

“My cubist paintings
are my most Mexican.”

Diego Rivera

Diego María Rivera's art honored the history, traditions, and everyday lives of the Mexican people.

To celebrate the recent gift of *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life), the National Gallery of Art has organized an exhibition of Diego Rivera's paintings—on view in the East Building April 4 through July 25, 2004. This exhibition focuses on Rivera's experimentations with cubism early in his career.

Diego Rivera, *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life) (detail), 1915, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Katharine Graham

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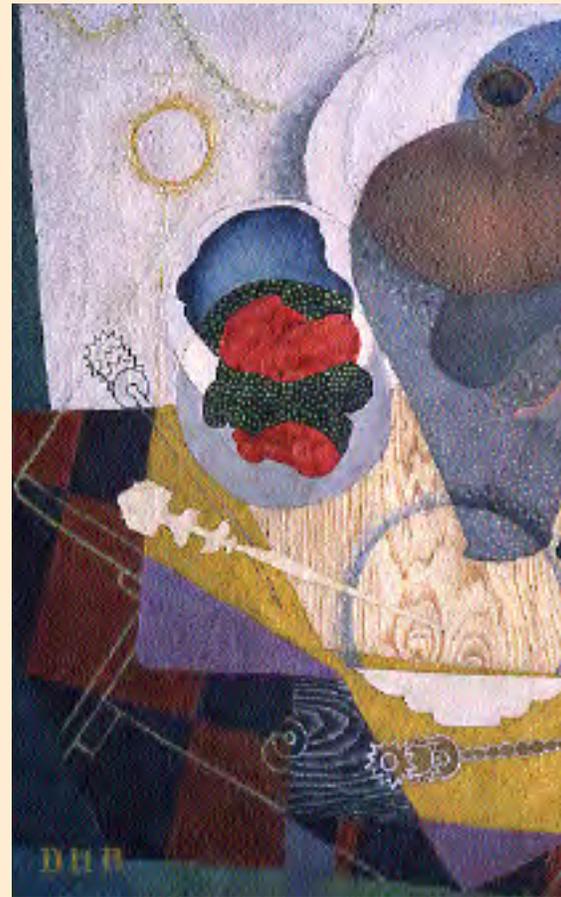
Tell me about the artist.

Diego María Rivera was born in the small town of Guanajuato in central Mexico in 1886 and moved with his family to Mexico City in the early 1890s. Both of his parents were school teachers, and Rivera's father encouraged his artistic talent, covering the walls of his room with canvas so that he could draw on them. By age twelve, Rivera had already finished high school and was attending San Carlos Academy, the national art school. Rivera studied Mexican painters, collected Mexican folk art, and traveled to see the art of Mexico's ancient Maya and Aztec cultures. He gained a deep respect for his country's traditions.

At age twenty-one, with a government grant, Rivera traveled to Europe. Between 1910 and 1920, a decade marked by the Mexican Revolution and World War I, Rivera lived and worked in Spain, Italy, and France. He gathered inspiration from Spanish art, the Renaissance wall frescoes of Italy, and the bold new style of modernism. In Paris, Rivera met many artists, among them Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who were developing a new style called cubism. Cubism was a daring way of visualizing three-dimensional objects on a flat surface such as paper or canvas. Consider a table, which has a front, back, top, bottom, and sides: Picasso and Braque challenged themselves to paint several views/sides of such an object simultaneously. This technique made objects in their works look broken up and reassembled.



The artist. Diego Rivera, *Self-Portrait (detail)*, 1941, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA. Gift of Irene Rich Clifford

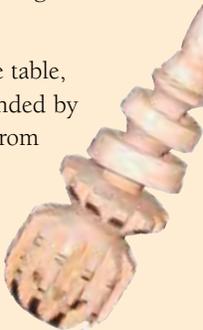


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What's going on in this picture?

In his investigation of cubism, Rivera painted this still life in boldly simplified shapes. Look for circles, triangles, and rectangles throughout *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life). Do you recognize any objects? Overlapping rectangles show a table viewed simultaneously from above and the side. Find the areas where Rivera painted patterns imitating the wood grain table top.

A large earthenware jug sits in the center of the table, casting a blue-green shadow. The jug is surrounded by glass bottles, fruits, and vegetables, all shown from multiple views. On the left, Rivera included a *molinillo*, a small wooden whisk used to mix the ancient Mexican drink *chocolate de agua*. For hundreds of years, the people of Mexico have used this tool to whip hot chocolate—the *molinillo* is rapidly twirled between the palms to make the hot drink frothy. When making his cubist paintings in Europe, Rivera often included memories of Mexico in his pictures.



Can you find all three views of the molinillo?

