Diego Rivera left Mexico for Spain in 1907 and went on to spend more than a decade in Paris, experimenting with Symbolism and Pointillism before emerging as a leading cubist painter. By the time he returned to Mexico, in June 1921, he had abandoned abstraction for the "return to order" that shaped so much postwar French painting; his novel figurative approach would combine aspects of his cubist experiments, his close study of the work of Paul Cézanne and Pierre Auguste Renoir, and his exploration of how the Italian masters had deployed the golden ratio in their compositions. Before returning home, Rivera traveled through Italy for three months, studying fresco painting and noting the color and spatial relationships in Etruscan and Byzantine art, as well as in Renaissance works by Titian and Tintoretto, among others. That study trip was financed by the Mexican government through the educational and cultural program directed by José Vasconcelos, then rector of the Universidad Nacional de México. In a letter to Vasconcelos, Rivera noted the "crucial importance" of his travels: "Here one feels, sees, touches, and apprehends how the diverse materials manipulated by the different crafts unite, collaborating with, merging within, and exalting each other; until they make of the whole—building, city—a sum total that is function and expression of life itself, a thing born of the soil."*

Using the durable medium of encaustic, Rivera painted Creation in the Anfiteatro Bolívar, the auditorium of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, between March 1922 and March 1923. A close technical and iconographic study of the mural, along with related sketches, drawings, and cartoons, has revealed new insights into Rivera's meticulous approach and creative process, and into the mural's specific meanings. The title and iconography allude to the creation of the world in the biblical sense, and to intellectual or artistic invention at a crucial moment following the Mexican Revolution. Most importantly, Rivera based Creation on the concept of synthesis, visual and symbolic, spatial and conceptual. His program referenced diverse historical precedents, from the Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna to Mexico's folk art traditions, all filtered through his avant-garde perspective. This complex approach not only reflected theories fundamental to the Parisian avant-garde (such as Synthetic

1. Leading sources on this early period are Ramón Favela, El joven e inquieto Diego Rivera (1907–1910) (Mexico City: Museo Estudio Diego Rivera, NBPA, Editorial Secuencia, 1999); Ramón Favela, Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years, exh. cat. (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984); and Olivier Debroise, Diego de Montparnasse (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979).

2. I discuss the 1917-21 period in Sandra Zetina, “Pintura mural y vanguardia: La Creación de Diego Rivera” (PhD diss., Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2019), 132-248.9.195 j/pdf/2019/junio/079205/index.html. This study, currently being revised for publication, is based on a close technical examination as well as historical analysis, situating Creation as a foundational work of the Mexican avant-garde rather than the end of Rivera's Parisian period.


4. Rivera and Vasconcelos were introduced by Alfonso Reyes and Alberto J. Pani, Mexican ambassadors in Madrid and Paris, respectively. For the mural, Rivera was paid two thousand pesos in gold. José Vasconcelos to the Treasurer of the Nation (telegraphic authorization), November 24, 1920, Archivo de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter Archivo SEP).


Although the contract for Creation has not been located, the French-born painter Jean Charlot, one of Rivera's assistants on the mural, later recalled that Vasconcelos asked Rivera to provide written descriptions before giving his final approval, revealing an "intellectual planning as thoughtful as any known in more scholastic ages." Charlot, Mexican Mural Renaissance, 196. Charlot's firsthand account remains the foundation for all later interpretations.


8. Although Rivera never referred to these figures as muses, parallels are easily drawn: on the feminine side, Comedy/Thalia, Dance/Terpsichore, Song/Calliope, Music/Euterpe; on the masculine side, Poetry/Hermes, History/Thucydides, Philosophy/Socrates, Religion/Apollonio. See Rivera's notes to sketches for the mural, Rivera used the French word “Sagesse” to describe this figure.

