Made in Her Image: Frida Kahlo as Material Culture

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Abstract Frida Kahlo’s art and persona are powerful examples of material culture. This article examines how Kahlo’s development and influences from early twentieth-century Mexico City played crucial roles in her personas as artist and celebrity. This article notes the contested nature of Kahlo’s status as female artist and details the geographical and historical circumstances that led to her reigning title as the most famous Latin American artist. This examination of Kahlo’s positionality demonstrates how Kahlo’s appropriation and production of material culture began even in her own lifetime and continues to multiply at an astonishing pace in the current milieu.

Introduction

Frida Kahlo’s image and art are hot commodities. Their marketability includes not only the selling of her actual paintings and photographs, but also a host of tangible items ranging from magnets to tennis shoes. These items can be found online, in tourist shops, in museum gift shops, and in other offbeat capitalistic enterprises (Borsa 1990). A friend of the authors’ recently came back from a trip to Berkeley, California with Frida Kahlo socks purchased from a generic ‘ethnic’ shop (Figure 1). This ‘Fridamania’ or ‘Fridolatry’ or even ‘Kahloism,’ has been non-stop since Kahlo’s rediscovery as an artist – a cultural phenomenon that some pinpoint to the 1982 exhibition of both Kahlo and Italian photographer Tina Modotti at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, some to the 1983 publication of Hayden Herrera’s biography, Frida, and yet others to the flowering of Chicana and feminist art movements in the 1970s (Helland 1991; Bergman-Carton 1993; Francis 2001; Dosamantes-Beaudry 2002). In particular, Herrera’s book has an accessibility and broad emotional appeal that
helped catapult Kahlo to high-profile popular culture, including the matronage of Madonna, and a shot of Melanie Griffith reading Frida in the opening scene of the 1986 film Something Wild (Bergman-Carton 1993).

Prior to her rise to individual fame and notoriety, Kahlo was known primarily, both abroad and in Mexico, as Diego Rivera’s wife; the headline of her death in 1954 in The New York Times read “Frida Kahlo, Artist, Diego Rivera’s Wife.” Kahlo now has a global pop culture status that challenges the likes of Elvis and Marilyn Monroe; yet, it is the attention she receives in academic space, in the international art world, and as an emerging national symbol in Mexico that makes her unique as an icon of material culture.

It is certainly no accident that Kahlo’s popularity rose with the linguistic and cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences. With a greater emphasis on representation and identity politics, the academy found in Kahlo a perfect subject for analysis. Kahlo’s complex ethnicity (Hungarian/German father, mestizo mother), artistic autoeroticism, and evident links to gender construction are of much appeal to poststructuralists (Greer 2005; Dragomir 2009). While Kahlo’s strong connection to a postmodern sensibility is intriguing, it often leads critics to ignore her geographical and historical context within post-Revolutionary Mexico City (Borsa 1990; Baddeley 1991).

In the following essay we imbue Kahlo within her geographical and historical context and examine the ways in which Kahlo constructed herself as material culture. The theoretical foundation of the essay allows a further examination of how her image and the reproduction of her artwork are transformed into material culture in the contemporary milieu. Essential to our narrative is a progression beyond Kahlo’s standard biography. A frequent complaint in the literature is the obsessive focus on the colorful details of Kahlo’s life and their supposed direct connection to her work. Although Kahlo’s personal narrative is significant in any discussion of her artistic identity, an overemphasis on it has the tendency to mask what David Lomas describes as “the disruptive force of her imagery” (1993, 5). In order to further understand Kahlo’s significance, the following essay will also delve briefly into the growing interest exhibited by Mexico towards Kahlo – an interest that is quickly pushing Kahlo to the status of national heroine. In examining Mexico’s current interest in Kahlo as a national figure, our work draws theoretically from Don Meinig’s seminal essay “Geography as an art” (1983). In it, Meinig reminds geographers and other readers that creative output shapes the world. Meinig’s powerful idea is elaborated nicely in Dydia DeLyser’s 2005 Ramona Memories – a text that examines the power of social memory that can be created through fiction and other art forms. Additionally, our work expands the assertions of Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep (1998/1999), Elizabeth Bakewell (1992), and Margaret Lindauer (1999) who discuss Kahlo’s conscious appropriation of material culture in service of her artistic and political agendas. These authors also offer incisive critiques of the ways in which Kahlo has been appropriated by groups and individuals around the world.
A Troubled Historiography

