

KAHLO and RIVERA: Art, Heartbreak and Worship

By Juan Carlos Flores Zuñiga

Is art broader and deeper than the lives of those who produce it? Undoubtedly. Otherwise, our appreciation of artistic production would be limited to the research and reading that disciplines such as history, sociology and psychology make of it.

We have accepted as a convention since the last century that an object to be considered art must be produced by a human being endowed with symbolic thought and intentionality to communicate emotions, thoughts, and life experiences. However, it is argued that the first artistic evidence on this planet was made 40,000 years before Christ by homo sapiens through his intention to communicate his intelligence and sensitivity through objects made of shell, stone, and cave pictorial representations.

But if we did not know the context in which such prehistoric objects were produced, would they have the same meaning for each of us today? It is very likely not. The ideal to appreciate the artistic fact freely is not to depend on the distanced and interested readings of third parties that force foreign lenses on our own way of looking at and experiencing art.

From the perspective of the art critic, as Charles Baudelaire already pointed out, "*criticism should be partial, passionate and political - which means, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view open to the widest horizons*".¹

This has never been more pressing than when studying the mythologized artistic production of the duo made up of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who have become Mexican national heritage, a popular mass cult and a "*heroic and romantic*" cosmetic saga articulated by the left and feminism especially since the late seventies of the last century.

The exhibition entitled "*Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism*" is part of the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection that travels in a modular way around the world - almost seventy cities have hosted it in the last decade - allowing each museum to adapt the content to his own curatorial concept.²

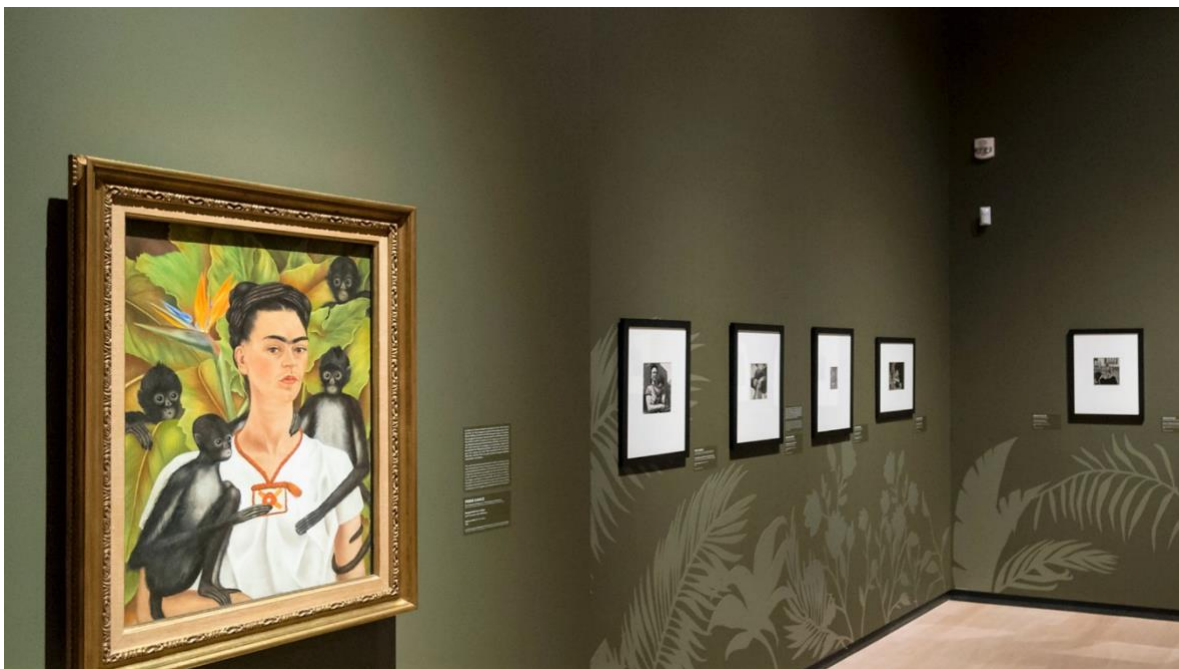
It provides an exceptional opportunity to critically examine the artistic contribution of Rivera and Kahlo and the myths that, from a personal perspective, ended up permeating their legacy for reasons of reputation, fashion, and the market.

Different curators have displayed more than 150 objects in 19 sections in each city focused on the Rivera-Kahlo couple, although works by other renowned Mexican artists are exhibited.

As explained by André Gilbert, curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Quebec, Canada, where it was exhibited "*It is an exhibition about a couple. That's how I tried to design it. Both are important, although today the critical*

*fortune of Frida Kahlo has surpassed that of her husband. We tell the story of a couple and we put Frida in the heart of each room."*³

When entering the halls of museums in cities such as Quebec, Denver, and Portland, one notices that the curatorship has consistently given prominence to the figure of Frida Kahlo over that of the rest of the exhibitors, including Diego Rivera (1886-1957). Not only are five of the twenty well-known self-portraits in the Gelman collection on display, but also numerous of his photographs taken by well-known photographers such as Edward Weston, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Gisèle Freund, and Nickolas Muray, author of a well-known series of color photographs. In addition, productions by the artist's father, Guillermo Kahlo, are emphasized, along with brief biographical films of the couple and Kahlo's typical wardrobe, which the Gelmans also collected.



