REWRITING MURALISM:
AURORA REYES, MURALISTAS, AND THE MEXICAN MURAL RENAISSANCE

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2021

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

This thesis will examine women muralists involved in the 20th c. Mexican Mural Renaissance, and the historical reasons for the lack of scholarship on these women. Through an analysis of the specific contributions made by women from the 1930s through the 1960s, I unpack the relationship among women muralists and the larger Mexican Mural Movement through the iconography of their murals. In this thesis, I will focus specifically on the muralista Aurora Reyes (1908-1985) and analyze how she engaged as a Mexican woman with the various cultural and political challenges of what had become known as a “mural movement.” In order to properly analyze Reyes’s influence on the mural movement, I find it necessary to produce a comparative analysis of her career and murals with those of her contemporaries. Thus, the thesis also examines the work of Marion Greenwood (1909-1970), the first woman to be given a mural commission in modern Mexico, and Fanny Rabel (1922-2008), one of the last women to receive a government commission. These two muralists help to contextualize Reyes’s career and situate the role women played within muralism and especially the history of muralism.

Utilizing a feminist lens, this thesis highlights the ideologies and social movements present during each artists’ career and will show how the shifting societal views of women during various historical moments in 20th century Mexico that impacted Greenwood, Reyes, and Rabel respectively. This analysis shows how muralistas of the 20th c. Mexican Mural Renaissance adapted and adopted the traditional mural iconography established by male artists: Reyes’s adaption of those traditions helped redefine muralism; Greenwoods experience as a woman in the movement illustrates just how groundbreaking Reyes’s career was; and Rabel’s career proves the
lasting effects Reyes had on the mural movement.

A few scholars have published on women muralists; Reyes has been written about substantially more so than either Greenwood or Rabel, especially in terms of her mural career. Scholars such as James Oles and Dina Comisarenco Mirkin have both contextualized the work of the woman muralists discussed in this thesis within the rising political concerns of women in the first half of the 20th century. I, however, will be examining the differences in iconography during their careers. These differences, I argue, manifest how these muralistas navigated through ideologies of government commissions and feminist statements in a society dominated by male artists.
# Table of Contents

Images: .................................................................................................................. v

Introduction: ........................................................................................................... 1

Ch. 1: Marion Greenwood, the United States, and *Machismo* Muralism ............. 11

Ch. 2: Dichotomy of Victims: Aurora Reyes’s Representation of Violence, Feminism, and the Modern Woman ................................................................. 35

Ch. 3: Fanny Rabel: Student, Artist, Activist........................................................ 53

Conclusion: .......................................................................................................... 72

Bibliography........................................................................................................... 75
Images


Figure 1.4: Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry North Wall*, 1932-1933, frescos, various dimensions, Detroit Institute of Art, USA. Image from Detroit Institute of Arts online collection, accessed January, 2021, https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/detroit-industry-north-wall-58538 .........................................................................................................................32


Figure 2.2: Diego Rivera, *The Rural School Teacher*, 1923, fresco, approx. 14’ 4 3/8” x 10’ 8 4/3”

Figure 3.1: Fanny Rabel, Ronda en el Tiempo (Circles of Time), 1964, acrylic paint on linen canvas, 8 ½” x 63”, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Image from “Eclipse of Seven Moons. Muralist Women in Mexico,” accessed January, 2021, and https://artesdemexico.com/eclipse-de-siete-lunas/.................................68

Figure 3.2: Fanny Rabel, The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit, 1957, acrylic, 35x2.4 m, 125 m2, located in the ballroom of the Israeli Sports Center (CDI), Mexico City. Image from “Images and the Duty of Memory: The Survival of a People Due to Their Spirit (1957) by Fanny Rabel,” accessed January, 2021, and file://C:/Users/sarah/OneDrive/Documents/UIUC/Thesis%20Research/Fanny%20Rabel/Comison%20Mirkin,%20The%20Survival%20of%20a%20People...Rabel.pdf......................................................68

Figure 3.3: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Portrait of the Bourgeoise (Retrato de la Burguesia), 1939, pyrozylin, 1,000 sq feet, Electrical Workers Union Building, Mexico City, Mexico. Image from WikiArt: Visual Art Encyclopedia, accessed January, 2021, https://www.wikiart.org/en/david-alfaro-siqueiros/portrait-of-the-bourgeoisie-1939......68

Figure 3.4: Diego Rivera, “The Great City of Tenochtitlan” Pre-Hispanic and Colonial Mexico murals, 1942-50, fresco, 971 x 492 cm, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City. Image from “Art of the 20th Century: Diego Rivera,” accessed January, 2021, http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/rivera5.html..................................................................................69

Figure 3.5: Photographer unknown, Frida Kahlo and her students 1943, in front of ‘We Love Peace and the World Head Over Heels for Beauty,’ 1943, photograph, at the la Rosita pulque bar. Image from “Frida Kahlo, her students and “La Rosita,”” accessed January, 2021, https://www.fridakahlostory.com/frida-kahlo-her-students-and-la-rosita...69

Figure 3.6: Photographer unknown, Frida Kahlo, Fanny Rabel, Arturo Estrada, and other students of the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura (School of Painting and Sculpture), at the unveiling of the murals at the “pulque” bar “La Rosita,” 1943, photograph. Image from Google Arts & Culture accessed January, 2021, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/frida-kahlo-fanny-rabel-arturo-estrada-and-other-students-of-the-escuela-de-pintura-y-escultura-school-of-painting-and-sculpture-at-the-unveiling-of-the-murals-at-the-pulque-bar-la-rosita-casasola/6QEIQ3VbwAweFg. ..........................................................70

Figure 3.7: Diego Rivera, “From the Conquest to 1930,” History of Mexico murals, 1929–30, fresco, 1,000 sq ft, West Wall, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City. Image from “The History of Mexico: Diego Rivera’s Murals at the National Palace,” accessed January, 2021, https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/latin-america-
Figure 3.8: Diego Rivera, *Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita*, 1931, Encaustic Painting, 6’ 6 1/2” x 64” (199.3x 162.5 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image from www.DiegoRivera.org, accessed January, 2021, https://www.diegorivera.org/flower-festival.jsp
Introduction

There is an obvious lack of scholarship on any woman muralist involved with the 20th c. Mexican Mural Renaissance; as stated by Shifra Goldman in 1982, “…from its inception in 1921, muralism has been a male dominated field of activity.”¹ The 20th century Mexican Mural Renaissance consisted of 289 artists working between 1905-1969; yet, of the total number of muralists, only 11% were women and of the 1200 total murals produced during those years, less than 10% were painted by women muralists.²

In the almost 40 years since those numbers were published, the study of Mexican muralism continues to focus on the men involved, and particularly “los tres grandes,” that is Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. They became the driving force behind the ‘movement’ that was Mexican muralism in the 1920s. Although Mexican muralism began not as a collective political identity, it has come to represent the post-revolutionary political stance of artists and the visualization of a national ideology. The mural movement began with government backed commissions for artists to paint murals on public walls in Mexico in order to disseminate post-revolutionary government propaganda. As los tres grandes rose in popularity, their political stances became more overt in their murals. And this soon led to consistent stylistic and iconographic patterns established by the male mural artists that became indicative of the Mexican Mural Movement.

This male monopoly over the movement began from its inception: Adrian Locke claims that “[a]mong the muralists Rivera was dominant; between 1925 and 1936 he was the mural

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² Ibid.
movement.” My interest for this thesis stems from this lack of representation of the female muralists involved in the 20th c. Mexican Mural Renaissance, the histories of which have erased the active role that women played throughout the movement. This disregard suggests that the history of revolutionary Mexico—in which women were active participants in the battles, confrontations, and political upheaval of the nation—had little significance over the outcome of the modern nation. Modern focus on women in Mexican Muralism are often only the images of women painted by male artists; the history and participation of women involved in this movement becomes skewed and one sided. Contrary to the popular narrative surrounding Mexican muralism, women had been involved in the movement from a very early point, and women continued to be involved in the movement throughout the 20th century. This included the likes of Andrea Gómez y Mendoza (1926-2012), Sofía Bassi (1913-1988), Olga Costa (1913-1993), Elena Huerta Muzquiz (1908-1997), and Rina Lazo (1923-2019), among others.

A deeper examination into the muralistas involved in the Mexican Renaissance provides a deeper understanding of both the iconographic patterns found in mural production of the era in addition to the historiographic relationship between the artists and their productions within Mexico, and, to a lesser extent, internationally. This thesis will focus on the contributions made by women throughout the Mexican Mural Renaissance by unpacking the relationship between the women muralists and the larger Mexican movement through the iconography of their murals. I will focus on the muralista Aurora Reyes (1908-1985) and analyze how she engaged with the mural movement as a Mexican woman.

As the first Mexican woman to receive a mural commission from the government in 1934, Reyes painted Attack on the Rural Teacher at Centro Escolar Revolución. Reyes’s mural was

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3 Adrian Locke. *Mexico: A Revolution in Art.* (Royal Academy of Arts, London. September 2013, 57.)
meant as a homage to the elementary school’s goal of democratizing education as promised by the Mexican Revolution. This mural also broke a taboo in art by depicting gendered violence produced during the revolution, as pointed out by Dina Comisarenco Mirkin. By paralleling the larger mural movements commitment to political activism, Reyes both adheres to the stylistic practices of the time while also challenging those models by reflecting the women’s rights activism and feminist movements that gained popularity following the revolution.

Aurora Reyes embodied the ideologies of the mural Renaissance throughout the movement, and as the self-proclaimed “first female Mexican mural artist,” she continued to receive mural commissions into the 1970s. In order to properly analyze Reyes’s influence on the mural movement, I find it necessary to produce a comparative analysis of her career and murals with those of her contemporaries. This analysis will examine the work of Marion Greenwood (1909-1970) and Fanny Rabel (1922-2008) as a way to contextualize Reyes’s career and situate the role women played within muralism and the histography of muralism.

Marion Greenwood was active slightly earlier than Reyes, receiving her first mural commission in Mexico in the early 1930s. Greenwood was the very first women to receive a government commission for a mural in Mexico in addition to being the very first foreign man or woman to be given a mural commission in Mexico. (Greenwood received a non-government mural commission in 1932; Pablo O’Higgins, also a U.S. citizen, did not receive his first mural commission until 1934, prior to that he only worked as an assistant to Diego Rivera). She had a

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4 Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s Ataque a La Maestra Rural:’ The First Mural Created by a Mexican Female Artist,” Woman’s Art Journal 26 (2005): 21.
5 Although women’s suffrage in Mexico was not achieved until 1953— compared to suffrage in the United States granted in 1918— the movement towards women’s suffrage began to gain traction during the Revolution and only increased in popularity as the century progressed.
very successful career as an artist in Mexico, and painted four more murals throughout the country. However, as an American woman, Greenwood did not spend much time working in Mexico, she stayed only three years before returning to the United States. Her impact on the movement overall was less substantial, and her relationships with the other muralists relied heavily on her American compatriots, specifically O’Higgins.

Conversely, active near the end of the Mexican Mural Renaissance is Fanny Rabel. Rabel is the youngest woman muralist associated with the 20th c. Mexican Mural Movement. She worked as an assistant to both Rivera and Siqueiros; she was one of Kahlo’s los fridos (the coterie of Kahlo students), and a member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (co-founded by O’Higgins and Leopoldo Méndez, among others). She received her first government commission for her most well-known work, Ronda en el tiempo (1964-65), at the Museuo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico in 1964. This mural garnered much criticism from Rabel’s male contemporaries for her approach and subject matter, but she continued to stay active in the art scene in Mexico. With her career at its height at the decline of the mural movement, many of her mural commissions came from a place of political lobbying, and her mural career becomes removed from the original revolutionary ideals of the earlier Mural Movement. Due to that decline, much of her career is focused on other, smaller, works such as lithographs, oil on canvases, etc. Regardless, Rabel’s government commissioned murals reflect many of the key elements of the mural movement, and Rabel challenged those gendered expectations of muralism, albeit differently than Reyes at the beginning of her career 30 years.

Through the comparison of Greenwood and Rabel with Reyes’s mural production, I will examine the ways Aurora Reyes fits within the art historiographic model of the Mexican Mural Renaissance. By comparing her work to her specifically female contemporaries, I will demonstrate
the way Reyes mural, along with those painted by Greenwood and Rabel, paralleled their more popular contemporaries, specifically \textit{los tres grande}, while simultaneously contradicting those parallels.

This thesis will help close the gap of the one-sided history that Mexican muralism has become in terms of the artists studied, discussed, and analyzed. Adding the valuable history, experiences, and insights that the women involved in the movement can bring to our modern understanding of that period will help counter the traditional male dominated narrative and open up thought to other ideas and perspectives on Mexican Muralism.