Although her image, art, and even her first name are iconic, Kahlo’s artistic context is often overlooked. Also, the little the general public does know about Kahlo is often incorrect. Margaret Lindauer makes the insightful observation that “the historiography of Frida Kahlo is nearly as dramatic as her life story” (1999, 150). This revisionist approach to Kahlo started with Kahlo herself, when she altered the date of her birth in 1907 to correspond to the date of the Mexican Revolution: 1910. Kahlo so identified with the egalitarian and utopian ideals of the Mexican...
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Revolution that she wanted to embody its spirit in her public persona as Diego Rivera’s wife. She took quite seriously her role as partner to Mexico’s most famous artist, communist, and revolutionary idealist (Bakewell 1993). However, in many ways Kahlo’s partnership with Rivera is overanalyzed and overemphasized in the literature and in popular representations in films; in fact, this is sometimes done to such an extent that Kahlo appears to be almost a wild Amazon-like woman who was tamed only by Rivera’s urban cosmopolitanism. For example, in Tim Robbins’ 1999 film Cradle Will Rock set in 1930s New York the Kahlo character does not speak, she only stares menacingly and stays within feet of Rivera at all times. Such representations fly directly in the face of real biographical facts of Kahlo’s life that include attendance at an elite school and a family environment that was steeped in the consumption and appreciation of European intellectualism.

In his introduction to the reproduction and publication of her personal diary, Carlos Fuentes states boldly, “Born with the Revolution, Frida Kahlo both mirrors and transcends this central event of twentieth-century Mexico” (1995, 10). One of Kahlo’s first acts as Señora Rivera was to don a household maid’s blouse and skirt for her 1929 wedding, in lieu of the traditional European wedding dress that other young women of Kahlo’s class would have worn (Herrera 1983). This moment of identity construction through material culture was captured by Kahlo three years later in her work Frida and Diego Rivera 1931 (Figure 2). The historical event of Kahlo and Rivera’s wedding as material for one of Kahlo’s paintings pinpoints a major crux in Kahlo research – Kahlo’s clearly intentional acts of shaping and representing history. In addition to the alteration of the date of her birth, Kahlo broadcast other false biographical details in order to suit her agenda. For instance, although Kahlo’s father has been and continues to be categorized as Jewish within the literature, he was not (Ronen 2006). Kahlo’s strong communist ties made a Jewish background appealing as part of her and Rivera’s public personas and international stances against Nazism. Kahlo’s strong childhood bond to Catholicism, however, is not fabricated and its influence is evident throughout her work. However, as a self-proclaimed atheist, her relationship with her childhood religion was strained as she constructed her selves within the public eye (Castro-Sethness 2004/2005; Zetterman 2006).

Kahlo’s historiography is complicated not only by her manipulation of it during her own lifetime, but also by the unchecked adulation she has received over the last thirty-plus years. Furthermore, María Teresa Fernández-Aceves (2007) asserts that within Mexican historiography specifically, the roles of women have been neglected and gender analysis in general is absent from a national, historical perspective. Hence, in studying Kahlo from nationalist perspective, her gender adds challenges in a way that it would not for a public male figure like Benito Juarez. Scholarship on Kahlo remains within the confines of the personal and often overlooks the turbulent political climate of the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and World War II. This focus on the personal has lent itself to what Stephanie Mencimer notes aptly is “like a game of telephone” in which, “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” (2002, 27). Menicmer’s complaint is increasingly a common one in Kahlo literature. Thus, serious studies of Kahlo have the indomitable task of reconciling her larger-than-life persona that is both imprinted on the public imagination and reproduced again and again in various cultural artifacts.

