



Image from: [What the Water Gave Me \(1938\), by Frida Kahlo... in Encyclopedia of Disability](#)

Summary Article: **Kahlo, Frida (1907–1954)**

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Although she was born on July 6, 1907, in Coyoacán, the historic suburb of Mexico City, Frida Kahlo publicly declared her birth date 1910 so that she would be considered a true daughter of the Mexican Revolution. From 1926, when she painted her first self-portrait, to her death in 1954, Kahlo produced nearly 200 easel paintings, one third of which are self-portraits. Her art, considered revolutionary for its disturbing personal iconography, depicts the tortured and ravaged female body. Kahlo's painting reflects the confluence of art and politics, yet the biographical details of her unconventional life continue to press on the public's perception of her art. Careful analysis of Kahlo's physical and emotional pain, erotic life, and personal politics, however, supplant the sensational and affirm her art and life in a matrix of broader social, political, and cultural concerns.

Kahlo was the daughter of Matilde Calderón y González, a devout Catholic *mestiza* (mixed-race origins), and Guillermo Kahlo, a photographer and German Jew of Austro-Hungarian descent. She received her education at Mexico City's Escuela Preparatoria Nacional (National Preparatory School) where she was one of only 35 girls in a total enrollment of 2,000. There, Kahlo displayed an aptitude for science. In fact, she hoped to become a doctor at a time when female doctors were an anomaly. Following her studies at the Preparatoria, Kahlo took an apprenticeship with commercial engraver Fernando Fernández, which allowed her to demonstrate her proclivity for scientific drawing (biological details feature as a prominent compositional element of Kahlo's painting). However, Kahlo's ambition to pursue medicine was cut short in 1925 when she was injured in a catastrophic bus and trolley collision. A metal handrail impaled Kahlo in her lower torso, and as a result, she suffered irreparable damage to her uterus, multiple fractures to her pelvis, spine, feet, ribs, and collarbone. Remarkably, 18-year-old Kahlo recovered from her injuries, but she was never fully free of pain. All told, Kahlo underwent about 30 surgeries during the remainder of her life.

Thanks to the mirror and easel that her father installed above her bed, Kahlo began to paint in what many consider therapeutic response to her pain and confinement. Without the benefit of formal art training except for her brief engraver's apprenticeship and her father's introduction to the principles of photography, Kahlo displayed significant talent, her first painting, *Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress*, in 1926 showing an affinity to the conventions of Renaissance portraiture. Once recovered, Kahlo mixed with the aesthetic elite of Mexico among them Mexico's premier artist, Diego Rivera. The two first met when Rivera was completing a mural commission at the Preparatoria where Kahlo was a student; their reintroduction was instigated in the hope that Rivera would favorably assess her painting and subsequently offer her some part in assisting with his mural projects. However, rather than launch Kahlo's painting career, Rivera helped secure Kahlo a teaching position.

The Kahlo-Rivera relationship moved quickly from professional association to intimacy and the two married on August 21, 1929. Yet due to the social expectations associated with her new role as the wife of Mexico's premier artist, Kahlo did not pursue a teaching career. Instead, she accompanied Rivera to various mural sites in Mexico and the United States and forged ahead with her own painting.

The Kahlo-Rivera union proved uneasy during these years, with Rivera's philandering a constant source of anxiety for Kahlo. The two divorced in 1940, but remarried later that same year. Kahlo learned to negotiate Rivera's infidelities in their second marriage by engaging in numerous extramarital affairs of her own and exploring her bisexuality, most notably with Italian photographer Tina Modetti and Leon Trotsky.

Like many of the artists of her time, Kahlo was active in pure politics, dedication stemming from compassion for the disenfranchised poor of Mexico. Constantly in search of her own political identity, Kahlo embraced Trotskyism (Trotsky and his wife lived at the Kahlo-Rivera residence after fleeing Stalin) and swung from Marxism to Stalinism. No stranger to controversy, Kahlo, along with Rivera, was implicated in the murder of Trotsky; she and her husband were later exonerated of possible involvement in the Soviet politician's death. While dedicated to opposing ultraconservatism through involvement in pure politics, Kahlo was also prone to challenge authoritarianism through her painting. Unlike her male contemporaries the Mexican muralists who used social realism to exalt the struggle of the worker in large-scale works of the public sphere, Kahlo mounted resistance to repressive "systems" in her easel painting. As Latin American culture critic Claudia Schaefer explains, Mexican women artists' work was usually considered the domain of domestic hobby. Of particular importance about Kahlo's art, however, is that it elevated objects of popular culture (such as ethnic dress) and, as such, moved women artists' work out of the private sphere and into the public, traditionally male, forum of the art market.

The startling content of Kahlo's art lends credence to the indomitable strength of the female body. Her biological images put the female body on display to challenge the social, political and cultural discourses that sheathed femininity in the garb of idealized beauty. To wit, the difference between Kahlo's first self-portrait and the works of her mature aesthetic is striking. *Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress* depicts a feminine gaze that invites a viewer but does not fully allow him or her to penetrate Kahlo's self-fashioned mask of beauty. In contrast, the self-portraits of Kahlo's mature aesthetic display her own body as a subject to be *looked at*. Such portraits lay bare with disturbing realism female biological functions such as miscarriage and childbirth while still others show the artist's body literally cleaved open to exhibit the emotional and physical legacy of her accident, tumultuous marriage, and failed pregnancies. As such, viewing a Kahlo painting is a destabilizing prospect for a spectator who is transported to the territory of the artist's unconscious and suddenly made privy to the stark reality of her personal relationships.

Because the iconography of dreams, psychosis, and other realities lend an air of irrationality to Kahlo's compositions, her art often slides into the category of surrealism (the art movement that bodied forth an iconography of the unconscious mind). Some scholars, however, deny the connection between Kahlo and surrealism, contending that the traditionally male European art and intellectual movement had nothing at all to do with the feminist or Mexican context of Kahlo's work. That Kahlo categorically refuted any connection to surrealism is unmistakable, and she maintained that her work dealt with *her* personal reality, not the stuff of other realities. Notwithstanding such an argument, Kahlo's painting reflects an assimilation of surrealist techniques to the extent that her art pictorializes personal anxiety and stimulates intensity of emotion in viewers. Her preference for Mexican subjects (the landscape, pre-Columbian art and mythology, traditional Mexican costume), however, defies easy categorization and suggests an individualist's burgeoning feminist response to the colonizing agenda of a traditionally male European art movement.

It was not until the 1970s that Kahlo's art was considered a provocative response to the discourses that idealize femininity and buttress masculinity. Recovering Kahlo's art and life, then, was mostly the project of feminist critics who sought to analyze the artist's self-constructed identity and idiosyncratic iconography in the context of postrevolution ideology. While the reevaluation of Kahlo's art as a document of her life of emotional and physical pain demonstrates the extent to which changing sexual politics can prompt a revision of the Art History canon, scholars also consider Kahlo's "newly minted" cultural capital within the framework of her own self-consciously constructed artistic identity. To be sure, Kahlo adopted a signature style that made her an instantly recognizable figure, yet her contiguous eyebrow, Tejuana dresses, coiled hair, and exotic jewelry were more than a fashion statement; her style choices gestured to the politics of *mexicanidad* (the purest expression of Indian Mexico) in a time when "return to origins" was a concept inextricably linked to the rhetoric of Mexican nationalism.

See also

Communism; Feminism; Feminist Research; Marxist Theory; Mexican Muralists; Mexican Revolution; Rivera, Diego; Trotsky, Leon; Trotskyism

Further Readings

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