

NATIONAL MODERNISMS I

MEXICAN MURALISM

NOTE ON DIGITAL REPRODUCTIONS

Artworks created for public viewing are challenging to view digitally for a number of reasons:

- large scale
- intentionally modified perspectives
- not often as well documented or preserved (like works in museum collections)

What is Mexican Muralism?

- ▶ Government funded form of public art- specifically large scale wall paintings on public buildings; Need to promote national pride after the in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20)
- ▶ Created in accessible spaces (not museums)
- ▶ Visual art allows messages to be easily conveyed to people



Mural: a type of artwork created by painting directly onto a wall

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

- ▶ 1910 to 1920: civil war in Mexico as citizens revolt against dictator Porfirio Diaz
- ▶ Believed that land should be in the hands of the laborers who worked it
- ▶ Demand for agrarian reform, universal public education, health care and civil liberties
- ▶ At the end of the revolution, murals were created to promote ideas of national unity



A group of rebel women and girls wearing traditional dress practice their shooting skills for the Mexican Revolution in 1911.



ART OF THE REVOLUTION

- ▶ Iconography featuring atypical, non-European heroes
- ▶ Aztec warriors, peasants fighting in the Revolution, common laborers

Mexicanidad: movement reviving the indigenous religion, philosophy and traditions of ancient Mexico among the Mexican people.

Diego Rivera

Agrarian Leader Zapata

1931

“In this environment where everything was moving and changing, the role of the artist was not so much to engage in laboratory experimentation, but rather to collect the scraps from this ever-changing social, political, and industrial world in order to build something that made sense.” – Mexican scholar Renato González Mello



David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Dates in Mexican History or the Right for Culture*, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), 1952-56

Key characteristics

- ▶ Way to spread **visual messages to the illiterate population**, which created a new sense of inclusion and community.
- ▶ Often the messages promoted **pride in cultural and national identity**, Mexico's historical traditions or political propaganda.
- ▶ Larger scale and more impact compared to **traditional forms of advertising** and pamphlet printing.
- ▶ Although the early Mexican murals were inclined toward the favouring of socialism, they would evolve over time to portray these like the **industrial revolution**, the progress of **technology** and **capitalism** (were influenced by current events)
- ▶ Mexican muralist was an influential predecessor of today's public art. It sought to liberate the art market from its elitism and **make art accessible** to everyone.

Los Tres Grandes (The Three Greats)

Most well known artists of the muralism movement: each had a different ideology, style and subject matter, but often collaborated and influenced each other



David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera



Diego Rivera, *Creation*, the Bolívar Auditorium of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, 1922-23

Fresco: A technique of painting rapidly in watercolour on wet plaster directly onto a wall, so that the colours penetrate the plaster and become fixed as the plaster dries





Diego Rivera
The History of Mexico
National Palace, Mexico
1935

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/latin-america-modernism/mexican/a/the-history-of-mexico-diego-riveras-murals-at-the-national-palace>





Chronology: disrupts a typical narration of history as multiple events from different periods overlap one after the other

Nation-state: important moments in the history of Mexico, symbols like the flag

Pride in cultural traditions: references to the country's precolonial Aztec past

Social and economic themes: class conflict, indoctrination by the Catholic Church, struggle against foreign invaders

