

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

THE DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS, DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: The Detroit Industry Murals, Detroit Institute of Arts

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 5200 Woodward Avenue

Not for publication: \_\_\_

City/Town: Detroit

Vicinity: \_\_\_

State: Michigan

County: Wayne

Code: 163

Zip Code: 48202

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Private: \_\_\_

Building(s): X

Public-Local: X

District: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

Noncontributing

1

\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_

\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_

\_\_\_ objects

1

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**THE DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS, DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS**

**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Recreation and Culture

Sub: Museum

Work of art: mural

Current: Recreation and Culture

Sub: Museum

Work of art: mural

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Beaux Arts

**MATERIALS:**

Foundation:

Walls: Concrete and marble

Roof:

Other:

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**Summary of Significance.**

Between July 1932 and March 1933, Diego Rivera, a premier leader in the 1920s Mexican Mural Movement, executed one of this country's finest, modern monumental artworks devoted to industry. Often considered to be the most complex artworks devoted to American industry, the *Detroit Industry* mural cycle depicts the city's manufacturing base and labor force on all four walls of the Detroit Institute of Art's garden court, since renamed the Diego Court. Rivera's technique for painting frescoes, his portrayal of American life on public buildings, and the 1920s Mexican mural program itself directly led to and influenced the New Deal mural programs of the 1930s and 1940s.

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.<sup>1</sup>**

The Detroit Institute of Art is located approximately two miles north of the city's central business district on Woodward Avenue, the city's major north-south thoroughfare. The building dominates the entire block bounded by E. Kirby Avenue to the north, Farnsworth Avenue to the south, John R. Street to the east, and Woodward Avenue to the west. The front elevation extends 300 feet along Woodward Avenue.

Three connected buildings comprise the Institute: the original 1927 Beaux-Arts building designed by Paul Philippe Cret, the 1965 south wing, and the 1971 north wing, both designed by the Detroit architectural firm of Harley, Ellington, Cowin, and Stirton.<sup>2</sup> The T-shaped Beaux-Arts building, which contains the Diego Rivera murals, includes the building's main block and the auditorium. At mid-section, extending out from the stem of the "T," are the north and south wings. The entire building is included in the nomination. However, only the original exterior, the lobby and the Great Hall leading from the entry to the Rivera Court, and the Rivera Court containing the mural cycle contribute to the nomination

**Exterior**

The original building is constructed of reinforced concrete and covered with a smooth-faced, rusticated, Vermont white marble. A projecting central pavilion, with three massive arches and Ionic columns, dominates the façade. The glassed-in arches are enhanced by ornamental grillwork and hanging bronze lanterns. Above the arches, the words "THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS" appear in a frieze between garland and cornucopia swags. Above the frieze, in the attic story, a central medallion features the Seal of Detroit. A surrounding bronze inscription reads, "DEDICATED BY THE PEOPLE OF DETROIT TO THE KNOWLEDGE AND ENJOYMENT OF ART." The pavilion's monumental entry stairway has three copies of statues: Antoine Coysevo's "River God," Philippe Magnier's "Nymph and Cupid," and Rodin's "The Thinker."

Symmetrical wings extend out from the pavilion. The ground level has four groups of three small windows and the main floor level has three rectangular windows topped with a flat arch and keystone. Arched niches, in the slightly projecting end bays, are carved in shell motifs and contain bronze copies of Donatello's "St. George" and Michelangelo's "Dying Slave." Ornamented keystones feature Roman gladiator heads. Dentils accent the cornice line.

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<sup>1</sup> The description of the building only is compiled from Brian D. Conway, "Cultural Center," National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form (Washington, DC: National Park Service, Nov. 21, 1983). The Institute is one of three contributing resources of the National Register-listed Cultural Center Historic District. The district's two other buildings are the Detroit Public Library (1915-1921) and the Horace H. Rackham Education Memorial Building (1941).

<sup>2</sup> Cret, a native of Lyons, France, trained at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts and Atelier Pascal in Paris. His designs for the Pan American Union Building in Washington, DC, and the Indianapolis Public Library had gained him prominence as a major architect in the U.S. Detroit Area Library Network, "The Building/Paul Phillippe Cret Records," [http://www.dalnet.lib.mi.us/dia/collections/finding\\_aids/cret\\_finding\\_aid.pdf](http://www.dalnet.lib.mi.us/dia/collections/finding_aids/cret_finding_aid.pdf).

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The original side elevations that extend from the front of the building to the later north and south wings are identical. The ground level is articulated by a frieze. Like the front façade, four groups of three small windows appear on the ground level. On the main floor, three rectangular windows are centered between slightly projecting end bays with arched window openings containing doors and a small wrought iron balcony. As on the front façade, the keystones in the arches feature carved gladiator heads. Two goddess reliefs, one holding a Greek temple and the other holding the lamp of wisdom, flank the doors. Small medallions between the windows have reliefs of winged fish and profiled classical heads.

On the rear elevation, the north and south wings abut the original rear elevation of the main block and extend out from the connecting link to the auditorium block. The elevation facing east to John R. Street is framed by the later wings, its white marble contrasting with the wings' dark granite.

The south-facing theater-entrance side has a slightly set-back main block of smooth stone between two ends of rusticated stone. The second level has three, large arched windows. Keystones in the arches form carved masks portraying comedy, satire, and tragedy. On the two ends are smaller rectangular windows with bronze lanterns below. Under the metal marquee over the theater entrance are three double brass doors. The attic-level frieze reads: "Detroit Institute of Art" with the word "Auditorium" below.

On the auditorium side facing John R. Street (to the east), rusticated side sections flank a slightly projecting, smooth-surfaced, central block containing an elaborate marble balcony supported on a first-floor level arcade of rusticated marble. This balustraded-balcony extends over five segmentally-arched openings and is ornamented with large bronze and glass lanterns. The arcade shelters a ramp to a lower level receiving entrance. Centered at the piano nobile (principle) level is an oversized doorway heavily enframed and crowned by a broken pediment featuring carved reliefs of a Greek musician and theater masks. A bass relief in the attic story depicts a muse with a lyre.

### Interior

Cret's building has a major longitudinal east/west axis with three central rooms. From the Woodward Avenue entrance, the lobby and the Great Hall essentially form a ceremonial progression to the Rivera Court. The auditorium, located on the other side of the Rivera Court, is at the foot of the building's T-shape. On either side of the axis, small gallerias surround and open onto two large, square, temporary exhibit halls on the north, and an open-air medieval courtyard on the south.

The entrance lobby repeats the façade's triple-arch motif. Long columns under a denticulated cornice enhanced with stone classical profiles, lead to a transverse barrel vault. Through the triple arch, a small stairway leads to the Great Hall. A multi-colored marble floor stretches the length of the Great Hall. White marble, bordered in black and green marble, surrounds three circles of stone and tiles in designs of griffins, winged fish, and horses. Five side doors, trimmed with denticulated cornices and decorated with hand wrought iron grilles and carved classical heads, lead into the galleries. The walls are travertine block and the ceiling is decorated with trompe l'oeil painted decorations in the Pompeian manner incorporating an Etruscan red, soft yellow, and Wedgwood blue color scheme. Other ornamentation includes hexagonal medallions with plaster reliefs that imitate Wedgwood pottery of the Adam period and trompe l'oeil, gold-leaf, classical temples with scenes of Greek gods and goddesses.

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Rivera Court

A large, arched opening leads from the Great Hall into the Rivera Court (formerly known as the Garden Court). On the opposite (north) end, a loggia leads to the auditorium. The court walls are segmentally broken with renaissance molding and columns within which Rivera painted the twenty-seven panels that make up the *Detroit Industry* mural series. The court's expansive skylight, marble floors, and the murals themselves all combine to create an elaborate and opulent setting, described by some as a sanctuary.

The *Detroit Industry* Murals

Rivera conceived of the *Detroit Industry* murals as a tribute to the city's manufacturing base and labor force of the 1930s, with a specific focus on the manufacture of the 1932 Ford V-8 at the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant. Twenty-seven interrelated panels depict industry and technology as the indigenous culture of Detroit and stress the relationship between man and machine and the continuous development of life. Technology is portrayed in both its constructive and destructive uses, along with the relationship between the North and South Americas, management and labor, and the cosmic and technological. "Just as Rivera provided the cultural context for the new revolutionary order of society in Mexico through his murals, so he developed an ancient context for modern industry in the form of Fordism in Detroit."<sup>3</sup> (For images of the murals go to the Detroit Institute of Art website: [www.dia.org/art/rivera-court.aspx](http://www.dia.org/art/rivera-court.aspx).)

