

Diego Rivera

PAINTER OF MEXICO : 1886 - 1957



Artists are helpless and ineffectual without those rare and devoted personalities who move heaven and earth to establish and create the necessary conditions and opportunities. If such men are socialists they have the means of re-creating cultural upsurges of Renaissance-like proportions no matter where. Such a man was Jose Vasconcelos, a former student's leader who became Minister of Education in the Obregon government after the Mexican Revolution of 1910-17.

Vasconcelos was familiar with Lunacharsky's ideas and devised similar plans. The Fine Arts were to be placed at the service of the people in as varied and as stimulating a way as was possible with the meagre funds available. To further these plans he not only commissioned work from artists already in Mexico but zealously rounded up those who had strayed abroad. Diego Rivera was among these; he had previously been discouraged by the initial failure of the Revo-



Zapata: detail from fresco in Palace of Cortes, Cuernavaca, 1929-30.

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lution which had overthrown the Diaz dictatorship in 1910 and had left Mexico for Europe. Moved by the successful turn of events and by the Russian Revolution he returned home after Vasconcelos had made it possible for him to study mural-painting in Italy. He returned in 1921 with a much needed technical knowledge to play an important part in the development of modern Mexican art.

This new art, to which Rivera contributed so much, emerged out of the agony of bitterly-fought contests between an alliance of working people with an ambitious *bourgeoisie* against landowners who clung tenaciously to the *latifundia*. The military phase of this struggle brought about close and lasting bonds between intellectuals and the rank-and-file of the workers' and peasants' organisations. From their personal experiences with the armies of Carranza, Zapata and Villa, a large group of artists established the foundations of an art which expressed the aspirations of an entire people who wanted land and freedom from foreign domination.

The new art was at once a rehabilitation of ancient Mexican art, the strongly pictorial quality of which had always been a prime characteristic. The Aztec temples with their richly-carved interiors, the picture-writing which served as a language, the broadsheets and prints of Posada, all were part of a tradition which had been kept alive in spite of brutal Spanish repression. It was natural that this dormant image-making power should take shape round a national cause.

Rivera's achievement was to help revive this tradition by judicious cross-fertilisation with the questing formalism of European art of that time. His association with that catalyst of modern social art -



Tortilla maker Oil 1924

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Picasso - brought forward an application of the master's theories to the problem of creating monumental art in this century. In fact, the work of all the 'Big Three' of Mexican revolutionary art - Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco - reflects the two main currents in formal experiment of that time; Cubism and Expressionism. Harnessed in this way, they generated an art of immense visual power which held a mass audience enthralled before the walls of old palaces and *haciendas* which had been taken over as schools, colleges and ministerial buildings.

Diego Rivera was the most popular of the 'Big Three' possibly because he was the better-equipped as a story-teller. His great murals resembled historical films in their vast scope and grasp of significant detail. A vivid picture of the revolution-in-the-making emerged without the bitterness of Orozco who (refreshingly) portrayed its betrayals and excesses; and without the oppressive machine-like turbulence of Siqueiros. Its weakness in later years was an increased tendency to use the mural to pictorialize the party line. And whilst good art can be propaganda and good propaganda art, much of the work of Rivera's later period, notably the Korean War and Guatemala panels were carried out in a style more suited to political caricature than mural-painting. Diego Rivera's art like that of many others, suffered a real eclipse when he conceded to political leaders who, unlike Vasconcelos and Lunacharsky, used him as a means to an end instead of encouraging him to continue interpreting reality as an artist should. Rivera succeeded, in spite of the pressures and strictures, in creating a living and vital art for his fellow-man; an art which firmly planted seeds of progressive intention in the imaginations of generations. As a result, in Mexico itself, people think of their revolution as a living concept, the warm flesh on the bare bones of political theory.

Paul Hogarth.

