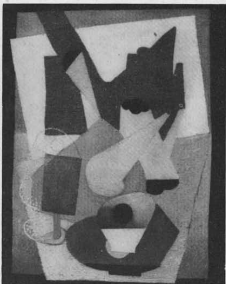


Jean Charlot

DIEGO RIVERA IN ITALY



UNTIL 1920, Diego Rivera was a bonafide member of the School of Paris, consciously lost in estoteric pursuits that held more than a touch of plastic alchemy. His return to Mexico, late in 1921, marks the beginnings of his present fame as a leading muralist, painting for the people at large. What were the reasons that brought about this sudden change of heart and radical change of style?

Rivera left Mexico in 1908 at the age of twenty-two, returning briefly in 1910, only long enough to hold there a one-man show. In 1920, if Mexicans thought about him at all, it was as an expatriate. Writing of the work of Saturnino Herran, a stay-at-home Mexican artist, the critic Manuel Toussaint stated:

"When he refused to leave his country, Herran made it impossible for Europe to tear apart from us his spirit and his art, as it had done with Zarraga, Diego Rivera, and many another artist who, though Mexican by birth, by fame and works is European."

Mexico's loss was Europe's gain. In his *L'Art vivant* (1920), the French critic André Salmon included Rivera—with reservations born of personal enmity—in the narrow circle of the Parisian group. There was even what amounted

to a consecration of this recognition, the publicity attendant on a mild esthetic scandal (in which the dealer Léonce Rosenberg also figured) that came to be known as "*Taffaire Rivera*."

Ramon de la Serna described the Mexican artist in Paris:

"In this studio hung with black curtains . . . Diego lived between colors and bottles of Vichy mineral water that he fed to his voracious liver. . . . With the coming of night, he would further his inventions by candlelight."

André Salmon went into details concerning one of these inventions:

"He had built a curious tool, a sort of articulated plane, like the one made of paper that engravers use to make their tracings. . . . Rivera even claimed to have found the true secret of the fourth dimension."

A co-worker with Rivera was Gino Severini, who in 1917 published in *Le Mercure de France* a summary of their joint experiments. It mentioned also the "curious tool" that Salmon attributed to Rivera, but claimed by Severini as his own:

Above: Diego Rivera, Cubist painting, c. 1916

"In my personal researches, I carried my experiments to the point of combining together planes made of paper and cardboard, which could be made to move by rotation and by translation. . . .

"To satisfy my curiosity I looked into qualitative geometry for the most evident demonstration of the fourth dimension. I knew beforehand, however, that geometry could do no more than strengthen convictions already arrived at in our group by common artistic intuition. . . .

"Placing oneself at the point of view of the physical sciences, it is possible to create a new world in a space of four or of n dimensions. Thus, a parallelism may be drawn between the phenomena existing in world 1 and those existing in world 2. Inventors (wireless telegraphy, etc.) proceed thus, and it is equally licit for the artist to do so.

"As the painter Rivera, following Poincaré, justly observed, 'A being living in a world with varied refractions, instead of homogeneous ones, would be bound to conceive of a fourth dimension.'

"This milieu with distinct refractions is realized in a picture if a multiplicity of pyramids replaces the single cone of Italian perspective. Such is the case with certain personal experiments made by Rivera, who sees in Poincaré's hypothesis a confirmation of some intuitions of Rembrandt, El Greco and Cézanne."

By 1920, in faraway Mexico, the military revolution begun in 1910 gave signs of cooling off, somewhat uncertainly, into a period of civic reconstruction. One of the young politicians violently risen to power, José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Education, now dreamt of a vast plan of cultural renaissance: music, poetry, architecture and mural painting were to be put at the service of the people at large. Vasconcelos' slogan, repeatedly expressed, was: "If genius has such an exalted standing, it is because of its capacity to serve the people best." To further his plans, the Secretary not only commissioned works from artists already in Mexico but zealously started a roundup of those who had strayed abroad. Rivera was among these.

