

# Former assistants remember man, and genius

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from newspaper photos) gently held by a nurse with a pretty white cap framing her face. A doctor, the likeness of Dr. Valentin, director of the DIA, stands by, vaccinating the child.

"In the foreground are the ox, horse, and sheep — the source of germs needed to control epidemics. A beautiful theme! Newspapers are having a holiday on the favor the mural causes. Jacky Edsel Ford shows real GUTS 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, Mex-

ico 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 1979, after the Dimitroffs and others assured 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 at Oakland, Jackson, Flint, Adrian College and more before they head back on March 30 to their home in Guadalupe, 125 miles north of San Francisco, on the edge of California's wine country.

And if the year 1986 is significant at the DIA — the retrospective celebrating 100 years since Rivera's birth is a major event designed to coincide with the DIA's Centennial Celebration — it is no less significant for the Dimitroffs. In September they celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

The two fell in love in New York while they worked on the ill-fated Rockefeller Center frescoes. After several months of work, the murals were almost completed when Rivera, an avowed Communist trying to get back in the good graces of the party, painted the head of Lenin into one prominent scene.

The sponsors protested, but Rivera refused to remove it. All work stopped and the murals were eventually smashed to bits.

As Dimitroff and the other assistants ground colors and applied the five coats of plaster needed for Rivera's style of fresco, Bloch shot roll after roll of film. Later, when the assistants got wind of a shut-down, the photographs took on a new importance.

Near the end, when RCA guards were ordered to confiscate cameras, Bloch tucked her little Leica into her blouse and entered the building with Dimitroff, saying they had last-minute work to finish up.

While Dimitroff pounded on boards to mask the sound of his clicking shutter, Bloch took the final photos of

the murals — including the controversial head of Lenin.

"It was insane, that destruction," Bloch said. "I'll never understand why they couldn't just cover the mural with canvas. To destroy such a work . . . and to think it could have happened to the Detroit murals, too."

RIVERA WENT back to Mexico and the Dimitroffs never saw him again, though Bloch corresponded with her friend, Frida Kahlo. The Dimitroffs set up a lecture tour to discuss the "Fresco Debate" as they called it, and when the interest waned, Bloch signed on as a WPA artist.

"You had to take what they called a 'pauper's oath,' saying you didn't have any money," Bloch recalled. "Steve absolutely refused to do it, even though he was so broke, but I wanted to."

"They asked me how much money I had and I told the truth — I said I had \$60. They weren't going to let me sign

up and I said, 'Listen, by next week I'll have nothing. My rent is due and I have to eat.' Well, they wanted a woman fresco painter so they let me go."

She painted two frescoes in New York City — one at the Washington School, since torn down and one at the Women's House of Detention.

About that mural she later wrote: "Conversation with the inmates revealed with what sarcasm and suspicion (they) treated the mention of art . . . I chose the only subject which would not be foreign to them — children — framed in a New York landscape of the most ordinary kind."

"In their make-believe moments the children in the mural were adopted and named . . . Such response clearly reveals to what degree a mural can, aside from its artistic value, act as a healthy tonic on the lives of all of us."

THEY MOVED to Flint, Dimitroff's hometown, where he worked as a ma-

chinist and later a draftsman and she taught art classes twice a week at the Flint Institute of Art.

"After we'd been there about eight years — by that time we had three kids and a house — we proposed a mural for the offices or dining room at General Motors," Bloch said. "Something in the style of Rivera. They weren't the least bit interested. That's when we decided we had done all we could in Flint, so we sold the house, loaded up kids, tents and sleeping bags into the car and headed out west."

"Since those days with Diego, Steve and I have never stopped working together," Bloch said last week, as they surveyed the frescoes before rushing off for another speaking engagement.

"And our great love is still fresco painting. We do other things out of necessity. You can't make a living from frescoes — each one takes too long — so we've done book illustrations, mosaics, anything anyone asks of us."

