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# William Morris and Diego Rivera: The Pursuit of Art for the People

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# **William Morris and Diego Rivera: The Pursuit of Art for the People**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by  
Heidi S. Shugg  
June, 2016*

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*Winter Park, Florida*

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**Project Approved:**

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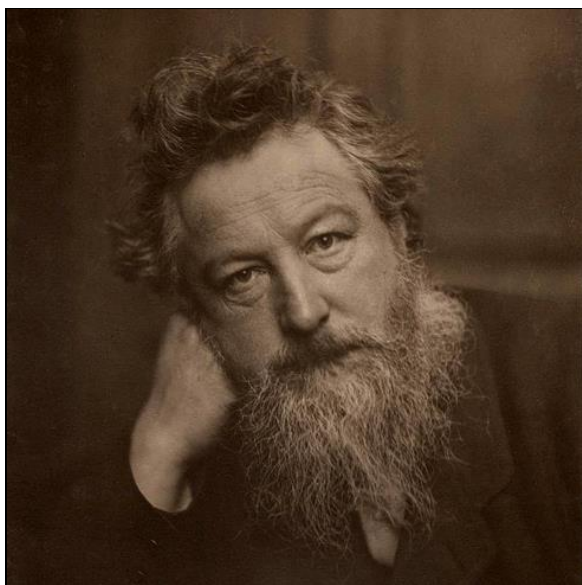
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**Dean, Hamilton Holt School  
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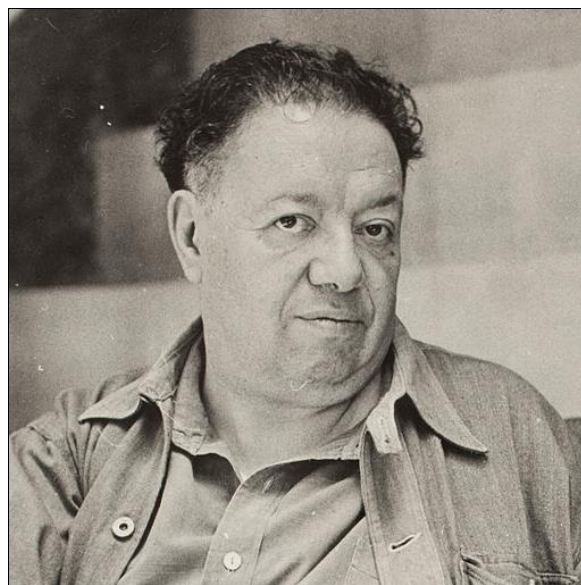
## William Morris and Diego Rivera: The Pursuit of Art for the People

William Morris (1834-1896) was an English author, poet, designer, publisher, and socialist activist most famous for his association with the British Arts and Crafts Movement. The aesthetic and social vision of the Arts and Crafts Movement derived from ideas he developed in the 1850s with a group of students at Oxford, who combined a love of Romantic literature with a commitment to social reform, bringing a gradual change in certain aspects of society. Morris began experimenting with various crafts and designing furniture and interiors, the most recognized being the Red House.

Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was a Mexican painter and socialist activist perhaps best known for his murals depicting the lives and struggles of the working class. He sought to make art that reflected the lives of the everyday man and native people of Mexico. The purpose of this thesis is to draw parallels between the art and philosophy of Morris and Rivera. Although not contemporaries, these men shared ideological kinship by: 1) expressing national identity through their artistic endeavors; 2) advocating for the accessibility of art for all people, not just the wealthy, and; 3) promoting a socialist agenda in their writing and art.



William Morris



Diego Rivera

In the following two sections I will provide a brief biography of each man, describing their lives and works, followed by a discussion of their nationalistic themes as portrayed in their work, their views on the availability of art for everyone, and their beliefs that socialism could elevate working classes.

## William Morris

### Morris's Life and Work

Born March 24, 1834, in Walthamstow, Essex, to an upper middle class family, William Morris was named after his father, a financier who worked as a partner in the Sanderson and Co. firm, a money dealer in the city of London (Kelvin, 150). His mother, Emma Morris, descended from a wealthy bourgeois family from Worcester (Kelvin, 159). Morris was the third of his parents' surviving children, their first child Charles having died four days after his birth in 1827, seven years prior to Morris's birth (Kelvin, 159). The Morris family were followers of the evangelical Protestant form of Christianity. As a child, Morris was kept largely housebound at Elm House by his mother, spending much time reading. Later his family moved into the Georgian Italianate mansion at Woodford Hall in Essex (Starr, 59). There young Morris took an interest in exploring the forest and also visited the various churches and cathedrals throughout the countryside. In 1847, Morris's father died unexpectedly, uprooting the family (Starr, 59).

Morris's education laid the framework for his artistic endeavors and architectural renditions. In February of 1848, at the age of fourteen, Morris began his studies at Marlborough College in Marlborough, Wiltshire, where he gained a reputation as an eccentric nicknamed "Crab" (Starr, 59). He despised his time there because he was bullied by his classmates, and was bored and homesick, so at Christmas 1851, Morris returned to Water House, where his family had moved after the death of his father (Starr, 59). After being privately tutored, in June 1852 Morris entered Oxford University's Exeter College (Blakesley, 7). Once again bored, this time by the manner in which Classics were taught, instead he developed a keen interest in medieval history and medieval architecture, inspired by the buildings at Oxford (Star, 59). For Morris, the Middle Ages represented an era with strong chivalric values and a cellular, pre-capitalist sense of

community, both of which he deemed preferable to his own period (Blakesley, 7). Art production during this time was an important local industry, in which art itself expressed the value of life and also the production of art made the creator of the art valuable (Blakesley, 7).

In January of 1856 Morris began an apprenticeship with the Oxford-based Neo-Gothic architect George Edmond Street, and focused on architectural drawing while he was there (Naylor, 12). Morris became increasingly fascinated with the idyllic Medievalist depictions of rural life which appeared in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of artists in England whose intention was to emphasize the personal responsibility of individual artists to determine their own ideas and methods of depiction in their art (Naylor, 12). In 1867, tired of architecture, Morris abandoned his apprenticeship and took up painting in the Pre-Raphaelite style, as exemplified by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a contemporary of Morris's (Naylor, 12). Morris also continued writing poetry and began designing illuminated manuscripts and embroidered hangings. In October 1857 Morris met Jane Burden, a woman from a poor working-class background, and married on April 26, 1859 (Naylor, 12).

Morris desired a new home for himself and his wife and constructed the Red House in the Kentish hamlet of Upton near Bexleyheath, ten miles from central London (Naylor, 23). Philip Webb assisted Morris in the architectural drawings and construction of the home. Named for the red bricks and red tiles from which it was constructed, Morris rejected architectural norms by making the Red House L-shaped (Naylor, 23). The Red House became an iconic representation of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with many of his modes of art contained under one roof, including everything from architectural design, murals, furniture and even tapestry (Naylor, 23). Influenced by various forms of contemporary Neo-Gothic architecture, the House was unique, with Morris describing it as "very Medieval in spirit," meaning that the house

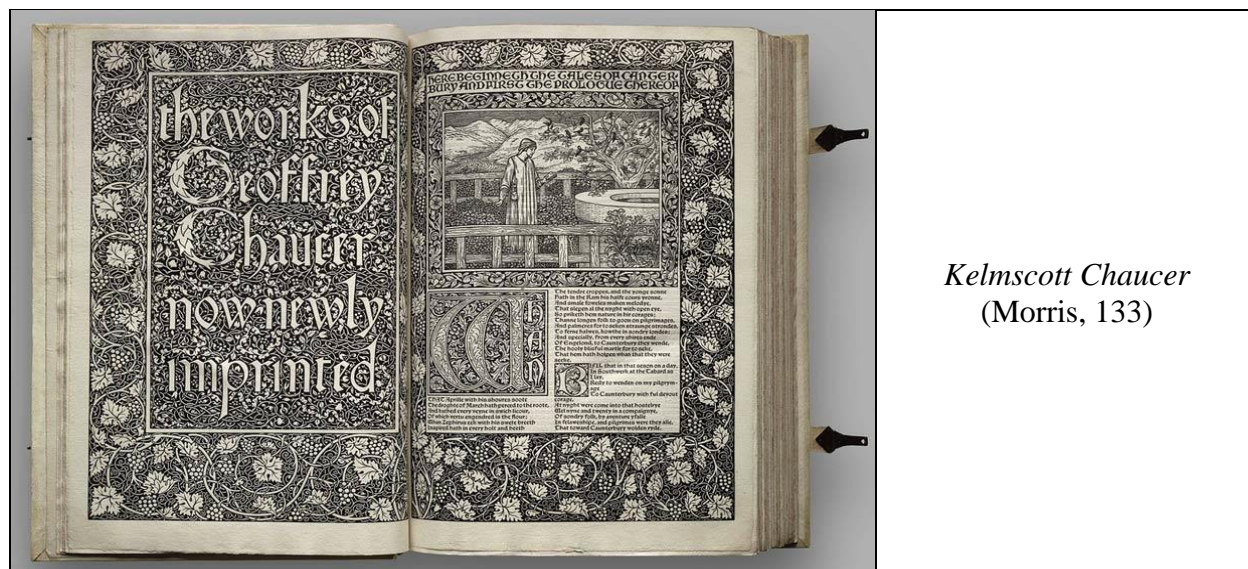
had a sense of purpose and utilization (Naylor, 145). Morris painted murals on the furniture, walls, and ceilings, much of it based on Arthurian tales, the Trojan War, and Geoffrey Chaucer's stories, while he also designed floral embroideries for the rooms (Naylor, 4). The architecture of the Red House was inspired by styles of British design from the thirteenth century. His patterns were based in flora and fauna and his products were inspired by the vernacular or domestic traditions of the British countryside (Naylor, 167). Using materials as they were, structure and function became characteristic of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Morris began feeling secure in his new artistic mediums and therefore began to seek out avenues to make his art work available for the masses. Morris's business ventures allowed him to design and produce his art and have it available to the masses. In April of 1861 Morris founded a decorative arts company, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. with six other partners, operating from No. 6 Red Lion Square (Stansky, 21). They referred to themselves as "the Firm" and were intent on adopting Ruskin's ideas of reforming British attitudes about production (Stansky, 21). Art Critic John Ruskin emphasized the connections between nature and society. The Firm hoped to reinstate decoration as one of the fine arts and adopted an ethos of affordability and anti-elitism (Stansky, 21). The products created by the Firm included furniture, architectural carving, metal work, stained glass windows and murals. The Firm was later dissolved and reorganized under Morris's sole ownership as Morris and Co. on March 31, 1875 (Stansky, 22). During the years of Morris and Co. he took up the practical art of dyeing as a necessary addition to his manufacturing business. In 1879 Morris taught himself tapestry weaving in the medieval style and set up a tapestry workshop (Clutton-Brock, 18). Morris's artistic talents were produced in the forms of painting, architecture, writings, and printing. His later years led to the construction and development of the Kelmscott Press. The Kelmscott Press



