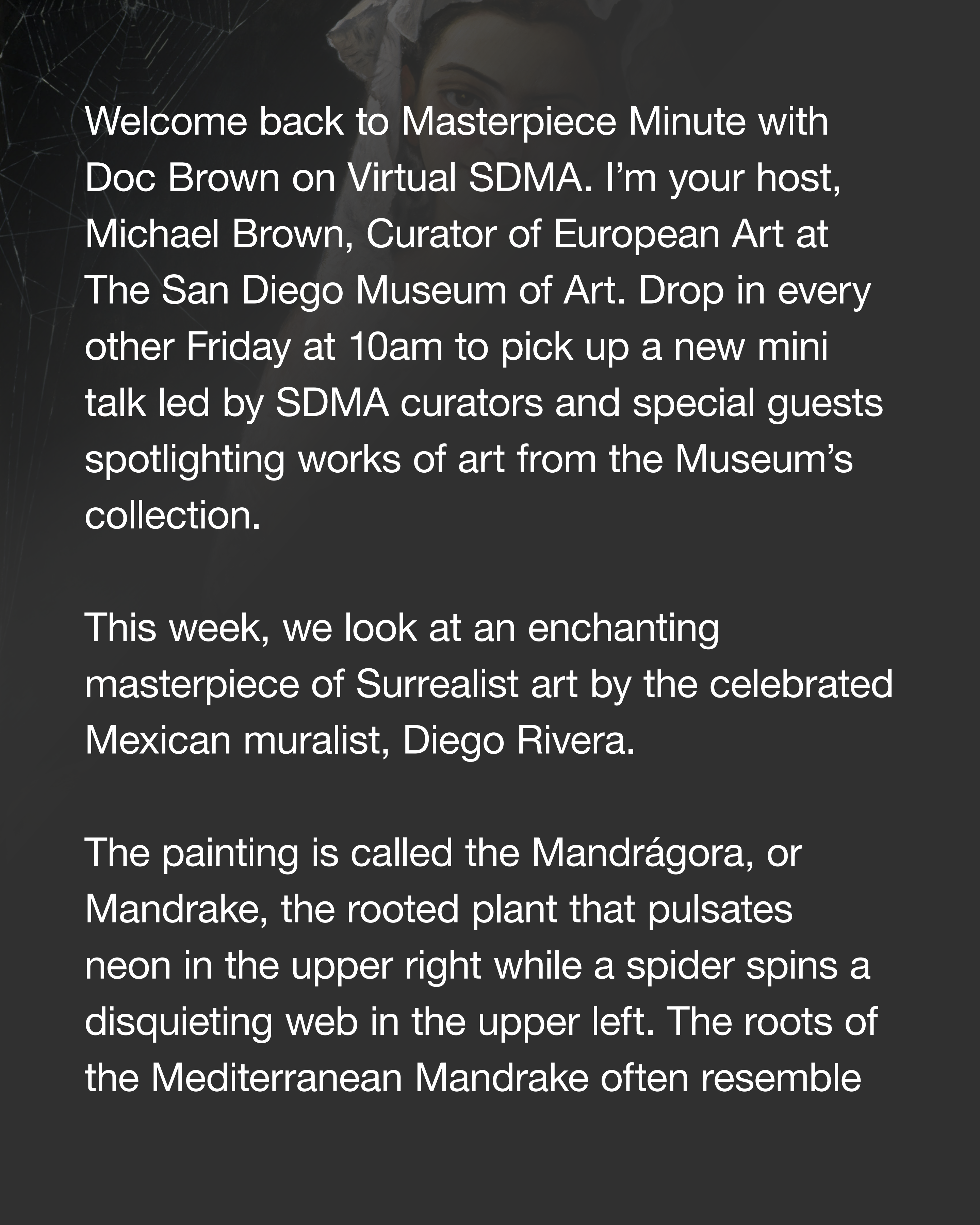


MASTERPIECE
MINUTE

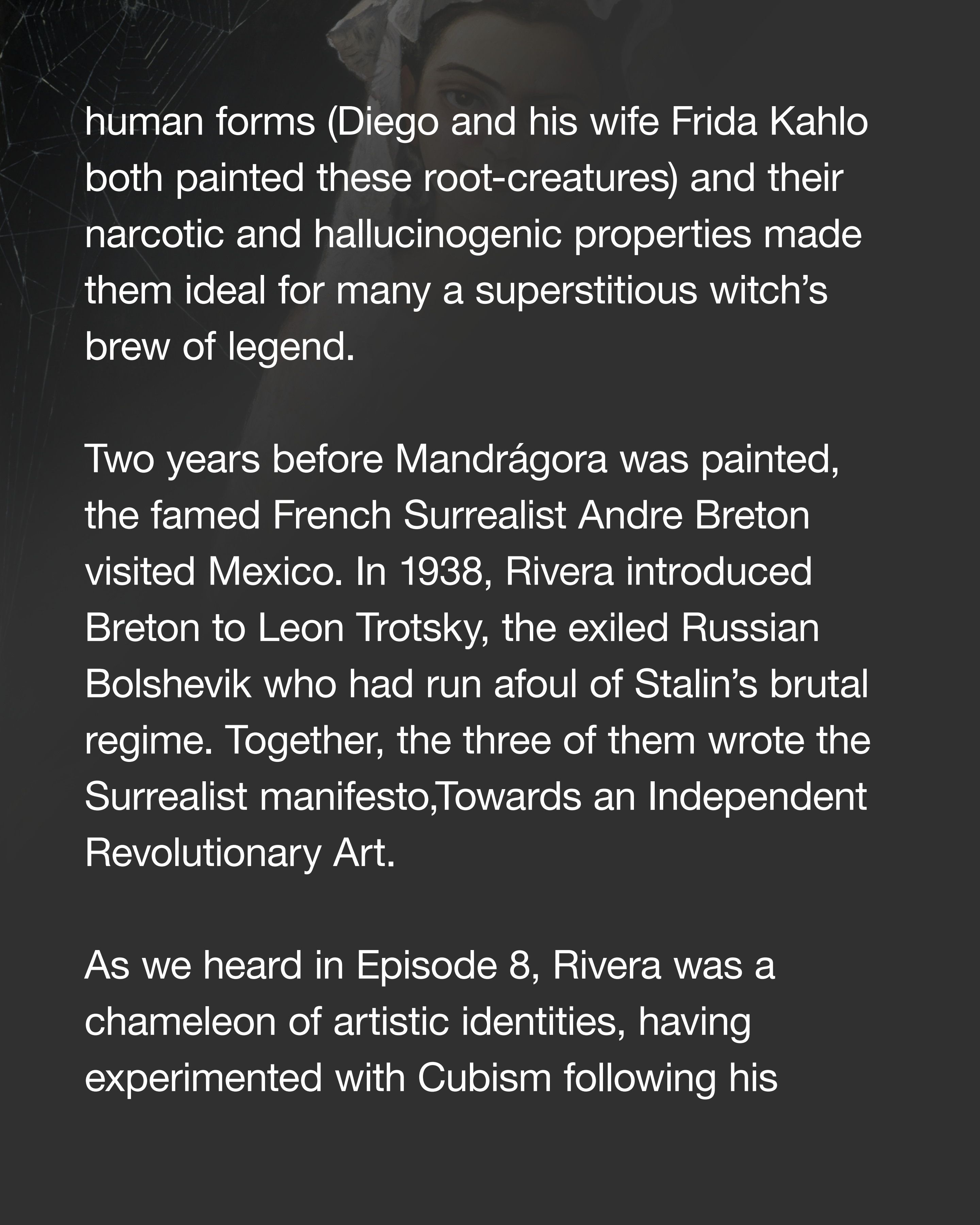


The background of the text is a dark, moody image. It features a close-up of a woman's face, partially obscured by shadows and a spider web. The spider web is prominent in the upper left corner, with its threads catching the light. The woman's eyes are visible, looking directly at the viewer. The overall tone is mysterious and artistic, fitting the theme of the Masterpiece Minute.

Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every other Friday at 10am to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

This week, we look at an enchanting masterpiece of Surrealist art by the celebrated Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera.

