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Censored Ambiguity: María Izquierdo's Tribute to Mexico

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ABSTRACT

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In October 1945, the Mexican art world came to a stop when the administration of President Manuel Ávila Camacho cancelled *Progress of the Nation*, the mural project it had commissioned from painter María Izquierdo eight months prior. Conceived to decorate the walls of the Departamento del Distrito Federal, a federal building located on the Zócalo, Mexico City's main public square, the murals were to be an homage to the nation and, more specifically, to the Camacho presidency (1940 -1946).

Like all post-revolutionary Mexican governments, the Camacho administration was keenly aware that public art played an integral part in the process of institutionalization and legitimization of its policies. Thus, in the 1940s, President Camacho utilized visual culture to promote federal projects of modern industrialization and economic liberalism. In this politico-artistic context, the realm of visual culture—including films, public murals, and war posters—was deployed to promote common Mexican identity and economic freedom to bind together the racial and socio-political dichotomies that had historically divided the country. Izquierdo's preliminary sketches for the murals presented themes that were in keeping with the government's official discourse, notably her acknowledgment of Mexico's mixed heritage. Yet, as this study demonstrates, some of her iconographic and formal decisions challenged expectations that other

muralists, most notably Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, complied with for their own projects for President Camacho.

Izquierdo's emphasis on female labor, and her ambiguous references to the Mexican proletariat and to the finance sector, were problematic for a government promoting political and economic freedom at home and abroad while being in direct confrontation with federal women employees, trade unions, and banks. This thesis argues that, ultimately, Izquierdo's proposed iconography for the murals led the Camacho administration to withdraw its support for the project.

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Introduction

In October 1945, the Mexican art world came to a stop when the administration of President Manuel Ávila Camacho cancelled the grand mural it had commissioned from María Izquierdo eight months prior. For this project, Izquierdo had initially been given funds and ample time. Approved and signed by Javier Rojo Gómez, the governor of Mexico's Federal District, the contract authorized her to complete what was to be an homage to the nation and, more specifically, to the Camacho presidency (1940 -1946).¹ The mural would also mark Izquierdo as the second painter after Diego Rivera (1886-1957) to be commissioned to paint on the walls of a federal government building—in this case, the Public Works Department of Mexico City (the Departamento del Distrito Federal—located on the illustrious Zócalo, Mexico City's main public square. Such a location carried immense prestige: the Zócalo had been a political, administrative, cultural, and spiritual center during Aztec and Spanish rule, a status unchanged with the advent of a contemporary, independent Mexico. Izquierdo's project, entitled *The Progress of Mexico*, entailed painting frescoes on the wall of the building's imposing staircase, on the ceiling above it, as well as on the walls of the second floor. This commission came at the height of Izquierdo's career. Five years prior, in 1940, she had been included in "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," a major show at the New York Museum of Modern Art as well as in "Mexican Art Today," an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art organized by Henry Clifford. Three years later in 1943, the prestigious Palace of Fine Arts (Palacio de Bellas Artes) in Mexico City held a solo exhibition of her oeuvre, showing sixty of her paintings. In addition to being a recognized artist, Izquierdo served as a cultural ambassador to Mexico in Latin America. Upon her return from Peru in 1944, she shared with Governor Gómez her desire to paint a mural in her country.

¹ The contract was never found

She was given this opportunity in February 1945. However, several months after she began the project, Izquierdo was ordered by Ignacio Martínez, a Federal District employee, to stop working. The only explanation she was given was that orders had come from someone higher up.²

This study examines why the government would withdraw its support for the project. The existing literature on the “Izquierdo affair” suggests that Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros—who, along with José Clemente Orozco, formed *Los tres grandes* or “The Big Three” of the muralist movement—were behind the cancellation. However, as this study shall demonstrate, the murals were ultimately problematic for the government. In what follows, I explain why the government would decide not to support Izquierdo, who appealed to President Camacho himself when the project came under pressure.

Despite Izquierdo’s popularity, the commission triggered vivid opposition after a watercolor sketch for the grand staircase mural was released in February 1945 to various newspapers. Luis Islas Garcia, a critic writing for *La Nacion*, sent a letter to the governor in which he rhetorically asked: “Do you believe that one who is not capable of resolving even the few problems posed by the background of a portrait is going to know how to find the answer to the immense problems of a monumental decoration?”³ As art historian Nancy Deffebach has pointed out, gender prejudice towards Izquierdo often took the form of reservations about her draftsmanship and composition and, over the years, some of her critics were quick to point out that she had dropped out of the prestigious National Academy of San Carlos at an early stage.

² Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art* (Austin: University of Texas, 2015), 113.

³ Quoted in Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 113. In this well-documented book, Deffebach sheds light on the ways gender prejudice against Izquierdo from the press and male muralists, namely Rivera and Siqueiros, likely played into the cancellation of the mural.

Upon seeing the reproduction of her watercolor sketch, art critic Antonio Rodríguez complained that her planned iconography did not reflect the history of the building, which had served as a grain and vegetable market during the colonial era.⁴ I argue that the government let the project die because of the way Izquierdo depicted Mexico City, and the nation at large, under the Camacho era.

The watercolor sketch she released to the press presented two scenes: a pre-colonial and a post-colonial Mexico City. Splitting the composition, Izquierdo represented each period on either side of an escutcheon that reads: “To Govern and to Serve the City” (fig. 1). On the left, an Aztec pyramid appears as the emblem of the grandeur and achievements of pre-Columbian Mexico. At the foot of the pyramid is a large maguey plant, a symbol of Mexico’s native flora. In the center right, an indigenous man secures a map depicting 16th century Tenochtitlan (the Aztec capital upon which Mexico City was built) to a *tlatoani* (an Aztec ruler) wearing a *xiuhuitzolli* (a royal headdress). In the background, another indigenous figure paddles a canoe as he passes before a domestic structure. Famously, Tenochtitlan had been erected on an island of a lake. The cross shape depicted at the center of Tenochtitlan in this map refers to the canals dividing the city into four barrios, which were built according to the four sacred directions in Aztec mythology.

On the right side of the escutcheon, Izquierdo represents Mexico as a woman. Holding a sketched empty map, she stands on a pipeline, and is encircled by a large seven-story building, railroad tracks, and a telescope, all respectively representing urban, industrial, and scientific development. The gray seven story building behind her, standing as a counterpart to the Aztec pyramid, is the Edificio de Guardiola, which was being renovated at the time to become the Bank

⁴ Ibid., 125.

of Mexico's headquarters. To emphasize her division of a pre-Hispanic and modern Mexico, Izquierdo added an hourglass at the center of the composition between the indigenous servant, handing the map of Tenochtitlan to the Aztec king, and a blue-collar worker holding a gun. In the following sections, I will argue that the mural's planned content played a significant role in the project's cancellation.

In May 1945, Izquierdo released to the press a pencil study of the mural she was contracted to execute on the second floor of the building (fig. 5). As in the sketch of her first-floor mural, the iconography is divided into two sections—connected by a small panel—that would have flanked a door. This time around, Izquierdo has acknowledged the building's former function as a grain and vegetable market, setting up a series of dichotomies: the indigenous and the modern; the rural and the urban; preindustrial and industrial labor.

On the left side of the panel, an indigenous woman, assisted by two young girls, shucks corn, carefully dropping the grains into a basket below her. Behind her is a granary called *cosmate*. On the right side of the panel, another woman whose facial features closely resemble those of her counterpart, processes corn and is assisted by a younger girl. Though the women on both sides look similar and perform the same activity, the setting in which they work has changed. The woman on the right wears modern clothes and works in a factory. Behind her, Izquierdo has portrayed a busy scene in which a chemist and two soldiers with guns stand before a tank. Because of their resemblance, the two female figures could be the same woman presented in different spatial—and perhaps temporal—settings. This sketch breaks the division made in the first sketch: indigeneity has entered a modern setting as the indigenous woman on the right works with a machine, thereby becoming an asset to mechanized industry. Because it

foregrounds female labor—traditional and industrial—arguably this sketch too was problematic from the perspective of Izquierdo’s patrons and direct audience.

Several factors played into the cancellation of the mural: Rivera and Siqueiros likely pressured the governor to abort the project. This is what Izquierdo also believed at the time as she claimed in an interview in 1950 that a secret meeting had taken place between the governor and the two muralists.⁵ We will never know whether this meeting took place, but we do know that Izquierdo’s husband, Raúl Uribe, visited Rivera’s home to collect the famous muralist’s signature for a letter in support of his wife after the mural was canceled. Rivera refused to sign the letter, explaining that a letter would change nothing.⁶ Considering the gender politics of the Mexican muralism, Deffebach has stated that Rivera and Siqueiros could not bear the fact that a woman had been selected to paint in such a prestigious site. She also posits that their opposition went beyond the male artists’ sexism. Izquierdo chose to use female figures to represent Mexico’s progress. In addition to featuring women on the first and second floor murals, she planned to feature allegorical female figures on the ceiling to portray the various fine arts (fig. 3). Such an iconographic program, Deffebach has explained, subverted the gendered themes of the Mexican mural movement as public paintings about Mexico mostly portrayed men in action and female as passive subjects. Thus, for Deffebach, Izquierdo’s women protagonists challenged traditional masculine representations of Mexican national identity.

Undeniably, competing with muralists who perceived the Mexican Revolution, and their own artistic practice, through the lens of a triumphant machismo must have been challenging for the few women painting public murals for which they were commissioned. Throughout her

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*

career, Izquierdo, a mestiza of humble provincial roots, had to continually prove herself to critics in Mexico City whose racial and gender prejudice inflected their assessment of her work. Yet when considering the “Izquierdo affair,” it is also useful to consider the government’s own motivations for dropping the artist it had initially hired. These two angles of approach are not mutually exclusive: the thematic and formal elements were likely problematic for both the government and for the muralists working for the state at the time. As Izquierdo was well-aware, painters in post-revolution Mexico were largely dependent on the support of the government for grand mural commissions. Rivera’s fame demonstrated that, in the context of nation-building, artists who could successfully put into pictorial form a vision of Mexico that was consistent with the political agenda of their stately patrons were guaranteed ample work and national recognition. If artists benefitted from state support, the reverse was also true: regardless of their agenda, post-revolutionary administrations were keenly aware that public art played an integral part in the process of institutionalization and legitimization of their policies. In this politico-artistic context, they often utilized visual culture to promote their federal projects—regardless of these projects’ popularity among the population.

To fulfill its role as a key supplier to the United States’ war effort against the Axis powers, the Camacho administration gradually moved away from the social and agrarian reforms demanded by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to modernize its economy through rapid industrialization. To gather support for this pro-business shift, often termed “the Mexican Miracle,” the government promoted—most notably through mass media and federal cultural patronage—national peace and prosperity that would ostensibly be achieved by a sense of common identity and a dynamic labor force. Though all post-revolutionary governments had made the topics of Mexican identity and economic growth central to their official discourse, the

Camacho government had to adapt to new socio-economic factors that marked the 1940s, the era of Izquierdo's commission.

Indeed, the rural exodus of *campesinos* to urban centers, as well as the need for the government to appease labor unions, presented a series of challenges for the new administration. To placate tensions arising from the presence of an indigenous and mixed-race rural population in the cities, as well as from the growing disparities between the educated bourgeoisie and the blue-collar class, the government extolled, more than ever before, the virtues of a common Mexican pride and vision. Aware that visual art had played a key role in unifying the country against dictator Porfirio Díaz during the Mexican Revolution, the Camacho administration employed the realm of visual culture—including films, public murals, and war posters—to bind together the racial and socio-political dichotomies that had historically divided the country. Thus, in many state-sponsored cultural projects, *indigenismo* (that which promotes Mexico's pre-Columbian past) was framed within the modern, the rural was acknowledged as being part of the urban fabric, and women were shown to work alongside men. Such a blurring of potential division masked ideological tensions and political challenges for the government. Indigenous populations, instrumental in building a strong economy in the cities, held a claim to the “authentic” Mexican identity. Trade unions realized how vital industry was to the government in a context of war and used that leverage to make demands of the Camacho administration. Women, who were now present in both white- and blue-collar sectors, demanded equal pay. While Izquierdo's murals on the progress of Mexico presented themes that were in keeping with the official government discourse, some of her iconographic and formal decisions challenged expectations that Rivera and Siqueiros complied with for their own state commissions.

Chapter 1: Muralism after the Revolution

After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and especially during the administrations of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924 - 1934) and of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934 to 1940), the state went to war against the Catholic Church, which was seen as an institutional remnant of colonial power. The conflict turned into a civil war that claimed the lives of over ten thousand Mexicans and triggered an exodus of an estimated five percent of the overall Mexican population to the United States.⁷ From the perspective of post-revolutionary governments, the war was necessary: The Church, they claimed, stood in the way of properly educating Mexican children, the future of the nation. Not content with educating the youth in the large cities, the Mexican government was keen on implementing throughout the provinces a secular education that placed a premium on science, technology, arithmetic, health, hygiene, as well as “proper” Spanish language.⁸

This meant that the primary educational apparatus, the Catholic Church and its religious schools had to be replaced, or at least, made superfluous. These campaigns of education were crucial because, officials felt, “un-incorporated” children—indigenous and (often mestizo) campesino children—often mestizo—would likely become a threat to the long-term stability of the nation. What the government did not advertise, or deny, was that such campaigns required the forced assimilation and the de-culturation of the primarily rural populations. In 1936, to galvanize support for its ambitious projects, the Cárdenas administration commissioned murals on the walls of The New Revolutionary School located in the heart of Mexico City. The artists selected—namely, Aurora Reyes, Raúl Anguino, Everardo Ramírez, Gonzalo de la Paz Pérez, Antonio Gutiérrez, and Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo—all belonged to LEAR (*Liga de Escritores y*

⁷ Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 429.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Artistas Revolucionarios), a Soviet-inspired artistic movement that lasted from 1933 to 1938. For the Cárdenas government, converting a building that had served as a convent in the seventeenth century into a secular school symbolically put the modern projects of the Mexican Revolution ahead of religion.

