

Gail Levin

## Frida Kahlo's Circulating Crafts

### Her Painting and Her Identities

Alejandro Gómez Arias, Frida's childhood friend, remarked in his 1983 memoir of her that she was "so contradictory [so] multiple, that the personality of this woman can be said [to be made of] many Fridas."<sup>1</sup> This essay will examine how political agendas have impacted the production and consumption of art by Frida Kahlo and how she crafted not only paintings, but also multiple identities. Frida communicated these identities either visually, through the presentation of her own appearance both in and outside of her paintings, or intellectually, through the public discourse she circulated about herself. Her craft—both her paintings and the projected identities—have inspired and continue to inspire creativity in diverse cultures, extending from North America to Asia. Contemporary artists continue to make their own commentaries about Frida and, through her art, also express their own identities.

Recent exhibitions have examined at length how the iconic Mexican painter defined herself through her ethnicity, disability, and politics: at the Museo Frida Kahlo (Casa Azul, Blue House) in Mexico City, ongoing since 2012; at London's Victoria and Albert Museum in 2018, and at New York's Brooklyn Museum in 2019.<sup>2</sup> However, none of these shows addressed the unresolved question of Frida's self-professed Jewish ancestry, which many people and several museums had previously celebrated as an integral part of her identity, but which more recently some German scholars have dismissed as inaccurate and "invented." Unlike the visible identities that Frida herself circulated, based on her physical disabilities and her claim on the Mexican folk tradition of Tehuana, she did not use visual signs to claim Jewish identity (**fig. 1**).

The Brooklyn and London shows featured many of Kahlo's personal artifacts, including Tehuana clothing and contemporary and pre-colonial jewelry, as well as her hand-painted corsets and prosthetics, which had been hidden since her death in 1954, packed away in Casa Azul, her Mexico City home. The stated aim of the Brooklyn exhibition in showing these objects was to "shed new light on how Kahlo crafted

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Salomon Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself* (New York: Merrell, 2008), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The Dresses of Frida Kahlo*, at the Museo Frida Kahlo in Casa Azul in Mexico City, was curated by Circe Henestrosa, has been ongoing since 2012 and was visited by the author in January 2020. *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* was at London's Victoria and Albert Museum in 2018, cocurated by Circe Henestrosa and Claire Wilcox. *Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, at The Brooklyn Museum, February 8–May 12, 2019, was based on the earlier two shows, curated by Circe Henestrosa and Claire Wilcox, with Gannit Ankori as curatorial advisor; Catherine Morris, Sackler Senior Curator for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and Lisa Small, Senior Curator, European Art, Brooklyn Museum.



Fig. 1: *Frida Kahlo on a Bench*, carbon print, 1938.

her appearance and shaped her personal and public identity to reflect her cultural heritage and political beliefs, while also addressing and incorporating her physical disabilities.”<sup>3</sup>

Frida's Mexican folk identity came in part through her adoption of Tehuana clothing, which she began to wear in her twenties. Kahlo dressed in her own interpretation of traditional Tehuana dress: floor-length full skirts, embroidered blouses, and a regal coiffure associated with a matriarchal society from Zapotec culture located on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca State, Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Yet this was neither the culture of Frida's nuclear family nor of her own neighborhood or community. She was born on July 6, 1907, to a German father, (Wilhelm) Guillermo Kahlo (1871–1941), and Matilde Calderón y González (1876–1932), a mestiza mother, who was born in Oaxaca to a mother of Spanish descent and an indigenous father. Though Kahlo spent most of her childhood and adult life in her family home in Coyoacán, a municipality of Mexico City, she romanticized and promoted her maternal grandfather's indigenous Oaxacan ancestry and also claimed that her German father was Jewish.

While Frida did not try to express Jewish ancestry with costumes, it has now been well documented that she chose to dress in variations of traditional Tehuana dress. It seems that she preferred this style of dress as a means of distracting from her physical deformities, which were the result of polio, contracted when she was just six years old, and from damage to her spine and pelvis, and other injuries suffered in a serious accident that took place when she was seventeen and riding on a bus that collided with a streetcar.

However, Frida's original choice of Tehuana dress also coincided with *Mexicanidad*, a romantic nationalism inspired by the Mexican revolution, that emphasized indigenous cultures, once but no longer regarded as inferior.<sup>5</sup> This celebrated fashion featured flamboyant (often floral) design on a *huipil* (a straight rectangular blouse or tunic) made from either satin or velvet embroidered with ornate floral or geometric borders, which frame the neckline and chest. The *huipil* was worn with a matching floor-length full skirt and could be accompanied by a large starched white lace head-dress called *huipil grande*, which would be worn for traditional fiestas, when women paraded through the streets.<sup>6</sup>

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3 The Brooklyn Museum, press release, February 8, 2019.

4 See Circe Henestrosa, “Appearances Can Be Deceiving—Frida Kahlo's Construction of Identity: Disability, Ethnicity and Dress,” in *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, ed. Claire Wilcox and Circe Henestrosa (London: V&A Publishing, 2018), 66–83.

5 Such use of clothing to express political affiliation or preference has been and is still evident in many other world cultures—from Ghana to Afghanistan. See also, for example, Aida Hurtado and Norma E. Cantu, eds., *meXicana Fashions: Politics, Self-Adornment, and Identity Construction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

6 See for example, Chloë Sayer, “Traditional Mexican Dress,” Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/traditional-mexican-dress>.

