

1-1-2016

# Frida Kahlo: A Post-Revolutionary Artist

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**FRIDA KAHLO: A POST-REVOLUTIONARY ARTIST**

by

**KATIE TAPIA-LYNCH**

**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

2016

MAJOR: ART HISTORY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to those who helped make this research project possible. To my advisor, Dr. Dora Apel, for assisting me in the writing process of this thesis and pushing me to be more confident as a writer. I owe her immense gratitude for always being a trusted professor and for all of her guidance during my time as a graduate student. Secondly, I would like to thank my second reader, Dr. Jennifer Olmsted. I have always appreciated Dr. Olmsted's valuable input on my writing and was fortunate to have her as a knowledgeable professor throughout graduate school.

I would also like to thank my sister and mentor, Dr. Lori Cortez, for always supporting me throughout my education. She has been there to cheer me on as I have worked towards my academic and professional goals. Her guidance has helped to shape me into who I am today. Lastly, I am so appreciative of my supportive husband, Gavin Lynch. He has always encouraged me to pursue my academic endeavors, and has remained at my side throughout. I am thankful for how understanding he has been, staying up late with me to have conversations about art history, and helping me smooth out ideas for my research projects.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the 1920s and 1930s, Mexico underwent major changes on political and cultural levels, as a direct result of its Revolution (1910-1920). The climate of post-revolutionary Mexico promoted a cultural arts movement that allowed artists to flourish in the search for a unique Mexican national identity. One of the most prominent artists that emerged from this period was the Mexican born artist, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). Known mainly for her deeply emotional and sometimes shocking self-portraits, her popularity derived from the fascination of her personal narrative. From her physical ailments to her complex marriage to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, viewers have been captivated by Kahlo's life story. However, Kahlo has also become a national and political icon. She has come to represent not only a successful Mexican artist, but also an artist who embraced her culture and leftist politics.

General scholarship on Kahlo focuses on her personal life, so much so that her work is often viewed through a narrow autobiographical lens. Scholars have subjected her work to a psychoanalytical approach, and have overused her personal narrative as the basis of discussing her art. Her dramatic marriage to Rivera, her poor health and the loss of several pregnancies have led scholars to psychoanalyze her paintings. However, it is crucial to avoid reducing Kahlo's art to merely her physical and emotional pain. This approach has been exhausted and may put Kahlo's importance as an artist at risk. While Kahlo's physical and emotional pain was undoubtedly a major source for her paintings, there are certainly other themes present throughout her oeuvre. Her paintings make intellectual statements about politics, culture, and national identity, which raise important and complex questions, and as a result complicates the personal approach to her artwork.

This thesis will focus primarily on the cultural and political concepts present in Kahlo's art, which have been overshadowed by art historical scholarship that analyzes her work using

autobiographical and psychoanalytical approaches. I will argue that Kahlo's self-portraits reveal her various identities, not just her personal traumas and pain. In her work, Kahlo explored her national, cultural, and political identities. As an artist during the 1920s and 1930s, her work was impacted by the political and cultural climate of post-revolutionary Mexico. My examination of these aspects of Kahlo's work will also address her relationship to the Surrealist movement. Instead of debating whether or not Kahlo was a Surrealist, I will explore how Surrealism began as a leftist political movement, and how this aligns with Kahlo's political ideologies. I will also analyze how Kahlo's paintings demonstrate Surrealist techniques.

Kahlo grew up in Mexico when a celebration of cultural nationalism was important after the Revolution of 1910. The government promoted *Mexicanidad*, a sense of romantic nationalism that drew on pre-Columbian art and culture.<sup>1</sup> This quest for national and cultural identity is apparent in Kahlo's paintings. There was a longing in Mexico to reconnect with its indigenous past and traditions. Kahlo often employed Aztec and pre-Columbian imagery in her work, and explored the ways in which these images functioned with images of a post-revolutionary Mexico. She was especially drawn to wearing Tehuana dresses and even portraying herself in these fashions within her self-portraits. The Tehuana dress is the traditional clothing worn by women in the Tehuantepec region, a city in the southeast area of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, having the reputation of being a matriarchal society.<sup>2</sup> By donning Tehuana dresses, Kahlo aligned herself not only with the women of Tehuantepec, but also with Mexico's search for national and cultural identity. However, Kahlo's exploration of her Mexican identity was complicated. In her paintings

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<sup>1</sup> Janice Helland, "Culture, Politics, and Identity in the Paintings of Frida Kahlo," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Normal Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 398.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah M. Lowe, "Biographical Overview," in *Frida Kahlo*, by Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Universe Publishing, 1991), 51.

she examines how the indigenous peoples of Mexico were romanticized after the revolution, and the failure of the post-revolutionary government's attempt to unite the nation. She reveals the wounds of Mexico's violent history in her paintings. She simultaneously embraces her *mestiza* identity while also exploring the issues surrounding it, such as the stereotypes associated with Mexican identity.

Not only has Kahlo's Mexican heritage been somewhat overlooked in the art historical discussion of her work, but also her political and social concerns. Kahlo's political views were shaped by the social climate of post-revolutionary Mexico and began early in her youth when she attended the prestigious National Preparatory School of Mexico. The National Preparatory School was the epicenter of post-revolutionary politics and Mexico's search for a new identity.<sup>3</sup> The time spent at this school helped shape a young Kahlo's social and political concerns and made her into the political activist that she later became. Kahlo would go on to officially join the Mexican Communist Party in 1928, invite Leon Trotsky and his wife into her home after his exile from the Soviet Union, and participate in political demonstrations throughout her life up until her death. Kahlo expressed her social and political beliefs in her paintings, often expressing anti-capitalist and pro-socialist sentiments, and even portraying the revolutionaries Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin in two of her later paintings.

Kahlo's importance as a painter should not rely solely on the personal issues she faced in her life, but instead the political and cultural significance of her work deserves attention too. By exploring a series of artworks by Kahlo, I will examine how they reveal her socio-political concerns. Her Mexican culture, nationalism, *Mexicanidad*, and Marxist political views each played an important role in the production of her artwork.

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<sup>3</sup> Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 30.



## Review of Literature

Although the discussion of the cultural and political statements in Kahlo's art have been dominated by autobiographical and psychoanalytical approaches in art historical scholarship, at least initially, there have in fact been scholars who have discussed her Mexican culture and leftist politics in her work. A primary goal of this thesis is to contribute to the existing research that surrounds Kahlo's paintings in terms of their political and cultural elements, and build from the findings of this scholarship.

## Psychoanalytic Approaches

There is an overabundance of scholarship on Kahlo that presents her as a tormented artist that painted her painful realities. The two most important scholars that frame Kahlo's artwork through a psycho-biographical lens are Hayden Herrera and Salomon Grimberg. Herrera's extensive biography about Kahlo (1983) prompted a renewed interest in her work, and helped shaped her popularity as a cultural icon. However, this biography also incited criticism because of Herrera's tendency to focus on Kahlo's art as a direct result of her emotional and passionate life. Herrera's biography maps the life of Kahlo, describing in detail her physical and emotional traumas throughout her life, and relies heavily on explaining her work through the context of her chaotic marriage to Rivera, as well as the numerous illnesses she endured. According to Herrera, Kahlo only painted to ease her pain,<sup>4</sup> and the author completely disregards the socio-political and cultural motivations behind the production of Kahlo's art. While this biography is undoubtedly important as the beginning of scholarship about Kahlo, it can also rely too much on the personal pain and suffering that she experienced in her life. Another book published by Herrera in 1991, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, delves into more extensive detail of Kahlo's paintings, but still relies

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 384.

heavily on an autobiographical approach, often discussing Kahlo's personal traumas rather than the cultural and political significance of her work. These two publications by Herrera are certainly important to this thesis in order to fully understand Kahlo's life and art, along with providing detailed biographical facts, but it is necessary to consider other sources that discuss Kahlo's cultural and political concerns more extensively.

Similar to Herrera, Salomon Grimberg, another prominent scholar in the discussion of Kahlo's work, employs psychoanalytical approaches in the study of both her life and art. Although Grimberg has contributed interesting approaches to the discussion and understanding of Kahlo's paintings, he relies heavily on the psychology of her work. For example, he disregards the cultural significance of *My Nurse and I* by framing his analysis of the painting around Kahlo's loneliness, which he traces back to her childhood.<sup>5</sup> Grimberg's psychoanalysis of Kahlo is reductionist in that it focuses primarily on her personal traumas and excludes social, political, and cultural concerns that Kahlo found important to include in her paintings.

### **Cultural and Political Approaches**

On the opposite side of art historical scholarship, there has been important and much needed research regarding Kahlo's representation of political and cultural concerns in her paintings. Janice Helland has taken a strong stance on the significance of discussing Kahlo's political content in her work. She argues that Kahlo's art has been, "exhaustively psychoanalyzed and thereby whitewashed of their bloody, brutal, and overtly political content. Kahlo's personal pain should not eclipse her commitment to Mexico and the Mexican people."<sup>6</sup> Helland emphasizes

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<sup>5</sup> Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo* (Dallas, Texas: The Meadows Museum, 1989), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Janice Helland, "Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings: Indigeneity and Political Commitment," *Woman's Art Journal* 11:2 (1990-1991): 8.

the importance of pre-Columbian and leftist imagery throughout Kahlo's work, and considers her a cultural nationalist.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Helland, Sarah M. Lowe has taken issue with the disregard for political and cultural contexts in the discussion of Kahlo's work. In 1991, Lowe published a biography on Kahlo that has been particularly helpful to this study. Lowe emphasizes that Kahlo's cultural heritage is one of the most significant themes in her paintings.<sup>8</sup> Lowe's biography takes the reader on an in depth analysis of the artist's political views, how her years at the National Preparatory School helped to shape these ideologies, what had attracted her to the Mexican Communist Party, and her anti-capitalist views.

Lowe also discusses the debate surrounding whether or not Kahlo is a Surrealist. The author makes an important point that fitting her into the neat category of Surrealist painting is too complex, and therefore it is more efficient and appropriate to note the Surrealist elements throughout her work. Lowe looks at specific artworks by Kahlo that reveal what may be considered approaches similar to Surrealist painting. The author also makes an important argument that unlike the French Surrealists' preoccupation with "primitivism," Kahlo's artwork is rooted in her own identity as a Mexican, and therefore the Surrealist qualities of her paintings come directly from her cultural heritage and Mexico's celebration of *Mexicanidad*.<sup>9</sup>

Two other important readings that will contribute to the discussion of political and cultural elements in Kahlo's paintings include Corrine Andersen's article, "Remembrance of an Open Wound: Frida Kahlo and Post-Revolutionary Mexican Identity," and Rebecca Block and Lynda

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>8</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 13.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah M. Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition" in *Frida Kahlo*, by Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Universe Publishing, 1991), 83.

Hoffman-Jeep's article, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia.'"

