Throughout the history of Western art, male artists have represented women from their own gendered perspective, creating paradigms that, though far removed from women's own experiences of womanhood, have influenced the social expectations of women's behaviors and feelings. An outstanding counter example of feminine voices bespeaking women's most intimate and painful experiences can be found in the works of art created by a group of Mexican artists active during the 1930s and early 1940s. Some of these artists are today well-known, such as María Izquierdo (1902-55) and Frida Kahlo (1907-55); others less so, including Rosa Rolando (1895-1970), Lola Cueto (1897-1978), Aurora Reyes (1908-85), Isabel Villaseñor (1909-53) and Olga Costa (1913-93).

Despite recent attention to the lives and works of Mexican women artists, the monographic methodological perspectives commonly used by art historians tend to emphasize the singularity of each artist, thereby diminishing the social and political significance of their coherent artistic production as a group. Here instead is offered a collective, comparative approach, based on their significant personal, social, and political connections, and considering the difficulties they faced as female artists in the highly patriarchal society of Mexico during the 1930s and early 1940s, which led them to develop, independently, a common iconographic repertoire.

Although these artists occasionally expressed joyful, confident images of themselves and other women, more frequently they focused on anguish caused by the social pressures imposed by the prevailing "machista" society. Through their selection of tabooed themes, among them unhappy brides, frustrated motherhood, miscarriage and infant deaths, and gender violence, these artists exposed not only their own private fears and feelings but common preoccupations and challenges posed to them by the social construction of gender roles in Mexican society. I contend that these artists chose such themes not only to work out some of their most subjective psychological torments at a personal level, but also as an effective political tool to publicly denounce some of the cultural bases that sustain the pernicious patriarchal gender paradigms in regard to what it means to be a woman.

The 1930s was a passionate time, both politically and artistically. The international context was marked by the 1929 crash of the United States stock market and the extraordinary economic depression that followed; by the Spanish Civil War, which mobilized people worldwide; and by the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Spain, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union that terrorized Europe. The serious economic problems faced by democratic governments throughout the world, marked by high unemployment, spurred a deep political consciousness among large portions of the population, with polarization between right- and left-wing ideologies, and agitated politics worldwide.

In Mexico, the long postponed social changes proposed after the Revolution of 1910 were finally coming to life. In 1934, when Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president, a position he held until 1940, new hope was born for neglected sectors of Mexican society, including women. Enormously popular, his progressive program included the implementation of so-called "socialist education" and great advances in land reform and social security. As workers' wages increased, the labor unions were revitalized. The oil expropriation of 1938, and subsequent foundation of "Petróleos Mexicanos" (PEMEX), was one of Cárdenas's most revolutionary and transcendental acts.

The movement in favor of women's rights also experienced an extraordinary growth, and many women began to take an active part in politics. Nevertheless, Cárdenas's 1934 effort to pass a law implementing female suffrage ultimately lacked sufficient support. In 1936, the Unique Front for Women's Rights (Frente Único Pro Derechos de la Mujer) assembled 50,000 women belonging to 800 organizations throughout Mexico. Their demands included extending maternity leave and legal recognition of breastfeeding time for mothers of infants; installing daycare centers near markets and other work centers; unionization of urban and rural working women; and a woman's right to vote and to be elected to public office. That same year, the women of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party) gained the right to vote in internal party elections and were able to participate in the 1937 PNR national conventions. Several women campaigned to become the first female independent candidates to run for the PNR presidency. Such active participation of women in politics affected other cultural areas also all but closed to women, in particular, the art world.

By the 1930s the Mexican School artists had consolidated a tradition of political commitment. The so-called "great three," the muralists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, were the national and international face of the Mexican Renaissance, with its challenging definition of public art, and its socially committed type of artist. The "great three" actually were part of a larger group of artists dedicated to using the power of their art to improve society. Members of the Liga
Many of the women artists being discussed here knew each other personally. Even those married to the male protagonists of the Mexican School, found themselves, as women, marginalized and outside the center of artistic practice. Additionally, with the exception of María Izquierdo and Aurora Reyes, most lacked traditional academic training and considered themselves as amateur rather than professional artists. At a social level, as a part of the most prominent Mexican artistic scene, these women frequently gained recognition, but as inspiring muses. Their male partners and others in their circle created some remarkable images of them—often personifications of the purest Mexican essence or the prototypical Mexican woman. When the women wanted to abandon their inspirational roles in favor of becoming active creators, they often struggled against the paradigms they incarnated in the collective imaginary. To oppose a well-established artistic iconography of themselves was one of the crusades they shared, consciously or not.

Most of the women experimented with artistic forms besides painting and engraving. Aurora Reyes was a well known poet; Isabel Villaseñor sang, wrote, and compiled traditional “corridos,” wrote plays, and acted; Rosa Rolando was a professional dancer, actress and photographer; and Lola Cueto was an important promoter and creator of Mexican puppetry, produced tapestries, experimented with craft techniques, and wrote children’s plays; Olga Costa sang and played the piano.

The Surrealist movement found in Mexico a fertile terrain in which to breed. Beyond direct impact such as André Breton and Antonin Artaud might have exerted on Kahlo and Izquierdo, respectively, there are some profound coincidences among Surrealism and female Mexican artists. For example, they shared an interest in non-rational, subjective experiences and the profound self-exploration and bold expression of feelings; gave enormous relevance to the fantastic; depicted apparently casual encounters of objects and persons characteristic of the world of dreams, and, in particular, explored the unconscious and childhood memories.

Through their expressions of intimate feminine experiences, these Mexican women artists created a highly original, authentic and provocative new imagery. Instead of focusing on the stereotypical abstract ideals about women’s “natural” abnegation and self-sacrificing happiness, they revealed profound, subjective, and sometimes conflicting feelings such as sorrow, desperation, and anger, which often are less acceptable to society.

Their new, more comprehensive interpretation of women’s experiences was meant to achieve a truer understanding of the complexities surrounding womanhood in modern society. One of their main objectives was to depict, communicate, and create awareness about the commonality of their “unspeakable” female experiences. Painting served them not only to work out difficult personal challenges but also to denounce the cultural practice of silence that leads to erroneous beliefs in regard to women’s identities and their self-images.