EAST WALL<sup>4</sup>

Thematically, Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle begins on the east wall, where the origins of human life, raw materials, and technology are represented. In the center panel, an infant is cradled in the bulb of a plant whose roots extend into the soil, where, in the lower corners, two steel moldboard plowshares appear. Plowshares are used to plow under weeds and debris from the previous crop to replenish the soil with nutrients. They symbolize the first form of technology—agriculture—and relate in substance and form to the automotive technology represented on the north and south walls. Flanking the central panel are two seated female nudes representing fertility and the European and indigenous populations of North and South America. The nudes hold wheat and apples. Below these figures are two still-life panels representing the fruits and vegetables of Michigan and the Americas.

## WEST WALL

The east wall theme of the development of technology continues on the west wall, where the technologies of air (the aviation industry), water (shipping and speedboats), and energy (the interior of Power House #1) are represented. The symbolic significance of the west wall is made explicit in the depiction of dualities in technology, nature, and humanity and in the relationship between labor and management. Rivera specifically shows the constructive and destructive uses of aviation; the existence in nature of species who eat down the food chain as well as those who prey on their own kind, the coexistence of life and death; the interdependence of North and South America; and the interdependence of management and labor. This wall combines the religious symbolism of Christian theology (the Last Judgment) with the ancient Indian belief in the coexistence and interdependence of life and death. The judgment here is related to humanity's uses of technology.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: The Detroit Institute of Arts, in association with W. Norton & Company, 1999), 67.

<sup>4</sup> This mural cycle description is excerpted or paraphrased from Downs, *Diego Rivera*, the seminal work on the *Detroit Industry* murals, 69-154.

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Upper Register: *Aviation*

The airplanes on the left of the fresco are passenger planes, while airplanes on the right of the fresco are fighter planes adapted from the original designs for passenger planes. Figures in gas masks stand next to the fighter planes, and welders stand next to the passenger planes. Rivera adjusted the perspective of the airplanes and a hangar in the fresco to the vantage point of the viewer standing on the floor of the court. Not only were the architectural divisions of the upper register disregarded to extend the airplanes into the side panels, but the perspective creates the illusion of a window opening out on the hangar and airfield. Below the passenger planes is a dove feeding on a lower species. Below the war planes is a hawk feeding on its own species.

Middle Register: *Interdependence of North and South*

While the *Aviation* panels give the illusion of windows looking out of the court onto the scene, Rivera created the opposite illusion, that of a sculpted niche, below the central window. Here he painted a compass rose in monochrome gray to suggest that it is carved in stone (directly above the middle register). The compass points to the northeast and southwest simultaneously. Most likely the compass introduces the theme of the interdependence of North and South America.<sup>5</sup> On the right side of the register is a rubber tree plantation. Four men are shown collecting sap to make latex. In 1927, Ford had established Fordlandia, a rubber plantation in Brazil, to produce latex for automobile tire production at the Rouge. Rivera hoped for stronger relations between South and North America through investments and trade, and he spoke of this panel as a representation of the interdependence of the industrial north and agrarian south.

Two Great Lakes freighters (based on Ford Motor Company ships that carried raw materials from the northern Great Lakes to the Rouge) pass, while race boats and fish glide in front of them. With the industrial port on the left and the rubber tree plantation on the right, the water represents the symbolic confluence of the Detroit and Amazon rivers and represents the interdependence of the Americas. The industrial port is based on the actual boat slip at the Rouge. A pipe-fitter and man working a chain pulley appear in front of a bridge crane on railroad tracks used to unload freighters. The skyline of the city of Detroit is represented in the left background.

The coexistence of life and death is graphically presented above the center of the shipping panel, where a half-face and half-skull are painted on either side of a five-pointed star. This dualism is a spiritual concept that goes back to the most ancient beliefs in Mexico. The half-face is a portrait of George Washington, whom Rivera referred to as America's first revolutionary.

Lower Register: *Steam and Electricity*

Vertical panels on each side of the west entrance to the court introduce the theme of the automobile industry through representation of Power House #1. The Power House was designed and built by the Albert Kahn architectural firm in 1921 and was the principal power generation and distribution facility at the Rouge. The manager/engineer in the electricity panel is a composite portrait of Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, who were close friends throughout their adult lives. The worker/mechanic is associated with the raw energy of steam. The manager engineer is associated with the transformed power of electricity. Here, Rivera graphically demonstrates the dichotomy of workers and capitalists in the steam and electricity panels of the west wall. He associates each with different kinds of power but also shows how these forms of power are inextricably linked.

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<sup>5</sup> See Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 85, for other interpretive possibilities for the compass associated with the museum's location, the orientation of the court itself, or Rivera's own "political compass."

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**NORTH AND SOUTH WALLS**

The north and south walls are devoted to representations of the four races, the automobile industry, and the secondary industries of Detroit—medicine, drugs, gas bomb production, and commercial chemicals. They continue the themes established on the east and west walls which combine ancient and Christian symbolic systems. The organization of each wall follows a pattern: monumental figures on top, the worker's everyday world of the factories in the center, and small monochrome predella panels showing a day in the life of a worker on the lower edge.

North and South Walls: The Four Races Panels

Rivera monumentalized the format: the four races take the position of the deity, the interiors of the factories take the place of the victim who is healed, and the small monochrome panels of a day in the life of a worker take the place of the description of the event.

North and South Walls: *Geological Strata* Panels

Below the four races panels, Rivera painted geological cross-sections showing iron ore (heratite) under the red race, coal with fossils and diamonds under the black race, limestone under the white race, and sand and fossils under the yellow race (below Four Races Panel).

North and South Wall Corner Panels: *Vaccination, Manufacture of Poisonous Gas Bombs, Pharmaceuticals, and Commercial Chemical Operations*

On both sides of the four races panels on the north and south walls, Rivera painted corner panels that serve as visual parentheses to the gigantic figures. They continue the themes of the unity of organic and inorganic life and the constructive and destructive uses of technology.

North Wall *Vaccination* Panel

The north wall right corner panel depicts a child being vaccinated by a doctor, who is attended by a nurse. In the foreground are a horse, a sheep, and a cow. Vaccines are made in the background by three scientists in a dissection laboratory. The composition of this panel is directly taken from the Italian Renaissance form of the nativity, where the biblical figures of Mary and Joseph and Jesus are depicted in the foreground and the three wise men in the background. The three wisemen are scientists who dissect dogs for the benefit of human health.

North Wall *Healthy Human Embryo* Panel

Below the vaccination panel, a healthy human embryo is shown gaining sustenance from the geological strata and at the same time being threatened by microscopic images of diseases. The embryo sac is surrounded by an egg. Sperm, multiplying chromosomes, red and white blood cells, and six forms of bacteria are associated with the work of the three scientists in the vaccination panel.

North Wall *Manufacture of Poisonous Gas Bombs*

On the left corner is a depiction of the production of gas bombs.

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North Wall *Cells Suffocated by Poisonous Gas*

The small panel below the production of gas bombs shows a microscopic view of cells being attacked and destroyed by poisonous gases.

South Wall *Pharmaceutics* Panel

*Pharmaceutics* is based on drawings of the Parke-Davis pharmaceuticals firm in Detroit. The figure in the foreground represents the chemist/manager, who is surrounded by devices such as a pill sorter, an adding machine on top of a Gothic-style radio, a microphone, and a telephone. Women sorting pills surround the manager. The background shows drying ovens and chemical operations.

South Wall *Surgery* Panel

The small panel below the *Pharmaceutics* panel depicts brain surgery in the center, surrounded by human organs, and the same four geological elements found in the middle registers—iron, coal, limestone, and sand. Above the gloved hands is a view of an open skull. The right hand of the surgeon has just extracted a brain tumor. Rivera divided the organs between those of reproduction on the right and digestion on the left. On the upper right side of *Surgery*, male and female sexual glands are represented. Digestive organs are presented on the left. In the lower foreground Rivera painted three covered dissecting trays.

South Wall *Commercial Chemical Operations* Panel

The right corner panel may depict a magnesium cell operation or perhaps an ammonia operation. The panel is stylistically and compositionally the most sophisticated of the upper panels. It is painted in a futurist style to demonstrate the movement of the workers, showing them in two different positions. Use of this style is rare in Rivera's work.

The figure in the lower left holds a torch to heat substances in the drums. In the left background a man in a lab coat works with standard chemical apparatus at a table. Behind him a workman studies gauges probably related to the ovens. In the upper right a man may be working on a brine well drilling process.

South Wall *Sulfur and Potash* Panel

Below the *Chemical* panel, the natural state of sulfur and potash is shown. The crystals on the left are halite, or table salt; the crystals on the right are sulfur. In the center, spherical objects in the four groups are suspended in gaseous fumes emanating from the salt and sulfur. This panel continues the theme of the development of life from inanimate material.

