

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954)

Frida Kahlo is perhaps best known for her bold, unflinchingly honest self-portraits. Though often small, these images are visually powerful and create immediate emotional impact on viewers. For Kahlo, art, politics, life, and the self were interconnected, and she portrayed herself accordingly. In her paintings, she openly explored her physical and emotional suffering, as well as her family heritage, radical politics, devotion to Mexico, and fascination with natural processes. As a result, her art serves as a visual document of both her personal life and her public persona.

Kahlo was one of four daughters born to a German-Hungarian father and a Spanish-Indian mother in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. This heritage, with links to both Mexico and Europe, became a source of pride for Kahlo and an inspiration for her art. She originally planned a career in medicine, but her dream changed dramatically in 1925. She was seriously injured in a violent bus accident, which damaged her spine, pelvis, collarbone, and right leg so badly that she lived with chronic pain and endured numerous operations for the rest of her life. While bedridden for three months following the accident, Kahlo began painting to pass the time and escape the pain. Unable to sit up, she had an easel and mirror affixed above her bed so she could be her own model; self-portraits would dominate Kahlo's work throughout her career.

Even after recuperating, Kahlo continued painting and settled on a career as an artist. She had little formal training, but found inspiration in the Mexican folk art she loved, incorporating its vivid colors and two-dimensional shapes into her own painting. Kahlo drew on pre-Columbian art and Mexican folk art as sources for forms and symbols in her painting. In her daily life, she expressed her devotion to her Mexican identity through her clothing. She favored the distinctive dress of the Tehuantepec women of southwest Mexico and often wore and represented herself in the long, full skirt, embroidered blouse (*huipil*), and woven shawl (*rebozo*) of the region.

Kahlo married the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in 1929. They shared much in the way of art, politics, and nationalistic loyalty; however their marriage was difficult and tumultuous. The couple traveled to the United States and France, where Kahlo met luminaries from the worlds of art and politics. She had her first solo exhibition in New York City in 1938 and enjoyed considerable success during the 1940s. In 1953, a year before her death, Kahlo was finally honored by the country she loved so much when she received her first solo exhibition in Mexico.

Selected Bibliography

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