The Unhappy Bride was one common theme. During the 1930s, an American traveler in Mexico, Verna Carleton Millan, observed the extraordinary weight of social expectations on women stemming from pervasive cultural roots. She wrote:

[T]he Mexican woman of today ... has this enormous burden of race and tradition upon her shoulders; product of a mestizo culture, she is caught in the mesh of not one but two traditions, both equally repressive. The Spaniards brought to Mexico the strict Catholicism that has held women in a subjective, passive role for centuries. On the other hand, the Indian tribes since time immemorial have crushed the spirit of their women beneath ironclad taboos and repressions ... Marriage is considered the supreme goal of every woman’s life. The mother’s marriage may have been a life-long tragedy, but she can conceive of no other fate for her daughters, on the theory that any kind of marriage is better than none because at least one thus fulfills the Christian command to multiply.

In effect, the persistent influence of religious beliefs and rites upon the lives of women in traditional countries such as Mexico is very strong. The ideal of religious maternity as the main existential objective of women’s lives is considerable even today. Reinforced by the seductive enchantments of popular childhood fairy tales and by other socialization practices, almost every little girl, even those raised in fairly progressive environments, dreams of a happy marriage and its obligatory dazzling wedding gown worthy of a “princess.” For many young women, frustrated by the lack of educational and professional opportunities, marriage becomes their main goal and reason for their existence. Idealism aside, the number of women who suffer the bitter disappointment of unhappy maternity is considerable, marked by infidelities, domestic violence, and other degrading (and traditional) means of male dominance that brutally dissolve the childhood illusions.

In bold and original paintings on the theme of unhappy brides, some artists called into question deeply held beliefs. At the same time, they uncovered some of the social forces and interests that shape the traditions regarding marriage and male dominance.

Olga Costa’s The Bride (1941; Pl. 1), is a highly enigmatic painting that at first sight appears typical of the genre paintings that characterize the Mexican School. A closer look reveals details that call into question some marriage customs and beliefs. The bride, a short, round woman, occupies the composition as if the space is too small for her to breathe in. Rather than the more typical, young Mexican bride, she is a mature woman. Abandoning the traditional white dress as a symbol of her chastity, this mature bride wears pastel colors, suggesting that she likely is no longer a virgin or, perhaps, that her social condition made the “mandatory” white wedding gown unaffordable. Her melancholic expression, her modest
gaze, and her timid gesture stand in contrast to her
prominently laced cleavage which leaves her upper
body imprudently exposed.

She stands before a large armchair with claw feet
and pompous festooned arms that confer it with an
animated quality. A huge bouquet of colorful flowers
tied with a large white ribbon fills the chair and the
upper background. The flowers, ripped from their
natural surroundings and incongruously standing
on the chair, echo the incongruities of the bride
herself. In Spanish, the word “desflorar,” like its
English counterpart, deflower, can express the loss of
a woman’s virginity. Here the large bouquet could
thus speak metaphorically and ironically to the
bride’s mature and “impure” condition. Regardless,
the painting seems to deconstruct the idealized,
virginal, princess-like Mexican bride by depicting
instead one more realistic, who, with her
imperfections and ambiguities, offers a very moving
and provocative image.

The Bride’s Veil (1943; Pl. 2) by María Izquierdo
may reflect the artist’s personal experience of an
unwelcome arranged marriage. After the artist’s
father died when she was five years old, she was
raised for some time by her grandparents. When María
was fourteen, her mother forced her to marry a much older military
man.15 After a few years, she managed to escape with her two
children, confirming the highly predictable suspicion that the
marriage was an unhappy one.

Although she painted it many years later, it is easy to
speculate that The Bride’s Veil, with its clear reference to one of
the most characteristic wedding symbols, may have served as a
way for the artist to share some of her painful memories. In
particular, the small size of the furniture, the low perspective,
and the disordered elements of the composition call to mind
the world of childhood that had been stolen from Izquierdo
and many other young girls forced into arranged marriages in
such a brutal way.

The most startling aspect of Izquierdo’s painting is the
absence of the bride, the owner of the veil who traditionally
would have starred in the work. Her absence is compensated
by the presence of numerous objects which suggest a very tense
general mood: the ghostly veil, the bouquet also discarded, the
wreath unceremoniously fallen onto the floor and the white
gloves in the lower margin that appear ready to fall out of the
painting. They populate the composition in a highly disordered
way, unrhythmically leading the spectator’s gaze toward a tiny
opening in the center of the curtains. The spectator can peek
into a dark background where barely visible fragments of a
bedframe and its fringed bedcovers are suggested.

Besides the unveiling of the bride, symbolically ending her
chastity, the chaotic composition suggests that the
consummation of the marriage, the sexual act, is most likely
taking place behind the curtain. On the right side of the
composition, the red hat with colored laces, boxed jewels, half
empty perfume bottle, enigmatic mannequin head with a black
embroidered shawl—all sitting on a child-size boudoir table—
and the red feather above the gloves on the floor contrast sharply
with the traditional wedding symbols on the left. They deprive
the painting of a traditional religious decoding and introduce
instead some turbulent, more ambiguous hints. Through formal
elements, Izquierdo seems to comment on the sudden sexual
maturity violently imposed on the very young bride,
demystifying in a forceful way romantic views about marriage.

Frida Kahlo’s The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened (1943;
Fig. 1) also alludes to the fears, doubts and disappointments
associated with bridal fantasies and marriage. Originally created
in 1939 as a simple still life with colorful fruits, an owl, and a
grasshopper, she later added the figure of a Victorian porcelain
bride doll that she had bought in a Paris flea market,16 thus
transforming it into an intriguing symbolic work.17

Salomon Grimberg convincingly interprets the painting as
an allegory regarding Kahlo’s friend, the French painter
Jacqueline Lamba (1910-93), referring to the fear Lamba
experienced when she asked her husband, the Surrealist leader
André Breton, for a divorce and he threatened her with her
“destruction.” As is often the case with Kahlo’s multilayered
works, the painting admits other more universal readings.18

From a formal and thematic point of view, the composition
is unusual for its bizarre combination of traditional still life
genre with fruits and creatures on the one hand with the
inanimate bride. A “doll” can be manipulated to participate in
the game of life, but she has a passive nature, and does not have
the power to decide. As suggested by Kahlo’s revealing title,
the tiny doll literally seems to glance at the disproportionately
large and menacing fruits and animals that are frightfully
displayed in front of her. This angelic figure does not seem
prepared to deal with the excess of life and the cruelty of “open
life. She stands in a precarious, oblique position, as if already
starting to fall from the devastating impression.

