

Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*
Mural description by Kelsey Ransick, 2011

Often described as “a blatant Marxist call for class struggle”, this painting in the New Realism tradition (in contrast to academic naturalism) explores the images of capitalism and communism in the face of modern science and technology. There is an overall feeling of determined idealism in this art for and of the people that is common to many works of art following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The dark colors create a very deliberate atmosphere, giving the sense that the painting was carefully and purposefully laid out. Strong lines create clear borders between objects and figures in the painting. Symbolic, densely-packed figures and objects form multiple montages and different sections of the painting convey melancholy, inspiration or hope. The chaos in some of these sections reflects a sort of orderly commotion. For the most part, the painting does not focus on perfect depictions of people and objects. Only a few faces are painted with the purpose mentioned earlier, specifically (Lenin and Trotsky, whom we will discuss later) and the Caucasian man in the center of the painting, where we will begin our section-by-section description.

The original mural was over 1,000 square feet. The second painting is a rectangle that is more than twice as wide as it is tall. The left and right sides are roughly symmetrical in layout, though the content varies. Running from 12 o'clock to the very center of the painting is a large, cylindrical machine—a telescope. The telescope's cylindrical body is a little less than a third of the painting's width. On the backside of the cylinder, sticking out at about 7 o'clock from the machine, is a spoked, wooden wheel that is roughly the same size as the telescope and is tilting away from the audience. Behind the whole machine is another spoked wheel, this one flat against the back of the painting and metallic-looking. A circle around the wheel has dark, various-sized lines around the outside, much like the lines in relief (raised from the surface) on a ruler. A pole connected to the bottom of the telescope disappears behind the back of the man, who is clearly Caucasian, with light skin and hair. His hands are in dark gloves, and the right hand holds the lever controlling the telescope, and his left hand rests on a table. On the left-hand side of the table (relative to the audience) is a small microscope. Directly in front of him on the table is a large disembodied hand reaching up, gripping a sphere, with only the wrist and fingertips showing. Below the table, running along the middle third of the bottom of the painting is a garden. There are 20-25 plants in a line, among them pineapples, tomatoes, lettuce, wheat, flowers, and carrots. At the center of the garden and painting is an irrigation pipe, bringing much-needed water to the plants on either side.

Behind the man's back, there are four narrow but long ovals at 45° angles from the center that form a large sort of X, with each oval being one leg or arm of the X. The X is centered horizontally and vertically on the painting and reaches over two thirds of the image. The oval forming the upper right arm of the X (on the audience's right) points toward 2 o'clock, and contains a telescope's view of comets, pointed stars, spiral galaxies, and open space. The lower oval on the audience's right points toward 4 o'clock and contains the magnified image of cells and veins. The lower oval on the audience's left points toward 8 o'clock on the viewer's left and contains a telescope's view of the sun and a large planet. The upper oval on the audience's left points toward 10 o'clock and contains magnified bacteria, viruses and cells.

The left and right sides of the painting are separated from the center by two large vertical, glass lenses (as one would see on a microscope). The lenses do not quite touch the arms and legs of the X, but are placed on either side of the X, forming a small triangle between the lens, a leg of the X and an arm of the X. Remember these triangles for later. The lenses are each framed by a metal ring and held up by two metal legs.

About 2/3 of the way up on each side of the painting, there is a marble statue in the Greek Classical tradition. Each statue sits as if in a chair and wears a toga thrown over his left shoulder. The one on the audience's right is headless. He holds a bundle of sticks between his knees with his left hand and a single, large stick on the side of his knee with his right hand. The statue on the audience's left has a thick beard framing his face, as well as a prominent nose and large heavy eyes. He is wearing rosary beads with a cross attached. His wavy hair is pulled back behind his shoulders. His toga covers both knees, and his left arm sits across his lap, though it has been broken off about halfway between his elbow and his wrist. Level with the statues' laps are two horizontal metal bars that disappear behind the arms of the X. The bars separate the upper third of the painting from the activity below it by serving as a ceiling for lower scenes and a floor for the upper scenes.

Above this bar on the audience's right is a crowd of men and women apparently watching or listening to something at the middle of the painting near the original cylinder of the telescope. The men wear vests and flat-topped messenger caps. The women wear babushkas, typical of those worn by Polish and Russian women. Behind the crowd is a far-off line of people carrying red flags.

Below the bar on the audience's right (between the lens and the edge of the painting) is another group of people standing at the statue's feet, perhaps at a protest or rally. The man in the middle of these Leon Trotsky is carrying a red flag. Those around him, all men, help him hold the flag. One man is clearly of African descent, but most are Caucasian and have thick beards. Looking up at Trotsky are two women sitting on the severed head of the statue the group is in front of and three men sitting on a metallic tube or pipe. The man on left-hand end of the pipe (relative to the audience) is wearing a cap, uniform and large jacket, and is perhaps a military officer. The man in the middle is wearing rather nondescript clothes, but the man on the other end is wearing a pair of jean overalls and a cap, as a railroad or factory worker would.

Moving to the other side of the painting, above the bar on the audience's left, is an army carrying guns with rapiers on the end and wearing gas masks, helmets and gloves in addition to their drab uniforms, so no skin is visible on anyone. One soldier at the front has a flamethrower that is spewing flames.

Below the bar on the audience's left is a group of people who are sitting in chairs at a meeting or lecture. There are both men and women of various ethnicities. At the back of the meeting room on the edge of the painting is a cubic x-ray machine with two radio antennas pointing up into the air. On the screen of the machine is an x-ray image of a human skull. Huddling together on the floor below the machine are a naked toddler, two dogs, a snake, a tortoise, and a cat.

The triangles mentioned earlier are the last areas we will describe. Remember that they are on the sides of the X, with an arm and leg forming the top and bottom, and the lens forming the third side that is parallel to the edge of the painting. Both triangles are split into two parts by slightly curved vertical lines that are a continuation of the spoked wheel behind the telescope. The outer portion of the triangle on the audience's right is filled by female athletes at the starting line of a race, while the inner portion has Vladimir Lenin surrounded by a crowd of his followers. The outer portion of the triangle on the audience's left is just a continuation of the scene in the meeting room with the x-ray machine. The inner portion has a party of people in ballroom attire, some dancing in the background and some forming a group of women sitting at a table playing cards and drinking champagne.