

Paintings Born from Toxic Love: Six Works by Frida Kahlo

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Abstract: Many of the works of Mexican female painter Frida Kahlo were created in the sweetness and pain of love, and her ups and downs in love with Diego Rivera have become part of her creative inspiration. This article takes Frida Kahlo's six works -- "Frida and Diego Rivera", "The Two Fridas", "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair", "Diego in My Thoughts", "Diego and Frida" and "Diego and I" -- as examples to analyze how her emotions are externalized into certain meaningful forms, thus creating rich visual language, artistic appeal, and aesthetic effects. These six works demonstrate Frida Kahlo's creative tendencies and artistic features, such as her emphasis on details and symbolism, her ability to construct a comprehensive text that echoes images and words, her strong feelings, intense moods, and extraordinary imagination that together construct a rich and complex artistic world. The diverse and intricate imagery triggers infinite speculation and association among viewers, and the tension of the painting language makes her works infectious and touching.

Key Words: Frida Kahlo; emotional forms; visual language; imagination; symbolization

1. The abnormal love between Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: art appreciation entangled with affectionate attachment

"I have experienced two great disasters in my life, one is the tram accident, and the other is Diego Rivera, the latter far outweighs the former." When Frida Kahlo witnessed her husband having an affair with her own younger sister Cristina, she didn't get angry, didn't go crazy, just coldly dropped the above words. She had long been accustomed to her husband's promiscuity and betrayal, but this time it only made her even more heartbroken. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were like two twisted and tangled vines, the two are known as the most passionate painter couple in modern and contemporary art history, but only Frida Kahlo herself knows the bitterness behind it.

When Frida Kahlo entered the National Preparatory School of Mexico at the age of 15, Diego Rivera was invited to create murals for her school. As a renowned painter at that time, Diego Rivera was hailed as a beacon and flag bearer of modern Mexican art, leading the cultural "Renaissance" that began on a large scale after the Mexican Revolution. Frida Kahlo often sat on the floor of the school auditorium and watched Diego standing on the scaffolding painting the walls of the auditorium, sometimes watching for hours. According to Diego Rivera's recollection, "Her eyes moved with my brush, and I saw an unusual dignity and self in this girl. A strange flame flickered in her eyes." Frida Kahlo also recalled declaring to her classmates, "One day, I will be pregnant with Diego Rivera's child."

Although she later fell in love with Alejandro Gomez Arias, the leader of the "Hat Party" (In Spanish: Los Cachuchas) for unknown reasons, but after she was involved in a car accident and heartbreak, she reunited with Diego Rivera. They met each other again at a party hosted by Italian female photographer Tina Modotti, by that time, Frida Kahlo was already a 21-year-old mature woman. As soon as the party ended, she decided to bring her three paintings to meet Diego Rivera, who was creating a new mural for the Mexican National Education Bureau. Afterwards, she recalled, "I was really a newborn calf, not afraid of tigers. I dared to call him down from the scaffold to see my paintings because I really wanted to know if my paintings had any value." Diego Rivera recalled, "As I flipped through her paintings one by one, I was instantly stunned. The canvas was filled with vibrant and passionate expression, precise depiction of character images, and a serious attitude towards art. Without a doubt, this young girl was clearly a true artist." A few days later, Diego Rivera visited Frida Kahlo's home, the famous Blue House (In Spanish: Casa de Azul), where he admired more of Frida's paintings and once again affirmed her artistic talent. It was at this time that they couldn't help but fall deeply in love.