Until recently, Frida's propensity to dress in Tehuana costumes had been attributed to the encouragement of her husband, the artist, Diego Rivera (1886–1957).<sup>7</sup> However, the cache of costumes and photographs that came to light in Kahlo's home demonstrated that Frida's mother, Matilde, "dressed as Adelita, a heroic revolutionary woman fighter enshrined in Mexican lore," making it clear that Frida had known these clothes since her childhood.<sup>8</sup> "La Adelita," which comes from a song and was not a real historical woman, was the romanticized version, as imagined by men, of the *soldaderas*, women who, by fighting in the revolution, forged a new identity for themselves as equals to men.<sup>9</sup>

Frida came of age at a time of conscious searching for a Mexican identity and a way to express it through an original Mexican artistic language. In 1922, while she studied at the National Preparatory School, José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), the minister of education, called upon students to search for a new "national" art. The philosophy professor, Antonio Cano (1883–1946), urged his students: "Turn your eyes to the soil of Mexico, to our customs and our traditions."<sup>10</sup> To find that original Mexican language, Frida, who combined and created her own "traditional" costumes, also began to emulate aspects of Mexican folk art in her own work. It has been noted that in her paintings she drew upon "Aztec, Zapotec, and Mexican folk imagery," reflecting "the nationalist ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico that revered indigenous and past traditions."<sup>11</sup>

By 1928, Kahlo had met and married the well-known Diego Rivera, who was more than two decades older. Soon, she was traveling with him in the United States, as he pursued his career as a muralist. Responding to nationalist ideology, she painted many self-portraits inspired by traditional Mexican votive images painted on tin, which she collected and admired for their symbolic details and narrative power. Her 1933 painting, *My Dress Hangs There*, presents her Tehuana dress as a symbol, standing in for her, since she felt alienated while living with Rivera in New York City. She represented herself as the unworn traditional dress, detached from her usual identity, ironically suspended between modern American plumbing and a golf trophy, both mounted on classical columns. The disembodied Tehuana dress appears as a

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7 Masayo Nonaka, "The Influence of Frida Kahlo's Maternal Heritage," in Hilda Trujillo Soto, *Frida Kahlo: Her Photos* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2010), 28–29; Henestrosa, "Appearances Can Be Deceiving," 73.

8 Hamish Bowles, "Behind the Personal Branding of Frida Kahlo," *Vogue*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/frida-kahlo-making-her-self-up-london>.

9 Delia Fernández, "From Soldadera to Adelita: The Depiction of Women in the Mexican Revolution," *McNair Scholars Journal* 13, issue 1, art. 6 (2009), <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol13/iss1/6>.

10 Baltasar Dromundo, *Mi Calle de San Ildefonso* (Mexico City: Editorial Guaranía, 1956), 46, quoted in Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York: Perennial, 1991), 30.

11 Corrine Andersen, "Remembrance of an Open Wound: Frida Kahlo and Post-revolutionary Mexican Identity," *South Atlantic Review* 74, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 119–30.

symbol in several other paintings including *Memory* (1937) and *What the Water Gave Me* (1938).

More often, however, Kahlo posed for photographs and depicted herself resplendent in her Tehuana costumes. We see her dressed this way in paintings such as *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera* (1931); *Self-Portrait (Dedicated to Leon Trotsky)* (1937); *Me and My Doll* (1937); *Itzcuintli Dog with Me* (1938); *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938); and in *The Two Fridas* (1939).

Kahlo's distinctive personal appearance and idiosyncratic choice of fashion soon attracted *Vogue* magazine, which featured her in its October 1937 American edition. She was interviewed by Alice-Leone Moats and photographed by Toni Frissell standing next to an agave plant for a feature titled, "Senoras of Mexico."<sup>12</sup> Then, in November 1938, *Vogue* published an article, entitled "The Rise of Another Rivera," by her friend, Bertram D. Wolfe, to coincide with her show at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York: "From the bright, fuzzy woolen strings that she plaits into her black hair and the colour she puts into her cheeks and lips, to her heavy antique Mexican necklaces and her gaily coloured Tehuana blouses and skirts, Madame Rivera seems herself a product of her art and, like all her work, one that is instinctively and calculatedly well composed."<sup>13</sup>

Kahlo's art also appealed to the Surrealist artist André Breton, who saw to it that she got her first solo exhibition in 1938 at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Around this time, she purchased at the market in Oaxaca a frame with flowers and birds painted on the back of glass, a technique utilized by folk artists in many cultures: to mention only American, Bavarian, Bohemian, Russian, Peruvian, and Mexican. Earlier modernist painters like Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc had collected folk paintings on the back of glass from Bavaria, known there as *Hinterglasmalerei*, and, in homage, produced their own versions of paintings on the back of glass, all of which they included in their anthology *Der Blaue Reiter*, first published in Munich in early 1912.<sup>14</sup>

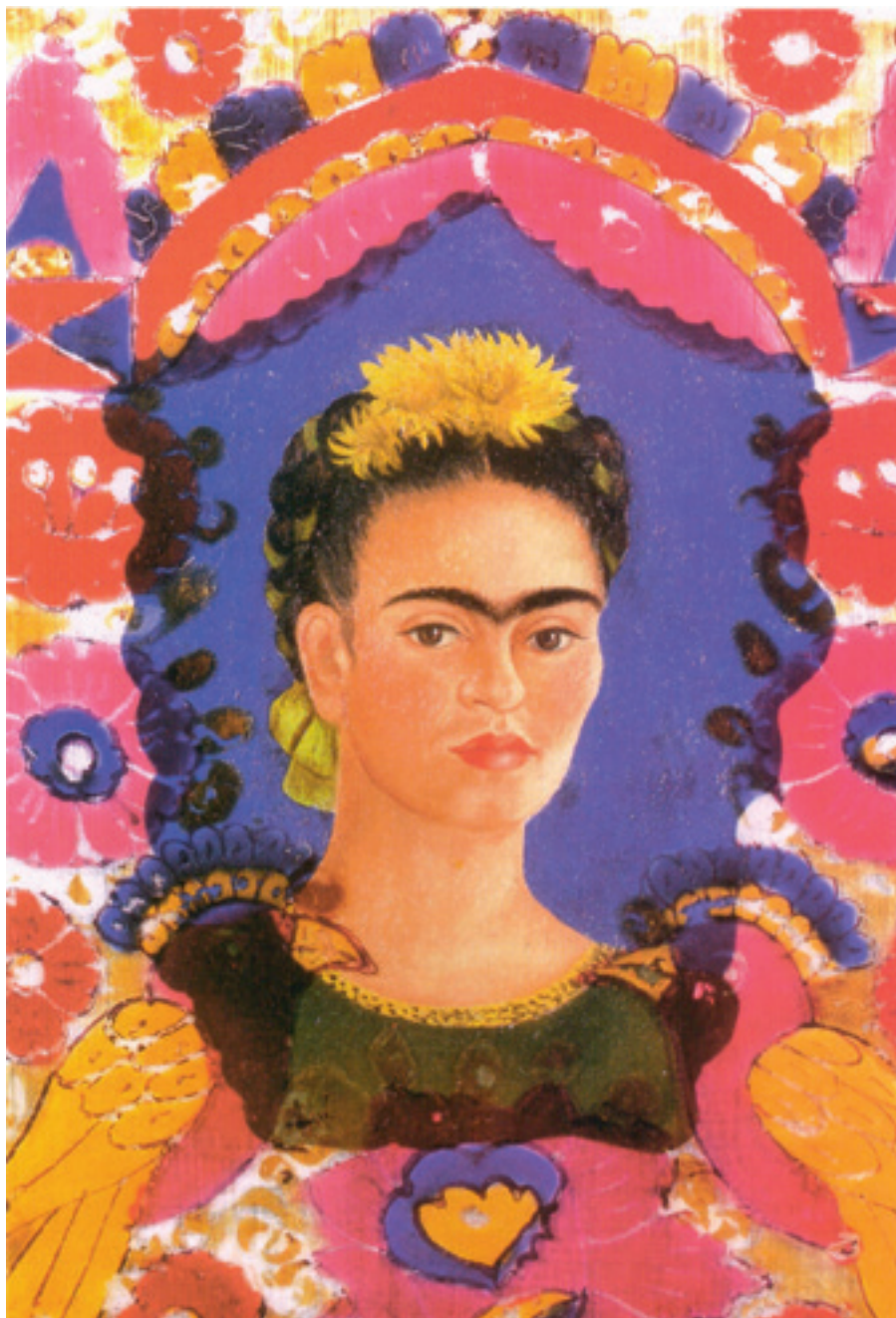
Into a purchased folk-art frame, adorned with bold flat decorative flowers and birds, Kahlo inserted a realistic self-portrait, her hair adorned with flowers, Tehuana style, which she had painted on thin piece of metal. The frame, into which Kahlo inserted her own image, has been identified as an artisanal product from the village of Santa Catarina Juquila, located in the State of Oaxaca.<sup>15</sup> Kahlo titled her assemblage *The Frame* (**fig. 2**), and included it in a Paris show in March 1939. This was not the only