Andersen's opening sentence expresses the need for a deeper understanding of Kahlo's art:

Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo set in motion a tidal wave of interest in the artist's life. Although Herrera deserves much praise, her psycho-biographic approach led to a flood of criticism that diagnosed Kahlo's art as a symptom of her turbulent private life. Critics who focus on Kahlo's biography tend to overlook her public agency and activism. More than cries for love, or desperate soul searches, Kahlo's self-portraits investigate the cultural and political tensions of her contemporary Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

Andersen's article discusses the political implications of Kahlo's use of the Tehuana dress, in her life and in her paintings, and examines select paintings that reveal her cultural and political concerns. Block and Hoffman-Jeep's article echoes similar remarks to that of Andersen's, arguing that Kahlo made political statements in her life and in her art, especially by wearing the fashions of the Tehuantepec women.<sup>11</sup> Block and Hoffman-Jeep discuss one of Kahlo's most political paintings, *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* (1932), while also noting her use of pre-Columbian imagery in the painting. The authors argue that it reflects Kahlo's political views and her anti-capitalist beliefs toward the United States.<sup>12</sup>

### Summary of Chapters

This thesis will utilize the existing research of Kahlo to uncover how her art is both politically and culturally motivated. An iconographic and formal analysis is necessary to discuss all of the paintings in this thesis, in order to understand how Kahlo's art reflects these ideologies. The second chapter will primarily set the stage for understanding the political and cultural context in which Kahlo was working as an artist. It is important to briefly explain the social climate of post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, including the country's desire to embrace the

<sup>10</sup> Corrine Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound: Frida Kahlo and Post-Revolutionary Mexican Identity," *South Atlantic Review* 74:4 (2009): 119.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 19:2 (1998-9): 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

*Mexicanidad* movement, and the tendency to appropriate its pre-Columbian past. Chapter 2 will also discuss Kahlo's years at the National Preparatory School and how it was there that she began forming her political views, the accident that shaped Kahlo's life, how it was at that point that she turned to painting, and a discussion of some of her earlier works. Chapter 2 will also view her time in the United States, the political and cultural significance of the Tehuana dress, and two important paintings that she created while in the U.S.

Chapter 3 will discuss Kahlo's return to Mexico after the United States and her interest in portraying Aztec and pre-Columbian imagery in her paintings. It will examine how her political activity played an important role following her return from the U.S. Chapter 3 will analyze several paintings, including some that contain references to Christian art and the Mexican retablo tradition, and how Kahlo subverts gender roles in this patriarchal religion. Additionally, Kahlo's artistic production in the late 1930s consisted of an exploration and critique of her Mexican and *mestiza* heritage, as she examines stereotypes surrounding Mexican myths and identity.

The final chapter, or chapter 4, will discuss Surrealism and how some of Kahlo's paintings reveal elements from this avant-garde movement. The Surrealists and Kahlo shared similar political views in that both were involved in the Communist Party and felt uneasy about industrialization dominating the working class. However, I will also highlight the differences between Kahlo and the Surrealists. Most importantly, Kahlo's artwork was rooted in her identity as a Mexican. Any Surrealist qualities in her paintings were directly from her own culture, unlike the Surrealists who idealized cultures they viewed as "primitive" and used as a source of inspiration for their paintings.

## CHAPTER 2: THE FRAMEWORK OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

During the 1920s, Mexico was undergoing important changes politically and nationally. After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the country was searching for a unique national identity and embracing its indigenous roots. This appreciation for native heritages was in response to Porfirio Diaz's thirty-four-year dictatorship. Diaz's governmental regime promoted the economic and cultural ideals of Western civilizations, such as the United States and Europe, while condemning Mexico's indigenous roots.<sup>13</sup>

Porfirio Diaz's overthrow resulted in uprisings led by peasants, and a civil war that lasted for nearly ten years between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. Workers and peasants were important for the revolution because they helped to replace abusive regimes and create a new political order.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, overthrowing Diaz signified Mexico's desire to gain national independence, particularly from the U.S. Only about sixty years before the revolution the U.S. had taken over the northern section of the country (the Mexican Cession of 1848), and interfered in political matters using military interference as well as economic pressure.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most important ideals that emerged from the Mexican Revolution was the promotion of culture and nationalism. The new government, led by Álvaro Obregón in 1920, encouraged Mexico to embrace its cultural and indigenous roots, known as the *Mexicanidad* movement. Unlike Diaz's contempt for Mexico's indigenous past, Obregón sought to emphasize Mexico's past cultures. The *Mexicanidad* movement increased the importance of indigenous art and artifacts, which further promoted a sense of pride and nationalism.<sup>16</sup> This post-revolutionary

<sup>13</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 119.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, "On the Margins," in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982), 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 76.

*indigenismo*, or emphasis on uniting Mexico's native peoples with the rest of the nation, was meant to heal the country's bloody past. However, this attempt was not entirely successful and is critiqued in Kahlo's paintings.<sup>17</sup> She examines the issues surrounding Mexico's pursuit for a national identity, as well as her own search for a Mexican identity.

In order to aid in promoting the ideals of *Mexicanidad*, Álvaro Obregón promoted José Vasconcelos as the Minister of Public Education. Vasconcelos created a campaign that promoted literacy among the masses, a reformation of public education, and state sponsored art, all of which were meant to demonstrate an emphasis on Mexico's culture and nationalism.<sup>18</sup> Out of the state-funded art came arguably one of Mexico's most important art movements, muralism. Muralism in the post-revolutionary period during the 1920s relied on uniquely Mexican sources and history, ultimately promoting the cultural and political ideals of *Mexicanidad*.<sup>19</sup> Vasconcelos promoted the muralist movement, because it endorsed art that would reveal what had long been hidden from Mexico's history, such as conquest, colonization, and native cultures. This appreciation of indigenous cultures inspired the *mestizo* population, or people of mixed heritages, to appreciate all areas of their cultural identity as an act of rediscovering their roots.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the newfound appreciation for nativism could also be seen as an act of romanticizing and exploiting Mexico's native peoples. The attempt to unite the nation with its indigenous history disregards Mexico's bloody and violent past. Kahlo acknowledges these histories in her paintings, and brings attention to various stereotypes associated with Mexico.

Frida Kahlo grew up in the post-revolutionary period in Mexico therefore she would have been familiar with the political and cultural ideals of this time. In 1922, a teenage Kahlo was

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<sup>17</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 119.

<sup>18</sup> Mulvey and Wollen, "On the Margins," 12.

<sup>19</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 76-77.

<sup>20</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 120.

admitted to the prestigious National Preparatory School in Mexico City, under Vasconcelos' campaign to rediscover Mexico's history. Kahlo was one of the first girls, thirty-five out of two thousand students, to gain admittance to the school. Due to the new education policies created by Vasconcelos, the school had started to admit girls. Kahlo's education goals were to study medicine, specifically anatomy, biology, and botany.<sup>21</sup>

The National Preparatory School was significant to the political and national principles of the post-revolutionary period, as Mexico searched for a unique cultural identity.<sup>22</sup> At the National Preparatory School, the students studied art, literature, scholarship, law and medicine. It was here that Kahlo found students that had similar interests to hers. Kahlo and these other students formed a group, calling themselves the *Cachuchas*, known for their rebelliousness and disdain for authority.<sup>23</sup> The *Cachuchas*' system of ideas consisted of Socialism, Romanticism and nationalism, thus making their focus political and intellectual. As followers of Vasconcelos, they were at the epicenter of Mexico's self-discovery and rebirth. Kahlo established her desire to become a child of the revolution by changing her original birth year of 1907 to 1910, the beginning of the Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Kahlo's two years at the Preparatory School are significant to her life and work because it is where her cultural and political ideas were beginning to develop.

Kahlo only spent two years at the Preparatory School because a near fatal accident suddenly interrupted her studies. In September 1925, after leaving school, the bus she was riding home to Coyoacán was in an accident with a trolley car. Kahlo's spinal column was broken in three different places, along with a broken collarbone, two ribs, and her pelvis in three places. Additional injuries included eleven fractures in her right leg, a crushed right foot, and her left

<sup>21</sup> Christina Burrus, *Frida Kahlo: Painting Her Own Reality*, (New York: Abrams), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Lowe "Biographical Overview," 17.

<sup>24</sup> Burrus, *Frida Kahlo*, 18-20.



shoulder dislocated. A steel handrail had impaled her body at the abdomen, entered from the side, and exited out of her vagina.<sup>25</sup> The aftermath of this accident would haunt Kahlo for the rest of her life. She already had her fair share of physical pain when she contracted polio at the age of six, causing one of her legs to be shorter than the other, and a limp when she walked.<sup>26</sup> She would endure many surgical procedures throughout her life because of these various physical issues. Another consequence of the aftermath was the struggle to have children. The accident had damaged her pelvis too much when the metal rod entered her abdominal area. This injury made it nearly impossible for her to have children, and she would go on to have two abortions and one miscarriage throughout her life.<sup>27</sup>

After the accident in 1925, Kahlo was bedridden for months, and thus her pursuit of a career in medicine ended. However, the accident did prompt her to begin painting. Kahlo claims that she began painting because she was, “bored as hell in bed.”<sup>28</sup> Taking up painting was not just a hobby for Kahlo, but it also served a financial purpose in order to earn money from home. Guillermo Kahlo, her father, was a commissioned photographer for Porfirio Díaz, and therefore after the Mexican Revolution he was getting very little work as a photographer, resulting in the family needing other financial gains. Her mother had purchased for Kahlo a special easel that was custom made so that she could paint lying down in bed, while her father provided her with his brushes and paints.<sup>29</sup>

Kahlo had little experience or formal training in fine art before her accident. She took two required art courses at the Preparatory School. Kahlo had considered the possibility of pursuing a

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<sup>25</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Lowe, “Biographical Overview,” 17.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah M. Lowe, “The Self-Portraits,” in *Frida Kahlo*, by Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Universe Publishing, 1991), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

career in drawing medical and scientific illustrations for journals and publications, and even began making drawings from slides under a microscope. The influence of microscopic and medical illustrations appears later in her paintings.<sup>30</sup> Before the accident, she had a brief paid apprenticeship with the commercial engraver Fernando Fernández. While working for Fernández, Kahlo's duties included copying etchings by Anders Zorn, a Swedish artist whose subjects consisted of female nudes and portraits of intellectuals.<sup>31</sup>

Kahlo also gained essential training in art from her father. Guillermo Kahlo, born in 1872 in Germany, emigrated to Mexico when he was only nineteen years old. He was commissioned by Porfirio Díaz's government to take photographs throughout Mexico of both religious and civil architecture from the pre-Columbian and colonial eras, as well as photographs of buildings created during Díaz's time as leader of Mexico.<sup>32</sup> Her father painted in his spare time, such as watercolor drawings of flowers, fruit and pastoral scenes. Her father taught her how to use a camera, develop film, and retouch and color photographs using brushes. Kahlo used what she learned from her father in her own paintings. Perhaps it was his portraits, his amateur painting, and his concentration on pre-Columbian sources that influenced her.<sup>33</sup>

Most of Kahlo's early paintings consisted of portraits of her family and friends. Nonetheless, Kahlo's concern with revolutionary politics began early in her painting career. One of her earliest paintings, *La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida* (1927) (figure 1), is a self-portrait in which Kahlo situates herself alongside a Revolutionary figure, Francisco "Pancho" Villa, a general from the Mexican Revolution. This painting is based off a popular Revolutionary song during the 1920s, titled *Adelita*, which referred to a *soldadera*, or a female soldier in the Mexican Revolution.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>31</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>33</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 19.

The song is sung from the position of a sergeant who is singing about his beloved *Adelita*, who describes his fear of dying while fighting. The song not only represents the dedication between two lovers, but also a dedication to the Revolution.<sup>34</sup>

*La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida* is a Cubist-inspired painting that demonstrates Kahlo's early interest in leftist Revolutionary politics. This painting reveals interesting formalistic techniques, such as the fracturing of the picture plane, a disorienting spatial area, and skewed perspective.<sup>35</sup> Kahlo locates herself directly in the center of the painting, and portrays herself in formal evening attire. She is accompanied by two male figures on either side of her, one is faceless and one is facing her directly, while a framed portrait of Pancho Villa hangs above her head. There are two paintings on either side of Pancho Villa, hanging crookedly, reinforcing the sense of a fractured picture plane. The painting to the left portrays a scene from the Revolution, while the other painting is a stage set or perhaps a bar.<sup>36</sup>

Lowe argues that although the meaning of this painting is a bit mysterious, perhaps the face of Pancho Villa could replace the faceless figure next to Kahlo just as she could be situated into the background painting of the Revolution.<sup>37</sup> This would then suggest that Kahlo has identified herself with Adelita, thus positioning herself alongside the Revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa. This painting is an attempt by Kahlo to assert her camaraderie with the *soldaderas*, who were working class women that fought among the men during the Mexican Revolution.<sup>38</sup> This is one of the earliest paintings in which Kahlo reveals a deep understanding and concern for political issues.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 40.