was a printing press that Morris set up in a cottage that he rented on a property near his Kelmscott House.

The Kelmscott Press was a tangible final effort to Morris's views. It was in a very real sense, the culmination of the work of art which was Morris's life. This was said to be one of his final attempts to preserve the old relationships between the artist, his art and his society. In 1891 he rented a cottage near Kelmscott House and set up three printing presses (Kelvin, 158). He had long been interested in the printing and the binding of fine books influenced by medieval illuminated manuscripts. The books issued by the Kelmscott Press were expensive. Morris designed his own typefaces, made his own paper, and printed the books by hand (Kelvin, 159). His religious background came into play in later years especially in his rendition of Chaucer. Morris created the manuscripts to be read slowly and to be appreciated. This was a profound statement that he made regarding the relationship between the reader, the manuscript, and the writer (Kelvin, 159). The way Morris envisioned, planned, and created his art was very important to this time. Having complete control over all facets of construction to production became a hallmark of the Arts and Crafts Movement. This art he created was the art of the people, the art produced by the daily labor of all kinds of men for their daily use (Kelvin, 159). Part of his national identity was being an advocate for the artists to have complete control over the art they produced.



*Kelmscott Chaucer*  
(Morris, 133)

Morris's social beliefs played an important part in his artistic works; his political views led him to take part in socialist groups and organizations. In January 1881 Morris was involved in the establishment of the Radical Union, an organization of radical working-class groups which hoped to rival the Liberals, and became a member of its executive committee (Clutton-Brock, 18). However he soon rejected liberal radicalism and moved towards socialism. In May 1883, Morris was appointed to the Democratic Federation which represented British socialism (Clutton-Brock, 35). In 1884 Morris founded the Socialist League with other Social Democratic Federation defectors (Clutton-Brock, 57). He composed the Socialist League's manifesto describing their position as that of "Revolutionary International Socialism," advocating proletarian internationalism and world revolution while rejecting the concept of socialism in one country (Clutton-Brock, 57). In this, he committed himself to "making socialist" by educating, organizing, and agitating to establish a strong socialist movement; calling on activists to boycott elections, he hoped that socialism would take part in a proletariat revolution and help to establish a socialist society (Clutton-Brock, 57). His socialism was a stand "against the ugliness and

injustice of capitalist society” (Clutton-Brock, 57). The Kelmscott Press is an example of Morris putting into writing his socialist beliefs.

### **National Identity**

Oxford medieval and gothic themes influenced Morris greatly (Clutton-Brock, 40). The art during this time period Morris found was the expression of the free and happy life of their craftsmen. Morris gave his life to the determination of the relation between art and labor. His purpose was to discover the principles of a craft by studying its best examples and working them into his era (Clutton-Brock, 40). Morris’s socialism was a part of his medieval gothic themes. It was about showing how things were constructed, so that the product looked different from what it was originated from (Clutton-Brock, 41). Morris made goods, not because he wanted to make money, but for the pleasure he took in his work, and the goods that were serviceable to others (Clutton-Brock, 41). Above all, he stood for the integrity of work and would not himself make a design he could not execute, or with reference to materials he did not know. Morris himself, however, held that art is everybody’s business, whether they are artists or not. Morris’s interpretation of beauty was demonstrated in his themes of nature.

Morris utilized his surroundings, in particular nature, and demonstrated the beauty of nature in his wallpaper and tapestry work. In March 1885 when Morris traveled to Paris to see the Louvre paintings with several of his friends, by chance they saw an exhibit of English Pre-Raphaelite paintings (Dore, 53). While Morris was in Paris he traveled around the countryside and was enchanted by the meadows and cornfields. This visit impacted Morris deeply, and in turn led to the inspiration in his pattern making from which he is well known (Dore, 53). Morris believed the great age of pattern making followed in the work of the free craftsmen of the Middle

Ages. He saw medieval weaving and pottery that was made for common household use by craftsmen who created their own patterns in their own handiwork (Dore, 56). “There was little division of labor among them...a man knew his work from end to end and felt responsible for every state of its progress” (*William Morris on Art and Socialism*, Morris, 43). Morris’s understanding of the history of the decorative arts helped him come to a conclusion that the only future of art was in a society of free craftsmen such as those in the Middle Ages (Blakesley, 123).. This view was absorbed by the Arts and Crafts movement, with its belief that a designer should execute his own work.

Morris’s wallpapers provide a characteristic example of this belief that the designer should execute his own work. Nearly all of Morris’s papers were hand printed from wooden blocks (Adamson, 100). Morris tried printing his first paper with metal plates but was dissatisfied. All of his future designs were therefore hand printed from wooden blocks (Adamson, 100). With his delight in the countryside, Morris wanted patterns to be the visible symbol of nature. He wanted these patterns to “clothe” our daily walls with “ornament that reminds us of the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest” (Clutton-Brock, 87). Creating his art by hand was very important to Morris. He believed that he ought to weave himself. The quality of the material and the technique of manufacture determined how close to naturalistic realism the design should come. He encouraged creating one’s own style. He said “a personal style should consist of a blending of traditional pattern structures and themes from nature within the limits imposed by the material” (Clutton-Brock, 120). This is why Morris’s wallpapers and tapestries were very naturalistic in fashion. His wallpapers and tapestries have a classic, timeless independence like his natural themes from which they were inspired. His art was meant to be displayed in one’s

home. Morris demonstrated this example of surrounding oneself with nature and themes of beauty in his Kelmscott House.

Early in 1878 Morris purchased his final home in London and renamed it Kelmscott House (Triggs, 23). To Morris Kelmscott was a refuge rather than a home. The city seemed to stifle him and therefore the fresh air of the countryside was considered home. He had a deep attachment to Kelmscott, he found in it peace and joy that no other place gave him (Triggs, 23). A proof press and a printing press were set up in the cottages on the property of Kelmscott House (Triggs, 23). In January 1891 the Kelmscott Press started working (Triggs, 23). Morris developed an interest in printing; he also became interested in typography. Frustrated by the declining standards of the printed book, Morris set up his own press “with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time...not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters” (Triggs, 25). He wanted to revive the skills of hand printing which mechanization had destroyed and restore the quality achieved by the pioneers of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Morris and Kelmscott Press are most famous for “The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer” (Triggs, 56). This book contains 87 wood cut illustrations done by Edward Burne-Jones a Victorian painter, who was a lifelong friend of Morris (Stansky, 67). Morris and Burne-Jones worked on the book for four years. Only 425 copies were printed and sold (Stansky, 67). The Kelmscott Chaucer set a new benchmark for book design at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stansky, 67). This was also the last major project during Morris’s life. This book was the culmination of two of Morris’s passions; his love of medieval literature and his socialist philosophy. Creating books such as these gave him personal fulfillment and to him was an example of social meaningful work.

Morris had his own view and reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Morris believed that not all machinery should be abolished. He felt that we should be the masters of the machines and not their slaves. He viewed this change would transform how factory work was carried out. His idea would be a well-designed factory with fine gardens surrounding it. It would be a clean environment with little to no pollution (Stansky, 123). There would be social venues such as a library, schools, concert hall and museums (Stansky, 124). The work produced by the factory would be the main focus and viewed as essential. Morris said “mankind would regain their eyesight. There would be a new living school of art, which would be an essential part of people’s lives” (Stansky, 125). This simplification would require a redistribution of the population. After the Industrial Revolution people would flock back to the countryside with beautiful gardens and well-constructed homes (Stansky, 126). Morris disliked what the countryside had morphed into with its poverty, run down homes and crumbling walls (Stansky, 126). Morris believed that these changes would lead to a settled, completely decentralized life without any government in the modern sense. He acknowledged that it would be necessary to have some sort of unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel responsible for its details and to be interested in them (Stansky, 126). Leaders like Morris in the Arts and Crafts Movement encouraged individualism, the creation of handmade good in place of machine uniformity, and a reappraisal of design materials.

