

FRIDA KAHLO

AN EXPLORATION OF ART THEMES AND SYMBOLS

By

Chelsey Rae Miller

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment  
of  
the Requirements of the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ART HISTORY

University of Wisconsin – Superior


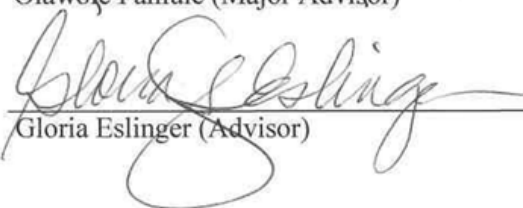
May 2012

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As members of the Thesis Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by Chelsey Rae Miller and that we approve it as fulfilling the thesis requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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Title: FRIDA KAHLO: An Exploration of Art Themes and Symbols

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Advisors: Famule, Olawole and Eslinger, Gloria

Abstract: This thesis is an exploration of the symbolism and themes in the artwork of Frida Kahlo. It examines and interprets Frida Kahlo's artworks on a more intimate level. The thesis explores the many self-portraits of the artist, as well as considers some additional non-portraiture works by Frida Kahlo. Furthermore the thesis considers Frida Kahlo's work I will examine her within the context of her personal life and how this molded the artist she has come to be known as. I addresses her love life with Mural Artist Diego Rivera, the long battles with her physical ailments, and how this (her personal life) had shaped her work. One the whole the thesis dwells on popular themes such as spirituality, religiousness, and political ideals in Kahlo's work, as well as examines some of the symbolisms in her art, such as Mesoamerican influence and surrealist idea and methodologies.

Description: Thesis (M.A.)

## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the following people:

My advisor Dr. Famule for all of this wisdom in Art History; for it was those very things that I learned from him and his courses that allowed me to look at this topic and all arts in the entirety of the world in a whole new light.

The UW-Superior Art Department, for all of their support throughout my entire academic career.

Lastly, but *not least*, I would also like to thank my family for **all** of their support during my schooling, and to my partner, Justin for everything he has done to support me in so many ways. Having a collective of caring and loving people to surround yourself with who care about your success makes life run so much more smoothly, and I couldn't have done it otherwise.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Title Page</b>	<b>Pg 1</b>
<b>Approval Page</b>	<b>Pg 2</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Pg 3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>Pg 4</b>
<b>List of Images and Sources</b>	<b>Pg 6</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Within Contexts</b>	<b>Pg 8</b>
Introduction	Pg 8
Frida, The Peg Leg	Pg 10
Frida, Diego's Wife	Pg 13
<b>Chapter 2: Frida's Art: A Historical Analysis of Symbol and Theme</b>	<b>Pg 16</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>Pg 23</b>
<b>Figures</b>	<b>Pg 25</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>Pg 46</b>

## Image Resources

Please note the image References are listed with the information of the piece followed by the image source.

**Figure 1:** Frida Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera. Photo by Juan Guzman. [http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/life/gallery\\_couple\\_6.html](http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/life/gallery_couple_6.html)

**Figure 2.** *Self-Portrait with Velvet Dress*. 1926. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. Herrera, Hayden. Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo. New York: Harper Collins, 1984

**Figure 3:** Salvador Dali. *The Face of War*. 1940-4, Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. <http://www.theartistsalvadordali.com/face-war.htm>

**Figure 4:** *The Two Fridas*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 67" x 67", Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg 140

**Figure 5:** *The Little Deer or The Wounded Deer*. 1946. Oil on Masonite. Private Collection, Huston Texas. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg 235

**Figure 6:** *Still Life with Watermelons*. 1954. Oil on Masonite. Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacán, Mexico. Souter, Gerry. Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 2005. Pg. 161

**Figure 7:** *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace*. 1940. Oil on Canvas. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Institute. Art Collection; University of Texas at Austin. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg. 158

**Figure 8:** [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cb/Huitzilopochtli\\_telleriano.jpg/250px-Huitzilopochtli\\_telleriano.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cb/Huitzilopochtli_telleriano.jpg/250px-Huitzilopochtli_telleriano.jpg)

**Figure 9:** <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/aztecs/coatlicue.gif>

**Figure 10:** *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth(Mexico), Myself, Diego and Senor Xoltil*. 1949. Private Collection, Mexico City, Mexico. Souter, Gerry. Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. 2005. Pg. 117

**Figure 11:** *The Broken Column*. 1944. Oil on Canvas. Collection of Dolores Olmedo Patiño. Mexico City, Mexico Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg. 210.

**Figure 12:** *Tree of Hope, Stand Strong (or Keep Strong)* 1946. Oil on Masonite. Isidore Ducasse Collection, France. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg. 230

**Figure 13:** *Dream*. 1940. Oil on Canvas. Isidore Ducasse Collection, France. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg 146

**Figure 14:** *Self Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Eloesser*. 1940. Oil on Masonite. Private Collection, New York. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007. Pg. 154

**Figure 15:** *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States*. Oil on Metal. Manuel and Maria Reyero Collection, New York. Helga Prignitz-Poda. Frida Kahlo: Life and Work. Schirmer/Mosel, 2007 Pg. 80

**Figure 16 A:** Leonardo DaVinci. *The Last Supper*. 1495-98. Oil and Tempra on Plaster (dining hall) of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, in Milan, Italy.  
<http://www.abcgallery.com/L/leonardo/leonardo4.html>

**Figure 16 B:** Frida Kahlo. *The Wounded Table*. 1940 Oil on Canvas. Location Unknown  
<http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/index.php?one=azt&two=aaa&id=466&typ=reg>

**Figure 18:** *Diego and I* 1949. Oil on Canvas mounted on Masonite. Collection of Mary Anne Martin Fine Arts. New York. Bauer, Claudia. Frida Kahlo. Presetel Verlag, Munic et.al., 2007

**Figure 19:** *Flower of Life* 1943. Oil on Masonite. Delores Olmedo Patiño Museum, Mexico City. Bauer, Claudia. Frida Kahlo. Presetel Verlag, Munic et.al., 2007

**Figure 20:** *Sun and Life* 1947. Oil on Masonite. Collection of Manuel Perusquia, Galleria Arvil, MexicoCity. Bauer, Claudia. Frida Kahlo. Presetel Verlag, Munic et.al., 2007

# CHAPTER I: WITHIN CONTEXTS

## Introduction

My research on Frida Kahlo has been a long journey coming. I was drawn to her art when I first began my college studies back in 2005. It was at that point that I knew my research on her and her art would become a long term commitment. I visited the Kahlo exhibit at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN in 2008 and from my experience I can say with certainty, as with most art, books and reproductions of the work does the originals little justice. I was astounded by the pure hum of silence as I stood there observing, alongside a mass of guests, works such as the *Two Frida's* (Figure 4), and *The Little Deer* (Figure 5). It was there that we all stood quietly considering what exactly it was this extraordinary woman left us with.

Frida Kahlo once said, "I am not sick. I am broken, but I am happy as long as I can paint." The life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo has been written into a multitude of books and her story has been produced into a number of films. In coming to know this electrifying artist, I feel whatever it is that makes up Frida Kahlo cannot be merely lumped into one small paper, nor can the expressions of her life be crammed into a book. However, with that said as it is with any artist the best way to view the artist is through their work. Frida was many things; a great bi-sexual lover, a broken would-have-been mother, an artist, a Communist, and a stunning vision of Mexico. But, above all I believe that her art is most worth of our consideration. The artwork of Frida Kahlo is a stunning visual autobiography of color charged images, and spiritual and emotional contexts.