She engages with national identity in contemporary Mexico, by positioning herself as an actual revolutionary figure.

A year after she painted *La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida*, Kahlo would further confirm her alignment with the ideals of leftist-politics when she joined the Young Communist League in 1927. Kahlo's interest in the Mexican Communist Party was perhaps shaped by at least two important matters. First, many significant artists in Mexico at the time were promoting the principles of the Communist Party. Artists that led the Mexican Muralism movement such as Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Xavier Guerrero, were involved in leftist politics and promoted these ideas in their murals.<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that Kahlo's work does dramatically differ from the art of the muralists, in terms of style and form, and the main element connecting her work and the murals is that both represented socio-political issues.<sup>40</sup>

A second reason the Communist Party may have appealed to Kahlo could have been the inclusion of a few important women. Her close friend, Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti, may have influenced her to join the party. Modotti is most known for her politically conscious photographs of the working class during the post-revolutionary period in Mexico. Modotti worked for the Communist publication, *El Machete*, and made her living from taking photographs of Mexico's murals.<sup>41</sup> Modotti introduced Kahlo to the world of art and politics, and even acquainted her with an important figure in Mexico at the time, the muralist Diego Rivera. Kahlo and Rivera had met previously when she was just a young student at the National Preparatory School, when Rivera was commissioned to paint one of his murals there.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 46.

Kahlo and Rivera would become married in 1929, when she was twenty-two and Rivera was forty-three years old.<sup>43</sup> Rivera was one of Mexico's most well-known political artists during the post-revolutionary period, and by marrying Rivera, Kahlo affiliated herself further with leftist politics. Although they shared similar political beliefs, their art often differed. Kahlo's paintings certainly reveal her political and cultural ideologies, but not in the way that Rivera's murals did. Rivera's art was entrenched in the tradition of Russian Socialist Realism, whereas Kahlo rejected the macho bravado of muralism, and rooted her work in portraiture and Mexican folk art.<sup>44</sup>

Although Kahlo was upper-middle class, she was concerned about issues regarding race and class. Throughout her life she represented her uneasiness with systematic oppression by aligning herself with the lower class, the working class, and the disenfranchised indigenous peoples of Mexico. Before Kahlo married Rivera, she wore mostly European-inspired clothes, while occasionally wearing men's attire. After her marriage, she began wearing a traditional Tehuana dress.<sup>45</sup> Her wedding day was the first time she wore clothing that was unique to Mexican culture. She borrowed a skirt, blouse, a *rebozo*, and a woven shawl from one of her maids.<sup>46</sup>

Many scholars such as Salomon Grimberg, argue that Kahlo wore Tehuana dresses to please Rivera.<sup>47</sup> However, scholars such as Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, claim that wearing Tehuana dresses made a cultural and political statement.<sup>48</sup> Given that Kahlo held a deep interest in Mexican culture, especially its pre-Columbian history, it seems most likely that by wearing Tehuana dresses, she was expressing solidarity with the women of the Tehuantepec

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<sup>43</sup> Alyce Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* Vol. 5 (2011): 41.

<sup>44</sup> Liza Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading," *A Journal of Women Studies*, 13:2 (1993): 168.

<sup>45</sup> Hayden Herrera, "Portrait of Frida Kahlo as a Tehuana," *Heresies* (1978): 58.

<sup>46</sup> Block and Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity," 8.

<sup>47</sup> Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Block and Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity," 8.

region, a city in the southeast area of the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The Tehuantepec region had a reputation of being a matriarchal society, which would have appealed to her.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, traditional indigenous fashions were considered trendy at this point, as part of Mexico's search for a unique national identity.

Kahlo not only wore Tehuana dresses throughout most of her life, but she also made these dresses a constant theme throughout her paintings. In *My Dress Hangs There* from 1933 (figure 2), painted during her stay in New York City, she depicts an American landscape and a single Tehuana dress hanging from a clothes hanger on a rope. Kahlo traveled to San Francisco, New York City, and Detroit when Rivera received commissions for murals in each of these places. Unlike Rivera, Kahlo did not enjoy her stay in the U.S., often calling it *Gringolandia*. Kahlo was homesick in the U.S., and expressed her disgust of how filthy the streets were, claiming that people in the U.S. did not care for their cities as well as the people of Mexico did.<sup>50</sup> In a letter quoted in Herrera's biography of Kahlo, she wrote to one of her primary doctors while in New York City, Dr. Eloesser, and expressed her contempt for the wealthy in America and how citizens were treated:

High society here turns me off and I feel a bit of rage against all these rich guys here, since I have seen thousands of people in the most terrible misery without anything to eat and with no place to sleep, that is what has most impressed me here, it is terrifying to see the rich having parties day and night while thousands and thousands of people are dying of hunger...Although I am very interested in the industrial and mechanical development of the U.S., I find that Americans completely lack sensibility and good taste. They live as if an enormous chicken coop that is dirty and uncomfortable. The houses look like bread and ovens and all the comfort that they talk about is a myth.<sup>51</sup>

In her letter to Dr. Eloesser, Kahlo was referring to the effects of the Great Depression,

<sup>49</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 51.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Rosenthal, "Diego and Frida: High Drama in Detroit," in *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit* (Detroit, New Haven, London: Detroit Institute of Arts, Yale University Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>51</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 130-131.

American capitalism, and greed. As a result, she critiques the U.S. in multiple paintings that she created during her stay in America.

Kahlo depicts the New York skyline behind an assemblage of various images. Towards the bottom of the painting she used the collage method and tenets from Synthetic Cubism by utilizing photographs from newspapers of breadlines of the unemployed in the Depression era, accompanied by photographs of military parades, a baseball game, and political demonstrations.<sup>52</sup> In the foreground of New York City's skyline there is a trash can with junk and garbage spilling out, such as bottles, daisies, a stuffed rabbit toy, a liquor bottle, a blood soaked cloth, a bone, entrails, a human heart and a bloody human hand.<sup>53</sup> These various body parts allude to the treatment of American citizens as discarded waste. A building is in flames while objects are scattered about. A toilet and a sport's trophy rest on tall classical columns, while accompanied by other objects such as a telephone and gas pump. All of these objects represent emblems of American values and capitalism. During this time of industrialization, the U.S. praised itself for being more modernized than Europe. Kahlo comments on America's pride by mockingly elevating the status of indoor plumbing, gasoline, and telecommunication. This gesture is not far removed from Marcel Duchamp's celebration of American culture, when he made *Fountain* in 1917.

An image that is most likely meant to be a poster of the Hollywood icon, Mae West, hangs in the background to the left. The poster appears to fall apart and peel from the billboard, offering a critique of America's commercialization of sex.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly enough, Rivera was infatuated with this Hollywood actress. Kahlo depicts the poster in such a deteriorating state not only to represent the current state of America's crumbling economy and infrastructure, but also because it

<sup>52</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 101.

<sup>53</sup> Herrera, *Frida : A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 174.

<sup>54</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 101.

reflects how her and Rivera's views of America differed tremendously. In a church window behind the billboard of Mae West is a serpentine dollar sign wrapped around a Christian cross, further reinforcing America's worship of money.

In the distance, the city seems endless as skyscrapers recede into the background. Smokestacks are clustered to the right, including one bizarre smokestack that takes on anthropomorphic qualities, giving the sense of a human and machine hybrid. This particular smokestack emphasizes the U.S.' obsession with industry and machine automation. The effects of industrialization and towering skyscrapers lurk over the city, dwarfing its inhabitants while they stand in breadlines, hungry and unemployed. Kahlo's critique of the U.S. is most revealing of her anti-capitalist sentiments.

Within all of this urban sprawl, one element stands out almost immediately against the backdrop of American industrialization, a Tehuana dress. On a clothes hanger, the brightly colored Tehuana dress rests on a blue rope tied between two items on classical columns, a toilet and a golden sports trophy. Corrine Andersen argues that the dress represents a symbol of difference, existing in the space of the exotic Mexican, which was viewed as a spectacle through the eyes of the American consumer in a capitalist world.<sup>55</sup> Although the dress hangs empty and the painting is devoid of Kahlo, there is still a sense of her actual presence, signified by the existence of the dress itself. Herrera claims that the dress represented a stand-in for Kahlo, and without her actually being in the dress, this could be considered an "absent portrait" or "absent self."<sup>56</sup>

The empty dress may represent Kahlo's homage to Mexico, as she viewed the U.S. as unfamiliar, dirty and exploitative. While she did not enjoy the U.S. and its pro-capitalist system, Kahlo found a way to make her critique of it clear. Instead of interpreting this painting as just

<sup>55</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 121.

<sup>56</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 111.



representing her homesickness, this painting actually echoes her socialist political views by portraying the U.S. as greedy and uncaring towards its citizens. The inclusion of the Tehuana dress functions as an imprint of her cultural and political ideologies onto the American landscape. The painting engages with Kahlo's anti-capitalist views and satirizes America's celebration of industrialization, while highlighting poverty and exploitation as a consequence.

Another painting that contrasts Mexico and the U.S., is *Self-Portrait on the Border of Mexico and The United States* from 1932 (figure 3). Kahlo painted this during her stay in Detroit while Rivera was painting the *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle at the Detroit Institute of Arts (1932-1933). After watching a solar eclipse on the roof of the DIA, Kahlo was inspired to create this painting.<sup>57</sup> Kahlo represents herself standing on the border between two very different landscapes: pre-Columbian Mexico and industrialized America. She is dressed in a pink European colonial-style dress with lace gloves. This image of Kahlo in Westernized clothing may appear unusual because she was usually seen wearing Tehuana dresses during this period in her life, especially during her visit to the U.S. She carefully balances the European dress with an image on her necklace of the Aztec goddess, Coatlicue.<sup>58</sup> Juxtaposing the European dress with an Aztec symbol could be interpreted as Kahlo emphasizing a division between the two nations, or conversely could mean she is attempting to identify with both countries. Kahlo often employed dualities in her paintings, allowing for multiple interpretations.

She stands on a pedestal in the center of the painting, while her gaze is uninviting and confrontational. Kahlo mocks traditional feminine modesty by holding a cigarette in one hand, instead of a fan which was often an accessory of a proper lady.<sup>59</sup> I would also like to add that

<sup>57</sup> Rosenthal, "Diego and Frida: High Drama in Detroit," 43.

<sup>58</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 125.

<sup>59</sup> Lowe, "The Self-Portraits," 43.

smoking seemed like it was a traditional masculine activity during the 1930s, and for Kahlo to portray herself with a cigarette suggests defiance and independence. She holds a Mexican flag in her other hand, implying her preference and patriotism to her homeland Mexico. Standing between these two countries, Kahlo embraces her Mexican culture and nationalism, while also acknowledging her *mestiza* identity as both European and Mexican.

Kahlo contrasts these two countries against one another, representing the Mexican landscape on the left, and the American landscape to the right. The American landscape is devoid of nature, and is instead dominated by machine and industry. Again, Kahlo has painted machines represented with anthropomorphic qualities, commenting on automation and the efforts of capitalism to replace the worker. Skyscrapers and smokestacks tower over the U.S.'s landscape, as they did in *My Dress Hangs There*, as the name "FORD" is sprawled across them. The smoke billowing from the smokestacks frame the American flag, helping to sustain this capitalist nation, just as the sun nourishes the Mexican landscape. There is no sign of vegetation or organic matter, because roots are replaced by machine cords and wires that ultimately feed and leach from the nutrients of Mexico's land. Kahlo has transformed the U.S. into an industrial landscape, while specifically critiquing the dominant auto business in Detroit, Ford Motor Company.

