

# Mexican Identity Through the Eyes of Diego Rivera

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## Abstract

Diego Rivera's murals are important to the national identity of the Mexican people as a whole because of their didactic influence in a historical and social context. Through these images Rivera introduced new concepts of self-determination and a feeling of national pride into the collective unconscious where shame and low self-esteem had been the norm before. While his art may be dominated by Marxist symbolism, he taught timeless truths and celebrated the unique mixture that La Raza brings to our world.

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In 1932, Nelson Rockefeller, one of the richest men in America, commissioned a mural by a famous artist for the sum of twenty-one thousand dollars. The artist worked at a feverish pace, and the first results of the mural pleased Rockefeller. They were full of colors and vivid imagery that seemed to draw you in. Nevertheless, when the fresco was almost done, the artist was prevented from completing his work, and ushered out of the building by security guards. A small portrait in the lower right center of the mural was the cause of the firestorm. The figure was that of Vladimir Lenin, the father of communism, and the fact that the artist refused to remove the image from his work led to its ultimate destruction.

Controversy was nothing new for Diego Rivera; some even say he thrived on it. His murals were often filled with images of historical and political figures, and the messages were not always complimentary. Even today, different groups claim his images illustrate their own political aims. But going beyond simple commentary, his paintings explained things visually in ways that words could not. His art, especially his murals, created a visual history and national myth that still helps define the Mexican nation. Octavio Paz, Mexico's celebrated poet and thinker, described the difficult search for Mexican identity in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz may not have named Diego Rivera when he penned this, but it describes Rivera and his work perfectly:

The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins. He has been influenced at one time or another by France, Spain, and the United States and the militant indigenists of his own country, and he crosses history like a jade comet, now and then giving off flashes of lightning. (20)

Mexico's national identity is vastly different from other nations because Mexicans celebrate the blending of

European and indigenous cultures. Mexican history is rich in both heroic saviors and despotic oppressors. Rivera showed how the nation overcame the stigma of the conquest to become a new race of people who possessed in their blood the best of Europe and the Americas. Rivera portrayed an entire picture of all that had happened—the good and the bad—as a unified whole.

An examination of four selections of Rivera's works, including an early poster from the time of the Revolution, will help explain how his unique style influenced Mexican identity. Rivera's style became distinct from other artists, especially in the way he painted people. Many of his murals contain excellent portraits of famous people, but his murals are more than just mass portraits of important figures from Mexico. Before artists such as Rivera, portraiture depicted people in the roles society gave them. John Berger's essay, "The Changing View of the Man in the Portrait" examines how portraiture itself is insufficient to capture individual identity. He points out that the identity of a person cannot be established simply by "preserving and fixing what he looks like from a single viewpoint in one place" (Berger 67). Portrait painters in the past used their work to "idealize [the] chosen social role of the sitter" (Berger 61). Berger adds that portraits "had nothing to do with the modern lonely desire to be recognized for 'what one really is'" (Berger 62).

Rivera's portraits were not static images simply placing people in their established social roles, but instead showed the identity of the people he painted more fully, by incorporating their personal history and place in the nation. It was this expression of the history of so many individuals that communicated abstract ideas about the nation as a whole. In his murals in the Palace of Cortés, Rivera shows the freedom fighter Zapata striking down a Hacienda overseer (Figure 2.). We see Zapata identified for what he did, for his place in his history, and not simply as a social stereotype. Rivera's ability to capture individual identities rather than social stereotypes came from an unlikely source. He introduced elements that have classically been part of comics into his art.

Traditionally, comics have not been considered fine art, but their influence is far reaching. In his essay, "Setting the Record Straight," Scott McCloud argues that "People [failed] to understand comics because they defined what comics could be too narrowly" (360). He

introduces Will Eisner's description of comics as "sequential art," and expands the definition of comics (McCloud 362). The idea of using multiple images to tell a larger story has been used throughout the centuries. McCloud shows examples of sequential art existing in pre-Columbian and Egyptian art, as well as famous works such as the Bayeux Tapestry from France (367-372). What sets sequential art apart from traditional portraits is the manner in which it handles space and time. Since comics have the ability to show not only the progression of time, but also the actions occurring during that time, they are able to express identity in a way very different from portraiture.

