

Washington and Lee University

Billboards for the Left

Leon Trotsky's Exile and Mexican Muralism

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Background and Introduction

The Beginnings of Revolution

In 1920, after the ten year revolutionary period, Mexico and its government struggled to define itself and create a national identity. After a revolutionary war which focused greatly on the regional participation of the masses and what would be considered a “genuinely national revolution,” Mexico needed to transition into an era of independence and self-identification in order to place itself in relation to the already established nations of the world.¹ In addition to shifting identity, power struggles culminated into what some deemed the “greatest revolutionary upheaval of the twentieth century.”² Although the revolution wasn’t solely driven by politics, after years of social and political oppression by the Porfirian government multiple political parties came together to attack the in-power conservative government. This led to a great amount of deaths on both sides of the revolution.³ For decades after the war ended the nation struggled to find some sort of identity and had difficulty identifying where they would stand politically and socially in relation to the rest of the world. During Alvaro Obregón’s first presidency from 1920-1924 Mexican politics began to reform and settle towards a focus on the working class. At the beginning of his presidency Obregón sent Mexico down the path of nationalization.⁴ Obregón represented the Laborist Party of Mexico, a social democratic party created by unions and one of the largest political parties of Mexico, and frequently fought against the ideals of the Communist party.

At the beginning of his presidency Obregón appointed José Vasconcelos to be the inaugural Secretary of Public Education with the purpose of expanding education from the city to the countryside.⁵ In 1924 Plutarco Elias Calles, also a member of the Laborist Party, was elected

¹ Knight, “Mexico Revolution: Interpretations.”

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Needler, *Mexican Politics: The Containment of Conflict*.

⁵ Ibid.

president and put an end to the social reforms Obregón had set into place the last four years, including the expansion of education. Notably, Calles pushed for “the creation of a political party that would unify all the forces of the Revolution and avoid the personal enmities and revolts that had absorbed so much.”⁶ Some saw this push as a move towards another oppressive regime similar to that of the Porfirian government. This initiated the start of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario and the end of the reformativo period. Calles’ push also began a movement to nationalize both the economics and culture of the country, marked by the appointment of Diego Rivera as the nation’s artist, implemented by José Vasconcelos.

Communism’s Move to Latin America and Mexico

In 1911 the Socialist Worker’s Party was founded and then eventually became the Mexican Communist Party (MCP) in 1919.⁷ Although the party was outlawed during the presidency of Plutarco Elias Calles it continued to meet and recruit throughout Mexican society. The MCP followed the tenants of Communism as laid out in *The Communist Manifest* closely, including the fight for the proletariat as laid out in the following statement:

“The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the monetary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement. In France, the Communists ally with the Social-Democrats against the conservative and radical bourgeoisie, reserving, however, the right to take up a critical position in regard to phases an illusions traditionally handed down from the great Revolution.”⁸

These values highlight a focus on fighting for economic equality of the proletariat towards their repayment. This was more directly aimed towards miners, farmers, and union workers whom garnered little salary for their work. In turn, members of the party said “it was time to form a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Poppino, *International Communism in Latin America: A History of the Movement, 1917-1963*.

⁸ Marx, Engels, and Trotsky, *The Communist Manifest*.

classic popular front in Mexico,” which became their aim for the future of the party.⁹ Although the MCP went through an early period of crisis, the tenants of the Communist Party held strong in a pocket of working class people of Mexico. Mexican artists like David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera soon became advocates of the movement and their artwork could be considered billboards for the party on a very public scale.

Internal issues at the center of Communism during the 1920s called for the introduction of the New Economic Policy, allowing and encouraging a revived bourgeois way of life, which for years prior had been discouraged.¹⁰ This caused “foreigners to question their enthusiasm for the New Soviet state,” and the new policies it was adopting.¹¹ While the communist ideals were changing at the center of the party, these ideals were not shifting in the Western hemisphere, especially within the Mexican Communist Party. Public support became verbal, written, and painted arguments which traced throughout the Mexican government.¹² At this point in time the MCP fell into poor graces with the Soviet Union. Steps were taken to publically show support for the faction in Mexico, but in reality the positions of the MCP were not tolerated by party officials like Joseph Stalin, which lead to unrest between both factions of the party.¹³ This lead the MCP to develop different beliefs than their mother party. As signified by the artwork of Rivera, Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, Mexican communism became more romanticized from the Soviet party’s beliefs and leading to greater support of the artists from the MCP than the leader’s in the Soviet Union. In the end, the communist ideals were publicly displayed through the work of the muralists.

⁹ Carr, “Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party.”

¹⁰ Richardson, “The Dilemmas of a Communist Artists: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Carr, “Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party.”

Leon Trotsky

In the early 20th century Ukrainian Leon Trotsky was on his road to becoming one of the principle revolutionaries associated with the Communist Party. The young revolutionary quickly rose in the ranks of the Party and became one of the authors of *The Communist Manifest*.¹⁴ “He first came to global attention in 1917,” and was one of the finest orators and writers of the Russian Revolution.¹⁵ Trotsky joined the Social Democratic Party during his time in exile from Ukraine and in 1903 when the party split. Trotsky followed the Menshevik, or minority, faction of the party and “developed his theory of ‘permanent revolution,’” which lays out that if bourgeois democratic tasks it is inevitable that the workers’ state will eventually rise up against the capitalist state.¹⁶ In 1917, Trotsky eventually joined with the Bolsheviks, or the majority party, and helped play a role in the communist takeover of the Soviet Union, where he built up the Red Army which defeated the White Russian forces.¹⁷

His penchant for oration allowed him to rise quickly in the ranks and become close with party leaders such as Stalin and Lenin. In turn, Trotsky’s wit and beliefs quickly alienated himself from these leaders and contributed to his eventual exile from the Soviet Union in the later decades of his life.¹⁸ After Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin and Trotsky fought for power of the party and Stalin eventually came out the victor. Stalin sent Trotsky into exile in 1929, where he remained a leader of the anti-Stalinist movement until his eventual assassination in Coyocán, Mexico in 1940.¹⁹ Trotsky’s political movement and exile movement significantly influenced the MCP. His

¹⁴ Marx, Engels, and Trotsky, *The Communist Manifest*.

¹⁵ Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*.

¹⁶ “Leon Trotsky (1879 - 1940).”

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*.

¹⁹ Daniels, “Leon Trotsky: Russian Revolutionary.”

outspokenness and power-vying attitude lead to his exile, assassination attempts, and eventual death. These traits also contributed to the diversity of political voices in Mexican public art.

Mexican Muralism

In response to the fledgling Revolution of 1910, Mexico was in desperate need for a form of artistic self-representation. Due to its continued use of other regions' artistic themes and styles. Mexican artists wanted to separate from the path and the muralism movement became the answer to that problem. The founding father of Mexican muralism was José Guadalupe Posada. Though he did not paint murals himself, he printed pamphlets and lithographs with political statements and called for revolution much like the artists to follow him.²⁰

At the time not many Mexican artists were well-versed in the act of painting large-scale murals. In response to the need of public art the Mexican School of Muralists began. This was not only in response to the revolution, but “also from the change in aesthetic perception that constitute[d] the European artistic revolution of the twentieth century.”²¹ This became both a social and aesthetic movement and it allowed for the expression and definition of “Mexicanism.” This movement became a form of self-representation and political expression.²² From the beginning of the movement on artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, better known as *los Tres Grandes*, would include references to Posada in their works through the use of the “Calavera Catrina” which Posada had used in all of his pamphlets.²³ These artists also took on the same political tones and call for revolution which Posada had done many years before.

Mexican muralism's primary purposes were to reach out to the public and to insight a change in political thought. The tactic behind the art form was to make the mural accessible to the

²⁰ Coffey, “Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico.”

²¹ Traba, “Mexican Muralism: Accomplishment and Impact.”

²² Arreola, “Mexican American Exterior Murals.”

²³ Coffey, “Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico.”

public in order to associate the aesthetics and politics of the murals with the desires and aspirations of the Mexican people.²⁴ Mexican muralists were some of the more outspoken proponents of a political reformation taking hold in the 1920s and 30s. These artists spoke out against the oppression of the proletariat and the unequal economic distribution which the country was facing at the time. The start of the industrial age came into the art scene through the addition of new materials. With the traditional techniques and industrial materials the artists were using the mural movement managed to highlight the combination of revolution and tradition which surrounded Mexican politics at the time.²⁵ These artists became the voices of the working class and used their position as means to call them to arms to make the government realize the atrocities they were committing against their citizens.