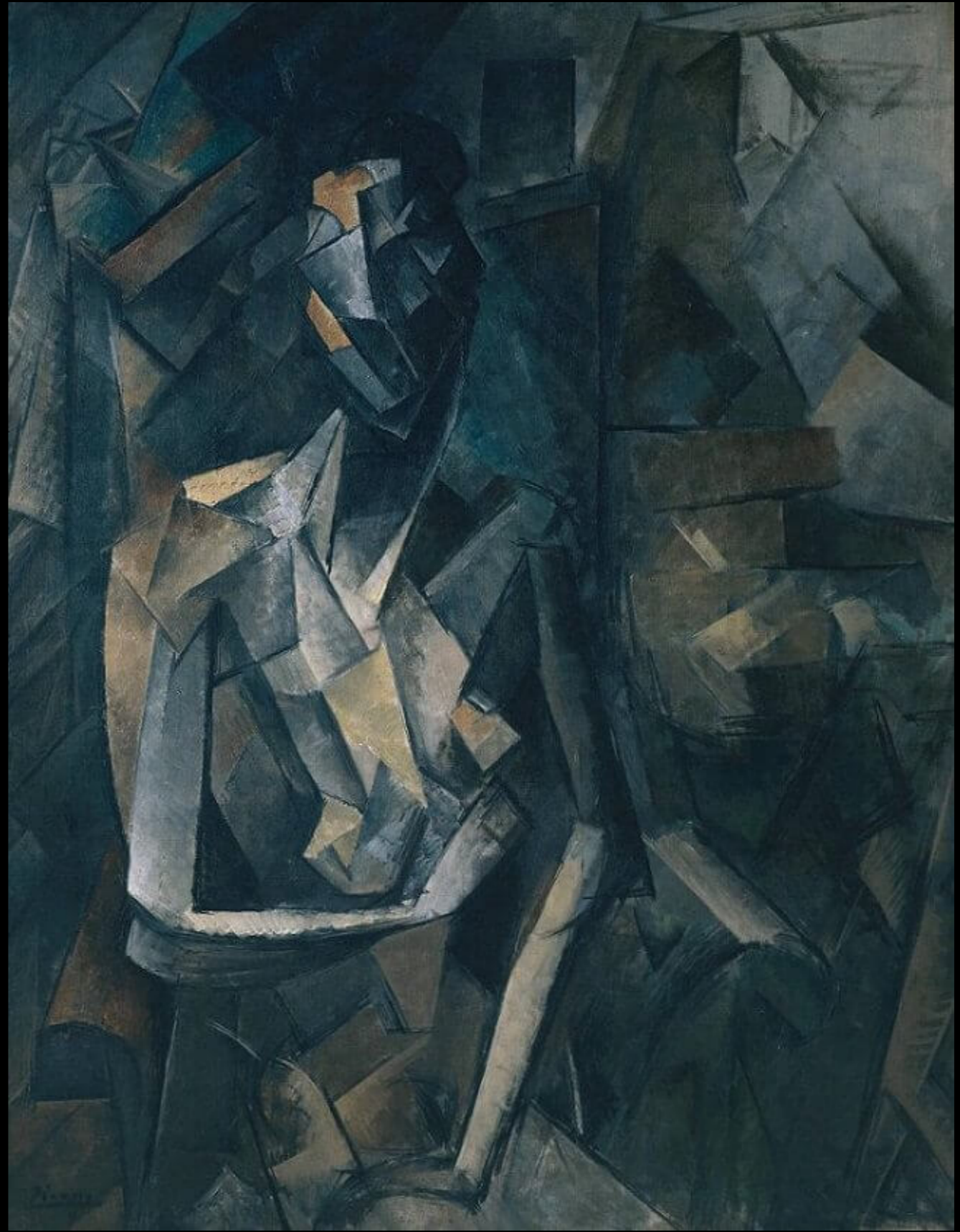




José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1926



José Clemente Orozco, *The Trench*, 1926



Picasso, *Seated Nude*, 1909



José Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1930



- ▶ Earliest example of Mexican Muralism in the US; before this murals were largely decorative
- ▶ Greek myth of Prometheus (stole fire from gods to give to humankind): message of spreading wisdom and learning to the masses
- ▶ Visual style: bold brushstrokes, dramatic figuration

José Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1930



Photograph at Pomona College, California

- ▶ Of the The Greats, Siqueiros was the youngest and the most politically radical.
- ▶ Siqueiros was an avid political activist with a tumultuous personal history; he once led a student strike against San Carlos Academy, and his more violent activities landed him in jail and, eventually, exile.