Furthermore as it is with all artists and other important figures of our past I believe it is important to at least consider the context of their work: i.e. their history. In consideration of how I would write this paper I found myself weighing two options: to forego her entire history or that is her birth, life, marriage to Diego, and her death and simply focus on her art **or** to include all of the above before examination of her art? After careful consideration I decided that it would be most beneficial and respectful to include



the aforementioned tidbits on her life, for those are the very things that molded her as an artist – whether she intended them to or not. With that, I have condensed her rather extensive life story into smaller portions including her birth, death, and in brief, her love life with Mural Artist Diego Rivera. Frida's spectrum of artworks is quite large and to consider all of her pieces individually would be a lengthy task, for purposes of this thesis I have decided to consider the messages throughout her artwork, and some of symbolism present throughout them, and in doing so we have to ask the question: We have to ask ourselves, from what place does the artist create from?

## **Frida the Peg Leg**

To consider the work of any artist, one must consider the context of the person, or that is the ultimate and all inclusive place from which the artist creates their work. In examination of artist Frida Kahlo's life, books have been written including autobiographical diaries, a number of documentaries and even a motion picture starring prominent Latino actress Salma Hayek. It seems that Frida's life was a rollercoaster of happiness, of chronic pain, and of sadness. Although there are many stories and much research on the life of Frida, this paper will focus on what I feel are the only two extremely important aspects to her life that created the building blocks for her art: her health and her life as the wife of mural artist Diego Rivera.

Frida was born Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon on July 6, 1907 in Coyoacán, Mexico, to Matilde and Guillermo Kahlo (Herrera); Her mother was a sincere Catholic, and her Father a German Jew (All sources). Frida was not an only child and had a handful of siblings, however she was closest with her sister Cristina.

It is worth noting that only three years after Frida Kahlo was born on July 7, 1910, the Mexican Revolution broke out; this is the year she claimed as her birth. When Frida was only six years old she was struck with a terrible pain in her right leg, which was diagnosed as Polio. Although she went through physical therapy and did eventually recover her right leg would plague her for the rest of her life as it remained smaller and weaker than the left one ("Life and Times of Frida Kahlo"). It is thought that perhaps this is one reason that may explain why she always wore long dresses, skirts and sometimes men's suits.

Although Polio physically changed Frida it was her accident on the seventeenth of September in the year 1925 that changed her life forever, both physically and emotionally. Frida was with Alejandro, her first love whom she met at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. (She commonly referred to him as Alex.) On that late September afternoon both she and Alex caught a bus to return to her home town of Coyoacán. The bus system was relatively new in Mexico City at the time, and despite it being crowded both Frida and Alejandro found seats near the back (Herrera 47). Author Hayden Herrera

described the drivers of the buses best saying, “Then, as now, they were driven with toreador bravado, as if the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe dangling near the front window made the driver invincible” (47). The bus to Coyoacán was turning onto an adjacent street, Calzada de Tlalpan, and a trolley car was approaching from the other direction but never stopped. In Frida’s recollection of the accident she said, “The crash bounced us forward and a handrail pierced me the way a sword pierces a bull.”(qtd. Herrera 48)

However Alejandro recalled the accident in much further detail saying:

“The electric train with two cars approached the bus slowly. It hit the bus in the middle. Slowly the train pushed the bus. The bus had a strange elasticity. It bent more and more, but for a time it did not break. It was a bus with long benches on either side. I remember that at one moment my knees touched the knees of the person sitting opposite me, I was sitting next to Frida. When the bus reached its maximal flexibility it burst into a thousand pieces, and the train kept moving. It ran over many people ” (qtd. Herrera 48).

During the accident Frida’s clothes had been ripped from her body, and a fellow passenger carrying gold powder had fallen and the powder covered Frida’s bleeding and broken body. Alejandro had noticed the iron handrail piercing Frida’s body and it was agreed by him and others that the handrail had to be removed (“Life and Times of Frida Kahlo”). There is one bit of information regarding this accident that remained the same in all of the sources I used for research and that is that Frida’s cries of pain, during the removal of the iron handrail, drown out the sounds of the approaching ambulances.

Frida was certainly not expected to live and it was assumed she would die on the operating table (Herrera 49). Frida’s wounds were many and author Hayden Herrera described them as such:

Her spinal column was broken in three places in the lumbar region. Her collarbone was broken, and her third and fourth ribs. Her right leg had eleven fractures and her right foot was dislocated and crushed. Her left shoulder was out of joint, her pelvis broken in three places. The steel handrail had literally skewered her body at the level of the abdomen; entering on the left side, and exited her body through the vagina (49).

The damage done to her body shaped the rest of her life. A friend of Frida's once commented on the accident saying, "They had to put her back together in sections as if they were making a photomontage" (qtd. Herrera 50). Frida remained in a full body cast for an entire month.

If her stay at the hospital for recovery was not trying enough, Frida's relationship with Alex was in the process of deteriorating. It is believed that prior to the accident Arias grew irritated at Frida's other relationships. However, it was a situation that was almost unavoidable as they would also part ways as he was leaving Mexico soon on a trip to Europe and would not return until November of 1927 (Zamora 27 ). This eventually became the end of their relationship and perhaps the beginning of Frida's life as an artist.

Frida's health only continued on a slow downward progression, and if enduring Polio and a near death accident was not enough for her she also suffered three miscarriages, a foot/lower leg amputation, her appendix removed, and her spine became so weak in her late years she practically lived in plaster and iron corsets ("Life and Times of Frida Kahlo"). There is no doubt in my mind that she endured a life long journey of physical pain, but perhaps it is that this was the catalyst for her as an artist. On the other hand, her relationship with Mural artist Diego Rivera also played a very important role in her art as well. Frida was even quoted once saying "I have suffered two serious accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar ran over me...The other accident is Diego" (Zamora 37). This is not to say that Diego was the death of Frida nor is this to suggest that she spent her entire 47 years of life in sadness and pain. Despite the trials of being married to one of Mexico's prominent artistic personalities and a well known infidel, it seems she did have a life of happiness with Diego.

## Frida, Diego's Wife

Diego Rivera was a prominent Mexican muralist (now considered the most influential Mexican painter of the 20th century), an active communist, and was an enthusiastic supporter of Mexico's independence. He was also a strong force in the art world, and was especially influential in America's conception of public art. His artistic merit was outstanding and he was commissioned by persons such as the Rockefeller's and Henry Ford. His mural in the Rockefeller center never came to a close and was destroyed on the grounds that his Communist ideals and personal political agenda were present in the painting. He was ordered to cease painting the mural and although he refused, the mural was destroyed. Even his murals in America were the source for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's WPA program (PBS.org). Despite being a prolific and influential artist and political personality, it seems he was severely lacking when it came to his relationship with Frida, and many other women for that matter.

