



**MONTCLAIR STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University  
**Montclair State University Digital  
Commons**

---

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

---

8-2012

## The Frida Kahlo Self-Portraits : The Objectification of Self as a Symbol and Statement

Diane Zimbaldi  
*Montclair State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Zimbaldi, Diane, "The Frida Kahlo Self-Portraits : The Objectification of Self as a Symbol and Statement" (2012). *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*. 1088.  
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/1088>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@montclair.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@montclair.edu).

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Frida Kahlo Self-Portraits: The Objectification of Self as a Symbol and Statement

by

Diane Zimbaldi

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

August 2012

College of the Arts

Art

Dr Martin Greenwald

Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Geoffrey W. Newman

Dr. Scott Gordley

Committee Member

Dr. Scott Gordley

Department Chair

## Abstract

Even with the vast analysis done on the work of Frida Kahlo, little attention has been paid to both the artist's probable abuse as a child and her intentional abortions as an adult. This study chooses to incorporate these findings to reexamine six of her famous self-portraits, *Self Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States*, *My Birth*, *Henry Ford Hospital*, *Self Portrait with Monkey*, *What I saw in the Water* and *The Two Fridas* to uncover a new perspective. Scrutiny of the artist's words, combined with historical fact dispels the current myth that Kahlo's painting was done strictly as the result of her lamenting the inability to bear a child and her often divisive relationship with Diego Rivera. Her work had another agenda. Kahlo is uncovered to be a woman truly ahead of her time in thought and ability. She was extremely intelligent and forward thinking. The vision of Kahlo that emerges from this investigation, while sad and complicated, is also surprisingly strong and determined and the vision of her work forever changed.

THE FRIDA KAHLO SELF PORTRAITS: THE OBJECTIFICATION OF SELF AS A  
SYMBOL AND STATEMENT

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

DIANE ZIMBALDI

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2011

## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Path to Symbolism	5
Chapter 2: Path to Objectification	13
Chapter 3: Self-Portraits	18
Conclusion	35
Illustrations	40
Notes	47
Bibliography	51

## List of Illustrations

1. *Mexican Votive on Tin*, 1862. Museo Nationale de Historia, Mexico City.
2. Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, 1932. Collection Manuel Reyero, New York.
3. Frida Kahlo, *My Birth*. 1932. Private Collection.
4. Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932. Collection Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City.
5. Frida Kahlo, *Fulang Chang and I*, 1937. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
6. Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Monkey*, 1938. Albright –Knox Art Gallery, Bequest of A. Conger Goodyear, 1966. Buffalo, New York.
7. Frida Kahlo, *What I Saw in the Water*, 1938. Collection Daniel Fillipachi, Paris.
8. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.
9. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait Wearing a Velvet Dress*, 1926. Mexico City. Behest of Alejandro Gomez Arias
10. Frida Kahlo, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1938/39. Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona.

## Introduction

Fraught with mysterious symbolism, the self portraits of Frida Kahlo have long been the topic of much conjecture. This work is an in depth look at the circumstances of Frida Kahlo's early life, an analysis of selected self portraits and the unraveling of the mystery of using herself and her paintings as both political, feminist and personal statements.

Self portraiture made up a third of Kahlo's body of work. The selected self portraits re-examined in this work are her 1932 paintings *Self Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States* (Fig.2), *My Birth* (Fig.3) and *Henry Ford Hospital* (Fig.4) as well as her work in 1938 *Self Portrait with Monkey* (Fig.6) and *What I saw in the Water* (Fig.7) and lastly *The Two Fridas* (Fig.8) from 1939. These works were selected because in the opinion of the author they best identify Kahlo's need to "speak" to the viewer about things she is unwilling or unable to talk about in ordinary fashion. Unlike some artists, Kahlo was very reticent about explaining her work<sup>1</sup>, but through her paintings she conveyed a lively political and personal conversation.

Kahlo's life and use of symbolism has been previously discussed and studied by many scholars, such as Salomon Grimberg<sup>2</sup> and Hayden Herrera<sup>3</sup>. But it was the work of Helga Prignitz-Poda and Eva Zetterman that were the catalysts for this investigation. Prignitz-Poda in her book *Frida Kahlo, the Artist and her Work* was the first art historian to suggest that Kahlo might have been sexually abused at a young age by someone close to her. Zetterman whose article "Frida Kahlo's Abortions : With Reflections from a Gender Perspective" for *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, while not the first to uncover these

facts, was the first art historian to document and remind us through her article that Kahlo's pregnancies ended in abortions, not miscarriages and to propose that Kahlo was using her paintings to send messages to the viewer about sex education.

The Influence of Mexican retablo and ex-voto on Frida's work will be discussed in terms of the symbol evolution. The intense need to make art from a native perspective coupled with her rebellion of the tenets of the Catholic Church and her enthusiasm for Socialism gave Frida's work a new and unique quality that created a direct link between herself and the viewer and a created substantial dialog.

Frida's constant physical pain and probable sexual abuse as a child will be the spring board for the discussion of her objectification of self which gives rise to the manifestation of her likeness as a symbol. Her self-portraits seem to bring into focus the question: in what circumstances might a person cease thinking of themselves as human and begin to think of them self as an object?

Kahlo self portraits will be analyzed using the premise that the paintings are not purely personal to the painter but have a larger agenda. Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist and Kahlo's husband states:

"She is the first woman in the history of art to treat, with absolute and uncompromising honesty, one might even say with impassive cruelty, those general and specific themes which exclusively affect women."<sup>4</sup>

Analysis will dispel current thought attributing Kahlo's self portraiture solely to laments about her life (failed pregnancies and illness) and will show how and why she objectified herself in her work and used the immensely popular paintings to spread the forward thinking ideas of a woman truly ahead of her time.



## Chapter 1

### Path to Symbolism

In the time before Frida Kahlo was born, an effort to modernize Mexico became a struggle between the Catholic Church and state for the leadership of not only the country but the thought processes of its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Historically Mexico's largest population consisted of mainly agriculturalists and the church was a persistent ambassador of the traditional. It was Hernan Cortes who brought the Catholic Church to Mexico where the conversion of the Indians was part of the directive. In 1492, Pope Alexander VI had ordered that natives of the new lands discovered by Columbus be instructed in Catholicism for the "salvation of their souls."<sup>6</sup> Cortes accepted this unconditionally and in Cozumel he convinced the natives to break up their idols and build crosses and a shrine to the Virgin. He continued these efforts throughout the Mexico, sometimes after vicious battles. His female interpreter and subsequent mistress Dona Marina became a devout catholic and worked hard to convert her fellow Indians. The Church had triumphed for the time being and for the next 250 years, there was an intimate union of church and state.<sup>7</sup>

What this mingling of Church and state did for the poorer and downtrodden of the country was to give them hope. The hope for an eternal life that might be better than the one they had on this earth gave way to the erection of many shrines to which the

devoted could prove their faith. This of course made the Catholic Church very powerful and dictatorial over the very thoughts of the faithful.

To compete in the industrialized world and have a truer sense of country Mexico needed a change. This came in the form of the Mexican Revolution. As with most leaders of revolt there were other motives as well and the hope was to both infuse a new self reverence and create a new political faction. The Church was a principal obstacle to both nationalism and modernization and therefore a primary target for attack by the revolutionaries.

During the time of the revolution there was a constant power struggle between the government and the Roman Catholic Church. Turmoil often erupted and the result would be ransacked churches and the adoption of anticlerical acts. When the churches eventually closed, the defenders of the church began to initiate terror attacks on all government agencies including railways and schools. Civil war erupted and an American Ambassador, Dwight Morrow held meetings with both factions to engineer a compromise. This culminated in a new political party -PNR- and in 1934 Lazaro Cardenas became president and adopted the teaching of socialistic doctrines in the schools. The new program included information on sex education and the church threatened parents with excommunication if they sent their children to the schools of the Godless government.<sup>8</sup>

Kahlo's mother was bound to both the traditions and teaching of the Church.<sup>9</sup> While she was able to teach traditional Mexican skills and the graces to all of her four daughters, she was unsuccessful in instilling her devout religious beliefs into her youngest offspring. Both Frida and Cristina, unlike their elder sisters Matilde and

Adriana, would successfully evade catechism to have candy at a local shop. They would smirk and stifle giggles during the prayers before a meal.<sup>10</sup> Just as Mexico was struggling to oust the strangle hold of the church and thrust itself into modernity so were the two youngest daughters of Matilde and Guillermo Kahlo.

