

## Subverting a Pan American Unity: Diego Rivera's Belief System and Quest for Emancipation

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## **John Cabot University**

Department of Art History

Bachelor of Arts in Art History  
Minor in Entrepreneurship

### Subverting a *Pan American Unity*: Diego Rivera's Belief System and Quest for Emancipation

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Fall 2018

## Abstract

In 1940, Diego Rivera was commissioned to paint a large-scale mural as part of the Golden Gate International Exposition in the San Francisco Bay. The masterpiece, originally entitled *Unión de la Expresión Artística del Norte y Sur de este Continente* (*The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and South of this Continent*) and often referred to as *Pan American Unity* (Fig.1), is composed of five sections in which the artist unfolds his multi-layered belief system, synthesizing Communist utopia and indigenous way of living with Christianity and proletarian art. Yet, this magnificent mural has been neglected in studies of Rivera's works in the U.S; as such, the literature produced on it is still limited if considering its primary importance for the understanding of Rivera's artistic and ideological evolution. In order to fully grasp the artist's visual discourse, a thorough analysis of the overt and covert elements is essential; indeed, the main scope of this thesis is to suggest a different reading of *Pan American Unity*. Apparently a straightforward 'innocuous' mural, depicting and celebrating America continental unity, once its iconography is unveiled, Rivera's political radicalism becomes clear in his choice of references, albeit concealed under a peaceful and harmonious mask. Unfairly overlooked, this mural reveals the artist's intricate dialectic of a unified American continent. The present thesis proposes to bring *Pan American Unity* to the foreground as a necessary work to unfold Rivera's debated personality and artistic practice, thus opening up new possible fields of research.

## **Dedication**

To my mom,

The strongest woman I know. To have instilled resilience, tenacity, and passion in me. I owe you everything.

And to my dad,

Who gave me the best opportunities without thinking twice and always encouraged me to explore the world.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I want to express gratitude to my family, who always supported me and always will. A special thank goes to my brother, his immense lust for knowledge inspired me since we were kids, and to my grandma Adriana, her love and care are the most precious gifts of my life. You are the rock upon which I lay.

Finally, a thank you to my friends. To all the experiences we have been through, the memories we collected on the way and the many more to come. To those Italian and Latin American friends who enriched my life immensely- you know who you are.

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## Introduction

Following the 1929 U.S stock market crash and the ensuing economic repression, in 1933 president Roosevelt issued the New Deal that gave federal support to unemployed workers and resulted in the creation of public arts projects such as the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), Work Progress Administration (WPA), and the later Federal Art Project (FAP).<sup>1</sup> In those years, photography and mural painting were among the most important practices; the first served the purpose of documenting the existing conditions and plights of farmers and the unemployed while murals attempted to reconstruct a sense of community and national self-awareness.<sup>2</sup>

The commissioning of large numbers of murals in public buildings throughout the U.S was modeled on the example of the Mexican muralists who, from the 1920s, worked under the national government of Alvaro Obregon and José Vasconcelos; indeed, after the Revolution muralism became state-sponsored and ‘Los Tres Grandes’, namely Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, produced public art that celebrated socialism and the emancipation obtained through the Revolution begun in the 1910s.<sup>3</sup>

Many U.S young leftist artists enthusiastically worked under the WPA, hoping that the Great Depression caused by capitalism would lead into the construction of a different model of society. The WPA itself was born out of the Artists Union of New York who, following the example of their Mexican counterparts, issued a manifesto demanding that “the state sponsor art

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Paul. *Varieties of Modernism*. 1st ed. Art of the 20th Century. New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, 2004: 85.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, *Varieties of Modernism*, 89-93.

<sup>3</sup> Wood, 91.

projects as an economic aid to the artist and as a cultural and artistic resource for the community.”<sup>4</sup> Once the WPA was inaugurated, many projects were undertaken that would make a long-lasting impact in the public spaces of North American cities.

When the Fair of San Francisco opened on February 18, 1939 an impending World War II was about to break out, Fascist expansion was at its peak and the effects of the Depression-era were still tangible. Amid such a harsh reality, the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) celebrated the completion of two of the most important engineering and transportation projects realized in California: the Bay Bridge in 1936, and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937 that would connect the city of San Francisco to the Bay Area. As soon as 1935, newspapers spread the news that a U.S \$10 million program for the construction of the GGIE was being prepared for submission to the federal WPA.<sup>5</sup>

After an evaluation of possible different sites, an area under the San Francisco Bay known as the Yerba Buena Shoals, was chosen to later become Treasure Island, the man-made island that would host the Fair (Fig.2). As a New Deal project, the GGIE had the aim, among other things, to generate employment and attract business in the Bay Area so as to support the economy at the end of the Great Depression; in this regard, a total of 13,000 people was expected to be employed between the Fair’s construction and to provide services during the Exposition.<sup>6</sup> Seven months before its official groundbreaking, President Roosevelt pre-viewed Treasure Island when the site was still in construction and publicly expressed his enthusiasm. He also commented on the role of the GGIE and the New York Fair, the latter also a New Deal project

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<sup>4</sup> Monroe, Gerald M. "The Artists Union of New York." *Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (1972): 17-20.

<sup>5</sup> "Propose to Build Exposition With WPA Relief Funds". *Healdsburg Tribune*. 30 August 1935. Retrieved September 15, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> *Healdsburg Tribune*.

held the same year, as “an expression of confidence that the United States and all the Western Hemisphere will be at peace next year”.<sup>7</sup>

That same year, in the fall of 1939, Clement Greenberg published his seminal ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch’ essay in which he discussed the somewhat preferability of the avant-garde artists over the kitsch, exemplified by Socialist Realists of the USSR. His formalist theory, however, is problematic when approaching Rivera, whose realist language and concern with “what is being expressed” fall beyond the confines of what Greenberg may have defined kitsch.<sup>8</sup> The minimization of content over the formal qualities of art can be seen as part of a progressive “de-Marxification of the American intelligentsia that had begun around 1936”,<sup>9</sup> which was problematic for any artist seeking to promote revolutionary solutions for the (art) world crisis, among those Rivera.

Opening only seven months before the outbreak of World War II when Hitler would invade Poland on September 1, 1939 the duration of the Exposition was on unstable ground. The GGIE’s optimistic view and its joyful spectacle could not impede its bankruptcy and it was shut down in October 1939, two months ahead of its expected closing date in December. Nevertheless, after fears that the Exposition was in too much debt to re-open the following year for a four-months run, a group of enthusiastic civic leaders worked restlessly to raise the necessary funds for a ‘Fair in Forty’ and, eventually, provided the possibility for the re-opening of the Exposition from May to September 1940. It is thanks to these funds that Timothy Pflueger, vice chairman of the Department of Fine Arts, was able to invite Diego Rivera, the Mexican

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<sup>7</sup> James, Jack; Weller, Earle Vonard (1941). *Treasure island, "the magic city," 1939-1940; the story of the Golden gate international exposition*. Prelinger Library. San Francisco, Calif., Pisani printing and publishing company: 56.

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, Clement. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1939: 8.

<sup>9</sup> Guilbaut, Serge, and Thomas Repensek. "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the "vital Center"." *October* 15 (1980): 386-387.

public muralist with a strong reputation of being a radical Marxist and an anti-imperialist committed artist; it is ironic therefore that, with his controversial credit and artistic legacy, Diego Rivera would be the star of Pflueger's 'Art in Action' show.

In the three chapters that constitute the body of this thesis, I will try to unfold the complex visual discourse presented by Rivera in *Pan American Unity*. In the first chapter I will survey the context and the driving reasons that led Rivera to undertake the commission at the GGIE, with an attention towards the political and social events that impacted the artist and the notion of Pan Americanism. The second section is an in-depth exploration and analysis of the mural's iconography: here I will argue that *Pan American Unity* visualizes Rivera's idea of indigenized modernity. This composite belief system with its hidden messages, however, is not immediately manifest but rather requires a closer understanding of all the elements and references involved in the artwork. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the afterlives of the mural and questions the extent to which McCarthyism and the cultural Cold War affected its destiny. In this last part I will also briefly address both the decline of Pan Americanism in conjunction with an increasing interest of the Soviet Union towards Latin America, and a revived interest in Diego Rivera's works as part of a social history of art emerging in the 1970s that re-evaluated most of the art neglected during the post-Second World War and Cold War era.

The notion of indigenous modernity is indebted to Jeffrey Belnap and his article published in 2006 entitled "Diego Rivera's Greater America Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P." Here, the author explains the ways in which the artist's dialectic differs and subtly counters the "Pan-American cooperationist model" acclaimed by U.S patrons.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Belnap, Jeffrey. "Diego Rivera's Greater America Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P." *Cultural Critique*, no. 63 (2006): 65.

author uses as a case study Rivera's iconography for the ballet *H.P (Caballo de Vapor)*, a neglected project he undertook in the U.S in 1932, in which the relationship between the North and South of the American continent is explored under an assimilationist light. Indeed, as Belnap urges to explain, the ballet *H.P* provides an iconographic program that enables to read Rivera's exploration of the relation between tradition and modernity according to his *socialist indigenism* belief; namely, that the union of the Americas will depend on "the assimilation of foreign technology to Native America's indigenous history."<sup>11</sup>

From here we shall start our investigation.

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<sup>11</sup> Belnap, *Diego Rivera's Greater America*, 86.

# 1. Mexican Socialism at the Golden Gate International

## Exposition in San Francisco:

### An Artistic Compromise?

Why was Diego Rivera, a declared Socialist painter from Mexico, invited to the GGIE in California? With the certainty of a re-opening, the Exposition had to work on and implement new strategies that would avoid the 'Fair in Forty' to be another flop. Perhaps not by chance, the theme of the Fair was the Pageant of the Pacific, a celebration of the cultures across the Pacific rim; paradoxically, this interest in the unity of the nations ended with the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese military forces in 1941 and the U.S consequent invasion of the Pacific. A team of architects including Timothy Pflueger, who would prove seminal to Rivera's involvement in the Fair, designed a new style called 'Pacifica' or 'Pacific Basin', which was to visually encapsulate the different aesthetics specific to Pacific cultures as in the example of the Elephant Towers, an architectural mix of Oriental and Mayan features.<sup>12</sup>

Most relevant to our ends, however, is the dramatic turn of the Fine Arts Palace. In the 1939 edition of the GGIE, the main show exhibiting works of art worth \$40 million was that of the Italian Old masters, but as the Fair closed and war spread in Europe, the artworks were shipped back to their Continent.<sup>13</sup> Situated in the Division of European Art, the exhibit included Renaissance masterpieces by Raphael, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto and Donatello

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<sup>12</sup> Poletti, Therese, and Tom Paiva. *Art Deco San Francisco: The Architecture of Timothy Pflueger*. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008. Accessed November 2018. <https://jculibrary.on.worldcat.org/oclc/769114368>

<sup>13</sup> Poletti and Paiva, *Art Deco*, 207.

as well as paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, decorative art and interior design displays.<sup>14</sup> In the same building, visitors would have viewed contemporary paintings and sculptures in the Division of American Art, with two additional galleries showing American native art from the pre-Revolutionary period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The past and present art of the people coming from the entire Pacific basin was instead shown in the Division of Pacific Cultures, with lesser known works in bronze, wood, ivory and textiles.<sup>15</sup> To try to recover this loss and replace the masterpieces, the architect Timothy Pflueger proposed the ‘Art in Action’ show, a studio art display where fairgoers could watch artists create their pieces.

Conceived to attract as many people as possible, the aim of ‘Art in Action’ was “to show to the public what effort goes into art work, and show artists as ordinary human beings.”<sup>16</sup> Adjoining this revolutionary art displays, Pflueger decided to host artists such as Robert Howard, Ralph Stackpole, Hermann Volz, Anna Hyatt Huntington, and Maynard Dixon.<sup>17</sup> They were all prominent figures of the city’s artistic scene, some of them were also part of the WPA and, importantly, Stackpole was as a close collaborator of Pflueger and recommended him to commission his friend Diego Rivera to paint *Allegory of California* (1930-31) on the stairwell of the Stock Exchange Luncheon Club, now the City Club of San Francisco in 1930, the first of Rivera’s works in the U.S where he established his contacts with Pflueger (Fig.3). Although a private commission, the arrival of Rivera in the city triggered skeptical discussions about his personality: he was thought to be a political propagandist and was attacked for his affiliation with the Mexican Communist Party (PCM).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Poletti and Paiva, 207.

<sup>15</sup> Poletti and Paiva, 207.

<sup>16</sup> “Artists in Action Steal the Show at San Francisco Fair”. *Life*. July 24, 1940: 49.

<sup>17</sup> Gray, Michael; Schnoebelen, Anne (April 19, 1992). "A Fair to Remember" (PDF). *San Francisco Examiner Image*. Retrieved September 16, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Lee, Anthony W. *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

The mural art scene in San Francisco was dominated by a regional character that caused Pflueger to be accused of deterring the local art scene by commissioning an outsider, namely Rivera, to produce a mural painting for the city and about California; in a caricature, Pflueger was depicted as a Communist general re-named ‘Timosky Pfluegin.’<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Rivera’s presence raised concerns about ethnic groups coming to San Francisco and “worries about competitive immigrant labor”,<sup>20</sup> fears augmented by the Great Depression. Significantly, *Allegory of California* laid the seeds for the later GGIE’s mural *Pan American Unity*, for the formal and iconographic similarities between the two are remarkable.

