Diego Rivera for a "Greater America": The United States Murals

Fascha Denray DeCrescenzo

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DIEGO RIVERA FOR A “GREATER AMERICA”: THE UNITED STATES MURALS

by

Fascha DeCrescenzo

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Major: Art History

The University of Memphis
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Dedication

For my husband,

Dr. Tyler B. Knewtson,

Without whom, I would surely be lost.
Acknowledgments

There are several people that, without whom, this project would have never reached completion. First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. William McKeown. His constant words of encouragement and patience were my saving grace. From Professor McKeown I not only learned a great deal about art history, but he also taught me what it means to be an art historian. He, no doubt, has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and even though my thesis is slightly outside his field of study, McKeown was delighted to study and learn with me. His guidance will not be forgotten, and he is greatly appreciated.

Secondly, I am also grateful for the other members on my committee: Dr. Fred Albertson and Dr. Patricia Daigle. They have each guided me to new levels of wisdom that I never foresaw in myself. From Dr. Albertson, I take a meticulous approach to methodology and enduring love of primary sources. I will forever cherish the opportunity that Dr. Daigle gave me when she allowed me to lead the lecture on Mesoamerican art in her World Art I class. Also, her direction in terms of primitivism and nativism helped shape this thesis, if only indirectly.

Professor Lou provided a starting point for this study when he suggested that I read the *Popol Vuh*. From there, I discovered Diego Rivera’s watercolors depicting the Mayan mythology. Considering that Rivera’s roots connect him to an Aztec heritage, I was curious as to why he would choose to dedicate so much time to the Maya story of creation. As I quickly learned, the project was a commission from an American writer, John Weatherwax. It became apparent to me, based on the number of mural commissions given to Mexican muralists, the archeological attention that the United States directed at Mexico in the early twentieth century, and by various novels written by United States citizens, such as *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) by D.H. Lawrence and *Mexico: A Study of Two Americas* (1931) by Stuart Chase, that a large
percentage of the United States’ population was extraordinarily interested in their neighbors to the south. Although this thesis only scratches the surface of one of the many multifaceted reasons as to why the United States was obsessed with Mexico in the 1930s, I have to recognized that Professor Lou sparked my interest in the matter.

Finally, I would like to thank the University of Memphis for allowing me to study at the graduate level. The monetary support via the Graduate Assistantship helped me enormously along my journey. And the University of Missouri in Kansas City (UMKC) provided me with a solid foundation during my undergraduate studies on which to stand. I was able to contact professors from UMKC, such as Dr. Frances Connelly, who helped me along the way. And of course, a special thank you goes out to my colleagues at the University of Memphis, Samira Rahbe Chambers and Olivia Wall. Thank you for making the graduate library a fun space in which to work. Our conversations and laughter definitely made graduate school and thesis writing much more enjoyable.
Abstract

This thesis focuses on several works of art created by Diego Rivera for United States patrons in the early twentieth century. Although these U.S. art patrons and Rivera supported the idea of hemispheric unity, the artist’s viewpoint did not always concur with that of the state-side capitalists. Rivera wished to use Pan-American iconography to idealize the indigenous cultures of Latin America, specifically Mexico. The United States capitalists wanted to use art patronage of Latin American artists to instigate a new brand of imperialism – American Imperialism. Nevertheless, through his murals and other projects, Rivera challenged the ideological foundations of the patrons who hired him. This study examines the artist’s visual language that he developed while working in the United States which dealt with the idea of hemispheric, or Pan-American, unity.
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Diego Rivera for a “Greater America”: The United States Murals

Introduction

Diego Rivera: Revolutionary or Pawn?

Diego Rivera was much more than a painter. The artist considered himself to be a sculptor of culture and an architect of society, unrestrained by national borders. However, his legacy has been debated and scrutinized throughout the years. At times, it appears as if he occasionally tempered his radical tone to better appease the tastes of his patrons and audience, especially in the United States. In other instances, the artist proved to be quite stubborn and stayed true to his artistic vision, even when it meant the destruction of his work. Rivera thus seems to fall somewhere between a radical socialist artist and a sell-out.

Such is the dilemma in understanding the enigma that is Diego Rivera. His career complicates the polemic. Rivera is renowned for his political paintings which express his personal dedication to communist principles espoused by Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky, but the artist did not follow the most popular communist concepts which were developed by Joseph Stalin. Rivera is also recognized as one of the Tres Grandes, the leading members of the “Mexican Renaissance” – a term applied to Mexico’s post-revolutionary mural art scene. The other Tres Grandes artists were David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco. The three committed themselves to a career of creating murals that highlighted the history of Mexico. As such, they crafted the nation’s history and were, in a sense, defining a new Mexican identity after the Revolution.

However, many of Rivera’s colleagues in Mexico, among them Siqueiros, criticized him for being an opportunist who accepted mural commissions from the very same “robber barons”
whom he mocked in his Mexico City frescoes.¹ For example, a scene in the 1923-28 mural at Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) displays American capitalists, including Henry Ford and Nelson Rockefeller, seated at a table feasting on receipt tape (figure 1). Corporations with these same men as the figureheads would later commission Rivera to design murals in Detroit and New York City, respectively.² Moreover, it is clear from an article in New Masses (1934) that Siqueiros had a different vision of the Mexican Renaissance than Rivera had.³ Siqueiros believed that the Mexican Renaissance and Mural Movement were meant to be collective approaches to social reform, but in Siqueiros’ view, Rivera continually refused to collaborate with the other muralists and instead developed an individual body of work. This criticism, according to Siqueiros, highlights a key issue in Rivera’s artistic practice that undermines a truly Communist effort for social revolution.⁴

The Central Committee of the Communist Party in Mexico City shared Siqueiros’ reservations about Rivera’s practice. They disliked that Rivera accepted a commission from


² The fresco series in the SEP building is characterized as a turning point in Rivera’s career and part of the reason he gained notoriety north of the Rio Grande. Therefore, it is probable that Henry Ford and the Rockefeller family knew about Rivera’s anti-capitalist political platform prior to hiring the artist to paint murals in the United States. According to Jefrey Belnap, Francis Flynn Paine described some of Rivera’s murals in Mexico to Abby Rockefeller in early correspondences. Using letters written by Paine, Belnap states that Paine “tells of Rivera’s current project at the National Palace in Mexico City, a mural cycle whose objective was to capture the history of Mexico from pre-Hispanic to contemporary times, and where images representing the Rockefeller family’s Standard Oil Company ‘play a very important part in the composition of the painting.’” See Jefrey Belnap, “Diego Rivera’s Greater America Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P.,” Culture Critique, no. 63 (2006): 74.

³ Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road,” 16.

⁴ Rivera’s response to Siqueiros criticism is recorded in Tibol, Documentación sobre el arte mexicano, 65-82.
Mexico’s National School of Fine Arts and was working at the National Palace. The Central Committee felt that Rivera, by accepting jobs connected to the Mexican government, did not respect the Communist Party in Mexico City. Furthermore, the artist’s refusal to take part in a protest involving the murals in the National Preparatory School by Siqueiros and Orozco ultimately led to Rivera’s expulsion from the Committee in 1924. However, he was readmitted two years later. Rivera’s vision for the Mexican Renaissance is a little harder to pin down, but it is clear that the artist believed that the best way to lead a communist revolution was through wide and public dissemination of his art.

Fellow Committee member Bertram Wolfe comments on Rivera’s expulsion from the Party as well, stating that it was Wolfe’s idea to ask Rivera to leave the Party due to Rivera being over-worked by various mural projects. According to Wolfe, the artist was distracted by thoughts of his murals whenever he attended a party meeting. The two decided that Rivera was more beneficial to the Party as a muralist instead of active participant. This idea is supported by art connoisseur, Frances Flynn Paine, who stated in an exhibition catalog published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York that Rivera believed that if he had any value to the Communist Party, then it was as a painter.

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6 Siqueiros notes that Rivera was an active member of the Mexican Communist party until “the ‘comfortable’ era for Communism in Mexico came to an end,” at which point Rivera lost enthusiasm and was intentionally expelled from the Party, Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road,” 18-19.


8 Paine, Diego Rivera, 33.
For his part, Rivera considered his working for some of the wealthiest families from the United States as a form of fighting behind enemy lines, like a guerrilla in warfare.\(^9\) Rivera asserted himself as a revolutionary, and he followed the teachings of Lenin by infiltrating the very institutions he wanted to rectify.\(^10\) Rivera attempted to subvert the social structures of the United States with the use of Pan-American iconography, or the idea of a “Greater America” wherein all the countries of the Western hemisphere live harmoniously in a socialized political system. According to Rivera’s theory on this new American culture, the fusion of North America’s technological modernity and the pre-Columbian heritage of Latin America would inevitably lead to an integration of the machine age into the resilient indigenous traditions.\(^11\)

Although the United States patrons of Rivera supported the idea of Pan-American unity and occasionally commissioned the artist to design murals within the framework of this hemispheric harmony, they did not necessarily envision the same end as the artist. In fact, North American politicians and corporate entrepreneurs preferred a Pan-America wherein United States capitalism provided the leading example for other American countries to follow. Nevertheless, through his Social Realist murals, the artist called attention to the class systems of Mexico and the United States and inequality across the Americas. Optimistic in his approach, Rivera


\(^10\) Jeffery Belnap, “Diego Rivera’s Greater America Pan-America Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P.,” 62. Belnap states: “Rivera’s response to Siqueiros’ accusations has become one of the important historical-theoretical documents of twentieth-century Mexico... Rivera characterizes Siqueiros’ accusations as the hysterical attack of a Stalinist lackey who is not only a theoretical deviant but also an inferior painter motivated by jealousy over Rivera’s international reputation. Characterizing himself as a loyal revolutionary in the Bolshevik-Leninist tradition, Rivera claims to be following Lenin’s dictum to infiltrate bourgeois institutions. Moreover, [Rivera] goes on to depict himself as a valiant soldier who has been forced not only to do battle as a guerilla fighter ‘in enemy territory’ but also to ward off the defamations of the Third International.”

subverted existing social systems and structures while idealizing proletariat-managed
industrialization and indigenous cultures.

This thesis focuses on the murals and related projects that Rivera designed for patrons in
the United States. It reveals ways in which Rivera challenged power structures, particularly
capitalism, that serve as the social and economic base of the New World, especially in North
America. This thesis will address Rivera’s personal assessment as a revolutionary artist and place
his work within the larger context of the socio-political atmosphere of the U.S. and Latin
America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite Rivera’s challenge to
the Western European ideologies of capitalism and class structures – ideas on which the
bourgeois societies of the United States and Mexico are modeled – his murals painted within the
United States between the years 1931 and 1940 are the direct result of policies and associations
that advocated for U.S. corporate interest in the name of “Pan-American” unity. In particular,
this study will examine the effects the Mexican Arts Association, Monroe Doctrine of 1823,
Article 27 from the Constitution of Mexico (1917), and the Good Neighbor Era, which officially
began in 1933, had on the development of Rivera’s Pan-American iconography.

Unlike other studies of Rivera and his U.S. murals, this study will explore the
development of Rivera’s Pan-American iconography and how said imagery was informed by a
variety of different points of view; especially noteworthy are the opposing viewpoints of the
artist himself versus the corporate art patrons of the United States. Moreover, Rivera’s own
views on Pan-American unity were not entirely consistent. This thesis examines the artist’s
visual language that describes a duality of the industrialized, masculine North American and the
natural resources and femininity of Latin America, and how Rivera occasionally reinforced or
complicated this duality. I will prove that although the United States used Rivera as a tool for
corporate interests, especially U.S. industrialists with intentions on Mexico’s resources, Rivera found a way to include his own voice in the dialog of the Pan-American identity.

**Chapter Precis**

The opening chapter examines the murals that Rivera painted in San Francisco during his first visit to the city in the early 1930s. These murals represent the artist’s transition from rural Mexico into the more industrial United States art scene.\(^\text{12}\) As such, they differ from his later expressions in the United States, for these earlier murals make little to no reference about Pan-American unity but opt for idealization of the working class and agrarian themes. The later shift in Rivera’s choice of subject matter, from the power of the proletariat to Pan-American iconography, suggests that he tempered his iconography to better appeal to U.S. art patrons, allowing his contemporaries a basis on which to criticize his lack of loyalty to communism.