### **Art for the People**

The title of the Arts and Crafts Movement is significant; art was a critical component, and many of its leaders were formally trained academic artists. Native or traditional works of art or craft occupied an important place in their work and teaching, but more as inspiration than as

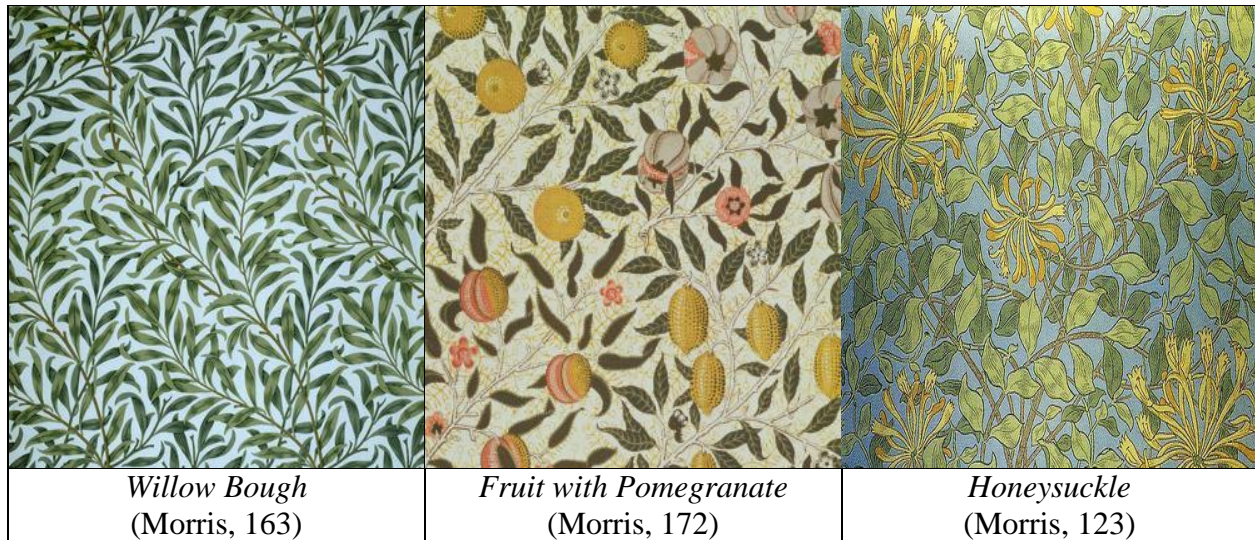
model (Kardon, 32). Morris, himself held that art is everybody's business, whether they are not themselves artists or not (Clutton-Brock, 10). Much of Morris's work reflects his ideals of British identity, the Arts and Crafts movement being one such example of these ideals. The Arts and Crafts movement was an international movement in the decorative and fine arts that flourished in Europe and North America between 1880 and 1910 (Schwartz, 204). It stood for traditional craftsmanship using simple forms and often used medieval, romantic or folk styles of decoration. It advocated economic and social reform and was essentially anti-industrial. The Arts and Crafts style emerged from the attempt to reform design and decoration in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Schwartz, 204). It was a reaction against a decline in standards that reformers associated with machinery and factory production. Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement emphasized handicrafts insisting that the artists should be a craftsman-designer working by hand (Schwartz, 205). They advocated a society of free craftspeople, which they believed had existed during the Middle Ages. Medieval art was the model for much Arts and Crafts design and medieval life, before capitalism and the factory system, was idealized by the movement (Schwartz, 259). Morris was not happy with how the factory system was organized nor was he satisfied with how factory workers were treated.

Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement criticized factory labor that separated workers from the joy of design and designers from the pragmatic experience of production. Anxieties about industrial life fueled a positive revelation of hand craftsmanship and pre-capitalist form of culture and society (Rowland, 288). Morris sought to improve standards of decorative design, believed to have been devalued by mechanization, and to create environments in which beautiful and fine workmanship governed (Rowland, 288). As modern machines replaced workers, Arts and Crafts proponents called for an end to the division of labor and advanced the designer as

craftsman (Clark, 54). Morris believed that industrialization alienated labor and created a dehumanizing distance between the designer and manufacturer. Morris strove to unite all the arts within the decoration of the home, emphasizing nature and simplicity of form. His notions of good designs were linked to their notions of a good society. This was a vision of society in which the worker was not brutalized by the working conditions found in factories, but rather could take pride in his craftsmanship and skill.

Morris's art became associated with the arts of domestic decoration. Nineteenth-century painters as well as writers looked to the past for an old order of chivalry, self-confident in its hierarchies of honor and adventure; they looked for traditional and symbolic ideals of workmanship and for a simple religious order dedicated to the welfare of both rich and poor. Many of Morris's designs were based on close observations of nature in the English countryside and gardens, expressing his love of birds, wild flowers and cottage garden plants (Clutton-Brock, 255). Morris wallpaper designs are now among the best known examples of this work (Dore, 67). Even though his papers, being hand painted, were produced in small quantities by today's standards, and often to special commission, Morris personally designed some 41 wallpapers and 5 ceiling papers over the length of his career (Dore, 67). He always remained closely involved in the production of his designs. The irony of Morris's wallpaper designs was that the Arts and Crafts movement advocated for handicraft for the people regardless of their socio-economic status, yet not everyone was able to afford it (Dore, 291). People could not actually afford Morris's handcrafted products because they were too expensive or not many were produced.





### Advocating for the Working Class

Morris had many thoughts regarding socialism, such as, “Well, what I mean by socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master’s man, neither idol or overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers, in a world, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realization at last of the meaning of the word common wealth” (Morris, 23).

During the 1870s Morris, who had previously made a strenuous effort to avoid political entanglements of any sort, made a commitment to increasingly radical political activities which would dominate the rest of his life (Cumming, 247). It is not so much that he abandoned his previous artistic activities and commitments, but that he extended them; his plunge into socialism was a new attempt to resolve, or at least to provide a framework which would permit the eventual resolution of the disparities between the rich and the poor. Morris hoped by means of organization to change the economic structure of society so that there should be no more very

rich or very poor (Clutton-Brock, 22). He was himself a workman and naturally had more of a relatability with workman than with the professors.

Morris, though born a member of the middle class, had long strived to be more than a representation of a socio-economic class. Morris had kept out of politics for many years because he knew that, if he went into them, they would make a difference in his work. But when he became a Socialist he believed that political machinery should be directly employed to improve economic conditions, and that, if it were so used, it would improve them (Clutton-Brock, 151).

Morris, when he became a Socialist, wished for economic changes which, he expected would provoke a civil war (Clutton-Brock, 151). "I am sure it is right," he wrote in a letter, "whatever the apparent consequences may be, to stir up the lower classes to demand a higher standard of life for themselves, not merely for themselves or for the sake of the national comfort it will bring, but for the good of the whole world and the regeneration of the conscience of man" (Clutton-Brock, 152). He believed that societies had desires, could be made conscious of them, and could achieve them. For that reason he was a socialist, and for that reason he thought that the western world had taken a wrong turn at the Renaissance (Clutton-Brock, 238).

Work and well-being are conceptually aligned in the sense that work is necessary to provide goods that are essential to the maintenance of wellbeing. Morris seemed intuitively aware of the moral dimension that is inherent in the labor theory of value. In "Useful Work verses Useless Toil," he wrote, "We have seen that modern society is divided into two classes, one of which is privileged to be kept by the laborer of the other that is it forces the other to work for it and takes from this inferior class everything that it can take from it, and uses the wealth to keep its own members in a superior position, to make them beings of a higher order than the others: longer lived, more beautiful, more honored, more refined than those of the other class"

(*Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, Morris, 129). Morris knew early on that his life would be devoted to making beautiful and useful artifacts. He took pleasure in designing and making beautiful things. Yet, he realized that laborers were forced into producing shoddy, ugly commodities in order to enrich a parasitic capitalist class. His creative work not only enhanced the well-being of those who acquired and used these artifacts, it enhanced the well-being of Morris himself. Morris believed it was the makers' personal responsibility for what they made in contrast to the soulless repetitive processes of 19<sup>th</sup> century factory production. Morris's ideal was that every worker "must have a voice in the whole affair" (Morris, 132).

For Morris, socialism would not come about at once. A gradual process of return to nature and an enjoyment of life would take place as people escaped the cities and moved into small collectives that relied on the land. William Morris's hopes, as expressed in his visionary novel *News from Nowhere*, involved dismantling the existing structures of society and inventing a freer, more equal and creative way of life (Morris, 135). Morris believed that this new "state socialism" that was his response to the Industrial Revolution would "hold all the means of production and distribution of wealth in its hands" (Morris, 132). Morris came to accept the usefulness of social reform but he continued to regard any half way stage, one not achieving a real revolution, as a totally unsatisfactory goal (Morris, 135). Under socialism Morris saw no need for religious authority. He stated that the ethic of socialism contained all that was valuable in Christianity, so that in the future society there would be no need for any separate religious ethic.

The theme of the Renaissance in art and in life is the individual triumphed and the notion prevailed that society existed to produce splendid individuals. (Clutton-Brock, 241). Since the Renaissance, philosophers and statesmen, whatever they have devised or

accomplished, have never had any clear notion of a society in which the ordinary man should make the most of his natural gifts and should attain to happiness by doing so (Clutton-Brock, 242). Morris believed that every man ought to be creative according to his natural powers. His desire, therefore, was for a society in which the craftsman should be esteemed and powerful; in which the mass of men should wish to be Craftsmen, and should look for happiness in the practice of some craft rather than in domination or in pleasure perused for its own sake (Clutton-Brock, 242).

