



Photo courtesy of Graham Beal.

ART

From left: Clifford and Jean Wight, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Edsel Ford's mother Clara and an unknown person in Detroit.

Mutual Admiration, Mutual Exploitation: Rivera, Ford and the Detroit Industry Murals

by Graham W.J. Beal

At the turn of the last century, Detroit was a small city of a few hundred thousand people. But with the advent of the auto industry, and with Henry Ford paying \$5 a day, people flooded in from all over the world. By the 1920s, the city was rolling in money. The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) opened in 1927. The planning analysis for the museum projected that, if the city continued to grow at its then-current rate, by 1935 it would surpass Chicago to become the second city in the United States, and by 1953 it would surpass New York to become the first city. Those were the kinds of ambitions that lay behind the creation of the DIA.

The museum's presiding genius was William Valentiner, a German scholar, a Rembrandt specialist and a man with extraordinarily wide tastes. He was an enthusiast for Islamic art; he was personal friends with the German Expressionists; he bought the first Van Gogh and the first Matisse to enter into an American museum collection. Between 1920 and the early 1930s, with the help of Detroit's personal wealth and city money, Valentiner

transformed the DIA from a respectable Midwestern museum into one of the half-dozen top art collections in the country, which it remains today.

Valentiner was a bold man in many ways. He met Diego Rivera when he was in California at the invitation of tennis champion Helen Wills Moody, a personal friend. Moody was featured in the mural that Rivera was creating for San Francisco's Pacific Stock Exchange Luncheon Club. Seeing Rivera at work, Valentiner was inspired to have him paint murals in the DIA's garden court — as had been the original intent of DIA architect Paul Cret. The museum director made a commitment to the artist, but then he had to find the money.

Back in Detroit, Valentiner talked to DIA patron-supreme Edsel Ford, who immediately agreed to pay \$10,000 for Rivera to come and create the murals. Rivera was in New York at this time to be on hand for the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective of his work — he was only the second artist to be so honored (Matisse was the first). In New York, he became involved with the Mexican Artists Association,

and there was a sense that art could be used to improve the wary relationship between the United States and Mexico. Rivera was such an ebullient individual that it was impossible to dislike him, even if he was a communist. He also worked in a heroic, realist style that was easily graspable.

Valentiner was planning for the future. In one of his letters, he wrote, “I had always hoped to have on my museum walls a series of frescoes by a painter of our time, since where could a building be found nowadays that would last as long as a museum.” But he soon discovered that there was not much enthusiasm on the part of the Detroit Arts Commission for a Mexican communist. From 1919 to 1999, the DIA was a city department operating under the direction of the Arts Commission, which in 1931 was headed by Albert Kahn, the great architect of Ford’s industrial buildings. Valentiner had to persuade these individuals to support the Rivera mural. He had the money from Edsel, but in those days, he still needed the Commission’s approval.

Valentiner made headway, undoubtedly with the use of the \$10,000 that Ford had supplied, and he wrote to Rivera saying, “The Arts Commission would be pleased if you could find something out of the history of Detroit,