North Wall: *Production and Manufacture of Engine and Transmission*

On the largest panel of the north wall Rivera combined the interiors of five buildings at the Rouge: the blast furnace, open hearth furnace, production foundry, motor assembly plant, and steel rolling mills. The panel represents all the important operations in the production and manufacture of the automobile, specifically the engine and transmission housing of the 1932 Ford V-8. One of the first stages in the production of steel is carried out in the blast furnaces, where iron ore, coke, and limestone are reduced by heat to make iron. Here, the blast furnace, the dominant background image, is the terminus of a processional way created by two rows of

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multiple spindles accompanied by conveyor lines. The steel milling processes then continue in the predella panels below.

Rivera included a variety of faces and physiques in his figures, reflecting the multiracial work force at Ford as well as his own assistants on the mural project. His emphasis on the multiracial workforce in the automobile panels expressed a Marxist hope for the future power of the working class.

South Wall: *Production of Automobile Exterior and Final Assembly*

Rivera combined another five buildings at the Rouge in the major panel of the south wall: Pressed Steel Building (now Dearborn Stamping Plant); B Building (now Dearborn Assembly Plant); Spring and Upset Building; By-products Building; and the Glass Plant. This automotive panel is devoted to the production of the exterior of the 1932 Ford V-8 and its final assembly. Unlike the north wall, this panel is not organized in production sequence, although all the major operations are included. The creation of the automobile body parts begins at the right, where the monumental stamping press produces fenders out of large sheets of steel. A cluster of stamping presses appears in the upper left section.

After the body parts are stamped into forms, they are spot welded. Spot welding is carried out to the lower left of the stamping press. The surface is then smoothed out in the buffing process, which is in the lower left foreground. Workmen are being observed by a foreman in hat and glasses. This figure represents the constant hostile supervision at Ford by production managers who were more interested in quotas than in the conditions of the workers or their environment.

At the top of the panel in the center is the welding buck where the separate parts are welded into the body of the car. To the right of the buck, women sew upholstery and to the left, painters spray the bodies before they are conveyed into the ovens. Below the welding buck is the final assembly of the car. Men use pullies to secure the chassis to the line. Along the line, the motors are lowered into the chassis, wheels attached, and the body secured. At the very end of the assembly line Rivera painted a tiny red car speeding off into time and space.

Two groups of people are not working in this panel. The first is a tour group made up of dour-faced bourgeoisie who look blankly or disapprovingly at the workers. Some figures are reminiscent of comic strip characters such as Dick Tracy and the Katzenjammer Kids. The second group is two observers standing at the lower right section. Rivera painted these two figures in the traditional position of Italian Renaissance donors. On the left is a portrait of Edsel B. Ford and on the right a portrait of William Valentiner. Valentiner holds a dedication paper of the mural project.

Predella Panels

Apart from their similarity to Italian medieval and Renaissance altar paintings, Rivera's predella panels are also reminiscent, in their monochromaticism, of traditional *grisaille* paintings, where the intent was to create the illusion of a sculptural frieze. He used the predella both to show a day in the life of a worker and to illustrate some of the major production processes not easily included in the larger panels. The predella panels appear as if fixed to steel gates, which separate the viewer from the workers in the automotive panel. The center of each gate is open (note the handles and chains on each sliding door), inviting the viewer into the factory space.

**Integrity**

The *Detroit Industry* frescoes retain a high degree of integrity in all seven aspects despite a period of "museological limbo," when the murals fell out of favor and received no professional care. In 1987 and 1988,

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mural cleaning, under the guidance of the Institutes' Conservation Services Laboratory by two of Rivera's former assistants (Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Dimitroff), revealed only minor paint losses and water damage from a leaking skylight to the feet of the black race figure. Otherwise, the frescoes were found to be in remarkably good condition.

Beyond the murals, alterations to the court have impacted the integrity aspects of material, design, and feeling. In 1930, when the Arts Commission commissioned Rivera to fresco the court's walls, a blue and gold canopy softened the skylight and a square, central fountain (that Rivera found to be "*horrorosa!*") decorated the court.<sup>6</sup> In 1957, the large 1930 stone fountain was replaced with a small fountain and the original brick, slate, and black stone floor was replaced with a terrazzo floor. In the late 1980s, the skylight was renovated, the small fountain was removed, and the terrazzo floor was replaced with ceramic tile that matched the original floor in the adjacent Great Hall. These changes yield a slightly more contemporary courtyard, however, the majority of the courtyard's essential physical features—the murals, skylights, and the architectural detailing that actually defined the fresco panel sizes—are intact. As an aside, the removal of the fountain aids in viewing the frescoes.

No changes have been made to the lobby or Great Hall leading to the court. The building itself maintains its original location within an urban monumental cultural area, its feeling as a 1927 Beaux-Arts public building, its overall design despite the later north and south wings set back from the building façade, and its association as the place where Rivera painted the *Detroit Industry* frescoes.

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<sup>6</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 65 for Rivera's comment; information on changes and restoration are from Downs, 183.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
 Nationally: X Statewide:    Locally:   

Applicable National  
 Register Criteria:

A X B X C X D   

Criteria Considerations  
 (Exceptions):

A    B    C    D    E    F    G   

NHL Criteria:

1, 2

NHL Theme(s):

III. Expressing Cultural Values  
     1. educational and intellectual currents  
     2. visual and performing arts  
 IV. Shaping the Political Landscape  
     1. political ideas, cultures, and theories

Areas of Significance:

Art

Period(s) of Significance:

1932 to 1933

Significant Dates:

N/A

Significant Person(s):

Diego Rivera

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder:

Architect Paul Phillipe Cret (1927 building)  
 Architectural firm of Harley, Ellington, Cowin, and Stirton (1965 and 1971 wings)

Historic Contexts:

Painting and Sculpture Theme Study Workshop, June 10-14, 1991  
 United States Department of the Interior / National Park Service

XXIV. Painting and Sculpture

I. The Second Generation, 1920-  
 K. Supporting Institutions

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

Between July 1932 and March 1933, Diego Rivera, a premier leader in the 1920s Mexican Mural Movement, executed this country's finest, modern monumental artwork devoted to industry. Considered to be the most complex work of industry in America, the *Detroit Industry* mural cycle depicts the city's manufacturing base and labor force on all four walls of the Detroit Institute of Art's garden court, since renamed the Diego Court. Rivera's technique for painting frescoes, his portrayal of American life on public buildings, and the 1920s Mexican mural program itself directly influenced President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal mural programs.

Under NHL Criterion 2, the *Detroit Industry* mural cycle has exceptional national significance in the area of Art for its association with Diego Rivera, a premier exponent of the Mexican Mural Movement in America who is credited, along with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, with the reintroduction of fresco painting into modern art. The mural cycle meets NHL Criterion 1 in the area of Art as Rivera's greatest work in the United States. It is an exemplary representation of the introduction and emergence of Mexican mural art in the United States between the Depression and World War II; this movement significantly impacted this country's conception of public art. The period of significance begins in November 1932 when Rivera arrived in Detroit and began his research on the city's varied industries, and ends in March 1933 when Rivera completed the *Detroit Industry* murals.

In the history of mural painting in America, the most commanding and vivid works came from the hands of three Mexican artists: José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), and Diego Rivera (1886-1957). Known as *los tres grandes* ("the big three"), these leading artists of the 1920s Mexican Mural Movement, who rejected the elite walls of museums and galleries, painted monumental murals on public buildings as part of Mexico's post-revolutionary cultural plan to educate the masses. The commissioning of works in the United States by these Mexican artists "coincided with a broader popular fascination with Mexican culture."<sup>7</sup> The American 1930s "'Mexican craze' or 'Mexican invasion,'" as contemporary art critics termed it— "created masterworks" and "enjoyed immense political and popular acclaim."<sup>8</sup> Between 1930 and 1933, "these three Mexican artists created murals in the United States that had a lasting impact on the history of its mural art, both immediately and in terms of Rivera's and Orozco's impact on the New Deal art projects"<sup>9</sup> as the program looked to Mexico for inspiration and organization. "Through the Mexican presence," writes historian Ingrid Fey, "the fresco technique became more well-known and appreciated in the United States."<sup>10</sup>

This nomination focuses on Rivera and his activities in the United States, highlighting how his exceptional mural at the Detroit Institute of Art came to be. From 1930 to 1933, Rivera's career spanned the country with murals and/or exhibits in San Francisco, New York, and Detroit. A self-proclaimed Marxist artist, Rivera ironically worked in the United States for blue-chip capitalist patrons. Here he combined his mural art with his intense interest in modern industrial technology and capitalism. His masterwork *Detroit Industry*, based primarily on the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant, "brilliantly portrays a comprehensive picture of the

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Diqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor, Francis V., *The Mural in America: Wall Painting in the United States from Prehistory to the Present* (New York, 2010), Part 6, Chap. 27, A, <http://www.muralinamerica.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ingrid E. Fey, "The Mexican Roots of North America's 1930s Mural Renaissance," prepared for delivery at the 1995 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, The Sheraton Washington, September 28-30, 1995, <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa1995/files/FeyIngrid.pdf>, 3.

