



## A review analysis of life history and its influence on the artwork of Frida Kahlo

### KEYWORDS

women artists, Frida Kahlo

**Rupal Khullar**

Research Scholar, Department of Drawing and Painting, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

**Dr. I.U.Khan**

Head, Department of Drawing and Painting, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

### ABSTRACT

*Throughout art history women and their likenesses have been important and primary subjects of the Fine Arts. Be it Monalisa or Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, since centuries "Women" have been one of the popular subjects of the master painters. At the beginning of the 20th century, many artworks featuring women tended to fall into two categories: reverential or decorative. During the 1930's and 1940's, women of the world held virtually one role and one role only homemaker. This was no different for the women of Mexico, except for one woman in particular, Frida Kahlo. This study focuses on the major twists and turns in the life of Frida Kahlo and how those events and people she met affected and influenced her artworks. The study is done on the basis of various literature about Frida Kahlo available.*

### Introduction

At the turn of the century, women in Western Europe and the United States began enjoying greater mobility, educational opportunities, and access to art markets. Many art schools opened their doors to women students for the first time. Women felt freer to work from nude models and to paint and sketch in public spaces. They also played key roles in the expansion of modernist sculpture and the contributed in tremendous growth of photography.

Women have been favorite subjects in the art history but when it comes to women artists in Art History, we seldom know much about the artists and their art. The place of woman in art had been until the dawn of modernism unchanging: she was the subject of the artwork or a source of inspiration to the artist. The examples of women in European art who managed to become creators by ignoring this rule are very few from the Renaissance until the beginning of the 19th century. This made me curious to focus on eminent women artists of the 20th century who also painted women as their subjects.

Women Artists of the twentieth Century Recent decades have witnessed an intense interest in the role of women in the art of the past. Scores of museum exhibitions have been devoted to the work of women artists, and scores of monographs have examined the contributions of women to our artistic heritage.

Women played major roles in innovative artistic movements, such as abstraction, expressionism, and minimalism. But, as in the case of Abstract Expressionism, they were still often overshadowed by their male peers who typically received more critical and commercial attention.

The Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s embraced diverse media and methods to transform the art world's status quo, challenge the unequal representation of women in galleries and museums, and reflect female experience in art. Women were also at the forefront of experimentation with performance art, electronic and digital media, and conceptual art.

In context of studying the paintings of west and India, Siva Kumar (1999) stated that In the West the history of modernism is primarily conceived as the history of the avant-garde. Such a conflation of the modern and the avant-garde, however, will not help us to understand the historical logic or dynamics of non-Western modernisms such as India's. For this we must develop an alternate perspective that does not see it as a linear, monolithic, and fundamentally Western phenomenon but as several distinct mutations occasioned and nurtured by a common set of cross-cultural encounters experienced differently from the two sides of the colonial divide.

Freedman (1979) the metaphor of "waves" has dominated the academic discourse on the history of American feminism. Defining the feminist movement by the ebb and flow of coordinated appeals for women's rights and equality, historians initially identified a disconcerting lull in activity between the 1920s and the 1960s and concluded that feminism had largely subsided in this "inter-wave" period. This dissertation contributes to more recent scholarship, which has begun to challenge the wave metaphor by filling in this midcentury gap. Focusing on cultural implications of feminist ideas and efforts in the first half of the twentieth century, this study reexamines what happened to feminism in the decades that followed the political achievement of woman's suffrage. Rather than a trajectory of retreat or decline, it finds continuity across this chronological marker. Through an investigation of the performances, images, words and actions of four successful pop-cultural figures—Mae West, Bee Freeman, Nancy Drew, and Wonder Woman—this study shows that feminism was deeply embedded in post suffrage Americans' understanding of what it meant to be a Modern Woman. Perpetuating the move away from the restrictive gender norms of the nineteenth century, these figures reinforced and promoted the early twentieth-century feminist effort to replace a traditional model of femininity with a modern alternative that was more independent, more self-assertive, freer, and more powerful.

### Review of literature

To learn from the inspirational life of Frida Kahlo, Darbyshire, (1994) in her article, Understanding the life of illness: Learning through the art of Frida Kahlo in the journal of Advances in Nursing Science mentioned that through engaging with the art of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, An educational approach to promoting more esthetic and less instrumental thinking and understanding can be described. This approach enables caregivers to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of suffering, chronic pain, miscarriage, and disability and how to get out of it.

During the 1930's and 1940's, women of the world held virtually one role and one role only homemaker. This was no different for the women of Mexico, except for one woman in particular, Frida Kahlo.

Frida Kahlo (1907- 1954, Mexico) was the Mexican self-portrait artist and feminist icon who was married to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Her work has been celebrated in Mexico as emblematic of national and indigenous tradition, and by feminists for its uncompromising depiction of the female experience and form. She was the one who refused to accept the current ideals of society and the accepted social norms by engaging in things that few women in history ever had.