<sup>12</sup> Alice-Leone Moats, "Senoras of Mexico," *Vogue*, October 1937, photographs by Toni Frissell.

<sup>13</sup> Bertram D. Wolfe, "The Rise of Another Rivera," *Vogue* (November 1, 1938), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1912).

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/corGag/ryjK6Bn>.



**Fig. 2:** Frida Kahlo, *The Frame*, 1938. Oil on aluminum and glass frame, 28.5 × 20.7 cm. Achat de l'Etat, 1939. Inventory number: JP 929 P (1) Centre Pompidou, Paris (transfer from the Louvre) Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.

time that Kahlo used a folk art “frame” for her art, but it is the instance in which her own painting seems to blend most seamlessly with the adopted frame.<sup>16</sup>

After the opening of the Paris show, Frida was pleased to write friends about receiving “great praises for my painting from Kandinsky,” who was then living in Paris.<sup>17</sup> Kandinsky’s enthusiasm impressed Rivera, too, who reported how “Kandinsky was so moved by Frida’s pictures that he embraced her and picked her up right in public in the exhibition room. He kissed her on both cheeks and on the forehead and he was so moved that tears were running down his face.”<sup>18</sup> What Rivera and Kahlo appear to have missed was that Kandinsky had responded to Frida’s use of the same folk tradition that had earlier inspired his own paintings, as well as those of many artists in his circle, from Gabriele Münter to August Macke. The Louvre also responded to Frida, purchasing *The Frame*, its first acquisition of a contemporary Mexican painting.

The next year, in her unique large-scale double self-portrait, *Two Fridas* (1939, **fig. 3**), Kahlo suggested her dual nature and hinted that she held multiple ethnic identities. Her image on the right is dressed in Tehuana costume, while on the left, she wears a European Victorian-style dress. Some of many interpretations of this picture argue that the Frida dressed in Mexican outfit, who holds Diego’s portrait, is the one that he loved.<sup>19</sup> Painted at the tumultuous time of the couple’s divorce, the image expresses Frida’s pained emotional state, before their reunion just a year later.

Kahlo followed the *Two Fridas* with *Self-portrait as a Tehuana* (**fig. 4**), in which she wears the traditional *huipil grande* headdress. She began this work in August of 1940, just as she and Rivera divorced, though she did not complete the canvas until 1943. Her subject, featuring the miniature portrait of Rivera on her brow, broadcast her obsession with him. This work made clear the link in her mind of her traditional Tehuana costumes to her estranged husband, for whom she yearned.

The miniature portrait of Rivera on Kahlo’s mind also suggests other aspects of her identity that are not so easily depicted in her paintings. Another link between the couple was their public claim to share Jewish identity. In his introductory essay to the 1995 publication of Kahlo’s diary, the late novelist and essayist, Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012), wrote: “But in the U.S.A., as in Mexico, Kahlo and Rivera loved to punctuate pretension and defy prejudice. She descended from Hungarian Jews, he from

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**16** For other examples, see Judy Chicago with Frances Borzello, *Frida Kahlo: Face to Face* (New York: Prestel, 2010), 25, Frida Kahlo, *Survivor* (1938), in a handcrafted Oaxacan tin frame, private collection; 135, *Diego and Frida* (1944), oil on wood in a frame of shells, private collection; 170, *Fulang-Chang and I* (1937), oil self-portrait with painted mirror frame (reverse glass painting), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**17** Frida Kahlo letter to Ella and Bertram D. Wolfe, March 17, 1939, Bertram D. Wolfe Archive, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, quoted in Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 122.

**18** Isabel Alcántara & Sandra Egnolff, *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera* (New York: Prestel), 63–64.

**19** See Grimberg, *Song of Herself*, 25, and Nonaka, in *Frida’s Photos*, 29, who identified the source for the European costume in an old photo of Frida’s mother’s family (42–43). Herrera, *The Paintings*, 135.



**Fig. 3:** Frida Kahlo, *Two Fridas*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 173.5 × 173 cm. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.



Sephardic exiles of the Spanish Diaspora of 1492. What better way of entering the U.S.A., when some hotels were barred to Jews, than announcing (ten years before Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*) as they registered at the front desk, that they, the Riveras, were Jewish? What greater fun than sitting at a dinner with the renowned anti-Semite Henry Ford and inquiring "Mr. Ford, are you Jewish?"<sup>20</sup> Well before anyone questioned Kahlo's Jewish identity, Fuentes, intuitively made a link to Hobson's bestselling 1947 novel that told the story of a magazine writer who researched anti-Semitism by posing as a Jew.