"Said to say, fresco painting is becoming a lost art. It's scary to see in print how much work goes into it. It is so more complicated than it really is."

"There's a joy to it. You can see it in the students at the fresco workshop. But it is very difficult work — time-consuming — and artists nowadays seem to want to do everything spontaneously. They don't seem to understand that even the spontaneous Japanese and Chinese brush painting is done only after 30 days of studying. Very disciplined study."

"So our joy is turning people on to painting frescoes again. Aside from a man we heard about in Texas, we seem to be the only true fresco painters left in this country. And that is so sad."



Detail of one of the murals shows the power of line and form, the earthy nobility that Diego Rivera gave to the working man.

## creative calendar

### LABOR SONGS WORKSHOP

The Detroit Historical Museum will host a workshop on the songs and music of the American Labor Movement on Saturday, March 22, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The program will feature the history of songs, a song exchange and an audience sing-along. Free admission. Museum is at 5401 Woodward at Kirby in Detroit's University Cultural Center. For more information, call 833-1805.

### YOUNG MUSICIANS

The Livonia Youth Symphony Society will host the Chicago Heights Youth Symphony in a concert in Pease Auditorium, Vpsilanti, at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, March 23. Sponsored by Professor Russell Reed and Eastern Michigan University, the concert will feature all three society orchestras under the direction of Peter Lepar. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$2 students and \$1 senior citizens.

### CHOIR CONCERT

Schoolcraft College Community Choir will present Mozart's "Coronation Mass" at 8 p.m. Sunday, March 23, at the First United Methodist Church, Northville, W. Eight Mile at Taft. The 65-voice choir will also perform works by Brahms, Bruckner and Rachmaninoff. General admission is \$5 with a \$2.50 charge for senior citizens and students. For more information, call 591-6400.

### SCHOLARSHIP AUDITIONS

Marygrove College's Department of

Music will hold its annual scholarship auditions in piano, voice, organ, flute and guitar 3:30 to 5 p.m. Tuesday, March 25, in room 129, Liberal Arts Building, 8425 W. McNichols near Washtenaw, Detroit. For more information, call 862-8000.

### MICHIGAN ART EXHIBITION

"Michigan's Masterpieces: Art from Public Collections" is on view through April 9 at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, 525 S. State at S. University, Ann Arbor. Over 150 of Michigan's finest artistic treasures, a lively mixture of art and artifacts, with highlights from more than 60 public art museums, university collections and galleries and art centers throughout Michigan. Museum hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; closed Mondays.

### COMPOSERS' CONCERT

Wayne State University music department will hold its 14th annual "Composers' Concert" at 8 p.m. Tuesday, March 25, in room 150 of the general lectures building. Frequent performances by undergrads and graduates will feature original compositions in classical and contemporary music. Admission is free.

### DEARBORN CONCERT

The Dearborn Symphony Orchestra will present its fourth concert of the season at 8:30 p.m. Saturday, March 22, at the Edsel Ford High School auditorium. Featured are solo concertos for the clarinet, french horn and cello. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$3 for students. For information, call 561-5782.



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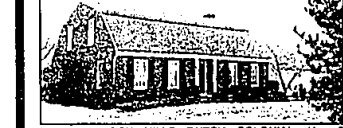
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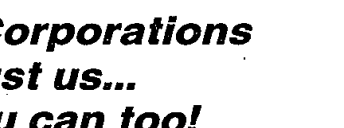
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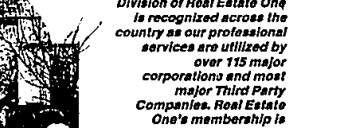
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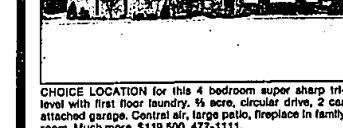
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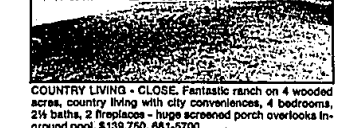
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