Nearly a decade later, Rivera returned to San Francisco. During this second visit he painted *The Union of the Artistic Expression of the North and South of This Continent: Materialization of the Gifts for the Creative Mechanical Expression of the North, by way of Union with the Plastic Tradition of the South, or Pan-American Unity*, for the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. Working with San Francisco architect, Timothy Pflueger, Rivera participated in an “Art in Action” exhibition and painted a mural with the theme of Pan-American unity, an idea that Rivera had always believed in with all his heart.\(^\text{13}\) Since this first chapter focuses on the murals painted in the city where Rivera began and ended his U.S.

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artistic career, it serves as the perfect introduction to a case study in the development of Rivera’s Pan-American iconography.

Although Rivera is famous for his works in true fresco, the second chapter starts not with Rivera’s traditional murals, but with two endeavors that the artist took on between U.S. mural commissions. The portable frescoes from the Rivera retrospective at Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), when examined in comparison to earlier works done by Rivera in Mexico, demonstrates how the artist changed his social message depending on the audience. This fact seemingly undermines the artist’s statement that he was working to deconstruct capitalist institutions from within and supports Siqueiros’ argument that Rivera was allowing himself to be used by the corporate patrons of the United States. In Philadelphia, Rivera assisted with the production of a ballet which dealt with a Pan-American theme and growing industries of the modern world. This endeavor expresses a duality between male industrialization and female fertility. Although the ballet strongly emphasizes this polemic, the artist complicates ideas surrounding a gendered workforce with his subsequent mural in Detroit.

The third chapter discusses the murals in the Detroit Art Institute (DAI) and Rockefeller Plaza. The DAI murals undermine the gendered depictions developed in the Philadelphia ballet and the capitalistic system of the Ford factory by challenging existing structures of race in 1930’s American society, suggesting that Rivera’s politics are complicated, and his career was more complex than a simple binary classification of either being a sell-out or being a devout communist. The chapter also discusses the infamous, and no-longer extant, mural Man at the Crossroads in Radio City Music Hall at New York City’s Rockefeller Center. The demolished fresco acts as a demonstration of what happens when an artist creates a work that clashes with the ideals of the ruling class – in this case, the patrons of the mural, the capitalist Rockefellers.
This thesis will prove that the Mexican muralist had a complicated political platform that does not easily fit into a binary-based social understanding. After an in-depth study of Rivera’s United States murals and related projects produced between 1930-1941, a development of the artist’s Pan-American iconography will be revealed. By employing a deeper iconographic reading of Rivera’s murals, I will demonstrate how he incorporated his theories of “Greater America” within seemingly innocent depictions of American industry.
Chapter One

San Francisco: Before and After

Given the specific set of circumstances that were in place before and during Rivera’s career, it becomes clear why his work expressed a highly political tone. Modern Mexico has had a long and violent history filled with conquest and oppressive leaders. At the turn of the twentieth century, the country had expelled its most recent and long-standing dictator, Porfirio Diaz. Mexico was left to redefine itself in the wake of this political vacuum. Many Mexican citizens saw this moment as an opportunity to break away from the long tradition of the colonial and imperial influences of Europe. Thus, began the Mexican Revolution in 1910.

Much of the Mexican Revolution was led by *campesinos*, or farmers, who fought for the return of communal ownership of rural lands as practiced in pre-conquest Mexico. Before the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores*, much of the Mexican Highlands were controlled by the Aztecs. The Aztecs had developed a communal system wherein their land was divided among the citizens according to their social status.¹ Like many of the indigenous cultures in pre-conquest America, the Aztecs did not have the concept of land ownership as it existed to Europeans who were settling in the American lands. Within their system, Aztec organization promoted social order rather than individual gain, as seen in capitalism. The post-revolutionary mindset of the Mexican population, which idealized the primitive ways of peoples long-passed,

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¹ The tlaltocalli and the pillalli were lands given to the nobility who supported the ruler. The mitchimalli and the teotlapan were public lands that were rented out to sharecroppers or used for army camps and temple grounds. Finally, the capullalli and the atlepetalli were the lands that belonged to the macechuales and capulis, or common-workers. Although the capullalli belonged to the community, certain families were allowed to farm the land and keep the crops as long as they continually worked the field. If the family failed to yield crops within a two years’ time, the plot would be given to another family. See James J. Kelly, “Article 27 and Mexican Land Reform: The Legacy of Zapata’s Dream,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 25 (1994): 546-47.
influenced not only Modern Mexico’s culture, but also Rivera’s theories on society and its future.²

Rivera wrote extensively on social theories dealing with hemispheric relations in the Americas. Specifically, two chapters in his book, *Arte y política* (remains untranslated), record the artist’s predictions that the United States would remain truncated and unfulfilled if the culture continued to sterilize itself of any indigenous presence.³ Similar ideas are found in English by Rivera’s biographer and colleague Bertram Wolfe. According to the historian, when the Spanish arrived with their European imperialism, they found that the Aztec society was not much unlike their own, for the Aztecs had a clearly defined ruler and social hierarchy. According to this belief, the “tropical Indian” was more easily coerced into slavery and modified feudalism than the “Redman of the Northern region,” whose nomadic and wild nature would not accept the European ways of feudalism and Christianity.⁴ Therefore, the indigenous peoples who lived in what would become the United States were removed from the land, but in Mexico and other Latin American countries the indigenous cultures were integrated into a new social system under the Spanish rule. As a result, the cultures of Central and South America maintained a closer

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² “Pero si esta situación para la América de todo el sur del Río Bravo es perfectamente negativa, en cambio resultó de ella, como contrapartida dialéctica, una importantísima situación positiva, la supervivencia de grandes masas de población indígena que han producido grandes mayoría de población mestiza, que en sus modos de vivir y pensar, en todo lo que constituye la cultura, mantiene vivas sus raíces en lo indio y constituye, por lo tanto, un magnífico plasma para el desarrollo retontante de una cultura americana, sin la cual la vida del norte no solo estará trunca sino que acabará por ser imposible; la alta cultura científica moderna y la super industrialización del norte unidas a esta cultura americana milenaria más el aporte progresivo único de la cultura europea, el socialismo, constituye la única posibilidad positiva para América en el futuro.” Diego Rivera, *Arte y política*, 250-51.


connection to their indigenous heritage than the colonies in North America under British or French colonialism.

It was these conditions that influenced not only Rivera’s career but also his ideas about Pan-American unity from a Mexican viewpoint. Unlike the more cynical exploitation of Pan-American harmony by corporate bosses in the U.S., citizens of Mexico and other parts of Latin America tended towards an interpretation of the “Pan-American ideal” as a communal social organization with a nucleus consisting of the inherited indigenous cultures lying at the heart of the union. Rivera wrote extensively about the perpetual influence of the Mediterranean imperial powers, especially the impact Julius Caesar had on the formation of society, and how said powers were sick and faulted from the very onset because they were based on slavery. According to the artist, Caesarism had a strong hold of the colonies in the United States and without the indigenous cultures of Latin America, the society north of the Rio Grande would be destined to be forever severed from its full potential.

In fact, many of Rivera’s early murals from Mexico focused on the aspects of Mexican culture that were strictly non-Spanish, or they negatively depicted Spanish colonial powers while idealizing the campesinos. Typically, Rivera’s ideas took the visual form of indigenismo, a style he used often in Mexico that emphasizes the relation between a nation and its indigenous

5 “Lo que se llama cultura occidental y que se puede definir mejor como cultura mediterránea, está cimentada sobre la esclavitud.” Diego Rivera, Arte y política, 249.

6 “Triunfo primero en Norteamérica, y cuajo ahí en una república esclavista que trataba de hacer siervos de ella a los verdaderos americanos, a los indios, asesinando en grande escala a los que no se sometían; comprando al mismo tiempo miles de negros africanos, con el fin de usarlos como esclavos sumisos. Se constituyó en los Estados Unidos una “democracia” de forma tan especial que, además de aceptar la esclavitud, confirió a sus presidentes tal poder, como ningún rey europeo más o menos constitucional del siglo XIX ha podido sonar para él. La democracia americana burguesa, al crecer, se convirtió en la plutocracia más fuerte del mundo y sus presidentes, por el carácter del poder que ejercen pueden ser calificados, con exactitud y sin exageración como cesarios, aunque en realidad César Augusto nunca tuvo mayor poder en Roma.” Ibid, 250.
cultures. Many of the murals Rivera painted in Mexico portray the effects of colonial rule by the Spanish conquistadors on indigenous Mexican inhabitants. For example, the series executed in the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca for Dwight Whitney Morrow, the U.S. Ambassador assigned to Mexico-United States relations in 1927, illustrate the negative consequences of colonialism on the indigenous population of Mexico (figure 2). The theme of this mural series is the history of Morelos. In its congested composition, the mural depicts conflicts in Cuernavaca due to oppressive Spanish colonialism. However, Rivera often omits this historical tension between cultures when he created works within the United States. Rivera’s first murals in California distance themselves from class inequality specific to Mexico’s history, but they retain a strong emphasis on agrarian and labor iconography. Rivera considered his first visit to California in the early 1930s as a transition from his earlier work in Mexico to a new stage of his career in the United States.

Rivera was hired by three main patrons, William Geistle, Pfleuger, and Albert Bender, to fulfill San Francisco’s need for monumental public art. Prior to 1931, murals in San Francisco – by painters such as Frank du Mond and Edward Mitchell (figures 3 and 4) – had been notably decorative and outdated in terms of style, appearing neoclassical during the height of modern

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8 Rivera, Portrait of America, 14.

9 The trio were prompted by the San Francisco sculptor, Ralph Stackpoole who had known Rivera while they both lived in Paris. Stackpoole visited Mexico and became supremely interested in Rivera’s work. Upon return to California, the sculptor convinced Gerstle, President of the Society of Fine Arts of San Francisco, Pfleuger, architect, to hire Rivera. Ibid, 14.
abstraction. Most of the public art from this period, including du Mond and Mitchell’s work, was part of the Panama Pacific International Exhibition (PPIE) of 1915. The planners of the PPIE in San Francisco sought a coherent unity in the design and decoration of the fair. However, their plan may have been too successful, for critics remarked on the general blandness of the murals that seemed to blend too well with the architecture and often went unnoticed.

Following this underwhelming display of public murals, Californian artists returned to private commissions and all but abandoned the idea of a public art scene in San Francisco for nearly a decade. Eventually, artists such as Maynard Dixon and Ray Boynton revived public murals in San Francisco during the mid-1920s. However, these artists drew from the PPIE’s mural prototypes and celebrated the wall’s barrenness in the neoclassical formal designs. As can be seen in the provided examples (figures 5 and 6), their work employs large areas of negative space, ornamentation that dovetails with the architectural features, and strict orders of decorative logic that allowed easy legibility by the public.

These formal precedents of mural painting conditioned the San Francisco public to a certain level of ornate, readable public artwork, which made the frescoes by Rivera more troubling upon initial reception. Audiences did not immediately understand the structure of Rivera’s murals with their complex and congested compositions, immersed in political undertones. Nevertheless, through repeated exposure to and open discussions about his work, through repeated exposure to and open discussions about his work, through repeated exposure to and open discussions about his work,

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11 Ibid, 1-25.


13 Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., “Rivera’s American Murals,” Saturday Review of Literature 10, no. 44 (May 19, 1934): 697-9 is but one example of the negative criticism Rivera received from the North American audience. In this
San Franciscans adjusted to Rivera’s visual language. As a result, muralists within the city adopted the foreign style and would eventually experiment with similar compositions and subliminally political imagery. This outcome was precisely what Rivera desired. The artist wanted to export Mexican muralism – the technique of true fresco and his iconography of radical, public murals – throughout the United States.

