

Transnational Modernism and Artistic Innovation: A Comparative Synthesis on Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo

Ezmo Flowers

The transnational, cross-cultural modernist movement emerged around the turn of the 20th century, reflecting social, political, and cultural changes. Across different contexts, from late Imperial Russia to Mexico's revolutionary period, revolutionary ideas fueled artistic change, innovation, radicalism, and critical reflection. Artists Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo exemplify this shift through their art, lives, political involvement, and legacies. Goncharova faced the turbulent transitional period of late imperial Russia, marked by tensions for change and revolution. Although she was pessimistic about the imperial government and the constant shifting expectations for women, she carved her own path within her evolving art. Kahlo was born during the years preceding the Mexican Revolution of 1910. She saw the rise of radical ideas, nationalism, and pride as Mexico moved to break free from the oppressive regime of President Porfirio Diaz. Mexico also underwent a period of change and became a major hub for cultural exchange. These cross-cultural exchanges and migration connected nations fueling revolutionary ideals and introducing Marxist theories to Mexico.

Natalia Goncharova, a leading figure of the Russian avant-garde, was born on July 3rd, 1881, into a minor noble family in the late imperial Russian province of Tula where she engaged with peasant life. Her father worked as a mathematician and architect while also relying on the family estate. The family relocated to Moscow where Goncharova began her attendance at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in 1901. She initially studied sculpture; however, she developed a strong passion for painting noting she loved, "the play of light and the

harmonies of color"¹ The artist established her distinctly unique Russian artistic identity by incorporating popular *lubok* prints, folk art, religious iconography, and Eastern and Western influences into her works. She became a central figure in Neo-Primitivism along with her partner Mikhail Larionov whom she met at the Moscow school. Goncharova co-founded radical art groups Jack of Diamonds and Donkeys Tail and pioneered Rayonism, an abstract style defined by the interaction of light rays and linear forms. In 1913, Goncharova was the first female artist to have a solo retrospective in late Imperial Russia, challenging gender barriers and employed the tactical public stunt of face painting for public attention and engagement. The artist and her partner Larionov emigrated to Paris, France due to the outbreak of World War I and the October Revolution of 1917. While living in Paris she had a significant role in set and costume design for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes further asserting her artistic vision. Goncharova and Larionov were legally married on June 2, 1955, to secure inheritance rights for the works of art they created. Goncharova continued working on painting, exhibitions, and designs despite having arthritis until her death in 1962. She left behind a diverse collection of works that was a true encapsulation of Everythingism, a term coined to describe her artistic expression.²

Frida Kahlo was born in Coyoacan, a neighborhood in Mexico City on July 6, 1907, to German immigrant photographer, Guillermo Kahlo, and Matilde Calderon, an Indigenous and Spanish Mexican woman. Kahlo actively engaged with nationalism, socialist ideals and the Marxist movement that accompanied the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Later she claimed that 1910 was her birth year as it aligned with her activist beliefs. Kahlo experienced medical trauma, she

¹Natalia Sergeevna Goncharova, *Natalia Goncharova: Between Russian Tradition and European Modernism* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz), 2009.

² Goncharova, *Natalia Goncharova: Between Russian Tradition and European Modernism*, 141-143.

caught polio as a child which weakened her leg, and she survived a severe bus accident in 1926 that caused significant impact to her body. This accident left her bedridden and in recovery for an extended period forcing her to abandon her medical studies at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. Kahlo turned to painting her classmates and herself during this period of recovery influencing her turn to art as personal reflection. Kahlo's artistic expression depicted her identity, physical suffering, emotional pain and the female experience redefining modern Mexican art and its centered focus on male artists. Her style incorporates Mexican folk traditions, pre-colonial imagery, Catholic symbols, and Eastern influences. She strongly rejected the label of surrealist stating that she only painted her own reality not dreams. Her marriage with Diego Rivera was turbulent beginning in 1938 and included affairs on both sides, divorce in 1939 and a remarriage in 1940 that was strictly a partnership and nonsexual. Despite her health declining, undergoing multiple surgeries and an amputation in August 1953, she continued to paint. The same year Kahlo's art is exhibited in Mexico City at the Gallery of Contemporary Art and was her first solo exhibition in her home country. Kahlo attended the opening while lying in bed, promoting her love for art. Kahlo passed away in her home from a pulmonary embolism in 1954. The artist waited for death, her last words in her diary reflecting, "I joyfully await the exit." Frida Kahlo's home, *La Casa Azul*, became the Frida Kahlo Museum in 1958, cementing her legacy as an international cultural icon.³

The comparison of Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo critically analyzes how both artists used their creative output as a central, intersectional medium for constructing self-identity. Their art challenges patriarchal structures, gender and sexual norms, and nationalistic political identities,

³ Frida, Kahlo and Sarah M Lowe, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1995). 288-292.