On August 21, 1929, with the joy of a cuckoo singing in spring, Frida Kahlo married Diego Rivera, who was over twenty years her senior. She didn't care about Diego's previous failed marriages and

notorious promiscuity. She once said, "Let him go wild with other women! Becoming Diego Rivera's wife is the most wonderful thing in the world!" What she could not foresee was that at this moment, her eyes filled with longing, would shed bitter tears inconstantly in the future; What she could not foresee was that at this moment, her lips moistened by the sweet and fragrant kisses would eventually dry out and become haggard due to arguments, curses, and shouting; What she could not foresee was that at this moment, the heart intoxicated by the joy of the wedding would sink into melancholy in the future, and her tolerance and generosity would be burned to ashes by countless betrayals in the future; What she could not foresee was that at this moment, her crystal clear innocence would be pierced by thorns called "loneliness" one by one in the future, causing her to bleed constantly.

2. A tribute to the marriage and a vow to be a tolerant wife: "Frida and Diego Rivera" (1931)

In the spring of 1931, less than two years after their marriage, Diego Rivera was already deeply entwined with the legendary American tennis champion Helen Wills. He boldly painted her nude on the ceiling of the lunch club at the San Francisco Pacific Stock Exchange. Meanwhile, Frida Kahlo was creating "Frida and Diego Rivera" as a tribute to their marriage.



Image 1. Frida and Diego Rivera (1931), by Frida Kahlo

Website source: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/frida-and-diego-rivera.jsp>

In this painting, Diego Rivera has a big body and a round waist, with a pair of plump feet firmly stepping on the ground, holding painting tools in his hand, and his slanted gaze faintly revealing his arrogant arrogance; Frida, wearing a traditional Mexican dress, tilted her head slightly and made a bird-like posture, delicate and gentle. Her slender tiptoes stood in sharp contrast to Diego's big feet. Although they held hands, Frida's left hand and Diego's right hand only lightly overlapped, and the fingertips of both hands didn't even touch much. The peace dove flies above Frida's head, holding a banner in its mouth that reads, "Here you can see us: Frida Kahlo and my beloved husband Diego Rivera. I created this painting for Mr. Albert Bender in the pleasant city of San Francisco in April 1931. " (Albert Bender, a loyal supporter of Diego Rivera. Diego was once denied entry into the United States due to his communist identity. Albert provided a personal guarantee for Diego and with his help, he was able to enter the United States smoothly.)

All the details suggest that Diego is a towering artistic master in Frida's heart, Frida was willing to be an admirer of her husband, respecting his private space and giving him enough freedom. Regarding the tumultuous relationship between Diego and Helen, she responded as follows: "Diego is not anyone's husband and will never be, but he is a great life partner. " This painting shows a certain creative tendency

of Frida Kahlo: her works blend delicate beauty with rough beauty, combining text with images, and every detail in her works seems to be rich in symbolic meaning. German art historian Aby Warburg has a famous saying in the field of art theory: "God resides in the details." In Aby Warburg's view, the truth of a work is often placed in the details of an image that are easily overlooked by people. When appreciating Frida Kahlo's works, viewers should particularly delve into the meaning conveyed by the details.

The two of them maintained an independent and ambiguous relationship throughout this marriage, both enjoying their private lives. Frida Kahlo once threatened to be Mexico's most famous slut, she was bisexual and having had many lovers, but her interactions with her lovers were closer to Platonic spiritual love. Her physical desires are both bold and subtle, sometimes wandering in ambiguous gray areas, unlike Diego Rivera's recklessness or unscrupulousness. Therefore, her extramarital affair was jealous for Diego, but Diego's extramarital affair was heartbreaking for her. Although she was accustomed to cutting off her pain along with her hair -- every time Diego betrayed her, she would cut off her long hair that Diego particularly pitied, she never expected Diego to covet her own younger sister Christina. Their affair was like someone suddenly piercing the back of her head with a thick iron needle.

