

**Diego Rivera, *Acuarelas: 1935-1945*, introduction by Samuel Ramos, New York and London, Studio Publications, 1948. Portfolio, 18 x 13", 25 watercolors. \$50.**

Among the figures of the first rank in contemporary art, Rivera stands out as the more objective master, meaning perhaps that his head consistently retains a priority over his heart. This also explains why Rivera is unashamedly an eclectic, who backs his own style with chips out of a history of art that he knows and appreciates better than many a scholar. Even if he were a less gifted artist, this position would single out Rivera from among his colleagues, who prefer to tug at their own heartstrings and to perform strictly personal antics with the brush.

Thus, what comes perilously close to a lack of originality—at least according to the contemporary usage of the term—has come to constitute Rivera's originality. While the passionate output of Orozco exhibits all the idiosyncrasies expected from the composite personage known as the modern artist, Rivera's work remains out-of-bounds.

Those who have looked too long and too exclusively at the School of Paris are apt to dismiss Rivera, especially in his later manner, with a shrug and an epigram such as "an academican in wolf's clothing." Other less impatient minds, by taking time to relate his work to past periods of art, are able to follow its filiation through Ingres and David to the *peinture d'histoire* that was considered the one noble genre in the eighteenth century. One may indeed marvel at the sturdiness of the painter's convictions as he builds slowly through a lifetime his challenge of hard work, good craft and common sense, setting it as a potential dam against the tumultuous eddies of today's taste.

This portfolio deals only with the least difficult facet of Rivera's vast *œuvre*. Its plates are tastefully chosen from among the many watercolors that are to the muralist both a relaxation and a merchandise—as Degas inclined to call his own pastels—trimmed to reach a public that huge immovable walls cannot tap. Other watercolors of this same vintage have already proved best-sellers in the field of color reproductions, thus suggesting a publisher's reason for this expensive publication.

Even though it does not represent Rivera at his greatest, such work, sound in plastic and in human content, deserves a more thoughtful

presentation than is apparent here. A dispassionate appreciation of the quality of the four-color plates would raise perforce a question as to the integrity and power of mechanical reproduction, even when of relatively high caliber. Cool minds usually take it for granted that photography can do no wrong, and yet, in this case, the original image can hardly be said to emerge intact. The range of the printer's ink fails to follow the nuances of its fluid washes, and the clarity of its lineal statement is fuzzed over by the requirements of plate-making. It looks as if the originally crisp watercolors had been left in a tubful of water to soak overnight.

In the field of art criticism, this publication does little to increase our understanding of Rivera. The text—written by Samuel Ramos and handsomely printed—is an amiable paean of praise for the painter, rather than the general dissertation that its title, "The Style of Indian Mexico," would lead us to expect. To make of Rivera the single pivotal factor of Mexican art is to disagree with the facts. He returned to Mexico in 1921; but already in 1913 and 1914, Francisco Goitia and Dr. Atl had penned manifestoes as detailed as blueprints for the coming renaissance.

According to Ramos, Rivera, on his return from Europe "is seized at once by the idea of creating a native Mexican style to give adequate expression to the Indian world." And yet Rivera's first mural, an encaustic unveiled in March, 1923, over which he labored a year, was so heavy with reminiscences of Byzantine Italy that his biographer, Bertram D. Wolfe, saw fit to label it "a false start."

Similar oversimplifications, intended to bolster Rivera's posture in art history, fail to explain the telltale *volte-faces* that stamp his early frescoes with an unrest close to greatness. Those who worked with and near him at the time of his return to the *patria* remember still the fierce inner conflicts—exploding at times into outward crisis—that marked his conversion to fresco and to Mexico.

The Paris where he had lived for eighteen years held beliefs opposed to those of post-Revolution Mexico. Nowadays, after surrealism has again made story-telling, or at least a certain kind of story-telling, fashionable in painting, it is difficult to recapture the narrowly puristic creed held as the only truth in the best-informed Parisian circles, a little over a quarter of a century ago. Then a dash of the literary in its

make-up was enough to brand a picture as unworthy. It was the period when Jean Cocteau defended Pablo Picasso with vigor from the unwitting "insult" of an innocent newspaperman who had referred to a group of two nude figures painted by the Catalan as representing *Adam and Eve*. The same Cocteau proclaimed still-life as the supreme genre, because it was less tainted than others by psychological inroads. If anyone had had the audacity to attempt it, a cardinal sin in 1920 would indeed have been a didactic painting with historical subject matter. Just this the Mexican painters were set to do.

Rivera had shared for a decade in the lore of prejudices, loves and taboos that inspired the small group of pioneer cubists who were his colleagues in France. After his return to Mexico, even though he soon became a leader of the local movement, his cubist-trained conscience could hardly stomach, at times, the resurrection of didactic painting that surged as an aftermath of the Revolution. His early frescoes even attempted the impossible: to reconcile his cubist manner, bred experimentally in the hothouse of a studio, with the very different plebeian requirements of dialectical painting. States Ramos blandly, concerning that time, "Rivera began his creative period already with complete awareness of his stylistic aims. . . ."

What constitutes the more original feature of this publication, and one that by itself makes it worth owning, are the illustrations scattered through the text. They are in the manner of simple linecuts after originals in brush-and-ink of a bold type, and never before reproduced as successfully. These are just the kind of apparently simple drawings that most American publishers, alas, esteem just right to suffer substantial reduction in layouts. These brave studies are reproduced here at what could be their original size, and thus escape the weakening of impact and content that accompanies a shrinkage in size.

It is revealing to compare the stylish make-up of this portfolio, issued in a limited edition, with the graphic means favored by the Mexican artists in an earlier phase of the movement. Then the organ of the group was *El Machete*, a sheet printed on the cheapest paper, made to sell on the streets for a penny. Its biting woodcuts were woefully lacking in what attracts decorators seeking a certain kind of picturesque, neatly packaged and "suitable for framing."

JEAN CHARLOT  
*University of Hawaii*

FIRST SHOWING OF PAINTINGS

R. HUNTER

HUGO  
GALLERY

26 E. 55th St., N. Y.  
PL 3-2314