functioning as a powerful avenue for resistance. These artists established themselves in the art world with bold artistic identities in male-dominated societies where women often remained unrecognized. They resisted patriarchal, oppressive government rule and male-dominated art circles while navigating and critically assessing Western influences. This study aims to address these key historical questions: How did Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo establish their place within art, politics, society, and culture? How did they use their art to challenge dominant norms and form a new understanding of identity? Furthermore, what external experiences shaped their artistic output? To answer these questions, this examination will compare their approaches across three major common themes. First, this analysis will examine their aesthetic hybridity, specifically through the context of Everythingism (*Vsechestvo*), which critically incorporates global influences and embraces fluidity within artistic expression. Second, it will examine their recontextualization and nuanced appropriation of popular, folk, and religious forms, examining how both artists redefine these cultural materials to construct a new visual language rooted in identity. Lastly, the study will explore gender, the body, and strategic performance as an avenue for asserting agencies by showing how Goncharova and Kahlo use their self-representation, expression, and physicality to reclaim the female gaze, reshape notions of womanhood, and resist patriarchal control. This study is significant because it provides a valuable analysis of the lives, work, and experiences of these artistic women and helps us understand how art remains a powerful medium to reclaim marginalized identities and the resistance against patriarchal post-colonial and post-imperial societies. The study aims to connect art history to global critical conversation about queer and gender identity, nationalism, feminist theory, and the deconstruction of patriarchal and lingering post-colonial attitudes.

Aesthetic Hybridity and the Critical Incorporation of Global Influences Within Art

Natalia Goncharova

Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the reactionary, oppressive, and violent escalations by imperial forces on Russian subjects, and increased class awareness redefined Russian modernism and the avant-garde movement. This defeat and tense period brought the critical reinterpretation of Russia's relationship with itself and the East. Artists like Natalia Goncharova turned to establish a Russian artistic cultural identity with influences from Russia, Asia, and Western Europe. Through artistic innovation and the incorporation of these elements, fluidity in artistic styles became more accepted. Goncharova's declaration of her revisionist cultural project placed her at the center of the emerging Russian avant-garde movement of the early 20th century, daring to be bold and branded a radical of her time.⁴ Although Goncharova's cultural project incorporated and balanced Eastern and Western influences. It also challenged Western dominance within transnational modernism and asserted Russia's cultural embeddedness rather than a summary of its influences.⁵ Within modern art the center of culture is in constant flux, reflecting a transitional period between the taste of the elite curated palette to the acceptance of artisan, peasant, and marginalized art forms. Goncharova's hybridized approach to artistic styles is reflected through various periods of her career. Her early work mixes French post impressionism into expressionism with Russian and Eastern primitive elements as reflected in the piece *Still Life With Tiger Skin*, 1908, first exhibited in 1910 at the Jack of Diamonds group exhibition.⁶ [Figure 1] This piece combines rich red, orange and gold colors reflective of iconographic Byzantine elements, Japanese prints, Tibetan Buddhism and *Lubki* Russian popular prints. The art displays

⁴ Jane, Sharp. *Russian Modernism between East and West, Natalia Goncharova, and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1, 20.

⁵ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 2.

⁶ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 182.

the incorporation of various influences by including a lithograph of a samurai, a classical Western style still life and a bright Tibetan tiger rug. The various elements in this painting do not compete for attention within the piece but rather establish the fluidity and parallels amongst various cultures and artistic developments.⁷ In 1908-12 Natalia Goncharova and her partner, Mikhail Larionov established their dynamic artistic relationship through their leading role within the neo-primitivist Russian art style movement, which combined the French European avant-garde with Russian primitive art forms.⁸

Goncharova's ability to reproduce an object within her art and redefine its meaning strengthened her agency, rather than a fixed linear focus on a set artistic style, she evolves within her work.⁹ The Peacock is a subject that Goncharova explores, redefines, and paints in various stylistic forms. The *Peacock*, 1910 inspired by Russian embroidery and folk art known as *vskivkin*, illustrates the red bird sprouting bright vines as feathers in contrast to a gray, background with peaks of lighter yellowish shades, while flowers grow beside it. [Figure 2] The main body of the bird is decorated with square patterns, symbolic of the rise of modernism and populated cities during transitional industrial change. The piece, *Peacock in Bright Sunlight*, 1911, draws on Egyptian art and vibrant color influences with Eastern themes. [Figure 3] The bird's symbolism differs between various cultures, but it embodies positive affirming traits like power, strength, luck, divinity, and transformation.¹⁰ Goncharova combines these traits within this powerful eye-catching reinterpretation of the bird. The embrace of various social, cultural, and political

⁷ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 182.

⁸ Olga, Furman. "Natalia Goncharova: Artistic Innovator and Inspiring Muse," In *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, edited by Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünsche, 193–206. Brill, 2017. 195.

⁹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 182.

¹⁰ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 182.

occurrences and elements shaped the art she produced. *Vsechestvo*, Everythingism, a term to describe the artist's artistic output, supports the artist's political and cultural relevance.¹¹ The piece *Harvest*, 1911, draws on Russian popular broadsheet influences, cubism, and expressionism to depict rural peasant Russian life during harvest season. The piece received gendered, negative criticism due to stylistic choices, the subject of the art and the artist herself.¹² [Figure 4] Critic Iakov Tugendkhol'd attacked the artist for highlighting the "degenerate popular culture of the city streets and black quarters" when critiquing this piece.¹³ Tugendkhol'd heavily gendered and limited Goncharova's work linking it to her defiance to adhere to societal expectations.

