

ART

# The Hybrid Sources of Frida Kahlo

by John Zarobell



**F**rida Kahlo was an exceptionally original artist whose paintings sometimes seem to emerge from her consciousness and experience without prior mediation. While Kahlo was an innovative artist who possessed a highly particular vision, it is not true that her art is without sources. The problem is that few art historians outside Mexico are familiar with the pictorial source material from which she drew her inspiration. Many scholars have documented the interest of Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera in Pre-Columbian sculpture and Mexican folk art, but her other influences are less well-known. This article will look at Kahlo's art in relation to a body of sources including 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican portraiture, European modernist art and Spanish colonial painting in order to provide a more complete picture of the resources she deployed in generating her unforgettable imagery.

Kahlo's interest in *retablo* painting, particularly the *ex-voto* tradition of producing paintings as offerings to saints in order to request intervention or give thanks for miracles performed, is evident throughout her work. Another popular painting tradition in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico was portraiture, as demonstrated by the careers of artists such as José María Estrada (1811-62) and Hermenegildo Bustos (1832-1907). The portraiture of Bustos, in particular, demonstrates a certain skill with painterly materials though it is clearly not the product of academic training. His paintings were made to commemorate special occasions, and they possess a frankness and immediacy that provide an air of authenticity. Neither the sitters nor the artist appear pretentious, and it is this spirit and tradition that guide Kahlo in her portraits from 1930 to 1931, including her own so-called wedding portrait, "Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera," 1931 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art). The painting exhibits a naïve style that she absorbed from this earlier tradition, and the use of this style shows that Kahlo intended it as an intimate picture for a close friend, the philanthropist and collector, Albert Bender. Kahlo produced this portrait as a gift for Bender, who had been instrumental in helping secure a U.S. visa for the communist Rivera, presumably to thank him for his generosity. In this sense, the motivation for the picture does derive from the *retablo* tradition

Left: Frida Kahlo painting "Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States," 1932. This work, shown on pages 26-27, was completed during Kahlo's stay in Detroit with Diego Rivera while he worked on the "Detroit Industry" fresco. (Courtesy of the Rivera Archives at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1932. Photograph © 1932 The Detroit Institute of Arts.)

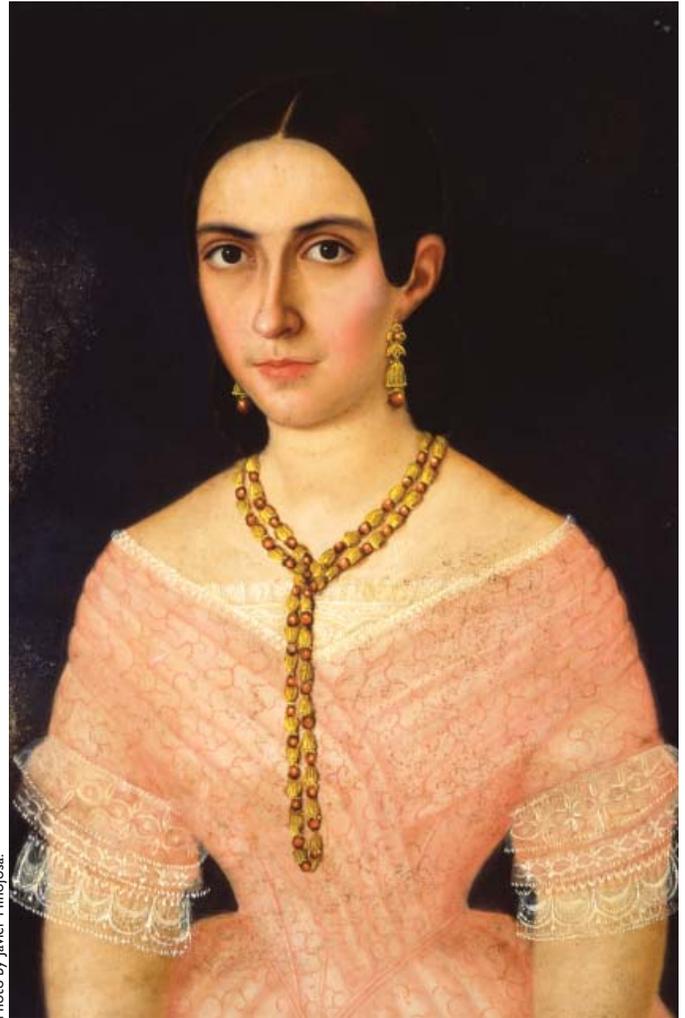


Photo by Javier Hinojosa.

"Portrait of a Young Woman with a Coral Necklace and Pink Dress," c. 1845, attributed to José María Estrada, oil on zinc laminate, 35.5 x 25.5 cm. Colección Museo Soumaya, Fundación Carlos Slim.

(Bender intervened on Rivera's behalf), and Kahlo has even dressed herself in the colors of the Mexican flag to stress her national roots.

Comparing Kahlo's "Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States," 1932, with a 19<sup>th</sup>-century portrait by Estrada, "Young Woman with Pearl Necklace" reveals Kahlo's interest in, and even identification with, the subjects of 19<sup>th</sup>-century portraiture. In her self-portrait, Kahlo pictures herself on a pedestal between the industrial North and a Mexico characterized by Mesoamerican art and ruins and native flora. This painting has been analyzed thoroughly in previous literature, and Kahlo's ambivalent position between these two cultures is reflected in her blank expression and the fact that the pedestal on which she stands is not labeled "Frida Kahlo" but "Carmen Rivera." There is also a flatness in the way the figure is painted, a rigidity in the modeling of the figure, dress and face; her pose is stiff and artificial.



“Landscape with Monkeys,” (oil on canvas) by Henri J.F. Rousseau (Le Douanier) (1844-1910)  
© The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania, USA/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

Comparing her image to the subject of the Estrada portrait, it seems almost as if Kahlo has copied this figure with certain alterations, such as the addition of the gloves, the Mexican flag and the cigarette she holds. The pink dress and coral necklace are there (photographs of Kahlo show that she owned both the dress and necklace) but also the turn of the head is the same, as is the line of hair that surrounds the faces of the two figures. Following Estrada, Kahlo has given her face a rigid appearance though there is ample evidence to demonstrate that her facility with oil paint by this point would have allowed her to render herself more realistically. In other words, Kahlo was looking either to

this portrait or to similar works in order to craft a particularly Mexican art and image of herself.

Other paintings demonstrate that Kahlo borrowed from European modernist art as well. In “Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird,” 1940, her debt to both Catholic and Mesoamerican religious symbolism is visible in the use of the crown of thorns, which has here become a necklace, and the hummingbird, an Aztec mythological symbol. Yet it is difficult to look at the background of this painting without thinking of the fantasy jungle paintings of Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), such as “Landscape with Monkeys,” c.1910. Rousseau was a self-taught artist

who was befriended and admired by members of avant-garde artistic circles in Paris, including Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire. (Kahlo’s husband Rivera also moved in these circles during his time in Paris before he met her.) Rousseau never left Paris and its environs, so his jungle scenes were conjured entirely from his imagination and visits to hothouse gardens. It seems odd for an artist from Mexico, whose territory includes tropical jungles, to be generating jungle imagery modeled on that of a modern Parisian. Yet the particularity of Rousseau’s pictorial style comes across in Kahlo’s work. Standing before a forest of huge leaves does not make sense in any realistic notion of pictorial space, but there is uncanny vividness in her portrayal: it projects the idea that the world the artist inhabits is a fantasy construction all her own. As with Rousseau, the modern world is repressed in this image, providing a background that exhibits the free reign of the artist’s imagination.

