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Power Built from Pain: The Creation of Frida Kahlo

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FY 103.32: Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History, Dr. Buckley

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Abstract

This paper discusses the highlights of Frida Kahlo's life from a feminist perspective. Although it focuses on her various medical and personal traumas, Kahlo's art is explored as well, especially her numerous self-portraits. The importance and significance of her art through a lens of self-expression is explained. Particular emphasis is placed on her complicated relationship with Diego Rivera and how it affected her life and art. The work of several experts is explored and expanded upon, including Kahlo-focused researchers, art critics, and creators of exhibits featuring her works. Kahlo's relation to the course this research paper is being written for is discussed in the final part of the paper, along with the reasons why the public is fascinated with her.

Keywords: Frida Kahlo, self-portraiture, medical trauma, bisexuality

Why I Selected My Topic

On the first day of my “Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History” first year seminar, we chose one woman to conduct research on for a quick in-class presentation. I shuffled through a card deck of ground-breaking women until I settled upon one featuring Frida Kahlo, sitting in a confident pose with her dark eyes daring me to pass her by. I’d heard vaguely of Kahlo’s work and impact, but she’s always been an enigma to me. As I held my card, I recalled the three things I knew about her. One, she painted many self-portraits. Two, she had amazing and coarse eyebrows that she never covered up in those self-portraits, despite Western beauty standards. Three, she allegedly slept with the woman who her husband had an affair with soon after it ended. None of these seemed to make up the whole of her life, and yet I learned enough about her from the information printed onto the back of the card to know she was an intriguing woman.

I was right. While researching her life, trying to find information that would fit into a two-slide presentation, I learned more and more about Kahlo’s life and why she is the icon that she is today. Even after the presentation ended, I found myself wondering about Kahlo’s life and how I could fill in the gaps of my own knowledge. I chose to write about Kahlo for this research paper to unravel the mystery behind the woman who has influenced so many people artistically, politically, and personally.

Biography

Even though the reasons behind me wanting to research her were simple, Kahlo’s life was anything but. Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderón entered the world on July 6, 1907. Kahlo’s childhood was colored by the Mexican Revolution, so much so that she eventually changed her birth year to 1910 to identify with the uprisings that began in that year and shaped her country.

In 1922, Kahlo enrolled in the exclusive La Escuela Preparatoria as only one of thirty-five women in the institution. Herrera (1983) notes the school as being “undoubtedly the best educational institution in Mexico” (p. 22, 25). In an ironic twist of fate, Kahlo’s dreams of working as a doctor were dashed in 1925 when she had a medically devastating trolley car accident. After the accident, Kahlo switched her focus to painting.

She took a few of her paintings to Diego Rivera, a relatively well-known artist, for his review. The two developed a mentoring relationship that evolved into a romantic one, culminating in their 1929 marriage. The pair moved around the United States for three years, returning to Mexico in 1933 (Herrera, 1983, p. 179). Once in Mexico, the pair became more politically active and identified with Communism. Kahlo became more deeply involved with her art, leading to her first major exhibition in New York in 1938.

Due to various extramarital affairs committed by both parties, Kahlo and Rivera divorced in 1939, but quickly remarried in 1940. The rest of Kahlo’s life was consumed by painting, teaching, complications from surgery and illness, and Diego.

Kahlo died in 1954 at La Casa Azul from either a pulmonary embolism or purposeful drug overdose, leaving behind a legacy of mystery, talent, and pain.

Challenges

Physical and mental pain was a constant theme throughout Kahlo’s life that shaped her art in profound ways. Kahlo’s pain was mostly medical in nature, from a case of childhood polio that atrophied her left leg to a trolley accident at the age of eighteen that impacted her health for the rest of her life. ““The bus that destroyed [Kahlo]”” led to numerous injuries, including spinal

cord breaks, fractures in her left leg, and a handrail impaling her abdomen and pelvic region (as cited by Herrera, 1983, p. 48).

