Frida Kahlo used the often traumatic and harrowing iconography of her Mexican heritage to paint herself and her pain. Pain became an integral part of Kahlo’s life after, at age 18, a streetcar accident left her partially paralyzed. From then on she underwent a series of operations and, because of her severely injured pelvis, a number of miscarriages and abortions. Her physical disability never inhibited Kahlo’s flair for theatrics and this, combined with a tempestuous relationship with her philandering husband, mural painter Diego Rivera, established her as a tragically romantic and exotic figure. As a result, Kahlo’s works have been exhaustively psychoanalyzed and thereby whitewashed of their bloody, brutal, and overtly political content. Kahlo’s personal pain should not eclipse her commitment to Mexico and the Mexican people. As she sought her own roots, she also voiced concern for her country as it struggled for an independent cultural identity. Her life and even her death were political.

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women artists and feminist scholarship, has Kahlo reemerged as an international figure. Because of her large number of self-portraits, many of which reveal her physical and psychic pains, her art is often subjected to a psychoanalytical approach. Harris and Nochlin write that “she turned to herself and her own peculiarly feminine obsessions and dilemmas for subject matter.” Herrera believes that “Kahlo has become something of a heroine to U.S. feminists who admire the devastating frankness with which she recorded specifically female experiences—birth, miscarriage, unhappiness in love.”

Certainly, as French theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have suggested, women must “speak” and “write” their own experiences, but the “speaking” must also be related to the context. Kahlo’s “speaking” herself encompasses her political self and her love for her country. For example, in a 1929 self-portrait, “Time Flies,” Kahlo wears a necklace of jadeite or greenstone, the favorite stone of Aztec sculptors. She painted two Aztec symbols on this necklace: a circle and cross superimposed on two crossed bands. The circle and cross on the necklace represents the Aztec glyph “movement” or “setting in motion” (a beginning). However, the crossed bands are associated with the Aztec god of death (or sacrifice), Michlantecuhltli, often found on Death Stone boxes. Considering Kahlo’s interest in Mexico, emphasis upon the Aztec, and fascination with the life-death cycle, it is not surprising that the work combines two symbols—the “setting in motion” or beginning with death and sacrifice—into one.

In addition to evocations of past cultures, Kahlo refers to the present and modernity in the portrait. Visible through the open window directly above her head is an airplane; to her left a clock rests upon a stack of books. Combinations of the modern with the traditional occur again in They Ask for Planes and Only Get Straw Wings (1938). A traditionally dressed Mexican woman is held up by an unseen force that has attached puppet strings to her straw wings. She is held fast to the ground by spiked pegs and rope, but in her hands she holds a model airplane. The painting may suggest modernization for Mexico, but not at the expense of cultural identity. Indeed, modernity and cultural nationalism often clash in Kahlo’s world.

For example, in Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States (1932; Fig. 2), Kahlo stands on the border between the highly industrialized, robotlike United States and agricultural, preindustrial Mexico. The sculpture on the Mexican side is typically pre-Columbian. In fact, the standing piece at the lower left is like many of the pre-classic sculptures found near Monte Alban in central Mexico (dating from c. 500 B.C.). The squattting figure to the right is a pastiche of the many squattting figures found in Aztec sculpture, for example, the Seated Old God With the Buccal Mask (c. 1200-1521 A.D.; Philadelphia Museum of Art), or the kneeling death goddesses who wear skulls or hand trophy necklaces (c. 1300 A.D.; Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City). The temple in the upper left resembles the Main Temple Area at Tenochtitlan depicted in one of Fray Bernadino de Sahugunt’s 16th-century codices or the drawing of Monteumza’s Palace in the Codex Mendoza (c. 1541-42; Bodleian Library, Oxford). It is located immediately beneath the blood-drenched mouth of the sun and the darker crescent moon. The dominating images, the temple, the sun, and the moon—all referring to the Aztec practice of ritual sacrifice—are deliberately rendered in a “primitive” or “naive folkloric style,” similar to that found on retablos, the traditional Mexican paintings of miracles collected by Kahlo. The pre-Columbian side of the painting has a rich, lush border of vegetation deeply rooted in the dark earth. In contrast to this, the industrialized United States (FORD is clearly printed on the smokestacks) is represented by high, narrow buildings rooted in the earth with electric cords that grow light bulbs. The robots on the right are balanced on the Mexican side with a skull that relates to the skulls that often lined the stone walls of Aztec temples, a life-sprouting-from-death metaphor. The painting effectively contrasts Kahlo’s Mexico with Western industrial civilization. Kahlo herself stands in the middle, holding the Mexican flag and wearing a Coatlicue-like necklace with bones. For her, life and death are as intimately related to the earth and the cosmos as they were to her pre-Columbian ancestors. The artist’s temple, meant for sacrifice, and the sun, dripping with sacrificed blood, are included without comment: a concrete visual example of Kahlo’s idealization of the Aztec past.

