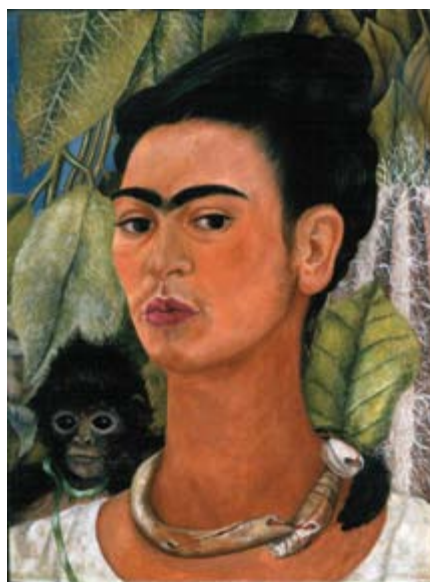


# The Trouble With Frida Kahlo

Uncomfortable truths about this season's hottest female artist.

By [Stephanie Mencimer](#)

If only I had been born a decade or two later. As a 6th grader in 1981, instead of enduring taunts about my emerging mustache, I could have found myself in high style, mocking those poor stylish Hollywood blondes who are now struggling to grow peach fuzz as they mimic the style of the late Mexican painter-cum-icon Frida Kahlo, who was so proud of her luxurious facial hair that she painted it right on to her self-portraits. My self-esteem could have been bolstered by any number of Frida storybooks, paper dolls, and art kits now available for millennial children in need of a unbrowed role model. Thanks to an extraordinarily enduring run of "Fridamania," the mustache and the unbrow have become vogue--particularly among



museum-goers visiting a recent exhibit of Kahlo's paintings (along with those of Georgia O'Keeffe and Emily Carr) at Washington's National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA). Sporting their own unbrows, they leave with new Frida totebags full of Frida memorabilia: Frida watches, the "martyr mouse pad," dolls, full-length wall hangings, books, pocketbook mirrors, photo boxes, and dressing screens.

Never has a woman with a mustache been so revered--or so marketed--as Frida Kahlo. Like a female Che Guevara, she has become a cottage industry. In the past year, Volvo has used her self-portraits to sell cars to Hispanics, the U.S. Postal Service put her on a stamp, and Time magazine put her on its cover. There have been Frida look-alike contests, Frida operas, plays, documentaries, novels, a cookbook, and now, an English-language movie. Mexican beauty Salma Hayek recently debuted as Frida at the Cannes film festival (reportedly playing the role

mustachioed, despite protests from Hollywood). Hayek, who wrestled the role away from Madonna and Jennifer Lopez, will join a star-studded cast that includes Latin Lothario Antonio Banderas.

The Kahlo cult has been well documented since it first emerged in the early 1990s. Back then, the artist was making headlines because her paintings were breaking records, fetching up to \$1 million at auction, thanks in no small part to Madonna, an avid collector who claims to "identify with her pain and her sadness." Today, those paintings have wildly surpassed that mark, breaking \$10 million--a price that puts Kahlo in a league with Picasso, Pollock, and Warhol.

What looked like a fad a decade ago has only grown stronger as Kahlo has been embraced as a poster child for every possible politically correct cause. By 1998, *Cosmopolitan* magazine was urging women to read Kahlo's biography as one of 10 ways to "celebrate National Women's Month." In a new book of essays celebrating resistance to the evils of global capitalism, John Berger writes an homage to Kahlo saying, "That she became a world legend is in part due to the fact that . . . under the new world order, the sharing of pain is one of the essential preconditions for a refinding of dignity and hope."

The fledgling NMWA has broken all box-office records with its recent show, drawing more than 28,000 visitors, in large part due to the Kahlo pilgrims. Susan Fisher Sterling, NMWA's chief curator, says "Each group seems to find some validation in Kahlo. In some ways we're obsessed with ourselves and sexuality. Kahlo was very much a part of that narcissistic body culture."

Kahlo's art is to painting what the memoir is to literature--self-absorbed, confessional, and hard to dismiss as a flash in the pan. "Frida Kahlo has been the right artist at the right time," says Gregorio Luke, director of the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA) in California.

