crossroads* (fig. 26) show a low horizontal composition. A group of workers stand in the center of the composition in front of a screen with a cosmic design projected on it. To the left and right of the workers are scenes of war and protest, mothers with children, community engagement, and progress through science. The figure of Lenin is missing, but the Soviet leader is represented by the inclusion of his tomb in the scene of protesting workers. By the time Rivera began to paint *Man at the Crossroads*, the composition and subject matter had undergone significant changes.

¹⁰⁴ Dickerman, *Diego Rivera*, 36.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

Man at the Crossroads, is a figuratively dense and meaning-laden mural. The composition centers around a single worker, poised in Rivera's words at the controls of "a large machine. In front of him, emerging from space, was a larger hand holding a globe on which the dynamics of chemistry and biology, the recombination of atoms, and the devision of a cell, were represented schematically."¹⁰⁶ Surrounding the worker are hundreds of figures. Armies of soldiers and workers oppose each other, famous philosophers and politicians are juxtaposed with decadent men and women reminiscent of the figures in the artist's *Wall Street Banquet* 1928 (fig. 27) in the courtyard of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. Nature and technology are also depicted as contrasting forces.

Man at the Crossroads represents not just a return to the political language of Rivera's earlier murals; the revised mural includes many thematic and aesthetic references to his Mexican works. The machine which the worker operates in the center of the composition seems to draw its power from the earth, linking the worker to the land. The relationship between man and nature is central to Rivera's mural cycle for the Chapel at the University of Chapingo in Mexico. The largest panel in the series *The Liberated Earth with Natural Forces Controlled by Man* 1926 (fig. 28), depicts the ways in which man through the intervention of modern science, has gained the ability to harness the energy of the earth. A more overt linking of man and nature is the panel *The Blood of the Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth* 1926 (fig. 29), where the dead heroes of the Mexican

¹⁰⁶ Rivera, *My Life My Art*, 126.

revolution literally provide the energy for the growth of food. The pipe which connects the workers machine is another reference to the connection between the worker/revolutionary to land.

The spatial organization of *Man at the Crossroads*, is also a nod back to Rivera's earlier works. The vertical layering of figures used by Rivera in his murals for the Ministry of Education and to a greater extent his murals for the National Palace in Mexico City, is noticeably absent in the California and Detroit works. Spatial organization is also used to make direct references to specific works. In the original fresco painted in the lobby of Rockefeller plaza Rivera included a scene of rich men and women drinking, gambling and dancing representing the excess of American capitalism. The scene was a return to the scathing critique of America Rivera expressed in *Wall Street Banquet*. In the middle of the scene Rivera inserted a caricature of John D. Rockefeller Jr, implicating the business man with the corruption of society (fig. 30). To drive his point home, Rivera painted a scene of germs labeled "Tetanus. Ty. Chol. Infl. Syph. Tuberc. Gangrene [and illegible]." ¹⁰⁷ It has been suggested by Dickerman that this image of Rockefeller Jr., rather than the portrait of Lenin, was the main impetus for the destruction of *Man at the Crossroads*, a suggestion that I think merits additional discussion. ¹⁰⁸

Rivera did not begin work on the mural until March of 1933 giving him ample time to digest criticism aimed at him by the left as well as the works made by Gellert,

¹⁰⁷ Dickerman, *Deigo Rivera*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

Gropper, and Shahn for MAPP. There is no evidence that I have found that Rivera personally saw the panels from MAPP, and I am not making the argument that *Man at the Crossroads* is a direct response to those works, but Rivera most certainly knew about the exhibition and the Rockefeller's role in allowing the works to be shown in the end. Ben Shahn served as an assistant to Rivera on the Rockefeller project. It is most likely that Rivera was aware of the events surrounding MAPP. James Wechsler in his dissertation on Hugo Gellert suggests that it might have even been Rivera's familiarity with the incident and the Rockefeller's decision to allow the murals to show, that inspired Rivera to insert the image of Lenin in *Man at the Crossroads* and push the limits of his commission.¹⁰⁹

The objections made by the patrons towards the works of Gellert, Gropper, Shahn, and Rivera are incredibly similar. A press statement authored by Rockefeller Jr. stated, "The letter, prepared in my office yesterday, refers to a fact which has never been made public before, namely, that the picture was obscene and, in the judgement of Rockefeller Center, an offense to good taste."¹¹⁰ Abby Aldrich Rockefeller also objected to the bad taste shown in the MAPP panels for their use of caricatures of MoMA patrons. Rivera took his caricature a step further by physically connecting the image of Rockefeller with disease, including sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis. The implication that someone of such high social standing as Rockefeller could be a carrier of

¹⁰⁹. Weschler, "The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert", 152.

