

Rivera in Hot Water



Artist and Propagandist

Diego Rivera believes artists should paint what the workers and peasants want.

SUPPOSE AN AMERICAN PAINTER were to place a portrait of John D. Rockefeller on the walls of a Soviet public building.

Would Soviet Russia applaud?

Would artist admirers organize marches of protest if the work was condemned?

Diego Rivera's mural for the Rockefeller Center Building was found to contain a portrait of Lenin and the Rockefeller interests demurred to the extent of holding up the completion of the mural and ending the contract of the artist with payment in full.

The integrity of art is thus assailed, according to Rivera and his supporters. There is implied no criticism of the Mexican artist's work, according to the Rockefeller interests. But a portrait of Lenin displayed on the walls of a public building in America, "might very easily offend a great number of people," Mr. Nelson A. Rockefeller wrote to Mr. Rivera, and he added:

"As much as I dislike to do so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face now appears.

"You know how enthusiastic I am about the work which you have been doing and that to date we have in no way restricted you in either subject or treatment. I am sure you will understand our feeling in this situation and we will greatly appreciate your making the suggested substitution."

THE head of Lenin was included in the original sketch, and in the drawings in line made on the wall at the beginning of the work, so Mr. Rivera stated in reply to Mr. Rockefeller's letter, and he offered his explanation of the meaning of the fresco and his willingness to make certain changes. Thus, as the correspondence appears in the press:

"I understand quite thoroughly the point of view concerning the business affairs of a commercial public building, altho I am sure that that class of person who is capable of being offended by the portrait of a deceased great man, would feel offended, given such a mentality, by the entire conception of my painting. Therefore, rather than mutilate the conception, I should prefer the physical destruction of the conception in its entirety, but conserving, at least, its integrity.

"In speaking of the integrity of the conception I do not refer only to the logical structure of the painting, but also to its plastic structure.

Rivera

"I should like, as far as possible, to find an acceptable solution to the problem you raise, and suggest that I could change the sector which shows society people playing bridge and dancing and put in its place, in perfect balance with the Lenin portion, a figure of some great American historical leader, such as Lincoln, who symbolizes the unification of the country and the abolition of slavery, surrounded by John Brown, Nat Turner, William Lloyd Garrison or Wendell Phillips and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and perhaps some scientific figure like McCormick, inventor of the McCormick reaper, which aided in the victory of the anti-slavery forces by providing sufficient wheat to sustain the Northern armies.

"I am sure that the solution I propose will entirely clarify the historical meaning of the figure of a leader as represented by Lenin and Lincoln, and no one will be able to object to them without objecting to the most fundamental feelings of human love and solidarity and the constructive social force represented by such men. Also it will clarify the general meaning of the painting."

CONTROVERSY, centering round his bold and brilliant-colored murals, is no new thing to Mr. Rivera, says the *New York Evening Post*. "On two continents, and in three countries he has faced opposition to his art and to the caustic criticism it expresses of a world that has both exploitation and oppression in it." People of his own blood have been his enemies, as this article points out:

"He has faced it and gone on, this huge 'mestizo' with his Indian face, his curling mane of hair, his tinge of Communism, and his outspoken enmity toward the rich and powerful of all ages, to paint with undiminished gusto the works that he considers 'useful' in the advance of civilization.

"Long ago, in Spain, when his first one-man show was given at Madrid, the police were called to guard his paintings from an angry crowd, which felt that it was ridiculed.

"In 1927, when he completed his satiric frescoes of Mexican history in the patio of the Ministry of Education Building in Mexico City, his friends patrolled the place with pistols, lest his more active critics scrape from the stone the paint that he had fused upon it with a blow-torch.

"Two years later, one of his assistants was employed to patch up the damage done after the patrolling ceased.

"Destruction of these murals, baked as they are on solid stone, is virtually impossible. But, large holes were gouged in them and streaks of dirt and paint and whitewash laid across Rivera's colors.

"Last month, in more polite Detroit, Rivera's murals in the Institute of Arts aroused as hearty if less physically expressed dislike.

"The Rev. H. Ralph Higgins, senior curate of St. Paul's Cathedral, demanded the removal of one panel, declaring that it caricatured the Holy Family, putting the Virgin in a nurse's uniform and representing Joseph as a doctor with a vaccine squirt.

"William Bradley, City Councilman, declared the paintings should be whitewashed over as 'a travesty on the spirit of Detroit,' which 'completely ignores the cultural and spiritual aspects of the city.'

"Dr. George Herman Derry, president of Marygrove College in Detroit, called Rivera's murals 'a heartless hoax on his capitalist employer, Edsel Ford,' and 'a Communist manifesto.'

"But Mr. Ford himself showed no resentment. He paid Rivera for the work, and it remains, despite the criticism."

BUT Mr. Rivera is not a "formal Communist":

"True, he was once a member of the party and stood high in its councils. It is true, too, that Russia honored him and paid him for his decoration of the hall of its Industrial School and for a course of lectures he delivered back in 1929.

"But, as he explained himself, Communism, like the Rockefeller Center, has ejected him.

"'I am in a curious position,' he declared, when the protests in Detroit were at their heights. 'The official Communist party of this country has expelled me from membership, and now the conservative element attacks me.'