One of the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo at the opening of the show at Musée National des Beaux Arts du Québec. Foto: MNBAQ

The museographic script is similar in all cities. After the first room dedicated to the work of Diego Rivera, the central character in the rest is Kahlo despite the company of works by great muralists such as José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros and mature paintings by Rufino Tamayo, Carlos Mérida and María Left. The exhibition is about life more than about the work of Rivera and Kahlo, so the concept of Mexican modernism with which the exhibition was baptized remains in the air like an empty promise.

FABLE OF THE ELEPHANT AND THE PIGEON

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) never made a name for herself as a painter or draftsman before meeting her future husband in 1928 at a leftist activists' party at the home of her mutual friend, the photographer Tina Modotti. She had only painted for four years without any technical or compositional mastery

and emphatically, according to her own confession, motivated by her therapeutic dimension.

Rivera, on the other hand, was 42 years old and had an internationally established artistic career, while she was 21 years old and her academic aspirations were cut short by a serious accident that occurred three years earlier when a tram collided with the bus she was traveling on, causing health problems for the rest. of her life that affected, among other things, a propensity for miscarriage.

That same year, Rivera portrayed her in a fresco called "El Arsenal" from the cycle of the "*Proletarian Revolution*" that she painted for the Ministry of Public Education. She appears flanked by Tina Modotti, Julio Antonio Mella and David Alfaro Siqueiros. She wears a black skirt and red blouse with a red star on her chest that affirms her membership in the Communist Party of Mexico that she became a part of in 1928.

Frida had been excited about another man, Alejandro Gómez Arias, who, in addition to lying to her, began to distance himself from her after her accident. And she approached Diego in search of advice since he respected him as a painter and needed to know if he could make a living from painting, an activity that he had started as a self-taught person since he needed to support his family who was bankrupt. Frida's first self-portrait dates from 1926.

According to her friend and her biographer, the art critic, Raquel Tibol, the muralist was attracted to atypical personalities like Frida's. To overcome her parents' misgivings, Rivera paid off the debts of the family whose residence she was about to be foreclosed on. Guillermo Kahlo was of liberal thought and artistic temperament, but his wife, Matilde Calderón, was religious and conservative.



FRIDA KAHLO, "Frida and Diego", 1931. Oil/canvas. Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
Photo: CCACR

It should not be surprising that when he learned of Diego's intention to marry Frida in 1929, he baptized it as the union between an elephant and a dove.⁴

Diego was an old man, fat, ugly, with chronic bronchitis, conjunctivitis in his eyes to the point that they had to hospitalize him several times, for fear that he would lose his vision. In addition, he was a dirty man with a troubling past as a womanizer. He made up for it with his impressive culture and scale as a

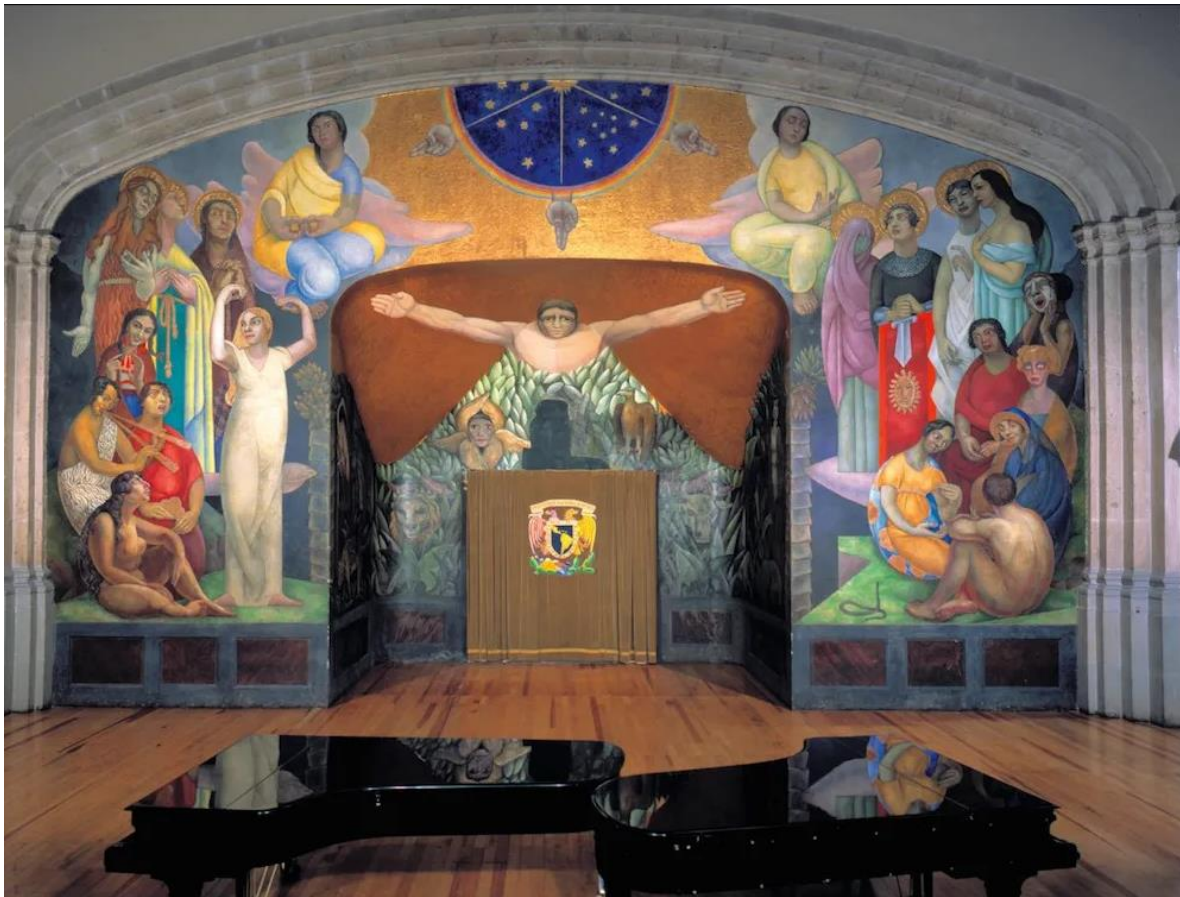
painter and teacher. Frida, who was basically self-taught, painted in a very "naïve" style, frequently returning to the ancient tradition of votive offerings incorporated into Mexican culture during the Spanish conquest.