¹¹⁰ John D. Rockefeller Jr., letter to John D. Rockefeller Sr., February 17th 1934, quoted in Dickerman, *Diego Rivera*. 41.

diseases often associated with moral degradation undoubtedly crossed a line, and would have been personally more offensive to the family than the image of Lenin.

Radical politics, while unpleasant, did not carry the same offense to dignity as caricature did. In response to the images of protesting workers donned with red bandanas and banners, Abby Rockefeller had no problem with the clear allusion to Rivera's communist politics much like Barr who did not object to the underlying political message of the MAPP murals.¹¹¹ In fact the caricatures of MoMA's backers were so offensive in Gellert's mural that the substitution of a portrait of Lenin was seen by MoMA administration as a suitable compromise. Lenin had appeared in American murals prior to *Man at the Crossroads* with little public comment,¹¹² and considering Rivera's history it begs the question of how shocking the portrait of Lenin could have possibly been. The claim by the Rockefeller's that Rivera's and the MAAP panels were in bad taste, speaks to something more than just politics. They read as a reference to decorum and social etiquette. The public ridicule of the patron was not something to be tolerated.

Perhaps the previous MoMA scandal had soured the Rockefeller's attitude towards communist imagery, and the inclusion of John D. Rockefeller Jr. as the face of a corrosive American capitalism was the last straw. Unlike the mural panels for MAPP, which were on view for a very short period and hidden as best as they could be during the exhibition, Rivera's fresco was a permanent work. Originally Rivera was asked to create

¹¹¹ Dickerman, *Diego Rivera*, 38.

¹¹² Both Hugo Gellert and Jose Clemente Orozco had completed mural projects with depictions of Vladimir Lenin that went without scandal.

a mural on canvas which would then be hung on the lobby wall, though he quickly convinced Rockefeller that the mural should be done in true fresco. The permanence of Rivera's work painted onto the wall rather than on a moveable canvas, may have made Rockefeller think twice about what type of imagery he would allow to represent himself and his family.

A personal request from Rockefeller to Rivera to paint Lenin out of the mural was made, though years later Rockefeller spokesman Hugh Robertson would testify that Rockefeller's real objection never had "anything to do with Lenin or the Russian people."¹¹³ Rivera, having already come under heavy criticism for his work with American capitalists could not afford to remove the image of Lenin lest it destroy his credibility with the left. In an interview with Eric F. Goldman for "The Open Mind" Ben Shahn, who served as an assistant on the Rockefeller Center mural relates how desperate Rivera was at this time to get back in the good graces of the leftwing press stating "[Rivera] made every effort to get approval and he just wasn't getting it. He would have given his right arm for two inches, say, in the *Daily Worker* or an article in the *Masses*."¹¹⁴

Rivera's refusal to remove the image of Lenin and Rockefeller Jr.'s decision to remove the mural altogether created a more substantial scandal, though one strangely similar to MAPP. Hundreds of artists organized a protest over what they saw as a gross

¹¹³ Dickerman, *Diego Rivera*, 41.

¹¹⁴ Ben Shahn interview, 1965 Jan. 17, Archives of American Art.

mis-use of censorship. Rivera's struggle to complete the mural endeared him to artists on all sides of the political spectrum and seemed to gain him the credibility he desired.

Analysis of the uproar over the MAPP murals, and Rivera's relationship with the Rockefeller family, helps to elucidate why the image of Lenin may not have been as offensive as previously thought. It also suggests that the caricature of John D. Rockefeller Jr. played a more substantial role in the destruction of the mural. In his previous commissions, and in his 1931 retrospective Rivera showed that he was willing to tone down his politics and produce works more in line with (or attuned to) an idealized American version of muralism. For this Rivera was criticized by artists on the left and then ostracized by both the American and Mexican Communist parties. Frustrated with how muralism and radical art was being represented in America, Hugo Gellert (and ostensibly William Gropper and Ben Shahn) , created mural panels more in line with the revolutionary manifestos published by Mexican artists. They created works which attempted to push the limits of free speech and reintroduce a more socially and politically conscious art into the mainstream. Looking for ways to regain some artistic credibility with the left-wing artists, the Rockefeller Center commission provided Rivera with an opportunity to engage with them in a visual dialogue about radical murals. Unfortunately Rivera pushed too hard and the mural was destroyed. This incident set a tone for future American mural production, particularly over the artistic direction of murals commissioned by federal relief agencies.