Now that the reader has been introduced to the public art scene prior to the arrival of Rivera, the remainder of this chapter examines two of Rivera’s earliest frescoes painted in San Francisco in 1931, The Making of a Fresco, The Showing the Building of a City (1931) and Allegory of California (1931). It will end with Rivera’s final mural in San Francisco, Pan-American Unity (1941). This comparison of the artist’s earliest and last murals painted within the United States best reveals the development of a Pan-American iconography. Rivera used the public art form of the mural to advocate for a unified America, or a “Greater America”. Similar to the feudal system of the Aztecs, Rivera’s Pan-Americanism would lend itself to social unity rather than capital gain. Moreover, the artist believed that for a “Greater America” to be

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14 See Lee, Painting on the Left, 72-79 for primary sources dealing with the reception of Rivera in San Francisco.

15 Although many artists quickly adopted Rivera’s technique of true fresco and his compositional style, many critics were hesitant to accept the foreign force. Several articles published by the Chronicle between the years 1927-30 develop a tone highly critical of outsourcing public art to a non-U.S. citizen. Likewise, Beatrice Ryan commented in the Oakland Tribune that “It is too bad we can’t have our own men do this type of work. We have any number of Californians who are capable of doing fine murals. We should aim at developing local talent rather than going abroad for our art.” See “Seeing Red,” Art Digest 5, no. 2 (1930): 8 and Lee, Painting on the Left.

successful, the modern machine age of the industrial United States must be sublated into an indigenous culture such as the Aztec heritage that existed in Latin America.\(^{17}\) This study will reveal ways in which Rivera’s iconography promoted his theories about a “Greater America”.

Within Rivera’s Pan-Americanism, the two parts of the hemisphere would share ownership of the means of production, resulting in a cooperative society instead of an elite class of profiteers feeding upon the toil of the proletariat class. However, Rivera knew that the agents of established capitalism within the United States, those same figures he mocked in the Secretary of SEP fresco, would not welcome this radical ideology readily – just as San Franciscans did not automatically accept the complex compositions of the murals. Therefore, Rivera would need to expose as much of the United States public to his iconography as he could and as often as he could. As such, Rivera first had to ensure his continued employment in the United States via additional commissions. As he secured a more prominent position as a public figure within the United States, he could create frescoes that were increasingly brazen in the expression of his ideology.

As examples of a transitional period for Rivera, the early California murals move away from themes of indigenismo and colonialism. Instead, the two frescoes painted by Rivera in San Francisco during the early 1930s can be read as depicting idealization of the proletariat.\(^{18}\) At this early juncture in the artist’s career, the U.S. audience was not yet predisposed to read a secondary meaning in Rivera’s iconography, and they were not yet adjusted to the complex


\(^{18}\) This chapter will not explore Rivera’s Still Life and Blossoming Almond Trees from Sigmund and Rosalie Meyer Stern’s private residence. The fresco still shows themes of labor and prosperity of an agrarian society, but due to its location in a private home, few people saw the fresco after its completion.
compositions used by him. Therefore, the frescoes were accepted as harmless depictions of growing Californian industry imbued with personal relations between the artist and his patrons or other American figures. But as this thesis will explore, there is an underlying theme beginning to take form in even these early San Francisco murals.

*Allegory of California as the Maternal Latin America*

*Allegory of California* (figure 7) was Rivera’s first mural painted in the United States. It is still located on a stairwell wall of the Pacific Stock Exchange building in San Francisco. The stairwell originally led executive employees to a private lunch floor of the building, which had been newly designed by Pflueger. In this San Francisco mural, Rivera depicts the production of raw materials as a position of femininity through his iconography and the position and scale of the figures. However, his own writings on the mural reveal a secondary interpretation of the mural. Throughout Rivera’s career within the United States, the artist continually inserted his social theories of a “Greater America” in such a subtle manner that even his closest comrades, such as Siqueiros, missed the subversion.

A large portion of the composition of *Allegory of California* is dedicated to a single giant female figure. As Rivera himself relates, “California itself is symbolized by a large female figure – a woman of tanned skin and opulent curves modeled after the rolling hills of the landscape.”\(^\text{19}\) Her left hand holds a cornucopia of fruit and wheat, while her right hand holds the trunk of a

\(^{19}\) Rivera, *Portrait of America*, 14.
tree, both symbols of the production of raw materials. Other fruit-bearing shrubberies cover her torso, reiterating the productive nature of the figure’s femininity.\textsuperscript{20}

The maternal figure’s connection to the theme of production would have appealed to anyone who favored normative reproductive practices by accentuating the female’s fertility. However, this female figure, as maternal as she may appear, is not traditionally an erotic representation of a woman. Her shoulders are too broad; her hands are massive; her presence would intimidate most men. She is not the average female, nor is she passive.\textsuperscript{21} The figure’s form alone should suggest to the viewer that there is more here than what meets the eye.

The woman in \textit{Allegory of California} was supposed to be a generalized depiction of a female figure, but it was based on a portrait of Helen Wills Moody, a professional tennis player who Rivera met at one of the numerous social events associated with mural projects. Rivera’s decision to use the likeness of Helen Wills Moody was criticized by Siqueiros in “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road.” Siqueiros claimed that Rivera was “the Millionaires Painter” who “remembered Helen Wills but forgot Tom Mooney, the Scottsboro boys, etc., and all the immediate problems of the American proletariat.”\textsuperscript{22} Helen Wills is not the only portrait included in \textit{Allegory of California}. Luther Burbank, American botanist who had just died in 1926, makes an appearance as the horticulturist inspecting California’s crop on the right side of the

\textsuperscript{20} It could be argued that Diego Rivera is laying the groundwork for future murals which will involve Pre-Columbian deities, and that he is personifying Earth as a female figure.

\textsuperscript{21} See Lee, \textit{Painting on the Left}, 72-79 for criticism from the 1930s U.S. public.

\textsuperscript{22} Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road,” 19.
James Marshall, a carpenter who had lived and died in the nineteenth century but was the catalyst for the California Gold Rush, and a companion pan for gold.  

Rivera chose to incorporate these figures for a specific reason. He saw California as a place which contained much potential in its agriculture. The western state was not yet as industrialized as New York City or even Detroit. The artist toured California’s countryside often while working on the murals. He recognized that it was the working-class who was shaping the future of the state, not the white-collar businessman. Rivera’s own interpretation of this painting is as follows:

In this mural in a luncheon club, I painted the fruits of the earth which enrich and nourish because of the productive labor of workers and farmers. I painted no mortgage-holding bankers, or industrial overlords, or parasitic exploiters - only the modern workers and discoverers, as well as the pioneers and those brave adventurous guides of the prairie schooners which brought the bloodthirsty hordes across the lands defended by the free Indians, there to become despoiling adventurers, persecutors of Mexicans, populators of the land of gold; all those barbarous settlers and entrepreneurs who were as necessary as the fatal crimes they committed in the process of transforming this new land by industrialization.

From this quote, one clearly gets a sense of how Rivera felt about colonization, especially North America’s approach to exiling the Native Americans from their homelands. However, this negative interpretation of colonization is not visually conveyed in the mural, yet again giving critics grounds on which to stand.

As a transition from his earliest murals in Mexico to a new American audience, Rivera’s first San Francisco mural remains well-endowed in imagery that idealizes the working-class, for

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24 Ibid, 14.

he chose to include the explorers, scientists, and pioneers who worked hard, who sweat to establish new land for their country. Although this theme of the proud proletarian will continue to appear in Rivera’s work, this mural also provides a foundation for his new direction which explores the theme of Pan-American unity from a Latin American perspective. Later, we will discover how this painting works into an analogy: man is to the United States, industry, and power as woman is to Latin America, nature, and fertility. After defining this parallel in a visual language, Rivera will undermine the paradigm by making his female figures powerful, insinuating that the Americas cannot be complete without Latin America.

**Making of a Fresco as the Paternal United States**

Rivera was initially commissioned to paint *Making of a Fresco, The Showing of a Building* (figure 8) as his first United States mural on the walls of California School of Fine Arts. However, before he arrived in California, architect Timothy Pflueger asked the artist first to paint *Allegory of California* the stairwell of the new Stock Exchange building instead of *Making of a Fresco*. After the completion of *Allegory of California*, Rivera began plans for the original request to design a mural for California School of Fine Arts. The mural has been pristinely preserved in what is now called the Rivera Gallery, an exhibition space for contemporary artists at the university. The California School of Fine Arts has since changed its name to San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI).

When one considers this fresco’s location in the public setting of the San Francisco Art Institute, one readily interprets this painting as depicting the simple and harmless concept of making art. However, a more socialist celebration of the proletariat lay at the heart of the subtext in *Making of a Fresco*. Compositionally, the fresco that is being made within this fresco is dominated by a man who occupies nearly one-third of the entire mural itself. Although he does
not stand in the foreground proper, several of the other figures in the fresco appear dedicated to the rendering of the giant man, thus making him essential to the composition. He is clearly in the working class, for he is dressed in blue coveralls typically seen on laborers. The giant wears yellow gloves, and he operates different mechanical controllers. Occupying the space flanking this figure are skyscrapers, an airplane in mid-flight, factory equipment, and a scene of a construction site composed of red iron beams, pulleys, and six men clothed in similar blue coveralls and yellow gloves.

The foreground is divided into six separate compartments by a scaffold, which complicates the composition as it becomes unclear which figures are part of the fresco in the background and which figures are involved in making the fresco. Each compartment features a different step in the process of industrial design: the rightmost compartments represent different stages of construction; the center depicts stages of painting; and the left compartments feature sculpting. It should be noted that the men in the upper sections of the scaffolding are occupied in the physically laborious side of constructing, sculpting, and painting. The sections in the lower register of the scaffold feature business men and architects, or more conceptual labors – perhaps an attempt to elevate the status of laborers.

Noteworthy among the figures of the conceptual labors is the female architect in the lower right cubicle. By inserting a female figure in an industrial scene, Rivera is beginning to subvert the male-dominated United States society. Furthermore, Rivera included his own portrait in this mural. The artist is located near the center of the composition, sitting on the

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26 It could also be argued that if industrial United States is represented by a male figure (as it is in Making of a Fresco and in the ballet in Philadelphia, discussed below), and natural Latin America is depicted with the female form (as it in the ballet and via insertions of Coaticue, also discussed below), then by including a female in an integral position, Rivera is claiming that Latin America is essential to the U.S.’s development.
scaffolding. His position among the other laborers places fine art painters amid the working-class. By doing so, Rivera changed the long-standing system of art as an elitist object for the wealthy class. Rivera made art an object for the working-class, by the working-class; he made art for the public.

An aspect of Rivera’s Pan-Americanism in this mural is the depiction of industrialized North America. In his conception of the new American society, the United States represents masculine power and industrialization. Part of the artist’s theoretical and utopian Pan-America involved a fusion of the technologically-advanced and modern United States with the indigenous traditions and spirit of the South or Latin America. It just so happens that one side of this ideology, the masculine proletarian side, took a visual form that the 1930s United States public supported. Several North American artists, working specifically in New York during the 1930s, created prints focusing on the proletarian struggle for economic justice. Some 1930s-era prints idealize the working-class male. For example, Hugo Gellert’s lithograph *The Working Day* (1933, figure 9) displays two laborers standing back-to-back and expresses heroic proletarianism and hope for a working-class brotherhood that would resist capitalist exploitation. Likewise, Louis Lozowick’s lithograph, *Above the City* (1932, figure 10) depicts a riveter standing on an iron beam of a building under construction. Helen Langa argues that the figure’s pose and scale suggest a call to workers to build a socialist future.28

It seems logical that a mural that depicts the process of making a fresco would be housed in an art institute. However, on a deeper level, the painting expresses the idea that people can

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28 Ibid, 89.
construct their society. Rivera is beginning to deconstruct the foundations of popular ideologies circulating within the United States in the early 1930s. By the early twentieth century, the art scene in North America was essentially an elitist club meant only for members of high society. Rivera, with his extensive anthology of public works, undermined that system. Also, by including a female figure in an integral position, the artist is building on the foundation he started in *Allegory of California*. Rivera is playing on a binary that already existed in the 1930s United States society. However, even at this early state of his United States career, Rivera allows the astute audience member to question these binaries by including a female architect in *Making of a Fresco* and by using brawny features for the female in *Allegory of California*. The artist continually pushed the boundaries of the United States culture as he proletarianized a traditionally high-society product such as fine art painting.

