



THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTITY THROUGH DRESS: FRIDA KAHLO

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Originality and creativity resided not only in Frida Kahlo's work. She did far more than paint, draw, and write; she intervened and transformed everything around her, including herself. She created her own image, constructing her personality by way of fashion.

She proudly wore garments from different regions of Mexico, as well as a few items of her own creation. It is true that her style of dress allowed her to conceal the shortness and thinness of her right leg, affected by a bout with polio she suffered at the age of six; it was also undeniably a way to please her husband, Diego Rivera; but above all, it allowed her to find vindication as an independent woman without prejudice, someone who was proud of her cultural heritage.

Her taste for traditional Mexican garments was passed down to Frida by her family. Among the photographs in the Blue House collection is an image of the Calderón family where Matilde, Frida's mother, appears alongside other women dressed in the costumes and splendor characteristic of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It was already known that Frida's mother was of Oaxacan origin, but what wasn't is that she herself wore the typical dress of the region. This photograph was rediscovered during the archival classification of images locked away in trunks, drawers, and bathrooms for nearly 50 years at the Blue House, now the Frida Kahlo Museum.

Frida valued her rich heritage and collected garments from different regions across the country. She intervened some of them using Spanish cotton fabrics and French silks to design her look, lending them an indigenous style. Not long ago, while traveling to Huejutla to purchase textiles for the Altar for the Day of the Dead created each year at

the Anahuacalli and Frida Kahlo Museums, we found ourselves in the home of one of the craftswomen viewing a photograph depicting André Breton, Frida and Diego, proving that they had been there, doubtless acquiring garments from a region that today, continues to fashion them masterfully.

Frida's mother was, moreover, an excellent seamstress. Her taste for fine fabrics and the interplay of textures and colors was inherited by the artist, providing a better understanding of why, years later, the painter would design and even intervene her own clothes. Frida's wardrobe holds interest and value not only because of this, but also as a testimonial to the textile treasures of Mexico that all too often, have gradually disappeared as certain items are no longer made. It is worthwhile noting here that thanks to the combined efforts of *Artes de México*, or Remigio Mestas of Oaxaca, designs have been salvaged that were considered to be lost forever. Above all, Frida used Mexican garb to create her identity, fashioning her own uniqueness. She was so good at it that she drew attention everywhere she went. Notably, the prestigious magazine *Vogue* published a photograph of her in October 1937. Diego and Frida were friends of Rosamon Bernier, the legendary editor of *Vogue* in the United States. Frida also inspired the Italian designer Elsa Chiaparelli to create a "Madame Rivera" dress. Her liking for Mexican colors and textures has continued to inspire creators of contemporary fashion such as Jean Paul Gaultier, Dai Rees, Alexander McQueen, Riccardo Tisci –for Givenchy–, Rei Kawakubo –for Comme des Garçons– and the Dutch duo Viktor & Rolf, among many others. Especially Gaultier, who presented in 1998 his *Tribute to Frida Kahlo*.

Clothes were also a strong symbol and major theme in Kahlo's painting, as can be seen in her *Self-portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* (1937), *Self-portrait along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932), *Roots* (1943), *Iztcuincli Dog with Me* (1938), *Self-portrait* (1948), *Self-portrait of Frida and Doctor Farill* (1951), *The Two Fridas* (1939), *Memory* (1937), and *My Dress Hangs There* (1934), to name only a few.

For Frida, her way of dress comprised a quest for her own identity. This is demonstrated by instances where she appears dressed as a man, for example in a family photograph taken by her father, Guillermo Kahlo, or as a worker-artist wearing a cap and denim shirt. Through her wardrobe, we may observe a metamorphosis among her inner circle of intellectual friends –Los Cachuchas– and the political-artistic awakening that would

indelibly mark her life –in another photograph, dressed as a worker, she marches next to Diego Rivera, her fist raised in a sign of protest– and afterwards, during her transformation as she wore with regal bearing garments from different parts of Mexico. It really must have been something to see her proudly strolling alongside Diego through San Francisco, Detroit or New York, decked out in dresses and jewels. It is said that cars would stop to get a better look at her. Later on, when she divorced Diego, Frida cut off her hair and would wear men's suits as well as traditional garments. Dating from this period is a work at the MoMA in New York titled *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). However, if there is one garment Frida identified with, it was her beautiful Tehuana costume. This dress, highly prized in the painter's wardrobe, holds special interest because while wearing it, the artist was immortalized both in her own paintings and in photographic images –such as the one taken in 1939 by Bernard Silberstein. Many other photographers portrayed Frida Kahlo, attracted by her personality and fashion: Edward Weston, Nickolas Muray, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Imogen Cunningham, Lucienne Bloch, Guillermo Dávila, Fritz Henle, Emmy Lou Packard, and Leo Matiz, among others.

In her manner of dress, Frida's creativity and profound understanding of color may also be recognized. Her style, in addition to being in and of itself a means of concealing physical and emotional weakness, conveyed her temperament. Her style was a fundamental element in the construction of a strong personality, one that has helped her stand out in the history of 20th century painting.

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Mexico City, year 2012