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Synopsis:
Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) was a painter, poet, and political activist who lived in Mexico City and married Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. Her life was laced with tragedy, which led her to paint her inner reality, all the aspects of life usually hidden. Known for her flamboyant life-style of Tehuana dress, unibrow, Communist party affiliation and her numerous affairs, she was a self-taught artist, whose paintings have been compared to many artistic styles, but she herself rejected such labels, as she "painted her own reality." Her fame emerged after her death and she is now considered one of Mexico’s best artists and icon for many women.

Keywords: Art; Aztec; Creativity; Cubism; Diego Rivera; Expressionism; Expressive arts therapy; Mexican; Murals; Neomexicanismo; Realism; Self-portrait; Surrealism; Tehuana dress; Trauma in art

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Biographical Sketch

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Kate was one of founding board members of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA). Kate is one the seven people to be awarded IEATA’s Shining Star, for contributions made by EXA pioneers.

Kate is a PhD licensed psychologist and registered expressive arts therapist (REAT) has maintained a full time private Jungian oriented EXA private practice in San Francisco for 30 years. Her work as an expressive arts therapist stems from her own deep and abiding passion for the arts, especially visual art, culture and dance. Her interest and love for Frida Kahlo started 30 years ago when she read Hayden Herrera and continues as she lectures and writes about Frida’s life and art.
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Frida Kahlo was born on 6 July 1907 in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City, now part of Mexico City proper. According to Hayden Herrera, her first biographer, Frida changed her birth date to 1910 when she entered high school in 1922; she wanted to be associated with the Mexican Revolution. With this, her first political statement entered high school in 1922; she wanted to be associated with the Mexican Revolution. With this, her first political statement

Frida Kahlo was born Carl Wilhelm Kahlo in Pforzheim, Germany. Though the family maintained their ancestry as Hungarian-Jewish, records state he was Lutheran German. Frida’s father sailed to Mexico in 1891 when he was nineteen years old and changed his first name to the Spanish equivalent, Guillermo. He was known as one of Mexico City’s foremost photographers.

Matilde Calderón y González, Frida’s mother, was of mixed Spanish and indigenous Mexican ancestry and a devout Catholic. Guillermo and Matilde were married shortly after his first wife died during the birth of their second child. Their marriage was quite unhappy, yet they did have four daughters. Frida was the third. Her father was surrounded by women and Frida was his favorite child.

Frida was born and lived most of her life in Casa Azul (The Blue House), in Coyoacán with her parents and four sisters and two step-sisters from her father’s first marriage. Casa Azul is currently the home to the Frida Kahlo Museum. Her parent’s marriage was marred by the death of Guillermo’s first wife and Matilde’s grief over her lost son. The family’s legacy was shrouded by death, and created a family dynamic that strongly influenced her development and creative process.

Frida had vastly different relationships with her parents. Frida’s mother was still in deep grief over the loss of her baby son when Frida was conceived. Matilde may have suffered from postpartum depression and was unable to breast-feed baby Frida. Soon after Frida’s birth, her mother became pregnant with her sister Christina. This may have deepened her mother’s depression and overwhelmed her. Frida felt unloved and abandoned by her mother and became competitive with Christina.

Matilde could seem cold, self involved, distracted and by many accounts depressed. When a mother is depressed, the child is often left unattended physically and emotionally: this inadequate mothering can leave a child unable to metabolize her experiences. Fortunately, from an early age, Frida had her art. She also had childhood’s natural connection to imagination through play and the arts. Her fantasy and imagination allowed her to create the images she needed to metabolize these painful experiences.

Her life was interlaced with tragedy. Frida contracted polio at the age of six and her left leg was less developed. During this period, Frida had an imaginary friend who lived in the interior of the earth and was always available to her when she was alone in bed. Her friend was her opposite, who could dance, and did not limp. She poetically describes her friend in her diary. As an adult, this imaginary friend was transformed into a series of unprecedented self-portraits, a form of empathic mirroring, the most famous of which was ‘The Two Fridas’ (1939).

