

RECENT LITERATURE ON DIEGO RIVERA AND MEXICAN MURALISM

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- DIEGO RIVERA: THE DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS.* By Linda Bank Downs. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. Pp. 202. \$49.95 cloth.)
- MURAL PAINTING AND SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN MEXICO, 1920–1940.* By Leonard Folgarait. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. 256. \$79.95 cloth.)
- DIEGO RIVERA.* By Pete Hamill. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999. Pp. 207. \$49.50 cloth.)
- PAINTING ON THE LEFT: DIEGO RIVERA, RADICAL POLITICS, AND SAN FRANCISCO'S PUBLIC MURALS.* By Anthony W. Lee. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. 264. \$24.95 cloth.)
- DREAMING WITH HIS EYES OPEN: A LIFE OF DIEGO RIVERA.* By Patrick Marnham. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. Pp. 350. \$35.00 cloth.)
- DIEGO RIVERA: ART AND REVOLUTION.* Catalogue for an exhibition curated by Luis-Martín Lozano, Augustín Arteaga, and William Robinson. (Mexico City and Cleveland: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1999. Pp. 421. \$70.00 paper.)

In an expansive era during the first half of the twentieth century, Mexico City was a celebrated site for vanguard art on a par with bohemian Paris or Weimar Berlin—and often in advance of both due to this art center's impact on the rest of the world. For almost twenty years, from the early 1920s until about 1940, Diego Rivera was rightly regarded as the leader of the Mexican Mural Renaissance and one of the three most famous painters in the Western World. In 1931–1932, he became the second artist to be given a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The first was Matisse and the third, Picasso, and yet the attendance at Rivera's exhibition set a record. His subsequent celebrity throughout the Americas and his consequent canonization in Mexico as part of the national patrimony—along with José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Frida Kahlo—have created nonetheless a frustrating situation for critics and art historians seeking to analyze Rivera's images.

As a household name and a national icon, Rivera achieved a standing that has frequently derailed constructive criticism in several directions. On the one hand, Rivera's "transcendent status" in Mexico as an artist-hero has triggered an awestruck admiration for the prodigious labor that made possible his accomplishment—over six thousand square meters in key public places of virtuoso painting in fresco. The magnitude of this feat has so far made difficult any analytical account of his overall career. Novelist John Dos Passos commented in *New Masses* in the late 1920s, regretting the sad state of modern art in the United States in contrast to that in contemporary Mexico: "Going to see the paintings by Diego Rivera in the courts of the Secretaría of public education straightens you out a little bit. . . . If it isn't a revolution in Mexico, I'd like to know what it is."¹

On the other hand, the sheer visual wealth of Rivera's daunting achievement has often produced an array of iconoclastic reactions to the muralist's work, predictably the case with U.S. conservative populists such as journalist Pete Hamill and writer Patrick Marnham. With their recycled cold war way of sizing up Rivera's murals, both tend to view these sweeping public paintings as little more than lamentable and muddled propaganda for the world "communist movement," whether Stalinist or Trotskyist in orientation. Perhaps less predictably, the iconoclastic devaluation of Rivera's frescoes can also be found in the writings of cautious political centrists like Octavio Paz or Enrique Krause. Finally, a related response has emerged even in the assessments of a "more-leftist-than-thou" group of scholars from the Americas whose interpretative roots are often embedded in the orthodox Marxism of the 1930s.

For the last two camps, Rivera's public art is frequently reducible to mere outsized ideological legitimacy on behalf of a supposedly leviathan Mexican state led by the appropriately named Partido Revolucionario Institucional. This monolithic view of the role of state patronage (and all partisan political directives) in relation to murals, particularly those of Rivera, has been laid out in rather harsh terms by Paz: "The government allowed artists to paint on the walls of government buildings a pseudo-Marxist version of the history of Mexico, in black and white, because such painting helped to give it the look of being progressive-minded and revolutionary."²

As fragments of an inadequate overview, these prevalent readings of Rivera's artwork can never really add up to an explanatory whole. Each of these opposing clusters of positions—one positive and the other negative—rests on deeply flawed theoretical presuppositions. It is thus not surprising that many of the best studies to date of Rivera's works have been micro-histories of specific paintings or narrowly focused examinations of

1. John Dos Passos, "Paint the Revolution," *New Masses*, Mar. 1927, pp. 13–14.

2. Octavio Paz, "Re/Visions: Mural Painting," in *Essays on Mexican Art* (1987), translated by Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 132.

particular thematic concerns, leaving the overall theoretical problems posed by his intensely visual work unaddressed in any probing or sustained way.

Yet some notable studies of Rivera have appeared recently, including several of the books under review here. This situation led art historian Edward Sullivan to observe that the past few years have seen publications about Rivera that “offer interesting new insights into his art” while “being scholarly yet provocative studies.”³ Two of the best new books on Rivera, those by Anthony Lee and Linda Bank Downs, are examples of first-rate micro-history. Both works focus on a highly circumscribed field of inquiry to elicit new insights into a particular set of artworks within Rivera’s overall corpus.

