England's Rivera: The Lost Murals of Viscount Hastings 1931-1939

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Abstract

Beyond his work as Diego Rivera's assistant in San Francisco and Detroit, little has been written about the British mural painter Viscount "Jack" Hastings, creator of the "*Worker of the Future Upsetting the Economic Chaos of the Present*" at the Marx Memorial Library in London. Drawing on a range of documentary sources and discussing some hitherto unknown murals in both the US and the UK, this article will examine the development of Hastings' work as an artist and political activist. A key theme of this article will be to explore Hastings' role in attempts to promote mural painting and socially committed art in England through his involvement with the Artists' International Association and his writings for *Left Review* and *Architectural Review*. This article will also examine the relationship between Hastings' work and his political interests, which culminated in him abandoning his artistic career in order to serve as a junior minister in Clement Attlee's post-war Labour Government.

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Reviewing Viscount Hastings' solo exhibition at the Lefevre Galleries in London in 1936, Anthony Blunt, writing in *The Spectator*, described Hastings' potential for emulating the success of his mentor, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, by demonstrating the way 'Rivera's style needs transforming to suit the English situation.'[1] Although closely linked to Blunt's wider advocacy of Rivera as an example of successful socialist realist art as a bulwark against the competing claims of Herbert Read and the Surrealists, his assessment was reasonably well-founded; for while Hastings is best remembered as Rivera's assistant on murals in San Francisco and Detroit, he also executed a considerable body of work as a muralist in his own right, both in England and the United States. Hastings was also active within the Artists' International Association; helping to organize the First Artists' Congress and Exhibition in London in 1937 and supporting, through his writing for *Left Review*, the AIA's wider attempts to cultivate the visual arts as an engine for political action among artists in Britain in the 1930s.

Viscount Hastings was an unlikely candidate for the mantle of revolutionary muralist; as son and heir of the Earl of Huntingdon he enjoyed a traditionally aristocratic upbringing, going from Eton to Christchurch where he read History, joined the Bullingdon Club and played Varsity polo. Although he claimed to have begun painting in 1922, Hastings received no formal art training until 1928, when he enrolled at the Slade under Henry Tonks. As an artist who had done much to

promote public mural projects in the 1920s, it is most likely to have been Tonks who encouraged Hastings' interest in Rivera and muralism; a medium successfully practised by several of Tonks' other students from the period, including Mary Adshead, Richard Carline and Stanley Spencer. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Hastings had both the wherewithal and social contacts to be able to pursue his interest at source and, after barely a year at the Slade, left England for the US, with the intention of studying under the maestro Rivera himself.

Following a short spell in Tahiti, Hastings arrived in San Francisco in the autumn of 1930. Thanks to his extensive and extremely influential social network, which included the Hollywood actor Douglas Fairbanks, Hastings was able to engineer a meeting with Rivera in November 1930 at a studio belonging to the artist Ralph Stackpole; an event described by Hastings in notes for a subsequent lecture on Rivera in London:

> I managed to secure an introduction and presented myself at the studio in Montgomery Street, which lies in the old artists' quarter of San Francisco. The door was opened by a small, dark haired and lovely Mexican woman. This was Frieda Kahlo Rivera, the painter's wife, an extremely gifted and charming person who is herself a painter of exceptional talent.[2]

The purpose of this meeting was to persuade Rivera to take Hastings on as his apprentice. That Rivera assented so readily to this request merits some consideration; Rivera had no shortage of ambitious young artists seeking his patronage and he had already secured the services of experienced artists, including Stackpole and Clifford Wight, to assist him in San Francisco. Whether it was Hastings' guile in approaching Rivera so directly, or his ability to act as an interpreter (Rivera spoke no English, so he and Hastings communicated in French), Rivera's decision to take on this well-born novice marked the beginning of Hastings' transformation from dilettante socialite to 'socialist decorator'.[3]

During his San Francisco apprenticeship, which included Rivera's commissions at both the Stock Exchange Luncheon Club and the Institute of Fine Arts, Hastings underwent intensive training in all aspects of fresco technique. As well as the usual assistant's duties of mixing plaster and grinding pigment, Hastings worked on enlarging Rivera's cartoons and plastering sections of wall ready for painting. Hastings and Wight were also, on occasions, charged with painting the 'unremarkable' parts of the fresco.[4] These undertakings were immortalized in the second of Rivera's San Francisco murals, *The Making of A Fresco*, at the Institute of Fine Arts, in which Hastings and Wight are shown preparing the walls under Rivera's watchful gaze.

