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Primitivism and Identity in Latin America: The Appropriation of Indigenous Cultures in 20th-Century Latin American Art

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Primitivism and Identity in Latin America

The Appropriation of Indigenous Cultures in 20th-Century Latin American Art

An Honors Thesis presented by

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to The Department of Art History

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Honors in the Major Field

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Introduction

In this thesis, I identify a spectrum of indigenist art in Latin America in the early twentieth century. I begin my analysis of indigenous influences on the contemporary art of Latin America through a discussion of the history and complicated relationships associated with the topic. The foundations of the complex relationship of primitivism in the art of Latin America is based in the idea of *otherness*. The idea of ‘otherness’ is central to sociological analyses of how majority and minority identities are constructed, and in this case, how these identities are formed through visual language. First in chapter one, an explanation of *otherness*, an example of it and its implications for societies will be discussed. Then, a review of the history and reasons for primitivism in Latin America. An analysis of European images of first encounters with the New World will prove how they shaped the way in which the world saw natives of Latin America. This imagery permeated so much that it became a certain ‘truth’ which was centuries later expected to be seen in images of Latin America in order to be defined as ‘good’ art, as will be discussed with a later explanation of ‘authenticity’. Furthermore, in the nineteenth century age of imperialism, an obsession with (stereotyped) national identities also fueled the want for *different*, new forms of art that contained the preconceived ‘truths’ and was made by Latin American people. Thus, primitivism and indigenism was to a degree *required* and thereby forced onto Latin American artists as a means of being accepted in international art communities.

In the second chapter I attempt to define and outline several issues with terms and theories presented in this study. I define the inherently difficult term primitivism, especially relating to the European construct of certain visual attributes projected onto other cultures. This definition is further determined through a historical analysis of colonization and imperialism in a

time of expansion. Central to this argument is a system of unequal power which determines this definition. A major point reached which defines the rest of this thesis, is that primitivism can be understood in different ways within different frameworks depending on the context of each artist, time period, and other assorted variables. Each artist in this study thus creates their own primitivism dependent on stylization which relies on the time period (history), the location (culture), and individual artist. Types of primitivism are aligned by artist based on category. Chronological, cultural, and aesthetic primitivism will be associated with Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Joaquín Torres García, respectively. Oswaldo Guayasamín will be an example of an indigenous cultural counter-gaze, though his work is not without primitivist or indigenist motivations as well. Ana Mendieta is included as an example of the effect of these artists' work. It is important to point out that although I look at several different countries and artists of various backgrounds, the experience of race is distinct and not homogenous in each situation.

Authenticity is examined in terms of what was expected of Latin American artists. Europe demanded a certain level of cultural authenticity which was directed towards making a distinctive style that reflected the 'genius', the 'spirit' and the 'character' of a non-European groups. Nations could only achieve difference through the presentation of anecdotal customs and characteristic scenes. An article, *The Failure of Authenticity*, outlines this call for cultural authenticity: "the European demand for 'authentic' art of the Americas, not 'copied' style or objects of European art." The author continues: "in the visual arts the marginalization of the Latin American cosmopolitan has been effected primarily through one particular discourse, that of cultural authenticity."¹ It is important to note that something is deemed as authentic by popular culture and, regardless of the level of its truth, can produce stereotypes. Stereotypes are

¹ Majluf, page 870

general assumptions and popular ideas about a group of people, which can often be exaggerated or unsound though well ingrained in some circumstances. This fact greatly structures primitivism in Latin America.

Chapter three focuses on some integral artists in the primitivist and indigenist discourse in Latin America. In order of presentation in this thesis, they are Joaquín Torres García, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Oswaldo Guayasamín, and Ana Mendieta. In this study, these five artists are examined for their different uses of primitivism. Joaquín Torres García, living in Europe for a very long period of time, had no direct contact with indigenous peoples and overlooked the identities of indigenous peoples and instead used the European mode (i.e., Cubism) of deriving aesthetic inspirations from pre-Columbian societies. Diego Rivera is studied as a marker of the Mexican muralist movement which worked to reconstruct Mexico and elevate the country's indigenous and pre-Columbian identity to the forefront of Mexican identity. Frida Kahlo is a prime example of re-appropriating indigenous ideologies to both her art and self and thus creating an iconic persona of female and natural power. Reversing roles, Oswaldo Guayasamín, an Ecuadorian artist of indigenous background, made works of social realism highlighting the struggles of the indigenous lower class. At last, Ana Mendieta is examined as a postliminary example of the effects of indigenism in a neo-indigenism and neo-paganism feminist movement that exemplifies a cultural hybridity with deep indigenous roots that is apparent in modern Latin America. Though these artists are criticized for their appropriation of indigenous societies, they also play an integral role in separating Latin America from its European and colonized history.

Despite the fact that I did not initially conceive of this thesis as having a focus on religion, as I delved further into the 20th-century history of the western transformation of material culture items produced in non-western, primarily 'tribal' societies, I found that the objects' status

as ritual or religious items was indeed significant regardless of their categorization as ethnographic artifacts or objects of fine art. Since the objects that westerners considered to be “primitive art” come mainly from societies in Africa, Oceania and the Americas, their provenience (who made them and when they were made) is unknown. This means that art dealers, collectors, and museums need to determine whether such an object is authentic or not based on a different set of criteria than that used for western art.

Additionally, as many of the societies where ‘tribal’ art is and was produced were formerly European colonies, there was at some point some form of western contact, most likely in the form of religious missionaries. When missionaries first encountered these Other objects, in the 18th and 19th centuries, entities such as masks, statues, and things used in various rituals or displayed in temples and other sacred places, were considered to be associated with pagan practices and thus ‘idolatrous’. According to missionaries, the destruction of such objects was a necessary first step towards saving the ‘native heathens’ through the conversion to Christianity.

However, by the early 20th century, with the advent of avant-garde artists and intellectuals, the status of non-western sculpture, masks, and other ritual paraphernalia, began to change. Throughout the 20th century many museum curators and “primitive art” collectors based the authenticity of such art on whether it had been used in traditional religious rituals or was believed to have spiritual value to the people from whom the object had been obtained. Thus, an object’s spiritual value in one cultural context increased the object’s desirability, economically and aesthetically in its western context.

It is also important to understand that the art movement, *Indigenismo*, was always a construction of the dominant culture, particularly that of elite intellectual *mestizos* who used indigenous issues to advance their own political agendas. Although *indigenismo* has

characterized anti-hegemonic intellectual currents, anthropologist Les Field argues it also “may have played a more significant role in serving as a means for political and economic elites to appropriate indigenous cultures for nation-building ideologies that end up maintaining the subaltern status of indigenous peoples.”² Often this ideology was set in the context of an allegedly conservative rural *campesino*-Indigenous population looking to an urban intellectual elite to awaken a dormant revolutionary Indigenous spirit. Nevertheless, these developments elevated Indigenous causes and made them a significant factor for political parties and labor unions. In this way, *indigenismo* became part of *campesino*, worker, and student movements for national and social change.

Indigenistas from this period of classical *indigenismo* that runs roughly from 1900 to 1940 fell into many different categories. For example, archaeologist Manuel Gamio reconstructed Teotihuacán in Mexico in 1909. In art, the famous Mexican painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo created representations of indigenous life. Novelists, such as Rosario Castellanos, depicted indigenous realities in books, such as *Balún-Canán* (1957). Sociologist Pío Jaramillo Alvarado similarly wrote about indigenous life through a nonfiction lens in *El indio ecuatoriano* (1922). Institutionally, Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas organized the First Inter-American Indigenist Congress in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, in 1940, which led to the formation of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (III) with national branches in many American countries. What all of these expressions of *indigenismo* had in common was that educated outsiders, including archaeologists, anthropologists, theologians, novelists, artists, philosophers, politicians, political activists, and others, examined Indigenous realities from their elite, privileged perspectives. This is mostly the perspective from which the artists are working.

² Field, page 243

CHAPTER 1

Precedents for 20th-Century Latin American Art

The Self and the Other

The phenomenon of ethnocentrism is present as a form of self-identification and self-consciousness in a wide variety of social groups. Although first defined by the sociologist William Sumner at the turn of the 19th century, the concept has obviously always been a part of social life. According to the anthropologist Edmund Leach, a “us” and “them” dichotomy stems from the binary opposition between “human” and “non-human”. It is the reason we divide ourselves into “us” – or true people, and “them” – or false people. This division is further deepened by the difficult issue of man’s attitude towards Otherness. This presents a wide range of often conflicting approaches to the Other: from hostile, to neutral, to full of awe and fascination as well as fear. The visual language which unfolds as a result of this relationship is often complex, and these frequently ambiguous attitudes are expressed in different art through the ages. Western culture often dominated as superior and in opposition to Other cultures of the world and preoccupied aesthetic movements for at least 200 years.

The idea of ‘otherness’ is central to the analyses of how majority and minority identities are constructed. This is because the representation of different groups within any given society is controlled by the group that has greater political power (in the age of exploration, this was often European countries). George Herbert Mead’s book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, established that social identities are created through our ongoing social interaction with ‘other’ people and our subsequent self-reflection about who we think we are according to these social exchanges. Mead’s work shows that cultural identities are produced through agreement, disagreement, and

negotiation with other groups (this is also known as the looking glass ‘self’)³. In its simplest terms, Otherness is being anything or anyone that is not ‘me’. Typically otherness is marked by outward differences such as race and gender. As such, otherness has also been associated predominantly with marginalized people, those who by virtue of their difference from the dominant group, have been disempowered, robbed of a voice in the social, religious, and political world. ‘Difference’ in literature is often articulated as either some kind of weakness or superior strength or intellect depending on the sympathies of the dominant cultural voice. For example, (and as a generalization) in colonial literature from Latin America the native is portrayed as either the innocent noble savage or the barbaric cannibal. In visual culture, regardless of the Other being imagined favorably or unfavorably, the image is a construction that often reveals more about the Self than the Other. Furthermore, it is important to note that without the permission from the dominant social group to speak, marginalized people could not tell their own stories, could not define themselves, but rather, submit to the descriptions assigned to them by the dominant group. So not only were they robbed of their voice, they were also robbed of their identity, their sense of self, and their sense of value.

The ‘primitive’, the ultimate sign of alterity, brings images of colonized Africa, Gauguin’s Tahitian images, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso to mind. The classic case of primitivism is of course from Europe looking to Africa in the early 1900s, as the aesthetics of traditional African sculpture became a powerful influence among European artists. While these artists knew nothing of the original meaning and function of the African sculptures they encountered, they recognized the aesthetic value of the works and adapted these qualities to their own efforts to move beyond the naturalism that had defined Western art since the Renaissance.

³ Mead

Colonization in Africa brought back a plethora of artifacts and artworks which were displayed in museums all over Europe, though without information on the objects and random, cluttered displays lead to an inevitable focus on the aesthetics.

As the dominating culture, Europe performed the role of the “Self” and took the voice away from African peoples as they were determined to be the “Other”. Three centuries of the slave trade made Europeans decisively assert that Africans were inferior - a portrayal which helped to justify imperialism in the minds of many Europeans. Even slave abolitionists contributed to this by arguing that Africans had to be "protected" from slavers, meaning that they couldn't take care of themselves. The limited information brought back to Europe by explorers made Africans appear warlike or childlike, and they wrote books and gave lectures that popularized the notion of Africa as "the dark continent." For example, this relatively favorable quotation from a first-time visitor to Africa illustrates the prevailing beliefs among Europeans:

As we steamed into the estuary of Sierra Leone on November 18th [1889], we found Africa exactly as books of travel had led us to anticipate--a land of excessive heat, lofty palm-trees, gigantic baobabs, and naked savages. At five o'clock we dropped anchor at Free Town, called, on account of its deadly fevers, the 'white man's grave.' Immediately, our vessel was surrounded by boats filled with men and women, shouting, jabbering, laughing, quarrelling, and even fighting. ... Without exception it was the most confusedly excited and noisy lot of humanity I have ever seen.⁴

By the late 19th century (between roughly 1875 and 1900) a handful of European nations conquered most of Africa. Since this came after more than three centuries of relatively cooperative trading activity between Europeans and Africans, it represented a significant departure in world history. This "Age of Imperialism" also had long-range consequences including the spread of European languages around the globe, the creation of borders that

⁴ Brown, page 3

sparked many subsequent conflicts, and the construction of institutions that made globalization possible.

Preconditions for South American Visual Culture

The way in which native people were depicted in history influenced many other artists, including those from Other countries. Primitivism within Other countries, such as Central and South America, further complicates the story and social scheme. Though primitivism has been uncovered as a form of depicting the Other and thereby as a project or construction necessary for establishing the modernity of the West, it continued to appear in art within the Central and South America.

The first museums in Europe were founded in the mid to late seventeenth century. By this time, the European colonization of the New World, Africa, and Asia was in full progress, and many of the great objects of the ancient world were being brought back to Europe, primarily for their value in gold and precious jewels. While missionaries and conquistadors plundered, looted, and burned the great temples, libraries, and palaces of the civilizations they conquered and subverted, the flow of cultural artifacts and literature to Europe gradually began to develop an academic interest. In the nineteenth century, the schools of Archaeology, Anthropology, and Ethnography began a systematic documentation and analysis of the old world and ancient cultures, including their temples, languages, art, ritual, and religion, which was closely related to cultural history. This appropriation of cultural and scientific documentation strongly determined how Europe saw the New World. Artists at this time would often create images of the New World through descriptions and objects in European museums.

European imagery of the New World (as the Self looking to the Other) greatly affected the discourse in which indigenous people were to be perceived. In the sixteenth century age of

discovery, the expansion of the known world, to western civilization, opened the artistic discourse to a wider repertory. A classic example of a European depiction of Latin America is the engraving entitled *The Discovery of America* (ca. 1580) by Theodoor Galle. Modeled after a drawing by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1575), it represents Amerigo Vespucci "discovering" America. Here a naked woman, crowned with feathers, raises herself from her hammock to meet the gaze of the armored and robed man who has just come ashore.

This image is a powerful visualization of the ideology of colonialism. This recumbent figure, now discovered and roused from her torpor, is about to be hailed, claimed, and possessed as *America*. It can also be seen to echo ideas of primitivism in Western Culture as America is lazily reclining nude and inattentive at the arrival of Vespucci. The theme of laziness is discreetly amplified by the presence of a sloth, which looks upon the scene of awakening from a shaded spot in the tree behind America. Vespucci carries with him the various empowering ideological and technological instruments of civilization, exploration, and conquest: a cruciform staff with a banner bearing the Southern Cross, a navigational astrolabe, and a sword-- the mutually reinforcing emblems of belief, empirical knowledge, and violence⁵. At the left, behind Vespucci, the prows of the ships that facilitate the expansion of European hegemony enter the pictorial space of the New World.

Behind America, on the right, representatives of the indigenous fauna are displayed as if emerging from American inland. In the distance, close to the picture's vanishing point, a group of naked people, potential subjects of the civilizing process, are preparing a cannibal feast. A severed human haunch is being cooked over the fire; another, already spitted, awaits its turn. In terms of the pictorial space, this scene of cannibalism is distanced, pushed into the background;

⁵ Certeau, pages xxv-xxvi

in terms of the pictorial surface, however, it is placed at the center of the visual field, between the mutual gazes of Americus and America, and directly above the latter's outstretched arm. The elements of savagery, deceit, and cannibalism central to the emergent European discourse on the inhabitants of the New World are already in place in this very early example.

Over time, as the Other gained more power (and more European descendants moved to the New World), new social hierarchies formed and changed the dynamics. A rejection of primitivism in the twentieth century allowed it to reappear in new, more acceptable forms. Victor Li of the University of Toronto describes a theoretical “neo-primitivism” as a contemporary version of primitivism in which the “critical repudiation of earlier primitivist discourses paradoxically enables their re-introduction”, under different *culturally acceptable* names and configurations as “cultural, political, ethical and aesthetic alternatives to Western modernity”⁶ (This idea will be further discussed later). Neo-primitivist discourses ignore or forget their own repeated warnings against the pitfalls of earlier forms of primitivism, thereby reproducing the very same problems they have warned us against. Thus, it can be categorized as an anti-primitivist primitivism that simultaneously disavows and reinscribes the primitive. Though neo-primitivism questions primitivism, it exhibits deep primitivist logic.⁷

In Latin America, the Other group was always considered to be its indigenous inhabitants by the Self (Europeans and European descendants in Latin America). Though many Europeans settled in the New World, all people living in Latin America were seen by the West as Other, to different degrees. Latin American countries have often had miscegenation, and even small amounts of European ancestry could entail significant upwards social mobility. When Spanish and Portuguese colonies were established in Central and South America a caste system formed.

