

OLGA COSTA'S FEMININE *MEXICANIDAD*

by

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Introduction

The oeuvre of Mexican painter, Olga Costa, has been described as serene, traditional, and simple in scholarly literature, particularly in the writing of Carlos Magdaleno in his article “Olga Costa: A Brief Look at a Serene Life.”¹ These characteristics were unfit for Mexico’s hyper-nationalist agenda that required heroic works of art from the 1920s to the 1950s. Scholars such as Magdaleno, Sergio Pitol, and Juan Coronel Rivera all agree that Costa’s paintings were free from political interests and, because of this, were overshadowed by Mexico’s sociopolitical concerns during the first twenty years of her career from about 1933-1955.² Costa’s paintings were “simple,” meaning they did not boldly narrate national identity, or *mexicanidad*, in the fashion of the older generation of *Los tres grandes*, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco.³

The term “*mexicanidad*” surfaced soon after the turbulent Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) to unite civilians under a cohesive nationalist discourse. *Mexicanidad* is the nature of being Mexican and the pride felt in Mexican identity. Starting in the 1920s, Mexican statesmen, intellectuals, and artists spearheaded a national project to promote *mexicanidad*. The resulting discourse based upon cultural mythology and a combination of Indigenous and Spanish societies sought to fashion a legitimate history of a mestizo nation. Unifying the nation was problematic in

¹ Carlos Magdaleno, “Olga Costa: A Brief Look at a Serene Life,” *Voices of Mexico*, no. 56 (2001): 41.

² Sergio Pitol, *Olga Costa*, (Guanajuato: Ed. La Rana, 1998), 11.

³ Ibid.

other ways as Mexico consisted of distinct social classes, a diversity of races, and an unequal gender construction. Nevertheless, post-revolutionary thinking promised fundamental human rights, social equality, and increased economic and educational opportunities. One of the ways how intellectuals shaped and responded to *mexicanidad* was through the visual arts.

Mexican modernism is the umbrella term for the non-homogeneous art movement that emerged in the 1920s and centered on reflecting Mexican heritage and honoring its working class, Indigenous populations, and pre-colonial traditions. The primary artistic method of spreading these post-revolutionary discourses was through the muralist movement. Muralism was a government-funded program that aimed to educate the public about national pride and identity. Mexico's Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, commissioned several mural paintings by artists like Rivera and Orozco to enhance the walls of public spaces and civic buildings with the goal of uplifting society through educational visuals. Vasconcelos gave his artists an avenue to express their ideas.⁴

Mexican muralism was influenced by the government's initiatives to involve Mexico's Indigenous heritage in the new cultural nationalism.⁵ This rhetoric, known as *indigenismo*, was a primarily intellectual-led movement devised to promote Indigenous ethnicities and communities and to underscore the contributions that these populations gave to the long line of Mexican history. Despite this rhetoric that promoted the Indigenous race, in reality, Indigenous peoples were often discriminated against, exploited, and denied inclusion into Mexican society. The upper classes viewed Native peoples as being in the past and regarded them as "primitive."

⁴ David Craven, "Lineages of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940)," *Third Text* 28, no. 3 (May 2014): 232.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

Government officials saw Indigenous communities as passive recipients of modernity since their very nature was understood to “lack progress.”⁶ To combat this negative outlook, Siqueiros urged in 1921, “Let us, for our part, go back to the work of the ancient inhabitants of our valleys, the Indian painters and sculptors. Our climatic proximity to them will help us assimilate the constructive vitality of their work. They demonstrate a fundamental knowledge of nature which can serve as a point of departure for us.”⁷ Although it aimed to honor the Native populations of Mexico and gave credit to their artwork, Siqueiros’s statement looked to the past. Instead of explaining how Indigenous peoples were significant to Mexico’s contemporary society, Siqueiros referred to the Indigenous as “ancient.”

Costa acknowledged the existence of Indigenous peoples in her own time as contributors to an ongoing *mexicanidad* discourse that continued to evolve well past the 1950s. At the same time, her predecessors and contemporaries mostly relegated Native accomplishments to the past.⁸ Costa aimed to dignify Indigenous populations by including them in the modern era and started painting Indigenous peoples when Mexico began globalizing in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ In doing this, she remained grounded in showing Indigenous peoples as possessing contemporary relevancy and brought new life into the discourse of *mexicanidad*.

⁶ Tace Hedrick, *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-1940* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 200.

⁷ David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Three Appeals for a Modern Direction to the New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors,” *Vida Americana*, May 1921.

⁸ Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1989, 172.

⁹ James Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 331-333.

To describe Costa's work as simple representations of everyday life is a disservice to her lifelong career and success as a painter. Instead, Costa's artwork attests to an underrepresented side of Mexican life. Her Indigenous figures and still lifes speak to the construction of a feminine *mexicanidad* separate from the masculine, and more specifically, the macho perspective that dominated much of Mexican modernism.¹⁰ I coin the term "feminine *mexicanidad*" to describe a discourse of Mexican pride that reflects aspects of the female experience such as women's rights, domestic and rural life, motherhood, and feminine craft.

Although she was not originally from Mexico, Costa primarily identified as Mexican since she moved to Veracruz during her youth and remained in the country for the rest of her life. In 1913, Olga Kostakowsky was born in Leipzig, Germany to Russian parents. When she was twelve years old, the Jewish family fled Germany for Veracruz. Sergio Pitol describes the sharp transition from the bleak, gray buildings of Germany to the colorful neighborhoods and lush environment of Veracruz as a pivotal moment in Costa's life and creative future.¹¹ After settling in Mexico City, she enrolled at the Academia de San Carlos in 1933. She did not find formal classes to her liking and only lasted four months at the academy.¹² She recounted, "I didn't learn much, but I did come to understand some important things."¹³ Two years later, she married fellow artist and Mexican muralist, José Chávez Morado, and instead of taking his last name, she

¹⁰ Machismo is an exaggerated masculinity characterized by an aggressive pride and concern for manliness. Common negative features associated with a macho mindset are emotional insensitivity, homophobia, womanizing, and dominance.

¹¹ Pitol, *Olga Costa*, 9.

¹² Juan Coronel Rivera, Raquel Tibol, and Deborah Dorotinsky Alperstein, *Olga Costa: Apuntes De Naturaleza, 1913-2013*, (México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2013), 192.

¹³ Jorge Labarthe, *Imágenes* [An interview with Olga Costa], in the journal *Pretextos*, Centro Guanajuatense de Escritores, year I, issue 5, March 15, 1986, 12.

converted Kostakowsky to Costa to Mexicanize her name. Enamored with Mexican culture and immersed in the *mexicanidad* discourse of Mexico City, Costa began producing her works that reflected her personal understanding of Mexican identity.¹⁴ Before she permanently settled in Guanajuato in 1966, Costa created the paintings that most characteristically conveyed themes of *mexicanidad* for their portrayal of Mexican heritage.

During Costa's early career in the 1930s, Mexico experienced a revitalization of revolutionary ideals as the imminent Second World War prompted an ideological battle against fascism. The Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) pushed for agrarian, social, and economic reforms that were the focus of the Revolution. Lázaro Cárdenas's anti-capitalist ideals, which were considered radical at the time, were shared by communist thinkers like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

In Siqueiros' 1945 book, *No hay más ruta que la nuestra*, he argued that art ought to be public, monumental, heroic, ideological, social, realistic, aggressive, and polemical.¹⁵ He rejected easel painting as decorative art that belonged in the homes of the elite who were snobbish, chic, domestic, and poetic. According to Nancy Deffebach, Siqueiros's choice of words revealed the degree to which gender organized his philosophy about the goals of modern art.¹⁶ As Sherry Ortner pointed out in her seminal article from 1974, in Western culture, men were seen as linked with culture while women were linked to nature, a dichotomy that was

¹⁴ Pitol, Olga Costa, 9.

¹⁵ David Alfaro Siqueiros, *No hay más ruta que la nuestra: Importancia nacional e internacional de la pintura mexicana moderna* (Mexico City: n.p., 1945), 32, 33, 39, 40, 75, 94, 101, 110.

¹⁶ Nancy Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art*, (Austin, TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 2015), 2.

widespread and generally accepted in Siqueiros's and Costa's time.¹⁷ As Deffebach points out, when Siqueiros utilized words like "heroic" and "monumental," he suggested that respectable art was masculine. In contrast, bad art was "domestic" and "chic," which related these descriptors with the feminine.¹⁸ Gendering art in this way—with men producing the "good" art and women making the "bad" art—presented significant obstacles for female artists.

As a masculine construction, *mexicanidad* did not properly include feminine subjects such as domestic interiors, feminine crafts, or motherhood.¹⁹ This is not to say that female contributions did not exist. A feminine *mexicanidad* is evident in the work of female artists such as Olga Costa, María Izquierdo, and Frida Kahlo. The works of these artists are often placed under the umbrella of the surrealist movement, a categorization that at times oversimplifies the subject matter as imaginary and fictitious despite its clear commentary on the female experience in Mexican culture and society. As these women artists navigated their careers, their works were sometimes described as naïve and unworthy of contributing to the masculine discourse of *mexicanidad*.

To be a woman artist in modern Mexico, as in the rest of the world and throughout history, was a trying process. Women often depended on male representatives like fathers and husbands to assist their entry into the profession. Women were encouraged to stay home as full-

¹⁷ Sherry B. Ortner, "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" in *Woman, culture, and society*, edited by M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, 68-87, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 73.

¹⁸ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 2.

¹⁹ Joanne Hershfield, *Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917-1936* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

time mothers as their way of contributing to society and nation-building. However, post-revolutionary efforts gained some rights for women, such as the ability to divorce their husbands granted in 1915 and the access to free state-sponsored secular education outlined in the Constitution of 1917. It was not until 1953 that women in Mexico were permitted the right to vote. Patriarchal paradigms remained strong in the artistic realm, which was seen as an intellectual space. Without Kahlo's relationship with Diego Rivera, Izquierdo's with Rufino Tamayo, or Costa's with José Chávez Morado, the contributions of these female artists to Mexican art may not have been recognized. Despite her struggles as a female artist, Costa's talent gained her national recognition, as was demonstrated by a government commission she received in 1951.

I argue that Costa filled the gaps in the male-fabricated *mexicanidad* by painting Indigenous women and settings of domesticity during her time in Mexico City between 1935 and 1955. In chapter one, I examine Costa's depictions of Indigenous women by contrasting her paintings with the Mexican muralists. Costa's female figures differ from those of *Los tres grandes* in that the muralists' figures are anonymous, stylistic, and are only intended as symbols for Indigenous peoples. Costa, on the other hand, painted her Indigenous figures with personality and agency. As representations of real people, Costa's figures revealed how Indigenous populations were an integral part of modern Mexico. She paints them as individuals and not as symbols. By comparing and contrasting her figures with those of the Mexican muralists, I show that Costa's attention to physiognomy, body language, and clothing further asserts her concern for depicting women that existed in modern Mexican society. Moreover, by depicting Indigenous women, Costa showed that Native women were not trapped in the past but were always relevant as active agents in Mexican society.

In chapter two, I investigate the subject matter of Costa's still lifes by delving into their iconography and surrealist themes. Costa painted several still lifes of table settings, *ofrendas*, plants, and food. In several instances, she painted objects that referenced Indigenous and mestizo life. The table settings and *ofrendas* signified the type of work women accomplished in their homes. Her representations elevated the beauty in female-made products that contributed to Mexican culture and national pride. In other works, Costa referred to Mexico's native flora and fauna to indicate the abundance of its land. Finally, Costa's use of still life further communicated feminine themes through a traditionally feminine genre. Historically speaking, still life was a genre that often fell to women since it could be practiced in a domestic space that did not require them to leave their home.²⁰ By painting in the still-life tradition, Costa uplifted the genre by showing that it deserved a space in the discourse of *mexicanidad*.