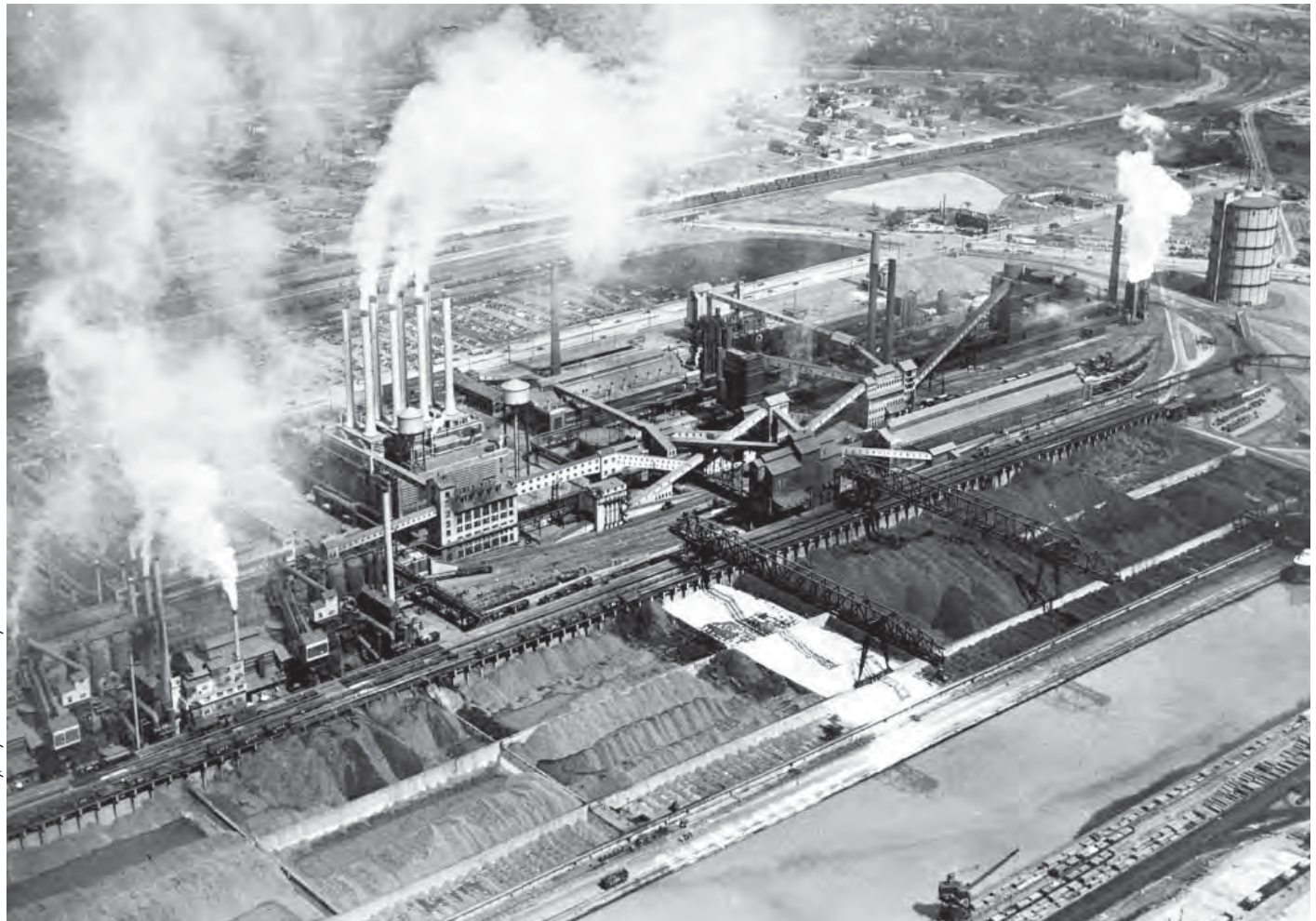
or some motif suggesting the development of industry in this town. But in the end, they decided to leave it entirely to you.” It seems clear that what Valentiner had in mind at the time was something like the Helen Moody Wills paintings, something that had an allegorical slant to it. They were to get something completely different.

In spite of the support of the Arts Commission, there was head-scratching as to why Henry Ford was allowing the mural to go forward. Some thought it was a publicity stunt: Ford getting an advertisement on the walls of a public museum. Others were surprised that he allowed it to happen. A few days before Rivera arrived, there was a hunger march on the River Rouge Plant. The police, the army and Pinkerton agents opened fire on the marchers, killing five people and wounding 20. There remains a very strong sense, although there is nothing in the Ford records to back this up, that Henry Ford did not step in to block the mural because he felt it would be good publicity one way or another for the Ford Company to do something this magnificent.

In April–May 1932, Rivera worked at the plant, producing hundreds of sketches. What is amazing about the murals is the way that Rivera seemed to retain most of the

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The River Rouge Plant in the 1950s.



details in his head. He went from a simple sketch to a full-blown work of art with almost no intermediary drawings. He would sketch out the framework, but for the details he relied on his memory and on photographs. He didn't do a lot of studies, it's not like Raphael — study of an arm, study of a torso — he just went directly forward.

Initially, Edsel Ford was shown only two presentation drawings — for the main panels on the north and south walls. Ford was so excited by the drawings, so the story goes, that he decided to increase Rivera's fee to a very strange sum: it went from \$10,000 to \$20,889. Some time after that, Rivera presented drawings of the rest of the panels without asking for more money. Rivera charged \$100 a square foot, and the agreed-upon fee was not much less than that. They also agreed that the museum would pay for all of the materials, while Rivera would pay his assistants. This was a time when French cobalt blue cost \$22 a pound. Some pigments cost much less than that, but lapis lazuli was expensive stuff. So it was quite a step that the museum had taken. Rivera, meanwhile, had the ability to do whatever he wanted with regard to his assistants.