The extent and depth of Morris's achievements make him a unique figure in the history of art and design. After his accomplishments in decoration and literature, Morris became interested in politics. For him the Socialist movement seemed to be the only solution to the problems of Victorian Society, particularly the complications emerging from the Industrial Revolution (Triggs, 163). He was skilled at combining beauty and utility in everyday objects, and though he was a mediocre painter; he helped promote the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of beauty through his work (Triggs, 165). He fought for a more beautiful world, a return to the aesthetics of the Middle Ages, and a more demanding attitude towards the art objects that surround us (Triggs, 172). Morris's art, his ideals, and his lifework paved the way for generations of artists who followed him in his pursuit of what he called "the beauty of life" (Compton, 321).

## Diego Rivera

### Rivera's Life and Work

Diego Rivera and William Morris shared many of the same theories and ideas regarding their art, politics, and solutions to the socio economic disparities of their respective time periods. Even though they were not living at the same time, their similarities are strikingly parallel. Diego's parents were Diego Rivera and Maria Barrientos de Rivera who lived in Guanajuato State Mexico (Hamill, 14). Diego and his twin brother Carlos were born on December 13, 1886, shortly after his brother passed away (Hamill, 14). In 1891 his sister Mari del Pilar Rivera was born (Hamill, 14). His father worked as a teacher, an editor for a newspaper, and a health inspector. His mother was a doctor.

As a young child Rivera had little to no religious teaching and his education was concentrated mostly in such areas as science and mathematics (Hamill, 14). Instead of teaching Diego about religion, his father focused on teaching him how to read, so he was reading by the age of four (Adamson, 32). Rivera also showed interest in art as a young child as well. At the age of three, Rivera began to draw. His parents made his first studio by draping black canvas on the walls and floor, where he made his murals (Adamson, 32). Rivera showed an attraction for mechanical devices and began to draw machines such as trains and locomotives, which were among his interests as a child, and made an impact later on in his life (Adamson, 32). Rivera Sr. would often take Diego to the railroad depot, where they watched the trains arrive and depart.

The Rivera family moved to Mexico City when Diego was six years old (Wolfe, 12). His father was among the educated liberals in Mexico who were active in fighting for the political and social rights of the working poor (Wolfe, 12). A young Diego, in making his own adaptation to Mexico City, experienced some health problems. He was sent to visit his great aunt Vicenta

(Wolfe, 12). At her house he saw her collection of popular Mexican art, which undoubtedly influenced his later countless paintings and murals of popular Mexican motifs (Wolfe, 12). When he was ten, Rivera loved drawing more than anything else and demanded that his parents allow him to go to art school (Hamill, 17). His father was unsure; Diego's sketches of battles and troop formations made him think the boy should be groomed for the army; his drawings of trains suggested a career as an engineer, although his mother liked the notion of Diego as an artist (Hamill, 17). Throughout his adolescence, Rivera would continue to draw and paint. In 1904 Diego painted both figure studies and landscapes in the manner of Jose Maria Velasco, a 19th century Mexican polymath, most famous as a painter who made Mexican geography a symbol of national identity through his paintings (Hamill, 18). He would soon come under the influence of European painters as well as Mexican artists.

In 1902, at age 16, Rivera was expelled from the academy he was studying at for leading a student protest when Porfirio Diaz was reelected president of Mexico (Landau, 26). Under Diaz's leadership, those who disagreed with the government's policies faced harassment, imprisonment and even death (Landau, 26). Many of Mexico's citizens lived in poverty, and there were no laws to protect the rights of workers. After Rivera was expelled, he travelled throughout Mexico painting and drawing. At the age of twenty, Diego Rivera set off for Madrid, Spain, arriving on January 6, 1907 (Wolfe, 12). There he received a modest four-year scholarship for European study from Governor Teodoro Dehesa (Wolfe, 12). His instructor Gerardo Murillo provided a letter of introduction to the fashionable Spanish realist Eduardo Chicharro, who took Rivera on as a student (Wolfe, 12). While in Spain, Rivera was exposed to the works of Francisco Goya, Diego Velazquez, and El Greco who became his preferred inspirations (Wolfe, 13). Diego's life was certainly affected by the social pressure in Guanajuato

Mexico. In 1909 he moved to Paris, where he was influenced by impressionist painters and later worked in a post-impressionist style inspired by Paul Cezanne (Wolfe, 13).

As Rivera continued his travels in Europe, he experimented more with his techniques and styles of painting. By 1913, he had plunged completely into Cubism (Lee, 20). The series of works he produced between 1913 and 1917 are cubist, a type of abstract art usually based on shapes or objects rather than pictures or scenes, in style. During the summer of 1913 Rivera also began to paint images combining Cubism and futurism (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 23).

Futurism was an artistic movement with political implications which sought to free Italy from the oppressive weight of her past and glorified the modern world, machinery, speed, violence, in a series of exuberant manifestos (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 29). When Rivera arrived in Mexico one year later in 1914, he immediately began to paint all of the colorful surroundings that made up his native country (Anguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 30). By 1912-1913, Rivera had reached his Cubist stage and later explained, "It was the revolutionary movement, questioning everything that had previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries and was creating out of the fragments, new forms, new objects, new patterns and ultimately new worlds. When it dawned on me that all this innovation had little to do with real life, I would surrender all the glory and acclaim Cubism had brought for me for a way in art truer to my in most feelings" (Lucie-Smith, 52). During the year 1918, Rivera, still working in Paris, was well known in avant-garde circles (Lucie-Smith, 52). These circles embraced Rivera's artwork as a representation of progressive and experimental expression (Lucie-Smith, 52). Later on, Diego would become very fond of Cubism, due to the exposure he

had in Europe and Spain. He surrounded himself with Cubism and it seemed the most natural technique in which to express his art.

The masterworks of Diego Rivera were created by a man of growing political convictions. It was as if the return to Mexico in 1914 had given him the confidence to express his strong Marxist beliefs about society, a confidence not possible in countries where he was not a citizen (Hamill, 90). The maker of public art and the Marxist partisan emerged at almost the same time. In his celebration of the Mexican people he created his own visual language (Hamill, 91). His murals were painted in the form of frescos. Frescos are murals done on fresh plaster and were used in universities and other public buildings (Hamill, 91). Later in his artistic career he was called to the United States and contracted to paint two major murals.

In 1932, he was chosen by the Ford Motor Corporation to paint murals known as the Detroit Industry murals (Congdon, 232). The Detroit murals showed Rivera's passion for industrial design, his intuitive knowledge of modern technology, and his understanding of ancient cultures, by his work in Mexico (Congdon, 232). The Detroit Industry is an artistic representation of the interaction of science, technology, and human life. It highlights the infinite possibilities of creativity in producing a modern progressive world to serve and not to alienate people (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 52). The man who at three years old drew pictures of locomotives would place his new version of the True Faith upon the walls of the central court of the Detroit Institute of Art (Hamill, 155). The final plan called for twenty-seven panels. He had been asked to reflect in his painting all the industry of Detroit, not simply the automobile industry (Hamill, 155). He spent a month at Ford's sprawling River Rouge plant in Dearborn, making sketches, asking questions, trying to understand, enthralled by the modernity and perfection of the technology (Hamill, 155). Ford union members inspired the fresco that took



eight months to produce with the help of several assistants (Congdon, 232). The mural depicts workers' hardships and their battle against oppressive conditions resulting from capitalism (Congdon, 232).

Rivera was ultimately pleased with the positive response and the overwhelming approval of his mural by the Detroit workers. A few days after the patrons viewed the mural, a group of engineers and workers in the steel and automobile factories in Detroit visited the museum, led by an engineer of the Chrysler automobile factory (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 56). The group of men favored the mural for its realistic depictions of the mechanical function and workers from various factories also visited the museum to express their gratitude for the dignified representation of the working class (Congdon, 235). However, people who came to visit the murals that did not have any experience with what went on in the factories were appalled at the depictions in the murals. Without supervisors and managers applauding the murals, they would have been discarded. Enduring this controversy, Edsel Ford, son of Henry and President of Ford Motor Company, announced his support and satisfaction with the mural (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 56). Edsel was a major art benefactor in Detroit, and had the initial commission.

One driving motivation for painting murals was to present them as a mass medium, great panoramas that would instruct the poorest Mexicans about their country and themselves. His true love was painting for and about his people. The mural paintings are only part of his painting portfolio. Rivera was also portrait painter, using design and detail to reveal human character (Hamill, 9). He was a painter of machinery, finding beauty in the immense twentieth-century objects that caused revulsion among others (Hamill, 13). His murals of man next to the machine working in harmony showed his belief in industrialization as something positive. Murals became a language in which his paintings told the story of the Mexican people.

