


SCHOLASTIC

ART[®]

MARCH 1993

VOL. 23, No. 5, ISSN 1060-832X.
PUBLISHED IN COOPERATION WITH
THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
FORMERLY ART & MAN



DIEGO
RIVERA
POLITICAL ART



SCHOLASTIC



COVER: Diego Rivera (1886-1957). *Self-Portrait*, 1941. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA. Gift of Irene Rich Clifford.

SCHOLASTIC ART

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POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 9360) is published six times during the school year, Sept./Oct., Nov., Dec./Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc., 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9538. Second-class postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmasters: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St. P.O. Box 3710 Jefferson City, MO, 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

U.S. prices: \$6.95 each per school year, for 10 or more subscriptions to the same address. 1-9 subscriptions, each: \$13.50 student, \$22.00 Teachers' Edition, per school year. Single copy: \$1.75 student, \$3.50 Teachers'. (For Canadian pricing, write our Canadian office, address below.) Communications relating to subscriptions should be addressed to SCHOLASTIC ART, Scholastic Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710 or call our toll free number 1-800-631-1586. Communications relating to editorial matter should be addressed to Margaret Howlett, SCHOLASTIC ART, 730 Broadway New York, N.Y. 10003. Canadian address: Scholastic-TAB Publications, Ltd., 123 Newkirk Rd., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 3G5. Available on microfiche through Xerox University Microfilms, Inc. 300 N. Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Also available on microfiche through Bell & Howell Micro Photo Division, Old Mansfield Rd., Wooster, OH 44691. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1993 by Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved. Material in this issue may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without special permission from the publisher.

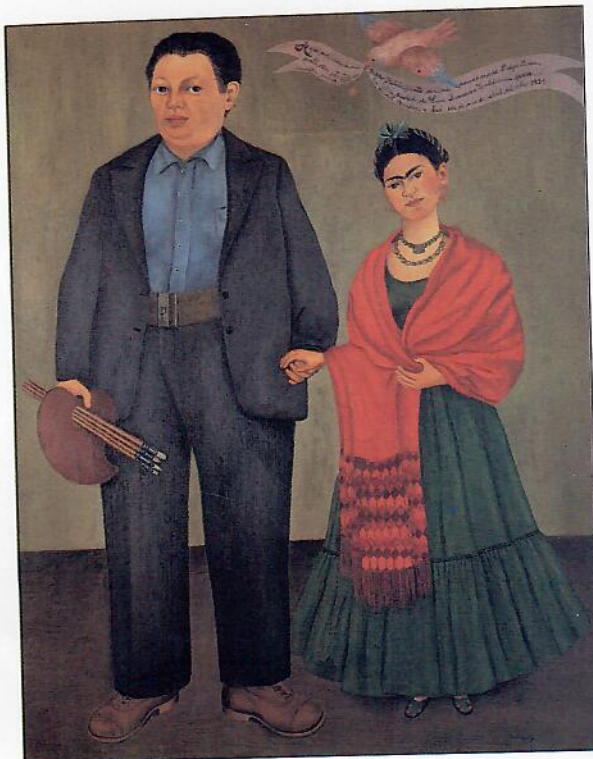
DIEGO RIVERA

ARTIST OF MEXICO

Twentieth-century Mexican painter Diego Rivera was so admired and respected by the Mexican people that when he died in the late 1950s, he had become a

In his self-portrait above, Rivera holds a note to a friend. He dominates the portrait below, done by his wife, Frida Kahlo.

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). *Frida and Diego Rivera*, 1931. 39 3/8" x 31" San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection.



legend in his own time. Stories circulated that Rivera had actually fought in the Mexican Revolution, although there is no real evidence that he did. (Rivera enjoyed this heroic image and probably encouraged these rumors a bit.) What Rivera had done, however, was to further the ideals of the Mexican Revolution through his painting. His works emphasize

Mexico's native Indian culture rather than its European influences. Diego Rivera created a style of art that spoke directly to the Mexican people.

Rivera was born in 1886 in a small town in central Mexico. His family was middle class, and both of his parents were schoolteachers. Rivera's father encouraged his artistic talent and had set up a studio for Diego before he had even learned to read. By the time he was 20, Rivera had studied with most of Mexico's master painters and had also received a government scholarship to study art in Spain. From Spain Rivera went to Paris, where he lived for several years. Most of the paintings and drawings he did



“Mexican mural painting celebrates the worker in the fields, the factories, the cities and the towns.” —DIEGO RIVERA

during this time were influenced by the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso.

While he was in Europe, Rivera saw many 15th-century Italian murals. These served as an inspiration for the famous political murals the artist was to paint later in his career. On his return to his own country, Rivera decided to paint only Mexican subjects.

One of Rivera’s best-known public murals is *The History of Mexico* (a detail is shown above), which he painted on a wall in Mexico City’s National Palace. This huge series of panels is a sweeping historical portrait of the Mexican people. Told in a **realistic, narrative** style, this vast mural was intended to honor ordinary Mexican people and to celebrate their Indian heritage.

