

# MARÍA IZQUIERDO

*Melancholic Nostalgia*

Teresa del Conde\*



Photos by Jesús Sánchez Uribe

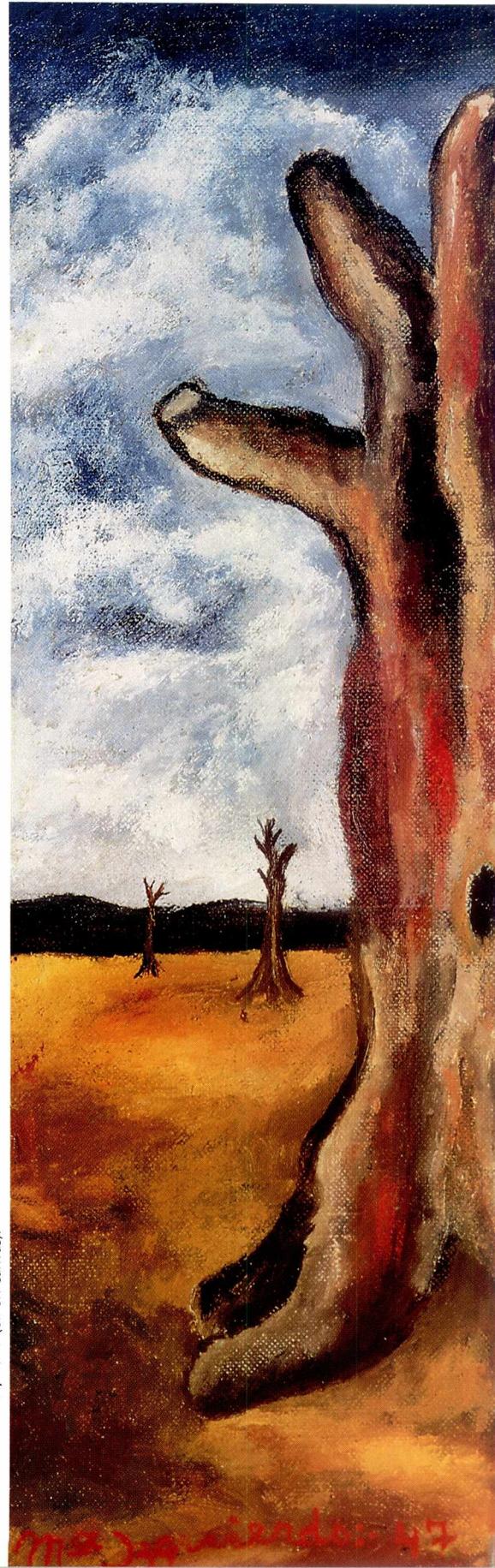
The Indifferent Girl, 1947 (oil on canvas).

\* Director of Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art .

Many of us, women and men both, are trapped gazing rapturously at the paintings of María Izquierdo, whether we are looking at the more ambitious canvases like the portrait of her three nieces, or her delicious gouaches peopled with circus characters similar to those of film makers Bergman and Woody Allen. María's works leave me with a sensation of infinite nostalgia. Despite her colors (and how very courageous are some of her orchestrations!), they often give me a feeling somewhere between melancholy and smiles. After a few moments of contemplation, I try to imagine the painter in all her different stages. A small town girl who, from the time she was born, could hear the bells of the sanctuary; the little girl who, during Lent, made her offerings on Good Friday as though they were *tableau vivants*; a precocious adolescent who met up with sexuality and perhaps violence before she became acquainted with painting; a young girl who wanted to experience other worlds defying the conventions of her time and homeland; a woman who enjoyed food, lace, the paintings of Cranach and Dürer, friends and solitude. Her splendid black eyes, liquid, shining, must have sometimes had that lost look that can be seen in her *Self-Portrait with Speckled Muslin Dress* from 1947. Was she already aware of her physical —though not moral— fragility?

