Diego Rivera: The Radio City Mural

Diego Rivera studied art in Mexico with Posada and others. He lived in Europe from 1907 to 1909 and again from 1912 to 1921 and developed into an accomplished cubist painter. Back in Mexico in 1921 he helped spearhead the Mexican fresco mural movement with its focus on Mexican history and life. Following the completion of his mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Rivera and Frida Kahlo came to New York to work on the Rockefeller commission.

Rivera stopped work on his Radio City Mural at Rockefeller Center the evening of May 9, 1933, when Rockefeller agents handed him his final paycheck and ordered him off the premises. The newspapers carried news about demonstrations as well as commentary. Rivera released a letter that Nelson Rockefeller had sent him prior to the event, published in The News-week in Entertainment (May 20, 1933). The letter read in part:

I noticed that in the most recent portion of the painting you had included a portrait of Lenin. This 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. If it were in a private house it would be one thing, but this mural is in a public building, and the situation is therefore quite different. As much as I dislike to do so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face now appears.

The New York Times published a protest letter on May 28, 1933, signed by about four dozen artists, while William Randolph Hearst editorialized in the New York American (June 11, 1933): "Inasmuch as Rockefeller Center is a private enterprise, its owners have some rights."

Rivera stayed on in New York and painted another mural for the New Workers' School. A duplicate of Man at the Crossroads was painted in 1934 for the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Workers Age, a Trotskyist newspaper, published Rivera's version of the controversy. When Rivera describes the "left" in the painting, he means the viewers' right; "right" means the viewers' left.

The Case of Rockefeller Center

Those who gave me the work at Radio City knew perfectly well my artistic tendencies and my social and political opinions. And the Detroit affair had just served to make very clear the nature of my reaction to the environment of the United States. They did much urging to persuade me to accept the work, which I finally did only on condition that they would give me full liberty to paint as I saw fit. My interpretation of the theme and my sketches for the painting were discussed and approved. The theme they assigned was: Man at the crossroads, looking with uncertainty but with hope to a better world. My interpretation, naturally, portrayed the crossroads with the road to the left as the socialist world, that to the right, the world of capitalism. The steel worker, in the midst of a connected system of machines which give him control of energy and means of knowledge of the various aspects of life, the infinitely great and the infinitely small, and a simultaneous vision of the most distant and the nearest things, and power over the forces of nature and the vegetable products and mineral wealth of the earth.

* * * * *

At the sides, arranged in horizontal zones like the floors of a building, were, at the left, an image of a May Day demonstration in Moscow, projected by television, and below, the workers of a factory gathered during the lunch hour to listen to a working class leader. At the right, in the upper part, war--an attack of infantry equipped with masks and flame-throwers, and supported by tanks and aeroplanes. And, below that, as a consequence, a demonstration of unemployed workers in Wall Street corner of South Street,
with the mounted police just in the act of attacking and dispersing the demonstration; in the background, crossed, an elevated structure and the steeple of a church. In the ellipses, representing the microscopic and telescopic views, on the side nearest the war, the wounds and the microbes of decomposition and infection and those of the typical plagues and diseases of war. On the lower edge of the ellipse, the microbes of venereal disease, syphilis, etc., and adjoining a sector showing a scene of gaming, drinking and dancing of members of the bourgeoisie, reminiscent of Marx's observation that such a scene was the overflowing scum of capitalist decay. Beneath this, in the astronomic field, was represented the moon, dead planet, and near the center, the sun, in eclipse. In the same field, on the left, constellations and nebulae in ascending evolution. Near this, a group of young women, youth and pioneers of the Communist movement.

* * * * *

Since, as much for my personal sentiments and opinions as for the historical truth, the outstanding leader of the proletariat is Lenin, I could not conceive or represent the figure of the worker-leader as any other than that of Lenin.

* * * * *

As the best answer to the financial dictatorship of the Rockefellers my co-workers and I have decided to make the revolutionary painting accessible to the New York workers which the Rockefellers tried to shut off from them. Therefore, we have decided to use the money that the Rockefellers paid to paint without charge in workers schools. Thus the Rockefellers have been stripped of their assumed mask of liberalism as art patrons and yet are paying for revolutionary art in the workers headquarters much against their will. At the same time, the whole incident has served to stir the interest of great numbers of workers in the development of proletarian art and the storm aroused demonstrates the living character of the art of the working class as against the art of the bourgeoisie which is no longer capable of stirring controversy.

We are confident that the workers will yet unveil our buried mural and, if it be destroyed or incomplete, they will create out of their own midst the artists of tomorrow who will fulfill our intentions and carry revolutionary art to far greater heights.