

Modernism and the Visual Arts: Frida Kahlo

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Introduction

Numerous challenges for women artists were presented during the Modernist period, as this particular movement was in contrast to past ideologies and changed many views in art and society. It was noticeable in the Modernist period that women were expected to pursue the expectant role of mother or homemaker and artworks or written articles by women were not really encouraged or accepted in the wider community. Frida Kahlo, a famous artist during the Modernist period, was challenged with many social constraints during the modernist period and many cultural views are recognised throughout her artworks. The majority of this essay will analyse the art and times of Frida Kahlo, discussing various impacts and responses which she had toward Modernism and the culture around her.

Social constraints confronted many female artists and impacted their everyday lives. Harrison and Wood (2003; 928) claim that “until now art has largely been created by men, it has usually been men who have provided their views, their answers, their solutions. Now we must articulate our views.” Being a patriarchal society, male artists and writers during this period were more prominent than their female counterparts and extensively developed their style of art and literature. Harrison and Wood state that “[t]he history of woman is the history of man... man has defined the image of woman. Men create and control the social and communicative media like art and science, word and image, dress and architecture, social intercourse and the division of labour” (Harrison & Wood, 2003; 928).

During the modernist movement, many female artists were associated with the modernist movement and most likely united with feminist groups. During the modernist period women made an undeniable difference through their art and literature, however, it was difficult for them due to the male dominance rejecting or devaluing their work, as women’s roles were encouraged to be submissive and subordinate. Wagner argues that women artists need to be recognized with a deeper understanding of the representational purposes and ambitions of their artwork and to be appreciated in their place, in a cultural discussion and memoir.

When transposed to visual representation, the relationship...did not always involve subordination and dependency. It is high time we learned to think more deeply about the representational purposes and ambitions of work by women, and to assess their place in a cultural dialogue. Only if we do so will we begin to give them their due (Wagner, 1996; 285).

Although women were challenged with the ideas during the time of the modernism movement, they continued to produce their artwork and literature, regardless of what their male counterparts thought, believed or accepted as their standard. Women artists wanted to change the way in which others saw them, particularly men. Kahlo, born in 1907, was recognised as the woman with long dark hair, moustache, and bird-wing brow, with a vibrant, creative, and adventurous nature who frequently painted self portraits (Selhorst, Moore & Matteo, 1994; 13). Kahlo developed an individual style of art from personal experiences. Kahlo stated, "I paint self portraits because I am the person I know best" (Frida Kahlo, 1998).

Frida was considered different to the world and did not really care what others thought of her, she wanted to be accepted for who she was and changing herself to suit the world was not a likely subject to perform. Kahlo responded to the conceptual challenges and ideas of the movement through her works of art, which predominantly depicted several personal experiences during her unpredictable life as a woman. Illustrations of herself, family and lovers are recognised throughout her work. It is obvious that her literature was a way to express feelings, her expressive poetry or responses to certain issues are examples of her passion for life, the landscape, the culture around her and personal feelings.

The vegetal miracle of my bodies' landscape is in you, the whole of nature. I traverse it in a flight that with my fingers caresses the round hills, the valleys longing for possession and the embrace of the soft green fresh branches covers me...Only a mountain knows the inside of another mountain, at times when your presence floats continuously, as if rapping all my being in an anxious wait for morning and I notice that I am with you in this moment still full of sensation, my hands are plunged in oranges and my body feels surrounded by you (*Frida Kahlo*, 1983).

Kahlo painted subjects that were personal sensations and life results based on experiences and expressions of what she felt inside and outside in the world. Women were not really encouraged to express themselves emotionally with their art and literature; they were more encouraged to be demure, controlled, gentle and polite. Kahlo was in disagreement to this social expectation and produced art that was meaningful and straight to the point with ideas on feelings and experiences she had.

Andre Breton saw Kahlo as a feminist artist and an idealisation of an unfamiliar or new femininity that worked with her own feelings that resulted in many untutored and spontaneous styles of paintings, most of her paintings were deemed a Natural Surrealist style, but Kahlo personally rejected any affiliations with Surrealism (Kleiner, 2005; 960). Breton wrote in 1938 that Kahlo's artworks are like "a ribbon around a bomb" (cited in Gambrell, 1997; 60). Diego Rivera, Frida's husband, wrote that "[t]hrough her paintings, she breaks all the taboos of the woman's body and of female sexuality" (Artist Rivera, 2008). Her artworks certainly captured viewer's attention and opened the eyes of many societies with comprehensive signals.

Lucie-Smith describes Kahlo as the artist who brought the region into a general consciousness, Kahlo was constrained by the modernist times in that her work was not taken seriously, she was considered secondary or as an amateur painter and an attachment to her husband, Diego Rivera (Lucie-Smith, 1995; 247-249). However, Lucie-Smith discusses that the responses towards Kahlo's art were positively changed, firstly because of the rise of the feminist movement and the publication of Haydn Herrera's biography.

