



# Belpré Illustrator Award Acceptance Speech

## Becoming Proud of My Roots

*Duncan Tonatiuh*



**Duncan Tonatiuh** is winner of the 2012 Pura Belpré Illustrator Award for *Diego Rivera: His World and Ours*, published by Abrams Books for Young Readers. He delivered his acceptance speech at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, on June 24, 2012.

It is a great honor to be here among such an excellent group of authors and illustrators. I wish to thank the Pura Belpré committee for choosing my book *Diego Rivera, His World and Ours*. I was truly blown away that lazy Sunday afternoon in late January when the committee called me to give me the news. I also want to thank ALSC and REFORMA for all the excellent work they do getting books into children's hands.

I would like to thank all the people at Abrams that made this book possible, especially my editor, Howard Reeves, who is full of great advice, and Jason Wells, who always looks out for me. Thanks to Chad, Sylvia, and to the rest of the gang who have always made me feel welcome at the 6th floor of 115 West 18th Street. Thanks also to Michael Jacobs, the president of Abrams. He is a cool dude, and I'm not saying that because he signs the checks. I remember getting into some deep conversations with him at last year's ALA Conference about *Chicharito* and other emerging soccer stars. I repeat he is a cool dude.

And I would like to thank my family and friends, of course, who are always supportive and encouraging of my work. I am very fortunate in that I do something that I love for a living: writing and illustrating. It is extremely gratifying that my work is able to speak to others.

Diego María de la Concepción Juan Nepomuceno Estanislao de la Rivera y Barrientos Acosta y Rodríguez, better known as Diego Rivera, was born in the city of Guanajuato in 1886. Last year, he would have turned 125.

From a young age, Rivera showed an exceptional ability to draw. He received his first artistic training at the San Carlos Academy when his family moved to Mexico City. He excelled, and at the age of 21, he was awarded a scholarship by the Governor of Veracruz to travel to Madrid to study with the painter Eduardo Chicharro.

Diego Rivera spent the next fourteen years in Europe. He lived in Spain, France, and Italy. In Paris, he met and mingled with the artistic vanguard. He was influenced by painters like Cezanne and Picasso and became an accomplished cubist painter.

In the 1920s however, Diego Rivera's career took a dramatic turn. Jose Vasconcelos, Mexico's Secretary of Education, urged Rivera to return to his native country. He wanted him to be a part of the major murals program he was launching.

In 1921, Rivera returned. He was encouraged to travel around the country with other painters. The nation was just emerging from the Revolution—nearly ten years of violence and struggle to take the power away from the few and spread it among the entire population. Vasconcelos wanted the murals to be about Mexican history and the Mexican people.

Rivera painted his first mural in 1922 at the National Preparatory School and his second one from 1922 to 1928 at the Secretariat of Public Education, both of them in Mexico City. While painting these murals, Rivera developed his own unique style of painting, the one that has come to identify him. In his artwork, Rivera combined the aesthetics and techniques of the Renaissance frescoes, the experimentation and space compression of cubism, and the boldness, roundness, and geometry of Mexican pre-Columbian art that Rivera had come to admire.

Over the next twenty-five years, Rivera was involved in more than twelve major mural projects; sometimes the projects involved entire chapels and multiple floors and walls. Many of his murals are in Mexico City, but a number of them are in the U.S., in San Francisco and Detroit. He was very prolific and painted an incredible number of canvases and watercolors up until his death in 1957.

Diego Rivera was a multifaceted and often controversial person. It is hard to do justice to all different aspects of his life. He was, among other things, a lover of science and technology, an avid pre-Columbian art collector, a member of the Mexican Communist Party, the husband of the famous painter Frida Kahlo, an infamous Don Juan, and a self-alleged child-eater. I recently met the author and journalist Elena Poniatowska. She interviewed Rivera on a couple of occasions and she confirmed this. He told her that he liked eating children and also little girl reporters that asked too many questions.

Rivera is undoubtedly one of the most famous and important artists of the twentieth century. I must be honest though. I did not think much of him growing up.

I was born and raised in Mexico, but I came to the U.S. when I was 16 to attend high school and college. My mother is Mexican and my father is American and I truly feel like I am both Mexican and American. Before I came to the U.S., I never thought much of the food, music, history, or art of my native country. I took them for granted.

