

MURALS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS:
NELSON ROCKEFELLER-DIEGO RIVERA CLASH AND MAKING OF THE
US ART CULTURE DURING THE 1930's

A Master's Thesis

By
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İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY
ANKARA

September 2013

To My Parents....

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Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

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in

THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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September 2013

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines part of the US art culture, more specifically the transformation it underwent during the 1930's through the case study, Nelson Rockefeller-Diego Rivera clash. This clash has such an importance in the US history as it triggered the questions of function in art in the US. The study mainly argues that by triggering these questions, Rockefeller-Rivera clash and Rivera himself contributed to the change in the perception of art work in the US during New Deal. They contributed to the emergence of federal programs which not only offered work relief for the unemployed artists but also motivated the poverty-stricken American nation and

injected a “cultural nationalism” as the Historian Harris states¹. More and more examples of artwork began to address social issues and went against the notion of “art for art’s sake.” The clash was also instrumental in organizing American painters and depicting them the advantage of federal funding over patronage.

This research also demonstrates the culturally symbiotic relation between the US and Mexican cultures during 1933 through art.

Conclusively, it brings a new approach to Rivera-Rockefeller clash, which was regarded to be a morbid phenomenon. The contribution of the clash to the change in the perception of American art, which ended up turning into “actionable” art during the New Deal, was remarkable. This type of art reached out more American people and became democratized to some extent.

Keywords: Diego Rivera-Nelson Rockefeller Clash, Mexican Art, US Art, New Deal Art, Mural Painting, Federal Art Project, 1930’s

¹ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.151.

ÖZET

MURAL SANATI KELİMELEERDEN DAHA SESLİ KONUSUR: NELSON ROCKEFELLER-DIEGO RIVERA ANLAŞMAZLIĞI VE 1930’LU YILLARDA AMERİKAN SANAT ANLAYIŞININ GELİŞİMİ

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Bu çalışma, Amerikan sanat kültürünün bir bölümünü, özellikle bu sanat kültürünün 1930’lu yıllarda geçirdiği dönüşümü Nelson Rockefeller ve Diego Rivera arasında geçen anlaşmazlık üzerinden incelemektedir. Bu olay; sanatın işlevinin veya amacının olup olamayacağı gibi soruları gündeme getirdiği için Amerikan tarihinde büyük önem teşkil etmektedir. Bu çalışma temelde Rockefeller- Rivera çatışması ve Rivera’nın görüşlerinin, ABD’de sanata bakış açısının değişiminde önemli katkıları olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu sanat anlayışı Yeni Düzen sürecinde birçok işsiz sanatçıya istihdam sağlamasının yanı sıra içerdiği mesajlarla çöküşe, ekonomik buhrana uğramış Amerikan halkını tarihçi Harris’in de dile getirdiği gibi “kültürel nasyonalizmle”² motive etmeyi amaçlamış ve sanat, sanat içindir görüşüne karşı

² Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.151.

ıkarak sosyal olayları da dile getirmiştir. Yařanan anlařmazlık o dnemde Amerika’da sanatın devlet tarafından fonlanmasının zel řirketler veya kiřilerce fonlanmasına oranla daha avantajlı olduėunu gstermekte etkili olmuřtur.

Ayrıca bu alıřma kapsamında sanat zerinden ABD ile Meksika arasında kltrel aıdan simbiyotik etkileřimleri grmekteyiz.

Sonu olarak bu alıřma marazi bir olay olarak grlen Rockefeller- Rivera anlařmazlıėına, bu olayın Amerikan sanat anlayıřının deėiřimindeki katkısını ortaya koyarak yeni bir bakıř aısı getirmektedir. Yeni Dzen srecinde Rockefeller-Rivera anlařmazlıėının Amerika’da sanat anlayıřının “bir davayı savunarak, harekete geiren” sanata dnřmesindeki katkısı kayda deėerdir. Deėiřen sanat anlayıřı daha fazla Amerikalıya ulařarak belli lde demokratikleřmiřtir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Diego Rivera- Nelson Rockefeller Anlařmazlıėı, Meksika Sanatı, Amerikan Sanatı, Yeni Dzen Sanatı, Mural Sanatı, Federal Sanat Projesi, FDR, 1930’lar

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Cradle Will Rock (1999) was the movie that introduced me to the clash between Diego Rivera and Nelson Rockefeller. Until that time, I had no idea what this controversy was all about and the more I became curious, the more I researched about it.

The movie depicted the 1930's during the Great Depression and it chronicled the events on the process of 1937 musical *The Cradle Will Rock's* production. The movie contained images of destruction of Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller for the RCA Building (1933-1934). The synopsis of the event was very simple although it led to serious consequences. Rockefeller wanted to place a mural on the ground floor of Rockefeller Center. There were so many painters from Pablo Picasso to Henri Matisse whom Nelson Rockefeller, a member of the Rockefeller family, considered to include in the project. At the end, he decided to commission Diego Rivera, a renowned, leftist Mexican muralist. The controversy started with Rivera's drawing Lenin in one of the portions of his painting. Many newspapers of the time, both Mexican and American,

carried this event to their headlines. The event had such an impact on the American society that new discussions burgeoned about the function of art and artist in the US. This was a sensitive topic as it involved race, communism and the core ideologies of the US people.

This thesis looks at the impact that Rivera-Rockefeller clash had on the approach to art in the US. It mainly argues that this clash influenced the way people perceived art. The clash also demonstrated the sharp distinction between the patronage and state funding of art. With federal funding, artists had the opportunity to work comparatively more freely than they did under patronage. As the historian Jane De Hart Mathews notes WPA artists were free of subscriptions as to the subject matter and style.³ The clash with Rivera and Rockefeller demonstrated the whole world that under patronage, an art work would be destroyed. There was no legal protection of an artwork in the US at that time. Federal funding was a getaway for the artists as they had more opportunities for employment. Having seen the clash and getting more opportunities, they were even protesting the patrons of art as the American Society of Painters did when the clash broke out. By chronicling all these contributions, the thesis foregrounds the significance of this clash although most of the historians depicted it as a morbid phenomenon.

As far as the change in perception is concerned, after the clash, more examples of artwork started to cater to people from all walks of life. Murals became an indispensable piece of artwork that reflected messages, ideologies of many different American lives. They continued to project American lives and disseminate messages during New Deal. The discussion generated by Rivera-Rockefeller clash contributed to a message-oriented, democratized art form in the US. It influenced

³ Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy" *The Journal of American History* vol.62 no.2 (Sept. 1975) p.334.

important American artists like George Biddle who sent a letter to FDR talking about how Mexican artists were having a great impact on Mexican society. In that aspect, the thesis concludes that this clash was not a simple dispute but a significant motive if not the main triggering force for a change in the perception of the US art culture during the 1930's.

While many scholars have analyzed the issue with a conventional perspective depicting a morbid clash that included questions of race, class and so on, this thesis offers a fresh interpretation concerning the clash and its transformative consequences. It is not a simple, destructive case about racial and class differences. In fact, it is a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted issue which includes traditions, societies, artistic perceptions and personal characteristics of the people involved in this very clash. There are so many factors contributing to this clash and this thesis aims to bring an all-inclusive approach while offering a detailed account of the making of this clash and its contribution to the New Deal US art culture.

Various scholars from all over the world have picked certain but not holistic angles to approach the issue. Yet, they were simplistic and totalizing in their interpretations. Historian Irene Herner de Larrea chose the aspect of “communism versus the US” while evaluating the crisis. She noted, “It is not by chance that Rivera chose the US as the place to paint his Marxist glorification. Was not the US the most industrialized country in the world?”⁴ Historian Larrea reduced the clash to a simple conflict of different classes. According to Larrea, Rivera painted the murals in the United States with a voluptuous taste for scientific, technological and industrial progress but the most important figure of his murals was the blue

⁴ Irene Herner De Larrea, *Diego Rivera's Mural At the Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1986) p. 11.

collar worker.⁵ Larrea approached this controversy relating the event with communistic and propagandistic beliefs of Rivera. She pointed, “Rivera was convinced of the utopian possibility of the US, through the leadership of American workers, to gain the liberty and autonomy of the American Continent from the rest of the world.”⁶

The academic Robert L. Scott took the issue in a different angle from Larrea. According to Scott, “although a controversy is formed by the individual acts of specific persons, once in motion, controversies use people and form people as much as people form and use them.”⁷ Put another way, the controversy formed Diego Rivera rather than he formed the controversy. Things got out of control once his murals became public. He used this clash to earn reputation and become a famous, powerful figure in a way. This is true to some extent as Rivera was a person who wanted to catch the attention all the time. However, this approach is not enough to explain the whole clash as the outcome of Rivera’s egocentric nature.

Another historian Ida Rodriguez-Prampolini regarded the event as clash of powers.⁸ The power struggle was involved in the aftermath of the clash but it would be a one-sided interpretation to regard the issue as a simple power struggle. At the very beginning, Rockefeller didn’t have such intentions as to exert his power over Rivera. The power clash occurred after Rivera challenged Rockefeller with defiance against his will and instruction. Rockefeller used his position as a renowned businessman while Rivera used the “subversive power of art” which he inherited from the Mexican rulers such as Alvaro Obregon. In the nationalist program of

⁵ Ibid. p.11.

⁶ Ibid p.11.

⁷ Robert L. Scott, “Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Frescoe Painting and Rhetoric” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* (Spring 1977) p.6

⁸ Ida Rodriguez- Prampolini, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1986) p.135.

Alvaro Obregon, the ruler would monitor cultural production in Mexico regarding art as both an indicator of the stability of state and a power for the national unification. Art was that much significant for Mexicans and for the formation of Mexican identity. Pampolini tried to emphasize cultural backgrounds of clash in order to explain the root causes of Rockefeller-Rivera controversy. It's necessary to analyze the cultural background and upbringing of both Rivera and Rockefeller to better understand their mode of thinking. However, reducing the causes of this issue to personal characteristics and backgrounds of the persons involved is neither true nor logical.

Historian Laurance Hurlburt, on the other hand, thought the opposite. He noted that North Americans dismissed Mexican art and politics during the 1940's and 1950's.⁹ He traced this to the fact that the US experienced two world wars. A related matter concerning US hegemony, especially on the American continent, involved the concomitant appearance of the New York School as the dominant art movement, Hurlburt explained. In other words, the cultural domination of the New York School led to the clash of ideas as the modernist thinking of art for art's sake prevailed in the US during 1930's. Hurlburt might have a point but it would be wrong to think that all the North Americans thought so. This would mean to ignore the fact that FDR based the section of murals in Federal Art Project on the premise of Mexican muralism. Even after 1930's, 1940's and 1950's, it is possible to see the abundant traces of Mexican muralist traditions in the streets of Los Angeles.¹⁰ In that regard, Hurlburt, as well, offers a simplistic approach to the issue.

⁹ Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the US* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) p.251.

¹⁰ Melba Levick and Stanley Young, *The Big Picture: Murals of Los Angeles* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) p.11

This study, however, tries to delve into the influence Rivera's murals had on the US art culture during the New Deal period although Hurlburt claimed that North Americans dispelled Mexican art during the 1940's. The findings suggest the opposite of what Hurlburt put forward. There was an interaction between the US and Mexican art culture in terms of what the art meant for both cultures and how their art had evolved influencing one another during 1930's. Exactly in 1940, Roosevelt appointed Nelson A. Rockefeller to the position of coordinator for cultural and commercial relations with Latin American countries, and the subcommittee on art came to function within the state's strategic operations.¹¹ Rather than dismissing the art of that culture, they wanted to secure economic, cultural and political relations with Latin American countries on the cultural and diplomatic levels. Most of the historians are prejudiced against this clash. They don't mention any contribution but a clash which resulted in turmoil. They summarize, "Rockefeller wants Rivera to substitute Lenin with the face of some unknown men. Rivera refused and he was paid off and fired. The mural was covered with a canvas and placed on death row."¹² Then they talk about "protests, picket lines, fiery editorials and press conferences."¹³ They are sidestepping the contribution because they get stuck on seeing the clash as a product of race or ideology conflict.

How Rivera-Rockefeller clash contributed to American art and artists during the New Deal period is the central question of this research. Stage by stage, the research takes up several sub-questions such as what the approach to art was in the US before 1930's, how and why it changed and what the reactions were to the process of this change. More interestingly, how did Nelson Rockefeller commission

¹¹ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.119.

¹² Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Abraham Books, 2002), p.166.

¹³ Ibid, p.166.

Diego Rivera although he was aware of Rivera's political tendencies and his mural "Millionaires" through which he humiliated John Rockefeller? Was this a clash bound to happen?

These sub-questions shed light on the main points around which the thesis revolves. They are significant to identify the problem, to reflect on the causes and consequences of the process of change in the US art culture. The thesis also examines Mexican Renaissance, Mexican political and artistic culture to provide the background of Rivera's ideologies that are substantively related to the Rivera-Rockefeller clash. This clash had a transformative impact on the US society, even with the questions it raised in the minds of US people.

Rivera's autobiography *My Art, My Life* demonstrates Rivera's side of the story while Nelson Rockefeller's personal and business papers reveal what was in Rockefeller's mind during that clash. With all these invaluable sources, this research attempts to bring a fresh interpretation of this "infamous" clash by foregrounding its cultural, artistic contribution of to the US art and culture, which makes it not that "infamous".

The first chapter provides a roadmap and introduces the historical context and literature review. It basically states that the rest of the historians dealing with this issue analyzed Rockefeller-Rivera clash within a one-sided perspective. They reduced it to a matter of race, ideology or power. They were also simplistic in their approach as they regarded the issue as a morbid phenomenon which had only negative consequences, which made nothing but trouble. The rest of the chapters prove that that was not the case and that this clash had a remarkable consequence in the US art world, indeed.

The second chapter introduces the reader with the clash occurred between Nelson Rockefeller and Diego Rivera in 1933. It gives a brief description of when, where and how exactly it broke out. It is significant to get the grasp of the issue to better understand the dynamics of the controversy. Historian Irene Herner de Larrea has compiled a book that involves most of the firsthand accounts of the clash with newspaper cuttings, letters, which helps to draw a picture of that time. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo's diaries provide one side of the story while Rockefeller papers including Nelson Rockefeller's letters complement the other side. Nelson Rockefeller was a businessman, art collector, philanthropist and politician. Rockefeller served as a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art from 1932 to 1979. In 1933, he was a member of the committee selecting art for the new Rockefeller Center. That's how he got involved in this debacle. Rockefeller papers received from the Rockefeller collection provided an insight about his interest in art, Latin America and the circumstances that brought him to this point.

The second chapter ends with the emergence of this clash and the stir it caused which was reflected in both Mexican and American newspapers. The discussion it led to on the function of the US art becomes the point of departure for the origin of discussion about Federal Art Project, PWAP¹⁴, WPA¹⁵ and New Deal art. This chapter is very crucial for this study as it introduces the reader with American artist George Biddle, who promoted the "actionable art" with a letter he sent to the president FDR. His reaction to Rockefeller-Rivera clash has the utmost importance as it forms a consciousness in the American mural artist, Biddle, about the function of art in the US. The third chapter reflects this atmosphere of discussion

¹⁴ Public Work of Art Project was a program to employ artists, as part of the New Deal, during the Great Depression. It was the first such program, running from December 1933 to June 1934.

¹⁵ Work Progress Administration was a New Deal agency employing millions of unemployed people (1935-1943)

with the help of Mexican and American newspaper clippings. Mexican newspapers are instrumental in describing in what kind of an environment and circle Diego Rivera lived in and how they shaped his painting.

As the study aims at providing an all-inclusive picture, the third chapter looks at Diego Rivera's background, his times in Mexico and how his mode of thinking was formed, which led him through "actionable art". Mexican Revolution (1910) and its ramifications had a huge impact on the thoughts and works of Diego Rivera. It was one of the most important and biggest events in the history of Mexico and it affected Diego Rivera as much as the Mexican society. It brought about the ideas of "Mexicanidad"-Mexican identity- which was reflected in the art works. The new minister of education, Jose Vasconcelos, proclaimed Mexican education to be about "our blood, our language, and our people".¹⁶ In order to convey this message to his very own public, he took advantage of the blessings of mural art. In 1921-1922, Vasconcelos commissioned artists to decorate the walls of the school with frescoes, paintings drawn on freshly plastered walls. With Mexican history as their subject, artists worked to transform society.¹⁷ Diego Rivera was one of these transformers as Vasconcelos commissioned Rivera to paint several murals in order to further their cause. The third chapter gives an account of this "Mexican Renaissance and nativism in Mexican Art" in relation to Diego Rivera's murals.

Futhermore, the third chapter looks at Diego Rivera and his US experience including his missions in Detroit, San Francisco and New York. Diego Rivera talks about the US evaluating its art culture in several ways. He received many commissions from rich American businessmen before engaging in such a controversy with Rockefellers. In 1926, through the American sculptor Ralph

¹⁶ Malka Drucker, *Frida Kahlo: Torment and Triumph in her Life and Art*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991) p.13.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.16.

Stockpole, whom he had known in Paris and Mexico City, he received an invitation from William Gerstle, President of the San Francisco Art Commission, to paint a wall in the California School of Fine Arts.¹⁸ California School of Arts was the place for which Rivera painted several murals and which had lots of students admiring Rivera's work. They were influenced by Rivera. The school offered Rivera large sums of money, which he was amazed at. He saw the US "as the ideal place for modern mural art".¹⁹ He envisioned the US to be so and when he came and saw the actual atmosphere, he understood that he was not mistaken at all. He was enormously excited to come to the US as he regarded this as a litmus test. He stated that this would be a crucial test of his mural techniques.²⁰ Because he believed that industrial places were perfect for the development of mural art and the US was an industrial country unlike Mexico.²¹

The fourth chapter opens up with the notion of "art as a propaganda-actionable art", which was led by the discussions on Rockefeller-Rivera clash. This notion can be regarded as Mexican's inheritance to the US art. This chapter looks at the traces of Mexican government's mentality (which was discussed in the previous chapter) after the Mexican revolution on Roosevelt's Federal Art Project. The Federal Art Project was the visual section of the Great Depression Era- New Deal Works Progress Administration program in the United States. It was in action from August 29, 1935 to June 30, 1943. Federal Art Project Artists created posters, murals and paintings, which was more like Mexican Government's notion of conveying messages to the public. With the collapse of the stock market in October 1929 and the resulting economic depression, in the absence of any large scale relief funding, a

¹⁸ Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991) p.105.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.105.

²⁰ Ibid, p.105.

