

**LAS MUJERES y LA
CULTURA DE LA REVOLUCION
FRIDA KAHLO**

As Obregon took charge, he began the task of winding down the violent military phase of the Revolution. Bitter fighting would continue but subside. His more formidable challenge was to translate the experience of the Revolution into palpable achievements. However, the nation was broke and broken; it was next to impossible to produce immediate results that would be visible to all, including the illiterate masses. Aesthetic achievement would have to substitute for immediate material results. Art would be drafted into the service of politics.

Art before the Revolution was mostly an importation; it was the fashion to depreciate things Mexican. But art that emanated from the Revolution became a search for nativism. Obregon turned loose his cultural chieftain, Jose Vasconcelos, whose task was to build a "portfolio" that would draw its themes, spirit, and rationales from the aspirations of the Revolution. Vasconcelos would enlist artists Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera. Mural art became the medium to express these indigenous themes in a spectacular and panoramic explosion of brilliant warmth and color.

Diego Rivera was the most prolific and arguably Mexico's greatest muralist. Was he also Mexico's greatest painter? The following transposes a familiar dialogue : "Who's Diego Rivera?" "He was married to Frida Kahlo," some might add, "twice."

Frida Kahlo's venturesome nature and dramatic impact would not be suggested by the fact that her life began and ended in the same place: in a southeast suburb of Mexico

City, Coyoacan, in a one-story stucco house. It is now the Frida Kahlo Museum, a wonderfully interesting but still inadequate (for it contains none of her greatest paintings) memorial *to one of Mexico's greatest painters. And, indeed, she was one of the world's greatest women painters*

Painted on the wall above a cabinet containing one of her Tehuana costumes are these words: "Aqui Nacio Frida Kahlo el dia 7 de Julio de 1910" (Frida

Kahlo was born here July 7, 1910). Frida was not without vanity; the majority of her paintings are self- portraits. But she would pick that date instead of the actual one, July 6, 1907, not to hide her age but because it would identify her with the year of the Revolution.

Although Frida might list herself among the women of the Revolution, she was, it could be argued, too young, even too urban, to be included in this study. Yet, by 1920, she was a teenager; throughout this decade, battles were still being fought and by "men" and "women" no older than Frida. While most of the combat was in the country, Mexico City was not free from military strife and, in any case, civil war had a devastating impact on sustaining life in the city. Kandell describes conditions:

"For Mexico City, 1915 proved to be the worst year of the Revolution. Snipers terrorized residents. Fighting in the countryside disrupted harvest shipments and created acute shortages of staples. People scavenged garbage, begged for food, and slaughtered any pet that could be captured. Women -some of them barely in puberty, others old enough to be grandmothers -prostituted themselves for a meal of bread. Hospitals, insane asylums, and orphanages emptied their wards because their kitchens were bare. At dawn, death wagons circulated the streets to retrieve the unidentified bodies of people who had starved, and carried the corpses to the main cemetery for incineration."

Her childhood was spent amidst the violence, the confusion, the fear and the deprivation that the Revolution wrought. From Frida's diary (written in the last decade of Frida's life but referring to when she was actually seven years old):

⁰I remember that I was four years old when the 'tragic ten days' took place. I witnessed with my own eyes Zapata's peasants' battle against the Carrancistas. My situation was very clear. My mother opened the windows on Allende Street. She gave access to the Zapatistas, seeing to it that the wounded and hungry jumped from the windows of my house into the 'living room.' She cured them and gave them thick tortillas, the only food that could be obtained in Coyoacan in those days.... We were four sisters: Matita, Adri, me and Cristi, the chubby one...

"In 1914 bullets just hissed. I still hear their extraordinary sound. In the tianguid of Coyoacan, propaganda in favor of Zapata was made with corridos edited by Posada. On Friday these ballad sheets cost one centavo and, enclosed in a great wardrobe that smelled of walnut wood, Cristi and I sang them, while my mother and father watched out for us so that we could not fall into the hands of the guerrillas. I remember a wounded Carrancista running toward his stronghold the river of Coyoacan. From the window I also spied Zapatista with a bullet wound in his knee, squatting and putting on his sandals."

