

Kristina A. Boylan

See 'Frida,' and See More to Frida

'Frida' is a powerful and colorful retelling of the life and loves of twentieth-century Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Julie Taymor fuses creative cinematography and animation to demonstrate how Kahlo's keen eyes took in details missed by ordinary observers and transformed them into art that is at once highly personal and powerfully communicative. Salma Hayek admirably portrays the intensity of Kahlo's passionate relationships with the leading political and artistic figures of her day, which provided a rich source of inspiration for her art.

As a student of twentieth-century Mexico, I recommend 'Frida' as a stimulating introduction to the artist. Yes, Kahlo's house was really that blue, and yes, her gaze was really that piercing. Some *aficionados* (fans) of her art and her personal and political statements have criticized the film for focusing more on Kahlo's romantic relationships and less on other elements of her creative process. This is in some ways valid; while Kahlo's friendships and love affairs were undoubtedly important, the sources for her passionate worldview were many. One scholar, Lesley Byrd Simpson, observed that there are "Many Mexicos." In a landmark study of the political upheaval that began in 1910, historian Alan Knight argues that Mexico had "many revolutions" within that event.^[1] It can also be said that there were many Fridas who deserve to be recognized. Rather than miss the film's stunning imagery and storytelling, though, I encourage readers to seek out more about Kahlo to appreciate more deeply the film, her life and her art.

In addition to being a passionate painter and lover, Kahlo was a scholar of science, politics, art, and Mexican culture in her own right. Filmed on location in Mexico City, we first see Kahlo as a mischievous student at the National Preparatory School, harassing Diego Rivera, played by Alfred Molina, as he painted scenes on the walls of that public but extremely exclusive high school for the Mexican government. The school aimed to produce a generation of leaders with an education that combined the most current knowledge with the values and symbols of the

Revolution of 1910-1917, including a new appreciation for Mexico's indigenous past, which had been obscured by Europeanizing prejudice. Kahlo's attendance in 1922 was even more notable as she was one of thirty-five female students in a student body of about two thousand.^[2]

Kahlo had planned to study medicine after high school, and earned some money for herself and her family in medical illustration. This helps explain the frequency and accuracy of depictions of human anatomy in her art and in the film's animation. The severe injuries Kahlo suffered when caught on a trolley that collided with a bus in Coyoacán cut short her studies, as she was bedridden or limited in her movement for much of her life afterwards. In one way her illnesses continued her medical education; as the film shows throughout, Kahlo was all too often made painfully aware of the her body's fragility, even as she tried to live sensually and passionately within it.^[3] At times, though this is obscured by Hayek's healthy, quick movements in the film.

Kahlo was encouraged to paint by both her mother, Matilda Calderón (Patricia Reyes Spíndola), who designed the easel she could use while reclining, and her father, photographer Guillermo (Wilhelm) Kahlo (Roger Rees), who gave her his sets of oil paints and brushes to begin working. While Calderón adhered strictly to Roman Catholic religious conventions and strongly objected to just about everything about Diego Rivera, her daughter did come to appreciate some of her teachings. Born in the heavily indigenous southern state of Oaxaca, Calderón's folk Catholic practices and combination of European and indigenous heritage strongly influenced Kahlo. Kahlo's portraits and intimate scenes were often compared to *retablos*, pictures painted by or for pilgrims about the favors they ask of the patrons of religious shrines across Mexico, where devotions that incorporate mainline Catholic and indigenous elements are maintained.

Kahlo began incorporating indigenous symbolism into her paintings before she became romantically involved with Rivera, though his love for things Indian encouraged Kahlo to change her wardrobe. This is shown in the wedding scene, when Kahlo rejects a frilly, white lace

wedding dress for a peasant woman's outfit to please him. As Kahlo explained to *Time* magazine in 1948, her chosen costume borrowed much from the dress of indigenous women, especially that of the matriarchal society of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca.^[4] This enabled Kahlo to make a complex statement with her dress. With traditional blouses, long skirts, and handcrafted jewelry, Kahlo harnessed a long tradition of female assertiveness in indigenous Mexico, the incorporation of indigenous traditions into modern Mexico's new, nationalistic self image, and her own desire to feel at once stronger and more womanly in her ailing body. 'Frida' helps us see that in her choice of dress as well as in her portraits, Kahlo made herself the author of her own, personal history of Mexico and Mexican womanhood, not just an object of observation for her husband or for others. True, Rivera encouraged Kahlo's style—but from early on, that choice was hers.

