
Book Review: *Traitor, Survivor, Icon*

Traitor, Survivor, Icon: The Legacy of La Malinche, edited by Victoria I. Lyall and Terezita Romo. Denver: Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2022. 211 pages. Hardcover \$50.00.

The role of biography in art history makes me uneasy. On the one hand, it feels impossible to approach certain artists without it in mind. To take a well-known example, Frida Kahlo: how can we consider her work without recalling the events that changed the trajectory of her life? The physical damage wrought by her bus accident as a young woman feels embedded in the surfaces of some of her paintings. At the same time, the work of an artist whose biography looms large in the discourse around them can fade into the background. Rather than help us to understand objects more profoundly, biography can reduce artworks to mere illustrations of an artist's life, rather than the product of it. If this concern is valid for artists, it is equally true for their subjects. Scholarly analysis of portraiture is often filtered through our knowledge of the sitter's biography. Similarly, the study of Catholic religious paintings often relies on hagiography and its close relative, legend.

Rather than avoid the challenges of biography, the authors in the exhibition catalog *Traitor, Survivor, Icon: The Legacy of La Malinche* instead choose to confront it head on. Peeling away five hundred years of history, myth, and slander, the authors reveal that very little concrete information is available about this pivotal historical figure. Even her name remains in question: known colloquially as "Malinche," in some historical documents she is called "Doña Marina," "Malinalli," or "Malintzin." By foregrounding what little *is* known of Malinche, the authors destabilize her five-hundred-year historical and cultural legacy, exposing the ways in which she has been conceived and reconceived in the centuries since her death. Including contributions from thirteen scholars alongside transcriptions of primary source material and poetry, the volume offers fresh lenses for reassessing Malinche and her impact, even as she herself remains, by virtue of the lack of reliable historical information, an elusive figure.

Based on the curatorial framework proposed by Terezita Romo, lecturer and affiliate faculty in the Chicana/o Studies Department at University of California, Davis, the catalog is organized into five thematic sections that reflect five archetypes embodied by Malinche over the roughly five hundred years since the Spanish conquest. The first, "La Lengua/The Interpreter," considers her role as translator and interpreter for Hernán Cortés. This section opens with an essay by historian Camilla Townsend that examines traces of Malinche in annals written by postconquest Indigenous authors. It is followed by a poem and essay written by the poet-scholar Alicia Gaspar de Alba that reflect her history of encountering the myth of Malinche growing up in the El Paso–Juárez borderland and her work reinterpreting Malinche's legacy. This section's three texts highlight the importance of the role Malinche first inhabited—interpreter—and the ways in which her voice continues to speak after her death.

In "La Indígena/The Indigenous Woman," the authors press on the theme of Malinche's indigeneity, considering its role in contemporary accounts and art made throughout the viceregal period. An essay by Victoria I. Lyall and Jesse Laird Ortega offers an overview of her appearance in sixteenth-century pictorial histories by Indigenous authors, enhanced by excerpts from two of the historical texts included in their analysis. Interrogating both the fashioning and the placement of Malinche in these narratives, Lyall and Ortega demonstrate her liminality, her association with Cortés and the Spanish that pushed her outside the boundaries of contemporary Indigenous society. Malinche's liminality evolves into erasure in Charlene Villaseñor Black's study of her presence and absence in paintings produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She was marginalized in favor of Cortés in a revised history of the conquest. Malinche's heritage and history connect her to these pictorial narratives, yet her

place in them is unstable and in an endless state of reconfiguration to meet the creators' needs.

This reconfiguration is further revealed in "La Madre de Mestizaje/The Mother of a Mixed Race," which explores the twentieth-century construction of Malinche, through her son with Cortés, as the founder of mestizo identity. Sandra Messinger Cypress explores the notion of Malinche as a kind of Mexican Eve whose actions, like the Old Testament figure, bring about the birth of a new race but also its betrayal. The myth of Malinche as the mother of mestizaje is linked by Luis Vargas Santiago to the creation of Mexico's new national identity following the 1910 Mexican Revolution. In the works of Diego Rivera and others, she is a vital protagonist—the foremother of the modern mestizo Mexico—yet also a villain for her role in the subjugation of the Mexican people. This section concludes with a brief account by Inés Hernández-Ávila of Malinche's presence in a traditional Mexican dance, the *Danza Conchera*. These essays highlight the unstable nature of Malinche's depictions, harkening back to the themes of liminality and erasure explored in the previous section and revealing a figure increasingly unmoored within Mexican visual culture.

The next section, "*La Traidora/The Traitor*," explores the origins and impact of Malinche's vilification. In her examination of sixteenth-century Nahua society and sources, Lisa Sousa finds little evidence to support the view that Malinche was seen as a traitor. Instead, her research confirms Townsend's assertions that she was respected for the pragmatic leadership she showed as Cortés's interpreter. Emmanuel Ortega dissects the cultural forces that vilified Malinche, tracing her evolution in images across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Mexico changed and increasingly privileged a patriarchal, white, Catholic society, a heroic Malinche became a dangerous source of disruption. If the previous three sections underscore her liminality within Mexican visual culture, this one identifies the response: to paint her

thoroughly as a traitor and thus neutralize her historical agency.

The catalog's final section, "'Chicana': Contemporary Reclamations," looks at Malinche's renewal in contemporary culture, where she has again been reimagined, this time by Mexicana and Chicana artists, activists, and writers, as a heroine and source of inspiration. Karen Cordero Reiman surveys this reinterpretation of Malinche by Mexicana artists, whose works explore how the misogynist and colonialist forces that shaped her life continue to affect women in Mexico. In a similar fashion, Romo explores Malinche's legacy in the United States, analyzing the work of Chicana artists beginning in the 1960s to highlight her contemporary relevancy and reframe her as an icon of human survival. The section concludes with a beautiful array of poems that touch upon these themes by Rosario Castellanos, Adaljiza Sosa-Riddell, Sylvia Alicia Gonzáles, Lucha Corpi, Carmen Tafolla, Naomi Quiñonez, and Pat Mora.

This final section, in particular, underscores the importance of projects that consider the impact of historical figures in visual culture across time, such as the present show or the 2019 exhibition *Emiliano: Zapata después de Zapata*, curated by Vargas Santiago. They remind us that our understanding of history and its protagonists—regardless of biographical fact—is complex and ever-changing. On its face this may be an obvious assertion, yet when one considers recent movements to decolonize museums and recontextualize objects—and resistance to them—I believe it is a vital one. Part of the power of *Traitor, Survivor, Icon* is that it not only uncovers and acknowledges the ways in which this icon has been misrepresented, misunderstood, and maligned but also offers a path forward for us to embrace a more nuanced and authentic understanding of Malinche.

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