

CONTEXTUALIZING FRIDA KAHLO

Biographical Context of Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo was a product of her time. She was born on July 6, 1907 in Coyoacán, Mexico, though she would later change her birth date to 1910. Some say she did this to appear younger, others say she did it so that her birthday would converge with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Regardless of her reasons, the triumph of the Mexican Revolution and all that it stood for were without doubt highly influential in Kahlo's life, a life that would be anything but average and which was in truth quite exceptional. Kahlo was incredibly intelligent. Unlike many girls of her time, Kahlo was able to attend the highly respected *Escuela Nacional*, a co-educational *preparatoria* in Mexico City, where she was preparing to study medicine. However, hopes for any further studies in medicine ended on September 17, 1925, when Kahlo was seriously injured in a street car accident that irreversibly changed her life. Over the next thirty years, Kahlo would have numerous surgeries as a result of the injuries she sustained. Her talent as a painter was largely developed as a result of her time spent in bed recovering from the initial injuries and surgeries. The bodily pain she endured became a constant theme in her art.

Beyond expressing her personal pain, her art also served as her introduction into the world of the Mexican Communist Party, political activism, and of course, Diego Rivera. In August 1929, Kahlo married Rivera – who was himself a noted Mexican painter. His role in her life and her work is impossible to deny. Kahlo's relationship with him was a major impetus for a great deal of her work; the emotional influence he had on her remained a theme woven throughout her many paintings. In November 1930, Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural in San Francisco. The couple traveled there, and then spent the majority of the next three years in San Francisco, New York, and Detroit. These years spent in the U.S. were another important influence in the development of Kahlo's art. Some of her most famous paintings reflect her U.S. experience. Kahlo was critical of the U.S., and her art from this period shows that. This period in Kahlo's life was marked by her criticism of the US, but also by a traumatic miscarriage she experienced while abroad. This time of unhappiness was exacerbated further when, shortly after the couple's return to Mexico, Rivera began an affair with Kahlo's sister, Cristina Kahlo. By December 1939, Rivera and Kahlo had divorced.

Both Rivera's affair and the divorce hurt Frida almost irreparably. She would later say, "I suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar knocked me down. . . The other accident is Diego" (Herrera, 1983, p. 107). Despite the pain the affair and divorce caused, they brought about a major evolution in Kahlo's art. By the late 1930s, Kahlo was welcomed into the world of Surrealist artists as one of their own. In the fall of 1938, Kahlo's first solo exhibit opened in New York, and in the late winter of 1939, Kahlo opened another solo exhibit in France.

In 1940, Diego and Frida remarried, but their relationship was much different in their older, tempered age. Frida's health continued to decline, although she remained as active as she could, both in teaching art and in politics. It was only during this last part of her life that her art

began to receive the recognition that it deserved in her home country of Mexico. In 1941 and 1942 she received two different government commissions, but only one would be completed. In 1946, Frida was one of six artists to receive a government fellowship. Later that year, Kahlo received a prize of 5,000 pesos at the annual National Exhibition of the Palace of Fine Arts for her work *Moses*. In April 1953, Kahlo held her first solo exhibit in Mexico. Less than a year later, she would die on July 13, 1954. Since her death, her work has continued to grow in popularity, significantly surpassing the attention she was given during her lifetime. In 1977, the Mexican government organized a retrospective exhibition of Kahlo's work. Between 1978 and 1979, Kahlo's work was organized into an exhibition that toured various museums in the U.S. Since that time, her fame has continued to grow in the U.S.

Frida Kahlo's Political and Social Relation to the Art World

Kahlo was most definitely influenced by the political and social context in which she lived. The Mexican Revolution, and the implications of the Revolution throughout the following decades, heavily impacted her. Julio Moreno describes the ideological thoughts during the period after the Revolution:

They idealized Mexico's indigenous and folk heritage as a symbol of national identity. They also adopted a rather romanticized version of Mexico's past as a heroic and revolutionary struggle that had progressively made the country a social democratic society. Yet these expressions of Mexican 'identity' coexisted with the country's commitment to industrial development, commercial growth, and the reconstruction of modern Mexico. Mexicans defined national identity as an all-inclusive concept that elevated the indigenous heritage, peasant tradition, entrepreneurship, industrial spirit, and regional diversity of the country (Moreno, 2003, p. 9).