In 1929, Rivera married fellow artist Frida Kahlo, who painted the wedding portrait shown on the left. However, their marriage was often troubled with stormy quarrels. The couple divorced in 1939, remarried the

following year, and remained married until Kahlo’s death in 1954. Rivera and Kahlo were part of a circle of artists, writers, and political activists that helped shape Mexican culture and politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Along with fellow muralists David Siqueiros (See-KWER-os) and José Orozco (Ho-SAY Or-OATH-ko), Rivera created a new Mexican art that drew upon native traditions.

In 1930, Diego Rivera began to receive commissions to paint murals in the United States. Throughout his career, he painted seven large mural series in this country, including one series (see pages 6-9) created to recognize the labor of the workers of Detroit.

Even though he was diagnosed with cancer in 1955, Diego Rivera continued to paint. Despite his failing health, he remarried, traveled all over the world, and drew up plans for future murals. In 1957 Rivera died of heart failure in his studio in San Angel, Mexico. He willed his art to the country of Mexico.

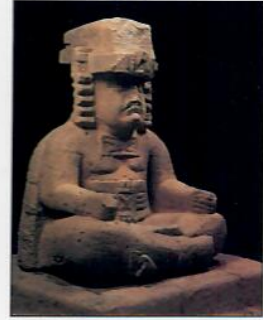
Diego Rivera celebrated Mexican culture in colorful public murals like *The History of Mexico* (detail, above) in Mexico City’s National Palace.

History of Mexico, 1929. National Palace, Mexico City. Photo, Superstock.



REDISCOVERING

MEXICAN IMAGES



While Diego Rivera was studying and painting in Europe in the early 1900s, many changes were taking place back home in Mexico. Laborers and farmers had become dissatisfied with the Mexican

government. Most land was owned by a wealthy few, and the Indians were left with no land of their own. Workers were not allowed to form labor unions, and foreign investors owned most of Mexico's natural resources. Rebellions, riots, and civil wars broke out, and leaders were overthrown and assassinated.

In 1920, a new leader, Alvaro Obregón was elected president of Mexico, beginning an era of social and political reform. When Rivera returned to Mexico in 1921, he became one of the first artists commissioned to create large public murals for government buildings.

Ever since the Spanish conquered the Aztec tribes in Mexico during the 1500s, Indian culture and religion had been devalued in favor of European values and traditions. In his art, Rivera wanted to recognize the Mexican people's Indian roots. Compare the **massive, stylized forms** and the **masklike face** of the early pre-Columbian Indian sculpture (above, right) with the figures in Rivera's paintings shown here.

The Grinder (right) is made up of **stylized, sculptural, organic (curved)** shapes that resemble pre-Columbian art. In this work, a woman, whose figure fills the entire canvas, makes thin, flat Mexican corn cakes called *tortillas* (tor-TEE-yuhs). Rivera **idealizes** and

monumentalizes the figure, transforming her into a symbol of home and family.

Rivera used native forms and colors in his political paintings like *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (left). Emiliano Zapata, who led Mexican peasants in a revolt to gain fair distribution of land and was assassinated in 1919, was considered by many to be a revolutionary hero. In Rivera's portrait, Zapata's flat, simplified figure dressed in shining white is presented in an almost saintly manner. Zapata's enemy lies sprawled beneath his feet, and his followers stand behind him with their weapons and farm tools. His mythical-looking white horse **echoes** Zapata's pose and **balances** the right side of the composition.

Rivera's figure below resembles the sculpture above, created thousands of years earlier.

Above, Olmec figure, 10th-6th century BC. Museo de La Venta, Villahermosa.

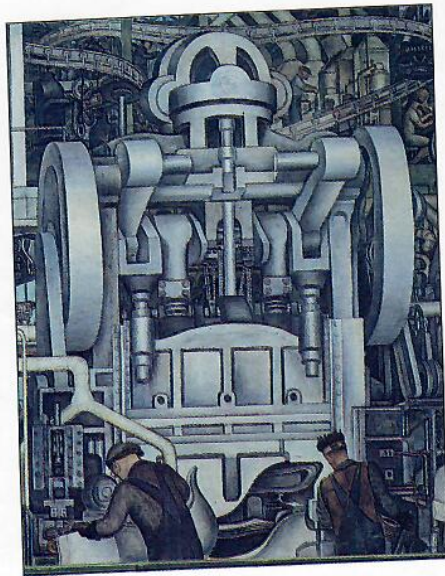
Below, *The Grinder*, 1924. Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City

In this dramatic portrait (left), Rivera idealized Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata.

Agrarian Leader Zapata, 1931. Fresco, 7' 9 3/4" x 6' 2". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund. Photograph © 1992, The Museum of Modern Art, NY.