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Fig. 1. Frida Kahlo, The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened (1943), oil on
canvas, 24 13/18" x 32". Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, The Centro
Cultural Muros, Cuernavaca, Mexico. Photo: CENIDIAP/INBA. Biblioteca de las
Artes, CENART (Mexico).
The aggressive, angular shapes of the sliced watermelons with the characteristic colors of the Mexican flag, the hairy coconuts with humanized faces, and the open papaya that recalls a female sexual organ seem charged with a twofold nationalistic/sexual symbolism that creates a nightmarish atmosphere for the fragile, tiny bride. This intimidating environment is underlined by the distressful presence of a camouflaged grasshopper and an owl, symbols, respectively, of the plague associated with ethical torment in traditional Christian iconography, and a nocturnal, rapacious bird, which, according to Aztec mythology, symbolized death and hell. They are part of the macabre game in which the only outsider seems to be the bride. The exposed fruit seeds, traditional symbols of life’s continuity, might allude to Kahlo’s obsessive suffering in regard to her own infertility. Let’s recall that, according to Christian dogma, sex without a procreative purpose is synonymous with sin, torment, and death.

The bride doll not only refers to Lamba or even to Kahlo herself but, at a more universal and profound level, to all women. Like the paintings of the unhappy brides by Costa and Izquierdo described earlier, Kahlo’s work demystifies the illusions surrounding marriage and weddings while exposing some of life’s many cruelties that display themselves before the bride’s frightened eyes. As often occurs in real life, this bride is considered a doll, a beautiful toy that can be manipulated easily by the larger and more powerful fruit and animal characters. These symbols of male dominance remain completely insensitive to the female’s feelings and are ready to mortify and destroy her with the force of their unleashed, selfish powers. The pun implied by the painting’s genre, which in Spanish is “naturaleza muerta,” or dead nature, and the bride, who traditionally is said to come to life through marriage, is in itself highly provocative.

Frustrated Motherhood was another theme women artists treated. Motherhood is one of the most enduring paradigms of womanhood in Mexican culture. Images of motherly goddesses appeared frequently in Pre-Hispanic and Vice-regal times and continued to evolve. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, personifications of the motherland, metaphors for the purity of the Indian race, and genre paintings representing the daily life of the poor reinforced the maternal iconography which characterizes Mexican culture.

In 1936, Mexico’s first General Law of Population was sanctioned to stimulate needed demographic growth. Correspondingly, popular entertainment media began to glorify the image of the virtuous and prolific Mexican mother. Books, movies, and art works, including Rivera’s murals, celebrated motherhood as synonymous with womanhood.

Painting was one of the few arenas in which women could carry out a self-analysis of the array of maternal experiences, and Mexican female artists managed to deconstruct one of the most pervasive paradigms of womanhood related to immaculate and idealized motherhood. They bespoke of the anguish and contradictory feelings implied in the real experience—the often tragically unfulfilled or frustrated experience of maternity so rarely acknowledged by society.

A woman’s strong impulse to have babies is a natural human experience but not mandatory. Gender socialization, and in particular the maternal instinct, is reinforced through the use of pink clothes, bows, and dolls for girls, from early childhood. When as an adult, someone does not fulfill those deeply imprinted gender stereotypes, her sense of self-worth is questioned, and, in some cases, her gender identity, too.

Frida Kahlo’s famous painting Me and My Doll (1937; Fig. 2), depicts a self-portrait of the artist seated on a rustic, child-size straw bed beside an articulated naked bisque doll with characteristic red cheeks, inlaid eyes, and modeled hair. The artist provocatively holds a cigarette with her right hand. She stares at the spectator with an intriguing grimace. According to Kahlo’s biographer, Hayden Herrera, when the artist painted this self-portrait she must have recently experienced another miscarriage because the theme was reiterated several times during that year. In an earlier study, I related the painting to Diego Rivera’s father’s bizarre tradition of giving Diego’s mother a doll after every stillbirth that she experienced, a tradition that the muralist probably continued with his own wife, Frida, following her numerous miscarriages. Regardless, the doll clearly alludes to the baby that Frida wanted yet could not have.

The cigarette, an obvious phallic symbol, may refer to a girl’s penis envy complex, famously described by Sigmund Freud, whose works Kahlo had read. According to psychoanalytic theory, girls later on in their development replace such obsessions by their desire to have a child with their father, which...
symbolically allows them to fully identify with their mothers and with the female gender as such. Kahlo’s mature awareness, after so many unfortunate pregnancies, that she could not have a child, and, therefore, that she could not fully identify with her mother or with womanhood, might have caused her to revisit an earlier stage of her psychosexual development as a child and to reconsider her bisexual identity in adult life.

Rosa Rolando’s The Girl of the Doll (1943; PL 3) relates to Kahlo’s work at different and interesting levels of interpretation. Born Rosemonde Cowan in Los Angeles, of Scottish and Mexican descent, Rolando was a professional dancer in New York, where she performed in 1916 for the Morgan Dance Company and later for the Music Box Revue created by Irving Berlin. It was in New York, in the early 1920s, that she met Miguel Covarrubias, by that time an acclaimed caricaturist, and later an illustrator, painter, amateur ethnologist, anthropologist, and dance promoter. They married in 1930 and began traveling all over the world, documenting the various customs of places they visited: Europe, Cuba, Bali, and China. By the mid thirties, they had settled in Mexico and become central figures of the Mexican artistic milieu along with Rivera and Kahlo, Dolores del Rio, Antonio Ruiz, Roberto Montenegro, and Carlos Chávez, among many others.