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worker's role in the contemporary industrial milieu of Detroit while it comments on the prospects of creating good or evil with machine technology."<sup>11</sup>

## Historical Narrative

### 1920s Murals and Marxism in Mexico

The Mexican Mural Movement emerged in 1920 with the end of the Mexican revolution, "a conflict that [had] lasted more than a decade and killed more than a million Mexicans."<sup>12</sup> The country's new president, Alvaro Obregón, sought to promote cultural education, appointing a new Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, who envisioned a comprehensive program of popular education to "help give an illiterate peasantry a binding, idealistic idea of what it meant to be a Mexican." His plan was to adorn public buildings with murals as art for the masses. "As we are small," Vasconcelos said, "we must perpetuate ourselves in large works."<sup>13</sup> Under this program, Rivera's knowledge of frescoes developed.

Born in Guanajuato, Mexico, on December 8, 1886, Rivera had demonstrated his love of drawing and his artistic talent at an early age. When he was ten years old, his mother oversaw his admission into evening classes at the oldest art school in Latin America, the San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts (Academia de San Carlos). Two years later, in 1898, he became a full-time student at the academy. After graduating in 1906, he narrowly lost the academy's competition for a fellowship to Europe. Nonetheless, Rivera prevailed in securing a modest four-year traveling scholarship from the governor of the state of Veracruz and he left for Europe in January 1907.<sup>14</sup> Living in Europe, primarily in Paris, for most of the next 14 years, he eventually became involved with the European avant-garde.

At Vasconcelos's urging, Rivera continued his training in Italy in February 1920. There, he studied "Renaissance art in the hopes of establishing a philosophy of public art that will be adequate for postrevolutionary Mexico."<sup>15</sup> Over the next seventeen months, Rivera immersed himself in Italy's thirteenth- and fourteenth-century frescoes and murals. Mastering the tools and techniques of traditional fresco painting, he would then use these techniques to create a new and revolutionary public art in Mexico.

Returning to Mexico in 1923, Rivera adopted a new and more politicized attitude toward art. He viewed himself as a "cultural" rather than an "elitist" artist, and joined with David Siqueiros and painter Xavier Guerrero to create *El Sindicato de Pintores y Escultores* (The Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors). The manifesto of this group stated, "We repudiate the so-called easel painting and all the art of ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic and we glorify the expression of Monumental Art because it is a public possession."<sup>16</sup> The art of Siqueiros and Rivera emphasized radical politics as they became more involved in the communist movement.

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<sup>11</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> MoMa, "Chronology: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art," <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/rivera/chronology.php>.

<sup>13</sup> Pete Hamill, *Diego Rivera* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 81. "Vasconcelos wanted the artists to produce a rich, high art that would regenerate and exalt the national spirit." Leticia Alvarez, "The Influence of the Mexican Muralists in the United States. From the New Deal to the Abstract Expressionism," M.A. Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, April 26, 2001, <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-05092001-130514/unrestricted/thesis.pdf>, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, 17-18, 28, 30; Laurance P. Hurlburt, *Diego Rivera (1886-1957): A Chronology of His Art, Life and Times*, in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, ed. Cynthia Newman Helms (New York: Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts, in association with W. W. Norton, 1986), 25. As a condition of the European scholarship and to follow his progress, Governor Teodoro A. Dehesa required Rivera to send him a painting every six months. *Ibid.*, 25, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Hurlburt, "Diego Rivera," 47.

<sup>16</sup> Alvarez, "Influence of the Mexican Muralists," 11.

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Between 1923 and 1924, Rivera covered the walls of a three-story courtyard at the Ministry of Public Education Building with 124 frescoes. According to Bertram Wolfe, Rivera's biographer, the series brought fame to Rivera throughout the Western world, and "initiated a revival of mural painting, decadent since the late Renaissance, a revival felt first in Mexico and then in the United States."<sup>17</sup> Rivera's undisputed masterpiece marked a sudden turning point in the Mexican art movement.

In 1926, Rivera's allegiance to the Mexican Communist Party (MCP) led him to oppose American holdings and expansion in Mexico. His political convictions were reflected in his art as evidenced in his 1928 caricature of American industrialists in the *Wall Street Banquet* showing John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and their wives seated at a dinner table examining a gold ticker-tape. His burgeoning international fame did not go undetected as San Francisco art critic Thomas Hess exclaimed how this work made Rivera "the most notorious political propagandist in the burgeoning Mexican Mural Movement."<sup>18</sup>

Rivera's introduction to the United States came partially through international diplomacy. In November 1927, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, had traveled to Mexico to defuse tense Mexican-American relations and secure threatened U.S. industrial holdings. Morrow formulated a radical solution in which he successfully persuaded Rivera, the MCP's leading figure, "to reverse his position on the American presence and cooperate with the new cultural policy."<sup>19</sup> Morrow also conceived of the famous "Mexican Arts" exhibition in America that was partially prompted by "the search for common American cultural origins." Including works by Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros, the exhibit focused on "authentic" Mexican culture featuring early, folk, and modern art. Organized by the American Federation of Arts, which had been established in 1909 "to enrich the public's experience and understanding of art," and financed by the Carnegie Corporation, the exhibit toured fourteen cities between 1930 and 1932 and proved popular with art patrons newly exposed to artistic developments in Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

### San Francisco Period, 1930-1931

In 1929, a new Mexican presidential administration officially outlawed the Communist Party. Rivera, who was then painting murals at Mexico City's Palacio Nacional, the seat of government, chose to continue painting rather than stopping in protest. As a result, the Communist Party expelled him. An invitation to paint in San Francisco would relieve Rivera from political pressures at home.<sup>21</sup> In 1930, Rivera traveled to the United States to begin the first of his murals inspired by America's industrial society. "These mural commissions enabled him to fulfill one of the greatest desires of his life: to create an art that would treat the machine as both an aesthetic object and a generating force in the process of social change."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), 182. In December 1924, articles on Rivera in North American periodicals attracted the attention of U.S. artists, intellectuals, and interested lay people. Hurlbert, "Diego Rivera," 59. This work, together with a cycle of murals at Chapingo (1925-1926), "represents the earliest definition of the general characteristics of the Mexican mural movement during the 1920s." Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 80.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 53-54. Rivera had also taken trips to Moscow as head of the Mexican delegation. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52, 54. The American Institute of Architects awarded Rivera its Fine Arts Gold Medal for 1929, a recognition also engineered by Morrow. *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> American Federation of Arts, "About the AFA: Overview," <http://www.afaweb.org/about/>; Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 9. Indych-López states that the three muralists' paintings containing "workers, soldiers, and heroes of the Revolution," received negative reviews and "proved to be an ill-fitting conclusion to the exhibition." *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Alicia Azuela, "Rivera and the Concept of Proletarian Art," in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, ed. Cynthia Newman Helms (New York: Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts, in association with W. W. Norton, 1986), 125.

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Two California artists, Ray Boynton, who taught *buon fresco* (true fresco) courses at the California School of Fine Arts, and Ralph Stackpole, a San Francisco-based sculptor who had known Rivera in Paris, fostered Rivera's introduction to three San Francisco patrons/businessmen. Shipping line magnate William Gerstle, architect Timothy Pflueger, and insurance man Albert Bender "represented a new kind of cultural player." As art historian Anthony Lee describes, these men "differed considerably from earlier patrons of mural painting." They had a "mix of university learning, political savvy, industrious entrepreneurship, and liquid capital."<sup>23</sup>

In late September 1930, Pflueger announced that he had commissioned Rivera to paint a mural for the Luncheon Club of the Pacific Stock Exchange in a building he had designed. His decision raised alarm among the media: "Radical To Do Exchange Mural," wrote one newspaper, and another asked, "Will Art Be Touched in Pink?"<sup>24</sup> Originally, Rivera's patrons had planned his first commission at the California School of Fine Arts, "the heart of mural training." Criticism over Pflueger's decision may have led Rivera's patrons to paint the Luncheon Club mural first, notes Lee, where a private commercial space rather than an academic public space ruled out "arguing in the public sphere." What the club chose to put on its walls was their own business, but radical political content was out. "I hold a contract with Rivera. And I hold the pursestrings for the job," Pflueger stated. "Should he attempt any of the caricaturing for which he is famous...well, there's power in pursestrings."<sup>25</sup>

