

Art and the Mexican Revolution



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Introduction

In this free course, *Art and the Mexican Revolution*, you will explore the significance of certain **murals** by the artist Diego Rivera. While Rivera is now often known (if he is known at all) as the husband of Frida Kahlo, he was in fact one of the three major Mexican muralists (alongside José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros). Together, these artists were collectively referred to as *los tres grandes* (the big three) and in the period after the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20 they were commissioned to produce monumental murals in Mexico City.



Figure 1 Diego Rivera, *Distributing Arms* [featuring the image of Frida Kahlo], 1928, fresco, 256 × 358 cm. Secretariat of Public Education, Court of Fiestas, Mexico City, Level 3 south wall. Photo: © 2017. Art Resource/Bob Schalkwijk/Scala, Florence. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACs 2018.

During the revolution, the Mexican **bourgeoisie** mobilised the radicalised peasantry and emergent working class to overthrow the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz who had been installed with the backing of the United States in 1876. And after the violence had subsided in the post-revolutionary period, the government commissioned these murals in

an attempt to win over the largely illiterate peasantry to its less than revolutionary political reform programme.

North of the border, the Depression decade of the 1930s was marked at either end by two major shows devoted to Mexican art in New York: at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1930 and at the Rockefeller-dominated Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1940. These exhibitions framed a period in which artists and intellectuals in the United States looked towards their southern neighbour for an example of a culture which they felt was, in certain key respects, superior to their own. Mexico seemed to offer a model of an agrarian economy, simultaneously rooted in tradition yet vitally progressive, in stark contrast to a model of capitalism in the United States that had crashed and burned so suddenly and traumatically after the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

This period of fascination with all things Mexican in the 1930s coincided with attempts by the government of the United States to negotiate favourable economic conditions that would preserve both the land holdings of its citizens and the continued extraction of Mexican natural resources (such as oil) after the revolution. It is no coincidence that the Rockefellers (one of the wealthiest families in America and who were major patrons of Mexican art in the period) largely controlled MoMA and owned the Standard Oil Company, which made huge operating profits south of the border. In this sense, Mexican murals were embroiled in a broader negotiation between the two countries, in which the purported **nationalism** of the Mexican post-revolutionary governments was supposedly pitted against the direct and exploitative economic interests of their more powerful North American neighbour.

You will begin this course by looking at how this conflict was played out in Rivera's mural the *History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Future* (1929–35) in Mexico City, before turning to two important commissions that Rivera undertook in the United States in the 1930s, to see how he negotiated this unequal relationship between the two countries in terms of his own personal vision of **pan-Americanism**. You will then finish with a brief analysis of Kahlo's more subjectively oriented painting, as a counterpoint to the monumental public art of her husband. Here you will see that it is extra-artistic factors that all too often determine the critical reputations of artists from the past in the here and now.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A344 Art and its global histories](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- situate a key example of Mexican muralism within the post-revolutionary context in which it was made
- explore recent debates around the interpretation of Mexican muralism
- examine the concepts of 'realism' and 'modernism' in relation to Mexican muralism
- address the relevance of social and cultural contexts for interpreting works of art
- analyse works of art in terms of different ideas and approaches.

1 The Mexican Revolution

Before looking at one of Rivera's murals, it is important to have some sense of the Mexican Revolution itself as the context in which it was produced. As early as 1924, the communist intellectual Bertram D. Wolfe (one of Rivera's earliest biographers) described the revolution as 'a very patchy and unsystematic affair', characterising the government that it threw up as 'a political power representing not a single class but an uncertain balance of power between the partially awakened workers and peasants on the one hand and the influence of foreign capital, especially that of American interests, on the other' (Wolfe, 1924, p. 207).

In fact, there were three revolutions involving a complex interplay of competing class interests (Hart, 1989, p. 348). The first was the peasant revolt led by Emiliano Zapata in the south, and supported by the forces of Pancho Villa in the north. Mobilising guerrilla insurgency, they advocated – and implemented in the state of Morelos – a radical redistribution of land. It was this component of the revolution that provided the impetus for agrarian reform from the mid-1930s onwards. The second was the incipient proletarian revolution by urban workers in the modern factories with its power channelled through national self-governing unions and their armed 'red battalions'. And lastly, there was the centralising and modernising bourgeois revolution of the enlightened middle class that championed constitutional reform under the banner of Mexican nationalism.

As John Mason Hart has convincingly argued, the struggle for power between these contending classes was significantly shaped by the government of the United States, which intervened whenever it could to protect its corporate interests in Mexico. So much so in fact that he describes the Mexican Revolution as 'the first Third World uprising against American economic penetration and control' (Hart, 1989, p. 18). The nationalism mobilised by the post-revolutionary regimes was, however, largely rhetorical in that at key points they looked to the United States for military support to contain the revolution (Hart, 1989, pp. 283, 290, 294, 299, 311 and 345–6).

This struggle also framed the production of the murals of *los tres grandes*, who were to the left of the post-revolutionary governments that commissioned them. It is this tension between the nationalist rhetoric of the politicians and the more internationalist one of Rivera (rooted, as it was, in his commitment to **Marxism**) that you will explore in this course.

2 History of Mexico

Now take a look at Rivera's famous mural the *History of Mexico: From the Conquest to the Future*, which is painted on the main stairway inside Mexico City's National Palace. First in chronological order, to the right of the central stairwell (on the north wall) there is the part of the mural called the *The Aztec World* (Figure 2), which was painted in 1929. Then, on the main (west) wall, consisting of five vaulted bays, there is the massive **fresco** *From the Conquest to the Present* (Figure 3), painted in 1929–30. And finally, to the left of the central stairwell (on the south wall), Rivera painted *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* (Figure 4) in 1934–35.



Figure 2 Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico* (north wall): *The Aztec World*, 1929, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 7.5 × 9 m. National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: Magdalena Mayo/Alamy. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACS 2018.