Fortunately, she had a positive and close relationship to her father. Guillermo Kahlo suffered from epilepsy and was a distant father: intellectual and introverted and solitary within his family, with the exception of Frida. Guillermo adored Frida and she, in turn idealized him, identifying with his creativity, intellect, and physical vulnerabilities. During her period of confinement with polio, he encouraged her to be physically active, to pursue art and education and overcome her disability, a style that would remain with her throughout her life.

Many scholars including Emily Tobeck, assert that Frida’s paintings and journals reveal evidence of incest with her father, emotional and/or literal. This hypothesis could provide an understanding on her later behavior: sexual acting out in adolescence; her marriage to an older man, Diego Rivera; and her numerous bisexual affairs. The surreal painting of ‘What the Water Gave Us’ (1938) and her poetic journal entries are interpreted as evidence of this. Enacted incest, emotional or literal, seemed to create a paradox, one of possible suffering and the other as a creative source.

As an adolescent, identifying with her mother, she often dressed as a male, portraying a sense of androgyny. She was her father’s daughter and this had a mixture of consequences. Frida adopted her father’s attitude towards her mother – devaluing and considering her mother stupid. Her father turned his attention toward Frida, and away from his wife. Frida was resented by her sisters and she could have later re-enacted these triangulated relationships with her love affairs. Yet she also had the world of men opened to her, especially as she pursued her education with her sharp wit and superior intelligence.

In 1922, Frida entered the National Preparatory School, which offered the best education in Mexico. It was also the center of post-revolutionary ideological and political ferment, and the center of the search for a Mexican identity. In an attempt to promote an identity founded on Mexican culture, the school hired painters like Diego Rivera (Frida’s future husband), José Clemente, and David Alfaro Siqueiros to decorate the walls of the school with murals of Mexican history and culture. The faculty consisted of the best Mexican scholars of the time. In the middle of this milieu, as one of 35 girls in a student body of 2000, considered the most intelligent students in Mexico, Frida stood out. She was a brilliant student who rarely studied and chose a pre-med course of study. An avid reader and a gifted writer, she worked on the school newspaper. Frida was part of a primarily male high spirited rebellious group called the Cachuchas. She was often the ring-leader of pranks, especially toward the fat, flamboyant muralist, Diego Rivera. She would challenge him, especially in front of his wife, Lupe Marin. Frida came to watch Diego work so
The Accident

There are particular moments that can change the course of one’s life. Frida had such an experience at the age of eighteen. In September, 1925, on her way home from school with Alejandro, the bus she was riding collided with a trolley car. Frida sustained grave injuries, including a broken spinal column, broken collarbone, broken ribs, broken pelvis, eleven fractures in her right leg, a crushed and dislocated right foot and a dislocated shoulder. Worst of all, a broken handrail entered her left hip and came out through her vagina. Frida often joked it was in this accident she lost her virginity. She suffered her entire life from the physical wounds of this accident, especially around her fertility. During the accident, her clothes were torn from her body, the handrail impaled her, and a sign painter on the bus had a container of gold-leaf paint that spilled during the crash and covered her bloody body. Many passersby called her ‘la bailarina, la bailarina’, the dancer. With the truly Mexican sense of the macabre, her body, in a dancer-like pose, was golden and bloody, thus symbolizing the relationship she would have with her body for the rest of her life. Alejandro found the terribly wounded Frida, pulled the rod out of her, and pleaded with the doctors to operate and not give up on her.

Frida spent a month encased in a full-body plaster cast that made her look like a mummy. She spent a year in bed recovering from these injuries. Told she would never walk again, Frida remained determined, and did regain her ability to walk, but lived the rest of her life in constant pain, and eventually had thirty-five surgeries, mostly on her back and right leg and foot. Frida, a Catholic, identifying with Jesus’ horribly bloody death, called this accident her Calvary. She had her foot amputated due to the long-term effects of the accident and these ulcers.

