



María Izquierdo:
Painting a Mexican National Identity
Grades 6-8

María Izquierdo: Painting a Mexican National Identity



Lola Álvarez Bravo
1907 Lagos de Moreno,
Mexico-1993 Mexico City,
Mexico
María Izquierdo
1946
gelatin silver print

The Jacques and Natasha
Gelman Collection of 20th
Century Mexican Art and the
Vergel Foundation

About the Artist:

María Izquierdo was born in San Juan de los Lagos, Mexico in 1902. In 1916, at the age of 14, Izquierdo married army colonel and author, Candido Posadas with whom she had three children. The couple moved with their family to Mexico City in 1923 where Izquierdo began her career as a painter.¹ The 1920s proved to be a time of great change for Mexico, and the role of art in culture and politics became increasingly important in developing the new nation. After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), muralism emerged as the art form of

choice for the construction and promotion of a new national identity. At the time, muralism was dominated by male artists; Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, known collectively as “*los tres grandes*” (the three greats). *Los tres grandes* created the majority of public murals painted in the decades that followed the Mexican Revolution. Muralism was positioned at the top of the artistic hierarchy and government sponsored commissions were highly sought after as public walls became prime real-estate. Although the revolution afforded many women previously unheard-of opportunities, numerous social and political barriers remained in place that limited what was accepted and expected from female artists. Women were almost entirely excluded from muralism and relegated to the realm of easel painting, considered, at the time, to be less serious and prestigious.

Much like other women, Izquierdo took the path of easel painting, creating evocative still lifes, landscapes, and portraits (most of which featured women).² Her work offered an alternate vision of Mexican national identity from that of the muralists. Many murals of the time were overtly political, depicting sweeping scenes of revolution, a triumphant working class, and the exaltation of an indigenous past all developed around a heroic male figure. Izquierdo, on the other hand, painted more intimate subject matter; she focused on her Mexican roots, depicting the land as it was, and capturing popular traditions from the viewpoint of a female artist. Izquierdo achieved success and recognition as an artist in her lifetime. She was well known and respected by many of her peers, both men and women alike, and she was the first Mexican woman to have a solo exhibition in the United States. Towards the end of her life, Izquierdo suffered a series of embolisms that ultimately led to her death in 1955.

About the Artwork:

“Izquierdo challenges traditional expectations for still-lives in this work by moving it from the confines of interior space to an open landscape. Her assemblage of objects represents both flora and fauna, with the tropical fruits placed alongside an egg and a conch shell.”³

In contrast to the muralists’ depictions of humankind’s struggle and triumph, Izquierdo’s *Living Still Life* contains almost no indication of human activity at all. Her arrangement dominates the foreground in its abundance, serving to highlight the emptiness of the stark surrounding landscape.⁴

Izquierdo left her mark on the Mexican art world by painting a *mexicanidad* left underexplored by the muralists. While *los tres grandes* concerned themselves primarily with painting man at the center of culture, politics, and society, Izquierdo (among others) was free to represent aspects of Mexican culture associated (by default) with femininity, like nature, food, family, and indigenous and rural cultures.⁵



María Izquierdo

1902 San Juan de los Lagos, Mexico-1955 Mexico City,
Mexico

Living Still Life

1946

oil on canvas

The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th Century
Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation

Lesson Description:

A look at the life and work of María Izquierdo and her contribution to a post-revolutionary Mexican national identity. Students will discuss the idea of national identity and how, why, and by whom it is constructed. They will learn about Izquierdo's piece, *Living Still Life*, and create a still life of their own around the idea of national identity.

Duration:

1-2 Class periods

Content Area(s):

Language Arts, Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will...

- Learn about the life and work of María Izquierdo.
- Participate in a group discussion about national identity.
- Create a still life that represents their own ideas of national identity.

Essential Questions:

- Who decides what to include and exclude from a national identity?
- What is Mexico's national identity and how did María Izquierdo contribute to it?
- What did you include in your still life that is representative of your own idea of national identity? Why?

Vocabulary:

- Still life- a work of art that depicts an arrangement of inanimate objects (either natural or man-made) as its subject
- National identity- the identity of a nation as a unified whole, represented by a specific culture, traditions, and, often, language
- *Mexicanidad*- the quality of being Mexican, Mexican identity

Activities:

Active Viewing

1. Before providing students with background information on the artist and/or artwork, lead the class in an exercise of active viewing using María Izquierdo's still life, *Living Still Life* (1946). Instruct students to use a graphic organizer to record thoughts, impressions, and questions about the piece as they arise. Consider the following questions as you lead the discussion to help guide your students in their viewing: What objects do they see? Why do they think those specific objects were included in the piece? What might they mean? How are the objects arranged? Are they in the foreground or the background? What is the setting of the still life? Which colors are used in the painting? Why do they think those colors were chosen? Do they have any questions about what they are seeing? How does the painting make them feel? What do they think Izquierdo's purpose was in painting it?
2. Share background information about María Izquierdo and *Living Still Life* (1946) with your students. Ask them to revisit their graphic organizers, is there anything they want to add? Do they see something new or see the objects in a different way? Has their interpretation of the piece changed? Did they learn any answers to questions they asked? Do they have new questions?