The National Palace stands on the east side of the Zócalo (the principal square in Mexico City) and was built upon the spot that had been the centre of Mexican political power going back to Aztec times. After the revolution, the palace housed the president, the cabinet and various government bureaucracies. Rivera painted his mural between 1929 and 1935, during the period when Plutarco Elías Calles was the 'Strong Man' in Mexican politics. Like his predecessor Álvaro Obregón, who was the first president after the violence of 1910–20 had abated, Calles had been a leading general in the revolutionary army. Although his presidential term had officially run from 1924–28, he effectively continued his rule for the next six years, during which time there were three short-term 'puppet presidents', until the more left-leaning Lázaro Cárdenas was elected in December 1934.



Figure 3 Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico* (west wall): *From the Conquest to the Present*, 1929–30, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 9 × 21.5 m. National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: © 2018. Art Resource/Bob Schalkwijk/Scala, Florence. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACS 2018.

History of Mexico may not be the biggest mural that Rivera produced in Mexico City but it is certainly the most important. According to Stanton Catlin, Rivera's mural sequence 'is one of the most compendious visual displays of historical material in near human scale in the history of art', and it is thereby equal in significance to Michelangelo's ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel (Catlin, 1986, p. 261). Its dramatisation of the history of the country from Aztec times through to the present (the 1930s), and beyond into an imagined future – prominently featuring the succession of wars fought by the Mexicans to overthrow different colonial oppressors from the conquest of 1521 onwards – is epic in terms of both scale and historical reach.



Figure 4 Diego Rivera, *History of Mexico* (south wall): *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, 1934–35, fresco, height from crown of arch to dado 7.5 × 9 m. National Palace, Mexico City. Photo: © 2018. Art Resource/Bob Schalkwijk/ Scala, Florence. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACS 2018.

3 The mural described

The **iconography** of the main wall (the west wall), the first that the viewer sees when ascending the stairs, is framed within a depiction of the two major nineteenth-century invasions of Mexico: by the United States in 1847 (in the upper part of the bay on the far right); and by the French in 1862–67 (in the bay on the far left). In the upper portion of the three central bays, Rivera depicted, from left to right, *The Porfirian Era* (1876–1911), *The Legacy of Independence* (1810–1930) and *Reform and the Era of Benito Juárez* (1855–76).

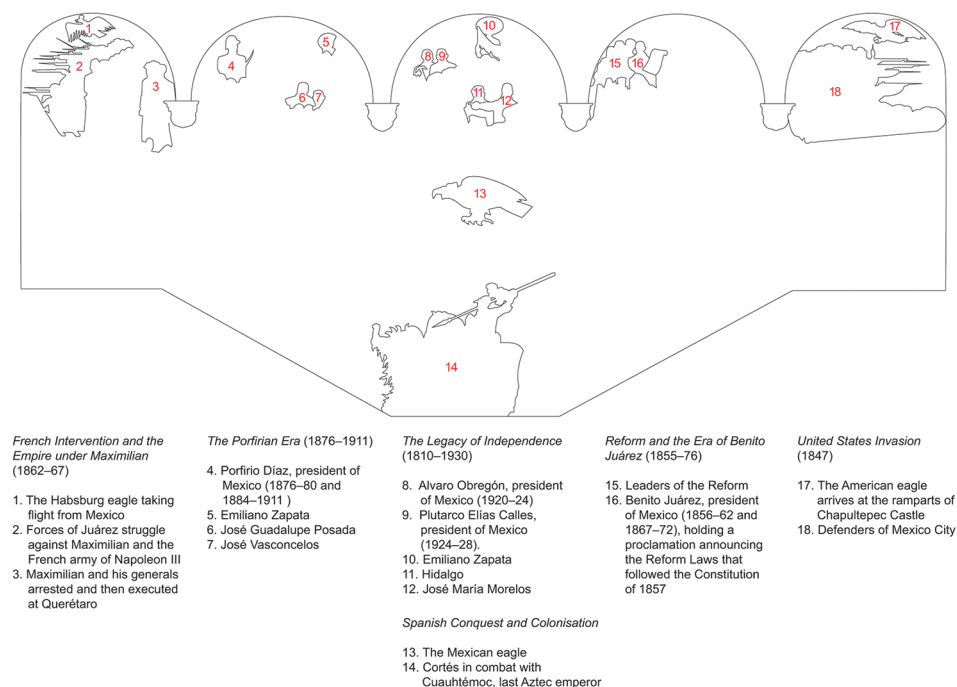


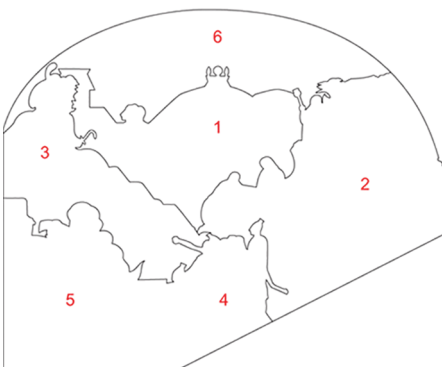
Figure 5 Diagram of *History of Mexico* (west wall): *From the Conquest to the Present*.

Although each section includes a cast of historical figures, Rivera does not focus upon anyone in particular. Instead, the Mexican people are themselves represented as the anonymous agents of social change, painted in what David Craven has described as a ‘post-heroic’ way (Craven, 2002, p. 55). A significant exception to this emphasis upon the non-hierarchical is the depiction of the revolutionary peasant leader Zapata, who appears

twice in the central wall. Below the upper register of these five bays, Rivera painted a kaleidoscopic arrangement of scenes and figures from the conquest through to the early colonial period. Importantly, he neither idealised pre-Columbian Indians nor represented them as mere victims of history, and added scenes of human sacrifice as well as resistance to the invading Spanish forces between 1519 and 1521.

These themes tie the iconography of the main wall to the north wall, which depicts the Aztec world. Here, the central iconographic feature is Quetzalcóatl – the important Meso-American mythological figure – in front of an Aztec pyramid. Arranged around him are a seated group of white-robed admirers as well as other figure groups that, taken together, depict the productivity and sophistication of pre-Columbian civilisation. Again, any idea that the pre-Hispanic world was some sort of Edenic paradise is offset by the inclusion of certain iconographic elements.