3. Hard to snip, never to grip: "The Two Fridas" (1939) and "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940)

In 1934, due to ovarian inflammation, Frida Kahlo, who was nearly three months pregnant, was once again forced to terminate her pregnancy. The tragedy of having no children deepened her loneliness, and the aftermath of the tram accident prevented her from giving birth to a baby. Every pregnancy ended in a forced miscarriage. She yearned for children, just like the tribe on a deserted island yearning for the continuation of their bloodline. She sought mercy from the Lord but ultimately could not get the mercy. Just as she was sobbing day and night, Diego had already set his sights on Christina. She tried to turn her heartbreak into frozen condensation again, just like how she treated life and fate, but at that moment her marriage had collapsed from within, devastated. In 1935, she separated from Diego, and for many years thereafter, she could not forgive her sister who had no regard for sisterhood. In 1939, Diego officially filed for divorce from Frida, stating that "I only want to have sex with any woman who attracts me and is attracted to me. Is that wrong?" Nightingale wept with blood and sang long songs, while Frida permanently engraved her inner scars on the milky white canvas, stroke by stroke. During their separation and divorce, she created several oil paintings. The most famous among them are "The Two Fridas" (1939) and "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940).



Image 2. The Two Fridas (1939), by Frida Kahlo

Website source: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-two-fridas.jsp>

"The Two Fridas" (1939) depicts one Frida dressed in traditional Mexican Tehuana clothing and the other Frida wearing a European Victorian style long dress. The right hand of the Mexican Frida on the left is linked to the left hand of the European Frida on the right, while the other hand that is left empty holds a miniature portrait of Diego Rivera and a pair of medical tweezers. The Mexican Frida has a darker skin tone, a reddish-brown soil color with characteristics of the indigenous Inca people; The skin color of European Frida is lighter, which is in line with the characteristic of most Europeans having fair skin color. The hearts of both Fridas are exposed outside the body, and the blood vessels of the two hearts are connected. The difference is that the European Frida's heart has been cut open, and its internal structure can be seen, as if it is in the process of surgery, while the Mexican Frida's heart is intact. The tweezers in the hands of European Frida cut through the blood vessels, and blood dripped uncontrollably onto the elegant Victorian white floral dress. The viewer could not distinguish how many of the decorative floral fragments were flying red petals and how many were splattered blood.

According to Fernando Gamboa, a friend of Frida, the inspiration for this painting comes from two works in the Louvre, one is Two sisters by Théodore Chassériau, a French romantic painter, created in 1843; and the other is Gabriel e d'Estr é es et une de ses sœurs, by an unknown painter of French Fontainebleau School in the late Renaissance, created in 1594. In early 1939, Frida Kahlo visited an exhibition at the Louvre and was deeply inspired by those two oil paintings she stumbled upon. Combining her own situation and emotions at the time, she created "The Two Fridas". The Mexican Frida was favored by Diego, while the European Frida was rejected by Diego. Mexican Frida, who deeply loves Diego, still cannot forget him. The miniature portrait of Diego in her hand is connected to the blood vessels leading to her heart; European Frida has gradually drifted away from Diego, so the place in her heart where Diego's name is engraved will be gouged out. The medical forceps in her hand symbolize that the surgery to remove Diego from her heart is being performed by herself. This intuitive and cruel way of expression allows viewers to instantly feel the bone penetrating sourness and heartache of being completely destroyed. Two Fridas hold hands, hinting at her inner struggles and contradictions, as she continues to hover low on the threshold of love.

The concept of this painting is very ingenious, and the details are also perfect, showcasing Frida Kahlo's amazing imagination and creativity. The ambiguity and chaos deliberately created by artists provide viewers with unlimited room for speculation. The influence of this painting on future generations is profound, it gave birth to the 1998 play of the same name -- "The Two Fridas", in which two actresses played different versions of Frida: one named Espina, meaning thorn; the other one is called Flor, which means flower.

The way "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940) conveys meaning is simpler and clearer.