In March of 1933 the Detroit murals were completed (Aguilar-Moreno, 48). Later that month Diego Rivera arrived in New York to begin work on the Rockefeller Center mural. The Rockefeller Center mural was completed in May of 1933 (Aguilar-Moreno, 48). In the mural shown below, entitled “Man at the Crossroads,” Rivera painted the demise of capitalism and included the images of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin (Aguilar-Moreno, 48). Abby A. Rockefeller visited the mural site and praised the section depicting the Soviet May Day demonstrations (Aguilar-Moreno, 48). Nelson Rockefeller asked Rivera to replace the face of Lenin with that of an anonymous individual. As a concession Rivera offered to substitute Abraham Lincoln and the other 19<sup>th</sup> century North American figures for a group opposite Lenin, not to replace Lenin. This he completed in April of 1933 (Aguilar-Moreno, 49). The Rockefeller Center dismissed Rivera in May, and the mural was then covered with canvas painted to match the adjoining blank wall. The mural was ultimately destroyed over the weekend of February 10-11, 1934 (Aguilar-Moreno, 50).

Evoking the Positivist analogy between biology and society in referring to his “biological function” as artist (Hurlburt, 95). “I am not merely an artist, but a man performing his biological function of producing paintings” (Hurlburt, 95). At Rockefeller Center and the New Workers School, Rivera worked in the vein of social function stressed by Positivism. Here, however, he turned the Positivists’ political position upside-down by injecting these works with an overt Marxist message (Hurlburt, 95). Rivera demonstrated at Rockefeller Center the role of technology for the socialist future, controlled by the imposing symbolic figure of a worker (Hurlburt, 95). Rivera continued to develop subject matter derived from technology, but in contrast to the Detroit mural program, Rivera predicted the liberation of man from the tyranny of the machine by the socialist transformation of society (Hurlburt, 99).



Rockefeller Center mural, destroyed in 1934  
Recreated by Rivera at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City

### **National Identity**

Jose de la Cruz Porfirio Diaz Mori was a Mexican soldier and politician, who served seven terms as president of Mexico; a total of three and a half decades from 1876 to 1911 (Lee, 11). Seizing power in a coup in 1876, Diaz and his allies ruled Mexico for the next thirty-five years, a period known as the Porfiriato. On December 26, 1934 Diego and his wife Frida Kahlo arrived in Mexico (Lee, 11). Mexico entered into a stage of institutional consolidation and modernism. In this context of rapid changes in society and a new nationalism, Rivera's work focused inward on the theme of the roots of Mexican identity and of the cultural and technological achievements of the pre-Columbian peoples (Lucie-Smith, 22). Rivera represented the popular history of the country in a more nostalgic and idealistic way. In Mexico City, there were brutal divisions between the classes. The ghettos held murderous, sick, and uneducated individuals (Lucie-Smith, 22). Memories of this era would accompany him for the rest of his life and impact both the good and the bad of his art.

Between 1935 and 1954, Rivera undertook numerous mural projects. He used historical, social, and political themes to show the history and life of the Mexican people. Vasconcelos offered artists commissions from the government to paint public walls (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 31). Jose Vasconcelos Calderon was important in the Mexican Revolution. This cultural resistance originated with the widespread political dissent felt by the people of Mexico around 1900 (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 31). The previous century had been one of tumult, defeat, and problematic modernization. War with the United States had led to tremendous loss of land, French intervention under Emperor Napoleon III to the near dictatorship of Porfirio Dias, and mass Industrialization to the upheaval of a mostly rural population (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 32).

The Mexican Revolution, beginning in 1910, spawned a cultural renaissance, inspiring artists to look inward in search of a specifically Mexican artistic language (Lee, 32). This visual vocabulary was designed to transcend the realm of the arts to give a national identity to this population undergoing transition. Calderon was an important Mexican writer, philosopher, and politician (Lee, 33). He was one of the most influential and controversial personalities in the development of modern Mexico. He then allowed artists the liberty to paint what had been defined by one scholar as “an art saturated with primitive vigor, new subject matter, combining subtlety and the sacrifice of the exquisite to the great perfection to invention” (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 31). The social and political events emanating from the turmoil of the revolution and the development in Mexico during that decade motivated the emergency in his works of the themes of revolution the land, and the cultural traditions of the people (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 45). By the end of the 1920s, besides the cultural focus in the local and immediate concerns of the Revolution, Rivera’s murals accomplished an interrogation of the historical

experience and a redefinition of the Mexican national identity. (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 47).

In 1941, Rivera was commissioned to paint murals for the second time in the National Palace in Mexico City (Lucie-Smith 31). The National Palace is the seat of the federal executive in Mexico. It is located in Mexico City's main square. This site has been a palace for the ruling class of Mexico since the Aztec empire, and much of the current palace's building materials are from the original one that belonged to Moctezuma II (Lucie-Smith, 31). Rivera produced 11 panels that represented diverse pre-Hispanic cultures. These show an idealized indigenous paradise with peaceful scenes of indigenous life, and from there can be seen how the diverse agricultural and productive activities evolved from culture to culture (Lucie-Smith, 31). The images that appear in Rivera's mural are so accurately portrayed that they have often been utilized to illustrate anthropological books and artifacts found and sold in Mexico and the United States during the 1940s and up to the present time (Lucie-Smith, 31). This entire mural focused on the cultural advancement that pre-Columbian Mexico had before the arrival of the Spanish, and the negative results this conquest had on native Mexican people (Lucie-Smith, 32). This historical mural concluded with the tragic Spanish conquest.

In April 1943 Rivera joined the National Academy of Mexico, a cultural society to promote and support the arts and sciences (Lucie-Smith 42). Later that same year Rivera was commissioned to paint two panels for the National Institute of Cardiology in Mexico City. The murals presented the traditional and modern techniques of practicing medicine. In 1946 Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural in the main dining room of the new Hotel del Prado (Lucie-Smith, 43). The theme of the mural is a combination of his childhood experiences and memories in the park as well as public figures associated with the history of Mexico. The story line was set



in the Porfiriato period and depicts the social prejudices that were prevalent during this period of Mexican history (Lucie-Smith, 44).



*Mural at National Palace,  
Mexico City  
Depicting Aztec Theme*



*Mural at National Palace,  
Mexico City  
Featuring Workers and  
Karl Marx*

Rivera was known as a Marxist. His art expressed his outspoken commitment to left-wing political causes, depicting such subjects as the Mexican peasantry, American workers, and revolutionary figures like Lenin. At times, his outspoken, uncompromising leftist politics collided with the wishes of wealthy patrons and his regard to promoting national identity through art Rivera believed in Mexican culture and history (Wolfe, 227). Rivera had acquired an

enormous collection of pre-Columbian artifacts using them as models to create panoramic portrayals of Mexican history and daily life, from its Mayan beginnings up to the Mexican Revolution and post-Revolutionary present, in a style largely indebted to pre-Columbian culture (Wolfe, 229).

## **Politics**

The political theories of Diego Rivera are an important influence in his work. These political views helped shape the themes behind the public murals that Rivera created. The political situation in Mexico during the 1920s was favorable to the development of a national art form (Lucie-Smith, 49). This political situation allowed artists such as Rivera to produce art that pertained to the strife that the middle to poor classes endured (Audi, 259). Rivera's art took the form of murals, and they spilled out onto the streets where everyone had the opportunity to view them.

On his return to Mexico in 1921, Rivera was immediately drawn into the government mural program (Lucie-Smith, 52). Rivera's political ideas were at this point more radical than his artistic ones. In 1922 he was the leading figure in the formation of a new Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors whose manifesto borrowed the language of Russian revolutionary constructivists, proclaiming a collective refutation of "so called easel painting and all the art of ultra-intellectual circles" in favor of artworks which would be accessible, physically and intellectually, to the mass public (Lucie-Smith, 52). This idea of having the art become relatable and accessible to the masses was something new and important to Rivera. He regarded himself as a natural Communist but was frequently on bad terms with both the Mexican Communist Party and with the official Communists in the Soviet Union (Lucie-Smith, 54).

Rivera's political beliefs were transposed into figures and representations of what was happening around him in his murals. His own political career, conducted very much in public, was stormy and sometimes had deleterious effects on his art (Wolfe, 32). His feelings and reactions to what was going on around him, and around others, came out in his work. Through this reaction, his murals became a representation of what was happening to the middle class and the poor at that time (Wolfe, 32). In the words of Diego Rivera, "What I knew best and felt most deeply was my own country, Mexico" Rivera wanted to create a new kind of art for and about people (Goldman, 5). "The new art...would not be displayed in a museum or gallery" but in everyday places: "post offices, schools, theaters, railroad stations, public buildings" (Goldman, 5). Unlike Mexico, the United States was truly an industrial country and the ideal place for modern mural art (Goldman, 5).

On July 15, 1926, Rivera began the murals that would depict his own version of American history. "I painted them for the workers of New York," he explained later, "and for the first time in my life, I worked among my own; for the first time I painted on a wall which belonged to the workers, not because they own the building in which their school has its quarters, but because the frescos are built on moveable panels which can be transported with them to any place where their school and headquarters may be called to move" (Hamill, 168). Rivera worked for five months on these paintings, ranging quickly through American history from the colonial past to the uneasy present (Hamill, 168). Rivera agreed to paint another ambitious work in New York: a suite of twenty-one portable frescos each weighing about 300 pounds, for the New Workers School on 14<sup>th</sup> Street (Hamill, 168). The institute was initially called the "Marx-Lenin School." The school was intended "to teach and defend the principles of Leninism within the Communist Party and the working class and to train workers for the class struggle," according to



the party at the time of its launch (Hamill, 168). The name of the party's institute was later changed in the fall of 1930 to "The New Workers School" as part of an effort to contrast itself to the Workers School the successful training program run by the regular Communist Party (Hamill, 169).