**Revolutionary/Post-Revolutionary Mexico**

Frida Kahlo is inextricably linked to the significance of the Mexican Revolution. This is true because Kahlo deeply identified with the ideals of the Revolution, and because, as the first revolution of its kind in the twentieth century, it placed Mexico City on the map in a way that created a unique intellectual, political, and artistic climate. This global event and its after-effects dominated the political and cultural landscape of Mexico during Kahlo’s lifetime and continue to echo today (Gonzales 2002). Prior to the Revolution, the long and suffocating reign of Porfirio Diaz had cemented the ruling notion of class differentiation within the country and elevated Mexico City to the status of a primate city. From the privileged vantage point of Mexico City, Diaz successfully controlled a country that, for nearly fifty years, had suffered from domestic unrest following independence from Spain in 1821 (Gonzales 2002). The Porfiriato’s emphasis on the capital city was played out via the pursuit of the two dominant ideals of progress and modernity (Trillo 1996). At this time, Mexico City still had strong ties to Europe not only because of its former status as a colony of Spain, but also because after Independence the city looked to Paris as a cosmopolitan ideal (Fuentes 1995; Trillo 1996). The Revolution, then, was in many respects a reaction to the Euro-centrism that defined the Porfiriato, as well as an effort to heal the sharp class and racial divisions within the country (Lindauer 1999).

The post-revolutionary era, however, still retained ties to European ideologies, especially a strong interest in Marxism (Helland 1999). From a global perspective, the Mexican Revolution presaged the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia – an event more widely known around the globe today because of its connections to the infamous Stalinist regime and the Cold War. Although the two revolutions are not commonly connected in the popular imagination, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen (1989) draw many parallels between the two events and their historical connections to modern art. Specifically, the authors point to the strong influence of the Continental movement of Cubism in both countries, the overthrow of archaic and repressive regimes, and a refiguring of society that called for a ‘new art’ (Mulvey and Wollen 1989, 82-83). This strong cultural element of the Mexican Revolution has encouraged critics to label it a cultural success if not a political one (Fuentes 1995). For example, after the Revolution and in an effort to construct a national culture that was distinct from that of Spain or France, Minister of Education José Vasconcelos commissioned (only) male artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros to celebrate the ancient, indigenous, and folk past of the Mexican land (Castro-Sethness 2004/2005; Flores 2008). These
and other large-scale projects contributed to the movements of *indigenismo* and *mexicanidad*—movements with strong inclinations toward the native that rejected the imperial West (Trillo 1996). It was within these movements that the Mexican Renaissance was born.

The Mexican Renaissance was an artistic movement characterized by muralism, innovative approaches to modern art, and national pride. Jean Franco (1991) points out that this public culture of nation building via the artistic process was, for the most part, a male-centered narrative. Franco (1989) contends that it was the lingering Messianic spirit which over-emphasized male virility in the Revolution that subsequently marginalized women even though, at the outset of the Revolution, they were a rhetorical target for liberation. Additionally, the ‘cult of Mexican femininity’ that intensified during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras contributed toward this stagnation and marginalization of women (Olcott 2005). This cult or espoused ideal of femininity became a source of national pride for all Mexicans. The female body, then, became a symbol for the qualities that contributed toward what Jolie Olcott describes as female *abnegación*—these include: “selflessness, martyrdom, self-sacrifice, an erasure of self and the negation of one’s outward existence” (2005, 15-16). This ideal of

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**Figure 3.** Frida (age 19) in gentlemen’s clothing (far left) for family portrait, Reproduced from http://www.scene4.com (Accessed July 15, 2011).
purity and goodness traced direct lineage to the Malintzin narrative, the story of an indigenous woman who is both credited with and blamed for giving birth to the first *mestizo* (Hernán Cortes’ first son) and for betraying her land (Misemer 2008). It is important to note that all of these national constructions of femaleness were anchored in motherhood (Zetterman 2006). Perhaps one of the reasons for the intensity of interest in Kahlo’s story is that she negotiated, and in many ways defied, this rather limited perspective of femininity in a very public and dramatic way – through her paintings and through her persona as Señora Rivera.