Siqueiros' works are distinguished for their use of dynamic perspective, monumental forms, dramatic use of shadow, and a limited color palette

David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Revolution*, 1957-66, Castle of Chapultepec, Mexico City



David Alfaro Siqueiros

SME mural

1939



David Alfaro Siqueiros

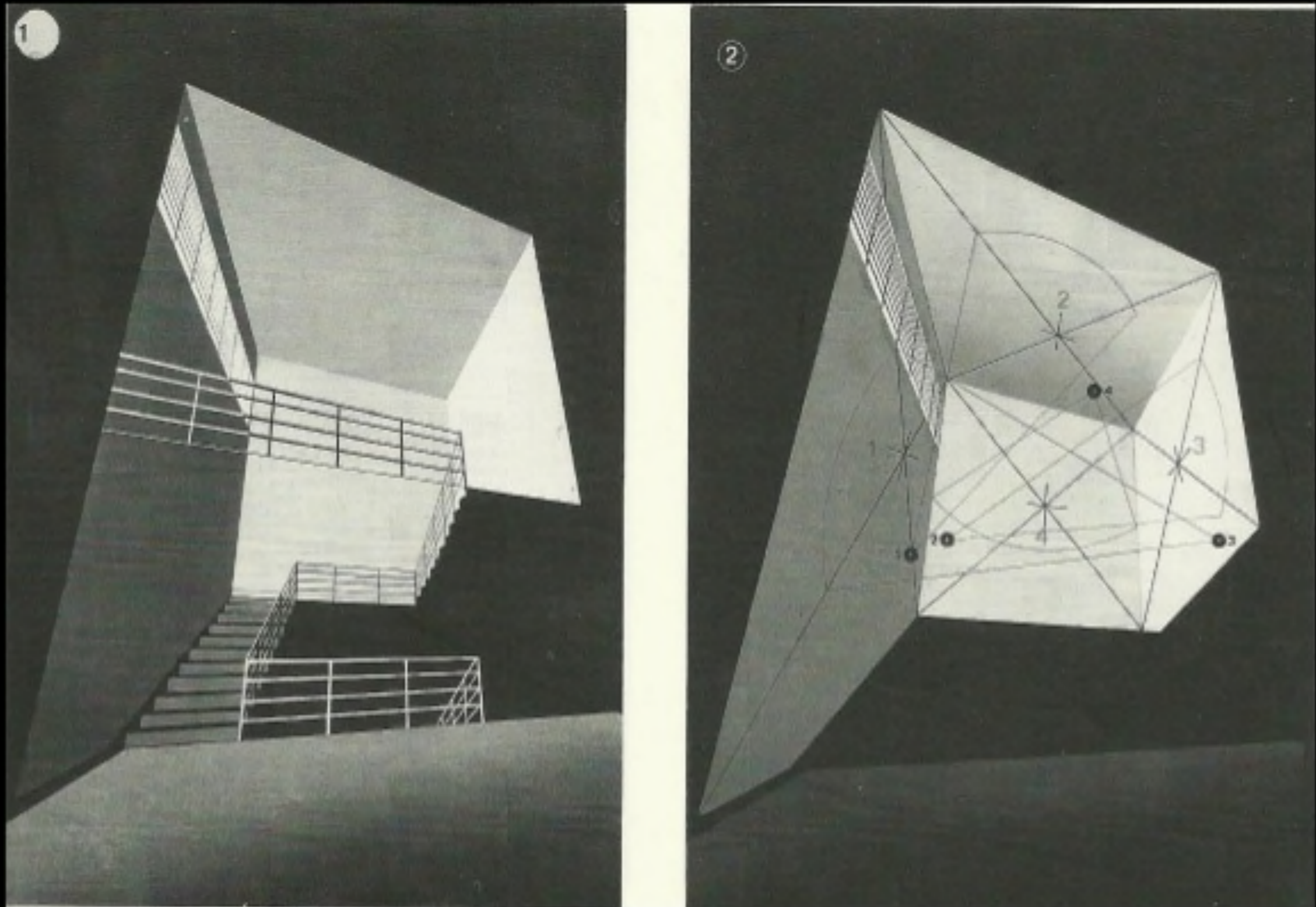
SME mural

1939

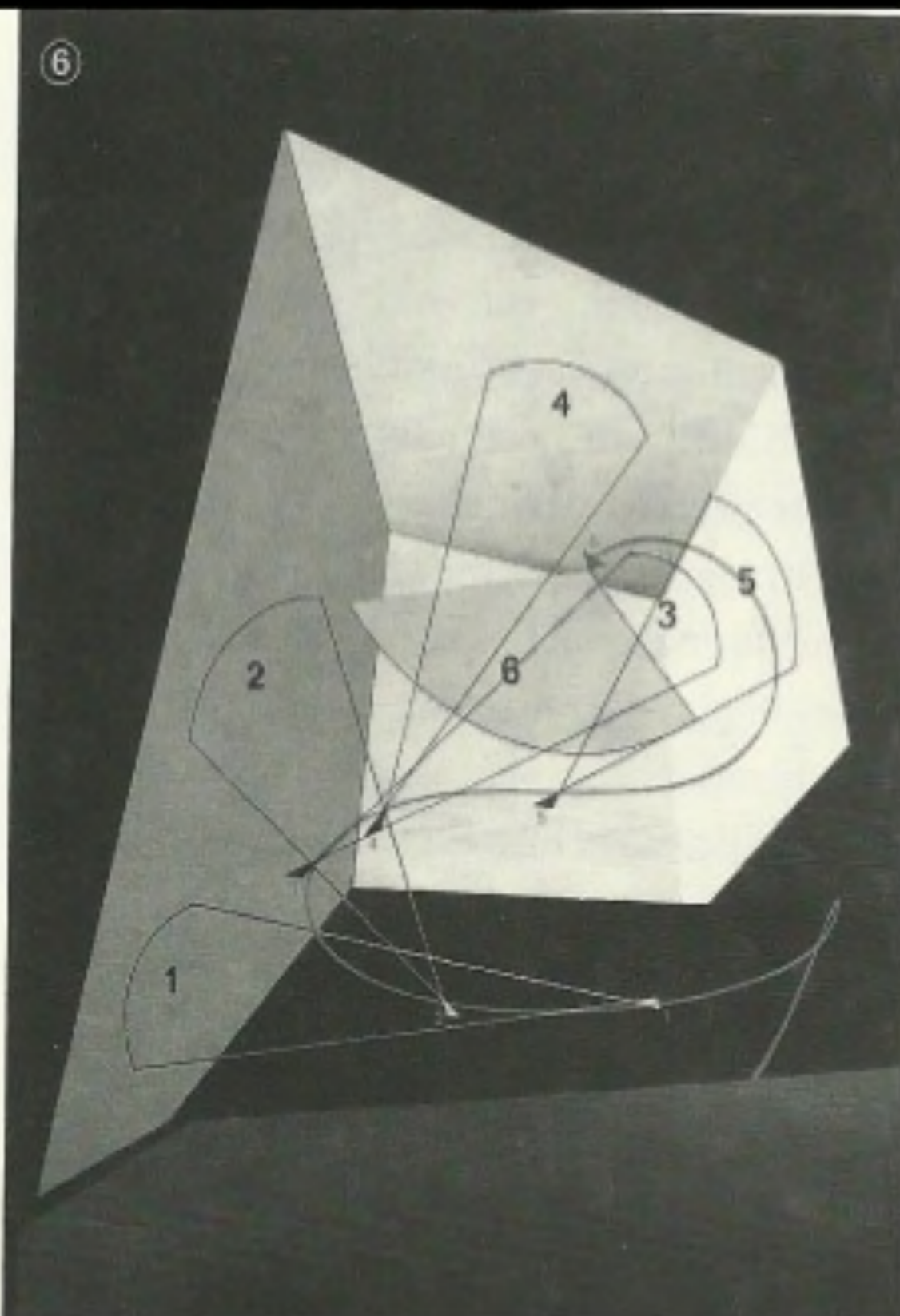


- ▶ The Mexican Electrician Syndicate in Mexico City (SME): prominent labor organization
- ▶ New headquarter was created to celebrate growth, leadership and successful strike actions
- ▶ Parrot headed leader with a torch in one hand setting fire to a temple on its right- dangers of fascism and military expansion towards the old culture of the country.