Rivera's own statements support this view of his art as a unique and indigenous effort in service of revolutionary ideals. In his autobiography, *My Art, My Life*, which began with a newspaper interview the artist gave journalists Gladys March in 1944, from then until his death in 1957, she spent several months each year with Rivera capturing recollections and interpretations of his art and life (Rivera, 23). He characterized the formation of his mural style as spontaneously generated from indigenous Mexican culture: "My homecoming produced an esthetic exhilaration which it is impossible to describe. It was as if I were being born anew, born in a new world...I was in the very center of the plastic world, where forms and colors existed in absolute purity. In everything I saw a potential masterpiece-the crowds, the markets, the festivals, the marching battalions, the workingmen in the shop and in the fields-in every luminous child...My style was born as children are born, in a moment, except that this birth had come after a torturous pregnancy of thirty-five years" (Rivera, 28)

### **Art for the People**

Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921, and was soon hired by the Mexican government to paint murals (Congdon, 232). Toward the end of World War II, Rivera struggled to survive financially, and began to abandon Cubism for artistic approaches that proved to be more appealing to commissioning patrons. These murals, although often stylistically classified as Modern Realism, continued to reveal a Cubist influence (Congdon, 232). "Indigenismo," an

organized Latin American Movement of the 1920s through the 1940s that sought to preserve Mexican traditional culture, motivated much of Rivera's work illustrating the daily life of Mexican people (Congdon, 232). Rivera's mission was, in his own words, to "reproduce the pure basic images of my land. I wanted my painting to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future" (White, 9). In 1921, in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, he returned home and became the central figure in the mural movement (White, 9). Rivera produced a series of murals during the 1920s and 1930s, a period which is generally considered the apex of his career (White, 9).

Rivera was able to introduce his work into the everyday lives of the people. Rivera concerned himself primarily with the physical process of human development and the effects of technological progress. Rivera's medium was frescos which were the perfect canvas on which to tackle the grand themes of the history and future of humanity. A lifelong Marxist, Rivera saw in this medium an antidote to the elite walls of galleries and museums. His work appealed to the people's interest in the history of technology and progress. The desire to understand this progress was visible in the growing industrial societies of the 1930s, and Rivera saw the worker's struggle, long hours and poor wages, as a symbol of the "fragile political ground on which capitalism trod" (Hamel, 168).

This is a timeline of murals painted in Mexico and the United States between 1920's-1940's. Some of these paintings are further explored in the following sections (Lucie-Smith 255).

## **Mexico**

- 1922-1923 “Creation” during his time with Jose Vasconcelos and National Preparatory School in Mexico City
- 1924 National School of Agriculture
- 1929-1930 Begins murals of National Palace stairwell
- 1934 Mural originally planned for Rockefeller Center in new form in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, “Man Controller of the Universe”
- 1935 Murals in stairwell of National Palace
- 1946 Mural for Hotel del Prado in Mexico City

## **United States**

- 1930-1931 Murals in Luncheon Club of San Francisco Pacific Stock Exchange and another in California School of Fine Arts
- 1932 (Begins) Murals in Detroit Institute of Arts
- 1933 (Begins) Murals of Rockefeller Center in New York
- 1940 Ten murals in San Francisco for the Golden Gate International Exposition

With several murals completed in Mexico, Diego Rivera was commissioned to paint his first mural in the United States. In 1926, he received an invitation by William Gerstle, the President of the San Francisco Art Commission, to paint a mural in the California School of Fine Arts (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 47). It is now called the San Francisco Art Institute and is one of the country’s oldest schools of higher education. Rivera later accepted the commission along with another mural to be painted at the San Francisco Stock Exchange. More sophisticated critics reacted with prejudice to his political message, describing the Mexican artist as “a

political propagandist, not a painter”, that he portrayed a false image of Mexico as an idealized pre-Columbian land, distracting the attention of the audience from seeing the extreme poverty of the country; a nationalist leftist thinker who painted murals with class imagery not appropriate for a country like the United States, where supposedly there were no class divisions and everybody lived under the protection of social and civil rights (Aguliar-Moreno and Cabrera, 48).

In 1930, Rivera made the first of a series of trips that would alter the course of American painting (Lucie-Smith 267). In November of that year, Rivera began work on his first two major American commissions: for the American Stock Exchange Luncheon Club and for the California School of Fine Arts (Lucie-Smith, 267). These two pieces incorporated Rivera’s radical politics, while maintaining a sense of simple historicity. Rivera had the ability to condense a complex historical subject, history of California’s natural resources, down to its most essential parts (Lucie-Smith, 267). For Rivera, the foundation of history could be seen in the working class, whose lives were spent by war and industry in the name of progress. In these first two commissions and all of the American murals to follow, Rivera would investigate the struggles of the working class.

In 1932, at the height of the Great Depression, Rivera arrived in Detroit, where, at the behest of Henry Ford, he began an homage to the American worker on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts (Lee, 58). Completed in 1933, the piece depicted industrial life in the United States, concentrating on the car plant workers of Detroit. Rivera’s radical politics and independent nature had begun to draw criticism during his early years in America (Lee, 58). Though the fresco was the focus of much controversy, Edsel Ford, Henry’s son, defended the

work and it remains today Rivera's most significant painting in America. Rivera, however, did not fare nearly so well in his association with the Rockefellers in New York City (Lee, 58).

In 1933 the Rockefellers commissioned Rivera to paint a mural for the lobby of the RCA building in Rockefeller Center. "Man at the Crossroads" was to depict the social, political, industrial, and scientific possibilities of the twentieth century (Lee, 87). In the painting, Rivera included a scene of a giant May Day demonstration of workers marching with red banners. It was not the subject matter of the panel that inflamed the patrons, but the clear portrait of Lenin leading the demonstration (Lee,87). When Rivera refused to remove the portrait, he was ordered to stop and the painting was destroyed. That same year, Rivera used the money from the Rockefellers to create a mural for the Independent Labor Institute in Mexico that had Lenin as its central figure (Lee, 88).

Rivera believed that all people, not just people who could buy art or go to museums, should be able to view the art that he was creating. To Rivera machines were "benevolent and triumphant, the redeeming engines of utopian future" (Rivera, 33) Rivera would paint the human spirit that is embodied in the machine. To him the machine was one of the most brilliant achievements of man's intelligence and reason. The meaning of the images in these murals was his view of industry that challenged ideas about its role in society and raised issues of class and politics (Rivera, 50). He painted workers of different races working side by side which caused some controversy. His murals engaged prevailing social and political issues, and portrayed workers and artists engaged in activities of social importance or in purported positions of power (Rivera, 50).

His murals were to educate society about what was going on socio-economically. Rivera believed that painting murals on the walls of public buildings made art accessible to the everyday

man. His murals focused on telling stories that dealt with Mexican Society and referenced the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (Lee, 87). His murals featured large forms, bright colors and recurring images of farmers, laborer, popular Mexican figures and depictions of Earth. He wanted to depict the industrial and agricultural labors of the Mexican people as well as their art, sculpture, dance, music, poetry and drama (Lee, 88). Rivera went on to paint murals in the New Workers School in New York City (Lee, 88). The work symbolized the heroes of American history. His murals became his visual language.

Rivera made the painting of murals his primary method, appreciating the large scale and public accessibility, the opposite of what he regarded as the elitist character of paintings in galleries and museums. Rivera used the walls of the universities and other public buildings throughout Mexico as his canvas, and revived interest in the mural as an art form and helped reinvent the concept of public art (Landau, 177). He reinterpreted Mexican history from a revolutionary and nationalistic point of view. Diego Rivera's murals expressed his personal ideals by unifying art with politics (Landau, 177).

The public murals of Diego Rivera changed the accessibility and audience of those who viewed the art. Diego Rivera wanted to create a new kind of art for and about his people. After World War I Rivera had given up Cubism and now searched for a more meaningful style of painting (Compton, 19). Rivera became enthusiastic about murals and frescoes and prepared for his new career as a mural painter. The murals would be for the people of his country and not just a few rich collectors. Rivera wanted to teach the people of Mexico through pictures (Compton, 23). At that time, most of the people still could not read or write, so murals were a way to contact with them through art. Murals would depict their history and also their visions of the future. Rivera would paint murals in public places where peasants and workers could view them

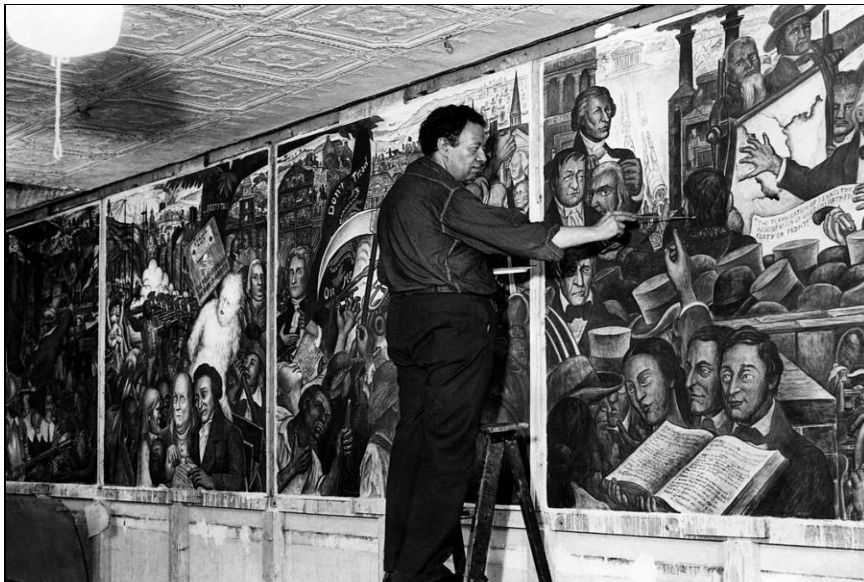
(Compton, 23). Diego Rivera took a worldly view on art, and portrayed controversial scenes which displayed different forms of politics that were not established around the world at that time (Kardon, 123).

