



María  
Izquierdo  
&  
Frida  
Kahlo

CHALLENGING VISIONS IN  
MODERN MEXICAN ART

Nancy Deffebach

# María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo

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*To my friends*

Kim Grant, Daniel Nelson, Susan Webster,  
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# CONTENTS

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*Acknowledgments*

*Introduction*

## PART ONE: THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO

1. Women on the Wire: Izquierdo's Images of Circus Performers
2. Saints and Goddesses: Kahlo's Appropriations of Religious Iconography in Her Self-Portraits

## PART TWO: LEGITIMATING TRADITIONS

3. Revitalizing the Past: Precolumbian Figures from West Mexico in Kahlo's Paintings
4. Beyond the Personal: Kahlo's *La niña, la luna y el sol* of 1942
5. Mother of the Maize: Izquierdo's Images of Rural Gardens with Granaries

## PART THREE: THE WALL OF RESISTANCE

6. What Sex Is the City? Izquierdo's Aborted Mural Project

## PART FOUR: STILL-LIFE PAINTINGS

7. *Picantes pero sabrosas*: Kahlo's Still-Life Paintings and Related Images
8. Grain of Memory: Izquierdo's Paintings of Altars to the Virgin of Sorrows

## PART FIVE: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN MODERN MEXICO

9. Beyond the Canvas: Izquierdo, Kahlo, and Women's Rights

*Conclusion*

*Notes*

*Bibliography*

*Index*

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I photographed the following images: figures [4](#), [5](#), [11](#), [15](#), [19](#), [20](#), [21](#), [24](#), [26](#), [27](#), [36](#), [37](#), [39](#), [61](#), [73](#), [83](#), and [84](#) and plates [10](#), [12](#), [13](#), and [16](#).

# Introduction

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*You do not paint with your hands: the painting should be born in your soul, pass through your brain, and then your emotions must spill it onto a canvas, panel, or wall.*

MARÍA IZQUIERDO, "MI PINTURA," 1950

*The most important part of the body is the brain.*

FRIDA KAHLO, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH OLGA CAMPOS, 1950

During the height of the Mexican muralist movement, María Izquierdo (1902–1955) and Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) established successful careers as easel painters and created bodies of work that have become integral to Mexican modernism (figs. 1 and 2). Izquierdo and Kahlo both began their artistic careers around 1929, nine years after the Mexican Revolution (1910 to ca. 1920) ended and several years after the mural movement began.<sup>1</sup> The two women artists made small and mediumsized easel paintings. Most of their works represent women, and some address personal themes, even though the muralists advocated a radically different type of art.

Izquierdo and Kahlo emerged as artists when Mexican muralism was a dynamic young movement but already sufficiently established to dominate the Mexican art world and earn international acclaim. Both were profoundly affected by this context, but the two artists, who were affiliated with different groups within the Mexican art world, responded to this context differently. Neither was in total agreement with all the ideas of the muralists. How, where, and why they departed from the dominant discourse is central to this book. It examines the ways in which they participated in the national and artistic discourses of post-revolutionary Mexico by demonstrating how their work reveals intellectual engagement with the issues and ideas of their time, especially those regarding national identity and the role of women in society.

Artistic theory played a fundamental role in the rise of Mexican muralism and the so-called *escuela mexicana* (Mexican School), a term that I use to refer to the muralists and artists working in other media who shared their ideas about art. The goals of these artists were first expressed in the "Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores" (Manifesto of the Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors Union). The manifesto was probably written by David Alfaro Siqueiros and was signed by Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and five other artists in December 1923 and published in *El Machete* in June 1924. It valorized indigenous traditions, exalted monumental art, rejected easel painting, and advocated using art to overthrow bourgeois individualism. The manifesto argued that artists needed to maintain an ideological focus while society is in a transitional phase between the destruction of the old order and the establishment of a new order.<sup>2</sup>





**Fig. 1.** Photograph of María Izquierdo at an exhibition of her paintings, ca. 1934. Photograph from the Casasola Archive of the Fototeca Nacional, Mexico. © 187798 CONACULTA.INAH. SINAFO.FN.MEXICO.



**Fig. 2.** Manuel Álvarez Bravo, photograph of Frida Kahlo painting, 1937. © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

Two decades later Siqueiros prescribed the goals of modern art at length in his book *No hay más ruta que la nuestra* (There Is No Other Route But Ours) of 1945, in which he advocated that art should be monumental, heroic, public, ideological, social, realistic, belligerent, and polemical. He dismissed easel painting as a decorative form suitable only for the homes of the elite oligarchy and repeatedly denigrated it with labels such as chic, snob, domestic, epicurean, decadent, metaphysical, poetic, and colonial.<sup>3</sup> While Siqueiros did not overtly address gender issues, his language reveals the extent to which gender structured his thinking about the goals of modern art. Throughout much of the twentieth century men were associated with culture and women with nature. These assumptions were not limited

to Mexico but pervaded Western culture. In 1974 Sherry Ortner examined and refuted these views in her seminal article “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”<sup>4</sup> But the association between men and culture and women and nature was widespread, widely accepted, and largely unexamined at the time when Siqueiros wrote *No hay más ruta que la nuestra*. When he used words like “heroic,” “monumental,” and “public,” he implied that good art was masculine. Bad art, in contrast, was “childish” and “domestic,” words that associated it with the feminine realm. Needless to say, the gendering of good art as male presented a major problem for women artists.

Cultural critic Jean Franco has noted that in the period following the Mexican Revolution national identity was essentially masculine identity. “The Revolution with its promise of social transformation encouraged a Messianic spirit that transformed mere human beings into supermen and constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated.”<sup>5</sup> In the visual arts the construction of national identity as male was vigorously and effectively propagated by the muralists.