Rivera had four main assistants who he paid \$12 a week: Clifford White, who had worked with Rivera on the murals in San Francisco; Andrés Hernández Sánchez Flores, the chemist who worked with the pigments; Ernest Halberstadt; and Arthur Niendorf. Now this is 20 years after Henry Ford had been paying \$5 a day for unskilled labor. And they were

the lucky ones. The others didn't get anything at all. They had to learn to get by and were taught by those who did get paid to use barter, to trade sketches for a visit to the dentist or whatever it was they needed.

In spite of the nonexistent pay, a number of people came to work for Rivera. Francis Jean Clarence West Plantagenet, Lord Hastings was one of his more unusual assistants. He was one of several communist peers who turned up in British politics in the 1920s and 30s. He and his wife were touring America, and he hooked up with Rivera, becoming his assistant until his visa ran out. Other assistants included Stephen Dimitroff and Lucienne Bloch, who later married. A young man named Paul Meier Klienbordt also turned up. He'd been in jail for being part of some labor riots in Pennsylvania after which he changed his name to Pablo Davis, jumped on a train with 60 cents in his pocket and came to work for Rivera.

Eventually, Halberstadt got tired of having no soles on his shoes and asked Rivera for \$18 a week, a \$6 raise. When Rivera refused, Halberstadt threatened to walk up and down in front of the museum saying that the artist was "unfair to labor." Rivera gave him the \$18, but he didn't speak to Halberstadt for a long time after that — and Halberstadt was one of his main assistants. Later, Steven Dimitroff fell ill after not eating for four days. When Rivera heard that Dimitroff was in bad shape and absolutely out of money, he started to pay \$8 a month.

Diego Rivera poses with Frida Kahlo, his assistants and their wives, Christmas 1932.



Photo courtesy of Graham Beal.

But that was after Dimitroff had worked for nothing for three months.

Rivera used his assistants to prepare the walls, but he painted everything himself. The mural is mainly a true fresco, but there are a couple of areas where he obviously went back and repainted the dried surface. It took him about 10 months to paint the whole thing, and he didn't work everyday.

Of course, Frida Kahlo came to Detroit with Rivera, and they took an apartment. Frida absolutely hated it. She didn't like the food, didn't like the weather. She thought New York was pretty bad, but she went back there as much as possible to get away from Detroit. The city was also the site of one of Frida's miscarriages, which was commemorated in one of her paintings. That event has a possible link to Rivera's mural as well.

Walking from the DIA's Great Hall into the Rivera Court, the first thing you see, on the east wall, is an embryo encased in a womb that can be read as both organic and inorganic. On each side are symbols of fecundity, with round, soft forms below them. One of these is a little panel of vegetables; another is a woman holding a lapful of corn. And if you turn around and face the west wall, that panel is all about man and machine. This sets up the series of extraordinary dualities which are the essence of the Rivera mural as a whole. On one side, there is agriculture and nature; on the other, there is man and the machine. On the machine side, Rivera included the figure of the "American Engineer," which is a composite portrait of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. On his right, is a picture of the idealized American worker, with all this fabulous machinery behind him. This is said to be a portrait that combines the American worker with Rivera himself. Rivera put a red star on the worker's glove, which could make him a communist, except that one of the main leather glove-producing companies in Detroit was the Red Star Glove Company. It was just a nice coincidence that Rivera teasingly wove into the work.

Not only is there the juxtaposition of nature and machine, there is also the contrast between the good and the evil of modern technology as represented by vaccination (the good doctor is actually a portrait of William Valentiner) and chemical warfare. Rivera also brings together the two hemispheres: North and South. On one side, rubber is being taken from tropical trees, on the other is the Detroit skyline. There is a contrast between fish and speedboats, between civil and military aviation, between the hawk and the dove. He also contrasts man and machine. Several of the individuals working with the extraordinary machinery he depicts are portraits of people



Photo courtesy of Graham Beal.

Edsel Ford.

with whom he worked. Sánchez Flores, Dimitroff and Niendorf all appear in the mural. Rivera also put Latinos, African-Americans and whites together on the assembly line, blending realism with wishful idealism: at the time, all the people on the assembly lines were white; nonwhites were stuck with the really filthy jobs.

