

Frida Kahlo and Mexican Tradition Identity

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Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) was perhaps the most radical woman painter of the 20th century. Who is not familiar with her flamboyant appearance – the austere, beautiful woman with her black hair and dark unibrow?

Frida Kahlo was radical in the clarity with which she told of her life and suffering. However, despite her weeping and love, or desperate soul searching, Kahlo's art inquires into the contemporary political and cultural stress of her Mexico. She did not draw inspiration from the world's art metropolises but, rather, from the pictorial storytelling tradition of the Mexican people. Popular image, in the case of Frida Kahlo, is the artist herself, her image, her elaborate hair, her featured brows, her Mexican costume. She embodies a set of axioms about Mexico itself: passionate, exotic, yet constantly struggling against pain and deceit.¹

Her paintings tell stories, together with her writings, (she kept a diary for the last ten years of her life as a repository of her feelings) and together they explore the toughness and vulnerability of the human body. In many paintings she melds together the ancient past with her present, merging animals, plants, personae and mythical beings. It is a practice that is artistic as much as it is shamanic, one related to the concept of Aztec duality and that is also addressed in other terms.²

According to Anderson, while, on the one hand, Kahlo's paintings reflect the nationalist ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico with the re-evaluation of indigenous and past traditions, on the other hand, Kahlo refuses to romanticize the autochthonous, as post-revolutionary Mexico attempted to do. Kahlo, instead, through personal

1 Baddeley 1991, 10–17.

2 Udall 2003/2004, 10–14.

introspection sought to redefine the modern *mestizo/a*.³ Indeed, the evocation of the Aztec and Zapotec, and the imagery of a folk Mexico is an evident pattern in her paintings.

After Porfirio Diaz's thirty-four year dictatorship, in 1920 the election saw Alvaro Obregon as his successor. He rejected the anti-autochthonous philosophy and policy of his predecessor, and developed a program for the creation of public, social art that would allow the masses to receive the ideals of the Revolution.⁴

Since Frida grew up after the Mexican revolution and reached maturity when indigeneity and *Mexicanidad* were strong forces in her country, we would expect to find her politics reflected in her art. In 1920, when the popular uprising of the Mexican Revolution began, society's values were still entirely established upon the veneration of the male as the center of the family and as having the right to the possession of both land and women. As a consequence of the violence of the Revolution, the idea of attempting to construct a new society arose, however this causes difficulties in maintaining a national identity, while it clashed with the constant advances in technology and capitalism that were represented by the United States, and this took place in a Country that is divided both geographically and culturally.

The education system was extended to serve indigenous and rural populations, and there was a considerable commissioning of murals depicting folkloric elements of Mexico's indigenous peoples, from both the past and the present.⁵

Contemporary manifestations of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past were supported and glorified by the Government and focusing on the variety and richness of Mexican culture.⁶ A strongly anti-Spanish idealization of Aztec Mexico and a focus in the 'Indian Question' became

3 Andersen 2009, 119.

4 Ibid.

5 Duran 1990, 245-246.

6 Blancarte 1994, 19.

the center of interest of the Mexican *indigenista*⁷. By refusing Spanish colonialism, Mexican nationalism identified the Aztecs as the roots of an indigenous political unit. This glorification of indigenous peoples evolved into what Luis Villoro has described as the dialectic of the *indigenista* mindset.⁸ The unique and pristine nature of Mexican culture, through the re-appreciation of its autochthonous people, was a protagonist in the revolution, and supported the nationalist movement between the 1920s and the 1940s. However, by the early 20th Century the United States began to replace Spain in interfering in the country's internal political struggles. The aim of the leaders was to elevate the life style of the 'real' Americans against the rest of the world, but particularly against the United States.⁹

