

Art in America

On Location with Diego Rivera By Lucienne Bloch

February, 1986

I first met Diego Rivera at a large banquet given in his honor in New York on November 16, 1931. He had just arrived from Mexico to prepare his one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art. A friend of mine from San Francisco, Mrs. Sigmund Stern, had told me about him with enthusiasm. He had painted a true Fresco in her dining room. I had seen this kind of mural of the 14th and 15th centuries in Florence and wanted to know more about it, but I hadn't known of any living artist who still painted in that ancient technique.

At the banquet I was placed next to Rivera not only because I was an artist, but because we both spoke French fluently – his English was worse than halting. Later, my sister Suzanne scolded me for monopolizing him throughout the entire meal. It was true! We talked continuously. My romantic notions of art and life – at age 22 – were knocked out of joint by this burly giant of a man, and I marveled at his preposterous opinions. When I mentioned that Frank Lloyd Wright had invited me to teach sculpture at Taliesin, Diego maintained that the great architect was an “old-fashioned sentimentalist with suburban ideas” that would only isolate men from each other. The city, he said, was man's place because he was gregarious and needed to congregate. “What about those dreadful machines man creates for ‘progress’ but that destroy beauty and nature?” I countered. The Mexican turned his frog eyes on me and grinned. “We don't control the machines, the machines control *us*! We are the catalysts that transform the raw materials of the earth into energy. We are a continuation of the geologic process.”



I was reeling after our long conversation. I never knew what “important people” were there or what I had eaten at that sumptuous restaurant, somewhere in New York City.

As we got up from the table, Rivera mentioned that the following day he would start painting frescoes for his big exhibition. To show off my knowledge of the ancient mural technique I said: “Oh, I'd love to grind your colors!” (though I doubted the old process was still in use). “Okay” – he used the American _expression – “come tomorrow at eight, sixth floor, room 606, at the Hecksher Building,” adding a humorous comment on that number...related to the cure for syphilis.

I reached out to greet Frida [Kahlo], his small, stunning wife, who was dressed in a Mexican costume down to her toes, her dark eyebrows touching in the middle of her forehead like a bird in flight, a wild Aztec necklace adorning her neck. She had been watching me suspiciously from across the room. Now she looked me straight in the eye and said petulantly, “*I hate you!*” I couldn't blame her. I had been under her husband's spell for two hours. Later, when she realized I was anything but a flirt, we became the best of friends.

Working as an Apprentice: The Fresco Technique

It was ten o'clock the next morning when I peeked into room 606. I didn't believe Rivera was going to start painting so soon after arriving in New York, or that he really meant to ask a total stranger to work for him. A tall dark-haired fellow growled, "You're late!" It was Clifford Wight, an assistant from California. This grumpy greeting did not discourage me. It was great to know they wanted me, at a time when the Depression was at its worst. Off I rushed to buy a smock at Bloomingdale's, close to the Hecksher Building.

The workshop was a large room, empty except for some tables and seven large portable panels (6 by 8 feet) placed against the wall. They would eventually be moved to the 12th floor, which was the first location of the Museum of Modern Art. Rivera had already started making sketches on his way to New York, in an improvised studio on the *S.S. Morro Castle*. The opening of his show was set for December 23, less than six weeks away.

An assistant from Mexico, Ramon Alva, showed me how to grind colors at a sturdy table – my first contact with the technique of fresco. I had studied sculpture, painting, wood engraving and anatomy in Europe, but this was something totally different. The colors came in metal containers marked "LE FRANC – PARIS." Though they were finely powdered, they had to be ground still more. First, Ramon placed a spoonful of yellow ocher dry pigment on a slab of plate glass, adding some distilled water to make a paste. He then picked up a heavy granite stone with a smooth bottom and placed it over the viscous glob. He began to grind it, holding the stone firmly with both hands and pressing down in a circular motion. That seemed easy enough, so I took over.

After a half hour of grinding, periodically adding water to keep the color from drying, we tested it. A dab of color transferred from my little finger to the surface of a clear glass of water showed that it was not yet ground finely enough: the color's tiny granules sank slowly to the bottom. Another half hour would be required to work the paint some more. Only when the pigment floated on the surface of the water was it ready to be scraped together with a palette knife and gathered into a clean glass jar. I continued with another color after cleaning the stone and the slab thoroughly. Some colors showed their characteristics by taking longer to grind than others: yellow had taken one hour to grind, blue would take two hours. I began to feel the strain on my shoulders and hands.

There were 10 to 12 colors in all. These had to be lime-proof and sun-proof mineral oxide and earth colors, very limited in hue but absolutely pure. They were so strong that a small quantity went a long way.

Rivera greeted everybody cheerfully when he arrived, and kidded me about my efforts. Then he checked the prepared panels closely, choosing the one that was dry and had already received two coats of lime and granular marble dust. With a stick of charcoal and a reproduction of his fresco in Cuernavaca to guide him, he sketched the hero of the revolution, Zapata, standing by his horse. I rested my weary arms to watch him draw with bold strokes on the rough surface of the plaster. In no time he had finished.

After standing back a while to look at his drawing, he asked for a jar of red ocher mixed with water. He corrected some charcoal lines with a bristle brush dipped in the red paint. Before leaving late that afternoon he showed Ramon where to plaster for the last intonaco coat, the surface on which fresco colors are applied, an area about 12 square feet, one quarter of the panel.

Next morning Ramon was polishing the same section with a trowel, making a smooth marblelike surface. In pidgin Spanish I asked him how it was possible for the artist to see his drawing now that it was covered with the intonaco.

Ramon smiled. He had heard that question so many times! He showed me a tracing he had made of that area before plastering. He had then perforated the tracing paper with a little wheel such as is used by dressmakers. Now I helped him hold the 12-square-foot sheet of paper against the damp plaster, exactly where the hidden drawing was located. He pounded the perforated lines with a cotton cloth bag of black powder. When we removed the tracing, all that could be seen were fine dotted lines.

I continued to grind color. Diego arrived soon after. First he felt the wall to make sure it was not too wet to work on. It had to be hard enough so that a bristle brush could not destroy the smooth lime surface. Because the two undercoats of rough lime plaster had been moistened with water thoroughly before the intonaco was applied at dawn, the wall would be moist for about eight hours of painting. The artist also had to consider the humidity of the air in timing his painting of the fresco. For these reasons, Diego worked swiftly all over the intonaco. His palette, a white enamel plate, had only a teaspoon of vine black paint on it. Starting with a small brush, he outlined the dotted lines with water-down black so they would set early. With larger bristle brushes, working from light to dark, he built up the values. The variety of shades of gray made the plaster look like an underdeveloped photographic print. Any errors had to be washed off immediately, because it took about 20 minutes for the brushmarks to set permanently to the wall surface.

How was it possible, I wondered, that with only water as a medium, frescoes throughout Europe and Asia had remained brilliant after hundreds, even thousands of years, their luminosity still unparalleled by later “improved” mediums? A popular idea about fresco is that “the color sinks into the plaster.” That is not true. What really happens, Diego explained to me, is that lime in contact with air forms a transparent calcium carbonate crystallization that binds the pigment to the moist lime wall “like microscopic mosaics.” Once the surface has dried the painting is an intrinsic part of the wall, unless the artist’s colors have not been finely enough ground, or he has continued to paint after the wall has dried, in which case those brushstrokes will rub off like chalk. If all the steps of the technique are correctly followed, however, a sponge with water can wash over the painting the next day without picking up any color.

Back at the workshop, when all the underpainting was done to Rivera’s satisfaction, he took a brief rest for lunch, which Frida brought in a paper bag. The assistant then prepared a new palette, this one with all 11 colors placed around its rim. Only a dab of each was necessary. When they started to dry the painter would ask for a fresh palette. The center of the plate was used to mix the tones he wanted. It was easy to wipe it clean when a new combination of tones was needed.

When Diego started to paint again, Frida coaxed me to go gallivanting with her. I gladly accepted. We bought sticky candy and went to the movies to see two scary, idiotic films, chewing away and laughing at all the gruesome scenes.