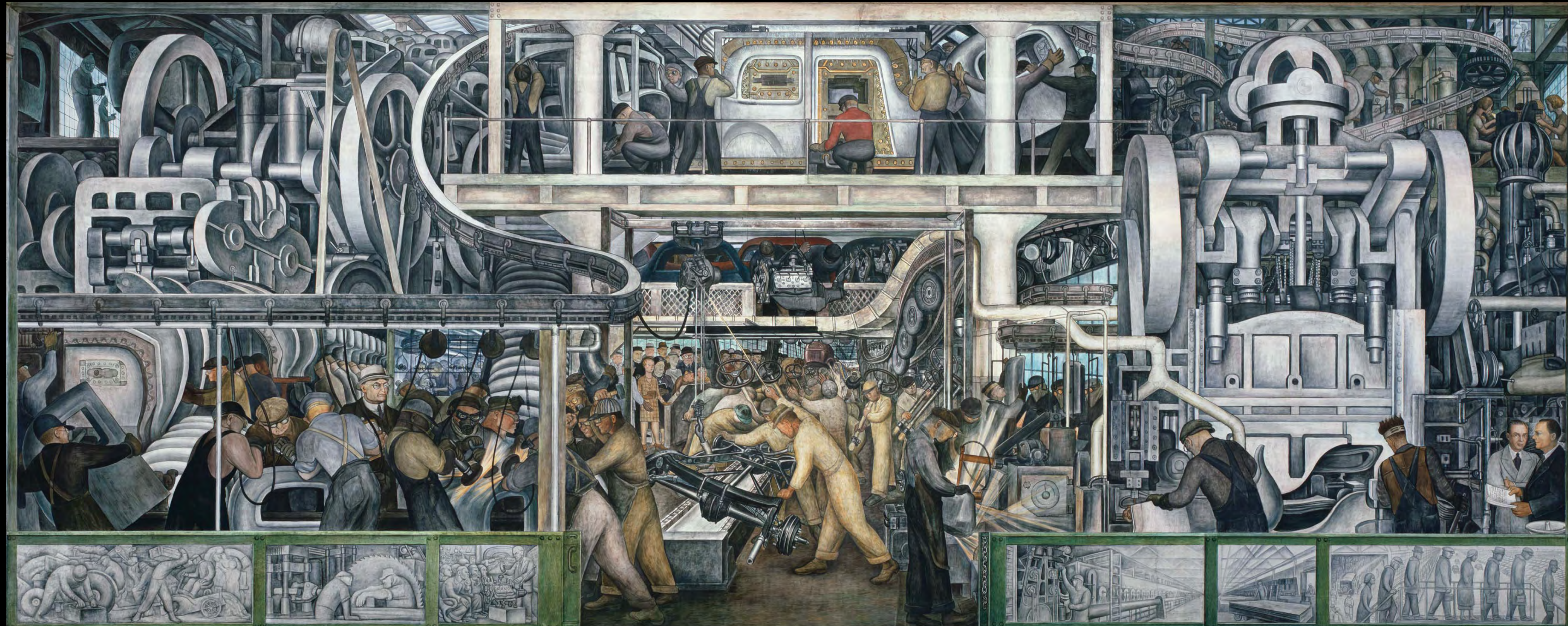
Rivera had a tremendous admiration for the industrial might and engineering of the United States. He spoke very fulsomely about America, the land of the new pyramids, as he called the great monuments that were being built. But in the mural, he chose to depict himself in solidarity with the workers. He painted himself on the assembly line, near the blast furnace — a rather sad-looking figure wearing a derby hat. He placed himself among the workers being poisoned by the plant, individuals who — in Rivera's way of thinking — were sacrificing themselves to the great god of industry and capitalism.

This theme is also referenced on the south wall. One of the things that Rivera prided himself on was the accuracy of the machinery. Nearly everything he painted was current, but the machine depicted on the south wall's

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The main panel on the north wall.
Image courtesy of Graham Beal.