Haydn Herrera's biography was produced in regard to Frida Kahlo in 1983. "These brought into focus the extraordinary vivid and personal nature of Kahlo's paintings, many of which were self-portraits. Though she possessed considerable powers of self-assertion, Kahlo would have been as surprised as anyone to find that her reputation now over-shadows that of her husband" (Lucie-Smith, 1995; 249). This would have been very unusual in a patriarchal society, especially when men were more popular in the arts than women.

Physical experiences in Kahlo's early life influenced the way she produced and responded to art. A bus accident in 1925 left Kahlo mentally and physically scarred for life, with a triple fracture of the pelvis and her back spine broken in three places, thus leaving her with severe pain throughout the rest of her life and changing her desire of becoming a doctor to becoming an artist. *The Broken Column* (fig. 1), 1944, is her painting that depicts the pain that resulted from the past accident. Kahlo was pregnant three times but her previous injuries prevented her from having a child. In 1932 she completed a painting called *Henry Ford Hospital* (fig. 2), which shows her swollen from pregnancy with objects floating around her bed that are symbolic representations of her experiences during that time.

The objects in this painting are connected with red ribbons that could be suggested as umbilical cords or veins; she holds the ribbons against her stomach. The objects are described as a broken pelvis, a male foetus, a snail that represents the slowness of her miscarriage and a lavender orchid, which was a gift from Diego (*Frida Kahlo*, 1983). This kind of artwork that Kahlo produced portrayed a different style and broke female traditions, as these subjects previously were not usually discussed or painted. Diego Rivera proclaimed that "Frida is the only example in the history of art, of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings. [She was the] only woman who has expressed in her work, an art of the feelings, functions and the creative power of women" (*Frida Kahlo*, 1983).

While Kahlo and Rivera were living within the United States during the 1930s, Kahlo became extremely home sick and desperately desired to return to her Mexican home. Nevertheless they remained longer, because Rivera was not likely to leave the popularity and public attention behind. During 1932 Kahlo expressed her feelings and painted her *Self Portrait along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (fig. 3). This painting depicts the artist

standing on a pedestal on the borderline between two diverse cultures; Frida wears a Mexican dress and holds the Mexican flag, indicating an eager desire to return to her homeland. The background landscape illustrates an industrialised American city and a Mexican region (Brooks, 2005-08).

Another year went by and the culture of America continued to affect Kahlo's lifestyle consequently providing Kahlo with further ideas to paint her feelings about the culture. An expressive painting called *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933 (fig. 4) was Kahlo's response to the culture. It represents a different and tedious culture; portraying sarcastic representations of American capitalism, her displeasure with the United States, its social decay, human values of destruction, the industrial society and superficiality (Brooks, 2005-08). Brooks declares that perhaps Frida was metaphorically speaking in her painting; Frida and her dress were in America but her heart and life were in Mexico, this is possibly why Kahlo did not portray herself in the painting (Brooks, 2005-08).

Selhorst, Moore and Matteo (1994; 13) state that Frida's work was influenced by a style called the Mexican *retablo*, which was a traditional art form that often portrayed descriptions of miraculous happenings or saints. Fer, Batchelor, and Wood (1994; 243-244) declare that Kahlo was not a native Mexican artist, but used the Mexican religions and traditions, since it was the familiar culture around her, thus reflecting these values through her paintings. A good example of her generation is in her paintings called *my grandparents, my parents and I* (fig. 5), painted in 1936. This painting symbolises the history of her ancestry which is connected by a red ribbon and held by the naked Frida at two years old standing in the gardens at her birth place, the Blue House, in Coyoacan. The parents of Kahlo's mother are situated over a Mexican land, representing the native origin, while her father's parents are positioned over the sea, indicating the European lineage (Brooks, 2005-08).

Throughout many of Kahlo's paintings, she used a wide variety of vibrant colours; this indicates that the colourful culture of Mexico influenced her painting style; the Mexican culture is described as being unique with stylish textiles and clothes. Every colour had a great importance and a personal significance to Kahlo. The colour green was considered as warm but also sadness or annoyance, navy blue had the meaning of distance, but also tenderness. Magenta or pinkish colours represent Aztec, the brightest and oldest. Yellow meant madness, mystery, sickness, fear and sometimes joy, red was obviously to represent blood or pain and her response to dark green was bad advertisement and good business (Brooks, 2005-08).

Continuing with the Mexican culture, every year the people of Mexico celebrate the continuity of life on the *Day of the Dead*, celebrating the deaths rather than mourning them. In 1938 Kahlo painted a significant piece representing this occasion; she called it *Girl with Death Mask* (fig. 6). The little girl is thought to be Frida wearing a skull mask and standing alone in a vast landscape

with stormy skies. Another daunting mask lies on the ground next to her; Brooks (2005-08) states that this figure resembles a tiger mask which hung in Frida's home. These two masks seem inappropriate for the girl, but Kahlo was possibly emphasizing on the harshness of her fate, through a portrait of an innocent child and unaware of the future ahead (Brooks, 2005-08).

Many of the clothes Frida wore in her paintings and in her life also had a symbolic representation, such as the colours and the styles. She often clothed herself in the elaborate regional costumes and garments of the Tehuana or Tywana from native Mexican maidens, no doubt representing her fondness for that culture. She also is portrayed in some of her paintings wearing men's clothing, such as the painting *self-portrait with cropped hair* (fig. 7) created in 1940, which shows her in a large man's suit, most likely to be her husband's suit. This again was a challenging idea with the social principles in that time; it is obvious that women were not usually seen in men's clothing because this act was not really accepted socially.

This painting (fig. 7) was a result of her feelings after the divorce with Rivera. Kahlo wanted to relinquish the compelling feminine image, and for that reason she cut off her hair and wore men's clothing. The painting gives an impression of Frida's desire to have the freedom and independence of a man (Brooks, 2005-08). Previously, women had been depicted in portraits or religious paintings of peace and serenity, such as the Victorian style of art, before the modernist movement. It is noticeable in earlier artist's portrayed women as the purpose of being a pleasing subject in a painting or an object for gazing.

Kahlo painted numerous portrait paintings that were symbolic of her experiences, events, love, loss, surgery, politics, and passions for life. Kahlo declared that her artwork did not represent nightmares or dreams; she painted her own reality, feelings and experiences (Brooks, 2005-08). Kahlo's paintings convey a message of pain, depicting her pain and the psychological hurt and misery of human existence (Kleiner, 2005; 960). Kahlo ignored social conventions of traditionalism; she wanted to make a change in the way art was portrayed. Fer, Batchelor and Wood (1994; 244) claim that Kahlo's representations of herself, in the majority of her paintings, was to portray the body as a symbol of suffering and pain and not just as the object of gaze. Kahlo established a way to express personal hurt in her paintings, thus creating examples and messages of pain to the world that undoubtedly illustrated her personal life as an artist.

In conclusion, the art of Frida Kahlo and many other women artists during the modernist period have changed the world of art around us today. We can look back on artists like Kahlo and see the transformations from past to present with concerns in art and culture. "Kahlo dealt with fantasy, not purely as a personal experience but also as a kind of mythology heavily laden with the conventions of different forms of representation" (Fer, Batchelor & Wood, 1994; 244). Kahlo ignored the social constraints and produced art that was meaningful which had personal realities, experiences and cultural significances.

It is evident that Kahlo's paintings were influenced from the accident in her young life, which influenced her to express many personal feelings; perhaps the process of painting filled an empty space in her life. She developed her own individual style against the conservative expectation of women's craft. "Kahlo depicted herself in the majority of her paintings, not as the object of the gaze but with the body as a terrain of suffering and pain" (Fer, Batchelor, & Wood, 1994; 244). Kahlo's paintings will certainly endure to be outstanding examples to the world, with strong cultural significances and icons of past memories and experiences, depicting the life of a striking artist.

Images obtained from: Brooks, M 2005-2008, *Frida Kahlo fans*. Retrieved: August 5, 2009, from <http://www.fridakahlofans.com>

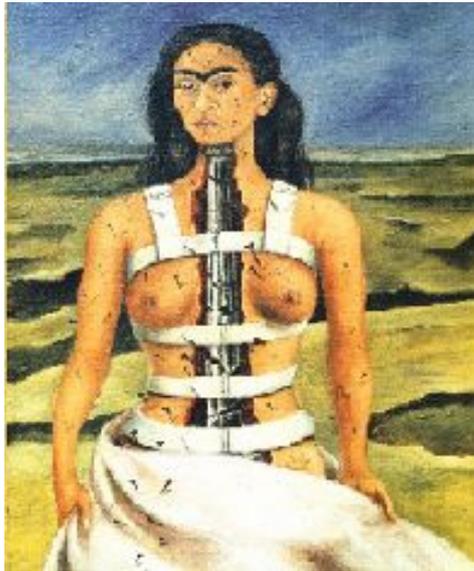


Fig 1: Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944, Oil on canvas 40 x 31 cm, Collection of Dolores Olmedo, Mexico. (Brooks 2005-08)



Fig 2: Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, 30.5 x 38 cm, oil on metal, Collection of Dolores Olmedo, Mexico. (Brooks 2005-08)