9. Rivera painted the jungle scene after he interrupted the project to travel to the Yucatan with Vasconcelos; see Oles, “From Murals to Paintings: Scenes of Everyday Life,” in this volume, based on Vasconcelos's theorization of a new Mexican culture based on a blending of local and universal forms and meanings. Although Vasconcelos's ideas on aesthetics and pedagogy, drawn from sources as diverse as Pythagoras, Anotoly Lunacharsky, Rabindranath Tagore, and Leo Tolstoy, are also of central importance here. Vasconcelos believed that true revolution and resistance to the cultural dominance of the United States could be achieved through the arts, both as cosmic pedagogy and a means to create a new culture, national as well as universal. By revisiting the Neoplatonic concept of the cosmic scales of knowledge, blending pagan and Christian elements in an ascending hierarchy, Rivera underscored the theme of cosmic harmony and the ideal unity of creativity itself.

Creation is marked by a second and equally fundamental idea formulated by Vasconcelos—that a new and universal Mexican Classicism would combine the best artistic elements from the classical world, Europe, America, and Asia. Rivera drew on the Hellenic past, the Italian Renaissance, Mexican folk culture, and Buddhist meditation postures (mudras), among other sources. He also referenced Vasconcelos’s theories of racial diversity and the generation of a new synthetic “cosmic” race by showing individuals with characteristics then associated with Mexico’s different regions, placing them on a chromatic scale ranging from figures with almost greenish complexes and blond hair to those with brown skin and dark hair. The masculine figure at the center represents the “ideal” synthesis of this notion of racial and cultural diversity, set within a lush Mexican landscape.

Rivera portrayed Mexican women of different social classes in Creation, a strategy that complicates his depiction of race. He associated profession, social origin, and political position, as well as physical traits, with the specific virtue or art represented by each allegorical figure. Some of the women who modeled for these figures were well-known feminists or contributors to the creation of a post-revolutionary culture as artists, dancers, composers, writers, comedians, poets, philosophers, or lawyers, exemplars for the new Mexican woman.

For his models on the feminine side of the mural, Rivera chose stage performers or musicians renowned for their beauty. Maria Dolores Asuín, who was born to a wealthy family and later became a dancer and the mother of writer Carlos Fuentes, starred in the role of La Torada, posed for Music (pl. 3). The model for Comedy was the actress and comi sopranos Lupe Rivas Cacho, dressed in the mural—albeit subtly—as a china poblana, as she appeared playing street vendors and maids in performances at the Teatro Lirico. Dance is embodied by Julia Alonso de Dreffes, an organ player and composer who taught at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and practiced what was known as the fe solidarista, a cult led by her husband that combined theosophical,


16. In the Secretaría de Educación Pública, the site of Rivera’s next mural, sculptural reliefs by Manuel Centurión feature philosophers and spiritual leaders from all over the globe: Buddha (India), Plato (Greece), Quetzalcoatl (Mexico), and Bartolomé de las Casas (Spain).


18. Rivas Cacho said in 1902 that her favorite character was the gorbancito— an Indigenous or mestiza person who worked in domestic service. Alberto Dalal, “Lupe Rivas Cacho, socióloga,” Revisión de la Universidad de México 506–7 (March–April 1993): 43.
ideas and disciplinary practices from the East. She also appears as Charity, a figure Rivera derived from Donatello’s sculpture of the Penitent Magdalene, with the added gesture of nursing, characteristic of Roman allegories of charity. Hope (pl. A) was personified by the incendiary María Luisa Marín, an anarchist and feminist leader who helped launch a major protest by renters in Veracruz in early 1922.

The figures on the masculine side of the mural were represented by women known as writers, poets, or academics. Science is Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean teacher and poet whom Vasconcelos had invited to Mexico City in 1922 to collaborate on his educational and cultural programs. Knowledge is Palma Guillén, the first woman to obtain a doctoral degree in the humanities in Mexico; and Justice is Esperanza Velázquez Bringas, a lawyer who was then director of the Biblioteca Nacional. The poet and artist Nahui Olin modeled for Erotic Poetry with a tear-eyed gaze (fig. 3), while Julia Iglesias, the wife of critic Jorge Juan Crespo de la Serna, posed for Prudence.