Mexico is represented in stark contrast to America. Modernized Mexico is not what is represented here, but instead an early pre-Columbian version of it, somewhat in ruins. Mexico's landscape is scattered with ancient artifacts, monuments and organic matter. Unlike the barren American landscape dominated by machinery, Mexico has thick and luscious vegetation growing from its earth. Despite the cords and wires from the United States leaching from the roots of Mexico, its plants and flowers remain nourished. Whereas the American flag governs the sky on the right, the sun and moon are present in Mexico's sky. An Aztec pyramid and various pre-

Columbian artifacts recall a previous time, as the U.S.'s landscape suggests sterile and bleak modernization. Kahlo may have depicted the Mexican landscape as a fertile pre-Columbian past in order to critique the views of contemporary post-revolutionary Mexico. The government encouraged citizens to connect with Mexico's past, but this sometimes resulted in the romanticizing of pre-Columbian history and the indigenous population.

This was one of the first paintings in which Kahlo represented pre-Columbian artifacts.<sup>60</sup> Although not identical, the pyramid in ruins was somewhat modeled from an actual temple at Malinalco in western Mexico. Two of the artifacts in the painting are represented almost identically from their originals. The female figure on the left, a nude woman holding a bowl of food and a suckling infant, is a copy of an object from Jalisco in the Museo Nacional de Antropología's collection in Mexico City. The original is partially broken, a detail that Kahlo depicted in her painting. The other object that can be identified is a vessel from Casas Grandes, which actually belongs to Rivera's wide collection of pre-Columbian artifacts. This vessel is of a woman adorned with geometric designs. The vessel is located from an area situated near the border between Mexico and the U.S., therefore Kahlo's choice to include this artifact from that particular site reinforces the idea of borders.<sup>61</sup> Among the figures is also a skull, which may refer to the skulls that decorated the walls of Aztec temples.<sup>62</sup>

As her husband was idolizing modern machinery in his murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Kahlo was painting the roots of Mexico's ancient past.<sup>63</sup> This serves as an example of how Kahlo's political views differed from Rivera's. Kahlo was more critical of industrialization and

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<sup>60</sup> Nancy Deffebach, "Revitalizing the Past: Precolumbian Figures from West Mexico in Kahlo's Paintings," in *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, edited by Nancy Deffebach (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 74.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>62</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 9.

<sup>63</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 95.

modernization than Rivera. While Rivera was elevating the significance of the machine as a necessary force for a technological utopia, Kahlo's paintings satirized the machine by representing industrialization as exploitative and isolating to the worker. For Rivera, returning to Mexico would have been considered as moving backwards in time. Rivera was convinced that the international revolution would occur in an industrialized nation, and he wanted to be present when this took place.<sup>64</sup>

*Self-Portrait on the Border* is likely one of Kahlo's most politically charged paintings due to her critique of the U.S. as an imperialist and capitalist society, as well as Mexico's idealization of its past. Kahlo engages with themes that are at once political and cultural, as she offers critiques for both of these nations. She represents the U.S. as sterile and dominated by industry and machines, and Mexico as fertile and natural. In this painting she references the complexities of embracing Mexico's pre-Columbian past and cultural nationalism while alluding to the effects of industrialization, such as replacing the worker with automation, and the exploitation and alienation of citizens in a capitalist society. *On the Border* also serves as a political observation about location. As Kahlo situates herself on the border between two nations, she emphasizes her position as an intermediary figure who has knowledge and observations about both of these cultures.<sup>65</sup>

In conclusion, Kahlo's early years as an artist in the climate of post-revolutionary Mexico was significant in shaping her views of Mexican nationalism and leftist politics. Obregón's new government, the *Mexicanidad* movement, and her years at the National Preparatory School helped to shape a young Kahlo in exploring her national identity. Additionally, joining the Mexican Communist Party was an important turning point in her life. She became entrenched in Marxist

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<sup>64</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 172.

<sup>65</sup>Block and Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity," 11.

ideologies and married a revolutionary artist. Kahlo and Rivera then traveled to the U.S., where she painted *My Dress Hangs There* and *On the Border*.

Kahlo mocks the United States' capitalist system, and criticizes the wealthy for exploiting the working class in *My Dress Hangs There*. In *On the Border*, Kahlo not only satirically comments on the effects of machine, while transforming the U.S. into a gritty industrialized landscape, but she emphasizes the idealization of Mexico's pre-Columbian past. Both of these paintings exemplify Kahlo's leftist views of America as being a greedy and corrupt nation, while highlighting the mistreatment of its working class. Kahlo does this in a way that also includes a complex exploration of Mexican identity, as she includes a Tehuana dress in *My Dress Hangs There*, and a romanticized pre-Columbian landscape in *On the Border*. Upon arriving in the U.S., Kahlo's views of national identity and leftist politics were just developing. I view her time in America as crucial because it helped in establishing her political beliefs.

### CHAPTER 3: RETURNING TO MEXICO

After Kahlo's sojourn to the U.S., she returned to Mexico at the end of 1933. Kahlo did not produce a lot of work once she returned to Mexico, but the time was full of personal growth for her.<sup>66</sup> Her marriage was in distress with Rivera, partly because he was depressed after his Rockefeller murals in New York City were destroyed and his popularity began declining as an artist. Secondly, both Kahlo and Rivera were having affairs. Kahlo practiced sexual freedom, a result of an era in which people were embracing sexual liberation. Although Rivera's affairs could have upset Kahlo, especially his affair with her own sister, she had relationships with both men and women during her marriage. However, Kahlo's affairs were treated as a double standard; her affairs were private while Rivera had a known and accepted reputation of being a "womanizer."<sup>67</sup>

In the period following her return to Mexico, Kahlo created nothing in 1934, she produced only two works in 1935, one painting in 1936, but in 1937 she created eight paintings and then fifteen more in 1938.<sup>68</sup> Lowe makes an interesting observation about the correlation between Kahlo's political activity and her artistic productivity, which can be viewed as a link to her maturity as an artist.<sup>69</sup> Kahlo was involved in raising money for the Mexican militiamen fighting on the side of the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Her political activities deepened when Kahlo invited the recently exiled Leon Trotsky, his wife, and his entourage to stay at her home in Coyoacán in 1937, the same year she produced eight paintings. Befriending Trotsky was far from a small gesture since Stalin was pursuing Trotsky.<sup>70</sup> Although Kahlo had a brief love affair with Trotsky while he was living with her in Mexico, Kahlo's political beliefs were different from his.

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<sup>66</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 23.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Rivera supported Trotsky, and it was for this reason that Kahlo approved of helping him, but she never relinquished her support of Stalin.<sup>71</sup> She rejected Trotsky's internationalism and it was instead Stalin's nationalism that appealed to her, along with his anti-capitalist and anti-American sentiments. Kahlo likely interpreted Stalin's nationalism as a sense of unification in one's country, as well as national growth and development, which was important to Mexico's post-revolutionary ideas at the time.<sup>72</sup>

During her fertile period of artistic productivity, Kahlo painted *My Nurse and I*, 1937 (figure 4). In this self-portrait, Kahlo portrays herself as having the bodily proportions of a baby, while maintaining her adult head. These strange proportions create a sense of eeriness, which is reinforced by the mysterious figure wearing a mask. Kahlo does not actively suckle on the breast of this woman, but instead allows breast milk to drip passively into her mouth, as she blankly stares out of the picture plane towards us. Kahlo and her wet nurse are positioned before a background with bountiful green foliage and a raining sky that mimics the falling drops of breast milk from the nurse. The nurse has a strong body as she holds Kahlo in her large arms, and is noticeably darker skinned than the infant Kahlo, suggesting that the nurse is indigenous. The nurse's face is obscured by a pre-Columbian funerary mask from Teotihuacan, and perhaps implies that she is not an actual individual but instead a symbolic figure. Although the nurse's face is hidden and she is darker skinned than Kahlo, the figures are united by their straight black hair and mono-brow.<sup>73</sup>

Prior to 1937 when this painting was created, Kahlo would occasionally employ pre-Columbian elements in her work. However, this particular work would pave the way for frequently

<sup>71</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Nancy Deffebach, "Saints and Goddesses: Kahlo's Appropriations of Religious Iconography in Her Self-Portraits," in *María Izquierdo & Frida Kahlo*, edited by Nancy Deffebach (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 60.

used pre-Columbian influences in her paintings in and after 1937.<sup>74</sup> Scholars like Grimberg and Herrera have claimed that this painting reveals underlying issues Kahlo had with her mother. This idea that Kahlo had a strained relationship with her mother originates from Kahlo's childhood, when the root of most psychological problems occurs, according to psychoanalysis. Kahlo's mother was unable to breastfeed her as a baby because her sister Cristina was born eleven months after Kahlo was born, and instead a wet nurse was hired to breastfeed her.<sup>75</sup> Herrera claims that *My Nurse and I* reveals Kahlo's fear of abandonment because her sister replaced her.<sup>76</sup> However, Herrera does not deny the cultural importance behind this painting, claiming Kahlo is announcing her celebration of her Indian ancestry as she suckles from the nurse.<sup>77</sup> Grimberg, a child psychiatrist, argues this painting demonstrates how Kahlo, as a child, did not quite develop properly, both physically and psychologically, because of possible issues with her mother. Grimberg implies that Kahlo's loneliness and "unsatisfied hunger" as an adult is rooted in her childhood, since she was not breastfed as a baby.<sup>78</sup>

Margaret A. Lindauer addresses Grimberg's extensive psychoanalysis on Kahlo and the problems that arise with his approach. She discusses Grimberg's need to apply psychoanalytic theory as a diagnostic tool to understand Kahlo. Lindauer argues that Grimberg often portrays Kahlo, based on her paintings, as having anxiety about abandonment and fear of loss in her adult life, because of her childhood experiences.<sup>79</sup> Diagnosing Kahlo by means of her paintings creates two problems that need to be addressed. First, when Kahlo's paintings are examined as direct

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>75</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>78</sup> Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 107.



access into her psyche, this only provides limited information about who she is. Secondly, this type of examination allows the masculine authority to characterize Kahlo using Freudian discourse.<sup>80</sup> Most importantly, diagnosing Kahlo by only looking to her artwork is highly unethical and presumptuous, because it implies that Kahlo's art is merely a visual record of her personal sufferings and traumas. This approach disregards statements made in her paintings about her Mexican culture and political views.

Many of Kahlo's paintings include biographical references to her life and beliefs, and it is known that Kahlo had an indigenous wet nurse when she was an infant. However, the importance of this painting does not rely on the fact that her mother did not breastfeed her, but instead on the cultural significance of this painting. In *My Nurse and I*, Kahlo is nourished from Mexico's indigenous past.<sup>81</sup> Similar to depicting herself as a *soldadera* in *La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida*, here she traces her heritage to pre-colonial Mexico, portraying herself as nurtured by an indigenous wet nurse.<sup>82</sup> Kahlo's nourishment comes from Mexico's culture, directly from the indigenous nurse's flower-like breast. The nurse is viewed as a symbol of Mexican earth, and therefore the glands of her left breast are exposed as plant-like patterns that similarly decorate pre-Columbian sculptures.<sup>83</sup> The flower-like bouquet on the breast is also a reference to the Aztecs and their method of assigning days of the calendar to portions of the human body. One of the days from the calendar is a flower, or *xochitl*, which was linked with the breast or nipple. In fact, Kahlo occasionally went by her nickname, *xochitl*.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>81</sup> Deffebach, "Saints and Goddesses," 61.

<sup>82</sup> Lowe, "The Self-Portraits," 48.

<sup>83</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Deffebach, "Saints and Goddesses," 61.