He had not had a teacher and seems to have found one in Diego Rivera who stated upon learning of his early works, "*The canvases revealed an unusual expressiveness, a precise exposition of characters and genuine seriousness... They possessed a fundamental directness and an artistic personality of their own. They conveyed a vital sensuality, enriched by a cruel, if sensitive, power of observation. It was obvious to me that I had a true artist before me.*" (Autobiography by Gladys March 1960)⁵

What Rivera does is encourage her to continue painting, thematically reaffirming the discovery she had made while convalescing from the accident, "*I portray myself because I spend a lot of time alone and because I am the subject I know best.*" (Interview published in 1945)⁶

Of the nearly 150 works she produced during her lifetime, 55 are self-portraits. Unlike Diego Rivera, who was a master of painting and drawing, formally and conceptually, the work of the self-taught Kahlo owes much to a certain innate ease. However, his drawings in the ex-voto tradition are always accompanied by handwritten referential notes, while his paintings are intentionally folkloric or crude treatments based on elements of popular culture fed by some "red notes" of journalistic origin.

But her work was refined from the age of thirty when she had to leave Mexico with her husband for a four-year stay in the United States due to the political persecution unleashed by the government of Plutarco Elías Calles, who abandoned the cultural policy that promoted mural painting. and terminate contracts with artists. Even some frescoes are destroyed, such as Rivera's mural "*The Creation*" located in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater of the National Preparatory School in the Mexican capital.



DIEGO RIVERA, "The Creation", 1922. Fresco mural. Simón Bolívar Amphitheater, Mexico D.F.
Photo: JFLORESZ

SEEKING HELP UP NORTH

Meanwhile in the north there was a huge interest in the so-called "*Mexican Renaissance*", as I have already written in *Ars Kriterion E-Zine*. (Which Rivera, as the most outstanding representative of the muralist movement, was able to capitalize on through important public commissions in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York.⁷)

A year earlier, 1931, the Museum of Modern Art in New York had dedicated its second largest retrospective to the work of Diego Rivera. The previous one had been dedicated to Matisse. Rivera sold more work than Picasso even in the middle of the American economic recession. He was the fashionable artist and the industrialists persecuted him to commission public and easel works. Although everyone knew of his communist political leanings, they ignored that aspect, adding it to the ethnic nuances and authenticity of the sought-after artist.

As the late writer and art critic Robert Hughes declared, Rivera was a "*cross between Whitman and Picasso*". He was a gifted draftsman who never stopped studying and perfecting his strokes with a sure hand and delicate form. Thanks to a scholarship received during the Mexican "*Porfiriato*", he settled in Spain first in 1907 and then in Paris in 1909. He was part of the Cubist movement

with Picasso and Braque, as evidenced by his 1915 oil on canvas "*Zapatista Landscape*", but for 1918 he returns to figuration.

In 1921 he returns to Mexico at the request of the minister of education and intellectual, José Vasconcelos, who established the vast program of mural painting in public buildings. Once he painted his first mural "*The Creation*" in 1922, Rivera never abandoned the genre.

When Rivera and Kahlo arrived in Detroit on April 21, 1932, to develop the commission for the murals for the Ford Company, Frida was asked if she was also a painter, to which she responded with fierceness and ambition "*Yes, the best in the world.*" How have times changed?

In 2015 the exhibition held by the Detroit Institute of Art titled the exhibition "*Rivera and Kahlo*", but in Quebec, as in Denver and Portland and before in Sydney and Vienna, what predominates is "*Kahlo and Rivera*". The sample we are dealing with precisely makes this inflection due to clear fashion and market factors.

In Detroit, Rivera reached the pinnacle of her career as a muralist while Kahlo found his own in a primitivist or "*naive*" style that bordered on the fantastic, translating his emotional and physical pain into clearly autobiographical art that appealed to deep emotions.

Rivera, for his part, loved the grandiloquence of the public declarations of their enormous formats and sociopolitical content. However, the four walls of "*Detroit Industry*" frescoes painted on wet plaster, in the Renaissance painterly style, created what critics have rightly dubbed a "*Secular Sistine Chapel*." In it, a Rivera radicalized by the Mexican revolution and his adoption of the communist doctrine - although by then he had resigned from the Mexican communist party for its Stalinist approach - represented the workers of the automobile plant of the Ford company in Río Rojo as heroes, just as he did with the peasants in the mural paintings of his homeland.

In one of the frescoes, a huge printing press is transformed into an Aztec deity in a kind of convergence between the power of industry and Mexican identity. Rivera and Kahlo expressed their cultural identity differently. Rivera was optimistic about the potential for a cultural synthesis between Mesoamerica and North America.

The collection on global tour includes fifty high-quality photographs of Rivera's murals to illustrate this crucial period.



