



Frida Kahlo

(1907-1954)

"I paint self portraits because I am the person I know best." - Frida Kahlo

In 1953, when Frida Kahlo had her first solo exhibition in Mexico (the only one held in her native country during her lifetime), a local critic wrote: 'It is impossible to separate the life and work of this extraordinary person. Her paintings are her biography.' This observation serves to explain both why her work is so different from that of her contemporaries, the Mexican Muralists, and why she has since become a feminist icon.

Kahlo was born in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán in 1907, the third daughter of Guillermo and Matilda Kahlo. Her father was a photographer of Hungarian Jewish descent, who had been born in Germany; her mother was Spanish and Native American. Her life was to be a long series of physical traumas, and the first of these came early. At the age of six she was stricken with polio, which left her with a limp. In childhood, she was nevertheless a fearless tomboy, and this made Frida her father's favorite. He had advanced ideas about her education and in 1922, at 15, Kahlo entered the premedical program at the Preparatoria (National Preparatory School), the most prestigious educational institution in Mexico, which had only just begun to admit girls. She was one of only thirty-five girls out of two thousand students.

It was at the Preparatoria that she met her husband-to-be, Diego Rivera, who had recently returned home from France, and who had been commissioned to paint a mural there. Kahlo was attracted to him, and not knowing quite how to deal with the emotions she felt, expressed them by teasing him, playing practical jokes, and by trying to excite the jealousy of the painter's wife, Lupe Marín.

However, her premedical training ended three years later, in 1925, when Kahlo suffered the serious accident which was to set the pattern for much of the rest of her life. She was traveling in a bus which collided with a tramcar. She spent over a year in bed, recovering from fractures of her back, collarbone, and ribs, as well as a shattered pelvis and shoulder and foot injuries. The accident made it impossible for her to have children, though it was to be many years before she accepted this. It also meant that she faced a life-long battle against pain. In 1926, during her convalescence, she began to paint with oils, mostly self-portraits, this marked the beginning of a long series in which she charted the events of her life and her emotional reactions to them.

In 1928, at 21, she met Rivera again through her friendship with the photographer and revolutionary Tina Modotti. Kahlo fell in love with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whose approach to art and politics suited her own. Rivera's marriage had just disintegrated, and the two found that they had much in common, not least from a political point of view, since both were now communist militants. Although he was 20 years her senior, they married in August 1929; this stormy, passionate relationship survived infidelities, the pressures of Rivera's career, a divorce and remarriage, and Kahlo's poor health. Kahlo was later to say: 'I suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar knocked me down... The other accident is Diego.'



Due to size difference, they were often referred to as the "elephant and the dove"

The political climate in Mexico was deteriorating for those with left-wing sympathies, thanks to the reactionary Calles government, and the mural-painting program initiated by the



Henry Ford Hospital (1932)

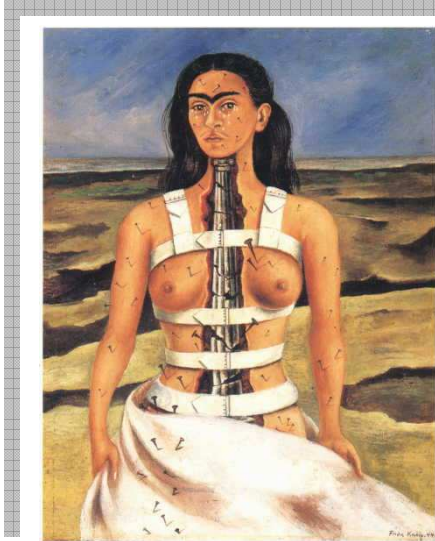
great Minister of Education José Vasconcelos had ground to a halt. But Rivera's artistic reputation was expanding rapidly in the United States. In 1930, the couple left for San Francisco; then, after a brief return to Mexico, they went to New York in 1931 for the Rivera retrospective organized by the Museum of Modern Art. Kahlo, at this stage, was regarded chiefly as a charming appendage to a famous husband, but the situation was soon to change. In 1932 Rivera was commissioned to paint a major series of murals for the Detroit Museum, and here Kahlo suffered a miscarriage. While recovering, she painted *Miscarriage in Detroit*, the first of her truly penetrating self-portraits. The style she evolved was entirely unlike that of her husband, being based on Mexican folk art and in particular on the small votive pictures known as *retablos*, which the pious dedicate in Mexican churches. Rivera's reaction to his wife's work was, however, both perceptive and generous:

Frida began work on a series of masterpieces which had no precedent in the history of art - paintings which exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit.