In Rivera's case, the claim to Jewish heritage was authentic. Though a professed atheist, Rivera took pride in his Jewish descent, explaining to the Jewish portrait photographer Marcel Sternberger: "My father told me that my [great] grandfather used to be an Italian Jew ... Tthe name] Rivera is from Italy – the real name was Rivera Sforza [and] all the people in Italy who have this name are Jewish ... On the other hand, I remember much more about my grandmother – my grandmother was a Portuguese Jewess by the name of Inez D'Acosta."<sup>21</sup> In a 1952 address, Rivera told a Mexico City audience that his ancestry was "Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, and – I am proud to say – Jewish." He asserted, "My Jewishness is the dominant element in my life. From this has come my sympathy with the downtrodden masses which motivates all my work."<sup>22</sup>

Frida clearly identified with Diego's politics and joined him in professing to be Jewish. To understand Kahlo's professed Jewish identity—whether authentic or invented—one needs to reflect upon what Jewish identity is. One argument goes, "One can be Jewish without being observant, or for that matter without being religious at all. Neither is the issue a question of race, for Jews have no genetic partic-



**Fig. 4:** Frida Kahlo, *Diego on my Mind (Self-portrait as Tehuana)*, 1943. Oil on Masonite, 76 × 61 cm, Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico City.

<sup>20</sup> Carlos Fuentes, introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Saul Jay Singer, "Diego Rivera's Jewish Roots and The Rosenberg Case," *Jewish Press*, May 4, 2017. <https://www.jewishpress.com/sections/features/features-on-jewish-world/diego-riveras-jewish-roots-and-the-rosenberg-case/2017/05/04/>. Rivera's family traced its Jewish ancestry back to philosopher Uriel Acosta, broadly recognized as Baruch Spinoza's philosophical precursor.

<sup>22</sup> Singer, "Diego Rivera's Jewish Roots."

ularity. We don't have a common language, nor even a common culture ... we are a people. A kind of family, held together not uniquely by the memory of an ancient religion, but belonging the one to the other in virtue of our very identification with the Jewish people. Simply put, we are Jews because we feel ourselves to be Jewish."<sup>23</sup> This concept, however, was not enough for the blog, *Jew or Not Jew*, to accept Frida's posturing.<sup>24</sup> Nor would it satisfy Orthodox rabbis, who look only for matrilineal Jewish descent, accepting only the children of Jewish mothers or those who go through a complicated process of conversion.

In fact, Kahlo's adoption of Jewish identity occurred in the early 1930s, just after years in which both the governments of the United States and Mexico had tried to discourage Jewish immigrants. In Mexico, as in parts of the United States, insecurity among some of the local Jews who were earlier settlers caused them to discourage further Jewish immigration, fearing that the local economy was already too difficult or that poor immigrants might cause anti-Semitism to increase.<sup>25</sup> The Mexican-born Jewish journalist and anthropologist, Anita Brenner, even recalled alarm from Mexican's Jews when they first heard Yiddish spoken there; they feared that their own good fortune would suffer.<sup>26</sup> Brenner's book *Idols behind Altars*, published in 1929, was instrumental in publicizing the production of artists working in Mexico, such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco, Edward Weston, and Jean Charlot.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, Kahlo's professed Jewish identity sparked ethnic pride among Jews. I recall how thrilled the feminist artist Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015) was to learn that Kahlo was a fellow Jew and how she shared with me this news.<sup>28</sup> She referenced Kahlo's Jewish heritage in one of her own paintings. In *My History*, of 1997, Schapiro included both Kahlo's portrait and the Jewish Star of David (fig. 5). Thus, Kahlo became known, sometimes celebrated, for having had a "Jewish" father, who was correctly reported to have emigrated to Mexico from Germany. Schapiro made multiple homages to Kahlo, appropriating her images.

Though Kahlo never painted herself as Jewish, she did accept a commission to make a painting on the story of Moses, the Jewish prophet. In a speech she made about her 1945 painting, *Moses*, Frida said: "the central theme is Moses, or the birth

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<sup>23</sup> David Wasserman, Letter to *New York Herald Tribune*, August 8, 2011, reprinted in *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/opinion/08iht-edletmon08.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Jew or Not Jew*, November 14, 2007, <http://www.jewornotjew.com/profile.jsp?ID=160>.

<sup>25</sup> In the United States, laws were passed in the early 1920s that limited Jewish immigration. In Mexico, in 1922, President Obregon made brief overtures inviting Jews, but that openness did not endure. See Adina Cimet, *Ashkenzi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Anita Brenner, *Idols behind Altars* (NY: Payson and Clarke, 1929).

<sup>28</sup> See Gail Levin, "Beyond the Pale: Beyond the Pale: Jewish Identity, Radical Politics, and Feminist Art," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, no. 2 (2005): 205–32.



Fig. 5: Miriam Schapiro, *My History*, 1997. Collage, Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

of the Hero ... I started painting the image of the infant Moses—Moses means ‘he who was taken out of the waters’ in Hebrew, and ‘boy’ in Egyptian. I painted him the way legends describe him: abandoned inside a basket and floating down a river.”<sup>29</sup> She also commented on Freud’s take on Moses in his controversial 1939 book, *Moses and Monotheism*: “Freud analyzes in a very clear but—for my personality—complicated way, the important fact that Moses wasn’t Jewish but Egyptian. But in the picture, I couldn’t find a way to paint him as either, so I only painted him as a boy who generally represents Moses.”<sup>30</sup>

In the case of Kahlo’s self-professed Jewish ancestry, it was the artist’s biographers who first wrote about her Jewish identity. Some years ago, art historians ignored the Jewish background of cosmopolitan modern artists such as Man Ray or Sonia Delaunay, who themselves did not broadcast their Jewish identity. In Kahlo’s case, however, both of her early biographers seemed authoritative: Hayden Herrera based her 1983 biography of Kahlo, *Frida*, on her City University of New York doctoral dissertation in art history. She wrote of Kahlo’s parents: “It is somewhat more difficult to imagine what attracted the devout Matilde Calderon to Guillermo Kahlo. The twenty-six-year-old immigrant was by birth Jewish, by persuasion an atheist, and he suffered from seizures.”<sup>31</sup> In a 1991 book, Herrera wrote: “The son of Hungarian Jews who lived in Baden-Baden, Germany, Guillermo Kahlo emigrated to Mexico in 1891 at the age of nineteen, and in the first decade of this century became one of Mexico’s foremost photographers.”<sup>32</sup>