In an environment in which artistic and political discourse associated the nation with masculinity, Izquierdo and Kahlo negotiated female identity in their work in ways that involved significant dissonance from prevailing views. Izquierdo and Kahlo supported the parts of artistic discourse that they agreed with; these were different for each artist, but they included an appreciation of Mexican popular culture and the valorization of indigenous traditions. They resisted other aspects of nationalist rhetoric, especially the glorification of male heroes. Both artists usually avoided politics in art, except in the sense that “the personal is political,” though Kahlo created a few political images at the end of her life.<sup>6</sup> Because they explored gender issues and in varying degrees addressed personal themes in their paintings, their art has political aspects even when the politics are not overt. As Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen write, “The phrase ‘the personal is political’ rejects the traditional exclusion and repression of the personal in male-dominated politics. It also asserts the political nature of women’s private individualized oppression.”<sup>7</sup> This book examines how Izquierdo and Kahlo negotiated female identity in a seemingly inhospitable context and succeeded in creating bodies of work that were accepted and appreciated during their lives—despite their considerable deviation from orthodoxy—and that still speak to wide and diverse audiences. Kahlo and Izquierdo were the two women who in different ways most directly challenged prevailing ideas about gender and what constituted important art. Paradoxically, they were also the two most successful Mexican women artists of their era.

## Women Artists in Mexico

One of the peculiar characteristics of the Mexican postrevolutionary period (1920–1940) is that women artists emerged earlier than women writers as prominent figures who combined creativity with the struggle for women’s rights. During Izquierdo’s and Kahlo’s lives, no Mexican women writers had a stature equal to theirs or prioritized gender to the same degree.

Izquierdo and Kahlo were not the only women artists active in Mexico from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. Others included the photographers Tina Modotti and Lola Álvarez Bravo and the painters Rosario Cabrera, Cecilia Calderón, Olga Costa, Dolores Cueto, Nahui Olín, Aurora Reyes, Rosalinda Rolando, and Isabel Villaseñor. Between 1939 and 1943 the European surrealists Leonora Carrington, Kati Horna, Alice Rahon, and Remedios Varo fled war-torn Europe and settled in Mexico, where, without exception, they created their most important visual work. Carrington and Varo became major figures in the Mexican art world after the mid-fifties. Mariana Yampolsky came to Mexico to join the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP: People’s Graphics Workshop) as a printmaker in 1945 and later became a photographer.

In Mexico women artists confronted substantial difficulties in addition to those faced by male

artists. But it is important to note that, despite Mexico's reputation for machismo, women artists do not suffer from more discrimination in Mexico than in the United States. Writing in 1975, a historian Jacqueline Barnitz observed that in the preceding six decades "more Latin American than North American women have become well-known artists."<sup>8</sup> In fact, in the first half of the twentieth century, only Russia and Brazil seem to have provided more conducive environments for the development of women artists than Mexico.

Some of the problems that women artists faced in Mexico were specific to the country or took on a distinct character there. Foremost among these were the ways in which women were represented,<sup>9</sup> the degree to which national identity was constructed as masculine, and the strong resistance to women participating fully in the muralist movement during the years in which mural painting was considered the pinnacle of artistic achievement in Mexico.

## The Relative Status of Izquierdo and Kahlo

In recent decades Frida Kahlo has become an internationally known artist whose fame—for better or for worse—extends into popular culture. Like Che Guevara's, her face is recognized by multitudes, many of whom have little or no knowledge of her work and ideas. At present María Izquierdo's reputation is limited to people knowledgeable about Mexican art. Nevertheless, during their lives the two artists had comparable reputations in Mexico. While many people may react to the preceding claim with skepticism or incredulity, overwhelming evidence exists to support it. Kahlo, as the wife of the *my discutido* (much discussed) muralist Diego Rivera, always had a highly visible presence in the media and was much admired by the French surrealists. In innumerable instances, however, Izquierdo and Kahlo were included together in major exhibitions (with or without the inclusion of other women artists). They were invariably the only women artists chosen for the most important professional activities and honors.

In 1930 María Izquierdo and Isabel Villaseñor were the only women represented in the enormous *Mexican Arts* exhibition organized by René d'Harnoncourt for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>10</sup> After this exhibition, until the late 1950s, important group exhibitions of Mexican art that included the big names—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Rufino Tamayo—invariably also included Izquierdo and Kahlo. This was equally true for major exhibitions held in Mexico and in other countries. When other women artists were included, the selections varied. For example, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* showed work by Izquierdo and Kahlo at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1940. The catalogue contains reproductions of Kahlo's *Las dos Fridas* (The Two Fridas) of 1939 and Izquierdo's *Mis sobrinas* (My Nieces) of 1940 and does not list pieces by other women. However, the exhibition was dramatically larger than the catalogue indicates, and Lola Álvarez Bravo, Rosa Rolando, and Isabel Villaseñor probably participated.<sup>11</sup> The 1943 exhibition *Mexican Art Today* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art included María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Olga Costa, Isabel Villaseñor, Lola Álvarez Bravo, and Doris Heyden. In 1952 the exhibition *Art mexicain du Précolombien à nos jours* at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris showed work by María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Olga Costa, Dolores Cueto, and Andrea Gómez.

