

Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric

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On May 9, 1933, Diego Rivera climbed down from the scaffold where he had been working on a mural above the central bank of elevators in the RCA Building, Rockefeller Center, then under construction in New York City. But who is Diego Rivera? How did he get on that scaffold? And why is the date important?

The date is important in the history of art, and so is Diego Rivera. But I am primarily interested in the rhetorical events that surround what must be from any point of view one of the most scandalous affairs in twentieth century art, scandalous in the New Testament sense of *skandalon*, a stumbling block. The story, however, must precede the rhetorical analysis.

THE TALE

Diego Rivera, 1886–1957, with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros formed a triumvirate that spearheaded “the Mexican Renaissance,” a movement that flourished in the period between the two World Wars. All three were fine easel painters, but their murals, which one confronts at every turn in the cities of Mexico today, are simply overwhelming in size, color, and message. Because of their work in Mexico City, one must go to Rome to find a rival display of frescoes. These men, and especially Rivera, may be said nearly to have re-invented the art of working pigments into fresh plaster, making the art integral with the buildings where men and women live, work, and rest.¹

Rivera, whose early art education had been in Mexico, lived, studied, and painted in Europe, mainly in Paris, for thirteen years. There he went through a number of phases, much like Picasso; like Picasso, he was amazingly adaptive and yet retained his own unique stamp.

When he returned to his homeland in 1920, Rivera was a convinced Marx-[70/71]ist, but he was also a man who felt more and more thoroughly Mexican as his years in Europe wore to an end. His growing identification with peasants and industrial workers was strengthened on a study tour of Italy during which he gazed at the walls painted obviously for ordinary congregations of people. He resolved to paint public art. Rivera rationalized his determination neatly: only the rich could buy fine easel art and for the most part they hid it away.

Although the impact of Europe and ideology may account significantly for Rivera’s thirst to create monumental art, one must recognize also a strong cultural component. For F. S. C. Northrop the fact that Rivera was a Mexican, thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the Indian aesthetic, is explanation enough for his mammoth, vivid public works.² Without doubt his works manifest both ideological and cultural components. His fresco paintings are usually historical panoramas, building a welter of diverse strands from the sides and below to an elevated central figure of future, utopian transformation. There is little mistaking the message of radical liberation after generations, even centuries, of inhumane

exploitation; the ideological component is clear. But neither is there any mistaking the great strength of the Aztec portions of the frescoes nor, when recognizable revolutionaries are painted, as they commonly are, the vigor of the Zapatistas compared to the rather perfunctory Bolsheviki; the cultural component is also clear.

From the middle 1920's on, Rivera was in constant trouble with the Communist Party in spite of his self-perceived loyalty. In 1929 he was officially expelled from the Communist Party of Mexico. The simplest explanations for his problems are that he represented too well a nationalistic bent at a time when the official line demanded a rigorous internationalism; in addition, he accepted commissions from the wealthy and from "corrupt" governments. His commonsense defense that no one else could pay for art or had walls to paint for the people was irrelevant to most Marxists. Rivera deeply and steadfastly considered himself a communist and wanted to be recognized as such. He was so recognized by the party, but not until near the end of his life, after extreme and servile self-criticism.

By 1930, however, his fame as an artist, and particularly as a fresco painter, was world-wide. Critics came to Mexico to see his frescoes at the Secretariat of Education, the National Preparatory School, the State Agricultural School at Chapingo, and the National Palace. The sheer size of the paintings was staggering. The 124 panels at the Ministry of Public Education, a building two city blocks long and a city block wide, where he painted most of the three stories of the inner courtyard, total over 17,000 square feet. A monumental fresco painter, of course, must work with assistants, with plasterers and apprentices who help transfer the sketches from long strips of paper to the walls, but Rivera always laid in all the

pigment himself. It is little wonder that he considered himself a laborer in art.

During the 30's Rivera's work became well known in the United States. Knowledgeable, wealthy art collectors began to buy his work years before. Among the earliest of these were John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and his son Nelson, or perhaps especially their wives, even though a panel at the Ministry of Public Education contained a caricature of John D. Rockefeller, Sr., as a part of "The Night of the Rich," which is contrasted to "The Night of the Poor"; the contrast could be considered vicious.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City presented a retrospective exhibit of his art in 1931, the second one-person show in its then short history (the museum was founded in 1929; its main benefactors were the Rockefellers); the first such exhibition there was that of Matisse. Rivera's route to Rockefeller Center, however, was not from West 53rd Street but from San Francisco.