**La Chica Moderna**

As an inheritor of this rhetoric for both equality and martyrdom, Kahlo first selects, as a young woman, the identity of what Jolie Olcott (2005) terms *la chica moderna*. This modern young woman in Mexico City was influenced strongly by the 1920s flapper culture in the U.S. and Europe. She was educated and ambitious. For example, Kahlo attended the elite Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico City at great cost to her middle-class family. Kahlo was one of thirty-five female students at a school of two-thousand pupils and, before her bus accident at the age of eighteen, had planned to eventually study medicine (Richmond 1994). In this school environment Kahlo developed much of her socialist and revolutionary politics. Kahlo’s sense of entitlement and much of her ambition came from her father, Guillermo Kahlo, a photographer and highly-educated immigrant. Kahlo scholars have become interested in the role Kahlo’s father played in her artistic and intellectual development. This role becomes especially informative to the overarching question of gender and creativity (Nochlin 1971; Beck 2006). Jeffrey Belnap (2001) contends that Kahlo’s highly evolved cosmopolitanism started with the influence of her father rather than with Rivera.

Kahlo’s first significant identity as *la chica moderna* was dependent on the utilization of material culture. Even at a young age, Kahlo was always mindful of the significance and power of clothing in the process of identity construction (Block and Hoffman-Jeep 1998/1999, Amador Gómez-Quintero and Pérez Bustillo 2002; Misemer 2008). In her role as *la chica moderna*, Kahlo took the identity a step further by playing with notions of masculinity and femininity (Bakewell 1993). For example, an infamous Kahlo family photo, dramatized nicely in Julie Taymor’s 2002 biopic *Frida*, portrays Frida dressed in a gentleman’s clothing (Figure 3). According to some critics, Kahlo’s strong and persistent exploration of gender and alternative sexualities throughout her life is glossed over in an attempt to make her the fit into the category of “woman” and, unfortunately, victim as well (Borsa 1990). This trend toward heteronormativity continues in the prevalent over-analysis of Kahlo’s marriage to Rivera (Lindauer 1999). Additionally many Kahlo fans and scholars were disheartened at Salma Hayek’s hypersexualized portrayal of the iconic Kahlo that relegates a figure of immense geographical, historical, and cultural significance to stereotypical notions of a ‘sexy’ Latina (Guzmán 2006). Unfortunately linkages to other feminist artists such as María Izquierdo (1902-1955); Rosa Rolando (1895-1970); Lola Cueto (1897-1978); Aurra
Señora Rivera

Although Kahlo is undoubtedly a feminist icon, there are some critics who question that label as well as those who undyingly defend it (Helland 1991; Bakewell 1993; Guzmán 2006). While a student, Kahlo first met Rivera as he was painting *Creation* 1922/23 (Figure 4) in her high school. Following Kahlo’s recovery from her bus accident in 1925, they formed a mentoring relationship and were married four years later. One oft-cited quote from Kahlo is that there were two accidents in her life – the trolley smashing into the bus and her relationship with Rivera. These two events shaped Kahlo’s life, art, and image in significant ways. For example, the slow recovery after the bus accident gave Kahlo the time to develop as a painter and also inspired the legendary and shocking depictions of pain in her art. The relationship with Rivera placed Kahlo at the center of the modern art world and, in fact, some critics suggest that Kahlo used the unending series of operations in order to keep Rivera’s attention in a sort of dramatic display of Munchhausen’s syndrome, a psychic disorder that compels one to feign illness in order to receive attention (Herrera 1983).

Another device for receiving attention from Rivera was Kahlo’s adherence to his ideal of the Tehuana woman. Kahlo, anticipating Rivera’s wishes, first visited him dressed in female Tehuantepec costume (Belnap 2001; Amador Gómez-Quintero and Pérez Bustillo 2002). The Tehuana woman is an iconic figure for women in Mexico to this day. Representations of these women by both Mexican and foreign observers stretch back to the sixteenth century (Campbell and Green 1996). The traditional clothing of the Tehuana includes brightly embroidered skirts and elaborate head coverings.

Hailing from what is now the state of Oaxaca and including part of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, female descendants of the Zapotec people enjoy a large degree of equality with the men in their society and are producers of valuable material culture bought and sold in the markets. Historically, these women have represented strength, sensuality, and exoticism (Campbell and Green 1996). Also, the region itself symbolizes a purity independent from colonial conquest (Belnap 2001).

