

# Rivera's Revolution

Mexico has produced three outstanding painters whose work has been in the political sense, candidly revolutionary: Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. They dealt with themes like poverty and the suffering of their masses under the tyranny of rulers and with the exploitation of peasants by avicious landowners.

The paintings range from works of obvious political and ideological content to those in which an intense concern with human misery is the dominant motif. The emotional strategy of their work often aimed to arouse one's normal feelings of shock and sympathy.

## Inspired

Viewers are forced to confront the unpleasant social reality. Some of the works do not have direct political content, but compel one's imagination and feelings towards a response which could relieve the human suffering. In most of their works these painters, have portrayed classes and racial groups according to the Marxist viewpoint.

The ideas are tremendously simplified because they are intended for the instruction of the poor and the uneducated. Furthermore, these artists were successful in teaching the ignorant masses the awareness of belonging to an oppressed class, and were also able to inculcate among them violent antipathy towards their oppressors.

Unlike early Christian artists explaining good and evil, sin and deliverance etc., these revolutionary artists endeavoured to explain the meaning of wealth and poverty, oppressors and victims, heroes and traitors, conquest

## Rivera's murals and frescos depicting the oppressed and the poor of Mexico reveal his penchant with the left wing world politics throughout his career

by A.R. Nagori

and revolt. Being basically brought up under religious tradition and culture, they were aware of the potential of art in a society dominated by the church. The doctrines of Rivera and his associates are clearly hostile to the clergy the latter being cohorts of the ruling junta.

Rivera, the best designer and the most sophisticated of this artistic Troika, is conspicuous in his formal organisation and among the three the least violent. The Detroit Institute of Art celebrated the hundredth birthday of this great artist and was the host institution in holding a Rivera Retrospective which inspired this write-up.

Diego Rivera studied in Spain, France and Italy from 1910 to 1921 and was associated in Paris with Derain, Braque, Klee, Picasso and Gris; as a result his early work was Cubist.

## Popular

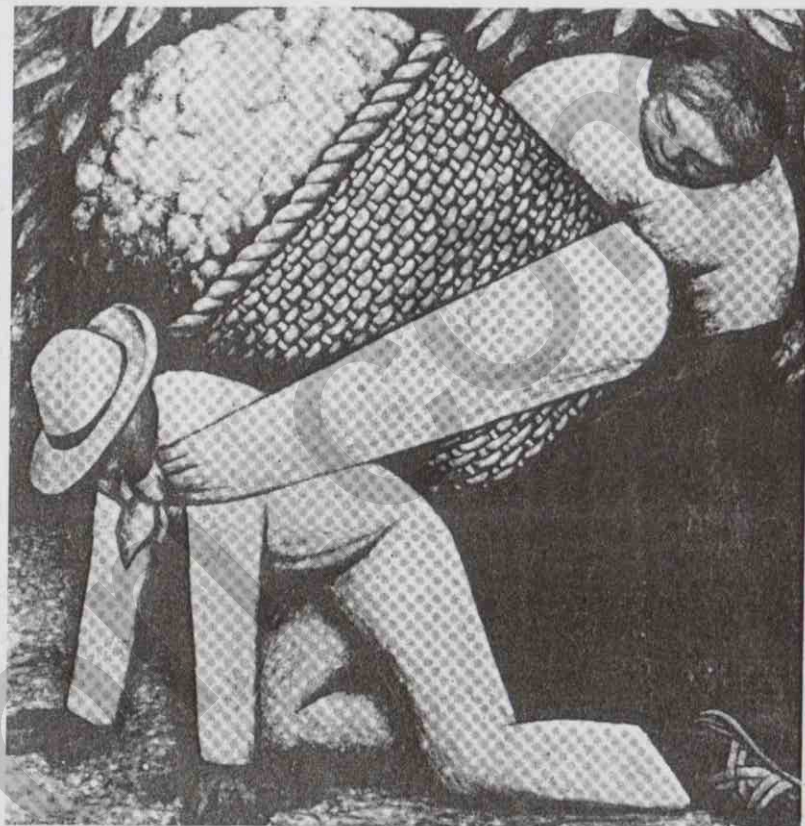
He returned to Mexico in 1922 to participate in the growing artistic revolution. He did encaustic murals and frescoes depicting oppressed people and their aspirations. In the United States, 1930-34, he did frescoes in San Francisco, Detroit and New York (the last in Rockefeller Center, destroyed through disagreement with the

sponsors).