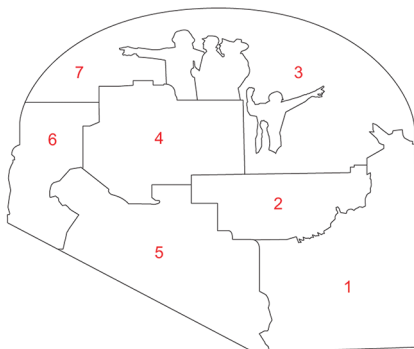
On the left, Rivera painted a scene which shows figures from conquered tribes climbing a pyramid with loaded woven baskets on their backs as tribute to an Aztec priest, and, below this, armed resistance to Aztec warriors dressed in military costumes. The conflict depicted here, and the ensuing one between the Aztecs and the Spanish conquistadores, is portended above in the detail of Quetzalcóatl fleeing eastwards on a huge feathered serpent. This provides another useful thematic link to the central wall in that, according to certain accounts, Quetzalcóatl vowed to return on the anniversary of his birth in 1519, the very year that Cortés arrived, thereby ironically facilitating a welcome reception for the Spanish invaders.



1. Quetzalcóatl instructs his followers
2. Productive activities
3. Payment of tribute
4. Resistance to Aztec rule
5. Aboriginal class struggle
6. The departure of Quetzalcóatl

Figure 6 Diagram of *History of Mexico* (north wall): *The Aztec World*.

Directly opposite this depiction of the Aztec world is *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*. Employing a grid-like system, this wall is the most tendentious. In the bottom right corner it depicts: *campesinos* (tenant farmers) labouring in a field under the watchful eyes of armed overseers; two murdered *campesinos* above them, one hanged for being a communist and the other for being an agrarian reformer; fascist-looking police suppressing a strike; above that a worker addressing a crowd; and at the top there is a pitched battle in the Zócalo. In the compartmentalised middle section, just left of centre, Rivera portrays the forces of reaction: top left, corporate barons in the United States hunched around a ticker tape; to their right, Calles surrounded by reactionary representatives of the army and the clergy; below them, corrupt journalists; and then, to their left, figures representing decadent high society.



1. Exploitation of the Mexican peasantry
2. Repression of strikers
3. Armed uprising in the Zócalo
4. Roots of social evil
5. Exploitation of the Mexican working class
6. Critique of bourgeois knowledge
7. Karl Marx pointing to a classless utopia

Figure 7 Diagram of *History of Mexico* (south wall): *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*.

Socialist education is a key theme on this wall, with the two Kahlo sisters – Frida and Cristina – instructing children in the writings of Karl Marx at the bottom centre; a figure on the far left holding a copy of Marx's *Capital* and ridiculing a university lecturer espousing reactionary ideas; and, at the top in the centre, the figure of Marx himself holding a scroll with passages from the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*. He is instructing the triad of soldier, worker and peasant while pointing out of the mural to the left, over a utopian landscape with fully harmonised industrial and agricultural scenes.

4 The mural interpreted

The nationalism that shaped the Mexican Revolution was also an important component of Rivera's iconographic scheme. The passages on the top right and top left in *From the Conquest to the Present* that depict the nineteenth-century invasions by the United States and the French respectively are triangulated by the scenes of conquest at the bottom middle led by Cortés on his horse.



The art historian Leonard Folgarait has pointed out that the significance of these details is underscored by the fact that the departing eagles in both side scenes are repeated by the central motif of the eagle in the middle of the composition, an obvious nationalist reference to the Mexican flag, which also has an eagle at its centre (Folgarait, 1998, p. 114). The eagles all fly in the same direction, which strengthens this visual symmetry, and hence their iconographic and narrative importance.

Immediately below the central eagle is the figure of Cortés on horseback in combat with an Aztec warrior, which, according to another art historian, Desmond Rochfort, can be read as 'the first great struggle against foreign domination' (Rochfort, 1987, p. 60). This fight against colonialism is taken up again, above the eagle, in the figures of the two priests Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, nationalist leaders who played a pivotal role in the build-up to the overthrow of Spanish rule in 1821.

The fight against imperialism is then brought up to the present with the depiction of Zapata, at the very top of the central bay, with the banner proclaiming '*Tierra y Libertad*' (land and liberty). This was Zapata's revolutionary slogan and was adopted by the peasantry, who appropriated many of the great estates owned by landed interests in the United States after 1910 (Hart, 1989, pp. 159 and 243).

It was this component of the revolution that Rivera supported. The bourgeois governments after 1920 deployed the nationalist card to win over the revolutionary peasantry and secure power. The murals were meant to be part of this process of propaganda to support their rule. Yet the political agenda of the post-revolutionary regimes that commissioned the murals was not as revolutionary as the more radical sections of the peasantry, or the muralists themselves for that matter.

The anti-imperialism of the bourgeoisie was borne more out of a desire to pursue its own economic and political self-interest, free from colonial domination. Yet once in power, successive bourgeois governments were more than prepared to negotiate with the government of the United States that had, in fact, helped them defeat the forces of Zapata and Villa, and to bring the period of revolutionary violence to a close (Hart, 1989, pp. 320 and 344–5). As a result of this, the process of land redistribution slowed and the class contradictions that largely fuelled the revolution remained in place.



It is the focus upon class conflict in the two side walls of Rivera's mural that undercuts the focus upon nationalism in the main one. Several commentators have agreed that the detail of pre-Columbian Indians fighting in the bottom left section of *The Aztec World* is a symbol of aboriginal class struggle (Catlin, 1986, p. 262; Craven, 2002, p. 56; Folgarait, 1998, p. 99). This emphasis upon class conflict as the motor of human history (central to Rivera's Marxist analysis of Mexican society) becomes even more explicit in the details that you can see in the opposite wall, depicting *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*. This was painted in 1934–35, after Rivera had returned from producing important murals for corporate patrons north of the border, and after Calles's domination of the executive had finally been supplanted by the more progressive regime of Cárdenas.

The side walls are linked iconographically as well as thematically. The departing figure of Quetzalcóatl, who rides out of the Aztec world on a feathered serpent to the right, thereby setting the scene for the Spanish invasion beginning in the bottom right of the main wall, has a visual symmetry in the opposite wall with the figure of Marx. He is pointing out of the mural scheme to the left, beyond the idealised utopia, to a classless future, which for Rivera was the desired outcome of the as yet unfinished revolutionary process.