Rivera's connection to comics is José Posada. Posada produced thousands of illustrations for newspapers including many great editorial cartoons. His illustrations took the place of photographs in many publications and communicated the essence of the story through one picture. This was especially important since many of the people could not read at the time. Rivera considered Posada one of his greatest influences. In fact, Posada is painted front and center in Rivera's painting, Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park. Bertram Wolfe's biography, The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera, explains that when Rivera was a young art student he spent a great deal of time in Posada's shop (34-35). It was there that Rivera discovered a sense of movement—of creating images that move and are alive (Wolfe 34-35). The fusion between the styles of portraiture and comics enabled Rivera to paint an accurate picture of the character of a nation. Rivera's murals show us the likeness of its historical figures and ordinary people and the events that have shaped the way Mexico sees itself as a nation. More than that, Rivera sought to teach his countrymen that they did not have to let history repeat itself; they could be the masters of their own destiny.

The first work examined shows just how much Posada influenced Rivera's work. This is a poster called El Reparto De Tierras (The Division of the Land, Figure 1). This was produced before any of his murals. This picture is certainly not as attractive as some of Rivera's other works, but it is remarkable in its own way. Rivera designed this poster to be distributed to campesinos during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The picture illustrates a farmer plowing the land with his team of oxen. His rifle is close at hand and he is wearing a cartridge belt around his shoulder. His wife is sitting nearby, tending to their child. As he works, a vision of Christ appears over the field he is plowing. His hands are pierced and we can see the Sacred Heart, as he appears to be blessing the work of the farmer. In his autobiography, Rivera describes the message he was trying to communicate: "its message to the poor, ignorant farmers was

that divine law did not forbid them to repossess the land which rightfully belonged to them. The corrupt Church of the time had been preaching the converse" (86). Rivera realized that "since the majority of peasants could not read" he had to illustrate the message (86).

This motivation towards art with a social meaning was a result of Rivera's introduction to Marxism while in Paris. When he returned to Mexico and was faced with the realities of the struggles of the campesinos for land and freedom, the principles of Marxism began to change his perception of the purpose of art. Graham Gordon's essay, "The Marxist Theory of Art" explores this change of perception. Gordon asserts "central to the Marxist conception is the idea art has a social function. It can confirm or unsettle the preconceptions upon which the structure of social and economic power rests" (116). This poster was the beginning of a commitment to art that informed and empowered Mexicans. Not only that, but he was also creating art that was accessible to all Mexicans, not just the literate or the intelligentsia, but to everybody. Later on, through his murals, he would begin to form a picture of national identity and character through a visual vocabulary that everyone could understand.

El Mundo Azteca (The Aztec World, also called El Antiguo Mundo Indígena – Fig. 2) is the next work we will examine. This is one panel in the series of frescoes in the national palace. Rivera set out to create a history of the Mexican people from the time of the Aztec empire through the conquest by the Spaniards and ended with a prophetic section of the mural looking into the future. This work explores the culture, legends, crafts, and daily life of the Aztec people. The great god Quetzalcóatl and his legends are seen here, as well as the valiant warriors in battle. But we also see scenes of the great pyramids, people planting corn, making music, and creating cloth and sculpture. This was important because of the negative way the Mexican people perceived their indigenous ancestors in the past. They preferred to emphasize their Spanish heritage. In Boye Lafayette De Mente's book, NTC's Dictionary of Cultural Code Words of Mexico, he explains that "the ancient Spanish and Indian belief that white-skinned people are superior remains deep-seated in the consciousness of Mexicans of all shades" (161).

Even today it is still common to meet Mexicans who are quick to point out that their heritage is more Castilian than indigenous. The majority of people on Mexican television and other media tend to appear very European, and are very different from the average people you meet on the street. For many Mexicans, a real sense of inferiority exists when comparing their indigenous culture to the European cultures.

Rivera not only educated people in their non-European heritage, but celebrated it as well. Marnham explains that "Rivera delighted to boast of his mixed blood, and one of the ways of doing this was by creating a romantic myth of Mexico's Aztec past" (302). In *El Mundo Azteca*, Rivera was presenting an entirely different view than that of the prevailing stereotype of the Aztecs as weak and ignorant savages. Instead he portrayed them as a people as intelligent and refined as the Europeans who conquered them. De Mente compares the Aztec society to the Roman Empire. Aztecs "were imbued with a driving will to be in power," but they also "cultivated the senses of aesthetic appreciation and practiced a refined system of manners" (De Mente 22). In Aztec society there were "profound philosophers, poets, and artists of the highest order" (De Mente 22). De Mente believes that "life in pre-Columbian Mexico was just as varied as it is in many countries of the world today" (20).

