The Power of Paint:
Diego Rivera and the Role of the Artist in Communities

Overview
Students will examine Diego Rivera’s Self-portrait and Market Scene, using the works as a basis for understanding Rivera’s political ideals and mission to instill historical awareness and pride in indigenous Mexican culture through art. Students will then make self-portraits that illustrate their own cultural background.

Age Group
Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Length of Lesson
Two 40-minute lessons

Rationale
By studying Rivera, students will consider the important role art plays in various communities and see how the artist can become a powerful voice for his or her community. Through drafting and revising their own projects, they will learn to communicate their own ideas distinctively yet effectively.

Objectives
Students will be able to:

• Identify and discuss at least 2 aspects of Rivera’s works, e.g. color, mood, subject matter
• Critique each other’s drafts and make at least 1 point
• Complete an artwork that expresses at least 3 things about their own cultural background

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection
Visual Arts:
• **Standard 7: Roles of Artists in Communities**
  7.2 (grades 6-8): “Describe the roles of artists in specific cultures and periods, and compare similarities and differences in these roles, considering such aspects as: the conditions under which artists created, performed, and/or exhibited work” etc.
7.6 (grades 9-12): “Describe various roles that artists serve, cite representative individuals” etc.

- **Standard 4: Drafting, Revising, and Exhibiting**
  4.8 (grades 6-8): “Create and prepare artwork for group or individual public exhibitions.”
  4.10 (grades 9-12): “Demonstrate the ability to develop an idea through multiple stages, responding to criticism and self-assessment.”

- **Standard 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts**
  6.3: “Interpret the meanings of artistic works by explaining how the subject matter and/or form reflect the events, ideas, religions, and customs of people living at a particular time in history.”

**Materials**

- Images of Rivera’s *Self-portrait* and *Market Scene* and a way to display them to the class (alternatively, 1 color copy of each picture for every 4 students)
- Plain, white construction paper
- Paper for drafting
- Drawing and coloring materials, e.g. pencils, oil pastels, watercolor pencils, charcoal, or acrylic paint and brushes
- Colored construction paper for making backings
- A way to hang the pictures up, e.g. masking tape, push pins, etc.
- **Optional**: Images of local public artworks—statues, murals, memorials, local parades and festivals.

**Lesson**

**Day 1: Discussion and Drafting**

1. **Warm-up**: Ask students about local spots where they see art—murals on buildings, cafés with art for sale, statues and memorials. What do they depict? What purpose do these objects serve? If they commemorate people or events, why are these people or events important? Get them to think about the role the visual arts play in their own communities: How the arts can help recall local history and culture; how they decorate public spaces. Include parades and performing arts as well.
   - If desirable, display images of these local works and events while discussing them. Or, if any monuments exist nearby, go see them.

2. Show Rivera’s *Self-portrait* and invite responses first. What do you notice? What do they think of the colors—what mood do the colors create? How would you define the man’s expression? Why? How old do you think he is? What more can we guess about him just by looking? Point to the “letter.” What do they think it is? Translate or have a student translate and explain what the inscription does (see *About the Art*).
3. Explain who Diego Rivera was, using the About the Art sheet. Focus particularly on his work as a muralist for public buildings and explain his role in his community. He too made the kind of art you’ve discussed—murals designed to tell people about their own history and culture. Describe his attitude toward indigenous culture, his political and social ideals, and his goals for his art: To reveal the legacy of colonialism as well as instill national and cultural pride. He used his commissions for large public works to communicate as well as beautify.

4. Show Market Scene and discuss. Ask the students: What is going on in this picture? Who are these people? What do they think of their expressions? The colors? How do they think it was made? How can they tell? What is the mood of the painting? Explain that this is a detail, made by Rivera, of his larger mural titled The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos at the Palace of Cortez in Mexico. The whole mural depicts the history of that part of Mexico. Here, he’s showing how the Spaniards conquered and ruled the native Aztecs in the 1520s. How does Rivera show us what event/period this is? What is his attitude toward it?

5. Prep for hands-on: Explain to the students that they’re going to make self-portraits like Rivera’s that tell about their own cultural heritage. Get ideas going by asking students about their background. What are some traditions that they still celebrate at home? What are other ways in which the students show/express their cultural heritage?

6. Hand out paper and pencils for drafting. Instruct students to outline their portraits and include at least 3 details that say something about their cultural background. These can be objects, background scene or pattern, their clothes, etc. There should also be an inscription on the bottom. Give them 10 minutes to brainstorm and sketch their ideas. Have them finish the draft as homework (encourage them to use a mirror!)

**Day 2: Finishing the Project**

1. Divide students into pairs. Have them explain their portraits and choice of detail to their partner, after which the partner should give them feedback. The partner should mention at least 2 things that they like and give 1 suggestion. They should consider questions like: Can I tell which details are related to the other’s particular culture? What do they tell me about that culture? Is that what the artist (my partner) wants me to see? The students should help each other develop a portrait that clearly conveys something about their heritage that the other students can perceive.

2. Hands-on project! Distribute the white construction paper and drawing materials. Now students get to make the final version of their portraits, using their drafts and the feedback their partners gave. Remind them to include inscriptions, like Rivera did, which gives their name, the occasion, and perhaps what culture(s) they are representing.

