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Mexico, According to Diego Rivera

From 1929-1935, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera depicted a detailed history of Mexico to be displayed in the National Palace in Mexico City. He carefully chose to portray scenes that represented Mexico's past, such as Aztec leaders and previous government leaders, the present (the aftermath of the Revolution and the fight for democracy in Mexico), and looks forward optimistically to the future (including major societal reforms). Through this work, Rivera attempts to portray a complete history of the country and allow those who view the work to ponder how Mexico has changed throughout the past centuries and how it will look to future generations.

On the North Wall of the mural, Rivera painted a piece titled *The Aztec World*. He highlights the importance of the indigenous populations to Mexico's past and present and carefully depicts several aspects of Aztec life, including portraying their leader Quetzalcoatl, musical instruments, sculpting, and pyramids. Rivera is careful to depict both the positive and negative parts of Aztec culture, including violence and warfare. However, his overall message in dedicating an entire wall to the Aztecs is that the indigenous populations of Mexico, including the Aztecs, are indispensable to both the history of Mexico as well as modern society. Following the Mexican Revolution, there was a big movement of appreciation and respect for indigenous cultures in Mexico, and a movement away from trying to suppress indigenous culture in an attempt to "fit in" with European cultures.

On the West Wall, which is the largest and most visible, Rivera painted *From the Conquest to 1930*. The most notable feature of this area of the mural is the jumbling of many different scenes together, with the exception of 5 clear scenes lining the top of the wall. The two outside scenes feature foreign invasions, France and the United States, while the middle three scenes portray eras of political leadership in Mexico, highlighting Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican Revolution, and Benito Juárez. Rivera draws attention to the middle scene, which depicts the Mexican Revolution, through a bright red banner held by Emiliano Zapata that reads 'Tierra y Libertad,' paying homage to the many Mexicans that fought for reform in the country. The fourth of the five top scenes depicts Benito Juárez proudly displaying the Constitution of 1857. This Constitution introduced many new freedoms into Mexico. In *The Mexico Reader*, Luis González y González says about this Constitution and the ideologies of Juárez: "The Liberal vision was comprised of a half-dozen freedoms-- economic, political, intellectual, religious, pedagogical, and the freedom to work" (pg. 239). Curiously, Benito Juárez is not portrayed in an overly flashy way and is surrounded by several other people. Perhaps Rivera wanted to emphasize the role that Mexican citizens, and not just political leaders, played in fighting for rights and freedoms throughout the past century.

While it is easy to identify notable people and events in the top five scenes of the West Wall, the bottom area is jumbled and at times confusing to decipher. Rivera portrays important battles in Mexican history, indigenous people, the arrival of missionaries in Mexico, and much more, with the Mexican eagle in the middle, symbolizing the unity of the nation even after at times divisive history. Lots of workers and common people in this section appear to be looking up at the murals depicting the Mexican Revolution, almost as if they are watching these events unfold after the work they put in for decades and centuries before the Revolution even took

place. Rivera wants to emphasize to viewers that while the history of Mexico has been diverse, everything that has happened has worked together to create modern-day Mexico and all of the rights and freedoms that its citizens enjoy.

Finally, the South Wall is titled *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* and focuses on the class conflict and poor conditions of workers. Rivera's goal with this piece is to negatively portray the forces working against the modernization of Mexico, such as Rockefeller and other foreigners attempting to insert themselves in the Mexican economy at the expense of the Mexican people and political leaders against reform. He also wants to empower Mexican workers to continue the fight and attempt to secure rights for themselves and future generations. Notably, Rivera chooses to portray Karl Marx. Marx is pictured holding a scroll of paper aimed at motivating workers and reminding them what their goal is and why they are continuing to fight. With his other hand, he is pointing, not at anything specific, but rather to some undetermined future that lies ahead. In this part of the mural, Rivera's ultimate goal is to show Mexicans that while there are many factors working against them and that it will be difficult, it is worth fighting and continuing to work for rights and liberties.

Through this mural, with all its intricacies, Rivera tell us that Mexico's history is not simple and doesn't follow a linear path. Rather, modern Mexico is the result of the sacrifices of thousands of Mexicans fighting for rights and embracing their culture and history. Rivera does not shy away from negatively portraying people and highlighting the less-than-ideal moments of history but ends the mural on a high note: he opens the door for even more reform in the coming years and ponders what Mexican society will look like for the next generations. Overall, Rivera seems to be celebrating Mexico's past and anxiously awaiting its future.

References

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