The prior health issues of polio and a possibly undiagnosed congenital spina bifida, a malformation that occurs when the lower spine does not close during fetal development, can lead to progressive trophic ulcers on the legs and feet, eventually causing Frida additional suffering. In her later years, she would have her foot amputated due to the long-term effects of the accident and these ulcers.

The family experienced a decline in upper middle-class status due to a decrease in Guillermo’s photographic business after the revolution, combined with the huge financial burden of Frida’s medical expenses. Frida felt guilty and powerless to help her family. She first began to paint more out of boredom, and then in an effort to develop a home-based income. Frida’s mother helped her by ordering a special easel that allowed her to paint while lying on her back. Her father allowed her to use his special brushes and paints. The loyal family offered themselves as models. Frida painted everything, even her plaster-cast corsets and herself.

For Frida, the near-death accident seemed to collapse life into a liminal space in which all is stripped away and she had to search anew for meaning, purpose, and rebirth. Frida wrote to Alejandro that she was reborn by this accident, “as a mature, sad woman who life had lost its color.” In her metaphoric utterances, she told him “death danced around my hospital bed at night.” Abandoning the goal of a medical career, she was reborn and her true essence emerged as a colorful Mexican painter. Symbolically, the accident birthed her as an icon of the wounded, triumphant feminine that her art and life holds for many women today.

Self Portraits

Having an essentially captive model, Frida drew and painted herself: 55 of her 143 paintings are self-portraits, which are among her best-known works. At first, her pieces were gifts to her boyfriend and friends so they would not forget her. This seemed to have been her way of ensuring their interest and love for her. In the early self-portraits, she represented her face in a serene and impassive way. Frida appeared to be denying the overwhelming feelings of helplessness and despair she felt. As she had done earlier, when she fell ill with polio by creating an imaginary double, she attempted to convey a sense of invulnerability, strength, and transcendence over her body’s limitations. Through her early attempts at this artistic empathic mirroring, she begins to start metabolizing the horror she has experienced as well as expressing her inquisitive, irreverent, and intellectual spirit.

Self-taught, these first pieces were stylistically European, influenced by Botticelli from the Italian Renaissance and Modigliani’s elongated figures. When Frida became involved with Diego Rivera, she turned to a deliberately naïve and flattened form of Mexican folk art that he loved, and she ceased painting in an aristocrat Renaissance style. Now, she wore pleasant blouses, Mayan beads and colonial earrings, representing herself as a Mexican girl full of self-possessed spunk. Following Rivera’s style, she depicted herself and other subjects in a more Gauguin or Henri Rousseau raw, native style. She painted bold colors to honor the flowering of post-revolutionary Mexico. Her attention to detail showed a tender interchange between artist and model, and between artist and self. In both her early and middle styles, there is none of the emotional tension found in her later self-portraits.

During her travels with her husband, Frida’s work began to show the tension of dualities which she believed were the foundation of life. In her painting ‘Self-Portrait on the Border Line between Mexico and the United States’ (1932), she shows us the paradox of then-current reality, living in the United States while longing for Mexico. We also see her political leanings and her sense of power and androgyny. Here seems to be a painting in a more Cubist style. As her work matured, she starkly painted her pain, creating sometimes shocking images of her numerous operations, painful miscarriages, and her troubled marriage to Diego Rivera, symbolically depicting her physical as well psychological wounds.
As her individuation process deepened, her art changed. Her paintings became replete with bright colors and indigenous Mexican imagery and culture, and her self-portraits increasingly reveal her cultural embrace. The thorns, in 'Self-portrait with Thorns' (1940), pierce her neck as her face is surrounded by nature. She starkly paints her suffering while embraced by mother earth in this piece, as she does in many of her later self-portraits.