My approach to examining Costa's paintings uses a similar framework used by Celeste Donovan in her dissertation, "María Izquierdo: Religion, Gender, Mexicanidad, and Modern Art, 1940-1948." Donovan argues that Izquierdo's art has narrowly been read in a *mexicanidad* of a past era instead of within the terms of an everchanging discussion about Mexican identity that has the freedom to evolve and grow.²¹ She suggests that the narrow definition of *mexicanidad* warrants room for expansion, especially if it adds female representation into the equation. The art-historical literature on modern Mexican art typically cuts off the *mexicanidad* discourse as ending in the 1930s, when in fact, artists continued working within this cultural and national language well into the 1950s.²² Many of the artists who sustained the ongoing evolution of

²⁰ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 176.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 333.

mexicanidad were women. The suggestion that they were working with outdated ideas shortchanges their contributions. By contextualizing Izquierdo within a patriarchal power system, Donovan asserted Izquierdo's contribution as an author of a Mexican woman's experience within the cultural narrative of *mexicanidad*.²³ I similarly approach Costa's work by contextualizing her as an artist who utilized themes and iconography that were significant to female identity and expanded the cultural narrative of Mexico's history, which I call feminine *mexicanidad*.

Adriana Zavala's discussion of women in Mexican art and visual culture has aided my analyses of Costa's works. Her book, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender and Representation in Mexican Art*, is a critical investigation of images by women and of women between 1850-1950 in Mexico. Zavala reviews the customs and hierarchies in modern Mexican art and visual culture to offer a reassessment of the symbolic function of women. She explores the ways in which womanhood was stereotyped. For example, women were categorized as "Indian," mother, modern, and sexually "degenerate" before and after the post-revolutionary cultural shift. By looking at works by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, María Izquierdo, and Frida Kahlo, Zavala unpacks complicated dichotomies between femininity and masculinity that occupied Mexican visual culture and society.

Analyzing Costa's work against the work of her contemporaries reveals several dichotomies that existed and still linger in Mexico, a largely patriarchal society built on a gender binary. These dichotomies were based on a male and female complementarity, with the masculine counterpart striving for progress and the feminine seeking a connection to nature. By

²³ Celeste Donovan, "María Izquierdo: Religion, Gender, Mexicanidad, and Modern Art, 1940–1948," (PhD Diss., City University of New York, 2011), 14.

associating men with advancement, they are inherently seen as the superior of the sexes. Nature versus urbanity, tradition versus advancement, and domestic versus public are the three main dichotomies that reoccur in this thesis and help elucidate the feminine *mexicanidad* that Costa's paintings represented.

This thesis posits that it is important to consider Costa's career in Mexico City from the perspective of a feminine Mexican identity. Most essential to my argument is the fact that Olga Costa's paintings contributed to the construction of a feminine *mexicanidad*. As a woman who actively worked among the chaos of modern Mexico in a *machista* society, Costa added a female perspective that had been missing from the male-fabricated dialogue on *mexicanidad*. Her paintings revealed the vibrancy of home life as well as brought marginalized peoples, including women, to the fore. Costa's paintings pushed the boundaries of what must be included in the broader scheme of *mexicanidad* and, while doing so, created a space for Mexican women to share their experiences within a patriarchal society.

Chapter I: Indigenous Women

Olga Costa's *Self-Portrait* from 1947 (fig. 1) makes her European heritage clear. The painting shows Costa turning backward in her chair and fixing her gaze on the viewer with her icy-blue eyes. In this work, the fair-skinned Costa wears a Mexican dress, indicated by the voluminous sleeves, embroidered neckline, and bright green color, as well as silver earrings that point to Mexico's wealth of silver deposits. She wields a paintbrush that emphasizes her identity as an artist, and her environment in a hacienda-style courtyard cements her in a Mexican locale. Close behind her is a Montezuma cypress, the national tree of Mexico, which further reinforces the Mexican setting as well as her knowledge of the nation's flora.

Though Costa demonstrated her immersion in Mexico in her self-portrait, her fair complexion, blue eyes, and European-immigrant status stood out to others in Mexico. Her teacher from the Academia de San Carlos, Carlos Mérida, called her *el ángel blanco de la pintura mexicana* or the white angel of Mexican painting. This nickname identified her as Mexican by inclination yet othered her by her complexion.²⁴ There is no indication that Costa took particular pride in her Russian-German roots. Instead, she actively assimilated herself into Mexican culture and even changed her name to reflect a Mexican identity. Costa did everything in her control to integrate herself into Mexican society, including painting in a Mexican style, but she would always be known as the "white angel," which gave special privilege based on her desirable complexion. Lighter-complected people in Mexico were more privileged in Mexican

²⁴ Yulia Stakhnevisch, "Mexico Through the Russian Gaze: Olga Costa in Guanajuato," *Bridgewater Review* 30, no. 2 (2011): 4.

society, so while Costa embraced Mexican identity, she was always marked with the privilege of whiteness.²⁵ As a white, upper-class woman, Costa's subjects were the opposite: Indigenous or mestizo, and lower class. We cannot know if Costa did not see her whiteness as an issue when painting Indigenous people.

Any study regarding a "white angel" who painted Indigenous women must contend with the issue of race. Costa's own desire to do so may have been motivated by a "white savior" wish to represent the women in a new way that reflected their female identity, which was lacking in the work of her male predecessors. Also, perhaps since Costa was othered by her gender and her complexion, she looked to the Indigenous as the quintessential people who defined the Mexican identity and authenticity to which she aspired. Of course, aligning the Indigenous people with authentic Mexican identity is problematic as they are native to a land that was colonized by European peoples that was then renamed Mexico. Moreover, Indigenous people were exploited and discriminated against in Mexico and had few opportunities to voice their ideas about their own identity. Because of their gender, Indigenous women had even fewer opportunities, and, as Julia Tuñon discusses, Indigenous women are a "double other" in that they are both female and exotic.²⁶ Thus, Costa's depictions of Indigenous women reflect her own views of them rather than their actual lived experiences.

In the art of the early 20th century, Indigenous women were used as symbols of Mexico's past and origination. *Los tres grandes* and several other artists utilized Indigenous women as a

²⁵ Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 45, 117, 160.

²⁶ Julia Tuñon, "Femininity, 'Indigenismo,' and Nation" in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 88.

symbol for their works regarding *indigenismo*. *Indigenismo* was promoted by the discourse of *mexicanidad* to celebrate Mexico's Indigenous race, but this promotion contradicted the reality of the Mexican Indigenous experience of exploitation and otherness. José Clemente Orozco's *Cortés y La Malinche* from 1924 (fig. 2) depicts a generalized white man and Indigenous woman, and if it were not for the title, one does not have the context to understand the identity of these figures. In Orozco's fresco, the conquistador and interpreter hold hands, which emphasizes their starkly different complexions. Cortés and Malinche are both nude, likely alluding to Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. Malinche and Cortés in this context symbolize a necessary union that formed the beginning of a Mexican people. The muralists continued to paint idealized Indigenous women in a manner that both voided them of individual identity and recalled the Mexican past.

By the late 1930s, there was a push by Mexican intellectuals to even out the social and economic inequalities that existed in Mexican society and which the Revolution had originally sought to fix.²⁷ These inequalities needed to better reflect the modernist points of view of the twentieth century that believed in a logically socialist and "unanimist" political sensibility.²⁸ Unanimism refers to the French literary movement based on the psychological concept of a communal spirit and unifying principles. There was a need for solidarity among divided social groups, so artists devised plans to unify the Mexican people. One issue of inequality was that Indigenous peoples were not seen as "belonging to the century," perhaps because Native people held on to their heritage through language, tradition, and dress. Instead, the idea was that

²⁷ Hedrick, *Mestizo Modernism*, 200.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Indigenous peoples occupied a “premodern” space and needed to be brought into the “modern” era.²⁹ Diego Rivera’s *Calla Lily Vendors* (fig. 3) from 1943 contemporizes Indigenous peoples as laborers and contributors to Mexican society. However, the women depicted are anonymous and generalized; they are identical. Rivera’s method of contemporizing Indigenous peoples in *Calla Lily Vendors* is unconvincing as it does not individualize the figures, nor does it give insight into the Native experience.

Olga Costa began painting Indigenous and mestiza women into her work at the beginning of the 1940s, but not in the way that modernist thinking called for. Rather than modernizing Native peoples, Costa depicted them on their own terms in their contemporary circumstances. Costa’s figures signified a departure from symbolism in which she aimed to paint them as individuals rather than symbols.

Part of bringing the Indigenous into the modern era was depicting their experiences. Costa’s *Niño Muerto* from 1944 (fig. 4) utilizes the image of the *angelito* or the angel child. This funerary image references a genre that was popular in the colonial period in which parents commissioned a portrait of their deceased child in remembrance of them.³⁰ *Death Portrait of Mariano Francisco de Cardona* (fig. 5) is a New Spanish example from 1768 of the typical postmortem portraits. The figure was the primary focus and was usually unaccompanied by any relatives. Colorless faces, elaborate costumes, and flowers are characteristic of these devastating portraits that memorialize the shortened lives of children. *Death Portrait of Mariano Francisco de Cardona* and all of the *angelito* paintings of the colonial era were public demonstrations of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Elisa C. Mandell, “Posthumous Portraits of Children in Early Modern Spain and Mexico,” *Hispanic Issues On Line* 7 (2010): 69.

the Catholic belief that children baptized before death were free of sin and gained immediate admittance to heaven.³¹

Costa's *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4) shows an Indigenous woman solemnly practicing the Catholic tradition of mourning her child during a vigil set with candles and calla lilies. Costa's painting focused less on the Catholic tradition and more on maternal grief. *Niño Muerto* is a representation of maternity and grief that portrays the taboo subject of child loss in a sensitive way. Instead of commemorating the child, this painting observes the mother's sorrow over the child she lost. The individualized Indigenous woman and child add to the convincing quality that this painting was created after true events and might represent real people. The mother confronts the corpse of her child in a solemn way as her gaze rests on her son's tender face. Her modest veil reminds one of a *pietà* in which Mary mourns the Christ child. As a symbol of purity, rebirth, and revolution, the calla lily was a popular image that appeared in several paintings by Alfredo Ramos Martinez and Diego Rivera. Costa used the calla lilies for their traditional symbolism, which was to represent the innocence and purity of the woman's deceased son. The flowers fill the composition and cover the child's torso and legs to express the immense honor given to this child by his family and community.

It is remarkable that Costa's *Niño Muerto* depicts the child's mother so prominently since it was unconventional to include a parent at a close distance, if at all. The mother's presence highlights the painting's focus on maternity over the *angelito*, which marks this work as portraying a female experience. Looking at works by Costa's contemporaries, such as Juan Soriano's *The Dead Girl* (fig. 6) from 1938, offers a stark contrast to Costa's *Niño Muerto*. The

³¹ Ibid.

deceased child's rigid body is the primary focus of the work. This painting recalls the Novohispanic incorporation of flowers as well as the use of a pale skin tone. Soriano's approach to the angelito subject matter is a chilling one. The girl's hands are crooked, and her toes look stiff to convey the idea of a corpse. Disembodied hands above her contort in grief, frustration, and prayer. Overall, the painting is overwhelmingly sad and difficult to look at. Alternatively, Costa's approach is more sensitive to the idea of parental loss rather than the loss of a child's life. *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4) conveys maternal grief, a feminine subject that was uncommon in Mexican painting but common in the lives of many Mexican citizens.