²¹ Ibid, p.105.

number of upper-middle class charities began to offer welfare payments to selected artists in New York City. This was a way of survival from the dissemination of radical ideas such as communism. Putting unemployed people to work and introducing them with works of art also helped them raise consciousness. Susman notes that the communist party received considerable political support that that time from the public including intellectuals.²² The danger was going to be thwarted. It worked indeed and the influence the art of mural painting influenced intellectuals and artists like George Biddle. In his letter, Biddle praised the Mexican muralists. He stated that they were successful at producing the greatest national school of mural painters since the Renaissance.²³ He added that the younger artists of America were conscious as they never had been of the social revolution that the country and civilization were going through and they would be very eager to express their ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation.²⁴ He trusted in the idea that American mural art, with a little impetus, could soon result, for the first time in the US history, in a vital national expression.²⁵

The fourth chapter brings up the resemblances and some differences between New Deal US art culture and Mexican mural movement embodied by Diego Rivera with his mode of thinking which is greatly reflected on the clash with Nelson Rockefeller. The propagandistic art was the ultimate form of this resemblance. The chapter gives a brief analysis of some murals painted by American artists as part of the Federal Art Project. American artists such as Fletcher Martin, John Stewart Curry, David Stone Martin, Karl Kelpe, Ben Shan and Victor Mikhail Arnautoff

²² Warren, Susman. *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* 2nd Ed. (DC: Smithsonian Books, 2009). p.173.

²³ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid, p.24.

²⁵ Ibid, p.25.

contributed to the state-sponsored murals to a great extent. They conveyed several messages in their murals which they hoped to make a difference in the lives of American society. The fourth chapter ends with the discussions on the function of art in the US during 1930's and New Deal period. The discussions reveal both the visions of American public and the public in Mexico City.

The discussions set out with the Nelson Rockefeller –Diego Rivera clash and opened up new doors for “actionable art” during New Deal period. However, at the end of the day, in both cases, there was an issue of patronage. In other words, artists were commissioned either by rich businessmen (the case with the clash) or by the state (New Deal art projects and Mexican Government's mural projects). Artists envisioned messages with the content of their work but the content had to change, in some cases, when it collided with the mindset of the public. At least, this was the case with some American muralists who worked for the Federal Art Project.²⁶

The very last chapter provides a conclusion with the revision of Diego Rivera-Nelson Rockefeller clash as a case study. Diego Rivera was a trailblazer for the “actionable art” in the US. He was a trailblazer for influencing many American artists, one of them being George Biddle who wrote a letter to FDR informing him about the notion of “actionable art”. Biddle informed FDR about Rivera and Mexican mural Renaissance while Rivera was having a clash with Rockefeller. Biddle supported Rivera in every step of the way and condemned Rockefeller for killing an artwork. This clash made people, most importantly George Biddle, think that an artist can make people think about social issues, raise consciousness and promote “action”. By means of art, an artist can elevate the mood of people, motivate them, and create

²⁶ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture* p.48.

some sense of solidarity. This was what had been done with “Man at the Crossroads with Hope” and this was what had been done with “New Deal actionable art”.

CHAPTER II

THE BACKGROUND OF ROCKEFELLER-RIVERA CLASH

2.1. Origin of the Clash

Diego Rivera-Nelson Rockefeller controversy had various causes and consequences although it seemed like a simple clash caused by the existence of opposite ideologies, namely capitalism and communism. However, when we delve deep into the issue, it becomes clear that it was not simply a clash of ideologies. The cultural codes and historical values that these two countries had, also counted as causes which paved the way for new cultural and artistic codes for the US. In order to understand these new codes, values and the transformation process of the US artistic culture, it is crucial that we make a better understanding of this controversy examining the issue from both Rockefeller's and Rivera's sides.

Nelson Rockefeller, an American businessman, philanthropist and politician, was the grandson of Standard oil founder and Chairman John Davison Rockefeller. Sr. Nelson Rockefeller worked in the Rockefeller Center joining the Board of Directors in 1931. He decided to commission Diego Rivera, in 1933, to paint a huge mural in the RCA building (General Electric Building that forms the centerpiece of

Rockefeller Center in New York, Manhattan) of the new and modern Rockefeller Center. He was an art collector and like his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, he very much enjoyed the presence of art work around him. His correspondence with a professor from department of art at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, partly shed light on his commissioning of Rivera for this mission. It became clear that the exhibition of Diego Rivera in the museum of modern art impressed Nelson Rockefeller as an art collector. In a letter, N. Rockefeller talked about how Mr. Rivera had sold the whole set of his frescoes which he did for exhibition to the Weyhe Gallery for ten thousand dollars.²⁷ Also, a correspondence between Nelson Rockefeller and Francis Flynn Peine, an art historian, demonstrated Rockefeller's eulogy on the work of Diego Rivera. Rockefeller told Peine, "I saw the pictures that Rivera did of my sister's children and I really don't think there is a painter living who could have done a better job."²⁸

In his diary Diego Rivera noted that when Nelson Rockefeller decided to decorate the main floor of his new RCA Building in Radio City, he decided to get the best artists so his choices were Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Rivera himself.²⁹ Rivera described the process of commission in detail. According to his account, through the architect of the building, Raymond Hood, Rockefeller asked the painters to submit sample murals. He even specified how the sample murals were to be done. Upon this, Picasso refused the invitation. Henri Matisse replied that these specifications did not accord with his style of painting. Rivera answered Hood that he was frankly baffled by this unorthodox way of dealing with himself and he simply

²⁷ Nelson Rockefeller Project Papers. A letter to Mr. Artemus Packard, Department of Art, Dartmouth College, Hannover, New Hampshire Series L, Box 139, Folder 1360 February 17, 1932.

²⁸ Nelson Rockefeller Project Papers, A letter to Francis Flynn Peine Series L, Box 139, Folder 1360, February 17, 1932

²⁹ Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991) p.124

said no.³⁰ In his account Rivera concluded that, “having thus quickly lost Picasso and Matisse, Rockefeller determined that at the very least he would have me.”³¹

When Rockefeller and Rivera were on the process of negotiating, smaller clashes started to break out which later on became the sole reason of the bigger clash. The difference in their understanding of art started to become obvious. Rivera found Hood’s idea of mural “typically American”. By this “typically American” Rivera meant “a mural as a mere accessory, ornament”.³² However, Rivera believed that “art must be art but there is not a single activity, including prayer and love, that is not essentially political.”³³ He stated that “art is propaganda and is as essential as food”.³⁴

Raymond Hood, the architect, wanted Rivera to work in a funeral black, white, gray and on canvas. Their differences piled up. Rivera decided to take action against this. Among Nelson Rockefeller’s papers, there is a letter sent by Diego Rivera discussing these differences. He sent this letter to Nelson Rockefeller’s mother. He asked for help saying, “since it is to you that I owe, Madame, the opportunity of being able to paint here, I would beg you again to help me if this is not abusing too much your good will.”³⁵ From that, we understand that Madame Rockefeller had a great role in commissioning Rivera for this job. Rivera wanted to obtain permission to work in fresco. He wanted that not only because this was the medium that he preferred but for the architectural beauty of the building, as he added in the letter. He also sent a letter to Nelson Rockefeller revealing his discontent. Nelson Rockefeller went into this problem with Mr. Hood. He sent a reply to Rivera telling that Hood was quite agreeable and very enthusiastic about Rivera’s suggestion

³⁰ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.125.

³¹ Ibid, p.125.

³² Ibid, p.125.

³³ Irene Herner de Larrea, *Diego Rivera’s Mural at the Rockefeller Center*. 2nd Ed. (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1990) p.33.

³⁴ Ibid, p.33.

³⁵ Nelson Rockefeller Papers, A letter from Rivera to Abby Rockefeller Record Group 4, Nelson Rockefeller, Personal, Series L, Projects Box 216, Folder 2195 October 13, 1932 p.1.

of using some color.³⁶ At this point, Rockefeller handled the differences quite professionally and created a nice environment for Diego Rivera to work at. Rivera also gave credit to Rockefeller stating that amid all the difference and tension he moved with the calm of a practiced politician.³⁷

The theme offered by Rockefellers was “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future”. They wanted a work plan from Rivera. Content of the mural was also important so Rivera submitted a proposal which had been kept among Rockefeller papers thus far. The analysis of this proposal would demonstrate whether Rivera gave signs of his intentions. He noted in the proposal that he wanted to depict the development of the ethical relations of the mankind.³⁸ He desired to emphasize “human intelligence in possession of the forces of nature”. His central emphasis was on “the power of man”. He wrote, “my panel will show the workers arriving at a true understanding of their rights regarding the means of production.”³⁹ After all, power meant to have a full knowledge about what their rights were. Rivera intended to depict the man in the center expressing him in his triple aspect. One was the peasant “who developed from the earth the products which were the origin and base of all the riches of mankind”. Another was the worker of the cities “who transformed and distributed the raw materials given by the Earth”. The other was the soldier “who under the ethical force that produced martyrs in religions and wars represented sacrifice”.⁴⁰ Rivera imagined a sketch for his mural in which the worker gave his right hand to the peasant who

³⁶ Nelson Rockefeller Papers. A letter from Rockefeller to Diego Rivera. Record Group 4, Nelson Rockefeller, Personal, Series L, Projects Box 216, Folder 2195 October 13, 1932 p.1.

³⁷ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.125

³⁸ Nelson Rockefeller Papers “Subject Matter of the Proposed Mural Decorations By Diego Rivera For the Radio Corporation of America Building in the Rockefeller Center”, Record Group 4, Nelson Rockefeller, Personal, Series L, Projects Box 216, Folder 2195 New York City Archival Copy p.1.

³⁹ Ibid, p.1.

⁴⁰ Nelson Rockefeller Papers “Subject Matter of the Proposed Mural Decorations By Diego Rivera for the Radio Corporation of America Building in the Rockefeller Center, New York.” Archival Copy p.2

questioned him and with his left hand, took the hand of the sick and wounded soldier, the victim of War, leading him to the new road.⁴¹ He included mothers in that sketch and teachers who watched over the development of the New Generation that were protected by the work of the scientists. On the right side, Rivera showed a group of young women enjoying sports, and on the left, showed a group of unemployed workmen in the breadline. He summarized the center of his paintings in that way. There were leftist themes in this proposal but since the depiction of technology and science subordinated them, Rockefeller and his team just approved it. On the opposite side, above the representation of the joy derived from sports, the same cinematograph brought the image of a popular movement accompanied by technical power and industrial organization. This industrial power was what Rockefeller wanted to disseminate through Rivera's work. In the last chapter of his proposal, Rivera concluded that man represented by these figures, looked with uncertainty but with hope toward a future, with more complete balance between the technical and ethical development of mankind necessary "to a new, more humane, logical order."⁴²

In his proposal sent to Rockefellers, he did not mention anything about Lenin figure that he was going to include in his mural. These documents gave no room for any doubt or suspicion about this fact. Rivera, in his memoir, also wrote that after he submitted his preliminary sketches, he received "prompt and unqualified approval from Rockefeller".⁴³ Rockefeller and his team did not go through the sketches diligently. It was reasonable for Rockefeller not to get engaged with the preparation and sketches closely as a busy businessman but his team failed to oversee the steps of such a dangerously active man as Rivera. When he got the approval, Rivera set to

⁴¹ Ibid, p.2.

⁴² Nelson Rockefeller Papers "Subject Matter of the Proposed Mural Decorations By Diego Rivera for the Radio Corporation of America Building in the Rockefeller Center, New York." Archival Copy p.2

⁴³ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.125

work immediately. Everything went smoothly. He painted rapidly and easily on his wall which faced the main entrance of the building. As the mural was about to be finished, the controversy had already started.

2.2. Perspectives from Rivera Concerning the Clash

Rockefeller saw some of the photographs depicting the unfinished mural. At that time, Lenin part was not done and Rockefeller was enthusiastic about the outcome. He hoped that Rivera would be finished by the first of May 1933 when the building was to be officially opened to the public.

Meanwhile, Rivera was concretizing his imagination on the fresco. He described the latest and definite form of his mural in his memoir. According to his description, the center of his mural showed a worker at the control of a large machine. In front of him, emerging from a space was a large hand holding a globe on which the dynamics of chemistry and biology, the recombination of atoms, and the division of a cell, were represented schematically.⁴⁴

He went on explaining his finished mural in the diary and came to the problematic part in which he depicted the figure of the worker. Two elongated ellipses crossed and met in the figure of the worker, one showing “the wonders of the telescope and its revelations of bodies in space”; the other showing the “microscope and its discoveries- cells, germs, bacteria, and the delicate tissues”.⁴⁵ Science and technology was in the control of men according to this description. However, Rivera divided the kinds of men into two, which reflected his thus far hidden ideologies. He

⁴⁴Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.126.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.126.

told, “above the germinating soil at the bottom, I projected two visions of civilization.”⁴⁶ These two visions, in fact, caused part of the controversy. On the left of the crossed ellipses, Rivera showed a night-club scene of the “debauched rich”, a battlefield with men in the “holocaust of war”, and the demonstration being clubbed by the police. On the right, he painted “corresponding scenes of life in a socialist country”, in which he depicted a May day demonstration, singing workers; an athletic stadium filled with girls and a figure of Lenin, “symbolically clasping the hands of a black American and a white Russian soldier and worker, as allies of the future.”⁴⁷ The Lenin figure initiated the controversy, which spread to the US immediately.

At that moment, he transformed into a politician in a way. His art became politicized or more truly he politicized his art. He started to give brief interviews to several newspaper reporters as soon as the crisis broke out. A newspaper reporter for a New York afternoon paper came to interview him about his work. He was particularly struck by the May Day Demonstration and Lenin scene in the mural and he asked for explanation from Rivera. Diego Rivera said that as long as the Soviet Union was in existence, Nazi Fascism could never be sure of its survival. Therefore the Soviet Union was going to be attacked by this reactionary enemy. Rivera added that if the United States wished to preserve its democratic forms, it would ally itself with Russia against fascism.⁴⁸ Since Lenin was the “pre-eminent founder of the Soviet Union” and also “the first and most altruistic theorist of modern communism” according to Rivera, he said that he used him as the center of the inevitable alliance

⁴⁶ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.126

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.126

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.127

between the Russian and the American.⁴⁹ He also confessed that, in doing this, he was quite aware that he was going to go against Rockefellers.⁵⁰

Thus he had such kind of provocative intentions from the very beginning. However, in his proposal to Rockefeller whose content has been analyzed in the previous pages, Rivera obviously did not talk about these ideas of including May Day demonstrations and Lenin figures in the mural.

The following day, the reporter's story appeared in his paper, *The World Telegram*. The reporter told that this crisis should not have surprised anybody, least of Nelson Rockefeller, who was fully acquainted with Rivera's actual plans and sketches, that he was painting a revolutionary mural.⁵¹ Rivera commented on the reporter's story claiming that the story suggested that he had hoaxed his patron, Rockefeller. He told that "this was of course not true".⁵² However, his work proposal demonstrated that he had misled Rockefeller in a way by not mentioning about Lenin.

The first of May passed and Rivera was nearly finished when he received a letter from Nelson Rockefeller requesting him to paint out the face of Lenin and substitute the face of an unknown man. Diego Rivera found this "reasonable" but he also thought that "one change might lead to demands for others" and he asked "does not every artist have the right to use whatever models he wished in his painting?"⁵³

Rivera claimed that he gave the problem the most careful consideration. He noted that the reply he sent Rockefeller after receiving his letter was "conciliatory" in tone. However, his words defied Rockefeller's words. He told, "to explain my refusal to paint out the head of Lenin, I pointed out that a figure of Lenin had appeared in

⁴⁹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.126

⁵⁰ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.126.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.126

⁵² Ibid p.127.

⁵³ Ibid, p.127

my earliest sketches submitted to Raymond Hood.”⁵⁴ He wrote that he never expected that a presumably cultured man like Rockefeller would act upon his words so literally and so savagely.⁵⁵” Lastly he said, “rather than mutilate the conception, I should prefer the physical destruction of the conception in its entirety, but preserving at least its integrity.”⁵⁶ In fact, he defied Rockefeller rather than approaching the issue in a “conciliatory” tone. He dared the destruction of his art work to keep its integrity. However, after some time had passed, he suggested as a compromise that he replaced the contrasting night club scene in the left half of the mural with the figure of Abraham Lincoln. He deliberately chose this figure because he wanted to symbolize the reunification of the American states and the abolition of slavery as he noted.⁵⁷ He was going to surround Lincoln by John Brown, Nat Turner, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Philips and Harriet Beecher Stowe. He also considered including a scientific figure like Cyrus McCormick whose reaping machine had contributed to the victory of the Union forces by facilitating the harvesting of wheat in the fields depleted of men. This thought of substitution is available only in his memoir. The newspapers of the time noted that he didn’t want to substitute Lenin with any other person. According to the *New York Times* issue, Rivera stated, “Whom could I substitute? and how could I put an ‘unknown man’ in the place of leader? The idea would lose all its meaning and the entire composition would be spoiled.”⁵⁸

In his memoir, Rivera recounted the days in detail when he awaited Rockefeller’s response to his suggestion. While waiting, he summoned a photographer to take pictures of the almost finished mural, but the guards who had been ordered to admit no photographers barred him. He recounted that one of his

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.127

⁵⁵ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.127.

⁵⁶ Ibid p.127.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.127.

⁵⁸ “Career of Rivera Marked by Strife” *The New York Times* May 14, 1933- Art. 27

assistants, Lucienne Bloch, smuggled in a photo machine concealed in her bosom. She surreptitiously snapped as many pictures as she could without getting caught.⁵⁹

In the second week of May 1933, Rivera recounted that Rockefeller finally made his move. The private police force of Radio City reinforced around the mural was doubled. Rivera and his assistants continued working as if nothing had happened. Yet, when he understood that he could not resist any longer, he acknowledged the order to stop work and received his check. He described the scene as such, "As I left the building, I heard airplanes roaring overhead, mounted policemen patrolled the streets."⁶⁰ Rivera interestingly commented that one of the very scenes he had depicted in his mural materialized before his eyes. A demonstration of workers began to form, the policeman charged, the workers dispersed.⁶¹

In February 1934, after Diego Rivera returned to Mexico, his Radio City mural was smashed to pieces from the wall. In his memoir he commented, "thus was a great victory won over a portrait of Lenin, thus was the free expression honored in America."⁶² In the spring of 1933, Rivera aired his views over a small radio station in New York. He commented that the case of Diego Rivera was a small matter. He gave an example of an American millionaire who bought the Sistine Chapel which contained the work of Michelangelo. He asked, "would that millionaire have the right to destroy the Sistine Chapel?"⁶³ He wanted people to understand that this was not only to do with Diego Rivera, art and the protection of the art was at stake. He kept giving examples. He supposed that another millionaire should buy the unpublished manuscripts in which a scientist like Einstein had written his

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.127.

⁶⁰ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.128.

⁶¹ Ibid p.128.

⁶² Ibid, p.128.

⁶³ Ibid, p.129.

mathematical theories. He asked again “would that millionaire have the right to burn those manuscripts?”⁶⁴ According to his vision, these works of art were belongings of humanity, indeed. No individual owner had the right to destroy it or keep it solely for his own enjoyment. Rivera regarded Rockefeller’s act as “vandalism”.⁶⁵ He gave out a statement telling, “Rockefellers cannot prevent me from speaking through my paintings to the workers of New York and the US. There ought to be, these will yet be, a justice that prevents the assassination of human creation as of human character.”⁶⁶

2.3. Perspectives from Rockefellers

Nelson Rockefeller, an art collector, also had multiple missions both as an educated young man who had hopes for the office and a businessman who had to defend his interests. He had to appeal to Rockefeller’s vision in a way and he wouldn’t accept a Lenin figure at his work place. His reaction to Rivera incident had to be evaluated in accordance with his position both in society and in the world of business and politics although he was an avid art lover.