Frida did not meet Diego until she attended the National Preparatory School in 1922, in Mexico City. He was commissioned at the *Prepa* to paint a mural in the auditorium. Initially Frida's interest in him began as light-hearted torment along with her gang of friends, the *Cachuchas* (Herrera 31-32). It was not until later on that her interest in him became more serious.

Although Frida's studies came to a halt at the Preparatory school in 1927 she, did return to call upon Diego to critique the work she had created as a means to help her father financially. Diego fell in love with not only her art, but also with Frida herself and they met again later on at her home in Coyoacán on the following Sunday as per Frida's request (Herrera 88-89). The two were later married on August 21, 1929 (Figure 1). It was Diego's first Legal marriage. They were complete opposites of each other: Frida was 21 and Diego 41, Frida was short and thin and Diego was tall and wide ("Life and Times of Frida Kahlo").

The day after they were married Frida lived with her Diego for many years before returning to her home in Coyoacán. There were also brief periods in their relationship where she lived in United States alongside him in places like San Francisco and New York but it was Mexico she longed for and truly

considered home.

Much like her own life Frida's relationship with Diego was too, a rollercoaster of emotion, as Diego simply could not manage to keep to one woman, and instead he frequently had affairs, many of them with his models. However, Frida was no exception. It is known that she had affairs with both men and women, and in terms of her sexual appetite she was quoted saying, "Make love, take a bath, make love again" ("Life and Times of Frida Kahlo"). Some of her known affairs included Leon Trotsky, Isamu Noguchi, and Nickolas Murray. According to author Claudia Bauer it is believed that "Diego seems to have derived some pleasure from Frida's lesbian affairs" (qtd. Bauer 95). It is however, unclear as to whether or not Frida took other lovers out of spite for Diego's infidelity or if she truly enjoyed a lifestyle of a plethora of sexual partners.

Eventually Diego and Frida came to an understanding that they could pursue other lovers, but with the understanding that these love affairs did not carry the same intimacy and feelings that Diego and Frida had for one another (Zamora 50). Despite this agreement it is easy enough to deduce that Diego's lifestyle deeply hurt his wife.

Despite Diego's intense sexual appetite and Frida's sexuality, she deeply longed for children. She was never able to bear them, and it is believed that this was a result of her trolley car accident. In consideration of the injuries she sustained it is no surprise. Despite many miscarriages she continued to try.. Many accounts on Diego's lifestyle suggest that he disliked children; author Jack Rummel claimed he was even repulsed by children (82). It is known that regardless of whether or not he liked children he had more than one with quite a few women and refused to care for them. In one case according to Rummel, a child that he had with his common-wife, Angelica Beloff, came down with pneumonia and because Beloff could not afford to heat the apartment in which she lived with the child, he died. It was only after the death of the child, claims Rummel, that Diego then shared his grief and had a "nervous collapse" (82). Perhaps it was Frida's inability to bear children that kept her so close to Diego.

In 1939 Frida had traveled to Europe for her art exhibitions and upon returning was met with a request of divorce from Diego. It is unclear as to the real reason he asked for a divorce: In one source he

claims it was for no “sentimental, economic, or artistic reason” (Zamora 62). However according to Bauer, Diego said, “I loved her too much to want to cause her suffering, and to spare her further torments, I decided to separate from her...I simply wanted to be free to carry on with any woman who caught my fancy” (97). After the unwarranted, but not unlikely divorce Frida became ill and turned to alcoholism. When Diego, living in San Francisco at the time, heard of her “illness” he rushed her to a doctor who practiced in San Francisco. She eventually recovered, and on Diego’s 54<sup>th</sup> Birthday (December 8, 1940) he married Frida again, but it was not the same. She was growing more and more independent and craved both her home in Mexico and her independence. She moved back to the *Casa Azul (Blue House)* in Coyoacán and never returned to the studio next door to her husband’s (Zamora 70).

Frida’s health only declined after Diego returned to her after their divorce. Perhaps it was the thought of losing her that scared Diego into returning to his wife. About a year later, on July 13, 1954, Frida died peacefully in her *casa azul* in Coyoacán. Some suspected she overdosed on alcohol and pills, but nothing was ever confirmed. In the last period of her life Frida did little painting, what she did manage to paint was evidence of her deteriorating health and unending frustration as she teetered between life and death. Her last painting was done in 1954 not long before her death; the painting was a still life of sliced watermelons which carries the words *Viva la Vida*, “long live life.” Three years later Diego died; his last painting was a small still-life of cut watermelons (“Life and Times of Frida Kahlo”).

## CHAPTER 2

### Frida's Art: A Historical Analysis of Symbols and Themes

Frida was never classically trained in art. Although her father Guillermo, a photographer, arranged for drawing lessons from friend Fernando Fernández which came to a close because of her accident in 1925 (Bauer 19). I do not believe Frida ever intended to be an artist, but it is believed that because of her father's skill in Photography that Frida possessed his eye for "looking at the world (Bauer 19)."

What exactly was it then that motivated her to paint? Perhaps it was that her parents gave her painting supplies (including an easel to go over her lap, a mirror above her head) while in her recovery from her near-fatal accident, and maybe it was the thought of losing Alejandro, her *novio*. I would like to believe that it was a little of everything. While recovering she painted the first of many self portraits to come, a *Self-Portrait in Velvet Dress* (Figure 2), which was originally intended as a gift for Alejandro, Frida's first long term lover. She requested that it be placed at eye level as if she herself were with Alejandro.

Frida technically belonged to the Surrealists. But she never gave herself to them. The Surrealist movement began in Paris in 1924. Although it began originally as a literary movement, its founder, André Breton, later included and promoted Surrealist ideas in art (Art Story). I do not believe that Frida ever intended to be a part of such a movement; but it is no doubt that her work *is* a stunning reflection of the ideals and cannons of Surrealism. She even once stated, "I never knew I was a surrealist until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was" ("Frida Kahlo"). Kahlo's art, although it provided similar elements to Surrealists such as Dali (Figure 3), was vastly different. In her art she captured a certain type of energy and accomplished something much different from the other surrealists. She grasped something much deeper and wholesome in art, which I believe is something that had not previously been present in the art world. Diego said it best, "...through her paintings she breaks all the taboos of the woman's body and of female sexuality..." and he was absolutely correct in saying so.

On the other spectrum if we were to compare her work with other surrealists she firmly grasped



not only the emotional but the psychological ideals that were an essential part of the movement. The ultimate goal of the Surrealists was to “channel the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of imagination (Art Story).” Art of the Surrealist movement was visually charged with the exposé of the bizarre inner minds of the artists, and the symbolic ways in which they expressed their deepest psychological ailments (Art Story).

So, what is it that we can say about the artwork of Frida Kahlo? Furthermore, what is it that can be deduced from her art and what exactly does it accomplish? When we consider the entire span of art’s history up to the current we can say that Frida did not meet the traditional canons of art where the elements of a painting were presented with almost mathematical precision. If we considered her artwork against these traditional cannons her style could be compared to something more along the lines of folk art, but Frida’s art carries something much deeper than the traditionalists could have ever conceived.