Recent accounts of Mexican muralism have highlighted the conservative nature of the Mexican post-revolutionary governments and have read the ideological content of the murals commissioned by them accordingly (Coffey, 2012; Folgarait, 1998). However, it can be argued that Rivera's *History of Mexico* cuts against such an interpretation of the murals as propaganda for the post-revolutionary bourgeois regimes pure and simple. The emphasis upon Mexican nationalism, which is so significant in the central wall and so pivotal in governmental attempts at winning support for their policies post-1920, is just part of a broader historical struggle rooted in class conflict. This is highlighted in the south wall by the detail of Calles being surrounded by the army and the clergy, and, to the right, by the pitched battles between the conservative forces of Calles and the supporters of the newly elected Cárdenas that were taking place in the Zócalo as Rivera painted. Indeed,

Cárdenas's redistribution of land to the peasantry in line with what Zapata and Villa had fought for, and the nationalisation of Mexican subsoil resources in 1938, were achieved on the back of this grass roots popular support. For Rivera, the Mexican Revolution was far from finished and it was the job of his mural to signal this to the more radicalised sectors of the workers and peasantry, and thereby agitate for further political and economic gains.

Activity 1

Rivera's mural sequence is massive and extremely complex in terms of its iconography which is difficult to read in small-scale reproductions. To get a better sense of what it looks like, and to consolidate what you've learned so far, as well as to prepare you for what will follow, watch this short film about *History of Mexico* before continuing to Section 5.

Video content is not available in this format.



5 Muralism and modernism

It was in the period that he was painting his National Palace mural that Rivera's artistic reputation reached its height as it was at this point that he was given a one-person show, only the second one after Henri Matisse, at the recently opened MoMA in New York in December 1931. This retrospective was a huge success, breaking attendance records, with over 50,000 visitors in just over a month, and receiving overwhelmingly positive critical reaction in the press. All this even though Rivera was a renowned communist who was, by this point, committed to a form of **realism** in his mural practice that sat rather at odds with the modernist agenda being promoted at the museum. While in New York to promote his show, Rivera also negotiated his future contract for the ill-fated mural at the Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan, which you will look at later in this course (Smith, 1993, p. 208).



Figure 8 Diego Rivera, *Zapatista Landscape*, 1915, oil on canvas, 145 × 125 cm. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City. Photo: Bridgeman Images. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACS 2018.

Rivera had not always been a proponent of realism in painting and, before returning to Mexico in 1921 to paint the revolution, he had been a celebrated second-generation Cubist in Paris (Favela, 1984). Yet while a work such as Rivera's *Zapatista Landscape* (Figure 8) of 1915 obviously has a radical iconographic content in the context of the ongoing Mexican Revolution, its complex formal arrangement was clearly unsuitable for the large-scale propaganda drive conceived to win over the Mexican masses to Obregón's post-revolutionary government after 1920. This shift was, as Rivera himself said, 'because of the war, the Russian Revolution, and in the belief in the need for a popular and socialised art. It had to be a functional art related to the world and the times, and had to help the masses for a better social organisation' (Rochfort, 1987, p. 17).

Rivera therefore fused the formal techniques of Cubism with social realism in the traditional mural medium of fresco. He had seen Renaissance examples of this while travelling widely in Italy before his return to Mexico (Coffey, 2016, p. 349). In *History of Mexico* this fusion can be seen, in particular, in the central wall with the flattening out of the mural plane and the large cast of historical personages that, at times, seem to sit at oblique angles to each other. It is also evident in the south wall with the different spatial registers and grid-like system that Rivera used to construct the complex design.

What an analysis of Rivera's mural makes clear is that he had quite clearly learned important lessons from European **modernism** and incorporated some of its technical devices into his monumental wall paintings. In this way, he challenged the usual current of art history under colonialism so that, as the cultural historians and film theorists Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen have argued: 'instead of the exotic or the primitive feeding into

European art, the reverse would happen: the lessons of European art ... would feed back into the native Mexican tradition' (Mulvey and Wollen, 1982, p. 12).



Figure 9 Arkady Plastov, *Collective Farm*, 1937, oil on canvas, 188 × 307 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photo: © VG-Bil/age fotostock.

This fusion of social realism and modernism becomes apparent when Rivera's murals are compared to a typical example of Soviet Socialist Realism. This became the state-sanctioned form of painting in the Soviet Union under Stalinism in the 1930s and was an avowedly anti-modernist formation, having more in common technically with aspects of French nineteenth-century Academicism. This can be seen in the rural arcadia depicted in Arkady Plastov's *Collective Farm* of 1937, which was actually painted during a period of famine caused by the enforced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture (Figure 9). We will now look at the more typically social realist murals produced by Rivera north of the Mexican border to see how he negotiated the asymmetric relationship between the United States and Latin America in his vision of pan-Americanism.

6 Rivera in Gringolandia

As you have already seen, Rivera's artistic status in the early 1930s was unparalleled in Mexico, and rivalled only by Pablo Picasso and Matisse in Europe. This was apparent in the fact that he was fêted by leading figures within the corporate class of the United States, notably the Ford and Rockefeller dynasties, who commissioned him to travel north and paint murals for them. As we look at these works, it is important to bear in mind that these commissions were for private institutions funded by major corporate donors, and not by a government, as in Mexico City.

The different types of commissions carried different sets of pressures. If Rivera was allowed to project his political radicalism in murals funded by the Mexican state post-1920, then this was because these regimes benefited, to some degree, from the radical gloss that such works conferred by association. Working for Ford and Rockefeller had a similar dynamic, if with a different set of variables and parameters on what would constitute an acceptable iconography and corresponding political ideology. While Rivera's later critique of United States capitalism in the south wall of his National Palace mural would have obviously have been an unacceptable subject in the context of a commission in Detroit, the pan-Americanism that was such a notable feature of the period would have seemed a perfect fit.