ART FOR THE PEOPLE



Compare this sculpture (above left) of an ancient Aztec goddess with the machine (detail above right) painted by Diego Rivera in one of his *Detroit Industry* murals.

Coatlicue. Aztec. Stone. From Tenochtitlan. Anthropological Museum, Mexico City.

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH

Preview

Diego Rivera was fascinated with engineering and the workings of complex machinery. One of his greatest desires was to portray the visual beauty of machinery, as well as its potential benefit to society.

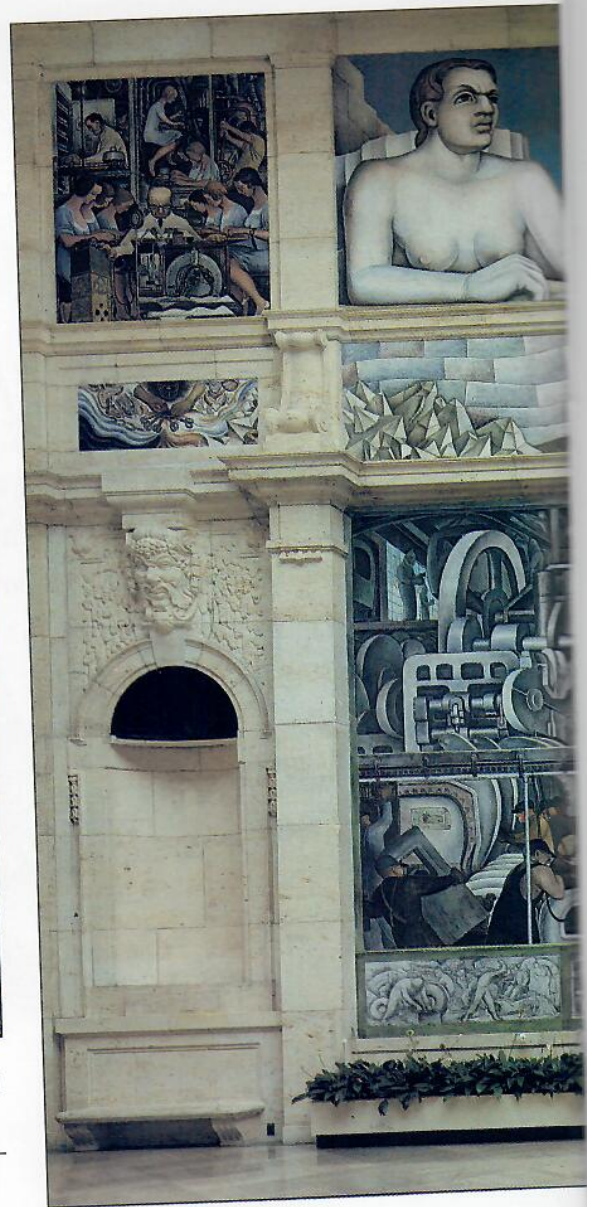
In 1930, Rivera began to fulfill this ambition when he was commissioned to paint the first of a series of murals in the United States.

One of Rivera's most famous U.S. murals is *Detroit Industry*, done for the Detroit Institute of Arts. These paintings were done as a tribute to the workers of Detroit and commemorate that city's achievements in the chemical, aeronautic, and automotive industries.

To create his murals, Rivera used the 15th-century Italian technique called *fresco* — a method of applying paint directly to wet plaster so that the painting becomes a permanent part of the wall.

Like much of Rivera's art, *Detroit Industry* was meant to be instructive and convey specific messages to the public. The murals contain several themes that were important to Diego Rivera. The central idea of the murals is **machinery and its functions**. Rivera also wanted to emphasize an exchange of technology and natural resources between North and South America. In addition, he shows the cooperation between engineers who develop the technology and the physical labor of the workers who build the machinery.

The paintings on the South Wall (above) and the North Wall (pages 8-9) honor





Detroit's automobile industry. Rivera spent more than three months in several Ford Motor Company plants. The South Wall shows the assembly of the body of a car. On the North Wall, workers put together a V-8 engine.

Rivera paints industry in an **idealized** setting. People of different races and positions work in harmony with each other and with the machinery. Rivera has captured the **continuous movement** of an assembly line. There are no labor problems or poor working conditions in this perfect industrial world.

Just as Rivera wanted his Mexican murals to reach out to farm laborers, in *Detroit Industry*, he wanted to speak directly to American industrial workers. However, not everyone agreed with Rivera's political views. There were those who found some of Rivera's Detroit images "improper," while others feared the

socialist influences in his work.

Rivera's murals eventually won acceptance by the American public and his industrial murals influenced many American artists in the 1930s. During the Depression, the U.S. government commissioned artists to paint murals in public buildings. Those who participated in this government program were issued booklets describing Diego Rivera's mural techniques.

Rivera never completely forgot his Mexican roots, even in his "industrial" murals. On the South Wall of *Detroit Industry*, look carefully at the enormous piece of machinery on the far right of the composition (see the detail on the opposite page). If you can imagine the machine as a giant body, it bears a resemblance to a sculpture of the Aztec earth goddess, *Coatlicue*. (Ko-AT-lee-kew).