Rolando and Covarrubias had been introduced to Kahlo and Rivera in New York in the early 1930s by Nickolas Muray and had since become good friends. They shared their political allegiance to the left (although the Covarrubiases were never as actively militant as the Riveras), and a strong interest in Pre-Hispanic and Mexican popular art that led them to become important collectors in both areas. Also both couples were childless.

In Rolando’s painting, a serious little girl, dressed in pink and bejeweled with a pink hair bow, is seated on a typical “equipal” chair, symbol of the ancient Mexican culture. She holds a tanguyu doll, made of clay in Zapotec, a kind of toy usually given to children as gifts on New Year’s Eve. These dolls are generally dressed with the characteristic tehuana costumes of the area, and hold babies in their arms and baskets of fruits, and were originally given to Zapotec girls along with child-size kitchen utensils. Since colonial times, tanguyus also began to include horsemen toys for boys, with stylized shapes, typically painted white with some sketchy brushstrokes in blue, red, yellow and green, much like the one depicted in the painting sitting at the little girl’s feet.

The tehuana dress, a well established symbol of the independence and strong character of the Tehuantepec woman, was adopted in real life by both Kahlo and Rolando, becoming one of their most characteristic attributes. As Terri Geis has pointed out, the tehuana doll depicted by Rolando also displays the united eyebrows, one of the most iconic signs of her friend Kahlo. In regard to Kahlo’s Me and My Doll painting, the doll theme in Rolando’s work suffered an important transmutation, since now Frida herself has become the doll.

Geis has also pointed out that in this painting, “Rolanda closely follows a theme and style developed by Diego Rivera in images such as Modesta (1937) in which young, often indigenous children with wide, almond-shaped eyes and thickly rounded bodies—and often holding toys—are celebrated as the purest embodiment of the Mexican nation.”

Such a clear allusion by Rolando to Rivera’s iconographic tradition of children holding traditional Mexican toys and other popular craft items such as rebozos and petates, transformed by Rolando’s original inclusion of the Frida doll, could be considered within the context of the theme of motherhood, that undoubtedly preoccupied both women.

In Rolando’s painting, the theme of the socialization of young girls through their early adoption of pink bows and dolls, so characteristically alluded to by Rivera in his easel paintings, was unusually transformed. The barren yet forceful tehuana Frida doll, symbolically dressed to visually and unmistakably express her independence and pride, became the highly unusual doll held by the Zapotec girl. The implication was perhaps to state that, since the indigenous girl this New Year’s was going to play games other than motherhood, she may very well grow to fulfill a completely new and different paradigm of womanhood.

The horse and guitar-playing rider tanguyu depicted in the painting might also play an important symbolic role. His hat identifies him as a “charro,” the typical peasant with a pistol on horseback, a recognized sign of the stereotypical “macho” Mexican culture and its emphasis on masculinity, bravery, sexual potency, and physical aggressiveness. Because of its diminished size and “toy-like” connotation, his placement at the girl’s feet, as if offering her a serenade, bespeaks humorously of the positive prospective of changing gender roles in Mexican society according to Rolando’s progressive views.
One of the earliest, most intriguing and influential paintings, which initiated the deconstruction of the traditional paradigm of motherhood, was Frida Kahlo’s *My Birth* (1932; Fig. 3). Usually acknowledged as an autobiographical work related to both the artist’s recent miscarriage in Detroit and her mother’s death, the scene depicts the unsettling image of Frida’s imagined birth as she emerges from her mother’s dead body, covered by a white piece of cloth reminiscent of a burial shroud. The highly peculiar birthing scene is enigmatically presided over by a representation of the Mater Dolorosa. The opposition between Frida’s visible face and her mother’s covered one; the bodiless portrait of the Virgin and the faceless portrait of Frida’s mother; the act of giving birth and mourning; the empty dedication scroll and the enigmatic presence of the religious image, greatly problematize the traditional iconography of motherhood.

In an earlier study of the painting, I suggested that Kahlo’s fruitless attempts to become a mother, and, therefore, to continue the life and meaning of her own mother as a progenitor, did not allow the artist to psychologically reconcile herself with her mother.\(^\text{39}\) The painting has also been interpreted as symbolically representing Kahlo’s birth as a painter, as if her biological inability to procreate was at the origin of her drive to become an artist.

The simply framed, traditional Mater Dolorosa image and the embroidered pillowcase are the only ornaments within the otherwise sober room, furnished only with a rustic wooden bed. Given the horrifying scene taking place, the religious image, more than a protective function, seems to act as a symbolic foreteller of the many pains endured by Kahlo throughout her life, beginning with the most terrible one, her unfulfilled wish to become a mother.

A painting with some interesting parallels with *My Birth* is Maria Izquierdo’s *Consolation* (1933; PL 4), a highly mysterious work. In another austere room, a weeping woman lies on the ground, naked, covering her invisible face with her hands, while another nude female approaches to cover her with a white cloth, reminiscent of Kahlo’s shroud. Behind her is a truncated reddish column, its cylindrical shape echoing that of the trumpet played by a winged cherub standing on the frame of an ambiguous window/picture.

Geis points out that “in keeping with the period’s nationalist rhetoric, Izquierdo’s painting was regularly read as deeply reflecting the authentic Mexican spirit.”\(^\text{40}\) Additionally, she says that the painting can be related, together with other works by Izquierdo from the same period, to the depiction of the destruction brought by the Mexican Revolution, and that it “may allude to the experiences of women,” rhetorically asking herself whether “*Consolation* depicts some profound heartbreak or grief.”\(^\text{41}\)

Also noted by Geis, the spread-legged position of the reclining woman could relate the image to childbirth, while the shroud-like appearance of the white cloth and the angel relate to the theme of death. Based on some of the parallels that exist between *My Birth* and *Consolation*, I believe that the missing key to decoding the hidden meaning of this enigmatic picture may be a miscarriage or a premature infant’s death.

Replacing Kahlo’s Mater Dolorosa is Izquierdo’s cherub, often used in Christian iconography to symbolize innocence. As God’s little messengers, cherubs usually escort the deceased to heaven, sounding the trumpet or horn to announce the Final Judgment. Angels and cherubs are typical of Mexican popular art and culture, loved and reclaimed by Izquierdo in most of her paintings. The column, which reappears in other works by Izquierdo, may allude to the male presence, or in this case, because of its truncation, to a man’s absence and lack of support.