The choice to focus on Aurora Reyes was partly derived from the fact that she has become the most popular and remembered woman muralist from the Mexican Renaissance; her relationships with all of the major artists during that period has inserted her, if only slightly, into Mexican collective memory. Her significance to the mural movement extends beyond her being the first Mexican woman muralist; she produced multiple large-scale murals that challenged controversial political issues, she used her art to express her activism and political ideologies, and she extended her practices into literature and poetry. She influenced individuals such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Concha Michel. Comparing Reyes with her female mural contemporaries will allow us to examine questions such as: how did Reyes’s subject matter differ from her male contemporaries? Were there more personal traits within the works produced that can be seen? How did her relationship with other female artists affect the movement? By analyzing the way each woman challenged the \textit{machismo} society surrounding them, I will examine how these women artists navigated the dynamics of this male dominated field of the Mexican art scene and mural movement of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

This thesis examines a period of roughly 30-years: 1933-1965. The first date is represented
by the earliest mural Marion Greenwood produced in Mexico, the latter by one of the late murals produced by Fanny Rabel. Comparing Reyes’s murals to those of the muralistas at either end of the movement will help situate her impact to readers. Individually, the three artists—Greenwood, Reyes, and Rabel—also represent distinct moments and different responses to the call for public mural commissions in Mexico. This thirty-year time frame situates not only key works by muralistas within the wider Mural Movement, but it also coincides with early feminist movements in Mexico in addition to the second wave feminist movement the United States and Western Europe.

Situating Greenwood within this analysis will help the reader to better understand the climate of the mural movement within Mexico during this period and the inherent obstacles women faced as artists. Furthermore, Greenwood’s time in Mexico has been severely ignored due to her status as a woman and the fact that she did not fit neatly into conventional categories of mural painting during the 1930s. Even though Reyes and Greenwood were contemporaries, each woman painted in a very different style and received vastly different responses from audiences, other artists, and the Mexican government that often had more to do with the individual women’s nationality, gender, and sexuality than their art. Greenwood’s artistic career in Mexico will contextualize Reyes’s position as Mexico’s first Mexican woman muralist and the many layers of obstacles she faced as an artist as this thesis progresses.

Rabel’s mural career at the end of the movement allows for a comparison in terms of Reyes lasting effects on muralism for women, and how muralism for women changed over the course of those 20 years. Similar to Greenwood, Rabel has less written about her compared to her male contemporaries and even other women muralists; considering she was most active at the end of the mural movement (roughly 1950-80), and with her career extending beyond the years of the
Renaissance (the movement’s dates are contested, cited as 1920-1940/70, depending on the scholar), many scholars don’t often consider her contributions beyond her time spent assisting *los tres grandes*.

With the goal of this thesis— bringing to light the impact three women muralists had on the Mexican Mural Movement— my research will also highlight the areas that are lacking in current scholarship; my analysis will help by suggesting not only areas in which other scholars can develop, but also how the scholarship can shift to include a greater analysis of the impact of all the women involved in the mural movement, foregoing the one-sided view of history that has dominated. By looking at different women muralists who were active during different periods of the mural Renaissance in Mexico— Marion Greenwood at the birth of the movement, Aurora Reyes active almost throughout the Mural Renaissance, and Fanny Rabel near the end— one can see how the shift in government administration and leaders, feminist movements, and status of muralism affected the women artists and how these artists helped shape muralism and, in turn, help produce visual representations of modern Mexico.

The scholarship on 20th century Mexican muralism can be understood as encompassing five key phases of publications that reflect distinct surges in popularity in academic scholarship:

1) Contemporary scholarship (1920- mid 60s)

2) General writings about muralism as a movement (most prominent 1960-90s, but continued to be popular into 2010s)

3) Revivial of *Los tres grandes* as individual artists (1970-2010s)

4) Ideological framework of the muralists (2000-2010s)
5) Revisionism (1980-Present)

Understanding the evolution of scholarship of post-revolutionary Mexican muralism will provide my research with a foundation on which to base my comparative analysis of Aurora Reyes, Marion Greenwood and Fanny Rabel. Although these women are not often discussed within previous scholarship, what has been previously written on Mexican Muralism will ground my research and further prove the lack of writings on women muralists, providing the reader with more reasons as to why this thesis, and more like this, are needed.

Most relevant to this thesis is the current scholarship being published, which, when it has included women, has tended toward revisionism, inserting artists that have been ignored in the history of Mexican muralism. Much of this—albeit scarce—scholarship focuses on women, and the role they played in the 20th c. Mexican Mural Renaissance. This coincides with third wave feminism, beginning in the late 1990s and extending into modern day, which is found in both western popular culture and academic scholarship.

Beyond his research on los tres grandes, James Oles is one of the few scholars to publish a book dedicated to woman muralists as a way to insert them into the history of muralism. His book, Las Hermanas Greenwood en Mexico (2000), is more a collection of the artist’s work than an analysis of their impact on the movement, however this introduction has inspired more recent scholarship focusing on the role of gender influence in the Mexican mural movement. Dina Comisarenco Mirkin has published on Aurora Reyes, specifically an essay on “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural” (2005), in addition to her larger work on other women artists, Eclipse de Siete Lunas: Mujeres Muralistas en Mexico (published in 2017). Publications in English on the muralistas include Stephanie Smith’s The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico (2017), which focuses on artist’s ideological positions and an understanding of the interactions
between the creative intellectuals and the prorevolutionary Mexican state, where Smith highlights women’s roles in shaping the cultural revolution. Beyond the works mentioned here, there have been a few publications on Olga Costa and María Izquierdo as well (Carly Goodkin, 2013) Even with so many individual women involved in the movement, there are a limited number of articles and books highlighting their art and contributions to the movement, as seen by the short list above.

Even with more work being published in recent years focusing on the artistic production of women in post-Revolutionary Mexico, more still needs to be written on the individual artists and their contributions analyzed in relation to not only the mural movement but to those artist’s connections with the international art world. It is with this knowledge on the current state of the field that I approach my analysis.

Although I will be unpacking this analysis chronologically through my comparison of the three women muralists discussed, I will overlay my study with multiple theoretical frameworks. Utilizing a feminist lens, I will examine the ideologies and social movements present during each of the subject artist’s careers, and unpack the shifting societal views of women during various points throughout Mexico in the 20th century and how this impacted Marion Greenwood, Aurora Reyes, and Fanny Rabel respectively. This lens will help me to illustrate the context in which Reyes— and other women muralists— were active, in addition to proving the widespread impact Reyes had on the movement despite the limitations she faced due to her gender. Additionally, by focusing on the iconographic elements of the murals within this analysis, I will connect the formal elements with the social theories in discussion.

Chapter one of this thesis, “Marion Greenwood, the United States, and Machismo Muralism,” examines Marion Greenwood’s 1934 commission for Industrialization of the Countryside. Comparing the northern women’s murals to that of Aurora Reyes, this study will
analyze why the American woman was picked before Reyes for a state sponsored mural as part of a larger post-revolutionary nationalist project—diving into issues of race, class, etc. on top of the gendered obstacles already present.

Chapter two, “Dichotomy of Victims: Aurora Reyes’s Representation of Violence, Feminism, and the Modern Women,” examines Reyes’s mural career, focusing on her most famous mural *Attack on the Rural Teacher (Ataque a la Maestra Rural)* (1936). Looking at the iconographic elements of her mural, this chapter unpacks the way Reyes adopted the themes established by male muralists in her work. Themes of revolutionary heroes, mestizo identity, and Mexican cultural history. However, Aurora Reyes added another layer to their art that challenged the sexism found within their *machismo* society, adapting the common iconographic elements to fit their own ideological needs.

The final chapter, “Fanny Rabel, Student Artist, Activist” takes Rabel’s career as a comparison to Reyes’s demonstrates the lasting impact Reyes had on the mural movement and the art world in Mexico, and one can see the impact it had on other women artists, such as Rabel. As one of the last artists to receive a government backed mural commission, Rabel was in a unique position: she was able to build relationships with established muralists without having to succumb to the movements established traditions. Her resulting mural, and continued career, demonstrates the way her position as a woman artist was impacted by those women artists who came before her.

Through my analysis of the iconography of Aurora Reyes’s murals, I will demonstrate the impact women had on the Mural Renaissance in 20th c. Mexico.
Marion Greenwood, the United States, and *Machismo* Muralism

Although Aurora Reyes, in 1946, cites herself as “the first female Mexican mural artist” to receive a government commission for a mural, she was not the first woman muralist in Mexico: Marion Greenwood was granted a commission three years prior to Aurora Reyes’s first mural commission. Greenwood’s 1934 commission for *Industrialization of the Countryside* is important in the history of muralism since it was the first mural in modern Mexico created by a woman, but it is also important because Marion Greenwood was an American woman. Considering the Mexican mural movement was a nationalistic project focused on highlighting Mexico’s indigenous history and culture, and in light of the fact that all Mexican men, not surprisingly, were elected to paint the first government-commissioned murals, how is it that—when the opportunity arose for the choice of a woman muralist—it was a foreigner?

Within 1930’s Mexico, issues concerning women’s rights, the definition of national art, and the role of women in the mural movement culminated with the commissioning of Marion Greenwood by the Mexican government as the first woman muralist in Mexico. This chapter will focus on how, and suggest reasons why, Greenwood received this commission, looking at her artistic and cultural background as an American, her relationships with other artists in Mexico, and her iconographic choices. This analysis on Marion Greenwood’s mural *Industrialization of the Countryside* and her career in Mexico will help contextualize the careers of later woman muralists in Mexico, specifically Aurora Reyes, and will help answer questions as to how and why Marion

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7 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural’,” endnote 4.
Greenwood was the first woman muralist. How Marion Greenwood paved the way in the Mexican art scene for more woman artists is an important narrative to consider when analyzing the impact Reyes had as the first Mexican woman muralist in Mexico during the 20th century Mexican Mural Renaissance.

Greenwood’s career in the United States and working for WPA has been thoroughly documented and written about, however her time in Mexico has only recently being analyzed by scholars. Although there is significantly less written about Marion Greenwood’s Mexican career compared to her male contemporaries, there are a few scholars who have focused solely on her murals in Mexico. One particular scholar who has written extensively on Marion Greenwood (and her sister Grace Greenwood) is James Oles (2000, 2004, and 2006); Oles’s works will be used throughout this analysis for his comprehensive analysis of Mexico’s first woman muralist. Michael K. Schuessler’s publication, *Marion Greenwood: The First Foreign Muralist* (2017) also focuses on Greenwood’s career as an American woman in Mexico, highlighting the relationship between her and O’Higgins’s political affiliations. Many other scholars, such as Shifra Goldman, include Greenwood in their compilations of women artists of Mexico or, like Adrian Lock and Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, in reference to other muralists.

**American in Mexico**

How could a female artist born in Brooklyn, New York in 1909 to a middle-class family find herself commissioned by the Mexican government to produce didactic murals? Her families support of her artistic tendences and their relative wealth allowed her the opportunity to attend the Art Students League in New York in the mid-1920s where she was able to study with the likes of John Sloan, George Bridgeman, and Frank Vincent DuMond. It should be recognized that although
there were an increasing number of women attending the Art Students League and earning leadership positions within it, this was still an exception, not a rule. Greenwood’s attendance at the Art Students League was a testament to her privilege and artistic ability at this early point in her life. Greenwood also studied with Winold Reiss, a German-born artist and graphic designer and a key figure connected to the Harlem Renaissance. She later shared a studio with her sister Grace Greenwood (1905-1979) in Paris. (While her older sister was an artist in her own right and would often collaborate with Marion on various Murals, Marion was the more famous and successful of the two from the beginning).

However, in December of 1932, Greenwood made the decision to follow her lover, Josephine Herbst (1892-1969), to Mexico. The radical writer and journalist, Herbst, was married at the time to novelist John Herrmann whom she had met in Paris. But that did not stop Greenwood and Herbst’s relationship, which Oles described as an “intense sexual affair that continued in Mexico.” What is unclear is whether Herbst was traveling in connection to her position as a reporter for *Scribner’s Magazine* (1933) or *New Masses* (1934) documenting the agrarian situation, or if the move to Mexico was motivated by their political affiliations and increasing interest in communism and post-Revolutionary communist state of Mexico.

Her personal relationship may not have been the only reason Greenwood traveled south that winter. Even though Greenwood had never been to Mexico prior to this, her decision as an artist to move south was not unique: Mexico offered many American artists freedom from artistic convention and European influence, and the country offered the opportunity for them to live cheaply, free from the suffocating financial situation that plagued the United States as it battled

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8 He was illustrator of Alin Locke’s 1925 *The New Negro.*
the effects of The Great Depression. Furthermore, Mexico offered a political haven for those becoming increasingly involved with communism in this interwar period. That is to say, Mexico seemed to offer even more freedom than that to Americans.

Additionally, It was during these post-WWI years that Americans embraced what James Oles has described as a paradoxical aesthetic: “a devotion to the most modern art and a keen interest in ‘the primitive,’ as found in archaeological excavations, ancient sculpture and artifacts, folk art, and craft, and commitment to an American or New World culture independent of European tradition.” For many Americans, and specifically artists, Mexico embodied both characteristics of that aesthetic: it was the artistic center for modern art, and it had a relationship to its ‘primitive’ past that was being utilized by modern Mexican artists (specifically, the muralists).