The glorification of ancient and contemporary native culture stimulated a largely *mestizo* population to incorporate previously disclaimed features of their heritage. As Stuart Hall asserts, this process of incorporating the past was indeed a manner through which to re-discover that past, but was also an intimate path in search of identity: 'not an identity grounded in the archeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past.'¹⁰ Within the chaos of this revival, Frida Kahlo, placed her interchangeable figure, not only as an artist, but also as a woman. She stresses that she belongs to the Mexican Tradition by changing her birthdate from 1907 to 1910, thus making it coincide with the Mexican Revolution. Kahlo liked to say she was a daughter of the Mexican Revolution.¹¹

My Dress Hangs There

Many of Kahlo's paintings demonstrate anti-imperialist, anti-materialist, and, more specifically, anti-US themes¹². Indeed, it was during

7 Keen 1972, 463-508.

8 Villoro 1949, 10.

9 Montfort 1999, 344.

10 Andersen 2009, 120.

11 Grimberg 1993/1994, 44-50.

12 Andersen 2009, 119-130.

her American sojourn, while her husband, the well-known muralist Diego Rivera, was working on his Rockefeller Central mural – unfinished and later destroyed by Nelson Rockefeller due to the identification of Lenin’s portrait in one of the characters – that Frida painted *My Dress Hangs There* (1933; fig. 1). Achieved through a mixture of collage, photography and painting – *My Dress Hangs There* is representative of a critique of industrialized North America. The painting – as Oriana Baddeley has stated – is Kahlo’s most formally adventurous work.¹³ Kahlo, in a theatrical manner, depicts the destruction, greed and abuse of capitalism. Through her symbolism she reminds us of, and underlines, the evils and excesses of industry and consumerism. The painting seems to be a stage and the audience is invited to see the show of the world around them.

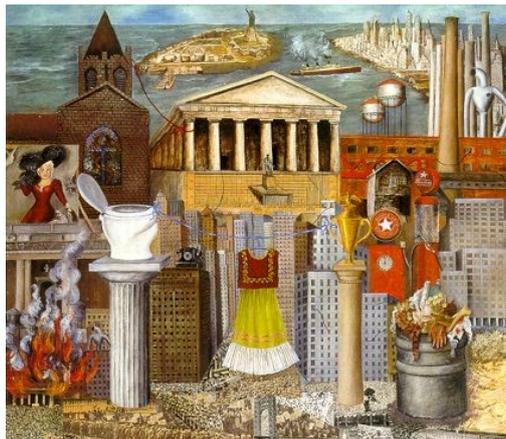


Fig. 1: Frida Kahlo, *My dress hangs there*, 1933.

The profound contrast between Mexican values and those Frida experienced in the United States served to crystalize her political attitudes. The Painting scourges the United States – equipped with a bourgeois life-style – represented with images of a toilette, and a sports trophy on the top of a classical column; and a telephone situated on a pedestal in the form of a skyscraper. Kahlo depicts its hypocrisy by wrapping a dollar sign around the cross of a church. The steps of a Federal building, presided over by a statue of George

13 Baddeley 1991, 15.

Washington, are a collage of a financial graph showing “weekly sales in millions”¹⁴, while the commercialization of sex is interpreted by a deteriorating poster of Mae West as a Hollywood fantasy. The Church, the Industry and Wall Street are joined together by telephone lines and, behind this inhuman environment, Kahlo places the people, highlighting their distance from their surroundings by the artist’s use of photo-collage.

The lower part of the canvas delineates the contrast between wealth and poverty in American society. In the forefront of this moral decay, corruption, poverty and suffering, Kahlo places a vibrant immaculate figure: the traditional costume of Zapotec women, from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec – located in the South Eastern part of Mexico in the region of Oaxaca – but the Tehuana dress hangs empty. There is no flesh, no human presence, no heartbeat or breath – only a dress. Zapotec women – according to the mythology that revolves around them – do indeed represent an ideal of freedom, economic independence, and of a matriarchal society. The image that they embodied may have led to Kahlo’s choice of the dress¹⁵. The absence of Nature, and a strongly masculine technology that masters the canvas, is in juxtaposition with the feminine presence that is embodied by the empty dress, the Statue of Liberty and Mae West.