Kahlo’s immediate and strong identification with Tehuana culture is well known. However, some critics are suspicious of the ways in which Kahlo opted to pay homage to Zapotec women, claiming that Kahlo participated in an “aesthetization of the other” (Campbell and Green 1996, 160) in line with colonial and masculinist representations of natives. Kahlo’s approach to the Tehuana figure was influenced strongly by Rivera, as he depicted her in that dress in his own murals. Carl Sauer’s seminal 1941 article “The personality of Mexico” is an excellent example of such academic adulation and romantic envisioning of native Mexican landscape. Kahlo participated actively in this revived interest in Mexico as a land of exoticism, not only with her appearance, but also with her art. In fact, Rivera also encouraged Kahlo to use the Tehuana trope as a guiding theme in her art (as he did in his own); this can be seen quite dramatically in Kahlo’s 1943 Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Figure 5).

It was also Rivera’s suggestion for Kahlo to draw from the native traditions of retablo and ex-voto paintings – folk art that flourished in rural Mexico after Independence (Castro-Sethness 2004/2005; Misemer 2008). Consequently, Rivera facilitated Kahlo’s strong connection with the material culture of native Mexico and used the popular results for his own agenda of advancing mexicanidad. It is important to note that as a Communist, Kahlo’s appropriation of colonial traditions carries many implications. Kahlo’s active use of these tropes suggests her reliance on Rivera’s guidance. However, this is not to suggest a role of passivity on the part of Kahlo. As Bakewell (1992) notes, there were few opportunities for women in Mexican society to distinguish themselves and one of the primary vehicles for such distinction was via marriage to a successful man. Thus, it is a blatant utilization of presentist thinking to assume and/or assert that Rivera’s role and influence in Kahlo’s life diminishes her accomplishments and iconic status. Instead, it is much more fruitful to examine Kahlo’s positionality within the constraints of both her role as Rivera’s wife and her own burgeoning political and artistic expressions. Belnap (2001) contends that Kahlo’s image as a Tehuana
negotiated an uneasy space between the colonial legacy of Mexico’s past and the *indigenismo* promoted by the intellectual, Mexican elite. Such re-readings of Kahlo’s agency within her marriage are best supported by demonstrating the dynamic and unique ways in which Kahlo deliberately constructed her artistic identity as material culture. In fact, Kahlo is an excellent example of how personas and celebrity are in and of themselves material culture.

A Cosmopolitan Icon in the Making

Kahlo’s journey to unprecedented iconic status is, in some part, due to her geo-historical conditions. Lindauer (1999) notes that in Kahlo’s milieu the role of ‘artist’ was equated with masculinity and that Kahlo’s marketable success during her own lifetime edged her out of a thoroughly feminine realm. In particular, the Mexican School, of which Rivera was a leader, was centered on the male artist – this is true to such an extreme extent that Bakewell terms that environment “a male cosmos” (1992, 190). Though Kahlo’s impressive iconisation is affected by her social, cultural, and historical conditions, she did not lack agency. Many critics specifically point to the deliberate and innovative ways in which Kahlo redefined femininity in her work and her life, not just in respect to Mexican society, but on a global scale as well.

One of Kahlo’s most radical and iconoclastic artistic accomplishments is her redefinition of the female form (Franco 1991; Bakewell 1992). While Kahlo’s male contemporaries and predecessors most commonly positioned the female body as an object of desire within their work, Kahlo uses the body (most often her own) for the purpose of representation. Kahlo’s depictions of bodily pain are the most widely explored elements within her work (Zarzycka 2006; González 2008). However, to focus solely on Kahlo’s artistic interactions with the body as simply expressions of physical pain and/or emotional suffering is to shortchange the lasting impact and originality of her work. For example, Bakewell (1992) asserts that in painting herself as woman, Kahlo claimed herself as a subject rather than passively submitting to the objectification of traditional Western artistic processes. One of Kahlo’s most graphic pieces that centers on the representation of body is My Birth 1932 (Figure 6). There are several interpretations of the painting, including that the woman giving birth is dead, that the woman giving birth is Kahlo’s mother, or that the woman giving birth is both Kahlo and Kahlo’s mother combined. Many critics link the painting back to Kahlo’s tense relationship with her traditional and extremely religious mother while others see it as a clear indication of Kahlo’s expression of artistic and gendered identities. There is a strong tendency for viewers of Kahlo’s work to connect it with her private/emotional life. And while there may be a great deal of validity in such readings what is often ignored, unfortunately, is the deliberateness with which Kahlo worked. (Udall 2000). What is undeniable in My Birth, however, is that Kahlo took inspiration for the painting from the Aztec sculpture of the goddess Tlazolteotl that graphically depicts birth from an upright position (Castro-Sethness 2004/2005). Kahlo’s conscious and creative manipulation of indigenous material culture is one aspect that helps her retain her status as the most famous Latin American artist, a fame that now places her in a commercial and Avant-garde league with the likes of Van Gogh, Monet, and Picasso.

