Frescos by Diego Rivera -- Ministry of Education

The frescoes in the Ministry of Education are by and large the result of the early sketches made by Diego Rivera when he first returned to Mexico from Europe. They reveal his enthusiasm in the rediscovery of Mexican subject matter and Mexican forms. These murals are characterized by a great simplicity of form derived in part from Indian sculpture. Subject matter is primarily the life of the Indian. The panels are organized in compact space-filling designs and are conceived as flat decorations, intimately tied into the architecture of the building. The lack of modeling in the forms is deliberate. It is interesting to note that the color of the frescoes on the first floor (the panels cover the corridors of three floors) is quite dark and as one progresses to the top floor the color becomes lighter. This may in part be due to the fact that by the time Rivera was painting the upper stories of the Ministry of Education, he had become a greater master of the technique of fresco painting which in the beginning was still in an experimental stage. His later frescoes show a growing clarity and luminosity. The greatest problem in painting these frescoes was the complexity of the architectural structure of the building and the great variety of view points from which these paintings were to be seen.

64A View of corridor in the Ministry of Education showing the placement of mural fresco panels on the walls. Note the way in which the painting is united with the architectural decoration.

64B The Court of Labor. The struggles of the people during the period of the revolution. Note the simplicity of treatment, the monumental quality of the forms, and the unity of design within a limited given area.
64C  The Court of Labor. Note the compact, space-filling design, the simplicity of treatment, the use of few colors and the unity of painting with the general feeling of the architectural space.

64D  The Court of Labor. Scenes from the Revolution. It is said that Diego Rivera painted the revolution as he thought it should be, rather than as it actually was. He is often accused of a romantic interpretation of that period.

64E  The Court of Labor. Notice the way in which this mural is incorporated into the architecture of the building. Notice the use of the door jamb as a perch for a figure in the painting. Notice, too, the simple treatment of form and the elimination of all but essential detail.

64F  Close-up detail of the lower part of the same panel. Note the way in which Diego Rivera combines angular and curved forms irrespective of subject matter in creating his pattern. It is to be remembered that the artist had part of his training in the School of Cubism in Paris. Influences resulting from that training can frequently be observed in his later paintings.

64G  The Court of Labor. Note the simplicity of design and the space-filling composition. Frequently, the artist creates an illusion of sculpture in low-relief in the treatment of figures in the foreground of his panels, as well as in the decorative details done in gray beneath the paintings and over the doorways.

64H  The Court of Labor. An especially poetic concept of family life of the Indian. In all these murals, note the insistence upon decorative flat pattern, and the use of limited color.

64I  The Court of Festivals. In the frescoes in this court, Rivera's technique shows more freedom. The color, while still brilliant, is more harmonious than that of most panels in the Court of Labor.
Set 64 Continued

This is the famous painting of Judas Day, the last day of Lent observed in Mexico by the exploding of Judas's in the street. These Judas's are made of paper mache and contain fireworks which are set off. It is one of the most picturesque and popular of the Mexican festivals.

64J The Court of Festivals. Subject matter based on Indian folklore and practice. Note the decorative treatment of the headdress of the women and pattern resulting from the way in which they are seated on their heels.
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65A The Court of Festivals. Other frescoes in these corridors are charged with both political and social meaning and are a criticism of capitalism and social conditions.

65B The Court of Festivals. This panel, dominated by the ticker tape, is a bitter criticism of existing social conditions and of the capitalistic system.

65C The Court of Festivals. Another example of a fresco criticizing the extravagance and decadence of the corrupt military and capitalist classes of that period.
The Palace of Cortes

In these murals Diego Rivera selected as his subject matter the exploitation of the Indian by the Spaniard. It was his intention to paint a historical illustration of the conquest, and by emphasizing the cruelty of the Spaniards arouse a hatred of Spanish tradition. The colors of these frescoes are very brilliant, although the technique is not always of equally fine quality. The lower part of these walls are painted in grays treated very decoratively and suggest low relief in sculpture. The murals show the landing of Cortes in Vera Cruz and other scenes of Mexican history.

These murals were a gift to the city of Cuernavaca by the then United States Ambassador Morrow. One of the most successful of Rivera's portraits is this one of Zapata. This figure in its simple dignity has the monumental quality of fine sculpture.

One of the famous decorative mosaic-like frescoes from Cuernavaca. Note the richness and complexity of design in contrast to the simplicity of treatment of individual details.

One of the most successful and most beautiful of Diego Rivera's frescoes is this one of the sugar cane. Again note the unity between the fresco painting and the wall, the flat decorative pattern and the intentional simplification of forms.

Chapel of National Agricultural School at Chapingo

In these murals in the chapel of the National Agricultural School at Chapingo are found examples of some of the best phases of the work of Diego Rivera. The murals were painted during 1926 and 1927 in a room which had peculiar and special architectural problems. The solution of these resulted in a composition which in space division is a wonderful combination of painting and sculpture and is often said to suggest the Sistine Chapel in Italy.
The building is a colonial structure with a vaulted nave, solid walls on one side of the room and round windows on the other. One of the most difficult problems in composition is the treatment of these windows so that they can be incorporated into the mural design and not detract from it. In the murals Diego Rivera attempts successfully to combine the Spanish renaissance style of the chapel with his paintings. Characteristically, he is not interested in the picturesque or the archeological, but attempts in these murals to do something which is universal in feeling.

In the subjects for the panels, he uses man, earth, sun and other natural forces as symbols to represent the state, revolution, germination of the revolution, sacrifice, the flowering, the harvest and harmony which is the approach to the ideal. On one wall this concept is represented by the blood of the martyrs fertilizing the earth and helping to produce the seeds for a better world.