The journalist Raquel Tibol (1923–2015), who also first published a biography of Frida Kahlo in 1983, quoted Kahlo, whom she had interviewed: “The son of Hungarians, my father was born in 1873 in Baden, Germany; and he studied in Nuremberg. His mother died when he was eighteen, and he didn’t like his stepmother, so my grandfather, a jeweler, gave him enough money to go to America, but when he arrived in Mexico in 1891 he suffered frequent attacks of epilepsy.”<sup>33</sup> Tibol concluded the impact of ethnicity on Frida’s development: “At any rate, the contrast between the liberal father of Jewish ancestry and the fanatically Christian mother was another of the things that nourished her precocity.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Martha Zamora, ed. *The Letters of Frida Kahlo Cartas Apasionadas* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 121.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>31</sup> Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (NY: Harper & Row, 1983), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: Una vida abierta* (Mexico City: Editorial Oasis, 1983); English translation, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*, trans. Elinor Randall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>34</sup> Tibol, *Frida Kahlo*, 36–37. Born “Raquel Rabinovich” in Argentina, Tibol understood Jewish identity. See *EcuRed*, [https://www.ecured.cu/Raquel\\_Tibol](https://www.ecured.cu/Raquel_Tibol). See also Alberto Híjar Serrano, “Raquel Tibol,” *Piso9*, December 9, 2016, <https://piso9.net/raquel-tibol/?lang=en>: “Her development as a historian was



Fig. 6: Frida Kahlo, *Portrait of Her Father*, 1951, Oil on canvas, Collection Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City.

Subsequent authors also tried to find some significance in Kahlo's Jewish identity. In 2000, Jack Rummel, wrote: "Much of Frida's talent for detecting complacency and her sharp eye for uncovering hypocrisy came to her through her father, Wilhelm Kahlo, a German Jew whose failed attempts to fit into Mexican society and whose strong German accent was never lost, equipped him with an outsider's eye for its defects. The elder Kahlo was born in Baden-Baden in 1872 and at birth was already something of an outsider in Germany. He was Jewish in a nation that had never completely accepted Jews as full citizens."<sup>35</sup>

Then, in 2002, Gannit Ankori published *Imagining Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation*, based upon her doctoral dissertation at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> She focused on Kahlo's portrait of her father (fig. 6), painted in 1951, and commented upon its brief text: "Frida stresses in this text ... Wilhelm Kahlo's active anti-Nazi position. This may seem strange within a Mexican context, but it becomes understandable when we remember that Wilhelm was a German Jew." The significance of this statement becomes clear if we take into account the rift that occurred within the German immigrant community in Mexico in the 1930s and 1940s, when many German immigrants living in Mexico espoused Nazi ideology.<sup>37</sup> Ankori explains that "Frida, a devout Communist and anti-Nazi activist, wanted to stress the fact that her German-born father was not to be identified in any way with Germany's dark past. Rather, his moral position against Nazism is presented as part of the legacy he left his daughter."<sup>38</sup>

Among other issues, Ankori uncovered what she considered evidence of Kahlo's Jewish ethnicity by interviewing the Mexican-Jewish art collector Natasha Gellman, who told her that in 1942 Kahlo got along well with Marc Chagall, a Jewish artist, born in Eastern Europe.<sup>39</sup> Kahlo's many friendships with Jews, however, do not make her Jewish. The fact that so many of Frida's collectors and supporters were Jewish might have motivated her eager adoption of their identity.

During the summer of 1938, the Romanian-born Jewish-American actor and art collector, Edward G. Robinson, had traveled to Mexico City just to see Kahlo's paintings and had thrilled her by paying her \$200 each for four of them. Then, when Kahlo had her first solo show at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in November 1938, a number of the twenty-five paintings shown were purchased through this Jewish dealer

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enhanced by her marriage, in 1957, to Boris Rosen, who gathered a major Marxist library in Yiddish."

<sup>35</sup> Jack Rummel, *Frida Kahlo: A Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Gannit Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>37</sup> There is no evidence that Guillermo Kahlo was German-Jewish. Moreover, he was depicted by Kahlo's niece, Isolda Kahlo, in *Frida Intima* (Mexico: Dipon, 2004), as apolitical.

<sup>38</sup> Ankori, *Imagining*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Ankori, *Imagining*, 59, note 46; Natasha Gelman, Ankori interview, March 9, 1989.



**Fig. 7:** Frida Kahlo, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)*, 1936. Oil and tempera on zinc, 30.7 × 34.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Allan Roos, M. D., and B. Mathieu Roos.

by Jewish collectors, including Mrs. Sam Lewisohn, Mary Schapiro (Mrs. Solomon) Sklar, Walter Pach, Edgar Kaufmann, and Nickolas Muray, the latter a close friend and lover. Salomon Grimberg has explained why Kahlo kept reshaping herself: “With each transformation she believed she would attain an image that would hold the attention of the people she most wanted to please at that moment, those who provided her with her sense of security and being.”<sup>40</sup>

Ankori also argued, “Kahlo’s visual metaphors are derived from a book of Yiddish poetry that Rivera was illustrating at the time, Isaac Berliner’s *City of Palaces ...* Rivera’s collaboration with Berliner required the translation of Yiddish texts into Spanish ... either her father (who was fluent in Yiddish) or Bertram Wolfe, himself a Yiddish writer, did the translations.”<sup>41</sup> The translation from Yiddish required someone who could read the Hebrew letters with which Yiddish is written, and was likely Wolfe, a Brooklyn-born leftist Jew who had also collaborated with Rivera on *Portrait of Mexico* of 1937 and, later, would write Rivera’s biography.<sup>42</sup>

The apogee of Frida Kahlo’s Jewish identity was in 2003 in New York, when Gannit Ankori served as guest curator for the Jewish Museum, which presented a small but memorable show, *Frida Kahlo’s Intimate Family Portrait*, on the theme of her Jewish heritage. The *New York Times* critic Grace Glueck reviewed it: “Her early religious roots didn’t concern Frida much (as an adult, she became an ardent Commu-