Feminists might celebrate Kahlo's ascent to greatness--if only her fame were related to her art. Instead, her fans are largely drawn by the story of her life, for which her paintings are often presented as simple illustration. Fridamaniacs are inspired by Kahlo's tragic tale of physical suffering--polio at six, grisly accident at 18--and fascinated with her glamorous friends and lovers, among them photographer and Soviet spy Tina Modotti and Leon Trotsky. It's the stuff that drives Hollywood, and the kind of story that has become de rigueur for entering the pantheon of "great" artists.

But, like a game of telephone, the more Kahlo's story has been told, the more it has been distorted, omitting uncomfortable details that show her to be a far more complex and flawed figure than the movies and cookbooks suggest. This elevation of the artist over the art diminishes the public understanding of Kahlo's place in history and overshadows the deeper and more disturbing truths in her work. Even more troubling, though, is that by airbrushing her biography, Kahlo's promoters have set her up for the inevitable fall so typical of women artists, that time when the contrarians will band together and take sport in shooting down her inflated image, and with it, her art.

### **Entering the Boy's Club**

The inflation of the artist over the art is certainly not unique to Kahlo. As the old saying goes, there is no great art, only great artists. Art history has focused on the personalities of the artist as far back as 1435, and even more so after the arrival of

Caravaggio, who was forced to flee Rome in 1606 after stabbing a young man to death in a dispute over a tennis score. Caravaggio helped cement the romantic ideal of the artist as troubled rogue and bohemian who flouts the norms of polite society. That artistic tradition has made good fodder for screenwriters; the lives of Jackson Pollock, Jean-Michael Basquiat, van Gogh, and Michelangelo have all been immortalized on film. Implicit, too, in these biopics is the notion that artists must suffer to experience the deep emotion that infuses their art. "The story of great artists is that they suffer during their lives and then their art is recognized as great after their death," says Margaret Lindauer, professor at Arizona State University and author of *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo*.

Until the 1970s, though, there were almost no "great" women artists, and virtually no literature describing where and how they might have fit into the history of Western art. As the feminist movement gathered steam, women sought to rectify that problem, but it was a difficult project. Historically, women's limited opportunities meant there were few women artists to begin with, and even fewer whose work had been collected and could be definitively attributed to them. (Male artists and scholars have, over the centuries, made a habit of appropriating the work of talented women or attributing it to men.) Once scholars did identify significant women artists, they had to demonstrate that those artists met the male standards for admission to the canon--i.e., they had to suffer and be mostly ignored during their lifetimes. This being the male canon, it was also helpful if the emerging female artists were beautiful and had glamorous friends.

Kahlo made a perfect candidate. She didn't lop off an ear, but Kahlo had a horrific story. In 1925, when she was 18, she was riding a bus in Mexico City when it was struck by a trolley car. A metal handrail pierced her abdomen, exiting through her vagina. Her spinal column was broken in three places. Her collarbone, some ribs, and her pelvis were broken, and her right leg was fractured in 11 places. Her foot was dislocated and crushed. No one thought she would live, much less walk again, but, after a month in the hospital, she went home. Encased for months in plaster body casts, Kahlo began to paint lying in bed with a special easel rigged up by her mother. With the help of a mirror, Kahlo began painting her trademark subject: herself. Of the 150 or so of her works that have survived, most are self-portraits. As she later said, "I paint myself because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best."

As if her bodily injuries weren't compelling enough, Kahlo's drama--as well as her art--was enhanced by what she referred to as the second accident in her life: Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican muralist to whom she was married for 25 years. Rivera was a notorious womanizer, a habit he did not abandon after marrying Kahlo, his third wife. Legend has it that for American women traveling to Mexico, having sex with Rivera was considered as essential as visiting Tenochtitlan. The 300-pound Rivera even had an affair with Kahlo's sister Christina. (Kahlo, in turn, had her own affairs with men and women.)