Frida provokes us with her metamorphosis on her canvases. In 'Roots' (1943), she gives fertility to the earth. In the transformative 'Broken Columns' (1944), Frida is no longer lying down as she was in life, but is upright and gazing into a reality that is beyond the personal, into the very nature of existence, an archetypal reality. During this later period near the close of her life, her self-portraits took on a surrealist bent, reflected as well by her poetry found in her journals. Accidents are made into art, a metaphor for Frida's life. Color and images are fragmented, distorted, and reassembled.

In the pieces created in the three years before her death, Frida's physical suffering increased dramatically. Her internal terrain changed as did her self-portraits. She related more to the archetype of life as depicted in nature. Her self-portraits, her empathic mirroring, and her imaginary friend were now fruit, foliage, and animals, the archetypal source of life. As we can witness in the piece, 'Sun and Life' (1954), her paintings fill with life. On the shadow side, her paintings were said to be 'over-exuberant', due to her addiction to pain medications. It can be said, however, they also reflect the intensity one can feel about life with the approach of death.

Frida painted her painful inner experience through realism, symbolism, and surrealism always laced with her indigenous Mexican culture. She never liked these labels and often said she painted her own reality. She used art to reveal her internal experience and to heal and find meaning in her life.

Her Marriage to Diego Rivera

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's lives intersected in many ways even before they fell in love. Frida was a budding artist and politically active before her accident. She had a high school crush on Diego, and taunted him while he was painting a mural at her high school. She would call him fat and then run and hide to see his reaction.

After the accident, her friend, Tina Modotti, an Italian photographer, actress, and leftist activist, introduced her to the inner circle of Mexico City's art and political leaders, of which Diego Rivera was a member. Their lives went into each other's again. After meeting him at party at which Diego shot the phonograph, Frida became attracted to his untamed and unpredictable manner, perhaps one that matched her own. Though a tiny woman, Frida's personality was large, loud, vibrant and extroverted and could match his personality, if not his size. Her compensatory style of defiance became stronger after the accident. She would hide her vulnerability and pain with a strident, loud, and adventurous persona.

At the age of 21, she fell fully in love with Diego Rivera, who was also affiliated with the Communist Party. As she sought his counsel on her paintings, their relationship flowered. He admired her work and began to spend time in her home, Casa Azul. Her parents had mixed feelings about Rivera. Her father understood her opportunities to marry were limited as she had massive current and future medical debts. Guillermo was more in favor of the marriage and realized Diego could help Frida as an aspiring artist. Matilde did not like Diego. According to her, he was too old, too fat, and a communist. Matilde thought it would be a marriage 'between a dove and an elephant' and said he looked like a frog. Many of these stories were recorded in a dual biography of Frida and Diego by Isabel Alcantara and Sandra Egnolf.

Nothing could deter Frida. They married on 21, August 1929. She borrowed her maid's clothes and dressed like a regional Mexican woman. Her appearance was unconventional; she declined to remove her facial hair and was known for her unibrow, small mustache, and for her flamboyant Mexican-styled clothes: long, colorful skirts, peasant-style embroidered blouses, large beaded jewelry, all of which became her style of dress till her death.

At first, Frida tried to be a traditional Mexican wife, bringing Diego lunch and painting like him. She ignored his infidelities, and hid her own with men and women. Years later, she painted this aspect of their relationship in, 'Diego and Frida on their Wedding Day' (1941), depicting herself as small and child-like in contrast to the larger-than-life painter. His wife was his most trusted artistic critic. Soulmates and lovers, theirs was a turbulent relationship. Twenty years her senior, with a demanding and successful career, Diego was repeatedly unfaithful to Frida, with one of the most hurtful encounters occurring between Diego and her sister, Christina. Diego may have had this affair to retaliate for Frida persuading Diego to return to Mexico from the United States, where he had been commissioned to paint a number of now-famous murals.