He went to California to paint frescoes, having been offered a small wall at the California School of Fine Arts and later extended a larger commission to paint a mural at the new San Francisco Stock Exchange Building. He arrived in 1930 after a long period of controversy about whether or not such an undesirable person should be admitted and some considerable protest by artists who argued that California walls should be painted by California painters.

Rivera was fascinated with the industrial might of the United States. Then, as now, there were voices who told of the corrupting force that the machine had loosed in the lives of humankind, but Rivera's was not among them. He saw the machine as potentially liberating for the masses. In his mural at the California School of Fine Arts, "The Making of a Fresco," there occurs a central figure that strikes the dominant, recurring motif in his work in this country—an industrial

worker with his hand on the control lever; clearly he is the future, dominating the machinery. Rivera left San Francisco for Detroit having painted, characteristically, a mural at the Art School of 1200 square feet although he had been commissioned to paint 120.

In Detroit he had a commission to paint an inner court of the Art Institute, mainly through the astute and quiet work of Edsel Ford. He spent more than three months touring industrial plants and finally decided to paint four walls although his original contract called for him to paint one. Edsel Ford, again quietly, doubled his fee. Punches, presses, and conveyor belts were to Rivera as roads, canals, and trees to Constable, or Courbet, or Eakins. His Detroit Murals are considered his best work in this country, but they were controversial. One panel, called "The Vaccination," was seen as a caricature of "The Holy Family"; indeed, the white cap of the nurse has the effect of a halo as [72/73] she holds a child, whose white hair seems halo like, to be vaccinated. A horse, a cow, and sheep stand in the foreground. To those who said that the animals suggested the stable, Rivera pointed out blandly that the painting was quite straightforward and that we owe vaccine to the gentle creatures pictured.

Rivera received letters from the Rockefeller family even while the controversy raged in Detroit. Nelson Rockefeller wrote that he and his wife were looking forward to coming to see the murals. There were hints of a commission to paint in New York, where Nelson Rockefeller, then twenty-nine years old, served as executive head of the corporation building the Center. When the commission was proffered, the terms were absurd. It was to be a competition among Matisse, Picasso, and Rivera, and the painting was to be monochrome on canvas. Matisse politely declined to submit sketches; the work simply was not

his metier. Picasso did not even reply. Rivera was warmly interested, but he objected that he was quite beyond competing for a commission. He would offer sketches and a description that could be accepted or rejected, but no competition; furthermore, he was known as a fresco painter and color was his forte. The architect, with what call be interpreted as relief, took Rivera's reply as rejecting the offer. But Nelson Rockefeller stepped in and smoothly negotiated a contract, accepting Rivera's sketches and verbal description, on the theme that had been set for him: "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future."

Rivera set to work in Radio City in March 1933. The fresco took shape gradually on the wall. The familiar motifs appeared. Around the edges were turmoil and exploitation contrasted with joyful cooperation. And in the center the commanding industrial worker, his hand on the controls, his eyes forward. The crossroads was formed of two long, narrow ellipses—one a microscopic slide, the other a telescopic view—intersecting just below the worker, dividing the panel into four sections.

Soon, however, another face became recognizable. A figure to one side uniting the hands of a worker, a soldier, and a negro, a figure labeled in Rivera's verbal description as a "worker-leader" and outlined only roughly in his preliminary sketches now took on the unmistakabl[e] features of Lenin. The public furor began with a story in the *New York World-Telegram*, April 24, 1933, headlined, "Rivera Paints Scenes of Communist / Activity And John D. Jr. Fools Bill."

For the next two weeks, Nelson Rockefeller, and others, attempted to persuade Rivera to remove Lenin's portrait and substitute another, perhaps simply a generalized person; the painter's assistants threatened to strike if he altered that portion of the fresco. Rivera offered

to balance Lenin with the portrait of an American liberator; Abraham Lincoln seemed appropriate to him. [73/74]

When the situation seemed at stalemate, Rivera hired a photographer to take pictures of the nearly finished fresco, but construction guards would not let him enter. One of Rivera's assistants smuggled a camera into the work area and took photographs surreptitiously. Finally Rivera was called from the scaffold on May 9. After a brief conference, he and his assistants left for the day; the fresco was immediately covered, and Rivera was not permitted to re-enter the RCA Building, which was opened to the public with the mural neatly masked from view.