A Macro-History of Muralism: Revisionism versus Post-Revisionism

In one of the few books to attempt a comprehensive assessment of Rivera and Mexican muralism in the 1920s and 1930s, the dismissive and constraining thesis of Paz is given a remarkably fine hearing. In the thoughtful *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, Leonard Folgarait gives a highly problematic perspective the best possible presentation. No future study of Diego Rivera as “an official artist” whose views are said to articulate in paint the dominant ideology of the Mexican state will be able to advance this particular position further than Folgarait has in his masterful 1998 examination. The strengths of his book come precisely from the manifest weaknesses of a stance that is argued well by Folgarait. But he sometimes concentrates his fire so closely on only one set of structural concerns that he often says nothing about such issues as individual agency in opposition to state patronage or any conception of the state as a fractious or contradictory entity. The post-revolutionary Mexican state is presented by Folgarait as having had a seamlessly unified and smoothly harmonized intent from 1920 onward.⁴

In fact, a key issue in the literature on Rivera revolves around an inadequate conception of the state that underlies most problems with comprehensive overviews of Rivera’s oeuvre. And yet a book as impressive as Folgarait’s requires a concession. Nothing clears the interpretative field as effectively as a strong presentation of a position with evident weaknesses. What remains strong about a weak thesis becomes a *sine qua non* for any future advances in historical understanding of the important issue addressed. Thus it must be said of Folgarait that he has dramatically elevated

3. Edward Sullivan, “From Mexico to Montparnasse—and Back,” *Art in America* 87, no. 11 (Nov. 1999):102–9, 153, citation on 104.

4. For a more extensive look at the problem of the state, see David Craven, “Marx, Marxism, and Art History,” in *Companion to Art Theory*, edited by P. Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming).

the discourse about the heyday of the mural movement to a point where old and seemingly insoluble theoretical sticking points will now be more easily addressed by future scholars. Moreover, they will be able to propel our assessments even further ahead by analyzing comprehensively the overall achievement of Rivera along lines more worthy of his work.

Folgarait's *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* is a highly significant study. The author has long been known in the field for his deftly critical micro-study of David Alfaro Siqueiros's late mural-relief housed in the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros of Mexico City, *La marcha de la humanidad* (1964–1971). In his new book, Folgarait enhances his reputation by publishing a probing macrostudy of Mexican muralism as well.⁵

In *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico*, Folgarait is concerned with how prominent patrons (more conservative than the artists they commissioned to paint the murals) had a decisive say in shaping the ultimate ideological values of the public paintings emerging from this entire process of artistic production. Less interested in charting the broader popular reception of these murals, Folgarait focuses more on how the images produced were invested with certain formal values and thus seem to require concomitant terms of spectatorship. The perceptual cues that coach the murals' viewers were supposedly dictated more by the unified institutional demands of the patrons than by the diverse intentions of the artists who actually executed the artworks.

Yet to launch such an argument about a revolution in which no government directives from above mandated "a monolithic, official style," Folgarait needed to posit a "structural relationship" for his cohesive approach to the Mexican mural movement:

Crucial to such a project is an assumption that there is a politically constituted body of people out there who can be called citizens . . . , full of awareness of their structural relationship to the government. This structure situates citizens at a place where they will receive the words and actions of the government—receive, consume, and process to the extent that they, as subjects of the state, are also produced by the state. . . . Should this assumption of the existence of such a population prove unfounded . . . , it would be necessary to construct the illusion of a desired social coherence, to create a program of strong populist premises that might invent out of sheer need, as it were, the symbolic, required human subjects of official ideology, a critical mass whose controlled behavior would be a prime goal for the government. (P. 6)

To a considerable extent, the acknowledged strengths of Folgarait's fine study are linked to the stringency of his neo-Althusserian structuralism. Although Folgarait never actually mentions the French thinker, it is difficult to read the passage just cited without recalling Louis Althusser's famous discussion in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" on how "all

5. Leonard Folgarait, *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”⁶ Folgarait instead cites two of Althusser’s best-known students, Nicos Poulantzas and Michel Foucault.

Although Althusser seldom succeeded in documenting the material basis for his rarified abstract claims, Folgarait is adept at primary archival research as well as concrete visual analysis. Thus he infrequently takes theoretical steps that outstrip his empirical research. *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* provides a rich tapestry of facts woven into a strikingly coherent narrative of theoretical sophistication.

Consequently, Folgarait’s book represents a ringing riposte by a first-rate art historian to the currently fashionable “histories” of many self-styled “theorists” who implausibly seem to say, “That is all well and good in practice, but how does it work in theory?” Yet the successes of *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* come from the nimbleness and qualifications with which he deploys a battery of theoretical traditions to organize his impressive research and analysis. He plays off different theoretical trends against each other, rather than assuming that any intellectual tradition is adequate to all historical problems or that every theoretical framework harbors empirical blind spots that make them all useless.