**Diego Rivera and Hemispheric Relations**

Returning to San Francisco in 1939-40, Rivera painted *The Union of the Artistic Expression of the North and South of This Continent: Materialization of the Gifts for the Creative Mechanical Expression of the North, by way of Union with the Plastic Tradition of the South, or Pan-American Unity* (figure 11). The work was commissioned by Pflueger, the same patron who commissioned Rivera to paint the earlier San Francisco murals, for the Golden Gate International Exhibition in 1939.\(^{29}\) Originally, the fair directors borrowed several Old Master paintings from European collections to be on display for the duration of the exposition, but with the outbreak of World War II in 1940, the lending institutions ordered that the masterworks be returned. As a result, Pflueger turned to Rivera, and other contemporary artists, to fill the void.

\(^{29}\) The mural is now housed in the City College at San Francisco.
Rivera accepted the commission readily as he felt uneasy in Mexico City after an attempt had been made on the life of his friend and political ally Leon Trotsky, who had been living in exile in Mexico since 1937.\textsuperscript{30} As part of the stipulations surrounding the agreement between the artist and Pflueger, Rivera was to paint in the open area on Treasure Island to allow visitors to watch the artist at work. Also, his work had to contribute toward the growing trend of hemispheric relations between Mexico and the United States.\textsuperscript{31} According to Stanton Caitlin, the theme requirement was not an issue for the artist who had tempered his earlier iconography of the idealized proletariat, opting for themes of harmony between two neighbors – a theme that had been present in Rivera’s work for over half a decade by this point.

In this later San Francisco fresco, Rivera formally realizes his utopia of Pan-American solidarity. The mural consists of five portable frescoes mounted on steel frames. One side of the mural is dedicated to the mechanical North America, busy with various educational and technological pursuits, while the other half of the painting features the spiritual and sensual Latin America. The two hemispheres intermingle as they near the center of the fresco. A half-bone, half-machine Coatlicue, an Aztec goddess, sits as a spectacular centerpiece, signifying a figurative marriage between the two Americas. As a whole, this mural pays homage to a fusion of the United States’ industrialism and Latin America’s spirit. It calls for the union among the Americas.

The first panel on the far left, “\textit{El genio creativo del sur creciendo del fervor religioso y un talento nativo hacia la expresión plástica}” (“The Creative Genius of the South Growing from


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 309.
Religious Fervor and a Native Talent for Artistic Expression”), depicts an image of Pre-
Columbian Mexico. Indigenous craftsmen create a stele with the patternized image of an Aztec 
ruler. Behind the stele, more artisans craft the effigy of a jaguar. One nude sculptor uses a bow 
drill to create the deep crevasses of the monster’s fangs. Farther back, additional artists make 
ceramic pots and god figurines. Behind the ceramicists, dancers and musicians perform. In the 
distant background, Aztec temples and mountains rise high above the horizon. Around the 
figures are colorful quetzal feathers that lead the eye into the next panel, where the feathers meld 
into a sculpture of a snake’s head, thus creating the image of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent –
another important god in Aztec mythology.

This second panel is titled “Elementos del pasado y del presente” (“Elements from Past 
and Present”). Quetzalcoatl, as a feared god of the Aztec cultures, represents an element of the 
past. Former United States presidents, such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, also 
appear in this panel. The Venezuelan military and political leader Simon Bolivar is depicted next 
to Father Hidalgo. Both figures led Latin American countries to their independence. Rivera also 
included his own portrait. His back is turned to the viewer as he is busy painting the patriots of 
the Americas. Alongside the artist are other modern folk artists from Mexico such as weavers 
and potters. In front of the historical figures are native Mexican villagers who are crafting goods 
in folk traditions. The background of this painting consists of San Francisco landmarks and 
skyscrapers, such as the Sutter Building, the Pacific Telephone Building, and the Oakland Bay 
Bridge. Meanwhile, the famous American swimmer, Helen Crienkovich flies through the air as 
she performs an award-winning dive.

The central panel which depicts the image of Coatlicue is called “La plastificación del 
poder creativo del mecanismo del norte por medio de la unión con la tradición plástica del sur”
(“The Plastification of the Creative Power of the Northern Mechanism by Union with the Plastic Tradition of the South”). By title alone, it is clear that this mural advocated for improved hemispheric relations between the United States and Latin America. The Coatlicue goddess depicted in this San Francisco mural is a literal fusion of Rivera’s interpretation of the North and South America. She is half bone, half machine. She raises a hand to ward off tyranny. In front of the deity is a head which is meant to represent life and death. It peeks out from behind a rock formation with a ram, the City College of San Francisco mascot. As in many of his murals, Rivera included portraits of people from his personal life in the foreground of the central panel. These figures include his wife and fellow Trotskyist painter Frida Kahlo, her younger sister, and his patron Timothy Pflueger. A self portrait of the artist also appears in this panel. He is holding the hands of actress Paulette Goddard, and the tree of life and love sprouts from their physical contact.

The fourth panel, “Tendencia de esfuerzo creativo en los Estados Unidos y el ascenso de la mujer en varios campos de esfuerzos creativos por medio de su uso de la maquinaria artificial” (“Trends of Creative Effort in the United States and the Rise of Woman in Various Fields of Creative Endeavor through Her Use of the Power of Manmade Machinery”), depicts women in positions of power such as an architect, star athlete, or primary assistant to the artist. The scene takes place in the San Francisco Bay area, for Alcatraz Island and Treasure Island – the site of the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition – appear in the background.

32 Ibid, 311.
33 Ibid, 311.
34 Ibid, 311.
The fifth and final panel focuses on United States’ history and acts as a parallel to the first panel. “La cultura creativa del norte desarrollándose de la necesidad de hacer la vida posible en una tierra nueva y vacía” (“The Creative Culture of the North Developing from the Necessity of Making Life Possible in a New and Empty Land”) emphasizes the pioneering aspects of the United States. Set in front of Mount Lassen, wagon trains caravan to the west where oil derricks pump the rich land for black gold. Great American inventors and painters populate the image, such as Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Albert Ryder, Samuel Morse, and Robert Fulton. Other artisans include a woman embroidering, a man painting sailboats, and a man carving a Native American statue. These craftsmen represent the folk tradition in the United States.

Rivera’s Pan-American iconography is best developed in this series of moveable frescoes in which aspects of Latin and North America intermix in harmony. It should not go without noting that this mural was commissioned a year after the United States, as part of the Good Neighbor policy, negotiated compensation to Mexico after the Latin country nationalized its oil reserves. The Good Neighbor policy was part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inaugural speech in 1933 wherein President Roosevelt declared that the United States would “respect” the rights of its neighbors.35 This newly instated policy not only demonstrates a shift from one-sided, U.S. dominated deals from the past, but it also surely had an effect on the relations between Mexico and the United States, an effect that manifested itself into the iconography of Rivera’s mural in San Francisco.

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35 Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1933), Washington DC.
After the fiasco in New York at the Rockefeller RCA Building (discussed in chapter three), Rivera abandoned iconography instilled with an explicitly socialist and proletarian themes. Instead, he opted for murals dedicated to pre-Colonial Mexico, the colonial history of the United States, and the popular Pan-American subject. Furthermore, he omitted his opinion about the effects of colonization of the Americas. In interpretations of various murals, especially an earlier fresco in San Francisco, Rivera stated his outlook on the devastating impact of Anglo settlers into the Native American lands. However, he makes little to no reference to his stance of colonization in Portrait of America or Pan-American Unity. It would appear as if the United States tamed the beast, for even his medium changed slightly in the later years. Rivera is no longer painting directly on the walls of buildings, but often opts for moveable frescoes – a development that happens in New York for a MoMA retrospective.

By this point in Rivera’s career, he had delineated his Pan-American binary as industrial/male/North America and natural/female/Latin America. Part of his “Greater American” theory, the industrial United States would need to assimilate into Latin American culture. Therefore, by placing a giant Aztec goddess figure in the center of the composition, Rivera is reiterating through his iconography, that the Pre-Columbian aspects of culture that still exist in the Americas must serve as the central focus. So, although it looks as if this image depicts harmony, it also subtly suggests that a harmonious future is only possible through the idealization of the indigenous cultures of the Americas.

36 Rivera, Portrait of America, 15.

37 Rivera, Arte y política, 249-63.
Chapter Two

New Cities, New Mediums

Rivera’s murals in true fresco were his primary focus as an artist. As a public art form, the frescoes presented an opportunity to reach a broader audience and to subvert the traditionally elitist, high-society nature of modern art. In the early 1930s, Rivera was asked to paint a few murals in San Francisco. He was excited by the opportunity because the artist saw the United States as the epitome of the industrial world – the ideal setting for his public murals and to reach the proletariat audience. However, the artist did not immediately receive additional mural commissions after his work in California, and he briefly returned to Mexico.

Back in Mexico, Rivera was contacted by the tireless promoter of Mexican culture, Frances Flynn Paine, and Museum of Modern Art Director, Alfred J. Barr Jr., who the artist had met in Russia a few years earlier. Through Barr and Paine, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) commissioned the artist to paint a series of portable murals. The portable fresco project helped disseminate Rivera’s techniques of true fresco to young North American artists.

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1 Rivera, Portrait of America, 14.

2 Barr and Abbot traveled to Russia in the year 1928. They both kept a travel journal and from entries from their diaries it is clear that they not only met with Rivera in Russia, but also bought some of the artist’s works. See Sabine Mabardi, “The Politics of the Primitive and the Modern: Diego Rivera at MoMA in 1931,” Curare: boletín trimestral de Curare, Espacio Crítico para las Artes, no. 9 (1996): 9.

3 Rivera’s first portable fresco was commissioned by Elizabeth Morrow as a gift to her husband, the former United States’ ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow. The portable mural is an excerpt of a larger painting The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos (1930) and depicts two females kneeling in front of a staircase that leads the viewer’s eye up to a Spanish ruler. The original fresco is located at the Palacio de Cortés in Cuernavaca and depicts the oppressive colonial powers that shaped Cuernavaca’s distant past. However, Siqueiros criticizes the lost opportunity for Rivera to make a connection between Spanish Colonial powers and the United States Imperialism. This mural serves as an example of when Rivera was too “valiant with the dead and cowardly with the living.” Siqueiros, “Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road”, 19. For more information see Anna Indych-Lopez, “Mural Gambits” and Henry McBride, “The Palette Knife” Creative Art 10, no. 2 (1931): 93-7.
For the purpose of this study, the retrospective demonstrates how the artist altered his political tone for the New York art audience, which strengthened Siqueiros’ case against Rivera as a revolutionary artist. Directly after the MoMA retrospective, Rivera turned to an even more surprising medium. In Philadelphia, Rivera designed the set and costumes for a ballet, *H.P. (Caballo de Vapor)*. These two non-traditional mural projects greatly aided in the maturity of Rivera and his Pan-American iconography.

It was during the MoMA retrospective that Rivera clearly moved away from the highly critical tone on colonialism that he used in Mexico and which appears in his writings about *Allegory of California*. Instead, he began moving towards a new theme of international harmony. Rivera’s shift towards hemispheric relations was a result of complex and interdiscursive cultural events that took place in the United States and Mexico in the early twentieth-century. MoMA’s retrospective on Rivera was informed by a larger trend of corporate patronage for Pan-Americanism, produced by the necessity for Mexico and the U.S. to define themselves as something other than a supplementary “Other” of Europe. This necessity can be understood as a revival of Monroe Doctrine principles.