The 1931 mural shows a central heroic female figure, the personification of California, who stands frontally dominating the whole scene; she is depicted as a goddess, the great mother holding in her hands fruits and gold and giving them to her sons as Coatlicue, the hybrid goddess in the central panel of *Pan American Unity*, is the great mother of Mexico. The riches of California are transformed by men’s genius into goods for the liberation of their lives.<sup>21</sup> The theme of the raised hand, as the ultimate symbol of the immense abundance and preciousness of the Earth, is prominent in both murals. Yet, the importance of the central female figure is underscored, in both *Allegory of California* and *Pan American Unity*, because she is the fulcrum of all the surrounding actions and figures. Thus, the industrial scapes, the artistic and scientific endeavors that proliferate around her in both images, highlight her role as the *sine qua non* condition for the thriving of California on the one hand, and the whole American continent on the other.

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<sup>19</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Lee, 65.

To conform with the GGIE's Pacific theme, Pflueger focused on America Continental art by commissioning and collecting numerous artworks from Central and South America.<sup>22</sup> At the physical center of 'Art in Action', Diego Rivera, Hermann Volz, and Dudley Carter were simultaneously working on their pieces: the first two were creating massive murals at the opposite sides of the Fine Arts Palace's walls, while Carter was carving his wood sculpture with an axe, epitomizing his primitive working method inspired by the native American tribes he lived with.<sup>23</sup> Along with Rivera, another Mexican artist was commissioned to realize a six-panel mural; Miguel Covarrubias presented his *Pageant of the Pacific or Esplendor del Pacífico*, depicting the natural connectedness of the Pacific countries (Fig.4).<sup>24</sup>

### **Rivera: Political Refugee or Socialist Activist?**

Pflueger, among all the local artists of the Bay area, chose Rivera to create a massive artwork entitled *Unión de la Expresión Artística del Norte y Sur de este Continente (The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and South of this Continent)*, commonly referred to as *Pan American Unity*. Yet, who was Timothy Pflueger, why did he choose Rivera and why did Rivera agree to contribute to the GGIE?

Pflueger, together with William Gerstle and Albert Bender, were San Francisco's three new powerful patrons (and businessmen) who changed the city's art scene in the 1920s and 1930s by embracing more progressive ideals and supporting local artists. Gerstle was the President of the San Francisco Art Commission, who as early as 1931 commissioned Rivera to realize a mural at the San Francisco Art Institute. Just a few months after the completion of

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<sup>22</sup> Poletti and Paiva, 207.

<sup>23</sup> Puccinelli, Dorothy. *Diego Rivera: The Story of His Mural at the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition*. Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthew Digital, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Spitta, Silvia, and Lois Parkinson Zamora. "Introduction: The Americas, Otherwise." *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 189-208.

*Allegory of California*, Rivera was asked to create a mural, this time a public commission that, nonetheless, sparked many debates for the inclusion of Gerstle and Pflueger's portraits. On his preliminary sketches for *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City* (1931), the Mexican artist envisioned a central female figure in the process of being painted (Fig. 5).<sup>25</sup> This central goddess, holding fruits and frontally facing the viewers, would have immediately evoked Rivera's *Allegory of California*, so tracing a continuity between the iconography of his private and public commission. However, in this final work, she was replaced by the standing figure of a worker being painted by Rivera himself and his assistants; this self-reference with his back to Gerstle and Pflueger, shown beneath the scaffolding, was read as the artist's mocking of the establishment and as proof of his radicalism.<sup>26</sup> Bender was the leading figure for the cultural development of the city, a modern patron of the arts who was also one of Rivera's first U.S. benefactors.

In the case of Pflueger, he involved himself early into the city's fabric. Born in San Francisco out of a working-class German family, he started working as an architectural draftsman during the city's reconstruction boom after the 1906 earthquake and the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal. As a young aspiring architect who could not afford a higher education, Pflueger worked hard to, eventually, be appointed chairman of the Committee of Consulting Architects for the Bay Bridge construction project and, in 1935, he won the prestigious commission to design some of the core buildings for the GGIE, such as the Federal State Building. San Francisco undoubtedly carries the mark of Pflueger's contributions to the city in the forms of his Art Deco buildings, both public and private. Significantly, as already seen, the architect's collaboration with Diego Rivera

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<sup>25</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, 108.

ten years earlier for the mural at the Stock Exchange Luncheon Club, paved the way for the 1940 realization of *Pan American Unity* at the GGIE. Written correspondence testifies the somewhat idyllic relationship between Rivera and the city's artistic circle as it emerges from the many letters the two exchanged. Finally, on April 15, 1940 Rivera accepted to paint the mural at the Exposition by explaining that "the real art of the Americas most came as a result of the fusion of the machinism and new creative power of the north with the tradition rooted in the soil of the south, the Toltecs, Tarascans, Mayas, Incas, etc".<sup>27</sup> After agreeing that the mural's theme would be the art of the Americas, in accordance with the Pageant of the Pacific Fair, the preliminary sketches were approved on July 25, 1940 by the San Francisco Art Commission.

Still, what were the reasons for Rivera to accept this commission other than the pleasant relationships he had in San Francisco? As the Mexican artist was trying to leave the country for the U.S, he wrote to Pflueger stating that he was in danger; namely, that "the difficulties that have been created for me within the last few days, are the result of the work of Mexican Agents of the Stalin-Nazis, who want to avoid my going to the States, to injure me here in every way, and assassinate me if possible".<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the threat to the followers of Trotsky was very real at the time when, from 1936 to 1938, almost all Trotskyists who were still within the Soviet Union's borders were executed in what is commonly referred to as the 'Great Purges', and even abroad the climate was becoming increasingly tense. Rivera, however, never openly explained the motive behind his vulnerable situation; according to rumors in the media, he was suspected to have participated in the attempt to assassinate Trotsky in the May of 1940. After Trotsky's

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Rivera to Pflueger (April 15, 1940). *City College of San Francisco*, [www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html](http://www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html)

<sup>28</sup> Diego Rivera, letter to Timothy Pflueger, May 30, 1940. *City College of San Francisco*, [www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html](http://www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html).

gruesome murder with an ice ax three months later by hand of the Spanish Stalinist Ramón Mercader on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, Rivera had an armed guard to protect him while he was working at his *Pan American Unity* in San Francisco.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, his decision to take part at the GGIE was the result of a series of events, rooted in an earlier time. Indeed, Rivera excitedly went to the Soviet Union in 1927 when it became “a mecca for foreign leftists who hoped to see the foundations for a new world”.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to the artist’s involvement with the PCM and the Soviet embassy, which opened in Mexico City in 1924, he was invited to participate in the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in Moscow (1917-1927); at that time though, the fight between Trotsky and Stalin was at its peak. After resisting the troika formed by Zinoviev, Stalin and Kamenev in the 1920s and leading the ‘Left Opposition’ against the rise of Stalin, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party in 1927, and finally exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929. Amid this series of events, Rivera did not find the revolutionary art he was hoping to see, but instead “he was greatly disillusioned with the growing authoritarianism of a Soviet government that felt it permissible to establish a formal esthetic policy which Rivera believed was counterrevolutionary in its denial of pluralism”.<sup>31</sup>

Precisely, his ideological vision contrasted with the dominant direction that Soviet Russia was taking in 1927. He strongly believed that the aim of revolutionary art was that of serving the masses of workers by placing art in public settings, and by rejecting past bourgeois models derived from the old painterly tradition to produce an art that was entirely new in its form and scope. Rivera also insisted that, in order to allow the workers to fully understand art, it was necessary to improve their cultural level by educating the masses and gradually exposing them to

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<sup>29</sup> Poletti and Paiva, *Art Deco*, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, William. "The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928." *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 3, no. 1 (1987): 49-69.

<sup>31</sup> Richardson, *Diego Rivera in Moscow*, 50.

art itself. His vision began to be less tolerated in Moscow as it contrasted deeply with the artistic and ideological monopoly that was laying its base during those years; as a result, Rivera left the USSR in 1928 and initiated “that distancing process that would lead to his long estrangement from the PCM and the Soviet government of Joseph Stalin”.<sup>32</sup>

In 1929 the painter was expelled from the PCM because of his contacts with the regime of Plutarco Elías Calles, who controversially won the presidential election of that year and started to show his rather conservative policies; in fact, the PCM was banned and Siqueiros, Rivera’s colleague of the painters’ syndicate, was arrested. Rivera was harshly criticized for having accepted prestigious commissions from the government and, even more, for painting under the U.S ambassador to Mexico Dwight Morrow and his appointment for the Cortez Palace in Cuernavaca. The artist’s philo-North American tendencies would, soon thereafter, be expressed in the many commissions he undertook in the U.S in the 1930s. However, his acceptance to work several times in North America to produce major murals does not undermine Rivera’s political radicalism, rather it proves and elucidates his enduring fascination with Pan Americanism as epitomized by the later GGIE commission.

Pan Americanism, which advocates cooperation among the states of the Americas, is a notion rooted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the victorious struggles of the colonies for their independence throughout the American Continent inspired sentiments of unity.<sup>33</sup> Simon Bolívar, who fought and liberated many South American countries from the Spanish empire, is regarded as the first Pan Americanist and rightly appears in Rivera’s fresco for the 1940 Exposition. Bolívar made the first step towards Pan Americanism when, at the Congress of Panama in 1826,

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<sup>32</sup> Richardson, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Wickham, Fletcher Ryan. "Pan Americanism-A Dream or a Reality?" *Hispania* 18, no. 1 (1935): 103-112.

he envisioned the Americas as “one single nation”,<sup>34</sup> and proposed the creation of a military and political league. The issue of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 by the namesake U.S president advocated the complete autonomy of the Americas from European domination, but also caused issues of interference in Latin America with the use of armed forces and a paternalistic attitude that undermined the principle of equality inherent in Pan Americanism.<sup>35</sup> Later in 1889, the Pan American Union was formed to promote peace, independence, territorial integrity, equality, and principles of non-intervention between the American nations.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1929 and 1930, Rivera worked on two murals offering a panoramic vision of Mexico’s history, one at the National Palace in Mexico City (Fig. 6 and 7) and the other in Cuernavaca (Fig.8), where the Spanish conqueror Cortez had his castle, now Morrow’s house.<sup>37</sup> These two cycles, on which he worked simultaneously, are the first ones to present Rivera’s interpretation of Mexico’s past and post-revolutionary present, and the reclamation of the Indian world as the base of the nation’s modern identity; for instance, on the west wall of the National Palace, the artist depicted the Aztec world with Quetzalcoatl, the creator and bringer of civilization, at the center of this vision. On his right, Indians are cultivating and engaging in artistic activities whereas on his left, slaves and captives show the other reality of pre-Columbian culture. On the opposite east wall, almost mirroring the Aztec deity, Rivera painted Karl Marx on the top section of the panel pointing with his arm to the future, an industrial scene: to his right, the artist presented images of class struggles and to his left, views of capitalist decadence.<sup>38</sup> By

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<sup>34</sup> Wickham, *Pan Americanism*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> William R. Castle. "The Monroe Doctrine and Pan-Americanism." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 204, no. 1 (1939): 111-18.

<sup>36</sup> Lockey, Joseph B. "The Meaning of Pan-Americanism." *The American Journal of International Law* 19, no. 1 (1925): 104-17.

<sup>37</sup> Rochfort, Desmond, Diego Rivera, and Julia Engelhardt. *The Murals of Diego Rivera*. 1st ed. London: South Bank Board in Collaboration with Journeyman, 1987: 62.

<sup>38</sup> Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, 60-61.

drawing such parallels between the Aztec past and the revolutionary present, Rivera is visually synthesizing Mexico's historical transformation, importantly putting the ancient Indian world at the outset of the social changes that would have determined the nation's present. In the murals at the Cortez Palace, Rivera recounted the history of the Spanish conquest in Cuernavaca and the state of Morelos: the struggle faced by the Indian civilizations once invaded, are transposed into its modern equivalent as the artist portrays workers, peasants and the agrarian leader Emiliano Zapata, with his motto 'Land and Liberty', fighting for emancipation.

The break from the PCM also marked the beginning of Rivera's "intellectual flirtation with Trotskyism".<sup>39</sup> At the time Lev Trotsky was in the midst of the Moscow Trials, charged with treason and conspiracy with Hitler, Rivera joined the Trotskyite Fourth International Communist League in 1936 and, that same year, he offered protection to Trotsky in Mexico City who arrived the following January.<sup>40</sup> The Fourth International was officially founded by Trotsky and his supporters in France in 1938, after his exile from the USSR, and it firmly opposed the Third International or Comintern now led by Stalin, which was accused of totalitarian deviations and of impeding the establishment of international Communism. Rivera's contribution in the writing of the essay "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art", along with André Breton and Trotsky, was interpreted as an act of anti-Stalinism. The French Surrealist poet André Breton was similarly expelled from the French Communist Party in 1933 and, in 1938, he traveled to Mexico under a French government commission, where he met Trotsky and Rivera.

Against all odds, in 1939 the Mexican artist apparently broke with Trotsky and founded the Revolutionary Party of Workers and Peasants (PROC). This unexpected separation from Trotsky, I suggest, has more to do with Rivera's private life rather than any ideological

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<sup>39</sup> Richardson, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 204.

divergence, for the Russian revolutionary while living in Mexico City at Rivera's house had an affair with the latter's wife, Frida Kahlo. Nonetheless, without the support of the Fourth International or the Comintern, Rivera was losing his public influence and was being increasingly marginalized. Moreover, he supported Juan Almazàn in Mexico's presidential election, a former general supported by anti-labor and anti-communist factions.<sup>41</sup> Rivera's controversial stance, his attempt to re-launch himself into the center of the country's political scene but, meaningfully without any official Communist allegiances, increased the preoccupation of his own safety when Trotsky's attempted assassination failed. Furthermore, from 1936 to 1940 Rivera did not receive any major commission and he had not painted a mural since the Hotel Reforma's *Burlesque of Mexican Folklore and Politics*. When Timothy Pflueger proposed to him such a prominent commission, painting at the GGIE for an international audience, Rivera's enthusiastic acceptance can be interpreted as the fair response to this chain of events.

