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(The Pain in Frida Kahlo's art)

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Thank You….

The Pain in Frida Kahlo's art

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'*If Diego did not open car doors for Frida, he opened worlds*.'

INTRODUCTION

Frida Kahlo is widely regarded as the most important twentieth-century woman artist in the Americas. In Mexico Frida is recognized as the country's greatest woman artist. In 1984.the Mexican government decreed Frida's work to be national patrimony.

This paper is about to deal with one of the most famous female Mexican artist. Not only that her life was an unordinary one, which could present an interesting topic for various biographers, but the fact that she tended to reflect it into her canvas is marvelous.

Through out the paper we will learn what were the circumstances that introduced Frida to the world of art and the way she introduced herself to the world. Worldwide, the figure of Frida Kahlo is connected to the masculine terms- mustache, unibrow and foul language, but only to convey her true pain and loneliness. But we have to notice that she was more than those things- she presented modern women in 20th century male Mexico. She was a female artist in the world of males. She was a traditional Mexican in the modern Mexico. She was a symbol of pain and struggle since she was in pain whole her short, but unpredictable life. She was Frida Kahlo.

Her art gave us the most original and dramatic imagery of the 20th century. Painting herself bleeding, weeping, cracked open, she transmuted her pain into art with remarkable frankness tempered by humor and fantasy.[1]

[1] Frida, A biography of Frida Kahlo, Hayden Herrera, Perennial ,Harper Collins Publisher, 2000.,preface, Xii

Frida Kahlo was portrayed as political heroine and revolutionary fighter, as a suffering female, mistreated wife, childless woman and '*Mexican Ophelia*.'

She was a strong woman that could be seen throughout her works, which did not have any self-pity, but strength.

I will try to present this remarkable woman, but first I will start with her childhood, that there has been so much word about, but inevitable for understanding her works and Frida in general.

I will try to portrait Frida's activities as an outcome of her terrible accident, or even more than one. The bus accident represents just a beginning of an outstanding artist, who was driven by life and had to create in order to express her vivid and tremendous feelings of despair, pain, love, betrayal. Frida, who was jubilant, and hyperactive, had to substitute her deficiency and disability with some other form of expression-art.

I will represented her pain and illness as the driving device for her art. Without these circumstances Frida would not be Frida- the artist, but rather Frida unknown to us. We might easily say, that thanks to Frida's growing illness and pain, she grew as an artist. In this work, we will see independently on her paintings the representation and elaboration of Frida's pain. Throughout her biography, we will learn what steps Frida undertook to becoming the most representative Mexican woman artist of the 20th century. Frida's pain stands as a symbol of her wish to leave and of life itself.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

When thinking of Frida Kahlo, we instantly think of pain and suffering which were main factors of her life and art as well. I will try to prove that Frida would not be an artist if there was no physical and emotional pain during her life. As I will mention throughtout my work, there were few 'accidents' in her life that have caused her great pain. First one was the polio Frida contracted at the age of six, second one was the bus accident when she was eighteen and the third, maybe the hardest 'accidents' was marriage to Diego Rivera.

The question that imposes is what kind of pain was Frida enduring during her life? But first, we must define pain as a medical condition. The International Association for the Study of Pain gives this definition:' Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage.'[2]

Where the Merriam Webster online dictionary [3]defines pain as punishment, usually localized physical suffering associated with bodily disorder (as a disease or an injury); a basic bodily sensation induced by a noxious stimulus, received by naked nerve endings, characterized by physical discomfort (as pricking, throbbing, or aching), and typically leading to evasive action; acute mental or emotional distress or suffering. There is no disagreement to the fact that pain is an unpleasant sensation. In addition, it causes physical, psychosocial & psychological distress to the unfortunate victim, considerably damaging their personal and social lives. Term suffering comes along as an equivalent to pain.

[2] http://jubilation.uwaterloo.ca/~ranney/pain.html

[3] http://www.merriam-webster.com/

Frida Kahlo's destiny was to suffer all her life and to filter the same onto the canvas. Her pain was as well as physical, also emotional. We, as her viewers, feel her pain and experience her anguish, especially in her self-portraits.

DiGiovanni and Lee[4] discuss Frida's obsession by the fear of abandonment, which is in close relation to her father. Children from her father's first marriage were abandoned and she could not help it but to wonder will that also be her destiny. They say that the attention she received, while being ill, made her feel more cohesive. She was aware that illnesses could work in her favour, because when she was ill and in the hospital everyone would come and nourish her. In her art, she had created and art object of her own scared and crippled body. There are many of Frida's paintings presenting her slightly deformed body, which she transforms into beautiful art. Paintings such us *Keep firm, The broken column, The Detroit Hospital* etc. Could something bloody (Frida was in a way obsessed with blood), and deformed be beautiful? Well, by my opinion, Frida's art influences the viewer and makes us sympathize with her, which was her intention. We form a special bond with the painting, since each of which, has a lot to say about Frida and her constant inner struggle.

She was afraid of being unloved and forgotten. That has also caused her a great immense of pain. She has lived in constant fear and pain, but fortunately she found her way to filter those feelings into something that has provided her to stay immortal, not forgotten as she feared she

[4] Joan Fimbel DiGiovanni, Ronald R.Lee, *The art and suffering of Frida Kahlo,1907-1945*, Creativity and Madness: Psychological Studies of Art and Artists, eds. B, Panter and B Virshup: Aimed Press,1994.

would be. Zamora[5] writes that Frida's paintings were affected by her frequent mood swings from euphoria to deep depression and her periods of paranoia. Frida's health often depended on her feeling about Rivera, that when he was away and she felt abandoned by him, there was a crisis.

We could, in a way, thank Rivera for making a great artist out of Frida. I am not referring to a specific style of depiction nor technique but rather to the theme. If there was not for her feelings of joy, betrayal, love towards Diego, one of her best art works would not even exists.

Grimberg[6] writes that Frida at one point decided that her life would be one of suffering and that she would use that suffering for her own pursuits in art. It seemed that Frida has intentionally placed herself in dangerous situations, since that required attention and taking care of Frida by her friends. I agree with Grimberg, since indeed, Frida gave her best efforts to emphasize constant pain in her life in art as well as to manipulate others with her pain. Although she presented herself in public as a strong, independent woman, that she in fact was, Frida was also terrified of death, which was, paradoxically speaking, her life- long companion. Death became her obsession. If she did not talk about it, she would paint it. But each time the presentation had different connotation; whether it presented Frida's victory over death, or other way around. It was a 'psychomachia.'(Represents a inner struggle of good and bad). It exists around us, but also in all of us.

[5] Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish,*San Francisco, Chronicle books, 1990.

[6] Frida Kahlo, Salomon Grimberg, Meadows Museum,1989.p.40

Placing herself constantly in extreme situations, she tested her limits with a vital intensity. Her paintings reveal her interior world at the same time that they forced an awareness of her loneliness and misery. Standing alone, they have a value that requires no biographical corroboration.[7]

Frida has always lived on the edge, between Diego, Mexican heritage, Revolution and Communist Party. She, although torn between mentioned notions, has been trying to stay cohesive and sane. The filtered pain through a paint brush helped her to do so. As soon as she found a way to do so, the great artist was born.

All of the mentioned critics agree in that Frida knew what she wanted. She wanted attention and to always be in the spotlight. The way to get that desired attention was, unfortunately , through many operations. Her fears of abandonment were always present but dimmed.

As all of the mentioned critics, so do I, think that Frida's growing physical pain throughout years became more bearable in comparison to emotional heartache and despair.

Frida was jubilant and joyful creature that was bond to bed for a long period. She needed a way to express her feelings, thoughts and emotions.

For the last decade interest in Frida's art and life enormously grew. She became an icon of Mexico and an icon of Mexican art. She got the fame and adoration that she so often craved for and of course, that she deserves.

[7] Frida Kahlo,The Brush of Anguish, Martha Zamora, Chronicle books, 1990.,p.9.

In her last diary entry Frida wrote:' I await joyful my departure, and I hope never to come back again.Frida'[8]

[8] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.67.

BROKEN CHILDHOOD

Frida Kahlo was born on July 6, 1907 in the house of her parents, known as a Blue House in, Coyoacán Londres Street, just outside of Mexico City. Today, Coyoacán is part of the Mexico City. The name comes from Nahuatl and most likely means "*place of coyotes*," when the Aztecs named a pre-Hispanic village on the southern shore of Lake Texcoco which was dominated by the Tepanec people. Nahuatl s a group of related languages and dialects of the Nahuan (traditionally called "Aztecan") branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family. Collectively they are spoken by an estimated 1.5 million Nahua people, most of whom live in Central Mexico. All Nahuan languages are indigenous to Mesoamerica.[9]

Frida was born as Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderón. Her name bears a meaning '*peace*' in German, and she spelled it with an e, until the late 1930s, when she had to drop it, because of the rise of Nazism in Germany.

Her father Guillermo Kahlo was born Carl Wilhelm Kahlo in Pforzheim, Germany. He came from a Hungarian-German family. At the age of nineteen he sailed to Mexico, where he changed his name to its Spanish equivalent. He was a photographer, who had been commissioned by the Mexican government to record the nation's architectural heritage.

Her mother Matilde Calderón y González was of Indian -Spanish descent. She was a devout Catholic. Guillermo and Matilde had four daughters, of which Frida was the third. Frida said that

[9] http://www.wikipedia.org/

she grew up in a household surrounded by females. Throughout her life Frida remained close to her father.

Although Frida was of European background, she identified all her life with New World, Mexican heritage, dressing in native clothing.

Kahlo later claimed that she was born on July 7, 1910, the year when the Mexican Revolution began. She did so the people would directly associate her with the revolution. She decided that modern Mexico and she had been born together. She connects herself with Mexican symbols- an ixcuintle dog (the name comes from the Nahuatl for dog), a spider monkey, and pre-Columbian figure.[10]

Frida had portrayed her Blue House and her family tree in the painting *My grandparents, My parents and I* in 1936. (Figure 1). This work traces history of Frida's ancestry. She is depicted as a small three- year old girl, standing in the patio of her blue house, and she is holding a crimson ribbon, which presents her bloodline. That ribbon supports her family tree, as if she is holding a string of balloon. The portrait of her parents is based on an old wedding photograph of 1898, which she faithfully copied , but amusingly, and typically for Frida , added humorous elements, such as a well-developed pink fetus that she had placed on her mother's virginal white skirt. The fetus is Frida. Below the fetus she presents a big sperm, followed by a smaller competitors, that penetrates the egg; Frida at the moment of conception. Her father Guillermo has an uneasy, penetrating gaze, a look of unsettling intensity, which will later be seen in his daughter's eyes.

[10] Frida Kahlo, A Modern Master,Terri Hardin,New Line Books, 2000., p.29

Frida's maternal grandparents, the Indian Antonio Calderón and the gachupina (of Spanish extraction) Isabel González y González , are depicted above Frida's mother. On her father's side is a European couple, Jakob Heinrich Kahlo and Henriette Kaufmann Kahlo. As it is very obvious, Frida inherited her heavy, joined eyebrows from her father's mother, but she always said that she has her father's eyes and her mother's body.

Frida had set her house in front of the mountains that were often the landscape setting of her self portraits. Her maternal, Mexican grandparents are symbolized by the land, while her paternal, German grandparents, were also Jews, are symbolized by the ocean.[11]

Her affliction with polio beginning in 1913, when she was only six years old, would forever mark her as different. Frida contracted polio, which left her right leg thinner than the left, which she disguised by wearing long, colorful skirts. . During her recuperation, her father lavished attention on his favorite child, who had once been an energetic tomboy. He helped Frida exercise and, in an attempt to find ways of entertaining her, he gave his daughter some paints.

Throughout her childhood, Frida felt alone and showed herself as solitary child. In 1938 she painted *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (figure 2), where she, as a child, is confronting her cultural heritage and celebrating her Mexican roots. Frida sits on the dirt ground, sucking her finger, clutching her skirt and is being unprotected by the walls of her house. La Rosita, a pulque bar near Frida's house is visible in the background. The image is empty, because the revolution had left Mexico empty. Frida has painted an ambivalent view, identifying Mexico's suffering with her own. Four characters are depicted: a pre-Columbian Nayarit idol, Judas figure (which she

[11] Frida Kahlo,1907-1954, Pain and Passion, Andrea Kettenmann,Taschen, 1999., p.9

would also depict in other paintings), a clay skeleton, and a straw horseman. Little Frida is staring at pre-Columbian clay sculpture of a naked pregnant woman who is a symbol both of Mexico's Indian heritage and of her own future as a sexually mature woman. But, it is evident, that the sculpture is broken, just like adult Frida: the fronts of its feet are missing and its head has been broken off and repaired.

The Judas figure, a large, unshaved man wearing overalls stand as a counterpart to the pregnant idol. The grimacing skeleton, a big version of the small ones, that Mexican children play with on the Day of Dead, presents Frida's future. The Day of Dead consists of two parts. The first one taking place on November 1st, All Saints Day, and the second one on November 2nd, All Souls Day are marked throughout Mexico by intriguing customs that vary widely according to the ethnic roots of each region. Common to all, however, are colorful adornments and lively reunions at family burial plots, the preparation of special foods, offerings laid out for the departed on commemorative altars and religious rites that are likely to include noisy fireworks.

In most localities November 1st is set aside for remembrance of deceased infants and children, often referred to as angelitos (little angels). Those who have died as adults are honored November 2nd.[12]

In the middle distance is the straw man, someone like Pancho Villa, who was a revolutionary bandit, who presents some kind of pathos in Mexican life. He is a mixture of Mexican poverty, pride, and dreams. Although not aware of it, Frida became a fifth inhabitant of Mexico. The

[12] http://spanish.about.com/

square's huge emptiness and the feeling of estrangement must reflect the child's vision. *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* is like a bad dream.[13]

Guillermo Kahlo preferred Frida to his other children because she was the most intelligent. And in 1922, Frida made Guillermo even prouder when she became one of 35 women from a student body of 2,000 to be admitted to the prestigious National Preparatory School, or El Prepo, in Mexico City. She wanted to study medicine, but upon arriving to the vibrant intellectual center of her country, she discovered political activists, artists, communists, and other people who dared to dream and question. Lopping off her hair and switching to overalls from the drab outfits of a good Catholic girl, Frida fell in with the Cachets, a group of pranksters led by Alejandro Gómez. One of the Cachets' victims of trickery was a tall and fat muralist, Diego Rivera, who was commissioned by the school to paint its auditorium. Spunky Frida stopped at nothing to annoy Rivera, 20 years her senior. She and the Cachets soaped the stairs so Diego would slip and fall, stole his lunch, and popped water balloons over his head. Fat, loquacious Diego Rivera was Frida's favorite victim. After returning from fourteen years of living and working in Europe, Rivera had embarked on his first mural, an allegory entitled Creation, in the Preparatory Scholl's theater. At thirty-six he was a fabulous monster. He looked like a cross between a Buddha and a frog, and he wore a Stetson hat, a gun belt, and baggy overalls. But the women liked to play beauty and a beast with him. He attracted women also because he was a great listener, and a charismatic storyteller. It seemed that young Frida was obsessed with Rivera and would watch him for hours. Frida was drawn to him. Once, when she was discussing

[13] Frida Kahlo, The Paintings, Hayden Herrera, Harperperennial,1993.,p.24

life plans with her friends, she declared that her ambition was to have a child by Diego one day. Diego is so gentle, so tender, so wise, so sweet. I'd bathe him and clean him. [14]

Only years later would her taunting and teasing of Diego evolve into a love affair.
Meanwhile, Frida had a boyfriend named Alejandro Gomez Arias, who was nothing like Diego Rivera. He was handsome, erudite, ironic and an outstanding leader of Cachuchas, named after the caps they all wore and were famous at the Preparatoria for their brains and their mischief. Frida would love outstanding men all her life.

On September 17, 1925 Frida and her boyfriend Alejandro were in Mexico City waiting for a bus to Coyoácan. The bus came and they climb on. Frida was admiring a new balero which was a gift from Alejandro . While she chatted with Alejandro about her plans for medical school, an electric trolley rammed into the bus. Eighteen year old Frida disappeared in the confusion, and Alejandro, who was also injured, found her with a metal pole protruding from her abdomen. After someone pulled the pole out, the ambulance rushed her to the hospital. She suffered serious injuries in the accident, including a broken spinal column, a broken collarbone, broken ribs, a broken pelvis, eleven fractures in her right leg, a crushed and dislocated right foot and a dislocated shoulder. Also, an iron handrail pierced her abdomen and her uterus, which seriously damaged her productive ability. Frida would comment wryly, 'I lost my virginity.' The first sight of her was incredible. The explosion had blown off all of hers clothes. She was naked with iron guardrail pierced through her body. Even more bizarre, a bag of gold dust carried by a passenger had also burst in the crash, turning Kahlo's naked, bleeding and mutilated body into

[14] Frida Kahlo, H.H,op.cit., p.32.

golden statue. The crowed that had gathered because of the accident pointed to Kahlo and shouted ‘La Bailarina’ –meaning the dancer, as if they were encountering a miracle. But one man pooled the rail out of Frida and she was then taken to the Red Cross hospital, where she would spent next three months recovering. Frida’s parents were overwhelmed by the tragedy and could not see their daughter for twenty days.

Hereafter, she never had a day without pain because these severe injuries never fully healed. She was not expected to survive. "They had to put her back together in sections as if they were making a photomontage", said a friend. One year after the event, in 1926., Frida recorded the fateful accident which was to change her life so greatly. In the style of popular ex-voto painting, she presents the scene with no consideration for the rules of perspective. (figure 3). This accident was the beginning of an unbearably painful series of physical ailments that would persist for the rest of Frida’s short life. From the accident onward pain and fortitude become central themes in her life. Only two things would offer solace: painting and the muralist Diego Rivera.

DIFFICULT LOVE

The only things Frida did, during months of recovering from the bus accident, were painting and writing letters to Alejandro G**ó**mez Arias. Yet another way for Frida to escape the boredom and pain. In letters to Alejandro her development from a spirited child into a passionate adolescent and finally into wily and long-suffering woman are extremely vivid. In a letter to Alejandro, in April 25th, 1927, Frida wrote:

'My Alex,

Yesterday I was very ill and very sad, you cannot imagine the hopelessness one comes to feel with this illness, I feel a dreadful irritation that I can't explain and then at times there is a pain that I can't get rid of with anything. Today they were going to put the plaster corset on me, but it will probably be Tuesday or Wednesday. So I and I alone suffer, and feel hopeless and all. I can't write much because I can hardly bend over, I can't walk because my leg hurts horribly, I'm tired of reading- I have nothing good to read-, I can't do anything but cry and there are times when I can't even do that. I don't get any amusement at all and haven't a single distraction, but only more sorrows, and I find all those who come to see me occasionally very disagreeable. I would go through all of this if you were here, but this way is just makes me want to pop off all the sooner, you can't imagine how the four walls of my room exasperates me. Everything! I don't know how to describe my hopelessness to you.'[15]

[15] Frida by Frida, Selection of letters and texts, foreword and notes, Raquel Tibol, México Editorial RM, 2006.,p.69.

Frida's father owned a bow of oil paints, some paintbrushes, and a palette, which she wanted badly. But her father, just like a little boy, decided only to lent them to Frida temporary. While Frida's mother asked a carpenter to make her an easel, because the plaster cast would not allow her to sit up. The bed was also given a canopy with a mirror covering its entire underside, so that Frida could see herself and be her own model. This saw the start of self-portraits which provide us with an unbroken record of every stage of her artistic development, but we will be discussing it in later chapter. Once she said' I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best.'[16]

Painting was part of Frida's battle for life, but death was her companion. Although she had her own 'painful planet', she did not share it with many friends. So eventually the role of heroic suffering became part of Frida: the mask became her face. She even exaggerated the painful facts of her past claiming that she had spent not one month but three months in the Red Cross hospital. The strength and the emphasis on suffering, both, pervade Frida's paintings.

A close friend of Frida, Tina Modotti , also, an important photographer, was a model for Diego Rivera, and she introduced the two artists. Diego was forty-one years old when Frida came to know him and most famous Mexican artist at the time. Diego Rivera adored the past and sometimes painted it as an idyllic epoch, even though he devoutly believed that mankind's hope for the future lay in industrialization and Communism. He and Frida surrounded themselves with Mexican popular art, and his collection of pre-Columbian sculpture is on of the

[16] Kahlo, A.K.,op.cit.,p.18

best in Mexico.[17] In later years Frida was to say that she met with two accidents from which she never recovered; one was the bus accident, and the other was Diego. As soon as Frida had permission to walk, she took her painting and went straight to Rivera for a professional critique. He told her that day that she has got talent. During the courtship Frida began to paint with new confidence and application. In Rivera's autobiography he said that Frida's canvases revealed an unusual energy of expression, precise delineation of character, and true severity. They showed none of the tricks in the name of originality that usually mark the work of ambitious beginners. They had a fundamental plastic honesty, and an artistic personality of their own. They communicated a vital sensuality, complemented by a merciless yet sensitive power of observation.[18] Rivera's influence could be seen in both the style and the substance of Frida's paintings form 1928-1929. An example is a painting *The Bus (*figure 4). A 1929 painting in which Frida attempted to do, in her own way and on tiny canvas, what Rivera did so often in his huge murals. Stereotypes of Mexico society are all lined up on the bench of a rickety Mexican bus; a plump, lower-middle class matron with a straw shopping basket; a worker holding a monkey wrench and dressed in blue denim overalls and a blue cap; in the center the heroine of the group, a barefoot, Madonna-like Indian mother suckling her infant, whom she swaddles in her yellow shawl; next to her a small boy watching the world go by outside the window; an old man readily identified by his blue eyes and bulging money bag as a gringo(stranger); a prissy young woman of the upper bourgeoisie(a fashionable scarf and a neat little pocketbook are her emblems). As a pair, the bourgeoisie and the capitalist are contrasted with the housewife and

[17] Frida,H.H., op.cit.,p.84.

[18] Frida Kahlo, H.H,op.cit., p.46

the worker, for the two couples flank the central Indian mother in neat social symmetry. The notion of painting a scene of social hierarchy is Rivera's influence, but the humor with which the social strata are portrayed is pure Frida. She surely had a political conscience, but she also had a sharp sense of the ridiculous. It is evident that Frida's intelligence worked in a different way from Diego's. She penetrated into the particular, focusing on details of clothing, faces, trying to capture and individual life.

