



## BIOGRAPHY OF FRIDA KAHLO

FRIDA KAHLO, or MAGDALENA CARMEN FRIDA KAHLO CALDERÓN, was born on July 6, 1907 in the Mexico City home owned by her parents since 1904, known today as the BlueHouse. Daughter of Wilhelm (Guillermo) Kahlo, of German descent, and of Mexican Matilde Calderón, Frida was the third of four daughters of whom her two sisters, Matilde and Adriana, were the eldest and Cristina, the youngest.

At the age of six Frida fell ill with polio, causing her right leg to remain shorter than the other, which resulted in bullying. Nevertheless, this setback did not prevent her from being a curious and tenacious student. She completed her high school studies at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria.

At the age of 18, on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1925, Frida was in a tragic accident. A streetcar crashed into the bus she was traveling in. The consequences to her person were terrible: several bones were fractured and her spinal cord, damaged. While she was immobilized for several months, Frida began to paint. Afterwards, she formed relationships with several artists, including the photographer Tina Modotti and the already renowned artist Diego Rivera.

In 1929, Frida married the muralist. The couple lived at the Blue House, Frida's childhood home, as well as at Diego's studio in San Ángel. Kahlo and Rivera also resided in Cuernavaca and in various cities of the United States: Detroit, San Francisco, and New York. They stayed for short periods of time in Mexico City.

In 1930, Frida suffered her first miscarriage. In November of that same year and for work-related reasons, the couple traveled to San Francisco. There, the painter met Doctor Leo Eloesser, who would become one of her most trusted doctors and one of her closest friends.

Diego's infidelities unleashed a series of emotional crises. Frida divorced the muralist in 1939, only to remarry him one year later.

Despite her poor health and having been subjected to operations on multiple occasions, Frida was an intensely active artist. In political terms, she was a member of the Communist Party

and a faithful left-wing activist. Together with Rivera, she refurbished the Blue House to provide asylum for over two years to Leon Trotsky and Natalia, his wife. Few days before her death, Frida even participated in a protest march against the coup that overthrew Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz, suffering a pulmonary embolism as a result.

She taught at La Esmeralda National School of Painting and Sculpture. Both in her work and in her daily life –language, wardrobe, and household décor– Frida sought to reclaim the roots of Mexican folk art, an interest that is reflected in all her work; for example, her attire or her self-portraits, as well as the simple and direct style characteristic of the *ex-voto* folk art she collected.

Frida claimed that, unlike the surrealist painters, she did not paint her dreams but rather, her reality. Outstanding in her work are the self-portraits influenced by the photographic portraiture style she learned from her father, Guillermo Kahlo.

Toward the end of her life, the artist's health deteriorated. From 1950 to 51, she remained confined at the *Hospital Inglés*. In 1953, subjected to the threat of gangrene, her right leg was amputated.

Frida Kahlo died at the Blue House of Mexico City on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1954, while the National Institute of Fine Arts was preparing a retrospective exhibition as a national tribute to her.

Among the canvases that comprise the painter's oeuvre, some of the more famous are: *The Two Fridas*, *Long Live Life!*, *A Few Little Pricks*, *The Broken Column*, and *Diego on my Mind*.

During her life, the artist held several exhibitions: one in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery, another in Paris at the Renou et Colle Gallery, and another in Mexico in the Lola Álvarez Bravo Gallery. She also participated in the Group Surrealist Show at the famous Mexican Art Gallery.

The Louvre Museum acquired one of her self-portraits. Today, her paintings are also found in numerous private collections in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Her personality has been adopted as one of the banners of feminism, handicapped people, sexual freedom, and Mexican culture. Frida Kahlo has become a reference that surpasses the myth the painter created around herself.

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## Biography of Frida Kahlo

By: Gerardo Ochoa Sandy

### I

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1907, in Mexico City Frida Kahlo was born, Coyoacán. Guillermo Kahlo, her father, a photographer, was a Jewish immigrant of German descent born in 1872, who arrived in our country in 1890, at the age of nineteen. He was initially married in 1884 to María Cardeña, with whom he conceived two daughters, María Luisa and Margarita. His wife died as a consequence of her second labor, in 1887.

