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## INTRODUCTION

The Mexican Revolution began November 15, 1910 and was led by Francisco Madero.

In May 1911 came the fall and exile of the old dictator, Porfirio Diaz.

Francisco Madero was elected president in October 1912, but in February 1913 his government was overthrown by a reactionary group led by Victoriano Huerta and Madero himself was treacherously murdered.

A period of desperate civil war between rival armies of Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Venustiano Carranza who rose to avenge Madero's death and set out to overthrow Huerta. Huerta resigned in July 1914 and Venustiano Carranza took the title of leader of the constitutionalist government and gained foreign recognition for his leadership between 1915 and until his assassination in 1920.

The inauguration of President Alvaro Obregón, one of Carranza's generals in 1920 finally brought about a stable government based on new constitution and the nation began a period of consolidation and development.

The established Mexicans preferred politics that were based on the skills of the Spanish masters, such as military and law.

A program of agrarian reform based on the Mexican peasants ownership and cultivation of their own land which meant strict legislation against the clergy and ranchowners was put into practice. The government also established an extensive public educational system and public health services, but perhaps the most fascinating phase of the whole revolutionary movement was the attempts to re-adjust the spiritual and cultural heritage of the nation. Archeology, ancient history of Mexico, religion, literature, music and popular arts had all existed in Mexico but had never been developed to any major extent within the nation's cultural structures.

Alvaro Obregon's Minister of Education Jose Vasconcelos was the main force behind this surge of enthusiasm for the development of national education. At the centre of this renaissance the strongest and most important achievement of Mexican national art was mural painting. Vasconcelos believed art could inspire social change and he arranged with painters like Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Sigveiros and Diego Rivera to decorate public walls with murals that depicted Mexican history and culture.

During Porfurio Diaz dictatorship, his government looked abroad to 'Modern' Europe for economic and cultural guidance.

The slavish following of European models by the pre-revolutionary regime, who saw indigenous Mexican Culture as degrading and treated the Indians who created it with contempt.

The sophisticated Mexicans preferred paintings that were painted in the style of the Spanish Masters, such as Murillo or Zuloaga.

The Mexican Revolutionary Government's program was to reinstate the masses of people into the social and economic structure of Mexico. Because the people of Mexico were predominantly of Indian blood, a recognition of their religious and artistic expression which was already a major part of Mexican culture, was looked to as the most vital source of inspiration.

Jose Vasconcelos came under considerable abuse and ridicule because of his many political mistakes, but he must be given credit for his foresight and the openmindedness of his program which renewed the government's interest in popular arts. With the encouragement and development of native talent by the construction of numerous open-air schools in various parts of the country, "his aim was to make Mexican education truly Mexican".<sup>1</sup> Vasconcelos planned extensive mural decorations in public buildings and so in 1921 a group of enthusiastic young men came together to execute this mural program. Fernando Leal and Fermin Revueltas came from an open-air school at Coyoacán, and with Jean Charlot, who had just arrived from Paris, they started experimenting with various techniques of Fresco painting in the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. Jose Clemente Orozco had returned from New York and David Alvaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera had arrived from Europe and joined the group at the end of 1921. 1922 was a year of youthful artistic expression and activity, their aims were not for individual gain but as the progression of a collective group.

Diego Rivera had been in Europe throughout the revolution and came back to Mexico with a new outlook having gained knowledge of European Art and the experience of a European life-style for more than ten years.

"My return home" he said "caused in me an immense aesthetic joy impossible to describe. It was as if I had been reborn; born into a new world".<sup>2</sup>

Vasconcelos found in Diego Rivera more than any other artist the energy to match his own monumental ambitions. Rivera was to dominate Mexican painting setting his mark on the Mexican Renaissance.

Rivera drew from early Italian Renaissance such as Giotto with elements of Cubism, Gauguin and Cezanne fusing these influences with the Mexican caricature tradition, pre-columbian and popular art.

Many other muralists flourished, such as Siqueiros and Orozco and like Rivera they publicly displayed the history of Mexico on a monumental scale, in a modern but distinctively national style, drawing on Indian and popular forms.

When Frida Kahlo entered into the National Preparatory School in 1922 at the age of fourteen, she was at once "caught up in a centre of cultural and political ferment".<sup>3</sup> Her childhood life was spent in the quiet village of Coyoacán which was a far cry from the tremendous pace of Mexico City where students participated in Mexico's mood of ardour and activism.

Kahlo's father was a German Jewish photographer and her mother was a Mexican Roman Catholic of Indian and Spanish extraction.

At fourteen Kahlo had an already active social conscience and she read constantly, not only in her father's library but the many books that she borrowed from fellow students.

She learned five languages, German, French, Spanish, English and a Mexican Indian dialect.

Kahlo belonged to a lively left-wing clique called the Cachuchas at the National Preparatory School and to the young communist league as well.

The Cachuchas read Blasco, Ibanez and Russian authors such as Pushkin, Gogol, Andreyev, Tolstoy and also Zorobra which was published in 1919 by the poet Ramon Lopez Velarde. The volumes of Vasconcelos were also of great interest to the Cachuchas. Kahlo spent long hours in the Iberoamerican library next to the Ministry of Education studying magazines, monographs and art books.

While she was still at the preparatory school studying to become a medical student she would often watch Diego Rivera paint at the Ministry of Education and became somewhat infatuated by him.

Frida Kahlo could have concluded her education as a medical student and no doubt she would have ended as a distinguished professional, but at the age of fifteen a tragic accident changed her life.



The bus in which she was a passenger was rammed by a street car. Kahlo's spinal column was broken in three places, her right leg had eleven fractures and right foot was dislocated and crushed. Her collarbone and ribs were broken.

The bone that would cause her the most suffering was her pelvis. Because it was broken in three places she was unable to bear children.

Kahlo never fully recovered from these injuries and her life was a succession of spinal fusions, bone grafts and foot operations. She had several miscarriages and at least three doctor-ordered abortions. Kahlo had to wear a series of metal braces and plaster corsets during many attempts by doctors to mend her injured spine.

During her convalescence she began to draw and paint to relieve the tedium of immobilization and confinement. Kahlo's early paintings were of members of her family, her friends and many self-portraits. Between her time spent in hospital and periods of relapse, there were times when she felt more or less well. Through her feelings of fatigue and almost constant pain in her spine and right leg, she began to walk again.

In 1928 she met the Italian-born American photographer, Tina Modotti, who had come to Mexico with her companion the photographer, Edward Weston.

Through her friendship with Modotti, Kahlo enrolled in the communist party and was introduced to Diego Rivera.

During her courtship with Rivera, Kahlo began to paint with new confidence. While Rivera took pleasure in advising Kahlo on her career as a painter.

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were married in 1929. It was to be a tempestuous marriage full of adventure and pain marked by battles, separations and reconciliations.

## CHAPTER I

### MY BIRTH AND HENRY FORD HOSPITAL

During the great Mexican muralists movement Frida Kahlo choose to paint personal subjects, modest in size and self serving in purpose. By contrast the great muralists like Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siguenros, and Diego Rivera who worked on an epic scale were motivated by external social circumstances, their imagery communicated shared revolutionary beliefs depicting historical or political figures.

Kahlo's self-portraits were products of her own self-awareness. Her choice of self-portraiture suggests the confinement of invalidism led to the confinement of subject matter. The smallness of Kahlo's work immediately contrasts with the monumental scale of the muralists. She choose to become a painter at a time when women were restricted from seriously following a career. The traditional constraints of women's art could have been one of the contributory factors which determines the small format of her work. It is significant then that within these constraints Kahlo was able to produce work as innovative and as powerful as her male contemporaries. She painted her own experiences as a woman, incorporating traditional popular forms, folk, naive and Indian art. The personal content within her work emerges from her life as a suffering human being and the political content was motivated by her concerns with Mexican identity.

The small scale of her images, her frequent use of tin instead of canvas and the continuation of the image onto the picture frame underlines Kahlo's wish to identify with popular religious imagery and Indian art forms.

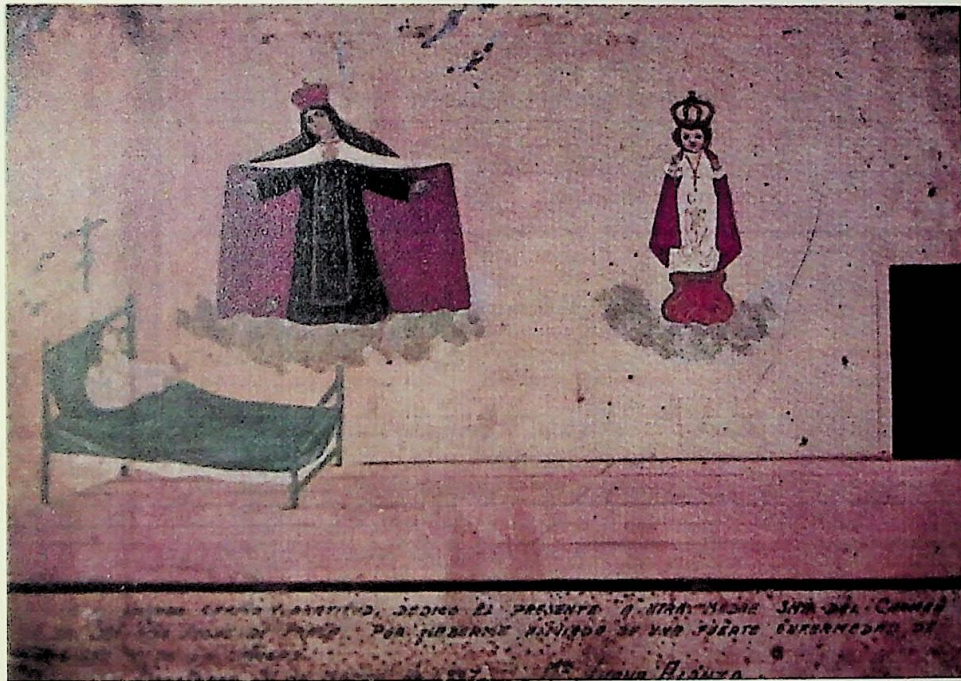
Her adoption of the Mexican retablo or ex-voto which is a shared tradition, and private in its imagery emphasises Kahlo's position between public and private realms.

