



## Diego Rivera

### Former assistants remember the man, the genius



By Ramona Grigg  
special writer

When artist Lucienne Bloch was a young girl in her 20s, during the height of the Great Depression, she gave up a job teaching sculpture for Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin to grind powdered paints for Diego Rivera — a back-breaking, poor-paying, thankless job, at best.

She met the famed Mexican muralist in 1931 in New York, at a banquet given in his honor during an exhibition of his work.

"My romantic notions of art and life, at age 22, were knocked out of joint by this burly giant of a man, and I marveled at his preposterous opinions," Bloch wrote in a recent article for Art in America titled, "On Location with Diego Rivera."

What swayed her the most, Bloch wrote, was Rivera's notion that man doesn't control the machines. "The machines control us," he told her. "We are the catalysts that transform the raw

materials of the earth into energy. We are the continuation of the geologic process."

LAST WEEK Bloch and her husband, Stephen Dimitroff, another of Rivera's early assistants, stood in the Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Art transfixed by the 53-year-old Detroit industry murals.

They stared at them, moved closer to pick out certain touches, and delighted in them as though they were seeing the 27 frescoes for the first time — as though they themselves had not worked on them.

"Can you imagine the genius of the man?" Dimitroff said. "He was incredible. It was the thrill of our lives to work for Diego."

When Bloch asked Rivera at the banquet if he would let her grind colors, the muralist already had a reputation as a self-centered perfectionist who worked his assistants until they dropped, then refused to pay them a dime when a nickel would do.

He had the energy of 10 men half his

age, and if he worked 20 or 30 hours straight, as the Dimitroffs said he often did, his assistants worked as long, without question. And there were plenty of young artists, including Dimitroff, who begged for the job.

Dimitroff was born in Bulgaria, but his family eventually settled in Flint, where he and his father worked in the auto plants.

He went to Chicago to study art, but left in a fury when the art school wouldn't recognize his three years of night art courses in Flint.

In his book "Apprentice of Diego Rivera in Detroit," Dimitroff remembers:

"An overwhelming urge to reject art schools and meet a living, active artist, Diego Rivera, had propelled me by night bus and streetcar to the DIA. That early chilly November, 1932, I ran up the marble steps boldly, I winked at the bronze hulk of Rodin's The Thinker — then the fact hit me that this was Monday, when all the museums of the world are closed."

DIMITROFF CAJOLED the guards and finally got in by saying he had to get back to Flint "where my dad was laid off from Buick." The guard turned away and said, "Well, son, if I don't see you go in I can't stop you."

He met Rivera and told him he just wanted to watch. He did that for days, going back each night to his \$2.50 a month room, until finally somebody let him grind colors.

"It was the Depression, then, you have to remember, and nobody mentioned money," Dimitroff said with a laugh. "But I was there to learn. It was what I wanted to do." Dimitroff was hired when one of the assistants suddenly quit.

Rivera asked to see some of his paintings and the young man was terrified. "I showed him landscapes and still lifes and portraits of my family, including one of my dad coming back from the factory with his lunch pail. (Rivera said) 'Very fine, sketches good — but why you not paint worker's factory? That interesting.' I was stunned. I didn't know how to answer. The factory was just plain close to me."

At one point Dimitroff stopped working long enough to pose for Rivera, whose habit it was to choose real people for the subjects of his paintings. He appears as a pink-shirted worker on the North Wall lifting a motor block with another Rivera assistant, Art Niendorf.

Though Bloch and Dimitroff both worked with Rivera in Detroit, they didn't meet here. "I left for New York one day, and Steve showed up in Detroit the next day," Bloch said. They met for the first time some months later in New York when Dimitroff and Niendorf came to her door begging for money.

"They'd been sent from Detroit to Rockefeller Center to prepare the walls of the RCA Building lobby for Rivera's next job — three frescoes commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller depicting 'Man at the Crossroads.'"

NIENDORF KEPT "forgetting" to send the two men their living expenses and they were dead broke. "You're the only one I know in New York," Niendorf told Bloch. "Can we borrow \$20?"

When Bloch hesitated, Niendorf said she could be chief photographer for the Rockefeller project. Bloch says now, "It was the most significant \$20 I ever parted with."

Throughout her days with Rivera in Detroit (where she shared an apartment for five months with Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo) and in New York, Bloch managed to find time to keep a diary.

A passage, dated March 20 (1933), has Bloch looking for the Riveras in New York after they'd arrived there fresh from the Detroit project: "I met Dimi (Stephen Dimitroff) at RCA. We went together to the Barbizon Plaza and looked all over for the Riveras. They were in (Mexican artist) Covarrubias' apartment."

"They looked great! Diego is relating with hilarious gestures the scandal in Detroit about his frescoes. There are many 'experts' who want to remove them — whitewash them."

"PURITANICAL GROUPS are shocked at the big nudes. Some object that the workers in the factory scenes don't look happy. But the greatest of the commotion is the panel which some call a 'travesty on the Holy Family'."

"This is a small panel, glorifying the great medical research work of science. It shows a blond baby. (The model, Bloch said later, was the kidnapped Lindbergh baby which Rivera sketched from newspaper photos) gently held by a nurse with a pretty white cap framing her face. A doctor, the likeness of Dr. Valentiner, director of the DIA, stands by, vaccinating the child."

