

A chapter from my nonfiction manuscript: *Art as a Weapon: Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Attack Detroit.*

**"ARE YOU A DANCER?"**

**By Louis Aguilar**

As Angelica stood in front of the Detroit museum, she decided it looked like a castle. Her father and his two friends had guessed it would resemble a church.<sup>1</sup>

The building had tall columns and wide, clean white stairs. Angelica loved the patter of her glossy black dress shoes as she walked up the marble steps. It sounded classy. She felt grown-up. The steps led to golden doors – everything was shiny and fancy.

The men had discussed all morning what they would say in order to gain entrance to the museum. Delfino, Angelica's father, and the one who spoke the most English among the men, would do the talking. He hoped to say:

*Hello sirs. We are citizens of Detroit. We have lived here for several years now. The artist Diego Rivera and his wife have come many times to our neighborhood on the southwest side near Michigan Avenue. We are citizens of Detroit now, but we are Mexican like the artist and his wife. The artist Mr. Rivera has said many times he would like workers like us to come watch him work. When times were better, we worked full time, but we work now when we can. It would be an honor to see him work.*

If the men had to answer any questions, Angelica, who spoke more English than her father, would translate. Angelica was a straight-A student about to enter fourth grade, which meant she already had more education than her father.

The guard who opened the door looked at 10-year-old Angelica in her pink dress and smiled. He didn't ask any questions. The guard told them the only thing the public was allowed to see in the museum was Mr. Rivera and his crew painting a 'modern fresco mural' on the walls

---

<sup>1</sup> Davila, Angelica. Interview by author. San Luis Potosí, San Luis Potosí, Mexico. Feb. 1998.

of the Garden Court. The rest of the museum has been closed since '31 because the Detroit government did not have the money to operate the city-owned facility, the guard said .<sup>2</sup>

Angelica was right; the museum was a castle. Inside were big rooms with high ceilings and black-iron chandeliers, and floors of slick multicolored tiles. To reach the Garden Court, her group walked through a dark Great Hall lined with suits of armor. There wasn't any furniture in the Hall and the room had a spooky echo.

The Italian-baroque-style Garden Court was radiant from the August sun streaming through the skylights. Others who had come to see the artist-at-work sat on the edge of a gray stone fountain in the center of the Court. Many gazed above Angelica's head as she and the men walked through a large entrance with a white marble frame.

The crowd was looking at several men standing on a wooden scaffold that stretched from the floor to ceiling. The Court was nearly three stories high. The men on the scaffold were gathered around a husky man in a sleeveless white t-shirt and baggy pants covered with white dust. His black hair was stringy and messy. He reminded Angelica of the hobos she had seen lying in the grass in city parks.

Angelica heard one of his father's friends say aloud, *El Maestro*. That's what the Mexicans in her neighborhood called him; the master. Señor Diego Rivera. The man who these *peones* travelled three and ½ miles on the trolley to venture into this strange new place; a big city museum.

*El Maestro* was pointing to a drawing on the wall. It looked as if it was drawn with a thick pencil. The drawing was of a man with a head of a mosquito, or maybe a fly, Angelica

---

<sup>2</sup>Various articles in *The Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* during 1931 and 1932 document the closing of most of the city-owned museum due to the economic crisis caused by The Great Depression.

thought. The man had no hair, ears or nose. His eyes were flat white circles, like saucers. Where his mouth should be was a skinny tube that ran to his belt.

Angelica and her group stuck together and didn't say much. It was standard practice for *Mexicanos* once they left their teeming immigrant neighborhood: don't draw attention, speak Spanish in low tones; if need be, whisper. Especially in a palatial room where the rest of the crowd was White and wearing clothes that didn't look second-hand or shabby.

The more Angelica looked, the curiouser and curiouser the Garden Court became. In the corners of the walls were stone carvings of the heads of men with curly hair and unruly beards.<sup>3</sup> The men had snarling faces. Still, other areas of the room reminded her of the friendly mess of her old kindergarten class.