Two women appear in multiple guises on both sides of the mural. Rivera’s favorite muse was his wife Guadalupe (Lupe) Marín, a native of Guadalajara with connections to that city’s Círculo Bohemio, whom he saw as an embodiment of mestizaje. Rivera was fascinated by her face but even more by her hands (see pl. 105), which, according to the painter, had “a strange and extra-human beauty whose effect verged on horror.” He also described her using animal metaphors, many associated with pre-Hispanic culture, such as an Olmec-Zapotec mask with a feline mouth; the body of a mule, kangaroo, mare, or tiger; or the claws of a bird of prey or the black, flaring mane of a horse. Marín posed nude for the figure of Woman, a robust Eve with mestizo features. Unlike fin-de-siècle stereotypes of femininity that featured delicate, pale, passive women, Rivera’s Marín is a force of nature, representing the instinctual qualities sought by so many modernists: she bares her teeth, and her wide hips and strong legs recall the abstract forms of his archaic caryatids (fig. 4). Rivera also depicted Marín and Serna and personified her masculine aspect in Fortitud, where she appears with the crossed sword and crown of Joan of Arc.

Another important model was Luz Jiménez, an Indigenous woman from Milpa Alta who spoke an ancient variant of Nahuatl that connected her directly to the ancient Mexico (or Aztec) civilization. In Creation Jiménez represents concepts that Rivera and his contemporaries associated with Mexico’s Indigenous population:

15. Marín was famous for the two blonde braids with which she is depicted in the mural, although the related drawing (pl. 4) shows a woman with dark hair. The drawing is dedicated to “Mme. Prud’; the use of Marín’s married name further confirms her identity here.
17. The drawing identified as that of the left hand of Fabio (pl. 12) presents something of a dilemma, as the position of the hand is slightly different from that in the mural. Perhaps this is due to an assistant’s error, or it is possible that the hand was drawn in the studio and not used, since as Rivera signed the drawing, the hand position is inverted vis-à-vis the mural.
18. De la Torre, Memoria y razón de Diego Rivera, 2180–82.
19. De la Torre, Memoria y razón de Diego Rivera, 2182.
20. This probably problematic ideas of savage beauty and of woman as natural force were central to cubist practice, allowing artists—in a world shaped by colonialism—to reconnect with Deeply problematic ideas of savage beauty and of woman as natural force were central to cubist practice, allowing artists—in a world shaped by colonialism—to reconnect with
23. The poet José D. Frias was astonished by the “cartoons with powerful and expressive Indian heads, where hands of amazing strength and vigorous intention that nobody could dream of, give us the impression of our race. They have a monumental character, as if made of hard obsidian stone; they recall the tumultuous and quiet life of the stone ornaments at Teotihuacan and the Serpent’s Cordonazo, which had been used for the walls of the auditorium.” 28.
24. The model Luz Jiménez is personified by the incendiary María Luisa Marín, an anarchist and feminist leader who helped launch a major protest by renters in Veracruz in early 1922.
25. The portraits that appear in Creation would become a constant in Rivera’s later work. His use of recognizable models served a radical avant-garde strategy, elevating the Indigenous figure to the realm of allegory. Rivera’s greatest provocation was to depict heroic figures with traits considered mestizo or “purely” Indigenous, characteristics that were then barely visible in modern Mexican art, much less in idealized forms of public function. They belonged to the images that, shortly after Creation was painted, photographer Edward Weston used to feature the same models—Luz Jiménez, Lupe Marín, Nahui Olin—to create heroic portraits, sometimes echoing the expressions they held in Rivera’s mural (fig. 5). In Creation, Rivera thus began to contemplate the construction of a new ideal body of the nation; in subsequent works, especially his murals in the Secretaria de Educación Pública, figures with Indigenous traits would become far more central.
26. Rivera’s choice of technique for Creation further relied on the notion of synthesis. He chose encaustic because the heated wax combined with pigments allowed a brilliant palette. The medium had been known since antiquity, and he appears to have consulted various artists’ treatises, given that his sketches, drawings, and cartoons employ compositions in the manner prescribed in painting handbooks by Cennino Cennini and Francisco Pacheco. At the same time, Rivera “nationalized” the wax-based formula used by classical artists by adding Mexican copal resin to the mix, while modernizing the process by applying the paint to reinforced concrete, which had been used for the walls of the auditorium.
27. Surviving preparatory drawings reveal Rivera’s creative process as he approached mural making for the first time, assisted by Jean Charlot as well as Carlos Mérida, Xavier Guerrero, and Amado de la Cueva. Rivera began with simple sketches in pencil, made with quick, loose gestures. Then, using a square and a compass, he created more precise drawings, annotated with measurements and other observations, that allowed him to create a harmonic composition based on the golden ratio (fig. 6 and pl. 1). In the margins of one drawing, Rivera composed a small diagram of the golden ratio and added notations to mark the golden points: “SO,” referring to the French section d’or, and “P.H.,” alluding to the Greek letter phi (ϕ) associated with the golden ratio. Because the drawing was to scale, it could be used to transfer the design to the wall through a technique known in Mexico as cordonazo, in which a string covered with powdered chalk or pigment was snapped against the wall to replicate the square and compass, with no need for a grid.
28. Rivera created around forty full-size cartoons for Creation: seventeen are studies of faces and twenty-three of arms and hands, all of which required more careful elaboration than the drapery-covered bodies. These were done in a temporary studio set up in November 1921 at the nearby Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo. The cartoons were drawn on thick paper that resists tearing, since they...
were meant to be transferred to the wall. Rivera used both a French laid linen- and cotton-fiber paper with an indigo-gray tone and a rougher light tan butcher paper.31 The differing papers allowed him to experiment with tonal gradations and volume, using pastels or Conté crayons in three colors: blood red, black, and white.32