The end of Rivera's work on the wall was not the beginning of the controversy; it had begun long before. Rivera feared that the painting itself would be destroyed, even though the Rockefellers pledged not to; some argued that the painting should be finished and displayed, and others that it should remain covered for the judgment of future generations or that it should be removed intact.

Here I must end the narrative and begin to consider briefly the ebb and flow of the controversy, trying to draw some conclusions about its significant rhetorical properties.

THE MORAL

Four years ago I argued that "rhetoric" shared with every other term in natural language and with human experience generally a certain ambiguity.³ It seemed to me then, and still does, that the ambiguity of "rhetoric" cannot be fixed (in the sense of repaired) in a definition but may be fixed (in the sense of stabilized) *momentarily* by taking a plurality of perspectives. I proposed somewhat arbitrarily three perspectives; these I labeled the *dynamic*, the

substantive, and the *strategic*. I shall use them in turn to discuss the affair at hand,

Another way to express the dynamic quality of rhetoric is to say that whatever else it may be, the human milieu is also rhetorical. We may be blissfully unaware of the rhetorical aspect of our existences, or choose to ignore it, or find it trivial; just as we may be blissfully unaware of, or choose to ignore, or find trivial other aspects of our experiences. But we are nonetheless surrounded by a flow of argument.

The controversy, the immediate rhetorical discourse, of the affair at Rockefeller Center was formed to some degree by the controversy over the Detroit murals. And when the furor broke in New York City, the argument renewed its life in Detroit. In Detroit it had a markedly religious side. Seen from some angles, the blasts at the "Holy Family" panel was a small part of a continuing controversy about the role of religion in the lives of people, a controversy that a great deal of Rivera's art had a way of bringing to the [74/75] surface. From other angles, the controversy in Detroit could undoubtedly be seen as involving the rhetorical working out of the roles of certain religious leaders and religious groups in that community.

When Marie Hochmuth Nichols wrote her fine study of Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, she presented in meticulous detail the setting for the speech.⁴ These details included excellent descriptions of the physical environment and a careful examination of editorial opinions about the speaker and his party, about the ideas for which he stood, and the actions throughout the nation that could be expected, in short, a description of what Carl L. Becker has called "the climate of opinion."⁵ But she did not attempt to trace the debates in which the theories of the Federal Union as a "compact" or a "contract" were hammered out, nor did she do more than

mention the failed effort of the so-called "Crittenden Compromise" which occupied much of the time of the Senate during the fall preceding the inauguration. Should she have? A yes-or-no answer is not relevant to my argument at this moment; rather I would point out that the open possibilities of associating the various strands of argument that always surround us, subordinating and superordinating some to others, gives rhetoric its dynamic quality.

Rhetoric, in its dynamic sense, seems to need some center of interest, some nucleus, so to speak, to shape its character. The arguments over the Rockefeller Center mural had cooled perceptively when, on the night of February 9, 1934, workmen entered the RCA Building, reduced the painting to dust, and resurfaced the wall.

The fresco was destroyed; but, of course, in other quite literal senses it was not. Immediately after he was locked out, Rivera offered to reproduce the mural on any suitable wall in New York City. He was offered several, but none were suited to the plan of that mural. Declaring that he would use the Rockefeller money in the interests of the masses (he had been paid his entire fee), Rivera painted a series of panels at the New Workers School in New York. After the destruction of his work at Radio City, the Mexican government gave him a wall at the Palace of the Fine Arts in Mexico City, where he painted a fresco, "Man at the Crossroads." That mural can be seen today and compared with the photographs of the version hammered off the wall in New York. They are different; as Rivera said, the walls are different.

Art spawned controversy; the controversy spawned art. E. B. White wrote verses in the form of a dialogue between "John D.'s grandson Nelson" and Rivera—"A Ballad of Artistic Integrity"—which echoed many of the words both parties had spoken or written.

