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RIVERA REDEFINED:
A STUDY OF THE LATE EASEL PAINTINGS
OF DIEGO RIVERA

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RIVERA REDEFINED:
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By

Lisa Ann Mitchell

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ABSTRACT

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By

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Diego Rivera is one of the best known Mexican artists, and also one of the least known. His lifetime has seen his name make the newspapers countless times, he has made public statements extensively, and hundreds of books have been written about him. Yet, his life is full of complexities, controversies, and contradictions, and, as such, he still escapes us. There has remained around Rivera the air of a hero. While he professed support of a public art, an art that could not be owned by museums or private wealthy homes, he painted throughout his life more than 3,000 easel paintings, and sold many of them to capitalist homes in the United States. Yet, even with the knowledge of his production of many excellent easel paintings and their representation in a number of exhibitions, he is somehow still defined exclusively as a muralist to this day. Through an in-depth examination of one of these works and Rivera's artistic and political motives, this thesis attempts to introduce some balance to the definition of the painter.

To Eric, who changed my life.

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Born Diego Maria de la Concepcion Juan Nepomuceno Estanislao de la Rivera y Barrientos Acosta y Rodriguez in the declining Mexican city of Guanajuato, Diego Rivera would prove to be a very controversial and impressive painter. Called a liar by some and a weaver of tall tales by others, Rivera had a fluid relationship with the truth. Meyer Rapheal Rubinstein suggests in his article "A Hemisphere Decentered" that "against so fantastic a background [as Mexico and its history], Rivera was almost forced to invent the wildest tales for himself, or risk getting lost in the general sound and fury."[1] In the end, Rivera was far from lost. Between his many wives and lovers and his strong Marxist proclamations, Rivera led a life that remained in a constant state of turmoil. His leftist political beliefs made their way into the foreground of his art. So powerful were the socialist images he incorporated into his work, particularly his murals in both the United States and Mexico, that several were defaced, demolished or removed from their original sites. "Rivera Perpetrates Scenes of Communist Activity for RCA Walls--and Rockefeller Jr. Foots the Bill" was the headline of New York's *World Telegram* on April 24, 1933, and unusual it was not.

It is his murals for which Diego Rivera is best known. Not only are these murals the source of his fame, but he proclaimed them to be his purpose in life. Just as Rivera believed in land and equality for the people, he also believed in art for the people--not for

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[1]Meyer Raphael Rubinstein, "A Hemisphere Decentered," *Arts Magazine* 65 (1991): 68.

museums or wealthy private homes.[2] Rivera dreamed of an art that was not only accessible to the populace, but would teach the evils perpetrated by government and the glory of socialism. And his murals, with their critical depictions of Mexico's government and glorifications of Marx and Lenin, became his instrument of education. However, Rivera's subject matter was not the only thing that was revolutionary about his art. In Mexico, along with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfáro Siqueiros, Rivera revitalized the art of *buon fresco* (true fresco).

Diego Rivera is an excellent example of a twentieth-century avant-garde artist. He was heir to a discontent that developed at the end of the nineteenth century regarding the rejection of the bourgeoisie and the increasing alienation of the artist from society. Like William Morris, Leo Tolstoy, and Vincent van Gogh, who sought an art to serve a Utopian brotherhood of man, and the Brücke group of the German Expressionists, who saw art as the new religion and themselves as the new evangelists, Rivera sought to become a messenger of social change. Along with David Alfáro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, Rivera formed the "Revolutionary Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors," and their 1922 Manifesto states their intentions:

> We proclaim that this being the moment of social transition from a decrepit to a new order, the makers of beauty must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art

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[2]José Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, "Manifesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors," *Modern Mexican Art*, trans. L. E. Schmeckebier, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1939) Rpt. in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (London: The University of California Press, Ltd., 1968) 462.

> valuable to the people, and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression for individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle.[3]

Additionally, in 1938 Rivera, along with André Breton, signed Leon Trotsky's *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* which decreed,

> our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.[4]

Having seen his native Mexico raped by dictators such as Porfirio Díaz and observed his country's search for a government to replace the dictator deposed during the revolution, Rivera eventually promoted socialism as the best form of government. Although inconsistently, Rivera was active in the communist party and in the political environment in Mexico (he even claims involvement in a plot to assassinate Díaz).[5] While studying in Europe and experimenting in nearly every artistic movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--from Impressionism to Cubism--Rivera began to incorporate his political interests into his art. In 1915 while involved with Pablo Picasso and the cubist movement in Paris, he painted *Zapatista Landscape - The Guerilla.*

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[3]Orozco 462.

[4]André Breton and Leon Trotsky, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review*, trans. D. MacDonald, IV(1938): 49-53. Rpt. in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (London: The University of California Press, Ltd., 1968): 485.

[5]Diego Rivera and Gladys March, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Citadel Press, 1960) 88-9.

This painting, while fully embracing European Cubism, foreshadows his later works in his references to the Mexican Revolution through the inclusion of the Zapatista sombrero, the rifle, *serape*, and the Mexican landscape in an iconic image of the revolutionary leader, Emliano Zapata.

In 1925 Rivera explained his break with Cubism as resulting from his feeling that Cubism was an art inaccessible to the common man. He said,

> For me now, Cubism seems too intellectual, more occupied with virtuosity, with technical rarities, than with the natural fluidity of design supported by a fixed law of inner structure. That is why the characteristic aspects of Cubism gradually disappeared from my work.[6]

It is often said that it was the socialist revolution in Russia that caused him to begin questioning his work. However, this does not seem to be true--Octavio Paz, Mexican poet and critic, says Rivera abandoned Cubism,

> but not in order to embrace the still nonexistent "Socialist realism." It is errant nonsense to say that he abandoned Cubism because of his revolutionary convictions, which in turn also impelled him to break with galleries and "bourgeois art." It is impossible to find in the Rivera of those years the least trace of revolutionary political preoccupations....Only in 1924, in [his second frescoes at the Secretariat of Public Education], does he begin to paint revolutionary subjects.[7]

His abandonment of Cubism in 1917 is difficult to explain with certainty. It could be due, in part, to "l'affaire Rivera", an incident

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[6]Diego Rivera, "From a Mexican Painter's Notebook," *The Arts* 7 1 (1925): 22.
[7]Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican Art*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt, 1993) 128-9.

that "was undoubtedly a manifestation of the friction, personal and otherwise, which had begun to permeate Cubist Paris around 1917."[8] For "most Cubists were exploring other paths in those years. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Diego did not leave Cubism for social painting; nor did he venture into new territory: he went back to Cezanne."[9] Regardless, the fact is that he did abandon Cubism and the "intellectual" baggage it entailed--an event that changed the course of his artistic career. For after he returned to Mexico and became involved in the mural program of José Vasconcelos, Minister of Public Education, he came to believe that in order for people to run their lives, farms and factories, they must first understand the lessons of history. It was at this time Rivera decided to use his art--an art that must be easily understood, and therefore less "intellectual" and weighty with theory--as a tool to transfer this information to those who needed it. Furthermore, Rivera believed that a truly Mexican art was necessary in order to assist in advancing the goals of the Mexican Revolution. Thus, he began the arduous process of riding himself of European influences in an attempt to realize a truly Mexican style that could speak to a wider national audience.

It is evident that Rivera's murals were of the utmost importance to him. He often worked on them without financial profit and continued producing them without giving in to requests to tone down their political messages even at times when his murals were in

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[8]Ramón Favela, *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984) 145.
[9]Paz. *Essays* 129.

danger of defacement, demolition, or removal. Maltby Sykes, Rivera's assistant for the Hotel Reforma murals, suggests "that he still believed exactly that...the messages in his murals might change a capitalist society into a communist one."[10] Rivera professed himself a common laborer--it was his job to paint murals. He painted over 23 of them.

In addition to his magnificent and imposing murals, however, Rivera completed over 3,000 easel paintings and 25,000 drawings. The easel works can be separated into two periods: early and late. The dividing line between Rivera's early and late easel paintings coincides with the development of his mural style during the early to mid 1920s. His late easel paintings include mural studies, portraits and self-portraits, genre paintings of Mexican Indian and popular subjects, and, like his early easel paintings, experiments in many diverse styles. Each easel painting type plays a different role in relation to Rivera's overall aesthetic and political statements. His mural studies, as well as certain aspects of his genre paintings, are most directly tied to the political and aesthetic ideas discussed above in relation to the public mural commissions. The genre paintings follow the murals in their subjects--heroic peasants--and their style --direct and simplified. In addition, many of his stylistic experiments also retain the heroic peasant subject of the murals. The self-portraits and portraits, of which there were many, appear in conflict with his aesthetic and political statements. They are contradictory to his stated beliefs on the public ownership of art and

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[10]Maltby Sykes, "Diego Rivera and the Hotel Reforma Murals," *Archives of American Art* 25 (1985): 38.

rejection of art for the wealthy. In addition, they often diverge from his simplified mural style.

Although certain groups of easel paintings appear to have much in common with Rivera's murals (for example, the promotion of the heroic peasant in both genre paintings and murals), the vast majority are in fact very different. Unlike the murals, which often include hundreds of figures--each playing a specific and limited role in an overall narrative that is easily read--the easel paintings concentrate on one or sometimes two or three figures whose significance and role requires interpretation or exists without the aid of an accompanying narrative.[11] This difference between the easel paintings and murals is very significant. It establishes a difference in intent between the works and indicates that the easel works do not exist as substitutes for the murals, but rather as independent works.