CONCLUSION: THE SPECTER OF RADICALISM

What the MAPP and Rockefeller Center incidents demonstrated was a final consensus among mainstream critics and patrons as to what was appropriate and inappropriate subject matter for American murals. The demeaning caricatures of powerful patrons and politicians would not be tolerated in American buildings.

This visual dialog which encouraged artists to continually push for a form of muralism that was politically motivated and socially critical was at odds with what mural patrons and art critics had decided American muralism was. Words such as “obscene, indecent, and bad taste, were used to describe the works of Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn and again for *Man at the Crossroads*. Mural panels that were praised by critics in MAPP included works that focused on the positives of American capitalism. Panels by Berenice Abbott and Reginald Marsh which focused on construction, technology, and ingenuity themes embraced by Rivera in his own American frescoes were singled out as exemplary works of American muralism. The iconography of construction and the metropolis had already gained institutional acceptance as appropriate subject matter for representing postwar america. The treatment of the panels by Gellert, Gropper and Shahn by MoMA only served to strengthen this codification of modern american art.

The American mural movement never truly escaped the shadow of Mexican Muralism. The association of the mural with communist propaganda continued to haunt the efforts of artists throughout the decade. In a Report of the Commission of Fine Arts of July 18, 1933, when the idea of a federally commissioned murals was in the early days of discussion, officials expressed concern over “efforts at mural painting by members of the group... [which] ... have been attended by much controversy and embarrassment to those authoring the work, condemned by the profession for chaotic composition, unharmonious in style and... in subject matter.” and “references in [the original proposal] statement to the Mexican movement.”¹¹⁵ What is interesting in this report is the authors’ reference to the critical and institutional reaction to controversial murals. It is obvious from the early correspondence between Biddle and various government officials that the institutional opinion mattered a great deal. It is clear that the government made the decision early on to distance itself from the Mexican movement as well as the artists who used muralism as to express radical politics. Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn, along with other leftist artists, did receive federal mural commissions later on in the decade. But their work was heavily regulated by federal agencies to avoid a repeat of the early mural scandals.

The destruction of Rivera’s mural caused a much larger press scandal than that of the MoMA exhibition, but the questions posed by the event were essentially the same. What is the function of a mural? Newspaper articles surrounding the Rockefeller center

¹¹⁵ Report of the Commission of Fine Arts of July 18, 1933.” George Biddle papers, 1910-1969, Archives of American Art.

project made continuous reference to the murals as “decoration”. Headlines such as “Extensive Decoration Scheme Takes Form in Rockefeller Center”, and “Modern Decorations on a Grand Scale” suggests that American critics and audiences were still conceptualizing the “mural” as a tool of gilded age interior decoration. On the other hand, a substantial group of artists took the line of the mural as propaganda or at the very least some sort of democratic tool. These early years of mural 1930s production represent a time of colliding discourses. All sides recognized that the mural as a form of art was important and represented a new way of producing and consuming visual imagery, but beyond that the details become muddled.

I would also like to suggest that from the MoMA scandal and a re-examination of these early years of mural production in America that we can infer something of the mural production that followed. The relationship between the Mexican and American mural movements is often presented as one sided. American artists were and still are compared to “Los Tres Grandes”, and often seen as coming up on the short end of the style and content sticks. But both movements were in continuous dialog with each other and continued to influence each other throughout the decade. The stable political climate in America allowed the Mexican muralists to expand their demographic and explore new subject matter and techniques. The controversial nature of the Mexican artists’ work, made American patrons anxious about what artists would create. Rivera’s acceptance of several high profile commissions in America, sparked American artists to revert to more

aggressively critical subject matter, which in turn prompted Rivera to look to his past in order to save credibility.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Hugo Gellert, detail from mural for Worker's Communist Part Cafeteria, New York, 1928. Reproduced in Wechsler, James. "From World War I to the Popular Front: The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (January 1, 2002): 199–229.



Figure 2. Hugo Gellert, detail from mural for Worker's Communist Part Cafeteria, New York, 1928. Reproduced in Wechsler, James. "From World War I to the Popular Front: The Art and Activism of Hugo Gellert." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (January 1, 2002): 199–229.

