FRIDA KAHLO

Mexican painter Frida Kahlo was born in 1907, but later she told people she was born in 1910. It's not that she wanted to seem younger – 1910 was the year of the Mexican Revolution and Kahlo wanted to identify herself with Mexican culture and pride. With that goal in mind, she painted self-portraits and other scenes to represent different aspects of Mexican culture and women's experiences in that culture. She would go on to become a popular figure in Mexico and around the world, as a person who stood against the stereotypes2 and cultural expectations of her time. Kahlo was a passionate artist who loved her country and valued being true to herself over all else. She did not behave how women were expected to in the early twentieth century and her paintings, many of them self-portraits, were of a style never seen before at that time because she often experimented with the images she produced of herself. Her radical political beliefs3 and exciting lifestyle also set her apart. Her unique personal style – dramatic eyebrows, fancy flowery headdresses, and bright colours – is so recognizable that her portraits still show up on magazine covers and as Halloween costumes today.

Kahlo grew up at home with her parents in Coyoacán, Mexico, right outside of Mexico City. She described her childhood as "very, very sad," because her parents had a bad marriage and she was often sick. When she was six years old she contracted polio, a very serious disease affecting muscles and movement. Since the disease left one of her legs smaller and weaker than the other, her father encouraged her to get outside and bike, swim, and play sports, all unusual activities for a little girl at the time. Later she enrolled at National Preparatory School, one of 35 female students at a school of over 2,000 students.

ART

Kahlo fell in love with drawing at an early age. Her father's friend Fernando Fernandez gave her drawing lessons and even employed her as an engraving apprentice. He thought she was an extremely talented artist, but Kahlo never considered art as a career. However, at the age of 18 Kahlo was riding a bus when it collided with a streetcar, and she was so badly injured in the ribs, back, and pelvis that she had to spend three months on bed-rest to recover. She spent those long hours painting, mostly self-portraits and some portraits of her friends from school. Though she recovered, she would spend the rest of her life in pain. Because of this, pain was a theme often featured in her work.

MEXICAN HERITAGE

After she recovered she started socializing with her friends again and joined the Mexican Communist Party. The political activism the group practiced gave Kahlo greater appreciation for Mexican culture, especially when it came to the role women played within it. She continued painting, and in 1928 she met Diego Rivera, a famous artist and fellow member of the Communist Party. She asked him if her paintings were good enough to make a living on; Rivera was extremely impressed by her unique work. Kahlo and Rivera went on to get married the next year.

Over the next few years, Kahlo continued to embrace her traditional Mexican heritage. She wore traditional dress (long, colorful dresses, fancy headdresses, and heavy jewelry) and changed her artistic style to reflect traditional Mexican folk art. Kahlo believed that her lifestyle, fashion choices, and art all reflected her feminism5 and spirit of Mexican independence.

Kahlo maintained her style when she and Rivera moved to the United States in 1930. The couple lived in several cities in just a few years, and both enjoyed success in the art world. Kahlo displayed her artwork in galleries and became popular with the American press, who appreciated her strong English and passion for art and her home country. Sadly, Kahlo suffered from more health problems while living in the United States, as she would for the rest of her life. She became homesick and convinced Rivera to move back to Mexico with her.

RELATIONSHIPS

The couple led a unique and varied life back in a rich suburb of Mexico City. They were commissioned6 to paint a bridge together; Kahlo painted her half blue and Rivera painted his half pink and white, and the colours met in the middle. The bridge became a symbol and meeting place for artists all over the city. They hosted the famous Russian political refugee Leon Trotsky in their house for two years. Kahlo met a French art critic8 who loved her work and offered to host an art show for her in Paris. Although the show was not as successful as she hoped, she did become the first modern-day Mexican artist featured in the Louvre, Paris' world-famous art museum.

Continual relationship troubles with Rivera and never-ending health issues only pushed Kahlo to paint even more. She produced some of her most famous paintings during the early 1940s, such as The Two Fridas, Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair, and The Wounded Table, and her art was featured in galleries from Mexico City to New York. She also adopted some unique pets, including spider monkeys and parrots. During this same period, she began teaching at an art school in Mexico City, where she encouraged her students to be informal with her and taught them more about traditional Mexican folk art. Kahlo's paintings became so popular around Mexico that she could usually sell a painting before even finishing it, and most group art exhibitions in the country featured at least some of her work.

DEATH AND LEGACY

Unfortunately, by 1950, Kahlo's health was so bad she was mostly confined to bed. She lobbied for political causes as much as she could. Her nurses observed that a combination of medicine and increased alcohol consumption changed her painting style to be much more rushed, colourful, and intense. Her very last drawing was a black angel, which many people see as a foreshadowing10 of her death in 1954.

Kahlo's fame only grew after she died. Her family home opened as a museum in 1958, and the feminist movement in the 1970s led to a re-examination of her paintings as feminist icons. Kahlo's paintings are a unique mix of Mexican folk art, realistic portraits and still-life images, as well as gory interpretations of history and emotions. She is, today, one of Mexico's most famous artists, and is considered to be a woman who was ahead of her time. Exhibitions of her work have been featured all around the world, films have been made about her life, and her paintings have sold for a lot of money. Her self-portraits are so iconic that, today, some people call her "the mother of the selfie" – so next time you snap a picture of yourself, remember Frida Kahlo and her passionate commitment to culture and art, which she said was "the frankest expression of myself."