

# Social conscience

WHEN I arrived at the fashionable old Hotel del Prado in Mexico City, the first face I recognised was Diego Rivera's: the country's most famous artist had portrayed himself as a schoolboy in the middle of the immense mural which filled the wall of the lobby.

The painting, his dream of a Sunday afternoon in the nearby Alameda Central park, depicts 140 people from Mexico's history, folklore and myth. So behind little Diego, a smiling nine-year-old with a frog peeping out of his breast pocket, is his painter wife, Frida Kahlo. And holding his hand is a skeleton in a woman's dress: she is La Calavera Catrina, a symbol of the Mexican fascination with death.

Sauzy, the hotel where visitors used to drink margaritas next to Rivera's dreamworld has gone: it was badly damaged in the city's 1985 earthquake and the mural is now in a museum. Rivera painted on a colossal scale, filling vast

**DIEGO RIVERA: THE COMPLETE MURALS**  
by Luis-Martín Lozano and Juan Coronel Rivera  
(Taschen, £120)

walls of major public buildings with colourful, pageant-like pictures designed to inspire a whole nation with respect for its history and hope for its future.

In spite of its technical sophistication, Rivera's art is unashamedly populist. Politically a communist, he set out to appeal to the poor, at a time in the 1920s and '30s when as many as two-thirds of adult Mexicans were thought to be illiterate.

It is not easy to appreciate Rivera's work without going to Mexico, and in recent years his reputation has faded while Frida Kahlo has been celebrated not only as an artist but as a feminist symbol — her life became agonising after she was horribly injured in a bus crash. Kahlo's

## the size of a house

major paintings can be lent to galleries anywhere in the world: most of Rivera's are firmly attached to buildings and can no more travel than can the Sistine Chapel ceiling or Stonehenge.

Now, however, 50 years after his death, a remarkable book gives stay-at-homes a chance to see all of Rivera's surviving murals, on a reduced scale of course, but in great detail and with charts to identify the characters who mill about in these enormous compositions.

It is luxuriously produced and elegantly printed, on paper with gold backgrounds, and not a book you can read propped up in bed: 674 pages, almost 18in tall,

12in wide and 3in thick, it weighs a wrist-spraining 19lb, according to my bathroom scales. But it's a tiddler by the standards of the publisher, Taschen, which four years ago launched a book about the boxer Muhammed Ali: 792 pages, 75lb and a cover price of £2,250. Taschen was encouraged to do that because of the success of SUMO, a 66lb tribute to the photographer Helmut Newton which rose to a cost of £6,000 a copy by the time it sold out its complete edition of 10,000 copies. But it did come with its own coffee table.



**DAVID BRADBURY** *Death and the schoolboy: A Rivera mural*