While Rivera's early easel works, particularly his Cubist paintings, have been objects of significant discussion, few of Rivera's easel paintings completed after his adoption of the mural technique have received serious consideration.[12] Only Rivera's portraits have begun to be examined as independent works.[13] The vast majority of his later works, however, have consistently been ignored, dismissed as inspired by financial gain or artistic substitutes for murals, when

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[11]There do exist a relatively small number of Rivera's easel paintings that incorporate many figures into an arranged narrative, such as *América Prehispánica* of 1950, but these are the exceptions and not representative of Rivera's easel work.

[12]See Favela for an extensive examination of Rivera's Cubist paintings.

[13]See Rita Eder, "The Portraits of Diego Rivera," *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts Founders Society; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986) 197-201.

these commissions were scarce, or recognized only in relation to Rivera's murals. Discussion of them is either extremely brief: "[he] worked on a series of highly regarded paintings depicting flower vendors inspired by his own vast collection of pre-Columbian art;"[14] or as incidental inclusions in a discussion that ultimately focuses on Diego the muralist, as in the catalog for the exhibition "Crosscurrents of Modernism." This publication exemplifies a phenomenon related to the few exhibitions of Rivera's easel works wherein an exhibition of easel paintings only is transformed into an examination of his murals. Furthermore, John Milner's review "Diego Rivera at the Hayward," an exhibition of easel paintings, even apologizes for them: "The exhibition cannot, of course, convey the importance of the murals as the major achievement of Rivera's life."[15]

Yet, an in-depth examination of his easel works clearly establishes the importance, complexity and independence of the late easel works of Diego Rivera. As we will see, these paintings are interesting, complex and sincere, and stand firmly on their own merit. E. P. Richardson has called Rivera's generalized studies from life "the essence of the Mexican scene."[16] And Rivera's biographer, Bertram Wolfe, has said,

> As for Rivera, the tenderest and most lyrical sections of his work are precisely those inspired by the love of his people, by the beauty of the Mexican landscape and the life of the Mexican folk, a life which, for all its misery and poverty, is the

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[14]*Modern Arts Criticism* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991) 368.
[15]John Milner, "Diego Rivera at the Hayward," *The Burlington Magazine* 130.1018 (1988): 47-9. Rpt. in *Modern Arts Criticism* 398.
[16]E. P. Richardson, "Diego Rivera," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 12.6 (1931): 75-76.

> expression of a civilization more passionate and esthetic than rational in its quality....In the awkward grace of his Mexican children and the simple, elegant, abstracted curve of the back of one of his burden-bearers, it is not poverty we see but the tenderness of the vision of a painter who loved his country and his people.[17]

Such a description is applicable to a host of Rivera's easel works.

In addition, the critical conflicts between Rivera's stated political and aesthetic ideas and his late easel paintings have failed to be addressed. While his portraits have received some serious consideration, their contradictory relationship to his stated intentions for his art and their place in his overall artistic career has not been acknowledged nor explored. Through examination of some of Rivera's late easel paintings and a reevaluation of his artistic and political statements and motives, these conflicts can be investigated and attempts made to determine their role in his total career.

In order to introduce balance to Rivera's overall artistic career, it is essential that we view these works on their own, without constantly comparing them to and supporting them with his murals. The easel paintings must not supplant the importance of Rivera's murals, but rather be given equal balance with his murals, as characteristic of his life and career. They are magnificent works that need not rely on Rivera the muralist for justification or proof of their worth--they are worthy in and of themselves. These works have consistently been given short shrift and second class status in attempts to move on to the assumed exclusive achievement of his murals. Therefore, the intent of this study is not to lessen the

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[17]Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963) 431-2.

importance of Rivera's success as a muralist, but to give balance to his success as an artist.

In my attempt to introduce a sense of balance to Rivera's artistic career I have studied 37 of Rivera's late easel paintings and approximately 150 more in the form of reproductions. I have concentrated on American and European scholarship (with the exception of the Mexican poet and critic Octavio Paz) because, while the majority is based on Rivera the heroic muralist, the Mexican scholarship tends to promote the heroic Rivera even more.

II. *Women Selling Calla Lilies*

An extensive examination of one of Diego Rivera's easel paintings reveals their complexity and their ability to stand on their own merits. Many of Rivera's late easel paintings are part of a series depicting the flower vendors of the ubiquitous open-air markets in Mexico which he first sketched in Tehuantepec in 1922. *Women Selling Calla Lilies* of 1943 (Figure 1) is one in this series, and an analysis of its composition, style, influences and meaning provides an excellent opportunity to exhibit Diego's talent as an easel painter.

In *Women Selling Calla Lilies* the entire scene is pressed into the foreground, negating the middle- and backgrounds. Two small Indian women kneel harmoniously, backs to the viewer, in the lower corners. The center and majority of the painting is filled with beautiful fresh calla lilies that rise from a basket and dwarf the women in front of them. Behind the flowers and above the women appears the hat of a man whose hands grasp at the flowers in the basket. The scene is discomforting, for of all three figures, not one face is exposed. As is usual in Rivera's depictions of Mexican peasants, he presents anonymous figures who primarily communicate their occupation or role in life.

The flowers serve as the focal point of the composition. Rivera makes use of theatrical lighting that sets up a sharp contrast between the extremely dark background and the brightly lit pure white of the calla lilies. The intensity of light and vast space devoted to the calla lilies causes them to overpower the figures in the composition. These flowers are extraordinary in size--they tower over the women who kneel subserviently in front of them as well as

Figure 1. Diego Rivera, *Women Selling Calla Lilies*, 1943.

the standing figure behind them. In addition, space in the composition is extremely limited. There is almost no empty space--the majority having been taken up by the flowers. The figures are held rigidly in their space and seem to possess no possibility of movement. Furthermore, the size of the painting is nearly five feet high and it would generally be seen hanging above ground level, hence it rises over the average viewer and adds to the monumentality and iconic presence of the composition. The relatively large scale of the painting is not surprising considering Rivera's experience with large-scale mural painting.

While the forms are presented in a manner imitative of natural appearances, they have been stylized and simplified. The braids of the two women lay in identical u-shapes on their backs and their legs and feet are depicted in positions that are not humanly possible. The bodies have very little modeling, and instead are presented more like assemblages of geometric shapes. The contour lines are strong and hard, thereby amplifying the flatness of the figures. The draperies too, rather than revealing the presence of the bodies beneath them, are treated as decorative assemblages of shapes. Valerie Fletcher notes that "Rivera seemed to luxuriate in the opportunity to paint for beauty's sake dwelling on the patterns of shapes and lines and colors offered by the flowers..."[18]

Rivera's composition is without excess and elaboration. The simple forms and colors fulfill their functions of representation without unnecessary detail. For Diego Rivera, an artist devoted to art

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[18]Valerie Fletcher, *Crosscurrents of Modernism: Four Latin American Pioneers* (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian, 1992) 57.

for the people and for the revolution, to employ this style in his painting is not surprising. As Cesar Vallejo, a Peruvian and also a member of the communist party states, "The form of revolutionary art must be as direct, simple and spare as possible. An implacable realism. Minimum elaboration. The shortest road to the heart, at point-blank range."[19]

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[19]Cesar Vallejo, "Revolutionary Art, Mass Art, and the Specific Form of the Class Struggle," *Autopsy on Surrealism* trans. R. Schaaf (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1982) Rpt. in *Twentieth Century Art Theory* ed. Richard Hertz and Norman M. Klein (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 207.

III. *The First Ball Game*

I've come to offer you songs,
flowers to make your head spin.
Oh, another kind of flower
and you know it in your heart.

I came to bring them to you
I carry them to your house
on my back,

uprooted flowers
I'm bent double with the weight of them
for you.[20]

--Aztec love song

From very early in Rivera's painting career he had felt the influences of pre-Conquest art. He said, "...I was continuously aware of the greatness of pre-Conquest art. Within and without, I fought against inhibiting academic conventions..."[21] After he returned to Mexico in 1921, he painted his first mural, *Creation.* However, he still was not satisfied. The turning point seems to have finally come for Rivera upon his discovery of Mexico's indigenous cultural heritage. In 1921 he traveled to the Yucatán Peninsula and in 1922 to Tehuantepec, where he first sketched the flower vendors.[22] These trips introduced Rivera to Mexican peasant life and the popular arts and customs that "he thought...epitomized the virtues of indigenous Mexicans, whom he perceived as the living embodiment of their Pre-

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[20]*Flower and Song: Aztec Poems*, trans. Edward Kissam and Micheal Schmidt (London, 1977). Rpt. in Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era 1820-1980* (Milan: Amilcare Pizzi SpA, 1989) 198.
[21]Rivera. *My Art* 44.
[22]James Cockcroft, *Diego Rivera.* (New York: Chelsea House, 1991) 63-4.

Columbian forebears..."[23] Thus, Rivera began to incorporate elements of Pre-Columbian art and culture as well as contemporary Indians and their worlds that he thought so beautiful into paintings such as *The Day of the Dead* of 1925 and *Dance in Tehuantepec* of 1928. These tendencies would continue in the majority of his works for the rest of his life. In addition to his trips to ancient sites and indigenous communities, Rivera studied ancient and popular Mexican art in codices, chronicles, and collections.[24] At the time of his death Rivera had established a substantial collection of pre-Conquest objects that are now housed in Diego Rivera's Museo del Anahuacalli.[25]

The influence of pre-Columbian art on Rivera's style is apparent in many of Rivera's paintings, including *Women Selling Calla Lilies*. This influence can be seen generally in the rounded forms of the figures that are reflective of the classical qualities of Pre-Columbian sculpture, his use of the monumental style of Aztec art, and in his arrangement of space. In Aztec art, as in *Women Selling Calla Lilies*, there is "space for everything; yet also what space there is is completely filled up in an orderly manner. There is neither excessive crowding or large empty spaces. To an Aztec, large empty spaces would have suggested nothingness, chaos, and poor design."[26] Moreover, this influence becomes direct borrowing in the case of the kneeling women. In Aztec stone sculpture, the majority

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[23]Fletcher 55.