From the correspondence now filed in the national archives, it appears that Rivera was loath to return to his *patria* without first having visited Italy. Vasconcelos, for his part, felt grave reservations as to the fitness of cubism as a means of edifying the masses; perhaps an Italian trip would prove a shock treatment to cure the painter of his prideful isolation.

In November, 1920, the Secretary wired Rivera a sum of two thousand pesos—then the equivalent of a thousand dollars—ostensibly for fulfilling a mission connected with a reform of art teaching. In practice, by mutual understanding, the money served to pay for the coveted Italian trip.

Doubtless Rivera had heard of the cultural slant of his patron in esthetic matters, and thus knew what to look for in Italy—some formula that would ease the transition from ivory tower to public walls, in preparation for the kind of job that he hoped awaited him on his return to Mexico. His conversion was genuine, at any rate, as his interest veered from occult experiments towards communal manifestations, so splendidly and publicly realized in ancient Italian towns. He described his reaction in a letter to the Secretary, dated January 13th, 1921, and posted from Venice:

"Thanks to this sum, I am now realizing that tour of Italy for which I so longed. . . . It would be superfluous to state of what crucial importance it is for everything that concerns my craft—but even I failed to realize in what measure, and how emphatically so. . . .

"Here one feels, sees, touches and apprehends how the diverse materials manipulated by the different crafts unite, collaborating with, merging within, and exalting each other; until they make of the whole—building or city—a sum total that is function and expression of life itself, a thing born of the soil, organically tied to life—the living life of today, and past and future—a thing lifted above all the factors dependent on time."

Some such feeling is reflected even in the hasty landscapes that Rivera sketched, perhaps from train windows: medieval towers, square and crenelated, soaring over vineyards and low walls, their tops level with those of the rounded hills; cypresses and towers—nature and architecture—grown together in geological compactness.

Early Christian and Byzantine mosaics, in close interplay with architecture and outspoken in their public message, proved a corrective lesson that Rivera could never forget. In Ravenna, he sketched the processions of San Apollinare Nuovo and heads from the twin mosaics of Justinian and Theodora; he drew the outlines of the river god who witnesses the Baptism of Christ on the ceiling of the Arian Baptistery. An unidentified sketch stresses the theme of murals linked with architecture, and the relation of both these arts to life: men kneeling in prayer are seen against the backdrop of a mosaic saint, gigantic in scale, geometrized to blend with the surrounding architecture. Slight as was this scribble, the sensation it recorded proved a lasting one. *Creation*, the first mural that Rivera painted on his return to Mexico, followed to the letter the style and scale delineated in the sketch.

Rivera's conversion to muralism, experienced in the presence of Byzantine mosaics, had no need to take the form of a *mea culpa* for lost time. It was rather an overt expansion of what, as a cubist, he had discovered and experienced in secret. The same letter, quoted above, had this to say concerning his experimental Pa-



Left: Diego Rivera, Sketch of figure of river god in Baptism of Christ, Early Christian mosaic, 6th c., Arian Baptistery, Ravenna (at right)

risian period:

"The little I did was always meant to be shared with all, even though it happened between the four walls of my studio and far away. . . .

"During all these years, all my efforts were bent on gathering all the data I could, up to the limit of my strength; so that, once back there with you and our people, I would attempt to make it work."

There is hindsight growing out of his Italian trip in this justification of his recent past, politically addressed to Vasconcelos; but it remains true that a passion for geometry stamped the ancient murals as forcefully as it informed the best of cubist works.

Rivera could feel at home in yet another period, as starkly intellectual as his own, when painters who were also geometricians computed the laws of Italian perspective and defined the "divine proportion." In the proud words of the cubist Severini:

"Sympathy for science existed also in the times of Paolo Uccello, Andrea del Castagno, Domenico Veneziano, Luca Signorelli, Leonardo, etc. . . . These were realistic painters in the widest sense of the word, just as we are."