Guillermo Kahlo, having been born Wilhelm in Germany to Jewish parents, came alone in 1891 at the age of 19, to live in Mexico.<sup>11</sup> At the time the dictator Porforio Diaz successfully enticed many European companies as well as individuals to invest in his country. It was not unusual then for most of the professors at the art academy in Mexico City to be German, French or Italian. Kahlo had reasons for leaving his native country but none were made very apparent. His chances to succeed in Mexico were good given the current regime, so his father gave him the opportunity to set sail for a new land.<sup>12</sup> At first Kahlo worked as a salesman for different stores, eventually settling on the store of jeweler and photographer Antonio Calderon.

Guillermo Kahlo had met and married a Mexican woman, Maria Cardena, in 1894. After giving birth to their second child, she died and Guillermo sought comfort in Calderon's daughter, Matilde Calderon y Gonzales. After his marriage to Matilde, Kahlo agreed to have his two children from a previous marriage sent to a convent to live.<sup>13</sup> Although it might seem harsh on the part of Matilde to ask this of Guillermo, she became pregnant almost immediately after marriage and had to care for a husband afflicted with epilepsy.

Guillermo became a photographer at the suggestion of his wife. After their marriage, in spite of his health, he opened his own studio in Mexico City. His specialty was architecture and he traveled around the city taking pictures of churches. Because of

his epilepsy he could not be alone and had to have a companion with him on these journeys. Frida was often his companion.<sup>14</sup> He was given a commission by the government to assemble a pictorial inventory of the architecture of the pre-Columbian and Colonial periods. He earned the title "first official photographer of Mexico's cultural patrimony"<sup>15</sup>

Although at first a flourishing photographer for the government, Kahlo's father was not a jocular man. He was never quite comfortable in his new homeland and as the years went on became more and more withdrawn.

The Mexican revolution took from the Kahlo household the main source of their income. No longer were government photographs a mainstay and any photo commission was very dear. This calamity had a profound effect on Guillermo, already introverted, and left Matilde to fend for the family by bringing in boarders and bartering with merchants.<sup>16</sup> Their marriage in turn was not a happy one.

The third daughter of the marriage, Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon was born on July 6 1907. Her first two names were not used to address her but for baptismal reasons. The third however means "peace" in German and was the name everyone in the family used for her.<sup>17</sup> At first Frida was a happy if not chubby little girl with a zest for life. At about the age of six she became ill with what was thought to be polio. She became gaunt and her right leg and foot did not grow as the left.<sup>18</sup> At this time she finally had the full attention of her father who uncharacteristically doted on her in her nine month recuperation<sup>19</sup>.

In the beginning of the twentieth century and in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution the most abundant and accessible artwork in the region was the Votive

painting known as Retablo or Ex-Voto (Fig.1). Mexican Retablo painting is distinguished from the European Retablo in that the European Retablo work was a compilation of religious images, paintings and sculptures joined under an architectural frame that decorated the back of the main altar of a church or chapel.<sup>20</sup> Done by professional artists on wood or canvas, the work was used to offer translation of the sacred texts to the congregation. The Mexican Retablo(or Retablo Santo) refers to a small oil painting done on tin that portrays a solitary saint or diety painted by self-taught artists that were devout believers.<sup>21</sup> These paintings might be painted and sold at church festivities for home use.

The ex-voto paintings (retablo-ex-voto) were almost always painted as the result of a miracle. Sickness was depicted in these paintings, often images of people bedridden, overseen by the prayerful vigil of loved ones. This took place in the “Reality or Earth” realm which was placed in the center of the painting. Located on top or in the “Supernatural world” was the interceding sacred healer. On the bottom of these paintings was the text that explained the situation and the miracle that ended the misery through divine intervention.<sup>22</sup> Votive offerings were not only meant to be seen by the townspeople where they were created but often pilgrimages were initiated. Juan Rulfo the acclaimed author from Jalisco (in the western part of central Mexico) describes these difficult pilgrimages:

“ To walk with so many people it was almost like a swarm of worms coiled up in the sun...At night ...the people on the pilgrimage prayed the Rosary with their arms in the shape of the cross looking up at the sky of Talpa”<sup>23</sup>

The origins of votive offerings dates back to prehistory when early humans ”felt the need to call on the supernatural as an expression of their feelings of impotence in the

face of the untamed forces of nature”<sup>24</sup> Votive offerings are well known to promote communication between human beings and the spiritual world.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) produced many results not the least of which was the artistic yearning for indigenous expression. Frida Kahlo, who altered her birth year to coincide with the revolution, was no exception to this idea. She was surrounded by the presence of votive offerings in her childhood with her proximity to Villa of Guadalupe in Mexico City and in her adulthood with the collection at the Blue House at Coyacan.

Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera collected much Mexican art including many retablo and ex-voto paintings. This art was interesting to Kahlo in many ways. Firstly it was native to Mexico. It represented the newfound freedom and resolve of the supporters of the revolution to discard the old oppressors and proceed in an authentic manner. But perhaps more interesting to Kahlo was the fact that retablos were small enough in size to be painted from her sick bed.<sup>25</sup> Frida Kahlo suffered chronic pain from an accident that happened while she was still a teenager. Subsequent operations and treatments left her bed-ridden often and the small scale suited her needs.<sup>26</sup>

Like the originators of the Mexican retablo Frida Kahlo was a self-taught painter, but unlike them she had a vast knowledge of European Art History from volumes in her father’s library and the Biblioteca Iberoamericano.<sup>27</sup> Her very early paintings like *Self-Portrait Wearing a Velvet Dress* (Fig.9) take on the flavor of a Florentine Renaissance style.

But not long after her paintings began to resemble the original work of her ancestors. The Mexican retablo and ex-voto paintings were known to establish a direct

link between the supernatural and human beings. In this Kahlo had her model for establishing the link between herself, her thoughts and the public.

One of Frida's many paintings that can be structurally likened to a retablo is the painting *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (Fig.10). The painting is small and colorful. It can be seen as having a heavenly section at the top. There is a caption in a banner on the bottom. But there is where the similarities end. There is no plea for help and no spiritual intervention.

What we see is a direct statement to the viewer. The painting was commissioned by Clare Booth Luce of *Vanity Fair* fame as a memorial to her friend but Kahlo's controversial painting spares no details in the reality of the way in which Ms. Hale came to her end. This style demonstrates the way Kahlo painted with the purpose of getting her forward thinking ideas to the viewer.

“While all animals may “learn“ and perhaps even have “traditions”, no other being organizes its experiences in arbitrary symbol systems imposed by social groups, where there are non-iconic relationships between the symbol and the referent. The power of this new language integrated with natural neural languages is enormous and escalates the complexity of social and material environments to which the human animal attends. In considering the uniqueness of the human being we need to explain carefully the process of human adaptive interaction within the environment”.<sup>28</sup>

A symbol by definition is “anything that can by custom or convention stand for something else”.<sup>29</sup>The symbol represents like an ambassador the other thing. Anything can be a symbol and in human life almost anything is. No one can establish even a sound others have never heard and expect it immediately to be taken as standing for anything.

The depiction we make must be at all times tied commonly to the objects they are made to represent. Kahlo was of course surrounded by symbols and symbolism in her native Mexico. Her established exposure to retablo as well as her knowledge of art history from her studies could have given her the basis to begin to use her body as a symbol in her work. Much is always made of the decoding of the objects surrounding her in her self portraits. What might these objects mean or signify? But the grander idea is ignored: it is at this point that Kahlo began using herself as the symbol and statement in her self-portraiture.



## Chapter Two

### Path to Objectification

As Frida Kahlo stated in her Diary:

“I must have been six years old when I had an intense experience of an imaginary friendship with a little girl .. roughly my own age. On the window of my old room, facing Allende Street, I used to breathe on one of the top panes. And with my finger I would draw a “door” .....

Through that “door” I would come out, in my imagination, and hurriedly with immense happiness, I would cross all the field I could see until I reached... a dairy store called PINZON... Through the “O” in PINZON I entered and descended impetuously to the entrails of the earth, where “my imaginary friend” always waited for me. I don’t remember her appearance or her color [sic]. But I do remember her joyfulness – she laughed a lot. Soundlessly. She was agile and danced as if she were weightless. I followed her in every movement and while she danced, I told her my secret problems, Which ones? I can’t remember. But...

from my voice she knew all about my affairs. When I came back to the window, I would enter through the same door I had drawn on the glass. When? How long had I been with “her”? I don’t know. It could have been a second or thousands of years... I was happy. I would erase the “door” with my hand and it would “disappear”. I ran with my *secret* and my joy to the farthest corner of the patio of my house, and always to the same place, under a cedron tree, I would shout and laugh Amazed to be...

