Photo from Google Art Project/Wikimedia Commons.

Diego Rivera with his daughter Guadalupe, circa 1927.

ART

The Mexico of My Father

By Yngrid Fuentes

Beyond the power of his imagery, painting style, and influence in Mexican art, to talk about Diego Rivera is to talk about Mexico, according to Guadalupe Rivera y Marín, daughter of the famous Mexican painter.

During her talk, "The Mexico of My Father Diego Rivera," organized by the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley and San Francisco's Mexican Museum, Rivera y Marín discussed her father's legacy and evolution as a muralist, in conversation with Andrew Kluger, president of the Mexican Museum.

Rivera's paintings and murals played a critical role in shaping contemporary Mexican culture and forming the attitudes of Mexicans themselves towards their history, from the pre-Columbian indigenous past through the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution and its fulfillment during the Lázaro Cárdenas years in the 1930s. Rivera's outsized life was intertwined with iconic artists of the 20th century, from Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani in Europe during the early years of that century to contemporary muralists like David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco in Mexico from the 1920s onwards. And Rivera's art and passion linked him to defining people of his era around the world, from Detroit industrialist Edsel Ford to Leon Trotsky, the exiled Russian revolutionary.

"If there was someone who understood and loved Mexico, that was my father," said Rivera y Marín.

But it wasn't until the age of 35 that Diego Rivera truly discovered his country. After studying art for eight years in Europe, he only knew his hometown of Guanajuato, in central Mexico, and Mexico City.

"He came back [to Mexico] in 1921. He was invited to collaborate with the artistic revolution that the Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, planned to start," said Rivera y Marín.

The artistic revolution sparked by Vasconcelos intended to define a new Mexican culture that would give meaning to the lives and extreme sacrifices of a fractured people after the Revolution. In a country where illiteracy hovered at 90 percent in the aftermath of a devastating conflict, one vital tool was the promotion of mural painting through a government-funded program. Ordinary people, from peasants to factory workers, would be moved, inspired, educated, and amused with powerful art on public walls. Muralists like Siqueiros and Orozco were also part of this program.

A year after his return to Mexico, Diego Rivera developed his first mural in the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, at the request of Vasconcelos. In the mural called "La Creación," Rivera portrayed several well-known contemporary women artists from Mexico. One of the women who posed nude for Rivera was Guadalupe Marín. She ended up marrying him and, years later, becoming Rivera y Marín's mother.

"After [she had posed nude], my grandfather traveled from Guadalajara to Mexico to ask my father to marry my mother. That was my origin, but I only found out after many years," said Rivera y Marín with humor.

Unfortunately, "La Creación" did not meet Vasconcelos's standards. He considered it "too European," because it did not reflect Mexico's turbulent, traumatic reality. So Vasconcelos bought train tickets for the artist and his new wife, Guadalupe, to travel across Mexico. The experience would help Rivera to better understand the country, its people, and their revolution and to translate that new perception into art. Rivera's long, meandering trip through Mexico provided the passion and the subjects for his murals. His art gained meaning, relevance, and power, and his artistic genius forged the style we associate with Rivera today.

From the lives of working-class people to images of indigenous Mexicans, farmers, politicians, and depictions of power struggles, Diego Rivera's work became an account of Mexico's reality.

In front of more than 300 attendees, Rivera y Marín explained how her father's murals reflected Mexican culture, such as the traditional festivities of the Día de los Muertos or the floating parties on the Xochimilco.

As an artist with strong political convictions — he viewed himself as a Marxist and, at times, a Communist — many of Diego Rivera's murals addressed social themes, like the struggle for land. Yet his art also reflected a human universality that transcended his ideology.

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Diego Rivera, "La Creación" (1922), Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso.

Photo by Evgeny Zhivago. © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2. Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, Mexico City.

Rivera y Marín said that many of her father's beliefs converged in the murals he made at the chapel of the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo.

"According to art critics, this was Diego Rivera's masterpiece. To the left, there is the land and the unfortunate living conditions of farmers, and to the right, the way the land was distributed," said Rivera y Marín.

The murals inside the chapel also featured Rivera's wife, Guadalupe, and their daughter as a cherub.

Over time, Rivera y Marín's achievements and involvement in Mexican politics would go far beyond her early appearance floating through the sky in a mural. She became a lawyer, worked as a lawmaker, and represented Mexico at the United Nations. She was also named the Diego Rivera Foundation's Chair and Director.

