



ART

Diego and Frida in Detroit: An Interview With Graham Beal

The Detroit Institute of Arts exhibit “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit” brought together some 70 works illustrating the careers of these two gifted artists, including eight of the large-scale drawings that Rivera made in preparation for his Detroit Industry murals and 23 works by Kahlo. In an exclusive interview, Professor Harley Shaiken, Chair of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, talks with **Graham Beal**, director, president and CEO of the DIA since 1999, and the driving force behind this monumental exhibit.

Harley Shaiken: Let me start by asking, what inspired the “Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit” exhibit?

Graham Beal: Many of the stories that were circulating about Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as I discovered, were not true. They were wonderful

stories, but setting the record straight just seemed a strong human-interest story: realizing that Rivera had come here as a fully formed well-recognized genius and Frida, who is now much more appreciated, was completely unknown. When she left Detroit, she had become the artistic Frida that is unmistakable today.

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Frida Kahlo paints “Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States,” as Diego Rivera observes. In the background, the Detroit Industry murals are in progress.

(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts Archives.)

HS: How complex was it to put together an exhibit of this scale, with the work of both artists involved, and then to stage it in Detroit?

GB: The critical thing was to get as much of a representation of Frida's work that was done in Detroit, and that really meant going to three particular lenders in Mexico. Without one of those paintings, the "Henry Ford Hospital," it wouldn't have been worth doing the exhibition.

While she was in Detroit, Frida suffered a miscarriage, and in the painting she created to record this trauma, you see, for the first time, all of the ingredients in what we have come to expect from a Frida Kahlo painting: the focus on self and surrounding as well as symbols that allude to her inner feelings. With the Henry Ford Hospital picture, it's as if the butterfly emerges from the chrysalis.

So it was really a matter of going to Mexico and talking to the owners of those works of art. I thought to go about 10 years ago, working with Agustín Arteaga, a recognized Rivera specialist who was the Director of the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City at the time. He now is the director of the Museo Nacional de Arte. He helped me, he was my guide and took me to see

all of Rivera's murals, and we negotiated the launch. But then we had taken a detour into how important Rivera was in the United States in the 1930s, and we were looking at an exhibition that was more about Rivera's universe alone than about Rivera and Frida.

Then all the existential economic threats to the Detroit Institute of Arts came along. At the time, we had an urgent need to generate new financing, and so the idea of the exhibit was dropped for a time. When we went to work again, I decided to go back to the human-interest dimension. When you start talking about Rivera's influence on U.S. artists, as important as that was, what we were planning had become too much of an art history lesson.

We had the opportunity to do a unique show here in Detroit. It can't travel because it's based around the Rivera murals at the museum. If people want to see the exhibition, they will have to come to the DIA in Detroit to see it. We brought in Mark Rosenthal, a highly regarded curator with an international reputation, and he went to work. We started negotiating the loans all over again, and this time it all happened.

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Frida Kahlo, "Henry Ford Hospital (*La cama volando*)," 1932, oil on canvas.

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Frida Kahlo on balcony above the Detroit Industry murals.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts Archives.)

HS: It is certainly an extraordinary achievement to have done this exhibit at a time of existential economic threat that only got worse while you were mounting it. The achievement recalls the fact that the frescoes of Diego Rivera were themselves initially painted at a similar moment of economic crisis. You have spoken about “art as a shared human experience.” What is your sense of the impact that this exhibit has had in Detroit?

GB: It has drawn wonderful crowds. I’ve actually just come from the courtyard in which Rivera painted his murals. People have come from far away as well as from

throughout the local area to see the exhibition. I think it is adding to the sense of pride that local people have, now that the collection has been given so much attention as a result of Detroit’s bankruptcy.

I also think that it’s showing people in this time and place that art and life are deeply intertwined in a way that doesn’t often come across in exhibitions. If this exhibition is about anything, it’s about passion. Passion of human beings to one another, passion of human beings for art, passion of one individual for industry and everything that is produced by people, and passion about identity, in the case of Frida.

