



Art 110

### **Frida Kahlo "The Subject I Know Best"**

Frida Kahlo was born as, Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo Y Calderón in Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico on July 6th, 1907 (1910 according to her). Frida was a round little girl and had a dimple in her chin. She was very imaginative and full of life. Her father, Wilhelm Kahlo, was German. He moved to Mexico in his youth and remained there the rest of his life. Wilhelm took over her mother's family's photography business. Kahlo was very close with her father. She hung out with him on his painting excursions and would collect things from nature. They both had a love for the beauty of nature. Her father also had epilepsy and Frida knew what to do to help him if he had a seizure. This is probably part of the reason she later wanted to study medicine. Frida's mother, Matilde Calderon y Gonzalez, was his second wife. Together they had four daughters, Frida being the third. Kahlo's mother raised her sisters and her in a very strict religious environment. In addition to her stringent upbringing,



Frida had a few events that really shaped the rest of her life. The first was her contracting polio at age 6 which she was bed ridden for 9 months. Frida walked with a limp afterwards. Her father encouraged her to be active to strengthen that leg. She was involved in wrestling, soccer and swimming which were sports that most girls didn't do back then. Wilhelm was very close with his daughter and enrolled her in the prestigious National Preparatory School in Mexico City when she was 15. In 1922, there was a new education policy enacted after the Mexican Revolution, which allowed Kahlo and only 35 other girls to get into the distinguished school. While there Frida wanted to study medicine, botany, and the social sciences. She became friends with a group of other students, the Cachuchas, who shared her rebellious spirit and interest in poetry, literature and socialist nationalist ideals. During her time there she was introduced to the writings of some European philosophers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Her mixed Mexican and European heritage influenced her life and work. The next tragic event that molded Kahlo happened in 1925. She was in a devastating accident where the bus she was riding in was hit by a trolley. This caused severe





damage to her skeletal structure and her abdomen was impaled. The initial recovery took a year



and she was bed ridden and in a body cast. This is where she began her career of painting. Frida



went on to have about 35 more operations and this left her being immobilized much of the time.

She had a special easel that allowed her to paint in bed and because of her driven spirit and wanting to provide some money for her family she kept herself busy by creating beautifully intense works of art.

At age 22 Frida reconnected with an earlier crush, fell in love and married the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera who was 20 years older than her. Both revered as talented artists, they traveled between Paris and New York going to different art exhibits and having their works displayed but they always loved coming home to "Casa Azul" in Mexico. Diego turned her childhood home "Casa Azul" into an art museum. They also lived for a time in San Francisco and Detroit. They tried to conceive but Frida wasn't able to due to her pierced abdomen and back issues from her accident. She had several miscarriages. Frieda suffered from loneliness even though she was married to Diego for 15 years. Her married life was not healthy. Diego had many extramarital affairs, including one with her sister Christina. This of course was devastating to her. He was told by his doctor that he was "unfit for monogamy," which he gladly accepted. Kahlo, despite her unending love and devotion for her husband, wasn't faithful herself. It was probably out of cries for attention. She wanted companionship. Frida wanted children but couldn't. She wanted her husband to love her as much as she did him. They had grown apart as Frida's career took off. Sadly it wasn't until after she died that Diego realized what he had. In his autobiography he said that the day Frida died was the most tragic day of his life and then went on to say that he finally realized that the most wonderful portion of his life was his love for her. " Although Kahlo was known as a bold, confident, feminist her paintings portray a woman who is deeply troubled and alone, crying out for love and companionship and mourning the loss of her babies. "I've suffered two grave accidents in my life..., " Kahlo said, "One in which a streetcar knocked me down...the other accident is Diego."



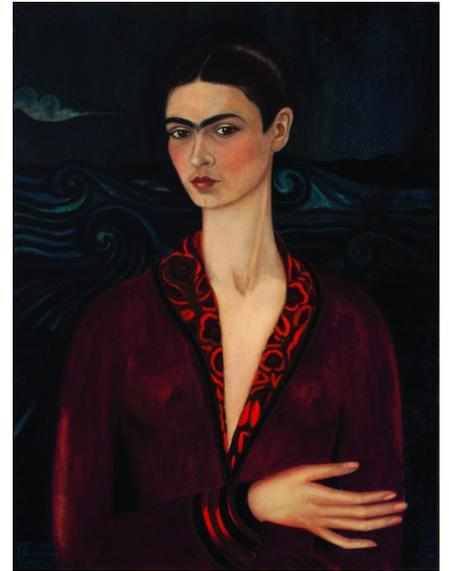
Frida didn't set out to become an artist. Her career path of medicine took a turn due to her health problems. Kahlo didn't have any formal art education she learned a lot from her father, the photographer. She was a daddy's girl and learned a lot from him on his painting outings. He painted a little with watercolor. When Kahlo was older she helped her father touch up his photos.

