

Eduardo Costantini to exhibit rivera's canvas at his malba gallery

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The interface of art and power

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For the Herald

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Argentine art collector Eduardo Costantini has announced he will exhibit his recent purchase, Diego Rivera's biggest ever canvas 'Dance in Tehuantepec', at his MALBA gallery next March for which he deserves the most fulsome commendation as the painting has been hidden away in a private collection for the past twenty years and he is doing everyone in Argentina interested in Art and in Mexican Art in particular a huge favour.

MALBA already has in its permanent collection 'Self Portrait with a Monkey and a Parrot' painted by Rivera's wife Frida Kahlo and Rivera's 'Portrait of Ramón Gómez de la Serna' (Frida and Diego pictured left in a photo by Carl Van Vechten taken in 1932). as well as presently exhibiting a collection featuring Rivera along with fellow Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco so with 'Dance in Tehuantepec' added to the mix early 20th Century Mexican Art will have enjoyed an exemplary outing in Buenos Aires.

I am equally fascinated by Rivera's personal life which is a window not only on a past era but also the present and through which I can see that the dynamics of the interface between art and power has not changed one jot since Rivera's heyday nor indeed since human societies were formed.

State leaders and tycoons have always co-opted artists to their causes such as the Greeks with Polygnotos and Apollodoros, Romans who commissioned endless sculptures to glorify themselves and their regimes, the Medici and Pope Julius II who hired Michelangelo to glorify their respective interests, endless monarchs and captains of industry who hired great masters to paint them flatteringly for posterity and even scraping the bottom of the barrel to Adolf Hitler & Mussolini who hired like-minded artists to project their perversity.

These days state leaders do not want so much to commission famous artists' work but rather in the glare of media to clothe themselves in an artists' fame and they prefer performing artists such as movie stars, singers and writers than painters as good painters do not generally achieve real fame, given art markets operate on the basis of supply and demand, until they are dead albeit there are exceptions to this rule such as Picasso, Lucian Freud, Damian Hirst and Jeff Koons (also currently featuring at MALBA).

A good example of leaders vicariously basking in the fame of performing artists was how Argentina's former president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner latched-on to actress and singer Madonna like a Pit Bull when she visited Buenos Aires in December, 2008 when Madonna was received at the Casa Rosada in a manner befitting a head of state all the while an official photographer recorded events and the images of Cristina and Madonna communing were broadcast across social and mainstream media worldwide.

The recent meeting of George and Amal Clooney with Pope Francis and Angelina Jolie Pitt hobnobbing with the Obamas, David Cameron, British Royals and holding the United Nations Security Council in thrall are also good examples of this (mutually beneficial) modern-era phenomenon.

Tycoons will fraternise with performing artists but favour more commissioning and/or collecting plastic artists' work and Constantini typifies this as a tycoon's acquisitive power is demonstrated in the stratospheric prices they pay for the best art and their prestige is enhanced by its ownership which is generally a good thing as most, to cast themselves as philanthropists and further enhance their prestige, make their collections accessible to the Hoi Polloi either while, as Constantini does, they live or after they die when their collections are bequeathed to galleries and museums to perpetuate their names and prestige.

Rivera was one of those painter exceptions who enjoyed fame in their lifetime and in affirmation of the rule that state leaders and tycoons are attracted to artists like moths to flame he was welcomed into the open arms of Mexican presidents and even, despite being a communist, celebrated by United States business tycoons as both groups wanted Rivera's talent to progress their sectoral interests.

Mexican governments after the 1910 – 20 Mexican Revolution courted Rivera (and Siqueiros and Orozco too) as they were all birds of a feather inasmuch as they shared a commitment to socialism as a means to overcome inequality and Rivera's monumental murals were an apposite tool with which to promote social and political messages to the Mexican masses in the reunification of Mexico after its bloody and divisive revolution.

In the United States Edsel Ford paid Rivera handsomely for the incomparable 'Detroit Industry' murals which are now venerated in the Detroit Institute of Arts and the millionaire stockbrokers of the San Francisco Stock Exchange were enchanted with Rivera's 'Allegory of California' in their Luncheon Club.

US corporate oligarchy acclaim was not universal as Nelson Rockefeller objected to Rivera including an image of Lenin in a mural Rockefeller commissioned called '*Man at the Crossroads*' and he had it destroyed in March 1934.

I know why Rivera was and is so celebrated as I have seen the wonder of his huge murals in Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts and the National Palace and they capture the revolutionary struggles of Mexico with powerful simplicity and though the murals have a central theme of oppression and exploitation there is always a centre of hope evoking a better future.

Rivera was expelled from the Communist Party of Mexico in 1929 for being a Trotskyite and labelled a "millionaire artist for the establishment" which in death at least, given the US\$15.7 million price Constantini paid for 'Dance in Tehuantepec', has proved prophetic but there is no denying that in paying such a price (nearly double the previous highest price ever paid for a Latin American work of art, Frida Kahlo's "Two Nudes in the Forest (The Land Itself)") Constantini has made Rivera the preeminent Latin American artist of all time Trotskyite or not.

Several decades ago when I lived on Mexico's Pacific Coast in Acapulco I explored south to Oaxaca and in doing so unwittingly followed Rivera's footsteps to Tehuantepec and saw the Zapotec people folk-dancing in the town square and to have the opportunity next March, thanks to Costantini, to see Rivera's take on the zestful and joyous dances I saw in Tehuantepec has me champing at the bit.

Not only do state leaders and tycoons seek to clothe themselves one way or another in the celebrity of living artists they will do the same if they get the chance with dead artists providing they're famous enough and it will not surprise me one jot if Mauricio Macri or Horacio Larreta suddenly reveal they have been Diego Rivera aficionados for years and volunteer to cut the ribbon at the unveiling of 'Dance in Tehuantepec'.

Regardless of who cuts the ribbon I'll be there for the unveiling and very grateful to Eduardo Costantini who is an Argentine cultural treasure as much as the art jewels with which he has so generously stuffed MALBA.