In 1942 the president of Mexico, Manuel Ávila Camacho, sent a request to Inés Amor, the director of the prestigious Galería de Arte Mexicano, asking to meet with a small group of painters at his gallery. The painters he wished to meet were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Antonio Ruiz de Arce, Roberto Montenegro, Miguel Covarrubias, Juan O'Gorman, María Izquierdo, and Frida Kahlo (Rufino Tamayo was in New York, while David Alfaro Siqueiros was in Chile.) Inés Amor hung one work by each artist in the gallery and set up mural-sized panels by Rivera in the patio. The tour of the exhibition began with some rather naïve questions from the president, who wanted to know if Orozco

was a cubist. After viewing the work, the group gathered for drinks and hors d'oeuvres in another room. The president asked each artist for suggestions about how to promote Mexican art. Rivera, Orozco, and O'Gorman asked for mural commissions.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the meeting the president asked if he should know about any other group of artists. Kahlo replied: "Yes, Mr. President, there is another group headed by Carlos Ruano Llopis, but they are not worthwhile and you need not bother seeing them." After the president left, Kahlo turned to Amor and quipped: "What if the good ones turn out to be Ruano Llopis's group?"<sup>13</sup> No record survives of what Izquierdo said, but she must have made a positive impression. In 1942, at Ávila Camacho's suggestion, the Mexican government purchased *Mis sobrinas* for the collection of the Museo Nacional de México (National Museum of Mexico). This meeting between the president and these painters was a pivotal event. As art historian Ana Garduño observes, this was the first time that a Mexican president asked to meet with artists.<sup>14</sup> Years after the meeting, Inés Amor recalled that after this event "all the governments and all the presidents of Mexico have been interested in current art." For Amor, the interest of Mexican presidents in the country's contemporary art testifies to the importance that Mexican art has nationally and internationally "as an instrument of cultural prestige and presidential pride."<sup>15</sup>

In 1942 the painter Antonio Ruiz was appointed director of the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura (School of Painting and Sculpture), the art school popularly known as La Esmeralda because it was located in an alley of that name.<sup>16</sup> Ruiz's goal was to renovate art education, so he hired a prestigious faculty eager to employ innovative approaches to fostering creativity, including María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Raúl Anguiano, José Chávez Morado, Jesús Guerrero Galván, Agustín Lazo, Carlos Orozco Romero, Diego Rivera, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Francisco Zúñiga, and others. Izquierdo taught watercolor, and Kahlo taught oil painting. For reasons related to her health, Kahlo soon moved the class meetings to her home.

Izquierdo and Kahlo each received major honors and awards. In 1946 Kahlo won a 5,000-peso prize for *Moisés* (Moses) of 1945 at the annual national exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts).<sup>17</sup> In 1944 Izquierdo was appointed ambassador of Mexican art by the minister of education, Jaime Torres Bodet; she was sent to Peru and Chile, where she held six solo exhibitions of her paintings.

Izquierdo and Kahlo appeared together in major group exhibitions countless times and participated equally in professional activities. Izquierdo's career can also be considered more professional than Kahlo's in other ways. Kahlo only had two solo exhibitions during her lifetime: the first at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1938 and the second at Lola Álvarez Bravo's Galería de Arte Contemporáneo (Contemporary Art Gallery) in Mexico City in 1953. In contrast, Izquierdo had at least twenty solo exhibitions during her life. Her second solo show was held at the Art Center in New York City in 1930, where she was touted as the first Mexican woman to exhibit her work in the United States.<sup>18</sup> In 1937 the French playwright and poet Antonin Artaud organized an exhibition of Izquierdo's work at the Galerie Van den Berg in Paris.<sup>19</sup> And in 1943 the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City hosted a major exhibition of Izquierdo's recent works, including sixty paintings created between 1939 and 1943.

Izquierdo's body of work is larger than Kahlo's, though the exact size of their oeuvres has not yet been established. The 1988 catalogue raisonné of Kahlo's work lists 176 paintings, 82 drawings (including 13 diary pages and several drawings made in the margins of letters), and 2 prints.<sup>20</sup> Since then, intense research about Kahlo has recovered additional works. But estimates of the size of Kahlo's oeuvre have become muddied with the introduction of a large body of forged objects that emerged during the first decade of the twenty-first century (discussed in greater detail below). There is no catalogue raisonné of Izquierdo's work. The catalogue to her 1988 retrospective at the Cent

Cultural, Arte Contemporáneo provides visual documentation of 317 paintings, 12 drawings, and prints.<sup>21</sup> After the retrospective, some additional works emerged. In the mid-1990s Luis-Martín Lozano estimated Izquierdo's oeuvre at around five hundred works,<sup>22</sup> which I consider a reasonable approximation. Izquierdo's last husband was the Chilean painter Raúl Uribe, whom she met in 1933 and married in 1944. Uribe was a mediocre painter but well connected with South American diplomats and used his connections with South American embassies to facilitate the sale of her paintings. Toward the end of her life, Izquierdo wrote that 80 percent of her art was in other countries.<sup>23</sup> The majority of Izquierdo's known works remain in Mexico, so a significant number of her paintings may have left Mexico without being documented.