Indeed, in Florence, Rivera drew an intense set of sketches after Uccello's *Rout of San Romano*. Stressing the fan-spreads of ruled lines, he exaggerated the artificiality of horses and armor to such a degree that they seem to become the cogs and pistons of Rivera's own machine age. Intent on muralism, he must have longed to know how the Uffizi panel, together with the

companion pieces in London and Paris, blended with each other and with the lost architecture for which they were originally planned.

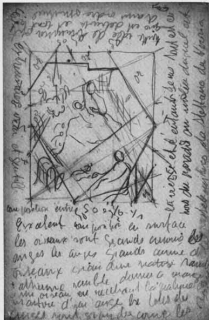
Rivera's Parisian experiments spectacularly touched on the topic of a fourth dimension; but also, more sedately, on the problem of illusion in depth and its proper degree of relationship to the flatness of the canvas. It was with iconoclastic gusto that the impressionists had collapsed the backdrop used by classical masters to dam in the pictorial space. In turn the cubists—Rivera included—questioned the impressionists' spatial nonchalance, eschewed its doubtful freedom and returned to the older concept of a measurable space.

As Rivera began to think in terms of murals, additional problems were raised that cubism had as yet had little occasion to meet. These were concerned with the tying together of the picture and the surrounding architecture—the ordering of illusionistic painted space to fit the inner space of the sustaining building. The Mexican looked to the old masters for a key to the solution. This uneasy intercourse between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional elements made Rivera forget for a while his search for a fourth dimension; but the system of analysis that this search had bred, based on the translation of lines and the rotation of planes, proved as fruitful when applied to the Italian masters as it had already in the case of "Rembrandt, El Greco and Cézanne."

Even though Mantegna was omitted from Severini's list of precursors of cubism, his steel-hard compositional solutions, passion for perspective riddles and impersonal goals sought by his strong personality could easily qualify. Rivera's



Stefano da Zevio (?), *Madonna with St. Catherine in a Rose Garden*, c. 1425-35, tempera, 50 1/4 x 37 1/2", Museo Civico, Verona



Diego Rivera, Sketch after painting by Stefano da Zevio

sketch after Mantegna recalls the murals at Padua with the hallucinatory bulk of their Roman architecture—perhaps, more specifically, the *Baptism of Hermogenes*.

Rivera noted on this sketch:

"Construction where the actual partitioning of the surface follows guidelines relating to depth; thus creating a surface harmony shot through in make-believe style by the architecture. The frightening relief does not violate the surface."

In Verona, Rivera called "magnificent" Bonsignori's *Madonna*, steeped in Mantegna's spirit. In Rivera's sketch, the Infant Christ, sterner than in Bonsignori's painting, lies forlornly on the slablike cube of cubism and reveals even more clearly than does the painting its indirect prototype, Mantegna's *Dead Christ*—its drawing cruelly foreshortened on the esthetic rack of scientific perspective.

It was also in Verona that Rivera studied Stefano da Zevio's *Virgin and St. Catherine in a Rose Garden*. He skillfully isolated the geometrical backbone of the delightful *hortus conclusus*, dividing the surface into halves and quarters, with diagonals abutting the golden sections. The basic heptagon is apprehended more readily in

the sketch than in the picture, where it is overgrown with quaint accessories that seem to turn the initial scheme in depth into a *millefleurs* tapestry.

Writing as always in French, all over the remainder of the sheet, up and down and sideways, Rivera managed a word picture of the tender epidermis he had so ruthlessly skinned off his drawing:

"Excellent surface composition. Birds the size of angels, angels the size of live birds. St. Catherine seemingly feeds a bird while receiving from an angel the palm of martyrdom.

"Angels' heads are as big as are the roses in the mystical rosebush of Stefano da Verona.

"The Virgin and Child. All is gold outside of paradise. Within, all idea of optical scale is destroyed and all is in the spiritual order. It is extremely truthful and gentle."