<sup>40</sup> Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Ankori, *Imagining*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Bertram D. Wolfe, *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939).

nist), but in 1936, probably affected by the growing menace of Hitler's anti-Semitism, she painted "My Grandparents, My Parents and I," a family portrait that included her Jewish ancestors. The painting, owned by the Museum of Modern Art, is the centerpiece of the show" (fig. 7). Glueck described the painting: "In her right hand she holds a ribbon that flows upward on either side of the picture to support floating portraits of each set of grandparents; the Mexican couple on the left, the Hungarian-Jewish pair on the right. (From her Kahlo grandmother, Frida apparently inherited those awesome black eyebrows that almost met in the middle of her forehead.)"<sup>43</sup>

Just two years after the show at the Jewish Museum, however, the story of Frida's Jewish father was challenged by a German book, *Fridas Vater: Der Fotograf Guillermo Kahlo*, by Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle, that traced Kahlo's father's genealogy and argues that "despite the legend propagated by Frida," Guillermo did not have Jewish Hungarian roots, but was born to German Lutheran parents.<sup>44</sup> This research has since been accepted by other authors.<sup>45</sup>

Kahlo's claim to Jewish ancestry was quite clever and enduring. She said that her Hungarian-Jewish ancestors came from Arad, Hungary. Once the home of a Jewish community in Hungary, Arad is now located over the border to Romania, where its archives remain rather difficult to access.<sup>46</sup> Kahlo may have taken inspiration from the birthplace of her Jewish lover, the photographer Nickolas Muray, whom she first met in 1931. His hometown of Szeged, Hungary, is a mere fifty-five miles to her chosen town of Arad.

The issues motivating Frida to boast of Jewish identity were complex and can be viewed as a part of her creative craft, similar to her dressing in Tehuana costumes or slipping her art works into folk art frames. On September 9, 1950, less than four years before her death on July 13, 1954, she told Olga Campos, "I ... have no religion, am of the Mexican race, or better to say I am a mixture." Yet, because she had earlier

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<sup>43</sup> Grace Glueck, "The Multi-cultural Identity Beneath Frida Kahlo's Exoticism," *New York Times*, September 19, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle, *Fridas Vater: Der Fotograf Guillermo Kahlo Von Pforzheim bis Mexiko*, (Munich: Schirmer Mosel, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> See Suzanne Barbezat, *Frida Kahlo at Home* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2016), 23–24: "Frida perpetuated several myths about her father. His family did not have ties to Hungary, but had lived in the area around Baden-Baden and Pforzheim ... She affirmed that he was Jewish, but he was baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church in Pforzheim."

<sup>46</sup> Given anti-Semitism in Germany, a Jewish immigrant might have decided to pass as Lutheran. I wondered about the possibility of a distant relationship of Frida Kahlo's Kaufmann grandmother to the Austro-Hungarian painter of Jewish themes, Isidor Kaufmann (1853–1921), who moved from his birthplace in Arad to Vienna. I asked if Ankori had been to Arad to check the archive and was told that it was too complicated. To find out for myself, I asked several colleagues in Romania. Searching the archives in Arad would require reading old German script used in the Austro-Hungarian empire.



claimed Jewish ancestry, many continue to insist upon it despite the ample evidence that Frida Kahlo fabricated her Jewish identity.<sup>47</sup>

In Frida Kahlo's case, her claim to be half-Jewish was ironic, since she alleged this at the time the Nazis took power, when so many Jews had to hide their identities to survive. While her father was born in Germany, it now appears that she invented the story that he was Jewish, appropriating convincing details of her paternal grandparents' supposed emigration from Arad. Beyond her statements, however, Kahlo took the trouble to write on the reverse of a photograph of her paternal grandmother, that she was Jewish and from Hungary.<sup>48</sup> Kahlo's identification with Jews who were threatened or actually lost their lives played a key role in shaping the reception of her art.

Since so many of Kahlo's collectors, dealers, and those who wrote about or photographed her and her husband, Diego Rivera, were liberal, left-wing, and often Jewish, Kahlo appears to have responded to the political agendas of the marketplace. Her choice was no simple matter but was in fact entangled in a complicated transnational drama being played out between Europe, where Nazis threatened and eventually murdered Jews, and the rest of the world, where some Jews and some Nazis took refuge—from Mexico to South Africa to China.

By 2013, Ankori responded to the German scholars' claims that Kahlo's father had only Lutheran ancestors with a new book in which she commented on the many recent discoveries related to Frida Kahlo's life: "Ironically, the uncovered information actually highlights and further accentuates the contradictions embedded in her biographical narrative."<sup>49</sup> Ankori quotes some of the sources that led her to believe in Frida's Jewish ancestry, most notably the view of Frida's niece, Isolda P. Kahlo, who published her book, *Intimate Frida*, around the same time as *Frida's Vater: Der Fotograf Guillermo Kahlo*.<sup>50</sup> Ankori addresses the German scholars directly in a footnote: "Their assertion that Wilhelm Kahlo's forefathers were German Lutherans is difficult to substantiate since Judaism is a matrilineal religion and tracing the matrilineal genealogy of the Kaufmann family is virtually impossible. This type of research is, of course, very difficult given the destruction of Jewish communities and their archives throughout Europe during the Nazi era."<sup>51</sup> Perhaps someone will take up the challenge and confirm one way or another whether or not Frida's grandmother descended from a Jewish family before emigrating and marrying into a Lutheran family, however unlikely. Alternatively, the difficulty of obtaining archival evidence from Arad leaves

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the website entry as of July 25, 2019, on Frida Kahlo at *The Art Story*, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-kahlo-frida-artworks.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> See Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle, "The Mysterious Father," in Hilda Trujillo Soto, *Frida Kahlo: Her Photos*, 82. Frida kept this photograph of her paternal grandmother, Henriette Kaufmann, and labeled it on the verso: "My father's mother (a German Jew)".

<sup>49</sup> Gannit Ankori, *Frida Kahlo* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ankori, *Frida Kahlo* (2013), references this book as Isolda P. Kahlo, *Intimate Frida* (Bogotá, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Ankori, *Frida Kahlo* (2013), 202–03.

one wondering if Kahlo left a strand of hair that might allow for DNA testing, which would finally resolve the contested issue of her father's ancestry.