Three hours later, Diego was still painting. It was amazing to see the transformation of the fresco: the strong design, the contrasts of color, the draftsmanship. He had left the surface of the lime wall white for Zapata’s suit and his horse, gently modeled with opalescent grays to give them structure. Though the painting seemed finished to me, Diego continued to paint for two more hours. I found out why only years later, when I painted my own frescoes. A painting on wet plaster lightens considerably as it dries, so one has to strengthen and darken the color where necessary, leaving alone those places that need to be lighter. An hour or two before the wall dries, the painter experiences a wonderful harmony among himself, the brush and the wall’s acceptance of each stroke of paint. No other painting medium offers a comparable sensation.

Diego was still painting the last of the seven fresco panels when his one-man show of 150 oils, watercolors and drawings opened on December 23rd, a good sampling of his already prodigious career, from his Cubist period in Paris and Spain to his colorfilled Mexican scenes, was admired by the invited guests. Four of the fresco panels – his immediate impressions of New

York- were a shock to many viewers. Diego had definitely been affected by the Depression mood, and a cold November drabness was echoed in these frescoes. *Frozen Assets* especially didn't please the wealthy patrons. This panel is divided into three horizontal scenes, the lowest, a bank vault; the middle, a dreary hall filled with sleeping unemployed men; and above ground, the skyline of the city gray and lifeless.

The Rivera's lived at the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel another three months, Diego working on a series of lithographs at the studio of George Miller. They then took a train to Michigan, where he painted the huge frescoes in the garden court of the Detroit Institute of Arts. I joined them in May 1932, staying with them for five months before returning to New York to try my luck at earning my living as an artist.

Chief Photographer to Diego

Returning to my one-room apartment in the Village one evening in January 1933, after a long day of work on lithographs at George Miller's, I met the roly-poly Italian janitor, Dominic, at the entrance of my brownstone apartment. "You must be very popular!" he said with a twinkle. "Two young men came to see you *twice* today. They said they came from Detroit. One of them looks Russian, the other has a mustache." I knew at once that the latter must be Art Niendorf, one of Rivera's assistants. I couldn't place the other. Early the next morning they came again. It was Art all right. He introduced me to a new helper of Diego's by the name of Stephen Popoff Dimitroff. "We came to say hello...and to ask a favor of you," Niendorf said. "Diego sent us to work on the preparation of the Rockefeller Center mural wall. He expects to start painting here as soon as the Detroit job is finished, in about six weeks. He didn't give us enough money for living expenses. I sent him a telegram, but while waiting we're completely broke. You're the only one I know in New York. Can we borrow 20 bucks?" I was lucky to have an allowance of \$100 a month from my parents, until I could find a job. There was to be an exhibition of my work at the Delphic Studio soon, and maybe I'd sell something...Niendorf saw that I hesitated. He said with a glint in his eye, "We'll make you chief photographer of the project! You'll be given a pass to come in and out of the RCA Building. It's still in construction, you know, and you can start photographing the wall space right away." At this offer I forgot all about finances. It was the most significant \$20 I ever parted with. With my 1927 Leica camera, I followed the two men to Niendorf's 1929 rumble-seat Ford parked on Charles Street. We drove to the site of the tallest building in the future Radio City complex. From the time it had been nothing but a deep chasm at 50th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, I had watched and sketched the hundreds of workers as they operated the cranes and bulldozers, my ears ringing with the din of pneumatic drills. Now, except for thousands of unglazed windows, the lofty 72-story structure looked almost finished. I had to stop to photograph its soaring tomblike appearance on this wintry day. Niendorf and Dimitroff led me to the side entrance, where an official sitting at a desk stopped us. Art looked distinguished as he asked for a pass for me, his wide-brimmed hat set stylishly at an angle, his slight Texas drawl pleasant to hear. Dimitroff, on the other hand, was in an old threadbare overcoat, his worker's cap covering his tousled blond hair. With the cocky posture of a guy not afraid of anything, he puffed on a corncob pipe. After a brief wait my blue pass was issued; I signed it, and we picked our way to the main lobby, strewn with debris, scaffolds, stack of metal pipes and rolls of wire. There, facing the plaza entrance of the RCA Building was the huge wall, the center of Rivera's future fresco. Because the elevators were behind it, the assistants had already supervised the construction of channel irons which were to be covered with expanded metal lath on which five coats of fresco plaster would form the base of the artist's painting. This extra step was necessary to minimize any possible vibrations from the elevators. It was the assistants' job to see that all these specifications were followed to the letter.

We climbed a temporary scaffold and I took detailed photos of the lower wall structure. My Leica, the earliest of all 35mm cameras, had no built-in focusing meter, only a device like a miniature periscope which could be attached temporarily to the camera to focus; then the data was transferred manually to the camera lens. It had no flash synchronization or built-in light meter,

both of which came much later. The camera's greatest virtue was that one could take up to 36 pictures on one roll, while most other cameras of the time could take was a dozen, on a larger type of film. Mine had a fine Leitz Elmar 1: 35 F = 50mm lens. It was compact and weighted only half a pound. The light in the lobby was terrible, so I tried different exposures, hoping there would be one or two good ones in the bunch. I ended up taking one with Dimi and Niendorf standing alongside the wall, to show the scale. I wondered why it was so important to take details of the wall at this time. Niendorf explained that in case the mural should have to be removed, we needed to know exactly what was under the fresco surface. This would simplify the delicate process of removing the fresco to preserve it. To celebrate our first collaboration we went to the Waldorf Cafeteria for coffee and doughnuts. It was a block away, on Sixth Avenue, under the murky, rattling elevated trains, and was to be our meeting place for the next weeks. We hit it off from the start.

How Rivera Accepted the Job

Early in 1931, 65 prominent American artists were invited to create sketches and finished details for an "imaginary mural" of specific dimensions. These were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in May 1932. Nothing came of it at the time, except an interesting catalogue. At that time, also, Matisse, Picasso and Rivera were contacted to enter mural proposals competitively for the lobby of the RCA building. The Rockefellers, in keeping with their roles of America's leading patrons of modern art, were set on persuading the art world's greatest names to participate. Meanwhile, the building's architects, Raymond Hood and Associates, had loaded the project down with restrictions. The subject was grandiose: "Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future." The conditions were these: The colors would have to be black, gray and white, the mural to be painted in oils on canvas. The artists were to submit sketches, for which they would be paid \$300. "Man" himself was to be exactly 8 ½ feet tall, standing at the center foreground. Matisse and Picasso both refused. It was not his style of painting, wrote Matisse; nor did he care to paint in such dimensions. (The wall, including the two side sections to be decorated, was roughly 1,400 square feet.) As for Picasso, he would not even see an agent of the architects. Rivera thanked Hood but said he had painted enough in the past for people to know his value as an artist: "One can always have me make a sketch – and take it or leave it – but NO competition!" It was finally through the intervention of Nelson Rockefeller, executive vice-president of Rockefeller Center, Inc., and the final judge in matters of art, that Rivera was invited to do the mural. In Detroit, Diego received the blueprint of the RCA lobby's mural area so he could start planning his design. He was informed that two other artists had been invited to paint murals for the right and left elevator banks, the Englishman Frank Brangwyn and the Spaniard Jose Maria Sert. For six months Raymond Hood and Diego were in correspondence. Rivera objected firmly to painting murals on canvas. For the same price, he would do the work in fresco, which is, after all, a more complex technique requiring assistants. "Monumental painting does not have as its objective or ornament, but to extend in time and space the life of the architecture..." Rivera wrote. As for limiting colors to black, white and gray: "[by doing so]...we would accentuate the funereal feeling which is fatally aroused in the public by the juxtaposition of black and white. In the lower part of a building...one always has the feeling of a crypt. Suppose some ill-disposed person should chance upon such a nickname as 'Undertaker's Palace.'...

Except for hearing veiled, humorous comments by Diego at the time I lived with the Rivera in Detroit, I was not aware that such arguments were continuing. Diego had all he could do to tackle his gigantic painting at the Art Institute without having to confront an architect and officials of Radio City almost as stubborn as he. It was Nelson again who did all he could to bring peace between the painter and Raymond Hood. Other instructions the owners of the building gave to Rivera, Brangwyn and Sert to guide them in their subject matter were:

We want the paintings to make people pause and think and turn their minds inward and upward...we hope these paintings may stimulate not only a material but above all a spiritual awakening.