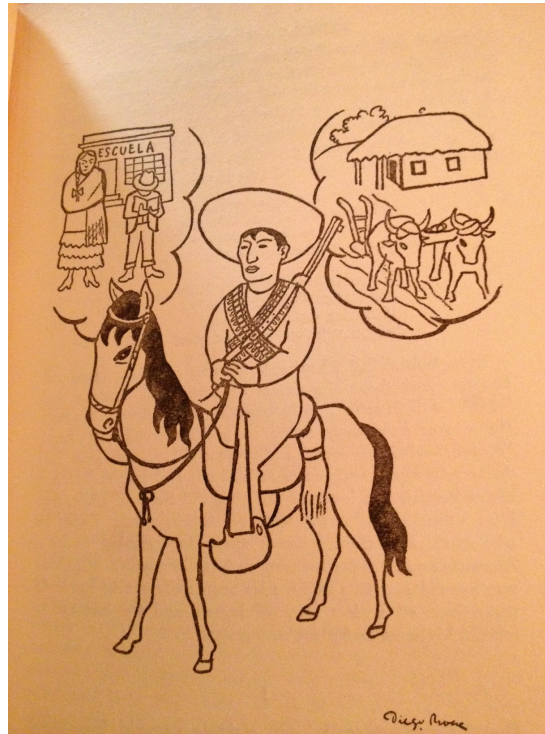


Figure 3. Diego Rivera, Illustration for Mexican Maze, printed in Beals, Carleton. *Mexican Maze*. New York: Book League of America, 1931.



Figure 4. Diego Rivera, *Flower Festival*, 1925. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 5. Diego Rivera, *Indian Warrior*, 1931. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. SC 1934:8-1



Figure 6. Diego Rivera, *Sugar Cane*, 1931. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Cameron Morris, 1943. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Figure 7. Diego Rivera, *Liberation of the Peon*, 1931. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Cameron Morris, 1943. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Figure 8. Diego Rivera, *Agrarian Leader Zapata*, 1931. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Imaging Services (John Wronn)



Figure 9. Diego Rivera, *The Uprising*, 1931. Private collection, Mexico. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Rafael Doniz