Yet, if Frida was not a creator of the Revolution, she was assuredly one of its creations. She was a revelation of the Revolution --the evidence, if you will --that a woman molded in that crucible could be boldly different, a refutation of women's stereotype.

La Lucha de Frida Kahlo was far more than the Revolution. At six years old, she was stricken with polio. To strengthen her withered right limb, she took up all kinds of sports, "male" sports: soccer, boxing, wrestling. She became a champion swimmer. But her leg remained thin; to hide the leg, she wore three or four socks on the calf and shoes with a built-up right heel (Herrera).

But this tragedy was merely for practice. What followed shortly after her eighteenth birthday was an accident that would maim her for life. A trolley rammed into a poorly constructed bus in which Frida was riding. So much of her body was damaged, there is general disagreement over what was broken. Perhaps the most accurate description:

"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, it had come out through the vagina. 'I lost my virginity,' she said." (H) (In fact it was too late for that.)

Her body would begin a lifelong battle against decay, and she would endure at least thirty-two surgical operations, mostly on her spine, during the next twenty-nine years of her life.

But this horrible event was a "baptism by fire" for her artistic development. She began to paint with a passion perhaps uniquely reserved for one in constant fear of dying.

Within two years, with her heart in her hand and her paintings under her arm, she would seek out Diego Rivera who would confirm her talent and find her lovable. He was less constant with the latter appraisal that created in her psyche an additional inseparable fear: the loss of Diego's love. For the rest of her life, she would paint mostly about herself with a vivid emotional drive, revealing her preoccupation with these dual anxieties: possible death and impossible Diego.

Linda Nochlin in her article, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* describes the characteristics of those exceptional successes: they were either daughters of artist fathers or "had a close personal connection with a strong or dominant male artistic personality." Frida's father, whom she adored - and vice versa - was a painter and successful photographer. From Diego, she would receive still another "ticket" to success.

Frida's biographers, like Nochlin, deal only limitedly, if at all, with what the "client" has returned to the patron. How much did "she" contribute to "his" art if not by criticism, instruction and direction, then by emotion and feeling. Rivera described her work, "In the whole history of art, Frida is the only example of a painter virtually tearing her breast and heart open in order to express the feelings within ... Frida is the first artist to portray the real act of birth (her own) which brought forth the world's leading woman painter, the best ever proof of the existence of Mexican art." Let us not overlook that Rivera, for all the Revolutionary fervor of his art and politics, spent the years 1907-1921 (the most violent years of the Revolution) safely abroad with his fellow artists in Paris. As a child of the Revolution (as Rivera would often depict her), Frida was the authentic offspring of her nation's La Lucha, and this she combined with that of her own struggles. In terms of passion, to use the slogan of Mexico's most popular consumer product (Coca-Cola), Frida was "the real thing"; Diego, by comparison, was the counterfeit.

If the jury is still out regarding Diego's rank among Mexico's greatest painters, an early verdict was reached regarding his stature among womanizers. "Rivera himself was the greatest of womanizers." (Kandell) This was surprising on two counts. Herrera describes the first (and alludes to the second):

"Although he was undeniably ugly, he drew women to him with the natural ease of a magnet attracting iron filings. Indeed, part of his appeal was his monstrous appearance -- his ugliness made a perfect foil for the type of woman who likes to play beauty to a beast --but the greater attraction was his personality. He was a frog prince, an extraordinary man full of brilliant humor, vitality, and charm. He could be tender and was deeply sensuous. Most important, he was famous and fame seems to be an irresistible lure for some women."

Secondly, in a society believed to be governed by macho precepts, Diego simply did not play by the "rules." To be unfaithful was not especially innovative to Mexico's husbands. However, men believed they should make the amorous conquests; they would view Diego with envy, all the more so when his manner and physical characteristics were considered. Diego was "laid back," literally laid back if you can imagine this elephantine frog prince in this posture. Women flocked to him, and these included Marla Felix,

Paulette Goddard, Lupe Marin (*wife*) and Tina Modotti, *to name just a few of the more* publicized liaisons. His most unforgivable affair was with Frida's sister, Cristina; In Frida's opinion, too, and it created a marked departure in Frida's art. (*A Few Small Nips* poignantly reveals the impact *of the* episode *on* Frida.)