Entitled *Attack on a Rural Teacher*, Reyes's contribution is the first public mural painted by a woman in Mexico (fig. 4). Outside of her own merit, Reyes's successful career as a poet and painter was partly due to the support of her uncle, Mexican writer, and diplomat Alfonso Reyes and to the rest of her family's prominence in Mexican politics. Though their background and political allegiance differed, Reyes' mural is a useful case-study of a post-revolutionary commission to a woman painter tasked to celebrate the government's policies in a public space. The mural also offers clues about how, before Camacho's own efforts to secure support from the *campesinos*, the Mexican government depicted rural Mexicans who opposed its long-standing aspiration to assimilate them into mainstream society.

If the populations targeted by reforms were subjected to the paternalistic exigencies of the state—proper use of Spanish language, abandonment of local agrarian practices in favor of incorporation into the hacienda system and modernized industries—the experience of many government employees laboring under these policies was also traumatic. To the cry of "*¡Viva Cristo Rey!*", Catholic guerillas regularly burned down new government schools, murdered teachers, and, in April 1929 dynamited a Mexico City-Guadalajara train, killing one hundred civilians.⁹ Reyes's painting, made in the school's foyer, in the right corner of the main wall, certainly conveyed the brutality that characterized the conflict. Referring to a massacre that

⁹ Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 429.

occurred on March 29, 1936, during which parishioners attacked a county cultural mission's celebration at the village plaza, attended by teachers, Reyes has depicted two men beating a female schoolteacher to death. One man, wearing the sign of the sacred heart around his neck, forces the butt of his gun into her open mouth while the other, carrying pages ripped from a book, drags her by the hair as she struggles in vain. The attackers' clothes identify them as campesino and stand in contrast with the modern clothes—high heel shoes and red dress—the teacher wears. The scapular around the neck of the man in the center, projected to the right as he brutalizes the teacher, signals he is Catholic. In the background, three children, whose clothes also identify them as campesinos, hide behind a column in terror.

More than a tragic rendering of rural violence against government presence, Reyes' mural is a scene of sexual violence and domination. The victim is one of the thousands of women who stepped outside of their traditional role of family caretaker to participate in the nation's modernization projects. As an active member of the National United Front for the Rights of Woman, Reyes had a life-long commitment to the condition of women in Mexico and, throughout her life, she advocated for women's suffrage and rights in the workplace. This rape scene, in which a gun, standing for a phallus, is forced to the mouth of a woman, is a blatant representation of misogyny. In a lecture at the Congreso Nacional Femenil in Havana in 1939, Reyes denounced the gender prejudice that permeated all domains of Mexican society, including culture:

“Analyzing the process of culture through the history of humanity, we find that the values that create it, although important, are insufficient to fulfill the needs of a humanity that is composed of both women and men, since, up to the present day, culture in general had displayed exclusively masculine characteristics, because it has created by them, casting women aside to a

greater or lesser degree; women are relegated in all of their activities to the status of protected beings, that is, slaves to be exploited by men who are, in turn, enslaved by other men.”¹⁰

In this statement, Reyes points out that men have marginalized women in the field of culture for the sake of protecting them. Years later, Izquierdo would also call out the ways women have been excluded from institutions of art. Because Reyes was a Communist, her statement on the exploitation of men by men likely referred to capitalism.¹¹ Though the mural program at the New Revolutionary School was meant to demonstrate support for the government’s push for secular education, this disturbing scene is anything but an uplifting rendering of the situation. From the perspective of teachers called upon to bring “light” to the nation’s peasantry and indigenous population, this scene was likely demoralizing—and certainly terrifying. Though teachers sent to rural areas feature in the murals, they did not necessarily constitute their primary audience. The audiences who truly mattered were those who paid for it—namely, Mexican government officials engaged in a campaign of vilification of those who opposed or resisted their plans. Another targeted viewership were the teachers at the newly built school—those who safely worked in the Mexican capital—as well as the children and their families, who viewed a mural that suggested that the Church’s henchmen will stop at nothing to prevent “progress” from empowering “the people.” The Mexican people did not mean all inhabitants of Mexico; it rather referred to those who endorsed the government’s war against the traditional structures, mainly the Catholic Church. Reyes’ scene echoed the government’s claims

¹⁰ Aurora Reyes, excerpt from lecture entitled “Women and Culture” delivered on April 1, 1939. Quoted in Terri Geis, “The Struggles of Modernizing Mexico and the Mural of Aurora Reyes at the Centro Escolar Revolución” in *Women’s Contributions to Visual Culture, 1918-1939*, Edited by Karen E. Brown (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub, 2008), 159. In this essay, Geis explores the ways some of Reyes’ art both endorsed government-directed cultural assimilation and denounced the pervasive misogyny that operated at all levels of Mexico society.

¹¹ Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, “Ataque a la Maestra Rural: The First Mural Created by a Mexican Female Artist,” in *Woman’s Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (2005), 22. In this essay, Comisarenco Mirkin argues that the man dragging the teacher by the hair holds currency bills, inferring that he is a cog in an exploitative capitalist system.

that only violent and backward-minded peasants would want to stand in the way of its modernization. For the teachers at The New Revolutionary School, such a tragic scene would likely foster solidarity with their peers working in the countryside.

Because it used a specific event to identify the enemies of the state, the mural was acclaimed. Critics ignored the fact that the mural also points to the vicious misogyny that permeated all realms of Mexican society. Indeed, art critics like Mariano Paredes focused on formal elements, noting the “vibrant colors,” “admirable composition” and masterful fresco technique.¹² Despite the positive acclaim mural received, the mural did not boost Reyes’s career and she would not be commissioned a mural for another twenty-four years. The lack of opportunities for women artists undermined the careers of other women painters such as Frida Kahlo, Isabel Villaseñor, and Izquierdo.¹³ Ten years after Reyes’s mural at The Revolutionary School, Izquierdo would also be tasked to paint a mural endorsing government policy. Despite being at the peak of her career, she would also face gender prejudice when the press expressed doubts about whether she could produce a large-scale mural.¹⁴

Chapter 2: The Rodriguez Market Mural Project

In June 1934, under President Abelardo L. Rodríguez, whose term was endorsed and largely controlled by Calles, the *Jefe Máximo* (the ultimate leader) the Public Works Department (PWD), contracted Rivera to paint the walls of the newly built Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market.

¹² Mariano Paredes, *Aurora Reyes: Frente a Frente*, October 1937. Quoted in Geis, “The Struggles of Modernizing Mexico and the Mural of Aurora Reyes at the Centro Escolar Revolución,” 167.

¹³ During the 1930s, Izquierdo produced a watercolor series showing female figures in agony and featuring in violent rituals.

¹⁴ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 113.

Located in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City, the market was built to improve the economic, moral, and social conditions of the barrio, and was part of a larger public project conceptualized to modernize the city's economy.¹⁵ As such, this grand public plan included the building of a theater, a civic center, and childcare facilities.¹⁶ Stating that he was too busy to fully commit to such a large program, Rivera suggested that Pablo O'Higgins, an American muralist who had assisted him with murals at the Ministry of Public Education, oversee the hiring of artists. O'Higgins put together an artistic team that included American painters Marion and Grace Greenwood, (who both regarded O'Higgins as their mentor), Mexican artists Miguel Tzab, Antonio Pujol, Angel Bracho, Ramon Alva Guadarrama, and Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi. The artists were given, so they were told, aesthetic and ideological freedom. The contract indeed provided little thematic and stylistic direction.¹⁷

Tensions quickly arose, however, when O'Higgins demanded that Rivera, who remained on the project as the "artistic guarantor" charged with approving the finished work, be replaced by his friend Siqueiros. Because he was a Stalinist, O'Higgins' refusal to work under Rivera was likely connected to the latter's declaration of allegiance to Leon Trotsky. At the time, Siqueiros and his supporters claimed that Rivera, who dominated public art commissions during the Calles era, was too involved with the government to honestly paint about Mexican social realities, and more specifically, about the struggles of the proletariat. The Siqueiros camp did not hold much sway, however: Siqueiros was at the time in the United States, at a safe distance from the Calles

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Esther Acevedo, "Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market," in *Mexican Muralism, A Critical History*, ed. Anreus, Alejandro, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 125. In this chapter, Acevedo argues that aesthetic and political disagreements among the commissioned artists, as well as between them and the PWD, eventually resulted in the cancellation of the market mural program.

administration who had condemned his involvement with the Communist Party and for his support for unions opposed to Calles. Unsurprisingly, the PWD turned down O'Higgins' demand. Aware that political divisions could put the project in jeopardy, the PWD issued a letter stating that the content of the murals would now be assessed by PWD administrator Antonio Mediz Bolio. This procedure, the PWD insisted, would guarantee artistic freedom among all participating artists. Yet even this arrangement was no assurance of acceptance, since despite initial approval from Bolio, Marion and Grace Greenwood's murals raised concerns among various government agents that eventually led to the cancellation of the entire project.

Like Izquierdo's *Progress of Mexico*, the project was meant to be an homage to Mexico's president at the time, Abelardo L. Rodríguez. The clash that followed at the Rodríguez Market between the PWD and the muralists, as well as among the muralists, sets a precedent for the Izquierdo's own struggle with the PWD. More broadly, the mural project at the Rodríguez Market raised the issue of artistic autonomy and its relation to federal patronage. In this instance, like for the Izquierdo project, artistic expression was curtailed and eventually suppressed. Indeed, in the face of concerns about the iconographic program—which included peasant resistance to imperial power seeking to industrialize the agrarian economy, as well as blue-collar workers protest against their work conditions in the mines—Aarón Sáenz, who served as the governor of Mexico's Federal District and as the head of the PWD from 1932 to 1935, rescinded the contract. The PWD's refusal to renew the contracts that would have allowed the artists to paint the rest of the market came in October 1935, shortly before some the artists, including Grace and Marion Greenwood, finished the murals they were working on. Beyond pressures outside the PWD to terminate the project, Sáenz was likely personally opposed to some of the subject matter painted on the walls of the market—namely, the exploitative nature of the sugar

industry. At the time, Sáenz was investing in and developing the sugar industry, which he modernized by both using new machinery and exploiting a cheap pool of labor. From the mid-1930s to the early 1950s, he held a virtual monopoly over the lucrative business, earning the name of “The King of Mexican Sugar.”¹⁸

Let us turn to the iconography that led the PWD to cancel the mural program at the market. The Greenwood murals staged dramatic contrasts between the hardships that characterized the life and the working conditions of workers, and the considerable wealth enjoyed by capitalist agents such as bankers and heads of large companies. On the west wall of the market, Marion Greenwood painted *Industrialization of the Countryside*, which depicts the modernization and mechanization of the agrarian sector, focusing on the harvesting, processing, and sale of Mexican sugar (fig. 5). In the upper right corner, campesinos harvest sugar cane that will be processed by heavy machinery set in motion by blue-smocked workers. On the right, at the center of the scene, Greenwood featured a financial baron in a black suit. Above his head and shoulders—his overweight look suggests his wealth has made him fat and inactive—Greenwood has painted his two immense hands holding a ticker tape. The baron, who appears behind a row of armed guards, stands still as he discretely counts his profits. At the center of the composition, Greenwood depicted peasants illuminated with bright light, holding a red banner that reads “Workers and Laborers United Against Imperialism.” As a collective group, they literally, and figuratively, push back the capitalist. Greenwood included a few individualized faces, distinctive in their strength in comparison to the impersonal soldiers standing in formation around the financial baron. While ostensibly protected by the soldiers, the fat capitalist boss is surrounded by muscular workers—welders, miners, campesinos—who perform their activity with strength

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and determination. In this mural, working class labor is fighting against, and gaining ground on, capitalism and finance. The workers, in turn, form a barrier around the destitute and disgruntled figures appearing in the foreground. A woman carrying a child directly faces the viewer—the daily merchants and customers of the market, as well as the patrons of the market—implicating them all into the narrative unfolding above. Overall, the mural stages the dynamism of Mexican labor and its determination to save the people against self-serving exploiters.

Before Marion Greenwood began painting, she shared her frustration in letters to O’Higgins about the uncritical “scientificism” painted on the market walls by her Mexican colleagues on the project.¹⁹ Greenwood was likely referring to her colleague Bracho’s promotion of the benefits of certain vitamin-rich food sources in his mural. This accusation also likely referred to her colleagues’ literalization of political propaganda instead over an accurate representation of harsh realities on the ground. Indeed, she felt the work of Pujol, Bracho, and Guadarrama did little to reflect the real conditions of the popular classes and she accused the painters of being dupes for the state.²⁰ Agreeing with her, O’Higgins had replied in his letter: “To paint victory of the proletariat at present merely serves the demagogic ends of the Gov [government].”²¹ His advice for his fellow American colleague was to draw attention to local conditions and to emphasize what an impoverished and oppressed life looked like.²² Ironically, such statements contradicted the dictates of Stalin who demanded a Social Realist style promoting a liberated proletariat. Like Siqueiros, O’Higgins believed that art needed to reflect the continuing struggle of the proletariat. This position shows that, despite their political allegiance to Russian Communist figures, Mexican artists did not fully adhere to their views on

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Quoted in Acevedo, “Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market,” *Mexican Muralism*, 137.