She was promiscuous with men and women and was involved in subjects which were predominantly masculine like politics. She painted pictures of herself in ways that had never been done before, and she wore the clothes of her indigenous people as opposed to the current fashions of the world.

Frida claimed to be born on the year of the outbreak of the Mexican revolution, because she wanted her life to begin together with the modern Mexico. This detail introduces us to her singular personality, characterized since childhood by a deep sense of independence and rebellion against social and moral ordinary habits, moved by passion and sensuality, proud of her "Mexicanidad" and cultural tradition set against the reigning Americanization: everything mixed with a peculiar sense of humour.

She did not originally plan to become an artist. At 15 Kahlo entered the premedical program at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. However, this training ended three years later when she was severely injured in a bus accident.

Her life was marked by physical suffering, starting with polio contracted at the age of five and progressively worsening through her life-dominating event, the bus accident when she was 18. She underwent approximately 30 surgical operations and numerous painful treatments including an array of corsets and mechanical "stretching" systems. Many of her works were painted lying in bed. To add to her trauma, she was never able to have children as a complication of her injuries.

The paper written by Bose (2005) presents a critical reading of the painting *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* provides as a fascinating insight into the landscape of pain management, narratives of illness, and the use of art in documenting medical history. The paper examines Frida Kahlo's painting style and metaphors of Greek architecture and anatomy as a unique form of medical autobiography. The analysis of Frida Kahlo's paintings illustrated the extent to which the painter revealed details of her injury, miscarriages, pain, isolation, trauma and surgeries. The iconography expressed in these drawings and paintings emphasizes the artist's ability to come to terms with her diagnosis through the creative process in defining her body through medical-artistic analogies and letters to loved ones and colleagues.

One year after the bus collision, she sketched *The Accident*, in the style of traditional Mexican ex-voto paintings. As religious works of art, ex-voto paintings, usually executed on tin sheets, portray scenes of miraculous heavenly interventions. The miracle in this sketch, Frida did not die. Describing events with both pictures and words shows another signature of the ex-voto style. Most of Frida's paintings would incorporate elements of the ex-voto style.

Drawing on her personal experiences (her troubled marriage, her painful miscarriages, her numerous operations), her works are often shocking in their stark portrayal of pain. Fifty-five of her 143 paintings are self-portraits, often incorporating symbolic portrayal of her physical and psychological wounds.



Fig.-1-The Accident

Another thematic element in her work developed from her deeply felt influence of the indigenous Mexican culture, which surfaced in her paintings' bright colors, dramatic symbolism, and unapologetic rendering of often harsh and gory content.

Although Kahlo's work is sometimes classified as surrealist, and she did exhibit several times with European surrealists, she never considered herself a surrealist. Her preoccupation with female themes and the figurative candor with which she expressed them made her something of a feminist cult figure in the last decades of the 20th century.

Kahlo preferred dressing in native Mexican costume and paid great attention to her hair and make-up even when gravely ill. The numerous self-portraits she created range in mood from violent (i.e. showing herself as a deer shot through with arrows or a woman ripped open from neck to navel and covered with nails), to heart-rending (showing herself naked and bleeding profusely from complications of childbirth), to more serene images such as the *Self-Portrait with Monkey*.

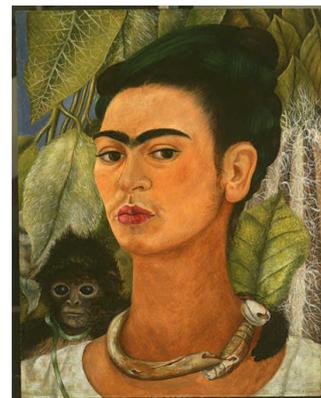


Fig. 2 - Self-Portrait with Monkey

Kahlo's imagery reflects a preoccupation with the exploration of love and its connection to pain in her life. She had many lovers, both male and female, and was married twice, first in 1929 and again in 1940, to the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whom she loved obsessively. The small, slender Kahlo was a stark contrast to the portly Rivera. Her father remarked, "It was like the marriage between an elephant and a dove." Their stormy relationship inspired many of her paintings. As her biographer, Hayden Herrera, noted, "Every time Diego left her, there's another painting with tears or gashes." In Kahlo's own words, Rivera showed her "the revolutionary sense of life and the true sense of color."

In *Self-Portrait with Monkey*, Kahlo emphasized her signature icon, her joined eyebrows. She chose a monkey as her companion because she admired its childlike and playful nature. The apparently naïve (un schooled) drawing, bright and bizarre colors, and dramatic and fantastical images reflect her inspiration in native Mexican art.