The couple announced the engagement. Frida's mother could not grasp the fact that she is going to marry a ugly, fat, forty-two year old Communist, but Frida's father's only concern was his daughter's happiness. He knew that Diego would take good care of his favorite child. Especially since Frida had gone through so many operations, and would still need medical attention that is not free. They were married in August 21st, 1929 in **Coyoacán's** ancient city hall by the town's mayor. Frida's parents said that it was like the marriage between an elephant and a dove.

Frida did not paint much in the first months of her marriage. Being married to Diego was a full-time job. When Frida was not home, she was watching Diego paint. He valued her criticism, for she was quick to detect falseness or pretension in art as in people, and as the years went on he came to depend more and more on her judgments. Frida was tactful; if she had something negative to say, she would soften the impact by making the suggestion with certain tentativeness or by couching it in a question.

Frida, on the other hand, loved Diego obsessively. He was an unfaithful husband, of that there can be no doubt. But if Frida despaired at her husband's infidelities, there were times when she

pretended to care less, and was sometimes actually amused by Diego's affairs. Most of her affairs, especially those with men, she kept secret.

In all, Frida became a mother figure to Diego, especially after the second time the couple married.

Frida adored Diego, and the meaning of her existence was to be a good wife for him. Whereas Diego admired strong and independent women; he expected Frida to have her won ideas, her own friends, her own activities. He encouraged her painting and the development of her unique style. When he built a house for them, it was in fact two separate houses, linked only by a bridge. It pleased him that she tried to earn her living so as not to depend on him for support and that she kept her maiden name. He was the great maestro, and she chose to be him admiring companion.

He preferred her to dress in the Tehuana Indian manner, and she responded enthusiastically. For the rest of her life, she adopted Tehuana dress, which served the multiple purposes of being exotic, politically correct, and at the same time disguising her physical problems.[19]

Even when she was a girl, clothes were a kind of language for Frida, and from the moment of her marriage links between dress and self-image became the marking point in her life drama.

The costume she favored was that of the women from isthmus of Tehuantepec. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas usually with waterforms on either side. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is an isthmus in Mexico. It represents the shortest distance

[19] Frida Kahlo,T.H.op.cit.,p.40-41

between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, and prior to the opening of the Panama Canal was a major shipping route known simply as the Tehuantepec Route. Tehuantepec women are famous for being stately, beautiful, sensuous, intelligent, brave and strong. Legend says that there is a matriarchal society and that they dominate the men.

For Frida the elements of her dress were a kind of palette form which she selected each day the image of herself that she wished to present to the world. To go with the exotic costumes, Frida arranged her hair in various styles, some typical of certain regions in Mexico, some her own invention. In later years, when she was weaker, she liked to have her sister, niece or a close friend arrange it.

She adored jewelry and she wore everything from cheap glass beads, heavy pre-Columbian jade necklaces, to ornate colonial pendant earrings. Also an admirer, Pablo Picasso gave Kahlo a pair of earrings shaped like hands in 1939., which she donned for a later self-portrait. "*Neither Derain, nor I, nor you*," Picasso wrote to Rivera, "*are capable of painting a head like those of Frida Kahlo*."[20] Her fingers displayed a constantly changing exhibition of rings, all of different styles and origins.

So, on one level, Frida chose to dress as a Tehuana for the same reason that she adopted Mexicanism: to please Diego. Rivera liked to stress the Indian aspect of Frida's heritage, describing her as authentic, unspoiled and primitive.

[20] Frida by Frida, R.T.,op.cit.,p.283.

As the years passed, Frida's costumes became an antidote to isolation; even at the end of her life, when she was very ill and received few visitors, she dressed every day as if she were preparing for a fiesta. Frida said that she wanted to hide her scars and her limp. The costume was to compensate for her body's deficiencies, for her sense of fragmentation, dissolution and mortality. Ribbons, flowers, jewels became more and more colorful and elaborate as her health declined. Frida's decoration was touching-on one hand it was an affirmation of her love of life and, on the other, a signal of her awareness of pain and death.

The Frida that Rivera married was no longer wearing the luxurious Renaissance-style gown, depicted in her first self-portrait, that we will later discus, but was rather covered with a cheap peasant blouse, and wore Mayan beads and colonial earrings. She was no longer the winsome, melancholy aristocrat, but a contemporary Mexican girl.

Frida chronicled the ups and downs of her marriage in paint, starting with *Frida and Diego Rivera, 1931.* (figure 5), a wedding portrait completed after nearly two years of conjugal life. Here Frida adopted the stiff, frontal pose favored by naïve nineteen-century, whose work influenced Rivera as well. An informative inscription on the ribbon in the beak of a dove is as ingenious in tone as the painting is folkloric in style: 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. The inscription derives from Mexican colonial painting.

The painting hints at what the Riveras' marriage would become. Rivera looks immense next to his bride. Slightly turning his head away from her, he brandishes his palette and brushes; he is

the great maestro. The couple's clasped hands are placed in the center of the canvas, suggesting the importance, to Frida, of the marriage bond. Frida, whose tiny feet barely brush the ground, cocks her head and reaches toward her monumental mate. She plays the role she liked best: the genius's adoring wife. Frida knew that Diego was unpossessable. The determination to be 'Rivera's woman' are unmistakable in this portrait .But even as she was working on this painting, Rivera was entranced by the tennis champion Helen Wills, whom he painted nude on the ceiling of the Luncheon Club of the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco.

The Mexican mural renaissance had become renowned in the United States by the mid-twenties, and Rivera in particular had become a legend. No one seemed to care for the fact that he was a Communist whose murals were full of hammers and sickles, red stars, and portraits of Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller and others. Rivera, by accepting the commissions from the Mexican government and form U.S. capitalists, got a chance to create public works for the glorification and edification of the industrial proletariat. The most important fact for Rivera was that the capitalists of the United States were masters of the most marvelous technological achievements.

In 1930 Frida travelled with her husband Diego to San Francisco, where he worked on murals at the Pacific Stock Exchange and the California School of Fine Arts. It is very likely that it was here Frida painted *Luther Burbank* (figure 6), a portrait of the California horticulturist know for his work in creating hybrid vegetables and fruits. The painting represents the scientist as a half-man, half-vegetable, receiving nourishment from his own corpse. He stands in a hole, and his brown-trousered legs become a tree trunk. A kind of X-ray vision that shows us the

continuation of the tree-man under the earth, where his roots are entangled with a human skeleton. Burbank presents to us the theme that would become Frida's favorite: life-death duality and the fertilization of life by death. This early narrative painting indicated that Kahlo was beginning to look beyond simple caricature and was refining her unique vision, that she will become a painter of fantasy rather than a painter of straightforward, relatively realistic portraits. The portrait indicates that Frida was to become a painter of fantasy. Her inventiveness came straight from Mexican popular culture and from the pre-Columbian one, where the metamorphosis of humans into plants or animals is common.

In 1931 they went to New York where Diego had a major exhibition, and the following year they moved to Detroit where Diego worked on the series of murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Frida followed Diego as a wife and companion, but not as a fellow artist. She has always been by his side, bringing him lunch, making sure he had enough sleep. But the times in United States of America were very painful and depressing for Frida alone. Frida's injured pelvis did not prevent conception, but she could not bring a child to term. The most traumatic of her several miscarriages happened during the year they lived in Detroit. On July 4th 1932, after three and one half months of pregnancy, Frida hemorrhaged and was rushed to the Henry Ford hospital. She wrote a letter to Dr. Eloesser after saying: 'Now that it has happened there is nothing to do but to put up with it.'[21] Her indomitable will had begun to triumph over despair and apathy. To fight her depression, Frida began to paint, as if pain and loss propelled her to a new level of intensity, she found her own vision. *Henry Ford Hospital* (figure 7) is the first of the series of

[21] Frida Kahlo, Frank Milner, Smithmark,1995.,p.15.

bloody and terrifying self-portraits that were to make Frida Kahlo one of the most original painters of her time. This painting, in quality and expressiveness, far surpasses anything that she had done before. In Henry Ford Hospital Frida lies naked, weeping and hemorrhaging onto the single sheet of her hospital bed. Just like in Four Inhabitants of Mexico, space is a nightmarish void in which she has no grounding. She said that she painted the ground earth color in order to express her loneliness. Frida added that the earth to her is Mexico, people around, and everything, so it was help to her, when she had nothing, she would put the earth around her.[22] On the horizon, distant and unavailable, lies the Ford Motor Company's Rouge plant, where Rivera, full of enthusiasm for modern industry, was busy making preparatory sketches for his murals. Frida looks diminutive in relation to her bed and to the plane in which it floats. The feeling of helplessness and disconnection is emphasized with the way the bed is tipped up in intentionally incorrect perspective. Her discomfort is made vivid by the odd twist in her body; from the waist up she turns to the viewer; and from the waist down she turns away.

Six objects symbolic of her feelings at the time of her miscarriage are suspended from the ends of red ribbons that she holds against her stomach as if they were umbilical cords. One of the ribbons is tied to the stump of the umbilical cord of a male fetus, the little 'Dieguito' she had longed to have. Frida based the fetus on medical illustrations procured for her by Rivera while she was still in the hospital, and wanted to draw what she had lost. Other symbols of maternal failure include the orchid, which looks like an extracted uterus. It was, she said, a gift from Diego when she was in the hospital. For her, the orchid was a symbol of sexuality and emotions.

[22] Frida,H.H.,op.cit.,p.145.

The snail referred to the slowness of the miscarriage. The snail also appears in other of her works (*Double Portrait, Diego and I,* and *Moses)* as a symbol of vitality and sexuality. Its protective housing led Indian cultures to see the snail as a symbol of conception, pregnancy and birth. The salmon-pink female torso is a plaster model of the type used to illustrate anatomy in medical schools. The cruel-looking machine is an autoclave, a device for sterilizing surgical instruments. Frida did not share Rivera's passion for modern industry, she considered it painful and career of bad luck.

The loneliness and helplessness evoked by the small figure of the artist surely reflect Frida's won feelings following the loss of her child and during her stay in hospital. This impression is reinforced by the desolate industrial landscape on the horizon, against which the bed appears to float. This painting is the first one, where Frida used sheet metal as its support and inspiration of retablos.

Retablo (or lamina) is a term for a Latin American devotional painting, especially a small popular or folk art one using iconography derived from traditional Catholic church art. This is a different meaning from the original one in Spanish, which still applies in Spain, and is equivalent to reredos in English or retable in French: a painting, sculpture or combination of the two, rising behind the altar of a church. Like a retablo, *Henry Ford Hospital* makes no distinction between fact and fantasy, and the drama is recorded in a straightforward, primitivistic style. This primitivism distanced the viewer and herself from horrific subject matter. For the rest of her artistic expression, Frida continued to use primitivism as a distancer. Further on, Frida expressed her sorrow in lithograph entitled *Frida and the Miscarriage (figure 8)*, and in the

painting *Me and My Doll* from 1937(figure 9). Previous one is a powerful and heartrending image. In it, Frida stands naked and passive, submitting to the various stages of her pregnancy. A male fetus is attached to her by a long winding vein, and a much less developed embryo is curled within her womb. Two tears fall on her cheeks, and the hemorrhage that ended her pregnancy is depicted in droplets of blood that run down the inside of her leg and into an earth that is both a grave and a garden. In contrast to Frida, the earth is fertile; its plants, nourished by her blood, have grown into shapes that echo the eyes, hands, and genitals of her male fetus. Frida's body is divided into light and dark halves, as if to reveal the light and dark halves of her psyche, the presence within her of life and death. On her dark side is the weeping moon, and a third arm which holds a palette shaped like the fetus, maybe implying that painting is an antidote to maternal failure.

Latter painting, *Me and My Doll*, is produced in 1937, when she must have had another miscarriage. Frida and a large naked baby doll sit side by side on a child's bed, as if they are posing for a family photograph. The doll is lifeless and wears a dumb, fixed smile that makes a bitter contrast with Frida's sober demeanor. We see a woman sitting bolt upright, facing straight ahead, instead of facing the 'child'. Her hands are folded in her lap and she smokes.

'My painting carries within it the message of pain. Painting completed by life. I lost three children… Paintings substituted for all of this. I believe that work is the best thing.'[23]

It was here in Detroit, that she adopted a certain posture as a painter.

[23] Frida, H.H.,op.cit., p.148.

After the Detroit murals were completed, in March 1933, the couple left Detroit and spent the next nine months in New York, where Diego was working on the *Man at the Crossroads* mural in the Rockefeller Center. This mural depicted a portrait of Lenin, whom both of the artists supported, and hence it was destroyed at the end. Riveras were communists and very active in the revolution movement in Mexico, where they returned in 1933. Riveras had now been in America for almost three years, and Frida was growing homesick fro Mexico.

Frida's longing to absent herself from New York, to return home, is visible in her painting called *My dress Hangs Here* (figure 10) which is painted in 1933. Frida painted a personal and sardonic view of New York. This painting is crammed with details that are given coherence by a primitive brand of Synthetic Cubism. Frida's Cubism included bits of collage: fragments of newspaper photograph of breadlines, a military parade, the audience at a basketball game, and political demonstrations. The steps of Federal Hall, presided over by a statue of George Washington, who is a reminder of the revolutionary idealism of the past, are made out of a collaged graph showing 'weekly sales in millions'. She poked fun of American values, sports and plumbing, by setting a golf trophy and toilet on top of classical columns. A skyscraper forms the pedestal for the almighty telephone, whose cord snakes in an out of city buildings they resemble tombstones. Trinity Church with dollar sign in its window is linked by a red ribbon to Federal Hall, which in her view stood for capitalism. Other false values that Frida remonstrates against are the commercialization of sex seen in the sex goddess Mae West vamping Manhattan from a peeling billboard above buildings going up in flames. West is placed next to the church, because they both represent false values: in her case, vanity, luxury, the worship of glamour. And conspicuous waste suggested in a garbage pail stuffed with detritus, including a human hand.

Suspended from a blue ribbon tied with bows to the toilet and the trophy, her Tehuana dress hangs empty. Disgusted with watching millionaires sip cocktails while the poor starved, she wanted to flee to Mexico, a longing hinted at by the collaged steamship chugging out of New York Harbor while the Statue of Liberty appears to wave.

Directly in the middle of a composite image that shows Manhattan as the capitol of capitalism as well as the center of poverty and protest in the Depression years hangs Frida's Tehuana costume. Surrounded by cold skyscrapers with endless blank windows, hanging on a blue hanger hooked over a blue ribbon, the embroidered maroon blouse and pea-green skirt with pink ribbons and white ruffles looks exotic, intimate and feminine. Frida is saying that her dress may hang in Manhattan, but she is elsewhere.

Serious disagreements arose between the couple before their return to Mexico. While Frida had had enough of America and the Americans, Diego remained fascinated by the country and did not want to leave. The protracted stay in 'Gringolandia' , the miscarriage, the physical breakdowns of both parents, Rivera's affairs, misunderstandings, the death of Kahlo's mother and the estrangement from loved ones in general, and Mexico in particular began to affect the couple.[24]

In an irony of fate, Diego was release from his contract before its official expiry.

When the Riveras returned to Mexico in December 1933, they moved into their new home on the corner of Palmas and Altavista in San Angel. Rivera had commissioned the house from a

[24] Frida Kahlo, T.H.op.cit.,p.49

friend, the architect and painter Juan O'Gorman. It was made up of two cuboids; Frida lived in the smaller, blue one, while Diego set up studio in the larger, pink one. Frida's house was more private and compact. It had three stories; a garage, a living room/dining room and a small kitchen. And on the top floor a bedroom/studio with a huge window, plus a bath. Its flat roof was made into a terrace, and from here the bridge let to Diego's studio.

Having done little work during her last year in America was ready to throw herself into painting. But health problems forced her back into hospital, and another pregnancy was terminated. Frida should have been happy after returning to Mexico, but the evidence of her paintings in the next two years show that she was not. Upon returning, Diego was disconsolate. He wanted to continue painting murals for an industrial society, he thought, the Marxist revolution would eventually occur. He blamed Frida for persuading him to leave the United States, and it may have been in retaliation that he had an affair with her younger sister Cristina, the person beside Diego whom Frida loved the most. Rivera's affair with Cristina changed her from an adoring bride into a more complex woman, one who could no longer even pretend to be a pretty appendage to her more 'important' spouse; she had to learn to be, or pretend to be her own source, autonomous. Of course, she kept on shinning and reflecting in the dazzle and glow of Diego's orbit, making her husband happy; but more and more, the light that attracted people to Frida was her own.[25]

As mentioned above, Frida's health getting worse. She was in the hospital al least three times in 1934; once to have her appendix removed, once for an abortion, after three months of

[25] Frida,H.H.op.cit.,p.192.

pregnancy, and a third time because the foot problems that she was having in New York grew worse.

In 1935 she was only to produce two works: *A Few Small Nips (figure 11)* and *A Self-Portrait.* Former is based on a newspaper account of a drunken man who threw his girlfriend on a cot and stabbed her twenty times. It was an act of jealousy. The murderer had defended his actions before the judge with the words: 'But it was just a few little nips.'

As in the case of most of her works, this gruesome representation of a murderer must be viewed in the light of her own personal situation. Her relationship with Rivera during this period was so troubled that she was only able to find release through the symbolism of her painting.

In this painting, we are presented with the immediate aftermath of the murder. The killer, holding a blooded dagger, looms over his dead victim, who lies sprawled on a bed, her naked flash covered with bloody gashes. One of the woman's lifeless arms hangs downward. Her wounded and bleeding palm open toward us. Streams of blood flow from her fingers on the greenish-yellow floor. Frida said that the yellow color of the floor stand for insanity, sickness and fear. But the plashes of blood continue out onto the painting's frame, and thus becoming life-size red splashes. The impact on the viewer is immediate, almost physical. The transition from fiction to reality is made by these trails of blood. Frida said that she needed to paint this scene because she felt a sympathy with the murdered woman, since she herself had come close to being 'murdered by life.'[26]

[26] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.181.

The devastating violence of the subject matter is mitigated, not only by Frida's primitivistic style, but also by a strong note of caricature seen in sly details. The delicate lace trim on the pillowcase, the festive pink and blue walls, the rolled-down stocking on the dead woman's leg suggest she was a whore. Most incongruous of all is the pair of doves, one black, and one white, which hold in their beaks a pale blue ribbon inscribed with the painting's title. Frida said that they stood for good and evil. Humor, like hope, was a mainstay that helped her to survive her embattled life.

Profoundly her by Diego and Cristina's affair, Frida left the couple's home at the beginning of 1935 and took and apartment in the center of Mexico City. She contracted a lawyer friend, one of the former Cachuchas, in order to ask his advice about a possible divorce.

Whatever the reasoning, Frida took the betrayal keenly. To her, it was the ultimate betrayal. She felt a sense of disillusionment from which she never truly recovered. In her despair, she cut off all her hair, a traditional method of women's mourning of which Kahlo was surely aware. As she has as an outrageous young girl, she began to dress in men's clothes, as if she were disassociating herself from her feminine side. But in a larger sense, Rivera's betrayal of Kahlo also set her free. It showed her that a traditional relationship would not work, because he did not value sacrifices of that nature. Rivera's betrayal was a kind of physic surgery: it removed the final impediments to her progress as an artist. Unshackled by conformity, she was able, during the next decade, to fulfill the realization of her sexuality and her artistic vision. Fame would come, too.[27]

[27] Frida Kahlo, T.H.,op.cit.,p.49.

In the middle of 1935 she escaped to New York with two American friends to get away form her burdensome situation. After confiding her troubles to Lucienne Bloch and Bertram and Ella Wolfe, she decided to go back to Diego. On July 23 she write to Diego: 'All this made me understand in the end that I love you more than my own skin, and that, though you may not love me in the same way, still you love me somewhat. Isn't that so?... I shall always hope that that continues, and with that I am content.'[28] When the relationship between Rivera and Cristina finished, at the end of 1935, Frida returned to San Angel. But Frida was not content. After their reunion, she and Rivera may have had some kind of understanding that, though they adored each other, they would be free to have love affairs with others. Perhaps to balance Rivera's philandering and as a reaction to his liaison with her sister, in 1935 she had an affair not only with Noguchi but also with the graphic artist and mural painter Ignacio Aguirre. Particularly in the last years of her life, frida had affair with women, too. Frida felt no shame about her bisexuality. Neither did Diego.

From 1936 Frida renewed her political activities. Mentioned year was the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, so Frida, together with other sympathizers, founded a solidarity committee in aid of the Republicans. Her political work, beside giving her new drive, brought her closer to Rivera, who had been sympathetic towards Trotsky. That same year, the couple petitioned the Mexican government to grant asylum to Leon Trotsky, who had been expelled from Norway, as a result of pressure from Moscow. President Lazaro Cardenas granted the asylum request.

[28] Frida Kahlo, H.H.,op.cit.,p.108.

On 9 January 1937, Natalia Sedova and Trotsky docked in Tampico, where they were met by Frida Kahlo. The artist gave them the Blue House in Coyoacán on disposal, where the Trotskys lived until April 1939. The two couples spent many hours together, and a brief love affair flourished between Trotsky and Frida. He was a man with vigorous interest in sex. Around women, Trotsky became especially animated and witty, and thought his opportunities were few, his success seems to have been considerable. His approach was not a romantic or sentimental, but rather direct and sometimes even crude. Trotsky's reputation as a revolutionary hero, his intellectual brilliance and force of character attracted Frida. No doubt that Rivera's obvious admiration for him fanned the flames: an affair with her husband's friend and political idol would be the prefect retaliation for Rivera's affair with her sister. After the relationship finished in July 1937, Frida gave Trotsky the self-portrait dedicated to Leon Trotsky, but we will discus it in latter chapter.

Jacqueline Lamba and Andre Breton arrived in Mexico in April 1938 and stayed for several months. For some time they lived with Riveras in San Angel. Breton, who was one of the leaders of Surrealism, had been sent to lecture in Mexico by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also sympathized with the Trotskyist League and was very eager to meet Trotsky, He saw Mexico as the embodiment of Surrealism, and he also interpreted Frida Kahlo's work as Surrealist.

Breton was charmed by Frida and by her work. 'My surprise and joy was unbounded when I discovered, on my arrival in Mexico, that her work has blossomed forth, in her latest paintings,

into pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself.'[29]

It was through this contact with Breton that Frida Kahlo was offered her first large exhibition abroad the same year.