Our theme is NEW FRONTIERS - Today our frontiers are of a different kind...Man cannot move on. He has to solve them on his own lot. The development of civilization is no longer lateral-it is inward and upward. It is the cultivation of Man's soul and mind, the coming into a fuller comprehension of the meaning and mystery of life.

On Brangwyn's walls the theme would be: "Man's New Relation to Man. That is, Man's new more complete understanding of the real meaning of the Sermon on the Mount." On Sert's walls: "Man's New Relation to Matter. That is, Man's new possibilities from his new understanding of material things." One morning in Detroit at the Wardell Hotel where we lived, Diego read to me the theme he was to follow for the New York job. This business about Matter, Life and Mind reminded me of a terrific scenario I had suggested to my father, the composer Ernest Bloch, a few years earlier. He had been invited in 1929 to compose the music for a film version of French writer Romain Rolland's lyric story "*Melusine*." VITA, a German cinema company, had suggested this collaboration, but Father did not feel it fit his style of music. As we were hiking in the mountains of Switzerland I had told him what I believed would be a scenario more in his vein. The thread of the story was the Prometheus legend – man's incompetence to handle science, given human nature.

At the end, the camera would show cities going up in flames after a horrible weapon of war has devastated the planet. Skyscrapers twist in skeletal heaps, the forests are ashes, the oceans boil. The camera then recedes from the planet slowly, slowly. The earth becomes a misty glow among the lights of the Milky Way; the universe revolves majestically. Nothing has happened to disrupt it; nothing is amiss. "What music you could write!" I told Father, and added, "Then the camera slowly moves back, silently, through the void, through the grim remains of the Earth, searching. It stops at a crack in the rocks and travels into the microscopic world. A faint sound of music is heard, growing louder as it focuses on cells dividing...The End. I described all this for Diego, who listened attentively. The next day, just before he went to paint, he drew his first conception of the RCA mural. It was on a scrap of Wardell Hotel stationery, and it was extremely simple: just two ellipses crossing, with a rough drawing of Man at the Crossroads in the center. The ellipses represented what is seen through the microscope and the telescope – the microcosm and the macrocosm. It was a bold idea, and I was happy my story had "inspired" him. However, when he submitted his final drawing to Raymond Hood, his sketch bore no resemblance to the first idea. This one was crowded with figures within static rectangular areas. Diego wrote a lot of pompous verbiage to describe what his sketch meant, adopting the same style that the architects had used in their instructions to the three artists. For instance: The main plastic function of the central panel is to express the axis of the building, its loftiness, and the ascending echelon of its lateral masses. For this, color will be employed in the center of the composition, merging laterally with the general clair-obscur. In the center, the telescope brings to the vision and understanding of man the most distant celestial bodies. The microscope makes visible and comprehensible to man infinitesimal living organisms, connecting atoms and cells with the astral system. Exactly in the median line, the cosmic energy received by two antennae is conducted to the machinery controlled by the Worker...Above on the right side, the cinematograph shows a group of young women in the enjoyment of health-giving sports, and on the left it shows a group of unemployed workmen in a breadline. Above this group a television gives an image of War; as in the case of unemployment the result of the evolution of Technical Power unaccompanied by a corresponding ethical development. On the opposite side, above the representation of the joy derived from sports, the same aspirations created by Ethical development, but unsuccessful without an accompanying parallel material development of Technical Power and Industrial Organization, either already existing or created by the movement itself...

This was all pure socialism, but the strangest part was the way it was accepted by the employer. Raymond Hood discussed the project with Rivera, at the Detroit Art Institute in January 1933, when the painter had finished this sketch; the assistants, Flores, Halberstadt and Dimitroff were nearby. Hood asked Diego if he had the sketch. Rivera opened a portfolio and presented the drawing to him.

The architect glanced at it, then signed it. Rivera asked, "Do you have the contract?" When Hood handed it to him, the artist turned to the last page and signed it. "You better have your lawyer see it," said Hood. Diego replied, "You signed my sketch without looking it over. You trust me, I trust you!" Early in February Diego went to New York on a brief visit to inspect the site of his projected mural, and for the first time he saw the true scale of the wall in relation to its surroundings. The white columns, fabricated of square fluted marble slabs, were almost in place. The floor was to be of speckled black terrazzo squares separated by thin bands of brass. Confronted with the lobby's sharp-edged vertical and horizon lines, which made the space seem cold and severe, Rivera quickly realized that his sketch was too static.

Back in Detroit Rivera made a new one, returning to his original spontaneous composition. The ellipses were the "crossroads" of the macrocosm and the microcosm. A telescope still represented the feeling of the 72-story building's height, but behind it was a swirling of wheels and the disks of television. The impression was now one of movement. Instead of the static groups of his first detailed drawing, there were now only some background shapes with symbols of people. Where in the center of the crossroads he had placed a group of men – workers, soldiers, farmers and so on – now he had only one symbolic man. The section below was not detailed, but he planned to include the plants of the earth that nourish man, using the excuse to bring some color into the lobby.

The side panels at right angles to the main wall would remain as he had submitted the sketches originally. They represented *The Liquidation of Superstition* on the south side, next to where Brangwyn would hang his canvases; and on the north side, *The Liquidation of Tyranny*, next to Sert's work.

Interlude: To Detroit and Back

All this time Art and Dimi were working at Rockefeller Center, supervising the preparation of the wall. After the metal lath was secured, three coats of plaster were applied, with a wait of one week between each coat. I was busy getting my exhibition ready for the Delphic Studios. Many invitations were sent for the opening, then it was delayed two weeks. The gallery belonged to Alma Reed, the benefactor of Jose Orozco, and it was in the Carteret Hotel, where Alma had an apartment and where Orozco and his family lived. I was exhibiting wood engravings, lithographs and the glass sculptures I had designed for Leerdam Glass in the Netherlands. At the same time, Frida and Diego had begged me to come back to Detroit to see how the mural had progressed. Art lent his car to Dimi so he could take advantage of the lull between bouts of plastering to visit his folks in Flint, Michigan. So when my show was finally launched, we decided to make the trip to Michigan together. Dimi assured me he could drive there in one stretch (I couldn't drive). There was snow on the narrow road – no freeways then – and hardly anybody on Route 20. We kept awake through Pennsylvania and Ohio by singing and talking, but by 5 A.M. Dimi admitted he was too sleepy to drive. We parked on the side of the road, at what seemed a 40-degree angle, and he slept for 20 minutes. He left me at the Detroit Art Institute 28 hours after we left New York, and then drove on two hours to Flint.

Diary: Feb. 23, 1933

I was so excited to see what Diego had painted since November! The walls are like nothing I ever saw before; green-red flames and gray-blue steel, machines like Aztec monsters. Frieda (1) was happy to see me. She wanted me to stay for as long as they were still in Detroit and leave for New York with them, but I wanted to be back for my exhibition, not to miss any possible lucky breaks. Talked with F. for hours. Her new passion is applesauce, malted milk and American cheese. Her paintings (five in all) are as great in their dimension as anything Diego ever did. I showed her my lithos (which I brought with me). She and Rivera liked especially *Detroit-Buick* and *Bird's Eye View*, and Diego bought the Buick one! Frieda the other. They suggested that I

show the extra set of five to Dr. Valentiner, who liked them but didn't seem to know what to do with them. So I left them anyway at the museum. I helped Diego, tracing some little panels at the bottom of the huge wall. Cliff was sick! He hadn't come to work that morning. Diego was mad at him so he called Art in NY to come at once to Detroit to do the plastering – and hardly had Dimi arrived in Michigan than he was sent back to NY by bus to Radio City to do the supervising all by himself. That's some job for someone who admitted to me on the trip that he was only 22 years old. And I thought he was about 28. He left "Barlow" – the good old car that gave us no problems on that long trip – at the Art Institute for Niendorf to pick up. Diego gave Dimi final instructions on what to do in New York and some money for the bus. Frieda insisted that he take food along. We wrapped up some sandwiches and a few funny surprises. The next morning Art Niendorf arrived from New York by bus. He was put to work immediately at the job. We never found out what was behind Clifford Wight's sudden quitting. There was a rumor that he was a member of the Communist Party, and because Diego had sympathy for Trotsky "they" did not approve of him working for a "renegade"! [I didn't mention it in my diary because at the time this idea seemed too preposterous.] I too returned to New York after some jolly days with the Detroit gang. Frida and I saw Martha Graham dance one evening, then we went to a party at the Institute, where Dr. Valentiner begged me to put on my "make-up," an invention of mine. I picked a red rose petal from the decorations on the dining-room table, bit it in the right place and made myself horrible lips, pushed my hair forward into a bang and sang dirty French songs learned at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. Great success!

