Frida Kahlo (1907-54), *Self Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, 1932

Digital image courtesy of Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Christie's

30cm x 34cm, oil on tin

Inscribed in Spanish: "*Carmen Rivera painted her portrait in the year 1932"* on concrete block

IDENTITIES IN ART & ARCHITECTURE – GENDER, NATIONALITY, ETHNICITY

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter:

In this full-length frontal self-portrait with three-quarter face Frida Kahlo turns towards Mexico as she stands on the border with the United States of America. For the one and only time in her oeuvre she explicitly identifies herself as the wife of the artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957), signing the painting

with her Spanish middle name Carmen to make two points. Firstly she is in Detroit as the wife of her famous husband, not as an artist in her own right; and secondly that she wants to differentiate herself from the culture of north America, yearning for Mexico. It is an opportunity for self-reflection. Everything about her self-image is designed to highlight her nationality, ethnicity - her *mestiza* culture, as well as her gender. In her left hand she holds a *papel picado* (a popular tradition of cut-paper) Mexican flag. Her central parting, dark plaited hair and distinctive monobrow make this an easily recognisable record of her appearance at this specific moment. Her heavy Pre-Columbian jewellery is in stark contrast to the long pink ultra-feminine dress, and old-fashioned long lace gloves, which she was forced to wear for the cocktail parties at the houses of Grosse Point dowagers sponsoring Rivera's work (Herrera p.152). Her cigarette is not merely a sign of rebellious modernity but also a link to Mesoamerican culture which first discovered tobacco. The background details are lined up in a series of binary oppositions. On the left side above the famous Aztec temple at Teotihuacan the pagan spiritual cosmic forces of the anthropomorphised sun (masculine) and moon (feminine) clash, causing lightning and thunder. Kahlo witnessed a solar eclipse on 31 August 1932 while painting this work. The power of nature was recognised in the ancient pagan temple, while the pile of rocks might relate to the destruction by the Spanish conquistadors. In front of it are three artefacts associated with Pre-Columbian cultures: male and female fertility dolls, and a skull associated with the Day of the Dead - the impact of Catholic culture on Indigenous religions. While on the right, in the USA, industrial capitalist culture looms. The large flag of the USA with its artificial stars is obscured by the polluting smoke of the chimneys from the branded Ford motor factory, next to simplified modernist tiered Art Deco skyscrapers. There is no sense of great cultural icons but only the modern city. Anthropomorphic heating ducts approach threateningly, their piping leading to the foreground. Electric wiring, plugged into the concrete pedestal, powers an air conditioner, a light bulb and a heating element or 'a loudspeaker, a searchlight and a generator' (Carter). One black cable connects like a root to the fertile Mexican side. In contrast with the sterile, barren USA, Mexico has local lush, fertile flowers, vegetables, and cacti white-rooted in the rich organic soil fed by the sun. The contrast, yet 'interdependency' (Carter), between the modernist dystopia and her beloved Mexico is stark.

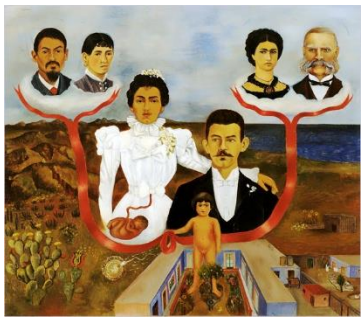
Visual Analysis:

Kahlo developed a unique personal style based on her study and love of Early Renaissance Catholic art and portraits, including that of Piero della Francesca, and Spanish colonial art full of symbolism; alongside traditional Mexican Indigenous popular arts revived since the Revolution. The latter were part of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) and included votive paintings, prints, murals on the walls of

pulqueria, and clay and *papier mâché* sculptures often in a so-called naïve style. Self Portrait Along the Borderline is highly structured on a grid of verticals and horizontals to provide the contrasts in subject matter. Giving a greater area to Mexico, her figure bisects the image vertically. A horizontal line towards the bottom delineates the subsoil underground, where a script would have been in a *retablo.* The space is created by a series of overlapping planes with items lined up behind each other. The pipes and angles of modern Detroit on the right work as orthogonals taking one's eye to the horizon line. There is a total disregard for accurate scale, instead she uses a hierarchy of scale as seen in popular art and Medieval paintings.

