

Henry Ford and Diego Rivera -
Private Lunch at Ford's Fairlane Estate. April or May 1932
John M. Staudenmaier, sj

Draft only: Please do not reproduce w/o permission:

". . . I regretted that Henry Ford was a capitalist and one of the richest men on earth. I did not feel free to praise him as long and as loudly as I wanted to, since that would put me under the suspicion of sycophancy, of flattering the rich. Otherwise, I should have attempted to write a book presenting Henry Ford as I saw him, a true poet and artist, one of the greatest in the world."

Diego Rivera's 1960 encomium for Henry Ford (in *My Art, My Life* with Gladys March) is improbable on more than one count. It appears near the end of his whimsical reminiscence of lunch with Mr. Ford in spring of 1932. Rivera would spend 11 months in Detroit on commission to paint the twenty seven panel "Detroit Industry" frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA). He began work by visiting a variety of Detroit's industrial plants, in particular immersing himself for one month sketching Ford's 2000 acre River Rouge manufacturing complex, then one of the wonders of the world. Rivera's commission came not from Henry but from his only son Edsel whose image alongside that of DIA director William Valentiner holds pride of place at the bottom corner of the great south panel, a muralist's tribute to his patrons.

Edsel, more than any other single person, would withstand a firestorm of outrage from Detroit's financial and religious elite after the murals were unveiled in March of 1933. Detroit Industry was Communistic, atheistic, and ugly, a deformation of the Museum's charming Italian courtyard. Edsel's patronage and his public defense of Rivera's finished work contrast sharply with the following year's debacle in New York's Rockefeller Center RCA Building lobby. Rivera's Rockefeller contract foundered

because he painted Lenin among the mural's crowded mass of people. On May 9, 1933 Rivera and his team, at work on their scaffolds, were evicted. The corporation withstood the storm of protest from both sides of the Atlantic, and nine months later pulverized the unfinished work with axes.

In Edsel Ford Diego Rivera had found the perfect patron for what would become his most important work in the United States; From his understated shorefront mansion among the city's front line wealthy in Grosse Pointe, he led the city's efforts to create centers of music and the arts worthy of Detroit's growing stature as a world-class technological center.

Henry differed from his son in every regard. By 1932 when he lunched with Rivera at Fairlane, his 1300 acre estate had become quietly infamous as a fenced and guarded compound. As a home, Fairlane stood out in working class Dearborn, miles across the city from the Grosse Pointes. Apart from a handful of cronies, Thomas Edison and Charles Lindberg notable among them, visitors were rare. A quarter century earlier, however, a supple and charismatic Ford had led the most creative technological design team in the world. Their core achievement culminated in 1914 when three related events -- The Model T, the Moving Assembly Line, and the Five Dollar Day -- fused at white heat to form the symbolic identity of "Mr. Ford." The 1908 Model T, perhaps the best match between innovative technological design and market context in U.S. history, had become so sought after that demand drove the design team to build a paradigm breaking factory at Highland Park. Albert Kahn's wide open high ceiling spaces allowed the team to arrange and rearrange the flow of inputs until, in January 1914, they began operating an integrated moving assembly line. The flow of the line achieved an incomprehensibly

complex integration of on time delivery for thousands of parts that would emerge as a working Model T. In the same month of January, however, Ford shocked the entire world, his face becoming instantly recognizable from news articles around the globe. The company announced the Five Dollar Day for all its workers: a reduction from a 9 to an 8 hour day and a near doubling of the daily wage to \$5.00.

Mr. Ford's iconic status as technological genius and friend of the working man proved durable enough over the next decades to survive harsh public reaction to Ford's increasingly disturbing behavior. By 1919 he had bought out all stockholders and assumed complete control of the corporation. In the same year, on the witness stand during the Chicago Tribune libel trial he revealed himself as, to quote The Nation's elegiac verdict,

"a Yankee mechanic, pure and simple . . . He has achieved wealth but not greatness . . . So the unveiling of Mr. Ford has much of the pitiful about it, if not of the tragic. We would rather have had the curtain drawn, the popular ideal unshattered."

