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PAINTING FOR THE FESTIVAL

Frances Gillmor

AN AESTHETIC of impermanence—of fireworks flaring against the dark—of an effigy made to be destroyed. . . . This is the philosophy of Diego Rivera.

It sounds like a modern philosophy of impermanence and change, of a present that gives form to a past that is gone. It sounds like Whitehead and Mead.

It is in the quick current of modern sophisticated thought. But it shapes too from the Mexican village, and from the fiesta where rockets break in puffs of white smoke over the church towers and are gone; where a whole year's savings may be spent to build a piece of standing fireworks into a *castillo* as high as the church tower itself, so that for a quick interval of light, fire may run along the cubes and circles up to the very tip, to delight the little saint; where on the Saturday before Easter the effigy of Judas may be hanged and exploded with firecrackers to the cheers of the crowd.

Diego Rivera has brought the village art into his studio at San Angel just outside Mexico City. At one end stand two grotesque figures of Judas, more than life size; they have missed their destiny of being exploded to the cheers of a crowd on Saturday of Glory. Near them stand four models of *castillos*, their wheels and cubes loaded with firecrackers; perhaps tonight their larger counterparts will go off in flaring light to end a village fiesta.

To balance these examples of a Mexican folk art of today Rivera has shelves loaded with the idols and masks of a pre-conquest yesterday. Some of the idols are grinning and exaggerated; some of the masks calm and inscrutable.

Rivera points to the Judases.

"No one believes me when I say they are beautiful. But the people who make them put into them what the ancient people did. Look at this."

And he points out an idol with its head tilted to the very angle of the head of the Judas.

"No, these *idolos* have not the serenity of the masks. But the masks were made for death. Serenity belongs to death. People who want serenity want only to sit down."

He turns to the models of the *castillos*.

"These are the best examples of abstract design in Mexico. They are good because the people who make them are not trying to create great art, are not trying to create anything that will last. A *castillo* burns for a few minutes and goes out. Because of that it is good, it is pure, free from the desire for riches, free from the desire for fame. . . .

"Yes, of course an artist could do something he hoped would last, just because it was good, just because he wanted it to exist—not wanting riches or fame. But the desire for permanence belongs to the fear of death. If we lived in the day, a day at a time, we would lose that fear. We would know that there is no death."

His words crowd upon each other as he explains himself further.

"No death for the individual, because the individual does not exist. We are just parts of the whole—the lights on the *castillo*."

He goes on eagerly. His philosophy of the brief present seems to shape itself even as he talks.

"You say I find my permanence then in the whole?" he says. "Not the permanence of death. It is movement, it is speed. The more you move, the more you touch, the more permanent you are. Life isn't serenity. The desire for serenity," he repeats, "is the desire to sit down."

What is brief has not only purity, but power, he declares.

"Think of the methods of magic. When people want magic they turn to design, and to design that can be destroyed. A design cut in paper here in Mexico. A design made in sand among the Navajos—and destroyed at sunset."

He pulls out some photographs of his Detroit murals.

"I like these better than anything I have done. Look at them—electricity and steam. The engineers don't make them beautiful because they are trying to create a great art. That is one reason why they are beautiful. Look—they have power. They are male, female.

"And do you know people get more offended at a picture like this of engines and machinery and industrial subjects than at a political subject. Why? Because they feel the power of it and are helpless.



A pre-conquest mask from Rivera's collection, whose serenity, according to Rivera, belongs to death.

A country Judas which has just exploded. This is art free of the desire for fame or riches or permanence, and therefore pure, says Rivera.

Photo by Ola Apenes





A castillo at a village fiesta in Mexico. The castillos, says Diego Rivera, are the finest examples of abstract art in Mexico.

Photo by Ola Apenes

Two Judases, with political placards attached, about to be burned on a Mexico City street on the Saturday before Easter. "No one believes me when I say they are beautiful," says Rivera.



Suppose a man meets a woman. He may love her. He may try everything, every argument within himself to convince himself he should not love her. But in spite of that he will love her more and more. It is so with design. If you feel the power of it, the only release from that power is in its destruction—its brevity. Only in the knowledge of its brevity is there detachment and satisfaction. It is part of the magic that the sand painting should be destroyed. . . .

He looks at the steam turbines in the picture.

"I'd rather live in Pittsburgh or Detroit, where there are industrial subjects like this, than in Mexico," he says. "The engineers don't even know they are doing something beautiful. Their art is unconscious. That is why I have come to be against instruction in art. I have thrown it all away. If I had not had so much instruction, I should have had twenty, thirty more years of painting. It is only in the last ten years, perhaps only now, that I am beginning to see what I want to do."

But he turns back to the *castillos*, brief fireworks in dark night.

"No, I have no desire for permanence in my own work. In fact, I think this whole idea of mine affects my choice of subject matter. I didn't realize it until this minute—but I think I choose subjects so that they will be destroyed. I enjoy it. I didn't mind it when the Rockefeller frescoes were destroyed.

"They live through destruction. One person sees them, and they are ideas then in his mind. They have more life. They have life even in the minds of the people who have not seen them.

"You know those paintings that were made in the middle ages, one on top of another? There was no condemnation of the earlier work when they painted it over. It had been painted perhaps for a festival—and the festival was over. A few years later there was a new offering. Why not?

"I paint that way. I paint without wanting permanence. I prepare the wall for a festival."