Figures and forms have strong clear outlines infilled with distinct colours, pastel pinks, blues and greys alongside vivid reds and greens against the earth colours of the barren soil. The pink of her dress and warm colours of skin and necklace link to the reds in the four corners creating a sense of overall balance. The representation of the USA has simplified architectural and industrial features which crowd the composition, while Mexico is open and has the potential to be lush and fertile. The still life in the foreground is also symbolic, as flowers and vegetables are predominantly painted in the colours of the Mexican flag; while the barren land behind with the skull might symbolise Kahlo's inability to carry a child to term. Kahlo herself is raised above the ground like a statue and stands with a static, closed pose and solemn face, her figure tonally modelled. All the forms are painted in meticulous, realistic detail. Despite the sun and moon in the sky there is no consistent light source and no cast shadows. By referencing votive paintings her impact is '*immediate, direct, and as centred as an icon'* (Chadwick & de Courtivron p.120).

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS



The Mexican artist Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderón, now known as Frida Kahlo, was born in the Blue House, Coyoacan, near Mexico City in 1907. Her father was a German Jewish immigrant, her mother was *mestiza* – with both Spanish colonial and Indigenous heritage. Kahlo's multi-ethnic identity is illustrated *in My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* of 1936. At the age of six she contracted polio which affected the growth of her right leg and foot (one reason to adopt long dresses); at 15 she attended the prestigious National Preparatory School and hoped to be a doctor; at 18 she had a serious accident. Her bus was hit by a tram, she suffered a broken pelvis, spinal column injuries, and spent months in bed; she never fully recovered. She was unable to have

Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*, 1936, oil and tempera on zinc, 30.7 x 34.5 cm. Collection Museum of Modern Art (102.1976). Digital image courtesy of Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

children, and became heavily reliant on opioids and alcohol to ease the pain in later life. She claimed she had been 'murdered by life', while a friend said 'she lived dying'.

At the same time as she began to paint to recuperate, she became interested in politics. She celebrated her Mexican national identity by claiming she had been born in 1910 – the year the Mexican Revolution began when dictator Porfirio Diaz was replaced; later she changed the German 'Frieda' to Frida. She rejected European art influences – still dominant even though Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1813. Instead she looked to *Mexicanidad* – traditional arts and crafts. In 1927 she joined the Young Communist League led by Diego Rivera – Mexico's most famous artist at the time. In 1929 she became his third wife (see her wedding double portrait of 1931, oil on canvas 100 x 78.7cm) and both were expelled from the Communist Party. In late 1929 – the year of the Wall Street Crash – the couple travelled to the USA, and in 1932 Rivera received the prestigious commission to paint a mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The USA was in the midst of the Depression, while Europe was experiencing the rise of fascism, reasons enough for Kahlo to tune into a sense of cultural decline.

Frida Kahlo, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, 1931, oil on canvas, 100.01 × 78.74 cm. Collection San Francisco Museum of Art. Digital image courtesy of Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Kahlo stated in her personal correspondence and her own writing that one of the main functions of this work was to alleviate her sense of isolation in Detroit; explaining why she painted self-portraits she said 'because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best'. She said that she painted *Self Portrait Along the Borderline of Mexico and the United States* in order to express the trauma not only of being homesick but also because she felt tremendously isolated. On 10 July 1932 she had suffered a second miscarriage and spent 13 days in the Henry Ford Hospital. She was 25 years old, and had been married for three years. Despite her radical personal politics and atheism, she lived in a world where a wife was expected to become a mother, especially in Catholic Mexico. She began this painting on 30 August, and returned to Mexico in September just in time to see her mother before she died. Later she was to write '*painting completed my life. I lost three*

children…Painting substituted for all this. I believe that work is the best thing' (Chadwick & de Courtivron p.121).