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4 Rivera’s exhibition was the second one-person show held at MoMA. His retrospective directly followed a Matisse show. Therefore, the exhibition served as a comparison between European and American modern artist. According to Sabine Mabardi, the two modern artists differed in more ways than style and subject matter. Their political and social attitude also differed. For example, an admission fee of one dollar was charged the first three days of Rivera’s exhibition to raise money for the unemployed. Mabardi, “The Politics of the Primitive and the Modern,” 5-7.

5 Ibid, 6.

6 Ibid, 6.

However, I would like to point out the inherent irony in this venture of the western hemisphere to separate itself from a European influence, for Europe had already produced several works of art in the so-called Primitivist vein—an artform that appropriates imagery from indigenous cultures for the use of high European Modernism. Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin are famous for utilizing this style. Gauguin referenced pre-conquest Peruvian vases in some of his ceramic pots and bottles. Therefore, in attempts to separate themselves culturally from Europe, North and South American artists and patrons followed in Europe’s “returning to the native” example and in a sense...
As a reaction against the “anti-American” attitude of Europe, policies such as the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 were developed. This doctrine advocated for the idea of a Pan-America, indicating its long-existing presence in the New World’s history. In a State of the Union Address to Congress, President James Monroe initiated the policy which opposes European colonialism in the Americas. Arguably, the lack of a European influence would allow the American countries more freedom to create their own culture. However, the United States leaders enacted the policy in order to replace European colonialism with their own brand of imperialism. This was the more cynical approach to a Pan-American ideal that existed in the United States. In contrast, groups of Post-Revolutionary Mexicans, including Rivera, cultivated an atmosphere for Pan-American unity where all the American countries worked together to build a society based on their indigenous inheritance, independent from Western European influences.

Conferences dealing with the Pan-American theme were held mostly in Central and South America throughout the nineteenth century.\(^7\) The United States was rarely represented at such meetings. It was not until the early twentieth century when U.S. officials revived their push for a Pan-America. Although the United States’ return to the Pan-American ideal is multidimensional, I argue that a main reason underlying this policy renewal was oil resources. Contemporary events in Mexico threatened the expulsion of U.S. oil industries. Therefore, industrial corporations, such as the Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, needed to restore hemispheric

relations between Mexico and the United States to ensure a future for the U.S oil industry in Mexico.

Following an unconventional precedent set by Dwight Morrow, U.S. Ambassador to Mexico who began his term in 1927, American capitalists used the arts, specifically the murals in Cuernavaca, as a means to build harmony between the two countries. And who better to implement such a scheme than one of Mexico’s prized artists, Rivera? Patrons from the United States, the very same patrons who had a stake in the foreign oil industry, commissioned Rivera on more than one occasion. So, the question remains. Was Rivera being used as a tool for the interests of his corporate patrons or was he truly infiltrating the bourgeois institutions of capitalist America?

**Portable Frescoes and MoMA**

The portable murals were commissioned by MoMA at the end of 1931 for a retrospective on Rivera and as a means to import Mexican muralism to New York.⁸ Art connoisseurs in the United States had become interested in Mexican muralism, since the excitement surrounding the post-colonial murals which played an integral part of the new cultural identity in Mexico after the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920.⁹ However, due to the nature of the mural medium as a large-scale painting that is part of a wall in a larger building, transporting the frescoes to the

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⁸ Anna Indych-Lopez, “Mural Gambits,” 287-88. According to Rivera in Portrait of America, MoMA approached the artist with the idea of portable frescoes. They were not his idea. He seemed skeptical of the idea at first, since murals are typically designed to work in dialog with the surrounding architecture. He was nevertheless excited for the chance to show his work in New York, the cradle of American industry.

⁹ Rivera’s murals at the Secretary of Public Education had gained notoriety in their overly critical tone towards specific United States’ capitalists. Moreover, the murals commissioned by Morrow in Cuernavaca were followed by various government officials and private corporations who had a strong interest or investment in Mexico-United States relations.
United States was not an option. Typically, U.S. exhibitions on Mexican muralism featured photographs or preliminary sketches of murals.\textsuperscript{10} Unfortunately, the mural loses much of its power when it is removed from its physical context and shown as a mere photograph or drawing. Therefore, the portable frescoes were conceived to alleviate these issues and to demonstrate the technique of true fresco painting, a medium that had not been widely used in the United States at that time.\textsuperscript{11} These portable frescoes acted as conduits through which the New York public could come to understand the artist’s work.

The specific exhibition commissioned and curated by MoMA included two types of portable murals by Rivera: those which modified and reproduced some of his earlier murals in Mexico, and those which adopted a more industrialized imagery characterizing the environment of the United States and were entirely new compositions. When the exhibition opened in December of 1931, only the five Mexican-themed reproductions were ready and on display. A second opening in January (1932) included the three additional New York and American industry frescoes. Of these eight paintings, only three were reproduced in the exhibition

\textsuperscript{10} The Metropolitan Museum held an exhibition entitled “Mexican Arts” one year prior to the MoMA retrospective. The Met exhibition was organized by the American Federation of Arts in coordination with Dwight W. Morrow. The exhibition organized arts from Mexico into two categories: applied and fine art. Some of Rivera’s works were included in the exhibition under contemporary fine art painting and drawings. Artwork listed under Rivera’s name in the exhibition catalog include two drawings. Orozco had four drawings in the exhibition. Although very few illustrations were published in the catalog – only one being one of the six drawings included by the most famous Mexican muralists (a water color drawing by Rivera) – it is safe to presume that representing mural works prior to the MoMA exhibition proved problematic. \textit{Mexican Arts: Catalogue of an Exhibition} (United States: The American Federation of Arts, 1930-31), 50-1.

\textsuperscript{11} The first portable fresco was technically commissioned by Dwight Morrow’s wife. She had Rivera reproduce a detail of the Cuernavaca mural for her husband when he returned from Mexico. Close and personal friends with Abby Rockefeller, Mrs. Morrow probably inspired leaders of the MoMA to incorporate the portable fresco idea into a mural exhibition. Anna Indych-Lopez, ”Mural Gambits,” 287.
catalogue, and only one is discussed in brevity, leading to confusion and uncertainty as to which images were a part of the show and what the underlying narrative was meant to be.\textsuperscript{12}

The museum curators downplayed the revolutionary nature of Rivera’s art through strategic exhibition organization and transformation of revolutionary imagery. The exhibition catalogue omits any critical analysis or discussion of the social significance of the frescoes. Instead, the text features only a brief biography of the artist by Paine and a description of the fresco technique by Jere Abbott, Associate Director of MoMA in 1931. Of the five Mexican-themed murals, only three were reproduced in the exhibition catalogue: \textit{Agrarian Leader Zapata} (1931), \textit{Liberation of the Peon} (1931), and \textit{Sugar Cane} (1931). Due to their inclusion in the catalogue, these three frescoes were discussed consistently in reviews of the retrospective and will be the focus of this study. However, all five of the Mexican-themed portable panels were reproductions of existing murals that the artist had previously painted in Mexico.

\textit{Agrarian Leader Zapata} (figure 12), commissioned by Abby Rockefeller for the MoMA exhibition, is a detail from a mural in the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca.\textsuperscript{13} The original fresco, “Exploitation and insurrection, Zapata leading the Agrarian revolt” (figure 13), is the last scene of a larger series which illustrates the history of the state of Morelos. On the left side of the original scene stands peasant rebellion leader Emiliano Zapata, his horse, and a few other generic revolutionaries. Above the agrarian fighters, families flee their homelands with their children and bundles of belongings on their backs. Even farther into the background, positioned above the

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Diego Rivera} (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1931), 64.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 64. The MoMA only commissioned seven portable frescoes, but Rivera tended to paint more than was requested of him. In a letter to Rivera requesting the reproduction of \textit{Agrarian Leader Zapata}, Abby Rockefeller included a picture of the original Sugar Cane painting, suggesting that Abby Rockefeller had more influence on the portable frescoes than can be avoided; Sabine Mabardi, “The Politics of the Primitive and the Modern,” 14.
fleeing locals, three individuals dressed in white hang by rope while another is being flogged, possibly to death, by a shadowy figure. However, in the MoMA portable mural, only Zapata, his horse, and the following rebels are depicted. The other, more gruesome details of atrocities were omitted. Therefore, this mural and the others at MoMA directly took on a wildly different narrative than the original post-Revolutionary murals in Mexico.

*Liberation of the Peon* (figure 14) reproduces a detail from murals at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City.¹⁴ The original fresco was part of a large cycle of scenes which depicted working-class individuals fighting the injustices of their various institutions, such as peons working in fields of *haciendas* that they do not own (figure 15). Clearly, not all of the uprisings were successful, as the peasant in the original scene has been flogged to death. Three other figures have dismounted their horses to tend to the deceased. A fifth man stays atop his steed but grieves the loss. The flame-engulfed *hacienda* in the distance symbolizes the oppressive forces in Mexico’s economic and social system. A sickle and rifle rest at the feet of the peons. The sickle has a strong iconographic connection to communism, and its placement seems to suggest that communism is on the side of the working-class individuals.

In contrast, in the version for the MoMA all four men have dismounted their horses, but no longer seem to mourn or grieve over the death of their fallen ally.¹⁵ The burning *hacienda* in the background has been given less space and is partially blocked by the heads of the horses. The sickle and the rifle have been removed from the image. Their omission is probably due to the communist associations of sickle imagery. The original context of the painting within the Court

¹⁴ *Diego Rivera*, 64.

of Labour in the Ministry of Education worked well with its companion piece which advocated for liberation of the peon through education. However, removed from this context, the message seems to claim that only through death does the peon find liberation.

*Sugar Cane* (figure 16) is another detail derived from a mural in Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca. The original fresco depicts a scene of indigenous men working as peons in a field of sugarcane (figure 17). One hacienda boss rides around on horseback, brutally urging the workers to harvest the cane faster. Farther back, another boss uses sticks and whips to motivate a group of men who haul a wagon like a team of oxen. In the background, the property owner relaxes blissfully on his hammock as he reaps the benefits of other men’s labor. Such was the sad reality of the *hacienda*.

When the original mural was reworked as a portable fresco for the MoMA exhibition, the image was changed from one depicting the cruel exploitation of the peon to one representing a market scene. Instead of the men working as beasts of burden, Rivera has included two females and a young boy who pick fruits from a tree to fill their baskets. The three figures are much larger in scale than the men toiling in the fields behind them, and their position in the foreground demands more of the viewer’s attention. Other slight changes in imagery make the portable fresco appear less intense. Therefore, the Mexican-themed MoMA murals were edited presumably to be more palatable for the art viewers in the United States, since the brutality of oppressive agrarian conditions were downplayed for the New York audience. The exclusion of troubling and revolutionary material must have been intentional for the U.S. public and Rivera’s potential patrons. While it is not impossible for the artist to have changed the murals due to

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16 *Diego Rivera*, 64.
natural maturing throughout his career, it seems more likely that he edited the murals in the way that he did for reasons concerning his audience.

Rivera’s portable frescoes that dealt with an industrialized United States were not overly successful. Henry McBride, an American art critic during the 1930s, reviewed the portable frescoes by Rivera in an article written for *Creative Art*. McBride wrote fondly of the artist as a revolutionary force who gave a voice to fellow Mexicans and who inspired many American artists. However, McBride criticized Rivera’s United States-themed portable frescoes as “unofficial and second-hand.” He goes on to say that Rivera’s knowledge of the United States is the result of too much reading about the place and not enough living in it. His criticism falls in line with those who felt like U.S. art commissions should go to artists from the United States.

The most popular fresco from the United States-themed murals is *Frozen Assets* (1931, figure 18). It depicts a multi-layered cross-section image of New York as Rivera understood and interpreted it. At the top of the panel sits the skyline of 1930s New York, complete with cranes busily constructing yet another building and a subway tunnel rushing commuters to and fro. Below, a huge warehouse is filled with sleeping bodies of unemployed workers, a result of the Great Depression. In the lowest ranks of the panel, a woman sits inside a bank safe to inspect her worldly possessions. In many of Rivera’s writing, especially in his introduction to *Portrait of America*, the artist is clearly hesitant to advocate or boast about ownership of any kind. It is

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18 Ibid, 97. Also see Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 59-63.