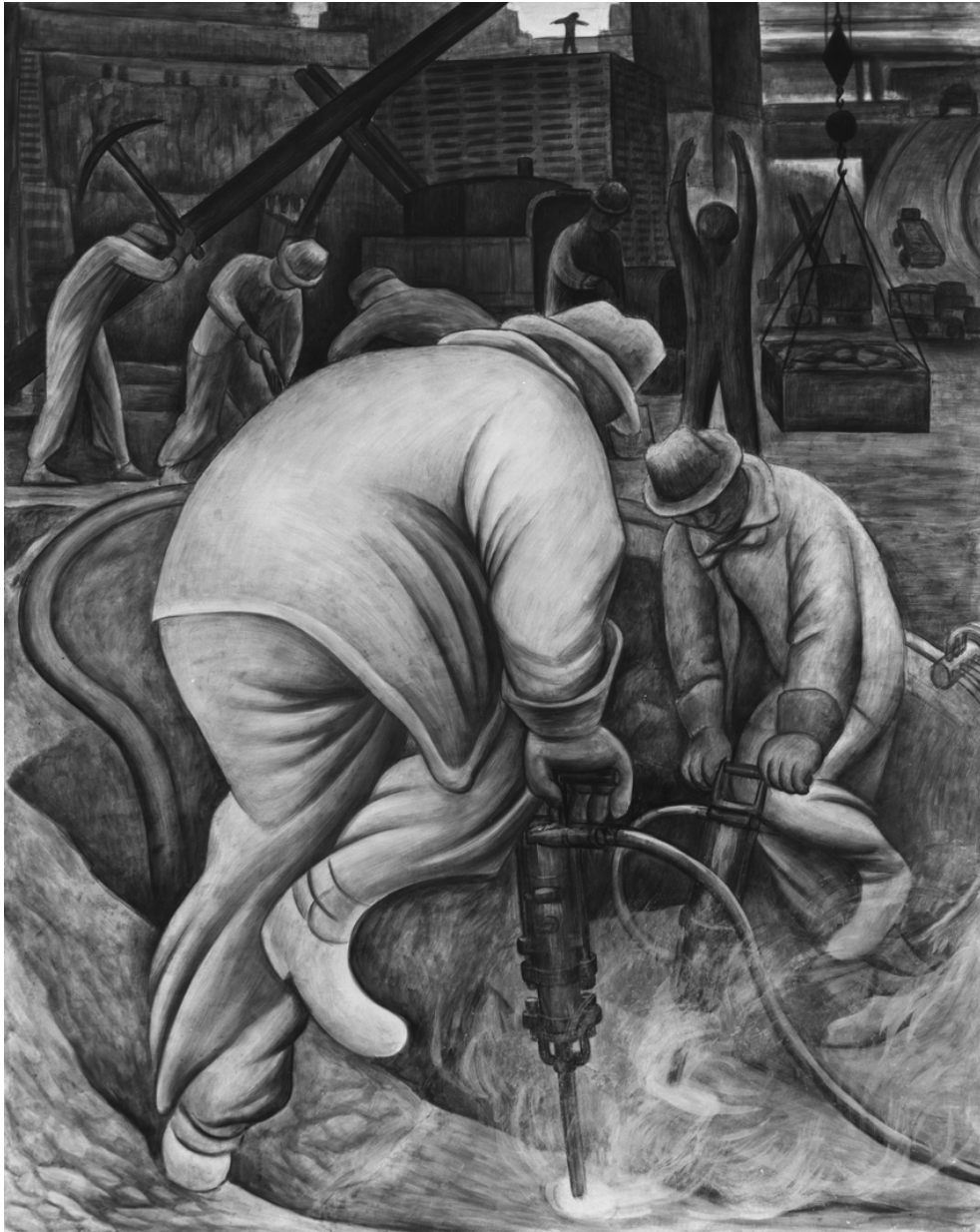


Figure 10. Diego Rivera, *Pneumatic Drilling*, 1931. Location unknown since 1977. Reproduced from a 1932 photograph by Peter A. Juley & Son. Photograph courtesy Peter A. Juley & Son Collection, Smithsonian American Art Museum (cat. no. J0005920)



Figure 11. Diego Rivera, *Electric Power*, 1931. Private collection, Mexico. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Rafael Doniz



Figure 12. Diego Rivera, *Frozen Assets*, 1931-32. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Xochimilco, Mexico. © 2011 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph © Eumelia Hernández and Ricardo Alvarado; Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes



Figure 13. Diego Rivera, *Slavery in the Sugar Plantation*, Tealtenango, Morelos, from the series, *History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*, 1930-31. Museo Quaunahuac, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico



Figure 14. Thomas Hart Benton, *City Building*, from *America Today*, 1930–31. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of AXA Equitable, 2012 (2012.478a–j2012)



Figure 15. Georgia O'Keeffe, *East River from the Shelton Hotel*, 1928. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe, 1986. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 16. Hugo Gellert, *Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together or The Last Defense of Capitalism*, 1932. The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection.



Figure 17. William Gropper, *The Writing on the Wall*, 1932. Whereabouts unknown. Reproduced in the *New Masses*, 1932.



Figure 18. Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1932. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Edith and Milton Lowenthal in memory of Juliana Force 49.22 Art © Estate of Ben Shahn / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

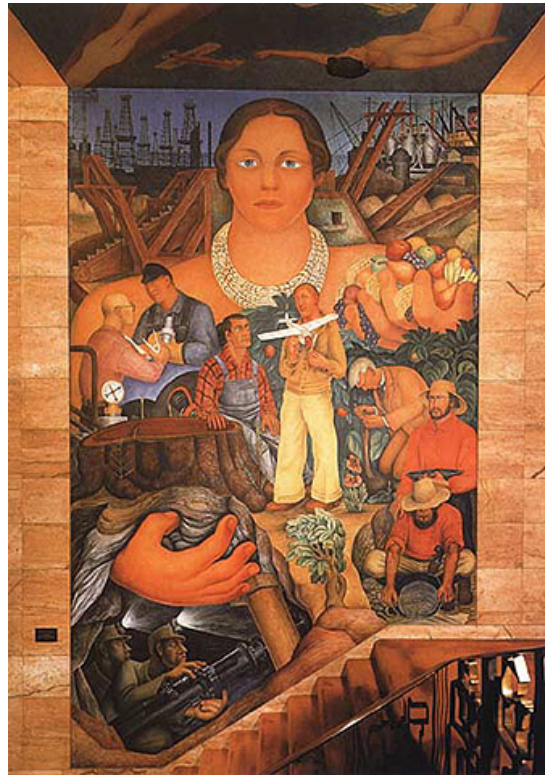


Figure 19. Diego Rivera, *Allegory of California*, 1931. San Francisco Stock Exchange.



Figure 20. Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, 1931. San Francisco Art Institute.