⁶ Li, page ix

⁷ Ibid, page x

A person's social class was directly tied to how "pure" their blood was and place of birth. The Europeans looked at all people in Latin America as Other while within these countries, the caste system reinforced the *real* Other as being indigenous and African peoples. While some European artists were influenced by *l'arte nègre* and indigenous art, a new track of Latin Americans making art within the new world also began. The continuous praxis of Eurocentric discourses lead to the representation of cultural dichotomies that emphasized the notion of European superiority (and is exemplified in the influential Argentine novel *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarianism* of 1845, which will be discussed in Chapter 3). This reflects the civilizing mission of European powers, as well as the fear of racial and cultural hybridity that clearly posed a threat to this race-based ideology. Rather than European artists gaze upon the 'savages' of the New World, people living in Central and South America started creating art looking for the roots of their individual country that thereby separated them from Europe.

Reviving Interest in Indigenous Latin America

The preconditions for hybridity in South America are numerous and varied. In the 1520s, when Spain conquered parts of Central America, several written languages were used and continued into the 1600s as Hispanicization developed. Some eyewitness accounts and the later tradition of indigenous inspired literature were the only preserved elements of the pre-Columbian traditions. Despite relative interest in societies such as the Aztecs, Hispanicization eventually defined pre-Columbian history as non-existent. Although the exact pre-contact population of the Americas is unknown, it is generally agreed that the number of Native American populations diminished can be estimated between 80 and 90% within the first centuries of contact with Europeans. To reinforce a new history that began with Cortés' victory, many native monuments were deliberately destroyed by colonizing European countries. However, a creole culture

eventually crept its way into the society and became a distinct aspect of national pride by the late half of the eighteenth century. In a recurrent critique of the Eurocentric world, these groups claimed pre-Columbian cultures as a part of national history.

European interest in pre-Columbian societies was stimulated in part with the works of Alexander von Humboldt and his travels through the Americas in the early 1800s. Political independence movements in South America began right after, in about 1806. At the same time European interest in pre-Columbian history was rising, countries across the Americas were gaining independence and power. English, French, and American explorers searched jungles for unknown cities and temples. Probably the most famous adventure trip books were by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood - two great explorers who documented the ruins from Copán in the south to Chichen Itza in the north and will forever be linked to Mayan studies. In his book, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, Stephens wrote of his first impressions of the ancient ruin of Copán:

Diverging from the base, and working our way through the thick woods, we came upon a square stone column, about 14 feet high and three feet on each side, sculptured in very bold relief, and all four sides, from the base to the top...The back was of a different design, unlike anything we had ever seen before, and the sides were covered with hieroglyphics. This our guide called an 'Idol' and before it, at a distance of three feet, was a large block of stone, also sculptured with figures and emblematical devices, which he called an altar. (See figure 2)

The popular sharing of these publications such as the descriptions and illustrations by Frederick Catherwood brought the indigenous societies of Latin America to the forefront and began an interest in studying ancient societies such as the Maya.

Imperial Obsession with the Other

A competition of “internationality” between different countries raged on at this time as the first world’s fairs were set up in England and then France. So eager were the French to be on

the forefront of new worldly knowledge that “The French government financed Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg’s preparation and publication of two enormously important literary sources of information about Pre-Columbian civilization, which he had recovered on his travels to Mexico and Central America during the 1840s and 1850s: Bishop Diego de Landa’s 16th century accounts of the Yucatán, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, and the *Popol Vuh*, the great epic of the Quiché Maya people.”⁸ However, the Spanish friar, Diego De Landa, is considered to be both a benefactor and a scoundrel. After reaching the Yucatán in 1549, only seven years after the Spanish conquest, Landa sought intimate contact with the natives to gain knowledge of their native religion, practices, and life in his zealotry to learn, understand and destroy it. He is most famously responsible for the burning of many Maya codices and a detailed description of Maya society at the village of Mani in the Yucatan. Almost immediately, Landa's contemporaries expressed deep disappointment in the wanton destruction of records that contained the history, rituals, and customs of the native people. The natives were obviously devastated with the loss, but this would not be the only time natives faced cruelty from Westerners. Ironically, Landa’s *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* is a foundation of Maya archaeology studies just as Father Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* is the foundation to the Aztec field.

After London hosted the first international exposition in 1851 the new Emperor Napoleon III realized that France needed to seize back the initiative and surpass England’s Crystal Palace. The motive given for the 1855 Paris exposition was to celebrate forty years of peace in Europe. A hidden agenda, however, was the competition among the major European nations, to establish

⁸ Braun, page 26

their industrial and artistic supremacy. Napoleon III even decided that France needed a spectacular structure "based on the plan of the Crystal Palace of London."⁹ Prince Napoléon in his speech to the Emperor at the opening ceremonies of the 1855 Universal Exposition said: "You wanted the first years of your reign to be crowned by an Exposition of the entire world, following the traditions of the first Emperor, for the idea of Exposition is eminently French..."¹⁰ There was much national pride put into the planning and execution of the show, and the French pushed to have a new innovative part, a "Universal Exposition of Art in addition to that of Industry"¹¹ in anticipation of establishing the cultural superiority of France.

Nonetheless, the new arts section was not fully welcome as a new implementation of entrance fees was put into practice. This created many controversies and complaints; a journalist from *L'Illustration* wrote for instance that "Ces allures fiscales, en pareil lieu, sont en contradiction avec la noble hospitalité que la France avait coutume d'exercer" (These tax incentives, by the same token, contradict the noble hospitality that France was accustomed to exercise).¹² There was a fight between old aristocratic and new capitalist values in a government memorandum on the Universal Exposition pleaded for retention of free admission for art if not for industry. In the end, however, art was not to be distinguished from industry, it would cost "five francs for each during May and one day a week thereafter...No one attended on the five franc days but some tarts and five or six lords and ladies. As a result, the price was dropped to two francs in August. Regular admission was one franc and on Sundays, twenty centimes."¹³ With the new fees and the focus on industry, "the public was less willing to pay to

⁹ Lavedan, page 228

¹⁰ Great Britain, Imperial Commission. Paris Universal Exhibition, 1855. Chapman and Hall, 1855.

¹¹ Mainardi, Part I

¹² *L'Illustration*, Paris, 1855-05-19

¹³ Mainardi, Part II

see the expositions of art than that of industry: there were 4,180,117 visitors at the Palais de l'Industrie, 935,601 at the Palais de Beaux-Arts."¹⁰

Regardless of the cost and visitors, the exhibition was the first time the contemporary art of the world was gathered together. Foreign art had hitherto been known in France only through engravings or the occasional painting or sculpture that found its way into the Salon or picture shops. "As the French rarely visited other countries, they had little first-hand experience, and thus were dependent on the evaluations of critics who travelled. Now, for the first time, they would be able to see and compare the art, to form their own opinions."¹⁴ In fact, Patricia Mainardi argues, "the critic became even more important than ever, for, alone and unprepared, the visitor would be unable to make sense out of this enormous display."¹⁵ The show encompassed the art of 28 countries that were being presented in contrast to French aesthetics. In total, there were over five thousand works by almost two thousand artists.¹⁶

The exposition's official guides were simply lists, forcing visitors to look to writings of critics and artists to prepare themselves beforehand. Fortunately, nineteenth-century France witnessed the flowering of the salon essay as a prose genre. This phenomenon was made possible by the then popular belief that any cultivated person was qualified to judge the arts. Salon essays, appearing in the press as serial articles during the months the exhibition was held, later were often published in book form, while some lengthy salon essays appeared in this format initially. There was an astounding wide variety of articles published by practically any Parisian journal and revue that was designed to lead the public gently through the exhibition universelle: "Every shade of political and aesthetic opinion was represented in the press, albeit muffled to escape

¹⁴ Mainardi, Chapter 10

¹⁵ Mainardi, page 66

¹⁶ Majluf, page 871

censorship, the average French citizen, whether legitimist, clerical, Orleanist, liberal, republican or socialist, could receive, along with political news, the appropriate aesthetic opinion.”¹⁷ In spite of this, an area that lacked any significant amount of critical attention was the art from foreign countries. “In truth, no one in France liked any of the foreign art on display in 1855.”¹⁶

However, an interesting idea comes out of this art criticism boom as shown in Claude Vignon's salon essay which reveals the critic's own conception of her discursive role. In her prefatory "General Overview," Vignon sets forth her perception of the role art criticism should play in French cultural life:

It is necessary that it be able to maintain impartiality, which is its strength, and, at the same time, make itself [be] as kind as possible to everything and to all. Indeed, if it forgets one moment to be just, even at the risk of being cruel, what will be its value? And if, on the other hand, appreciating conscientious works from a too elevated and too independent viewpoint, it concerns itself little with the artist in order to consider only art in general, what good will it do for the exhibitors, and what lessons will it give to the public, in forming its taste and determining its choice?¹⁸

The tension between objectivity and subjectivity that Vignon perceives to be at the heart of art criticism results from her conception of its moral role. She argues that in order to be just art criticism must be impartial, in order to fulfill its pedagogic mission it must also be engaged. This pedagogic function included instructing artists in ways to improve their art, forming the public's taste and influencing the decisions of collectors or others interested in purchasing art works.

Effect on Latin American Artists

Most of the 28 national exhibitions were grouped together by the critics as “the minor Schools” and received little critical attention but allowed a contrast to comparatively define French art. The foreign displays were representative but conservative. In the mid-1800s, the area

¹⁷ Mainardi, page 67

¹⁸ Vignon, page 12.

that we now call 'Latin America' was categorized as 'derivative' as there was no term to designate this large area of the world yet.¹⁹ This geographic determinism set a mental precedent that carried predetermined opinions about anything Latin American. Their cosmopolitans were expected to have a different culture, painting or language - something different from that of the modern West as they had learned existed from adventure writings by authors like John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood. But these cosmopolitans had no other culture, nor could they speak in another tongue as they were European descendants. They sought to be included as the same but the international community systematically rejected any signs of sameness.

The many studies of the exhibition universelle fail to mention the Latin Americans involved in the 1855 exposition, "For only six works by three painters were exhibited out of a total of over five thousand works by almost two thousand artists."²⁰ Only Mexico and Peru participated in the exhibition, however, their minor presence is "countered by the symbolic importance they held within the exhibition as markers of cultural difference."²¹ Though there was not much response to this first exhibition, Napoleon III financed an ornate exploration for Brasseur to collect Pre-Columbian antiquities along a scientific expedition on the occasion of the French invasion of Mexico in 1864. Charles Wiener's 1875 expedition to Peru yielded around four thousand objects and many more missions up to 1900 continued the imperial collection.

By the mid-19th century there was a diverse array of stylistic possibilities being explored and thereby a push for new artistic genres leading to an inevitable eclecticism created by globalization. An article by Natalia Majluf, titled "Ce n'est pas le Pérou" (Failure of Authenticity) is one of the only sources available to outline the experience of the three Latin

¹⁹ Mainardi

²⁰ Majluf

²¹ Majluf, "Ce n'est pas le Pérou," pages 868-893

American artists at the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle. According to Majluf, out of the three Latin American painters, only one received any attention from critics. Francisco Laso's *Inhabitant of the Peruvian Highlands*, was painted for the 1855 exhibition, three decades after Peru proclaimed its independence (see figure 3). It represents, in a sense, the return of the repressed. The painting shows a man holding a Moche pot depicting a prisoner with his hands tied behind his back, and a rope knotted around his neck. Displayed alongside a portrait of the conquistador Pizarro, it was a clear reference to the oppression of natives, past and present. The increase in archaeological publication provided a rich trove of imagery for artists and their work as globalization was beginning. Francisco Laso incorporated a representation of an indigenous ceramic vessel as a pivot around which he explored complex ideas about ancient history, the subjugation of native populations, and Peruvian national identity.²² Regardless of its meaning, “the piece was reproduced as an engraving in *L'Illustration* and *Magasin pittoresque*, caricatured in the *Journal pour rire*, and discussed by most of the leading critics of the period.”²³ This piece was not of interest for the artist's technical abilities but rather it “satisfied certain demands for difference—that, even if only the level of content, the painting could be claimed as an ‘authentic’ work”¹⁶ (We will return many times to this idea of authenticity). Vignon's argument that critics can and should instruct artists to improve their art and form the public's taste thereby greatly affected these Latin American artists. The crave for “authenticity” in international artworks demanded by European critics allowed the single painting that portrayed a native to be somewhat successful and thereby set the precedent for all of Latin American art's reception in the west.

However, a strong reaction against European philosophic and aesthetic values takes place in the mid twentieth century. It acts as an attempt to undermine imperialism by breaking down

²² Ibid

²³ Majluf, page 876

the boundaries between “developed” (Self) and “underdeveloped” (Other) societies. Oswald de Andrade’s famous “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928), also known as the “Cannibalist Manifesto”, proved a new and uniquely Brazilian style that worked to exhibit themes of anti-colonialism, Brazilian modernism/nationalism, and tribalistic primitivism. In it, he declared a modernist notion of cannibalism that was a declaration of Brazilianness through cultural cannibalism. He believed that Brazil’s greatest strength rested in its ability to “cannibalize” other cultures by incorporating them, re-appropriating them, and regurgitating them as an entirely new and unique creation. De Andrade thus metaphorically cannibalizes figures such as Freud and Shakespeare. The most defining and significant aspect of de Andrade’s thought was the constant juxtaposition of colonizing, European, violent, and evil interests to the native, indigenous, local, natural, and good Brazilian interests. He lived in a country struggling to create its own national identity and which had been paralyzed by the imposing superstructures of Portuguese thought. De Andrade’s primitivism was a response to that colonial power; a “return” in time and ideology to what was native to the country before European corruption. He demonstrated the worthiness of “primitive” culture (using “primitive” as a tongue-in-cheek label of the original cultures which European settlers had labeled as such) and the necessity of Brazil to create a new tribal identity. He thus is an active cannibal, that “neither apes nor rejects European culture, but ‘devours’ it, adapting its strengths and incorporating them into the native self.”²⁴ Though this is an example of Brazilian resistance to colonial history and by no means is the same in all places, it underscores the attempt to reappropriate offensive language and stereotypes associated with the New World.

²⁴ Andrade, pages 38-47

CHAPTER 2

Ideologies behind Primitivism

“It is important to analyze how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense”

-James Clifford “The Predicament of Culture” (1988)

Defining ‘Primitive’ in Latin America

It is important to recognize that in the 19th century, Europeans described and borrowed from a variety of styles deemed as primitive, including archaic Greek, medieval, Egyptian and Pre-Columbian art. It was a construct projected onto others by Europeans. Primitive art, as the notion developed during the eighteenth century, would be more accurately described as a collection of visual attributes that Europeans construed to be universally characteristic of early, or primal artistic expression. The discussion of primitivism in modern art and aesthetics must then begin with the invention of primitive art itself, a set of ideas.

The growing popularity of African art in Europe in the early twentieth century led a number of artists to the conclusion that such objects had been drained of value for their radical agenda, precipitating a search for new sources of inspiration. Artistic groups in Europe, such as the Surrealists, turned instead to the indigenous arts of the South Seas and the Americas, perceiving in these cultures a spiritual, vital essence and magical allure akin to their own artistic aspirations. The fixation with the ‘unconscious’ and fascination with dreams, myth, ritual, animism and the occult drew them to these mystical objects and sought to channel their powers. It was not only among the Surrealists, however, that the arts of the Americas were gaining attention. *Les arts anciens de l’Amérique*, an exhibition held in the Louvre’s Pavillon de Marsan in 1928 featuring almost a thousand objects from across Southern and Central America, greatly advanced public awareness of these cultures.