In early October 1938 Frida travelled to the United States to prepare her forthcoming exhibition in Julien Levy's gallery. She had worked intensively for the past two years, and had taken part in a group exhibition in Mexico for the first time. Levy now proposed to stage a solo exhibition of her work in New York.

Since she had never painted with a public in mind, Frida could not understand what interest her work could have for others. She was astonished when the American actor Edward Robinson purchased four of her paintings, at two hundred dollars each. She realized then that she could be financially free from Diego and earn her own money. All the more reason for Frida to enjoy her trip to the States, which she made alone. Despite the concrete evidence, friends assumed that she had separated from Diego. She flirted freely with her admires and started a very intimate and passionate affair with the photographer Nickolas Muray.

Since the number of galleries in those days was still only small, the opening of the exhibition proved to be a major cultural event. For her first solo exhibition it was a considerable success, and received remarkable coverage in the press. Despite the economic depression affecting the United States, half of the twenty-five works on display were sold. A number of visitors

[29] Frida Kahlo, H.H.,op.cit.,p. 116.

commissioned new works from the artist, amongst them a painting of *The suicide of Dorothy Hale* (figure 12). It was due for her friend Clare Boothe Luce, publisher of the fashion magazine *Vanity Fair.* Dorothy Hale was Luce's friend, an actress with whom Frida was also acquainted. She had committed suicide in October 1938. Frida said that she will do a retablo of Dorothy, which her poor mother would probably like to have. Luce did not speak Spanish in order to understand what it meant. Soon the painting was finished. It was a documentation of a real event in the form of an ex voto. Dorothy had thrown herself from the window of an apartment block. As in a multiple-exposure photograph, Frida records the various stages of her fall, placing the corpse at the bottom on a stage-like platform in the foreground plane, detached from the building behind. When Clare received the picture, she was astonished and considered of destroying it. She felt physically sick. Eventually, Clare allowed herself to be persuaded by friends not to destroy the picture, but to have the banderole painted over. The banderole said ' *The suicide of Dorothy Hale*, painted at the request of Clare Boothe Luce, for the mother of Dorothy.' Part of the inscription was painted out to enable the picture' s sponsor to distance herself from this 'gruesome' work. Frida's suicidal feelings during her separation from Diego were expressed in this painting. As in A Few Small Nips, she projected her feelings of being killed by Diego onto another woman's tragic demise.

In January 1939 Frida sailed to Paris. Andre Breton had decided to hold his own show in Paris at the start of the year. But when the artist arrived, she found that Breton had yet to take any practical steps towards arranging the promised exhibition. Her works had not been cleared through customs, and no suitable gallery had been found. It was only with the help of Marcel

Duchamp that she managed to complete all the necessary preliminary arrangements. She considered Duchamp the only one of Surrealist who had both of his feet on the ground.

The exhibition was not a financial success, due to the imminent onset of World War II. For this reason she cancelled a follow-on exhibition which was to have been held in the Guggenheim Jeune gallery in London. She saw no point in showing her art at a time when the Europeans were preoccupied with quite different matters.

Pierre Colle Gallery presented the show 'Mexique', whose curator was Breton.

The exhibition included eighteen paintings by Frida, as well as photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, some pre-Columbian pieces, and a selection of such popular art objects as retablos, toys, sugar skulls, masks, ceramics, baskets, and even some dressed fleas.

The exhibition nevertheless received a very favorable review in the magazine '*La Fleche*', and one of the exhibited paintings- *The frame* (figure 13) became the first work by a twentieth century Mexican artist(Frida Kahlo) to be purchased by the Louvre. It has been in the possession of the French nation ever since.

Although Breton claimed that Frida was a self-invented Surrealist, she was neither ignorant of this European movement nor was she truly part of it. Her work differs from Surrealist in that her fantasy was always rooted in concrete fact and immediate experience. Frida did not want to mystify. She wanted to communicate her feelings with the greatest possible clarity and directness. As the years went on, she rejected Surrealism. Yet Surrealism encouraged Frida to follow her own fantasy, which was deeply imbedded in her native culture. There is a change in

her work after her direct contact with Surrealism during Breton's visit in 1938. A comparison between the naïve style and straightforward drama of such early works as Henry Ford Hospital and the more complex and allusive *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) reveals Kahlo's fascination with Surrealism's unsettling enigmas.

Frida left France just two days after the exhibition closed. After a stopover in New York, she was back in Mexico before the month was out.

However, things were going badly on the personal front. Kahlo's relationship with Rivera was disintegrating, and they were moving towards divorce. While they were united in their efforts against Nazism and on behalf of Spanish War refugees, they had become personally estranged. Rivera's affairs were a constant irritant to her. This was the time when Kahlo painted *Two Fridas* (1939) that we will discuss in latter chapter.

When Frida rejoined Diego in Mexico in the spring of 1939, her marriage collapsed, and she moved into the Blue House in Coyoacán. Whether the trouble came from her own or his infidelities is not certain. By mid-October they had petitioned for a divorce by mutual consent before the court of Coyoacán, and by the end of the year the divorce had come through on 6 November 1939.

Frida's health declined. Her doctor ordered a twenty-kilogram weight to stretch her spine. By the end of 1939 she was drinking a bottle of brandy each day.

She told her lover Nickolas Muray that there are no words to express her pain, but she still did have paint. Resulting, during the period of her divorce she worked harder than ever before,

producing some of her most powerful self-portraits. But there was an economic motive as well, since she did not want Diego's money. She wanted to be economically free woman.

But the pain was still there, so she tried to numb it with liquor and painkillers.

Frida's work from the year in which she and Rivera were separated demonstrates a heightened awareness of color's capacity to express emotional truths. As a self-thought artist, she began with a highly personal and unorthodox feeling of color. Her palette came out of her love for the combination of pinks, purples, and yellows seen in decorative arts of Mexico. She chose colors the way she chose her clothes, with exquisite aesthetic calculation. In later paintings the choice of colors is just as odd and often more dissonant and complex as in earlier works.

Frida came closest to Surrealism in the diary that she kept during the last decade of her life. Often the entries are like stream of consciousness poems. Color and line burst free of the images they depict. Figures are fragmented, distorted, reassembled. Using a Surrealist method for incorporating accident into art, Frida occasionally made a drop of ink her starting point. Or a splotch of color formed by closing the diary when the ink was still wet could be transformed into exotic flora and fauna.

Since Frida's health was getting worse, she flew to San Francisco, where her illness was diagnosed as a combination of a crisis of nerves and osteomyelitis. She had met Diego in San Francisco, who had been commissioned to paint a mural for the Golden Gate International Exposition. She needed him, but he needed her, too, for Frida saw to his every desire, making sure that his shirts were washed, his letters written, and his finances more or less straight, and that his favorite meals appeared on time. Just as she loved his vulnerability and his womanly

breasts, he loved her grit and her '*zapata*' mustache. Her mordant wit and her lively, critical mind never bored him, and Rivera hated to be bored. And of course he was proud of having such a striking woman at his side.

The separation was having a bad effect on both of them. Frida agreed to remarry Diego. She insisted on providing for herself financially from the proceeds of her own work, on paying for half of household expenses, and that they would not have any sexual intercourse. She explained the last condition by saying that with the images of all other women flashing through her mind, she couldn't possibly make love to Diego, for a psychological barrier would spring up.

Perhaps, to consecrate their reunion, Rivera painted Frida, who was now in her Tehuana costume, into his *Golden Gate Mural* (figure 14). As usual, she is a symbolic figure. She represents the Mexican artist with a sophisticated European background who has turned to native plastic tradition for inspiration. She personifies the cultural union of the Americas for the South.

On December 8, 1940, Rivera's birthday, Frida and he remarried. Conjugal life soon fell into its old patterns.

With the death of her father in April 1941, Frida's health worsened; the war in Europe intensified her distress. She would be able, 10 years after, to paint a portrait of her beloved father *Portrait of Don Guillermo Kahlo,* 1951 (figure 15). It took her a long time to come to terms with his death. It is a tender portrait that reveals the love with which she thought of him.

Frida's portrait's of others are almost always less vibrant and original than her subject paintings and self-portraits, perhaps because, in painting a specific individual, she did not feel free to project all her complex fantasy and feeling onto the image. Certainly the most extraordinary portrait of a friend that Frida ever produced is that of *Dona Rosita Morillo* (figure 16). Dona Rosita shows her general move toward an extremely refined, miniaturistic realism that is influenced by mural-style Mexican portraits of 1929-1930 or the naïve portraits of 1931 which are based on a folk limner tradition. Wise, but judging, powerful but worn, Dona Rosita embodies the essence of grand motherliness. She seems the concretization of a basic human longing for such familiar values as comfort, communion, and continuity. Dona Rosita holds her knitting, and from it a length of wool leads our eye out of the painting to the very space in which we stand. Knowing the way Frida used ribbons and other such connectors to establish emotional linkage, we can assume that the length of wool was meant to offer the viewer a concrete tie to the portrait subject. Darkness in the gasp between leaves shows that the time is night, which to Frida meant the end of life. Other signals of old age and death are brown leaves, and five desiccated, gray, leafless sticks. But as always, Frida presents death as a cycle of life. For all the wisdom and compassion in her eyes, the set of her mouth suggests that she possesses the critical cantankerousness of old women who watch successive generations making all the predictable errors. Frida wanted to materialize Dona Rosita. She was building up an image with heavy layers of pigment that is painted with numerous tiny strokes, shown in the woolliness of her sweater and shawl, hairy texture of the flowering plant.

In 1942 she began writing a diary, one of the most important keys to her feelings and thoughts. She not only recorded her experiences chronologically from the forties right up to the end of

her life, but reflected back upon her childhood and youth. She discussed such topics as sexuality and fertility, magic and esotericism, and her mental and physical suffering. She also captured her moods in watercolor and gouache sketches. In her self-portraits, Frida Kahlo's regal and penetrating gaze is simultaneously seductive and defiant. With an almost masculine confidence she asserts her position as confrontational observer rather than passive object of depiction. She has full command of her sexual powers and uses them to gain power and maintain control, even as she displays her vulnerabilities.

Kahlo was never one to bow down to rules of propriety. Sexually liberated for the standards of her day, she rejected her assigned role of sexual passivity. In her allusion to and flaunting of her sexual attitudes, her paintings defy the prudish conventions of her European and Catholic heritage. She rejected any links between sexual behavior and shame or sin, preferring instead to celebrate its associations with fertility, abundance, and the cycle of life and death. Yet for Kahlo, sex was also a source psychic, and possibly physical pain. Sexual activity was often a device to mask her emotional pain and take revenge on Diego Rivera for causing it. At other times, it was a source of comfort. Kahlo's self-portraits, still-lifes, and surrealistic fantasies provide evidence of all these aspects of her unabashed sexuality.

Starting with the '*wedding portrait*' from 1931, Frida recorded the vicissitudes of her marriage. The various paintings that show her and Diego together, or that include Diego only by implication, reveal the extant to which the Riveras' relationship changed with the years.[30]

[30] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.361.

All of the paintings express Frida's great love and need for Rivera. He connects with her in a different way in each painting. In *Diego and Frida 1929-1944*(figure 17), she has intertwined herself so closely with Diego that their faces form a single head- a symbiotic state that is clearly not a comfortable, harmonious union. This painting was an anniversary gift fro Rivera at a time when the couple had once again separated. This time Frida's urgent need to be tied to her husband made her merge her identity with his, creating a single head out of half of each of their faces. Male and female- the duality alluded to also by the sun and the moon and by a conch and a scallop shell- are joined, but as I have said, the union is not stable. The spouses' faces do not line up, and their head must be held together by a necklace made of leafless branches. For Frida, the marriage bond was a martyrdom.

Many other self-portraits will be discussed in later chapters.

As the years went on, Frida took a more and more motherly role in relation to her husband. He loved to be pampered, and she discovered that playing mother made it easier to indulge his mischief.

LIFE BETWEEN REALITY AND VISION

Kahlo was influenced by indigenous Mexican culture, which is apparent in her use of bright colors and dramatic symbolism. She frequently included the symbolic monkey. In Mexican mythology, monkeys are patrons of dance, also symbols of lust, but Kahlo portrayed them as tender and protective symbols.[31] Christian and Jewish themes often are depicted in her work.

She combined elements of the classic religious Mexican tradition with surrealist renderings. Kahlo created a few drawings of "portraits," but unlike her paintings, they were more abstract. She did one of her husband, Diego Rivera, and of herself. As I have mentioned it above, at the invitation of André Breton, she went to France in 1939 and was featured at an exhibition of her paintings in Paris.

One can easily see why so many people called Frida a Surrealist. Her self-mortifying portraits have a surrealistic emphasis on pain and a definite undercurrent of suppressed eroticism. Her use of hybrid figures (part animals, part human) is familiar from Surrealist iconography. Her placement of scenes of dramatic inaction in immeasurable large, open spaces can also be construed as a Surrealist device to disassociate the spectator from the rational world. Even her closed-up, claustrophobic spaces might have a Surrealist source.

But Frida's outlook was vastly different from that of the Surrealists. Her art was not the product of a disillusioned European culture searching for an escape from the limits of logic. Instead, her fantasy was a product of her temperament, life and place. It was a way of coming to terms with

[31] http://Smithsonian.com/

reality, mot of passing beyond reality into another realm. Her symbolism was almost always autobiographic and relatively simple. The magic of Frida's art is not the magic of melting watches.[32] It is the magic of her longing for her images to have a certain efficacy, they were supposed to affect life.

The Surrealist invented images of threatened sexuality. Frida made images of her own ruined reproductive system. In *Roots* from 1943(figure 18), she joined her own body with a green vine. She was expressing her personal feeling of being a childless woman who was longing for fertility. We know that her greatest wish was to give childbirth to a little *Diegito.* Her emotion is utterly clear. Eroticism ran more in her veins than in her head, since for her sex was less Freudian mystification than the fact of life. By rooting herself in the land Diego loved, she was able to attach herself more closely to him. This painting gives brilliant evidence of Frida's growing desire to become deeply embedded in nature. It is Frida who nourishes nature by giving birth to a vine. Her solitary presence in the wilderness is mysteriously dream like and natural. A window on her torso opens to reveal not broken bones or barren womb, but the rocky landscape beyond. From this mystic womb the pliant green vine emerges and spreads luxuriantly along the desert floor. Frida's blood courses through its arteries, and continues in red vesicles that extend like creeping roots beyond the edges of its leaves. Frida in this way becomes a source of life rooted in the parched Mexican earth. To gain immortality, Frida linked her very body with the chain of life.

[32] Frida Kaho, F.M.,op.cit.,p.18.

Even *What the Water Gave Me* (figure 19) is more real than surreal. She said that this painting had a special importance to her. The mood is elusive and subdued. Memories are glimpsed, but not grasped. This canvas is the most complex and deliberately enigmatic of all Frida's works. All its images are closely tied to events or feelings in Frida's life, and the scene taken as a whole is a 'real' depiction of the dreamer and her dream. This painting was a bathtub revery. As she soaked her aching body, her mind began to drift. The tips of her feet, her toes that are protruding from the water, are grotesquely doubled by reflection so that they look like fleshy crabs. The big toe of the deformed right foot is cracked open, a reference to her accident and to later operations. Beside her wounded toes she envisioned a vein emerging from the drain and dripping blood into the bathwater, just like in some horror movie. On her right thigh she saw her imaginary wound with sexual-looking pods, red petals and roots floating above it. The water's lulling light also precipitated images of past and present, life and death, comfort and loss. In the midst of this vision is Frida, drowned in her imaginings and bleeding from the corner of her mouth. She is kept afloat by a lasso that serves as a tightrope for insects, a minute dancer, snake. The rope lassos the neck and waist of a drowned Frida. A blood-curdling detail is daddy longlegs, several of whose legs reach down from the tightrope to touch Frida's face. Beside the drowned Frida floats her Tehuana costume, once again empty, and once again an emblem of her spiritual disconnection.

To the right of Frida are her parents, based on their wedding photograph. Their light and dark complexion reappear in two female nudes, who use a sponge as a raft. These women are aspect of Frida's duality, the Indian and the European, the comforter and the comforted. They may

also refer to her bisexuality, and they turn up again the following year, in a painting called Two Nudes in a Forest, which Frida made for an intimate friend.

The broken conch shell in this painting might refer to her inability to bear a child and the emotional pain it gave her. The ship heading for a rock means death. To the right is an island with skeleton and a dead bird whose one red foot seems analogous to Frida's bleeding foot. It is unclear whether she intended the Empire State Building, caught in the molten red crater of an erupting volcano, to signal the death of capitalism or the rape of Mexico. The masked man, laying on the island's shore holds one end of the tightrope that winds around Frida's neck and waist. The other end is attached to a phallic rock. If either end were released, Frida would sink farther into the watery depths of her dream.

Unlike most of her self-portraits, *What the Water Gave me* has no dominant central image. Details come in and out of focus as the viewer scans the water's surface and partakes in the flux of the artist's imaginings. The canvas's subdued tones and this, relatively transparent paint surface, enhance the mood of revery. Each detail is so intimately connected to the painter's life that the work remains a realistic depiction of the dreamer and her daydream.

As does everything else in her intimate life, Frida's lesbianism appears in her art. Along with self-love and psychic duality, it is suggested in her double self-portraits, and it emerges in many of her paintings as a kind of atmosphere, a sensuality, so deep that it was stripped of the conventional sexual polarities, a hunger for intimacy so urgent that it ignored gender.[33] When,

[33] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.198.

in 1939, she painted a pair of loving women in *Two Nudes in a Forest* (figure 20), she used the same light and dark skinned women as in What the Water Gave Me done a year before. These women can easily represent herself and a woman she loved. She has placed them outside the realms of time, space, and convention, bordered on one side by a lush jungle from which they are watched by a spider monkey (a symbol of lust), whose tail wraps around coiling, twisting branches, and on the other by a precipice where roots protrude from the earth as if from a freshly dug grave. In such surrounding, women cling to each other. One is a seated guardian wearing a red shawl as if she were an Indian Madonna. From the tip of the dark woman's shawl blood is dripping into the fissured Mexican earth.

Frida's powerful sexual appetite- both homo and heterosexual- radiates from the surface of all of her paintings. Her friends noticed that Frida's most passionate love affair was with herself. Despite growing up in the repressed Catholic culture of Mexico at the turn of the 20th century, where sex, at least as far as women were concerned, was for procreation only, and a woman's virtue hinged on her ability to deny her sexual impulses, Kahlo did not shrink away from her sexual appetites. She rejected these societal dictates, believing that sex was a natural act in which pleasure was meant for both men and women. In self-portraits, Kahlo frequently employed the symbolic use of hair and animal imagery to allude to the primal nature of her sexuality. It was fashionable then, as now, within Western societies for women to remove excessive body hair by shaving, waxing, or tweezing. Modern standards of feminine beauty, always subject to cultural conditioning, idealize a nearly hairless female body. Not only does this negate any possible associations with masculinity, it also suggests a civilized cultivation of everything biological and instinctive. Excess body hair, due to its association with animals, may

be regarded as a sign of an over-active sex drive or lustful personality. A shaved, plucked and bleached woman appears to have her primitive instincts in check; her animal impulses under control. Kahlo rejected this artifice, preferring to remain au naturale.

In *Fulang Chang and I*, 1937, Kahlo's un-tweezed eyebrows form a pair of thick arches over her dark staring eyes. The exaggerated shadow of fur that sets off her upper lip is intensified by a lock of long, thick slightly uncontrolled hair hanging over her shoulder. As she rebuffs the artificial vanities that dictate our perceptions of feminine beauty, she flaunts her unrestrained sexuality and possibly alludes to a masculine or androgynous aspect of herself. Kahlo reinforces the suggestion of uninhibited sexual impulses in this portrait with the inclusion of her pet monkey. She kept a menagerie that included a number of spider monkeys that appeared in many of her paintings. In both Mayan myths and in Western tradition, monkeys are regarded as a symbol of lust, unrestrained animal instincts and primitive drives. Monkeys are hair-covered humanoids with faces, hands and bodies that bear an uncanny and genetic similarity to our own. But while they resemble humans, they are subject to none of the restraints or boundaries that culture imposes on us. They are free to act on their primitive urges without any consideration for propriety. Kahlo draws a parallel between the fur-covered monkey and her own furry lip and brow, flaunting her uncultured sexuality in the face of polite society.
Kahlo also draws connections between sex and the natural order in her eroticized still-lifes. As in much Western art throughout history, fruit, flowers, and plant forms serve as symbols for fertility, passion, and sexual delight. In Fruits of the Earth, 1938, Kahlo projects her obsession with fertility onto flowers, transforming them into obvious male and female genitals . She combines nature's phallic and vaginal forms in an overflowing plate, drawing connections

between the pleasures of sex and food, passion and fertility, nature and the abundance of things that are good. She suggests sex is beautiful, natural, and life giving. She also implies, however, that the fruit, like her body, is wounded. While sex is a source of pleasure, it also leads to pain, if not in the body then in the soul. When you love deeply, she seems to say, you can hurt deeply as well.

Her true desire was to be unconditionally loved, and her pain was always evident in her works with the blood dripping as in *The Wounded Table* (figure 21), 1940. It was her only other large painting, along with *Two Fridas*. *The Wounded Table* has human legs that are flayed like those of an ecorche, and several knots on its surface bleed. As a place where people gather, the table stand for domesticity, Frida's sense of home was battered by divorce.

The painting, like The Two Fridas, which we will have a word in latter chapter, is a dramatization of loneliness. In this painting she is accompanied by her sister Cristina's children, which she loved and cherished as her own, by her pet fawn Granizo, and by three of the Four Inhabitants of Mexico. Theater curtains are pulled aside to reveal a stage where seven characters are arranged on three sides of the table in a scene that recalls the Last Supper. In the center, Frida plays Christ, and a papier-mache Judas wearing overalls that identify him as Diego plays the role of Judas. We know that even as the Judas embraces Frida, he deceives her, for he leans on the table, as did Judas at the Last Supper. Inspired by a Nayarit sculpture of an embracing couple, Frida elongated the arm of the idol that sits on her left. And, in order to emphasize her link with pre-Columbian culture, she made the idol's arm continuous with her own. The clay skeleton, with its pelvic bone tied to a chair to keep it upright, lifts a lock of her long hair in the coiled

spring that forms his forearm. He seems intimately linked with Frida. All three Mexican artifacts are probably aspects of Frida, for the idol has peg legs, and the skeleton and the Judas have broken and bloodied right feet. The figure of Judas is connected to the Easter in Mexico which is a combination of Semana Santa (Holy Week - Palm Sunday to Easter Saturday) and Pascua (Resurrection Sunday until the following Saturday). On Palm Sunday people use elaborately woven palms. Weavers ply their craft outside churches, and worshipers follow the priest into church with the woven fronds. Later, those palms are traditionally hung on the doors of Mexican homes to ward off evil. The most spectacular of Easter traditions in Mexico is the burning of a Judas effigy filled with firecrackers. This custom takes place on Holy Saturday. Judas effigy is now a popular way to express anguish over some contemporary person, frequently an unpopular politician.[34] Kahlo's attitude to death, grounded in Mexican popular Catholic culture, and laced with her won taste for the gothically shocking, could sometimes unsettle American purchasers, who were more respectful of mortality's attendant social obligations.