[24]Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993) 188. More generally, the entire study displays the extraordinary range of the artist's archaeological research.

[25]Betty Ann Brown, "The Past Idealized," *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts Founders Society; New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986) 139.

[26]Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York: Abrams, Inc., 1983) 87.

of which portray female deities, the second most frequently depicted figure is the Goddess with Tasseled Headdress (Figure 2).[27] The borrowings are multiple. The garments of the Aztec sculpture--the triangular shawl (quechquemitl) with tassels and the skirt--are duplicated on Rivera's women. The odd and very distinctive positioning of the feet and the kneeling position, which is the pose proper for Aztec women, are also explicit borrowings.[28] In addition, the sculpture depicts the goddess as a youthful girl, just as Rivera paints the kneeling women as small and youthful.

It should be mentioned that Rivera's practices of drawing from native sources were not received with complete support and were not considered by all to be successful or beneficial to the Mexican people. David Alfáro Siqueiros, a friend and cohort of Rivera's in his earlier years, accuses him of damaging Mexican art and blasts him for "prolific production of '*Mexican Curious*', which he defines as "...structurally an alien art dressed up in Mexican clothes."[29] He warns, "we must put all conscientious Mexican painters and sculptors on their guard against ['*Mexican Curious*'], otherwise our movement, with all its great potential, will sooner or later become a school of folk art instead of remaining faithful to the enormous and monumental artistic values vital to all important movements."[30] He then goes on to promote and praise the work of the Indian masters

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[27]Pasztory 219.
[28]Pasztory 219.
[29]David Siqueiros, "New Thoughts on the Plastic Arts in Mexico," *Art and Revolution* trans. S. Calles (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975). Rpt. in *Twentieth Century Art Theory*, ed. Richard Hertz and Norman M. Klein (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 312.
[30]Siqueiros. "New" 312.

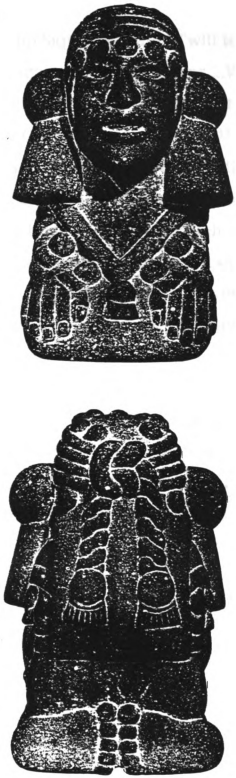

Figure 2. Aztec, *Goddess with Tasseled Headdress*, 1200-1521.

of the Americas, who Siqueiros claims "will teach us to understand the great essential masses, primary forms....We have nothing here which can teach us to paint or sculpt better than our Indian sculptures and pre-Cortesian monuments."[31] Both of these revolutionary artists, who have in the past discussed and agreed on the same goals for art, look to the same Indian masters as sources. However, there is a huge gulf between their ideas and standards of how such borrowing can truly help the Mexican people. There were others too, who did not fully appreciate Rivera's work. Some thought his works just plain "ugly" and some resented the treatment of women in his painting.

The subject of *Women Selling Calla Lilies* is typical of much of Rivera's work from the mid-1920's on, and also reveals the influence of the Aztecs on Rivera's painting. He has said "I wanted my paintings to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, through my vision of the truth, to show the masses the outline of the future."[32] Rivera began frequenting the open-air markets and sketching the activities, later to transfer the sketches into paintings such as *Flower Seller* and *Basket Vendor.* Cesar Vallejo, describing the work of the revolutionary artist, says

> The content of the artwork must be a content of the masses. The stifled aspirations, the turbulence, the common fury, the frailties and driving thrusts, the lights and shadows of class consciousness, the back-and-forth swaying of individuals within the multitudes, the frustrated potential and the heroism,

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[31]Siqueiros. "New" 312.
[32]Rivera. *My Art* 134.

> the triumphs and the vigils, the ups and downs, the experiences and lessons of every working day...[33]

Rivera, always concerned with the fate of the laboring peasants trapped in the class struggle, portrayed them as heros, as in *The Flower Carrier* of 1935 (Figure 3). As the peasant struggles to carry the huge basket of flowers, he symbolically carries the weight of the extravagances of the wealthy on his back.[34] Just as these flowers overwhelm their carrier beneath them, the calla lilies dictate the positions of the figures in *Women Selling Calla Lilies*. In the art of the Aztecs, of whom Rivera wrote:

> [The Aztecs], for whom everything, from the esoteric acts of the high priests to the most humble domestic activities, was so many rites of beauty; for whom rocks, clouds, birds, and flowers (*What is comparable to the enjoyment of the flowers for their colors and aromas? Love is but a light thing beside it,* said the people in a hymn) were motives of delight and manifestations of the Great Material,[35]

the flower is a symbol frequently used and has multiple layers of meaning (interestingly enough, the flower can also be associated with the artist himself, for certain days, one of which is the flower, were propitious for an artist's birth).[36] And three Aztec deities, Xochipilli (whom he depicted faithfully to its Aztec prototype in his Secretaría de Educación Pública mural), Macuilxochitl and Xochiquetzal, who serve as patrons of beauty, pleasure, and the arts, have specific connections with flowers. More specifically, the smelling of certain

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[33]Vallejo 207.
[34]Fletcher 57.
[35]Diego Rivera, from unpublished papers written in the early 1920s in Bertram Wolfe's possession, quoted in Wolfe 147.
[36]Pasztory 91.

Figure 3. Diego Rivera, *The Flower Carrier*, 1935.

flowers was restricted to the elite, and therefore the flower could symbolize social status.[37] As discussed above, the reference to social status in *Women Selling Calla Lilies* is clear. The scarcely exposed purchaser grabs as many of the flowers as possible. The sheer size and overflowing number of the flowers alone suggests the excess of the person who is privileged enough to enjoy them. But these flowers are not available for the peasant women to enjoy. Rather, they must support themselves by selling these flowers in the market. Just like *The Flower Carrier*, they succumb to the enormous flowers in the basket and to the burdens of social class. For the Aztecs, excess is tied to flowers through the five gods of excess, the Ahuiateteo, which included Xochiquetzal, or "Flower Quetzal", and Maccuilxochitl, or 5 Flower.[38] Also, the flower may symbolize the social masses--the "flowers of the field". Braun says, "For Rivera, Indians and flowers were synonymous....he remarked that flowers always adorn even the humblest Indian hut, and he explained this as an aspect of the Indians' natural artistry and love for color."[39]

In addition, for the Aztecs the flower could also refer to fertility or sexuality, or be used as in Aztec aristocratic poetry, where the flower is often a metaphor for blood spilled in battle.[40] These references too can be applied to *Women Selling Calla Lilies*. Before one gains an understanding of the symbolism of the flower regarding social status, the primary reference in the painting is sexual. The

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[37]Pasztory 80.
[38]Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1993) 40.
[39]Braun 245, note 44.
[40]Pasztory 80.

basket is filled not just with flowers, but with calla lilies, the form of which is very suggestive of female genitalia. The male figure stands behind the calla lilies, exposing only his hat and his hands, appearing very sinister. With these hands he reaches out and takes the calla lilies from the basket--as many as he can manage--as the women kneel subserviently before it. Ultimately, this man reaches out and takes these women sexually.

Sexual metaphor is used by the Aztecs to explain the seasonal renewal of nature--or fertility.[41] The sexual content of Rivera's depiction of the women before the large group of fresh flowers that has already been addressed above may also be accompanied by a more general reference to fertility as well. Some of Rivera's other paintings of this type make a clear reference to fertility, such as the *Flower Seller* from 1926 (Figure 4). This painting depicts an Indian woman behind a relatively small basket of mixed flowers, some of which are calla lilies. The woman sits, breast partially exposed through the flowers, nursing a baby. The positioning of the basket relative to the woman gives the appearance of her being a part of the arrangement of flowers. It is as if she is growing up out of the flowers--as if she were one of the flowers. It must be noted, however, that the general feeling of this painting is very different than that in *Women Selling Calla Lilies*, in which the sinister quality contributed by the male figure detracts from the idea of a fertility reference. Still, the underlying fertility reference, albeit less explicit, cannot be dismissed. Rivera has given to his *Women Selling Calla*

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[41]Pasztory 57.

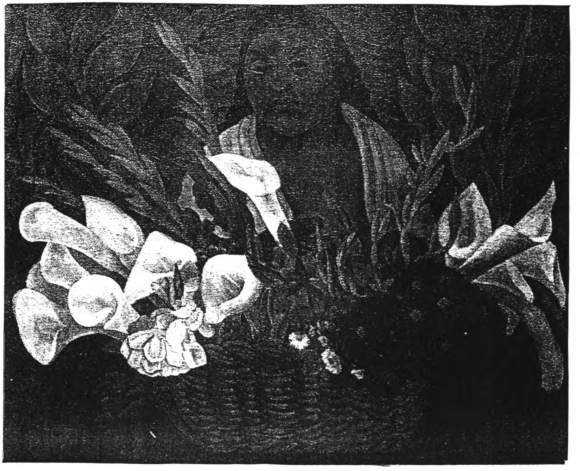

Figure 4. Diego Rivera, *Flower Seller*, 1926.