The role of women gained important symbolic meaning after the Mexican revolution. With the birth of a new nation and culture, the figure of the woman symbolized a nurturing and maternal force within Mexico. In this new framework of post-revolutionary Mexico, the figure of the woman was responsible for uniting everyone in Mexico, most importantly with the indigenous people.<sup>85</sup> In *My Nurse and I*, the wet nurse seems to function as the symbol of Mexican mother earth as her milk nourishes Kahlo. She is fed from the pre-Columbian past as well as the modern day post-revolutionary nation it has become. However, I would like to argue that this notion of a maternal figure for Mexico actually romanticizes Mexico's native population. I believe Kahlo acknowledges this problem in her painting by representing the nurse as stoic and lacking any individualistic qualities, and conceals her face with a mask. Additionally, I believe that Kahlo alludes to the failed attempt by the government to unite all of Mexico. This is suggested by the sorrowful raining sky in the background and the wasted drops of milk from the nurse's right breast. As Kahlo suckles passively on the nurse's breast, milk drips from her mouth, echoing the misled attempt by Mexico's post-revolutionary government to embrace and appreciate its indigenous culture.

This concept of a protective mythical mother is an iconographic subject that is present in many cultures that are familiar with Catholicism.<sup>86</sup> This painting does not exclusively contain pre-Columbian influences, but also includes some Christian references. The image of infant Kahlo being cradled by a nurturing mother figure recalls the traditional images of the Madonna and child. Others have suggested that the painting also resembles a pieta.<sup>87</sup> Kahlo hinted at Christian

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<sup>85</sup> Charles Merewether, "Embodiment and Transformation: The Art of Frida Kahlo," in *The Art of Frida Kahlo* (Adelaide Art Festival: Art Gallery of South Australia & Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1982), 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>87</sup> Teresa del Conde, "Frida Kahlo: A Profile," in *The Art of Frida Kahlo* (Adelaide Art Festival: Art Gallery of South Australia & Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1982), 9.

symbolism and explained in an interview by Parker Lesley in 1939 that the raindrops in the background are “milk from the Virgin.”<sup>88</sup> Kahlo disrupts the traditional images of child Christ and the Virgin, by replacing the male infant with herself as a female infant.

By painting a semi-blank scroll at the bottom, Kahlo alludes to the retablo tradition, a popular Christian Mexican art form with devotional meaning. Usually retablos include saints or members of the Holy Family, including ex-voto paintings. Ex-voto paintings are meant to hang in churches and venerate Christian miracles. Specifically, they serve as a record of a life-threatening event, such as an accident or illness, with an intervening miracle from a holy figure, including a small description on a scroll.<sup>89</sup> Kahlo would often use the tradition of ex-voto painting as an influence in her work, but she took it one step further and the result is at once fascinating and disturbing. Unlike a traditional ex-voto painting that depicts a miracle, her paintings subvert this practice by excluding a divine intervention, and often the scrolls are left blank with no description. Therefore, the scene that Kahlo depicts is not resolved. Although in *My Nurse and I* there is not necessarily a divine intervention needed, Kahlo still includes the blank scroll at the bottom of the canvas.

*My Nurse and I* functions as a visual exploration of Kahlo’s Mexican identity, but it also mirrors Mexico’s own search for a national identity. Kahlo represents herself as suckling from Mexico, and nourished by the pre-Columbian past and post-revolutionary present. However, her explorations are complex as she engages with themes of cultural and national identity. Kahlo embraces her *mestiza* identity as she simultaneously critiques Mexico’s idealization of its pre-Hispanic past and native peoples.

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<sup>88</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 96.

The next year in 1938, Kahlo painted *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (figure 5). Four figures stand in this vast plaza surrounded by buildings. These figures were actually objects that Kahlo and Rivera owned.<sup>90</sup> Their collection of pre-Hispanic objects often provided a source of inspiration for Kahlo's paintings. The setting for this scene is a square in Coyoacán, Kahlo's hometown, which is an area of Mexico City.<sup>91</sup> Despite the title of the painting, there are actually five figures, including a small child sitting in the shadows casted by these figures, staring in bewilderment. All of these figures look unrelated and seem out of place as they stand awkwardly beside one another. Upon further examination, they actually represent various symbols associated with Mexican culture and identity.

From the left stands a figure of a man whose entire body is tangled in firecrackers. This figure is meant to represent Judas Iscariot, or the burning Judas figure, a popular figure in orthodox and Catholic practices. These celebrations are held near the holy holiday of Easter, in which papier-mâché dummies designed to look like Judas are tied in fireworks and lit on fire. It is believed that this celebration not only serves as an entertainment purpose but also as a constructive method for venting a collective feeling of class struggle.<sup>92</sup> In Mexico, Judas figures were sometimes given the faces of corrupt politicians, therefore burning this effigy symbolized society's purging of its villains.<sup>93</sup> This Judas figure also stands in as a representation of the stereotypical macho male, while the fireworks symbolize his destructive and violent tendencies.<sup>94</sup>

Next to the Judas figure is a small girl sitting on the ground. This could be Kahlo as a child, but perhaps symbolizes her entire generation, the children of post-revolutionary Mexico whom are

<sup>90</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 11.

<sup>92</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 91.

<sup>93</sup> Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: Life and Work* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2007), 36.

<sup>94</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 24.

overwhelmed by the narratives of both the past and present.<sup>95</sup> The child's expression of awe and wonderment as she stares up at the enormous figures surrounding her, reinforces the feeling of being overwhelmed. Her gaze is directed to the Nayarit pregnant figure before her. The clay idol's feet are broken off and the head reconstructed, as seen by the crack along the neck. Perhaps this pregnant idol stands for Kahlo's belief that the culture of the pre-Columbian past is a fertile inspiration for her art.<sup>96</sup> Herrera claims that this figure could also represent Kahlo, since she had various surgeries on her foot, including the amputation of some of her toes. She equates Kahlo's brokenness with that of the fertility idol.<sup>97</sup> However, as seen in *Self-Portrait on the Border of Mexico and The United States*, Kahlo often depicted the likeness of artifacts and objects she owned as well as those in museums. The original Nayarit figure that was in Kahlo and Rivera's collection, which she modeled this one after, did actually have broken feet and a cracked neck, as this one does.<sup>98</sup> Herrera's claim that this idol represents a wounded Kahlo disregards the possibility that the artist was merely observing an actual object in her collection that was significant to Mexico's pre-Columbian history.

The figure next to the clay idol is a papier-mâché skeleton, which may represent the Day of the Dead, a traditional Mexican holiday.<sup>99</sup> This figure is a recurring theme in several of her paintings, likely to symbolize death, and may also reference Aztec art.<sup>100</sup> Kahlo herself explained in an interview, as cited by Herrera, that the skeleton was included as a joke.<sup>101</sup> If the skeleton is meant to be a joke, it is an eerie one, as he stands in contrapposto with a twisted grin on his face,

<sup>95</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 126.

<sup>96</sup> Deffebach, "Revitalizing the Past," 79.

<sup>97</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 24.

<sup>98</sup> Deffebach, "Revitalizing the Past," 79.

<sup>99</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 11.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 24.

almost as if he is mocking what he symbolizes.<sup>102</sup> The skeleton's gaze travels off to the right, bringing attention to the straw man on a donkey. This figure is relatively smaller than the others because he is closer to the buildings in the background. Kahlo explained in an interview that she painted the straw man because he is weak and easy to destroy, but also elegant.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps this figure is viewed as a revolutionary figure, symbolizing the fragility of the ideals of post-revolutionary Mexico, because the new government had failed to unite the nation.<sup>104</sup>

In *Four Inhabitants of Mexico City*, Kahlo critiques the superficiality of national unity of post-revolutionary Mexico. Unlike *My Nurse and I*, where Kahlo was nurtured by her Mexican heritage, in this painting she seems critical of Mexican culture as she analyzes stereotypes and myths more closely.<sup>105</sup> Kahlo engages in themes associated with Mexican identity, and the overwhelming narratives of both the past and present. As cited in Herrera, Kahlo explained that she left the plaza mostly barren because, "too much revolution has left Mexico empty."<sup>106</sup> The openness and eerie desolation recalls proto-Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico's empty plazas. Kahlo's approach to space, the vastness of Mexico City's plaza, the exaggerated shadows cast by the inhabitants, and the feelings of alienation are similar to the sentiments expressed in de Chirico's "metaphysical" piazzas.<sup>107</sup> The difference between Kahlo and de Chirico is that Kahlo did not exactly reject modernism, as de Chirico's paintings often expressed nostalgia for the past.<sup>108</sup> Instead, Kahlo was critiquing her culture by examining stereotypes about Mexican identity.

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<sup>102</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 91.

<sup>103</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 24.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>105</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 126-27.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>107</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 89.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-91.

These symbols of Mexican identity reappear in another painting, *The Wounded Table* (figure 6), created two years later in 1940. This painting illustrates Kahlo's expression of her *Mexicanidad*. Only three of the four inhabitants make an appearance in this painting, such as the Judas figure, another pre-Columbian sculpture from Nayarit, and the skeleton. Although the Nayarit sculpture appears stylistically different here than in *Four Inhabitants*, this figure was modeled from a couple embracing one another, now in the Frida Kahlo Museum.<sup>109</sup> Kahlo sits at the middle of the table, which happens to also be the center of the painting, and is surrounded by three figures of Mexican identity as well as two children and a fawn. The two children are her niece and nephew, and the fawn was her real pet.<sup>110</sup> Therefore Kahlo is surrounded by three symbols of her cultural identity, while she is also accompanied by tangible beings that existed in her life. Unlike in *Four Inhabitants of Mexico City*, the figures interact with Kahlo, who is no longer a child and is instead an adult. Theater curtains are pulled back to reveal that this setting is on a stage. A stage backdrop depicts a stormy sky and thick vegetation. Perhaps by including theatrical curtains and a stage, Kahlo is suggesting how Mexican identity is performed and masqueraded, parodying the stereotypes of *Mexicanidad*.<sup>111</sup>

Kahlo depicts herself wearing a Tehuana dress again, suggesting *Mexicanidad*. A section of her long black hair is lifted playfully by the grinning skeleton, linking himself to Kahlo. A rope through his pelvic bone secures him to the chair, keeping him upright and stable. Between Kahlo and the skeleton sits the pre-Columbian Nayarit sculpture whose arm becomes one with Kahlo's arm. Kahlo elongated the sculpture's arm as well as her own to suggest her link with the pre-Columbian past.<sup>112</sup> The Judas figure is also physically interacting with Kahlo but he now has a

<sup>109</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 139.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>111</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 126.

<sup>112</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 139.

shrunken bleeding head and oversized body. He extends his lengthened arm around Kahlo's shoulders, as if he is protectively embracing her, but in a way that seems possessive. All three of these figures are physically interacting with Kahlo, and she does not reject their touch, perhaps to emphasize that her identity is connected to theirs. She is celebrating her *Mexicanidad* while simultaneously presenting stereotypes of Mexican identity that were emphasized during post-revolutionary Mexico.<sup>113</sup> Kahlo aligns herself with the inhabitants of Mexico, and declares she is at the center of this group.

There is an eerie atmosphere that this painting exudes, as the table's legs are replaced with human legs with exposed musculature, while the tabletop oozes with blood, and some of the figures suffer from visible bloody wounds. Herrera suggests that since a table usually functions as a symbol of domesticity, then the bloody wounds represent her broken marriage with Rivera.<sup>114</sup> There is no denying that Kahlo relied on her own reality to inspire her images. However, there could be a second interpretation of the bloody wounds throughout the painting. Andersen argues that the Tehuana-clad Kahlo bleeds alongside the symbols of Mexican identity, thus making her a martyr for *Mexicanidad*.<sup>115</sup> Different from a martyr in Christianity, Kahlo becomes a martyr for the stereotypes associated with Mexican identity. By wearing a Tehuana dress in this painting, while surrounded by various characters of Mexico, Kahlo alludes to the romanticizing of her culture in post-revolutionary Mexico. I would also like to note that the composition of the painting recalls the scene from Leonardo da Vinci's, *The Last Supper*. Kahlo positions herself at the center as the Christ figure, accompanied by Judas, the betrayer. As in *My Nurse and I*, Kahlo subverts the gender role of the Christ figure, and instead situates her female body into this traditional male-

<sup>113</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 126-127.