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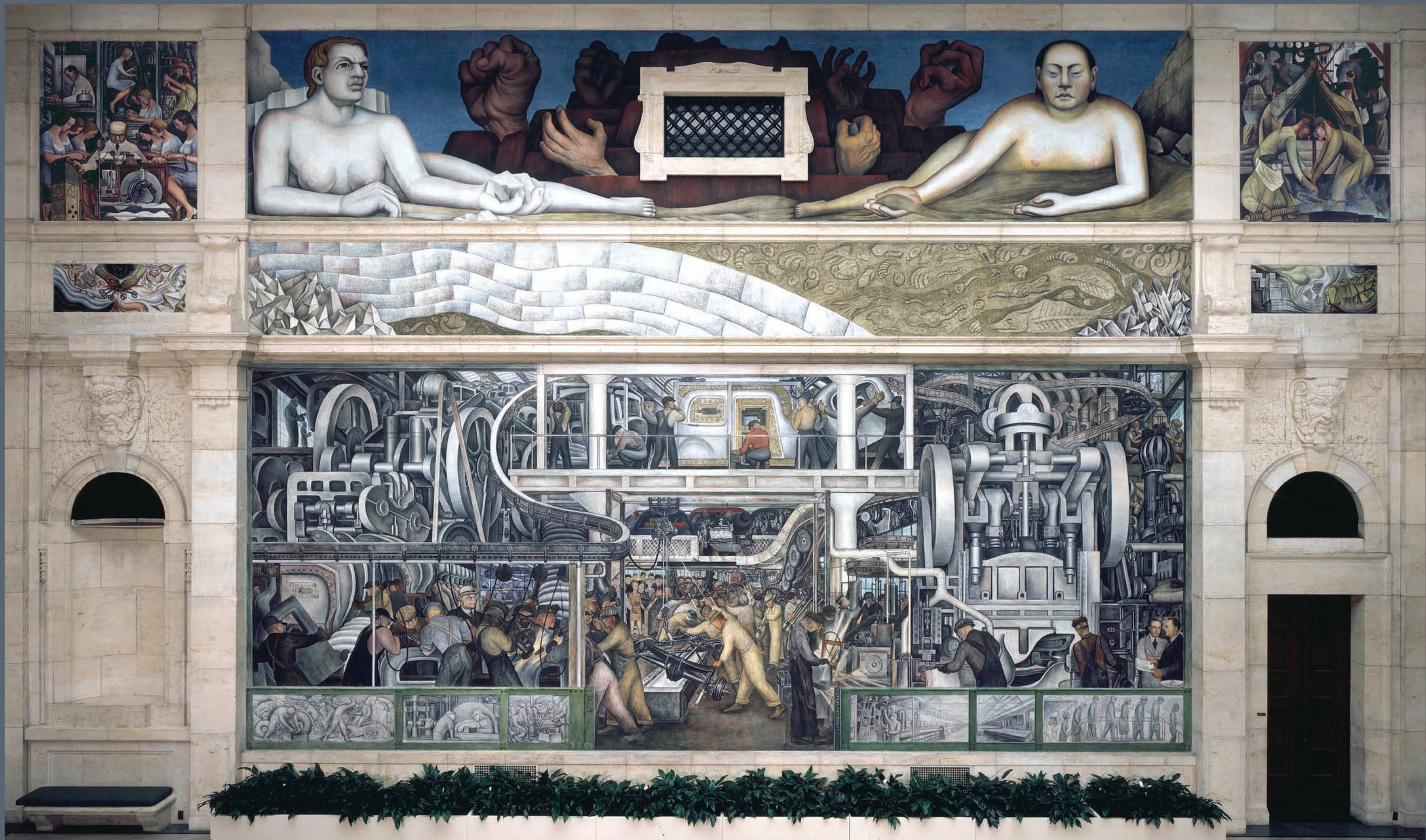
Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo kiss on the scaffolding.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts Archives.)



Right:
Diego Rivera, "Detroit Industry," west wall, 1932-33, fresco.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts.)

Centerfold
Diego Rivera, "Detroit Industry,"
north and south walls, 1932-33, fresco.
(Photos courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts.)







Left:
Diego Rivera, "Detroit Industry," east wall, 1932-33, fresco.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts.)

HS: Focusing on passion is a moving way to talk about the exhibit. Are there parts of the exhibit that have particular meaning for you, paintings, drawings, anything that really personally affects you in a particular way?

GB: I think it's being able to look at the Rivera "cartoons" [the life-size drawings he made for the murals] and realize, in looking at them, that he didn't actually use them the way that they were traditionally used, which was to put them over the actual area that's to be painted and then use a roulette to make the outlines and then pounce onto the paper. There is no pouncing [pricked holes] on the paper; it's just the marks he made on the paper as an artist. We have footage of him with the cartoon to one side and him painting directly onto the wall, transferring the drawing by eye with no perceptible difference in terms of the overall composition and design. There's more detail in his paintings, but isn't that amazing, this manual, perceptual feat that Rivera carried out?

Then — and I make this point as often as I can — he came up with the whole program for the complicated murals when he went beyond the initial commission. Originally, Edsel Ford agreed to commission just the two main panels showing the creation of an automobile. The original plan then became 27 panels. Rivera created a highly realistic, convincing scene of an automobile being created. An engineer from another automaker, not from the Ford Motor Company, pointed out that Rivera had compressed two miles of an assembly line onto two walls, and it was perfectly coherent from the engineer's point of view. Not only was he able to organize that, but he then went on to create this program. I call it allegorical — it's symbolic, not literal — although there is plenty of realism in it. It's wonderfully complex, and in those days, it was not uncommon to hire a university professor of philosophy or someone like that to help the artist pick his way through the overall program that they were trying to design, the story that they were trying to tell. Instead, these murals are manually, intellectually, his creation, and I find that extraordinary.

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Diego Rivera sketches one of his "cartoons" while on a scaffold.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts Archives.)

Before Anterior a
DETROIT
1925-32



PORTRAITS OF TWO ARTISTS

RETRATOS DE DOS ARTISTAS

HS: One of the things you've done as director of the Detroit Institute of Arts is reorganize the entire museum to present art in a highly sophisticated but very accessible way, often in historical context that draws the viewer in and allows them to discover and appreciate art in new ways. The Wall Street Journal has called the DIA "the most open museum in the world." As you are stepping down as director, what do you feel is your most important legacy?

GB: Never losing sight of the fact that the art is what we're all about, finding ways to connect art to the broader public. What I leave behind I see as my contribution to a global debate that has been going on for some 25 years now about

what a modern museum, an art museum in particular, should be to its public. [My legacy] was demonstrating that the museum has relevance to its community, and that is demonstrated by people in Southeastern Michigan voting to tax themselves to keep the museum going. I think that also underlay the strong public feelings that the collection should not be sold when Detroit entered bankruptcy. We have been a little bit ahead of the game, and I am very curious to see what my successor does to take this institution further.

Graham W.J. Beal is the director, president and CEO of the Detroit Institute of Arts. He spoke with CLAS on May 13, 2015.

Visitors in the exhibition, 2015.
(Photo courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts.)