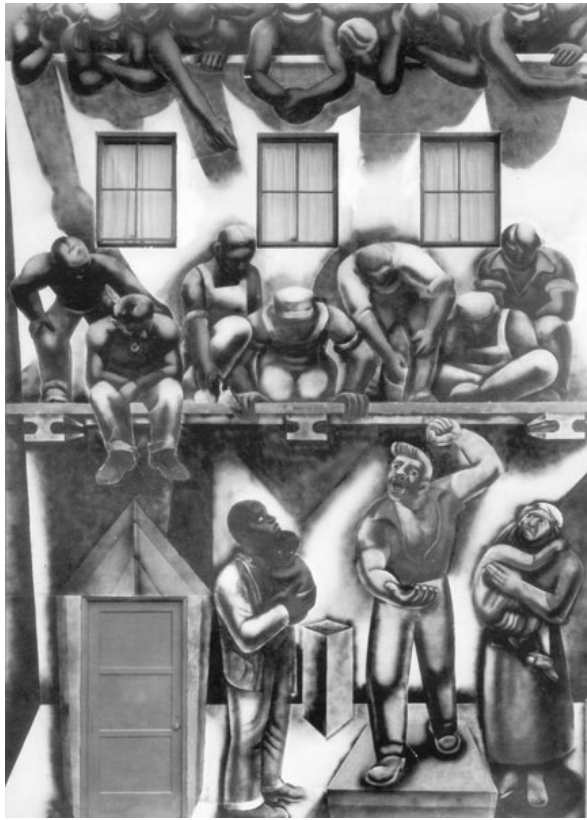


Figure 21. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Worker's Mural*, 1932. Destroyed.

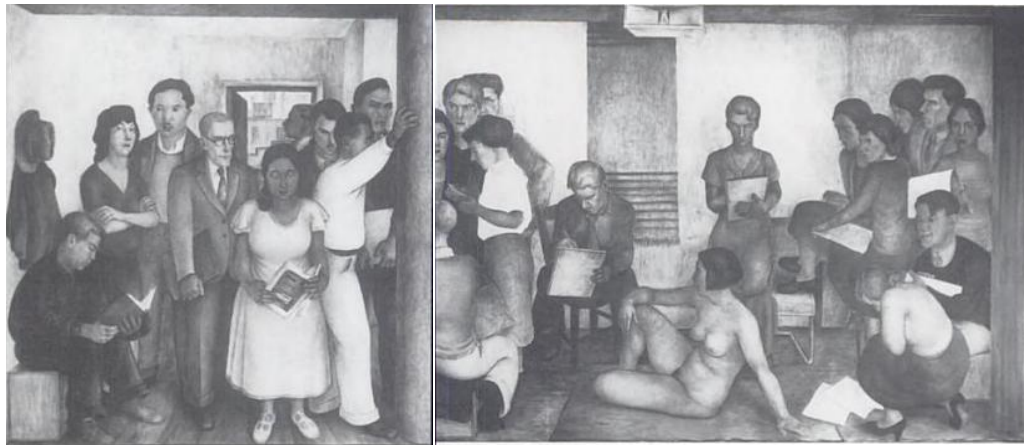


Figure 22. Victor Arnautoff, *Studio Mural*, 1931. Destroyed



Figure 23. Reginald Marsh, Sketch for *Post War America*, 1932.

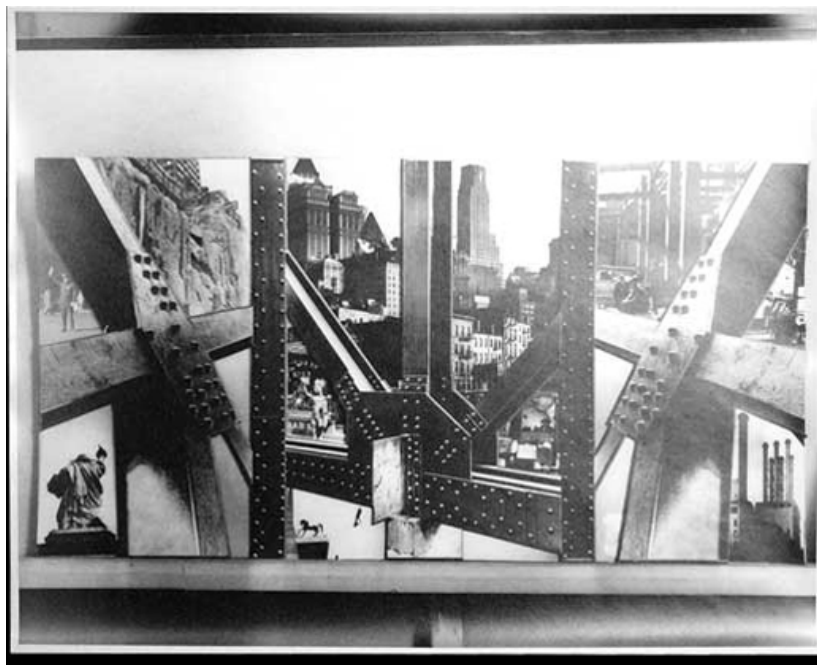


Figure 24. Berenice Abbott, *New York*, 1932.