What comments can you make about this work in terms of today's economic conditions?

Detroit Industry (South Wall). 1932-33. Detroit Institute of Arts. Founders Society Purchase, Edsel B. Ford fund. Gift of Edsel B. Ford.

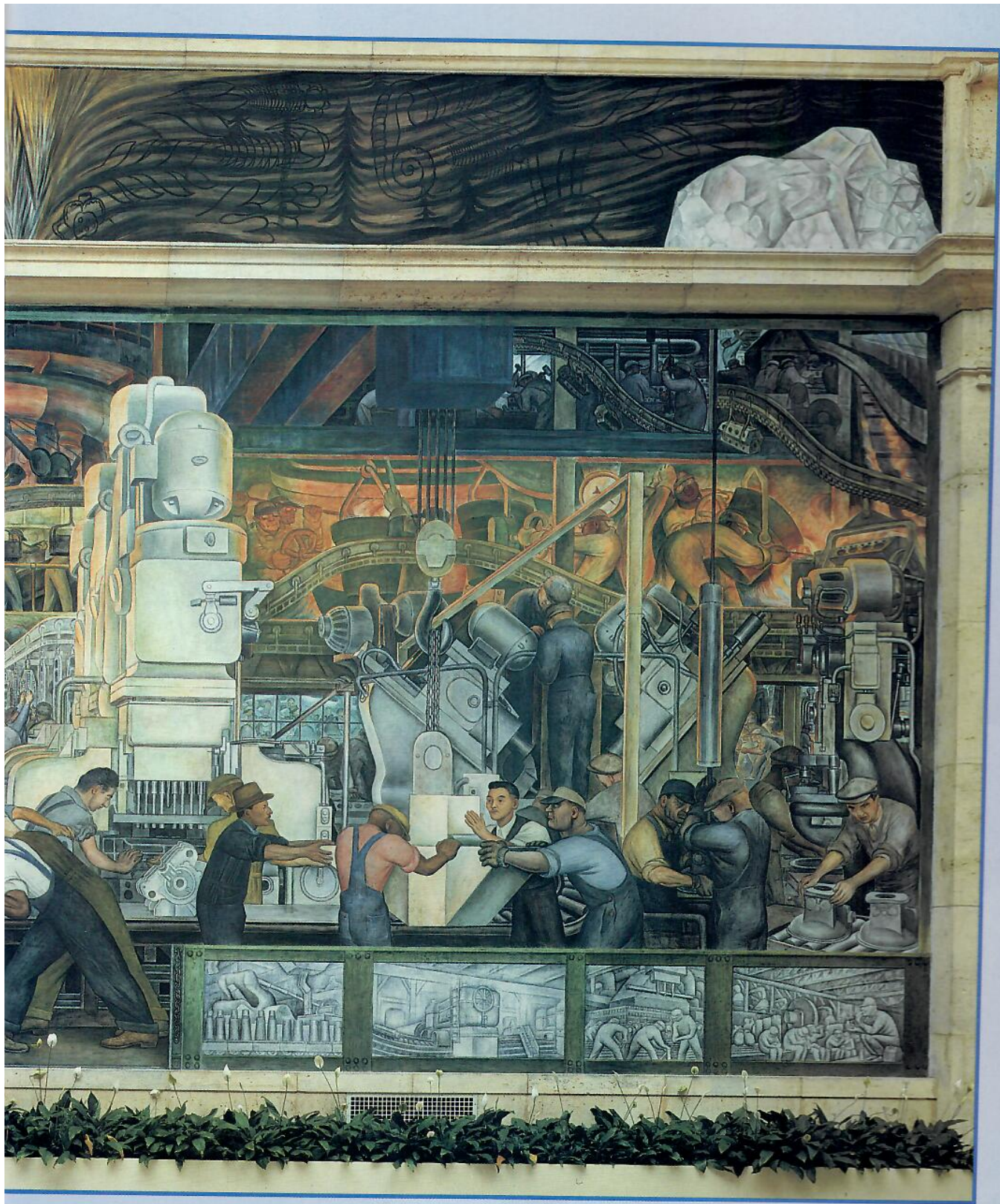


SCHOLASTIC

ART

MASTERPIECE
OF THE
MONTH # 5

DETROIT



Diego Rivera (1886-1957). *Detroit Industry*, 1932-33. © The Detroit Institute of Arts. Founders Society Purchase. Edsel B. Ford Fund. Gift of Edsel B. Ford.

DIT INDUSTRY

DIEGO RIVERA

POLITICAL ARTISTS TODAY: Three contemporary Americans who use their art to point out political injustices.