Another painting from her American sojourn, My Dress Hangs Here (1933; Fig. 3), scourgés the United States with pictures of a toilet, a telephone, a sports trophy, a dollar sign wrapped around the cross of a church, the steps of a federal building depicted as a financial graph, and Mae West as Hollywood fantasy. The incorporated photographs highlighting the plight of the Depression-era unemployed in the lower part of the canvas depict the contrast between wealth and poverty in American society. In the midst of moral decay, corruption, poverty, and suffering, Kahlo places a pristine image: the Tehuana dress. This traditional costume of Zapotec women from

![Fig. 1. Coatlicue, stone, late postclassic. Mexican National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City.](image)
the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is one of the few recurring indigenous images in Kahlo’s work that is not Aztec. Because Zapotec women represent an ideal of freedom and economic independence, the image of their dress probably appealed to Kahlo. However, the reference to freedom and liberty is combined with Aztec imagery in at least four of Kahlo’s works, thereby uniting the two sources into one statement of cultural nationalism dominated by the Aztec. This use of the Tehuana dress with Aztec symbols occurs in Memory (1937; see front cover), Remembrance of an Open Wound (1938), The Two Fridas (1939), and The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me and Señor Xolotl (1949).

In The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me and Señor Xolotl, Tehuana-robed Kahlo holds an infantlike Rivera on her lap and, in turn, both are encompassed by a large, protective Earth Goddess sprouting Mexican cacti from her earth-body. Señor Xolotl is the small dog—Kahlo’s pet—curled up on the large arm of the dark side of the goddess. The inclusion of a dog with such a name in a picture so obviously about life and death (the large goddess is wounded but sprouts new life from her body) must be considered a play both upon the name and the animal. Señor Xolotl could represent the dog of the nine-layered Mictlan, the Aztec underworld; the historic chieftan of the early Chichimecs, Xolotl, considered the progenitor of the Aztecs; or the nahual, or alter-ego, of one of the great gods in Aztec mythology, Quetzalcoatl. Xolotl, in this sense, would be Venus, the evening star, twin to Quetzalcoatl, the morning star. Perhaps even more appropriate considering the duality common to Aztec thought, the dog might represent both the warrior Xolotl and the alter-ego of Quetzalcoatl, also named Xolotl. Xolotl the hero may be conquering or protective: Kahlo holds the oversized infantlike Rivera in her arms. Xolotl the nahual may be Venus, the goddess of love in Western tradition: the eminates from and unites both figures. Although Kahlo’s frequent and explicit use of the heart may also relate to her emotional and physical suffering, the indigenous cultural sources of this symbol cannot be overlooked.