Our relationship with our parents can influence our choice of spouse. Perhaps Frida and Christina enacted the family secret through their competition, triangulation, and betrayal by the affair with Diego. After she learned of the affair, she chopped off her long hair, which Diego loved, in an act of defiance. Reflecting her sardonic humor, at the top of this painting, 'Self Portrait with Chopped Hair' (1940), are the words of a popular song: "Look, I used to love you, it was because of your hair, now you're pelona (bald or shorn), I don't love you any more." She also used the cutting of her hair as a symbol of her rage, attempting to sever her attachment to Diego. Her fury is palpable in her ugly men's clothes, mutilated hair, and angry expression. Frida's femininity had been sacrificed at Diego's altar of infidelity. Yet Frida never entirely severed her relationship with her husband.

After this betrayal, she became more blatant about her affairs. The most famous was with Leon Trotsky in 1937. Diego and Frida divorced in 1939 and were re-married in 1940 while both had affairs simultaneously. Their passionate, stormy relationship survived these infidelities, her seriously dangerous miscarriages, their divorce, remarriage, and her faltering health.

Frida suffered tremendously with her inability to birth a child due to the accident. In many of her pieces about miscarriages and abortions (e.g. 'Henry Ford Hospital' and 'Caesarian Section' both in 1932), she depicts her inner horror of being unable to bear a child. Through her art, Frida transforms pain into beauty and truth and then penetrates into our inner loneliness, universally bridging our experiences with hers.
Diego and Frida’s relationship was very complex. On one level, he offered an arena for the enactment of her relationship with her father: the adored child, the triangulation and later betrayal as well as the positive artistic mentoring of her father. She had a sense of the enormity of his influence on her as she would say she had two grave accidents in her life: the street car accident and Diego. This paradox symbolically gave her life, death, and rebirth.

Diego indirectly influenced her to abandon her early European style and adopt a more Mexican, retablo style. Initially, she absorbed his cultural embrace along with his political idealism. As her journey of individuation matured however, her culture, politics and sense of style increasingly reflected the deeper sense of her true self.

Diego was her muse and supporter artistically. In his autobiography, Rivera said that Frida’s canvases revealed an unusual energy of expression, precise delineation, character, and true severity. They showed none of the tricks in the name of originality that usually mark the work of ambitious beginners. They convey a fundamental honesty and an artistic personality of their own. They communicated a vital sensuality, complemented by a merciless yet sensitive power of observation. It was obvious to him that this girl was an authentic artist. He has often said she was a better painter than he was.

Diego and Frida were comrades and bound by their commitment to Communism as well as art. In several self-portraits, she holds Diego in mind and heart, ‘Diego in My Thoughts’ (1943?). They seem to complete each other, which is clearly evidenced in ‘Painting of Diego and Frida’ (1944). From a different perspective, they may have found in each other what they longed for in themselves, and hold the paradox of the masculine and feminine; anima and animus in the other.

**Symbols of Mother: Dead and Archetypal**

Frida painted how she imagined her birth in ‘My Birth’ (1932) created after her own mother’s death, where she illuminates the suffering she endured in her relationship with her mother. In this painting, the baby is birthing herself from a dead mother, alone and unaided. On the wall is an image of the Virgin of Sorrows pierced by thorns, bleeding and weeping. This image seems to hold birth and death simultaneously. The mother wears a death’s shroud and the baby emerges with a face of anguish.

The collective mother in ‘My Nurse and I’ (1937) gives Frida the nurturance she needed. Frida was not nursed by her own personal mother, but is nursed by the great mother of Mexico, forced to find the Great Mother by digging deep within her culture. Frida started to create the goddess and the mother she longed for. However, the nurse in this painting looks austere and has a pre-Hispanic death mask instead of a human face. Nurturance and life are laced with death and suffering while the baby Frida appears insecurely held.