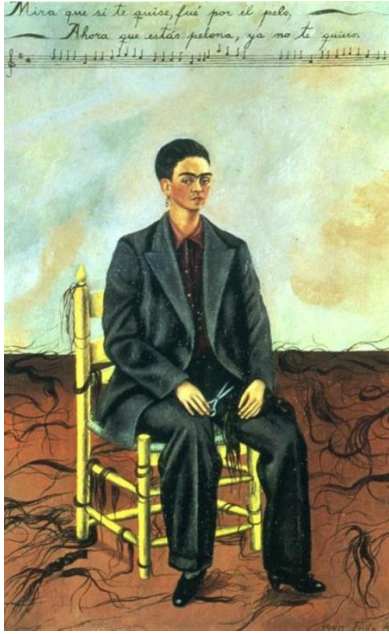


Image 3. Self Portrait with Cropped Hair (1940), by Frida Kahlo

Website source: <https://www.51artworld.com/2826.html>

In this painting, Frida Kahlo is dressed in a dark brown stand up collar shirt, a large navy-blue men's coat, gray work pants, and a pair of black leather shoes. She held scissors in her right hand and held the long hair she had cut with her left hand. Both the ground and the yellow chair she was sitting on were scattered with hair, curled, floating, and wandering as if they had come to life. Perhaps they were escaping from this sad place, or perhaps they were searching for their masters. At the top of the painting was a lyric: "Look, if I love you, it's for your hair; now that you're bald, I don't love you anymore. (In Spanish: *Mira, que si te quise fue por el pelo. Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero.*)" Just under this lyric, Frida Kahlo neatly drew a line of stave. The background of the entire painting -- brown floor and dull walls -- is extremely simple to the point of boredom. The scene of being alone in a room accentuated her isolation and distance, as if she were living in a secluded and enclosed space. She abandoned Diego's long hair and Tehuana long dress, which showed her independence and desire to break away from Diego at that time. She abandoned her long hair loved by Diego and her Tehuana long dress, which showed her independence and desire to break away from Diego at that time. But in reality, after the divorce, both of them realized that they couldn't let go of each other spiritually and artistically. Diego proposed to Frida again, and the two remarried in 1941.

The hair in this painting is so anxious and full of neurotic and crazy vitality. If the viewers gaze at this painting for a long time, they may feel the hair in the painting moving and wriggling, crawling out of the frame and towards each viewer. This tense suffocating feeling seems to force people to think of the crows in Vincent van Gogh's "Wheat Field with Crows" (1890), which symbolize misfortune and death and give viewers a strong sense of oppression. Another unique feature of "Self Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940) is the presentation of the lyrics and sheet music on the canvas, which gives the painting a sound that symbolizes the artist's unwillingness to remain silent, her desire to cry and scream, and her desire for the viewers to hear her voice. Frida Kahlo attempted to break through the silent and static frame of the painting by the voice, but at the same time, because this lyric came from a popular song at the time, viewers could also perceive Frida's self-mockery. Overall, this painting has a power that seems to have been accumulated for a long time and poised to take off and act.

4. Diego as a part of the soul, the mind and the body: from "Diego in My Thoughts" (1943) to "Diego and I" (1949)

From the summer of 1940 to 1943, Frida Kahlo created "Diego in My Thoughts".

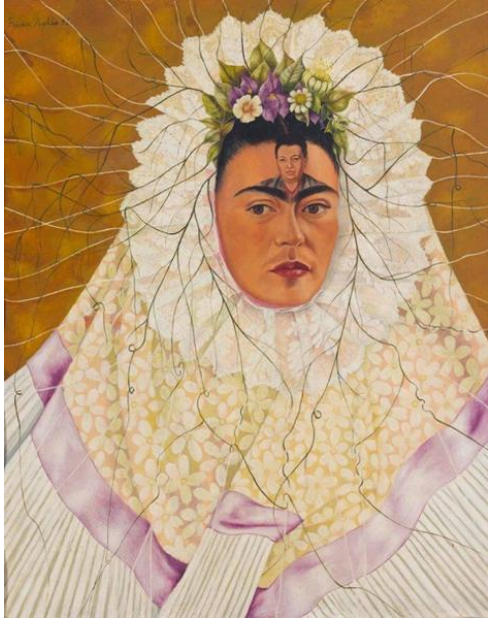


Image 4. Diego in My Thoughts (1943), by Frida Kahlo

Website source: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-as-a-tehuana.jsp>