Art Herstory

Sculptor Judy Chicago felt that art history should be rewritten to include the many female artists whose work has gone unrecognized. So she and 400 assistants spent five years creating a large room-size installation dedicated to the creativity of women. This work, called *The Dinner Party* (right), took the form of a huge triangular dining table with 13 place settings on each side. Each setting, a painted china plate on an embroidered cloth, commemorated a mythical or real artist, writer, or politician.

Judy Chicago's large environmental sculpture called *The Dinner Party* focuses on women's issues.

Judy Chicago b. 1939. *The Dinner Party*, 1979. Mixed Media, 48' x 48' x 48' Photo by Donald Woodman. © 1979 Judy Chicago

The artist used many techniques usually considered "female" such as needlework, sewing, watercolor, and china painting in order to symbolize the centuries of anonymous women's labor in the "minor" or "decorative" arts.



Images of War

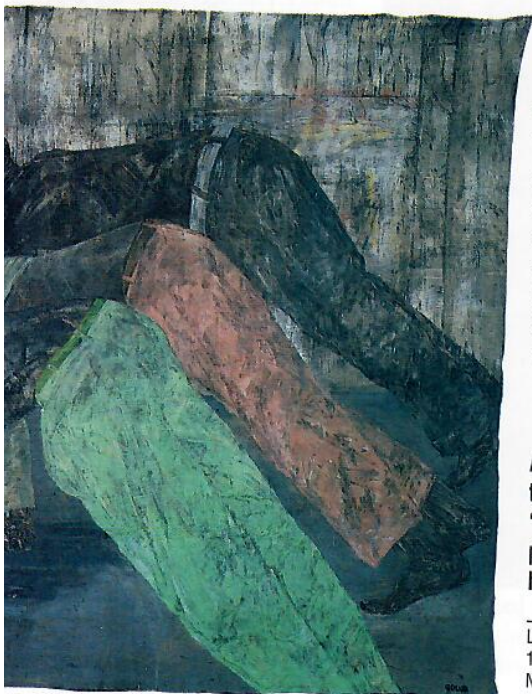
Throughout his 50-year career, Jacob Lawrence has painted important events in the history of black Americans. In *Daybreak—A Time to Rest* (right), he used the **simplified, flat, abstracted shapes** and **bright colors** found in African art.

This work is about Harriet Tubman, a 19th-century black woman who helped runaway slaves escape north during the American Civil War. At first the scene appears peaceful; three figures rest on a beach surrounded by water, blue sky, and green plants. But the **exaggerated perspective** of the foreground figure and the **diagonal line** of the shotgun she carries sets up a *dynamic visual tension*. The **jagged lines** and **contrasting colors** add to the feeling of danger.



Can you find the three figures in this work?

Jacob Lawrence b. 1917
Daybreak—A Time to Rest, 1967. 30" x 24" © 1992 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Revolutions in Paint

When you look at the terrible image on the left, what do you see? A line of figures—prisoners of the man on the left—crouches on the ground. The terror of their situation is heightened by the smirk on the man's face as he waves casually to the viewer.

Power and violence are the

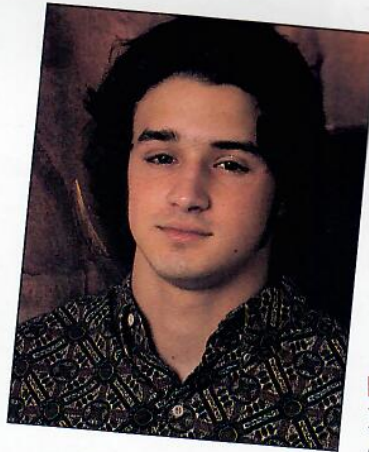
Artist Leon Golub, who did the painting on the left says, "Political violence and political oppression can happen anywhere."

Leon Golub b. 1922. *Mercenaries V*, 1984. 120" x 172" Josh Baer Gallery, NY., NY. Photo by David Reynolds.

subjects of the paintings done by contemporary artist Leon Golub. The artist has based many of the images in his paintings on those broadcast by the news media. Although *Mercenaries V* was painted in the 1980s, this scene could be occurring at any time and in any place, except for the gun and some of the clothing.

Like Rivera's, Golub's paintings are huge—he works on enormous pieces of fabric tacked to the wall. The subhuman-looking figures, harsh colors, opposing diagonals, tight cropping, and raw backgrounds heighten the ominous atmosphere the artist has created.

Mike Richlen: POLITICAL STATEMENTS



Eighteen-year-old Mike Richlen was a sophomore at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when he did the Scholastic-Art-Award-winning drawing on the right. Titled "What's Your Stand?" Mike did this satirical pastel, crayon, and charcoal drawing early in 1991, during the Persian Gulf war.

Now in his senior year, Mike devotes most of his time to art and would like to go to Rhode Island School of Design, majoring in fine arts or illustration. Mike also plays the electric guitar and works at his father's auto repair business.

■ **When did you start doing art?**

I've been drawing ever since I could pick up a pencil. People, plants, animals—whatever grabbed my eye, I drew.

I was fascinated by the fact that you could draw a couple of lines and represent an object. I loved being able to use a pencil to make something come off the page, and make it real. That really excites me.

■ **How did you come to do this picture?**

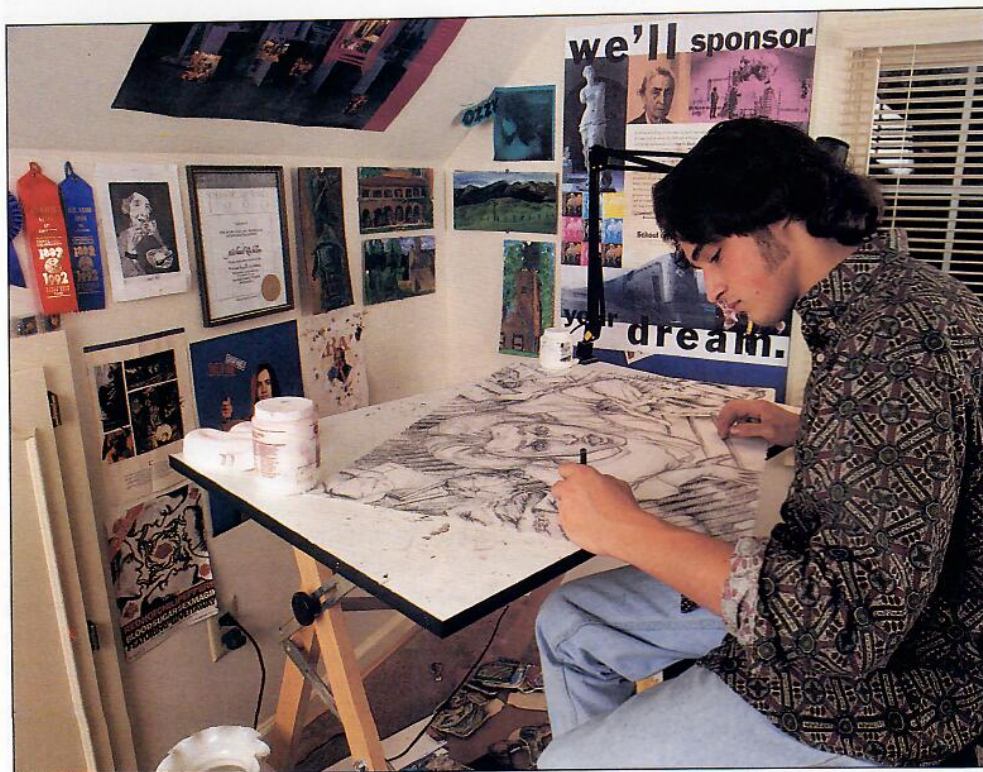
The Persian Gulf war was going on, and I wanted to depict it somehow. I remember watching the first couple of hours of the war on TV thinking "Are they really going to go through with this or not?" I felt a sense of history. I thought somehow I had to record something about it; draw about it. So I did. It wasn't a class assignment. I just drew the picture on my own.

■ **Where did you get the idea?**

I knew I wanted to show the war in a way that was totally different from anyone else's. I also knew I wanted to focus on the leaders of the two countries, former President George Bush of the U.S. and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Both were leaders in this thing, but they were opposing forces. I wanted to show that. So my idea was to put the two of them together on one page.

■ **How did you begin?**

The first thing I did was try to



Mike Richlen does much of his work at his home in Franklin, Wisconsin.

I wanted to depict the Persian Gulf war somehow, and in a way that was totally different from anyone else's.

find pictures of the two leaders' faces in newspapers and magazines. I photocopied the best ones. Then I cut them down the middle and arranged the best two halves so they would match up in one face.

Next, I used a grid method to enlarge the small composite picture. I made an outline of their faces and drew a grid over it. Then I counted the squares and drew a large grid on an illustration board and enlarged each square separately.

■ **Then what did you do?**

After I finished the outline, I started drawing the details. At first I distorted their faces. I wanted to make them look bloated, like they were going to explode. Then I limited that idea to keep some of the distinguishing features of Saddam's and Bush's faces.

I also had to have other ways for people to realize this was about two countries at war. So I added the two tattered flags behind the two faces, one of the U.S. and the other of Iraq. I also placed flags in each pair of eyes and microphones in front.

To portray Saddam as an evil ruthless person I put a little skull in his eye, which might be hard to see. He's also got tombstones in his teeth and he's wearing an army uniform.

I wanted Bush to look like a responsible President, doing his job to protect people. But I also felt ambivalent about why we were in this war. The war was

also about oil, money, and power. People were going to die defending all that. So I put a little skull in Bush's tie and money and oil barrels behind him.

■ **Did you use collage to include all these symbols?**

No, I used film adherent. It's a chemical that transfers a magazine image onto whatever surface you're working with.

I wanted to show real images of the war in my picture. So I took pictures of warplanes, people with gas masks, skulls, tombstones, soldiers, oil barrels and rubbed them—transferred them—onto my paper using the chemical.