More pointed is her reference to Dada collage in “My Dress Hangs There,” 1933 (Femsa Collection, Monterrey, Mexico), which records Kahlo’s impressions of New York. The painting is a small work replete with urban imagery. Upon careful inspection, it becomes clear that the artist inserted images of crowds cut from local newspapers and magazines in the lower segment of the work. These crowds, whether attending protests, military parades or baseball games, provide a sense of seething life to the otherwise unoccupied city depicted by Kahlo. Her cutting and pasting in this work is contemporary to the collages of John Heartfield (1891-1968) in Germany. However, it is even closer to the most well-known collage from

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# Frida Kahlo



Frida Kahlo, "Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird," 1940.

Oil on canvas, 24 5/8 x 18 7/8 in.

Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

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Frida Kahlo, "Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States," 1932.

Oil on metal, 12 1/2 x 13 3/4 in.  
Collection Maria Rodriguez de Reoyo.





CARMEN RIVERA  
PINTÓ SU RE-  
TRATO EL  
AÑO 3 1932



Frida Kahlo, "My Nurse and I," 1937.

Oil over laminate, 30.5 X 35 cm.

The Art Archive / Dolores Olmedo Patiño / Gianni Dagli Orti.

Berlin Dada, Hannah Höch's "Cut with the Kitchen Knife..." 1919-20 (Staatliche Museum zu Berlin). Kahlo would have identified with this liberated and radical woman artist who was known for her caustic attacks on German postwar idealism and bourgeois culture, though her artistic aims were ultimately distinct.

Kahlo's life was unquestionably cosmopolitan, whether in Mexico City or New York, and she had access to many artistic sources, but it was Mexican imagery that she drew upon more than any other. In addition to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century portraiture that influenced her early career, there is another, less-explored source of Mexican imagery reflected in Kahlo's work, namely Spanish colonial painting. Kahlo's father, Guillermo Kahlo, was a photographer charged with the mission of recording Spanish colonial churches throughout Mexico. It is not known whether Frida accompanied him on any of these visits, however she did work as his assistant and so would have been familiar with the paintings of this period (from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century) which, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly hung in churches. For the purposes of this analysis, one comparison will have to suffice to make these connections clear.

This final comparison casts light on one of Kahlo's most enigmatic and powerful images, "My Nurse and I," 1937. In this painting, Kahlo depicts herself as a baby with the head of her adult self nursing at the breast of her dark-skinned Indian nursemaid whose face is replaced by that of an Olmec stone sculpture. In this work, Kahlo's assertion of her Mexican identity (*mexicanidad*) is evident; she is drinking the milk of her spiritual Mesoamerican ancestors, and from this source



Cristóbal de Villalpando, detail of "The Lactation of Saint Dominic," late 17<sup>th</sup>/early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Oil on canvas, 142 1/8 x 189 3/8 in., Church of Santo Domingo, Mexico City/Conaculta, Dirección General de Sitios y Monumentos del Patrimonio Cultural.

her identity is formed (complete with unibrow). This interpretation is extended when one compares this image with a painting by the renowned baroque Mexican artist Cristóbal de Villalpando (1649-1714) from the second most prominent cathedral in Mexico City, the Church of Santo Domingo. In this painting, Saint Dominic is seen receiving the supreme reward for his hermetic, spiritual life: milk from the breast of the mother of Christ that can be seen shooting across space into his mouth. If Saint Dominic becomes the "milk brother" of Christ as he miraculously drinks from the same holy breast, Frida portrays herself as the recipient of a similarly miraculous occurrence. On the one hand, she is a baby drinking at the breast of her nursemaid; on the other, she is the full-grown

milk sister of all Mesoamericans. This painting makes visible her indigenous identity and sources of artistic inspiration even as she depicts this spiritual formation in a Rousseau-inspired jungle. Her creativity is unmistakable and was in many respects unequalled, but like her, it emerged from multiple hybrid sources.

**John Zarobell was the Coordinating Curator for the Frida Kahlo exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He spoke for CLAS on September 24, 2008.**