In Frida’s art, there are many Aztec and Mexican symbols of gods and goddesses. Frida’s art seemed guided by the Aztec goddess, Coatlique/Coatlicue (pronounced kwat-lee-kweh), the Mother of the Gods, the goddess of life, death, and rebirth, the Lady of the Skirt of Snakes. She is the Aztec goddess of death, dismemberment, and destruction as well as life. She was created in the image of the ‘unknown’, the mystery created by the decorations of skulls, snakes, and lacerated hands. Coatlique is the archetypal symbol of death like the Hindu goddess Kali. With skeletons and hearts in her paintings, Frida found a way not to fear Coatlique but to embrace her, thus finding meaning beyond suffering. With the help of this cultural icon, Frida came to understand symbolic death culturally as well as personally.

**Paradox of Culture and Politics**

This goddess’s influence is best seen in the paradox of the ‘Two Frida’s’ (1939): The European and the Mexican Frida. She becomes her imaginary friend and companion again as the two Fridas hold each other hands. Frida is painting her psychic pain, her exposed and wounded heart. She holds the duality of existence: the observer and the observed. This was also a death and rebirth in her art: the death of the European feminine, and a rebirth as a Mexican icon. Frida’s eventual transformation from a personal into an archetypal image stems from her rebirth as Mexican feminine icon.

Her painting of political paradox was first evidenced in ‘On the Border between the United States and Mexico’ (1932). In her 1945 piece, ‘Moses’, her most mural-like piece, she attempts to depict the paradox of fear the fear of life and the fear of death. This piece is interlaced with spiritual and political imagery. Later, Frida even more poignantly declaims capitalism’s superficial values and praises Marxism as the cure for the world’s ills in ‘Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick’ (1954). In this piece, Frida no longer needs her crutches as they fall away. Marx is touched by the peace dove, and the United States eagle is surrounded by a red atomic explosion. Frida valued three things in life: Diego, her art, and communism. Frida used her culture and political beliefs as universal symbols, which C. G. Jung, founder of analytic psychology,
called archetypes. They laid a foundation for her becoming an icon, an archetype herself in flamboyant Mexican attire, and her vivid use of color in her paintings.

Her Later Years

Throughout their marriage, Frida and Diego traveled a great deal, mostly to the United States. Diego loved the US while Frida always longed for Mexico. During their marriage they lived in small apartments and in two major houses, Casa Azul and the San Angel, joined homes designed by the famous Mexican designer, Juan O’Gorman. They separated many times and were divorced and remarried. When they remarried in 1940, her later years, Frida lived in Casa Azul and Diego would reside with her frequently while still maintaining his O’Gorman home. Frida became more accepting of Diego’s ways and attended to him as if he were her baby, which is best reflected in her painting, ‘The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth, Me, Diego and Xolotl’ (1949). In this piece, Frida cuddles a baby Diego while she is held by the Aztec goddess Xolotl.

With a history of heavy drinking and smoking, which complicated her consistently poor health, Frida deteriorated even more throughout 1941. She was exhausted, losing weight, depressed after her father’s death and in constant, extreme pain. Medical procedures and all kinds of corsets to support her back became a way of life. Frida now became manipulative with her true ailments in an attempt to secure Diego’s attention, especially when another woman was on the scene. Many of her operations were said to be elective.

In 1943, Frida began teaching and developed a following of students who came to be called Fridos. She was an unorthodox and respectful instructor. Her instructions would be to go out in the street and get acquainted with life so they could better understand how to paint it. She held court with her students at Casa Azul.

In these later years, Casa Azul changed from a happy gathering place for artists and important people traveling through Mexico, to a home of intense suffering visited only by a small group of friends. In 1946, Frida painted two pictures, ‘The Little Deer’, and the ‘Tree of Hope Stand Fas’, symbolizing her hope that the pain would cease from a new operation to be done in New York. However, she did not improve. She suffered from mood swings, from euphoria to depression, even paranoia. Periodically she became violent, was drinking heavily and was increasingly dependent on her pain medication. She became obsessed with her ailments and became the first woman in Mexico to enter psychoanalysis, which was explored by psychiatrist Simon Grímberg. In 1950, a bone graft failed miserably, and she spent nine months in the hospital, yet continued to paint. Frida began a diary in 1944 that chronicles her physical and emotional suffering in poetic verse and drawings. When Frida was forced to have her right leg amputated below the knee, she grew more despondent, writing in her diary and capturing her gallows humor momentarily with “Feet, why do I want them if I have wings to fly?”