Alone with my great happiness with the very vivid memory of the little girl. It has been 34 years since I lived that magical friendship and every time I remember it it comes alive and grows more and more inside my world.”<sup>30</sup>

The diary entry, as well as the poem that follows, are both entitled “Memory”. It seems too much of a coincidence that Kahlo’s imaginary friend should appear at the same time she has her bout with polio and is being cared for

so closely by her father. Kahlo wrote the poem at fifteen years old:

All I had done was smile, but there was an  
innocence in me and in the depth of my silence.  
He, he was following me. Like my shadow irreproachable  
and unsteady.

At night he sobbed a song...  
Through the town alleys the Indians sinuously moved away  
wrapped in capes  
They were on their way to a dance after drinking mescal.  
A harp and a small guitar furnished the music and some  
smiling dark skinned girls supplied the gaiety.  
Beyond behind the marketplace shone the river flowing like  
the minutes of my life.

He, he was following me.  
I ended up crying crouched in the atrium of the parish  
church and wrapped in my beaded scarf drenched in tears.<sup>31</sup>

Why would a young girl need to escape herself while in her room? Why would she need to become someone else for a while, leave herself and invent a twin? Maybe someone who would not want to remember what was actually happening to her. The poem suggests some sort of childhood trauma as well. The suggestion by Prignitz- Poda that there was more than likely a crossing of boundaries by Kahlo's father Guillermo with the daughter which he favored so intensely seems a valid one. Prignitz-Poda states "He may have overstepped his boundaries during that time, violating Frida's integrity in a dramatic way."<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Roland Summit describes *The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation*

*Syndrome*:

"includes five categories, two of which are preconditions to the occurrence of sexual abuse. The three remaining are sequential contingencies which take on an increasing variability and complexity. While it can be shown that each category reflects a compelling reality for the victim, each category represents also a contradiction to the most common assumptions of adults."<sup>33</sup>

The five categories are:

1. Secrecy-happens only when alone with offending adult (“This is our secret” etc.)
2. Helplessness-the adult expectation of child self-protection and immediate disclosure ignores the basic subordination and helplessness of children within an authoritarian relationship.
3. Entrapment and Accommodation-failure of Mother/daughter bond will lead to hope of gaining acceptance of the male abuser.
4. Delayed, Conflicted and Unconvincing Disclosure-most abuse is never disclosed.
5. Retraction-Guilt and compulsion to preserve family usually means the retraction of the statement of abuse.<sup>34</sup>

A survey of the list above, along with the knowledge of Kahlo’s life, can lead us to the conclusion that every one of the things on the list can be applied in this case. First, secrecy: there was much time Guillermo spent alone with his daughter, especially after her illness. Second, helplessness: Kahlo was obviously very young when she describes “escaping” from her room to her imaginary friend. Third: entrapment and accommodation: it is well documented that from an early age there was not a good relationship between Kahlo and her mother. Fourth, delayed conflicted and unconvincing disclosure: Kahlo never wrote or said anything to anyone about the abuse. Lastly retraction: although she gave many hints through her painting and behavior, Kahlo had nothing but wonderful things to say about her father.”My childhood was

marvelous because although my father was a sick man (he had epilepsy) he was an immense example to me of tenderness, of work and above all understanding for all of my problems.”<sup>35</sup> Listed as an accommodating mechanism for abuse, is the splitting of reality as well as delinquency and hyper sexuality.<sup>36</sup> Most child sexual abuse for females begins at the age of eight.<sup>37</sup> The suggestion that Kahlo was both aggressive and sexually promiscuous at a young age can also be explained if this was her experience at the hands of her father.<sup>38</sup> There can be various reasons for the split in two by Frida Kahlo but a solid explanation would be sexual abuse by someone close to her.

Although Kahlo never put any of her abuse into words she could certainly speak to it in her paintings and the diary she began writing only after her father died.<sup>39</sup> In an interview referred to by Hayden Herrera, Kahlo mentions a “horrible secret” relating to her father. Either Kahlo’s devotion to him would not let her disgrace him by writing about his actions or her memories of the situation were blurred or repressed.

There has been long hypothesized a direct relationship between disassociation of self and child sexual abuse.<sup>40</sup> Disassociation is a clinical psychiatric condition that can be defined in terms of the splitting of the mind and perception of the self and body.<sup>41</sup> The child finds a way to cope with what is happening to him by “escaping” into someone or something else while the abuse is or memory of it is happening. When the occurrence ends the child can come back to him or herself. Disassociation allows the individual to detach themselves from the impact of the event. Traumatized people that also have chronic pain evidence significantly more frequent dissociation than those that have not been traumatized.<sup>42</sup>

In 1925, at the age of seventeen, Kahlo had a horrific accident that almost cost her

her life. She was riding on a bus with her then boyfriend Alejandro Arias. A streetcar rammed into her bus skewering Frida's abdomen with a pole. This left her with many fractures in her spine, legs and pelvis.<sup>43</sup> Kahlo's accident left her in constant pain for the rest of her life. Both her childhood trauma as well as her chronic physical pain could very well set the stage for Kahlo to begin seeing herself from the outside, as an object. This could explain much about Kahlo's subsequent behavior in life.

As described by Heinz Kohut, in a self-selfobject relationship a person (self) seeks to idealize another (selfobject) to have the person validate them.<sup>44</sup> Diego Rivera was already famous when Kahlo met him. Although not a very handsome man, Kahlo adored him and all that he brought to her artistically and intellectually. As Kahlo initially developed a self-selfobject relationship with Diego Rivera to validate herself, the result was that she used her art to develop her own sense of self and in the process her own objectification.<sup>45</sup>

## Chapter Three

### Self-Portraits

Frida Kahlo is best known for her colorful thought-provoking self-portraiture. Udall says it best, "Her body and biography were her chief subjects".<sup>46</sup> Most analysis of Kahlo's work before Zettermann, then, has relied on those two subjects and focused mainly on her accident in her teens, her relationship with her husband Diego Rivera, and her inability to produce a child.

The following examination of select Kahlo self-portraits will demonstrate additional embedded information. With the revelations by Prignitz-Poda and Zettermann combined with both the recent studies on chronic pain and the feminist perspective a new more modern version of analysis emerges.

The first self-portrait with which we will begin our reexamination is *Self Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States* (Fig.1). This work was completed while Kahlo was accompanying Rivera, on his trip to the US for a commissioned mural painting.<sup>47</sup> At the suggestion of her husband, Kahlo modeled this work after the native votive paintings of Mexico.<sup>48</sup> The painting is small (12 1/2 x 13 3/4 inches) and is done in oil paint on metal. The colors used vary from the pastel blue of the background sky and the pink of Kahlo's dress to the dark muted neutral tones and the industrial colors used in the middle ground. The painting is bisected vertically with one side reflecting a Mexican landscape and the other the United States.

In the foreground of the Mexican half are colorful plants and cacti blooms and buds. The ground is dark which gives a three-dimensional illusion to the brighter objects. The vegetation roots pierce the earth and some even connect with the intruding wires from the right. The middle ground is dark brown and contains a crumbling rock wall and three figures. Two of the figures appear to be female clay fertility figures (one light and one dark), and one a skeleton's head resting on its side. A Mexican pyramid-type structure looms in the background. Both the sun and moon are visible on the Mexican side, each sitting inside a cloud that barely touch like the forefingers in the *Creation of Adam* and formulate between them a lightning bolt.

The large US flag slightly obscured by factory smoke indicates to us that the right side of the image is Kahlo's representation of "Gringolandia." In its foreground are mostly mechanical/electrical devices, the concrete block on which Kahlo stands, and wires from all the machinery inside the earth. The middle ground is dominated by four anthropomorphic metal smoke stacks that mirror objects Rivera used in a few of his murals and lead directly to the pelvis of Kahlo. The background which contains a small portion of blue sky is full of skyscrapers and each of the four smokestacks from the manufacturing plant display a letter (F,O,R and D) and lead right up to Kahlo's left arm.