In the same year, related articles and photographic illustrations began to appear in the recently established journal, *Cahiers d'art* (dedicated to painting, sculpture, architecture, ancient art, ethnography, and cinema).²⁵ The heightened interest in the arts of the Americas was further reflected in the increasing frequency with which such objects could be seen in shops of curiosity, galleries, and private collections. Complicating this newfound interest in arts of the Western hemisphere was France's colonial history in the Americas (as discussed in relation to the 1855 World's Fair Exhibition in Paris) and the retention after the loss of its colonies early in the nineteenth century of the country's "nostalgic attachment" to the first Americans.²⁶ This history is further confounded by an unsystematic intermingling of ancient and contemporary cultures from the Americas and a inclination in popular culture to mix non-Western objects with a notion of *l'art nègre*.²⁷ This ill-conceived comprehension of indigenous arts from the Western hemisphere extended to institutional classifications that deemed pre-Columbian objects ethnographic and classified them as "primitive" rather than as ancient art, which was the terminology applied to material of comparable age from China, Egypt, and India. The ambiguous place these objects occupied—as the work of either "savage" or "highly civilized" peoples—presented, as Elizabeth Williams notes, a "profound enigma" for the contemporary art world. She concludes:

[the] final task of revaluation of the arts americana was accomplished only in the wake of the 'primitivist revolution' in European aesthetics, a process set in motion by avant-garde artists who appear to have been little indebted to previous endeavors of ethnographic labors among the 'primitive arts'.²⁸

²⁵ Journal archive on website <http://www.cahiersdart.fr/history>

²⁶ Boym

²⁷ In a 1912 article published in *Comoedia*, the French art critic André Warnod was probably the first to use the term *l'art nègre* to refer to African and Oceanic art. Georges Henri Rivière and Alfred Métraux, eds., *Les arts anciens de l'Amérique*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Musée du Louvre (1928).

²⁸ Williams, page 148

It was indeed the embrace of arts of the Americas by European artists that served as a catalyst for the surge in interest in the “New World”, especially after the First World War. One of the earliest proponents in Paris of the modernity of pre-Columbian art was George Sakier (1897-1988), an American graphic and industrial designer and painter whose role in this development has been largely absent in scholarship from this period. An avid collector of Mayan art, he joined the wave of literary, performing, and visual artists who were drawn to the city following the war. In a 1923 article for the international magazine *Broom*, published on the Left Bank by its American editor Matthew Josephson, Sakier wrote: “Today, when a new order of artists is trying to rescue art from the morass of misused realism and to bring direction to an inchoate aesthetic, Maya art particularly recommends itself.” His knowledge of Mayan art influenced a small circle of Dada artists, including Paul Eluard and Hans Arp, and his writings on the topic allegedly stimulated the rescue of a collection of Mesoamerican objects from the basement of the Trocadéro.

Through the lens of their own society, many modern artists looked both to the art and to the worldview of the primitive as a means of challenging established beliefs, yet the primitive to which they turned was as varied as the movements of modern art. So what is primitive? Today, ‘primitivism’ is considered a derogatory term, connoting the 20th century Western attitude towards the presumed “inferiority” of non-Western art. Primitivism refers to the abiding belief that non-Western cultures and peoples of color were, by definition, primal, uncivilized, and in need of the civilizing influences of European powers. Primitive images “generally focus on what their creators perceive as their subject’s savage nature. Emphasizing, for instance, disheveled appearances or wild behavior, like the practice of cannibalism, these pictorial constructions imply native irrationality, aggression, and mystery—characterizations that generally succeed in

coaxing fear and loathing...”²⁹ Primitivism has today become equated with imperialism, colonialism, and the exploitation of the Other by the West. A more polite term that has replaced primitivism is “tribal art,” indicating an indigenous art by non-Western peoples. However, it is important to note two little discussed facts: first, that the so-called “native” art came from colonized peoples and second, this art was often made expressly for the tourist trade and/or had been altered by Western influences. “Primitive” is a relative term, it constantly changes and forms to new cultures. Michael Bell suggests that “any attempt to define this term should proceed with a cautious respect for its natural untidiness, without imposing too rigid a theoretical grid.”³⁰ I thereby will attempt to further define it through its historical relevance.

Colonialism as a Catalyst of Primitivism

The West’s drive to conquer and exploit new lands fused myths, histories, and cultures after European projected speculations and fantasies about the ‘other’. The assimilation of war spoiled objects took place on western terms, meaning no ideas or information that would shift or dissolve the western preconceptions about the ‘other’ cultures would be digested. Delia Cosentino examines the mixing of native imagery and Christian teachings at the service of evangelization as the first step of Latin America primitivism. “Colonialism, in fact, lies at the heart of theories about Primitivism” according to historian Colin Rhodes.³¹ The colonial enterprise starting in the fifteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth provided knowledge and objects from ‘new’ cultures. This enterprise within a system of unequal power relations “which determined that the primitive, or more often in contemporary writings, ‘the

²⁹ Consentino, page 41

³⁰ Camayd-Freixas, page 109

³¹ Rhodes, page 6

savage' was invariably the dominated partner."³² During European colonial expansion, "some religious primitivists found [native Latin Americans'] 'uncorrupted nature' ideal for creating new Christians without European vices and were ready to translate Christian teachings into remotely similar Indian images."³³ The imposition of a constructed identity on the native peoples for the means of a spiritual conquest was best impressed by mixing Christianity with symbols, people, and ideas already familiar to them. Thereby, "a complex mix of western projection and native contribution held together by some culturally converging, idealized concepts" began to form.³⁴ In the most general sense, this can be read as the foundation for the mixing of native cultures in Latin America that slowly grows more complex.

"Primitivism does not designate an organized group of artists, or even an identifiable style arising at a particular historical moment, but rather brings together artists' various reactions to ideas of the primitive."³⁵ Artists look beyond the conventions of their own culture for many reasons which will be investigated throughout this thesis. Primitivism is therefore layers of different ideas artists held about the primitive and of the uses to which they were put. Rhodes points out the diverse applicability of Primitivism:

The diverse issues raised by Primitivism extend far beyond the use in modern European art of images and styles appropriated from Africa, Oceania or other remote and exotic culture that have, at time, been designated as 'primitive'³⁶

Thereby, primitivism is not only the European gaze to Africa, Asia, and Oceania but can be applied in numerous situations. Rhodes further defines primitive as sometimes being found in the

³² Rhodes

³³ Camayd-Freixas, page xi

³⁴ Camayd-Freixas, page x

³⁵ Rhodes, page 8

³⁶ Rhodes, pages 10-11

Western world as “peasants, children, the insane and even women!” Though he does not mention Latin America, he outlines the attraction to the primitive:

There is a fascination with ‘exotic’ subjects, as in Orientalist painting, from the nineteenth century to Matisse and after. The yearning for the mystical and the mythic is apparent in contemporary art. All of these elements have been called ‘primitive’³⁷

The ‘primitive’ can thus be understood in different ways within different frameworks depending on the context of each artist, time period, and other assorted variables. Each artist creates their own primitivism dependent on stylization which is reliant on time period (history), the location (culture), and individual artist.

Chronological, Cultural, and Aesthetic Primitivism

Primitivism “is a theory that enables differences to be described in qualitative terms” according to Rhodes³⁸. This theory is easily amendable, allowing each artist to adapt perspectives of the primitive that they then conform to their art. Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas established an early distinction in their book, *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), between chronological and cultural primitivisms. Chronological primitivism is a philosophical history that marks the height of human civilization in ancient beginnings (a cultural golden age). While the foundational roots of primitivism could be said to be that of Greek antiquity, other cultures have had their golden age societies: Tahuantinsuyu for Incas and Tula for Aztecs, for example. As long as a society studies and honors history, primitivism will always be a part of the equations as “testimonial peoples...are susceptible to that nostalgic, idealizing, backward haze.”³⁹ Cultural primitivism is a cultural ideology; the dissatisfaction of modern society with its complexity and thereby an attitude that a

³⁷ Rhodes, page 7

³⁸ Rhodes, page 13

³⁹ Camayd- Freixas, page x

simple, elementary and natural life offers greater freedom and moral wholeness. This often means seeking a way of life that is exotic or “natural” –as is evident in native people who still survive in a “state of nature” preserved by remote isolation. A third category suggested by Erik Camayd-Freixas in an essay on narrative primitivism is an “aesthetic” primitivism. This is a “plain and simple matter of ‘taste’ for primitive forms and archaic sensibilities” most commonly seen in the plastic arts since the avant-garde⁴⁰. In other words, the aesthetic primitivism is a stylistic choice in which artists use nominally primitive artifacts as models for developments in their own work. Chronological, cultural, and aesthetic primitivism are rarely ever found in pure theoretical forms as each work, artist, and period shows new combinations and affiliations of the categories. However, I will attempt to align artists as examples of each of the three.

Development of Modern Primitive Theories in Latin America

As Rhodes discussed the attraction to the primitive, he explained a “fascination with the ‘exotic’” and “mythic” which are considered ‘primitive’. On top of this, the ‘primitive’ can be considered ‘childish’ or ‘underdeveloped’. The primitive in Latin America was seen in Europe along the lines of being the new, colonized land of underdeveloped or ‘archaic’ peoples who are savage, sometimes even cannibals, with strange customs and mystical powers not so different from Brothers Grimm tales. These commonly accepted ‘facts’ of the New World’s people developed largely due to the repeated imagery set by the colonizing powers; “a body of representations whose use of visual imagery and words trace the contours of the complex and conflictive relationships between colonial power and that which it sought to dominate.”⁴¹ An

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Schreffler, page 295

image can be repeated and believed to be true as a stereotype because it is disseminated through popular culture as the ‘first’ image which thus becomes ‘truth’ through replication.

The early writings on “primitivism,” such as *Primitivism in Modern Art* by Robert Goldwater, equated non-Western art with that of “undeveloped” people, such as children, and usually in reference to art of Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Goldwater also attempted to point out that this equation was made by the art world of pre-war Paris and that the art of Africans was considered the most sophisticated and beautifully crafted. “Primitivism” was again a sort of state of mind or a mindset on the part of certain artists who were looking for new ideas, according to Goldwater. African art was considered to be “discovered” in Paris around 1904, by artists such as the notable André Derain and Pablo Picasso. The sources and sightings included the Musée de l’Homme and artifacts purchased by travelers. It is highly unlikely that any of the first ‘primitive’ inspired artists knew or cared about the original (and probably lost) meanings of the tribal works or about how the art might have functioned in tribal societies. Artistic creation behind “primitivism” consisted of seizing upon new ideas and absorbing the concepts and adapting the tribal for the avant-garde. As such, there is a “extreme scarcity of the direct influence of primitive art forms” according to Goldwater. By this he means to say “there is little that is not allusion and suggestion rather than immediate borrowing.”⁴² This latter point is the only of which I can fully agree in the case of Latin America. Earlier studies on primitivism concentrated on how Western subjects have used the rhetoric of primitivism to ideologically justify their exaltation of non-Western cultures, and concomitant critique of the West, or their often implicit discrimination against their cultural outgroups. In Latin America (a largely

⁴² Goldwater, page xxi. (Earlier versions of this writing were part of his dissertation subject, on primitivism and modern art, which was suggested by Richard Offner)

understudied example), subjects employ a Western construct to look at themselves and appropriate it for their own purposes.

The largest scale exhibition on this topic was the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition in 1984 titled "Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of Tribal and Modern" which demonstrated that the major literary and artistic movements of modernism and postmodernism are grounded in the contested terrain of the term 'primitivism'. But this exhibition ignored Pre-Columbian influences and the exhibition catalogue by William Rubin justified this exclusion by claiming it to be a "court" or "archaic society, that is, an avowedly higher, yet not fully high culture, akin to Egypt, Persia, or Cambodia."⁴³ Yet, it is the primitive in Latin America that clearly influences some European artists but even more so the aspiring artists of Latin America. What happens to the concept of the primitive when considered from the location of those supposedly tainted with the very characteristics of primitivism? As pointed out by Erik Camayd-Freixas and José Eduardo Gonzalez in their book *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America*, by virtue of the historical effects of colonization that continue to operate at multiple levels, Latin American primitivism includes a "tenor" distinct from that of its metropolitan counterpoint. "It posits itself as the returning gaze of the colonized, a re-appropriation of identity that lays claim to the rhizomorphous continuity of multiple cultural origins."⁴⁴ The forming of identity is a complex subject that started with the artistic shift of stylistic choices to include native influences in a similar manner to that of European artists.

For much of Latin America, the ensuing transculturation of European primitivism since the avant-garde is characterized by a shift from a psychoanalytic (individual and universalist) to an anthropological (collective and regionalist) outlook. This shift responded to a desire for finding Latin American identity in a non-Western cultural substrate or otherwise founding an identity based on difference... [which was spurred

⁴³ Braun, page 11

⁴⁴ Camayd-Freixas, page x

post-WWI from the Mexican Revolution, the coincidental rise of African ethnology and re-Columbian archaeology].⁴⁵

This provides an angle from which to reconsider the meaning of a regional or continental identity and its “autochthonous expression”⁴⁶ together with ideologies such as Magical Realism, syncretism, transculturation, and hybridity which have shaped the Latin American discourse.

Authenticity and Truth Value

Latin America in the twentieth century saw the emergence of diverse artistic styles as powerful political and social instruments. The impact of globalization on culture and artistic production, including on the one hand, the tendency toward cultural homogenization and increase fragmentation and distinction on the other. The increased artistic investment in the construction on “national cultures” and the appropriation of indigenous arts into national identity through the blending into popular art movements. Later on, in the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘pure’ indigenous art became a part of “cultural capitalism” in which non-material objects started to become exploited as drivers of economic growth.⁴⁷ The new (but limited) global context in the twentieth century results in a complex grappling with this shift. Many of the artistic movements dealing with this topic assert a reinvented cultural authenticity that simultaneously participates in and resists national rhetoric and international interest. By “authenticity” here it means local and artistic creative autonomy, the persistence of the expertise of the artist and artistic communities as authorities, the continuity of local meanings and referents, and the efficacy of the arts as a site of political critique and resistance. Natalia Majluf’s

⁴⁵ Camayd-Freixas, page 111

⁴⁶ Sacken, pages 86-88

⁴⁷ Yúdice

article speaks of cultural authenticity as something that “could not be borrowed” for it was “nontransferable cultural property” that was meant to “be” and represent the people it was made by. “This character” according to Majluf, “could be variously established by a philosophic tendency, geographical determinants, or political traditions.”⁴⁸ An outside person or groups of people “rejected imitation” and searched for “distinctive characters” of work. Thereby, the Western trained artists living between South American cosmopolitans and Europe were immediately rejected and forced to develop a unique style that established “the national difference that critics sought.”⁴⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, who logged his extensive travels in Latin America from 1799 to 1804, wrote and published in an enormous set of volumes over 21 years following the explorations. In his work *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, Humboldt reinvented South America first and foremost as nature: “Not the accessible, collectible, recognizable, categorizable nature...but a dramatic, extraordinary nature... a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding.”⁵⁰ With support from the Spanish government Humboldt and French botanist Aimé Bonpland were guaranteed support and passage through Spain’s New World viceroyalties for a scientific adventure that would take them through what is now Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba. What they learned about the physical landscapes, peoples, and economies of Spanish America, especially the little studied interior of South America, advanced the world’s knowledge of the region and transformed how Europeans perceived the New World. Humboldt furthermore describes the New World as a nature that “dwarfs humans, commands their being, arouses their passion, defies their powers of perception.”⁵¹ The human was so

⁴⁸ Majluf, page 885

⁴⁹ Majluf, page 886

⁵⁰ Humboldt

⁵¹ Humboldt

miniaturized by the cosmic concept of nature according to Humboldt that in many of his portraits, such as Friedrich Georg Weitsch's 1806 portrait, he is often depicted engulfed by either nature or his own library which describes it (see figure 4). In the background of Weitsch's piece, Humboldt is shown in front of Venezuela's Orinoco River, which he explored at the beginning of the Latin American trip.

