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Frida Kahlo was a unique and individual voice that stood out from the often pretentious posturing of early twentieth century artists. Her husband, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, described Frida as “the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings” (White, 12). Frida put it more simply, “I paint my own reality” (Herrera, 266). By giving us a view of her reality Frida introduced us to a new world, her world, a world inhabited by people proud of their heritage and secure in their convictions. She dug deep within herself to examine the nature of pain, both universal and personal. In so doing, she showed the world a new way to view beauty that is both disturbing and enduring.

Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo was born July 6, 1907. Her father Guillermo, born Wilhelm Kahl, was a Hungarian-German Jewish immigrant. Her mother, Matilde Calderon de Kahlo (Guillermo’s second wife), was a native to Mexico, of Spanish and Indian descent. Frida later shaved three years off her age, saying she had been born July 7, 1910. Fiercely proud of her heritage, she did this to align her birth with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, making herself a child of the Revolution. Frida’s pride in her heritage can be seen in My Grandparents, My Parents, and I. In the center of the piece, Frida’s parents pose for their wedding photo. Next to Magdalena, her parents float on a cloud supported by a ribbon over Mexico’s rough terrain. Likewise, Guillermo’s parents float supported in the same manner over the ocean. The placement of both sets of grandparents is significant. It ties them to the land of their birth. It is interesting that Guillermo’s parents float over the ocean, rather than Europe. It is likely that they are portrayed in this way because Frida felt a distance both emotional and physical between herself and her European heritage. The idea is not surprising. Most immigrants do their best to assimilate themselves into their new society. Though she was half German, Frida was fully Mexican. Her self-identification as Mexican can be seen in her portrayal of herself. She appears as a child, naked and innocent, not yet a victim of the pain she would later experience. The child Frida clasps the ribbon supporting her grandparents, but they are like figments of her imagination. She stands firmly, larger than life in the courtyard of her childhood home. Through this piece she is acknowledging the family ties that exist, while placing an emphasis on the Frida she will someday become, confident and thoroughly Mexican.

When she was six, Frida contracted polio. She was confined to the house for nine months. The loneliness and isolation she felt made her become more and more reliant on her imagination. It was at this time that she made an imaginary friend also called Frida (Herrera, 13). Imaginary Frida lived in the center of the earth, and they would laugh and dance together. This other Frida was later a partial inspiration for The Two Fridas. Polio shriveled Frida’s right leg, and the doctors suggested to her father that she exercise to build up the muscles. She dressed like a tomboy, swam, wrestled, skated, and rode bikes. Because of the doctor’s advice, she was allowed to participate in activities to which most respectable girls were not allowed access. This fact, combined with her natural precociousness, served to mold her into the elegantly flamboyant, cross-dressing artist she would one day become.

Frida had an active and inquisitive mind. Her father’s favorite, she often accompanied him on walks or when he was working as a photographer. Guillermo was an epileptic and occasionally had violent seizures. Frida took care of him when these seizures struck and also
kept watch to make sure no one stole the camera. The family could not afford to buy another one, and the loss of this source of income would have been disastrous (Sabbeth, 17). Guillermo encouraged her interest in the natural world, which he shared. She collected pebbles, plants, and shells, which she peered at under her microscope. He lent her books from his library, and when she was older shared his interest in archaeology and art. He taught her to use a camera, develop pictures, retouch, and tint photographs (Herrera, 19). Frida’s early love of biology can be seen throughout her body of work.

In 1922 Frida entered the prestigious National Preparatory School, one of only 35 girls in a student population of two-thousand (Hardin, 31). Incredibly bright, she quickly became bored because academics came easy to her. Consequently, she refused to go to any class she deemed boring or stupid. Instead, she put most of her energy into socializing. She loved to roam the halls, stirring up trouble. Frida had a close group of friends called the Cachuchas. They were obsessed with knowledge and shared a love of reading. One of their main hangouts was the Ibero American Library. They would compete to see who could find the most interesting book and read it first. The Cachuchas were not solely interested in intellectual pursuits, however, and delighted in playing pranks and causing general mischief. Frida’s love of the natural world and science were nurtured at the Prepatoria. She planned to go to medical school and become a doctor, but this was not to be.