Continuing the theme of female interiority, Costa's *Patio* (fig. 7) from 1946 illustrates a scene from rural, everyday life. This image depicts an Indigenous or mestiza woman from a distance, standing outside of her home carrying a child in her arms. The architecture suggests that this home is located in a rural space. The triangular stone support on the corner of the home evokes a similar structural element in Costa's self-portrait (fig. 1), which suggests that Costa preferred to be away from the chaos of the city and more in tune with nature. The rural elements in Costa's paintings might also explain her move to Guanajuato in the 1950s. By the late 1940s, Mexico City was quickly urbanizing and expanding in population size.³² As modern architecture began to rise all over the city, Costa's *Patio* surely provided a stark contrast against the fast-paced development happening downtown. *Patio* reminds Mexicans that rural life still existed in its serenity, perhaps projecting her own idealized notions of ruralism. The mother standing in the doorway looks out at the trees, flowers, and rooster, which points to the openness in nature that the countryside allows. Contrary to the concept of *indigenismo* that implies the notion that the

³² Ibid., 313.

Indigenous race needs a white savior to be the author of their successes and worth, Costa's *Patio* is evidence that the race is self-sufficient and peaceful on its own.

Patio resembles a rejection of modern urbanization by situating a woman and child in a country setting. This composition implies the peacefulness that is had by raising a child in a rural space. The distance from the figures in the doorway shows the luxury of privacy and quietness that is afforded in a more secluded location. Tenderness and harmony are comforts that are not representative of the hustle and bustle of Mexico City. The city, which represents masculinity and advancement, is a hostile environment in which the mother and child are forced to adapt, but in the country, woman and child are granted space, fresh air, and intimacy. Thus, *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4) and *Patio* (fig. 7) convey how Costa used her figures to communicate a feminine interiority that emphasized the femininity in maternity as well as in ruralism, which is not evident in the work of her male predecessors.

Costa's predecessors painted Indigenous women in a way that removed individuality and emotional expression. Alfredo Ramos Martinez's *Calla Lily Vendor* (fig. 8) from 1929 employs the Indigenous woman as a flattened and geometrically rendered figure that symbolizes the sturdiness of her race. She carries a large basket full of calla lilies which further drives the idea that she is strong and capable of bearing the burden of tradition on her back. Rivera painted his rendition of the *Calla Lily Vendor* (fig. 3) in 1943. His work represents the plight of the Indigenous race who must labor to survive amidst their social and economic inequality with the rest of Mexican society.³³ His figures are completely anonymous with their backs faced towards the viewer. The lilies overwhelm the two women who are knelt down in front of the billowing

³³ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 8.

basket of flowers. Though fourteen years apart, the works of Ramos Martinez and Rivera both employ Indigenous women as a symbol for the Indigenous race but express little sense of the actual lived experiences of Native women.

Unlike the vacant gaze of Ramos Martinez's *Calla Lily Vendor* (fig. 8) and the complete omission of faces in Rivera's *Calla Lily Vendor* (fig. 3), the woman in Costa's *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4) reveals the solemn facial expression of mourning and *Patio* (fig. 7) glances into the tenderness of maternity. While Ramos Martinez and Rivera focused on *indigenismo* and the laboring "suffering Indian," Costa was concerned with the human experience of grief and motherhood as experienced by an Indigenous woman. As a woman herself, Costa knew the depth and complexities of womanhood and had the ability to nuance these intricacies in her artwork, unlike Martinez and Rivera, who merely used the woman as a symbol for nature, nationalism, and rebirth.

Just as Sherry Ortner showed a gendered association of men with culture and women with nature, Julia Tuñon explains that European colonizers associated the Indigenous with nature and themselves with culture. Because of the disparity in technological advancements, religion, and dress at the time of the conquest, the Indigenous were viewed as uncivilized by European colonizers. In a similar way, women have long been stereotyped as belonging to nature as men developed culture.³⁴ Pulling from a hunter-gatherer mentality, women stayed local to their home as the passive sex that reared the children and gathered vegetation. In contrast, men dominated the animal kingdom with hunting skills, engaged in politics, and created technological innovations. Tuñon argues that in Mexican society, this line of thinking resulted in Indigenous

³⁴ Tuñon, "Femininity, 'Indigenismo,' and Nation," 88.

women symbolizing national authenticity, origin, and nature.³⁵ Therefore, Indigenous women were the archetypal image for indigeneity and the feminine condition.³⁶

Furthermore, gender constructions in Mexico made it that women's enfranchisement, freedom, sexuality, and reproductive capacity were decided by men. Like the Indigenous, women had little to no voice in the value they contributed to society. Indeed, women in 1940s Mexico could not even vote. Tuñón describes women as the "other" for men; the feminine is constructed as a direct opposite of the masculine. She convincingly argues that "Woman" in this way formed an abstract entity that inhibited the social characteristics of actual women and equated them to the origin of a biological species.³⁷ Thus, the Indigenous woman is both the root of a nation and a species. She bears the idealization of a nation that is both rooted in the traditional and unafraid of modernizing. As Mexico modernizes, the Indigenous woman is expected to retain the traditions of the past.

Additionally, Adriana Zavala argues that depicting the Indigenous woman in post-revolutionary images was evidence of the "progress" Mexican society had made in terms of modernizing their country and the races that inhabit it.³⁸ She shows that *mestizaje*, or the mixing of European and Indigenous peoples, was reinforced by racist eugenic theories that used pre- and postnatal care, sex education, and the prevention of a variety of health issues to push their pejorative agenda to strategically "improve" the mestizo nation.³⁹ Yet Costa painted the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 10.

³⁹ Ibid.

Indigenous retaining their traditional dress and made them current by portraying them in a naturalistic manner. Her depictions of these women show that Indigenous women had no need nor desire for eugenic improvement or supposed “evolution.” Instead, they are active members of Mexican society, a point that is further conveyed by the following two portraits.

La Niña de las Palmas (fig. 9) from 1944 and *Tehuana Sentada* (fig. 10) painted in 1949 explore women deep in thought and exemplify the way Costa intended to paint her Indigenous women: as individuals. Traditionally, Indigenous women were passive symbols and determined laborers (fig. 3), as evident in Rivera’s painting. Costa took a different approach when she created *La Niña de Palmas* and *Tehuana Sentada*. Each painting compels viewers to ask what the women are thinking.

La Niña de Palmas is a relatively simple composition of an Indigenous girl seated next to a palm plant. The dirt beneath her feet indicates the girl is sitting outside. Her hands clasped neatly in her lap with her feet pushed together suggest an introverted personality. The girl’s unique physiognomy is a refreshing departure from the standard geometric female face seen for example in Ramos’s painting (fig. 8), as well as the anonymity of figures in Rivera’s painting (fig. 3). A graphite drawing (fig. 11) of the girl in *La Niña de las Palmas* strongly implies that Costa drew this person from life and adjusted her surroundings later. In the painting, a quiet introspection is apparent in the girl’s eyes and barely furrowed brow. Her Indigenous identity is expressed through her embroidered dress and colorful headband, but she does not need to labor, sacrifice, or impress to be acknowledged for the existence of her Indigenous race.

Juan Coronel Rivera sees Costa's artistic goals as focused on illustrating the personalities of the Mexican people and depicting them as they appeared in reality.⁴⁰ I concur with this statement as it is apparent that Costa was dedicated to naturalism in her human figures as well as in other areas. In addition to committing herself to depict the naturalistic features of figures, Costa was also concerned with flora. She was a collector of plants and was interested in the texture and structure of plants. Knowing this detail about Costa, it appears that she paired a figure and plant together in *Las Niña de las Palmas* to bridge two aspects that interested her artistically: portraying the unique physiognomy and timid body language of this girl as well as capturing the texture of the palm and shrub behind her. In this work, Costa makes a connection between the young girl and nature quite clear.

Tehuana Sentada (fig. 10) takes a similar approach compositionally and thematically, but it shows a livelier shift in Costa's color palette. Compared to *La Niña de Palmas*, Costa simplified the composition in *Tehuana Sentada* to focus on the figure and her clothing. Painted against a vibrant yellow background, *Tehuana Sentada* portrays a Tehuana woman seated in a chair and resting her face on her hand. The tight composition allows for a closer look at the details of the Tehuana woman's clothing. This traditional dress of a huipil and skirt, known as a *traje*, denotes her Indigenous identity, and Costa showcases the intricate embroidered patterns on both garments, for which the women of Tehuantepec are famous. Frida Kahlo was also famous for wearing Tehuana *traje*, as seen in Figure 12. As half European and half mestiza, Kahlo wore the garments to enhance her "Mexicanness" and also painted herself dressed in it.⁴¹ By contrast,

⁴⁰ Juan Coronel Rivera, "Apuntes de naturaleza" (curator talk, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, Mexico, August 2014).

⁴¹ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 234.

Costa instead showed the Native women themselves wearing the *traje*, revealing her awareness of the importance of Tehuana dress as a key manifestation of a feminine *mexicanidad*.

In addition to the woman's clothing, much attention is drawn to her pensive facial expression. Like the girl in *La Niña de Palmas* (fig. 9), the Tehuana woman looks individualized. This reminds viewers that Indigenous people are not symbols but living members of Mexican society. Costa's women stand alone as contemporary members of society without having to adhere to the busyness of modern life. *Tehuana Sentada* shows a woman taking a moment of rest to think and reflect; her mind is occupied, she is a woman with her own thoughts and opinions. By highlighting traditional elements and individualizing figures, Costa brought her figures into the modern era as they were, retaining their traditions without associations with pre-colonial times nor with labor.

All of the artworks by Costa discussed above evoke feelings of contemplation, tender emotions, and intimacy, which do not seem to have a place in the chaos of modern life. As a whole, Costa's images of Indigenous women are important to the broader narrative of *mexicanidad*. Costa's departure from the typical subjects of *mexicanidad*, such as *indigenismo*, gives her audience a way of looking at *mexicanidad* through a new lens. Her perspective gives insight into the domestic female experience. As women's rights issues and matters regarding feminine identity rose to the fore after the Revolution and into the 1950s, female artists responded accordingly, giving them an avenue to contribute to the discourse of *mexicanidad*.

Costa's representations of Indigenous women also commented on the issues women were facing in modern Mexico such as persisting in the workforce.⁴² In 1951, Costa completed *La*

⁴² For information regarding women's rights issues in postrevolutionary Mexico, see *Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917-1936* by Joanne Hershfield. For more specific information about how the struggle for women's rights affected

Vendedora de Frutas (fig. 13) as part of a commission by the Mexican government to promote the cultural difference and abundance of Mexico in comparison to other countries.⁴³ Starting in Paris in 1952, *La Vendedora de Frutas* along with *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4) were part of an exhibition entitled *Art mexicain du précolombien à nos jours*, which eventually made its way to Stockholm.⁴⁴ *La Vendedora de Frutas* showcased the colorful diversity of Mexican fruit and accordingly the bounty and wealth of Mexico. Since then, *Vendedora de Frutas* has been part of nearly every survey exhibition of Mexican art.⁴⁵ Unlike her works explained above, *Vendedora de Frutas* represents a woman wearing contemporary clothing which suggests she is a mestiza woman. Moreover, she is shown clearly at work and participating in the Mexican economy. As a government commission intended for display abroad, Costa's painting needed to communicate a hyper-nationalist theme. Roughly five feet tall and eight feet wide, *La Vendedora de Frutas* is Costa's most monumental work, acting like a portable mural that references the muralism movement.