On completion of the Institute of Fine Arts mural, Hastings remained in San Francisco while Rivera travelled to New York for his one-man show at MoMA. In

Rivera's absence Hastings embarked on his first solo commission at the home of the Hollywood screenwriter Gouverneur Morris. This mural, now under the custodianship of the Monterey Museum of Art, features a portrait of the patron and his wife, Ruth, within a landscape that includes images of New York, California and Tahiti. Having sent photographs of his solo debut to Rivera in New York, Hastings must have been delighted by the response, made via a letter from Clifford Wight to Hastings' wife Cristina in November 1931:

> Rivera is far more enthusiastic about Jack's fresco than you can possibly imagine (…) He simply raved about it to me.[5]

Indeed, Rivera was sufficiently impressed by the Morris mural to offer his former pupil a job as a paid assistant on his commission at the Detroit Institute of Arts. For $8 per day Hastings was responsible for making stencils from Rivera's cartoons to produce an outline on the wet plaster prior to painting. Hastings' aristocratic credentials and skills as an interpreter would also prove invaluable in helping Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo, fulfil the social demands of the commission; as well as accompanying Rivera and Kahlo to a dance hosted by Henry Ford at Dearborn, the Hastingses also acted as hosts for the dinner party at which Rivera's preliminary sketches were presented to his patron, Edsel Ford, and William Valentiner, Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

However, according to the diary of one of his colleagues in Detroit, Lucienne Bloch, Hastings' usefulness in negotiating the Detroit social scene on Rivera's behalf, was not always matched by his performance on the scaffold. Bloch's entry for August 19th 1932 describes an entire day's work on the west wall being lost as a result of Hastings getting the proportions wrong,[6] while on another occasion Rivera himself complained 'Jack is working too slowly'.[7] It is, perhaps, for these reasons that in September 1932, with only the South and East walls completed, Hastings left, with Rivera's full blessing and encouragement, to accept his own mural commission in Chicago.

The Chicago commission was for a private house in the wealthy suburb of Glencoe owned by a grain broker, James MR Glaser. The mural, entitled *The History of Bootlegging* (Fig. 1) was painted in the basement bar and featured portraits of Al Capone and Legs Diamond. The overall composition owes a striking debt to Rivera's approach to the Detroit frescoes; in the same way that Rivera sought to document every stage of production at the River Rouge factory, Hastings attempts to show every aspect of the bootlegging process, from the smuggling of alcohol from abroad by boat, plane and truck and the production of moonshine from illegal stills, to the shady glamour of the speakeasy and the attempts by federal agents to stop the trade. Working within a much smaller space, Hastings also mirrors Rivera's attempt to incorporate the architecture of the building into his design; the panels are arranged to accommodate a bar area in front and the existing wall lights become street lamps in the design.

The origins of the Glaser commission are unclear but, as in the case of his introduction to Rivera in San Francisco, may be the result of Hastings' wider social connections. Among his associates in Chicago was the adventurer and polymath William Montgomery McGovern, then Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, who Hastings had met at Oxford in the early 1920s. As well as completing a mural for McGovern at Northwestern, Hastings also painted a portrait of his distinguished friend,[8] one of several studies of his hosts and associates in Chicago. Indeed, such was Hastings' success in Chicago that, while completing the Glaser mural, he was offered a $700 commission to decorate the Dentistry Section of the Hall of Science at the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition; a great irony given that Rivera's own commission for the General Motors Pavilion had been withdrawn as a result of the scandal arising from his inclusion of a portrait of Lenin in his mural for the Rockefeller Centre in New York.

Composed of three separate panels, *The Dental Profession Carries its Health Lesson to the Far Corners*, depicts aspects of dental care from across North America. These range from a Californian nurse giving advice on healthy eating, to a dental hygienist supervising a child's brushing, and an itinerant dentist giving outdoor treatment in New Mexico (Fig. 2). This latter panel is the most Riveraesque in that it shows the gathered villagers in traditional Mexican garb, with white wide-brimmed hats for the men and dark, long skirts and rebozos for

the women. The sleeping dog under the bench and a small girl with braids tied behind her back, also reference motifs that appeared regularly in Rivera's work.

The most remarkable feature of Hastings' Dentistry mural, however, is the technique employed. Although trained by Rivera in the use of true fresco (whereby pigment is applied directly onto wet plaster), Hastings' mural was painted using a spray gun on aluminium panels, a method closer to that used by Rivera's great rival, David Alfaro Siqueiros, for his murals in Los Angeles in 1932. Although it is entirely possible Hastings had heard of Siqueiros' methods, (described in detail in a lecture to the Hollywood branch of the John Reed Club in the autumn of 1932), his innovation was clearly borne out of necessity; Hastings' commission required him to produce the mural in advance of the construction of the building in which it was to be housed. Time was also a consideration; the fair opened in May 1933, the same month in which Hastings was to mount a solo exhibition at the Increase Robinson Gallery in Chicago, and just five months after the completion of *A History of Bootlegging*. Given that this was to be Hastings' largest solo mural cycle (indeed it was so large that the only space big enough to serve as a studio was the Chicago City Mortuary), and that it needed to be fully portable, Hastings' solution was an elegant one. Sadly, however, the eventual fate of these murals remains unknown; although Hastings' own records indicate that the panels were donated to the Chicago Medical School in 1934, no trace of them has yet been found among the major medical facilities in the greater Chicago area.

Although Hastings' murals in the United States drew a great deal on Rivera's example in respect of composition, it was not until after his return to London in 1934 that Hastings' work began to reflect the kind of social and political concerns that had come to define muralism in both Mexico and the United States. Although Hastings himself attributed his growing political awareness to Rivera's influence and his experiences of living in the US during the early years of the Depression, he was also attracted to the theoretical aspects of socialist discourse; an interest which may have been encouraged by his contact with McGovern at Northwestern, but was stimulated still further by the publication of John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* in 1932.[9] Regardless of its origins, both Hastings and Cristina had become sufficiently radicalized by the time of their return to London in 1934 to begin proselytizing among their friends. Although, as Hastings' lifelong friend, the writer Alec Waugh suggests, many in their largely aristocratic circle were unsympathetic towards their views.