It was within this formative period of post-Revolutionary national identity that Kahlo became involved with the Communist party. Though she and Rivera would both leave the Communist party for a period of time, neither

would ever renounce Communism or its broadly conceived goals. During this same period of time, political repression against leftists was beginning to change. According to Hayden Herrera (1983), "the period of 1929-1934 was one of political repression. The military budget increased, and the attitude of tolerance toward leftists changed to virulent antagonism. Government support for labor unions ceased. Communists (Siqueiros, for example) were frequently jailed, deported, or murdered, or they simply disappeared." Most likely it was Rivera's connections within the government that spared him, at least for a period of time, the same fate of Siqueiros, who was another noted Mexican painter of the time.

U.S.-Mexican relations were also an important factor in this post-Revolutionary period. The 1920s through the 1930s were a relatively tense period for relations between the two countries. According to Moreno (2003), "the multifaceted relationship between the two countries was based on the establishment of cultural boundaries or a 'middle ground' that ended what up to 1940 had been a bitter and tense binational relationship" (p. 8). Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs was very important in the development of the middle ground. As a result of improving relations, the Mexican Arts Association was

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created, the initial impetus for which came out of a meeting in John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s home. The Association was created, "to promote friendship between the people of Mexico and the United States by encouraging cultural relations and the interchange of fine and applied arts." (Moreno, 2003, p. 127-128).

While this middle ground may have allowed Mexicans to monitor U.S. activities in their own country, the U.S. was still influential in shaping new societal aspirations. The middle ground

also did not enable them to control how Mexico was presented in the United States. The interest of families like the Rockefellers in Mexican contemporary art "led to discourses that presented a mixed image of Mexicans and their relationship to Americans. They depicted Mexicans as backward and even 'uncivilized' while portraying a romanticized image of Mexico's past and its revolutionary and indigenous heritage" (Moreno, 2003, p. 52). These tendencies will be important in thinking about Kahlo's reception in the U.S.

Frida Kahlo on Body, Beauty, and the Role of Women

There has always been a great deal of pressure put on women to conform to certain societal expectations, in both the actions one undertakes to meet society's expectations and how one literally and metaphorically "dresses" for the part. Going against these norms is at once a means of social and political protest. There is a great deal of overlap between the social and the political, but the discussion in this section will focus on the social criticism that Kahlo expressed.

Women's roles in society, and the expectations put upon them in terms of body and beauty, were themes in the lives and works of Kahlo. While undeniably beautiful, she did not conform to the contemporary fashion of her time. She created her own persona and then put that on the canvas; thus it became part of her art. Herrera (1983) writes, "Even when she was a girl, clothes were a kind of language for Kahlo, and from the moment of her marriage, the intricate links between dress and self-image, and between personal style and painting style, form one of the subplots in her unfolding drama" (p. 109). What she chose to create in that persona is of great importance.

Kahlo's choice of Tehuana clothing is important on a number of different levels. Many historians and critics, like Herrera, attribute her Tehuana

costumes to the influence of Rivera. Herrera (1983) writes, "Frida chose to dress as a Tehuana for the same reason that she adopted Mexicanism: to please Diego. Rivera liked the Tehuana costume. . . . There was of course, a political factor as well. Wearing indigenous dress was one more way of proclaiming allegiance to la raza. Certainly Rivera did not hesitate to make political mileage out of Frida's clothes" (p. 111). Even when Herrera notes the meaning behind the costume for Kahlo, it is both in relation to Rivera, and completely apolitical. Herrera goes on to suggest, "Wearing Tehuana costumes was part of Frida's self-creation as a legendary personality and the perfect companion and foil for Diego. Delicate, flamboyant, beautiful. . . . she invented a highly individualistic personal style to dramatize the personality that was already there and that she knew Diego admired" (p. 112). These descriptions only address one level of the meaning behind the Tehuana costume, in effect ignoring the very strong political connotations.