DIEGO RIVERA, "Detroit Industry", 1932. Fresco mural. (Detail north wall). Art Institute Detroit, USA. Photo: jflorez

But where he built a bridge, Kahlo built a wall. This was central to Kahlo's creative development from this decade onwards based on her paintings, mostly in small format, which explored the intimacy of her own body, her dreams, nightmares, and the painful physical afflictions that would accompany her until his death in 1954, in an apparent suicide.

Four works from this period confirm her assertion as a primitivist author, sometimes peering into the dimension of the fantastic at this stage. First, her portrait of Dr. Leo Eloesser, a thoracic surgeon at the San Francisco Hospital who had treated her while he was there with Rivera, with whom he had been a friend since 1926. The work, an oil on masonite, was done in gratitude for his services, but the relationship with the couple lasted several decades. It is the first of two that she undertook after two medical treatments.

Kahlo totally trusted Dr. Eloesser to the point of asking him for advice on whether she should abort the child she was carrying. He had already had an abortion in 1930 for medical reasons. The doctor recommended him to another doctor at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit where he weighed his options.

She then wrote, "*After weighing all the hardships a child would cause, I am excited to have one.*" All the above even though Rivera was not interested in having more children after her second marriage. However, Kahlo suffers a miscarriage and records her experience in a pencil drawing that serves as the basis for her oil painting "*Henry Ford Hospital*".⁸

The artist is shown naked on a huge hospital bed that seems to float. The sheet under her body is soaked with blood. From her womb, still swollen, three red strings float as if they were veins and to which symbols of her sexuality and her failed pregnancy are linked. One of them shows in the center

the oversized fetus of what she would later call hers "*little Dieguito*" of hers. The third element is a snail that represents the slowness of abortion, but it is also a symbol of conception and childbirth.

Three threads connect the cause of the abortion at the bottom of the bed, like a medical mock-up of a bone model on the right that recalls the pelvic and spinal fractures she had suffered before she met Rivera. As well as a medical machine on the left that served as a steam-based sterilizer. The violet flower in the center is an orchid that Diego took to the hospital.

The work evokes impotence and helplessness, a state of mind that adds to the growing criticism of Americans and their way of life. There is again a similarity in this work with the votive characteristics of her small format works on metal. It does not include an explanation in text as in the traditional works of the 19th and 20th centuries, except for writing the name of the hospital, but it continues in the same naïve biographical tradition with fantastic edges.

Also, her work "*Self-portrait on the border between Mexico and the United States*" that shows her in an elegant pink dress holding in her left hand a Mexican flag erect as if it were on a pedestal before a world divided by tradition and modernism. In the north, technology with its ugly industrial chimneys and in the south, the landscape and pre-Columbian cultural heritage. There is clear symbolism in showing the resources of fertility in the south, in contrast to the infertility of the north. The cycle of life is clearly symbolized by the presence of the Mexican deities Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca that correspond in composition to the sun and the moon on the ruins of a pre-Hispanic temple.



FRIDA KAHLO, "Self-portrait on the border between Mexico and the United States", 1932. Oil/metal. Art Institute of Detroit. Photo: jflorez

In a letter to Dr. Eloesser he writes, *"The High Society here drives me crazy, and I am revolted by all these rich guys, as I have seen thousands of people in the worst of misery, without the minimum to eat and without a place to stay for sleeping, that is what has impressed me the most; it is appalling to see these rich people partying day and night, while thousands and thousands of people are starving...Even though I am very interested in all this industrial and mechanical progress in the USA, I find that Americans lack sensitivity and a sense of decorum. They live like in a huge dirty and uncomfortable chicken coop. The houses look like bread ovens and the worn-out comfort is nothing more than a myth".*⁹

In this work we do not see the synthesis with which Rivera communes. She does not believe in the benefits of the American life that her husband celebrates. The only melting pot in the painting is her living in the moment with her body.

Finally, in the collage *"My dress hangs there in New York"* made in 1933, she defines the direction of her production. On the left represents the *"sexy and*

fatal" actress Mae West who was famous not only to use her sexuality to climb in the cinema, but she was also a screenwriter and set designer.



"There hangs my dress or New York", 1933. Painting and collage. FRIDA KAHLO. Hoover Gallery, San Francisco. USA. Photo: AKEZ

Frida admired her for her affirmed empowerment of her in phrases like "*When I'm good I'm very good, but when I'm bad I'm better.*" This symbolic collage portrays with a certain irony the icons of modern capitalism in terms of the decline of human values. Kahlo does not hide her disagreement with Rivera because of his fascination with the progress that dominates the capitalist world. She wants to go back to Mexico while Rivera wants to stay longer.

The moment of rupture occurs when his continuous discussions are joined by criticism from his colleague David Alfaro Siqueiros, who accuses him of having sold out to American capitalism at the time that Rivera is making his fresco mural "*Man: controller of the universe*" in 1933 for the Rockefeller family in the lobby of Building No. 30 in Rockefeller Plaza in New York.

In clear doublespeak that reveals its contradictions, Rivera altered his original proposal for the mural by adding the portrait of Russian revolutionary Vladimir

Lenin to the right of the mural's central figure. That didn't stop him from collecting the equivalent of \$412,000 today.



DIEGO RIVERA, "The Man: controller of the universe", Replica of the fresco (Detail). 1934. Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico. Photo: jflorez

Rockefeller asked Rivera in a respectful letter, dated May 4, 1933, to replace the image of Lenin since it contradicted what he was looking for in the public exhibition space. Given his refusal, the entire mural was covered with paint. Ten months later it was demolished. In response, Rivera painted another version of the work currently on display at Mexico's Palacio de Bellas Artes, which he modified by inserting a caricature of John D. Rockefeller flirting with a woman with syphilis cells on her head.

