



1 Mexico's Modernist

Diego María Rivera (1886–1957) was born in the small town of Guanajuato in central Mexico. He moved with his family to Mexico City in the early 1890s. Both of his parents were school teachers. As a way to encourage his son's artistic talent, Rivera's father covered the walls of the boy's room with canvas so that he could draw on them. By the age of twelve, Rivera had already finished high school, and he entered San Carlos Academy, the national art school of Mexico. Rivera studied works by Mexican painters, collected Mexican folk art, and traveled great distances to see the art of Mexico's ancient Maya and Aztec cultures. In this way he gained a deep respect for his country's traditions.

From 1910 to 1920, a decade marked by the Mexican Revolution and World War I, Rivera resided in Europe on a grant of money from the government of Mexico. By the age of twenty-one he had lived and worked in Spain, Italy, and France. He was inspired by Spanish art, wall frescoes from the Italian Renaissance, and the bold new style of modernism. In Paris, Rivera met many artists, including Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. They were developing a new artistic style called cubism, which was a daring way of visualizing three-dimensional objects on a flat surface, such as paper or canvas. Picasso and Braque challenged themselves to show several views or sides of an object simultaneously. This cubist technique makes objects in their works look broken up and then reassembled.



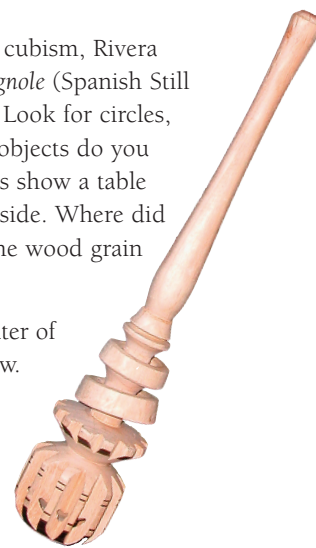
Diego Rivera, *Self-Portrait* (detail), 1941, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA. Gift of Irene Rich Clifford



2 Spanish Still Life

In his own experimentation with cubism, Rivera painted *No. 9, Nature Morte Espagnole* (Spanish Still Life) in boldly simplified shapes. Look for circles, triangles, and rectangles. Which objects do you recognize? Overlapping rectangles show a table viewed both from above and the side. Where did Rivera paint patterns to imitate the wood grain of the table top?

A large earthenware jug at the center of the table casts a blue-green shadow. Surrounding it are glass bottles, fruits, and vegetables, all shown from multiple views. On the left, Rivera included a *molinillo*, a small wooden whisk used to mix the ancient Mexican drink *chocolate de agua*. For hundreds of years, Mexicans have used *molinillos* to whip hot chocolate into a frothy drink. When making his cubist paintings in Europe, Rivera often included things that reminded him of Mexico. Can you find all three views of the *molinillo*?





left: Diego Rivera, *No. 9, Nature Morte Espagnole*, 1915, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Katharine Graham

below: Molinillo (photo: Donna Mann, National Gallery of Art)

4 Celebrating Mexican Culture

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



Diego Rivera, *Friday of Sorrows on the Canal at Santa Anita*, from *A Vision of the Mexican People*, 1923–1924, mural. Secretaria de Educacion Publica, Mexico City © 2013 Banco de México Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museums Trust / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Schalkwijk / Art Resource, NY

This mural is part of a cycle showing the history of the Mexican people from the time of the great Aztec civilization.

3 Rivera's Technique

Rivera varied colors and textures to make his paintings more visually interesting. His cubist compositions are distinctive for their bright colors. To add texture, he applied paint thickly in some places or covered areas with little dabs. Sometimes he mixed sand or sawdust into his oil paint to give it a rough texture. Rivera used a variety of textures in *No. 9, Nature Morte Espagnole*. The paint is so thick at the mouth of the jug that it resembles real clay. It almost seems water could be poured through the opening!

"My cubist paintings are my most Mexican."

Diego Rivera

try this

Cubist Still Life

Diego Rivera's *No. 9, Nature Morte Espagnole* is an example of his early experimentation with cubism. Flowers, fruit, books, musical instruments, bottles, bowls, or other objects are carefully arranged in still-life paintings. Some artists paint these objects so convincingly that they fool your eye into thinking they're real. Other painters, such as the cubists, make it difficult to identify the items.

Cubism was pioneered in the early 1900s by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who were influenced by Paul Cézanne's use of multiple viewpoints in a single painting. The way cubists represented the world was considered to be radical: they fractured form, shifted viewpoints, confused perspective, and flattened volume. Their work often resembled a collage and sometimes even included collage elements, like newspaper. They wanted to show several different views of one thing in a picture—the front, the back, inside, and outside all at the same time.

A Cubist Approach to Drawing

You will need:
Paper
Paints, colored pencils, or markers

First, gather ordinary objects from your home or, like Rivera, include things that have a special meaning to you. Make the composition interesting by selecting objects with distinct colors, patterns, shapes, and textures. Arrange the objects on a table in a way that pleases you.

Next, draw what you see in your still life arrangement. Focus on basic shapes—spheres, cubes, and cylinders—and textures.

Then, draw your still life from a different viewpoint. Draw some objects while standing up, draw a few from another side, and draw some by looking up at them from below.

Reflect: What are the challenges of drawing three-dimensional objects on a flat piece of paper?

from top to bottom:

Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and Peaches*, c. 1905, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer

Juan Gris, *Fantômas*, 1915, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Fund

Pablo Picasso, *Still Life*, 1918, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection © 2012 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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