The Retablo or ex-voto (plate 1) is a painting on tin that records a disaster that a victim has survived and offers thanks to the Holy Virgin, Christ or Saint that has intervened. An inscription tells the story of the incident, complete with name date and place and offers the donor's thanks.

Kahlo utilizes the traditions of retablo's and ex-voto's without obscuring their inherent meanings with accepted hierarchies of art practice. Her adoption of popular forms is not just to create the appearance of that art, but to use its cultural significance and meanings as a vehicle for her own private experiences.

Frida Kahlo's subject is herself, her tortured relationship with her body and her obsession with her own image. She explored her personal space and the personal side of her life and used it as a source of imagery and experience. This led her very quickly to analyse her circumstances and the way in which she functioned within her often confined surroundings. Because she was at times unable to move freely, the house in which she lived in Coyoacan was her world.

The private and personalized world that was expressed in her



1 Retablo 1937  
Oil on Sheet Metal 10 x 14  
Herrera Collection N.Y.

art was often painted from the most private part of the home - her bed.

A mirror was attached to the underside of the bed's canopy allowing Kahlo to study and paint her own image.

Her paintings seem to highlight a connection between women's art and the domestic space, as if her life, her work could not be separated from it.

Her paintings stand as bitter comments on her experiences as a woman.

Frida Kahlo's depiction of her body in her paintings, shows us that her particular problem to do with childbearing, her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood, caused her constant pain and suffering.

This pain and suffering shatters any notion of safety within her paintings.

Safety is replaced by insecurity and vulnerability in My Birth 1932 (Plate II) and Henry Ford Hospital 1932 (Plate III) in which she depicts isolated environments in order to convey her sense of loss.

Having already suffered an abortion demanded by her doctor in Mexico, Kahlo conceived again.

In Henry Ford Hospital the trauma of her miscarriage in 1932 is recorded.

Kahlo lies naked haemorrhaging in a hospital bed. Against her swollen stomach she holds six red, vein-like ribbons which are connected like umbilical cords to objects that symbolize her emotions at the time of the miscarriage. The

bed is placed outdoors and the absence of a top sheet, emphasises the feeling of isolation and despair. The world outside is oblivious to the pain she is suffering. As the factories in the distance continue to function normally, Kahlo lies weeping, bleeding and unprotected.

Frida Kahlo's response to the miscarriage is even more gruesome in My Birth 1932.

A child who resembles Kahlo is being born to a dead mother or indeed Kahlo may herself be giving birth to a lifeless child. A sheet resembling a shroud hides the woman's upper body and head.

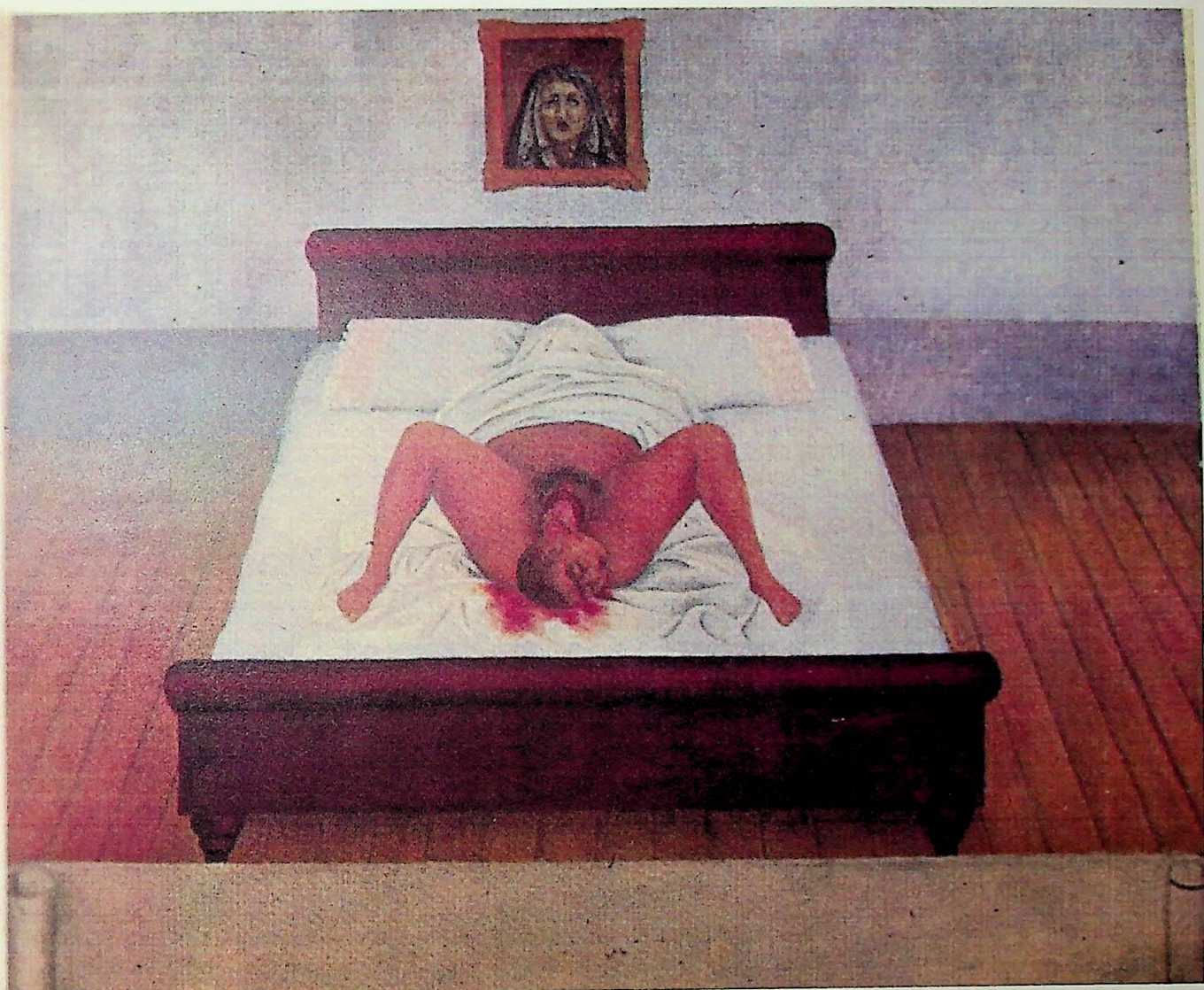
A painting of the Virgin of Sorrows hangs on the wall in the background. The Virgin of Sorrows pierced by knives weeps over the dead child and dead mother.

In Kahlo's first work on metal Henry Ford Hospital she shows a conscious choice of the Mexican retablo as a model for her own art. Although Kahlo's "retablos" do not look like retablos, her combination of factual incidents from her life and her use of fantasy in this way brings them close to the Mexican retablos that inspired her.

As Hayden Herrera has explained "Both Frida's paintings and retablos record the facts of physical distress without squeamishness" <sup>4</sup>

Like Henry Ford Hospital but more awesome My Birth is like a retablo in style and content.

There is a scroll at the lower edge of the picture but unlike



Frida Kahlo

II My Birth 1932

Oil on Sheet Metal 12½ x 14

Koufmann Jr. Collection N.Y.

a retablo it remains without an inscription.

This suggests that the mother and child suffered and died without any miraculous intervention.

My Birth refers to Kahlo's birth and the death of her unborn child. This painting is of Frida Kahlo giving birth to herself.

What makes Henry Ford Hospital and My Birth so powerful is the fact that even today there have been very few women dealing with their own bodies who have introduced the subject of pregnancy, childbirth or miscarriage as a major part of their art work.

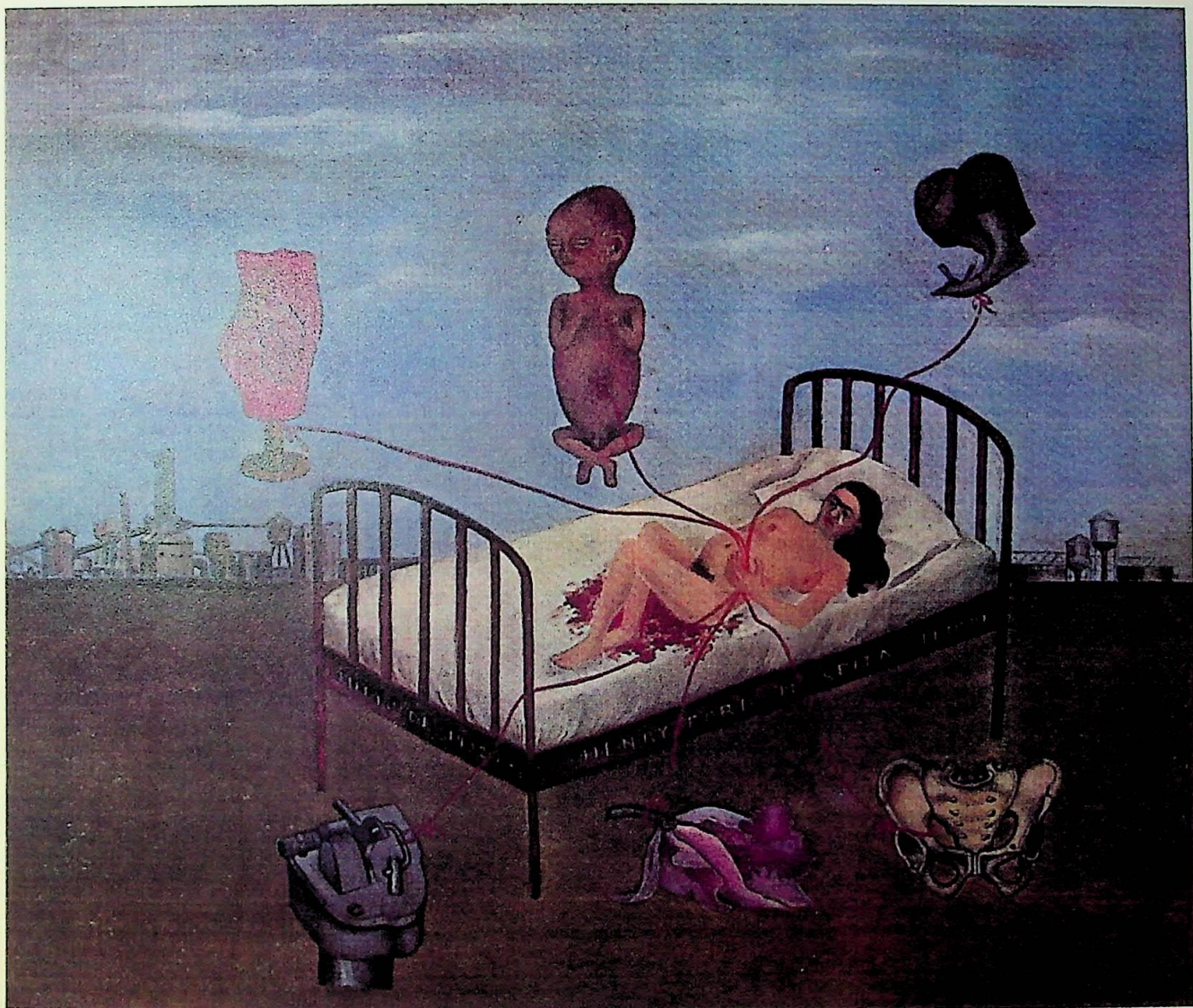
Indeed many women artists have dealt with the pregnant nude "but for individual conceptual artists this mental and physical condition unique to women exists in a curious void"<sup>5</sup>

