

Florence Arquin: A Woman Lost in History

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Abstract: When reflecting on key advocates for Latin American studies and art within the U.S. educational system, a few illustrious figures are often immediately invoked: César Chávez, the celebrated civil rights activist; Judy Baca, a distinguished artist, activist and professor; and perhaps most iconic of all, Frida Kahlo, whose enduring influence permeates both cultural and academic discourse. These individuals are widely acknowledged for their transformative contributions to Latin American studies and art. However, one name that seldom receives recognition in this intellectual domain is Florence Arquin. Although she was not of Hispanic or Latinx descent, Florence Arquin was very much a pioneer for Latin American studies between the 1930s and 1960s, using her influence to bring important cultural works to middle-American high schools and colleges. Arquin worked tirelessly to dispel the reductive stereotypes of “cuteness” and “curiosity” that were often ascribed to Latin American cultural artifacts and instead was determined to elevate their academic and artistic merit. This passion for Latin American culture would eventually lead to her most noteworthy project—the Kodachrome Slide Project of Latin America—where she traveled across various Latin American countries capturing life and culture through her photography in hopes of using the project to boost the interest of Latin American studies. Born in New York in 1900 to Russian immigrant parents, Florence Arquin had followed in her family’s footsteps and originally studied medicine before leaving the discipline altogether after her brother died from a contagious illness he contracted by a patient. She turned her focus to art, and by 1933 started her schooling at the Art Institute of Chicago. This would lead to her becoming an art teacher at Libertyville High School, a local high school in a suburb of Chicago, while simultaneously holding the role of administrator for the Federal Arts Project from 1935 to 1940. During this period, she collaborated with the Art Institute of Chicago where she developed educational programs (for secondary school students) that focused on Latin American art and architecture. She consistently advocated for increased visual materials that highlighted the cultural contributions of various Latin American countries, constantly submitting proposals and requests to the board and administration. In the early 1940s, she traveled to Mexico to further her study of painting. Her time spent in Mexico would result in her first solo exhibition in Mexico City where she would become very close friends with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and would later use her photography skills to document the artists’ daily life. Her photos of Kahlo are still among the most readily reproduced and can be found on the Google Arts & Culture platform. Shortly after her exhibition, Florence’s most noteworthy project would come to light—the Kodachrome Slide Project of Latin America. Between 1945 and 1951, Arquin traveled extensively through Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and other various Latin American countries capturing photographs of the countries’ landscapes, architecture, and cultural expressions. From 1951 to 1955, she toured various parts of Mexico and the U.S. with the slide collection, showcasing her work. These projects were part of an effort to provide educational institutions with visual resources to support the study of Latin American culture and history. In 1961, she initiated a similar project, securing another grant to expand the

collection by documenting additional images from her travels to Latin America, Spain, Portugal, and various European countries. Altogether, these two projects resulted in a collection of over 13,000 color slides, and 25,000 slides altogether, offering a rich visual archive of the diverse cultures and geographies of Latin America and Europe. Before her death in 1974, Florence would use her time to promote her slide projects while also writing a biography on the formative years of Diego Rivera. The overall intention of this project was to shine a light on a figure in history whose work made large contributions to art history, visual arts, and Latin American studies but whose name is seldom mentioned when referring to any of the mentioned fields. Over the summer my time was spent combing through (virtual) archives uncovering documents on Florence Arquin's life that date from 1923 to 1985. The documents housed her most noteworthy works but also found various documents such as, but not limited to, biographical material, personal correspondences between her and her close friend Frida Kahlo, writings, teachings, project files, printed material, photographs, artwork and scrapbooks that were all filled with intimate details of what her day to day looked like between the 1930s and 1960s. Because her archival collection consists of 18,346 images (digitized documents) I was unable to explore the collection in its entirety. Once finished with the collection, I hope to have a better understanding as to why a young woman born to Russian immigrant parents was so persistent in bringing attention to Latin American studies and art during the early twentieth century.