This period of “primitivizing” of Mexico by Americans was a pattern stemming from numerous xenophobic acts of the 1920s, many emerging with the new polices of immigration and emigration, and resulting tense U.S./Mexican relations. U.S. Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, the Immigration Act, and creation of the US Border Patrol in 1924. Although not all of these new policies directly addressed Mexican immigration, they did have lasting effects on the U.S./Mexican border, allowing the state to collect visa fees and taxes from (usually poor farm) workers entering. As a surge in Mexican workers escaping the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 to the United States initially filled a need for manual labor during WWI (1914-1918, the U.S entered in 1917), the onset of the Great Depression (1929) quickly changed Americans feelings towards foreigners. Now, many Americans saw Mexicans as competitors for jobs and a

drain on already scarce social services. This prompted a forced repatriation program of both Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and hundreds of thousands more returned to Mexico voluntarily. Artists specifically flocked to Mexico because, as Marion Greenwood said herself, the Mexican peasant “seemed to understand so much more about painting than the average [American] white collar-worker or slum dweller.” American cultural leaders such as anthropologist Frances Toor, author Anita Brenner, painter George Biddle, and writer D.H. Lawrence all migrated to Mexico during the 1920’s.

Things did begin to change between Mexico and the United States in 1933 with U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, a namesake of the term President Woodrow Wilson coined a quarter century earlier to justify the U.S. involvement in the Mexican Revolution. Roosevelt promised, with his Good Neighbor Policy, to improve relations with Latin America. Happening almost simultaneously as Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy was the spread of Mexican muralism to the United States via the commissioning of high publicity works including Diego Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* mural (destroyed 1934) at Rockefeller Center, New York. Much of this interest in Mexico came from the male Mexican muralist’s early fame and success, with artists such as Rivera forming relationships with individuals like George Biddle and Dwight Morrow. Influenced by the example of Mexico’s commissioning of artists such as Rivera, Biddle proposed the creation of the Federal Arts Project to his childhood friend and now President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Federal Arts Project (1935) was a branch of the WPA (1935)—an American New Deal agency that employed millions of people to carry out public works projects—that provided jobs specifically for artists, writers, and actors. Diego Rivera’s

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14 Ibid.
relationship with both George Biddle and US Ambassador Dwight Morrow heavily influenced the Depression era government to hire their own muralists beginning in the 1930s.

Rivera’s influence continued to draw aspiring American artists to Mexico City with the hope that they would be able to learn from him and assist him on future murals. And in the 1930s, the large group of artists and writers who studied in Diego Rivera’s studio began moving back to the United States to work for the WPA. Contrary to the northern migration of male muralists, Marion Greenwood arrived in Mexico as many men were leaving; this reverse migration that Greenwood followed could lead one to believe that there would be an increased chance to work with some of the big names in the artistic community along with more commissions for new artists like herself with the sudden lack of established male muralists. And her admiration of Diego Rivera pushed Greenwood to seek out mural commissions in Mexico City.

Greenwood’s confidence may have stemmed from the nascent feminist movement she had just left behind in the United States. Women’s rights in the United States—including the right to vote, labor rights, and the belief in the expression for female sexuality—were much different than the reality faced by many women living in Mexico in 1920, a topic that will be examined in the next chapter. Greenwood was stepping into a culture that was much different from the one she was leaving behind, and though women had been fighting for rights and suffrage in Mexico since the Revolution, it would still be another 20 years from Greenwood’s arrival before women were granted the right to vote in Mexico.

**Machismo and Muralism**

Marion Greenwood may have arrived with confidence to Mexico’s artistic capital, but

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17 Panzer, 18.
machismo was still a driving force in the art community there in 1932. Greenwood was not the only woman forced to deal with machismo; this pride is what Evelyn Stevens called a “cult of virility” focusing on “aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships.” However, Matthew Gutman points out that machismo is a term that has a specific temporal location; it refers to Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary Mexico and, “together with the pistol” it came to play a role in “the consolidation of the Mexican nation.” Machismo dictated the lives of both men and women in Mexico during the 1920’s and 1930’s, a culture that Greenwood would have to navigate as an American woman.

The post-Revolutionary governments power rested on its claim to represent ‘the people,’ pushing its ideas through the state-sponsored muralists project. And the muralists ideas of heterosexist, patriarchal machismo showed through their representations of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity within their murals, such as Rivera’s The History of Mexico (1929-35, National Palace, Mexico City) or Siqueiros’s From the Dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz to the Revolution (1957-65, National History Museum, Mexico City), murals that came to define mexicanidad and were supported by the new government. With the embodiment of machismo muralism at the head of Mexican muralism, Diego Rivera’s representation of Mexican society highlighted how, in McCaughan’s understanding, the “system of political power that emerged out of the revolution was highly- and consciously- gendered.”

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21 Ibid.
Marion Greenwood idolized Rivera’s iconographic representations of ‘the people’, although she, unlike other women artists, such as Fanny Rabel discussed later, never had the chance to study in his studio or assist him on any of his murals. In fact, upon her arrival, Greenwood was not even able to secure a commission in the same city as Diego Rivera; instead, when she moved to Mexico in the early 1930’s, the only commission she could find was secured through her mentor Pablo O’Higgins, a successful American artist highly involved in the Mexican Mural Renaissance. He gave her access to a network of artists and commissions, providing her with her first mural commission in Mexico from the American owners of Hotel Taxqueño in Taxco, over 100 miles southwest from the artistic center of the country, Mexico City.

Although it seems obvious that her nationality as an American had a huge impact on her receiving this commission at a hotel owned by an American and operated for Americans, Oles believes that “any artist willing to make the trip would probably have been welcomed with open arms.”

The resulting mural, Mercado de Taxco (Taxco Market) (1933) was a technically challenging mural to paint considering the wall allotted for the fresco was an irregular space; part of the wall is defined by the staircase while another area was cut through by a ceiling beam. This limited Greenwood’s options since the full mural could only be seen in limited points. Although no photographic reproductions exist of the entire mural to the best of my knowledge (though sections have been reproduced), it is clear though secondary sources that Greenwood’s interpretation of Taxco Market was an idealization of timeless Mexican, and her iconography makes it clear that her intended viewers were meant to be the American tourists of the hotel. As described by Dulce María Pérez Aguirre, Greenwood’s Mercado de Taxco depicts indigenous

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people at the local Taxco market in “typical attire,” i.e. men wear a hat, blanket suit, and coat while women were covered with a shawl. And even though Greenwood depicts the landscape of the open-air market, the rooftops, and walls of the houses, she paid little attention to the products and focused more on the local residents; her view is almost voyeuristic.

With no reference to current events, politics, or a specific historical moment, Greenwood’s mural functioned more as an ideal for the American viewer; it illustrated a picturesque local market economy, one that tourists want to be able to experience before returning home. Greenwood herself is quoted as saying that she loves the small towns, that her time there was “wonderful, because I had nothing to worry about, just drawing and observing, and then going home and sleeping.” And, according to Pérez Aguirre, Greenwood’s iconographic choices were successful both to her contemporaries and to present-day individuals since the mural was still intact when the hotel became the Colegio Centro Cultural y Acción in 1953 and is, to the best of my knowledge, still intact today. However, I have been unable to confirm the present condition of any surviving murals.

Her second fresco commission in Mexico was *Paisaje y economía de Michoacán* (*Landscape and Economy of Michoacan*) (1933-34) (Figure 1.1) at the Universidad de San Nicolás de Hildago in Morelia, another provincial town west of Mexico City. Here, Greenwood shifts her focus to labor, replacing the commerce-based theme she focused on in Taxco. Instead of the focus being the products (as in the Taxco market), here she chose to depict the daily toil of the laborer: at the bottom left corner, there is a couple weaving with a child seated at their feet, staring

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25 Pérez Aguirre, 185.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
at the viewer; above them, we see faceless men working numerous fishing boats; walking towards the upper right corner is a line of women facing away from the viewer, children slung on their backs as they walk past another figure bent over with a sickle in his hand. Here, her iconography suggests she is supporting the indigenous worker, and making a subtle claim for indigenous workers’ rights in post-Revolutionary Mexico. All the figures depicted within this mural are dark skinned and seemingly poor; Greenwood’s caricatures of Mexican labor loosely imitated the popular political ideologies that were in Mexican artistic circles at the time; especially those beliefs purported by Diego Rivera and his followers. In *Paisaje y economía de Michoacán (Landscape and Economy of Michoacan)*, Greenwood’s figures follow Rivera’s Indigenous troupe of dark skinned, poor, and simplistic.

And, by signing her name on the skirt of the female potter grinding pigments, James Oles has argued that Marion Greenwood “made a public (and even feminist) statement, identifying herself directly with an indigenous woman painter working for the community for little remuneration.”30 This mural does come across as more radical compared to her last mural in Taxco; her shift to depicting actual labor, toil, and clear references to communism with the sickle show that. However, Greenwood still refused to reference any current events. Furthermore, these murals that were supposedly promoting the rights of the indigenous workers did not give the local populations any agency, suggesting that only outsiders could save them.31 Originally, local students and members of the community protested Greenwood’s mural. It was not until the future President Cárdenas visited and gave his approval did the protests subside; yet conservative factions continued to challenge the painting.32 Although the male Mexican muralists would often paint

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30 Oles, “The Mexican Experience of Marion and Grace Greenwood,” p. 82.
31 Ibid. 83.
32 Pérez Aguirre, 190-191.
indigenous peoples in anonymity and without agency, Greenwood’s stylistic choices that followed that same pattern only emphasized her position as an American; and while the male Mexican muralists can get away with a depiction of a generic, helpful indigenous population, viewers today may see the Americans stereotyping Mexican and Indigenous peoples as racist and bigoted.

**Industrialization of the Countryside**

Regardless of those critiques, in 1934, Marion Greenwood was commissioned to paint a mural at the Rodriguez Market in Mexico City. Named after former president Abelardo L. Rodriguez, this square has had a politically charged history: it was transformed from the Saint Gregory School for Indians (Colegio de los Indios de San Gregorio) during Spanish colonial times to the National College of Agriculture (Nacional de Agricultura) after Independence, and subsequently being occupied by the Mexican army during the Revolution. The Rodriguez Market housed a theater, day care, and government offices, so these murals would be highly visible by a large portion of the local population.

Why, then, did the Mexican government commission Marion Greenwood to paint a mural in a site as politically significant as the Rodriguez Market? Even with Greenwood’s previous experience with muralism in Mexico, this new commission was in the largest city in the country; the rural towns of her previous commissions were in stark contrast to from Mexico City. And it was precisely due to her limited experience in rural Mexico that many other artists felt she was not qualified for this commission. As a result, she was at first overlooked for this commission, with


the official 1934 contracts absent of any reference to either Greenwood sister. O’Higgins fought to bring both women into the project, claiming that Marion and her sister Grace had more experience than the other artists considered.

Her previous mural commissions proved that she was an adequate muralist, but they also showed that her politics were not the driving force of the murals themselves; rather, she was more motivated in these early years as an artist to prove herself capable. And this was shown in her actions; in 1934 Marion Greenwood returned to the United States to work on WPA murals while waiting for her commission for the Rodriguez mural to be solidified. Only after she was called back with permission to begin painting did she return to Mexico. While she was sympathetic towards the proletariat and labor movements in Mexico, as evident in her iconography, Greenwood seems not to have engaged with the plight of the workers, or the market’s, urban politics, beyond their use as subject matter and background for her murals. Rather, she concerned herself with finding commissions, regardless of the politics behind the commissions. With that being said, the art commissions for this building were less important than the propaganda value they provided for the market itself.

Therefore, it can be posited that the Mexican government commissioned Greenwood because they believed her to be acquiescing enough to follow their goal of promoting this market for new urban poor without being too personally politically motivated since she was American artist. The Mexican government wanted the artists they commissioned to promote the socialist themes of the Mexican Revolution, and though that can be seen as political in and of itself, they did not want these artists to challenge these political beliefs or the government.

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35 Ibid.
36 Oles, “The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood,” 123
The Mexican government wanted to use this market space as a way to revitalize a working-class district in Mexico City, and hired ten muralists for this expansive project: Grace and Marion Greenwood, Pablo O’Higgins, Isamu Noguchi, Ramón Alva Guadarrama, Angel Bracho, Raúl Gamboa, Antonio Pujol, Pedro Rendón, and Miguel Tzab Trejo (all of the Mexican muralists involved were former assistants to Diego Rivera).

While sisters Marion and Grace Greenwood were hired together, when they began painting their portion of the Rodriguez Market mural in February of 1935, they separated their spaces. Marion alone was given an almost three thousand square foot space along the northeast stairwell to paint her mural, *Industrialization of the Countryside*. Grace painted *La Minería* (The Mining) and *Hombres y Máquinas* (Men and Machines) on the opposite stairwell, but all ten muralists would often come together to discuss themes, politics, aesthetic solutions, and as a result, many of the murals share themes and repeated images.  

As Marion Greenwood said herself:

"It was wonderful to be working with artists and with all this wonderful space and [to have] the chance to work at these problems with one another. We'd have meetings every couple of weeks about what we were going to paint and how we would work it out...we were, of course...all very socially conscious. It [suffering] was all over the world at the time, and we were terribly sincere and very eager to make it very clear, if we had anybody suffering in our murals, why they were suffering."