In 1940, when Kahlo and Rivera remarried, one of her conditions was that she provide for herself financially. Although this was an admirable goal, their lifestyle and paying her high medical expenses depended on the relatively high prices that his work commanded. Izquierdo, in contrast, earned her living as a painter and teacher throughout most of her career.<sup>24</sup>

## Philosophical Divisions in the Art World in Mexico

Izquierdo and Kahlo met by the late 1920s and both taught at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura in the 1940s. The two artists were acquaintances rather than friends and usually maintained a certain distance, although at least once they took their students on a joint field trip to Teotihuacan.<sup>25</sup> In the early forties, when Rivera and Izquierdo became openly hostile to each other in the press, Kahlo and Izquierdo became even more distant. On at least three occasions Izquierdo made brief comments about Kahlo that were published in Mexico City newspapers: twice praising her work, and once vehemently criticizing her influence on students.<sup>26</sup>

Izquierdo and Kahlo held significantly different beliefs about art and were affiliated with different groups of artists that advocated opposing points of view about the role of art. For each artist the affiliation had an important personal element in addition to its philosophical and theoretical components. During Izquierdo's formative years as an artist, she was in a committed romantic relationship with the painter Rufino Tamayo. Izquierdo and Tamayo were among the visual artists allied with the Contemporáneos, an avant-garde literary group that believed in art for art's sake and took an international approach to art. Kahlo's marriage to Rivera in 1929 linked her socially to the muralists and other artists who thought that art should advance leftist political and social agendas and celebrate Mexican identity.

## Kahlo, the Muralists, and the So-Called *Escuela Mexicana*

Frida Kahlo's art shares some iconographic and thematic elements with the work of her husband Diego Rivera, and sharply diverges from it in other ways. The same is true about Kahlo's painting in relation to the *escuela mexicana* in general. The term *escuela mexicana* (Mexican School) is usually used to designate the muralists and artists working in other media who shared the muralist conviction that art should advance leftist political and social agendas and celebrate Mexican identity. This is how I use the term throughout the book, although the term has two drawbacks. First, no absolute consensus exists as to what the Mexican School includes and excludes. Some people use it to designate virtually all art created in modern Mexico. The U.S. art historian MacKinley Helm, for example, who promoted Mexican art in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, used it for all modern Mexican art.<sup>27</sup> The second problem is that the term has become dated. Since the 1980s Mexican art historians have increasingly rejected narrow definitions of Mexican art and criticized nationalist rhetoric. To younger and/or more theoretical art historians, the phrase *escuela mexicana*

implies an overly restricted vision of what constitutes Mexican art. Ana Garduño sometimes refers to the “so-called *escuela mexicana*” or employs a phrase such as “what was then known as the Mexican School of painting” as a way of problematizing the term.<sup>28</sup> In this introduction (and occasionally elsewhere) I use *escuela mexicana* in order to distinguish the work of the muralists and like-minded artists from artists associated with the Contemporáneos and have therefore adopted Garduño’s strategy to acknowledge the problems with the designation. In the rare instances in which I forego the qualifying phrases, I continue to use the words to signify a group of artists with shared values in a specific historical period, not as a prescription for what Mexican art should be.

Kahlo’s themes, iconography, and media often adhere to widely accepted ideas of the dominant Mexican art movement, but she also departed from them in significant ways. One of the goals of this book is to look carefully at which aspects of the theory and practice of the so-called Mexican School she embraced and which she ignored, resisted, or contested. Central to this study is the issue of how Kahlo promoted her own beliefs in ways that sometimes affirmed and sometimes resisted the dominant discourse.

The short manifesto (approximately 900 words) issued by the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores is the single most influential document in the history of modern Mexican art. The manifesto, which was probably written by Siqueiros, advocated social and political art that supported the goals of the Mexican Revolution. It called for art to be collective, monumental, popular, and national. It praised the Mexican people, especially “our natives,” and recognized “the physical and spiritual existence of our race as an ethnic force.” The manifesto proclaimed: “*The art of the people of Mexico is the greatest, healthiest spiritual expression in the whole world, and its indigenous tradition is simply the best of them all.*”<sup>29</sup>

By the time the manifesto was signed in December 1923, the majority of signatories had already painted murals at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School). The word “mural” was not used in the manifesto, but the document called for an art that was collective, monumental, ideological, and for the people. The artists who signed the manifesto would no doubt have agreed that these goals could best be addressed in large-scale works in public places. The manifesto was written while postrevolutionary Mexican art was in a nascent phase. It did not describe work that had already been created; rather, it voiced the artists’ goals for the future.<sup>30</sup> After the manifesto was written, Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco began painting images that were more national, political, and revolutionary than their first murals.

The manifesto stated that indigenous traditions are at the heart of Mexican art. Representations of indigenous people and Precolumbian cultures of Mexico, which were already important subjects in nineteenth-century academic painting, became a salient feature of modern Mexican art.<sup>31</sup> Both Rivera’s, Siqueiros’s, and Orozco’s representations of native peoples and ancient civilizations developed in divergent ways. These differences are substantial, but beyond the scope of this book. Because of Rivera’s relationship with Kahlo, his treatments of these themes are the most relevant for this particular study. He is the artist who most frequently portrayed modern indigenous people and ancient cultures of Mexico. His paintings protest the abuse of indigenous workers, document native artisan traditions, praise traditional clothing, and celebrate regional customs. Rivera conducted extensive research before depicting the ancient cultures of Mexico in murals, where he promoted an idealized view of the Precolumbian past.<sup>32</sup>

A related concern of the manifesto was *lo popular* (the popular, in the sense of being of the common people), especially as it was linked to art. The manifesto asserted that popular painting, literature, and music could combat bourgeois influence and that popular indigenous taste had a purifying effect in intellectual circles.<sup>33</sup> It promised to fight the decline of the popular indigenous

aesthetic, which, according to the manifesto, only survived among the lower classes. In Spanish the words *arte popular* signify what would usually be translated into English as “folk art,” “artisan objects,” or “craft.” While the manifesto did not use the phrase *arte popular*, it repeatedly used the word *popular* in statements about taste, aesthetics, and painting, thus implying support for the artisan traditions of Mexico. The manifesto was not the origin of the rising appreciation for artisan objects which had long been despised by the majority of middle- and upper-class Mexicans and greatly admired by artists, but it affirmed the valorization of popular culture.<sup>34</sup> Many modern Mexican painters incorporated elements of *arte popular* into their work as a way of expressing admiration for indigenous aesthetics and declaring allegiance to campesinos (peasants) and indigenous people.<sup>35</sup> This is one of the principal ways in which Mexican artists expressed *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).

