

## A MURAL IN MINIATURE

Diego Rivera is the best known of the Mexican muralists who rose to international prominence in the 1920s and 1930s. Working in the medium of fresco, a wall and ceiling painting technique with roots in both ancient Europe and ancient Central America, Rivera formulated a unique style of modernist painting that fused historic and avant-garde idioms. A tireless worker—his entire oeuvre covers an astonishing 7,200 square yards—Rivera was also a champion of the working class.<sup>1</sup> He celebrated the fortitude, power, and historical significance of the laboring classes by making them the primary subject of his paintings, a move he understood to be revolutionary. As he explained it, “Mexican muralism—for the first time in the history of monumental painting—ceased to use gods, kings, chiefs of state, heroic generals, etc., as central heroes. . . . Mexican mural painting made the masses the hero of monumental art.”<sup>2</sup> Rivera’s Marxist politics also engendered controversy, most famously in the case of his Rockefeller Center mural, *Man at the Crossroads* (1932–33), which Nelson Rockefeller ordered destroyed when the artist refused to paint over a portrait of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, however, even the most contentious debates about the content of the artist’s murals eventually subsided, leaving to posterity his eloquent and powerful testimonials to the power of the people.

José Diego María Rivera (1886–1957) was a precocious child who learned to draw at the age of three. He spent the first decades of his life experimenting with a myriad of artistic styles, first as a student at the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts in Mexico City and later in Spain and Paris, where he studied the works of the old masters as well as Europe’s most avant-garde modernists.<sup>4</sup> While in Paris,

Rivera was contacted by a member of Mexico’s new post-revolutionary government interested in reviving the indigenous tradition of wall painting in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> Rivera was advised to travel to Italy to study early Renaissance frescoes, and he subsequently made some three hundred sketches of frescoes by Italian masters, including Giotto.<sup>6</sup> Rivera was deeply inspired by these colorful wall paintings, but he did not have a true artistic epiphany until he returned to Mexico in 1921. According to the artist, “My homecoming produced an aesthetic exhilaration which is impossible to describe. . . . From then on, I worked confidently and contentedly. Gone was the doubt and inner conflict which had tormented me in Europe. I painted as naturally as I breathed, spoke, or perspired. My style was born as children are born, in a moment, except the birth had come after a torturous pregnancy of thirty-five years.”<sup>7</sup> Buoyed by his newfound artistic confidence and enthusiasm for his native country, Rivera painted bold and dramatic murals, which secured his reputation in Mexico and north of the Rio Grande and earned him many prestigious commissions.

While completing his mural commissions in Mexico, Rivera also painted a number of easel paintings, including *Two Women and a Child* (1926), which was acquired by the San Francisco businessman and art patron Albert M. Bender the year it was painted.<sup>8</sup> Bender’s interest in Rivera may have been inspired by two contemporary San Francisco artists, the sculptor Ralph Stackpole and the painter Ray Boynton, who had traveled to Mexico to see Rivera’s recent work and returned with such vivid descriptions that they sparked the interest of local art patrons.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, because Rivera’s murals adorned walls of buildings in Mexico, few of his paintings were to be seen in San Francisco. Thus



83. Diego Rivera (1886–1957), *Two Women and a Child*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 29¼ × 31½ in. (74.3 × 80 cm). Gift of Albert M. Bender, 1926.122



Fig. 83.1 [top]. Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1267–1337), *The Lamentation*, 1305–6. Fresco. Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy

Fig. 83.2 [bottom]. *Kneeling Female*, Jalisco, Mexico, 200 B.C.–A.D. 300. Ceramic (Amica Grey),  $1\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$  in. (39.4 × 23.5 × 21 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, L1994.3.14. Lent by the Land Collection

in 1926 Bender purchased a number of easel paintings from the artist, including *Two Women and a Child*.<sup>10</sup> Bender's acquisition of this painting fit his program of cultivating a regional art scene in San Francisco since, although Rivera was a Mexican artist, California has always had strong historical, cultural, and artistic ties with Mexico. Bender's purchases also enabled him to see examples of Rivera's mural style without actually traveling to Mexico.<sup>11</sup>

