



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1999 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from the Olmec to Modern Times

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## **Diego Rivera: A Man and His Murals**

Curriculum Unit 99.02.06  
by Susan Norwood

### **Introduction**

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Why should we study Diego Rivera? After all he was controversial as well as a multi-faceted individual. Why should we teach our students about this artist? The answer is simply that Rivera was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. He was a legend in his own time. The effect of his art can be compared to that of Michelangelo. We can learn about history and ourselves through the murals created by Diego Rivera whose dream was to be the artist of the Americas.

In this curriculum unit students will learn about the artist Diego Rivera, the Mexican mural movement, New Deal Programs, and finally, murals in New Haven, Connecticut. The students will learn how mural art can teach a wide audience. The students will demonstrate what they have learned by creating a mural in their school. This will be an interdisciplinary unit that will be taught by the fourth grade teacher, the art teacher and the media specialist. Computer and research skills will be developed and the reading of biographies will be used as a research tool. The length of the unit will be one month. Several field trips will be planned in order to view some local murals in neighborhood schools.

### **Diego Rivera**

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In December of 1886 in Guanajuato, a silver-mining town in central Mexico, twins, Diego Maria Rivera and Carlos Maria Rivera were born on the eighth of December. Two years later Carlos died and in 1891 a sister was born. The family moved to Mexico City in 1893. Both of Diego Rivera's parents were school teachers. By the age of two, Diego was already drawing and his father set up a studio for him before he could even read. At age ten Diego Rivera decided to become an artist and by the age of eleven he began to attend evening courses at the National School of Art, the Academy of San Carlos, in Mexico City. At his father's request, Diego enrolled in the Military College. This lasted two weeks. Afterwards, he attended San Carlos as a full-time student. There his teachers included many famous 19th century Mexican artists. However, Diego said he learned about the art of his own country from a teacher he found himself, Jose Posada. Posada owned a small printing shop near the academy and Diego often stopped to watch Jose Posada working on his drawings and prints. Diego thought these drawings were so full of life and energy that they might jump off the page at

any moment. (1)

In 1902 Diego Rivera was unhappy with the new art director at the San Carlos academy. Because of this he decided to leave the school where he had been a student for six years. Sixteen year old Diego ventured into the Mexican countryside to seek his artistic fortune. He painted houses, streets, churches, Indians, volcanoes, all of which was part of the unique beauty of Mexico. For a while he was happy painting the Mexican landscape. People began to acclaim him as an artist in his own right. But although he wanted to believe them , Diego was not content. He became restless and dissatisfied with his work. He felt that there was more to being a painter than he had so far mastered. He knew that in Europe there were great painters and the work of the old masters from whom he could learn. Rivera thought that perhaps he could raise money for his passage by selling his paintings but he knew he would still need money to support himself.

Diego's father was at that time an inspector in the National Department of Public Health, a job that took him to many parts of Mexico. On one of his trips to the state of Vera Cruz, he showed the governor, Teodoro Dehesa, some of his son's paintings. The governor was very impressed and when he met with Diego, he offered him a scholarship to study in Europe. He told Diego that he was sure that he would be an honor to his country. Diego hastily arranged an exhibit of his work in Mexico city and sold all fifteen of his paintings, enough for a passage to Europe. (2)

## Diego Rivera In Europe

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At age twenty, in 1907, Rivera left Mexico and arrived in Barcelona, Spain, to study with the Spanish painter Chicharro who was regarded as the leader of the younger generation of Spanish painters. During the two years Rivera studied with Chicharro, he produced a large number of paintings, many of which he sent home to Mexico and some which he sent directly to Governor Dehesa to justify the scholarship he was receiving. Dehesa was convinced more than ever that his judgment had been correct as it related to Diego Rivera's artistic skills.

In spite of the apparent success Rivera was experiencing , he still felt that there was something missing in his art that technical growth alone could not supply. There was still that something he had seen in Posada's shop and in the powerful work of Aztec architecture that seemed to elude him. (3)

He left Spain for a long tour in France, Belgium, Holland and England hoping to solve a problem he couldn't really define. He admired greatly the work of Breughel, Hogarth and Goya. He wished that his work could provoke the intense feeling got when he looked at their work. In Paris he went to a shop where he saw the work of newer painters who called themselves Cubists. He saw Picasso's Harlequin and paintings by Braque and Derain. Rivera spent hours in Paris looking at paintings by Cezanne. (4) Rivera would become a part of this Parisian art world for a decade. He would argue, study, paint, learn so much and do so much; yet at the end of ten years he still felt that something was absent from his work. His paintings seemed only to be enjoyed by well-educated people who could afford to buy them for their homes. He thought that art should be enjoyed by everyone--especially poor,working people. (5) He was developing a growing interest in the masses and began to deepen his understanding of the folk art and ancient masterpieces of his native land. Art, Rivera felt , was never so isolated from life as when he was there in Europe.