La Vendedora de Frutas shows a mestiza woman at her storefront surrounded by a variety of tropical fruits, which create a colorful, idealized, and mesmerizing display. Fruits known to be cultivated on Mexican soil such as guava, mamey, pear, custard apple, soursop and watermelon are displayed by the dozens, intricately cut and piled high in decorative pyramids. The woman holds out a pitaya, more commonly known as a dragon fruit, which is an Indigenous

female visual artists, see Nancy Deffebach's *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo: Challenging Visions in Modern Mexican Art*, pages 164-174.

⁴³ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 332.

⁴⁴ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 236-237.

⁴⁵ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 332.

cactus fruit native to the Americas. As in her self-portrait (fig. 1), in *La Vendedora de Frutas*, Costa demonstrates her vast knowledge of Mexican vegetation. Costa strategically placed fruits of different colors next to each other to create a repetition of rainbows across the composition. Among all the paintings in her oeuvre, *La Vendedora de Frutas* is her most adventurous application of bright colors in a single composition. If Costa considered the ideas that women may be tied to nature, then *La Vendedora de Frutas* showcases women as colorful and diverse as all of the fruits on display.

Besides communicating the abundance of Mexico through an elaborate presentation of tropical fruit, Costa's *Vendedora de Frutas* communicates a feminist message. Operating the storefront is a mestiza woman who radiates pride from behind her soft smile. She wears a simple pink shirt with a blue apron, which denotes her mestiza identity and places her in a contemporary setting. The blue apron evokes denim overalls, alluding to her identity as a working woman. She is visibly responsible for the success of her fruit stand, which implies her accomplishment as a businesswoman. As an independent working woman, she contributes to national pride and economic success without the need of male assistance. *La Vendedora de Frutas* empowers women through their tie to nature and their ability to nurture and thrive in a business setting. In other words, women are significant contributors to culture just as men are. Thus, nature and culture become linked in *La Vendedora de Frutas*. Two years later in 1953, women were granted the right to vote, which was a milestone in the fight for women's rights in Mexico. *Vendedora de Frutas* celebrates the working woman, a role that Costa considered herself to be a part of as an artist, as is evident by the paintbrush in her self-portrait.

Receiving a government commission as a female artist was no small feat. María Izquierdo who received a government commission for a mural project at the Departamento del

Distrito Federal quickly lost the assignment after she proposed to break conventions by gendering the hero of her mural as female.⁴⁶ Thus, while *Vendedora de Frutas* was intended as a piece to celebrate Mexico's abundance, it also celebrates the achievement of the artist who painted it for overcoming the obstacles of gender discrimination.

The following year, Costa returned to her preferred subject matter of Indigenous women. Having experimented more with color and discovering the rich significance of native fruits, Costa painted *Tehuana con Sandía* in 1952 (fig. 14). This work celebrates a Tehuana woman in an idealized way. This is perhaps Costa's exception in her efforts of portraying more individualized figures. Here, the Tehuana woman's stylized facial profile emphasizes the long nose and almond-shaped eyes that were associated with Indigenous peoples. She props up a large slice of watermelon and gazes upon it as if it were a trophy that has sprouted from her hand. The watermelon may point to the woman's fertility, but perhaps in reference to the supernatural powers of a goddess rather than in allusion to maternity. The watermelon slice complements the woman's red dress, highlighting the equal significance of both the fruit and the garment. Furthermore, the complementary green background contrasts the woman's dress in order to give it greater prominence. Clearly, *Tehuana con Sandía* commends the customs of the Tehuana women who were well-known for their intricate traditional dress. As a matriarchal society, the Tehuana were looked upon by women artists as positive role models, especially in light of the struggle for women's rights. In typical Costa fashion, her Tehuana figure is not modernized with the European fashions of the time but is brought into the modern era as she is.

Costa's *Tehuana con Sandía* introduced some modern elements in the background of her painting with blocks of color. Depending on the viewer's interpretation, the background looks

⁴⁶ Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 177.

like abstract shapes that balance the composition with a vertical line running down behind the watermelon and a horizontal one running below the woman's knees. Another way to view the composition is to imagine that the woman is seated on a stool outdoors as made evident by the dirt ground. Mexican buildings tend to be boldly painted in a variety of colors, so I interpret the Tehuana woman as seated in front of darkly painted walls, which makes her a fiery contrast against a cool background.

Costa was deeply influenced by Rufino Tamayo, particularly in his use of color, and recounted that a friend, “encouraged me to study painting and advised me to speak with Tamayo, who at the time was fighting for outdoor painting schools to be reopened. Since that never happened, I started at San Carlos.”⁴⁷ Knowing Costa did not have her preferred educational experience at the academy, it seems as though she regretted not pursuing an artistic relationship with Tamayo. Unlike Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros, Tamayo set on his own path to constructing a visual vocabulary of Mexicanness that extended beyond concerns of nationality.⁴⁸ Color played a major role in Tamayo's work. He described his approach to color explaining that “as we use an ever-smaller number of colors, the wealth of possibilities grows.”⁴⁹ Costa applied this mode of thinking to her paintings as seen in the broad planes of color in *Tehuana Sentada* (fig. 10) and *Tehuana con Sandía* (fig. 14), which add greater vitality to her paintings.

As I have shown, Costa portrayed individualized Indigenous women as a means of adding female subjects and feminine experiences into the discourse of *mexicanidad*. These

⁴⁷ Labarthe, *Imágenes*, 12.

⁴⁸ The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, *Rufino Tamayo: Myth and Magic* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979), 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

paintings show women's personal moments, whether in the midst of loss as seen in *Nino Muerto* (fig. 4) or during a moment of contemplation as seen in *La Niña de las Palmas* (fig. 9) and in *Tehuana Sentada* (fig. 10). Additionally, Costa showed women's involvement with nature, first in the middle of a rural setting in *Patio* (fig. 7), then directly engaging with nature and using it to her economic advantage in *La Vendedora de Frutas* (fig. 13). Finally, in *Tehuana con Sandía* (fig. 14), the woman is the very arbiter of nature with a watermelon sprouting from her hand. In each painting, Costa considered prominent feminine themes that broadened the scope of *mexicanidad*. *La Vendedora de Frutas*, simultaneously a monumental work and a still-life painting, further challenged the standards of *mexicanidad* subject matter. As I show in the next chapter, Costa widened the scope of her feminine *mexicanidad* further by involving still life, a rejected genre within the discourse of *mexicanidad* according to Siqueiros.

Chapter II: Still Lives

In contrast to Costa's sensitive depictions of Indigenous women that were free from symbolic meaning, her thought-provoking still lifes are rich in symbolism. As I show in this chapter, these still lifes utilize Mexican objects that carry feminine associations juxtaposed with more masculine ones to further point to the gendered nature of *mexicanidad*. Often categorized as a woman's genre in the Western tradition, still-life painting was an accessible way for women to paint without leaving the domestic sphere. Like many women before her, Costa mastered the genre of still-life painting as is evident by *La Vendedora de Frutas* (fig. 13). This work may be considered as Costa's most popular and acclaimed still life for the sheer number of colors and fruit that are depicted in it. However, *La Vendedora de Frutas* reads more like a history painting, one of the noble painting genres as defined by western tradition because of its large scale and attention to detail. By painting *La Vendedora de Frutas* in a large format, Costa monumentalized the genre of still-life painting and equated it to the scale of history paintings, or even to a smaller mural.

Additionally, this painting draws attention to the details of the fruits and how they are displayed. The mestiza woman holds a pitaya that is sliced in a vulvic shape. Other fruits like the mamey and lemons right below are cut in a similar way, foregrounding the fruits that resemble female genitalia in a colorful display. Above, phallic bananas dangle from the awning, but in a constrained manner in which they do not interfere with the bountiful arrangement below. The juxtaposition between the feminine and masculine fruits in this work reads as the restrained masculine contrasted with the expressive and colorful feminine. Other than *La Vendedora de*

Frutas, Costa's smaller and more modest still lifes lack scholarship. Paulina Bravo Villareal believes the lack of scholarship might be due to Costa's subject matter that was deemed inferior by her contemporaries and was often read as decorative up into the early 1990s.⁵⁰ It is also worth noting that the still-lives of her contemporaries such as Rufino Tamayo, Juan Soriano, and Roberto Montenegro were given less attention due to a prejudice against the still-life genre.

Costa's subject matter has been linked to *costumbrismo*, a nineteenth-century painting tradition that depicted everyday life.⁵¹ The women who painted in this tradition, such as Guadalupe Carpio and Josefa and Juliana Sanromán, were confined to the home and therefore often painted portraits and still lifes.⁵² As bourgeois women, their artistic endeavors were viewed as pastimes and not as serious careers.⁵³ Costa's still-life paintings recall this genre which fell to bourgeois women, but with a twist. Her still lifes are rich symbols of Mexican identity and provide a peek into a surrealist realm. More recent reevaluations of Costa's work in the last ten years have shed new light on the deeper themes in her paintings, which have removed the one-dimensional view of her still lifes as possessing only a decorative function.

Estudio de Olga Costa from 1954 (fig. 15) is not decorative in nature but instead reveals Costa's life in her studio. Details such as the current painting she was working on, pieces of art she collected, and a still-life arrangement in the center of the room give insight into specifics about Costa's life and personality as an artist including the items that inspired her. In many ways,

⁵⁰ Paulina Bravo Villareal, "Artists Who Are Women; Women Who Are Strong," in *Mexico 1900-1950: Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Agustín Arteaga (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 174.

⁵¹ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 203.

⁵² Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 29-31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Estudio de Olga Costa reasserted her profession as an artist with her own creative space. Francisco Zúñiga's *Busto de Olga Costa* is displayed on her top shelf to showcase her recognition as an important figure in the network of Mexican art. Moreover, Costa's studio shows that she owned the proper equipment like brushes, cabinetry, a large easel, and palette full of colors. Even more, her studio is evidence that she is a Mexican painter. A Mesoamerican head sits on her top shelf and a calavera sits one shelf below. To the left-hand side of the composition rests a painting of a rooster, which was a symbol of pride in Mexico. An Indigenous woman is the subject of her current painting that sits on Costa's easel, and a *rebozo* rests on her chair. Additionally, a bright yellow ceramic bowl and two colorful boxes lay on the central table and to the right-hand side a wicker basket stores rolled up canvases. By their bright colors and design, these items are clearly Mexican products, likely purchased at a local market. The boxes and ceramic bowl are part of a still-life arrangement along with a dagger, mug, candlestick, tray of jewelry, a compact mirror, and a bowl full of seashells. The candle burned almost to its end is evidence of how much time Costa spent in her studio and used everyday objects for her still-life projects.

In many ways, *Estudio de Olga Costa* functions as a more complex self-portrait than the one she painted in 1947 (fig. 1). Her studio offered a more personal expression of herself conveyed through a collection of objects than the somewhat superficial depiction of her likeness in *Self-Portrait*. As a reiteration of how steeped she was in Mexican culture, *Estudio de Olga Costa* reminded artists around her that she was well established in the Mexican tradition, and perhaps even allowed her to escape her white identity for a moment and focus on her national identity as a Mexican. The issue of how Costa's race played into her engagement with objects of Indigenous and mestizo culture is unresolved. However, it is understood that she developed a

deep admiration for the Mexican and Indigenous cultures, the Mexican landscape, and Mexican tradition from a young age.