Diego Rivera

Diego Rivera, an artist born in Guanajuato in 1886 to a well-off family, was known by the Mexican government as a self-proclaimed Communist. During the beginnings of the Mexican Revolution Rivera travelled to Europe to learn the skills and techniques of the new wave of artists converging on society, the social realists.²⁶ While being exposed to European artists he was also exposed to the new political ideas which flowed throughout the people of Europe. These themes included the ideas of social education and revolution and these soon became major themes in his artwork and his daily life. This period in Europe is when communist ideals took hold in Rivera's life. As Rivera transitioned back to Mexican society, taking his role as national artist, efforts were made by the Mexican government to suppress his arguments of social revolution and proletariat power.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Traba, "Mexican Muralism: Accomplishment and Impact."

²⁶ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

²⁷ Ibid.

Even though Rivera was one of the more outspoken Communist artists at the time, facing public scrutiny from the government, he occasionally was too extreme for the MCP and was kicked out of the party several times over the course of his career.²⁸ Despite these expulsions Rivera still held firm beliefs in communism and continued to display the communist pillars in his murals. Identifying as a Trotskyite, Rivera hosted Leon Trotsky during his final exile from the Soviet Union in 1937.²⁹ His political views took over his artistic and public life. Rivera did not just paint to paint, but he painted to start a social revolution and it was difficult to silence his views throughout his time as Mexico's national artist.

David Alfaro Siqueiros

The youngest of *los Tres Grandes*, David Alfaro Siqueiros was ten years Diego Rivera's junior. Born in Chihuahua in 1896 to a well-off Catholic family Siqueiros developed his rebellious take on life at a young age. After fighting in the Revolution, Siqueiros founded a union and plotted to kill President Obregon, two actions which landed him in prison and initiated his plan for exile in the United States.³⁰ Siqueiros also identified as a Communist, but as opposed to Rivera's Trotskyite beliefs, Siqueiros identified as a Stalinist and the two would later fight publically about these differences in beliefs.³¹ His radical political beliefs and lack of filter led Siqueiros to be attributed with extreme actions threats from his faction of the MCP. Rather than focus on the themes of social outreach and justice, Siqueiros' work focused greatly on getting the message of communism out and maintaining the publicity surrounding this project.

Siqueiros was an avid writer and supporter of what he believed as true communism, an adherence to the values of Stalin. His sympathies for the party and Stalin ran deep enough that he

²⁸ Davison, "Diego Rivera's Dirty Little Secret."

²⁹ Lindauer, "Frida as a Wife/Artist in Mexico."

³⁰ "How a Young Revolutionary Fooled the City Elders."

³¹ Evans, "Painting and Politics - The Case of Diego Rivera."

is attributed with several attacks on the different factions of the party which did not line up with his own.³² As noted in his first well-publicized manifest, Siqueiros believed that art should not be completed for money, but rather for public enjoyment and public agenda.³³ Throughout his career Siqueiros supported the creation of art by the community and by the masses. Rather than creation of murals and other types of art by himself, Siqueiros hired groups of individuals to collaborate with to achieve an end product which focused on the power of the masses.³⁴ Throughout his career he fought for communist beliefs and achieved what he wanted through whatever means possible. His outspoken nature and appealing artistic styles allowed for Siqueiros' art to become well publicized and emblematic of the struggle of the proletariat.

With reformation of Mexican politics, muralists like David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera were called to paint "billboards" for the government identity. What the government didn't realize in their hiring of these artists is that they were paying for some of the most outspoken Communist artists of the 20th century.^{35,36} Though both artists maintained beliefs that aligned with Communist principles, both believed in different sects, with Rivera being a Trotskyite and Siqueiros being a Stalinist. With the death of Lenin in 1924, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky fought for control over control over the Soviet State, the former garnered power and Trotsky began his time in exile. He eventually ended in Mexico with the help of Diego Rivera.³⁷ Trotsky's presence in the fragile equilibrium that was the Mexican political atmosphere led to a series of arguments between Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. While the artists' political ideals held strong,

³² Biography.com, "David Alfaro Siqueiros Biography."

³³ Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos Pintores y Escultores, "Manifiesto Del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores Y Escultores, 1922."

³⁴ Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936."

³⁵ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

³⁶ Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

³⁷ Service, *Trotsky: A Biography*.

the presence of the Russian revolutionary and the artists' public debates managed to influence the artistic styles and the overall legacy they left at the end of the artistic revolution.

The Manifestos

Barcelona Manifesto, 1921, David Alfaro Siqueiros

In 1921, while he spent time in Barcelona, Siqueiros published one of his first manifestos. He highlighted his extreme political beliefs. The simply titled *Barcelona Manifesto* was published in *American Life Magazine* and made clear that Siqueiros was not going to be silenced by any form of political oversight or governmental organization. At the beginning of this manifesto Siqueiros begins by attacking the outdated nature of the current popular form of art, canvas paintings, and even criticized himself in saying, "our work for the most part, is out of time and develops incoherently without producing anything lasting to respond to the strength of our great racial faculties."³⁸ Although unclear of which specific artists he was attacking with this statement, it is clear that he pointed a finger at other Mexican artists and more specifically those who catered to the type of artwork which the rich paid for. In turn, this manifesto marked the relationship between Spain and Mexico. He claimed the revolution of the antiquated artistic styles of Spain and translated this transition in such a way to push Mexican artists to do the same:

"Felizmente surge en España un grupo de pintores y escultores que sienten la inquietud del momento, inquieten, se libentan del peso enorme de su gran tradición y se universalizan; grupo formado en su mayor parte por catalanes."³⁹

By comparing the Mexican artists to the country from which they had broken ties, Siqueiros began a call to indigenismo and art focused on the social realities of the modern era.

³⁸ Siqueiros, "Barcelona Manifesto."

³⁹ Ibid.

At this point in time Siqueiros was a no-name artist who has garnered no fame for his pieces. It was at this moment when Siqueiros transitioned to a more politically minded artist. He realized that though this manifesto would not be read by many, writing it had a significant impact on his career. Prior to the start of the muralism period of Mexican art, he focused on generating reproducible art. He maintained political underpinnings found later in his murals.⁴⁰ In addition to this realization, this manifesto marked the widening of Siqueiros' targeted audience from artists "to include peasants, intellectuals and the proletariat," which became clear in his later life roles which included union organizer.⁴¹ Furthermore, this manifesto was the first indication of the reasoning behind Siqueiros' lack of government commissions later on in his career. His statement that he "discard[ed] the theories based on the relativity of 'national art,'" Siqueiros indicated his intention to never take a nationally funded commission.⁴² The beginning of Siqueiros' career in manifestos also marked the end to any possibility Siqueiros had in painting a mural to be displayed on the governmental stage. This point in his career marked the start of commissions like that from the Electrical Workers' Union and the Chouinard Art Institute, locations where Siqueiros could make strong political statements in his artwork without the censoring of what he viewed as a capitalist government.

Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art, Breton and Rivera, 1938

In 1938 André Breton, a French artist and anti-fascist, met Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera in Mexico City. At this point in time Trotsky was in exile in Mexico, hosted by Rivera. At the time, the two artists came to a decision to write down the political beliefs in a manifesto entitled *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* and explain to the public how their artwork would

⁴⁰ Vallen, "Siqueiros: Confronting Revolution & Censorship Defied."

⁴¹ Hilton, "Long Live the Mexican Revolution; EXHIBITIONS."

⁴² Siqueiros, "Barcelona Manifesto."

translate the primary pillars of the Communist party.⁴³ Due to the similar political themes surrounding this manifesto and several other pieces by Trotsky it is believed that he coauthored along with Breton and Rivera due to his exile and controversial notoriety amongst members of the Communist Party, it is believed his authorship was hidden in order to insure publication of *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*. At this point in time, Stalin was tightening his control over the communist parties around the world through dictatorship and drove the artists to support those fighting both capitalism and Stalinism. This work was the sole manifesto in which Rivera truly combined both his political and artistic beliefs into one concise piece.

Although the manifesto is a general call to arms, it more specifically speaks out against the regimes of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, a fascist and a communist respectively. These two dictatorships, though opposite in beliefs, maintained similar control over the general population. More specifically, this manifesto explained how artists were able to expose the real nature of both the Soviet and German government systems.⁴⁴ Breton and Rivera more pointedly informed their audience of the atrocities being committed by both regimes against artists, specifically by citing the “widespread destruction of those conditions under which intellectual creation is possible,” and that “the regime of Hitler, [at the time] rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime,” according to reports, it was “the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorian reaction [was] reaching its climax.”⁴⁵ In the eyes of Breton and Rivera the worst was happening, artists were having their voices stifled, and the only way they could get artists to take notice was through this manifesto.

⁴³ Breton and Rivera, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.”

⁴⁴ “Surrealism’s Revolutionary Heart.”

⁴⁵ Breton and Rivera, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.”