Rivera's arrival in San Francisco on November 10 with his wife, artist Frida Kahlo, appears to have defused the controversy. Newspapers described him as "a jovial, big jowled 'pisano', beaming behind an ever-present cigar, his clothes bulkier than his big frame, a broad-brimmed hat of a distinctly rural type on his curly locks."<sup>26</sup> Rivera remained popular with the press over the next year, for more reasons than his appearance, as Linda Bank Downs, an expert on Rivera, explains:

The accessibility of Rivera's art, the fact that he was the recognized leader of the Mexican Mural Movement, his engaging and eminently quotable conversation, together with the desire of the United States and Mexican governments to promote cultural exchange that in turn would help create a positive business environment (if not one of mutual economic benefit, then at least an environment that maintained a wary political peace)—all helped make Rivera a favorite in the popular press in 1931.<sup>27</sup>

Between mid-December and February 14, Rivera painted the *Allegory of California* on the club's stairway wall and ceiling. Laurance P. Hurlburt describes the wall portion of the mural as "Rivera's most successful work from the 1930-31 San Francisco period.... In both color and overall design, Rivera recreates the actual topographical features of California."<sup>28</sup> The central figure is modeled after Wimbledon tennis champion Helen Wills Moody, herself an amateur artist and a conduit for the Detroit commission.

After completing the *Allegory of California*, and before starting his commission at the California School of Fine Arts, Rivera completed a small mural at the home of Sigmund and Rosalie Stern in Atherton, California. Mrs. Stern, well known within the Bay Area business and cultural community and a collector of Rivera's paintings,

<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 99. Rivera had already been expelled from the Mexican Communist Party in 1929. Another source of contention came from local conservative artists who complained that only a U.S.-born artist should have been contemplated for the commission. Ibid. This building is known as the San Francisco Stock Exchange.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 58, 63-64.

<sup>26</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 108, 109. Assisting Rivera were Clifford Wight and Lord John Hastings, with plastering done by Matthew Barnes. Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 102

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had invited Diego and his wife Frida to rest at her home. Here Diego created a mural for Mrs. Stern of an idealized landscape scene that marked his first use of a “portable” mural format.<sup>29</sup>

Rivera next turned to his commission at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), a location that, unlike the Stock Exchange Luncheon Club mural, would ensure that this mural was aimed at a public audience. Once again, concerns over political content reigned as the San Francisco Art Association made clear their desire for a nonpolitical work: “The character of the mural might have a very wide choice of subject matter—anything but of a political nature—of course suitable to an art institution.” Rivera’s mural, *Making a Frescoe, Showing the Building of a City* (April 30 – June 2, 1931), portrays the productive role of artistic and mural laborers. The scene is dominated by a giant hard-hat laborer shown being painted by Rivera and his assistants on scaffolding. On the bottom level of the mural, Rivera paints individuals known to him—Pflueger, Brown, Stackpole, and the patron Gerstle—as architects, artists, and designers involved in building a city. On the top level, laborers install steel girders on a building.

In his assessment of Rivera’s San Francisco work, Hurlburt emphasizes Rivera’s reluctance to engage with a political viewpoint: “Rivera introduced the themes of twentieth-century industry and North American capitalism to his murals, albeit in an undigested manner and with a curiously muted political point of view. These murals lack the ideological programs of the Mexican work...and present instead a pastiche of industrial motifs rather than any intelligibly planned subject matter.” Rivera’s approach would change dramatically in Detroit. But in the meantime, he next appeared on the east coast. From December 23, 1931, to January 27, 1932, he exhibited portable fresco panels at his hugely successful one-man Museum of Modern Art retrospective. The event captivated critics and broke all MOMA’s attendance figures. The retrospective was only the second one-person show MOMA ever held (the first had featured Henri Matisse).<sup>30</sup>

### Detroit, 1932-1933

While still working on the California mural in January 1931, Rivera met William R. Valentiner, the director of the Detroit Institute of Art, at a reception Helen Wills Moody hosted for the director.<sup>31</sup> Later Valentiner recalled that Rivera “wanted to hear all that I knew about industry in Detroit, and he explained that he had a great desire to see that city and study its extraordinary growth.”<sup>32</sup> On May 26, 1931, the Institute’s Art Commission, chaired by Edsel Ford, Henry Ford’s son and President of the Ford Motor Company, approved Valentiner’s proposal for Rivera to paint two large murals on the north and south walls of the Institute’s Garden Court. The Arts Commission would pay \$10,000 from the Edsel B. Ford Fund, plus cover the cost of materials and plastering.

As for the mural’s content, Valentiner informed Rivera that the commission “would be pleased if you could possibly find something out of the history of Detroit, or some motif suggesting the development of industry in this town; but at the end they decided to leave it entirely to you, what you think best to do, although they would be pleased to see the sketches for the painting and approve them before they are executed.” In the end, Rivera proposed expanding his design to cover all four walls of the Garden Court. The commission approved the proposal at an increased rate of \$20,899.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Wolfe, *Diego Rivera*, 329; Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 109-10. The mural, painted on a separate frame of galvanized metal lath, was moved to Stern Hall at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1956 after Mrs. Stern’s death. *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralist*, 98 for quote; 7; Hurlburt, *Diego Rivera*, 79. Almost 57,000 people viewed the exhibit.

<sup>31</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 127-28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 128, 129. “Rivera’s original request for \$100 per square yard was drastically reduced to an average of \$27.52 per square yard when he proposed to paint twenty-seven panels...for the same amount of \$20,889.” Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 35.

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For the Ford Motor Company, more than just a work of art was at stake. Workers at Ford's River Rouge complex, who faced an oppressive work environment intended to increase production, had conducted a hunger march that negatively impacted the company's image. As a result, Edsel Ford was eager to restore the company's good name and he saw the mural project as a means to that end. Ford also had major interests in Latin America, recently opening its first Mexican assembly plant in Villahermosa. "Rivera was probably unaware of the magnitude of his role in respect to the company," Downs explains. The company's intent "went far beyond the actual murals he was to paint. The company's image in Mexico would be enhanced and its public-mindedness would be demonstrated to the workers in Detroit through this commission."<sup>34</sup>

Between April 20 and July 25, 1932, Rivera toured and sketched Ford's River Rouge plant and other industrial sites. He made thousands of preliminary drawings. Lucienne Bloch Dimitroff, one of Rivera's seven assistants, recalled Rivera's total immersion in the project:

I was there when he [Rivera] was still going to the factory [Rouge] almost every day to make sketches. Edsel Ford took him there and gave him absolute freedom to wander all over. To him, those were the happiest days of his life, he told Edsel Ford later, because he had always loved machinery from the time he was five years old.... To be there and see the creation of automobiles was something so wonderful to him, he really felt it and he let it absorb him, so that it became a part of him.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond drawing and painting, the walls at the Detroit museum had to be prepared. Fresco—meaning "fresh" in Italian—"requires the painter to work quickly. Wet plaster is applied to a wall, and while it is still damp, water-based tempera paint is applied over it. The plaster has been pre-mixed with pure lime, which serves as the binder. As the plaster dries, the thin paint is permanently bonded to the surface through a chemical process."<sup>36</sup> Rivera could then affix his finished drawings to the wall. If he considered the relationship of the image to the architectural environment to be satisfactory, assistants transferred the cartoons "to the wall by tracing the outlines on transparent paper, perforating them and dusting the perforations with red ochre to create a dotted outline of the general design on the wall (pouncing). Rivera then could begin to paint."<sup>37</sup>

Rivera would paint in the harsh reality of a city particularly devastated by the Depression. As art historian and museum administrator E. P. Richardson noted, "It was a terrible human situation we were living in while the fresco was going forward—the whole world was collapsing around us." Rather than portraying the Depression in his mural cycle, Rivera focused on the marvel of the modernistic and high-tech River Rouge complex and its impact on workers. He captures "the technology of the Rouge, but also a brilliant condensation of the general flow of manufacture and transportation that governed the entire factory," and the "tension, the string of performing repetitive tasks at maximum speed—relentless, even hateful labor—on the sullenly determined faces of the workers in his panels."<sup>38</sup>

Before Rivera finished the murals, the *Detroit Times*, on Sunday, October 23, 1932, described the project in almost mystical terms: "the work in material, manner, and enormity is beyond the conception of the people.... When they see it, it will hit them like a bolt."<sup>39</sup> More negative press coverage emerged just mere days before the Institute opened the murals to the public on March 21, 1933. A March 18 front-page *Detroit News* editorial called the murals "un-American" and "foolishly vulgar." The work "bears no relation to the soul of the

<sup>34</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 31, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 140-41. Ford assigned a Ford Company photographer to Rivera to take study photos at the plant. Ibid., 141.