As late as February 10, 2018, the week before I gave a paper on Kahlo's invention of Jewish identity at the College Art Association meeting in Los Angeles, both the Museum of Modern Art's wall text and its website continued to reiterate the Jewish Museum's 2003 interpretation of its painting, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*. MoMA's website posted the 2015 gallery label, which was slightly abridged from the one that I had photographed. It stated: "While Kahlo celebrated Mexican culture by invoking its traditions in her art and wearing elaborate traditional attire, this painting is as much a tribute to her European and Jewish heritage. On the right is her German-born Jewish father and his parents, symbolized by the sea...." MoMA's label also attempted to contextualize this 1936 painting in terms of what was then going on in Germany: "Kahlo made this painting shortly after Hitler passed the Nuremberg laws, forbidding interracial marriage.<sup>52</sup> While the painting adopts the format of genealogical charts used by the Nazis to advocate racial purity, Kahlo uses it subversively to affirm her mixed origins."

As recently as April 2017, a play called *Frida Fragmented* by Andrea Dantas was presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It was promoted as follows: "After facing an episode of bullying due to her Jewish heritage, a crippled young Frida Kahlo is determined to prove that she is not a nobody. But a tragic accident and a heart-breaking betrayal leave her in shambles. Shattered and alone, she has no choice but to paint." One reviewer, Regina Weinreich, wrote: "Resilient as she was, and talented too, of course, the outside world crippled Frida. Taunted as a child for being Jewish, and later, for being Mexican, bisexual, and a feminist, Frida's key moments form this portrait in fragments."<sup>53</sup>

In fact, well after the war, on May 18, 1949, Frida wrote to Hans-Joachim Kahlo in Hannover, Germany, responding to his letter inquiring if they might be related to one another. She wrote: "Here are all the facts I can give you. My grandfather's name, Jacob Kahlo born in Baden-Baden. My grandmother's Henriette Kaufmann (I am not quite sure, but I heard from my father that she was from Pforzheim."<sup>54</sup> In the same

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<sup>52</sup> What MoMA cut out in brackets: "Kahlo [was fluent in German and closely monitored the rise of Nazism in Europe. She] made this painting shortly after Hitler passed the Nuremberg laws, forbidding interracial marriage." The rest is identical to the label posted from 2015. Shortly after I delivered this paper in Los Angeles in February 2018, MoMA, without communication from me, took down its wall text and updated its website by removing the related text, both of which had accepted and continued to discuss Kahlo's Jewish identity.

<sup>53</sup> Regina Weinreich, "Frida Kahlo in Andrea Dantas' One-Woman Show at BAM," *Gossip Central*, April 15, 2017, [https://www.gossipcentral.com/gossip\\_central/2017/04/frida-kahlo-in-andrea-dantas-one-woman-show-at-bam-.html](https://www.gossipcentral.com/gossip_central/2017/04/frida-kahlo-in-andrea-dantas-one-woman-show-at-bam-.html).

<sup>54</sup> See the photograph of Frida's letter, written in English, reproduced in Franger und Huhle, *Fridas Vater*, 13.

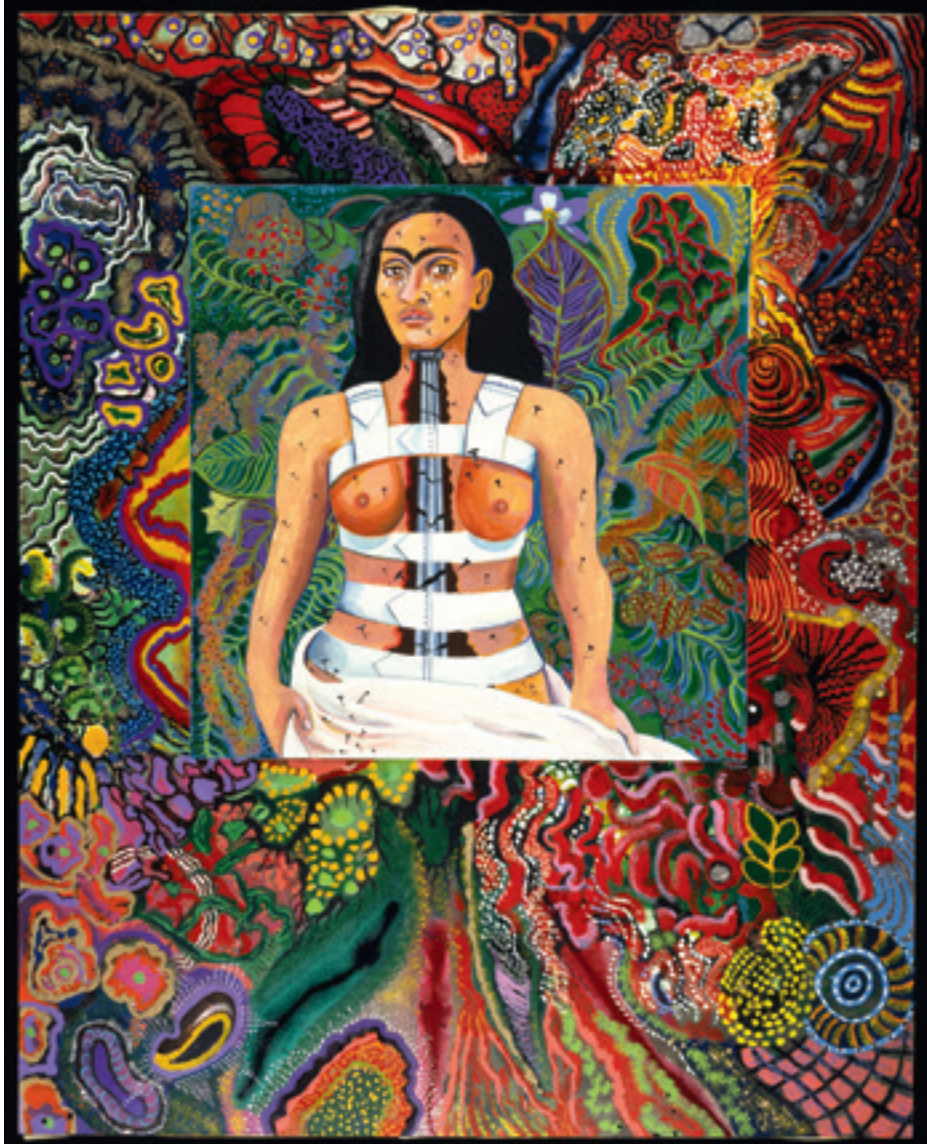


Fig. 8: Miriam Schapiro, *Agony in the Garden*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas with glitter, 229.1 × 183.4 × 5.1 cm. Brooklyn Museum, Purchase gift of Harry Kahn, 1991.112.

book, we learn that Frida's grandmother's full name was "Rosine (Marie) Henriette Kaufmann." She named one of her daughters Maria Karoline, which seems to reference Mary of the Christian faith.