Archibald Macleish composed a [75/76] remarkable cycle of poems entitled "Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City." Rivera and Bertram D. Wolfe got out a book, *A Portrait of America*, which, published in 1934, told the story of Rivera's work in this country and contained sixty illustrations, including one of the unfinished and destroyed mural.

The protest meetings, pickets, editorials, letters to the editor, petitions, and manifestoes continued for the better part of a year. Rivera spoke on the radio, at meetings, and on street corners. One speech strikes me as especially significant for a reason that may seem strange: it is peripheral to the controversy.

Shortly after he was locked out, Rivera appeared at a meeting on the Columbia University campus protesting the firing of Donald Henderson, an instructor in economics. The dissenting students marched, threw eggs, besieged briefly the home of the university's president, and, when the rally was invaded by "loyal students," had fist-fights. In his brief speech Rivera urged the students to "wrest the control of the university from Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler," or so translated the *New York Times*, since the painter, whose English was difficult to understand, addressed the crowd in French.⁶ Surely, given the circumstances and the language, even when translated on the spot, the specific words that Rivera spoke could not have had much significance; but the sheer presence of the radical artist, himself the target of concerted criticism from the right, must have been symbolic.

Specific symbols are like logs in a fire. As Horace Gregory observed, the hammers in the RCA Building on the night of February 9, 1934, did not so much destroy as create a symbol: "The real issue was raised when the Rockefellers dismissed Rivera. The blank space is now a better testimonial to the cause of art

and revolution than the work itself would have been."⁷

So the first moral of the story of Rivera at Rockefeller Center is this: although a controversy is formed by the individual acts of specific persons, it has nonetheless a reality of its own. Put another way, once in motion, controversies use people and form people as much as people form and use them. I take the human world to be one in which rhetoric is a natural force, but rhetoric is also the everpresent manifestation of that force.

The dynamic flow of rhetoric takes its shape from substrata of values. Just as rhetoric, as dynamic, may reveal the underlying substantial value levels, it contributes to these, as if by such geological processes as erosion and sedimentation. In 1973 I argued that the old rhetoric was strategic (a quite legitimate and necessary perspective) but that the dynamic and substantive aspects, taken together, revealed a new rhetoric of value-evolution.⁸

In the case at hand, a very old conflict in values is played out; the conflict was [76/77] scarcely settled, and I shall not settle it here. But the dominant opinion in our culture is that advocacy is the antinomy of fine art; that opinion may be, and often has been, challenged.

So often was Rivera attacked as a "mere propagandist" that he learned to make the label into a banner of superiority, arguing, in effect, that propaganda was the only force that justified art; and that properly justified, propagandistic art was art in the interests of the people.⁹

The difficulty with the reversal of values Rivera repeatedly attempted was that it opened the claim to legitimacy in the suppressing of his art. The editorialists in the *New York Times*, for example, argued consistently that if the value of his art was chiefly propagandistic then the Rockefellers, or presumably anyone else who could, might well obliterate murals.

In one instance, for example, a *Times* editorialist chided John Sloan, an American artist who raised the specter of censorship, for not understanding, as he should have, the differences between easel painting and mural painting: "It is censorship to suppress a picture or a statue. It is not censorship to suppress a mural display which is in shrieking contradiction with its environment, with its own purpose. A mural painting is a signboard. People don't hang signboards in front of inns announcing that poison is on sale within. They don't put up over the doors of schools Latin inscriptions stating that children's minds are befogged inside. Yet that is what a Lenin mural on a Rockefeller business structure amounts to."¹⁰

Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., a Columbia University professor, saw the matter a little as the *Times* editorialist did, but resolved the issue quite differently: "Is the propaganda soaked up in the art, or does it remain more or less like the cherry in the cocktail? A propagandist attitude will generally add to a painter's difficulties, as requiring visualization of matter normally conceived in verbal terms; it may also powerfully reinforce his emotional capacity, and if that can be concentrated visually, his art will become the gainer."¹¹ As Edmund Wilson observed perceptively, at one juncture in a running controversy with Joseph Freeman, a Marxist critic who denounced Rivera, propaganda is a defect in art mainly when one dislikes the ideology, "but the same people who take propaganda for granted when Virgil or Giotto has done it, will outlaw it when Eisenstein or Diego Rivera does it."¹² [77/78]