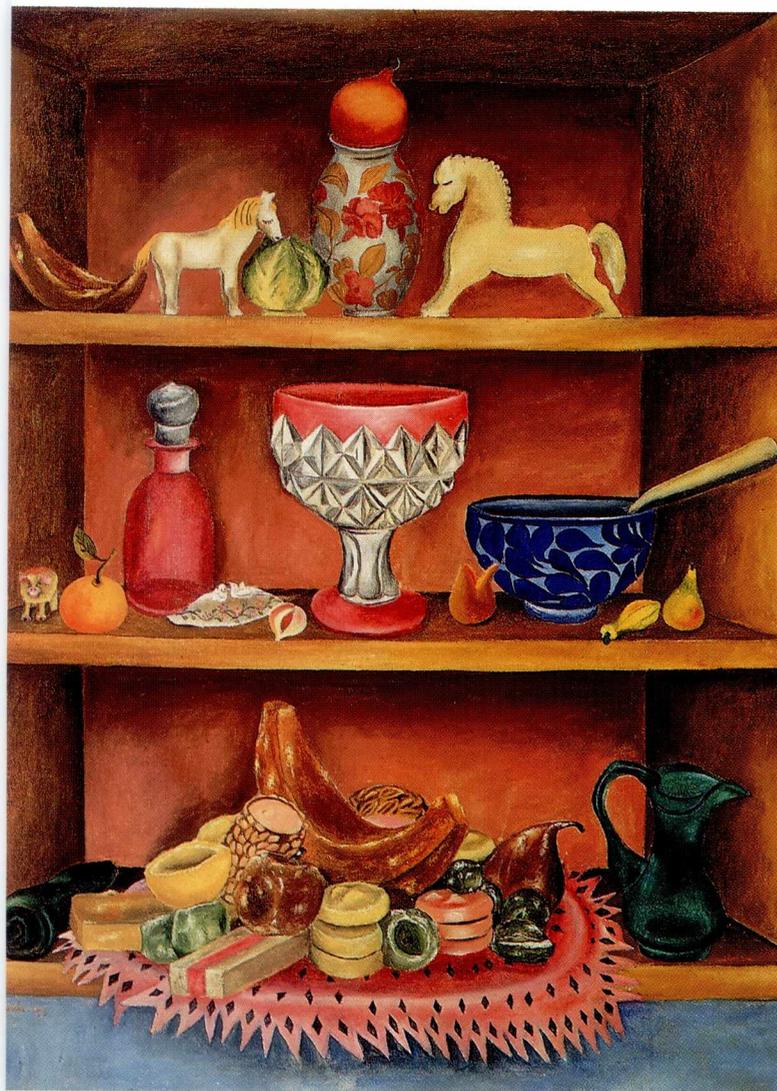
It is never a good idea to over-interpret. And yet... How can you not stop to wonder what went through her head when she painted the ominous *Dream and Presentiment*, one of her masterpieces? It is a double self-portrait. María peers through a window brandishing her own severed head like a trophy, holding it by the hair, like a triumphant Perseus bragging of his triumph over Medusa. María's severed head weeps tears that change into leaves. Swept away by the wind, they fall into an earthen jar-coffin that could also be a boat; the mast is a cross.

Heads separate from bodies are frequent iconographic motifs in her work, whether she presents them as such, as in the extremely curious *Allegory to Freedom* done in 1937, or whether they appear as strangely alive mannequins. This is the impression given by the plaster Pierrot that weeps black tears in the still life *Grown Wheat* (1940). In *The Wise Cat* (1943), the dark clay head is of a young man with painted lips and false eyelashes. The cat is attentively



The Moose, 1947 (oil on canvas).





*Cupboard with Candied Fruit*, 1946 (oil on canvas).

examining the prayer book open to what can be seen is —once again— an etching of the Cross, accompanied by symbols of the Passion. Is it the Passion of Jesus or of María, María Izquierdo, who learned to draw and write with her left hand after suffering a stroke?

Some people seem to be predetermined by their names. It is not the same being named María or being named Frida. If we observe closely, we will note that the painter from San Juan de los Lagos [María Izquierdo] did several self-portraits dressed as the eternal madonna with a child in her arms, in the Renaissance tradition.

She used many different sources of inspiration, but in contrast with painters from other latitudes, each of her paintings has an identity of its own (except where it resem-

bles Tamayo). The word “identity” is so overused that perhaps it can be better understood negatively: so, when I say “identity” I do not mean her work is uninfluenced by other painters, nor that, as Antonin Artaud thought, it has its roots in some archetypal Mexican primitivism. Her selection of motifs, the synthesis she proposed and the crafting she gave them, in my view, did not consist of completing her universe through fantasy nor reproducing “things from real life.” When did María have time to paint? She loved parties; she was preoccupied with international fashion which seemed to have entertained her considerably, although for different periods she herself gave free rein to her own very personal concept of regional Mexican dress. A friend to intellectuals and artists, she frequented the legendary Leda Salon, imposing a life-style that left its mark on many.

