



INSTITUTO DE INVESTIGACIONES
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FONDO	BEATRIZ DE LA FUENTE
SERIE	007: ESCRITOS ACADÉMICOS
CAJA	022
EXP.	095
DOC.	002
FOJAS	201532
FECHA (S)	s/f

DIEGO RIVERA AND PRE-HISPANIC ART

By Beatriz de la Fuente

IN HIS WRITINGS, Diego Rivera touches upon a series of concepts which support what I am about to propose. The artist, referring to Rembrandt, writes that "he discovers a basis of profound humanity," () and Rivera also says that he conceives of "art as living and not dead matter." ()

Elsewhere, the muralist states his opinion of the ancient Mexican cultures. He says:

It is a profound and direct expression of a pure art related to the life that produced it, and it is not obscured by niggardly cults or corrupt theories. It is produced totally and absolutely by the natural sourced of art, by human feeling and experience combined with an ample sense of beauty. ()

Now then, in order to properly celebrate the centennial of Diego Rivera's birth, the Detroit Institute of Arts has organized both a symposium dedicated to his painting and a generous retrospective. As a participant in the symposium, I have been asked to speak on "Diego Rivera and Pre-Hispanic Art;" this is a topic which refers to a relationship that is self-evident and based on the exploration of humanity as the origin of art.

As a matter of fact, it is not possible to approach to works of the Mexican painter--especially those which portray aspects of pre-Hispanic life--without being dazzled by the comprehension of one basic fact: Man, for Rivera, is the center, the axis around which the ancient universe, now deceased, revolved. He understood that in the indigenous Mexican, in the man that fulfilled his daily tasks, fundamental human values were to be appreciated.

Rivera found in the art of this universe evidence for the presence of man and the supreme value of his existence. In the light of this understanding, I will proceed with my paper.

Great art is above tastes, fads and even traditions. This occurs in Rivera's painting in the same way that it does in the art of our indigenous ancestors. Both are characterized by a deep human relationship established with the viewer. This is why those who look upon these works of art as alive and changing will find through these relationships something that definitely belongs to them, in spite of the natural distance created by the differences of space and time.

Thus did Rivera see himself as reflecting the human values of that "pure art related to the life which produced it," and this is how those of us who approach Rivera's painting experience the definitive encounter with pre-Hispanic man.

Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921 after fourteen years in Europe during which he studied and experimented in numerous artistic currents and styles, not only the Parisian avant-gard and the art of the Netherlands, but also the primitive and renaissance art of Italy. With these studies and experiments he had already formed an open-minded spirit which enabled him to apprehend his own artistic roots. His search for the meaning of the indigenous art of our past was decisive but gradual. The steps of this approach can be perceived clearly while observing the temporal evolution of his murals.

When he carried out the first murals at the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Board of Public Education), visions of pre-Hispan-

ic life are not as yet a strong presence. The image of Xochipilli, the famous Aztec sculpture, for example, appears transfigured and artificially situated outside its normal habitat. He also shows a lack of stylistic unity. One can see the grisaille which represents the monumental image of a figure in the process of being sculpted, yet the face of the classic Huastecan sculpture has Teotihuacan traits.

It is important to note that in Rivera's painting, whether it be in the large coloristic compositions or in the grisailles which remind us of bas-relief techniques, one does not find copies of either pre-Hispanic styles or forms. In other words: Riveran murals are not elaborated along the lines of the Teotihuacan murals, the Mayan reliefs, or the Aztec sculptures. When Rivera went through his Cubist period he was a Cubist, and the same thing happened when he experimented with other European styles. But when Rivera painted the pre-Hispanic world it became part and parcel of the Riveran style which emerged unmistakably "from the natural sources of art, from human sentiment and experience."

His real communion with the pre-Hispanic world came about when he began painting the walls of the Palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca, and those of the National Palace in Mexico City. Previously, in search of the man that made that world, Rivera examined with penetrating eyes all the pre-Hispanic art he could find: clay vessels; jade, stone and terracota sculptures; gold pieces; shells and feathers; mural paintings. He examined some of the original codices and copies of those which are no longer in our country.

It is there that he discovered the fundamentals of the "profound humanity" that, beneath it all, was his.