Nature thus became a prime marker of difference and a reason why Laso's *Inhabitant of the Cordillera of Peru* was critically acceptable. The Andes mountain chain (a *cordillera*) was one of a repertoire of images that came to signify "South America" during the transition period of 1810-1850. As argued by scholar Mary Louise Pratt in the book *Imperial Eyes* there were three images "all canonized by Humboldt's *Views* [that] combined to signify the standard metonymic representation of the 'new continent'."⁵² Of these three were the "superabundant tropical forests (the Amazon and the Orinoco), snow-capped mountains (the Andean Cordillera and the volcanoes of Mexico), and vast interior plains (the Venezuelan *llanos* and the Argentine pampas)."⁵³ However, Humboldt wrote and thought of South America beyond these images though it was Europe that took the primal nature images elaborated in his scientific works and "codified [them] in the European imaginary as the new ideology of the 'new continent'."⁵⁴ Thus, nineteenth century Europeans reinvented the Americas as nature. This is partially due to how the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans had invented America for themselves and also eighteenth century writers such as Humboldt, though more self-conscious of the connections between nature and man, still wrote of America as a primal world of nature, as an "unclaimed

⁵² Pratt, page 125

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Humboldt

and timeless space occupied by plants and creatures, but not organized by societies and economies; a world whose only history was the one about to begin.”⁵⁵

Inhabitant of the Cordillera of Peru was thus an image of the new nation that began to be disseminated in books, photos, and postcards. However, the image of the Indian was slow to emerge and when it did, it was to satisfy the European interest. Though an acceptable ‘authentic’ theme, Laso was considered a traditional artist and evidently was not accepted as he was ‘too cosmopolitan’ and could only amount to the equivalent of a travel writer documenting images of Peru. Paradoxically, critics overlooked his presence as a painter “for example the organization of the composition or facture of the paint, [which] were simply invisible to the French critics.”⁵⁶ This enigma later became a staple of artistic discussion in Latin America. This search for a “cultural authenticity” or certain images that denoted “South America” was effectively internationalized and pushed on Latin American countries. Artists thus responded in different ways to this push.

As Europe put pressure on Latin American artists to produce art with a certain level of cultural authenticity new art movements formed as a response. Some movements, such as Universal Constructivism, emphasized aesthetic aspects of indigenous visual culture such as geometric structures in order to appeal to the European demand for ‘authenticity’. Other movements, such as the indigenist art movement, looked to indigenous groups as a means of social revindication of autochthonous communities and the revalorization of their cultural traditions. This focus thereby pushed away from Eurocentric values by, ironically, introducing the ideas Europe demanded of their art.

⁵⁵ Pratt, page 126

⁵⁶ Majluf, page 888

CHAPTER 3

Artist Case Studies

Overview

In this study, four artists are examined for their different uses of primitivism and one more modern artist is looked at as an example of the influence of this movement. Joaquín Torres García, living without direct contact to indigenous peoples, is studied for the overlooking of indigenous peoples identities and instead used the European mode (i.e., Cubism) of deriving aesthetic inspirations from pre-columbian societies, in this case, to create a ‘universal’ language with metaphysical intentions. To the opposite of this effect, Diego Rivera is studied as a marker of the Mexican muralist movement which worked to reconstruct Mexico and idealize or at least elevate the country’s indigenous and rural identity in Marxist ideals. Frida Kahlo is a prime example of re-appropriating indigenous ideologies to both her art and self and thus creating an iconic persona of female and natural power. In a form of reversing roles, Oswaldo Guayasamín, an Ecuadorian artist of indigenous background, made works of social realism highlighting the struggles of the indigenous lower class and later on creating works on the universal struggles of mankind following the patterns of his previous indigenous works.

Chronological, cultural, and aesthetic primitivism as defined in chapter 2 will be associated with Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Joaquín Torres García, respectively. The arrangement of artists is based on the most European styles to the furthest away or in opposition. Torres-García is arguably the most European influenced as he uses a aesthetic primitivism, similar to that of which Picasso used, by merely adopting physical traits of indigenous art. Diego Rivera, though often considered to be knowledgeable of Mexican indigenous cultures, idealized indigenous cultures greatly to form a mythical Aztec golden age - a chronological primitivism.

Frida Kahlo acts as a microcosm of primitivism, deriving only provocative aspects of Aztec society in a form of cultural primitivism which allowed the matching of parts to her personal and political styles and appropriating them to fit her objectives. Oswaldo Guayasamín, though not devoid of primitivist tactics, is a counter-gaze to the white intellectuals using indigenous inspiration in their art. Finally, Ana Mendieta is examined as a postliminary example of the effects of the indigenous movement in a neo-indigenism and neo-paganism feminist following that exemplifies cultural hybridity with deep indigenous roots that is apparent in modern Latin America.

Joaquín Torres García

Among the foundational figures of Latin American primitivism, Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García mixed pre-Columbian and abstract art in a constructivist, geometrical style to portray idealistic metaphysical ideas. Torres-García often drew from non-European cultures for his well-recognized pictographic iconography. His work, *Inverted Map of South America* (1943), often called the Upside-down Map, is an ink-on paper drawing that places the south of the continent in the north (see figure 5). The equatorial line is shown below the latitude line for Montevideo, located at 34°41' south, 56°9' west. The South Pole is marked at the top of the drawing. It is full of symbolism with a fish, the moon, the sun and a sailing ship. All of these symbols are meaningful and recur in Torres García's other works. For example, interpreters regard the fish as a symbol of life and fecundity, and as Torres García said, "it represents the physical and formal universe."⁵⁷ Torres García placed the South Pole at the top of the earth, thereby suggesting a visual affirmation of the importance of the continent, in an effort to present a revision of the world. He was also interested in presenting to the world a modern "school of the

⁵⁷ Torres García, "Historia de mi vida"

south," a place of experimentation that could rival what was happening in Paris or New York. His workshop in Montevideo, El Taller Torres García was described in the New York Times in the nineties:

It must have been an amazing place to study. The pages from Torres-García's notebooks, with their collages of Egyptian, Greek, Indian, pre-Columbian and European art, indicate the invigorating breadth of his interests, and his call for a Latin American art to be "created from the bottom to the top" surely quickened the pulse of the young people who came to him.⁵⁸

El Taller Torres-García (TTG) served as a catalyst for the consolidation of Torres García's artistic philosophy as well as for the elaboration of his theories concerning the role and function of modern art in Latin America. It became a testing ground for ideas regarding the role of constructivism and abstraction in the production of an American art, as well as a laboratory for experimenting with new and traditional materials and techniques. "The members of El Taller produced a significant body of work that included painting, sculpture, ceramics, wood and iron reliefs, furniture, murals, and architectural projects. As a model for an integrated artistic community, as well as for the breadth and range of media and materials that characterized its output, the TTG has had no precedents or parallels in Latin America."⁵⁹

Torres García published "The School of the South" after returning to Montevideo from Europe in 1935, which is considered his first Latin Americanist manifesto. In it, he formulated the premise that would make it possible to establish an autonomous art movement in Latin America. For many critics and scholars, this manifesto was the first systematic attempt to put together an autonomous artistic tradition for Latin America. Torres García was proposing that Native America was the point of origin for a new hemispheric visual-arts tradition founded on

⁵⁸ Holland Cotter with the New York Times

⁵⁹ Ramírez, *El Taller Torres-García, The School of the South and Its Legacy*.

the recovery of the pre-Hispanic past and its reconciliation with universalist art. Even before drawing *Inverted Map of South America*, Torres García had already stated in “The School of the South” manifesto:

I have called this “The School of the South” because in reality, our north is the south. There must not be north for us, except in opposition to our south. Therefore we now turn the map upside down, and then we have a true idea of our position, and not as the rest of the world wishes. The point of America, from now on, forever, insistently points to the South, our north.

It is still possible to find a variety of interpretations and readings of this map, including the idea that the countries of Latin America felt slighted by the dominance of the developed north, and the conclusion drawn by some scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Latin American art should go back to its pre-colonial origins. However, as James Corner points out in several studies, mappings are not transparent, neutral or passive devices of spatial measurement and description. They are instead extremely opaque, imaginative, operational instruments.

Mappings are not representations but mental constructs, or ideas that enable and effect change.⁶⁰

There is in fact a long history of cartography representations of the New World that exhibit the European concepts of native peoples in America as “primitive”. Hans Holbein’s 1538 World Map and Willem Blaeu’s America map, made over a century later (1642), both use allegory within iconic devices to determine the identity of New World (see figures 6a and 6b).⁶¹ Along with mythical creatures and exotic wild animals, natives in Hans Holbein’s map are depicted as cannibals, chopping a body into pieces and burning them over a fire (almost identical to the representation of cannibalism in Vespucci’s *Discovering America*). Willem Blaeu’s map is surrounded by ten panels of allegories of indigenous peoples that include a person soaking in a

⁶⁰ Corner, pages 213-217, 221-225, 229-231

⁶¹ Idea for this comparison came from Professor Christopher Steiner’s “Imagining Otherness” course, images of both maps came from the class PowerPoints

boiling pot being prepared to be eaten, bloody and fearsome warriors, a half nude woman being gazed upon, and depicts “traditional” robe as nudity or scarce but colorful cloths. These maps represent the stereotypes that originated in the European encounter with the New World and persisted for centuries after. Thus, Torres García’s inverted map is an intervention into this association with the European gaze on the New World. The boat emerging at the upside down South America may be an allusion to this point about colonization. Or it may be a metaphor for the arrival of Europe in Uruguay (the spot with an “x”) and Torres García’s attempt to make Uruguay more cosmopolitan and help Latin America define an autonomous artistic culture. The fish, sun and moon are read in many different way but none are definite readings beyond the point that Torres García is obviously using a style derived from indigenous societies. Read with the later understanding of the ship’s arrival, the presence of indigenous aesthetics will be the items which define a new artistic style to Uruguay and South America.

Torres García longed to link reason, emotion, and nature in a single mode of expression to form this new artistic expression but had not yet arrived at a satisfactory synthesis. His interest in indigenous art is believed to have started during his time living in Paris when the interest in primitive cultures peaked in the 1920s. Though geographically and often historically so distant, the abstracted emblematic forms “derived from the world of nature” corresponded to a strictly coded order which could be read and given a spiritual infusion. Because of the potential for devotional or metaphysical meaning, and also for reasons of formal aesthetic appeal the sculpted and painted motifs had a strong physical and emotional impact on the artist. Torres García’s son, Augusto, initiated this relationship to primitivism shortly after moving to France at the age of fourteen. The flea markets in Paris, rampant with Oceanic, African, and occasionally Native American art, initiated his interest in studying “primitive” cultures, especially at the Musée du

Trocadéro. An interest in pre-Columbian art may be documented at least by 1928, the year a major exhibition of “Ancient Art from the Americas” at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris which Joaquín Torres García is known to have visited.⁶² He developed a close relationship with the curator of the exhibition and later director of the Musée du Trocadéro, Paul Rivet. Augusto then worked at the museum for a year, making renderings of Nazca pottery for inventory files which his father often saw and admired. The pottery, Peruvian textiles, and the painted animal hides then in the permanent collection were particularly intriguing to Augusto’s father. It is important to note the irony that indigenous Latin American cultures were salvaged and preserved outside of Latin America - a European endeavor to possess other cultures.

This introduction to the native art of the Americas is especially important for two reasons. Numerous modern artists visited Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in the early 1900s and were influenced by its “primitive” art, most famously Pablo Picasso while working on *Les Femmes d’Alger*. This explains why pre-Columbian and indigenous motifs appear in his paintings as early as 1931 despite not returning to Uruguay until 1934. Before returning to Uruguay, he spent much of his time in the archeological museum examining the American collection to find further examples of pre-Columbian and later on also prehistoric artifacts. These objects reinforced his interest in the “schematic expression and magical powers of primitive peoples”⁶³ and clarified his theoretical thinking before leaving Europe or ever encountering indigenous peoples. Thus, his knowledge and theories developed by primitivism were equivalent to that of Picasso encountering and appropriating African art in his work. Erik Camayd-Freixas’ term “aesthetic primitivism”⁶⁴ comes to mind in regards to this point. Torres García uses an

⁶² The catalogue for the exhibition is still in his library in Montevideo.

⁶³ Torres-García, “Historia de mi vida”

⁶⁴ Camayd-Freixas

aesthetic primitivism as a stylistic choice in which he uses assorted primitive artifacts as models for developments in his own work.

In fact, much of his early primitivist works were focused on African art. In the transition from his early studies in neo-classicism to what eventually becomes the Latin American primitivism movement, Universal Constructivism, he painted works in the African inspired “negro” art style. These works show dark and earthly Africans in exotic landscapes posed in an awkward manner - as he was trying to emulate the “stylized volume and energy”⁶⁵ he saw in African art. Works such as *Trois Africains* (1928) were the beginning of his search for abstract forms which he was convinced was the only to express the ideals in painting (see figure 7).

Torres García returned to Montevideo in 1934 with a broad knowledge of “primitive” art and experience of high avant-garde groups in Paris. However, there were no indigenous people or culture in Uruguay by this time. The rather small original indigenous population had either been driven north or wiped out by the mid-nineteenth century. There were little artifacts or architecture from the old, mainly agrarian society that once was but Torres García was interested in the retrieval of prehistoric and native cultures in order to give authenticity to his work. James Clifford argued in *The Predicament of Culture* that an artist could study and make work after another culture as a sort of “native informant”, somewhat like an ethnographer, in the early twentieth century. This is because of the state of a growing “interconnected world, [in which] one is always, to varying degrees ‘inauthentic’: caught between cultures, implicated in others” thus a sense of difference or distinctness can’t be solely in continuity of a single culture or a tradition.⁶⁶ “Fragments over wholes” is how Edward Said summarized this theory.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Clifford, page 150

⁶⁷ Said

Torres García's first use of South American indigenous inspiration is likely the grid-like structure he used in many of his works such as *Arte Universal* (1943) (see figure 8). The stonework of ancient Inca, such as Machu Picchu, is evoked in this grid painting. Inca masonry was founded on certain astrological and numerical laws as well as a need to withstand earthquakes. It thus reflects symbolic order and practical concerns. In a sense the geometry of the painting, like that of Inca masonry, is natural and appealed to Torres García. Working with a specific format, the resulting intersecting composition expressed a universal cosmic order and order of human reason - like that which Mondrian and Van Doesburg had done before him. In 1943, he wrote the book *Universimo Constructivo* (Constructive Universalism), in which he describes his theory of art: The word constructivism must be used because he was influenced by geometry in using the grid and insisting on flatness. Yet at the same time, he felt that constructivist art was art of the intellect and lacked spirit and soul which he did not want to abandon. Hence the term Universalism. In an effort to communicate at a universal level he studied pre-Columbian societies, other ancient cultures, religions and symbolism. He liked the idea of using symbols that he believed could be recognized by any culture, symbols which represent human values, symbols which synthesize ideas and bypass narrative. Though this is problematic as it claims ancient societies from which he is taking symbols to be simple, something anyone could understand, or part of an unconscious past that has since been forgotten. Nevertheless, this universalism sought to end Latin America's reliance on European culture and colonialism.

He would distribute objects and figures within these grid systems to symbolize certain humanistic notions (love, justice, hope, etc.) He began a series of works with this formula, beginning with colorful paintings such as *Port au drapeau jaune* (The Cellar) in 1929, *Coloured*

structure (1930) to more unified canvases with less color, such as *Composition in five parts* (1931) and *Constructive* (1931). By 1930-1931 his language of symbols included clear references to the cosmos (sun), the ideal parameter (the number five), human emotions (heart and anchor), nature (fish), and references to North American indigenous peoples (tepee with a crescent moon and sun like such on painted hides he saw in France). The symmetry of the works, the earthly palettes and language through symbols demonstrate Torres García's interest in pre-columbian art and in particular Nasca pottery from Peru.

Torres García did not paint as much after his return to Montevideo and instead focused on teaching through his workshop. The cultural content of Montevideo was largely imported and current concepts, such as abstraction, were unheard of. So, Torres García worked towards a style which would be specific to the "New World" that both expressed its mentality and history. Thus, the indigenous South American arts became a necessity in the movement. The constructivist paintings he made between 1938-1943 are the most dense with objects, grid patterns, and filled with indigenous motifs. He wrote in his book *Estructura* that he felt he had completed the cycle "from naturalism to animist symbolism to abstraction." He felt he reconciled the modern formal and conceptual conventions he found important by using a prehistoric vision and mystical energy that would forge "a universal style that appealed to reason, sense and the spirit."