Frida Kahlo explored the very private areas of female experience in an age where childbirth and abortion was considered totally inappropriate subject matter.

Kahlo found that she was able to paint personal experiences such as miscarriage by using styles taken from Mexican folk art and naive painting. She felt no restrictions in recording such a taboo subject in paint, using the understood and accepted tradition of the retablo or ex-voto which traditionally deal with imagery of a physically distressing nature.

Kahlo's motivation and her concerns were with exorcism, exposing the private and painful aspects of her life by using the public traditions of popular art forms. Her exploration of the very private areas of female experience act in dispelling





Frida Kahlo

III Henry Ford Hospital 1932

Oil on Sheet Metal 12 x 15½

Olmedo Collection Mexico City

taboos and move towards a process of breaking down "derogatory myths surrounding female experience and physiology" *ibid*

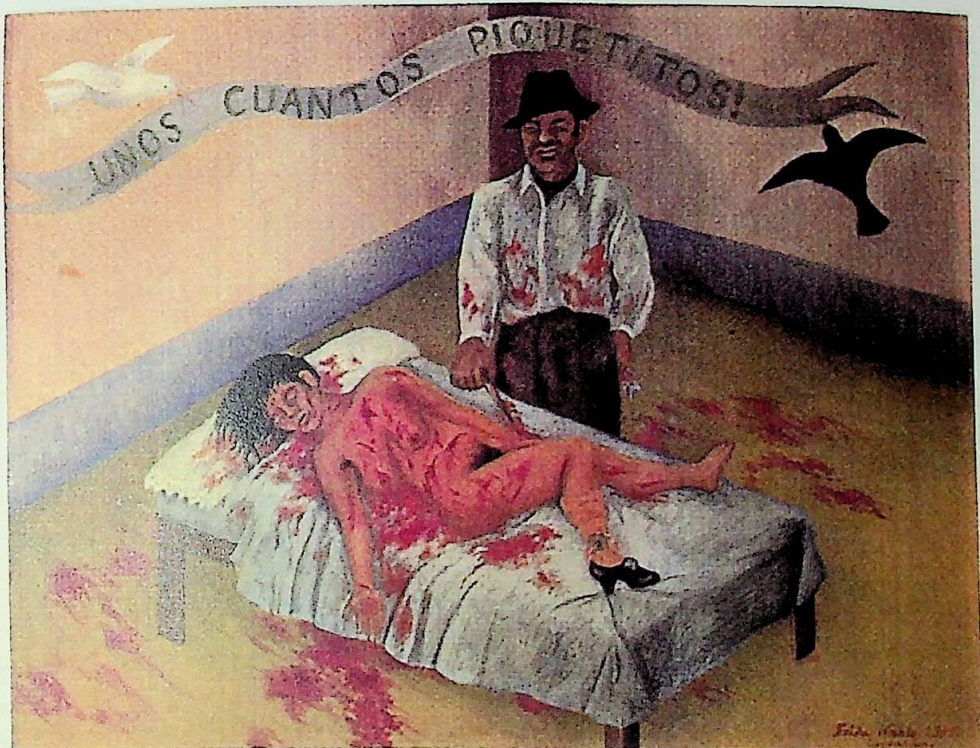
The wounds inflicted by physical illness and accident, which often merge with wounds caused by her husband's infidelities are revealed to us in A Few Small Nips 1935 (Plate IV) where a man holding a knife inflicts wounds on a woman's body. This painting is based on a newspaper's description of a drunken macho who stabbed his girlfriend twenty times on her bed. Kahlo's painting of the incident shows us the immediate aftermath of the murder.

The murderer with knife in hand stares upon his blood stained victim. Splotches of blood are continued from the picture surface onto the picture frame bringing the crime into the viewers space. Hayden Herrera in her biography on the artist has quoted Kahlo as saying that she had needed to paint this picture as she felt "Murdered by life."

Diego Rivera's affair with Kahlo's younger sister Cristina had caused her immediate pain.

She projected her suffering onto another woman's experience. The truly devastating violence of subject matter seems to be controlled and somehow distanced by the ingenious style and the floating banner inscribed with the painting's title. The many retablo's anonymous paintings of the dead and genre scenes that Kahlo collected during her life are recalled in A Few Small Nips.

However it was Jose Guadalupe Posada's illustrations and engravings of sensational horror scenes (Plate V) that were the principal source for this painting.



Frida Kahlo  
IV A Few Small Nips 1935  
Oil on Sheet Metal 15 x 19  
Olmedo Collection Mexico City



J. G. Posada  
V Engraving 1890 5 x 7

## CHAPTER II

### MY NURSE AND I

The accounts left by the early Spaniards tell us of the Aztec civilization's magnificent towering pyramids, their impressive temples and brilliantly decorated palaces. The embodiments of the Aztec pagan religion involved the familiar practices of prayer, penance, fasting as well as the bloody human sacrifices which so horrified the Spaniards and European invaders. Astronomy, sophisticated systems of picture writing, poetry, ritual dance and music were all practiced by the Aztecs during the sixteenth century.

The Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) which was founded in the thirteenth century was taken and razed by Hernando Cortez and his warriors in 1521.

The missionaries of the Church followed within a few years of this Spanish conquest, and the Inquisition was established soon after the Franciscans and the Jesuits arrival between 1524 and 1572.

Ancient pagan remnants were destroyed and replaced by the institutions of the Church.

The pyramid and temple of Huitzilopochtli where captives were sacrificed was razed and the Cathedral of Mexico was erected upon it's ruins.

Laurence E. Schmeckebier has pointed out that the conversion of the mass of Indian people's of Mexico by the Spanish missionaries was accomplished in a relatively short time.

"Since the outward forms of the Christian and Indian religions have much in common: the ancient temple found its counterpart in the Cathedral; the crucifix and the statues of the apostles and saints took the same place in the religious system as idols held before. The Eucharist itself bore the same significance as the bloody human sacrifices of the Aztecs - though in a much more humane form, since the actual sacrifice of human beings was superseded by the symbolic sacrifice of the Saviour on the Cross"<sup>6</sup>

In her painting My Nurse and I 1937 (Plate VI) Frida Kahlo fuses the Indian form of the nurse, reminiscent of an Aztec goddess with the colonial Catholic motif of the Madonna and child. This painting shows Kahlo's search for an intrinsic Mexican identity. The baby Frida with an adult-size head suckling at the floreate breast of her masked Indian nurse. Mexico's Indian heritage is represented by the Aztec mask donned by the nurse which reveals similar qualities to Kahlo's own face.

Her long black hair and dark eyebrows that meet are not unlike Kahlo's.

As the embodiment of the artist's Indian heritage the nurse protects, feeds and yet seems to threaten Kahlo.

The mask worn by the nurse is one that is associated with Indian rituals where women and children were offered as sacrifices to the Sun God.

Human blood, it was believed, fed and sustained the sun's life force.



Frida Kahlo

VI My Nurse and I 1937

Oil on Sheet Metal 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$

Olmedo Collection Mexico City

The significance to Kahlo of life giving powers was linked with her condition as an invalid and her failure to have children. The Aztec's ceremonial and magical beliefs, the unity of life, their emphasis on fertility, blood, violence and their view of time cycles pervade Kahlo's paintings. In My Nurse and I, Kahlo's face expresses her knowledge of her ill-fated future while the nurse's stone mask expresses all the savage rites of Mexico's past.

In the background drops of milk like milk from the breast fall like rain. Nature nurtures the earth, while Kahlo is both nurtured by nature and history.

#### THE BROKEN COLUMN

Frida Kahlo used traditional Mexican Catholic art as a vocabulary for her self-portraits, thus magnifying her personal misery. Her paintings are in their own way about faith and salvation, so Kahlo gave her paintings Christian significance and borrowed the depiction of reality and extreme pain found in the bloody portraits of martyrs familiar to Mexican art. In colonial Mexico, the Spanish clergy and upper classes of Mexican society patronized painters such as Balthasar de Eehave el Mozo and Sebastian Arteagas whose painting of the Flagellation in which the figure of Christ is depicted as a mass of raw flesh, bloody and beaten.

In the parish churches the Indians painted the same type of realism and bloody theatricalism, but their "Dark-skinned Madonna and Christ figures were used to show that the Virgin and the Saviour were not necessarily white Europeans, but

but could have Indian characteristics as well" <sup>7</sup>

The Indian image of the dark-skinned Madonna brings to mind Kahlo's painting My Nurse and I in which the infant Frida is held like a Christ child in the arms of the Indian Madonna. Kahlo's adoption of the Catholic tradition of allegory for her masquerade, is not only to emphasize a solitary figure but paradoxically, like Catholicism, its very nature is bound up in the community.

