

Dividing Walls and Unifying Murals: Diego Rivera and John Dewey on the Restoration of Art within Life

by Terrance MacMullan

English Abstract

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey decried the estrangement of art from lived human experience, both by artificial conceptual walls and the physical walls that secluded art within museums. Instead he argued that making and enjoying art are crucial organic functions that sustain communities and integrate individuals within their environments. In the 1920's Diego Rivera became one of the luminaries of the Mexican muralist movement by creating frescoes that were rooted in Mexican life, both in their subject matter and public location. Rivera and the other artists working within the government cultural program guided by José Vasconcelos created murals that boldly expressed the new values of democracy, peaceful revolution, racial equality and cultural pride. This essay explores the deep resonance between Rivera's most prominent murals from this period and Dewey's argument that art is a refined and integral feature of human experience. In particular, this essay will examine the great extent to which these men independently came to the common understanding that for people to thrive and grow they need to create and experience art that grows out of and remains rooted in their culture. Without claiming that either thinker influenced the other, this essay argues that their works mutually inform and enrich each other. Both men sought to free art from the museum, but where Dewey urged us tear down the walls that separated art from lived experience, Rivera transformed walls themselves into murals that unified and educated the people of Mexico and restored their culture.

Resumen en español

En su libro *El arte como experiencia* John Dewey criticó el alejamiento del arte de la experiencia humana vivida, tanto por paredes artificiales conceptuales y los muros físicos que el arte aislada dentro de los museos. En su lugar, argumentó que hacer y disfrutar el arte son cruciales funciones orgánicas que sustentan a comunidades e integran a los individuos dentro de su medio ambiente. En la década de 1920 Diego Rivera se convirtió en una de las luminarias del movimiento muralista mexicano mediante la creación de frescos que tienen sus raíces en la vida mexicana, tanto en su temática y lugar público. Rivera y los otros artistas que trabajan en el programa cultural de gobierno guiado por José Vasconcelos creó murales que expresan valientemente los nuevos valores de la democracia, la revolución pacífica, la igualdad racial y orgullo cultural. Este ensayo explora la profunda resonancia entre los murales más importantes de Rivera de este período y el argumento de Dewey de que el arte es un rasgo refinado e integral de la experiencia humana. En particular, este ensayo examina como estos hombres llegaron independientemente al mismo entendimiento: si las personas iban a prosperar y crecer necesitan crear y experimentar el arte que nace de y permanece

arraigado en su cultura. Sin pretender que uno pensador fue influido en el otro, este ensayo sostiene que sus obras mutuamente informan e enriquecen mutuamente. Los dos hombres buscaron arte libre del museo, pero donde Dewey nos instó derribar los muros que separaban el arte de la experiencia vivida, Rivera transformó a sí mismos en las paredes murales que unificó y se educó al pueblo de México y restauró su cultura.

Resumo em português

Em *Arte como Experiencia*, John Dewey expôs a desconexão entre a arte e a experiencia humana, ambos através das muralhas conceptuais artificiais e das muralhas físicas que encerram a arte em museus. Ele argumentou que fazer e disfrutar arte são funções orgânicas que sustentam comunidades e integram os individuos ao seu meio ambiente. Na década de 1920, Diego Rivera se tornou um dos astros do movimento muralista mexicano, criando frescos que estavam enraizados na vida mexicana, tanto na sua temática quanto a sua localização pública. Rivera e os demais artistas trabalhando dentro do programa cultural do governo, liderado por José Vasconcelos, criaram murais que expressavam com ousadia os novos valores de democracia, revolução pacífica, igualdade racial e orgulho cultural. Este resumo explora a profunda ressonância entre os murais mais prominentes de Rivera deste periodo e os argumentos de Dewey de que arte é um elemento refinado e integral à experiencia humana. Em particular, este resumo examina como estes homens chegaram independentemente ao mesmo entendimento: para que as pessoas se realizem e desenvolvam é preciso que elas criem e sintam arte que brota e permanece enraizada na sua cultura. Sem professar que nenhum dos pensadores influenciou o outro, este resumo argumenta que as obras deles mutuamente os informaram e enriqueceram. Os dois homens procuraram livrar a arte dos museus, porém onde Dewey nos instigou a derrubar as muralhas que separavam a arte da experiencia vivida, Rivera transformou estas mesmas muralhas em murais que unificaram, educaram o povo mexicano e refletiram sua cultura.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and
kiss the ground.[1]

This paper examines the deep resonance between Dewey's aesthetics and Rivera's murals, in particular their shared commitment to experiencing, living and conveying art's essential and organic connection to human experience. Hopefully this study will enable us to better understand how and why, in the words of the great Sufi poet Rumi, both men came to kneel upon and kiss the same patch of ground. However, by saying that Rivera's murals embody fundamental elements of Dewey's aesthetics this paper does not argue that Dewey developed his theory as a consequence of absorbing Rivera's artistic genius or that Rivera's art was inspired by Dewey's writings.