This painting conveys her longing for Diego. Despite repeated betrayals, this longing has had never stopped and could not be contained. In the painting, she's tightly wrapped in Diego's beloved Tehuana dress, revealing only a solitary head. The collar with lace stood up vigorously, and white silk threads stretched outwards from every corner of the collar; the flower crown she wore extended thin green vines, also growing in all directions; white silk threads interweave with green vines to form a huge spider web. On her forehead, there was a painting of Diego's upper body. Her thick eyebrows, connected together, supported Diego's shoulders in the portrait. Both her and Diego's expressions were serious, with a hint of bitterness and sadness.

One important reason why this self portrait of Frida is thought-provoking is that although traditional Mexican clothing and plant elements occupy prominent positions in the painting, when these elements are combined and presented in an extraordinary and peculiar way, they convey the saintly temperament of Christianity. In the painting, the way that the collar of the Tehuana costume unfolds and surrounds Frida is just like a halo around Maria's head. It symbolizes shelter, as well as suffering and loyalty. When Frida was enveloped by the huge Tehuana dress, she felt as if she had gained a sense of security, her physical and emotional wounds were covered, and she seemed to have been healed. Overall, the composition of this painting and the way the portrait is portrayed have an inherent fit with the traditional Western image of the Virgin Mary. The Frida depicted in the painting is also solemn and dignified, symbolizing Frida's willingness to endure hardship and loyalty to love. It can be seen that in creating this painting, Frida used elements of Mexican ethnicity while expressing Christian style emotions. This painting reveals Frida's spiritual duality and cultural diversity as a Mexican painter. As Mexico was once colonized by Spain, indigenous culture and Christian culture intertwined into a complex cultural landscape.

Aby Warburg focuses on the form, style, and overall details of clothing in images. In his view, these details can be the protagonists of visual storytelling. For the painting "Diego in My Thoughts", undoubtedly, Frida Kahlo spent a lot of time and energy meticulously crafting the folds, patterns, and layering of the collar, as well as the way the Tehuana dress wrapped around her body. All these details are not flashy "zero-degree signifiers" just to show off skills, but rather participate in the formation process of the overall style of the complete image. The perfect combination of details gives the painting a solemn divinity and a martyrdom like endurance against betrayal.

In 1944, to commemorate her 15th wedding anniversary (excluding the brief divorce period from 1939 to 1940), she created "Diego and Frida".



Image 5. Diego and Frida (1944), by Frida Kahlo

Website source: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/diego-and-frida.jsp>

In this painting, Diego's right face and Frida's left face are combined to form a complete face, symbolizing their indispensability to each other. The two are no longer independent individuals, but complementary beings, and have grown into a whole. The gnarled trunk and branches tightly wrap around the neck of the two, implying their unbreakable, tangled yet deeply intertwined love. The sun and moon located on the left side of the picture symbolize the relationship between husband and wife, while the scallops and seashells pasted together at the bottom of the picture symbolize the union of spiritual desires. The background of the entire painting is a fiery and passionate red, as if saying, "Your blood has already merged into my meridians, and my blood has also merged into your veins." What might easily cause a controversial argument is the expressions of the two people in the painting: Diego seems to be smiling, while Frida seems to be melancholy and silently shedding tears. The two of them achieved a strange and wonderful harmony, which was naturally endowed by Frida Kahlo through imagination.

The entire painting is embedded in a magnificent and exquisite frame, with a unique design reminiscent of the ancient Greek lyre. The frame itself is adorned with shells and stones. It is interesting that the work and frame form a whole, which points to both an elegant and noble aesthetic style, as well as a passionate and passionate aesthetic style. The aesthetic and spiritual elements of European style and Mexican indigenous style have once again merged together.