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37 Ibid. See The Whitney’s video in conjunction with “Vida Americana” exhibit; they show many shots of the Greenwoods siters’ Rodriguez Market Murals along with mural produced by other artists: https://whitney.org/media/46658
38 Panzer, 21.
This immersion in the Mexican mural world— their ideologies, political leanings, and public polemics— had a huge influence over Marion Greenwood and how she would approach this new mural commission, and this political influence was even greater since the famous muralist Diego Rivera was hired to approve the visual content of the various artists participating in the Rodriguez Market. However, according to James Oles, he was surprisingly slack in his supervisory role, allowing many of these less-experienced artists to have freedom in their murals. Al Ready, many of these new artists had strong political beliefs that aligned with Rivera, beliefs that contradicted the request for themes that were progressive but not radical, and related to health, sanitation, and food distribution. Here, at the Rodriguez Market, the Departamento del Distrito Federal (Department of Federal District, DDF) branch of the federal government, commissioned artists to paint progressive— but not radical— themes related to health, sanitation, and food distribution. Since he was openly communist (although he had been expelled from the communist party in 1929), Diego Rivera’s role here was a sign, in Oles opinion, “less of government sympathies with radical content than a toleration of the muralists rhetoric as a smokescreen for the conservative politics of the regime.” This overt disregard of Rivera’s political leanings by the government can help explain Greenwood’s relationship with Mexican politics. Often criticized for his disregard of his own political ideals, Rivera’s pattern of foregoing his political leanings in favor of commissions is replicated by Greenwood as she begins her own mural career in Mexico.

40 This information has been cited to the Marion Greenwood Archives, which I have not yet had a chance to access myself and confirm this source. See James Oles, “The Mexican Murals of Marion and Grace Greenwood,” Out Of Context (2004, 22): 123-124. (Footnote 46).
41 Ibid., 123
42 Most famously manifested by the arguments between Siqueiros and Rivera. Siqueiros in 1934 who was a passionate Stalinist and opposed Rivera’s support of Leon Trotsky, was involved in a heated public debate over their political and artistic views. On the political difference between the two, see Stephanie Smith, Power and Politics of Art, chapter 3.
Contrary to the Mexican government’s desires for this mural, and a clear result from outside artistic influence, Greenwood began this mural with a focus on the struggles affecting Mexico’s urban and rural workers. In Marion Greenwood’s *Industrialization of the Countryside* (1935) (Figure 1.2), she filled her composition with the history of labor in Mexico, her narrative beginning on the left of her composition with field workers harvesting sugar cane and early factorization and progressing vertically into the upper right with modern industrialization. The poor and destitute are concentrated in the center foreground of this mural, closest to the viewer when walking past, and as one follows the composition, one can see references to the Mexican Revolution, American capitalism, and modern welders in factory lines.

Rivera’s influence extended beyond his supervisory role and political ideals: Marion Greenwood used Rivera’s stairwell mural in the Ministry of Education as a model for her own mural at the Rodriguez market. And like Rivera, Greenwood researched her subjects beforehand so her mural would be more “authentic.” Greenwood was aware of the markets locations politically strife history reaching back to the colonial period and the modern governments desire to push post-revolutionary propaganda and emphasize *mexicanidad* through production of murals usually painted by male artists depicting masculine labor and indigenous female beauty.

Although this composition was Greenwood’s, her iconographic elements are clearly replicating Rivera’s previous murals, drawing a connection between herself and the most famous muralist. Some of her references are common tropes that anyone visiting the market would understand, such as the sugar cane scene at the top left of *Industrialization of the Countryside* which has clear references to the monopoly in Veracruz in addition to obvious references to Rivera’s Slavery in the Sugar Mill from the Palacio de Cortés murals in Cuernavaca, Mexico.⁴³

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However, almost the entire mural seems to reference a previous Rivera mural: the hands at the top of the mural grasping the ticker tape reference in Rivera’s *The Wall Street Banquet* (Figure 1.3) found in the Ministry of Public Education; below that, the red banner is an obvious replica of Rivera’s banner that runs throughout the Ministry of Public Education murals; and one could even compare the modern industry Greenwood shows with Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* (Figure 1.4) mural completed just the year prior. Furthermore, Greenwood’s picturing of the injustices to workers bears a likeness to sections of Rivera’s Chapingo University mural cycles of ten years earlier.

Emulating Rivera, Greenwood is insistent on showing popular criticisms of, as stated by Angélica Martínez-Sulvarán, the “injustices done to both urban and rural workers by the ruling class in complicity with the federal government.” But even with her imitation of the most famous of los tres grandes, what cannot be replicated is Greenwood’s obvious technical talent and ability to express her individual vision: the “[p]lay between interrelated forms and actions which conceal the underlying compositional structure was one of most important skills she learned from Rivera’s fresco.” Between her and her sister, over 3,000 square feet needed to be painted, some of it crossing over corners and other architectural elements (Figure 1.5). Her ability to paint the expansive walls should not be overlooked, and it was precisely because of her artistic ability that Marion Greenwood, and her sister, became the first women muralists in Mexico and why Diego Rivera called them “the greatest living women mural painters.”

Within Greenwood’s *Industrialization of the Countryside*, the only women she depicted were represented in the foreground as poor and destitute—however one could argue that

Greenwood’s strongest figure is the female centered in the mural. Here Greenwood positioned a dark-skinned woman staring directly into the viewer, gripping her child as her partner stands beside her in tattered and torn clothing. This clear challenge and confrontation of the viewer is almost drowned out by the busy composition of men filling up the wall. Unlike Rivera, though, Marion Greenwood did not paint any women in active roles within this mural. More attuned to Orozco’s representation of women, Greenwood reserved the role of active participants (of the laborers, workers, and revolutionaries) in her mural for men. Although this may come across as hypocrisy for Marion Greenwood to relegate the women she paints to such passive roles while she herself was an active participant in the art scene, the reality is not that simple. Although she was the first woman in Mexico to be awarded a mural commission, an accomplishment that speaks to her artistic ability and drive for success, that does not mean that sexism and machismo were not a present challenge to her career in Mexico City. American culture of the 1920s, the era of the flapper and women’s liberation— the era in which Marion Greenwood grew up— was beginning to be more accepting of women in non-traditional roles. The culture surrounding women in the early 1930s Mexico City was different, though. Machismo, sexism, and traditional women’s roles still heavily dictated both women’s and men’s lives, more of which will be said in later chapters. As a woman, Greenwood had to violate social and dress code that dictated women’s social presence in 1930s Mexico; the dress codes that modern women were expected to abide by contrasted with her infamous overalls she donned while working a physically demanding.47

It was speculated by James Oles in “The Mexican Experience of Marion and Grace Greenwood” (2006) that by choosing to align her iconography with already established masters-like Rivera and Orozco- Greenwood solidified her position as an artist in Mexico City and avoided

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overtly feminist themes that may have come across as “ungrateful.” Oles further argues that Marion Greenwood (and, to a lesser extent, her sister and collaborator, Grace Greenwood) actively chose not to question “the very spirit of equality that has given them that opportunity.” Oles view of Greenwood’s representation of feminist themes seems superficial, especially considering Greenwood’s desire to escape certain aspects of the art scene, and the restrictive WPA in the United States.

I, however, would like to posit a different theory. It is seen throughout the subjects in her murals that Greenwood did not aim to paint any actively feminist themes, choosing instead to align herself with male muralists by replicating their style, themes, and iconographic elements as an act of self-preservation and to protect her status as a woman and artist in a foreign country. Less concerned with feminism and equality for woman, Greenwood’s position in the mural movement was dictated by her desire to achieve success over any political ideology. Her avoidance of what today would be understood as ‘feminist’ themes— imagery and representation of women with greater agency beyond the traditional allegorical and maternal themes— may be due not simply to a wish for appeasement of the public and influential figures in the movement, but more so to avoid being labeled as a ‘feminist’ entirely. Although American feminist activists were able to secure suffrage (remembering that suffrage in U.S.A came in 1919; Mexican women did not receive suffrage until 1953), bring awareness to female sexuality, including lesbianism, and numerous rights for women throughout the early 20th c., being labeled a ‘feminist’ had detrimental effects to a woman and her career as early as the late 1920s. Furthermore, Greenwood came to Mexico with her female lover, and although her sexuality cannot be assumed (MacKenzie claims that as early as 1939 she was married to Charles Fenn), deviating from the heterosexual norm during this

period was still not accepted in the United States or Mexico and a condemnation as such could have been dangerous to the woman accused.\textsuperscript{49} So maybe Greenwood was not trying to support the equality that brought her the commission in the Rodriguez Market, but rather Greenwood’s lack of overtly feminist iconography was an act of self-preservation. It can be seen that the line of thinking for professional women during this period was “loyalty to the predominant ethos- to male partisan priorities in the case of politics- was a necessary although not a sufficient requisite for women’s acceptability. In politics, to show loyalty to partisan priorities meant, for the most part, abandoning feminist rhetoric and giving up any visibly independent stance on behalf of women.”\textsuperscript{50} Greenwood’s fight in terms of her physical presence outweighed any iconographic stance she could take; her famous quote of “If I was [sic] a man everything would be easier” may lend itself as a reason as to why Greenwood chose to model her iconographic elements after already established male muralists and decided to use men as her leading characters as opposed to women within \textit{Industrialization of the Countryside}.\textsuperscript{51} Because not only did her very presence on a scaffold prove controversial, she was lauded by others in the art world and criticized by those with more conservative views, but the act of Marion Greenwood painting was a direct challenge to the established patriarchy that dominated Mexican muralism (Figure 1.6).

\textit{Industrialization of the Countryside} at the Rodriguez Market, in contrast to her earlier mural at Hotel Taxqueño in Taxco, does not contain overtly feminist iconography (which, as will be seen in the next chapter, can be seen in the likes of Aurora Reyes \textit{Ataque a la Maestra Rural} (1936) mural or in other media such as Tina Modotti’s \textit{Baby Nursing} (1926-27)). Instead of challenging muralism through her iconography, Greenwood challenged the very notion of


\textsuperscript{51} James Oles, "The Mexican Experience of Marion and Grace Greenwood," 83.
muralism as a ‘man’s job.’ I want to make clear that just by being a woman muralist in 1930 Mexico Greenwood challenged the *machismo* standards even though her iconography heavily imitated *los tres grandes* often sexist, male-centered imagery.

Yet, regardless of the steps she was taking towards challenging the sexism found in the mural movement in Mexico City purported (consciously or unconsciously) by her male contemporaries, Greenwood’s career as a foreigner did not last long. In 1936, Marion Greenwood returned to the United States, bringing with her political ideologies and artistic innovations she learned during her years in Mexico back to America, and the WPA. Although she never returned to Mexico, Marion Greenwood continued to earn recognition of her paintings of the American South and China until her early death in 1970. Regardless of the fact that her iconography did not push a more overtly feminist stance, Marion Greenwood still played a vital role in the history of Mexican muralism. Her very presence paved the way for future muralists, and her challenge to not only the act of painting as a labor reserved for men, but her challenge to other accepted gendered stereotypes of the time, including her dress, labor, and position. And her position could not come at a better time; Greenwood was obviously not the only woman involved in the mural movement during the early 1930s, and soon after completion of her Rodriguez Market mural other women were awarded more commissions throughout Mexico City. And just two years after Marion Greenwood painted *Industrialization of the Countryside*, Mexico’s first Mexican woman was commissioned to paint the political and controversial mural *Attack on the Rural Teacher (Ataque a la Maestra Rural)*. Aurora Reyes became the most renowned woman muralist, and her position in the art world was viable partially due to Marion Greenwood establishing women’s positions as muralists.

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Images

Figure 1.1: *Paisaje y economía de Michoacán (Landscape and Economy of Michoacan)*, 1933-34, Universidad de San Nicolás de Hildago in Morelia

Figure 1.2: *Industrialization of the Countryside*, 1935, Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, Mexico City
Figure 1.3: Diego Rivera, *Wall Street Banquet*, 1928, Secretariat of Public Education, Mexico City

Figure 1.4: Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, North Wall, Detroit Institute of Art, USA
Figure 1.5: Marion Greenwood standing in front of her mural at Rodriguez Market, 1935 (?)
Figure 1.6: Marion Greenwood photographed in front of her mural at Red Hook Housing Project in New York City, 1940
Two years after Marion Greenwood completed *Industrialization of the Countryside* at the Rodriguez Market, Aurora Reyes, Mexico’s first native women muralist, was commissioned by the government to paint a wall at the Centro Escolar Revolución in downtown Mexico City. The resulting mural by Reyes, *Attack on the Rural Teacher (Ataque a la Maestra Rural)* (1936) (Figure 2.1), is a revolutionary mural depicting a woman being dragged by her hair out of her classroom as children watch. The two male attackers— one striking the victim with a gun and the other dragging her off with papers clutched in his hand and raised above his head— all approximate the outline of Mexico’s territory. Reyes’s simplified, rounded shapes and limited color scheme create, as stated by Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, a “dynamism that is emphasized by the predominance of the diagonal compositional axes that structure the subject.”

