

Building bridges instead of walls: 'Paint the Revolution' opens at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

The exhibit will feature works from Kahlo, Rivera and more.



JENNIFER LOGUE
@jenniferlogue
jennifer.logue@metro.us

On Oct. 25, The Philadelphia Museum of Art debuts "Paint the Revolution," an exhibition dedicated to the history of modern art in Mexico from 1910 to 1950. A collaboration between PMA and the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, "Paint the Revolution" has been in the works for more than three years, and such an in-depth study of this period has not been presented in the United States or Mexico in decades.

While much time has passed since the days of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, the exhibition holds special significance in today's political climate, possibly fostering a renewed cultural understanding that could inspire the building of bridges instead of "walls."

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 and eventually led to remov-



"Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States," 1932, by Frida Kahlo. BANCO DE MEXICO DIEGO RIVERA FRIDA KAHLO MUSEUMS TRUST, MEXICO, D.F./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

ing Porfirio Diaz from power. Curator Mark Castro explains: "His goal had been to modernize the country, keep Mexico stable and productive and

very much modeled on European ideals of culture."

He continues: "By 1920, the revolution has ended and what begins is

sort of a postrevolutionary period where they try to take a lot of the ideas that spurred the revolution and enact them into political and cultural and

social reform."

One of these ideas was to bring education to everyone and art was seen as an important vehicle of

doing so at the time.

"The vast majority of Mexicans were poor farmers, and art was a way of giving everyone a sense that they had a common culture and a common future together," Castro says.

Fellow curator Matthew Affron says that modern artists in Mexico didn't completely give up on European influences but instead "mixed those ideas with Mexican folk culture and other non-elite culture" to create something "quite distinct."

With the government's involvement, modern art in Mexico became socially conscious.

"Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, for example, get signed up by the government to make big murals for public spaces," says Affron. "Mexican mural painting quickly became very interesting around the world as



Matthew Affron and Mark Castro, curators for "Paint the Revolution" PROVIDED

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"Dance in Tehuantepec," 1928, by Diego Rivera BANCO DE MEXICO DIEGO RIVERA FRIDA KAHLO MUSEUMS TRUST, MEXICO, D.F./ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



Married Mexican painters Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) talk together in the garden, near the porch of Kahlo's home, Mexico City, 1937. GETTY IMAGES

a model for socially engaged modern art."

The mural movement in Mexico inspired a lot of Works Progress Administration programs in the 1930s that put many Americans to work. Its influence continues today

locally with Philly's own Mural Arts Program.

"The Mural Arts Program is something which has made an impact in Philadelphia, in all the neighborhoods of Philadelphia and is inspired by this idea that art can have

a positive social function," says Affron.

Both Castro and Affron emphasize the relationship between Mexico and the United States during this period as having multiple elements, a theme that still resonates.

"To see it as a relationship of cooperation or to see it as a relationship of tension — there was no one way to see it," explains Affron. "The Frida Kahlo painting 'Self-Portrait on the Border' is a

great example of this."

In the famous painting, Kahlo stands caught between two worlds, as she traveled with her husband, Diego Rivera, back and forth between the two countries as he completed commissions in New York, San Francisco and Detroit.

"One one side you have an image of a very industrial Detroit — a symbol of the U.S. as a country of

modern technology. On the other side, you have an image of Aztec Mexico. It's ancient versus modern, the south versus the north. And there she is, holding a Mexican flag, while the American flag is flying in the sky over her left shoulder," describes Affron.

"Self-Portrait on the Border Line of Mexico and the United States" will be on display at the exhibit, as will full-size digital

projections of Rivera's famous murals.

"If nothing else, I'd like visitors to walk out of the show and think: 'Wow. There's a lot to be said for exploring our similarities and differences together rather than apart,'" says Castro.

"Paint the Revolution" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art will run from Oct. 25 to Jan. 8. Tickets are available at philamu-seum.org.

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