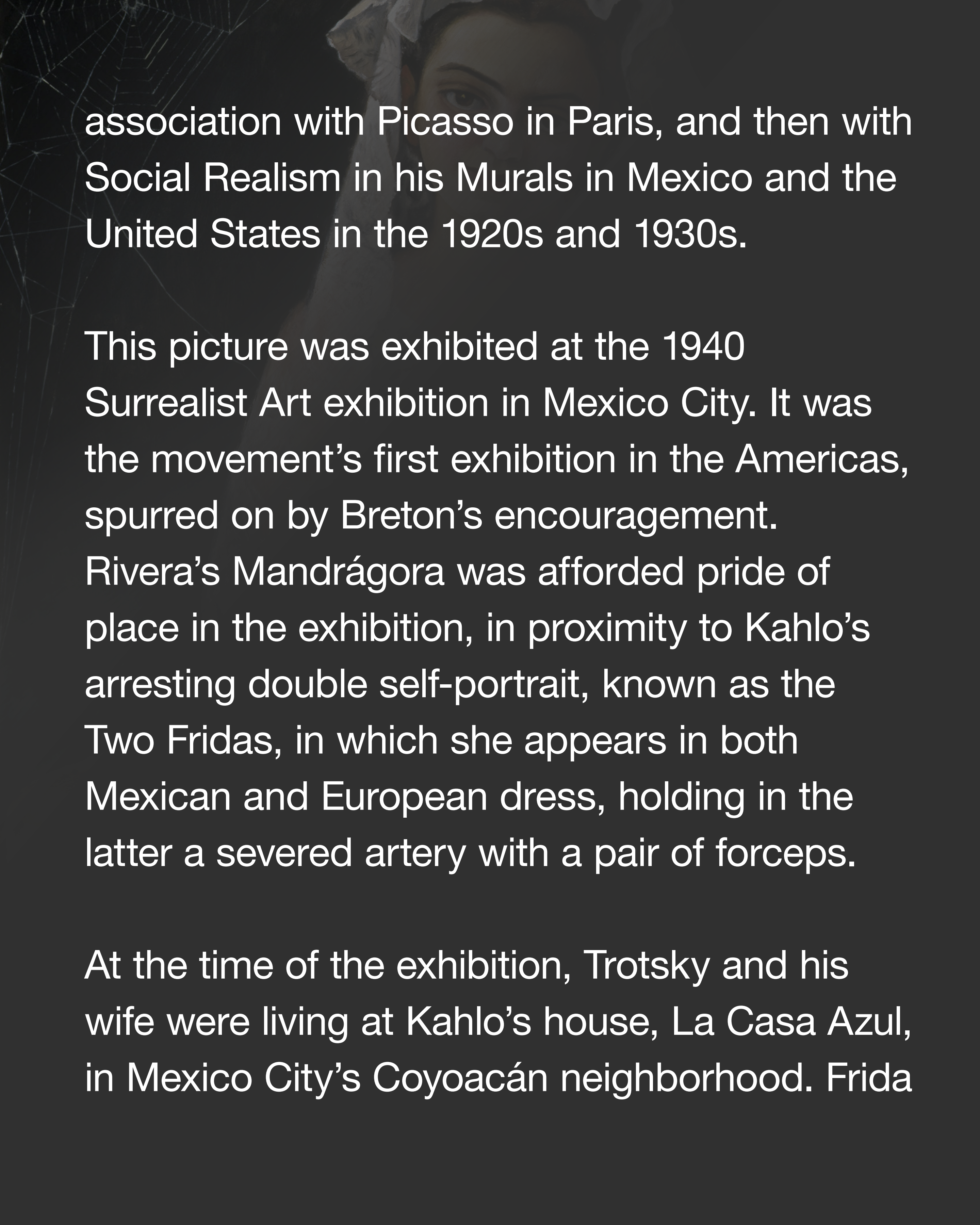
The painting is called the Mandrágora, or Mandrake, the rooted plant that pulsates neon in the upper right while a spider spins a disquieting web in the upper left. The roots of the Mediterranean Mandrake often resemble



human forms (Diego and his wife Frida Kahlo both painted these root-creatures) and their narcotic and hallucinogenic properties made them ideal for many a superstitious witch's brew of legend.

Two years before *Mandrágora* was painted, the famed French Surrealist Andre Breton visited Mexico. In 1938, Rivera introduced Breton to Leon Trotsky, the exiled Russian Bolshevik who had run afoul of Stalin's brutal regime. Together, the three of them wrote the Surrealist manifesto, *Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art*.

As we heard in Episode 8, Rivera was a chameleon of artistic identities, having experimented with Cubism following his