Lilies the garments, pose and youthful appearance of the Aztec Goddess with Tasseled Headdress, who was "the Aztec ideal of fertile young womanhood, the potential progentress of courageous warriors..."[42] And, flowers were an important part of harvest festivals which were presided over by these Aztec fertility goddesses.[43]

Finally, Rivera's interests in the Mexican Revolution and the turbulent history of Mexico suggest that the use of flowers as a reference to the bloodshed of battle is also feasible in *Women Selling Calla Lilies.* Rivera's murals were his means of paying homage to and teaching the masses of the heros of the Revolution and Mexican history. For in his murals "Rivera set out to celebrate...the struggling masses who fought the Revolution only to be betrayed."[44] In his Palace of Cortés murals, Rivera glorified the history of the state of Morelos and the revolutionary leader Zapata. The mural portrayed the span of time from the Spanish conquest to the revolt led by Zapata, who was assassinated by the representatives of President Venustiano Carranza, thereby ending the Morelos Commune. The Aztecs waged battles referred to as flowery wars, a concept that interested Rivera, and Barbara Braun says,

> Just as the Aztecs went to battle out of necessity, to nourish their sun god and to maintain a unified state, Rivera suggests, so have modern Mexicans had to fight wars of resistance to foreign domination: the battle of Tenochtitlan against Cortes,

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[42]H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quinones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983) 71.
[43]Braun 193.
[44]Cockcroft 64.

> 19th century wars of liberation, and the bloody 20th century revolution.[45]

Therefore, Rivera's interest in and depiction of the heros of Mexican history and the Revolution in his murals coupled with his interest in and knowledge of Aztec art and their flowery wars, suggests that it is possible that these flowers do indeed make additional references to the blood spilled in the battles of Mexico. Rivera himself said:

> But now there begins to dawn a hope in the eyes of the children, and the very young have discovered on the slate of the Mexican sky a great star which shines red and is five-pointed. Like the features on the face of the moon, there can be discerned on it a hammer and a sickle. And emissaries have come saying that it is a presage of the birth of a new order and a new law, without false priests who enrich themselves, without greedy rich who make the people die though they might easily, on what they produce with their hands, live in love, loving the Sun and the flowers again, on condition of bringing the news to all their brothers in misery on the American continent, even though for that a new Flowery War might be needed.[46]

And, "flowers were viewed as sacrificial offerings...according to some stories, Quetzalcoatl led his people to offer flowers and butterflies in lieu of human flesh."[47]

If we conclude that Rivera intended this multiplicity of levels of meaning in *Women Selling Calla Lilies*, once again a very important parallel with Aztec art is established. Esther Pasztory says that there exists in Aztec art a "...potential richness of its meaning within a restricted space. In a single image the Aztec artist could

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[45]Braun 214.
[46]Rivera, quoted in Wolfe 149.
[47]Miller 88.

express so many levels of meaning...," and thus added to its universal truth and applicability.[48]

While the specific meanings of the Aztec flower symbolism discussed above may have only been documented by scholars recently, the parallels between Aztec iconography and that which appears in Diego Rivera's paintings is so dramatic that, considering his extensive interest in Aztec life and culture, and his close study of it, the similarities hardly seem coincidental. Furthermore, we must remember the living presence of Aztec art and culture in Mexico. Unlike the United States, Mexico's heritage is very much a dual heritage. The indigenous peoples and their cultures live on in modern Mexico intermingled with European traditions. Many of these Aztec meanings then, while not officially "discovered" until later in the twentieth century, would very likely have been known to Rivera through popular oral traditions. As Octavio Paz said, "The world that Rivera's eyes saw was not a collection of museum objects but a living presence."[49]

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[48]Pasztory 89.
[49]Paz. *Essays* 280.

IV. *The Ravages of Time*

The recognition of Rivera as an accomplished easel painter gives rise to an undeniable discrepancy between his stated convictions and actual practice. The Manifesto Rivera's Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors issued in 192 stated "We repudiate the so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic;"[50] yet Rivera completed and sold many easel paintings, including *Women Selling Calla Lilies.* Why?

Although Rivera's production of "aristocratic" easel art appears to contradict his published artistic goals, many of the elements of *Women Selling Calla Lilies* and other works do conform to his aesthetic goals as established thus far. First, the messages include references to the struggles of social class and the excesses of the rich, yet at the same time give a large scale portrayal of these peasants as heros. Second, the possibility exists that Rivera makes the further reference to the heros who have lost their lives for Mexico and the revolution. Therefore, Rivera is still using art to teach a lesson--mainly, that of the struggles of the burdened peasant held down by the wealthy. Furthermore, for this painting Rivera used fiberboard--not a traditional material of permanent easel painting and thus possibly a study for another project--instead of canvas, and, as in many of his paintings, the size is nearly 5 feet--too large for the average home and in essence a mural itself. Thus in *Women Selling Calla Lilies* Rivera pulls away from traditional aristocratic easel art

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[50]Orozco 462.

and retains in a general sense the commitment to anti-aristocratic art outlined in his *Manifesto.*

Still, Rivera's easel paintings do present a paradox in his artistic character. The fact remains that it is easel art and it is purchased and displayed in wealthy private homes (frequently capitalist)--two aspects of art (and one political) that Rivera professed to be against. The monumental size of the easel paintings may seem to suggest a public quality, but their content--one or sometimes a few figures presented as individuals--is distinct from that of the narrative mural --many figures presented like words in a story.[51] In addition, Rivera's propensity for great size seems to be unrelated to any attempt to publicize the easel works. Rather, Rivera just seems to have a tendency for great size--not a few of his Cubist paintings done before his mural interest developed and sold to private patrons in gallery exhibitions measure 4 to 5 feet; and many of the numerous portraits he painted--which are typical excesses of the wealthy, painted expressly for individual pleasure and to be exhibited in private homes--exceed 5 feet in height. In addition, Rivera's choice of materials follows no definable pattern. He uses masonite for portraits like *The Milliner (Henri de Chatillon)* and many of his heroic peasants are oil on canvas.

The paradox goes beyond Rivera's painting and into his lifestyle, as demonstrated by the fact that he lived very comfortably.

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[51]This distinction can be usefully contrasted with the consistency between mural and easel painting in the work of David Alfáro Siqueiros, where both mural and easel work usually contain one to three or four figures presented in like manner--an easel painting of Siqueiros' can be translated into a mural without alteration; few of Rivera's easel paintings could be translated into a complete mural.

He had a fabulous house and studio that have been said to have been financed with capitalist money from his United States murals.[52] This is hardly what one would expect from a devoted socialist. Indeed, his devotion was doubted by some. The Communist Party thought him an opportunist for accepting the commission to paint for the walls of the National Palace, home of the offices of top government officials of Calles's dictatorship, and in 1929 the Communist party expelled Rivera for his acceptance of the directorship of the Academy of San Carlos.

Therefore, the question remains--why did Diego Rivera paint so many easel paintings?

It is clear that Rivera was dedicated to an art for the people and for the revolution. This has been exemplified by the messages, both explicit and implicit, he included in both his murals and his easel paintings, the many long hours he put into the murals--an art both for the revolution and the people--often without financial gain, and his participation in the political arenas that reflect the beliefs and goals he pronounced. Therefore, it is not an issue of his dedication to his murals, but rather one of the extent of, or motivation behind, this devotion.

Rivera's production of easel paintings may simply be a result of practicality and self-expression. During the period from 1935 to 1943, a time of prolific production of easel paintings for Rivera, there were no murals, in either the United States or Mexico, for him to paint. This lack of government walls for Rivera to paint was due in

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[52]Sykes 30.

large part to the war environment and the resulting destabilization of global economies, and it has been suggested that this situation in Mexico was due to Rivera's openly being a Trotskyist at a time when the communist party was pro-President Cárdenas.[53] Therefore, the easel paintings may very well have been a substitute for nonexistent mural commissions and the money or artistic outlet they provided. His biographer said that during this period

> ...he turned out an endless succession of sketches, oils, water colors. Sometimes he repeated himself with fatal ease. Sometimes he tackled a new esthetic problem. He found joy in his work; he sold all he could turn out; commissions showered upon him beyond even his gargantuan capacity.[54]

Being an artist and feeling the desire to paint, and being human and needing an income, Rivera had to paint *something* during this shortage of mural commissions. So, he did his best to achieve as many of the goals he had set out for his art--to be revolutionary--in material, technique, subject and style. It is as if he produced many very small murals. For he continued teaching lessons through his painting and he made many relatively large-scale works. *Women Selling Calla Lilies* and many more of his easel paintings may have been like pieces of murals that existed only in Rivera's mind.

Furthermore, financial reasons may have forced Rivera's easelwork production regardless of the availability of mural commissions. In discussing Rivera's finances Wolfe says, "...there is certainly no likelihood that he would ever grow rich from...mural ventures. Indeed, Diego had to work furiously at oils, water colors,

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[53]Cockcroft 95.
[54]Wolfe 362.

and drawings, which he sold in the United States, to make up the deficits incurred on his frescoes."[55] Therefore, it would seem as though Rivera was without a real choice in this matter--either make easel paintings to feed himself and support his murals or starve and be debt-ridden.