Even after settling in Paris, Rivera returned every year to Spain to paint--often in the style of cubists such as

Cezanne, Picasso, El Greco and Modigliani. During the years from 1913 to 1918, Rivera devoted himself almost entirely to cubism and found himself getting caught up in his search for new truths. Among his works during this period were *Two Women on a Balcony* 1914, *Landscape Majorca* 1914, *Portrait of Ramon Gomez* 1915, *Still Life* 1917, *Eiffel Tower* 1916, and *The Telegraph Pole* 1917. In all of these paintings and indeed of the cubist style as a whole it appeared that the artists took apart their subjects and created new objects of their own creation.

The subject of his Ramon Gomez portrait, Don Ramon, was thrilled at Rivera's skill as a cubist painter. He said that Rivera had "not bottled me and has left me free and stretched out... In the round eye is synthesized the moment of luminous expression, and in the long shut eye, the moment of comprehension, This portrait is my most stupendous portrait. Its colors stir me." (6)

After Rivera gave up cubist portraits, he still employed the same techniques: allowing the sitter freedom of motion, chatting with him, letting him get on with his work (Don Ramon worked on a manuscript), and seeming hardly to look at his subject at all. Bertram Wolfe quoted a magazine article by Katherine Anne Porter in which Rivera himself said that although he often quarreled with Picasso, he acknowledged his gratitude for what he had learned from him. He said that Picasso was the only modern painter who formed a style undeniably new. But Diego Rivera felt that cubism was too intellectual, more concerned with technical skill than with the natural fluidity of design and that is why, he said, that cubism gradually disappeared from his work. (7) This departure from cubism becomes quite apparent in his *Edge of the Forest*, *The Aqueduct*, and *Landscape in Arcachon* all done in 1918. But, although Picasso's presence has disappeared from these works, the influence of Cezanne is quite noticeable. (8)

During this period Rivera met Elie Faure, a doctor and a lover of the arts. Rivera's 1918 portrait of Elie Faure seems to emphasize the man's simplicity and at the same time his deep thoughtfulness. The time spent in making *Portrait of Elie Faure* was the foundation of a lifelong friendship between the two men. Faure rekindled Rivera's enthusiasm for murals and prompted him to set off for Italy to study the works of the masters. (9) There he saw frescoes that had been painted hundreds of years earlier. They were usually painted on the walls of churches so that everyone in a town or city could enjoy them. He knew then that he would return to Mexico to make paintings for all the people to enjoy. In the frescoes of Italy he saw how the need for a popular art capable of appealing to the masses--telling them a story--could be met.

## **Return to Mexico**

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After a fourteen year absence from Mexico, Rivera decided to return home and participate in what we now know as the Mexican Renaissance. At this time the new minister of public education, Jose Vasconcelos, initiated a national program of popular education which included adding mural art to public buildings. In 1921, he offered Rivera an indoor wall at the National Preparatory School, part of the University of Mexico. Just before Rivera began work on his first mural, he and other artists traveled to the Yucatan to study Mayan ruins at Uxmal and Chichen Itza. They also visited the Isthmus of Tehautepec. Here Rivera made numerous sketches of the indigenous people. Rivera spent months figuring out the dimensions and proportions of the wall, making sketches and experimenting with the best way to fuse colors to the wall. After his preliminary work he spent a year creating the mural on a surface of almost a thousand square feet. Rivera called the mural *Creation*. The mural contained figures that were over twelve feet high. These figures were in harmony with the huge pipe organ that surrounded them. However, Rivera was unhappy with the work; he felt that it

was too Italian in technique and lacked any trace of the beauty of Mexico. In spite of how Rivera felt, the mural caused great excitement. Although some made fun of the painting, no one could ignore it. (10)

The Mexican art movement was really underway and Rivera, even before he completed *Creation*, was negotiating for a fresco series in the Education Building. At the same time David Siqueiros and Jose Orozco, among others, had been awarded other walls in the Preparatory School. Almost every painter in Mexico was being underwritten by the Education Department. It was the beginning of a "Mexican Renaissance". Word began to spread throughout the continent and many painters from other countries came to Mexico to study and work in the Mexican art movement. They came to paint walls and be a part of the great fresco revival. Isamu Noquchi, Pablo O'Higgins and George Biddle were three of the well known artists who were involved in the Mexican mural movement.