When approaching *Pan American Unity*, the question to be asked is: how does Rivera apparently fit into the GGIE? Is the mural a compromise between Rivera's leftist political beliefs and its U.S. commissioners? Of crucial importance for the scope of this thesis, is the artist's self-characterization as "a loyal revolutionary in the Bolshevik-Leninist tradition"<sup>42</sup>: Rivera thought of himself as a guerrilla fighter infiltrating the system to lay the base of the international revolution from within bourgeois institutions and capitalist societies. The way in which Rivera presented a leftist discourse in the context of the GGIE's celebration of capitalist advancement, via his *Pan American Unity* and his multi-layered belief system, is at the core of the following chapter.

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<sup>41</sup> Lee, 204.

<sup>42</sup> Belnap, *Diego Rivera's Greater America*, 62.

## 2. Indigenized Modernity: Rivera's Hidden Ideologies in Pan American Unity

In one of his writings Rivera insisted that America's only chance to survive was to "indianize or perish" ("indianizarse o perecer").<sup>43</sup> Using Jeffrey Belnap's notion of "indigenous modernity", according to which the complex interaction of technology and nature is resolved with the assimilation of Northern technology to the millennial American culture survived in the indigenous populations of the South, the aim of this chapter is to present a comprehensive view of Rivera's dialectic of Pan Americanism.<sup>44</sup> I argue that in *Pan American Unity*, the artist drew on an eclectic array of iconographies and ideologies that resulted in the creation of his personal belief system: here religion, Socialist Realism, the native and the industrial, social indigenism are visually and theoretically synthesized. In formulating this vision and in choosing the Pan American theme for the GGIE, Rivera was able to coherently bring together a Communist utopia and an indigenous way of living with Christianity and proletarian art.

### Renaissance Influences: Between Fiction and Reality

*Pan American Unity* is divided into five panels, each composed of an upper and lower register, and is larger than any single scene Rivera painted throughout his career. Although the risk of such a monumental work is the lack of focus, the artist was able to construct a visually

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<sup>43</sup> Rivera, Diego, and Raquel Tibol. *Arte Y Política*. 2a ed. Colección Enlace. México, D.F.: Editorial Grijalbo, 1986.

<sup>44</sup> Belnap, *Rivera's Greater America*, 76.

coherent image by using compositional links that allow for a cross-referenced reading; indeed, the activities and figures in the first two panels from the left can be read as counterparts to those on the right. The symmetrical structure equals a clear thematic, that is the synthesis of the artistic genius of the South of the American continent with the mechanical and industrial expression of the North, and it facilitates the comparison between ancient and modern cultures brought together in the central panel, where the creation of a unified contemporary American culture is epitomized by the massive half-stone, half-machine sculpture which, as seen further on, ultimately blends Rivera's vision (Fig.9).

Past and present elements are combined in an altar-piece like structure. The mural can be read as a polyptych and its composition parallels that of many altar-pieces of Italian Quattrocento artists, whose technique Rivera studied during his trip to Italy in 1920. The monumental effect that the Mexican artist admired in such works has been translated into his *Pan American Unity*, where each figure is imposing and firmly occupies its space; however, the polyptych-like composition is particularly manifest in the central panel. By comparing it to Masaccio's *Trinità* (Fig. 10), the panel by Rivera has a similar structure. Indeed, the vanishing point common to the artworks is the central monumental figure that directly faces the viewers and to whom is given a preeminent position as it is depicted on the highest viewpoint and, in the case of *Pan American Unity*, also evokes a meditative quality within the animated mural.

Masaccio included the commissioners of the work by portraying them as being an integral part of the divine scene; in the *Trinità*, the Florentine artist has included the two unknown husband and wife donors in the lower register situated at eye-level, both kneeling with their hands joint towards the central figure of Christ on the cross. Masaccio, following Giotto's example, revolutionized the principles of Christian Renaissance iconography by including

contemporary figures in a past divine scene; in doing so, the represented fictional space of the artwork is linked to the real space inhabited by contemporary living persons, meaning that is the spectator who actively connects the two realities through the act of viewing and decoding the image.

Rivera similarly constructed his central panel; for instance, he centered the work on the monumental half-stone, half-machine sculpture that undoubtedly dominates the panel's space. On the right-side of the lower section, in the same exact position as the lady donor in Masaccio's fresco, Timothy Pflueger, commissioner of the mural project, is portrayed in a three-quarter pose holding the plans for the Library Building of the San Francisco Junior College (now City College), where the mural was destined to go. Moreover, Pflueger faces Frida Kahlo who is depicted on the opposite left-side of the register, so recalling the *Trinità*'s disposition of the two commissioners. Interestingly, Kahlo assumes a visually comparable pose to that of the Virgin Mary: both are standing, gazing in front of them in a somewhat aloof stance. The idea of the compression of time, evident in the Quattrocento Italian artists' altar-pieces, realized through the inclusion of contemporary figures in a divine scene fits as well into Rivera's panel; precisely, by superimposing the ancient Aztec goddess Coatlicue in her hybrid form, the artist is visually and ideally bringing together past and present, divine and earthly.

This continuity between fiction and reality characterizes Rivera's conception of the mural as the site where the creation of a shared visual language manifests itself. Rejecting a linear notion of time, the artist's construction of his images is of a fluid spatial display, in which the inclusion of the viewer's body and spatial field, disrupts any stationary or fixed perspective to allow a physical and ideal participation in his retelling of past, present, and future history.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006: 89-94.

fracturing of space and time conveys dynamism, and ultimately grants his visual histories to circulate and not to progress.<sup>46</sup> In such effort, the Renaissance aesthetic was a useful vessel for the complex ideologies he was translating: as Masaccio was the middle man between the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance, likewise Rivera engaged with a variety of visual media, from Renaissance frescoes to pre-Hispanic cultures, to express his multifold belief system. More analogies thus emerge, prominently the presence of death and the idea of the Renaissance man. At the bottom of the *Trinità*, Masaccio placed a sarcophagus with a skeleton and a Latin inscription that reads ‘I once was what you are and what I am you also will be’. The duality of death and life is further epitomized by the figure of the Trinity, and recalled by Rivera in the imposing Coatlicue, at once the goddess of death and life. Fiction and reality, death and its destruction appear instead in the lower section of the fourth panel, here personified by the figures of Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini. The notion of the Renaissance man, with broad knowledge and skills in multiple disciplines, pervades *Pan American Unity* with its portraits of inventors and geniuses, but is particularly personified by Netzahualcoyotl, the king of Texcoco in Mexico depicted on the left-hand side of the lower section of the first panel. A poet, inventor and politician, Netzahualcoyotl is thought to have invented the first flying machine of which he holds a model, as a Mexican version of the Italian Leonardo da Vinci who was regarded the Renaissance man par excellence.

In addition to the Quattrocento altar-piece formal similarities, but not of lesser relevance, is the ideal component of such a reference. The artist’s vocabulary of Christian imagery, or rather the pictorial allusions to religious art that he acquired during his stay in Italy are evident in other works from the early 1920s, especially his Ministry of Education murals in Mexico City

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<sup>46</sup> Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, 92.

(Fig. 11). Although Rivera's position on Catholicism is not known, his fascination with Christianity may be interpreted under the light of the Catholic-Communist debate taking place during the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> For instance, in 1936 the French Communist Party (PCF) organized a conference dedicated to Catholic-Communist relations: the rise of fascism in Europe made "a tactical alliance" necessary between Catholics and Communists to promote social progress.<sup>48</sup> With the creation of the Popular Front (1936-1938) and the growth of the PCF, the dialogue between these two apparently contradictory ideologies intensified and a group of French Catholic intellectuals saw the social programme of the Popular Front in accordance with Catholic social doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Spending fourteen years in Europe (especially France and Spain) for his artistic formation, Rivera entered in contact with similar ideological discussions as part of a politically engaged artistic community.

However, the images painted by Rivera are secular in nature and the religious allusions are, rather, part of the many artistic ideas and currents that influenced the artist, who was a master in synthesizing such references into a pictorially unifying vision. Consequently, Rivera's evocation of the use of the fresco-technique, suggests an ideological implication not to be disregarded in an artist deeply engaged in leftist political activism; thus, the very specific medium of the fresco leads itself to a socialist reading. The technicalities of the medium typically require a team of assistants that is essential in the process of the preparation and realization of the mural painting.<sup>50</sup> As such, the buon fresco technique is referenced by Rivera as being the

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<sup>47</sup> Hellman, John. "French "Left-Catholics" and Communism in the Nineteen-Thirties." *Church History* 45, no. 4 (1976): 507-523.

<sup>48</sup> Hellman, "Left-Catholics and Communism", 507.

<sup>49</sup> Hellman, 511.

<sup>50</sup> "Diego's Assistants." Diego Rivera Mural Project. Accessed November 12, 2018. <http://www.riveramural.org/diegosassistants>.

most appropriate art form for a socialist society as it is the outcome of communal effort, contrasted to the individual artistic activity of easel painting as the result of a bourgeois society.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the fresco-technique was revived during the Middle Ages when painters were part of the Craft Guilds. The latter were important socio-political structures of Medieval society and provided an example of a communistic system in which each guild acted as a union of workers asking, for instance, for the improvement of working conditions and protection in form of insurance in case of sickness. The poetic revivalism of the Middle Ages as a period characterized by a simple, more spiritual, pre-industrial way of living was symbolically referenced by many 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-academic artistic experiments in Europe and North America such as the Nazarenes, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Arts and Crafts movements.<sup>52</sup>

These movements were inspired by the Italian art of the 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and they all strove to restore the old relation between art and the people, as obtained during the Middle Ages when art did not adorn private residencies but was displayed on the walls of public buildings. In addition, many members of the Arts and Crafts Movement, among them one of its influential founders William Morris, were also socialists and advocated economic and social reform. Thus, the ideological allusion to fresco painting, the form of art that served and spoke to both the fabric of Medieval society and ancient pre-Columbian civilizations that brought art and people together, can be interpreted as part of Rivera's effort to present his leftist ideas through the use of a metaphorical language.

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<sup>51</sup> Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Blackwell, 1993: 406.

<sup>52</sup> Barringer, T. J, et al. *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design*. New Haven Conn., Yale University Press, 2012: 9-23.

## Socialist Realist Women from Coatlicue to Crlenkovich

The past and present visions of the second and fourth panel (Fig. 12 and 13), with their subtle references, provide exciting examples to understand the visual vocabulary from which Rivera drew to conceive a mural project that would uncover all of his aesthetic inspirations one layer after the other. In particular, these two panels offer formal elements linked to Socialist Realism and the debate around an adequate form of revolutionary/proletarian art to which Rivera eagerly participated. Such formal elements point to a photographic sensibility found in the works of many Russian avant-garde artists experimenting with graphic art such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Gustav Klucis.<sup>53</sup> The birds-eye view of San Francisco, the choreographed composition, and the careful staging of the figures recall the Constructivist designing of images by means of photography and photomontage (Fig. 14 and 15).<sup>54</sup> In the wake of the Russian Revolution, many debates arose on the social role that art was felt it needed to take in the construction of a Communist society as opposed to the bourgeois tradition of easel painting, which promoted only the interests of the few.

As already briefly mentioned in the first chapter, Rivera went to the Soviet Union in 1927 where he soon became involved in such artistic debates; indeed, he interacted with a wide range of Soviet artistic figures and signed a contract with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People's Commissar of Education, who commissioned him to paint a fresco in the Red Army Club in Moscow.<sup>55</sup> Rivera's friendship with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and the artist's familiarity with Russia's artistic community, probably convinced him to become part of the "October

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<sup>53</sup> Bowlt, John E. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism. Reprint.* Farnborough: Thames & Hudson, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 250-254.

<sup>55</sup> Richardson, *Diego Rivera in Moscow*, 57.

Group” whose manifesto was published in 1928. The October Group rejected both the passive ‘heroic’ realism of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), which relied on conventional pictorial formulas that would have been later developed into Socialist Realism in the 1930s, and the excess of the avant-gardes, which failed to directly communicate to the working class. With a similar mission to that of the Proletkult, the October Group condemned the reliance on bourgeois modes of production claiming that art should adopt a new form of realism, aimed at promoting a collective way of living and at using all the means of expression to organize the consciousness and serve the needs of the proletariat.<sup>56</sup> Rivera was a strong supporter of a socially conscious art and, thus, hoped to encourage a muralist movement in the Soviet Union as he stated that mural painting was the most significant art form for the proletariat;<sup>57</sup> nevertheless, his cry for artistic pluralism free from the dictates of state intervention came to be less and less tolerated as Stalin started to enforce hegemonic control over Soviet society which resulted, by 1932, in the dissolution of independent artistic groups while Socialist Realism became the only state-officially approved aesthetic. Both Rodchenko, the prominent Constructivist who became the official photographer of sporting events and a Socialist Realist, and Klucis, for instance, fell out of favor under Stalin’s government and the latter disappeared during the ‘Great Purges’.

Consciously expressing the need to tie his artistic endeavors with the international advancement of Socialism, Rivera wrote along with Trotsky and André Breton “The manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art”, published in 1938, in which they state that “true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society (.

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<sup>56</sup> Wood, P. “Realism and Realities” in Fer, Briony, et al. *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*. Yale University Press, in Association with the Open University, 1993: 300-326.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 406.