**Infant Deaths** was another “unspeakable” theme related to the dramatic aspects of frustrated motherhood. Newborn mortality transcends social and economic barriers; however, in underdeveloped countries such as Mexico, particularly during the 1930s and early 1940s, the rate was particularly high. Extreme poverty and endemic social violence along with inadequate nutrition, sanitation, education, access to advanced medical technology, and prenatal and postnatal care were among the causes that increased the number of such tragedies. Once again, the personal, which originated the representation of infant deaths by Mexican female artists, is filled with social and political resonances.

In Mexico and other Latin American countries with similar cultural backgrounds, the theme of infant and child deaths had a well-established iconographic tradition, known since colonial times as “la muerte niña.” The genre derived from popular religious beliefs according to which infants who died after
being baptized became little angels. Because their deaths implied their glorious entrance to Heaven, these children were not supposed to be mourned but celebrated instead, through joyful mortuary rituals. During the vigils, the "little angels" were dressed in beautiful clothing and surrounded by an abundance of colorful flowers that anticipated Paradise, where they were going to live forever. Painters and photographers were hired by the parents or families to record their last, glorious images. Among the Mexican School painters’ memorable traditional images in this genre are Kahlo’s *The Deceased Dimas* (1937)\(^4\) and Olga Costa’s *Dead Child* (1944), as well as David Alfaro Siqueiro, *Dead Girl* (1931), and Juan Soriano’s *The Dead Girl* (1938).

In spite of the spiritual relief offered by Christian dogma, the grief over losing a baby is one of the most intense and painful experiences that a human can suffer. These contradictory feelings, aggravated by a general intolerance of grief that characterizes contemporary society, makes the sadness even more difficult to overcome. Some artists consciously separated themselves from the established iconographic tradition and conveyed a more intimate and dramatic sense of the unsustainable pain involved in an infant’s death.

Isabel Villaseñor’s untitled wood engraving (1934; Fig. 4) is a moving image on this theme. At its origin is, once again, a personal tragedy, in this case, the premature death of Villaseñor’s and Fernández Ledesma’s first baby, documented to have occurred the same year in which the unsettling image was created.\(^4\)

Using simple yet persuasive formal means, Villaseñor expresses her desperate response to her infant’s death. The nakedness of both mother and child and the emptiness of the space around them emphasizes their vulnerability. Through their continuous, curvilinear silhouettes and the rhythm established between the concave and the convex shapes of both figures, Villaseñor stressed the unity that remains between mother and child in spite of the cruel separation inexplicably imposed by death.

As in Izquierdo’s *Consolation*, the mother dramatically covers her face with her hands, unable to hold her infant’s tiny body. Though not wanting to look upon the devastating image of her dead baby, she can still feel the child, who is falling away from her motherly lap. The broken diagonal line in the middle ground accents the physical and emotional plummet of the drama. The sense of profound pain and impotence are heartbreaking.

Aurora Reyes’s *Women of war* (1937; Fig. 5) takes a different approach, relating in both content and style to the artist’s passionate political commitment and conscious regard for the social/political function of art.\(^4\) As a member of the Communist Party and of LEAR, Reyes supported the Republicans, and her painting clearly relates to some well-known Spanish posters on the theme of infant deaths, such as “Criminales.” Featuring an expressionistic image in which a desperate woman holds the dead body of her child while screaming “Criminales,” the poster was created by the international branch of the *Socorro Rojo* brigades and the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista). Reyes’s painting might have been intended to serve also as political propaganda in favor of the Spanish Republic.

![](image)

Fig. 5. Aurora Reyes, *Women of war* (1937), oil on canvas. Photo: CENIDIAP/INBA. Biblioteca de las Artes, CENART (México).

The wretched mother holding her dead child in her right arm recalls the religious iconography of the Pieta, although her angry gaze and strong-willed posture belie any sign of Christian resignation. Rather, an extraordinary rage seems to incite her—and everybody who dares to look at the scene—to fight for justice. Her infant is an innocent victim of war, and with the rifle in her other hand, she is ready to go to battle. One has no recourse to a natural death, but one caused by war is inadmissible. The grieving mother, having lost her beloved child, has nothing more to lose. Because she knows better than anyone else that those terrible things should not occur, the grieving mother goes to war to prevent it from occurring again.

Frida Kahlo entered this realm of the “unspeakable” through her unusual and shocking depiction of the lifeless image of the unborn baby she lost in 1932. In *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), she portrays herself nude, alone, and hemorrhaging blood on a cold, unfriendly hospital bed. Objects with scientific appearances and organic elements with more or less openly sexual symbolism accompanied the very odd depiction of the fetus she had just lost.\(^4\)
Gender Violence, a serious and seemingly endemic social problem in Mexico, manifests itself in a multitude of ways, from verbal and physical domestic abuse to discriminatory punishments for equivalent transgressions committed by men or women, sexual harassment, rape, forced prostitution, even murder. Although seldom used as subject matter for artistic works produced by male Mexican artists, with the emergence of newspapers of the times, the reporters reduced the punishable deviances from the traditional paradigm of the virtuous wife. In particular, the moralizing message was made explicit in the corridos of the same title, whose lyrics clearly exemplified the pervasive machismo.

In particular, the moralizing message was made explicit in the corridos of the time, in which the criminal was exalted to hero status. Some of the lyrics related to gender violence explicitly justify the male's criminal outbursts as an almost mandatory response provoked by women’s allegedly provocative behavior. According to this perspective, murder was simply the punishment that any respectable male was due to impose on any woman who showed independence from male authority, particularly in regard to her sexuality. The moralizing nature of the corridos made the genre particularly dangerous, since it helped spread the highly pernicious gender biases and characteristic violence of Mexican society.