19 *Frozen Assets* (illustrated in *Portrait of America*) was a title given to the work by the United States, not by the artist. Rivera, *Portrait of America*, 18.
likely that it was no accident that the bank safe in which the wealthy female inspects her goods resembles a prison cell, making the woman a prisoner to her own material wealth.

Despite its inconsistent ideologies, the portable fresco endeavor strengthened the continental intermingling between the artists of the United States and Mexico. New York artists were able to study the true fresco technique first-hand as the artist painted the eight portable panels on location. The subverted and de-contextualized iconography of the original murals promoted Mexico as a country that was once again safe for travels, for during the Porfiriato years, United States Americans traveled frequently to Mexico; however, throughout the long revolution, the country was considered too dangerous for tourism. These murals were an attempt to promote Mexico as a safe travel destination once again. Arguably, the retrospective was also an attempt by the Abby Rockefeller, who co-founded MoMA, to strengthen hemispheric relations between the U.S. and Mexico to insure a future for Standard Oil, another Rockefeller business.

**Horsepower and Philadelphia**

After Rivera completed the moveable frescoes for MoMA, he picked up in earnest a project he had been working on since 1927, predating his first visit to the United States. The Philadelphia ballet *H.P. (Caballo de Vapor)*, composed by Carlos Chávez and designed by Rivera, draws on the Pan-America concept. The ballet’s musical numbers were conducted by Leopold Stokowski and choreographed by Catherine Littlefield. It was performed only once for

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an audience on March 31, 1932.\textsuperscript{21} The ballet offered the chance to communicate multiple Latin American perspectives on Pan-American unity to the United States audience.

Rivera designed the set and costumes and collaborated with Chávez on the ballet program. The proscenium featured a visual pun: a horse on the left and a battery on the right plays on the idea of horsepower. The proscenium also anticipates the subject matter of the ballet, which – in part – dealt with themes of the industrialization of the United States, especially the automotive industry since the title and main character are called Horsepower. Through the performance program, the audience of the ballet learns that the hemispheric division of labor was intended to promote continental cooperation as the mechanical male and sensuous female characters synchronize and consummate the continents’ gendered industries.\textsuperscript{22}

This ballet casts North America as an aggressive, mechanical male character named Horsepower, or H.P. for short. Latin America is depicted as sensuous and fertile females. There are strong parallels between the stereotypes used in this ballet and Rivera’s early San Francisco frescoes, suggesting that the ballet set the precedent for Rivera’s treatment of North and Latin American allegories. For example, \textit{Making of a Fresco} uses a downtown skyline congested with skyscrapers and an airplane, machinery and mechanical activity in juxtaposition to a large male figure to reference the “normative” trope of man. The ballet uses similar devices to identify the United States with industrial modernity and masculine energy. The main character, H.P., is a

\textsuperscript{21} A special train was arranged to transport audience members from New York City to Philadelphia. Many governmental officials were in attendance at the performance as well. However, the program notes and newspaper articles make no mention if the ballet was financially supported by the United States government. For more information see Belnap “Diego Rivera’s Pan-American Patronage,” and Nancy Schmitz, “A profile of Catherine Littlefield: a pioneer of American ballet” (doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1986), 45.

\textsuperscript{22} Belnap, “Diego Rivera’s Pan-American Patronage,” 68.
posthuman male figure who represents the force of the machine in the Age of Industry. His opening dance consists of ways in which he can subdue his surroundings and express his energy.\textsuperscript{23} His costume consisted of a pair of boxer shorts and industrialized limbs and, like many design aspects of the ballet, was developed by Rivera (figure 19).

\textit{H.P. (Caballo de Vapor)} uses the production of raw materials, especially an abundance of fruit, to connect Latin America with feminine sensuality. In the two scenes following H.P.’s Dance of Man, the audience is transported via a cargo ship to a sensual and tropical sea port. Here, the stage is enlivened with dancing fruits and trees as the sailors load the raw goods onto the ship. The dance become increasingly languid as the ship approaches the South, further associating seductive qualities with the warmer climates and perpetuating “otherness” in a manner similar to orientalist texts in European literature and culture.\textsuperscript{24}

The final scene takes place in the industrialized United States among the skyscrapers and factories. The dance becomes mechanical and synchronized once again. According to Schmitz, there were two programs, each offering its own interpretation of the ending wherein the workers open a safe for the natural resources of the earth. The first, presumably written by Chávez in collaboration with Rivera, describes this scene as a workers’ revolt against capitalism.\textsuperscript{25} However, Philip L. Leidy, the secretary of the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, supplied a secondary interpretation for the ending which was included in the official souvenir ballet

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\textsuperscript{23} Schmitz, “A profile of Catherine Littlefield,” 49.
\textsuperscript{25} Schmitz, “A profile of Catherine Littlefield,” 49.
\end{flushleft}
program. In attempts to downplay the socialistic or communistic statement that the first interpretation suggests, Leidy interprets the ending as a hemispheric integration wherein the two continents blend together in interdependent harmony.

Leidy’s description of the ending contradicts Chávez and Rivera’s attack on capitalism and provides a more readily-accepted finale for the Philadelphia audience, or at least for skeptics of a worker’s revolution. However, the differing interpretations highlight the opposing viewpoints that the North and Latin Americas had when it came to Pan-American unity. Latin American thinkers envisioned a harmonious, anti-capitalist future for the Americas; whereas, capitalists in the North wanted to use Pan-American ideals to replace European colonialism with American imperialism. The United States wanted to exploit the natural resources of Latin America, such as oil, for their own capital gain.

The ballet was highly modern, was unconventional, and received much negative criticism, but it expresses Rivera’s iconographic analogy between gendered roles and the American hemispheres. The MoMA murals prove that Rivera tempered his work to better suit his capitalist patrons, but the exhibition still allowed for his style and technique to spread to a new coast in the United States. Both endeavors strengthened the development of the artist’s Pan-American iconography, and despite the overall failure of the ballet, Rivera was commissioned by Henry Ford to paint a mural series in the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA). Rivera returned to the

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26 Schmitz notes the first interpretation of the ending as (Philadelphia Grand Opera, March 31, 1932) and the second ending by Leidy as (Philadelphia Grand Opera, March 31, 1932b). This is the only instance in the chapter when Schmitz includes a “b” in the reference to the Philadelphia Grand Opera Records.

27 This reading closely resembles the description provided by Belnap, “Diego Rivera’s Pan-American Patronage.”
true fresco medium and painted the Garden Court walls of the DIA with renderings of industrialized factory interiors.
Chapter Three

Rivera’s Radical Legacy

The modern industrial world demanded oil. “Black Gold” quickly replaced coal as the most efficient energy source for industry. Greedy for more than its fair share, it was not long before the United States tapped into Mexico’s subsoil resource. During the Porfiriato, President Díaz not only allowed the United States to extract oil from Mexico, but he also offered incentives and tax breaks to encourage this symbiotic relationship.\(^1\) By the 1920s, Standard Oil of New Jersey was one of the leading companies present in Mexico. However, all this changed in the 1930s with the enforcement of Article 27 by President Lázaro Cárdenas and the enactment of the Agrarian Code in 1934.

Nearing the end of the Mexican Revolution, the new President of Mexico, Venustiano Carranza, passed Article 27 in 1917. According to the decree, most of the transactions that allowed the purchase of public land by private and foreign investors under Miguel Lerdo de Tejada’s Ley Lerdo (1856) were declared void. However, it was not until the inauguration of President Cárdenas in 1934 that real strides were taken in returning the land to the indigenous community. Cárdenas is recognized as a leading force in the redistribution of previously private lands. He re-introduced the *ejido* structure of land tenure, which resembled the Aztec *capullalli* system – a system more based on communal land ownership than private property. The *ejido* is publicly owned land that a farmer may use as his personal farm as long as it is used to produce

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crops at least every two years. Furthermore, Cárdenas enacted the Agrarian Code of 1934 which provided complete protection from foreign ownership of ejidal lands. Finally, in 1937, President Cárdenas pushed to nationalize the oil industry in Mexico, meaning that the U.S. corporations, such as the Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, would lose approximately 4,000,000 acres of land.

The United States wanted to protect its investments in Mexico for, if nothing else, the fear that other Latin American countries might follow Mexico’s suit and expropriate U.S. corporate assets. At the threat of losing power and capital footholds in Latin America, the United States attempted to establish a strong sense of hemispheric unity. Luckily, the foundations for Pan-America were already in place. The Monroe Doctrine of the nineteenth century which opposed European colonialism in the Americas and called for a greater unity among the newly independent countries, albeit under U.S. hegemony, was revitalized in modern U.S. business politics. By renewing its focus on hemispheric cooperation, the United States created additional policies, such as the President Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Era, which began in 1933 and advocated that the U.S would engage in reciprocal exchanges with Latin American countries. The United States used the idea of a Pan-America for its personal, political agenda. It became common practice during this period to use art patronage as a means for U.S. capitalists to accomplish their goal of economic gain behind the veil of hemispheric cooperation. Therefore, Rivera’s United States murals are arguably the result of methods used by United States corporations to ensure capital pursuits in Latin America.

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2 Kelly, “Article 27 and Mexican Land Reform,” 553.

3 Kelly, “Article 27 and Mexican Land Reform,” 549; and Meyer, Mexico and the United States, 149-172.
Detroit Industry as Rivera’s Pan-American Ideal

Personal relations were key to Rivera’s endeavors in the United States. This fact is especially true in Detroit. Through an unlikely friendship, Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural for the Ford family at the Detroit Institute of Art. Henry Ford was a notorious capitalist, and as such he was outspokenly pro-business, anti-communist, and anti-union. Rivera not only openly mocked Ford in the earlier SEP fresco in Mexico City, but he also occupied the opposite side of the spectrum in each case: Rivera barely turned a profit with his mural work; he was a communist; and he believed in the necessity of unions. The artist even gave Ernst Halberstadt, a hired assistant who helped with the Detroit mural, a raise while painting the Detroit fresco after Halberstadt threatened to go on strike. In contrast, it is unlikely that Ford would have crumbled so easily to a single disgruntled employee who merely threatened to go on strike.

Exploring the relationship between Rivera and Ford sheds light on the complexities of Ford’s capitalism/Rivera’s communism and reveals flaws in a binary-based identity structure. In Seeing Differently, Amelia Jones breaks down the ideology of identity. According to her argument, ideological formations that were introduced during European colonialism as a way of understanding new cultures, especially in the New World, became the framework that developed

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4 Rivera, My Art, My Life, 182-189. The artist discusses his first few days in Detroit and his experience meeting Ford.


6 Rosenthal, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2015), 62. Also, a fact that Siqueiros overlooked in his criticism towards Rivera in his article in New Masses. Siqueiros declares that Rivera had “never had trade-union experience. [Rivera] never took part in the daily struggles of the working class.” Siqueiros, “Diego Rivera’s Counter-Revolutionary Road,” 18.

a systematic means of knowledge production. Under this structure, identity came to be understood as a collection of binaries: us/them, black/white, male/female, communist/capitalist, etc. This idea can be traced further back in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which traces the us/them division back to the Greek/Persian conflict of what art historians call the Orientalizing Period.8

Alex Goodall uses a similar argument in “The Battle of Detroit and Anti-Communism in the Depression Era.” In his article, Goodall states that the relationship between Ford and Rivera reveals the complexities in Ford’s anti-communism which fails to fit the normative binary structure of identity.9 This argument can be extended to include the complexities of Rivera’s politics. For example, Rivera was a communist, which would set him politically against capitalists such as Ford. However, Rivera did not adhere to the philosophies of Stalin like many of the other communist artists, such as Siqueiros. Instead, the artist preferred the teachings of Trotsky and Lenin, which were considered radical even by communist terms.10 This nuance is another example of how complex identity can be. Considering that Rivera’s mission was to restructure society with his artwork, he would have to start at the level where ideas are produced. He had to make people question “naturalized” concepts. By accepting the commission from one of the richest families in the United States and building a friendship with a capitalist, the communist artist’s lifestyle, in and of itself, undermined typical binary-directed relations. Moreover, by working for the bourgeoisie, Rivera was staying true to his Leninist/Trotskyist philosophy by infiltrating evil institutions and fighting behind enemy lines.