Women in the Tehuantepec region are known for their majesty, beauty, sensuality, intelligence, courage and strength. Popular legend recounts that their society is a matriarchy, where women manage markets, are responsible for fiscal affairs and dominate men. Their dress is lovely: an embroidered blouse and long, usually purple or red velvet, skirt with white cotton voile at the hem. Frida, in a certain way, opted to dress as a Tehuana for the same reason that she adopted the *mexicanidad*: to please Rivera. However, she does not modify her character to match the Rivera ideal. Rather, she invented a very individual personal style to dramatize the personality that she already had and that she knew Diego liked, and to hide her physical

14 Herrera 1992, 101.

15 Helland 1990/1991, 8–13.

imperfections. Rivera was moved by the Tehuana costumes and headdresses, in fact, he stated that all Mexican women should wear traditional Mexican costumes:

The classical Mexican dress has been created by people for 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., a great American and French bureaucracy.¹⁶

Frida Kahlo was able to perceive the semiotic qualities of the clothing, which lie within its role as a metaphorical vehicle, and which is also easily understood by the eye of the viewer. Frida's use of this traditional dress to strengthen her identity, reaffirming her political beliefs, and concealing her imperfections, also built on her own sense of heritage and personal history, defining her identity, reasserting her indigenous values and her *Mexicanidad*.

Her transitions from being a single to a married woman, from a private to a public role as the spouse of a well-known artist, and from being an individual to being an artist are reflected in her conscious appropriation and assimilation of her culture, both ancient and contemporary.¹⁷ Indeed, her personal transition mirrors Mexico itself, in a "phase of self-examination and self-definition after the revolution"¹⁸. Frida expressed her belonging to what she called *la raza* (the race), not only through her art, but through her conduct, in the decoration of her home and, above all, in her wardrobe¹⁹. Native costumes highlighted her link with Nature. The Indian costume represented one more way of proclaiming her alliance with the race²⁰. The Zapotec women, is identified with the image of the strong Indian woman, *La llorona* (the weeping woman), in strong contrast to the *Chingada*, whose representation is related to Mexico's hybrid post-conquest culture.

16 Herrera 1983, 111.

17 Block - Hoffman-Jeep 1998/1999, 10.

18 Schaefer 1992, 3.

19 Herrera 1992, 7.

20 Herrera 1983, 147-150.

Both characters – as described in Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*²¹ – are descended from an Aztec mother goddess: *Llorona* is, in a broader sense, the symbol of the trauma of the Spanish invasion. Mad with grief over the loss of her child, she wanders the streets, crying and calling for a spectral memory of the past before the Conquest. *La Llorona* is a long-suffering mother figure. In contrast, the *Chingada* is the mother of the mestizo culture, 'the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived'. The feminine soul, defaced and stolen by the male forces of the Spanish invader.²²

The Indian Mexico raped and abused by the conquistador yet bearing his bastard child. The rhetoric of the Tehuana opposes the nihilism of traditional feminizations of colonial trauma, and asserts the potential of a dignified cultural resistance.²³

The empty Tehuana dress is in sharp contrast with the industrialization of consumerist North America. Since Kahlo does not depict herself within it, it suggests absence and displacement. According to Herrera, in fact, Frida did not enjoy her stay in New York, often complaining of homesickness, and of her dissatisfaction with the racism she experienced.²⁴

The Tehuana dress, for Frida, therefore, embodies the true Mexican identity. It represents the exotic Mexican in a reality where industrialization is the first on a scale of values. The Tehuana dress represents the purity and richness of a culture that is far from the industrial world of the United States which is, on the contrary, oversaturated, consumer-oriented and depersonalized. It represents the most recondite belonging to the real Mexico. In a letter to a friend, Kahlo writes:

Meanwhile, some of the gringa-women are imitating me and trying to dress a la Mexicana, but the poor souls only look like cabbages and, to tell you the truth, they look absolutely impossible. That's doesn't mean that I look good in them either.²⁵