My Birth is just one example of Kahlo drawing directly from her historical background and ethnic heritage. Because of Kahlo’s international fame and ability to cut across cultural and gendered borders, it is often forgotten (or at least rarely mentioned) that she is undeniably Mexican and this Mexicanness was repeatedly
demonstrated in her work through the use of iconic symbols and material culture drawn from her native environment. Pointing to Kahlo’s Mexicanness is not an attempt to suggest an overriding quaint or folksy quality to Kahlo’s persona. In fact, at the time Kahlo was working, Mexico City was a haven for cosmopolitanism. The city acted as a beacon for artists and intellectuals from all over the world as well as a shining example of revolutionary politics. It is not purely coincidental that famed Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky was granted asylum in Mexico City by president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1937. And it is not coincidental that Kahlo and Rivera provided the initial accommodation at Casa Azul for Trotsky and his second wife, Natalia Ivanovna. Kahlo’s brief affair with Trotsky is one of those Kahlo ‘facts’ that is widely circulated and highlighted within her complex narrative.

Though it may seem out of place to incorporate a discussion of cosmopolitanism into the analysis of an artist who is a national icon, cosmopolitanism and nationalism are concepts that are often misunderstood. In tracing cosmopolitanism back to its Kantian roots, Pheng Cheah (2006) notes that one common yet incorrect assumption is that cosmopolitanism is directly opposed to nationalism. Cheah (2006) notes that Kant’s formal reflections on cosmopolitanism occurred prior to the rise of popular nationalism in Europe and that what Kant argued against with the formation of a cosmopolitan viewpoint was in fact absolutist statism and not early nationalistic ideals. Thus, the fact that Kahlo and Rivera

were ardent nationalists does not contradict the assertion that they were also cosmopolitanites. Kahlo in particular, with her connection to the Surrealist movement in Europe, stood out early on as a cosmopolitan figure. Although Kahlo is famous for asserting that she didn’t know she was a Surrealist until André Breton bestowed the title upon her, many scholars argue that it is very unlikely that Kahlo, who was well educated, of direct European descent, often socialized with an international crowd, and traveled extensively, was unaware of and uninfluenced by the Surrealist movement (Zarzycka 2006). In fact, in the eyes of Breton, the spirit of Surrealism in Europe was embodied by the national character of Mexico and, consequently, by Kahlo herself (Fauchereau 1980). Given Kahlo’s intimate connections to cosmopolitanism during her own lifetime, it is not a surprise that she looked to other iconic non-Mexican figures in her work. In *My Dress Hangs There* 1933 (Figure 7) Kahlo depicts a billboard of Mae West in the background of the corrupt, crowded and filthy landscape of New York City. Udall (2000) makes a compelling argument that Kahlo identified with West’s theatricality and hyperfeminity as she simultaneously positioned West in her painting as an icon of northern decadence and decay. It is clear then, that Kahlo was drawn both in the construction of her public persona and in her art to this notion of icon – be it Mexican or international.