Wilhelm gave her his paints and her mother gave her an easel and thus she began. Her time spent in a body cast recovering from all of her surgeries gave her the opportunity to focus on her paintings. She had a specially made easel which allowed her to paint while bed ridden. Kahlo's work reflects her many life experiences mostly tragic but with glimmers of hope and strength. Kahlo was known for the many self portraits she painted, roughly 55 of her 200 paintings were self portraits. When asked the question of why she did this she said, "Because I am so often alone....because I am the subject I know best."

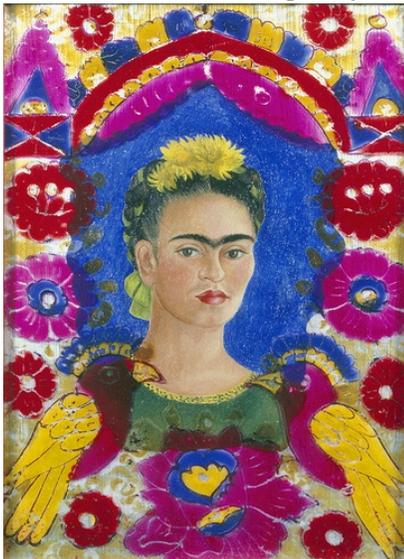
She was at first known as a "naive" or "folk" artist due to the childlike simplicity of her technique and imagery in her work. This wasn't complimentary because it was a title given to artists who didn't have formal training and was shown by the lack of use of traditional art elements. Frida was later considered more of a surrealist painter. In 1938, André Breton, a poet, came to Mexico and saw her work. He was impressed. He himself being an important surrealist thought Kahlo should be part of the surrealism movement. She didn't consider herself a surrealist because her paintings were real life not dreams. Kahlo's influence was from more than just the surrealist crusade, her Mexican heritage influenced her as well. She included things from her culture by combining humans with plants or animals. She loved spider monkeys. Frida did many oil paintings on canvas based on her raw emotions from her life experiences. In 1953, at her first solo exhibition in Mexico, a local critic said this about her, " It is impossible to separate the life and work of this extraordinary person. Her paintings are her biography." This explanation tells why her works were different from the other artists of her time. She herself was so different than the other artists. Frida had been so ill at the time before her exhibition opening that she was told by her doctor to stay in bed. Kahlo didn't let that stop her, she arrived in an ambulance with her bed in the back and was carried in, on her bed, by four men to see her waiting guests.

Kahlo's first self portrait was "Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress" in 1926, an oil on canvas. This painting was a gift for her boyfriend who was also her student. He broke off their relationship and she gave it to him as a token of love in hopes to regain his affection. This gesture worked and they were reunited for a time. The painting is of her in a red velvet dress with curvy multi shaded blue lines that look like ocean waves in the background. There is also a dark sky above. It gives the viewer a sense of storminess but yet she so eloquently stands firm in front of it as if she is not phased but what is happening behind her. She is in an aristocratic pose

which reflects her interest in the Italian Renaissance period. Even though this was her first painting she showed signs that she knew some things about artists. Her right hand is visible and the thumb and fingers are separated indicating that this is the hand that holds the paint pallet. Her left hand is hidden indicating the active hand that she paints with. Color, form and line are strong elements in this painting. The red dress gives a sense of power or confidence. The dark colored wavy lines behind her look stormy or tumultuous but she doesn't seem fazed.



In her painting "*Self-Portrait-The Frame*," 1937-38, oil on aluminum, under glass and painted wood, it was thought that she was trying to experiment with different types of media. She was usually more direct in her work than with this painting. The two birds ethereal quality with their heads painted over so you don't notice them as much. This



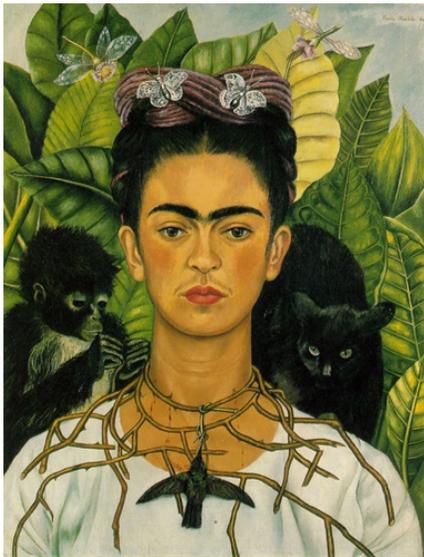
wasn't a typical style for Kahlo. Her color choice and shapes really make this piece representative of her Mexican culture. The following year Frida was invited to Paris to be part of a "Mexique", art exhibit which featured examples of Mexican art pieces. This painting was included in the show. Even though this exhibit wasn't a financial boon for Kahlo this painting was purchased by the Louvre. It was the first 20th century work by a Mexican artist to have this honor.