Isabel Villaseñor, who was a singer, composer, and connoisseur of corridos, engaged in dialogue with the genre in some interesting engravings in which she managed to expose the brutality of the murderers and the dramatic outcomes of their dreadful acts. Her La gúera Chabela (Chabela the blonde) (1929; Fig. 6) was inspired by the popular corrido of the same title, whose lyrics clearly exemplified the pervasive machismo. In particular, the moralizing message was made explicit in Chabela’s last agonizing moments, when she has assumed her “guilt” and advises young girls not to live like she did so as to avoid her tragic end. The famous last stanza, which summarizes the popular belief that one dies according to the life one lived, was handwritten by Villaseñor as the epigraph of the print, which she dedicated to Ledesma, her husband.51 Villaseñor’s image focuses on the victim’s mourning family, challenging the message of the lyrics in a significant way.

Chabela lies agonizing, her eyes closed but still beautiful and intact, with no visible signs of the brutal shooting she has suffered, according to the lyrics. Consciously, Villaseñor beautified the victim’s death, thereby eliminating the dubious undertones that in the corrido had led the woman to her tragic death. The victim is peaceful, surrounded by her grieving parents and siblings, subtly evoking the mourning scenes characteristic of Christian iconography. By stressing the emotional pain of the mother, who holds her hands near her heart, and the devastated father, who covers his face, Villaseñor overturns the corrido’s emphasis on the alleged culpability of the young female victim, and transforms her into a secular saint, a heroine, a tragic emblem of the capriciousness and cruelty of gender violence.

Elena la traicionera (Elena the traitor) (1930; Fig. 7) was based on another popular corrido, which Villaseñor transfigured in her visual interpretation of the theme. The engraving was produced in the same year in which the artist also worked on the mise en scene and libretto of the original corrido with Ledesma and Graciela Amador.52 In her engraving, Villaseñor depicts the tragic moment when Elena’s husband, Benito, having proved the unfaithfulness of his wife with the Frenchman don Fernando, is ready to kill her with a machete. However, the isolated image, removed from the context of the complete lyrics, pictures only the brutality of the femicide. The enraged husband is represented as the stereotypical Mexican male, complete with sombrero charro, bolero jacket, tight pants, and leather boots. In contrast, Elena wears a simple white dress, the color traditionally associated with purity, beauty and goodness.
background, another woman witnessing the tragedy gestures dramatically, her angularity contrasting with the victim’s rounded forms and calmer attitude. A dislocated frame in the background echoes the disorder and violence of the scene.

A real femicide, of the type alluded to in the corridos, inspired Kahlo’s painting *A Few Small Nips* (1935), specifically a newspaper crime report that a drunken man had stabbed his girlfriend twenty times. When interrogated by the judge, he defended himself by stating that he “only gave her a few small nips.” The absurdity of the man’s self-defense, written across a delicate banner held by two doves, contrasts with the bloody scene depicted. The victim lies naked on a bed with her body pierced by the fatal wounds. Her blood spills onto the bedclothes, the floor, the shirt of the murderer who still holds his weapon in one hand, and even onto the painting’s frame, which was purposely pierced to emotionally amplify the “small nips.”

Even though Kahlo stated that she painted the scene “because in Mexico, killing is quite satisfactory and natural” and because of her empathy with the murdered victim, for she herself had come close to being “murdered by life,” the painting goes well beyond these autobiographical references. Implicit is her strong opposition to the moral biases assigned to the violent deaths of women, her protest against the unfairness of the social dictates used to justify gender violence. The empathy she experienced is not just personal; rather *A Few Small Nips* is highly political, since it denounces femicides in an open, bold, and persuasive way, uncovering male brutality and self-indulgence.

In *Attack on the rural teacher* (1936; PL 5), Aurora Reyes represented the heartbreaking murder of a female teacher at the hands of two mercenary assassins. The fresco painting, a deeply moving representation of gender violence, was inspired by an actual event that occurred when the mural cycle of the Centro Escolar Revolución was being planned. On March 29, 1936, a Sunday:

> [I]n the village of San Felipe Torres Mocha [later renamed Ciudad González] in the state of Guanajuato, some parishioners emerged from mass armed with stones, sticks, and pistols, and attacked the county cultural mission’s celebration at the plaza, attended by teachers, peasants, and children. The newspapers reported that at least 16 people were killed during the assault and another 25 were seriously injured.

Through well-thought-out compositional tools, Reyes was able to transcend the specific historical event, transforming the tragic femicide into a symbol of capitalist exploitation and its characteristically unequal patriarchal order. The clear identification of the female victim as a rural teacher forcefully prevents the manipulation of the assassinations that were common in the newspapers reports.

Although best known for her naive portraits, sensuous still lives, and surreal circus scenes, during the 1930s María Izquierdo created an intriguing group of works on the theme of women’s slavery and torture (PL 6), which generally has been overlooked in scholarly studies on the artist. To decode the deeply personal and profoundly disturbing symbols Izquierdo used, it is necessary to consider possible personal and artistic motivations to express grief in such an enigmatic way. Chronologically, the series corresponds to the painful period in which Izquierdo had just broken up with the well known painter Rufino Tamayo, after four years of an amorous relationship. Stylistically, the group has been associated by Terri Geis with Surrealism and, particularly, with the possible influence of Antonin Artaud, a French Surrealist writer and a friend. Luis-Martín Lozano points out that the series elaborates on Izquierdo’s earlier iconographic circus repertoire but with a new, conceptual, and highly enigmatic approach that can be related to the preoccupations and anxieties Izquierdo experienced as a woman. Furthermore, Lozano points out that the group is original, with no equivalent in the history of Mexican art.

The watercolors and gouaches in this group have a series of common elements that Izquierdo combines in different arrangements that, within a ritualistic environment of the type evoked by Artaud in his different texts on the Tarahumaras, denounce the historical abuse of Mexican women. The “mythical landscapes” where the scenes take place are characterized by wide, deserted spaces where barren hills enclose deserted valleys, subtly recalling the characteristic Mexican geography of the Tarahumaras region. Crescent moons and the sun recall the sexual symbolism clearly expressed in some pre-Hispanic rites of sacrifice. Jacques Soustelle points out, for example, that according to an ancient Teotihuacan tradition, men were sacrificed to the sun and women to the moon. Christian iconography, influential in several of Izquierdo’s paintings, possibly reflected this symbolism because of its traditional association of Christ with the sun and the Virgin Mary with the moon.

