Frida Kahlo used the often traumatic and harrowing iconography of her Mexican heritage to paint herself and the pain which had become an integral part of her life after, at age eighteen, a streetcar accident left her crippled. 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, the 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.

Kahlo died eleven days after participating in a public protest opposed to American intervention in Guatemala. On 14 July 1954, her body lay in state in the magnificent foyer of the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. Much to the chagrin of Mexican officials, her coffin was draped with a large flag bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle superimposed upon a star. With her love of the unconventional and her talent for black humor, Kahlo, in all likelihood, would have enjoyed the uproar caused by this spectacle.¹

Kahlo, like many other educated young people during the tumultuous era between the world wars, joined the Communist Party in the 1920s. In the early part of the century, the intellectual atmosphere in Mexico was charged with cosmopolitan European ideologies, most prominently Marxism tempered with Mexican nationalism. Renewed interest in Mexico's culture and history began in the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century, Mexican indigenista tendencies ranged from a violently anti-Spanish idealization of Aztec Mexico to a more rational interest in the "Indian question" as the key to a truly Mexican culture.²

Mexican nationalism, with its anti-Spanish anti-imperialism, identified the Aztecs as the last independent rulers of an indigenous political unit.
However, by the early twentieth century, the United States had replaced Spain as the intrusive foreign power. The threat became particularly evident to the Mexican left when the United States interfered in internal political struggles between capital and labor. The most romantic of the anti-imperialists continued to idealize the self-control and governing power of the Aztecs, who, according to some prominent late nineteenth-century intellectuals, could trace their roots to an early civilization based upon a combination of communism and labor leading to fraternity and virtue. Allegedly, from this early simplified society grew the complex structure of Aztec society.

Alfredo Chavero, a nineteenth-century Mexican intellectual and a leading supporter of Aztec eminence, was one of the first to describe as beautiful the awesome, fearful goddess figure *Coatlicue* [2], now on view in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. This serpent-skirted goddess, adorned with a necklace of skulls that rests upon her breasts and enhances her severed neck, is a favored motif in Kahlo’s work. Although she seldom represents the deity in her complete sculpted form, she nevertheless repeatedly refers to the severed neck and skull necklace. In addition to Coatlicue imagery, Kahlo also uses images of the heart and the skeleton in her paintings. All three are important symbols in Aztec art as well as in Kahlo’s *Mexicanidad*.

In Kahlo’s particular form of *Mexicanidad*, a romantic nationalism that focused upon traditional art and artifacts uniting all *indigenistas* regardless of their political stances, she revered Aztec traditions above and beyond those of other pre-Spanish native cultures. She expressed her deeply felt nationalism by favoring in art the representation of the powerful and authoritarian pre-Columbian society that had united a large area of the Middle Americas through force and conquest. This emphasis upon the Aztecs, rather than the Mayan, Toltec, or other indigenous cultures, corresponds to Kahlo’s demand for a unified, nationalistic, and independent Mexico. Unlike her husband, she disapproved of Trotsky’s internationalism. She was drawn, rather, to Stalin’s nationalism, which she probably interpreted as a unifying force within his own country. Her anti-imperialism had a distinctly anti-U.S. focus.

Her repeated use of often bloody Aztec imagery is an intrinsic part of her social and political beliefs and derives much of its power from the depth of her convictions. Thus, the skeletons, hearts, and Coatlicue, images relating to the emanation of light from darkness and life from death, speak not only to Kahlo’s personal struggle for health and life but to a nation’s struggle. It is this intense interest in her homeland that is behind her transformation into a mythological or cult figure by the Mexican people.

For a time, Frida Kahlo was also the “darling” of New York and Paris art circles. She was courted...
by the “pope of Surrealism,” André Breton, who in 1938 described her as a “ribbon around a bomb” in his glowing brochure for her exhibition in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery. However, Kahlo never saw herself as a Surrealist and became thoroughly disillusioned with the movement and with Breton after a trip to Paris early in 1939. By the mid-1940s, Kahlo was rarely mentioned north of the border or in Europe, although her popularity and influence remained undiminished in Mexico.