Octavio Paz met her when he was very young, when he returned from Spain in 1938. He used to see her in the *Café de París*, a center of Mexico City’s artistic and literary circles. As he tells it, around six in the afternoon a group would arrive headed up by a thin, nervous young man, the *enfant terrible* Juan Soriano, accompanied by Lola Alvarez Bravo, Lupe Marín and María Izquierdo, among others. Paz says, “Lupe Marín and María Izquierdo were the centers of attention because of their manner and dress. They were two very different women, physically, spiritually and in terms of their goals. María was like a pre-Hispanic goddess. A mud face dried in the sun, smoked with copal incense. Very made up, not with modern make-up, but in an ancient, ritualistic style: lips like red-hot coals, cannibal teeth; a nose made to breathe in the delicious smoke of prayers and sacrifices; violently ochre cheeks; the eyebrows of a crow and enormous circles surrounding deep eyes... but that woman with the terrible air of a pre-Hispanic goddess was sweetness itself. Timid, intimate...”<sup>1</sup>

Such is the intimacy of her paintings that they need neither apology nor superlatives. I think this is why they seduce so many collectors, both past and present. This is why, in their time, they have received the attention of Mexico’s best writers. This is why they became an obsession of Antonin Artaud.

<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, interview with Miguel Cervantes. “María Izquierdo sitiada y situada,” in Octavio Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista II, Obras completas*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1993, pp. 297-298.



*The Granary*, 1943 (oil on masonite).

María's painting (except the projects for murals, which were never executed and for which we have the drawings) was not ideological, but they certainly had meaning. A figurative painter, like almost all the artists of her generation, she unlearned the training of a venerable teacher who liked to put his models out of their time: Germán Gedovius. She was able to apprehend what harmonized with her spirit through Rufino Tamayo, with whom she had a tempestuous relationship.<sup>2</sup> She assimilated the pictorial tradition of the Western historical avant-gardes without eliminating

the air of a shack decked out in its Sunday best that can be perceived in a good many of her canvases. But we must always keep in mind that not only Mexico has shacks decked out in their Sunday best, great pink fishes covered with scales, blue seas, bare trees, dry ochre pieces of land, big-eyed little girls with shortened limbs à la Picasso who pose very seriously, chairs made of palm leaves, popular photographers, tennis rackets, masks and mannequins, always incomplete walls, small-town hand-ball courts, topped off with classical kettle-drums, rows of trees which converge in a single vanishing point, whitewashed walls. All these are Mexican, yes, but they are also typical of provinces in many other parts of the world.

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Fernando Gamboa, Chimalistac, March 1987.

She is not the only artist who has used the microcosm of the circus as a symbol for human life. She presented herself in a kind of a disguise before her well-dressed, fashionably be-hatted, chic friends. She dressed in traditional clothing and did her hair as Yalalteco women did; at the same time her canvases and drawings sported representations of “the great theater of the world,” reduced to a microcosm in which everything dear to her can be found, be it circus tent characters or a tryst of two modest lovers protecting themselves from a possible storm, internal and external, with an umbrella, watched over by a curious glossy reproduction of Botticelli’s Venus (I am referring to the 1946 painting, *The Idyll*). She painted clay corn barns, bread baked for the Day of the Dead, which were really “natural surrealism,” funnels or the telephones that Tamayo liked so much as formal and symbolic motifs, the gloves that retain the shape of the hands no longer inside them, fishes with pop-eyes, taken out of their usual culinary context and turned into enormous characters *en repoussoir*.

