

The Transition in Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait: Before and After 1939

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Abstract. The special life and experiences of artists usually serve as beginnings, motivation, and significant turning points for their artistic creation. Affected by various emotional changes, these artists show the influence of critical events in their styles of artwork, marking their stages of life. As one of the most important female artists and one of the legends of contemporary art, Frida Kahlo lived a life that is filled with miracles and tragedies. By looking through the timeline into her art of different times, we could match her stages of life with her change in style and develop a further understanding in how the life of the artists influences their work in art.

Keywords: *reality, self-portraits, surrealism, pain*

1. Introduction to Frida Kahlo

1.1 Review

Surrealism is an artistic movement that has had a lasting impact on painting, sculpture, literature, photography and film. Surrealists—inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories of dreams and the unconscious—believed insanity was the breaking of the chains of logic, representing this idea in their art by creating imagery that was unreal, juxtaposing unlikely forms onto unimaginable landscapes. Surrealism has never disappeared as a creative artistic principle.

According to scholars, Surrealism existed in spirit well before 1924, but Breton formally launched the movement that year with his Surrealist Manifesto. Surrealism, Breton wrote, is pure psychic automatism, intended to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other way, the true functioning of thought. Banished was the Neoclassical god of reason, the sureness of logic, and the need to portray an observable reality. It is an intensive exploration of the unconscious. Surrealists argued that we see only a surface reality. More important was uncovering the reality that, as Freud maintained, resided in the deep-seated secrets and desires of the unconscious mind.

He encouraged the use of dream like images, the juxtaposition of unrelated objects that would jar the imagination, and stream-of-consciousness writing. He called for the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality. He emphasized the concept of creating the marvelous images, either verbal or visual, that are mysterious, and poetic, and that jolt the audience into a new, unknown plane of reality and surreality.

As a surrealism painter, Frida Kahlo participated in the "International Exhibition of Surrealism" in 1940 at the Galeria de Arte, Mexicano. There, she exhibited her two largest paintings: *The Two Fridas* and *The Wounded Table* (1940). Surrealist Andrew Breton considered Kahlo a surrealist, a label Kahlo rejected, saying she just painted her reality. Frida Kahlo said:

They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality (Kahlo claimed in an interview with Time magazine in 1953).

At first glance, Frida Kahlo's works might look surrealist, with their strange floating shapes, interior and exterior perspectives, and bizarre objects. However, the main concern of surrealist art is to transform things into a new state, and produce some associations to lead to new meanings. Frida, however, stresses that her paintings come from her reality, her pain, and her sorrows. To her, the surrealist scenes are her life but were not made up. Those are the stories of her life and all the turning points that made Frida the woman she is. The paintings are autobiographies of her, just like her own quote that "I never paint dreams or nightmares. I paint my own reality," she said.

Frida has become a countercultural symbol of 20th century, and created a legacy in paint that continues to inspire the imagination and mind. Born in 1907, dead at 47, Frida Kahlo achieved

celebrity even in her brief lifetime that extended far beyond Mexico's borders, although nothing like the cult status that would eventually make her the mother of the selfie, her indelible image recognizable everywhere.

1.2 Self-Portrait

Most of the paintings of Kahlo involve elements of self-reflection. Conveying information of stories of her life or subconscious ideals, the paintings store a part of Frida's soul, makes her a round character in and out. Among all her paintings, those that attract me most are her self-portraits. Self-portraits are special in that they exhibit how the artists interpret or communicate with themselves, and what the portraits show has an additional meaning to the artist because we are standing on the side of the artist to perceive the image of one own. Many artists prefer to paint self-portraits not only because it is one of the most easily accessible subjects for training and exercising, but that it is also the most difficult of all, having so much knowledge of the self but should all shrink down to this one piece.

In a report interviewing contemporary artists, many explained the motive behind painting self-portraits: to have a free model to delve into the minor depictions of human body, to capture the essence of one's own self in order to better capture the essence of someone else; to show the world how one perceives oneself, to construct a window to the soul, to discover a new perception, to challenge one of the hardest things to do and to be honest about oneself.

There is a unique psychological issue that takes place when the painter look into his own eyes and face and paint his portrait. The painter's own face suddenly becomes a mirror to his soul, the real him, and strange things happen as you paint. I would recommend it to anyone in pursuit of the prize, 'know thyself'.

Similarly, in the paintings of Frida Kahlo, we can see a considerable amount of self-representation such as her special facial features, details implying her identity, and elements of Mexican culture. In order to advance into the motivation and incentives of her unique self-portraits – whether she is using them as a kind of self reflection, to tell stories, or as an identity of herself – we need to find the clues from Frida's specific works of art.

1.3 Time Period

In order to explore Frida's art, we should also look at the life of Frida and the period of her artwork. Now I will divide her life into three main parts.

1.3.1 Stage I

Born in Mexico City in 1907, Frida was the third daughter of Guillermo and Matilda Kahlo. Her father was a photographer of Hungarian Jewish descent, who had been born in Germany; her mother was Spanish and Native American. Her life was to be a long series of physical traumas, and the first of these came early.