On September 17, 1925, Frida boarded a bus that would change the course of her life. Buses were new in Mexico, and the buses of Mexico City at the time were made of wood and very flimsy. The buses were crowded, but that day Frida and her boyfriend Alejandro managed to find seats at the back (Cruz, 5). Suddenly, the path of the bus met with the path of a trolley. When neither driver gave way, the trolley pushed the bus sideways against a wall. The bus splintered, then exploded. A rod impaled Frida. The explosion had blown off all her clothes. She was covered in blood and a packet of gold dust belonging to a painter had burst, showering her. She wasn’t expected to live. Her spine was broken in three places. Her right foot was crushed. Her right leg and collarbone were fractured. Miraculously, however, she survived. She spent 3 months in the Red Cross hospital before being sent home to convalesce. She never fully recovered. She was unable to return to school, and it was during this year while she was bedridden that she began to paint (Hardin 35-36). Her pain is a consistent theme in her work, illustrated in paintings such as The Broken Column.

The Broken Column shows perhaps the most clearly, the results of her accident. It is unusual. Unlike most of her pieces, Frida’s direct gaze is no longer expressionless. Tears pour from stoic eyes, and her hair unbound likewise pours down her back. Nails large and small pierce and protrude from her skin, bringing to mind a martyred saint. Once again tearing open her flesh, she reveals to the viewer her spine in the guise of an ancient broken column. The column is ionic, whose sensuously curving capital is evocative of the feminine form. She is seminude, and in homage to classical art, white drapery clings to her hips shielding her from total nudity. One of her many corsets encircles her body, simultaneously supporting and restraining her. The corset also serves to frame and segment her torso drawing attention to her feminine curves, especially her breasts. The broken column of her spine is mirrored in the broken landscape behind her. She stands alone, a monument to the failure of her many doctors to make her once again whole.

Frida once said to a friend, “I have suffered two serious accidents in my life; one is the streetcar which ran over me . . . .The other accident is Diego” (Cruz, 25). Frida Kahlo first encountered Diego Rivera when she was at the Prepatoria. One of the three most famous
muralists in Mexico, he had been commissioned to paint a mural in the school. Frida became obsessed with him, watching him for hours while he worked and playing tricks on him. In 1928 however, she was no longer an obsessed child, but rather a budding artist seeking the advice of an established one. Diego was impressed by her work, and a friendship formed. In 1929 they were married. To commemorate the event she painted *Frida and Diego Rivera*.

*Frida and Diego Rivera* is at first glance a fairly typical wedding portrait. The couple stands, looking out and holding hands. Overhead flies a dove carrying a ribbon bearing the inscription:

> Here you see us, Me Frieda Kahlo, with my beloved husband Diego Rivera. I painted these portraits in the beautiful city of San Francisco California for our friend Mr. Albert Bender, and it was in the month of April in the year 1931 (Herrera, 124).

The couple stands, not quite centered, and almost filling the frame. Diego stands feet splayed firmly grounded. He gazes out at the viewer, confident and calm. In his right hand he holds a pallet and brushes, clearly identifying him as an artist. With his left hand, he lightly clasps Frida’s right hand. This gesture appears normal, but upon closer inspection, it is highly unusual. By placing Diego’s pallet in his right hand and herself in his left, Frida is making a statement as to the roles that will be played. Diego is an artist first and her husband second. The statement is further enforced by the way Diego’s head is turned. He glances sideways, almost slyly, out at the viewer. He seems almost to be in motion, as if he has stopped to pose for this portrait, but only momentarily. Frida, on the other hand, inclines her head toward Diego and looks out directly at the viewer. Where Diego is grounded and solid, Frida seems insubstantial, almost a floating figure. Her tiny feet peer out from her skirt and seem almost too delicate to support any weight. It is almost as if she could reach up, clasp the ribbon above her head and be carried away. She is, nonetheless, not a weak presence. Though Diego is the stronger figure in the painting, Frida’s red shawl immediately draws the eye. In the end, her presence is much more noticeable than Diego’s. If she were removed from the piece, it would be far less interesting and probably not noteworthy at all.