In considering the audience of Frida’s work I think that from a historical aspect that her work has appealed to primarily to a female audience, perhaps these viewers are feminists...but I would like to think that the audience is made up a little of everything. However, it is true that the revival of her art began in the 1960’s with the influx of the feminist movement; this is not surprising in the least. Muralist Diego Rivera said it best, “Frida is the only example in the history of art, of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings...the only woman who has expressed in her work an art of the feelings, functions, and creative power of woman” (“Frida Kahlo”).

Frida’s paintings present a multitude of interpretations from various contexts. Of all things that can be considered it is both the cultural, whether this refers to the Mexican culture present or the Female cultural, and spiritual that stands out in all of her work. Although it appears as though she abhorred organized religion and is believed to have often made a mockery of it, it is no surprise that her mother’s devotion to Catholicism played a role in her art. Perhaps it was not her intention to include this presence and was simply a result of the institutions of Christianity being instilled in her from childhood by her mother. That is something we will probably never know. There is no doubt, however, that Frida believed in something greater than herself. It goes without saying that she at least observed the ideals of both her

own beliefs and those things present through her mother. Author Maria A Castro-Sethness said it best, “Through her persistent use of self-imagery, Kahlo meticulously examined her agony. Because of her long confinements and isolation, she entered into a spiritual realm that inevitably led, consciously and unconsciously, the incorporation of the Christian beliefs and iconography rooted in her cultural heritage and upbringing (Castros-Setness).” There is a presence of extremely powerful energy in her work, but it exists quietly within the contexts of her paintings. Was this her intention? Perhaps it was, but perhaps it was not. From her very first painting, a self-portrait, to her last painting, a still life of watermelon inscribed with the words *viva la vida (long live life)*(Figure 6) it is clear that this powerful energy that exists in all of her work; both portraiture and non-portraiture.

As mentioned previously, one of her first ever self-portraits (Figure 2) was created while recovering from her trolley car accident; looking at that piece, even without being aware of the history of her accident we could certainly deduce that it was painted at a very dark or benchmark time in her life. The portrait is of Frida in a red velvet dress. Her head is turned to the side, and only her right hand is available to the viewer. The background appears to be entirely black at first glance, but when viewed closer we can see that there are barbaric waves before a hilly landscape, with only a glimmer of light in the distance. Frida sits so still and gentle in front of an ominous landscape, could it be that she was simply and quietly waiting for the death she was so fortunate to have escaped? Or could this be an allusion to the anger she felt for being subject to such a trauma?

It is this quiet yet powerful energy that is apparent in all of her work. In considering this near esoteric energy that has many viewers and critics captivated, we can consider the primitiveness of her work. Primitive in art does not necessarily refer to artwork devoid of quality, but rather refers to something much deeper than traditional canons. The word itself is even devoid of a single definition, but rather something artists have come to understand as a present force in modern art. Although the term often implies something or someone lacking of civilized qualities, in this case it is to represent the inherent qualities in humanity. I consider, and I know there are others who think in the same respect, the primitive essence in art to represent the very basic qualities of human culture. More specifically this

means a connection with earth and with powers greater than our existence. This also means our inherent willpower to create. I have observed that culture's (so deemed primitive) throughout history have linked the Earth with the creative energy of women; i.e. the capabilities to procreate and give birth. Frida's work carries that very energy that speaks of the inherent power of the feminine and the deep connection of women to the feminine Earth.

In many of her works the primitive energy that speaks to us so eloquently. In paintings such as *The Love Embrace of the Universe, The Earth (Mexico), I, Diego and Señor Xólotl* (Figure 10) it is clear that Frida felt a deep connection to the Earth and to the feminine energies. At times this feminine energy is sexual in nature. Often times this is in the form of flora and fauna and others it is simply the images such as the exposed breasts of her wet nurse.

Additionally, in a few of her artworks such as *The Little Deer* (Figure 5) it is clear that the dense forest and earth represents comfort and healing to her. The wounded deer bearing Frida's head lies wounded in the forest where the vast sea/ocean exists in the distance. It could very well be that she saw Mexico as her whole universe, thus her allusions to its lush flora and fauna representing the only place she felt most comfortable in and sought healing in. There is a clear presence of feminine energy in her work. Take for example the following pieces: the *Flower of Life* (Figure 19) and *Sun and Life* (Figure 20). In *Flower of Life* Frida illustrates the creative powers of women by suggestive interpretation: a flower representing the female reproductive system. In the distance there is a golden orb representing the sun. Here Frida visually explains the connection of creative feminine energy with the earth and the power of procreation – something of which she was incapable of. Additionally, in her painting *Sun and Life* she illustrates the sun amongst thick stemmed foliage. However, further examination of this piece will bring us to understand that it too alludes to the creative and reproductive powers of the feminine. The plants bear elements which are highly suggestive of female genitalia. Closer examination will also reveal a “weeping embryo” which is believed by Bauer to represent “Frida's unfulfilled desire for a child” (79). Paintings such as these invoke a deep sense of feminine and of creative energy associated with woman.

Examination of her art furthermore will illustrate another powerful theme: the influence of Aztec

art and culture in her work. There are both indirect and direct influences of Aztec culture in her art, for example in paintings such as *Moses* (Figure 17) or *On the Border Between Mexico and the US* (Figure 15) we can see the direct incorporation of Aztec architecture and sculpture. In pieces such as *Self-Portrait With Thorny Necklace* (Figure 7), a personal favorite of mine, we can consider the influence of Aztec culture and how Frida sought to use these elements as a means of visual communication. One of the most interesting elements of the aforementioned self-portrait is the thorny necklace that adorns Frida's neck and the dead hummingbird who hangs at the center from her throat. The hummingbird is believed, by Janice Heller to represent the god "Huitzilopochtli (Figure 8), the god of sun and war, and furthermore that it also represents the soul or the spirit of the warrior who died in battle on the sacrificial stone (Heller)." This necklace could be a reference to the Aztec practice of self-mutilation as described by Janice Helland: "Aztec priests performed self-mutilation with agave thorns and stingray spines." Helland also explains that it is possible that the thorny necklace is an allusion to Coatlicue (Figure 9), the "Aztec goddess of death whose neck also bleeds (Helland)." In her painting *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Eloesser* (Figure 14) she again wears a thorny necklace. It is clear that the use of the thorn necklace symbolizes or alludes to the unending pain that she suffered throughout her life. Perhaps it is that Frida felt as though she had been sacrificed to the gods many times over.

Having been raised by her Catholic mother Matilde there is no doubt that the ideals of Catholicism were at least observed by Frida, in considering the very foundations of Christianity we could then possibly deduce that the thorny necklace alludes to Christ and his crown of thorns and inevitably his sacrifice, and perhaps she is bringing the two worlds together by alluding to Christ and Coatlicue.