- ▶ Octopus legged machine spewing coins and blood and pinning two figures beneath its body- representation of the destructive nature of fascism and capitalism, and also the dangers of combining technology and nature infiltrated by capitalistic interests.

Siqueiros referred to this compositional technique as "polyangular perspective" : using multiple viewpoints in a three dimensional space



Portrait of the Bourgeoisie (perspective diagram of stairwell), 1939-40.



Portrait of the Bourgeoisie (perspective diagram of stairwell), 1939-40.

Questions to explore

- ▶ To what extent is art supposed to be autonomous and separated from everyday life?
- ▶ Does art that communicates a certain political message cross the line from art to propaganda, or is there a hazier area between the two?
- ▶ What does public art accomplish? If muralism is monumental and public, how do you think it functions differently than small, private works of art that are made for consumption by the art market and institutions like museums?



Modernism beyond the Los Tres Grandes

- ▶ First Mexican woman artist to have her work exhibited in the US.
- ▶ Known for her works that addressed her Mexican roots and held personal meaning
- ▶ Began to serve as a cultural ambassador for Mexico in 1944, but career hit a rough patch when she had her first stroke in the mid 1940s and also lost a large commission of murals in 1945
- ▶ Besides her paintings, Izquierdo was also well known for rebutting the Mexican muralist action and her famous quote "it is a crime to be born a woman and have talent."

Maria Izquierdo

Self Portrait

1940



Maria Izquierdo
Sorrowful Fridays
1944-45



Maria Izquierdo
Our Lady of Sorrows
1943

The works of Frida Kahlo



Frida Kahlo, *Me and My Parrots*, 1941
Banco de México



Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Thorn
Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940.

