

## **Frida Kahlo**

Frida Kahlo was a painter whose work fascinated prominent and diverse artists around the world. The wife of world-renowned Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, Kahlo forged a place in the art world that was completely of her own. Her dramatic work consisted primarily of self-portraits, although she did capture her family and friends on canvas on occasion. Some critics contend that Kahlo's paintings were reflections of her personal history, her relationship with Diego Rivera, her damaged physical condition, her philosophy of nature and life, and her individual and mythological worldview. Although Kahlo never had formal training in art, she developed into an artist who fascinated a wide range of fellow artists, including Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, painter Pablo Picasso, and novelist Andre Breton. In addition to these literary and artistic luminaries, her circle included political figures such as Leon Trotsky and the Rockefeller family.

Frida Kahlo lived from 1907 to 1954, a time of incredible worldwide movements and changes. The Mexican Revolution occurred just three years after she was born, a development that triggered dramatic social and economic change in Mexico. A new sense of nationalism surged throughout Mexico as the people rejected dictator Porfirio Diaz and his policies, and a renaissance of cultural renewal glorifying Mexico's native roots took place. The modern Mexican muralist tradition grew out of these changes and proved to be an enduring method of expressing national pride. Kahlo was an active participant in the social, economic and political landscape that characterized that life.

Frida Kahlo was born Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderon on July 6, 1907, in her parents' house in Coyoacan, Mexico a suburb of Mexico City. In about 1935 she dropped the "e" in her first name. Her father, one of Mexico's foremost photographers, was the son of Hungarian Jews from the German town of Baden-Baden who emigrated to Mexico. Guillermo Kahlo married her mother Matilde Calderon, a Mexican of Indian and Spanish ancestry. The family home, called the Casa Azul ("Blue House"), was built by Guillermo Kahlo a few years before Frida's birth. She was born, raised, lived and died in her family's home. Kahlo's father had a profound influence on her life. Her mother was a meticulous housekeeper and devout Catholic whose conventional patterns of thought created some distance between her and her daughters. Kahlo's father, on the other hand, recognized and encouraged her intellectual independence and curiosity.

At the age of seven, Kahlo was afflicted with polio, a disease that left her right foot turned outward and stunted the growth of her entire right leg. Her father nursed her back to health and subsequently encouraged her to play various active sports not typical for a Mexican girl at that time. Kahlo's bout with polio held her back in school, so in 1922, when she entered the National Preparatory School, she falsified her age. Some historians have speculated that she chose 1910 as her birth date to coincide with the year of the Mexican Revolution started. Kahlo was adamant in her commitment to ideals of revolution. She expressed her bond to the Mexican people in her art, in her dress, her behavior, and the decorations of her home. During her days at the National Preparatory School, Kahlo became known as something of a prankster and was a highly visible presence. She often wore elaborate indigenous jewelry and colorful native clothing, and was fond of piling her hair upon her head and decorating it brightly with ribbons and bows in the fashion that the natives of Oaxaca, Mexico, favored. Kahlo regarded every occasion as a cause for rejoicing, and celebrated birthdays, baptisms, and all the popular holidays with great enthusiasm.

It was at the National Preparatory School that she first met Diego Rivera, an artist whose work she admired. Her attraction to the painter was considerable, and one story from that period of her life alleged that she declared to her school friends her ambition to have a child by Diego Rivera. In 1925, however, Kahlo was involved in a tragic accident that dramatically changed her life.

Traveling home from school on a bus, the vehicle collided with a trolley car, driving a piece of iron into her pelvis and back. Kahlo struggled with the effects of this accident and the pain it caused for the rest of her life. She underwent as many as 35 operations over the course of her life, most of them on her spine and her polio-deformed right foot.

It was during Kahlo's convalescence from the bus accident that she began painting. Kahlo was required to spend long periods of time flat on her back in bed, so her mother bought her a special easel that she could use despite her physical limitations. She began to express her explosive feelings through painting.

Kahlo never returned to school after her release from the hospital. Instead, she concentrated on her painting. About this time, she met the Italian-born

American photographer Tina Modotti. It was through her friendship with Modotti that Kahlo was introduced to an exciting new sphere of art and leftist politics. Diego Rivera was a member of this circle, and he and Kahlo soon became involved. Kahlo joined the Young Communist league, an organization that Rivera founded and led the 22-year-old Kahlo married the 42-year-old Rivera in a civil ceremony in 1929.

The marriage proved to be a tumultuous one. Kahlo lamented that she suffered through two accidents in her life; one was the trolley car incident, the other her marriage to Rivera. Both had extramarital affairs, and several of Kahlo's relationships were with other women. Kahlo and Rivera separated for a long time, divorced, and eventually remarried. All during their stormy association, however, they served as the hub of an international intellectual circle. Their political activism continued, unaffected by the state of their marriage, as both Kahlo and Rivera used their artistic talents to express their social and political views.

In 1938 Andre Breton visited her in Mexico and remarked that she was a surrealist. Kahlo disagreed, arguing that she painted her reality. She did, however, travel to Europe and New York to show her work in surrealist exhibitions. Later, she firmly rejected the surrealist label, contending that her work dissolved the distinctions between reality and fantasy.

In the 1940s Kahlo taught art, her students became known as Los Fridos. Although her students spent a lot of time with her at home, in her studio, and out in the streets, they never saw her paint. She painted alone, a practice that led some critics and friends to describe her paintings as a form of therapy.

Kahlo's marriage to Rivera was but one of the difficulties she grappled with during her adulthood. She suffered numerous miscarriages that caused her great grief. In addition, the injuries suffered in the bus accident continued to hound her, relegating her to her bed for months at a time and keeping her in a state of almost constant pain. Finally, in 1953, her right leg was amputated due to gangrene. Throughout all of these difficulties, Kahlo continued to paint. She became addicted to the medicine prescribed for pain. Despite her failing body, Kahlo endeavored to maintain the old ways of gaiety, excitement and drama.

Her last public appearance was at a demonstration protesting C.I.A. intervention in the overthrow of leftist President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala. She died seven days later on July 13, 1954, at the age of 47.

Source: Tardiff, Joseph C. and Mabunda, L Mpho, editors. *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, New York, Gale Group, 1996