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DIEGO RIVERA AT THE ACADEMY OF SAN CARLOS

By Jean Charlot

TOWARDS the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico City was quite different from the cosmopolitan metropolis of today. Interesting sights, now disappeared, still surrounded the eighteenth century building that housed the Academy of Fine Arts of San Carlos of New Spain, known since Independence as the National Academy. Facing it, at the corner of the Cerrada de Santa Teresa and the street of Santa Ynez, was the open workshop where the Indian craftsman, Guadalupe Posada, carved on type-metal masterly engravings. Close by was the printing establishment of Don Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, who turned out one hand-manned screw-presses popular editions, strictly unlimited, of penny sheets, pious images, and street gazettes, reckoned today among the more authentic witnesses of their era.

Only two city blocks away from the Academy were still to be seen the last live vestiges of a time when Mexico-Tenochtitlan was the Venice of the Americas, its commerce gliding on the criss-cross web of its waterways. In the vicinity of Roldan Street the scene had scarcely changed from the one that Cortez sighted on arrival, and not at all since 1855 when Castro lithographed his busy plate, "The Roldan Bridge," for the album that described Mexico City and its suburbs.¹ On feast days, and especially on that of Santa Anita, the usual traffic loads of vegetables gave way to boat-loads of flowers brought from the countryside on primitive canoes by Indian paddlers in white, and girls in native embroidered blouses and full skirts of hand woven material. Less gracefully, the city sewage flowed into the canal, and neighboring wine-shops catered to the noisy busy crowds gathered at the landings.

Diego Rivera entered the Academy of San Carlos in 1898, being then twelve years of age. What went on back of the school building interested him at least as much as the stuffy classrooms where, for the first two years, he drew exclusively from prints, mostly charts of noses, ears, feet and eyes. His fellow students, among them Ignacio A. Rosas, remember how Diego came to school in short pants and shocking-pink socks, his pockets full of

¹ "Mexico y sus Alrededores," V. Debray, editor and publisher, Mexico, 1855.

fearful boyish things, bent pins, old strings and live bait that wiggled freely, minus the luxury of a container. Between classes, and presumably more often, the fat boy would sneak out along the back streets with lowbrow names—de la Alhondiga, de la Leña, de la Pulqueria, de Machincuepa—and, sitting by the canal, feet dangling close to the stinking waters, fish. At that, he must have found time to draw too: at the end of the first year his teacher, Andrés Rios, consulting with other members of the faculty, pronounced Rivera's work "Very good, unanimously;" and the second year this estimate was topped with a "Perfectly good, unanimously."² Dating of one of these two first years is the most childish among his preserved student drawings, a medley of putti and garlands imbued with a naive rococo flavor.³

From the copy of prints after plaster casts, Rivera graduated in 1900 to the rendering from actual plaster casts. Two of these drawings are still filed in the school archives. One is a bust of Homer, and the other a Venus of Milo, of fair semblance though standing on her head; such unconventional postures were meant to sharpen in the students an appreciation of proportions as such.

Diego's new teacher was the painter and etcher, Julio Ruelas, who has left a name and a work of enduring interest.⁴ Dean of the faculty was Don Santiago Rebull, a born Ingrist and a disciple of Pelegrin Clavé, Catalan director of the Mexican Academy for twenty years of the mid-century.⁵ Since youth, Rebull shared Clavé's admiration for the theories of the Nazarenes, German pre-Raphaelite expatriates who had lived and painted in Italy. As a result, the leaders of this forgotten art sect, Overbeck and Cornelius, were still worshipped in 1900 at the Mexican school. Like the Biblical personages that they painted, the Mexican Nazarenes grew apostolic beards, disdained fashion, and adopted an austerity of dress and deportment that the tiny salaries on which they raised large Catholic broods would alone have justified. Perhaps they overshot the mark in their disdain of niceties: it is told of Felix Parra that, while correcting a student, he would

² Archives of the school. 1905-10, "Alumnos certificados." It contains a detailed account of Rivera's activities as a student, up to December 2, 1905.

³ Collection of student drawings, in the care of the school librarian, Señor Lino Picaseño. 1763-1913.

⁴ Born Zacatecas, 1870. Died Paris 1907. Studied at the University of Karlsruhe, Baden, Germany. A pre-surrealist, working under the influence of Boecklin and of Félicien Rops.