In further consideration of Christianity and its potential influence in Frida's work, we can compare her painting *The Wounded Table* (Figure 16 B) against Leonardo DaVinci's *The Last Supper* (Figure 16 A). In the *Wounded Table*, Frida sits at the center of the piece at a bleeding/wounded table upon a stage looking out at the audience. Various characters accompany her left and her right. It is possible that these characters represent different aspects of Frida by means of various cultural identities. For example to her Right a seemingly male figure with an obscure body places its arm around her. This is

believed to be a representation of Judas (the betrayer) and by extension possibly alluding to Diego's infidelity. Continuing to the right we also see two young children: a boy and girl. To Frida's left a small statuette of Nayarit – a Pre Colombian figure. It is believed that this female figure is a representation of Mexico, and its independence, and furthermore that Frida has sacrificed herself to this figure – thereby sacrificing herself to the independence of Mexico (Mexicolore). This was something both her and Diego were committed to. Continuing to the Left in the painting we come to a skeletal figure and a deer. There is no doubt that the skeletal figure is another reference to Aztec art and culture. Looking at the figure on a much more intimate level we see that the skeletal figure has female genitalia and that it also bears a hole in its stomach area – the very place the iron handrail pierced Frida. This skeleton is believed to be Aztec Mictlancihuatl or the Goddess of the Dead who died herself in child birth (Mexicolore). The deer could be simply a reference to the pet deer Frida had. It is known that she had many pets in place of the children she would never be able to bear. This interpretation of *The Wounded Table* is only one interpretation, but no matter how we consider it, it is clear that the figures are all representations of Frida in some way: her death, her failed childbearing, or her commitment to communism and Mexico's independence.

From all that I know on Frida Kahlo the one thing I know most definitely is that she endured some of the most unimaginable pain a person could; whether it was physical pain associated with her Polio and quality of health, or Diego. In paintings such as *Diego and I* (Figure 18) it is clear that Frida experienced much pain due to Diego's infidelity. During the time that this piece was painted "Diego was having an affair with actress Maria Félix (Bauer 105)." Pain, however we contextualize it is something that serves as a deep theme in her art. In some pieces such as *Self Portrait with Velvet Dress* (Figure 2) her pain exists in quiet undertones, but is exemplified by the sometimes dark and desolate landscapes. In other pieces such as *The Broken Column* (Figure 11) her pain and sadness is overwhelmingly evident, but in pieces such as *Tree of Hope, Keep Strong* (Figure 12) it is clear that she teetered between hope and despair: in one half of the painting the sun shines down, blistering and cracking the desolate landscape (an allusion to Frida herself), her lower backside exposed with bloody wounds. Her face is not available to us and she rests upon a hospital bed. On the other side of the painting Frida sits, looking out at the viewers

the moonlight illuminating the still cracked landscape. Her body adorned in one of her many traditional dresses, and her hair bound with flowers. In her hand she holds one of the many medical contraptions she wore, and a flag bearing the words “ARBOL DE LA ESPERANZA MANTENTE FIRME.” I believe this piece speaks of the idea that she lived in two worlds throughout her life; or that is a world where she was hopeful all her medical procedures and her doctor’s help would pay off, and the other world in which she felt no hope at all. Pieces such as these speak volumes of the sadness and pain she so quietly managed.

It is unclear to us whether Frida was fearful of death, or perhaps it is that she welcomed it with grace and dignity. One thing is clear, and that is death, life and birth played an important role as a theme in her work. In works such as *The Dream* (Figure 13) Frida illustrates her interpretation of death. The skeleton atop the bed is representative of Aztec imagery and even alludes to art from (what we now know) as the *El Día De Los Muertos* or Day of the Dead. It is covered in fire crackers and flowers, and rests parallel to Frida. She, on the other hand, is covered so beautifully in a plethora of fines and leaves which appear to be rooting from the foot of the bed. It appears that to Frida death was a beautiful thing and perhaps it illustrates that she welcomed it by celebrating it. This is a perfect example of Surrealist art, where dreams and the imagination coexisted, although Frida claims she “never painted her dreams, only her reality.”

In all of Frida’s work the emotional, the spiritual and the cultural all melt into one. There is no doubt that her relationship with Diego, her accidents, her inability to bear children and her deep love and passion for life played the most influential roles in her artwork. The presence and energy of her work cannot be viewed and understood merely from the glossy reproductions in the pages of books and magazines, instead it should be viewed in person. This amazing woman ripped herself open for the entire world, and did so with much dignity, grace and beauty. She left this world with a stunning and emotional visual autobiography of her life and all she ever asked was that we simply consider it.

## CONCLUSION

Frida's artwork once captivated the world, and still does today. Her art spoke of spiritual and deeply emotional contexts. Although it seems that she had a clear grasp on life, but I think deep down like the rest of us she feared her own end. In her art she created something that resonated with the viewer. It appears, as we consider her messages now, that she was desperately crying out in her work. I am not certain that anyone heard her at the time, however, I believe people could deduce that something powerful was present in her work; an incredible energy and force. Perhaps it was this aspect that drew them to her.

I have no doubts, especially after reading her diary, that she lived an incredibly painful life; her polio, her terrible accident which later resulted in miscarriages and abortions leaving her childless, and the endured trials of loving Diego; a man who belonged to no one. Perhaps some of us could deem her "lucky" to have never been a mother so that she could be at the side of Mexico's most influential artist.

It is hard to analyze the true identity or personality of Frida Kahlo. Surely we can analyze her art based on traditional cannons. However, there is something more to her art, something indescribable. Frida seldom made her innermost thoughts and feelings public, if she had secrets it is more than likely she took those deep secrets to the grave. She put up a tough leather exterior, but remained a beautiful, almost painterly, image of Mexico. I believe that deep down inside her very existence as a human she crumbled and did so very hard. It is *The Dream* (Figure 13) that I feel best illustrates best her perception on her exit from this world. At the time she painted it I think she had enough suffering in this world and she was ready for her exit. To her death was beautiful, and she seemed to welcome it. There is even some speculation that she overdosed on pills and alcohol, but nothing was ever proven. Diego said at one point that, "...through her paintings she breaks all the taboos of the woman's body and of female sexuality..." and he was absolutely correct in saying so. Frida was unlike any artist of her time. Not only was she a woman, in a primarily male world, but she was this sensual, spiritual, political, and emotional bomb that shook the art world, and perhaps it was she who changed the playing rules in the area of the art world for

women. That we will probably never know.

In her last journal entry she wrote: *Espero alegre la salida—y espero no volver jamas. Frida,*”  
(In English it translates as “I hope for a happy exit and I hope never to return.”)