Cultural ambivalence and ancestral heritage

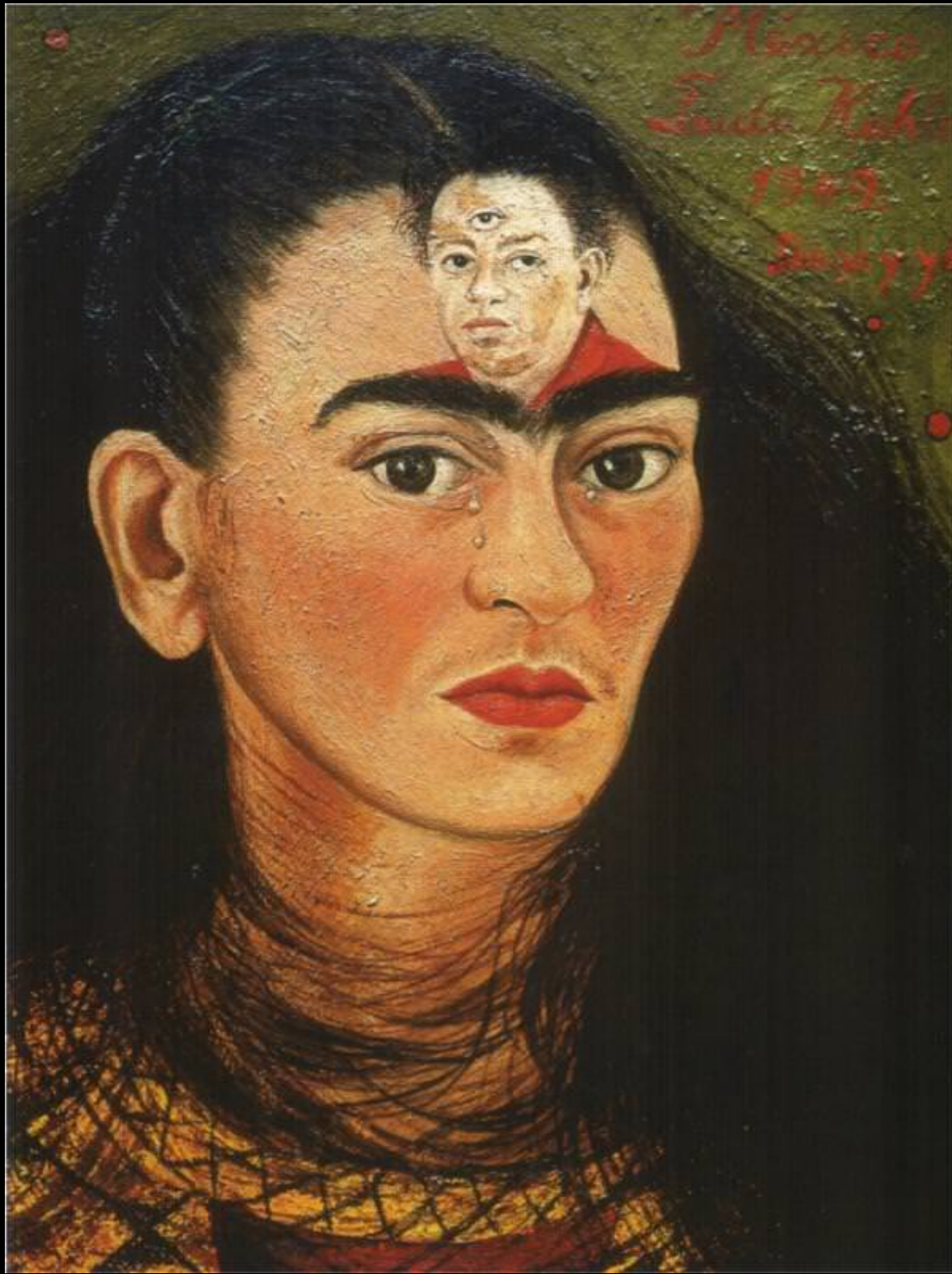
indigenismo: the ideology that upheld the Indian as an important marker of national identity

mestizaje: the racial mixing that occurred as a result of the colonization of the Spanish-speaking Americas



Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)*, 1936, oil and tempera on zinc, 30.7 x 34.5 cm
(Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico City)

Kahlo and Rivera

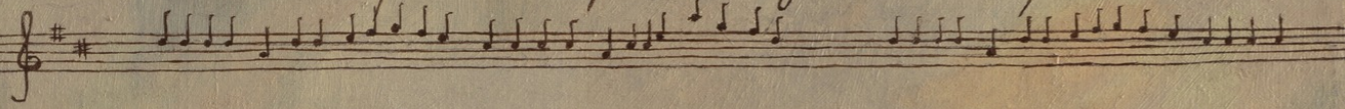


Frida Kahlo, *Diego and I*, 1949, oil on canvas



Frida Kahlo, *Frida and Diego Rivera*, 1931, oil on canvas

Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo,
Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero.