<sup>36</sup> Hamill, *Diego Rivera*, 87-88.

<sup>37</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 141.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 129-30, 132, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 173.

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community, to the room, to the building or to the general purpose of Detroit's Institute of Arts... This is not a fair picture of the man who works short hours, must be quick in action, alert of mind, who works in a factory where there is plenty of space for movement. The best thing to do would be to whitewash the entire work (and completely return the court to its original beauty."<sup>40</sup>

Some clergy were distraught over the *Vaccination* panel, and in a jump for publicity, the museum set up a press conference on March 16, with clergy and the media. "It broke in the Detroit papers, and within ten days, was all over the world." As an assistant in Ford's office explained, "We kept that pot boiling for three or four weeks."<sup>41</sup> Supporters of the mural struck back against the negative media coverage. In a surge of enthusiasm for the murals, organizations and others circulated and signed petitions. Beyond the City of Detroit, the controversy extended to the national art community. In *Art Digest*, Rivera exclaimed: "The official Communist Party of this country has expelled me from membership; and now the conservative element attacks me. However, my public is made up of the workers—the manual and intellectual workers."<sup>42</sup> All this attention must have surely had an impact on the record 86,000 people who saw the murals in March alone.<sup>43</sup> Eventually on April 11, the Arts Commission unanimously voted to accept the murals.

### New York, April – December, 1933

In comparison to the Detroit controversy, Rivera's next commission at the Rockefeller Center's Radio Corporation of America (RCA) building would prove disastrous. Rivera's decision to include a portrait of Vladimir Lenin in the mural *Man at the Crossroads* made headline news in the April 24 edition of the *New York World-Telegram*: "Rivera Perpetrates Scenes of Communist Activity for RCA Walls—And Rockefeller, Jr. Foots Bill."<sup>44</sup> A furor erupted and Nelson Rockefeller wrote to Rivera on May 4, asking him to remove the image, "As much as I dislike to do so I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face now appears." Rivera refused. Following a five-day standoff, the RCA management firm ordered Rivera to cease working and to leave the building. Rockefeller paid Rivera his \$21,000 fee in full. For reasons unknown, negotiations between Nelson Rockefeller and others to move the mural to The Museum of Modern Art proved unsuccessful, and the mural was destroyed over the weekend of February 10–11, 1934.<sup>45</sup>

Repercussions from the Rockefeller Center debacle prompted General Motors to cancel plans for Rivera to create a mural at the Chicago World's Fair. However, in June, Rivera used his Rockefeller Center commission to create 21 portable fresco murals at New York's New Workers' School, an ideological training center of the Communist Party USA. Rivera finished the series entitled *Portrait of America* in December, and he and Kahlo returned to Mexico on December 26, where Rivera reproduced a revised version of the RCA mural at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.<sup>46</sup>

The Mexican presence of the 1930s had come to an end and despite the Rockefeller Center controversy, Rivera became a "role model both stylistically and ideologically." Art historian Francis O'Connor concludes: "By 1934, Rivera had virtually single-handedly, forged a strong mural tradition. He was the best, and certainly the

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<sup>40</sup> *The Detroit News*, "Detroit was Muse to Legendary Artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo," April 6, 2011, <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20110406/ENT01/104060365#ixzz29a2drUEE>.

<sup>41</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 178.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 176, 177.

<sup>43</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso had both previously declined painting a mural at the new Centre. MoMa, "Chronology."

<sup>45</sup> Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 132; MoMa, "Chronology."

<sup>46</sup> MoMa, "Chronology." He also completes two murals for the Communist League of America (Opposition), a U.S. branch of Leo Trotsky's International Left Opposition. *Ibid.*

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most famous, muralist in the Americas, and his walls had become the standard against which those who aspired to be muralists were judged (or judged themselves).”<sup>47</sup>

### The New Deal

On the day Rivera was dismissed from his Rockefeller Center mural, artist George Biddle wrote to his former Harvard classmate, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his letter, he proposed the idea of a federally-funded art program modeled after the 1920s Mexican Mural Movement. No stranger to the movement, Biddle had met Rivera and other painters in Mexico and had been one of Rivera’s strongest supporters during the Rockefeller Center mural controversy.<sup>48</sup> Biddle urged Roosevelt to “emulate Mexico in supporting a mural movement.” He wrote:

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because [President] Obregón allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber’s wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution. The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be very eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve. And I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression.<sup>49</sup>

Biddle’s letter piqued the President’s interest, but, given the erupting mural scandal, Roosevelt moved forward cautiously. He referred Biddle to the Treasury Department, the agency charged with administering “the embellishment of public buildings.” This referral “led to the first attempt by the federal government to promote rather than just procure art.”<sup>50</sup> During the New Deal, three art programs emerged: the Public Works of Art Project (1933-1934), the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (1934-1943), and the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (1935-1943). “Aimed at providing relief to artists and art to the nation, these programs created new roles and responsibilities for artists that emphasized the democratization of art and the reconnection of art and society. At the same time, these programs provided most American artists with the only opportunity to continue in their chosen profession during the Depression.”<sup>51</sup>

O’Connor regards the 1930s as a “transition to a new conception of the mural,” crediting the Mexican artist presence in America:

[T]he Mexicans brought to the United States a sense of the mural’s capacity for expressing social concern, a fascination with the country’s rampant technology, and a revival of the fresco technique. While they initiated the decade to mural painting and their artistic influence is undoubted, they did not in

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<sup>47</sup> Francis V. O’Connor, “The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s,” in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, ed. Cynthia Newman Helms (Detroit: New York: Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts, in association with W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 171.

<sup>48</sup> Francis V. O’Connor, *The Mural in America: Wall Painting in the United States from Prehistory to the Present* (New York: 2010), Part 7, Ch. 28, C, <http://www.muralinamerica.com/>; Ingrid E. Fey, “The Mexican Roots of North America’s 1930s Mural Renaissance,” prepared for delivery at the 1995 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, The Sheraton Washington, September 28-30, 1995, <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa1995/files/FeyIngrid.pdf>, 4. Biddle lived with Rivera for a month in Mexico, painted Orozco’s portrait, and met other Mexican painters. Fey, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 8; O’Connor, *Mural in America*, Part 7, Ch. 28, C.

<sup>50</sup> O’Connor, *Mural in America*, Part 7, Ch. 28, C.

<sup>51</sup> Fey, “Mexican Roots,” 1.

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fact, directly address either the history or social reality of this country.... Their influence lay in reinvigorating the mural as an art form capable of addressing public issues at a time American artists needed such means and permissions....

Of all the cultural institutions of the 1930s, none caused more murals to be painted than the innovative government programs set up between 1933 and 1935 by the New Deal administration to help artists survive the Depression. The resulting programs had an enormous impact on the nation, set precedents for future government cultural patronage, and, both despite and because of their controversial nature at the time, have come to be the most popularly remembered of the New Deal's achievements.<sup>52</sup>

Along with influencing New Deal artists, the Mexican muralists also influenced artists of the 1930s American Scene Painting movement, a naturalized painting style in which artists rejected the modern European style in favor of a uniquely American style of art. "Social Realism" artists of the movement addressed urban and political aspects and "Regionalism" artists covered local and small town themes. A highly prominent Social Realism artist, Ben Shahn, had assisted Diego Rivera on the Rockefeller Center mural. Thomas Hart Benton, closely associated with Regionalism and perhaps the most prominent muralist associated with the American Scene Painting Movement, had met Rivera in Paris and been influenced by his "use of vivid colors and portrayal of social realities."<sup>53</sup>

Another group largely ignored in art circles, black artists of the post-1930s, continued the mural tradition as a way to express social concern. They turned to the work of the "big three" Mexican artists as an example. Among these artists, Hale Woodruff, who in 1939 painted scenes of the Amistad mutiny at Talladega College in Alabama, had studied with Rivera in Mexico. Another, William Walker, who recognized Rivera's influence, led a small team of black artists to create the *Wall of Respect* (1967) in a black ghetto in Chicago. That mural began the Community Mural Movement, thereafter more closely associated with the Chicano movement's politically oriented murals that were influenced by Orozco and Siqueiros.<sup>54</sup>

## Epilogue

Rivera returned in 1940 to paint his last mural in America. His ten-panel mural for the Golden Gate International Exposition, *Pan-American Unity*, advocated against Fascism. Mounted on portable steel frames, it now resides at the City College of San Francisco. Rivera remained a highly influential figure in the development of national art in Mexico throughout his life. In 1957, he died in Mexico City at the age of seventy. In that same year, the California School of Fine Arts, which had concealed the *Allegory of California* work behind a false wall, claiming "it didn't fit with their exhibitions," rededicated the mural. Likewise, *Pan-American Unity* had been placed in storage boxes for over twenty years—all because the Mexican artists had fallen out of favor during the post war years of Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, the critical reputation of the Mexican muralists "suffered greatly, practically to the point of oblivion."<sup>55</sup>

Art scholars who initially viewed the 1930s Mexican murals as too political to be considered as modern works of art began to reassess the murals in the 1970s. Art critic Max Kozloff in 1973 exclaimed that "the epic Detroit

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<sup>52</sup> O'Connor, *Mural in America*, Part 7, Ch. 28, A & C. Roughly 3,000 more murals had been created in the 1930s than in the previous two centuries. "The actual number of murals painted during the 1930s is unknown, except that the New Deal projects created about 4,000." O'Connor, *Mural in America*, Part 7, Ch. 28, A.

