

# Dolores del Río Conversation Kit



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984, revised 1991, mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1998.161, © 1991, Amalia Mesa-Bains

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## Dolores del Río



“Dolores del Río  
[was] the first  
Mexican superstar  
breaking racial  
taboos of  
mainstream  
Hollywood.”

– Artist Amalia Mesa-Bains

Photograph of Dolores del Río by Benjamin Strauss and Homer Peyton. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired through the generosity of the Honorable Anthony Beilenson in honor of his wife Dolores

Dolores del Río was a Mexican actress who dazzled audiences in the United States and Mexico from the 1920s until her death in 1983. Her presence in film paved the way for other Latinas and Chicanas, offering a model of cultural pride.

Use this conversation kit to consider how del Río presented herself and how she was represented by others. Zoom out to explore how culture influences stories, music, media, and art as well as an individual's actions and thinking. The institutions and industries people create in response to shared needs, beliefs, and interests reflect and reinforce their cultural identity.

## Driving Questions

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How does the portrayal of a particular group of people in media inform or influence my impression of that group of people?

How might the way a sitter portrays their cultural identity differ from the way an artist does so? How do these portrayals affect the public's thinking in turn?

## Supporting Questions

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- Why might a person want to control or manage the manner in which they are portrayed?
- How can a portrait represent a sitter's looks, personality, and/or identity?
- How can a portrait represent the artist's identity?
- How can portraiture be a performance of one or more identities?
- How might a sitter use their portrait to communicate a message of individuality and/or social change?
- How might an artist's choices communicate a message of social change, during and after the life of their sitter?

## Civic Learning Themes

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- **Community Participation:** Meaningful engagement in community life, including volunteering with local organizations, attending neighborhood meetings, joining community groups, and so on. This is differentiated from civic action in that it is not necessarily tied to governing or political initiatives.

## College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

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**This conversation kit follows the learning arc outlined in the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#).**

**D3.1.6-8.** Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

**D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

**D2.His.6.9-12.** Analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history that they produced.

**D3.1.9-12.** Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

**D2.Soc.3.9-12.** Identify how social context influences individuals.

**D2.Soc.7.9-12.** Cite examples of how culture influences the individuals in it.

**D2.Soc.13.9-12.** Identify characteristics of groups, as well as the effects groups have on individuals and society, and the effects of individuals and societies on groups.

**D2.Soc.14.9-12.** Explain how in-group and outgroup membership influences the life chances of individuals and shapes societal norms and values.

**D2.Soc.18.9-12.** Propose and evaluate alternative responses to inequality.

## Primary & Secondary Sources

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All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#).

Individual links to resources are also included below for your convenience.

- Artifacts:
  - [Dolores del Río cinema card from 1927](#)

Benjamin Strauss (1871–1952) and Homer Peyton (1884–unknown), *Dolores del Río*, Photograph, Gelatin silver print. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired through the generosity of the Honorable Anthony Beilenson in honor of his wife Dolores.
  - [An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río, by Amalia Mesa-Bains](#)

Amalia Mesa-Bains (b. 1943), *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984, revised 1991. Mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers, and glitter. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1998.161, © 1991, Amalia Mesa-Bains
  - [Close-up of film stills included in An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río](#)

These films stills are close-ups of the stills that appear on the left side of the installed *ofrenda* and depict del Río in the following films, top to bottom: *In Caliente*, directed by Lloyd Bacon, 1935; *The Fugitive*, directed by John Ford and Emilio Fernández, 1947 (second and third images); *The Bad One*, directed by George Fitzmaurice, 1930.
- Multimedia: [“Installing An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río- time-lapse.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, October 30, 2013.](#)

## Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

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Provide students with [the Dolores del Río cinema card](#), showcasing a 1927 portrait by Benjamin Strauss and Homer Peyton, and [film stills](#) from [An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río](#) by Amalia Mesa-Bains. Explain that one is a portrayal of Dolores del Río during her life and the second is a memorial to her after her death.

### Portrait Analysis: Strauss & Peyton's 1927 photograph of Dolores del Río

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Focus the students' attention on the cinema card. What are your first impressions of this object?