21 Paz 1985, 67–79.

22 Baddeley 1991, 15.

23 Ibid.

24 Herrera 1992, 63.

25 Herrera 1983, 173.

The Tehuana dress is the most decorative of the pre-Hispanic forms of clothing. The Mexican Indian dress is extremely variable in every region of the country. Kahlo's devotion to her country, and her use of the themes and symbolism of the indigenous Aztec make her art, at the same time, both political and cultural. Kahlo knew what she wanted her art to be²⁶:

Some critics have tried to classify me as a Surrealist; but I do not consider myself a Surrealist ... I detest Surrealism. To me, it seems a manifestation of bourgeois art. A deviation from the true art that the people hope for from the artist ... I wish to be worthy, with my paintings, of the people to whom I belong and to the ideas which strengthen me.²⁷

Her emphasis on the Aztec, rather than on the Mayan, Toltec, or other indigenous cultures, corresponds to her political demands for a unified Mexico, nationalist and independent. Unlike Rivera, who approved of Trotsky's internationalism, Frida exalted the nationalism of Stalin, who was probably seen as a unifying force within his country. Her focus was anti-materialist and, especially, anti-US.

The *Mexicanidad* of Kahlo takes the form of a pure nationalism, focusing on the art and artifacts that unite all *indigenistas*, regardless of their political positions, and on the Aztec tradition so revered as a symbol of native, pre-Hispanic cultures. In her art, Frida expressed her nationalism, encouraging the representation of the pre-Columbian, powerful and authoritarian society that had joined a large area of the Middle Americas by force and conquest.²⁸ *Indigenismo* was the expression of a nostalgia for an imagined, folklorized figure of indigeneity. Most indigenous people were separated, socially and economically, from the mainstream of Mexican society, even though *lo indigena* embodied the root and essence of all 'true' Mexicans. Paradoxically, *lo indigena* incorporates, for Mexican society in general, on one side that which is most ultimately Mexican and, on the other, that which is most foreign and separate.²⁹

26 Helland 1990/1991, 8–13.

27 In a 1952 letter from Kahlo to Antonio Rodriguez, quoted in Herrera 1983, 263.

28 Helland 1990/1991, 8–13.

29 Villoro 1949, 207.

Frida started to dress in traditional clothes on the day of her marriage to Diego Rivera: 21st August, 1929. Eventually, it wasn't bohemian insouciance that encouraged her to choose as a wedding dress, a skirt, blouse, and *rebozo* that she borrowed from an Indian maid. Of uncertain origin, the *rebozo* is a rectangular woven shawl of cotton, wool, or silk, sometimes embroidered and with long fringes. It was worn by all social classes, differentiated only by the type of its material.³⁰

By dressing, she was choosing a new identity. This is demonstrated by the photographs (1926, fig. 2) in which – still a young girl – she appears dressed as a male, in a family photo taken by her father, Guillermo Kahlo.



Fig. 2: Guillermo Kahlo, 1926.

Dressing, for Frida, was always a way to state her freedom and her personality. In Frida's dress one can recognize creativity and the deep sense of color that she had as an artist. Her clothes, besides being in themselves a way to hide physical and emotional weaknesses, translated her temperament. Her outfit was a key element in building the strong personality that has transcended the history of twentieth-century painting. For her, clothing was equivalent to a kind of language, and, after she married, the intricate link between clothing and her

30 Cordry – Cordry 1978, 11–130.

image of herself, between her personal style and her painting, became more evident.

Kahlo, quite distinctly merges the private and public aspects of her life in her sartorial allegory of post-revolutionary Mexico. Her fashion was her public statement of her *mexicanidad* and of post-revolutionary Mexico's attitude towards U.S. economic and cultural colonization.