By 1920 the five dollar day had devolved into the early stages of a spy-ridden police state even as Ford began to shift central manufacturing operations to the new River Rouge plant across town. The Rouge took Highland Park's design principles to a new level by taking advantage of existing rail lines intersecting on the property and linking them to the Great Lakes' vast freight hauling capabilities. More ominously, the Rouge adopted a design feature which would later become infamous in the 1937 battle of the overpass at Miller Road Gate 4. Photographs of Ford enforcers beating union organizers appeared in newspapers across America. Unlike Highland Park which opened directly onto the public streets, the much larger Rouge complex was fenced, gated, and guarded, a mirror image of Henry's estate, a mile up river from the plant. In 1927, a lawsuit forced Ford to

disavow the virulently anti-Semitic diatribes appearing in his Dearborn Independent. In 1938, he would receive the Third Reich's Grand Cross of the German Eagle.

Such hard edged incidents notwithstanding, Ford's almost sacral popularity showed remarkable staying power in the public mind. In 1923 he was the favorite, (unannounced) candidate for President in the country. Ford's 1934 industrial pavilion was the runaway favorite at the Chicago Century of Progress World Fair.

Through the 1930s, 150,000 visitors toured The Rouge annually and nearly one million toured The Rotunda (now moved from the Chicago fair grounds and relocated just north of the Rouge). Visitors were drawn by the mesmerizing sensuality of Ford's system integration and materials handling. A transcendent sense of awe permeates the occasional written reflections of visitors. Thus German engineer Otto Moog c. 1927:

No symphony, no Eroica, compares in depth, content, and power to the music that threatened and hammered away at us as we wandered through Ford's workplaces, wanderers overwhelmed by a daring expression of the human spirit.

By 1932, when Rivera came to lunch, Ford's isolation had deepened into neurotic and furtive patterns. He spent many evenings in the Fairlane powerhouse, sometimes working alone in his workshop, sometimes spending time with "the boys" who ran Fairlane's mechanical systems. Other nights he roamed the nearby Greenfield Village. The Museum and Village had been dedicated over a national radio hook-up in October 1929 by President Hoover and a fragile Thomas Edison who highlighted a glittering banquet of technological and business elites in the foyer of the unfinished museum. The high profile dedication notwithstanding, the museum and village would not open to the public until June of 1933. Ford hosted a small school in the Village but whether he

perceived the children more as students or as props for his nostalgic reincarnation of 19th century small town America remains in doubt. Even after the public opening in 1933, Ford haunted the Village, using a variety of unobtrusive access routes to come and go, always at the margins of adult visitors. The Village was public only in daylight. For the rest of his life, the aging Mr. Ford continued to reclaim his private world in solitary nocturnal wanderings. Sometimes, so the staff report in oral reminiscences, he pocketed watches from the Village's replica repair shop, leaving a luckless craftsman to discover the loss next morning. Capricious firings were common in the little world of the Village and Museum as well as in the vast world of the Ford Motor Company down river. Perhaps most disturbing of all, six weeks before Rivera arrived in Detroit the city's Depression driven desperation played out at the Rouge where a Communist Party led Hunger March erupted in a spray of 200-300 machine gun rounds fired into the marchers outside Gate 3 of the plant. Five days later, some 8000 marched in the funeral for four dead protesters.

How then understand Rivera's burst of adulation for the Henry Ford of 1932? How understand Henry's invitation to the flamboyant Communist for lunch and his willingness to sign off on Rivera's remarkably open access to the Rouge complex and the still private Museum and Village? Ford's motives are particularly elusive. One might argue, after the manner of Ann Jardin's psychological history, that Henry Ford's neurotic proclivities and his well documented obsession with control were masked by the vast resources he commanded as owner of an industrial empire. The Ford Motor Company's image management played on and protected his iconic status so effectively that it remains impossible to identify the man in any published statements attributed to him. Rivera

wore his passions on his sleeve but his whimsical reminiscences thirty years after his brief encounter with Mr. Ford do more to underscore the improbable nature of their connection than explain why it happened at all. Nonetheless, both men left tracks that reveal a deep seated aesthetic kinship. Both recognized in the other a love for the beauty of mechanical precision and system integration. Rivera's intensity is nowhere more evident than on the great north and south panels of the DIA frescoes. Pulsing with action, ablaze in color and densely packed with intimate humanity, the murals reveal Rivera's command of classical muralist style. The panels also reveal extraordinary visual insight into the technological constraints of the Rouge's production and assembly systems.