Though trying to develop a separation from European aesthetic values, Torres García used European modes of developing knowledge of pre-Columbian societies without direct contact with the archeological sites or Latin American sources. He did, however, develop a large collection of ancient antiquities which were later preserved in either his museum, Museo Torres García or the Museo de Arte Precolombino e Indígena, both in Montevideo.⁶⁸ His first encounter

⁶⁸ CISLA provided me with the ability to intern at the latter museum in the summer of 2014.

with indigenous societies was nonetheless in Europe, where information was appropriated and distorted. Most information about indigenous societies at this time was, in fact, through European sources. For example, items stolen during colonization or brought back from archaeological or ethnographic trips to the Americas. People living in the Americas were not in charge of native excavations until the twentieth century so practically all research was dependent on foreign scholars. Diego Rivera, on the other hand, was a Mexican who studied ancient sites such as Mayan ruins at Uxmal and Chichen Itza.

Diego Rivera

In 1922 a group of Mexican artists including David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera issued a “Declaration of Social, Political, and Aesthetic Principles” in which they stated that “the noble work of our race, down to its most insignificant spiritual and physical expressions, is native (and essentially Indian) in origin. With their admirable and extraordinary talent to create beauty, peculiar to themselves, the art of the Mexican people is the most wholesome spiritual expression in the world and this tradition is our greatest treasure.”⁶⁹ The art of Diego Rivera illustrates well the ways in which Mexican indigenismo on occasion blended an unwarranted appreciation of the pre-conquest past with an interest in contemporary indigenous peoples.

Though Rivera is often praised for uplifting the indigenous cause, he too began to learn of indigenous cultures in Europe and spent many years studying art forms there. At the beginning of the 20th century, Spanish modernists introduced Latin American painters to impressionism, post-impressionism, symbolism and art nouveau. Diego Rivera, among others, defined this moment in Mexican history. He was influenced by European modernism, having studied a long time in Spain

⁶⁹ Siqueiros, pages 406-407

and Paris and worked with Spanish artists Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris who were experimenting with Cubism. Cubist techniques such as the use of a diagonal grid as the basis of large scale organization abound in the works of Rivera and the other Mexican muralists. Upon Diego's return to Mexico, he soon became a symbol of the indigenist art movement amidst political upheaval.

Like his colleagues, Diego Rivera painted allegorical depictions of traditional indigenous culture and the dignity of the working class, as well as utopian visions of the future under socialism. *Indigenismo* broadly refers to representations of Indigenous peoples by non-Indians. Although arguably this intellectual trend dates back to the beginnings of the Spanish Conquest with Bartolomé de las Casas's defense of Indigenous rights, it reached its high point at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Andes and Mexico, home to highly developed pre-Columbian civilizations. *Indigenistas* were commonly white, educated urban dwellers who often celebrated these ancient histories while lamenting the deplorable and impoverished situation of their contemporary descendants. The indigenist art movement mostly spread in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico though each place had different albeit similar characteristics. In most cases the movement was developed by middle-class, white persons, who were socially and culturally far away but also aware of this disjunction. All of them presented the indigenous world as a paradigm of authentic nationality, as the origin of a national culture.

At the end of the Mexican Revolution, a very bloody campaign, the Mexican people needed a unifying force. The Mexican muralist artists, of which Rivera was a leader, found their inspiration in the revolution and in indigenismo. Indigenismo was thus a cultural, political and artistic response to the Revolution and to the regime of Porfirio Diaz. Indigenismo was not necessarily about the Indigenous population, but the revival of the nation's native traditions and legacies. The Mexican muralists had the support of the new government to create this politically

charged art. In this new Mexican government, José Vasconcelos was in charge of public education program, and he believed that education was the most important objective of the government - to educate the mostly illiterate population. Vasconcelos, a politician, minister of public education, writer and philosopher, passed a program destined to socialize art and make it more accessible for the population. With this in mind, he engaged artists who were committed to the theme and endorsed their painting of murals all over the country. The main muralists were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Diego Rivera fostered a sense of Mexicanidad, or pride in one's Mexican identity, by looking to his country's pre-Columbian heritage, indigenous population, and working classes for inspiration. Rivera's work referenced these groups in both style and subject. In his murals, the ordinary people of Mexico were made extraordinary, as modern heroes. The visual language he created, however, was meticulously crafted to serve both his artistic and political agendas. As he incorporated ancient pre-Columbian imagery into his work, Rivera created a visual and cultural identity for a modern Mexico.

On the large walls with his paintings, Rivera illustrated Mexico's economic and class systems in murals of market scenes, mines, mills, and Communist gatherings, forging the idea of the peasant and the modern man, and underscoring the notion that by embracing the nation's past it would be possible to create a new future. Rivera thus took indigenous culture and re-appropriated it as a way of connecting to his countrymen and to express to the world the fundamental cultural values of Mexico. On the vividly-colored walls of the Ministry of Education, his first large-scale mural commission, Mexico's history and cultural heritage comes alive with cinnamon-skinned campesinos in crisp white shirts and high-crowned sombreros who bend their backs in manual labor, graceful indigenous women in multi-colored skirts have their hair plaited in thick black braids as they carry fruit and sell flowers, while men and women come together in celebration of

the Day of the Dead and the Maize Festival - all traditions that celebrate the persistence of indigenous tradition in the face of hundreds of years of European Catholicism.

His one-hundred and twenty-eight panels at the Ministry of Education depict the history of all the Mesoamerican and European peoples, struggling to build a utopian future, summing in a new heroic image of *El Grande Mexico*. One section, *The Aztec World* (1929), highlights Wolfe's argument that "The past present and future of Mexico are presented in a dialectical march from the glories of primitive, pre-conquest Aztec 'tribal communism'..."⁷⁰ that reaches for a utopian future (see figure 8). Rivera thus idealizes pre-Columbian societies: "In Diego's dream there is nothing modern civilized man can do which Aztec, Zapotec, and Mayan have not done more elegantly, intensely and skillfully."⁷¹

Rivera often repeated thematic images in his murals, like characters in a novel, or part of a campaign, they represented different aspects of his political views. Images of indigenous people hunched over bearing a burden on his or her back is seen in several sections of the Ministry of Education mural, including *The Aztec World* section in the bottom right quadrant. This image is repeated thematically, though it varies as to what they are carrying and occasionally female figures replace the male ones. The work *Sugar Cane* (1931) clearly depicts this figure as an emblem of tensions over labor, race, and economic inequality (see figure 9).⁷² Set on a sugar plantation, this mural introduces the tensions over inequity that simmered in Mexico after the Revolution. In the foreground, a peasant Indian woman, with traditional braids and white clothes cuts papaya from a tree while children collect the fruit in baskets. Behind them, dark-skinned men with bowed heads

⁷⁰ Wolfe, page 524.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² In creating the scene, Rivera adapted an image he had formerly made for a mural cycle at the Palace of Cortez in Cuernavaca, Mexico. *Sugar Cane* was specifically commissioned for the Museum of Modern Art's Diego Rivera exhibition of 1931.

gather bunches of sugar cane. A foreman, with distinctly lighter skin and hair, watches over them on horseback, and in the background a white *hacendado* (wealthy landowner) relaxes in a hammock. In the middle of the work, a man hunched over in hard work carries cut sugar cane across the scene. He is faceless and unidentifiable, like all of the peasant men in white who are cutting the cane. In this work, Rivera thus adapted his Marxist ideas about class struggle to the context of Mexico and revealed the burden held on the shoulders of the lower class.

Other works were based on this same theme including *El Vendedor de Alcatraces* (1941), *Cargador de Petate* (1943), *Cargador de Flores* (1935), and *Flower Day* (1925) (see figures 10, 11, 12, and 13 respectively).

Flower Day (*Día de flores*) is his earliest and most accomplished depiction of a burden bearer. It shows a hunched figure bearing a burden on his back. The figure has a broad, flat head and cheeks, a low forehead, snub nose, short neck, and rounded, gently stooping shoulders. He has unmuscle limbs and expressive clasped hands though his head and hands are disproportionately large in relation to the slender, short body. The standing figure has his weight distributed evenly on both feet. A terracotta sculpture in the Diego Rivera Museum in Mexico City also fits this description, titled *Burden Bearer* (250 BC-250 AD).⁷³ This burden bearer is an Aztec *macehual* figure (see figure 14). Macehual figures represent standard bearers who were positioned on temples holding flags and banners. Often nude or simply dressed, they may have been costumed in ceremonial masks, capes, skirts, and jewels for different ritual occasions, at which times they would be impersonators of appropriate deities. The word *macehual* literally means the plebeian freemen who formed the base of the pyramidal structure of Aztec society. Rivera is thus copying the image of the quintessential native peon.

⁷³ Braun, pages 191-192

Rivera invented a new physical type for the previously not represented nineteenth century native workers and peasants - modeled after Aztec stone sculptures and some ancient West Mexican terra-cotta figures. Diego figures “replicate the proportions, physiognomy and even the hairstyles of Aztec representations of naturalistic, nude, or simply dressed male figures who are usually identified as *macehuals*.”⁷⁴ It is not a stretch to make this accusation as this specific sculpture was in his personal collection which later transformed into part of the Diego Rivera Museum. Rivera closely affiliated himself to Pre-Columbian history largely through new archaeological investigations. Rivera had a large collection of West Mexican materials thanks to new archaeology excavations of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit. Thereby the other figures of porters carrying heavy loads of agricultural produce and manufactured goods imitate many ceramic sculptures from Rivera’s collection. “Diego Rivera cherished the formal inventiveness, exoticism, and frank expression of death and sex in the ancient objects of Tlatilco and West Mexico - the same traits that many modernist artists located in the primitive.”⁷⁵ David Siqueiros, who studied in Europe with Diego Rivera and became one of the three big Mexican muralists, articulated the notion of returning to Pre-Columbian roots as an extension of vanguard primitivizing in his 1921 Barcelona manifesto: “We must come closer to the works of the ancient settlers of our vales, Indian painters and sculptors, Mayan, Aztec, Inca....Our climatological identification with them will help us assimilate the constructive vigor of their work.”⁷⁶

Rivera’s figure, derived from West Mexican ceramic and Aztec stone representations of porters, were the humblest members of Aztec society and also hardworking manual laborers. Rivera wished to project the values of the ancient society and *macehuals* onto the contemporary

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Braun, “West Mexican Arts and Modernist Artists” page 268-267

⁷⁶ Braun, 187

peasant and indigenous groups as a way of pushing his socialist beliefs. This imagery helped serve “to rediscover and preserve indigenous arts and crafts to develop a new autonomous national art that was based on the great native heritage.”⁷⁷

As he continued this pattern as a means of creating a new, figurative art he sought to revive Mexican nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, and a revival of indigenous aesthetic traditions, without ignoring avant-garde attitudes and his lessons in Cubism. To produce, along with plasterers and carpenters, “ideological art for the masses...that would forward aims of the Revolution by raising the collective consciousness of the people and mobilizing them to action.”⁷⁸ Rivera thus immersed himself in ancient forms and created instantly recognizable and distinguishable protagonists out of them for his own socialist agenda.

Frida Kahlo

Mexicanidad, or Mexican identity, especially as provided from indigenous culture and national heritage was the platform from which Kahlo worked. There were a set of constructed ideologies that were applied to indigenous groups, even in Mexico which is one of the only Latin America locations where indigenous societies were part of a cultural revival. A popular stereotype of indigenous groups was (and still is) that they were better connected to the Earth and ‘one with nature’. While a positive stereotype, the concept is derived from the association of indigenous groups as simpler, archaic, and wild. Frida Kahlo appropriated this constructed idea as it applied to both her personal situation and political views and molded it to her needs. This produced a feminist following with a ‘mother nature’ focus on the natural world, which was separate but intertwined with Kahlo’s commodified indigenous deities, stereotypes, and virtues.

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

Frida Kahlo made fifty-five self-portraits during her lifetime. Her impulse towards self-portraiture is inextricably linked to the broader Mexican socialist concern to remake Mexican identity, involving the re-casting of Catholic religious iconography and style, and by providing an indigenous presence in the largely masculine tradition of Western painting in general and self-portraiture in particular. This is well exemplified in her work, *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace* (1940) which, despite its relatively small size (approximately 16" x 24"), contains many different interesting aspects to focus on, many of which are specific to Kahlo's symbolic lexicon.

The direct but solemnly inward gaze of Kahlo makes her appear to be patiently enduring pain. Like Theodoor Galle's *The Discovery of America* (ca. 1580) imagines the nude native *America* amongst nature and surrounded by animals, Kahlo is accompanied by large, exotic leaves, a black cat and a spider monkey, butterflies and dragonflies, she wears a thorn necklace with a dead hummingbird fixed to it by a string. On her throat she bears Christ's unraveled crown of thorns as a necklace that digs into her skin, drawing blood, signifying her self-representation as both a Christian martyr and of an Aztec past. A dead hummingbird lays across her chest, a symbol in Mexican folklore of luck charms for falling in love as well as a symbol for one of the two principal deities of Aztec religion (Huitzilopochtli). The butterflies and dragonflies represent resurrection and life while a black cat, a symbol of bad luck and death, crouches behind her left shoulder. A spider monkey given to her by her husband, Diego Rivera⁷⁹, is symbolic of evil and representative of his infidelity. This self-portrait is an illustration of her appropriation of Aztec imagery for both her personal and political means though intertwined through a web of symbology.

⁷⁹ Marin, page 20. The spider monkey's name was Fulang Chang. The pet monkey that frequently appears in her paintings are often interpreted as surrogates for the children she and her husband, Rivera, were unable to conceive.

Kahlo's mask-like face stares but does not engage the viewer, antipodal from a suffering Christ gazing heavenward for spiritual salvation. The iconic thorn necklace, however, mimics a type of *Imitatio Christi* as "it is of flexible stem, and would be soon woven into a wreath, the spikes of which, when it was placed around that majestic head, would be driven into the flesh, and produce great agony."⁸⁰ Kahlo unravels the wreath of the Christian idol across her chest but passively allows the thorns to cut into her throat. The monkey, a representation of her husband's infidelity, toys with a vine like a leash to her collar.

It is difficult not to compare the blood dripping on her neck to Aztec traditions. The thorn necklace brings to mind a popular legend of the beginnings of Aztec bloodletting ceremonies: "Quetzalcoatl bled himself to stain thorns with blood" as Quetzalcoatl and Macuilxochitl punctured their penises so that the blood irrigated the earth goddess, Cihuacoatl, whose body then gave rise to an "huge maize tree with enormous ears."⁸¹ Auto sacrifice, as the ritual extracting of one's own blood, was one of the most ancient and important cultural acts in ancient Mesoamerica.⁸² In both Aztec and Christian traditions, blood is symbolically elaborated as the quintessential symbol of life and the ingestion of blood is emphasized (in the Catholic tradition in the Eucharist and the Aztec tradition of drinking sacrificial blood) as a means to bring the spiritual world closer to the physical world. Kahlo may thus be provoking the European Catholic tradition by accentuating its similarities to paganism. However, there is a distinct difference in the significance of blood in the two traditions. The Catholic faith elaborates heaven as the site at which man is returned to a state of grace in a universal "sea" (before the fall) whereas for the Aztecs the spiritual life is not so much the afterlife, as much as another dimension of life and

⁸⁰ Bible. John 19:2 Verse 2.

⁸¹ Sahagún, pages 13-36. Note the large leaves in the background may be referencing this specific story

⁸² Sahagún, page 43

being that co-exists with the physical world attainable through personal journey. Thus, she sides with the Aztec ideology; rather than being an allegory for universal pain, this work instead connects pain with personal, intrinsic experience. “Pain became an integral part of Kahlo’s life after, at age 18, a streetcar accident left her partially paralyzed. From then on she underwent a series of operations and because of her severely injured pelvis, a number of miscarriages and abortions.”⁸³ The weaving and synthesizing of pagan and Christian iconographies can be justified as an attempt to testify to the experience of universal pain and the profound inability to fully articulate the experience of her personal pain.

