

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), *The Two Fridas (Las dos Fridas)*, 1939



Oil on canvas, 173 x 173 cm, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. Digital image courtesy of Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Wikimedia

IDENTITIES IN ART & ARCHITECTURE – PORTRAITURE, GENDER, NATIONALITY, ETHNICITY

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter:

This painting is a full-length double self-portrait of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, easily recognizable by her unique facial features. In her diary, Frida Kahlo noted that the painting was inspired by her



imaginary childhood friend. While this may be true, it also commemorates two versions of herself at a pivotal moment—during her divorce from her husband of ten years, the artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957), who was 21 years older. Hence, the painting symbolizes a significant crossroads in her life. It

reveals not only her hybrid ethnic identity as a *mestiza*, but her conflicted identity through two

distinct aspects of herself. On the left-hand side she wears a high-necked white historical European style wedding dress, similar to those shown in her family tree *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* of 1936. This could be interpreted as relating to the European side of her heritage, her mother's Spanish heritage, with her father's German Jewish

of Hungarian descent. In contrast, on the right she wears the cap-sleeved *huipil* and long skirt worn by women from Tehuantepec, known for their matriarchal culture, a homage to the Indigenous side of her mother's *mestiza* heritage. On the left side her dress is ripped open to expose her breast and beneath the surface a wounded, damaged heart. Blood flows from a vein recently sutured with a surgical tool; but not before a pool of blood stains the pristine white skirt, a reference to her several miscarriages seen in previous paintings. This Frida's hand rests gently on her neighbour's which supports it, as her own hand rested on Diego's in her *Wedding Portrait* of 1931, oil on canvas 100 x 78.7cm.



Left 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

Right Frida Kahlo, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, 1931, oil on canvas, 100.01 x 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

The figure on the right seems stronger, her heart is intact and healthy, pumping blood through her vein and around her arms to the miniature portrait of a young Diego (a copy of a painting in his family). Uniquely, this double portrait not only captures the external physical features of the 32-year-old Kahlo but also gives literal form to her inner emotions, vividly portraying her broken heart. The married Frida is in white, unable to bear children, rejected by her husband, bleeding in physical and emotional pain. Blood is not only a symbol of life, but in the Spanish Catholic tradition spilled blood relates to martyrdom, and the sacred love of the Madonna. Is she a martyr to love? The vibrant Frida serves as a visual representation of her ethnic *mestiza* heritage, with a beating heart forever connected to Diego. He admired her deep connection to Pre-Columbian and traditional Mexican cultures, seeing her not only as a muse and an icon of *Mexicanidad* but also as an extraordinary artist in her own right. Her hand cradles a young Diego, or a 'Diegito' who will never be born, which acts as a memento of their life together. Rivera had initiated the divorce and the final papers came through while she was still painting this work.



Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas (Las dos Fridas)* (detail), 1939, Oil on canvas, 173 x 173 cm, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. Digital image courtesy of Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Wikimedia

Visual Analysis:

The two Fridas sit beside each other on a green bench, with the lower third of the image taken up with a smooth ground, in a never-ending space. Behind are heavy, turbulent, thunderous clouds, reminiscent of El Greco's paintings of Toledo; it looks as though she is on the edge of the world. The disturbed natural world contrasts with the containment of these static figures. The clasped hands, a symbol of unity, are at the centre of the image. The Frida – as Tehuana – sits straighter, legs wider, and seems taller; her skin is darker and her slight moustache and monobrow accentuated. The warm colours of her flesh and clothes dominate, and her seated pose with open legs is strong. Although both faces look out at the viewer from a three-quarter view, the left-hand Frida's body is angled towards the right, the version of Frida loved by Diego. The clear outlines, the tonal modelling, yet lack of a single light source or cast shadows, are typical of the style she developed by looking at Spanish colonial religious imagery and popular folk art. Decorative details are full of significance, such as the decorative embroidered flowers transformed into patches of blood. Kahlo's departure from naturalism was her way of painting her "own reality", even though European artists considered the fantastical elements of her work to be surrealistic.

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. Kahlo's multi-ethnic identity was significant for all her works, as was her experience of physical and psychological pain. 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 – hence her detailed painting of the hearts and veins. 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 children. 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; later with the rise of fascism she changed the German 'Frieda' to Frida.



