Mercedes Carbayo-Abengozar

**Kahlo, Frida**

Born: 1907 – Cayoacán, Mexico City where she lived until she died in 1954.



Self-portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser, 1940; Available in book: *Frida Kahlo self-portraits*; *http://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-dedicated-to-dr-eloesser.jsp*

One of the most recognizable Mexican painters of the twentieth century, Frida Kahlo produced around 200 paintings, dozens of drawings and an illustrated journal. She related her works to her experiences in life: in particular, to her physical and emotional pain and her relationship with her husband, the acclaimed Mexican painter Diego Rivera. Her paintings are visual narratives in which she fuses elements of fantasy and reality, Surrealism and Mexican folklore. She is perhaps best-known for her self-portraits. The life cycle is a constant concern in her art: birth, childhood, family, pain and death; her pictorial language is characterised by a great irony and sense of humour. Her importance lies in her ability to explore taboo aspects of female experiences long before the women’s movement. She was known for her alliance to the Mexican Communist Party, and her political position influenced her paintings from her earliest years as a painter in many different ways. Her work is emblematic of Mexican national and indigenous tradition, and as a depiction of female experience. Today Frida Kahlo has become an international icon and her paintings fetch more money than any other female artist.

Frida Kahlo was born as Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo Calderón on 6 July 1907 in Coyoacán, although she always gave the year of her birth as 1910 to coincide with the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), identifying with the ideals she was devoted to all her life. Her parents were Guillermo Kahlo, a Hungarian-German Jewish immigrant who worked as a photographer, and Matilde Calderón, a native Mexican of Spanish and Indian descent. Frida was very proud of her complex family and ethnic background and her *mestiza* origins, which made her look simultaneously towards Europe and the Americas in search of her roots, as she expressed in her work. *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* 1936 and *The Two Fridas* (1939) are two works in which she explores her Mexican-European ancestry and its emotional complexities. Kahlo openly expressed the fluidity and complexity of identity, representing androgynous traits in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) and homosexual tendencies in *Two Nudes in the Forest* (1939). Moreover, she often presented herself as a hybrid creature, merging her human self with plants in *Roots* (1943) and animals in *The Little Deer* (1946).

Kahlo contracted polio when she was six, which earned her the nickname of “peg-leg Frida” due to the deformity of her leg. It did not, however, stop her from joining the prestigious and competitive *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria,* where she made her first attempts at painting, although her intent was to become a medical doctor. Those ideals were left behind and her vocation as a painter began after she suffered a terrible bus accident in 1925, which confined her to bed for several months. With a mirror attached to her bed so she could see herself, the artist became her own model, as seen in the wide variety of self-portraits dominating her oeuvre. The half-length portraits within the universe of portraits of Kahlo appear to be most symbolic. In them, Kahlo appears surrounded by pets, jewellery and decorations mimicking her moods and mental states. In contrast, her full-length self-portraits are generally linked to autobiographical events such as her relationship with her husband Diego Rivera (*Frieda and Diego Rivera,* 1931), her physical condition (*The Broken Column,* 1944) or her ideas of life (*Memory of the Hearth,* 1937).

The Mexican Revolution encouraged a new wave of Mexican nationalism, leading to a pride in indigenous arts, crafts and historical traditions. This would become an intrinsic part of Kahlo’s work (*Pancho Villa and Adelita,* 1927). She joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1928 and became part of the intellectual, politically radical elite who allied with the poor and embraced the ideal of indigenism, intending both to vindicate indigenous/native issues and to place indigenous struggle for autonomy at the center of their work. In this way, the rich imagery of Kahlo’s works derives primarily from Mexican popular art and pre-Columbian culture (*The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth [Mexico], Myself, Diego and Señor Xólotl,* 1949) and in her work we can see people of working class origin represented, as in *The Bus* (1929) or *My Nurse and I* (1937).

Kahlo’s work carries political messages expressed in many different ways. She openly expressed her utopian believe in politics by creating works such as *Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick* and *Self-Portrait with Stalin,* both painted around 1954, the latter showing Stalin as a saint and thereby revealing her almost religious faith in Communism. She also expressed very clearly the power relationship between Mexico and the US by representing neo-colonialist pressures in *Self-Portrait on the Borderline* (1932). The still lives of fruits and vegetables were a way of expressing her love for Mexico (*Fruits of the Earth,* *Cactus Fruits* and *Pitahayas,* all painted in1938; *The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life,* 1943; *Still Life with Parrot and Flag* and *Still Life,* both painted in 1951; and *Still Life with Watermelons*, 1953). Perhaps her most important contribution to politics, however, was her very personal approach to her work, which made her a pioneer of 1960s and 1970s feminism in Mexico, embodying the motto “the personal is political”. She broke the taboos of her day with regards to the female body and female sexuality, as in her paintings *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), which represents the miscarriage she suffered in Detroit that year, or *My Bed* (1932), where the artist represents her own birth. Also, in *The Tree of Hope, Keep Firm* (1946), the artist shows the scars derived from an operation done New York. In *Without Hope* (1945) we see Kahlo vomiting in result of a fattening diet. These paintings can be read not only as an invitation to witness her pain, but also as a way to share it with the world, allowing other women to identify with her.

Frida Kahlo died in 1954. The last entry of her diary is a sketch of a black angel with the words: “I hope for a happy exit and I hope never to come back”. Indeed, despite being the envy of Pablo Picasso and claimed by André Breton for his Surrealism movement, she was at first forgotten within years of her death. She was rediscovered in the 1980s, in particular after the publication of Hayden Herrera’s biography *Frida* (1983). Since then, Kahlo has become an international icon both in artistic circles, with her works breaking records for sale prices, and as a popular figure. In 2002, Salma Hayek portrayed her in the successful Hollywood biopic *Frida*. Kahlo’s face has become as iconic as the image of Che Guevara and her corpus of work one of the most renowned from Latin America.

**References and further reading:**

Bartra, Eli. (1994) *Frida Kahlo. Mujer, ideología, arte,* Barcelona: Icaria.

Dexter, Emma and Tanya Barson. (2005) *Frida Kahlo*. London: Tate Modern.

Hardin, Terri. (1997) *Frida Kahlo. A Modern Master.* New York: Todtri Productions.

Herrera, H. (2003) *Frida: A biography of Frida Kahlo,* London: Bloomsbury

Kahlo, Isolda P. (2004) *Frida íntima.* Bogotá: Dipón.

Kettenmann, Andrea. (2009) *Frida Kahlo, 1907-1954. Pain and Passion.* Köln: Taschen.

Zamora, Martha. (1990) *Frida Kahlo. The Brush of Anguish,* trans by Marilyn Sode Smith. Seattle: Chronicle Books.

**List of works:**

Frida Kahlo, *The Bus*, 1929, oil on canvas, 10.14 x 22 inches. Fundación Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, 1936, oil and tempera on metal panel, 12.18 x 13.58 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, oil on canvas, 67 x 67 inches. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair,* 1940, oil on canvas, 15.34 x 11 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column,* 1944, oil on mansonite, 15.14 x 12.14 inches. Fundación Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

Frida Kahlo, *The Little Deer,* 1946, oil on masonite, 8.78 x 11.78 inches. Private collection.

Frida Kahlo, *Still Life with Parrot,* 1951, oil on canvas, 10 x 11. Iconography Collection Harry Ransom Humanites Research Centre, University of Texas, Austin.

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Ixcuíntle Dog and Sun*, 1953-54, oil on mansonite, 23 x 15.34 inches, Private collection.