In 1923 Diego Rivera began a series of 124 frescoes on the courtyard walls of the Ministry of Public Education. The building was three stories high, two city blocks long and one block wide. It took Rivera over four years to complete the work. During this time, as busy as he was, Rivera also completed thirty-nine frescoes at the Agricultural School in Chapingo. But it was his work at the Education Building that made him famous throughout the Western world and really began a revival of mural painting. The work is divided into two parts - the Court of Labor, which depicts the industrial and agricultural labors of the Mexican people as well as their art, sculpture, dance, music, poetry, and drama; and the Court of Fiesta, which depicts popular festivals and folk ballads. In addition to his murals in the Ministry of Public Education and the Agricultural School at Chapingo, Diego Rivera created beautiful murals at Cuernavaca, the National Palace, the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City and the Hotel Reforma banquet hall. All of these were painted over a span of fifteen years. Diego Rivera felt that his murals in the Education Building constituted the entire history of Mexican civilization and social structure.

In 1929 Rivera was appointed the head of the Department of Plastic Crafts at the Ministry of Education, a position which he held until 1938. With the help of Jose Orozco and David Siqueiros, Rivera created the Labor Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors. Rivera and his assistants painted 235 individual fresco panels covering 15,000 square feet. These panels depicted his political views of cultural, historical and popular Mexico. Rivera received what would be comparable to two USA dollars for a mural painting. He supplemented his income with easel paintings which he probably sold to American tourists.

The three artists devoted themselves to painting large scale murals. They wanted to put art in the public domain. The artists wanted the victory of the Revolution to be told to the entire public. This devotion led to a movement that lasted about fifty years. The Mexican mural movement is one of the greatest artistic achievements of the twentieth century. The themes of the murals were of Mexican society and revolution. The murals often told historical stories that began with an Aztec past, leading to the glorious revolutionary present. This was the first time that the story was told this way, and the past was interpreted in light of modern politics. The murals reflected artistic influences such as surrealism and cubism. The mural paintings were created in the fresco technique and were done in harmony with the surrounding architecture. They were usually done in bright, bold colors with strong imagery.

The mural movement did have predecessors. It can be linked to Jose Posada, the printmaker known for his socio-political "calaveras" (prints using skulls and skeletons). As we already know, Posada had a great influence on Rivera.

## Diego Rivera in America

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Diego Rivera was attracted to the United States most of all by the land. Its skyscrapers were to him great testimonials to the powers of construction and works of incomparable beauty. He was enchanted by its steel bridges and concrete highways. "Your engineers are your great artists and these highways are the most beautiful things I have seen in your beautiful country," he once told his friend Bertram Wolfe. "Out of them and the machine will issue the style of tomorrow."(11) In 1931, when he sailed into New York harbor at dawn on a winter morning , a reporter recorded part of an interview with Rivera in this fashion:

It was seven o'clock in the morning as the ship rode up the bay . Diego Rivera studied the fog, the red sun rising over Brooklyn, the lights in the Manhattan towers, the shadows; he pointed to the tugboats , the ferries, to a gang of riveters at work on a dock; he waved his great arms and declared, "Here it is -- the might , the power, the energy, the sadness, the glory, the youthfulness of our land ." He looked at the Equitable Tower on lower Manhattan and said that the architects, whether they know it or not, were inspired in that design by the same feeling which prompted the ancient people of Yucatan in the building of their temples. (12)

In 1929, Ralph Stackpole, a San Francisco sculptor who had known Rivera in Paris, returned from Mexico greatly excited. He brought two of his pictures, one of which was a portrait of a Mexican woman holding an infant in her arms, which he gave to his friend William Gerstle, president of the San Francisco Art commission. Gerstle did not like the gift but was too embarrassed to say so. He thought the subject seemed to be a characterless Mexican woman and her infant. The woman , he felt , was heavy , coarse featured and huge-limbed. The child in her lap looked like a rather large cloth doll loosely stuffed with flour. He noted that only three colors had been used by the painter: a dismal brown , a washed-out lilac, and several shades of much faded overall blue. He thought it was a pretty poor painting, but to please his friend Stackpole, he made a place for the painting on his studio wall next to a Matisse and some other works. Much to his surprise , Gerstle could not take his eyes off the painting and after a few days his reaction to the picture changed completely. The simplicity of the construction seemed to come from a skill he had not at first suspected, The colors began to seem right . There was, he noticed , a settled, earthy quality - -the subject , style, design and mood proved to be in solid harmony. He began to feel that Rivera's painting had more power and beauty than any of his other pictures. He began to share his friends' enthusiasm for Rivera's work and agreed that arrangements should be made for him to paint in San Francisco. (13) William Gerstle offered Rivera fifteen hundred dollars to paint a mural on a small wall in the California School of Fine Arts. Diego Rivera accepted the contract but four years would go by before he executed the painting. When he finally tackled the job, he thought the 120 square foot wall was too small so he choose the largest and finest wall in the building and painted his mural over 1200 square feet with out taking any more money than in his original contract.