Among the Rockefeller papers, Nelson Rockefeller’s letter to Diego Rivera was available to give an idea about how exactly he reacted to the issue. In his May 4, 1933 letter, he told that while he was in the No.1 building at Rockefeller center viewing the progress of the “thrilling mural” he noticed that in the most recent

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.129

⁶⁵ “Destroyed Lenin Painting at Night and Replasters Space” *The New York Times* February 13, 1934- Art.68.

⁶⁶ Ibid, Art.69.

portion of the painting Rivera had included a portrait of Lenin. Actually Rockefeller's tone was more conciliatory than Rivera's. He said in the letter, "the piece is beautifully painted but it seems to me that his portrait appearing in this mural might very easily seriously offend a great many people."⁶⁷ He gave credit to the artist, Rivera, but he also defended the public whom he would represent in the future. While Rivera emphasized the rights of the artist and protection of the art work, Rockefeller's argument was that he painted in a public place and thus Rivera should have considered the public concern. In his letter, Rockefeller noted that if the mural was in a private house it would be one thing, but this mural was in a public building and the situation was therefore quite different.⁶⁸ He added, "as much as I dislike doing so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown men where Lenin's face now appears."⁶⁹ He was like an intelligent politician in his tone and reminded Rivera that to date they had in no way restricted him in either subject or treatment. Although there were some limitations on the content and method of the papers, Rockefeller solved out all these issues and provided Rivera with freedom.

With the same persuasive tone he finished the letter expressing how enthusiastic he was about the work which Rivera had been doing and he was sure that Rivera would understand his feeling in this situation.⁷⁰ Rivera was hesitant about making any changes rather than modifying the night club scene and including Abraham Lincoln in the mural.

Nelson Rockefeller initiated his interviews with the engineers and architects of the building to evaluate the issue. In his correspondence with the engineer Hugh Robertson, Rockefeller enclosed a large photograph of the original sketch that Rivera

⁶⁷ RockefellerPapers. A letter from Rockefeller to Rivera, May 4, 1933 Archival Copy Record Group 4, Nelson Rockefeller, Personal, Series L, Projects Box 216, Folder 2195 October 13, 1932.p.1

⁶⁸ Ibid p.1.

⁶⁹ Ibid p.2.

⁷⁰ Ibid p.1.

made for the fresco in Rockefeller Center, and which he presented to Rockefeller. In the letter, Rockefeller mentioned the conversation they had with architect Mr. Hood while Mr. Rivera was there. Rockefeller wrote, “it was suggested that Rivera simplify the center of this sketch, putting in one man instead of the three, but that he would leave in the lower part of the sketch with the children, artists...etc.”⁷¹ He made sure that anybody, first and foremost, the architect Mr. Hood would very accurately remember all the conversation that took place that day. The conversation mainly went around whether or not the mural should have been done on canvas or in fresco, as Rockefeller noted.⁷² Rockefeller ended the letter by sending the photograph of this original sketch as he told in the letter. However, Rockefeller archives do not have this sketch attached to the letter so we will never know whether this original sketch included Lenin or not. The proposal Rivera gave, which was also among Rockefeller papers, did not include the figure. Upon, Rivera’s insistence on not backing down, Rockefeller dismissed Rivera and destroyed the mural.⁷³

Rivera argued that everything was determined at the very beginning and Rockefeller knew that. Yet, Rockefeller stated that inclusion of Lenin was a big surprise for them. In fact, Rockefeller was right because in the proposal Rivera’s ideas seemed acceptable. Rockefeller noted that his team let Rivera free at every turn of his work. They merely interfered with the general concept but not the coloring and work material. Both parties tried to reflect that they did what should have been done while that was not always the case.

⁷¹ Rockefeller Papers. A letter from Rockefeller to Rivera, May 4, 1933 Achival Copy p.1

⁷² Ibid, p.1.

⁷³ “Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1933, Art.10.

2.4. Perspectives from the Newspapers

2.4.1. The US Newspapers

This controversy generated a huge amount of discussion in the society, which media reflected to a great extent. The discussion centered around art work, protection of art work, freedom of artist and the objective of art if there was and there should have been any. Newspapers placed great significance to Rivera's and Rockefeller's comments but they also portrayed the views of American society, artists even Mexican people as much as they could.

The controversy was not only among Rockefeller and Rivera; their supporters also included themselves in the situation. Radical groups seized upon the conflict to issue statements condemning the halting of work as comparable with "the vicious deeds of Hitler".⁷⁴ The newspaper quoted Diego Rivera saying, "I refuse to compromise, I will not change my mural even if I lose in the courts, it is a question of the right of the artist to complete his work and have it viewed."⁷⁵ Speaking partly in English and partly through an interpreter, Rivera set forth his views in detail to the newspaper reporter. His fresco, he insisted, was not communist propaganda, but the propaganda of the artist for his ideas.⁷⁶ In the newspaper interview, he insisted on his first argument claiming that the Rockefellers and their representatives, he declared, knew that he was going to place the figure a "leader" in the fresco and he asserted that in his opinion Lenin was "the most modern leader in the world".⁷⁷

⁷⁴ "Row on Rivera Art Still in Deadlock" *The New York Times* May 11, 1933- Art.17

⁷⁵ Ibid, Art. 17

⁷⁶ Ibid, Art.17

⁷⁷ Ibid, Art. 17

Another newspaper, *The Nation*, gave the news under the headline “Rivera’s Revolution”. According to the writers, the trouble between Rivera and Rockefeller Center really began long before the head of Lenin appeared.⁷⁸ They were referring to the negotiations about color and work material which were solved out by Rockefeller. For the writer, this controversy was inevitable. He found it difficult to understand how Rockefellers could have let themselves in for an embarrassing situation although they knew that they would have such a controversy with Rivera at the end of the day.⁷⁹ The Rockefellers could not understand Rivera’s work thoroughly, according to the reporter, and still expected him to do an uncontroversial, “highly imaginative” fresco for a capitalist building in New York City.⁸⁰ The writer also reminded the readers that Rivera set down, in one of his most famous panels in the Education Building in Mexico City, his conception of a capitalist. Its model was John D. Rockefeller and he was depicted as a “capitalist” who was dining with friends and the food they were eating was money. No one, after seeing that panel, could mistake Diego Rivera’s attitude toward capitalists in general, Rockefeller in particular, according to the reporter.⁸¹ In fact, Rivera was very obedient and respectful in his letters to Rockefeller and except for few details, he seemed eager to conform to the concept, “Man at the Crossroads” given by the Rockefellers. He would begin his letters⁸² addressing to Nelson Rockefeller as “trés distingué et cher ami”⁸³. He would also talk about how enthusiastic he was about the concept and how hard he worked for it.⁸⁴ However, the writer from *The Nation* suggested that Rivera had done nothing since then to indicate that he would accommodate his art to the

⁷⁸ “Rivera’s Revolution” *The Nation* May 24, 1933 Art.48

⁷⁹ “Rivera’s Revolution” *The Nation* May 24, 1933 Art. 48

⁸⁰ Ibid, Art.48

⁸¹ Ibid, Art 48.

⁸² “Rockefeller Papers” Letter from Rivera to Rockefeller, October 10, 1932 Archival Copy

⁸³ means very distinguished and dear friend.

⁸⁴ Ibid, Rivera’s words “Comme resultat je vous confesse que, non pas seulement j’ai trouve l’enthousiasme necessaire, mais celui-ci m’a fait détourner toute la semaine de mon travail d’ici.”

tastes of those who hired him.⁸⁵ The Rockefellers were faced with the inevitable result of their original acceptance as a great artist of the Communist Rivera. This result was bound to come out. Yet, the question, as why Rockefeller hired Rivera when he was even aware of the millionaires fresco involving John D. Rockefeller in a pejorative way, was still in the minds of many reporters in the media. In Rockefeller papers, there is a newspaper article as an archive copy, discussing this question. The newspaper's and reporter's names are not provided in the records yet the date of the commentary is clear. In the article, the writer stated that perhaps in giving Rivera the commission, the Rockefellers thought the fact that the artist had actually been expelled from the Mexican communist party was sufficient justification for anticipating that "he would give no further pictorial expression to economic or political heresies."⁸⁶ For the writer, the expulsion of Rivera from Mexican Communist Party was a valid reason for Rockefeller to think that Rivera was not that same old, ideology-oriented Rivera anymore. Yet, even if that was the case, the writer stated that it was a poor reed to lean on because men like Rivera left parties often, they thought the party doctrines were too extreme and they found party discipline too burdensome.⁸⁷ In matters with aesthetic, Rivera was an anarchist who lived according to the orders and desires of his own nature, regardless of any obligation to express anything but his own individuality. Rockefeller should have foreseen the risks involved at hiring Rivera for Radio City murals. He should have considered Rivera's ideological background, which he reflected in his previous art work in the first place.

⁸⁵ "Rivera's Revolution" *The Nation* May 24, 1933 Art.48

⁸⁶ Rockefeller Papers, "Rivera and Rockefeller" May 10, 1933 Series L, Box 139, Folder 1360 (N. Rockefeller and his comments on Rivera) p.1

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.1

From another article, which was kept in Rockefeller archives, the columnist reported the firing process and commented on the Rivera Affairs' as "humorous phase."⁸⁸ He asked what could be more ludicrous than the Rockefellers employing "a rabid radical to do their decorating work". He was also thinking that contrary to Rivera's own claims, Rivera had done all those on purpose without stating his objectives in his previous proposal. He in a way "played a funny little joke on Rockefellers by slipping Lenin in."⁸⁹

The reporter approached the issue from a different angle and made some suggestions as to why Rivera would have painted such a mural despite knowing that it would invoke controversy. According to the writer, "like all people of his type, Rivera was delighted to become a hero as well as a martyr and was taking full advantage of the situation."⁹⁰ He was right in a way as the incident had made a martyr of him in the eyes of the socialists, communists, reds and radicals of many types as well as college students. Radical groups assembled to organize a "unified front committee" to protest against the veiling of the Diego Rivera murals in Radio City, booed and hissed one another before they united a plan of action. Speakers and sympathizers of the John Reed Club, a communist organization that had long borne Rivera a grudge for selling his paintings to capitalists, started the protest.⁹¹ They even called Rivera to stand and speak out. They shared the same platform with him. In Spanish, French and English he called on the workers of the world to unite saying, "the paintings which my comrades and I have painted represent only one thing, they represent the color, banner of the proletariat, they represent the signal of the direction

⁸⁸ Rockefeller Papers "Rivera at Columbia" May 17, 1933 p.1

⁸⁹ Ibid,p.1.

⁹⁰ Ibid,p.1.

⁹¹ "Comrade Rivera Causes Red Row" *The New York Times* May 15, 1933 Art.32

in which the proletariat must go.”⁹² Rivera became “comrade Rivera” once again. People, mostly Mexican artists large in number, signed protests against Rockefeller thanking all the workers and American artists who protested against the destruction of Rivera mural. All the signers asked for the establishment of a legal guarantee to protect creative art which although it belonged to mankind, had been replaced by the forces of circumstance in the hands of capitalists who paid for it.⁹³ They defined the function of a work of art which would be useful to productive men and which would help the progress of humanity. Useless or false, art created in the mind of men the opposite effect, more truly, rendered worthless the activity and usefulness of humanity in favor of the personal interests of those who held financial power. They stated that Rockefellers with their financial power used and abused art. They noted in the protest petition that art was like morphine now. After all, morphine and cocaine which were intended for curative purposes were, by the perverse manipulations of capitalism, converted into intoxicants.⁹⁴

As obvious, this controversy created diverse sides in the media. Some newspapers justified Rockefeller and his acts; some reflected that Rivera was right in his battle. However, it is very difficult to come to the conclusion that American newspapers were supporting Rockefeller and Mexican newspapers gave credit to Rivera. There was not a homogenous reaction from American newspapers. Some of them even reflected the nativism that prevailed the era. *The Christian Century* of the time noted that many a hungry American artist read with watering mouth the story Mr. Rockefeller’s paying off Diego Rivera in full (21.000\$) and telling him that he need not bother to complete the murals which he had been engaged to paint for Radio

⁹² Ibid, Art 32.

⁹³ Rockefeller Papers “Abstract of the Protest” February 26, 1934. Series L, Box 139, Folder 1360 (N. Rockefeller and his comments on Rivera)

⁹⁴ Rockefeller Papers “Abstract of the Protest” February 26, 1934.

City.⁹⁵ The newspaper gave credit to Rivera as an artist stating that Rivera was the greatest mural painter in the western world. Yet, he was also a Mexican who always painted figures that demonstrated that he was communist. The newspaper did not mean to promote this “buy American” policy in the arts but it reported this confusion of getting an artist who was perfectly certain to produce a characteristically communist picture to do a job which called for something that would be characteristically American.⁹⁶ He was to reflect American way in an American building. Even General Motors began to feel the same way about it, for after engaging Rivera to paint a mural in their building at Chicago’s Century of Progress exposition, they cancelled the contract.

2.4.2.American Society of Painters and George Biddle

Among the protesters was also American Society of Painters. In protest against the destruction of the Diego Rivera mural in Rockefeller Center, the council of the American society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, including the membership of many of the most important artists in the country, decided to withdraw from the Municipal Art Show, which was to be held in Rockefeller Center. They published an explanatory statement. They announced their decision of withdrawal. Yet, they stated that this was not to be interpreted as a protest in sympathy with Rivera’s work or communistic propaganda.⁹⁷ This was propaganda of the artist for his ideas. Accordingly, it is obvious that although there was a nativist mentality in some Americans, some American artists were by Rivera’s side just to

⁹⁵ “Rivera, Too Communist and Too Mexican” *The Christian Century* May 24, 1933 Art.50.

⁹⁶ Ibid, Art. 50.

⁹⁷ “Art Society Quits Show in Protest” *The New York Times* February 15, 1934 Art.75.

protect the freedom of art and artist. Eleven artists from the group signed a protest labeling the controversy as “cultural vandalism” of the Rockefeller Center authorities for destroying Diego Rivera’s fresco.⁹⁸ They called upon other painters and sculptors to join in the protest by taking similar action. They also called upon Mayor LaGuardia either to cancel the forthcoming show or to transfer it to other quarters. The signers of the protest were prominent painters such as A.S. Baylinson, Maurice Becker, George Biddle, Hugo Gellert, H. Glintenkamp, William Gropper, Edward Laning, Louis Lozowick, Walter Pach, Helene Sardeau, Ben Shahn and John Sloan. Leon Kroll, president of the American Society of Painters, Sculptors, Gravers and a member of the committee in charge of arranging the Municipal Art Show, said that he could not speak in behalf of the organization which he headed, since the council had yet to take up the matter. Yet, he personally felt “greatly distressed about the destruction of the Rivera Mural.”⁹⁹ He stated that regardless of whether it was a great work of art, Rockefeller family did not have a moral right to take such action. He continued that it was particularly unfortunate to do so at this time, since the purpose of the forthcoming Municipal Art Show was to get all the best artists of New York together in a harmony party.¹⁰⁰ Another protest was made by Ralph M. Pearson, artist and teacher formerly associated with the New School for Social Research. He withdrew his exhibit from the forthcoming Industrial Arts Exhibition to be held by the National Alliance of Art and Industry in the RCA building in Rockefeller Center.¹⁰¹ Not all the people from art world put the blame on Rockefeller. A different point of view was expressed by Harry Watrous, president of the National Academy of Design and also a member of the committee arranging the Municipal Art Show,

⁹⁸ “Artists Quit Show in Rivera Protest” *The New York Times* February 14, 1934 Art. 73

⁹⁹ “Artists Quit Show in Rivera Protest” *The New York Times* February 14, 1934 Art. 73

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, Art. 73.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, Art 73.

who termed the withdrawal of artists from the show as “an almost infinitesimal tempest in a tea pot as the show would not even know that they have withdrawn.”¹⁰² The ideal of the Municipal Art Exhibition was “to show paintings by New York artists from the most radical to the most conservative and to see the reaction of the public”, according to Mr. Watrous.¹⁰³ He expressed a directly opposite argument with many other artists. Mr. Watrous stated that for artists to speak of the destruction of Rivera Mural as a crime against art was all “poppycock”. He did not see the painting so he stated that he could not speak of its merits as a work of art.¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, George Biddle’s take on the clash was just the opposite with Watrous. Biddle signed the bill which read as “we, the undersigned artists, indignant over the cultural vandalism of the Rockefeller Center authorities in destroying Diego Rivera’s fresco, announce that we will not show our pictures at the Municipal Art Show if it’s held at Rockefeller Center.”¹⁰⁵ Biddle was greatly “distressed about the destruction of the Rivera mural” and he thought that it was particularly unfortunate to destroy a mural at that time, since the purpose of the forthcoming Municipal Art Show is to get all the best artists together “in a harmony party”.¹⁰⁶

Several other newspapers went on questioning both sides. His work in New York was classified as everything from a “marvelous interpretation of industrial life” to “pure communistic propaganda”.¹⁰⁷ Which was right or wrong? On the one hand, there was this work of art, once lawfully acquired, to be looked upon as a piece of personal property, which might be disposed of if the owner let. On the other hand,

¹⁰² Ibid, Art 73.

¹⁰³ “Artists Quit Show in Rivera Protest” *The New York Times* February 14, 1934 Art. 73.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, Art 73.

¹⁰⁵ “Artists Quit Show in Rivera Protest” *The New York Times* February 14, 1934 Art. 73

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, Art.73

¹⁰⁷ “Rivera Loses 100 pounds” *The New York Times* December 19, 1933- Art.65

did a work of art possess an intangible value not involved in a transfer of ownership? Might art be scrapped? There was not a definite answer both legally and artistically to these questions. The newspapers tried to evaluate the issue by means of “ifs”. They noted that if Rivera had not, in the first place, been engaged to paint at Rockefeller Center, the issue would have never arisen.¹⁰⁸ His political views were perfectly known. The newspaper continued with another “if” stating that if the Rockefellers had removed the fresco, instead of permitting it to be hacked to bits, there would have been no cause for further complaint. Finally “and this would be the simplest of all”, if the Rockefellers had advised Rivera that structural changes involving the wall in question were to be undertaken and invited him to come in and take his fresco away.”¹⁰⁹ In this interpretation, the American newspaper blamed Rockefeller for his lack of vision which caused further problems. There was not a unity in the approach of the American press in general. Some of them blamed Rivera for being propagandistic; some of them thought that it was the fault of Rockefeller due to his lack of vision and inconsiderate attitudes. American media was still not ready for a major shift in the approach to art changing from the modernist codes of art for art’s sake to “actionable art”, but at least, they started questioning and had more or less a liberal town which was a facilitating factor for the actionable art to thrive in the US.

¹⁰⁸ “Removing a Mural” *The New York Times* February 14, 1934 Art.74

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, Art 74.