Kahlo borrows forms and representations traditional to Mexican religious imagery and the dialects of Mexican peoples, thus her paintings communicate and identify with Mexican community.

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits are penetrating and often violent in their directness.

She casts herself in various roles revealing and concealing her true self.

Kahlo dramatized her physical and emotional pain. This pain became central to her self-image.

Through her painting and through the donning of her costumes she created a self that could survive the pain that life dealt her. When psychological and physical pain merge together it is often difficult to decide whether a weeping self-portrait deals with Riveras rejection of her love or her physical suffering.

She was both tragic victim and heroic sufferer.

Both roles are displayed in her self-portraits where the wounded Kahlo is always a survivor.

In some respects the act of painting self-portraits became



a form of therapy for her.

By painting her pain outwardly onto another Frida, a Frida whose austere presence could put up with this pain without flinching and without self pity. Her tortured body contrasts with her expressionless face to create a certain tension within the viewer. Frida Kahlo stands in a bleak and barren plain in her painting The Broken Column 1944 (Plate VII).

The mask-like face Kahlo wears is another disguise or covering. It is like the persona we all adopt in public, it hides our repressed desires and worries. Kahlo's mask-like face over her inner being like the wound concealed by the bandage is bleeding. The mask-like expression she wears enhances the pain it conceals. Her torso is split open to reveal a shattered column which is an inadequate substitute for her own deteriorating spinal column.

The feeling of imprisonment is symbolized by the steel orthopaedic corset that holds her body together.

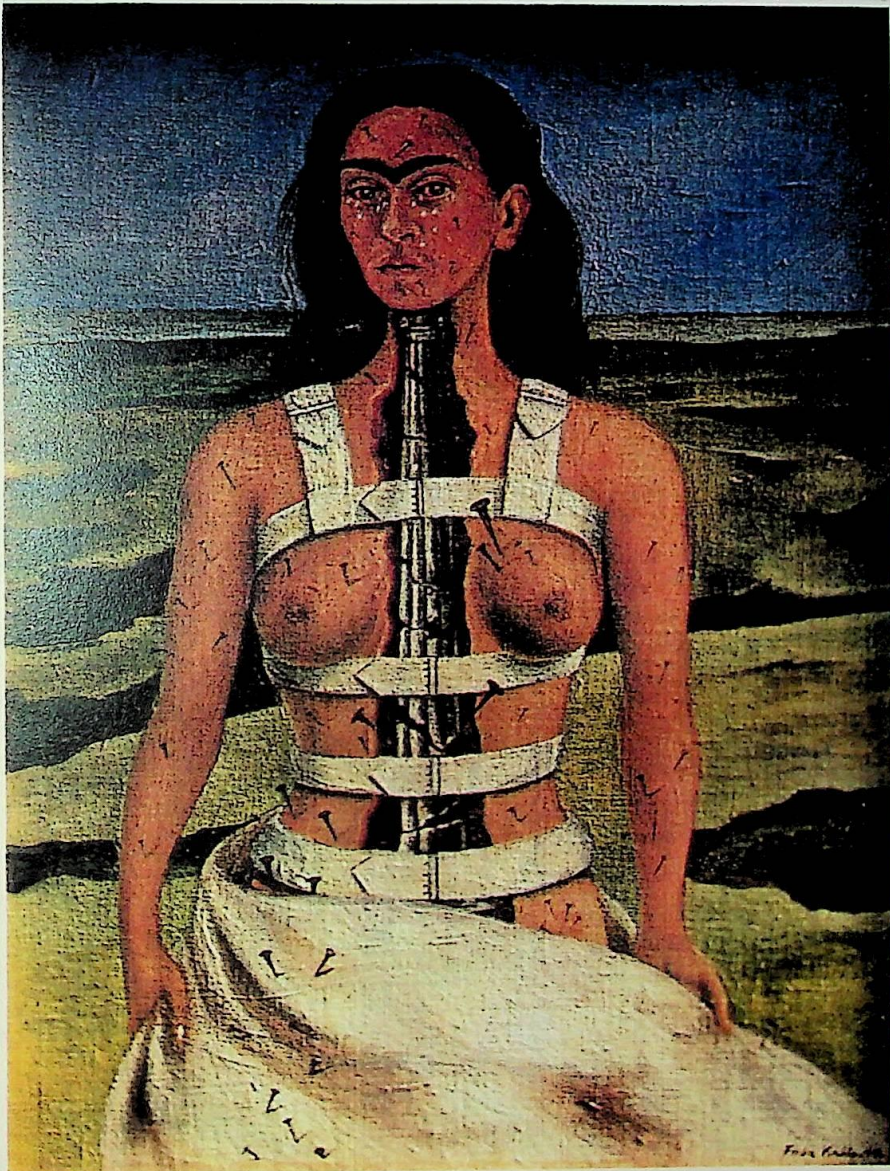
In the hands of the male doctors Kahlo was advised to wear a series of twenty-eight corsets during her lifetime and referred to these orthopaedic braces as "punishment".

Her agonizing pain is intensified by the nails driven into her torso and face.

Her reference to pain relates to Catholic iconography. Kahlo's naked body is only partially covered by a cloth reminiscent of Christ's winding sheet.

She becomes a Christian martyr, a female Saint Sebastian.

Kahlo displays her wounds, and shows us that there is no escape from her physical disability. Locked inside the steel



Frida Kahlo  
VII The Broken Column 1944  
Oil on Masonite 19 x 15½  
Fastlicht Collection Mexico City

orthopaedic corset she stands bound to her physicality. Kahlo stares out at the viewer who must confront her predicament directly as she has. Tears dot her cheeks, but her face remains expressionless. Kahlo's inner desolation mixed with her emotional suffering is conveyed in the empty cracked landscape that surrounds her.

#### A NECKLACE OF THORNS

1940 was the year in which Diego Rivera divorced Frida Kahlo. During this separation she painted Self-Portrait with Necklace of Thorns and Hummingbird (Plate VIII) and a group of self-portraits in which against a background of luxuriant tropical vegetation the spider monkeys seem to play with Kahlo like the children she could not have. Although the monkeys are playful companions their very presence creates a certain tension because one is aware that their very nature is less than human.

In Self-portrait with Hummingbird the necklace of brambles whose thorns pierce Kahlo's throat is held by a seemingly playful monkey, but a sudden jerk of the monkey's paw could deepen Kahlo's wounds.

The presence of the black cat seems menacing too, as he fixes his stare on the dead hummingbird that hangs from the necklace and rests against Kahlo's bleeding flesh.

The hummingbird's lifeless body seems to suggest again Kahlo's feeling of being "murdered by life". The hummingbird also represents the Mexican belief in its magical powers as a bringer of love, but here the hummingbird is lifeless and so

it becomes a metaphor for Kahlo's unfulfilled love.

There is another bust length self-portrait painted in 1940 in which Christ's crown of thorns again becomes a necklace which pierces Kahlo's throat.

Again she presents herself as a martyr, the thorns draw blood giving her self-portraits Christian meaning.

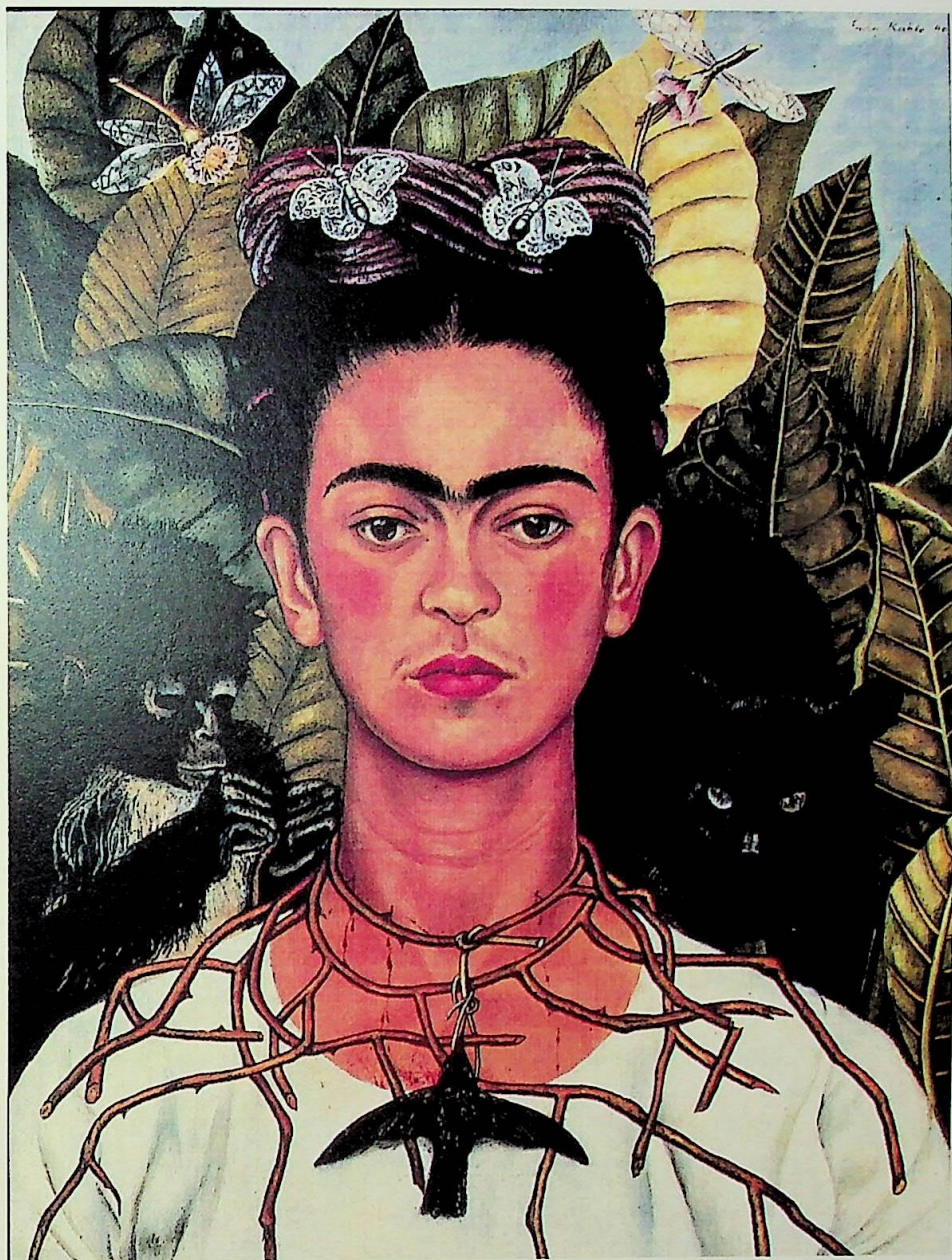
The bloody inflictions of martyrs familiar in Mexican art from which Kahlo draws her influence goes back to the Aztec tradition. The Aztecs pricked their own skin in belief that the blood drawn would ensure that their crops would flourish.