<sup>114</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 280.

<sup>115</sup> Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound," 126.



dominated role. Therefore, this painting engages with themes such as the issues associated with exploring cultural identity, stereotypes of Mexican identity, and traditional gender roles within Catholicism.

In conclusion, Kahlo's return to Mexico from the United States was another major turning point in her life. Her artistic production increased and she focused more closely on the theme of Mexican identity and nationalism. She became more involved in political causes, such as raising money for Mexican militiamen fighting in the Spanish Civil war, and befriended the Marxist revolutionary, Leon Trotsky. She also painted many of her culturally significant works during this time. *My Nurse and I* explores the complexities of her Mexican identity, while she comments on the idealization of Mexico's native peoples. She also subverts traditional gender roles, specifically in the patriarchal religion of Christianity. She replaces the infant Christ with an image of her female body. Kahlo does this again in *The Wounded Table*, as she positions herself as Christ from the Last Supper. In both *The Wounded Table* and *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, Kahlo explores the various identities unique to Mexico, but I believe she does this in a way that critiques Mexican stereotypes of identity. These three paintings are essential in understanding the complex relationship Kahlo had to post-revolutionary Mexico, and her examination of national identity.

## CHAPTER 4: SURREALISM

Beginning in 1937, Kahlo was producing work more consistently and her paintings started to reveal techniques closely associated with the avant-garde art movement Surrealism. In fact, she exhibited *The Wounded Table* in 1940 at the Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo (International Exhibition of Surrealism) in Mexico City in 1940.<sup>116</sup> André Breton who had first visited Mexico in 1938 organized the exhibition. Breton, the self-appointed father of Surrealism, met Kahlo and observed her work. Breton acknowledged Kahlo as a member of the Surrealist movement because he believed her paintings revealed elements of Surrealism.<sup>117</sup> With the assistance of Breton, Kahlo participated in an exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City, which played an important role for America's exposure to European and Latin American Surrealism.<sup>118</sup> In the exhibition catalog Breton claimed that Kahlo stood, "at the point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line, beyond which we hope that they might unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them."<sup>119</sup> Breton viewed Kahlo as a member of the Surrealists not just because of her artistic abilities, but also because of her revolutionary leftist politics that aligned with theirs.

Kahlo participated in an exhibition in 1938 in Paris called "Mexique," at the Renou Et Colle Gallery. She described in a letter to her friend and previous lover, Nickolas Muray, that she met Marcel Duchamp and he was a "marvelous painter" who was the "only one who has his feet on the earth among all this bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of Surrealists."<sup>120</sup> Kahlo never

<sup>116</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 25.

<sup>117</sup> Rosenthal, "Diego and Frida: High Drama in Detroit," 117.

<sup>118</sup> Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary," 33.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>120</sup> *Frida Kahlo to Nickolas Muray, New York, N.Y., February 16, 1939*. Letter. From the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, *Nickolas Muray Papers, 1910-1978*.

fully identified with the Surrealists and often seemed annoyed by Breton and his curatorial incompetence. For example, he did not adequately prepare for the exhibition, and used stereotypical Mexican objects like toys and sugar skulls to accompany Kahlo's paintings.<sup>121</sup> However, she was pleased that her art gained positive responses from artists such as Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Yves Tanguy and Wolfgang Robert Paalen.<sup>122</sup>

There is an ongoing debate among scholars whether or not Kahlo can be defined as a Surrealist, but it is not my intention to engage in this debate. Instead, a more productive conversation would be to explore the ways in which some of Kahlo's artworks reveal qualities that could be understood as Surrealist. Although Kahlo never explicitly categorized herself as a Surrealist, she once said that her paintings may relate to Surrealism, but she "never had the intention of creating a work that could be considered to fit in that classification."<sup>123</sup> I would like to argue that any formalistic or iconographic elements in her paintings that could be interpreted as Surrealist are actually from sources unique to Mexico's national culture and history. Additionally, the Surrealists and Kahlo held similar radical political beliefs that were both rooted in the foundations of the Communist Party. It is important to note that Kahlo's painting style, iconography, and political views were fully developed before she became acquainted with Breton and the Surrealists.

Surrealism was one of the longest avant-garde movements, stretching into the 1950s, and was also one of the most political. Surrealism emerged around 1924, with influences dating back to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire.<sup>124</sup> The movement developed out

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<sup>121</sup> Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary," 45.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>123</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 255.

<sup>124</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, "Modern, Surrealism, and Political Imaginary," in *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*, by Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 93.

of World War I by Breton who had convinced other important figures to join, such as Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Tristan Tzara, Pablo Picasso, Yves Tanguy, and others. Although these figures participated in the movement's endeavors, not all identified their work as Surrealist and were merely associated with the activities of the group.<sup>125</sup>

Breton is widely considered the father of Surrealism as he created its first journal, *Littérature*, and is credited with bringing together several important figures.<sup>126</sup> He had called for a refusal of reality in order to reveal the dream element that exists in everyday life, allowing a person to become aware of his or her repressed feelings.<sup>127</sup> The Surrealists viewed everyday life and reality as an obstacle to the expression of unspoken desires that exist in dreams. Breton wanted to highlight polarities, such as the real and the imaginary, and insisted that these dualities should not clash with one another.<sup>128</sup> This notion of dualities is a common theme throughout Kahlo's work. She often depicts opposites and emphasizes their relationship. For example, the connection between the sun and the moon, death and life, the United States and Mexico, all reoccur in her paintings. The Surrealists embraced these contradictions, as did Kahlo.

Surrealism was influenced by Cubism and Dada and appropriated aspects from each of these prior movements. The Surrealists were not concerned with reducing reality to geometric forms, as Cubism did, but instead they were attracted to the concept of collage. The Surrealists admired the collage technique for its ability to blend several pieces of reality, which prompted the Surrealists to look outside of everyday experiences and further a better understanding of reality.<sup>129</sup>

The Dadaists paved the way for the political concerns for the Surrealists. Dada promoted anti-art,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 98-100.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 95.

the outrageous and the satirical. Two of its founding members, George Grosz and John Heartfield, were political from the beginning. The Surrealists were much more unambiguous in their political stance compared to the Dadaists, as they were often involved in revolutionary causes and some were members of the Communist Party. The Dadaists were less interested in organized political activity, but they certainly helped to shape these ideals.<sup>130</sup>

Breton first joined the Communist Party in 1927, as an effort to support the “Workers Opposition,” led by Trotsky, which promoted proletarian democracy and artistic autonomy during Stalin’s rise in power in the Soviet Union, but also during the decline of Trotsky’s radical influence. The Surrealists were opposed to Stalin’s attempt to establish a regulated proletarian art, or Socialist Realism.<sup>131</sup> Stalin promoted Socialist Realism because he believed art should depict life and the struggle of the proletariat realistically. Therefore, the Communist Party viewed Surrealism as just another modern art movement that did not appropriately serve the proletariat nor did it accurately portray the ideals of the revolution.<sup>132</sup> As a direct response, the strict rules and regulations placed on art did not appeal to the Surrealists. The Surrealists also faced issues with the French Communist Party and their tendency to focus more on the socio-political features of the revolution, and less on art. The French Communist Party left the responsibility of issues regarding art and culture to the bourgeois forces.<sup>133</sup>

The Surrealists supported Trotsky’s political ideologies, such as his promotion of a united front against Fascism, his dedication to the revolution on a wider international scale, and most importantly his tolerant stance on art.<sup>134</sup> The Surrealists admired Trotsky’s views on art and the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>132</sup> Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “The Situationist International, Surrealism and the Difficult Fusion of Art and Politics,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27:3 (2004): 377.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>134</sup> Bronner, “Modern, Surrealism, and Political Imaginary,” 103.

function it served in the revolution. Trotsky rejected the notion that art should contain any restrictions, and viewed freedom of creativity as a prerequisite for the production of art. Unlike Stalin's rigid set of rules regarding art, Trotsky believed that even if the content of art was not outright revolutionary, it could still assist the communist agenda. If art was censored and dictated by a set of rules to create a standardized type, then it would lose its freedom of creativity and expression and ultimately work against the ideals of the revolution.<sup>135</sup>

The Surrealists and Kahlo both held similar political beliefs in that they supported Communism, were members of its political party, and pursued the ideologies of the revolution. Kahlo and the Surrealists were anti-imperialism, anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, and disagreed with the common view that other countries should follow in the footsteps of American industrialization. Unlike the Surrealists, some Marxists believed that industrialization was progress for the proletariat. However, Kahlo and the Surrealists were cautious of America's industrialization, fearing that too much of it could create a sterile and alienating world.<sup>136</sup> This is seen in Kahlo's *Self-Portrait on the Border of Mexico and The United States*, in which she depicted the American landscape as a world dominated by machines, capitalism and industry, devoid and sterile of anything natural. The Surrealists romanticized the pre-capitalist past, disavowing the cold rationality of industrialization.<sup>137</sup> Kahlo similarly believed this, suggested by the constant theme of representing Mexico as fertile and self-sustaining throughout her paintings.

Although the Surrealists are considered one of the most political art movements of the avant-garde, other groups were similarly involved in Marxist politics. The painters in Latin America during the 1920s were concerned with radical leftist politics, especially during the post-

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<sup>135</sup> Rasmussen, "The Situationist International," 376.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 372.

revolutionary period when Mexico was attempting to embrace its indigenous roots. Artists such as Kahlo were expressing their political and cultural ideologies in their work, often employing what could be interpreted as Surrealist approaches. However, there is an important distinction that should be made between what is considered Surrealist in Kahlo's work, and that of French Surrealism. Much of Kahlo's formalism and iconography did not necessarily come from Freud's theories and the study of intellectual constructs of dreams and the subconscious. Instead, Kahlo's artistic sources were rooted in Mexican folk art, the tradition of ex-voto painting, and pre-Columbian imagery.<sup>138</sup>

When Breton arrived in Mexico in 1938, he had a prior interest in Mexico's pre-Hispanic art, which may have been the purpose of his visit. European artists, like the French Surrealists, had a fascination with ethnography from Africa, Oceania, and even Meso-America. The Surrealists' attraction to non-western art, which they inaccurately considered as "primitive," was a problematic perspective.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, Breton was already inclined to view Latin America as an "other" place that was exotic and mythical. With this view in mind, Breton interpreted Kahlo as having no knowledge of Surrealism or modern art. He believed that Kahlo, as a woman and as an exotic "other," came to these Surrealist tendencies merely through intuition.<sup>140</sup> This is a highly problematic view of Kahlo because it suggests that she was not generating conscious decisions about her artwork, and disregards any intellectual, political and cultural statements present in her paintings. Secondly, Kahlo was fully aware of modern art movements, especially Surrealism.<sup>141</sup> Kahlo was surrounded by artists and intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s. She began painting while the avant-garde movement, *Movimiento Estridentista*, was in full swing in Mexico. She was

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<sup>138</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 77.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 79.

associated with the muralists, the modernist photographer Tina Modotti, and Rivera exposed her to modern art, as he was associated with Socialist Realism. Her early work shows Cubist influences as early as 1927 in *La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida*. Most importantly, “primitive” art appealed to Breton because it was unfamiliar. Whereas for Kahlo, her formalism and iconography was rooted in her identity as a Mexican while any Surrealist tendencies in her work come directly from her own culture and heritage.<sup>142</sup>

One of the best examples of Kahlo employing aspects that could be considered Surrealist is her painting, *What the Water Gave Me* from 1938 (Figure 7). This painting stands out from the rest of Kahlo’s oeuvre due to the scattered daydream-like qualities, reinforced by the subdued tones of her paint palette. However, these images are not as random as they may seem. In a bathtub filled with water, feet emerge which are presumably Kahlo’s own feet, as her legs are surrounded by vignettes of different images that settle on the surface of the water. These visuals evoke Hieronymus Bosch’s images of the surreal and imaginary, suggested by the use of flora and fauna, nude figures scattered about, and even a larger than usual bird. In this painting, iconography, mythology, symbolism, eroticism, and botany are mapped out on Kahlo’s legs. Her composition includes references to earlier paintings, as well as allusions to her political views.<sup>143</sup> Interestingly, the observer views this scene through the eyes of Kahlo. Although Kahlo’s face is not actually seen, this painting still functions as a self-portrait, as she is identified by her wounded right foot on which she had numerous surgeries on during the 1930s.<sup>144</sup> Next to her mangled right foot, a bleeding vein emerges from the drain, perhaps to emphasize the wound on her toes.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>143</sup> Mahon, “The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary,” 34.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 34.