<sup>53</sup> American Studies at the University of Virginia, "The American Scene, the 1930s: Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975)," [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~am482\\_04/am\\_scene/bentonbio.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~am482_04/am_scene/bentonbio.html).

<sup>54</sup> O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera," 178-79.

<sup>55</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 10, 122.

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frescoes have no peer in Western Art.”<sup>56</sup> Art historian Gerald D. Silk wrote how Rivera “presents the assembly line as a personification of the myth, ritual, and historical actuality of the ‘New America’.”<sup>57</sup> Lastly, as Linda Bank Downs writes in 1999, “[N]o other work of art of the twentieth century so clearly embodies the ideals, aesthetic preferences, and realities of industrial technology during that brief period of time between the Depression and the beginning of World War II.”<sup>58</sup>

*Detroit Industry* remains today as a monumental modern work of art for all to deliberate and enjoy.<sup>59</sup> This reflects the true concept of a mural, a work of art for the public. As one of Rivera’s peers José Clemente Orozco proclaimed in 1929:

The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. In this form alone is it one with the other arts—with all the others.

It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few.

It is for the people. It is for *ALL*.<sup>60</sup>

### Comparable Properties

Because the Mexican Mural Movement was dominated by three renowned artists whose work defined the essence of the movement, this comparison is restricted to their work.

*The Allegory of California, Pacific Stock Exchange, Diego Rivera, December 1930 – February 15, 1931; Making a Frescoe, Showing the Building of a City, California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, Diego Rivera, April 30 – June 2, 1931*

Rivera painted three permanent true frescoes in America between 1930 and 1933, excluding the destroyed Rockefeller Center mural, all of which focused on North American industrial technology and capitalism. Compared to the *Detroit Industry* murals, where Rivera came to terms with this theme, these two murals in San Francisco, “depicted industrial objects only superficially.”<sup>61</sup>

*The Epic of American Civilization, Dartmouth, Clemente Orozco*  
*Prometheus, California, José Clemente Orozco*  
*Revolution and Universal Brotherhood, New York, José Clemente Orozco*

During his time in the United States, Orozco completed these three murals. Critics agree that *The Epic of American Civilization* was the grandest of the three in terms of its scope and design. A true fresco, this property qualifies for eligibility as a National Historic Landmark and is currently being considered for nomination.

<sup>56</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 185.

<sup>57</sup> Gerald D. Silk, “The Image of the Automobile in American Art,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Fall 1980), 606.

<sup>58</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 185. Per Hurlburt, a question may exist as to the “contribution of the monumental political art of the Mexican school within the broad context of the twentieth-century art.” Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 252.

<sup>59</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 187. Fifty years after Rivera completed the *Detroit Industry* cycle, staff at the Detroit Institute of Art made a remarkable find. Rivera’s “cartoons,” the chalk-on-paper giant sketches for the mural cycle, were discovered in storage and have been made part of the museum’s permanent collection.

<sup>60</sup> Hurlburt, *Mexican Muralists*, 11

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 98. “At some later date, the building of a storage room into the lower register covered the *tromp l’oeil* scaffolding, and one views the mural today in this partially obscured condition.” *Ibid.*, 122.

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While the murals Orozco completed at the New School for Social Research in 1931 were “the finest example of Orozco engaging in an ideological dialogue with the cosmopolitan modern age using the mural form,” scholars have assessed these murals as “awkward and rigidly conceived.”<sup>62</sup>

*Tropical America, Los Angeles, David Siqueiros*

*Street Meeting, Los Angeles, David Siqueiros*

During the 1930s, Siqueiros created three murals in Los Angeles. Two of these were public murals on par with those executed by Rivera, Orozco, and Thomas Hart Benton in terms of the theme, impact, and innovative techniques used. *Street Meeting* was created on an exterior wall of the Chouinard School. For this work, Siqueiros developed a series of innovative techniques, materials, and methods into his working practices. Completed in 1932, this work met with a mixed response and extensive criticism. *Street Meeting* may survive under layers of plaster, paint and tile, but no conservation efforts have been undertaken.

*Tropical America*, created on an exterior wall of the Plaza Art Center, was Siqueiros’ second commission in the United States. Over eighty feet long, he located this mural in the center of Los Angeles’ Mexican community. Drawing on the innovatory practices, he had created with *Street Meeting*, Siqueiros created an overtly political mural reflecting “our land, our America, of undernourished natives, of enslaved Indians and Negroes...and as a symbol of the United States’ imperialism.”<sup>63</sup> *Tropical America* was covered in whitewash soon after its completion. Under painstaking restoration since 1988 by the City of Los Angeles and the Getty Museum, the work was unveiled on October 9, 2012. This mural may qualify for National Historic Landmark designation.

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<sup>62</sup> Roger Reed, “*The Epic of American Civilization Murals, Baker Library*,” National Historic Landmark Nomination (Washington, DC: National Park Service, draft 2012), 18.

<sup>63</sup> Reed, “*The Epic of American Civilization*,” 19.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository):

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: (tbd)

UTM References:	<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>
	17	329960	4691540

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary takes in Parcel #01004234 and consists of E. Kirby Avenue to the north, Farnsworth Avenue to the south, John R. Street to the east, and Woodward Avenue to the west.

Boundary Justification: This boundary is that historically associated with the building as its overall context. The mural is a permanent part of the walls. Not only does the cycle possess a specific association with the Detroit Institute of Arts as a whole, but the architectural elements of the courtyard walls dictated Rivera's design for the mural cycle's twenty-seven panels of varying sizes.

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NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS PROGRAM  
February 8, 2013

# THE DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS, DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

# Figures

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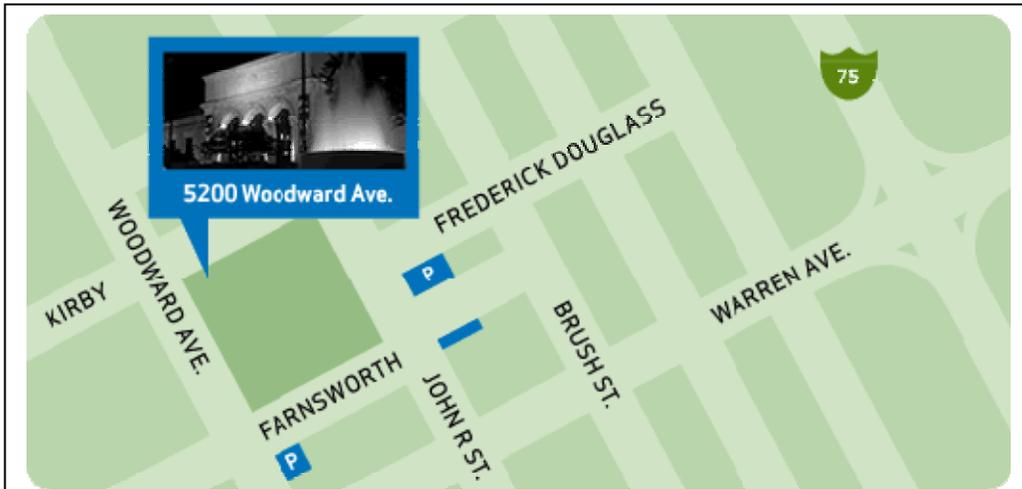


Fig. 1. Locational Map. The building occupies the entire block. Source: Detroit Institute of Arts, "Museum Info." <http://dia.emsix.com/about/>