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8 Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

9 Alex Goodall, “The Battle of Detroit,” 460.

Rivera spent several months observing and sketching the mechanical manufacturing processes of several different factories, including Ford’s River Rouge, before painting the fresco cycle at DIA. During this period of research, Rivera remarked on the visual connections of the cyclical process of industrialization to pre-Columbian ruins and deities. After fighting for more wall space to fully realize and render his idealized industry, Rivera covered all four walls of the Garden Court with twenty-seven panels of murals. However, for the sake of brevity, this chapter limits itself to a detailed exploration of only four panels, located on the north and south walls. Other panels are mentioned in passing, and Rivera’s own commentary will be used to interpret the complex iconography of the mural.

Inspired primarily by Ford’s River Rouge Plant, the idea of hemispheric cooperation from the ballet, and the current social climate of 1930s Detroit, Rivera began painting his opus magnum in the United States. In keeping with a vision of machinery’s potential and the future of the proletariat (as he used in his earlier San Francisco murals, especially Making of a Fresco) Rivera utilized the wall space at Detroit to further expand his utopian views about the Machine Age. The murals in Michigan focus on the machinery and the workers who control the equipment. Very little attention is dedicated to the finished product of the factory. In fact, only one car is seen in its finished form, and it occupies but four inches of the surface area.

11 Rivera, My Art, My Life, 182.

12 Wolfe includes an excerpt from Rivera’s writings about mechanical development of the U.S. “There we are on our own earth, for whether the architects know it or not, they were inspired in that design by the same feeling which prompted the ancient people of Yucatan in the building of their temples.” Wolfe, The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera, 277-278.

13 Rivera, My Art, My Life, 183.

14 Rosenthal, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit, 66.
Nonetheless, that tiny car racing off in the distance is, as Rosenthal stated in *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit*, the “result of the colossal effort of man and machinery.”\(^{15}\)

Upon entering the Garden Court at the Detroit Institute of the Arts, the viewer is greeted by the image of a child, or “germ cell” to use Rivera’s words, who is enveloped in a plant bulb.\(^{16}\) Steel plough-shares are placed on either side of the child and represent “man’s first industrial activity.”\(^{17}\) Two female figures flank the germ-cell panel. Each female holds the products, cereals and fruits, of man’s agricultural endeavors. Although Rivera does not explicitly state so in his interpretation, it is likely that the artist is drawing a connection between women’s ability to reproduce and the fertile nature of earth, an allegorical theme that Rivera was hardly the first artist to utilize.

On the entry wall, directly across from the germ-cell panel, Rivera has depicted the use of water as a major mode of transportation in Detroit. Rivera recognized the ability to use the river and lake systems to facilitate commerce as a reason for the development of the metropolitan area of Detroit. This panel highlights the U.S. capitalist’s perspective on Pan-American unity by illustrating trade between “the industrial city and far distant lands which produce the raw materials and consume the finished products.”\(^{18}\)

Also present on this wall, Rivera makes note of two types of birds that feed on lesser and weaker animals. In one case, it is a dove that pursues an insect, and in the other case, a hawk

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 67.

\(^{16}\) Diego Rivera, “Dynamic Detroit, an interpretation” *Creative Art* 12 (1933), 289-295.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 291.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 291.
preys on smaller birds. The artist uses language such as “seeking its sustenance from a lower species,” and “maintaining itself by the destruction of a weaker member of its own species” to describe the role of the birds.\textsuperscript{19} The iconography appears innocent enough, but when it is read with the artist’s own words, a secondary understanding begins to surface. It is possible that Rivera meant for the birds to represent United States capitalists who wished to use Latin Americans and their fertile lands for the industrial and imperial expansion of the United States’ economy.

The upper-most panels on the north and south walls resemble each other in their composition (figures 20 and 21). Both frescoes feature two giant female figures lying on their sides, feet towards the center of the panel, and propping themselves up on their elbow. They each preside over a particular raw material, such as sand, coal, iron, and limestone.\textsuperscript{20} Rivera chose these materials because the Detroit earth is composed primarily of these substances. Therefore, they work as an allegory for the physical location and resources of Detroit. Despite the figures’ similarities in pose, position, and size, they each differ in skin tone and facial features, possibly reflecting the racial or ethnic populations present on the floors of Fords factories. On the south wall the models appear white and yellow, while the north wall figures are depicted in brown and black skin tones. The raw material below each figure loosely corresponds to the color of the respective figure’s skin tone: the white figure rests on limestone; the yellow female reclines on sand; the black nude lounges on coal; and the brown body surmounts iron.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 291.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 291.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 291.
Between each pair of personifications rise a series of plateaus, creating a mountainous landform of tungsten, nickel, molybdenum, and other materials needed to make steel. From this mound, huge, disembodied human hands reach up from below, gripping stones from this otherworldly realm. According to Rivera’s interpretation, these hands are the depiction of the working class. The size and grip of the hands are meant to represent the strength of the proletariat.\textsuperscript{22} It is almost as if the hands come from the panels below to tap into the abundant source of earthly elements and to transfer the materials to the lower realm to be manufactured by the proletariat into consumer goods, such as steel cars.

Like many of Rivera’s females, the allegorical figures presiding over the raw materials are not overtly feminine in their rendering. Indeed, it is as if Rivera is again challenging the binary of gender formations with these androgynous female figures. They each have broad shoulders and thick limbs while their breasts are small. Their hair is slicked back and unstyled, and their faces are unadorned and without make-up. Their facial features are not delicate or typical for a depiction of a female in the 1930s as seen in pop culture, especially when compared to Hollywood stars. The jawlines of the allegories are too pronounced; the noses are too large; the brows are furrowed; lips left unsmiling. The figures cannot even be recognized as female by their dress, as they are nude. The American audience did not fail to comment on the artist’s choice.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 291.
\item \textsuperscript{23} See Goodall, “The Battle of Detroit,” 466-468 for primary sources concerning the reception of the DIA murals in the 1930s. The artist himself remarked on the appearance of the female figures, calling them “hardly ’pretty’” in his autobiography. \textit{Rivera, My Art, My Life}, 191.
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At the bottom of the north and south walls are the two largest fresco panels of the entire cycle. These feature the bustling movements of an industrial factory. The viewer’s eye is led through the congested composition with the aid of the serpentine conveyor belts which intertwine throughout the image, encouraging the discovery of all the intricate details of industry. With the help of intensive study at the Ford plant over the course of several months, Rivera was able to recreate the factory scene so well that chief engineers commended the artist on his accuracy. The composition of the two murals is nearly too dense for even the most descriptive words to penetrate the surface. In his own interpretation, the painter describes the different stages of production he included in the images.

However, in a few noteworthy examples, Rivera has deviated from documentative realism and undermined the accepted politics of the American factory, such as segregation. First, a look at the north fresco will demonstrate how Rivera attempted to deconstruct the social structures in existence within the United States. Then, an iconographical explanation of the south wall supports Rivera’s desire to break borders between the North and Southern countries of the Americas to create something culturally unique to the New World.

Rivera dedicates most of the north wall’s space to the machine. Human workers occupy but little of the composition, sprinkled in among the massive machinery. However, at the foreground of the panel stand two rows of men working on either side of a conveyor belt, each contributing a different component to the assembling of an engine block. The men are dressed in work clothes, most clad in blue overalls and long-sleeve shirts. Closer inspection of the men

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reveals that, although they are dressed in the standard uniform of a working man, the men differ from one another in a fundamental way. Like the deities above them, the men do not share the same skin tone; they differ in their race. Due to the racial tensions in Detroit at the time, factory floors were in reality segregated. Minorities worked in specific areas of the foundries, factories, and plants, separate from white workers. Therefore, Rivera’s decision to depict different races working alongside one another was a deliberate statement meant to bring attention to the ugly and impractical barriers Americans were building for themselves.

The south wall also displays men of various skin tones working next to one another. However, this fresco surrenders even more space of the composition to the machine. Above the conveyor belts, pulleys, pistons, and other metal contraptions, towers a large machine. The purpose of this device is to stamp metal into different shapes for car body parts. Rivera slightly

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26 Detroit was facing massive waves of immigration from several different countries in the early twentieth century. More than 25% of Detroit’s population in the 1930s was registered as foreign-born. The “nativist” fear that non-Anglo-American cultures would destroy the Western European foundation of the United States led to the increasing popularity of racist groups across the nation, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Black Legion. In 1924, the National Origins Act established proportional immigration allowances specifically to minimize the percentage of Asian and Eastern European immigrants and to encourage Western European migration. However, Mexican migration was not regulated by this mandate. With rising numbers of Mexican migrants in the United States came rising hostility towards the race from white workers who resented the growing competition for jobs. This fear of the foreigner transmitted itself into the organization and racial or ethnic segregation of the factory floor. Minorities worked in specific areas of the foundries, factories, and plants. Nevertheless, Detroit proved a popular destination for immigrants because of the region’s growing industrial opportunities such as Ford’s factories – including his automobile factory, which required high amounts of oil, Goodall, “Dynamic Detroit,” 474-476.

27 Racial segregation was not the only challenge Detroit’s industries were facing. The Great Depression had resulted in high unemployment rates. Prior to Rivera’s arrival to the city in 1932, Henry Ford had laid off thousands of employees at River Rouge. Rosenthal argues that a small detail on the lower right section of the south wall refers to the Hunger March. This grisaille image depicts marchers crossing the Miller Road overpass in Dearborn. Beyond their lack of food, the working class was also suffering from a lack of alcohol. Prohibition laws were still in effect in the early 1930s. Wealthy individuals could still afford liquid spirits and drank freely in speakeasies. However, the working class had no such luxury. On the lower left-center section of the south wall, a worker wears hat with the visible words “We want.” Goodall suggests that these words reference a popular protest in Detroit. The full slogan would have read “We want beer.” The fact that Rivera was able to visually render these key issues of the condition of 1930s American society undermines McBride’s assertion that Rivera’s understanding of the United States was superficial at best.
altered the appearance of actual stamping presses from the 1930s to make the machine appear anthropomorphized. The circular head – complete with two dark eye sockets, ears, and mouth line – rests atop a neck and body. Giant wheels on either side of the mechanical torso appear as giant shoulders with pistons-as-arms extending from them. This humanlike machine is often described as the representation of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue.28 One of many gods within the Aztec pantheon, Coatlicue was worshipped as the mother-earth goddess who governed over warfare, childbirth, and agriculture. How fitting is it that Rivera would choose to depict one of the most important pieces of equipment in a car factory as a metallic mother-earth goddess!

This insertion of an Aztec goddess is a way for Rivera to visually articulate his Pan-American ideal by incorporating imagery that is distinctly non-European, pre-colonial, and indigenous. Moreover, it also subverts the modern American trend of the male worker as the industrialized “hero.” Through this image, Rivera built on his idea of a Pan-America wherein the Latin American countries work with the industrialized United States to produce not only commercial products but a new and revolutionary culture and society that is distinctive to a continent with its rich indigenous inheritance. The Mesoamerican iconography is a slight but significant shift from his earlier frescoes in California, in that it includes an aspect of indigenous iconography in addition to idealization of the proletariat. Perhaps the artist felt inspired by the social atmosphere of 1930s Detroit to incorporate such imagery. The Coatlicue stamping press in Detroit Industry builds on the idea that North America needs Latin American culture to fully realize the Pan-American ideal.