> Hastings had originally been a liberal. He had moved much further to the Left. Cristina had moved even further. The effects of the Depression in American had made them feel that there was something wrong with the contemporary structure of capitalist society (…). They had expected to find many of their friends in agreement with them. They were disconcerted by the general atmosphere of 'laissez-faire', the readiness to believe that England, as always would manage to 'muddle through.'[10]

Such was the missionary zeal with which the Hastingses pursued their political interests that they soon became known to the Security Services, who began monitoring their activities around 1936. Although the full nature and extent of the surveillance remains unknown, both Hastings and Cristina were subject to the attentions of MI5 for almost 20 years.[11] Among the 'Communist front' organisations with which Hastings is known to have become involved was the Society of Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union (SCR), whose members also included the film director Ivor Montagu and the lawyer DN Pritt, (a Communist sympathiser and Labour MP for Hammersmith). The SCR specialized in organizing visits to the USSR through the official Soviet agencies VOKS and Intourist, a trip which Hastings himself, accompanied by Waugh, undertook in February 1935.

In his Moscow journal, Hastings records trips to a workers sanitorium and the Moscow metro, activities that were typical of officially sanctioned visits aiming to show the Soviet state in its most positive light. As well as tea with Ivy Litvinoff, (the British wife of Stalin's Commissar for Foreign Affairs), Hastings visited the muralist and printmaker Vladimir Favorsky, with whom he discussed the collective process of artistic production in the USSR. Although, as Waugh notes, their movements were restricted,[12] Hastings seemed impressed by what he observed of Soviet conditions remarking that 'nobody is well dressed by western standards, but nobody is shabby either'.[13]

In later life Hastings claimed that his experiences in Moscow led him to become disillusioned with Communism. However, this seems unlikely given his enthusiastic contribution to the establishment of the First Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR, held in London in December 1935. Opening proceedings at the evening session on December 7th, Hastings referred directly to his visit to Moscow in contrasting the 'degeneration' in Europe with the USSR's economic achievements and cultural progress.[14]

Hastings' first exhibition in the UK was also motivated by specific political concerns; having joined the Artists' International Association (AIA) soon after his return to the UK in 1934, he participated in the Artists Against War and Fascism exhibition in November 1935, held in protest at Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. Located in a derelict building in Soho Square, the exhibition, attended by around 6000 visitors, was supported by lectures from Alick West (Marxism and Aesthetics) and John Strachey (The Crisis in Culture). Alongside more than 180 works by British artists, the foreign section on the third floor included pieces by Fernand Leger and Franz Masereel.

In common with many of the exhibits at Artists Against War and Fascism, Hastings' contribution, (*Mexican Girl,* one of a series of paintings produced while visiting Rivera in Mexico City in 1934), made little specific reference to the tyranny of fascism or to the benefits of a socialist alternative. A more strident manifestation of Hastings' emerging political consciousness appeared, however,

in the fresco *An Interpretation of Marxism*, also known as *The Worker of the Future Upsetting the Economic Chaos of the Present*, (Fig. 3) painted at the Marx House and Workers School between September and October 1935. The mural, restored after the artist's death in 1991, bears a strong compositional resemblance to Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* (especially in placing the oversized figure of the anonymous worker at the centre and surrounding this with smaller portraits of specific, recognisable figures), while also making reference to a historical narrative, similar to that employed by Rivera in *Portrait of America* at the New Workers' School in New York in 1933. Within the narrative of the *Worker of the Future*, Hastings presents the destruction of capitalism and its institutions (parliament, the church, the military and the banks), within the historical context of the development of socialism; although Hastings' worker acts alone, his actions are shown as the culmination of the actions of others, including the Chartists, William Morris and Robert Owen. Like Rivera, Hastings also adopts a clear hierarchy in his depiction of historical figures, and uses the juxtaposition of these figures to convey a version of historical progress; in Hastings' conception of the revolutionary process Marx and Lenin appear as the dominant influence, with Owen, Morris and Engels at their shoulders. In placing Owen and Morris on the side of Marx, Hastings is also attempting to establish his vision of a specifically British form of socialist development, distinct and separate from the Soviet model.

In the Channel Four documentary that accompanied the restoration of *The Worker of the Future*, the late Marxist historian John Saville noted that the absence of Stalin from the fresco indicated Hastings' remarkable ambivalence towards the Soviet leader at the height of the Cult of Personality; a position Saville attributes to the influence and Trotskyist leanings of Rivera.[15] This view, however, is somewhat undermined by Hastings' next mural *Welcome to Pearl Binder* painted at the private residence of DN Pritt, in 1936, and featuring a prominent portrait of Stalin (Fig. 4). In contrast to Saville's claims, the Binder mural demonstrates Hastings' growing links to the organised left and to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). In March of that same year Cristina Hastings, already a member of the CPGB, had been arrested and deported from Brazil on charges of espionage. Her arrest, (alongside that of her companion, Hastings' sister, Lady Marion Cameron) made front-page news with Hastings himself petitioning the authorities to intervene with the rather disingenuous claim that "my wife and sister are certainly not Communists".[16] Although Cristina claimed to be visiting Brazil in order to research a travel book, intercepts of communiqués between the CPGB and its Soviet contacts subsequently published by MI5 reveal that the purpose of the visit was to gather information on the disappearance of the Brazilian Communist leader Luis Carlos Prestes, and that both the visit and the subsequent media outcry over Cristina's arrest were officially sanctioned and engineered.[17]