The plain wooden scaffolding, which looked like it would be fun to climb, ran along all four walls. A wheelbarrow, buckets stuffed with long paint brushes, and other workers' tools were lying around. Big sections of the walls were rough and gray, other parts covered with sheets of white paper. On the paper were many images, all drawn in the same thick pencil style as the bug-headed man. And over the images ran many diagonal lines and squares drawn in a lighter shade.

The largest drawing ran the length of one side of the room. Angelica could see a long row of men who looked to be dancing. Some were bent forward, others leaning way back. Some pushed and pulled on big machine parts. The men were as tall as real life and behind them loomed gigantic machines that breathed huge clouds of smoke.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Etruscan-style masks that are part of the original design of the Garden Court. The white terra-cotta carvings are embedded in the walls. Various documents of *Detroit Institute of Arts*

<sup>4</sup> She is describing the main panel of north wall: *Production and Manufacture of Engine and Transmission*. Rivera, Diego, *Detroit Industry fresco mural*. *Detroit Institute of Arts*.

Above the drawing, near the ceiling, was a finished painting. Its colors were as bold and bright as Angelica's beloved Sunday comics in the newspapers. The painting showed two women, both as big as pictures on a billboard.

It wasn't the size of the women in the painting that seized Angelica's attention.

The women were naked!

Not like the soothing images of a plump baby Jesus that Angelica was familiar with. These were just big pictures of naked women –Angelica could not fathom why they were nude. Even worse, she was holding her father's hand. She would die of shame if her father saw her looking at the pictures.

One of the women was Black and the other had the red/brown skin of an Indian, or maybe a Mexican.<sup>5</sup> They were lying on their sides, which meant you could see their boobies and a part of their butts. At least both had an arm draped in front of them that hid their you-know-whats. The women were on opposite sides of the painting, like bookends. Between them, there stood a tan-colored mountain. Hands were growing out of the sides of the mountain.

Angelica did not know what to think about the all things she was seeing in this place called a museum. But as she peeked at the big naked women, she was certain of one thing. *El Maestro* Diego Rivera was a dirty pig - a *cochino*! Angelica's mother, who went to Mass twice a week at Holy Trinity, would certainly think so too.

To the left of the dirty picture, *El Maestro* was in the same spot; still surrounded by the other men who listened and watched Sr. Rivera gesture to the bug-headed man.

At the other end of the room was another grand entrance. Above it was a large open area overlooking the Court. The sunlight only reached the front of the room and the rest of the area

---

<sup>5</sup> North wall panel. *The Red and Black Races*.

was dark. Angelica saw a woman standing alone in the room. She looked tiny against the black backdrop.

The woman was leaning on the stone ledge, smoking a cigarette. Angelica rarely saw women smoke. The woman was drawing in a notebook. She looked as serious as *El Maestro*.

Angelica instantly knew the woman was Mexican. She had pure black hair and the same *café-con-leche* skin as Angelica. The woman's white blouse with a rectangular neckline embroidered with flowers was something *Mexicanas* wore when they wanted to look pretty.

Angelica stared at the mysterious *Mexicana* when the woman set aside her drawing book and began to scan the Court. The woman watched *El Maestro* for a while. She eventually looked in Angelica's direction – and she kept looking in Angelica's direction.

Suddenly, the woman yelled: "¡*Hola mi muñeca!*" (Hello, my little doll!)

Angelica jumped a bit. She was still holding her father's hand and she darted behind his legs. Her father tugged her arm and shot her a stern look. When she peeked back in the direction of the woman, the woman yelled again.

"¡*Mi encanta tu vestido rosa!* (I love your pink dress!)

The woman motioned with her hands that she was coming down to the Court. She disappeared into the darkness and a moment later Angelica saw her walking down a staircase in the back of the ground floor entrance.