3. Have students glue their finished portraits onto a construction paper backing in the color of their choice.
4. Use 10-15 minutes to have each student come forward and briefly explain their portrait and choice of details.

5. Hang up the pictures around the classroom or in the hall. Keep the pictures up all week or longer for the kids to examine and enjoy!
About the Art


The artist: Diego Rivera

Diego Rivera is best known for his large-scale public murals created in various locations in Mexico as well as in America, but he also painted works on canvas, including twenty self-portraits. A passionate communist, he believed strongly in promoting the working poor and indigenous peoples of Mexico through his art.

Rivera was born in 1886, the son of a politically active schoolteacher interested in social reform. Already as a teenager, the governor of Veracruz sponsored a trip to Europe for Rivera, which began his life-long relationship with powerful government officials and businessmen who appreciated art and recognized it as a means of wide-reaching communication. In Spain and later Paris, Rivera was influenced by Cubism, but he eventually rejected that movement as “too technical, fixed and restricted for what I wanted to say.” He turned to *social realism*, a realistic style focused on social and racial injustice, economic hardship, and glorification of the working class.

By 1922, Rivera had joined the Mexican Communist Party (MCP) and had co-founded the Revolutionary Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors. During the 1920s, Rivera protested against American holdings and expansion in Mexico and against the concentration of land ownership among the powerful few. However, Rivera considered himself an artist first and a communist second. His government commissions and questioning of party platforms made him unpopular in the party, and he was excluded in 1929.

Rivera used his relationships with government officials, especially Dwight Morrow, the US ambassador to Mexico from 1927 to 1930, both to further his own career and social agenda. (It was Morrow’s wife, a Smith alumna, who donated *Market Scene* to Smith College.) Rivera also published a personal statement in 1929 and asserted the socially-engaged nature of his art, but his personal ambition and radical politics made him controversial to both left- and right-wing people. He continued to paint numerous public murals for businessmen and officials in San Francisco, New York and Mexico.

The works: *Self-Portrait*

Throughout his lifetime, Rivera portrayed himself approximately twenty times in a variety of media—including easel paintings, drawings, murals, and prints—over a period of nearly fifty
years beginning in 1906, when he was still a student, until 1951, six years before his death. His self-portraits reject vanity; they depict everything from his warts to his bulging, doubting, quizzical eyes. Later in life, when old age affected his health, Rivera remained ruthless in his personal portrayals.

For this portrait, the artist chose to use natural earthy tones, which possibly refers to his Mexican roots and that culture’s connection to the land and nature. The painting is dedicated to Irene Rich, an American film actress, by means of a ‘letter’ or inscription that reads in translation: “I painted this for the beautiful and famous artist Irene Rich, and it was done in the city of Santa Barbara, Southern California during the month of January of 1941 Diego Rivera.” Rivera was staying at Rich’s house to paint a portrait of Rich’s daughter Frances, a Smith alumna. He stayed to finish *Self-Portrait*, then a commission for a collector from New York. Rich bought the *Self-Portrait* instead and Rivera stayed to finish another self-portrait for the collector. The use of the inscription derives from the Spanish tradition that was introduced in Mexico during the colonial period, in which portraits and votive paintings included often lengthy inscriptions that relate to the sitter or to the event portrayed.

The portrait makes no reference to Rivera’s politics. It is introspective, wry, and honest. Throughout his life, Rivera balanced the tension between his artistic career and his social ideals, taking commissions from the very tycoons and politicians he despised politically. This is a portrait of a man with few illusions about himself.

*Market Scene*

This is a copy, made by Rivera, of a section of the huge fresco sequence at the Palace of Cortez at Cuernavaca. Commissioned from Rivera in 1929 by the US ambassador, Dwight Morrow, it traces the history of Cuernavaca and the surrounding regions in the state of Morelos from the battles of the Spanish Conquest in 1521 to the recent popular peasant revolts led by Emiliano Zapata in 1911. These frescoes stand in the lavish home of the European conqueror of Mexico, Hernan Cortez, and within walking distance of the extravagant weekend mansions of the corrupt Mexican officials who worked under President Callas (1924-28). By making the murals there, Rivera sought to reclaim the site metaphorically for the indigenous peoples who had been oppressed by Cortez and his political descendants.

*Market Scene* is from the earlier part of the history told by the sequence. Rivera depicts, as in all his frescoes, the indigenous peoples of Mexico as noble victims of colonial cruelty. He hoped thereby to instill a sense of ethnic and patriotic pride. Here, an Aztec woman and child in the foreground hold a basket of fish and fruit up to a Spanish man. In the wider scene, the construction of Cortez’s palace proceeds at the upper right, while a man, perhaps Cortez himself, observes from the upper left. The females are faceless and therefore universally represent the plight of the Aztecs after their conquest. The Spaniard inspects the fish as the native woman kneels. The scene recalls the contemporary farmers and workers of 1930, who still lived in poverty and served the wealthy. Like the Aztecs, their fate depended on whether rulers like the Spaniard would find their goods suitable enough for purchase.

This work of art may not be currently on display at the Museum.

This work of art may not be currently on display at the Museum.
Part of *The History of Cuernavaca and Morelos* by Diego Rivera. 1930. Fresco. Palacio de Cortés, Cuernavaca, Mexico.