**Elements of Portrayal.** Individually or in pairs--and using the elements of portrayal (visual clues in portraits that help the view tell the story of the image) as a guide--have students examine the image and respond to the prompts below.

- Facial expression: Use adjectives to describe the del Río's facial expression. What emotion(s) does this expression convey?
- Pose: Describe del Río's pose.
- Clothing: What clothing is del Río wearing? What might her clothing convey about her?
- Hairstyle: Describe del Río's hairstyle. Why would hairstyle be an important element of a portrait?
- Setting: What is the setting of the portrait?
- Objects: What objects are in the portrait? Objects function as symbols. What might they be telling us about the del Río?
- Color: What is color conveying in this image? How does color set the tone and mood of the portrait?
- Medium: What is the medium of this portrait?

Display an image of the cinema card for the full class to see (see [hi-res image](#)). As students share their responses to the object analysis questions make note of their response on the image or in a separate chart on the board.

**Biographical Context.** del Río's film debut turned her into the first internationally revered Mexican movie star and one of the very few Latinas in Hollywood at the time. Her extraordinary beauty and expressive face earned her principal roles in *The Trail of '98* (1928) and *Ramona* (1928), among other films. As the silent era ended and talkies were introduced, del Río was among the few actors who survived the transition. Owing to her accent, however, she was often typecast as ethnic and exotic characters, among them a Polynesian princess in *Bird of Paradise* (1932) and a Brazilian belle in *Flying Down to Río* (1933). At the same time, her fair skin and aristocratic bearing made her ideal for such European characters as the mistress of Louis XV in *Madame Du Barry* (1934). All the while, she fought to be recognized as a Mexican actress in Hollywood, particularly when the media repeatedly referred to her as Spanish.

Have students reflect on the prompts below.

- What kinds of connections can we make between the biographical information about Dolores del Río and her portrait?
- How does her biography inform the way we view the image?

**In Her Own Words.** Have students individually read Dolores del Río's quote and respond to the reflection question.

"...My conception of a great success is... being capable of reflecting and impersonating all the beauty and cleverness of every different type of woman." Dolores del Río in 1927's *Achieving Stardom*

- How does this quote either extend our understanding of the image or provide dissonance to that understanding?

**Idealized Beauty.** For nearly two decades in the early twentieth century, Kansas City-based photographers Benjamin Strauss and Homer Peyton created glamorous, idealized portraits of the many celebrities who passed through that midwestern metropolis. Operating principally in a ground floor studio in Kansas City's most prestigious hotel, Strauss and Peyton exploited their location to attract the patronage of the hotel's famous guests who found much to admire in the duo's highly flattering



portraits. Enhanced by artful retouching, this luminous photograph of del Río is typical of celebrity portraits produced by the Strauss-Peyton studio.

Have students reflect on the prompts below:

- In what ways is del Río sharing her own identity in her image? How are Strauss and Peyton conveying an idealized version of del Río?
- Given the contextual information provided during this analysis, revisit the essential question. How does this portrait of Dolores de Río inform or influence our impression of her?

## Portrait Analysis: Amalia Mesa-Bain's 1991 artwork, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*

Focus the students' attention on [the Mesa-Bains artwork](#). Have students carefully examine the image and respond to the prompts below.

- This artwork is called *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*. The Chicana artist who made it, Amalia Mesa-Bains, met del Río in 1983 in the last year of the actor's life. The artwork was completed nearly a decade after del Río's passing. Look closely:
  - What materials did the artist use to construct this large artwork?
  - How many depictions of Dolores del Río can you find?
  - How are these materials arranged, what plan does the artist seem to be following?
  - What does the overall shape of the artwork remind you of?

Show students the [time-lapse footage of museum staff installing \*An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río\* in a gallery](#). As they watch, explain that an *ofrenda* is a traditional temporary altar created for the Mexican holiday *Día de Los Muertos*, a celebration that brings deceased loved ones into the present through memories.

Have students reflect on the following prompts:

- Amalia Mesa-Bains, a Mexican-American artist, used the *ofrenda* as a way to place Dolores del Río in the "...pantheon of female role models with which she and other Chicanas can identify." Chicanx is a term that describes the identity of people of Mexican descent living in the United States.