⁵ Rebull: Born at sea, from Spanish parents, 1829. Died Mexico D.F., 1902. Rome prize, 1852. Professor at the Academy since 1859. Was Director of the school under Emperor Maximilian. Clavé: Born Barcelona, 1810. Died there, 1880. In Mexico, he was official dictator in matters esthetic from 1847 to 1868.

reproach him mildly, "Move that line just a trifle to the left. Look here, no wider than the black under my nail."⁶

In 1901, Rivera added to his curriculum perspective and anatomy, and the drawing of landscapes, presumably after French lithographs. The next year, he began to draw from life, and to paint, but only from other paintings. In 1903, he "took" art history and painted from nature, both life and landscape. The latter class was under José Maria Velasco, who rates high in the history of Mexican art.⁷ Velasco had been a student of Eugenio Landesio, an imported Italian teacher who rendered landscapes in a tight, sharp and enamelled manner, to which the genius of his gifted student added the silvery glow and spatial immensity of the Mexican plateau sights. It is through Velasco's teachings that Rivera was spared the stage of impressionism that he would have contacted at that date in Europe; Velasco's severely logical approach to optical problems prepared instead the young man for the further rationalizations of cubism. Rivera tells how the Mexican master introduced him to the classical concept of color, when correcting one of his juvenile essays, "Boy, you cannot go on painting in that way. In the foreground you put side by side yellow spots for sunlight and blue spots for shadows; but yellow comes forwards and blue recedes, so that you destroy the very plane that you pretend to describe."

The final examination in landscape painting for that year took place in November. The locale was the park of Chapultepec, famous since pre-Hispanic days for its *abuehuetes*, gnarled ancient trees with a foliage subtle as mimosa's, that Velasco himself so loved to paint. "Having selected a site adequate for studies from nature, the jurors assigned a place each to the students registered for the test, and left. The students worked from nine A.M. to noon for six successive days, under the supervision of one of the school prefects." The coveted medal went to a girl, Maria Enriqueta Gochicoa, with Rivera receiving a mention.⁸

That same year, 1903, a newcomer to the school faculty was Antonio Fabres, a Catalan like Clavé. His masterpiece, a Bacchanal, combining the subject matter of Velasquez and the style of Meissonier, had just been bought by the Mexican government for 12,000 pesos.⁹ Fabres also was the

⁶ Parra: born Morelia, Michoacan, 1845. Died Mexico, D.F., 1918. Professor at the school since 1882. His best known picture: "Father Las Casas, defender of the Indians."

⁷ Born Temazcaltzingo, Mexico, 1840. Died Villa de Guadalupe, D.F., 1912. Professor at the Academy since 1868.

⁸ Archives, "Libro de Actas," p. 165.

⁹ Papers relating to the transactions in Archives, 1905-2.

inventor and exponent of a teaching method that he claimed to be no less than a shortcut to genius. Whatever the more seasoned members of the faculty may have thought of him, they kept it wisely to themselves because Fabres had just been named sub-director of the school in a personal move of the Dictator and President of the Mexican Republic, Don Porfirio Díaz, who befriended him. The director, Don Antonio Rivas Mercado, was a Mexican architect of some renown and of a lymphatic disposition.¹⁰ At the beginning, at least, he made an honest effort to work in harmony with Fabres, but the task was to prove impossible. The school archives bulge with the irate haughty letters that the sub-director wrote to the director to coerce and frighten and bully him into submission.

Fabres failed totally to understand how respect was due to the older teachers who were not only his betters as artists, but meant an irreplaceable link in the national tradition. In one of his written complaints, he referred to Parra, who continued, as he had done since 1882, to give to his students for models prints after the Masters, "You know very well that, in my system of drawing, approved by the government so that today IT IS THE LAW, there is no such thing as drawing from prints. If we keep it for the first years it is only with the understanding that, eventually, we shall be able to replace prints with photographs."¹¹

Out of his own mouth, this ambitious man emerges as something of a charlatan, for example in this self-appreciation, "Sr. Fabres is the discoverer of the fact that, to insure quick progress in drawing and painting from the model, there is nothing equal to a certain sort of photographs that only he knows how to achieve. . . . Now that his claim has been approved, the Mexican school will lead all other schools in the whole world in this matter."¹²

It became the responsibility of the school photographer, Caboni, to put into practice the mysterious method. The explanations furnished by Fabres lacked technical explicitness, if we judge by the following note, "Fabres to Caboni: Please be present at the life class and at that of costume, there to take, by the use of magnesium and all other customary accessories, the photographs that I will tell you to take."¹³

The faith that Fabres put in the art of Meissonier, deemed indeed by most of his contemporaries to be the leading master of the age, went further

¹⁰ Mercado's best known work is the Column of Independence, in the Paseo de la Reforma, where the ashes of national heroes are enshrined.