The sacrificial mood of the paintings is reinforced by the depiction of enslaved women, shown nude or partially clothed...
The artistic dialogues established by these Mexican women artists through their paintings and engravings responded to a widely justified personal and political need to depict women’s feelings in a new, straightforward, down to earth way. Many times, when faced with thorny and cruel human experiences, particularly when they result from difficult conditions suffered by women in patriarchal society, silence is culturally imposed. Certain themes and feelings are judged as so horrible and unnatural that they are tacitly classified as “unspeakable.” Purposely ignored and silenced by society, women have no option but to suffer alone and in silence. Isolated from each other, and consequently inclined to believe their pain unique, an abnormal deviation from the natural norm, their tragic experiences become even harder to cope with.

To paint became the channel that these artists managed to open in order to publicly acknowledge and consequently share some of these traditionally “unspeakable” themes and feelings. Through the conformation of their unusual iconographic repertoire, filled with mutual references to each other, they were able to realize that their terrifying experiences and feelings were not unique, bizarre deviations of proper womanhood but, on the contrary, very natural—desperate—responses to cruel experiences aggravated by the silence that surrounded them. Through the mutual discovery and painterly acknowledgment of their shared sufferings—which extended to other experiences such as suicide, illness, isolation, and much more—they were able to come out of their shared alienation and begin to mitigate their pain.

The unmistakably biographical traces that appear in these works should not diminish their universal value. On the contrary, by their brave decisions to paint the unspeakable, these women transformed the subjective into strong public statements. The iconography of the unspeakable denounces some of the multifaceted restrictions and arduous social pressures exerted against women and, at the same time, it sustains the right of free expression and women’s rights. Confirming one of the most important feminist slogans of the early Women’s Liberation Movement, that “the personal is political,” Mexican women artists made clear that even the most subjective and intimate experiences are influenced by social and political causes, and through their artistic works they called for social and political change.

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NOTES

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1. Raquel Tibol gives Villaseñor’s date of birth as 1909, although other sources state that it was 1914.
2. Other well-known painters such as Remedios Varo (1908-63), Leonora Carrington (1917-), Alice Rahon (1914-87), and Angelina Beloff (1879-1969), and photographers such as Kati Horna (1912-2000), arrived in Mexico after World War II.
3. An important exception was “Kahlo’s Contemporaries, Mexico: Women: Surrealism,” the exhibition curated by Dawn Ades and Valerie Fraser, Oct. 3 - Nov. 5, 2005, at Essex University Gallery in the United Kingdom.
4. For a detailed study of the women’s rights movement in Mexico, see Anna Macias, Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).
5. After this failed attempt, Mexican women’s right to vote was not granted until 1958.
6. See Macias, Against All Odds...
7. María Izquierdo was amorously tied to Rufino Tamayo. Those married included Frida Kahlo to Diego Rivera, Isabel Villaseñor to Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Olga Costa to José Chávez Morado; Rosa Rolando to Miguel Covarrubias, and Lola Cueto to the sculptor Germán Cueto. Aurora Reyes was the exception, although she was married briefly to the writer and journalist Jorge Godoy. It is interesting to note that even today, in dictionaries and books on Mexican art, in the biographies of women artists, it generally states to whom they were married, but in the case of male artists, the wives are omitted.
8. Izquierdo and Reyes, two of the most professional artists of the group, lived independently most of their lives. Both were married but later had to financially support themselves and their children.
9. For example, Isabel Villaseñor, particularly following her appearance as María in Sergei Eisenstein’s film “Qué viva México” (1931), became a frequent model for painters including José Chávez Morado, Angelina Beloff, Fernando Leal, Juan Soriya, Alfredo Zalce, Olga Costa, Raúl Anguiano and Frida Kahlo, and for photographers such as Edward Tissé, Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Lola Álvarez Bravo. Rosa Rolando was painted by Miguel Covarrubias, Diego Rivera and Roberto Montenegro, and photographed by Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Nickolas Muray, Carl Van Vechten, and Man Ray.
10. The archive of Rosa Rolando’s photographs at the Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, has several images of Rosa acting in theater and films such as “Aloma of the South Seas.”
11. The puppet company Espiral, under the direction of Lola and Germán’s children, Mikeya and Pablo Cueto, is still active today, continuing the family tradition.
12. Kahlo ironically once said, “I never knew I was a surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was … I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration.” quoted in Hayden Herrera, Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 254.
14. Sergio Pitol concluded that in the painting “nothing definitely means anything,” since “it is just painting, and even though perhaps Olga Costa did not know it when she painted the work, it is that coherence among the gratuity which keeps conferring actuality to the painting,”
See his Olga Costa (Guanajuato: Artistas de Guanajuato, Ediciones La Rana, 1998), 11-12 (my translation).

15. Martín Lozano points out that the artist rarely mentioned her mother, who had remarried, and that she hardly ever used her mother’s last name. See Luis-Martín Lozano, María Izquierdo, (México, D.F, Editorial Oceano de México, S.A. de C.V., 2003), 14.

16. In a letter Frida wrote to Nickolas Muray from Paris in 1939, she described the bride doll, which she bought at the “thieves market”: “The only things I bought here were two old fashion dolls, very beautiful ones. One is blond with blue eyes, the most wonderful eyes you can imagine. She is dressed as a bride. Her dress was full of dust and dirt, but I washed it, and now it looks much better. Her head is not very well adjusted to her body because the elastic which holds it, is already very old, but you and me will fix it in New York. The other one is less beautiful, but very charming....” See Solomon Grimgberg, I Will Never Forget You... Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 23.

17. Considering that while in Paris, Kahlo became close with Marcel Duchamp, the painting could be related to his famous Dada work, The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (1915-23).


19. For a detailed study of the subject of motherhood in modern Mexican art, see my dissertation, “The Representation of Motherhood in Twentieth Century Mexican Painting,” (PhD. Diss., Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1997). In the introductory chapters I traced the origins of the genre during Pre-Hispanic and Vice-regal times.