The method of attack against these atrocities that the manifesto called for: artwork. Moreover, the manifesto called for the artists to pick a side:

“True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time –true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture. If, however, we reject all solidarity with the bureaucracy now in control of the Soviet Union, it is precisely because, in our eyes, it represents not communism but its most treacherous and dangerous enemy.”⁴⁶

In this portion of the manifesto, Rivera and Breton called for the artists to avoid neutrality. More specifically, “the retention of capitalism... or Stalinism” would result from continued neutrality of the artists and especially those associated with the Communist party.⁴⁷ In addition to this claim, Rivera and Breton were not afraid to more specifically blame any future form of attack on artists through Stalinism or capitalism/fascism on those artists whom didn’t speak out against the specific attacks which were taking place at the time of writing. At this point it became clear that both Breton and Rivera decided where they stood in the political environment of artists, and what they think of any artist who doesn’t join them.

Importantly, Rivera and Breton reminded their audience that “the communist revolution [was] not afraid of art” and all opinions that may accompany art.⁴⁸ It is noted that art is a “process of sublimation” and the conception of self is essential to this process and varying political opinions are expected for that of their own.⁴⁹ But, it is important to note that Trotskyites believed that the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Surrealism’s Revolutionary Heart.”

⁴⁸ Breton and Rivera, “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

reality of surrealism and the future styles of artwork was based in the political beliefs presented in this manifesto.⁵⁰ In the end, this was Rivera's sole concise manifesto where he relayed his beliefs on art and politics. He later wrote an autobiography with Pete Hamill in which he more concisely went through his political views and how it influenced his art.⁵¹ It was the true political fire accompanying this manifesto which emphasized the importance of taking a stand to Rivera which was reflected in his artwork.

Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores, Y Escultores, 1922

In 1922 the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors published a collective manifesto in the newspaper *El Machete*, which tended to print communist-based writings. Artists including Diego Rivera came together with David Alfaro Siqueiros to compose this piece of writing that would describe their views on society, artwork, and politics. Although Rivera is considered an author of the manifesto by signing his name to the piece, Siqueiros later claimed primary authorship of the manifesto. Under the name of *El Sindicato*, Siqueiros was able to make his first highly publicized manifesto of many which would be published throughout his career.⁵²

Within the first part of the manifesto *El Sindicato* noted the following:

“We are with those who seek to overthrow of an old and inhuman system within which you, worker of the soil, produce riches for the overseer and politician, while you starve. Within which you, worker in the city, move the wheels of industries, weave the cloth, and create with your hands the modern comforts enjoyed by the parasites and prostitutes, while your own body is numb and cold. Within which you, Indian soldier, heroically abandon your land and give your life in the eternal hope of liberating your race from the degradations and misery of centuries.”⁵³

⁵⁰ “Surrealism’s Revolutionary Heart.”

⁵¹ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

⁵² Vallen, “Siqueiros: Confronting Revolution & Censorship Defied.”

⁵³ Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos Pintores y Escultores, “Manifiesto Del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores Y Escultores, 1922.”

Before the bulk of the manifesto had even started, it became clear that this manifesto was an attack from the artists of Mexico on both the government and the bourgeoisie. Only aged 26 at the time, Siqueiros began a career of making bold political statements in the press through this manifesto. Not only did he begin this piece by attacking the bourgeoisie, but he also indicated that it is the job of the artists, like those who make up *El Sindicato*, to fight against the tyranny which the proletariat was facing.

It was in this manifesto where the public could finally understand the artists' motivation behind the Mexican Muralism movement. As all three of *los Tres Grandes* signed the manifesto, the true motivation behind muralism could be highlighted as: "We hail the monumental expression of art because such art is public property."⁵⁴ This motivation indicated that muralism was not for the commission or the patron, but rather it was to become an accessible piece of expression and art for the public. This movement specified the transition of artwork from an upper class form of entertainment to a way for the voice of the people to be voiced.⁵⁵ Rather than add on to the forms of art which were already used throughout society *El Sindicato* wished to "proclaim that this being the moment of social transformation from a decrepit to a new order, the makers of beauty, must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art 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."⁵⁶ This proclamation highlighted the efforts of *El Sindicato*, and indicated that there was an issue in the way art was completed in the past. It claimed art was in desperate need of a change. Siqueiros and the other members of *El Sindicato* were focusing more on human condition at this point in their history.⁵⁷ It is clear that their efforts

⁵⁴ Ibid.

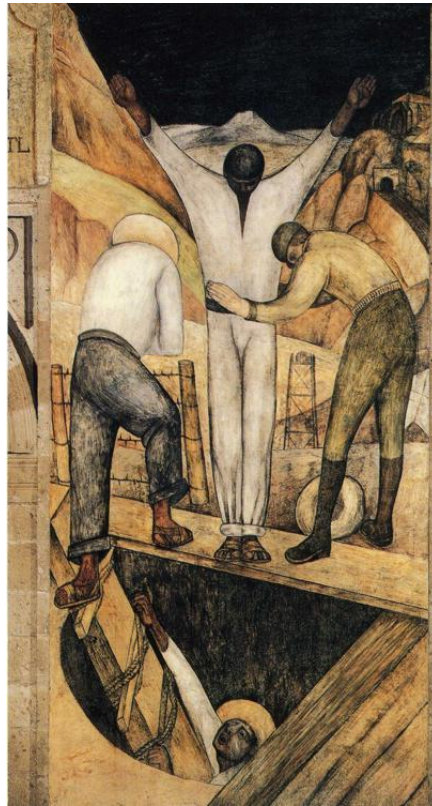
⁵⁵ Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*.

⁵⁶ Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos Pintores y Escultores, "Manifiesto Del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores Y Escultores, 1922."

⁵⁷ Vallen, "Siqueiros: Confronting Revolution & Censorship Defied."

were to transition art into a form of social realism, or a more naturalistic form of realism which would more specifically focus on the social and political issues surrounding everyday life. The conglomeration of Mexican artists underneath *El Sindicato* as organized by the newcomer, Siqueiros, started one of the most significant political and artistic movements in Mexico. *El Sindicato*, including Rivera and Siqueiros, began their lives as the voice of the people when this manifesto was published. Their purpose from here on out was to fight for the people and display their plight for all to see.

Artwork before Trotsky Exile



Leaving the Mine, Patio del Trabajo, La Secretaría de Educación Pública, Diego Rivera 1923.

Leaving the Mine, 1923, Diego Rivera

Although Rivera experimented with muralism before 1923, he hadn't come to his own artistic voice until the mural series at the Ministry of Education. Initiated by José Vasconcelos, *los*

Tres Grandes fought for the very public, government-funded, project. The project would cover “128 individual panels on three floors covering a total of about 17,000 square feet.”⁵⁸ In the end, Rivera won the coveted space, and proceeded to make the Ministry a platform of his own political and cultural beliefs.

In the panel *Leaving the Mine*, Rivera starts one of the most profound anti-government statements any artist had made at the time. The center figure remains faceless, leaving a sense of anonymity and generalization attached to the worker. This lack of personalization makes the worker a representation of any mine worker at the time, creating a voice for the people whom Rivera wished to speak out for in his artwork. As if he were a sacrifice to the mining industry, Rivera spreads the worker’s arms in a pose mimicking crucifixion as the overseers search him for stolen goods. This simple attack on the wealthy business and factory owners of Mexico is just the beginning of Rivera’s public attacks on the bourgeoisie.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie attempt to quell Rivera’s strong voice in this mural series. The following poem was originally inscribed above this panel in the series, calling for the workers to fight back:

*“Comrade miner,
Bent under the weight of the earth,
Your hand errs
When it extracts metal for money.
Make daggers
With all the metals,
And thus,
You will see
That the metals*

⁵⁸ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

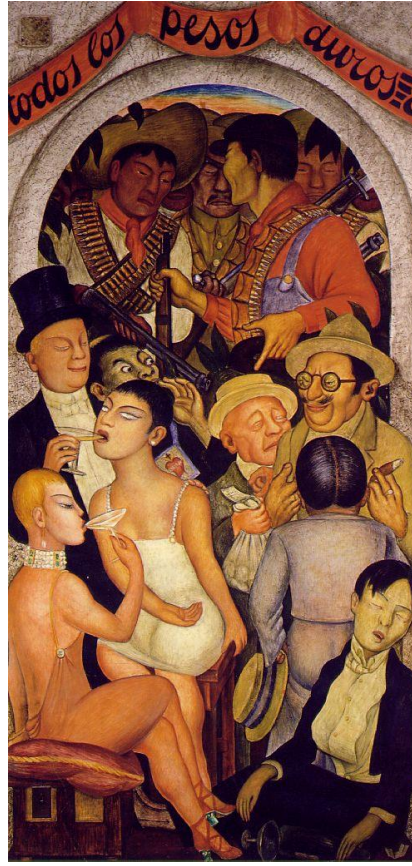
After all

Are for you.⁵⁹

This inscription caused Vasconcelos to erupt as he felt it detracted from the overall message the government wanted within the murals, a push towards government support. But this poem added to the disapproval the Obregón government was already facing by his opposition.⁶⁰ In one of the first attacks on Rivera's political views and artistic voice, Rivera was forced by his commissioners to remove the poem from the panel. Despite this hindrance, Rivera managed to call attention to the plight of the workers and laborers of Mexico in an extremely public stage. This is just one statement made throughout the 128 panel series which became a billboard for Rivera's political beliefs as well as an advertisement for the general beliefs of the Communist party. Furthermore, this panel was not Rivera's sole attempt at making audacious political statements at La Secretaría de Educación Pública. In addition, the mural as a whole is full of political statements and artwork which Vasconcelos was incapable of hiding or destroying over the course of the series' creation and has remained relatively unchanged over the past 93 years.