Little by little, Frida's father assimilated to Mexico with the assistance of the German community. He was an employee of La Perla jewelry store, located today on Madero Street and frequented by high society during the Porfirio Díaz era. Following the death of María Cardeña, Kahlo married Matilde Calderón, with whom he worked at La Perla. The couple had four daughters: Matilde, Adriana, Frida –her full name: Magdalena Carmen Frida Calderón– and Cristina. After Adriana and before Frida, their son Guillermo was born, who died a few days later.

In Mexico, Guillermo Kahlo got his start as a photographer, the same profession held by his second father-in-law, Antonio Calderón. His probable influence, as well as the circumstance of his dealings with clients from the jewelry store and the support of the German community in Mexico, helped him consolidate his social standing. By invitation of José Ives Limantour, Minister of the Treasury under President Porfirio Díaz, from 1904 to 1908 he was placed in charge of the photographic registry of historic properties and monuments relevant to the history of Mexico, a visual contribution to forthcoming publications commemorating the Centennial of Mexico's Independence. Kahlo printed

around 900 glass plates that currently form part of the Archive of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. This project allowed him to build the house in Coyoacán and provide an education for his daughters. The bonanza ended with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution and the family endured severe hardships, leading the photographer to mortgage the Blue House and auction away the living room furniture. Guillermo then had to start working as a portrait photographer of people, which was new to him; previously, he only photographed buildings.

Frida assisted him in his laboratory by retouching photos and with other practical matters related to capturing the images. Guillermo suffered from epilepsy, so little Frida tried to accompany him during the photographic sessions, to help him if he suffered an attack. Later on, it would be Frida who would be succored by her father.

In 1913, at the age of six, Frida fell ill with polio; as a result, her right leg was thinner, slightly shorter, and less developed, with the foot twisted outwards. The photographer encouraged her to take exercise by riding bicycles and swimming.

## II

In 1922, Frida enrolled in the National Preparatory School (ENP in Spanish), an educational arena where the most advanced ideas of the time were in full bloom, driven by the Mexican Revolution and the academic proposals of José Vasconcelos, Secretary of Education under President Álvaro Obregón. At this high school, she had her first two art teachers—Luis G. Serrano for drawing and Fidencio L. Nave for modelling—although they do not appear to have had any lasting influence on her vocation, nor did Frida show any general interest. She was more occupied with physical activity to counteract the effects of her illness.

After the Revolution and just in the generation that Frida entered, the school had become co-ed, given that in a generation of two thousand students there were 35 young ladies, which was enough to outrage conservative families. Hence the girls were taken aside at recess, so that they would not coexist with the young men in the patio. Nonetheless, the national atmosphere, the opening of studies to both genders and the readings there influenced her outlook, creating a preamble to her

future political and feminist stances as well as her interest in public affairs, which she experienced from that time onward as a naturally given right.

There are eyewitness accounts of her character during that era. She was a jovial girl, rebellious in the classroom, who owned a sharp tongue and was skilled at giving nicknames to her classmates. She was also naughty –she would rent bicycles for transportation to the school and fail to return them, due to which Renato Leduc, who would later become a well-known poet and journalist, had to go and bail her out from police headquarters on more than one occasion. Frida's character was different of that of her father, who was a reserved and taciturn man, an immigrant obliged to carve out a future, a widower from his first wife and an epileptic.

At the ENP, Frida joined a student group called "Los Cachuchas" formed mostly by males: Alejandro Gómez Arias, Miguel N. Lira, Agustín Lira, Manuel González Ramírez, Ángel Salas, Jesús Ríos Valles y Alfonso Villa. Frida and Carmen Jaime were the only young women. They were joined by friendship, their interest in literature, ideas and politics, and the cap, or *cachucha*, that was their emblem. The youths were bilingual and good readers; indeed. One of her most beloved books was *Imaginary Lives* by Marcel Schwob. She was even familiar, thanks to her Jewish German father, with the Kabbalah, something that may be noted in various of her notes and works from this early stage.