March 1

Back in New York to start 3rd chapter of this 12 chapter Diary. It starts with a strange disposition of mind, contrary to all that is around me physically. When I come to my exhibit (without illusions) Miss Ferguson at the Delphic Studios looks pale and tragic and wishes I had never come back! TWO of my statues were broken. The glass head that caused a "hit" was knocked down by a maid and busted, the other fell victim to one of Orozco's kids. Hardly any visitors came, and the gallery will definitely close at the end of the show. And no money can be had for the one thing I sold because the check comes from Ohio and all the banks are closed there which brings the total of banks on moratorium to 15 throughout the USA. All these catastrophes! I feel elated and cheerful. It means a change is coming in the world. I want to be in the depth of everything. So I was cheering up Miss Ferguson and telling her this was only the beginning of a storm gathering up everywhere on earth almost simultaneously...but I went to my bank anyway on 72nd Street, and drew out half of my fortune (\$200) to meet the crisis comfortable, being encouraged by what Henry Ford said: that it was "no use risking one's money with people who speculate with it." President Roosevelt was passing by in a limousine and there was a crowd on the street to look at him, and little boys were hiding behind cars and playing they were Zangara and "shooting" at the President! In the midst of the change, when President Roosevelt was inaugurated and the "bank holiday" was in full swing, Dimitroff was at Radio City taking over the job of preparing for Rivera's coming. He had a temporary shack built on the mezzanine with a good eye-level view of the mural wall. A large table was built where we could grind colors and prepare the tracings. A private telephone line was installed from a pole outside the window. Dimitroff went all over New York to find the best aged lime putty, and he also ordered the sand and marble dust to be delivered in another area of the mezzanine, where he installed the mixing board and tubs for our special plaster. The Plasterers Union let it be known that they would not allow anyone except union members to plaster the wall. The initiation fees were somewhere around \$1500, but as our type of plastering was very special, the powers-that-be, O'Rourke & Co., agreed after much discussion that Diego's workers could plaster – as long as we hired one of their union men to sit by. And, later, when Rivera started to paint, one good-looking fellow did come. He wore his white coveralls and cap, and I took a picture of him next to the plaster wall, which then had the lines of Rivera's drawing on it's third coat. These showed a soldier, a worker and a farmer together. The worker had a cap and looked like Lenin. Though it was there on the wall for a whole month, nobody ever commented on the resemblance.

During my show I hardly ever saw Dimitroff. I was appalled to find out that all the time he was working he had no money, and that once lacking even a nickel to take a subway uptown, he walked 60 blocks from his room east of Washington Square to the bank where Art used to draw out money from Rivera's account for the RCA job. He had to convince the clerks to give him one dollar for food! At that point I wrote to Niendorf begging him to answer *when* we could expect the Rivera's to arrive.

On the day after my exhibition closed, Dimi helped me take it down. We found a lost kitten, which we promptly adopted, and after we had left the artwork at my room we looked all over for some earth for his pan. New York was hopelessly over-cemented, so we went to the RCA building and asked the workers where we could snatch some sand for our kitten. They told us to go up to the 69th floor, where wall construction was still going on. The elevator was a rickety affair, without sidewalls and we shot up at dizzying speed, the walls on all sides whizzing down around us. The room we landed in was huge; two stories high, with a snowy balcony overlooking snowy New York. None of the fellows knew what was planned for the room, but we decided right then and there that it should be a restaurant. Half a century later, we have yet to visit the place. It did in fact become a restaurant – the Rainbow Room. We gathered up a pile of sand in a paper bag for the kitten, whom we solemnly named moratorium. After throwing a few snowballs down from the balcony, watching them disintegrate in their fall to the street, we walked back to the Village quite pleased with our “gift from Heaven.”

Invasion of Rockefeller Center by the Rivera Crew

For three whole weeks Dimi worked and waited for the Boss. He had not received any more instructions from Detroit and wondered if he was doing the work correctly. But to the workers at the building he showed no hesitation when he told them how to prepare the wall for fresco. I finally wrote again to Art begging him to tell me if and when the Rivera's were coming. They all arrived from Detroit three days later.

Diary: March 20

I met Dimi at RCA. We went together to the Barbizon-Plaza and looked all over for the Rivera's. They were in the Covarrubias' apartment [another Mexican artist whose full-sized color cartoons enhanced the pages of *Vanity Fair*, under the title “Private Lives”]. They look great! Diego is relating with hilarious gestures the scandal in Detroit about his frescoes. There are many “experts” who want to remove them – whitewash them. Puritanical groups are shocked at the big nudes. Some object that the workers in the factory scenes don't look happy. But the greatest of the commotion is the panel which some call “a travesty on the Holy Family.” This is a small panel, glorifying the great medical research work of science. It shows a blond baby gently held by a nurse with a pretty white cap framing her face. A doctor, the likeness of Dr. Valentiner, director of the Detroit Art Institute, stands by, vaccinating the child. In the foreground are the ox, horse and sheep – the sources of serums needed to control epidemics. A beautiful theme! Newspapers are having a holiday on the furor the mural causes.

Luckily Edsel Ford shows real GUTS not to weaken before the hue and cry of the bigots. I'm impressed. Maybe he's got some of his Dad's stubbornness. Diego says that thousands of people are visiting the Art Institute who never went there before. Indeed it was the largest crowd of visitors Detroit had ever seen in its museum history. The mural was saved and is now the pride of the city. We went with Rivera to RCA in the afternoon. Martin, the publicity man for Radio City, was all excited. He had been awaiting Diego for a month. There were lots of reporters and photographers, including Anita Brenner, a friend from Mexico, the author of *Idols Behind Altars*, who is a reporter for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. She's going to write an article about this new job. We put up the sketches against the blank walls so the newspaper men could see what the mural likes like. The large metal scaffolding was erected so we could start work. We enlarged Rivera's sketch, which had been divided into one-half-inch squares, by transposing it onto the one-foot squares we had marked off on the wall with a blue chalk line. On the third coat of lime plaster now

dry, we quickly drew the main lines of the sketch with charcoal sticks. Diego studied the work from below, the best angle from which to view the design as a whole, and when he had made a mental image of what he liked and what he didn't, he climbed up to the top left and went over the charcoal lines with liquid red ocher paint, correcting our efforts here and there. When he had finished, he called Niendorf to the top, to show him where he was planning to paint the next day, so that the wall would be prepared with two more coats of lime plaster, the final one with intonaco. Diego always started a mural from the upper left section, painting all the way across to the top right corner. Then the scaffold planks would be lowered about six feet, to the next tier. He painted an area averaging 30 square feet at a time, and if, the next day, he did not like a particular section he had just painted, it had to be scraped off, then replastered with number four coat and intonaco while the consistency of the rejected surface was not yet stone-hard. His assistants always hoped that this kind of revision would be unnecessary, since replastering was one of their most difficult jobs. The seams between the existing layer and the new one had to be smooth; the master would not accept the slightest flaw. We respected him for this perfectionism, and the discipline paid off when we started to paint our own frescoes.

Diary: April 4

When all the construction workers had left this evening, we went to Radio City to start at last on the real fresco job! Dimi and I place a huge piece of tracing paper over the section Diego has marked to paint. We trace it with charcoal. Then Steve D. goes to his mezzanine area where he washes his marble dust and mixes the plaster. He fills pails of "stuff" to bring up to Niendorf on the high scaffold, using a pulley from the lobby floor to the top. I stay in the shack to perforate the tracing.