Juxtaposed to this landscape stands Kahlo, the sole person contained in it. She is dressed in a floor length pink dress wearing long white lace gloves. Her hair is pulled back and braids are secured. Adorning her neck is a coral and jade necklace. She stands slightly right of center on a pedestal of concrete inscribed "Carmen Rivera painted her picture in 1932", indicating her subordination to Rivera. Her determined face gazes on us steely as a statue. Her hands are folded in front of her protecting her womb. In her left

hand she holds a Mexican flag made of cut paper (*papel picado*, a traditional Mexican art form). In her right hand she holds a cigarette. All images seem to be placed on a stage with Kahlo seemingly in the center looking totally out of place.

The majority of what has been written in terms of the interpretation of this painting mirror the writings of Herrera and Kettemann. These writings portray Kahlo as a lost homesick soul in “Gringolandia”, standing in the middle of the two worlds, longing for her native land. Herrera states, “It was in the “Motor City” that she lost her child and it was machinery that took Diego away from her for so many hours while she was in Detroit. Agrarian Mexico, on the other hand meant life, human connectedness and beauty and she longed to return to it.”<sup>49</sup> Kettemann discusses the depiction of Mexico vs. the US in the painting as “...”development” is reflected in her portrayal of the dead, cold world of industry in predominantly greys and blues. The Mexican world, on the other hand, is depicted in warm earthy and natural colors; flowers burst forth ...”<sup>50</sup>

Prignitz-Poda points out :

“Also crucial for understanding the painting is the edge of the stage that Frida is standing on. On the Mexican side, blooming exotic plants are visible, that on closer inspection, turn out to be poisonous and dangerous. Among them are some prickly succulents, with their beautiful but rare blossoms, as well as some flowers that grow straight out of the earth, without a stem of protective foliage. In the center, below the young girl’s private parts is the cuckoopint, in all parts an extremely poisonous plant causing irritation at the lightest touch ; its consumption can cause inflammation of the mucous membranes and could even lead to lethal poisoning. Right next to herself, Frida placed the pulsatilla, the pasqueflower, also a poisonous plant that used to serve multiple medical purposes, such as inducing abortion, albeit with frequently fatal consequences for the women.”<sup>51</sup>



The exposure of the true nature of the “beautiful colorful flowers” on the Mexican side of the painting leads us to think there is something more Kahlo is saying here. Kahlo visually suggests that she is an object, like a statue, by putting herself on that pedestal. By placing her figure and pedestal not in the middle but slightly right of center she creates visual evidence in the painting that she is objectifying herself and aligning herself with the industrial US side. The vertical rhythm of the skyscrapers and smoke stacks ends with her figure. Visually she might want us to think that she too is being treated like a factory, a factory for the production of the progeny of Rivera.

The four larger smokestacks have been rendered to appear like uteri and fallopian tubes and march right up to her womb. There is even the suggestion of a fertilized egg on the fallopian tube arm closest to Kahlo. Although she did not address this particular painting these observations bolster the arguments of Eva Zetterman whose work conveys the message that Kahlo was using her self-portraits as ‘representations of a critical subject position addressing political issues in contemporary Mexican society.’<sup>52</sup>

Next we will reexamine the self-portrait *My Birth* (Fig.2). As with the previous painting, this was both painted in 1932 while Kahlo was in the United States and done in the votive style, so it is small (12 x 13 ½ inches) and done in oil on metal.<sup>53</sup> To satisfy the retablo requirement, the saint or interceding sacred healer is a picture in a frame of the Mater Dolorosa (sorrowful mother) hanging on the center of the blue/gray wall of the bedroom in which the action takes place.<sup>54</sup> The room is very sparse containing only a bare hardwood floor and the bed where the birth is taking place. The bed itself is typical of the wooden beds of the 1930’s.<sup>55</sup> The bed is covered with pale blue sheets and has two pillows with light blue and pink pillowcases trimmed in lace. Behind the bed across the

bottom of the wall there is a thick band of darker blue color that is on the same level as the pillows in the bed. This gives the appearance of the horizontal piece of a cross. Combined with the vertical of the picture frame and the angle of the view of the bed the cross is complete.

At the center of the bed lying right between the two pillows is a female figure shrouded to her chest by part of one of the sheets. The figure with legs spread widely apart has just partially given birth to the head of a baby. The infant torso still remains inside the body of the mother. The female genitalia of the birthing mother are very explicitly rendered. There is blood on the sheet under the infant's head. The infant's eyes are closed and it appears a stillbirth. While at the bottom of the painting there is the characteristic ribbon which usually holds the information about the situation or divine intervention, it has been intentionally left blank.

Often misinterpreted as a reaction to Kahlo's first "miscarriage" and the death of her mother, *My Birth* is correctly credited with signaling the incarnation of Kahlo the painter and not as an appendage of Diego Rivera.<sup>56</sup> Rivera prompted Kahlo to begin to document major events of her life.<sup>57</sup> This painting uses her native retablo knowledge to speak to her viewer. Herrera says:

“*My Birth* is like a retablo in both style and content; indeed, there is a scroll set aside for an inscription along the painting's lower edge. But the requisite information was never filled in. Perhaps Frida felt it was superfluous to tell the story again in words. Or perhaps she wanted to say that here no miraculous salvation had occurred. *My Birth* depicts a calamity, not a close call, not a disaster averted by divine intercession for which thanks should be given: the icon of the Virgin gazes ineffectually upon a scene of double death.”<sup>58</sup>

With the detailed exposure of the female genitalia in this painting, Zettermann's claim that Kahlo's paintings were used as sex education for the masses is well argued.<sup>59</sup> She recounts that at the "New York and Paris exhibitions it was entitled merely *Birth*."<sup>60</sup> Zettermann also successfully argues that the depiction could also warn of the dangers of childbirth.<sup>61</sup>

While Prignitz-Poda agrees with Herrera that *My Birth* is done in the style of the votive offerings, that is where their common assessment ends. She does not believe, as did Herrera, that this has anything to do with the "miscarriage" Kahlo claims to have had. Prignitz-Poda feels that this is Kahlo's rebirth from the succession of disturbing events around her and needs to begin fresh.<sup>62</sup>

The claim that this is the birth of Kahlo is without question when we see the infant's "heavy joined eyebrows"<sup>63</sup>. With the knowledge of her disturbing childhood traumas and the possibility of her father's unthinkable actions toward her, the interpretation can have an entirely different path. Visually the objects in the room coupled with the dark band of blue on the bottom of the wall conjure a large cross. At the top center there is the Sorrowful Mother. This could be interpreted as a crucifixion scene. But who is being crucified?

Kahlo painted this after her mother died, so the assumption has always been that her mother's head was covered with the sheet because of her death. But what if Kahlo felt that her mother chose not to see the monstrosities happening to her child at the hands of her husband? Her head might be covered, then, for different reasons. Maybe the person being crucified is the child Frida Kahlo. Perhaps Kahlo uses her body as a symbol again for the educational purposes of her viewers.

This revelation would also explain the lack of inscription on the ribbon or scroll on the bottom of the votive-like work. This space is usually saved for the explanation of the situation and the miracle that ended the misery through divine intervention. In Kahlo's case there was never a verbal explanation of the situation by her to anyone and certainly no one divine or otherwise ever intervened on her behalf to end her misery.

*Henry Ford Hospital* was also painted in 1932 just after Kahlo aborted her second child.<sup>64</sup> Zettermann states:

“In the large amount of text produced on Kahlo, interpretations of her self-portraits from the 30's and on depart from the major myth in Kahlo's biography: that the interrupted pregnancy in Detroit in 1932 was a miscarriage –when in fact it was a self-inflicted abortion after taking quinine and purgatives as described in a letter dated 26 May 1932. How was this myth established? What does the documentation in literary sources say?

The first author to describe the termination of Kahlo's pregnancy as a miscarriage is Bertram Wolfe in his 1939 biography of her husband Diego Rivera. In her 1983 biography of Kahlo, Hayden Herrera interprets the painting *Henry Ford Hospital* as a biographical documentation of the 1932 miscarriage and the grief Kahlo felt over the loss of a child. Herrera cites the source of her reference to a comment by Kahlo to the art historian Raquel Tibol, made in the spring of 1954. Kahlo said: “Painting completed my life. I lost three children...Painting substituted for all this. I believe work is the best thing.

