

Seeing Red

‘It is not a legal question’, he said. ‘It is a moral question. They have violated two fundamental elementary rights, the right of the artist to create, to express himself, and the right to receive the judgement of the world, of posterity.’ Talking to a reporter from the *New York Times* in May 1933, Diego Rivera summed up his rage at how he had been treated by the Rockefeller family and his belief – shared by many artists when the survival of their work came to be threatened by its legal owners – that artworks should not be treated like commodities. Individuals may own artworks, Rivera argued (like Jacob Epstein and other artists before and since), but the vision expressed in the objects ultimately belonged to a culture and to posterity.

This argument alone might have generated press column inches and, had Rivera sought to pursue matters, a court case. But there was also a real political edge to the dispute, one that threatened to draw attention to fissures within American society at a time of significant tensions within America and, with the coming to power of a Nazi government in Germany, in the western world more generally. Underpinning the controversy – made particularly colourful by the spectacle of a famous and charismatic artist at war with one of the richest family dynasties in the world – was a rivalry between two competing visions of the future of industrialised societies.

Brainchild of John D. Rockefeller Jr, the Rockefeller Center was a complex of fourteen high-rise buildings in the heart of Manhattan, New York. Financed by Rockefeller alone, this ‘city within a city’ was the largest private building project undertaken in modern times, and brought employment to forty thousand workers. By 1939, more than 125,000 people visited the art deco offices and entertainment venues in the Rockefeller Center each day; on its own, it would have been the fifty-first largest city in the U.S.

The Center aimed to bring together companies working at the forefront of modern communications. Radio, in particular, was quickly identified as a potent new force, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) was an important early tenant of one of the buildings in the complex. (Its President was particularly forward looking and in 1930 pushed forward plans for television broadcasting studios in Rockefeller Center, not only before construction had begun but also before the equipment had even been developed.) The developers were clear that, ‘as a monument of human skill and taste and imagination’, the Center would become famous throughout the world – not just for its beauty and innovativeness, but also as ‘the first clear expression in our economic life of a new social ideal, that is of human welfare and happiness as centring in the work that we do, and not in some incidental wage’. As planning documents show, this

Diego Rivera 1886–1957

*Man at the Crossroads Looking with Uncertainty
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Mural (unfinished), Rockefeller Centre, New York

aspiration – framed at a time when everyone was becoming aware of the competition between capitalist, communist and, ever increasingly, fascist visions of the future – had a political edge:

If a whole population, such as Rockefeller will possess, can be lifted into a finer life in their working hours, then the economic democracy of America will have begun its answer to the Bolshevik challenge.

For the vast lobby in the RCA building within the complex the developers took as their theme a particularly all-encompassing subject:

FRONTIERS OF TIME is a theme phrase which is appropriate for an enterprise indicating that here is the beginning of a new conception in the culture of America. Undoubtedly the age is ripe for such a conception. The geographical, the space frontiers of our Globe have virtually come to a close in our own day, but for the future of mankind, in the measures of time, greater frontiers are opening. Few indeed are the institutions that are not being replaced or reconstructed in society – the political, economic, religious, scientific, and perhaps of most importance the biological worlds are all undergoing transformation; and it is to discoveries along these frontiers that mankind must turn if society is to remain healthy and civilization grow strong.

Amid a huge programme of artistic commissions designed to express different aspects of this theme throughout the Center, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was one of three internationally famous artists initially approached to provide paintings for the lobby. Picasso and Matisse declined but Rivera, who then was living and working in North America, accepted, provided he could paint not on a canvas but create a fresco directly on the walls of the building.

Rivera was then very much in the public eye. Recently expelled from the Mexican Communist Party for his anti-Stalin views, he had come to America in 1930 to work on a mural in San Francisco at the invitation of an architect, and had stayed in the country with his wife, the artist Frida Kahlo, working on various commissioned murals. In 1931 he had a popular retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that broke the previous attendance record. The *New York Sun* hailed him as ‘the most talked about artist on this side of the Atlantic’. Significantly, the wife of John D. Rockefeller, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, was one of the founders of the museum, and, unperturbed by Rivera’s communist beliefs, bought a sketchbook of the 1928 May Day parade in Moscow at the time of his retrospective.