Rivera y Marín admitted that her father's radicalism and sympathy towards Marxism became a burden during her childhood.

"My father was widely discussed and not quite appreciated in Mexico. During his first years, when he returned from Europe, he was a member of the Communist Party," said Rivera y Marín. " And as you all know, Communists around the world are like enemies of the world."

"This was hard for me when I was a child, because people saw me as the daughter of a Communist. Now, my father is the most prominent figure in Mexican art and is seen as an example of a respected and admired Mexican around the world."

Evidence of Rivera's considerable impact outside Mexico can be found in the murals he painted in the United States in the 1930s. The Detroit Industry murals fill 27 panels in the Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Art, and the San Francisco Art Institute is home to a mural called "The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City," which Rivera painted at the request of architect and interior designer Timothy Pflueger.

"That time was very important for my father. It was a period when Frida traveled with him, and they were both guests of San Francisco," said Rivera y Marín.

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Gatefold (right): Diego Rivera, "Tierra Fecundada (Fertile Land)" (1927), Chapel of the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo.
Gatefold (overleaf): Diego Rivera, "Pan American Unity" (1940), City College of San Francisco.

(Chapingo photo by Jorge Ibarra. Pan American Unity photo courtesy of City College of San Francisco. Both images © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, Mexico City.)

Diego Rivera, "The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City" (1931), San Francisco Art Institute.

Photo by Doug Oster. © 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, Mexico City.

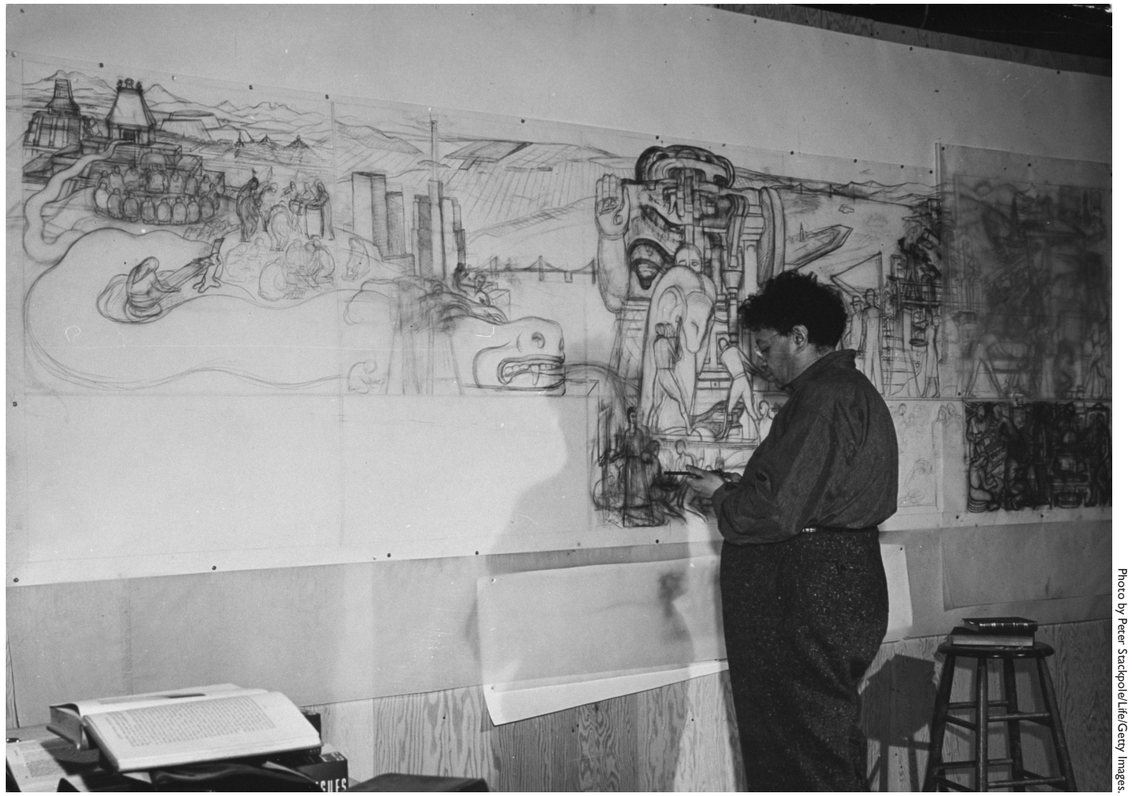

Photo by Peter Stackpole/Life/Getty Images

Diego Rivera sketching for "Pan American Unity."