Both Kahlo and Rivera were active in the Communist Party and Mexican politics. More importantly, when Kahlo met Rivera, he was a leading proponent of a post-revolutionary movement known as Mexicanidad, which rejected Western European influences and the "easel art" of the aristocracy in favor of all things considered "authentically" Mexican, such as peasant handicrafts and pre-Columbian art. Kahlo also became a diehard adherent, adopting her now-famous traditional Mexican costumes--long skirts and dresses, which also had the practical effect of covering

up her polio-withered leg. Rejecting, too, conventional standards of beauty, Kahlo not only didn't pluck her unibrow or mustache, she groomed them with special tools and even penciled them darker.

Likewise, her paintings, rooted in 19th-century Mexican portraiture, ingeniously incorporated elements of Mexican pop culture and pre-Columbian primitivism that, in the 1930s, had never been done before. Usually small, intimate paintings that contrasted with the grand mural tradition of her time, her work was often done on sheet metal rather than canvas, in the style of Mexican street artists who painted retablos, or small votive paintings that offer thanks to the Virgin Mary or a saint for a miraculous deliverance from misfortune.

The paintings often reflect her tumultuous relationship with Rivera, as well as the anguish of her ever-deteriorating health. Between the time of her accident and her death, Kahlo had more than 30 surgeries, and a gangrenous leg was eventually amputated. She dramatized the pain in her paintings, while carefully cultivating a self-image as a "heroic sufferer."

While Rivera was painting murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932, Kahlo had a miscarriage, which prompted her to paint some of the most gruesome of the self-portraits that later sealed her reputation as one of the most original painters of her time. During those months in Detroit, she broke taboos and painted her miscarriage as well as a work entitled "My Birth," a startling look at a partially covered woman's body with Kahlo's bloodied head bursting out of the vagina. (Madonna, naturally, now owns that one.) In his autobiography, Rivera said, "Frida began work on a series of masterpieces which had no precedent in the history of art--paintings which exalted the feminine qualities of endurance of truth, reality, cruelty, and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit."

While Kahlo's work never attracted the attention her husband's did, it did win some critical acclaim. The great surrealist Andre Breton came to Mexico and fell in love with Kahlo's work (and Kahlo), calling it "a ribbon around a bomb." He arranged for her to show her work in New York in 1938--one of only two shows during her lifetime. Eventually, though, her failing health left her addicted to painkillers and alcohol. She continued to paint, but the addiction destroyed the controlled, delicate brushwork that had characterized her best work. In 1954, suffering from pneumonia, Kahlo went to a Communist march to protest the U.S. subversion of the left-wing Guatemalan government. Four days later, she died in what may or may not have been a suicide.

### **Reviving the Cult of Personality**

Kahlo largely disappeared from the mainstream art world for almost 30 years, until Hayden Herrera's famous 1983 biography. When it was published, there wasn't a single monograph of Kahlo's work to show people what it looked like, but the biography, which could have been the basis for a Univision telenovela, sparked a Frida frenzy. By 1991, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was using her self-portrait to advertise an exhibit on the side of New York City buses.

Today, Kahlo's legend is much more akin to that of Evita Peron than of van Gogh. (It's no coincidence that when Madonna was unable to play Kahlo in a movie 10 years ago, she went on to star as Evita.) Among all the Kahlo tchotchkes now on sale at the NMWA gift shop, only her self-portraits adorn the fridge magnets, not

"My Birth," or "A Few Small Nips," a disturbing image of a bleeding woman lying on a bed with a man standing over her wielding a stiletto. Kahlo's visage has become a symbol in its own right--a trend evident in the number of artists now creating tributes to her. Chicano artists in California have been incorporating her image into their murals since the 1970s in celebrations of their heritage. But the practice has become so common that the Japanese performance artist and drag queen Yasumasa Morimura recently did a show called "An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo," in which he painted himself as Kahlo self-portraits.

Plenty of people have been thrilled by Fridamania, and not just because it may represent a feminist triumph. "I don't necessarily think that the excessive popularity of an artist is a bad thing," says MoLAA's Gregorio Luke. "You can agree or disagree with the sideshow, the marketing of it all. But we need a younger generation to get involved in the art world, and she draws them in. Young people dress like her. It's a fad, but a welcome one."

