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## KAHLO, FRIDA

1907–54 • Artist

Frida Kahlo is one of Mexico's most important twentieth-century figures, well known for the life she suffered and the wrenching self-portraits she painted. Although during her short life she was a recognized figure outside Mexico, her international reputation receded to her own country after her death. In the 1980s a number of important biographies and traveling art shows catapulted her once again into the international mainstream. The large prices her canvases command today at New York and London auction houses is evidence of her growing reputation. Frida Kahlo's legacy—her paintings and life history—has inspired self-portraits, sculptures, short stories, plays, operas, movies, and even fashion shows. In academia she has entered standard art history survey courses, scholarly journals, and the covers of many books, even those having little to do with her or Mexico. During her lifetime Frida Kahlo, the person and the personage, was a symbol of human suffering and emotional strength. Today she is honored and reproduced in various guises worldwide as a patron saint of the post-1968 generation. And, like other saints in their posthumous lives, she is known and invoked by her first name, Frida. Among her followers there can be no doubt to whom they are referring.

Frida Kahlo was born to a German Jewish father of Hungarian descent and a Mexican Catholic mother of European and Indigenous background. She was the third in a family of four daughters. Two other daughters from her father's first marriage joined the family periodically when on vacation from their home in the convent to which they were sent when their parents divorced. Kahlo was raised Catholic, attending church daily as a child with her sisters and devout mother. However, she was not a typical Mexican Catholic girl. When she was not in church or school she was seen romping in the streets outside her house with the neighborhood boys, often in boys' attire. According to those who remember her childhood, she was an accomplished rascal, a cheerful tomboy, until she was six years. From that time onward Kahlo's life was to be a life of illness, operations, recovery and setbacks until her body and soul would expire 40 years later. First polio struck Kahlo, leaving her with a deformed right leg. Twelve years later she suffered from a trolley-car accident on her way home from high school. Her back was broken in three places, her collarbone and pelvis were crushed, her right leg and both feet suffered numerous fractures, and she was impaled by a metal rod through her stomach and vagina. Finally, based on contemporary readings of her x-rays, it appears that Kahlo suffered from spina bifida,

a congenital and debilitating condition in which the spine is left partially open at birth. For the rest of her life Kahlo was to have dozens of operations and eventually a leg amputated. She would suffer several miscarriages and abortions. She would spend many months in a body cast in bed, others in a wheelchair and in pain. Despite all this, Kahlo was remarkable for her ability to rise to innumerable occasions.

Kahlo's reaction to her own handicaps and the teasing she received from her cohorts was to foster her strong personality. Kahlo became an extrovert, building friendships in the most public of circles, while simultaneously becoming an introvert, retreating into herself through her writing and her painting. With two half-sisters in a convent, an older sister preparing to be a nun, and a pious mother, Kahlo could have turned to religious devotion for comfort and inner strength. However, Kahlo found herself dissatisfied with the church and turned toward her nonreligious father for a role model. Guillermo Kahlo was an accomplished photographer, which is how he made a living, as well as an amateur painter and pianist. He was well read and had a substantial library. Frida admired all of this about him. But, it may have been his epilepsy that contributed most to the bond that grew between them. Soon after her recovery from polio, it was Frida's father who encouraged her to excel in sports. She took his advice seriously. Before the age of ten and despite her withered leg Kahlo became an accomplished runner, boxer, wrestler, bicyclist and tree climber. While recuperating from the trolley-car accident her father along with her mother brought her paints, canvases, and brushes while she lay for months on her back. From this time onward Kahlo painted her world of pain, which never subsided; indeed, it only grew worse with age.

Frida Kahlo came of age when the newly formed Revolutionary government set up programs to integrate Mexican Indians into mainstream society through public education. She also came of age when the Revolutionary *políticos* and their artistic comrades presided over the Mexicanization of several bourgeois art forms. Long before her accident Kahlo had admired the famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who was a central figure in this effort. He had created a mural in her high school while she was a student there, and it was then that she first caught glimpses of him while he painted. After her accident, when she was back on her feet, she met him at a party; from that time onward he would figure prominently in her life. They married in 1929 shortly after their fateful meeting—she was twenty and he forty-two—and they

stayed married until her death in 1954. It was not always a smooth relationship, and it included periods of separation and even a tumultuous year of divorce and remarriage to each other. Both Kahlo and Rivera had lovers, but Rivera had a reputation for his philandering; it was almost a second occupation for him that at one time even included Frida's sister Cristina. Although Rivera's philandering hurt Frida enormously, she did her best to overlook it. In the early stages of their marriage she was a devoted wife; she regularly fixed his meals; she joined his artistic circles; she embraced his revolutionary ideologies. In addition, she joined the Communist Party of which her husband was president, and she readily embraced Mexican indigenous identities, as did her husband, casting the European pre-Revolution aesthetic aside in life as much as in art.