The subject of *Two Women and a Child* corresponds to Rivera's declared interest in representing the working-class people of Mexico. Two women, one cradling an infant, sit across from each other in a moment of subdued conversation. The woman to the left, dressed in a pale purple dress, sits crosslegged and turns her back to the viewer. This posture focuses our attention on the two braids of thick black hair that cascade down her back and on the tiny hand of the child she cradles on her lap. The woman opposite her, wearing a pale blue skirt and blouse, sits facing the viewer with her legs tucked beneath her and her hands clasped in her lap. She looks intently and attentively in the direction of the other woman. The sparse setting consists of a mat, an ambiguous blue and white background, and an unadorned ceramic bowl in which the artist signed his name and dated the painting.<sup>12</sup> The women's warm brown skin, jet black hair, broad faces, peasant-style clothing, and the spartan setting are all intended to invoke a scene of rural Mexico.

This painting lacks the spatial depth and detail of academic easel paintings and instead looks like an early Italian Renaissance fresco. Rivera painted his murals in a technique known as *buon fresco*, which he learned from his study of Italian Renaissance precedents.<sup>13</sup> This technique, also known as "true fresco," involves painting water-based pigments on a damp plaster surface. The drying plaster adheres the pigment to the wall permanently through a chemical process. Because the fresco artist must cover a large area before the plaster dries, there is no time to render the figure or setting in great detail. Therefore, the artist's drafting skills are at a premium if he or she is to create direct and bold compositions that will grab and hold the viewer's attention. Also, because the water-based pigments are quickly absorbed by the porous plaster surface, they cannot be blended as can oil paints, and therefore the artist is unable to render subtle textures and reflections. Thus, fresco painting requires the artist to model figures and objects with broad strokes of paint, which often impart a greater solidity to the subject than is possible with oil paint.

If we compare Rivera's *Two Women and a Child* to

Giotto's famous *The Lamentation* (1305–6) from the Arena Chapel (fig. 83.1), we can see just how much Rivera mirrored the attributes of fresco painting even while painting in oils. Both artists created compositions in which figures dominate and the setting has been reduced to a minimum. Like Giotto before him, Rivera also modeled light falling on drapery using broad, smooth brushstrokes that define the mass and volume of bodies underneath rather than the superficial texture of the cloth. In addition, the woman to the left seems to be a direct quotation of the seated figure turning her back to us in the foreground of Giotto's *Lamentation*.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the figure on the right with her legs tucked beneath her also calls to mind pre-Columbian seated ceramic figures from western Mexico (fig. 83.2).<sup>15</sup> By invoking both fourteenth-century fresco paintings and this indigenous Mexican art form, Rivera linked these women, assumed to be contemporary, with a premodern past.

More important, by painting *Two Women and a Child* to look like a fresco, Rivera gave these women a historical weight that corresponded with his vision of the significance of the laboring peasantry in world history. Unlike Giotto's fresco, Rivera's painting lacks a narrative, and therefore the theme of his painting is largely symbolic. To this end, the women appear as generic types, lacking individualized physiognomies or clothes. They also are larger than life.

They occupy nearly the entire compositional space and, because no other objects or scale referents are visible (other than the small, unadorned bowl in the right foreground), they dominate the canvas in truly monumental fashion. By forcing us to focus on these figures, Rivera makes us aware of the pyramidal massing of their seated bodies, which, when combined with Rivera's technique of modeling the figures with broad strokes, imparts a solidity that anchors each of them to the earth. As a result, these women appear as iconic Earth Mother types who possess within them the natural processes of creation and nourishment, a theme underscored by the infant in the woman's lap and the empty bowl in the foreground.