At the age of 6, she was stricken with polio, which left her with a limp. She suffered from polio and contracted a virus in her legs.

At the age of 15, she met Diego Rivera, a famous painter at that time who was married, yet Kahlo was attracted to him but did not know how to deal with such emotions.

At the age of 18, a serious car accident caused the spine to break into three parts, cervical vertebra fracture, severe fracture of right leg, and crushed foot, after which 31 operations were performed. She was traveling in a bus that got into a huge accident. Consequently, she suffered serious injuries to her right leg and pelvis. The accident made it impossible for her to have children. This accident was very traumatizing and it took her many years to come to terms with it. Much of her artwork is influenced by this tragic event and the life-long battle against dealing with the memory and pain of this event.

At the age of 19, during her convalescence, she painted her first self-portrait, the beginning of a long series in which she charted the events of her life. Kahlo painted about seventy self-portraits.

The self-portraits demonstrate in her face her feelings of pain and love, loss and passion for those whom she loves.

Her paintings about physical pain started after her accident when she was 19, and after that many of the elements of her self-portraits connected with her sufferings regarding to miscarriage, bruise, and pain.

1.3.2 Stage II

At the age of 21, she met Rivera again and instantly she fell in love with him and married him. Her marriage to Rivera was another huge influence on her paintings. Kahlo later expressed, "*I suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar knocked me down...the other accident is Diego.*" Throughout the rest of her life, she suffered many health problems with her legs and her back as well as miscarriages. Her husband continued to have affairs with other women as did she carry her own romantic affairs as well. Her health reached its lowest point when she had to have her leg amputated due to gangrene and her weight loss became so bad that she was bedridden for months.

At the age of 22, she got married. Her injuries led to three miscarriages and she was unable to have children for life. In the light of this, later she painted various paintings regarding birth, miscarriage, and life.

1.3.3 Stage III

Frida and Diego married in 1929, when Frida was 22. However, during the marriage, the two kept separate but communicated in studios and at work. Later on, the two were confronted with affairs with outsiders of the marriage, which greatly undermined their relationship.

In 1931, Frida painted *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera*. This painting resembles the wedding portrait of Diego and herself. This painting is interesting because both of them look very stiff and are not facing each other but rather facing forward. They do not seem to look happy and their hands are loosely clasped as if the connection between them was never as strong as one would expect in a newly married couple. Most of the painting has dull colors except for the bright red shawl that Frida is wearing. The features on both faces are exaggerated. On Frida, her eyebrows, her height and her small feet are very different when compared to Diego's huge stature, large head and large feet. This probably shows that it has not been a very smooth marriage.

When Frida turned 32, the two divorced and it was from then on Frida's paintings emphasized more on her identity, her special experiences, her belief and her sorrows. Even though a year from then Frida and Diego re-married, Frida could not forgo her underlying worries and confusions. She questioned about her self, her love in the world, her disabilities from her tragedies, her relationship with her husband, and her meaning in this world.

When she died in her fifties, she claimed, "Hope the exit is joyful. And I hope never to return." Her paintings are about her reality and her thoughts. Even though some claim them as surreal, they are actually her reality.

In conclusion, Kahlo's paintings are unique in that they capture many emotions that a human being can experience in a life-time in a single painting. However, her paintings are even more unique because they capture the feelings that many women such as herself experience as well. She is thought to be one of the leading female painters of her time because she had no reservations about painting her reality. An art critic once said:

Frida began work on a series of masterpieces, which had no precedent in the history of art - paintings which exalted the feminine quality of truth, reality, cruelty and suffering. Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida (Diego Rivera, Apr 1932).

2. Frida Kahlo's Self-Portraits

2.1 Frida Kahlo's Affection Toward Painting Self-Portraits

Among 143 works that Frida painted during her artistic career, 55 of which are self-portraits.

"I paint self-portraits because I am the person I know best. I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to and I paint whatever passes through my head without any consideration." This statement by Frida Kahlo captures the essence of her work.

Everything she paints, she paints without reservation. Her artwork is a biography of her life, encompassing her emotions, her feelings, her pain, her hatred, her love, her guilt, her family and much more. Kahlo is a woman who experienced many happy times, but her life was filled with tragedy as well. Both of which led to her profound artwork. When looking at her work, one can be lost in a sea of emotions.

Also as she points out, "I am my own muse, the subject I know best." Her inspiration comes from herself and her actual experiences. From the beginning, her dramatic life has been recorded in her mind and motivated her through her path of artistic career, to paint down the pains and the sorrows, to reflect her own reality.

2.2 Some Essential Elements in Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait

Among all the works she painted that contained self-representation, we could find something common in each Frida figure.

Nearly none of her faces in the self-portraits express much emotion: hair worn in a bun, subtly frowning Latino eyebrows that join together, straight-looking eyes, little mustache above her lips... these elements immediately announces her identity as Frida Kahlo in a most Mexican-styled and personal way.