Part of the irony of this theory, however, is that Rivera supposedly refused to be paid highly for his murals--he insisted that the artist behave as any other laborer, and be paid accordingly.

> It was his philosophy that artists should 'work like real workmen, at a daily wage like masons or plasterers...Thus 'Art' will cease to be something for the few and the chosen, for the critics and sophisticates, and those ridiculous words will finally be erased from our language.'[56]

This refutation of the idea of the artist and his work as extraordinary served as an element of support for the ideals of public art and a rejection of traditional aristocratic art. Additionally, it was a means of denouncing the separation between himself as an artist from all other laborers. In describing the existence of the painter he said,

> We are laborers....We work from ten to sixteen hours a day, with the privilege of working on Sundays if we like! for a wage that comes to about four pesos the square *metro*. When we are absent...we do not receive pay. If I receive a little more than the others, it is because I paint more than the others, and also pay a helper...the artist needs simple food, clothing enough to protect him from the elements, a roof to cover him when he sleeps. I strongly doubt if he needs more.[57]

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[55]Wolfe 202.

[56]Sykes 35.

[57]Diego Rivera, "The Guild Spirit in Mexican Art," in an interview with Katherine Anne Porter, *Survey* 52.3 (1924): 174-8. Rpt. in *Modern Arts Criticism* 370.

Doesn't it seem improbable that this man would refuse high pay for his murals, his public art, based on the rejection of traditional art and the traditional status of the artist, only to turn to producing and selling traditional art in the form of easel paintings to compensate for money lost on mural production?

Furthermore, there is just as much evidence that Rivera did not need additional funds. Maltby Sykes, who worked as mural assistant for Rivera on the Hotel Reforma murals said:

> By any standard, and especially by Mexican standards, Rivera lived extremely well. Since he was the most publicized Marxist in Mexico, one might have expected his style of living to resemble that of an artist in a theoretically classless society such as Russia's. To the contrary, it was far above that of most artists in capitalist societies, and more closely resembled that of the capitalists themselves. Rivera's house and studio were said to have been financed by capitalist money from his mural commissions in the United States.[58]

This view of Rivera's life completely contradicts his stated philosophy that artists should "work like real workmen, at a daily wage like masons or plasterers," and it is not exceptional in its suggestion that Rivera was not financially needy. Moreover, Rivera often left unopened for years letters of payment that contained large checks issued to him.[59] Not only does this suggest that Rivera took no interest in his finances, but more importantly, that he was not in desperate need of money.

Finally, even if there was indeed a need for money behind his production of easel paintings, it may not have been solely, or even

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[58]Sykes 30.

[59]Heyden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 193.

mostly, due to the low wages of mural painting, but rather to Rivera's persistent spending. "He spent money when he felt like it, and though his and Frida's life style was relatively modest, their expenses were enormous," says Heyden Herrera, biographer of Frida Kahlo.[60] In addition to expenses for pre-Columbian idols, political organizations, and Rivera's and Kahlo's families, Frida's medical bills were costly and continuous; yet he adds that she often acquired money from others, saying, "I did not ask Diego for the check because it pained me to bother him since he is very irritated about money..."[61] Cockcroft says,

> Rivera supported his low-paying mural work by selling his paintings, watercolors, and drawings....But the money was gone almost as soon as Rivera received it. Marin [Rivera's first Mexican wife] resented his donations to the Communist party,...his frequent handouts to homeless men and women, and every dollar he spent on his beloved pre-Columbian relics."[62]

Therefore, the idea that circumstances forced Rivera into an activity he opposed--selling traditional easel paintings to wealthy capitalists --due to a basic human need for money for food and shelter, is extremely unlikely.

Additionally, the sheer quantity of easel works Rivera produced suggests that financial need was not his only motive. The sale of a few easel paintings brought Rivera a substantial income--"in 1930 alone Rivera sold more than $8,000 worth of his art to

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[60]Herrera. *Frida* 193.
[61]Herrera. *Frida* 193.
[62]Cockcroft 65.

collectors in this country."[63] And the income from his murals in the United States augmented his bank account handsomely. The RCA mural contract alone paid $21,000, and the Wolfe papers show receipts of $3,300 for mural studies for the San Francisco Luncheon Club.[64] Therefore, it is evident that if Rivera produced easel paintings for financial reasons alone, he would have had to have produced only a small fraction of the many that he actually made.

In addition to Diego's lack of interest in his financial affairs and poor or nonexistent management of his money, it seems that he thought about money only when he needed it. Rather than arrange for future income, Rivera would wait until he needed money and then sell whatever of value he possessed at the time. Herrera tells a story that illustrates this point: at one time Diego was so broke that he planned to sell a gift he had received.[65] Although clearly not substantive evidence in itself, this aspect of Diego's character, when combined with the others discussed above, certainly adds credibility to the argument that financial need was not a primary motivation for his creation of the easel paintings.

While Rivera did produce a number of paintings that were intended for sale, the majority of the easel works suggest other motivations. Of the paintings I have studied, other than portraits and self-portraits, I am aware of only one painting that was

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[63]Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1989) 272, note 27, from Frida Kahlo's catalog of Rivera's work from 1926-32 in the B.D. Wolfe papers, Hoover Inst. of War, Peace, and Revolution, Stanford Univ.

[64]First figure from Herrera, *Frida* 165; San Francisco Luncheon Club receipt figures of $1000 on 1/12, $1800 on 4/12, and $500 on 6/3, cited in Hurlburt 273, note 35.

[65]Herrera. *Frida* 399.

commissioned. And, gallery representation of Rivera's late easel works was minimal. Furthermore, many of the easel paintings themselves indicate a more complex motivation. An obvious example: the portrait of Lupe Marin from 1938. This very powerful, very intriguing depiction full of intricacies was definitely not intended for financial gain, from Lupe or anyone else. It was Rivera's study of an important person in his life. Even more indicative of the extension of Rivera's motives beyond those of a financial nature are paintings such as *Women Selling Calla Lilies.* The intricacies and profound meanings of this painting as revealed above suggest a deeper motivation behind its production. The existence of so much meaning, in both quantity and quality, in the work separates these paintings from their counterparts intended for sale. Many of the paintings that he did paint for money are obvious--the subject being something like the repeated doe-eyed Mexican children, such as *Girl With Mask* of 1939 (Figure 5) that presented the Mexico the United States patrons desired as well as the Mexican society ladies who wished to express their *Mexicanidad.*[66]

Thus, the suggestion is not that Rivera did not produce any easel paintings solely for money, but rather that sweeping statements such as "At first Rivera executed few easel paintings, but he increasingly returned to that medium to earn income because the mural projects paid very little,"[67] are gross exaggerations that diminish an entire aspect of this painter's work to a less-than-respectable status.

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[66]Eder 199.
[67]Fletcher 55.

Figure 5. Diego Rivera, *Girl With Mask*, 1939.

V. *The Milliner*

> *And future art lovers may also discover what I wish to call the "unknown" Rivera, the maker of numerous small pieces, such as sensitive pencil drawings of women, oil portraits of friends, watercolor sketches of landscapes, works that have been neglected--unfairly we hasten to add--over certain big anecdotal murals that created controversies and made good newspaper copy. These small, unambitious works provide good insight into the man Rivera. They indicate that, despite all the bragging and self-advertising and shouting, he must have been a rather lovable monster, this Gargantua who was able to retain the love of many a woman, the friendship of such gentle individuals as Modigliani, Lipchitz, and Elie Faure, and the respect of critics, including some who, while not sharing his political ideas, could not help admiring the zest and versatility of his genius.*[68]

Diego's mature easel paintings--those done after he developed his mural style in the mid-1920s--are today still a part of the "unknown" Rivera. They have been largely ignored in the literature on Rivera. Yet, as we have seen, these complex and sincere paintings stand firmly on their own merit--and in order to recognize the true balance of Rivera's overall artistic career, it is essential that we view them as complete and independent works. While not supplanting the importance of Rivera's murals, the easel paintings must cease to be recognized soley in comparison to and as supported by his murals.

In the end, the perceived importance of a whole host of Rivera's easel paintings depends on overcoming two things: the

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[68]Alfred Werner, "Diego Rivera and His Mexico," *The Antioch Review* 20.1 (1960): 88-100. Rpt. in *Modern Arts Criticism* 390.

dominating position continuously given the murals and the existence of the repetitious easel paintings produced for money.

Critical to achieving that end is a need to clarify what motivated Rivera to create the easel paintings. It might be suggested that his wife, artist Frida Kahlo, influenced his production of easel paintings. This is possible, especially when Diego's desire for attention is considered. When Kahlo was "discovered" by André Breton, she very quickly became the recipient of a great deal of attention. Rivera, so accustomed to being the famous member of the household may have desired the attention she now received. For he did go so far as to experiment in his wife's area and paint several Surrealist works during this time.

However, this does not seem to be a feasible answer as to Rivera's easel production. He had been producing numbers of easel paintings long before Frida began receiving such praise. In addition, it was Rivera who "encouraged (even cajoled) her to keep on painting in spite of the misery of the numerous surgical operations..."[69] And,

> He also pushed her to show and sell her work. Rivera's support of her art was absolutely essential to Kahlo's continuing artistic endeavor....Rivera often told friends that Kahlo was a better painter than he was--no doubt his praise was lavish because her painting and the scale of her ambition was so distinct from, and so much smaller than, his own.[70]

Furthermore, Kahlo's attitude seemed to have promoted a peaceful atmosphere regarding their work: "...perhaps in part because she did

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[69]Heyden Herrera, "Beauty to His Beast: Frida Kahlo & Diego Rivera," *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership* ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1993) 121.
[70]Herrera. "Beauty" 122.

not want to compete with Rivera, she frequently spoke of her work in diminishing terms, as if it were an amusing pastime. She acted surprised when people took an interest in it, and purchases astonished her."[71] Thus, a competitive attitude between the two does not seen to have been a contributing factor to Rivera's easel production. In addition, it seems doubtful that Rivera would have painted easel paintings in order to compete with his wife and divert some of the attention she was receiving, when he did not publicly promote his easel paintings.

Consideration of the easel paintings themselves yields many indications to the motivation behind their production. While his easel works included preparations or studies for murals--subjects and even entire compositions appear in both--the purpose of the majority of his easel paintings surely went beyond mural preparation into artistic expression and experimentation. It seems highly improbable, if not impossible, that this artist, who had such a passion for experimentation--as exemplified by his early years, and especially his time in Europe--was willing or able to discontinue all experimentation once he found his purely Mexican art for the people. Rather, his portraits and self-portraits, genre paintings, and trials in alternative styles suggest an artist hungry to experiment--and an artist of great versatility successful in making very powerful works. Easel paintings, especially portraits, provided Rivera with the opportunity to explore issues of style, space and particularly form. While portraits are almost always commissioned and may therefore

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[71]Herrera. "Beauty" 122.

seem unlikely arenas for experimentation, Rivera explores variations in representation of form and space more often than not. It may be that the inherent unpopular quality of the portrait freed Rivera from his simplified, easy to read, public style. In his portraits he concentrates on aspects of the sitter's essential character and emphasizes them, achieving a very powerful representation through exaggerated form. In the *Portrait of Lupe Marin* from 1938 (Figure 6) he experiments with space through the introduction of a mirror behind the sitter that reflects the light of a window on the opposite side of the room. In form, he takes advantage of artistic licence and portrays her strong, intriguing character by depicting her hands as unusually large and her eyes as strangely transparent.

Needless to say, Rivera's deviation in portraiture from his unelaborated, easy-to-read mural style is substantial. Yet Rivera extends this experimentation even further in easel paintings such as *The Hands of Dr. Moore*, 1940 (Figure 7) and *Peasants* of 1947 (Figure 8). In *Peasants* Rivera abandons the geometric and utterly solid forms of his style for the people in favor of dissolved, fluid forms. *The Hands of Dr. Moore*, an even more radical departure, exemplifies Rivera's experimentations with Surrealism stimulated by the visit of André Breton to Mexico. Through Rivera's depiction of forms as both human and plant, he presents an investigation into the unreal and illogical. Such Surrealistic works not only reveal Rivera's explorations into the means of representation, but into theories of art that are entirely different and even in direct opposition to those he promoted. Aside from experiments in form and style, he also prodigiously explored issues of content and composition. Paintings in

Figure 6. Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Lupe Marin*, 1938.

Figure 7. Diego Rivera, *The Hands of Dr. Moore*, 1940.

Figure 8. Diego Rivera, *Peasants*, 1947.

his vendor series, as with many of his genre paintings, which generally retain the forms of his mural style, push past the easily read narrative of his murals and into complex content and composition, as exemplified by *Women Selling Calla Lilies.*

Rivera's easel works have often been characterized by such terms as "boring" and "repetitious", thereby suggesting that he experimented very little. However, for such a prodigious painter some repetition is bound to occur. It is his successes that count--and there are many.

Effective investigation of what impelled Rivera to produce easel paintings requires an examination of his rejection of that art form. Considering Rivera's passion for experimentation, it is possible that Rivera never intended his statements repudiating easel painting to be taken so literally. Not only does the possibility exist that he intentionally exaggerated in order to make his point (which, given Diego's propensity for weaving attention-grabbing tales, does not seem at all unlikely), another entirely distinct issue rests in the interpretation of what he proclaimed. Translation must be considered. For example, the translation of the Manifesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors cited above, reads as "We repudiate the so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic," while another source translates it as "We reject so-called Salon painting and all the ultra-intellectual salon art of the aristocracy and exalt the manifestation of monumental art because

they are useful."[72] While the difference between the translations may appear slight, it is not negligible. The rejection of Salon painting is a broader-based rejection of academic painting; while the rejection of Salon painting does not necessarily mean a rejection of easel painting, a rejection of easel painting would most definitely entail a rejection of Salon painting. His promotion of public mural painting and repeated denunciation of artwork for museums and wealthy private homes does imply a rejection of Salon painting, but the relationship of such statements to technical medium is still unclear. For example, Rivera rejects the traditions of art and instead promotes a revolution in art, yet he bases his revolutionary art for the people on a very traditional medium, buon fresco.[73] So, if the very basis of his revolutionary public art is traditional technique, the probability of his rejection of "easel art" as technique diminishes.

Rather, the basis increasingly seems to be one of relationship to the bourgeoisie. When Rivera rejected easel art, maybe what he was referring to was the art that appealed to the bourgeois mind: that which reflected "European bad taste." In the Manifesto, the statement that follows the rejection of "easel art" is, "We believe that any work of art which is alien or contrary to popular taste is bourgeois and should disappear because it perverts the aesthetic of our race."[74] And when he rejects things bourgeois, he seems to be

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[72]David Alfáro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, et al, "Manifesto of the Union of Mexican Workers, Technicians, Painters and Sculptors," *El Machete* (Mexico City), 1923. Rpt. Ades 324.

[73]It is true that Rivera experimented with cactus juice mediums for mural painting in an attempt to emulate pre-Columbian wall painting, however, these experiments proved unsuccessful, and he ultimately relied on the true fresco technique of the Italian Renaissance.

[74]Siqueiros. "Manifesto" 324.

rejecting things European--it was the middle class who preserved and practiced a European art while the Indian preserved and practiced pre-Hispanic art. And this preference for things Mexican, and therefore Indian, and rejection of things European was the basis of the modernist movement in Mexico after the Revolution of 1910. Recall that this was the basis of Rivera's art as well--he worked to rid himself of his European influences and replace them with those of peasant life and popular arts and those of their pre-Columbian ancestors. And when he discusses the attributes of this "Indian aesthetic" versus that of the bourgeois, he defines what it is that makes it preferable:

> It is a profound and direct expression of a pure art in relation to the life which produced it, a relation not obscured by petty cults, or corrupted with theories. It is produced whole and elect from the natural sources of art, human experience and human emotion grounded in a spacious sense of beauty."[75]

Given his love of the Mexican people, maybe his "art for the people" meant something more than just murals, but an art *of* the people--the people as the subject, the style of the people and pre-Columbian civilizations. Therefore, what he rejected was not strictly the form "easel art", but the art of the bourgeois: the traditional, pretty art--"women with useless white hands"--that was preferred in Mexico at the time (Figure 9)[76].

While the reasons behind Rivera's repudiation of easel art escape clear definition, the more private associations of that art form

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[75]Rivera. "From" 21.

[76]Rivera's own *Head of a Woman* of 1898 reflects the traditional training of the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico.

Figure 9. Diego Rivera, *Head of a Woman*, 1898

he publicly rejected (its private ownership and selective audience) remained a part of his life and work. The existence of this other side of Rivera, one that does not comply with his public persona, establishes two distinct facets to the artist and his art. Publicly, Rivera was a vocal powerhouse who made his position and intentions very clear. However, there is another side to Rivera that he, and most everyone else, disregarded publicly. His public statements, which were many, were overwhelmingly reserved for his murals--his public art. There are exceptionally few instances where even the existence of any easel paintings is suggested. Yet numerous easel works occupied an enormous amount of Rivera's time and gave extensive expression to his talent. It is as though Rivera defined his murals as his work and easel paintings became something he did in a more private vein. It seems that an artist who publicly denounced art for wealthy private homes and then proceeded to paint easel paintings and then sell them into private homes, would eventually feel the need, or be forced, to defend himself. However, Rivera never did, and it seems no one ever asked him to. By so boldly offering up certain controversial aspects of his life and work and concentrating his own statements on his murals, he seems to have been able to direct all attention to those areas. It appears as though Rivera himself separated his activities into those that were available for public attention and those that were not. It was his murals that he promoted and for which he was known, and therefore they were his work; when asked about his "painting", both he and the inquirer knew it was the murals that were the topic.

This leads to the issues of why there was such a separation in the work of Diego Rivera. Interestingly, the art of the Aztecs, a highly stratified society, was divided along the same kind of lines as Rivera's. The art for the general public was more simplified when compared to other aspects of Aztec art that were effective only for the elite because of their metaphoric and many-leveled meanings--only a schooled aristocracy and priestly class could interpret and understand these images.[77] Rivera's easel paintings--genre paintings, portraits, and stylistic experiments--reflect this selective effectiveness. A comparison of a genre painting like *Women Selling Calla Lilies* to Rivera's murals provides a good example of this aspect of his artwork. Unlike the murals, which were intended for public observation and were therefore restricted to a content that could be easily read and understood, the easel painting, which involved a smaller and more sophisticated audience, could incorporate many levels of meaning within the outward composition.

Another possible contributing factor lies in the application of male and female stereotypes. Heyden Herrera suggests that in comparing the artwork of Diego to that of his wife, Frida Kahlo, "their approaches to work follow male and female stereotypes that prevailed in Mexico...at that time. Rivera liked to think of himself as both a disciplined worker (a painter, he said, is a worker among workers) and a demiurge;"[78] and,

> Again following cultural stereotypes about differences between men and women, she [Frida] was more personal and saw the

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[77]Pasztory 89.
[78]Herrera. "Beauty" 121.

