

Mexican Muralism: The Work of Diego Rivera

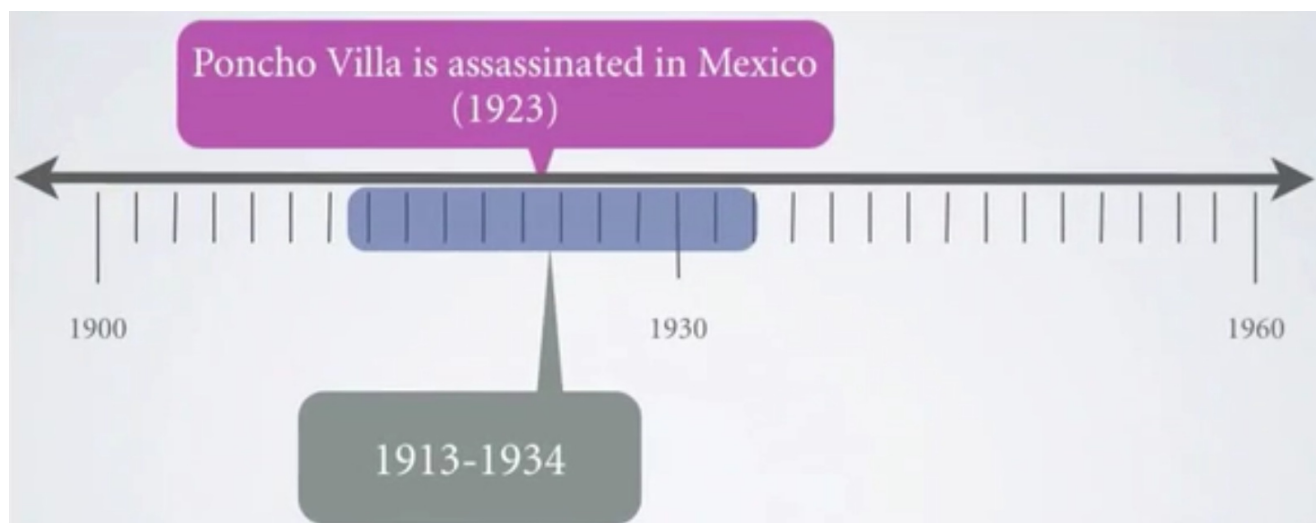
by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is about Mexican muralism, specifically the work of Diego Rivera. By the end of the lesson, you'll be able to identify and define its key terms, describe the historical context of Mexico during this time, and identify examples of Mexican murals. The murals of Diego Rivera reflect the political atmosphere of Mexico at the time and the goal of creating a more progressive image for the Mexican government. This lesson covers:

You'll be looking at artwork that dates from between 1913 and 1934.



1. Catrina Calavera

The early 20th century was an interesting and dynamic political period. World War I and the Russian Revolution took place between 1910 and 1920, as did the Mexican Revolution, which deposed the autocratic Porfirio Diaz.

At the end of the revolution and with the formation of the National Revolutionary Party in 1929, many looked at this time as an opportunity to create a more progressive image for the Mexican government.

This is an image of some of the revolutionaries:

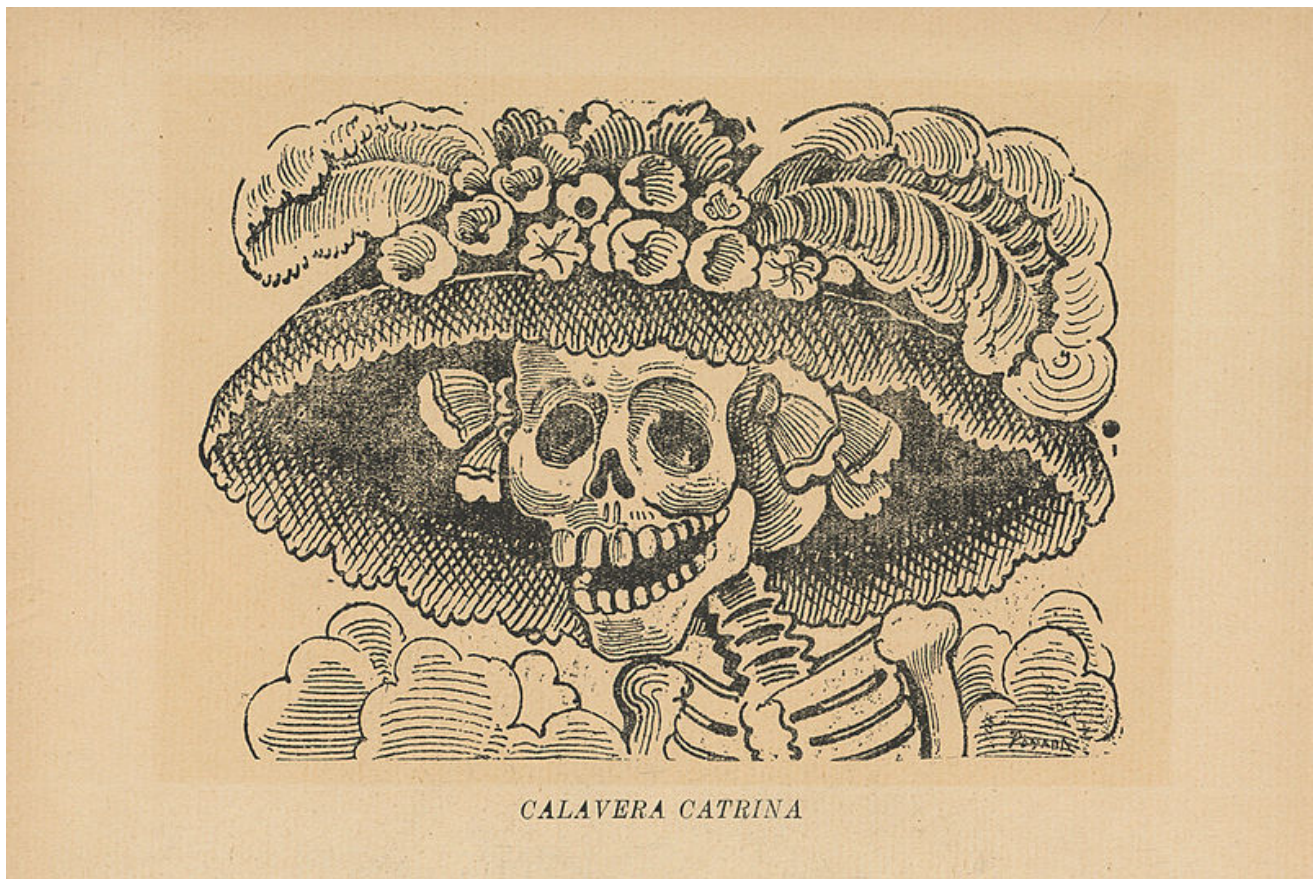


Mexican revolutionaries

José Posada was a Mexican printmaker who created the vast majority of his work before the Mexican Revolution. In fact, as Posada died in 1913, it wasn't until a French artist named Jean Charlot who was working in Mexico discovered his work that it came to the attention of the populace at large.

Posada made his living creating prints that addressed issues of the time. They were often satirical and with a visual wit that countless illiterate Mexican provincials relied upon to get an idea of the sociopolitical climate of the time.

This calavera image became very popular:



Catrina Calavera by José Guadalupe Posada

1913

Zinc Etching

A type of image associated with the Mexican holiday called the **Day of the Dead**, it depicts the smiling figure of Death as something to be welcomed rather than feared. This imagery struck a chord with individuals such as Diego Rivera in the aftermath of the revolution.

The broadsheets of José Guadalupe Posada (his full name) were inexpensive prints produced before and during the Mexican Revolution with lyrics to popular **corridos**. Containing tabloid-like stories and **calavera**/Day of the Dead imagery, the broadsheets influenced the imagery in the murals of the Ministry of Education's mural program, which came a few years later.



TERMS TO KNOW

Day of the Dead

A Mexican holiday focused on remembrance through celebration of loved ones who have passed away.

Corrido

A genre of Mexican songs that tells the history of communities and encourages political activism.