In doing so, Folgarait extracts incisive points from numerous theorists without being wholly bound to any of them—from Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas, Stuart Hall, Alex Callinicos, and Terry Eagleton on the one hand to Theda Skocpol, Michel Foucault, John Frew, and Norman Bryson on the other. Folgarait wisely follows Hall’s dictum that “the greatest value of theory” is how it calls for rethinking (but not discarding) old paradigms yet also allows scholars to glean all that is still serviceable in the old theories by an agile “repositioning” of their signal insights within a new conceptual framework (p. 9). Thus Folgarait can often test each theory in a critically sound and historically stringent way that “theorists” in cultural studies generally fail to undertake because of their uncritical application of theory to historical issues.

Folgarait is interested less in a new “theory” of Mexican society from 1920 to 1940 than in a more historically astute disclosure of what was distinctive about it. He says of his book, “A social history of art is at work here . . . , one that ultimately seeks to unravel and analyze the ideological nature of art” (pp. 9–10). Just as ideology is used here in the broadest sense to show how “a body of values” endows humanity with an overriding mission in society, so ideology is used by Folgarait in a more surgical manner to reveal the divergent “articulations of interest” that divide the body politic along

6. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1969), reprinted in *Lenin and Philosophy*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 173. More recently, see Slavoj Žižek, “The Supposed Subjects of Ideology,” *Critical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1997):39–59.

class lines, even as mainstream ideologues speak of the Mexican nation as a seamless anatomical whole. Thus ideological critique in Folgarait's study means at least two different things simultaneously: an explication of the official position concerning national harmony and a dissection of this "innocent" ideological claim in the face of class-based inequities that cancel out any nonhierarchical worldviews of the state regarding the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico (pp. 10–11).

Significantly for an author so indebted to structuralism, Folgarait avoids the main pitfall now linked to it—the momentous "death of the author" thesis once championed famously by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault during the most militant days of the late 1960s. Folgarait is not interested in writing yet another text to "bury artists-as-authors"—as if artists like the Mexican muralists possessed no individual skills to inflect their artworks or distinctive techniques to accent their specialized forms of labor. Consequently, Folgarait treats the main murals in Mexico as "historical agents" in and of themselves in two different ways. First, he views them impersonally as "sign vehicles articulating ideas" within the "semiotic social system of the day," and thus as symptomatic of the "paternalizing generosity of the [state] patron" (p. 12). This structuralist or revisionist approach dominates two-thirds of *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico*.

Second, he contends more specifically that not all these Mexican murals by Rivera et al. "line up on the axis of consent to official policy" because "the murals at times present instances of internal rupture, of the presence of several conflicting voices" (p. 12). This post-structuralist or post-revisionist perspective surfaces intermittently in the monograph. In preserving a possible "resistant space" for individual agency by the engaged artist in relation to allied popular groups, this stance underscores the methodological sophistication of Folgarait's book by pointing beyond its findings to areas for further study.

Now I will examine a specific case study in *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* to determine the incisiveness and range of Folgarait's analysis in historical terms. How much did the public murals of Rivera really embody the paternalistic and populist values of patron José Vasconcelos, the Secretario de Educación from 1921 to 1924? Folgarait's critique of Vasconcelos is duly probing. His discussion will be a valuable point of departure for anyone wishing to grapple with the generally underacknowledged ideological project of the primary government patron who helped to jump-start the whole Mexican mural movement during the administration of Alvaro Obregón (pp. 16–24). Not content with the sharply nationalist and vaguely populist praise of Vasconcelos's notably liberal patronage, Folgarait delineates instead the unsettling underside, the constraining logic of Vasconcelos's program. Folgarait shows how much this state project, at least under Vasconcelos, was self-serving in fairly conventional class terms and along established ethnic lines, notwithstanding its "revolutionary rhetoric."

Seen in this light, the radiant “gift” of the minister on behalf of artistic renewal and national literacy takes on a more somber hue. Despite, or even because of, Vasconcelos’s recourse to the didactic pedagogical project of Anatole Lunarcharsky, the contemporaneous Soviet Commissar, what was most desired by the Mexican ministry in its cautious haste to educate the popular classes was not particularly empowering for them or structurally transformative for a society like a revolutionary literacy crusade, but something more homogenizing and reformist in character.

To point out the populist thrust of Vasconcelos’s program, Folgarait quotes from his public statements in 1920, when he was still rector of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México: “Only intimate contact between workers and intellectuals can produce a spiritual rebirth. . . . [F]or the middle class to . . . enrich itself, it should ally itself with the proletariat of the earth” (p. 17). Folgarait notes instructively how the tenor of Vasconcelos’s literacy campaign can be recognized by remembering that the Mexican philosopher invoked the Spanish Conquest of the Americas as “a model for social and cultural transformation, valuing especially the work of the missionaries as a civilizing force” (p. 18). Accordingly, Vasconcelos called the teachers in his literacy crusade “maestros misioneros” and claimed that “to educate is to redeem.” Understandably, then, Folgarait concludes that the social reenfranchisement of the popular classes in post-revolutionary Mexico was to be achieved through a moderation of their “uneducated” political and economic criticisms of the class-based nature of the system: “Vasconcelos’ motives in directing the national culture through education were to assist the government in creating a system of political control” that was driven by vague concepts like “the Mexican people” and “the national culture.” Paradoxically, Vasconcelos wished to end poverty yet maintain the class hierarchy, to revalue the indigenous traditions yet assimilate indigenous people into a *mestizaje* with a predominantly Hispanic inflection.