In life, values tend not to occur singly or stand neatly isolated from one another; when they occur mixed naturally in day-to-day affairs, they seem to generate dissonance. This circumstance, it seems to me, is the genesis of Stephen Toulmin's

insight that “conflicts of duty are an inescapable feature of the moral life.”¹³

In discussing religious celebration, Northrop makes this contrast: “There is another difference between the Mexicans’ and the Anglo-Americans’ approach to democracy in its bearing on religion. For the Mexicans, art is a necessity of life, not a luxury.... For people of the English-speaking world, art tends to be a luxury or an afterthought, or else a hash of souvenirs without integrity because of the use of old art forms for modern institutions and doctrines which deny the theses which the art forms represent.”¹⁴ Can it be that many who take art as very serious, having an integrity that cannot brook propagandistic use, could at the same time experience art as “a luxury ... or else a hash of souvenirs”? If there is dissonance in these values expressed time and again in the letters to the editor supporting the Rockefellers, it is reduced in favor of art as luxury or souvenir items by the notion that art objects are private property which, consequently, can be treated in any way owners may choose.

Rivera challenged the precedence of private property in a radio address: “The case of Diego Rivera is a small matter. I want to explain more clearly the principles involved. Let us take as an example an American millionaire who buys the Sistine Chapel, which contains the work of Michelangelo.... Would that millionaire have the right to destroy the Sistine Chapel?” And he said later in the speech, “We all recognize, then, that in human creation there is something which belongs to humanity at large, and that no individual owner has the right to destroy or keep it solely for his own enjoyment....”¹⁵

But the arguments of Rivera and his supporters apparently did little to refocus values for most Americans. He and they often choose examples of long recognized religious art. Perhaps to Americans, religion is religion and

business, business; furthermore, Rivera himself was militantly antireligious, wasn’t he? And there always nagged his argument about the wider ownership of art the fact that he accepted commissions from persons with private fortunes. That fact was hurled at him by the left as well as the right. His answer to leftist opponents at one mass meeting, that they must bring the revolution to [78/79] fruition and own the walls or he would have no choice but to paint the walls he could get with the fees offered, undoubtedly did not help Americans in general rethink the relationships of private property and public art.¹⁶

Intermingled with the values of ownership and of art are fascinating questions of honesty. The conduct of the Rockefellers was contrasted from several points of view with that of Rivera who, seemingly by his own admission, concealed his purposes while taking the commission.¹⁷ The substance of these questions would be well worth detailed consideration in a separate paper. Their mention here may serve as a transition, for the arguments can be seen from the perspective of *ethos*, a traditional aspect of the strategic art of rhetoric.

Before turning to the consideration of rhetoric as strategy, a judgment concerning the substantive level of rhetoric may be appropriate. A second moral of the story of Rivera at Rockefeller Center is this: since human acts are value laden and the appreciation of art is a confluence of acts, we should expect controversy to be expressed in as well as to grow out of art. A demand for aesthetic purity is fundamentally a demand simply to ignore an aspect of being human. Such a demand is successful only tentatively as a strategy of focus. Ironically, as such, it suddenly exhibits a rhetorical thrust.

Prior to considering the topic of *ethos* with which I shall close, let us consider briefly the strategies of the surface of

Rivera's art, which does *not* mean its superficialities, but rather what appears to the viewer. As a muralist, Rivera was a story teller; his work is saturated with historical detail. The teeming detail of his narrative art swarms from the edges to the usually clear summary figure commanding the center. Such a style and execution serves the purposes of an advocate well. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., who did not find "Man at the Crossroads" quite satisfactory ("in general, the invention seems too literary for a mural in a concourse—too much in need of an explanatory text") praised the panels Rivera completed for the New Workers School: "The procedure recalls the close-up of the cinema reinforced by cut-backs, or more remotely those abundant *exempla* which illustrate the main theme of a medieval homily."¹⁸

That examples may be relevant to a thesis *seen* as well as thesis *heard* should be apparent enough. The rhetoric of Rivera's surfaces is straightforward: his art is that of iteration and emphasis. But it is color that arrests the viewer and makes it possible for iteration and emphasis to have their effects. I can still remember, after twenty years have intervened, being stopped [79/80] literally in my tracks on my first sight of Rivera's murals in Cuernavaca. Of these murals, Phillip N. Youtz wrote: "It is a hard test for any painting to be set as a rival to nature herself. One of Rivera's murals covers the three walls of a court in the Palace of Cortés. The fourth side is entirely open to a view of the valley. The painted landscape which is background for the figures in the Story of the Conquest of Mexico has to stand against the real landscape which is one of the most striking in the world. The result, which has both unity and contrast, proves that man, too, can create a world."¹⁹

And the world created by Rivera has meaning.

