

Art and Revolution in Mexico

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

THE Mexican revolution is a very patchy and unsystematic affair. Like most institutional changes in a world of conflicting forces it lacks the unity of a picture, the logic of a rational system, or the structural consistency of a poem. Government in the interest of worker or peasant in two or three states—notably in Yucatan and Veracruz; fragmentary attempts at the installation of political democracy; sporadic distribution of *ejidos*, or bits of large estates, to landless peasants; a government without unity, made up of a curious intermixture of liberals and conservatives; 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—such is the unsystematic reality of the moment in Mexico.

Only in the work of the philosopher, the artist, and the poet have the effects of the revolution assumed system and unity. The new content and form of art and poetry, perhaps because artist and poet always seek unity in composition and consistency in structure, seem to be the most complete, the most logical, the most "revolutionary" of the by-products of the Mexican revolution.

The delightful and amusing results of this inexorable logic in artist and poet are: the Communist Union of Painters and Sculptors and the League of Revolutionary Writers.

Neither of these organizations is quite what its name suggests. The first would seem on the face of it an organization of painters of Communist propaganda posters and the second a league of writers of legends to go with the posters. But in reality the first is an organization of artists according to the critic's acceptance of that word, and the second, of eager young men most of whom have published a book or two and who try to write—principally poetry. Aesthetically, the first assumes tremendous importance because it includes (I am almost tempted to say "it consists of") Diego Rivera, Mexico's greatest painter and, in the judgment of competent foreign critics, one of the biggest figures in contemporary art. The dominant and dominating figure in the other organization is the poet Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz, a fair-sized figure among the young poets of Mexico, but Mexican poetry for the moment is at a low ebb and Mexican painting at high tide.

Says the Statement of Principles of the Communist Union of Painters and Sculptors, which, by the way, is affiliated to the Red International of Moscow:

We believe that the solution of the social and material problems of the painters and sculptors of Mexico, identified as these problems are with those of the rest of the world's workers, will naturally bring with it the solution of the problems of aesthetics, for in this way we will take part as an active element in collective life, something we have not hitherto done, and our work will thereby become the logical reflection of the popular character.

The union believes in the "overthrow of the present social mechanism," and these wielders of brushes and pens paradoxically enough believe in "employing force" against the force used by the bourgeoisie.

Diego Rivera and his comrades refuse to paint for the "bourgeoisie." He has told me many times that he believes their taste is execrable and that the secret of the "bad art" of bourgeois painters is their obligation to paint the fat possessor of shekels and his fat wife and to try to make of the painting at the same time "a good likeness" and a portrait that "favors the sitter." Consequently Rivera paints only for the Revolutionary Government, or, rather, for the more

revolutionary departments of the Government, for as I have said the Government is not a unit. In practice, he painted murals for the Department of Education under José Vasconcelos and for the Department of Agriculture under De Negri. When General Calles becomes president Rivera hopes to get an opportunity at "the biggest wall I ever had" on some big public building where all the workers can come and enjoy his painting. The Communist painter's vision of the cooperative commonwealth is not unlike the vision of heaven in Browning's *Andrea del Sarto*.

Four great walls in the New Jerusalem . . .
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo, and me
To cover . . .

While Manuel Lourdes, painter for "the bourgeoisie," gets 8,000 pesos for the portrait of Horacio Casassus, Diego Rivera earns precisely twelve pesos a day and often works twelve, fourteen, and even sixteen hours a day with feverish intensity to earn it. Twelve pesos are six dollars; a sign painter in the United States earns more. I tell him so.



By M. Covarrubias

A Caricature of Diego Rivera

He laughs and answers, almost reprovingly: "That's several times as much as the average worker here earns. And he works much harder than I. I love my work. He does not. He should be better paid than I."

The statutes of the League of Revolutionary Writers express a similar attitude. They too are "in accord with Moscow," although none of their members, so far as I know, have joined the Communist Party. They too believe that the artist and poet should get a living wage out of his trade, no more and no less. The second article of their aims reads: "To render effective the concept that the writer is a worker." And the third: "To study and devise measures for making the pen a means of livelihood for any man who may be able to wield it."

Gutiérrez Cruz recently published a book. It was poetry, some part of it good poetry. It was badly printed on cheap green paper such as is used here for broadsheet ballads. It had no cover. It was sewed together with thread. It had been printed to sell at five centavos per copy.

"I used to publish my books for the bookshops and libraries and well-to-do book-buyers," he informed me. "But now I write for the peasants, and five centavos represent a big sum to them."