2.4.3 Mexican Newspapers

The Mexican press of that time, almost all of them, was harsh and they published many things against Rivera. According to some Mexican journalists, Rivera caused a clash on purpose and he wanted to gain more reputation around the world, which he managed to do so because most of the American newspapers were publishing articles about Rivera.¹¹⁰ He was running after new commissions and money according to the Mexican newspapers. They accused him of being a “cunning bourgeoisie” and “enfant terrible of art”.¹¹¹ According to them he had unconformity, some problems with his *Mexicanidad*.¹¹² His physical appearance and his inferiority complex was the reason behind this “infernal torment to himself”.¹¹³ According to these newspapers, to console himself, he generated controversies as the “painter of ugliness and besides... a communist... a merchant and Indian lover.”¹¹⁴ The newspaper, *El Excelsior*, gave credit to Rockefeller’s talent but also noted that while trying to promote “actionable art”, he didn’t produce art for the masses but for a small group of privileged people, for minorities, for “snobs like Rockefeller”.¹¹⁵ They, in a way, insinuated that Rivera was hypocritical about this “actionable art”. They were very critical and judgmental about Rivera and his work. These criticisms made Rivera anxious during the clash as many of his Mexican intellectual friends who were writing for these newspapers condemned him for betraying the masses by

¹¹⁰ “Nueva York de Dia y de Noche” *El Universal* May 26, 1933- Art 54- Mas si el profeta hubiese agregado que Rivera, ademas de ser reconocido aqui como un gran pintor, acaban da proclamarlo criticos del calibre de Walter Pach y John Sloan, habria de ser aceptado no solo en su plastica admirable sino hasta en su radical ideologica. Hace dos semanas que los retativos a diario hacen resonar el nombre RIVERA en reportazgos, editoriales y comentarios justicieros.

¹¹¹ “Por El Ojo De La Llave: Diego Rivera Revolucionario” *El Universal* May 12, 1933- Art 24.

¹¹² “Editoriales Breves: La Estetica de Diego Rivera” *El Excelsior* May 16, 1933- Art.33.

¹¹³ Ibid, Art. 33.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, Art.33- the original words-“Pintor de la feo, y, ademas... comunista”.

¹¹⁵ “Lo Del Dia Por un Observador: Diego Rivera, el Gincel y la Tea” *El Excelsior* February 18, 1934- Art 83.

painting for Rockefeller.¹¹⁶ Such kind of a reaction made him more decisive and rigid about his steps and messages he wanted to convey with his RCA mural. There was no return since he started to take this path he was definitely go for his mural without any compromise at all.

2.5. Conclusion

There was not a monolithic interpretation of this clash by the American newspapers. Some of them were pro-Rivera and some of them found Rockefeller and his tumultuous action reasonable. They generated the environment of discussion and that's what must be appreciated for the generation and progress of "actionable art". Some of them attacked Diego Rivera as he rejected to change the content of his work, namely excluding Lenin. They noted that if the penalty seemed harsh to Rivera and his doctrine sympathizers, he should have been blessed that it happened in America. They added that he had his liberty and received his pay in full.¹¹⁷ They compared the US with Russia stating that "in Russia, had he exercised a questionable liberty contrary to the sentiments of the 'governing classes', the Cheka would have had him in prison and he would be on the road to Siberia."¹¹⁸

Some American newspapers noted that Rockefeller was disrespectful to the notion and function of both art and artist. They asked, "has the owner of a work of art the right to destroy it? Almost instinctively the answer comes, 'no'."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Rivera, *My Art, My Life* p.129.

¹¹⁷ "Rivera Again" *The Art Digest* May 15, 1933- Art.21.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, Art.21.

¹¹⁹ "Walls and Ethics" *The Art Digest*, March 1, 1934- Art.93

Mexican newspapers were much clearer about their approach to the issue. They were against Rivera in every aspect and blamed the clash on him. While discussing the place of propaganda in art, they pointed Rivera for causing scandal to gain reputation worldwide.¹²⁰ This was just for the sake of Rivera's self-interests, according to the Mexican newspapers. They didn't note a productive objective on the part of art.

In general American newspapers were more liberal in terms of approaching the clash, which might be counted as a factor that made the transformation to the "actionable art" easier. But Mexican newspapers also caused the clash to go further with their bitter criticisms on Rivera, which made him more determined to defend his cause and promote a message-oriented art no matter what Rockefeller did to prevent him.

¹²⁰ "Como Vamos Viviendo: El Escandalo Como Propaganda" *El Excelsior* May 11, 1933-Art.19.

CHAPTER III

DIEGO RIVERA AND TRACES OF HIS LIFE ON HIS ACTIONABLE ART

The clash Diego Rivera involved in was not a simple controversy as can be understood from the previous chapter. When we analyze this clash, a certain sense of curiosity prevails over and leads to several questions such as what kind of a person Diego Rivera was. His upbringing, roots and personal characteristics give away so many clues, which helps make better understand the issue. Now that the reader is familiar with the whole issue about the clash, he will understand that Rivera was courageous enough to defy Rockefeller and all that criticism against all odds as much as he could. Yet, still there are so many contradictory points in this story, which would be solved out by looking at Rivera's background. This chapter re-evaluates the painter's historical and cultural roots.

Rivera was born into a wealthy family, which facilitated his intellectual and artistic development as he had the means to develop himself. He travelled to Europe to study painting and had the chance to work with great artists in Madrid and France.

He gives a detailed account of his days in Europe as an avid art student. He says, “I have often tried to find an explanation for the incongruity between my understanding of life and my way of responding to it in this period of my painting”.¹²¹ It seems that he was trying to find his style and method as much as his personality and world-view. He mentions an inferiority complex which he went through during his times in Europe. He says, “I was aware of my Mexican-American inferiority complex, my awe before historic Europe and its culture.”¹²² He had to come to terms with this inferiority complex so that he could realize and use his own potential. As the years passed by, he gained his confidence and changed his mindset. He notes, “I now know that he who hopes to be universal in his art must plant in his own soil”.¹²³ According to him, great art was like a tree which grew in a particular place and had a trunk, leaves, blossoms, boughs, fruits and roots of its own.¹²⁴ With these words in mind, he attempted at emphasizing the significance of native art for the development of an artist. Thanks to his visit to Europe he concluded that “the more native art is, the more it belongs to the entire world because taste is rooted in nature. When art is true, it is one with nature”.¹²⁵ This was the secret of primitive art and also of the art of the masters-Michelangelo, Cezanne, Seurat and Renoir- as Rivera noted. In his diary he also added that the secret of his best work was that it was Mexican.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Rivera, My Art, My life p. 31

¹²² P.31

¹²³ P.31.

¹²⁴ P.31.

¹²⁵ P.31.

¹²⁶ P.31.

3.1. Mexican Revolution and Its Reflection on Diego Rivera's Perception of Art

With his quintessential characteristics of Mexicanidad, he managed to move the masses both on favorable and unfavorable terms. The Mexican Revolution shaped his thoughts considerably. He saw how the Revolution was taking place. The Revolution strengthened the notions of national identity in Mexico. Historian Desmond Rochfort describes this big event on his own terms stating that half-Indian Porfirio Diaz despised native Mexican Culture and like many in Mexico, followed the trend of lightening his face with powder to look more European.¹²⁷ However, Alvaro Obregon, the new president, had ousted those government officials who worshipped Europe and regarded them as “the intellectual and cultural model for Mexico”.¹²⁸ The history of Mexican mural renaissance started at the beginning of the 1920's during the administration of Obregon. The minister of education Jose Vasconcelos who proclaimed Mexican education to be about “being Mexican with blood, language and people” shaped the course of Rivera's art career.

In 1921-1922, Vasconcelos commissioned artists, one of them being Diego Rivera, to decorate the walls of the school with frescoes, paintings drawn on the walls. The Revolution of 1910 gave Mexico so much hope and reason to transform the society. By the late twenties, many students, teachers and artists became politicized turning into political activists. They had a common belief of “making *la raza*”¹²⁹ strong again by connecting people to their roots through education and art.”¹³⁰ A revolution in culture was necessary to be truly a nation.

¹²⁷ Desmond, Rochfort. *Mexican Muralists* (Mexico, University of Chapingo Press, 1993), p.34

¹²⁸ Malka Drucker, *Frida Kahlo: Torment and Triumph in her Life and Art*, (Bantam Books, 1991), p. 13.

¹²⁹ La raza refers to Mexican race.

¹³⁰ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p. 37.

Historian Malka Drucker gives a brief explanation of how pre-Columbian art, which reflected the indigenous roots, came to be embraced by Mexican people during the Revolution of 1910. She notes that pre-Columbian art, which predated Columbus's discovery of the New World, once considered crude and primitive, and was now found to be powerfully beautiful in its "frank" expression of life.¹³¹ In pre-Columbian art works, fertility goddesses with small figures represented events in everyday life such as childbirth or haircut. These ordinary, everyday life events were part of that culture's art. Malka Drucker also pays attention to the change on the social level. He says, tequila and pulque replaced French wine while mariachi music, folk art and peasant clothing became the new style. Avant-garde mothers carried their babies in *rebozos*¹³² instead of pushing them in English prams.¹³³

While these social changes were taking place in Mexico City, Mexican artists unified at one point. Drucker notes, Mexican artists, even those who had studied in Europe, proclaimed in a collaborative statement that "Mexican art is great because it surges from the people."¹³⁴ Rivera shared the same belief as can be understood from the fact that he put "man" at the center of almost all of his murals.

Drucker also adds that as part of the new Mexican society, artists were trying to create a revolutionary atmosphere and they wanted their work to be "public property".¹³⁵ This notion pervaded the mindset of Diego Rivera as well. Although he knew that as part of a "patronage", he was commissioned to do an art project taking the instructions of Rockefeller into consideration, he chose to treat the work as part of a social project belonging to public. As a result, he overlooked some of Rockefeller's instructions, in a way, by incorporating Lenin into his work.

¹³¹ Ibid. p.37.

¹³² Rebozo means large shawls.

¹³³ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p.37.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.37.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p.37.

Mexican artists made an effort to put man forward in every way that they could. They issued a manifesto declaring that “the makers of beauty must invest in their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people, and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression for individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs struggle.”¹³⁶ As a matter of fact, this manifesto celebrated beautiful, actionable art. It combined beauty and action. The second element was what the US modernist art lacked by that time.

Such Mexican artists as Jose Clemente Orozco, David Siquieros and Diego Rivera were responsible for the action- and- beauty -packed Mexican Mural Renaissance and Mexico’s prominent position in modern art in the thirties. Like most of the Mexican artists and intellectuals, they were supporting the Revolution of 1910 and Russian Communism. They regarded Russian communism as the ideal model. Diego Rivera was no exception. He was exposed to political and social theories from the Russian painters, writers and exiles when he was back in Europe. He became a member of the Mexican Communist Party. He joined the party but he couldn’t stay there for long. He had several problems with the party’s leaders. The problems emerged for several reasons. Firstly, the Communist Party in Mexico was not content with the work Rivera did for capitalists in the US and for the right-wing Mexican government. The party accused him of mixed loyalties and populism.¹³⁷ The party also didn’t like Rivera’s independence. Rivera didn’t share all the ideas Mexican Communist Party believed firmly. For example, their ideas differed in regard to Joseph Stalin, ruler of Russian Communism. Stalin had a reputation of a brutal leader who was ready to do anything radical and atrocious for the sake of his causes. Historian Drucker states that “Rivera was not pro-Stalinist enough for the

¹³⁶ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p.38.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 49.

Communist party who called him a painter of millionaires and a government agent because he had friends outside the party.”¹³⁸ When Rivera began to work in the ministry of education, he was attracting a lot of publicity. The reporters started to call him a “quote machine”.¹³⁹ He was treated like a celebrity, which must have brought a certain type of jealousy among his fellow party members.

He was dismissed from Mexican Communist party due to these disagreements. In fact, he was not a man of “totalizing discourses”. He did not belong to any –ist’s on his own right, although many historians tried to lump him into a category. Rivera lived his life pursuing his own interests. As the circumstances changed, the way of his handling the issues changes as well. He lived according to his interests. If being patronized by the rich people was in accord with his interests, he did it. If it was at his best interest to support the ideals of Communism, he did it. When cracks occurred or anything that conflicted with his interests, he stopped supporting it. He had problems with Rockefeller, whom he was praising in his correspondence. He experienced the same thing with the Mexican minister of education Jose Vasconcelos. He was once working with Vasconcelos shoulder to shoulder. However, there came the time that they had dissension. Historian Pete Hamill notes that, when Rivera sensed that a serious split was developing between the president Alvaro Obregon and Vasconcelos, Rivera began to back away from Vasconcelos.¹⁴⁰ The minister of education resigned from his post in 1924. Upon this, Rivera started to work with the new Minister of Education, J. M. Puig Casauranc. He convinced the new minister to keep him at work on the mural projects. He gave Rivera the full authority with the ministry murals. Hamill regarded Rivera as a very

¹³⁸ Ibid. p.50.

¹³⁹ Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, (New York: Abraham Books, 2002), p.97.

¹⁴⁰ Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, p.98.

clever person in that “Rivera was a very good politician as he understood that all power was provisional.”¹⁴¹ He adds, “other painters might worry about the future development of their work, Diego had learned to worry about the future of the people who signed the checks.”¹⁴²

3.2 His Times in the US

As you will remember from the previous chapters, Jose Vasconcelos, the Mexican Ministry of Education, envisioned a mural movement which would teach the illiterate Mexican masses about their country and Mexican identity. However, Diego Rivera was now starting to paint murals for businessmen in the US.

Turning to murals was like turning back to his origins for Rivera. The word “mural” itself is Spanish and means “wall” now signifying larger meanings as “wall painting”. Their visit to the US was thanks to their very own Mexican “mural paintings” because he was commissioned to paint walls in San Francisco Stock Exchange Luncheon Club and the California School of Fine Arts. The US doors were opened to Rivera through the American sculptor Ralph Stockpole whom he had met in Europe. This was a great opportunity for Rivera to test and prove his mural techniques outside Mexico City. Rivera thought that modern mural art was ideal for the US as a truly industrial city.¹⁴³

He wanted to go to the US very much. This will sound contradictory as he was part of a nationalist art project in Mexico City. Yet, this must be no surprise as a person who is attached to his interests would easily make moves for his own good.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p.98.

¹⁴² Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, p.98.

¹⁴³ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.105.

To get a reputation in the US would mean a lot to Rivera both politically and artistically. Historian Drucker states another reason for Diego's travel to the US. He mentions that Diego told a reporter in the US that he had come as a spy to bring revolutionary art to a capitalist country.¹⁴⁴ None of the businessmen must have taken him seriously as Rivera would like to utter sensational remarks to be the center of attention. If they had cared, they wouldn't have commissioned him at all. Vasconcelos wanted to change the peasants and indigenous people of Mexico yet Diego must have aimed at changing the big corporate patrons with his murals.

When Rivera applied for admission into the US, he ran considerable difficulty because of his political affiliations. Rivera was an old member of Mexican Communist Party. "A prominent San Francisco art patron and collector" Albert Bender made an effort to help Rivera obtain a visa easily. When he arrived in the US, he received a magnificent welcome from the people of San Francisco with parties, dinners and receptions as he tells.¹⁴⁵

Right after arriving in San Francisco, he starts working on his mural, "Making a Frescoe". He recounts, "I chose another wall, ten times as big. It was here where I showed how a mural is actually painted."¹⁴⁶ He also gives a brief account of the atmosphere with the scaffold, the assistants plastering, sketching and painting, Rivera resting at midpoint, and the actual mural subject, a worker whose hand is turning a valve so placed to seem part of a mechanism of the building. The problem was that since he was facing and leaning toward his work, the portrait of himself was a rear view with his buttocks protruding over the edge of the scaffold. As Rivera notes in his diary, some people took it as a deliberate expression of contempt for American hosts and raised a clamor. So the mural caused a conflict that Diego Rivera did not

¹⁴⁴ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁵ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.105.

¹⁴⁶ Rivera, *My Art, My life*, p.108.

intend to stir according to his account. He says, “I insisted that the painting meant nothing else than what it pictured. I would never think of insulting the people of a city I had come to love and in which I had been continuously happy.”¹⁴⁷ He was disappointed with what he had gone through but he pulled himself together soon.

The work in the US caused so much trouble and headache for Rivera but he took advantage of some of the opportunities while working in California. California was an ideal intermediate step between Mexico and the United States, as he tells. He found it more agricultural than industrial but its agriculture was highly advanced and mechanized.¹⁴⁸ He described the state counting its similarities and differences with Mexico:

“Its mining districts are very like the part of Mexico where I was born, even though the primitive mining technique of my boyhood days bore little enough relation to the methods in use here, and the state as a whole is a rich land intimately bound up with the remains of its earlier Mexican character, forming a transition stage between the Industrial East and primitive backward Mexico and the flat plains and lake dotted rolling hills of the Middle West, North and the East, the cradle of America’s industrialization.”¹⁴⁹

Besides finding a place very much like Mexico, he enlarged his circle of rich friends and artists. While working in California, he met William Valentiner and Edgar Richardson of the Detroit Institute of Arts. He directly mentioned his desire which he wanted to paint a series of murals about the industries of the US, a series that would constitute a new kind of plastic poem, depicting in color and form the story of each industry and its division of labor.¹⁵⁰ Valentiner was keenly interested and he considered his idea as a “potential base for a new school of modern art in America as related to the social structure and understanding of American life”.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.108.

¹⁴⁸ Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America* p.13

¹⁴⁹ Ibid p.14

¹⁵⁰ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.108.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p.109.

Valentiner had this foresight which came true with the Federal Art Project. A new understanding of art came out in the murals of Federal Art Project.

Rivera reflected all his hopes, resentments and observation of the US in his exhibitions. He included representations of subjects he observed in the city. In the murals, “Electric Welding” showed a group of workers welding a big boiler in one of the power and light plants of the General Electric Company. “Pneumatic Drilling” depicted laborers drilling through the rock ledge of Manhattan preparatory to the construction of Rockefeller Center.¹⁵² Rivera was amazed at the collaboration of the industrial power and man power which facilitated lives of so many people in the US.

Industrialization with man power was a life-long interest for Rivera. He noted that his childhood passion for mechanical toys had been transmuted to a delight in machinery for its own sake and for its meaning to men. Rivera believed in the power of industry which provided men with self-fulfillment and liberation from drudgery and poverty.¹⁵³ That was why he placed “the collective hero, man and machine-higher than the old traditional heroes of art and legend”.¹⁵⁴ He felt that in the society of the future as already, man and machine would be as important as air, water and the light of the sun.¹⁵⁵

Rivera found this perfect collaboration stunning. However, he was also surprised at the huge gap between the rich and the poor. The most ambitious of his frescoes represented various strata of life in New York during the Great Depression. At the top were skyscrapers reaching up to the sky. Underneath them were people going home, miserably crushed together on the subway trains.¹⁵⁶ In the center was a wharf used by homeless, unemployed as their dormitory, with a muscular cop

¹⁵² Ibid p.110.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p.112.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid p.112.