¹¹ Archives, 1903. "Asunto Fabres," March 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1904-7, "Comunicaciones del Sr. Fabres."

¹³ *Ibid.*, April 29, 1904.

than to favor photographic exactitude over the great styles of the past. Meissonier was also famous for a zeal for accurate detail, that, for example, made him borrow Napoléon's greatcoat from the Musée des Invalides, to give added historical validity to his tiny picture of the retreat from Russia. Fabres collected whatever paraphernalia was judged an indispensable adjunct of artistic success: old uniforms of grenadiers and musketeers, armors, spurs and leather boots, helmets, rapiers and daggers, rags of damask, velvet and goldcloth. These treasures, that he brought with him from Spain, became a never ending source of squabbles with harassed Rivas Mercado. Wrote Fabres, who spoke of himself decorously in the third person, but with an occasional lapse: "Señor Fabres reports the following to the Directorship of the school: the individual who models for the class of costume has put the one I gave him to wear in such a condition of filth that he [Fabres] asks how to proceed in this disagreeable occurrence, as he is loath to see this clothing depreciated from its artistic state. To give it to be washed would impair this quality, and its owner is equally unwilling to let it out of sight. In another case, a helmet was injured as well as a cuirasse, and other clothing was unstitched and ripped."¹⁴

The true ambition of Fabres, that was far from secret, was to replace Mercado as director. His impatience in this respect led to an incident that afforded Rivera the opportunity for a first recorded act of rebellion. July 29, 1903, Fabres gave a paper to his students to sign, implying that it was only a routine class checkup. As the paper was folded in such a way that its contents were not revealed, the signers had to take his word for it. A majority obeyed, but two of the adolescents refused to comply, saying that they would gladly give their names but not their signatures. The following day, Lino Lebrija, head janitor of the school, reported to the director, "Last night, students Rivera and Gutierrez were expelled from the costume class of Señor Fabres, because they refused to put down their names and qualifications."

Queried by Mercado, Fabres gave a heated version of the incident, "These two gentlemen, Rivera and Gutierrez, not only do they disobey in everything, but I know from what other students have reported, that they also attempt to recruit other boys, equally non-conforming, and loudly proclaim my actions and advice to be no better than nonsense and madness; . . . Despite my indignation, I did no more than to point out to them the exit door.

"If I may state my true feelings, it is that both may never again be seen

¹⁴ *Ibid. n.d.*

in my classes. As they themselves have put it, of what possible use could it be to themselves or to myself that they be present only as active impediments?"¹⁵

August 1st, both students volunteered their own version, "Respectfully do we ask: How long is this punishment to last? . . . Are we at fault for refusing to sign a paper that was handed to us closed or folded, without disclosing its contents. . . . All that was said is that our names were needed, and we are at a loss to understand why our signatures were also asked for.

"Furthermore we suspected that this was another document, meant, it was rumored, for the President of the Republic, disregarding orders issued by the Director."

A week later, Mercado received a surprise communication from the Ministry of Education that proved the shrewdness of these youthful suspicions: "The attached petition was sent to the President of the Republic, and was signed by sixty-four students of the school. . . . We answered the petitioners in the sense that they should obey the authorities as well as the rules of their school."

The enclosed document read, "Sir, . . . it is thanks to your generous initiative that we possess a great teacher. After surmounting initial jealousies, he won us by his vast learning, his fruitful lessons and the rectitude of his conduct. . . . Alas, Mr. President, we feel impelled to state that the Director does not share our views, perhaps because, being an architect, he is somewhat removed from our interests.

"Could it be possible that architecture be separated from painting, sculpture and engraving? Thus securing for Don Antonio Fabres the needed independence to fulfill the mission that brought him to Mexico. . . ."¹⁶

Enlightened, Director Mercado reinstated Rivera and Gutierrez. It must be said for Fabres that he held no resentment: in the final tests for his class, that were held in November, the medal went to Natcho Rosas, but Rivera received a mention.

The next year, 1904, the breach widened still further between director and sub-director. In a huff, Fabres took his famed wardrobe out of the school building. Mercado complained to his superior, the Secretary of Education, Don Justo Sierra, "Since February 6, the students are drawing from the model just as he happens to be; that is in the clothes of the lower classes to which he belongs."