Curiously, those on the political right and on the political left in this period could agree that the success of the economy and quality of life of hinged upon the role of the modern industrial worker. To display sympathy with, and faith in, workers made enlightened capitalists look benign; and, though blaming capitalism for oppressing workers, communists similarly could point to the qualities and aspirations of workers as key to future social development. Thus, in 1932 the President of the Ford Motor

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Company commissioned Rivera to create a series of murals for the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Rivera happily provided scenes of Detroit industry based on what he saw around him during his stay in the city. The controversy over their communist content that arose when the murals were unveiled should have given Rockefeller pause for thought, though by this point Rivera had already been commissioned. However, Rivera was charming and famous, and was seen as one of the most gifted artists of modern times, and his planned interpretation of the chosen theme for the New York mural appeared to fit the brief well enough.

Rivera's early sketches – submitted to and approved by the developers – show that he responded positively to the Center's theme of 'Frontiers of Time', and, in particular, to the idea that new technologies of communication would transform society. On either side of the central emblematic figure of a male worker controlling machinery are large cinema and television screens. They show scenes of a May Day parade on Red Square in Moscow and of a workers' unrest in Depression America (based on contemporary press photographs of a demonstration in Wall Street), as well of young girls exercising – images that Rivera selected as emblematic of the forces at work in contemporary society. (The images remained in the final composition though it was no longer so evident that they were projected or televised scenes.) Behind the central figure in Rivera's plans are two ellipses representing the lenses of a microscope and a telescope, suggesting that modern man was engaged in learning about, and mastering, all aspects of nature. The left and right hand panels show, respectively, lightning hitting the hand of Jupiter and being transformed into electricity, and the overcoming of tyranny (a crumbling statue of Caesar) together with the discovery by workers of their rights to the products of their labour. Most strikingly, the sketches for the massive mural are crowded with anonymous people, a feature that satisfied both Rivera's desire to forefront ordinary workers in all his paintings and the vision of the site developers that the Center was to be for a broad public.

The devil, however, was in the detail. Rivera was not someone who would be content with vague symbolism, and as he worked on a commission he tended to incorporate portraits of real people (often those working with him) or use photographs of contemporaneous events. To capture the spirit of the city in the Detroit murals, for example, he spent time in the Ford factories, seeing industrial machinery at work. For the Rockefeller murals he painted the portraits of project assistants and incorporated imagery taken from press photographs of a workers' demonstration in Wall Street. In other words, Rivera's compositions tended to evolve, and, indifferent to the sensitivities of those who commissioned him, he also sharpened their political messages as he worked.

Things began to go wrong when the press got wind of the 'communist activity' shown in the mural. On 24 April 1933 the *New York Telegram* wrote:

Diego Rivera, great Mexican mural painter, over whose shaggy head many storms have broken, is completing on the walls of the RCA Building in Rockefeller Center a magnificent fresco that is likely to provoke the greatest sensation of his career.

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The painting is a forthright statement of the Communist viewpoint, unmistakable as such, and intended to be unmistakable, and it is being paid for by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., whose opposition to collectivist principles has been unwavering for a lifetime.

This ‘opposition’ was associated in the public mind with Rockefeller’s involvement in a notorious suppression of a strike in 1913, which had left forty workers and thirteen women and children dead. A pivotal moment, it led to him withdrawing from business and focusing on a lifetime of philanthropy. The Rockefeller Centre was his first public foray back into the world of business, and the use of Rivera – a self-professed champion of the working class – now threatened to rake up memories of class conflict that he had worked hard to bury. It did not matter that the Rockefellers personally admired Rivera as an artist, or that Rivera was quoted in the same article speaking about his efforts to create a beautiful and effective image in the setting of the new building: the political gulf between them was real and could barely be disguised by the veil of enlightened patronage.

In these circumstances it is hard to understand why in the next few days Rivera chose to add the face of Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution and founder of the Communist Party, to the mural (let alone the Soviet emblem of a hammer and sickle, disguised among a grouping of stars and spotted only by those working with him on the mural). It may have been devilment; it may have been a riposte to those in the Communist Party who accused him of being a capitalist lackey; it may have been an honest evolution of his ideas about how best to represent the idea of political leadership in a future society (Lenin is shown clasping the hands of workers of all races, watched by a pair of lovers). Or Rivera, acting as a revolutionary, may have judged it the right time to pin his true colours to the mast. Interviewed a couple of weeks later, Rivera talked about having come to America to advance the cause of the workers but having had to do so surreptitiously and slowly. ‘Sometimes in times of war a man disguises himself as a tree. My paintings in this country have become increasingly and gradually clearer.’