The building is very dark except for the two lamps Art can adjust, to see his work. It's pretty spooky and cold; the only sound one hears is when the watchmen turn the keys to set the time on their special clocks when they make the rounds. They walk on wooden planks and their gruff voices echo. When they are gone Art starts a song and we join in, loud and clear. At three o'clock in the morning we take a break because the fourth coat has to set before the intonaco is applied. We go to the Waldorf for coffee. This will probably be the routine from now on. It's fun to be with these two pals, they're so jolly! Dimitroff looks fine with his wavy hair and his tartar face. There's a waiter at the cafeteria who speaks French and Spanish. Arts speaks a beautiful French with a slight Texan accent, and by now, having lived with the Rivera's for five months, I can break in with the odd "Como no, Hombre!" I've never stayed up so long at a job but I hardly notice because there's plenty to do. I had to wash Diego's brushes...about 50 of them, all bristle and all sizes, many of them worn out almost to the metal. It's the lime that erodes them. They were still dirty from the Detroit job, but as they have no oil or chemicals on them, just pure pigment, it comes off very well when shampooed with soap and water. When dawn crept through the open space where a sculptured Lucite window by Paulanship is to be installed at the entrance to the lobby, Art was still busy polishing the final coat. This has to be as smooth as marble. Like schoolboys the union workmen arrive, streaming in lazily, staring at the wall, some of them very angry that a non-union man is doing this...and all night, too! My eyes could hardly keep open when we went out for another breakfast. Sanchez came to relieve us. Dimi and I went to my place on Charles Street and we slept all day. It's weird to reverse day and night; it paralyzes all sensation of time. At twilight we went back to see what Diego had done. The section was almost finished. He was still painting. It represents war and fascism – airplanes, gas masks, death rays, men in gray-green masked contraptions looking futuristic, planes overhead bombing. The entire tone is gray and dull like Rivera's panel *Frozen Assets*. He is controlling himself to keep the mural in grays to fit with the black and white architecture.

April 6

I bought myself some overalls with blue stripes and Dimi got me a machinist's cap. Now I can scramble all over the scaffold and show off to the boys how well I can climb up and down over the metal pipes – something I can't do in a skirt. We worked all night again. There was thunder and

lighting. We braved the rain and hurried out to eat bacon and eggs at 3 A.M. Steve waltzed and swung me all over the street to the surprise of the few night stragglers on Sixth Avenue. The elevated trains rattled above us adding din to the thunder, but when one is in love even that cruel street seems full of poetry. I'll never be able to see it again from now on without remembering this rainy night.

April 7

Diego believes in Television! Ivan [my big brother, who was an electrical engineer] comes at my phone call from Brooklyn where he lives, to help advise Diego in Cathode Ray designs. Steve signed a pass for him to get into the building. He stayed all night and is thrilled at the painting. When we were about to go home to sleep, Diego asked me to trace Ivan's sketch after I enlarged it to scale. He doesn't realize that we have been up more than 18 hours. So I had about five more hours of work. It feels grand to be of help on this job; it's not something that happens every day.

April 8

I enlarged the entire North and South walls. Diego plans to paint them before the planks are taken down to the next level. He has painted the telescope section and still controls his colors. But today he sure loosened up! He's on the right side of the wall painting Communism, with women in kerchiefs singing, and red flags all over – and they're RED. The subject is "May Day Demonstration." He's working from his little Moscow sketchbook, which is full of drawings of a May Day at Lenin's tomb. He had been permitted to add "a slight amount of color" towards the center of the mural, but with the booklet reminding him of the time when he sketched this from life, he forgot all restraints. I expect some commotion about this new turn, but Frieda tells me that Mrs. Rockefeller visited him and climbed the scaffold to watch him work and said that it was the finest part of the mural yet. [I think later on she bought this little sketchbook from Rivera.] When I showed surprise, Frieda told me that Mrs. R. has a radical taste. She even wanted Diego to paint a copy of his fresco from Mexico showing the millionaires, John D., Morgan and Ford sitting at a table, looking at the ticker tape, holding champagne glasses, except John D. with his glass of milk! He would have loved to do that. It's right down his alley, but there is no doubt he was afraid the C.P. would pounce on him again for being a renegade and flirting with the capitalists. My reaction is that Mrs. R. has a fantastic sense of humor. Diego had been expelled from the Communist Party three years earlier for refusing to toe the line. He wanted desperately to return to the fold, but on his own terms. So it is to prove to them that he is not afraid of any capitalists that he paints the Moscow May Day with gusto and with plenty of Venetian red. On the other hand, the wealthy patrons, who know very well what Rivera's ideals are, think they can win him over. In Mexico, he painted all his great frescoes at a plasterer's poor wages. Here, [they think,] handsome fees will win him over to their camp, or at least he'll subdue his brush a little...

April 9

Diego is still working on the May Day scene all the way to the end of the right wall. He has men singing now. I took photos of details before the scaffold will be lowered.

April 10

We got up at 2 A.M. Diego is painting the Fascist side again, lower down. He's having a grand time with the microbes below the war scene. The colors are red and orange to balance the Moscow scene – but what a red! Weird tones representing the germs of syphilis, gonorrhoea, black pest, TB and other such pleasant designs, inside the ellipse. Ben and Lou brought him some medical books to follow. There is such a tremendous expanse of wall to paint that they tried to help him by painting the germs also, but Diego didn't like it. It was ripped off and replastered, as it was not his style. I think he has so much fun painting; he doesn't like anybody else to do it on HIS wall!

April 11

The kids [my brother and my sister, Suzanne] came while we worked this evening...they brought REAL BEER! Yes, Prohibition is over! When we came home at 4 A.M. the beer stalls opened up with crowds all around. One person was already drunk in the subway. It's another world to go there at night, around 3 to 5 A.M. All the leftovers of humanity are to be seen – pale, thin – even the Negroes look pale. They are the cleaners of offices, or the unemployed spending countless nights where it isn't too cold; the lonely ones; the late party couples in evening dress, half decayed with cocktails and boredom. It seems as though half of New York is awake at night – a half I never knew existed.

My diary rambles all over now, to catch some of the atmosphere of those days. We didn't know anymore if it was day or night; we often worked 24 hours without any rest. Because Diego averaged painting 30 square feet a day, he too was up that long. On four occasions he had Niendorf scrape off certain sections he did not like. On the first occasion it was a place below the telescope. He happened to come by just as we were pouncing the design. There was a terrible draft, and the tracing paper blew around and ripped. We blamed the wind; but the boss said it was our fault. I felt awful to hear him imply such a thing, but the boys were not annoyed at all. Another time it was the area just below the May Day demonstration. I had not mentioned it in my diary and only found out 50 years later (!) when I planned to write this article and was studying my old photos. I noticed that the section of the ellipse on the detailed photo was very dark where Rivera painted the stars, while the full mural photo taken much later had the ellipse with a swirl of white-gray nebula. Diego might have been painting his propaganda, but his sense of design was still foremost in his work. He realized that the dark area under the Moscow demonstration did not have enough contrast. The ellipse had to stand out as a luminous "crossroad." The same time I photographed the Red singers, I also snapped a scene from high up the scaffold showing Yay Sanchez standing near a peculiar star. It had a special rosy glow and faintly showed the hammer and sickle. Nobody caught that one, and this is the first time the world will know.

And while we are on the subject of sections that had to be ripped off, another change was made. Rivera almost always painted figures from real life. He knew he was a clever painter and could whip up a subject from imagination, but he realized that the variety in nature was superior. Whenever possible he asked real people to pose for him – his assistants, his friends, people from photographs. For instance, in Detroit the child in the panel labeled "a travesty on the Holy Family" was from a photo of the Lindbergh baby, who had recently been kidnapped. When Rivera came to paint the section of the mural showing wealthy women playing cards and drinking, there was not time to find anyone to pose. He did that day's work from imagination. I took a photo of the lady facing front when I heard he was going to redo that part because he didn't like it. It was removed and replastered. This time he asked Ben Shahn and Lou Block to look in the street for someone to pose, preferably a redheaded woman. At a subway entrance the artists spied two young women going to Grand Central Station to catch a train for Vassar College. They were so thrilled to pose for the great man that they preferred to flunk their exams rather than miss the opportunity. Rivera was delighted with his models, who took a later train, quite elated with their experience.

