

**Not So Bad:** The life of Frida Kahlo began a one-hour streetcar ride away from Mexico City in the pueblo of Coyoacán. In La Casa Azul, a one-story blue stucco house shadowed by taller-than-one-story trees, Frida was born on the morning of July 6, 1907.

Her mother, a devout Catholic, was part Indian. Her father was an atheist Austro-Hungarian Jew who had emigrated from Germany at age 19. It was her maternal grandmother and Indian grandfather who infused her with the Mexican ancestry she celebrated her entire life.

When 6, Frida was bedridden with polio for nearly a year. The disease left her with one leg shorter than the other, a deformity of which she was always self-conscious. At 15, she qualified for the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in the old Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City where women had only recently been admitted. Kahlo was one of a mere 35 females in a class of 2,000. She studied art, literature, law, and medicine.

It was here she first experienced the driving cultural forces that prepared her for her future in modern Mexico and the world. It was here she designed her sights on medical school at a time when women doctors were rare. It was here she began adorning her notebooks with sketches. It was here she met and set her desires on Diego Rivera the grand muralist of Mexico whom one day she would marry, divorce, and marry again. It was here as a teen she told her friends she wanted to have Rivera's child.

It was here at age 18, when the bus on which she was riding turned in front of an oncoming streetcar that impinged itself into the bus. A metal handrail literally impaled Kahlo entering through her left hip and exiting through her genitals. A man at the scene dressed in overalls said the rod had to be removed. Without pause for thought, he pulled the metal rod out of Kahlo's body to the horrific sound of breaking bones.

Kahlo always maintained that this intrusion into her pelvis caused her inability to bear children. Though never medically validated, Kahlo believed it and endured it in a culture where motherhood defined womanhood.

In fact, she was lucky to be alive. She had incurred numerous breaks in her pelvic bone, spinal column and collarbone. Several ribs were cracked, her right leg was broken in 11 places and her right foot was crushed. And, despite 39 subsequent operations, Kahlo would be a semi-invalid the rest of her life.

Confined to bed in immobilizing splints designed to protect her many fractures, she spent a month hospitalized and the next 2 years in body-restrictive recovery. She did not return to her medical studies but bedridden, she began to paint.

Though Kahlo did not become the female physician she set out to be, her studies of science, particularly physiology, played an important role in her paintings. The glands, hearts and other inner body organs she often included in her paintings were incredibly accurate. In The Two Fridas, she paints her condition anatomically correct and portrays her condition of aloneness by being alone together with herself, the same as being alone.

Kahlo's activism in politics is portrayed in two political paintings, My Dress Hangs There where aloneness also manifests itself in her depiction of one dress devoid of other dresses or any other articles of clothing, and in Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick where again, she is alone.

Kahlo celebrated the culture of Mexico through her ethnic dress style and in her paintings, yet recognized it as a culture that restricted and defined not only her art, but her life. In Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States where again she is alone, Kahlo conveys her strong political and personal anxiety for the two countries of which she is a product.

Kahlo was part of the generation that introduced a significant female presence into the visual arts. Nonetheless, women artists in Mexico were virtually excluded from the mural movement in Mexico that was more highly valued than easel painting. Kahlo was victim of how gender curtailed opportunities for female artists.

But when she began dating Rivera, Kahlo painted with a new confidence. She assumed his way of painting and painted what he liked. She measured her success through his affirmation. Her paintings took on value for her only when they were valued by a man. This female-need to be validated by males was not unique to Kahlo at that time. It was, some say is, accepted and expected normal behavior by women in general.

At age 22, Kahlo became Diego's wife. She painted little during their early months of marriage when she subordinated her life to his. She catered both to his needs and her need to be a good wife to him. He became her identity. Diego put her first in his life also, but somewhere after his paintings. Life together was stormy at best.

As a female painter, she received little if any encouragement from others. She painted only 143 known paintings, 55 of which are self-portraits 8 of which show her with tears painted on her face in a surrealist style rather than anatomically correct, thus deeply, deeply provoking, given her anatomically-correct knowledge. She masked her inner feelings.

When asked why she painted many self-portraits, she frequently replied "porque estoy muy sola/because I am all alone." She didn't fit anywhere in the accepted gender codes of society as well as within herself, for she herself was part of that society. Albeit she had little respect for limitations, she herself had limits.

Perhaps if someone would have said, "you're not so bad," she would have known, shown, and accepted the woman she was before she died in 1954.