The manifesto rejected easel painting and bourgeois taste. In order to reach a proletarian audience mural painting became the preferred form of art. Murals in public venues satisfied the criteria of being monumental, collective, public, and accessible to everyone.<sup>36</sup> Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros considered murals the pinnacle of artistic achievement and based their reputations on their mural work. Nevertheless, easel painting did not disappear. Even the most successful muralists went through long periods when they could not obtain mural commissions, and many artists who wished to paint murals had limited or no opportunity to do so. Prints were an effective alternative for reaching a wide popular audience and avoiding the pitfall of bourgeois tastes, so printmaking, which already had a strong tradition in Mexico, still flourished. Nonetheless, despite the artistic hegemony of muralism and the more easily accessible alternative of printmaking, easel painting continued to thrive. Ironically, many members of the so-called *escuela mexicana* pursued the goals of the manifesto by using the traditional form of easel painting. Even Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros produced quantities of easel paintings which provided an important source of income.

The muralist movement was supported by the Mexican government, served didactic purposes, and promoted nationalism. The audience that the muralists wished to reach included peasants and workers who had a high rate of illiteracy. To communicate with this audience, the muralists narrated Mexican history in visual form through panoramic images on the walls of government buildings. Many of the murals created in the 1920s bear witness to the recent Mexican Revolution, while others communicated the epic of Mexican history from the Precolumbian era to the present. By the 1930s the leading muralists began to place their social, political, and historical subjects in global contexts.

Monumental images of heroes dominate many Mexican murals and fill innumerable canvases. The muralists chose heroes who fought for liberty, represented Marxist ideology, or brought culture to their people. Rivera’s heroes were Emiliano Zapata, Quetzalcoatl, Vladimir Lenin, and the common man. He created numerous images of Zapata, the agrarian leader of the Mexican Revolution, as a romantic horseman, revolutionary martyr, and secular saint. He depicted Lenin in the ill-fated mural at Radio City, New York, and endured the destruction of his mural rather than kowtow to his patron’s pressure to remove the likeness of the Communist leader. Rivera presented Quetzalcoatl—Mesoamerican deity, Toltec ruler, and cultural hero—three times in his mural *México prehispánico* (known in English as *The Aztec World*) of 1929 at the Palacio Nacional (National Palace). Rivera also represented heroes who were not members of the elite. For example, he created a narrative sequence about a brave unnamed peasant wearing blue overalls and a red shirt in the panels about social revolution on the left wall of the former chapel at the Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo (Autonomous University of Chapingo). At the end of his life, Rivera proclaimed that one of the greatest contributions of Mexican art was that artists made the common man the hero of monumental art for the first time in the history of art.<sup>37</sup>

Orozco portrayed Quetzalcoatl, Prometheus, and Miguel Hidalgo. For him, Quetzalcoatl symbolized



the achievements of a lost golden age. Orozco repeatedly portrayed the Greek god Prometheus, whom he considered a benefactor of humankind, rising boldly from conflagrations. Orozco also represented dynamic Miguel Hidalgo—the priest who proclaimed Mexican independence from Spain in 1810—emerging from a fiery background and looming large above writhing masses of people (fig. 3).

Siqueiros's favorite heroes were Cuauhtemoc, Zapata, and himself. He eulogized Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec ruler, who defended the nation's integrity against foreign invaders. Siqueiros presented himself as the *coronelazo* (big hard-hitting colonel), whose clenched fist thrusts aggressively toward the viewer.

The hero in Mexican art of the 1920s and 1930s can be a common man, a general, a ruler, or a god, but he is always male. The muralists utilized the image of the dynamic male hero to dramatize history, construct national identity as masculine, and associate virility with social transformation.

During the postrevolutionary period (1920–1940) and beyond, women were depicted in murals and other media in ways that were distinct from the representations of men. In art and in the ideology of the postrevolutionary state, motherhood was women's most valued contribution. After the devastating loss of life in the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government promoted population growth and the maternal role of women. Art historian Mary K. Coffey observes that motherhood was “the only acknowledged form of female citizenship.”<sup>38</sup> Women could not yet vote, but their ability to nurture future (male) citizens was valued.<sup>39</sup> Orozco's *Maternidad* (Maternity) of 1923 and Siqueiros's *Madre campesina* (Peasant Mother) of ca. 1931 pay homage to the theme of motherhood. Artists also frequently portrayed women as teachers, Tehuanas (women from Tehuantepec), *indias bonitas* (pretty Indians), flower vendors, *soldaderas* (women who followed their men to war) trailing behind the troops,<sup>40</sup> and embodiments of the fecundity of nature. Men were envisioned as leaders who fought, governed, and changed the world; women were cast in supporting roles as wives, mothers, teachers, and helpers.



**Fig. 3.** José Clemente Orozco, *Hidalgo*, 1937, fresco, Palacio del Gobernador (Governor's Palace), Guadalajara, Mexico. Photographed by Rafael Doniz. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2015.



**Fig. 4.** Diego Rivera, detail of *El mundo de hoy y de mañana* (known in English as *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*), 1935, fresco, Palacio Nacional (National Palace). © 2014 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2015.

