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## Art Masterpiece: THE FLOWER VENDOR (1949)

By Diego Rivera 3 ½ " x 5" oil on canvas  
Museo Nacional - Madrid, Spain

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**Keywords:** Contrast and Movement

**Grade:** 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>

**Activity:** Oversized Chalk Flower

### Meet the Artist :

"An artist is above all a human being, profoundly human to the core. If the artist can't feel everything that humanity feels, if the artist isn't capable of loving until he forgets himself and sacrifices himself if necessary, if he won't put down his magic brush and head the fight against the oppressor, then he isn't a great artist." -----Rivera

**Considered the greatest Mexican painter of the twentieth century.**

- Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was born in Guanajuato, Mexico. He began to draw at age 3 and when he was 10 he started going to regular school during the day and art school at night. He later received a scholarship to study art. He spent 10 years studying in Europe.
- Rivera was searching for a new form of painting, one that could express the complexities of his day and still reach a wide audience. It was not until he began to study the Renaissance frescoes of Italy that he found his medium. It was with a vision of the future of the fresco and with a strong belief in public art that Rivera returned to Mexico.
- Frescoes are mural paintings done on fresh plaster. Using the fresco form in universities and other public buildings, Rivera was able to introduce his work into the everyday lives of the people.

- Throughout the twenties his fame grew with a number of large murals depicting scenes from Mexican history, day to day life, culture and politics.
- In a series of visits to America, from 1930 to 1940, Rivera brought his unique vision to public spaces and galleries, enlightening and inspiring artists and laymen alike.
- His work appealed to the people's interest in the history of technology and progress. The desire to understand progress was visible in the growing industrial societies of the 1930s, and Rivera saw the workers' struggle as a symbol of the fragile political ground on which that capitalism trod.
- In 1930, Rivera began work on his first two major American commissions: for the American Stock Exchange Luncheon Club and for the California School of Fine Arts. These two pieces firmly but subtly incorporated Rivera's radical politics, while maintaining a sense of simple historicity.
- In 1932, at the height of the Great Depression, Rivera arrived in Detroit, where, at the behest of Henry Ford, he began a tribute to the American worker on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Completed in 1933, the piece depicted industrial life in the United States, concentrating on the car plant workers of Detroit. Rivera's radical politics and independent nature had begun to draw criticism during his early years in America. Though the fresco was the focus of much controversy, Edsel Ford, Henry's son, defended the work and it remains today Rivera's most significant painting in America.
- He helped to raise awareness of the working class struggle to overcome poverty and improve their quality of life.
- Rivera was a very large man – over 300 pounds. When he was painting murals he would paint for over 15 hours straight and didn't sleep or eat much. Some of his murals took years and during that time he would lose over 100 pounds.
- Rivera is well known for his wall murals and is credited for painting more than 6,000 square yards of murals during his lifetime.
- Both his original painting style and the force of his ideas remain major influences on American painting.
- Rivera is also largely responsible for creating an artistic identity for the country of Mexico.

### **About the Painting:**

The Flower Vendor is one of several images painted by Rivera showing workers with calla lilies. This piece is both figurative and strongly symbolic – depicting the contributions of both children and adults in the Mexican workforce. This composition shows Rivera's masterful depiction of form and rhythm.

### Discussion Questions:

- What is happening in this painting? (people are selling flowers) Who are these people? (a family)
- What do you think it would be like to be a flower vendor? What kind of work do you do together as a family?
- Where do you see similar SHAPES in this image? The lily's group together and the four heads of the family group as like shapes. Notice how our eyes are drawn to finding these similar shapes. In this piece our eyes move around the image in a clockwise spiral direction. In art this is referred to as visual **MOVEMENT**.
- What difference do you see between the COLORS in the foreground and in the background? (the foreground is bright and against a dark background).
- Look for the bright colors. Yellow, white, red. Notice how they pop out against the other colors. This is called **CONTRAST**. Contrast adds excitement, emphasis and interest to a piece of artwork.

**Activity: Oversized Chalk Flower** (Students will expand their realistic drawing skills with these flower enlargements).

#### Materials needed:

Black construction paper 1/student

Pencils

Pictures of flowers or real silk flowers - prop

Colored Chalk

Black Crayon

Hairspray

1 piece white copy paper/ student (for sketching and to protect the art as they work)

Paper towel or lids from copy-paper boxes can be used to discard excess chalk dust at their desks.

Handi-wipes for clean-up of hands and desks. ☺

**Pre-discussion:** Share with the students that today's project will use the art medium - **CHALK**. Chalk is known to produce strong and brilliant color. Chalk can be blended

directly by applying one color over another or rubbing with fingers. Warn that it can be very messy. Students should be mindful of the chalk dust and avoid blending with their fingers for this project. Use document camera to show how to blend colors by layering colors on top of one another. This way of blending is permissible and encouraged.

When finished the use of a fixative will set the chalk to prevent smudging.

\*\*\* The fixative step will be done by an adult outside the classroom.

### **Process:**

1. Cover Pre-discussion information on Chalk. See above.
2. Have the students select a type of flower to draw. Use photos or silks for ideas.
3. Share that today's project will resemble the art print in that the background will be dark and they will add a bright and colorful floral design to the foreground.
4. On sketch paper:  
Practice drawing in pencil enlarged versions of flower. A portion of the flower should touch each of the four sides of the paper. Using the document camera demonstrate the desired size of the flower and how petals can go off the sides of the paper.
5. Hand out the black paper. Students need to sign their name to the back.
6. Students should begin by selecting their favorite sketched design and in pencil transfer it onto the black paper.
7. **Time for color: Stress neatness.** Students can now use the piece of scrap paper to protect their artwork from smudging by placing the scrap paper between the drawing hand and the black paper. They will need to move the paper as they work on the flower. Demonstrate.
8. **Show them if their artwork begins to get heavy with chalk dust they can tap the paper onto a piece of paper towel or into a copy-paper box lid to clear of excess chalk dust. Tell them not to brush with their hand or it will smudge their design.**
9. Color the enlarged flowers with the colored chalk.  
Encourage **CONTRAST** by using:
  - a. Bright color combinations.
  - b. Light application and Heavy application of chalk
  - c. Blending/ layering colors together by overlaying colors. (Tell them they are NOT to blend with their fingers. Too messy.)
  - d. Leave some areas of the black paper showing for contrast.

When done, an adult will spray the artwork (outside) with the hairspray to keep it from smudging.

10. **Lastly, outline the flower with the black crayon being careful not to smudge the chalk. The black glossy outline creates CONTRAST.**



Sample shows contrasting black crayon/oil pastel outline.





Chandler Unified School District Art Masterpiece



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Note black outline.



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His fame grew with a number of large murals.  
Through his art he helped raise awareness of the working class struggle to overcome poverty and improve their quality of life.  
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Brief info about the project: Students learned of chalk as an art medium and created their own chalk-flower art.



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