He became increasingly seen as a controversial figure, and in Mexico some of his murals were hidden or removed because of his use of imagedry (Compton, 24). These concepts are the relatability of the themes to those who were poor and uneducated, the accessibility to those who did not have access to art and crafts, and the comprehension and awareness of the art and craft itself (Goldman, 5). For much of his career he was trying to make art which would achieve objectives closely related to those of Soviet Socialist Realism (Lucie-Smith, 54). It is a style of realistic art that was developed in the Soviet Union and became a dominant style in various socialist countries (Goldman, 6). Diego wanted to speak directly to the Mexican People, and in order to achieve this he had to abandon those elements that were typical of Modern Art, at least in formal terms, such as fragmentation of imagery and the disguise of appearances (Lucie-Smith, 54).

Rivera's murals in the United States were equally impactful and were accessible to those who made up the working class. They addressed an unknown body of viewers whose attentiveness to larger civic developments was none the less assumed (Lee, 59). Rivera's reconciliation with American industrialists did not extend to the major aristocratic figures in San Francisco during the late 1930s (Lee, 59). The responses to Rivera's visit signal a new connection between art and labor, brought about by anxiety over the stock market crash and worries about competitive immigrant labor at a time when jobs were scarce (Lee, 59). Unlike Mexico, the United States was truly an industrial country and the ideal place for modern mural art.

## Advocating for the Working Class

The autumn of 1922 Rivera joined the Mexican Communist Party. It had been organized in 1911 to support the rights of miners, factory workers, and farmworkers (Goldman, 16). Within the party, Rivera formed the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors. Under the groups influence, free art schools opened everywhere and thousands of workers and children of workers brought forth remarkable productions (Goldman, 16). Even when he was no longer a member of the party, Rivera continued to sympathize with the working class and to think of himself as one of them. Rivera's involvement with the Mexican Communist Party is often portrayed in paintings and public murals, yet he frequently accepted commissions from capitalists (Congdon, 232).



*Rivera at Work*  
(Wolf, 33)

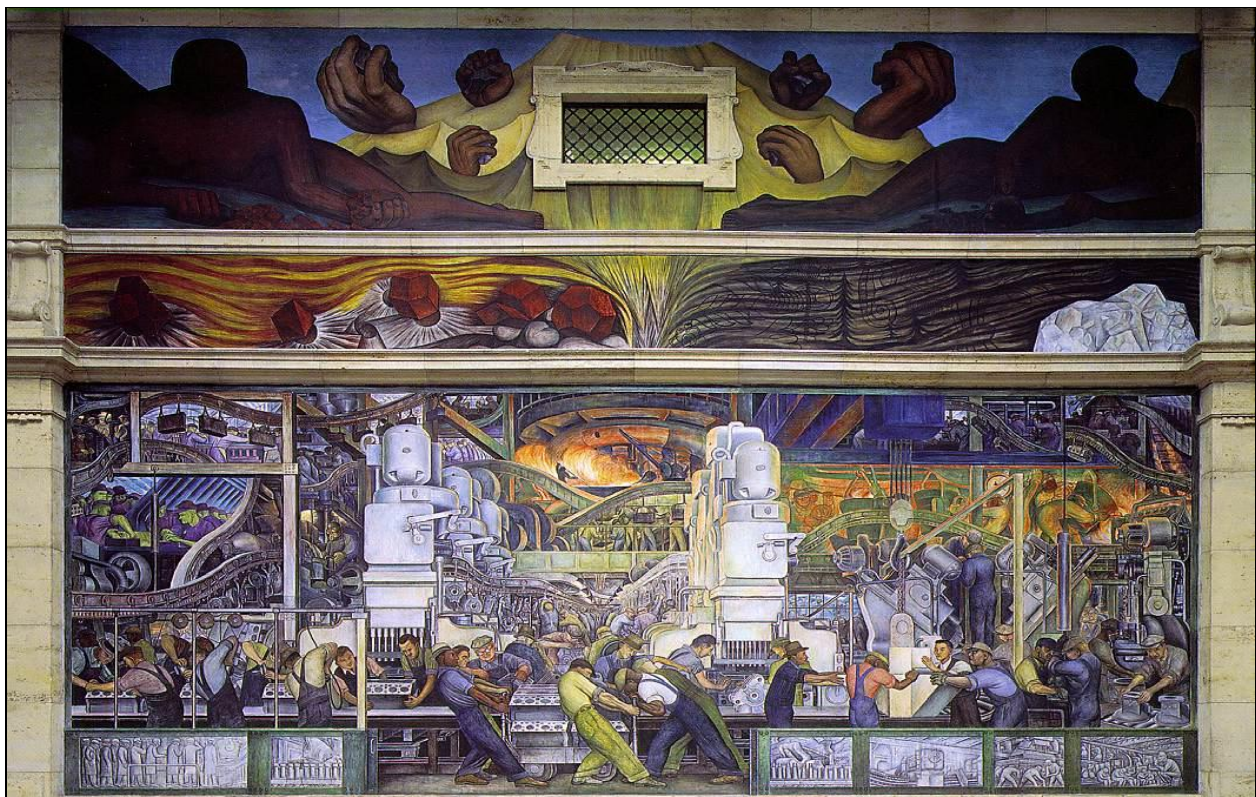
Several writers influenced Rivera during his time in Spain, during the 1930s, the most prominent one being Karl Marx (Aguilar-Moreno, 48). These writers not only influenced Rivera's artwork but also his beliefs throughout his life "What I knew best and felt most deeply was my own country, Mexico," he said. Rivera wanted to create a new kind of art for and about



people (Goldman, 5). “The new art... would not be displayed in a museum or gallery” but in everyday places: “post offices, schools, theaters, railroad stations, public buildings” (Goldman, 5). From 1922 to the end of 1923, Mexican artists began to move toward depicting nationalistic themes and Mexico was becoming widely known for mural painting (Hamill, 171)

In 1922 he helped found the Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers and joined the Communist Party’s Central Committee (Goldman, 22). His passion was to represent visually the social ideas of the Mexican Revolution. His art addressed his opposition to the established elite and the church in his work. There were however, ironic aspects to Rivera’s position. One was that while his political beliefs implied opposition to the United States, his reputation was greatly helped by North American enthusiasm and patronage (Lucie-Smith, 53). Rivera’s own political career, conducted very much in public, was stormy and sometimes had deleterious effects on his art (Lucie-Smith, 54). He regarded himself as a natural Communist but was frequently on bad terms with both the Mexican Communist Party and with the official Communists in the Soviet Union (Lucie-Smith, 54). He resigned from the party in 1925, was re-admitted in 1926 and then in the following year paid an official visit to Russia, from which he was expelled at the request of the Soviet government. By 1932 he was seriously at odds with orthodox communism and was denounced as a “renegade.” The situation worsened when, in 1937 he was instrumental in getting President Uzaro Cardenas to grant asylum to the exiled Leon Trotsky, who for a while lived in Mexico as Rivera’s guest (Goldman, 76). The two men quarreled before Trotsky’s assassination in 1940, but Rivera, who now desperately wanted to be re-admitted to the party, had great difficulty in obtaining forgiveness. This was granted only in 1954, after many genuflections to the official communist line and a number of artistic compromises (Goldman, 77).

Rivera's popularity with the American public continued into the 1940s, but his reputation among art critics and scholars diminished as realism and emphasis on social content fell into disfavor in the face of a growing interest in the styles of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism, then being brought to this country by European artists fleeing Hitler (Cumming and Kaplan, 29). Rivera's political philosophy and subject of his murals did create a common bond between his work and that of the Social Realists (Cumming and Kaplan, 29). Rivera's work and the Mexican Mural Movement as a whole have been characterized as politically motivated, stylistically retrograde, and historically isolated (Cumming and Kaplan, 30).



*One of the Detroit Industry Murals*  
(Wolf, 49)

## Conclusion

William Morris and Diego Rivera lived on different continents during separate time periods in history and yet had similar sources of inspiration that influence their work. Both were influenced by architecture, the Industrial Revolution (the machine), and national cultural/identity, socialist politics, and both in their own way, embraced the theme of art for the people. Both Morris and Rivera created art that portrayed realistic forms in the shape of nature and people. Morris portrayed the beauty of nature both in his designs and in his wallpapers. Rivera utilized cubism, an abstract style, in his art, his larger than life figures and his realistic interpretations of pre-Columbian history. He was inspired by cubism which was displayed in the use of color and form.

The early influence of architecture in their lives is reflected in the furniture Morris created and the murals that Rivera painted. The Red House designed by Philip Webb and Morris was designed to be a place that reflected Morris's ideals and celebrated art, craftsmanship and community (Clutton-Brock, 311). Morris and Webb collaborated to make the house's architecture and interior design merge into a unified whole. They designed the house in a Tudor Gothic Style. The features of this style include historicizing elements such as steep roofs, prominent chimneys, cross gables, and exposed-beam ceilings, all present in the Red House (Clutton-Brock, 311).