Since Frida was attracted to death, as we have seen in her paintings *A Few Small Nips* and *Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, her preoccupation comes again at the time of her divorce in *The Dream,* 1940, where she sleeps in her four-poster bed floating in the lavender, cloud filled sky of her dream, a sky that appears to be a continuation of the lavender shadows on the rumpled white garment that envelops her (figure 22). She pairs herself with the skeleton once again, this

[34] Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico,William H. Beezley,University of Nebraska,1987.,p.3.

time one in the form of the Judas that she actually did keep on top of her bed's canopy, which she explained to friends as an amusing reminder of her own mortality. While Frida sleeps, the plant embroidered on her bright yellow bedspread springs to life, becoming a thorny vine that bursts into foliage around her face and grows away from the bedspread and into the air as though it were a real plant, not just stitches of embroidery thread. It is as if Frida were dreaming of a time long after death, when plants would sprout from her grave.

Just like Frida, the skeleton rests its head on two pillows, but instead of a vine, it is entwined with wires and explosives, and it holds a bouquet of lavender flowers. Unlike Frida, whose face is calm in sleep, the skeleton stares and grimaces. One feels it could explode any moment, making Frida's dream of death a reality.

In almost all the self portraits from the year of her divorce, Frida gives herself companions-skeletons, a Judas, her niece and nephew, her own alternate self, and her pets. The most intriguing of these are her monkeys, who often embrace her like intimate friends. The animals were to her like children.

Her idea of Surrealism was playful:' *I use Surrealism as a means of poking fun at others without their realizing it, and of making friends with those who do realize it.'*[35]

When she painted herself twice in *Tree of Hope*, from 1946(figure 23), once seated and once recumbent, this has nothing to do with irrational juxtaposition for the purpose of creating '*sur-reality*.' It is a particular surgical patient anesthetized on a hospital trolley and watched

[35] Frida,H.H.,op.cit.,p.261.

over by the part of her being that was strengthened by hope and by will. It shows a weeping Frida, clothed in a red Tehuana costume, sitting guard over a Frida who lies naked but partially covered with a sheet on a mentioned hospital trolley. The recumbent Frida appears to be still anesthetized after an operation that has left deep incisions on her back, it is open and bleeding. The seated Frida proudly holds an orthopedic corset painted, with an irony typical for Frida, bright pink with a crimson buckle, which stands for her trophy for her medical marathon. She also wears another corset, which is evident from the two braces that really buttresses her. She painted this self-portrait for her patron, Eduardo Morillo Safa, after an operation in New York. In her right hand she holds a green flag emblazoned in red with words 'Tree of hope, keep firm' and seems to be giving herself courage. The phrase is taken from one of her favorite songs by Veracruz.

'*Tree of hope, keep firm*' was her rallying cry and motto. Her tree of hope grows from her pain. In the painting the flag's red tassels are analogous to the blood dripping from the patient's wound and the flagpole's red pointed tip suggests the bloody sharp end of a surgical instrument. Despite all the horror and danger, this painting is an act of faith, like a retablo. It represents Frida's faith in herself, not only in a holy image. The landscape is day and night and death is present metaphorically, in the grave-like trench and in the dialectic of light and dark that accompanies the living and the nearly dead Fridas. Oddly, the Frida that holds hope sits beneath the moon, while the daylight sun reveals the devastated surgical patient. One might find an explanation in an Aztec belief that the sun is nourished by human blood. This bluntness contrasts in the strongest fashion with Surrealist indirection and ellipses.

After Frida and Diego remarried , as I have mentioned above, the mother-son bond became so physical that Frida at one point stated that she have 'given birth' to Diego This type of relationship she shows in *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth(Mexico), Diego, Me and Senor Xolotl* (figure 24). Here she is a kind of Mexican earth mother, and Diego is her baby. A bright red crevasse cracks open her neck and chest, and a magical fountain of milk sprays forth from where her breast and heart would be, food for the large, pale baby Diego lying in her lap. He holds a maguey plant painted in fiery orange, yellow and gray, which was Frida's metaphor for sex. Tears make Frida a weeping Madonna, who has lost or fears she will lose her child. She respected and admired Diego, which she has shown in this painting, by placing a third eye in the middle of his forehead and she called this the eye of 'supervisibility'.

Frida holds Diego, and she in turn is held by an earth goddess who represents Mexico and resembles a pre-Columbian idol. Like Frida, the idol has long loose hair, not black, but made out of cactus. And the chest, just like Frida's, is cracked open. Near this wound sprouts a patch of green grass, and the gash goes all the way down to the earth goddess's nipple, from which one drop of milk falls, like a tear.

Although Frida is wounded and weeping, she is also caught up in a series of love embraces,set one inside the other, that not only expresses her belief in the interrelatedness of all things in the universe, but also forms the matrix that joins and sustains herself and her spouse. The live roots symbolize the hardiness of her and Diego's love.

OBSESSION IN THE MIRROR OF SELF –PORTRAITS

'*I paint myself because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best.*'[36]

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits helped her to shape an idea of her own person; by creating herself anew in art as in life, she could find her way to an identity. This may explain why her self-portraits differ in only relatively small respects. The artist looks out at the viewer with almost always the same mask-like face, in which feelings and moods can be read only with difficulty. Her eyes, framed by the heavy, dark eyebrows which met like the wings of a bird above her nose, are particularly impressive.

Frida does not perceptibly age over two decades of self-portraits. Her 1920s visage is youthful and varied; her 1031 double portrait with Rivera shows her curiously doll-like; but by 1933 she had settled to a facial formula from which she deviated little. Frida was much photographed, most famously by Imogen Cunningham around 1930, later in color by her lover Nickolas Muray in 1938. Comparing photographs with self-portraits reveals how she manipulated her own image, thickening and adding emphasis to the arch of her eyebrows, making them meet in the dense bush above the bridge of her nose, giving herself fuller, slightly shorter mouth, and delineating hair by hair the downy moustache on her upper lip.

In Catholic cultures female hair has always connoted the dangerous territory of active sex; whilst Kahlo's elaborate coiffure and exaggeration of her own facial hair are part of the projection of her own erotic forwardness.

[36] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.74.

In order to express her ideas and feelings, Frida developed a personal pictorial language employing its own vocabulary and syntax. She used symbols which offer insight into her oeuvre and the circumstances surrounding its creation. As mentioned above, Frida's rich imagery is derived from Mexican popular art and pre-Columbian culture. The artist also draws upon the stylistic vernacular of retablos, votive paintings of Christian saints and martyrs which have a permanent place in popular religious belief. She refers to traditions which, however surreal they may strike the European, continue to flourish in Mexican daily life even today. Her messages are never impenetrable or illogical, her works fuse fact and fiction.

Several portraits show her accompanied by monkeys, ancient symbols of lust; other include parrots. When Kahlo wished to show herself 'un-sexed' by the trauma of her divorce in 1939, she painted herself shorn and wearing a man's suit. When she wished to celebrate reconciliation a year later, her hair is shown prominently standing up.

Te background to several of the head-and shoulders self-portraits of the 1940s is a forest of huge leaves, cacti and flowers, insistently fecund and fertile. Frida does not wince, does not smile; she often cries tears, but these always appear as added glycerine droplets, which suggest, rather than truly document pain.

One may also draw parallels between the format Frida adopts and small Italian and Northern European Madonna and Child votive images, especially those that are loaded with gold-finches, lilies, pomegranates, cherries, lemons, and other flora and fauna traditionally symbolic of Mary or the Christ Child's future suffering. When she shows herself full length there is often a much clearer narrative, a more specific biographical exposition. As mentioned, *The Broken Column*

(1944), *Tree of Hope*(1946), we see her presented as an actress in her own distressing medical drama.

In her earlier self-portraits *On the Border* (1932) and *The Two Fridas* (1939), she hovers between two cultures, with some choice and some action implicit.

Frida Kahlo's first self-portrait, the *Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress* of 1926(figure 25), along with other early ones, greatly differs from artist's later portraits, which reveal a clear trend towards Mexicanism, Mexican national consciousness. This sense of national identity was shared after the Revolution by the whole country. This painting was a gift for Alejandro, her high school boyfriend. She began it sometime during the late summer of 1926, when she became ill again and was once more confined to the house in Coyoacán. Like so many of her self-portraits, it was a token by which she hoped to bind her loved one to her. So this works represents a kind of visual entreaty, a love offering at a time when Frida felt that she had lost the person she most loved. It is a dark, melancholy work, in which she has succeeded in painting herself looking beautiful, fragile, and vibrant. She holds out her right hand as if she were asking for it to be held. She is wearing a romantic wine-red velvet dress with what looks like a gold brocade collar and cuffs. Eschewing flapper styles, she stresses her femininity, a plunging neckline dramatically sets off her pale flesh, long neck, and breasts with prominent nipples. The tender depiction of her breasts seems a way of hinting at vulnerability without actually admitting it. By contrast, her facial expression remains cool and reserved. And instead of filling the width of her canvas with the portrait bust, Frida has left a strip space on either side of the figure. The slender, elongated girl looks all the more alone against the dark ocean and the sky.

The painting was like an alternate self, one that shared and reflected the artist's feelings, akin to the little girl who befriended Frida in her childhood dreams. On the back of it are the words: 'Frieda Kahlo at 17 years of age in September 1926. Coyoacán.'[37]

She herself portrays a very different Frida in her second self-portrait *Time flies* (figure 26) of 1929. Here appears the Frida that Rivera loved.A comparison between this and her *Self-portrait in a Velvet Dress* makes clear the change in her style. The earlier work, as I have mentioned, reflects her interest in the Italian Renaissance; she is portrayed in an aristocratic, somewhat melancholic pose, her neck manneristically elonged in the style of Amedeo Modigliani. In the second self-portrait, by contrast, she offers a frontal view of her fresh, red-cheeked face, gazing confidently out at the viewer and wearing a positive, determined expression. She is wearing a simple cotton blouse, a popular item of clothing which can still be purchased in markets throughout Mexico today. She is now a contemporary Mexican girl wearing Mayan jade beads and colonial earrings. The gloomy Art Nouveau background of the earlier portrait is here flooded with light: the curtains have been tied back with thick red cords, and in the sky above the balcony railings we see a propeller plane looping the loop. The ornate stand behind the artist's shoulder on the right carries an ordinary metal alarm clock, and not the precious object of art that we might expect. In her inclusion of the airplane and the clock, she illustrates the name of the painting: 'Time flies'.

Of all Frida's paintings, the one that most powerfully illustrates her sufferings is *The Broken Column* (figure 27), painted in 1944 soon after she had undergone surgery and when she was

[37] Frida, H.H.,op.cit.,p.61.

confined in an apparatus, as she was in 1927. Here Frida's determined impassivity creates an almost unbearable tension, a feeling of paralysis. Anguish is made vivid by nails driven into her naked body. A gap resembling an earthquake fissure splits her torso, the two sides of which are held together by the steel orthopedic corset that is a symbol of the invalid's imprisonment. The opened body suggests surgery and Frida's feeling that without the steel corset she would literally fall apart. Inside her torso we see a cracked ionic column in the place of her own deteriorating spinal column. The tampered column thrusts cruelly into the red crevasse of Frida's body, penetrating from her loins to her head, where the two-scrolled capitol supports her chin. The painting alludes to the link in Frida's mind between sex and pain, and it recalls the steel rod that pierced her vagina during the accident. The corset white straps with metal buckles accentuate the delicate vulnerability of artist's naked breasts, whose perfect beauty makes the rough cut from neck to loins all the more ghastly. With her hips wrapped in a cloth suggestive of Christ's winding sheet, Frida displays her wounds like a Christian martyr; she uses physical pain, nakedness, and sexuality to bring home the message of her spiritual suffering.

She stares straight ahead as if to challenge both herself and her audience to face her predicament without flinching. Tears dot her cheeks, but her features refuse to cry. They are as mask-like as those of an Indian idol.

To convey the loneliness of physical and emotional suffering, Frida has painted herself isolated against an immense and barren plain. Ravines cut into the landscape are a metaphor for her injured body. In the far distance there is a strip blue sea beneath a cloudless sky. The sea in this

painting seems to represent the hope, but it is so far away, and Frida is broken, that it is utterly beyond reach.

We have to note that the pain was the cause of Frida's artistic inspiration. The great amount of love and, in the same time, the great amount of pain and heartache came from the same person-Diego. Frida's emotional suffering started when Diego and Cristina had an affair. Frida was never able to let it go, and two and three years later she gave testimony to its lingering impact in *Memory* (figure 28) and in *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (figure 29). In *A Few Small Nips*, which we have discussed earlier, and in her earlier works Frida depicted the female body in actual physical pain or death, but in these works the artist has begun to use physical wounds as symbols for psychic injury. She is no longer the passive female recumbent to her fate, but instead she is an upright woman staring out at the viewer and insisting that the viewer be conscious of her personal suffering.

In *Memory*, done in 1937, which can also refer to her transformation from child to woman, Frida appears with cropped hair, and she is wearing non- Mexican clothes, a skirt and a cowskin bolero that she actually owned. She is flanked by her alternative identities- schoolgirl clothes and Tehuana costume, both linked to her by red ribbons and both hanging on red hangers that are suspended by ribbons from the sky. Each set of clothing has one stiff arm while the central Frida is armless and thus helpless. One bandaged foot refers to the operation on her right foot in 1934, when Rivera fell in love with Christina. The bandage is wrapped in such way that the foot looks like a sailboat, and it stands in the ocean while the normal one stands on the shore. May be the boat foot is a symbol of separation from Diego, while the sea of suffering. *Memory*

is an accurate rendering of pain in love. In this painting, her broken heart has been yanked out of her chest and lies at her feet pumping rivers of blood into the landscape as an imposing monument to the immensity of her pain. Blood flows up into the distant mountains and down toward the sea, where a red delta opens into the blue water. To create an extraordinarily accurate visualization of the sensation of pain in the chest caused by extreme sorrow, Frida pierced the hole left by her extracted heart with a steel rod and put seesawing cupids on either end. The image has something of the brutality of an Aztec sacrifice in which the live victim's beating heart was torn from him, and blood ran in rivulets down the stone temple steps to the ground, where his arms and legs were sold as meat. Indeed, the red river gushing from Frida's extracted heart captures the poetry of blood that pervades so much of Latin American culture.[38] The greater the pain she wished to convey, especially pain caused by rejection from Diego, the bloodier Frida's self-portraits became.

In *Remembrance of an open Wound*, from 1938, Frida again expresses her unhappiness at Rivera's affair with her sister. Here the artist sits with her legs apart as she pulls up the ruffle on her Tehuana skirt in order to display her wounds. Her foot wound is real. The other wound, and open gash on her inner thigh, is invented, and it alludes to the injury to her sense of herself as a sexual being. Next to the gash Frida placed a sprig of leaves as if it were a commemorative wreath. The leaves may also be another example of Frida's enlisting plants as players in her personal drama. Frida is festive and candid about her pain. She told her friends that her right hand is hidden under the skirt because she is masturbating. Once again, sex and pain are linked,

[38] Frida, H.H.,op.cit., p.188.

and Frida is again underneath the flamboyant behavior and exotic clothes alone. The vein-like roots that dangle from her flowered headdress and that cover her like a wedding veil remain as unconnected and unrooted as was Frida without Diego.

Since Frida started using Diego's affairs as a role model for her own, we might say that she felt more content about herself. When Leon Trotsky and his wife Natasha came to Coyoacán to live with the famous couple, Frida, as I have mentioned above, did not hesitate to seize the moment and start an affair with Trotsky. Months after their affair was over, on November 7, 1937, the anniversary of the Russian Revolution and also Trotsky's birthday, Frida gave her ex-lover a present. The gift was one of her most charming *S*elf-*portraits* (figure 30) from 1937. She presents herself to the revolutionary leader in the form of colonial-style bourgeois or an aristocratic woman rather than as a Tehuana or political activist. She stands like a prima donna between two curtains, holding in her primly clasped hands a bouquet of flowers and a sheet of paper inscribed with the words:' For Leon Trotsky with all love I dedicate this painting on the 7th of November,1937. Frida Kahlo in San Angel, Mexico.'

She is dressed in colonial jewelry and with a purple carnation and a red ribbon in her hair. Her lips are red, her cheeks are pink, and her nails are painted red. She has chosen the colors of her clothing with skill- a salmon-pink skirt, an ocher shawl and a wine-colored blouse, all beautifully set off by the painting's live-green background. The pink and green velvet frame that she chose for this self-portrait compliments the painting in the same way that her yellow shawl is becoming to Frida. The seductive, worldly Frida, having rejected her lover, now teases him by giving herself back to him in the form of a portrait.

But what Trotsky saw when he met Frida was the woman she herself depicted in the March, 1937, self-portrait *Fulang-Chang and I (* figure 31). The seductive young woman is depicted with a full face and sensuous lips. Her eyes are appraising, appealing and wise, without the wariness that would fill them in her later self-portraits. There exists a note of explosive but contained emotion, a mood of slightly perverse amusement, when Frida's features 'match' those of her pet. Frida always maintained that her paintings were full of humor for those with the wit to see. The monkey is a symbol of lust and promiscuity.

Two years after this magnificent portrait, on the day of her divorce, Frida had nearly finished her best-known painting *The Two Fridas*(figure 32). They sit side by side on a bench, their hands joined in a stiff but poignant clasp. The Frida Diego no longer loves wears a white Victorian dress, while the other wears a Tehuana skirt and blouse, and her face is perhaps just a shade darker than that of her more Spanish companion, suggesting Frida's dual heritage, part Mexican and part European. Both Fridas have their hearts exposed- the same unashamedly literal device to show pain in love that Frida used in Memory. The unloved Frida's lace bodice is torn to reveal her breast and her broken heart. The other Frida's heart is whole.

Each Frida has one hand placed near her sexual organs. The unloved woman holds surgical pincers, the Tehuana Frida a miniature portrait of Diego as a child. From that miniature springs a long red vein that also resembles and umbilical cord emerging from a placenta. Diego's egg-shaped portrait seems to stand for both a lost baby and a lost lover. To Frida, Diego was both.

The vein winds around the Tehuana Frida's arm, continues through her heart, then leaps across space to the other Frida, circling her neck, entering her broken heart, and finally ending on her

lip, where she shuts off its flow with the surgical pincers. But the blood continues to drip, and in her white lap it forms a pool that overflows to make another puddle. The striking image of blood on white cloth makes the viewer think of miscarriage.

The two Fridas' impassive faces are profiled against a gray and white sky. Frida, as often in her full-length self-portraits, is alone in an endless, flat, empty space. Except for the Mexican bench on which she sits, she is completely disconnected from any solid objects that might provide the comfort of familiarity.

Frida's only companion is herself. Abandoned by Diego, she holds her own hand, and links her two selves with a blood vein. Frida comforts, guards and fortifies herself.

After the divorce, Frida's monkeys and especially the spider monkey Caimito de Guayabal (meaning guava-patch fruit), which Diego had brought her upon his return from a trip to southern Mexico, helped to fill some of the place vacated by her great mischievous child Diego. The animals also took place of the children she would surely never have. Monkeys in her art play a more complex and subtle role.

In a 1940 *Self-portrait* (figure 33), which Frida sold to Nickolas Muray, she is accompanied by Caimito and a black cat and from her necklace of thorns dangles a dead hummingbird. As the monkey gingerly fingers Frida's necklace of thorns, the viewer feels that with one ill-considered tug, he could deepen her wounds. The cat is the menace too. Poised to pounce, her ears forward, he fixes his eyes on the hummingbird, which hangs against the artist's bare, already bleeding flesh. Since the hummingbird represents a species with which Frida felt closely associated, its lifeless body probably refers to the fact that once again Frida felt 'murdered by

life.’ Important to note is that in Mexico hummingbirds are used as magic charms to bring luck in love.

Frida wears a Christ’s crown of thorns as a necklace again in another bust-length *Self-portrait* from the same year (figure 34). In this painting a hand-shaped brooch holds a ribbon on which she has written: ‘I painted my portrait in the year 1940 for Dr. Eloesser, my doctor and my best friend. With all love, Frida Kahlo.’ The attention to details is acute, for example the white buds next to dried brown twigs. Frida appears grave, her head held high with her characteristic hauteur. Her face is older, tenser, and more wary than it was is self-portraits done before her separation from Diego.

Frida painted another self-portrait in 1940 to express her distress at being separated from Diego. *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (figure 35) shows the artist sitting on a bright yellow Mexican chair in the midst of a large expanse of reddish-brown earth in covered with strands of her shorn black hair. The sky is full of pinkish, nacreous clouds that should be soft and lovely, but are instead airless and oppressive, like the clouds in the *Self-Portrait dedicated to Dr.Eloesser*. The chair is gay and folkloric, but the way the artist made it the only bright object accentuates the feeling of desolation. In this painting a mood of angry retaliation is expressed, in which she has also stripped herself of the Tehuana costume Diego liked her to wear. Instead, she is dressed in man’s suit that is so large it must be Diego’s. She sits with her legs apart like a man, and she wears men’s black lace-up shoes and a man’s shirt. Earrings are her only vestige of femininity.

By destroying attributes of female sexuality, Frida has committed a vengeful act that serves to heighten her loneliness. A lock of hair hangs between her legs like a murdered animal. She holds the scissors that did the cropping poised near her genitals, in the same position she held the surgical pincers in *The Two Fridas*. We feel as if Frida violently wanted to reject femininity or the part of herself that possesses the capacity to love.

