

PICASSO AND RIVERA: CONVERSATIONS ACROSS TIME

When Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Diego Rivera (1886–1957) met in Paris in 1914, they had a great deal in common. Both were Spanish-speaking expatriates (Picasso from Spain, Rivera from Mexico), and each had been trained in an academic tradition that emphasized the values of ancient Greek and Roman art. In Paris Rivera had embraced Cubism, a new style that emphasized the two-dimensionality of the canvas by reducing and fracturing objects into geometric forms. He was a great admirer of Picasso, one of the movement's creators, and the two quickly became friends. Their friendship, however, was short lived; they had a falling-out just a year later, in 1915, when Rivera accused Picasso of copying one of his techniques. Both eventually turned away from Cubism and, in the early 1920s, explored ancient art as a means to create a timeless yet modern visual language that could express who they were as artists.

Examining the influence of antiquity on Picasso's and Rivera's work, these curriculum materials address issues of identity and how art can help students connect with their own cultural histories. The essays demonstrate the value of traditions and cultures beyond the European canon, and reveal the creative potential of cross-cultural and cross-historical dialogue.

Although he began with conventional academic training based in the study of classical art, Picasso never stayed with one artistic style or framework for long. He did, however, frequently return to certain themes, addressing them in a new way with each approach. Soon after his permanent move to Paris in 1904, Picasso borrowed elements from ancient Iberian art in an attempt to reduce his style to its essentials. In 1917, after the development of Cubism, which rejected the traditional idea that an artist's goal should be to mimic nature, and the upheaval of World War I, Picasso visited Italy and took a renewed interest in the timeless values of ancient art. Like other European artists, Picasso turned to sculptures like *The Lansdowne Artemis* and *Protome of a Female Figure*. This resulted in his creation of unique works that blend antiquity and modernity,

as seen in *Three Women at the Spring*. With its classically inspired subject and forms, the painting pays homage to classical art yet simultaneously gives little attention to classical proportions or grace. The monumental work asserts Picasso's incontrovertible place in art history.

Unlike Picasso, Rivera drew upon an ancient past that did not hold a revered place in art history. While ancient Greek and Roman art was traditionally seen as the foundation of Western art history and the source from which all subsequent traditions grew, ancient Latin American art had been largely ignored, or dismissed as consisting of primitive and exotic oddities. When Rivera visited Italy in 1920, he sought out not only Italian art, including frescoes, but also pre-Columbian and early colonial Mexican manuscripts that had been acquired by Italian collectors. Upon his return from Europe to Mexico in 1921, Rivera delved into ancient Mexican art and became a passionate advocate for its legitimacy as a counterpoint to the canonized art of ancient Greece and Rome. Just as Picasso and other European artists were influenced by ancient Greek and Roman art, Rivera believed a Modern Mexican art should build on the aesthetics of pre-Columbian art. He drew from his own collection of Aztec and Maya artifacts, including works like *Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)*, to reinforce this message in his work. He infused such paintings as *Creation of the Universe (La creación del universo)* and *Flower Day (Día de Flores)* with ancient Mexican iconography and forms, thus establishing himself and his work firmly within a Mexican tradition with deep roots.

Like Picasso, Rivera looked to antiquity as a catalyst for experimentation rather than as an end in and of itself. He combined Aztec and Maya forms with contemporary subjects to create a new, Modern Mexican aesthetic independent from European colonial influence, and in doing so he brought his country recognition and respect on an international scale. Meanwhile, Picasso looked to the past for renewal and sampled from ancient themes and forms, thus placing himself within a European tradition while also asserting his differences from it.

WORKS CITED

Govan, Michael, and Diana Magaloni. *Picasso & Rivera: Conversations Across Time*. New York: Prestel, 2016.

Newman Helms, Cynthia, ed. *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*. New York: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts, in association with W.W. Norton, 1986.

These curriculum materials were prepared by Michelle Brenner and designed by David Hernandez. © 2017 Museum Associates/LACMA. All rights reserved.

Evenings for Educators is made possible by The Rose Hills Foundation, the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Foundation, The Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Joseph Drown Foundation, and the Mara W. Breech Foundation.

All education and outreach programs at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Education Fund and are supported in part by the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education, the Margaret A. Cargill Arts Education Endowment, and The Rhonda S. Zinner Foundation.

THREE WOMEN AT THE SPRING

Pablo Picasso, summer 1921

THE LANSDOWNE ARTEMIS

Rome, 1st century BC or 1st century AD

PROTOME OF A FEMALE FIGURE

Tarentum (Taras), South Italy, 440–430 BC

With Cubism, Picasso questioned the fundamental conventions of Western art. Cubism rejected the idea that art should mimic nature and create the illusion of three-dimensional space, and replaced it with stripped-down, fragmented forms that emphasized the flatness of the canvas. Following the turmoil and devastation of World War I, Picasso was seeking a new visual language that stepped away from this fragmentation and emphasized continuity as well as modernity. Although elements of Cubism persisted in his work, Picasso began to look back to the time-honored principles of simplicity and tranquility as seen in ancient Greek and Roman art.

Three Women at the Spring is Picasso's first monumental painting in this Neoclassical style. In the painting, three women, themselves monumental, dominate a vaguely articulated rocky, clay-colored setting, filling the canvas with their statuesque forms. Fittingly for an image of three women collecting water from a spring, three ceramic water vessels resembling ancient amphorae (tall Greek or Roman vessels with handles) appear in the painting. Varying in size, they form a diagonal line from the lower left to the upper right corner of the canvas, leading the viewer's eye through the composition. The painting's palette is restrained to shades of gray-white, the color of ancient marble sculptures, and an earthy terracotta, the color of the material used for ancient vessels.

The women's hair echoes the stylized waves of the hairdos of Greek and Roman goddesses. Their draped tunics resemble the typical dress of a High Classical goddess, clinging to their thighs and chests

like that of *The Lansdowne Artemis*, a characteristic Roman copy of a Greek statue of a goddess. And the heavy pleats of the women's tunics call to mind the fluted columns of ancient Greek temples.

The subjects' poses are unnaturally frozen, and the contours of their faces and gowns are so exaggerated they appear carved rather than drawn. The women's features have been reduced to simple, regular geometric forms reminiscent of the early classical style visible in the *Protome of a Female Figure* (pictured here): vacant eyes with thick eyelids, prominent noses that proceed in a straight line down from the forehead, uninterrupted by a bridge or indentation of any kind, rounded chins, a slight pout, and generally full, stylized features. Not one of the women stands out as a distinguishable individual. They sit, lean, and stand perfectly still and stable, which is in stark contrast to Picasso's fragmented Cubist subjects. These women at the spring face one another, even reaching out to each other, yet they don't interact. Instead, they seem distant, modern manifestations of the three graces in Greek mythology.

Despite these classical references, Picasso remains firmly based in modernity, adding his own variations to these traditional forms. Every feature, from the women's eyes to their hands and feet, has been exaggerated and enlarged in a deliberate departure from classical proportions. The women's limbs are cylindrical; their necks and arms resemble the thick tubes of machinery rather than the elegantly proportioned limbs of antiquity. Their squat, robust forms imply that these are modern, earthy, grounded women, in contrast to the divine figures of antiquity. As a result, these women bridge times and cultures, bringing the calm dignity, elevated status, and permanence of antiquity into the twentieth century.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Compare *Three Women at the Spring* to the 1913 Cubist painting *Still Life with Violin* (<http://collections.lacma.org/node/252189>) by Picasso's friend and the cocreator of Cubism, Georges Braque (France, 1882–1963). How do these works differ in style and subject? How do they make you, as a viewer, feel as you look at them?
2. How does *Three Women at the Spring* differ from ancient Greek and Roman sculptures like *The Lansdowne Artemis* and *The Hope Athena* (<http://collections.lacma.org/node/229951>)? How much of these differences are because of their varied artistic mediums? Which qualities of sculptures can't be reproduced in paintings?
3. If the women in this painting came to life, what do you think they would be talking about? What do you think their tones of voice would be? Would they speak quickly or slowly? How would they move? What do you see that makes you say that?



Three Women at the Spring (Trois femmes à la fontaine)

Pablo Picasso, summer 1921

Oil on canvas

80 ¼ × 68 ½ in.

The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil, © 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York



Lansdowne Artemis

Unknown, 1st century B.C. or 1st century A.D.