. . .) that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture”.<sup>58</sup> Here Rivera openly distanced himself from the totalitarian regime of the USSR, which was accused of negating that aesthetic pluralism that he regarded as the symptom of an emancipated society where art is the base and fuel of that same freedom. Even though the stay in Russia was somewhat disillusioning for Rivera, the experience with the October Group had a consequential impact in the works he later produced; for instance, the graphic sensibility that his Russian colleagues used in their posters, is especially visible in the second and fourth panel, as well as the inclusion of workers into a bigger pictorial narrative, usually placed in front of machines or in factories. As Rivera thought of himself as the direct result of the modern age in which he was living, with its struggles and radical changes, he decided to ally himself with those past and present artists who consciously used “art as a weapon”, in this case in the service of the revolution and empowerment of the proletariat;<sup>59</sup> in *Pan American Unity*, and in the context of the GGIE, Rivera presented his leftist discourse as reflected in his, carefully selected, aesthetic references.

The second and fourth panel abruptly bring the spectators in a precise historical and geographical area: the aerial view of the San Francisco bay with the newly constructed Bay Bridge, Golden Gate Bridge and the man-made Treasure Island, site of the GGIE, as they would have appeared in 1940 when Rivera painted them. The bridging of time and space from the first panel to the second, accurately entitled *Elements from Past and Present*, is symbolically visualized by the diver Helen Crlenkovich. She appears again diving in the fourth section, *Trends of Creative Effort in the United States and the Rise of Woman in Various Fields of Creative*

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<sup>58</sup> Rivera and Tibol, 181-186.

<sup>59</sup> Harrison and Wood, 407.

*Endeavor Through Her Use of the Power of Manmade Machinery*, strengthening the visual continuity between the panels.

The idea of women's emancipation, as sport champions, architects, artists and artisans is present throughout the mural and it is a significant statement in the construction of Rivera's vision of Pan Americanism, a society free from racial and gender discriminations.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the artist's inclusion of strong female figures attests their presence and contribution as essential in the development of a more just and inclusive society; indeed, the women Rivera included are portrayed while performing typically men's activities. For instance, Helen Crlenkovich was U.S 1939 national diving champion, who also graduated at the San Francisco Junior College, obtained a pilot license and worked as a Hollywood stunt double.<sup>61</sup> On the right corner of the lower section, a Tehuana is portrayed while sculpting among other Mexican artisans. Women of Tehuantepec, a city in Southern Mexico, did all the creative work since their society was a matriarchal one in which men had a minor place in the social structure. As the diver Crlenkovich appears twice in the panels, Paulette Goddard occupies a central position; she was a famous American actress who co-starred in Chaplin's movie "The Great Dictator", whose scenes are depicted in the lower section of the fourth panel. Notably, she features in the central panel holding hands with Rivera, epitomizing close Pan Americanism.<sup>62</sup> Emmy Lou Packard, Rivera's close friend and chief mural assistant for the GGIE, is shown in front of a canvas; as Rivera, Packard was also a social activist, a full- fledged artist and a committed feminist.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Rivera and Tibol, 255-256.

<sup>61</sup> "Pan American Unity: Panel 2." Diego Rivera Mural Project. Accessed November 13, 2018. <http://www.riveramural.org/panel2>.

<sup>62</sup> "Diego Rivera: His amazing new mural depicts Pan-American unity". *Life*. Vol. 10 no. 9. Time, Inc. 3 March 1941. pp. 52-56. Accessed November 13, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> "Emmy Lou Packard, Artist, Teacher and Social Activist". *SFGate*. March 25, 1998. Accessed November 13, 2018.

The notion that emerges from *Pan American Unity* is that women are as capable as men in any field, as architects, athletes and artists. The presence of sportswomen in swimsuits and Crlenkovich's pose, immediately recall the photos Rodchenko took during official Soviet sports manifestation, or Klucis' photomontages, as evident in both Fig.14 and 15. However, there is another gender-related question to be posed, which is the extent to which women are objectified. Married four times, he never formally acknowledged the daughter he had with his first wife and entertained many affairs outside the marriages: by interweaving Rivera's public and private life it is hard not to speculate about his somewhat utilitarian vision of women. In the fourth panel, Crlenkovich is also shown in a forward momentum, depicted almost as if she is in the process of becoming architecture, of objectifying into her wooden figurehead counterpart being carved by a man on the beam, which is an extension from the adjoining panel.

Touching the cloud hovering in the upper left corner of the second panel are the two skyscrapers designed by Pflueger, which dominate the city's view; one is the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company Building, the tallest building in San Francisco during the GGIE, and the other is 450 Sutter building, which unusually features Mayan motifs in both its exterior and interior (Fig. 16). Perhaps inspired by the Aztec Hotel in Los Angeles, Pflueger wanted to emphasize pre-Columbian designs and recall the Mayan stepped-stone temples, whose ruins were discovered in 1926, as the source for a uniquely modern American architecture versus the classicist European models.<sup>64</sup> In the foreground, men and women gaze upwards so stressing the allegorical connotation of the diving figure; however, the foreground is dominated by the marble head of Quetzacoatl which is being sculpted by Mardonio Magaña, a peasant and artist whom Rivera regarded as the greatest contemporary Mexican sculptor.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Poletti and Paiva, *Art Deco*, 91.

<sup>65</sup> Rivera, Diego. "Mardonio Magaña." *Espacios* (Mexico City), no.1 (September 1948): 5-6.

Rivera considered the sculptor's artistic activity as preserving and continuing the visual tradition of Mexican ancient culture, once again metaphorically connecting past and present. The lower section is, partially, a fresco within a fresco since Rivera portrays himself while painting a fresco of the great liberators who fought for America's independence and the abolition of slavery. The background is, indeed, the liberty tree and from left to right, there are Simon Bolívar, Miguel Hidalgo, Jose Maria Morelos, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and John Brown, who is depicted addressing the people of America. Jefferson's paper reads in bold red letters his own words: "The Tree of Liberty needs to be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants" whereas Lincoln holds his Gettysburg Address, pronounced in 1863, during the American Secessionist War, when he claimed that the struggles and victims of the civil war were necessary for the birth of a new equal and unified nation.

Next to Rivera, a series of contemporary Mexican artisans are depicted at work plastering, sculpting, carving, and weaving. Above the Tehuana, ideologically contrasting her, frames of violent scenes including knives, *fascis lictoriae* (emblem of Fascism), and a figure holding a dead baby foresee the emergence of those reactionary regimes depicted in the lower section of the fourth panel, visually and concretely threatening the efforts of the liberators to emancipate the American continent. The cross-reading here is essential: to contrast the forces of aggression and totalitarian powers coming from the European continent, Rivera insisted on his belief that the Americas needed to come together as one continent, whose joint effort to achieve freedom was symbolized by both North and South revolutionaries.

The fourth panel offers a clear panorama of the San Francisco Bay where the diving figure, Helen Crlenkovich, appears again this time floating above Treasure Island, setting of the GGIE, so balancing the right side of the mural. Beneath the diver, in the foreground, there are

different characters; a worker, only visible at half-length as he is climbing a ladder, gloomily glance to the figures in front of him. He resembles the worker Rivera depicted at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1931, whose gigantic proportion dominated the mural and arose controversies once it was unveiled (Fig.5). On the right, Rivera probably depicted the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who worked also in the Mayan revival architectural style drawing, exactly, from pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures.

The lower section of the fourth panel offers the darker scene of the mural as it presents several symbolic images of the widespread violence invading Europe; however, this section is based on scenes from the 1939 movies “The Great Dictator” by Charlie Chaplin and “Confessions of a Nazi Spy” by Edward G. Robison as attested by the cameras on both sides of the panel. Importantly indeed, Rivera saw the moving picture as one of the greatest contemporary art forms, and the most original contribution to art made by North America as the ultimate development of mural painting.<sup>66</sup> Charlie Chaplin appears multiple times in this panel both as the satire of Hitler, Adenoid Hinkle, and as a Jewish barber. The dark mocking of both movies dramatized the then-present struggle of democracy and freedom against the totalitarian powers personified by the central figures of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini who became allies in 1939 after the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact. Stalin is depicted with a knife and a blood-stained ax so recalling the hammer and sickle emblem, but perhaps also pointing at Stalin’s responsibility for the assassination of Trotsky in 1940; at the center, Hitler bears the swastika, the Nazi symbol, and Mussolini, on the right, with the emblems of Fascism. Below this trinity, the letters G.P.U (the acronym of the Soviet secret police) interlace with GESTAPO (the Nazi secret police), so forming a cross to show their common purpose. Below the gaseous tree, a

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<sup>66</sup> Interview of Alfred Frankenstein to Diego Rivera. "Pan American Unity: Panel 5." Diego Rivera Mural Project. Accessed November 13, 2018. <http://www.riveramural.org/panel5>.

soldier in a gas mask lies dead on barbed wires and a figure is desperately covering a blood-stained baby, as if the pain was the source for the violent electrified tree. On the right side, Rivera painted Chaplin-Hitler shown while holding a golden world map with the Americas on the front to stress the threat of war and Nazism's expansionism oversea. On the opposite side of the scene, Heinrich Himmler, leader of the Nazi SS, is falling against the massive hand bearing the U.S flag and halting the forces of aggression coming from the trinity tree. The emerge of this hand, in Rivera's view, was the symbol of both North and South America's conscience and resistance to the violent threat of European Caesarism. Rivera's cry to a Pan-American unity is emphasized by the legible papers on the bottom left corner of the image that read "U.S.A national defense" and "Pan-American Union Plans".

If on the one hand *Pan American Unity* presents the poetic and symbolic reference to a pre-industrial society, on the other Rivera shows the technological advancement of the U.S, of which the last panel appears as a celebration. Here, though, there is no contradiction: Rivera, as many committed artists and intellectuals of the time, after the sanguinary revolution that took place in Mexico (1910-1917), longed for the building of a newly liberated nation, finally able to shape itself outside any imposed domination. In such a common imagery, the agrarian leader Emiliano Zapata represented for Rivera the force that could reconcile Mexican nationalism with the advent of international Socialism. Zapata, whose political thinking can be described as agrarian socialism, had been a source of political and artistic influence throughout Rivera's life (Fig. 17);<sup>67</sup> he fought for land distribution and in 1911 his Plan of Ayala was issued. The latter was the first land reform in Mexico and it called for the nationalization and re-distribution of the lands stolen under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The centrality of Zapata to the Mexican

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<sup>67</sup> Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, 44.

Revolution, shot to death in 1919, is attested by the emergence of the so-called ‘Zapatismo’, an expression that identifies the politics and philosophy brought forward by the revolutionary.<sup>68</sup> Considering this need, the duality of past and present, namely the recovery of the pre-Columbian Indian past and the urgency of making Mexico a modern nation, led Rivera to resolve such an apparent conflict through the symbolic meeting of the North and South of the American continent. This temporal continuity between the two Americas and their unity was to be based on two tenets: the reclaiming of the Indian world as representative of America’s modern identity and the use of the immense productive power of modern technology as the means to liberate the whole continent.<sup>69</sup>

### **Spirituality, Industry and the Revolution**

*Pan American Unity* is meant to be read laterally since the use of compositional links ultimately unifies the whole mural and iconographically connects the panels. This interrelation is evident in the first and last panels where art making is paired with industrial work. The first panel (Fig. 18) entitled *The Creative Genius of the South Growing from Religious Fervor and a Native Talent for Plastic Expression* depicts the symbols, practices and figures at the roots of Mexico’s great indigenous origin. By comparing it to the fifth and last panel (Fig. 19), *The Creative Culture of the North Developing from the Necessity of Making Life Possible in a New and Empty Land*, which shows the unfolding of modernity and technical advancement of North America, it seems legitimate to claim that ancient and modern civilizations here engage in a continuous conversation.

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<sup>68</sup> Rochfort, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Rivera and Tibol, *Arte Y Política*, 249-258.

Firstly, both panels are tied by a similar topography, carefully reproduced by the artist. For instance, in the first image the two volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl provides the natural backdrop to the detailed scene representing the ancient Aztec capital Tenotichtlan (the modern-day Mexico City) and the nearby Teotihuacan, the site of the ancient temples complex with the temple of Nahuatl highly visible on the upper left-side of the panel. On a circular platform, right in front the temple, Quetzalcoatl (the feathered serpent) is shown by Rivera as the high priest teaching to the ruling council. The latter was the main deity for both the Aztecs and the Toltecs and was associated to fertility, knowledge, and rectitude.<sup>70</sup> Rivera here depicts the deity in his multiple appearances; precisely, the colorful bundle of light that runs from the temple of Quetzalcoatl in the first panel to the giant sculpted serpent-head in the second panel is the immaterial embodiment of the supreme Aztec deity (Fig.20 and 21).

The religious fervor and creative plastic genius with which Rivera entitled the very first panel of *Pan American Unity*, is particularly manifest in the left-side of the middle ground where dancers and musicians from the Yaqui tribe of Northern Mexico perform the deer dance, a ritual and religious practice that permitted spiritual exchange with the natural environment.<sup>71</sup> The lower section of the panel somewhat parallels the aforementioned scenes, for it presents the immensely rich artistic talent of the ancient Southern civilization by paying homage to Netzahualcoyotl and Mexican goldsmiths.

Panel five is the counterpart to the first one and the two visually and ideally bring together South and North of the American continent. The composition of this panel follows the same formal structure; as the far backdrop of the scene, Rivera depicted California's mountain

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<sup>70</sup> Carrasco, David. *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, Revised Edition*. University Press of Colorado, 2000: 63-103.