Since Reyes was more popular for her lyrical poems during her lifetime, much of her mural work has been forgotten in the historiography of Muralism in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Dina Comisarenco Mirkin is the most notable scholar publishing on women artists in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Comisarenco Mirkin has written extensively on Aurora Reyes in addition to Concha Michel, Fanny Rabel, and other muralists in order to reinsert their stories into the collective memory. Her multiple articles that focus solely on Reyes in addition to her other books on women artists of the period take a modern, feminist approach to the artists and their work. Since

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she has published the most comprehensive work on Reyes, Comisarenco Mirkin will be referenced throughout this chapter for both her research and her theories on the art and artists. Additionally, since much of Reyes’s art is connected to the politics and gender equality protests of the time, Ed McCaughan’s “Gender, Sexuality, and Nation in the Art of Mexican Social Movements” (2002) provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between artists, muralists, women’s social positions, and Mexican politics during the post-revolutionary mural Renaissance.

This chapter will explore Aurora Reyes’s mural *Attack on the Rural Teacher*, her involvement with the mural movement, and the controversy surrounding the *Attack on the Rural Teacher* mural painted by the first Mexican woman to receive a commission from the government. Beginning with a brief analysis of Reyes’s childhood and artistic training, this chapter will explore the impact her upbringing and personal life had on her later political activism and artistic career. Her artistic influences specifically will be analyzed in depth within this chapter, and how those relationships fostered her political and gender ideologies. Although many believed the revolution would solve the issue of gender inequality in Mexico, the reality was that post-revolutionary Mexico was not as accommodating towards women’s rights, and this chapter will relate those issues to the iconographic choices Reyes made in *Attack on the Rural Teacher*.

Overall, this chapter will look at how Reyes’s childhood, artistic training, female influences, and relationship with the emerging feminist movement in Mexico impacted and is reflected in her iconography in her first government commissioned mural, *Attack on the Rural Teacher*, and how she went against the typical iconography of official contemporary muralism in Mexico. Reyes’s challenge of the established tradition in muralism and of the narrative pushed by the government in her iconography can be seen in her mural, *Attack on the Rural Teacher*; but what can also be seen is her adherence to the stylistic practices of the time while also challenging
those stylistic models by reflecting the women’s rights activism and feminist movements that gained popularity following the revolution. Reyes’s mural uniquely draws off the established mural stylistic tradition and government political beliefs while challenging the latter within her iconography.

Although Reyes was not the first woman in Mexico to receive a mural commission, she was the first Mexican woman. And compared to Greenwood, Reyes’s approach to muralism was drastically different: Reyes was politically active, and some may even call her a feminist for her thematic choices. This is all to say, it is interesting that the Mexican government chose to hire an American artist over a Mexican artist as the first woman muralist for a movement that was based on nationalism and Modern Mexican identity.

Early Influence

Born in Mexico in 1908, Aurora Reyes’s family was wealthy, her father, Captain Leon Reyes, was an engineer and Captain of the Porfirian regime. President Porfirio Diaz’s regime’s goal was to bring ‘order and progress,’ but only to the wealthy and politically connected. However, Reyes’s father was politically targeted after her grandfather was killed in front of the National Palace at the beginning of the “Tragic Ten Days” (Decenía trágica) in 1914.54 This forced Reyes’s family into hiding since they were now considered enemies of the regime. However, Reyes was very poor living in rural Mexico. This experience was formative to who she grew up to be; Reyes was able to experience both ends of the political economic spectrum—she was connected to the politically wealthy while living in rural Mexico, poor and hungry. Because of these early experiences to hardship and tragedy, Reyes became committed to society’s underclass.

When the political persecution of her father ended, Reyes enrolled in the National Preparatory school in 1921 where she became friends with Frida Kahlo. However, Reyes was expelled after getting into a serious physical altercation with another classmate who “condemned her father Leon Reyes’s ties with Diego.” At thirteen she began taking night classes at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes. Her graduation in 1924 at the age of 16 ended her formal art training. In 1927, however, Reyes became a schoolteacher herself, a career she kept for the next 40 years. Shortly after accepting her position as a teacher, Reyes became a member of LEAR, where she was introduced to and formed lifelong relationships with many artists, composers, poets, and political activists including Diego Rivera, María Izquierdo, José Clemente Orozco, Raúl Anguiano, Concha Michel, Silvestre Revueltas, Renato Leduc, Juan Marinello, and Nicolás Guillén.

As involved as Reyes became in the art scene from an early point, she never formally worked with or assisted any of lost tres grandes (Rivera, Orozco, or Siqueiros). She was, however, influenced more by other women artists, activists, and creators. People such as Frida Kahlo and Concha Michel were friends and colleagues of Reyes and influenced both her art and politics. Although neither woman had a direct iconographic inspiration over Reyes, Michel’s social theory on the duality of men and women and motherhood as the origin of a solidary, pacifist society was a significant element that Comisarenco Mirkin says “enables us to approach the affective and cognitive tools that characterized the women artists in the 1930s.” Comisarenco Mirkin makes a good point in connecting Michel’s theories with the other women artists of the period; Reyes’s murals and iconographic choices are derived more from experiences and events than her adherence

56 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural,’” 19.
to a social theory.

Female Collective

Much of Reyes’s influence came, instead, from the women she surrounded herself with. Art historians writing on muralists tend to emphasize the individuality and singularity of the artists, of this period ignoring the social, political, and community significance of the art world. Reyes was a part of a collective of female intellectuals; artists, writers, photographers, archaeologists, and other professionals maintained professional and personal relationships. As mentioned, Reyes had a much shorter academic career than many artists at this time, she graduated from the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes at sixteen after spending only three years there. However, her relationship with her female friends and colleagues can be seen to have had a huge impact on her artistic career. Frida Kahlo, an artist and celebrity whom Reyes befriended while in school, along with Concha Michel the singer-songwriter and researcher, were both friends and influences over Reyes. And within this collective, many women pushed for liberation not by imitating men’s activities but by recognizing women’s own nature, or, what Dina Comisarenco Mirkin has termed a “feminism of difference.” Comisarenco Mirkin states that Michel’s influence extended to both Kahlo and Reyes as some of their works can be read using Michel’s theory as a key. Michel’s ideas of a utopian concept of original duality— which argued that women should have the same rights as men not because they are equal, but because of their differences; women, according to Michel, were mothers responsible for human life, which is why they must have the same authority and economic power as men and the denunciation of oppression and violence against women that caused the duality to be lost, as well as an understanding of motherhood as the origin of a solidary

58 Comisarenco Mirkin, Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes,” 3.
59 Ibid.
pacifist society are seen throughout both Reyes and Kahlo’s work. Furthermore, Michel’s political ideology supported a matristic society without war, weapons, or the need to control women’s sexuality. These themes can be seen in in Reyes’s own *Attack on the Rural Teacher*, the obvious one being the critique of violence against women. But here we also see other dualities: between men and women, modern and traditional, poverty vs wealth. Reyes’s mural shows her frustration at the violence and poverty that undermined women’s right to a dignified life.

Yet, even with her overt concern with women’s rights and gender equality, Reyes did not declare herself a feminist. Instead, as Turu Pilar suggests, her concerns are a precursor of feminism in Mexico. Jean Franco also avoids calling Reyes a feminist and labels the post-revolutionary period as ‘pre-feminist’ because feminism “presupposed that women are already participants in the public sphere of debate”; in Mexico’s suffrage movement, women were yet to be invited to those debates. In the 1930s, women had not yet been granted suffrage, Reyes’s activism and gender beliefs may align more with Michel, who distanced herself from the suffragettes of the era who were, in her view, “generally co-opted by most conservative parties.” Instead, Michel adopted a ‘matristic feminism’ influenced by England’s Hannah More (1745-1833) and Canada’s Rose Henderson (1871-1937), who saw women as more respectful towards life and the care of human beings, a trait that should not be confined to the home but applied to public action and social activism.

This push by the likes of Michel, Reyes, and others of this period towards increasing women’s roles in society stemmed from the Revolution. McCaughan has pointed out that the

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60 Comisarenco Mirkin, Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes, 5.
61 Comisarenco Mirkin, Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes, 11.
62 Turu.
64 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes,” 10.
The political system that emerged from the revolution was “highly- and consciously- gendered,” and while the constitution of 1857 did not explicitly exclude women from voting and holding office, the election law restricted suffrage to only males.\(^{65}\) The revolution was the first serious break in tradition of gender roles, and during the revolutionary years women gained access to higher education, divorce, and generally more rights.\(^{66}\) After women fought alongside men in the Revolution, the expectation was that they would gain political rights and positions of power within certain roles.

As the revolution concluded and congress worked on passing the new constitution, debates surrounding women’s suffrage were being brought up as early as 1917, yet congress simply “ran out of time” to include it in the adoption of the 1917 constitution.\(^{67}\) But as women gained their suffrage in the United States in 1919 and 1920, pressure from newly founded women’s organizations was placed on the Mexican government.

By 1923, there was a considerable number of women’s rights groups and organizations throughout Mexico; by 1924 women received the right to vote in local and state elections in Yucatán, the first state to grant suffrage to women. That, unfortunately, was short lived. The Yucatán voting rights for women was annulled after the assassination of the governor within the year. And by 1928 women’s rights received another huge setback- the assassination of president-elect General Álvaro Obregón on July 17 by religious fanatic Leon Toral at the instigation of a catholic nun.\(^{68}\) The anti-clerical reaction of President Calles exterminated all prospects of a church-state settlement and instead incited the idea in politicians that fanatical women voters of the church

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\(^{67}\) Morton, 8.

\(^{68}\) Morton, *Woman Suffrage in Mexico* 12.
would dominate state-run elections.⁶⁹

In an attempt to further educate the population to turn Mexico into a modern nation in the post-Revolutionary era, José Vasconcelos—head of the Secretariat of Public Education (1921), writer, philosopher, and author of *The Cosmic Race* (1925)—called on women to join literary campaigns and sent them on educational missions (*misiones culturales*) to rural areas of Mexico, hoping that as teachers, women would alter education itself by giving it a more maternal image.⁷⁰ Vasconcelos goal was to bring dignity to the teaching career by transforming it into a social mission and turning the teacher into a national hero. This is significant because prior to the revolution, a woman’s role was as a mother first. These ‘missions’ were a way to form modern Mexico into an educated nation while maintaining certain gender roles. And with these missions, as Jean Franco outlines in *Plotting Women*, they “placed women in a position that was rather similar to that of the nuns in the colonial period serving their redeemer. They were expected to be unmarried and chaste, they had little expectations of rising in their professions, and motherhood was still regarded as woman’s supreme fulfillment.”⁷¹

The tension between modern women and traditional gender roles exploded during Cristero Rebellion, or *La Cristiada* (1926-29), a widespread struggle in rural western Mexico in response to the anticlerical articles of the 1917 Constitution that were perceived as being anti-Catholic and aiming to impose state atheism. This event, the anti-women sentiment coupled with the tension between the rural Catholic community and the new post-revolutionary government, can be read in Reyes’s mural. Some scholars, including Comisarenco Mirkin have cited the events of March 29, 1936 as the direct impetus of Reyes’s work; the mural shows the moments when armed

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⁷¹ Franco, *Plotting Women*, 103.
parishioners attacked the county cultural mission’s celebration at the plaza, which was attended by teachers, peasants, and children. At least 16 people were killed during this assault, and another 25 were seriously injured. This moment was especially dangerous for teachers sent on the “cultural missions,” and Reyes’s mural expresses her outrage at violent attacks on the teachers during the 1930s. Reyes’s mural should also be seen in terms of the influence of a rising feminist stance against the larger suppression of women in post-Revolutionary Mexican society.

In *Attack on the Rural Teacher*, there is a clear dichotomy between the woman victim and the attackers: on one attacker, we can see a pendant swinging from his neck with the sign of the consecration to the Virgin Mary, a reference to the *Cristero Rebellion* (1926-29). Reyes herself believed that religion was a “conservative force that impeded progress and peasant’s ignorance made them susceptible to enemies of revolution.” Her positioning of the arms and legs of the male attacker at the left to insinuate a swastika further clarifies her beliefs that these atrocities were enemies of modern Mexico and revolutionary ideas.

