

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: The Golden Age of Mexican Painting

Background Notes

Chloë Sayer - 27 April 2016



Frida Kahlo: *Self-Portrait with Monkey*, 1940 (oil on masonite, private collection)



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Frida Kahlo: *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, 1931 (oil on canvas, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

This painting shows one of the most famous pairings in art history. When Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were married in 1929, he was 42 years old and extremely celebrated; she was barely 22 years old and totally unknown. The banner in the background reads: "Here you see us, me Frieda Kahlo, with my beloved husband Diego Rivera. I painted these portraits in the beautiful city of San Francisco, California for our friend Mr. Albert Bender, and it was in the month of April of the year 1931."

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Diego Rivera (1886-1957) have iconic status in Mexico. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 swept away the old régime and banished European influence in the arts. Kahlo and Rivera, in their different ways, helped to shape the cultural identity of twentieth-century Mexico. Together they made Mexico a magnet for the rest of the world.

The Mexican mural movement, born during the 1920s, was destined to produce some of the greatest public art of the last century. Diego Rivera's panoramic images adorn the walls of public buildings, combining social criticism with a faith in human progress. Inspired by early Italian fresco painting, as well as by Aztec and Maya imagery, his intricate visual narratives incorporate allegory and symbolism.

Compared with the monumental scale of Rivera's work, Kahlo's work is small in format. Arguably Mexico's most original painter, she made herself the principal theme of her art. Her paintings reflect her experiences, dreams, hopes and fears.

In 2005 an estimated 340,000 visitors saw her retrospective at Tate Modern. Photographs of Frida were simultaneously exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery under the title: 'Frida Kahlo: Portraits of an Icon'. In 2011, the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester hosted an exhibition of their work -- 'Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: Masterpieces from the Gelman Collection'.

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were married in 1929. Their turbulent marriage and the turbulent times they lived through are the subject of the film 'Frida' (USA, 2002). They are key figures in 'The Lacuna', a historical novel published in 2009 by Barbara Kingsolver and currently on the reading list of many UK Book Clubs.

DIEGO RIVERA

Diego Rivera was born in 1886 in the town of Guanajuato, Mexico. From his very earliest years, his passion for art was evident. His family later moved to Mexico City. There, from the age of 10, he attended the prestigious San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts in Mexico. One of his early influences was the Mexican landscape artist José María Velasco (1840-1912).

In 1907, Rivera was offered a government bursary to further his studies in Europe. He spent two years in Madrid, where he greatly admired the paintings of Spanish masters Francisco Goya and El Greco. After his move to Paris in 1909, he became fascinated by the work of Paul Cézanne. Importantly, he was also able to view the paintings of Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Rivera began experimenting with cubism, and was inspired by the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) to paint *Zapatista Landscape* in 1915. Ten of his fourteen years in Paris were spent with the Russian artist Angelina Beloff. Their son Diego, born in 1916, died at the age of 14 months in 1917. By this time, Rivera was romantically involved with a second Russian artist: Marevna Vorobëv. In 1919, she gave birth to their daughter Marika.

The Mexican Revolution ended in 1920 and Rivera returned home soon afterwards, abandoning both his mistresses and his tiny daughter in Paris. Importantly for his future as a muralist, however, he visited Italy before his departure. He saw the Byzantine-style mosaics of Ravenna. He also studied and sketched the work of the great fresco painters of the Renaissance: Giotto, Raphael, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo. These months in Italy would inspire Rivera to become the greatest fresco artist of the twentieth century.



Diego Rivera: *The History of Mexico — The Ancient Indian World*, fresco North wall, 1929-35 (National Palace)

Although Rivera's Cubist paintings had been admired in Europe, his style and subject matter would change after his return to Mexico — a land rich with ruined cities from the past and peopled by the descendants of ancient civilisations. The visual impact of Mexico's rediscovered landscapes and people would bear rich fruit. Rivera had mastered a number of techniques, but had thus far failed to find his own vision or his own personal style. Later Rivera would declare: "My style was born like a child, in a moment, with the difference that this birth took place at the end of a painful, 35-year gestation."