Rivera later made clear the attraction of painting a mural in the United States when he said it was 'the ideal place to make a modern mural painting', for, unlike Mexico, it 'was a true industrial country' (Dickerman and Indyck-López, 2011, p. 31). But what potential benefits could the Ford Motor Company have accrued from commissioning Rivera to come and paint a mural like *Detroit Industry* in the prestigious Detroit Institute of Arts? At this point, the United States was still reeling from the effects of the stock market crash of 1929 and was mired in the Great Depression. Cities like Detroit, which were largely dependent upon corporate giants like Ford as their main employer, were hit particularly hard. The period in which Rivera was in the city was bracketed by the Ford Hunger March in March 1932 and the Michigan bank collapse in February the following year. So the city was witnessing unprecedented levels of unemployment, financial chaos and class conflict.

For many suffering from this economic and political turmoil, Ford's response was derisory. By the time Rivera arrived, the pre-crash workforce, and their wages, had been halved and, while it still funded a hospital, the company made no relief contributions and continued its implacable opposition to industrial trade unionism. With its public reputation in the city in tatters, the company could only benefit by its association with Rivera, the pre-eminent muralist of the Mexican Revolution and a self-styled 'artist of the people' (Smith, 1993, pp. 205–9). Given that the subject of the commission was the contemporary industrial environment of Detroit, then the question remained as to whether or not the economic and political strife that the city was undergoing outside the museum would be presented inside.

7 Detroit Industry

In *Detroit Industry* (the 27-part mural spanning all four walls of the Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts) the two principal sections focused upon the River Rouge Ford factory at Dearborn, just outside the city. The north and south walls were dominated by the massive *Production and Manufacture of Engine and Transmission* (Figure 10) and *Production of Automobile Exterior and Final Assembly* (Figure 11) frescoes respectively. Structured within grid-like compositions indebted to the artist's earlier Cubist work, they were painted in a social realist mode that foregrounded the fact that the Ford plant was the epitome of industrial modernity at the time (Indych-López, 2016, p. 343).



Figure 10 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry* (north wall): *Production and Manufacture of Engine and Transmission*, 1932–33, fresco, 540 × 1372 cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Gift of Edsel B. Ford. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

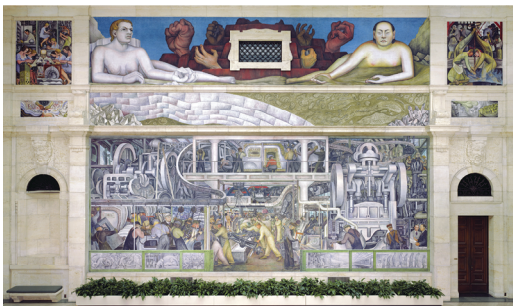


Figure 11 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry* (south wall): *Production of Automobile Exterior and Final Assembly*, 1932–33, fresco, 540 × 1372 cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Gift of Edsel B. Ford. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

Rivera, nevertheless, combined this realist emphasis upon the modernity of the factory plant with a focus upon what actually happened on the shop floor. Here Rivera was clear that, even in the most advanced technological plant in the Western world, the role of human labour continued to be central to the processes of industrial production. While there is an actual image of a finished automobile in the distance in the centre of the south wall it is so small as to be barely perceptible. Instead the central foreground is dominated by the image of heroicised automobile workers engaged in performing a multitude of different tasks in assembling the cars that were produced at the Rouge, and this is mirrored in the lower half of the north wall with monumental figures arranged in a frieze-like fashion across the whole wall from left to right while working on one of the many conveyor belts in the factory.

With this dual emphasis upon the industrial modernity of the plant and the heroic labour of the workers, Rivera pulled off something of a coup. The world's premier political artist had taken the Ford Company's money – nearly \$21,000 – and produced an image of contemporary cutting-edge industrial production that not only pleased its corporate sponsors but also the multi-ethnic workforce that operated the machinery, at least those who had not been forced out of their jobs and deported back to Mexico (Lee, 2005, pp. 211–12). There is, indeed, an image of an overseer in both of the main walls: the green-faced figure to the left of Rivera's self-portrait with a bowler hat looking out at the viewer in the top left of the north wall and the bespectacled figure with a white hat and suit in the left of the south one. Such details allude to the fact that the Ford Motor Company had a ruthless management culture that readily used a network of spies to intimidate and regulate the workforce (Smith, 1993, p. 54). Yet, other than this, there is little to suggest the capitalist relations of production that actually framed the production process at the plant.

As art historian Anthony Lee puts it: 'The factory floor is laid out like a blueprint, a manual for alternately a capitalist or a socialist operation' (Lee, 2005, p. 210). For Rivera, as for other communist thinkers and intellectuals at the time, it was not the forces of production that were the problem – indeed they had the potential to speed up the manufacturing process while minimising the necessary human labour involved – just the model of private ownership under which the factory operated. With this in mind, it could be argued that the two central images of monumentalised purposeful human labour, with workers depicted in a perfectly symbiotic relationship with the machines that they operate, Rivera not only painted a realistic rendering of the workings of the Ford plant but also alluded to a communist vision of an industrial utopia in which the relations of production have been transcended, private property socialised, and the alienation of industrial labour rendered obsolete. This is hinted at by the cultural historian Terry Smith when he claims that here Rivera painted not only an image of modern industry, but 'its prehistory, its birth, its present structure, and its future', just as the artist had done in terms of the subject of Mexico itself in his National Palace mural (Smith, 1993, p. 204).

What is really interesting here is how these two main walls fit within the larger iconographic scheme to say something about the present and the past, and the relationship between the United States and Latin America. If this is, as Paul Wood argues, 'the greatest of all socialist realist projects' this is because of 'the connections it draws between modern industry and more distant times and places, and the way it situates modernity in both a history and a geography' (Wood, 2014, p. 211).

In the upper registers of the two main walls, Rivera depicted the four races that between them comprised the ethnic diversity of the Americas: white, yellow, brown and black, with each one holding a particular mineral essential to the production of iron, which is itself central to the development of industrial modernity. The tracing of this modern manufacturing regime in Detroit back to pre-Columbian times, and the relationship between the two continents, is made most explicit in a painted **grisaille** detail on the west wall, which represents the interdependence of North and South America (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Diego Rivera, detail from *Detroit Industry* (west wall): *Interdependence of North and South*, 1932–33, fresco, 133 × 796 cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. Photo: CTK/Alamy.