"In the foreground are the ox, horse, and sheep — the source of serums needed to control epidemics. A beautiful one! Newspapers are having a holiday on the furor the mural causes. Luckily Edsel Ford shows real GLITS not to weaken before the hue and cry of the bigots. I'm impressed. Maybe he's got some of his Dad's stubbornness. Diego says that thousands of people are visiting the Art Institute who never went there before."

Today, a half-century later, Rivera is back at the DIA, in the form of a major retrospective on view through April 27 before going on to Philadelphia, Mexico City, Madrid and West Berlin. It includes Rivera's huge preparatory drawings — or "cartoons" in museum lingo — found in the basement of the museum in 1970, after the Dimitroffs and others assisted staff members the drawings existed and should be there.

And the Dimitroffs, major forces during Rivera's United States stay, are back, too. They're here at the DIA's invitation to teach and lecture on Rivera's Detroit frescoes.

Twice a week they're at Detroit's Northern High School teaching the lost art of fresco painting to gifted students "who, with such joy, do all the dirty work," Bloch said. The adults in the class come from Cranbrook.

"There's a 70-year-old man who's just marvelous!" She said, adding, "He's so full of life." Bloch herself is a 75-year-old human dynamo who admitted she "works all the time. We're only happy when we're working. Our work is our joy."

THE LECTURE schedule is filling up — Oakland, Jackson, Free, Adrian College and more before they head back on March 30 to their home in Guatemala, 125 miles north of San Francisco, on the edge of California's wine country.

And if the year 1988 is significant at the DIA — the retrospective celebrating 100 years since Rivera's birth is a major event designed to coincide with

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BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Lucienne Bloch, daughter of the famed composer, Ernest Bloch, is painter, fresco artist and photographer with a witty, outgoing personality. Here she pauses to look again at the murals she worked on with Diego Rivera.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Stephen Dimitroff was the model for the man in the center panel, directly behind his head while working with Rivera on the murals at Detroit Institute of Arts. Dimitroff took a bus from Flint each day to watch Rivera work until he was hired.

## Unusual gallery shows Zenian's early work



Still life with photo of the artist, an oil on canvas, 36 by 24 inches, by Paul Zenian, is one of 29 works in the exhibit at Bellan Art

Center of Troy. They are from 1966 to 1972 and are done in various media.

By Manon Møllgaard  
special writer

While galleries featuring modern art are naturally inclined to promote "new work by . . ." or "work in progress," it is sometimes refreshing to take a nose-dive into time and nostalgia and acquaint oneself with a modern-day artist's earlier work.

Enter then, artist and teacher Paul Zenian, who is currently exhibiting 29 pieces from the period 1966-1972 at the Bellan Art Center in Troy.

Amongst an impressive collection of pen and ink and charcoal drawings, watercolors, graphite, intaglios and oils on canvas, the large oil paintings (often portraits) predominate.

Moody and meditative, these figurative canvases evoke a feeling of loneliness and isolation, set against land or seascapes painted with dense stretches of color, illuminated by a subtle play of light and shadow.

As Zenian says: "Quite a few pieces are derived from family motifs. The emphasis on bold methods of lush paint handling is more reminiscent of abstract expressionism rather than, say, realism or impressionism."

the two women are alone on an otherwise deserted and vast stretch of beach. The feeling of isolation is dramatized by the beige, almost muddy color of the beach, which is relieved by the reds and pinks of the women's bathing suits and skin tones and a strip of yellow sand which blends into the vivid blue horizon of sea and sky.

AGAIN, "STILL LIFE," 36 by 24 inches, which includes a photograph of the artist in the foreground, portrays a nude woman gazing on to a large expanse of yellow, veldt-like space. Though it might not be the artist's intention, the sense of loneliness — entrapment even — is enhanced by the bars on the bed and the window.

Much lighter in contrast is "A Toilette," a 28-by-34-inch watercolor composed of a series of small vignettes in soft pinks and orange tones, where a woman is voluptuously engaged in taking a bubble bath, dressing and generally beautifying herself.

The Bellan Art Center is in itself unique. Situated on the countrified, wooded intersection of Rochester and Square Lake roads, the building is divided into an art gallery on the north side and dental offices on the south, with a short passage inside, connecting the two.

Dr. Gary Bellan, dentist, musician and art collector, and his wife Zabel, talented artist, photographer and gallery director, have not only graced the spacious gallery with a collection of fine art, but have also extended this into the dental area.

Imagine having dental work in an office adorned with glorious paintings, prints and drawings in lieu of those fearsome charts which graphically portray the onset of receding gums?

TO ADD TO the interest, the Bellans have very unusual backgrounds. Both are of Armenian descent, he grew up in Jerusalem and she was born in Ethiopia. They met and married in Beirut.

Paul Zenian has taught drawing and painting at the University of Michigan, and is presently an art instructor at the Washenaw Community College.

He was commissioned in 1981 to design the sculpture that stands in the plaza of the latter college, and has works in numerous local, regional and national private collections.

"Early Works" by Paul Zenian, Bellan Art Center, 1800 Rochester Road, Troy, continues through March 30. Gallery hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Saturday.

In "Two Women," a 50-by-42-inch canvas,