
Book Review: *Diego Rivera's America*

Diego Rivera's America, edited by James Oles. Oakland: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with University of California Press, 2022. 281 pages. Hardcover \$60.00.

The exhibition *Diego Rivera's America* confronted the historical and cultural gravity of the Mexican artist's representation of America's past and present. Curated by James Oles with Maria Castro, it was seen at SFMOMA (July 16, 2022–January 2, 2023) and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas (March 11–July 21, 2023). It featured over one hundred fifty of Rivera's paintings, portable frescoes, and illustrations, all of which are documented in this catalog of the same name. As Oles states in the exhibition catalog, *Diego Rivera's America* corresponds with Rivera's understanding of "America" as a hemisphere and "invites audiences to reflect on commonalities" rather than on the "tensions created by political borders or narrow definitions of territory and identity" (13). The ten-panel, 1,600-square-foot portable fresco *Pan American Unity* (1950), which was installed on the first floor of SFMOMA and on view free to the public, inspires both exhibition and catalog. Produced for the Golden Gate International Exposition and painted in San Francisco in front of a live audience, *Pan American Unity* makes visible Rivera's hemispheric vision of America. The mural represents the American experience through an optimistic modernist lens and simultaneously attempts to demonstrate America's deep-rooted historical and cultural foundations.

At the exhibition entrance at SFMOMA, visitors were greeted by a mural map of the United States and Mexico, outlining the geopolitical territory of the two countries without visible borders. The map traced locations where Rivera observed Indigenous customs and produced murals. The exhibition itself, though, framed the installation around his time in San Francisco with a hemisphere-conscious perspective of social, political, and cultural relations between the two countries as the core theme.

Audiences engaged with artworks that have rarely been viewed together, and the exhibition featured effective representations of in situ murals from San Francisco and

Mexico City that were projected on walls throughout the exhibition, as well as *Still Life and Blossoming Almond Trees* (1931) and *Pan American Unity*, two carefully transported and installed portable frescos. One captivating aspect was the display of murals alongside concept drawings. The first gallery included a video recording of musicians playing in front of Rivera's first fresco in Mexico City, *Creation* (1923). Also notable was a gallery dedicated to the artist's costume and backdrop designs for the ballet symphony *H.P.* (short for horsepower), performed in 1932—Rivera's production of artworks for theater is infrequently exhibited and seldom explained. Two costumes designed by Rivera and fabricated by Mexican puppeteer Toztli Abril de Dios, *Banana* and *Tobacco*, stood alongside his watercolor sketches for the costumes and the backdrop. The inclusion of a rich combination of media provided a new perspective on his inventiveness and range.

The catalog is a comprehensive guide to Rivera's most productive years, from 1912 to 1940. Beyond the artwork reproductions, it contains nine chapters and thirteen brief entries that explain Rivera's artworks in the context of his politics and personal life. Contributors include Mexican scholars Sandra Zetina and Dafne Cruz Porchini, as well as a wide array of US specialists: art historians Jennifer González, Rachel Kaplan, Adriana Zavala, and Oles himself; historian John Lear; literature scholar Claire F. Fox; conservationists Michelle Barger and Kiernan Graves; and SFMOMA curator Castro. Certain entries and chapters stand out due to their compelling discussion of Rivera's hemispheric themes. The first chapter, by Zetina, sets the stage by explaining his understanding of José Vasconcelos's ideas about *mestizaje*, which influenced his vision of America. To Vasconcelos, *mestizaje* was a "theory of racial diversity" that categorized people of mixed race—European, Indigenous, and African—in Mexico and Latin America as *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race, 17–19). In

Rivera's first mural, *Creation*, this notion is visualized using a central male figure to represent the "ideal synthesis of racial and cultural diversity," which would become a recurring subject in the artist's work (19).

In Oles's chapter, "From Murals to Paintings: Scenes of Everyday Life," the production of easel paintings from 1920 to 1935 in Rivera's studio in Mexico City demonstrates his creation of "idealized forms and subjects" seen in scenes of daily life involving Indigenous and mestizo/a subjects (35). Oles's entry, titled "Luz Jiménez, Weaver," identifies an Indigenous weaver, Julia Jiménez González (known as Luz Jiménez), as a model during the twenties and thirties for Rivera and several other artists in Mexico—including photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. Their depictions of Jiménez propagated the idea of an anonymous woman as the embodiment of "Indigenous beauty" (214). Representations of Jiménez, as well as other portraits of Indigenous women and children, became a popular subject devoid of political context for the international, especially US, market. This further situated the idea of *mestizaje* as modernization, whereas Indigenous was synonymous with a static past opposing the rapidly changing modern world.

Castro's chapter describes three of Rivera's San Francisco murals, *Allegory of California* (1930–31), *The Making of a Fresco* (1931), and *Still Life and Blossoming Almond Trees* (1931), in which Rivera explored "continental American themes," such as industry and capitalism, that could be understood by a broader audience (112). Other texts elaborate upon his transnational conception of America as a visualization of *mestizaje*, technology, and an optimistic and modernist view of Pan-American history. Fox's chapter on the costumes and backdrop designs for *H.P.* describes the mixture of "industrial and Indigenous cultural elements" that reference both Yaqui deer dancers and the international market (150, 225–28). The artist's personifications of raw goods, such as *Banana* and *Tobacco*, express economic, political, and social aspects of Pan-American relations. Alliances between Mexico and the United States, and between their cultures, as well as advocacy for "hemispheric unity," secured binational policies for the export and import of products and art (226).

The final chapter, by González, explains the artist's "profoundly idealistic vision" of America by comparing his murals to the work of Chicana artist and muralist Juana Alicia (253). In analyzing Alicia's mural *The Spiral World: The Codex Estánfor* (2012), González sees the influence of her training under Rivera's assistants Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Pope Dimitroff, particularly in the "curvilinear compositions" that express the flow of language between humanity and the natural world, as emphasized by the spiral scrolls and the representation of a Maya scribe (257). Alicia's mural expands upon Rivera's representation of American history and the exploitation of the environment through her own optimism as a Chicana artist, by focusing on the aspect of renewal and restoration. González concludes with a discussion of two contemporary artists, Mexican street artist Flavio Martínez (aka Curriot) and American artist Victor Quiñonez (aka Marka27), who produce artworks as a "powerful force for change in the present," centering Indigenous, African-descendant, and mestizo/a peoples and their cultures to create "new perceptual possibilities" of a just future (259).

The catalog and exhibition are valuable for what they reveal about Rivera's vision of America, though as González's chapter suggests, this hemisphere-conscious understanding must go further to include Central America and the Caribbean. *Diego Rivera's America* reintroduces Rivera to twenty-first century audiences by reinforcing the deep-rooted historical and cultural foundations between the neighboring countries that must be reexamined rather than overlooked. The content innovates within the field of art history as well as interdisciplinary fields like Chicana/o/x studies and Central American studies, analyzing Rivera's perspective on America as an interconnected body of people, land, and culture beyond geopolitical borders. His optimism for the next generation's participation in the advancement of science and technology also values the transnational social and cultural growth that continues to impact our daily life.

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