Kahlo, however, pretended not to consider her work important. As her biographer Hayden Herrera notes, 'she preferred to be seen as a beguiling personality rather than as a painter.' From Detroit they went once again to New York, where Rivera had been commissioned to paint a mural in the Rockefeller Center. The commission erupted into an enormous scandal, when the patron ordered the half-completed work destroyed because of the political imagery Rivera insisted on including. But Rivera lingered in the United States, which he loved and Kahlo now loathed. When they finally returned to Mexico in 1935, Rivera embarked on an affair with Kahlo's younger sister Cristina. Though they finally made up their quarrel, this incident marked a turning point in their relationship. Rivera had never been faithful to any woman; Kahlo now embarked on a series of affairs with both men and women which were to continue for the rest of her life. Rivera tolerated her lesbian relationships better than he did the heterosexual ones, which made him violently jealous. One of Kahlo's more serious early love affairs was with the Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, now being hounded by his triumphant rival Stalin, and who had been offered refuge in Mexico in 1937 on Rivera's initiative. Another visitor to Mexico at this time, one who would gladly have had a love affair with Kahlo but for the fact that she was not attracted to him, was the leading figure of the Surrealist Group, André Breton. Breton arrived in 1938 and was enchanted with Mexico, which he found to be a 'naturally surrealist' country, and with Kahlo's painting. Partly through his initiative, she was offered a show at the fashionable Julian Levy Gallery in New York later in 1938, and Breton himself wrote a rhetorical catalogue preface. The show was a triumph, and about half the paintings were sold. In 1939, Breton suggested a show in Paris, and offered to arrange it. Kahlo, who spoke no French, arrived in France to find that Breton had not even bothered to get her work out of customs.

The enterprise was finally rescued by Marcel Duchamp, and the show opened about six weeks late. It was not a financial success, but the reviews were good, and the Louvre bought a picture for the Jeu de Paume. Kahlo also won praise from Kandinsky and Picasso. She had, however, conceived a violent dislike for what she called 'this bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of surrealists.' She did not renounce Surrealism immediately. In January 1940, for example, she was a participant (with Rivera) in the International Exhibition of Surrealism held in Mexico City. Later, she was to be vehement in her denials that she had ever been a true Surrealist. 'They thought I was a Surrealist,' she said, 'but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.'

Early in 1940, for motives which are still somewhat mysterious, Kahlo and Rivera divorced, though they continued to make public appearances together. In May, after the first attempt on Trotsky's life, led by the painter Siqueiros, Rivera thought it prudent to leave for San Francisco. After the second, and successful attempt, Kahlo, who had been a friend of Trotsky's assassin, was questioned by the police. She decided to leave Mexico for a while, and in September she joined her ex-husband. Less than two months later, while they were still in the United States, they remarried. One reason seems to have been Rivera's recognition that Kahlo's health would inexorably deteriorate, and that she needed someone to look after her.



The Broken Column, 1944

This may be the one of Frida's paintings that shows the pain she was feeling the most. The Column itself, which is broken, shows one of the sources of her pain, the nails in her body show in a physical way the pain she was enduring and the tears in Frida's eyes show that her pain was excruciating. Frida's face shows both courage, and resignation; Frida's nudity may suggest that she felt she could do little about her situation.

Her health, never at any time robust, grew visibly worse from about 1944 onwards, and Kahlo underwent the first many operations on her spine and her crippled foot. Despite more than 30 operations throughout her life, Kahlo spent her life in constant pain. Authorities on her life and work have questioned whether all these operations were really necessary, or whether they were in fact a way of holding Rivera's attention in the face of his numerous affairs with other women. In Kahlo's case, her physical and psychological sufferings were always linked. In early 1950, her physical state reached a crisis, and she had to go into hospital in Mexico City, where she remained for a year.

During the period after her remarriage, her artistic reputation continued to grow, though at first more rapidly in the United States than in Mexico itself. She was included in prestigious group shows in the Museum of Modern Art, the Boston Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1946, however, she received a Mexican government fellowship, and in the same year an official prize on the occasion of the Annual National Exhibition. She also took up teaching at the new experimental art school 'La Esmeralda', and, despite her unconventional methods, proved an inspiration to her students. After her return home from hospital, Kahlo became an increasingly fervent and impassioned Communist. Rivera had been expelled from the Party, which was reluctant to receive him back, both because of his links with the Mexican government of the day, and because of his association with Trotsky. Kahlo boasted: 'I was a member of the Party before I met Diego and I think I am a better Communist than he is or ever will be.'

While the 1940s had seen her produce some of her finest work, her paintings now became more clumsy and chaotic, thanks to the joint effects of pain, drugs and drink. Despite this, in 1954 she was offered her first solo show in Mexico itself - which was to be the only such show held in her own lifetime. It took place at the fashionable Galeria de Arte Contemporáneo in the Zona Rosa of Mexico City. At first it seemed that Kahlo would be too ill to attend, but she sent her richly decorated four-poster bed ahead of her, arrived by ambulance, and was carried into the gallery on a stretcher. The private view was a triumphal occasion.

In the same year, Kahlo, threatened by gangrene, had her right leg amputated below the knee. It was a tremendous blow to someone who had invested so much in the elaboration of her own self image. She learned to walk again with an artificial limb, and even (briefly and with the help of pain-killing drugs) danced at celebrations with friends. But the end was close. In July 1954, at age 47, she made her last public appearance, when she participated in a Communist demonstration against the overthrow of the left-wing Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz. Soon afterwards, she died in her sleep, apparently as the result of an embolism, though there was a suspicion among those close to her that she had found a way to commit suicide. Her last diary entry read: 'I hope the end is joyful - and I hope never to come back - Frida.'