> world in relation to herself, specifically in relation to her body. He took in the world with his erudite and deeply curious mind, transforming what he saw according to his elaborate political mindset.[79]

If the introduction of prevailing stereotypes can help explain the differences between the expected ideal work of men and that of women, then those same ideas may also help illuminate the forces behind Diego's dual artistic expression. Social forces may have encouraged Diego to lessen the importance of the aspect of his work that was less fitted to social expectation, while emphasizing that which was.

In considering the issue of the separation of Diego's artwork, a final, and most important, factor must be considered--Diego's opportunism. With his rejection of an academic style of painting and his controversial political declarations, Diego stirred up many emotions and raised such an uproar that he became extremely well known. He said, "The loud voiced quarrelling of our critics had this effect: the public began to hear of our work, and painting became a current issue for the first time in several centuries."[80] And his biographer said, "He took the issues and the aspirations of art from the studio to the street, made them a subject of newspaper headlines, parlor conversation, music-hall satire;"[81] but Diego did more than that--he made himself a subject of newspaper headlines, parlor conversation, music-hall satire.

As such, we must address a very important question: was Diego's fame just a beneficial by-product of his controversial

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[79]Herrera. "Beauty" 126.
[80]Rivera. "Guild" 177.
[81]Wolfe 429.

convictions? Or was such an outcome part of the intended purpose of those convictions?

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that it was the radical ideology that was in service of the artist and not the other way around. When asked whether Rivera's influence played a role in the change of the Muralist movement toward more and more Marxist positions, Octavio Paz answered,

> No. Diego was extremely astute and made haste to go along with the tide of opinion. To make this point clear, one need only recall that he returned to Mexico in July of 1921, after the Muralist movement had already begun, and that the subjects of his first murals, in the Bolivar Amphitheater and in the Secretariat of Public Education, were mythological allegories and representations of popular life.[82]

While these representations of popular life eventually gave way to more outwardly revolutionary subjects in his murals, they continue in his easel painting throughout his life. Paz also adds that "...the artists did not trust Rivera, who thirsted for publicity and had no real relationship to the revolutionary movement in Mexico..."[83] It was 1924, three years after Rivera's return to Mexico and four years after the end of the revolution, before *El Machete*, an artist's publication that soon became an instrument of communist propaganda, was first edited and published by Rivera and others, and Rivera joined the Communist Party. Paz says, "With characteristic exuberance, he put out an abundance of declarations of principle, laid down articles of faith and fulminated anathemas

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[82]Paz. *Essays* 136.
[83]Paz. *Essays* 140.

against what he had loved and thought only a few months before."[84] Thus, Rivera took advantage of a situation developing around him, rather than actively creating the situation.

Rivera's tendency for contradictory actions and statements is one that continues throughout his life and has made the construction of any clear and accurate image of him nearly impossible. Diego is, to say the least, a difficult character to get a handle on: he repudiated easel painting, yet he painted over 3,000 of them; he said an artist was a common laborer (he even made a point to wear workers overalls) and only needed money for food and shelter, yet he had a very modern double home for he and Kahlo, built an incredible museum, acquired a substantial collection of pre-Columbian objects and spent money freely; he claims to have been involved in fighting in the Mexican Revolution, when in fact, he was in Europe during the whole period of the revolution; he claims to have determined socialism's superiority while in Europe and that he returned to Mexico already decided on a revolutionary art for the people, yet when he return to Mexico he was actually at a stylistic loss, and the mural movement was already underway and the idea had been one promoted even earlier by Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl). Rivera has made many claims such as these that simply do not hold up. His autobiography *My Art, My Life* reads more like intriguing fantasy than even a creative account of his actual life. But this too, is in keeping with Diego's character--he was an incredible story teller.

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[84]Paz. *Essays* 140-1.

> He was a marvelous inventor of tall tales and fantasies. His fondness for inventing fictions could lead him, however, to outright lying and even to things with weightier consequences ...Rivera's [political career] was lamentable and inconsistent.[85]

Beyond accepting this aspect of Diego's character and realizing that we cannot take everything he says as fact, we, as *notreamericanos*, must not make the mistake of too easily judging him based on our cultural standards. While taking care not to define Rivera as an individual in terms of a whole cultural model, the cultural circumstance must be considered. For example, in his study of the individuality of his native Mexico and the Mexican character, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz associates lies with self-protection and manliness. He says,

> ...our mechanisms of defense and self-preservation are not enough, and therefore we make use of dissimulation, which is almost habitual with us....We tell lies for the mere pleasure of it, like all imaginative peoples, but we also tell lies to hide ourselves and to protect from intruders. Lying plays a decisive role in our daily lives, our politics, our love-affairs and our friendships, and since we attempt to deceive ourselves as well as others, our lies are brilliant and fertile, not like the gross inventions of other peoples....At first the pretense is only a fabric of inventions intended to baffle our neighbors, but eventually it becomes a superior--because more artistic--form of reality.[86]

And Diego's tales most certainly are a more artistic form of reality. In fact, although he confuses us continuously, he deserves our admiration and respect, for he truly was an artist with words as well as paint.

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[85]Paz. *Essays* 163.

[86]Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985) 40.

However, the existence of Diego the opportunist, willing to manipulate a situation to his benefit, is exemplified by aspects of Rivera's character in addition to the suspect relationship of his controversial convictions and his fame. Wolfe said,

> It was characteristic of Diego to give battle precisely on that ground where the attack was most furious and the defense most difficult. Aztec civilization was denounced above all because of its rite of human sacrifice, so it was precisely that, as devil's advocate, he chose to glorify it.[87]

Therefore, the implication is that it was characteristic of Diego to go to the extreme, to intentionally emphasize the most threatening and controversial ideas for the sake of controversy. If it was in keeping with his character to glorify the Aztec practice of human sacrifice precisely because it was the basis for the denunciation of Aztec civilization and his defense of it would therefore be shocking, it is just as likely that his praise of the controversial socialist ideology was based on the resulting conflict. And upset he did; and he reaped the benefits from his notoriety. Rivera's show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

> not only received critical acclaim, it also drew the highest attendance of any exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art to that time. By January 27, 1932, when it closed, 56,575 people had paid admission to see it, and the dean of New York art critics, Henry McBride, had described the artist in the *New York Sun* (December 26, 1931) as "the most talked about man on this side of the Atlantic."[88]

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[87]Wolfe 148.

[88]Herrera. *Frida* 131.

The Mexican Revolution provided Rivera with a situation that he was able to use to his benefit. The time was perfect for a Diego Rivera--for a cultural hero. The Mexican revolution was a nationalistic and agrarian revolt, not an ideological revolution; it had no clear, single political solution as had the Russian Bolshevik revolt.[89] In Mexico, a highly charged post-revolutionary environment in search of something followed the ten year revolt. The Russian Revolution offered up communism, which became a seemingly perfect answer for those who knew it only slightly and saw no viable alternatives. "The Marxism of Rivera and his comrades has no other meaning than that of replacing the absence of philosophy of the Mexican Revolution with an international revolutionary philosophy."[90] One must remember that there was no corresponding social or historical reality in Mexico to Rivera's professed ideas. Mexico was not communist, nor was the government that hired him to paint his murals. "To understand the decision of those who adopted the *Bolshevik* version of Marxism we must remember that in those years the image of the Russian Revolution appeared on the historical horizon as an event destined to change the fate of humanity.[91]

It seems clear that Marxism was not quite as meaningful to Diego as he professed. In fact, Wolfe suggests that he did not even really know what Marxism meant:

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[89]Paz. *Essays*, 114. Paz suggests that the Mexican Revolution was not a revolution, but rather a revolt--a popular uprising made up of many different agendas.

[90]Paz, from an essay originally published in 1950, quoted in *Essays*, 144.

[91]Paz. *Essays* 146-7.

> None of the painters ever took the trouble to study the writings of the Marx and Lenin whose names on occasion they invoked....All that Diego ever knew of Marx's writings or of Lenin's, as I had ample occasion to verify, was a little handful of commonplace slogans which had attained wide currency.[92]

Rather, this suggests that Marxism was not a passion of Rivera's, but more of an invocation of words he knew represented very powerful and threatening ideas, as well as an option to fill Mexico's political void.

> In the Mexico of the Twenties, Rivera became a Communist, not because he had read *Das Kapital* or Lenin's theoretical writings and found himself to be in agreement with them, but because the Communists in this backward, demoralized, and impoverished country appeared to be the only ones anxious and able to fulfill the vast promises made by the national revolution of 1910.[93]

It seems that if one truly believed in Marxism as passionately as Rivera indicated he did, he would have read its basic philosophy and been much more familiar with it. If, on the other hand, one was merely interested in keeping up with what seemed fashionable or evoking passionate responses, then familiarity with a few catch-phrases would do. Additionally, it seems as though Diego's support of communism had more to do with his rejection of the bourgeois aesthetic.

> That at times he confused the Mexican Revolution with the excitements of anarchist and socialist ideological fragments picked up in café conversations in Madrid and Paris is not surprising. Diego was not the only painter in Paris, nor in St. Petersburg either, to confound the studio-and-café revolutions aimed at upsetting, astonishing, defying, the 'bourgeois' with

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[92]Wolfe 419.
[93]Werner 387.

