



ARTISTS *who* INSPIRE

## FRIDA KAHLO

Sunday, July 13th, 2024  
preached by Rev. Beth Dana

Every artist has a muse, or muses, the source that inspires their creation. In Greek mythology, there were nine goddesses identified as the muses who inspired the arts, science, and literature. Today in our Artists Who Inspire series, we muse about the ways that the painter Frida Kahlo has inspired our world and what her life and art might inspire in us.

Kahlo famously said, "I am my own muse. I am the subject I know best, the subject I want to know better." This explains why about one third of the paintings that she created in her lifetime were self-portraits. I would say that her other muse was revolution. The Mexican Revolution, yes, but also just the spirit of revolution.

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon was born on July 6th, 1907, but she always claimed to have been born in 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution began. Regardless of her exact year of birth, living through the Mexican Revolution as a child made an impression on her. She remembers hiding with her sister Cristina in a walnut chest while her mother cooked for starving soldiers in their kitchen. Frida was the third child of a German father and a Mexican mother.

You may notice in this painting, this family portrait, that she is right in front of her father. Frida was his favorite and she was most like him in many ways. He was a photographer of architecture, claiming that he didn't photograph people because he didn't wish to improve what God had made ugly.

This photo is a notable exception, one that he took of 25-year-old Frida, that captures her God-given beauty. Frida inherited this direct way of communicating and his approach to art, as she was famous for not shying away from the ugliness and pain that she saw in herself and in the world around her.

At age six, Frida contracted polio and was isolated for nine months at home. It resulted in a thinner right leg and a limp that she had for the rest of her life. Her father encouraged her to overcome infirmity and counter bullying by taking up swimming, boxing, and wrestling, physical activities that were considered very unladylike at the time. Her bending of gender norms extended to dress as well, much to her mother's chagrin. You can see her there on the left in this family portrait wearing a three-piece suit.

Frida was a promising student, fluent in three languages with her sights set on becoming a doctor, but then at 18 years old she was severely injured when a bus she was riding collided with a trolley and slammed into a brick building, shattering both the bus and her body. She had a broken spine, collarbone, ribs, pelvis and leg, and a metal rail pierced her torso. She lay on the floor of the bus, covered not only in blood, but in gold dust that another passenger, a painter, had been carrying in his bag. It is truly a miracle that she survived such an accident.

After the accident she wrote in her diary, "A little while ago, not much more than a few days ago, I was a child who went about in a world of colors of hard and tangible forms. Everything was mysterious and something was hidden. Guessing what it was was a game for me. If you knew how horrible it is to know suddenly, as if a bolt of lightning elucidated the earth, now I live in a painful planet, transparent as ice, but it is as if I learned everything at once in seconds. I became old in instance, and everything today is bland and lucid. I know that nothing lies behind. If there was something, I would see it."

She was in bed in a full body cast for three months following the accident, and it was during this time that she began to paint. The world gradually became less bland and more colorful. First she drew on her body cast. Then her parents brought her a custom-made easel for her bed and some oil paints, and they placed a mirror above the easel so that she could see herself. "I paint myself," she said, "because I am often alone and I am the subject I know best." She wanted to begin again, painting things just as she saw them with her own eyes and nothing more, she said.

Out of this immense tragedy was born the artist, Frida Kahlo, a painter who depicted what she saw within and around her with a vivid and often painful realness. Now when life gets us down and it feels like the world is spinning out of control, many of us default toward poor self-care, right? Does that sound familiar? We allow ourselves to be sucked into the 24-hour media horror. We sleep less, don't give our body the food that it needs, we care less for our appearance, we stop doing things that we love and that bring us joy, but not Frida.

Just as her cast became a canvas, so did her body, whether she was out and about or confined to her bed, she adorned herself with beautiful jewelry, put bold, bright flowers in her hair and wore colorful, traditional Mexican clothing. She turned her medical corsets prescribed by her doctors into works of art, and even after having one leg amputated, she wore fabulous shoes on her prosthesis. Perhaps all of this was a way to cover up her disabilities. Perhaps it was a way of arming herself against pain. Perhaps it was a way of defiantly celebrating her strength and power, and it could be all of these things.

One of her biographers, Kayla Klein wrote, "She was vivid, multicolored, and brimming with surprises, akin to a Mexican piñata. But she was destined to be shattered, life continued to deliver blow after blow to her. However, the piñata's fate is rendered all the more poignant by its vibrant beauty, which dances and sways prior to its destruction."

As her own muse, Frida found the beauty inside herself amidst all the brokenness. It's almost as if that gold dust that covered her body in the immediate aftermath of the bus accident never went away, but made her into a living, breathing artwork, akin to the Japanese art of Kintsugi in which broken pottery is pieced together with gold seams. She found beauty in the imperfection and brought it out, not letting that imperfection define or limit her. Frida wrote in her journal that there were two great accidents in her life. One was the trolley and the other was Diego.

"Diego was by far the worst." She said. Diego, that is Diego Rivera, the famous muralist, 20 years her senior, who began as the target of some of her pranks in grade school, went on to be one of the early critics and champions of her art and then became her husband. Their relationship was a soap opera before there were soap operas full of passion and political fervor and tequila and infidelity and art. That's Diego on the far right of the bottom photo. She called him, "My ugly toad." And he called her, "My little dove."