Frida is surrounded by animate strands of her hair that spread all over the earth and entwine themselves like vines or snakes in the rungs of her yellow chair. Because these black locks do not diminish in size as they recede in space, they seem to float in the air, thus recalling the veins, vines, roots and ribbons that in other self-portraits are symbols of Frida's feeling of being linked with realities beyond herself.

Since Frida's paintings were written by her life, after remarriage with Diego she had produced *Self-Portrait with Braid* (figure 36), in 1941. It is one of the first bust-length self-portraits that she produced after returning to Mexico. This painting can be seen as a comment on her remarriage, as a counterpart to *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, which we discussed. We can imagine as if Frida had gathered, braided and shaped her hair into the pretzel, which she had cut off in the mentioned self-portrait. Putting back her hair is reaffirmation of the femininity she had denied, but the affirmation is not joyous; there are nerve ends of an anxious psyche. No less disquieting are the huge predatory jungle leaves with sharp, serrated edges that hide Frida's nakedness. Their swirling rhythm suggests a turmoil held in check behind her calm features. Thick stems encircle her chest, preventing free movement. Oppressiveness is

reinforced by the heavy choker of pre-Columbian beads and the painting's muted colors add to the mood of melancholy.

Her self-portraits that follow the formula of Fulang-Chang and Me became very popular. Added at this time to self-with-monkey portraits were *Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot* (1942), *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* (1943), *Self-Portrait with Monkey* (1945) and *Self-Portrait with Small Monkey* (1945). In these, the right combination of art and commerce was attained, for Kahlo could be true to her vision while treating buyers to the exotic, but not the disturbingly bizarre, side of her own nature.[39]

In 1942, Frida's work was included in an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art entitled 'Twentieth-Century Portraits.' Frida was represented by *Self-Portrait with Braid*, her defiant affirmation of continued life with Rivera. This led to Frida being included in a New York exhibition of thirty-one women artists at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery in January of 1943, as well as her inclusion in an exhibit of contemporary Mexican art at the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art in the same year.

In the same year, 1942, the former College of Sculpture, under the administration of the Ministry of Public Education, was turned into a School of Painting and Sculpture. Its students quickly nicknamed it '*La Esmeralda*', after the street in which it stood. Art tuition was to be reformed, and to this end a new teaching staff of twenty-two artists was appointed, amongst them, as from 1943, Frida Kahlo. She taught a painting class for twelve lessons a week. As a consequence of the Mexican-nationalist convictions of the teachers, tuition proceeded very

[39] Frida Kahlo, T.H.,op.cit., p.94.

differently of other art colleges. Instead of working from plaster models or copying European models in the studio, students were sent out into the streets and the countryside to take their practical training. Since most of the students came from families on low incomes, tuition and materials were free.

Frida's unorthodox teaching methods surprised many of her pupils. She insisted that everyone use the familiar *you* form of address right from the start and placed great emphasis on a comradely relationship. She did not patronize her students, but encouraged self-development and self-criticism. She sought to teach them a few technical principles and the necessary self-discipline, and commented on their works, but never intruded directly upon the creative process.

After a few months, Frida was forced by her poor health to teach from her Coyoacán home. Constant pain in her back and right foot made it impossible for her to travel into the school, not least since she had been ordered to rest completely. She had to wear a steel corset, which reappears in her self-portrait from 1944 *The Broken Column*, which conveyed her understandable preoccupation with the broken spine and of which we talked at the beginning of this chapter.

Of the students who enrolled with her, four-Fanny Rabel, Arturio Garcia Bustos, Guillermo Monroy and Arturo Estrada- would gain fame as *Los Fridos*. These students continued to study with Frida at the Blue House in Coyoacán, once pain kept her from going to La Esmeralda.

One of *Los Fridos*' most famous group efforts was the mural painted on the Rosita pulqueria.(Pulquerias served a fermented drink made out of pulque, a plant that had religious

significance dating back to the time of the Maya.) The painting was both an artistic and social success with much singing and celebrating afterward.

Rivera continued to be an incorrigible womanizer and that she kept on suffering was evident in *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (figure 37) from 1943. Frida's face, with its penetrating gaze beneath dark, connecting eyebrows, its carnal red lips and faint mustache looks perverse, almost demonic. Framed by her Tehuana headdress, Frida's face looks as devouring as a carnivorous flower. White and black tendrils that spring from her headdress are like conducting wires carrying her positive and negative energy out into the world. But once again, the connectors are disconnected; the black threads that are continuations of the veins of leaves adoring her hair are unrooted and dangle in the air.

Like a female spider, Frida watches from the center of her web. She has consumed her mate and trapped the thought of him inside her forehead in the form if a miniature portrait. But Rivera does not look possessable, his gaze lifts upward and far away, even though Frida dressed up to capture his regard.

In *Thinking about death* from the same year (figure 38), Frida's desire has turned in the opposite direction. Instead of thinking about Diego, she focuses on the skull and crossbones, which appear in circular window opened in her forehead. In this painting stems with blood-red thorns and veins of leaves are forming a wall behind her thus creating similar web to the one in her *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana*. She is telling us that there is no exit from obsessional thoughts.

There is no doubt that *The Mask* (figure 39), from 1945, in which Frida holds a purple mask with orange hair and dopey, doll-like features over her face, was painted during another period in

which she was being betrayed by Diego. Her tears fall onto the mask, and her own black eyes peer through two holes torn in the mask's eyes, which are painted to look like actual holes in canvas. The displacement of the tears from the weeper to the weeper's mask is very disturbing. Frida is clearly commenting on the inability of a mask to hide emotions when the wearer is under severe stress. The feeling of hysteria that this painting communicates is augmented by the heavy, grayish-green wall of ugly leaves and prickly cacti that press in on Frida from behind.

Frida's anguish intensifies in *Diego and I (* figure 40),1945, when Rivera almost divorced her to marry Maria Felix. The beautiful film star was an intimate friend of Frida as well, and though Frida pretended to joke about this affair, as she had about Rivera's other escapades, this painting shows that she was hurt. For once she almost loses her mask of reserve. Instead of a web of lace or leaves closing her in, she is now surrounded by a mass of her own loose hair, which swirls around her neck suggesting strangulation.

The cause of her distress is indicated by small bust of Diego, for which her eyebrows serve as pedestal. A third eye, which refers to Rivera's superior mental and visual acuity, opens in her husband's forehead. Of all of the five eyes depicted in this painted, only Frida's meet ours.

Painting was the best antidote to Frida's pervasive sense of barrenness-that barrenness that is seen in the desert backgrounds of so many of her self-portraits. The year she died, she told a

friend: '*My painting carries within it the message of pain. Painting completed by life. I lost three children…Paintings substituted for all of this. I believe that work is the best thing.*'[40]

[40] Frida Kahlo, H.H.,op.cit., p.148.

DISABILITY AS POWER IN HER WORKS

'*Death dances around my bed*'[41] , the phrase Frida used to describe her condition after the streetcar accident, but which became more prophetic as her life drew near its close.

In the mid 1940s Frida's health declined. She lost weight and had fainting spells. To support her back she had to wear a series of orthopedic corsets, as mentioned before, and which she described as a '*punishment*'. Now more than ever, painting was a weapon for survival. Determined to confront and communicate her predicament, she painted herself as the heroic sufferer. Yet even her most grueling depictions of pain are not obviously self-pitying.

In 1945, she was briefly in the hospital, where she was able to eat only strained food. During the time she depicted her own condition in *Without Hope* (figure 41). The faults and fissures of Mexico's volcanic terrain once again symbolize the violence done to Frida's passive body in *Without Hope* from 1945, where Frida lies in bed crying and vomiting or screaming a cornucopia of gore out onto an easel that straddles her bed. The presence of the easel could refer to the connection between her illness and her need to make art. The funnel of butchery is topped with a sugar skull that had her name on its forehead. Perhaps Frida is being force-fed and the painting is meant to convey her disgust when doctors made her eat pureed foods every two hours. Again, Frida is naked, but partially covered by a sheet. Nakedness for her usually implies helplessness, possibly because she was familiar with the experience of being stripped in preparation for surgery or because she remembered landing in the street with her clothes torn off during the bus crash. Frida's sheet is dotted with microscopic organisms, which, by echoing

[41] Frida Kahlo, T.H.,op.cit.,p.93.

the blood-red sun and the pale moon, extend the drama of her suffering from microcosm to macrocosm.

In June of 1946, Frida traveled to New York City with her sister Cristina to undergo a bone graft operation at the Hospital for Special Surgery. Four of her vertebrae were fused together and a metal rod was inserted to strengthen her spine. Cristina, who held her hand during the operation, later recalled that the pain was so agonizing that Frida had to be given massive doses of morphine. It was later thought that the wrong vertebrae may have been fused. It was also assumed that Kahlo compounded the seriousness of her condition by ignoring doctors' orders and trying to do too much too soon.

Whatever the reason, the operation was for Frida the beginning of her physical decline. She was in such great pain that she frequently relied not only on alcohol but on strong painkillers such as Demerol, which she acquired by means both legal and illegal. Upon her return in Mexico, it became necessary for her to spend more and more time in bed.

During this time she painted remarkable work *The Little Deer* (figure 42) in 1946. Here Frida presents herself with the body of a young stag, her human head crowned with antlers. This painting uses simple metaphors to show that Frida is prey to suffering. Again, the message is hurt, mortal hurt, perhaps betrayal.[42] Running through a glade, the deer is pierced by nine arrows that will slowly kill him. This, for sure, must refer to Frida's own journey through life. The little deer's arrow wounds bleed, but Frida's face is calm.

[42] Frida, T.H.,op.cit.,p.105.

The painting points out to psychological suffering. In Frida's life both, the physical and psychic sufferings were interconnected. Starting with the divorce, and probably even before that, her illnesses coincided so often with periods of spiritual trauma. Frida once again used flawed objects to refer to her injuries. Massive tree trunks of dry, cracked wood with broken branches signify decay and death, and the knots and gashes in the bark echo the wounds in the deer's flank. Beneath its hooves is a slender, leafy green branch that has broken off a young tree, and represents a symbol of artist's broken youth. By painting herself as a deer, Frida expresses again her feeling of oneness with all living things. It is a feeling that has a source in Aztec culture. In Aztec belief the deer was the sign of the right foot; even with Frida's various operations, the condition of her right foot continued to worsen, and the deer could have been a kind of talisman. The arrows in the deer may, like the arrows in valentine hearts, point to pain in love.

Since Frida was extraordinary person, it is very likely to believe that she sabotaged her well-being by choosing to have unnecessary operations as a peculiar form of narcissism. Having operations was a cry for attention. Being a surgical patient could alleviate her feelings of disconnection. Each new surgical procedure, each new doctor offered renewed hope. Each operation brought her admiration and sympathy, and, most important, the attention of Diego.

Of all Kahlo's paintings it was *Moses* (figure 43) that brought her recognition in Mexico. Based on a work of Freud's called Moses and Monotheism, the painting is among Frida's largest, and it bears some resemblance to Rivera's murals. In the middle, little Moses, armed with the all-seeing third eye with which Frida would so often endow Rivera, floats along the Nile, while

images of religion, Communism, and biological creation surround him. Moses was a complex work for which Frida received the National Prize of Arts and Sciences from the Education Ministry in 1946.

In 1950 Frida entered the British Hospital in Mexico City. When she left a year later, she had had at least seven operations on her spine. Her healing process was complicated by an infection, probably osteomyelitis. Frida maintained her humor and stoicism, delighting visitors with her gaiety and listening to their problems, instead of complaining. Frida decorated her room with sugar skulls, wax doves, clay candlesticks and the Soviet flag. She hung sheets of paper on the wall and asked visitors to sign their names for the Stockholm Peace Petition. With the help of friends she decorated her various plaster casts with signatures, feathers, mirrors, decals, and the red star and hammer and sickle painted in iodine.

When she had been injected with painkillers, Frida was exuberant to the point of being manic.

When convalescing at home in 1951 she painted a secular retablo entitled *Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Dr. Farill* (figure 44), with Frida as the saved victim of a narrowly escaped danger. Dr.Farill takes the place of the holy image. In this painting, Frida is seated in her wheelchair, working on a portrait of Dr. Farill. Except for her jewels, she is dressed almost as a nun. She wears her favorite shirt and a full black skirt. She sits rigidly straight, her loose blouse conceals the bulky orthopedic corset. Bare surroundings underscore the great austerity and dignity of this woman. The blank, confining walls of the room reverberate with her solitude. A wide blue band along the lower part of the wall is almost the only bright color in the painting.

Frida has placed her extracted heart, laced with red and blue veins, on her heart-shaped palette. She offers the doctor her heart- palette both as a token of affection and as a testimony to her suffering. In her other hand she holds a bunch of paintbrushes with pointed tips. They drip red paint, immediately reminding us of surgical instruments.

Confined to her house and often bedridden, she painted mostly still lives, the fruits of her garden or the local market, which could be placed on a table by her bed. Frida made her fruits look like her. Her melons and pomegranates are cut open, revealing juicy, pulpy centers with seeds, making us remember her wounded self-portraits and her association with sex and pain. Sometimes she peels off just a little of fruit's skin..

Frida tried to politicize her still life by inserting flags, political inscriptions, and peace doves nesting among the fruits.

Starting 1952., Frida's paintings lost their miniaturist precision and became rather crude both in conception and execution. This was in part because it was difficult for her to sit for long periods and in part because since 1946, when she was given morphine after the spinal fusion, she increasingly took refuge in drugs. Brush strokes seem to have been laid down with frenetic haste. Color is no longer clear and vibrant, but strident and grating. The paintings seem overexuberant. The late still lives are not just animate but agitated. They have a kind of wild intensity, as if Frida were flailing about in search of something solid. Brushwork became looser, her characteristic small, slow, affectionate strokes gave way to messy, frenetic handling. Parrots replaced peace doves in the most slapdash manner. Fruits that were formerly arranged with precision and sly wit on a table are now spread on the earth beneath an open sky.

As her world became more and more restricted, her attachments to objects, friends, politics and Diego intensified. Her engagement with painting became more charged than ever. Now she only wanted to paint.

In the spring of 1953 Frida was honored with the fisrt one-person exhibition in her native land. Although her doctors had forbidden her to attend the opening, she arrived at the Galeria Arte Contemporaneo in the ambulance, Enthroned on her own bed, installed in the gallery, she greeted guests, sang Mexican ballads and drank tequila. The paintings were very well accepted that the show was extended for a month. The press was full of praise for Frida's heroic accomplishment.

The personal nature of the subject matter in her paintings began to trouble her. She tried to politicize her still lives by inserting flags, political inscription and peace doves. But Frida's paintings remained a hymn to herself and to life.

In her political self-portraits she turned to retablos again to express her faith and gratitude. In *Marxism Give Health to the Sick* (figure 45), 1954, Frida, dressed in an orthopedic corset and clutching a red book that must be Marx's Capital, is the victim saved by the miracle saint Karl Marx. Two enormous hands, one with an extra eye signifying wisdom, descend from Marx to support Frida so that she can cast aside her crutches. Another hand projects from Marx's head and strangles an American eagle, which is a caricature of Uncle Sam. Beneath the eagle rivers run red and an atomic bomb explodes. The other side of Marx's head is touched by a peace dove that hovers protectively over both Frida and a globe dominated by the Soviet Union, where the rivers are blued.

In early 1953, Frida's doctors began to talk about the possible amputation of her right leg at the knee because of gangrene. Frida said she wanted to die. In August the doctors made their decision and although the operation was a success, and Frida was able to walk short distances with her artificial leg, spiritually she never recovered. She became deeply depressed. The removal of her leg was a terrible offense to Frida's aesthetic sensibility- she had lost her will to live. Her emotional excesses had much to do with her increased dependence on drugs.

Since she has developed drug addiction due to her pain, her paintings suffered. While her late paintings lacked the precision of her earlier work, they were still striking expressions of the woman herself. Although her illness made her less sure of her brushstrokes, the visionary aspects of her painting remained intact which is evident in her work *Self-Portrait with Ixcuintle Dog and Sun* (figure 46). This painting shows her once again bringing together the elements that had given her happiness: Diego, a beloved pet, herself as a young woman and the land of Mexico. For once, the sun is shining against a clear blue sky.

She made several attempt at suicide, and she was frequently violent toward others as well. Much of the time she slept in a drug-induced stupor.

On July 13, 1954 Frida Kahlo, the great artist, had died in her house in Mexico. When her death was reported as being caused by pulmonary embolism, but given her suicide attempts, many of Frida's friends believe that she killed herself. The last words in her journal would suggest as much:' I hope the exit is joyful- and I hope never to come back'.[43]

[43] Frida Kahlo, H.H.,op.cit.,p.219.

Frida was dressed in her favorite blouse, which she wears in her Self-portrait with Dr.Farill, and in Tehuana skirt. Her friends braided her hair with ribbons and flowers and adorned her with necklaces of silver, coral, and jade. Her hands, resting on her stomach, glittered with rings. That evening of her death, she lay in state in the vestibule of the Palace of Fine Arts, while Rivera, friends and family formed honor guards around her coffin.

At noon the next day a funeral procession of some five hundred mourners followed Frida down Avenida Juarez. At the crematorium her coffin was opened and friends gathered to pay their last respect.

Several years later, Rivera gave Frida's Coyoacán home to the people of Mexico in order to perpetuate her memory. The museum recreates Frida's presence to such extent that many visitors feel her spirit is alive there.

In death Frida is full of life. In recent years she became first a myth and then a cult figure.

CONCLUSION

Frida Kahlo, as I have presented it in my work, was, and still is, a remarkable person and artist, whose life and works will continue to live on. Frida had an urge to express herself and to stimulate other people to do the same through different kinds of media. Although she was very limited and could not live a 'normal' life, she tried her best to take whatever possible from life and to fulfill the same.

I tried to point out that Frida's pain and illness through her entire life, by my opinion, only made her stronger and carved an icon out of her, that she was and still is today.

Frida's pain, firstly physical, and then emotional, mental, made an amazing artist out of her. Should we be thankful for her faith, the way it was? If there weren't for the accident, she would not bestow us with some of the greatest pieces of European art.

Although she suffered tremendously, she had a way to use the pain, filter it on to the canvas and, of course, bring much desired spot light on her, firstly from Diego Rivera, and latter from all the people she knew.

Frida Kahlo' s life with pain and illness gave her a reason to live her life fullest and without regrets. We should all be inspired by her and the legacy she left behind.

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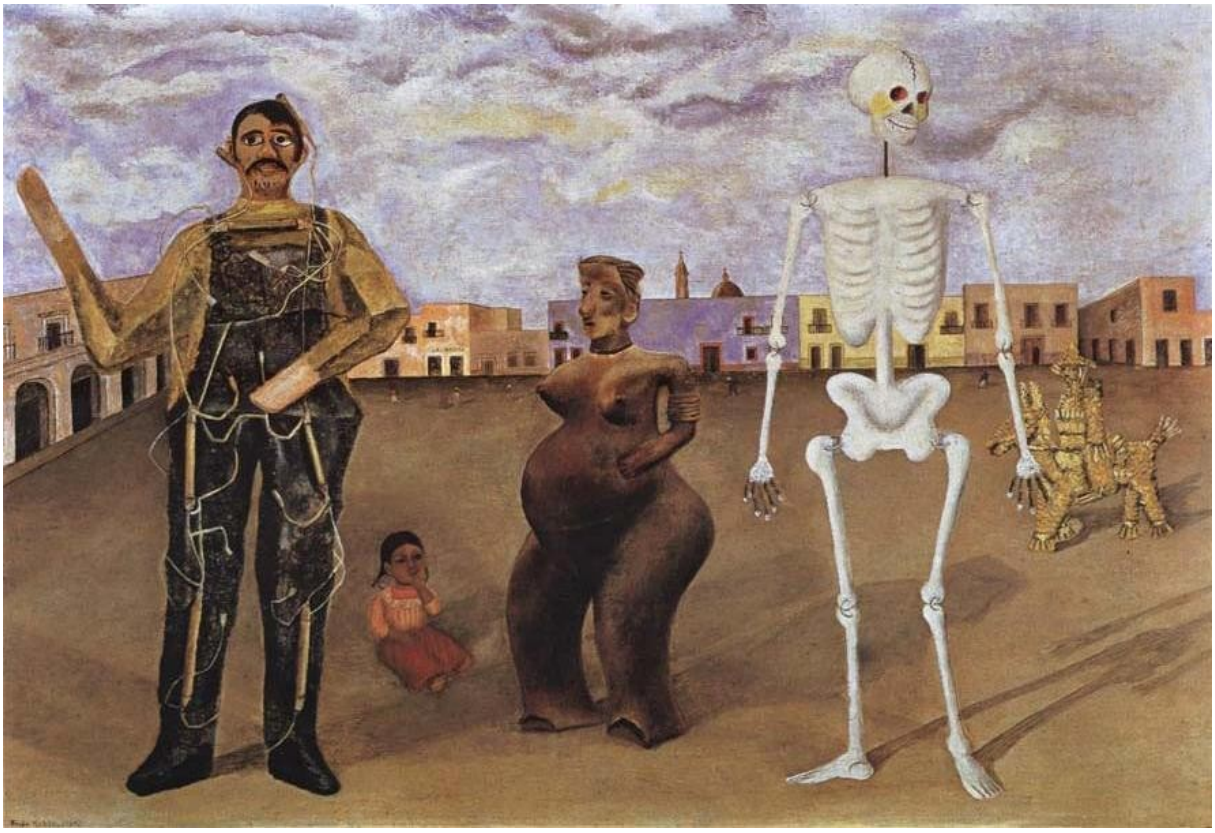
ILLUSTRATIONS

BROKEN CHILDHOOD

1. My Grandparents, My Parents and I, 1936; oil and temperaon metal panel; 30.79 x 34.73 cm.

   The Museum of Modern Art, New York



2. Four Inhabitants of Mexico. 1938; Oil on wood panel; 131.1 x 47.6 cm. Private collection.

3. The Accident, 1926; Pencil on paper; 19.8 x 26.9 cm. Collection of Juan Coronel, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