Diary: April 13

When we have time Dimi and I go off into the jumble of the RCA basement where the pipes and wires look like roots, where the pale electric bulbs create fantastic lighting. We can hear the rain drip from steam pipes. We kiss there as though we were in a Wagnerian stage set, and quickly, too, before the night watchmen shuffle along with their swinging flashlights. Steve is teaching me Bulgarian folk dances in one basement area already cleared of debris. I wonder what it will be when occupied? All I know is that whatever it will be won't be as jolly as it is now: our own improvised dance floor! The guards know about us. They brought Steve a little toy baby carriage made of tin with the compliments of "the Workers of RCA." There is one nice guy who has a little

cigar box of paints, and made a remarkable study of Diego on the scaffold – name is Bernsten. He's an ironworker. Where Niendorf plasters is the warmest part of the building, because of the three 1,000-watt lamps that shine on his work. Otherwise it's freezing cold; it's the draft caused by the large areas not yet glassed in. He always sings when he plasters, and we've learned some cowboy songs. We also join in with Mexican corridos Frieda has taught us: like "Quatro Milpas," "Corrido de Lucio," "Ticolote," "Sandunga" – and "Bandiera Rossa," and Italian C.P. song against Mussolini. Sometimes we go up to Diego's shack to sleep on the worktable. There's also a little couch now, put there for Frieda. Then every day the purple dawn comes earlier. The sun touches the top of the skyscrapers the way I used to see it on the Alps in Switzerland, and the windows glitter like gold. The workers shuffle in and ask questions about the work. Most of them are now quite excited about it.

April 14

Slept a few hours and sneaked off with Suzanne to Stokowski concert, half asleep. Free tickets from Mrs. Fishel. We were in evening clothes and at midnight I took her to RCA as she had no chance to see the work yet, which has so much atmosphere at night: the huge building still in construction, the darkness with the cold wind howling through it. She was glad she came. Some of the other assistants were there too who relieve us during the day. There was Noda, and Lou, who always brings friends to view the work so that it is always full of elegantly, dressed females when he is around. The workmen couldn't recognize me all cleaned up, next morning, as I stayed after Suzanne left. I went home dead tired: had only 6 hours' sleep in 48 hours.

April 15

At five P.M. we were up again. Diego is certainly a despot! When we have been up 24 hours (he too...) HE will stand in the shack for 6 hours or more looking over the sketch and counting with his big pocket watch how many hours that will take him, how many hours he'll sleep after that to give us a chance to plaster the next MILE. And then when he has figured it out, he finds a newspaper on the table and starts reading! It's with the greatest difficulty that we get him out to have some sleep. One time, at the Waldorf Cafeteria, he was so tired he hardly knew what he was doing. At a joke he laughed uncontrollably. It was painful to see. The saliva dripped out of his mouth and he hadn't the strength to hold it back. Then he calmly spilled six spoonfuls of salt in his cereal remarking that he hoped it was sugar. On the way out he stared long at a store window: he could have been asleep on his feet right then. Frieda, who had come to fetch him six hours before, could hardly stand straight herself. She was so furious at him; she stuck the meanest tongue out in his direction – like a little kid would do.

April 17

While the men are lowering the scaffold planks for the next section, and the floor has to be terrazzoed, we shift over to the South wall to plaster the large section Diego plans to paint. It's the *Liquidation of Superstition*. Right now it shows Jove, a huge white statue of him: the hand that strikes lightning has been destroyed by Man's invention of artificial electricity. The colors are mainly monochrome – a rose-gray-white with wonderful nuances, giving the scene an uncanny opalescence. I think it's great! I took a photo of the line drawing and then another when the boys were plastering the section below, in eerie light. It will be interesting to see what Brangwyn will do on that side. He is supposed to have the subject of "Man's New Relation to Man...the Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount." It will be on canvas, and this English painter is doing it with OILS in London!

April 19

Nelson R. called on Diego, is crazy about the fresco! The floor is now polished and looks very fancy. A smaller scaffold replaces the big one, now that we are working on the lower level. Diego has asked some students who have been watching him to come back tomorrow to pose.

Diego was now working on the extreme left side of the main wall; painting a group of young people listening to a professor (the model was Bertram D. Wolfe, who later on was Rivera's biographer). The students gaze through a huge lens, and toward the center they would, according to the sketch, see a scene of unemployment. But on the day Diego was to begin the scene, a violent demonstration took place on Wall Street in desperate response to the conditions of the Depression: Ben Shahn brought in newspaper photos showing the commotion, and Diego painted the scene directly from those clippings, with the police on their horses holding clubs, ready to strike. In the foreground he added three of the unemployed staring forlornly in the direction of the obvious Beautiful Set.

Diary: April 22

At last the time has arrived to paint the most important figure in the mural: MAN at the Crossroad! Diego looked all over for a typical worker, someone with brawn and brain. He thought of Howard Scott [founder of Technocracy, the rage then] but I dissuaded him. I think that guy is too fat and a Romany Marie freak. [She was an eccentric, jolly personality who reigned over her picturesque Rumanian restaurant in the Village, which was filled with the famous people of the day.] So he chose the night watchman who likes to call us by our first names. (He says he hates to work!) Diego thought that because he was hanging around most of the time, that man could pass without the Union complaining. He did and it was a very good likeness. When the workmen filed in the next day, and as usual gazed at the latest section of Diego's work, they began to snicker and joke. And a joke it is! They told us, "That man is Hugh Curry Jr., the grandnephew of John F. Curry of Tammany Hall!!!! He has a cushion job." Diego had us scrape him off at once. Then he chose a great-looking guy right from the workers there and the Union permitted him to pose. Steve was sent to Macy's to buy a special shirt for the model. It has to have a zipper, the latest invention. Luckily I took a photo of Curry's likeness before we obliterated him. I intend to make a day of photographing the whole mural when it is finished and the scaffold is off. We still have a lot of surface to cover, and we're not going to be finished by May 1st even though Diego is working furiously. It was planned that on that day we might be off to Chicago for the mural job Diego will do next at the General Motors building of the World's Fair. Something may come too in Minnesota, and I've been doing research at the Library on the Indians whose land was raped.

April 24

Rockefeller Center starts to look too damn civilized since the lighting fixtures are in, and there are twice as many workers now. This afternoon there was an article in the World Telegram about the mural. A big headline! "RIVERA PERPETUATES SCENES OF COMMUNIST ACTIVITY FOR R.C.A. WALLS – AND ROCKEFELLER FOOTS BILL." Apparently the reporter, Joseph Lilly, wants to start a fight like in Detroit.

We were too busy to read the whole article then, which was a good description of the mural. But one small item made us laugh because it was incongruous. It read, "Often Rivera's wife, young, slim and pretty, sits for hours beside him, knitting." Frida *knitting*! How ridiculous! We thought maybe he was trying to soften the blow that was bound to come. We kept the article, not realizing that this was only the start of a deluge of printed explosions. When we left Rockefeller Center that evening to return to our Village room, Mr. Lilly insisted on accompanying us. He tried to question us like the good reporter that he was, but we let him do all the talking, asking him to tell us about himself. At the Charles Street apartment we told him we were working long hours, so...good-bye!

Diary: April 25

There's another article by Joseph Lilly today in the same paper. He must have inveigled the Communist Party members who are artists, and the editor of the *New Masses*, Joseph Freeman, into climbing the scaffold to talk with Rivera, because in this article he interviews them. Typically, they denounce Rivera (since he is now a "renegade"!) William Gropper admits he is "one of the

best painters we have...but he has not portrayed to me the brutality, the starvation and the hunger as it really exists." Burke, a cartoonist for the Daily Worker, thought it was "too static"! Freeman, the editor, said that the Mexican painter's work in his native land was better, because he did not "state" condition, but "attacked them."