The political message in Kahlo's use of Tehuana dress is undeniably important, and should neither be relegated to a side comment, as many authors seem to do, nor attributed solely as a Kahlo's wish to please Rivera. Margaret Lindauer (1999) alludes to the deeper significance of Kahlo's dress choices when she

explains the history behind the women of Tehuantepec and the political connotations of their style of clothing:

. . .the women of Tehuantepec maintained their traditional matriarchal social structure in which women held primary economic and political positions. In other words, according to myth, they represented a past that had escaped European rule, thereby sustaining a 'true,' uncorrupted Mexican society. . . .Thus the Tehuana dress, donned by women in urban Mexico and illustrated in post-revolutionary art, was not merely a celebration of cultural heritage but an exaltation of continuous pre-Columbian culture and defiance to cultural assimilation (p. 126).

The way that Kahlo dressed was, in short, a way of defying cultural assimilation and asserting the importance of her Mexicanidad. Even in a choice so simple as selecting her clothing, Kahlo was politically resolute and assertive.

To understand Kahlo's resistance to cultural assimilation, it's useful to understand beauty ideals as they were conceptualized in Mexico during her lifetime. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, European and North American women were presented in advertising materials as the universal concept of beauty. Their white, Anglo-Saxon skin tones and facial features were idolized. Along with advertisements, beauty

columns began giving Mexican women advice based upon North American values and practices. Often times these columns were written by women and celebrities from the US. Moreno (2003) writes of a "1943 article on how to fight against an 'enemy of beauty,' body hair, [which] gave detailed instructions on how to prepare a depilatory cream and how to use it to remove unwanted hair. . . .The article described this process as a natural method. . . . However, it was neither natural nor Mexican, since there is no indication that Mexican women were accustomed to removing their body hair prior to the 1940s" (p. 143).

Kahlo obviously did not conform to the North American ideals of feminine beauty that were shared through advertisements. She did not believe that body hair was the 'enemy of beauty.' In fact, she was famous for her light moustache and heavy eyebrows, and she included them in every self-portrait that she did. More than simply not eliminating these characteristics, she elevated their significance. In her paintings, her eyebrows came to represent different things. At times, they were wings of birds, symbolic of her desire to fly away from her bodily pain; at other points, they symbolized her ambivalence toward gender.

In similar sentiment, her Tehuana costume would not have been considered 'en vogue' in

the 1920s and 1930s, although she would make it more fashionable in the 1940s when she appeared on the cover of *Vogue* magazine.

Kahlo's self-depictions simultaneously asserted her Mexicanidad and her sense of being a woman. In the process, Kahlo brought something previously private into the public realm, liberating women from their place in the home's private spaces. Her painting, *My Birth*, for instance, which deals with childbirth, is an example of her making public what would typically have been an incredibly painful, private experience. McDaniel Tarver writes, "*My Birth* takes a theme rarely treated in Western art, that of childbirth, the privacy of which is emphasized by the intimate setting (a bedroom), and exposes it in its painful reality to the public" (p. 66). Kahlo also makes another private act, that of breastfeeding, public in her painting *My Nurse and I*.

Kahlo dealt with many experiences that women of the time (and today) silently dealt with on their own. Domestic violence and abuse were one of these experiences. It was typical during Kahlo's lifetime to expect that women would be judged harshly for infidelity, while men's infidelity was overlooked as normal or expected. Violence against adulterous (or supposedly) women was relatively commonplace in Mexico and the US.

When Kahlo read about a drunken man who stabbed his girlfriend twenty times for her supposed unfaithfulness, she responded with a painting called *A Few Small Nips*. The newspaper article claimed that, when questioned, the man replied, "But I only gave her a few small nips!" Herrera (1983) examines how Kahlo deals with the topic by observing that, "In the painting, we are presented with the immediate aftermath of the murder: the killer, holding a bloodied dagger, looms over his dead victim who lies sprawled on a bed, her naked flesh covered with bloody gashes. . . . The impact on the viewer is immediate, almost physical. We feel that someone in our actual space—perhaps our self—has committed this violence" (p. 180). In making this brutal display of domestic violence public, Frida is protesting not only the act of violence itself, but the imbalanced stereotypes surrounding men and women's sexuality and fidelity. Lindauer (1999) writes the painting is "a visual explication of repressive social norms that delineate the paradigmatic male and female, distinguished not only in terms of sexual activity but also according to active versus passive behavioral roles" (p. 33).

