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# Inventing a Mexican Cubism: Diego Rivera in Paris



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Famed as a muralist, the array of styles that Diego Rivera utilized throughout his artistic career has been frequently overlooked. Rivera's active participation in Cubism while studying abroad in Paris established him as an international artist who possessed a profound understanding of Cubism. His interpretation of the style was unique; Rivera's Cubist works explored his Mexican identity while simultaneously establishing a connection between Rivera and Mexico through the incorporation of Mexican iconography.

## Thesis

The rigid, traditional artistic training that he received in Mexico primed Diego Rivera for Cubism. After moving to Paris, Rivera worked closely with Picasso who taught him the logic and process behind Cubism. These two aspects of his artistic education allowed Rivera to fully understand the rationale behind Cubism. Rivera's Cubist work demonstrated a profound understanding of the style, but his deviation in subject matter, color, and tone establish a connection between Rivera and Mexico enabling him to construct a Mexican identity while still in xenophobic Paris.

## Early Life

Born in 1886, Rivera was encouraged to explore his artistic talents from a young age. "As far as I can remember," he later wrote, "I was drawing... my father set aside a special room where I was allowed to write on anything I wished."<sup>1</sup> Rivera showed advanced artistic skills; his mother, not wanting this talent to go to waste, enrolled him in evening classes at the National Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City at the age of seven. The National Academy of San Carlos provided the necessary structure and training to become a successful artist

in Mexico, but the European focus of the academy led Rivera to question the importance of Mexican styles, themes, and motifs in artwork.

For most of its history, San Carlos was a gloomy prisoner of the European tradition, a condition made worse by the familiar time lag between mother country and colony. The School's directors were usually imported Spaniards, beneficiaries of a policy that was even more rigidly enforced during the Porfiriato. Right up to Diego's time, most attempts at creating a *Mexican* art were discouraged. Students at San Carlos spent months, sometimes years, copying classical busts or engravings of European paintings.<sup>2</sup>

Rivera recognized his Mexican identity to be secondary. The attitude of European superiority imposed by the Academy was blatant and, as a result, Rivera developed an inferiority complex. His artwork, however, demonstrated a profound understanding of European artistic styles and techniques.

Rivera's *Head of a Woman* depicts his advanced artistic talent. The one-point perspective and shading in this sketch, a copy of a classical bust, proves Rivera's skill. His acute attention to facial details gives the woman a soft, tranquil look. He already demonstrates in this portrait a deft touch, acute observation, and seemingly effortless aptitude for evoking a sense of volume that would all be developed further into hallmarks of his most noteworthy paintings.<sup>3</sup>

This focus on realism promoted by the academy was limiting to its students. The enforcement of traditional techniques often made students less receptive to Mexican art as well as contemporary art movements occurring in Europe. San Carlos restricted students by focusing on the realist qualities evident in classical

1. Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1999), 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. David Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997), 9.

and renaissance artwork; students were unaware of the experimentation with abstraction happening in Europe.

Rivera worked with Santiago Rebull and Jose Maria Velasco during his last few years at the academy. These two professors were crucial to Rivera's artistic education; their training tremendously influenced him. The rigorous instruction that Rivera received from his professors, primarily Santiago Rebull and Jose Maria Velasco, primed him for Cubism by providing the education to understand the movement both logically and creatively. The emphasis on composition, proportion, and space that Rebull placed on Rivera's work made a momentous impact on his artistic process and style. According to Hamill:

Rebull also introduced Rivera to composition, emphasizing the use of the Golden Section...the elevation of geometric pseudo-formula was another example of the way the philosophy of positivism was permeating most aspects of Mexican education, even the artists. The effect on the boy was clear: he was learning that there were rules and scientific principles behind everything. Through his life, both in his Cubist phase and in his commitment to Marxism, Rivera continued to insist on the presence of rules.<sup>4</sup>

These emphases combined with Velasco's logical approach to art instilled a solid artistic foundation in Rivera upon which his Cubism was later built upon. As Jean Charlot wrote, "His [Velasco's] severely logical approach to optical problems prepared the adolescent for the further rationalizations of Cubism".<sup>5</sup>

*La Era* demonstrates Rivera's application of these principles. *La Era* deviates from his other work at San Carlos through the choice of subject matter. The emphasis on realism, composition, and proportion is apparent, but the subject matter is distinctly Mexican. This painting marks an important advancement in Rivera's artistic career; he has transformed himself from a student into an artist. Using

the lessons of Rebull and Velasco as building blocks to his work, he demonstrated a mastery of painting. Rivera abandoned the European emphasis of subject matter promoted by San Carlos and reaffirmed his Mexican identity through the depiction of Mexican farm workers amidst a Mexican landscape. Rivera rendered *La Era* in a European style, the acute attention to detail and the realist quality is reminiscent of the European work that he studied and copied in San Carlos. However, Rivera began to juxtapose Mexican subject matter within a European style. This embracing and acceptance of his heritage continued to play an important role in defining Rivera as a person and artist during his time spent abroad in Europe.

During his final year at San Carlos, Rivera applied for a fellowship to study abroad in Europe. Despite struggling with the traditional European focus of San Carlos, Rivera understood that this opportunity would hone his artistic skills. In 1906, Teodoro Dehesa, the governor of Veracruz, granted young Diego a small scholarship to study abroad in Europe. Rivera received this scholarship with the understanding that he would send one painting home a month to prove that he was working. Rivera concluded that Spain would be an appropriate country to start his studies considering that he already knew the language. Rivera departed for Spain at the end of 1906.

### Move to Spain

Rivera arrived in Spain in 1906 with aspirations to achieve success and fame in Europe, but his later reflection of this period reveals his inner struggle with his artistic talents. He stated, "The inner qualities of my early works in Mexico were gradually strangled by the vulgar Spanish ability to paint. Certainly the flattest and most banal of my paintings are those I did in Spain in 1907 and 1908."<sup>6</sup> This cultural and geographical shift had negative implications; Rivera felt isolated. He lived in the Hotel Rusia on Calle Carretas. This location was relatively close to the Café de

Pombo, a popular location for artists and writers. Despite feeling like an outcast, he eventually befriended two *mondernista* writers: Ramon Gomez de la Serna and Ramón del Valle-Inclán. His introduction to avant-gardism through these two writers inspired a more abstract style in Rivera's work.

The traditional training that had been instilled in Rivera in Mexico continued to manifest itself within his works, but his art continued to become more abstracted after his exposure to the avant-garde. A closer examination of two of his self-portraits gives insight to the impact that the avant-garde had on Rivera's work. A comparison between *Self Portrait* of 1906 and *Self Portrait* of 1907 affirms Rivera's break away from his traditional training in Mexico and his experimentation with an avant-garde style. Accentuating facial features, setting, and emotion, Rivera's *Self Portrait* of 1906 demonstrates his utilization of his traditional training; he continued to paint in a realistic style. In *Self Portrait* of 1907, Rivera began to utilize the avant-garde style through facial ambiguity and a painterly technique. The painterly style of the work and the treatment of the face demonstrate a loosening of the artistic principles instilled in Rivera at San Carlos. With its splendid silhouetting, earthy and heavily impastoed application of pigment, starkly faltering light/dark passages, and restrained palette based on variations of reddish brown, this self-portrait also reminds us of the neoromantic tenor that resonated in much late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century modernist painting from Europe.<sup>7</sup> This abstraction, though subtle, marks a significant modification in Rivera's style opening him up to more abstracted styles.

Between 1906 and 1908, Rivera habitually visited museums in Madrid. His primary focus of study was Spanish masters, such as El Greco, Goya, and Velázquez and the Flemish artists Bosch and Breughel. He became particularly absorbed in El Greco, and under the influence of fellow Mexican Angel Zárraga, he began to accentuate the angular planes of his Toledo landscapes

4. amill, *Diego Rivera*, 22.

5. Ibid., 23.

6. Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, 31.

7. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 10.

and picturesque subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Following his self-portraits, Rivera painted a series of landscapes exhibiting a modification of the pseudo-geometric formulas mastered from Rebull. Among the works in Rivera's oeuvre that stand out from this period are several scenes such as *Landscape of Avila: The Street of Avila*. It features an emphatically geometric construction of space in keeping with realism and an understated treatment of the sky through an under painting consistent with Impressionism.<sup>9</sup> This same geometric construction of space is demonstrated in *Night Scene in Avila*. Both landscapes are dominated by the illuminated Spanish buildings; the shadows cast by the natural light sources in both works exaggerate the geometric quality of the paintings.

Valle-Inclán, knowing Rivera's zeal for art and France, persuaded him to travel to Paris. During this trip, Rivera began to reconsider his future in Europe. Rivera understood Paris to be the center of the art world in Europe and believed that moving to France would be auspicious; in Paris, Rivera could establish himself as a prominent artist. Upon returning to Madrid, Rivera was convinced that living in Paris was a necessity for his artistic career. After returning home to Mexico in 1910 to exhibit his Spanish paintings, Rivera moved to Paris.

### History of Cubism

As Rivera was moving to France, the Parisian art world experienced a revolution of sorts in the creation of Cubism. This artistic movement, founded by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, embodied several aspects of Rivera's logical artistic training in Mexico. Cubism focused on formulas, a rigid creational process, and the geometric principles of subject matter.

Picasso's experimentation with techniques utilized by Cézanne led to a defining style characteristic of Cubism: multi-point perspective. Cézanne had experimented with this facet of abstraction

throughout his Post-Impressionist career. Multi-point perspective introduced various viewpoints of an object into a single painting. Though Picasso and Braque admired Cézanne for this revolutionary discovery, Cubism was not a continuation of his work. Cézanne established a link between their art and art created centuries ago while also giving the Cubists fuel to rebel against the last fifty years of art:

Their way of looking at the exterior world, the means they used of recording their ideas about it, even their concept of what a painting was, all these things were different from anything that had gone before them. And they were reacting not only against the art of the past fifty years but also against the techniques and traditions of vision that had shaped Western painting since the scientific discoveries of early Renaissance. But it was Cezanne who formed the bridge between their art and the art of the preceding five centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Picasso and Braque frequently exaggerated multitudinous viewpoints throughout their Cubist works.

Braque, continuing Cézanne's painting technique, amalgamated reality and abstraction in his *La Femme*. Braque sensed, too, that by dismissing the conventional, single viewpoint it was possible to synthesize a variety of information; thus, in a three-quarter view the knot of hair at the back of the head is seen clearly, as if from the side.<sup>11</sup> This exploratory technique of multiple viewpoints involved the breaking down of subject matter and distinguished Cubism from other movements at the time.

*Woman with Mandolin*, by Picasso, is typical of early Cubist works that concentrate on abstracting subject matter by constructing the woman from simpler geometric forms. The woman's head is suggested through a square and rectangle, and the body is a collage of parallelograms, slight curves, and triangles. As Cubism developed, subject matter would continue to be further broken

down until it became imperceptible. This process also involved fusing subject matter with their surroundings. The pictorial innovations of Picasso and Braque—the construction of a painting in terms of a linear grid, the fusion of objects with their surroundings, the combination of several views of an object in a single image, and of abstract and representational elements in the same picture—began to influence a widening circle of artists, and the style became distinguishable by virtue of these features.<sup>12</sup>

Cubism incorporated reason, rigidity, and rules that obscured the line between creativity and mathematics. Cubist artists used mathematical theories and processes in their works. Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris, an artist in the latter part of the movement, incorporated linear grid works in the artistic process. Having specific areas in which subject matter would be broken down heightened the geometric quality of the work.

Between early 1911 and late 1912, Cubism became the name of a movement given a public face by group showings in the Indépendants and the Salon d'automne. The term, thus, became identified with a set of theories and a group of artists simultaneously: its status as a movement was doubly consolidated.<sup>13</sup>

Picasso, Braque, and other Cubist artists focused primarily on creating still lifes and portrait subjects steeped in European tradition. Despite the variety of subject matter in their works, they all shared a fundamental commonality: Europe. European writers, artists, and critics became the muses of Cubist portraits while still lifes celebrated everyday life in Europe. Still lifes consisted of objects found in an artist's home, such as fruit, tumblers, instruments, vases, and furniture. These paintings gave the viewer a glance into the private lives of the Cubist painters.

Cubism continued to evolve through the use of color. Color restriction became paramount to the movement after receiving recognition in Paris; earth tones

8. Dawn Ades and Brett Guy, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 127.

9. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 21.

10. John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 61.

11. Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, 57.

12. Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, 10.

13. Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 20.

superseded the soft reds, greens, and blues in later works. Braque's *The Pedestal Table* embodies this transformation in color. An array of objects is chaotically stacked on a pedestal table; the lack of color diminishes the identity and individuality of each object. The bold hues in his *La Femme* have been replaced by variant shades of yellow, black and grey. As Cubism continued, color continued to attenuate.

Another important Cubist painter in Paris was Juan Gris; he strongly emphasized the logic of cubism. More cerebral and with a much more coldly analytical mind than either Picasso or Braque, Gris was more interested in the implications of the discoveries they had made than in the appearance of their paintings.<sup>14</sup> His interest in the implications of the theories and logic of the style would anticipate Rivera's.

### Rivera's Introduction to Cubism

Rivera was first introduced to Cubism in 1913, and this experience inspired and transformed his artistic style. He was enthralled with the movement, claiming throughout his life that Cubism constituted "the [most] outstanding achievement in the plastic arts since the Renaissance."<sup>15</sup> He saw potential in the style and immediately began to incorporate Cubist techniques into his works. A thoroughgoing use of his new visual language would result in approximately 200 Cubist or Cubo-Futurist paintings from 1913 through 1917. Rivera later regarded his involvement with this movement to be one of the most important experiences in the formation of his artistic ability.

His fascination with the style led him to explore it in his artwork. Rivera's commanding portrayal of a fellow Mexican artist, entitled *Retrato de Adolfo Best Maugard*, was a key transitional painting. The hazy Parisian backdrop was executed in a semi-Cubist style along the

lines of "simultaneity" and represents a celebratory look at modernity, but with a slightly more limited color range and a somewhat more muted use of color<sup>16</sup> Sharp angles and planes are prominent in the cityscape behind Maugard demonstrating and reaffirming Rivera's profound understanding of the geometric forms in painting.

Cubism paralleled the traditional training that Rivera had received in Mexico. Rivera's early Cubist works embraced muted colors and jagged angles while searching for an artist identity in Europe:

A more frank Cubist work from the same period was a small study in watercolor entitled *Arbol*, or Tree. Cursively adumbrated in Rivera's work, the basic forms of a tree and its surroundings are intimated only by means of a dense network of shallow lines alternately organic and geometric in character. The resulting all-over composition is largely monochromatic in keeping with Analytical Cubism.<sup>17</sup>

*Arbol* uses a color scheme similar to that of as Braque's *The Pedestal Table* but, simultaneously, diverges from other Cubist works for using nature rather than objects for subject matter.

*View of Toledo* combines Cubist techniques with the work of El Greco, an artist whom Rivera frequently studied while in Spain. Although Rivera's entry into Cubism was gradual, he demonstrated a Cubist construction of space in *View of Toledo*. Two attributes immediately stand out in this work: a high-value color palette and the proto-Cubist architectonic elements.<sup>18</sup> The angular planes that form the mountains and cityscape are exaggerated by Rivera's bold use of color; he has deviated from other Cubists through a polychromatic color scheme, yet the almost exclusive use of high-value colors is offset by an icily crystalline delineation of the structure of the city along with

the landscape, thus suggesting a formal affinity with Cubism.<sup>19</sup> Here Rivera still demonstrated a minimal Cubist skill set. Rivera's understanding and use of Cubism fully developed only after meeting Picasso; this friendship was momentous in his career as a Cubist.

### Friendship with Picasso

Rivera was introduced to Picasso and Gris in 1914 through a mutual friend. His friendship with Picasso was brief but was essential to Rivera's comprehension of Cubism. Picasso asked to meet with Rivera at his studio due to his considerable admiration for Rivera's work. Previously, Rivera had a hard time making friends in both Spain and France; his height, weight, and outlandish behavior often made him an outcast. Until he met Picasso he had remained in many ways an uncomprehending exile, lost in a hostile environment.<sup>20</sup> This friendship introduced Rivera to the rationale of Cubism while also fortifying his status in the Parisian art world. Rivera describes his first encounter with Picasso: "After I had shown Picasso these paintings, we had dinner together and stayed up practically the whole night talking. Our theme was cubism—what it is trying to accomplish, what it had already done, and what future it had as a 'new' art form."<sup>21</sup> Picasso mentored Rivera, teaching him the techniques and style of the work.

Rivera's friendship with Gris was intensified through their mutual ardency for logic and reasoning. From the cerebral Juan Gris, Rivera absorbed several technical procedures, including a re-acquaintance with the use of the "golden section" and the idea of mixing sand with oil paint in order to create impasto or evoke textural distinctions.<sup>22</sup> Rivera incorporated these lessons and emphases in his Cubist works which reveal that he fully comprehended all facets of Cubism.

14. Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, 97.

15. Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1992), 68.

16. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 31.

17. *Ibid.*, 31.

18. *Ibid.*, 31.

19. *Ibid.*, 30.

20. Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 100.

21. Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*, 60.

22. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 32

Rivera was introduced to other members and friends of the Cubist group, including the art critic Guillaume Apollinaire, who were as impressed with his work as was Picasso. This acceptance into Paris was, however, anomalous. Apollinaire had a kind word for Picasso's new friend, whose work he described as "by no means negligible," but others looked on the new celebrity of this ungainly Mexican giant with a less welcoming eye

### Xenophobia in Paris

The beginning of the twentieth century marked an important shift in Parisian salons and galleries. Since the late nineteenth century, internationalism had been promoted in France, which led to a rise in the percentage of foreign artists in France:

In the period 1900 to 1930, between 30 and 40% of the artists in Montparnasse were not French. The private artists' societies were increasingly open to foreign exhibitors after the 1880s. In the reforms of the Artistes français led by Jean-Paul Laurens in 1901, the most conservative of the Salons ended restrictions on foreigners, though its juries remained exclusively French. From its formation in 1890, the Salons of the Société Nationale had been open in this way. The indépendants imposed no restrictions on nationalities, and through the 1900s showed rising proportions of foreign artists, as did the Salon d'automne, which organized a series of foreign exhibitions to promote internationalism.<sup>23</sup>

The encouragement of internationalism received a substantial amount of criticism and fear from the press, artists, and French citizens. Members of the government and salons began instating rules and laws to limit the success and progress of foreign artists. These rules were created to placate the fear that these artists would swamp the

art market with foreign products:

It was this argument that provided Deputy Breton with a convenient scapegoat for his complaint about the cubits in Grand Palais in 1912; he noted 300 foreign exhibitors among the total of 700, and a majority of foreigners on the salon jury. His xenophobia was shared both by the majority of press commentators on the affair and, it appears, by the government; even the president of the Salon d'Automne. Frantz Jourdain, to revise its rules to prevent both future excesses such as the cubits', and the domination of the salon by foreigners, as a condition of its continued access to the Grand Palais.<sup>24</sup>

In 1881 the government divested itself of the responsibility for this monopoly in the interest of a free market, and introduced a series of measures enabling a wider variety of art works to be produced for an increasingly diversified and expanding bourgeois clientele. In partial consequence, the numbers of artists in Paris roughly doubled in the forty years from 1870. One of the most common charges against Cubism in the Salon d'automne controversy of 1912 was that it was foreign.<sup>25</sup>

Xenophobia in Paris affected thousands of immigrants and artists. Whatever their origins, these cultural immigrants were also, like other foreign workers, the victims of the terrifying waves of xenophobia that came, first following the Moroccan crisis in 1911.<sup>26</sup> Tensions between France Germany came to an all time high in 1911; Germany demanded that France give them the Congo in exchange for Morocco. After negotiations were settled, France signed over the two prongs of their territory, the Congo and Ubangi Rivers, to keep control over Morocco. To the French, this was seen as a tremendous victory over Germany and heightened national pride.

While the Moroccan Crisis amplified xenophobia in France, it also strengthened nationalism; 1911-1914 became known

as the period of nationalism. Nationalism inadvertently increased xenophobic tendencies in France; outsiders were viewed as either a threat to France or as a lesser being. This adversely affected the treatment of foreign artists during this time, especially Cubists.

Despite the success of Cubism, a national hierarchy remained prominent in the salons. Foreign artists remained foreign, magnets for prejudice like any other immigrant, and the openness of French society to immigration in general and to artistic immigration in particular bred reaction. Foreign artists were often made to feel their difference, even inadvertently by the most welcoming.<sup>27</sup>

Immigrant artists, including Rivera, experienced this anxiety. Rivera and his friend, the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, were part of an international circle of émigrés living in Montparnasse. Rivera shared a sense of displaced identity with these fellow exiles, members – like him – of an intellectual elite that had fled from largely agricultural nations to the center of the art world.<sup>28</sup> The psychological crisis was straining for Rivera, but through this he developed his own interpretation of the Cubist style.

Rivera understood that his Mexican identity would always be associated with, and in some cases trump, his successful art career in Paris. Rivera, then, used Cubism to construct and reaffirm his Mexican identity by Mexicanizing Cubism; he introduced Mexican iconography and themes into his work. Rivera's Mexican identity became the driving force behind many of his Cubist creations; his Mexican inferiority complex that had been instilled in him at an early age receded as he began to Mexicanize Cubism.

### Cubist Career

Rivera's Cubist work became distinct through his modification of subject matter and color. His work remained analogous to that of Gris, Picasso, and Braque

23. Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 61.

24. David Cottington, *Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris 1905-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13

25. Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940*, 61.

26. Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*, 61.

27. Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940*, 61.

28. James Ole, *Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 10

through the Cubist construction of space, subject matter, and viewpoints, yet Rivera incorporated Mexican themes in the Cubist style to explore his identity in Paris. It was Rivera's conflicts with xenophobia that drove him to search for his identity and place within Paris through his works. He neither worked exclusively in a Cubist style throughout these years nor did he develop only in one direction within the multipoint manner of Cubism, and he increasingly forged a highly distinctive Mexicanist variant of Cubism.<sup>29</sup>

Rivera began juxtaposing Mexican symbols with non-Mexican subject matter. This technique, seen in *Joven Con Sueter Gris* (Jacques Lipchitz), demonstrated Rivera's struggle to reconcile his national heritage and the European art movement he actively participated in. Jacques Lipchitz, a prominent Cubist sculpture from Lithuania, is painted in neutral tones in a Cubist style:

It is more dynamic in tenor, more allover in character, more *mexicanista* in signification (with its incorporation of the image of a serape being a new element in Rivera's oeuvre). A remarkable fusion of both Analytical Cubism and Synthetic cubism, it displays a highly disciplined dissection of form in geometric terms. Simultaneously, it features a generally unified color range and tightly faceted "collage" components.<sup>30</sup>

Rivera's Cubist style has matured, and this work marks an important shift in Rivera's Cubist style.

Rivera established a personal connection with Lipchitz through the juxtaposition of the serape – a Mexican blanket. Both combated xenophobia while working in Paris and struggled to define what it meant to be a foreign artist working in a European artistic style. Rivera, in this work, relates his struggles to that of Lipchitz through the fragmentation of the serape; he makes his foreign identity known and embraces it.