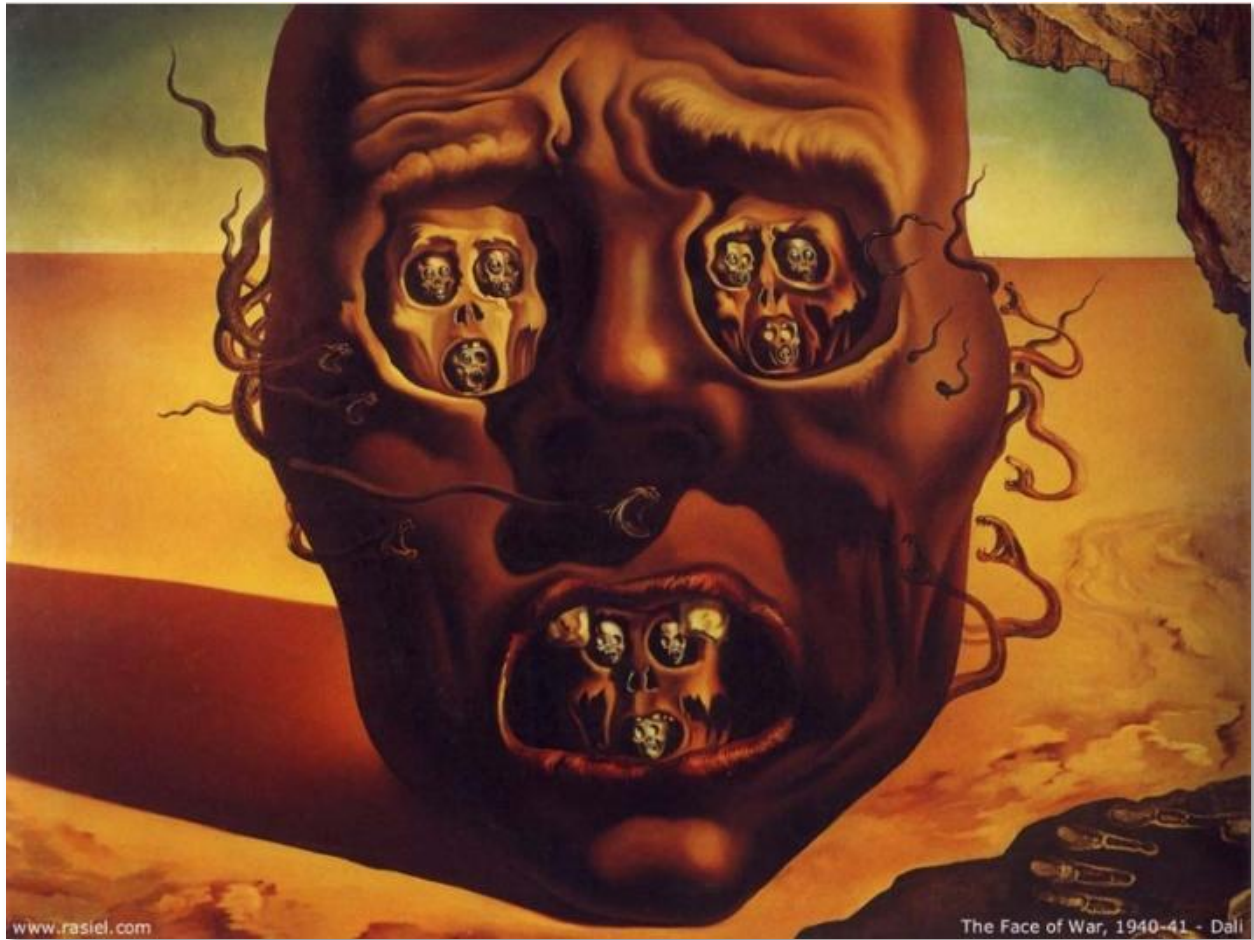
## FIGURES



**Figure 1.** Frida Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera. Photo by Juan Guzman



**Figure 2.** *Self-Portrait with Velvet Dress*. 1926. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.



**Figure 3.** Salvador Dalí. *The Face of War*. 1940-41

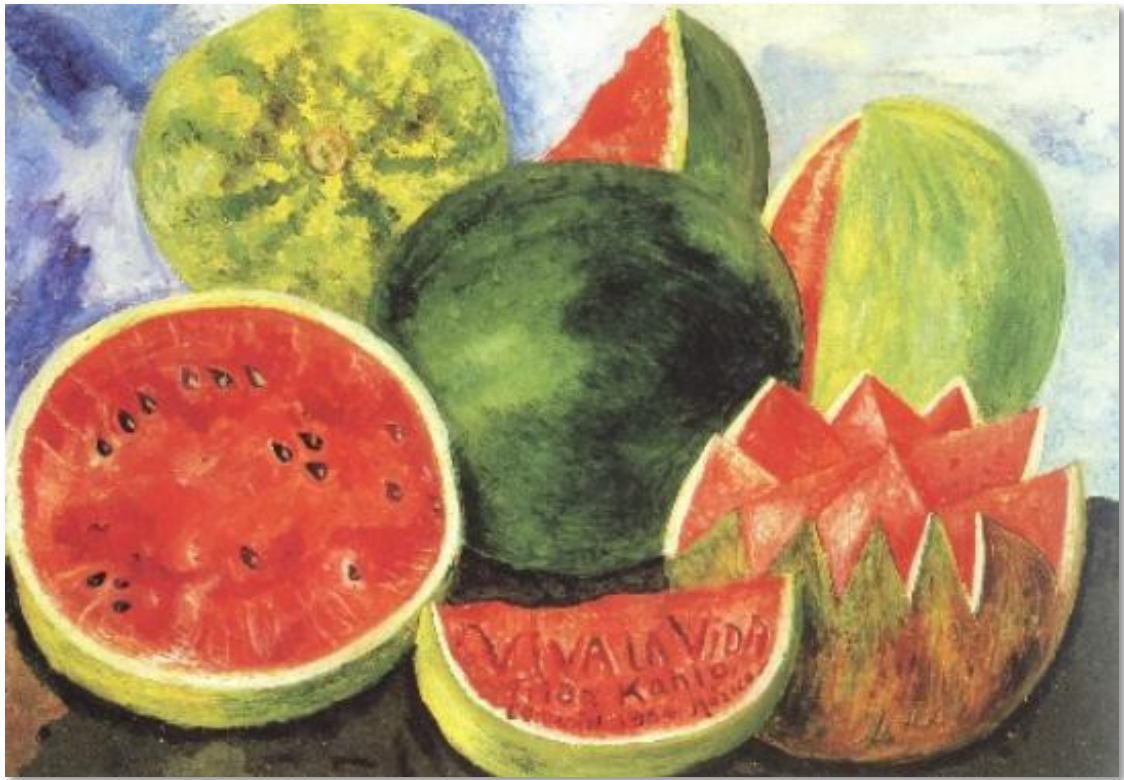




**Figure 4.** *The Two Fridas*, 1939, Oil on canvas, 67" x 67",  
Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

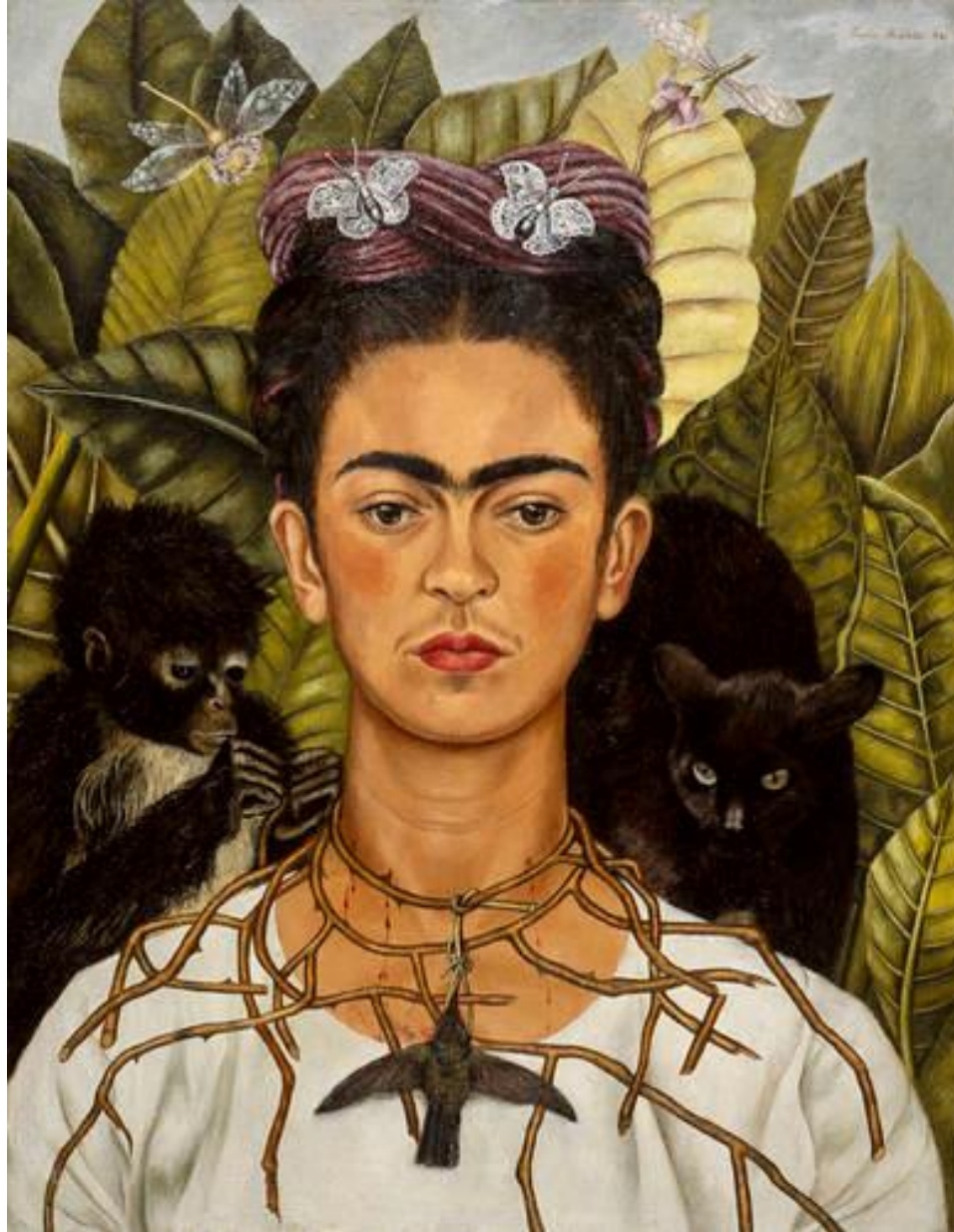


**Figure 5.** *The Little Deer or The Wounded Deer*. 1946. Oil on Masonite. Private Collection.



**Figure 6.** *Still Life with Watermelons*. 1954. Oil on Masonite. Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacán, Mexico.





**Figure 7.