Mother’s Helper
By Diego Rivera
(1886-1957)
1950

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Born in Guanajuato, Mexico in 1886, Diego Rivera was not only a renowned artist and muralist in Mexico but he became quite famous in the United States as well. At a young age Rivera’s artistic interest was encouraged by his father who papered the walls of a room in their home and allowed him to paint there. Attending the Academy of San Carlos from 1898-1905 Rivera first became interested in Pre-Columbian Art while also learning about the laws of perspective.

Recognizing Rivera’s artistic ability, the Mexican government awarded him a grant to study art in Europe. While travelling in Europe (1907-1921), Rivera was introduced to many revered artists such as Braque, Derain, Cezanne, Picasso and Mondrian. Greatly influenced by studying their works of art he practiced their techniques and their styles resonated with him as well. Making such an impact from 1913-1917 was the Cubist style spearheaded by Braque and Picasso as well as the Post-Impressionist Cezanne with his simple forms and large splashes of color. In 1920 while in Italy, Rivera was exposed to the Italian murals from the quattrocento. He felt through this form of public art his modern ideas could be advanced.

Returning to Mexico in 1921 Rivera was upset about the political and social conditions there as Mexico was in the midst of an Agrarian revolution. He believed that through his murals he could paint a better future for Mexico’s society where all people would have opportunities and the common man could have political rights and landownership. He recognized that all people could enjoy murals not just the elite so he convinced the Mexican government to allow him to decorate the walls of public buildings. Rivera moved away from the modern art movement while trying to create a national Mexican style. He wanted to incorporate not just the socialist spirit of the Revolution but the history of Mexico as well. Choosing subjects meant to promote social change the murals were beautiful depictions of his ideas for the public. Rivera’s work on these murals commissioned by the post-revolutionary Mexican government have become acknowledged as a national monument.

By the late 1920’s Rivera had become a sought after artist in this country and was able to focus on other subject matter besides his Mexican Nationalist political ideals. He incorporated many diverse interests and influences into his work. An example is his interest in technology and the renowned series of murals in Detroit. The Detroit Industry Murals illustrate the industry of Ford Motor Company.

Married twice to the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, Rivera was considered a hero to Mexican culture. Through his paintings the illiterate could “read” the history of Mexico.
and education. He loved the people of Mexico and supported their effort to fight for fairness and equality among all of the people.

ABOUT THE PAINTING:

Women and children were among Rivera’s favorite subjects. He loved to portray his subjects doing everyday things especially working people and life in Mexico. He painted many pictures of Mexican farm life using rich tones and dark outlines. This painting shows a young girl helping her mother who most likely is a flower vendor. The bright yellow-orange of the tightly packed blooms in the bouquet is reflected in the background in bursts of color surrounding the pair. The mother and child are of equal height with the mother seated and the little girl full-sized. Their eyes are locked onto one another exhibiting an intensity of emotion. Typical of Rivera’s work this painting reflects his love of Mexico and its people.

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

• Is this a painting? Or a photograph?

• The title of this painting is Mother’s Helper. How is she helping her mother? What is she doing?

• How old does the girl appear?

• Where is the light source? What time of day is it?

• What is the mood of this painting? How does it make you feel?

• What do you think happened right before she gave the flowers? What do you think happened right after?

• What do you think is the shape that is partially cut off at the top of the picture? Is it a window? A reflection?

• By using dark outlines around the two figures they stand out from the rest of the picture. What do you think is happening in the background?