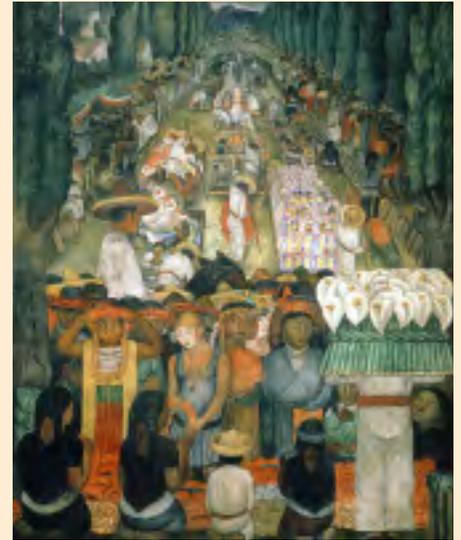
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Celebrating Mexican Culture

When he returned to Mexico, Rivera combined painting techniques he'd learned in Europe with his passion for Mexico. He focused on Mexican subjects, showing the history and daily life of ordinary Mexicans, particularly factory workers, farmers, and children. In the 1920s and 1930s, Rivera became famous for his large murals painted on the walls of public buildings. Rivera believed that art should be seen free in public places and enjoyed by all people. He used his murals to tell powerful stories about the struggles of the poor and to celebrate the history and diverse peoples of Mexico. When he died in 1957, Rivera was honored for creating a modern Mexican art that drew upon his country's native traditions.



Diego Rivera, *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life)



This mural cycle shows the history of the Mexican people from the time of the great Aztec civilization. Diego Rivera, *Friday of Sorrows on the Canal at Santa Anita, from A Vision of the Mexican People*, Mural Cycle in the Ministry of Education, Mexico City, 1923–1924.

Rivera images © 2004 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F.

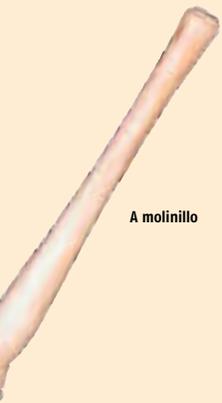
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Color and Texture

Rivera varied colors and textures to make his paintings interesting to the eye. To add texture, he applied the paint thickly in some places or covered areas with little dabs. Sometimes he mixed sand or sawdust into his oil paint to give it a rough texture. Look closely at the large jug in *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life) to see a variety of textures—the paint is so thick at the jug's mouth that it resembles the real clay used to make these jugs. It almost seems that water could actually be poured through the opening!

Rivera's cubist paintings are distinctive in their use of bright colors.

Point out all of these colors in *No. 9, Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life):



A molinillo

red = rojo
orange = anaranjado
yellow = amarillo
green = verde
blue = azul
purple = morado
pink = rosa
brown = café
white = blanco
black = negro
gray = gris

book nook

These books about the art and traditions of Mexico, for children ages four and up, can be found in the Children's Shop located on the Gallery's concourse level or at your local library or bookstore.

Diego

By Jonah Winter, illustrated by Jeanette Winter

An excellent beginning biography of Diego Rivera, in English and Spanish.

Frida

By Jonah Winter, illustrated by Ana Juan

A story about Frida Kahlo's unique artistic imagination and how painting saved her life.

The Pot that Juan Built

By Nancy Andrews-Goebel, illustrated by David Diaz

Vibrantly illustrated, this story celebrates master potter Juan Quezada who uses traditional methods to create stunning pottery.

Ghost Wings

By Barbara M. Joosse, illustrated by Giselle Potter

Set in Mexico amidst the annual migration of the monarch butterfly, this touching story of a little girl and her grandmother introduces the traditions of the Days of the Dead.



try this!

activity

Still-Life Painting

Diego Rivera's *No. 9 Nature morte espagnole* (Spanish Still Life) is a *still life*—a painting of arranged objects. Flowers, fruit, books, musical instruments, bottles, and bowls are some of the most popular objects found in still-life paintings. At the National Gallery you can see many examples of still lifes. Some are painted so realistically that they fool your eye into thinking that you could reach into the painting and touch the objects. With others, such as those by cubist artists Picasso and Braque, it is difficult even to identify the items.

Take a stroll through both East and West Building galleries to look for still-life paintings: How many can you find? Write down all the objects that you see in them. Which still life is your favorite? Why?

Compose your own still life

You will need paper and paints, colored pencils, or markers.

First, gather objects from your home. You may select ordinary items, or, like Rivera, you might want to include objects that have a special significance to you. To make the composition interesting, select objects that have distinct colors, patterns, shapes, and textures. Arrange the objects on a table in a way that pleases you. Next, sit down in front of your still life and begin drawing what you see. Then, move around your still life and draw a few objects from a different view.

To learn more about still-life painting, visit www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/still_life/index.htm

1: Paul Cézanne, *Still Life* (detail), c. 1900, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman

2: Henri Matisse, *Still Life with Apples on a Pink Tablecloth* (detail), 1924, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

3: Henri Fantin-Latour, *Still Life* (detail), 1866, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

4: Georges Braque, *Still Life: Le Jour* (detail), 1929, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection