

# Frida Kahlo retrospective in Berlin

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## The “Kahlo myth” and the reality

The largest Frida Kahlo retrospective ever presented in Germany recently closed in Berlin. The long lines of people standing outside the Martin-Gropius-Bau testified to the great popularity of the Mexican artist (1907-1954). Attendance had never before been so high for the exhibition of a single artist. The recent film *Frida* (Julie Taymor, 2002) has also no doubt contributed to the interest. The film depicts a fascinating woman who was full of life despite severe physical suffering and who radiated an enormous force, reflected in her work.

The exhibition provided a sense of the wide range of her work. It included approximately 150 paintings, beginning with her first attempts at painting around 1925 and continuing until her last, *Self-portrait in a Sunflower*, which she painted shortly before her death in 1954. This small-format picture, which was earlier thought to have been destroyed, was exhibited alongside previously unknown abstract drawings, shown for the first time in Europe. Together with other drawings, often playful or precisely conceived sketches for future paintings, humorous cartoons and early portraits of friends and acquaintances, they form a contrast to famous paintings such as *The Broken Column* (1944), *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), or the famous self-portraits that are inextricably linked with the Kahlo myth.

The case of this Mexican artist is a prominent example of what happens when individual aspects of a body of work are placed in the foreground and are commercially marketed or exploited. The complexity of Kahlo's work has not only been overshadowed by many anecdotes and embellishments, but downright distorted. Reviewers and critics tend to stress the “female aesthetic” in her work and an apparent narcissism, rooted in her biography and eccentric disposition.

According to the exhibition catalogue's introduction, the recent show aspired to “bring light into the history of Frida's reception” and also go beyond popular “biographical and voyeuristic aspects.” In this regard, however, the Berlin exhibition failed to counter a number of the misconceptions about Kahlo—despite the fact that the exhibition organisers had obviously gone to great lengths to assemble examples of her art from all over the world.

A stark contrast was noticeable between the views of art historian Helga Prignitz-Poda, expressed in the exhibition catalogue, and the guiding concept of the show, which largely ignored the complexity of the multifaceted display of works from a historically important period of Kahlo's life. A possible clue as to the reasons for this contrast is indicated in the catalogue's foreword, which states: “Frida Kahlo is a Mexican national treasure, and it took ... also great diplomatic efforts to realise this project”.

The cult around this so-called “icon of pain” can primarily be explained by her turbulent relationship with the muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957),

the physical pain she experienced following her devastating bus accident as an 18-year-old, her apparently exotic character, her bisexuality and “feminist art”. The exhibition audience, unfortunately, was presented with a sentimental narrative about Frida's emotional life, which did not go beyond the trite image of Kahlo incarnated by actress Salma Hayek in Taymor's *Frida*. The focus in dealing with Kahlo's imagery was to convey her artistic work as a striking analogy to her dramatic life. If art history and social questions were mentioned at all, they were reduced to fodder for Kahlo's self-reflection and individual psychological interpretation.

The roles in which Kahlo is presented in her self portraits were again evaluated as mere idiosyncrasies of the artist: martyr, woman of pain, goddess, lover, Mexican fighter, loner, self-promoter, etc., and contributed to a further iconization of Frida Kahlo. In keeping with this approach, necklaces, plaster of Paris jacket and folk clothes were displayed like holy relics in glass cases.

In fact, her smaller works of art contain a variety of symbols, allegories, various mythologies, and open or encoded appropriations from various world cultures. Because the spectator was not enlightened about these, ultimately the popular notion of Frida Kahlo prevailed: she matured from a young girl into the artist, shaped by marital problems, physical trauma, psychological crises and her inability to have children.

Of course, all of these factors played a role in her life, and many visitors certainly admired the fact that she was able, out of often tragic, deeply human situations, to develop the power to paint and produced images that strike home with many people. However, suffering is not a mandatory requirement for the creation of art. What is needed is a general, creative dissatisfaction with the state of the world and the desire to explore the sources of this dissatisfaction.

Frida did this in an entirely unsentimental manner. After her tragic bus accident in September 1925, which caused her indescribable pain and confined her to her bed, she found her way to painting. That she had actually wanted to study medicine is evidenced by the anatomical knowledge she displayed in her subsequent imagery.

Initially, she created self-portraits and portraits of her friends and some family members. Apart from its practical results, allowing her to earn a living and relieving her family of the burden of enormous medical bills, painting for Kahlo became a way of giving meaning to her life, as part of the basic struggle for existence and self-discovery. In her efforts she was able to rely on the support of her parents. Already striking in her first pictures is a sense of detail, an eye which accurately perceives the environment. This is a skill that might be traced back in part to her German father, a photographer and avid amateur painter who also took architectural photos for the government.