Frida created many paintings, some of which are too graphic to show here, representing the rollercoaster of emotions that came from her relationship with Diego. Shown here, if you can see on her forehead, she made paintings representing the rollercoaster of emotions that came from her body's inability to carry a baby, and from the homesickness that she experienced when traveling to the United States with Diego for his commissioned mural projects. This one is called My Dress Hangs There. Notice how despite she had so many self-portraits, this was not one of them. She was not there.

While Frida disdained the institution of the Catholic Church, she was captivated by Catholic ex-votos, or votive offerings, tiny paintings that Catholics offered as gratitude for miracles. She and Diego had a collection of almost 500 lining the walls of their blue house in Mexico City. Each one of these little paintings depicts a human disaster, an accident or sickness or death or robbery, and the figures in the scene are appealing to saints or angels or Christ or God for divine intervention to save them. You can see the influences of these gruesome and agonizing scenes in some of Frida's art, but the main difference being the absence of the divine. Diego said of Frida's paintings, "Never before has a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas." Frida externalized her pain in a way that's incredibly difficult for most people to do. It is palpable in her paintings.

This is why today her works are used by some therapists to help patients, especially Hispanic women, talk about their experiences of emotional and physical trauma such as infidelity and violence and infertility. While painting or talking about one's trauma is difficult, it is also for many people a crucial step toward healing. Frida's art gives these women permission to be real about their pain and reminds them that they are not alone, and really she does this for every person who encounters her paintings and is open to it.

She once said, "At the end of the day, you can endure much more than we think we can." The power of Frida Kahlo's art is that she takes these experiences of immense loss and pain and transforms them into forces of life and creation. This, for her, is the meaning of revolution. Frida wrote, "Revolution is the harmony of form and color, and everything exists and moves under only one law, life. Nobody is separate from anybody else. Nobody fights for themselves. Everything is all and one. Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are no more than a process of existence. The revolutionary struggle in this process is a doorway open to intelligence."

One friend described Frida as a pantheist, in love with the world and all that was alive, seeing the sacred in everything she touched. Or as art researcher and curator, Ximena Jordan suggested, Frida may have viewed her survival as a miracle like in the *ex votos* paintings. The only difference is that she did not attribute that miracle to a deity of Catholic origin, but to the generosity of life.

On January 30th, 1953, Frida wrote, "In spite of my long illness, I feel immense joy in living." *Tree of Hope* depicts two Fridas, one who just had another operation on her back, one of over 30 in her lifetime, and the other sitting up straight wearing a vibrant red dress, holding one of those medical corsets that she had to wear and also holding a sign that reads, "Tree of Hope, Remain Strong." Just one year before her death, Frida had her first exhibition in her hometown of Mexico City. Her doctor told her that she could not leave her bed to attend, so she was transported by ambulance and placed in her bed in the gallery.

*Tree of Hope* was among the paintings on display there. She returned home from the event exhausted, but savoring the praise, and writing about her experience in her diary, she concluded the entry by echoing the words in her painting *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*, perhaps a reminder to herself.

Two months later, she had part of her leg amputated. Her response was, "Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?" The final year or so of her life was marked by a shift toward still life paintings featuring produce from her garden and from the market, but they were not the placid or static image that you might envision when you hear still life. They were pulpy melons and pomegranates, some punctured with tiny flags, dripping what almost looked like tears. In some of the paintings she incorporated peace doves and revolutionary slogans representing her fierce devotion to the Communist Party. They were fruit, yes, but they were personal. They were hymns to life.

Her last painting, created eight days before she died, was of cut watermelons with the words, *Viva la Vida*, or *Long Live Life*. "I joyfully await the exit," She wrote in her diary shortly before her death, "and I hope never to return." Frida died at age 47 on July 13th, 1954, 71 years ago today.

Frida Kahlo has become an icon. She is an icon for Chicanos, for feminists, for the LGBTQ community, for people with disabilities, for activists and artists. Her life, her work, her signature unibrow and distinctive sense of style are recognized around the world, and marketed in ways that she could have never imagined and probably wouldn't approve of. As we muse about the ways that Frida Kahlo inspires us, I invite you to consider what kind of creative interchange are you a part of that connects

you, as it did with Frida, with the generosity of life, with a sustaining source, with a God of many names and mystery beyond all our naming, or with the beauty that lies within?

Frida teaches us that every person has inherent worth and dignity and beauty, and that this beauty is present even in our imperfections. She shows us how personal suffering when shared can be transformed into universal truth. She teaches us that revolution is about recognizing the law of life, that we are interconnected and none of us fight only for ourselves. She teaches us about embracing transformation and keeping the Tree of Hope strong and rooted.

In her 1943 painting *Roots*, Frida depicts herself reclining in the desert with a vine coming out of her chest, carrying the blood of life from her body through the vine and its roots into the earth. It's an image of pain and sacrifice, but also of creation. When I see this painting, I think of Rilke's words that TJ read earlier, "Fear not the pain. Let its weight fall back into the earth, for heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas. The trees you planted in childhood have grown too heavy. You cannot bring them along. Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold."

Sometimes we need to let go of the things that have grown too heavy, channel them into something like a painting and move into a space where something new is possible. The recently deceased theologian, Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one, the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

So, I don't care if you can't paint or draw or sculpt or take amazing photos, all of us can be artists in this way, keeping alive the ministry of imagination. I believe Frida would want us to do that right now, in this time when the rhetoric is so much about going back to when things were supposedly great, and so many forces are conspiring against life and love and the thriving of all. So, friends, let us channel the spirit of Frida today as we wholeheartedly sing our final hymn, saying yes to Life, yes to truth, and yes to love. Just as long as I have breath may it be so, and amen.