She leans heavily on the Aztec traditions, and even relates herself to several Aztec earth goddesses, perhaps to ground her frailty in an eternal system. A bird often symbolizes freedom and a hummingbird is usually thought to be colorful and hovering above a flower, yet this bird is black, lifeless, and tied to her necklace of thorns. A hummingbird was itself a charged symbol for mestizo cultures, referring to the fleeting nature of life, to love and a sort of transformation. In Mexican folkloric tradition, the dead hummingbird, dressed in red embroidered outfits, was used as a talisman to rouse the interest of an unrequited love or to provoke the return of a lover gone astray (i.e., her husband’s infidelity). This Mexican folklore was likely derived from indigenous religion. The Aztec god of sun and war, Huitzilopochtli, is a literal cognate of the Nahuatl words *huitzilin*, “hummingbird,” and *opochtli*, “left.” Aztecs believed that dead warriors were reincarnated as hummingbirds and considered the south to be the left side of the world; thus, the god’s name meant the “resuscitated warrior of the south.”⁸⁴ Resuscitation (resurrection) here again plays with the strings of entanglement over the Christian juxtaposition. As Janice

⁸³ Helland

⁸⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/275172/Huitzilopochtli>

Helland argues, this parallel to the Aztec religion is the best justification for the hummingbird's presence.

Janice Helland argues Kahlo's self-representation in this piece can only be understood in terms of iconographical Aztec work, rather than the more modern Mexican folklore, by specifically relating this work to a Coatlicue sculpture. "[Frida Kahlo's] repeated use of often bloody Aztec imagery is an intrinsic part of her social and political beliefs and derives much of its power from the depth of her conviction. Thus, the skeletons, hearts, and Coatlicue, images relating to the emanation of light from the darkness and life from death, speak not only to Kahlo's personal struggle for health and life but to a nation's struggle."⁸⁵ Coatlicue is considered the mother of all Aztec's multidimensional gods, who gave birth to the moon, stars, and Huitzilopochtli, the god mentioned before. Huitzilopochtli's mother conceived him after having "kept in her bosom a ball of hummingbird feathers (the soul of a warrior) that fell from the sky."⁸⁷ As Kahlo paints herself with the hummingbird on her chest, she portrays herself as Huitzilopochtli's mother, Coatlicue.

The inclusion of Coatlicue, referred to as "the image of life and death, of the past and the future," assists the theme of cultural transcendence, syncretism, and appropriated historical accounts.⁸⁶ Although the Spanish destroyed most Aztec art during the conquest of 1519, a Coatlicue statue was buried instead, as if the Spaniards feared desecrating such a formidable religious icon. Placed at the site where the Cathedral of Mexico was constructed in 1522, the statue was rediscovered in the late 18th century, only to be re-buried as Coatlicue was too vivid a reminder of the 'pagan' history the Church wished to repress. This imposing symbol of Aztec art and culture thus became a reminder of Cortes' world view of European dominance and

⁸⁵ Helland, pages 8-13

⁸⁶ Lujan, page 208

superiority as it was again buried. Alfredo Chavero, a nineteenth-century Mexican intellectual and an eminent leader in the growing Aztec field, was one of the first to describe the goddess figure *Coatlicue* (figure 16): “This serpent-skirted goddess, adorned with a necklace of skulls that rests upon her breasts and enhances her severed neck.”⁸⁷ Kahlo’s bloody throat alludes to a severed neck and nods to the necklace motif but with thorns to underscore the Catholic similarities to sacrifice.⁸⁸

In Catholicism, Jesus took the ultimate sacrifice: dying for faith in the religion. The sacrificial death at Calvary to “atone for the sins of mankind” follows the same pattern as indigenous blood sacrifice. However, the indigenous use of blood and human pain or death as a part of religion was condemned as ‘sacrilegious’ and ‘demon-like’ to most colonists. Though the human sacrifice is the most talked about, there were actually many types of sacrifices in the Aztec empire. By repaying the debts to the supernatural world, the Aztec believed that it would aid their farming, fertility, health, and longevity. By engaging in these sacrificial acts, it was believed that the Aztecs would earn merit, and they had to earn merit because they were merited with life from the gods. “Ye ica otopan tlamaceuhque” is a phrase in Nahuatl used to describe a reason for auto sacrifice, meaning “because on us [the bones from which humans were created], they did penance.”⁸⁹ Parallel to the more familiar Protestant belief that original, inherent sin must be overcome with a ‘rescuing’ through atonement. Thus, Aztec bloodletting and sacrifices were a form of atonement. Overcoming the colonial view of ‘barbaric’ ancient Mexican societies by highlighting their similarities gives more power to the foundation of Mexico and reinforces its place as an independent country.

⁸⁷ Helland, “Culture, Politics, and Identity in the Paintings of Frida Kahlo”, pages 397-405

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Graulich, pages 301-329

As Kahlo sought a personal connection to nature and expression of her pain through agonizing Aztec rituals, she also looked to voice concern for her country as it struggled for an independent and authentic cultural identity. As mentioned earlier, Helland argued her artistic imagery spoke “not only to Kahlo’s personal struggle for health and life but to a nation’s struggle.” From an early age Kahlo was a critic of her society. Like many other educated young people in post-revolutionary Mexico, Kahlo joined the Mexican Communist Party in the 1920s but when Rivera was expelled from the party in 1929, Kahlo left as well. As early as 1933 Rivera began to develop an interest in international Trotskyism and in 1936 joined the Mexican section of the movement. Kahlo, who admired Leon Trotsky (and had a brief affair with him) never became a Trotskyist. Some years later Frida, and later Diego, rejoined the Communist Party. Kahlo remained a Stalinist until her death but even her death was political. In July 1954, her coffin was draped with a large flag bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle superimposed upon a star. Despite different political views growing in Mexico, Helland wrote of Kahlo’s theory of Mexicanidad as “a romantic nationalism that focused upon traditional art and artifacts uniting all *indigenistas* regardless of their political stances.”

In the early part of the century, the intellectual atmosphere in Mexico was charged with cosmopolitan European ideologies. Renewed interest in Mexico’s culture and history began in the nineteenth century around the same time Domingo Sarmiento, a writer and journalist who later became the seventh president of Argentina, wrote *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). A cornerstone of Latin American literature, it is a work of creative nonfiction that helped to define the parameters for thinking about the region's development, modernization, power, and culture. Subtitled *Civilization and Barbarism*, *Facundo* contrasts civilization and barbarism as seen in early 19th-century Argentina. The main question posed was “De eso se trata, de ser o no

ser salvaje (To be or not to be wild, that is the question).”⁹⁰ The work was so popular and applied so universally the other Latin American countries that it essentially defined the issue with Mexicanidad. Mexican *indigenista* tendencies ranged from a violently anti-Spanish idealization of Aztec Mexico to a more rational interest in the “Indian question” as the key to a truly Mexican culture.⁹¹ However, Mexican nationalism, with its anti-Spanish anti-imperialism, almost one hundred years later (in the height of Kahlo’s work) identified the Aztecs as the last independent rulers of an indigenous political unit. Thus,

[Frida Kahlo] revered Aztec traditions above and beyond those of other pre-Spanish native cultures. She expressed her deeply felt nationalism by favoring in art the representation of the powerful and authoritarian pre-Columbian society that had united a large area of the Middle Americas through force and conquest.⁹²

Aztec traditions identified sacrifice and communion as a means of achieving cohesion in a new, ‘open’ society and of ‘prefiguring’ the ideal society of the future identified with a return to a golden “powerful and authoritarian” age. Sacrifice could thus not be equated with cruelty or barbarism, but with rituals having an important spiritual function. In a recovering Mexico after the painful Revolution this was an ideological way of bandaging the country’s hurt. Thus, Kahlo’s personal pain could be read as an analogy for the pain and perseverance of Mexico.

Earthly Feminism: Implications of Kahlo’s Work

Frida Kahlo spun her own life into a myth. Her persona, fashioned over almost three decades of self-portraits, fused physical suffering, emotional isolation, politics, and frank depiction of women’s lives. It was this frank depiction of a woman’s psychic pain made her a feminist icon. She became a Chicana heroine and an unintended purveyor of Mexican kitsch but

⁹⁰ Sarmiento, page 42

⁹¹ Keen, pages 463-508

⁹² Helland, page 398

as she died at the premature age of forty-seven, she left a legacy of paintings that became a symbol for the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970's. Feminists embraced Frida Kahlo for her expression of self and femininity and the journey of the feminine spirit. The dichotomies of women's lives became popular subjects: personal and political, strength and tragedy, life and death, physical and emotional pain, love and loss. Artists such as Ana Mendieta then carried out new forms of art that were inspired by Frida's art and theories. As Frida Kahlo followed the belief that indigenous societies, especially ancient ones, were somehow closer with nature and used this theme in her self-portraits she embodied a new form of 'earthly feminism' through her art. Cuban American artist, Ana Mendieta, was most famous for her series, *Siluetas* (1973-1980), which replicated ideologies from Kahlo and is a great example of a new age form of earthly feminism derived from indigenous societies. Ana Mendieta will be further discussed in the last section of the chapter.

With wholly different histories, both female artists shared great psychological anguish (for Kahlo it was also physical) that found an outlet in their art. Kahlo's *The Broken Column* (1944) reinforces the woman artist's use of the mirror to assert the duality of being, the self as observer and observed (see figure 17). "Kahlo used painting as a means of exploring the reality of her own body as her consciousness of its vulnerability; in many cases the reality dissolves into a duality, exterior evidence versus interior perception of that reality."⁹³ Kahlo painted herself in the back brace that she had to wear and with nails embedded all over her body. The column represents her broken back from a bus accident in 1925. She had injuries to her right leg, pelvis, and she could no longer have children. She also had to have many surgeries on her back which left her constantly in pain. Not only did she deal with pain through art, but she also dealt with

⁹³ Chadwick, page 315

self-image. She was constantly looking at herself through her self-portraits. Though, she stated, "I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration."⁹⁴ The foundations for chicana feminism grew out of the imagery of goddesses such as Coatlicue, for representing female strength and or Kahlo, mirroring the brutality of her personal and political life.

Oswaldo Guayasamín: The Counter-Gaze Reaction against Indigenism in Ecuador

Historically, paternalistic impulses which saw indigenous peoples as passive receivers of outsiders' actions have been the driving force behind *indigenismo*. Ecuadorian artist, Oswaldo Guayasamín offered an active voice opposing this viewpoint. At different points in history it has been the domain of various groups of people including archaeologists, anthropologists, theologians, novelists, philosophers, politicians, and political activists. In his book *Indigenismo*, Jorge Alejandro Ovando Sanz wrote that "*indigenismo* is the theory of members of the Latin American oligarchy to stop and repress the indigenous peoples' liberation movement."⁹⁵ Historian Pedro Chamix criticizes an academic indigenismo that "takes the Indians into a laboratory to study them in terms of their physical appearance, family names, dress, language, customs" with a resulting analysis that is contained "in hundreds of publications and books in English, German, or French, and only later translated into Spanish without any political utility."⁹⁶ Juan Bottasso notes in the introduction to *Del indigenismo a las organizaciones indígenas* that Indigenous peoples do not favorably view *indigenistas* who analyze their status

⁹⁴ Fuentes

⁹⁵ Sanz, page 7

⁹⁶ Chamix, page 48

from the perspective of a dominant class and seek to integrate them into a modern nation-state. He writes that these Indigenous peoples "reject the presence of intermediators and deny that people who do not belong to their cultural world have the right to speak in their names or, worse, represent them."⁹⁷ Employing stronger language, Adolfo Colomdres calls *indigenismo* nothing other than ethnocide.⁹⁸ Similarly, indigenous organizations have also consistently taken a stance against indigenist ideologies. Indigenous delegates gathered at the Second Conference of Indian Nations and Organizations of South America in Bolivia, in 1983, and declared that "*Indigenismo* must be rejected because it corresponds to the ideology of oppression. Since its origin, it has served the racist interests of governments, missionaries, and anthropologists."⁹⁹ All of which make the foundation for artists, thus meaning art can be included in this argument.

The worry was that indigenism had reached such an extreme that if there were no natives depicted in a painting, it was not considered good art. The representation of brutalized natives was argued by scholars to be a form of superficial propaganda. Pío Jaramillo Alvarado, the most convincing indigenist thinker in Ecuador, "repudiated the exploitation of the Indian by national painters, contending that the Indian has become a guinea pig for everyone who takes up painting."¹⁰⁰ Ideologies of *indigenismo* have deep roots in Latin American history and culture. During the first half of the twentieth century, it emerged as a strong political force in Mexico and Peru. Its importance spread beyond these countries to become an important part of revolutionary movements in Guatemala and Bolivia in the 1950s. *Indigenismo*, however, has not played as important of a role in Ecuador as in other countries with large indigenous populations. Despite

⁹⁷ Bottasso, page 5

⁹⁸ Colomdres, page 19

⁹⁹ South American Indian Information Center, *Working Commission Reports: Second Conference of Indian Nations and Organizations of South America, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, March 1983*, page 18.

¹⁰⁰ Llerena

rising aversion to indigenism, indigenous themes persisted in the national Salon into the mid twentieth century as they served the country's interests. The artists who wished to separate from the indigenismo movement increasingly spoke of universalizing their work to create a new avant-garde form. What made this new concept of "universal" art different from indigenism, which had previously been hailed for its internationally recognizable human content, was not yet clear.

Oswaldo Guayasamín was one of the few artists that painted indigenist content who belonged to the same social group. Son of a Quechua laborer and a mestizo mother, he came from absolute misery, hunger, and poverty surprisingly, he identified with a universalist impulse and further denied he was an indigenist painter. It also important to remember that the art movement, *indigenismo*, was always a construction of the dominant culture, particularly that of elite intellectual *mestizos* who used indigenous issues to advance their own political agendas.

Guayasamín was identified as among the few artists who were beginning to achieve a form of *universalism*. While he continued to paint indigenous people and owed a great deal to his predecessors, he consistently denied that he was an indigenist. "Indigenism, *choloismo*, or bourgeoisism will always be cages where a true painter's sentiment becomes entrapped"¹⁰¹ To distance himself from the regional specificity and dogmatism associated with indigenism, Guayasamín avoided narrative and conveyed meaning symbolically - though he did maintain a political voice.

A 2009 exhibition at the Museum of Latin American Art in California titled, *Of Rage and Redemption: The Art of Oswaldo Guayasamín*, covered each of Guayasamín's major periods and

¹⁰¹ Greet, page 177

organized them as such: “his early paintings that reflect the plight of the indigenous peoples of the Andes, his more mature work that addresses human suffering in the context of war and injustice, and, finally, the paintings of his last period that embody the artist's hopeful affirmation of life and love.” Guayasamín's work evokes strong emotional responses to its subjects - the horrors of war, the injustices of inequality, discrimination, and oppression - and reflects his life-long commitment to peace and social justice.

Guayasamín made a pro-longed visit to Mexico in 1943, where he met the muralist José Cle-mente Orozco and kindled a lifelong friendship with the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Guayasamín's connection with the Mexican muralists is clearly evident, particularly in his period of work known as *Hua-cayñán*, Quechua for Path of Tears. Composed of a mural and 103 paintings executed between 1946 and 1952, this series of works focuses on the main ethnic groups of Latin America: the black, the Indian, the *mestizo* (the offspring of Spanish and Indian parents) and the *mulatto* (the offspring of white and black parents). In this project Guayasamín explored a new pictorial vocabulary, which was inspired by important modernist works that he had seen firsthand, including Picasso's *Guernica*, which was on display at the MoMA during his time there. Each of these thematic groups began with a landscape, which represented the region that the group had traditionally (or stereotypically) inhabited; for example, the Blacks were placed in the jungle, the Indians in the mountains, and the Mestizos in the city of Quito.¹⁰² Each composition included one or two figures, varied subtly in pose and technique, situated against an abstract background, and entirely void of narrative. To distance himself from singling out a specific indigenous group with Indigenism, Guayasamín utilized the symbolic power of metaphor throughout the *Huacayñán* series in order to connect to all indigenous peoples.