He might also mention that it's a profitable one, as Kahlo's icon status has driven up the value of her work, giving museums something besides the ubiquitous Impressionist shows to draw large crowds and gin up gift-shop sales. But Fridamania does have its downside, revealing particular dangers for the work of women artists who are treated as phenomena rather than simply as artists.

Kahlo's move into the cult of personality is a familiar pattern in which women stop being the artist and become the subject of art, transformed from a powerful creative force to an ideal of quietly suffering femininity. In her book *Women, Art and Society*, Whitney Chadwick traces the trend back to the 16th century, with stories like that of Marietta Robusti, the eldest daughter of the Venetian painter Tintoretto. Robusti worked full-time in her father's workshop for 15 years, developing skills that were considered indistinguishable from the great master's. Her fame as a portrait painter earned her the respect of emperors and the devotion of her father. After her death during childbirth at age 30, Robusti became a subject of fascination for other artists and writers, not because of her great work, but because of her tragic ending. According to Chadwick, Romantic artists of the 19th century transformed Robusti from a gifted prodigy into "a tubercular heroine passively expiring as she stimulated her father to new creative heights."

Some feminist art historians have struggled against such reworkings of women artists, but Kahlo's pop-culture mania revives it with a vengeance. Kahlo certainly facilitated this process by painting herself as the quietly suffering female. In every possible sense, the mass-culture Kahlo embodies that now-poisonous term: victimhood. She was the victim of patriarchal culture, victim of an unfaithful husband, and simply the victim of a horrific accident. But that's probably one reason why she's so popular. "People like to see women as victims," says Mary Garrard, a professor of art history at American University.

### **Just Like a Woman**

The art establishment's demand for tragic bio as a prerequisite for greatness has given talented women artists wings of wax. Take the case of Artemisia Gentileschi, whom *The New York Times* dubbed "this season's 'Eit' girl," after an exhibition of her work opened in February at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Born in Rome in 1593, Artemisia was the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, one of Caravaggio's most important followers. Artemisia is the first woman artist in the

history of Western art whose historical significance is unquestionable. She also had a good story. In 1612, she was raped by one of her father's assistants, which prompted an O.J.-style trial during which the teenage Artemisia was tortured with thumbscrews to establish the truth of her statements. Despite her ordeal, she went on to become famous as an artist during her lifetime, and was the first woman admitted to the famed Accademia dell'Arte del Disegno in Florence. She was one of feminist scholars' first rediscoveries in the 1970s. But, as is the pattern, much of Artemisia's recent celebrity has not come from her art but from her story, which has inspired a number of plays, movies, and books, including Susan Vreeland's recent novel, *The Passion of Artemisia*, and the play "Lapis Blue Blood Red," which opened in New York in mid-February.

Unlike the fawning reverence accorded Kahlo, though, Artemisia's work is now taking something of a beating, particularly from the Met exhibit, which is curated with a highly skeptical view of her contributions to Western art. Met curator and spokesman Keith Christiansen has said that feminists, preoccupied with her biography and victimhood, have exaggerated Artemisia's achievement. She is, in his estimation, a mediocre artist.

Yet Christiansen seems to be reacting more to the pop-culture inflation of the artist than to the art itself. Her celebrity notwithstanding, Artemisia is an important figure in art history, having painted women in a way no one ever had before her. Her "Judith Slaying Holofernes," for instance, shows a muscular Judith hacking off Holofernes's head. Previous paintings of the story by men (and there were many) had always portrayed a squeamish Judith taking a gingerly approach to her grisly task, as befitting their view of women. If nothing else, Artemisia could do something men of the Accademia were not allowed to: She painted women from nude female models, making her all-nude paintings of Susanna and Cleopatra rare works for that time.

The backlash over Artemisia illustrates an artistic double standard: The female artist needs a compelling tragic biography to enter the male canon, yet her work is then trivialized because of that biography--something that rarely happens to men. Critics have complained about the overemphasis on biography in art marketing by promoters of van Gogh. But as Garrard points out, nobody ever says van Gogh is overrated. "It's the women's artists' reputations that are always vulnerable," she says.