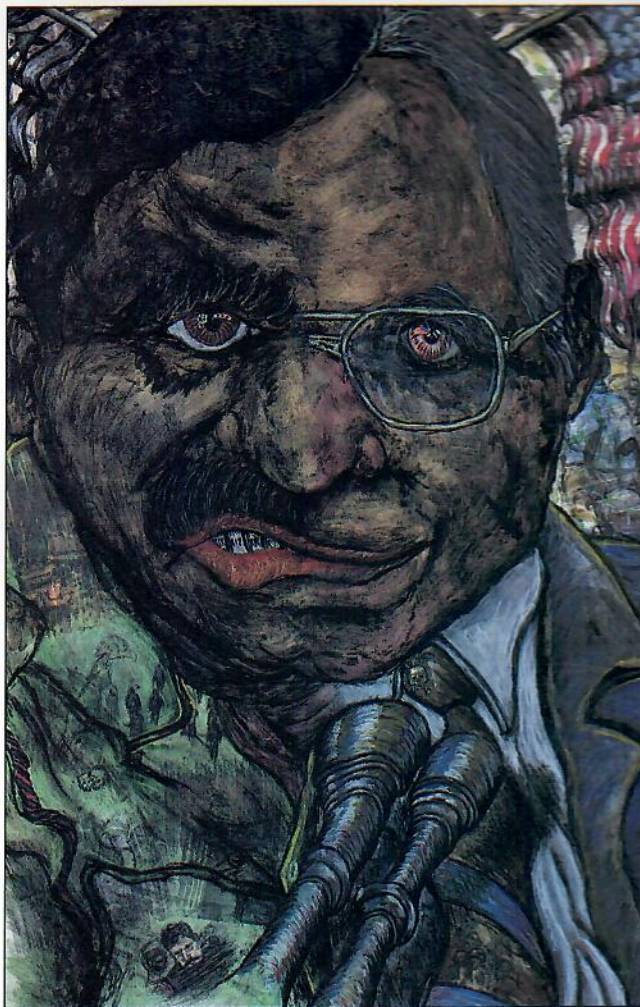
When I finished, I began to put in details with oil pastels and acrylic paint. I mixed the oil pastels with turpentine to thin them and give the picture a dingy dirty look, just like the war. I think the dark, dirty colors I chose express my feelings about this war.

■ **Did you compose your picture or add as you drew?**

I planned the two faces and the general composition. The details to emphasize the war came to me as I went along.

■ **Does the picture have a message?**

The message, I think, was mixed. The war was good in that it liberated the people of Kuwait. But the war was also very destructive to people and



to the world. The Gulf War polluted the atmosphere totally. It killed many innocent people.

■ **Why did you call your picture "What's Your Stand?"**

I was challenging people to think about the war and to decide whether they thought it was right or wrong.

■ **How did people react to your picture?**

At first many people didn't see the two faces. People had to look at it for a while to figure the picture out. It got them to think about the war and the picture's message.

■ **Would you call your picture a political satire?**

I guess you could say that it is. It does kind of poke fun at the leaders of both countries from their images and action.

We select our Artist of the Month from among Scholastic Art Award winners. To enter, ask your teacher to write to the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003 for entry deadlines and rules books. *Scholastic Art* magazine does not have a separate competition.

MAKING A MURAL

Create a wall-size mural that visually describes your art class

covered several walls and their stories would unfold slowly in a series of panels. Since his murals were designed to be seen from a distance, the shapes he used were simplified and

Diego Rivera was best known for his huge public murals filled with images from Mexican history. Rivera's murals usually covered several walls and their stories would unfold slowly in a series of panels. Since his murals were designed to be seen from a distance, the shapes he used were simplified and stylized. Rivera's figures—like those on pages 4-5—were idealized and made to appear heroic in order to convey the artist's patriotic message. In this workshop, you'll use some of the techniques employed by Diego Rivera as the class works together to create a giant classroom mural.



Materials

- 12" x 18" 60lb. white sulfite paper
- Ebony or No. 2 school pencil
- Vinyl eraser
- 36" or 48" wide utility paper (40 lb.)
- Primary, secondary, intermediate, black, white, brown tempera
- Palettes for mixing paint (old dinner plates)
- Containers for holding paint (margarine containers; cup-cake tins)
- Paper towels
- Containers for water to clean brushes
- Variety of flat/round paint brushes





Starting Out

Step 1. Working as a class, decide on a possible theme for your mural. It could be a political, historic, or social event; the environment; people you consider heroes; your neighborhood; family; leisure activities. The mural should tell a story or have social or historical significance. Begin researching/drawing national events (newspapers/magazines), or sketching personal activities/events.

Step 2.

Arrange sketches on a large table and begin working out the location of each. Determine mural length and lay out utility

paper. You can use or combine parts of sketches. Each student or group of students should take responsibility for drawing an area. Determine scale of figures; how scenes will link together. Sketch outline of final mural.