In describing outdoor excursions organized by her elementary school, Costa expressed how her love of nature began as a child.⁵⁴ As she matured as an artist, Costa transformed this love of flora into a creative experience. She began painting still lifes early in her career and continued the practice into the early 1980s, which demonstrated how important the genre was to her artistic practice. One of her earlier still lifes, *Naturaleza Muerta* from 1945 (fig. 16) is an exploration of a still-life arrangement within a domestic interior. Red cabbage, cauliflower, and red bell peppers surround a vase of flowers that sit atop a dining table. The red wall, fiery bell peppers, and maroon cabbage work together to create a warm and inviting atmosphere within this particular home. These rich reds also allow for the white cauliflower and its outer leaves as well as the flower vase and its contents to stand out. As in her figural works, *Naturaleza Muerta* makes evident Costa's strong attachment to rich and bold colors. She transformed an unassuming table arrangement and froze its ephemeral quality into a painting. As an arrangement that evokes a woman curating and beautifying her own home, Costa's *Naturaleza Muerta* celebrates the feminine tradition of decorating home interiors in the simplest ways like displaying market groceries on the dining room table. Yet, paintings like *Naturaleza Muerta* were the types of paintings Siqueiros claimed were purely decorative and used to adorn the homes of the bourgeoisie.

The western construction of a painting hierarchy long maintained that the still-life genre ranked low as a minor art and functioned only as decoration.⁵⁵ Bravo Villareal explains that

⁵⁴ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 203.

⁵⁵ Bravo Villarreal, "Artists Who Are Women," 174.

Costa and female artists like her were belittled for exhibiting inferior techniques and genres such as portraits, self-portraits, and still lifes.⁵⁶ After all, Costa only studied at La Academia de San Carlos for four months before deciding to leave.⁵⁷ This choice put her at the relentless critique of her contemporaries. One critic, Margarita Nelken, commented in response to Costa's paintings, "And these reflections assault us as we look upon the pieces of fruit, the portrait of a small boy with fruit and a handcrafted toy, this earthenware of Olga Costa's, many of them correctly sketched, but which are dominated by a complete absence of imagination."⁵⁸ Nelken's critique suggests Costa had no problems rendering common objects, but believed her subject matter was unequivocally boring.

As an artist who is well-known for her bright color palette in *La Vendedora de Frutas* (fig. 13), some of her still lifes are painted in uncharacteristically muted color schemes, which convey melancholic feelings, and perhaps prompted Nelken's opinion regarding Costa's "lack of imagination." One example is *Flor de Alcachofa* (fig. 17) completed in 1950, which represents a dried artichoke flower that overtakes the composition. Beside it rest three intimidating pairs of thorns thick enough to cause someone harm. In the bottom left-hand corner, a small ceramic dish in the form of a snake is a reminder of the prominent size of the artichoke flower. Overall, the color palette of this painting is muted, utilizing earthy and ocher colors. Even though Costa used a restrained color scheme, she managed to make the flower stand out with mustard tones and applied a variation of brushstrokes to create textural diversity. Smooth, sweeping brushstrokes

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Marybel Toro Gayol, "Olga Costa and Lola Alvarez Bravo," *Voices of Mexico* 25 (1993): 60.

⁵⁸ Margarita Nelken, "La de Olga Costa," in *Excelsior*, Mexico, June 3, 1962, p. 12-D.

were used to create the lowest layer of smooth petals. Softer, more carefree brushstrokes seen in the white middle layer of petals convey their withered quality that unfold to reveal the fluffy interior. The flower's florets are painted with stiff, staccato brushstrokes to show their dryness and lack of life. In addition to the flower, Costa furthered her expertise of creating texture by including the burlap fabric at the bottom register of the composition. This piece of fabric composed of roughly painted squares of varying colors balances well with the coarse florets of the flower to create a harmonious composition.

Flor de Alcachofa and several of the paintings discussed below show the influence that Mexican surrealism had on her artwork. In the 1930s, Mexico was more deeply infused with the European surrealist movement as European artists sought refuge from the imminent second World War. European surrealism is known for producing dreamlike images born out of one's subconscious. Once Mexican artists began participating in the movement and exhibited alongside European surrealists, the language around the movement in Mexico shifted to reflect a Mexican surrealism that preserved its authenticity in its pre-colonial roots.⁵⁹ Artists like Carlos Mérida and Manuel and Lola Álvarez Bravo frequently worked in the surrealist style and had contact with Costa as well as influence on her artwork. Costa was the subject of many of the Bravos' photographs, which was testament to their artistic relationship.⁶⁰ This impact is evidently seen in her still lifes that deal with psychological and emotional themes by juxtaposing arranged compositions with the fantastical.

Flor de Alcachofa consists of an unusual arrangement of objects in a single setting. Though the artichoke flower, thorns, ceramic snake, and burlap sheet pique curiosity about

⁵⁹ Ades, *Art in Latin America*, 218.

⁶⁰ Gayol, "Olga Costa and Lola Alvarez Bravo," 65.

Costa's thought process when selecting this arrangement. Costa intentionally picked items of Mexican association that expressed surrealist themes. The flower likely refers to the herbal tea made from *flor de alcachofa*, a cleansing beverage. Furthermore, the ceramic snake is reminiscent of the large-scale Aztec sculptures of coiled snakes and may refer to the Mesoamerican belief that snakes symbolized rebirth, renewal, and transition. The significance of the snake pairs well with the dead flower of the *alcachofa*. Though the flower has transitioned into death, it is possible for it to be renewed into tea and in turn restore a person's hydration and nourishment. The thorns could reference Christ's crown of thorns, alluding to his death and resurrection, which would have had significance in Catholic Mexico. Besides Christianity, the thorns are also evocative of Frida Kahlo's *Autorretrato con Collar de Espinas* (fig. 18) in which Kahlo has painted herself with a complicated necklace constructed of thorns which pierce her neck and shoulders. In both Kahlo's and Costa's paintings, the thorns add an element of danger or discord that interrupts the themes of renewal seen in the snake and the *alcachofa* flower. Perhaps the thorns are a masculine, more specifically macho, force that threatens the feminine flower, yet the flower, in the sheer size of its bloom, is unaffected by such threats.

Costa chose objects found in the Mexican landscape that were familiar to the Indigenous peoples. Since the personal meaning Costa assigned to each object is merely speculative, one can at least conclude that Costa used these common objects to counteract each other physically through a variety of textures. The thorns mimic the sensation that one would experience when picking up the dry and abrasive flower. Furthermore, the burlap fabric below imitates the rough texture that would be found on the ceramic snake if it were real. All of the elements in *Flor de Alcachofa* evoke a sensory experience of dried objects that is counterbalanced by the symbolic renewing properties possessed by the objects she chose for her arrangement.

Another example of Costa's textural exploration utilizing a muted color palette is *Corazón Egoísta* (fig. 19), painted in 1951. As one of the few still lifes with a symbolic title, there are several themes to unpack here. Translated as "selfish heart," the painting's title suggests psychoanalytic possibilities, already associating this work with surrealist overtones. Like the dried *alcachofa* flower, *Corazón Egoísta* incorporates decomposing elements that evoke a melancholic tone. Two browning *cuajilotes* are propped in a ceramic dish, and below it, a ruptured seed pod spills its red seeds. To the right, conjoined *nopales* form a heart shape. They are violently pierced by a dagger that props up their rotting flesh. The dagger is a reoccurring motif in Costa's artwork, also appearing in the painting of her studio (fig. 15). Below, a small skull is highlighted by the brightest portion of the composition—a green piece of paper, which prevents the skull from blending in with the rest of the composition. Like *Flor de Alcachofa* (fig. 17), in *Corazón Egoísta* Costa studies a variety of textures. The majority of these textures are identified as having a type of smooth surface. Even though the flesh of the *nopales* is soft to the touch, Costa depicted it as ragged and rotting, and its intimidating spines jut out to contrast the entirety of the composition's smooth surfaces. The contrast of the *nopales*' pitiful condition compared to everything else draws attention to its decomposition. It is pierced so forcefully by the knife that the tip has pricked the table surface below and stands alone. Like the dagger in *Estudio de Olga Costa* (fig. 15) and the thorns in *Flor de Alcachofa* (fig. 17), the reoccurring violence of the objects suggests an allusion to a macho threat that assaults the feminine, in this case, the *nopal*.

Adriana Zavala suggests that it may be too simple to consider Costa's use of the *nopal* here to reference the Mexican nationalist symbol alone because of the painting's surrealist nature. Instead, she suggests that the *nopal* might allude to Carlos Orozco Romero's use of the

nopal in his painting *La Manda* (fig. 20).⁶¹ In Orozco Romero's *La Manda*, an unidentifiable woman is completely masked by a tight piece of fabric around her head and wears a large *nopal* necklace. According to Zavala, the *nopal* lays against her chest as a sign of self-mortification and penance, which evoke the daggers and thorns in Costa's works.⁶² Returning to *Corazón Egoísta* (fig. 19), it may be that the heart-shaped *nopal* is the selfish heart pierced by the knife of penance, as Zavala suggested. However, the dagger's hilt is evocative of a bird, which paired with the *nopales* suggests an allusion to the Mexican flag in which an eagle perches on a cactus. Pointing back to nationalism, the *nopal* pierced by the eagle dagger indicates that a still-life painting can be patriotic without needing to be of monumental size.

By analyzing the other objects included in this painting, I propose a new interpretation of *Corazón Egoísta* as representing a life cycle. The seed pod implies the beginning of life, the ripe *cuajilotes* suggest the prime of one's life, the *nopal* may symbolize one's confrontation with one's life decisions in old age, and finally the skull signifies death. The seed pod looks like a caterpillar inching its way towards the green paper that looks like fertile grass. Beside it, the skull suggests that its now absent flesh fertilized the "grass" beneath it. Furthermore, the Aztec believed in a sacred duality in which death was necessary for life, thereby creating the need for sacrifice. The *nopales* are next in line to fertilize the ground and bring about new life for the red seeds. The dual nature of life and death in *Corazón Egoísta*, focusing on the dagger through the *nopal*, also calls a gender binary to mind in which men and women are at odds with each other. I believe that *Corazón Egoísta* may point to women's rights issues in which men were resistant to

⁶¹ Adriana Zavala, "Selfish Heart - Olga Costa - Google Arts & Culture," Google, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/selfish-heart-olga-costa/cQEN4GmAKDaZYg?hl=en>.

⁶² Ibid.

women's desire for progress. Thus, the knife in the *nopal* represents the obstacle of machismo that pierces woman's "selfish" desire for equal rights.

In looking at her other still lifes, it is difficult to know what Costa did and did not paint from life. As Costa expressed in a statement about her creative process, she noted that she sometimes painted from her impressions of things.⁶³ According to Costa, "while working in the garden, something suddenly catches my interest. I observe the object for quite a while and then I paint it. But not from life at that point, but rather the impression I've got in my mind. That is to say, I paint with my back turned to the model."⁶⁴ This way, she was able to achieve a particular effect that was indicative of her own style, as explained by Juan Coronel Rivera's observation that Costa's still lifes are not in fact still. He explains that Costa's artistic approach to still-life painting was handled with great sensitivity in examining a subject from multiple perspectives, whether scientific, symbolic, or cultural.⁶⁵ This sensitivity is apparent in *Corazón Egoísta* in which Costa scientifically analyzed her subjects' lifegiving or decaying nature and contemplated the symbolic and surrealistic nature of these objects when paired together. Moreover, I believe that she thought carefully about their cultural relevance to Mexican identity. In achieving a well-rounded understanding of naturalism paired with nationalism, Costa had the ability to present still lifes in a way that was unforced and familiar, especially to the Mexican eye.