Here, Rivera painted the freight ships that moved between Detroit, symbolised by the skyline and industrial port on the left, and the Amazon, symbolised by the tropical landscape and rubber plantation workers on the right – what Linda Bank Downs, who has worked extensively on the mural cycle, has argued is a reference to Fordlandia, the Ford Company's failed attempt to produce its own rubber in the rainforest in Brazil (Downs, 1999, p. 85). Rivera was obsessed with the idea of pan-Americanism and what Wolfe described as 'a wedding of the industrial proletariat of the North with the peasantry of the South, of the factories of the United States with the raw materials of Latin America' (Wolfe, 1991 [1963], p. 278). When Rivera painted his mural scheme in Detroit, this relationship was obviously unequal on every level and, as such, Smith sees this pan-American fantasy as hopelessly naive and apolitical (Smith, 1993, p. 213). Yet if this panel is considered in terms of the utopian dynamic of the main murals on the north and south walls, it is possible that this confluence of the waters of Detroit and the Amazon could be encoded with a utopian dimension that points to a possible future when this relationship between the north and the south could be equal.

8 The Rockefeller Center mural

This balancing act between producing a mural that could satisfy a corporate patron as well as communicate a radical iconography pointing to a utopian future was not an easy one to maintain. Emboldened by his success in Detroit, Rivera left to paint a commission for Rockefeller in New York. Unfortunately for him, his success in Detroit was not to be repeated. In February 1934, Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (Figure 13), which was over two-thirds complete on the ground floor of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) building in the Rockefeller Center, was hammered off the wall.

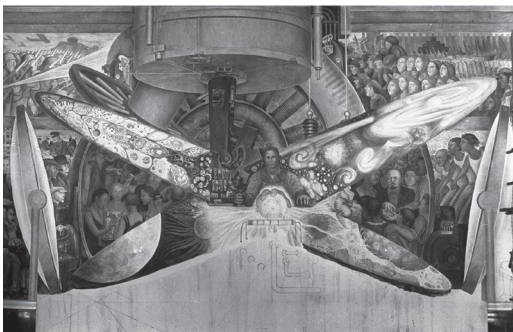


Figure 13 Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*, mural (photographed in 1933). Rockefeller Center, New York. Photo: Lucienne Bloch (1909–99). Courtesy of Old Stage Studios, www.LucienneBloch.com. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACs2018.

Rivera had diverted attention away from the actual conditions of capitalist crisis when he painted his *Detroit Industry* and instead painted an image of harmony on the shop floor that pointed towards a transcendence of the class contradictions of modern industrial production. In his RCA mural, he went one stage further. Here, he attempted to show how those contradictions could actually be overcome by depicting the opposing forces of capitalism and communism, with a portrait of Lenin just right of centre denoting the future triumph of the latter. All this in the Great Hall of the most important building in the Rockefeller Center, an ambitious building project that cost hundreds of millions of dollars at the height of the Great Depression.

It was this detail of the Russian revolutionary leader that brought work on the mural to a standstill and, after Rivera refused to remove it, ultimately ensured its destruction.

According to Laurance Hurlburt, who produced the first major work on 'los tres grandes' in the United States, Rockefeller's cultural philanthropy masked a hidden agenda in that his 'primary objective lay in seeing that Standard Oil succeeded in avoiding what happened in other Latin American countries – the nationalisation of foreign-owned oil properties' (Hurlburt, 1989, p. 9; Indyck-López, 2009, p. 98). Hence Rivera's one-man retrospective at the Rockefeller-dominated MoMA in 1931–32 and a further exhibition there in 1940 devoted to twenty centuries of Mexican art. Yet, with the removal of the mural, this strategy backfired and both Rockefeller and Rivera suffered accordingly. Rockefeller's reputation as a friend of the Mexican people was seriously dented by what many considered an act of cultural vandalism against the continent's pre-eminent artist. And, as already mentioned, the Cárdenas regime nationalised the Mexican oil industry in 1938 anyway. Rivera got the opportunity to repaint the mural later that year on the third floor of

the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, but the controversy generated by the incident persuaded other rich patrons in the United States to withdraw from future sponsorship.

9 Fridamania

No account of Mexican art in the interwar period would now seem complete without a discussion of Frida Kahlo. In this sense, the reputational arcs of her and her husband are instructive. In the early 1930s, Rivera was one of the most celebrated contemporary artists in the western hemisphere; however, after the debacle of the Rockefeller Center commission, his patrons in the United States abandoned him. After the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, and the ratcheting up of anti-communism in the United States, Rivera's star waned, as did that of social realism in painting more generally, with the consolidation of Abstract Expressionism as the latest, and greatest, manifestation of modernism in painting, and home-grown to boot (Smith, 1993, pp. 199–200).

Kahlo had been championed by the Surrealist André Breton in the 1930s and he wrote the catalogue essay for her first New York show, at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1939, as well as organising an exhibition for her in Paris later that year (Wollen, 2003, p. 120). Yet it was not until the 1980s (over a quarter of a century after her death) that her critical reputation really took off. Indeed the first major retrospective of Kahlo's work outside of Mexico was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1982.

Again, extra-artistic factors were key to her posthumous success, with feminism, postmodernism and post-colonialism being crucial in her rise to cult status (Wollen, 2003, pp. 123–4). Second-generation feminism had already had an impact upon the discipline of art history, and it was at this point that feminist art historians were constructing an alternative archaeology of women artists left out of the traditional male canon. Furthermore, Kahlo was a figurative painter, which ensured that her rediscovery in the West meshed perfectly with the return to easel painting that was part and parcel of the reaction against the anti-aestheticism of Conceptual art in the 1970s.



Figure 14 Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait along the Border Line between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, oil on tin, 31 × 35 cm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie's Images/ Bridgeman Images. © Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./DACS 2018.