Kahlo also explores the question of women's hidden emotions when she explores themes of shame and pain in her work titled *Suicide of Dorothy Hale*. Hale was a beautiful woman who

frequented the fashionable circles of rich society, until her husband was killed, leaving her with little money. For a while, Hale relied on the help of friends to maintain her lifestyle, but, unable to get another husband or a job, she became wretchedly unhappy, eventually committing suicide. Kahlo depicts the three stages of Hale's suicide as she jumped out of her top-story window, ending with Hale lying stiff on the ground, in a pool of her own blood. Herrera (1983) writes, "Perhaps Dorothy Hale was the victim of a set of values that Frida Kahlo

did not share, but Frida's compassion for her fall—literal and figurative—and her identification with her dead friend's plight gives *Suicide of Dorothy Hale* a peculiar intensity" (p. 294). Kahlo offered a 'visual' history of the plight of a friend, a plight with which many women could identify. However, society's norms that both created and perpetuated the expectations that could lead a woman like Hale to suicide, were rarely, if ever, dealt with publicly. Kahlo made it public in her *recuerdo*.

The Political Message of Frida Kahlo

Kahlo was a member of the Communist party for a good part of her life, and her art often provided a means for her to communicate her political views. Interestingly, however, the political messages behind much of Kahlo's work have been all but ignored. She has effectively been de-politicized, both in her own country and in the United States. The intense biographical nature of Kahlo's paintings often supersedes the political messages that she painted. As a result, viewers and other consumers of Kahlo's work have found it easier to focus on her self-representation and biographical content.

In terms of her politics, Kahlo was highly critical of the U.S.; her feelings in this regard were evident in both paintings and personal correspondence. Her dislike was not monolithic and unilateral; there were areas that she enjoyed in her travels, such as San Francisco – a plan with which she was enamored:

The city and bay are overwhelming . . . What is especially fantastic is Chinatown. The Chinese are immensely sympathetic and never in my life have I seen such beautiful children as the Chinese ones. Yes, they are really extraordinary. . . it did make sense to come here, because it opened my eyes and I have seen an enormous number of new and beautiful things (Herrera, 1983, p. 118).

Yet even while she was drawn to the mystique of San Francisco, Kahlo was critical overall of what she saw while in other parts of the U.S., especially New York and Detroit. In one letter to a friend, Kahlo writes the following of New York:

High society turns me off and I feel a bit of a rage against all these rich guys here, since I have seen thousands of people in the most terrible misery without anything to eat and with no place to sleep, that is what has most impressed me here, it is terrifying to see the rich having parties day and night while thousands and thousands of people are dying of hunger. . . I find that Americans completely lack sensibility and good taste. They live in an enormous chicken coop that is dirty and uncomfortable. The houses look like bread ovens and all the comfort that they talk about is a myth (Herrera, 1983, p. 130-131).

Her criticism of the US was rooted largely in her mistrust and dislike of the myths of the superiority of U.S. culture and lifestyle that were being disseminated across the globe. Her paintings during this period aptly demonstrate that. Both *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) and *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and*

the United States (1932) are considered to be her more politically explicit paintings because “they critically portray the corruption, alienation, and or dehumanization of people in the United States” (Lindauer, 1999, p. 117).

In My Dress Hangs There, Kahlo has juxtaposed her empty Tehuana dress with a collage representing the cityscape of New York, making a distinction between Mexico and the U.S. While many writers and viewers choose to focus on how Kahlo's empty dress is a symbol of her loneliness and unhappiness while in the U.S., Kahlo's painting can be viewed equally as a strong demonstration of the critical eye with which she perceived the U.S. and its capitalist system. Lindauer (1999) offers the following insightful comments:

“In the upper left side of the composition, the stained glass of Trinity Church integrates a cross and a dollar sign, a highly cynical insinuation of a religious institution's unscrupulous debasement. . . .Directly above his [George Washington's] statue, in the background to the cityscape, stands the Statue of Liberty. Together they embody the founding philosophy of the United States as an immigrant nation offering individuals economic opportunity and liberation from repressive governments. Kahlo's composition intimates the

emptiness of such a promise because the citizens of New York City, represented in the foreground by newspaper photographs glued to the surface of the painting, do not live a liberated and prosperous life. They stand in bread lines, picket lines, chorus lines, and military formation. . . .They are faceless, anonymous, hordes of consumers standing in line for entertainment, justice, and fashionable goods. . . .”