⁵⁹ Marnham and Rivera, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*.

⁶⁰ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.



Fighters of the Revolution and Civilian Debauchers, Second Patio, La Secretaría de Educación Pública, Diego Rivera, 1923.

Fighters of the Revolution and Civilian Debauchers, 1923, Diego Rivera

In the second patio of the Ministry of Education, red ribboning traces throughout the panels which has harsh statements against Obregón and capitalism. In the panels of the Second Patio, Rivera more pointedly calls to arms the working class of Mexico to fight against the liquidation of the wealth they brought the nation for the happiness and lifestyles of the elites.⁶¹ Most prominently, this is seen in the panel *Fighters of the Revolution and Civilian Debauchers*. In this panel, while the elite are drinking and smoking themselves into a stupor, the workers and indigenous of the nation are behind them mobilizing and coming to arms. This depiction is Rivera's representation

⁶¹ Edwards, *Painted Walls of Mexico: From Prehistoric Times Until Today*.

of what accompanies the proliferation of capitalism across the Western hemisphere in addition to a call for the workers to fight back against the unfavorable and inequitable wealth separation between the classes.

The red ribbon traipsing above the panel reads “*todos los pesos duros*,” refers to the money the proletariat worked hard for, yet the elite were both claiming as their own, and spending frivolously. This further emphasizes the statement which Rivera wished to make with the totality of his work in La Secretaría de Educación Pública in Mexico City. The government was responsible for the separation of wealth between the workers and the elite of Mexico. Despite the government funding of this mural series, Rivera refused to quell his political beliefs and the purpose of his artwork in order to fit the government’s own beliefs. He fought publically for the people in the margins of the government’s plans and against the principles of capitalism for the public expression of the Communist Party’s ideals. Against the wishes of Obregón and Vasconcelos, Rivera “brandished a pseudo-socialist discourse that was not supported,” which further alienated the government from his artwork.⁶² Obregón pressed for a stop to the murals and despite his efforts the leftist community and proletariat pushed for completion of the series at La Secretaría de Educación Pública.

These mural panels were the first a series of attacks which Rivera made against the Obregón government in the Mexican Mural movement that took hold in the early 20th century. His murals became “works pervaded by a sincere hatred of oppression and sympathy with the masses to be interpreted then as politically revolutionary.”⁶³ Despite his support by the Mexican government, Rivera neglected to shape his artwork and voice around the political ideals which the government was following at this time. At this point in his career Rivera was in the process of both

⁶² Azuela, Kattau, and Craven, “Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism.”

⁶³ Ibid.

angering the government and empowering the working classes through his artwork and public murals. Although he went about the artwork more symbolically, he managed to incorporate the ideast of communism into his work. Furthermore, at this point in his career he used the government and elite-funded murals as a billboard advertisement for the Communist Party and a direct address to the working class of Mexico.



Mural at the National Palace, Palacio Nacional de Mexico, Diego Rivera, 1935.



Class Struggle, Palacio Nacional de Mexico, Diego Rivera, 1935.

Class Struggle, Mural at the National Palace, 1935, Diego Rivera

In 1935 it was obvious that the government had not learned from its previous blunder as they became the patrons of Rivera's murals at the Palacio Nacional de Mexico. The purpose of these murals was to trace Mexican history from the Aztec Empire through the country's future. As a continuation of Vasconcelos' mural project started at La Secretaría de Educación Pública, the project was aimed with continuing to build Mexico's national identity and to increase the nationalism of the people. Rivera had previously noted that the need of the Mexican people with nationalism was to both acknowledge the country's own needs as well as take a turn towards returning towards indigenism.⁶⁴ Although the proprietors initiated the project under positive ideals,

⁶⁴ Belnap, "Diego Rivera's Great America Pan-America Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P."

the “future” of the nation, as predicted by Diego Rivera, was traced with the massacres and fighting of the past and the emphasis of the bloodbaths that were yet to come.

In the central arch of the stairway the eagle of the Mexican flag watches over the fighting and wars that are taking place around him. Above the eagle stands Miguel Hidalgo, the father of the first Mexican revolution, and the figurehead of the revolutions to come. He is surrounded by the other revolutionaries of Mexican history, and faced by the farmers and working class who have come to arms. Although the murals at La Secretaría de Educación Pública were Rivera’s first call to arms of the proletariat, this massive mural in the entrance of the national palace was Rivera’s first in which he displayed the history of Mexico in such a violent way, and compared his called-for revolution of the future, to the bloody revolutions of the past.

Some of the most violent panels of this mural are the ones which call for the modern-day revolution that Rivera is strived, more specifically the panel entitled “*Class Structure*” on the far right of the full mural. Rivera depicted the horrors that the agrarian workers were facing in their daily lives, and forces the viewer to see these hidden horrors in a graphic way. Carrying banners calling for “*huelga,*” or strike, in front of the hanging bodies of dayworkers, those who Rivera believes should make up the majority of his Communist Party, with signs around their necks reading: “*Por reblde laro faccioso comunista*” and “*Por reblde y sedicioso agrarista.*” These statements emphasize the political environment at the time in Mexico, in which the proletariat and those who identified as communist lived and the ridicule and danger they faced by identifying as communist. This is the beginning of Rivera’s call to revolution of the working class and the Communist Party. Rivera also depicted the fight against fascism within this panel by including swastikas behind the police force who are stopping the revolution. These figures are then fought

by the Communist Worker's Party and the agrarian figures included in the panel. Rivera went to the extent of depicting Calles in the fascist forces which attacked the workers.⁶⁵

As expected, the mural series was not met with the favor of the Mexican government. Calles referred to its patronage as a misuse of the public's money. Although some revolted against Rivera's brutal tale of Mexican history, the underrepresented proletariat classes pushed for the continued display of the mural and support of the class struggles they faced in modern society by protesting at the centers of government and in front of officials' offices.⁶⁶ Although Rivera had been declared too radical for the MCP, and was expelled in 1929, this artwork still held firm in the beliefs of the party, and became a government-sponsored billboard for the Party. Rivera continued to be a strong believer in communism, Marxism, and began to tie his beliefs in the ideals of Trotskyism. These ideals became prominent in his mural at the Palacio Nacional de Mexico through the use of symbolic imagery. At this point in his career it was clear that no government would be able to change his views or hide these views from becoming part of his artwork. It was clear that Diego Rivera would neither listen to the Mexican government nor the guidance of the Communist Party.

⁶⁵ Folgarait, *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*.

⁶⁶ Carter, "The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico."



Birth of Fascism, Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros, Mexico, Mexico, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1936.

Birth of Fascism, 1936, David Alfaro Siqueiros

Although David Siqueiros is noted as one of the three great muralists, the beginning of his career was not spent painting many murals. As he was fairly outspoken about his political views, he did not garner the same commissions that his counterparts did.⁶⁷ Some of his most prolific works, *Birth of Fascism* and *Stop The War*, were small pieces which paled in comparison to the size of the murals which he painted later in his career. Perhaps the more symbolic of the two paintings, *Birth of Fascism* was painted in 1936, and was used as a method of experimentation for his future medium of choice, proxylin paint.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "How a Young Revolutionary Fooled the City Elders."

⁶⁸ Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

At the center of the painting, a raft floats on a tumultuous ocean. On the raft, the mother of fascism, capitalism, lies, birthing a three headed monster. Each of the heads of the monster represent the three figure heads of fascism at the time, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and William Randolph Hearst.⁶⁹ The overall dark pallet and theme of the painting runs consistent with the rest of Siqueiros' portfolio—though, the color red is uncharacteristically absent from this painting. *Birth of Fascism* highlights the horrors of fascism emphasized by the dangers of the sea surrounding the mother at the center of the piece. To the left of the raft, a swastika is painted into the generally calm area of ocean. What is the most tumultuous part of the sea is that which immediately surrounds the raft.