Macetas (fig. 21) was likely one of Costa's impressions of her plant collection. Painted in 1954, *Macetas* represents a striking arrangement of potted plants in close proximity to each other

⁶³ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 203.

⁶⁴ Luz Marcela Vera, "Una artista con los sueños en un pincel. Entrevista con Olga Costa," in the magazine *Tierra Adentro*, Mexico, November/December 1993, 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

to show the abundance and diversity of succulent plants. Each plant is nestled in a planter that suits it, and two figural, sculptural elements are included in the composition to break the stillness. Whether an invented arrangement or a portrayal of her gardening collection, *Macetas* is an ode to the stereotypically feminine practice of indoor gardening in which decorative plants are reared to beautify and warm a home.⁶⁶ Two of the identifiable plants are the cactus and the agave plant which sit at the uppermost right-hand corner. Pointing to ancient belief, the cactus and agave plant are significant symbols in the Aztec-Mexica tradition. The cactus represents the founding of Tenochtitlan as memorialized on the Mexican flag, which represented a new beginning for the Aztecs. Additionally, the Aztec goddess Mayahuel is the personification of the agave plant, which represents fertility and nourishment and further emphasizes the role that women play in nurture—in this case, indoor gardening.

Costa herself had an affinity for gardening and botany, but her first love was music. She was born to a family of musicians, which remained part of her identity.⁶⁷ The sculpture playing the bass in the foreground is a source of life for the plants around it. To the right, an antelope gives the bassist its full attention by turning its body in the direction of the music. In the middle of the foreground, the red flower bends towards the bass, further suggesting the music is the life-giving power to the plants around it. As mentioned earlier, Costa may have been aware of Tamayo's advice in restraining one's number of colors in a single work to leave room for possibilities. That effect is certainly achieved in *Macetas* in that Costa draws attention to a single red flower amongst the muted greens and tans. The surrealist possibility here is that the red

⁶⁶ Growing up in a Latino household, my mother and grandmother were responsible for tending indoor plants while my father maintained the yard. This custom has been practiced in my family for generations.

⁶⁷ Gayol, "Olga Costa and Lola Alvarez Bravo," 60.

flower possesses the most life as it is in close proximity to the music and implies that the music will sustain the surrounding plants. Overwhelmed by lively plants, *Macetas* is directly contrary to *Flor de Alcachofa* (fig. 17) and *Corazón Egoísta* (fig. 19), which show decay. Growing with life, *Macetas* communicates a fertile landscape arranged by woman, not necessarily in correlation with woman's ability to bear children but by her artistic ability to tend to life around her, such as indoor plants.

In addition to tending to everyday objects in the home, women were largely responsible for altar making in which shrines were constructed to memorialize the deceased for Día de los Muertos. Perhaps the most outward expressions of Mexicanness in Costa's still lifes are another *Naturaleza Muerta* from 1952 (fig. 22) and *Recuerdos de Silao* from 1954 (fig. 23). Both still lifes refer to the products created during this holiday, during which towns are transformed with decorations made of paper, papier-mâché, flowers, and even sugar. Shrines can be decorated in numerous ways, but religious figures, candles, and calaveras are commonly used to adorn these beautiful arrangements.

In *Naturaleza Muerta* (fig. 22), Costa composed a narrative with an arrangement of Día de los Muertos themed objects. Three of the calaveras process towards an elaborately decorated casket. Two of them hold their hands to their chests in grief and the last calavera holds the body of a deceased girl over her head. On the other side of the composition, a life-size calavera cries tears of *alfeñique* (molded sugar paste) as it witnesses the three skeleton figures laying the girl to rest. Central to the composition is a Marian icon that prays over the funerary ritual, while below, three sacred hearts further point to the Catholic theme. Like the casket and calaveras, the sacred hearts are also decorated with bright colors and likely made out of *alfeñique*. In the lower right-hand quadrant of the composition, a dagger lays beside the casket. Recalling the knife in *Estudio*

de Olga Costa (fig. 15) and *Corazón Egoísta* (fig. 19), the dagger in *Naturaleza Muerta* likely alludes to death and suffering. It may also refer to the Catholic devotion of the Sorrowful Heart of Mary in which the mother of Christ is represented with a pierced heart.

The sadness of *Naturaleza Muerta* is at odds with the painting's bright colors, most notably the cheerful pinks. These colors communicate the dark humor expressed by this commemorative holiday for the dead and at the same time emphasize the feminine nature of this painting. The calavera to the right is decorated with delicate flowers and leaves, the casket is decorated with an elaborate pattern and is adorned with pom poms that resemble large flowers. All of the human figures are female, which identifies this funeral scene as uniquely feminine. The mournful figures in *Naturaleza Muerta* recall Costa's *Niño Muerto* (fig. 4). In *Niño Muerto*, the mother maintains her composure as she reflects on the tragic loss of her child, which shows the difficulty of emotional restraint. On the other hand, the figures in *Naturaleza Muerta* have the freedom to express their grief in an unconcealed way.

In contrast, *Recuerdos de Silao* (fig. 23) painted two years after *Naturaleza Muerta* alludes to happier themes. The painting consists of an arrangement of Mexican objects that again reference Día de los Muertos, most notably by the inclusion of bright colors and a bold calavera. An enlarged sacred heart is labeled with a text that reads "*Recuerdo de Silao.*" *Recuerdo* is translated into English as souvenir and Silao is a town within the state of Guanajuato, so one might assume that this oversized sacred heart was acquired by Costa on a trip to Guanajuato during Día de los Muertos. Painted only a year before she moved to Guanajuato temporarily, *Recuerdos de Silao* may point to Costa's affinity for the slow-paced culture of this town and its state. Turning her focus away from nature, Costa utilized small bowls of fruit to highlight the large scale of the papier-mâché sacred heart and calavera, which monopolize the majority of the

composition. The playful nature of these objects emphasizes the Mexican holiday's enjoyment of brightly colored decorations that are larger than life.

Beginning in 1955, Costa and her husband traveled more frequently to the state of Guanajuato and settled in the city of Guanajuato in 1966. The countryside was the perfect getaway for Costa, and she even confessed that “without any exaggeration whatsoever, that the loveliest, most productive, most enjoyable periods for my work are the ones I've spent in San Miguel de Allende...I love the people, the village, the countryside.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, Costa was exhausted by city life and portrait painting. She expressed, "I used to really like painting people, but now, this over-production – masses who overwhelm you – horrifies me. I am truly terrified by crowds and public transport; places filled with people just kill me.”⁶⁹ Based on these statements, Costa rejected the fast-paced urbanization of Mexico City. Her artwork reflects the type of Mexico she preferred. Looking at *Patio* (fig. 7), *La Niña de las Palmas* (fig. 9), and even her self-portrait (fig. 1) it is clear that Costa strove to encapsulate the quiet countryside in her work that reflected an authentic Mexican identity that was separate from the masculine motivation for urban progress.

By depicting subject matter commonly encountered in everyday Mexican life, Costa challenged what was worthy of high esteem and representation in Mexican art during her career in Mexico City. She described her style as “very personal” and not associated with the “big subjects” that were found in mainstream movement likes muralism.⁷⁰ She defined herself as “solitary” in the sense that she saw herself linked to artists who were not “tied down” to the

⁶⁸ Raquel Tibol, *Olga Costa: Apuntes De Naturaleza, 1913-2013*, 217.

⁶⁹ Gayol, “Olga Costa and Lola Alvarez Bravo,” 61.

⁷⁰ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 193.

conventional agenda Rivera and Siqueiros were known for.⁷¹ Her modest still lifes elevated common objects in a way that presented them with care and consideration.

Nancy Deffebach describes Frida Kahlo's approach to simple subject matter in still lifes in which Kahlo described fruits as "precious" and that it was "necessary to give them a pretty arrangement."⁷² In a still-life lesson she gave to a student, Kahlo expressed to him that the fruits were beautiful and that it should not be difficult for him to arrange them because his mother arranges things nicely for him at his home. Kahlo's awareness of the beauty in domestic objects brought appreciation upon the tradition of still-life arrangements in art and in the home.⁷³ Her still lifes offered greater representation of the domestic sphere, a space traditionally thought of as feminine, into the broader narrative of *mexicanidad*. I believe Costa tackled still-life painting in a similar way, by carefully considering everyday items and rendering them as worthy subjects to provide better representation of feminine objects in interior spaces.

From the more obvious beauties of fresh vegetables and fruits in *La Vendedora de Frutas* (fig. 13) and *Naturaleza Muerta* (fig. 16) to the lesser regarded beauties of decaying objects in *Corazón Egoísta* (fig. 19), Costa challenged the way in which ordinary objects are contemplated. She even pushed the envelope so far as to paint the common *alfeñique* calaveras in *Naturaleza Muerta* (fig. 22) in a surrealist manner to invite deeper reflection and produce a narrative. Finally, in *Recuerdos de Silao* (fig. 23), she represented the kitsch, or the handmade souvenirs

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Deffebach, *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, 136.

⁷³ Ibid.

that were commonplace during Día de los Muertos but were not typical items found in a still-life painting. By depicting “lowly” subject matter, Costa remained loyal to her artistic preferences.⁷⁴

Costa equated her experience starting out as a visual artist to that of Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo. All three artists frequently dealt with judgment and doubt from external forces. She expressed that as woman painters, they “were seen as suspicious people, as ‘bad’ people.”⁷⁵ Choosing to pursue a career in the mid-thirties meant that Costa faced comments suggesting she would be better off staying home.⁷⁶ The irony surrounding Costa being compared to the perfect housewife was that she already held the same responsibilities of a housewife in addition to her profession as an artist. She maintained and beautified a home as proven by dynamic still lifes like *Macetas* (fig. 21) and *Recuerdos de Silao* (fig. 23). As a wife and painter, Costa brought attention to the domestic sphere as an area that warranted more artistic notice.

At the same time she faced criticism, Costa also received much praise from artists like Juan Soriano, Carlos Mérida, and writer Luis Cardoza y Aragón.⁷⁷ Costa flourished as a painter. She described that she painted “for pleasure, as a pastime, but the people who saw [her] paintings suggested that [she] should mount an exhibition here, another there, and so [she] advanced farther and farther into the painting world without even noticing.”⁷⁸ Based on the several opportunities she received to exhibit in several local galleries, founding Galería Espiral with her

⁷⁴ Bravo Villareal, “Artists Who Are Women; Women Who Are Strong,” 174.

⁷⁵ Coronel Rivera, *Olga Costa*, 203.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 234, 235, 237.