²² Ibid.

art. Despite being a stout follower of Stalin, Siqueiros' belief that artists needed to use industrial technologies echoed Trotsky's call to fuse art and modern technology, as expressed in his dialectical theory of *Literature and Revolution* (1924). On other topics, Mexican Stalinists like Siqueiros and O'Higgins vehemently disagreed with Trotsky. For instance, Trotsky argued that, although true art aspired to a reconstruction of Communist society, artists did not have to paint the ongoing revolution.²³ He reinforced this position in "For a Free and Independent Revolutionary Art" a manifesto he wrote in Mexico with French surrealist poet Andre Breton and Rivera.²⁴ As art historian Diane Scillia has pointed out, the muralist did not show much interest in Trotsky's theorization of a new art, took no part in the writing (which was the result of sophisticated conversations in French, which he did not speak properly) and broke away from the Russian dissident early in 1939.²⁵ In this manifesto, Trotsky declared: "The free choices of themes and the absence of all restrictions on the range of their explorations—these are possessions of which the artist has the right to claim as inalienable."²⁶ For Trotsky and Breton, culture would best benefit from an "anarchist regime of individual liberty." Anarchist artists could, they posited, support Marxism, but no political doctrine should mediate artists' exploration for inner truths.²⁷ In this configuration, various styles of art were accepted, including

²³ André Breton and Leon Trotsky, "For An Independent Revolutionary Art," in *What is Surrealism?*, edited by André Breton and translated by Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 183.

²⁴ Schwarz, Arturo, Shwarz and Paul Avrich, *André Breton, Trotsky Et L'anarchie* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1977). In this book Schwarz reports that to Breton's surprise, Trotsky insisted that the Communist Party, and Marxism in general, should be govern art, which operated according to its own laws and mechanism.

²⁵ Diane, Scillia, "A World of Art, Politics, Passion and Betrayal: Trotsky, Rivera and Breton and Manifesto: Towards A Free Revolutionary Art (1938)," in *Does the World Exist?*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2004), 451. In this chapter, Scillia explains that Rivera, by nature, did not adhere to any orthodoxy, whether Catholicism, Cubism, Trotskyism, or Surrealism. She adds the Rivera saw himself as a man of action, not as a theoretician.

²⁶ André Breton, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art," 183.

²⁷ Robin Greeley, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico," in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture* (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 200), xxx. In this chapter, Greeley notes that Trotsky's willingness to make art independent from politics likely derived from his belief that cultural analysis and artistic production did not constitute critical tools capable of bringing significant socio-economic changes within a capitalist society.

abstract art. Siqueiros and O'Higgins rejected these postures: they promoted a didactic art that spoke to the proletariat and the peasantry.

Marion Greenwood's work reflected Siqueiros' and O'Higgins' call for a social-realist style that addressed class struggle. The narrative of her finished mural the narrative offers neither resolutions for the present, nor a promising future—only an arresting rendering of workers revolting against exploitative work conditions. Her fresco ended at the top of a stairwell where Grace Greenwood's mural cycle began. In *Mining*, Grace Greenwood portrayed the minting of coins (fig. 6). On the right, miners extract gold that is purified, then transformed into coins. The last stage of this process takes place in the upper left where Greenwood has included Mexican bankers and businessmen who avidly collect the money as they dip their hands into bins of coins. Grace Greenwood has made visible the wealth that Marion has implied by depicting various lucrative Mexican industries. generated by various sectors but kept hidden in Marion Greenwood's mural. One of them keeps his eyes on the foreman, as if sensing the latter's second thoughts about his complicit place in the system. Just as in Marion Greenwood's mural, a group of angry workers holding a red banner protest beneath capitalist agents. Below them, two women, one sitting on the floor, the other awkwardly hunched over, look at children sorting through trash.

The iconography chosen by Grace and Marion Greenwood invariably evoked contemporary labor struggles and workers exploitation under the administration of Calles, who officially sat in the presidential seat from 1924 to 1928 but controlled Mexican politics with an iron fist until 1935, a year into Cardenas's presidency. With a message made legible for the users of the market using a social-realist style, their murals presented scenes about issues Calles encountered as he opened the economy to foreign investors for the sake of modernizing Mexican

industries. In the mid-1930s, the Mexican economy was gripped by strikes from workers who denounced the erosion of wages caused by inflation. In 1934, two years before the Greenwoods' mural cycles were completed, American and English mining companies violently put down strikes in Tampico and Puerto Mexico. In his letter to Marion Greenwood, O'Higgins, who had joined the strikes to show his support, reported that the government was in fact complicit in the repression.²⁸

In the context of a Calles government reliant on Mexican labor to modernize its economy, tensions in the mines were a sensitive subject. The Great Depression in the United States aggravated Mexico's predicament. Pointing to the devaluation of the pesos, and to its twenty-five percent drop in federal revenue, the Mexican state, followed by private companies, lowered wages in most industries. Unmoved by the gravity of the situation, high officials enriched themselves by taking from the treasury, earning the name of "millionaire socialists."²⁹ Protected by Calles, President Rodriguez's personal fortune grew exponentially, and by the end of his presidency, he was among Mexico's richest men.³⁰ The Calles administration's contentious relationship with the mining industry does not necessarily mean it instructed the PWD to cancel all contracts for the mural program at the Rodriguez Market. What is certain is that, rather than dismiss concerns voiced by José L. Favela, the General Director of Urban Services and Public Works, about the "ideology" expressed in the mural program at the market, Sáenz decided to put an end to the entire Rodriguez Market mural project.³¹ Such a cancellation would have likely been avoided if the Greenwood's iconography had shown a triumphant

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 432.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Acevedo, "Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market," 142.

proletariat and peasantry. Ten years later, Izquierdo produced a mural that suggested the continuing struggle of the Mexican proletariat. Her mural would also be cancelled.

Chapter 3: Reconciling Mexican Modernity

The cancellation came as a shock as Izquierdo benefitted from affluent supporters, including from the Contemporaries, who in the 1940s, had leverage over national cultural affairs. The Contemporaries were a group of urban poets and writers who advocated for a Mexican cultural production that absorbed and contributed to literary, theatrical, and visual avant-garde experiments conducted in Europe, especially Paris. The visual arts section in their journals often featured paintings by Georges Braque, Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, and Henri Matisse.³² The group's founding members were Jaime Torres Bodet, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano and Jose Gorostiza. Over time, their group would grow and include Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, Jorge Cuesta, Gilberto Owen and Celestino Gorostiza. The Contemporaries avoided making explicit their own aesthetic program. Openly stating their artistic and political convictions, they felt, would have been hypocritical from a group denouncing socialist propaganda (they were anti-Marxists, but did not necessarily oppose all socialist projects).³³ In June 1928, in the first issue of their journal entitled *Contemporáneos*, they called for the need to establish a “new ethical sensibility” that would replace the work of Rivera who, they stated,

³² Mark A. Castro, “Tales of the City: the Contemporáneos and Modern Mexican Art,” in *Paint the Revolution : Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950*, ed. Matthew Affron, Dafne Cruz Porchini, Renato González Mello (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016), 312.

³³ Robin Adèle Greeley, “Nietzsche Contra Marx in Mexico: the Contemporáneos, Muralism, and Debates over ‘Revolutionary’ Art in 1930s Mexico,” in *Mexican Muralism, A Critical History*, ed. Anreus, Alejandro, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 148.

reduced “art to a political-social instrument, a mechanical instrument, mechanizing, unrefined.”³⁴ Their criticism went beyond targeting Rivera. Indeed, they took issue with the premises of the foundational *Manifiesto of the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors* published in 1924 and signed by Rivera, Orozco, Xavier Guerrero, Germán Cueto, Fermín Revueltas, Ramón Alva Guadrrama and many other muralists. Rejecting “European elitist tastes,” the manifesto declared that *mexicanidad* (that which is quintessentially Mexican) was to be found in the lives and culture of the indigenous people, the peasants, and the working-class segments of the population.³⁵ Simply put, the manifesto declared that *mexicanidad* could only be rooted in *indigenismo*. For the Contemporaries, *mexicanidad* stemmed from Mexico’s indigenous past and from contributions made by Europe. Stressing the need to fuse cosmopolitan modernism with the national, they believed that by combining the avant-garde with the traditional, the rural with the urban, a *mexicanidad* based on “universalism” would result.³⁶ Adopting the position of non-politicized humanists had political implications, however. Undoubtedly sensitive to the Contemporaries’ silence on issues faced by labor union, and on the impacts of modern capitalism on the peasantry and proletariat, the Camacho government integrated and promoted Contemporaries like Bodet and Gorostiza. The Contemporaries had welcomed the advent of Camacho as the end of the Cárdenas presidency which, they argued, had instigated a cultural Marxism that stifled individual creativity.³⁷ Their position within the government would boost the career of Izquierdo who, conveniently, had never joined a political party.

³⁴ Ibid. Quoted in Greeley, “Nietzsche Contra Marx in Mexico: the Contemporáneos, Muralism, and Debates over ‘Revolutionary’ Art in 1930s Mexico.” In this chapter, Greeley comments on the confrontation between the progressive and liberal Contemporaries who advocated for a “universal” attention to aesthetic practice and the leftist muralists who promoted *indigenismo* as the basis of Mexican identity.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 150.

³⁷ Robin Adèle Greeley, *Mexican Muralism*, 149.

The Contemporaries' interest for painters was precipitated by the fact that, in post-revolutionary Mexico, literature, which had reigned supreme under the bourgeois cultural regime of Díaz, did not hold as much sway as the visual arts understood by illiterate masses. Turning to art criticism, the group promoted—via art shows, catalog essays, reviews, and commissions—the oeuvres of Augustín Lazo, Julio Castellanos, Izquierdo, and Rufino Tamayo. Subsequently, Tamayo became one of the most successful painters in Mexican history and gained recognition abroad, especially in New York. In the realm of painting, Tamayo was the muralists' most formidable foe. As art historian Mary K. Coffey has pointed out, Tamayo often used the international press as leverage in his war against *los tres grandes* as well as against successive post-revolutionary governments who, he felt, had ignored him for too long.³⁸ Tamayo's frescoes of mytho-poetic figures, the Contemporaries claimed, reconciled modernity and tradition, a quality they would also see in Izquierdo's work (fig. 7).

Chapter 4: María Izquierdo, The Contemporaries and Diego Rivera

Talk about Tamayo often led to Izquierdo. She and Tamayo had met in 1929 when she was a student and he a teacher at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City. The two eventually moved in together in an apartment in Mexico City where they painted side by side. It was through Tamayo that Izquierdo drifted into the orbit of the Contemporaries who introduced her to avant-garde trends in Europe.³⁹ Unfortunately, during her lifetime, critics inside and outside the Contemporaries too heavily focused on Tamayo's influence on her work. Her personal input,

³⁸ Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, 66.

³⁹ Adriana Zavala, "Painting in the Shadow of the Big Three," in *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*, ed. Mary Kay Vaughan, and Stephen E. Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 71.

in the eyes of many, only came from the fact that she was a woman, which gave her works, in the words of Villaurrutia (who was considered the most brilliant of the Contemporaries by the rest of the group) a “feminine sensuality.”⁴⁰

Contemporaries like Villaurrutia and Gorostiza were eager to dissociate Izquierdo from Rivera who, for the rest of Izquierdo’s life (and after) would claim he “discovered” her. The story between Rivera and Izquierdo dates to 1928 when, to welcome its new director, the Academy of San Carlos organized a student art show. Art historian Margarita Nelken reports that Rivera had passed in front of all the students’ works without saying a word, and, suddenly, stopped in front of Izquierdo’s painting, exclaiming: *es el único!* (“this is the only one!”).⁴¹ The painting in question, entitled *The Judgment of Toral* (1928), has been lost and no reproduction survives.⁴² However, unlike her peers, Izquierdo had picked a daring subject, one pertaining to the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath: the trial of José de León Toral, a caricaturist who had shot and killed President Álvaro Obregón several months before. A devout Catholic, Toral was regarded by many Mexicans as a martyr who bravely attempted to put an end to Obregón’s war on the Church. No records exist on Izquierdo’s stance on the assassination. It is likely that Rivera—who was known for his anti-clerical stance, and for his appreciation of Obregón’s nomination of José Vasconcelos who founded and championed the Mexican muralist

⁴⁰ Xavier Villaurrutia, “María Izquierdo,” *Mexican Folkways* 7, no. 2 (August-September 1932) 38-42. Quoted in Zavala, “Painting in the Shadow of the Big Three,” 73. In this chapter, Zavala explores Izquierdo’s complex relationship with Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, who at various moments in her career, promoted and derided her work. Zavala notes that some of her supporters from the Contemporaries, including namely Villaurrutia, employed a paternalistic language that both complimented her work while subordinating it to Tamayo, who, the poets claimed, was her life-time mentor and inspiration.

⁴¹ James Oles, *A New Art: The Contribution of María Izquierdo*, trans. and ed. Marie Nicole Nakazawa, Adriana Zavala and Mónica Mayer (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008), 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*

movement—approved of the trial and the subsequent execution of Toral. This anecdote about Rivera’s encounter with Izquierdo, which quickly circulated in artistic circles, combined with the fact that Rivera wrote the catalog essay of her first solo show at the Gallery of Modern Art in Mexico City the year after, helped launch Izquierdo’s career. Only two paintings featured in this 1929 first solo show have survived: *Portrait of Belem* (fig. 8) and *The Soup Tureen* (fig. 9). In the former, Izquierdo painted her sister Belem as a young and modern woman: dressed in heels and wearing a purple dress and beige scarf, Belem leans on a wardrobe. The top of the dresser is covered with a white cloth on which rests a vase of flowers and a purse. In *The Soup Tureen*, an open bowl is filled with eggs next to a covered soup tureen. In these two works, Izquierdo has rendered her motifs through simple and slightly awkward draftsmanship. Space is flattened and foreshortened in both works, tying them to Cubism. The two paintings differ in a few ways. The bright colors and compressed space in *Portrait of Belem* contrasts with the muted tones and the faint suggestions of three-dimensional space in *The Soup Tureen*. For instance, the way the volume given to the small white ball in the background produces a sculptural effect. Izquierdo’s application of paint is also different: rough and crude in *The Soup Tureen*; layered and finished in *Portrait of Belem*.

Izquierdo’s affinities with Cubism undoubtedly presented a challenge for Rivera in his essay for the show’s catalog. At the time, he denounced the recent avant-garde trends from Europe, and was overtly denying the ties his own art had with Cubism while he was living in Paris in the 1910s.⁴³ Adroitly, in the catalog essay for Izquierdo’s show, the muralist side-

⁴³ Dafne Cruz Porchini, “Everything Was For The Revolution”: Muralism At The Ministry Of Education,” in *Paint the Revolution Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950*, ed. Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Renato González Mello (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016), 273.

stepped references to European modern art and instead pointed to the classicism that, he felt, was inherent in all Izquierdo's works: "Her portraits, like all her works, are informed by a fine classical lineage; the paint of María never pretends to be more than what it really is, and this a major virtue."⁴⁴ Rivera presented "María" as a painter who engaged "without pretensions or haughtiness" with traditions cultivated in academies. Though critical of modern European art, Rivera admired the techniques (most notably, fresco) and refined draftsmanship of the masters of the Renaissance and of French neo-classical painters. Aside from this reference to classicism, the entire catalog essay tackles the work with considerations unrelated to her actual art: "The harsh character of her portraits reflects how she navigates her daily life; with distance, and measurement; with all challenges accepted; and with a face, like the masks of the ancient Mexican masters, showing a peaceful impenetrable expression, modeled and refined in hard matter."⁴⁵

For Rivera, her personality and physical appearance provided a lens through which some of her art could be understood. His narrative tied her work and style to her womanhood, which, in his eyes, led viewers to her alleged Mexican essence: "Her persona is like her painting: classically Mexican. She could have posed for an ancient sculptor, the author of an ancient image of Centeotl."⁴⁶ Though intended to be a compliment, Rivera's statement makes Izquierdo into the object of an ancient sculptor rather than an active agent of art production. In this text, Izquierdo became the channel through which Rivera could roll out his vision for a Mexican modern art:

⁴⁴ Diego Rivera, "María Izquierdo," exhibition catalog, Galería de Arte Moderno, November 6-17, 1929. Reprinted in Mexico City by Galería de Arte Moderno in 1956 with a preface by Carlos Pellicer.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

one fed by a pre-Hispanic heritage that was at the time championed by the influential Mexican archeologist and sociologist Manuel Gamboa.

Izquierdo never argued with analogies—most famously made by Rivera and French poet Antonin Artaud—between her persona, her physique, and her work. Throughout her career, she would strategically craft her appearance in various ways to suit distinct contexts. Indeed, Izquierdo showed up on several opening nights dressed in a Tehuanan huipil, heavy pre-Columbian jewelry, and braided hair wrapped around her head. (fig. 10).⁴⁷ This surprised people who knew her as she did not usually dress this way (fig. 11).⁴⁸ As French-Mexican art historian Olivier Debroise has noted, she usually “looked like a flapper—a woman of the twentieth century.”⁴⁹ The folkloric appearance she sometimes adopted seemed to respond to the call from various cultural agents in post-revolutionary Mexico—most vocally Rivera and Siqueiros—to promote traditional Mexican dress (particularly Tehuana clothing for women) and not succumb to new modes emerging in Paris particularly. Showing up as she did during some of these *soirées* contrasted with how she portrayed herself in *Self-Portrait* (fig. 12). In it, Izquierdo depicted herself as a modern woman wearing black heels and a chic dress, with her hair pulled back into a chignon. Her position, upright and elegant, is framed by a chest of drawers and a guitar. The viewer here is welcomed into the home of a bourgeoisie—one interested in music and appearance (the mirror on top of the dresser hints at an awareness of self-representation and care). This back and forth between the “bourgeois” and the “indigenous” looks was also staged by Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) at the time. For Izquierdo and Kahlo, who knew each other but

⁴⁷ Fernando Gamboa, *MARIA IZQUIERDO*, ed. Olivier. Debroise, Sylvia. Navarrete, and José Pierre (Mexico City: Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneos, 1988), 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Olivier Debroise, “The Shared Studio: María Izquierdo and Rufino Tamayo,” in *The True Poetry of María Izquierdo*, ed., Elizabeth Ferrer (New York: Americas Society, 1997), 49.

were not friendly, these two poles constituted less a contradiction than a game played to mark the difference between their “folkloric” presence in the art world and their everyday life.⁵⁰

Whether she showed herself as a modern or indigenous woman, Izquierdo accentuated feminine aspects of her look with makeup, jewelry, and dresses. Gendered performance has often been adopted by women artists competing with men artists. British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere attributed the ability to masquerade to the character of women: “womanliness could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as the thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods.”⁵¹ Riviere’s point about women alleviating the anxieties of being successful in a male-dominated world is pertinent to the Mexican art work context. In 1942, Izquierdo stated: “The first obstacle that a woman painter must overcome is the old belief that a woman belongs in the home with her domestic duties. When she succeeds in convincing society that she can also create, she meets a great wall of incomprehension caused by the envy or superiority complex of her male colleagues. Almost never do male artists see a woman who paints as just another colleague who is as dedicated as they are to the same labor.”⁵²

For Izquierdo, emphasizing feminine traits likely served to diminish the perceived threat from male Mexican painters. Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros famously used art making as a “weapon” to promote their masculine bravado.⁵³ In Mexican society, women who demonstrated

⁵⁰ Elena Poniatowska, “María Izquierdo, On Horseback,” in *The True Poetry of María Izquierdo*, ed., Elizabeth Ferrer (New York: Americas Society, 1997), 85.

⁵¹ Laurie Monahan, “Radical Transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness,” in *Inside the Visible: an Elliptical traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. by M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), 128.

⁵² Quoted in Tibol, Raquel, *María Izquierdo y Su Obra : Museo de Arte Moderno Bosque de Chapultepec, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes*, exhibition catalogue (*Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes*, October 1971), 23.

⁵³ Geis, “The Struggles of Modernizing Mexico and the Mural of Aurora Reyes,” 166. In this essay, Geis quotes Siqueiros’s assistant who stated that Siqueiros always wore a gun, which he let protrude from his pocket as he

“masculine” traits like creativity, boldness, and confidence were associated with the *chica moderna*, or “modern girl.” In this context, the indigenous appearance Izquierdo at times adopted served as an additional mask dissociating her from frowned upon cosmopolitan, independent, and presumably sexually active women. This look also reflected the folkloric sentimentalism that marked popular culture at the time. The indigenous “mask,” however, was not her default look and she would invariably put it on and take it off: Izquierdo was a modern woman, *and* she was in touch with the traditional customs of the Mexican provinces. In 1945, she would formally juxtapose the “indigenous” and the “modern” for the first-floor mural at the Department of Public Works.

Izquierdo’s career reached its height in the 1940s, during the Camacho presidency. Taking advantage of a booming Mexican art market, she sold her works to wealthy collectors with the help of Raul Uribe, her husband from 1943 to 1953, who was a well-connected figure in the art world.⁵⁴ Moreover, as previously mentioned, her supporters from the Contemporaries were being promoted to high positions within the newly formed Camacho government. Indeed, Camacho appointed Bodet, one of the Contemporaries’ most prominent members, as the new secretary of Public Education. The president also appointed José Gorostiza, one of Izquierdo’s most fervent advocates, as director general of political affairs at the Secretariat of Foreign Relations. Another member of the Contemporaries, Novo, became the best-paid editorial writer in the nation and wrote eight hundred pages for the newspapers during his time at *Mañana*, Mexico City’s most read newspaper.⁵⁵ In addition to writing columns about fine arts and film,

_____ painted. On page 167, she quotes art critic Antonio Rodriguez who recalled that watching Orozco paint was like witnessing a fight.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Novo became a prominent radio host, animating a daily show for the BBC edition in Latin America.

The rise of the Contemporaries within the government and media alarmed many muralists and former revolutionaries who saw in the rise of the Contemporaries within the administration the end of the revolution. Their fears were not fully unjustified. As historian Salvador Oropesa has explained, for many of the Contemporaries, the Mexican Revolution represented a dark page in Mexican history, one in which barbarity had broken the balance established by Díaz.⁵⁶ Contemporaries did not reject outright the Mexican Revolution, however. The poets saw in the collapse of the Díaz regime an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-shape middle class mentality, which was still too rigid and intolerant in their view.⁵⁷ Such politico-cultural ambitions entailed the promotion of like-minded artists on a national and international level. In May 1944, Bodet appointed Izquierdo as cultural ambassador to Peru for Mexico. While she was in Lima, the Peruvian government proposed an artists' exchange between the two countries: Izquierdo would paint a mural in Lima and a Peruvian artist would paint a mural in Mexico. In January 1945, she notified Governor Gómez of the offer made by Peru but added that she would prefer to realize her first mural in her own country. Gómez responded favorably. The exchange with Peru was turned down and Izquierdo was commissioned a mural on the walls of the Department of Public Works in Mexico City addressing the progress of the nation in honor of the ending Camacho presidency.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Salvador A. Oropesa, *The Contemporáneos Group : Rewriting Mexico in the Thirties and Forties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 9.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 113.

Chapter 5: Mexico Under President Manuel Ávila Camacho

In the early 1940s, the president appeased the tensions that had risen between Mexico and the United States when his predecessor, socialist President Cárdenas, had decided to nationalize the petroleum and the railroad industries. Under Camacho, Mexico became a valuable ally to the American war effort by providing raw material—mainly copper, zinc, mercury, and graphite. The war boosted Mexico’s economy, especially in the sector of heavy industry, manufacturing, transport, mining, petroleum, and electric power. This economic boom was fueled by urban development as cities, especially Mexico City, grew exponentially to respond to a demographic boom caused by both an increase in birth rate (the population of Mexico increased by a million every year under Camacho) and by a massive flight to the cities (between 1940 and 1950, the population of Mexico City surged from 1,757, 530 to 3,050,442).⁵⁹ The government’s liberal economic reforms facilitated the growth of an educated and prosperous bourgeoisie who fueled consumption-based capitalism modeled after the United States. Upon being elected, the president set a new path for the country’s economy when he declared: “It is necessary to create confidence in investors: first in the Mexican investors; then in the foreigners.”⁶⁰

Historians like Susan M. Gauss and Stephen Niblo are nonetheless struck by the wide popularity the president enjoyed at the time—that is, the popularity outside of the bourgeoisie, who benefitted from his repeal of socialist reforms in favor of liberal policies.⁶¹ Indeed, the land and blue-collar reforms the Camacho administration abandoned were at the heart of the 1917 Constitution—the document drafted by revolutionaries who had galvanized most of the country

⁵⁹ Susan M. Gauss, *Made in Mexico: Regions, Nation, and the State in the Rise of Mexican Industrialism, 1920s-1940s* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 108.

⁶⁰ Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

against the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship. Camacho's popularity undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that, in an international situation marked by the rise of political extremes and war, Mexico had remained relatively peaceful.⁶² One of the strategies the state employed to appease and reassure its population was to always give the impression of choosing a political middle ground.⁶³ In the context of a war against the Nazis, Mexicans were wary of political figures situated on the right of the political spectrum and supported their moderate president over potential military usurpers like General Juan Andreu Almazán.⁶⁴ Rivals on his left were equally feared by the press, which often warned the population—except for *El popular*, the Communist newspaper—of the risk of a rising Communism seeking to eradicate personal liberties.⁶⁵ Amid this political situation, the president astutely extinguished threats by forming a well-balanced administration in which all political sides—and judiciously, potential rivals—felt heard and useful.⁶⁶ The Communist Party, however, was excluded from an alleged politically-open administration. Thus, Camacho's liberal regime claimed to defend democracy while curtailing certain political channels. Invoking the need to be a united nation in times of war, the president incorporated into his cabinet former *Cardenistas* socialists, presidents of banks, and chief executive officers of major companies like Pemex from the Monterrey Group, a coterie of corporations in northern Mexico known for their anti-revolution and laissez-faire convictions. Though many political pundits were perplexed by the eclectic composition of the administration, much of the population seemed to approve of the cooperation between political sides who had historically been in conflict.

⁶² Enrique Krauz, *Mexico : Biography of Power : a History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 503.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 505.