In one of the first versions of the painting, the Statue of Liberty and a book representing religion floated in the water surrounding the raft.⁷⁰ One of Siqueiros' former assistants noted that *Birth of Fascism* was an ongoing work which Siqueiros worked on for the majority of his career. He eventually covered up the monster at the center with a sheet, and did away with the Statue of Liberty and the book in the water.⁷¹ The changing nature of this art work reflected the changing styles and voice of Siqueiros throughout his life. Although he maintained a strong Stalinist view throughout his career, his methods of presenting this political vision changed over time. This painting represents the beginning of Siqueiros' experimentation with industrial materials like proxylin paints in the push towards Industrial Revolution in Mexico.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.



Experimental Workshop May Day 1936 Float, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1936.

Experimental Workshop May Day 1936 Parade, 1936, David Alfaro Siqueiros

At the beginning of the 1930s Siqueiros travelled to the United States in order to explore techniques he could use with the aim of “creating a viable 20th-century revolutionary art form.”⁷² Although the mural movement had already taken hold in Mexico and was becoming more popular throughout the rest of the Western hemisphere, Siqueiros strived to find a better way of getting his points across. It was at this time when Siqueiros experimented with techniques and art forms in order to get his message across. This was what was determined to be his “Experimental Workshop.”⁷³ In 1932 he had been exiled from both Mexico and the United States at the same time, but by 1936 he was allowed back into the latter as a delegate to the American Artists Congress.⁷⁴ At this point, many artists with fairly similar political beliefs, including Jackson

⁷² Hurlburt, “The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936.”

⁷³ Vallen, “Siqueiros: Confronting Revolution & Censorship Defied.”

⁷⁴ Hurlburt, “The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936.”

Pollock, were present in New York, collected at the American Artists Congress. Together, they formed a workshop, with the purpose of making art for the people in temporary artworks, and to make art which would fund the other goal of the Workshop.⁷⁵ Although no murals were created for this workshop, the work of Siqueiros during this workshop shaped the future of his career in which he understood how to voice his political views in a way that would be legible for the proletariat.

The first major movement of the Experimental Workshop were the floats created for the May Day Parade of 1936. This international day celebrating workers was the perfect day to express the communist views of the artists in the Workshop. There isn't much evidence remaining of the parade as the floats were quickly destroyed at its completion, but accounts of the parade note that the first float in the parade was the Workshop's embodiment of the capitalism of Wall Street in the following manner:

“The figure's head topped with a swastika and holding in his outstretched hands emblems of the Republican and Democratic parties. A gigantic hammer adorned with the Communist hammer and sickle, which represented the unity of the North American people, smashed into oblivion a Wall Street tickertape machine, spewing the tape blood-like over the capitalist figure.”⁷⁶

Although this float was destroyed its tenants hold with the rest of the parade as well as the manifest Siqueiros had written with other artists in Mexico before. Not only did this float attacked the U.S. government and the foundation of Capitalism through Wall Street, but it also demonstrated to the people the plight they were coming under because of the two parties which were controlling them through the establishment of Wall Street. Siqueiros and the rest of the Workshop used the funds

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

gained from the patrons of Wall Street, using their money to make such dismissive statements against them.⁷⁷

The float following in the parade was the only to be photographed. “Produced for the American League Against War and Fascism for the demonstrations of ‘Anti-Hearst Day’,” a boat was the main component of the float. Hitler and Hearst were seated on the boat, overseeing the crowd.⁷⁸ The sides of the boat were covered in red handprints, which were meant to symbolize the suffering of the people at the hands of fascism and its leaders like Hitler and Hearst.⁷⁹ The float had originally been built to sail in front of the crowds at Coney Island, but authorities and bad weather prevented this from happening.⁸⁰ The motivation behind this float was clear, it was to reach out to the people who didn’t realize the atrocities which were going around them. Although the ideals of the Communist Party traced throughout the float it was not as much of an advertisement for the party. Rather, it was a means to call the attention of the people to what they were participating in. Wall Street was the definition of capitalism, and Hitler and Hearst were the definition of fascism, which stemmed from capitalism in the eyes of the Communist party. The publicity garnered from this event made Siqueiros realize that he could be more outspoken in his artwork.⁸¹ The Experimental Workshop set the trajectory for the rest of his career. Marked by his debates with Rivera Siqueiros was unafraid of voicing his political views in a more blatant way than he had in the past.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Rivera-Siqueiros Debates and Trotsky Exile

The Exile

What seems to be driven by Rivera garnering greater notoriety and success on a national front, Siqueiros took whatever opportunity he could get to downplay the successes of Rivera.⁸² In addition to this artistic competition, the two had greater political differences which stemmed to the sect of Communism they believed in, Siqueiros a Stalinist and Rivera a Trotskyite. As noted by the Encyclopedia Britannica, Trotskyism is based on a theory of permanent revolution. It holds that economics had to be a world system, rather than a national one and that the revolutions of other countries were necessary to the maintenance of the Russian Revolution. This view also emphasized the hegemony of the working class over the revolutionary class due to their position in industry and contribution to the economy.⁸³ While Trotsky's ideas focused greatly on the equal sharing by the masses in what Trotsky determined to be "true" communism, Stalin focused more greatly of the central power of the State.⁸⁴ The Encyclopedia Britannica defines Stalinism as a practical approach to revolution, devoid of equalization of the classes. It promoted the acceleration of class conflict and also used state violence to insure the domination of society by the bourgeoisie. Stalinism greatly focused on the lower ranking of counterrevolutionaries and bourgeoisie in society.⁸⁵ Both of these sects believe strongly in the pillars of communism outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*, but their ways of ruling the people are what create a greater distinction between the two parties. While Stalin believes it is necessary for a central ruler to manage the Communist State, Trotsky believes in total control of the State by the proletariat. Furthermore, the distinct differences in their stances on Communism led to the eventual exile of Trotsky by Stalin

⁸² Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

⁸³ Editors, "Trotskyism."

⁸⁴ Poppino, *International Communism in Latin America: A History of the Movement, 1917-1963*.

⁸⁵ Editors, "Stalinism."

when he came to power in 1929.⁸⁶ The differences of these two sects between Siqueiros and Rivera became more distinct when in 1937. Rivera pulled strings through the Mexican government to let Trotsky into the country. He hosted Trotsky and his wife in his home for the beginning of Trotsky's exile.⁸⁷ These facts and political ideologies contributed to the eventual argument to which their disagreements came. While Siqueiros distinctively spent much of the debates on the attack, Rivera glided through while garnering commissions and also fighting for the political ideals he believed in.

The Debate

The most public part of the arguments between Rivera and Siqueiros took place in August 1935 at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City.^{88,89} Both sides debated about their own artwork which would later influence the end of both of their respective careers. This debate at the Palace of Fine Arts was attended by the masses which either supported Rivera or Siqueiros, eachside also participating in the debate by making their own claims.⁹⁰ As an example, "Marion Greenwood publically demonstrated her allegiance to Rivera when she challenged Siqueiros during the debate for not practicing what he preached."⁹¹ This was an attack that seems to have led to the change in both Siqueiros' political action as well as his artistic voice, both of which will be discussed later. For the rest of the debate Siqueiros spent much of his time arguing against the government, and, in turn, Rivera, for silencing of his voice as well as the harsh terms he faced because of his political forthrightness.^{92,93} These debates continued to take place through the media, and in typical fashion,

⁸⁶ Daniels, "Leon Trotsky: Russian Revolutionary."

⁸⁷ Davison, "Diego Rivera's Dirty Little Secret."

⁸⁸ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

⁸⁹ Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

⁹⁰ Salus, *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*.

Siqueiros continued to be the more outspoken of the two artists. While continually defending his own artwork, he responded to each criticism with an attack of criticism on Diego Rivera.

Although it was noted in their collective manifesto that art and muralism was for the masses in that it is accessible and drives the masses to fight back against the injustices faced.⁹⁴ Siqueiros took this mandate to make the art more useful to the masses as dictated by Marx and Stalin more seriously.⁹⁵ While the debates took place Rivera was in the process of painting his murals for Rockefeller Center entitled *Man at the Crossroads* which became subject to Siqueiros' attack in the debates. Siqueiros claimed it was a "painting conceived for the static contemplation of the parasite or of the elite. And in no way functionally equivalent of the revolutionary spectator, of the mass spectator...And what about the subject-matter? The chronological itinerary will answer us."⁹⁶ As we will note later, these murals were funded by the Rockefellers and became Rivera's most controversial mural series of his career.⁹⁷ Siqueiros' main fault he found with Rivera's artistic style was that his murals required prior knowledge of communism for the public to understand. This is opposed to what Siqueiros believed of his own as a call to arms rather than something to be figured out.⁹⁸ Rivera used his place as national artist to focus on the smaller details associated with the political movement.⁹⁹ Siqueiros did not appreciate, and proceeded to attack incessantly.