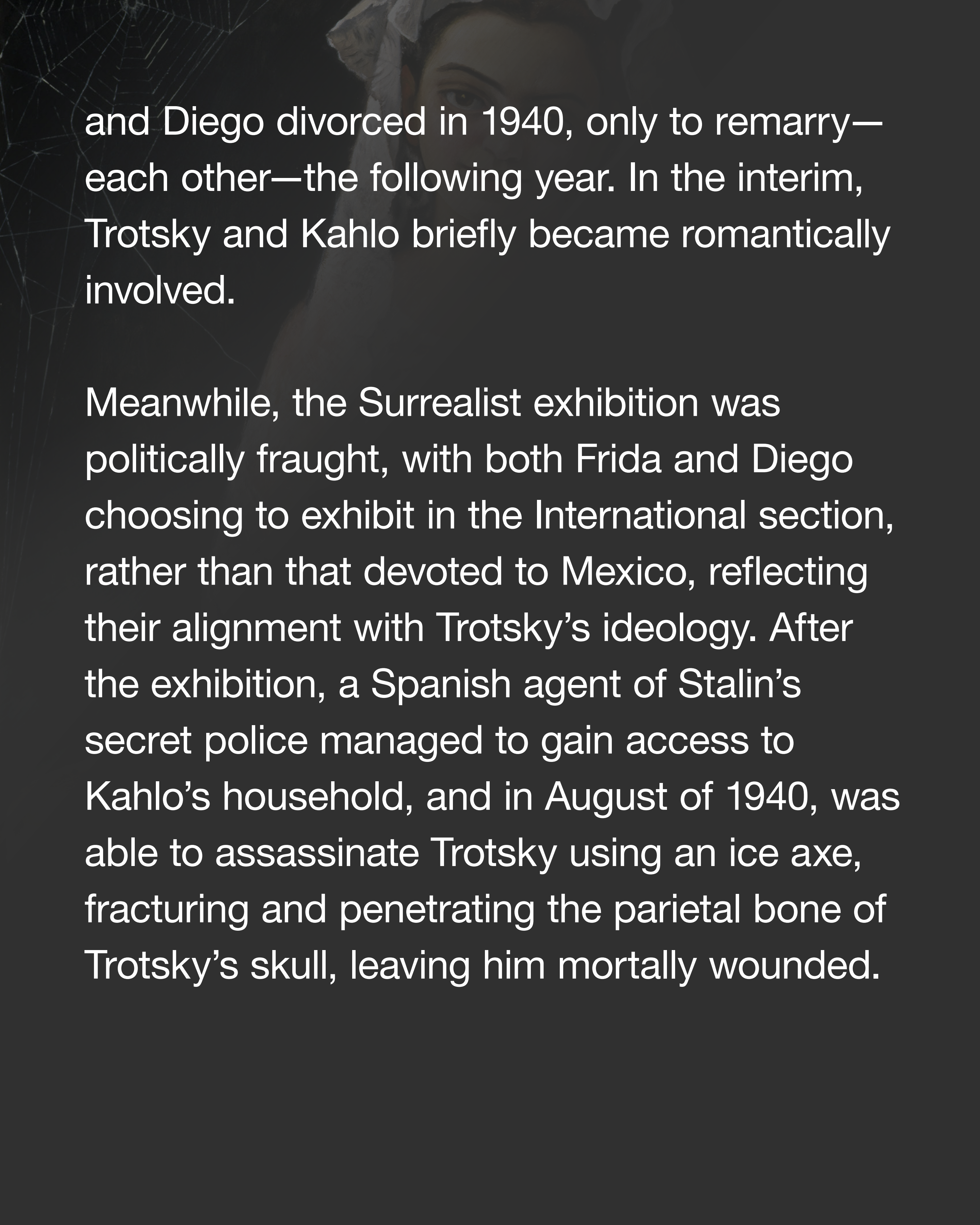


association with Picasso in Paris, and then with Social Realism in his Murals in Mexico and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

This picture was exhibited at the 1940 Surrealist Art exhibition in Mexico City. It was the movement's first exhibition in the Americas, spurred on by Breton's encouragement.

Rivera's *Mandrágora* was afforded pride of place in the exhibition, in proximity to Kahlo's arresting double self-portrait, known as the *Two Fridas*, in which she appears in both Mexican and European dress, holding in the latter a severed artery with a pair of forceps.

At the time of the exhibition, Trotsky and his wife were living at Kahlo's house, *La Casa Azul*, in Mexico City's Coyoacán neighborhood. Frida

A dark, moody portrait of Frida Kahlo, looking directly at the camera. She has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored garment. A spiderweb is visible in the top left corner of the image.

and Diego divorced in 1940, only to remarry—each other—the following year. In the interim, Trotsky and Kahlo briefly became romantically involved.

Meanwhile, the Surrealist exhibition was politically fraught, with both Frida and Diego choosing to exhibit in the International section, rather than that devoted to Mexico, reflecting their alignment with Trotsky's ideology. After the exhibition, a Spanish agent of Stalin's secret police managed to gain access to Kahlo's household, and in August of 1940, was able to assassinate Trotsky using an ice axe, fracturing and penetrating the parietal bone of Trotsky's skull, leaving him mortally wounded.

Speaking of skulls, note the papier mache calavera (as they are known in Mexico) in the woman's lap in Rivera's painting, whose stark white cheekbones and yellow eyes are set off by pointedly scarlet fingernails. The calavera may be an allusion to the Dia de los Muertos, coinciding with All Saints and All Souls' Day, during which the departed are celebrated with offering altars, calaveras, and often, confectionary figurines called alfeñiques, which had origins in Islamic Spain.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute. Thanks for joining us here on Virtual SDMA!