Instead it would seem that these two men – who were so different in temperament and disposition – each charted their own, independent course to a common view of art as essential to life.

This paper explores the affinities and resonances between the groundbreaking murals of Diego Rivera and John Dewey's aesthetics, in particular the great extent to which Rivera's murals manifest Dewey's hope for art to work as a living and fully integrated feature of democratic culture and community. This essay frames this inquiry about the remarkable relationship between Dewey and Rivera within the larger context of philosophy in the Americas, in particular, the long tradition of Latin American intellectuals and writers who have offered wisdom on the possibility or impossibility of there ever being such a thing as a common Pan-American philosophical community or tradition spanning this hemisphere. The hope is that such a contextualization will both deepen our appreciation of the Dewey-Rivera relationship and more importantly will show that their important commonalities gesture towards areas where philosophical common ground might already exist or could be found between the intellectual traditions of North and Latin America.[2] This work follows in the footsteps of philosophers like Risieri Frondizi and Gregory Pappas by hopefully uncovering more common ground upon which a truly democratic and non-imperialist vision of cultural and philosophical Pan Americanism might be built. It will explore this relationship both for the sake of better understanding each of these figures, but also as a contribution to a growing corpus of truly inter-American philosophy that strives to "stimulate conditions more conducive to dialogue and memory." [3] It assumes both the possibility and worth of developing a common philosophy that integrates the compatible, life-centered philosophical traditions found in both Americas that share a common interest in the improvement and fruition of human life understood as a dynamic and aesthetic process.

I. John Dewey and Walls Dividing Art From Life

Even though Dewey was enormously prolific, a single thread runs through virtually all of his many works. Lamenting the myriad dichotomies that sunder the unity of our minds, Dewey argued that many of the entities that we have been taught to think of as being separate – mind and body, the political individual and the body politic, experiences and ideas, scientific facts and moral values – are in fact two interactive features of a single lived experience. Consequently, in almost all of his major works, Dewey strove to reunite things that had been erroneously, needlessly, and detrimentally separated. It should come as no surprise then that his groundbreaking work on aesthetics – his 1934 *Art As Experience* – shares precisely the same structure. It starts by positing a problematic separation—in this case works of art separated from life—and then seeks to resolve the problem "of recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living." [4]

Dewey identifies many facets to the problem of art's divorce from its natural genius loci within human experience. One of the most trenchant is the common misconception that art, especially fine art, is a collection of pure and sophisticated

products that must be isolated from the sullyng effects of mundane life. Dewey argues that we do ourselves a disservice when we think of art as a series of isolated *products*, by which he means the objects produced by an artistic process that are viewed without the necessary sense of place and context from which they emerged. Instead, he would have us think of art *works*, that is, art as a transitive and interactive feature of human experience; art that is a *doing* and not a *being*. Where the notion of art as a series of products feeds into the idea of art as a series of things that are made by artists that ought to be appreciated from afar and apart from everyday life, Dewey instead emphasized the need for great *works of art* that are engaged by a community that has meaningful contact with the works.

For Dewey, a true art work does something to the community of which it is a part, it expands and enhances their sense of meaning and opens novel and imaginative possibilities. Ray Boisvert elegantly conveys Dewey's meaning on this point in his outstanding book *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*:

An art work is a novel existence which first of all expresses its own combination of possibilities. In addition, its mediating potential continues so long as it forms part of the life-world. The interpretive frameworks to which it gives rise are as diverse as are the peoples and times whose cultures it touches. Art works liberate by immersing us in a fuller, wider world, not by removing us from the world.[5]

Dewey similarly refutes the common distinction between fine art and craft saying that "it is this degree of completeness of living in the experience of making and of perceiving that makes the difference between what is fine or esthetic in art and what is not." [6] Instead of evaluating art according to its rarity, sophistication, or monetary value, Dewey calls on us to evaluate art according to the ultimate purpose of "contributing directly and liberally to an expanded and enriched life." [7]

Unfortunately, historical, economic and intellectual factors have contributed to the current condition where we are alienated from art by the idea of art as being a series of sophisticated products, which leads us to think that we must protect art from life by sheltering it within museums. This diminishes our ability to be affected by works of art, and it denies the works of art the context they need in order to be meaningful.