In Siquieros' later confession to the assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky he managed to attack Trotsky and his beliefs, but also Diego Rivera, the government's national artist. Furthermore Siqueiros attacks the government and its support of Trotskyism in the following way:

"Now and then, the intelligent Trotsky could not hide the fact that the anti-Stalinism of Dies was no more than an immediate method of attacking Cárdenism, that is, the Mexican Revolution, and by

⁹⁴ Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos Pintores y Escultores, "Manifiesto Del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores Y Escultores, 1922."

⁹⁵ Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Scott, "Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric."

⁹⁸ Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State*.

⁹⁹ Marnham and Rivera, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*.

this road the revolution in general. It was then only concerned, as is known, with unmasking his Iscariotism. The remains of modesty? Sophistry of a traitor! For the object he used the generous voice of Diego Rivera - the political answer on the Mexican scale – purposefully to inform of imagined Stalinist ambushes in the Mexican government apparatus, which *Ultimas Noticias* published sensationally.”¹⁰⁰

As noted through Siqueiros’ *The Assault on the House of Leon Trotsky*, there was no love lost during the debates or Trotsky’s presence in Mexico during the later part of the 1930s.

These debates managed to bring the public “into contact with both the production and reception of artwork,” but also responsible for the “reframing of official public institutions and spaces, publicizing artwork in a manner immanent to its location within the official public sphere.”¹⁰¹ Although these debates drove the artists to attack each other, it is clear that their public debate did some good. Rather than allowing the government to portray a one sided view on politics, their debate called attention to the multiple political arguments going on around the country and the artistic styles that were trying to make them public. Although Rivera did not spend much of his own time to argue against the attacks of Siqueiros outside of the August debate, he managed to argue his point of view through continued sponsorship of his fairly well-publicized murals.

Trotsky’s Assassination

With the discourse surrounding Trotsky both in the Soviet Union as well as Mexico, Trotsky required guards and guaranteed safety in his homes. Notably, when he and his wife stayed with Diego Rivera the security of Rivera’s home had to be significantly increased in order to assure the protection of Trotsky.¹⁰² Trotsky’s presence in Mexico was well known and there were several assassination attempts against the revolutionary. For the sake of this argument, the two attempts

¹⁰⁰ Siqueiros, “The Assault on the House of Leon Trotsky.”

¹⁰¹ Campbell, *Mexican Murals in Times of Crisis*.

¹⁰² Davison, “Diego Rivera’s Dirty Little Secret.”

of importance were the May 24, 1940 assassination attempt conducted by Siqueiros and the August 20, 1940 assassination by Ramón Mercader.¹⁰³

Due to the high level of threat on his life, Trotsky had prepared his exile home in Coyoacán to defend against any attacks. On the Morning of May 25, 1940 Siqueiros and 24 other men, under the direction of Stalin's police force, infiltrated the walls "and riddled with machine gun slugs, the bedroom where Trotsky and his wife, Natalia, slept."¹⁰⁴ As more facts about the assassination attempt came out it became clear that there was not just involvement of Stalin's police force, but also members of the MCP, including David Alfaro Siqueiros. Although he initially claimed he was not involved in the attempt, when questioned by the Mexican court system Siqueiros responded by writing a complete confession of his crimes against Leon Trotsky. He also justified these actions with a detailed explanation of the crimes Trotsky had committed against both Communism and the Mexican people.¹⁰⁵ Siqueiros justified this attempt by stating:

"I considered that as a Mexican revolutionary nothing would be of greater honour than to have contributed to an act that tended to expose the treason of a political centre of espionage and provocation, seriously contrary to the National Independence of Mexico, the Mexican Revolution—that counted me among its soldiers and militants from the year of 1911—and of the international struggle for the cause of Socialism."¹⁰⁶

Though his actions were not condoned by the Mexican government, these actions had a great impact on the artistic profile of both Rivera and Siqueiros' art work during the time after the attack. Considering Siqueiros was later implicated in attacks on the President of Mexico, garnering him jail time in the 1960s due to his outspoken and physical nature of political agenda. This point in Siqueiros' life marked a significant turning point in his notoriety as well as his artistic styles.

¹⁰³ "Leon Trotsky (1879 - 1940)."

¹⁰⁴ Hansen, "The Attempted Assassination of Leon Trotsky."

¹⁰⁵ Siqueiros, "The Assault on the House of Leon Trotsky."

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The next attempt on Leon Trotsky's life was the successful assassination in August 1940, carried out by Ramón Mercader. At this point in time Siqueiros had been separated from the MCP for several years now and was very outspoken about his disgruntled attitude towards the popular views of the Party. Due to his failed assassination attempt just a few months prior, Siqueiros was one of the primary suspects of the assassination on August 20, 1940.¹⁰⁷ Despite his exile from the USSR, Trotsky still proved to be a thorn in Stalin's side by maintaining a distinct political following in areas across the world where Communism was beginning to take hold.¹⁰⁸ Although the May assassination attempt had failed, Stalin ordered another attempt, this time under the direction of Mercader, who had been dating Trotsky's secretary.¹⁰⁹ Ramón Mercader gained access to Trotsky's study with an ice pick and "struck him a 'tremendous blow' on the head."¹¹⁰ Although Trotsky did not die immediately, the injuries sustained proved too grave and the revolutionary died the next day, August 21, 1940.¹¹¹ Although evidence later proved this assassination attempt was not conducted by Siqueiros, this assassination marked the end to the debates between the two *Grandes*. After Trotsky's death the artists began to focus more on their artwork than their public debate. They returned to fighting for commissions and the proletariat rather than fighting against the beliefs of the other.

At this point in both of their careers Siqueiros and Rivera allowed the information garnered from their debates to influence their artistic styles and messages. Although neither admitted the claims the other was making were just, their artwork indicates both artists took the attacks from the debate to heart. Rivera began to make his message to the people clearer and Siqueiros began

¹⁰⁷ Richardson, "The Dilemas of a Communist Artists: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928."

¹⁰⁸ Poppino, *International Communism in Latin America: A History of the Movement, 1917-1963*.

¹⁰⁹ Carlson, "This Week in History: Leon Trotsky Is Assassinated in Mexico City."

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

to tell the proletariat how it was necessary for them to fight back against the injustices their government was committing.

Artwork During and After Trotsky



Early Sketch of Man at the Crossroads, Diego Rivera, 1932.



Man, Controller of the Universe, Mexico City, Diego Rivera, 1934.

Man, Controller of the Universe, 1934, Diego Rivera

In 1932, as his debates with Siqueiros were beginning, Rivera turned to the Rockefellers in the United States for the commission of a mural piece called *Man at the Crossroads*, in response to a lack of government-sponsored commissions. Although the government had stifled his voice, Rivera turned to the United States for a public display of his beliefs. Rivera would soon find that his voice would be stifled in both countries despite his known political beliefs. Interestingly, Rivera took on a commission by the Rockefellers, a family representative of the capitalism Rivera

so adamantly hated. At the beginning of the commission the Rockefellers did not know that this mural would become Rivera's most controversial piece of this artistic movement and possibly his most controversial piece of artwork during his career. To begin the controversial creation of *Man at the Crossroads*, the Mexican government did not appreciate the loss of one of their national treasures to their wealthy in the United States.¹¹² The greater issue behind the mural started just as painting began. It is important to note, this story has become an argument of he-said-she-said between Rivera and the Rockefellers.

As prompted by the Rockefellers, Rivera wished to depict the progression and industrialization of the world in the 1930s. Prior to the start of painting, the Rockefellers required that all planning and sketches be approved, as Rivera's political beliefs preceded his appointment to the Rockefeller Center mural project. In some of the initial sketches it was clear that Rivera was painting a "defiant exercise in communist idealism," and as he painted he inserted Vladimir Lenin into the painting.¹¹³ Despite the capitalist ideals which the American government and John D. Rockefeller conformed to, Rivera painted Communist imagery on the wall of Rockefeller Center. The man standing in the center of the mural represented the working class and the power they had to explode the development of the future. He was surrounded by the technology and people Rivera deemed necessary for future development.¹¹⁴ This was the power which Rivera wanted the proletariat to exploit in their future fight toward equality in political representation and economic reparations.

The Rockefellers' requests for Rivera to remove Lenin from the mural were met with no avail. As he had in Mexico, Rivera refused to change his artistic voice. Despite their threats, Rivera

¹¹² Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Edwards, *Painted Walls of Mexico: From Prehistoric Times Until Today*.

believed that the development of “science and mechanisms point the way to the future under Marxist beliefs,” and that these crossroads could not be depicted without the Communist leaders and inciting the proletariat to speak out against the prejudices they faced in society.¹¹⁵

After his refusal to remove the communist propaganda before the mural was done Rivera was dismissed from the project and the mural was destroyed. In 2012 when asked about the mural project, the Rockefeller’s said: “Unfortunately, what he painted was different from the sketch,” creating contradiction to all of Rivera’s accounts.¹¹⁶ In a strange turn of events, despite the censorship from the United States and the government’s abhorrence of communist views, the Mexican government sponsored Rivera to continue with this mural in Mexico City.