¹⁵⁵ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.111.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.110.

standing. In the lower part of the panel, he showed a steel-grilled safety deposit vault in which a lady was depositing her jewels while other persons waited for their turn to enter the sanctum. At the bottom of the panel were networks of subway tunnels, water pipes, electric conduits and sewage pipes. His exhibition consisted of 150 pieces. He actually reflected American lives to American people and served as a mirror for them. Although there was embarrassment in some quarters about the frankness with which Rivera represented the current economic crisis, he notes that, his exhibition was well received.¹⁵⁷ He wanted to perfect his way but still he failed to fulfill one of his hopes in the show. His intention was to give American museum directors and architects a grasp of the character and value of mural painting. Rivera believed that a true appreciation of the mural might be long in coming to the US. According to him, the chief obstacle was “the essentially temporary characteristic of its architecture, combined with the North American preference for commodities of easy manipulation, which resulted in the creation of expensive, screen printed wallpaper rather than wall-painting of real artistic value.”¹⁵⁸ He put forward that Americans couldn’t grasp the real technique and materials for the mural painting. He tells that the movable panels which he did for a show gave a “fairly good idea” of his technique “but not of the true uses of medium”.¹⁵⁹

Rich businessmen were competing with each other to show their industrial improvement and to celebrate their accomplishments. The way for it was to put murals on all around their headquarters which conveyed the story of success. These murals would most probably be customized and tailored according to the tastes and instructions of these businessmen. The system of patronage was all around. For instance, just like his work with Rockefeller, Rivera received instructions from

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.110.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p.110.

¹⁵⁹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.110.

Henry Ford while he was working with him. Ford set some conditions for Rivera that in representing the industry of Detroit, he shouldn't limit himself to steel and automobiles but take in chemicals pharmaceuticals, which were also important in the economy of the city.¹⁶⁰ Ford wanted to have a full tableau of the Industrial life of Detroit. Rivera adds that Ford warned him good-humoredly that he wished to avoid any impression of partiality toward the industry served by his father and himself.¹⁶¹

Although he warned Rivera, another controversy was inevitable. He received many criticisms about his work in Detroit and he was touched by these criticisms as he notes them in his autobiography. Critics viewed his murals as Marxist Propaganda. Diego Rivera deemed all these criticisms as unfair. He stated, "what I didn't understand was that certain people in Detroit were looking for a pretext to attack me and my mural" and he gives an example to these people one of them being Father Coughlin¹⁶². He named him as a "crackpot" telling that he had his own radio station at this disposal for the dissemination of his "lunacies". He added that Father Coughlin began to honor him daily with long diatribes condemning the institute frescoes as "immoral, blasphemous, antireligious, obscene, materialistic and communistic".¹⁶³ He experienced the agonies and limitations of a painter under the patronage system in the US.

Rivera had a love-hate relationship with the US. He fluctuated between embracing the US and condemning it most probably taking his interests into consideration. He loved the freedom but he detested the struggle, the distinct division between the very rich and the very poor. This love-hate relationship is best epitomized in how he took on Henry Ford. He wrote, "I regretted that Henry-Ford

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.111.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p.111

¹⁶² He is a controversial Roman Catholic priest who used radio to reach audience during the 1930's.

¹⁶³ Rivera, *My Art My Life*, p.182.

was a capitalist and one of the richest men on the earth.”¹⁶⁴ He didn’t feel free to praise Ford as loudly as he wanted to because he believed that would put him under the suspicion of flattering the rich. He said that, otherwise, he would write a book presenting Henry Ford as he saw Ford a “true poet and artist, one of the greatest in the world”.¹⁶⁵ His admiration towards Ford was that much strong. According to Rivera, Henry Ford made the work of socialist state possible but Rivera also added that none of their contributions would have meant anything without the political genius of Stalin.¹⁶⁶ He pictured Ford’s factories in an idyllic fashion.

“As I rode back to Detroit, a vision of Henry Ford’s industrial empire kept passing before my Eyes. In my ears, I heard the wonderful symphony which came from his factories where metals were shaped into tools for men’s service. It was a new music, waiting for the composer with genius enough to give it communicable form.”¹⁶⁷

As a person, widely known to be a communist, he was praising the deeds of a person who was not other than an avid capitalist. Because Rivera was a person full of contradictions, he reflected all these on his work of art. He had many inconsistencies both in his mind and in his life. For example, he might wear boots, carry a pistol and paint the Communist hammer and sickle, but he would live in luxury.¹⁶⁸ Historian Malka Drucker states that wealthy art collectors, artist and intellectuals filled their elegant house on the broad tree-lined Paseo de La Reforma in Mexico City. This was a street and its houses resembled Paris, and the famous boulevard, Champs Elysées, in Paris.

Rivera family had mixed feelings towards the US. In fact, Diego Rivera embraced the industrial development and professional improvement (as previously stated) while his wife Frida Kahlo despised the huge income gap. Frida found the system in the US quite ferocious. According to her, the most important thing for

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p.115.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.115.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p.117.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p.111.

¹⁶⁸ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p. 49.

everyone in Gringolandia¹⁶⁹ was to have ambition, to succeed in becoming “somebody”.¹⁷⁰ As to the gap between the rich and the poor, she commented, “it is not right that some people have so much more than the others.”¹⁷¹ Maybe this was due to the fact that they came to the US in the middle of the Great Depression. It was inevitable to see people standing in line for soup and bread, men in ties and jackets who were selling something in the streets.

She was also not content with the architecture and the perception of art in the US. She told, “although I am very interested in all the industrial and mechanical development of the US, I find that Americans completely lack sensibility and good taste.”¹⁷² She added, “Americans live as if in an enormous chicken coop that is dirty and uncomfortable. The houses look like bread ovens and all the comfort that they talk about is a myth.”¹⁷³ She was complaining to a friend about the US in that the US cultural influence had a great impact on Mexican territories. She was not happy with her hometown either but she still thought that the little positive things about Mexico was disrupted by the US cultural hegemony. She wrote, “Mexico is as always, disorganized and gone to the devil, the only thing that it retains is the immense beauty of the land and of the Indians.”¹⁷⁴ She was discontent with the US influence regarding it as “the US ugliness” claiming that it was stealing away the beauty of Mexico and that there was nothing to do in order to stop it, the big fish eats the little one, she concluded.¹⁷⁵ Historian Drucker gives background information to offer an interpretation of Frida’s arguments. He tells that by “ugliness”, Frida referred to “inexpensive and quick-to-build structures, tasteless American food and a worship of

¹⁶⁹ Some Mexicans would call the US as Gringolandia and the American people as Gringos.

¹⁷⁰ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p. 91.

¹⁷¹ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p.58.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.57.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.57.

¹⁷⁴ Drucker, *Frida Kahlo*, p.56.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.56.

money.”¹⁷⁶ She told Rivera all of her concerns about the US but every time Rivera ended up defending the country to his wife because before Rivera had problems with Rockefeller, he had quite positive remarks concerning the US. His opinions changed right after his artwork was destroyed on the authority of Nelson Rockefeller. Diego Rivera was aware of the fact that machines would free people as they would take care of most of the repetitious, time and energy consuming tasks. Only a few could afford a hand-woven carpet but many could afford the same carpet by machine.¹⁷⁷ Industrialization would lower the costs. On the top of that, Ford’s invention of production with assembly line would facilitate the freedom more. That’s why Rivera mentioned Ford and the usage of machine in the US in his diaries with a heroic fashion. Yet, right after what he had gone through with Rockefellers, he noted, “in February of 1934, I had returned to Mexico, my radio city mural was smashed to pieces from the wall. Thus was a great victory won over a portrait of Lenin; thus was free expression honored in America.”¹⁷⁸ A country where freedom was prevailing became a country which was disrespectful towards freedom of expression, Rivera thought. He was actually disillusioned with the lack of freedom under patronage and so did many American artists who were able to experience this most vividly with Rockefeller-Rivera clash.

Diego Rivera had the hopes reconstructing the mural somewhere in the US. Yet, he couldn’t find a suitable place and the means to start his project. So he went to New Workers School that was maintained by a communist group in opposition to the Communist Party. He decided to paint a series of movable panels, which the school could transport when it moved to another building. The important thing about it is that the theme of his work was “Portrait of America”, in which he aimed at

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.56.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.54.

¹⁷⁸ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.128.

representing each period of the US. It is in the Museum of Modern Art now. He did twenty one panels in all representing such objects as American Revolution, Shay's Rebellion, the westward expansion, the antislavery movement, the Civil War, Reconstruction, The World War I and the Syndicalist Movement, modern industry, the new liberties, the imperialism, the Depression and the New Deal. He painted portrait interpretations of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, John Brown and other figures of importance in American history and thought. He wanted to "create a dynamic history of the US from the Colonial Era to 1933, illuminating the continuous struggle between the privileged and the dispossessed."¹⁷⁹

His US experience changed his perspective about the US. The more he engaged with the American public, the more unstable his ideas became about the US. In a nutshell, he was very positive about the country as long as the system there would have let him accomplish what he wanted. Otherwise, if it conflicted with his interests, he turned negative about the country. However, deep down, he admired the system and industry in the US. That's why he saw the country as an opportunity for his murals to change perception in the US. Namely, he wanted the reunion of man's, worker's power and the power of the machines. His murals would empower the unprivileged. Maybe his "Mexican-American inferiority", that he coined himself, fuelled him with this ambition and will to empower the underprivileged through art, as he himself, was an underprivileged person in his own eyes. After all, he had to endure many difficulties in Mexico (his conflict with Mexican Communist Party) as well as in the US (his conflict with businessmen and with some American public).

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p.130.

He told, “my life had not been an easy one. Everything I had gotten, I had to struggle for. And having got it, I had to fight even harder to get it.”¹⁸⁰ He had to fight for his interests. Again, his interests had played a key role on both how he viewed the US as he went on living there and how he made sense of the Rockefeller issue. If his personal nature and his background in Mexico are well understood, his experience in the US and his making of the Rockefeller-Rivera clash would be clearer enough to make sense.

His reactionary attitude and “revolutionary stance” were first shaped in Europe. He combined his stance with the Mexican mural movement during the Mexican Revolution. His “actionable” murals became his signature even after he went to the US to continue this “tradition of actionable art”. It created a lot of buzz as the US was not accustomed to a message-oriented art. Yet, the discussions related to this new kind of art opened new doors for New Deal art projects and they influenced American muralists. These federal projects provided the artists with freedom that the patronage system lacked in the US thus far. Only courageous, unstable and uncontrollable Rivera would have succeeded to demonstrate this in a country like the US, which was also courageous, unstable and uncontrollably developing.

¹⁸⁰ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.180.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION:

“ACTIONABLE NEW DEAL ART”

Rivera’s “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future” created a lot of action in the US for sure. We have covered this action in the very first chapter. People began to question the action and function of art, which was a perception very new to the American art lovers. As mentioned in the previous chapters, Rivera was against the notion of a mural as a mere accessory or ornament.¹⁸¹ He found this notion as “typically American”.¹⁸²

He was rather prejudiced by deeming this notion as typically American. Every art work, whether an ornament or not, carries some kind of an emotion which might hide a message underneath. The objective does not necessarily have to be related to carrying a message but even the stance of the art work might bear a view and thus a message. In other words, it would be wrong to lump the American art into a category. For instance, an art work which might be regarded as an ornament might well demonstrate the aura of jazz age, roaring twenties and insinuate a message about

¹⁸¹ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p. 125.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 125.

that particular American era. However, whether these art works managed to create a buzz, whether their messages were strong and obvious enough to change something and thus whether they could be regarded as “actionable” are the main questions. Rivera-Rockefeller clash was the catalyzer that brought up these questions. The discussions that revolved around whether art should carry a message and move the masses opened new horizons for Americans. These discussions motivated by the Rivera-Rockefeller clash contributed to the “actionable New Deal art” during the 1930’s.

4.1. The Origin of New Deal Art

The Great Depression hit the US with full strength and changed the course of American nation to a great extent. The fall in stock prices began in September 4, 1929. It had a tremendous impact on the nation. President Herbert Hoover tried to put several acts and tariffs into effect. However, he was not successful enough to manage the economic depression. As the economy deteriorated, the nation sought a savior in a way who would be effective enough to end the economic depression.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 4, 1933. He announced that “with the understanding of the people themselves” he would end the “unjustified terror which paralyzes” and commence the “primary task” which was “to put people to work.”¹⁸³ Lots of people were put back to work through several programs under the umbrella of New Deal plan. This thesis deals with the Federal Art Project which was a part of Work Progress Administration tied to New Deal. The

¹⁸³ Roger, G. Kennedy, *When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art and Democracy*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2009), p.22.

New Deal was a series of programs enacted in the US between 1933 and 1936. It aimed at relief for the poor and unemployed, recovery of the economy and reform of the broken financial system. The Second New Deal was enacted during 1935 and 1938. Work Progress Administration was part of the Second New Deal. It was the largest New Deal Agency and it employed millions of unemployed people. The New Deal put art to work for the community. Roosevelt was satisfied with the Federal Art Project that he told Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of the Treasury, that one hundred years from then, his administration would be known for its art, not for its relief.¹⁸⁴

The arts programs of the Roosevelt Administration had two objectives. It was a work relief for unemployed artists and secondly it was a commission for those who might take it without government aid but who would aid in “re-inspiring community”.¹⁸⁵ By the end of Roosevelt’s first term, the work relief program of the Work Progress Administration was reported by *Time* magazine in March 1936, to have been able to announce that “4.300 muralists, portrait painters, print makers, sculptors...etc. are now at work... on 327 projects that will cost 3000000 dollars.”¹⁸⁶

4.2. A Look at the Mural Section of the Federal Art Project

With the Federal Art Project, a huge amount of art work was produced : 100.000 easel paintings, 18.000 sculptures, over 13.000 prints, not to mention posters and photographs. This section of the thesis will look at the content of some of the murals that were painted by some American artists as a part of Federal Art Project. The contents will prove that the actionable art executed during Mexican Revolution

¹⁸⁴ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.24.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p.26.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p.26.

by several renowned Mexican muralists was now taking its place in the US with New Deal Art Projects.

First of all, the messages conveyed by the New Deal murals were concentrated on “healing, courage and finding the strength to go on”.¹⁸⁷ This was the core message president Roosevelt wanted to give to American nation. Furthermore, the murals depicted American life and culture exploring American identity. FDR also wanted to promote unity through “citizenship”. Each and every American was bound to this nation by the strong bonds of “citizenship”. Everybody including the artists was citizens who should have done everything they could to get this nation back on track. Mrs. Roosevelt helped the President to organize and gather the artists around a cause. She gathered several artists for an objective. Most New Deal artists had this objective, this responsibility to explore art’s many expressions, to reach out as many Americans as possible, and to put art to practical uses.¹⁸⁸

Reaching out Americans meant Indians, blacks, tenants, farm laborers along with magnates, lawn parties and mansions. They were to democratize art in a way. Muralists such as Olin Dows succeed in including all walks of life in American society. Mrs. Roosevelt also praised him and her husband, the President, adding that Dows Sketches would help “us to remember that out of this kind of living came great democratic leaders.”¹⁸⁹

The muralist Dows depicted an “actionable past” in his mural showing what “an eighteenth century “democratic leader” might be doing in such a mixed community.”¹⁹⁰ In his mural, Dr. Samuel Bard, an American physician is shown treating a black worker who was badly burned in a fire that had destroyed a house-

¹⁸⁷ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.60.

¹⁸⁸ Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*, (New York:University of Washington Press, 1997), p.101.

¹⁸⁹ Kennedy, p.60.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p.60.

probably the black man's. The doctor's son adds light with a lantern and his son-in-law, the rector of St. James's, supports the patient and comforts his wife.¹⁹¹ Dr. Samuel Bard was famous in the neighborhood as an abolitionist. He regarded the slavery as an institution full of evils. This depiction by Dows was unitary in its nature. It embraced the inclusion of blacks into the society, which was struck by poverty and division.

In his post office murals at Rhinebeck and Hyde Park, American muralist Dows made another point: most of the Indians of the valley were agricultural, settled people- settled for a very long time. In his scene of the arrival of Henry Hudson, he showed a petroglyph to underline the point: that the truly "old settlers and "old families "were Indians. ¹⁹² This time, Dows made another move to include Indians in the American society by appreciating their role in the making of the US nation.

Another American muralist that worked in the Federal Art Project was Thomas Hart Benton. He studied in Paris where he became acquainted with the work of Diego Rivera. In 1932, he executed only one large commission – a set of murals for the New School for Social Research in New York. He was chosen to produce a 250-foot-long set of murals of Indiana Life for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. They were depicting Indiana down-home "decency and honest hard work- as well as Indiana the northern hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity and tawdry, carny life juxtaposed with bible camps." ¹⁹³ The Indiana Department of Conservation was embarrassed by Benton's vehement candor but kept the murals on display.¹⁹⁴ Although the mural included Ku Klux Klan, it was useful at arising the strength and

¹⁹¹ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.61.

¹⁹² Ibid, p.61.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p.72.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p.73.

efforts of American people depicting their honest, decent work in the face of the Great Depression.

As part of the Federal Art Project, the muralist Victor Mikhail Arnautoff contributed a lot to the “actionable art” in the US. He arrived in San Francisco in 1925 after having travelled through China and Mexico. He studied with Diego Rivera from 1929 to 1933, taught at the California School of Fine Arts. In 1934, he and Rivera’s associate Clifford Wight were heads of a group of 25 artists given work by the CWA¹⁹⁵ to provide murals for the Coit Tower, a memorial to volunteer firefighters. The problem arose with a given work by the WPA to provide murals for the Coit Tower, a memorial to volunteer firefighters. The same problem with Rockefeller and Rivera occurred after the sketches of Arnautoff and Wight had been approved. They inserted references to Marx, Lenin, The Daily Worker, The Western Worker, a Hammer and Sickle, and the motto “Workers of the World Unite”. In San Francisco, their insertions after the approval of the designs called down upon the Coit Project at the wrath of the San Francisco Park Commission, which shut the doors to the tower.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, they gave Arnautoff two further mural commissions: a post office mural for College Station, Texas, and another for the Department of Agriculture and Post Office Building in Linden, Texas. This time, he depicted the poverty of migrant cotton pickers and sharecroppers who harvested cotton by hand. The name of the work was “The Last Crop”. Another muralist, Ben Shahn photographed the cotton pickers, the difficulty of their jobs which involved dragging heavy sacks of cotton bolls when temperatures in the fields are over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ CWA stands for Civil Works Administration which was a job creation program established by the New Deal during the Great Depression to create jobs for the unemployed people.

¹⁹⁶ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.82.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p.83.

Millions of Americans were following the harsh realities of the Depression era and how people from all walks of life coped with it with strength, honesty and integrity. Sometimes controversies broke out due to the left-wing artists and much other sensitivity of American people, the objective of Federal Art Project endured against all odds.

Ben Shawn's murals for the WPA depicted harsh working conditions among industrial workers, and his photographs of country people in drought and destitution informed the urban public of the desperate conditions among the rural poor.¹⁹⁸ The murals raised awareness about the conditions during the Great Depression. They also had historic values in that they were testaments to what American people had endured and had gone through during those difficult times. For instance, in the early 1930's, nine out of ten American farms had no electricity, and few had indoor plumbing. The New Deal succeeded in bringing electrical power to rural parts of the country, which could be seen in the Tennessee River Valley. Tennessee Valley Authority built huge hydroelectric dams in the Tennessee River Valley to provide power to the countryside. The mural entitled as "Electrification" depicted the process of the construction and the workers making effort to finish the construction. The mural was installed a few miles from where the Tennessee Valley Authority was constructing the Fort Loudon Dam.¹⁹⁹ David Stone Martin, who studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and worked with the muralist Ben Shahn, was the art director of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Another mural that was conveying a message covered the idea of justice during the Great Depression. In fact, there were many other murals taking on the idea of justice during that particular time period. The murals like the anti-lynching mural

¹⁹⁸ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.83.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p.91.

of John Steuart Curry were produced by artists commissioned to celebrate the kind of justice that protected people and their rights, including the interposition of justice in the face of despots or mobs, and the uses of law to remedy economic exploitation in tenements and sweatshops.²⁰⁰ There were so many mobs and despots that were mushroomed during the Great Depression. Managing such kind of people and the menaces they were committing was not an easy job, as the murals also demonstrated.

