



1979

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 x 18 1/2 inches  
(33 x 47 cm)

Sheet: 16 x 20 inches  
(40.6 x 50.8 cm)

**GRACIELA ITURBIDE**

Mexican

Purchased with funds contributed by Lynne and Harold Honickman and with the Lynne and Harold Honickman Fund for Photography, 1998, 1998-69-2

### FIRST LOOKS

Who is this person?  
What is she doing?

Where is she? Where is she going? What is she holding?

How was this picture made?

Close one eye and extend your hand, covering the right side, then the left side of the photograph from view. How does looking at half of the photograph change its overall effect?

If you were able to enter this scene, what would you smell, feel, see, and hear?

Look for contrasts, for example: light and dark, modern and traditional, eternal and momentary.

What do you think the woman's face looks like? Why?

Describe the mood of this photograph. What do you see that makes you describe it in this way?

## MUJER ÁNGEL (ANGEL WOMAN)

A woman with loose, dark hair wearing a long, billowy skirt strides along the side of a rocky hill. The dark shape of the hill bisects the photograph diagonally, from the top left corner to the lower right corner. In the distance, gray sky and scrubby desert meet at the horizon line formed by the lumpy shapes of mountains. We cannot see the woman's face because she is moving away from us with her left hand extended and a boom box in her right. Her dark blouse and head are silhouetted against the sky, and the swirling folds of her light skirt contrast with the dark hillside. Who could she be?

Graciela Iturbide (ee-tur-BEE-deh), a contemporary photographer known for her documentary photographs of indigenous (native) peoples throughout Mexico, made this photograph of a Seri woman in the Sonora Desert in 1979. The Seri people, who call themselves the Comcáac (the People), originally lived on Isla del Tiburón (Shark Island) in the Mar de Cortés (Sea of Cortés, part of the Gulf of California) and the coastal area of the mainland nearby. Today, the Seri keep some of their ancient ways of life while adapting to the modern world. Until recently, women decorated their faces with delicate paintings and tattoos. Carved ironwood sculptures of sea creatures made by Seri men and tightly woven backsets that hold water made by Seri women are popular with tourists. Iturbide was drawn to the process of acculturation among the Seri: "I don't pretend to make my photographs speak the truth of what Mexico is all about. But in its villages I can feel the way culture is changing, and it's fascinating to live through it and try to capture it on camera."

The mysterious woman in this photograph has a traditional hairstyle and clothing and is walking in a landscape that appears to have existed forever. The boom box, firmly grasped in her right hand, seems surreal in this setting. Iturbide described her memory of

making this photograph: "I can distinctly remember the moment I took the pictures [Angel Woman]. It was like a gift life gave me. There was the music from her cassette, her hair was all tangled up—and it seemed as though she was flying." The title, *Mujer ángel (Angel Woman)*, reinforces the notion that this woman is moving gracefully between different worlds. Crossing the desert on foot while listening to recorded music, she combines old ways with modern ones. And like an angel, she seems to hover between ground and sky, heaven and earth.

## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Graciela Iturbide began taking photographs after she was married and had three children. Born in 1942 to an upper-middle-class, conservative Catholic family in Mexico City, she led a comfortable, sheltered life. After the death of her young daughter, she enrolled in a filmmaking class and met Manuel Álvarez Bravo, a modernist photographer renowned for black-and-white photographs that combine surrealism and social realism, was a major turning point in her life. She abandoned her dream of becoming a film director and began to work on still photography. While working as Álvarez Bravo's assistant, she traveled to villages and became aware of the lives and customs of indigenous peoples for the first time.

As a result of these experiences, since the 1970s Iturbide has focused on creating photo-essays of diverse cultures and lifestyles, capturing both the seasonal celebrations and the daily lives of people throughout Mexico. She also traveled abroad to work in Chile, Argentina, England, Japan, Madagascar, and Los Angeles. Iturbide establishes strong relationships with each community she visits and makes photographs that express a deep connection between their worlds and her own inner life: "I seek to trap life in the reality that surrounds me, remembering that my dreams, my symbols, and my imagination are part of that life."

In 1979, Francisco Toledo, a prominent Mexican artist and collector, invited Iturbide to photograph the people of Juchitán (hoo-chi-THAN), a Zapotec town in the southern state of Oaxaca (wah-HAH-kah). Iturbide spent time there, learning the ways of the indigenous Zapotec women and making her photographs with their cooperation and trust. Unlike most of Mexico, which is known for its patriarchal social structure, Juchitán has a matriarchal structure. The Zapotec women run the markets, control household expenses, and are the *curanderas* (healers). In Juchitán, Iturbide photographed women demonstrating at a political rally, selling iguanas and crabs, and enjoying evenings out in the cantinas (bars).

When she is not traveling or being a resident artist, Graciela Iturbide lives in Mexico City. She exhibits her photographs around the world and has won important prizes in Mexico, Chile, the United States, France, Germany, and Japan. While Iturbide's striking photographs capture the essence of unique individuals from a variety of traditional cultures in transition, they also represent a search for her own identity as a contemporary Mexican woman.

### ANGELITO MEXICANO (LITTLE MEXICAN ANGEL), CHALMA, STATE OF MÉXICO

Iturbide took this photograph in Chalma, the second most visited pilgrimage site in Mexico after la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe). Chalma is a small town located near Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos. When Augustinian friars arrived in the 1530s, they discovered that people made pilgrimages there to worship Ozteotl (ohs-THE-oh-tel), the Dark Lord of the Cave. After Christianity took hold, a shrine dedicated to Saint Michael, the slayer of dragons and demons, was built near the cave.

On the feast day of San Miguel Arcángel (Saint Michael the Archangel) in Chalma, children dress up as angels or as brides with skull masks. The angel child in this photograph is holding a leafy branch that symbolized purity.



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### CONNECT AND COMPARE

Look at these images of women in this poster set. What adjectives might you use to describe them? What story do they tell about the women of Mexico?

Compare *Mujer ángel (Angel Woman)* with *Angelito mexicano (Little Mexican Angel)*. What meanings or associations do you think angels might have for Graciela Iturbide?

Investigate the indigenous peoples of your region. (Hint: Explore the origins of geographical names.)

## RELATED ART PROJECT

Create a simple frame similar to the viewfinder on a camera. Fold an index card (4 x 6 inches) in half, then cut a small rectangle (1 1/2 x 1 1/4 inches) out of the middle of the fold. Close one eye and look through the frame. Experiment with framing the world around you. How does the composition inside the frame change? Look through your frame at a classmate walking, then trade places. Would it be easy or hard to capture just the right moment to take a photograph of someone walking away from you?

*This photograph is included in Mexican Art, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group, Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company, and The Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Foundation.*