The artists "turn to the East" declaration asserted that Russian culture should not be viewed as a monolithic discourse. Scholar Sharp states, the embrace of the orient progressed orientalism in reverse a form of "reverse cultural assimilation" that rejected Western and European dominance within cross cultural influences and art. Through Goncharova's synthesis of various artistic styles impressionism, neo-primitivism, cubism, futurism and Rayonism, *Vsechestvo* is the embrace of pluralistic ideas.¹⁴ In Natalia Goncharova's and Mikhail Larionov's *Rayonist and Futurists: A Manifesto*, 1913 the artists proclaim, "We acknowledge all styles as suitable for the expression of our art styles existing both yesterday and today—for example, cubism, futurism, orphism, and their synthesis, Rayonism, for which the art of the past, like life, is an object of observation."¹⁵ This manifesto presents the artists' support of modernist developments within Russia and global society and positioned Rayonism as a major stylistic development within the emerging and the

¹¹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 260.

¹² Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 222.

¹³ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 222.

¹⁴ Furman, "Natalia Goncharova: Artistic Innovator," 200.

¹⁵ Goncharova, Natalia and Larionov, Mikhail, *Rayonist and Futurists: A Manifesto*.

multifaceted Futurist artistic landscape. Rayonism is defined as rejection of concrete forms created by the intersection of light rays within art emphasizing texture, depth, and color rather than a recognizable object.¹⁶ Goncharova's piece *The Weaver (Loom and Women)*, 1912-1913, uses cubism and futurist abstract techniques to comment on the impacts of urban life, industrialization, and the speed of modernity. [Figure 5] Another example of the artists stylistic flexibility is through the *Portrait of Larionov*, 1913, which presents cubo-futurist elements and Rayonist influences into a ceremonial portrait.¹⁷ The subject of the painting Larionov is reinterpreted by the abstract use of lines, light, and color rather than a binary concrete bodily form, addressing his influence and energy. [Figure 6] Through *Electric Lamp*, 1913, Rayonism displayed using white light rays reflecting off the yellow light bulbs. The piece focuses on an abstract concept of a lamp that conducts electricity and its spread of light rays through space. [Figure 7]

Frida Kahlo

In the 19th century tensions in Mexico came to a heightened point, after centuries of Spanish colonial occupation, the fight for Independence, the American and French wars, and the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. Foreign investors and United States capitalists received incentives under Diaz for the purchase of Mexico's valuable and natural resources. This drastically affected Indigenous communities and the poorer classes by providing the rich with exploitable labor all under the guise of industrialization. The result of the Mexican November Revolution of 1910 was the removal of Diaz in 1911, after years of violent conflict and an intense civil war between revolutionary factions and United States intervention. The New Constitutional Republic established in 1917 aimed to grant land reform and basic human rights to all Mexicans, equal

¹⁶ Goncharova, Natalia and Larionov, Mikhail, *Rayonist and Futurists: A Manifesto*.

¹⁷ Furman, "Natalia Goncharova: Artistic Innovator," 201.

educational opportunity, and the creation of a new united national identity. The Mexican Modernist and Muralism Movement formed and provided artist Diego Rivera with muralist work and political influence. Frida Kahlo took inspiration from this period and its revolutionary values, Marxism, a new national Mexican identity, and Eastern philosophies, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. The hybridity expressed through her art draws on radical mythological and cultural aspects, challenging ideas of purity and emphasizing inclusivity through expressive freedom. Kahlo constructed her own identity as a mestiza through the exploration of her mixed and migrant ancestry. In the piece *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* 1936, she portrays her interfaith and interracial heritage, countering German racial charts used under the Nuremberg Race Laws in Nazi Germany during this time.¹⁸ [Figure 8] The painting highlights her father's Jewish and German immigrant background by the symbolic significance of the land and sea, her mother's mixed Spanish and indigenous identity depicted by the Mexican landscape and Kahlo represented in prenatal and early developmental stages. A child version of Kahlo is holding both together with a symbolic red ribbon while standing in the Mexican soil of *La Casa Azul's* patio.

Guillermo Kahlo held a close relationship with Frida; in his letters he refers to her as “the one he loves the most.”¹⁹ Her father received an education in Germany attending the University of Nuremberg prior to his migration to Mexico. His artistic passion and career in photography landed him important jobs documenting architectural work in Mexico. He encouraged Kahlo to pursue academic and artistic paths. Kahlo notes that her father held atheist beliefs despite coming from a Jewish background and that he read a wide variety of literature.²⁰ Kahlo's relationship with her

¹⁸ Ankori, Gannit, *Frida Kahlo*. London, England: Reaktion Books, 2013, 38-40.

¹⁹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 30,35.

²⁰ Kahlo, Frida, and Sarah M Lowe. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*,288-292.

mother Matilde Calderon was often emotionally distant with close friends stating that Matilde did not fully understand Frida.²¹ However her Catholic and indigenous roots influenced themes Kahlo addresses and develops within her art. Frida states, “I have my father’s eyes and mothers body” symbolic of her artistic vision and strength.²²

Kahlo’s interfaith cosmologies reflect spiritual and religious influences and themes despite her rejection of religion due to her communist ideology.²³ Kahlo’s construction of a revolutionary identity uses Mexican national cultural identity and indigenous elements that critique colonial attitudes and capitalist values. Kahlo’s symbolic Catholic, Indigenous and mixed European heritage is depicted in the piece *My Nurse and I*, 1937.²⁴ [Figure 9] In the painting, Kahlo is nursed by an indigenous woman who was hired by Kahlo’s parents to provide milk for Frida once her sister Cristina was born. The wet nurses face covered with a Teotihuacán funeral mask while hold infant Kahlo addresses the disconnect, she felt and her need for maternal connection. In the work *The Two Fridas*, 1939, Kahlo explores her mestizaje as duality exposing fragmentation.²⁵ [Figure 10] Kahlo’s creation of a double self-developed as a psychological defense to help her navigate and understand emotion, physical pain and isolation.²⁶

Her time in the United States between 1932-1934 shaped her view on capitalism and its clashes with her communist Mexican values. She turned these experiences into a critique of “Gringolandia” and the inherently white racial ethnic views of the U.S.²⁷ In New York she

²¹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 25.

²² Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 32-33.

²³ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 137,148.

²⁴ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 137.

²⁵ Sutherland, Camilla, “Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation, “Indigenismo and The Limits of Cultural Appropriation: Frida Kahlo and Marina Núñez Del Prado.” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 27, no. 3–4 (2022), 80.

²⁶ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 47,49.

²⁷ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 99,102,107.

described the “indignation at all these moneybags” as those with money celebrating in excess while hunger, racial discrimination and the gap between the rich and poor increased.²⁸ *My Dress Hangs There* 1933 [Figure 11] and *Self Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* 1932, [Figure 12] are critical portrayals and critiques of the west, the alienation she felt as an “outsider” and the grief of her mother’s death.²⁹ The pieces critique U.S. capitalism by juxtaposing patriotism with slums and industrial landscapes, using newspaper clippings of workers protests and racial inequality for the collage portion within *My dress hangs there, 1933*.³⁰

Kahlo drew inspiration from Eastern philosophies like Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism by using symbols ying and yang, Karma and the third eye.³¹ In work *Self-portrait as a Tehuana* 1943 [Figure 13] and *Diego and I* 1949 [Figure 14], Rivera is shown on her forehead as her third eye or source of insight.³² In piece *Diego and Frida*, 1944 Kahlo links their marriage to Siva and Parvati depicting a hybrid unity yet turbulent relationship. [Figure 15] In *The Love Embrace of the Universe* 1949 Kahlo merges Christian, Hindu and pre-colonial Mexican indigenous imagery balancing opposites like male and female, life and death.³³ [Figure 16] Rivera is depicted as a man child with a third eye and fire which symbolizes Siva, paralleling Parvati, the Virgin Mary, and the Indigenous earth goddess Coatlicue. Kahlo’s art caught the attention of French surrealist Andre Breton when visiting Diego Rivera who claimed Kahlo’s art as surrealist. After her stay in Paris and the *Mexique* art exhibition in 1939 she later states, “They thought I was a surrealist, but I was not I never paint dreams I paint my own reality.”³⁴ Kahlo reclaimed her artistic style by advocating

²⁸ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 103.

²⁹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 103-104.

³⁰ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 104.

³¹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 140.

³² Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 141.

³³ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 144-145.

³⁴ Time. 1953. “Art: Mexican Autobiography.” *Time*, April 27, 1953.

for the deeper meaning behind her work that combined magical, religious, and spiritual imagery within her compositions. Her main technique focuses on self-portrait depiction, she states, “I paint myself because I am so often alone.”³⁵

Recontextualization and nuanced appropriation of Popular, folk, and religious forms

Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo subverted artistic hierarchies by incorporating marginalized groups and cultural art forms within modern art. The art forms recontextualized by the artists are religious iconography, folk, peasant and indigenous influences, and popular prints. Goncharova’s approach within Russian primitivism strategically used traditional, cultural, and popular forms with the goal to make art accessible to all not just the Russian elite.³⁶ This was done to make a Russian identity distinct from European influences with the peasant symbolizing a continuity between modern and rural life.³⁷ After the 1905 debates on the peasantry’s role shifted, artists started promoting folk art as Russian tradition. The Abramtsevo and Talashkino art colonies established by Savva Mamontov and Princess Maria Tenishevs revived peasant crafts and celebrated the importance of their preservation.³⁸ Goncharova brought popular prints, *Lubok* into major institutions, which transformed them into art forms taken more seriously.³⁹ Goncharova rejected Western modernism’s focus on originality and the divide between what is ornament and what is a copy.⁴⁰ In 1912, Goncharova and Larionov challenged originality by arguing that Russian art valued reproducibility over simple uniqueness.⁴¹ Goncharova incorporates these religious and folk themes into broadsheets as seen in pieces *The Passion of the Holy Martyr Saint Barbara*

³⁵ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 54.

³⁶ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 143,153.

³⁷ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 46-48.

³⁸ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 54-55.

³⁹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 153.

⁴⁰ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 174.

⁴¹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 170-171.

[Figure 17] and *Pedlars* 1912⁴² *[Figure 18]* See Appendix. Goncharova blends Byzantine Orthodoxy into Western secular imagery challenging established artistic hierarchies by incorporating national and popular themes. This radical approach led to censorship of her religious paintings, including the *Coronation of the Virgin*, 1910 *[Figure 19]* and *the Archangel Michael*, 1914 *[Figure 20]*, by the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg, resulting in a public legal battle after her 1914 St Petersburg exhibition.⁴³ Despite negative press and reception the artist would learn to use scandals to promote herself and her work.