One of Diego Rivera's most controversial works was "Man at the Crossroads," which he did during his time in the United States at the Rockefeller Center shortly after completing the Detroit Industry murals. The fresco generated increasingly heated criticism by its patrons as a portrait of Vladimir Lenin among other noted revolutionaries began to appear. After Rivera refused to remove the image from the mural and replace it with a more "suitable" iconic American figure, John D. Rockefeller had the mural destroyed.

"That was a great emotional shock for my father. It depressed him," Rivera y Marín recalled. The mural's destruction threw Rivera into a deep depression, which also led him to one of the most unproductive stages of his career.

It wasn't until 1940 that he was resurgent as an artist: once again at the invitation of Timothy Pflueger, Diego Rivera came to San Francisco to work under the sponsorship of the architect.

The "Pan American Unity" mural features a synthesis of art, religion, politics, and technology of the Americas. Rivera painted it as part of the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island.

"My father found the way in which the United States and Mexico belong to America, and that there is a reason to fight for America, the continent," Rivera y Marín said. "It was a reconciliation of my father with the United States." She then reflected "the mural should be in [the new home of the Mexican Museum] that is going to be built, as a tribute to the friendship that we now have between the United States and Mexico."

Powerful Friendships

During his lifetime, Diego Rivera surrounded himself with the most renowned artists and activists.

In Europe, for example, he befriended many leading artists of the day, including Pablo Picasso. Around that time, the Mexican painter also experimented with diverse art techniques. He even tried his hand at Cubism.

"The Cubism created by Picasso was a dark Cubism, without political meaning, and what did Diego Rivera do? He used Cubism to confirm his political ideologies," said Rivera y Marín to explain "Paisaje Zapatista (Zapatista Landscape)," one of Diego Rivera's incursions into Cubism.

"In 1915, he was already convinced that Zapata was a national hero and was sure of the success of the Revolution,

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Diego Rivera, "Zapatista Landscape (The Guerrilla)" (1915), Museo Nacional del Arte, Mexico.

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Photo by the Hermanos Mayo

Diego Rivera with Lazaro Cárdenas (left) following Frida Kahlo's hearse, 1954.

so this painting was done in tribute to Zapata. It has bright Mexican colors. Picasso was very upset and stopped being my father's friend. He also asked him to leave the Cubist group because he had broken the Cubist tradition."

Rivera y Marín also reflected on her father's relationships with public figures like Nelson Rockefeller, Leon Trotsky, and several Mexican presidents.

Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary leader who was hounded across Europe by Stalin, was given refuge in Mexico by Lázaro Cárdenas. Rivera had intervened on Trotsky's behalf with the Mexican president. The Russian exile initially stayed at Diego Rivera's house and became a close friend of both the painter and his wife, Frida, Rivera y Marín said.

"Trotsky and Diego's relationship had some highs and lows. Why? Because Trotsky fell in love with Frida, and Frida fell in love with Trotsky," said Rivera y Marín.

"When my father found out, he terminated the friendship. It was tough, because when Trotsky moved to another house ... he was killed."

Kluger's conversation with Rivera y Marín concluded with a discussion on the state of contemporary art. According to her, art in Mexico has fallen short of meaning and political impact, qualities that infused art during her father's time.

"Nowadays, contemporary art lacks political meaning," she said.

"In the last years, mural painting is rarely done. It has decayed, unfortunately, and now, we see this art that I no longer understand."

Guadelupe Rivera y Marín's presence and her comments seemed to resonate deeply with the audience. One listener observed that she felt as if she had just walked with Diego Rivera through the art and politics of the first half of the 20th century.

Guadalupe Rivera y Marín, Ph.D., is the daughter of Diego Rivera. She is a lawyer, former legislator, ambassador to the United Nations, and Diego Rivera Foundation Director. She spoke at an event co-sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies and the Mexican Museum.

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Guadalupe Rivera y Marín at Berkeley, November 2015.
(Photo by Jim Block.)