The Aztecs believed that human sacrifice and the shedding of blood was a necessary ritual and offering to the earth and the heavens.

Red blood the vital hidden fluid contained within the body that spells life and represents abundance or pain and death when drained from the individual.

The spilling of blood delighted the great earth mother who sucked it deep into the soil, it nourished her creating new growth and new life.

The most important of all blood sacrifices was Christ's crucifixion. The wooden figures of Christ found in many Mexican churches often describe His suffering and misery in terms, that relate them to those the Indian was forced to bear. Kahlo borrowed from these depictions so that she could amplify her personal suffering. Her personal suffering becomes recognizable to the viewer within the rhetoric of Catholicism.



Frida Kahlo

VIII Self-portrait with Hummingbird 1940

Oil on canvas 24½ x 18½

University of Texas, Austin.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE INDIAN FRIDA

Diego Rivera liked to stress the Indian aspects of Frida Kahlo's heritage, he said: "She is a person whose thoughts and feelings are unrestricted by any limitations forced on them by false necessities of bourgeois social conformity"<sup>8</sup>

He praised her as "authentic and unspoiled" *ibid*  
Kahlo was a city <sup>girl</sup> and her upbringing however, had nothing to do with the simpler life of the Mexican Indian. She was of part-European parentage and middle-class background, and she travelled to San Francisco, New York, Detroit and Paris during the 1930's. Frida Kahlo wore the beautiful long dresses from Tehuantepec instead of European-style clothing.

The Tehuantepec women are the most matriarchal of Mexican Indian cultures.

The donning of the Indian costume was at first a choice but it soon became a necessary part of Kahlo's day to day existence. It became her second skin, her frame and her mask. The Tehuana costume made the often frail Kahlo look radiant and all the more visible while disguising her feelings of insecurity and insignificance.

Her costume became a form of communication, when people greeted Kahlo they saw a magnetic and colourful person whose body of pain was hidden away beneath her ribbons and frills. Kahlo felt that her physical disintegration was somehow compensated

by the magic powers of her clothes: the inner turmoil disguised by external beauty. The Indian dress was not only a declaration of her love of life and her wish to defy, pain and death, but most importantly a declaration of political affiliation.

Kahlo adopted the native dress in order to display her ancestral link with Mexico's Indian heritage.

The costume was worn by Indian women because it was a primitive statement of their separateness from bourgeois conventions. By wearing it Kahlo proclaimed her affiliation with the indigenous race (la raza).

Rivera emphasised the inextricable political significance of the Mexican dress

"The classic Mexican dress has been created by the people for the people. The Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, i.e. the great American and French bureaucracy"<sup>9</sup>

Frida Kahlo's main source of influence was firmly rooted in Mexican colonial and popular art and her energies were used to stress the Mexican elements in many aspects of her experience. The background to her behaviour, her appearance, her home and her work is provided by the affirmation of national identity of Mexicanidad. In post-revolutionary Mexico, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera like many other artists and intellectuals affirmed their pride in Mexico by looking to ancient traditions establishing a connection with indigenous culture.

Mexico, a country that had been recently freed from a corrupt dictator, had promised to support the Indian peoples and their programme of land reform.

When the military phase of the revolution of 1910 passed an intellectual revolution emerged.

The Muralist movement which began in 1920 and a surge of interest in native arts and crafts was a sign of political affiliation at this point in Mexico's history. The great muralists, Diego Rivera, David Alaró Siqueiros, Fernando Leal, and Xavier Guerrero, declared in their manifesto that

"Mexican art is great because it surges from the people; it is collective and our own aesthetic aim is to socialize artistic expression to destroy bourgeois individualism. We repudiate the so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, for it is essentially aristocratic. We hail the monumental expression of art because such art is public property" <sup>10</sup>

Other Mexican painters proclaimed that "the art of the Mexican people is the greatest and most healthy spiritual expression in the world" <sup>ibid</sup> Many Mexican elements and Indian motifs entered into the work of European-oriented easel painters such as Tamayo, Augustin Lazo, and Carlos Merida; they blended a native style with imported ideas such as "Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism and Picasso's neoclassism of the 1920's" <sup>11</sup>

Many other Mexican artists rejected all foreign influences. Using the simpler forms of Mexican popular art they attempted to forge work that was direct and accessible, devoid of the 'Ultra-Intellectual' values of the Europe avant-garde.



During this distinctly Nationalistic climate the revaluation and revival of interest in popular and traditional art of the people, Pulqueria murals (naive and usually humorous decoration of bars selling pulque), retablo's and ex-voto's, popular prints, (such as Posada's skeleton prints and song illustrations) and traditional portraiture, served as a 'modernest attack on academicism and on the institution of "Fine Arts"' 12

Frida Kahlo's revival of popular art forms stemmed from a fear of losing what was in danger of being lost completely. Most of Kahlo's symbols were specifically Mexican in origin, monkeys, hairless dogs, pre-Columbian sculpture and Judas effigies.

Amongst all this she placed human hearts, wounds, blood, orthopaedic casts and skeletons and finally she connected all these elements together with colourful ribbons, roots, and veins.

The Folk, Naive and Indian arts which were traditionally associated with real social groups, were employed by Kahlo to express her private experiences. She used the popular forms in her self-portraits to bring the private aspects of her life into the public realm. By adopting these traditions Kahlo was implicitly making a political statement.

## CHAPTER IV

### WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME

The Surrealist poet and essayist André Breton was sent to Mexico in 1938 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to give some lectures. While he was in Mexico, Breton wanted to make contact with the Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky who had been given political asylum and who was at that time living with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera at their house in Coyacán.

Breton wanted to explore Mexico, and to find there the magic

"point of intersection between the political and artistic lines beyond which we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them" 13

Frida Kahlo looked forward to Breton's arrival as he had planned to stay at the Riveras' home, but on meeting him, she found him extremely vain, boring, and his "theorizing pretentious" 14

However, Breton found Kahlo fascinating.

This was heightened by Kahlo's and Rivera's connection with Trotsky. He was entranced he said by "her gifts of seduction" and his fascination increased when he saw her paintings.

The similarities between Frida Kahlo's work and that of Surrealism are evident.

Both display a fascination with pain and eroticism, death and procreation.

Kahlo frequently adopted surrealist devices as in Roots 1943 (Plate IX) for instance in which her body opens like a window from which a luxuriant vine sprouts forth.

Her employment of irrational shifts of scale, the juxtapositioning of forms and figures, her hybrid creations - part human, part animal and part plant all recall Surrealist iconography.

The closed off spaces that serve as backdrops of luxuriant tropical growth in her self-portraits are not unlike the jungle landscapes painted by the Surrealist artist Max Ernst. The affinities between Kahlo's preoccupations and those of the Surrealists are recognizable in her use of "bizarre, fantastic and visceral imagery"<sup>15</sup>

Kahlo places her tortured body within isolated environments, open spaces, and cracked landscapes, to emphasise a disconnection from everyday life. Kahlo frequently constructed imaginary surroundings where the laws of rationality are suspended, giving her self-mortifying portraits their sense of Surrealism. It is little wonder then that André Breton welcomed Frida Kahlo into the Surrealist circle, proclaiming her as a self-created Surrealist, and offered to organize an exhibition for her in Paris.

In an introduction for the brochure of her New York debut at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1938 he wrote of her work as being

"pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself" <sup>16</sup>



Frida Kahlo

IX Roots 1943

Oil on Sheet Metal 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$

Olmedo Collection Mexico City

This somewhat rhetorical introduction was more self-serving to Breton than truthful, as he knew her latest paintings had been painted after her trip to Paris in 1937. Kahlo was obviously aware of Breton and the Surrealist movement, their theories and activities.

Breton wanted to see Kahlo as an original artist who somehow had tapped into Surrealism without having any prior knowledge of its existence, as if it had been predestined.

His statement renders Frida Kahlo a Surrealist discovery. Breton it seems saw Kahlo existing only in relation to Surrealist practices, only their theories gave her work its meaning. She was in a position where they recognized her existence, thus she is used to support their existing ideas, but will neither shape or develop them. However, Kahlo was happy to be accepted into the Surrealist movement, it offered her "a place at the high table"<sup>17</sup> and her association with the group would bring her critical acclaim.

Kahlo was fully aware of her position when Breton applauded her work, her response was one of innocent bewilderment. She said "I never knew I was a Surrealist till André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was!"<sup>18</sup> Her apparent naïveté was mixed with a measure of shrewdness. It was not Kahlo who proclaimed herself to be a Surrealist but André Breton. She used the Surrealist tag but remained creatively active outside the movement's direct influence.

When André Breton was in Mexico, Frida Kahlo was just finishing



Frida Kahlo

X What the Water Gave Me 1938

Oil on Canvas 38 x 30

Marquez Collection Mexico City

a painting entitled What The Water Gave Me 1938 (Plate X). Breton chose this painting to illustrate his essay on Kahlo in his book Surrealism and Painting. He said that

"What The Water Yields Me illustrated unbeknown to her the phrase I had once heard from the lips of Nadja (the heroine of Breton's Surrealist novel Nadja) "I am the thought of bathing in a mirrorless room"" 19

In her painting What The Water Gave Me, Kahlo has painted her own legs from the bather's point of view, the open cut on her big toe of her right foot refers to Kahlo's accident and the many foot operations that she underwent.

