



An artist who turned his back on the works of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and other friends of the European avant-garde, Diego Rivera devoted the mature part of his career to powerful depictions of his Mexican compatriots. Completing mural commissions and easel paintings alike, Rivera is arguably the best-known painter of his country in the twentieth century.

As a student aware of the general discontent brewing in Mexico and the need for reform, Rivera searched for an effective means of communicating his social concerns. His discovery of early Italian Renaissance murals marked a pivotal point in his career as he recognized in them a painting type that was legible to all and appropriate for complex iconographic statements. Rivera took Mexico as his subject—the strength of her people confronting their social, political, and economic history—and joined to it what he had learned in Italy about style, technique, and content. Although his major commissions were generally for government-sponsored murals, Rivera also executed a prodigious number of easel paintings, a fine example of which is the *Flower Seller*. Here, a young Mexican woman quietly nurses her child as she sits behind the array of varied flowers she waits to sell.

The *Flower Seller* demonstrates Rivera's brilliant sense of design and a grandeur of conception illustrative of his mature style. The artist concentrated on the geometric

#### **DIEGO RIVERA**

Mexican, 1886–1957

*Flower Seller*, 1926

Oil on canvas; 36 × 43¾ in. (91.4 × 111.1 cm.)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Philip E. Spalding, 1932 (49.1)

essence of the image; crisp in contour and bright in hue, the contrasting rounded and angular forms completely fill the work, creating a symmetrical composition of balance and order. Rivera's placement of these basic shapes close to the picture plane and the use of a dense screen of leaves to obscure a larger spatial context also stress the two-dimensional surface of the canvas and contribute much to the painting's bold compositional patterning. As flat, simple forms of strong color take on a significance independent of the physical world they describe, Rivera generated a decorative abstract design of remarkable visual impact.

The serene and thoughtful expression on the young mother's face suggests a resigned acceptance of life's lot. Grave and dignified, the woman nursing her infant assumes iconic proportions reminiscent of earlier European depictions of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. Rivera's sympathetic respect and affection for the Mexican people, humanistic concern for the dignity of the individual, and still-potent social realism demonstrate his easel work at its best. JS

Diego Rivera (Mexican, 1886–1957)

*The Flower Seller*, 1926

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Philip E. Spalding, 1932 (49.1)

The Mexican painter Diego Rivera devoted the mature part of his career to powerful depictions of his compatriots. Though renowned for his large-scale, government-sponsored murals, he also executed a remarkable number of easel paintings. *The Flower Seller* demonstrates Rivera's skill at design and grandeur of conception. A Mexican woman nurses her child as she sits among an abundant and varied array of flowers. Crisp in contour and bright in hue, the contrasting rounded and angular forms of the flowers fill the canvas, framing the woman and imparting balance to its composition. While this painting inevitably evokes Christian imagery of the Virgin and Child, it also speaks to Rivera's sympathetic respect and affection for the Mexican people, his humanistic concern for the dignity of the individual, and his persistent social realism.

Diego Rivera



Mexican artist Diego Rivera's striking and poignant 1926 painting of a peasant flower seller nursing her child (35" x 43") is on view in the *Revelations* exhibition September 16–October 24.

Flower Seller  
1926  
Oil/canvas

NARRATOR— If you look briefly at the woman selling flowers, you might not notice the partially obscured body of a nursing child. This pensive, dignified woman sits behind her basket, earning a living while discretely managing the care of her infant. Mexican artist Diego Rivera spent a lot of his career honoring the Mexican people and their struggle to endure.

Although this is a somewhat realistic scene, there are elements of this painting that are more stylized. The leaves in the background have been reduced to a flat pattern of

repeating almond-like shapes, while the features of the woman's face have been simplified to their geometric essence. He used these stylized elements to emphasize the dignity and humanity of the young mother and laborer.

Rivera spent the early twentieth century in Europe. He studied Italian Renaissance murals that often depicted Catholic themes. Here, the religious influence is evident in this woman's quiet humility and steady gaze that resembles the Virgin Mary.