⁶⁴ Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

Little scholarship has been dedicated to the Camacho government's relationship with the domain of culture, especially with the mural movement.⁶⁷ The common explanation is that Camacho did not care about art, unlike Soledad Orozco, his wife, who preferred academic works and was generally conservative in taste.⁶⁸ But Camacho was an astute politician and, as such, knew politics was not just about managing the economy. His predecessors had shown that being president of a modern nation was about crafting a *récit*, a metanarrative that gives meaning to where the nation stands at a given time by articulating it with the past and future. Filling the collective imaginary of a given population, such metanarrative also indicates where their nation stands in the history of the world and in relation to other nations. Camacho's *récit* was one of unity and prosperity for all domains of Mexican society—including culture. Indeed, as a means of securing a common identity, Camacho turned to realm of culture, particularly movies, posters supporting the allies' war effort, and public mural projects.

The new government was aware that the Mexican mural movement could also speak to the nation, as it had done in the past. In politics like in culture, the government's strategy was the unification of former foes. In the early 1920s, under President Obregón, muralists had benefitted from sustained patronage from a government that encouraged artists to provide uplifting—and even critical—visions of the struggles and ambitions of post-revolutionary Mexico. State patronage had considerably flagged in the early 1930s, however: under Calles' puppet presidents, the muralists Fernando Leal and Ramón Alva de la Canal were getting very few commissions while Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros, left the country (respectively in 1927, 1930 and 1932) to go work in the United States.

⁶⁷ Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

The unifying bonds forged in the 1920s by what art historian Esther Acevedo has termed “an atmosphere of revolutionary euphoria” quickly dissipated in the 1930s as a battle erupted between the Rivera and the Siqueiros camps.⁶⁹ Denouncing Rivera’s prolific stay in the United States, Siqueiros accused his peer of feeding a bourgeois market’s thirst for “Mexican curios.”⁷⁰ In May 1934, Siqueiros declared in *New Mass* (a left-wing American magazine) that Rivera had betrayed revolutionary principles to become a “pin-up for bourgeois diletantes,” “an aesthete of imperialism,” and “a painter of millionaires.”⁷¹ Siqueiros did not acknowledge that Rivera’s project at the Rockefeller Center had been destroyed just a month before when the muralist turned down his American patron’s request to erase his portrait of Lenin.

On a technical level, Siqueiros resented the “Giottoism” of Rivera’s fresco making and advocated instead for the modernization of muralism. This entailed relying on industrial and cheaper tools like paint guns and air brushes. For Siqueiros, these tools were more democratic because they were not only easier to use, but also removed the hand of the individual artist. Siqueiros also adopted the practice of applying synthetic paint over cement, which contrasted with Rivera’s wet fresco technique using stone walls (though his Rockefeller Center murals were mounted on brackets rather than attached directly to the walls). As previously mentioned, they were fiercely opposed in terms of their relation to Communism: from 1937 to 1939, Rivera housed Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova in the famous *Casa azul*, which infuriated Stalinists like Siqueiros who would eventually participate in a failed attempt to assassinate Trotsky in 1940.

⁶⁹ Esther Acevedo, “Young Muralists at the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market,” 130

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

To revive the dynamism of the early days of 1920s muralism, the Camacho government reinvigorated the career of Xavier Guerrero (1896-1974), a dedicated Mexican Communist who had worked in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s. Ignored under the Cárdenas regime, Guerrero was now praised by the government, which lauded his work as one of the founding members of muralism.⁷² Judiciously, the liberal administration made him official representative of Mexico abroad. As a result, the alleged even-handed government sent the Communist painter to Chile, where he painted colored murals in the social-realist style at a recreation center for workers in the capital Santiago. Guerrero was now conveniently painting at a safe distance from the now economically liberal nation he represented.

Determined to reconcile the muralists and take credit for the union of various leftist ideologies, Camacho founded in 1943 the prestigious Colegio Nacional de México, naming Rivera and Orozco as heads of the visual arts. A year later, he pardoned Siqueiros and allowed him to return to Mexico from Chile, where he had been sent because of his involvement in the attempted assassination of Trotsky. The government's goal was to revive mural art under unified national ethos. Newspapers supported the government's promotion of various artists because, regardless of their political convictions, these creators deserved to be in the nation's spotlight for having put Mexico on the international stage.⁷³ Overall, the so-called "cultural laissez-faire" by federal patronage was part of a political agenda designed to renew Mexico's cultural arena. To further secure support from an increasingly affluent bourgeoisie, and of the youth who had not experienced the Mexican Revolution, the government of the 1940s ushered in, though generous subsidies, a Golden Age of culture: cinema, theater, ballet, comic books, music, and fine arts.⁷⁴

⁷² Michael Nelson Miller, *Red, White, and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad 1940-1946* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1998), 109.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

The viability of such a project, however, depended upon covering ideological tensions under the cloak of cultural cachet. Indeed, the government was willing to support popular and high culture if both fields contributed to its understanding of national identity, unity, and prosperity.

In practical terms, for the mural movement, unity meant asking *los tres grandes* to mend their fences and start working for the state again, regardless of their political differences. In the fall of 1944, Siqueiros reconciled with Rivera in a series of articles published in newspapers *Hoy* and *El Nacional* in which he declared that Rivera was “the most important and prolific founder of Mexican art movement.”⁷⁵ Siqueiros added that it was Rivera who had first recognized the value of the pre-Hispanic, colonial, and popular forms of art. This had led Rivera, Siqueiros explained, to defy the “false ingenuity” and “dilettantism which the snobs of the modern school of Paris so admire.”⁷⁶ This rapprochement likely reassured government officials. Undeniably, the unification of two of Mexico’s most famous painters—two painters who had clashed on artistic and political grounds—lent force to the state’s claim of building a unified and culturally advanced nation.

This peace, however, was only initiated by Siqueiros who was likely motivated by the need to secure his place in Mexico and gather support for his newly founded school, the Center for Realist Art.⁷⁷ Siqueiros concluded his series of articles with the following declaration: “Not only was Diego the first practical interpreter of our art, but he also remained faithful to mural painting and has accepted the program of the Center for Modern Realist Art.”⁷⁸ Thus, Siqueiros, aware of Rivera’s affluence, turned his nemesis into a supporter for his Center for Realist Art.

⁷⁵ D Anthony White, *Siqueiros: Biography of a Revolutionary Artist* (Encino, CA: Floricanto Press, 1994), 253.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁷⁷ The Centro de Arte Realista was an institute dedicated to the study of the plastic arts, chemistry, mechanics, paintings, sculptures, and graphics.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

These statements by Siqueiros likely reassured government officials and gave cachet to his institute. The peace between the two painters did not last. In 1946, Rivera derided Siqueiros's self-commissioned project at the Old Customs House on the Plaza of Santa Domingo in Mexico City. Referring to Siqueiros's use of Celotex panels fixed to wooden structures and covered with mounted canvas, Rivera accused his rival of "sticking cardboard on a stone building and creating homes for rats."⁷⁹ Rivera resented Siqueiros's addition of structures within colonial edifices. For Rivera, painting directly on the original stone, as he did, was more respectful of a given site. Siqueiros responded that Rivera's new art studio, built as a replica of an Aztec pyramid, was an anachronism in the twentieth century and "a cave for dinosaurs."⁸⁰ Judiciously, the two painters had first secured major commissions from the Camacho administration in 1944 before resuming to their mutual lampooning. The murals they produced for the Mexican state at the Palace of Fine Arts and at the National Palace endorsed, though in ways that kept their rivalry alive, the Camacho government's priorities.

Chapter 6: María Izquierdo in the 1940s

For the government, Izquierdo was also a painter worthy of hiring. In many ways, she seemed to be an ideal candidate to paint the homage to the Camacho administration. By 1945, she was a nationally and internationally recognized figure. As previously mentioned, she had been included in "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," a major show held at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1940, as well as in "Mexican Art Today," an exhibition held in 1943 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and organized by Henry Clifford. 1943 was also the year the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 260.

Palace of Fine Arts organized a grand solo show of sixty of her paintings showing circus scenes (fig. 13), devotional altars (fig. 14), portraits, horses in arid landscapes, created between 1939 and 1943. Far from being an exclusive event, her show at the Palace had attracted crowds from various segments of the population. S. Walter Washington, the United States' first secretary of embassy in Mexico City in the 1940s, remarked in his memoirs that Education Secretary Jaime Torres Bodet had the ability to organize grand art openings that managed to attract "Mexicans of all classes."⁸¹ Unlike fine art shows in the United States, which in Washington's eyes mainly attracted educated urbanites, he was astonished to see at the Palace "young men in mechanic's or workmen's overalls, debutante girls, whole families of obviously poor people and a fair sprinkling of campesinos in white shirts and trousers and wide sombreros in their hands."⁸² In addition to being a much loved form of popular entertainment in Mexico, the circus—painted by Picasso during his Rose Period, as well as by Georges Seurat, Georges Rouault and Reginald Marsh—held currency in the modern avant-garde circles. The Contemporaries' praised Izquierdo's circus series because, they posited, it married Mexican traditions with the avant-garde.⁸³

In the 1940s, a decade marked by the return of peace between the state and the Catholic Church, Izquierdo painted a series on the Virgin of Sorrows. This series paid tribute to altars that devotees of the *Virgen de Dolores* place in their homes, gardens, plazas, and churches on the sixth Friday of Lent. These paintings about popular piety honored the Catholic folk traditions of rural Mexico. Though Izquierdo was not a believer, she was nonetheless drawn to Mexican

⁸¹ Miller, *Red, White, and Green*, 161.

⁸² Quoted in Miller, *Red, White, Green*, 162.

⁸³ Mark A. Castro, "Tales of the City: the Contemporáneos and Modern Mexican Art," 324.

religious rites.⁸⁴ Her interest in those traditions echoed the administration's own efforts to bridge the gap between secular cosmopolitanism and provincial Catholicism. At the time, the government hoped that healing the wounds opened by the Cristero War (the government's war on the Catholic Church begun by Calles in the mid-1920s) would facilitate the integration of provincial Mexicans into city life.

From the perspective of an administration keen on appearing to always choose the middle ground, an homage from an artist appreciated by diverse artistic factions and engaged with various cultural trends was fitting. The government was probably sensitive to the fact she had never declared her allegiance to a specific party. Izquierdo also made clear that she did not identify with the feminist movement. Shortly after her grand solo show at the Palace in 1943, Izquierdo was invited to give a lecture entitled "La mujer y el arte mexicano" (Woman and Mexican Art) on XEW, Mexico's most popular radio station.⁸⁵ In the typed six-page manuscript of the lecture that has survived, she stated that women should be able to follow unconventional activities and added that art was the most noble unconventional activity.⁸⁶ In this text, she laid out her own politico-artistic philosophy, explaining that women in Mexico could be classified into three categories: feminists, *intelectualoide*, and authentic.

The "intelectualoide" category referred to the type of woman who held a prominent place in the artistic circles but was only there by association as she was often the lover of a male artist greater than her. As a mother of three children and a lover of Mexico's ancient cultures, Izquierdo put herself in the "authentic" category. Authentic women like herself, she argued, were

⁸⁴ Izquierdo's daughter Aurora Posadas Izquierdo would later recall: "she pulled us away from religion." Quoted in Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 154.

⁸⁵ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 177.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

feminine, spiritual, self-sacrificing, and content in their maternal role.⁸⁷ Regarding the first category, she asserted that feminism's ultimate goal of building a society without men would fail because feminists did not help improve to contribute to society: "I think feminists have not conquered anything for humanity nor for themselves, and instead of helping women grow (who for so many years have been slaves of everything) they get in the way of emancipation."⁸⁸

In this same lecture, Izquierdo turned to the topic of women in culture and judiciously argued that the lack of women artists derived from their exclusion from institutions of art:

Is it not a fact that primitive women of the Middle Ages, or of the Renaissance, were completely excluded from artistic and intellectual work? Everyone knows that only in our century are women beginning to be given the opportunities to study and work at what they like. Before, women were not permitted to do anything other than cooking, embroidering, and attending to their husbands. Have you forgotten about the condition of women during the Middle Ages? Women are only now being given the opportunities to develop their talent. For this reason, it does not seem strange to me that women have not equaled the immortal masters of painting. But I believe that if women continue winning greater freedom of expression, they will achieve such heights in the visual arts.⁸⁹

As Deffebach has pointed out, this pertinent insight on the historical causes for the lack of women in fine art predates Linda Nochlin's *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* essay. In this lecture, Izquierdo attacked feminists while pointing to gender prejudice that restricted women's achievements in culture.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lecture "la mujer y el arte mexicano," María Izquierdo. 4-5. Quoted in Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 169.

Chapter 7: David Siqueiros under President Manuel Ávila Camacho

During Izquierdo's lifetime, the National Palace and the Palace of Fine Arts of Mexico City were the uncontested sites of "official" culture. Given these institutions' power to sanction what was constituted "true" Mexican art, it is worth considering the work the Camacho government sponsored there. In 1945, the year Izquierdo was contracted to paint murals at the PWD, Rivera and Siqueiros were also producing murals that addressed Mexico's identity. Examining these projects and their critical reception will help us understand the political and artistic conditions that framed Izquierdo's own mural for the Camacho government. In 1944, Siqueiros was contracted to produce *Mexico for Democracy and Independence* (fig. 15). This mural, still on view today at the Palace of Fine Arts, coincided with "The Drama of War," a temporary exhibition about the Second World War organized by the minister of public education and member of the Contemporaries, Jaime Torres Bodet.