⁷⁸ Elena Urrutia, “Autorretrato hablado de Olga Costa,” in the catalogue *Olga Costa. Exposición homenaje, XVII Festival Internacional Cervantino*, Guanajuato, 1989, 31.

husband in Mexico City, and receiving a government commission for *La Vendedora de Frutas* (fig. 13), her efforts were clearly not in vain. With her confidence secure, Costa later commented on the early critique from Margarita Nelken: “In general, all my first reviews were very flattering; there was just one lady who trashed me. It was terrible; she just looked at me and snorted. She’s dead now...Poor little Margarita Nelken must be in hell.”⁷⁹

Costa’s representation of the domestic sphere, interior spaces, and common objects is an essential contribution to a feminine *mexicanidad*. In the artworks discussed above, it is undeniable that Costa was fluent in the national and cultural vocabulary of Mexico and had achieved a well-deserved seat at the table of Mexican painters. Combining her recognition as a Mexican painter with her defense of domestic spaces, and her representation of a traditional female genre, Costa broke boundaries in Mexico City where machismo thrived.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

Despite the noise of the inner city and the push for modernization, Costa remained loyal to her artistic vocabulary that included Indigenous women and modest still lifes, which challenged the norms of Mexican art. Her paintings recorded feminine themes which in turn expanded a feminine *mexicanidad* that was not represented by male artists. Her works were influenced by nineteenth-century *costumbrismo* and surrealism; however, I believe that her works need not be confined to a progression of artistic styles but rather need to stand on their own as Costa's independent search for Mexican authenticity and feminine representation. As a European-born woman, Costa developed a personal understanding that an authentic Mexican identity needed to include the more feminine everyday as well as the people that occupied that space.

Although Costa exhibited a considerable amount during her career in Mexico City, the number of times she exhibited increased substantially once she moved to Guanajuato. From 1955-1966 Costa continued painting in the style of *mexicanidad* but afterward her style shifted to more overt surrealist themes. It seems that once Costa settled in Guanajuato definitively, she no longer felt the need to bring the serenity of rural life into Mexico City, but finally had the opportunity to unite herself fully to the countryside by living in it. Throughout her life, Costa promoted Mexican art and culture by founding several museums in the state of Guanajuato with

her husband.⁸⁰ Her involvement in the arts scene in Mexico City and Guanajuato presents another avenue for study.

This thesis highlights a selection of Costa's paintings, most of which have had little scholarly attention with the goal of digging more deeply into her paintings and removing the mark of simplicity and serenity that previously characterized her work. Although she depicted modest women and simple objects, she utilized these subjects to convey complex meanings. Analyzing this specific selection of works side by side brings several ideas to light such as the representation of Indigenous women in modern Mexico, women's rights in Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century, psychological interiority, domestic spaces, and the uplifting of still lifes. This selection of paintings focuses on her career in Mexico City, which was only a small part of her career.⁸¹ Costa painted for at least thirty more years in a diversity of styles and subject matter which present additional possibilities for research.

My focus on Costa's influence on a feminine *mexicanidad* required a reconsideration of a historical moment in which women were evidently concerned with Mexican identity yet were not considered as strong contributors. This investigation into Costa's paintings provides insight and

⁸⁰ Laura Elena Sánchez Hernández, "Olga Costa" in *México 1900-1950: Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco and the Avant-Garde*, Edited by Agustín Arteaga, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, 340.

Costa and Morado established a collection of Pre-Columbian and Colonial art which they donated to the Museo Alhóndiga de Granaditas in 1975. In 1979, they founded the Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato that showcases their antique collection from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before Costa's death in 1993, the couple's Guanajuato home was converted into a museum called Museo Casa Olga Costa-José Chávez Morado which features more of their personal collection as well as some of their own painted creations.

⁸¹ My study of Costa's work can be expanded with deeper archival research in partnership with museums in Mexico City and in Guanajuato. Personal accounts regarding her artwork will add greater nuance to the interpretations of her artwork I have presented in this thesis. While publications on artists like Frida Kahlo are numerous, publications on Costa's work are relatively rare and often do not dig deeply into the content of her paintings.

invites a greater discussion surrounding a feminine cultural language that was unconventional for its departure from the mainstream masculine as seen in works by the muralists. Indeed, Olga Costa's sensitivity and careful considerations for her subjects were well-respected by those who recognized her fresh perspective.⁸²

⁸² Coronel Rivera, Olga Costa, 235.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Olga Costa, *Autorretrato*, 1947, oil on canvas, 90 x 75 cm. Colección Blaisten.



Figure 2: José Clemente Orozco, *Cortés y La Malinche*, 1926, fresco, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Ciudad de Mexico.



Figure 3. Diego Rivera, *Calla Lily Vendor*, 1943, oil on Masonite, 149.9 x 119.4 cm. The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation.



Figure 4. Olga Costa, *Niño Muerto*, 1944, oil on canvas, 104 x 82 cm. Private collection.



Figure 5. Artist Unknown, *Death Portrait of Mariano Francisco de Cardona*, ca. 1768, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 99.7 cm. San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX.



Figure 6. Juan Soriano, *The Dead Girl*, 1938, oil on panel, 47 x 80 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

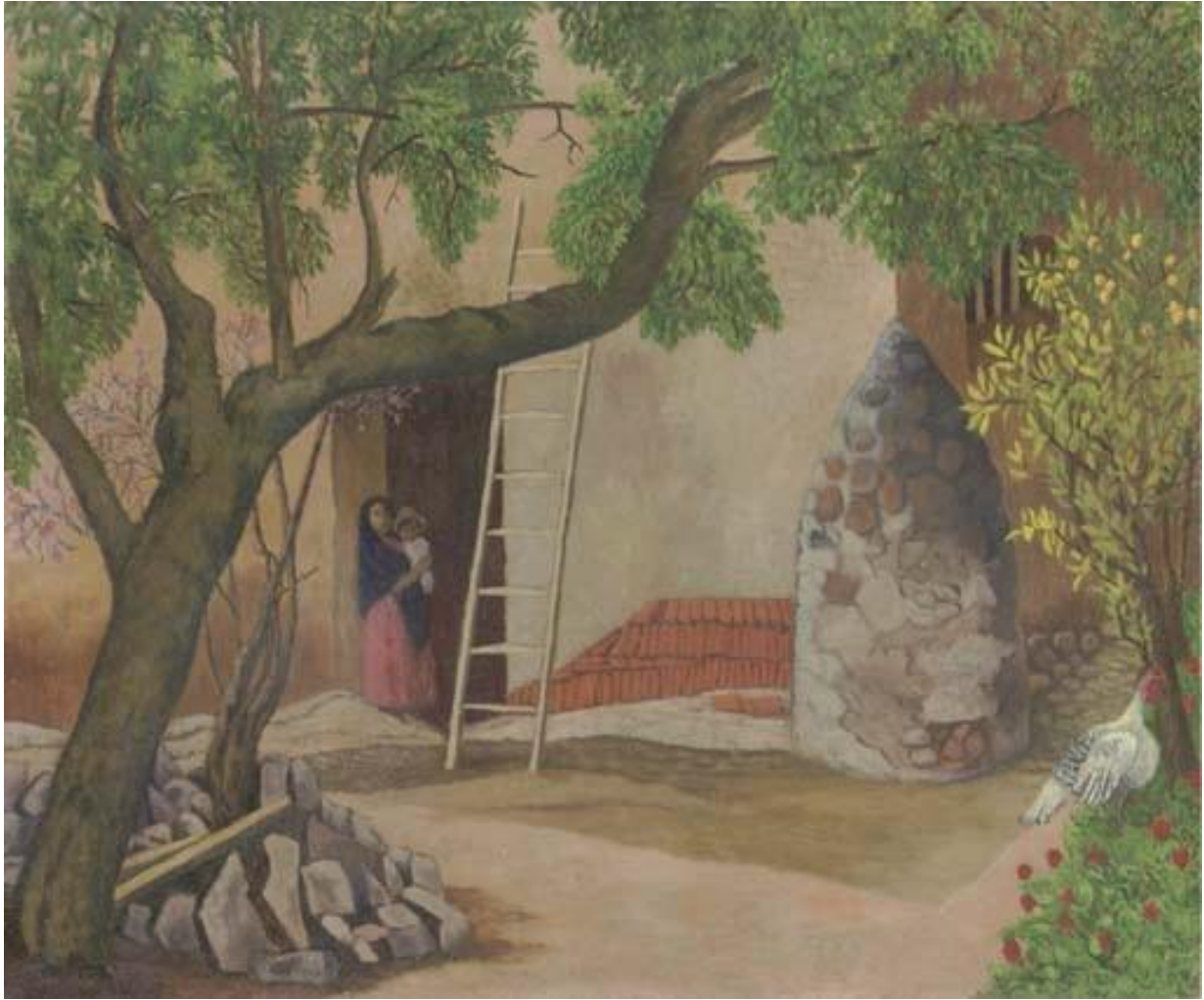


Figure 7. Olga Costa, *Patio*, 1946, oil on canvas, 52 x 62 cm.



Figure 8. Alfredo Ramos Martinez, *Calla Lily Vendor*, 1929, oil on canvas, 116.3 x 91.4 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.



Figure 9. Olga Costa, *La Niña de las Palmas*, 1944, oil on canvas, 85.7 cm x 66 cm. Private collection.

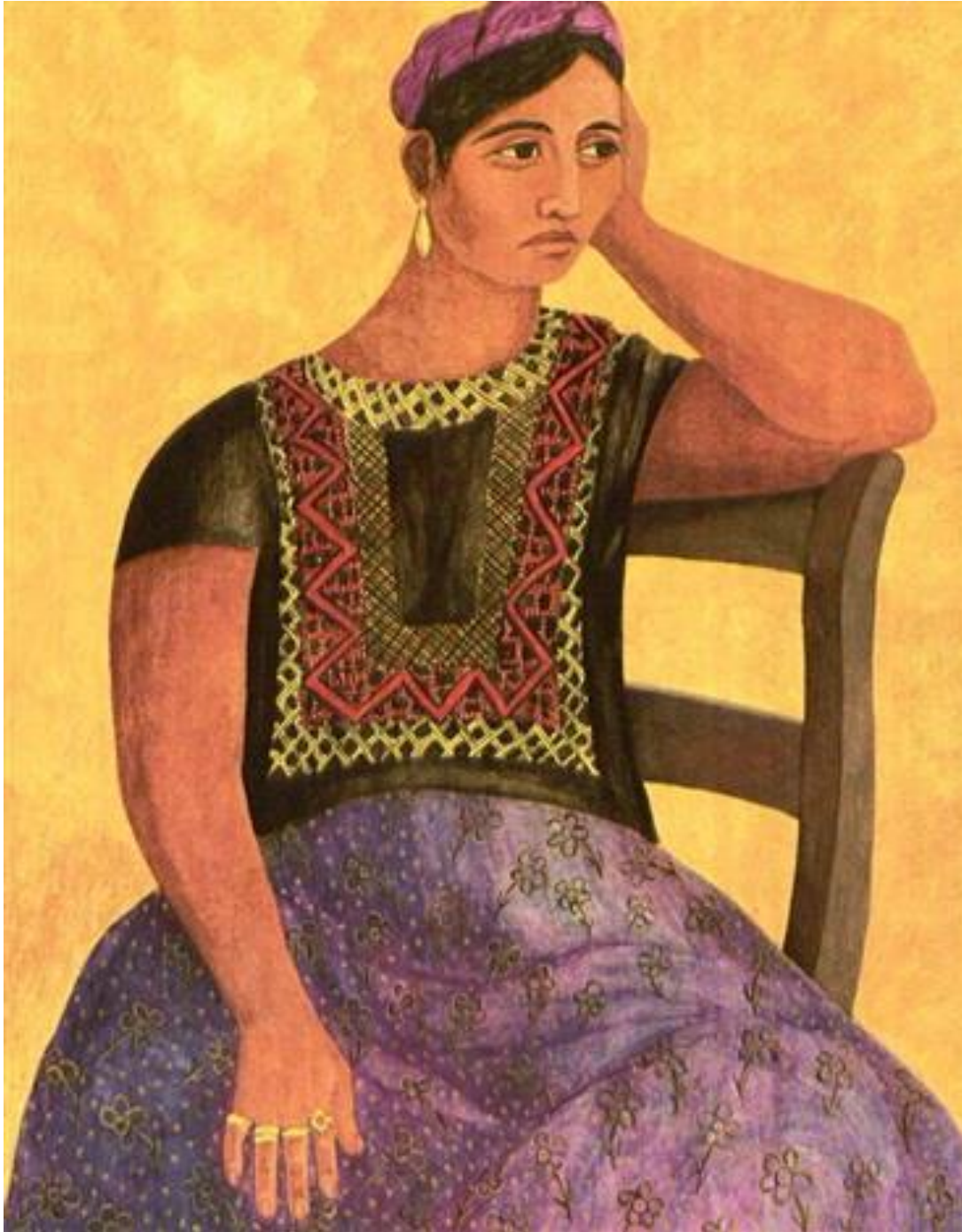


Figure 10. Olga Costa, *Tehuana Sentada*, 1949, gouache, 61.6 x 48.3 cm.