Folgarait does a first-rate job of analyzing the pedagogical project of the education ministry, but several prickly questions immediately pop up. Can it be assumed that Vasconcelos’s stance automatically represented Obregón’s in the presidency or the literacy teachers’ in the trenches? Can an ideological congruence, even on the unconscious level, be assumed between the ideological project of Vasconcelos and that of leftist painters like Diego Rivera—or even that of artist-dandies like Adolfo Best Maugard, head of the Departamento de Dibujo and the school art programs under Vasconcelos? Can it be assumed that Vasconcelos’s educational project merely outlined a predetermined state policy on art and education that would be relentlessly pursued by the subsequent administrations led by Plutarco Elías Calles from 1924 to 1934 during the so-called Maximato? It should be recalled that Vasconcelos resigned over the more leftist program originally represented by Calles when he was selected as Obregón’s successor in 1924. Finally, can it be assumed that the post-revolutionary state had a unified top-down

purpose from beginning to end? Readers might recall Poulantzas's concept of the state as a site of contestation among competing power blocs and class factions rather than being a mere institutional enforcer of ruling-class ideological and economic interests at the expense of a supposedly resigned or passive majority.

To Folgarait's credit, he forces readers to answer anew these crucial queries about the state even when he generally responds to them in a conventional way. *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* advances to the threshold of a much-needed transition in art history from a revisionist critique, with its affiliations to "dependency theory," to what historians Mary Kay Vaughan and Alan Knight have labeled since the late 1980s as a post-revisionist stance more in line with a "dialogical conception" of uneven historical development.⁷

The post-revisionist position for launching a critique of historical events, with its measured restoration of agency to dominated popular classes and dissident individuals, is much more attuned to locating the existence of "resistant cultures" that were frequently at odds with the official state-sanctioned cultural values in art and education. As recent research has made clear, these resistant cultures rooted in popular organizations have wielded great influence at times, even though they have rarely ascended to a national level. These resistant subaltern cultures were often allied with the ideological views and political agendas of the main Mexican muralists like Rivera, even while he worked for the national government at tense moments when the state sought to suppress or at least mute these same resistant cultures.⁸

Alan Knight has consolidated signal work along these lines by an earlier group of progressive scholars (including Linda Hall, Michael Meyer, and many others). Knight has advanced the "post-revisionist position" since 1990 with a broad-ranging yet penetrating summation of state-sponsored developments in Mexico after 1920.⁹ Knight's encapsulation of events from the 1920s through the 1940s has opened a way to fine-tune and extend the

7. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); and Alan Knight, "The Rise and Fall of Cardenismo, c. 1930–c. 1946," in *Mexico since Independence*, edited by Leslie Bethel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 241–321.

8. The post-revisionist or dialogical concern was central to my book on Rivera, which appeared only a short time before Folgarait's study of muralism in general. See David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1997).

9. For a well-known look at the political culture passed on by Obregón, see Linda B. Hall, *Alvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico, 1911–1920* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1981). For an equally enduring examination of the richness of the revolutionary lineage in Mexico long after 1920, see the now classic textbook by Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, with Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The first edition appeared in 1979.

discussion of muralism and the literacy crusade by Folgarait. Knight summarized the situation acutely:

It is true that Mexico's economy had not been revolutionized by the Revolution. . . . In contrast, Mexico's social and political life was dramatically changed by the Revolution, albeit in an often unplanned and unforeseen manner. The armed mobilization of 1910–20 gave way to new forms of institutional mobilization: peasant leagues, trade unions and a mass of political parties, left and right, great and small. The result was not a decorous politics, such as Francisco Madero had advocated in 1910; but neither was it a closed, personalist, autocratic system of the kind Díaz had maintained to the end. . . . [A] form of mass politics . . . was gestating. Such a politics defies neat generalization. . . . Although state control over civil society thus increased, the state built by the leaders from Sonora (1920–34) was not an authoritarian leviathan. The rumbustious civil society of the 1920s defied such control. . . . Organized workers and peasants often elected to ally with the state, but they usually did so conditionally and tactically, and there were many examples of popular dissidence. . . . What is more, by the 1920s, the demands and rhetoric of popular movements . . . displayed a new radicalism, a new self-confidence. . . . The CROM, the dominant official labour confederation [before 1934] was not simply a cipher of the Callista state: it forced employers to reckon with labour as never before. . . . Equally, the peasantry, which still constituted the bulk of the population, displayed a different temper compared with pre-revolutionary days. . . . [Moreover] the political institutionalization of the maximato was accompanied by growing social and ideological polarization. Herein lay the genesis of Cardenismo, the political movement associated with President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). . . . The radicalization of the regime was closely bound up with the struggle for power.¹⁰