Rivera, like other muralists, almost always represented women in secondary roles in his frescos. In *El mundo de hoy y de mañana* (known in English as *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*) of 1935 at the Palacio Nacional, he depicted his sister-in-law, Cristina Kahlo, with her two children holding up political documents, while Kahlo herself teaches a dark-skinned working-class boy to read (fig. 4). In *En el arsenal* (known in English as *Distribution of the Arms*) of 1928 at the Secretaría de Educación Pública, he portrayed Kahlo as a young Communist (she wears a red star on a red shirt) handing out rifles to soldiers. Jean Franco observes that Rivera's images of women show that they have entered

new social spaces, where they are teachers and comrades, yet “they are still represented as ‘helpers’ in the epic narrative.”<sup>41</sup>

In addition to portraying women in auxiliary roles, the muralists occasionally featured allegorical female figures. In *Nueva democracia* (New Democracy) of 1944–1945, Siqueiros personified Liberty as a woman (following Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*). Orozco, in contrast, deepened mistrusted traditional academic allegories, a distrust that probably contributed to his invention of the garish green-skinned whore who lies on her back with her legs spread on the left side of *Katharsis* (Catharsis) of 1934, an unforgettable sign of social disorder and corruption.<sup>42</sup> Usually, however, the muralists merely relegated women to minor roles in the great drama of Mexican history.<sup>43</sup>

The ways in which Kahlo’s representations of women diverged from the norm is a major theme of this book. Yet she also embraced aspects of the so-called *escuela mexicana*. Like many other artists associated with the dominant trends in Mexican art, she greatly admired Mexican popular culture and artisan objects, which she used in her daily life and cited in her art. She incorporated Mexican popular arts into her work by adopting the medium (oil on tin), format, and small size of *retablos* or ex-voto paintings, for paintings such as *Hospital Henry Ford* (Henry Ford Hospital) of 1932 and *Mi nana y yo* (My Nurse and I) of 1937. As an affirmation of *mexicanidad* she wore traditional Mexican clothing: *rebozos* (shawls), *huipiles* (sleeveless blouses or shifts), long skirts, and especially the regional clothing of Tehuantepec.

Kahlo’s citations of Precolumbian art and culture are one of the major issues of this book. [Chapter 2](#) includes a discussion of her use of Precolumbian iconography. [Chapter 3](#) analyzes her representation of ancient figures from West Mexico in paintings, and [chapter 4](#) focuses on an understudied painting that Kahlo created in 1942 and exhibited two years later under the title *La niña, la luna y el sol* (The Girl, the Moon, and the Sun).

While Kahlo concurred with the so-called *escuela mexicana* with regard to the valorization of popular art, indigenous people, and ancient Mexican civilizations, she also differed from the dominant school of art in fundamental ways. At a time and place when art was supposed to be monumental, political, public, and collective, she created small easel paintings about intimate and sometimes intensely personal subjects. She is best known for self-portraits, which are highly individualistic, even though the manifesto linked easel paintings and individualism with the bourgeoisie. The discrepancy between Kahlo’s work and the dogma of the *escuela mexicana* are usually related to gender issues.

Kahlo held the work of her husband in the highest esteem and presumably admired the work of some of the other artists in the so-called *escuela mexicana*. When she took issue with parts of the rhetoric, she expressed her own ideas in the imagery of her paintings but appears not to have verbalized her differences. The one exception is the issue of the hero. In 1945 she was commissioned to paint *Moisés* (Moses), her only image of a hero and the only work in which she presents a panoramic vision of history ([fig. 5](#)). Although the painting is modest in size (20 × 37 inches), the composition resembles that of a mural. Unlike the muralists’ presentation of bold heroes, however, Kahlo portrays Moses as an infant floating helplessly in a basket on the Nile. Rather than glorifying a human hero, she exalts the fertile and procreative elements of nature—sun, rain, womb, fetus, cell, sperm, and ovaries—to which she gives pride of place at the center of the composition. At the unveiling of the painting, she said: “What I wished to express most intensely and *clearly* was that the reason that people need to invent or imagine *heroes* and *gods* is unmitigated FEAR. Fear of life and fear of *death*.” She added: “Like Moses, there have been and there will be a great number of ‘high ups,’ transformers of religions and of human societies. It may be said that they are a type of *messengers* between the people whom they manage and the ‘gods’ invented by [the managers] in order to manage [the people].”<sup>44</sup> Clearly, Kahlo did not consider the glorification of heroes to be in the be-



**Fig. 5.** Frida Kahlo, *Moisés (Moses)*, also known as *Núcleo solar (Solar Nucleus)*, 1945, oil on Masonite, 20 × 37 inches (61 × 75.6 cm), private collection, Houston, Texas. © 2014 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2015.

Outside of Mexico, Kahlo is often considered a surrealist, but this designation is highly problematic. Evidence indicates that Kahlo had some knowledge of surrealism by the early 1930s and her first solo exhibition (in 1938) was held at a New York gallery with strong ties to surrealism. After 1938 Kahlo frequently expressed disapproval of the surrealists, whom she considered decadent, especially the poet André Breton, who wrote the two manifestos of surrealism (1924, 1930). In 1939 Breton invited Kahlo to hold a solo exhibition in Paris. But when she arrived in January 1939, she discovered that he had failed to make preparations of any kind for the show. Marcel Duchamp quickly got her paintings out of customs and arranged an exhibition of Mexican art that included her work at the Renou & Colle gallery.<sup>47</sup> In a letter written in English in mid-February she described Duchamp as a “marvelous painter” and observed that he was “the only one who has his feet on the earth, among a bunch of this bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of the surrealists.”<sup>48</sup> Kahlo utilized surrealist ideas and visual strategies in her work when they suited her purposes, but she was not a member of the group and did not adhere to surrealist theory, and after her trip to Paris vehemently rejected being labeled a surrealist. As art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez observes, “in Latin America the marvelous is not outside the real, but an integral part of it; it exists within the real as a faith that carries the potential for a transformation of perception and thereby consciousness.”<sup>49</sup> Kahlo used fantasy and fantastical imagery to communicate her version of reality with an intensity that surpassed a literal recounting of facts. But she also believed that the reason she did not have a solo show in Mexico until 1953 was because she had been called a surrealist—a member of a European art group, which was a serious liability in a country eager to assert the native origins of all its art movements. “They thought I was

surrealist,” she protested, “but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality.”<sup>50</sup>