Goncharova focuses on the rural peasant and Jewish population as subjects and address rural life, state sanctioned prejudices, alienation, and continuity. In *Gardening* 1908, *[Figure 21]* and *Peasants Picking Apples*, 1911, *[Figure 22]* the main subjects of the art are peasant women and men. Each painting focuses on the actions and labor produced by the subjects, *Gardening*, 1908, focuses on women working together to pot and plant flowers, *Peasants Picking Apples*, 1911, focuses on farm labor and cultivation. Peasant depiction and the incorporation of peasant crafts and popular art aimed to prove their crucial importance within Russian national identity and culture. Goncharova chose the Jewish population as her subject to highlight violent state-sanctioned persecution and prejudice, opposing these policies due to her anti-establishment beliefs. She critiqued antisemitic leniency backed by the Orthodox Church, Tsar Nicholas II, and imperial authority, emphasizing Jewish identity, social conditions, culture, and expression.⁴⁴ In *Jews: Sabbath*, 1912, Goncharova points to the prevention of Jews from properly observing the sabbath. In the painting, the pale complexion of a woman may reference Russian fears of race mixing due

⁴² Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 166-167.

⁴³ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 227, 238, 244.

⁴⁴ Cheryl, Kramer. "Natalia Goncharova: Her Depiction of Jews in Tsarist Russia" *Woman's Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (2002): 17-23, 17.

to violence against Jewish women during the pogroms. The muted colors Goncharova uses in these works reflect a melancholic atmosphere, reflecting what life in the Pale of Settlement may feel like. The red flower symbolizes paradise, which contrasts with the bleakness of the Pale and emphasizes the gap between an ideal world and the undesirable.⁴⁵ [Figure 23] *The Jewish Family* 1912 criticizes assimilation policy, highlighting the conflict between modernity, the in-between and tradition. [Figure 24] The painting highlights assimilation as trading one form of alienation for another represented with the women, one in traditional dress and one in modern attire.⁴⁶ Goncharova's subject focus proves that art is a medium to express and address political and social concerns.

Kahlo mestiza identity construction grounded her art within Mexican culture using religious forms as personal and political avenues of expression.⁴⁷ Kahlo integrated Christian painting styles and elements used in ex-votos and Mexican retablos into some of her more secular works.⁴⁸ The ex-voto transformed from a thank you to God into a more personal expression of life and crisis, which also built her identity and personality.⁴⁹ Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, painting is noted as her transformation into a taboo breaking artist. [Figure 25] This piece depicts her bleeding alone and crying after a miscarriage blending a new visual vocabulary using medical imagery to address the topic of miscarriage and abortion. The symbolic embodiment of *La Llorona* emphasizes grief and child loss.⁵⁰ *La Llorona* is a Mexican folk lore

⁴⁵ Kramer, "Natalia Goncharova: Her Depiction of Jews in Tsarist Russia" 18.

⁴⁶ Kramer, "Natalia Goncharova: Her Depiction of Jews in Tsarist Russia" 19.

⁴⁷ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 20-21.

⁴⁸ Sarah, Misemer. "(S)ex-votos: Miraculous Performances of the Body and Politics by Frida Kahlo," In *Secular Saints: Performing Frida Kahlo, Carlos Gardel, Eva Perón, and Selena*, NED-New edition., 17-46. Boydell & Brewer, 2008. 18.

⁴⁹ Misemer, "(S)ex-votos: Miraculous Performances of the Body and Politics by Frida Kahlo," 19.

⁵⁰ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 94-95.

figure whose grief pushes her to wander the streets near creeks and rivers searching for her dead children. It is said that you can hear her late at night crying and calling for her children. Through a nuanced perspective Kahlo subverts indigenista tropes and gender roles by centering powerful female figures which also reimagined nationhood in matrilineal terms.⁵¹ As a symbol and critic of indigenismo she embraced the ideals of nationalist identity through her personal style and art while exposing homogenizing aspects of the Mexican indigenismo movement.⁵² By doing this Kahlo challenges the eugenicist vision of mestizaje within the movement that Jose Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio pushed to establish.

In *The Love Embrace of the Universe*, 1949, Kahlo comments on male dominance in Mexican art by depicting herself as a goddess while hold Rivera who is a child. Kahlo's focus on personal narratives countered the male centric dominance of mural art.⁵³ Her art depicts Indigenous women as assertive challenging idealization and passive stereotypes. The piece *Portrait of Lucha Maria*, 1942, presents an indigenous girl as a symbol of progress and modernity, the girl is wearing modern clothing opposed to tradition indigenous dress like a huipil or rebozo and holding a toy airplane subverting gender and racial hierarchies.⁵⁴ [Figure 26] Kahlo does not objectify the female subject but keeps their bodily autonomy and sovereignty.

Gender, Sexuality, the Body and Performance

Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo strategically used self-portraits, their bodies, and public appearances as political mediums to challenge gender stereotypes, assert themselves and secure visibility within male dominated art circles and society. Goncharova's strategy

⁵¹ Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 78.

⁵² Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 79-81.

⁵³ Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 79.

