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Huge Diego Rivera Mural Gets a New Home

Stephen West · Friday, July 9th, 2021

A gigantic mural by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity* of 1940 (top image, detail), has taken up residence at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#). It's an astonishing collection of scenes, ranging from the ancient Aztec civilization to the booming economy of California to the looming threat of European totalitarianism.

The mural has been displayed for decades in a theater at City College of San Francisco, far from major tourist attractions. With the theater scheduled for demolition and replacement, the 10-panel fresco is now on view downtown for two years, free to the public in an airy SFMOMA gallery open to busy Howard Street. It's the culmination of a four-year process of planning, stress-testing, conservation, removal, and transporting the 30-ton work to its new home.



Installation view of *Pan American Unity* in the Roberts Family Gallery, looking toward Howard Street. Photograph by Stephen West.

By the late 1930s, Rivera (1886-1957) already had completed major murals in Detroit, New York, and San Francisco. In 1940, he was commissioned to return to the Bay Area to paint *Pan American Unity* as an attraction for the Golden Gate International Exposition, held on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. Visitors to the world's fair could watch the artist at work creating his masterpiece, which measures a staggering 74 feet wide by 22 feet high. It's painted in the bright, almost

cartoony style of 1930s social realism.



Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity*, detail of Aztecs in upper left panel, 1940, fresco on steel-reinforced cement panels, © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy City College of San Francisco.

The mural, formally known as *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent*, makes a case that the diverse cultures of the Americas exist on a single continuum, represented by five vertical pairs of panels. On the far left are the Aztecs, cultivating tidy fields, making sculptures and metalworks, dancing to drums, sitting in a circle with a priest. They live in harmony with the land.



Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity*, detail of California industry in upper right panel, 1940, fresco on steel-reinforced cement panels, © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy City College of San Francisco.

On the far right are California industries at work, mining, logging, drilling for oil, panning for gold, building bridges and railroads. Except for a woman sewing a sampler and teaching a little girl her ABCs, and some portraits of historical figures including Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and Samuel Morse, all of the people are hard at work, grim even. In Rivera's implied critique, while the Aztecs are benign stewards of the land, North American workers are exploiters of the land and also perhaps exploited themselves.

The imagery in the center of the mural (top image) is more ambiguous. Two men swing axes to carve a wooden sculpture of a mountain ram, while behind them is a confusing mashup of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue and modern automaking machinery of the sort that Rivera painted in Detroit.

To the left and right of the central panels is a wonderful bird's-eye view of San Francisco Bay, with the city on the left, Treasure Island on the right, and the Bay Bridge snaking across the water. Flying above it all are two high divers, young women in white bathing suits with arms extended

and bodies arched over the scene. (One of them is modeled after a City College grad who was an Olympic diver.)

Below, a group of prosperous-looking San Franciscans marvel at the high divers. Nearby a Mexican artist carves a sculpture of the Aztec serpent god Quetzalcoatl, a fierce-looking creature with huge, curved fangs. What all these juxtapositions mean is hard to discern.



Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity*, detail of Pan American leaders in lower center-left panel, 1940, fresco on steel-reinforced cement panels, © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy City College of San Francisco.

In some cases, though, the contrasts are clear. Just below the serpent god in the lower panel of the second pair, for example, is a cluster of revered national leaders: Bolivar, Hidalgo, and Morelos for Mexico, and Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln for the United States. (The abolitionist John Brown, looking like Moses with a long white beard, is just below.)



Diego Rivera, *Pan American Unity*, detail of totalitarian leaders in lower center-right panel, 1940, fresco on steel-reinforced cement panels, © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy City College of San Francisco.

In the comparable position on the right, in the fourth pair of panels, is a cluster of sinister national dictators: Stalin of the Soviet Union, Hitler of Germany, and Mussolini of Italy. They're accompanied by Charlie Chaplin from *The Great Dictator* and a jumble of images from the World War II era, including bombers, barbed wire, gas masks, and a dead child.

While the mural may seem too complicated to be coherent — there are more than 100 human figures, and more than a dozen separate scenes with their casts of characters — it rewards the patient viewer who can see the big picture and also focus on the details.

Just to the left of the national leaders, for example, is a self-portrait of Rivera at work. He's chubby, wearing wire-rim glasses and blue work clothes, and paints a mural with his back to the viewer. To his left is an assistant spreading plaster for the fresco. (Rivera appears a second time in the bottom center of the mural, next to his ex-wife, the painter [Frida Kahlo](#), decked out in one of her signature Mexican outfits.) The mural is full of such surprises.

So the next time you're in downtown San Francisco, take a few minutes, or half an hour, to explore this remarkable mural. It offers a sweeping portrait of the city and its roots more than 80 years ago. And the price of admission couldn't be better.

Pan American Unity is on view until 2023 at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), 151 Third Street, San Francisco. Use the Howard Street entrance to visit the Robert Family Gallery. All visitors must wear masks and observe social distancing. For more information, [click here](#). The mural will be part of a major exhibition, *Diego Rivera's America*, opening at SFMOMA in the summer of 2022.

Top image: Diego Rivera, The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on This Continent (Pan American Unity), detail of three upper-central panels, 1940, fresco on steel-reinforced cement panels, © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy City College of San Francisco.

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