Internationalism and Popular Culture

It is common for pieces on Kahlo to open with a discussion of the hagiography that dominates the discourse. Germaine Greer pays tribute (tongue in cheek) to this approach to Kahlo with the title of her piece, “Patron saint of lipstick and lavender feminism” (2005). Greer asserts that there are far more photos circulating of Kahlo than there are Kahlo’s own artistic works. The audiences for these photos at the time included national and international newspapers (particularly for the photos of Rivera and Kahlo together) as well as close friends and lovers of Kahlo. Greer likens Kahlo’s lived performance of posing for pictures in her Tehuana clothing and incorporating other aspects of native Mexican culture into her persistent and powerful *tableau vivant* to another Latin American icon, Carmen Miranda. Greer’s analysis looks for a way to respond to art critics such as Tom Lubbock (2005) who bemoan Kahlo’s bad painting while still holding the artist up to serious critique. Greer goes so far as to contend that Kahlo’s paintings function as advertisements—an assertion that doesn’t wash with Kahlo’s politics, and an assertion that can only be made from the vantage point of the current political and social milieu of Western globalization and market-driven economies. It is at this critical juncture that Kahlo has gained her international reputation and has been made over into innumerable items for sale all over the world.

Kahlo dramatically and overtly utilized the material culture of Mexico and other lands in her work and image. This mélange of Kahlo and material culture began to be bandied about the globe freely and ardently within a mere two decades after her death. Critics often speculate on how Kahlo would have reacted to this adoration—some claiming she would have been disgusted and others asserting her potential delight at the ironic humor of the situation. Peter Schjeldahl cuts through the division of differing viewpoints with the bluntly honest statement, “There are so many ways to be interested in Frida Kahlo” (2007). Schjeldahl’s point, it seems, is to dismantle the hierarchy of how best to study and/or appreciate Kahlo. Instead, Schjeldahl suggests that it is the variety and diversity of appreciation and/or appropriation that makes Kahlo distinctive. Thus, although many critics are dismayed by the ways in which Kahlo’s Mexicanness and personal tragedy have been commodified (Baddeley 1991; Lindauer 1999; Zarzycka 2006), Schjeldahl’s approach embeds that commodification as part of a serious appreciation of Kahlo. This provides room for assertions such as Teresa Conde’s (1997) that Kahlo’s enduring value to material culture is in her painting and not in the fact that she and/or her work grace tote bags and other cheap collectables. Indeed, Joan Borsa is adamant that Kahlo’s work (which is continually globally commodified) informs and even disrupts a number of culturally and politically relevant issues, including: “the intersection of art and politics, strategies of resistance, the significance of colonial discourse and the practice and process of negotiating critical subjectivity in an attempt to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ our own histories” (1990, 38). Borsa, therefore, places a high value on how Kahlo is understood now and rejects the trivializing of Kahlo’s oeuvre simply because she stands as a popular icon throughout the world.
In her analysis of Kahlo as a cultural icon, Irma Dosamantes-Beaudry (2002) furthers Schjeldahl’s inclusiveness of Kahlo by detailing the function that Kahlo performs in the current milieu as both a receptor for others’ perceptions and as an independent image/identity operating within the material world. Dosamantes-Beaudry also touches on a major theme throughout discussions of Kahlo – the divide between public and private. As a cultural icon, Kahlo seems to bridge these two spheres of lived experience. According to Jean Franco (1991), this divide between public and private is quite complex. She asserts that “Kahlo’s paintings actually expose the myth of privacy, often depicting a body that was both irredeemably connected to reproduction but also invaded by science, pinned to surgical instruments with the inner organs exposed to public view. What Kahlo’s paintings often put on display is the social nature of the body as well as the staged nature of representation” (Franco 1991, 226). These themes of the body, technology, and intimacy are what push Kahlo across borders; they are what make her accessible to an international audience, male and female, straight or gay (Adams 1992; Udall 2000).