Diego Paints Lenin

April 28

It's four day's since the first headlines. Diego asked us to find a good photo of Lenin, either at 14th street or uptown at 42nd. It was not easy but near the Acme Theatre there was a man who looked just like Lenin! It was so extraordinary, I wanted to stop him and ask him to come with us, and I would call out to Diego at RCA. "Here's Lenin himself!" But I was too shy to talk to him. Anyway we found a photo. When we brought it to the shack. Diego explained to us what he planned to do now. It is an afterthought. He is going to transfer the group showing the Soldier, the Worker and the Farmer, which is at the far right section of the wall, and move the group where they will be more centrally located. On the butcher paper that covers the big table, and which is full of coffee cup rings and scribbles, he drew a small sketch of what he wants to do. This will be just below the ellipse of the stars and nebulae. The group he sketched is not as static as the line drawing on the wall. A woman nurses a child at the left corner of the triangular space. A soldier, a worker, a Negro farmer face forward with LENIN in the center, holding hands. Below are two lovers. When Rivera went back on the scaffold to finish the fascist section of the macrocosm ellipse, which shows the moon – a dead planet – and the sun in eclipse, I wasted no time. To protect his sketch from any more coffee spills, I cut it out with a razor blade...

The work continued according to the same routine regardless of the commotion the press had stirred. But another kind of tension ripple din the lobby. To hurry the official opening of the building, the shift of workers had doubled. Elevator boys in uniform scurried over the newly polished floor. Businessmen came and went. It had suddenly become an office building, but with a difference! For when our scaffold was entirely removed, we saw for the first time the fresco out of its bonds. It was breathtaking: a vortex of color vibrating, the disk of television, the electric generator swirling in a dark center, rays of poison spray at the left facing a chorus of singing people, the violent flesh-red ellipse of microbes swinging boldly across, balanced by the ellipse of stars and nebulae.

Diary: April 30

Now Diego has a large crowd of people watching him work all day since the building is open to the public. We came at night because he wants us to pose for the lovers, but he still has so much to do on the upper section of the Lenin panel that he told us to come back tomorrow A.M.

May 1

We posed for Rivera at 4 A.M. The top part of the panel is finished, with Lenin holding hands with the group. Diego painted him without his cap. Now there's no doubt about who is up there! He made a good likeness of the worker too. It's Bernstein, the ironworker who painted that fine sketch of Diego a while back. Diego asked us to pose in our overalls with Steve's arm resting on my shoulder. We're seen from the back: my little green woolen ribbon in my hair the only decorative spot. When Diego was through painting us, we went out to watch the May Day parade on Fifth Avenue. Policemen were glaring at the marchers as though they were carrying bombs. We had the day free so we went to Riverside Park and found a tree in full bloom. We were happy in the sun. It's spring. It's also the day Steve gave up his room on the East Side. He wrote his name on

my letterbox because now he lives with me officially. We may be a little crowded in one room but it won't be for long since we will be leaving for Chicago pretty soon. On the way home we looked at the shops in Greenwich Village. There's a shopkeeper who wants me to design a fountain, but he didn't like the price I quoted.

May 3

The female gymnasts leaping over hurdles were painted yesterday. Now it's the microcosm ellipse below the Lenin section. In contrast to the evil germs of poverty, social diseases on the fascist side, Diego is painting the womb and the ovum, the spermatozoa – the living, positive miracles of Life. But there's a weird ugly mass of cells toward the center of the Crossroad. Diego explained that it is the cancerous cell representing Stalinism, the growing worship of a totalitarian regime invading a great ideal. WOW! What a powerful conception – right on the wall of a capitalist building.

May 6

Diego has finished most of the north panel. There are rumors now something quite expected, that Nelson Rockefeller saw Lenin and didn't like the idea. He wants Diego to change the face for some imaginary character. So Ben Shahn wrote a "protest note" to Rivera saying that we would all strike" if he changed the Lenin head as such as act would weaken him as well as the painting. When Diego read it with some of our signatures, he asked Ben why head had written all this "in fun," and that he should have been more affirmative! That's just like Diego! Apparently he did try to compromise. He suggested that he would change the section of the "card players" and paint portraits of the great American leaders, such as Lincoln and Jefferson on that side, but he would never take out Lenin as that man represents a new future. Frieda told me not to lose a minute but to start making photos of the fresco since things might happen any time now. It is getting pretty serious if she warns me, and I feel that my role as photographer, given to me at the start of the great project, is becoming crucial.

Luckily on May 6, Rivera did not paint. Dimi and I were at the RCA building early, to move the temporary scaffold so that I could take photos of the front panel. Trying to include the entire fresco in the picture, I moved as far back as I could and used a ladder to climb on top of the entrance doors with my tripod. The light was awful, and I had to guess the exposure, so I took only two photos, one a half-second exposure and the other at three seconds. Even at that distance, I could not get the full wall in the frame, but I wasn't too worried: some professional photographer would certainly take a great picture when the wall was fully painted. I took one more shot from the mezzanine, showing an angle view of the south panel, *The Liquidation of Superstition*, in relation to the front wall. I saved the rest of the film, and we went shopping to get Dimi a new suit – his first ever – because his 23rd birthday was May 9.

Frida went to the movies with us on May 7, and saw a documentary about the Russian Revolution (authentic, with Trotsky, etc.). This reminded her that she had been present with Diego at a meeting May 6 with some important RCA people and a trade representative of Amtorg, the only link the USSR had with the USA at that time, as the United States had not yet officially recognized the Soviet Union.

"Would you believe it," said Frida, "if I told you that this guy repudiated Diego, that he called him a troublemaker who had nothing to do with the interests of the USSR? As far as they, Russia, were concerned, they washed their hands of anything relating to the Lenin painting." She added, "This meeting has been hushed up." When I, in my innocence, refused to believe this, she replied gravely that she wasn't kidding. She had witnessed it all. On May 8 we realized there was no time to dally. We went back to RCA early, and while the scaffold was back on the wall for Diego to paint, there were also heavy-set men stopping everybody who came in. They asked us our business, and a foreman we knew told us nobody was allowed to take any photos. We said we were just getting the wall ready for Rivera, as usual. In the shack, we changed to our overalls,

took up our paraphernalia, tools and the usual large sheet of tracing paper. My camera was already adjusted to a focus of one meter, the closest this would work. The diaphragm was at its widest, 3.5, the speed at a 20th of a second. I slung it around my neck with my jacket covering it. Having adjusted the lamp for plastering, Steve had brought up a pail of stuff and was scraping the wall to make noise. We acted very busy, aware that the detectives were all over the place, glancing in our direction constantly. Taking a deep breath, I took the first photo of the Lenin panel without looking through the lens. Because I felt I had moved, I took another. The next ones I attempted more precisely, hoping that Steve was doing something more dramatic and the eyes of the tough guys would be on him. At one point I lifted the Leica to my eyes, centering the Lenin head. I was satisfied that at least photo would be good, but what about the exposure? We picked up the tracing paper, which had been slung over the scaffold bar to hide some of the action, and traced what Diego was to paint the next day. This would be his conception of what was still only theoretical, The Splitting of the Atom. An arm rises out of the ground, holding in its hand a transparent sphere through which the atom is split. It was just below Man at the Crossroads.

A prophecy...

A big crowd had gathered by then. We went about our work, and then left to give the film to Fine Grain Laboratories, a German store connected to the Leica Industry. In those days it was the only place we knew which treated their special 35mm films so that big enlargements would not show grain.