With Kahlo's marriage to Rivera, the most vocal and celebrated of all the Mexican muralists, Kahlo placed herself quite literally in the center of the political avant-garde. Owing to Rivera's close friendship with José Vasconcelos, the secretary of public education and architect of the Mexican Mural Renaissance following the Revolution, he was considered *the* man responsible for creating the visual vocabulary of the Revolutionary government. Kahlo and other women who on occasion modeled for Rivera found themselves scripted into the master narratives of his epic paintings that festooned the walls of the Revolutionary government buildings. Through Rivera Kahlo met the Parisian surrealist André Breton, the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, the Italian-American photographer Tina Modotti, and the U.S. industrialists Edsel Ford and Norman Rockefeller, among others. She traveled across the United States with him, as he painted murals commissioned by wealthy U.S. businessmen. Kahlo managed to use the international settings in which Rivera shined as platforms for her own self, earning a separate reputation in her own right, testimony to the power of her art. By 1938 Kahlo found herself in New York City with her first one-woman show, on the cover of *Vogue* magazine that same year, invited to numerous fancy parties as the guest of honor, and a year later with a one-woman show in Paris, at the invitation of Breton.

Rivera was Kahlo's greatest admirer and most active mentor. He promoted her painting career, encouraged her own style, and had much to do with the construction of her own identity as an artist and as an independent "Mexican" woman. It was Rivera who brought Kahlo her first Tehuana outfit from one of his trips to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. These non-tailored, brightly colored outfits with their embroidered shirts and long flowing skirts worn traditionally by the Tehuanas became Kahlo's hallmark both in her life and in her self-portraits. They suited her physical needs, her political agenda, and her strong personality. They made it possible for her to hide her polio-stricken leg and her ailing feet and troubled back; they underscored her allegiance to the nationalistic rhetoric of the Revolution and its ideologies of *Indigenismo* and Mexican-made aesthetic traditions; and, they associated her with the Tehuana women who were known and continue to be known in Mexico as matriarchs of

their society. Submerging her body in Tehuana fabrics, Kahlo gave to herself an aura of empowerment and other-worldliness, especially when she traveled to New York and to Paris; they were neither of her class nor of her time. On Kahlo the Tehuana outfit traveled to worlds far beyond its home—to the art worlds of Mexico City, New York, and Paris, to the political worlds of Mexico City, New York, and Los Angeles, to the social worlds of the Rockefellers and Fords and the André Bretons and the Claire Booth Luces. She appeared dressed in this garb in many of her self-portraits, in photographs taken of her, and in the fashion magazine *Vogue*. The Tehuana clothing contributed enormously to making Kahlo a symbol of Mexico as well as an advertisement for Mexico. On Kahlo the colorful fabrics did not hang quietly as they do today in her home. Instead they were always part of a grand performance.

Although Kahlo was an ardent supporter of the mural tradition and all it claimed to be and do—she promoted it at parties; she marched in political parades—in her painting she rejected it. Her narrative was personalistic, rooted not in the Italian Renaissance and the Beaux-Arts traditions of historical painting, nor in the Mexican school of Russian socialist realism, nor in the historiographic tradition of third-person narration, all of which characterized Rivera's work. Instead Kahlo's artistry drew upon the Mexican traditions of religious folk art known as *ex-votos*, with their first-person narration of human tragedy and upon the European traditions of portraiture as practiced in Mexico by the church. Kahlo also drew upon images of Christ and Mary for inspiration, but she did so in her own way, challenging the gender-specific conventions of ecclesiastical representation. In Kahlo's paintings women's bodies are as naked and bloody and fully embodied as those of Christ and as clothed and emotionally stoic and disembodied as those of Mary.