Frida’s life as an artist and the persona most people are familiar with began after her marriage. It was Diego who encouraged her to dress in the colorful Tehuana costumes that became her trademark. At first she dedicated herself to being Diego’s wife, but as their relationship continued, she began to paint more and more.

Frida’s art reflects simultaneously the instability and great love of her relationship with Diego. This complexity can be seen especially clearly in *The Two Fridas*. The growing distance between Frida and Diego would have led to a feeling of isolation, much like the isolation she felt as a child bedridden by polio. Once again, she calls upon imaginary Frida to lift her out of herself.

*The Two Fridas* was painted at a particularly bad point in Frida’s life. Her marriage was dissolving, forcing her once again to weather a significant change. The two Fridas sit on a small rush bottom bench or loveseat holding hands. They are usually described as the European or Unloved Frida and the Tehuana or Loved Frida. Both have an exposed heart connected by a single vein. Behind them roil storm clouds. The clouds are both ominous and despairing; they are the main conveyer of emotion in this piece. As is typical in Frida’s work, both Fridas stare out at the viewer, stoic and dispassionate. This dual self-portrait is an interesting commentary on the duality inherent in everyone. People are faceted and complicated. Everyone has a part of himself he would like to deny, but even these less attractive aspects of a personality are vital.
Each facet shapes the whole, and whether or not one can admit it, without these facets, however unattractive or boring, the whole would not exist. With this piece, Frida acknowledges her own duality as well as the strengths and weaknesses inherent in all the many parts of herself. She illustrates beautifully those pieces of herself that make her both worthy and unworthy of love.

The Tehuana Frida holds a small portrait of Diego as a child. The portrait is framed in a vein that wraps around her arm and connects to her heart. This same vein is connected to the open and wounded heart of the European Frida. The vein is severed, and the Unloved Frida attempts to stop the flow with a forceps; but it continues to leak blood onto her lap. The blood gathers and pools, spilling down the otherwise pristine skirt of her white dress. The source of the vein (the portrait) suggests that the love she has lost sustained her as blood sustains the body. By severing this connection, she loses a bit of the life she had; but by attempting to stop the hemorrhage, she refuses to lose her entire life. The pooling of the blood in her lap serves two purposes. The first, it brings to mind a miscarriage. Frida desperately wanted children, but was unable ever to carry a baby to term. Her inability to become a mother was a source of constant pain. However, her pain at her inability to produce a child is not all that the blood is representing. The crimson of the blood matches the embroidery on the hem of her dress. Drops of blood merge with and become a part of the floral design. The result is that while a woman bleeding profusely is a terrible, hopeless image, the merging of the blood and the flowers gives an element of hope. Though she is in pain and wounded now, Frida will turn her momentary weakness into something beautiful and new, regaining her strength and herself.

Frida Kahlo died July 13, 1954, at the age of forty-seven. The official cause of death was a pulmonary embolism. Her funeral was a large event. She was laid out in her Tehuana finery and jewelry. As mourners looked on singing the “Internacionale,” her body was rolled into the crematory oven. A blast of heat dramatically blew her lifeless body into a sitting position. Then, as her hair caught fire and flared up, she lay back down. Frida, so colorful in life, left a lasting impression in death as well (Hardin, 108).