Diary: May 9

We were at work early [today] because Ivan [my brother] was to meet Diego at the Waldorf. But though he waited there for an hour, the boss didn't come. The RCA was in a fever: more news from Rockefeller and the contractors saying Rivera must remove the Lenin head or they will cover up the fresco. Diego doesn't seem much perturbed. They just couldn't do anything to such a tremendous artwork. We went to the movies in the afternoon while Diego painted the atom, with Ivan's technical help. Coming back at 6 P.M. we found quite a crowd watching. I put on my overalls and gathered the pails, bumping into the crowds and a lot of men in uniform. There's electricity in the atmosphere! Mrs. Frances Paine, the Rockefeller art agent, was looking from the balcony of the mezzanine. I asked her if anything could be done in this situation. She is in the thick of it, seemed skeptical, said it was up to Diego to compromise. She said lots of things against Anita Brenner, who was standing below. Later, Anita talked with us in the shack, but was suddenly ordered out of the building! I was sure that it was a Paine's instigation, but heard that even SHE was ordered out. "It's getting hot!" says I to Steve. We followed our routine, regardless, going to the plastering area, with its smell of urine. That's the place where workers do it, so Dimi has put up a big sign: "PLEASE DO NOT PISS HERE." We mixed plaster for about an hour, talking of the future, when suddenly Diego comes walking toward us in his street suit, instead of work clothes – the first time he's ever been over to this area. Solemnly he calls out in French: "Arretez!! Stop work! I've been ordered to stop because of Lenin." I began to cry. He patted me on the back and added, "*Maintenant c'est la bataille!*" I was in such a fury, I wanted right then and there to smash the windows around me. One could hear streams of workers coming from all sides with boards and hammers, hectic pounding going on in the lobby. There wasn't any way to express our frustration, so we continued to mix plaster for another ten minutes, not believing it possible that that batch wouldn't be used next morning. Then we decided to write all over the windows, "Help! The murals are being destroyed!" But the white paint covering the windows was too hard to scrape off. Just once I scraped in reverse, so people in the street might be able to read it.

'SAVE RIVERA MURAL'

:but I had to hide when a guard walked by. In the shack were Yay, Ben and Lou. They had just telephoned the *New York Times* and some other newspapers when suddenly the phone was mysteriously silenced – cut! – though we had a private line. Then the guards ordered every visitor

out. They are guarding the entrances with revolvers!!! Workmen covered windows with tarpaulin so no one outside could know what happened. They added boards over the heavy canvas nailed to the fresco so nobody would peek at the painting. We emptied the scaffold of trowels and pails, throwing the water all over the floor in disgust. We were the last ones out – I, minus my little harmonica, lost in the shuffle – went to Diego's lawyer, Philip Wittenberg, from where we called up Niendorf, who was asleep! The rest is in the newspapers. No sooner had we left the building, than Dimi and I rushed to Fine Grain Laboratory hoping my film had been developed and printed. Two Lenin details were not too bad. We immediately gave them to the *New York Times*. Their first edition at midnight had two long columns on the front page: "RIVERA IS OUSTED AS ROCKEFELLERS BAN HIS RCA MURAL." The continuation of the story on page 2 included a photo of Rivera full length and breadth, but no Lenin. The next editions, however, showed my photo. What amazed us was that while the *Herald Tribune* and all the afternoon and evening papers printed that same photo on their front pages, they credited it to Wide World Photo – maybe not so inappropriately in the end, since indeed it was seen all over the wide world. The reactions set from Left to Right. Columnists, cartoonists and even the poets vented their wrath. E.B.White's 'I Paint What I See' was a masterpiece, and so was Miguel Covarrubias's "Private Lives" monthly colored illustration for *Vanity Fair*, which we had the privilege to see just after he had painted it. It showed John D. Jr. at night in the RCA lobby, peeking behind a curtain with a flashlight shining on Lenin's face. Unfortunately, I never found out if it was accepted for publication.

Diary: May 15

The whole affair is still hectic. It's even rumored that all this is a publicity stunt for the Chicago World's Fair. But the "joke" is that in Chicago they are scared to have Diego paint more Communist stuff. In fact Diego didn't send them the first sketches for approval because he intends to make a more radical one! The Barbizon-Plaza phone rings continuously. It is rumored that his contract with the World's Fair has been broken. The Rockefellers are absolutely silent. We had a United Front meeting at Columbus Circle where all the different radical groups met for the first time in years. There were ten-minute speeches by the various factions. The C.P. contingent yelled, "We want Rockefeller with a rope around his neck!" The others demanded "Freedom for Art." Days later the rumors were a reality. Our plans to go to Chicago were dashed, the Minnesota job went down the drain – but Diego was not fazed. "*Maintenant c'est la bataille!*" He was in his element. With the \$14,000 the Rockefellers had given him (two thirds of the original price of \$21,000, the rest going to the agent, Frances Paint), we chased all over New York to find a fresco wall for him to paint on.

The Socialist Rand School had a good wall in their library, but they stipulated, "No Lenin, please!" The Trotskyites had a very small office. The only radical splinter faction eager to give its wall space to us without applying brakes was the Lovestone Group (Communist Party Opposition). The place was on the walk-up third floor of a rickety loft building between Fifth and Sixth Avenues on 14th Street – a real firetrap perfumed with the long-lasting stench of stink bombs, compliments of the official Communist Party. It was there that Diego worked on 21 movable fresco panels from May to December, painting *The History of America Labor*. The wall's serial panels reminded him of the Sunday comics, which he considered a very important phase of popular American Art, and it was with gusto that he painted the dramatic and brutal scenes of his subject, rarely recounted in the official schoolbooks. The only panel, which was not historically accurate, was the ethical "Unity" panel. There Diego got Lenin's portrait out of his system once and for all: very big, flanked by Marx and Engels, Stalin with bloodshot eyes, Trotsky angry, with a fist salute. Some of the brilliant Bolshevik theoreticians are shown, two who were martyrs for the cause, and one of the many later to be liquidated under Stalin's reign. Finally, the foreground showed an impossible family portrait of the American leaders of the Communist factions. The enormous hands of Lenin hold them together. Dimitroff and Sanchez Flores stayed the seven months to assist on the project. Diego grew moody as the period of excitement died down. Frida was homesick for Mexico.

On Dec. 4 at midnight, when the last brushstrokes were applied to the wall, I took a photo of Rivera and Frida seated on the radiator at the School to celebrate the occasion. Diego gave a few lectures before returning to Mexico. We left for the Midwest, Dimi and I, to give illustrated lectures on the Rivera episode and on the technique of fresco. On the way back to New York we stopped at Dartmouth to see Orozco paint his remarkable frescoes in the Baker Library.

Epilogue

On a cold February evening in 1934, after seeing two feature films on 42nd Street for the price of a quarter, Dimi and I decided to walk eight blocks to the RCA building, like old times. The streets were deserted. We strolled wistfully to the entrance of the building, wondering how the fresco was, hidden behind its coverings. The doors were locked. In the semi dark we noticed about a dozen 50-gallon oil drums against the RCA entrance, heaped with what looked like small chunks of plaster. Horror of horrors: it was the fresco, smashed into tiny pieces – Diego's mural! We picked up some chunks to make sure. Yes, we recognized the brushstrokes of the painting. In one instant, all our hopes that the mural could still be saved were shattered. And it *could* have been saved! Canvas could have been pasted directly over the smooth fresco without any harm to the now rock-hard painted surface because the water-soluble glue that would have been used does not affect fresco at all. Someone else could then have painted a decoration, atop the masking canvas, and the mural would not have been harmed. We immediately rang the newspapers and Bertram D. Wolfe, who called Diego in Mexico. A new wave of protest rose among liberals and creative artists who were already distressed at the news from Germany, where the insane burning of books was only the beginning of a holocaust. Dimi met one of the RCA workers later who exclaimed, "What did you put in the plaster to make it so tough? We had a helluva time chopping that wall!"

In 1984 Dimi and I went to New York to photograph a fresco job I had painted 45 years earlier for the WPA at the George Washington High School. We decided to go sightseeing at our old haunt, the lobby of the RCA building. Diego's wall had been replastered, and Jose Sert had been commissioned to paint a mural there in the color scheme the architects had originally requested. The warning Diego had given them, that "limiting colors to black, white and gray will accentuate the funereal feeling, which is fatal..." had proven accurate, to put it mildly. The walls were creeping with forms floating aimlessly in a yellowed oil-varnish atmosphere that reminded me of what the French called in the old days, *degueuli de sergent de ville*...which, in a respectable magazine, cannot be translated.

(1) It was not until five years later that she changed her name to "Frida," dropping the Nordic "e" in protest against the Nazis.

Finis!