The number three in Kahlo's comments corresponds to the number of interrupted pregnancies cited in a clinical history of Kahlo written in 1946 in Mexico by the German doctor Henriette Begun and later published by Tibol.”<sup>65</sup>

This self portrait is also diminutive (12 x 14 in) and done in retablo style. There is the indication of the blue heavenly sky in the top half of the painting. In the distance there is silhouetted the gray of the factories. The foreground is painted in a somber brown. In the center of the painting is an oversized hospital bed with the words “Henry Ford

Hospital Detroit” written on the side of the bedframe and the date “Julio de 1932 F.K.” on the front. The obviously distraught Kahlo lies in the middle with her legs bent at the knees. There is an enormous tear falling from her left eye and her usually chignonned hair is loose and falling around her. There is blood on the sheets under her pelvic area. Surrounding the bed on top and bottom are six large objects attached like helium balloons to red artery-like strings being held by Kahlo. In the top left the first object we see is a female pelvic medical model showing internal organs, in the middle a male fetus, and on the right top, a gray snail. On the bottom right is a pelvic bone and in the middle an orchid and finally at the bottom left part of an autoclave.

Because of the misinterpretation of Kahlo’s abortion as a miscarriage the painting has always had the significance of the documentation of a biographical event.<sup>66</sup> As interpreted by Herrera it was the lament of a woman who could not physically bring a child to term.<sup>67</sup> Herrera states, “Against her swollen stomach, she holds six vein-like ribbons from the ends of which float a series of objects symbolic of her emotions at the time of her miscarriage...All the symbols of her maternal failure, including the fetus, are in the same large scale in relation to Frida regardless of their actual size.”<sup>68</sup>

Kettenmann concurs with Herrera that the painting is a “reflection of her feelings following the loss of her baby.”<sup>69</sup> The misinformation first documented by Bertram Wolfe permeates the interpretations of Kahlo’s work to this day. Prignitz-Poda, although not always in agreement with Herrera and Kettenman refers to the painting as a “symbolically fraught reflection on her miscarriage.”

Zetterman explains that Kahlo’s maternal longing might have been feigned to fit in with the early twentieth century definition of “femaleness.”<sup>70</sup> In the days of Frida

Kahlo's Mexico it was thought that all females were supposed to want to have children. This notion coupled with the fact that contraception was restricted and abortion illegal made it close to an impossible situation for a woman who did not want to give birth.<sup>71</sup> It is Zettermann's suggestion that Kahlo might have used her 'poor health' to legitimize her multiple interruptions of pregnancy.<sup>72</sup> To underscore her point it is interesting to read parts of a letter to Dr. Leo Eloesser from Kahlo:

"The most important thing and what I want to consult with you about is the fact that I am two months pregnant. For that reason I saw Dr Pratt again... Given my health, I thought it would be better to have an abortion. I told him that and he gave me quinine and very strong castor oil for purge... Dr Pratt thinks that I did not abort and it would be much better to have the child instead of aborting through surgery. He says he will watch over me closely if we stay in Detroit during the next seven months of my pregnancy. I want you to tell me what you think, in all honesty, since I do not know what to do in this case... Two years ago I had a surgical abortion in Mexico after three months. This time it has only been two months and I think it would be easier, but I don't know why Dr. Pratt would think it is better to have the child... In case the abortion is more advisable I beg you to write to Dr. Pratt... Since performing an abortion is illegal he might be scared or something."<sup>73</sup>

The controversy over politics, religion and sexual education in Mexico, leaves Zettermann with the belief that *Henry Ford Hospital* is a "visual documentation of the bodily process she had gone through as a consequence of having ingested quinine for an abortive purpose, terminating an unwanted pregnancy. The original title to the image *Lost Desire* indicates that this was a traumatic bodily process Kahlo did not want to experience again."<sup>74</sup>

Zettermann also points out that Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen compare the objects in the air that surround Kahlo's bed to the emblems that surround the crucified

Christ in the allegories of the resurrection.<sup>75</sup> This evaluation could correlate to the crucifixion scene alluded to in *My Birth*.

While Zettermann's assessment of this painting is correct it might not be complete. Like the right side of the painting *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United, Henry Ford Hospital* includes factories in the background. The factories themselves are in the direct horizontal path of Kahlo's womb. It might be naïve to assume that they are there merely to set the backdrop of Detroit. More than likely the structures are there for another reason. It is possible to make the assumption that Kahlo, while using herself as a symbol in her narrative to her viewers, is telling them that she does not want to be seen strictly as a production facility for the fetus. She is worthy as a person in her own right.

Having worked very rigorously for two years Kahlo was ready when asked by Julien Levy in 1938 to travel to the US for a solo exhibition of her work<sup>76</sup> It proved to be quite an event and Kahlo's exhibition was considered a success.<sup>77</sup> The then president of the Museum of Modern Art, A. Conger Goodyear, admired especially *Fulang Chang and I* (Fig.5), a painting that had been promised to Kahlo's friend, Mary Schapiro Sklar, sister of the art historian Meyer Schapiro. Kahlo was commissioned to paint something similar and did this in a week .<sup>78</sup> The result is the next painting we will reexamine, *Self-portrait with Monkey*.

This self portrait from the shoulders up is not done in retablo style. It was painted with oil on Masonite. It is a close up of Kahlo slightly turned to her side with a proud yet detached gaze that harbors all her personal thoughts. On her neck is a necklace made from bone and a snail shell attached with a red string. Beside her is the image of a monkey that stares vapidly ahead with its paw malevolently draped around the bottom of her neck. The leaves and cactus behind them proves to be a device Kahlo uses again and

again in her work.

In her book, Prignitz-Poda relates her view of some of pictorial language used in Kahlo's work. This information proves crucial for the reexamination of this particular portrait. Once enigmatic these walls have now been deciphered as in her diary Kahlo writes: "leaves, blades, cupboards, sparrow. I sell it all for nothing . I do not believe in illusion."<sup>79</sup> She believes these were Kahlo's imaginary childhood tools for protection from whatever ill fate brought her way.<sup>80</sup> Kahlo also showed one leaf in reverse to illustrate the Mexican saying "turn a leaf" or to change the subject, as to alert the viewer to another level of meaning.<sup>81</sup>

The monkey in Kahlo self-portraits has been erroneously thought to be an extension of her domestic reality when, in fact, the animal was put in the paintings for a emblematic reasons.<sup>82</sup> As Prignitz-Poda explains:

"Emblems are pictorial signs whose meaning, partially defined in manuals, goes beyond what is actually represented, instead pointing to a more abstract level. In Renaissance and Baroque painting, emblems also appear as allegories whose abstract meaning reveals themselves through imagery. Frequently, the meaning was usually clarified by a fitting, usually Latin saying....Frida studied in detail the art of the Renaissance and beyond that greatly admired Peter Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch, true masters of the emblematic coding."<sup>83</sup>

Kahlo chose to hide her true feelings and thoughts but with some knowledge of emblematic tradition certain paintings can be decoded.<sup>84</sup>

Kahlo chooses to paint the spider monkey in this portrait. As with her father Guillermo, this monkey produces female offspring more frequently than males. In the visual arts the monkey is viewed as the devil or at least in lascivious terms such as



a seducer. In emblematic convention the monkey also warns against too much love.

Henkel-Schone's classic handbook of emblems states of the monkey:

"The monkey embraces it's young in such a passionate manner that it kills them in its embrace. Some fathers love their offspring so much, that their affection leads to great suffering. Because he loves them too intensely and too foolishly, he silently tolerates their impertinence. And once they are past childhood and have grown up they are incorrigible."<sup>85</sup>

Although Kettenmann recognizes the symbolism of the monkey in this painting she wrongly minimizes Kahlo's intent by stating "In Mexican mythology the monkey is the patron of the dance, but also a symbol of lust. Here, however the artist portrays the animal in such a way that it becomes the only truly living tender and soulful being, its arm placed protectively around her neck."<sup>86</sup> However Prignitz-Poda realizes the import of the image of the monkey hanging on to the neck of Kahlo. She identifies the traumatic memories of her childhood that continue to haunt her.<sup>87</sup>

In reexamining this painting more becomes clear using the information gleaned from Prignitz-Poda's unraveling of Kahlo's symbolic language. As in the previous works examined here Kahlo is subtly trying to tell the viewer her secret. The monkey is an obvious reference to her father, especially given the fact that after her father died this singular monkey did not appear again in her self-portraits.<sup>88</sup> The monkey's eyes appear vapid and soulless. The "old man" cactus that appears on the monkey's opposing side could also be a reference to Guillermo surrounding her.