If, on one hand, the Tehuana dress has political meaning, on the other, it can be seen like a *piñata* – the traditional papier mâché container stuffed with sweets and gifts that is set off during *fiestas* – as simultaneously being the embodiment of the decorative and the explosive. Yet, the dress was also a form of humor, an exalted theatrical camouflage, as well as a call to the image of the suffering, naked body beneath it, and the discovery of its secrets. Necklaces, rings, white organdy headgear, flowery peasant blouses, garnet-colored shawls, long skirts, all of it covering the broken body. The clothes, for Frida, were nevertheless, more than a second skin.³¹

Nonetheless, from the New York visit Kahlo gained a clearer perspective on Mexico. Through the cultural and physical distance from her country, Kahlo was able, by the observation and appreciation of the Tehuana dress as a symbol of her *Mexicanidad*, to define her identity.

Self Portrait with Hummingbird

In Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Hummingbird* (fig. 3) from 1938 (or 'Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns'), that she sold to Nickolas Murray,³² we are presented with Kahlo's direct gaze, almost martyred by wearing Christ's crown of thorns; an association that is strengthened by the presence of blood, caused by the thorns which ring her neck. Suspended from the necklace of thorns hangs a dead hummingbird,

31 Fuentes 1995, 22–23.

32 Herrera 1992, 142.

the hummingbird of the painting's title. The miniature of the hummingbird holds many meanings. In Mexican folk tradition, the hummingbird was used as a love charm to bring luck in love. Indeed, Kahlo painted this self-portrait in the months following her divorce from Diego, perhaps Mrs. Rivera used its symbolism as a talisman through which to attempt to re-establish the lost love. In a pre-Columbian association, the hummingbird embodies the images of courage, oracles and magic, and it is associated with the great god Huitzilopochtli, and the god of rain, Tlaloc. In the Aztecs' mythology these birds symbolized the reincarnation of the spirit of dead warriors.³³



Fig. 3: Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait with Hummingbird*, 1938.

From both sides of the shoulders, two small animals stain the green wall of leaves that are in the background of the painting with black. A menacing cat, that seems ready to jump on the bird, and a monkey, precisely Caimito de Guayabal – a gift from Diego – is playing with Frida's necklace.

The leaves in the background of the picture, with their veins, front and back, are turning to the audience, just like the picture of Frida with her frontal position. Among the leaves you can see two flowers transformed into a dragonfly, perhaps as a symbol of transcendence, as the two filigree butterfly brooches adorning her head may be.³⁴

33 Udall 2003/2004, 10-14.

34 Herrera 1992, 142.

For Kahlo, the butterfly was also a kind of emblem. In Mexican tradition the butterfly, with its intrinsic duality of transformation, from caterpillar to pupa to butterfly, was one of the founding tropes.³⁵

This picture also evokes the miracle of Saint Veronica, who, after having wiped the face of the Savior, found His picture, with the crown of thorns, mysteriously transferred onto her veil. In addition, Veronica (from “vera-icon”) is associated with the stopping of the blood flow. The frontal position of Frida – not common in other portraits – and the lack of depth, makes this painting a sort of secular icon image. The monkey, her sweet monkey, which appears in at least eight other paintings, serves as a religious attribute and further emphasizes the iconic image. Probably, Kahlo, also refers to the *nabual* concept in Aztec tradition, and the use of the animal as an alter ego.³⁶ For the Aztec, parrots were considered beings that could take many forms. “In cultured Aztecs circles *nabual* gave *nabualli*, wise man and poet, and *nahuatato*, speakers of many tongues.”³⁷ In the Mexican culture, in fact, the bird is seen as a symbol of divination. Frida, who liked to call herself “*la gran ocultadora*”, the great concealer, and considered herself to be a magical being, might have identified herself with the veiled identity that the bird represents, a multiple identity that is similar to the story of her Mexico.³⁸ Frida’s uses of animals: monkeys, dogs, cats, parrots, in conjunction with nature, could be interpreted as an allusion to the Mexicans’ religious belief, according to which their gods had the ability to transform themselves into animals. Iconographic analysis of Frida self-portrait cannot “explain” their meaning, asserts Lowe.³⁹ Moreover, it indicates the sophisticated and intrinsic level of meaning.

