

Frida Kahlo: A Life of Passion
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This year marks the centennial of Frida Kahlo; one hundred years since the now renowned artist was born in Mexico. At this moment, there is an exhibition of her life work at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. This represents the largest collection of her work including paintings, letters, and photographs, some being publicly displayed for the first time. The exhibition entitled “National Homage to Frida Kahlo” has received rave reviews! One reporter estimated that over a two-month period more than 300,000 people would attend the show.¹

How much has changed since her lifetime! For one thing, Frida Kahlo would never admit that she was born in 1907. Frida proclaimed that she was born in 1910, the year that marked the birth of the Mexican Revolution! Even though she was actually three years old when the Revolution began, her identity was profoundly shaped by the cultural and political awakening of that period.

Frida Kahlo is only now beginning to be appreciated as an artist in her own right. She was known as Mrs. Diego Rivera, wife of the Mexican artist who painted epic murals in Mexico City, San Francisco, New York, and Detroit. They were an odd couple. Diego was twenty years her senior, over six feet tall and 300 pounds. Frida was only five three, and less than one hundred. However, they were well-matched in their intensity, enjoyment of tequila, music, art, politics, and Mexican indigenous cultures. They had a tumultuous love affair even divorcing and becoming remarried. There was no question that Frida loved him passionately despite his womanizing and her own series of lovers.

Frida’s artistic style was quite different from that of her husband Diego and other leading artists of her day when art was seen as revolutionary. Murals were being commissioned to depict Mexican history and especially to depict the indigenous cultures suppressed by colonization. I was fortunate to see Rivera’s murals in Mexico City, which on a massive scale he portrays Mexico’s past including Aztec temples through the Revolution to the leaders of his day. The predominant spirit of this postcolonial period was that art was in service to the masses.

Frida was unable to create public art on that massive scale because of her injuries. Instead she painted her own intimate experiences: heartbreak, physical pain, birth, death, sexual intimacy, self-portraits, and portraits of people she knew. In her words, “The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration.”

Her current popularity is largely due to the movie, “FRIDA” produced and starring Mexican actress, Salma Hayek. If you haven’t seen “FRIDA”, I highly recommend it to you. The film was directed by theatre artist Julie Taymor, who brings some of Frida’s paintings to life on the screen. It will take your breath away!

Although Frida Kahlo's paintings received some recognition during her lifetime, she would be astounded to know that her popularity has reached cult-status today; what some call "Frida-mania". As many of you know, I spent part of my Sabbatical in Mexico. Many of Kahlo's paintings and especially her self-portraits with her penetrating gaze and characteristic uni-brow have been transformed into merchandise for the turistas. I saw a lot of Gringos carrying Frida bags in the marketplace and wearing clothing or jewelry bearing her image.

So, why did *I* choose Frida Kahlo as the inspiration for today's service? Frida Kahlo lived a life of passion. She challenged the conventions of society. Her artwork captured "Amor y Dolor", Love and Pain, with a vividness that expresses the universal human experience that even today is not shared with her candor.

Frida Kahlo only had one solo exhibition during her lifetime. It occurred a year before her death in Mexico City. A local critic wrote, "It is impossible to separate the life and work of this extraordinary person. Her paintings are her biography." So, I would like to share with you some broad strokes of her biography and why I feel her life and artwork offer a message worthy of Sunday morning.

At the age of six, Frida contracted polio. One of her legs remained weakened and stunted from the disease causing children to taunt her as "peg-leg Frida". Adversity and teasing often causes people to become withdrawn in order to escape from notice and avoid being hurt. Frida's response was quite different. She became a tomboy and athletic. As a teenager, she sometimes wore trousers to cover her leg. There is a family portrait in which she wears a suit and looks confidently at the camera. We think nothing of girls in pants but this was as unconventional as men wearing skirts today.

Frida never intended to be an artist. She wanted to become a doctor and enrolled in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. Of the 2000 students, she was one of only thirty-five females admitted. Frida became part of a socialist-nationalist group known as the Cachuchas, after the caps they wore. Several members of this group of intellectuals became leaders of the Mexican Left.

As the recent bridge collapse so vividly brought to our attention, lives can be cut short or hurled in unexpected directions at any moment. Such was the experience of Frida Kahlo. On her way home from school her bus collided with a trolley. Several people died in the accident. Frida was thrown from the bus and landed in the street with severe injuries to her spine, foot and pelvis. She was not expected to survive.