Given the contentious history between the Contemporaries and the muralists, such a partnership seems odd. Yet, the revolutionary painter was not in a position to negotiate. As previously mentioned, Siqueiros was in desperate need for money to build his Center for Realist Art, and he was anxious about being exiled once again for his attempt on Trotsky's life. The painter correctly saw this commission as an official pardon for his personal past—one that was, from the government's perspective, problematic.⁹⁰ In addition, Siqueiros knew that adding his work at the Palace of Fine Arts alongside Rivera's *Man at Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (1934) and Orozco's *Catharsis* (1934) would firmly establish his status as one of Mexico's greatest muralists. The government, by

⁹⁰ Ibid.

including both Siqueiros and Rivera in their cultural projects, demonstrated its ability to resolve past ideological conflicts and alluded to an alliance with the left. It was certainly no coincidence that the mural was to be inaugurated on November 20, 1944, for the thirty-fourth-year anniversary of the start of the Mexican Revolution. Yet Siqueiros did not capitalize on this important national event: rather than paint a nationalist scene, Siqueiros was asked to paint an allegory of a threatened but victorious democracy defeating fascism, thereby commemorating the Camacho contributions to the world war.

Situated on a balcony and topped by a cornice, the wall given to Siqueiros was not ideal. The work could only be viewed from up close or from another balcony. Despite the site's shortcomings, the forty feet of wall would produce a monumental presence. The painting was done on the north wall of the third-floor corridor leading to the east and west balconies where Orozco's and Rivera's murals respectively appeared. Siqueiros's contribution radically differed from those of his peers. Instead of producing a fresco, he used pyroxylin (a synthetic paint drying much faster than the tempera traditionally used on frescoes) on Celotex and Masonite. To layer this synthetic medium, he used a paint gun and air chisel, thereby amplifying the sculptural presence of his figures. From Siqueiros' viewpoint, these tools and pictorial devices made him a more modern painter than Rivera and most of his muralist colleagues.

At the center of the composition, Siqueiros painted a colossal figure of Liberty marked by her red Phrygian bonnet. Powerfully emerging from an erupting crater, she thrusts her arms outward, breaking from the heavy chains that pull her down. With her right hand holding a flower and her left hand clenched around a torch, she looks up, with an expression of both pain and relief. To her right, a third arm—more muscular and masculine—appears to have just defeated a soldier in grey with a helmet alluding to German fascism, lying on the ground, with

blood on his hands. In this scene, Siqueiros summoned tropes he had employed throughout his career to paint the Mexican Revolution—the chains, the clenched fists, the flower—as well the foreign—specifically, French—image of Liberty (Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*) to connect his mural to the international call to defeat fascism. The central reference to French painting undoubtedly pleased Bodet. It’s unlikely the two suddenly got along, but as previously mentioned, the Stalinist was in no position to challenge his patrons. Siqueiros thus situated Mexico on the international stage, a move that was in keeping with the government’s own political and cultural strategy at the time.

Indeed, Camacho’s effort to connect Mexico’s past and future aspirations to a global context were literalized in government-sponsored posters distributed all over the country. These posters aimed to galvanize waning support for the war, which, by 1942, was rapidly flagging. The growing hostility from Mexicans towards the war effort was partly caused by the scarcity that followed the government’s decision to prioritize exports to the United States over production for a domestic market. Mexicans’ discontent was aggravated by the shortage of staple goods that had historically been imported from Europe. To keep the population’s support for the war, Camacho asked the Ministry of Education to take charge of war propaganda. The propaganda had until then been controlled by the Office of Internal American Affairs, a U.S agency working closely with Mexican corporations and media.⁹¹ The Ministry of Education distributed all over the country—on public walls, schools, buses, and shops—posters presenting themes of either antifascism or *ávilacamachismo* (pro-Camacho policies).⁹² In 1942, the government also commissioned a war posters exhibition—the largest art exhibition during the Camacho era—at

⁹¹ Monica Rankin, *México, la patria! Propaganda and Production during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 249.

⁹² Miller, *Red, White, and Green*, 110.

the Palace of Fine Arts. Commissioning the Workshop of Popular Graphic Art, which was composed of graphic artists who had made posters during the Mexican Revolution, the government demanded colorful posters done in the “heroic” style. One of these posters entitled *Por qué luchamos? por un mundo donde el hombre sea el amigo del hombre?* (For what do we fight? For a world in which Man can be the friend of Man) showed two muscular men shaking hands as they stand on top of the world.

Such an effort to direct Mexico’s mobilization towards international ideals conveniently avoided the fact that the administration was failing to meet the demands of equality made by the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, under Camacho, land distribution programs were rolled back, socio-economic inequalities between the countryside and the cities increased, and a significant part of the agrarian workers were sent to the United States under the Bracero Program. To counter criticism challenging the war effort and the rapid modernization of the economy, the government argued that the democratic legacy of the Mexican Revolution was in danger—abroad. In 1942, Camacho declared in the *Educación Nacional* journal that “those who believe that the Revolution has ended are fooling themselves.”⁹³ At the inauguration of an exhibition of contemporary war posters, political leader Isidio Fabela gave a speech to the press in which he asserted that Mexico was at war to defend what had been won in its own Revolution.⁹⁴ Positioning Mexico as a revolutionary and democratic nation, one willing to help Europe regain her “freedom,” gave cachet to the Camacho administration who was aware that, at the end of 1942, the tide of the war was turning in favor of the Allies. Victory would be followed by the

⁹³ Rankin, *México, la patria!*, 252.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

organization of a new world order, one in which Mexico would seek to take an advantageous place.

It is in this context, one marked by the state's instrumentalization of the Mexican Revolution to justify its economic policies and eventually become a world player, that Siqueiros painted *Mexico for Democracy and Independence*. His tribute to Mexico's contributions to the fight against fascism on the international stage to commemorate an anniversary that would have more likely suggested subject matter addressing the Mexican Revolution is perplexing. Amongst other remarks, critics pointed out that Siqueiros's famous ability to thematically unify subplots within the general theme of a given mural had been replaced with obvious sloganeering.⁹⁵ The government did not seem concerned by Siqueiros's eschewing of Mexican contributions to the notion of liberty in favor of a European iconography passing as universal. On the contrary, Bodet congratulated Siqueiros for his outstanding contribution to Mexico's visual culture. The following year, to celebrate the Allied victory over the Axis powers, Siqueiros painted two other works on Celotex and Masonite, *Victim of Fascism* (fig. 16) showing a mutilated man with roped hands, and *Victims of War* (fig. 17) showing a mother and a child as victims of violence on cracked steps. Placed on the third floor on either side of *Mexico for Democracy and Independence*, they formed a triptych entitled *New Democracy*. Though Siqueiros was not in a position to criticize his patrons, it is possible that the violent features that characterize "new democracy" constitute a sly attack on the Camacho government.

⁹⁵ White, *Siqueiros: Biography of a Revolutionary Artis*, 248.

Chapter 8: Diego Rivera under President Manuel Ávila Camacho

In 1945, the government also commissioned Rivera to produce a fresco cycle covering 1200 feet along the open corridors of the first floor and on the second floor of the National Palace. Like Izquierdo, who was also working on her proposal for Camacho at the time, Rivera offered a vision of Mexico City, and more broadly, of Mexican identity by addressing Mexico's pre-Columbian past. Both painters would tie this past to the modern Mexican nation. To comment on the relationship between past and present, tradition and innovation, indigeneity, and modernity, both painters foregrounded the topic of labor. Unlike Izquierdo's and Siqueiros's concise and easily read subject matter, Rivera produced a long narrative packed with historical references. This kind of realism, one that demanded astute and focused viewing, differed from conventional Soviet social realism, and thus furthered marked his difference from the Stalinist camp. Rivera's new cycle was devoted to pre-Columbian life and civilization and included *The Great City of Tenochtitlan* (fig. 18), *The Papermakers* (fig. 19), *Totonac Civilization* (fig. 20). This 1944-1945 cycle provides an additional lens for understanding the visual rhetoric under Camacho. More pertinently, examining *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*, the largest mural executed for the Camacho government, provides additional insights on the conditions that framed Izquierdo's own mural commission.

In *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*, the ancient capital of the Aztec empire is depicted through a bustling market scene. Commerce is represented in the gigantic fresco as well as below it in the monochrome trompe l'oeil predella Rivera has rendered as a bas-relief. The composition is densely packed and animated by a plethora of figures in action who together create a flow accompanying visitors walking along the hallway. In the upper third of the composition, Rivera has rendered a seemingly endless Tenochtitlan, halted only by the mountain range punctuated by

snow-capped volcanoes. Rivera's composition draws on Mexican "naïve" painting traditions that present scenes filled with figures engaged in various tasks. In this bird's eye view of the city, he makes the city look *above* the commotion rather than behind it. By doing this, Rivera is replicating what the contemporary viewer would see from the National Palace—namely, the Mexican capital stretching into the distance. This allegorical window into an expansive experience at the National Palace contrasts with the inescapable literalization of liberty that Siqueiros was painting at the same time at the Palace of Fine Arts, not far from the National Palace. With *The Great City of Tenochtitlan*, Rivera emphasized the medium of painting and its ability to unfold a story, marking a distinction from the sculptural effect Siqueiros gave to his own mural.

In the center left of the composition, Rivera painted a long passageway above canals leads to a pyramidal temple. At the center of the composition, a truncated pyramid, carrying sanctuaries respectively dedicated to the war and the rain gods, appears to project into the sky. All over the composition, indigenous men, and women plant corn, harvest the ear, grind the kernels, and bake them into flat corn cakes.⁹⁶ In addition to showing figures engaged in agricultural labor, Rivera has featured the technologies of the period by painting craftsmen who weave, smelt, hammer, plait, make jewelry and facet stones for ritual objects.

Situated on the right, the largest figure—closely resembling Frida Kahlo—is a courtesan holding a Tigredia, a native flower—symbol of goddess of love—and surrounded by admirers offering gifts to her. Below her, Rivera represented medicine as a man examines the mouth of a child while his wife sells herbal medicine. On the left hand, a boy pulls a dog on a wheel. This

⁹⁶ Coffey, "State Ritual, Mass Politics, or Mytholpoesis?" 351.

debunks the myth that the wheel did not exist prior to European contact (the wheel was used as toy and ornament, other uses would have been a sacrilege given that it was the form of the Sun God and Goddess of the Moon). Rivera has presented here a scene of sophisticated urban culture. One on which labor is made rhythmic and coordinated; one in which labor is idealized. This scene of Mexico's agricultural contribution to the world—the tomatoes, cacao, maize, poinsettia—invites a conversation on the state of the Mexican economy at the time. Aided by corporate state structures established during the Cárdenas era, the Camacho government launched liberal economic policies that boosted commerce between Mexico and other countries. In this context, many feared that Mexico, like its northern neighbor, had become a pro-business country. Thus, at a time when some accused the government of taking a turn to the right, Rivera offered to the most important government building in the country a visit to the pre-Hispanic past—the core of *mexicanidad* for many—from which he extracted a snapshot of dynamic labor, material abundance, and overall wealth.

This mural presents a different rendering of Mexico's past and identity when compared to his *History of Mexico* (1929-1935) also located at the National Palace, despite claims that Rivera's new mural served as a complement to the famous cycle (fig. 21). Painted on three adjoining walls, including a central wall topped by five arches, *History of Mexico* towers over the National Palace's main staircase. To contemplate it is to be overwhelmed by a thematic and temporal interlocking of scenes presenting historical moments of heroism, courage, betrayal, empathy, oppression, and subjugation. Rivera showed "glorious" moments of Mexican history such as *La reforma* initiated by Benito Juárez, Mexico's first indigenous president who established the nation's first liberal and democratic regime in 1858. Under the left arch of the mural (fig. 22), Rivera painted Porfirio Díaz standing before oil drilling rigs, evidence of the

industrial initiatives he fostered. The dictator is confronted by peasant leader Emiliano Zapata, head of the Constitutionalist faction Venustiano Carranza, and former Secretary of Education José Vasconcelos who all denounced the annexation of Mexico's modernization by foreign companies. Under the outer arch located on the right-hand side of the central wall (fig. 23), Rivera painted the Mexican-American war of 1847 and the United States' temporary—but bitterly remembered—occupation and permanent appropriation of 500,000 square miles of Mexico. Under the outer arch of the left-hand side of central wall, the viewer can contemplate another scene of foreign occupation with the French invasion of Mexico in 1861, and the subsequent rule of Emperor Maximilian.

On the right wall, serving as a prologue to the stories unfolding on the main wall, offered a violent vision of a pre-Columbian world. Enslaved figures climb stairs, painfully carrying large baskets to an Aztec priest who, dagger in hand, is about to sacrifice one of them (fig. 24). Below the scene, warriors fight each other in inter-tribal warfare. In this rendering of pre-Hispanic life, Rivera has paid equal attention to agriculture, art, sacrifice, and slavery. On the left wall, the muralist painted the concluding chapter of the historical drama unfolding on the main wall. (fig. 25). At the top, Karl Marx stands in front of the sunset of the modern world and shows the nation, represented by workers and peasants, and points the way towards a Mexico made of luminous fields and factories. Rivera thus ends his narrative of Mexico's long historical transformation with the Communist ideal. In this cycle, he has given visible form to a long series of antagonistic forces clashing one another at various moments in times and through different forms. This trajectory eventually leads to an ideal Mexican society—that is, a society politically awakened by Marxism and culturally in tune with *indigenismo*.