In 1927 Kahlo joined the Young Communist League led by Rivera – Mexico's most famous artist. In 1929 she became his third wife. The couple travelled and worked in the USA, Kahlo suffered miscarriages, an abortions. They both were polyamorous; Kahlo was bisexual. In 1933 they moved into two adjoining modernist houses, with a bridge from her bedroom (in the smaller blue house) to his studio. In 1934 they separated temporarily after Rivera had an affair with Kahlo's sister, and again in 1935.

The casa-estudio designed for Rivera and Kahlo by Juan O'Gorman. Digital image courtesy of Atlas Obscura

In 1938 André Breton, author of the Surrealist Manifesto, visited them and claimed to have 'discovered' a new surrealist. Kahlo thought otherwise: *"Really I do not know whether my paintings are surrealist or not, but I do know that they are the frankest expression of myself. Since my subjects have always been my sensations, my states of mind and the profound reactions that life has been producing in me, I have frequently objectified all this in figures of myself, which were the most sincere and real thing that I could do in order to express what I felt inside and outside of myself."* Thanks to Breton's influences she had an exhibition in New York City art gallery, and in 1939 he invited her to exhibit in Paris to great acclaim. It was at this moment, at the height of her international artistic fame, that she divorced. In January 1940 The Two Fridas was exhibited in the 'International Surrealism Exhibition' organised by André Breton and Paalen at the Gallery of Mexican Art. It was acquired by the Mexican National Institute of Fine Arts from Kahlo in 1947 and transferred to The Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City in 1966.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Kahlo was largely self-taught as a painter. At the age of sixteen she saw Rivera painting large scale historical frescoes at her school, and after her accident she took classes with a commercial painter, and she was interested in European traditions, especially Mannerism. But her unique style was entirely her own. It was a deliberate attempt to create a new post-Revolutionary Mexican national style linked to her politics which supported the Indigenous population after the Revolution of 1910-20. She was also aware of the communist preference for legible realist work. The Two Fridas is unusual due to its large scale and more conventional use of oil paints on canvas. She painted with meticulous detail, as can be seen in the lace, the pulled back hair and individual brows. It took three months to paint.

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

Kahlo said the painting showed *'the duality of her personality'* (Herrera p.279). The image of the two Fridas has been interpreted as an image of Frida in white, rejected by Diego, and the more explicitly *mestiza* Frida, beloved by Diego even as the divorce was finalised. They did in fact remarry in 1940. These dualities link with Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity', a racial and cultural mixing as the legacy of colonialism and imperialism manifested as an interdependence in the construction of identity.

In her biography Herrera suggested *'the doubling of herself deepens the chill of loneliness. Abandoned by Diego, she holds her own hand, and links her two selves with a blood vein. Her world is thus self-enclosed, a dead end.'* Herrera also made observations about duality in all self-portraits – *'the observer and the observed... Her body... she painted as a subject of the artist's scrutiny; the female in the passive role of pretty object, victim of pain, or participant in nature's cycles of fecundity... looking at her face in the mirror, she perceived herself as a depicter... She thus became both active artist and passive model, dispassionate investigator of what it feels like to be a woman'* (p.279). Rivera called Kahlo *'la pintura mas pintor'* with both feminine and masculine terms.

Adler & Pointon use Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* to illustrate Luce Irigaray's theory that within patriarchy the masculine sex is privileged at the expense of repressed female imagery which is *'at least double, is in fact plural'*: *'Kahlo articulates just such a composite identity... which alludes to her mixed Mexican and European ancestry and conflicting cultural affiliations. Fashioning her identity solely with the garments she is wearing, as more surface and masquerade, Kahlo craftily embroiders into the lace bodice of her European self a stylised image of the female genitals – a witty play of doubling, concealment and exposure'* (p.18).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Kahlo's art gained recognition through feminist artists and art historians who explored the connection between her personal life and left-wing politics. Today, she has become a cultural icon with transgressive appeal, from fashion influencer to symbol of unconventional living arrangements. At the same time, contemporary research now focuses on how her paintings represent ethnicity and address a range of medical issues. *'Her body is a site where political concerns intersect with personal ones'* (Adler & Pointon).

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