Kahlo never represented a single self but always a multicultural one. By mingling symbols from a diverse body of beliefs, she manages to reveal relations between things known and unknown.⁴⁰

35 Schaefer 1992, 12.

36 Lowe 1991, 57.

37 Udall 2003/2004, 10-14.

38 Ibid. p. 13.

39 Lowe 1991, 57.

40 Ibid.

Always, she drew a story into history, where dreams, reality and history were, for her, interchangeable.⁴¹ She, herself made it clear in her statement “I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality”.⁴² By painting herself as a martyr, Frida iconizes herself, she becomes, like an image in the votive painting, at the same time an abstract symbol and a powerful physical presence. Her self-portraits were like *ex-voto*, and she was the first artist to have rediscovered it. According to Paul Westheim:

What Frida retains of the popular spirit of the *ex-voto*, in addition to that vital affirmation, is the sincerity, the childish character of the forms and the expression of a truth told in such a way that it appears to contain a lie, since there are no limits separating the real, the natural, objective world and the world of the imagination, the world of the unreal and the symbolic.⁴³

Conclusion

Kahlo painted astonishing images, combining objects that are not linked with one another, mostly joining them with her self-centered image. It seems that Kahlo also perceived herself and the world around her as a single entity.⁴⁴ Recognizable and recurring elements of her artistic universe are the Tehuana costumes, tropical flora and fauna, the splitting or doubling of her image, eyebrows turned into birds' wings, that are the personal form of Kahlo and the cult of the ego. The native costume from Tehuantepec gives her an exotic identity and defines her as the *Other* in the city centers of her country as much as it did abroad. This was, for Frida, a declaration of solidarity with the traditional Mexico in the face of a changing world of social, political and economic modernization.

Kahlo's own observation of herself plays two interchangeable roles. She is the subject and the object at the same time. In her personal introspection in seeking her identity, Frida explores the inner and outer world of her *physical body* and plays with these two worlds.

41 Schaefer 199), 13.

42 Burrus 2008, 70.

43 Ibid. pp. 48-49.

44 Grimberg 1993/1994, 45-46.

She merges and confuses them. By privatizing the public and *publicizing* the private, she makes them a whole. As much as her *querido* Mexico: “reduces and institutionalizes the Revolution into icons for mass identification and consumption.” In her images, Mexico appears to be pre-Columbian and post-revolutionary at the same time.⁴⁵

Inevitably, given her strong interest in Aztec culture and in her homeland, her art encompasses both the political and the cultural aspects. She painted herself, she painted Mexico, and, she painted in such a way as to be understood by the people.⁴⁶

Kahlo had been sympathetic to Communism since her youth: she joined the Young Communist league in 1927, when she was twenty. She compares the emblems of Communism with those of the Aztecs, and poses attention to her politics and her commitment to social causes. The evocation of Aztec civilization echo being political acts at a time when the increasing interest in indigenous art coincided with an ardent sense of nationalism. By the mid-forties, her interest in Communism had moved beyond social conscience and had become an epistemological, perhaps even religious, search for “pillars” that could support her faith.⁴⁷

To better understand Frida Kahlo’s cultural contributions, one must pause to look at the growing interest in native Mexican Indian culture at that time. Indeed, this was considered to be the preservation of the *essence* of Mexico’s past, as *immutable* in the changing ocean of modernization.⁴⁸

One of the principal characteristics in Kahlo’s œuvre are her searches for identity in terms of opposition or Others. This alluring retrieval of the *exotic*, or the Other, is represented by Kahlo “through the cracks and fissures in the mask that promises insight or revelation, but that neither exhausts nor even completely reveals, leaving

45 Schaefer 1992, 10. 24–36.

46 Helland 1990/1991, 8–13.

47 Fuentes 1995, 28–29.

48 Schaefer 1992, 10.

intact a certain element of the unknown, after the viewer's gaze has been enticed to draw nearer".⁴⁹

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49 *Ibid.* pp. 23–26.

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