The subject of the mural, the writer and printmaker Pearl Binder, was also a fellow associate of Hastings in both the SCR and the AIA. As well as using a different technique (tempera painted directly onto an existing plaster wall), *Welcome to Pearl Binder* is also the smallest of Hastings' murals. However, both size and technique appear to have been determined by the constraints of time; whereas the *Worker of the Future* had taken three weeks to complete, the Binder mural was executed over the course of a weekend visit to commemorate Binder's return from a trip to the Soviet Union, an event which provides the basis for the mural. The reduced size might also account for the composition, which has less in common with Rivera than with Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait on the Borderline*, painted in 1932 (at a time when Hastings was living in the adjoining apartment to Kahlo and Rivera at the Wardell Hotel in Detroit). As in Kahlo's painting, Hastings has placed a full-length portrait (of Binder) in the centre, with images on either side representing the contrast between two cultures (for Kahlo, Mexico and the US, for Hastings, Britain and the USSR). However, while Kahlo's painting suggests tension and conflict in the juxtaposition of images of Mexico and the US, Hastings attempts to show a more harmonious relationship, with Binder (who was writing a book on her experiences in the USSR) acting as the conduit through which the two cultures could be reconciled. Although keen to point out fundamental differences between British and Soviet society; contrasting Pritt's ornate flower garden with the productive land of the modern collective farm, and the sombre Victorian slum terrace with a modern Soviet workers housing block, Hastings places an even greater emphasis on the potential for unity. Although

the image of Stalin and his comrades waving from the Soviet side could be regarded as symbolic of Binder's departure from the USSR and return to England, it might also represent Hastings' aspirations for a lasting harmony between Britain and the USSR. Indeed, while the images of a train and a boat in the background indicate Binder's journey, the reference to travel, as well as the relatively narrow (and geographically imprecise) body of water and land between the Soviet and British sides, hints at a closer and more enduring relationship; the boat, with it's Soviet and Union flags (as well as its solitary passenger waving farewell to the British side) giving the clearest indication of travel in both directions.

Alongside these commissions and his growing involvement in organised politics, Hastings was also engaged in a campaign to promote mural painting in the UK. Foremost among these activities was his attempt to organize an exhibition of Rivera's work at the Tate Gallery. Negotiations for this began soon after Hastings returned to the UK when, in October 1934, he sought the advice and support of Samuel Courtauld. By March the following year the proposal received official endorsement from JB Manson, then Director of the Tate, 'subject to satisfactory financial arrangements being made and to suitable material being available'.[18] It was at this point, however, that the plan began to unravel as Rivera, a notoriously unreliable correspondent, failed to reply to Hastings' letter of March 31st 1935 inviting him to put together an exhibition for early the following year. According to Rivera's biographer, Betram Wolfe, Hastings' letter was eventually

retrieved after the planned date for the exhibition had passed and, while a further invitation was extended later in 1936, no exhibition took place.[19]

Had Hastings been successful in bringing Rivera to London, his task of promoting muralism in England may have been considerably easier. However, in the absence of both Rivera's example and of any kind of state sponsorship for public murals in the UK, Hastings sought instead to engage the professional support of architects and to encourage them to include mural schemes in their designs. During a visit with Rivera in Mexico in 1934, Hastings had become friends with the architect Juan O' Gorman, who had designed Rivera and Kahlo's home in San Angel and who was closely associated with the Mexican Mural Movement. As a progressive modernist, keen to incorporate mural decorations into his designs, O' Gorman's influence is clearly demonstrated in Hastings' article, Renaissance in Mexico, for the *Architectural Review* in August 1935, in which he advocates the use of mural decorations as an alternative to conventional wallcoverings:

> The decoration of large bare walls, with glass, metal or slabs of marble is both monotonous, expensive and unsatisfactory. A mural painting can completely solve the problem, and the feeling of the construction of the building can be expressed in this decoration which is actually part of the wall itself; and which in no way destroys

> the flat planes, lines or proportions of the building – it catches no dust, it can be washed or cleaned.[20]

Citing the example of the public mural programme in Mexico and the WPA Federal Art Project in the US, Hastings then goes on to model the ways in which murals could correspond with and enhance the function of a building; an aspiration that clearly influenced his collaboration with the architect Peter Hesketh in his unsuccessful attempt to win the commission for the Dominion Theatre in Harrow in 1935. Indeed Hastings' desire to produce a mural in the UK that corresponded directly (rather than philosophically) with the function of the building for which it was produced was not realized until the 1960s, when he produced scenes of music and dancing for the Students' Union building at Birmingham University in 1963, and a mural celebrating the work of female journalists at the Women's Press Club headquarters in London in 1964.