He also read Sahagún, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and Durán very carefully. Years later, when he returned to paint the corridor of the National Palace in 1942, and the Hospital de la Raza in 1954, Rivera possibly already had the chance to read the first translations by Angel Ma. Garibay of Nahuatl literature. In this way, through that live entity which is art, he came to possess the world of our ancestors; he became part of it and, in a perfect symbiosis, he saw himself as belonging to this ancestral humanism.

Now then, Rivera basically takes three large topics from that world: the battles, the daily chores upon which the sense of human life is based, and the images of the gods. He also uses a myriad of other images that serve as background and complement the principal themes: pyramids, temples and other edifices, symbols and signs taken from codices and sculptures, divers archaeological objects and other bits of knowledge gleaned from his readings. Ignoring the latter aspects, I shall only touch upon the three fundamental topics.

The battles are of different sorts. In some, the natives struggle against the conquistadors, as in the Palce of Cortés and in the central mural of the National Palace stairwell; in another, the natives wage combat among themselves, as in the lower part of the right section of the same stairwell. It may possibly have to do with a "florid war."

Stanton L. Catlin's enthusiastic study of the Palace of Cortés

murals is quite precise as to the pre-Hispanic and Colonial sources used by Rivera. Among them are the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, which dates from the middle of the sixteenth century; the Matrícula de tributos, dating from before the Spanish conquest, and the Florentino, Matritense and Primeros memoriales codices belonging to Bernardino Sahagún, which the artist consulted in Francisco del Paso y Troncoso's 1905 edition.

The Battle of Cuernavaca occurred in the Spring of 1521 when Cortés, with his army of Spaniards, Tlaxcaltecs and Texcocans prepared to lay siege to Tenochtitlan and to take the Aztec capital. Bernal Díaz del Castillo narrates the aforementioned Battle of Cuernavaca:

The next day we took the road for a much better and larger town named Coadlabaca (at the present time we usually alter the spelling and call it Cuernavaca), and it was garrisoned by many warriors both Mexican and Native, and was very strong on account of the Barranca more than eight fathoms deep, with running water at the bottom, but the volume of water is small. However, they make the place into a stronghold and there was now way of entering for horses except by two bridges which had already been broken down. This protection was sufficient to prevent our forcing an entrance so we fought with them from across the stream and ravine, and they shot many arrows and lances at us and hurled stones from their slings, so that they fell thicker than hail." ()

In the Relación de la conquista of 1528, possibly the oldest document written in Nahuatl, there is a brief mention of this historic moment:

Eighty days later they went to Huaxtepec and Cuahnahuac (Cuernavaca) and from there they attacked Xochimilco. A great many Tlatelolcans died in the battle." ()

The last skirmishes between Mexicans and Spaniards, rendered in the lower part of the central mural of the National Palace stairwell, remind us of the Cantos de guerra (War Cantos), thanks

to the image of Cuauhtémoc and the figure of the eagle--symbol of Tenochtitlan:

Collection of Mexican Cantos

Proud of itself
 Is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.
 Here no one fears to die in war.
 This is our glory.
 This is your command,
 O giver of Life!
 Keep this in mind, O Princes.
 Do not forget it.
 Who could conquer Tenochtitlan?
 Who could shake the foundation of heavens?
 Through our arrows,
 Through our shields,
 The city exists.
 Mexico-Tenochtitlan remains.

In the exact center of the main mural Rivera painted an enormous eagle resting on a nopal-cactus, and from whose beak descends the sign of water and fire. This representation is taken from the posterior section of the Teocalli of the Sacred War. In the Mexica migration legend, Huitzilopochtli told his people that they should settle where an eagle should alight on a nopal which emerges from a lake. The water-fire sign--in Nahuatl atl tlachinolli, or tleuatl tlachinolli, according to Sahagún--

Was said when a great war or pestilence occurred. They said: Divine liquid and fire have overcome us, have swept over us. This means pestilence or war itself." ()

The battles in which the ancient Mexicans fought are evoked by Rivera as an intensely human testimony of those peoples, our ancestors, who suffered the maximum tragedy: the destruction of the very foundations of their culture. In the battle of the Palace^a of Cortés and in that of the National Palace, Rivera depicted the physical and spiritual reality of the indigenous peoples. He painted them as men with their own features, with their own garb

and the arms which they used in combat, rising to the occasion upon seeing their ancestral ways of life being threatened by strangers.