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement.[8]

Our general separation and alienation from art is problematic for various reasons. The most serious problem is that we all *need* art, not as commodities or diversions, but as essential catalysts of personal growth and maturation as well as a necessary ingredient

of democratic culture. Dewey argues that making and enjoying art is the greatest proof that we are truly alive:

[Art] is proof that man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and that he does so in accord with the structure of his organism – brain, sense organs, and muscular system. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plain of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The ... *idea* of art as a conscious idea – [is] the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity.[9]

Artistic experience unifies and bridges different elements of our lives that might seem disparate and disconnected, showing us how these different facets of our experience affect and interact with each other.

In order to fully understand how artistic experience serves a crucial unifying function within experience generally, we need to speak for a moment about the importance that Dewey places in these special moments referred to as consummatory. These are the experiences that are so filled with meaning, intensity, or beauty that we might say of them “now that was *an* experience.” Dewey points out that while many (perhaps sadly even most) of our experiences are repetitive and end without any sense of meaning or completeness, there are other experiences that he calls consummatory because they do not so much signal the end of something, but a *closing* or *completing* of a strand of experience.[10]

[W]e have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.[11]

As living creatures we are drawn to and need art because it, like the rest of our lived experiences, provides us with the opportunity to experience these necessary moments of closure, completeness, and consummation. Art and regular life are at their best when they share this consummatory quality. Art only has the power to affect us because we are in effect primed for these feelings of consummation and harmonious conclusion by our currency with those fortunate moments when our mundane lives take on a greater-than-average significance or power. Similarly, aesthetic experiences can shatter the bonds of ennui and boredom that plague modern people and ignite our sense of possibility and excitement. Art’s power and currency is drawn from lived experience and in turn can replenish our experiences of life and renew our sense of wholeness by showing us what life can be.

While art enriches our lives by unifying experiences that seem disconnected, it also plays a vital role in that it can sunder old patterns, associations, meanings and associations, clearing the way for growth by imaginatively presenting futures yet unexperienced. This dual role of art within experience – both as a Vishnu like preserver and as a Shiva like destroyer – is why Dewey argued that art and democratic life bear a necessary mutuality. Art has a social purpose because democracy is not a static political principle, but is instead a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”[12] Since democracy is a dynamic phenomenon that lives within the face-to-face interactions of its citizens and *through* our individual and collective acts of aesthetic self-creation it needs artistic experience as an essential vehicle of imagination and innovation:

The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized No form of life does or can stand still; it either goes forward or it goes backward, and the end of the backward road is death. Democracy as a form of life cannot stand still. It, too, if it is to live, must go forward to meet the changes that are here and that are coming. If it does not go forward, if it tries to stand still, it is already starting on the backward road that leads to extinction.[13]

Artistic experience – not just the artist’s creation of new art that emerges from her experiential interactions with her environment, but also the audience’s experience of the art—is a crucial element in democracy’s movement of growth and rediscovery.

According to Dewey, being a citizen in a democracy means having hope that we can achieve greater individual and collective freedom through moral, intellectual and aesthetic growth. He asks us to think of participating in a democracy as an artistic endeavor where we continually imagine and engender ever-better political futures because, as Dewey rewords Shelly’s famous pronouncement, “[i]magination is the chief instrument of the good.”[14] Just as Dewey shows us that that democracy needs art to “meet the changes that are here and that are coming,” Rivera himself said his aim with this collection of murals was “to reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth, to show the masses the outline of the future.”[15]

Dewey’s solution to the problem of the social and conceptual walls that separate human communities from artistic experience that we need as individuals and as members of democratic communities is to bring art back down to earth by seeing it – and even more making and enjoying it – within its original context within experience:

A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.[16]

What is most remarkable about the relationship between Dewey and Rivera is that as different as these two men were – and in terms of temperament and conduct they could not be more different – they both sought to address the problem of art that was misused and alienated from life. Both men lamented the walls we have erected around art and sought to replace art to its natural and original place in life. They rejected the common treatments of art as being merely a representation of life or a pleasant escape that makes bearable the drudgery of life. Instead, they both understood art as an intimate and irremovable strand of life that enhances and enlarges experience. Further, while we might think of many artists whose works realized Dewey's hope of restoring the continuity between art as refined experience and the everyday experience, we can think of none who have achieved this restoration more fully and lovingly than Rivera. Rivera gave the Mexican people a treasure of art wherein all the events of everyday Mexican life – from washing, to mining, to grinding maize, to shopping – were represented in a way that ruptured the mundane experience of self and life and enabled the viewer to re-envision these activities with new meaning and possibilities.