Rivera and other muralists who had migrated to the United States in search of income, such as Alvaro Siqueiros himself and José Clemente Orozco, enjoyed an advantageous position, talent, and influence in a critical period of Mexican history, but their lives and careers exposed a double discourse. common to the militancy of the left: to maintain a Marxist ideology sustained by a capitalist market.

SURREALIST MACHISM

The return to Mexico becomes inevitable, and the beginning of a stage in the visual arts gradually dominated by abstraction and non-figuration. Rivera's epic realism suddenly starts to look traditional. But, on the other hand, Kahlo's career took off thanks to her timely association with surrealism through influential artists such as Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Marcel Duchamp and the leader of the movement, André Breton, who moved to Mexico in 1938 with his wife Jacqueline Lamba.

There he pleads with Rivera for an art free of political restrictions and takes advantage of the friendship of the dissident Marxist leader, Leon Trotsky, and his wife Natalia Sedova, who since the previous year had lived and worked as exiles in Mexico. Breton writes the "*Manifesto for an independent revolutionary art*" that he signs with Trotsky and Rivera.

Although this opens the door for Breton's international promotion of Frida Kahlo's work first in New York in 1938 and then in Paris in 1939, the relationship is soured by Frida's disillusionment with the Surrealists.

To begin with, Frida was never a surrealist despite Breton's whimsical assertion since she did not follow the methods of intellectual production of that movement. Frida was consciously free from the intellectualism that she despised as much as the arrogance of the surrealists. Her style did not correspond to the uninhibited expression of the unconscious, characterized by dreams, nightmares, and Freudian neurotic symbols. If she agreed to be part of the surrealist rhetoric, she did so in the interest of being independent. When she saw that her paintings were starting to sell, she wrote, "*So I can be free. I will be able to travel and do what I want without having to ask Diego for money.*" But she was clear that her thing was not surreal art. That is why I declared on one occasion, "*I never painted dreams, I only paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint everything that goes through my head, without any other consideration*".¹⁰

However, a pattern begins to emerge in Kahlo's life and work. The attempt of different groups or movements to "*kidnap*" it intellectually. First it was the surrealists, then by the feminist fundamentalists. The surrealists tried to seize it, especially from the painting *What the water has given me*, in which Frida is bathing and her feet can be seen, one of them wounded. The water is full of things: memories and objects.



FRIDA KAHLO, "The Two Fridas", 1933. Oil/canvas. Museum of Modern Art, Mexico. Photo: AKEZ

André Breton even said that Frida Kahlo's work is "*a silk ribbon around a bomb*". Her stay in Paris made her forever disappointed in the surrealists. In a letter to her lover, Nicholas Muray, she wrote, "*You can't imagine how fucking stupid these people are... They make me throw up. They are so damned intellectual and degenerate that I can't stand them anymore... It was worth coming here to see why Europe is rotting and that all these rogues are the reason for all the Hitlers and Mussolini. I bet you my life that, as long as I live, I will hate this place and its inhabitants.*"¹¹

Breton's own wife, Jaqueline Lamba, who had had lesbian affairs with Frida, assured that "*Women have always been undervalued. It was very hard to be a painter*".

Artists also considered part of the surrealist movement, but in reality "*fantastic*" such as Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo, with whom she

was also mistakenly compared Kahlo, denounced the rampant chauvinistic machismo of the surrealists.

Her progress in the international market led her to compete in prices and attention with Rivera while she exposed the fissures of her dysfunctional marriage with Diego, where he had sex with different women, including her sister Cristina. While it is true, she also had affairs with different men, part of the problem was that her affective relationship was almost sexually abstinent. Rivera was jealous when she was with other men, so he encouraged her relationship with lesbians, whom, however, Kahlo never seemed to love.

In her correspondence and diaries there are deep declarations of love only towards men, in particular the Catalan painter José Bartolí and the Hungarian photographer Nickolas Muray, whom she said she loved almost as much as Diego and with whom she lived in New York. The popularization of Frida in American fashion magazines is due to this relationship. Color photos developed and published by Muray included in World Tour Collection.

RIVERA WAS ALWAYS HIS MENTOR

Regardless of their breakups and reunions, the only teacher Frida respected politically and artistically was Diego. All people who boasted of her knowledge or culture deeply disliked her, according to her acquaintances.

Upon her return from Europe, she leaves the house that she shared with Rivera and moves definitively to the house that she had inherited from her parents in Coyoacán, the blue house, now converted into a museum. Rivera requests a divorce from her, and this is consummated at the end of 1939.

Frida is very affected by the separation, and she begins to drink alcohol in large quantities. She refuses to receive economic support from her ex-husband and reflects her status in her well-known work "Las dos Fridas". The work that was part of the international surrealist exhibition held in 1940 due to the Second World War exhibits Kahlo's emotional and cultural two-dimensionality.



FRIDA KAHLO, "With Diego in my mind", 1943. Oil/masonite. Gelmann Collection. Photo: MNBAQ

In a clearly biographical and therapeutic tone, it reflects the marital crisis and the consummated divorce. The figures connected by an artery represent two dimensions of Frida, on the right dressed in the *Tehuana* style as Diego Rivera liked it, holding in her left hand an amulet with the portrait of her husband when he was a child while her alter ego on the left of the painting represents her in European style dressed in lace with an organ that evokes the Catholic tradition of the heart of Jesus. The latter tries to avoid bleeding with a surgeon's clamp on a second artery. It could be said that Frida's recent

success is due to her European experience, which is undervalued amid the rupture.