### **The Rise Before the Fall**

Kahlo will no doubt suffer the same fate as Artemisia--although it's a testament to her work that the backlash hasn't come sooner. At the same time, Kahlo's work might benefit from a clearer examination that focuses less on her painting as autobiography. The NMWA exhibit is a good example of how the current view of Kahlo often fails to acknowledge that perhaps her images transcend autobiography and speak to universal themes, as all great art should. Walk through the NMWA's exhibit, and you'll see that even Kahlo's still- life paintings are treated as a reflection of her personal life. The "open fruit," we're told, depict her aggressive sexuality and obsession with fertility, as do the monkeys in her self-portraits, even though she had them as pets. (Apparently her pet dog, which she also painted, carries no such connotations.)

This kind of analysis, which is just as often articulated by women as by men, follows another long tradition in art criticism of attributing stereotypical female

values to the work of women painters and eroticizing their subjects, regardless of how the painters intended the work to be read. For instance, one of the common interpretations of Kahlo's work is that it demonstrates how much she mourned her inability to have children. Herrera writes, "Many of her paintings express this fascination with procreation, and some directly reflect her despair at not having children. One of the most moving of the latter is 'Me and My Doll,' painted in 1937. " Yet that painting is hardly the image you'd expect from someone desperate for motherhood. It is a self-portrait of Kahlo sitting on a bed next to a lifeless looking child/doll. She is smoking a cigarette and looks bored, and is sitting some distance from the child on the bed--a reflection of, perhaps, her real lack of maternal instincts. Her other images of childbirth and pregnancy are some of the most violent and disturbing ever to grace a canvas.

Arizona State University's Lindauer has argued that nowhere in Kahlo's letters does she reveal a deep longing for children, and that whatever regrets she did express publicly may have been because her culture demanded them. In fact, Kahlo's letters reflect deep ambivalence--if not outright rejection--of having children, if only because she recognized that children would distract Rivera from his work--and from her. She volunteered for an abortion after one of her pregnancies partly because of this. When she got pregnant again, she considered another one, but ended up having a miscarriage after intentionally disobeying doctors' orders to stay in bed. (She took driving lessons instead.)

While it's impossible to know whether Kahlo's injuries would have allowed her to bring the child to term even if she had stayed in bed, her behavior is hardly that of a woman longing for a baby. The current view of Kahlo's work seems more a reflection of our current hysteria over childless professional women than anything in the art. "People make her a screen for their projections," says Chadwick, now a fellow at the Clark Art Institute and a professor of art at San Francisco State University.

It's entirely possible that Kahlo was conflicted, experiencing both longing for motherhood and relief at not having to endure it--a sentiment many women surely recognize. Yet that view would detract from the hagiography. "If [Kahlo's] paintings were looked at closely, she would become a dangerous woman," says Lindauer, explaining that Kahlo's paintings actually challenge lots of feminine ideals. If they really took a good look at her art, she adds, "People would be less comfortable buying her fridge magnets."

Because she died young, at 47, Kahlo never had a chance to repudiate some of the interpretations of her work as did Georgia O'Keeffe, who once threatened to quit painting if critics kept imbuing her flower paintings with Freudian interpretations. "She didn't want her flower paintings to be identified as the essence of womanhood," says the NMWA's Fisher.

### **Biography, Warts and All**

If the focus of the art business must be on biography, that biography should at least include the artists' warts. Truly great artists, after all, can survive such scrutiny. But, because it seems a woman must become a saint to gain admittance to the Met, there is a great tendency by Kahlo's marketers to overlook the less appealing part of that biography. It's similar to the way the left likes to ignore the fact that the Guatemalan Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchu invented much of her memoir. Heroism serves the cause, and there is much of Kahlo's life that is not heroic.

Many of her surgeries may have been unnecessary. Even Herrera notes, "If Frida's physical problems had been as grave as she made out, she would never have been able to translate them into art." Kahlo's close friend, the famous doctor Leo Eloesser, believed that she used her many surgeries to get attention from people, particularly from Rivera. There's no doubt that she was obsessed with him in a way that should make feminists cringe. She also made several suicide attempts and spent much of her adult life addicted to drugs and alcohol.