¹⁰² Greet, page 178

Guayasamín's segregation and definition of the various Andean groups recalls the racial typologies of the nineteenth century, rudimentary theories of geographic determinism and the naïve portrayals of Costumbrista art. However, in this series Guayasamín is not interested in the scientific classification of ethnic types or detailed depictions of their "strange" customs; rather, he employs variation in technique to distinguish between the Indians, Mestizos and Blacks.¹⁰³

The Bull and the Con-dor (1957), a later work added to this period, is a good example of Guayasamín's interest in depicting conflicts that to this day are inherent in a society where race and ethnic origin play a prominent role (see figure 18). This large painting captures a dramatic moment in a festive Andean ritual in which a condor is tied to the back of a bull. For Guayasamín, it represents the struggle between the indigenous peoples (the condor) and their conquerors (the bull being Spain specifically), but, in its depiction of the condor as prevailing, the long history of colonialism is reversed.

By 1943, Indigenism had fallen out of favor as the progressive artistic strategy of choice, and artists like Guayasamín began to avoid characteristic indigenous motifs or interpreted them in new, imaginative ways. Coming into his own as an artist at the height of the crisis surrounding pictorial indigenism (as the thematic conflation of imagery as indicative of nationalist policy and/or regional esteem), Guayasamín was undoubtedly aware of this crisis, however, he never rejected the trend altogether. The artist reinvented this highly charged subject matter, manipulating both style and content in order to create a "new approach to indigenous subjects,"¹⁰⁴ which no longer favored idealized, realistic narrative scenes depicting the plight of workers and natives. The controversy surrounding indigenism likely reinforced Guayasamín's

¹⁰³ Greet, page 179

¹⁰⁴ Greet, page 171

decision to eliminate narrative from his work, and avoid subjects that could be construed as political propaganda.¹⁰⁵

Universalizing experiences, especially in the post-World Wars period, was essential to his later work as a means of averting those subjects. This “Family of Man”¹⁰⁶ humanism was performed through a series of tragedy paintings. Armed conflicts and social injustice led him to paint this series “La edad de la Ira” (“The age of Rage”) in the 1960s. *La Edad de la Ira* series was developed between 1961 and 1990, comprising of 150 large-scale paintings. Within that series are collections that explore the same topic, such as “Hands” (12 oils), “Weeping Women” (7 oils), “the Waiting” (11 oils), “the Mutilated” (6 oils), “Meeting at the Pentagon” (5 oils), and “Rivers of Blood” (3 oils). All of these collections report on the violence of man versus man in the 20th century. With this collection, Guayasamín performed exhibitions around Europe and America, shaking the conscience of mankind, from Rome to Santiago de Chile, from Prague to Mexico, from Madrid to San Francisco. It shows all the tragedy of the twentieth century; the brutal wars, torture and pain that dictators produced, and the anguish of mothers who lost their children. It denounces the violence of man against man as it is universal.

Las Manos de la Protesta or “Hands of Protest” (1968) belongs to the collection “Hands” from this series (see figure 19). Guayasamin explored the expressive potential of faces, hands and bodies to convey a range of human sentiments. The *La Edad de la Ira* series specifically addresses human suffering caused by war, genocide, torture, poverty and discrimination that could be felt on a global scale. In *Las Manos de la Protesta*, Guayasamín showcases raw human emotion through expressive color and gesture. Guayasamin focused on expressing the theme of

¹⁰⁵ Greet, page 160

¹⁰⁶ See Solomon-Godau, “The Family of Man. Refurbishing Humanism for a Postmodern Age” for more on the theory of The Family of Man.

the universal human suffering. Coarse and skeletal, the hands are made huge and exaggerated, confronting the viewer and dominating the canvas. The impetus behind Guayasamin's conception of *La Edad de la Ira*, is the denunciation of human suffering, echoed by the social ideology of the indigenist movement. It is a piece that is both beautiful and very difficult to look at. To do so is to stare at the marginalized, dispossessed, and wretched of the Earth. The most eye-catching element is the intimidating size of Guayasamin's work (in this case 96 x 48 in). The suffering portrayed in *Las Manos de la Protesta*, parallels the political context of Ecuador in the 1960s. The atmosphere in Ecuador was very violent and revolved around demands of political rights due to protests and mobilization. From 1912 to 1999, Ecuador lacked political stability due to social and economic problems that had been carried over from the time of post-colonization. Thus, the creature's mouth is opened up widely which indicates that he is screaming in chaos. A scream, or cry, which is unheard from a painting but now visualized was a main symbol in his universalist creations. Another of his works, *El Grito* (1983), exemplifies this theme with three faces and hands that have no distinct characteristics but represent not only indigenous people of Latin America but all people suffering in the world, especially after both World Wars (see figure 19). The universal suffering crosses boundaries and places humankind on an equal level. The distorted, expressive hands in *Los Manos de Protesta* are emphasized as large and coming forward, as if begging for a resolution to end all the protests and sufferings.

After winning first prize at the national Mariano Aguilera competition with *El niño*, a portrait of a mestizo boy (his deceased younger brother), the indigenous poet Sacotto Arias distinguished the need for an art that was all-encompassing: "at the risk of remaining at the margins of the so-called indigenist or creolist movement in national art, he eagerly and

courageously chooses his own place in the artistic battle.”¹⁰⁷ As Michele Greet argues, “by focusing on Guayasamín’s versatility and defining as universal instead of national, Sacotto disassociated Indigenism from universalism.”¹⁰⁸ The controversy surrounding indigenism likely reinforced his artistic decision to eliminate narrative from his work and avoid subjects that could be constructed to a political means. Though he did not abandon the indigenous themes altogether, he ‘universalized’ them by avoiding any contemporary reality references.

Ana Mendieta

One of the earliest and strongest proponents of neo-indigenism was Ana Mendieta’s art and performance pieces. As an artist, Ana Mendieta played a large role in the history of feminist art in the latter half of the 1900s. Her work crossed multiple categories including land art, body art, and performance and her work addresses the ideological struggle of gender and race. Mendieta herself described her art as “earth-body work” and “earth-body sculptures”¹⁰⁹ She also used “primitivism” as a method of reexamining heritage and promoting cultural convergence, especially as she expanded in her later work. She drew upon her interpretation of pre-Columbian religion to provide a non-European spiritual base for Chicana life. Mendieta initially employed “primitivism” as an integral component in the expression of selfhood and an exploration of trans-historical traditions shared between humans. The artist frequently utilized indigenous Mexican art forms, as well as a Jungian theory of universal archetypes, to illustrate a relationship between Mexican and Hispanic-Caribbean cultures and highlight the commonalities between traditions throughout differing locations and time. She was part of a neo-indigenism and feminist art

¹⁰⁷ Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, page 160

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ *Ana Mendieta*, exhibition catalogue, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea

movement that proves the influence of the indigenist movement as well as a result of resurgent appropriation.

The result of indigenism was a significant diffusion of what was considered to be a hidden Latin American self. The influence of indigenism is even clearer in realms of contemporary life, including political rhetoric and ideology, revolutionary thought, and attempts to return to an indigenist past that encompass, for example, an almost mystical telluric attachment to the land. Yet, behind such practical thoughts are deeply structured essences that serve as underpinnings, ideologically, and philosophically. Indigenism itself had also been at times overly idealized, romanticized, made to hark back to a “paradise lost” that never was. For some it provides a refuge from a harsh reality, at times more cosmetic than concrete. Thus, indigenism offered an inspiring role model and guide to the creating of identity. A Chicana Renaissance emerged in the ‘60s and adopted indigenism as a significant force in its art, literature, and philosophy.

Neo-Indigenism arose in a new and transformed way as part of a resurgence in feminism and vice versa. The two turned out to fit together because Chicana feminists re-interpreted indigenous ideologies in a synergistic manner. Idealization was extremely prevalent and points that were significant to feminism were highlighted: such as an original matriarchal system of Aztlán, a male and female dualistic principle as central to Aztec thought, unrealistic, overstated interpretations of female equality in the structure of the family, or in Aztec social order. Research was made to support this skewed ideology.

Jane Blocker describes the first work of Ana Mendieta’s famous *Siluetas* series, a photograph titled, *Imagen de Yagul*, as dealing with the “themes of death and rebirth staged in an earthen, womb-like cavity. Here, the category woman is sanctioned by the first woman, by

Mother Earth, by the biology of childbirth.”¹¹⁰ Mendieta embraced the image of the earth as a feminine life-giver and employed it as her prominent artistic medium. She explained her personal associations with feminism and the environment by declaring, “I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. Having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast out from the womb (Nature).”¹¹¹ Mendieta performed these works before Mary Beth Edelson also started using her nude body to make goddess-worshipping art. In “Art in the Dark,” Thomas McEvilley did not find Edelson’s use of primitivism problematic; in fact, he praised the invocation of the Palaeolithic sensibility “shamanic magic and ordeal” and the Neolithic sensibility of “fertility and blood sacrifice” in a number of pieces by women artists, including that of Edelson.¹¹² But many contemporary scholars referred to this works as “disturbing” and strongly disagreed. However, this points out the important neo-indigenist movement that strongly influenced Mendieta - a goddess focused neo-paganism rooted in indigenous societies. Many Chicana intellectuals in this feminist movements appropriated ancient goddesses as symbols of female strength derived from an Amerindian cultural past that subverts preconceived, western binary systems. The Goddess movement includes spiritual beliefs or practices (chiefly neo-pagan) which emerged predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s. The movement grew as a reaction to perceptions of predominant organized religion as male-dominated, and makes use of goddess worship and a focus on gender and femininity. The "Goddess movement" was a widespread, non-centralized trend in neo-paganism, and therefore

¹¹⁰ Blocker, page 37

¹¹¹ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio, “Ana Mendieta, A Historical Overview,” in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), rpt. in Brett, “One Energy,” page 297

¹¹² McEvilley, Thomas “Art in the Dark,” *Artforum* 1983

has no certain centralized belief systems but often took from societies that which they were physically closest to.

Imagen de Yagul crosses the bounds between performance, body art, and photography (see figure 19). In an open Zapotec tomb in the ancient city (and archeological site) of Yagul, Mexico, Mendieta's naked body lays within the formation of rocks that encapsulate her. Her body is covered with white flowers and green leaves, the thickness increases around her chest and face, making it difficult to discern her facial features amidst the flowers. Mendieta leaves only the outer contours of her body, arms and legs discernable to the viewer. This particular piece differs from the other works in the series, in that her body is fully present here, rather than just represented as an ephemeral silhouette that marks where she once was. This image is the first in the series of silhouette (*silueta*) portraits in which Mendieta traces the outline of her body in different locations between Mexico and Iowa. These locations are significant as they trace a personal journey between places that she identifies with: on a trip to Oaxaca she identified with the region's "mixture of indigenous and European cultures with her own hybrid Cuban heritage "and she developed an appreciation for pre-Columbian iconography."¹¹³ When Mendieta's *Silueta* series is looked over in a sequential, progressive manner, it seems to demonstrate the process of the vanishing (or infusion) of her body into a mere impression on the land, or silhouette. In this sense, Mendieta performs the act of simultaneously affirming and losing one's self.

"Primitivism" and pre-Columbian historical references, such as location, within the *Silueta* series provided a creative basis through which the artist explored her individual

¹¹³ Quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio and John Perreault, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1988, page 10

formations of identity that transcended specific ethnicities and physical locations. Inspired by Mexican pageantry and rituals, particularly those relating to death and the afterlife upheld through the funerary traditions (i.e., Dia de los Muertos celebrations), Mendieta infused the earth-body work motif with a central theme of regeneration and rebirth.¹¹⁴ “Primitivism” also provided the artist with a perceived source of history which did not reflect aspects of Western culture. The artist’s search for an attachment to her ancestry produced an affinity with original Mexican civilizations, like the other Latin American artists discussed already. A contribution to Mendieta’s self-identification with pre-Hispanic Mexico emanates from the trans-cultural diasporic consequences of colonization. She asserted that her ancestors in Cuba encountered repression from the Spanish conquistadores similar to that inflicted upon the original Mexicans.¹¹⁵ Native Cuban civilizations, such as the native Taíno Indians, underwent the devastation of total extinction from the violent contact, just as various civilizations in Mesoamerica underwent total or near disappearance.¹¹⁶ The destructive implementation of South American and Mesoamerican colonization originated in western European countries and affected numerous indigenous civilizations in North and South America, and the artist utilized these historic aftereffects as a uniting experience amongst the assaulted societies. Mendieta displayed her identity and the presence of the minority groups through appropriating traditional imagery and imbuing the *Siluetas* with a theme of transcendence. The artist refrained from employing European and Anglo-American influences as a form of resistance to further acculturation, thus attempting to bond with her ancestral heritage and examine other native cultures. She held a belief that “primitive” cultures maintained a higher level of authenticity because of their lack of

¹¹⁴ Viso, page 296

¹¹⁵ Sabbatino, page 138

¹¹⁶ Ibid

European influences.¹¹⁷ Differing from what she expressed as the Anglo predisposition to overemphasize individuality and difference, these societies functioned in a more collective existence in her eyes. Their alleged respect for nature and utilization of natural materials further appealed to Mendieta's concepts of earth sculpture.

Studying the art of indigenous and "primitive" civilizations as a student at the University of Iowa in the 1960s provided the artist with knowledge in an area of examination previously underappreciated both nationally and globally. Barbara Braun notes that it was not until the late-nineteenth century that the Aztecs were accepted as a source of national Mexican identity; additionally, this genre of "primitive" art did not attract analytical scholarly attention in the West until the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹⁸ Following Mendieta's identification experience in Mexico, the *Siluetas* exhibit an incorporation of various traditional Mesoamerican motifs and religions which previously did not receive adequate scholarly attention.

As females Kahlo and Mendieta share many attributes. Both were autobiographical, erotic, and body-conscious, both established ties to the earth as an extension of being. Both died young, a little more than thirty years apart and a little more than ten years apart in age. Both invoked the traditional belief structures of their respective lands: in Kahlo's case, pre-Columbian imagery and colonial folk Catholicism, in Mendieta's, the rituals of Afro-Cuban *santería*, which she sought in the United States. Both were Latin American artists who lived their lives with passion, with power, and with political conviction. Beyond that, the comparison fractures. However, it is evident Kahlo's philosophy of natives' naturalness persists in the feminist canon despite the fashion of its appropriated origins. The Mesoamerican mythological goddess system continued as a cultural motif of strength, vitality, and creativity of females while challenging

¹¹⁷ Ibid, page 109

¹¹⁸ Braun, pages 35, 39

both western views and diversifying the rhetoric of the predominantly male indigenous movement.

Chicana neo-indigenism is a paradox that longs for a pre-colonial past that can never be fully understood. The allure of indigenous mythology is strong, especially in Mesoamerica, and provided a new grammar with which to challenge European and Euro-American domination of natives. Thereby, this critical analysis and discussion of indigenism is important as it remains a ground upon which resistance finds expansion.

CONCLUSION

The Paradox of Authenticity

Indigenism emphasized both the artist's identity and the indigeneity of their homeland. No single style united these movements but their commonality derived from primitivist inspiration. This transnational and interdisciplinary study explored how indigeneity was expressed and understood in the midst of a complex, globalising world. All of the examined artists interpreted the material and conceptual presence of the modern era as more than mere tools. Simply put, they took the modern as the impetus, indeed the mandate, to correct the colonial legacy and neo-colonial reality so firmly rooted in the region. As such, one should not forget the profoundly utopian sense that undergirds each of these attempts to pronounce modernity.

Though these artists studied came from different backgrounds, each depended on indigenous societies as a source of inspiration to separate from their nation's colonial history. Thus, "otherness" was transformed into a positive characteristic that determines independence. Although an imperfect enterprise, it was a first step toward the hybridization of Latin American cultures that we know today. Perhaps, even, an inevitable step. The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, argues that the self cannot exist, cannot have a concept of itself as self, without the other. "I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I', precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that make me an individual 'I'."¹¹⁹ Just as Europe once used "other" countries to better solidify their national identity, so did Latin America. In a way, Latin America became the "self" in its attempt to create a separate identity. However, in order to play off of the stereotypes originally set in

¹¹⁹ Levinas, 62

colonial America, this art overly praised or played into these stereotypes (i.e., Diego Rivera's chronological primitivism that marks Aztec society as a golden age and Andrade's "Cannibalist Manifesto"). In the end, this creates a untruthful culture but also a collective sense of identity achieved through the reconstruction of the native past which colonialism irreversibly altered.

