



1931

Fresco

57 1/8 x 94 1/8 inches  
(145.1 x 239.1 cm)

**JOSÉ DIEGO MARÍA RIVERA**  
Mexican

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert  
Cameron Morris, 1943, 1943-46-2

### LET'S LOOK

How many people do you see? What are they doing? Which ones are children?

Find places in the painting that look warm and sunny, and others that look cool and shady. Explain why.

Where are the largest figures located? The smallest?

Where could this scene be taking place? (Hint: Look at clothing, skin colors, and plants.)

Compare the foreground, middle ground, and background. What do you notice?

Look for vertical, curving, and diagonal shapes. Which shapes are repeated?

How does the artist, Diego Rivera, make our eyes move around the painting?

What is Rivera showing us about life in colonial Mexico?

## SUGAR CANE

Who and what do you notice in this scene? In the foreground there are three children wearing simple, peasant clothing. On the left, a girl reaches up to cut papayas from a tree, and a younger girl, in profile, holds an empty basket. On the right, a barefoot boy lugs a heavy basket full of papayas. The curve of a heavy bundle of sugar cane on a man's back leads our eyes into the middle ground. Here, a man wearing a gun and a sombrero (broad-brimmed, straw hat) sits astride a horse, pointing his whip at three men tying bundles of sugar cane. In the background, a man with a crisscrossed cartridge belt and a rifle sits in the shade. Behind him, a man holding a whip lounges in a hammock, lazily looking out at all the activity. The straight, white columns of the veranda (porch) march back on a diagonal, echoing the figure of the girl in the foreground. The silhouette of an alert dog directs our attention toward a row of men cutting sugar cane with machetes (large knives).

Diego Rivera, known for his immense mural paintings on public buildings in Mexico, created this smaller, portable mural for his first one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1931. It is based on one of a series of sixteen murals that he painted on the walls of the *Palacio de Cortés* (Palace of Cortés) in Cuernavaca, located in the southern state of Morelos. In the portable mural, which weighs more than 1,000 pounds and measures approximately six by eight feet, Rivera added the figures of children in the foreground and left out men pulling a cart at gunpoint from the background. Both versions of *Sugar Cane* show the harsh reality of Mexico's colonial era when Spanish rulers forced Mexicans into hard labor on sugar plantations.

When Rivera made the portable *Sugar Cane*, he was at the peak of his powers as an artist and an international celebrity. He wanted

to show capitalist North America images of class struggle in Mexico. He also wanted to display the Italian fresco techniques that he had adapted in Mexico. Fresco means “fresh” in Italian. Ground pigments are mixed with water, then quickly applied to fresh plaster spread on a wall before the plaster dries. Mural making requires several stages and the work of many skilled artisans—a collective process that suited Rivera’s socialist ideals.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

José Diego María Rivera was born in Guanajuato (Goo-ah-nah-hoo-AH-toh), Mexico, in 1886. He was named “Diego” after his freethinking, journalist father, a *criollo* (a person of European descent born in Spanish colonial America), and “María,” after his mother, who was an obstetrician and a mestizo (part European, part Indian). A precocious child who learned to read at the age of four, he liked to draw so much that his father gave him a special room in which he could draw on anything, even the walls! When Diego was five, the family moved to Mexico City. At the age of twelve, he was allowed to enroll in the Academia de San Carlos (Academy of San Carlos), a prestigious, European-style art school, despite the fact that he was much younger than the other students.

After graduating, Rivera traveled on a government scholarship to Spain and France. He remained in Europe for fourteen years, going home for only one brief trip in 1910, when the Mexican Revolution was beginning. During his time abroad he became friends with avant-garde artists Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and Jacques Lipchitz and learned all about Modern art. In 1921, Álvaro Obregón was elected president of Mexico. Obregón provided government support for a revival of mural painting designed to give illiterate Mexicans a sense of their national identity. Rivera then decided to return home.

Seeing Mexico again through fresh eyes, Rivera was enchanted by pre-Colombian and folk art. With artists David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, he quickly became a leader of the Mexican mural renaissance. He also joined the Mexican Communist Party, with which he had a stormy relationship throughout his life. After funding for murals in Mexico began to fade, he accepted commissions from U.S. businessmen and created controversial murals in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York City. Rivera’s personal life was also tumultuous, especially his marriage, divorce, and remarriage to the charismatic artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954).

Rivera lived during a period of intense social and political change in Mexico and the world. He

created an amazing number of large-scale murals in his own country and the United States. *Sugar Cane* is a vibrant expression of his passionate sympathy and support for oppressed workers.

### CONNECT AND COMPARE

- Explore the idea of national identity. What does it mean to be a citizen of Mexico? the United States? China? Puerto Rico? Nigeria? Germany?
- Compare mural paintings by Rivera with frescoes by Giotto in Italy and murals in your own community.
- Imagine a dialogue between two people in the painting.

### RELATED ART PROJECT

Use light cardboard and oil pastels to make and decorate cutout figures loosely based on figures found in the painting. Are the figures in the painting all the same size? What will the people you create be doing? What clothing will they wear? Glue cardboard triangles to the back of your figures to make them stand up. Experiment with placing all the figures made by the class in different groups and arrangements.

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