Rivera's architectural influence took another route. His frescos were created in buildings located in specific architectural settings that could be seen by the most people. The images in his art contained his interpretations of Mexican architectural themes. Both Morris and Rivera's

architectural influences showed up differently in their work from designing a home to educating Mexicans about architecture.

For Morris, the Industrial Revolution led him to believe that mechanized factory production deprived workers of the personal satisfaction and creativity involved in designing and making an object entirely with one's own hands (Anscombe, 17). Morris was a true pioneer; he never designed anything which he did not know how to produce with his own hands and by extension, he insisted that nothing should be produced by his workshops which he could not do himself. "But to me, and I hope to you, art is a very serious thing, and cannot by any means be dissociated from the weighty matters that occupy the thoughts of men; and there are principles underlying the practice of it, on which all serious minded men may, nay, must have their own thoughts" (*Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, Morris, 88). Morris rebelled against the Industrial Revolution with its assembly lines and lack of craftsmanship. He also believed that people who bought these goods were surrounding themselves with soulless objects that lacked aesthetic value. Thus, their domestic environments were missing the elements of spirituality and refinement that produced healthy well rounded citizens (Anscombe, 22). Morris believed the home was a morally uplifting refuge from the negative influences of city life. Morris advocated a return to the medieval gothic model in which artisans were responsible for handcrafting their works from beginning to end. This produced a sense of pride in the worker and guaranteed quality products for the consumer. He was opposed to the idea to take the artisan out of the art.

While Morris was inspired to move away from the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution, for Diego Rivera the machine was beautiful and necessary. Rivera embraced the themes of the working class, hard work and hands on, and depicted them in his art. From Detroit factory workers to Mexican laborers working in the fields, the themes of the machine were

depicted as the way for mankind to evolve. Rivera was also inspired by the Mexican Revolution that had caused such upheaval in Mexico. Rivera saw industry as advancing workers' opportunities. Laborers' low wages, and poor working conditions brought about what Morris would have called ugly and shoddy products. Rivera saw industrialization as one solution to these working conditions in his Detroit murals, as he depicted man side by side with these beautiful and romanticized machines, showing them working together in harmony. While both Morris and Rivera felt that industrialization, the machine, had an impact on society, Rivera held a more optimistic view of its impact than Morris did.

Morris's socialist political beliefs and activism influenced his artistic process. Morris was a member of guilds made up of artisans and workers thinking about the work and processes they had in common. Morris being a socialist believed in the redistribution of wealth, as he writes in *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, "The first step towards making labor attractive is to get the means of making labor fruitful, the Capital, including the land, machinery, factories, and companies, into the hands of the community, to be used for the good of all alike, so that we might all work at "supplying" the real "demands" of each and all that is to say, work for livelihood, instead of working to supply the demand of the profit market-instead of working for profit-i.e., the power of compelling other men to work against their will" (Morris, 29) Morris wanted to give opportunity to the community, a sense of ownership and voice. In that way the community would be working to fill the real demand around them and not the demands of those who are in power.

Rivera's political influences caused him to take a different approach in his artwork. Rivera's subject matter created a pictorial language that showed his reaction to events such as the Mexican Revolution and Pre-Columbian history to name a few. He was part of a large

community of artists who sympathized with the workers, and respected the accomplishment of the Bolshevik Revolution. In fact, Trotsky and other revolutionary leaders often stayed with Rivera when visiting Mexico (Lee, 251). Despite his work in support of communism, Rivera had a complex relationship with the Mexican Communist Party. Rivera desperately wanted to be a part of the communist party and did in fact firmly believe in supporting the rights of workers. However he was not as willing as other leftist to dismiss people based on their class. Another complication to his relationship to communism was his admiration for technology. Since Karl Marx stated that “Machine technology is instrumental in creating alienated labor” (Landau, 177). Although a growing number of leftists believed that technology could be beneficial to workers, the majority of liberals were skeptical of the potential for technology to improve the lives of workers.



*The St. George Cabinet*  
Designed by Philip Webb,  
Painted by William Morris

Going back to their roots was something important to both artists. Morris esteemed medieval and gothic artistic themes and sought to bring those back into every work his hands touched. William Morris conducted his art in many forms that were made to be enjoyed inside

one's home or establishment. Morris expressed his nationalism by using plants and animals from the British garden in his wallpapers and fabrics (MacCarthy, 1995). This can be seen through his wallpapers, tapestry, frescos and wood work to name a few. He also drew on English history, literature, and mythology such as Arthurian legends, St. George (patron saint of England), and of course his printing of British authors at Kelmscott, including the *The Kelmscott Chaucer*-one of the most beautiful and expensive books in the English language (MacCarthy, 1995). The Arthurian legends were capsulized in the "Holy Grail" tapestries by Morris & Co. The St. George Cabinet was designed by Philip Webb and painted by William Morris. The highly decorated cabinet demonstrates Morris's love for romance and medieval themes. Morris's privileged upbringing and scholarly endeavors as well as his travels heavily influenced his art. His goal was to bring nature indoors to be enjoyed in one's leisure time at home. Morris believed in having art accessible to all, but in all reality his art was something that only individuals who could pay his prices could afford.

Rivera expressed Mexican pre-Columbian themes within his murals and frescoes and drawings, which contained the history of the Mexican people. His themes addressed social inequality, the relationship of nature, industry and technology; and the history and fate of Mexico. Rivera made the painting of murals his primary method, appreciating the large scale and public accessibility, the opposite of what he regarded as the elitist character of paintings in galleries and museums. Mexican culture and history constituted the major themes and influence in Rivera's art.

Diego Rivera created his art to be enjoyed by everyone. Rivera chose public spaces to hold the canvas for his frescos and murals. Nature wasn't as important to Rivera as Mexican history was. Rivera brought the history of Mexico and of the Mexican people to life within his

frescos and paintings. Diego Rivera designed his art around cubist characteristics. Rivera's depictions of people were disproportionate and colors were bright and fanciful, almost realistic in form. The colors were bright, the subject matter larger than life, and Rivera's thoughts and views were brought to the forefront in each of his art pieces. His art was considered controversial since he was not opposed to portraying his true feelings on the subject matter he painted. This can be found in his artwork both in the United States and in Mexico. However he felt that he had more artistic freedom and acceptability in Mexico than in the United States.

Morris's view on Art for the People can be found in "William Morris on Art and Socialism" in the chapter "The Lesser Arts." Morris believes that the production of objects in mass batches causes them to be lesser and trivial. The objects are then considered to be mechanical in form as opposed to natural in form, which to him results from the handicraft. The producers of this art are incapable of resisting the changes put upon them by fashion or by dishonesty from the material or by a production process required by the managers. The artist then loses the dignity of popular arts. Conversely handicraft produces objects in a natural form and with use or meaning. To give the consumer pleasure, the object must be useful; if not, the products in which they are made would be vacant and uninteresting, numbing both mind and body. It is true that one had to be at least middle class to afford Morris's wallpaper, textiles, etc., but his ideal was a society where everyone could produce and enjoy handcrafted goods: "To give pleasure in the things they must perforce *use*, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce *make*, that is the other use of it." "I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few" (*The Lesser Arts*, Morris, 128) Morris desired work to be meaningful with hope of rest and wealth to be redistributed. He



also felt there should be a division between design and production, they are in themselves becoming machines.

Art has always been a part of people's lives, whether it is public art or private art. However, beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing into the Renaissance Period, most works of art were created only for those who could afford to buy them. Rivera believed that the individual need not pay the fees to a museum or travel the distance to enter a church in order to experience his art. He wanted his art to be located in common areas of cities and public buildings in which to be viewed on the way to work or strolling down the street. Rivera remained a central force in the development of a national art in Mexico throughout his life. In 1957, at the age of seventy, Rivera died in Mexico City (Lee, 355). Perhaps one of his greatest legacies, however, was his impact on America's conception of public art. Both his original painting style and the force of his ideas remain a major influences on American painting. Both Morris and Rivera sought to have their art enjoyed any time of day either in one's own home or on their way to work.

The visions of Morris and Rivera for a socialist society did not come to fruition; Morris's push for a return to handicraft was also unsuccessful. However, conditions have improved for the working class both in the United States and Mexico. The working class culture tends to center around community. Many individuals work within the cities and towns in which they live. This therefore encourages funds to be spent in the areas in which people live and work. A tight knit community and sense of belonging is forged. Artistic inspiration is harvested within one's community and can be inspired by the daily life or a single event that has impacted their own city or town.

We are now in a different age with a different definition of Art for the People; two things have remained constant, accessibility and opportunities to engage in the creative process. Art is available to anyone who wishes to experience it. Mexican murals adorn street corners and public areas across the country. The same is true for the United States. Parks and free art festivals are just two of the immense artistic expressions that happen in America. There is freedom of artistic expression both in a response to historic events or something that brings about an emotional response.

Today there are greater opportunities to view and experience art. Art both in Mexico and the United States can be viewed out in public locations or in more formal exhibitions. Art can also be accessed through the internet as well as created on computer software systems and printed out via 3D printers. Art has become a fluid experience that can be created and viewed anywhere and everywhere and is a common language that is spoken throughout generations. It has become a common thread that has been used to stitch the fabric of humanity.

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