Figure 11. Olga Costa, *Sin título*, no date, graphite, 71.4 x 53 cm.



Figure 12. Nickolas Muray, *Frida in New York*, 1946, Carbon pigment print, 35.6 x 27.9 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Figure 13. Olga Costa, *La Vendedora de Frutas*, 1951, oil on canvas, 245 x 195 cm. Modern Art Museum collection, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 14. Olga Costa, *Tehuana con Sandía*, 1952, oil on canvas, 130 x 111 cm. Collection of Lance Aaron and family.



Figure 15. Olga Costa, *Estudio de Olga Costa*, 1954, oil on canvas, 70 x 85.5 cm. Collection of Jorge and Guadalupe Hidalgo.



Figure 16. Olga Costa, *Naturaleza Muerta*, 1945, oil on canvas, 72 x 93 cm. Acervo Museo de Arte Olga Costa - Jose Chavez Morado.



Figure 17. Olga Costa, *Flor de Alcachofa*, 1950, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm. Collection of Dr. Bernardo Sepúlveda and wife.

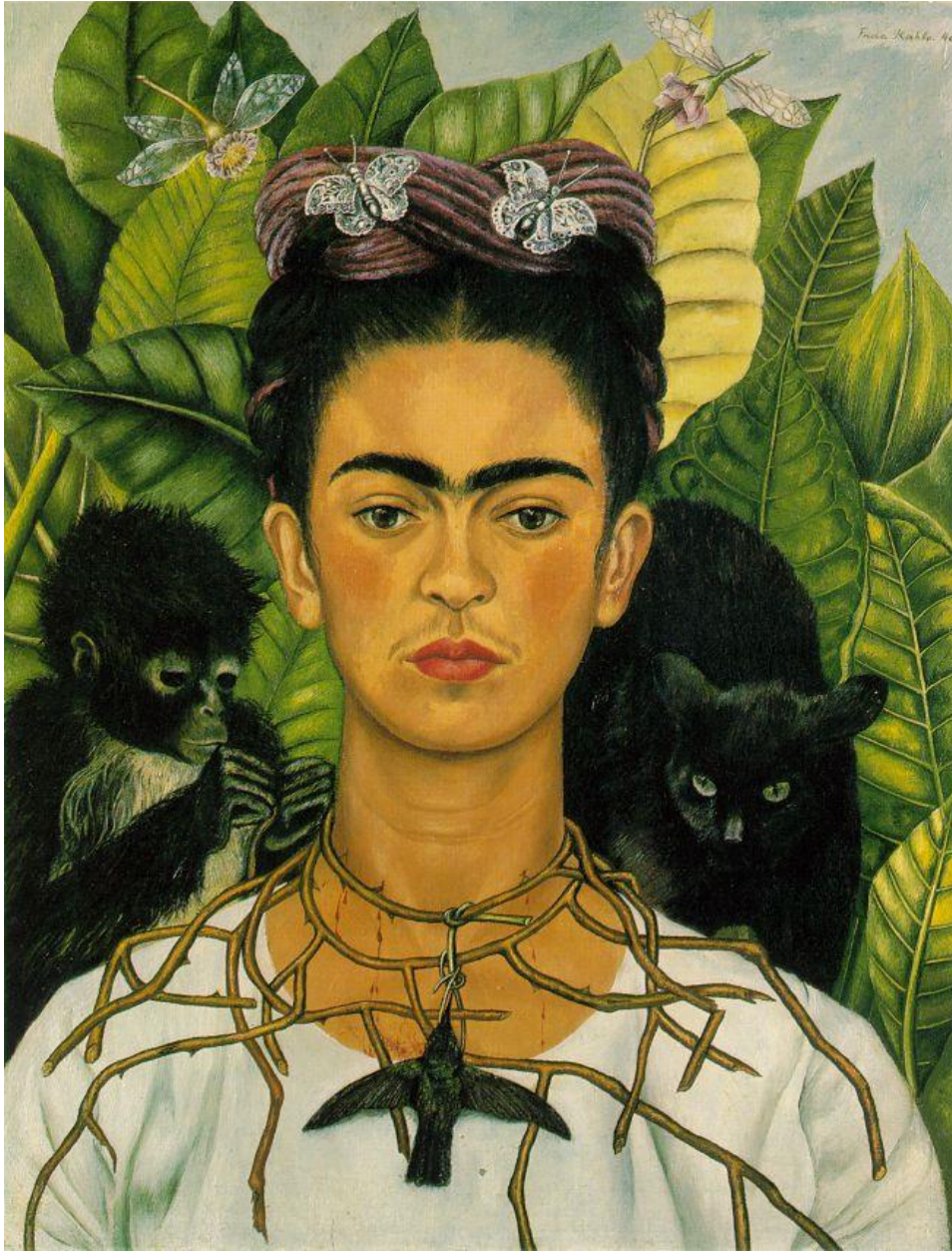


Figure 18. Frida Kahlo, *Autorretrato con Collar de Espinas*, 1940, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 49.5 cm. Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.



Figure 19. Olga Costa, *Corazón Egoísta*, 1951, oil on canvas, 67 x 73 cm. Colección Blaisten.



Figure 20. Carlos Orozco Romero, *La Manda*, 1942, oil on canvas. Museo Robert Brady, Cuernavaca, Mexico.



Figure 21. Olga Costa, *Macetas*, 1954, oil on canvas, 100 x 90.5 cm, Collection of Mr. Jorge Epstein.



Figure 22. Olga Costa, *Naturaleza Muerta*, 1952, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 cm. Private collection.

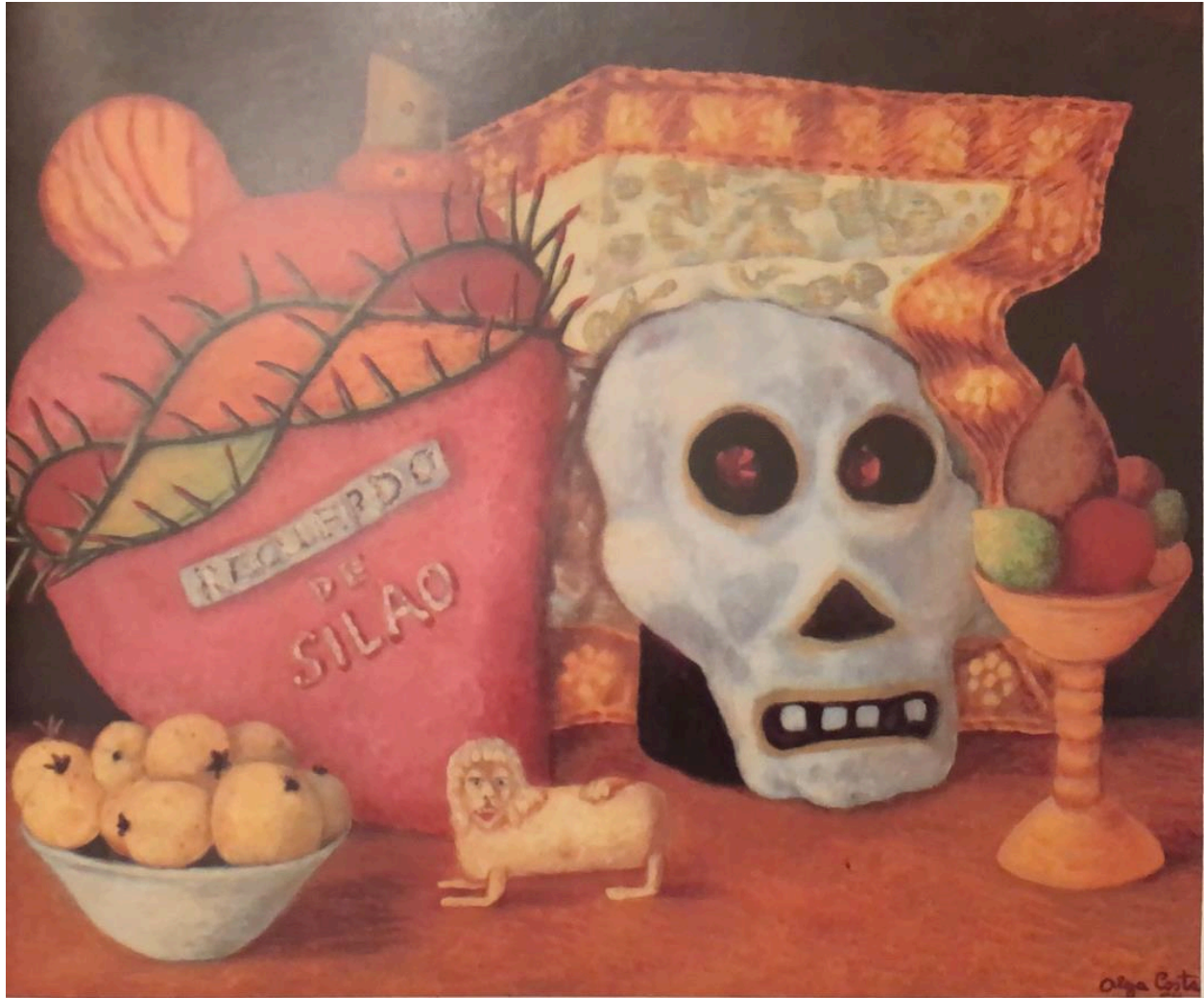


Figure 23. Olga Costa, *Recuerdos de Silao*, 1954, oil on canvas, 66 x 55 cm. Collection of Mrs. María Asúnsolo de Colín.

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ABSTRACT

OLGA COSTA'S FEMININE *MEXICANIDAD*

by

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In the early 20th century Mexico, and surely in reaction to the Mexican Revolution, there was a growing desire to create a new nationalist artistic style that could promote *mexicanidad*, a word that reflects the nature of being Mexican and the pride felt in identifying as Mexican. This pride can be seen in the muralist movement, with its often heroic and hyper-nationalist representations of Mexican identity. Working in Mexico City from 1935-1954, Olga Costa painted Mexican identity from a female perspective, which I define as a feminine *mexicanidad*. This thesis explores Costa's depictions of Indigenous women and still lifes which contain products that reflect feminine themes as well as Mexican identity. In the midst of the machista society of post-revolutionary Mexico, Costa added to a feminine *mexicanidad* that unveiled the active roles that Mexican women played in constructing Mexican identity.