In the first few months of the couple's stay in Detroit, Rivera was preparing to paint the murals while Kahlo was disenchanted with Detroit, isolated and pregnant. Citing Kahlo's letters to her doctor, the DIA exhibition says she feared injuries from her bus accident would make giving birth impossible, and considered terminating her pregnancy in May. In July, she lost a large amount of blood and was rushed to a hospital, where she miscarried. She spent two weeks there recovering, and turned 25 in a hospital bed.

Her miscarriages and unfulfilled desire to have a child became a major theme of her work, the exhibition's curator, Mark Rosenthal, told *The Huffington Post*.

Apart from her health issues, Kahlo missed Mexico and found little to

like about Detroit. Rivera was busy with the murals, so she spent more time painting; he encouraged her to keep pursuing art.

"Kahlo's breakthrough is Detroit," art historian Victor Zamudio Taylor says in the documentary "The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo." "In Detroit, Frida Kahlo, for the first time, consciously decides that she will paint about herself, and that she will paint the most private and painful aspects of herself."

Pre-Columbian artifacts were common both in the Kahlo/Rivera home (Diego collected sculptures and idols, and Frida collected Jewelry) and in Kahlo's paintings. She wore jewelry from this period in "Self-Portrait -- Time Flies" (1926), Self-Portrait With Monkey (1938) and Self-Portrait With Braid (1941), among others. Other Pre-Columbian artifacts are found in The Four Inhabitants of Mexico City (1938), Girl With Death Mask (1938) and Self-Portrait With Small Monkeys (1945).



*Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States, 1932*

Active Communist sympathizers, Kahlo and Rivera befriended Leon Trotsky as he sought political asylum from Joseph Stalin's regime in The Soviet Union. The great Russian revolutionary had been expelled from the U.S.S.R. by Stalin in 1929 and sentenced to death, in absentia, by a Soviet court in 1937.

Sometime after Trotsky's death, Frida denounced her former friend and praised the Soviet Union under Stalin. She spoke favorably of Mao, calling China "the new socialist hope".

Kahlo was a famous personality in her time, and lived a life full of drama and passion right to the end. When her first major exhibition finally opened in Mexico City's Gallery of Contemporary Art in 1953, she was not expected to attend due to the grave condition of her health. To the surprise and delight of her patrons and fans, however, she arrived on a hospital stretcher and was enthroned in her canopy bed, which had been installed in the Gallery that afternoon. Less than a year later, she died from an overdose of tranquilizers. Her popularity has taken an upswing lately, due both to the avid collection of her work by celebrities such as Madonna and the relevance of themes such as androgyny and violence in 1990s.

Frida Kahlo participated in the "International Exhibition of Surrealism" in 1940 at the Galeria de Arte, Mexicano. There, she exhibited her two largest paintings: The Two Fridas and The Wounded Table (1940). Surrealist Andrew Breton considered Kahlo a surrealist, a label Kahlo rejected, saying she just painted her reality. However, in 1945, when Don Jose Domingo Lavin asked Frida Kahlo to read the book Moses and Monotheism by Sigmund Freud - whose psychoanalysis works Surrealism is based on - and paint her understanding and interpretation of this book. Frida Kahlo painted Moses, and this painting was recognized as second prize at the annual art exhibition in the Palacio de Bellas Artes.

Widely known for her Marxist leanings, Frida, along with Che

Guevara and a small band of contemporary figures, has become a countercultural symbol of 20th century, and created a legacy in paint that continue to inspire the imagination and mind. Born in 1907, dead at 47, Frida Kahlo achieved celebrity even in her brief lifetime that extended far beyond Mexico's borders, although nothing like the cult status that would eventually make her the mother of the selfie, her indelible image recognizable everywhere.

### Conclusion

Kahlo did not sell many paintings in her lifetime, although she painted occasional portraits on commission. She had only one solo exhibition in Mexico in her lifetime, in 1953, just a year before her death at the age of 47. It may be concluded from her life sketch that she was not only confined to self-portraits but also her paintings influenced many incidences, people, friends and movements which may be observed clearly in her artworks. It is also clear that she indeed also influenced many people in her lifetime.

### References:

1. Galenson, David W., *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, Pg.13
2. Galenson, David W., *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, Pg. 14
3. Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview. R. Siva Kumar. *Journal Art Journal*. Volume 58, 1999 - Issue 3. Page 14-21.
4. Estelle Freedman. Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930. *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 3, Toward a New Feminism for the Eighties (Autumn, 1979), pp. 512-529.
5. Darbyshire, P. (1994). Understanding the life of illness: Learning through the art of Frida Kahlo. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 17, 51-59.
6. <http://www.fridakahlo.com/bio.shtml>
7. Bose, J. (2005). Images of trauma: pain, recognition, and disavowal in the works of Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 33(1): 51-70.
8. <http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/worksofart/accident.html>
9. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frida\\_Kahlo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frida_Kahlo)
10. <http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/worksofart/index.html>
11. National Museum of Women in the Arts - <http://www.nmwa.org/collection/detail.asp?WorkID=1432>