Dewey did not seek to subordinate art to his or any other philosophy, but instead to use “philosophy as an incidental aid in appreciation of art in its own language.”[17] Diego Rivera, being an artist of great genius and daring, had different tools at his disposal, the most effective of which was his almost magical ability to transmogrify actual physical walls from being structures of separation into murals that not only returned art to lived experience, but also unified and healed Mexico after its centuries of class and ethnic division and civil war. However, before we make the case for a strong and meaningful compatibility between Dewey's aesthetics and Rivera's murals, we need to present comments from a notable and knowledgeable source that greatly problematizes any argument in favor of meaningful common ground shared between Dewey's aesthetics and Rivera's murals.[18] In 1933 – four years before spending a significant amount of time with Diego Rivera during the Trotsky trial of 1937—Dewey was asked by Mr. Phillip Wittenberg, a prominent civil rights attorney, to sign a petition condemning the decision by Nelson and John D. Rockefeller to cover over Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads*. The Rockefellers commissioned this work for the lobby of Rockefeller Center but objected to a prominent depiction of Vladimir Lenin. In his cordial letter to Wittenberg explaining his refusal to sign the petition, Dewey wrote:

While I think the treatment meted out to Mr. Rivera was unfortunate, and indeed disgraceful in its method, I do not feel able to sign the document which you have sent me, because I do not agree with its estimate of Mr. Rivera as an artist. He seems to me an excellent illustrator, but hardly a great creative painter.[19]

This response is odd for various reasons. First, it shows a lack of charity that is uncharacteristic of Dewey's general attitude towards the works of others. Second, this response is out of sorts with Dewey's frequent championing of intellectual and artistic expression. Thirdly, his justification for not signing the petition seems to suggest that Dewey only lends his support to artists that he deems to be good enough. That is, Dewey would support Rivera if only he were a better painter. This litmus is in turn odd

because it seems to violate Dewey's humble desire for philosophy to serve only as an "incidental aid in appreciation of art in its own language." [20] Nevertheless, despite the uncharacteristic nature of Dewey's response to Wittenberg, we are left with the fact that one of the relatively few statements by Dewey on the worth of a contemporary artist places Diego Rivera outside the ken of artists and paints him as being a mere illustrator. We will address this problem after examining Rivera's murals and explaining why they serve quintessential examples of great and creative art that is intimately associated with the life of the surrounding community.

II. Diego Rivera and Unifying Murals

Diego Rivera and John Dewey were kindred spirits at least in so much as they understood that art was not a collection of beautiful objects but an essential component of any meaningful life. Rivera's biographer, Andrea Kettenmann, writes of Rivera that "[a]rt was paramount in his life ... he saw it as an organic function, not only useful but life-supporting, like the consumption of bread and water or the breathing of air." [21] One of Dewey's primary criticisms of our sequestering art within hushed museums is that it removes art from the natural social and cultural contexts from which they emerged. We see much the same insight in Diego Rivera's description of the artistic epiphany that he experienced in 1921 upon his return to Mexico after 14 years of study primarily in Europe.

My homecoming produced an esthetic exhilaration which it is impossible to describe. It was as if I were being born anew, born into a new world.... In everything I saw a potential masterpiece – the crowds, the markets, the festivals, the marching battalions, the workingmen in the shops and fields – in every glowing face in every luminous child. All was revealed to me. I had the conviction that if I lived a hundred lives I could not exhaust even a fraction of this store of buoyant beauty Gone was the doubt and inner conflict that had tormented me in Europe. I painted as naturally as I breathed, spoke or perspired. [22]

Perhaps the best point of contact between Dewey's aesthetics and Rivera's murals is Dewey's simple admonition that our greatest aesthetic goal is "that of recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living." [23] The three great Mexican muralists—Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros – working under the auspices of renowned philosopher and Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, used their art to make the new ideals of equality, humanism, and revolution understandable, approachable, and meaningful for the Mexican people. Their murals "would be the visual gospels that created the myth of the Mexican Revolution." [24] The public art program directed by Vasconcelos fits well with Dewey's conception of dynamic and adaptive democracy because