In 1937 Hastings was also charged by the AIA with developing a programme for teaching fresco technique to its members, an enterprise that later resulted in him being engaged as an instructor at Camberwell School of Art. Support for the development of muralism in the UK also came from Sir John Rothenstein, director of the Tate Gallery who, in 1939, organised an exhibition of photographs and portable panels entitled Mural Painting in Britain since 1918 and featuring work by Stanley Spencer, Eric Ravilious and Ithell Colquhoun, as well as Hastings' murals at Marx House and Buscot Park, and the fresco panel *Nuns on*

Hampstead Heath. According to Lynda Morris and Robert Radford in *AIA: The Story of the Artists' International Association 1933-1953,* further attempts to stage an exhibition of work by the Mexican muralists and WPA artists from the United States were also made by the AIA, but the show planned for the Whitechapel Art Gallery was eventually abandoned due to the outbreak of World War II.[21]

Alongside his contribution to the attempts to promote muralism in Britain, Hastings also participated in the critical debates surrounding the revolutionary potential of abstraction and, in particular, surrealist art. Exhibitions of European surrealism had been appearing in London, most notably at the Mayor Gallery, since early 1933 and had found a powerful advocate in the critic, Herbert Read, who, in the 1935 anthology *Five on Revolutionary Art*, championed the surrealist's aim 'to discredit the bourgeois ideology in art'.[22] As well as endorsing the revolutionary potential of surrealism and abstract art, Read's essay also dismissed social realism as 'feeble', blaming it for the failure of the first AIA exhibition in 1934 and 'the partisan adulation of a competent but essentially second-rate artist like Diego Rivera'.[23] Opposing this view were Francis Klingender, Alick West and A L Lloyd, who lamented the loss of realistic content in abstract art as indicative of the unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to confront the social and political crises afflicting the masses. Although the artists themselves continued to coexist reasonably peacefully, (a surrealist group was formed within the AIA in 1936), the critical debate raged on and was engaged by others,

including Anthony Blunt and Edgell Rickword, and played out in numerous exchanges in *Left Review*. Hastings, (who must have been especially irked by Read's criticism of his friend and mentor) entered the fray himself in 1936 with his review of the poet David Gascoyne's *A Short Survey of Surrealism*. Although his conclusion that surrealism 'remains the complete expression of bourgeois decadence'[24] echoes the sentiments of Lloyd, Blunt and West (which may, of course, have constituted a "party line"), Hastings' article also makes some concessions to Read's position by asserting surrealism's effectiveness in leading 'a revolt against the smug ineffectualness of bourgeois art'.[25] Hastings also goes on to credit the surrealists' position in the class struggle, describing them as 'Fellow Travellers with the Proletariat'[26] and largely in sympathy with the workers. However, for Hastings, surrealism's debt to Freud ultimately undermines its revolutionary claims:

> *The fundamental difference between surrealist art and Marxism, is that the theory of Freud and of the psycho-analysts on which surrealism is based is in no way materialistic: it is an idealistic study of thought and emotions; largely concerned with the neuroses of the wealthy under capitalism*.[27]

Hastings' own Marxist leanings gained a further outlet at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. As well as participating in the fundraising activities of his wife Cristina, who became joint treasurer of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee

(SMAC) at its inception in August 1936, Hastings himself undertook the first of several visits to Spain in September of that year as part of an unofficial delegation charged with investigating breaches of the non-intervention treaty by Italy and Germany. Accompanied by the Labour MPs William Dobbie and Seymour Cocks, and the Communist Isabel Brown (Cristina's colleague at the SMAC), Hastings visited Toledo, before meeting with the Republican leadership in Madrid. During the visit the delegation collected evidence of foreign intervention, including photographs of a captured German aeroplane, official documents found on the bodies of foreign airmen and an Italian parachute. Reporting back on their findings in London, Hastings provided a contrasting account of the desperate measures undertaken by the Republican Government in their attempt to match this aerial threat:

> Lord Hastings described civil aeroplanes setting out to bomb the rebel lines unaccompanied by pursuit planes. The only method of discharging the bombs was to throw them through the door of the plane.[28]

On his return from Spain, Hastings completed the fresco panel *Spanish Government Militia* (fig.5), an image of which was used to illustrate an article by Ralph Bates in the *Daily Worker* on the hardships faced by Republican civilians and the injustice of Britain's non-intervention policy.[29] *Spanish Government Militia*

was also one of the three portable mural panels included in Hastings' first solo exhibition in the UK, held at the Lefevre Galleries in December 1936.

Although overshadowed by the abdication crisis, the opening of the exhibition received extensive press coverage, with the writers HG Wells and Somerset Maugham and the actors Flora Robson and Edward G Robinson among those in attendance. The critical response was, however, mixed and reflected the ongoing debates between those who supported realist, representational art, and those who favoured an abstract approach. Indeed, in contrast to Blunt's favourable endorsement of Hastings as Rivera's heir, Clive Bell, writing for the *New Statesman* is witheringly dismissive of both master and pupil:

> For once in a way the Lefevre Galleries disappoint us. Notwithstanding a short lecture, well suited to the upper classes in elementary schools, on the craft and history of fresco-painting, by way of a preface, there is nothing in the collection of works by Lord Hastings, with the possible exception of one or two water-colours, to interest anyone who cares for art. However, I can truly say that I do not think the work of the pupil appreciably inferior to that of the master, Diego Rivera; so I hope his Lordship will think that I am being civil.[30]

Despite the publicity surrounding its star-studded opening, sales from the exhibition were disappointing, with the majority of the eight pieces sold going to family friends; the bohemian eccentric Lord Tredegar purchased what may have been the last portrait of Hastings' mother-in-law, the Marchesa Luisa Casati, for £150,[31] while Viscountess Chelmsford and her daughter, the photographer Margaret Monck, bought two of Hastings' Mexican works, *Indian Woman with Shawl* and *Indian Girl*. The three fresco panels on display, *The Hop-Pickers, Nuns on Hampstead Heath* and *Spanish Government Militia* remained unsold.