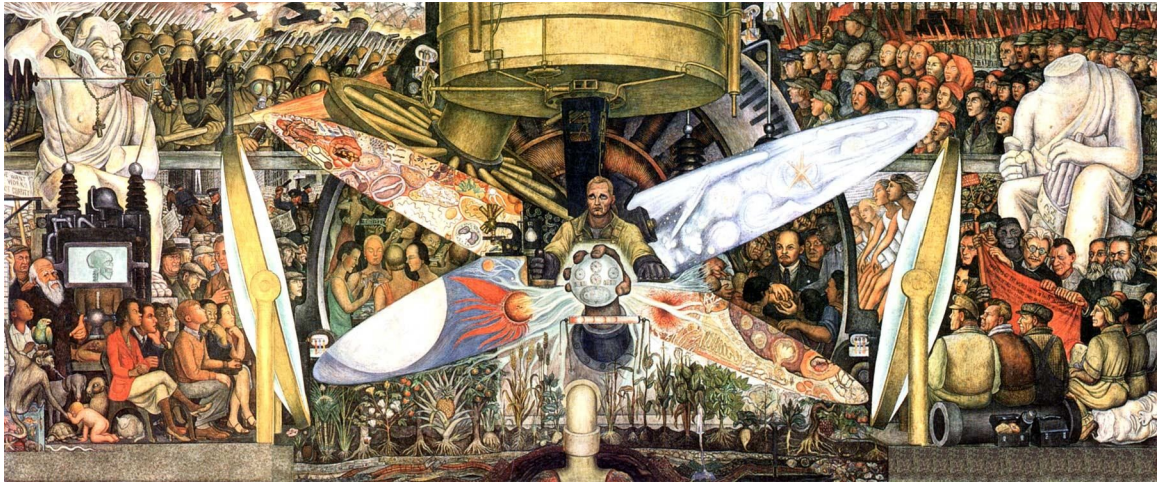


Figure 25. Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads/Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1933. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 26. Diego Rivera, Sketch for *Man at the Crossroads*, 1932-33. Museum of Modern Art

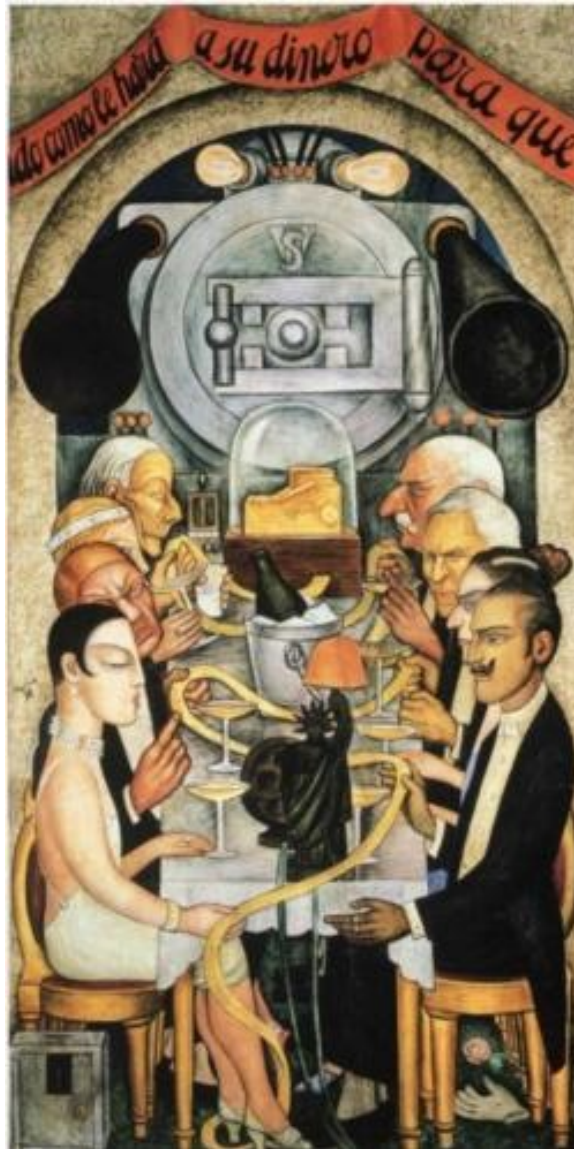


Figure 27. Diego Rivera, *Wall Street Banquet*, 1928. Courtyard of the Fiestas, Ministry of Education, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 28. Diego Rivera, *The Liberated Earth with The Powers of Nature Controlled by Man*, 1926. Chapel, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.