<sup>71</sup> Puccinelli, *The Story of His Mural*, 1.

chain, with the two volcanoes Lassen and Shasta, but this time the natural environment is transforming under human intervention. Instead of a ritualistic exchange with the nature epitomized by the Yaqui deer dance, the panel shows the modern engineering achievements north of the border. The middle ground is dominated by agricultural workers and miners panning gold; the space is filled with industrial structures and, especially evident, is the conveyor belt that runs throughout the image and visually intrudes the fourth panel so creating a compositional balance with Quetzalcoatl's colorful light bundle. Likewise, the lower section of the last panel depicts those figures who, with their creative minds, fostered the industrial revolution that was radically transforming the U.S: Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Samuel Morse, and Robert Fulton are all shown with their inventions.

But why is this visual pairing relevant to the reading of *Pan American Unity*? In April 1933, Rivera explained the meaning of the iconography of the *Detroit Industry Murals* and I consider his visual and written statements as the seed of the artist's later imaging for the GGIE commission. After having spent two months visiting the Ford River Rouge complex, the factories of Ford Motor Company and the Chrysler Corporation in Detroit, Rivera wanted to express his fascination for the duality he saw existing between the masterpieces of the ancient pre-Columbian art and the images produced by modern industry.<sup>72</sup> This is evident as the artist introduced allegorical images of Aztec deities next to factory scenes (Fig. 22). At the time Rivera was working in Detroit, the heart of the modern capitalist world, and precisely some weeks before his arrival the city witnessed a major communist-organized march of 3000 people against the unemployment caused by the Great Depression: the demonstration ended violently at the Ford Motor Company River Rouge plant where three workers lost their lives.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>72</sup> Rivera, Diego. "Dynamic Detroit: an interpretation." *Creative Art* (New York) 12 (April 1933): 289-295.

<sup>73</sup> Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, 67.

Rivera consciously decided not to include any reference to these episodes and, instead of openly criticizing capitalist production and defending workers' struggles, he apparently opted for a celebration of such industrial complexes.

If we are to apply the notion that, in Rivera's vision, continental unity was to be achieved through the reclaim of the Indian world as the base of America's modern identity and the use of industrial technology to liberate the whole continent, then both the *Detroit Industry Murals* and *Pan American Unity* are not glorifications of capitalist products but emblems of a potential transcendence inherent in technological advancement.<sup>74</sup> The harmonious synthesis of the artistic genius of the South with the industrial potential of the North, brought forward by the creative effort of the workers, is for Rivera the route to the future emancipation of the working class and the building of a socialist society. The images he presented, therefore, are essentially linked to his personal radical leftist discourse. Being a Communist, for Rivera the industrialization process occurring in the U.S meant that the proletariat was emerging and would have eventually shaped the future: the larger the working class, the more chances for Socialism in the future.

### **Embodiment of a Belief System: the Hybrid Coatlicue**

At the beginning of this chapter, I stressed the importance of the central panel as bringing together the left sections, focused on southern artistic activities, with the right ones, visualizing the northern industrial advancement. Yet, as briefly mentioned, there is more about this image that its central position undoubtedly emphasizes: it is this panel that consolidates Rivera's vision. The mural, entitled *The Plastification of Creative Power of the Northern Mechanism by Union with the Plastic Tradition of the South*, is anchored by the massive half-stone, half-machine

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<sup>74</sup> Wood, *Art between the Wars*, 251.

goddess of earth and death Coatlicue. If on the right side she depicts the stamping machine already represented by Rivera at the Ford Motor Company (Fig.22), the left side highlights her role as the great mother of Mexico with the hand proudly showing jade-jewelled calluses, symbols of the preciousness and necessity of working the soil, recalling Zapata's concept of land and liberty.

The theme of hybridity is carried forward by the inclusion of the central human head, half-dead and half-living, representing once again the duality past and present, death and life of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue. The apparent Pan-American kinship is symbolically evoked in the lower section by the planting of the tree of life by Rivera, embodying Central and South America, and Paulette Goddard, personifying North America. The seed of Pan-Americanism is transposed in the nearby depiction of a little Mexican girl seated next to a North American kid, the portrait of the son of Rivera's assistant Emmy Lou Packard.<sup>75</sup> The metaphor of the tree is a recurring element throughout the mural, but it appears in very different contexts. It can act as the symbol of freedom and unity in the third panel as the liberty tree painted by Rivera, and in the central panel as the tree of life. Yet, it can also stand for exploitation and violence as seen in the fourth panel with the electrified tree containing the trinity-like portraits of Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, or in the last section as exploitation of the land for industrial advancement.

However, *Pan American Unity* is more than a celebration of continental unity, and its layered iconography reveals instead a very different and controversial notion that can be defined as indigenized modernity.<sup>76</sup> In Rivera's vision, the unity of the American continent was to be led by the hybrid goddess Coatlicue, who embodies the eternal return of native America as opposed

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<sup>75</sup> "Pan American Unity: Panel 3." *Pan American Unity: Panel 3 | Diego Rivera Mural Project*, [www.riveramural.org/panel3](http://www.riveramural.org/panel3).

<sup>76</sup> Belnap, *Rivera's Greater America*, 93.

to the U.S-Anglo model of domination.<sup>77</sup> Precisely, the utopian vision of the artist for the future of his continent was to be based on indigenous way of living, the latter implemented by the use of machinery and where the mechanical industrialization is seen as originating from and responding to the principles of the natural laws. This indigenized modernity was for Rivera the only way in which the native indigenous past, the bedrock of the American continent, could be reconciled with the industrial transformation of the Americas. A future that had to be socialist and indigenist to avoid the destruction that was violently shaping Europe with the beginning of the Second World War and the establishment of totalitarian regimes, which Rivera found inherent in the history of the European continent. This union between Communism and indigenous movements from which Rivera drew inspiration, came from Zapata, the symbol of the peasant revolution in Latin America, who fought during the Mexican Revolution with the renowned motto “land and freedom”.

Visions of indigenized modernity are present throughout *Pan American Unity*; indeed, in the central panel beneath Coatlicue, Rivera portrayed three times the wood carver Dudley Carter sculpting *The Ram*. Rivera and Carter worked across from each other during the “Art in Action” exhibition at the GGIE and soon became friends. Rivera deeply admired Carter because he turned to purely plastic expression, using primitive materials and tools such as the ax.<sup>78</sup> After living with the Kwaquit and Tlingit tribes of Canada, Carter’s artistic language, as Rivera argued in an interview, was first the result of the assimilation of Indian art, which then became his own personal artistic expression: what Rivera deeply admired about Carter was that he turned to the Americas, to his native roots, for his personal and artistic enrichment instead of sterilely copying

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<sup>77</sup> Belnap, 89.

<sup>78</sup> Puccinelli, *Diego Rivera: The Story of His Mural*, 2-3.

the art of Europe.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, the portrait of Frida Kahlo, notably depicted wearing the traditional Tehuana dress, represents another instance in which an American artist with a rich European background, decidedly turned to her native artistic tradition for inspiration. As Carter embodies the cultural union of the Americas for the North, Kahlo personifies the cultural union of the South. On the left of the central panel, the Yaqui dancers recall Mexican indigenous spirituality, and Mardonio Magaña reinforces Rivera's idea that the creative activity of such artists preserves and continues the visual tradition of ancient native cultures, which for the Mexican muralist are the leading forces for the construction of a truly American, socialist indigenist society.

In *Pan American Unity*, Rivera uses a recurrent iconography that he starts to develop in the 1920s, whose elements are part of his intricate belief system (Fig. 23 and 24). After the Mexican revolution, in many of his works Rivera starts including the most important symbols of national identity and the most suited for the construction of his socialist indigenist vision; the women of Tehuantepec, with their non-conformation to gender roles, are an emblem of America's resistance against imperial European domination, and the Yaqui dancers are a metaphor for the spiritual indigenous assimilation of the natural environment, opposed to the instrumentalization and domination of the landscape by means of technology. Although the present mural can be seen to conform to and promote Pan-Americanism and its economic cooperationist model, its layered iconography instead suggests that America's survival and thriving depended on the inclusion of the native past, represented on the left, rather than the governance by technology depicted on the right.<sup>80</sup> For Rivera, the social change was to be guided by an indigenized modernity, which would have substituted a civilization based on human

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<sup>79</sup> Puccinelli, 2-3.

<sup>80</sup> Belnap, 82-84.

slavery for a new one based on the use of the “slave-machine”, so ending the exploitation of man by man and exerting the power of technology to liberate America’s population.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Rivera and Tibol, *Arte Y Política*, 263.

### 3. The Afterlives of Pan American Unity in the Shadow of Anti-Communism

When the ‘Art in Action’ show and the GGIE closed on September 29, 1940 *Pan American Unity* was not completed yet. It would take an additional two months for Rivera and his two assistants to finish it in the empty exhibition hall: the artist’s public endeavor turned into a rather private performance. During its final months of completion, some controversies arose on the subject matter, especially protests against the inclusion of caricatures of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.<sup>82</sup> The mural was, indeed, destined to be the central piece decorating the three walls of the reading room in the library of the San Francisco Junior College, designed by Pflueger. The original project envisioned by the architect was that of placing the work on the south wall of the library, visible from the outside through a glass wall placed at ground level.<sup>83</sup> However, the plan was never realized. What happened to *Pan American Unity* after its unveiling? Why was it ‘forgotten’? Or was it intentionally neglected during the onset of the Cold War and the great ‘Red Scare’ that gripped the U.S in the late 1940s and early 1950s under McCarthyism?

The official public uncovering on December 1, 1940 was anticipated a few days earlier by a private preview for the city’s social elite on Treasure Island in which the mural’s reception caused different reactions; among others, a local newspaper opined that “(. . .) There will be many who view the work who will wonder why, after it is placed in storage, it is not permitted to

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<sup>82</sup> “Verdict refused on theme of work of art”. *San Bernardino Sun*. Volume 46, 24 August 1940. Retrieved 24 November 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Pflueger to Rivera (April 30, 1940). *City College of San Francisco*, [www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html](http://www.ccsf.edu/en/about-city-college/diego-rivera-mural/DRarchive/letters.html)

remain there. There would be no great loss to the art world if this could happen”.<sup>84</sup> Yet approximately 30,000 visitors came for the public showing, expressing their appreciation for *Pan American Unity*.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, the mural was on view only for these two events before being crated to be then finally installed in the San Francisco Junior College library, yet to be built. The project awaiting the fresco was ambitious: as Pflueger was designing the reading room that would have hosted Rivera’s panels, the artist enthusiastically accepted the commission to enlarge the work of art to create the biggest mural he would have ever paint.<sup>86</sup> The area of the mural to be realized would have covered 3850 square feet with *Pan American Unity* forming only the central portion of a larger mural covering the entire east, south and west walls of the library and having Pan Americanism as its overarching theme.

However, the life of the mural after the GGIE was dramatically different. As the Exposition came to be known as ‘the Forgotten Fair’,<sup>87</sup> similarly *Pan American Unity* did not generate the public discussion Pflueger hoped to achieve by commissioning Rivera, the star of the ‘Art in Action’ show. Being exhibited for a single day and with San Franciscan workers unable to afford the tickets to Treasure Island, Rivera somewhat failed to address the working-class which has always been invoked as the mural’s proper audience.<sup>88</sup> Awaiting to be moved from the GGIE site to the college campus, the panels were temporarily placed in crates in a military hangar on Treasure Island, which was transformed into a U.S Navy base; indeed, with the entry of the U.S into the Second World War in 1941 even the construction of the Library Building was interrupted due to the lack of materials and costs of the war. The project was

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<sup>84</sup> “Should remain in storage”. *Madera Tribune*. Number 159, 27 November 1940. Retrieved 24 November 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Timothy Pflueger papers. *City College of San Francisco*, <http://www.riveramural.org/content/timothy-pflueger-papers>.

<sup>86</sup> Puccinelli, *Diego Rivera: The Story of His Mural*, 5-6.

<sup>87</sup> Poletti and Paiva, *Art Deco*, 199.

<sup>88</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 214.

completely suspended when Pflueger died in 1946, so leaving the destiny of *Pan American Unity* pending. The mural would have been re-installed for view just in 1961.

It was thanks to Pflueger's brother, the architect Milton Pflueger, that interests in Rivera's *Pan American Unity* were revived. The latter was, indeed, commissioned in 1957 to design the performing arts theatre of the City College of San Francisco (CCSF), the old name for the San Francisco Junior College where the mural was destined to go after the GGIE. In that year, which also marked Rivera's death, Milton proposed to the college's Board of Education to install the mural in the lobby of the new campus theatre. Among debates on whether it was appropriate to show the fresco of a committed radical painter in the city's new college, the plan was approved and *Pan American Unity* was finally unveiled in 1961 for its third time, twenty years after its completion, and open to the public.<sup>89</sup> In 1993, the building was re-named the Diego Rivera Theatre in honor of the Mexican artist.<sup>90</sup>

Why, during the twenty years from its unveiling, was *Pan American Unity* not given the prominent position it deserved? The question becomes even more relevant and controversial if considering the importance of Rivera to San Francisco. Although the wall painting scene in the city was already present during the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, it was thanks to the Mexican artist that the leftist radical language entered the public mural sphere, which till then accommodated the demands and desires of private patrons.<sup>91</sup> Rivera, with the two early murals realized in the city, begun and encouraged a dialogue between the public, mural art,

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<sup>89</sup> "Mural History: An Overview." Diego Rivera Mural Project. Accessed November 25, 2018. <http://www.riveramural.org/overview>.

<sup>90</sup> "SFMOMA and City College of San Francisco Partner on Historic Display of Monumental Diego Rivera Mural as Part of Major Exhibition on Rivera's Work in 2020." SFMOMA. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/diego-rivera-mural/>.