Bosch-like images float on the water like toys. Some of these images represent Kahlo's childhood memories, others refer to traumatic events and feelings in her life. The irrational juxtaposed detail brings to mind the paintings of Salvador Dali, but also recalls Kahlo's admiration for Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. 20 This painting is one of Kahlo's most complex and enigmatic works. A phallic skyscraper emerges from a volcano and an empty dress floats beside the naked artist, who is strangled by a masked male figure.

The twisted and severed vine that emerges from the drain next to Kahlo's injured toe drips blood into the water. The overall feeling is one of insubstantiality where memories are glimpsed and events are never fully comprehended.

After Kahlo's contact with Surrealism in 1938, her paintings reached a new level of complexity.

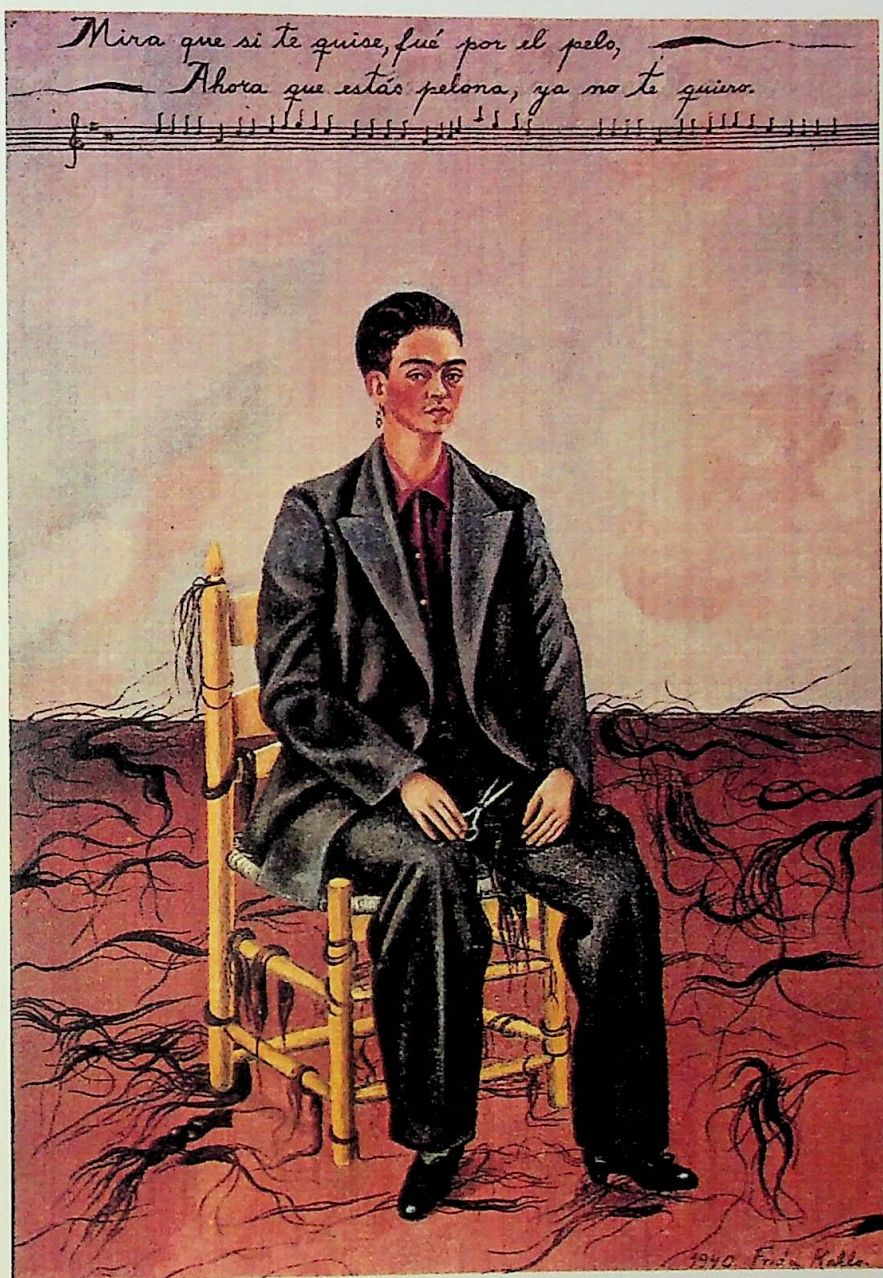
They became more intense and more disturbing.

When one compares Henry Ford Hospital (Plate III) or My Birth (Plate II) and later works like Self-portrait with Cropped Hair 1940 (Plate XI), The Broken Column (Plate VII) or What The Water Gave Me one sees that what began as a fascination with the incongruities and simplicities of naive art later developed into more complex, enigmatic and psychological forms. Paintings such as Self-portrait with Cropped Hair or Kahlo's most surreal painting What The Water Gave Me, one feelings must have been influenced by the Surrealists stress on the subconscious of the source of artistic content. However, Kahlo's painting differs from that of the Surrealists. Her images are always concrete and her symbolism relatively simple.

Although her paintings were private in their imagery they were meant to be accessible in their meaning. Even her hybrid figures and irrational juxtapositions are not obscure creations dredged up from the depths of the subconscious, but concrete forms which function to express her physical and emotional reality.

In her painting Roots 1943 (Plate IX) in which her reproductive system spreads out like a vine, this fantasy stems from the personal desires of a childless woman and her longing for fertility. Kahlo makes her emotions utterly clear. When she splits open her torso to reveal a shattered column in the place of her own deteriorating spinal column, she is revealing the pain associated with her physical condition.





Frida Kahlo  
XI Self-portrait with cropped Hair 1940  
Oil on Canvas 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11  
Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

Antonio Rodriguez has stated that "Kahlo was not a Surrealist but a painter rooted in reality"<sup>21</sup> He said,

"Frida's work instead of wanderings in the world of oneirocritical sensations, is a bleeding memory of what she has experienced, a kind of autobiography" *ibid*

The overall look of Kahlo's painting What the Water Gave Me may be construed as surreal, but if one looks closely at any section of this work the figures and their surroundings are painted in a straightforward and most literal way. Not every detail is understood but one is very aware that every moment and event depicted here had a very real and specific significance to Kahlo.

Kahlo's paintings like much of Mexican art, retablos, Posada's engravings, fuse fact and fantasy as if the two were inseparable.

The invented images of threatened sexuality were distinctly male surrealist visions of women. Kahlo made images of her own ruined reproductive system, she had first hand experience of pain and did not need to turn to the writings of de Sade (who was heralded by Breton and adopted as a voice for revolutionary erotism) for guidance.

Her paintings and her beliefs contrast in many ways with male European Surrealism, because of her loyalties to her Mexican heritage and because she was a woman. Whatever Kahlo's interest was in surrealism it added to a development that was already part of her personality and was intrinsically bound

to her land.

The violent image of a woman by a woman expresses the pain associated with normal functioning realities of female sexuality. Kahlo's bloody and gruesome self-portraits in which her violent experiences of childbirth, Henry Ford Hospital, My Birth, rather than the male Surrealists choice of erotic violence becomes the link within the cycle of creation and death.

Kahlo depicts her body as a bearer of signs expressing her emotional reality, becoming the maker and bearer of her own meaning.

Kahlo's physical reality merged with fantasy, her fantasy having a different source to that of Surrealism.

Her source is rooted in the magical belief of the unity of all living things, a belief that is part of ancient Indian Mexican cultures.

#### THE LITTLE DEER

Frida Kahlo portrays herself as a wounded stag in her painting The Little Deer 1946 (Plate XII).

This painting uses simple metaphors to show that Kahlo is prey to pain and suffering.

Running through the forest, the deer is pierced by arrows. The stricken stag's fatal journey through the glade represents Kahlo's own painful journey through life. Here the forces of pain are psychological as well as physical. Ella Wolfe has said that The Little Deer refers to the "agony of

living with Diego"<sup>22</sup> another friend of Kahlo's has said that like the knife wounds in A Few Small Nips, the arrows that pierce the deer represent "Frida's suffering due to male oppression" *ibid*

The dry cracked wood of the massive tree trunks express Kahlo's obsession with death and decay. The broken branches signify Kahlo's injuries and her suffering both physical and psychological.

The Little Deer like Roots reveal Kahlo's perception of herself as being capable of transforming so naturally into any form, plant or animal. Kahlo's magical transformation within her paintings had a lot to do with the influence of Surrealism on her work, but its real source is rooted in ancient Mexican culture, the Aztec belief in the magical unity of all living things. As Anita Bremner explained in Idols Behind Altars an Aztec worshiper "could pray, I am the flower, I am the feather, I am the drum and mirror of the gods. I am the song. I rain flowers. I rain songs."<sup>23</sup>

Frida Kahlo's metaphor of the wounded stag comes out of Mexican folklore and poetry too, for example the 'verses expressing the feelings of a lover' by Sur Juana Ines de la Cruz:

If thou seest the wounded stag  
that hastens down  
the mountainside,  
seeking, stricken, in icy stream  
ease for its hurt,  
the crystal waters,  
not in ease, in pain it mirrors  
me. <sup>24</sup>



Frida Kahlo

XII The Little Deer 1946

Oil on Masonite 9 x 12

Ulloa Collection Mexico City

## ROOTS

Frida Kahlo's masquerade surrounded with tropical vegetation, ornaments and animals expresses an obsession with her masked and ornamented self.

Kahlo's masked self allowed her to inhabit two worlds the real and the unreal.

Her body becomes a symbol emersed in nature and cosmos.

The earth, animals and plants that surround her become pictorial symbols 'pictograms' <sup>25</sup>

This pictorial language acts outwardly from Kahlo's particular private world to the general and the public. Her body functions as a pictorial symbol of nature and history. Her use of imagery of fecundity and luxuriant plant life stemmed from an obsession to identify herself with the abundance of nature and link herself with all natural phenomena, which compensated for her feelings of utter barrenness.

