

Man, Controller of the Universe

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Abstract. The *Man, Controller of the Universe* painted by the renowned Mexican artist Diego Rivera in the gigantic mural of the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City is overlooked by a telescope. We acknowledge this instrument as the Plaskett Telescope at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory in Victoria, Canada.

By 1930, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1866-1957) gained international favor for his lush and passionate murals. Inspired by Communist ideals and an intense devotion to his cultural heritage, Rivera created boldly hued masterpieces of public art that adorn the municipal buildings of the major metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Chapingo, Cuernavaca, San Francisco, Detroit, and New York City. Throughout his career, Diego Rivera incorporated many diverse interests and influences into his work. His academic interests led him into various fields; science, medicine, archeology, social cultural and political history, philosophy, mythology, industrial technology as well as the new and emerging cosmology. He was a draftsman, painter, printmaker, sculptor, illustrator, costume and set designer, and architect. He experienced and rejected traditional training and considered his European and American experiences as preparation for his post-Revolutionary murals. He had the ability to see a potential masterpiece in everything—crowds, markets, festivals, workers in shops or fields. He was able to present universal ideas using images, colors, and masterful composition, both in social and political murals, and traditional renderings of everyday Mexican culture.

In 1932, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller convinced her husband, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to commission a Rivera mural for the lobby of the soon-to-be-completed Rockefeller Center in New York City. Flush from successes in San Francisco and Detroit, Rivera proposed a 63-foot-long portrait of workers facing symbolic crossroads of industry, science, socialism, and capitalism, called *Man at the Crossroads Looks Uncertainly but Hopefully Towards the Future*. The painter believed that his friendship with the Rockefeller family would allow him to insert an unapproved representation of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin into a section portraying a May Day parade. However, the real decision-making power laid with the Center's building managers, who abhorred Rivera's propagandistic approach. Horrified by newspaper articles attacking the mural's anti-capitalist ideology, they ordered Rivera to remove the offending image. When Rivera refused, offering to balance the work with a portrait of Abraham Lincoln on the opposing side, the managers payed his full fee, barred him from the site, and hid the mural behind a massive drape. Despite negotiations to transfer the work to the Museum of Modern Art and demonstrations by Rivera supporters, near midnight, on 10 February 1934, Rockefeller Center workmen, carrying axes, demolish the mural. Later,



Figure 1. Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934, mural, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico.

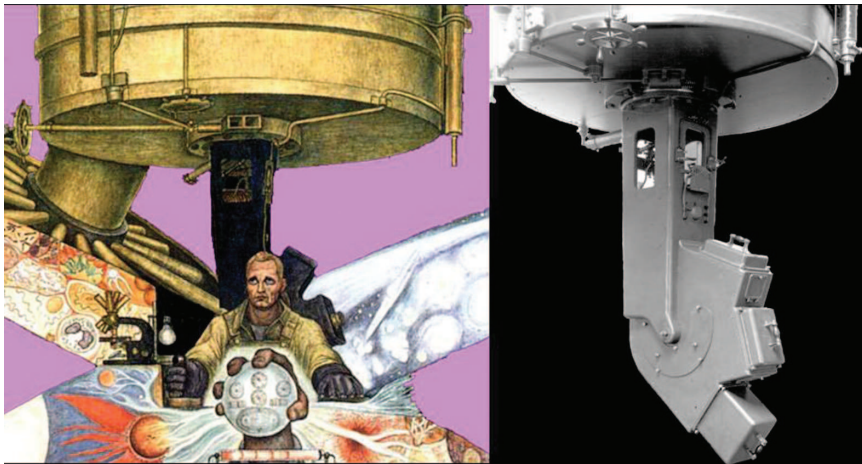


Figure 2. Detail of *Man, Controller of the Universe* (left panel) and Plaskett Telescope at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory in Victoria, British Columbia (right panel). (Credit: NRC Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics, Dominion Astrophysical Observatory)

Rivera recreated the frescoes, renamed *Man, Controller of the Universe* (Figure 1), in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, adding a portrait of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in a nightclub.

Both murals contain dramatic images of scientific instruments and observations, and this paper will explore these in detail. In the center of the frescoes a telescope

brings the most distant celestial bodies into man's vision and understanding. A microscope makes infinitesimal living organisms visible and comprehensible to man, connecting atoms and cells with the astral system. Exactly central, cosmic energy, focused by giant lenses and received by two antennas is carried to the machinery controlled by the Worker where it is transformed into productive energy. Crossed lunes contain images of the micro and macro cosmos. Rivera's keen interest in contemporary science and his use of technical resources allows us to identify individual aspects of the image, in particular the actual astronomical telescope he used as a model. We acknowledge this instrument as the Plaskett Telescope at the Canadian NRC Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics' Dominion Astrophysical Observatory, in Victoria, British Columbia (Figure 2). The Plaskett 72-inch (182-cm) missed becoming the largest telescope in the World, but remained the second largest after the Hooker 100-inch (254-cm) telescope at Mount Wilson Observatories near Pasadena, California until the 74-inch (188-cm) reflector at David Dunlap Observatory in 1935 (also in Canada) debuted. It is certain that Diego Rivera used the Plaskett Telescope as a model for the great instrument used in his *Man, Controller of the Universe*. This is quite fitting as we celebrate with INSAP the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first astronomical use of the telescope.

References

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