The incorporation of Mexican iconography became more evident after Rivera started illustrating the struggles of the Mexican Revolution in his work. *Zapatista Landscape* embodies Rivera's Mexicanization of Cubism through the depiction of a guerrilla fighting during the Mexican Revolution behind a Mexican landscape. Rather than concentrating on neutral motifs, Rivera was extremely personal. In particular, Rivera persisted in depicting human subjects despite the criticism that portraiture—an act of reproduction or interpretation – was an anathema to the cubist idea of using neutral motifs in order to achieve pure creation.<sup>31</sup> Rivera has included Mexican objects within this portrait to enhance the non-European focus of the work including a sombrero, rifle, and serape that further camouflage the guerrilla:

Far from being a mere "mirror" of reality then, the magisterial Cubist painting of a Zapatista "guerrilla" by Rivera was composed of a densely relational field of human traces with collage-like space and a convergence of several cultural traditions ranging from popular art in Mexico to fine art in France. Moreover, the use of Cubism, as a language of decentered fragments camouflaging the figures in it, caused the eye to dart about searchingly, thus eliciting a link between the trail of Cubist clues in paint and the guerrilla's actual elusiveness in nature. Rivera's remarkable choice of the decentering language of Cubism to produce perhaps the first oil painting in the history of a guerrilla was hardly fortuitous, however unlikely at first glance.<sup>32</sup>

*Zapatista Landscape* demonstrated the pride and support that Rivera felt for the revolution.

This portrait engendered a reaffirmation of Rivera's Mexican identity. The Cubist contestation of western cultural hegemony is precisely what allowed Diego

Rivera to recruit Cubist collage and modernist space on behalf of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with its unequivocal commitment to constructing a non-Eurocentric national identity.<sup>33</sup> His use of Mexican subject matter created a personal bond with Mexico though Rivera did not physically witness the Mexican Revolution.

The revolution continued to inspire the subject matter of his work. Through exiled friends from Mexico, Rivera learned of the revolution. The resulting paintings were in keeping with the actual events Rivera was himself responding to in the most advanced and virtuoso manner.<sup>34</sup> The revolution became a recurring theme in his works that both demonstrated support for Mexico and tied Rivera to his home country.

Rivera visually represented the Mexican Revolution in a series of works including *Portrait of Martín Luis Guzmán*. The figure in the painting is considered the pioneer of the revolutionary novel; Guzmán's novels discuss the Mexican Revolution in addition to its political aftermath. Rivera considered Guzmán a political hero in Mexico, and through the incorporation of Mexican iconography in this portrait, established a connection to him.

The fragments of obscure shapes, objects, and facial features are collaged together; they create an unmistakable portrait of Guzmán. Unlike other cubists, Rivera endeavored to "individualize" his subjects by devising, in his own words, an "ensemble of traits that would make a unique and personal facial cipher."<sup>35</sup> The suggestion of the face is ambiguous, as a circle, an ellipse, two curved lines, and a right angle distinguish Guzmán from the array of objects juxtaposed beside him.

*Zapatista Landscape*, *Joven Con Sueter Gris*, and *Portrait of Martín Luis Guzmán* are also analogous in Rivera's choice of Mexican iconography; all three works include a serape. The serape utilizes traditional Mayan motifs and is a staple in

29. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 30.

30. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 32.

31. Carl Good and John V. Waldron, *The Effects of the Nation Mexican Art in an Age of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 76.

32. Craven, *Art and Social Revolution in Latin America 1910-1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 11.

33. Rasheed Araeen, *The Third Text Reader: On Art, Culture and Theory* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 33.

34. Craven, *Diego Rivera As Epic Modernist*, 37.

35. Good and Waldron, *The Effects of the Nation Mexican Art in an Age of Globalization*, 76.

Mexican culture. This object distinguishes his Cubist works; the work is instantly recognized as Mexican and thus foreign. He has established a disconnect from Paris; Rivera embraces his foreign identity by prominently displaying throughout his works. Rivera connects his struggles to Lipchitz in *Joven Con Sueter Gris* while simultaneously establishing a personal link to the Mexican Revolution through the serape.