Speaking and Listening

1. Divide students into groups (or breakout rooms) to discuss the idea of a national identity. Ask them to consider the following questions: What is national identity? Who gets to decide the characteristics of a national identity? Who is represented by a national identity? Who is not represented by a national identity? Why are national identities constructed? What purpose do they

Speaking and Listening continued...

serve? Are there any problems with promoting the idea of a national identity? If so, what are they? What do you consider to be key elements to your own national identity? Why? Remember that everyone will have a different idea about what national identity means, remind students to listen respectfully to their classmates' beliefs and opinions.

2. Instruct students to keep track of their ideas by creating a group mind map.

*For online learning, students can create individual mind maps or contribute to a virtual mind map .

Writing

1. Ask students to use their graphic organizers and mind maps to help them write a summary of their interpretation of María Izquierdo's *Living Still Life*. Students should focus on making a clear, well-organized, assessment and on supporting their claims with logical reasoning and direct references to both the artwork and the background information.

Visual Arts

Materials: pencil and paper, art supplies of your choice, objects or images of objects that represent students' ideas about their own national identities

1. Instruct students to choose objects for their still lifes that they feel best represents their own national identities (if objects are not available or easily accessible, students can look up reference pictures or create their still lifes from memory as María Izquierdo often did).
2. Ask students to create a still life that represents their national identity.

Visual Arts Assessment-

1. Instruct students to trade still lifes with a partner; each student should take 5-10 minutes to look at their partner's work and fill out a graphic organizer with what they see, think/feel, and wonder about their classmate's artwork.
2. Ask students to review their partners' graphic organizers and write two to three paragraphs reflecting on their own work. Did they learn something about themselves from their classmates' observations? Does learning how someone else sees their art make them think about their work in a new way? If they were to create a new still life after reading their partners' comments, would they make different choices?
3. If time and materials allow, ask student to revisit and revise their still lifes accordingly.

Suggestions for older/younger students:

- For younger learners, ask students to consider their own identities in terms of their likes and dislikes, their families, and their communities. Lead a discussion about the different types of communities people can belong to.
- For older students, extend the discussion to include the idea of intersectionality. What is intersectionality? Why is it important? How does it relate to the idea of a national identity? How do María Izquierdo's overlapping identities contribute to her art? How are they reflected?

Additional Resources for Teachers:

- María Izquierdo and the Female Face of National Identity- <https://radageorgieva.medium.com/mar%C3%ADa-izquierdo-and-the-female-face-of-national-identity-ffd08d73384d>
- María Izquierdo—Monumento Artístico De La Nación- <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1075-maria-izquierdo-monumento-artistico-de-la-nacion/>
- Mexican Muralism- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/latin-america-modernism#mexican>

Standards Addressed:

Common Core Standards for English Language arts (grades 6-8)

WRITING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Common Core Standards for Visual Arts (grades 6-8)

ANCHOR STRAND 3: REFINE AND COMPLETE ARTISTIC WORK

VA:Cr3.1.6a- Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.

VA:Cr3.1.7a- Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

VA:Cr3.1.8a- Apply relevant criteria to examine, reflect on, and plan revisions for a work of art or design in progress.

Notes:

1. María de Jesus González, "María Izquierdo: Portrait of an Artist," *The Latin Americanist* 47 no. 3-4 (winter/spring 2004): 29-30.
2. María Izquierdo was offered the opportunity to paint a mural in a government building, but the commission was revoked after Rivera and Siqueiros suggested that she didn't have the experience or knowledge to tackle such an undertaking. The lost commission remained a sore point for Izquierdo for the rest of her life. It is worth noting that Izquierdo's proposed mural featured women as the protagonists, something that had not yet been done.
3. Wall text from the "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism" exhibition.
4. Robin Adele Greeley, "Painting Mexican Identities: Nationalism and Gender in the Work of María Izquierdo," *Oxford Art Journal* 23 no. 1 (2000): 53-54.
5. Greeley, "Painting Mexican Identities," 66.





What do you see?

What do you think/feel?

What do you want to know?

Mind Map