During the New Deal, several homesteads were built. They were created to provide work-relief and housing for garment workers during the Great Depression, most of who were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The muralist Ben Shahn painted a mural to commemorate the New Deal resettlement community of Jersey Homesteads (now called Roosevelt). It was like an urban version of the rural housing built by the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. On the one hand, Shahn promoted the efforts of the Farm Security Administration; on the other hand, he depicted the idea of “unity” during the Great Depression by including Jewish workers in his mural (1938). His panels depicted the ancestral places of most garment workers, their arrival at Ellis Island, and their planning of their cooperative community. In his murals, Shahn contrasted dark tenements and sweatshops in the city with the simple but light-filled homes and cooperative garment-factory, store, and farm in Homesteads.²⁰¹ The unity and cooperation of the community was a very holy message in that it would be an encouraging factor for the rest of the Americans to see that they were not alone in their war with poverty and despair. There were also other people who were struggling and working hard to survive, which were depicted in Shan’s murals.

²⁰⁰ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.66.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p.94.

“The worker” was the topic of most of the murals painted by Ben Shahn. He painted a mural as a winning entry for the competition to decorate the Bronx, New York and Central Postal Station. The work was entitled “Resource of America” and it depicted various skills of American industrial and agricultural workers. The art historian Bruce Bustard interpreted the mural’s theme as the importance of human beings and their skills to preserve natural resources.²⁰² These skills were also important during the New Deal. Human Beings, their skills and efforts, the youth would be the saviors of the nation.

However, the youth was a problem for American community during the Great Depression. There were so many problems from crime, poverty to gambling and homelessness which was faced by the Depression-era American youth. National Youth Administration was founded as a New Deal agency in the US. Its objective was to provide work and education for Americans between the ages of 16 and 25. In 1936, Alden Krider, a National Youth Administration artist, painted the story of the NYA for an exhibit.²⁰³ The art historian Bruce Bustard notes that, “the painting’s shadowy background represents some of the problems and temptations faced by young people and in the foreground, Krider shows the various types of beneficial employment provided by the NYA.”²⁰⁴ Moreover, the painter Krider displayed President Roosevelt’s words while establishing the NYA. On the front, he included part of Roosevelt’s speech: “We cannot afford to lose the energy and skill of these young men and women.” The message was so clear in that it was written in words and included in the painting. It was a propaganda which was promoting the New Deal and government projects just like Rivera was promoting the deeds of the Mexican government.

²⁰² Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*, p. 50.

²⁰³ Ibid, p.72.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p.72.

The muralist Karl Kelpe executed similar murals for the Work Progress Administration-Federal Art Project for the Percy Julian School in Illinois. His mural for the Southern Illinois University Library was in the illustrative “American Scene” style, depicting the growth of local industry, agriculture and commerce (1939).²⁰⁵ It was, in a way, conveying a message of success. It was the success of American people and their endurance. It was the success of New Deal projects. It was the success of a unified nation.

Another muralist Raphael Soyer’s work concentrated on scenes from the everyday experience of urban living. His inspiration was the streets of New York City; for his models he would sometimes hire the homeless. His work has a sad, sentimental quality that, in the words of one critic highlighted “a series of episodes in the lives of simple, even drab human beings.”²⁰⁶ According to the art historian Bruce Bustard, his mural “Working Girls Going Home” captured some of this feeling, picturing several anonymous women on a busy rush-hour street with their tired-looking faces.²⁰⁷

Most of the American muralists were assigned to work for murals that were going to be ornamenting the post offices. One of the murals was Fletcher Martin’s mural which was entitled as “Mine Rescue” (1939). This mural was also centered on hard work and effort. It was a mural painted for a new post office in Kellogg, Iowa. The mural demonstrated the hardship faced by Mine and Smelter workers. However; there was an objection coming from the local mine owners. They stated that the mural was unfair and would pain those who had lost a loved one in an accident.²⁰⁸ Martin was asked to redesign the mural which wouldn’t offend the rest. Martin

²⁰⁵ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.86.

²⁰⁶ Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*, p.50.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.50.

²⁰⁸ Kennedy, p.95.

renamed the mural as “Discovery” and showed two prospectors discovering a mine.²⁰⁹ The danger of creating mural art was that it would offend some people and create controversy just as it did with Rockefeller and Rivera. Still, Martin kept on receiving other Section post office commissions in Texas and California.

Some muralists preferred to give direct political messages through their artworks. One of these was the artist Rockwell Kent. He wanted to celebrate Puerto Rico’s first airmail delivery. There was a horse and a shadow of an airplane while a delivery was being made but Kent added a message. It was not the head of Lenin or something but a letter held by a young woman. It is not obvious on the copy of the mural but the letter said: “To the people of Puerto Rico, our friends! Let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free!”²¹⁰ According to what art historian Bruce Bustard recounts, there was a buzz about it in Congress and Kent responded: “The cause of independence in Puerto Rico needs no propaganda. Everybody knows that the majority of the people down there are in favor of it.”²¹¹

4.3. Mexico’s Inheritance to the US: Art as Propaganda

As can be understood from the examples, the artworks produced during the New Deal carried a lot of political messages unlike the examples that were produced prior to New Deal. It should be regarded as political because they were promoting a government policies and New deal agencies directly or indirectly at times. The murals also played a role to motivate the nation and encourage them to go on living with dignity, hope and decency no matter how hard the Great Depression was.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p.95.

²¹⁰ Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*, p.93.

²¹¹ Ibid, p.93.

Moreover, the murals introduced the nation with the policies the government was implementing for the fellow Americans, at times.

This important role played by the murals takes its root from the similar roles Mexican muralists played during the Mexican revolution. Diego Rivera, the primary example, summarized the essence of this role in his autobiography. He told that as a contribution to the Revolution, he designed a huge poster, copies of which had been distributed among the peasants throughout all Mexico. He stated that its message to “the poor, ignorant farmers” was that divine law didn’t forbid them to repossess the land which rightfully belonged to them.²¹² He noted that “the corrupt church of the time had been preaching the converse” and the slogan dominating the poster read as “the distribution of land to the poor is not contrary to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Mother Church.”²¹³ Most of the peasants were not literate so they couldn’t read. It was very clever of the government to take this path as their message would be easily illustrated by a painting.

This path which was shrewdly constructed caught George Biddle’s attention. Biddle was an American artist who had been to Mexico and witnessed these revolutionary art projects executed by renowned Mexican muralists. Having seen this transformative process, on the 9th of May, 1933, he wrote the recently inaugurated president and urged him to provide federal support for arts not just to help artists but mobilize them to be of aid in “the social revolution that the country and civilization are going through”.²¹⁴ As stated in the introduction of the thesis, he wrote that Mexican muralists were producing the greatest national school of mural painters since the Renaissance.²¹⁵ It was a relief program for unemployed artists but it would

²¹² Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.47.

²¹³ Ibid, p.47.

²¹⁴ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.63.

²¹⁵ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, p.24.

promote government agencies and to some extent, it was propaganda of government policies during the Great Depression. It was propaganda of Tennessee Valley Authority or National Youth Administration or Work Progress Administration. It aimed to unite the nation by including all walks of life, all different races in these murals. These murals were the melting pot; they were the United States of America, indeed. They preached hard work, dignity, decency. They conveyed the message that perseverance and hard work pay off. This program, which aimed at action and difference among the nation was an invaluable opportunity created by the government for the government at this very difficult time. The “actionable art” made the hope of these aims tangible.

The actionable art was the legacy of Mexican Government. This legacy started with the pre-conquest art, according to Rivera. He wrote that before the coming of the Spaniards, the Mexican Indian artists had shown “great force and genius”.²¹⁶ Rivera also emphasized the fact that “like all first-rate art, their work had been intensely local: related to the soil, the landscape and colors of their own world.”²¹⁷ American muralists influenced from the path that the Mexican muralists took so they dealt with local issues in their murals in order to make a difference in their own people’s lives. Rivera added that above all Mexican murals had been “emotion-centered” and they were “moulded by their hopes, fears, joys, superstitions and sufferings.”²¹⁸ Being emotion-centered is an important aspect of the mural art. Muralists convey messages and find the strength and inspiration under intense emotions. If they hadn’t felt passionate about their cause, they wouldn’t have produced such artwork that would create a buzz. The American muralists saw tough, intense conditions and long breadlines during the Great Depression. They captured

²¹⁶ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.19.

²¹⁷ Ibid, p.19.

²¹⁸ Ibid, p.19.

the tired but hopeful faces of the American nation. This intensity of emotions led to the creativity and productivity of the artists. They projected these emotions onto their murals. If they hadn't been emotion-centered, the American muralist Raphael Soyer wouldn't have had such a touching mural as "Working Girls Going Home". Or, Fletcher Martin wouldn't be able to convey the pain, hard work and dedication of the American miners of the Depression Era with its authenticity.

According to Rivera, Mexican tradition taught him a lot. In his autobiography, he told that it was the Mexican tradition that taught him the supreme lesson of art that nothing could be expressed except through the force of feeling, that the soul of masterpiece was powerful emotion.²¹⁹ The actionable art emerged from these outpouring of emotions.

It is so remarkable that this new understanding in art came right after big transformative events. For instance, the pervasion of actionable art began after the Great Depression in the US. With the Mexican Case, it emerged after the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution promised so much to Mexicans. The government of the Revolution offered reforms which would be reflected on the murals that were going to ornament buildings of government, schools, markets, recreation centers. Mexico would be the country that was going to lead the world in mural painting. Many painters came from all around the world to study and experience this transformative power. Charlot from Paris, Mérida from Guatemala, Paul O Higgins from California, Noguchi, a Japanese-American artist, came to the country to introduce themselves with the Mexican art movement.²²⁰

The question here is why Mexico? Why exactly this country that developed the notion of "actionable art"? Rivera responded to this question with the emergence

²¹⁹ Rivera, *My art, My Life*, p.18.

²²⁰ Bertram David Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1984), p. 142.

of 1910 Mexican Revolution because as far as he told, one of the great services of the Mexican Revolution to the painters was to “break through the vicious circle of private patronage.”²²¹ He was sick of painting for the bourgeoisie as Diego told his circles.²²² Rivera portrayed a Mexican middle class who had “no taste” and what all of them wanted was their portraits, or that of their wives or their mistresses.²²³ Rivera also complained about “the 19th century bourgeois esthetic criticism.” It was another name for “art for art’s sake”. He criticized this theory which also prevailed over Mexico before the Revolution. He put forward one of the characteristics of this notion telling that it could be appreciated only by a very limited number of “superior persons”.²²⁴ Only those superior persons would appreciate that art and this quality would make it political implying the “superiority of the few”.²²⁵ It was not apolitical, indeed.

Rivera thought that the notion of art for art’s sake discredited the function of art claiming that “all art which has a theme, a social content, is a bad art.”²²⁶ The function and action of art would be great, in fact. The people who cannot read and write can be mobilized and made conscious of their environment through the murals. Rivera discussed this function in an article telling that art has the advantage of speaking a language that can be easily understood by the workers and peasants of all lands.²²⁷ He added, “it is necessary for the proletariat to learn to make use of beauty in order to live better.”²²⁸ The people suffering from the Great depression, farmers...etc

²²¹ Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, p.143.

²²² As a person uttering these words, it was contradictory of him to accept the commission of Rockefeller but it meant to open his art and name to the world so he accepted the toll it took.

²²³ Wolfe, p.144.

²²⁴ Diego Rivera, “Nationalism and Art”, *The Journal of Workers Age*, July 15, 1933, p.52.

²²⁵ Ibid, p.51.

²²⁶ Ibid, p.52.

²²⁷ Ibid, p.53.

²²⁸ Ibid, p.53.

would all find something related to themselves and their lives in these murals. The murals would speak louder than words for the American nation.

Rivera was so happy about the Mexican Renaissance (Açıkla) that transformed the notion of art in Mexico. He recounted this transformation in a detailed fashion in an article. He stated that in Mexico there existed an old tradition, a popular art tradition much older, much more splendid. According to him, this art was of a truly magnificent character. He added, “the colonial rulers of Mexico, like those of the US, had despised that ancient art tradition.”²²⁹ It dated back even before the era of Spaniards. The Indian had painted frescoes on the walls of his pyramids over a thousand years ago, before the Spaniards came.²³⁰ According to him, this tradition was the reason of his becoming a revolutionary painter and it also contributed to the emergence of Mexican Renaissance in my opinion. This was embracing and appreciating a country’s roots by that particular country.

This was a transformation “from a party of revolutionary politicians to a party of revolutionary painters”.²³¹ This transformation had an impact on both the US and Mexico.

²²⁹ Diego Rivera, “Nationalism and Art”, *The Journal of Workers Age*, July 15, 1933, p.54.

²³⁰ Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, p.143.

²³¹ Ibid, p.151.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This chapter provides conclusive points as to the concept of “actionable art” considering the relationship between Nelson Rockefeller-Diego Rivera clash and the transformation of understanding about the notion of art during the New Deal era in the US. First three chapters have dealt with the Rivera-Rockefeller clash, its causes and consequences. In order to better understand the background of the controversy, this study has looked at the notion of art during the Mexican Revolution and the notion of art during the New Deal and how the previous affected the latter. The conclusion has a holistic approach in offering how this clash contributed to the transformation in the notion of American art from being “art for art’s sake” to becoming “actionable art” during the New Deal period. It also demonstrates how federal funding outweighed patronage as the case with Rockefeller and Rivera proved to be problematic for the rest of the artists. Who would want to work with Rockefeller or under any other private cooperation after this clash?

First of all, historians have discussed the perception of art prior to the New Deal period, which has been mentioned in the previous chapter. Art historian Bruce

Bustard, having researched about the pre-New Deal art notion, notes that a few generations ago, the people of this country were taught by their writers and their critics and their teachers to believe that art was something foreign to America and to themselves. He meant that people were made to believe that art was something imported from another continent, “from an age that was not theirs-something they have no part in, save to go and see it in a guarded room on holidays and Sundays.”²³² New Deal’s “actionable art” changed this view. Now, they were able to see art in their own towns, in their own villages, in schools, post offices and government buildings. The murals were painted by very close people and the nation internalized the messages conveyed by these murals by the American painters.

In fact, there is no evidence, which shows that Franklin Roosevelt was an ardent, passionate art lover. However, he was promoting a new deal for American people so his political objectives converged with the tradition of message-oriented murals. In his letter, the artist George Biddle put forward the cause very clearly to the president saying that “the younger artists of America are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through and they would be very eager to express their ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s co-operation.”²³³ Biddle also added that “Mexico was producing the greatest national school of mural painters since the Renaissance”, Biddle firmly believed that “our mural art, with a little impetus, can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression.”²³⁴ The American art and the artists started to play the same role, as far as mural painting was concerned during the New Deal. Besides conveying the message of faith and perseverance, the art programs provided relief for the artists as a part of Harry Hopkins’s notion of

²³² Bustard, *New Deal for the Arts*, p.66.

²³³ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, p.24.

²³⁴ Harris, p.24.

work creation for all needy artists. They were going to embellish the walls of government buildings, schools, post offices.

The “actionable art” was much of a buzz as the Congress was divided on the matter of state fund for art. Actually criticism on the World Progress Administration revolved around this aspect. In Donna Binkiewicz’s book, “Federalizing the Muse”, she tells that, “many officials opposed support for the arts on the grounds that government had no mandate for using taxpayer money to fund artists.”²³⁵ The opponents stated that the government should have retained a laissez-faire stance because it didn’t have a jurisdiction in aesthetic endeavors.²³⁶ Even FDR was not so much comfortable with the content of some of the works but he focused on the outcomes such as creating job opportunities and re-inspiring American people.²³⁷

The other aspect of the criticism was “lack of freedom for the artists”. Critics asserted that, “government funds necessarily imposed standards and curtailed the freedom of the artists.”²³⁸ The government didn’t necessarily impose anything on the artists but the public opinion about a certain mural would cause some kind of a limitation for the depiction of that mural. As this study examines the entire New Deal period, the Coit Tower project can constitute an example of a public opinion which affected the destiny of a mural. When the muralist Victor Mikhail Arnautoff and his friends were given work by the PWAP²³⁹ to provide murals for the Coit Tower, a memorial to volunteer firefighters, they faced some limitations by “their federal patrons” as the opponents and Binkiewicz would call. After their sketched had been approved, Arnautoff inserted some references to Karl Marx, Lenin, *The Daily*

²³⁵ Donna M. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p.21.

²³⁶ Ibid, p.21.

²³⁷ Ibid, p.88.

²³⁸ Ibid, p.23.

²³⁹ The Public Works of Art Project was a program to employ artists, as part of the New Deal, during the Great Depression. It was the first such program, running from December 1933 to June 1934.

Worker, The Western Worker, a hammer and sickle, and the motto “Workers of the World Unite”.²⁴⁰ In San Francisco, their insertions led to the wrath of the San Francisco Park Commission, which shut the doors to the tower at that time. Some other stories were recorded when the muralist Fletcher Martin was asked to change the content of his Mine Rescue mural when it was decided that the content offended the public for reminding them of the work accidents.²⁴¹ These alterations were done on the basis of public opinion. Otherwise, the artists enjoyed considerable freedom.

Despite all these oppositions, the New Deal administration succeeded in implementing such a program and a notion of “actionable art”, which was influenced by Diego Rivera and his “actionable art” for the Rockefellers. The oppositions to federal funding for arts were heavy but the social and economic conditions were hard during the Depression era. There was this big fear that people would go Communist at the end as a result of extreme poverty and unemployment.²⁴² The fear of communism itself was a powerful factor to trigger the implementation of these programs which would fund artists in order to create job opportunities and, thanks to their work of art, would “rally people into the American covenant.”²⁴³ It would restore public confidence in the government and in American people. This was a valid reason to put aside oppositions against federal funding for art at least for a short period of time.

With his mural “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future”, Rivera was promoting an action, spreading a message as stated in the previous chapters. By putting Lenin in the center of his mural, he wanted to convey the message that “Lenin is the center of inevitable

²⁴⁰ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.82.

²⁴¹ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, p.94.

²⁴² Albert, Fried. *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.77.