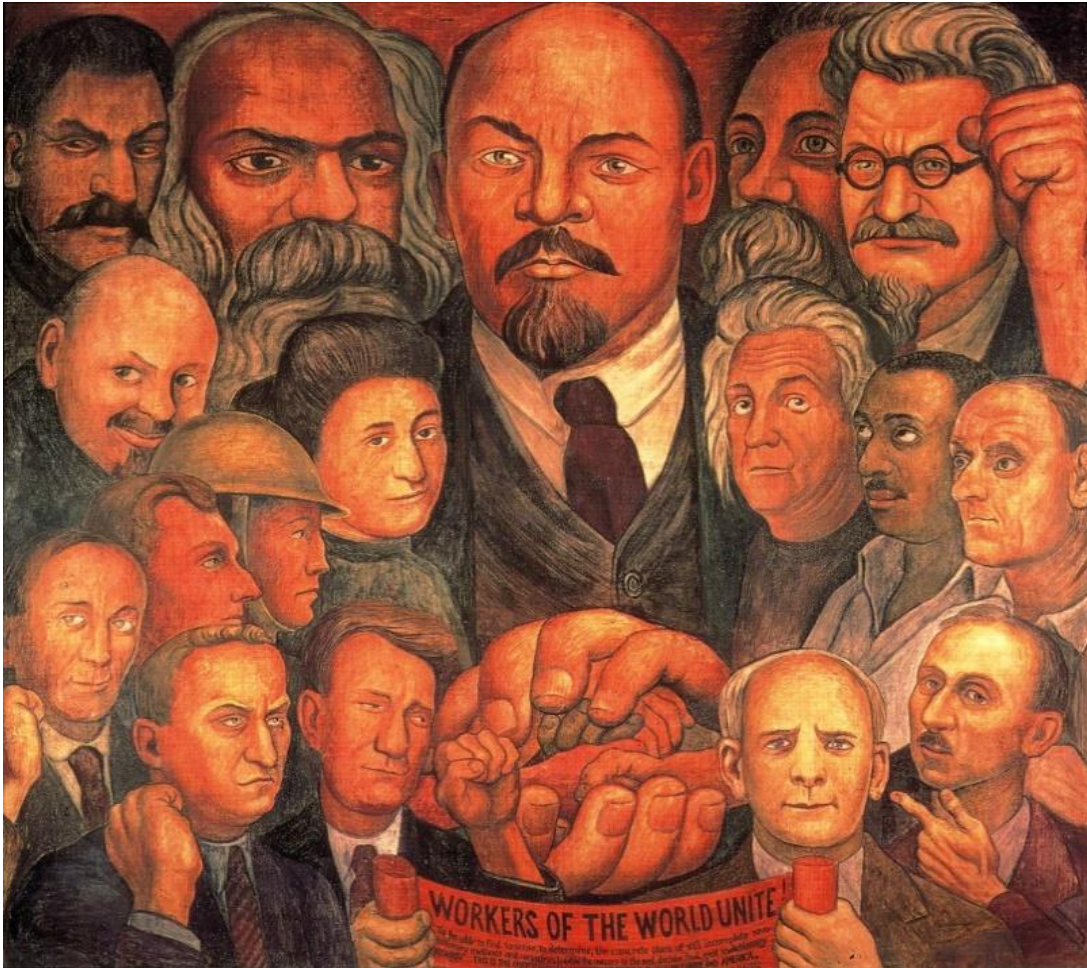
Rivera managed to push the new version of *Man at the Crossroads*, now titled *Man, Controller of the Universe*, even further to the left than his sketches for the Rockefeller mural predicted. The new mural at the center of Mexico City not only contained the controversial figure of Lenin, but the entire right side of the mural is highlighted with Communist red and the congregation of the working class and Communist leaders. Instead of depicting the future of society as originally purposed, Rivera’s purpose of the new version was to depict how the masses had control over the developing society. Communist leaders and the proletariat are hand-in-hand throughout the mural depicting the work of the masses and the fruits of their labors. Not only was this sponsored by the Mexican government, this mural was placed at the center of Mexico City, the Palace of Fine Arts.¹¹⁷ Rivera manage to get his original message out to the public, but he also accomplished a depiction of his own ideals without censorship or public scrutiny by the government upon its completion. This marked the first time Rivera had not been censored for

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Keyes, “Destroyed by Rockefellers, Mural Trespassed on Political Vision.”

¹¹⁷ Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*.

artwork which pronounced Communist beliefs. Through his work up to this point, Rivera had attempted to empower the proletariat and foster the beliefs of the Communist Party on a national stage using imagery. Here is where Rivera began to transition to more blatant discussion of his views. At this point Rivera was publically discussing his support of Trotsky and the core tenants of the Communist Party held strong in *Man, Controller of the Universe*. It was clear that Rivera was trying to get a message consistent with his previous artwork out to the public despite the Party's internal conflict. *Man, Controller of the Universe* marked Rivera's transition to a more obvious artistic voice against the attacks by Capitalists governments and pushed for the increased spread of Communism throughout the Mexican people.



Portrait of America, The New Worker's School, New York City, Diego Rivera, 1933.

Portrait of America, 1933, Diego Rivera

In addition to his newly empowered voice in Mexico, Rivera's murals at The New Workers' School in New York City signified his first uncensored piece in the United States. In a series of murals painted throughout The New Workers' School, Rivera was meant to present the core pillars for the Communist Party USA and present the leaders of the party in an artistic format. In the panel *Portrait of America*, Rivera made his most obvious tribute to the Communist Party. Rivera started this piece in response to his dismissal from the Rockefeller Center mural project

and painted the series at no cost to the school.¹¹⁸ Reacting to the censorship of the Rockefellers, Rivera fit all of the leaders of the Communist Party into one panel. Under the Rockefeller-destroyed Vladimir Lenin, hands of different skin colors join above a banner reading: “Workers of the World Unite!” Surrounded by political figures such as Trotsky and Marx, this panel calls for the joining of races and classes in order to stand up and fight back against the injustices which they faced throughout the world.

Although the U.S. government was in the process of silencing communism throughout the country, Rivera’s funding of the project exemplifies how he overcame censorship throughout his artistic life. Even though the Rockefeller project was never completed, Rivera demanded the remaining \$14,000 of his \$21,000 commission and used this money to paint the murals at the New Worker’s School.¹¹⁹ Protests had laced New York City in response to the destruction of Rivera’s original mural, but Rivera managed to spend the money that came from the Rockefellers to paint a pro-Communist piece of art, in Mr. Rockefeller’s City. Although the piece of art he originally meant to be an advertisement for the Communist movement in America was destroyed, Rivera managed to destroy the walls of censorship that Rockefeller and others had built to stop him from making platforms in the United States. This mural was a continuation of the more obvious themes Rivera began to incorporate into his artwork in response to Siqueiros’ attacks. Although Rivera’s career began to wind down at this point, these messages were what marked his career and became translatable throughout his murals. Even though Rivera removed himself from the media after his fallout with Siqueiros, these pieces were Rivera’s response to Siqueiros’ criticism and his attack on the injustices to the proletariat.

¹¹⁸ Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*.

¹¹⁹ Scott, “Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric.”



Portrait of the Bourgeoisie, Electrical Workers' Union Building, Mexico City, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1939.



Portrait of the Bourgeoisie, Electrical Workers' Union Building, Mexico City, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1939.

Portrait of the Bourgeoise, 1939, David Alvaro Siqueiros

Beginning in 1939, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* was Siqueiros' first mural since his time fighting in the Spanish Revolution and since his debates with Rivera.¹²⁰ The mural took approximately a year to complete and instead of being placed in the government buildings like the murals of Diego Rivera, Siqueiros decided to place his next mural in the building of a union, specifically the Electrical Workers' Union Building.¹²¹ At this point in time leftist-Cardenas was in charge of the government, but the unionization of workers was still attacked through governmental policies.¹²² *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* was nothing short of an attack on the government through public support of workers and unions.

Experts believe that "Siqueiros' mural uncritically gives visual form to the process whereby 'workers [were] pulled irresistibly into a final and static social slot, and subjected to the hub of official power.'" ¹²³ This is demonstrated throughout the totality of the mural which continues the artist's dark styles which accompanied his art for all of his career. Lining a staircase in the union building, the mural is an allegorical analysis of the industrial revolution which was pushing Mexico into a more capitalist society. On the far right side of the mural Siqueiros inserted himself with a gun pointing at the machine at the center of the mural and the figure clad in Nazi regalia and outfitted with a gas mask in front of the Capitol building. Behind him more gas mask clad figures are coming into frame and below the scene the masses are ordered approaching the machine at the center of the figure. The government building behind the Nazi is engulfed in flames,

¹²⁰ Folgarait, *So Far from Heaven: David Alvaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*.