### III

At the ENP she met Alejandro Gómez Arias—a law student, notable speaker, future leader of the movement for university autonomy and later on, a respected journalist—whom she dated. However, in the final years of his life, Gómez Arias would indicate that given Frida's outlook and the period Mexico was experiencing, it would be more precise to say that they were "young lovers."

On September 17, 1925, Frida and Gómez Arias were traveling in a bus that was crashed into by a street car, destroying it completely. The metal bannister impaled young Frida through her hip, fracturing the pelvic bone and exiting through the vagina. The collision also caused three fractures to the spinal column, one to the clavicle, and two to the ribs, dislocating her right shoulder. Her right leg,

the same one affected by the bout with polio, suffered eleven fractures as well as the dislocation of her foot.

It was the start of a tortuous existence from a physical, psychological, and emotional perspective. Her frequent suffering, chronic pain, prolonged periods of bedrest and constant fragility undermined her mercilessly. Throughout her life, Frida underwent a series of operations, some of them disastrous, with long convalescences and serious consequences; she used around 25 different corsets to correct her posture. Three pregnancies—in 1930, 1932, and 1934—ended in miscarriages. Moreover, during her final stage, her right leg was amputated below the knee due to the threat of gangrene.

Guillermo Kahlo came to her aid once again. Frida had noticed that her father had a box of paintbrushes and colors, and she asked him to share it with her. Her father placed it in her hands and her mother commissioned a carpenter to manufacture an easel that could be adapted to her obligatory bedrest. Gradually, Frida would find in painting a path for survival and self-expression during these painful biographical episodes, in which raw pain was intertwined with expiation and the tributaries of dreamscape and symbolism converged, in addition to ironic or crude notes and references to folk culture in Mexico. This visual biography would be complemented by the registry of her family heritage, portraits of public figures, and a few brief urban or naturalist moments.

The main emphasis is on her exploration of identity, which would lead her to complete self-portraits, many of them portentous, doubtless the most vivid and emblematic in Mexican artistic tradition. Throughout this unplanned self-referential sequence, given that they would emerge with the unforeseeable spontaneity and forcefulness of an earthquake, the expressive force of her different stances and the enigmatic beauty of her countenance would become the centripetal force that would aspire to integrate the circumstances of her broken corporeality and her damaged soul, both in continual convalescence.

Young Frida was unaware of what lay ahead as she exerted herself to adapt to her new condition; nor would she witness the impact of her work on collective imagery nationwide and throughout the Western world. At that moment, what was most important was to see the world on her own steam,

after her fallout with Gómez Arias. In his biography, correspondence and in different testimonies, the young attorney minimized the relevance of their romance and would even deny having broken it off with her just after the accident. Nevertheless, Frida's letters provide evidence that their bond was deep, that she needed him, and that she was hurt by his absence. The first self-portrait Frida painted in oils was dedicated to Gómez Arias. Contact between the two of them continued; what they may have communicated without words on such occasions remains a mystery.

#### IV

Frida frequented artistic and social circles in the capital. Through the Cuban communist Juan Antonio Mella and his companion, Italian photographer Tina Modotti, she met Diego Rivera. On one occasion, Frida sought him out to show him her painting. Diego encouraged her, their relationship became close and the muralist became an assiduous visitor to the Blue House. Bonds of affection emerged on both sides, the relationship prospered and they were married in 1929. Diego was 43 years old and Frida, 22. According to Frida, Matilde Calderón, mother of the bride, described the union as "the wedding between an elephant and a dove."

At the beginning of the 1930s, the muralist helped his new in-laws to vent their hardships, by paying the mortgage on the Blue House, which Diego himself leaves in the name of his spouse. Now then, it is Frida's house. This property would become their primary place of residence, visited by culturally prominent figures from Mexico and abroad.