Kahlo's verisimilitude, particularly her bloody and fragmented bodies, led André Breton to declare her a surrealist. Surprised, Kahlo claimed that she painted because she needed to do so and painted what came into her head. Kahlo's paintings had little in common with the French surrealist imagination. There were many homespun reasons why she constructed her portraits from the pieces of her life; not one of them connected her to war-torn Europe or to the many phallogocentric manifestos of the surrealist movement. Kahlo's fragments mirrored her own personal life, especially her physical life, to her crumbling spine and her ailing foot. However, the awareness of her fragmented body was exaggerated by the conflicting character of post-revolutionary Mexican identity. What was it to be Mexican?—modern, yet pre-Columbian; young, yet old; anti-Catholic, yet Catholic; Western, yet New World; developing, yet underdeveloped; independent, yet colonized; *mestizo*, yet neither Spanish nor Indian. Kahlo identified herself with the contradictions of her *mestizaje* and through the assemblage of disparate objects, through her identity with church and national icons, and through the exposure of her own fragmented materiality she constructed a subjectivity for herself. Her pictorial honesty came less from something dream-like and imaginary

than real. And the bloody Christs of Mexico, the ex-votos and their tragic tales, and her father's documentary approach to photography offered important precedents.

Although Kahlo was upper-middle class and supported many ruling-class constructions of nationhood, in her painting and private life she was at odds with them and their elitist constructions of gender, race, and class differences. She demonstrated her discomfort in various ways. She decorated her house not with European and American imports but with Mexican *artesanías*, a common practice among her artist friends. Her collections of paintings were not the easels of "great" artists, rather the ex-votos of everyday people. When she married Diego Rivera, she wore not a fancy, expensive dress, but a dress belonging to her housekeeper who lent it to her for the occasion. In 1952 she had her photograph taken with all her servants, not common practice among Mexican elites. In the pictorial as well as actual construction of her own *mestizaje* (mixed-race status), Frida Kahlo mixed Indian with European, art with craft, high with low, crossing from one strata to the other with little regard for such elite constructions of difference. Kahlo not only traversed the sacred domains of gender, constructed and preserved by church and state, but she ignored the sacred domains of high and low art and high and low social status, crossing from one level to the other. Rather than mask her racial and cultural hybridism, as other members of the elite did, Kahlo openly acknowledged hers.

As an art teacher at La Esmeralda (1943–53), Kahlo not only refused the hierarchical role of *Maestra* and asked her students to address her with the familiar, second-person *tú* instead of the formal *usted*. She also rejected the tendency to take students to the country to paint the outdoors, popular among teachers then. Instead she took them to see Francisco Goitia, an artist who retreated from the Mexico City art scene to live a peasant—not bohemian—life in Xochimilco, a town south of Mexico City. She also took them to drink at local bars and to visit slums, marketplaces, convents, and churches. "*Muchachos*," she would announce, "locked up here in school we can't do anything. Let's go into the street. Let's go and paint the life in the street." She once had her students paint a mural, but not as the other art teachers at La Esmeralda had their students do, her husband among them. Instead, she chose the wall of a *pulquería* (a type of popular bar) on which to do it. This is what she meant by "life in the street." When she and her students were not outdoors, she encouraged them to paint what was in her house: popular art, traditional Judases, clay figures, popular toys and hand-crafted furniture.

It is not surprising that Frida Kahlo is at the center of contemporary identity politics in and outside Mexico. The insistence of many young painters and writers to credit Frida Kahlo with being a heroine in an otherwise male-dominated landscape and with achieving this recognition by public admission of her personal life helps to explain her popularity among young artists today—men and women—who seek ways to construct their own identities. Her followers are numerous and varied. For women artists in Mexico City, most all of whom grew up in upper-middle-class homes where the Virgin is held as the role model for young girls, Kahlo's rejection of the self-abnegating woman introduces the possibilities of a self-awareness that is profoundly rooted in the flesh and blood of female experiences. Reconstructing womanhood by women on their terms, indeed reconstructing a sexuality that runs contrary to those advocated either by church or state, has few precedents, since historically the representation of female—not to mention male—sexuality was exclusively a male prerogative. Kahlo, through the self-portrait, operationalized the psychology of being a woman as she did of being a Mexican. Her imagery is unique in the history of art. As Rivera himself put it; "This is the first time in the history of art that a woman expressed herself with utter frankness."

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## KINSHIP

See Family and Kinship

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