

Cultural Daily

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Diego Rivera Shines in Sprawling Bay Area Show

Stephen West · Thursday, November 3rd, 2022

It was a real eye-opener last year when the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) unveiled its long-term installation of Diego Rivera's huge mural *Pan American Unity*.

The 10-panel, 74-foot-wide fresco — with a staggering collection of subjects ranging from ancient Aztecs to chic 1940s San Franciscans to fascist dictators — made clear how ambitious an artist Rivera really was. While his reputation as a leader of the Mexican muralist movement of the 1920s and 1930s was largely built on his paintings of peasants and workers, there was a lot more to his art.



SFMOMA's current exhibition, *Diego Rivera's America*, seeks to present the full range of his career in both halves of his America: Mexico and Latin America in the south and the United States in the north. The sprawling show, with more than 150 works, is organized both chronologically and thematically, focusing mainly on the 1920s and 1930s.

There are plenty of paintings of Mexican peasants working in the fields and selling produce in the markets. But there are also politically charged images expressing Rivera's left-wing views, such as *Opponent of Nazism* of 1933, in which a man in front of a Communist flag restrains a swastika-tattooed arm and hand holding a bloody knife. In contrast, there are also sweet portraits of young children, and impressive ones of wealthy patrons like Edsel B. Ford, who helped sustain him financially.

Still Life and Blossoming Almond Trees of 1931 (top image), a fresco from Stern Hall at the University of California, Berkeley, combines several genres: a landscape with a sea of white-blossomed almond trees, three workers weeding the orchard, and a tractor; a still life of apples, oranges, and melons in a woven basket; and a portrait of curious children getting ready to eat some of that fruit. It's charming and almost completely apolitical. The children at the ledge remind you of *putti* from a Raphael fresco.

Rivera (1886-1957) grew up in a prosperous Mexican family and studied art in Madrid and Paris, where he was influenced by Cubism and, later, by the figurative style of Post-Impressionism. Back in Mexico by the early 1920s, he was hired by the new socialist Mexican government to paint murals of the proletariat in prominent public buildings.

Over his lifetime, Rivera married four women, including the painter Frida Kahlo (twice). He

hosted the exiled Russian Communist leader Leon Trotsky for several months at his and Frida's house in Mexico City and visited Russia in 1927-28. By the early 1930s he headed north to San Francisco, Detroit, and New York to paint for wealthy clients including Rockefeller Center. His mural there, including a portrait of the Communist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, so upset the Rockefeller family that the work was removed.

When Rivera wasn't working on fresco murals, he was painting in his studio, often portraits. Sometimes they were just studies for his next mural, but often they were commissioned works that helped pay the bills.



Portrait of Lupe Marin of 1938 seems like a simple full-length painting, at least at first glance. The subject, Rivera's second wife almost a decade after their divorce, wears a long white dress, Mexican jewelry, and an anguished expression. She sits on a simple wicker stool with her hands clasped in front of her. Yet Rivera frames her on a diagonal, and there's a mirror in the corner of the room that reflects part of her back as well as a distorted window frame that's otherwise invisible. It creates an odd, almost Cubist space that transforms the image.



A more straightforward portrait, possibly a study, is *Man Smoking* of 1937. The subject, apparently a Mexican peasant, wears a tan shirt and cowboy hat that match the simple tan background. He holds a cigarette in the long, bony fingers of his right hand and also grasps a brown cloak or blanket flung over his left shoulder. With his thin mustache and goatee, and his eyes narrowed to slits, he gives off a slightly sinister vibe. He's clearly not someone to be messed with.



One of the most polished works in the show is *The Flower Carrier* of 1935, part of SFMOMA's extensive collection of Rivera works. A man dressed in white, on his hands and knees, balances an enormous basket of purple flowers on his back while a woman in a brown dress and blue shawl adjusts his load. The two figures are completely solid, almost filling the large square canvas, yet the precarious position of the flower basket creates a tension that gives the work its energy. It's a simple image, yet wonderfully complete.

Diego Rivera's America runs through January 2, 2023, at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), 151 Third Street, San Francisco. It then travels to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, where it will be on view from March 11 to July 31, 2023. An extensive catalog is published by SFMOMA and the University of California Press. The *Pan American Unity* mural will remain on view at SFMOMA through January 2024.

Top image: Diego Rivera, Still Life and Blossoming Almond Trees, 1931; Stern Hall, University of California, Berkeley, gift of Rosalie M. Stern; © 2022 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo © The Regents of the University of California.

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