Whatever later generations of artists may think, who prefer to paint

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1903-41, "Expulsion de dos alumnos," for both documents.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1903-33, for both documents.

the Indian in his white *calzoncillos*, or, even better, in overalls, this was dismal news indeed at the turn of the century, and Fabres was begged to reconsider. Still referring to himself in the third person, he refused to comply in no uncertain terms: "Señor Antonio Fabres, as owner, sole owner, of the costumes . . . feels moved to answer, I repeat, AS THEIR OWNER, that he is resolved not to lend them any more."

April 19th, the students, reduced to the plight of painting Mexicans as they are, humbly approached the Director, "Is there not a way of helping us to follow the opportunity of studying the costume? Such classes, besides being instructive, were also most entertaining, as much because of the knowledge gained of the diverse styles of clothing according to periods, as for the wealth of color and the artistic interest that it added to the model."¹⁷ Having made his peace with Fabres, Rivera appears among the signers.

That year, 1904, Rivera got the coveted medal. The catalogue of the class show, that was held at the school, gives his first published biography: "Diego Rivera. Age: 18. Entered the school in 1898 and, after four years, was admitted to life-class."

In the next contest, held January 13, 1905, Rivera was again adjudged a medal, and this repeated success brought official repercussions:

"Office of the Ministry of Justice and Public Education.

"The President of the Republic graciously allows to student Diego Rivera a pension of 20.00 pesos monthly, payable at the School of Fine Arts and starting the first of the current month . . . as a reward for the medal obtained by the aforementioned student in the contest of painting from the costumed model. Mexico, January 17, 1905."

A student thus favored by the government was closely watched for progress. Every semester, the Director gave a personal report, and a corresponding printed form, such as the following, was filled in, "The President of the Republic, considering that the student *Diego Rivera* has been of good conduct and of sustained application . . . graciously renews his order of January 17, 1905, to pay to *the aforementioned student* the sum total of *pesos 120.00* in monthly sums of *pesos 20.00*, so as to further the studies of *the aforementioned student*. July 1. Signed Ezequiel A. Chavez. Sub-Secretary of Education."

Rivera's pension was short-lived. The last document in the files of the school that concerns it, also gives the reason; it is a curt reply by the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1904-7.

sub-Secretary of Education to the next semestrial Director's report on progress and conduct, "From the contents of your communication of the 8th of the current month, notice is taken of the fact that the pensioned student Diego Rivera entered the contests of life-drawing and coloring without obtaining any positive results. Mexico, January 12, 1906. E. A. Chavez."¹⁸

Soon after, Fabres lost favor with official circles. His epitaph as a teacher was written by Rivas Mercado, in a letter to the Secretary of Education, Justo Sierra, "It is by now public knowledge that photographic cameras are used in his classes, but Señor Fabres and his group may not any more have this supreme recourse to dazzle laymen and to waylay their own selves.

"His incompetence as a teacher should be easy to demonstrate, once he is despoiled of his only weapon in the competition of lawful teaching. I refer of course to the *camara lucida*, with whose powerful help he surprised the good faith of men unversed in matters of art."¹⁹

That same year, 1906, an exhibition was held at the Academy of the work of twelve artists pensioned to go to Europe, or who sent their contributions from there. To recoup his loss of a federal pension, Rivera had just received another one, this time from the Governor of the State of Vera Cruz, General Teodoro Dehesa, and was also making ready to go abroad. As a result, Rivera was also included in the group show. His display was substantial enough to constitute a first one-man show, and has been referred to as such by his biographers. The paintings, listed in the printed catalogue of the show, were all Mexican landscapes, brushed under the star of Velasco: "Vera-Cruz;" "Foggy Day, Xalapa;" "Queretaro;" "San Angel;" "Mixcoac;" etc. . . . Rivera's earliest style of landscape painting can be gathered from the small picture of the volcanoes that he still owns, where the pigment is applied with circular rhythmical strokes of a sensuousness that was not to outlast his European experience.

Gerardo Murillo, better known under the name of Dr. Atl, was busy in 1906 at an inventory of the ancient pictures piled in the storerooms of the school.²⁰ It was Atl who, acting as a friendly salesman, sold enough of Rivera's landscapes to buy him his passage to Europe, that the meager State pension could hardly provide. It was also Atl who wrote a personal letter of introduction to a painter friend, Eduardo Chicharro, who became Rivera's teacher in Spain.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1906-8, "Pensiones," for both documents. The first one is a printed form. The italicized words are added by hand.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1906-34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1908-23.