In 1932 Nelson Rockefeller, after seeing some of Rivera's Detroit murals , asked if he would be interested in painting a mural in the Radio corporation Arts Building in Rockefeller Center. Interestingly, Picasso and Matisse were also asked. Both turned down the invitation and Rivera himself rejected the offer saying that " Ten years ago I would have accepted your kind invitation with pleasure. It would have helped me to start.... but since then I have worked enough and I am known enough to ask of each one who wants my work that he ask for it on my value. No 'competition'- I am no more at that point." Rockefeller finally persuaded Rivera to accept without competition. (14)

In March of 1933, Rivera moved into the RCA building and began to paint. Although he employed others to prepare the walls, grind his colors and make tracings of his sketches, he always did the actual painting

himself. His work progressed smoothly and he received a note from Rockefeller indicating that he had heard that Rivera was making rapid progress and perhaps the mural could be completed by the first of May when the building was to open. However, another letter from Rockefeller showed his concern over Rivera including a portrait of the Russian revolutionary leader Lenin in his mural. Nelson Rockefeller told Rivera that while the portrait was beautifully painted, it might easily offend a great many people. He asked the painter to remove Lenin's face and substitute it with some unknown man. (15)

Rivera's assistants told him that if he removed the head of Lenin, they would go on strike. Rivera agreed with his assistants and told Rockefeller that Lenin's head would stay but that he would be glad to add the head of some great American leader such as Lincoln to another section of the mural. He must have guessed that his suggestion would not solve the problem and had photographs of the work taken secretly. Sure enough, Rockefeller said the mural would remain covered, hidden from sight, for an indefinite time but pledged that it would not be destroyed. But a few months later the mural was smashed to powder.

Rivera went on to paint his "Portrait of America" murals in the New Workers School in New York City. The work symbolized the heroes of American history and included such figures as Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, Emerson and Thoreau, Walt Whitman and John Brown. It was said by Rivera's friend, Bertram Wolfe, that there was no example- even by an American painter-- that comes anywhere near giving so complete and penetrating a portrayal of our people, our history, and our land. (16)

In December of 1933 Diego Rivera left the United States to return to Mexico. Among his major works in a country that allowed him freedom of expression--his native Mexico--were Man Controller of the Universe, in the Palace of Fine Arts, Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico, in the corridor of the National Palace and his autobiographical fresco Dream of a Sunday

Afternoon in the Alameda, in the Hotel Del Prado. The mural depicts historical scenes as well as Rivera as a boy and Posada, who greatly influenced him, standing by his side.

## **The New Deal and Murals in New Haven, Connecticut**

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In the 1930's America experienced what is now known as the Great Depression. There were over four hundred thousand American people out of work. Many relief programs were initiated to provide work for the unemployed. It was President Herbert Hoover who asked the Senate to approve money to provide immediate unemployment relief through work on the highways, waterways, and public buildings.

The United States government's first investment in cultural development was marked by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Cultural program. The New Deal programs were influenced by the ideas created by the Mexican Muralist Movement. The Federal Arts Program was first suggested to FDR by George Biddle, who studied painting with Diego Rivera and was impressed by the Mexican mural movement. He suggested in a letter to FDR that a group of muralists work on the new Justice Department Building in Washington D.C. Biddle's suggestion helped to develop the Public Works of Art Project. The PWAP was part of the Civil Work Administration. The CWA was an experimental federal work relief program. The PWAP employed artists to create murals on public buildings such as schools orphanages, libraries and post offices. The PWAP ended in April of 1934 along with the CWA.

There were over 5,000 artists involved throughout the nation in the W.P.A. Artists were paid between twenty-three to thirty -five dollars a week for their work. Many of the artists such as Milton Avery, Stuart Davis, Mark Rothko, Willem De Kooning and Jackson Pollack went on to achieve world-wide recognition.