The leaves that are so predominant in the background of this self-portrait can be seen as her protection from something or someone. As one of them is turned the opposite way (*doblar la hoja*) "to change the subject" gives the knowledgeable viewer the idea that

there is a deeper meaning to the painting than what it says superficially. It is interesting to note that after her father died the protective leaves began to thin in the background of her paintings.

As Prignitz-Poda and Zettermann see it Kahlo tries to get more information to the viewer than is originally perceived. Kahlo stated before the solo exhibit in New York, "I have painted about twelve paintings all small and unimportant with the same personal subjects that only appeal to myself and no one else."<sup>89</sup> This was probably a self-deprecating smoke screen to obscure her true grander motives. She continually uses herself as a symbol to get a statement to the viewer.

*What the Water Gave Me* was painted by Kahlo in 1938 and is more than likely her most complex and enigmatic work. It is larger than the previous examined self-portraits at 36 x 27 ¾ inches and is done in oil on canvas.<sup>90</sup> It is an unusual self-portrait in that the only part of the painter you see clearly is the front portion of her feet. A portion of her legs can be seen under the bathwater. The canvas consists of a small background of neutral color at the top with the remainder the partial aerial view of a bathtub. The tub itself and the contents floating in the water take up the majority of the canvas. The viewer is brought into the same plane as Kahlo by the perspective she chooses to use.

In the tub we see the artist's feet poking out of the water. The nails are painted red and there is an injury to the right foot. This is where the familiar contents of bathwater end. Out of one of the holes in the drain is a detached vein that drips blood into the water. The rest of the tub is filled with a myriad of images, some taken from her previous paintings. In the center of the action is the body of a naked woman who has a rope tied around her neck that is being held by a partially nude masked man. The rope is then

attached to two mountain peaks. Along the rope crawl both an abundance of insects and a tiny dancer.

Kahlo's parents are present in the water with protective leaves around them. Below them are two naked girls who seem to be consoling one another. A red passion flower with curly black roots is placed between the legs in the tub. Kahlo's dress is floating in the water next to the flower. There is a shell that has been broken spewing water and above that a sailboat. To the right of the boat there are some floating cacti that lead to an island where a volcano erupts with a skyscraper in the center. On the island is a tree with a large dead bird on top. Below the volcano sits a skeleton.

It is no wonder that initially this was thought to be a surrealist painting.<sup>91</sup> With all these seemingly unconnected fantastic images floating in the water, it had to be super reality or something of Kahlo's dreams. Herrera says, "For while the accumulation of small and fantastic details makes this painting appear to be less coherent and less grounded in earthly reality than other works, all its images are closely tied to events in Frida's life."<sup>92</sup> Julian Levy shed more light on the subject by relaying a rare conversation Kahlo had with him about this work. "She indicated, for one thing, it was about time and childhood games and the sadness of what happened to her in the course of her life. ....The painting's images relate to her bathtub games."<sup>93</sup>

A look at the images in the painting reveals the injury to Kahlo's foot at the age of nine.<sup>94</sup> As previously discussed this was just about the time her father began to closely attend to her. The reflection of her feet in the water reminds us of the duality she has created for herself. Her father is present in the bathtub scene along with her mother, a dissimilar leaf separating them. Next to them riding on the sponge are two girls. The one

sitting up comforts the one that is lying down. Could these two be Frida and her imaginary friend?

There are multiple allusions to the fact that things are not always what they seem. First, there is the leaf turned around floating in the water. Prignitz-Poda's pictorial language assessment explains the sailboat "velare" as a pun in which "something is being covered up".<sup>95</sup> The disguised man that holds the rope that is strangling the (Kahlo) woman sits in front of a boulder that invokes Sisyphus and hints that this act has been repeated many times.<sup>96</sup> The only other rope seen in the painting is the one seen loosely placed on the neck of Kahlo's father.

Could Kahlo be the tiny dancer who is poised on a tightrope with the insects following her? It is sad but probably true that all of the tumult that ensued in her life began in the bath tub when she was eight or nine years old. In explaining to Levy that in this work she was demonstrating her bathtub games, what monstrous games was she actually referring to? In placing these fantastic pieces together she can share with the viewer things she never spoke about. In using her own body as a symbol and conduit she might be able to save another child from her fate?

The last self-portrait we will reexamine is the one that in its title alone hints at the fate that left Kahlo to create another world for herself. *The Two Frida's* was painted in 1939 at the time of her divorce finalization from Rivera. It is oil on canvas and measures 68 ¼ x 68 inches, quite large scale for a Kahlo painting. In the background there is a stormy sky which references El Greco<sup>97</sup>. On a long straw bench with green trim sit the two Fridas. Kahlo has dual images of herself sitting on the bench holding hands. They are wearing quite different attire and have seemingly quite different demeanors. Frida on the

right is wearing a blue shirt and long green skirt. She sits with her legs apart and has noticeable facial hair. Her heart is positioned on the outside of her shirt with arteries coiling around her that join her to the other Frida. While one hand clasps the other Frida's, one rests near her sexual organs. She is holding a small picture in her hand which connects to an artery. Frida on the left is wearing a long white lacy dress. Her complexion is lighter. She sits in a more demure fashion. In her hand she is holding a surgical clamp to help alleviate the blood flowing from her open artery. But blood still does flow right in to her lap. Her heart is exposed as is her breast where her dress is torn open. A curious decoration fills the right side of the bodice of the dress where it is intact.

Many believe that this painting is no more than a direct response to the finalization of the divorce Kahlo obtained from Rivera after learning of his affair with her beloved sister Cristina. They accept as true that the two Frida's represent the Frida Diego loved on the right of the painting (The Tehuana Frida) and one he did not (European Frida) and the processing of emotions afterward is the sole purpose of the painting.<sup>98</sup> While it is true that the timing of the creation of the painting did coincide with the divorce, there is much more Kahlo was saying with her dual likenesses. It is not clear that the long white dress she wears on the left is a European one at all. It is not something that would have been in style in the thirties. And it certainly is not clear that Diego Rivera would have any dislike to European Frida.<sup>99</sup>

With information that comes directly from Kahlo's diary she points out that the source of this painting comes from "problems" during childhood<sup>100</sup>. She created an imaginary friend just about the time her father was caring for her. She created the "tough" Frida. This Frida who resides on the viewer's right appears more masculine, by

virtue of the more prominent facial hair and posture, and more confident than the other Frida. She is more darkly complexioned and her half of the heart appears (to the public) intact.

On the other hand the “innocent” Frida is dressed in white and is lighter in complexion. She sits in a more lady like fashion. Her hand is delicately placed in the hand of the tougher Frida. Her heart has been torn out and is clearly seen halved. Her blouse is torn on one side and the reference to virginal genitalia is evident on the other with the odd fabric design and decoration. She is literally trying not to bleed to death by doing what she can to clamp a severed artery. The figures are alone in the picture sharing a bench instead of occupying two separate chairs. These things promote the idea of solitary oneness.

As Prignitz-Poda discusses, Innocent Frida invented Tough Frida to deal with her stress from childhood.<sup>101</sup> Similar figures, one dark one light, are seen in *What the Water Gave me*. In it an innocent Frida lies down while a tough Frida sits up attending to her. Kahlo, in her life, uses this tough incarnation of herself to fool the public and win them over. The turbulent sky might reveal the havoc in her mind that had Frida split initially.

She is as graphic with her use of accuracy of anatomy in the depiction of the internal organs in this painting as she was in *Henry Ford Hospital* or *My Birth*. The severing of the heart and the arteries and their overlay on the two Fridas could be considered medically precise and are what tells us the viewer that this heart has been halved and is shared by the two incarnations of Frida. She uses her body again to educate the public. The message this time is more about will to survive. Kahlo has had help from her alter ego to overcome not only the trauma of her childhood and the divorce from

Rivera but the reality her society on a strong willed intelligent female. Kahlo speaks directly to her viewer's about the role of the woman - about how sometimes you need to be two people to survive.

## Conclusion

### La Gran Ocultadora- The Great Masquerade

Frida Kahlo led a tumultuous life for a woman who was born and died in the same house at Coyoacan. She was one of the first females to be admitted to the National Preparatory school in Mexico City.<sup>102</sup> Like many other educated young people concerned with Mexican nationalism she joined the Communist Party in the 1920s. Extremely intelligent, she was able to read in three languages: Spanish, English and German. She survived a near-fatal accident at the age of eighteen.<sup>103</sup> She married a famous painter and traveled to Europe and the United States. She had famous lovers and friends in both the arts and in politics. Without any formal training she became a great painter in her own right.

