
A Journey through the Eyes of Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo, born in Coyoacán in 1907, was, and is considered to this day, one of Mexico's most notable painters. Her artwork can only be described as powerful and expressive. She lived a life full of pain and found herself being reborn through art, which became both her escape and her reality. A declared Marxist and Stalin supporter, her political views are reflected in many of her paintings. To look at Frida Kahlo's art is to immerse oneself in a tumultuous yet strangely beautiful inebriation of emotions; to look at her art is to put oneself in the artist's shoes and experience her life, her struggles, and her ideas.

Born to a German father and a Mexican mother, Frida Kahlo grew up in the "Blue House" with her parents and sisters. When she was 6, she contracted polio, causing her to be unable to attend school for several months. Due to her illness, her right leg was deformed, which made her a target for bullies at school. Her father encouraged her to play sports to help her overcome this disability, and Frida began wrestling, boxing, and swimming, among other activities. These were all highly unusual activities for girls at the time, which shows how she was raised differently from the beginning, which would contribute to many of her feminist traits as she grew up. She attended the National Preparatory School, where she was one of the very first female students. This is also where she saw for the first time who would be her future husband, muralist Diego Rivera.

In 1925 she was in an accident that would change her life forever. Impaled by a steel handrail after the collision of the bus she was in and a streetcar, she suffered several injuries, including a broken pelvis, ribs and collarbone. She had to spend several weeks in the hospital, and then stay in bed at home for several months to recover from her nearly fatal injuries. This is the time when she began painting, producing her first self-portrait. After recovering, she rejoined her group of friends, who had become politically active, and then joined the Mexican Communist Party herself. Frida's political affiliation and her health issues shaped a great part of her art, which is why her life cannot be ignored when one looks at her paintings. Her essence is in every single one of her paintings; her personality, beliefs, and feelings shining through.

In 1929 she married artist Diego Rivera, whom she traveled with to different parts of the United States, where her husband was commissioned. Later on, exiled communist and one of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky found asylum in The Blue House. Frida and Diego sided with him on his anti-Stalinist campaigns. In one of her letters, Frida states that she's "more and more convinced it's only through communism that we can become human." Being such an independent individual, it can be hard to understand why she would be such a strong supporter of communism, since communism can seem to rob people of their individuality, making everyone live the same way. However, Frida criticized capitalism because of its impersonal way of shaping society, its cold grey buildings and factories, and how unfairly the lower class people were treated. In the 1930s a wave of anti-communism led to a hate campaign against intellectuals and artists, forcing many of them to leave Mexico. Frida and Diego took off to the United States, where they lived for a few years, associating mainly with other artists.

After World War II ended, many intellectuals were under the impression that the creation of

socialist states in Eastern Europe made Stalin's crimes an issue of the past. After Trotsky's assassination, Frida joined what at the time people called "peace movements", but were really Stalin supporters' events. Not only was she interested in the revolution, Frida was also very patriotic and took pride in her Mexican style of clothes and painting. She was very concerned with Mexican political issues, and created several paintings depicting this. On her painting "Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States," Frida stands in between the industrialized United States and a preindustrial Mexico. This is an obvious critique to capitalism and the new use of machines replacing nature. On the Mexican side one can also see a skull and a temple, with a bleeding sun on the sky, representing the hard work of the native people to build and preserve their culture. Many argue that the painting "My Dress Hangs There" very blatantly attacks American capitalism by portraying Manhattan as a gray and dark place, with her dress hanging from a toilet and a sports trophy. On the bottom left of the painting flames can be seen emerging from a building, and a congregation of people in front of it. This most likely represents her Marxist ideals, and her concern about fair treatment of workers. In her last years she painted "Marxism Will Give Health to The Sick", where she stands with a red book of Marxism, the background split into the good and the evil. When asked about this painting she said "for the first time, I am not crying anymore", hinting at the power of her political views on her emotional health. The symbols on her paintings give us a glimpse of the society she lived in, and how it was to live in her world and her reality.

Frida Kahlo is considered a feminist symbol, progressive and ahead of her time. She fearlessly painted herself and her struggles as a woman, showing without shame her sexual side, but also desexualizing herself in paintings of pain where she appears naked. Her naked body is not the centerpiece of these paintings, but the symbols around her, and oftentimes her pain, are what really give meaning to them. On her painting "What the Water Gave Me" Frida is portrayed taking a bath, with only her feet visible, one of them deformed. There are many symbols representing her struggles at the time; her naked dead body is sinking next to her parents. Two women, one white, one tan, float on a sponge on the right, showing her mixed heritage. All the different elements of this painting point to a pessimistic outlook on both Mexico's and The United States' society. A burning building, and a drowning Frida serve as a metaphor for the impact of colonization and foreign domination. Colonialism hurt the Mexican people, and now centuries later, the U.S. took almost half of the Mexican territory, leaving their people impoverished.

Frida Kahlo's life was full of illness, pain, and despair. This can be seen very clearly in her artwork. Not only was her foot deformed and her whole body in constant pain, she also had several miscarriages and many heartbreaks due to her husband's infidelities. After a separation with Diego Rivera, she painted "The Two Fridas", where she is split into two versions of herself, connected by heart vessels. In her hands rests a medallion with a picture of Diego, depicting her suffering and sadness, and representing the part of herself that belonged to him. Yet she is holding her own hand, showing strength. There is something surreal about seeing oneself as two different people. Sometimes as a person it is hard to separate oneself from the body and see things from a different perspective. Frida seems to have dealt with identity issues, which lead her to try to acquire a different philosophical perspective. Perhaps she felt that the person she showed the world was not the same person she saw when she looked in the mirror. "The Flying Bed" symbolizes one of her miscarriages, portraying Frida laying helpless and alone in a bed, bleeding out. A fetus is connected to her belly by a cord; a child she would never have. A pelvis is also connected to her body. Her broken pelvis never fully recovered from the accident she had as a teenager, contributing to her pain throughout her life, and impeding her from

having children. The painting is raw and vivid, full of emotion and pain.

Another consequence of her accident was that she had to wear a corset made out of steel. In “The Broken Spine” both her physical and emotional pain can be seen, her body full of nails and a metal spine, while her eyes look deeply saddened and full of tears. Again, she is alone and hopeless, left in a lifeless desert to suffer. When looking at this particular painting, the first thing that comes to mind is her “expressive gaze”. All that emotion being kept inside her is released through her gaze on the painting, making the pain real to the observer. It creates a connection between the artist and the observer, inviting the latter to experience things from her perspective. Her only way of letting all her negative feelings out of herself and into the world was through a paintbrush.

Despite the suffering she faced, she did not stop creating art or trying to find her own artistic identity. She carried herself with grace and determination throughout her life, trailing her own path as an artist and an individual. She claimed not to paint dreams, but her own reality. She explored this space of reality through her paintings, fighting depression, substance abuse, and her deteriorating health. She was always in search of a higher understanding of herself and the world she lived in. However, she seemed to always find herself to be incomplete, as can be seen in many of her artworks. She often painted herself being split open, or as an entity dissociated from herself. Her struggle never ended, and she died in pain, but she remained herself until the very end, never letting her personality be shadowed.