Art and drawing interested me from very early on. As a kid, the Spider-Man comics that I bought at the news stand and the Japanese cartoons about soccer and Zodiac Warriors I saw on TV inspired me to draw. As a teen, I admired painters like Van Gogh and Egon Schiele. But I never thought much of the art that is representative of Mexico. Pre-Columbian codex or the paintings of Diego Rivera seemed to me to belong on mugs and souvenirs for tourists at the crafts market.

Soon after I arrived in the U.S., I began to feel nostalgic for things that I always had around me in Mexico. I missed *tortillas*, *elotes*, *chiles*, *mole*, *pozole*, *molletes*, *tacos*, and basically all the street food, the *antojitos*. I missed the *rancheras* of Jose Alfredo Jimenez too. That longing grew, and with it my interest and drive to know more about Mexico. I remember vividly reading Octavio Paz' *The Labyrinth of Solitude* at age 17. It had a deep impact on me, especially an essay called "Mexico and the United States" in which he compares and contrasts the two countries. I highly, highly recommend it.

Paz' masterful analysis of the history of Mexico and its influence on the psychology of the Mexican people helped me see and understand Mexico in a new light. That winter break when I came back to San Miguel, my hometown, for the holidays, I remember devouring Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and seeing Manuel Alvarez Bravo's photography in Bellas Artes. Rulfo and Alvarez Bravo are two of Mexico's most iconic artists. However, Diego Rivera did not captivate me yet.

I returned to school with a new understanding of my heritage and of who I

was, on both sides of the border. Later, in college, I incorporated Mexican themes in my different classes. Sometimes that meant photographing an immigrant reform march for a journalism class or writing a short story that took place in San Miguel for creative writing class. My senior thesis was a short graphic novel shaped like a codex about an undocumented indigenous Mexican worker.

While working on my thesis, I developed my current illustration style. I draw by hand contemporary images inspired by pre-Columbian art and collage them digitally. That piece called *Journey of a Mixteco* led to my first children's book *Dear Primo, A Letter to My Cousin*, thanks to a Parsons professor named Julia Gorton who liked my work and who introduced me to Howard, my editor.

I came to admire Diego Rivera only recently. I was doing an illustration for a textbook on Mexican history a few years ago. I looked at a lot of Rivera's images

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for reference in books and online. The more I looked, the more impressed I was. Rivera painted the pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico, the Spanish Conquest, the Independence, and the Mexican Revolution in his murals at the National Palace. He painted the dances and traditions of Mexico in his murals at the Secretariat of Public Education, and he painted factories and the Industrial Revolution in his murals in Detroit.

Rivera's murals are epic. Looking at his work I began to think, what would Diego Rivera paint nowadays? What would he paint in our globalized world of smart phones and the Web 2.0? With that thought in mind I began to write and draw *Diego Rivera, His World and Ours*.

I have seen many of Rivera's murals by now. They are luminous and formally

exquisite. But what I have come to admire the most about Rivera is the way in which he celebrated the art and culture of his country.

Rivera's work especially celebrates our indigenous past. I especially marvel at the way in which he looked back at the art of ancient Mexico and was able to incorporate some of its aesthetic into his own work. He combined that ancient art with the art of his time and was able to create something new and exciting that speaks to the heart of people of Mexican origin on both sides of the border and beyond: something I yearn to do.

I hope that my book pays Rivera the homage that he deserves. My wish is to introduce Diego Rivera and the culture he celebrated to a new generation of young readers and artists. I hope that it is a book that not only teaches children about the past, but that it is a book that they can relate to, and that stirs their imagination: "Would Diego paint

the Big City today like he painted the Ancient Tenochtitlan, would he paint Luchadores wrestling in their costumes like he painted the Aztec warriors fighting the invading soldiers, the Spanish Conquistadores?"

Again, it is a great honor to receive this award named after the wonderful Pura Belpré. Pura Belpré herself hosted Diego Rivera at her 115th Street branch in New York during one of his visits to the city. I can only imagine what that was like. I hope that Diego Rivera behaved and that he did not eat any children.

And now if I may I'd like to give a brief synopsis of my speech in Spanish so that my mom, my grandma, my family, and friends who don't speak English can get the gist of what I said. ☺