²⁴³ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, p.67.

alliance between the Russian and the American.”²⁴⁴ Rivera believed that as long as the Soviet Union was in existence, Nazi fascism could never be sure of its survival. If the US wished to preserve its democratic forms, it would ally itself with Russia against fascism, as he stated.²⁴⁵

Rivera acquired this tradition of “actionable, message-oriented art” with the works he had done during the Mexican Revolution as stated in the previous chapters. He promoted the projects of the Mexican government. Having witnessed the Mexican Renaissance, he thought that, this was the time to implement the same thing in the US. He was aware that it would cause a clash, though. Yet, the clash organized the American painters to unite on a common cause and defer the system of patronage due to the arbitrary handling of an art work. It influenced many artists including Geroge Biddle. Biddle was among the eleven artists who signed the protest condemning Rockefeller for his stance, in this clash, against “actionable art”. Moreover, he sent the letter persuading FDR to create such a project right after this clash occurred. They were pointing out federal funding rather than the system of patronage. Even Rivera told that the Mexican Revolution disrupted the system of patronage and amplified federal funding which led to the emergence of Mexican Renaissance and one of the most remarkable murals around the world. This aura of clash was what moved people, even the artist George Biddle, who informed FDR with a letter about the possibility of establishing Federal Art Project with its “actionable artworks”.

Firstly, these murals put man forward and they created a revolutionary atmosphere, the works became public. These dots can be recognized in the murals of

²⁴⁴ Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, p.126.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p.126.

New Deal art as well.²⁴⁶ These murals surged from people and they chronicled the lives, problems, happiness and sadness of these people. The murals reflected people on themselves. People turned to their own roots. As the historian Warren Susman puts it, there was an effort to “seek and define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding.”²⁴⁷ American people searched their nativity in these art works just like Mexicans. In the murals of Mexican Revolution tequila replaced French wine. In New Deal art, TVA murals²⁴⁸; the unity, perseverance, integrity, honesty of American people under the harsh circumstances replaced the grandeur of modernist art in the US. During the Mexican Revolution, the murals taught illiterate masses the meaning of Mexican identity and their cause with “actionable art” and it democratized the Mexican art. With New Deal Art, we see the democratization of art as well with the murals in hospitals, schools surging from the people and reaching out the people again. The interest in American culture and life went beyond the Federal Art Project but this interest was politicized particularly during and after the Great Depression. It was a time for unity as both people and citizens. The murals of New Deal served this purpose and depicted the value of everything American just like the Mexican mural Renaissance, which promoted Mexican identity.

Contrary to most of the historians who regarded Nelson Rockefeller-Diego Rivera clash as a mere controversy or a source of trouble stemming from racial or class differences, this thesis proves that the clash actually served for transforming the perception of art during the New Deal. Thanks to this project, art was democratized

²⁴⁶ See appendices for the examples of New Deal art.

²⁴⁷ Warren, Susman. *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* 2nd Ed. (Smithsonian Books, 2009) p.157.

²⁴⁸ TVA is the abbreviation for Tennessee Valley Authority, a federally owned Corporation to provide navigation, flood control, electricity generation and economic development in the Tennessee Valley, a region affected by Great Depression.

as WPA muralists painted artwork for schools, libraries, city halls and country offices, hospitals, airports, and colleges. American people had the opportunity to see all these pieces and these murals were not confined to a bunch of rich people's offices and work places anymore. Secondly, it provided relief for so many artists. In San Francisco late in 1936, the Art Project discovered even Armenians and Turks on relief who possessed ancient skills in tapestry making and set up a unit to employ them.²⁴⁹ The murals painted after the clash made the American identity and culture shine out even more (just like the case with Mexican murals funded by government during Mexican Revolution). Besides American identity and culture, they also made the message-oriented art outshine during that time. Finally, the clash demonstrated the liberating aspect of federal funding. It depicted that patronage was not that secure in terms of the artist and his or her artwork. There were no policies protecting them from any arbitrary destruction or violation, after all. The clash united most of the American painters and influenced them, made them think about function, purpose of art and the advantages of federal funding over patronage. After all, the American artists saw what Rivera and his mural had gone through under Rockefeller's patronage. In these aspects, Rivera-Rockefeller clash proved to be functional and transformative for American people and artists like George Biddle, although it was regarded as a merely destructive, trouble-causing phenomenon at first sight.

²⁴⁹ Donna, Binkiewicz. *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).p.277.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Nelson Rockefeller's Letter Depicting his Interest in Rivera's Art. Series L, Box 139, Folder 1360 (N. Rockefeller and his comments on Rivera)

February 17, 1932

Dear Mrs. Paine:

I have just received the enclosed letter from Mr. Packard whom you may remember discussed the possibility of Rivera doing some frescoes for Dartmouth College. I think the letter is self-explanatory and I felt the best way to take the matter up with you was simply to lay the facts before you as they came to me. Would you be good enough to give me your frank opinion on this subject? Say just exactly what you would advise doing under the circumstances.

I saw the pictures that Rivera did of my sister's children and I really don't think there is a painter living who could have done a better job. They really are perfect. It seems to me the Miltons can consider themselves extremely fortunate. These paintings have every bit of the charm that the pictures of his Mexican children have, if not more. Personally I think the pictures of the Milton children are a lot more interesting than Rivera's pencil drawing of my sister but I guess that is a question of personal taste.

Very sincerely,

Mrs. Frances Flynn Paine,
Hotel Buckingham,
101 West 57th Street,
New York City.

NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER

APPENDIX B: Nelson Rockefeller's Invitation to Diego Rivera to build a Mural in RCA. Box 94, Record Group 2 The Office of the Messengers Series C.
Business Interests.

2

October 13, 1932

Dear Mr. Rivera:

I have your letter of October 10th with a copy of the letter to Mr. Hood. I have gone into this question with Mr. Hood and Mr. Harrison and they are quite agreeable, in fact very enthusiastic, about your suggestion of using some color in your mural. They feel, just as you do, that it would aid greatly in giving the proper accents and therefore are in complete agreement that you should go ahead along the lines which you suggest. I am terribly glad that they feel this way about it as I was entirely in accord with you the other day. I am writing Mrs. Paine of this decision and I know she will be equally pleased.

May I take this opportunity to again tell you how much my mother and I appreciate your spirit in doing this mural under the existing circumstances.

Please let me know when your frescoes in Detroit are finished so that we can arrange to come up and see them. Everybody is terribly anxious to see how you have interpreted the industrial life of Detroit.

With very best personal regards, I remain,

Sincerely,

Mr. Diego Rivera

APPENDIX C: Diego Rivera's Proposal Submitted to Nelson Rockefeller

Rockefeller Papers Box 94, Record Group 2 The Office of the Messengers Series C.

Business Interests

SUBJECT MATTER OF THE PROPOSED MURAL DECORATIONS BY
DIEGO RIVERA FOR THE RADIO CORPORATION OF AMERICA
BUILDING IN THE ROCKEFELLER CENTRE, NEW YORK CITY.

On the side where Brangwyn is to depict the development of the Ethical relations of Mankind, my painting will show as the culmination of this evolution, human intelligence in possession of the Forces of Nature, expressed by the lightening striking off the hand of Jupiter and being transformed into useful electricity that helps to cure man's ills, unites men through radio and television, and furnishes them with light and motive power. Below, the Man of Science presents the scale of Natural Evolution, the understanding of which replaces the superstitions of the past. This is the Frontier of Ethical Evolution.

On the side where Sert is to represent the development of the Technical Power of man, my panel will show the Workers arriving at a true understanding of their rights regarding the means of production, which has resulted in the planning of the liquidation of Tyranny, personified by a crumbling statue of Caesar whose head has fallen to the ground. It will also show the Workers of the Cities and the Country inheriting the Earth. This is expressed by the placing of the hands of the producers in the gesture of possession over a map of the World resting on sheaves of wheat supported by a dynamo, expressive of Agricultural Production supported by Machinery and Scientific Technique - the result of the evolution of the methods of production. This is the Frontier of Material Development.

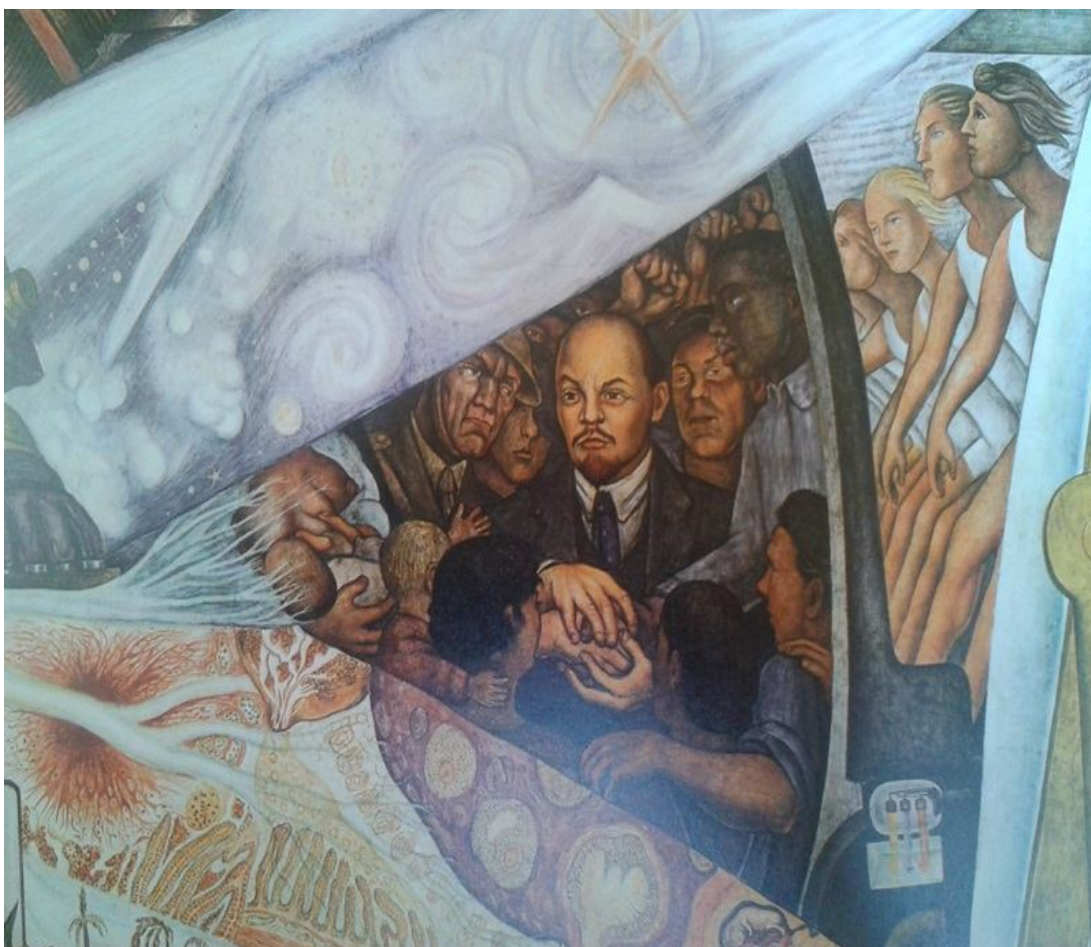
The main plastic function of the central panel is to express the axis of the building, its loftiness, and the ascending echelon of its lateral masses. For this centre of the composition secure.

The Worker gives his right hand to the Peasant who questions him, and with his left hand, takes the hand of the sick and wounded Soldier, the victim of War, leading him to the New Road. On the right of the central group, the Mothers, and on the left, the Teachers watch over the development of the New Generation which is protected by the work of the Scientists. Above, on the right side, the Cinematograph shows a group of young women in the enjoyment of health-giving sports, and on the left, it shows a group of unemployed workmen in the bread-line. Above this group, the Television gives the image of War, as in the case of Unemployment, the result of the evolution of Technical Power unaccompanied by a corresponding Ethical Development. On the opposite side, above the representation of the joy derived from Sports, the same Television brings the image of a Popular Movement, the result of high aspirations created by Ethical Development but unsuccessful without an accompanying parallel material development of Technical Power and Industrial Organization, either already existing or created by the movement itself.

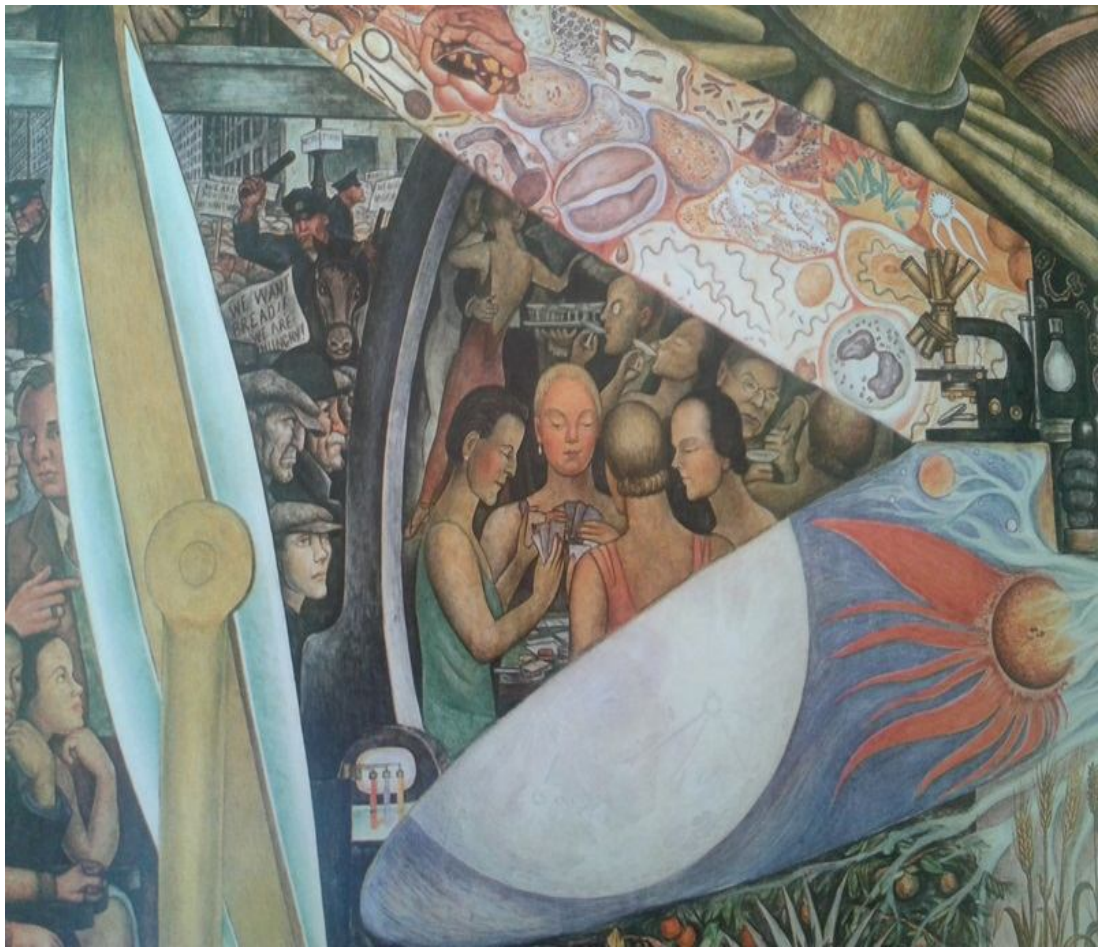
In the centre, Man is expressed in his triple aspect - the Peasant who develops from the Earth the products which are the origin and base of all the riches of Mankind, the Worker of the cities who transforms and distributes the raw materials given by the Earth, and the Soldier who, under the Ethical Force that produces martyrs in religions and wars, represents Sacrifice. Man, represented by these three figures, looks with uncertainty but with hope toward a future, more complete balance between the technical and ethical development of Mankind necessary to a New, more Humane and Logical Order.

(Signed) DIEGO RIVERA

APPENDIX D: Diego Rivera's RCA Mural with Lenin, 1933



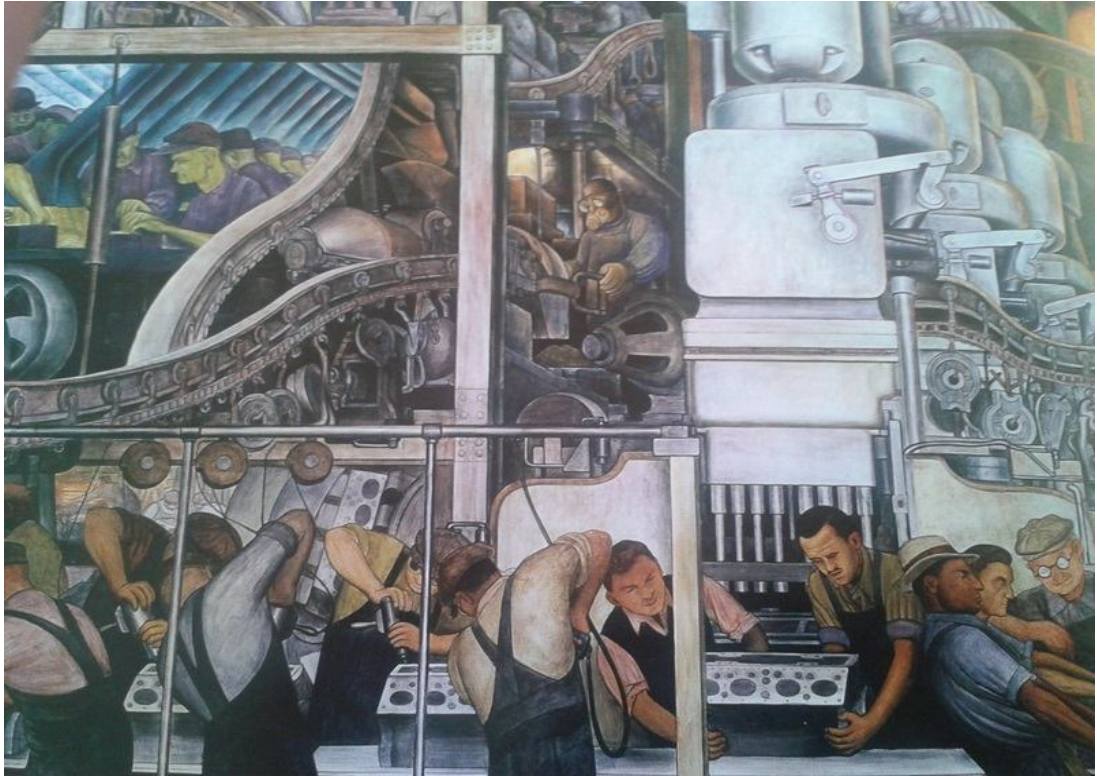
Diego Rivera's Mural for RCA Building, 1933