Put like that, it all seems senseless. Her particular ability for combining elements is what makes her paintings small dramas in which the characters are often inanimate objects. The things are there, or rather, we know that they are there; they shoot out at whoever looks at them, as though they had no other transcendental mode of existence but the one they acquire when speaking to each other.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned the fact that some of her works seem to be prescient. They are like mirages compulsively emerging from the memory. When Freud discusses daydreams, he says that the visualization of mirages superimposes psychic realities on images which materialize.<sup>3</sup> This must have something to do with telepathy. While I have never analyzed telepathy, I do know that in what we call the collective unconscious, premonitions are related to the possibility of death. The painting *The Noose* (1947), whose sinister hanging rope, dangling from a no less threatening leafless and branch-less tree, seems to warn of the danger to the little white colt, the only living thing wandering in the locale where blood is clearly suggested. Blood as a metaphor. María seems to have painted blood as a metaphor: the men-

strual flow, the blood of childbirth. For Artaud, her soul was red and “the red soul is concrete and speaks.”<sup>4</sup>

María spoke of a dark and unjust past in which she makes the entire feminine sex a co-participant. However, she struggled unceasingly against the subjugation that her condition as a woman imposed. In her painting, she left constant evidence that she took full responsibility for her femininity, at the same time that she put it to the test in her professional life; that is why her madonnas always weep. In her own words, “It is a crime to be born a woman. It is an even greater crime to be a woman and have talent.” This opinion is taken from her memoirs and quoted by Olivier Debroise in his excellent 1988 essay on María. However, Debroise also says quite correctly that there is no cause/effect relation between her life and her work. “The biographical elements do not explain everything, *of course* [my emphasis], but do allow us to situate the character and clear up some unconfessed influences and motives [otherwise kept] in the dark.”<sup>5</sup> When María Izquierdo wrote those words, she had just received a definitive show of support: that of none other than Diego Rivera. Was it the case that María could not completely tolerate her status as a woman painter because she was not born a painter, but made?

The same thing happened to Frida Kahlo, the inevitable reference point, although we know full well that her posthumous universal enthronement is due to the combination of her autobiography, her painting and her being a woman-painter-of-note. María Izquierdo’s case is not so spectacular, although she may well have sought the same thing unconsciously.

She was made of earth and water: that you could see in the very color of her skin and in the colors she favored in the early part of her career. “Throughout her pictorial career, María Izquierdo changed her palette from dark earth colors to an

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Sueño y telepatía,” *Obras completas*, José Luis Etcheverri (trans.), Vol. XVII, Amorrortu, Buenos Aires, 1979, p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, “El alma roja,” Paris, 1937. Quoted in Carlos Monsiváis’ introductory essay to María Izquierdo “La idolatría de lo visible,” Casa de Bolsa Cremi, Mexico City, 1986, p. 21. Bibliographical research by Luis Mario Schneider.

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Debroise, “María Izquierdo,” in *María Izquierdo*, Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, A.C., Mexico City, 1988, p. 27. Olivier Debroise on p. 49 of this book says that it is a good idea to emphasize “the strange tension that comes out of the uneasiness caused by the unwanted loss of innocence and its automatic complement, nostalgia, a desperate effort to find the ideal form...”



Apples, 1947 (oil on canvas).



*The Wise Cat*, 1943 (oil on masonite).

explosion of contrasts very similar to those on textiles, ceramics or multicolored tin work,” says Raquel Tibol.<sup>6</sup> And it is true that she sometimes returned to natural tones, like when she painted a kneeling, imploring, resigned, potent woman (all these things at once), in the 1945 canvas where she personifies the Earth. She is the Earth, but she is also the forever turbulent sky, this time with no horizon.

I think we should not forget that imagination is our means of interpreting the world, but it is also our means of forming images in the mind. The images we form are not separate from our interpretations of the world, but as Mary Warnok has quite correctly seen, “They are our way of thinking about the objects of the world.”<sup>7</sup> However, the imagination is also educated, particularly in the case of an artist. The painter builds an analogy of his or her own mental vision and, even in representational painting like María’s,

the object painted no longer works as an analogy for the scene. I am thinking of the painting of the indifferent, bored little girl dressed in pink with an enormous squash in front of her and a multicolored balloon rising in the sky behind the veranda, glimpsed through open French doors. Here, there is an unreal collection of completely familiar objects, even though their combination may be unusual. María’s work holds the sensations, the memories of a childhood that she never overcame, but it also undeniably contains what is going on in her artistic surroundings: metaphysical architecture, sped-up perspectives, rudimentary sketches of clay nativity scenes common to the festivities before Christmas (in Spanish, the *posadas*, also the last name of her first husband, a soldier-cum-journalist). They also contain the reminiscences of what other painters were doing, not only Tamayo, but also Rodríguez Lozano, Picasso, Frida Kahlo, Juan Soriano...