Photographs taken in March 1922 while the project was underway show that after a rough outline was sketched onto the wall, the working drawings were used by Rivera or his assistants to transfer the hands and faces—the most complex details of the composition—directly to the wall, using tracing paper or paper rubbed with vine charcoal (this material appears in the margins of some drawings). Recent tracings of the mural, when superimposed over the sketches, reveal a perfect 1:1 correspondence.33 One photograph (fig. 8) shows the drawings tacked to the wall with resin (perhaps copal), and some of the cartoons (pls. 6 and 9) bear the resulting stains in the corners. A few drawings show drips of the same paint used for the mural (pl. 10), providing evidence that they remained on the wall while the work was being completed. The thick paper allowed the drawings to be reused in different positions, but Rivera did this in only one case, for the heads of Wisdom and Tradition, although he altered the hairstyles slightly while painting them. Though carefully worked by Rivera, these drawings and the resulting painting make clear that this was a collective pictorial process, even in the painting of faces, which in the hierarchical ancient guild system was often reserved for the master. Rivera was clearly proud of the drawings: a staged photograph shows that he lined up sketches of faces in front of the unfinished mural (fig. 7), and he dedicated others to models or friends. He included ten of the studies—many now in the SFMOMA collection—in his first two retrospective exhibitions, held at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1930 and at the Museum of Modern Art in 1931–32.

Seen together, these sketches and cartoons provide evidence of Rivera's creative process, of the importance he placed on the role of gesture in conveying iconographic meaning, and of his desire to inscribe himself within the tradition of mural painting while at the same time acting as an innovator. Creation was not an end but a beginning: Rivera's formal experimentation, his repertoire of themes, and his technical, visual, and narrative strategies laid the groundwork for modern Mexican muralism. Although the mural reveals unresolved tensions in its attempt to integrate formal avant-garde strategies with references to past art and folk traditions—which may have led to Vasconcelos's dissatisfaction with the results—it was a crucial first step toward Rivera's construction of a national and universal aesthetic language.

31. The watermark “Ingres, Canson & Montgolfier” is visible on the cartoon for the hand of Science (pl. 15).
32. I am grateful to Michelle Barger and Amanda Hunter Johnson for allowing me to study these drawings up close at SFMOMA. As noted by Hunter Johnson, Rivera used the entire surface of the paper for the tracing, especially the faces. The Ingres, Canson & Montgolfier blue paper continues to be produced and is commonly used for pastel drawing.
33. Darío Meléndez Manzano completed the outlines in collaboration with Lili Sun and Mariana Ciprés, students in the graduate visual arts program of the Faculty of Arts and Design, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.