Here was a new, or rather a forgotten kind of fourth dimension, different from the cubist one. Rivera could not remain insensitive to its spiritual depth, even though its extent was not to be measured by rotating or sliding the parts of a cardboard device.

A thirty-five degree tipping of the upper left corner of the picture, sliding around the

golden section, was Rivera's way of expressing the dynamics of an unidentified Giovanni Caroto. The note scribbled in the margin of the sketch is partly autobiographical:

"Surface composition with golden section, the half and the square of the picture.

"Mediocre painter. Construction depending too much on figures inscribed with too many foreshortenings and accidental postures in depth, stressing surface lines.

"Try to avoid this defect; danger for myself."

Problems of technique and color at times took precedence over those of composition. In Venice at the Scuola di San Rocco, Rivera puzzled, pencil in hand, over a fragment of a frieze by Tintoretto. Off-size and folded back high on

the wall where the mural canvas belonged, this fragment had been recovered intact in 1905, unvarnished and apparently unfinished. Maurice Denis had already lucidly written in 1910:

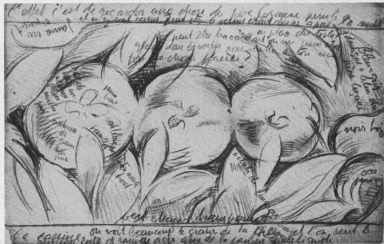
"In it were apples painted in a pale green and bright red on a ground of Veronese-green leaves. *It is all color.* One would call it a Cézanne. Perhaps it lacks the finishing touch of umber that would have sobered it, but, such as it is, that precious fragment indicates in Tintoretto an effort at chromatism altogether similar to that which I have explained in Cézanne."

Rivera wrote in turn:

"It seems as if one is looking at a thing of père Cézanne, painted in casein. The grain of the canvas is much in evidence and one feels



Above: Tintoretto, Fragment of Sala dell'Albergo ceiling decoration, 1565-67, oil, Scuola di San Rocco, Venice; below: Diego Rivera, Sketch after Tintoretto's ceiling decoration





Left: Tintoretto, *Three Graces and Mercury*, 1578, oil, 57½ x 61", Doge's Palace, Venice

Below: Diego Rivera, Sketch after Tintoretto's *Three Graces and Mercury*



was put up in position? Perhaps one worked slightly with glazes in the fresh varnish to harmonize once the thing was done?"

Notes on color are scattered over the drawing: "Earth-red with accent of pure vermilion. Orpiment yellow. Cold neutral tone. Green warm and transparent. Blue-gray identical to that of *père Cézanne*."

This Mexican, thinking aloud in Venice, jotted down his thoughts in French. Gallic habits showed more deeply than in the language alone. The whole glorious *décor* of San Rocco with its painted giants twisted in holy and violent actions was gently outweighed for Rivera, as it had been before him for Denis, by three apples, *Cézanne*-touched.

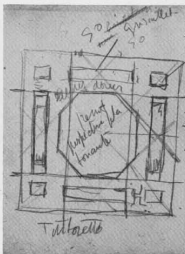
In the Doge's Palace in the same city, Rivera sketched Tintoretto's *Three Graces and Mercury*. He felt at ease while ruling the diagonals that divide the surface area of the picture into quarters—more so than when rendering the spiraling depth, with its streaks of *chiaroscuro* disembodied from actual plastic form. He noted: "Quite close to a window. A picture in which the composition is arrived at by color, determined by the effect and dynamism of the physical light."

A point that Vasconcelos, in his desire to lure back the artist, had perhaps failed to make clear was that the Mexican art renaissance was launched practically minus a budget. Rivera dreamt active dreams under the baroque ceilings of the Doge's Palace, jotting down blueprints and recipes that in time to come could help enhance

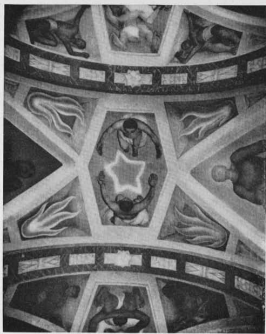
how the brush, agile and hurried, acts with the rather liquid pigment.