Frida discovered painting during her recovery from the accident. While confined to her bed for months, her father gave her paints, attached an easel to the bed frame, and hung a mirror from the canopy. She began to paint herself. Over the course of her life, she had many operations, wore braces and casts over her torso, experienced great physical pain, and was often confined to bed. In her own words, "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best."

Frida's artwork was uneven over the course of her lifetime because she was often in pain or under the influence of alcohol or pain-killers. There are times when her brush strokes are thick and the composition mediocre. However, there are many paintings and drawings that are nothing short of brilliant. Those masterworks draw me in; the vivid images command my attention.

In her series of self-portraits, Frida looks out from the canvass with a penetrating gaze; there is no hint of a smile. She painted herself with a rare honesty portraying even the slight dark mustache over her lip and the connecting arch of her eyebrows.

While reading about Frida, one of my projects this summer was organizing family photographs. Creating albums documenting special events, family and friends is an activity I have always enjoyed. However, with our new digital camera, the images lived only on our computer so I began printing them out and creating photo albums. As I poured over the smiling faces, it occurred to me that although all the major events like trips, special gatherings, and holidays were represented, the images only captured my experience of that year on a certain level. The photos do not convey the struggles, uncertainty, and tears shed.

Of course, who would want to look at an album like that! If I started posing for photos with Frida's penetrating look, I would scare people. I do not recommend that we document the difficult moments of our lives along with the fun and pleasant ones. However, in preparing for this service, what occurred to me is snapshots are part of the myth we tell ourselves about life—that we must always be smiling and laughing with loved ones nearby when in reality every one of us spends time alone and many days we are gripped with the difficult emotions of sorrow, uncertainty, anger, and grief. Pain is a universal part of the human condition which Frida was courageous enough to express. This woman who was not expected to survive transformed her suffering into art.

We often do not share our suffering with one another. We hold it in private as if others would not understand. However, pain, loneliness, uncertainty are all part of life. We cannot experience love without sorrow. Being open to the beauty and sweetness of life requires vulnerability. Shrinking back from difficulties, withdrawing in order to avoid pain actually magnifies it further. Instead we must live life with passion fully embracing its contradictions.

The following poem by Kahlil Gibran captures this essential truth:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked
 The same well from which your laughter rises
 was often times filled with your tears.
 And how else can it be?
 The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
 the more joy you can contain.
 Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup
 that was burned in the potter's oven?
 And is not the lute that soothes your spirit,

the very wood that was hallowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find
it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart and you shall see
that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Frida lived a life of passion. As much as she expressed suffering on canvass, she also captured the sensuous beauty of the world. Her paintings are animated with the parrots, dogs, monkeys, and plants that filled her home. There is a wonderful still life of fruit with a glistening slice of watermelon boldly captioned, “VIVE LA VIDA”, Live Life! She was a fan of the movies especially slap-stick comedy like Charlie Chaplin, and Laurel and Hardy.

Frida herself was a work of art, dressing in traditional Mexican costumes with colorful flowing skirts, rings on every finger, large pre-Columbian necklaces, and her long hair tied up on her head with intricate braids and ribbons. Men and women were drawn to her.

Toward the end of her life, Frida became an art teacher at a new School of Painting and Sculpture. Her teaching method was unconventional. She encouraged the students to be disciplined in their work but to find their own authentic style. When Frida’s deteriorating health prevented her from traveling to the school, she invited the students to come to her home to paint. Four students did so and in becoming her disciples, are known as the Fridos. There is a wonderful PBS special in which these now senior artists describe what it was like to paint on the grounds of the Casa Azul. One said that it was a sort of Garden of Eden teeming with lush plants, parrots, monkeys, dogs, and flowers. Frida was unable to see the students every day. When she did, she emerged in her colorful clothing, set a beautiful table, they drank and ate together, and she offered her complete attention. Frida encouraged each her students to read, to study art, and most of all to be authentic in their painting, in expressing their experience of life.

According to Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, “I do not think Frida was a Communist. I think Frida was a pantheist. She was in love with the world, everything that’s alive.” (PBS Special)

My prayer for each one of us is that we fall in love with the world, everything that is alive. Dare to welcome the raging power of passion. Take delight in all of our senses: sight, sound, smell, and touch. Engage in the art and politics of our times. Remember the spiritual truth that birth and death, joy and sorrow, male and female, pleasure and pain—the seeming contradictions of life—teach us essential lessons in the one thing that matters most of all, LOVE. May we dare to live and to love with the beauty and the courage of Frida Kahlo.

1. Collins, Hugh, *Rueters*, 7/12/07