Most of these women would find their way into Diego's canvasses. But it is in his murals where he would accord women a place so interesting to this study. In his tableaux of Aztec society, women were not subservient to males, not even to the Aztec warriors. In the Conquest, they were far more radiant than the Spaniards. Of greatest significance: *Women Of the Revolution* appeared as heroically determined as men. Does a nation's culture reveal the true and underlying -but real -maxims of its society?

In Rivera's last great mural, *Sueno de una tarde dominica en la Alameda Central* (Dreams of a Sunday afternoon at Alameda Park), he paints Frida as a mature, maternal woman, her hand protectively placed over the shoulder of a child-like Diego. Similarly, Frida in a number of her paintings would juxtapose herself in this same maternal connection: *The Love Embrace* expresses "Frida's sense of the fragility of her

hold on Rivera as a husband (which) made her all the more determined to hold on to him as a child. In the end, Frida kept her husband. She was the woman Diego loved more than any other." (H) Frida became a mother figure to Diego. It was their most workable relationship.

It should come as no surprise that Frida would bear no children, She experienced at least three traumatic miscarriages that she depicted and revealed in her art. She was nevertheless obsessed with motherhood and fertility, which would be expressed in her "super- madre" relationships, not only with Diego but with her sisters' children and her students, and this would extend to plants, flowers and the ubiquitous monkeys seen in her paintings. In a society that tends to revere La Madre, she would satisfy this "requirement" in other ways. In a sense, she can be counted along with other famous but childless wives of the Revolution --Carmelita Diaz and Sarita Madero -who would seek this maternal fulfillment through their husbands.

Although the Riveras' greatest bond may have been their "enormous respect for each other's art," they had a good deal more in common: humor, intelligence, a bohemian approach to life, and (relevant to this discussion) Mexicanism and social conscience" (H). The costume Frida wore most often was that of the Tehuantepec women. This attire was not uncommon among the "upper bohemian" crowd with whom she and Diego circulated and had little to do with the "simple" life of the Mexican Indian. She viewed it as reflecting one's being more earthbound, sensual, even more real. And it was a political statement, a way of claiming allegiance to La Raza. Tehuantepec women are reknown for their beauty, intelligence, strength and courage. More interesting and of greater significance here is that Tehuantepec society is maternalistic. Women dominate the native trade and industry, handle financial matters, and, in general, are distinctly superior to men in status and ability. Frida's choice of costumes makes a statement. Not that her "message" was found lacking in her verbal statements: she peppered her speech with the tabasco sauce of Spanish four-letter equivalents, making creative use of words like "chingar" and "pendejo." In a society said

to have a double standard which would apply not only to sexual behavior but also to language, Frida made full use of a "forbidden" lexicon.

The Riveras joined the Communist Party and participated in numerous demonstrations. Like many artists, including Orozco and Sigueros, they were disenchanted with the course of the post-revolutionary years. Artists' murals not only depicted the "original" Revolution, but would display the Obregon-Calles establishment in an unfavorable light, *showing, for example, the generals who dislodged the old elite in fat diamond rings* toasting their whores with imported champagne. The establishment would squirm with embarrassment, but to their everlasting credit, they would tolerate it, giving credence to what was Mexico's version of "glasnost." It was an example of what Alan Knight describes

"The masses could not be ignored: but they could be integrated into a stronger, more stable state than Diaz's; and to this end the regime took up the demands, myths and symbols of the popular movement, and wove them together with its own developmentalist 'etatisme.' Here lay the *genius of the revolutionary leadership: its capacity to harness the energy and grievances of the popular movement to antithetical ends --state-building and capitalist development. It was the trick the KMI failed to turn in China, and it ensured the continuation of the revolution from above by other means.*"

But Frida's and Diego's arm-waving and fist-clenching demonstrations seem somehow naive to me. There was one perceptible result: when combined with artistic output, some substance would be added to the North American argument that the Revolution was inspired by Bolsheviks, which it was not.