- How does this *ofrenda* for Dolores del Río connect with the photographic portrait you saw?
- What does it add to or extend your thinking about the actress?
- What about this artwork is challenging?
- With this artwork, Mesa-Bains sought to "...shift perception of Dolores del Río from being merely a fashionable commodity to her recognition as a woman of significant accomplishment, the first Mexican superstar breaking racial taboos of mainstream Hollywood."
  - How/has she depicted del Río as fashionable? As a commodity?
  - How/has she depicted del Río as a superstar? As Mexican?
  - How/has she depicted del Río as a woman of accomplishment?

## Comparative Analysis: Cinema Card and *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*

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Present students again with both artworks, side-by-side. Remind them that one is a portrayal of Dolores del Río during her life and the second is a memorial to her after her death.

During the era of silent movies, Dolores del Río was often cast as a white character. When "talkies" came along, del Río managed a transition that many actors didn't: she remained a star. Her "exotic" accent, however, led her to be typecast as a Polynesian princess, a Brazilian belle, and a European aristocrat. The newspapers referred to her as Spanish. Del Río, however, spent her career fighting to be recognized for her heritage: Mexican.

Have students reflect on the following prompts.

- Looking at these two works side-by-side, what cultural or historical influences do you think helped shape each of these works?
- How is del Río's identity addressed differently when you compare these two works? What in American culture, if anything, might this reflect?
- What is the power in reflecting one's own culture proudly, and in the public sphere? How did del Río act as a change agent, in addition to a Hollywood star?

## Extension Idea

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Invite students to look carefully at advertisements, speeches, governmental systems, etc. (called "provocations" below) as the product of a particular cultural identity.

Challenge students to:

1. Break the provocation into its physical or conceptual parts. *What are these parts? Name them.*
2. Think about the purpose each part serves. *What job does each of these parts do? How do the parts of this provocation work together? What larger need does this seem to serve? Name that system.*
3. Consider who is impacted by the system and who shaped the system. *How do I participate in this system? Whose choices created this system?*
4. Ask themselves challenging questions. *Do I think this system is fair? To whom? What kind(s) of change would I like to see? What kind of information do I need in order to take informed action? What challenging questions do I need to ask? Of whom?*
5. Take informed action. *Based on what I know now, what chance would I like to see? What first step can I take to inspire that change?*

## Supplemental Resources

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Additional artworks to connect to and extend from the themes of depicting the lives and identities of Latinx people as nuanced, bicultural, empowered:

- [A powerful portrait of author and poet Sandra Cisneros](#). Consider pairing this image with the portrayal of a much younger girl in Cisneros's *Eleven*. [Start at 2:30 in this video](#) to hear the author reading her own work.
- [Fabricated film still](#) by Asco, a group of artists whose work placed Chicanos in control of their own public images, revealing the hunger for a broader range of Latinx representations.
- A fictionalized narrative captured in photos, [Maria's Great Expedition](#), features artist Christina Fernandez in the guise of her great-grandmother María González, the first member of her family to migrate to the United States from Mexico.
- Publication: Hershfield, Joanne. *The Invention of Dolores del Río*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ©2000.

Additional information on *Día de Los Muertos* and *ofrendas* to support students' understanding of the meaning behind artist Amalia Mesa-Bains's choice of media:

- ["Amalia Mesa-Bains, 'An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río,'" an episode in the podcast series Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art produced by the Smithsonian Museum of American Art.](#)
- [Anderson, Maria. "5 Facts About Día de Los Muertos \(The Day of the Dead\)." Smithsonian Insider, Smithsonian Institution, October 30, 2016.](#)
- [Enriquez-Flores, Fabiola. "Exploring Día de Los Muertos with Sandra Cisneros." O Say Can You See? Stories from the Museum, Smithsonian Institution, November 11, 2014.](#)
- [Vidaurri, Cynthia. "Did Disney Pixar Get Day of the Dead Celebrations Right in its Film 'Coco'? Smithsonianmag.com, Smithsonian Institution, November 21, 2017.](#)

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