Only since the late 1970s, with the increased interest in women artists and feminist scholarship, has Kahlo re-emerged 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 psychological analysis. 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 the 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 Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States, 1932 [1], Kahlo stands on the border between the highly industrialized, robotlike United States and agricultural, pre-industrial Mexico. In this painting, as in other works of hers, she evokes past cultures while, at the same time, she comments on modernity; although she sometimes suggests modernization for Mexico, this is never at the expense of cultural identity. The sculpture on the Mexican side of the picture 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 ca. 500 B.C.). The squatting figure to the right is a pastiche of the crouching figures found in Aztec sculpture or of the kneeling death goddesses who wear skulls or hand trophy necklaces, and the temple in the upper left resembles the main temple area at Teotihuacan. The temple, the blood-drenched sun, and the moon, all suggesting 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, with its rich, lush border of vegetation deeply rooted in the earth, dramatically contrasts with the industrialized United States, represented by skyscrapers, technology, and pollution. The Mexican skull, probably relating to the skulls that often lined the stone walls of Aztec temples, is a life-sprouting-from-death metaphor that appropriately complements the vegetation. The picture 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 were 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 sacrificial blood are included without comment or apology: a concrete visual example of Kahlo’s idealization of the Aztec past.

In another painting from her United States sojourn, My Dress Hangs There, 1933 [3], Kahlo scourges the United States with representations of the accouterments of a bourgeois life-style (a toilet, a telephone, and a sports trophy) and indicts its hypocrisy by wrapping a dollar sign around the cross of a church. Her appropriated photographs of Depression-era unemployment, which constitute the lower part of the picture, juxtapose “reality” with the “made-up” painting and thereby highlight the vulgar display of American wealth and well-being as opposed to the poverty and suffering of the lower classes. In the midst of this Kahlo places a pristine image: the Tehuana dress. This traditional costume of Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is one of the few recurring indigenous representations in Kahlo’s work that is not Aztec. Because Zapotec women represent an ideal of freedom and economic inde-
of the great gods in Aztec mythology, Quetzalcoatl. If Xolotl were the nahual, then he would also represent 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 painting is called The Love Embrace of the Universe. Or, because of the earth goddess’s wounded chest and Kahlo’s slashed neck, the “love embrace” could mean death. The heart is alluded to by the drops of blood on the breasts of both the goddess and the Tehuana-clad Kahlo. Aztecs often represented the “heart,” which they perceived as the life center of a human being, as drops of (or spurring) blood. The Aztec heart, according to Laurette Séjourné, “is the place of union where the luminous consciousness is made.” She connects the painful spiritual search into one’s own “heart” (or psyche) with the iconography of the wounded or bleeding heart in Aztec imagery. This wounded
pendence, their dress probably appealed to Kahlo. However, the reference to freedom and liberty is combined with Aztec imagery in at least three 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 *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* [4], 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. The small dog, Señor Xolotl, is Kahlo's pet. However, the representation of a dog with this name in a picture so obviously about life and death (the large goddess is wounded but also 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 Aztec underworld; he could be named after Xolotl, the historic Chichimec chieftain who is considered the progenitor of the Aztecs; or he could be the nahual, or alter-ego, of one
heart with drops of blood, which recurs so frequently in Aztec art, is shown most dramatically in Kahlo’s picture *The Two Fridas* [5]. One Frida wears a Tehuana dress and the other a white lace European-style dress. The two women are united by hands and hearts. Like a cord, an artery reaches from one heart to the other, closely joining the two cultures. The “luminous consciousness” emanates 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.

Kahlo wears the Tehuana dress again in *Remembrance of an Open Wound* [6]. 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 her thigh near the wound are spiky plants, which probably refer to the use of thorns for self-mutilation, perpetrated by Aztec priests.15 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.\textsuperscript{16} Esther Pasztory in \textit{Aztec Art} 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.”\textsuperscript{17} Nowhere in Kahlo’s oeuvre is this attitude more strongly expressed than in \textit{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 three 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 intimate relationship between life and death is most obvious in \textit{Luther Burbank}, 1931 [7]. Here the skeleton lies embedded in the earth; roots grow from the skeleton and become a tree, which, in turn, becomes the horticulturist Luther Burbank. From the roots of death, as represented by the skeleton, springs the life-affirming tree.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{The Dream}, 1940, the skeleton rests atop the canopy of a bed that holds a reclining Kahlo entwined by a living plant. The skeleton sleeps above her and, as Herrera suggests, may represent her own dream of death.\textsuperscript{19} However, it may also speak of life; the plant grows around Kahlo’s sleeping body in much the same way that it twines around Luther Burbank. In another painting, \textit{Roots},
1943, Kahlo replaces the supine skeleton sprouting Luther Burbank as tree with her own body, from which grows a lush, rich green foliage veined with red blood. The skeleton is not death; it speaks of life.20