<sup>91</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, xviii-xix.

and the left. This heritage is evident in the frescoes of the Coit Tower in 1933, part of the New Deal Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), where different artists strongly expressed their leftist political beliefs in a “Rivera-esque” fashion.<sup>92</sup>

Rivera though was not the only painter who fell into disrepute in the U.S during the late 1940s and early 1950s; for instance, in 1953 the artists Ben Shahn, Alexander Calder and Georgia O’Keeffe were placed under FBI surveillance and that same year Anton Refregier’s WPA mural, produced for the Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco, was fiercely attacked for its Marxist imagery.<sup>93</sup> The disdain toward artworks of more or less explicit political content translated into an official censorship that struck many artists and organizations such as the “Los Angeles City Council, the Dallas Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the American Federation of Art circulating exhibit called "100 American Artists of the Twentieth Century," the Orozco murals at the New School for Social Research, the Diego Rivera murals in Detroit.”<sup>94</sup> An important example of Social Realist art being reviled in the U.S is the Coit Tower and its frescoes realized by twenty-five WPA employees; among them, four artists Victor Arnautoff, John Langley Howard, Clifford Wight, and Bernard Zakheim caused public outrage for the Communist references of their images, especially their inclusion of left-wing periodicals, *The Masses*, *The Daily Worker*, *the Western Worker* and Marx's *Daas Kapital*.<sup>95</sup> Although strongly opposed, the murals were left intact, yet Clifford Wight’s explicit depictions of a hammer and

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<sup>92</sup> Lee, xix.

<sup>93</sup> Atkins, Robert. "A Censorship Time Line." *Art Journal* 50, no. 3 (1991): 35.

<sup>94</sup> David Shapiro, and Cecile Shapiro. "Reading Abstract Expressionism." In *Excerpt from "abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting," Parts*, 338-45. Yale University Press : New Haven, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Gelber, Steven M. "Working to Prosperity: California's New Deal Murals." *California History* 58, no. 2 (1979): 104-106.

sickle and the caption ‘Workers of the World Unite’ were regarded as Communist propaganda; eventually, the tower was closed to the public and the symbols whitewashed.<sup>96</sup>

Even though the 1930s were the “heyday of American Communism”,<sup>97</sup> there was a large popular and institutional dissent towards it; precisely, in the late 1930s the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was formed to investigate alleged subversive activities linked to Fascism or Communism. Before that, in the early 1920s, the so-called Palmer raids arrested more than 5,000 political radicals prosecuted under the anti-subversive laws.<sup>98</sup> Although the Great Depression offered a favorable environment to undermine capitalism and highlight the value of an alternative order, Communism was never favored in the U.S. As the number of adherents to the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) increasingly grew during this period, Roosevelt’s policy suddenly changed after the 1939 treaty between Hitler and Stalin. Following major strikes throughout the country, such as the general strike in San Francisco in 1934, Roosevelt approved a series of legislations aimed at containing the spread of radical organizations; for instance, the Hatch Act (1939) denied federal jobs to members of associations advocating the government’s overthrow, and the Smith Act (1940) required the registration of all non-U.S citizens.<sup>99</sup> This widespread red hunt, which is often referred to as the ‘Great Red Scare’, reached its highpoint in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the Cold War brought with it the possibility to promote a militantly anti-communist politics to avoid any alleged Soviet expansion in the U.S.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Gelber, *Working to Prosperity*, 106.

<sup>97</sup> Haynes, John Earl. *Red Scare or Red Menace?: American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era*. The American Ways Series. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996: 15.

<sup>98</sup> Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace*, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Goldstein, Robert Justin. *Little 'red Scares': Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014. 2014: xv.

<sup>100</sup> Goldstein, *Little 'red Scares'*, xv-xxiii.

This period of U.S history is known as the McCarthy era or McCarthyism and was characterized by widespread fear of agitprop infiltrations. The term derived from the senator Joseph McCarthy, who became identified as the leading anti-Communist and whose series of irresponsible investigations and abuse of power cost him his censure from the Senate and the loss of credibility. The Communist hysteria soon transformed into a cultural Cold War. Though immigration restrictions were already applied in the 1920s, in the 1930s onwards there was the stigmatization of immigrants, homosexuals, black people and, clearly, radical leftists. Any form of dissent from what was considered the standard U.S proper behavior became equated with disloyalty and subsequent persecution.<sup>101</sup> All sorts of ideological weapons were used against those individuals who fell beyond the U.S orthodoxy; hence, certain movies, actors, artists, music, popular children's stories were censored and repeatedly attacked to be Communist propaganda.<sup>102</sup>

A well-known case in the cultural Cold War was the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) covert use of American modern art, especially Abstract Expressionism, to promote a non-figurative art whose freedom of language strongly contrasted with the rigid Socialist Realism of the Soviet Union.<sup>103</sup> The many exhibitions financed in the U.S as well as tours in Western Europe were aimed at presenting Abstract Expressionism as embodying the supposedly openness of the American democracy, in opposition to the totalitarian Stalin's USSR and the official art state propaganda.<sup>104</sup> Starting from the 1970s many scholars have written about the Cold War propaganda of Abstract Expressionism during the emergence of the social history of art, critical

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<sup>101</sup> Sbardellati, John, and Tony Shaw. "Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America." *Pacific Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (2003): 501.

<sup>102</sup> Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace*, 185-187.

<sup>103</sup> Guilbaut and Repensek, *The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America*, 389-393.

<sup>104</sup> Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace*, 184.

of the form of modernism produced in the U.S from the 1940s.<sup>105</sup> Greenberg, and his influential position in the art world, also played a role in shaping the ideological implications behind Abstract Expressionism. He saw in the supposedly gestural violence of some of these artists and the spontaneity of their works, the values of a U.S avant-garde preoccupied with anything but its own form; from his stance, it is reasonable to state that he strove to push art back in its ‘ivory tower’, shunned from the social and propagandistic distortions that artists could end trapped in during the cultural Cold War.

How can all of these be linked to Rivera and his *Pan American Unity*? Indeed, after the 1940 commission in San Francisco, the artist left North America and went back to Mexico City to start painting a new series of frescoes along the corridors of the National Palace. Shortly after Stalin’s death, in 1954 the PCM allowed the return of the muralist into the party.<sup>106</sup> Rivera, thus, represented the perfect target in the age of McCarthyism; his origin, political allegiances, moral beliefs and behaviors created the subversive image par excellence in Red Scare U.S. He was a foreign coming from the revolutionary country of Mexico, in which he played an important social role as a public muralist during the post-revolution period. Though his long-life controversial relationship with the PCM, Rivera was a declared Communist and political activist somewhat between a Bolshevik, a Trotskyite and a Leninist, and his artistic endeavors in the U.S already raised concerns about his radical demonstrations, especially the New York episode. For instance, in 1932 the Mexican artist was commissioned by John Rockefeller to paint a mural for

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<sup>105</sup> Wood, *Varieties of Modernism*, 75.

Amongst some of the earliest writings there are: Max Kozloff, “American Painting During the Cold War,” *Artforum* XI, no. 9 (May 1973): 43-54. Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* XII, no. 10 (June 1974): 39-42. David and Cecile Shapiro, “Abstract Expressionism: The politics of apolitical painting,” *Prospects* 3 ed. Jack Salzman, (1977): 175-214. These can all be found in reprint in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>106</sup> Richardson, *Diego Rivera in Moscow*, 68.

the new Rockefeller Center; yet, when the mural was almost completed Rockefeller asked Rivera to remove Lenin's portrait from the work, but the artist refused to do so and the work was destroyed. Later in 1934, Rivera recreated this controversial fresco in Mexico City, at the Palace of Fine Arts.<sup>107</sup>

Not only was he Mexican and openly Communist, although never a supporter of Stalin, but he also advocated for racial equality in a time when proponents of civil rights and racial integration were deemed pro-Communists.<sup>108</sup> Rivera's *Pan American Unity* is a cry for the creation of a unified American Continent devoid of any discrimination and based on the blend of the indigenous people, whites and blacks, men and women. His political and ideological subversions also came with moral corruption. As it is known that homosexuals were persecuted during the Cold War because considered threats to national security for fear of Soviet contamination, heterosexuals could be similarly suspected if outside the gender norms acceptable in the McCarthy era.<sup>109</sup> Precisely, "marriage was the only proper arena for a healthy sex life",<sup>110</sup> thus this rigid sexual politics excluded any deviations from traditional gender norms such as adultery. Rivera, however, has been married four times and was infamous for his many intercoursés and romances outside the marriages, so that a similar sexual misconduct would have been hardly tolerated.

Moreover, the depoliticization of modern art operated by the U.S State Department and the CIA was strongly opposed by Rivera. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of 'art for art's sake' gained increasing momentum before and after the Second World War, the Mexican muralist always defended the importance and role of art as a weapon in the class struggle. Indeed, as early as

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<sup>107</sup> Rochfort, *The Murals of Diego Rivera*, 69-71.

<sup>108</sup> Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace*, 185-186.

<sup>109</sup> Sbardellati and Shaw, *Booting a Tramp*, 506-507.

<sup>110</sup> Sbardellati and Shaw, 507.

1932, Rivera wrote an article to openly contrast the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ by arguing that, even though this theory was defined a-political, it nonetheless bore with it an “enormous political content- the implication of the superiority of the few”.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, it discredited art that expressed social content while elevating a certain idea “which envelops art, the legend of its intangible, sacrosanct, and mysterious character which makes art aloof and inaccessible to the masses”.<sup>112</sup> Since Rivera thought of muralism as the art form that most spoke to the masses and generated debates against the elitist tradition of easel painting, the cultural tactics used during the Cold War by the U.S government to discredit art with a political content must have seemed horrendous.

These factors, matters of nationality, political kinship and private affairs are the reasons for the neglect of *Pan American Unity* as a radical work of a subversive artist. This seems even more legitimate if considering that the mural was to be exhibited in the library of a major city’s college, exposed to young people who could be easily influenced, or better, ‘infected’. What happened though to the Pan American dream? In the 1930s, also encouraged by Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, the Visual Arts Section of the Pan American Union played a central role in shaping the post-war hemispheric art scene.<sup>113</sup> The rise of Mexican Muralism in the 1920s, as well as other Latin American movements, raised the possibility of American art as an hemispheric phenomenon; this corresponded to cultural diplomatic efforts to increase the contacts of Latin American artists and intellectuals with U.S institutions.<sup>114</sup> The belief that culture and the free circulation of art throughout the hemisphere were central to the theorization

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<sup>111</sup> Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 405.

<sup>112</sup> Harrison and Wood, 405.

<sup>113</sup> Fox, Claire F. *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 2013: 3.

<sup>114</sup> Fox, *Making Art Panamerican*, 3-8.

of a greater American culture declined in the post-war period, when the onset of the Cold War corresponded to a cooling of the enthusiasm for inter-American cultural exchanges.<sup>115</sup>

Yet, the decline of Pan Americanism corresponded with Latin America and the Caribbean's close dealings with Communism in the Cold War. Ties between the USSR and Latin America can be traced back to the late 1890s when the first official political and economic relations were established.<sup>116</sup> However, “the geographical fatalism”, meaning the proximity of the U.S. to Latin America and the economic and political influence the U.S exerted there, was a deterrent for any possibility of a Communist revolution advancement in the area, thus causing little involvement of the Soviet Union.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, with the Cuban revolution and Castro’s radicalization, the Soviets saw the potential of a social revolution in Latin America and, by 1961, their practical involvement started to increase.<sup>118</sup> Soviet support, especially in such countries as Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, was primarily motivated by the URRS aim to isolate the U.S and weaken its aspirations for hegemony in Latin America. The strain of anti-U.S sentiments invading this portion of the hemisphere was capitalized on during the Cold War by the Soviets, who sought opportunities to expand their influence.<sup>119</sup>

After Stalin’s death in 1953 and McCarthy’s censure from the Senate in 1954, with his ultimate death few years later, there was a gradual softening of the red hunt that had gripped North America after the end of the Second World War. This coincided, not without debates, with the decision to re-install *Pan American Unity* in 1961. In the heart of the main campus of the

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<sup>115</sup> Fox, 11.

<sup>116</sup> Richardson, William. "Soviet Policy toward Latin America—A Historical Outline." *World Affairs* 149, no. 2 (1986): 61-66.

<sup>117</sup> Dinerstein, Herbert S. "Soviet Policy in Latin America." *The American Political Science Review* 61, no. 1 (1967): 80-90.

<sup>118</sup> Dinerstein, *Soviet Policy in Latin America*, 83-84.

<sup>119</sup> Reyes, Edmé Dominguez. "Soviet Relations with Central America, the Caribbean, and Members of the Contadora Group." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 481 (1985): 147-58.

CCSF, but quite isolated from the public, the mural's existence in the city has been known to few people therefore not achieving the position of public importance envisioned by its creators. Nevertheless, the revival of the last years has brought to a main project; that is, in 2020 the CCSF in collaboration with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will display a major exhibition of Rivera's works, with *Pan American Unity* as the cornerstone of the whole retrospective. The mural will be installed in the SFMOMA's Roberts Family gallery at street level as part of the museum's free, unticketed space, and visible from the outside through a large glass wall.<sup>120</sup> At the conclusion of the 2020 exhibition, the fresco will return to the CCSF for permanent display.