20. Motion pictures included Madre querida (1935) by Juan Orol, Mater Nostra (1936) by Gabriel Soria, Eterna mártir (1937) by Juan Orol, La cueva vacía (1937) by Miguel Zacarías and No basta ser madre (1937) by Ramón Peón. Literary works included Amado Vicario’s Felicitaciones: alocuciones, versos, discursos y pensamientos para el día de las madres (1931); Maria Refugion Ochoa’s A las madres (1934); José Sánchez, ed., Antología de la madre: 121 poesías seleccionadas cuidadosamente (1931); Pedro Pérez Pina, Madre por derecho, novela mexicana (1935); Lydia Blanca Trejo, 10 de mayo, poemas a las madres (1936); Luciano Kubli, Madre proletaria, madre campesina (1936); Enrrique de Parodi, Madre, prosas (1937), and Nellie Campobello, Las manos de mamá (1937).


22. The doll was probably of German origin, as its features are similar to those produced by the Kammer and Reinhardt factory.

23. See my “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Tlazolteotl.”


25. Significantly, during Kahlo’s convalescence from polio when she was a child, her father acted as her primary caregiver. Throughout her life she identified with her father, a distinguished photographer and free thinker. Frida and her mother, a devout Catholic, were never as close.

26. The name Rosa Rolando was chosen for her by Covarrubias. Later, Diego Rivera drew a portrait of her, changing her name once again to Rosa Rolanda.


28. Miguel Covarrubias’s second wife, Rocío Sagáon, once stated that she wanted to have a child but Miguel refused because he did not want the child to inherit his diabetes. Mary Carmen S. Ambri, “Medio siglo sin El Chamaco Covarrubias,” Milenio, Cultura, (11 de junio de 2007).


30. Later these were popular souvenirs for various celebrations of the Tehuanetepec region, such as fifteenth birthdays, and wedding anniversaries.

31. Both women adopted the costume and were largely photographed and painted wearing dazzling tehuana attire. They also made some remarkable self-portraits as tehuanas, that although they were obviously modeled after the prototypes created by their male colleagues, also managed to confront them through the inclusion of some very significant personal attributes. Rolando was photographed as a tehuana with and without the “resplandor” or ceremonial headdress by Edward Weston and painted as a tehuana by Roberto Montenegro. She also produced an interesting self-portrait in which her tehuana image is repeated three times and accompanied by three alternating flower bouquets. Kahlo was photographed innumerable times in different tehuana costumes by Nickolas Muray and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, and she was painted as tehuana by Diego Rivera, for example in his mural Pan American Unity from 1940. Throughout her life, Frida painted many tehuana self-portraits and other allegorical works with the tehuana dress motif.


33. Ibid.

34. It is interesting to note that in some villages, among some ethnic groups of Yucatan and Veracruz, newborn babies are given miniature objects that vary depending on their sex and expected occupation.

35. See Xavier Villarrutia, “Los niños en la pintura de Diego Rivera,” in Diego Rivera, Cincuenta años de su labor artística, Exposición de Homenaje Nacional, Museo Nacional de Artes (Mexico City: INBA, 1951), 211-34.

36. Nowadays Frida dolls produced by the craftswomen of the Tehuantecpec are popular souvenirs for tourists.

37. The toy might also allude to Kahlo, since a similar horseman figure, made of “tule” or straw, was depicted in her Four Inhabitants of Mexico (1938), in which the little girl, probably a self-portrait as a child, wears a tehuana dress.

38. A similar figure appears in María Izquierdo’s Portrait of Cibeles Henestrosa, (1943, Private Collection).


41. Ibid.

42. Dimas was the son of Delfina, a woman who worked and posed for the Riveras.

43. Two years later, in 1936, Villaesnor’s husband, Fernández Ledesma, responded to the series with his own monotype known as Lullaby (Arrullo), clearly related to Villaesnor’s imagery. In 1944 a new baby arrived, Olincia Fernández Ledesma, the only living daughter of the couple. Several years later, in 1959, Fernández Ledesma painted a highly impressive image, entitle Dialogue of the Girl and Death, which very probably drew on the artist’s tragic experience.

44. From the time she was very young, Reyes was an active member of the Mexican Communist Party. From 1938 on, she held influential posts in the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza de la República Mexicana (Mexican Republic Teachers’ Union, STERM) and in the Confederación Nacional Campesina (National Peasant’s...
Confederation, CNC). She forcefully defended the rights and political participation of women.


46. The more than 400 murders of women recently committed in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, still not properly investigated by the local authorities, is one of the most shameful examples of the dramatic contemporary reality of the tragedy.

47. For example, Posada based his series Los Crímenes del Chalequero degollador de mujeres (The Crimes of El Chalequero Slayer of Women) on the murders of the serial killer Francisco Guerrero, compared in the Mexican press with Jack the Ripper.

48. Gendercide is a neologism coined by Mary Anne Warren in her book *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection* (Totowa, NJ: Roway & Littlefield, 1985), used to refer to the systematic killing of female victims, synonymous with femicide.


50. Corridos are Mexican ballads derived from the Spanish romance tradition. Particularly popular were the ones about the Mexican Revolution that served both a commemorative and didactic function.

51. The phrase was also cited as the title for a work on the subject of corridos and gender violence by Gabriela Nava, “Pongan cuidado, muchachas, miren cómo van viviendo” Los feminicidios en los corridos, ecos de una violencia censora, Revista de literaturas populares, año III, no. 2, (julio-diciembre 2003).

52. Their theatrical adaptation was musicalized by Silvestre Revueltas.


55. Ibid., p. 22


57. Luis Martín Lozano, María Izquierdo, 26-27.


Pl. 4. María Izquierdo, Consolation (1933), gouache on rice paper, 10 5/8” x 8”. Private Collection/Fundación Andrés Blaisten.

Pl. 5. Aurora Reyes, Attack on the rural teacher (1936), fresco on metallic frame, Centro Escolar Revolución, Mexico, D.F. Photo: Augustín Pimentel Mayén.

Pl. 6. María Izquierdo, Prisoners (1936), gouache on paper, 8 1/4” x 10 5/8”. Private Collection.