When the Mexican people try to ignore that part of their past, it leaves a hole in their own cultural identity. Paz compares it to a wound "caused by 'separation from one's parents, matrix or native land'" (64). In the same way people try to cover up a physical flaw that makes them appear different from other people, many Mexicans find it difficult to celebrate their mixed heritage. They fail to see how that same heritage makes them unique compared to the rest of the world. De Mente explains it this way, "Mexico is the only major

country in the world in which the bulk of the population consists of the racial merger of the indigenous people with European whites and African blacks—a merger that produced a new breed of people" (160). This fusion of Aztec and European cultures is what makes Mexico so unique. In 1908 José Vasconcelos, the education minister who would later commission Rivera's murals on public buildings, first explored the idea of the mixed lineage

of Mexicans as being a positive thing. The term "La Raza" was coined to express this new race. De Mente defines La Raza as "a superior in a humanistic, philosophical, spiritual and artistic sense, made up of a people who are a product of the best of Europe and the best of the New World" (161). Rivera's attempt to preserve the ideas of La Raza through *El Mundo Azteca* is exactly why this work is still essential for defining who Mexicans were in the beginning, and who they are today.

The last two murals we will analyze revolve around the theme of the empowerment of the people. The first is *Zapata's Horse* (figure 3). This image is part of a larger series of frescoes in the Palace of Cortés.

In this series of murals the story of the Conquest of Mexico by Spain and the effects of colonialism are portrayed in multiple panels. The destruction of the Aztec culture and the suffering of the people in slavery to their



Fig. 1. Diego Rivera, *El Reparto De Tierras*, Jean Charlot Collection (Tyler 48) (Translation of the top half of text) "The distribution of land to the poor is not contrary to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Mother Church" (Rivera 86). (Translation of bottom half of text) "The Mexican people fought and suffered ten years desiring to discover the word of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Translated by John Homan).

new masters, as well as the abuses of the Mexican people at the hands of the Catholic Church, including the inquisition, are portrayed vividly. The striking conclusion of this series of murals is the image of Emiliano Zapata triumphing over the hacienda overseer. The hacienda owner, with his great white horse and steely blade, lies on the ground at the feet of Zapata, who is armed with a sickle. Zapata holds the reins to the great steed now, possibly symbolic of the control of this great country with

present and our past...to change it into a living thing: a past made present" (144). In this mural Rivera not only explained the nightmarish history of the past of Mexico, but he also pointed to the liberation of his countrymen from that past. The cycle of abuse and oppression ended with Zapata. Even the building the mural was painted on, the Palace of Cortés, the frame of this new portrait of the Mexican people, testifies to the fact the nation of Mexico was overcoming its past.



Fig. 2. Diego Rivera, *El Mundo Azteca* , National Palace, Mexico City.

all its resources, finally in the hands of the people.

Emiliano Zapata, one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, appears often in Rivera's murals—more often than Benito Juárez, who has been called the George Washington of Mexico. Paz helps us to understand the value of the Zapatista movement to Mexican identity when he explains “the Zapatistas did not conceive of Mexico as a future to be realized but as a return to origins” (144). He proceeds even further by stating that “the Revolution became an attempt to integrate our

In the recent biography, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*, Patrick Marnhan describes why this was such an important mural to Rivera, “To be able to retell the history of the Conquest, and to redefine Mexican identity on the walls of the palace which the conqueror had imposed on his subject people, was, for Rivera the culmination of everything he had set out to achieve...” (226). Marnhan believes that the portrait of Zapata as the conclusion of the story of the mural points to the fact that the cycle that started the nightmare of the Conquest has been ended by the uprising of the people

during the Revolution of 1910 (227). Zapata was symbolic of the genuine, native-born people of Mexico taking back their country on their own, not as the pawns of the European-trained generals and politicians of Mexico, whose primary concern appeared to be their own enrichment.

The last painting we will examine is called In the Arsenal (also called Insurrection Fig. 4). This picture is also a part of a larger set of murals in the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico City. The multi-level mural tells a story about the revolution. Above each of the panels are lyrics to a corrido, telling the story of the Mexican Revolution. In the Arsenal is one of the final panels in the mural. It depicts the distribution of arms to workers. This occurs in a workshop with lathes and other equipment for manufacturing weapons. Children and women unpack and distribute rifles, ammunition, and bayonets to a mass of workers. There is a central figure waving a Soviet flag pointing to the right

towards a group of men on horses. These men on horses are the Zapatistas of the Revolution of 1910. They are dressed in the white pants and shirts of the campesino, but all have red bandanas. They are also carrying a red flag that reads "¡Tierra y Libertad!", but it has a red sickle on it. The Zapatistas are shaking the hands of these new freedom fighters of the future, as if asking them to continue on in the work they started.