About a year after they are married, the artists spend a three-year stay, from the late 1930s to the late 1933, in different cities of the United States, New York and Detroit among others. In the US, Diego spends most of his time busy creating and the execution of various murals, including the controversial Rockefeller Center mural.

During that period, Frida suffered her first abortion and had to come to Mexico unexpectedly in 1932, for the death of her mother. Upon their return to the capital they would reside starting in 1934 in what is now known as the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio Home in San Angel, built in

the functionalist style by architect Juan O'Gorman, who would also be in charge of the future expansion of the Blue House, as well as the design of Rivera's emblematic work: the Anahuacalli.

Frida and Diego were joined, aside from bonds of affection and art, by their sympathy for the revolutionary ideals of the time. They were both affiliated with the Communist Party of Mexico. In the long run, Diego would express his differences and be expelled from the organization, which was aligned with the Soviet Union. Frida left written and visual testimony in her Diary of her adherence to the Russian Revolution and hung framed images of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao at the foot of her bed.

Diego's attitude was that of a political animal, a *zoon politikon* who assiduously wrote texts on art and politics. Frida's was more emotional, humanitarian and idealized, yet equally authentic. Regardless of such vicissitudes, the couple took in the dissident Leon Trotsky, persecuted by Stalin, and his wife from 1937 to 1939. Frida would have a brief affair with Trotsky who, in the end, would be assassinated by Ramón Mercader, a Spanish communist and agent of Stalin.

Frida and Diego's relationship was passionate and creative. Conflicts were also frequent, derived from countless infidelities on the part of the painter, perhaps more than twenty! according to Frida's count at some point. The artist incurred in the same weakness, propensity, or past time out of downheartedness, capriciousness, or pleasure with both men and women, friends or close acquaintances of the two of them. Diego's most serious infidelity was with Cristina, Frida's little sister and perhaps the closest to her. The artists were divorced in 1939 and remarried in 1940, under a common agreement: autonomous sex lives. Diego was more tolerant of Frida's lesbian relationships, but not so of the heterosexual ones.

In 1941, Guillermo Kahlo passed away.

## V

For a long period of time, cultural criticism emphasized the notion that Frida had been a marginalized artist in her era and that recognition would come only after her death. In more recent



decades, as a result of the boom in so-called *Fridamania*, that began in European feminist circles in the 1970s, among others, it is underscored that her work had attained the high regard of Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Marcel Duchamp and André Breton, among other prominent figures in the European modern art world. Both readings are, in one way or another, exaggerated yet have a grain of truth.

In 1938, she held her first individual exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York, celebrated by André Breton in a text that defines her as a surrealist, a term Frida rejected although in the bookshelf next to her bed, she kept close to her literature regarding that trend. Likewise, she participated in various group shows. In 1939, she formed part of the *Mexique* exhibition at the Renou et Colle Gallery of Paris. In 1940, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* and in 1942, *Portraits of the 20th Century*, both in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, include works of hers. In 1941, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston included her in the show *Modern Mexican Painters* and in 1943, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in *Mexican Art Today*, among others.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Frida participated in 1940 in the *International Surrealist Exhibition* presented by the Mexican Art Gallery run by Inés Amor; in 1947, in *Forty-five Self-portraits by Mexican Painters: 18th to 20th century*, and in 1949 in the inaugural exhibition of the Mexican Visual Arts Salon. The artist also joined the Mexican Culture Seminar as a founding member in 1942 and became a teacher at the National School of Painting, Sculpture and Engraving "La Esmeralda" in 1943. A year later and due to her increasingly limited mobility, she must stop attending her classes. However, three of her students and one of her students continue to have work sessions with the teacher Frida, in the same Casa Azul. For this reason, these four painters are later known as "Los Fridos".

It is true that the only individual show dedicated to her during her lifetime in Mexico was inaugurated in 1953, at the Lola Álvarez Bravo Contemporary Art Gallery the year before her death.