Rivera had been involved in leftwing world politics, throughout his career. In his work, the mood in general is lyrical rather than emotional, with accent on narrative facility and factual detail — far from naive, he was an extremely sophisticated personality and an active political radical.

Before giving comments on the retrospective, it is worth reading Rivera's own concept and Marxist interpretations in aesthetics which he wrote in 1929:

A few years ago before the great war I, I often discussed the role which art would assume once the power of the state was in the hands of the working class. After the Mexican Revolution, my revolutionary confreres — then living in Paris — thought that if they gave modern art of the highest quality to the masses this art would immediately become popular through its instant acceptance by the proletariat. I was never able to share this point of view, because I always knew that the physical senses are susceptible not only to education and development, but to atrophy and desuetude; and also that the "aesthetic sense" can only be reached through the physical senses themselves. I had also observed the indubitable fact that among the pro-



letariat — exploited and oppressed by the bourgeoisie — the workman, ever burdened with his daily labour, could cultivate his taste only in contact with the worst and the vilest portion of bourgeois art which reached him in cheap chromos and the illustrated papers. And this bad taste in turn stamps all of the industrial production which his salary commands — public exhibitions being difficult of access for him because he is at work day in and day out.

## Politics

Popular art produced by the people for the people has been almost wiped out by this kind of industrial production of the worst aesthetic quality throughout the world. And I also believe that a popular peasant art could not achieve an effective substitute in modern industrial production of fabrics, utensils, illustrated books and so forth.

Rivera believed that only

the work of art itself can raise the standard of taste. According to him art has always been employed by different social classes who hold the balance of power as one instrument of domination — hence, as a political instrument. One can analyse epoch after epoch, from stone age to our own day, and see that *there is no form of art which does not also play an essential political role*. For that reason, *whenever a people have revolted in search of their fundamental rights, they have always produced revolutionary artists*. What is it then that we really need? An art extremely pure, precise, profoundly human, and classified as to its purpose. An art with revolution as its subject; because the principal interest in the worker's life has to be touched first. It is necessary that he find aesthetic satisfaction and the highest pleasure apperelled in the essential interest of his life.

Rivera emphasised that it is necessary to create that kind of art. Was it necessary to deny the classic tradition and discard modern technical means? To this, he replied: It would have been foolish to believe that in order to construct a grain elevator, or a bridge, one should not use the material and methods of constructions achieved by the industrial technique of the bourgeoisie. It is on the contrary the duty of the revolutionary artist to employ modern techniques and allow his classical education (if he had one) to effect him subconsciously. Neither was there a need to feel belittled in matter of subject. *The subject is to the painter what rails are to locomotives*. He cannot do without it after the subject is admitted as a prime necessity, the artist is absolutely free to create a thoroughly plastic form.

When he refuses to seek or accept a subject, his own

aesthetic theories and plastic methods become his subject instead. And even if he escapes them, he himself becomes the subject of his work. He becomes nothing but an illustrator of his own state of mind, and in trying to liberate himself he falls into the worst form of slavery. That is the cause of all boredom which emanates from so many of the large expositions of modern art, a fact testified again and again by most different temperaments. According to Rivera, that is the deception practised under the name of "Pure Art", two new resounding words which attest to nothing more in the works of talented men.

## Herald

As regards the Rivera Retrospective, the present writer agrees with learned Professor Emeritus Gerhard Magnus of Michigan State University, who is also an editor of the New Art Examiner, when he observes, "... Obviously any Rivera retrospective outside Mexico City comes perilously close to being a production of Hamlet without the Dane. The Mexican Revolution, as Octavio Paz, remarks so cogently, was a spontaneous revolt that revealed Mexico to Mexicans, a revelation of its subterranean life and popular culture". Mexico returned to its tradition, writes Paz, "not in order to repeat itself but rather to inaugurate another history."

To Rivera, Marxism had revealed the mythic form, says Prof Magnus, and substance of that history. Nothing in the retrospective quite calls to life what Rivera brought with him from Mexico to the US in 1931 to meet the mood of idealism and despair in the American experience at that moment. To young radicals of the early depression, capitalism had failed. The Mexican revolution seemed to herald an alternative more consonant with the American heritage than the demands of Stalin's Third International. (Ref: New Art Examiner).

It seemed to many young city and suburban radicals that the truths of Marxism could be adopted to serve both nationalism and democracy. Rivera was a herald of such possibilities.