[t]he educational use of wall-paintings was an important instrument of [Vasconcelos'] policy; by this means he wished to demonstrate a break with the past, although not with tradition, and above all, to establish a rejection of the colonial epoch and nineteenth-century European culture. [25]

Further, these muralists were contrarians in an artistic era when most high art was developing in a modernist mode that eschewed message, symbol or obvious connection to the experiences of non-artists in favor of a focus on technical innovation and novelty that was exciting for artists and critics, but held little obvious meaning for non-artists and often encouraged distance from the common and the normal (think surrealism and futurism). Instead, these muralists created public works of art that were *aesthetically continuous* with Mexican life in at least two ways.

First and most obviously, by creating *public* murals, Rivera made works of art that were *present*, even unavoidable, within daily life of Mexican people. These murals – ranging in style from the majestic *Epic of the Mexican People* (1935) in the National Palace to the experimental *Water, The Origin of Life* (1951), which decorated the cistern of the basin of the waterworks at Chapultepec Park—made artistic encounters normal and everyday occurrences for the people of Mexico, just as Florentines have had their lives enriched and their self-identities informed by the public masterpieces of Brunelleschi and Fra Angelico. This is a crucial point for Dewey, as he argues that if art works are to *create* a civilization they must “become a part of the environment, and interaction with this phase of the environment is that axis of continuity in the life of civilization.”[26]

Second, these murals showed what Dewey would call aesthetic continuity with life through their use of symbols and subject matters that were meaningful to the people of the surrounding community. Rivera’s murals radically reorient the experiences of the people viewing them. By taking routine actions that might normally seem mundane and unremarkable –making tortillas, shopping, praying, cutting sugar cane, working in a factory – and placing them in a greater context, whether it be Mexico’s Revolution or humanity’s entire evolution, these murals enable people to see the moments of their lives not just as simple, functional acts but as parts of the ever-flowing stream of life. Rivera’s murals work within Mexican reality both as mirrors and crystal balls. They reflect back to the viewer moments of her or his life, not as humdrum and mundane, but as esthetic experiences that are integrated and complete, where “characteristics that are subdued in other experiences are dominant; those that are subordinate are controlling.”[27] At the same time, the murals pull the viewer out of their individual and constrained point of view and grants them a broader perspective that enables them to see the changes being effected around them not as a riot of political and economic friction, but as an integrated movement – *an* experience – where the various resistances and tensions are being resolved and moved “toward an inclusive and fulfilling close.”[28] Just as the Italian Quattrocento masters were instrumental in transitioning Europe from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance by re-imagining Christian and historical subjects, Rivera’s murals effected a kind of humanist and democratic transubstantiation, where the beauty that had dwelled so long within ecclesiastical substance was transferred to the body of Mexican culture and life in a way that helped the Mexican people to reinvent themselves in light of their full history and culture and fledgling revolution.

While we find many points of connection between Dewey's aesthetics and each of Rivera's murals, one of Rivera's earliest works, his *Political Vision of the Mexican People* (1923-1928), offers a wealth of such connections. This work – whose 235 frescoes were completed by Rivera and his assistants in 1928 – was obviously a refined work of art that meaningfully impacted his community. Sometimes the impact was positive and uplifting, as in the case of the pride felt by the Mexican people who instead of seeing saints or gods, the rich or the powerful, saw *their* own daily lives and struggles as miners, dyers, workers and teachers gracing the walls of the Court of Labor in the new Ministry of Education. Other times his impact was significantly more controversial and less welcomed, as the reaction that the same work elicited from conservatives and elites with his eulogies for the communist revolution and his satires of the rich. Most importantly, his works gave flesh and meaning to the new beliefs of racial and economic equality, democracy, and the promise of the nascent Mexican Revolution. Arresting images that combined old and new symbols in novel ways—like the miner from *Exit from the Mine* being patted down by his foreman while his arms were outstretched in the pose of Christ-like crucifixion or the Mexican people of all different races, classes and regions mingling together in *Good Friday on the Santa Anita Canal*—helped his countrymen and women rediscover, remake, and reinvent who and what they might become once free of imperialism, racism, and economic oppression.

