

Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings: Indigenuity and Political Commitment

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Source: *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn, 1990 - Winter, 1991), pp. 8-13

Published by: Woman's Art Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3690692>

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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.

Kahlo died eleven days after participating in a public protest opposed to American intervention in Guatemala. On July 14, 1954, her body lay in state in the magnificent foyer of the Belles Artes 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 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 19th century, and by the early 20th 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 20th century, the United States began to replace 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-19th-century intellectuals, could trace their roots to an early civilization based upon a combination of communism and labor leading to fraternity and virtue.³ Allegedly,

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Indigenuity and Political Commitment

By Janice Helland

from this early simplified society grew the complex structure of Aztec society.

Alfredo Chavero, a 19th-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* (Fig. 1), 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*.

Kahlo's particular form of *Mexicanidad*, a romantic national-

ism that focused upon traditional art and artifacts uniting all *indigenistas* regardless of their political stances, revered Aztec traditions above and beyond those of other pre-Spanish native cultures. She expressed her deeply felt nationalism in art by favoring 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 on the Aztec, rather than Mayan, Toltec, or other indigenous cultures, corresponds to her political 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-materialism 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.⁴

For a time, Frida Kahlo was also the "darling" of New York and Paris art circles. She was courted by the "pope of Surrealism," Andre 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.⁵ 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 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷

Certainly, as French theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have suggested, women must “speak” and “write” their own experiences,⁸ 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*,”⁹ 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).¹⁰ However, the crossed bands are associated with the Aztec god of death (or sacrifice), Michlantecuhli, often found on Death Stone boxes.¹¹ 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 squatting figure to the right is a pastiche of the many squatting 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 Antropología, Mexico City). The temple in the upper left resembles the Main Temple Area at Tenochtitlan depicted in one of Fray Bernadino de Sahagun’s 16th-century codices or the drawing of Montezuma’s Palace in the *Codex Mendoza* (c. 1541-42; Bodleian Library, Oxford).¹² 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,”¹³ 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), scourges 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.



Fig. 2. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States* (1932), oil on metal, 31 x 35 cm. Manuel Reyero, New York. Photo: Christie's.

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.¹⁴ 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 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 nine-layered Mictlan, the Aztec underworld; the historic chieftan of the early Chichimec, 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.¹⁵ 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. Aztec art often represents the "heart" or life center as drops of (or spurting) blood.

The Aztec heart, according to Laurette Séjourné, "is the place of union where the luminous consciousness is made."¹⁶ She discusses the spiritual associations between the search into one's heart with its accompanying pain and the iconography of the wounded or bleeding heart in Aztec imagery. This wounded heart with drops of blood, which recurs so frequently in Aztec art, is shown most dramatically in *The Two Fridas* (1939). One Frida wears a Tehuana dress, 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.

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 her thigh near the wound are spiky plants, which probably refer to the use of thorns for self-mutilation perpetrated by Aztec priests.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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."²¹

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.²² It pools near the hem of the Tehuana dress and splatters onto the skirt. 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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)* (Württembergisches 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.²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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 Freud* (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, Huitzilopichtli, 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



Fig. 3. Frida Kahlo, *My Dress Hangs Here* (1933), oil and collage on masonite, 46 x 50 cm. Dr. Leo Eloesser Estate. Courtesy Herbert Hoover Gallery.

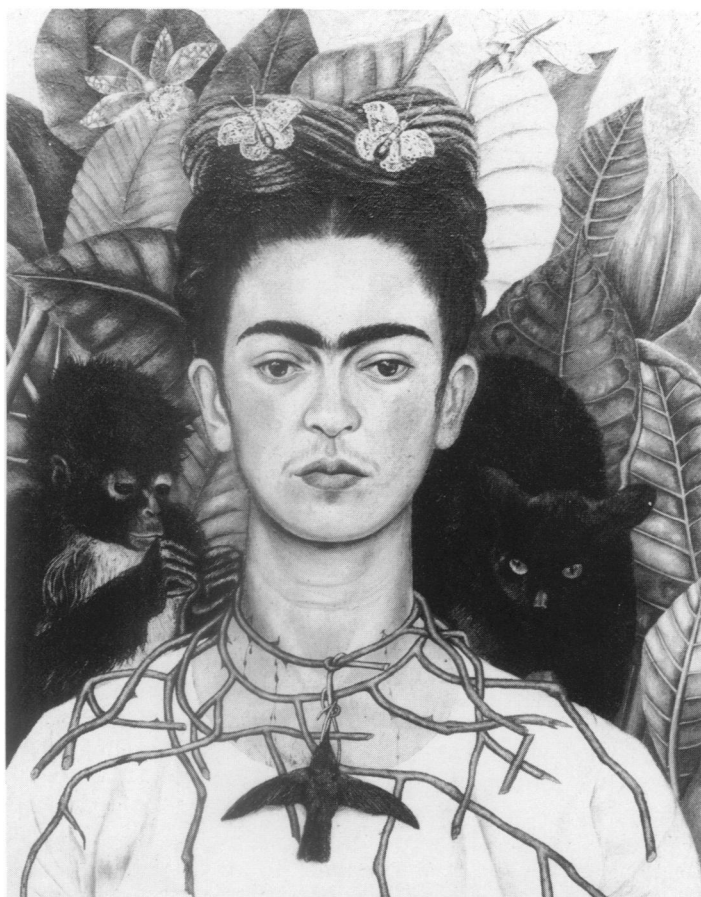


Fig. 4. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940), oil on wood, 63 x 49 cm. University of Texas, Austin.

