



Biography of Frida Kahlo

By: Gerardo Ochoa

I

On July 6, 1907, in Mexico City Frida Kahlo was born in the Blue House, Coyoacán. Guillermo Kahlo, her father, a photographer, was a Jewish immigrant of Hungarian-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 during 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, three months later. The couple had four daughters: Matilde, Adriana, Frida –her full name: Magdalena Carmen Frida Calderón– and Cristina. Their son, Guillermo, died a few days after he was born.

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 Porfiriato and the family endured severe hardships, leading the photographer to mortgage the Blue House and auction away the living room furniture.

Frida assisted him in his laboratory by retouching photographs and with other practical matters related to capturing the images. She would also help him recover from the epileptic attacks

he suffered, which was the reason why she accompanied him to his photography sessions. 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 activities to counteract the effects of her illness.

At least symbolically, the school was 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 quite the opposite of that of her father, 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, Angel Salas, Carmen Jaime, Jesús Ríos y Valles, and 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 *cacucha*, that was their emblem. The youths were bilingual and good readers; indeed, Frida was trilingual in Spanish, English, and German –yet although she dominated her father's tongue, she felt insecure and avoided speaking it. 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, with whom she did not have a good relationship, 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. However, 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, however. 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. The wedding between an elephant and a dove, as the girl would define it. The muralist helped his new in-laws settle their hardships and paid the mortgage on the Blue House, which remained in his spouse's name.

This property would become their primary place of residence, visited by culturally prominent figures from Mexico and abroad. Afterwards, the artists would reside for three years, from late 1930 to the end of 1933, in different cities of the United States including New York and Detroit, where Diego was occupied with different murals—the controversial Rockefeller Center among them. During that period, Frida suffered her first miscarriage and while they were away from Mexico her mother, Matilde Calderón, passed away in 1932. 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.

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 would eventually paint a portrait of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, leaving visual and written testimony of her adhesion to the Soviet revolution in her diary, and would decorate the head of her bed with his photograph alongside those of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao.

Diego's attitude was that of a political animal, a *zoan politikan* 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.

The couple'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 visual arts school La Esmeralda in 1943, where some of her students comprised the

collective 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. Pain and discouragement cornered her into two suicide attempts by opiate overdose, on April 19 and May 6. 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 Iduarte, 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, who had beat Madonna to the role, 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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