## Social and artistic upheavals

Frida Kahlo's life is closely linked with a social event that was so important to her and her generation that she shifted her year of birth from 1907 to 1910—the eruption of the Mexican revolution, the birth of modern Mexico.

The civil war dragged on for some 10 years. Because her parents' house lay within the combat zone, Frida Kahlo was acquainted as a small child with the brutality and existential danger of war. Ultimately, most of the revolution's popular objectives were not achieved—one ruling general replaced another. Under these conditions, the Russian Revolution of 1917 exerted a strong attraction for critical intellectuals and artists such as Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. They saw in the Russian Revolution the path by which to complete the Mexican uprising and became early members of the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM), founded in 1919.

Russian and Mexican artists and theorists discussed the relationship between avant-garde art and revolutionary politics, and discovered their own quite unique forms of expression. It was the epoch of modernism, in which the twin poles of "Art and Revolution" became the driving force for many artists, both in the Soviet Union and cities such as Berlin and Paris. Rivera, who openly supported the Russian Revolution, played a leading role. Poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein responded to Rivera's visits to the USSR (among other things, he taught in Moscow in 1927-28) by visiting him in Mexico.

At the beginning of the 1920s, as the 15-year-old Frida was preparing for her future studies by visiting the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* (she was one of the first girls to be admitted to the school), the Mexican government was conducting a campaign against poverty and widespread illiteracy. Many intellectuals were engaged in supporting social progress and turned to oppressed layers of society who had remained ignored and unheeded. This tendency found artistic expression in "muralism", a form that was able to show, using monumental murals, the history of Mexico, its new values and revolutionary ideals—and not just to the illiterate. The Ministry of Education was responsible for legendary commissions for various wall paintings from "*los tres grandes*" (the three great) Mexican muralists: Rivera, Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco.

The revival of certain traditional and folk art forms, the rediscovery of native Mexican and pre-colonial art and culture expressed an aesthetic "turn to the people" by intellectuals and artists. This trend was also promoted by the government for other reasons. A special Mexican self-confidence directed against the old European colonial powers and its neighbouring superpower, the United States, was in keeping with the spirit of the new social elite. Nationalism was also a means of pouring ideological cement into the great social divisions in Mexican society, which persisted and deepened following the limited reforms introduced by the revolution.

The students of the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*, who mainly came from better-off families, grew up in this contradictory, hothouse atmosphere. Above all, they were filled with the idea of a better Mexico. Frida's school clique, the *cachuchas* (Spanish for caps), appears to have been marked by its singular lack of respect for the school authorities. The girls discussed the reformist ideas of the Minister of Education José Vasconcelos Calderón, international literature, the philosophy of Karl Marx, as well as the conservative ideas of Spengler. Some of Frida's friends later took up senior positions in the new society.

The establishment of a Mexican national culture, based on the old, previously frowned-upon pre-colonial culture of the indigenous peoples, was associated in part with attacks on the academic painting and institutions of the existing "Fine Arts", and the latter's aesthetics, which were mainly taught by professors from France, Germany and Italy. Frida discovered the traditional ex-voto art, simple stories mostly painted on small metal plates as offerings of thanks for salvation, healing, etc., left by believers in churches. She utilised the Christian themes and stories favoured by the ordinary population, although she was an opponent of Catholicism, that centuries-old system for the suppression of the people.

The first seven years of her portraits (1925-1932) follow European examples, especially Renaissance Florentine portraiture. She gained her knowledge of this school from her father's remarkable library and the *Biblioteca Ibero-Americana*. Her first *Self-portrait in velvet dress* and the *Portrait of Kahlo Adriana* (both painted in 1926) show the clear influence of Botticelli or Bronzino. The inescapable gaze of the elegantly dressed individual portrayed before a dark, unreal background and other visual features correspond to Florentine sensibilities.

Portraits, usually women, were enhanced through allusions and symbols that characterize the person portrayed. Revealing, humorous means were used to unmask the person depicted on a second glance, and also to shift the meaning of the seemingly unambiguous depiction. The butterflies surrounding the woman portrayed in the 1942 portrait *Marucha Lavín* are actually nocturnal moths, in other words, pests—a reference to a well-known Mexican pun: "La Polilla come tela, la mujer te la come". ("The moth eats the material, but the woman, you!")

Frida Kahlo was quite familiar with the realities of social life. It is completely misleading to present her as someone merely obsessed with her own feelings, thoughts and passions.