The last of these was exhibited again in 1937 at the first British Artists Congress and Exhibition, organised by the AIA. This enterprise, aimed at creating a kind of trade union for artists, was modelled on the American Artists Congress in New York in 1936, and brought together artists from across the disciplines of Fine, Applied and Commercial Art, as well as critics, teachers and students. Alongside the main exhibition of almost a thousand works, (including pieces by Picasso, Kandinsky, Miro and Leger), held in a rented mansion in Grosvenor Square, the Congress hosted three separate discussion panels on the Fine Arts, Art Education and Industrial and Commercial Art, as well as a fourth panel dedicated to students. Although he had not yet begun his teaching career at Camberwell, Hastings was charged, along with Nan Youngman and Quentin Bell, with organising the Education panel. Hastings also appeared on the platform at the Congress itself; opening the public proceedings on the evening of the 24th of April

and leading a discussion panel with Bell, the AIA founding member Misha Black and Herbert Read.

Although the AIA exhibition received favourable reviews in *The Times*, and from both Blunt and Read in *The Spectator* and *The Listener*, wider coverage of the event focused on the political controversy surrounding the Congress itself. Several newspaper reports of the time denounced the event as Communist propaganda, prompting agents for the landlord of the Grosvenor Square exhibition site, the Duke of Westminster, to force the AIA to relocate the Congress proceedings to Conway Hall.[32] The surrealist group within the AIA also took the opportunity of the exhibition and Congress to demonstrate their revolutionary credentials; producing a broadsheet manifesto denouncing politicians as 'knaves and liars' and demanding an end to Britain's non-intervention policy in Spain.[33]

The deteriorating situation in Spain also prompted the AIA to embark on a series of fundraising activities for the SMAC. Having already presided over the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the work of Felicia Browne at the Frith Street Gallery in November 1936, Hastings also contributed to several "Artists Help Spain" exhibitions held in 1937, and stood as sponsor and guarantor for the UK tour of Picasso's Guernica. Hastings also participated in the AIA's "Portraits for Spain" initiative, whereby prospective patrons could commission a portrait for a fixed fee, with a percentage being donated to the SMAC. These initiatives raised over

£2000 in six months and, alongside their contribution to rallies and public meetings, confirmed the AIA's growing political and propagandist role.

In 1938 Hastings completed his fourth, and largest, fresco cycle at Buscot Park near Oxford, the home of Lord Faringdon. Having studied together at Eton and Christchurch, Hastings and Faringdon had been reunited in the thirties by their shared political interests. In a transformation similar to Hastings own conversion to the socialist cause Faringdon, (perhaps better known as Gavin Henderson, one of the 'Bright Young Things" of London society in the 1920s), had become a member of the Fabian Society and the National Council for Civil Liberties, and had elected to sit on the Labour benches in the House of Lords. A committed supporter of Spanish Medical Aid, Faringdon hosted numerous meetings and events at Buscot Park and donated his Rolls Royce for an unlikely conversion into a field ambulance. Faringdon later gave over part of his estate to house a colony of Basque refugee children and, in the last days of the Spanish Civil War, chartered a small ship from Marseilles to collect 400 Republican refugees from Alicante.

Although the Buscot Park murals make no reference to Faringdon's activities in Spain, they do provide a detailed narrative of Faringdon's influence as a Labour Party activist and impassioned advocate of agricultural labour. As well as the panel depicting Faringdon addressing a meeting of the local Labour Party, several other panels document the work of the estate; including a panel devoted

to cattle rearing and milk production, under the supervision of Mr Cowdray, the Farm Manager (Fig. 6), and another to the work of Mr Bastion, the Head Gardener. The skill and nobility of these manual labours are further highlighted by their juxtaposition with other panels documenting the leisure activities of Faringdon and his guests, which include golf, tennis, swimming, an outdoor theatre and a rather dour-looking dinner-party.

Such a mix of contrasting and contradictory images is, perhaps, a comment on the ambiguity of Hastings and Faringdon's own positions; both men continued to enjoy an aristocratic lifestyle, while at the same time espousing the virtues of Socialism. The emphasis on domestic affairs in the Buscot Park murals may also reflect Hastings' own despondency over the international situation; completion of the murals coincided with the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia and growing Fascist success in the Spanish Civil War. Hastings was also preoccupied with problems in his private life, having become estranged from Cristina as a result of public revelations about his extra-marital relationship with the writer Margaret Lane. Although there was speculation in the press that Hastings might become the first Communist member of the House of Lords on the death of his father in April 1939,[34] by that time he seems to have become sufficiently detached from his more radical associates to opt for the Labour benches, becoming a full member of the Party in 1941.