While it is risky to make a list of her most emblematic works, in an appeal to subjectivity we include: *The Two Fridas*, *The Broken Column*, *Henry Ford Hospital*, *A Few Little Pricks*, *The Wounded Deer*, *Diego and Me*, *Diego on my Mind*, *My Birth*, *My Nanny and I*, *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), I, Diego and Lord Xólotl*, as well as the *Self-portrait in Velvet Suit*, *Self-portrait with*

*Monkey, Self-portrait with Monkeys, Self-portrait with Small Monkey and Serpent Necklace, Self-portrait with Necklace of Round Jade Beads, Self-Portrait with Necklace of Thorns and Hummingbird, Self-portrait as a Tehuana, Self-portrait with Medallion, Self-portrait with Loose Hair* plus her corsets, garments, accessories, her diary and her personal correspondence.

## VI

The final years were torturous due to constant setbacks in her health and the proximity of death. In 1950, she spent nearly the entire year convalescing at the hospital due to an infection derived from a negligent graft to her spinal column. In 1953 she attended, against medical advice, the inauguration of her one show in Mexico in an ambulance, from which she was lowered in her hospital bed. This is the same year a section of her right leg was amputated.

By 1954, Frida would no longer have wings to fly. She copes her pain and discouragement with opioid overdoses. The last flicker of the flame of her life glowed during her participation, in a wheelchair alongside Diego and Juan O'Gorman, in the march on July second protesting the U.S. intervention in Guatemala.

On July 13, Frida died at the age of 47. Her vigil was held at the Palace of Fine Arts. Present at the ceremony were Lázaro Cárdenas, Heriberto Jara, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Juan O'Gorman, Efraín Huerta, Lupe and Ruth Rivera, and María Asúnsolo, among many others. The coffin was draped with the flag of the Mexican Communist Party, causing Andrés Bello, the General Director of the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA in Spanish), to lose his job.

## VII

The start of a legend drew near, although it would still take a few decades to arrive.

Cinematography made its contributions. *Frida, Living Nature*, by the Mexican cinematographer Paul Leduc, with Ofelia Medina in the role of Frida and Juan José Gurrola as Diego, won the Ariel –the

Mexican Oscar— for best picture in 1985, among eight other nominations. In 2002, *Frida* appeared, a version by U.S. cinematographer Julie Taymor, winner of six Oscars, notably the one awarded for her characterization of the artist to Mexican actress Salma Hayek, winning the same distinction in the Golden Globe Awards and the BAFTA Awards of the United Kingdom.

Art historians from various parts of the world have contributed as well. The list of biographies and biographical sketches, essays, and articles from different perspectives are countless and continue to grow. The same is true of dozens of national and international exhibitions dedicated to Frida or including her within the context of group shows.

As a cultural reference, Frida Kahlo has become at the same time a feminist icon and a reference for young millennials in search of constructing their own identities because of her style of wardrobe and makeup or the commercial exploitation of her image.

On a parallel, a most curious phenomenon of cultural syncretism has arisen out of the sheer drive of Frida's life and work. On the traditional Altars fashioned in Mexico on the Day of the Death in remembrance of the deceased, Frida's photograph has become an obligatory reference. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Halloween, meanwhile, Frida has become a motif for costumes that coexist with ghosts, bats, corpses, zombies, and many more creatures from beyond the grave.

On another level Frida, who reconstructed her identity after it was crushed by an accident basing herself exclusively on what made her different, is likewise a reference to another identity, that of Mexico. What happened to Frida in this sense is comparable only to the destiny of the work of José Guadalupe Posada, who likewise occupies a place of honor in Anglo Halloween. These are the only two artists of Mexico to achieve something like this, along the margins of the construction of State nationalism and the invasion of the American Way of Life.

This is no anecdotal bit of information: her restored identity causes us to call her by only her first name—which incidentally was not her first, or her second, but her third—and none of her last names.

The most recent discovery, which took place in 2003, of countless archives and personal objects in the Blue House has ratified her vitality.

Frida wrote at the end of her diary before her death as a farewell, "I hope the way out is joyful, and I hope I never come back again."

She left.

And she is here to stay.

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Edited and updated by Ximena Jordan, January 2020