Only a few years later, however, interest in women’s rights was renewed within Mexico. In 1934 Lázaro Cárdenas, running for election, agreed that if elected, he would support a national-wide drive for women’s rights and suffrage. (He tried passing a female suffrage law, but it still lacked political support.) And when Reyes began painting *Attack on the Rural Teacher* the Unique Front for Women’s Rights (Frente Único Pro Derechos de la Mujer) assembled 50,000 women belonging to 800 organizations throughout Mexico to make political demands. One year later, women were granted suffrage, but only to those belonging to the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (all women did not gain full suffrage until 1953). This is to say, Reyes was not alone in her push

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72 Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable”, 29.
73 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural,” 22.
74 Ibid.
75 Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable,” 21.
towards gender equality in Mexico. Many of the LEAR artists that were working on murals within the Centro Escolar Revolución shared her belief that the violence against women, especially the teachers on ‘cultural missions’ in rural Mexico, was detrimental to modern Mexico.\textsuperscript{76}

Even with that type of male support, the tradition of muralism in Mexico had been decidedly gendered and sexist. The male muralists, especially \textit{los tres grandes}, hired by the new regime in post-Revolutionary Mexico, promoted heterosexist, patriarchal \textit{machismo} while specific representations of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity came to constitute the central elements of \textit{mexicanidad}.\textsuperscript{77} As men like Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros became celebrities and national heroes, the only representations of women were the ones that filled the murals, and they “remained largely anonymous, noble, and quietly enduring mestizas or exotic Indian princesses.”\textsuperscript{78}

Reyes’s condemnation of the atrocious violence against women set her apart from her male contemporaries since, Comisarenco Mirkin states, “none of her male colleagues would have broached this theme, and certainly not in such an explicit way.”\textsuperscript{79} José Guadalupe Posada, a political lithographer and illustrator of an earlier generation (died in 1913), seems to be the only exception to alternative representations of women. Siqueiros, for his part, included women in his murals, but quite often as sorrowful victims. Most muralists painted women in passive roles, such as “La India Bonita.”\textsuperscript{80} Even when painting teachers, male artists of this period would show the women in classrooms reading books or writing on blackboards, always protected by a revolutionary male soldier and surrounded by surrogate offspring, such as in Rivera’s \textit{The Rural

\textsuperscript{76} Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural,’” 19-25.
\textsuperscript{77} McCaughan, “Gender, Sexuality, and Nation,” 100.
\textsuperscript{78} McCaughan, “Gender, Sexuality, and Nation,” 101.
\textsuperscript{79} Comisarenco Mirkin, “Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes”, 9.
\textsuperscript{80} Gisel Corina Valladres. “Maybe She’s Born With it, Maybe it’s Mexicanidad: Depictions of Mexican Feminine Beauty and the Body in Visual Media During the 1950s,” (April 28, 2017), 22.
School Teacher (1923) (Figure 2.2). 81 Reyes’s 1936 Ataque a la Masetra Rural mural depicts the opposite: the teacher here is in a dress that accentuates her curves and high heels; she does not represent the traditional ‘moral’ woman, but a sexualized modern professional whose gender does not dictate her role in life as only a mother and a wife. Here, Reyes’s woman is a professional, she is not dependent or protected by any men, and she is not left to mother the children.

Aurora Reyes’s Attack on the Rural Teacher challenges the established tradition by basing her subject matter not on traditional iconographic elements found in the modern mural tradition but based off modern political and current events; furthermore, she painted something that has almost never been broached by any male artist in her first government commissioned mural. This mural pushed beyond the traditional iconographic elements of muralism to portray Reyes own gendered beliefs and in doing so, as Comisarenco Mirkin says, transformed “feminicide into a symbol of capitalist exploitation and its characteristically unequal patriarchal order.” 82 And in doing so, Reyes challenged not only the mural tradition of the time, but the narrative pushed by the popular press in Mexico during this period as well. It was common that the press diminished the significance of violence against women, especially those who deviated from the traditional paradigm of ‘virtuous wife.’ 83

However, Reyes was not unique her iconographic choices. Comisarenco Mirkin has outlined a common iconographic repertoire amongst women artists from the 1930s and 1940s. Themes tend to focus on unhappy brides, frustrated motherhood, miscarriage and infant deaths, gender violence; all reflect social constructions imposed upon them by the Mexican society in which they were living. 84

81 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural,” 23.
82 Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable,” 30.
83 Ibid.
84 Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable,” 29.
Painting Attack on the Rural Teacher

*Attack on the Rural Teacher* was meant as a homage to the elementary school system’s goal of democratizing education as promised by the Mexican Revolution. Multiple murals were created in the Centro Escolar Revolución foyers between 1934-36. Six different LEAR (Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios; League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) artists were assigned to paint 11 murals, and apart from the only female artist Reyes, they included Raúl Anguiano and Gonzalo de la Pérez, among others.85

Reyes’s *Attack on the Rural Teacher* embodies Comisarenco Mirkin’s theme of gendered violence, illustrating the attack as more than just an illustration of a specific event, but more so a commentary on gendered violence nationwide. However, these neat and uniformed categories of women artists of the period suggested by Comisarenco Mirkin is challenged by Tatiana Flores, who states that women artists lack a unified style or medium: “women’s work illustrates their diversity and plurality and counters stereotypes about uniformity of Mexican school and simplistic interpretations of Mexican art in general.”86

Reyes drew from her own background as a teacher as well when painting *Attack on the Rural Teacher*; she believed that only an educated populace could construct a new society.87 Like President Cárdenas, Reyes believed teachers played a fundamental role in spreading socialist education and the ideals of the revolution; her representation of the teacher as a victim illustrates the need for educating the rural populaces against traditional gendered norms. Reyes became

85 Other artists involved included Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo, Antonio Gutiérrez, Everado Ramírez; in addition, the building has stained glass windows by the artist Fermín Revueltas. Comisarenco Mirkin, “Aurora Reyes’s ‘Ataque a La Maestra Rural’,” 21.
incredibly involved as a union leader, and these newfound unions are often cited as the “beginnings of the women’s movement in Mexico.” She defended teachers rights and wanted women to gain government positions; she fought for rights for women to vote and be elected to civil posts, extension of maternity leave time, legal recognition of breastfeeding time for mothers, creation of daycare centers in schools for children of teachers.

Reyes’s mural focuses on the abduction and attack on a woman whose innocence is underscored by her religious fanatic attackers’ actions and yet challenged by her sexuality and modernity. Reyes intentional conflation of traditional gendered ideals for women was a way to force viewers to empathize with the modern women; by creating a victim who was the epitome of the modern women, the viewers of the mural were forced to support a figure who did not align with the traditional conservative gender values of the time. Instead, Reyes positioned rural ignorance as the enemy, making this mural a blatant criticism of that government that allowed such ignorance to exist. She was able to use the ideals of the modern nation in her own critique of the post-revolutionary society. As stated by Octavio Paz in his 1950 essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* “the very construction of national identity was posited on male domination.” Reyes shows that view through the attack on the schoolteacher- a woman who embodied the modern nation—she was educated, employed, and well dressed— but the very fact she was a modern woman did not allow her to represent Mexican national identity.

In visual media, women representing *mexicanidad* are often positioned either as a “virgin

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89 Ibid.
91 Although I was not able to find any documentation on the contemporary reception of Reyes’s mural, however as early as 1955, Comisarenco Mirkin cites that the government attempted to construct a street through the Centro Escolar that would destroy the mural. Reyes was able to petition with other parents to prevent the ordinance from happening. And the mural still stands today.
or as a whore." And Reyes plays into that exaggerated dichotomy in *Attack on the Rural Teacher* with her representation of a modern, sexualized woman as the victim. The representation of a woman as a martyr and whore is a uniquely Mexican narrative: The Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche. Both are tied to traditional ideas of Mexican heritage and nationalism. It was not until Mexico became an independent nation and national identity became an area of contention that Doña Marina, or Malintzin (transformed into La Malinche)—the Indian interpreter/advisor to the conqueror Hernán Cortés—came to symbolize the mother of the Mexican mestizo nation because of her offspring with Cortés, “but also the humiliation --the rape-- of the indigenous people and the act of treachery that would lead to their oppression.”

I am not the first to connect this mural to the dichotomy between the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche; scholars such as Oles and Comisarencio Mirkin connect the *Attack on the Rural Teacher* to that troupe. But I argue that Reyes does not use it to justify modern gendered roles of women solely as sexually liberated bodies, or as an enemy to men. Instead, Reyes used that symbolism to critique the entire idea of national identity. Franco states that the “problem of national identity was thus presented primarily as a problem of *male* identity, and it was male authors who debated its defects and psychoanalyzed the nation. In national allegories, women became the territory over which the quest for (male) national identity passed.” Thus, Reyes was aware of the narrative of national identity that the government wanted her to push, and yet she challenged that narrative through her ironic representations of the failures of the governments push for a modern nation.

Reyes challenged these sexist ideas in her art but also in her activism and daily life. Women who were lighter skinned, fit those notions of beauty had more ‘freedom’ than those who looked

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92 Valladres, “Maybe she’s born with it,” 33.
94 Ibid.
more ‘indigenous.’ Reyes challenged those notions of European beauty. Like Kahlo, she dressed in the Tehuana indigenous dress as a symbol of female independence and a rejection of western culture (Figure 3.6). Even though today we see women like Reyes and Kahlo donning the ‘traditional’ Tehuana dress and see clear references to traditional Mexican society, it was in fact, quite popular among middle-class women, who found it fashionable and a patriotic way to celebrate the exotic aspects of Mexican culture. Contrary to this political and fashion statement was the popular ‘Chica Moderna’, or modern women. This was closely related to the flapper that gained popularity in the United States in the 1920’s; tall, slender, ethnically white Mexican elites would engage in modernity by adopting the latest fashions from Paris and New York. These contrasting views of what the modern Mexican woman should look like is not surprising when considering the current political rhetoric surrounding the idea of legitimizing national identity through the portrayal of women. As Gisel Corina Valladres says in Maybe She’s Born With it, Maybe it’s Mexicanidad,

“Even though Mexico became independent and attempted to consider darker skinned indigenous past and living population by incorporating them into the countries transforming nationalistic ethos after the revolution, Mexican elites prevailing appreciation of European characteristics indicates post-revolutionary Mexico’s efforts to become more inclusive were diminished by elites’ exclusionary attitudes”

96 Valladres, “Maybe she’s born with it,” 28.
97 Zavala, Becoming Modern, 211.
The Mexican elite continued to reinforce colonial ideas of race that created a divide between the indigenous, mestizo and white citizens rather than unifying Mexico as a modern nation.

And it was not only the media and newspapers that purported this message; through the popular state sponsored male muralists that were racist and sexist and through the rejection of women like Reyes who were modern women adopting and adopting traditional dress that challenged western ideals, the government wanted to relate modern Mexico more to European ideals rather than its own indigenous past. So, we can see why Reyes was at first looked over and then eventually forgotten in the history of Mexico and muralism; she went against everything that muralists were pushing for and also was against the narrative the government was trying to promote. Her pre-feminist ideas and staunch political leanings did not fit either narrative and she, like many women artist of this period, was not received the attention she deserves.

Conclusion

Dina Comisarenco Mirkin says that history has forgotten the numerous ties of female collectivity, and to recover those ties is a way to develop a more just world.⁹⁸ Reyes’s relationship with other woman artists, such as Frida Kahlo, provided her with a new perspective in her own art. By paralleling the larger mural movements commitment to political activism, Reyes both adheres to the stylistic practices of the time while also challenging those models by reflecting the women’s rights activism and feminist movements that gained popularity following the revolution. So, all of this is to say, maybe these notions of Mexican feminism (or lack thereof), racism, and anti-Indian sentiment help to contextualize and further explain why Greenwood received the commission first and before a Mexican female citizen. The government seems to have been more concerned with

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⁹⁸ Comisarenco Mirkin, “Frida Kahlo and Aurora Reyes,” 12.
their ‘international statues’ than their national political movement. Greenwood was a white, relatively wealthy, and the ideal modern women, while Reyes donned traditional dress, challenged colorism and antikidnap propaganda, and was not embodying the modern women that the government was trying to project. Reyes herself recognized the disadvantage women, especially artists, were in during this period in Mexico’s history. In a 1939 lecture, she said that "…culture in general has displayed exclusively masculine characteristics, because it has been created by them and for them, casting women aside to a greater or lesser degree…” 99

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Images

Figure 2.1: Aurora Reyes, *Attack on the Rural Teacher (Ataque a la Maestra Rural)* (1936)

Figure 2.2: Diego Rivera, *The Rural School Teacher* (1923)
The death of the leading figure of Mexican Muralism in the early 20th c., Diego Rivera, in 1957 signaled to many the end of the movement. However, in 1964, Fanny Rabel (1922-2008), the youngest woman muralist associated with the 20th c. Mexican Mural Movement, received a government commission for her most well-known work, *Ronda en el tiempo* (1964-65) (Figure 3.1), at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico. Many sources consider the 1920s-50s the height of the movement, which makes Rabel’s position unique: to be actively receiving commissions from the government in the 60s can be considered late, but it also shows the government’s continuing interest and investment in muralism.