** *Self Portrait with Thorny Necklace (Or Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns)* 1940. Oil on Canvas. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Institute. Art Collection; University of Texas.



**Figure 8.** *Image of the Aztec God Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird God)*



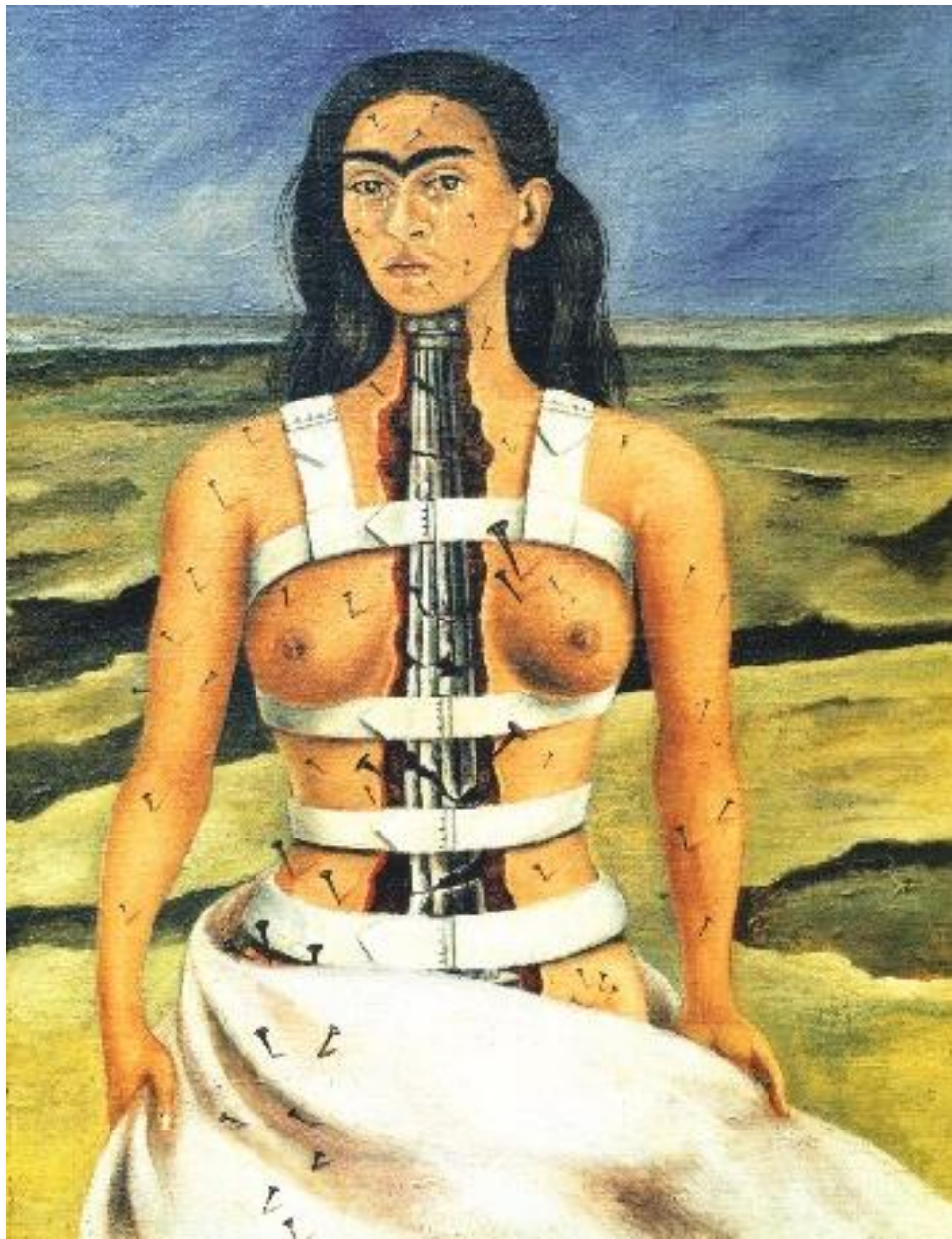


**Figure 9:** *Aztec Goddess “Coatlicue”*



**Figure 10:** *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Señor Xótlí.* 1949. Private Collection, Mexico City, Mexico.





**Figure 11:** The Broken Column. 1944. Oil on Canvas. Collection of Dolores Olmedo Patino. Mexico City, Mexico



**Figure 12:** *Tree of Hope, Stand Strong (or Keep Strong)* 1946. Oil on Masonite. Collection of Daniel Filipacchi. Paris, France.