⁵⁴ Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 80.

involved tactical public stunts to manage her public identity and leverage scandal to prove her key role within the Russian avant-garde movement. By doing this the artist also confronted gendered critics of her and her art. In Goncharova's art piece *Self Portrait With Yellow Lillies*, 1907-8, she asserts herself as a strong artist and challenges conventional beauty within art forms.⁵⁵ [Figure 27] The art depicts Goncharova in her Moscow studio a place where she creates and is the focal point. While challenging stereotypes Goncharova also acknowledged that embracing the orient and feminine as decorative aided in her identity management.⁵⁶ She defined her role within the avant-garde and modernism by exploring new paths within the movements and by claiming agency through a flexible artistic lens.⁵⁷ However, she often navigated gendered critiques and her legitimacy as an artist. Critics characterized her work as "typically feminine," undermining her artistic ability and framing her public stunts as "gender transgressions."⁵⁸ Her piece *Ornament*, 1911, has decorative art and critics note that the decorative elements of this piece are its key strengths. Marina Tsvetaeva an influential Russian chronicler, poet and writer looked to assert Goncharova's work beyond gendered limitations and its significance within Russian culture and art history.⁵⁹ [Figure 28]

Goncharova use of public performances, cross dressing, self-fashioning, and scandal aided in securing legitimacy for the artist. She used and leveraged media engagements, public scandals and confrontation with public debates, interviews, and her later arrest.⁶⁰ The avant-garde artists used newspapers to bring in and engage with multiple audiences. The reception of the Jack of

⁵⁵ Furman, "Natalia Goncharova: Artistic Innovator," 195.

⁵⁶ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 4.

⁵⁷ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 89.

⁵⁸ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 221.

⁵⁹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 221.

⁶⁰ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 97-100, 102.

Diamonds exhibition shows how the public and critical reviews can have consequences like scandal and arrests for artists. Artists then adapt and use aggressive strategies to influence the reception of their art and themselves.⁶¹ Goncharova's use of media and public debate shaped her impact in challenging and navigating expectations. On December 22, 1910, after the Jack of Diamonds opening, the artist was arrested for pornography and public display of corrupting pictures. This led to censorship and seizures, but Goncharova and Larionov adapted and used it to strategically promote their art.⁶² Goncharova uses dress as a performance strategy and to challenge dominant gender norms. In 1913, Goncharova was photographed in men's clothing in an asserts role with her partner, Mikhail Larionov, in a soldier's uniform.⁶³ [Figure 29] Within the avant-garde circle artistic women often cross dressed and wore men's clothing, what we in contemporary terms call Drag. Women avant-garde artists wore drag to assert their place within the rigid patriarchy and to challenge binary thoughts and limits on their capability. Goncharova, although nobly born, wore peasant clothing in public to appeal to a broader audience.⁶⁴ She also wore face paint and her own designs, which blend self-advertising and performance, appealing to a bourgeois crowd.⁶⁵ Her art *Wrestlers 1908-09*, drew inspiration from popular broadsheets, posters, and elite art in combination to appeal to a multitude of audiences.⁶⁶ [Figure 30] Despite criticism, gender, and scandal in 1913, she was the first woman and avant-garde artist in late imperial Russia to break boundaries and have solo work exhibited on a larger scale.

⁶¹ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 97.

⁶² Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 104-105.

⁶³ Marina Dmitrieva, "Transcending Gender: Cross-Dressing as a Performative Practice of Women Artists of the Avant-Garde" In *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, edited by Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünsche, 123-36. Brill, 2017, 124-125.

⁶⁴ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 57.

⁶⁵ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 230.

⁶⁶ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 128.

A second stage in her career began in Paris, 1914 with Sergei Diaghilev, a prominent art critic, creating sets and costumes for the Ballets Russes. The work displayed traditional Russian influences and her engagement with Saison Russes 1909 to advocate for the Russian orientation in art.⁶⁷ By working on the Ballets Russes in her role as a costume and set designer she established her Russian artistic identity on the performance world stage. Goncharova's role in theater, set and costume design in the Ballet Russes also established her significant role in crafting this distinctly Russian cultural identity.⁶⁸ Her stage design *The Firebird* 1926 displays the artist large scale capabilities and a unique blend of modernist and avant-garde styles giving a visual aesthetic and distinctly Russian vibe. [\[Figure 31\]](#) Goncharova evolved and adapted as she transitioned from life in Russia and the avant-garde scene to asserting her Russian identity abroad internationally while managing the challenges of exile. After the October Revolution Goncharova and Larionov made Paris their permanent residence. She lived in a crumbling building which Marina Tsvetaeva noted as symbolic to the artist's resilience and growth with the passage of time.⁶⁹ Goncharova and Larionov experienced financial difficulties during their later years in Paris. Goncharova held a close relationship with Larionov marrying in 1955 to ensure that the surviving partner inherited the other's art and estate. By remaining unmarried for most of her life she challenged traditional gender roles.

Kahlo crafted a powerful, fluid public identity through herself portraits and self-fashioning. Her mythologizing transformed her pain, personal struggles and non-conformity into resistance that confronted social, political, and patriarchal expectations. Kahlo crafted

⁶⁷ Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 2.

⁶⁸ Lowell Gallagher "Avant-Garde Lot's Wife: Natalia Goncharova and The Rebirth of Hospitality," In *Sodomscapes: Hospitality in the Flesh*, 96–125 (Fordham University Press, 2017), 100.