More importantly, though, Kahlo's Communism--now treated as somehow sort of quaint--led her to embrace some unforgivable political positions. In 1936, Rivera, a dedicated Trotskyite, used his clout to petition the Mexican government to give Trotsky and his wife asylum after they were forced out of Norway. Rivera and Kahlo put up the Trotskys in Kahlo's family home, where Kahlo seduced the older man. (She painted a self-portrait dedicated to him that now hangs in Washington's NMWA.)

After Trotsky was assassinated, however, Kahlo turned on her old lover with a vengeance, claiming in an interview that Trotsky was a coward and had stolen from her while he stayed in her house (which wasn't true). "He irritated me from the time that he arrived with his pretentiousness, his pedantry because he thought he was a big deal," she said.

Rarely is this unflattering detail included in the condensed Kahlo story. Nor is the fact that Kahlo turned on Trotsky because she had become a devout Stalinist. Kahlo continued to worship Stalin even after it had become common knowledge that he was responsible for the deaths of millions of people, not to mention Trotsky himself. One of Kahlo's last paintings was called "Stalin and I," and her diary is full of her adolescent scribblings ("Viva Stalin!") about Stalin and her desire to meet him. Less scandalous but worth noting is that Kahlo despised the very gringos who now champion her work, and her art reflects her obvious disdain for the United States. One wonders what the postal service was thinking when it put Kahlo on a stamp. "Visas are denied to [foreign] artists with Frida Kahlo's politics," notes Chadwick.

Since her rediscovery in the 1970s, one of the few people to openly criticize Kahlo for her politics was her fellow countryman, the late Nobel laureate Octavio Paz. In *Essays on Mexican Art*, he questions whether someone could be both a great artist and "a despicable cur." In the end, he says they can, but suggests that, because of the way they embraced Stalin, "Diego and Frida ought not to be subjects of beatification but objects of study--and of repentance . . . the weaknesses, taints, and defects that show up in the works of Diego and Frida are moral in origin. The two of them betrayed their great gifts, and this can be seen in their painting. An artist may commit political errors and even common crimes, but the truly great artists--Villon or Pound, Caravaggio or Goya--pay for their mistakes and thereby redeem their art and their honor."

It's not an omission necessarily inherent to women's art--Pablo Neruda, the beloved left-wing Chilean poet, wrote poems to Stalin, which are almost never reproduced in books of his poetry. But neglecting the dark side of the artist's narrative deprives the public of a full appreciation of the art. Without knowing that by 1953 Kahlo was so strung out that she could barely pick up a paintbrush, how can the public possibly know why some of her late work is so bad? A casual observer might instead simply conclude after looking at one particularly sloppy, scratched-up canvas in the NMWA exhibit, that perhaps her work is overrated. The



museum, after all, doesn't provide a reason to think otherwise.

Which is the really tragic part of Kahlo's story. Because when you sweep away the sideshow, ignore the overwrought analysis, and take a hard look at what she painted, much of it is extraordinary. Her paintings tap into sex and violence, life and death, in original and profound ways. "Suicide of Dorothy Hale," for instance, one of her lesser-known works, was commissioned in 1939 by Clare Booth Luce after her beautiful friend had thrown herself from her New York penthouse. Hale's bleeding corpse is shown smashed at the base of the high-rise, still looking stunning in a black cocktail dress. One shoeless foot is painted as if hanging off the frame, which is itself painted to look splattered with blood. Its surrealist influences are apparent, as are hints of the retablo style. Rather than soften Hale's suicide with American-style euphemism, Kahlo used the Mexican tradition of placing death front and center, in all its horror. The painting, even reproduced in black and white, as it is in Herrera's book, makes you stare guiltily the way you might driving past a car accident. Few paintings have such power.

As Gregorio Luke explains, "Her work is very inclusive. She was able to incorporate elements of pop culture, Indian, Aztec mythology, surrealism, a whole variety of things in which many people can identify. She is the multicultural artist par excellence."

So while women might celebrate Kahlo's success, it may be that real progress has come when a woman can be remembered both as a great artist and as a despicable cur. Because in the end, as Garrard notes, "Life is interesting, but art is what the interesting person made."

Stephanie Mencimer is an editor of The Washington Monthly. < C\$>

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