The war years saw Hastings eschew his role as ‘England’s Rivera’ in favour of more direct political involvement; using his seat in the Lords to petition for the removal of the ban on publication of the *Daily Worker*, as well as an increase in widows’ pensions. Although featuring prominently in the 1939 exhibition of Mural Painting in England curated by Rothenstein at the Tate and participating in the AIA exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in February of the same year, Hastings did not accept another mural commission until Birmingham University in 1963. Spending most of the war years living outside of London, he also exhibited only sporadically; contributing three paintings to the Royal Watercolour Society’s British Impressions of Mexico Exhibition in 1942, and two at the United Artists Exhibition in aid of the Red Cross at the Royal Academy in 1943.

The extent of Hastings’ retreat from active professional practice is all the more marked by his complete absence from any of the wartime initiatives to promote mural painting in Britain. Although the AIA had failed in its final attempt to bring an exhibition of Mexican and American murals to London in 1940 (an enterprise to which Hastings does not appear to have contributed, despite his extensive contacts), it continued to campaign for a public mural programme in the UK as a means of enabling artists to contribute to the war effort. In February 1943 the chair of the AIA Mural Committee, Richard Carline, produced a lengthy report on the benefits of mural painting and how this might be developed along the lines of the Mexican and US models. This led, in October of the same year, to a conference of AIA members aimed at considering the possibility of bringing about

a national scheme for mural decorators. Although endorsed by various government officials, including Kenneth Clarke, Director of the National Gallery and member of the wartime Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), Hastings does not appear to have been involved in either this or any of the subsequent events organised by the AIA Mural Committee and CEMA during the war years.

Although the mural projects initiated under the auspices of the AIA Mural Committee and CEMA, were fairly limited and short-lived; amounting to little more than decorating the temporary “British Restaurants”, (communal canteens), established to ensure workers could be fed during rationing, Hastings absence from these initiatives marks the start of what became his swift excision from contemporary accounts of the history of mural painting in Britain, a process that was further accelerated by the ascendancy of abstract tendencies after the war and the growing marginalization of realist and socially committed art. In Hastings’ case, this is most ably demonstrated in Hans Feibusch’s, *Mural Painting*, published in 1946. Although a fellow advocate of the true fresco technique and for the incorporation of mural decoration into architectural projects, Feibusch makes no mention of Hastings’ work and, while hailing the likes of Henry Moore, Paul Nash and John Piper as the 1930s generation’s ‘best artists’,[35] is less than complimentary in his analyses of the works of Rivera, Gill, Stanley Spencer or any other muralist of a realist or socially-committed bent:

> We shall be spared, I hope, another outcrop of monumental banalities such as the last war brought us, and those immense, theatrical or pedestrian agglomerations of portraits or guns with which the museums of all countries were embarrassed.[36]

While the predominance of abstract tendencies in accounts of the history of British art between the wars may go some way to accounting for the lack of any existing scholarship on Hastings' work, the artist himself must also bear some of the responsibility. In failing to engage with any of the wartime initiatives to promote public mural painting by the AIA and CEMA, Hastings missed what was probably the best opportunity to put into practice in Britain the kind of mural programmes developed in Mexico and the US for which Hastings had been such a passionate advocate. Indeed, while the mural careers of artists such as Mary Adshead, Evelyn Dunbar and Laurence Scarfe flourished under CEMA, both Hastings and Clifford Wight, the only British-born artists who had studied directly under Rivera, largely disappeared from view.

The extent of Hastings' retreat from active professional practice in favour of organised politics was confirmed in 1945 when, following Labour's election victory, he accepted the position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture. Outside of this modest ministerial role, Hastings also continued to campaign for broader progressive causes, including nuclear disarmament, the abolition of the death penalty, and the decriminalization of homosexuality.

Although he had failed to exploit the opportunities afforded by CEMA to contribute to the development of a public mural movement in the UK, Hastings' attempt to emulate the example of his mentor Rivera was not entirely without success. As well as completing five murals and three portable fresco panels between 1934 and 1938, Hastings had also been quick to emerge as a prominent and persuasive advocate of mural painting as an engine of political action; standing alongside Blunt and John Rothenstein in raising awareness of public mural programmes in Mexico and the US and attempting to promote similar opportunities in the UK. In joining the AIA and contributing to the collective effort to establish unity among artists in pursuit of the anti-fascist cause, Hastings can also be seen as engaging with similar initiatives to those developed by his fellow muralists across the Atlantic. As well as engaging with his contemporaries through his work with the AIA and *Left Review*, Hastings also sought to promote mural painting among the younger generation through his teaching activities at Camberwell and, later, at the Royal College of Art and the Central School of Art. Although Hastings' decision to abandon his artistic career at the height of his fame brought a premature end to his role as 'England's Rivera', the murals that remain offer a rare example of work by a British artist with direct experience of the Mexican and US mural programmes of the 1930s, and a tantalising hint of what might have been if either Hastings, Rothenstein or the AIA had been successful in their attempts to cultivate a similar programme in the UK.