Amid the destructiveness of world war, the “Mexican miracle,” namely, Mexico’s booming economy, was seen as a carrier of hope to which all citizens could contribute. Yet the government could not ignore that a significant part of the country’s indigenous population was not integrated into the national economy. This issue was not new as debates on the place of indigenous populations within the nation had been a constant feature of the post-revolutionary period. In the 1930s, two sides—one represented by Manuel Gamio and the other, by Moisés Sáenz (Aarón Sáenz’s brother) who were both anthropologists and sociologists—were the driving force behind the intellectual and political movement of *indigenismo*. Although they agreed on the need for Mexico to reconnect with its pre-Hispanic past, they disagreed over how to manage the perceived problems posed by contemporary indigenous populations. Gamio, who led massive archeological works in the Valley of Teotihuacan, argued that the “glorious” aspects of indigenous culture could only be found in the past. Contemporary indigenous populations, he posited, were the unhygienic degeneration of what was once a mighty civilization.⁹⁷ For Gamio, their “bastardized” hybrid culture prevented them from joining mainstream society. But according to this line of thought, the situation was not hopeless, and it was the government’s duty to “help” them become part of the nation. As discussed earlier, this “help” entailed establishing a process of complete acculturation. In the realm of visual arts, Gamio applauded public murals exalting the virtues of pre-Columbian civilizations because, like his archeological discoveries, they ennobled the Indian past in ways that made their descendants worthy of saving. Despite their “handicaps,” he posited, contemporary indigenous populations were the heirs of advanced societies and could become worthy of respect again. Gamio’s most formidable intellectual opponent, Sáenz, head of the Autonomous Department of Indigenous Affairs from

⁹⁷ Zavala, “Constituting the Indian/female Body in Mexican Painting, 1900-1950,” 406.

1936 to 1941, argued that if indigenous populations were not properly assimilated into the nation, it was because their economic practices had been marginalized—not because of their culture. For him, the solution was to integrate indigenous tribes and their economic practices into the national economy.

Both approaches were acknowledged by the Cárdenas government who attempted to “educate” indigenous populations while working out strategies to include Indian craft making into larger commercial networks.⁹⁸ In 1941, Sáenz died unexpectedly and was replaced at the A.D.I.A by Gamio. Considerate of the institution’s mission under Sáenz, and aware of the Camacho administration’s economic objectives—ones that largely relied on the mobilization of a cheap labor force—,Gamio adopted some of the ideological tenets of his former opponent. During his inauguration as new head of the A.D.I.A, he declared that “if well directed and developed, Indian craft culture could fortify the national economy.”⁹⁹

At President Camacho’s request, Gamio turned his speech into an essay published in honor of the “Day of the Indian.”¹⁰⁰ The essay ended with an official endorsement by the Camacho administration.¹⁰¹ In many ways, the new government was determined to follow the policy traced by the Cárdenas government, which regarded the indigenous population as a potential workforce. Indeed, if official claims were made about eradicating poverty, the actual goal seemed to transform the indigenous “impediment” to national industrialization into an asset. For the Camacho administration, indigenous people and mixed race *campesinos*, coming in droves to Mexico City and other urban centers at the time, could, if well integrated into urban

⁹⁸ Ibid., 409.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 413.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 414.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

centers, become economic actors in the saga of the “Mexican miracle.” Mirroring the language used by officials at the time, Rivera’s *Great City of Tenochtitlan* depicted an organized and efficient urban culture—that of old Mexico City—in which various indigenous populations are included. Indeed, at the center of the grand scene, a Totonaca trader pays his tribute with transparent feather quills filled with gold dust to tax collectors. Above them, dressed in white and carried by four other natives, a *Cihuacoatl*, the senior advisor of the Aztec emperor, watches the transaction.

Unlike in *History of Mexico*, however, indigenous men and women in the *Great City of Tenochtitlan* are less political actors of a revolutionary process than busy workers stimulating a larger urban economy. This is not to say that a vibrant economy was not crucial to a revolutionary socialist project: after all, taking ownership of the means of production was part of the development and actualization of political consciousness. But, in the case of indigenous workers in Mexico, political consciousness inevitably led to an uncomfortable historical truth: the indigenous populations, not the lighter-skinned mestizos, could lay claim to an authentic Mexican identity. In these conditions, the government had to manage economic integration while mediating its socio-political implications. With this mural, Rivera has solved the “problematic” aspects of Marion and Grace Greenwood’s 1935 murals about the Mexican economy. Like them, he has shown economic contributions from rural populations, who were both needed and feared by the government. Yet his take on the subject mystifies labor. More, in this scene of controlled mercantilism, Rivera not only reinforced racial hierarchies—between the Aztecs, the original Mexico City residents, and other indigenous populations from outside the great capital—and reinforced the notion of urban superiority.

As his previous cycle at the National Palace testified, Rivera knew that that the history of Mexico had been defined by struggles against foreign interventions—Spanish, French, and American. The revolution had overthrown Díaz who had actively “opened up” Mexico for the benefit of a small elite and foreign companies. His riveting *History of Mexico* was a layered visual account of Mexico’s historical struggle to fight off colonialism and its modern iterations. Yet at a time when Mexico was re-opening its borders to foreign economic powers, he avoided the subject. His 1945 counterpart to the complex formal and temporal montage of *History of Mexico* was seemingly frozen in time. Yet the new cycle also invited viewers to consider their present—one in which a new administration was eager to implement its liberal economic plans. Of course, in a democratic nation fighting totalitarian dictators abroad, such plans needed legitimacy through consent or, better, endorsement. Fortunately for the president, Mexico’s most acclaimed painter delivered just that. Supported by a “reinvigorated” muralist movement, the state could revitalize the country with transformative economic reforms favoring industries in the cities. After all, dynamic urbanized labor was, as anyone could now observe at the National Palace, at the core of Mexico’s identity.

Chapter 9: María Izquierdo’s 1945 Mural Project

In a context marked by state coercion of official murals, let us turn to how Izquierdo’s representation of the progress of the nation responded to economic and socio-political changes occurring at the time. Unlike the murals of her two peers, her project was ultimately cancelled. The various reactions to the “Izquierdo affair” are worth restating. On December 26, 1945, two months after she was told to stop painting by Ignacio Martín, a Federal District government employee, a letter in support of Izquierdo was sent to Governor Gómez. Signed by one hundred

artists and intellectuals—including former president Emilio Portes Gil, and José Vasconcelos, the minister of education who had initiated the Mexican muralist movement in the 1920s—the letter asked that the project resume. After two months of silence from Gómez, Izquierdo wrote to President Camacho. In this letter, Izquierdo appealed to the president’s intelligence and sense of justice. Specifically, Izquierdo expressed her confidence that Camacho would let her resume her contribution to the culture of the nation.¹⁰² The president did not respond and let the project die.

To better understand the government’s withdraw of support, it is worth considering what her *Progress of the Nation* would have suggested about the country’s vexed relationship with indigeneity and modernity. Izquierdo’s proposal presents a series of symbols, positioned as counterparts on either side of the escutcheon, that set her mural apart from Rivera’s crowded narrative. Unlike Siqueiros, whose figures at the Palace of Fine Art are universal and politically neutral, Izquierdo chose emblems that pertain to Mexico City. Her representation of Mexico City is arguably a gestalt of Rivera’s involved narrative.

In an earlier black and white ink drawing for the first mural (fig. 26), the female figure standing as an allegory of Mexico City wears braids, identifying her as an indigenous woman. Yet in the final watercolor sketch, the one released to the press in February 1945, the figure is tan-skinned with straight black hair. By settling on a mestiza instead of an indigenous figure, Izquierdo responded to the postrevolutionary intellectual and political debates about how to incorporate the indigenous past into Mexican identity. In their effort to delegitimize the Church, successive post-revolutionary governments chose to transform the distant pre-Hispanic past into a usable legacy. The grandiose pyramids of the past were the precedents into the promising

¹⁰² Thank you to Nancy Deffebach for forwarding me this letter.

modern future that awaited Mexico.¹⁰³ Thus, the post-revolutionary governments constructed and instrumentalized Mexico's "great" past to convince all Mexicans that, regardless of their extreme divergent situations in life, they could unite and build an advanced nation. But one issue in particular stood in the way of the state's ambitious designs: Mexicans, especially in the provinces, still held on to Mexico's hybrid legacy—one made of both pre-Hispanic and colonial culture.

This situation presented a political conundrum: governments who sought to diminish the long-standing ramifications of the Spanish Conquest to better promote a pre-Columbian legacy were confronted to a large part of the population who, on the contrary, saw ancient indigenous civilizations as belonging to a removed past, and lived a life structured by a colonial heritage. Camacho's presidency was a watershed political moment. By declaring he was a Catholic believer, the president reminded many elites—who hypocritically glossed over their own mestizo racial identity and their use of the Spanish language—that a nation could not elbow aside four hundred years of Spanish influence. Thus, on the subject of identity, the president adopted a middle ground to secure the trust of a broad swath of the population. This stance on Mexican identity from Camacho, to whom Izquierdo was supposed to pay homage, could have played into her led decision to replace an indigenous woman with a mestiza figure, one acknowledging Mexico's mixed identity. We cannot be sure this is what Izquierdo had in mind—if it is, this would be an incentive, from the president's perspective, to preserve this commissioned homage to the progress of Mexico under his term.

¹⁰³ Paula López Caballero, "Which Heritage for Which Heirs? The Pre-Columbian Past and the Colonial Legacy in the National History of Mexico," in *Social anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2008), 338.

Izquierdo also articulated the promise of national prosperity—ostensibly guaranteed by a dynamic economy and common identity—that was ubiquitous in federally-sponsored visual culture. Aided by the existing architectural feature on the wall, Izquierdo established counterparts each representing two historical sides. The sketch presents pictorial tropes of *indigenismo* on the left—the Aztec emperor, the Codex Mendoza, and the maguey—and of modern economic progress on the right—the large concrete building, the microscope, and the train tracks. The combination of the pre-Columbian past and of modern industry was in keeping with the state’s strategy to reach into the nation’s past and mold it into a legacy suitable for its contemporaneous projects of modernization. In this light, Izquierdo’s proposal for the nation’s progress would have been acceptable for the government. However, the pairing of distinct elements—the blue-collar worker with the indigenous servant; the Aztec ruler with the female figure; and the Aztec pyramid with the Edificio Guardiola—suggested a logic that, from the state’s perspective, would have been problematic.

The Aztec king, the largest figure in the proposal, holds a map of Tenochtitlan and points to the wall’s escutcheon, which reads: “To Govern and to Serve.” His position of power is further emphasized by the servant, or perhaps slave, who is mostly nude and secures the map of the capital for his king while kneeling at his feet. On the opposite side of the servant, Izquierdo has depicted a blue-collar worker. The hourglass between the two men further signals that the worker is the contemporary counterpart of the ancient indigenous servant. The worker’s kneeling position and bare-chest—Izquierdo has emphasized his musculature—also reinforces his association with the servant. Instead of a map, the worker holds a gun, and directly looks at the viewer. The sketch thus suggests the proletariat’s state of servitude, strength, and capacity to fight. As such, it likely raised concerns from the government. Throughout his term, Camacho

engaged in an arm struggle against labor unions who were determined to hold on to the political and ideological victories secured during the Cárdenas years. Using the Second World War as a pretext, the new government gave the executive branch “extraordinary” powers: the authority to deal with socio-political “threats” by forbidding strikes on the grounds that they might impeded the war effort.¹⁰⁴ At a time when Mexico’s economy became dependent on industry—the railroad, depicted by Izquierdo in the upper right corner, was particularly crucial to conducting business within Mexico and with the United States—labor unrest made the government anxious. At no time was this more clearly demonstrated than in September 1941. On this day, Camacho feared for his life when 2,000 union workers from railroad, mining, and petroleum sectors, protesting inflation and low wages, stormed the gate of his mansion.¹⁰⁵ The president’s guards opened fire, killing thirty-three men and women workers.¹⁰⁶ Izquierdo’s depiction of a shirtless worker holding a gun, kneeling beneath railway-tracks and a tunnel, could not have alleviated the concerns of officials expecting a celebration of their policies.

On the right side of the composition, above the female figure, Izquierdo painted the Edificio Guardiola as the counterpart to the Aztec pyramid. Opened in 1947, this grey building was at the time being built by Carlos Obregón Santacilia to become new headquarters of the Bank of Mexico and house the biggest vaults in the country (fig 35).¹⁰⁷ From the perspective of the government, the inclusion of the Guardiola Edificio was problematic on several levels. At the time, the Camacho administration was coming under heavy fire from residents of Mexico City—laymen and elites alike—for destroying and rebuilding the city. Indeed, under Camacho, the

¹⁰⁴ Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 121.

¹⁰⁵ Gauss, *Made in Mexico*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Adriana Zavala, “Mexico City in Juan O’Gorman’s Imagination.” *Hispanic research journal* 8, no. 5 (2007), 499.