Kahlo thus crafted her performance of Jewish identity and broadcast her hyper-identification with what appealed to her patrons: she was someone at once

exotic, Mexican, and politically correct. Had she not projected her invented Jewish identity, someone could have incorrectly assumed that her German father was a Nazi. Thus, for her, Jewishness represented a desired status. It allowed her, as a dedicated Communist, to declare her solidarity with her Jewish friends and patrons without the cloud of her beloved father's German ancestry during the time of Nazism. In addition, her *public* assertion of her identity as Jewish was prompted by her awareness and first-hand experience of anti-Semitism in the United States. She performed empathy for her Jewish friends.

Beyond Kahlo's original intentions, many have responded to the bold self-image she projected both as a modernist and an outsider. Artists continue to appropriate her images, infusing her ideas and identities with their own. Miriam Schapiro, taken with Frida as another Jewish woman artist, produced homages not only to her Jewish identity, but also to her as a disabled woman who persisted despite the obstacles placed in her way. Schapiro painted *Agony in the Garden* (fig. 7) in 1991, recreating Kahlo's image of herself from her 1944 painting called *The Broken Column* (fig. 8), where she showed herself standing on the beach, wearing her restrictive medical corset. For Schapiro's appropriation, she transformed the beach of Kahlo's painting into a fantasy garden of patterned fabric and glitter, as if turning Kahlo's pain and suffering into triumph.

In contemporary Japan, Yasumasa Morimura (b. 1951), who views himself as a cross between an actor and an artist, must appreciate Frida Kahlo's use of "craft" in the sense of her skill in "deceiving others." Within the context of his own visual art, Morimura interprets Kahlo's various deceptive guises as performative, much like Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) dressed up as his female alter ego, Rrose Sélavy. For Morimura's own art, communicated through photographs for which he performs and poses, he uses a mix of heavy makeup, costumes, painting, and digital manipulation to transform himself into iconic figures from pop culture or art history—from the *Mona Lisa* to Marilyn Monroe to Frida. While his self-portraits are certainly homages, they also explore his own identity as an artist, touching on themes of gender, sexuality, and the culture of celebrity.

Morimura's exhibition catalog of 2001 features a conversation between him and Frida, titled "Frida de mi Corazon: An Imaginary Dialogue":

F: Señor Morimura, how many times have you been to Mexico?

M: I've yet to go even once

F: ¡Ay de mí! Bueno, how many paintings of mine have you actually seen?

M: One, I guess.

F: How can you dare to say Frida Kahlo had such an impact on you?

M: I never look at the real thing ... As I am being inspired by you, Doña Frida, I drink in what I like to think of as your essence so as to create a Frida of my own, in my own mind's eye. I'm living in the 2001, so I might even create a 21st-century Frida. It's all a conception of my imagination. In that fantastic sphere, the various elements of Doña Frida and myself mix into a muddle, a che-



**Fig. 9:** Yasumasa Morimura, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Flower Wreath and Tears)*, 200. Color photograph. Edition of 2: 55.25 × 40.01 cm; edition of 3: 210.19 cm diameter; Edition of 5: 49.86 × 120.02 cm; Edition of 10: 120.02 × 95.89 cm.



**Fig. 10:** Sambuu Zayasaikhan (Zaya), *Frida under the Steppe Sky*, 2018. Oil on canvas 135 × 162 cm., Private Collection, New York.

mical reaction occurs, creating this imaginary Frida of mine ... I just wanted to give form to what Doña Frida is to me. Via self-portraiture, that is.”<sup>55</sup>

In Morimura’s version (**fig. 9**) of Kahlo’s *Self Portrait as a Tehuana*, for the headdress, he substituted what appear to be silk flowers in place of her lace. Of course, the facial features are his own and there is no vision of Diego Rivera on his forehead, for it is Frida who was on his mind. He called his 2001 show in Tokyo, at the Hara Museum of Art, *Morimura Self-Portraits: An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*. It featured fifteen self-portraits of him posing as Kahlo, a video, and other work.

More recently, from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Zayasaikhan Sambuu, known as Zaya, (b. 1975) has painted his own version of *Two Fridas*, which he calls, *Frida under the Steppe Sky* (2018, **fig. 10**). In his version of *Two Fridas*, Zaya has responded with empathy to what he perceives as a barren Frida, who grieved because she was childless. Thus, he, the father of several young children, transformed one of the *Two Fridas*

<sup>55</sup> Yasumasa Morimura, *FridaKahlo.it*, <http://www.fridakahlo.it/en/morimura.php>.

into a Mongolian woman who gives the other Frida her child, turning her into a “Frida of Hope.” Just as the Frida who receives the gift of the Mongolian baby wears her national Tehuana costume, the Mongolian woman is dressed in her own national costume, which includes extra-long sleeves, raised shoulders, and an elaborate headdress that is “protective for her family.”<sup>56</sup> By painting these two female images together in this way, Zaya fantasized creating happiness in Frida, which he noticed is difficult to find in her paintings. Of course, his particular assessment of Frida’s life and his original solution has evolved out of his own life and culture in Mongolia.

Thus, Kahlo’s craft—both her paintings and her invented identities—have circulated widely. What might have once been seen as her local, authentic, and typical Mexican qualities are in fact now entangled in a complex transnational contemporary art scene, fueled by images available in books, magazines, online, and in the cinema. Frida Kahlo’s creativity is now tied to a vast history of appropriation. Both her political agendas and the nationalism that originally fed the development of her art are now filtered through the myriad diverse cultures and artists that have drawn inspiration from her work.

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<sup>56</sup> Author’s interview with Zaya (Zayasaikhan Sambuu) in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, July 2, 2019. See also Gail Levin, *Zayasaikhan Sambuu: Mongolia, Lost and Found* (Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia: National Gallery of Art, 2020).