wearing your heart on your sleeve, literally. This painting expresses how heartbroken she is because of the trouble in her marriage with her love, Diego, and their separation. The Frida on the right shows her heart open, exposed but whole. She is dressed in a traditional Tehuana dress showing her Mexican heritage from her mother's side and also the dress

"*The Two Fridas*," 1939, oil on canvas. Talk about



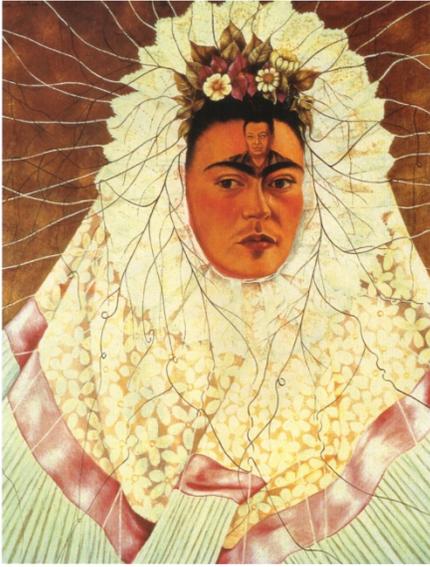
that Diego liked her in. The Frida on the left is in a Victorian wedding dress which shows her European heritage on her father's side, her heart is exposed and broken and she holds a pair of surgical pincers which she tries to stop the bleeding in despair. The Frida on the right holds an amulet with a picture of Diego when he was little. She says that depicts the Frida he loved. The Frida on the left is the one he no longer loved and has left heartbroken. The Fridas are holding hands because she is her only companion during this time. Both Fridas are connected by the blood going through the vein between them but yet they are separate as well. The sky is stormy and filled with unsettled looking clouds which may reflect her inner struggle. Iconography, color and line give this painting its life.



"Self-Portrait with Necklace of Thorns," 1940, oil on canvas. Frida deliberately placed herself in a frontal pose in this painting to give the viewer the sense of her immediate presence. She uses tropical leaves as her background. The necklace she wears is representative of Christ's crown of thorns. She is portraying herself as a Christian martyr. The crown is deconstructed and worn around her neck, with the thorns poking into her flesh which represents the pain she is still suffering over her divorce from Diego. The monkey on her right shoulder is her pet from Diego and represents the devil. The black cat on her left side is symbolic of bad luck and death and it is looming over the hummingbird on her neck. The hummingbird's wings spread out like the arch of Frida's joined eyebrows. Butterflies on her hair are used to symbolize the resurrection. Color is strong in the contrast of the black animals against the bright green leaves and her white dress. Line is strong in giving shape and detail to the different subjects. Shading and overlapping give the painting some depth.

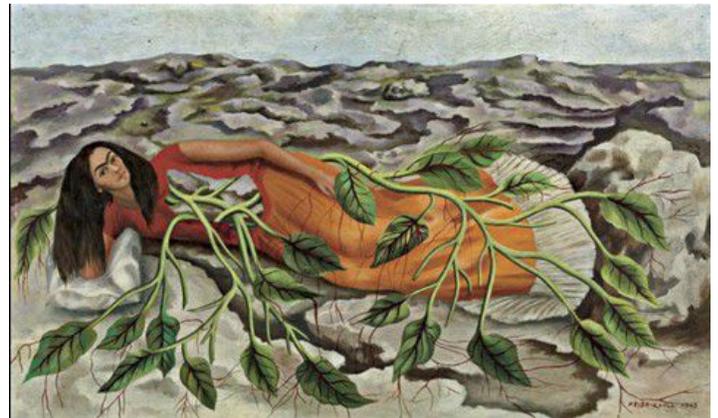
"*Self Portrait with Monkeys*," 1943, oil on canvas. This painting was done during her most productive periods of her career. This too has a tropical plant background common among her paintings. Frida pet monkeys are surrounding her in this painting. It is thought that they might represent the four loyal students she had left at this time coming to her house for art instruction from her. Kahlo's health had worsened and she had to teach from home and only four students continued to come, they called themselves, "Los Fridos," which means loyal to Frida. This painting has some depth in overlapping the leaves and the monkeys, color is also used to contrast with the darker colored monkeys and her white dress which gives interest. Line and shading are also strong elements in creating texture and form on the monkeys hair and body and on the tropical leaves.