While Kahlo’s ties to surrealism have been exaggerated, the intellectual impact of another international connection has gone largely unrecognized until now. Significant changes took place in Kahlo’s art in 1937. Before 1937 Kahlo had created some seminal paintings—two oil on metal paintings about her miscarriage in 1932 and her indictment of violence against women, *Unos cuantos piquetitos* (A Few Small Nips) in 1935—but the quantity of paintings she produced was small indeed. In 1937 she began to work more consistently; the paintings she produced in the next fifteen years constitute her most important achievements. Kahlo’s greater dedication to her work during this time may have been due at least in part to the artistic freedom advocated by Leon Trotsky, who entered her life when Rivera sought and obtained political asylum for Trotsky from the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas. Trotsky and his wife Natalia lived in the *casa azul*, Kahlo’s blue house in Coyoacán, from January 1937 to April 1939; the Riveras moved to their studios in nearby San Ángel.<sup>51</sup> In 1938 “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” which was signed by Rivera and Breton, was published in *Partisan Review*.<sup>52</sup> Although the essay was signed by the Mexican muralist and the French poet, it was actually written by Trotsky, who could not sign it because he had been granted political asylum in Mexico under the condition that he abstain from all political activity. Although Trotsky may have been the sole writer, he wrote the manifesto after numerous conversations with Rivera and Breton, who eagerly sought him out when he came to Mexico in April 1938.<sup>53</sup>

In “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” Trotsky quoted the following statement from Karl Marx: “The writer naturally must make money in order to live and write, but he should not under any circumstances live and write in order to make money. . . . The first condition of the freedom of the press is that it is not a business activity.”<sup>54</sup> Trotsky believed that Marx’s words should be used to refute “those who would regiment intellectual activity in the direction of ends foreign to itself, and prescribe, in the guise of so-called reasons of state, the themes of art.”<sup>55</sup> He asserted that the artist has an inalienable right to the free choice of themes and the absence of all restrictions. The manifesto unequivocally advocated complete freedom in art and concluded with the words: “The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!”<sup>56</sup>

The ideas expressed in “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” in 1938 contradict those advocated by the “Manifesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores” in the early 1920s. The earlier Mexican manifesto rejected easel painting, criticized bourgeois individualism, and insisted that art should have an ideological focus. The 1938 manifesto contained no proscriptions against easel painting, implicitly encouraged individualism, and explicitly warned against governments determining artistic content. The 1938 manifesto must have been profoundly liberating for Kahlo, whose own artistic inclinations and abilities did not conform to all the rules of the earlier manifesto. Her greater dedication to her career beginning in 1937 was facilitated by Trotsky’s support for artistic freedom first in conversations at the *casa azul* and then in the manifesto. For Kahlo, who was a Marxist, it mattered a great deal that she had unconditional support for her highly individualistic work from her husband and from Trotsky, a leading figure in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and a prolific writer of Communist theory and history.

## Izquierdo and the Contemporáneos

During her formative years as an artist, Izquierdo was closely associated with the painter Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991), who was her lover from 1929 to 1933. During these years, they shared a studio on the *azotea* (rooftop) of a building located at Soledad 9, immediately to the east of the Palacio Nacional in the very heart of the historic center of Mexico City.<sup>57</sup>

Tamayo and Izquierdo were linked to the Contemporáneos, a group of talented young avant-garde writers who formed the loyal opposition to the politically driven goals of the most famous muralists and published the literary and art journal *Contemporáneos* from 1928 to 1931. Because the writers were united by a shared philosophy of art rather than by adherence to any one style, the Contemporáneos have been referred to as a *grupo sin grupo* (group without a group). They worked in a variety of literary genres but are best known for poetry and criticism. They situated Mexican literature and cultural identity within Western culture, objected to an overly determined nationalism, and prioritized creative freedom over political ideology. The magazine published literature from Mexico, Europe, the United States, and South America. Every issue contained reproductions of visual art, and many also included essays about art.

The principal contributors to *Contemporáneos* were Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Jaime Torres Bodet, José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Enrique González Rojo, Jorge Cuesta, and Gilberto Owen. Other writers linked with the group socially, philosophically, and through their contributions to the journal include Carlos Pellicer (considered by some to be a full member), Celestino Gorostiza (brother of José Gorostiza), Elías Nandino (a physician), Rubén Salazar Mallé, and Ermilo Abreu Gómez. While the group takes its name from the journal, the contributors published in other journals before and after *Contemporáneos*, and their influence extends far beyond its publication dates. Most of the members were born between 1899 and 1905, so they were quite young during the years when *Contemporáneos* was published. They became leading writers of their generation in Mexico. Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, Jorge Cuesta, Gilberto Owen, and Jaime Torres Bodet are the preeminent poets of the period.