Dewey argued that imagination plays a crucial role in art, namely to effect a “welding together of all elements, no matter how diverse in ordinary experience, into a new and completely unified experience.”[29] We can find examples of this kind of imaginative welding in Rivera's 1923 fresco *Creation* in the National Preparatory School, where he created a work that he viewed as a condensed history of the world that demonstrated the combined evolution of the arts and sciences. Even more importantly, Rivera presents this history of the world using figures of different ethnicities, underscoring the promise of a harmonious ethnic cooperation and intermingling that he saw in the young revolution. According to the biographer Andrea Kettenmann, it depicts “racial fusion, represented by the mestizo couple; education through art; the striving for virtues, which teach Judeo-Christian religion; and the wise use of science in order to control nature and to lead man to absolute truth.”[30]

Great art is transformative, according to Dewey, because it “celebrates with particular intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is.”[31] This quote perfectly describes the power of one of Rivera's other great murals, his *Epic of the Mexican People* (1935), which Kettenmann describes as “three thematically linked murals having the effect of a triptych, allegorically depicting the history of Mexico in a chronological sequence of paradigmatic episodes.”[32] By presenting Mexico's history as a painful progression from a pre-columbian indigenous Golden Age to a brutal middle period marked by strife and suffering wrought by conquistadores, inquisitors and dictators and that culminates in a present filled with revolutionary promise, Rivera encourages his countrymen and women to re-imagine their present Revolution in Hegelian fashion as a penultimate

chapter in a sacred story of redemption that has been unfolding for centuries and whose final chapter of a fairer more humane future waits to be written by the viewer. This work is an excellent example of why Dewey emphasizes the importance of context and place for a work of art. Just as Dewey points out that it is impossible to fully understand the Parthenon outside its Athenian context, much of the power of *The Epic of the Mexican People* resides in the fact that it is a mural, which chronicles the Mexican people's journey from peace through war and back to peace, that was painted on the walls of the National Palace, which was the center of the political and military power structure that had for centuries oppressed the Mexican people since the days of Hernán Cortés who built the palace on the ruins of Montezuma's palace.

Dewey's philosophy is marked by a commitment to wholism or the tendency to emphasize the continuity and interactions that unite different elements or experiences. He lamented our tendency to separate different facets of our experiences. He writes "Life is compartmentalized and the institutionalized compartments are classified as high and as low; their values as profane and spiritual, material and ideal." [33] Perhaps the best example of Rivera's tendency to unify those things that are commonly seen as separate is his 1933 mural *Detroit Industry* or *Man and Machine* where he daringly represented the origins and paralleled growth of human life and technology. Just as his murals at the ministry of Education were influenced by his 1922 visit to Tehuantepec, his Detroit murals reflected his careful preparatory studies at the Ford Motors Rouge River factories. While we find a wide range of images within the 27 frescoes of this mural series – including doves and hawks, war machines, steam engines, women holding grain and fruit, agricultural scenes and even a small infant—Rivera wrote that these murals were his finest work, and that together they "form a plastic and thematic unity." [34] Rivera's penchant for uncovering the aesthetic within subjects traditionally rejected by more conventional artists for being too plebeian or crude meshes well with Dewey's oft-made point that aesthetic experiences are everywhere and that great art simply makes us more sensitive to and aware of them.

The most elaborate philosophic or scientific inquiry and the most ambitious industrial or political enterprise has, when its different ingredients constitute an integral experience esthetic quality. For then its various parts are linked to one another, and do not merely succeed one another. And the parts through their expanded linkage move toward consummation and close, not merely to cessation in time. [35]

Detroit Industry shows that Rivera, like Dewey, strove to reconnect in art all elements of human experience, especially those that were seen as unrelated or even opposites, such as industry and the fine arts. Also like Dewey, Diego was fiercely criticized for his willingness to make these connections. For example, Kettenmann writes, "In Detroit critics had claimed to find blasphemous, pornographic and Communist elements in his work, and held it against him? that he had admitted the raw world of industry into the sublime world of culture." [36] What is truly fascinating is that in this work Rivera not only strove to show the essential interconnectedness of man and

machine and art and industry, but also human past and present, and even the great cultures of the Americas. Rivera describes this mural in this way:

In the composition of the large wall on the right, the main currents of the composition come together in the center of the lower portion, in the midst of huge presses, in a realistic and abstract plastic, dynamic and everlasting, like the marvelous morphological representations of the Nahuatl cosmogony of earliest pre-historic America, that historic substratum into which plunge the roots of our continental culture, now on the eve of an artistic blossoming forth through the union of the genius of the South, coming from the depths of the North, to produce the new human expression which shall be born in Greater America, where all races have come together to produce a new worker.[37]