This chapter will show how the iconographic choices of the women muralists discussed within this thesis developed over the decades, stemming from a number of reasons, including: muralism’s relationship with the Mexican government, various feminist movements, and challenges to the establishment by earlier generations of women muralists. Fanny Rabel is the best example to illustrate these changes through her works, particularly her murals that she produced in the 1960s and 70s, due to her position in the art world and her relationship to the original members of the mural movement. The focus of this chapter will be on Rabel’s most famous mural, *Ronda en el tiempo*; I will begin with a brief analysis of Rabel’s artistic upbringing, her professional connections, and her previous experience as a muralist. I will then examine 1960’s Mexico and the changing relationship between artists and the government, before turning to a study of Rabel’s iconic *Ronda en el tiempo*.
The Politics of Painting

Rabel’s work has been celebrated throughout Mexico and internationally, yet of the three artists discussed within this thesis, she has had the least amount of scholarship published on her. Considering she was most active during the latter decades of the mural movement (roughly 1950-80), and with her career extending beyond the years of the Renaissance (the movement’s dates are contested, cited as 1920-1940/70, depending on the scholar), many scholars don’t consider her contributions beyond her time spent assisting los tres grandes. To the best of my knowledge, no single monograph exists on Fanny Rabel; rather, she is often discussed as a women artist in conjunction with other contemporaries. Although her timeline places her much later in the century than many other muralists, the sparse scholarship on Rabel seems to speak less about her position as an artist or her production, but rather the fact that she is a woman. The earliest reference to Rabel comes from Shifra Goldman’s “Six Women Artists of Mexico” in 1982. This coincides with the general emergence of women artists in western academic scholarship due to the development of the second wave feminist movement in the late 1960s, the first effects of that in academia in the 1970’s: the first women’s studies courses were offered at San Diego State University (1970); Title X (1970); Title IX (1972); the Women’s Educational Equity Act (1974). These new programs in turn shifted the focus in academic writing to women. However, Rabel is still highly underrepresented in full studies. The most prolific writer on Fanny Rabel is Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, herself a feminist scholar and dedicated to a more inclusive approach to art history. In addition to her work on Aurora Reyes, Comisarenco Mirkin has published numerous articles on Rabel in addition to a chapter within her larger work, Eclipes de Siete lunas: Mujeres Muralistas en Mexico. Furthermore, Comisarenco Mirkin has also curated exhibitions that showcase all of

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Fanny Rabel’s production.\textsuperscript{101}

There is a clear relationship between increasing opportunities for women muralists and the increase in women’s rights in Mexico by the 1960s. The 1930s saw numerous women’s activist groups challenging the Mexican constitution, and full suffrage for women was granted in 1953. In the West the Second Wave Feminist movement had begun, with activist in the United States citing as early as 1964 the birth of the movement. And as post-World War II fears slowly fade, the Cold War tensions began to be felt. However, by the 1960’s when Rabel was painting \textit{Ronda en el Tiempo}, the state sponsored mural project had changed from its original iteration in the 1920s; artists relationship with the government that once sponsored the murals has shifted, fewer murals are being commissioned, and the illustration of a state-backed narrative is no longer promoted by artists. We can see this with the number of earlier mural commissions Rabel was receiving from institutions that were not state sponsored: \textit{Alphabetization} (1953) for Labels and Print company in Coyoacán;\textsuperscript{102} and \textit{The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit} (1957) (Figure 3.2) for the Israeli Sports Center in Mexico City. Due to the decline in government commissions, much of her career is focused on other, smaller works such as lithographs, oil on canvases, etc. However, in the early 1960s she began receiving a number of state and government commissions throughout the decade and beyond: \textit{The Constitution} (1960) for the Mexican Revolution Pavilion; \textit{Towards Health} (1962) for the Children’s Hospital of Mexico; \textit{Ronda en el Tiempo} (1964) for the Museo Nacional de Antropología; and \textit{The Mexican Family} (1983-84) for the Public Registrar of Property and Commerce in Mexico City. At this point, muralism is no longer dependent on state sponsorship or solely dedicated to the state’s goal of nationalism and didactic art.

\textsuperscript{102} This has since disappeared.
A Circle in Time

Fanny Rabel’s position as a muralist is, in part, a continuum of the history established by earlier artists, Aurora Reyes being one of them. Rabel’s mural career at the end of the movement allows for a comparison in terms of Reyes’s lasting effects on muralism for women, and how muralism for women changed over the course of the 30 years between 1934 and 1964. The changes are evident in Rabel’s iconographic choices and representations of the progression of time, history, and education. These changes are also seen in her traditional technical approaches while representing emotive and relational imagery. *Ronda en el tiempo* illustrates how the values of the mural movement have shifted by this point in the century in addition to a shift in government attitudes towards muralism, feminist movements, and the political status of muralism. All of these factors played some role in Rabel’s artistic career, positioning her as an artist who helped to shape muralism and define modern Mexico.

With her career at its height at the decline of the Mural Movement, Rabel’s mural commission likely came from a place of political lobbying, and her mural career becomes removed from the original revolutionary ideals of the earlier Mural Movement. However, Rabel’s most well-known state sponsored mural, *Ronda en el Tiempo*, is still the best example to look at when analyzing the iconography of women muralists in Mexico. Furthermore, the consistency of patrons will help provide a better comparison between the previous works analyzed: both Marion Greenwood and Aurora Reyes’s murals were commissioned by the Mexican government.

Painted for the Sala Infantil of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Rabel’s *Ronda en el Tiempo (A Circle in Time)* (1964), painted on a 62 x 6.5 ft linen canvas fitted over a wooden frame, narrates the progression of time through the story of education, knowledge, tradition, and culture.
from the ancient Aztecs to the present day. On the far-right side of the mural, Rabel depicts an Aztec teacher sitting amongst a group of children, rapt with attention. Another adult leads a small child to the group. This half of the mural is filled with references to ancient Aztec culture including step pyramids and temples in the landscape. As the mural moves towards the center, the children, holding hands and reaching across the wall, change in their depiction. Likewise. The mural moves across time from the far-right Aztec dress to colonial clothing and post-revolutionary outfits into present day representations of children at the left.

The focal point of this mural is, however, the very center. A child stands, arms and legs spread wide, connecting the ancient past with the present and bridging the gap between Mexico’s indigenous past and their contemporary traditions. This child is without a shirt, like the Aztecs depicted to the left, but the pants resemble the children on his right. He is the connection, and he stands on the ancient representation of Coatlicue, the Aztec earth goddess and a reference to the Aztec foundation of Mexico as a modern nation. In the background, directly behind the boy, we see a step pyramid topped with a colonial catholic church. Though this mural shows the progression of time through the representation of children dressed in traditional clothing of important periods of Mexican history, Rabel focuses on the founding of Mexico as a ‘modern’ nation, colonization, and Catholicism. Of this mural, she wrote: “The Spanish conquest by implanting the Catholic state, building its churches on the pyramids, could neither destroy the Old cultures nor annihilate its surviving spirit, infiltrated like the crossbreeding of blood in the nascent race. This is symbolized by the face of Tlaloc in the sky, on the dome of the church, in the central part the wall.”

As time progresses towards the present, Rabel illustrates that through her representation

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of the children holding hands, reaching back towards the Aztec period and forward towards the present. At the far left of the mural is another adult figure, guiding the child with book in hand, to education and the future. All of the children depicted within this mural are of mixed race or indigenous ancestry, a way of connecting the present-day children to those of the ancient past. Here we also see skull masks, typical for celebrations of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), a Mexican holiday celebrating and remembering those who have died, connecting the present to the past and the living and the dead, completing the circle.

**Background**

Rabel’s personal background was a huge influence on her artistic career: born Fanny Rabinovich in Poland on September 27, 1922, Fanny Rabel’s Polish-Jewish parents traveled around Europe as itinerant actors, settling in Paris in 1929. Less than ten years later, however, with the rise of the Nazi persecution of Jews, the family relocated to Mexico. Although she was not born in Mexico, Rabel spent the remainder of her life there and for that reason considered herself a Mexican citizen. She attended the *Escuela Secundaria Nocturna para Trabajadores* taking classes in drawing and engraving. Before her 20th birthday, Rabel already inserted herself into the political activism within Mexico as World War II erupted in Europe. Unlike American muralist Marion Greenwood, Rabel was deeply involved in the politics and social issues of the time; she began collaborating with members of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP: The People’s Print Workshop)— such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Antonio Rodríguez Luna, and others— to further her role as an activist. These relationships lead to her invitation to assist Siqueiros in 1940 on his

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mural for the Mexican Electricians Union, the anti-war “Retrato de la Burguesía” (Portrait of the Bourgeoisie) (Figure 3.3) depicting Nazi atrocities.106 This is a significant event in her career as an artist- assisting one of los tres grandes on, arguably, one of his most significant murals as her first experience in muralism provided her with artistic and political motivation. More so, Rabel was the youngest woman muralist to be involved with the mural movement in Mexico. Her participation with the mural movement artists only increased from then. Five years later, Rabel assisted Diego Rivera on his National Palace mural (Figure 3.4).107

In 1942, Rabel then enrolled in the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura, y Grabado (The School of Painting, Sculpture, and Printmaking) in Mexico City. It was there that Rabel’s relationship with prominent art figures began; she met Frida Kahlo, José Chávez Morado, and Feliciano Peña. It was through this experience that led to Rabel’s invitation to Kahlo’s famed Casa Azul, where she became a student of Kahlo, one of ‘Los Fridos.’ And through the collective of Los Fridos, under Kahlo’s guidance, they produced original murals throughout Mexico City: We Love Peace and the World Head Over Heels for Beauty (1943) at the la Rosita pulque bar (Figure 3.5); Single Mothers Work Together to Solve their Problems (1945) for the single mother residence (casa de la Madre soltera). Rabel’s collaboration with Kahlo is bookended by her experience assisting both Siqueiros (1940) and Rivera (1945). And yet, those three years working and learning from Kahlo were the most formative for Rabel’s mural career. Dina Comisarenco Mirkin says:

From Frida, she gained a consciousness of the multiple options open to muralism,

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107 However, even with such a foundation assisting both muralists, Rabel is rarely if ever mentioned in scholarship discussing either Rivera or Siqueiros. Works focusing on the male muralist usually list anonymous ‘assistants.’ It was only in Jennifer Jolly’s article on Siqueiros Electrician Union’s mural that Rabel was listed by name as an assistant.
mainly with regard to its inspiration from popular art and the conviction of freedom of expression. Rabel once said that her experience with Frida was the trigger for the birth of her ‘ambition to create mural paintings.’

I want to pause here to note this: Rabel worked with two of the most famous Mexican muralists—Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros—and yet, as stated by Comisarenco Mirkin and quoted by Rabel, it was not the men that had such an impact over her career, but the women she was collaborating with and learning from. Frida Kahlo had a clear influence over Rabel as a teacher and friend, but something to note is that Kahlo and Aurora Reyes’s were close friends for years. And seeing that there are photographs showing Reyes and Rabel at the same event unveiling the Los Fridos murals at the ‘pulque’ bar La Rosita, one can assume that Rabel was at least aware of Reyes and her position as a woman artist and muralist in Mexico (see Figure 3.6 of Reyes and Kahlo at event, Figure 3.5 of Rabel and Kahlo at event). Although there is no documentation citing Reyes as a direct influence over Rabel, Reyes’s 1936 mural Ataque a la Maestra Rural can be cited as a precursor to Rabel’s Ronda en el Tiempo: Reyes’s refusal to replicate the traditional style of muralism, her modern and controversial subject matter, and her representation of women in non-passive roles can all be seen adapted in Rabel’s murals thirty years later.

Furthermore, as much as she challenged tradition in her subject matter, Rabel still drew influence for her mural from politics and her role as an activist. Common for most muralists in 20th c. Mexico, Rabel was involved with numerous activist groups; participating in groups such as The Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR; League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists), Taller de Gráfica Popular, and a founding member of the Salón de la Plástica Mexicana.

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Rabel’s strong political beliefs helped to ground her iconography within her murals. Rabel drew from those experiences and the relationships built as a member of those groups, especially with the other artists and muralists involved.

These relationships and experiences helped to ground her work in the Mexican mural tradition while also challenging the norm and expanding iconographic elements to suit her modern audience. One specific way that Rabel both replicated and challenged traditional iconographic elements was through her representation and focus of time in Ronda en el Tiempo. This use of time that focuses on the linear progression from ancient past to the present moment is common in the tradition of Mexican muralism; many of the male muralists represent the progression of time in their own murals. Diego Rivera’s History of Mexico (1929-35) (Figure 3.7) in the stairwell of the National Palace in Mexico City illustrates Mexico’s ancient past, colonialism, and modern industry. However, as stated, many male muralists represent time in this linear fashion to show the progression of ideas and of Mexico as a modern nation. Although there is an obvious narrative to Rivera’s murals, his representation of the linear timeline is not as clear when compared to Rabel’s. Rivera creates multiple scenes that often conflate the division of time in his representations of significant historical moments in Mexico’s history. Rabel was aware of Rivera’s specific use of time in his History of Mexico mural since, as mentioned earlier, she was one of the artists who assisted him on another National Palace mural in the mid-1940s.

In his mural, Rivera situates the ancient past as the opposite to the modern industry he idolizes in History of Mexico. Rabel, however, connects the past with the present, unifying them through the extended hands of the children and highlighting their similarities rather than theft differences. In doing so, Rabel, on the one hand, connects Mexico’s past with its present, creating

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a nationalism built off a historic moment. Rabel’s mural promotes nationalism but not at the expense of the other, she does not represent dark skinned Mexicans in stereotypical positions—the men as laborers and the women as passive attendants (for example, Rivera’s North Wall of History of Mexico shows the ancient stereotype and the South wall his contemporary representation of the indigenous Mexican). On the other hand, Rabel connects both herself and the entire mural tradition to the foundation of Mexico, promoting the art form as essential to the identity of the nation.