Marble

70 × 26 × 17 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, William Randolph Hearst Collection (49.23.5a)

Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Protome of a Female Head

Tarentum (Taras), South Italy, 440–430

Terracotta

5 $\frac{9}{16}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Gianfranco Becchina (Basel, Switzerland), sold to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1982

Photo courtesy The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California

FLOWER DAY (DÍA DE FLORES)

Diego Rivera, 1925

WATER DEITY (CHALCHIUHTLICUE)

Mexico, Aztec, 1200–1521

After fourteen years abroad, Diego Rivera returned to his native Mexico in 1921 and set out to promote Mexican cultural development by conveying its history and revolutionary ideals to the masses through national art. *Flower Day* is the first in what became a series of artworks of Mexican flower vendors painted by the artist. It was also Rivera's first major painting to enter a public collection in the United States, having been acquired by LACMA's predecessor, the Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art, in 1925.

In the painting, two Mexican women, one with a baby on her back, kneel before a flower vendor. The figures, Mexican peasants, are largely anonymous; only the flower vendor's face is visible. The vendor, bending forward, holds in his hands a bundle of green palm fronds (associated with Easter), and the woman on the left appears to be preparing to place a red wreath from the stack beside her on his head. A basket overflowing with oversize calla lilies tied to the vendor's back hovers over the composition, filling the upper portion of the canvas while conforming to its square shape. The women's white shawls associate them with the lilies, symbols of the Virgin Mary used in festivals around Easter time. On either side of the vendor, crowds of people wearing similar wreaths and carrying bundles of red flowers are barely visible. Besides these figures, what little background that can be seen is an indistinct gray. The painting's composition is dominated by the large, simple forms of the figures, the flowers and palm fronds in red, white, and green (the colors of the Mexican flag), and the lily stamens and the basket, both in yellow.

From their poses to their clothing, the figures in *Flower Day* directly reference the forms and iconography of ancient Aztec sculptures of female

deities like the *Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)* pictured here. The compact bodies of the painting's subjects evoke figures carved from blocks of stone, and the women kneel before the flower vendor barefooted, just as countless Aztec sculptures of female gods kneel with their feet beneath them, turned inward so their toes touch beneath them. Rivera's women wear skirts and triangular shoulder capes, outfits that echo the traditional clothing of an Aztec noblewoman, as seen on the *Water Deity*. Even the face of the flower vendor echoes those of Aztec sculptures: ageless, geometric, symmetrical, and general rather than specific.

Because they are peasants and not Aztec deities, the figures in *Flower Day* lack the distinctive headdress of the *Water Deity*, which consists of thick bands of cotton wound about her head, bordered by rows of balls and flanked by large tassels. This headdress would have identified her to Aztec worshipers as *Chalchiuhtlicue* ("she of the jade skirt" for the mountains that resemble jade-green skirts after it rains), a symbol of the water that irrigates the fields and gives life.

Sculptures like this one, which is from Rivera's personal collection, would originally have been installed in temples as objects of devotion. In *Flower Day*, the influence of *Water Deity* turns a chaotic marketplace scene into a solemn one, imbuing anonymous peasants with a quiet dignity and almost religious level of importance. There is a sense that Rivera has painted a picture that infuses the present with the gravity of the ancient past, reinforcing the Mexican people's ties to their illustrious Aztec heritage. In doing so, he elevates a small group of Mexican people into icons, symbols of Mexico's great heritage and bright future.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Why do you think Rivera chose to depict a mundane flower market scene? How does painting an everyday setting infuse it with more importance?
2. Rivera was interested in promoting Mexican history and ideals through a national art. What, if any, art or public images would you consider specifically American, successfully conveying America's history and ideals to the public? For example, the Statue of Liberty.



Flower Day (Día de Flores)

Diego Rivera, 1886–1957,

Oil on canvas

58 × 47 ½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Fund (25.7.1), © 2016 Banco de México

Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Water Deity (Chalchiuhtlicue)

