

Art for the People

Dena Clamage

The factories of Detroit are the guts of the city. They are a central, common reality in the lives of Detroit people, whether people are working a 10-hour day on the line or just watching from their office windows as factory chimneys fill the air with thick, black smoke.

Most public art in Detroit tries to ignore this centrality. Factories are not pretty places. For the people who work in the factories life is not a pretty matter. So “The Spirit of Detroit” is a jolly green giant.

But there is one notable exception to this art blackout of Detroit reality. In the Detroit Art Institute in a large inner court, there is a mural painted by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera. Sinuous miles of painted conveyor belt winds its way along the walls past monstrous machines, gears, wheels, snaking across the mural with no visible end. Scattered along the tasks, straining to push machines, holding objects at all times like appendages to the giant machine which dominates the mural—and the men.

When working people look at the mural, they see their own lives reflected back at them. On the job, they may see only a small part of the total operation which oppresses them. But when they stand in the middle of the Institute court surrounded by four walls filled with the raw power and forcefulness of the machines and their smallness in comparison, when they see the workers in the murals straining their muscles to move heavy objects while suit-clad wearing foremen and engineers with muscles like water stand around smugly observing, their life experience becomes clearer.

This is what is so powerful about Rivera’s work; his art is revolutionary.

When people think about revolutionary or socialist art, they often get hung up on the conception of revolutionary art which existed thirty years ago. Confusing revolutionary art with a socialist realism trip, they picture the old posters with stereotypical workers, stern, determined and faceless holding aloft the red banner of the people’s heroic martyrs.

Diego Rivera was a socialist artist who felt there were other ways in which artists serve the revolution.

He realized that a revolutionary artist must be involved in the making of the revolution.

Art is never “objective” or “detached.” The artist must make a choice as to which class his art will serve, the oppressors or the oppressed; those who own and control or those who are owned and controlled.

This choice is not an abstraction. It is not a question of intellectual principles. The artist who remains in his studio is irrelevant. Art which is painted for a private collection serves only the people who have money to pay for it.

For many years Rivera studied in Europe, steeping himself in cubism, which he considered a revolutionary innovation in art. But in his own words, “When it dawned on me that all this innovation had little to do with real life, I would surrender all the glory and acclaim cubism had brought me for a way in art truer to my inmost feelings.”

These “inmost” feelings centered around a deep love for the people of Mexico, Rivera’s native land, and grew into a commitment to the poor and oppressed people of the world. This love did not remain on an abstracted level. Besides painting, Rivera participated in the Mexican revolution against Diaz, smuggling ammunition in the bottom of his paint-box to underground revolutionary fighters and even participating in an abortive plot to assassinate the dictator.

At all times Rivera's political actions demonstrated his clear identification with the class of the oppressed and the willingness to participate in the struggle of this class against their oppressors.

To make his art part of this struggle, Rivera rejected the abstract impressionism of Europe and sought out both a style and a content which could communicate with and move the people, without moralism, without superficial propaganda, without preaching.

In his art he attempted to reflect the lives of the people, to produce an art which working people, peasants, poor people, real people could identify with. His art starts with the experience of the people, clarifies this experience and returns it back to the people in easily accessible form.

Most of Rivera's murals will not be found in museums. They are painted in public places so that people can constantly confront Rivera's vision of what their life is and what it could be.

Rivera wrote in his autobiography, "I foresaw a new society in which the bourgeoisie would vanish and their taste, served by the subtleties of cubism, futurism, dadaism, constructivism, surrealism and the like would no longer monopolize the functions of art...The new art would not be a museum or gallery art but an art the people would have access to in places they frequented in their daily life—post offices, schools, theaters, railroad stations, public building. And so logically...I arrived at mural painting."

Even in the art forms of his murals, Rivera demonstrated his commitment to the liberation of the people of Mexico and other colonized people. Rivera was aware of the sense of inferiority which Mexicans have felt since the Spanish conquest. Spanish colonization, like French colonization of the Algerians, like American colonization of Afro-Americans, destroyed the sense of the cultural and historical worth of Mexico. This was an important tool in breaking the passivity and with it a sense of the futility of resistance.

Rivera refused to submit to this feeling of inferiority. He studied the pre-Conquest art of Mexico and used elements of this in all his paintings in color, forms and composition. Art can do more than reflect and clarify people's lives in order to move them to struggle. Art itself can be a form of resistance to oppression, a refusal, a very part of the revolutionary struggle.

When the Detroit murals were opened to the public in 1933, they aroused the fury of rich matrons, sterile connoisseurs of art and businessmen. At the first public display of the murals, attended only by the rich patrons of art who get their money from the labor of Detroit workers, enraged women in evening gowns descended on Rivera demanding to know why he had painted the factories. "They are so ugly. Why couldn't you choose something beautiful to paint?"

But the next day a delegation of workers from Detroit's factories came to view the murals and saw their lives in them. For Rivera, their approval completely outweighed the anger of the Detroit automobile nobility. After all, the murals were intended for them in the first place.

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