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Kahlo was largely self-taught. At the age of 16 she saw Rivera painting large scale historical frescoes at her school, and after her accident she took classes with a commercial painter but her unique 'naïve' style was entirely her own, a deliberate attempt to create a new post-Revolutionary Mexican national style. According to her diaries it was Rivera who suggested she work on a small scale on tin – to deliberately make her work resemble the traditional *retablo* votive paintings in churches which gave thanks to God for miracles. *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) was her first ex-voto work, shortly followed by *Along the Borderline*. *'After preparing the small panels of sheet aluminium with an undercoating to form a binder between metal and pigment, she would proceed as if she were painting a fresco rather than an oil, first drawing the general outlines of her image in pencil and ink, and then, starting with the upper left corner, working with slow, patient concentration across and from the top downward completing each areas as she went along...her method was primitive – almost a colouring book approach – but it was effective'* (Herrera p.150).

Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, oil on metal, 30.5 cm × 38 cm. Collection Dolores Olmedo Museum, Xochimilco, Mexico City. Digital image courtesy of Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Wikimedia

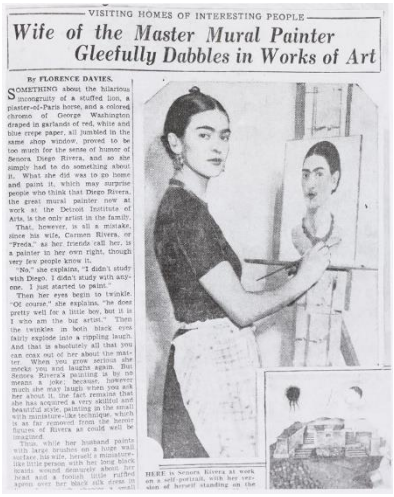
She used tiny traditional brushes and a range of oil paints, with meticulous strokes to create a highly finished surface, with the only softening around the edges of the clouds and smoke. This practice was quite different from contemporary artists' use of oil and linked directly to popular art traditions dating back to the conquest of Mexico. Rivera claimed it was '*like a diamond…clear, and hard, with precisely defined facets'* (Chadwick & de Courtivron p.122).

WAYS IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Kahlo painted more than fifty self-portraits during her lifetime, more than Van Gogh or Rembrandt; they make up more than a third of all her works. All are immediately recognisable and all engage with both her external appearance and her internal state of mind and physical and emotional pain.

Many explore what it means to be a woman in a particular time and place. Linda Nochlin pointed out that Kahlo '*turned to herself and her own peculiarly feminine obsessions and dilemmas for subject matter…when the issues of women's rights, status and identity have been critical'* (Nochlin p.115). To

show herself standing on an engraved block, with her married name, is likely to be a deliberate comment on patriarchal traditions of objectifying women by putting them on a pedestal: a trope which she reclaimed by often dressing elaborately to turn herself into a walking work of art - see the Victoria & Albert exhibition 'Making Her Self Up' of 2018. Kahlo never represents a woman, but always a Mexican woman. Chadwick described her as '*an exterior persona constantly reinvented with costume and ornament, and an interior image nourished on the pain of a body crippled*' (p.294). In this case, according to the official Kahlo website, she is '*as motionless as a statue, which is what she pretends to be. With the high-voltage irony of her withering glance, Frida looks, once again, like a "ribbon around a bomb"'* - the latter a famous quotation from the Surrealist André Breton in1938. The hyper-feminine pink dress with subtly visible nipples has also raised debate. It is similar to her wedding dress and her known preference for *Mexicanidad*, therefore most European authors read it as a heavy woven cotton 'indigenous Tehuana dress' (Huntsman), as the Zapotec women of Tehuantepec were known for their matriarchal power. Others have read it as a 'colonial period pink dress more associated with North America' (Carter), while Herrera interpreted it as an ironic comment on expectations of wifely demeaner from Detroit patrons.



VISITING HOMES OF INTERESTING PEOPLE

Wife of the Master Mural Painter Gleefully Dabbles in Works of Art

By FLORENCE DAVIES.