Many of these injuries would haunt her for years to come, relegating her to a less than active lifestyle and frequent visitations to varying hospitals. During her lifetime, she suffered from three miscarriages and two medically necessary abortions (Gunderman & Hawkins, 2008, p. 306). The accident destroyed more than Kahlo's health—it destroyed many of her dreams, as well. Although she was able to pivot and find a new love in art, Kahlo originally wanted to become a doctor. However, after the accident she found that she couldn't treat others when she herself needed near-constant medical care.

Her first dedicated exploration into art occurred after her accident. *Self Portrait* is very telling of her mental state at the time, crafted with dark shades of brown, messy swirls (almost like a rough, choppy ocean) taking up the background, and featuring Kahlo at the forefront, looking at the viewer with an gaze that at first glance seems cool and collected. Upon further examination, however, one can see the pain in Kahlo's eyes, even as she attempts a smile.



Figure 1: "Self-Portrait in a Velvet Dress" by Frida Kahlo

Toward the end of her life, Kahlo's medical state became more and more desperate. Rivera divorced her in 1939, leading to a depression expressed by creating a masculine image, smoking cigarettes and drinking brandy, and beginning affairs with a German art collector during a hospitalization despite her incessant obsession with Rivera (Collins, 2013, para. 27 and 28). She also developed an addiction to morphine, an addiction born from the trauma of constantly shifting from home to hospital. Her troubled relations with Rivera

and medical problems even led to a suicide attempt after her leg was amputated. Kahlo seems to have had a standing invitation with death, one that she almost accepted several times both of her accord and due to other issues, but she did not succumb until either a pulmonary embolism or purposeful drug overdose took her life at forty-seven years old.

Major Accomplishments

Despite her challenges, Kahlo was able to live more vividly than most. Although during her lifetime she was mostly known as Diego Rivera's wife in art circles, Kahlo managed to begin to pave the way toward the worldwide fame she would have after her death. Kahlo's most important accomplishment lies in her art, but not because of accolades or applause. Kahlo's art is personal, pure, and expresses her emotional state in a unique, often shocking way, giving her the outlet for the tumults of her life that she desperately needed.

Kahlo created a documented 140 paintings, at least 55 of which were self-portraits. Her penchant for the self-portrait was unusual, but necessary because she was the person she knew best. Kahlo was often surrounded by people during her lifetime, and yet spent the majority of her time alone because of her many medical issues. This allowed lots of time for self-reflection, leading her to cultivate the ability to express her emotions with a paintbrush any time she felt the urge to. Kahlo managed to not fall into the trap of Western beauty standards, even after her trips to the United States. Instead, Kahlo intertwined her coarse eyebrows, dark skin, and Mexican heritage into many of her paintings. This was done in part to please Rivera, but mostly to celebrate herself and the country she was so proud of.

Influential Individuals

Arguably, Rivera was the most influential person in Kahlo's life. Aside from him, many others helped shape Kahlo to become the famous artist she is today. The first major influence in Kahlo's life was her father, Guillermo Kahlo. He supported her studies by allowing her to enroll in La Escuela Preparatoria, even though the education of girls was not a priority at the time of her schooling (Herrera, 1983, 25-26). Once Kahlo was unable to continue her education after the trolley car accident, he encouraged her art studies by giving her the tools she would need to paint from a hospital bed.

If it weren't for Kahlo's father's interests in his daughter's artistic pursuits, she may not have met Diego Rivera, a famous muralist who simultaneously enchanted and destroyed her for the rest of her life. Kahlo and Rivera's relationship, spanning three decades and two marriages, was marked by a cycle of passion, extramarital affairs, separation, and reconciliation. Kahlo first officially approached Rivera to ask his opinions on her art after her accident. He saw her talent and the two grew close, bonded by their love of art. They quickly fell in love with each other, him because of her spirited personality and beauty and her with him because of his zest for life and humor. He encouraged her both directly and indirectly to improve her painting and improve her works, advising but not teaching her because "he did not want to spoil her inborn talent" (Herrera, 1983, 95).