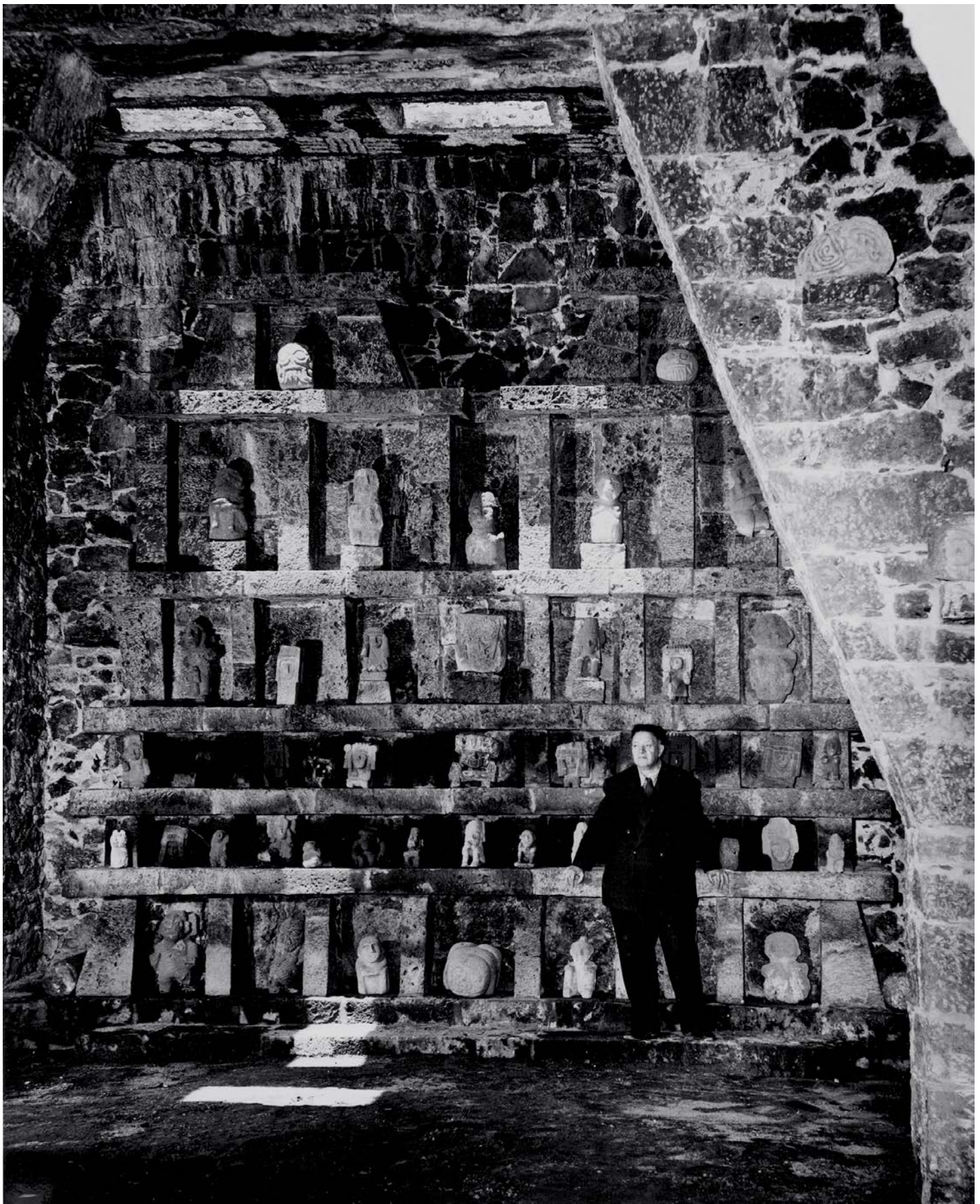
Mexico, Aztec, 1200–1521

Basalt

7 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.

Museo Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli

Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA, by Javier Hinojosa



Diego Rivera at the Museo Anahuacalli, Mexico City
c. 1950s

Photo courtesy of Museos Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli y Frida Kahlo



Diego Rivera
c. 1950s
Photo courtesy of Museos Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli y Frida Kahlo

CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE (LA CREACIÓN DEL UNIVERSO), ILLUSTRATION FOR POPOL VUH

Diego Rivera, 1931

The *Popol Vuh* (Book of the People) is a compilation of the creation myths of the ancient Guatemalan Maya-K'iche' people. The stories of the *Popol Vuh* were originally passed down orally and then recorded in paintings and hieroglyphics. However, following the Spanish Conquest (1519–21), most Maya manuscripts were destroyed, along with the images of ancient gods they contained. Fortunately, the stories of the *Popol Vuh* were eventually recorded in the K'iche' language in an attempt to preserve them as well as the Maya-K'iche' culture.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish conquistadors condemned works of pre-Columbian Mexico as products of the devil; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these works were seen as admirable but incomprehensible products of a savage ancient civilization. For Rivera, a twentieth-century Mexican artist, these texts and images contained a magic and power that imbued all of Mexico with an ancient lineage and dignity. According to his daughter, Guadalupe Rivera, the artist kept a copy of the *Popol Vuh*, in Spanish, on his nightstand and, drawn to its visual and poetic beauty, read it so frequently that he could recite passages from memory.