Kahlo's dress also was part of her criticism of foreign influences in the new Mexico. In 'Frida,' we see that Kahlo accompanied Rivera to the United States when he worked there, and intensely disliked it. Kahlo strongly resented the "imperialist" assertions she saw in the United States, where business leaders like Nelson Rockefeller (Edward Norton) dictated artistic standards as well as trade policies. Similarly, she did not enjoy her treatment at the hands of the French, where art critics like surrealist André Breton claimed to have "discovered" and "inspired" Mexican artists like herself. Yet Kahlo did value and use in her work the insights of some foreigners and immigrants whom she knew, first and foremost her Hungarian-Jewish father, Italian photographer Tina Modotti (Ashley Judd), and Russian political exile Leon Trotsky (Geoffrey Rush). This makes it especially interesting that Hayek, herself a child of Lebanese immigrants who enthusiastically studies Mexico's history and culture, plays this part.

As shown in the film, Kahlo sometimes belittled herself, saying she was just "the wife of the painter Diego Rivera," a self-criticism that was echoed by some journalists and art critics. In 'Frida,' Kahlo's wish to establish an independent career and source of income for herself only emerges once it becomes evident that her husband is less than completely reliable and that separation might be immanent. But, just as Kahlo endeavored to help offset her family's

expenses in her youth, she insisted on keeping her own accounts fairly early on in her marriage. Troubled by the instability of an artist's income, she became a shrewd manager of household finances, especially when she and Rivera decided to maintain separate houses. She also lobbied, early and aggressively, to show her art in Mexico and abroad, to advance her artistic career as well as her finances. Later on, Kahlo also earned money by giving art classes in her family home. Her students, dubbed "Los Fridos," remember her as a passionate and dedicated teacher who imparted her value of Mexican popular culture along with artistic skills.^[5]

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a nun, scholar, and poet in seventeenth-century Mexico whose writing surged despite ecclesiastical censure. Once, when banished from her studies and sent to work in the convent kitchen, Sor Juana continued to perform scientific experiments with heat, cold, and different ingredients, and famously concluded that "if Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more."^[6] Kahlo could not have agreed more with her intellectual precursor—and perhaps since she was also a creative and *good* cook, painted much more. Both Kahlo's physical injuries and tumultuous personal life prevented her from having children, but she opened her house to many relatives, friends, and guests, even Rivera's children with other women. As part of being a generous hostess and surrogate parent, Kahlo's meals gave her yet another opportunity to explore and share Mexico's fusion of its indigenous and European pasts and its evolving popular culture.^[7]

Undoubtedly, this review could also be criticized for leaving out as much from Frida's life as the film might. It is obvious that Kahlo was a complex, intense, social-convention-flouting person to whom there was even more than meets the eye in her art, body image, and persona. This film is appropriate for more mature viewers, as the sadness, confusion, and pain that Kahlo experienced can be as difficult to understand, if not more so, than the physical aspect of her romantic relationships. Still, it could be a good vehicle for intelligent teenagers to learn about Kahlo and Mexico, provided that discussion about the film is opened with them afterwards. I encourage readers to see the film as Frida would have, with open eyes, and to try to learn more

about her and the tumultuous times in which she lived. A library of work exists on Kahlo's life, art, and times, and for the true *aficionado*, the Blue House is now a museum dedicated to Kahlo, just a short taxi ride from the Coyoacán metro station in Mexico City.

Suggested Further Reading:

Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, NY: Harper and Row, 1983, 24-25.

Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (N.Y.: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995). Introduction by Carlos Fuentes, Essay and notes by Sarah M. Lowe.

Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle, *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1994).

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^[1] Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952); Alan S. Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 2: 493.

^[2] Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, NY: Harper and Row, 1983, 24-25.

^[3] Sarah M. Lowe, "Essay," in Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (N.Y.: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 29.

^[4] "Fashion Notes," *Time*, vol. 51 (May 3, 1948), 33.

^[5] *Diary of Frida Kahlo*, 291.

^[6] Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, "Carta atenagórica. Respuesta a Sor Filotea," excerpted in June E. Hahner, ed., *Women in Latin American History: Their Lives and Views* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1980), 30.

^[7] Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle, *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1994).