Although *Two Women and a Child* is an oil painting, it nevertheless provided Bender with an approximation of Rivera's mural style. Curiously, Bender gave the work to the Legion of Honor the same year he acquired it, 1926. It was not that he disliked the painting. Indeed, with the advantage of hindsight, we know now that by giving Rivera's painting to the museum, Bender helped cultivate a public taste for the work of Diego Rivera, who eventually came to San Francisco to paint the much-loved murals at the Pacific Stock Exchange, the California School of the Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), and Treasure Island (now relocated to City College of San Francisco).<sup>16</sup> [KM]



### 83. DIEGO RIVERA, *Two Women and a Child*

1. The magnitude of Rivera's output is noted in Luis Cardoza y Aragón, "Diego Rivera's Murals in Mexico and the United States," in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 185. For a discussion of Rivera's political beliefs as they changed over his life and as he expressed them in his art, see David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1997).

2. Rivera, quoted in Aragón, "Rivera's Murals," 187.

3. Rivera's Rockefeller Center murals are discussed in Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 159–174.

4. For an insightful account of the numerous styles Rivera experimented with during these years, see Craven, *Rivera as Epic Modernist*, 7–51.

5. The new government hoped mural painting would position Mexican culture on the world stage and foster a sense of Mexican identity, especially among the illiterate populace. For a discussion of Rivera and the mural revival in Mexico, see *ibid.*, 53–72.

6. Rivera also made sketches after frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Mantegna, Uccello, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo; see *ibid.*, 67.

7. Rivera, March 1960, quoted in Ellen Sharp, "Rivera as a Draftsman," in *Diego Rivera*, 203.

8. Albert Bender (1866–1941) was born in Dublin, Ireland. He immigrated to San Francisco in the early 1880s and by the 1920s had become insurance broker to the city's most important houses of business. He profited handsomely from the insurance business, but he neither indulged himself with a luxurious mansion nor surrounded himself with a munificent collection of imported objets d'art or old master paintings. Instead, this lifelong bachelor spent his money in support of local artists and artistic institutions. As a founding member of the Book Club of California he helped to promote regional authors, including Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller. Bender also purchased and donated rare books to local institutions of higher learning. When he turned his attention to the fine arts in the 1920s, he preferred to support local practitioners and institutions, which he did by purchasing an artist's work and then giving it to a local museum. Bender's life is most fully recounted in Oscar Lewis, *To Remember Albert M. Bender: Notes for a Biography* (n.p.: Oscar Lewis, 1973).

9. For a brief discussion of the growing interest in Rivera's work among San Franciscans, see Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 41–42.

10. Bender's purchases were negotiated by Ralph Stackpole. *Two Women and a Child* was probably one of several paintings Rivera sent to Bender in the fall of 1926. See *ibid.*, 233 n. 58. See also Diego Rivera to Ralph Stackpole, 13 October 1926, Ralph Stackpole Letters, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

11. The role Rivera's easel paintings played in cultivating interest in his murals in the United States has been literally overshadowed by the scale and complexity of Rivera's murals. As a result, his easel paintings have received little scholarly attention, to the point that today they are often regarded only as a means by which the artist supplemented the meager income he was paid for his mural work. See *Diego Rivera*, 56.

12. The background of the painting can be read either as a blue and white painted wall or a sea extending to the horizon. Notice how the blue band changes height as it passes behind each of the women, a device that Rivera probably learned from his study of the paintings of Paul Cézanne and that subtly animates the composition.

13. *Buon fresco* and Rivera's mural technique are discussed in detail in Craven, *Rivera as Epic Modernist*, 89–93; and Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 253–256.

14. Bender and others in the San Francisco art world would have recognized Rivera's reference to Giotto because, as the painter Ray Boynton noted at the time, the present generation "worships at the shrine of Giotto." Boynton, "The True Nature of Mural Painting," *Argus*, n.d., quoted in Boynton, *California Art Research* 9 (San Francisco, 1937), 15.

15. Rivera was an avid collector of pre-Columbian art. See Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 235–242. For a discussion of Rivera's use of pre-Columbian forms in his murals, see

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