The staircase was beautiful; white stone with etchings on the side and black iron railings. The woman was just as elegant, Angelica thought. The woman descended slowly and with a very upright posture. Her long flowing white skirt looked as fresh and unwrinkled as her flowery

blouse; her hair perfectly parted in the middle and braided in the back. She wore gold earrings and several necklaces and bracelets made of chunky stones.<sup>6</sup> Like a princess, Angelica thought.

People gravitated toward her as she entered the Court. She smiled and talked a bit to the many who approached her. Angelica heard people address her as Mrs. Rivera.

She kept walking toward Angelica and the men, all of whom had been frozen in their spots ever since Sra. Rivera shouted in Spanish in a room full of *gabachos* (white people). To them, yelling out in Spanish invited danger.

Even 10-year-old Angelica knew the stories: Mexicans speaking Spanish in public were sometimes reported to the police. Some were deported - including people born in the U.S like Angelica.<sup>7</sup>

Quite a few people had gathered around *la señora* by the time she made it to Angelica's father and his friends. The men, hats in hands, began to thank her for coming to Detroit – truth is, Angela didn't hear much of the conversation. She couldn't believe what was happening.

Finally, Sra. Rivera leaned down and smiled. Her perfume was spellbinding.

"*Mi muñeca,*" Sra. Rivera said.

Angelica, dizzy from it all, blurted out:

"Are you a dancer?"

And with that Sra. Rivera laughed and hugged Angelica hard and gave her a long wet kiss on the forehead. She grabbed Angelica's hand and announced she was giving her a tour of

---

<sup>6</sup> Various photos from the *Detroit Institute of Arts*, the silent movie footage by Ford Motor Co. and newspaper articles show Kahlo wearing such clothing and jewelry.

<sup>7</sup> Vargas, Zaragosa. *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.) Up to 1.8 million people of Mexican descent, most U.S-born, were rounded up nationwide in informal raids and deported during the Great Depression. In Detroit, the deportations shrank the city's Mexican/Mexican-American community from an estimated 15,000 in 1929 to 1,200 in 1939.

the Court. She told one of the people following her to bring Angelica's father and his friends some Coca-Colas and the person scurried off.

Angelica was giggly and aware many people were looking at her and *la señora* as they climbed the ladder of the scaffold. Sra. Rivera moved slower than most people. Her posture was very upright even on a ladder. Angelica thought it was lady-like.

It was exciting to stand above everyone else. Angelica waved at her father and his friends, each with bottles of Coca-Cola. Angelica and *la señora* sat on wooden chairs, behind them was the wall with the dancing men and the naked ladies.<sup>8</sup> Sra. Rivera held Angelica's hand as they sat and talked.

*El maestro* was painting every wall in the Court, Sra. Rivera explained. The drawings on the paper sheets were the first step on what would be painted on the walls. The diagonal lines and squares over the drawings were like a guide that measured the images and ensured they were the size Diego wanted.

That sounded like math – her favorite subject in school, Angelica said.

"*¡Fabuloso!*," Sra. Rivera said. When she was Angelica's age, she wanted to be a doctor, she told Angelica.

*El maestro* and the men were still on the same spot on the scaffold. Angelica asked why the man in the drawing had a head like a bug. Sra. Rivera laughed. The man in the drawing was wearing a gas mask, like the one soldiers wore during the Great War, she explained.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Detroit Institute of Arts* archives detail the progression of Rivera's work, including a timeline of when the 27 panels of the mural were created. Based on the timeline and what Angelica remembers seeing, she visited museum sometime in August 1932.

<sup>9</sup> Detail of *Aviation* panel, East Wall. *Detroit Institute of Arts* material.

The men around Diego must have measured something wrong in the drawing. Sra. Rivera said. Diego hates it when something is not right in his work, she said. Angelica asked if they got the math wrong. Sra. Rivera laughed again. "*¡Eres preciosa!*" (You are precious!)

*La señora* leaned in. In a faux-whisper, she needed to ask Angelica something important, she said. "Do you think Diego is a *panzón* (a pot-bellied man)?"