28 For a list of scholars who have described the connection between the stamping machine and the Aztec goddess, see Speer, “Detroit Industry,” 67. It could be argued that this insertion of Coatlicue in the form of a stamping machine serves as a precedent to the San Francisco mural on Treasure Island in 1940.
After completing the mural cycle in Detroit, Rivera went to New York to work on what would become the most controversial commission of his career in the Rockefeller Plaza. Henry Ford was not the only unlikely figure from the United States business world to offer a commission to the communist painter. The Rockefeller family hired Rivera to paint a mural in the lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza (RCA Building) in 1933. The never-finished mural was inspired by the theme “Man at the crossroads, looking with uncertainty but with hope to a better world.” Due to a disagreement between the Rockefeller family and Rivera, the mural was destroyed in 1934. However, the composition survives in a photograph, taken by Lucienne Bloch in May of 1933, and in a re-created mural in Mexico City painted by Rivera himself. Preliminary sketches also survive but differ greatly from the final mural conception (figure 22).

The Rockefellers did not expect the artist to brazenly insert his radical politics with the image of Lenin, for the portrait was not included in preliminary sketches or written proposals by the artist. But when the face of Lenin appeared on the walls of the RCA building, the Rockefellers were quick to address the issue. Nelson Rockefeller, son of Abby and John Rockefeller, wrote a request to Rivera asking that the artist remove the portrait, but Rivera refused to comply perhaps to prove his radical credentials to his critics on the left. The artist had received many prestigious commissions from U.S. patrons since 1927, especially patrons

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32 Ibid, 325.
whom he had mocked earlier in his Mexican murals. As we have seen, Siqueiros and other Stalinists attacked Rivera as a sell-out or capitalist pet. Perhaps Rivera felt as if he needed to reassert his communist identity and, therefore, refused to remove the portrait.

Due to the artist’s refusal to remove a portrait of Lenin, Nelson Rockefeller fired Rivera from the job and ordered the mural to be destroyed. Lenin was not a popular figure to the American audience, especially not to Republican businessmen like the Rockefellers, and it seemed justified when the Rockefellers argued that the inclusion of Lenin would make the majority of Americans uncomfortable.33 However, this act of destroying the mural stands as an example of censorship in the discourse of the relationship between art and politics.34 The events surrounding the commission and destruction of the mural at RCA reveal the level of censorship that the power structures will go through to conceal their motives. In hindsight, it is generally conceded that the controversy of destroying the mural has led to continued dialogue about censorship and the role of art within politics.35

One might wonder why capitalists, like the Rockefellers, would request a mural from a known communist such as Rivera. It is very possible that the Rockefellers were following a precedent set by Dwight Morrow in 1927. Morrow used the unconventional approach of art patronage to improve Mexico-United States relations when he worked as U.S. ambassador to Mexico. The future of the Mexican oil industry was uncertain for the United States in the 1930s, and capitalists such as Morrow, Ford, and the Rockefellers were exploring political uses of art

33 Ibid, 325.


patronage to improve hemispheric relations. Standard Oil was a Rockefeller company after all, so the Rockefellers had much to lose if relations with Mexico continued to deteriorate. Therefore, Rivera was given the job, at least partly, as an attempt by American capitalists to improve the relationship between the two countries to ensure a future for U.S. landholdings in Mexico.

True to Rivera’s mature style, the RCA mural has a dense and complicated composition. The center of the Rockefeller mural features a large male wearing gloves and overalls. His hands control levers and gears of the machinery in the picture plane in a similar manner as the giant figure in *Making of a Fresco*. According to a quote by Rivera, the man expresses a trinity: the peasant, the worker, and the soldier.\(^{36}\) The man looks toward the future with hope for balance between “the Technical and Ethical Development of Mankind necessary to a New, more Humane and Logical Order.”\(^ {37}\) He is placed in front of two ellipses, one cosmic and one biological. These ellipses serve as a vision of nature in its entirety, from astronomical proportions down to a single cell, being transformed by technology. In front of the man is a giant hand grasping a glowing sphere filled with renderings of cell division. This anomaly is meant to represent the interrelationship between mankind and the machine.\(^ {38}\) The man at the crossroads is flanked by scenes of people participating in various activities. The right side of the mural depicts the idealistic social order of the left. In contrast, the left side of the mural displays images of war, violence, and capitalistic greed of the right.

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\(^{36}\) Bertram Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Time*.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Robert Linsley, “Utopia Will Not Be Televised”, 60.
The Rockefellers paid the artist in full, even though Rivera had not finished the mural and it was promptly destroyed. Rivera donated his time, talent, and the money he earned from the Rockefeller commission to the New Workers School in New York.\textsuperscript{39} The artist returned to Mexico in the mid-1930s and recreated the RCA work on the walls of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Nevertheless, the two projects in Detroit and New York proved that Siqueiros was correct, in part, to point out that Rivera was commissioned by the bourgeois corporate capitalists. However, as we have seen, even though Rivera worked for some of the wealthiest families in North America, he found a way to insert his own perspective of Pan-American iconography into the murals.

\textsuperscript{39} Rivera, \textit{Portrait of America}, 31. Using the moveable fresco technique, Rivera painted the \textit{Portrait of America} series for the school. These twenty-one panels summarize the history of the United States from Colonial America to World War I. Rivera decided to use the movable fresco format so that the school could move the paintings to a new location if needed. See Rivera and Wolfe, \textit{Portrait of America}, for illustrations of this mural series.
Conclusion

Reconsidering, Redefining, and Reconstructing Rivera

In the opening of this study, I called into question the revolutionary nature of Diego Rivera, which was challenged during his lifetime by some of his fellow Mexican muralists at the time, especially Siqueiros. There is no doubt that Rivera was involved in the radical politics of socialism and communism, specifically the “more radical” Trotskyist communism compared to Stalinists, like his contemporary Siqueiros. However, he was first and foremost an artist. So, was Rivera a revolutionary artist, or an artist who dabbled in revolutionary politics?

Many of Rivera’s murals advocate for social reform. For example, by depicting workers of different races working alongside each other on the factory floor in Detroit, the artist brought attention to social injustices in the industrial workplace. Rivera continually portrayed North America as an industrialized male proletariat figure who dominates his immediate surroundings. Likewise, the artist constructed parallels between Latin America and the subservient, sensual female. However, even in these gendered portrayals of the two parts of the hemisphere, Rivera refused, despite negative criticism, to depict a weak or fragile female figure. If Latin America must take the role of the female, she will be an empowered and non-European goddess like Coatlicue and the personifications of natural resources in the DIA murals. This fact is really the key to understanding Rivera’s perspective on the Pan-American ideal. He believed that the United States would self-destruct, much like Rome under Caesar did, if not for the indigenous influence of Latin America. Finally, the instance in New York at Rockefeller Plaza earned Rivera the title of “revolutionary” by depicting the socialist side of the mural as orderly and peaceful with portraits of specific leftwing heroes like Lenin contrasted with the capitalist side as
violent and greedy. As such, this mural promoted a social revolution which would remove the capitalist roots of the United States in favor of socialism.

Rivera’s ideas of Pan-America, of the United States and Latin America working together in an egalitarian economy, seem controversial if one does not consider Rivera’s historical context. Upon closer inspection, it appears as if the artist was being used by United States patrons for their own agenda – to increase harmony between Mexico and United States relations to maintain landholdings in Mexico that produced oil for large corporations in North America. Rivera’s infatuation with Pan-Americanism was not a novel idea; indeed, it had been a long-established tradition within the politics of the American hemispheres. Therefore, even his revolutionary utopia was not a product of his own genius, but the result of his being conditioned in Mexico during a time when the idea of a unified and harmonious Western Hemisphere was highly desirable.

Policies such as the Monroe Doctrine, Article 27, Agrarian Code, and Good Neighbor created an atmosphere in the New World that inspired hemispheric relations. Although this trend, overall, dates to the early nineteenth century, it became increasingly important in the United States as Latin American countries, such as Mexico, began to expropriate foreign corporations in the early twentieth century. Using Morrow’s unconventional approach to relations between countries, United States capitalists patronized the Mexican muralist in order to maintain the status quo of the oil industry that had been well-established since the Porfiriato.

Rivera’s practice of compromising his principles for the establishment has precedents even in his Mecio murals. When Morrow commissioned Rivera to paint the walls of the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca, the artist imbued his iconography with the social injustices and brutality of Spanish Colonialism. As Siqueiros pointed out, Rivera could have used this
opportunity to paint more current social issues within Mexico but opted for long-past tragedies. Furthermore, when MoMA commissioned the muralist to create a series of portable frescoes for a retrospective, Rivera chose scenes from the Cuernavaca murals, but even further tempered them for the New York audience. He could have easily selected more radical images that would have revealed the ugliness of the capitalist lifestyle or the gruesome reality of colonial forces in foreign countries including corporate entities like Standard Oil, but instead Rivera recreated Zapata standing beside a horse and market commerce on a hacienda.

Rivera wanted to reach the masses with his radical politics and ideas. As such he used an unusual technique for the twentieth century. By using true fresco, the artist was able to create works in public spaces. Although, this technique was also in no way inventive, for true fresco had been perfected in the Mediterranean centuries before Rivera utilized it in Mexico, it did break from the current trajectory of modern art. Rivera’s works on walls in public spaces made art accessible for the working class and elite society alike. In that way, Rivera revolutionized the direction in which some artforms would be presented.

Furthermore, although the artist worked within the theme most desired from him by his U.S. patrons at the time, Rivera chose to depict his ideal Pan-America where Latin America was not only omnipresent in the United States’ economic advances, but also absolutely necessary for a balanced future within the New World. He sublimely executed this subversion by building, and then subtly undermining, a binary parallelism: male/United States/industrial and female/Latin America/natural. This idea began to take shape as early as 1927 during the collaboration between Chavez and Rivera. In Rivera’s earliest California frescoes, we see it in the inclusion of the female architect in Making of a Fresco and strong form of the female figure in Allegory of California. In Detroit, Rivera turned the most essential machine the Ford’s factory into an Aztec
goddess, and returning to California, Coatlicue serves again as the centerpiece for the harmonious union between Latin America and the United States.

While Siqueiros’ argument is not unwarranted, it appears Rivera stayed true to his word as a guerrilla fighting behind enemy lines by finding a way to insert his voice and perspective on Pan-American unity throughout his U.S. career. He did so by building a parallel between the United States/masculinity/industrialism and Latin America/femininity/cultural heritage, and then subverting the paradigm by casting females in powerful and integral parts within his murals.
Bibliography


Appendix
Images

Figure 1 – Rivera, Diego. Detail of Secretaria de Educación Publica mural. 1923-28. Mexico City.
Figure 2 – Rivera, Diego. “The Conquest of Cuernavaca.” 1929-1930. Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca, Morelos, México.

Figure 4 – Mitchell, Edward. *On the Road of a Thousand Wonders*. 1915. Private Collection.


Figure 6 – Boynton, Ray. *Memory Recalling the Dead*. 1928. Fresco. Music Hall, Mills College.
Figure 7 – Rivera, Diego. Allegory of California. 1931. San Francisco Stock Exchange.
Figure 8 – Rivera, Diego. *Making of a Fresco, The Building of a City*. 1931. San Francisco Art Institute.

Figure 10 – Louis Lozowick, *Above the City*. 1932. Smithsonian American Art Museum.
Figure 11 – Rivera, Diego. *Pan-American Unity*. 1940. City College of San Francisco.

Figure 12 – Rivera, Diego. *Agrarian Leader Zapata*. 1931. Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 13 – Rivera, Diego. “Exploitation and insurrection, Zapata leading the Agrarian Revolt.” 1927-30. Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca.

Figure 14 – Rivera, Diego. *Liberation of the Peon*. 1931. Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 16 – Rivera, Diego. Sugar Cane. 1931. Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 17 – Rivera, Diego. “Sugar Cane.” 1927-30. Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca.

Figure 19 – Rivera, Diego. Watercolor of H.P. costume design. 1927. Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 20 – Rivera, Diego. *Detroit Industry*, North wall. 1933. Detroit Institute of Arts.
Figure 21 – Rivera, Diego. *Detroit Industry*, South wall. 1933. Detroit Institute of Arts.

Figure 22 – Rivera, Diego. *Man at the Crossroads*. 1934. Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes.
Figure 23 – Rivera, Diego. Preliminary design for Man at the Crossroads. 1932. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.