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 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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.*²⁹

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

A brief version of this paper was presented at the Universities Art Association of Canada in Ottawa, November 1985. In addition to faculty members in the Department of History in Art at the University of Victoria who generously offered their time and assistance during the preparation of this paper, I thank S. L. Cline, University of California, Santa Barbara; Ralph Croizier, University of Victoria; and Reesa Greenberg, Concordia University, Montreal, for their critical comments and suggestions.

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 Coyoacan, Kahlo's birth- and deathplace, that the last Aztec ruler, Cuauhtemoc, 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* (Harmondsworth, 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 Pernoud, "Une autobiographie mystique: la peinture de Frida Kahlo," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (No. 6, 1983), 43-48, 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 18th and 19th 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.

5. See Andre Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera," reprinted in Breton's *Surrealism and Painting* (London: Macdonald, 1972). For a discussion of a "natural affinity" between Surrealism and pre-Columbian imagery, see Nancy Breslow, "Frida Kahlo: A Cry of Joy and Pain," *Americas* (March 1980), 36-37. Breslow is one of the few Kahlo scholars who writes on her indigeneity.

6. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 59.

7. Herrera, *Frida Kahlo* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1978), 4. For a more theoretical (and political) discussion of Kahlo's work, see Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982). See also Terry Smith, "From the Margins: Modernity and the Case of Frida Kahlo," in *Block* (No. 8, 1983), 11-23.

8. See Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" *Signs* (Autumn 1981), 41-55, and "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* (Summer 1976), 875-93; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985).

9. All the paintings discussed in this essay are illustrated in Helga Prignitz-Poda, Salomon Grimberg, 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).

11. 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 Tenochtitlan* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1983), 56-58. Esther Pasztory, *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.

12. 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.

13. "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), 160-69, 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 found it." (68) I submit that Kahlo's work demonstrates both a "faith in her own experience" and "a profound scepticism about society."

14. See Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (London: Cassell, 1946), 30, for a rather romanticized description of the Tehuanas, and Joseph Whitecotton, *The Zapotecs: Princes, Priests, and Peasants* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1977), for information about

the women and their lifestyles. Breslow, in "Cry of Joy," appropriately suggests that Kahlo's Tehuana dress represents the Zapotec, the "unconquered" people.

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 McGowan 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), 160.

18. See Herrera, *Frida*, 190-91.

19. Pasztory, *Aztec Art*, 57.

20. Herrera identifies the square as one in Coyoacan (*Frida*, 17), and conducts a Freudian analysis of the work. She also compares the "broken" sculpture with Kahlo's "brokenness." At the same time, she pointed out that each of the inhabitants of the painting was modeled after an artifact owned by the Riveras. (16-17) On the other hand, Mexican art historian Ida Rodríguez-Prampolini, in "Remedios Varo and Frida Kahlo: Two Mexican Painters," *Surrealisme peripherique* (Montreal: University of Montreal, 1984) stresses Kahlo's realism.

21. Herrera, *Frida*, 17.

22. Herrera also views this painting as a psychological statement of grief: "As a symbol of domesticity, the wounded table must stand for Frida's broken marriage." (*Frida*, 280) Rivera's numerous extramarital affairs and the divorce have been cited as the reason for much emotional turmoil in Kahlo's life, even though she herself had many affairs. Rivera's emotional state at the time has not been explored, although Herrera writes that he was very dependent upon Kahlo. The artists remarried in 1940.

23. This kind of imagery is also found in the work of many Mexican artists and writers. See Barbara Brodman, *Mexican Cult of Death in Myth and Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1976), for a discussion of life-from-death metaphors in Mexican literature.

24. Herrera, *Frida*, 281.

25. As Pasztory states in her discussion of the skeletal goddesses in *Aztec Art*, "death was chaos, evil, and darkness overcoming the forces of order, good, and light; yet it was also necessary, for without it life could not continue." (220)

26. *Ibid.*, 158.

27. In *My Art, My Life* (New York: Citadel, 1960), Rivera tells us that "Frida detested Trotsky's politics but, desiring to please me," she met him and invited him to stay in Coyoacan. By 1940 political differences existed between Rivera and Trotsky as well. (229-30)

28. *Narodnost* refers to the loosely organized populist ideals growing out of the anarchistic socialism of the 19th-century *Narodniki*. *Partinost*, "party consciousness" or "party spirit," implies total dedication to a centralized leadership. See Jerry Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1979), 10-16 and 116.

29. In a 1952 letter from Kahlo to Antonio Rodriguez, quoted in Herrera, *Frida*, 263.

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