On the lower left in Memory, a larger-than-life heart is set upon the earth, its pulsing blood running into the ocean. In the center of the painting stands a handless Kahlo in contemporary dress, heart pierced by a lance. To her right, holding her with one hand, is an empty Tehuana dress (the same dress as in My Dress Hangs Here); to her left an empty, one-armed dress, the simple, everyday garment worn by the poor. Kahlo wears the Tehuana dress again in Remembrance of an Open Wound (1938). Here the artist lifts her skirt to display an open wound on her leg, the result of one of her numerous operations, but there is also symbolic reference to Aztec culture. Lying on the thigh near the wound are spiky plants, which probably refer to the use of thorns for self-mutilation perpetrated by Aztec priests. Moreover, she has entwined her head and the upper part of her body with growing roots, once again making the tie between life and death. She playfully told friends that the right hand beneath her skirt near her genitals indicates that she is masturbating. Pasztory explains: “The two basic metaphors for transformation in ancient Mesoamerica were sexuality and death, because both were seen to result in the creation of life.” Nowhere in Kahlo’s oeuvre is this attitude more strongly expressed than in Remembrance of an Open Wound, and nowhere else can such a strong statement be found for her personal identification with her cultural traditions. Within her own body, she explores all the death-life traditions of her past. And although she wears a Zapotec dress in all four paintings mentioned above, it is the brutal, powerful force of the Aztec imagery that attracts and repels the viewer and creates strong, compelling works.
The skeleton, another symbol in Aztec art, is also ubiquitous in Kahlo’s paintings. In *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (1938), Kahlo’s “four inhabitants”—a child, a Nayarit (western Mexico) idol with broken feet, a skeleton, and a large Mexican man wrapped with cords and dynamite—are in the immediate foreground. A small straw horseman is in the midground of the far right and, in the background, very near to the buildings along the horizon line, are seven tiny, barely visible figures. The setting is a square in Coyoacan, Kahlo’s birthplace, which is now part of Mexico City. The skeleton probably relates to the traditional Mexican holiday, the Day of the Dead. In fact, Kahlo indicated that the skeleton signifies “death: very gay, a joke.”

In *The Wounded Table* (1940), a Tehuana-clad Kahlo shares a long table with the cord- and dynamite-wrapped male figure and the skeleton of *Four Inhabitants*. Her long dark hair is lifted up and draped over the skeleton’s arm, tying the two figures together. Seated between Kahlo and the skeleton is a small Nayarit sculpture. The long arm of the sculpture extends toward Kahlo and, near her shoulder, merges with hers. Blood oozes from wounds in the table, the man’s feet, and the skeleton. It pools near the hem of the Tehuana dress and splatters toward Kahlo and, near her shoulder, merges with hers. Blood is never far removed from the heart, and in this particular work the skeleton is touched by the blood-heart linking the skeletal death figure with the heart-life.

The life-skeleton relationship is most obvious in *Luther Burbank* (1931). Here the skeleton lies embedded in the earth; roots grow from the skeleton and become a tree which, in turn, becomes horticulturist Luther Burbank. From the roots of death, the skeleton, springs the life-affirming tree. In *The Dream* (1940; inside front cover) the skeleton rests atop the canopy of a bed that holds a reclining Kahlo entwined by a living plant. The skeleton here is directly related to Kahlo. It sleeps above her and, as Herrera suggests, may be an indication of her own dream of death. However, it also speaks of life; the plant grows around Kahlo’s sleeping body in much the same way that it twined around Luther Burbank. In addition, the skeleton holds a bouquet of flowers. In *Roots* (1943) Kahlo replaces the supine skeleton sprouting Luther Burbank’s tree with her own body, from which grows a lush, rich green foliage veined with red blood.

An outstanding example of the skeleton in Aztec art is the standing greenstone *Skeletal Figure (Xolotl)* (Wurttembergisches Landesmuseum, Stuttgart), which has the eagle and the sun disc carved on its back. Xolotl is Quetzalcoatl’s “twin,” the evening star. The passing away of the evening star allows the morning star to herald the day. The skeleton is not death; it speaks of life. Skeletal goddesses, usually carved in greenstone, are frequently found among Aztec artifacts. The skull, too, is often used to adorn sculptures, for example, Coatlicue or the kneeling death goddesses.