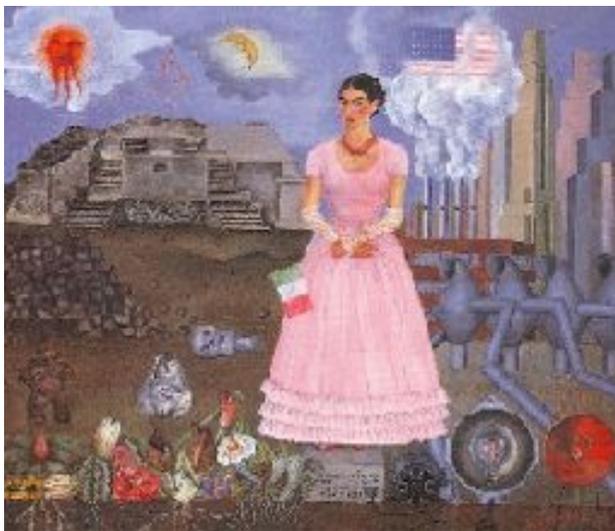


Fig 3: Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, 31 x 35 cm, oil on metal, Collection of Maria Rodriguez de Reyero, New York City. (Brooks 2005-08)



Fig 4: Frida Kahlo, *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933, 46 x 50 cm, oil and collage on masonite, Hoover Gallery San Francisco, USA. (Brooks 2005-08)

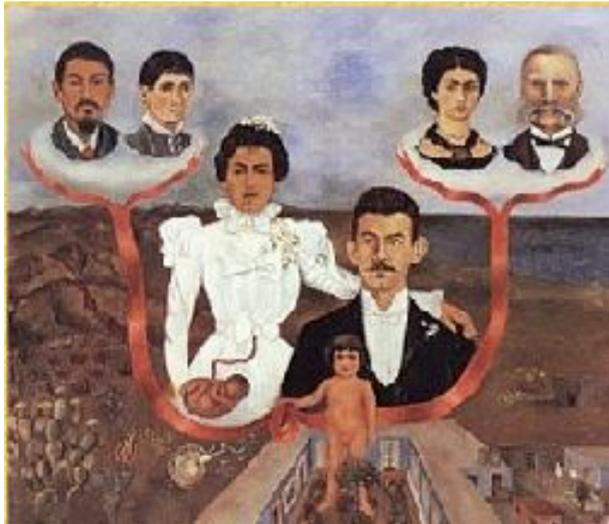


Fig 5: Frida Kahlo, My Grandparents, Parents and I, 1936, 31 x 34.5 cm, oil and tempera on metal, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

(Brooks 2005-08)

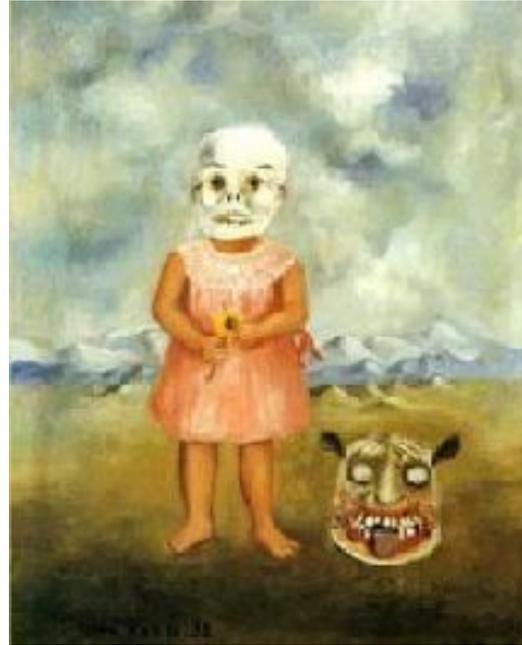


Fig 6: Girl with Death Mask, 1938, 15 x 11 cm, oil on metal, Nagoya City Art Museum, Japan.

(Brooks 2005-08)

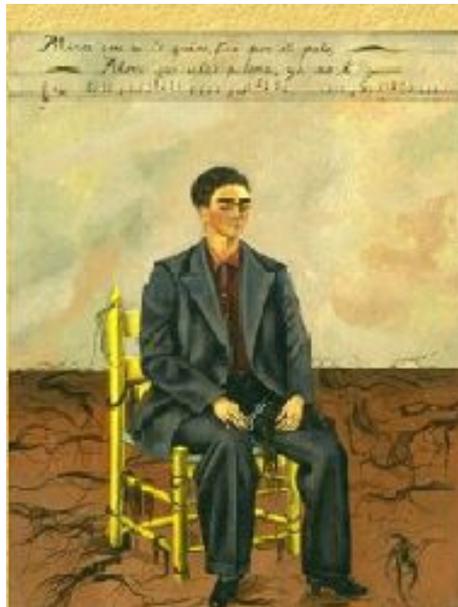


Fig 7: Frida Kahlo, self portrait with cropped hair, 1940, 40 x 28 cm, oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

(Brooks 2005-08)

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