> Lenin's hatred of the bourgeoisie or determination to liquidate whole classes of men.[94]

Rivera's lack of familiarity with communist ideology is to a large extent exemplified by his subscription to it. Ironically, the artistic freedom Rivera enjoyed in both subject and style was possible specifically because the government that patronized him was not communist. Only because the Communist Party did not conquer Mexico was Rivera able to paint in such un-Communist fashion and continue to call himself a communist painter.[95] Yet, communism and communism in conjunction with the Mexican Revolution did provide Rivera with opportunities specifically in his role as an artist. The nineteenth century had transformed the position of the artist into one of isolation and economic insecurity. As such, the concepts of artists banding together and state patronage became desirable--and "communism" could provide both. In addition, the Mexican Revolution had impoverished the oligarchy and thereby destroyed the market for easel paintings.[96] While at Rivera's exhibition in 1910 nearly all his paintings were sold, "in 1920 painters could find no other Maecenas except the state...If a painter wanted to paint, he was obliged to rely on the government, the universal patron."[97] The market for easel paintings was not replenished until the proliferation of the middle class after World War II when between the years 1950 and 1960, the Mexican public began to interest itself in the acquisition of works of art.

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[94]Wolfe 418-9.
[95]Wolfe 421.
[96]Paz. *Essays* 150.
[97]Paz. *Essays* 150-1.

The ideas Rivera professed were radical ones, they were controversial and attention-grabbing. As he himself said, the media sensation caused by his radical statements and elements in his art got people talking about art and about him--something his story-telling and eventful personal life suggest he valued highly. Much to his credit, it worked! For almost 40 years since his death, and even before that, he has been largely made out to be a radical, a near saint who worked for the betterment of the life of the Mexican people.[98] He claimed anonymity, that he was just a worker, yet he was one of the most colorful, well-known personalities of Mexico of the time--"...he was the most publicized Marxist in Mexico..."[99] However, he was more full of claims and proclamations than action. For example, while Rivera often falsely claimed to have fought in the Mexican Revolution, his fellow muralist, Siqueiros, who also had a very colorful personality, actually had.

This is not to say that his deception was ill-willed. Indeed, he painted very impressive murals in Mexico for little financial reward; and Lupe Marin confirms his contributions of money to the homeless. Artistically, it was a time that called for something radical and for the people--what the revolution was about, recognizing Mexico and its past--a large part of which were the Indian peasants who had been denied, suppressed. The mural movement provided a solution, and therefore was successful. Easel painting at that time, in that place, just could not provide equal effectiveness because of its

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[98]There are numerous accounts of Rivera's life that portray him as such. A recent example is the video produced by The Detroit Institute of Arts for the 1986 retrospective.

[99]Sykes 30.

private nature (being displayed in homes or museums rather than in public places) and aristocratic and European associations.

VI. *Flower Day*

While the Mexican Revolution did not provide an answer in the form of any particular political ideology, it did bring forth new social circumstances. In 1920 a Mexico hidden beneath years of European imitation reemerged. Since the Spanish Conquest the visual arts, literature, and social customs in Mexico all tried to emulate the European example. Octavio Paz calls the Mexican Revolution "the discovery of Mexico by Mexicans."[100] It was the discovery and embracing of popular and traditional Mexico; the replacing of things European with things Mexican--it became the traditional songs and dances that were taught to schoolchildren, and popular art that was praised. The Minister of Public Education, José Vasconcelos, invited artists--dancers, painters, writers, musicians--to participate in the creation of this new Mexico. He believed in the mission of art and was committed to a mural program to arouse Mexican aesthetic sensibilities.

> If in several decades the Mexican Revolution has not accomplished much else, this much it has accomplished: the reversal of some of the social consequences of the Spanish Conquest and the rise of the Indian to full citizenship in his country. And this, it seems to me, leads us to the essence of Rivera's painting in Mexico, not in his murals alone but in most of his easel paintings and drawings, as well.[101]

It is these revised ideas about Mexico that are truly at the heart of Rivera's work. Just as his country shed its European façade, Rivera strove to drive the European influences from his art and replace them with Mexican elements. And with his truly Mexican art

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[100]Paz. *Essays* 114.
[101]Wolfe 416.

"...he was sufficiently optimistic to believe that he and his friends might be able to uplift the 'man in the street' by giving him the proper food for his eyes: wholesome, yet also well cooked, of a good quality, while also easy to digest."[102] While not a true communist or even dedicated exclusively to public art as he claimed, Rivera did indeed have a passion for his public art: he wished to uplift the peasants, the folk of Mexico he so dearly loved. For even if it could be proved that Rivera was a loyal supporter of communism, one would have to ask what his idea of it was--what did it mean to him, what was he really supporting? We have already seen that he was not very familiar with communist ideology--he had never studied its philosophy and knew only a few catch-phrases. Considering this lack of specific knowledge of communist doctrine, it is not unlikely that a creative man like Diego filled in the gaps in his understanding of communism himself. So, when he promoted communism chances are that whatever he was promoting is not what we understand communism to be. What was he promoting? My research leads me to conclude it was the Mexican Indian.

Rivera's opportunism and questionable understanding of and support for communism are countered by his genuine concern for the Mexican Indians and their struggle, and a true love for them--past and present. They were his real motive--not socialism, as he professed so adamantly. Frida Kahlo said, "No words can describe the immense tenderness of Diego for the things which had beauty....He especially loves the Indians...for their elegance, their beauty, and

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[102]Werner 388.

because they are the living flower of the cultural tradition of America."[103] When Rivera was at an artistic loss upon his return to Mexico, it was his discovery of the culture and art of the Mexican Indians, past and present, that inspired him. This was indeed a subject near enough to his heart and interesting enough to his mind to have propelled him to study it in depth. Unlike Marxist philosophy, no one could ever accuse Diego Rivera of not being knowledgeable about pre-Columbian art and culture. He did, however, find so much interest in the subject that his knowledge and admiration became blind idealization, and he ignored the exploitation, fanaticism and hieraticism of the Aztecs. But this tendency of Rivera's was tied to his ideas of utopia about the future --ideas based on pre-Columbian civilization, not on Marxism. As his biographer said, "Rivera's true Prometheus is not Marx but Quetzalcoatl," and as such, Rivera's political leanings appear to more like those of a populist rather than a communist.[104] Thus, the implication is that Diego, whether out of his interest in furthering his own personal cause or out of simple ignorance, translated his true interest, the Mexican Indians, into the prevalent philosophies of the time. And this Rivera, the populist, is the man revealed more often, more passionately, and more sincerely in the painting of this enigmatic personality.

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[103]Frida Kahlo, unpublished writing quoted in Wolfe 432.
[104]Wolfe 428.

VII. *Sunsets*

This examination of the late easel paintings of Diego Rivera and their place in his overall career has produced a complex picture of a complicated artist. Rivera has proved to be a very accomplished easel painter as well as muralist. His stated political and aesthetic ideas have been both confirmed by his production of public murals for low pay and denied by his production of commissioned society portraits. And, while many of his easel works stand in direct confrontation to his professed political and aesthetic ideas and therefore give rise to a rift in Rivera's work, the nationalism inherent in so many of his paintings, both mural and easel, reunites the works on another level.

Consequently, it is evident that Rivera's works exist in two separate realms that meet and share elements at one point and diverge at the next. For although the celebration of national heritage and the Mexican Indian are the major threads that underlie both the murals and easel paintings of Diego Rivera and thereby suggest continuity in his work, several critical issues remain. First, the significant conflict between his stated beliefs and intentions for his art and his actual practice, still exists. Second, there are aspects of Rivera's artwork in which this continuity is not in evidence. For example, his portraits and Surrealist works do not contain the same populistic messages.[105] Finally, and most importantly, the

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[105]Although it may be argued that Surrealism is very much a part of Mexican heritage based on the prevelance of the "fantastic" in Mexican art, I would argue that the so-called "fantastic" in Mexican art and European Surrealism are not nearly as closely related as typically presented. For a critical introduction into the relationship of "fantastic" art and Surrealism see Mari

differences in content between the murals and easel paintings establish diverging intents for the two art forms that cannot be ignored. While many of Rivera's easel paintings can be tied to his murals through the nationalism present in both, the content of the easel works--few figures presented as individuals rather than one of many playing a specific and limited role in an overall narrative that can be easily read, and the existence of many levels of meaning requiring interpretation--separates them. Thus, content establishes that the easel paintings of Diego Rivera are distinct from his murals and do indeed exist as independent works--complete and significant in and of themselves.

Diego Rivera was a painter and a man closely tied to Mexico and its people. More importantly, he was not only a product of his country, but of the post-revolutionary environment in which his country was immersed. And it was this post-revolutionary environment that is ultimately responsible for the development of the Mexican Mural Movement. During his lifetime Rivera, for whatever reason, very forcefully defined himself as a muralist, and that label has stuck to this day, seemingly without question. The definition of Rivera as exclusively a muralist was very well suited his time and place in history. However, to limit our view of Rivera's work today to what was popular and appropriate then, is to deny ourselves the whole new and very powerful experience of seeing

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Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'the Fantastic': Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art" *Art Journal* Winter (1992): 60-8.

Mexico and its people through the eyes of one of its most devoted admirers.

Although the criticism of Rivera's works has undergone great change--where early criticism concentrated on the controversial ideological content of his works, the more recent focus has shifted to his style and content as far as pre-Columbian and popular influences--an appropriate balance between the two facets of the artist and his work has yet to be established. Serious examination and recognition of Rivera's easel paintings as independent works has only just begun--and such examination promises to be an adventure just as exciting as that of Diego Rivera the muralist.

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