Rivera's modification of Cubism extends beyond the introduction of Mexican subject matter; Rivera's incorporation of bright vivid colors also distinguishes his works from other Cubist painters during this time. Almost from the beginning, his works were full of color; he avoided that somber repression of color that characterized works which made line, form, and faceting the only permissible syntax of Cubism.<sup>36</sup> Resplendent hues of blue, red, green, and yellow emerge in his Cubist works. This experimentation with color, often most prominent in the serape is unique to Rivera's Cubist works.

This bold use of color may involve the embracing of his Mexican identity. In *Jóven con sueter gris*, he utilizes color restriction; the entire portrait is comprised of earth tones similar to Picasso and Braque with the exception of the serape. Rivera incorporates bolder, brighter hues in his works as he explores and establishes his Mexican identity; this shift is historical. He cast aside the Cubist's idea of a monochromatic image and began creating polychromatic works. Rivera reserved color for subject matter that is personal and directly related to his Mexican identity.

Eventually, Rivera reduced the abstraction of his style, and he again worked in a more traditional, formal style. Angelina Beloff, Rivera's wife at the time, writes, "Diego was fully committed to a very strict cubism . . . But then by 1917, Diego's painting style continued evolving and he was moving away the classic cubism. He worked in his still life's in three planes: two verticals that would end in an angle and one horizontal, in a way that

the object projected in these three planes acquired three dimensions, which brought him closer to reality."<sup>37</sup>

### End of Rivera's Cubist Period

Rivera began to question the limits of Cubism; he came to the realization that Cubism did not provide a proper outlet in which he could express political issues in Mexico and Europe. Although he never forgot the lessons of Cubism, the movement ultimately proved inadequate for Rivera's need to express the social and political realities that were increasingly engaging his attention.<sup>38</sup> The restrictions of the style proved too great to continue working with the style for the rest of his artistic career.

Rivera's Cubist period was fraught with controversy, buffeted by debates about the proper course of the movement and by French xenophobia. This culminated in a well-publicized fight between Rivera and the French critic Pierre Reverdy, who condemned the artist's theories and argued that a Cubist "likeness" was an impossibility.<sup>39</sup> Rivera became an outcast; he lost his art dealer and all Cubist friends in the group.

Without support from fellow Cubists, Rivera was discouraged. His understanding of the limitations of Cubism and the loss of his artistic friends forced Rivera to reevaluate his artistic career in Paris. In 1918, Rivera moved away from Cubism; he began to study more traditional styles and techniques, such as fresco painting, in Italy.

### Conclusion

Rivera's contributions to Cubism were momentous; he provided a new perspective to a European movement. His evolutionary artistic progression from classicism to abstraction demonstrates the influence that Picasso and other avant-garde artists had on his work; nevertheless, Rivera continued to utilize his training in Mexico throughout his early artistic career. The

teachings of Velasco and Rebull provided the solid foundation upon which Rivera's Cubism was built. The logical and rigid training that Rivera received in Mexico primed him for the rational approach necessary in Cubism. After moving to Paris, Rivera was able to study Cubism in depth with Picasso. The xenophobia that Rivera faced while working in Paris engendered a strong connection with other foreign Cubist artists, such as Lipchitz, while also allowing him to diversify his style in response to xenophobia. His incorporation of bold, bright colors in his paintings distinguished him from other Cubists while also demonstrating pride and acceptance for his Mexican identity. The realization that Cubism did not provide a proper outlet to express political struggles in Europe and Mexico and Rivera's public fight with Reverdy led to the abandonment of the style; however, Rivera never forgot the lessons of Cubism and continued to utilize certain Cubist techniques throughout his artistic career

36. Sheila Wood Foard, *Diego Rivera* (Boston: Chelsea House Publishing, 2003), 42.

37. Mireya Pérez Bustillo and Raysa Gómez-Quintero, *The Female Body: Perspectives of Latin American Artists Contributions in Women's Studies* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 47.

38. Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 1993), 25.

39. Oles, *Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco*, 11.

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