Viewed in light of this new historiographic context of post-revisionism, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico* emerges as both ingenious and a touch ingenuous, as revisionist yet occasionally post-revisionist. The model for a post-revisionist analysis that would permit consolidating Folgarait's insights and also advancing beyond them has been provided in a significant study by Mary Kay Vaughan of the state-sponsored educational program in post-revolutionary Mexico. Her innovative thesis about the role of the Secretaría de Educación spells out what is missing from Folgarait's predominantly structuralist methodology and its application to the murals by Rivera in the Secretaría in Mexico City: "the real cultural revolution lay not in the state's project, but in the dialogue between state and society that took place around this project. . . . The school became the arena for intense, often violent negotiations over power, culture, knowledge, and fights. In the process, rural communities carved out space for preserving local identities and cultures. . . . If the school functioned to inculcate state ideology for purposes of rule, it also served communities when they needed to contest state policies."¹¹

10. Alan Knight, "Rise and Fall of Cardenismo," 241–42, 245.

11. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 7.

Books for Mass Circulation and Conservative Populism

No such innovative engagement with historical issues, ideological nuances, or historiographic oversights disturbs two new commercially successful books on Rivera by nonscholars in the field. Pete Hamill's *Diego Rivera* is a glossy coffee-table monograph published by Abrams, while Patrick Marnham's *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* is a straightforward biography of Rivera published by Knopf. Hamill is a prominent journalist who has been editor-in-chief for two conservative newspapers, the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post*. Marnham has written detective mysteries and travel books.

Certainly, forays by nonspecialists into an academic domain such as art history are to be welcomed when they broaden the debate about historic artworks and look with fresh eyes or unorthodox perspectives at what established scholars sometimes treat too routinely. Nonetheless, commercial ventures into a cultural landscape with a rich art historical literature are worth little to readers when the nonspecialists simply recycle populist platitudes and demonstrate a dilettantish indifference to the technical issues or formal advances that are always at stake in the probing analysis of artworks of international importance.

Both of these books represent commercial undertakings with rather conservative political agendas, although Marnham's biography contains some original interpretations of notable political events in the life of Rivera and the Mexican Left. If these two books were not widely circulated financial successes, they would be harmless rather than intermittently harmful and frequently misleading about Rivera's politics. The favorable commentaries that the two books have received in the mass media for reinstalling passé ideological briefs against Rivera in relation to geopolitics, concomitant with a series of inattentive "interpretations" of Rivera's career as an artist, make these two books deeply disappointing additions to the literature in the field. In several instances, these two nonacademic authors have done a sad disservice to Rivera, to serious scholarship, and to the general public as the main audience for Rivera's murals.

Hamill's book actually contains little material that is new to scholars, aside from a shrill tone on all political issues involving Rivera that has not been heard since the 1930s, when David Alfaro Siqueiros engaged in similar polemics. An insightful review appeared in *USA Today*. This hip summary of the book lays out in a probably unintentional manner Hamill's overarching ideological agenda:

When a colorful newsman from Brooklyn (Pete Hamill) profiles a larger-than-life artist from Mexico (Diego Rivera), olés for originality are in order. . . . Hamill is a hotshot in journalism, for 40 years a chronicler of culture in this country. . . . Politics are central to Hamill's book, which is part biography and part appreciation of Rivera's art. . . . On occasions the author seems personally affronted that Rivera did

not recognize the dark side of socialism. . . . Hamill's primary focus is social context rather than personality or art itself. And what art it is! . . . Reproductions of Rivera's paintings punctuate the sober text like bursts of lush color.¹²

To corroborate this thumbnail sketch of Hamill's mission in writing this text, two of the innumerable examples of its brusquely judgmental tone will be cited. The first involves Hamill's "analysis" of Rivera's trip to the USSR in 1927–28, when Rivera led a labor delegation on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. During his eight-month visit, Rivera criticized certain things in the Soviet Union that signaled his anti-Stalinism from the moment it emerged. Within a short period, Rivera's constructive criticism led to his expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party and his alliance with Leon Trotsky and sectors of the "ultra Left" from 1929 to 1940. He was readmitted to the party fold only during the de-Stalinization of the 1950s. Yet Hamill describes Rivera's trip to the USSR thus:

Rivera was one of the most famous communists in Mexico. . . . [H]e was a celebrity, and the communists needed his presence. . . . His hosts were generally gracious. . . . He met Stalin at some function, sketched his face, attracted his attention, and accepted Stalin's autograph on the sketch. He met with young artists and preached the gospel of muralism, and even signed a contract with Anatoly Lunacharsky. . . . Did he completely miss what was happening all around him in the Soviet Union? Was he blind? A fool? A bitter truth was slowly being revealed: communism, as envisioned by the theologians who composed its dogmas, was simply not working. . . . How could Diego Rivera, whose public art argued passionately against oppression, have failed to see oppression in the Soviet Union? If he saw it, how could he accept it? . . . One explanation is obvious: his brain had grown locked into the cold war rigidities of Marxist-Leninist theory. Communism supplied One Big Answer. It was an act of faith disguised as a process of reason. . . . But to accept such a creed, Diego Rivera had to harden his heart. (Pp. 130–32)

This presentation of Rivera's politics is a defining theme of the entire book. Is Hamill less severely judgmental in assessing Rivera's murals? Hamill takes on Rivera's first mural in Mexico, *La Creación* (1922) in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, which serious scholars consider the inauguration of the Mexican Mural Renaissance (despite some aesthetic shortcomings that were solved in the murals in the Secretaría de Educación Pública). Hamill observes, "Rivera's draftsmanship is competent, the colors are chromatically balanced and designed, the faces have variety, and he makes good use of the architecture. But the work itself is utter rubbish; insincere, irrelevant, a pastiche created for a new audience of one: Vasconcelos. . . . Diego Rivera was painting for the man who signed the checks" (p. 86).