Below Kahlo's right foot, a burning skyscraper protrudes from a crater within a volcano. Upon closer examination, the skyscraper resembles the Empire State building in New York City. By depicting this emblem of American culture surrounded by smoke and flames, Kahlo simultaneously alludes to the yearning of capitalism's demise, as well as the rape of Mexico by U.S. imperialism.<sup>145</sup> The death of capitalism is further suggested by the presence of a skeleton sitting at the base of the volcano. As the volcano represents the Mexican landscape, the man-made skyscraper symbolizes western capitalism. The volcano is a reoccurring symbol in Kahlo's paintings and would occasionally make an appearance in the compositions of the Surrealists.<sup>146</sup> Kahlo's choice of including the skyscraper devoured by flames is an expression of her anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist sentiments, thus reflecting her radical leftist politics.

To the left of the volcano is a large bird, which appears dead, and is supported by thick branches of a tree. This giant bird and its disproportionate scale recall Bosch's eerily massive birds in the fantastical triptych, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Near the tree and on the island's shore, reclines a man wearing a mask. The man has a rope attached to his wrist, which is also tied around a nude woman's throat, as she passively floats in the water. Her skin is pale in color, suggesting she has already died of asphyxiation. Her body is held afloat by ropes that connect her to other objects in the painting. Bugs and insects crawl and slither along the ropes, including a small dancing figure. Perhaps the floating nude woman is Kahlo, although she does not have any identifying markers, such as the uni-brow that she often included in images of herself. Alternatively, the nude woman could represent the colonized and conquered, also signified by the large ship with billowing sails,<sup>147</sup> an extension of the rape of Mexico metaphor.<sup>148</sup> Near the nude

<sup>145</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 127.

<sup>146</sup> Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary," 46.

<sup>147</sup> Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading," 179.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

woman is a Tehuana dress floating empty in the water, suggesting the failed attempt by Mexico's post-revolutionary government to unite the nation with its indigenous past.

To the right of the nude woman and behind thick vegetation, appear the faces of Kahlo's parents, based on their wedding portrait. A similar image of her parents appears in 1936, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (figure 8). In the painting, Kahlo portrays herself as a child and maps out her heritage by including a portrait of her parents and both sets of grandparents. The painting emphasizes Kahlo's mixed heritage. This painting exemplifies Kahlo's exploration of her cultural identity and multiple heritages, as her mother was a Mexican of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, while her father was a German Jew of Austro-Hungarian descent. Although Kahlo's heritage contained some European from her father, she often celebrated her Indian ancestry more,<sup>149</sup> which at times seemed to conflict with the examination of her Mexican identity.

In *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*, Kahlo depicts herself as a child that stands at the center of her heritages. She holds a thick red ribbon that connects the images of her grandparents, as the portrait of her mother and father hovers directly behind her. The red ribbon symbolizes the actual ancestral blood line that connects Kahlo to her grandparents and parents, and ultimately to her *mestiza* identity. Kahlo alludes to her birth by superimposing an image of a fetus over her mother's abdomen, while a sperm fertilizes an egg beneath the mother and child.

By including the same portrait of her parents in *What the Water Gave Me*, Kahlo once again explores her *mestiza* heritage. Kahlo's examination of her cultural identity was complicated and paralleled Mexico's own search for a distinctive national identity. Kahlo's mother is noticeably darker skinned than her German father. The theme of heritage is continued by the two nude women floating on a makeshift raft made from a sponge. Perhaps these two women are

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<sup>149</sup> Herrera, "Portrait of Frida Kahlo as a Tehuana," 58.

characteristic of Frida's own mixed identity, the Indian woman as comforter and the European woman as comforted. The two women could also be a reference to Kahlo's bisexuality and actually reappear a year later in *Two Nudes in a Forest* (figure 9), which she created for Mexican movie star, Dolores del Rio, with whom she had an intimate relationship with.<sup>150</sup>

Breton considered *What the Water Gave Me* as the best example of Kahlo's Surrealism.<sup>151</sup> At first glance, this painting seems to represent a daydream-like fantasy, in which the surreal combines with Kahlo's own reality, as various snippets of her imagination are scattered on the surface of the water. However, upon closer examination, these vignettes are actually related to one another and make political and cultural statements. Kahlo includes themes that engage with her critique of imperialism, capitalism, and colonization, as well as Mexico's post-revolutionary politics, bisexuality, and the complex relationships regarding her examination of her *mestiza* identity. Therefore, these images do not necessarily function as images do in a dream, and they are not automatically from Kahlo's subconscious, but instead are conscious references to her cultural and political views.

Another painting by Kahlo that could be considered Surrealist, but actually engages with themes of her cultural identity, is *The Dream (The Bed)* from 1940 (figure 10). This scene takes place in a dream world, a quintessential aspect of Surrealism. Kahlo represents herself sleeping in her bed, floating before a stormy sky, a background she often employed in her paintings. The stark contrast of the yellow bedspread stands out against the dark tones of the sky. According to Kahlo's diary, the color yellow was meant to signify madness, sickness and fear.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>151</sup> Mahon, "The Lost Secret: Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary," 34.

<sup>152</sup> Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 284.

Kahlo's body is encompassed by vines with thick green leaves, which begins as roots at the foot of her bed. The question remains whether these vines are trapping Kahlo within her own bed and in a dream, or merely embracing and nourishing her. The grinning skeleton mimics Kahlo's position, as he lies on her bed's canopy, reinforcing the feeling of uneasiness. Once again the skeleton figure makes an appearance, this time holding a bouquet of flowers, and has taken on the qualities of the papier-mâché Judas figure. He is entwined by ropes of dynamite, resonating with the vines that surround Kahlo's body. However, the skeleton Judas figure is not from some Surrealist fantasy, and neither is the bed she sleeps on. Instead, this bedroom scene actually resembles Kahlo's real bed in her home, which included a cardboard skeleton on the canopy.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, the elements that could be considered Surrealist are actually from her reality. The inclusion of the skeleton Judas figure once again stands as a symbol of Mexican identity.

With the presence of the skeleton, Kahlo alludes to death, once again an expression of her dark humor regarding life and death. The yearly celebration of the Day of the Dead in Mexico creates a new meaning of death, one that is not macabre or callous, but instead is full of acceptance.<sup>154</sup> The skeleton holds important meaning for Kahlo's *Mexicanidad*, and is also a symbol that originated from the Aztecs. For example, the Aztec god of lightning and death, *Xolotl*, was sometimes depicted as a skeletal figure with an eagle and sun disc carved into his back. *Xolotl* is associated with the sunset and was responsible for guarding the sun at night as it traveled to the underworld. Kahlo employs dualities, as the skeleton figure could symbolize death, but also life.<sup>155</sup> As she engages with themes of dualities, Kahlo demonstrates how the examination of her Mexican identity, and even Mexico's search for a national identity, are complicated.

<sup>153</sup> Lowe, "Surrealism, 'Primitivism,' and the Still-Life Tradition," 98.

<sup>154</sup> Lowe, "Biographical Overview," 98.

<sup>155</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 11.

Another painting, *The Two Fridas* (1939) (figure 11), was exhibited alongside *The Wounded Table* in the Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo. In what could be considered a double self-portrait, two images of Frida sit alongside one another, as a dark sky looms from behind. The dark backdrop induces characteristics of a dream world, a technique that could be considered Surrealist. Herrera claims the unsettling sky is an indication of a woman's inner turmoil.<sup>156</sup> Instead, I would like to argue that it is more likely that Kahlo painted the background to echo the nervous atmosphere of the overall painting.

Immediately noticeable about these two Fridas is their different styles of dress. The Frida that sits on the left is wearing a white lace European and Spanish-inspired blouse with a Tehuana skirt, whereas the Frida on the right is in an indigenous Tehuana dress from top to bottom. These two figures are united by embracing hands, and also by their shared circulatory system. Their arteries connect one heart to the other like a rope, or bloodline.<sup>157</sup> Not far removed from the ribbon bloodline in *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*, Kahlo once again refers to her *mestiza* identity. Kahlo painted the anatomy of the human hearts in a way that is somewhat consistent with the cutaway view used in scientific medical illustrations, something she was interested in since her studies at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City.

Some scholars, such as Grimberg, have interpreted this painting as a response to Kahlo's divorce from Rivera. He argues that the Frida on the left is slowly bleeding to death because of the absence of Rivera's love.<sup>158</sup> Once again Grimberg psychoanalyzes Kahlo's artwork, while disregarding any cultural significance the painting has. Helland believes that the image of the heart

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<sup>156</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 135.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>158</sup> Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*, 26.

should not be overlooked, since it stands for an indigenous cultural symbol. In Aztec art, the heart would often be represented with drops of blood, symbolizing the overall life center of the body.<sup>159</sup>

The pair of *Fridas* represent two distinct heritages, as shown by their different styles of dress. Kahlo is examining her *mestiza* identity as European, Mexican, Indian, and Spanish. Although Kahlo is once again employing dualities, Andersen claims Kahlo, “destabilizes a neat duality.”<sup>160</sup> In this painting, the two *Fridas* are separated but unified, contrasting but also connected to the same body.<sup>161</sup> Kahlo depicts the *Frida* on the left as representing both European and Mexican heritages, by pairing the Victorian blouse with a Tehuana skirt. As for the *Frida* on the right, she wears an entire Tehuana dress, but holds a nineteenth century photograph in her hand, which is an invention of European technology.<sup>162</sup>

Kahlo is not only emphasizing her mixed and dual heritage, but perhaps the dependence they have on one another. These dualities complicate her exploration of her *mestiza* identity. Although they share the same bloodline, the *Frida* on the left attempts to clamp and stop the vein from bleeding. Instead, it is too late because the vein has bled onto her white skirt, as the blood transitions into the red patterning. The indigenous *Frida* appears to be the stronger of the two, perhaps to suggest that Kahlo preferred to embrace her Mexican heritage more than her European heritage. Instead of interpreting *The Two Fridas* as Surrealist, I believe this painting is a statement on the difficulties that surround Kahlo’s investigation of cultural identity. Therefore, this painting separates itself from Surrealism in that Kahlo derived her influences from her own Mexican culture, not directly from Surrealism. Unlike the Surrealists who were interested in primitivism

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>160</sup> Andersen, “Remembrance of an Open Wound,” 123.

<sup>161</sup> Lowe, “The Self-Portraits,” 57.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 123.

and unfamiliar cultures, Kahlo used the themes and images she was familiar with in her own culture in order to examine the complexities of cultural and national identity.