Is María classically Mexican as Diego Rivera thought? What is “classically Mexican” exactly? It is what people want to understand as such. It is not what filters down through

<sup>6</sup> Raquel Tibol, “María Izquierdo y su dispuesta realidad” (catalogue of a María Izquierdo exhibit), Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Warnok, *La imaginación*, Juan José Utrilla (trans.), Fondo de Cultura Económica, Col. Breviarios no. 311, Mexico City, p. 340.

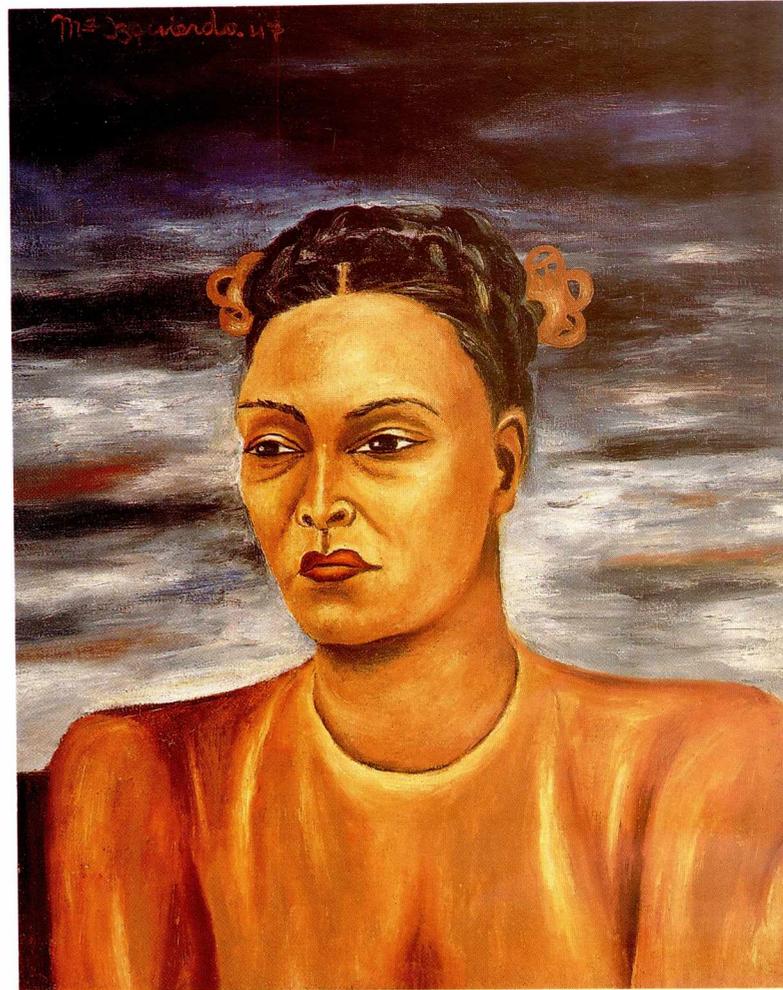
nationalist polemics; there has not been one “national reality,” but many. For example, Juan O’Gorman is one of the great exponents of iconographic nationalism, but pictorially he is completely alien to that non-existent Mexican essence that so many critics, museum directors and exhibit curators try to see in our country’s art between 1921 and 1955 (just to pick chronological limits). For María, “Mexican-ness” consisted in finding something to hold on to that allowed her to channel her both regional and contemporary sensibility.

“Women who want to be painters (in María Izquierdo’s time) will be greeted by macho wrath,” said Carlos Monsiváis.<sup>8</sup> Patronizing apologies of women’s qualities abound in every era. But, though feminine to the bone, as a painter, María was an artist first. Not a few women artists do adopt a feminine or feminist stance even in their work, but I do not believe that this was María Izquierdo’s case, even if she did paint groups of women or emphasize the paraphernalia of femininity. We are dealing here with iconography, not a stance vis-à-vis painting. I do not think that it had to have been *a fortiori* a woman who painted the jewelry box with the pink-trimmed open black umbrella, the pearl necklace and the high heeled shoe. Also, her cupboards are similar in composition to those of Arrieta. Her aforementioned difficulty with drawing, not to be equated with clumsiness, is a deliberate way of placing figures in a space. It is a constant in her style, and if the word style is appropriate for anyone, it is for María. With multiple variations, her style fitted in wonderfully with the broad mosaic of the so-called Mexican School.