## Frida Kahlo and communism

Toward the end of the 1920s, the Mexican government was still allowing artists a certain amount of political freedom. In 1928, Diego Rivera was able to commemorate communists as mural subjects in the Ministry for Public Education to celebrate the coming transition to socialism. Frida is seen at the centre of this painting, wearing a red shirt with a red star and handing out weapons. She joined the Communist Party of Mexico (PCM) that year.

This was the period of Stalin's sustained attacks on the Left Opposition, Trotsky's expulsion from the USSR, and the imposition of the anti-Marxist policy of "socialism in one country" on the various sections of the Comintern. Can anything of this atmosphere be sensed in Rivera's picture? It presents Frida as an activist in the revolution. The artist and muralist David Siqueiros, depicted on the left side of the picture, keeps a low profile and appears an detached observer. In real life he was to develop into a zealous Stalinist.

When Rivera was expelled from PCM in 1929, the year of their marriage, Frida followed him. During his stay in the Soviet Union, he had already come into conflict with party functionaries over cultural and political matters, which led the Stalinist government "to advise him to return to Mexico", as Andrea Kettenmann writes in a biography of Rivera. The latter was expelled from the Mexican party, after receiving several commissions from the government and accepting an assignment from the

US ambassador to Mexico, Dwight W. Morrow, to paint a mural in the former Cortéz Palace of Cuernavaca.

In the midst of the Stalinist campaign “against deviants and reconcilers”, Rivera failed to measure up to the phony “proletarian cultural” ideal of the artist who subordinates his artistic freedom to the party’s political line. Ten years later, together with Leon Trotsky and the surrealist André Breton, he was to collaborate on *For an Independent Revolutionary Art* (1938), a manifesto directed against Stalinism and other reactionary forces.

The year 1929 was also marked by social instability. The Mexican government of Emilio Portes Gil tried to consolidate state power by setting up a catch-all alliance, the National Revolutionary Party (PNR). The military putsch that followed was unsuccessful. Then the Communist Party was banned. In autumn, the New York stock exchange crashed. An assassination attempt on the new Mexican president, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, failed in early 1930.

In the wake of the anti-communist hysteria, a hate campaign was launched against dissident intellectuals and artists, the serious consequences of which (detention, deportation, murder) forced many of them to leave the country. In 1930, Kahlo and Rivera also fled for a few years to the United States, where they moved mainly in artistic and upper middle class circles.

Frida developed “quite a rage against all the rich people there”, but the Mexican Stalinists, with utter cynicism, made the couple’s travels a scandal and a pretext, smearing Rivera as an “agent of North American imperialism and the millionaire, Morrow”.

While in the US, Rivera and Kahlo became acquainted with the ideas of the anti-Stalinist Left Opposition, and its leader, Leon Trotsky. On their initiative—but with the state’s proviso that he refrain from political engagement—Trotsky was admitted into the country in 1937 by the Mexican government of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río as an exile in Frida’s parental home, the Blue House in Coyoacán. Frida Kahlo’s contact with Trotsky, which certainly would have been characterised by intensive political and cultural exchange, was presented ineluctably and sensationally in the exhibition.

At this time, in 1937, Trotsky was preparing for his appearance before an independent commission of inquiry headed by John Dewey. He wanted to publicly refute Stalin’s monstrous accusations against him. This political offensive was qualitatively deepened a year later with the founding of the Fourth International. In 1939, the Hitler-Stalin pact—against which Trotsky had long been warning—further revealed Stalin’s counter-revolutionary role. The Comintern and its supporters were thrown into crisis.

By failing to mention any of this, the exhibition ignores the fact that Rivera and Kahlo actively sided with Trotsky in his struggle against Stalinism. The exhibition also fails to use its placards and notes to indicate that Trotsky was one of the most important leaders of the Russian Revolution.

One significant individual is mentioned, but only by name. According to the exhibition notes, a woman breastfeeding a child in the picture *The Bus* (1929) is said to be Tina Modotti. The commentary only describes her as a sort of matchmaker who brought Diego and Frida together. Modotti (1896-1942) was an American communist of Italian descent, and a photographer who probably introduced her friend, Frida Kahlo, into the Communist Party.

In January 1929, Modotti’s friend, Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban student leader, communist and intellectual focus for left-wing critics of Stalin, was shot in broad daylight, probably by order of the Cuban government. Modotti’s photo of Mella’s typewriter, with a sheet of paper bearing a quotation from Trotsky—as was pointed out by Elisabeth Weyer

in her documentary film, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* (1996)—has become iconic.