Murals by Viscount (John) Hastings

Untitled Fresco, 1931, Gouverneur Morris Guesthouse, Monterey Museum of Modern Art, La Mirada, Monterey, California, USA

Unknown fresco, 1932, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA (missing, believed destroyed)

A History of Bootlegging, 1932, Glencoe, Illinois, USA (destroyed)

The Dental Profession Carries Its Health Lesson to the Far Corners, 1933, Hall of Science, A Century of Progress Exposition, Chicago, Illinois, USA (missing)

Untitled fresco, 1934-5, 45 Wellington Road, St John's Wood, London (destroyed)

Life of Nero, 1935, Nerone Restaurant, Trafalgar Square, London (destroyed)

An Interpretation of Marxism / The Worker of the Future Upsetting the Economic Chaos of the Present, fresco, 1935, Marx Memorial Library, Clerkenwell Green, London (restored in 1991)

Welcome to Pearl Binder, 1936, The Priory, Beechill, Reading

The Hop Pickers, portable fresco panel, 1936 (missing)

Nuns on Hampstead Heath, portable fresco panel, 1936 (missing)

Spanish Government Militia, portable fresco panel, 1936 (missing)

Untitled fresco, 1938, Buscot Park, Near Lechlade, Oxfordshire

Untitled mural, 1963, Founders Room, Students' Guild, University of Birmingham (missing, believed destroyed)

Untitled mural, 1964*,* Women's' Press Club, 52 Carey Street, London (missing, believed destroyed)

[1] Anthony Blunt, 'A Socialist Decorator', p.1082, *The Spectator*, December 18th 1936. A further favourable review by Blunt also appeared in *Left Review* in January 1937
[2] Notes from the papers of Francis John Westenra Plantagenet Hastings at the Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin. These notes were probably prepared for a "Lantern Lecture" on Diego Rivera, organised by the Artists International Association at the Frith Street Gallery in London February 1936.
[3] Blunt, p.1082.
[4] Letter from Hastings to Laurence Hurlburt, 18th November 1981, cited in Hurlburt, p.102, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*
[5] Clifford Wight letter to Cristina Hastings, 16th November 1931, papers of Francis John Westenra Plantagenet Hastings
[6] Lucienne Bloch, unpublished diaries, August 19th 1932
[7] Lucienne Bloch, unpublished diaries, May 30th 1932
[8] Both works were reported on in the 'Cousin Eve' society column of the *Chicago Tribune*, October 30th 1932. Although no trace of the Northwestern mural has yet been found, the McGovern portrait was shown at the Lefevre exhibition in 1936. A sketch of the McGovern portrait remains in the collection of Hastings' daughter, Lady Caroline Shackleton.
[9] The influence of Strachey's book on Hastings is noted on p.55 of Alec Waugh's autobiography, *The Best Wine Last*. Hastings and Strachey had been at Eton and Oxford together and, ironically, given their later political persuasions, had both been members of the Conservative Carlton Club at Oxford.
[10] Waugh, p.55.
[11] Viscount Hastings is listed in an index of those associated with the International Brigades in Spain, recently released by the Security Services to the National Archives at Kew (TNA KV2/124). Hastings' card refers to individual files on both him and Cristina with entries dating from 1936 to 1952.
[12] A more detailed account of the visit appears in Waugh p.63-67
[13] Unpublished papers of Francis John Westenra Plantagenet Hastings
[14] Viscount Hastings, Third Session, p.77-80 *Britain and the Soviets*
[15] Ramsay Cameron / Bandung Productions, *Marx on the Wall*, 1991
[16] Viscount Hastings, cited in "Titled Women Held in Rio as Reds", p.1, *Daily Express*, 6th March 1936
[17] See Mask transcripts dated 13th January 1936, and 2nd, 11th and 15th March 1936, reproduced in Nigel West, *Mask: MI5 Penetration of the CPGB*
[18] Letter to Hastings from JB Manson, 19th March 1935, Papers of Francis John Westenra Plantagenet Hastings, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin
[19] Bertram Wolfe, p.356, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*
[20] Viscount Hastings, 'Renaissance in Mexico', p.63-64, *The Architectural Review*, August 1935
[21] Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, p.55, *AIA: The Story of the Artists International Association 1933-1953*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1983
[22] Herbert Read, What is Revolutionary Art?, p.20, *Five on Revolutionary Art*
[23] Read, p.12
[24] Hastings, 'The Surrealists', p.187, *Left Review*, February 1936

[25] Hastings, p.186
[26] ibid
[27] Hastings, p.187
[28] Hispanicus, p.382-4, *Foreign Intervention in Spain*
[29] Ralph Bates, "We March To Victory", *Daily Worker*, 12th December 1936
[30] Clive Bell, p.980, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 12th December 1936
[31] This painting had been offered to, and refused, by the Tate Gallery in 1935. Once believed lost, I have recently been able to locate this portrait in the permanent collection of the Fischer Kunsthandel Gallery in Berlin
[32] "Red Artists Propaganda Foiled", *Sunday Dispatch*, 25th April 1937
[33] *We ask your attention,* circular published by the Surrealist Group for the First AIA Congress, AIA archive at the Tate Gallery Archives, TGA7043/17/1
[34] "Janus" p.622 *The Spectator*, No.5781, 14th April 1939
[35] Hans Feibusch, p.65, *Mural Painting*
[36] Feibusch, p.65

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