Mexican capital was transformed by a real estate boom that fueled urban initiatives. Though many of Mexico City's new buildings were erected with private money, the Camacho administration applauded and facilitated the city's new modern look. The national and foreign investments the government had encouraged spurred the import of technological and engineering innovations—Mexico City was becoming a city of skyscrapers.¹⁰⁸ With its imposing, clean-lined, and symmetrical façade, the Edificio Guardiola illustrated the efficiency and power of a surging modern capitalism. Mexico City's transformation did not benefit from unanimous support, though, and many deplored the demolition of certain barrios. The Contemporaries, including those working for the administration, vehemently protested the razing of red light districts, cabarets, dance halls, and of the neighborhood called *barrio chino* (Chinese quarter) known for its opium dens.¹⁰⁹ Declared unhealthy and “counterrevolutionary” by successive governments after the revolution, these ostensibly baser parts of cosmopolitan culture represented for the poets a Baudelarian paradise that inspired some of their writings.¹¹⁰ Opposition to the city's transformation also came from prominent architects like Juan O'Gorman who posited that the glass and concrete skyscrapers of the International Style were first and foremost the product of American, French, German, and Swiss imagination and taste.¹¹¹ As such, these buildings were ill-suited to Mexican building traditions of using local materials to erect edifices often painted with bright and warm colors. In this context, depicting a building representing the much-contested architectural transformation of Mexican cities was a risky artistic decision.

Moreover, making the Guardiola Edifice the counterpart to the Aztec pyramid implied that modern capitalism had replaced pre-Hispanic grandeur. More, it raised the question of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Zavala, “Constituting the Indian/female Body in Mexican Painting, 339.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Adriana Zavala, “Mexico City in Juan O'Gorman's Imagination,” 499.

whether banks were indeed becoming the new “sacred” sites of Mexico’s changing society. At the time, and more than ever before, the banking sector was becoming central to Mexico’s economy and was partly credited for building the wealth of the nation. But if the Mexican economy grew in the 1940s, by four percent every year, so too did inequalities: by the end of the Camacho mandate, the top ten percent of the population claimed almost half of the national income.¹¹² For many officials and businessmen in Mexico City, traditional agrarian and artisanal economies were “things of the past.”¹¹³ This neglect for the fate of the provinces was reflected in the art Mexican banks commissioned. Seeking to capitalize on Mexican muralism’s renewed prestige, banks became prominent art patrons and hired artists to decorate their lobbies. To avoid upsetting Mexican and foreign investors, overt signs of revolutionary social struggle were eschewed.¹¹⁴ This attitude from the business elite was reflected nation-wide in the glaring wealth gap between the rural population and the urban bourgeoisie. The gap widened when state legislature passed laws to decrease wages from eight pesos for agriculture laborer to three pesos.¹¹⁵ The infamous 1917 Constitution’s call for aiding the peasantry seemed to now fall on deaf ears. To make matters worse, at a time when wages in agriculture were being lowered, banks substantially increased rates of interests for *ejidos* (village lands communally held).¹¹⁶ Like the cancelled Greenwood murals, Izquierdo’s sketch depicts the powers sabotaging the agrarian ideals of the Mexican Revolution. Marion and Grace Greenwood, however, clearly identified capitalist bosses, collecting the gold, as the main benefactor of the nation’s wealth. Izquierdo’s bank, on the other hand, does not call attention to anyone in particular. Those who

¹¹² Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Acevedo, *Mexican Muralism*, 130.

¹¹⁵ Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 4.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

capitalize on Mexico's wealth are not made visible. In this depiction of a modern economy, transactions of resources and riches are masked, effectively taming hostility to capitalism.

By 1945, the Camacho government no longer tolerated that Mexico enrich the United States at the detriment of its own economy and started to regulate the finance sector. The president faced fierce opposition from bankers and technocrats who claimed that foreign capitals and technology—mostly coming from the United States—were key to deliver promises of prosperity.¹¹⁷ Disputes ensued as the Mexican government was determined to build a post-war independent domestic market by gradually severing commercial ties with the United States. Given the banks' dominance over the national economy, and their contentious relationship with a Camacho government eager to curtail in their power, the Bank of Mexico's prominence in *Progress of the Nation*, and its pairing with the Aztecs' most sacred, site likely exposed Izquierdo's mural to censorship.

Izquierdo's decision to represent Mexico City as a modern woman also entailed risks given the government's vexed relationship with women. The 1940s were marked by the proliferation of women organizations pressuring the Camacho administration to grant women voting rights at the local and national level, and to provide equal treatment in the workplace in terms of hiring, wages, promotion, social services, and public utilities. Deprived of electoral power, women often turned to informal political tactics like protests, strikes, and personal appeals to governors—and to the president himself. These demands, and how they were made, met stiff opposition from all sides of Mexican society. Echoing patriarchal statements made by journalists and politicians, sociologists argued that women's increasing role outside the home

¹¹⁷ Gauss, *Made in Mexico*, 95.

would lead to the demise of what they considered to be the bedrock of the nation: the family.¹¹⁸ Undeterred by the opposition, women organizations continued to press, and after years of political struggle, an amendment guaranteeing women's suffrage was approved unanimously by lawmakers. It was in this context that Camacho made one of the most baffling political moves in Mexican history. Alarmed by this groundbreaking amendment, the president warned congress that women—who were, he claimed, mainly conservative—would likely vote for the far-right wing candidate, Juan Andreu Almazán, in the next elections.¹¹⁹ Pressure from the executive branch proved successful: the congress chose not to publish the vote, and the suffrage amendment was not enacted.¹²⁰

The government's reluctance to give political agency to women, which they believed would affect the electoral fortune of the president, did not translate into barring them from the economy. At a time of economic liberalization and rapid industrialization, fueled by a massive arrival of *campesinos* and *campesinas* into the cities, industrial labor was presented as the key to transition into a modern society. As women entered factories and offices in large numbers, thereby becoming a cheap pool of labor for various sectors of the economy, the government was keen on praising the strength of their contributions. Yet Izquierdo's first sketch does not echo her patron's desire for an active women labor. In contrast to Rivera's *Great City of Tenochtitlan*, which explicitly staged the dynamic labor of men and women, Izquierdo's female figure does not interact with the tools around her—and nothing indicates she is empowered by them. Unlike the Aztec leader who dominates his surroundings, the woman is cramped between the Edificio

¹¹⁸ Susie S. Porter, *From Angel to Office Worker: Middle-Class Identity and Female Consciousness in Mexico, 1890-1950* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 215.

¹¹⁹ Jocelyn, Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 183.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Guardiola to her right and a railroad to her left. She also holds a blueprint of Mexico City, though what it shows is unclear. Her stance is unstable, and she tilts her hips forward as if forced to give room to the microscope behind her. Given the context, images of unproductive Mexicans were rare. As historian Susan Gauss has explained, many Mexicans immigrating to the cities resented the factory jobs, which were presented to them as the only option given their “lack of non-manual skills.”¹²¹ An informal economy quickly grew as many Mexicans turned to the black market, crime, and prostitution. The effects of informal economies provoked anger, in particular from the urbanite upper class, Camacho’s electorate. Keeping these newly arrived populations engaged in labor and disciplined by the work environment of factories or offices, was therefore crucial to the government. An image of a woman disengaged from the tools of industry around her to represent modern Mexico City contradicted these priorities.

In May 1945, Izquierdo released to the press her pencil sketch for the mural on the second floor.¹²² On the left side of the composition, an indigenous woman uses an *olotera* to strip the grain from corn, which falls in a large basket beneath her. On the right side, an indigenous woman processes corn with a conveyer belt. Izquierdo has kept the topic of modernity and indigeneity, and has this time addressed them through an attention to labor—traditional and industrial. In several ways, she has responded to the critique about the building’s purpose: this proposal acknowledges the history of the building as a former grain market and presents, like Rivera’s *Great City of Tenochtitlan*, scenes of Mexicans at work. The sketch also unites the past and present, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban: the indigenous woman on the right side—who shares the same facial features as the indigenous woman on the left side, suggesting

¹²¹ Gauss, *Made in Mexico*, 108.

¹²² Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 121.

they might be the same person—is in a factory working with modern machinery alongside men. Such a harmonious and somewhat idealized scene of rural and urban dynamism could have been seen by the patrons as an endorsement of their war-time policies.

But this second proposal did not save the project. It too likely challenged its direct federal audience and patrons. On both sides of the composition, female figures dominate their respective scene—in the countryside, a woman is at the center of a group of three children who watch, though the two girls are the only ones truly paying attention. On the industrial side, Izquierdo also placed her female figure in the foreground. Situated in front of the male chemist and two soldiers, she delicately grinds the grains collected by a young girl below. Above all, Izquierdo has emphasized female labor. Though encouraged by the government during war time, female labor became a heated issue. In 1942, Guadalupe Olvera, who worked for the Ministry of Public Assistance, wrote a letter to Camacho explaining that the best way to reduce infant mortality rates—which, the government concurred, sapped the future of the nation—was to provide fair salaries that could pay for adequate housing.¹²³ The letter also demanded that the government pay for daycare centers and childcare education for government employees. The president pledged his support for these demands and passed a social security law as well as decrees providing maternity leave and the creation of day care centers. However, women quickly realized that they were going to pay for all these benefits through wage deductions. On July 20, 1943, defying new legislation that made strikes illegal, thousands of blue- and white-collar women organized a demonstration on the *Zócalo*. The peaceful show of discontent turned into bloodshed when the government crushed the demonstration.¹²⁴ Wage deduction to pay for social

¹²³ Porter, *From Angel to Office Worker*, 221.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

services was maintained. Such an inflexible political posture could be detrimental for the government as losing support from the female work force could hinder the economy. The government eventually agreed to fund the creation of daycare centers in many of its ministries and departments. In light of this context, Izquierdo's iconography is ambiguous. On the one hand, her combination of motherhood and labor mirrored government rhetoric, which simultaneously urged women to be mothers while encouraging them to work in factories. On the other hand, the topic of women labor evoked protests and union power, which the government actively crushed.

The location of the mural in a government department gave additional weight to Izquierdo's iconography as it presented issues that pertained to government policies, ranging from its management of the rural exodus to the cities, its struggle with labor unions, and its treatment of women employees. Despite the growing wealth gap between the white- and blue-collar classes, women working in offices remained on unequal footing relative to their male counterparts since they were paid less than men for the same jobs and could not aspire to a promotion. Reacting to this injustice, Sara Batiza, the executive secretary in the Ministry of Finance, and author of the widely read book *Nosotras, las taquígrafas*, declared that if men could aspire to join the bourgeois class, women remained in the proletariat, both inside and outside the office.¹²⁵ The glaring inequalities within the government administration were made public after the publication of "The Pittance That is Women's Wages" in *El Universal* by renown journalist and women's advocate María Elena Sodi de Pallares. In this article, Sodi de Pallares shed light on the corruption and unfair treatment women received within governmental agencies and provided data showing that female federal employees' earnings were one-third that of men's for

¹²⁵ Ibid., 217.

the same work.¹²⁶ Quickly after its publication, female federal employees petitioned Camacho about the problem of low wages and the high cost of living.¹²⁷ Utilizing a paternalistic language to sustain their fight for equality, they warned the president not to forget the “working mothers of the nation.”¹²⁸ Their plea to Camacho, however, did not remedy the situation. It is in this politically heated context that Izquierdo presented a proposal for the walls of a federal department.

Conclusion

The Camacho administration’s cancellation of the mural project caused irrevocable damage to Izquierdo’s reputation, and she was never hired to paint a public mural for her country again. In post-revolutionary Mexico, the outcome of a public art commissions could establish or damage an artist’s career. As previously mentioned, the Mexican state also benefitted from these projects as successive Mexican governments actively relied on the visual representation of their policies to facilitate their institutionalization and reinforce their legitimacy. In this context, as the project at the Rodriguez Market showed, artists who challenged their stately patron—and notably, the PWD—ran the risk of having their contracts cancelled. Izquierdo’s *Progress of the Nation* was expected to reflect Camacho’s own understanding of his legacy—one marked by a dynamic economy fueled by a Mexican nation allegedly united by a common identity, and ostensibly defending freedom at home and abroad. Aware that their artistic standing depended on their patron’s expectations, Rivera and Siqueiros, though in ways that kept their rivalry alive, endorsed the Camacho’s presidency. Alluding to domestic affairs, Rivera produced at the National Palace a grand mural featuring various indigenous groups paying taxes to the rulers of

¹²⁶ Ibid, 204.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 203.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 221.

Tenochtitlan while participating in its bustling economy. Siqueiros, turning to foreign policies, showed Mexico fighting for liberty and against fascism on the international stage. Though Izquierdo's planned content also referred to the modernization of Mexico's economy and to the nation's mixed-race identity, the logic implied by her pairing of indigenous and modern, as well as past and contemporary, symbols was ambiguous. The Public Works Department was a powerful federal institution located in the *Zócalo*, the center of ancient Tenochtitlan and of modern centralized Mexico. Aware of the importance of such a site, Izquierdo claimed, for the rest of her life, that Rivera and Siqueiros could not tolerate the fact that a woman had been commissioned to paint in such a prestigious building. Though gender prejudice never ceased to undermine her career, it was her proposal that likely caused the cancellation. These two factors are not exclusive but compatible: a woman artist's decision to emphasize female labor likely disturbed an administration at the time wrestling with women workers. In addition, her ambiguous references to the Mexican proletariat and to the finance sector was also problematic for a government promoting political and economic freedom while being in direct confrontation with trade unions and banks. In this light, it comes as no surprise that President Camacho ignored Izquierdo's plea for support and let the project die. Poignantly, the walls on which Izquierdo would have worked remain unpainted. These blank spaces, this study has shown, are the results of censorship from a Camacho government wary of ambiguous representations of its socio-political and economic policies.

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