An Emerging National Symbol
Kahlo is clearly an international symbol; however, she is also an emerging national symbol in Mexico. Rivera’s murals continue to grace the most important public buildings in Mexico City, but it is Kahlo and her art that stand as the most recognizable and popular symbols for Mexican national pride today. Critics tend to trace Kahlo’s current supremacy to three key events in Mexico City: the 1968 student uprising against the Mexican government, the 1973 retrospective of Kahlo’s work at the Museo de Arte Moderno, and the 1977 Kahlo retrospective at Palacio de Bellas Artes (Orenstein 1973; Herrera 1983; Bakewell 1993). According to Bakewell (1993), the tumultuous nature of the intellectual and artistic activity in Mexico City during the late sixties created a movement of experimentation and rejection of the status quo – a movement that celebrated Kahlo’s resistance to the hegemonic legacy of Porfirio Diaz, Spanish colonization, and U.S. economic control. Particularly in reference to U.S. involvement in Mexico, Kahlo is an obvious choice as a symbol of defiance. Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States 1932 (Figure 8) depicts Kahlo perched between a landscape of native, spiritual, and bucolic Mexico and that of a capitalistic, polluted, and mechanical United States. The painting is clear in Kahlo’s preference for Mexico, even though she painted it during a three year period during which she traveled and lived with Rivera in the United States. In the painting, Kahlo contrasts the material culture of each country starkly against each other. The industrial and technological artifacts of the United States suggest sterility and oppression. Also, they are all products of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas the artifacts on the Mexican side are ancient, symbolic, and fertile. Bakewell (1993, 166) goes as far as to claim that Kahlo is the symbol for the post-1968 sensibility in Mexico City. Additionally, there are more recent examples of Kahlo’s connection to contemporary politics. Misemer (2008) contends that after
the NAFTA agreement in 1994 Kahlo’s popularity rose in Mexico and that women used Tehuana clothing in direct homage to Kahlo in order to protest the 1990 summit between Mexican President Carlos Salinas and U.S. President George Bush. Misemer also notes that the 1990 *Thirty Centuries of Mexican Splendor* exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City was advertised, primarily, on billboards with Kahlo’s self-portraits.

**Conclusion**

By viewing Kahlo not only in her role as a producer of material culture, but also as a symbol of material culture, her iconic geographic entanglements are brought to the forefront. Lindauer (1999) warns not to interpret Kahlo or her work as direct representations of Mexican nationalism but rather as complex compilations of a form of Mexicanness. Thus, it is quite possible, and some might even say necessary, to read Kahlo as both an international cosmopolitan figure and a figure of increasing national importance in her home country. What is undeniable is that Kahlo’s influence and symbolic importance span both national and international perspectives. Thus, the reading of Kahlo’s art as material culture, coupled with the explosion of Kahlo’s image into material culture, has re-shaped her geographic

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**Figure 8.** Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Reyero, Reproduced from http://www.abcgallery.com (Accessed July 15, 2011).
context. With such an intricate and delicate balance to her artistic identity, Lent’s assertion that “the sources of Kahlo’s creativity and the meaning of her art remain as enigmatic as ever” (2007, 75) is the only appropriate mind-frame with which to engage any study of Frida Kahlo.

To understand Kahlo’s iconic status we must include a placement of her within the material culture context. Within that critical engagement, it is imperative to acknowledge that Kahlo did not rise up out of a vacuum, but rather that she is a product of her own geographical embeddedness. An analysis of the ongoing representation of her positionality is crucial to understanding how she and her work developed and transitioned into unique material culture. Kahlo’s iconic statuses of international cult figure and national heroine are represented in numerous venues and for a diversity of audiences. Although Kahlo was extremely critical of the U.S. and the culture of consumption, the popularity of her work and image north of the border is quite strong.

By examining Kahlo both as material culture and as a producer/appropriator of it, we can begin to understand why she has such broad appeal. In her own time, Kahlo tapped into the powerful reformist movements of indigenismo and mexicanidad and, like many other politically engaged Mexicans, adopted and transformed some of the most powerful material elements of Mexico’s native culture. Kahlo’s choice to dress and paint herself as a Tehuana is perhaps the most well-known and replicated example. Appropriation of material culture, particularly of material culture that is not directly one’s own, is always controversial and at times, holds a very limited shelf-life. However, Kahlo’s ingenious translation of Mexico’s indigenous spirit in herself and in her paintings thrives almost sixty years later. Study of Kahlo through the lens of material culture allows us to see how one person not only represents material culture but also produces material culture and how this intersection creates a greater degree of iconization that is lasting and widespread.

References


18 Material Culture