⁶⁹ Marina Tsvetaeva, "Natalia Goncharova: Life and Art (an Excerpt)" *Critical Flame* (Dec. 2022).

the strategic persona of *La Mexicana* utilizing self-presentation to counter invisibility and construct her own narrative when traveling with Diego Rivera and within male dominated Mexican society and art circles. The image of *La Mexicana* Kahlo's Mexican identity uses indigenous dressing and jewelry reclaiming anti-colonial and revolutionary values.⁷⁰ In Kahlo's *Self-portrait Time Flies*, 1929, she presents herself as a feminine sensual and modern figure.⁷¹ [Figure 32] The jade Aztec necklace in the portrait has a glyph for Nahum Olin and suggest Kahlo's transformation to Rivera's lover and a sexually liberated woman. Kahlo wore a Tehuana dress traditionally worn by the Zapotec women of Isthmus of Tehuantepec who are viewed as feminist and as a matriarchal utopia.⁷² Her dress strategically helped her move beyond the identity of Senora Rivera to her own artistic independent authority. Kahlo and other women with revolutionary views resisted traditional family and relationship structures creating their own paths in their relationships.⁷³ Kahlo like most women in Mexico during her time wanted to be a mother and a wife. However, in the mid-1930s due to her experiences with Rivera's infidelity she rejected the traditional gendered role of mother and wife. She actively made the bold shift from being known as the painter's wife to claiming her identity as a painter herself.⁷⁴ In 1940 her remarriage to Diego Rivera in San Francisco listed Kahlo as a painter and not a homemaker.⁷⁵

Frida Kahlo challenges gender and sexuality norms within Mexican patriarchal society by using androgyny, art, and cross dressing to reject rigid feminine constraints. In a 1924 family photograph Kahlo dresses in men's clothing asserting herself and her active role within the family

⁷⁰ Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 82.

⁷¹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 71.

⁷² Sutherland, "Indigenismo and the Limits of Cultural Appropriation," 82.

⁷³ Stephanie Smith, "Revolutionary Women in the New Society, 1930–1954." In *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 117–48. University of North Carolina Press, 2017, 122.

⁷⁴ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 124-125.

⁷⁵ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 119.

structure. [Figure 33] As Kahlo experiences turmoil within her relationship with Rivera, piece *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, depicts the artist rejecting traditional Mexican wife and feminine roles. This is further evident with the clothing worn within the painting, a men's suit, rejecting *La Mexicana* identity Kahlo constructed as the central figure to the exotic prestigious wife.⁷⁶ [Figure 34] Kahlo identified with the threatening female archetypes of Mexican Folklore. She identified with *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*, both female figures known for their tragic and controversial stories. *La Malinche* a figure known for betrayal and aiding the Spanish during the colonial conquest of Mexico, seen as a mistress and a sinful sensual Indigenous Eve. *La Malinche's* story rewritten and retold from the view of one patriarchal society to another branded her as a threat. In Kahlo's piece, *The Dream, The Bed* 1940, [Figure 35] which references Antonio Ruiz's *The Dream of the Malinche* 1939, she depicts herself as this figure symbolic of sacrifice, suffering and betrayal. [Figure 36] Kahlo counters *La Malinche* portrayal as a traitor and emphasizes her as a tragic victim of patriarchal precolonial and colonial abuse.⁷⁷

Kahlo denied adhering to a specific sexual orientation, she held close relationships with Women and Men having a fluid sexuality.⁷⁸ Juan O'Gorman argued that Kahlo was not 'bi-sexual' but rather 'Ambi-sexual' and that love including sexual love was the most prominent feature of her art, her life and her very being.⁷⁹ Kahlo and Rivera known members and associated with the Mexican communist party offered Leon Trotsky and his wife a stay at their home *La Casa Azul* after Rivera's success in petitioning for their asylum.⁸⁰ [Figure 37] Kahlo and Trotsky had a brief

⁷⁶ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 128.

⁷⁷ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 131, 133.

⁷⁸ Misemer, "(S)ex-votos: Miraculous Performances of the Body," 17.

⁷⁹ Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 122.

⁸⁰ Smith, "Trotsky in Mexico: Artists United, Artists Divided, 1930–1940." In *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 86–116. University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 92, 96.

affair in 1937 which later contributed to speculation surrounding Rivera's falling out with Trotsky.⁸¹ Frida Kahlo gifted Leon Trotsky a Self Portrait in 1937, a gesture Kahlo did often with acquaintances. [Figure 38] Kahlo's art and life reflected preoccupation with mortality and death. This was rooted in her lifelong recurring medical traumas and chronic physical suffering. Her art became a medium for coping with this suffering and her dependence on the medical system.⁸² However, Kahlo did not fear death stating, "I think about death often" and "I am disintegration" in Mexican cultural practice Death turns into a celebration of life. The Día de Muerto's celebration embraces themes of loss and grief in a beautiful display of love. Although Kahlo struggled with disability this did not define her, within patriarchal shifts of power she addressed themes that resonated deeply with those marginalized within. In 1953 the artist attended her first solo exhibition in Mexico City, transported by ambulance and carried in her bed to the Gallery of Contemporary Art. [Figure 39] This final act symbolic of a farewell but also as a celebration of the artist life and continued legacy.

This comparison of Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo reaffirms that modernism remains deeply connected with transnational social, culture and political change. Both artists managed and established themselves by pioneering their own versions of aesthetic hybridity, leveraging their artistic creations as a means of resistance, self-identity, and as a medium to reclaim space while challenging and adjusting to the changes of patriarchal power. To synthesize both artists, I designed and created a mixed media Matryoshka Sculpture with my partner's aid. The sculpture inspired by the cardboard construction of a Mexican style Piñata, the *Matryoshka sculpture* symbolically merges cultural pathways used by the artists to advance art forms marginalized by

⁸¹ Smith, "Trotsky in Mexico," 92, 96.