Hamill's view of Rivera's masterful set of murals in the stairway of the Palacio Nacional is even more beside the point:

It stands today as exemplary of hard work and personal industry, but is one of the least satisfying murals as art. The unpleasantly meticulous rendering of it is domi-

12. Ann Prichard, "Rivera, with a Splash of Red," *USA Today*, 21 Oct. 1999, p. 8D.

nant, the composition is as crowded as a subway train in rush hour; the portraits are exercises in hagiography; the scenes of vanished Aztec glories are dishonest (no pre-Conquest militarism or human sacrifice here). Even Karl Marx makes a guest appearance in this Mexican panorama, as if offering a word from the sponsor. . . . Marx, of course, had as much to do with Mexican history as Babe Ruth. . . . Diego's hands are painting but his heart isn't. . . . There is plenty of violence, much oppression, and almost no insight. This is a painting that demands the services of a tour guide. (Pp. 149–52)

Of the numerous mistakes in this one passage, I will mention only one here.¹³ Contrary to Hamill's impatient claim, two of the murals include prominent references to pre-conquest militarism and human sacrifice. Anyone who has missed them has never looked at these frescoes in a sustained and thoughtful manner.

Patrick Marnham's *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* does not fall into the category of art journalism. This writer of detective stories is at his best when unraveling the instances of byzantine political intrigue and even murder that circulated around Rivera and the Mexican Left from the late 1920s through the early 1940s. Marnham does not allow his conservative politics to obtrude as often as Hamill does. Marnham is more smoothly dismissive (but not always more scholarly). Rivera's lifelong commitment to socialism remains inscrutable for him, even when solidly documented. An example of this world-weary writer's mannerisms appears when he attempts early in the biography to overturn a compelling reason for the Rivera family's abrupt move to Mexico City when Diego was six. Contrary to the standard view presented by Rivera and the major scholars in the field, Marnham seems to make light of Diego's father's integrity as a political activist: "The authorized version is that Don Diego had become politically unpopular for his liberal views. . . . However, none of these reasons explains the abruptness of María del Pilar's departure. . . . [S]he left like a woman avoiding a bailiff. . . . Don Diego's exit had no political significance; he was just another failed mine-owner" (p. 32).

Lack of generosity and an abundance of cynicism in biographies often lead to illogical claims. To say that the Rivera family's hasty departure from Guanajuato necessarily indicated financial disgrace rather than victimization through political repression is a non sequitur. Marnham himself concedes the implausibility of his own breezy claim in the next chapter: "María del Pilar's panic may not have been so ill judged after all. In Guanajuato the new governor closed *El Demócrata* [with which Diego's father was associated] and arrested the staff, and in years to come liberal newspapers in San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato were regularly suppressed and their journalists beaten up or murdered" (pp. 33–34).

A related problem is the tone of condescension that mars much of

13. I have analyzed these three frescoes at length elsewhere. See Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*, 119–29.

Dreaming with His Eyes Open, leading to remarks like this: “All his life Rivera showed a naivety in formal argument that verged on childishness” (p. 41). The ethnocentric undercurrents of this sloppy contention surface on realizing that such patronizing remarks are also aimed at Mexico as a whole. For example, Marnham opines that Rivera’s scholarship to study in Europe (primarily in Spain and France) was fortunate: “For the following fifteen years he was to inhabit a land of reason” (p. 49). Similarly, Marnham writes condescendingly of the Mexican Revolution, commenting that Rivera “came back to a country that had been in an almost continuous state of revolution. . . . General Carranza attempted in 1917 to introduce the rule of law. . . . The result was that his most able general, Alvaro Obregón, led a revolt against Carranza, and within a few weeks the first post-revolutionary Mexican president had been assassinated. Fiesta! . . . one year after the death of Carranza, the Revolution had already been betrayed and defeated” (pp. 155–56).

Marnham’s characterization of the Mexican Revolution is not only ethnocentric but dead wrong. How did he arrive at this ill-formed interpretation? The question is not easily answered because *Dreaming with His Eyes Open* has no notes and only a slim bibliography. Marnham’s view of the Mexican Revolution is contradicted by almost every book listed in the bibliography, which includes alarmingly few on Mexican history by key analysts like Michael Meyer, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Alan Knight. Similarly, Marnham cites Linda Hall’s excellent book on Obregón but then ignores everything she showed about this great revolutionary leader.¹⁴ Marnham offers neither reasons nor documentation for his dismissal of Obregón as responsible for “betraying” the revolution by 1920. Marnham further claims that the post-revolutionary government emerged “in its pure, idealistic form, as personified by Vasconcelos, and in its corrupt, opportunistic form, embodied in Obregón” (p. 165).