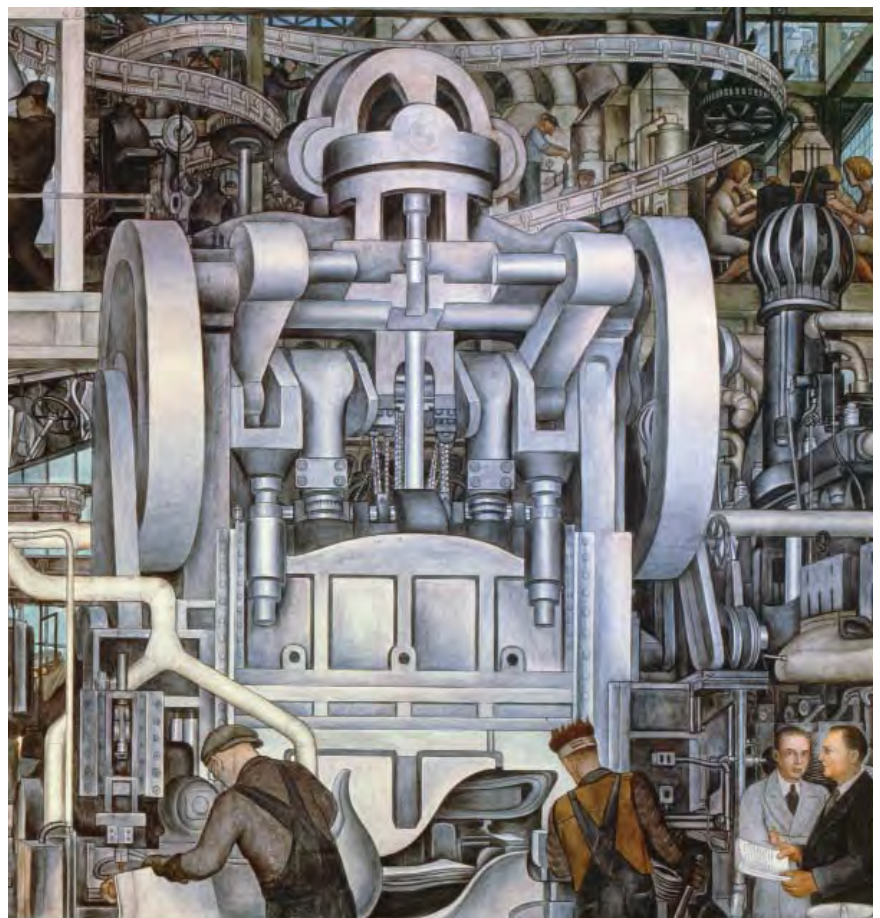
The main panel on the south wall.
Image courtesy of Graham Beal.



Details from the Detroit Industry Murals: On the left, William Valentiner, representing “the good doctor,” vaccinates a young child. On the right, workers manufacture chemical weapons. (Images courtesy of Graham Beal.)



The Aztec goddess Coatlicue and Rivera's stylized representation of her as a stamping machine. (Photo from Luidger/Wikimedia; image courtesy of Graham Beal.)



main panel was already obsolete. It had been replaced by something much sleeker and more built-in. The reason that Rivera wanted to show its predecessor was that it reminded him of Coatlicue, one of the great goddesses of the Aztec world. Halberstadt appears in front of the machine, his hair standing on end. There is a literal explanation for this: the stamping machine created a whoosh of air when it came down. But it also gives the more symbolic impression that the workers are being sacrificed at the altar of this mechanical god.

The mural also captures one of the most important aspects of the River Rouge Plant: everything was done there. The raw materials — coal and steel — went in one end, and cars came out the other. They made their own glass; they made everything. That all changed later, of course. But Ford built his great empire on the concept of total control.

At the top of the mural on the north wall are great forms that Rivera called the Red and the Black races combined with hands coming out of the earth bearing riches. When you put the murals together, the blast furnace that forms part of the mural depicting the River Rouge Plant sends flame up to the volcano in the panel above, creating a direct linkage between the real and the symbolic, the man made and the natural. On the south wall is a panel illustrating the completion of the automobile. Again, there are connections with the panel above it, although they are not as direct as those on the opposite wall.

The design is coherent, but at the same time, it is so crammed with details that there is always something more to see. In the background of the mural, on the south wall, is a juxtaposition of workers and the bourgeoisie. In those days, it was



Image courtesy of Graham Beal.

Henry Ford teaching apprentices in a mural detail.

possible to tour the River Rouge Plant, and people came to see this marvel of modern industry. Rivera's depiction of the bourgeoisie who came to visit is less than flattering: there is a plump, sour-faced woman with a cross around her neck; a rather sallow-looking priest; two fat little boys based on the comic strip "The Katzenjammer Kids"; and other people looking equally unpleasant. Amusingly, Dick Tracy is also in among the crowd.

Running along the bottom of the murals on the north and south walls is what we call the predella, a series of grisaille panels that follow the workers through the course of the day, just as the larger murals show the steps in the creation of a car. Workers are shown clocking in, performing their daily tasks and heading home in the evening.