Diego sponsored her second solo show, though it was only her first solo show in her homeland, in 1953. This project lifted her spirits, but all were unsure if Frida would be able to attend. Following her doctor’s orders, she did not leave her bed: instead she had her bed, with her in it, loaded into a truck and was escorted by motorcycles to the gallery. There is a very famous photo of Frida in her canopied bed greeting guests. It was macabre and theatrical, and entirely her style.

In that last year, Frida painted very little with the exception of still life of fruit, like ‘Viva la vida’, (Long live life) (1954) her last self-portrait. Some of her hospitalizations were suspected suicide attempts. Her last public appearance was at a political rally on a rainy day, and she subsequently developed bronchial pneumonia. According the death certificate, Frida died of a pulmonary embolism. However, her death might have been by suicide or an accidental overdose of drugs and alcohol.

In her last piece in her diary is sketched a black angel with the words “I hope for a happy exit and I hope never to come back.” Diego felt his soul was cut in two; he lost his best friend and the most wonderful part of his life. Frida was laid to rest, dressed and bejeweled with braided hair, at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. Five hundred mourners walked behind her hearse on the next day to pay respects before her requested cremation. The Internationale was played, and then Diego gathered her ashes in a silk scarf and took her home to Casa Azul.

Recognition Today

Diego Rivera was the first to preserve Frida Kahlo’s artistic memory. One year after her death Diego bequeathed her home, Casa Azul, to the Mexican nation as a museum. It contained her Tehuana dresses, jewelry, her painting utensils, her letters, diary, books, and most importantly, her art, the most intimate aspects of her life. In July, 1958, four years to the month after death, her home was opened to the public as the Frida Kahlo Museum. In death’s silence, her home illustrates a life of art, color, and passion.

For many years, she was only recognized as Diego Rivera’s wife. She was not recognized widely as the singular artist as she is now for decades, till the 1980s when the Neomexicanismo movement began, where the values of contemporary Mexican culture were finally recognized and prized. In the 1980s, Frida Kahlo became a household name in Mexico. In 1983, a Mexican movie about her was a huge success. The next year, Mexican government decreed Frida’s art a national treasure. Hayden Herrera published her seminal biography on Frida, which became a worldwide seller. Many other books about Frida surfaced after this. She became recognized as Mexico’s greatest woman artist, and by many, as Mexico’s greatest artist.

In 2001, she became the first Hispanic woman to be honored with a US postage stamp. A year later, the American film Frida was released, based on the Herrera book. In 2006, her self-portrait ‘Roots’ (1943) set a Latin American record when it was auctioned at (US) $5.6 million.

Her greatest recognition is among women as a symbol of the wounded but triumphant feminine. She persevered against all odds: physical injury, psychological wounds, and a culture that did not value small, intimate easel paintings or women’s art. Frida is also seen as a political heroine as she demonstrated with the example of her life her love for the la raza, the people. For the ill, oppressed and grieving, her art, with its open...
Two small excerpts from her diary may serve as coda:

I had smiled nothing more. But clarity was in me and in the depth of my silence.
He followed me. Like my shadow, irreproachable and light.
In the night he wept a song. . .
He followed me.
I ended up crying, forgotten in the entrance of the Parish church
Produced by silk shawl, which soaked up my tears

And:

Mine is a strange world
Of criminal silences
Of strangers’ watchful eyes
Misreading the evil.
Darkness in the daytime . . .
Was it my fault?
I admit, my great guilt
As great as pain
It was an enormous exit
Which my love went through

Further Reading