Kahlo’s representation 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. Pasztory writes that Coatlicue “embodies the duality of Mexican consciousness. . . . At the very centre of the figure is a contrast of quintessential opposites: breasts seen behind a skull, the two images of life and death.”21 Although Kahlo seldom included an actual representation of Coatlicue in her work,22 the enigmatic goddess recurs in symbolic form in a number of Kahlo’s self-portraits. For example, in Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940 [8], 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 the sacrificial stone. In her 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 Coatlicue and the kneeling death goddess sculptures so common in Aztec art 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 (these can be seen on Coatlicue's neck) that represent the fatty layer of subcutaneous tissue that would be exposed if the head or a limb were severed.

The psychological reductionism that equates the bloody, brutal imagery in Kahlo's work with a desire to "paint away" her accident, suffering, and pain does little justice to her work. It reduces an important group of paintings done by a deeply intellectual and socially committed artist to simply a visual cry of personal angst. But this was not Kahlo's intention. Since she grew up after the Mexican revolution and reached maturity when indigeneity and Mexicanidad were strong forces in her country, we should expect to find direct references to romantic nationalism in her work. And since she was a political person, we should expect to find her politics reflected in her art.

Because Rivera supported the internationalist Trotsky, Kahlo agreed to befriend the exile and his entourage, but she never renounced Stalin. In fact, she died with an unfinished portrait of Stalin on her easel. Framed above her bed were pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. In Russian parlance, perhaps partinost would not have appealed to her, but narodnost would have been preferable to bourgeois cosmopolitanism.

The intense interest in her homeland and her use of indigenous Aztec art for themes and symbols make Kahlo's 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 consciousness. She was a political radical and a passionate nationalist, whose art was inspired as much by her public beliefs as by her personal suffering. In a feminist art history Kahlo's pictures are interventions that disrupt the dominant discourse if we allow her to "speak" herself and refrain from imposing on her work our own Western middle-class values and psychology. She should be seen not as a Surrealist, nor as a member of any other Western modernist movement, nor exclusively as a painter of the female experience, but as a committed Third World cultural nationalist.
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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), pp. 429-40. Bertrand Wolfe, in The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), pp. 402-4, points out that it was in Coyoacan, Kahlo’s birth and death place, that the first Aztec ruler, Cuauhtémoc, was tortured by the Spanish. An altogether appropriate place, from Kahlo’s point of view, to die. Wolfe, a friend of 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, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1971), pp. 463-508. See Jean Franco, The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1970), for an analysis of Mexican culture and intellectual history.

3. See Keen, The Aztec, pp. 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, pp. 509-510.

4. Emmanuel Pernoud, “Une Autobiographie mystique: la peinture de Frida Kahlo,” Gazette des beaux-arts 6 (1983): 43-48, discusses Kahlo’s “cultification.” He also draws enlightening parallels between Kahlo’s self-portraits, 1940-50, and the Soeurs Couronées, portraits of Roman Catholic nuns common in Mexico during the eighteenth and nineteenth 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,” Herrera, Frida, p. 157), it is not my intention to explore them here.


9. The drawing is like those found in Fray Bernadino de Sahagun’s sixteenth-century codices or the drawing of Montezuma’s palace in the Codex Mendosa (ca. 1541-42, Bodleian Library, Oxford). Illustrations originally done for Fray Bernadino de Sahagun in his sixteenth-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 sixteenth-century commentator on New Spain.

10. “Primitivism” or a “naïve 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 “naïve, folkloric manner . . . camouflaged the awkward technique of an untrained artist” (p. 25). Newman, on the other hand, links primitivism with nationalism in her art and labels it “indigenity.” In “The Ribbon Around the Bomb,” Art in America, April 1983, pp. 160-69, he convincingly suggests that Kahlo’s naïve 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