

THE WORLD OF FRIDA KAHLO

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Frida Kahlo's vibrant paintings are filled with imagery that tells us of her heritage, politics, mental state, and physical suffering. The infamous Mexican artist—whose persona is as well-known as her art thanks to her distinctive clothing and formidable brow line—gained recognition for her powerfully provocative work in a male-dominated, Western art world, that often tried to pigeonhole her as an exotic outsider.

She defied her critics and the overbearing influence of her husband, the famous mural painter Diego Rivera, to become one of the most recognized artists in the world. As she famously stated “I was born a bitch. I was born a painter.” And in her short 45-year life, she changed the face of art forever.

Kahlo ① once declared, “I paint myself because I am often alone and I am the subject I know best.” Of the 143 works she created, 55 place **her own image** ② front and centre. Here, she stands with her arms outstretched, in a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, while the iconic image of **Our Lady of Guadalupe** ③ appears in the clouds to her right. This national symbol of Mexican Catholicism references her mother Matilde's devout religion, which had a profound effect on Kahlo's early upbringing. Other cultural symbolism common in her paintings is represented by **Mexicanidad** ④ motifs such as indigenous plant life, retablos, and *Día de Muertos* characters.

The skyline represents Kahlo's journey from Mexico to the United States and back again. Her native Mexico is symbolized by the Zapotec ruins of **Monte Albán** ⑤ in Oaxaca on the left-hand side. The presence of **Detroit's industrial landscape** ⑥ on the right signifies her visit to the city in 1932, which sparked a ferociously productive phase of her career.

The artist wears the traditional **garments** ⑦ worn by Zapotec women. This indigenous community became a symbol of cultural pride after the Mexican revolution, and Kahlo loved to celebrate her heritage. However, in her youth she eschewed the expectations of her gender by wearing **men's suits** ⑧, which is depicted in smaller detail. Despite her upbringing, Kahlo was also a proud communist, which is symbolized by the **hammer and sickle** ⑨ and the presence of **Trotsky** ⑩ (who gossip suggests was her lover), at a table covered in watermelons, in reference to her last ever painting *Viva la Vida (Long Live Life)* ⑪.

Kahlo's whole family had a profound impact on her life and work. Her father **Guillermo Kahlo** ⑫ was a photographer (pictured with his wife, **Matilde Calderón y González** ⑬) who allowed his young daughter to assist him in the dark room and sit for numerous portraits. This experience may well have informed the self-portraiture that defined her own work. Kahlo was one of four daughters, two from Guillermo's previous marriage. She often painted her **sisters** ⑭, particularly the youngest, Cristina, but the message was often far from joyful. In her dark and introspective



painting *Memory, the Heart*, Kahlo presents herself pierced by a rod, next to an enormous **human heart** ⑮, in reference to the affair between her husband and Cristina, while the presence of **scissors** ⑯ and knives in other works also symbolized her marital struggles.

When Kahlo met **Rivera** ⑰, he was already a famous artist, known for his incredible frescos that defined the Mexican mural art movement. He can be seen cutting a formidable figure in his traditional painter's outfit, complete with palette and brush, next to her outstretched hand. Their marriage was volatile and marred by affairs, complex love triangles and even a divorce and reunion. Kahlo often intertwined her images of this ongoing emotional sorrow with those of her debilitating physical health.

As a child she contracted polio, meaning she had to wear leg braces that she often disguised under long skirts. Later, she was in a bus accident that left her **bed-ridden** ⑱ for months, as signified on the bottom right. She was often in need of a wheelchair, **crutches** ⑲, and **medical corsets** ⑳, and spent a lot of her time alone in her studio, complete with a **modified easel** ㉑ (bottom left). Eventually her right leg was amputated, and she wore a **prosthetic** ㉒, complete with a bright red boot. Here it is shown filled with lilies, a universal symbol of sympathy and sorrow. Kahlo also suffered with fertility issues and endured an abortion and a miscarriage. She conveyed this pain with works like *Henry Ford Hospital*, which included a **baby** ㉓ much like the one seen here, seated next to her enormous heart.

Throughout her life, Kahlo loved animals. She kept **monkeys, birds, Itzcuintli (indigenous Mexican dogs) and even a deer** ㉔, named Granizo. These creatures appeared in her paintings and held particular significance. For example, monkeys symbolized lust, while her dogs are often interpreted as a substitute for children. The image of a **stag shot with arrows** ㉕ references her painting *The Wounded Deer*, in which her own face appears on the body of the beast that runs injured through the forest. It encapsulates her physical and mental suffering, while exemplifying her preoccupation with the animal kingdom.

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