Much has been written about Kahlo's self-portraits with respect to her accident, relationship to Diego Rivera, and inability or unwillingness to procreate, since she is so autobiographical in her work. Aztec and European influences are also prominent in the discussion of her emblematic use.<sup>104</sup> Her self-portraits are unique and infused with a myriad of symbols. They are both difficult to look at, yet difficult to look away from. Like their creator they are complicated, colorful and interesting. And like their creator they hold a secret that you must work very hard to uncover.

Kahlo's relationship with her father was an important aspect of her life, although a complex one. Of all his children Guillermo related most to her because of their similar

intellect and curiosity about nature.<sup>105</sup> When she fell ill at the age of six it was he who tenderly nursed her back to health. It is possible at this time he crossed the line intimately with her. If this did occur it might explain many things that happened later in Kahlo's life. It would certainly answer the question about why at the age of six she felt the need to escape herself by splitting in two to create an imaginary friend and a tougher version of herself as seen in *The Two Fridas*. It would explain until her father's death, the presence of a solitary monkey who always has a grip on Frida as in *Self-Portrait with Monkey*. It would explain her depiction of her mother with a sheet covering her eyes as not to see what has happened to her child in *My Birth*. It would also explain who is behind the mask and almost everything floating in the tub in *What the Water Gave Me*. It might also explain her objectification of self.

It could explain her promiscuous sexual behavior starting as a young girl. The first boy she dated seriously at the National Preparatory School, Alexander Gomez Arias said he couldn't take his relationship with Kahlo seriously because she was already too "experienced" sexually.<sup>106</sup> It is well known that throughout her life she took many lovers both male and female before and after her marriages to Rivera.<sup>107</sup>

Surrounded in her youth and in her home with Rivera by authentic Mexican retablo it is no wonder she used this style for some of her most famous work. Aside from the use of symbols, the idea of being able to "talk" to the viewer directly would have pleased Kahlo, because she always had so much to talk about. To articulate her ideas and feelings to the viewer she developed her own pictorial language and used the symbols to offer insights to the astute.<sup>108</sup> Her paintings always carry a message.

Interestingly Zetterman points us in a whole new direction illuminating us to the



facts that Kahlo might also be speaking to the viewer about broader issues than just her own circumstances. Is it possible that her situations gave rise to ideas that society had yet to evaluate? At the precise time the Catholic Church was banning all sexual education in the community, Kahlo was displaying it freely in *Henry Ford Hospital* and *MY Birth*. Her detailed images of a fetus as well as the explicit portrayal of female genitalia and vaginal birth were shockingly accurate. At a time when married women were supposed to want to have children might she be alluding to the comparison of factory and womb? Could it be that this was the main message to the viewer in *Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*?

Because Kahlo's work was so refreshingly unique Surrealist Andre Breton wrote:

My surprise and joy were unbounded when I discovered on my arrival in Mexico that her work blossomed forth and her latest paintings into pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself....The art even contains that drop of cruelty and humour uniquely capable of blending the rare effective powers that compound together to form the philter which is Mexico's secret. The power of inspiration here is nourished by the strange ecstasies of the puberty and the mysteries of generation and far from considering these to be the mind's private preserves, as in some colder climates, she displays them proudly with a mixture of candor and insolence."<sup>109</sup>

Rivera's reaction to Breton's statement was vehement. Kahlo was a realist:

"Recurring self portraits which are never alike and which increasingly resemble Frida, are ever changing and permanent like a universal dialectic. Monumental realism is brilliantly apparent in Frida's work."<sup>110</sup> Kahlo reinforced Rivera's view by stating "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I painted my own reality."<sup>111</sup>

The fact that Kahlo's total reality has purposefully never been verbally spoken about by her gave rise to the many self-portraits that she made during her shortened lifetime. More than likely feeling adamant that she would never "tell" a soul her secret, she kept painting it over and over again. It was probably a needed catharsis for her. As if she did not even trust herself with her secret, she would not keep a diary until her father passed away.<sup>112</sup>In different incarnations she would tell us her story. She would not tell the story with only herself in mind. She told tales of things that affected the many women of her generation. It was our difficult job to try to solve the various puzzles she put before us.

She left us many clues in her painting. She showed us many times her protective wall of leaves, but would turn one around to demonstrate the need for another meaning. The misinformation about her miscarriages blurred the truth for many. Although her volatile relationship with Diego Rivera did contribute grandly to her sadness in life, it seems another man that she loved first might have violated her trust even before him.

After the discussions of the circumstances of her life it is not a huge leap to see how she might have begun to objectify herself because of her continuous pain and probable abuse. Her knowledge of European emblematic images and Mexican retablo would heighten her propensity for the symbolic. What better symbol to use than her body? It was what she knew best. She could speak to the viewer as was done with retablo but she would do it in a subtler fashion. She would use her body as a symbol and a statement.

In the June 2007 issue of *ART news* Pernilla Holmes states as if she was

talking about Kahlo," Portraiture has become increasingly conceptual as it addresses not only personal identity but also issues of politics and social inequity."<sup>113</sup> The personal and feministic views that were represented by Kahlo in her work were much ahead of her time. Therefore she needed to mask them. She needed to hide them if you will in the bathwater. She was very intelligent and although wanted to get her work out to the viewer also wanted it to matter. To this end she did not speak much about her work but let the viewer do the work on their own. It is not until this reexamination of her work that we can see what she was trying to tell us and that she truly was La Gran Ocultadora.