Step 3.

Determine color scheme and begin painting. Carry one color throughout for unity (the color can be in background, used for focal points or color accents). Use paint to blend and weave one theme into another.

To create a mural, you need to respect and build on the ideas of everyone involved.

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., Morrison (IL) High School. Photos by Larry Gregory.

Some Solutions

What kind of theme do you think this class used? In the example shown below, the scenes are linked by placing them in one landscape. However, you could also use separate panels. You could use variously shaped compartments,

surround one enlarged figure with smaller figures, or place groups of portrait heads in front. Try to define a **foreground area**, a **middleground** one and a **background**. To create an **idealized setting**, you may use **simplified, stylized, flat,** or

organic shapes. You can include **repeated and overlapped forms** and **written words.** Determine the relationship of **scale, proportion, and perspective** between one scene and another.

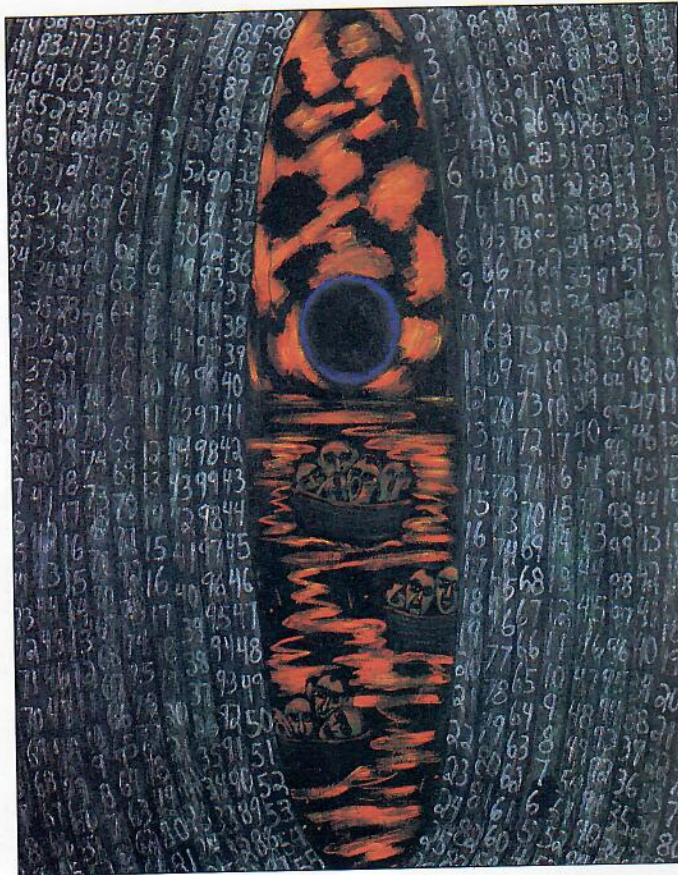


ARTS ALIVE

Two American artists who are making political statements today.

Cuban-American artist Luis Cruz Azaceta creates very emotional images to express his political beliefs.

Luis Cruz Azaceta, *Aliens: Refugee Count II*, 1989. Private Collection.



Fearful Memories

Hispanic artist Luis Cruz Azaceta, who came to this country from Cuba when he was 18 to escape its repressive government, says, "I paint to kill Cruelty, Injustice, Violence, Ignorance, and Hypocrisy." The painting (left) *Aliens, Refugee Count II* is one of the artist's many works on the theme of exile. The dangerous journey many political refugees must make to survive is suggested by the narrow orange space in the center, surrounded by dangerous, gray waves. The heads in the boats are self-portraits and the artist uses a fiery orange because "confinement in unknown waters is certainly hell." The waves that frame the scene are replaced by numbers, symbolizing the way the artist feels international politics reduces individual refugees to abstract figures.

Comic Comments

When he did the painting on the right during the 1960s, how do you think South American artist Fernando Botero felt about the then-president of Colombia and his family? Did he like them or respect them? Do you think they actually looked like this?

In this painting, six very heavysset, formally dressed figures pose together as if for an official portrait. The artist has used **exaggeration** and **distortion** to ridicule the *President's Family*. The bloated figures with their small, sinister, childlike faces seem to symbolize greed, corruption, and governmental repression. An adult-looking "child" at the left clutches a plane (possibly symbolic of war)

while sitting on her grandmother's lap. Behind her, the president holds a cigarette and stares mindlessly into space. His wife carries a tiny purse and has a very alive-looking fur piece draped around her shoulders. Even the family cat appears overfed, a comment perhaps on the general poverty of many people living in Colombia. The artist has included himself in back while a horrified snake slithers over the rocks past the feet of the family.



Compare these figures to those of Diego Rivera.

Fernando Botero b. 1932 *The President's Family*, 1967. The Museum of Modern Art, NY Gift of Warren D. Benedek, 1967.