Rabel also draws from other influences that are not common in the tradition of Mexican muralism. She often depicts scenes that connect to her Jewish heritage and her political affiliations, focusing on representation of sorrow and pain through emotion rather than the violence. In 1945, Frida Kahlo summarized Rabel’s painting qualities:

She paints as she lives, with enormous courage, an acute intelligence and sensitivity, with all the love and joy that her twenty years give her. But what I judge most important in her painting are the deep roots that tier her to the tradition and strength of her people [of Jewish heritage]. Her painting is not personal, but social. She is fundamentally concerned with class issues and has observed, with an exceptional maturity, the character and style of her models, always endowing them with vital emotion. All of this without pretensions, and full of the femininity and finesse that make her so complete.  

110 Comisarenco Mirkin, “Images and the Duty of Memory,” 4
The Bridge to her Audience

The bridge in her mural, connecting Mexico’s ancient past and contemporary present, through the idea of the education of children was an appropriate iconographic choice for this mural since it was a painting in the Children’s Room (Salón Infantil) of the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. Located on the wall adjacent to the staircase leading up to the lobby, the mural “would most often be seen by groups of school children who gather there before embarking on their tour of the museum.” And while Rabel’s use of figures of children as her focus on this mural is not unusual for her oeuvre, her depiction of children is still somewhat unusual for the time, and for the mural tradition specifically. Many of the most famous murals depict war, revolution, or indigenous women. Children are rarely ever the focus. And with abstraction gaining popularity in the art world, Rabel’s murals stood out. This mural in specific did not fit the masculine tradition of muralism; Shifra Goldman stated in 1982 that “Tenderness” is often used to describe her work, and it “reflects the influences of folk and popular art and the Indian presence.” While the tenderness in her work is often in reference to her representations of children, and although children are not a common theme in the mural tradition, it is not a motif unique to Rabel. Diego Rivera, for one, depicts children in a number of his works. His most famous depictions of children are with calla lilies (Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita, 1931 (Figure 3.8); The Flower Seller, 1942; Flower Vendor, 1949), and yet critics do not often describe these as ‘tender.’ This description of Rabel’s work as ‘tender’ comes across as gendered and verging on sexist, dismissing her art and avoiding any real criticism or critique.

Rabel was very conscious of the choices she made when painting Ronda en el Tiempo,
saying “Having the concept that the mural painting is not a mere decoration, but a platform from which a message is transmitted through plastic language, I have tried to get out of the illustrative anecdote to reach the mind of the infantile public through images symbolic, that awaken your imagination and stimulate your intelligence.” She knew of the references her painting was drawing from, and was aware of the audience who would be viewing this mural.

This is all to say that the Ronda del Tiempo addresses the very audience it represents. Indeed, this is not a work that can be dismissed so easily by the gendered adjective “tender”; rather, Rabel’s representation of the audience who would be seeing and interacting with the mural seems to elicit a response from that same audience. Her murals are able to connect on an intimate level with the audience since she caters so specifically to the patron, location, and viewers of her murals. By painting children in Ronda en el Tiempo, Rabel gave the visiting children someone in the painting to identify with. She went further by connecting the children visiting the museum with the history of Mexico. She was able to promote learning about Mexico for children visiting the institute that can help them learn about the history of Mexico and its people. This mural was able to tie in everything that the audience, patron, and artist could want in a mural.

Furthermore, there is no direct reference to any mural created by los tres grandes or other male muralists in Ronda en el Tiempo; there is no formal element that links this mural to the muralists cannon. While Marion Greenwood imitated los tres grandes style in her murals while trying to break through into the artistic scene in post-Revolutionary Mexico, Rabel felt no need to adhere to stylistic traditions established by the male muralists. But Rabel still finds ways to play into the narrative of Mexican national history through her iconographic choices. Ronda en el Tiempo represents Rabel’s ability to paint complex, emotive scenes that connected with the

viewers while also representing historical moments. Rabel was able to challenge the established *machismo* that is found within the established tradition of Mexican muralism. While she challenged muralism with her colors and iconography, she still included elements of Mexican Muralism that connected her mural with the larger tradition and the history of Mexico as a nation: the Aztec references, colonial history, Revolutionary motifs, and *Día de los Muertos* iconography grounds Rabel’s mural within the history of Mexico and the mural movement without subverting her own unique experience as an artist.

**Conclusion**

By the second half of the twentieth century, many more women artists became involved in muralism in Mexico: Marion and Grace Greenwood and Aurora Reyes, as discussed earlier, have established themselves and their careers in Mexico; Andrea Gómez y Mendoza (1926-2012), Sofía Bassi (1913-1988), Olga Costa (1913-1993), Elena Huerta Múzquiz (1908-1997), and Rina Lazo (1923-2019) are all noted for their contributions to the mural movement.

Through this chapter’s analysis of Fanny Rabel, I hope to have outlined the ties between Marion Greenwood, Aurora Reyes, and Rabel’s artistic careers. Although Rabel was not the first woman muralist, she still faced some sexism as a woman artist. But unlike Greenwood at the beginning of the movement, Rabel had more freedom as a woman muralist: she was not subjected to such outright sexism, or limited her imagery based on established traditions. And unlike Reyes, Rabel was not forced to focus on specifically feminist themes as a woman artist. Rabel was able to explore complex ideas of time, connecting histories and bridging the gap between the past and the present. Her position as an artist was not defined by her gender; she was not the ‘first’ woman muralist, nor was she positioning her career on redefining gender norms. But it is because of
muralists like Greenwood and Reyes who came before, Rabel was able to approach muralism as an individual and expand the definition and tradition of muralism as a woman artist and establish new iconographic elements in muralism.

However, even with such strong precedents in the tradition of women muralists, there is a definitive lack of representation of women muralists. Compared to her male contemporaries, Rabel has been almost forgotten in the historiography of Mexican Muralism. Marjorie Agosín suggests that the 1970s was the turning point for women writers in Latin America, but recognition for the plastic artists came later. Her lack of representation, however, is not representative of Rabel’s impact on the movement: Ronda en el Tiempo illustrates that Reyes’s had a lasting impact on women muralists in Mexico. Rabel was able to build off the tradition of woman muralists such as Reyes, and it is evident in the iconography of Rabel’s mural. Even with her time spent working alongside Rivera and Siqueiros, Rabel did not emulate their style or iconographic choices in her own mural productions; rather, she was able to adapt her murals to speak to her own experience as a woman and an artist living in Mexico. This mural highlights her ability to adopt traditional mural iconographic elements (representing historical moments, indigenous traditions, Mexican past) while incorporating new ones that challenge those established norms (her focus on children, color palette, use of time), albeit differently than Reyes did 30 years prior. Rabel’s Ronda en el Tiempo shows how iconographic elements of murals by women artists has shifted over the course of so many years, and outlined by: feminist/cultural movements, government relationships with the art form, and previous generations of women establishing themselves and challenging the gendered notions of the movement. Dina Cominisco Mirkin states it nicely:

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In her paintings Rabel was able to communicate a very intimate, complex, and painful account of what it means to be a woman in Mexico during the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s... At the same time, Rabel contributed enormously to the advancement of the struggle in favor of women’s causes, becoming a key figure in the genealogy of resistance to the social discrimination exerted against women in Mexico.\textsuperscript{115}

The past scholarship on Mexican muralism that is dominated by *los tres grandes* completely disregards these intricate and important moments in the history of muralism. The fact that so little is published concerning the role of women muralists and women artists during this movement needs to be corrected in future scholarship. Understanding the influence of women artists and the impact their careers had on the art world is essential to a comprehensive understanding of any period in the history of art.

Fanny Rabel continued to push the boundaries of what is expected of and challenged the establishment of mural movement. She was able to break in to the international and western art market: Rabel’s first exhibition in Mexico occurred in 1951 and, from there she has shown in Tel Aviv, Israel; Montreal, Canada; Santiago, Chile; Sao Palo, Brazil; Paris, France; the Royal Academy of Denmark; the Library of Congress, Washington DC; the Franklin Rawson Museum in San Juan, Argentina; and in many more private collections.\textsuperscript{116} Her work represents traditional muralism and modern iconographic elements all while positioning herself as an accomplished artist.


Images

Figure 3.1: Fanny Rabel, *Ronda en el Tiempo (Circles of Time)*, 1964, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico

![Image of Ronda en el Tiempo](image1)

Figure 3.2: Fanny Rabel, *The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit* (1957), Israeli Sports Center (CDI), Mexico City

![Image of The Survival of a People Due to their Spirit](image2)

Figure 3.3: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Portrait of the Bourgeois (Retrato de la Burguesía)*, 1939, Electrical Workers Union Building, Mexico City, Mexico

![Image of Portrait of the Bourgeois](image3)
Figure 3.4: Diego Rivera, “The Great City of Tenochtitlan” *Pre-Hispanic and Colonial Mexico* murals, 1942-50, fresco, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City

Figure 3.5: Photographer unknown, Frida Kahlo and her students 1943, in front of *We Love Peace and the World Head Over Heels for Beauty* (1943) at the la Rosita pulque bar (Circled in red: Kahlo, left; Rabel, right)
Figure 3.6: Photographer unknown, Frida Kahlo, Fanny Rabel, Arturo Estrada, and other students of the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura (School of Painting and Sculpture), at the unveiling of the murals at the "pulque" bar "La Rosita" (Circled in red: Kahlo, left; Reyes, right)

Figure 3.7: Diego Rivera, “From the Conquest to 1930,” History of Mexico murals, 1929–30, fresco, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City
Figure 3.8: Diego Rivera, *Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita* (1931)
Conclusion

This study has shown the immense influence Aurora Reyes had on the mural movement through her iconographic choices and her position as an activist and artist and how murals of women muralists adapted and adopted the traditional mural iconography established by male artist. And specifically, how Reyes’s adaption of those traditions helped redefine muralism for future artists. By focusing on the contributions made by women throughout the Mexican Mural Renaissance, this thesis unpacked the relationship between the women muralists and the larger Mexican movement through the iconography of their murals.

Marion Greenwood’s experience in the art world in Mexico during this mural ‘movement’ allows for a unique perspective on the expectations of women at this moment in history. She was praised for her adherence to the styles established by los tres grandes, specifically Diego Rivera. While she should be noted for being the first women to receive a mural commission in Mexico during the 20th century, the mural she produced was not wholly original. Greenwood’s 1934 commission for Industrialization of the Countryside reflected Rivera’s style and iconographic choices in many respects. This was largely because simply receiving a commission as a woman was bold in and of itself— for Greenwood to push that even further by producing a mural that challenges those very traditions would have put Greenwood in a precarious position.

Seeing just how delicate the situation was for women muralists at this time highlighted just how political and controversial Aurora Reyes mural choices were. Reyes’s controversial mural, Attack on the Rural Teacher (Ataque a la Maestra Rural) (1936) challenged the established tradition in muralism through her depiction of the teacher: she was a victim and a modern woman; a representation of both the virgin and the whore. Reyes’s capacity to both adopt the traditional stylistic elements established by male muralists while critiquing and challenging that very same
tradition was unique and groundbreaking in 20th c. Mexico. And her impact went beyond her immediate peers. Reyes’s position as the first Mexican woman to receive a mural commission influenced later artists and altered the entire mural movement.

Fanny Rabel’s own career as a woman muralist is directly influenced by Reyes’s time as an artist. Rabel’s most influential mural, Ronda en el tiempo (1964-65), painted roughly thirty years after Reyes’s first mural, shows the impact Reyes had on the mural movement. Rabel’s mural did not follow the traditional mural stylistic practices established years earlier by the male artist, however she was not denounced because of that. Ronda en el tiempo illustrates how the values of the mural movement have shifted by this point in the century in addition to a shift in government attitudes towards muralism, feminist movements, and the political status of muralism. The changes are evident in Rabel’s iconographic choices and representations of the progression of time, history, and education illustrate just how impactful Reyes’s career was in establishing women artists in the movement. Rabel was not criticized for her unusual subject matter precisely because Reyes established that the traditional stylistic elements in muralism were not immutable.

Overall, this thesis illustrated the impact women artists had over the Mexican mural movement of the 20th century. However, there were challenges to writing this analysis; mainly, the evident lack of scholarship on the women involved in the movement. This lack of scholarship by no means diminishes the impact women had on the historical movement; it does, however, make it more challenging for current academics to produce more in-depth analyses on the subject. As such, this analysis is by no means comprehensive, more needs to be written on these women that had such substantial impact on a movement as widespread as the Mexican mural movement; further research can include biographies, revisionism, etc. Beyond that, however, future scholarship should focus on analyzing the muralistas murals for iconographic and stylistic
subtilties that have impacted future artists. Having an understanding of women artists relationship to the art world they were a part of in addition to the larger political and social world in which they inhabited will bring a better understanding to the impact those forces had on their careers as artists. Further analyzing the impact sexism and machismo had on women artist of this period is a specific area of research that has yet to be explored, and is an area that will be sure to uncover new ideas.

There is still much to explore in terms of women muralists in 20th c. Mexican mural movement. Scholars and academics just need to start recognizing where women have been largely ignored in popular history. Aurora Reyes, Marion Greenwood, and Fanny Rabel are only a few of the numerous women involved in the mural movement. But they, like many women artists of this period, faced challenges specifically due to their gender. In spite of that, they were still able to create monumental and influential murals throughout Mexico City.
Bibliography