Though classified as a surrealist, Frida rejected the label, believing surrealism to be a European movement. Staunchly communist and fiercely proud of her Mexican heritage, she preferred to think of herself as an original. Frida’s paintings are striking. They simultaneously repel and attract all who view them. They are small--most of them no more than twenty inches tall--and are composed of small careful strokes, likely a holdover from her training in retouching photos. Frida painted three types of work: portraits, still lifes, and most famously self-portraits. Frida’s portraits, particularly her portraits of the deceased seem to capture the subject in a way that is both realistic and unnerving. This is especially evident in The Suicide of Dorothy Hale. Originally commissioned as a remembrance portrait for Dorothy’s mother, it proved so disturbing that it was never presented to her and remained unseen for many years. Frida has captured the entire event. It replays itself over and over as the viewer’s eye is drawn up from the broken body of Dorothy Hale, only to find her tumbling through the air. She is seen jumping from the window, just before impact, and bleeding on the ground. The eyes of the broken Dorothy stare out at the viewer, and she seems to beseech understanding for what she has done. Her arm seems to gesture to her own suicide, saying “Look what I did; I was in pain; please understand.” Frida has extended the mist through which Dorothy fell onto the frame, causing the image to burst out of the frame, uncontained. As the viewer is drawn to the image, it responds by moving forward to envelop the viewer’s field of vision. Once again pain, this time emotional, has entered into Frida’s work. It is impossible to imagine the pain Dorothy felt, the absolute
despair and unhappiness, which caused her to take her own life. With this piece, Frida invites the viewer to examine the pain both caused by and resulting in suicide.

Frida’s still lifes almost pulse with color and sensuality. Her early interest in nature is clearly evident in the loving detail with which she renders her fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Fruit in paintings has long been associated with sexuality. Frida’s fruit is undeniably sexual. It is ripe exotic, and opened. It was a favorite convention of hers to portray some of the fruit in her still lifes cut or sliced open. People were scandalized by her portrayals. They have often been compared to genitalia. They seem to drip with juicy sweetness and tempt with promise. Like Frida herself, these still lifes ooze raw sexuality. Yet, there is also something repellent about these pieces. The fruit is incredibly ripe, but the sweetness will soon turn to the sweetness of decay. The opened fruit also brings to mind the opened flesh in her other work. It reminds the viewer that nothing is permanent. Unlike most still lifes, the fruit does not seem eternal. This fruit is aging and spoiling as it is viewed, and it will someday no longer be there.

Frida Kahlo is most famous for her self-portraits. They arrest the eye of all who encounter them. Her direct and stoic gaze peers out at the viewer; *Self Portrait with Thorny Necklace* is no exception. The painting is very shallow, with no sense of deep space. Lush tropical foliage nearly fills the frame. While it lends an exotic feel to the piece, it is also menacing. It is as though the foliage has choked out everything in its path. Frida wears a thorny vine as a necklace, from which dangles a dead humming bird. The humming bird is symbolic. In Aztec mythology, the spirits of dead warriors returned to earth as humming birds (Sabbeth, 85). A monkey on her right shoulder toys with or tugs at the necklace causing it to pierce Frida’s skin, cruelly drawing drops of blood. Over her left shoulder crouches a black cat preparing to pounce. A black cat is often seen as an ill omen, but it also symbolic of power and feminine sexuality. Frida’s hair is braided with yarn and adorned with silver butterflies. Butterflies are also a symbol of rebirth. Buzzing about her head are strange flower/dragonfly hybrids. They add to the otherworldly feel of this piece. They seem to be thoughts floating through her mind. This whole painting seems to say, “I am a woman; I hurt, but I am in control of my own destiny and can still dream.”

Frida Kahlo is arguably one of the most important artists and undisputed as one of the most important female artists of the twentieth century. Like the fruit of her still lifes, she opened herself with her art. This openness is why her paintings, particularly the self-portraits, have endured. They are personal and evoke a response from the viewer. Pain and loss are universal—everyone understands them—but Frida took these things and transformed them. Her imagery is often disturbing, but it is also undeniably beautiful. Perhaps the most simple and eloquent description of Frida and her art is found in the children’s book *Frida* by Jonah Winters:

Frida imitates no one in her style. Her paintings are like nothing else. In museums, people still look at them and weep and sigh and smile. She turns her pain into something beautiful. It is like a miracle (Winter, 26).
Works Cited


*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. New York: Museum of Modern Art and the Instituto de Antropologia e Historia de Mexico, 1940.