But, Kahlo's criticism was not just limited to the United States. Lindauer suggests a very interesting interpretation of the symbolism of the Tehuana dress, considering it as a critique of the Mexican capitalist system:

In Kahlo's painting it [the dress] also is implicated in socioeconomic corruption. Hanging between the trophy and the toilet of capitalist society, it does not rise above. . . .exploitation of the labor force but rather generates an aspect of that oppression as the anonymous masses emanate from the skirt. . . .In the same way the telephone cord acts as semiotic thread implicating all aspects of capitalist industrial subjugation of workers (Lindauer, 1999, p. 127).

The symbol of the telephone cord and the billboard are also intriguing. It's been said that Kahlo found New York's prevalence of billboards intrusive; in her painting, the billboard is being destroyed in a fire.

Kahlo's *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* is another painting that offers a critique of the U.S. and Mexico. Kahlo has painted the border, but with stark contrast between the two countries. She has situated herself in that frontier, demonstrating her relationship to both nations. Her self-portrait in that space represents what Terry Smith refers to as a "mock persona, a Mexican-American monument" (as qtd. in

Lindauer, 1999, p. 131). This monument is representative of the Indian and European heritages, the symbols of the past and present. However, these two heritages, "never fuse. . .into one whole. . .[they] will not do, politically, precisely because it produces someone like her, like this, a mock persona. . ." (Lindauer, 1999, p. 131). Her painting effectively critiques the superficiality of U.S. nationalism as represented in the apparition of the U.S. flag in the industrial smoke, a superficiality echoed in Mexico's transparent flag, next to which smoke drifts, though not as forcefully, from Kahlo's cigarette. Both sides are equally devoid of life (Lindauer, 1999, p. 128-131).

The Legacy of the Image of Frida Kahlo

Kahlo was welcomed by peoples in Mexico and the United States alike, but her art and what she stood for were not; instead, popular society and art critics in both countries de-politicized Kahlo. When, in 1977 the Mexican government honored her with a retrospective exhibit of her work in the Palace of Fine Arts, it was what Herrera (1983) called "a strange sort of homage, for it seemed to celebrate the exotic personality and story of the artist rather more than it honored her art." Most critics and art consumers ignored the elements of social and political protest in her paintings, instead focusing on the autobiographical and the exotic. The default view held that she and her art were exotic, but not political.

Kahlo was not alone in experiencing this. Art collectors like Rockefeller even tried to de-politicize Diego Rivera, at least initially. When criticized for commissioning Rivera, a known Communist, to offer a show, Rockefeller made sure that the following was included in the exhibit's catalogue, "Diego's very spinal column is painting, not politics. . ." (Herrera, 1983, p. 127-128). However; Rivera's work was largely granted its due as a political act. Kahlo's work, although equally critical and politically incisive, was never politicized and never viewed in a subversive light, particularly in the U.S. Since

she was not seen as having a political consciousness, she was not labeled as a subversive artist. It was not Kahlo who was driven out of the U.S., but Rivera.

The de-politicization of Kahlo has made the world's current *Fridamania* possible. In 1990 at Sotheby's auction house, Kahlo's painting, *Diego and I*, went for 1.43 million dollars. Jack Rummel (2000) writes, the sale "confirmed an irony. It had been Kahlo's work, more than her husband's or many of the other recognized male artists of her lifetime, that has not only endured, but has triumphed" (p. 15). Despite the increasing danger in espousing anti-American sentiment, the fame of the woman who painted *Marxism Will Heal You*, has reached an all-time high within the U.S.

In an affirmation of Kahlo's popularity, Madonna bought two Kahlo paintings in 1990, and the 2002 movie, *Frida*, not only became a blockbuster, but earned Selma Hayek an Oscar nomination. Kahlo's likeness and her paintings have appeared on everything from socks to billboards, and her well-known coiffure with a flower crown has become appropriated by women and men alike. So, Rummel is right, Kahlo did endure, but we might ask: does the image that endures reflect her reality?