But few Americans, caught up in the edges of the controversy at least, looked at his walls, or, indeed, had the opportunity to see many of them. For most Americans, undoubtedly, Rivera was exotic, but the Rockefellers—in many ways more remote than he—were accepted parts of their world. A letter written to the *New York Times* by a man I assume to be typical, Harry D. Robbins, Flushing, New York, illustrates the case with which the patient, polite Rockefellers, who scrupulously paid their monetary debt to the ungrateful artist, were accepted:

Diego Rivera's changes in his murals at Rockefeller Center may have been, as Dudley Johnson asserts in his letter to THE TIMES, 'those of detail, not of form or general concept' [which quotes one of the artist's own statements], but I do not believe that even a noted foreign artist is entitled to abuse American standards of political thought or introduce objectionable propaganda under the guise of art and under the protection of a contract and approval of original sketches which, I take for granted, failed to reveal his subtle intent. Mr. Rockefeller's attitude is to be warmly commended. It is not a question of the attitude of a capitalist but the attitude to be expected of any proper American citizen.²⁰

Although many artists defended Rivera, others took positions much like that of this letter-writer. Rivera, after all, was a Communist, an atheist, and a foreigner. The cry raised before Rivera entered California was heard again: American walls for American painters.

A third moral: to be effective *as* strategy, a strategy should be conventional. (If true art conceals itself, what garb could be more appropriate than the conventional?) What is conventional, of course, is quite relative to culture. One might consider the apparent efficacy in our times of the

commercial use of testimonials of athletic and cinema stars and the apparent ineffectiveness of the same technique in straight-forward political causes. Recently the *Time* magazine line-up of stars-for-Ford against [!] stars-for-Carter call best be interpreted as comic relief in the midst of that periodical's *serious* [80/81] commentary.²¹ Most Americans found Rivera doubly improper, i.e., strategically and valuatively: improper means to improper ends.

CONCLUSION

In the sense of a means-to-an-end in discourse, *ethos* is a common rhetorical strategy. But clearly what we call *ethos* is also an end. There is a pervading sense of *ethos* as an open process-product relationship, one that takes character as something-in-itself and as generative. In the myriad of incidents, weighty and trivial, that swirled around Rivera's work at Rockefeller Center the question constantly is posed: What is the meaning of America? What is the character of this country? The corporate wholeness must be taken for granted, but the moment it is, it threatens to dissolve. What substance does it have?

To begin to answer such questions demands strategies of response. The mingling responses inevitably creates a dynamic flow of arguments. Given that flow across this country, from west to east, one is forced to conclude that if the head of Lenin had not appeared in the mural, the eruption would have issued from something else, but it would have come although undoubtedly its time and shape would have been different: Rivera had forced too much stocktaking; he had pushed his interpretations to the extreme. And, of course, at the same time the painter was being asked, What is the meaning of Rivera? What is the character of this man who claims to be

revolutionary and works for the capitalists?

People have and seem to need a sense of place: work-place, dwelling-place, resting-place. They attach to place what they mean to themselves. The plastic artist may have a privileged position in communicating such a sense, and some do their work with a strong sense of advocacy. Rivera did.

Rivera's work methods often dismayed his patrons. In San Francisco, for example, he spent months being a charming, social lion. The press, which had been apprehensive about the entry of the undesirable person, learned that he made marvellous copy. He was the hit of the Stanford-California football game in 1930, which he attended in a sombrero with his wife, the artist Frida Kahlo dressed in a full native Mexican costume; afterwards he gave an interview in which he compared football to a bullfight—but joyous, not brutal—and called the card-section "art in the mass, a new form of art."²² Then suddenly after what seemed to be interminable play, Rivera set to work, again worrying his patrons: would the man drop dead? He would work for days, weeks, months with little rest. If the sports writers were to have seen him, they would have had to write of his physical feats in terms of four-minute-[81/82]miles or sixty-home-run-seasons. He tried to soak up the life of a people in their places—as he did the work-life in the factories of Detroit—and then pour into his murals that life and its places.