The communist symbolism is certainly less than subtle in this picture. However, looking past that we can

see more timeless messages. The theme of empowerment to the campesinos and workers, of taking up arms against the oppressors is what is represented here. Similar to the portrait of Zapata, this picture is about Mexicans taking control of their destiny. Paz explains the change in how Mexicans saw themselves after the

Revolution, "for the first time in over three hundred years, we have ceased to be an inert material which the strong could use as they wished" (192-193). Where Mexicans were simply "objects" before, now they have become "agents of historical [change]" (Paz 193). It is worth noting that the first Zapatistas were not Marxist intellectuals. They were farmers and shopkeepers. That is what makes them of such vital importance. They were ordinary people who had suffered beyond their abilities to forbear any longer. They had nothing left to lose. Just like the minutemen of the American Revolution, they were willing to risk their lives to gain liberty.



Fig. 3. Diego Rivera, Zapata's Horse. Palace of Cortés, Cuernavaca.

Diego Rivera's art continues to be as relevant today as it was when he painted it—maybe more so. The nation still needs these messages he left on their walls. His murals still explain what is great about Mexico as a nation; their messages of hope and courage are still necessary. Many Mexicans still live in extreme poverty and the indigenous peoples are still treated as second-class citizens. While the new President Vicente Fox is trying to change the country for the better, corruption and human rights abuse continue to be a problem in the government, police, and military. Consider the example of

human rights lawyer Ochoa Digna. She spent years bringing charges against the army for various human rights abuses. Then on October 19, 2001, an unknown assassin shot her in the head. There are some people who believe her death is linked to the military, or to powerful business interests.

Besides the internal problems in Mexico, there are the challenges of its emergence into the global community. Many multi-national companies use Mexico's people for cheap labor in the abundant maquiladoras. Mexico's relationship with America has changed also, especially through the North American Free Trade Act. Mexicans thought they would see more jobs and opportunities; however, in their neighborhoods, some are only seeing more Wal-Marts - places they can't afford to shop. There is also the issue of the millions of Mexicans who work seasonally in the U.S. and send money back home to their families. Mexicans are becoming more dependent on the U.S. economy than ever before.

Rivera's work asks this question today: will Mexico rise up and stop this new cycle of oppression like Zapata did in 1910? The players may be different now, but the suffering is familiar. There are still elements in business and government that would bleed the people dry like the hacienda owners did in 1910. In his article in *US Catholic* magazine titled "Dear Tio Sam," Kevin Clarke explains Pope John Paul IV's idea of an economic process he calls "authentic development":

In this process development is measured not just by material enrichment or rising per-capita incomes but by how much technological, medical, and educational improvements actually pass on to the common people. In this authentic development, economies are put to the service of people, not the other way around, in a process of relationship building and mutual cultural respect. (27)



Fig. 4. Diego Rivera, *In the Arsenal*. Ministry of Public Education , Mexico City

This process will not happen by chance. It won't happen as a natural result of market forces. If Mexico is to have a chance for a just government and equitable economy, it remains up to the people, exactly as it did in 1910. I only hope they can take the courage and hope from the messages Rivera left on their walls to change their country again.

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### Glossary

**Campesino** – A rural person living in Mexico. Generally refers to a farmer, rancher, or someone who lives in a remote area.

**Corrido** -- A Mexican folk-song, normally taking the form of a ballad.

**Hacienda** – A large, manor type house. Also used when referring to large agricultural communities that was ruled by one landowner. Haciendas were very common during the 19th century before the revolution in the early 20th century. Because of the abject poverty of the campesinos, haciendas were more like medieval fiefdoms unto themselves.

**La Raza** – Refers to the mixed lineage of indigenous people and Europeans. La Raza is also considered the best of both worlds, also called the "Cosmic Race".

**Maquilladoras** – Foreign owned factories in Mexico. They allow their owners to capitalize on cheap labor and lax environmental standards.

**Quetzalcóatl** – "Toltec and Aztec god and legendary ruler of Mexico, usually referred to

as the Plumed, or Feathered, Serpent, the translation of his Nahuatl name" (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 99).

**¡Tierra y Libertad!** – The rallying cry of the Zapatista Movement, it means "land and freedom". The Zapatistas originated as a result of hacienda owners taking land from campesinos through illegal or immoral means.

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