¹²¹ Carter, "The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico."

¹²² Poppino, *International Communism in Latin America: A History of the Movement, 1917-1963*.

¹²³ Carter, "The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico."

representing where Siqueiros saw society going without the intervention of a communist revolution.

Interestingly enough, Siqueiros did not get to complete his vision. Later in 1939 he was arrested for his attempt to assassinate Leon Trotsky. Losing his chance to finish the mural, Josep Renau had to take over the rest of the project and made some interesting changes to the finished product.¹²⁴ In the initial painting of the mural three men were placed on top of the machine at the center of the mural, emphasizing the controlling nature of the humans behind the machine. The focus of this mural was not to fight back, but rather to empower and inspire. These men are now covered by the gold coins surrounding the machine. The rather pointed tone of this section of the mural completely changed focus from the people behind the machine to the money the machine makes society. This mural could be considered extreme for the Communist Party exemplified by the multiple expulsions of Siqueiros from the Party, and considering Siqueiros garnered little support from the party after his assassination attempt on Trotsky.¹²⁵ The creation of this mural and its location emphasized his continued assertion to produce murals under Stalinist vision, but doing so in a more obvious way for the people and by supporting Communist institutions like the Electrical Workers' Union.

¹²⁴ Jolly, "Art of the Collective: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Josep Renau and Their Collaboration at the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate."

¹²⁵ Jolly, "Art of the Collective: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Josep Renau and Their Collaboration at the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate."



The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos: Misery and Science, Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros, Mexico City, Mexico, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1964-71.



The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos: Misery and Science, Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros, Mexico City, Mexico, David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1964-71.

Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros Murals, 1964-71, David Alfaro Siqueiros

In his final mural David Siqueiros painted the largest mural in the world from 1964-1971, in a 12-panel series entitled *The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos*, which is housed on the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros in Mexico City.¹²⁶ Towards the end of his career Siqueiros was just as politically focused as he had been at the beginning of his career. This mural also marked a change in Siqueiros' stylistic quality and subject matter.¹²⁷ This break from his history also marked a break from the general mural movement that had been observed for the greater part of the century. At this point *The March of Humanity* did not have the similar tenants of the rest of the movement, the structure of the Polyforum decreased the general legibility of the mural and also lead to a difficult integration of the mural's content. This mural took similar themes from Siqueiros' past work such as, compilation of different artists' and workers' points of view, which would contribute to the collectivist nature of his artwork and the political statements that Siqueiros wished to make with his artwork, but did so in a manner which occluded the messages.¹²⁸

The Polyforum was built under the purpose of being "a major business and tourist complex to be named Mexico 2000," leading to a relationship with the millionaire and capitalist, Manuel Suárez, with the devout communist, Siqueiros.¹²⁹ In what became a mutually beneficial relationship, Siqueiros managed to convince Suárez to include his political piece on the outside of the building which would eventually be named after Siqueiros. The sketches of the mural were created while Siqueiros was in jail (1960-64) and it maintained common themes of his artwork, but in a less obvious way than the Experimental Workshop.¹³⁰ The panels throughout the mural include all but the communist flag, with one panel being redder than the last. In *Misery and Science*

¹²⁶ Folgarait, *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Jolly, "Art of the Collective: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Josep Renau and Their Collaboration at the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate."

¹²⁹ Balderston, Gonzalez, and Lopez, "Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros."

¹³⁰ Ibid.

a central figure reaches up to the sky, standing above the masses, in what seems to be calling that mass to arms. This was the final panel in the series and it tied the theme of the rest of the series together. Overall the panels tell the story of man's struggle from the prehistoric era, and at this point in the series, man is fighting back. In regards to the mural, Siqueiros is quoted as saying:

“I think it was magnificent, a tremendous success. But while we can reach the moon, on earth we have horrendous misery. More than 70 per cent of the inhabitants of the world suffer from hunger. But even the money spent on space exploration would not be sufficient to alleviate more than a minimal proportion of the misery on earth. So. Then, this is *Miser on Earth and Science Toward Space.*”¹³¹

With this, Siqueiros concisely describe the efforts which he had been making for years before. With this series Siqueiros was calling attention to the plight of the proletariat, and emphasizing the fact that it is not something that can be easily fixed with money. Instead of attacking fascism like he had in the past, Siqueiros was now making a more directed effort to call the proletariat to arms. In his last mural Siqueiros maintained his voice for the people and continued the message that he had fought and tried to kill for throughout his career.

The Effect of Trotsky on the Art and Legacies

The notoriety that both of these artists garnered was at its peak during their lifetimes. Despite their decreased levels of notoriety, they are still essential components of Mexican art and these artists were the founding members of the Mexican muralism movement. The political discourse these artists went through during the muralist periods of their life significantly affected their artwork. This effect was greatly ignited by the presence of Leon Trotsky in Mexico during his period of exile. The 1940 debates, which were initiated by Trotsky's impending move to Mexico, pushed both artists to recognize the faults in their styles. While both artists identified as

¹³¹ Angelo, "Mexican Artist Makes World's Largest Mural."

Communists, Rivera identified as more of a Trotskyite while Siqueiros identified as a Stalinist and Siqueiros took the more vocal approach of expressing his own political beliefs.^{132, 133} The art pieces presented in this paper are signifiers of this transition pushed by Trotsky.

With Rivera, Siqueiros believed that his paintings took complex and occluded ways to explain the overall message of Communism, so much so that he went against the purpose of the murals as laid out in the manifesto *El Sindicato* had put together.¹³⁴ He believed that Rivera missed the essential purpose of this manifesto, accessible translation of ideals to the public. Meanwhile, Rivera and his supporters attacked Siqueiros for talking about his beliefs, but not taking action on any of his claims. River indicated Siqueiros was making no effort to speak for the proletariat.

Within the decade of these debates, both artists demonstrated significant changes in their actions and artwork. In response to the continued presence of Trotsky in Mexico, Siqueiros attempted to assassinate the revolutionary and from that point on justified his reasoning behind the attack through his beliefs in Stalinism.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, Rivera became more removed from the political atmosphere bby not speaking to the media regarding any politics and focused on the last murals he painted before his 1957 death.¹³⁶

As exemplified by *Man, Controller of the Universe* and *Portrait of America*, Rivera began more obviously putting forward the beliefs of the Communist Party. Although he had the same aggressive as Siqueiros did in much of his work, Rivera incorporated the faces of the leaders of the party into his artwork, making his statements of Communism more forthright to the public and as a greater form of advertisement than before. In addition to his attacks on Trotsky, Siqueiros took a more distinct tone to his artwork. At both the Polyforum and the Electrical Workers'

¹³² Davison, "Diego Rivera's Dirty Little Secret."

¹³³ Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

¹³⁴ Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos Pintores y Escultores, "Manifiesto Del Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores Y Escultores, 1922."

¹³⁵ Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works*.

¹³⁶ Hamill and Rivera, *Diego Rivera*.

Syndicate, Siqueiros demonstrated scenes of the proletariat fighting back as opposed to describing the start of fascism and capitalism as he did in *The Birth of Fascism* and the May Day Parade in New York. The colors in his pieces became redder and highlighted the Communist cause which he fought for in oral manner prior to his debates with Rivera and Trotsky's exile. After their public debate, both artists garnered less sponsored artwork, in what could be considered a response to their public declaration of their political views.^{137,138} Although it was known that both artists had those political beliefs before Trotsky's exile in Mexico, Trotsky was what amplified this feud. Trotsky generated a series of debates and public discourse between the two artists, which changed the course of their actions and artistic styles. While these debates drove Siqueiros to become more verbose in both the media and his artwork, they drove Rivera into a quieted media presence and to incorporate the ideas of communism more obviously into his artwork. Trotsky's exile became the spark which ignited these changes in both artists.

Both artists made controversial and prolific statements at the time of revolutionary politics in Mexican history. While the muralism movement could be attributed to Mexico's need of a national identity, this platform allowed for artists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros to make distinct political statements on murals which would become billboards for the tenants the artists held dear. Although the internal conflicts of the Communist Party triggered a fractioning of the Mexican muralists, the distinct differences between Trotskyism and Stalinism drove the artists to better their artwork for the greater good of the proletariat. While the artists' political ideals held strong, the presence of Leon Trotsky and the artists' public debates initiated by his exile influenced the artistic styles and the overall legacy they left at the end of the artistic revolution of Mexico.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ "How a Young Revolutionary Fooled the City Elders."

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