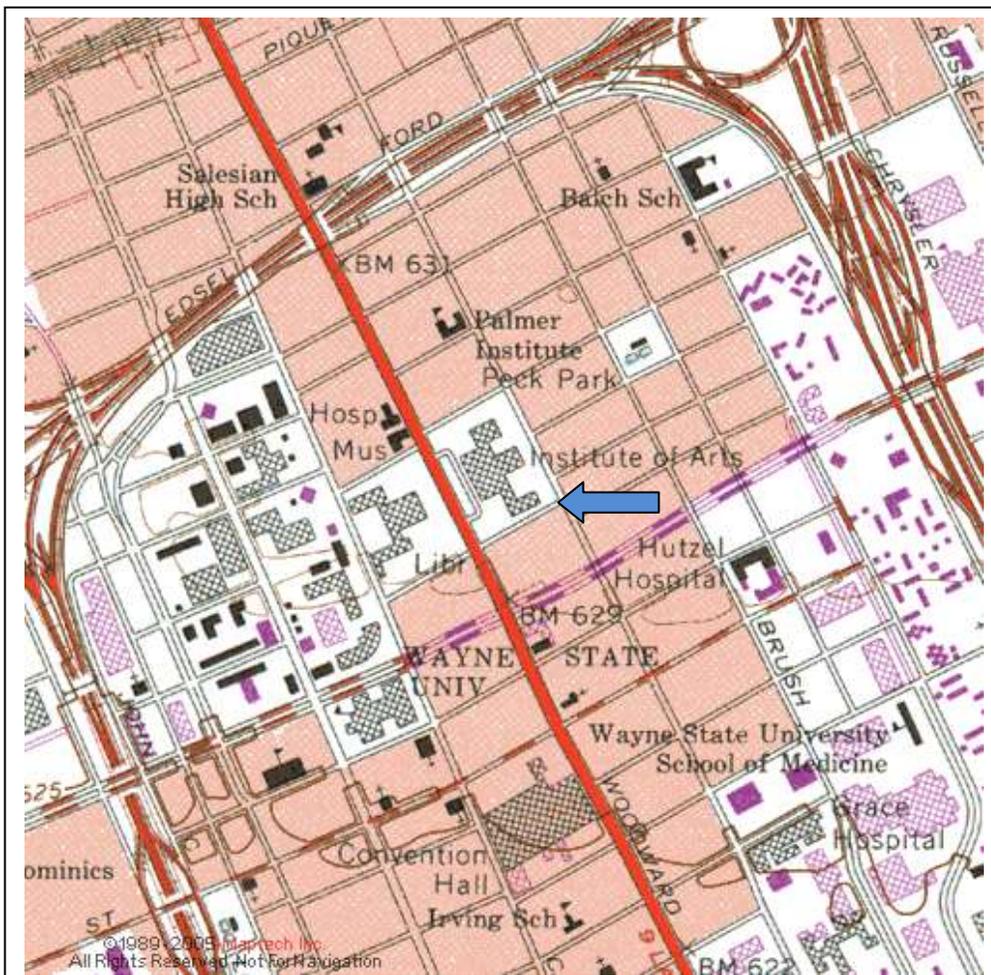


Fig. 2. USGS Map, Detroit, Michigan, 1968

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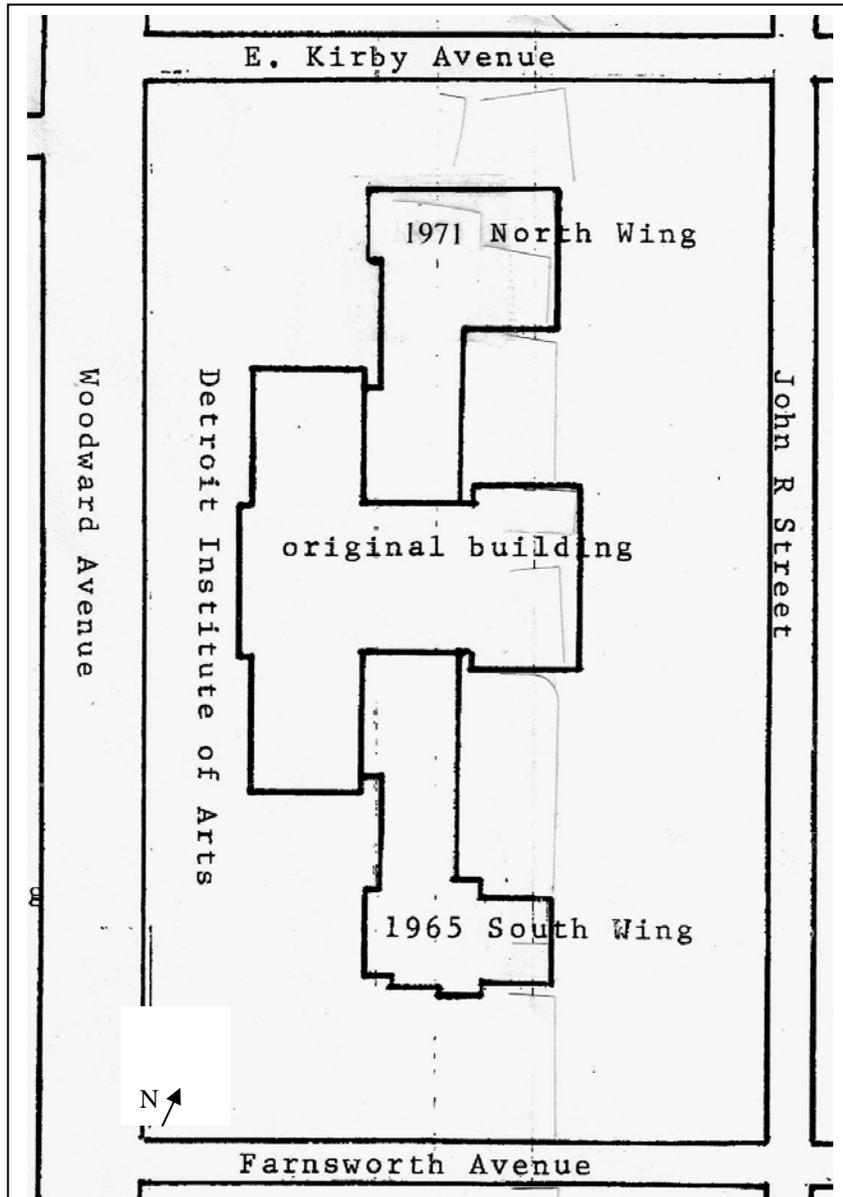


Fig. 3. Detroit Institute of Arts building outline. Source: Brian D. Conway, "Cultural Center Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1983).

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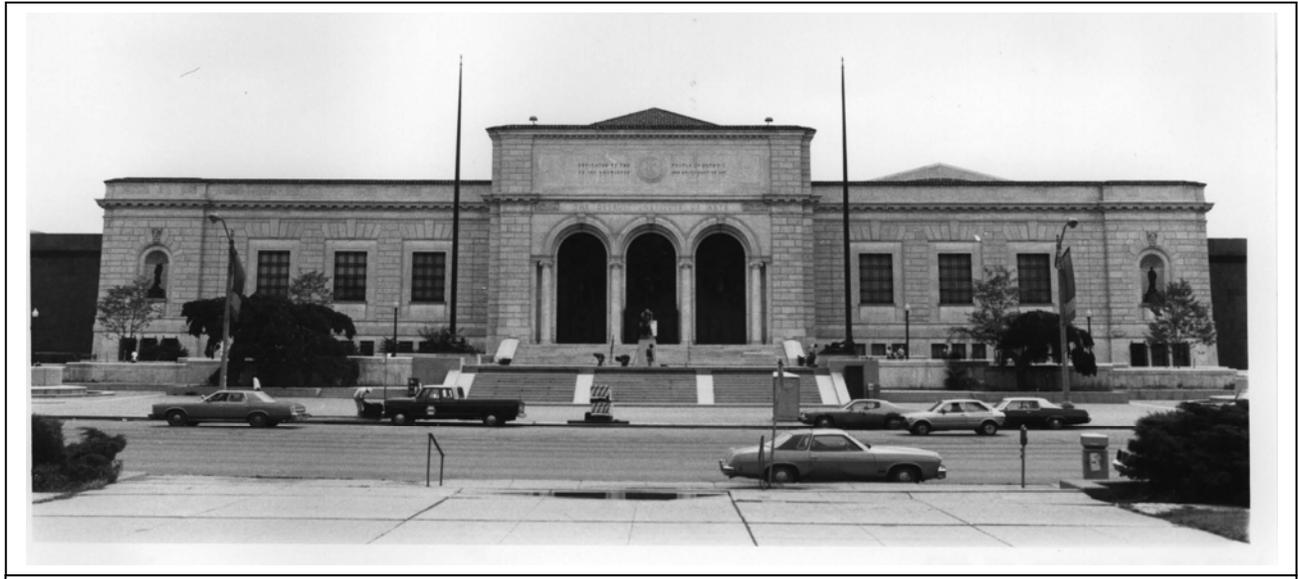


Fig. 5. Detroit Institute of Arts, 1981. Photographer: Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board in Conway, "Cultural Center Historic District."