She will focus mainly on self-portraits of herself in the following years almost always discovering herself in the composition facing her showing her face at an angle reminiscent of medieval altarpieces. She is almost always the same face with different decorations and backgrounds. Her expression is impassive, poised at times shedding tears or drops of blood. These are variants of the same concept mass-produced to sell and achieve financial self-sufficiency.

At the end of 1939, the pain in his spine reappeared with greater intensity, so he traveled to San Francisco to undergo treatment with his friend Dr. Eloesser. Rivera, who was fulfilling an assignment in the same city, proposed to remarry, which she immediately accepted. As Rivera has recorded, "the separation had had bad consequences for both." But Frida set conditions for the wedding, among them that "we would not have sexual contact again."

For the next few years, Kahlo would live with Rivera in the blue house, continuing to attend to commissions, each time in a larger format, and making concessions to buyers who wanted self-portraits, but only from the waist up so as not to affect their sensitivities.

Although he began teaching at the La Esmeralda academy in 1942 and took part in various group exhibitions, he would only have one really important exhibition until 1953, a year before his death, organized by his friend, the photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo, which he attended in a bed of convalescent.

However, her health began to deteriorate from 1946 despite the rapid medical attention and surgical interventions abroad. The underlying health problems that will overwhelm her for the rest of her life and will serve as an input for her artistic expression will finally be discovered: sequelae of the 1925 accident and spinal bifida that caused her continuous limp.

In 1948 she rejoined the Communist Party and many of her works pamphletically emphasize her service to the party and her usefulness to the communist revolution.

From there, the deterioration of her health deepens due to her addiction to demerol and other analgesics for extreme pain and alcoholism. Her work from her later years is rendered downright lackluster by her general state of health. During his agony his words resonate today "*I really like things, life, people. I don't want people to die. I'm not afraid of death, but I want to live. No pain, I can't stand that.*"

After her death in 1954, Kahlo gradually faded into obscurity despite the efforts of some biographers such as Raquel Tibol. It did not help much that Diego Rivera, before his death in 1957, instructed his friend and former model, Dolores Olmedo Patiño, to whom he had entrusted his and Kahlo's estate in trust, which will seal the many rooms for fifteen years of what would become the Olmedo Museum containing the belongings left in *the Casa Azul* by Frida.



FRIDA KAHLO, "The bride is scared to see life open", 1943. Oil/canvas. Gelman Collection. Photo: MNBAQ

KAHLO UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

It is not until the 1970s, with the emergence of feminist consciousness and a new generation of female artists who ideologically proclaim that the personal dimension is the result of a patriarchal political power structure, that Kahlo begins to be used as the godmother of art. feminist.

Something like what happened with Georgia O'Keeffe when post-war feminists began to read about her huge formats that oversize flowers to the point of evoking female vulvas. At least on that occasion, the American was alive to deny such interpretations and assert her own aesthetic concept.

But the historical fact that relaunches the figure of Frida Kahlo to the point of creating a global cult and marketing phenomenon of her life and work was the biography written by Hayden Herrera in 1983 that fostered a wave of international attention and exhibitions around the Mexican primitivist.

Frida was thus kidnapped with her folkloric shawl and united eyebrows as an emblem of radical factions of feminist fundamentalism to the point that her life has ended up overshadowing her work.

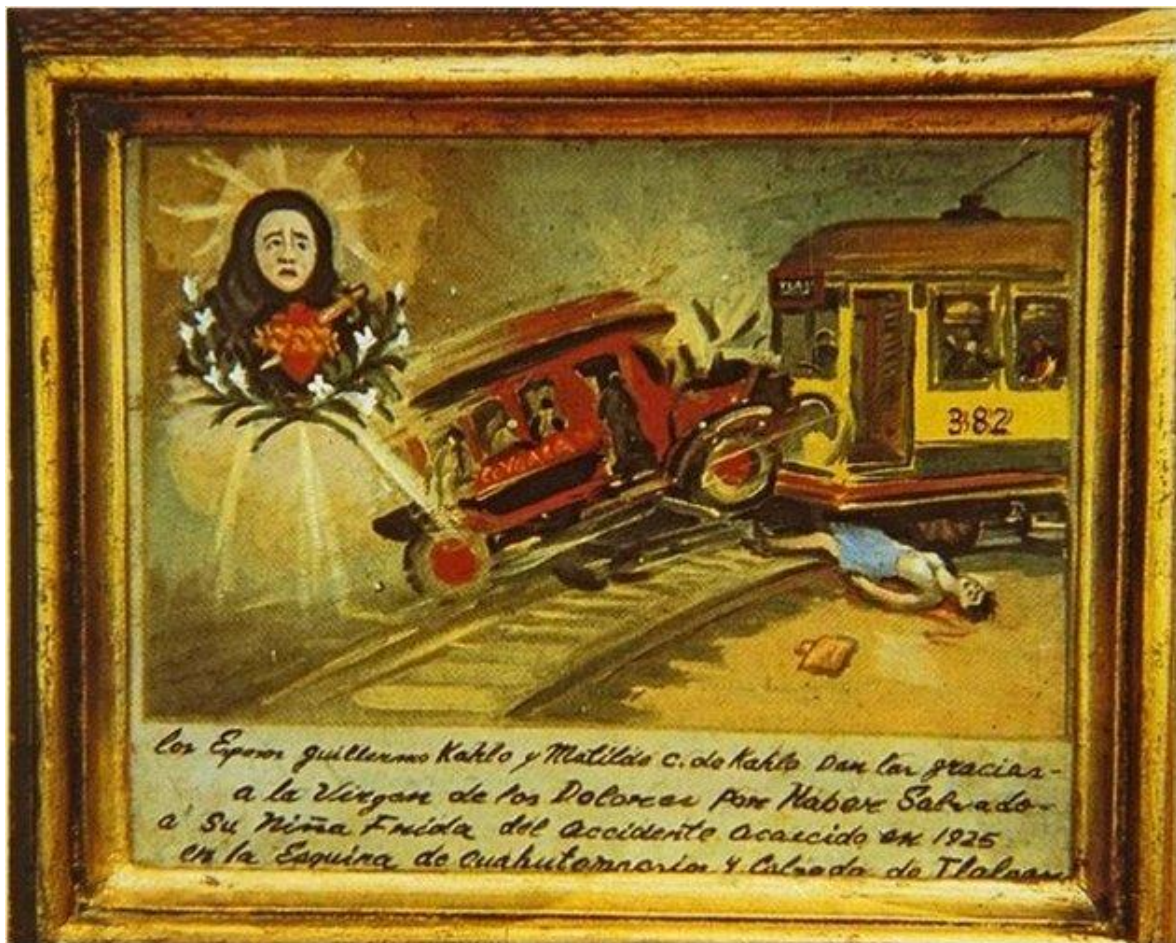
One of the undeniable reasons for this, in addition to the biographical connotation of her best-known works, is the fact that Frida has been better