"How about your poetry living in the future? Can it survive if it's printed and bound that way?" I queried.

"When you read it," he told me, "you will find that it is intended to survive in oral tradition among the peasantry. The Indian is fond of proverbs, of bits of accumulated wisdom and poetry, of little poems of two or three lines usually made up of a single pictoric image like a Japanese *hai-kai*. Our Indians have their own *hai-kais* in which is stored the accumulated wisdom of our race. But their wisdom is old. It is out of date. So I have tried to give them a new store of wisdom and fresh images. They will pass into oral tradition and the name of their author will be forgotten."

"Do you intend to publish all your books that way in the future?"

"Principally. My next book will be printed on cheap paper to sell cheaply, except for about fifty copies. They will go to the critics of the press. The critics won't review a book unless it's dressed according to the conventions."

Although Diego Rivera is naturally the bigger figure, there is much spiritual kinship between this boy Cruz—he is only 25—and the great painter. In fact, two of Rivera's recent paintings were inspired by verses of Cruz. One of them is called *The Embrace*. It adorns one of the walls of the *patio* of the Secretariat of Education. It portrays a worker and a peasant, each in the characteristic costume of the country, holding each other in close embrace, and as an integral part of the pictures one reads the verses, which in crude and ametrical translation I append:

Toilers of field and factory,
Disinherited of liberty,
Make stronger the bond
That unites you in struggle and suffering
Into a firm embrace of force and love . . .
After that embrace
You will no longer pay tribute nor homage,
And the field and the factory
Will give all of their fruits
To you.

It was the sight of this painting that, according to Rivera, inspired the Minister of Agriculture, De Negri, to engage him to paint the walls of the Agricultural College at Chapingo.

The other painting inspired by verses by Gutiérrez Cruz is also in the *patio* of the Secretariat of Education, but it no longer bears the verses. They were too revolutionary even for a revolutionary government department, and although the picture remains, the verses were erased by presidential order. Roughly translated they read:

Comrade miner,
Bent double by the weight of the earth,
When your hand extracts metals
Fashion them into daggers
And then you will see
That all the metals are for you.

Such is the "revolutionary ideology" that forms the background of some of the most important art and some not very important poetry that is being produced in Mexico. Whether it is the first flush of the dawn or only the red after-glow of a revolutionary sunset, no one can yet decide. The artists themselves have their own opinion on the matter as well as their own conscious theories of their respective arts. I shall close this article with a translation of some of the theories of Gutiérrez Cruz written especially for my use and for the readers of *The Nation*:

To create a new type of aesthetics in harmony with the new developments in the aspirations and activities of humanity, it is necessary to dispense with certain elements which are generally thought necessary to a work of art.

The principal of these elements is preciosity. The poets of the new lyricism must rid themselves of preciosity because it has no value outside the circles of the "refined"—authentic enemies of nature and of equality, absolutely incapacitated for noble and laborious activity.

Communitistic literature, then, will not be precious but sober, clear, simple, virginal, as are the spirits of the folk who have need of it, as are the peasants in their life and in their thoughts. We must have a faith in the work of nature, free of all artifice. The adherents of preciosity detest the rudeness of nature and the natural. All their thought is conditioned by an acceptance of the unnatural condition in which the fruits of the earth are monopolized by the little group which makes up the class of "refined tastes."

The new lyric is imbued with the passion of the despoiled ones. Its tragedy lies in the lyric woes of the oppressed; it seeks beauty in picturing a world more beautiful not in the dubious "golden age" of the past, but in a golden age which it sees in the future. Hence it dispenses also with the romantic claptrap of the "far away" and the "long ago" and it looks for suffering and beauty in the "here" and "now"—or the here and tomorrow morning.

Born as many of them were in a bourgeois environment, educated to bourgeois aesthetic taste, not all of the members of our League of Revolutionary Writers are yet able to adjust themselves to the simplicity which is the essential quality of the new lyric. They write libertarian lyrics in the manner to which the bourgeois intellectual is accustomed. He accepts the lyric because he recognizes the to him authentic aesthetics and craftsmanship of it, and then he is either puzzled and shaken or won over by it, or at the least quite properly scandalized.

Naturally the device "art for life's sake" or, perhaps, "art for the freeing and beautifying of life" comes nearer to being our motto. The "bitterness" and the "love" of which a voluptuous and elegant poet talks has nothing in common with the bitterness of the folk who suffer and the love of the comrades who fight for their fellows. Their poetry is a flight from what they find inharmonious in the life around them; our poetry is an attempt to fashion the life around us into a harmony. That is why we are revolutionaries.