Nelson Rockefeller, son of John and Abby and like his mother a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, was in charge of the Centre’s art commissions, and while visiting the mural in progress spotted the inclusion of Lenin. On 4 May 1933 he wrote to Rivera, politely asking him to remove the portrait. ‘The piece is beautifully painted but it seems to me that his portrait appearing in this mural might very easily seriously offend a great many people.’ Rivera refused, though offered to add great American leaders such as Abraham Lincoln to counterbalance Lenin. But he would not abandon his plan to present Lenin as a model of the ‘leader of the future’.

In initial correspondence about the commission Rivera had talked in general terms about representing ‘harmony between men and with nature’ in terms of groupings of different generations and types of people in a rhythmic and balanced composition. The Center’s rental manager Hugh Robertson therefore complained with some justice that it had been understood that the mural would be ‘purely imaginative’ and that Rivera

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had not given any indication that the mural would include ‘any portrait of any subject matter of a controversial nature’.

Matters quickly became ugly. On 8 May Rivera’s wife, Frida Kahlo, urged a young female assistant on the project called Lucienne Bloch to take photographs of the work as things were ‘getting pretty serious’ (if she had not done so, there would be almost no visual record of the mural; as it is, there is no photograph known of the right-hand panel, though this may have been because work on it had not started or was not sufficiently advanced).

The Rockefellers and the developers decided to end the dispute and to do so decisively. On the evening of 9 May the building was filled with armed security guards, the telephone line was cut, and Rivera and his team were ordered out. Rivera was paid the remainder of his fee but was not allowed to re-enter the building to complete his work or to photograph it. A demonstration of art students and supporters of Rivera around the building, quickly organised by the project team, was broken up by mounted police a few hours later.

The decision to dismiss one of the world’s most famous artists from one of the most prestigious architectural developments of the age predictably caused a storm of protest. Humiliated and angered, Rivera said his work had been ‘assassinated’ and compared what had happened to the mural – it was quickly covered over by paper by the site’s owners – as akin to the Nazis in Germany burning the books of those whose opinions they despised and sought to eradicate. Rivera addressed various gatherings and spoke on the radio, while supporters wrote to the press, organised meetings, signed petitions and even picketed and shouted outside Rockefeller’s home. A group of artists and writers petitioned Rockefeller directly to allow Rivera to continue work on the mural, writing, ‘The completion of these murals by the artist seems to us of extreme importance for American art of the present and of the future’. But the Rockefeller family remained silent and stood firm; and the Center opened with the murals completely hidden under a covering of canvas.

The denouement of the saga came nearly a year later. Notwithstanding talk of finding a way to transfer the mural onto canvas and thus preserve it, the mural was destroyed in February 1934. It was chipped off and the surface replastered one night, with the excuse given that it had proved necessary to remodel that area of the building and to do so at a time that caused the least disturbance. This reignited the public debate about the rights and wrongs of the case. One thousand people, mainly artists and writers, gathered in New York to voice their protest and there were complaints in the press about this drastic action. Many people might have agreed that Rivera’s political opinions were out of place in the Rockefeller Center mural but he was a popular artist who had been denied the opportunity to finish his work, and possibly create something of lasting value for everyone, because of his political beliefs.

The controversy ended Rivera’s career as the mural painter of choice for America’s capitalists. A commission to paint a mural for the Chicago World Fair was cancelled.

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No other work was forthcoming, and Rivera found himself with no option but to return to Mexico. Happily for him, a commission to paint a mural at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City on an even grander scale allowed Rivera, using the photographs taken by Lucienne Bloch, to return to the theme in 1934. Seeking a modicum of revenge, Rivera included a portrait of Rockefeller on the left (negative) side of the composition, under the lens-shape showing nature become unhealthy, symbolised by diseased cells.

Given that Rivera was able to repeat the work, admittedly with minor variations and on a different scale, it could be asked what exactly was lost when Rivera's mural was destroyed. Perhaps it was not so much the physical manifestation of the work itself but rather the possible conflation of two otherwise inimical utopian visions of society, one capitalist the other communist, within the context of a forward-looking complex in the heart of Manhattan with all that could have meant for the future. The story of Rivera's lost mural is, in part, the story of this lost context, this lost possibility.

Text—

Jennifer Mundy