Lastly, Kahlo was part Mexican and therefore considered at the time to be a Third World artist, which was a crucial factor in the context of the rise of post-colonialism that would do so much to challenge the traditionally Western canon of art. All of these strands come together in her focus upon the self-portrait, which is intimate, personal and private. After the well-documented traffic accident of 1925, her body was a broken one, and the

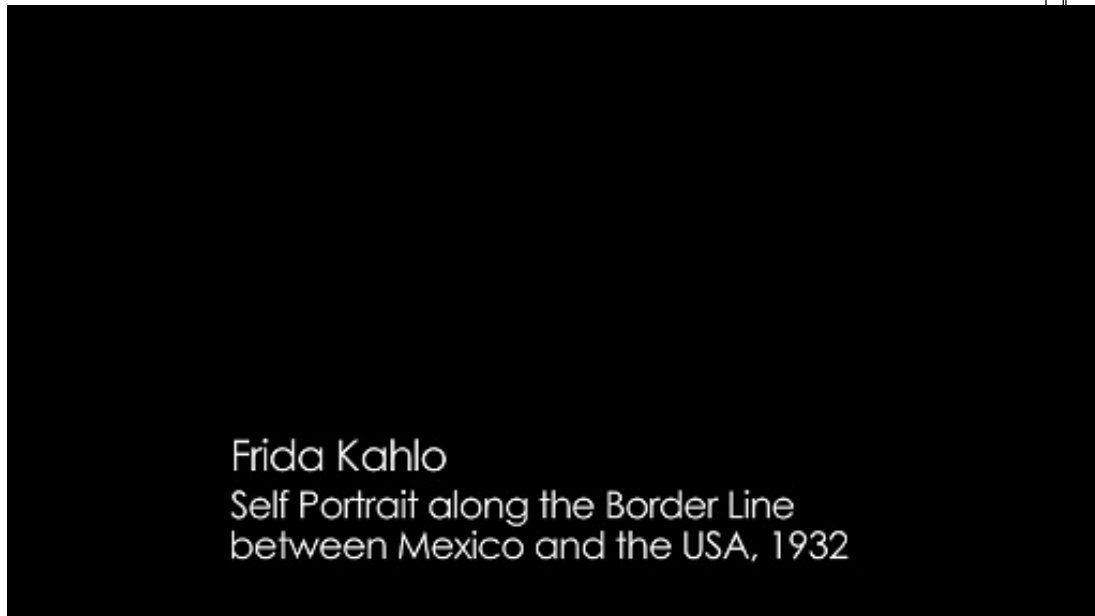
emphasis upon suffering in her works fitted with a particular current in feminism at that time, as well as a dominant trope in conventional art historical narratives – think Vincent van Gogh and the constantly recycled cliché of the mad, tormented genius. This is not to detract from the quality of Kahlo's art, which, despite its seeming naivety, is complex and highly sophisticated. Indeed, in the catalogue essay to the Whitechapel show, Mulvey and Wollen argue that the avant-gardism, popular historicism and mythic nationalism of the monumental wall paintings discussed so far are all embedded in Kahlo's self-portraiture (Mulvey and Wollen, 1982, p. 20).

This merely serves to underline that just as the formalist bias promoted by MoMA would consign the work of Rivera to the margins of Western art history in the post-war period, so the post-colonial turn within more recent scholarship would catapult the market value of Kahlo's paintings into the stratosphere, giving her a cult-like status in the process and thereby making her one of the most instantly recognisable artists in the world (Wollen, 2003, p. 119).

Activity 2

Watch another short film, this time about Kahlo's *Self-Portrait along the Border Line between Mexico and the United States* (Figure 14), painted in 1932 when she was in Detroit accompanying Rivera.

Video content is not available in this format.



Think about the iconographic content of the work and what it says about the relationship between Mexico and the United States divided by the figure of the artist. You may also want to consider how the juxtaposition between the two countries compare with Rivera's treatment of this theme in his *Detroit Industry* frescoes. Note your thoughts in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Kahlo stands on a flagstone just right of centre in a pink colonial dress as opposed to the indigenous costume that she usually wore. She is wearing a pre-Columbian necklace and in her left hand she holds the Mexican national flag; in her right she holds a cigarette. To her left is Mexico with a pre-Columbian pyramid, perfectly preserved on the right and decrepit on the left. Below this there is a pile of rubble, two female sculptures made of clay, and a carved skull. The plants and flowers in the foreground have roots that are embedded in the earth and link the Mexican landscape to that of the United States, shown to the right of her self-portrait. In the process of moving from one to the other, the roots turn into electrical cables that power a generator, a loudspeaker and a searchlight in the foreground. Above these, there is a repeated series of industrial air-conditioning ducts that stand in front of a Ford factory on the left and skyscrapers on the right. Smoke billowing out of the four chimneys on the factory partially obscures the United States flag painted in the sky above.

It is easy to read the set of oppositions that fed into a primitivising mythology of Mexico in the minds of many North Americans in the period: nature versus manufacture, humanity versus mechanisation, magic versus science, life versus death, pleasure versus work, dream versus reality and so on. In this way, the painting taps into a range of stereotypical dichotomies between Mexico and the United States, such as the past and the present, or the 'primitive' and the modern. Kahlo thereby counters the utopian pan-Americanism of Rivera's *Detroit Industry*, in particular the detail of the interdependence of North and South America (Figure 12), with a far darker, and even dystopian, image of the unequal relationship between the two countries.

As Mulvey and Wollen make clear, Kahlo uses self-portraiture 'to explore herself and her colonised cultural roots' (Mulvey and Wollen, 1982, p. 10). So while Rivera may have produced murals dramatising the effects of United States imperialism in Mexican politics, it is to Kahlo's credit that in her small-scale self-portrait on the border she showed us how imperialism looks once it has been internalised (Smith, 1993, p. 277).

10 The legacy of Mexican muralism

While the triumph of Kahlo's reputation, both critically and commercially, may have been bolstered by the constellation of historical, political and intellectual forces sketched out in this course, the example set by the Mexican muralists does have an afterlife, if largely outside of the rarefied world of high art.