known through the thousands of photographs taken and published by artists such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Nicholas Muray, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, and Tina Modotti, among other celebrities, who, for their own plastic work, which even today is difficult to appreciate outside of Mexico or in high resolution images in digital banks.

She was the only one of the six daughters of the Kahlo couple to learn to retouch, color, work in the darkroom and take photography. For this reason, she learned early to pose in all her photos with a kind of sensual laxity, as the critic Raquel Tibol pointed out at the time.

Ever since her father Guillermo de Ella took a photo of her in a velvet suit, there hasn't been a single photographic image of Frida in which her appearance is sloppy. Her poses were always studied. The fact that Rivera dressed her in heavy pre-Columbian adornments, typical headdresses and Tehuano dresses only added to her image an exoticism that especially seduced ethnocentric foreigners.

Kahlo compensated for her technical deficiencies in drawing and painting with a rich imagination that was both somber and exuberant, drawing on pre-Columbian roots and popular religious (votive offerings) and street art to create ideologically raw expression in her political-pamphleteer, kitsch paintings. In his latest production and of painful subjectivity in his best-achieved paintings between the thirties and forties, such as his best self-portraits, the two Fridas, the broken column and mainly my parents and me.



FRIDA KAHLO, "Ex-voto", 1940. Oil/metal altarpiece. Private Collection

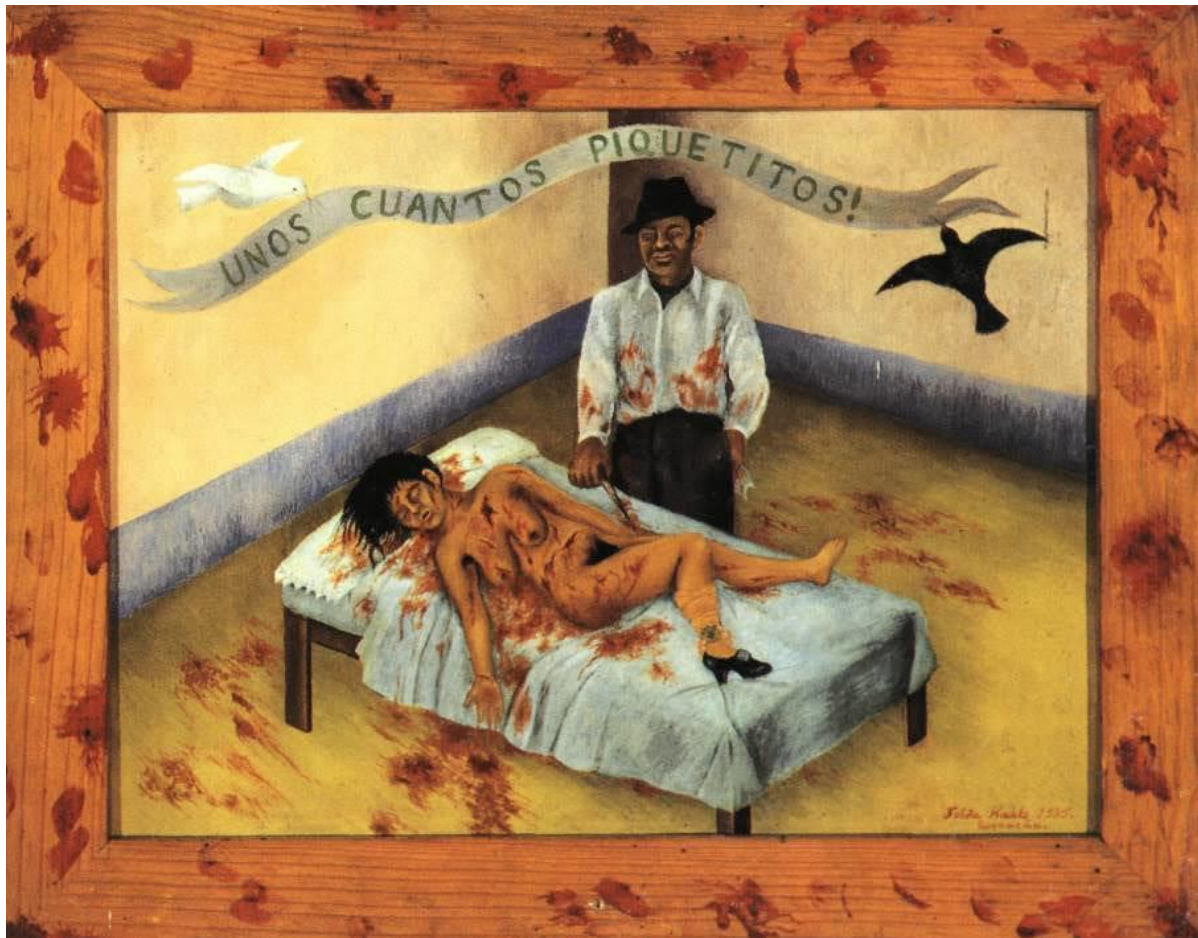
As the late critic Robert Hughes explained in 2001 in Time Magazine, Frida "*viewed by any reasonable criteria, is not a great painter, but a strong and talented woman who, thanks to her hagiographic suffering (not to mention the ardor with which is collected by the likes of Madonna), has become – surpassing even Artemisia Gentileschi – the emblem of feminist artist-saints.*"¹²