Marnham’s analysis of Rivera’s work is equally misinformed. For example, Marnham asserts that *La maestra rural* in the Secretaría de Educación “showed the future life of the hacienda.” In reality, Rivera’s mural depicted life after the hacienda, at the moment when the hacienda system was being broken up and progressively destroyed to redistribute land to communally held *ejidos*.

This process proceeded cautiously at first under Obregón and then with radical force under President Lázaro Cárdenas. It accelerated from three million acres expropriated under Obregón by 1924 to almost fifty million acres in just four years under Cárdenas beginning in 1934, with a third of the Mexican population ultimately receiving land through this post-revolutionary program.¹⁵ Such statistics make clear just how mistaken

14. Hall, *Alvaro Obregón*.

15. Meyer and Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed., 577–78.

Marnham is when he equates the situation under Porfirio Díaz with conditions after 1920. No wonder Marnham misses the mark when he takes interpretative stabs at the meaning of Rivera's murals.¹⁶

What can scholars in the field glean from this problematic book? Actually, more than one might first expect. Four chapters out of fourteen provide an intriguing and convincing reconstruction of the trail of sabotage and slayings left by vicious Stalinist assassin Vittorio Vidali. By the time Marnham tabulates the body count in Mexico and beyond, it is evident that Vidali helped torture and murder scores of left-wing political dissidents either within the Communist Party or outside it, including Julio Antonio Mella, Tina Modotti, Robert Harte, and Leon Trotsky. It now appears that Vidali was also responsible for Rivera's expulsion from the Communist Party in 1929 (pp. 208–15).

This outstanding part of *Dreaming with His Eyes Open* reveals Marnham resourcefully stalking Vidali with a relentless sense of purpose through stacks of period documents (some made available only since the Soviet collapse in 1989). In the end, Marnham gets his man, now in from the cold. Vidali, alias "Enea Sormenti" and "Carlos Contreras," was a terrifying henchman who embodied everything that has made Stalinism a synonym for all that any legitimate socialist movement must abhor. Marnham pays a marvelous tribute to Rivera's utter lack of sympathy with the sinister Vidali and the Stalinoid thuggery he represented. Marnham recalls that in 1954—following the death of Stalin, the ouster of Soviet leader Lavrenti Beria, and the painter's readmission into the Communist Party—Rivera toasted "the return of the Trotskyists to power in the Soviet Union" (p. 311).

Two Monographs as Micro-Histories

The excellent new monographs by Linda Downs and Anthony Lee both concentrate in circumscribed ways on artworks by Rivera of the 1930s in Detroit and San Francisco. In each study, the seemingly narrow field of inquiry yields a broad-ranging set of insights into the artistic process used by the painter during this period or the overall political import of his murals in the public life of two cities. Downs's bountiful *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* offers a rare and gratifying experience: the chance to view scores of little-known or even unknown sketches and cartoons by Rivera in preparation for his fresco cycle of twenty-seven panels in the Detroit Institute of Arts. This remarkable cache of new drawings has been augmented by numerous rare photographs from the period that freshly chronicle Rivera's and Frida Kahlo's visit to Detroit. The Detroit murals are

16. Marnham's misguided references to art and art history have already been singled out in several other instances by Dawn Ades in her review of *Dreaming with His Eyes Open*. See "The Many Revolutions of Rivera," *The London Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Nov. 1998, p. 17.

the finest paintings that Rivera ever executed in the United States, if not worldwide.

One of Downs's contentions in this work is that enough attention has already been lavished on the reception of Rivera's images, particularly along ideological fault lines. In her view, those interested in Rivera's work need to regain their footing by studying more specific art historical problems concerning Rivera's creative process, both technical and manual, as well as the iconographic program he used and the role of his workshop of assistants. Such redirection would hardly be advisable without the new material and a rethinking of things to go with it. Here at least, the reintroduction of the "classic" art historical preoccupation with the art object as an intended material artifact is entirely justified, owing to the way that Downs locates and handles this material in her monograph. All these topics are made even more intriguing by the fact that Downs was one of the key scholars who cleverly followed a series of hunches and leads to "rediscover" long-lost cartoons that Rivera drew in preparation for his Detroit fresco cycle. All are expertly reproduced in this book published by Norton in conjunction with the Detroit Institute of Arts. Downs has contributed an essential new study of Rivera, using conventional methodological procedures to great effect. With this book, she emerges as the heir apparent to the late Stanton Catlin as the dean of Rivera studies in the United States.