Modotti is an example of how the Mexican and Russian revolutions inspired young artists. However, she is also a tragic example of the many artists who came under the sway of Stalinism and paid a terrible price. Modotti worked for Stalin’s KGB (the Soviet secret service) from the mid-1930s, and was associated with the Italian Stalinist functionary Vittorio Vidali, who as early as 1927 had been a Stalinist operative in the Mexican party. Together with the muralist Siqueiros, he tried to murder Trotsky in 1940. Siqueiros, the former communist and artist—like the Communist Party of Mexico itself—had become part of Stalin’s apparatus.

It is very difficult to find out anything about Frida Kahlo’s actual political involvement with communism, and what can be discovered is usually only vaguely presented. Such information is mostly derived from correspondence or private archives. Kahlo’s sympathy for the Left Opposition against Stalin manifested itself in the most fulfilling and creative stage of her life, and it is impermissible to reduce this fact to a mere episode.

The exhibition catalogue explains that, during the 1930s, the New York Trotskyists of the Communist League of America often requested the presence of “comrade Frida” along with Rivera—an indication that she could have participated at political meetings. In one of Kahlo’s letters from the US, she writes: “I’ve learnt so much here and I’m more and more convinced it’s only through communism that we can become human.” The former Mexican Trotskyist, Octavio Fernández, regards her as one of the founding members of the Fourth International.

Kahlo was only one of many deeply shocked by Trotsky’s murder in August 1940, just a few months after the Siqueiros-led assassination attempt. Half a million people paid their grave-side respects to the founder of the Red Army and former comrade in arms of Vladimir Lenin. The famous folk song, mourning Trotsky’s death and attributed to an anonymous Mexican composer, presumably also emerged from the mood of the time (mp3 audio: Gran Corrido de León Trotsky).

It seems a great contradiction that Frida Kahlo rejoined the Communist Party of Mexico eight years later. But Stalin’s physical annihilation of the generation of communists and the rise of Hitler had grave consequences. It damaged and demoralized so many artists and intellectuals, for whom the struggle to build a new international in the working class proved overwhelming.

In certain petty bourgeois circles, especially after Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, any criticism of Stalin was seen as aiding the fascists and betraying “real existing socialism.” More complicated problems arose when the US and Mexico entered the war as military allies of Stalin. Moreover, the arrival of many European intellectuals and artists fleeing Hitler—who were increasingly granted political asylum in Mexico from the end of the 1930s, and many of whom were members of Stalinist parties—certainly contributed to an increasingly skeptical and pessimistic climate.

In the postwar period, a host of intellectuals convinced themselves that the victories of the Soviet army, the creation of “socialist” states in Eastern Europe, and the Chinese Revolution in 1949 made Stalin’s crimes an issue of the past. Kahlo apparently gravitated with ease toward such conceptions, collecting signatures in the early 1950s for one of the innumerable Stalinist-supported “peace movements.” Her evolution back toward Stalinism can be explained, but it doesn’t make the reality any more attractive.

Kahlo lived in explosive times and under volatile conditions, which can only be sketched here. But even a sketch provides a clue as to the source of her capacity to depict pain, anguish and uncertainty in such a resolute manner. The occasionally shocking brutality of her art combined with an ambivalent, disturbing atmosphere that is often difficult to pinpoint precisely in her pictures. These qualities cannot be reduced merely to

earlier civil war experiences, her personal problems, her complicated relationship with Rivera, and her tendency to dwell on the Mexican mentality and its supposed special relationship to death.

It is through her aesthetic confrontation with Mexican tradition, in the context of the great events of the 20th century, that Kahlo manages to transcend folkloric celebration of eternal cycles of nature and the passive dualism of peasant art. The tension in Kahlo's pictures, with their enigmatic symbols, arises from the shattering of this old dualism through the creation of a harmonic double tone. Her dualism—often depicted in the form of her relationship with Rivera; for example, in *Embracing the Universe or Diego, Me and Xolotl* (1949)—is strife-torn, occasionally destructive, and a certain mood of hostility underlies the apparent passivity. These pictures cry out for the peace and harmony that are beyond the realm of possibility.

This contrast is also to be found in Kahlo's "cult of nature". Symbols of fertility—a lushly rampant, cosmic and natural vitality—stand in contrast to the emblems of her miscarriage and her bodily suffering. Nature and the body become semaphores, as does Frida, by presenting herself interwoven with nature, or merely dressed in traditional Mexican clothing.

Perhaps Frida Kahlo's most popular portrait is *The Broken Column* (1944). When one considers the historical background of this and other paintings, it is difficult to look at them and think only of her physical illness. There was something else in her soul that was broken, something that could only be painfully held together with the aid of her art.



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