The ancient Indian Mexican cultures believed in their oneness with nature and that all life possessed something magical and sacred.

The magical interconnection of all living things was central to Kahlo's approach to her imagery.

It allowed her to transform herself or intermingle with various life forms. In her diary Kahlo mentions her identification with other living beings not human, which brings to mind the Aztec prayer "I am the Flower, I am the Feather", Kahlo writes of human beings relate "through millions of stone beings, bird beings, star beings, microbe beings, fountain beings" <sup>26</sup>

Kahlo's body functions as a receiver and transformer of the magical energies that she believed existed in animal and vegetable forms.

She transforms herself so naturally into many states, her body becoming a vital component within the great web of life. In her participation with plant, stone and animal forms one is convinced that she is bound together in a stream of oneness with nature, thus she becomes a symbol of its duality abundance and dearth.

Kahlo's damaged body is masked and ornamented intertwined with roots, vines, veins and enmeshed in plants. She expresses her wish for fertility by entangling herself in this web of connections as if to filter some magical energy from nature itself. Kahlo is searching for a sense of wholeness that goes beyond her physical body to a higher state which transcends the law of one's own gravity.

She becomes a link in the chain of causation, her body changes through the seasonal cycles of nature fluctuating between generation and decay.

In Roots 1943 (Plate IX) Kahlo expresses her wish to become deeply embedded in nature. Rooting herself in the land Rivera loved, connecting herself more closely to him. Unlike My Nurse and I 1937 (Plate VI) where the infant Frida receives nourishment it is the woman Frida who injects life into the earth. Kahlo's elbow is propped on a pillow, her somewhat calm and almost peaceful expression suggests that she is dreaming. Kahlo dreams that from her heart and womb she gives birth to

a vine.

Her blood nourishes the barren ground while leaves sprout from her veins and take root in the soil.

Roots may also express Kahlo's belief in the co-existence of fertility and death, her body fertilizing the earth after death becoming part of the cycle of nature and decay.



## CHAPTER V

### THE TWO FRIDAS

Frida Kahlo may have found looking at her mirrored image a comforting or meditative influence. This detached pain-free image devoid of emotion that stared back at Kahlo may have had a calming and reassuring effect on her, strengthening her feelings of self-regard.

Kahlo constructed a dialogue using many aspects of herself, with dual self-image, alter egos and her twined heritage. Her twined existence was crystalized by her thought dialogue with her reflected image in the mirror. Through the narcissism of self-portraiture Kahlo expressed a self-devotion which was essential for her determination indeed for any meaningful hold on life.

The mirror and canvas were focus points within Kahlo's meeting place of reality, desire and fantasy.

She may have painted a self-portrait or double self-portrait as a means of exploring the reality of her own body.

Kahlo's mirrored reflection did not represent to her an object to be depicted but the image of depicter. As both artist and model, Kahlo investigated her existence as a woman and passionately revealed her feminine emotions.

Frida Kahlo's continual pre-occupation with dualism begins with the personal: what she herself called the "duality of her personality" and ends with her dual heritage part Mexican

part European. 27

The Two Fridas 1939 (Plate XIII) one of Kahlo's largest paintings was just completed when she received the divorce papers from her husband.

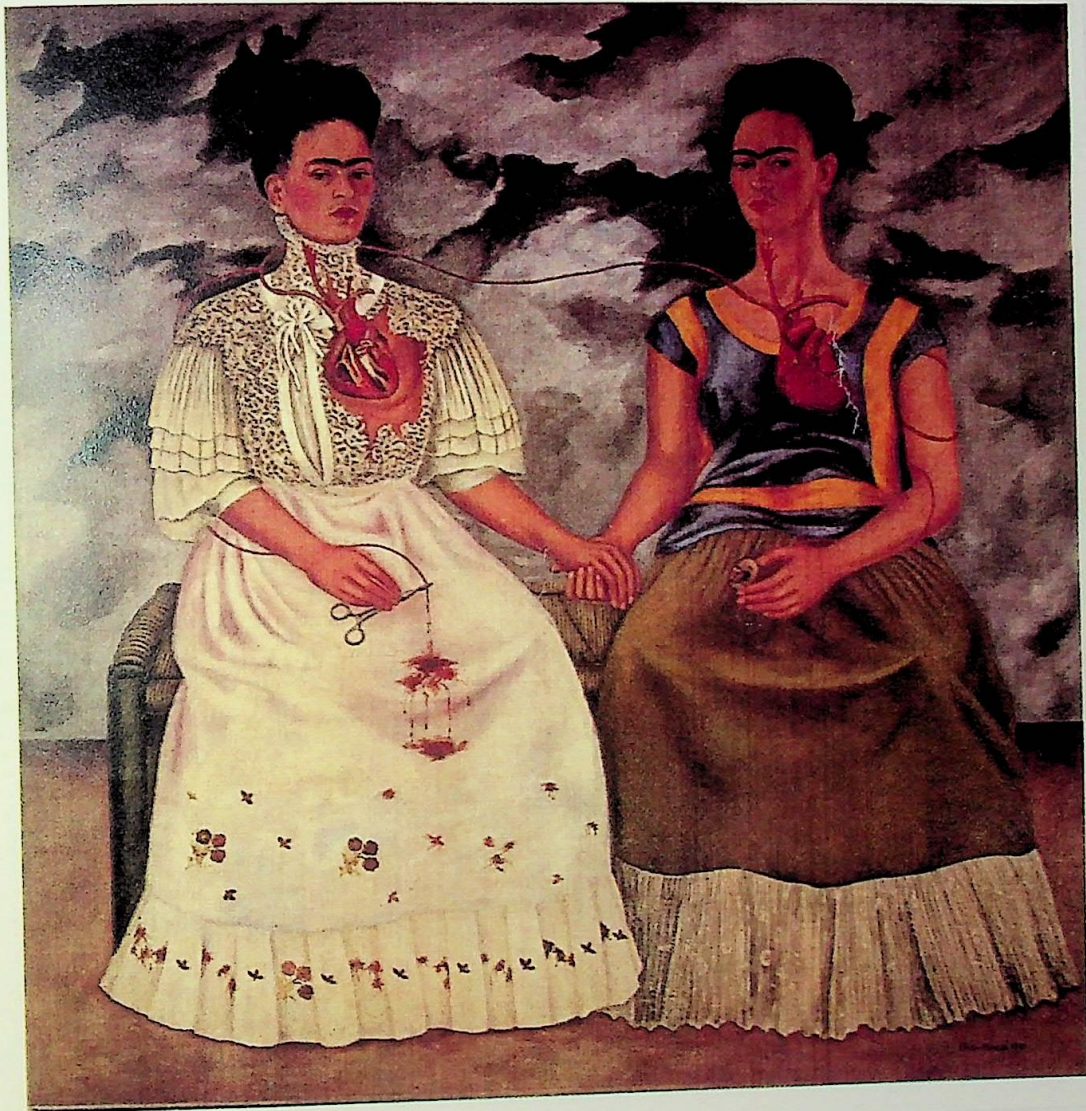
Both Fridas have their hearts exposed, bringing to mind the bleeding heart of Catholic tradition.

The unloved Frida displays a broken heart, while the other Fridas heart is whole.

They sit side by side, the Indian Frida wears a Tehuana dress and holds in one hand a miniature portrait of Rivera which is connected to a long red vein resembling an umbilical cord. The exposed vein winds around the Indian Fridas arm through her heart and ends on her counterpart's lap.

The European Frida wears a white Victorian dress She stops the flow of blood through the severed vein with a surgical pincers, but the blood continues to drip staining her white dress.

Kahlo's fascination with the nature of blood is shown not only in the red pool that gathers in the lap of the European Frida but in the embroidered flowers that transform into splotches of blood on the hem of her dress. The Indian Frida is the one Rivera loves, the second, the European Frida, is the one he no longer loves. In anguish at the divorce she cuts off the vital flow of blood with surgical pincers held near her sexual organs. The anger and despair that forced her to symbolically cut her attachment with Rivera and the outside world, serve to amplify her feelings of pain and isolation. When faced with these tragic circumstances the two Fridas



Frida Kahlo

XIII The Two Fridas 1939

Oil on Canvas 67 x 67

Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

show no emotions, they remain wilfully impassive. The paralysis of their demeanors intensify the sense of inner turmoil and contrast dramatically with the turbulent, grey jagged clouds in the background.

The blood that stains the Victorian Fridas white dress brings to mind her paintings of miscarriage and martyrdom. Kahlo's fascination with blood revealed itself in her paintings beginning in 1932, but here in The Two Fridas the dripping and flowing of blood takes on a more sadomasochistic intensity.

Kahlo is alone, isolated within a vast empty space, her only companion is herself. She is linked by a red blood vein to her counterpart, the two Kahlo's hold hands as if to comfort one another, but the doubling of her self deepens the sense of isolation and despair.

Frida Kahlo's paintings show us stages of uncovering what is beneath her elaborate costume and beneath her actual skin: the skin over wounds and the external envelope of beauty over the reality of pain.

She does not separate the real from the psychoanalytical as for instance in her Self Portrait With Cropped Hair 1940 (Plate XI). The forces of pain are made all the greater because they cannot be seen. The only suggestion of bodily harm is shown by the fact that Kahlo has cropped her hair, but there is no consolation as Kahlo stares directly at the viewer as if suggesting that she may inflict greater damage on her body.

Both The Two Fridas and Self-portrait with Cropped Hair express a mood of angry retaliation. Kahlo has reacted to her psychological suffering caused by her divorce from Rivera, by stripping herself of the Tehuana costume that he loved so much.

Kahlo has cropped her hair, and wears an oversized suit. Earrings are the only touch of femininity. Sinister looking strands of cut hair spread all over the ground and entangle themselves around the yellow chair that Kahlo is sitting on. At the top of the painting are the words of a song, "Look if I loved, it was for your hair, now that you are bald, I don't love you anymore."