III. Conclusion

This paper began with thoughts on the possibility or impossibility of there ever being such a thing as an integrated and unified Pan-American philosophical tradition or community. In the passage above, we hear Diego Rivera hope for an artistic blooming that might usher into being a unified Greater America. John Dewey, for his part, seemed to hold the same hope as evidenced by the introduction to the Spanish language edition of his 1916 *How We Think*:

One of the greatest satisfactions I have experienced in the last years ... has been to observe amongst my pupils the ever-increasing number of Hispano-American students. Since a long time ago I have the strong conviction that the intellectual relations between my country and the brother countries of the South would become more intimate, the result would be of benefit for both sides. Our very differences of race and historical traditions are combined with the sameness of our social tendencies and the politic ideas to show us, very clearly, what ones have to learn from the others.[38]

This shared hope underscores the greatest affinity shared by these men, namely that they were fundamentally imaginative unifiers. Dewey sought to reconnect elements of human experience and culture that had been alienated from each other by needless social convention, misunderstandings about values and tradition, and simple bad luck. Rivera combined elements of classical European art forms with Pre-Columbian and traditional Mexican art to make uniquely Mexican works of art that demonstrated the unity of lives across eras, technology and the arts as well as the concern for poverty and justice shared by Marxism and Christianity. Finally, as the two passages above show, these men both hoped for greater unity throughout the Americas.

Despite the considerable and significant similarities shared by Rivera and Dewey, the fact remains that one of the few times that Dewey writes of Rivera, he refuses to call him an artist, calling him an illustrator instead. Perhaps the best way to maintain that Rivera's murals exhibit many fundamental traits of Dewey's aesthetics in light of Dewey's pejorative comments about Rivera is to argue that Dewey failed to appreciate the merit of Rivera's work and the great extent to which his murals performed the very

work that Dewey hoped art would do within a healthy and flourishing democratic society. It is hard to know why Dewey dismissed Rivera as a mere illustrator. Dewey was clearly familiar with at least some of his work and of course went on to meet him four years later in Coyoacan. Nonetheless, when we give Rivera a more charitable and careful viewing, we see that he not only fits the Deweyan definition of an artist, but his work bears many of the features that Dewey identifies in art that have been properly connected to human experience.

Dewey calls on us to evaluate art according to the ultimate purpose of “contributing directly and liberally to an expanded and enriched life.”[39] This trait is well-evidenced in Rivera’s murals. His work, and that of the other great Mexican muralists, has directly and profoundly enriched the lives of not only the Mexican people who walked under them day after day, but all the people from around the world who have experienced them through reproductions from afar. The murals enrich the lives of both the people who see them where they stand and the people who see them through representations. The Mexican art before the 1920’s – though beautiful and sophisticated—spoke little to the average people or to day-to-day life in Mexico. Rivera’s murals, on the other hand, not only greatly changed the way the people of Mexico saw themselves, but literally ushered in a new, more democratic and egalitarian way of being.

This in turn recalls Dewey’s argument about the interconnections between art and politics. Dewey does not see them related via artistic propaganda where the political message forces artistic expression in a pre-determined direction. Instead he argues that good art facilitates good political processes because the latter is fundamental a process of living imaginatively and creatively with others, and genuinely meaningful art stimulates our imaginations in ways that help us see new possibilities in all facets of experience, including politics.

While Dewey, in 1933, did not think of Diego Rivera as a great artist, he later described his notion of a great original artist in terms that well fit the trailblazing work of Rivera.

Familiar things are absorbed and become a deposit in which the seeds or sparks of new conditions set up a turmoil. When the old has not been incorporated, the outcome is merely eccentricity. But great original artists take a tradition into themselves. They have not shunned but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between it and what is new in themselves and in their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression.[40]

Dewey’s idea of a single artist who takes in and digests two competing traditions and forms a unified whole out of their tension perfectly describes Rivera’s novel synthesis of European and Mexican themes and forms in his murals. Rivera absorbed several traditions – ancient Aztec art, traditional Mexican folk art, classical European masters and even contemporary artistic traditions—and placed them in novel communication with human experience in his present. I think that Rivera, along with Vasconcelos, would also say that this is not only a descriptor of what makes a great artist, but is also of the

cultural and intellectual blending that has been happening in the Americas for half a millennia.