"There is no varnish whatsoever. Perhaps the coat of varnish was added after the canvas

Right: Tintoretto, Allegory: Justice and Venice offering Sword and Scales to the Doge Gierolamo Priuli, c. 1559-60, Doge's Palace, Venice. Below: Diego Rivera, Sketch after Tintoretto's Allegory.



Diego Rivera,
Detail of ceiling, Chapel, Chapingo, 1923-27



his own mural paintings with sculptured panelings and embossed gilded reliefs. He noted of the *Sala delle Quattro Porte*: "Ceiling by Tintoretto. Architectural scheme by Palladio. Color alternating cools and warms"; and of the *Allegory with Doge Girolamo Priuli* and attendant panels: "Pictures in frontal perspective with very low horizon. The imitation bas-reliefs in monochrome painted in very warm tones."

That the artist was not craning his neck in idle awe of the unattainable is proved by his very practical sketch of a mural scaffold:

"A scaffold for working on ceilings, very simple to move by sliding it over planks greased with lard, slipped under the front legs raised by means of wooden screw-levers.

"To apply the canvas to the ceiling it is raised from the ground in this way, after having fixed the suspending screws in place very exactly by trial with the stretcher alone. The scaffold is put back in place after that."

Back in Mexico, Rivera was to manage to put to use his splendid Venetian experience—with simpler accessories and cheaper materials, it is true—in the partitions that artfully divide the ceiling of the chapel at Chapingo.

In Chapingo, Rivera embodied still another Italian memory—Sieneese this time—when he painted two panels on the contrasting themes of good and bad government, in homage to the Lorenzettis, the first muralists to deal openly with political themes.

The long-range significance of the Italian trip turns on the artist's disaffection from the esoteric in favor of a means more suited to painting on public walls. The Italian sketches prove how reluctant Rivera was to move towards a representational painting style, how he clung instead to geometry as the one safe common denominator between his work and that of the old masters. The contemporary esthetic etiquette of Paris decreed that story-telling was unbecom-

ing in art; thus conditioned, Rivera's thought habits automatically played down the rich subject matter found in Italian masters and shied away from the human moods inescapably attached. He understood, however, how a dramatic change of approach was implied if he was ever to become painter for the people at large. Notes that the artist himself dictated on his stylistic evolution, after his return to Paris from Italy and just before his departure for Mexico, show this awareness:

"1914-1915: deductive cubism.

"1915-1917: transition cubism.

"1917-1920: comes close to Cézanne and Renoir.

"1920-1921: trip to Italy; a new tendency, to humanize."

As the careful wording implies, this humanization was as yet only a tendency. Even later, back in Mexico once more, Rivera's first mural, Byzantine in style and content, was thus planned so as to postpone for a while longer the unavoidable conversion to realism.

There was, however, another facet to Rivera's work, perhaps begun as a form of relaxation from the abstruse research cited by Severini. In Paris, Rivera had drawn a series of heads keenly observed—*The Nun, The Laborer, The Widow, The Bureaucrat, The Boss*—with a touch of nineteenth-century humor à la Grandville or à la Cham. On the Italian trip, he also made a few sketches in this realistic vein, such as one of a female addict giving herself a hypodermic. In a similar strain Rivera was to jot down on his arrival in Mexico market scenes and provincial types. Even before the completion of his neo-Byzantine mural, these notes after things seen eased the way towards the long-delayed change of style.

Not until 1923, in the frescoes for the Ministry of Education, did Rivera combine his abstract computations with realistic observations in an openly dialectical style.

Diego Rivera,
Sketch of Italian street scene, pencil



Note: The sketches by Rivera illustrating this article were done during his trip to Italy, 1920-21. All photographs are reproduced courtesy of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.