The paintings that take the topic of daily life into account occupy, for the most part, the corridor sections of the National Palace, and are divided into two: the grisailles of the lower portion which suggest bas-relief in stone due to their treatment of form, and those of the upper portion, of various lengths, which are brilliantly colored scenes, luxurious in their almost infinite variety of tones and shades.

The grisailles essentially repeat the topics of the larger sections: daily undertakings. The differences between the lower and higher sections are on a pictorial, coloristic and formal order.

In the Market of Tlatelolco one can see how Rivera enjoyed not missing a single detail, in very much the same way Bernal Díaz del Castillo did. Díaz was particularly eloquent as to the great importance that commerce must have had in the pre-Hispanic world:

When we arrived at the great market place, called Tlatelolco, we were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that it was maintained. for we had never seen such a thing before... Each kind of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed with the dealers in gold, silver, and precious stones, feathers, mantles, and embroidered goods... Next there were other traders who sold great pieces of cloth and cotton, and articles of twisted thread, and there were cacahuateros who sold cacao... In another part there were skins of tigers and lions... Then every sort of pottery made in a thousand different forms, from great water jars to little jugs, these also had a place to themselves..." ()

This scene brings to mind other market texts, specifically those of Sahagún's informants apropos of the functions and meaning of commerce and the marketplaces. In the tianquiztli, for

example, the business transactions took place:

Thus we let you see
Thus we give you Mexico:
Ambar lip rings,
Earcaps of Quetzal plume,
Canes of colored inlays,
Fans made of pheasant feathers.
Our capes,
Mantles of knotted thread,
Linen of knotted thread.
All this will be our property
Our acquisition,
Our fame as men...

This is why we struggle,
It will be something only our own. ()

In pre-Columbian commerce--one of pre-Hispanic man's indispensable activities destined to the acquisition and distribution of the fruit of his labors--their are valuable elements which allow us to comprehend the implications of this cultural institution within a truly human context.

In the grisailles of the lower part of the market, there are corn sowers, collectors of chile, tomato, squash, potato, sweet potato and beans, cotton pickers, spinners and weavers, amate bark removers, paper makers and medicine men. These are all daily activities which are depicted in different ways in the other sections of the corridor. The medicine men are also workers, and the artist will once again take up the topic at the Hospital de la Raza and at the Teatro de los Insurgentes as a sample of his admiration and respect for health conservation.

Several Nahua documents enlighten us as to the meaning of some of these activities. Thus, the sowing of corn, the cereal of the New World, was for our ancestors a source of myths which expound on their origin. The following comes from the Legend of the Suns:

Thus (the gods) said once more:
 "What will (men) eat, O gods?
 Let the corn descend, our sustenance!"
 ()

And corn not only became our sustenance, but "flesh of our flesh,"
tonacáyotl.

In the mural called Cultura purépecha--which today we would call Culturas de Occidente (Western Cultures), a more adequate designation--the dye works and the painters stand out. In relation to the former, in the Códice matritense of the Royal Academy, there is a text of one of Sahagún's informants which is quite well known for the depth of its concepts:

Tlahcuilo: The Painter

The good painter is a Toltec, an artis;
 He creates with red and black ink,
 With black water...

The good painter is wise,
 God is in his heart.
 He puts divinity into things;
 He converses with his own heart.

He knows the colors, he applies them and shades them;
 He draws feet and faces;
 He puts in the shadows, he achieves perfection.
 He paints the colors of all the flowers,
 As if he were a Toltec. ()

These very same informants spoke of the feather workers and the smelters who were represented in the mural known as Cultura Mixteca:

Amantécatl: The Feather Artist

He is a whole, he has a face and a heart.

The good feather artist is skillful,
 Is a master of himself; it is his duty
 To humanize the desires of the people.
 He works with feathers,
 Chooses them and arranges them,
 Paints them with different colors,
 Joins them together. ()

And about goldsmiths:

Goldsmiths

Here is told
How a work was cast
By the smiths of precious metals.
They designed, created, sketched it
With charcoal and wax, in order
To cast the precious metal,
The yellow or the white;
Thus they began their works.