In addition to providing the sheer visual pleasure of following the conception and execution of the Detroit murals in a more measured and intimate manner, Downs's *Diego Rivera* also imparts a good deal of less spectacular information about Rivera's ongoing interrelationships with his team of assistants. Several of them emerge as distinct personalities for the first time in art history. Less expectedly, Downs further refines the already honed iconographic analysis of the Detroit murals that was put together for the momentous 1986 exhibition of Rivera's work in Detroit. The catalogue for this show remains one of the most important publications about Rivera ever to appear. Downs wrote the introduction and organized the exhibit along with Ellen Sharp.¹⁷

One of the few catalogues that has followed up the 1986 publication successfully is the one that originated at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1998 with an important show of Rivera's oil paintings, curated by William Robinson, Agustín Arteaga, and Luis-Martín Lozano. Both the catalogue and the exhibition are entitled *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*. The exhibition traveled to Los Angeles and Mexico City as well as Houston. Both make significant contributions by innovatively exploring Rivera's remarkable

17. *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, Detroit Institute of Arts, 10 Feb.–27 Apr. 1986. In addition to Downs's fine introduction and Catlin's invaluable "Mural Census," the catalogue contains important contributions by Ellen Sharp (co-curator of the show), Laurance P. Hurlburt, Alicia Azuela, Ida Rodríguez-Prampolini, Rita Eder, and several other leading scholars.

range as a painter who forged a novel language from the most disparate of visual traditions and cultural idioms. Noteworthy essays along these lines were contributed to the catalogue by Luis-Martín Lozano on Rivera's classical lineage, Irene Herner on the Rockefeller Center scandal, and Alberto Híjar on the Trotsky connection, to name only a few in this fine collection.

Just as Downs focuses on only one mural cycle, so Anthony Lee concentrates on the three impressive mural complexes that Rivera executed in San Francisco before and after the one in the industrial heartland. In *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*, Lee has written a "social history of art," one that commands attention with its vivacity and rigor. Lee's style and concision as a thinker are evident in his summary of the book:

San Francisco's most celebrated public murals, painted during the Great Depression by artists of the Left, were politically radical works of art. Although today their politics cause no misunderstanding or outrage, in the 1930s most of the city's major patrons and critics found them politically unpalatable, and often pictorially incomprehensible. . . . What indeed did these painters think they were doing when they related their work and pictorial experiments to leftist politics? That is the general question I pursue in this book. San Francisco experienced a historical moment . . . when art—public art, no less—could pursue socially and politically revolutionary ambitions. . . . Throughout this early history, "public" was (as it remained) an ideological term, referring to an imaginary social body that could be invoked as needed. Often patrons called upon it to stand fictive witness to their own ambitions. But once a public was said to exist for murals, other actors could make claims upon it. Diego Rivera's murals permitted specific leftist painters to do just that. . . . His first two San Francisco murals provided stunning visual evidence of a symbolic language of radical political dissent. The new art-critical term "Riveresque" was coined, admirers and detractors alike using it as a familiar descriptive category. . . . The Riveresque in particular had a radical afterlife in the famous Coit Tower panels, in which artistic and political practices were closely aligned . . . , the moment when their work entered into meaningful dialogue with widespread working-class dissent. . . . But when Rivera returned to San Francisco in 1940 to paint his third and final mural in the city, the triumphant mood had clearly passed. (Pp. xvii–xix)

Painting on the Left, which also covers obscure Anglo artists like Maynard Dixon and the misnamed "Bohemian Club," is at once visually astute and politically adroit. Lee acknowledges the unavoidably asymmetrical relationship between Rivera's murals and their patrons. The result is a post-revisionist reading of the shifting meanings of the frescoes in relation to a complex set of political tactics on the Left. Lee's discussion of the competing tendencies within the Communist Party reveals the crucible for arriving at an alternate reception of Rivera's murals even in the seemingly airtight Pacific Stock Exchange. Just as he skillfully analyzes how the fresco *Allegory of California* "exceeded the critical categories available to the writers" and "signaled that the mural contained subjects inherently critical of corporate industry," so Lee metaphorically pounds the period turf of San

Francisco to map out the main constituencies for Bernard Zakheim's Jewish Community Center mural, such as the leftist cadre of real bohemians centered on Montgomery Street and Telegraph Hill and led by the likes of Kenneth Rexroth and Frank Triest, or the members of District 15 of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Lee shows how the social import of public art at its most progressive in San Francisco during the 1930s was not simply an institutional "gift" of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) at the national level but rather a consequence of irregular popular mobilization on the local level.

Given the manifest strengths of *Painting on the Left*, what if any weaknesses are evident? First, the section on Rivera in Mexico prior to arriving in San Francisco is stale and superficial, not really abreast of the latest research on issues like the painter's relationship with the Communist Party or his work for the post-revolutionary government. Such issues as Rivera's "epic modernism" in Mexico will need to be addressed in the future. More seriously, an implicit cyclical notion of history in the study constrains the political import of the murals within an evolutionist development, from a promising beginning in the early 1930s to "the final failure" of the murals in the late 1930s. The glib concluding tone of the book lands readers on the familiar terrain of left-wing nostalgia tinged with melancholy about what occurred subsequently.

Yet what if the social promise of the Rivera murals were viewed not as defeated but as deferred until moments like that of the Chicano mural movement in the 1960s and 1970s, or other movements yet to emerge? If we look at Rivera's murals with a more profound and multilateral historical sense of this kind, we could switch from being nostalgic about the past to being "nostalgic about the future," as Ernesto Cardenal once said—and Diego Rivera would still be part of that future.