For all the ominous signs of Ford's obsession with control and his increasing discomfort with independent thought or action in his domains, attention to his feel for the technological precisely as beautiful shows unmistakably through these same troubling years of Ford Motor Company dominance. Examples could be multiplied. The 1910 Highland Park factory sat back from Woodward Avenue to make room along the street for a large but conventional Executive Office Building and a decidedly unconventional power house. The power house opened directly onto Woodward Avenue, its nine enormous generators enthroned behind 25 foot high plate glass windows in a gleaming hall maintained, at Henry's order, with impeccable cleanliness. Five years later when Ford's Fairlane estate took shape on the banks of the Rouge river in Dearborn, Henry attended to the design of one structure in particular, the estate's powerhouse. Modest in scale, it mirrored its giant model on Woodward Avenue in the elegance of its fixtures and its walls of glass.

The most striking evidence of Ford's feel for technological beauty is his supremely self-confident floor layout of the Museum. Every machine display area -- locomotives, automobiles, machine tools, steam engines, farm equipment, bath tubs -- shows off the elegance of design. By 1940, Ford, who continually intervened in the Museum and the Village installations, had created a floor plan that featured a straight line entry passage that reprised American progress in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Visitors entered an outsized replica of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, icon of 18th century American democracy. As they emerged onto the eight acre main floor they encountered an avenue lined with 19th century tractors driven by steam, the 19th century's defining technology. The tractors, in turn, framed a massive generator against the back wall, one of the original set that had powered Highland Park in earlier days.

To miss the disturbing signs of Henry Ford's retreat into a tightly controlled and neurotic world of technological and historical fantasy is to miss the character of this troubling man. To miss, in the same time frame, the unmistakable evidence of a man whose feel for mechanical elegance remained sure footed and confident is to miss the man as well. Were Ford's neuroses of privacy and control contained and protected by his vast wealth and the public relations machinery of the corporation? "Crazy but rich enough to get away with it for a lifetime"? Or, the interpretation favored here, did Ford's wealth allow him to act out, sometimes in excruciating detail, a pervasive societal ambiguity -- technology as liberating progress and technology as intimating master? The increasingly sophisticated systems shaping ordinary life in the 20th century stimulated fantasies of power while at the same time engendering a sense of impotence. What individual person could grasp the workings of, let alone control, a world of complex

systems? Ordinary people might head to the palatial department stores of the period and savor displays of the good life as a break from fast paced anxiety. Ford could build his own small world as full of comforting fantasy as pedestrians saw in the plate glass display windows at Macys, Wannamaker's, or Detroit's own Hudson's.

Rivera, too, hints at the ominous side of progress. In his 1960 memoir he rhapsodizes about the Rouge as quasi mystical even as he hints at radical diminishment for individual human beings.

"I thought of the millions of different men by whose combined labor and thought automobiles were produced, from the miners who dug the iron ore out of the earth to the railroad men and teamsters who brought the finished machines to the consumer, so that man, space, and time might be conquered, and ever-expanding victories be won against death."

Victories won against death require, it seems, the conquest of man as well as space and time. Both Ford and Rivera show the wear of technological progress, as relentless as it was beautiful.

Bibliography:

Downs, Linda. *The Rouge: The Image of Industry in the Art of Charles Sheeler and Diego Rivera* (Exhibit Catalogue). Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978.

Ford, Henry (in Collaboration with Samuel Crowther). *My Life and Work*. Garden City, New York: Garden City, 1922.

Jardim, Anne. *The First Henry Ford: A Study in Personality and Business Leadership*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1970.

Marnham, Patrick. *Dreaming with his Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*. Berkeley: California, 1998.

Rivera, Diego (with Gladys March). *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*. New York: Citadel, 1960.