This chapel is dedicated to those who fought in the struggle for Mexican freedom, and in his paintings Diego Rivera idealizes life in Mexico and expresses the hope that man will eventually, through science, control the elements and the future. These paintings are often considered his principal work because they demonstrate many phases of his highest achievements to date. They are considered by some a high point in American art. It is claimed that in painting these frescoes at Chapingo Diego Rivera was attempting to escape reality and to convey a new ideal of a better world to come.

65G Entrance hall. Note the richness of color, the simplicity of form and simple dignity of the composition.

65H Panel on opposite side of wall. Corn is used here as a symbol for the richness of the earth.

65I Indian life. Though stylized, this painting achieves a tender, poetic expression.

65J Another detail of the same panel.
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66A Panel criticizing the oppression of the Indian by the Spaniard (a favorite theme of this artist).

66B Symbolical interpretation of the richness of the earth, both above and below the surface.

66C Detail of the fresco, "the miners." Notice again the restrained use of color, the richness of design, and the rhythm of movement.

66D The ceiling. The decoration of this chapel at Chapingo has often been compared to the Sistine Chapel in Italy by Michaelangelo. Here we find the same problems of space-filling composition, of foreshortening, perspective, and of uniting painting with architectural structure.

66E These murals in Chapingo are unusual for Diego Rivera in that he uses nudes to express symbols of earth and natural forces. The large nude figure at the very top of this panel represents the earth. The man with the fire in his hand is a symbol of man controlling the elements and so creating a new and better future.

66F Detail of same panel. Notice the monumental quality of the rendering of this nude form.

66G A very tender rendering of a female form representing the earth asleep and holding in her hand a young plant — the promise of a potential future development.

66H This panel, sometimes called "germination," is one of the finest of the frescoes at Chapingo. Note the way in which the design for this mural has been organized to incorporate the window and make it an integral part of the composition.
66I  Detail of a section of this same panel. Here Diego Rivera shows himself a master in the drawing and painting, in fresco, of the human nude. Note the brush strokes used, the exquisite surface quality and the subtle, sensitive use of color.

66J  Again the human form is used as a symbol to represent an element. Notice again the masterly way in which the architecture has been united with the fresco design.
National Palace -- Main Stairway

These murals in the National Palace cover the three walls of the rectangular stairwell, and are probably the most detailed and elaborate of Diego Rivera's compositions. They are a documentation of the history of Mexico up to and through the revolution of 1910. One side wall represents the past golden age of the Indian. The opposite wall is devoted to the ideal and hope of a future golden age and includes a portrait of Karl Marx pointing the way to that future. The center and largest wall is divided into a series of smaller spaces -- each one devoted to a particular aspect of Mexican history, beginning with the empire of Maximilian in 1867; the revolution of 1910 and portraits of the leaders Diaz, Villa, Madero and Prieto; the period of the revolution with portraits of Father Hidalgo, Morelos and Zapata; the reform laws and portraits of the leader, Santa Ana and of Iturbide and Calle; and finally the defense of Mexico against the United States in 1848. The large eagle in this panel is symbolic of the ambition of the United States for empire. Diego Rivera has painted the portraits of all the heroes of Mexican history in a most realistic manner so that the large masses -- for whom these murals are intended -- will learn to know and recognize them.

Although the subject matter of the panels has great variety, it is unified by the basic simplicity in the organization of the composition and the masterly use of color.

67A This mural with the eagle in the center is especially interesting for it represents the revolution and includes portraits of the leaders, Zapata and Father Hidalgo.

67B Sins of the Inquisition. This panel is organized in bands. The bottom section
portrays the conquest; the center, the inquisition; and the top, the revolution of 1910. Included are very realistic portraits of Diaz and Madero.

67C Another view of the murals on the staircase.

67D Detail of the murals on the staircase of the National Palace.

67E This panel represents the defense against the United States in 1848. Note again the eagle flying in the sky.

67F This panel symbolizes a future golden age with Karl Marx, workmen, bankers, priests, and the Virgen of Guadalupe woven into a mosaic-like composition. In this panel, one of the most controversial of the series, Diego Rivera claims to have expressed the attitude of the large masses of people concerning religion in Mexico. Attempts have been made to destroy it by throwing acid on the objectionable sections.

67G There are, in the main corridors of the second floor, a series of frescoes based on Indian arts and crafts. The subject of the first panel is ancient Indian arts and techniques including weaving, painting, etc. Note the cotton growing in the background, the boats on the lake and the Indian architecture represented here.

67H Preliminary drawing for fresco. This cartoon or outline drawing is later again traced upon the damp plaster wall before color is applied. This is the original tracing for a panel which has very recently been finished, and shows the manner in which the line composition is organized.
Palace of Fine Arts

The murals in the Palace of Fine Arts are in great part a duplicate of the murals which were painted by Diego Rivera for the Rockefeller Center in New York City and later destroyed. The general themes are man controlling the universe by technical means, and capitalism destroyed by the worker. Because of the architecture of this building and the fact that the wall upon which this painting is placed is broken by two pillars, the composition is divided into three panels to be seen either as a whole or separately. In these panels, the color is most delicate and the entire treatment poetic and idealistic. This mural again demonstrates Rivera's unswerving faith in science and his hope for a better future created by the genius of man.

67I Detail; a large figure of capitalism surrounded by instruments of science, animals, and young students of all races.

67J The center panel: The four blades of a propeller, each one a symbol of life of the world: (1) microscopic life, (2) solar life, (3) terrestrial life, (4) celestial life. These forces are controlled by the figure of a workman. On the left side of the area that would be enclosed by the arch of these blades, are portraits of John D. Rockefeller and of society people; on the opposite side, portraits of revolutionaries; and below the propellers, the controlled germination of plants.