**Figure 13:** *The Dream*. 1940. Oil on Canvas. Collection of Selma and Nesuhi Ertegun. New York, New York.

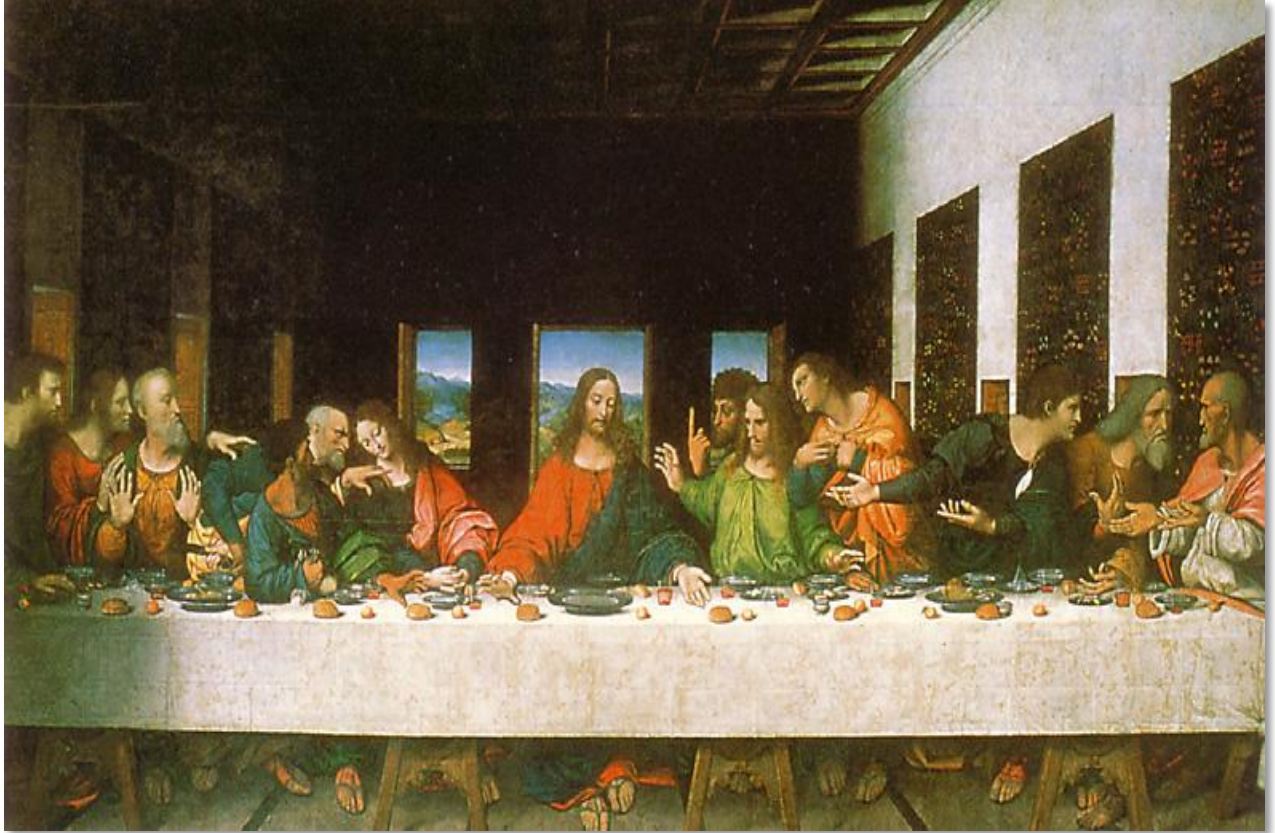




**Figure 14:** *Self Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Eloesser*. 1940. Oil on Masonite. Private Collection.



**Figure 15:** *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States*. Oil on Metal. Manuel and Maria Reyero Collection, New York



**Figure 16 A:** Leonardo DaVinci. *The Last Supper*.

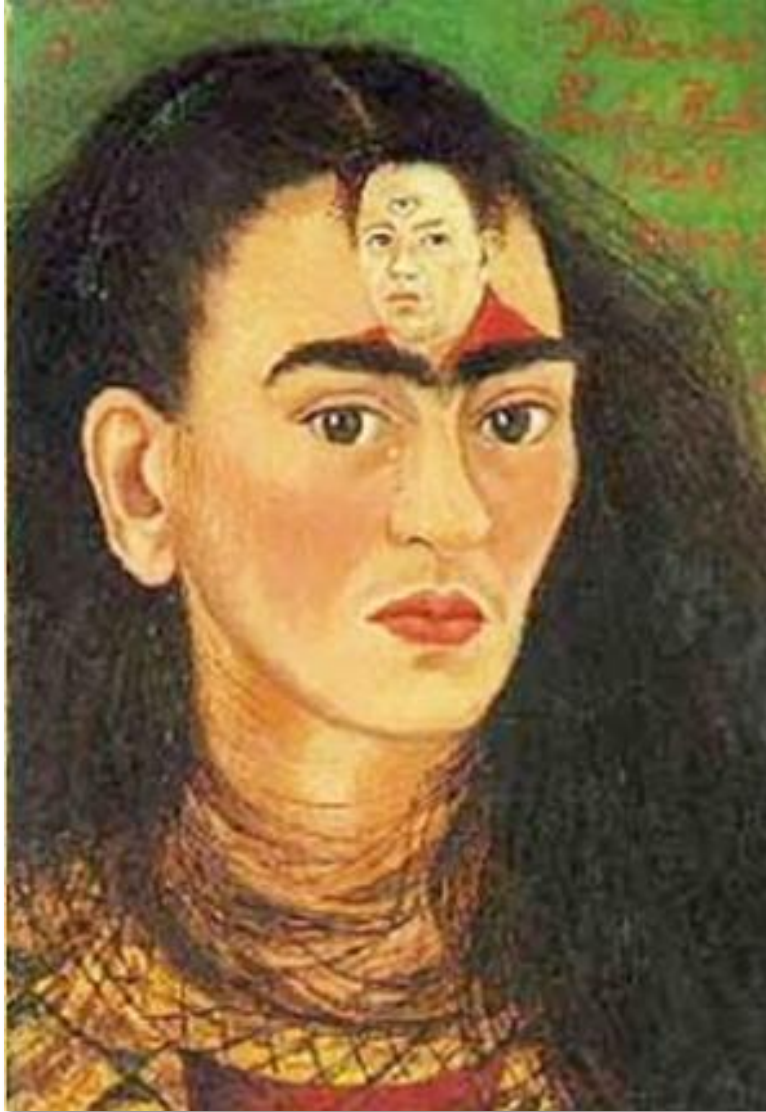




**Figure 16 B:** Frida Kahlo. *The Wounded Table*..1940 Oil on Canvas. Location Unknown



**Figure 17:** *Moses* 1945. Oil on hard fibre. Private Collection.



**Figure 18:** *Diego and I* 1949. Oil on Canvas mounted on Masonite. Collection of Mary Anne Martin Fine Arts. New York.





**Figure 19:** *Flower of Life* 1943. Oil on Masonite. Delores Olmedo Patiño Museum, Mexico City.



**Figure 20:** *Sun and Life* 1947. Oil on Masonite. Collection of Manuel Perusquia, Galleria Arvil Mexico City.

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