The mural programme launched by the post-revolutionary Mexican state provided a compelling model of how the arts in the United States might be both maintained and stimulated during the Depression era, when the Democratic government under Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal with a commitment to large-scale federal spending. An estimated \$40 million was spent on producing art for public buildings, including murals in federal buildings from schools through to post offices, like that in Symeon Shimin's *Contemporary Justice and the Child* (Figure 15) (Hemingway, 2002, pp. 75–100, 147–88).



Figure 15 Symeon Shimin, *Contemporary Justice and the Child*, 1940, tempera mural, 361 x 224 cm. Great Hall, Department of Justice, Washington, DC. Photo: From the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

As a medium frequently linked to revolutionary politics in the 1930s, muralism also became the cultural benchmark for Latin American anti-imperialist struggles thereafter. When Salvador Allende's socialist government took power on the back of a popular mandate against United States influence in the early 1970s, there was a wave of political murals put up in support of his radically democratic policies. Likewise, when the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua in 1979, after the country had been a client state for economic interests in the United States for years, it was only a matter of time before public walls were covered with murals in support of a popular democratic government that represented the genuine interests of its people (Figure 16) (Craven, 2002, pp. 117–75).



Figure 16 Chico Emery, *Sandinista Woman and Child*, c.1985, mural. Metrocenter near Managua.

In the late 1960s, when the civil rights movement mobilised African-Americans and Latinos in the ghettos and barrios of cities in the United States, the country underwent a mural renaissance, from the bottom up rather than from the top down, organised within the communities themselves (Figure 17) (Cockcroft, Weber and Cockcroft, 1977).



Figure 17 Unknown artist, *Tribute to Allende*, 1973, mural. Chicano Park, San Diego. Photo: Alfred S. Quezada.

Significantly, the example set by *los tres grandes* lives on in Mexico itself, despite the gradual decline of muralism after 1968 when the government sought more neo-populist forms of propaganda to contain the political fallout from the Tlatelolco massacre in the build-up to the Olympic Games (Coffey, 2012, p. 14). Rafael Cuaduro's stairway murals in the Supreme Court of Justice (next to the National Palace on the Zócalo) are a case in point and a clear statement of the contemporary political resonance of the medium. Finished in time for the centenary of the beginning of the revolution, the murals dramatise the ways in which the Mexican state has systematically repressed civil liberties and has regularly deployed paramilitary forces against its civilian population since Tlatelolco, when hundreds of demonstrators were killed.

If you would like to, you can see Rafael Cuaduro's mural scheme on this page under 'Suprema Corte de Justicia': [Murales](#) (make sure to open the link in a new tab/window). Originally conducted under the 'dirty war' backed by the United States, this violence has more recently been enacted in the name of the 'war on drugs'. The burgeoning narcotics industry is itself a by-product of the levels of poverty in contemporary Mexico that are in part related to neo-liberal treaties such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has opened up the country once again to the economic interests of the United States, this time under the guise of modernisation and the impact of globalisation. So, despite the decline of muralism in Mexico in the last half a century, Cuaduro's mural scheme demonstrates that the tradition of monumental wall-painting pioneered by artists such as Rivera in the interwar period lives on in the present.

11 Quiz

Now you have completed all of this free course how about you check out what you have learned in a short quiz before proceeding to the conclusion?

Activity 3

1. Who effectively held power in Mexico during the period in which Rivera's National Palace mural was largely completed?

- ☐ Porfirio Díaz
- ☐ Álvaro Obregón
- ☐ Plutarco Elías Calles
- ☐ Lázaro Cárdenas

2. How many times does the leading figure in the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata's, portrait appear in Rivera's National Palace mural?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4

3. On which wall of *Detroit Industry* did Rivera paint the panel depicting the interdependence of North and South America?

- ☐ The north wall
- ☐ The east wall
- ☐ The south wall
- ☐ The west wall

4. The depiction of whose head brought the painting of Rivera's mural in the Rockefeller Center to an abrupt end?

- ☐ Karl Marx
- ☐ Vladimir Lenin
- ☐ Leon Trotsky
- ☐ Joseph Stalin

5. The first major retrospective of Kahlo's work outside of Mexico was staged at which London gallery?

- ☐ The Tate
- ☐ The Haywood
- ☐ The Whitechapel
- ☐ The National Gallery

Conclusion

In this free course, *Art and the Mexican Revolution*, you have explored the significance of a key mural produced by Diego Rivera within the post-revolutionary period after 1920, when art was deployed by successive bourgeois governments to win over the radicalised peasantry and emergent working-class to their less than radical reform agenda. In this way you have been introduced to different and competing interpretations of how this art has been understood within these broader social and political contexts.

After looking at the art historical concepts of 'realism' and 'modernism' in relation to Rivera's *History of Mexico* you then looked at how his murals north of the border were part of a more complex negotiation between the United States and Mexico over the rights to subsoil resources such as oil. You then finished with a brief analysis of Frida Kahlo's more subjectively orientated oil painting, as a counterpoint to the monumental murals of her husband, and how the example of Mexican muralism lived on as a strategy for producing a stridently didactic art from the 1930s through to the present.

In this way, hopefully this course has given you a sense of the extent to which painting, and the history of art more generally, are not ideologically neutral but instead subjects in which interpretations are continuously contested and fought over.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A344 Art and its global histories](#).

Glossary

Bourgeoisie

The ruling class in capitalist societies that owns the means of production through which it exploits its working class.

Fresco

The art or technique of painting on a moist plaster surface with colours ground in either water or a limewater mixture.

Grisaille

A monochromatic painting in shades of grey.

Iconography

The analysis of subject matter and meaning in the visual arts.

Marxism

The system of economic and political thought developed by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century that posits class struggle as the motor of human history.

Modernism

A type of painting or sculpture produced from the late-nineteenth century onwards that emphasises the formal components of the work of art over and above what is actually represented in terms of subject matter.

Mural

A large picture painted or affixed directly on to a wall or ceiling.

Nationalism

The assertion of the interests of one nation over and above the interests of others or the common interests of all nations.

Pan-Americanism

The advocacy of a political alliance or union of all the countries of North, Central and South America.

Realism

A style of painting and sculpture pioneered in the mid-nineteenth century France in which figures and scenes are depicted as they might be experienced in everyday life.

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