APPENDIX E: DIEGO RIVERA'S DETROIT MURALS

Detroit Industry Diego Rivera, 1932 The North Wall

Rivera is amazed at the U.S. Industry

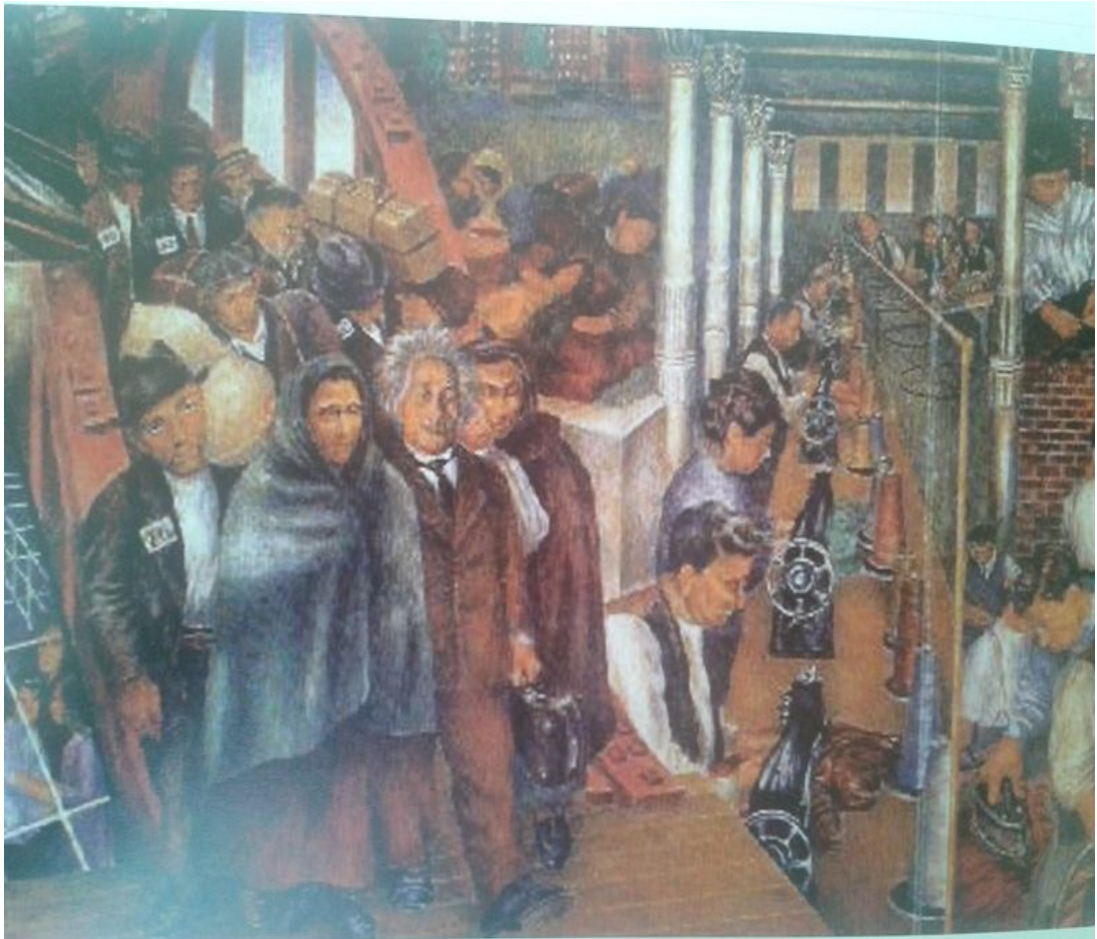


Detroit Industry Diego Rivera, 1932

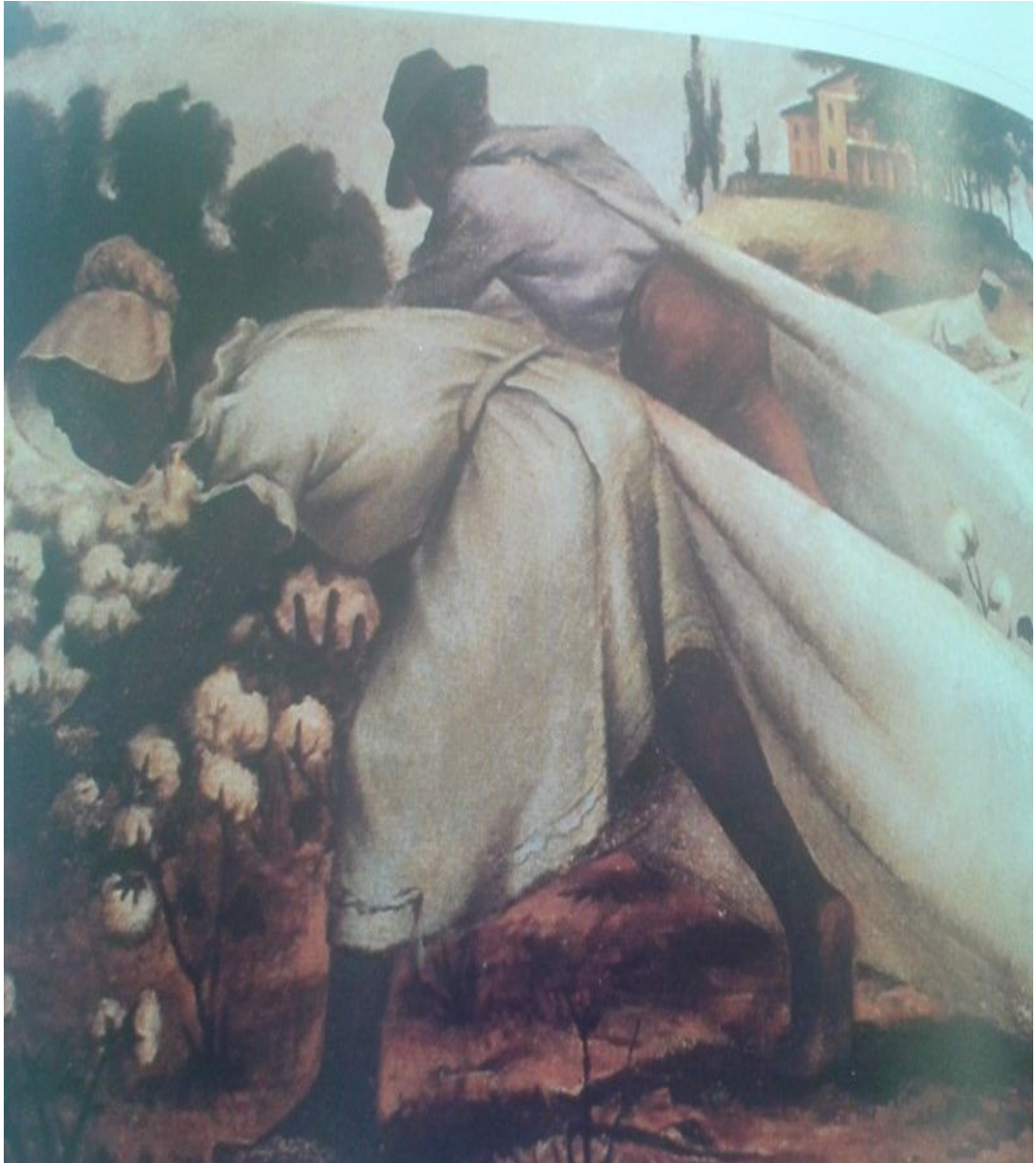


APPENDIX F: EXAMPLES OF NEW DEAL ACTIONABLE ART

The Jersey Homesteads Mural Ben Shahn, 1938 In the Roosevelt Public School, Roosevelt, New Jersey



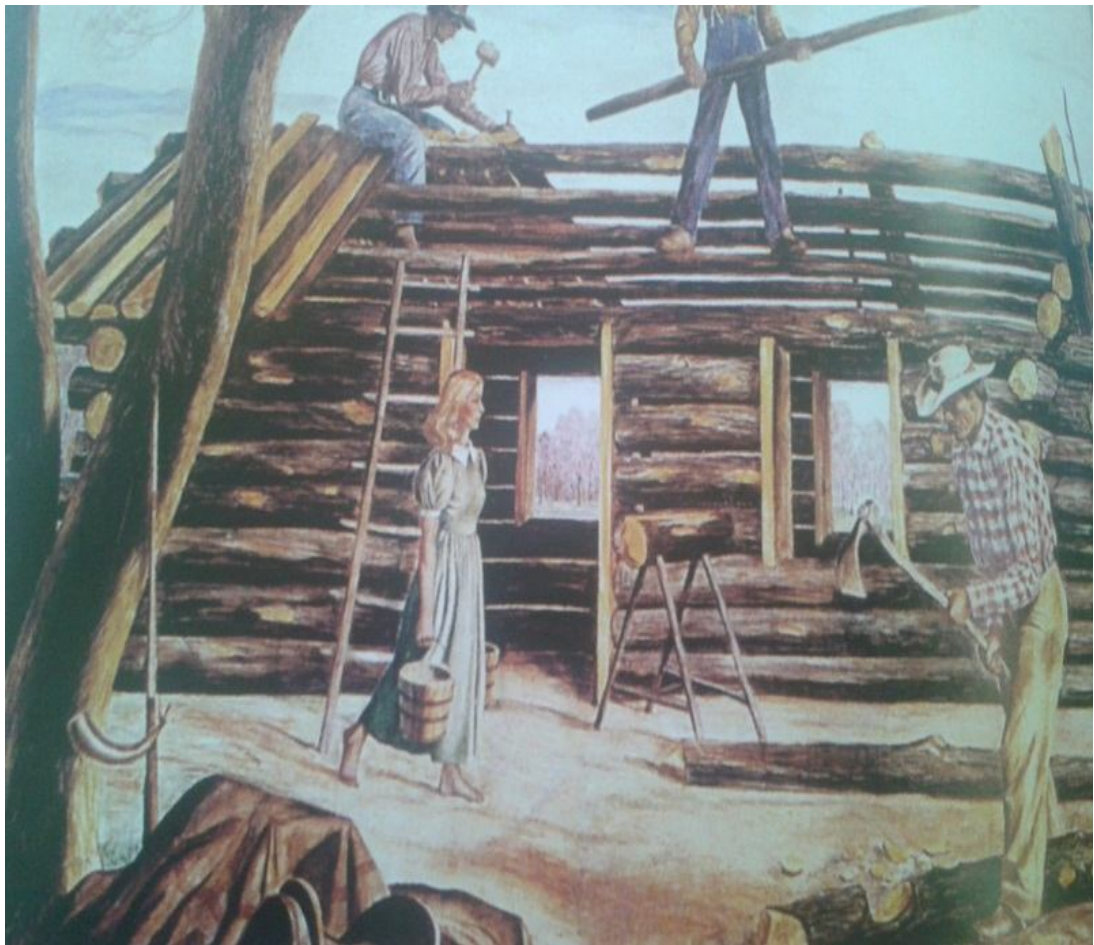
The Last Crop Victor Mikhail Arnautoff, 1939 U.S. Postal Service Building,
Linden, Texas



The Last Crop Victor Mikhail Arnautoff, 1939

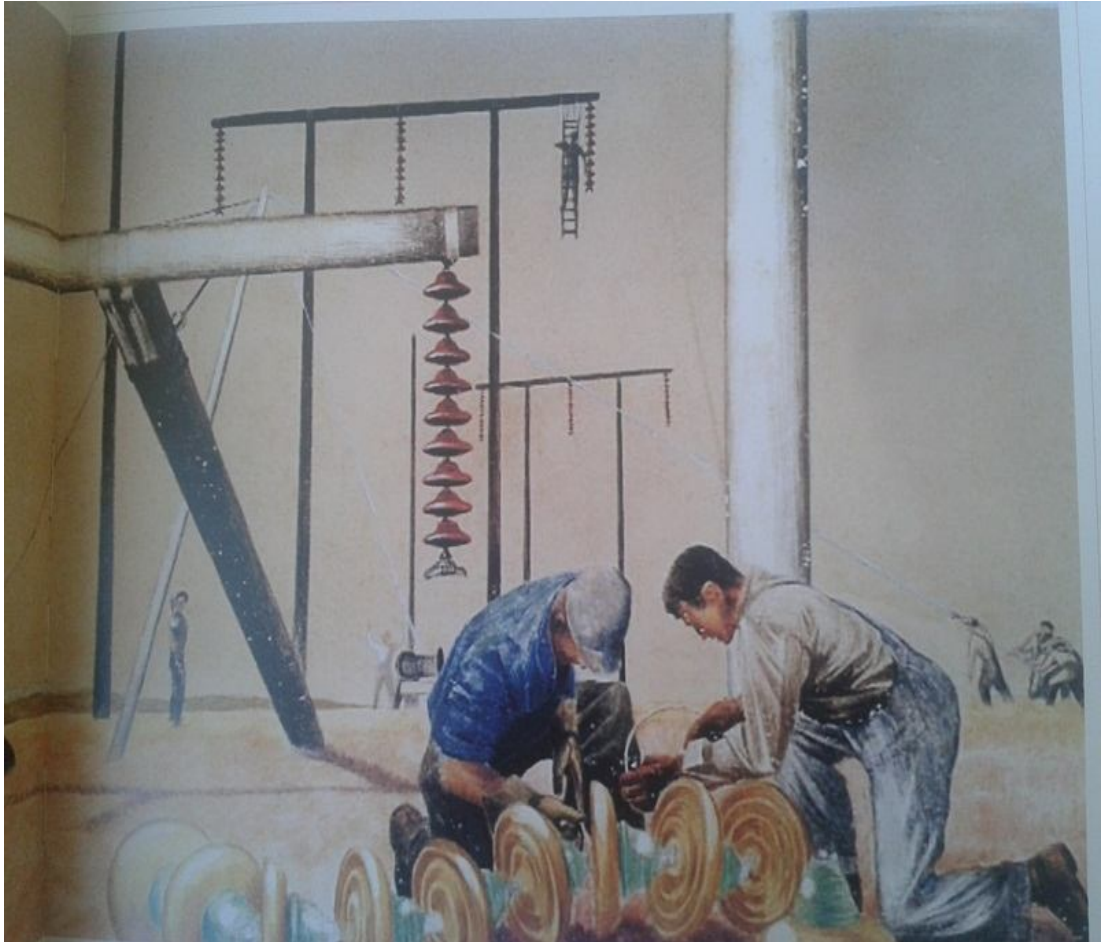


Pioneer Homebuilders Peter Hurd, 1939 Post Office, Dallas, Texas



Electrification Post Office, Lenoir City, Tennessee, David Stone Martin, 1940.

Promoting Tennessee Valley Act



Ranchers of the Panhandle: G-Fighting Prairie Fire with Skinned Steer Frank

Mechau, 1940 Post Office, Brownfield, Texas.



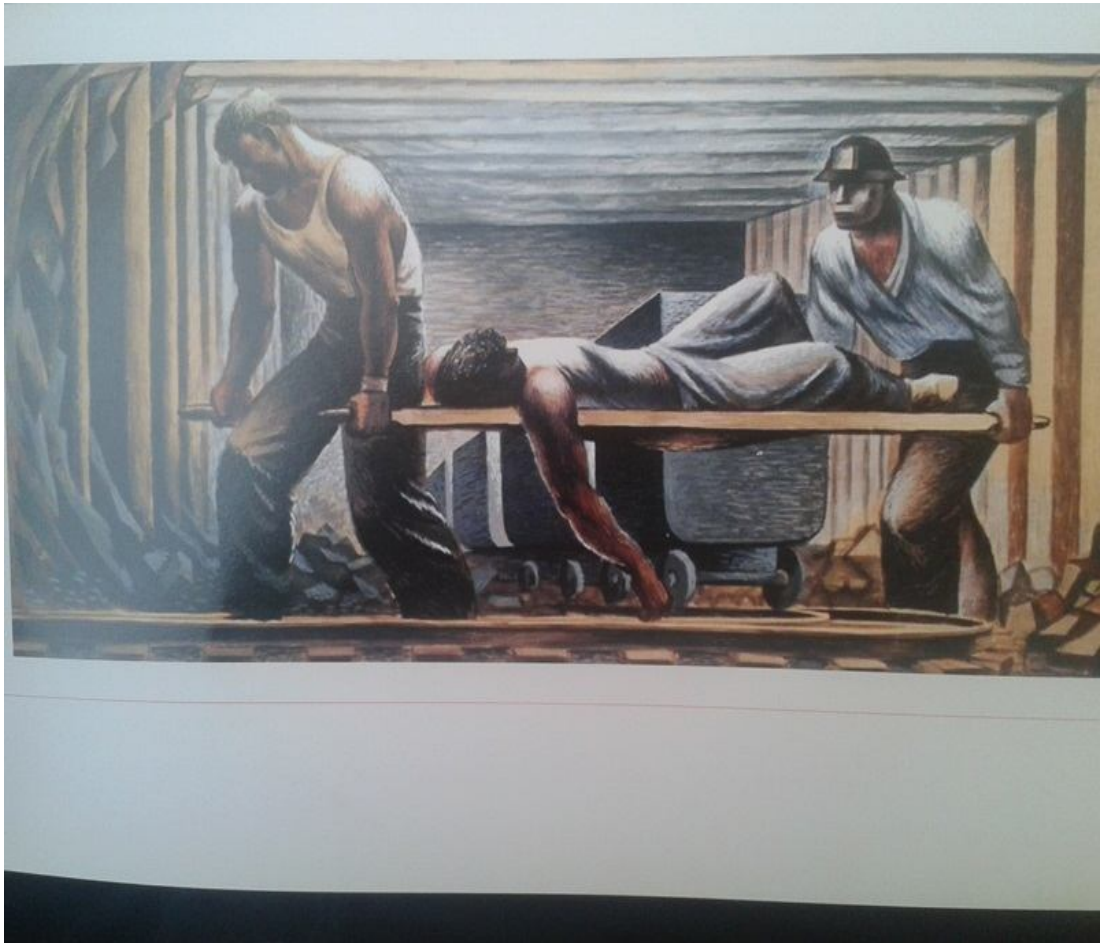


Preparations for Dunkirk Autumn Festival Post Office, Dunkirk, Indiana Francis

Foy, 1941



Mine Rescue Fletcher Martin 1939 Sketch for the Post Office



Filling the Water Jugs; Haymaking Time, Post Office Danville, Indiana Gail Wycoff

Martin, 1939



Jessie Hull Mayer, 1941



History of Southern Illinois Karl Kelpé, 1939



APPENDIX G: THE AMERICAN ARTIST GEORGE BIDDLE'S LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

FDR

May 9, 1933

2.

May 1, 1933. The Japanese plums and cherry trees are in full bloom. The tulip poplar trees are in bud and the dogwoods just beginning to open.

May 3, 1933. These past two days have been working steadily from nine until five o'clock on my mural canvas for the Chicago Fair, Century of Progress, and this afternoon finished it. Am in a state of collapse. Would like to spend a week in bed or lying in the sun.

May 9, 1933. Today I wrote to the President:

"Dear Franklin:

I never doubted your ability and courage, and perhaps that is the reason why I have so delayed in congratulating you on your achievements. The sincerest thing I can say to you is that you have grown and will continue to grow with the demands that America and the world puts on you. I am really proud to have known you at school and college.

There is a matter which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers' wages in order to express on the walls of the Government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution.

The younger artists of America are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through, and they would be very eager to express these ideas in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve. And I am convinced that our mural art, with a little impetus, can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression.

You are too busy at present with more serious problems to give this matter any thought. Perhaps during the summer you will let me drive over from Croton-on-Hudson and pay my respects.

Very sincerely,

(signed) George Biddle"

(My only memory of Roosevelt while at Groton is of seeing him at the mid-morning rest period at the school infirmary. Here boys who were underweight were served crackers and milk. I suppose he and I would occasionally walk back together to our classes at the Hundred House.