However, the historian Araceli Rico Cervantes, in her doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne on Mexican painting, has placed Kahlo within the community of "*sick creators*" recalling Van Gogh, Egon Schiele, Marcel Proust or Antonín Artaud.

If we pay attention to the artist, her physical martyrdom was more of an opportunity than a threat, which distanced her from any saint or martyr. She wrote in 1925, "*Since she was young, this misfortune did not take on tragic features, she felt enough energy to do anything instead of studying to be a doctor, and without realizing it she began to paint*" .¹³

Neither surrealist nor feminist, Frida Kahlo produced, beyond the absurd cult that is paid to her, works in a primitive style with references to Mexican fantastic art in the manner of her countrywoman and friend María Izquierdo, as evidenced in her work, "*Sueño y presentimiento* " an oil painting from 1943, or the work of Antonio Ruiz with his dream of the *Malinche* from 1939 or

the symbolist painter and illustrator Julio Roelas in his oil painting "la domadora" from 1897.



FRIDA KAHLO, "A few pickets", 1935. Oil/metal. Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico. Photo: AKEZ

All shared with Kahlo being self-taught, with a naive expression, compositions often without perspective, with shots dominated by popular and vernacular Mexican elements. It is interesting that Izquierdo, who was the first Mexican artist to exhibit internationally in 1930, became the dominant figure of Mexican primitivism, unseating Kahlo's legacy, even though she died the year after Kahlo.

For purposes of clarification to the fundamentalists, the only important work of denunciation against femicide carried out by Frida did not create a trend in her production focused more on her own life and her drama. I am referring, of course, to the oil painting on metal from 1935 entitled "A few pickets", inspired by a crime of passion reported in the media.

The murderer, according to the press, defended himself before the judge because of the atrocious act, declaring "But, if they were only a few bites." The use of crime was used symbolically by Kahlo alluding to the situation she was experiencing because of Rivera's affair with her sister Cristina.



DIEGO RIVERA, "Portrait of Natasha Gelman", 1943. Oil/canvas. Gelman Collection. Photo: MNBAQ

Thanks to private collections such as that of Jacques and Natasha Gelman, we can assess the real value of the work of Rivera and Kahlo without so much media noise or ideological readings.

Outside of Mexico, except for their American murals, it is difficult to gain first-hand access to the work of both artists. The collection that nourishes the exhibition in Quebec is made up of 300 paintings, and does not have a permanent place to exhibit, although it was for a time in a small town in Cuernavaca. However, it has continued to grow, even since Natasha Gelman's death in 1998.

Her husband, Jacques, made his fortune as a film producer of the most famous films by Mario Moreno "*Cantinflas*", but he dedicated his fortune and free time to searching around the world for works of art with a criterion that has allowed his art collection to be exhibited today. Modern European at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The curatorship agrees in qualifying the works of the itinerant Gelman collection as very representative of "*an extraordinarily fruitful period of Mexican art*", in reference to muralism, a current of which Rivera was the undisputed leader.

WILL THE CULT OF FRIDA KAHLO DISAPPEAR?

Dolores Olmedo, the living custodian of the work of Rivera and Kahlo, has 25 paintings by Frida in her museum collection, constituting an eighth of her total production, but her curatorship hardly stands out. Before her death in 2002, she had told the Los Angeles Times that "*in the future, Kahlo will fade away.*"

For now, Olmedo's prognosis about the cult of Frida Kahlo does not seem to dissipate and, as in Quebec, Kahlo and not Rivera is the center of attention. The fact that the so-called contemporary art is being dominated by those who politically tend grandiloquently to the left and liberal causes added to a stylistic pluralism that seeks to reconcile art with inclusive and diverse fashion trends explains why life more than quality of Kahlo's work keep it current.

What is happening today with this displacement is not unusual. The 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer spent two centuries in total obscurity after his death, until he was rediscovered to take his place among the greats of art history. The same thing happened with Vicente Van Gogh who was popular only for his brother Theo, but whose paintings are now sold for more than fifty million dollars.

This just goes to show that history can change for the better or for the worse, so it's hard to predict the future. Critical examination of art makes it clear that taste is subjective, that fashion and the market gravitate, often promoting the insubstantial, and that no one can maintain the same reputation forever.

This, which should make us humbler in our judgments and opinions, has reached Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera alike.

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