Contributor: June Koehler Black

**Rivera, Diego**

**Born: December 8, 1886—Guanajuato, Mexico; Died: November 24, 1957—Mexico City, Mexico**

Diego Rivera was born in 1886 in the Mexican city of Guanajuato. The family relocated to Mexico City in 1892 as a consequence of the liberal politics of Rivera’s father. In the capital, Rivera was educated at the National Preparatory School and the National School of Fine Arts (formerly known as the Academy of San Carlos), where he studied under **Félix Parra**, **Santiago Rebull**, and **José María Velasco**. In 1904, he met **Dr. Atl**, who was likely the first to encourage Rivera to explore modernism. Three years later, Rivera received funding to travel to Europe. There, owing to a letter of recommendation from Dr. Atl, he enrolled at the Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. Although he was influenced by such Spanish masters as El Greco and Ignacio Zuloaga, whose works he encountered on frequent visits to the Prado, he also learned of contemporary trends in the Spanish avant-garde. Eventually, Rivera relocated to Paris, the epicenter of the European avant-garde, where he worked in the Cubist style until 1917. In 1921, Rivera returned to Mexico after receiving a commission to start work on the first mural planned for a public building in the federal district—the building was his alma mater, the National Preparatory School, for which he created an encaustic and gold leaf mural titled *Creation*. It was while painting this piece that he first met his future wife, **Frida Kahlo**. Although he had rejected Cubism years earlier, it has been argued that Rivera appropriated the Cubist conception of space in his later murals. By utilising the multifaceted, compressed, and interlocking planes characteristic of Cubism together with the naturalistic forms more common to academic art, his works represent a peculiar blend of the academic and the avant-garde.

Rivera, along with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, formed the famed Mexican muralist movement, which began in the 1920s and lasted five decades, until Siqueiros stopped painting in the early 1970s. Rivera and his contemporaries came of age during the *Porfiriato*, so-called because of its leader, dictator Porfirio Díaz. Despite Díaz’s aim to bring order and progress to Mexico, his regime was severely repressive to the large majority of the Mexican population and was characterized by extreme divisions of power, property, and wealth. Díaz’s Eurocentric notions of progress benefitted the elite, while leaving the rural masses poverty-stricken. However, with the Mexican Revolution came huge social reforms that reshaped the country; these developments also allowed for a Mexican cultural renaissance to take place. From 1492 through the early twentieth century, European influences had increasingly gained preeminence over the indigenous cultural traditions of the Americas. The advent of modernism allowed artists like Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros to incorporate indigenous themes into the contemporary formalist trends of the art world. These artists depicted the changing ideas about Mexico in their monumental works, marked by their departure from European idioms and their emphasis on indigenous, nationalist, socialist, and utopian themes.

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*Agrarian Leader Zapata*, 1931

Fresco on reinforced cement in galvanized-steel framework

The Museum of Modern Art

**http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\_id=80682**



From 1922 to the end of his life, Rivera maintained a complicated relationship with the Communist Party. Despite his occasional deviation from the Marxist program, he remained politically engaged in both his art practice and his personal life. In the early to mid-1920s, he worked with fellow artists to found the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors, which equated the work of artists with that of labourers. He also collaborated on the founding of that organisation’s militant newspaper, *El Machete*. During the 1930s, he was associated with the radical artist’s group LEAR (*Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios*—League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers). Meanwhile, his paintings and prints took up many of the same issues he was battling against in the political sphere. By the 1940s, Rivera’s fame had grown considerably within Mexico and internationally. In 1949, he was granted an important retrospective at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, which brought together nearly 2,000 of his works and established him as one of the leading voices of modernism in the Americas and beyond.

In 1952, Rivera was diagnosed with cancer; he passed away five years later. Although he had requested his ashes be united with Frida Kahlo’s, who had died in 1954, he was buried in the Rotunda of Illustrious Persons in Mexico City’s Panteón de Dolores.

**FURTHER READING:**

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**LIST OF WORKS:**

The following pieces are in MoMA’s collection:

*Young Man in a Gray Sweater (Jacques Lipchitz)*, 1914

Oil on canvas

*Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita*, 1931

Encaustic on canvas

*Sleep*, 1932

Lithograph

*Distribution of Arms*, 1928

Fresco

South wall of the courtyard of the fiestas at the Ministry of Education in Mexico City

From the same source as above:

*Partition of the Land*, 1924

Fresco

Second floor foyer, administrative building, Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico

*Detroit Industry*, 1932-33

Fresco

Detroit Institute of Arts, south wall, Detroit, Michigan

*A Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*, 1947-48

Fresco, Mexico City