If they began a figure of a living thing,
If they began the figure of an animal,
They searched only for the similarity;
They imitated life
So that the image they sought
Would appear in the metal,
Whatever the artist makes
Is an image of reality;
He seeks its true appearance ()

According to the aforesaid, Rivera paints pre-Hispanic man carrying out his daily activities because in this way the artist encounters the real human being; whether he be taming nature or creating art, he thus attains his physical sustenance and spiritual well-being. Man fulfills his profound human destiny through these actions.

The third fundamental topic that Rivera incorporates into his murals is that of the images of gods. The divinities, because of their significance, are closely related to the handiworks of man who associates himself with the gods in order to make possible a harmonious universal unity.

First I will deal with the humanized image of the Quetzalcóatl god which presides over the México prehispánico mural, located in the National Palace stairwell. He is the benefactor and tutelary god of the Toltecs who carried out the arts and handicrafts that he himself taught them. According to Sahagún:

This Quetzalcóatl they considered as a god: he was thought as a god; he was prayed to in older times there at Tula... And the Toltecs, his vassals, were highly skilled. Nothing was difficult when they did it, when they cut the green stone and cast gold, and made still other works of the craftsmen of the feather works. Very highly skilled were they. Indeed these proceeded from Quetzalcóatl, all the craftworks, the learning."
()

In the other National Palace mural, called Cultura huasteca-- even though it depicts a landscape of chinampas (floating gardens) with a volcano in the background, suggesting a Tenochtitlan panorama--towards the right one can see the image of a goddess of corn and of fertility taken from the Borbonic Codex. According to a distinguished Aztecologist, this is a mixture of Chicomecóatl, the calendar name of this particular goddess, and Teteoinnan, or Toci, the mother of the gods, our grandmother, mother Earth. The tutelary image reinforces the contents of the scene: the growing of corn and the products that can be derived from this crop. ()

The deities painted by Rivera refer to the supernatural, the relationship between man and divinity; this is why the Riveran paintings give special meaning to the human handiworks wthat are carried out in communion with the gods, allowing the works to stand out in this way. It is a matter of reproducing myths or past beliefs which are inextricably bound up in human life; and for this very same reason they are a far cry from the "niggardly cults and corrupt theories." Yet in none of these cases does the artist try to impress with his archaeological erudition.

The fundamental topics of the pre-Hispanic world in Rivera's mural paintings--whether they be battles, their struggle against invading imperial forces, the daily handiworks of man, the foun-

dation of his free dignity, the images of gods, or the human faculty for becoming part of the world's unity--are all a living testimony to the artist's encounter with his ancestors and with those values which define them as such.

According to these values, Rivera is not only an artist, he who designs and draws, he who prepares and applies colors and deifies matter in his heart. He, along with his paintings, also brings to memory the ideal image of the Nahuatl wiseman:

His are the black and red ink, his are the illustrated manuscripts.

He is the path, the true way for others.

He directs people and things; he is a guide in human affairs.

He applies his light to the world.

He is a serious man.

Thanks to him people humanize their will and receive a strict education. ()

That is to say, through art he achieves the supreme object of human activity; to form man and guide him toward his perfect plenitude; this means education, the guidance of his experience and sentiment; and he achieves it through the powers that his "ample sense of beauty" grants him.

When Nancy Jones invited me to participate in this symposium, with the great tragedy that struck Mexico after the earthquakes of September 1985 in mind, she said: "We feel that the Diego Rivera retrospective now has an additional dimension of importance, for this exhibition of Mexico's greatest 20th century artist can play a role in the spiritual recuperation of her people. The exhibition will now be dedicated to the victims of the earthquake .. and to the indomitable spirit of Mexico and the creative genius of the Mexican people."

Moved by these words which reflect the noblest of sentiments toward our country, in the name of my people I give thanks for this showing of genuine human solidarity. And in conclusion, I shall repeat the words that Miguel León Portilla, well-known Mexican historian, pronounced shortly after the fatal occurrences: "Right here, where today we see roofless houses and where pain has a free hand, there was also a splendor of jade when the city, with its palaces, temples, alamedas and forests, reverberated in the sunlight. We who love this city need and want to believe in the prophecy of the wise lord of the Mexicas: "As long as the world exists, the glory and fame of México-Tenochtitlan will never end."