If Rivera failed in America, and in some senses he surely did, it was because he failed to soak up enough. He wanted to communicate the great energy and democratic promise of the country as persuasively as he himself felt it. He was well convinced of the weaknesses and past crimes of the nation, but he could easily record and accept these as subordinate to the promise. Finally, however, he was pulled beyond his own

vision by his internationalist needs which took the form of the Communist idea. In Mexico he was better able to control and integrate these internationalist urgings.

Rivera did, however, paint a portrait of America. His frescoes and the furor they created did reveal the conflicting value structures that are in our country. For Americans interested in the rhetoric of this bit of our past, one datum should not be overlooked: although the great Mexican fresco painter travelled with and to Moscow, he was never offered a wall there nor in any other city in the Soviet Union.

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¹ The details of Rivera's life and work are readily available. The best single source, and one on which my account depends heavily, is Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963).

² For F. S. C. Northrop's analysis of the Mexican historical and aesthetic spirit, and Rivera's relationship to these, see: "The Rich Culture of Mexico," the second chapter of his well-known book, *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

³ Robert L. Scott, "On Not Defining 'Rhetoric,'" *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6 (1973), 81–96.

⁴ Marie Hochmuth [Nichols], "Lincoln's First Inaugural Address," in *American Speeches*, eds. Wayland Maxfield Parrish and Marie Hochmuth (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954), pp. 21–71. See also: Walter R. Fisher, "The Failure of Compromise in 1860–1861: A Rhetorical View," *Speech Monographs*, 33 (1966), 364–71.

⁵ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1932), ch. 1, esp. p. 5.

⁶ "1,500 in Fist Fight at Columbia Rally," *New York Times*, 16 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 3, cols. 1–2.

⁷ "Texts and Murals," *New Republic*, 7 March 1934, p. 103.

⁸ Scott, p. 94.

⁹ In connection with the affair at Rockefeller Center, see: Diego Rivera, "What Is Art For?"

Modern Monthly, July 1933, pp. 275–277; and "Rivera Says His Art Is Red Propaganda," *New York Times*, 14 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 1, col. 2. See also: "Rivera in Hot Water," *Literary Digest*, 27 May 1933 pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ "Mural War Persists," *New York Times*, 18 March 1934, sec. 4, p. 4, col. 5.

¹¹ Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "Rivera's American Murals," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 19 May 1934, p. 697.

¹² Edmund Wilson, "Art, the Proletariat and Marx," *The New Republic*, 23 August 1933, p. 44. Wilson found Freeman as wrong as the Rockefellerers but concluded, sadly, "If our own national ideals were in good health at this time, you may be sure that we should have works of literature and art which would act as propaganda for them. One of the most dismaying things about the crisis it seems to me—one of the worst evidences of the surrender of the republic to financial and industrial power—has been our inability to muster for the emergency any symbols or myths from our national past" (p. 45). Mustering such myths was precisely the genius of Rivera's Mexican murals.

¹³ Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), p. 117.

¹⁴ Northrop, p. 47.

¹⁵ Wolfe, pp. 330–331. See also: "Art Row Pressed by Rivera Friends," *New York Times*, 18 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 22, col. 4.

¹⁶ See: "Comrade Rivera Causes Red Row," *New York Times*, 15 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 9, cols. 4–5.

¹⁷ Compare Rivera's statement quoted in "Rivera Says His Art Is Red Propaganda," *New York Times*, 14 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 1, col. 2, with those made three days earlier, "Row on Rivera Art Still in Deadlock," *New York Times*, 11 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 19, cols. 1–2.

¹⁸ Mather, pp. 698–99.

¹⁹ *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art*, Feb. 1932. Quoted by Wolfe, p. 275.

²⁰ 14 May 1933 sec. 4, p. 5, cols. 5–6. The letter cited from Dudley Johnson may be found in the *New York Times*, 12 May 1933, sec. 1, p. 16, col. 5.

²¹ *Time*, 1 Nov. 1976, p. 38.

²² See: Wolfe, pp. 276–296. The interview was printed in the *Oakland Post-Enquirer*, 29 Nov. 1930; quoted by Wolfe, p. 290.