In conclusion, this chapter was essential in discussing Kahlo's exploration of her *mestiza* identity. Although Kahlo had much to agree on with the Surrealists regarding leftist politics and the negative effects of industrialization, she found it difficult to identify herself with this avant-garde movement. Despite the fact that Breton helped her gain popularity within the Surrealist circles in America and in Europe, he also treated Kahlo as an "other," believing any elements of Surrealism in her paintings came from her intuition. He romanticized Mexico's pre-Columbian past, and therefore romanticized Kahlo and her work. Breton disregarded the intellectual cultural and political statements in Kahlo's paintings, and overlooked her knowledge of modern art movements.

Instead of engaging in the debate about whether Kahlo should be categorized as a Surrealist or not, I thought it was more important to examine certain Surrealist elements in Kahlo's paintings. I argue that any aspects that can be interpreted as Surrealist are merely direct references from her own Mexican culture and heritage. For example, in *What the Water Gave Me*, images float like vignettes do in dreams, but these images are not random and actually depict ideas specific to Kahlo's own heritage and also to Mexican culture in general. Additionally, *The Dream (The Bed)* seems quintessentially Surrealist because it portrays a dream world. However, the skeleton resting on the canopy of her bed was not only an actual object in her waking life, but it is a symbol dating back to the Aztecs, and a character from a Mexican religious holiday. Unlike the Surrealists idealization of "primitive" myths and culture, Kahlo uses sources from her own national culture and explores the complexities related to identity.

## CHAPTER 5: FINAL THOUGHTS

During and after the mid-1940s, Kahlo remained mostly in Mexico. As a result, her popularity began to decrease in the United State and in Europe. However, her status and influence as an artist remained unaltered in Mexico.<sup>163</sup> As the state of her health declined, so did her artistic productivity. She turned to painting mainly still-lifes until her death in 1954. Eleven days before Kahlo's death she attended a public demonstration, while recovering from bronchopneumonia, to protest the United States' intervention after the descent of the leftist government of Jacopo Arbenz in Guatemala.<sup>164</sup> Upon returning home, Kahlo confessed to a close friend, "I only want three things in life: to live with Diego, to continue painting and to belong to the Communist Party."<sup>165</sup> Kahlo died with an unfinished portrait of Stalin on her easel, and images of Mao, Stalin, Lenin, Engels and Marx framed above her bed.<sup>166</sup> After her death, she caused a bit of an uproar with Mexican officials because her coffin was draped with a red flag portraying the Soviet hammer and sickle overlapping a star.<sup>167</sup>

Even after her death, Kahlo made a political statement. This was to be expected, as she was associated with the Communist Party throughout most of her life, since her attraction to leftist politics began in her early years at the National Preparatory School. After marrying a revolutionary artist and joining the Communist Party, she traveled to the United States. It was in America that Kahlo created some of her most politically conscious paintings, in which she criticized capitalism and industrialization and the exploitation of the working class by the wealthy. After returning home to Mexico, Kahlo's artistic productivity increased as she further explored her national and *mestiza*

<sup>163</sup> Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 8.

<sup>164</sup> Herrera, *The Paintings*, 218-219.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>166</sup> Helland, "Aztec imagery," 12.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



identities, although complex at times. She critiqued gender roles within Catholicism, explored stereotypes of Mexican identity, and commented on post-revolutionary Mexico's tendency to romanticize its pre-Columbian past and native peoples. She became acquainted with the Surrealists, shared similar political views, and exhibited alongside them. Although she did not outright identify as a Surrealist, her popularity increased as her name was recognized throughout Mexico, America, and Europe. However, as I have stated before, most of what could be interpreted as Surrealist aspects of Kahlo's work are instead direct references to Mexican folk art traditions and pre-Columbian sources.

Most of the early scholarship about Kahlo frames her work through a narrow autobiographical lens. Scholars have focused on the aftermath of her accident, miscarriages, and passionate marriage, thus subjecting her life and work to psychoanalysis. These approaches are reductionist, and instead I wanted to examine the ways in which Kahlo's paintings made statements about culture, national identity, and politics. Although Kahlo did not explicitly paint revolutionary art as the Mexican muralists did, her paintings are still significant politically and culturally. Kahlo explores her various selves and the complexity of being a *mestiza*, a citizen of post-revolutionary Mexico, and a follower of Marxism. Her use of pre-Columbian imagery in order to examine herself, mirrored Mexico's own search for a national identity. These aspects are represented in her paintings and reveal that she was more than a tormented artist that some scholars write her as. Frida Kahlo was a post-revolutionary artist that was committed to investigating her various cultural and political identities, and therefore her personal life experiences should not overshadow the significance of her art.

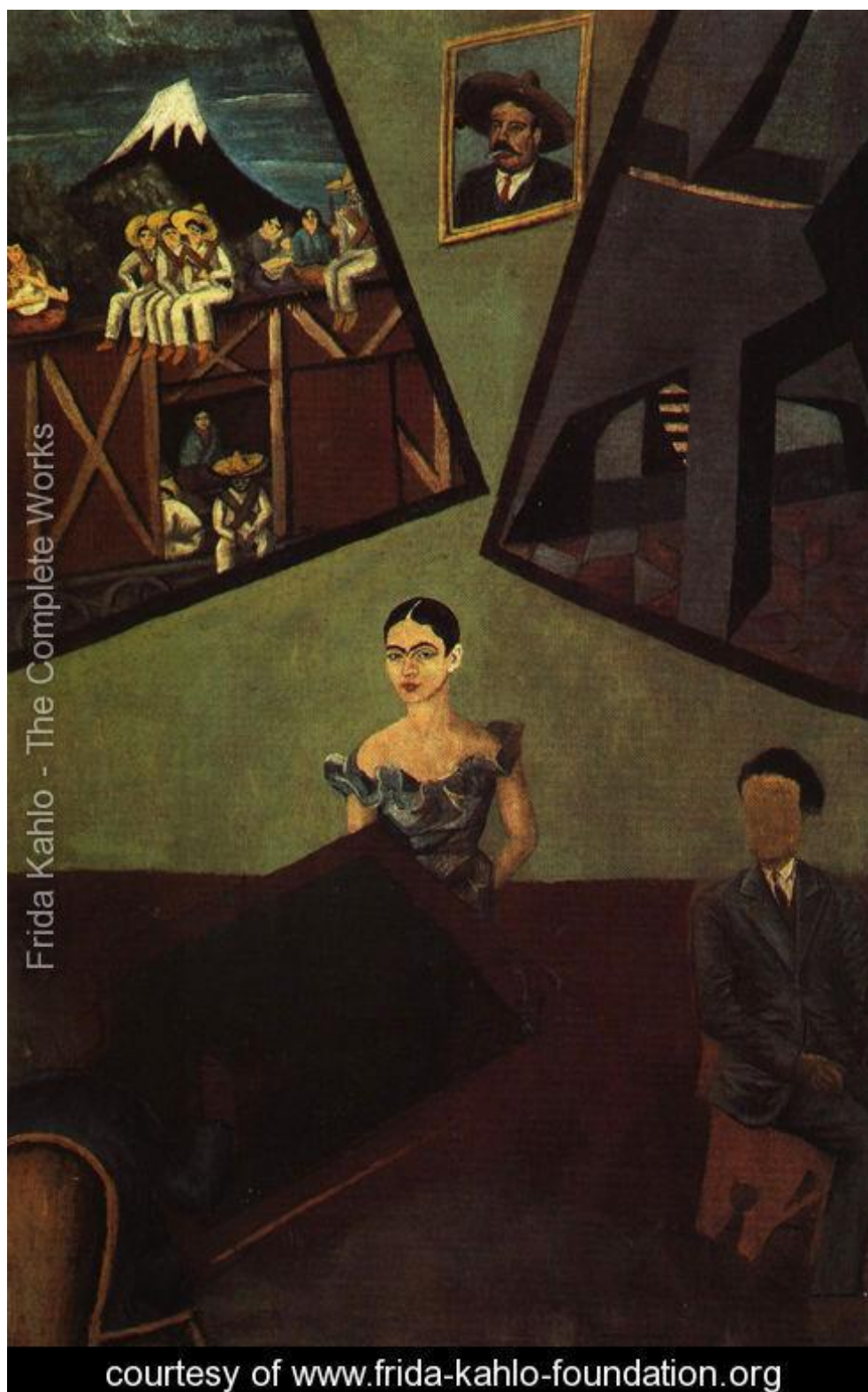


Figure 1. Frida Kahlo, *La Adelita, Pancho Villa and Frida*  
1927, oil on canvas mounted on board, 65 x 45 cm.

Tlaxcalteca Institute of Culture, Tlaxcala, Mexico. (Photo: [www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org](http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org))



Figure 2. Frida Kahlo, *My Dress Hangs There*  
 1933, oil and collage on masonite, 46 x 50 cm.  
 Hoover Gallery, San Francisco, United States. (Photo: [www.fridakhalo.org](http://www.fridakhalo.org))





Figure 3. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Border of Mexico and The United States*  
1932, oil on metal, 31 x 35 cm.

Collection of Maria Rodriguez de Reoyo, New York City, United States. (Photo:  
[www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))



Figure 4. Frida Kahlo, *My Nurse and I*  
1937, oil on metal, 30.5 x 36.83 cm.  
Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City, Mexico. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))





Figure 5. Frida Kahlo, *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*  
1938, oil on metal, 32.4 x 47.6 cm.

Private collection, Palo Alto, California, United States. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))



Figure 6. Frida Kahlo, *The Wounded Table*  
1940, oil on canvas, 122 x 244 cm.  
Unknown. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))





courtesy of [www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org](http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org)

Figure 7. Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me*  
1938, oil on canvas, 91.44 x 70.5 cm.

Collection of Daniel Filipacchi, Paris, France. (Photo: [www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org](http://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org))





Figure 8. Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*  
 1936, Oil and tempera on zinc, 30.7 x 34.5 cm.  
 Museum of Modern Art, New York City, United States. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))



Figure 9. Frida Kahlo, *Two Nudes in a Forest*  
1939, Oil on metal, 25 x 30.5 cm.

Collection of Jon and Mary Shirley, Washington, United States. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))





Figure 10. Frida Kahlo, *The Dream (The Bed)*

1940, Oil on canvas, 74 x 98.5 cm.

Collection of Selma and Nesuhi Ertegun, New York City, United States. (Photo:  
[www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))



Figure 11. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*  
1939, oil on canvas, 173.5 x 173 cm.

Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, Mexico. (Photo: [www.fridakahlo.org](http://www.fridakahlo.org))

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**ABSTRACT****FRIDA KAHLO: A POST-REVOLUTIONARY ARTIST**

by

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General scholarship on Frida Kahlo focuses on her personal life, so much so that her work is often viewed through a narrow autobiographical lens. Scholars have subjected her work to a psychoanalytical approach, and have overused her personal narrative as the basis of discussing her art. Her dramatic marriage to Rivera, her poor health and the loss of several pregnancies have led scholars to psychoanalyze her paintings. However, it is crucial to avoid reducing Kahlo's art to merely her physical and emotional pain. This approach has been exhausted and may put Kahlo's importance as an artist at risk. While Kahlo's physical and emotional pain was undoubtedly a major source for her paintings, there are certainly other themes present throughout her oeuvre. Her paintings make intellectual statements about politics, culture, and national identity, which raise important and complex questions, and as a result complicates the personal approach to her artwork.



## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

As a daughter of a factory worker and an elementary school lunch server, I grew up in a small town in Saginaw, Michigan called Bridgeport. With the help of my older sister, we both became first generation college students in our family. In 2006, I enrolled at Delta College, a small community college in Saginaw. It was at Delta that I first learned of my interest for art and art history. I moved to Detroit in 2010 to attend Wayne State University's art history program. At Wayne State University I earned a minor in art, and both my undergraduate and graduate degrees in art history. While in the graduate program at Wayne State University, I discovered my passion for modern and contemporary art. Upon finishing my thesis, I plan on continuing my education and pursue a doctorate in art history, perhaps with an emphasis on Latin American art, in order to become a professor or museum educator.