Neither do I see in María Izquierdo the *naive* painter that Artaud wanted to preserve at all costs. I see rather more of that in Abraham Angel, for example, but since he did not live very long, we cannot know how he might have evolved.

María’s immanent world transcended her moment by far. We can look at her conch shells—as we would, to pick an example, with those of Alfonso Michel—and see something different, something beyond what they represent. María’s gaze, her ideas, her pulse, the externality of her internal world come from a spirit which is neither simplistic nor easy. Perhaps it could be said that she was affected by things absent as though they were present. That is what the poet thought. **W**

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, “María Izquierdo. La idolatría de lo visible,” Casa de Bolsa Cremi, Mexico City, 1986.



Self-Portrait, 1947 (oil on canvas).

### MARÍA IZQUIERDO IN THE MODERN ART MUSEUM

An exhibit of the best work of María Izquierdo opened in Mexico City’s Modern Art Museum October 31, and will run until January 27, 1997. It had previously been presented in Chicago’s Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum from May until September 1996. Luis-Martín Lozano, curator for both the Chicago and Mexico City shows, made a careful selection of her work using both thematic and chronological criteria. The exhibition presents 74 pieces, including oils, watercolors, photographs, personal belongings and documents of the artist.

## MARÍA IZQUIERDO (1902-1955)

Born in San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco, in 1902, María Izquierdo moved to Mexico City in 1923. In January 1928 she began her studies at the National School of Fine Arts and continued at the Academy of San Carlos until June 1929. At the time a debate was raging about what aesthetic and pedagogical values were valid for teaching the arts, particularly painting. María's teachers included Germán Gedovius and Manuel Toussaint, although she was most profoundly influenced by Rufino Tamayo who, among other things, introduced her to the world of watercolors and gouache.

She had her first individual show in 1929. In his introduction to the small catalogue, Diego Rivera, at the time director of the School of Fine Arts, described her as one of the most attractive personalities of Mexico's artistic milieu and one of the academy's outstanding students. The following year she exhibited portraits, landscapes and studies in the New York Art Center, the first Mexican woman to have a show in the United States.

María Izquierdo transformed and channeled the influences from modern and avant-garde currents into a style of her own. Her paintings, inspired in folklore and Mexican motifs, sometimes become surrealistic. They are concerned with ordinary things and have a primitive style based on simple, vigorous lines and vibrant colors.

Izquierdo's vast work includes oils, watercolors, drawings, wood prints and etchings. She is known for her notably expressive use of color, her handling of volumes and space and the recurrence of certain themes, like the circus, horses, cupboards, portraits of women, and the street scenes, houses and gardens of a vague and poetic town, a town much like many throughout Mexico.

She exhibited in the most important museums and galleries of New York, Buffalo, Hollywood, Santiago de Chile, Guatemala and Panama, as well as in Rio de Janeiro, Lima, La Paz, Bombay, Paris and Tokyo. Several of her paintings are hung in important museums and private collections in Mexico and abroad.

She was a teacher at the School of Plastic Arts of the Public Education Ministry and a founder of the House of Artists of America. She was also a member of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists.

Her work was interrupted in 1948 when she was struck with a hemiplegia that paralyzed the right side of her body. Although this did not completely stop her from working (she continued painting with her left hand) the disease eventually killed her in 1955 when she was preparing her paintings for a retrospective showing and planning a trip to Europe.

Critics of the 1940s called her work "ingenuous," "spontaneous," "primitive," "naive," and "classically Mexican." However, contemporary critics agree that these adjectives do not adequately describe her work, and this has led to its reexamination. In 1964, the Year of Plastic Arts in the State of Jalisco, she was the only woman whose name was included, together with 17 other artists, in the wall of Guadalajara's monument to painter José Clemente Orozco.

**Note:** Information from *La Enciclopedia de México*, Volume VIII, Enciclopedia Britannica de México, Mexico City, 1994, p. 4397; Luis Martínez Lozano, *María Izquierdo, Sobre la moderna pintura mexicana*, catalogue of the María Izquierdo Exhibit (English-Spanish edition), The Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, Chicago, 1996, pp. 20-55; and "María Izquierdo, 1902-1955," Modern Art Museum Press Release, October 1996, Mexico City.