

American MASTERS

thirteen
WNET NEW YORK

450 West 33rd Street
New York, NY 10001-2605
thirteen.org

press information



AMERICAN MASTERS
is produced for PBS
by Thirteen/WNET
New York

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK'S *AMERICAN MASTERS* EXPLORES THE PASSION AND POLITICS OF A FAMED MEXICAN MURALIST WITH AN ENCORE PRESENTATION OF *RIVERA IN AMERICA*, SEPTEMBER 19 ON PBS

Features Interviews With Artists Lucienne Bloch And Steve Dimitroff, Architect Michael Goodman, And Photographer Peter Stackpole

"All art is propaganda. The only difference is the kind of propaganda."

– Diego Rivera

In 1933, Nelson Rockefeller commissioned Diego Rivera, an outspoken activist, to paint *Man at the Crossroads*, a mural that would cover the lobby wall of the RCA Building in the newly constructed Rockefeller Center. A few months later, after confrontation and controversy, Rockefeller paid the artist his fee and blasted the mural off the wall. Rivera's work had often elicited strong reactions – from critics, from the public, from his patrons, even from his fellow Communists – but it had never before been subject to total destruction. The artist's brief but stormy residence in the United States forms the centerpiece of *AMERICAN MASTERS Rivera in America*, which encores Wednesday, September 19 at 10 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings), following the premiere of *AMERICAN MASTERS Orozco: Man of Fire*. *Rivera in America*, which won first prize in the National Latino Film and Video Festival, originally aired in 1988.

Rivera in America is an Alturas Films production in association with *AMERICAN MASTERS*. The film is narrated by writer, director and actor Luis Valdez. The program is produced and directed by Rick Tejada-Flores, who co-directed *Man of Fire*. Susan Lacy is creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*.

- more -

A major figure in 20th-century art, Diego Rivera continues to have a profound effect on the global art world. His vision of a new form that could reach, and celebrate, the working man was fueled by the classic Renaissance frescoes he studied in Italy. Rivera's fusion of frescoes with the modern art and architecture in public buildings and spaces was a central force in the development of a national art movement in Mexico. His bold, visionary images sought to chronicle the history and culture of his nation, depicting the interaction of immense forces: continents and civilizations on the move, and the conflicts and upheavals of scientific, political and social change.

He once said: "An artist is above all a human being...if the artist can't feel everything that humanity feels...if he won't put down his magic brush and head the fight against the oppressor, then he isn't a great artist."

Perhaps Rivera's greatest legacy is the impact he had on America's conception of public art. In depicting scenes of American life on the walls of community buildings, Rivera – along with muralist José Clemente Orozco and painter David Alfaro Siqueiros – provided the inspiration for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's WPA program, which put scores of American artists to work adorning municipal structures and environments during the Depression years.

In a series of visits to America, from 1930 to 1939, Rivera brought his unique vision to public spaces and galleries, causing much controversy and debate. *Rivera in America* traces the artist's years in the United States through newspaper accounts and interviews with his former assistants, through film clips and photographs of the artist at work. The result is an assessment of his accomplishments in America and the impact he had on the development of American arts.

The film also tracks Rivera's artistic development, showing examples of his early work as well as his Mexican masterpieces, and documents how he emerged from Europe with a sense of form and color all his own. Color photographs of his works in Mexico and America demonstrate the luminous density of his forms.

In 1932, at the height of the Depression, Rivera arrived in Detroit where, at the behest of Edsel Ford, he began a paean to the American worker that was to cover the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts. *Rivera in America* draws on some remarkable footage of the artist at work on the Detroit mural, taken so that Ford could chart Rivera's progress. When the work was completed, Rivera once again found himself the center of a swirl of controversy, this time over one panel, *Vaccination*, which conservative religious groups saw as a travesty of the Holy Family. Edsel Ford decided in favor of the artist – the mural stayed, and the furor eventually died down.

Rivera did not, however, fare nearly so well in his association with the Rockefellers in New York City. Commissioned to paint *Man at the Crossroads*, Rivera depicted several scenes of modern life, including a giant May Day demonstration of workers marching with red banners. It was not the subject matter of the panel that inflamed his patrons, but the clear portrait of Lenin that incensed the Rockefellers. When Rivera refused to remove the portrait, they ordered him to stop work on the mural and later destroyed it. The documentary shows the only record of Rivera's original mural, a black-and-white photograph taken by one of his assistants – a photograph that the artist used to recreate the piece upon his return to Mexico.

Through still photographs and the reminiscences of friends, the film also follows Rivera's personal life, which was as dramatic as his controversial commissions for the Fords and the Rockefellers. He had a tumultuous relationship with his third wife, Frida Kahlo, a famous painter in her own right, who divorced him for his womanizing in 1939, only to marry him again in 1940. Rivera was a larger-than-life, homely man, over six feet tall and nearly 300 pounds. Kahlo was a tiny, exotic beauty.

Rivera in America is an Alturas Films production in association with **AMERICAN MASTERS**. The film is narrated by writer, director, and actor Luis Valdez. The program is produced and directed by Rick Tejada-Flores, who co-directed *Man of Fire*. Susan Lacy is creator and executive producer of **AMERICAN MASTERS**.

To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site (www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

AMERICAN MASTERS is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, a duPont-Columbia and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 17 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

AMERICAN MASTERS is made possible by the support of the NEA and by the CPB. Additional funding for *AMERICAN MASTERS* is provided by Rosalind P. Walter, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, Jack Rudin, The Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Lead Trusts, The André and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation, and public television viewers. More information about *AMERICAN MASTERS* can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

.....

Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as The Ethnic Heritage Specials, The Thirteen Walking Tours, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects - including the Celebration of Teaching and Learning - as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

.....

Press Contacts:

Donna Williams

Thirteen/WNET New York

212.560.8030

williamsd@thirteen.org

Debra Falk

Thirteen/WNET New York

212.560.3013

falk@thirteen.org