This major exhibition of Rivera's works and the prominence finally granted to *Pan American Unity* is part of a larger trend, started in the early 2000s, aimed at re-evaluating topics and strands in art history previously reviled. For instance, the art produced under the Soviet Union, formerly dismissed as Communist kitsch and mere propaganda, has become the focus of a number of large exhibitions throughout the world. Socialist Realism was exhibited at the Sackler Center for Arts Education at the Guggenheim Museum during the show *Reflections: Socialist Realism and Russian Art* (2005-2006), at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome with *Realismi Socialisti. Grande Pittura Sovietica 1920-1970* (2011-2012), at Sotheby's auction house in London in a non-commercial exhibition in 2014 called *Soviet Art. Soviet Sport.*, and finally in the U.S with the foundation of the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis in 2002. Mexican muralism is likewise enjoying a favorable revival with a traveling exhibition entitled *México "La Exposición Pendiente" Orozco, Rivera Y Siqueiros*, in the U.S with *Arte Mexicano*.

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<sup>120</sup> Major Exhibition on Rivera's Work in 2020, SFMOMA press release.

*Legacy of the Masters* (2014-2015) in Sacramento and *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950* (2016-2017) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The transformative power of art with which Rivera invested *Pan American Unity*, will be granted the opportunity to be easily admired by San Franciscans (finally even its workers), although in a very different social context than the one Rivera found himself in in 1940: the city now ‘boasts’ the record of being first in California for economic inequality.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kuo, Frederick. “San Francisco Has Become One Huge Metaphor for Economic Inequality in America.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 15 Aug. 2018.

## Conclusions

In *Pan American Unity* Diego Rivera was able to reconcile Mexican nationalism and international Socialism, which in a reductive way can be thought to be the overarching themes of his artistic production. His personal conception of art as fundamentally subversive and as a transformative tool in the construction of a reality truly American, finally emancipated from European colonialism, allowed him to draw from apparently distant aesthetic and ideological inspirations and to synthesize them into a coherent pictorial unity. Although hybridity is usually conceived of and discussed as duality, meaning opposition, in *Pan American Unity* Rivera expressed “the self-consciousness of his transcultural agenda.”<sup>122</sup> An agenda that eventually fell into disrepute when, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, any Communist-related issue became a national threat for the U.S, and revealed the growing incompatibility between Rivera’s insistence of an indigenized modernity and the imposition of a U.S-Anglo model of society. To express the immense cultural diversity that he saw in modern Mexico and all through the American continent, Rivera believed that the medium of the mural was essential because it was rooted in a continuous and shared cultural tradition. *Pan American Unity* is thus the embodiment of Rivera’s politically radical ideology that visualizes the struggle for independence and identity through the impressive variety and complexity of its aesthetic and ideological references.

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<sup>122</sup> Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, 92.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity*. 1940. Fresco composed of ten steel framed sections.

Diego Rivera Theatre (City College of San Francisco, California)



Fig. 2 Original foldout map showing an overview of Treasure Island. Designed by cartographer

Ruth Taylor, 1939-40

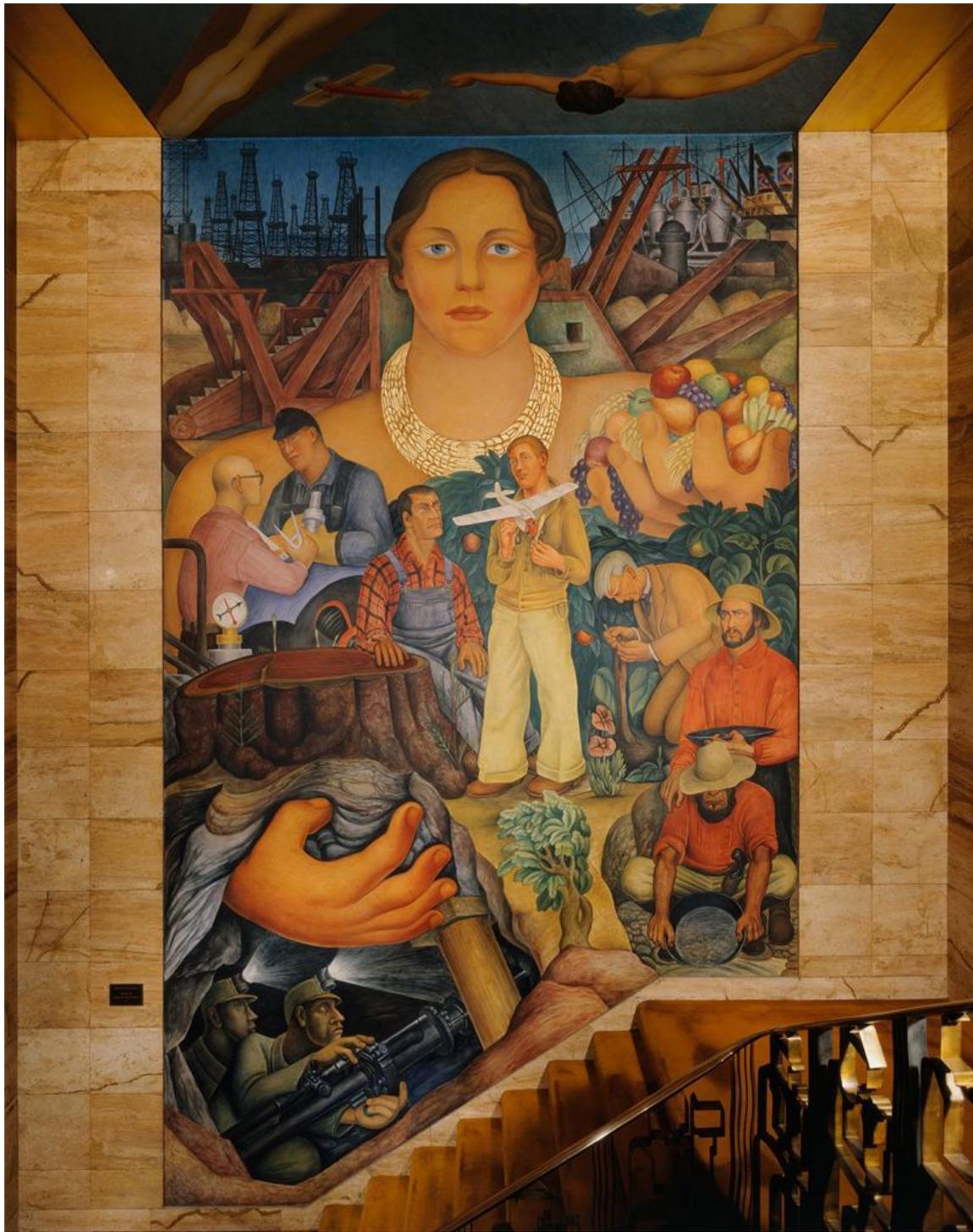


Fig. 3 Diego Rivera, *Allegory of California*. 1930-31. Fresco. City Club of San Francisco in the Stock Exchange Tower



Fig. 4 Miguel Covarrubias, *The Fauna and Flora of the Pacific*. 1939. Lacquer fresco on masonite, from the series of six murals entitled *Pageant of the Pacific*.



Fig. 5 Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City*. 1931. Fresco. San Francisco Art Institute (California)



Fig. 6 Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico: The Aztec World*. West wall. 1929-35. Fresco.

National Palace (Mexico City, Mexico)



Fig. 7 Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico: Mexico Today and Tomorrow*. East wall. 1929-35.

Fresco. National Palace (Mexico City, Mexico)



Fig. 8 Diego Rivera, corridor of the Cortez Palace depicting *The History of Mexico (Cuernavaca and Morelos)*. 1929-30. Fresco. Cuernavaca (Mexico)



Fig. 9 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* (panel 3). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera Theatre  
(City College of San Francisco, California)

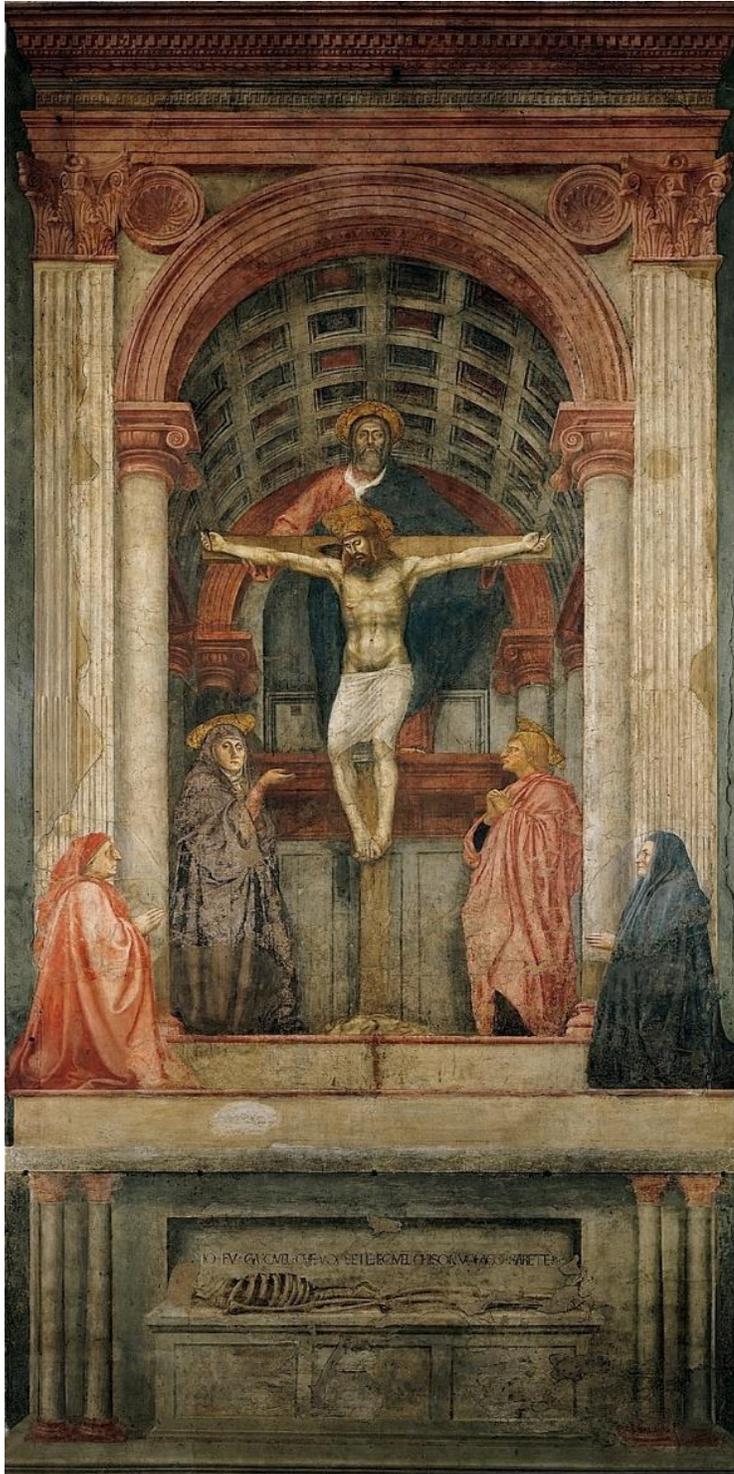


Fig. 10 Masaccio, Trinità. 1427. Fresco, Santa Maria Novella (Florence, Italy)

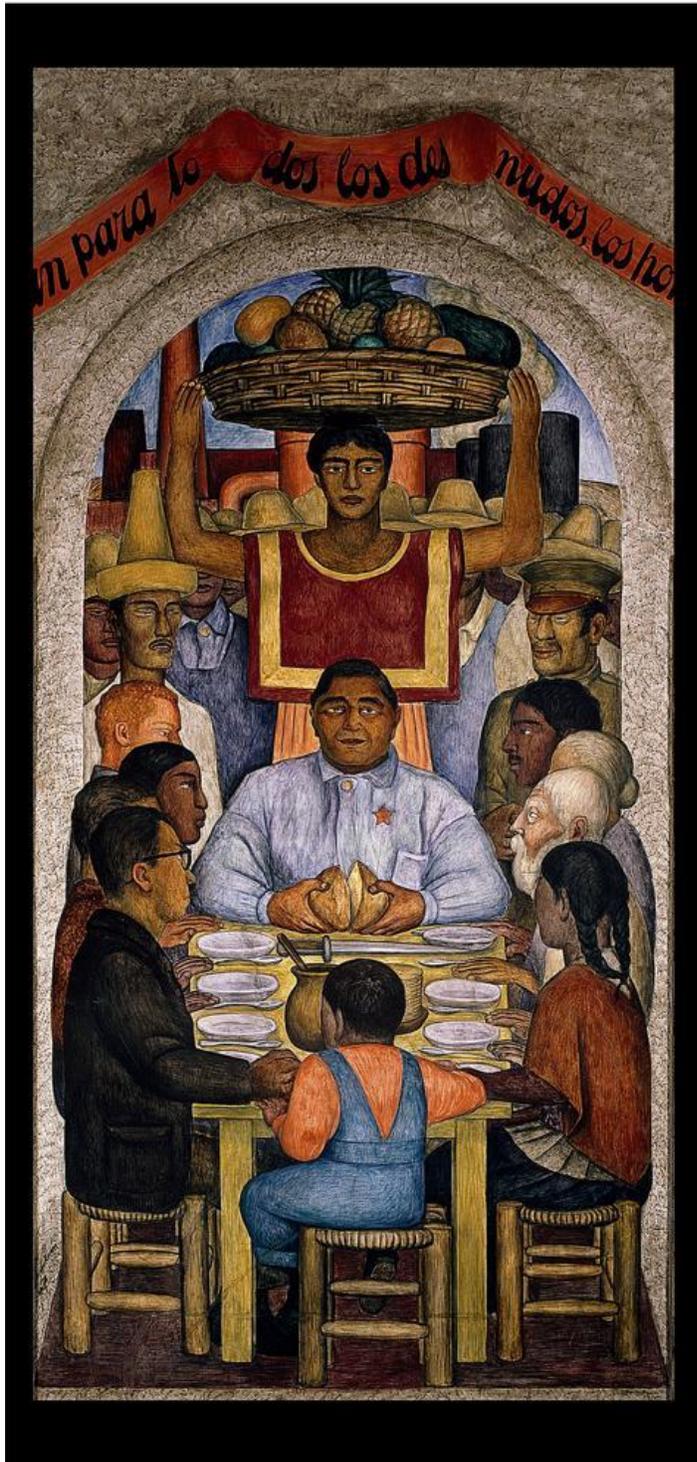


Fig. 11 Diego Rivera, Our Bread. 1928. Fresco, Ministry of Education (Mexico City, Mexico)