In New Haven, Connecticut, the Federal Art Program was headed by Theodore Sizer, the associate director for the Yale Art Gallery. Without pay he managed the direction of the program while still carrying on his work at Yale. The Federal Art Project, is a collective term for a series of programs under various New Deal Agencies. In Connecticut, the Federal Art Project employed dozens of artists and produced hundreds of works of art. There were 16,000 square feet of murals painted in Connecticut. Most of the murals had regional or historical themes and were painted in the style of 1930's realism. Federal funds paid for most of the labor and materials. Local government or civic groups were required to contribute to the effort. The Board of Education was the most active sponsor in New Haven. (17)

## Endnotes

1. Mike Venezia, Diego Rivera .(Chicago: Childrens Press,1994) 14. 2. Bertram D. Wolfe, Diego Rivera His Life and Times.( New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939) 36. 3. Wolfe,50. 4. Ernestine Evans, The Frescoes of Diego Rivera. ( New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company,1929) 23. 5. Venezia,18. 6. Wolfe, 98. 7. Katherine Anne Porter, The Arts ( January,1925) 21-23. 8. Instituto Nacional De Bellas Artes and the The Cleveland Museum of Art, Diego Rivera Art and Revolution .( Landucci Editors: Mexico City,1999) 147. 9. Instituto Nacional De Bellas Artes and the The Cleveland Museum of Art, 149. 10. Wolfe,314. 11. Wolfe, 314. 12. As cited in Wolfe, 314. New York Times (December 14,1931) 13. Wolfe,317. 14. Wolfe,361. 15. Wolfe,363. Wolfe describes this account from his own position as Rivera's friend. 16. Wolfe,363. A personal account told to Wolfe. 17. Annabelle, Simon Cahn, Journal of the Colony of the New Haven Historical Society. ( New Haven: Journal of the New Haven Colony Historical Society) 4-5.

## Glossary

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**Biography** A written account of a person's life. **Cubism** Cubism is an abstract style of art that uses geometric shapes and often provides several views of the same subject.

**Europe** One of the seven continents.

**Fresco** A fresco is the art of applying paint to a wet plaster surface. **Italy** A country in Southern Europe. Capital is Rome. **Mexico** A country in North America. Capital is Mexico City. **Mural** A mural is large painting on a wall in or outside of a building or other structure. A mural may tell a story or be historical in nature. **Picasso** Pablo Picasso was an artist from Spain. He was well known for his cubist style of painting. **WPA Works Projects Administration**.

## Lesson Plans

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### Biographies

Student Objectives:

1. To teach students the meaning of biographies.

2. To locate biographies in the school library media center.

Activities:

1. Read aloud to the students the following biographies.

Diego by Jeanette Winter

Diego Rivera by Mike Venezia

Diego Rivera by Jan Glieter

2. Discuss with the students the similarities of the previously listed books.

Are there any similarities? If so, what are they? What kinds of information can you find in a biography? How is a biography different from a fictional story about someone?

3. Have the students locate the biographies in their school media center. Discuss with the students the various biographies. How many are about artists? Presidents? Scientist? Sports figures? Have the students list the different kinds of people that the biographies are about.

4. From information found in a biography located in the school media center, have the students write a paragraph about a person

5. Have the students interview on another and write a brief biography on that person.

## **Cubism**

Student Objective:

1. To be able to identify and create a work of art in the style of cubism.

2. The students will become familiar with cubist paintings done by Diego Rivera, Paul Cezanne, and Pablo Picasso.

Activities:

1. Students will view and compare art work done by Cezanne, Picasso, and Rivera.

2. Using a still life have the students draw or paint it in the style of cubism.

## **Letter Writing**

Student Objectives:

1. Students will become familiar with the Work Progress Administration and its mural projects done in New Haven,Ct.

2. The students will view a variety of murals done in New Haven Public Schools( Troup Middle School and Fair Haven Middle School), New Haven Public Library and the Westville Post Office.



3. Students will learn how to write a letter.

Activities:

1. After studying about the W.P.A and the murals in New Haven, schedule several field trips to view the murals. Discuss with students the subjects of the various murals. Discuss why they painted the subjects and who was it they were depicting. Discuss the condition of the murals.
2. Have the students write letters to each other. The letters should be “friendly” letters reporting on what they thought of the murals they viewed.
3. Have the students write a letter to the Mayor of the city persuading him to preserve any existing murals in the school system.

## **Mural**

The mural will be a culminating project for the students.

Student Objective:

1. The students will create a permanent mural in the school media center. The mural will be created after they have studied and viewed murals done by Diego Rivera and murals done in local schools during the W.P.A.

Activity:

1. Have the students decide as a group what the subject of their mural be be. Will it teach others something? Will it represent something that has occurred and should be remembered? What do you want the viewer to learn or feel after they view the mural?
2. Plan mural with preliminary sketches. Sketch the outline of the mural on the designated surface.
3. Plan the colors to be used. Plan how they and the mural fit into the architecture of the room where the mural is located.
4. Paint the mural.

## **Bibliography for Teachers**

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