Angelica covered her mouth to hide her laugh. Sra. Rivera kept going. Doesn't Diego's round stomach and skinny legs make him look like a bullfrog standing on its hind legs? Angelica confessed she thought he looked like a hobo.

When they stopped laughing, Sra. Rivera became a bit serious.

Truth is, Diego is beautiful, *la señora* said. He is a genius.

She said it again. A genius.

Sra. Rivera continued to unravel the mystery of the drawings. The big drawing behind them was of the giant Ford factory. The row of men were working on an assembly line. Angelica confessed she thought the men were dancing and Sra. Rivera again erupted in laughter. Diego would love that, Sra. Rivera said, she would tell him later. Angelica had the same deep satisfaction as earning a gold star on her homework.

*La señora* then pointed to the naked ladies. Angelica could feel her face getting red. She didn't want to look, she said sheepishly.

*¿Por qué? (Why?)* Sra. Rivera asked.

They are naked. It's wrong, Angelica replied.

"*Ay, muñeca.*" Sra. Rivera said. She didn't speak for a moment as she stroked Angelica's hair.



Pictures of bug-headed men and big factories may seem silly and strange, she said finally. Diego was showing the different things men create and how they live in and work in this modern age.

Sometime men create good things and sometimes bad things.

But he has placed women atop all these man-made things for a reason: they are the most beautiful, powerful creations of all, Sra. Rivera said.

Sra. Rivera locked eyes with Angelica: "Please, never forget this: A woman should never be ashamed of her gifts."

Angelica's eyes began to well up. Sra. Rivera leaned back in her chair. Even a *panzón* like Diego knows that, she said. More laughter.

Angelica looked at her father below. He drank little of the Coca-Cola. He waved for her to come down. Sra. Rivera descended the ladder with Angelica. Delfino and his friends thanked *la señora* profusely. Sra. Rivera kissed Angelica on both cheeks and hugged her so hard it hurt.

As Angelica and the men left the Court and walked through the gloomy Great Hall, the men began to chuckle. They kept saying "*mi muñeca*" between their giggles.

The group exited the golden doors and as they walked down the fancy steps, Delfino lifted Angelica high above his head and shouted, "*Mi muñeca!*"

One of the men let loose with *un grito*, the distinctive Mexican yelp that's a primal mix of pain and joy. On the trolley ride back home they broke their rule. They spoke Spanish freely, joyfully. They laughed out loud as Angelica told them every detail. Angelica and her father would tell the story many, many times for many years.

Back at the museum, Frida was battling a new threat to her body: the Midwestern humidity. The sticky, heavy air of late summer made her feel as if she was "withering."<sup>10</sup>

She had stabbing pains in her right foot, the one damaged from her childhood polio. If she walked slowly, many didn't notice her limp. It had been just over a month since she had been released from Henry Ford Hospital. She had bloody discharges for weeks, and now terrible cramps.

Diego was spending 12 to 18 hours a day at the museum. He'd return to the apartment to eat, smoke a cigar and plan the next day of work until he fell asleep. On Sundays, he would take time to meet with the endless stream of people eager to kiss the ass of a genius: reporters, art patrons, bored socialites, etc.<sup>11</sup> Every day, everywhere, he was the main attraction.

Frida was spending a lot of time alone in the open area where she had first spotted Angelica. The area was just a few yards from the small storage room she had converted into a makeshift studio.<sup>12</sup> Amid boxes of office supplies and stacked rolls of brown packing paper, she had set up a portable easel beside an end table. She sat in a wooden folding chair.

As Diego created his epic vision in the grand Court, Frida decided she was going to explore her soul in a closet.

---

<sup>10</sup> Bloch, Lucienne, an assistant to Rivera who also lived with the couple in Detroit, personal diary, Detroit, August 1932.

<sup>11</sup> Various sources describe Rivera's routine in Detroit, including Lucienne Bloch's journal, *Detroit News* articles and Linda Bank Down's "*Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*" W.W. Norton & Co. New York, 1990

<sup>12</sup> Bank Downs, Linda, Author interview. Detroit, MI, September 2012.