In 1949, Frida Kahlo created "Diego and I".

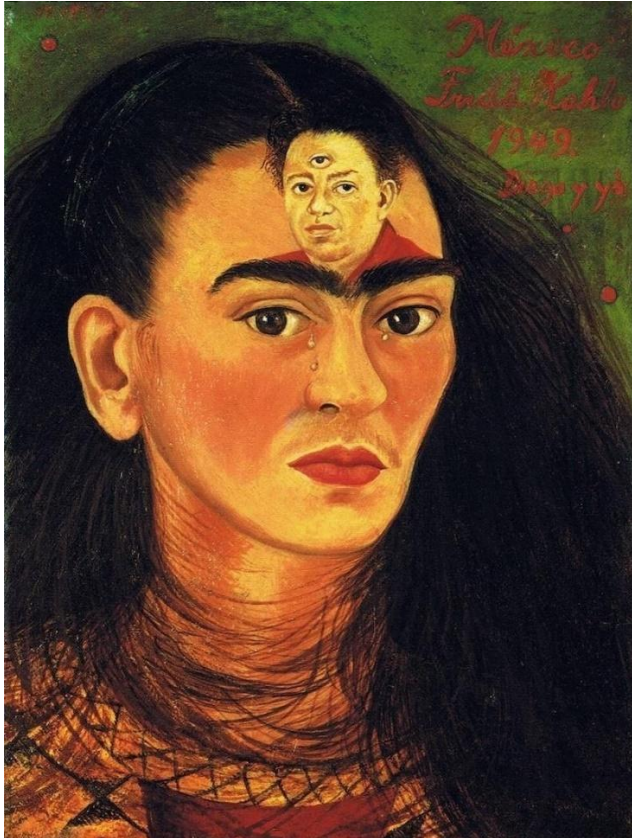


Image 6. Diego and I (1949), by Frida Kahlo
Website source: <https://www.fridakahlo.org/diego-and-i.jsp>

The emotional outburst of this work once again shocked the viewers. If the previous works still have calmness, restraint, and subtlety in expression, then this work is a complete release of sadness and heartbreak. Diego was once again painted on the forehead of Frida's self-portrait: Frida in the painting is in tears, her eyes sad and resolute; Diego in the painting is expressionless and appears numb. While the most eye-catching feature was Diego's third eye. Why did Frida draw a third eye for Diego? The Book of Revelation in the Bible symbolically describes the third eye. In Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, the third eye can connect the past and the future. Once the function of the third eye is activated, one can know everything in the world and comprehend the mysteries of the universe. It is likely that Frida wants to emphasize the status of Diego in her heart. For her, Diego is a transcendent and sacred existence. Despite repeated infidelity breaking her heart, she's still willing to protect this broken love. Frida in this painting is disheveled, with a portion of her long hair wrapped around her neck. The strands of hair seem like thin ropes that bind her neck, symbolizing the chaos and intense emotions that suffocate her.

This painting is a combination of static and dynamic, and the flowing tears are undoubtedly dynamic. They are praying for Diego to change his mind and calling for sympathy from the viewer. In the portrait, Frida's eyes and Diego's three eyes appear to be static, but they seem to be looking at the viewers, while the viewers are looking at them. This gaze process is dynamic to some extent, accumulating strength, and the viewers' contemplation and emotions slowly overflow.

5. Conclusion

Love nurtures and nourishes immortal works of art, even poisonous love can give birth to great works of art. Undoubtedly, Frida Kahlo is an artist with innate talent, which not only refers to her superb painting skills, but also to her artistic emotions, or artistic emotions. She is adept at unexpectedly transforming all her emotions -- whether happiness, melancholy, sadness, or anger -- into the formal language of painting, such as color, contrast, lines, composition, form, and so on. Most importantly, her

conception of each painting is clever and wise. Her paintings are filled with the radiance of sensibility and imagination, as well as the hidden aura of reason and contemplation.

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