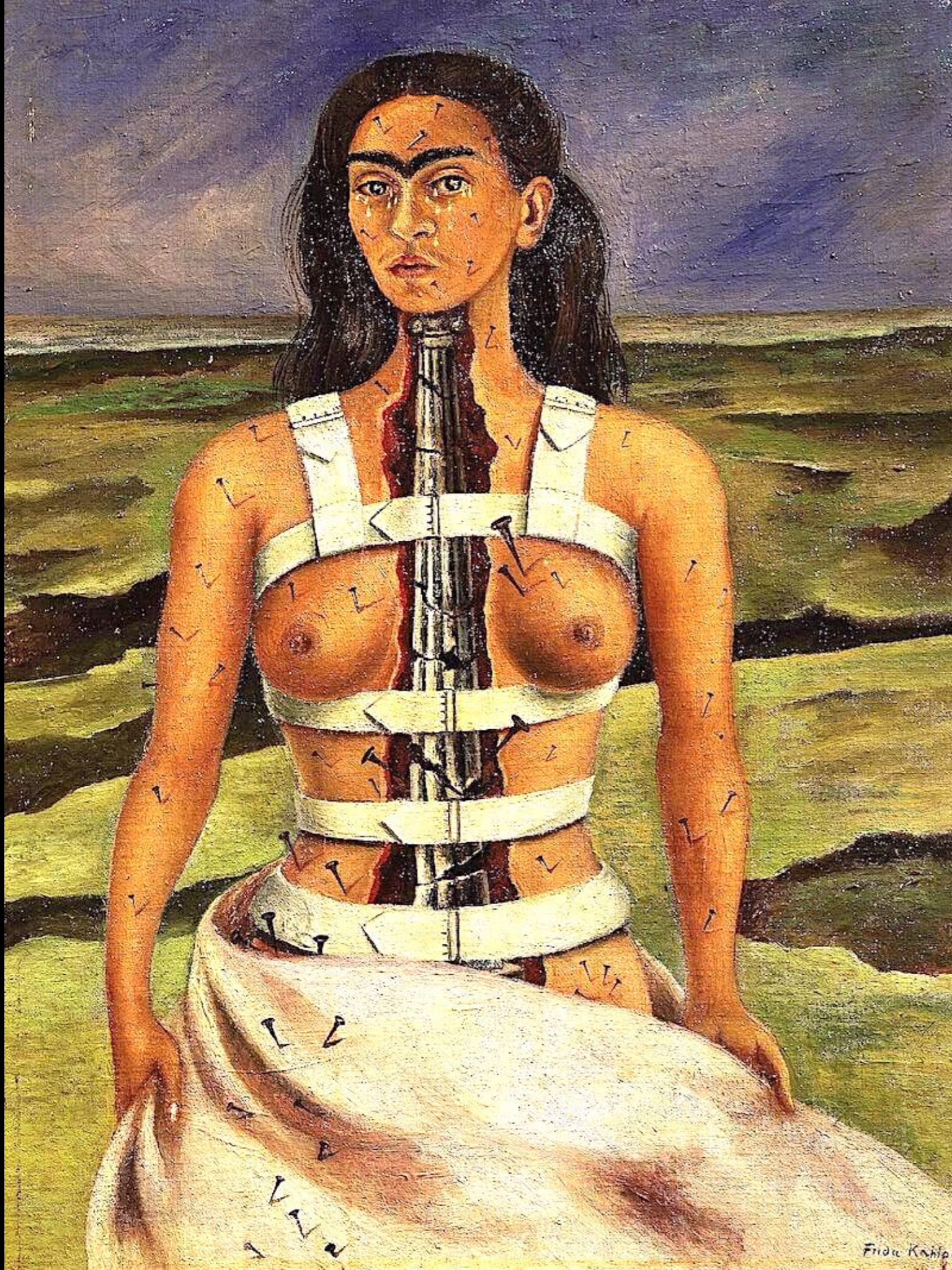


1940. Frida Kahlo.

Gender Identity

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, oil on canvas, 40 x 27.9 cm (Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico City)

Pain and Suffering



Frida Kahlo, *Broken Column*, 1944

Kahlo and Mexican Surrealism

"They thought I was a Surrealist but I wasn't, I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." -Frida Kahlo



Frida Kahlo,
Wounded Deer,
1940



- ▶ Three “key words”
- ▶ Three visual observations about her work
- ▶ Three questions that you have about her practice

Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939