His Paris life far behind him, Rivera took a Mexican wife in 1922. Lupe Marín gave him two children. She was his model for *Creation* — Rivera's first fresco at the National Preparatory School. In 1923, Rivera started work at the Ministry of Education: his murals here would take many years to complete, eventually covering 1,500 square metres. At the Agricultural College of Chapingo — formerly a great *hacienda* — Rivera undertook another ambitious commission. Between 1929 and 1951, Rivera also represented the entire history of Mexico at the National Palace. Again, the scale is breathtaking.

Mural painting had had a long and distinguished history in Mexico. Now it would serve to promote the sense of national pride that characterised post-revolutionary Mexico. With the old régime gone, the new régime was eager to banish the European values that had been dominant for so long and to replace them with Mexican values. Rivera was at the forefront of this cultural revolution.

FRIDA KAHLO

Although Frida often claimed to have been born in 1910, which would have made her a true daughter of the Mexican Revolution, she was actually born in 1907. Her father, Guillermo Kahlo, was an accomplished photographer. Thanks to her father, we have numerous photographs the young Kahlo in the Blue House in Coyoacán on the south side of Mexico City. From an early age, she was careful how she chose to present herself to the outside world.

Kahlo contracted polio at the age of 6, but made a good recovery. Misfortune struck again in 1926, however, when her school bus collided with a tram. Although her very serious injuries left her crippled and unable to bear children, Kahlo was determined to live life to the full. While she was recuperating, she taught herself to paint. Her interest in politics and in the aims of the Revolution provided the subject matter for some of her first paintings.

By the time Kahlo got to know Rivera in 1928, he and Lupe Marín were divorced. In 1929, Kahlo married Rivera. "I suffered two grave accidents in my life," she would say later. "One was the collision with the streetcar... The other accident is Diego." Although Rivera was incapable of fidelity, he enthusiastically encouraged his young wife to paint. Each took a deep, proprietary pride in the other's creations.

Kahlo's brooding self-portraits are introspective and haunting. Although Rivera was a social realist, he greatly admired her painting style. "I recommend her to you", he told a friend, "not as a husband but as an enthusiastic admirer of her work, acid and tender, hard as steel and delicate and fine as a butterfly's wing, loveable as a beautiful smile, and profound and cruel as the bitterness of life." André Breton, famous founder of the Surrealist movement, visited Mexico in 1938. Fascinated by her work — he likened it to a "ribbon around a bomb" — he claimed her as a Surrealist. She replied, "I paint my own reality", and rejected the Surrealist label.

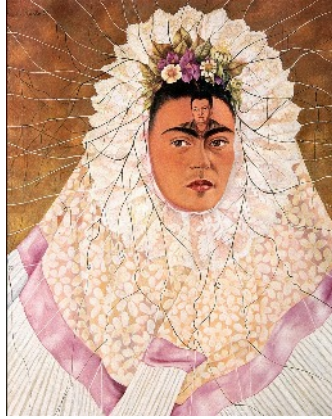
One of the most photographed artists of the twentieth century, Kahlo expressed her love of popular art and culture through her clothing. Her hand-woven, hand-embroidered garments became a crucial part of her identity. She wore these clothes because Rivera liked them, and because they covered up her damaged limbs. Importantly, they symbolised her political allegiance to peasant cultures, and shaped her own highly personal style.

In 1938 Kahlo exhibited her work in New York. In 1939 she was invited by Breton to show in Paris, where her work was admired by Marcel Duchamp, Picasso and Kandinsky. Rivera's romantic liaison with her sister led to divorce in 1939. In 1940, however, they remarried. Kahlo's deteriorating health led to her early death in 1954 at the age of 47. After her death, Rivera remarried and died in 1957.



Frida Kahlo: *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky*, 1937
(National museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.)

Like many of Kahlo's paintings, this self-portrait focuses on a particular event in the artist's life. It commemorates the brief affair that Kahlo had with Leon Trotsky, the exiled Russian revolutionary leader, after his arrival in Mexico in 1937. It is dedicated to Trotsky "with all my love".



Frida Kahlo: *Diego on My Mind*, 1943, (oil on masonite, Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection).

In this self-portrait, Kahlo wears the ceremonial clothing of Tehuana women on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. Asked to explain why she painted herself so often, she replied: "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best".

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