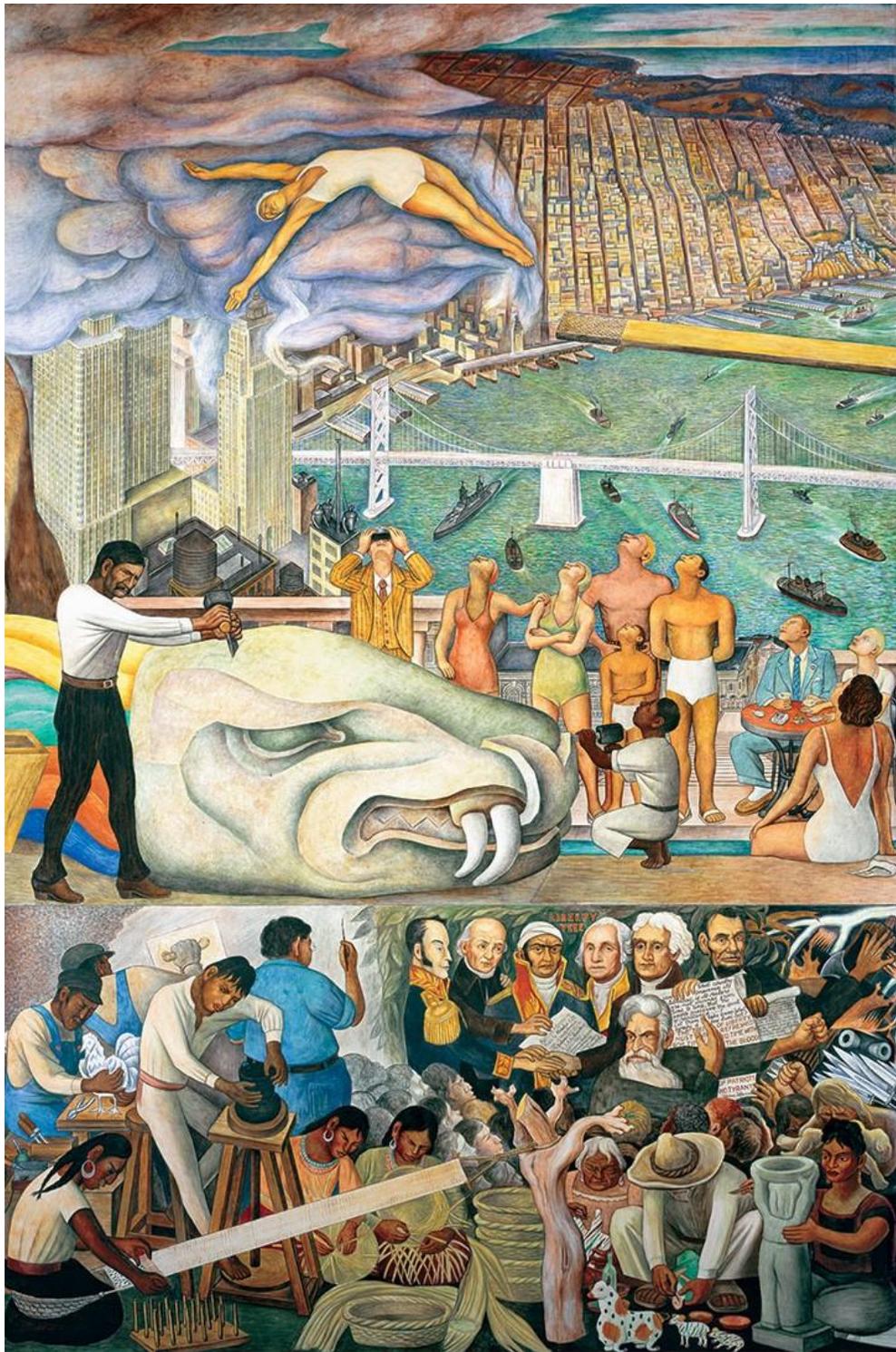


Fig. 12 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* (panel 2). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera Theatre (City College of San Francisco, California)



Fig. 13 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* (panel 4). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera  
Theatre (City College of San Francisco, California)



Fig. 14 Alexandr Rodchenko, *Untitled* (Diver from the Museum series Portfolio; Number 1).

1934. Gelatin silver print. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Texas, U.S.A)



Fig. 15 Gustav Klucis, *Untitled* (Postcard for the All Union Spartakiada Sporting Event). 1928.

Offset lithograph. Museum of Modern Art (New York City, U.S.A)



Fig. 16 Timothy Pflueger, *Four Fifty Sutter Building*. 1928-29. Steel and concrete. San Francisco (California)



Fig. 17 Diego Rivera, *Emiliano Zapata*. 1928. Fresco. Ministry of Education (Mexico City, Mexico)

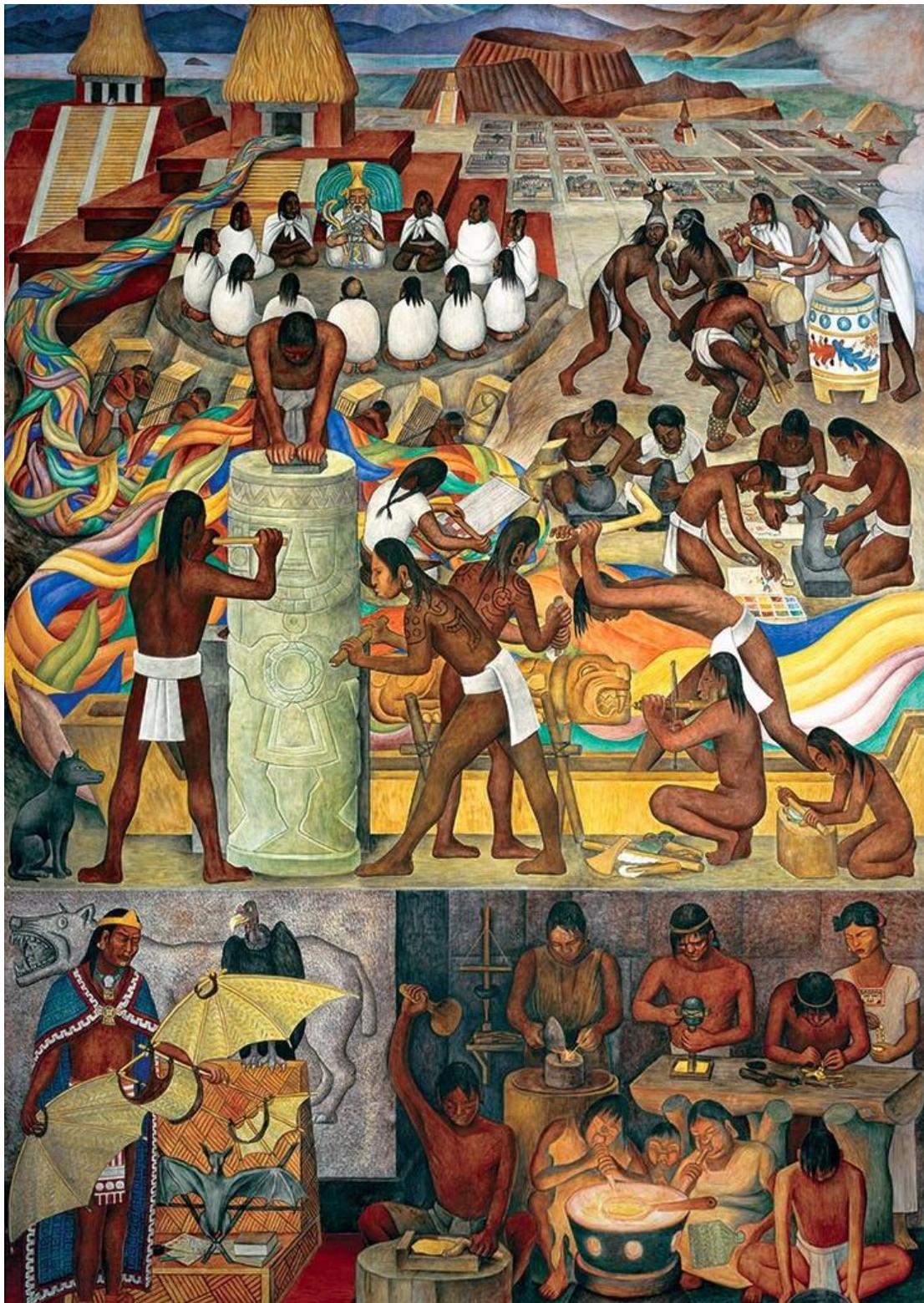


Fig. 18 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* (panel 1). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera

Theatre (City College of San Francisco, California)



Fig. 19 Diego Rivera, Pan American Unity (panel 5). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera Theatre  
(City College of San Francisco, California)



Fig. 19 Mask of Plumed Serpent, detail from the Temple of Quetzalcoatl on the sculpted decorations of the West façade. ca. 250-300, Mexico



Fig. 20 Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* (detail of panel 2). 1940. Fresco. Diego Rivera Theatre (City College of San Francisco, California)

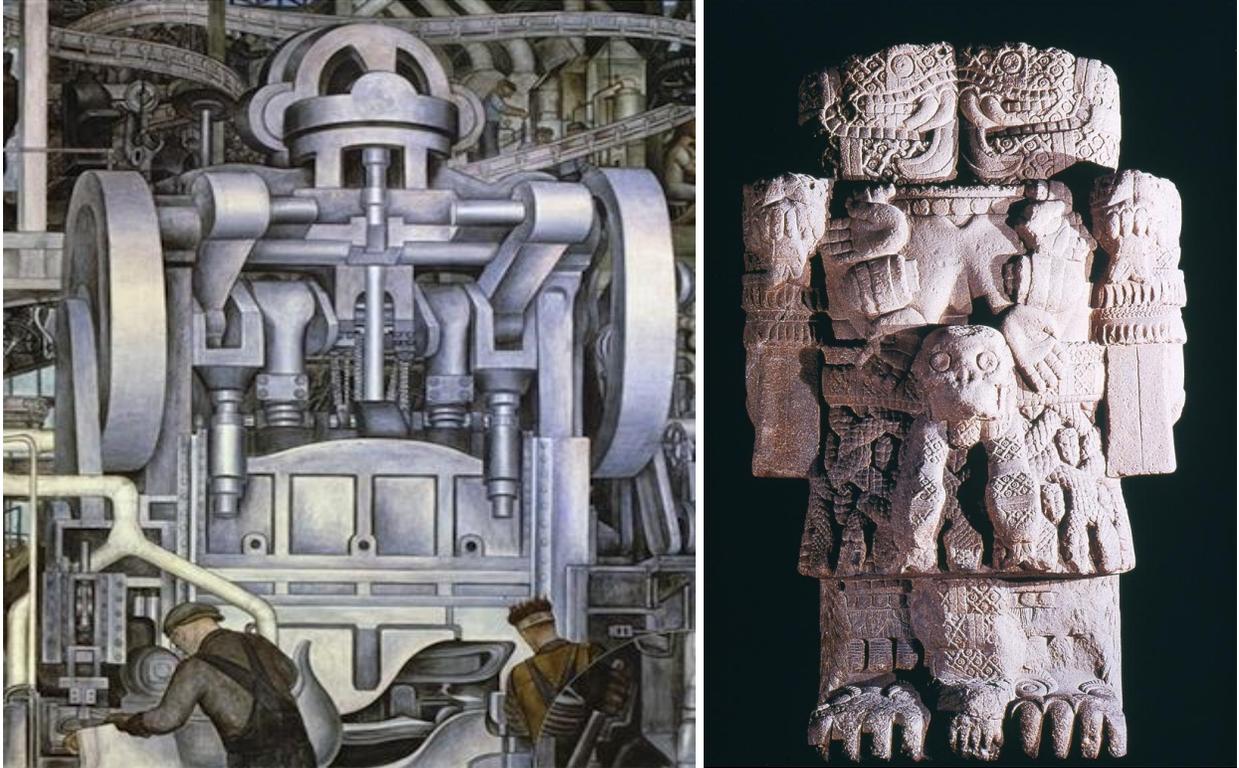


Fig. 21 On the left: Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Murals* (detail of stamping press resembling Aztec goddess Coatlicue on south wall). 1932-33. Fresco. Detroit Institute of Arts (Detroit, Michigan)

On the right: Monumental sculpture of Coatlicue, c.1500. Basalt. Found on the edge of Plaza Mayor in Mexico City during excavations, now at the Museum of Anthropology (Mexico)



Fig. 22 Diego Rivera, *Tehuanas* (detail of north wall). 1923-24. Fresco. Secretariat of Public Education (Mexico City, Mexico)



Fig. 23 Diego Rivera, *The Dance of the Deer* (detail of east wall). 1928. Fresco. Secretariat of Public Education (Mexico City, Mexico)

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