One of my favorite panels shows Henry Ford teaching apprentices. These men, who left school and went to work in the factories, were known as monkeys. There was a sense that

they weren't the brightest. Rivera picked up on that and gave them a slightly simian quality. The artist also turned the engine block into a dog, with legs and a tail. The legs mimic those of a cast iron stove, a reference to the fact that the reason the car industry got established in Detroit was because Michigan was the center of American cast iron manufacturing in the late 19th century. Thus, it was already the home of steel and iron-related industry. Another detail that I like is that Ford is making a gesture commonly used in Renaissance portraits of John the Baptist, which conveys the sense that a greater one is yet to come. In the background are students leaning over their books in such a way that they appear to be kowtowing to the figure of Henry Ford.

When the murals were opened to the public, on March 17, 1933, the people who saw them were stunned. Some were shocked. The Detroit Catholic Students Conference requested that "a committee be

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Image courtesy of Graham Bear

Tourists, including Dick Tracy and the Katzenjammer Kids, observe the River Rouge Plant in this detail from the murals.

appointed by the Holy Name Society, the Knights of Columbus and the League of Catholic Women to investigate Rivera's murals, and if evidence warrants to protest against their retention on the tax-paid walls of this institution." The Detroit Daily News described the murals "as coarse in conception... foolishly vulgar... without meaning for the intelligent observer... a slander to Detroit working men..." and "un-American." A volunteer group was created to crystallize feelings against the murals and formally request that they be removed. The press was stoking all of this and ran articles following "the battle of the murals."

Valentiner tried to control the controversy. The museum published a booklet that tried to implicitly answer all of the accusations being made against the murals. Interestingly enough, when Valentiner called a press conference to deal with the controversy, he discovered he had only one native English speaker on his management staff: Valentiner was German, his curator of textiles was Swiss, his conservator was German, the head of Islamic art was Turkish. All these people had jobs in 1933, in the middle of the Great Depression. And so one man, Edgar Richardson, who later became the director, was deputed to go and talk to the press in what turned out to be rather amicable discussions.

There were also people who supported the murals. The Women's Division of the American Artists Professional League published an open letter saying that "had the City

of Detroit Arts Commission heeded the request of the women and had engaged one of our own mural painters to do the work, there would be no controversy. But now that the deed is done, however, every effort must be made to prevent the murals' destruction." Edsel Ford, who initially remained aloof from the debate, finally issued words of support for the murals saying: "I am thoroughly convinced that the day will come when Detroit will be proud to have this work in its midst. In the years to come, they will be ranked among the truly great art treasures of America." A few days later, he released a statement through the Art Commission, saying: "I admire Rivera's spirit. I really believe he was trying to express his idea of the spirit of Detroit." And it was at that moment that the air seems to have gone out of the protests.

Looking back, Valentiner said, "I was never able to find out exactly how the attacks started. They came from Protestant as well as Roman Catholics sources, and they were connected with rumors to the effect that Rivera's painting in a public building was blasphemous. The curious fact was that these rumors were circulated long before the murals were shown." What is strongly suspected, in fact, is that Edsel Ford was behind the whole uproar. A man named Fred Black, who worked directly for Edsel Ford, later revealed that he had been told "to awaken some public interest in the museum and convince the city council that they should do something about it. They feel

that very few people go there and that the general public is not interested.”

Due to the Depression, the museum’s budget had been cut from \$400,000 to \$40,000, with the Arts Commission voting to dismiss all the curators and educators. Edsel Ford had stepped in and paid the salaries himself to keep the museum running. Many years later, Black claimed that his staff had fed information about the murals to the right people, to the clergy in particular, so that it broke in the Detroit papers. In 10 days, it was all over the world. “I would show Edsel Ford these things,” he said, “and in most cases he would laugh. He thought it was a great scheme. We had accomplished the thing he wanted.” The end result was that the City Council voted to replace some of the museum’s funding, thereby relieving Edsel Ford of having to pay everyone’s salary. And so it is possible that the final act of exploitation in this saga was that the Great Patron of Detroit arts, Edsel Ford himself, used Rivera and his murals to get people to come back to the museum and to reestablish its funding.

Graham W. J. Beal is the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts. This article was adapted from the transcript of a talk he gave for CLAS on February 25, 2010.

At last the job was finished,
and the people flocked inside,
The clergy took one hasty look
and they were horrified!
They pointed shaking fingers
at the panel of Diseases,
And said the vaccinated child
was no-one else but Jesus!

Oh jolly old Diego,
His enemies abound-o
The most prodigious, sacrilegious,
Son-of-a-gun Diego.

—Franklin M. Peck, 1933

The south and west walls of the Rivera Court in the Detroit Institute of Arts.



Photo courtesy of Graham Beal.