Kahlo’s images of the skeletal figure and death can be understood only in relation to their iconography in Aztec work. The Coatlicue sculpture provides a clue to understanding their use in Kahlo’s painting. An accurate representation of the goddess appears in the top left corner of *Moses (Nuclear Sun)* (1945). Pasztory writes that Coatlicue “embodies the duality of Mexican consciousness.... At the very center of the figure is a contrast of quintessential opposites: breasts seen behind a skull, the two images of life and death.” Kahlo demonstrates these “quintessential opposites” much more dramatically than does the original sculpture when she paints the death skull immediately beneath palpable breasts. Coatlicue as symbol is significant in a number of Kahlo’s self-portraits. In *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Sigmund Firestone* (1940) and *Self-Portrait With Braid* (1941), the traditionally clad Kahlo wears Coatlicue’s skull necklace. In *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940; Fig. 4), Kahlo’s thorn necklace draws blood from her neck. Aztec priests performed self-mutilation with agave thorns and stingray spines, and Coatlicue’s neck also bleeds. The dead hummingbird is sacred to the chief god of Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and of war. It also represents the soul or spirit of the warrior who died in battle or on the sacrificial stone. In *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Eloesser* (1940), Kahlo covers her head with flowers, and a necklace of thorns again draws blood from her neck. She also wears a small hand as an earring. Both the Coatlicue and the kneeling death goddess sculptures wear hands as trophies around their necks. The drawing *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Marte R. Gomez* (1946) shows her wearing a hand earring and, although her neck is not pierced, it is covered with an intricately webbed necklace that zigzags tightly around her neck. The top of the necklace looks precisely like the zigzag lines in Aztec sculpture that represent a severed head or limb. This type of line, representing the fatty layer of...
subcutaneous tissue, is most clearly seen on the recently excavated Coyolxauhqui (Moon Goddess) relief now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City. Although Kahlo did not see this stone, she would have been familiar with other examples, and a close look at her representation of Coatlicue in Moses reveals similar zigzag lines.

The intense interest in her homeland and her use of indigenous Aztec art for themes and symbols make her art at once political and cultural. She painted herself, she painted Mexico, and, as is common among many realists, she painted in such a way as to be understood by the people. Kahlo knew what she wanted her art to be:

_Some critics have tried to classify me as a Surrealist; but I do not consider myself a Surrealist. . . . I detest Surrealism. To me it seems a manifestation of bourgeois art. A deviation from the true art that the people hope for from the artist. . . . I wish to be worthy, with my paintings, of the people to whom I belong and to the ideas which strengthen me._

It is probably unfair, even speculatively, to associate Kahlo with the political authoritarianism and artistic didacticism of Stalinism. Far removed from the realities of Socialist Realism, for her, as for many radical Mexican nationalists, Stalin represented anti-capitalism and anti-Americanism as well as planned economic development in a national setting. Stalin’s attraction lay in the positive aspects of a national push for growth and development, supposedly under the auspices of Marxism. Certainly, the dark side of her Aztec symbols and her individualistic imagery would have offended any Stalinist cultural commissar. The idea of developing socialism within one country may have had a romantic appeal similar to that found in the unified realm of the Aztecs. Of course, Kahlo was not painting for a _de facto_ socialist government but from her own idealism. She was a political radical and passionate nationalist, whose art was inspired as much by her public beliefs as by her personal sufferings. As such, she should be seen not as a Surrealist, nor as a member of any other Western modernist movement, nor exclusively as painter of the female experience, but as a committed Third World cultural nationalist.

_NOTES_

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1. Hayden Herrera provides a vivid description of Kahlo’s death and funeral in _Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo_ (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 429-40. Bertrand Wolfe, in _The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera_ (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 402-404, points out that it was in Coyocan, Kahlo’s birth- and death-place, that the last Aztec ruler, Cuautlmetoc, was tortured by the Spanish. An altogether appropriate place, from Kahlo’s point of view, to die. Wolfe, a friend to both Kahlo and Rivera, claims that Kahlo would have “laughed at the spectacle of her funeral.”

2. For further discussion of these ideas, see Benjamin Keen, _The Aztec in Western Thought_ (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1971), 463-508. See Jean Franco, _The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist_ (Hammondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1970) for an analysis of Mexican culture and intellectual history.