Illustrations



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

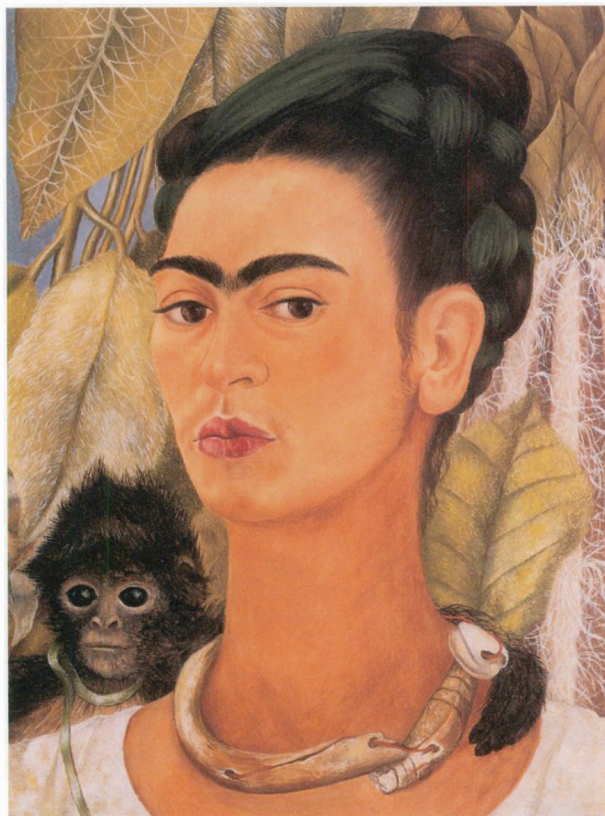


Figure 6





Figure 7



Figure 8

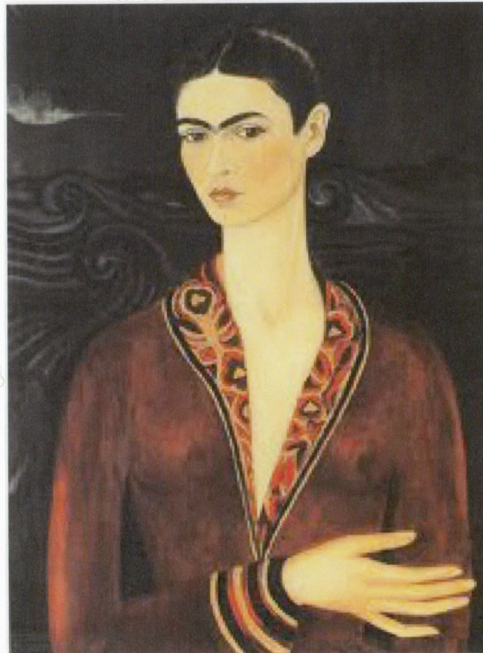


Figure 9



Figure 10

## Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Herrera,259.
- <sup>2</sup> Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo*.(New York:Barnes and Noble,1997)
- <sup>3</sup> Hayden Herrera.*FridaA Biography of Frida Kahlo*.Harper&Row Publishers.1983.
- <sup>4</sup> Andrea Kettenmann.*Kahlo*.(Germany,Benedict TaschenVerlag)10
- <sup>5</sup> Quirk,Robert E *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church,1910-1929*.Indiana University Press,1973.276
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Eva Zetterman.*Frida Kahlo's Abortions:With Reflections from a Gender Perspectiveon Sexual Education in Mexico*(Konsthistorisk Tidskrift 75 no4 2006)
- <sup>9</sup> Herrera,12
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Helga Prignitz-Poda,*Frida Kahlo,The Painter and her Work*.( New York,Schirmer/Mosel,2004) 9
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.,11
- <sup>15</sup> Herrera,7
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.,12
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.,15
- <sup>18</sup> Kettenmann,10
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Maria Castro-Sethness."Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World:The Influence of Meican Retablo and Ex-voto Paintings on Her Art"*Women's Art Journal*Vol 25 No.2 2004-5p21.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Elin Lugue and Michele Beltran"Powerful Images Mexican Ex -Votos"*Art and Faith in Mexico The Nineteenth Century Retablo Tradition*.. University of New Mexico Press,Albuquerque 2001.p70
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Herrera,63.
- <sup>26</sup> Prignitz-Poda,29
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.,20.
- <sup>28</sup> Ralph L.Holloway."Culture Symbols and Human Brain Evolution a Synthesis" *Dialectical Anthropology*.( Volume 5 Number4)287-303
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Kahlo was more than likely nine because of her realigning her birthday to suit the revolution.Frida Kahlo.*The Diary of Frida Kahlo:An Intimate Self Portrait*.(New York:Abrade Press/Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers,1995)82-86
- <sup>31</sup> Raquel Tíbol.*Escrituras Frida Kahlo*(Mexico:Universidad Autonoma de Mexico,Coordinacion de Humanidades,1999),13
- <sup>32</sup> Prignitz-Poda,13.
- <sup>33</sup> Roland Summit,MD.*The Child Sexual Abuse and Accomodation Syndrome*.Child Abuse and Neglect(Vol7 !983 Pergamon Press Ltd)177-192
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Kettenmann,9-10
- <sup>36</sup> .Ibid.

- 
- <sup>37</sup> Summit,177.
- <sup>38</sup> Prignitz-Poda,14.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Roger T.Mulder et al .”Relationship between Diassociation and Child Sexual Abuse, Child Physical Abuse and Mental Illness in a General Population Sample” *American Journal of Psychiatry*155 1998:806-11
- <sup>41</sup> Robert C.Scaer. *The Neuropsychology of Diassociation and Chronic Disease*.Behavioral Science(Volume 29 No1)71
- <sup>42</sup> Melanie Duckworth and Tony Iezzi et al.*Dissassociation and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Patients with Chronic Pain*
- <sup>43</sup> Prignitz-Poda,18
- <sup>44</sup> Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, New York: International Universities Press, 1977
- <sup>45</sup> Joan Fimbel DiGiovanni and Ronald R Lee.*The Art and Suffering of Frida Kahlo*.Creativity and Madness:Psychological Study of Art and Artists(American Institute of Medical Education Press,1995)
- <sup>46</sup> Sharyn R. Udall.”Frida Kahlo’s Mexican Body”,*Woman’s Art Journal*(Vol 24 No.2)10-14
- <sup>47</sup> Herrera,145
- <sup>48</sup> Herrera,150
- <sup>49</sup> Herrera,153
- <sup>50</sup> Kettemann,36
- <sup>51</sup> Prignitz-Poda,82
- <sup>52</sup> Zetterman, 230
- <sup>53</sup> Prignitz-Poda,84
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Kettenmann,38
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Herrera,157-8
- <sup>59</sup> Zettermann,238
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Zettermann,240
- <sup>62</sup> Prignitz-Poda,84
- <sup>63</sup> Herrera,157
- <sup>64</sup> Zettermann,230
- <sup>65</sup> Zettermann,230-1
- <sup>66</sup> Zettermann,236
- <sup>67</sup> Herrera,144
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> It is probable Rivera did not want children.Kettenmann,37
- <sup>70</sup> Zettermann,232
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Herrera,137-40
- <sup>74</sup> Zetermann,236
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>76</sup> Kettenmann,45
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>78</sup> Herrera,233
- <sup>79</sup> Prignitz-Poda,33
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid
- <sup>82</sup> Prignitz-Poda,40
- <sup>83</sup> In her discussions of Kahlo’s pictorial language.Ibid.

- 
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>85</sup> Prignitz-Poda,41
- <sup>86</sup> Kettenmann,45
- <sup>87</sup> Prignitz-Poda,120
- <sup>88</sup> Prignitz-Poda,53
- <sup>89</sup> Prignitz-Poda,120
- <sup>90</sup> Prignitz-Poda,124
- <sup>91</sup> Herrera,258
- <sup>92</sup> Herrera,259
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>94</sup> Prignitz-Poda 124
- <sup>95</sup> Prignitz-Poda,33
- <sup>96</sup> Prignitz-Poda,126
- <sup>97</sup> Herrera,220
- <sup>98</sup> Both Kettenman and Herrera believe this to be true.Herrera,279
- <sup>99</sup> Prignitz-Poda,140
- <sup>100</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>101</sup> Prignitz-Poda,144
- <sup>102</sup> Herrera,22
- <sup>103</sup> Herrera,4
- <sup>104</sup> Prignitz-Poda,40
- <sup>105</sup> Herrera,18
- <sup>106</sup> Prignitz-Poda,16
- <sup>107</sup> Herrera
- <sup>108</sup> Kettenmann,20
- <sup>109</sup> Breton discussing Kahlo's exhibition in New York with Levy. Herrera,228
- <sup>110</sup> In a 1943 article called *Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art*.Herrera,260
- <sup>111</sup> In defending her work as realism.Herrera,266
- <sup>112</sup> Immediately after his death Kahlo began her diary.Prignitz-Poda,56
- <sup>113</sup> Pernilla Holmes." In Your Face"*ARTnews*.June (2007)106

## Bibliography

- Castro-Sethness, Maria."Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World:The Influence of Mexican Retablo and Ex-voto Paintings on Her Art", *Women's Art Journal* 25 No.2 (2004-5).
- Duckworth, Melanie and Tony Iezzi et al. "Disassociation and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Patients with Chronic Pain", *International Journal of Rehabilitation and Health*. 5: 129-139.
- Fimbel DiGiovanni, Joan and Ronald R Lee. "The Art and Suffering of Frida Kahlo". *Creativity and Madness: Psychological Study of Art and Artists*. American Institute of Medical Education Press(1995).
- Grimberg, Salomon. *Frida Kahlo*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997.
- Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. Harper&Row Publishers. 1983.
- Holloway, Ralph L."Culture Symbols and Human Brain Evolution: a Synthesis" *Dialectical Anthropology*. 5 No. 4: 287-303.
- Holmes, Pernilla." In Your Face." *ARTnews*. June (2007): 106.
- Kettenmann, Andrea. *Kahlo*. Germany: Benedict TaschenVerlag 1992.
- Kohut, Heinz . *The Restoration of the Self*, New York: International Universities Press, 1977.
- Lugue, Elin and Michele Beltran. "Powerful Images: Mexican Ex -Votos" *Art and Faith in Mexico The Nineteenth Century Retablo Tradition*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque (2001): 70.
- Mulder Roger T. et al ."Relationship between Disassociation and Child Sexual Abuse, Child Physical Abuse and Mental Illness in a General Population Sample" *American Journal of Psychiatry* 155 1998: 806-11.
- Prignitz-Poda, Helga. *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and her Work*. New York: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004.
- Quirk, Robert E. *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1910-1929*. Indiana University Press, 1973: 276.
- Scaer Robert C." The Neuropsychology of Diassociation and Chronic Disease." *Behavioral Science* 29 No1: 71.

Summit, Roland MD. "The Child Sexual Abuse and Accomodation Syndrome". *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (1983): 177-192.

Tibol, Raquel. *Escrituras Frida Kahlo* Mexico: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, Coordinacion de Humanidades, (1999):13.

Eva Zetterman. "Frida Kahlo's Abortions: With Reflections from a Gender Perspective on Sexual Education in Mexico." *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 75 no4 (2006).