Figure 29. Diego Rivera, *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*, 1926. Chapel, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico.

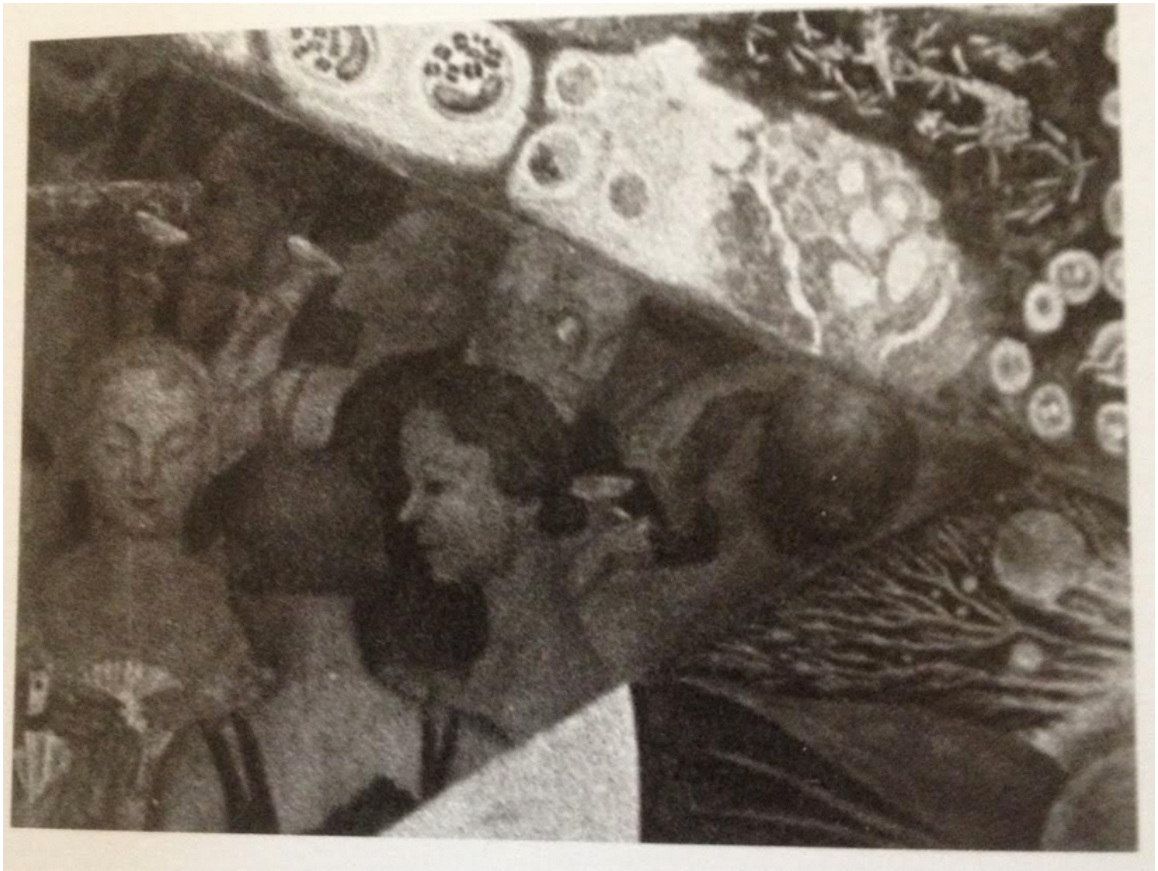


Figure 30. Detail from Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads* showing caricature of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Photograph by Lucience Bloch, reproduced in Dickerman, Leah, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.). *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art*. New York: Museum of Modern Art : Distributed in the U.S. by ARTBOOK/ D.A.P, 2011.

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Kristen Korfitzen graduated from Longwood High School, Middle Island, New York in 2004. She received her Associates of Applied Science in Fashion Merchandising and Management from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2008, and received her Bachelor of Arts in Art History from George Mason University in 2011. She has one cat and one husband.