⁸² Ankori, *Frida Kahlo*, 150-152, 157.

higher art. The Matryoshka wooden doll depicting a peasant women in folk dress is a distinctly Russian folk art piece that draws from the folk art revival in late imperial Russia promoted by patroness Princess Tenisheva and others.⁸³ Sergey Malyutin designed the Matryoshka's traditional style and wood craftsman Vasily Zvyozdochkin constructed the set of dolls drawing heavily on the Japanese Fukurama wooden dolls as a key element of inspiration.⁸⁴ This further demonstrates that prior to Natalia Goncharova's Eastern focus within her art, late imperial Russian art circles had also turned to other Eastern Asian countries for recontextualization. This led to the push for a distinctly Russian cultural artistic identity that combined several styles, elements, and influences without losing cultural, political, and social significance.

The transnational history of the piñata mirrors Frida Kahlo's anticolonial approach within her art. The piñata is traced back to China BCE during seasonal festivals and celebrations such as the Dachunniu tradition at the beginning of spring where a clay ox is beat to welcome good harvest.⁸⁵ In pre-colonial Mexico prior to Spanish colonization a similar tradition formed, to mark winter solstice and the celebration of Huitzilopochtli the Aztec war and sun gods birth by breaking a clay pot adorned with feathers and stone. The Spanish colonization and evangelizing mission brought Augustinian Friars to recontextualize this practice by transforming the piñata into a visual metaphor for sin and the struggle against it for indigenous populations facing extreme violence and oppression.⁸⁶ This culminating in the piñatas use during *Las Posadas* tradition that replaced the celebration of Huitzilopochtli to the celebration of Mary and Joseph's nine day journey in

⁸³ Priscilla, Roosevelt. "Matryoshka Dolls." *Encyclopedia of Russian History*.

⁸⁴ Roosevelt, Priscilla. "Matryoshka Dolls."

⁸⁵ Yong, Chen. *From the Dachunniu to the Piñata: Tracing the Alleged Chinese Origin of a Mexican Tradition*. *Fudan J. Hum. Soc. Sci.* 11, 69–81 (2018), 71, 74-76.

⁸⁶ CE Noticias Financieras, "'Where Do Pinatas Come From?'" get to know acolman, the cradle of the piñata, and its history" (2024, Dec 20).

finding shelter in Bethlehem prior to the birth of Jesus. In *Las Posadas* tradition this journey reenacted, and the piñata shaped like a seven-pointed star represents the seven deadly sins. In the contemporary modern era, the *Piñata* transformed into a celebration of birth and life. For first generation Mexican American and Latinos, the piñata is present during any important milestone and celebration. It is symbolic of growth, courage, resilience and can also be seen as a culturally distinct work of craftsmanship and art like the Matryoshka doll. This complex concept spanning Russian and Eastern origins, indigenous influences and anti-colonial adaptation reflect Goncharova's approach at a radical revisionist cultural project.

The primary material used for the construction of the sculpture further emphasizes themes of agency and political resistance. The piece uses leftover cardboard from protest posters to reclaim and provides a physical representation of marginalized communities and voices. Under the current Republican administration in the United States, President Donald Trump ordered large scale immigration escalations targeting and kidnapping migrant members of our communities, this has only heightened since Summer of 2025 [Figure 40] *See appendix*. Unlike a traditional piñata that houses candy this sculpture contains a green heart with cactus thorn details and a monarch butterfly attached as the center. This heart symbol of resistance surrounded by a multicolored aura and monarch butterflies suspended mid-flight within [Figure 41] *See appendix*. By choosing the monarch butterfly as a central part of the sculpture I incorporate my cultural and political personal history. The monarch butterfly migrates yearly from Canada to the state of Michoacán in Mexico where the climate is warmer for the winter. The monarch butterfly is a significant part of my cultural heritage and symbolizes the migrant's journey across borders. Although, the traditional meaning behind the Matryoshka doll represents Russia, motherhood, and family I interpret the doll as symbolic with the breaking of generational cycles, trauma, and expectations. As you open the

wooden doll you get to the center which houses the final form that breaks free from societal constraints as seen through artists Goncharova and Kahlo two women who went against patriarchal expectations. The outside of the sculpture is decorated with lace detail, a multicolor flower made from tissue paper and a monarch butterfly hinting at what is inside. The sculpture draws on Mexican paper art and piñata decoration styles [Figure 42] *See appendix*. Natalia Goncharova and Frida Kahlo collectively created a powerful artistic impact that continues to add to contemporary conversations of transnational modernisms, identity, gender, feminist theory, and artistic expression. Their life and artistic fluidity illustrate a profound connection to ongoing tensions within patriarchal societies and how to navigate, adapt and resist within these restrictive systems.

Appendix: Figures



Figure 17 Natalia Goncharova, *the Passion of the Holy Martyr Saint Barbara*, 1912.

(Image taken from Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, 166.)



Figure 18 Natalia Goncharova, *Pedlars*, 1912. (Image taken from Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*,167.)



Figure 40 Image taken by Ezmo Flowers, Downtown Los Angeles Summer 2025.



Figure 41 Ezmo Flowers and Miles Jambeau interior of the *Matryoshka Sculpture* 2025.



Figure 42 Ezmo Flowers and Miles Jambeau exterior of the *Matryoshka Sculpture* 2025.