In 1930 Rivera was approached by an American writer, John Weatherwax, who had translated the *Popol Vuh* into English and wanted to publish his translation accompanied by illustrations from Rivera. Traditionally, the stories of the *Popol Vuh* were recited aloud while a painter or scribe created accompanying images, so in the spirit of this custom, Weatherwax read the stories aloud to Rivera while he painted his illustrations. For visual inspiration, Rivera drew from the art and architecture of the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá, which he had visited in 1921, as well as several Maya texts that he had encountered in European collections, which had been sent to Europe from the New World by conquistadores and missionaries.

The *Popol Vuh* is filled with poetic imagery, dream-like allegories, and psychedelic visions; and these stylistic elements made their way into Rivera's watercolor illustrations. During his Cubist period, the artist had included multiple or contrasting viewpoints fragmented and then realigned within a single painting. Much as he did then, for *Creation of the Universe* Rivera collapsed into one image depicted figures and forms from different times and spaces. The forms are simple and flat, and the composition lacks any perspective or sense of real space; instead, the figures seem to float on a background of nothingness.

A mountain surrounded by water occupies the center of the composition. (The Maya-K'iche' people lived in a highland mountain valley, and the mountain was a common Mexican symbol, signifying a bountiful town, that was often used in indigenous maps.) Behind the mountain, but separated by water, lies a mountain range. In this context, the mountains surrounded by water represent primeval earth emerging from the still waters of the ocean before time and the sun were created, and the animals and vegetation on each mountain represent the beginnings of life.

Surrounding this central mountain range are six creator gods, manifestations of the two great creator gods: the Sovereign Plumed Serpent in the sea, referred to as the Giver of Breath; and the supreme god, Heart of the Sky, who appears in the story in the form of lightning. The gods' size and placement emphasize their importance, as well as their complete power over nature. Three of the gods, aspects of the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, are depicted as multicolored three plumed serpents hovering above the mountains in the upper section of the composition. In the lower register of the painting are three gods of different ages representing Heart of the Sky: the young god at the center whose adornments, including a sprouting headdress, evoke

the maize god; the elderly god in the right corner, whose blue hat and pelt evoke the Maya god of commerce, God L; and the god at the left, whose blue-and-white mask with prominent fangs and snout and big red circular eyes seems to be inspired by the Maya rain god, Chaac. All of the gods appear to be blowing life into the mountain scene.

Though the English-language edition of the *Popol Vuh* was never published, Rivera, believing in the project, continued to produce his related watercolor illustrations (twenty-four are known to exist). He also tried for many years to produce a Mexican edition, with no success.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Find examples of creation stories from other cultures and compare them. What do the stories have in common? How do they differ? How do these stories reflect the values of their respective cultures?
2. With his illustrations for the *Popol Vuh*, Rivera wanted to translate a complex poetic text that he loved into visual images. Find a poem that you love and think about how you would visually translate its text and style of writing into an illustration. How would you represent literary devices like alliteration, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, cacophony, dissonance, irony, point of view, rhyme, and tone in a visual artwork?
3. Have your teacher read a short story you've never heard before out loud to your class, and then record the story you just heard in written or visual form. Compare your visual account of the story with those of your classmates. Which elements of the story were retained? How does this exercise affect how you think about other stories that were originally transmitted orally, like the *Iliad*, *The Tale of Heike*, the Bible, and the *Popol Vuh*?



Creation of the Universe (La creación del universo), illustration for the *Popol Vuh*
Diego Rivera, 1200–1521
Watercolor on paper
12 ¼ x 18 ⅞ in.
Museo Casa Diego Rivera, Guanajuato, Marta R. Gómez Collection, INBA. © 2016 Banco de México
Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo courtesy Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, Guanajuato