

David Alfaro Siqueiros: Collective Suicide

OVERVIEW

David Alfaro Siqueiros' *Collective Suicide* (1936) is one example of a 20th century artistic representation of the Spanish Conquest. The following excerpt from *MoMA Highlights*¹ provides information on both the piece and the artist that can be shared with students as they study and analyze the painting.

Collective Suicide is an apocalyptic vision of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, when many of the indigenous inhabitants killed themselves rather than submit to slavery. Siqueiros shows armored Spanish troops advancing on horseback, a bowed captive staggering before them in chains. The broken statue of a god demonstrates the ruin of the indigenous culture. Chichimec Indians, separated from their tormentors by a churning pit, slaughter their own children, hang themselves, stab themselves with spears, or hurl themselves from cliffs. Mountainous forms create a backdrop crowned with swirling peaks, like fire or blood.

*Siqueiros, one of the Mexican mural painters of the 1920s and 1930s, advocated what he called "a monumental, heroic, and public art." An activist and propagandist for social reform, he was politically minded even in his choices of materials and formats: rejecting what he called "bourgeois easel art," he used commercial and industrial paints and methods. *Collective Suicide* is one of his relatively few easel paintings, but here, too, he used spray guns and stencils for the figures, and strategically let the paints—commercial enamels—flow together on the canvas. *Collective Suicide* is both a memorial to the doomed pre-Hispanic cultures of the Americas and a rallying cry against contemporary totalitarian regimes.*

OBJECTIVE

In this lesson students will examine David Alfaro Siqueiros' *Collective Suicide*. Using what they have learned in previous parts of a unit on Christopher Columbus, Spanish Conquest and Colonization, or other similarly themed units, students will study, analyze, and discuss Siqueiros' representation of the Spanish Conquest. After focusing specifically on *Collective Suicide* students will then think about and discuss how they would choose to represent the same historical event/period. If time allows and materials are available, the activity can be expanded to allow students to create their own sketch, painting, sculpture or other representation.

PREPARATION

- Secure internet access and appropriate technology for class viewing of the digital painting and MoMA video.
- Print copies of *Collective Suicide* for small group use (optional)

1 The Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 172. Excerpt also available online at http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79146 under publication excerpts.

MATERIALS

- Art materials such as various kinds of paper, paints, glue, glitter, fabric, clay, shoeboxes, cigar boxes, markers, etc. (optional)
- Printed copies of *Collective Suicide*
- Internet Access
- SmartBoard or other means of displaying painting and watching online video.
- Link to MoMA video: <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/177/1362>
- Link to digital version of *Collective Suicide*:
<http://md.artmeteo.ru/img/exhibits/2b/16/2b163aadee70322f4e21c14241a157ea.jpg>

PROCESS

Activity 1: Small Group + Whole Class Reflection and Discussion on Initial Viewing of *Collective Suicide*

1. Divide students into small groups. Provide each group a printed copy of Siqueiros' *Collective Suicide*. Ask students to take a few minutes to silently study the picture, thinking about questions such as:
 - What do you think is being depicted in the painting?
 - What kind of feel does the painting have?
 - What kind of message do you think is being shared here?
 - What stands out to you the most in the painting?
2. Next, ask students to discuss their thoughts with their small group. One person should record the group's ideas.
3. Display the painting for the whole class to see. As a whole class discuss each group's ideas on the painting. As students discuss various aspects of the painting, if applicable, direct students to the appropriate part of the painting. Classroom ideas can be recorded to refer to later.

Activity 2: MoMA Video and Materials

1. Read the excerpted materials from MoMA Highlights (included above or available at http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79146 under publication excerpts) to students. Highlight any of the ideas here that students also discussed in their reflection on the painting.
2. View the MoMA video on *Collective Suicide* available here:
<http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/177/1362>
3. Discuss any significant ideas or themes presented in the video that have not already been raised in the previous class discussion

Activity 3: Reflection Questions

The following questions can be used in various ways. Students can think about these individually, and then share in small groups or with the whole class. They can be used to guide a whole group discussion of the painting. They can also be used as writing prompts for an extended response writing activity.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Siqueiros titled his work *Collective Suicide*? Do you think that is an appropriate name? What would you name it?

2. Describe the various contrasting elements of Siqueiros' painting. What do you think these represent? Explain.
3. How do you think Siqueiros' own involvement and experience in the Mexican Revolution is reflected in the painting? At times artists and writers can romanticize the violence of war. Do you think Siqueiros does this in his painting? Explain your thoughts.
4. Do you think that Siqueiros is making a specific statement in his painting? What do you think that statement is? Explain.
5. How does Siqueiros' painting compare to other representations of Christopher Columbus or other European conquests of the Americas? Think about the paintings often included in history text books on exploration and children's books about explorers. Find specific examples if available. If you were to generalize, are the representations more alike or different? Specifically speaking, what representations are more similar to Siqueiros'? Why do you think they have more in common? Which ones are the most unlike *Collective Suicide*? Think about the message these representations are sending or the version of history they're telling. With this in mind, why do you think they are so different from Siqueiros' painting?
6. Art historians have said that one of the important themes throughout all of Siqueiros' work is the idea of rewriting history. In what way(s) can *Collective Suicide* be seen as rewriting history? What history does *Collective Suicide* tell?
7. How would you portray Exploration, Conquest, or specifically the Spanish Conquest artistically? Think about what you would depict and the type of medium you would use, and then explain your choices.

Expansion Activity

Create your own artistic representation (sketch, painting, sculpture, diorama, etc.) of conquest. Then, describe how you portrayed it and why.



Collective Suicide by David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1936. Reprinted from www.artmeteo.ru



Excerpt of *Collective Suicide* by David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1936. Reprinted from www.artmeteo.ru