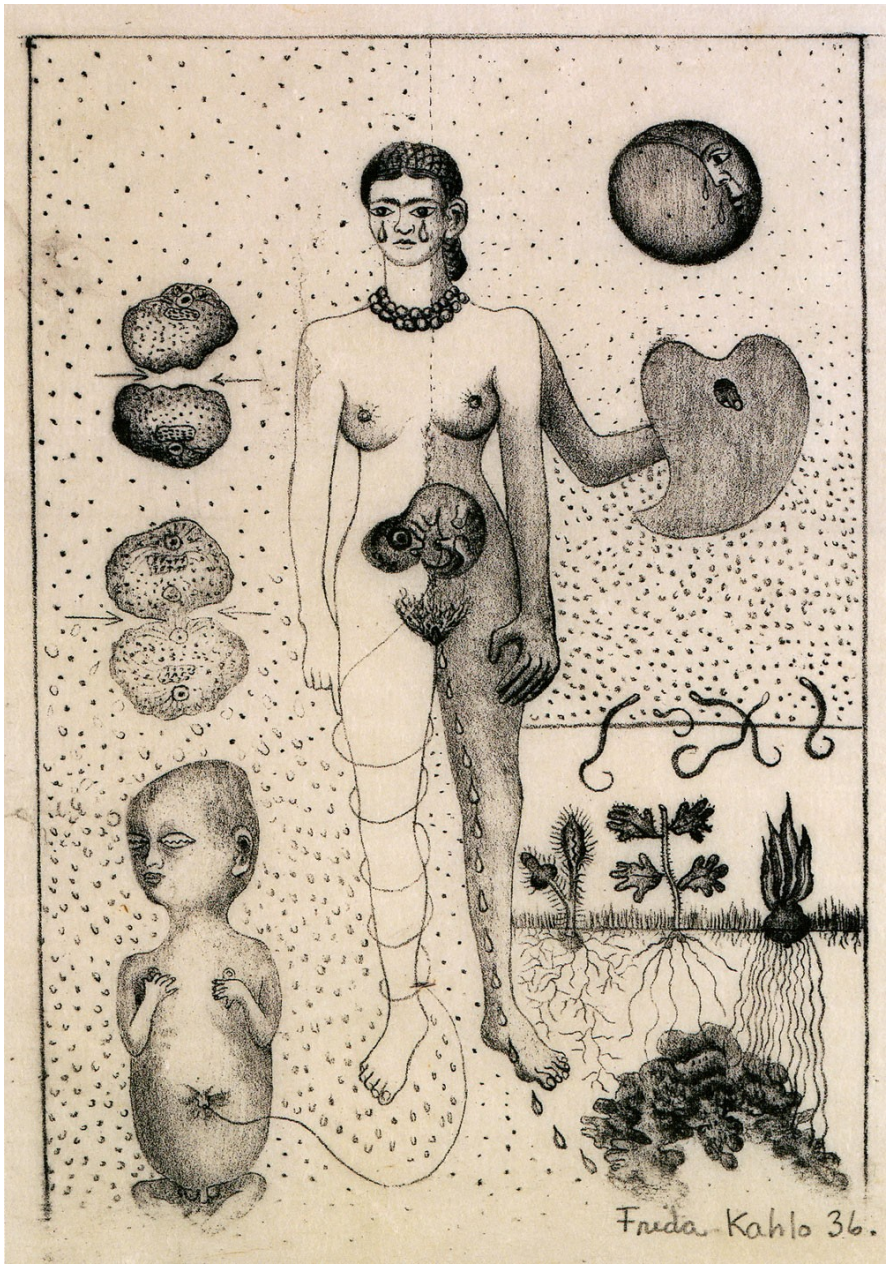
DIFFICULT LOVE

4. The Bus, 1929; Oil on Canvas; 26.03 x 55.88 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

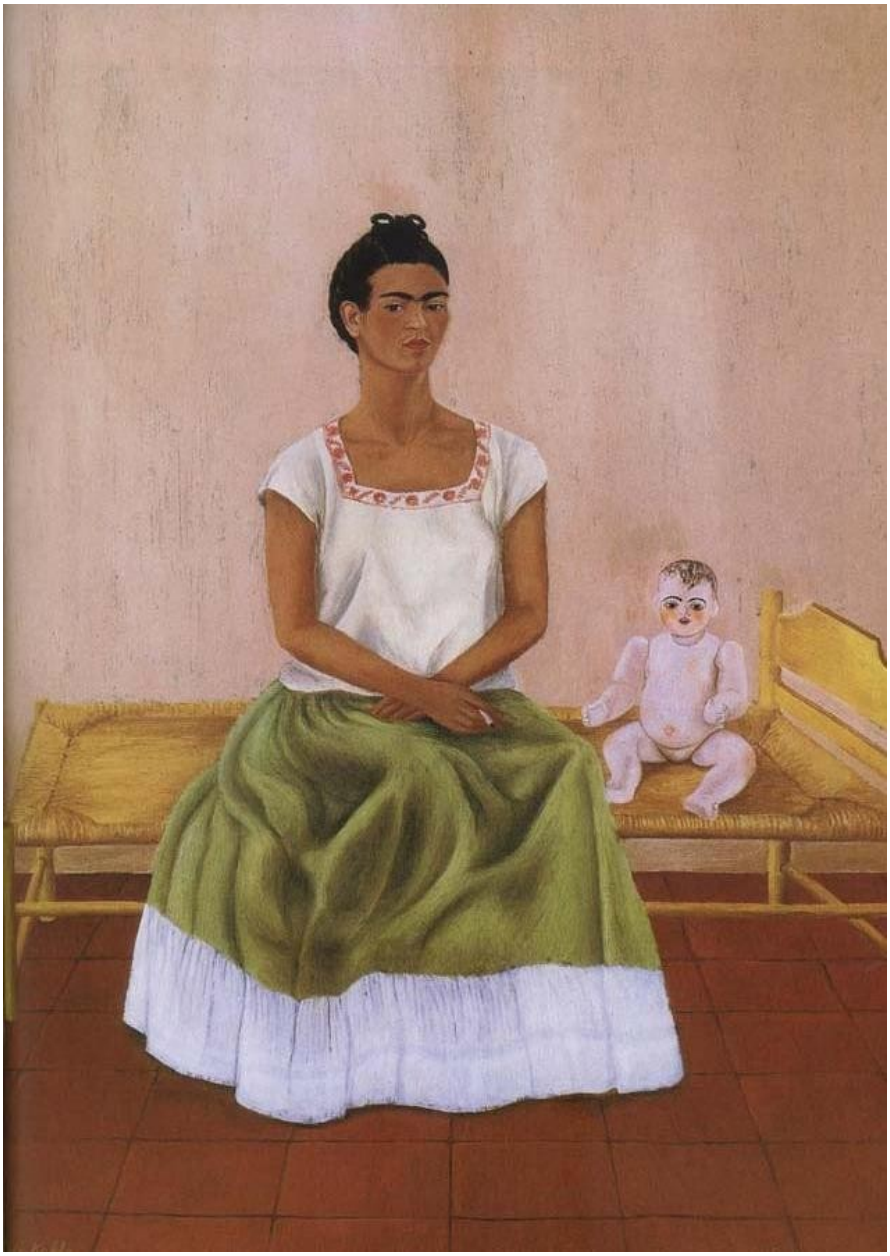
5. Frida and Diego Rivera, 1931; Oil on canvas; 99.37 x 78.74 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

6. Portrait of Luther Burbank, 1931; Oil on masonite; 87.63 x62.23 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

7. Henry Ford Hospital, 1932; Oil on metal; 30.5 x 38 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

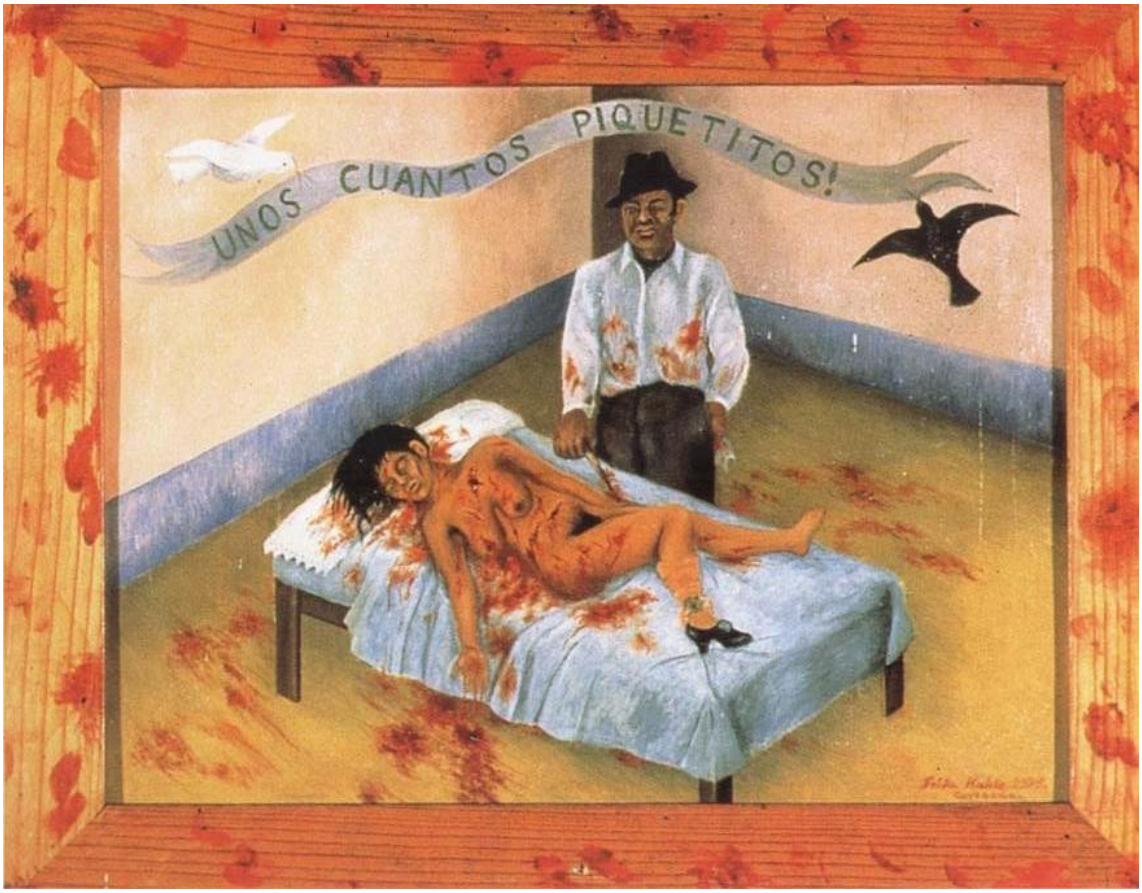


8. Frida and the Miscarriage, 1932; litograph; 31.11 x 23.5 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.



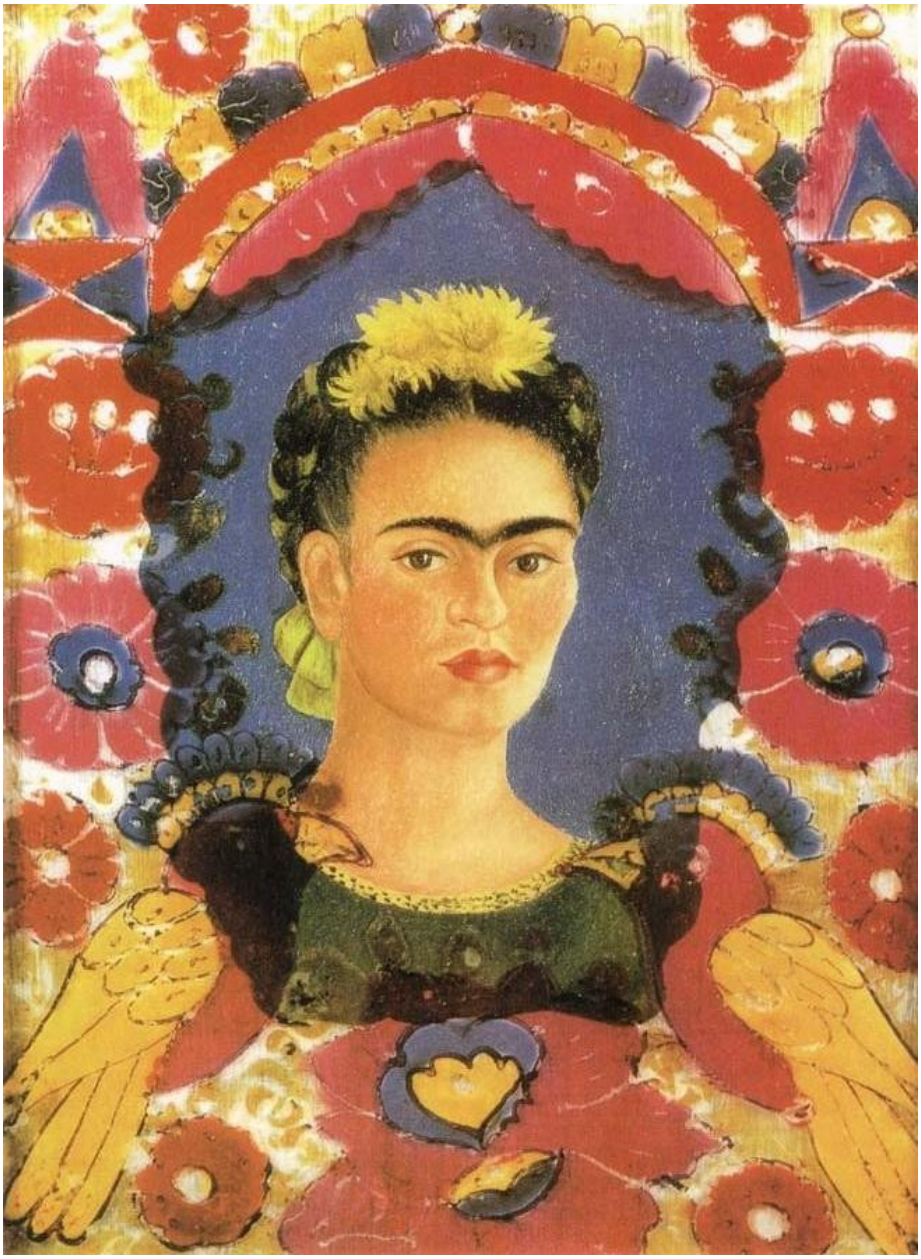
9. Me and My Doll, 1937; Oil on metal; 38.73 x 31.11 cm. Private Collection.

10. My Dress Hangs There, 1933; Oil and collage on masonite; 45.7 x 50.2 cm. Private Collection.



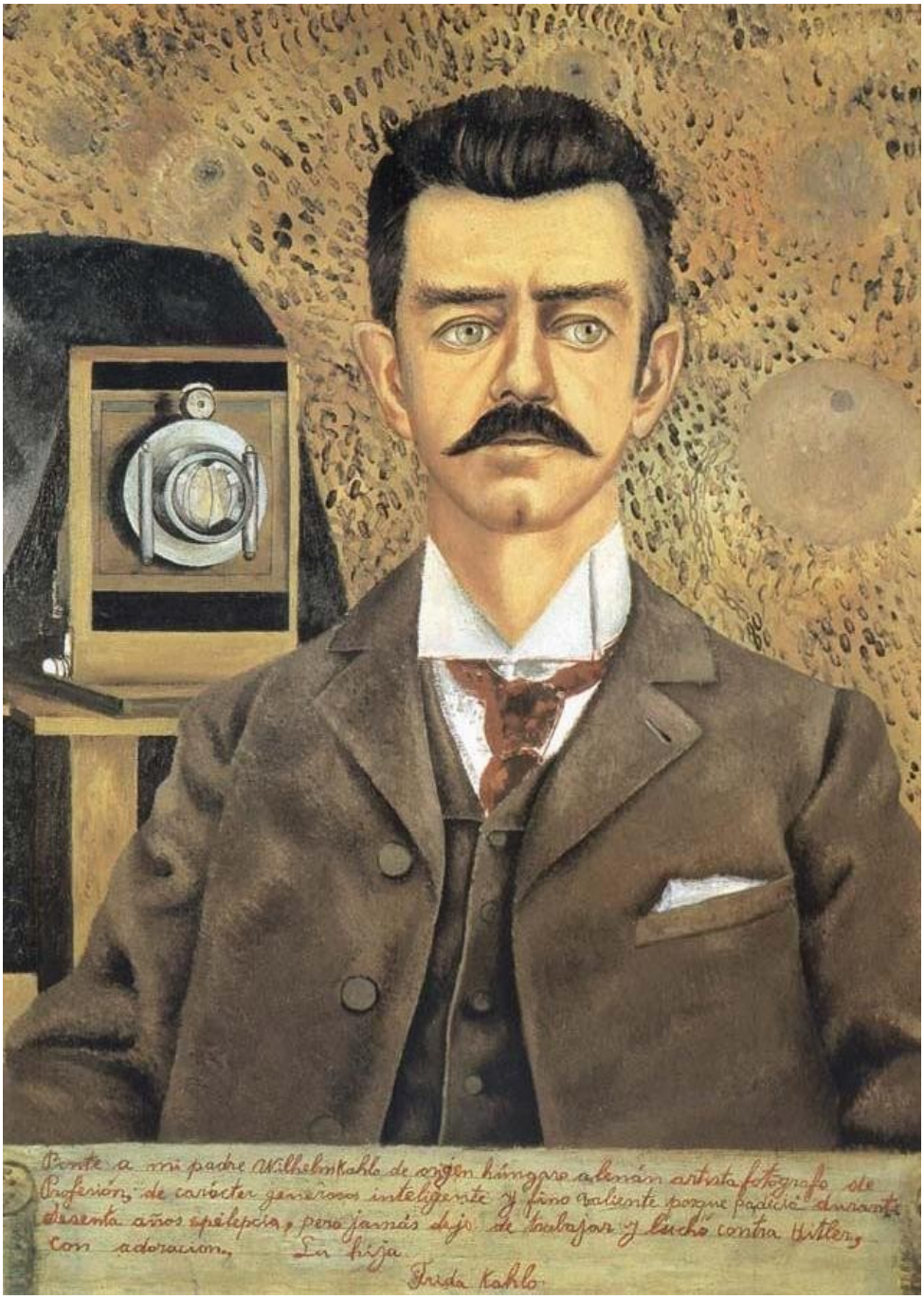
11. A Few Small Nips, 1935; Oil on metal; 30 x 40 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.

12. The Suicide of Dorothy Hale, 1939; Oil on masonite; 59.05 x 48.26 cm. Pheonix Art Museum, Pheonix, Arizona.



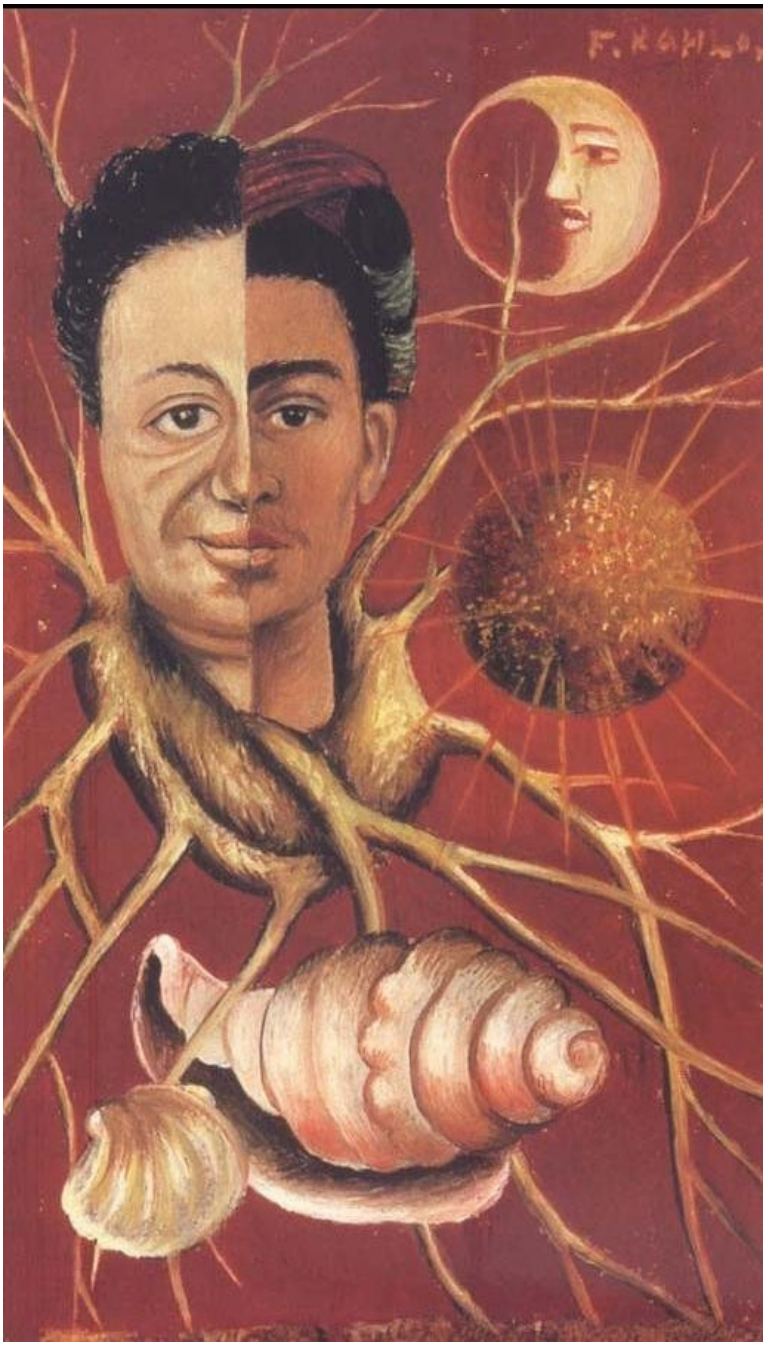
13. The Frame, 1938; Oil on metal with glass; 29.21 x 21.59 cm. Muse National d' Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

14. Diego Rivera “Pan American Unity”
San Francisco, San Francisco City College's main campus. Commissioned in 1940 for the Golden Gate International Exhibit and then moved to its now permanent location in the Diego Rivera Theater in the 1961, this 6.7 meters by 22.6 meters masterpiece is based on the marriage of North and South American artistic expression.

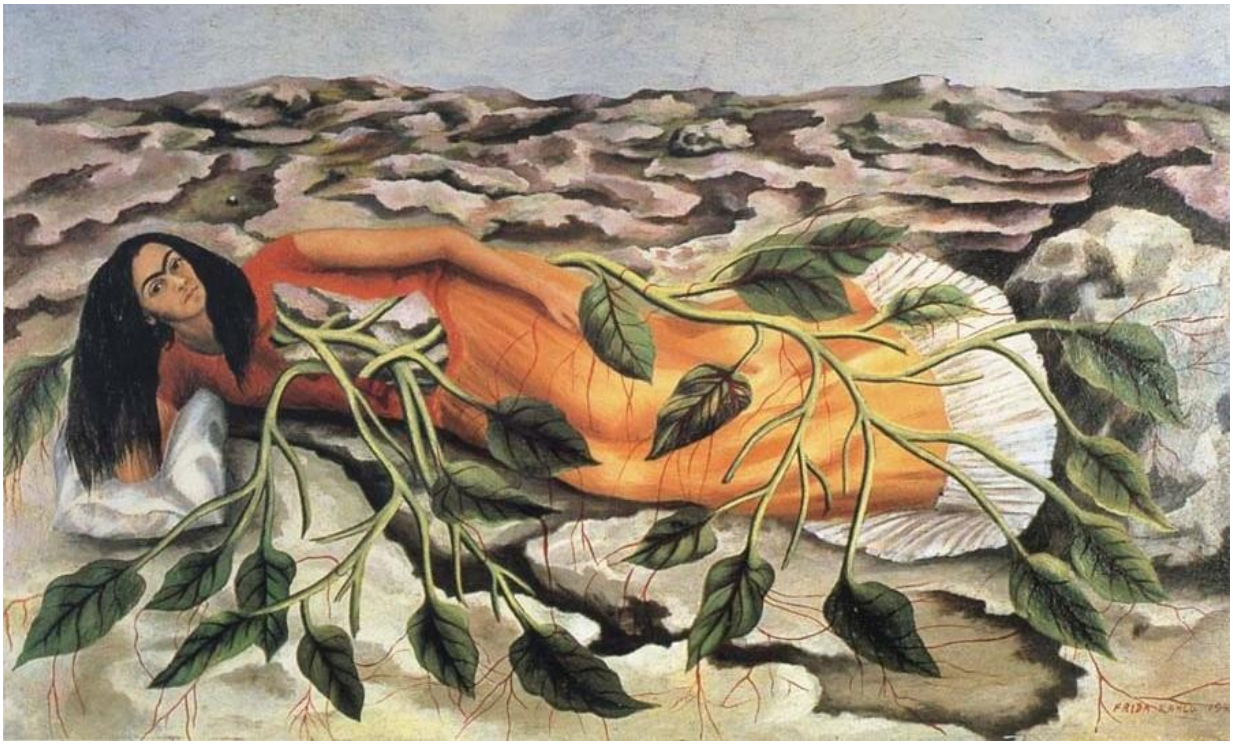


15. Portrait of My Father, Wilhelm Kahlo, 1951; Oil on masonite; 62.2 x 48.2 cm. Collection of the Frida Kahlo Museum, Mexico City.

16. Dona Rosita Morillo, 1944; Oil on canvas mounted on masonite; 75.5 x 59.5 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.



17. Diego and Frida 1929-1944; Oil on masonite; 12.7cm x 7.6cm. Collection of Maria Felix, Mexico City, Mexico.



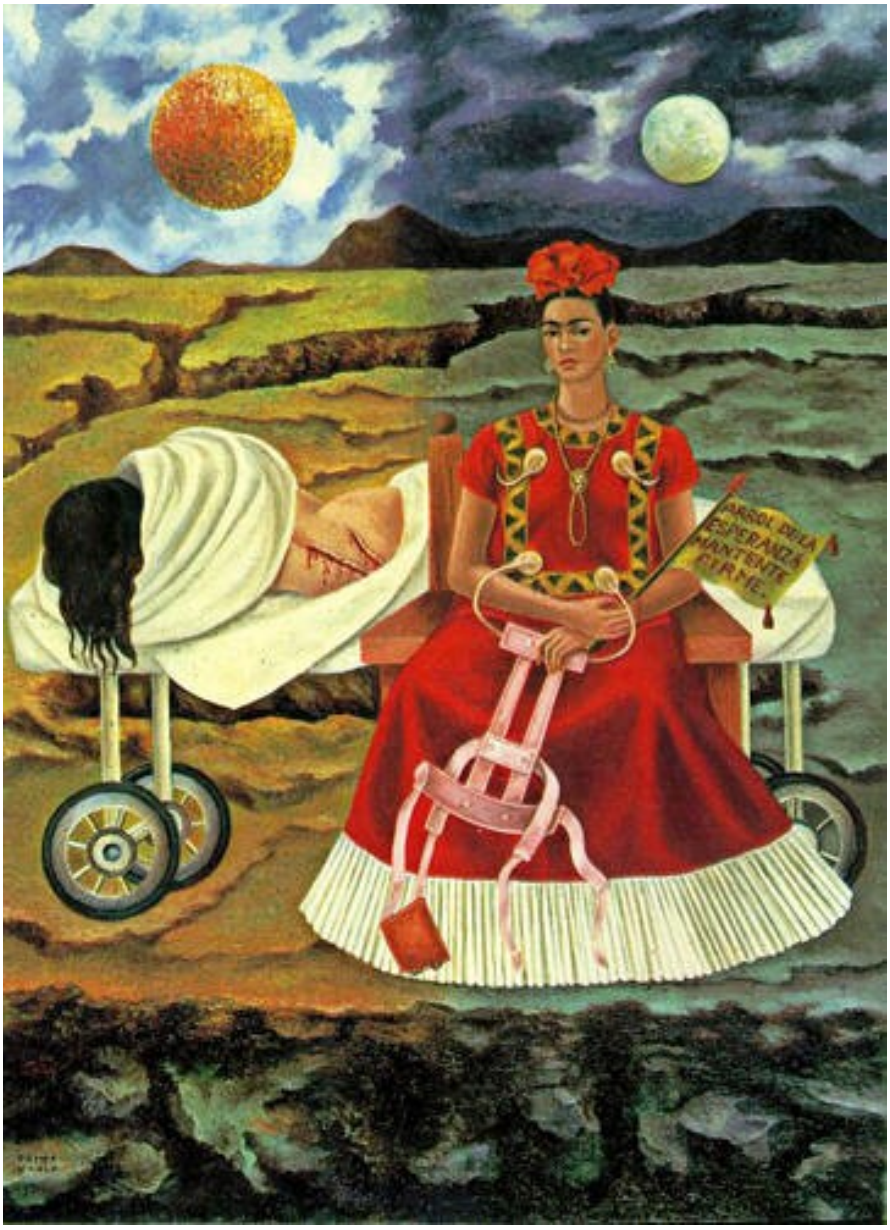
18. Roots, 1943; Oil on metal; 30.5 x 49.9 cm. Private Collection

19. What the Water Gave Me, 1938; Oil on canvas; 96.5 x 76.2 cm. Collection of Isidore Ducase Fine Arts, New York, NY.

20. Two Nudes in a Forest, 1939; Oil on sheet metal; 25 x 30 cm. Mary Anne Martin Fine Art, New York, NY

21. The Wounded Table, 1940; Oil on canvas; 244 x 122 cm. Location unknown

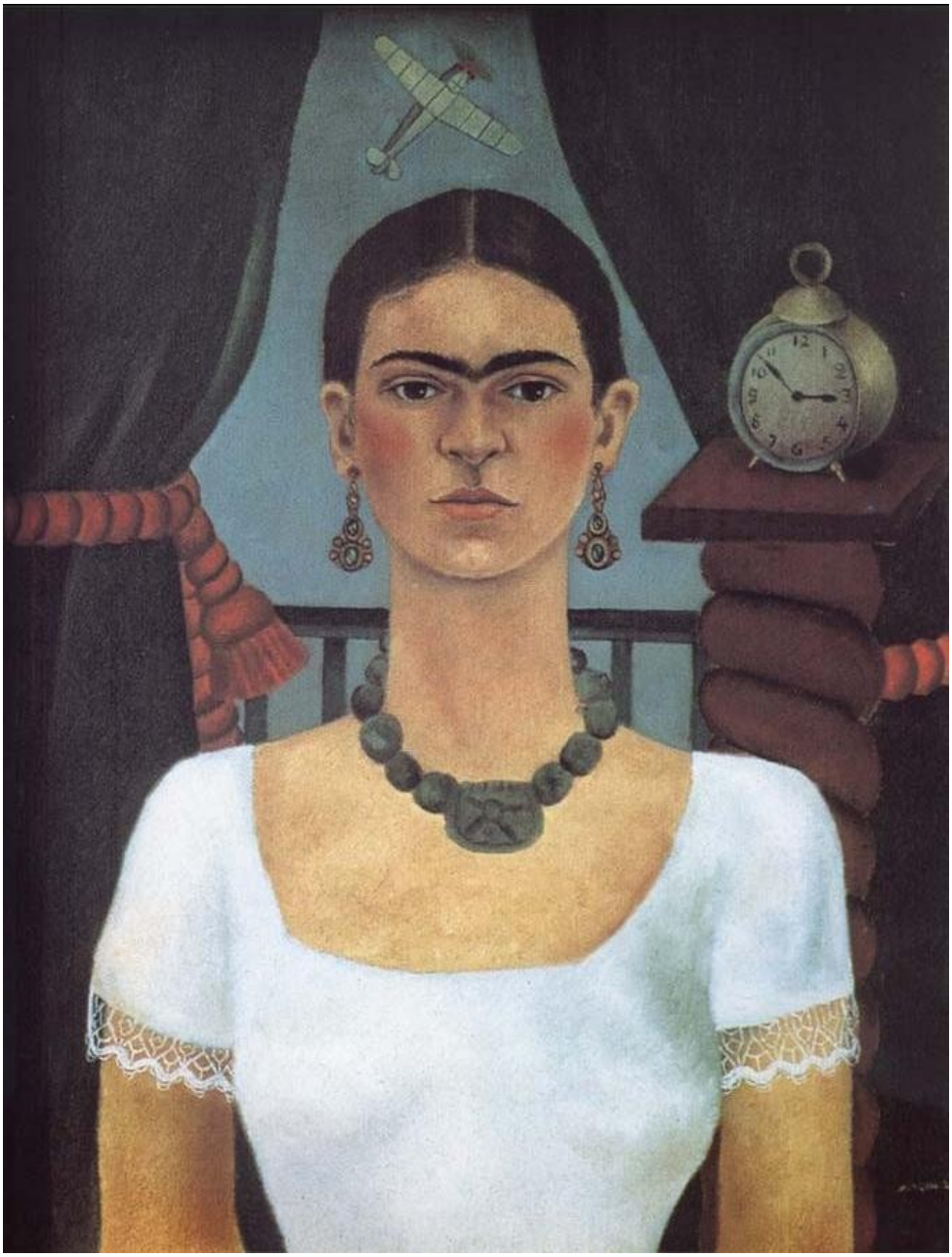
22. The Dream, 1940; Oil on canvas; 74 x 98.4 cm. Private Collection.



23. Tree of Hope, 1946; Oil on masonite; 55.9 x 40 cm. Collection of Isidore Ducase Fine Arts, New York, NY

24. The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth(Mexico),Diego, Me and Senor Xolotl , 1949; Oil on masonite; 70 x 60.5 cm; Jacques and Natsha Gelman Collection, Mexico.

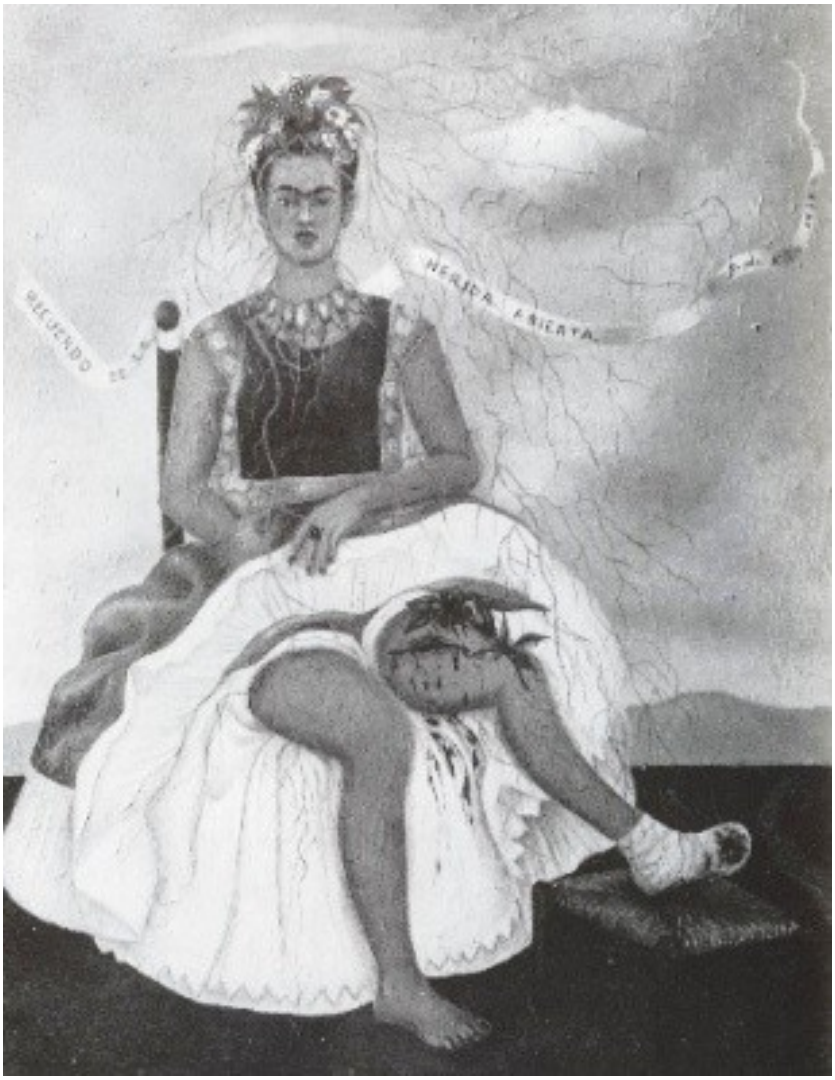
25. Self- Portrait in Velvet Dress, 1926; Oil on canvas; 78 x 61 cm. Private Collection.



26. Time Flies, 1929; Oil on masonite; 77.5 x 61 cm. Collection of Antony Bryan.

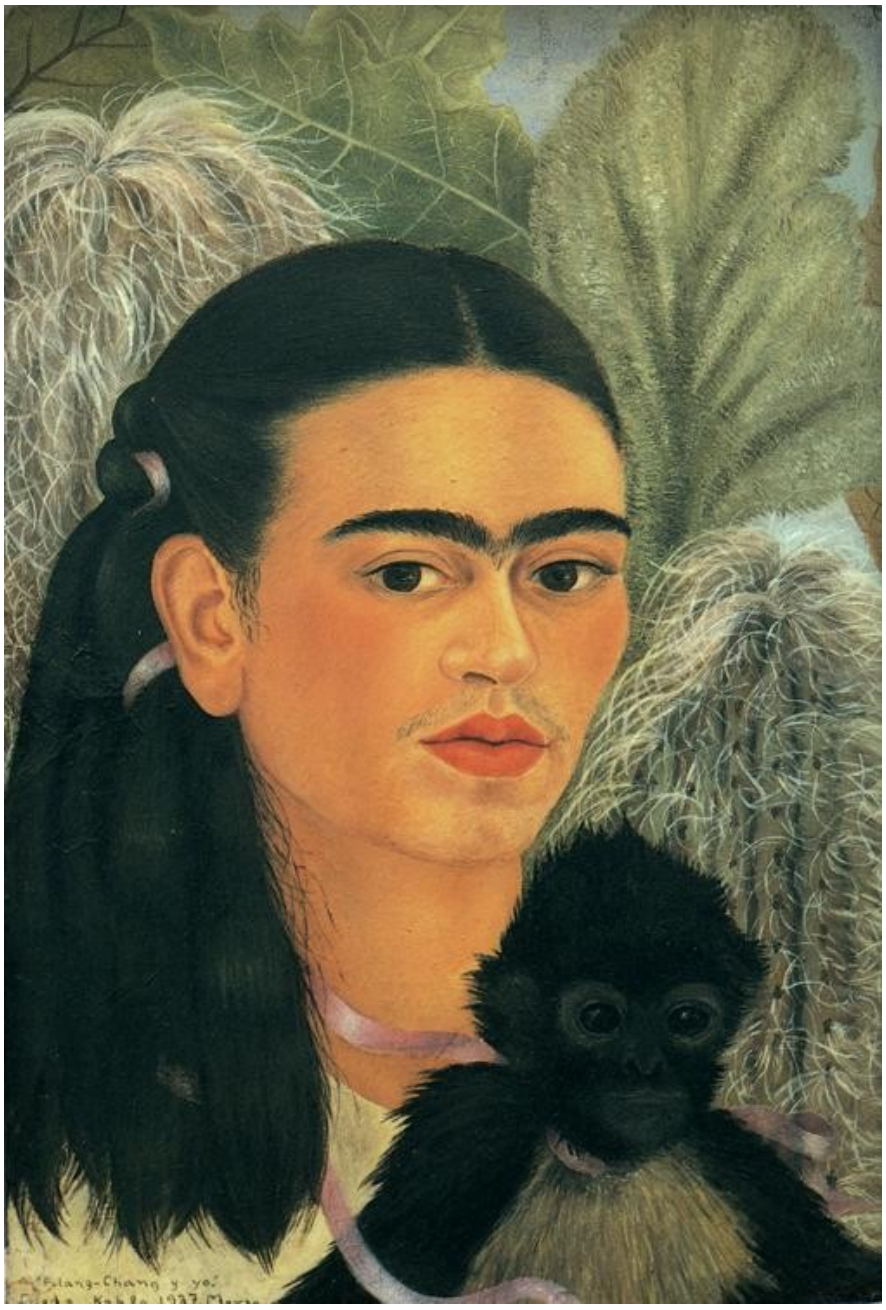
27. The Broken Column, 1944; Oil on masonite; 40 x 31 cm. Collection of the Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

28. Memory, 1937; Oil on metal; 40 x 27.9 cm. Private Collection.



29. Remembrance of the Wound, 1938; Pencil sketch study for the painting. Dimensions unknown. Destroyed in a fire.

30. Self- Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky, 1937; Oil on masonite; 76.2 x 60.1 cm. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.



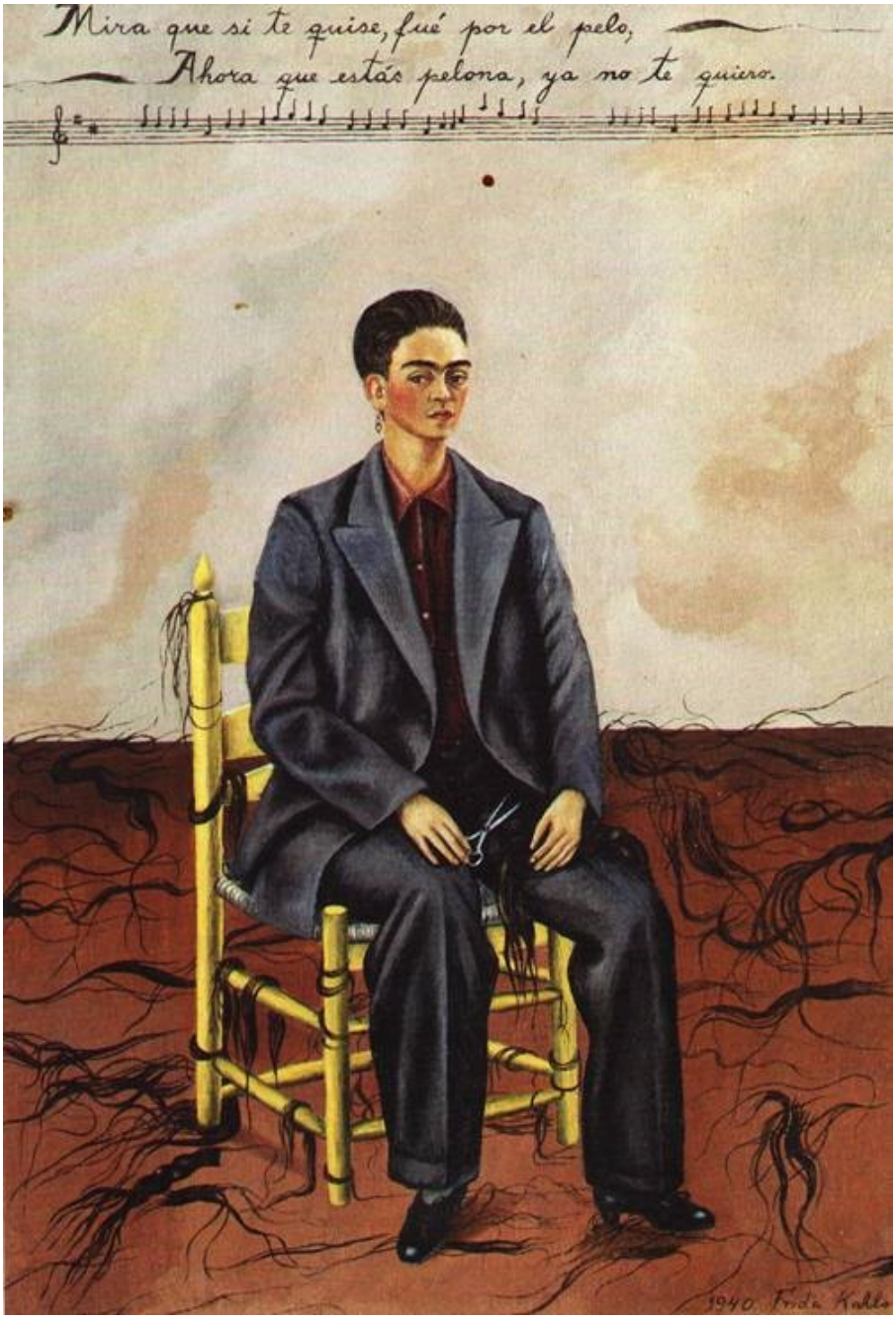
31. Fulang- Chang and Me, 1937; Oil on composition board; 40 x 28 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