Not only did this mean philosophic reconstruction but also a restoration of native culture. Latin American cultures were salvaged and preserved only outside of Latin America before the twentieth century. The European endeavor to possess Latin American cultures' art and artifacts during colonization and continuing through European empowerment was not resolved until Latin American artists began making their own indigenous art collections following with the interest in the indigenism art movement. Thereby, the indigenism art movement literally saved artifacts in Latin America and allowed them to be collected and preserved in the native land thanks to the contemporary artists who thought them important enough. El Museo Arqueológico is one of three sections at Fundación Guayasamín in Ecuador which houses Oswaldo Guayasamín's collection of pre-Columbian art. As mentioned earlier, Toress García has his pre-Columbian art collections distributed between museums in Montevideo for public dissemination. Perhaps no other two people had such an important and lasting effect in Latin America as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Their life and works included a profound interest in the preservation of the heritage of indigenous art. Diego Rivera collected perhaps the largest assembly of pre-Columbian artifacts (estimated at almost 60,000) and many of them are displayed in the museum Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli.

The after effects of indigenism are numerous beyond the salvation of pre-Columbian knowledge. As described in the case of Ana Mendieta, neo-indigenism, neo-tribalism, and other post-factum movements thrived in distorted pieces of native history, culture, and religion. The

indigenist movement also furthered many countries (i.e., Mexico's) political representation and awareness of contemporary indigenous groups. As James Clifford argued in *The Predicament of Culture* these sorts of artist, "native informants" could at least make present the issues with native groups both historically and in their present time. A complicated, fragmentary portrait appears out of this practice which is not entirely honest. This is because of the state of a growing "interconnected world, [in which] one is always, to varying degrees 'inauthentic': caught between cultures, implicated in others."¹²⁰ Authenticity in a globalized world is a paradox as culture flows freely with ease while viewers and consumers demand a high level of cultural "truth". This issue goes beyond just art as it covers all areas of cultural products including music, cuisine, dance, and more. Today, in an ever increasingly connected world, national, ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions that were once clear definitions of "us and them" are confused and disarranged, so much so that the diversification of values and multiplicity of lifestyles are provoking "identity crises" throughout communities and amongst individuals. Thus an inevitable cycle occurs as long as we continue to extend ourselves out to the world:

...The individual must become infinitely more adaptable and capable than ever before. He must search out totally new ways to anchor himself, for all the old roots—religion, nation, community, family, or profession—are now shaking under the hurricane impact of the accelerative thrust [of change].¹²¹

¹²⁰ Clifford, page 150

¹²¹ Toffler, page 36

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Figure 1. Theodoor Galle after Jan van der Straet, *The Discovery of America*. ca 1600. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 2. Frederick Catherwood, Lithograph of Stela D at the Mayan site of Copán. Published in "Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America". 1844.



Figure 3. Francisco Laso, *Habitante de las cordilleras del Perú* (Inhabitant of the Peruvian Highlands), 1855. Pinacoteca Municipal, Lima.



Figure 4. Friedrich Georg Weitsch, Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt. 1806. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen.



Figure 5. Joaquín Torres García, *América Invertida* (Inverted Map of South America), 1943. Fundación Joaquín Torres García, Montevideo.



Figure 6a. Hans Holbein, World Map, 1538.



Figure 6b. Willem Janszoon Blaeu, *Americae nova Tabula* (New Map of America) from *Le Grand Atlas* (*Theatrum Orbis terrarum, sive Atlas novus*). c. 1663-1667.



Figure 7. Joaquín Torres García, *Trois africains*, 1928.



Figure 8. Joaquín Torres García, *Arte Universal* 1943. Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales del Uruguay

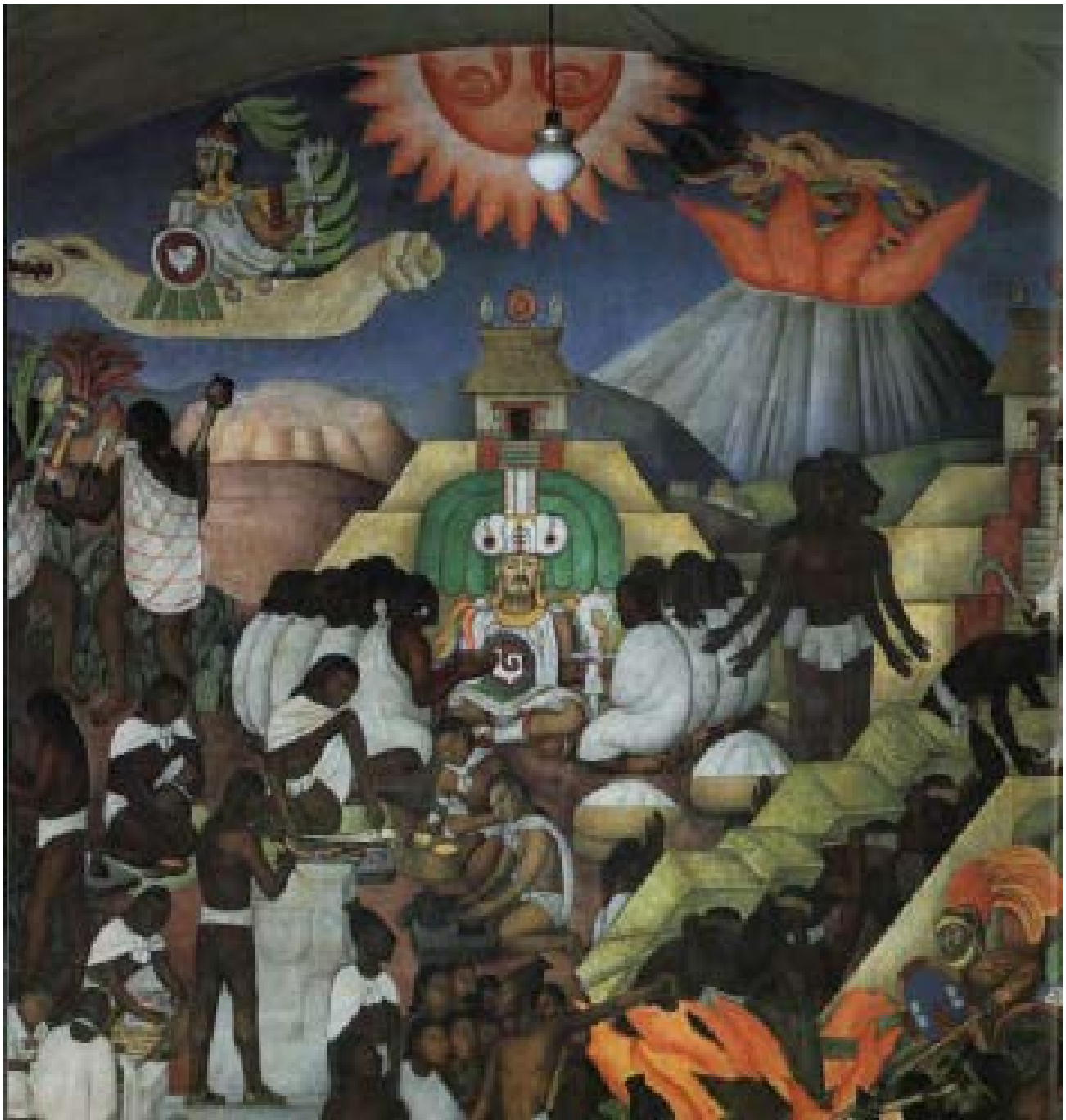


Figure 8. Diego Rivera, *The Aztec World*, 1929. Ministry of Education, Mexico.



Figure 9. Diego Rivera, *Sugar Cane*, 1931. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 10. Diego Rivera, *El Vendedor de A;catraces (Calla Lily Vendor)*, 1941.



Figure 11. Diego Rivera, *Cargador de Petate*, 1943. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 12. Diego Rivera, *El Cargador de Flores*, 1935. Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.



Figure 13. Diego Rivera, *Flower Day*, 1925. Los Angeles County Museum.



Figure 14. Burden Bearer, terracotta sculpture, 250 BC-250 AD. Diego Rivera Museum, Mexico City

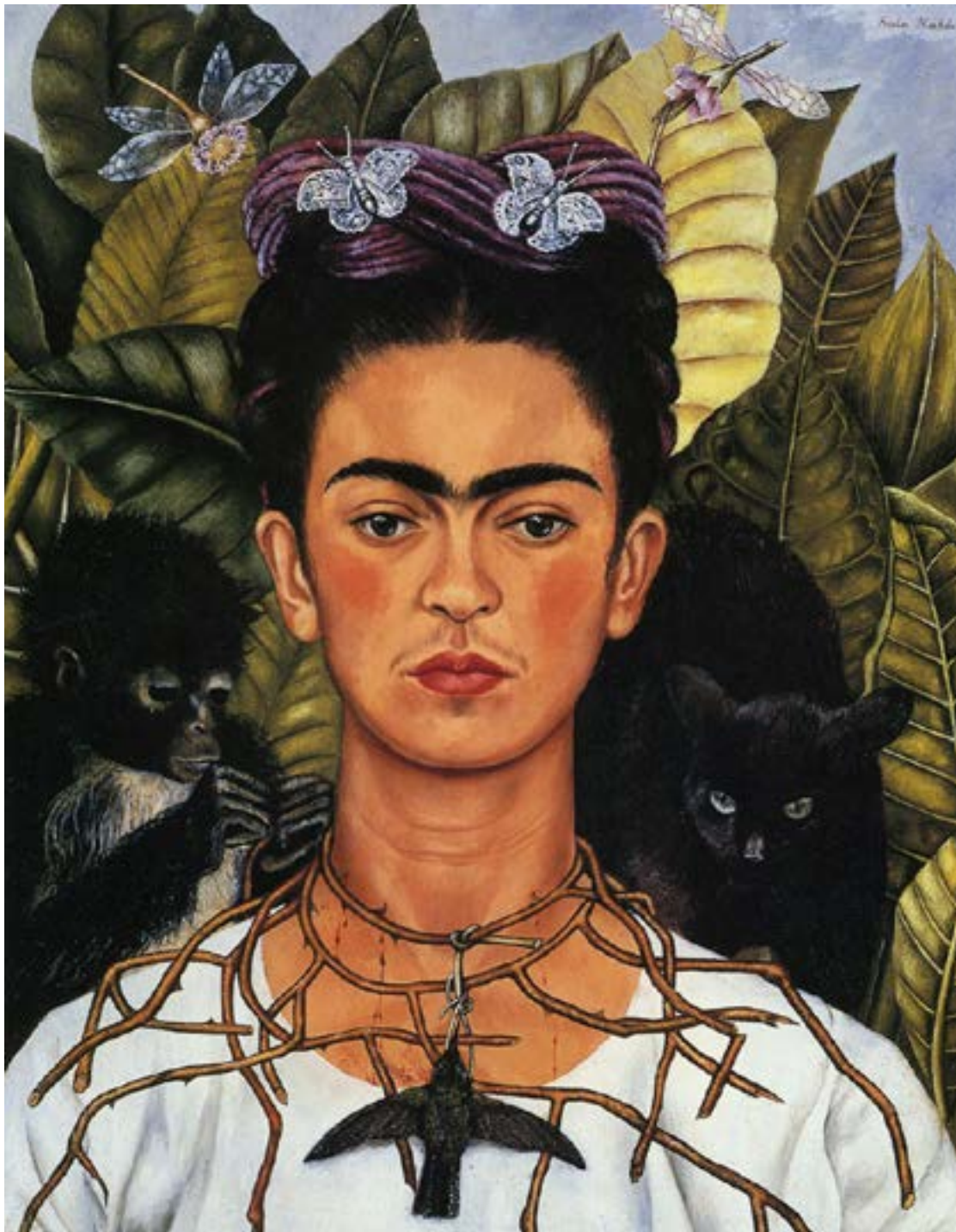


Figure 15. Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace, 1940. University of Texas at Austin.

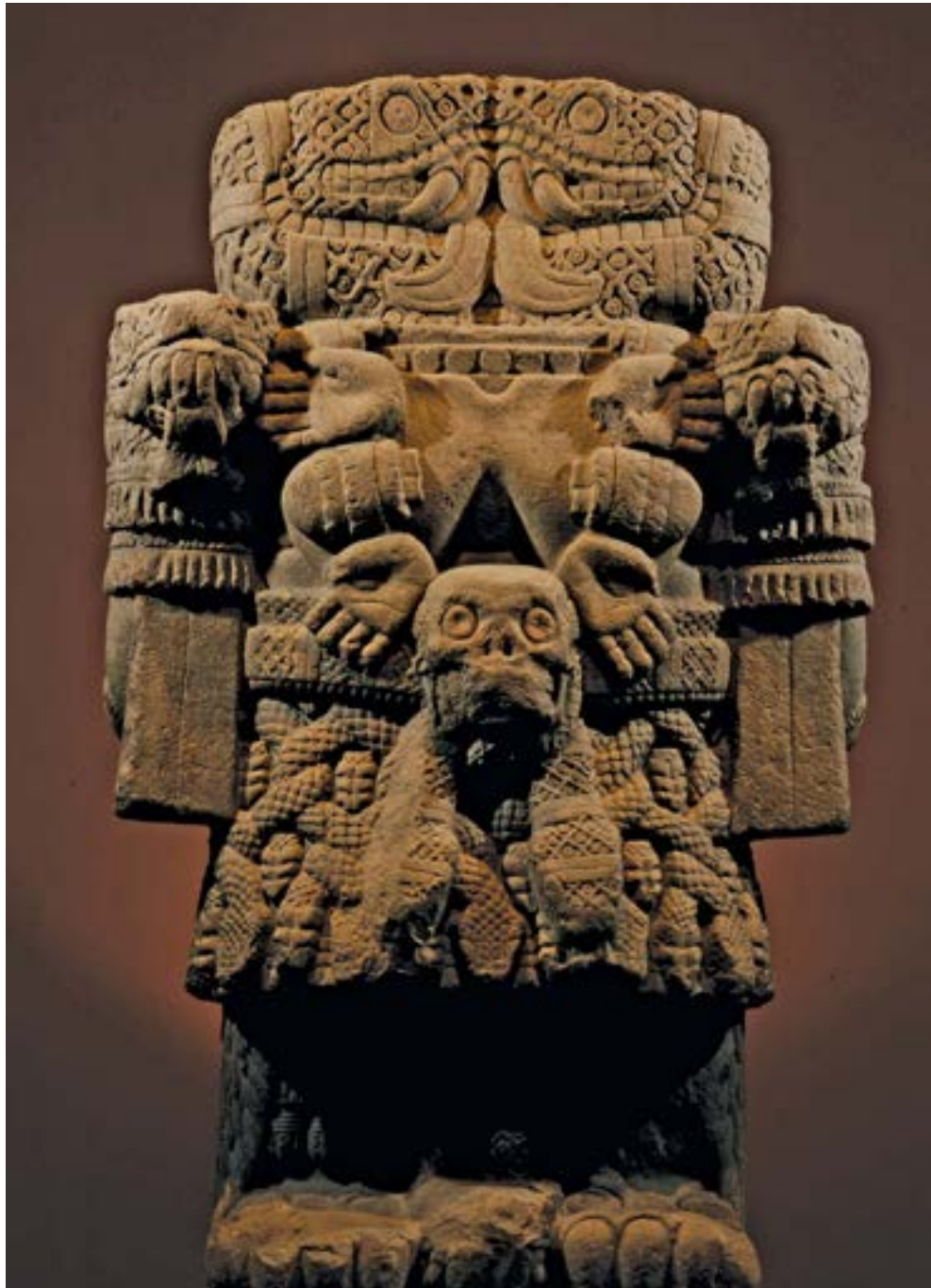


Figure 16. Coatlicue. Late Postclassic. Basalt, 350 x 130 x 130 cm. Collection National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.



Figure 17. Frida Kahlo, The Broken Column, 1944. Collection of Dolores Olmedo Mexico City



Figure 18. Oswaldo Guayasamín, *El toro y el cóndor* (*The Bull and the Condor*), 1957.



Figure 18. Oswaldo Guayasamín, *Manos de la protesta* (*Hands of protest*), 1968.



Figure 19. Oswaldo Guayasamín, *El grito (The Cry)*, 1983.



Figure 20. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973.