Frida was first "discovered" by Andre Breton. Two shows of her paintings, in Paris, drew accolades from Picasso, Kandinsky, Duchamp, and Tanguy. The Louvre bought one of her self portraits. When people compared the Riveras as artists, Diego proudly told the truth: "Frida was the better. He knew, too, that the power of her work lay in its introspective imagery and refusal to make concessions." (Grimberg, A&A). Although looked upon as a surrealist painter, the description will not hold. "Frida was right when she said: 'They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality. ' " (H)

Picasso praised Frida's paintings in a letter to Diego, "Nobody - not me (Picasso), not you (Rivera), not Derain, not Kandinsky can paint a face better than Kahlo." Far be it for me to substitute for Picasso's appraisal (and really I am not), but in my opinion, photographs of Frida reveal her as more beautiful than her paintings. To my knowledge, Herrera does not make this direct comparison, but comes close in the following as elsewhere:

"Most of the some two hundred paintings she produced in her abbreviated career were self-portraits. She started with dramatic material: nearly beautiful, she had slight flaws that increased her magnetism. Her eyebrows formed an unbroken line across her forehead and her sensuous mouth was surmounted by the shadow of a mustache. Her eyes were dark and almond-shaped, with an upward slant at the outer edges. People who knew her well say Frida's intelligence and humor shone in those eyes; they also say her eyes revealed her mood: devouring, bewitching, or skeptical and withering. There was something about the 'piercing directness of her gaze that made visitors el unmasked, as if they were being watched by **an** ocelot."

Frida for all the humiliations suffered from Diego, was far from being "woman-the-victim." Her body, though badly maimed, was "highly sexual" and she had a rich sex life. Her affair with Trotsky (probably motivated by a desire to get even with Diego for his affair with her sister) was only the most celebrated. There were numerous others, some casual, some extended. Frida's powerful sexual appetite revealed "a hunger for intimacy so urgent that it would ignore gender" (H) but her homosexual episodes were mostly limited to her later years when her failing condition would limit her. She preferred men.

But she would always return to Diego. She wrote in her diary, "Diego is the constructor, my child, boyfriend, lover, husband, friend, mother, father, son, myself, and the universe." And Diego was far more than simply "true to her in his fashion." He would say, "If I had died without knowing her, I would have died without knowing what a real woman was."

Rather than simply enlivening these pages with the Riveras' sexual adjustments, this discussion should serve to exemplify the breach in classic precepts of Mexico: male machismo and female submissive self-denial. This departure is evidenced by the Riveras' lifestyle, their relationship, and their art. It should demonstrate again the distinction between representational Woman and women as the individuals they really are.

Frida's final day -her cremation -was as dramatic as had been her life and her painting:

" There was an infernal heat that forced us all to press up against the back of the room but Diego did not move When Frida entered the furnace, the intense heat made her sit up and her blazing hair stood out from her face in an aureole. Siqueros said that when the flames ignited her hair, her face appeared as if smiling in the center of a large sunflower.
"...Diego wept ... dug his nails into the palms of his hands again and again, making them bleed. Frida's ashes retained the shape of her skeleton for a few minutes ...
(then Diego took out) a small sketchbook and drew Frida's silvery skeleton. Then he fondly gathered up her ashes in a red cloth and put them in a cedar box. He asked that his ashes be mixed with Frida's when he died."(H)
(underlining mine)

Diego Rivera wrote in his autobiography, "July 13, 1954, was the most tragic day of my life. I had lost my beloved Frida forever ... too late now, I realized that the most wonderful part of my life had been my love for Frida."

Diego's plan for his ashes would have thrilled Frida in the most meaningful way: Her lifelong pursuit was one of striving to merge with Diego, body and soul. What he sought has never been satisfied." ... it was deemed more fitting for the great muralist to lie in the resting place of Mexico's most famous citizens, the Rotunda de los Hombres ilustre."(H)

Thus, Diego's aborted request could serve as a metaphor for one of the themes of this book. Society's precepts would override fundamental human instincts and, in this case, those of male seeking communion with female. Moreover, immortality would be prescribed for the male performer, anonymity for the female.

Frida's epilogue, however, projects her immortality. She has become a heroine for several feminist groups. A recent exhibition of her paintings in Tokyo drew an unprecedented thousand visitors a day; 2,000 copies of the catalog were sold out in the first week, requiring a reprint. The latest: Madonna will produce and star in a screenplay based on Frida's life.