From the journal's inception, contentious debates raged between the muralists and the Contemporáneos. The first issue of *Contemporáneos* featured a controversial article by the Spanish-born painter Gabriel García Maroto about Rivera's murals at the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Public Education) and the Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo. García Maroto, whose own work was influenced by synthetic cubism, praised Rivera's use of form and color but criticized his choice of subjects. He observed that Rivera's murals "led the spectator outside the proper bounds of aesthetic values, and in so doing he turned art into a mechanized and unrefined political-social instrument."<sup>58</sup> Rivera retaliated in a public lecture in which he hurled various insults at the Contemporáneos and allegedly called them *maricas*, a derogatory slang term for homosexuals.<sup>59</sup> The incident set the tone and established the issues in the debate between the muralists and the Contemporáneos.

Several members of the Contemporáneos were in fact homosexual, including Novo, Villaurrutia, and Pellicer. Hence the sexual orientation of some members and the literary and artistic preferences of all of them stood in stark contrast to the priorities of the muralists, who promoted an aggressive masculine national identity and ideological art.

The Contemporáneos advocated "art for art's sake" (*arte puro*) and the exploration of formal issues. They wanted to insert Mexican creative writing into international discourses on literature and provide their readers with access to a wide variety of trends in literature. They made available translation writings by Guillaume Apollinaire, William Blake, Jean Cocteau, T. S. Eliot, Paul Éluar, André Gide, Langston Hughes, D. H. Lawrence, Paul Valéry, Thornton Wilder, and others. They also published reviews of writings by André Breton and Federico García Lorca and paid homage to Marcel Proust on the sixth anniversary of his death. In addition, the South American vanguard was represented with poetry by Jorge Luis Borges, Vicente Huidobro, Juana de Ibarbourou, and Pablo Neruda. While the Contemporáneos had an international perspective, they nonetheless vigorously supported Mexican literature and art. The subtitle of the journal was *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*.

(Mexican Magazine of Culture), and the principal contributors were Mexican.<sup>60</sup> In addition to publishing their own poetry, reviews, essays, and stories, they published numerous other Mexican authors, including Mariano Azuela, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Andrés Henestrosa, Samuel Ramos, and Alfonso Reyes.<sup>61</sup>

Art historian Karen Cordero observes that the Contemporáneos group proposed “a modern Mexican art based on formal and cosmopolitan values rather than on historical or folkloric themes.”<sup>62</sup> Instead of promoting a *mexicanidad* that was based on a nationalist valorization of the indigenous heritage, they sought to express Mexican identity through a dialogue with Western culture. In 1928 Tamayo expressed his preference for an international approach to art: “The problem in our painting lies in unresolved Mexicanism. Until now, Mexicanism has been interpreted only folklorically or archaeologically, having more to do with anecdote than essence. My work is oriented toward pure plastic expression.”<sup>63</sup> The visual artists who associated with the Contemporáneos, as well as the writers in the group, were interested in expressing Mexican identity; but they did not want to interpret it narrowly or to position it outside of and separate from the international sphere. They believed that creative freedom trumped nationalistic and political agendas and that artists and writers had the right to express themselves as individuals.

The Contemporáneos published visual art from Europe and the United States but especially promoted their own generation of Mexican artists. The magazine reproduced work by Agustín Lazo, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Julio Castellanos, Carlos Orozco Romero, Abraham Ángel, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Rufino Tamayo, and María Izquierdo. They also published art by Jean Charlot, Carlos Mérida, and Tina Modotti, who were born in other countries but worked in Mexico and were accepted as part of the Mexican art world. While the Contemporáneos were not generally in favor of muralism, they admired the art and ideas of José Clemente Orozco and reproduced his work in three issues.

Scholarly literature about the Contemporáneos identifies the members exclusively as writers. Even Agustín Lazo, who in addition to being a painter was a playwright and Villaurrutia’s partner, is usually ignored. The first exception to this exclusion is Salvador Oropesa’s *The Contemporáneos Group: Rewriting Mexico in the Thirties and Forties* (2003), which devotes a chapter to Lazo’s play and collaborations with Villaurrutia. Oropesa also notes that Villaurrutia considered Tamayo a member of the Contemporáneos.<sup>64</sup> In a 2012 essay about the philosophical and aesthetic differences between the Contemporáneos and the muralists, Robin Greeley incorporates the art of Tamayo into his analysis of the debates.<sup>65</sup> A study that provides an in-depth holistic view of the contributions of all the visual artists linked to the journal has yet to be done.<sup>66</sup>

Izquierdo was affiliated with the Contemporáneos rather than being a true member, but this tie was crucial for her career. In 1929 four of her paintings were reproduced in *Contemporáneos*: a nude, a portrait, a landscape, and a still life.<sup>67</sup> Members of the group attended her openings, occasionally gave talks about her work at galleries, wrote reviews of her exhibitions, penned newspaper articles about her work, and contributed essays to her exhibition catalogues.<sup>68</sup> This support was especially strong at the beginning of her career but continued long after the magazine ceased publication and after Izquierdo and Tamayo had separated. The Contemporáneos and other writers linked to the group who wrote about her art included Jorge Cuesta, José Gorostiza, Celestino Gorostiza, Carlos Pellicer, Xavi Villaurrutia, Ermilo Abreu Gómez, Elías Nandino, and Rubén Salazar Mallén. As minister of public education, Jaime Torres Bodet appointed her ambassador of Mexican art and sent her to South America. Izquierdo illustrated a children’s book titled *Pirrimplin en la luna* (Pirrimplin on the Moon) written by Ermilo Abreu Gómez. José Gorostiza and Elías Nandino owned paintings by her, and she painted a portrait of Nandino, who was also her physician.

Izquierdo’s apartment became a gathering place for artists and writers.<sup>69</sup> The people who



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