SOMETHING about the hilarious incongruity of a stuffed lion, a plaster-of-Paris horse, and a colored chromo of George Washington draped in garlands of red, white and blue crepe paper, all jumbled in the same shop window, proved to be too much for the sense of humor of Senora Diego Rivera, and so she simply had to do something about it. What she did was to go home and paint it, which may surprise people who think that Diego Rivera, the great mural painter now at work at the Detroit Institute of Arts, is the only artist in the family.

That, however, is all a mistake, since his wife, Carmen Rivera, or "Freda," as her friends call her, is a painter in her own right, though very few people know it.

"No," she explains, "I didn't study with Diego. I didn't study with anyone. I just started to paint."

Then her eyes begin to twinkle. "Of course," she explains, "he does pretty well for a little boy, but it is I who am the big artist." Then the twinkles in both black eyes fairly explode into a rippling laugh. And that is absolutely all that you can coax out of her about the matter. When you grow serious she smiles you and laughs again. But Senora Rivera's painting is by no means a joke, because, however much she may laugh when you ask her about it, the fact remains that she has acquired a very skilful and beautiful style, painting in the small with miniature-like technique, which is as far removed from the heroic figures of Rivera as could well be imagined.

Thus, while her husband paints with large brushes on a huge wall surface, his wife, herself a miniature-like little person with her long black braids wound demurely about her head and a foolish little ruffled apron over her black silk dress in

HERE is Senora Rivera at work on a self-portrait, with her version of herself standing on the

The everyday sexism Kahlo had to contend with, and her humorous rebuttals, are best illustrated by an article in the local Detroit newspaper titled 'Wife of the Master Mural Painter Gleefully Dabbles in Works of Art'. The woman journalist asked if Diego taught her to paint, to which she replied "*I didn't study with anyone, I just started to paint…Of course, he does pretty well for a little boy, but it is I who am the big artist*." Later in the article Kahlo is described as "a miniature-like little person with her long black braids wound demurely about her head and a foolish little ruffled apron over her black silk dress."

A Detroit newspaper article, circa. 1933. Image courtesy of Detroit Institute of Arts / Google Arts and Culture

Herrera also touches on ideas of the eternal feminine with links between women and nature that go back to ancient Pre-Columbian cultures.

This is the first painting in which Kahlo juxtaposed the sun and the moon. '*It represents the unity of cosmic and terrestrial forces, the Aztec notion of an eternal war between light and dark, the preoccupation in Mexican culture with the idea of duality: life-death, light-dark, past-present, day-night, male-female*' (Herrera p.152). Herrera also proposes a link with Christian symbolism, noting

the tradition of the sun and moon flanking Jesus in medieval crucifixions, an image of sacrifice familiar in Mexican colonial and popular art. In her self-portrait Kahlo combined both pagan and Christian symbolism for greater intensity.

Kahlo outlines her national identity in the painting as Huntsman notes: *'This painting is political: it represents Kahlo's post-revolutionary, left-wing national identity. She paints the United States as the bastion of capitalism and Mexico as a cultural heartland rejuvenated by the post-revolution transformation of the nation'* (p.257). The political and cultural context explains her direct depiction of national identity alongside ethnic identity. Carter summarises the oppositions between Mexico and the USA in Along the Borderline: *'the painting…fed into primitivizing mythology in the minds of many North American intellectuals in the period in question. Nature vs. manufacture, humanity vs. mechanisation, magic vs. science, life vs. death, pleasure vs. work, dream vs. reality, et cetera. This opposition between an archaic pre-Columbian Mexico and an impersonal full factory modernity is importantly inscribed within the figure of the artist herself, colonial dress and indigenous necklace, the Mexican flag and the modern, by association, Western cigarette.'*

These dualities are an expression of what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha called 'hybridity', a racial and cultural mixing as the legacy of colonialism and imperialism manifested as an interdependence in the construction of identity. Thus Kahlo's hybrid identity as a *mestiza* comes from her mother – Indigenous colonised Mexican and Spanish coloniser. While her sense of conflicted identity is related to her position working in the USA in 1932.

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