In this painting Frida Kahlo becomes a figure whom we see as androgynous. The viewer becomes fascinated by her seemingly sexually ambiguous appearance. We know that the person we are looking at is a woman but somewhere behind our rationalization of this figure there appears within our mind the possibility of dual sexual identity. The suit Kahlo wears belongs to Rivera, she sits with her legs apart like a man, and she wears man's black lace-up shoes.

Kahlo's donning of men's clothes in this painting brings to mind the American painter Romaine Brook's (1874-1970), whose self-portraits in male attire reveal a similar rejection of femininity as well as sexual ambiguity. Kahlo's rejection of femininity could have been a reaction to the guilt associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood.

She may have felt that her inability to have children contributed to her husband's wish for a separation. By cutting her link with Rivera she was disconnecting herself from feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Annette Nancarrow (a friend of Kahlo) has said that during Kahlo's separation from her husband "She cut off her hair and wore men's clothes to assert her identity as an independent person dedicated to a career. It was a denial of her more passive role as wife and well dressed woman"<sup>28</sup>

In Self Portrait With Cropped Hair Kahlo holds the scissors that was used to crop her hair near her genitals, in exactly the same position of the surgical pincers that severed the vein connecting her with her husband's miniature portrait in The Two Fridas. In both paintings one is aware that a macabre act has been performed.

The violent rejection of femininity cuts off the part of herself that contains the capacity to love.

Kahlo informs us that this vengeful act has resulted in total isolation.

She sits alone in oppressive surroundings contemplating what she has done. The lock of cut hair that hangs between her legs emphasises the feeling of wounded sexuality. Kahlo cuts her connection with Rivera and leaves him her message of vengeance.

She expressed these angry feelings in a letter that she wrote dated October 13, 1939 to a friend,

"Since I came back from New York, I don't accept a damn cent from Diego, the reasons you must understand. I will never accept money from any man till I die" 29

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH DIEGO ON MY MIND

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were separated for one year, but their mutual unhappiness led them to re-marriage in 1940. Through the familiar afflictions of their relationship they both remained obsessed with each other. Kahlo's obsession for Rivera is shown in her Self-Portrait With Diego On My Mind 1943 (Plate XIV) where the fear of losing her husband's love is expressed by trapping his image in her forehead. The sinister web of veins or roots radiate outward from the crown of her festive Tehuana headdress extending her energy from within, transcending the restrictions of her own body. Rivera is consumed within this network of tentacles and is forever in her psyche. Her black bird-winged eyebrows, dark penetrating eyes and her full lips underneath a faint moustache, distinctive features composed within her frills and lace like some demonic flower. Kahlo pleads to her husband for love by wearing her bride like frills and veil, clearly identifying here with her Indian self, the Indian Frida Rivera loved. The headdress with its veil and lace refers to marriage and has suggestions of the Catholic First Holy Communion, each ceremony allows rite of passage through a pledge of love and devotion.



Frida Kahlo  
XIV Self-Portrait with Diego on my Mind 1943  
Oil on masonite 24 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24  
Gelman Collection Mexico City.



## CONCLUSION

Today most of the popular arts of Mexico and Latin America in general are produced by the peasantry, who are largely of Indian stock.<sup>34</sup>

These popular art forms are "marketed by the makers themselves in rural village squares, by entrepreneurs in smart shops in downtown Bogotá or Buenos Aires and by the aid agencies of Europe and North America through catalogues and charity shops"<sup>35</sup>.

The urban poor produce popular art forms that are associated with popular religion and movements striving for social change.

Their work is "often highly political in expression",<sup>36</sup> for example, the work produced by "the arpilleras of Chile"<sup>37</sup>

Many avant-garde artists return to these art forms because they are searching "for authenticity of cultural identity."<sup>38</sup>

These popular forms of course are not free from problems associated with the complexities of ancient cultural heritage.

The Latin American artists of the art school and gallery tradition, re-use aspects of popular or Indian art. They do so not because they perceive it as being 'natural' or untroubled by the diversities of cultural identity, but realistically these forms provide a variety of influences "without the attendant overtones of a borrowed style from a non-Latin American source"<sup>39</sup>

Mexican artists such as Roco Maldonado (born 1951), and German Venegas (born 1959) "explore the territory mapped out

The beauty of Kahlo's outer appearance, expresses her undying love for Rivera while disguising her fear of abandonment, rejection and anger.

The greater the emotional or physical pain the more elaborate her self-decoration became.

Her feelings of loss brought about by Rivera's philandering were somewhat countered by her own casual affairs, but periods of undergoing operations, her frailty and her illness often isolated her and at times like these Rivera's long absences were unbearable.

However, this picture of Frida Kahlo is not one of the "sterotypical long-suffering Mexican woman".<sup>30</sup>

Frida Kahlo spent most of her life in the hands of doctors whom she scorned or idolized.

During her life of spinal and foot operations, abortions and miscarriages, death was a constant reality.

She adorned her bed with papier-mache skeletons and sugar skulls, and like many Mexicans she joked about death and celebrated it, and so confronted it directly.

Kahlo felt that death was lurking at every moment within her tortured body. She kept reminders of it around her house in Coyoacán in the form of clay skeletons, anonymous paintings of the dead, one such painting of a dead child surrounded by flowers was placed at the head of her bed.

Kahlo kept a real foetus preserved in a jar as a reminder of her miscarriages.

The ink drawings of winged female figures in the last few

pages of Frida Kahlo's diary, contrast dramatically with her painting Roots 1940 for example, in which her body is embedded in soil. Her ink drawings express her wish to transcend beyond her "earthy rootedness"<sup>31</sup> into the spiritual world. Kahlo's final drawing in this Journal shows a black angel rising up into the sky which surely expressed her feelings of being close to death.

Hayden Herrera has said that like Kahlo's depictions of pain, for example in her painting Self-Portrait With Humming Bird 1940 "her idea of death was split between Catholic and pagan traditions"<sup>32</sup>

The Christian belief in spiritual life after death and the ancient Indian belief that through death the body's energy becomes forever part of the life cycle of earth and cosmos.

"I hope the exit is joyful - and I hope never to come back -  
Frida"<sup>33</sup>

These were the last words entered into her diary before her death on July 13, 1954.

by Frida Kahlo" 40

Their use of iconic symbols of ancient Indian and Christian religions combined in a manner of folk and naive styles using modern materials of industrial and automobile parts, tracing the past and present of history and nature, and of death and ritual.

Mexicans in the United States have called themselves by a variety of names as a result of the social and historical restrictions made on colonized people.

Mexicano, Mexican, Mexican American, Raza ('the race' or 'the people'), Chicano, Spanish American and Hispanic. (Hispanic a term rejected by many because it ignores the Indian component in the Chicano movement).

"For Chicana artists" Frida Kahlo "provided a needed role model. Not only was her art of great interest and beauty, not only did it incorporate or absorb the pre-Columbian and folk imagery of Mexico which were vital strands of Chicano cultural nationalism in the seventies, but her whole life, lived as a work of art, was intriguing"<sup>41</sup>

Mexican and Chicana women have lived with misconceptions, restrictions and stereotyping from society on the whole and from within their own community, many of which are shared by women in general. The traditional stereotype of Mexican women (Hembrismo) as passive, gentle, sentimental, emotional fragile, dependent.

Mexican men (Machismo) are rough, strong, intellectual, independent, authoritarian and brave 42

The woman is seen only in relation to the man, standing by or backing him up.

Simply becoming an artist constantly involves breaking stereotypes within the community and within the family, who see no financial future for anyone entering into the arts.

The life and art of Frida Kahlo provided an introverted model for Mexican women and women in general. Finding inspiration from her interior life, her images of birth and death, pain and endurance. Mexican women artists today employ a wide range of styles and techniques from traditional retablos and altarpieces to autobiographical work using photography and video. These autobiographical works dealing with sexuality, stress a concern with images of women, their condition and their surroundings.

Frida Kahlo's exploration of her interior world, through the devotion of self-portraiture and her adoption of traditional rather than the language of high art, led her towards the potential for an alternative representation of women.

"Frida Kahlo's painting moves us today by the tension, both on a personal and cultural level, between desire and contingency" 43

#### FOOTNOTES

1. H. Herrera Frida A biography of Frida Kahlo p.24.
2. Diego Rivera Paradise lost at Rockefeller Centre p.17.
3. H.Herrera Frida A biography of Frida Kahlo p.23.
4. *ibid.* p.151.
5. L.R. Lippard. From The Center p.318.
6. L.E. Schimeckbier Modern Mexican Art p.5.
7. *ibid.* p.15.
8. H. Herrera Frida A biography of Frida Kahlo p.111.
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.* p.83.
11. *ibid.* p.84.
12. L. Mulvey, P. Wollen Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti p.19.
13. *ibid.* p.7.
14. *ibid.* p.227.
15. H.T. Day and H. Sturges Art of the Fantastic p.86.
16. H. Herrera Frida A biography of Frida Kahlo p.228.
17. O. Baddeley and V. Fraser. Drawing the Line p.102.
18. H. Herrera Frida A biography of Freida Kahlo p.254.
19. *ibid.* p.258.
20. *ibid.* p.257.
21. *ibid.* p.262
22. *ibid.* p.357
23. H.T. Day and H. Sturges Art of the Fantastic p.89.
24. L. Mulvey and P. Wollen Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti p.25.
25. *ibid.* p.27.

26. H.T. Day and H. Sturges Art of the Fantastic p.89.
27. H. Herrera Frida A Biography of Frida Kahlo p.279.
28. *ibid.* p.478.
29. *ibid.* p.286.
30. *ibid.* p. 368.
31. *ibid.* p.431.
32. *ibid.*
33. *ibid.*
34. O. Baddeley and V. Fraser Drawing The Line p.120.
35. *ibid.* p.119.
36. *ibid.* p.120.
37. *ibid.*
38. *ibid.*
39. *Ibid.* p. 120
40. p. 125-126
41. S. Goldman's Essay on Contemporary Chicana Artists. p.194
42. *Ibid.* p.190
43. M. Newman Art in America USA "The Ribbon around the bomb"  
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