Rivera didn't take his support of Kahlo's artistic pursuits to building a strong foundation for their marriage. Kahlo and Rivera were both considered irresistible in their own unique ways and were easily bored people, which led to numerous extramarital affairs on both sides. Each had an affair that hurt the other more than the other liaisons; Rivera's affair with Kahlo's younger sister broke her heart, while Kahlo's affair with Communist leader Leon Trotsky "infuriated him

most” (Collins, 2013, p. 23). But no matter how much they hurt each other, they were hopelessly drawn to each other like two moths going to the same destructive flame.

Impact

Why are we so fascinated with Frida Kahlo? Is it because of her thought-provoking art? Her bisexual, many, and thorny romantic relationships? Her shades of Communist history? Contemporary critics and art historians concede that it's a combination of these that pique public interest in Kahlo. No matter the reasons, Kahlo's art and life has created a frenzy of interest that can only be described by art critic Amy Fine Collins as “Frida-mania.”

Frida-mania, the obsession with Kahlo’s life and work, has led to smashed records (when one of her pieces was sold in 2013, it was for the highest price ever paid for a Latin-American art piece), frenzied bids for the printing rights to her now-published diary (an estimated \$100,000 to \$500,000), and exhibitions curated in her honor, even over sixty years after her death (Collins, 2013, para. 5 and 8).

Kahlo's colorful history was recently highlighted in an exhibition dedicated to her. Held at the New York Botanical Gardens, "Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life" explored central themes of her life with a natural twist. In the section dedicated to her complicated and beautiful artworks, fourteen creations ranging from paintings dedicated to former lovers to symbolic still lives that celebrate Kahlo's love of nature are featured. According to Scjeldahl (2015), some of the plants growing in a small garden within the exhibit were grown in La Casa Azul, while others simply "reasonably may be associated with the artist." One could find details about Kahlo's personal life sprinkled throughout the exhibit, including information about her tumultuous relationship with

Diego Rivera, her pride of her Mexican heritage, and her traditional recipes (New York Botanical Gardens, 2015).

How Frida Didn't Behave

Despite her traditional Mexican recipes, Frida was anything but traditional. Her rebellion began at La Escuela Preparatoria. She dabbled in revolutionary, prankster, and anarchic activities through her clique, the Cachuchas, who most notably set off a firecracker in the middle of a “boring” professor’s lecture (Herrera, 1983, p. 28). Kahlo would go on to become a proud Communist, to the point of being questioned during the politically charged period after Trotsky’s death (Collins, 2013, para. 28). Her coffin was even covered by the Soviet flag instead of her nation’s during her funeral (Helland, 1990, p. 397).

In the 1940’s, sexuality was very rarely discussed and the LGBTQ community was largely hidden from public view. However, Kahlo’s freely expressed her sexuality and bisexual identity, as shown by her credo: “make love, take a bath, make love again” (cited by Herrera, 1983, p. 199). As mentioned earlier, Kahlo had affairs with numerous men and women; the only person she sought to hide them from was her husband (as a side note: Rivera tolerated and even boasted about her relationships with women, but hated Kahlo sleeping with other men). Part of her openness was the culture she lived in; amongst the artist and bohemians associated with her and Rivera, “love affairs between women were common and condoned” (Herrera, 1983, p. 198).

Those may have been common, but Frida Kahlo? Never. Kahlo dared to be different, to paint her way into history and out of Mexico’s gender norms. Kahlo didn’t become the poor, medical invalid victim she easily could have. Her life story shows that she deliberately chose to create a full life for herself despite her pain and challenges. That’s why Kahlo is a woman to celebrate and admire—and we will do so, for years to come.

Resources

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