We see this theme of harmony and unity from tension most definitively in a Rivera mural that serves as the greatest monument to the unifying spirit that guided the lives of these remarkable men, his 1940 work *Pan-American Unity*.

The ten panels of this monumental work commissioned for the San Francisco Golden Gate Exhibition in San Francisco, California depict the combined cultural development of Mexico and North America and represent Rivera's hope that from the tormented histories of these two American cultures might emerge a common, unified culture. It is important to note that Rivera does not hold this hope lightly, as this work does not flinch from the brutal collective history of this hemisphere. Instead, it imagines a Pan-American future where equal cultural sharing will replace the legacy of empire, exploitation, and oppression. The predominant images of the North are engineers and scientists, while those of the South are artists and poets, culminating in a portrait of his wife Frida Kahlo who is seen painting in the center panel. Behind her Rivera places himself planting a tree with the help of his American assistant Paulette Goddard. Above them all towers a giant figure symbolizing the fusion of the two Americas. Its left side represents Mexican culture with Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of earth and death; its right side represents North American with an enormous steel android or pressing machine.[41] This work suggests that the culturally and artistically advanced South will share its gifts with the technologically and industrially advanced North, just as Risieri Frondizi will argue 13 years later in his essay "On the Unity of the Philosophies of the Two Americas."

Diego Rivera and John Dewey were kindred spirits in many ways, and not just because they both managed to incite hatred from communists and capitalists alike. Both men rejected false boundaries, like those that separated classical European art from pre-Columbian Mexican art, craft from high art, realism from surrealism, technology and culture, the sacred from the profane. Above all, they rejected the boundaries separating art from life. However, where Dewey called on us to tear down the conceptual walls that separated ordinary lived experience from artistic experience, Rivera's genius transformed the walls themselves and the ordinary lives of Mexicans and other Americans into works of art.

Terrance MacMullan
Philosophy Program
Eastern Washington University
266 Patterson Hall
Cheney, WA 99004
tmacmullan@ewu.edu

Notes

[1] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Coleman Barks, *Rumi: The Big Red Book: The Great Masterpiece Celebrating Mystical Love and Friendship* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 367.

[2] Throughout this paper I follow the well-established convention of using the term “North America” to refer to the United States of America and the term “Latin America” to refer to Mexico and the other Spanish and Portuguese nations south of it, even though Mexico is located within the North American continent.

[3] Guillermo Hurtado, "Two Models of Latin American Philosophy" *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20.3 (2007), 211.

[4] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkley, 2005), 9.

[5] Raymond D. Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 134.

[6] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 27.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid, 2.

[9] Ibid, 26.

[10] I offer thanks to Richard Bernstein for his critique of an earlier version of this paper that encouraged me to incorporate Dewey's notion of consummatory experience.

[11] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37.

[12] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* in *The Middle Works*, 1899-1924. Vol. 9 1916 (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 93.

[13] John Dewey and Jo Ann Boydston, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education" in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953* Volume 11: 1935-1937 (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 182.

[14] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 362.

[15] Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 79.

[16] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

[17] John Dewey, "A Comment on the Foregoing Criticisms" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6.3 (1948): 208.

[18] I offer great thanks to Guillaume Garrete for bringing this passage to my attention.

[19] John Dewey, "May 24, 1933" in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952* (Charlottesville, NC: IntelLex Corporation, 2009).

[20] John Dewey, "Foregoing Criticisms," 208.

[21] Diego Rivera, Kettenmann, and Antony Wood, *Diego Rivera: 1886-1957: A Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art* (Köln: 2000), 8.

[22] Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 72.

[23] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

[24] Enrique Krauze, Hank Heifetz, and Natasha Wimmer, *Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America* (New York, NY: Harper, 2011), 71.

- [25] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 23.
[26] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 340.
[27] Ibid, 57.
[28] Ibid, 58.
[29] Ibid, 278.
[30] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 24.
[31] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 17.
[32] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 57.
[33] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 21.
[34] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 49.
[35] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 57.
[36] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 51.
[37] Diego Rivera, "Dynamic Detroit – An Interpretation," *Creative Art* 12.4 (April 1933), 293.
[38] John Dewey, *Introduction to Psicología del pensamiento* (Boston, MA: Heath, 1917) translated by Jaime Nubiola as quoted in Jaime Nubiola, "The Reception of Dewey in the Hispanic World," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 24.6 (2005), 445.
[39] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 27.
[40] Ibid, 165.
[41] Rivera, Kettenmann, Wood, *Diego Rivera*, 71.