32. The Two Fridas, 1939; Oil on Canvas; 170 x 170 cm. Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.

33. Self- Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940; Oil on canvas; 61.6 x 45 cm.

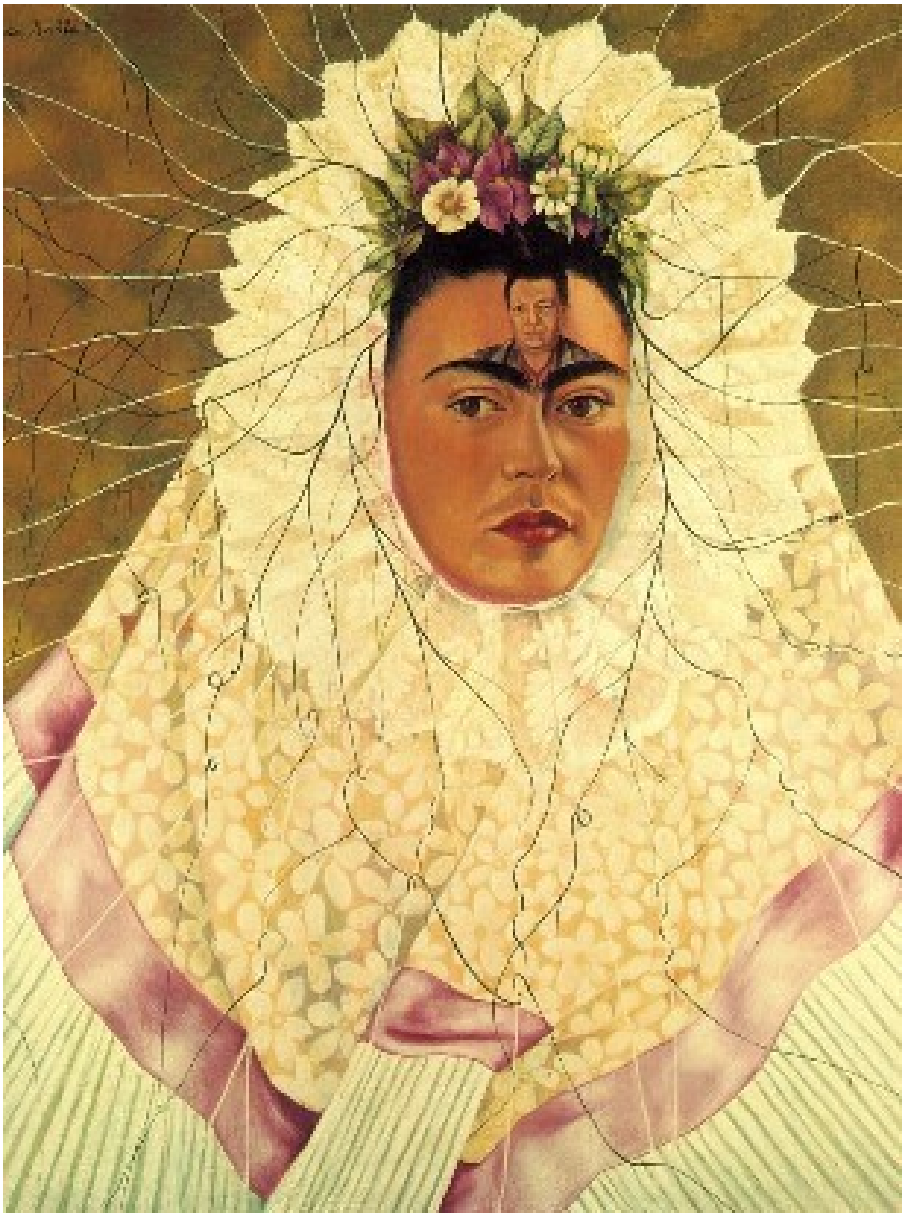
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center Art Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

34. Self- Portrait, 1940; Oil on masonite; 59.7 x 40 cm. Mary Anne Martin Fine Art, New York, NY.

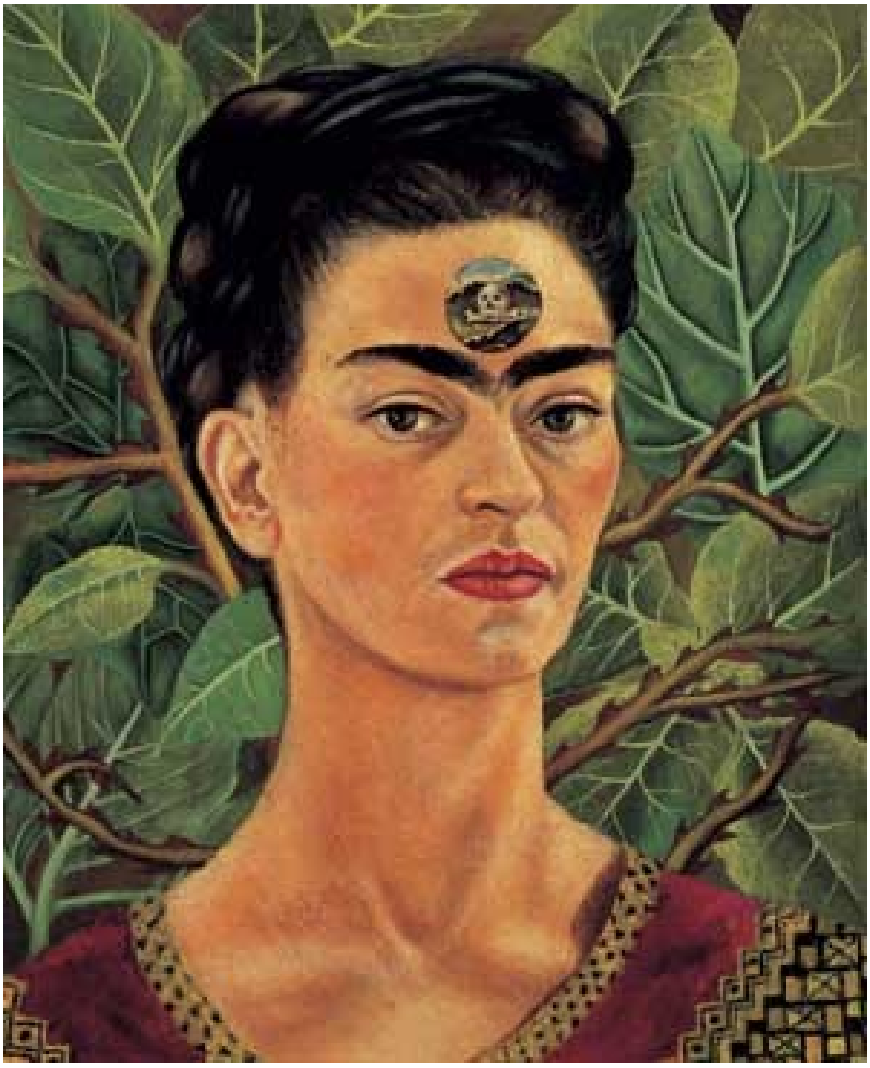


35. Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair, 1940; Oil on canvas; 40 x 28 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

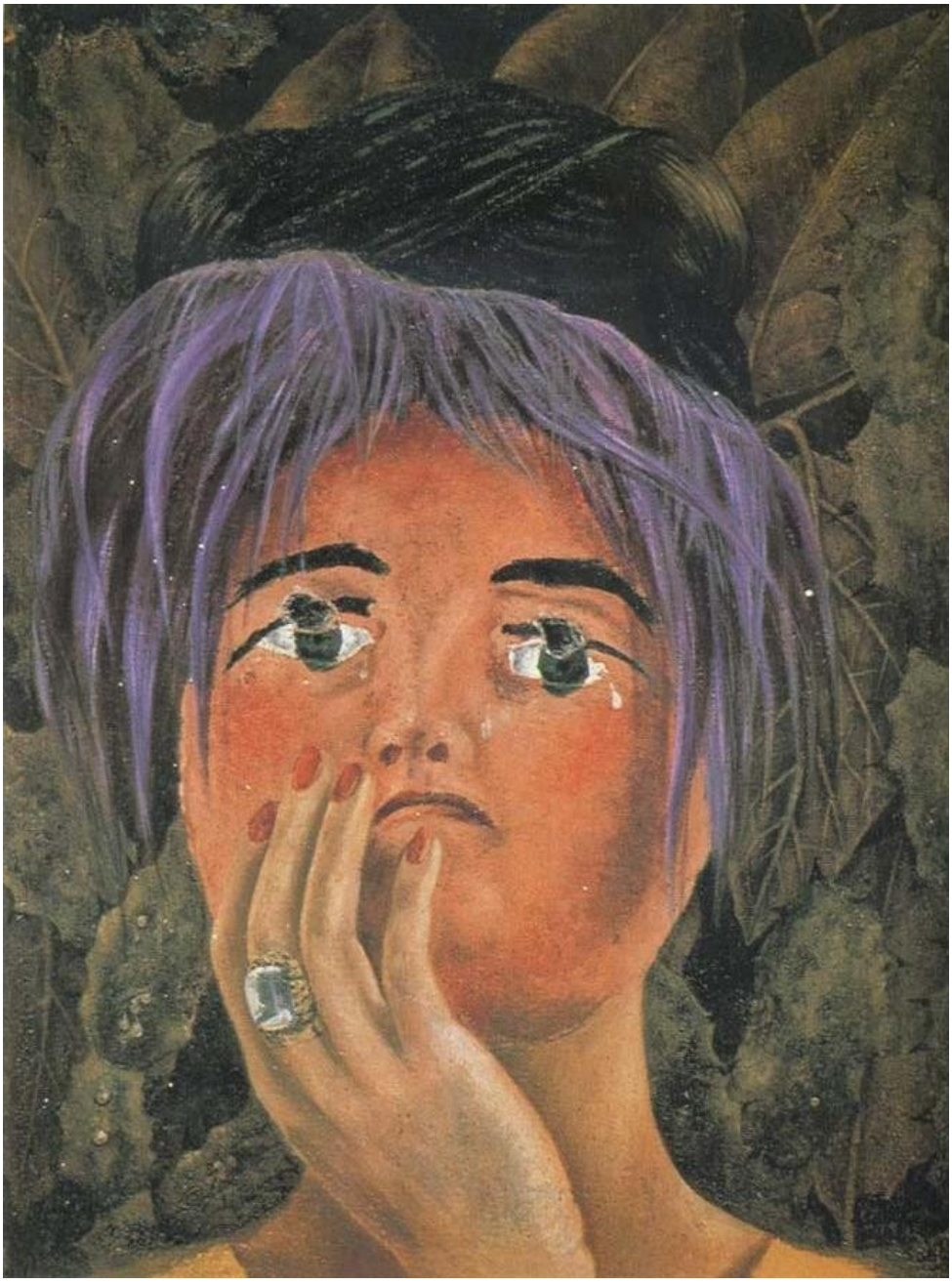
36. Self- Portrait with Braid,1941; Oil on masonite; 51 x 38.7 cm. Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico.



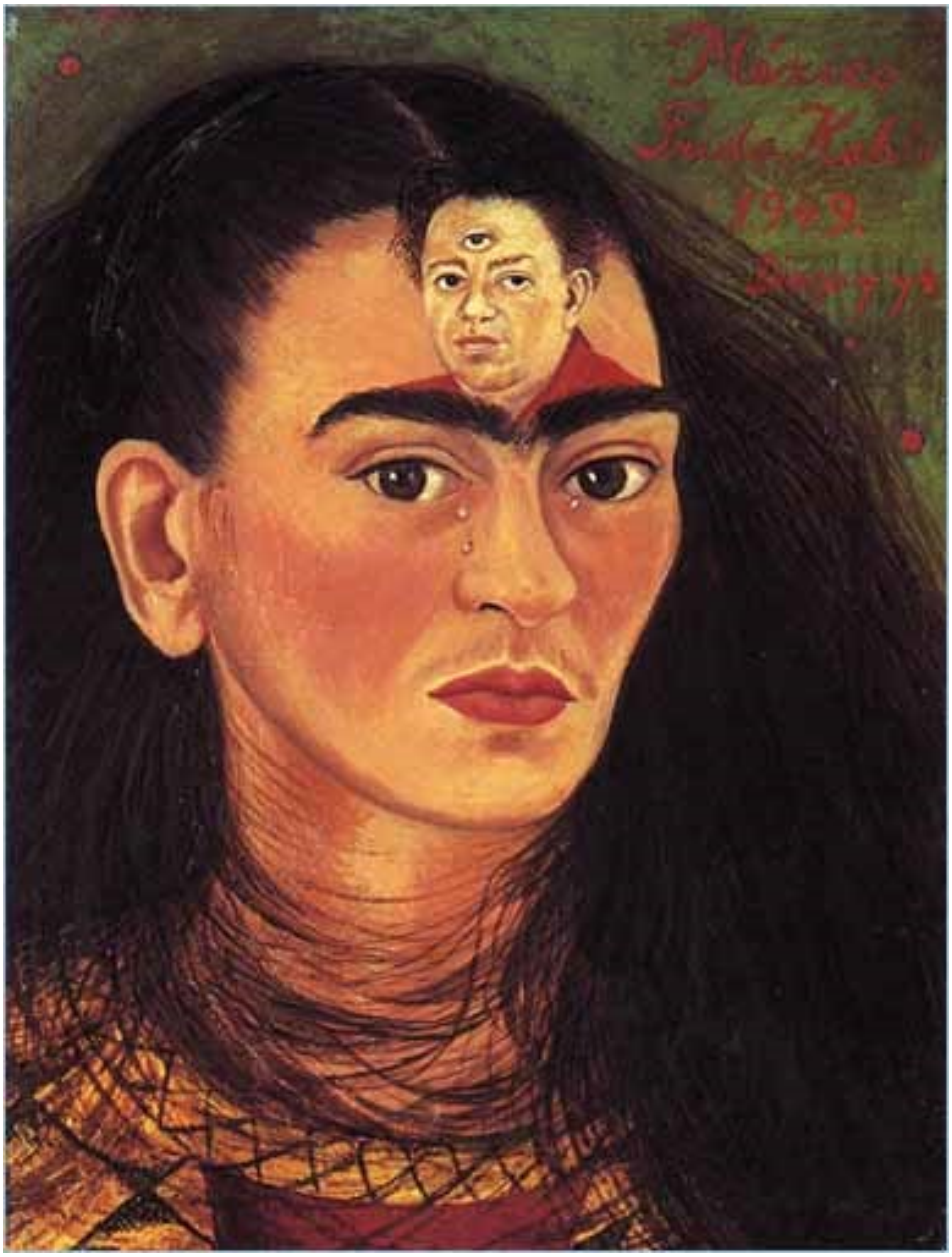
37. Self-Portrait as a Tehuana, 1943; Oil on masonite; 76 x 61 cm. Jcques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico.



38. Thinking About Death, 1943; Oil on canvas mounted on masonite; 45 x 36.8 cm. Private Collection.

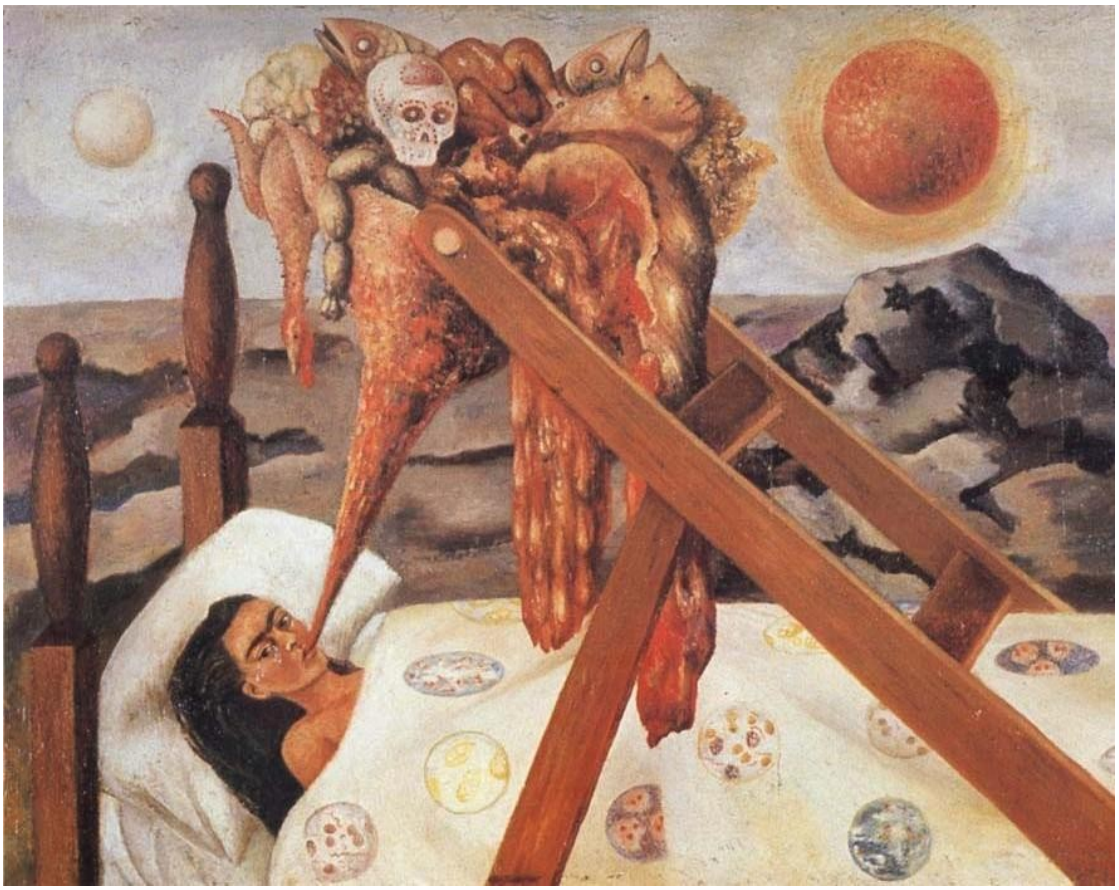


39. The Mask of Madness, 1945; Oil on masonite; 40.13 x 30 cm. Fundacion Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.



40. Diego and I, 1949; Oil on masonite; 29.65 x 21.13 cm. Mary Anne Martin Fine Arts, New York.

DISABILITY AS POWER IN HER WORKS



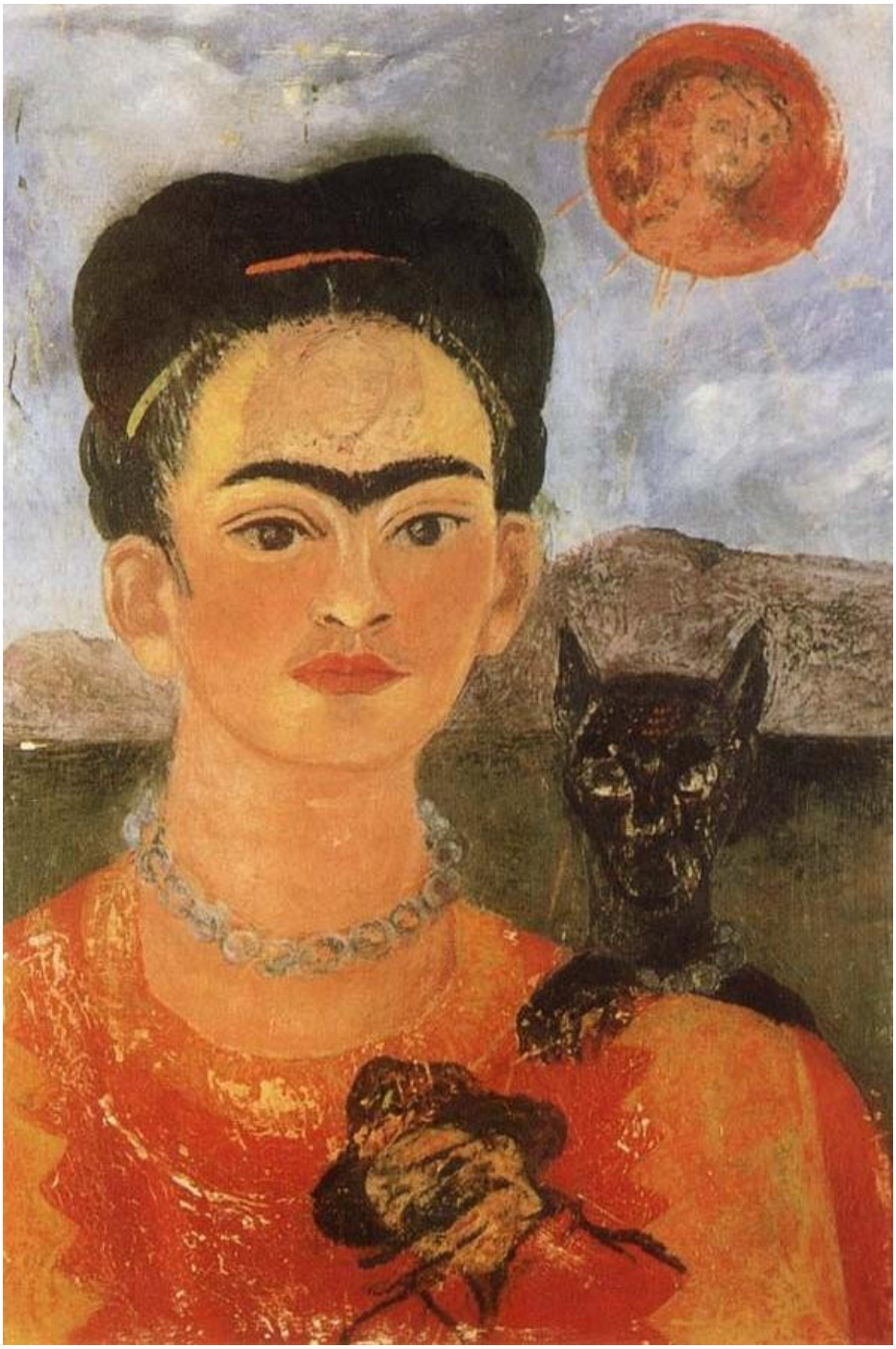
41. Without Hope, 1945; Oil on canvas mounted on masonite; 28 x 36 cm. Collection of the dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

42. The Little Deer, 1946; Oil on masonite; 22.9 x 30.5 cm. Mary Anne Martin Fine Art, New York.

43. Moses, or The Seed of Creation, 1945; Oil on hardboard; 61 x 75.6 cm. Private Collection.

44. Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill. 1951; Oil on masonite; 41.8 x 50.2 cm. Private collection.

45. Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick, 1954; Oil on masonite; 73 x 60 cm. Collection of the fRida Kahlo Museum, Mexico City.



46. Self- Portrait with Ixcuintle Dog and Sun, 1953-1954; Oil on masonite; 58.42 x 40 cm.

Private Collection.