"*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana*", AKA "*Thinking of Diego*" and "*Diego in My Thoughts*," 1943, Oil on Masonite. In this painting with the tiny portrait of Diego on her forehead it shows Frida's obsessive love for Diego and her desire to possess him as he is always on her mind. She is wearing the traditional Tehuana dress that Diego admires on her. Frida did this as a way of attraction. The spider web like structure and roots springing from the leaves on her headpiece are symbolic of a snare to catch her prey, Diego. She began this in 1940 but, the year Frida and Diego got a divorce and then wasn't finished until 1943. Like many other paintings of Kahlo's iconography is strong in this one as well as line.

"*Roots*," 1943, Oil on metal. This painting is a self-portrait where Kahlo goes back to her love of nature. She is making herself one with nature as she and the plant are fused together. A very raw and emotional painting of how a woman's dream to have children is lost. Frida sees herself as a tree of life with her head propped up on the pillow, her abdomen is opening up with leaves coming out of her and they have blood coursing through their veins which is coming out and nourishing the dying earth. This painting was sold at auction in 2006 at Sotheby's in New York for \$5,616,000, the most expensive one yet. Color is very strong in this picture, her vibrant orange dress makes her look alive and well, the green leaves are very bright and healthy green and the red of the blood is faint but noticeable as it seeps into the earth. Line is also a strong element in giving detail to the leaves and the dried out ground.



"*Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill*," 1951, Oil on Masonite. In this painting Frida painted her surgeon Dr. Farill, the one she says "saved me.". He performed seven

operations on her spine in 1951, she stayed in a Mexico City hospital for nine months and then was well enough to paint again. Her first painting was this one of Dr. Farill. It's thought that because she credits him with saving her, that this painting is done in an "ex-voto" style, where Dr. Farill is in the painting where a saint would be and she is painted in a wheelchair, the victim who needed saving. Her paint palette has a blood red color on it and is in a human heart shape and design, it could be saying that she painted this picture from her heart. Line is a strong element in this painting which gives shape and depth to the room.



*Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick*, In the last few years of Frida's life she was supporting her communist Party by introducing political themes into her work. In this painting she's showing that she believes in the Eutopian she and the rest of the people in the world can be saved and freed from their suffering by political conviction. There are many symbolic messages in this painting. She stands tall in front of the divided background. One side representing peace and goodness and the other evil and destruction. The two hands are healing her and they are a Marxist symbol as well as she is holding a red Marxism book and it looks as if she through down her crutches. This painting is an abstract. It's like her final statement in life, she's finally letting go of all the pain and strife an letting herself be healed though her beliefs. Color is very strong as well as line. This painting was her last work and was never finished. In regards to this picture Frida said, "For the first time, I am not crying anymore."



Frida Kahlo was a fierce figure in Mexican culture. She is remembered for her vibrant colorful, brazen, honest and bold themes in her artwork and her less vain attitude towards her uni-brow and mustache, which she often painted on the pictures of herself. She is also remembered for her political views and identifying with her Mexican homeland. It is thought

that the reason Frida says she was born in 1910 was because that was the year of the Mexican revolution when her beloved country was reborn. Diego and Frida were both heavily involved with the Communist Party in Mexico. Her last public appearance was at a Communist street demonstration in July of 1954 which not too long before she passed away on July 13th, 1954. Although her path in life started in medicine, the journey took her to becoming one of the most talented painter and feminist of her time. Nothing in her life was simple or dull. Frida lived life to the fullest that she was capable of. It's not surprising then, that the end of her life would be exciting as well. When asked what she would want done with her body after she dies, Kahlo said: "*Burn it...I don't want to be buried. I have spent too much time lying down...Just burn it!*" The day after Frida Kahlo died, many who loved her gathered to pay their respects at the crematorium where she would be cremated. Mexico's, and soon to be internationally known, greatest and most surprising painter knew how to give her fans one last unforgettable adios. The room was filled with somber admirers and then as if it was planned by Frida, a blast of heat from the open incinerator caused her body to shoot upright. Her hair caught on fire and it looked as if she had a hallow with the flames around her head. To add to the creepiness, it looked as if her mouth broke into a seductive smile just before the doors closed. The last thing she wrote in her diary was: "*I hope the end is joyful - and I hope never to return - Frida.*".

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