3. See Keen, _The Aztec_, 424-32, for a synopsis of Alfredo Chavero, _Historia antigua y de la conquista_ (Mexico, 1886). Keen provides a translation of Chavero’s comments about Coatlicue, 509-10.

4. Emmanuel Fernoud, “Une autobiographie mystique: la peinture de Frida Kahlo,” _Gazette des Beaux-Arts_ (No. 6, 1983), 43-46, discusses Kahlo’s “cultification.” He also draws enlightening parallels between Kahlo’s self-portraits, 1940-50, and the _Soeurs Couronnees_, portraits of Roman Catholic nuns common in Mexico during the 19th and 20th centuries. Most work on Kahlo, including Raquel Tibol’s _Frida Kahlo_;
Cronica, Testimonios y Aproximaciones (Mexico City: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1977), suggests relationships between Kahlo’s imagery and Mexican Catholic imagery. Although these symbols are important in Kahlo’s work (she said that Catholic imagery in her work was “part of a memory image, not for symbolic reasons,” see Herrera, Frida, 157), it is not my intention to explore them here.


9. All the paintings discussed in this essay are illustrated in Helga Prignitz-Poda, Salomon Grimnberg, and Andrea Kellenmann, Frida Kahlo: Das Gesamtwerk (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1988).

10. Reproductions of Aztec glyphs can be found in Laurette Séjourné, Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico (New York: Vanguard Press, 1956). Rivera owned a Death Stone box (now in the Diego Rivera Museum in Coyoacan) that has symbols on it very like the one on Kahlo’s necklace. A complete description of a Death Stone box can be found in Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtltlan (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1983), 56-58. Esther Pasztor, Aztec Art (New York: Abrams, 1983), 245-46, states that such boxes may have had various functions, such as holding the heart of a ritual sacrifice, holding the ashes of the aristocratic dead, or holding the thorns used for self-mutilation.

11. Illustrations originally done for Fray Bernadino de Sahagun in his 16th-century compilation of Mexican history and mythology, Codex Florentino, are frequently reproduced in books about Mexican history, where Kahlo could have seen them. Similarly, she would have had access to excerpts from the works of Fray Diego de Duran, another 16th-century commentator on New Spain.

12. “Primitivism,” or a “naive folkloric” style, in Kahlo’s paintings has been discussed by Herrera and by Michael Newman. In “Native Roots: Frida Kahlo’s Art,” Artscanada (October/November, 1979), Herrera wrote that Kahlo’s primitivism, her “naive, folkloric manner...camouflaged the awkward technique of an untrained artist.” (25) Newman, on the other hand, links primitivism with nationalism in her art and labels it “indigeneity.” In The Ribbon Around the Bomb, Art in America (April 1983), 180-89, he convincingly suggests that Kahlo’s naive style is deliberate and the result of her political commitment. John Berger, in “The Primitive and the Professional,” About Looking (New York: Pantheon, 1980), suggests that professional painting removes lived experience from a work of art. He writes: “The will of primitives derives from faith in their own experience and a profound scepticism about society as they have experienced it.” (68) I submit that Kahlo’s work demonstrates both a “faith in her own experience” and “a profound scepticism about society.”


15. The nahual, often the animal with which people and gods were magically linked or associated, has been described as the “twin” or the alter-ego. Charlotte McGoogan in, “The Philosophical Dualism of the Aztecs,” Katunob (December 1977), 37-51, explores this aspect of dualism found in the mythology and life of Aztecs.

16. Séjourné, Burning Water, 119. In Séjourné’s highly romanticized discussion, the cult of Quetzalcoatl is the apex of the spiritual side of life during the era immediately preceding Aztec rule. Her suggestion that the cult continued into Aztec times while Aztec society, as a whole, became brutal and militaristic is an attempt to rationalize and relativize the gruesomeness of sacrifice.

17. For further discussion of this phenomena, see Fray Diego Duran (trans. and ed. by Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden), Book of the Gods and Rites, and the Ancient Calendar (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1971), 82-84 and 419-20, or Michael Coe, Mexico (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 100.

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