Calavera

“Skull” in Spanish, but also refers to images of skeletons that are used during Day of the Dead.

2. Murals of Diego Rivera

The Mexican education minister José Vasconcelos was instrumental in the promotion of education and literacy, with the aforementioned goal of creating a more progressive image for the Mexican government.

Both he and Gerardo Murillo, also known as Doctor Atl, an artist who studied and lived for some time in Italy, believed that the appropriate inspiration for artistic murals celebrating reform in Mexico could be found in murals from the Italian Renaissance.

The mural program was developed by Vasconcelos, pictured below, to help promote and achieve their vision of a new Mexico.



José Vasconcelos

The preeminent artist of this program was Diego Rivera, pictured below. He worked in Mexico City and died there in 1957. He was hired to paint the early mural cycle for the Ministry of Education building; the Courtyard

of the Fiestas and the Courtyard of the Labors.



Diego Rivera

Rivera was a controversial figure in his time. A staunch socialist and communist, he readily attacked major institutions, such as the Catholic Church and its clergy. Artistically, he developed a unique style of simplified figures in bold colors. He was influenced by Aztec artistic conventions, with a visual narrative style that could

be considered a blending of Maya stele and Renaissance murals.

He often managed to sprinkle in his communist ideology in his work; his mural “The Distribution of Arms” is an example of this:



The Distribution of Arms (also known as The Arsenal) by Diego Rivera

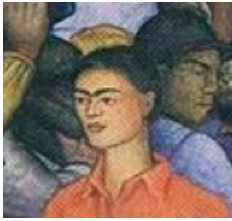
1928

Fresco

The mural is placed within the Courtyard of Labors in Mexico City, which located within the Ministry of Education building. This is one of several murals that are united by a red banner, which you can see at the top, with the lyrics of a corrido that wrap around them. Like the other murals of this group, the scene is fixed within a rounded arch, which would have blended into the architecture of the building where it was situated. The inclusion of architectural elements recalls the work of Renaissance murals, such as Raphael’s “School of Athens,” for example.

Rather than populate the scene with allegorical or mythological figures, as was the tendency in Renaissance art, Rivera includes contemporary figures that would have been recognized by people at the time.

In the center of the picture is Rivera's wife and fellow artist, Frida Kahlo. She can be identified by her unibrow.



The figure of Italian political activist/actor/model/photographer Tina Modotti is holding a belt of ammunition for Julio Antonio Moya, one of the founders of the internationalized Cuban Communist Party.



Rivera reached international fame and was commissioned to paint a mural within the Rockefeller Center in New York City, pictured here:



Man at the Crossroads by Diego Rivera

1932-1934

Fresco

This is the full image. It was an extensive and detailed mural filled with imagery of the changing times.

Focus in on this portion here:

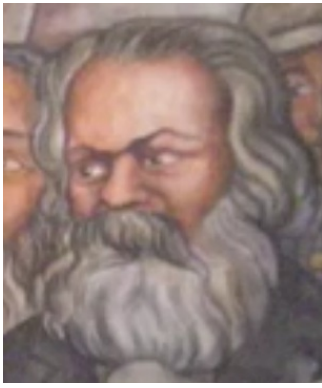


Rivera didn't hesitate to include imagery concerning his strong personal beliefs and political opinions, which landed him in hot water with Nelson Rockefeller, the man who commissioned and paid for the mural.

The mural included communist themes and prominent communist members, such as Leon Trotsky:



And a person believed to be Karl Marx:



These figures, among others, didn't win over many fans. The mural was eventually destroyed soon after its completion.



BIG IDEA

The murals of Diego Rivera reflect the political atmosphere of Mexico at the time, as well as a goal of creating a more progressive image for the Mexican government.



SUMMARY

Now that you've gone through the lesson, are you able to identify and define today's key terms? Can you describe the historical context of Mexico during this time? Can you identify examples of Mexican muralism? You saw the influence of the Mexican revolution in art by looking at a piece called "**Catrina Calavera**". The **murals of Diego Rivera** reflect the political atmosphere Mexico at the time, as well as a goal of creating a more progressive image for the Mexican government.

Source: Sophia author Ian McConnell



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