For example, *Self Portrait, Dedicated to Dr Eloesser* (Figure 1) in 1940 shows a typical face of Frida Kahlo. This is not the face of a conventionally comely woman with masculine elements. Also noticeable is the traditional Mexican clothing, the Latino American plants and animals, the colors of bright green, blue, yellow, red, and even the hideous blood and wound, all crying out power of life and vigor. She is remembered for her self-portraits, pain and passion, and bold, vibrant colors, Mexican and indigenous culture and by feminists for her depiction of the female experience. Her indifferent facial features should have been unharmonious with the overflow of enthusiastic elements of life, but they seem to balance in a peculiar and curious harmony.

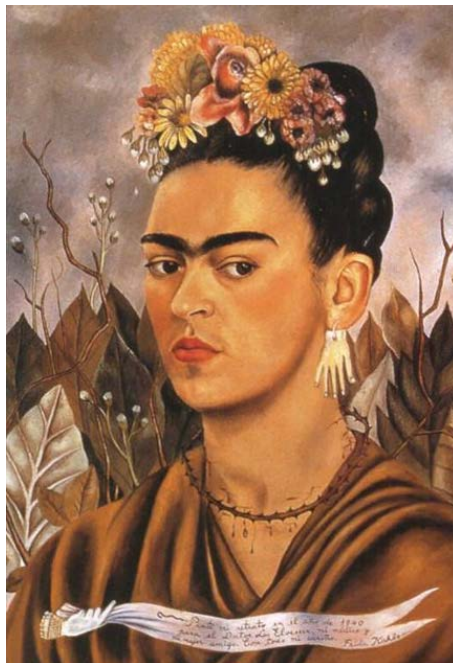


Figure 1: Dedicated to Dr Eloesser, 1940

She loves herself and values the elements that construct her for she accepts the imperfections, pains and suffering of the individual, not obeying to the aesthetic standards of the society. She steps

before her time as the woman who truly loves herself and calls for the awakening of women dignity not for the pleasure of others but just for herself alone.

3. The Transition

3.1 Frida Kahlo's Life during 1939-1940

Married in 1929, Frida and Diego were never a traditional union. By the mid-1930s, numerous extramarital affairs occurred, including both issues from Frida and Diego. Among these affairs of confliction, Frida was most saddened by his affair with her sister Cristina. In response to this familial betrayal, Kahlo cut off most of her trademark long dark hair. Desperately wanting to have a child, she again experienced heartbreak when she miscarried in 1934.

These conflicts undermined their marriage, and the two divorced in 1939. That same year Kahlo painted some of her most famous works, including *The Two Fridas*. The unusually large canvas shows twin figures of Frida herself holding hands, each figure representing an opposing side of Kahlo. The figure to the left, dressed in a European-style wedding dress, is the side that Rivera purportedly rejected. She wears a white Victorian dress; her lace bodice is torn, exposing her broken heart. In her hand there is a surgical scissors that is cutting off the flow of blood from Diego's portrait. The figure to the right is dressed in Tehuana attire, the side Rivera loved best. She wears indigenous Mexican clothes. Her heart is whole and in her hands there is a miniature portrait of Diego, which is attached to one of the vessels of the heart where the blood flows to his picture. This may symbolize how the blood pumping through her, the very blood that nourishes her, will always have the same amount of love and nourishment for him. The full heart of the indigenous Kahlo is on display, and from it an artery leads to a miniature portrait of Rivera that she holds in her left hand. Another artery connects to the heart of the other Kahlo, which is fully exposed and reveals the anatomy within. The end of the artery is cut, and the European Kahlo holds a surgical instrument seemingly to stem the flow of blood that drips onto her white dress. Frida once again evokes such a wide array of emotions such as pain, discomfort, disgust, empathy and sadness. She utilizes the horizon in the background and she focuses her detail more on the face than she does on the body.

This painting is one of the most-known self-portraits of Frida Kahlo. Painted in 1939, it probably marks her emotional state shortly after her divorce with Rivera. The confliction with her European and Mexican heritage, and also the confliction of her relationship with Diego Rivera, somehow, as some art historians put it, linking with the heartbroken event of Rivera's infidelity with her sister, this painting is a mixture of emotions concerning questions about identity, confliction, and love, probably a most apparent reflection of a woman just divorced.

Kahlo reconciled with Rivera in 1940, and the couple moved into her childhood home, La Casa Azul ("the Blue House"), in Coyoacán. Kahlo began to further decline in health, and she frequently turned to alcohol and drugs for relief. Nonetheless, she continued to be productive during the 1940s. She painted numerous self-portraits with varying hairstyles, clothing, and iconography, always showing herself with an impassive, steadfast gaze, for which she became famous. Kahlo underwent several surgeries in the late 1940s and early '50s, often with prolonged hospital stays. She died in La Casa Azul a year later, the official cause documented as a pulmonary embolism.

3.2 Before and After 1939

There are specific details in Frida's self-portrait we can focus on. Among these are facial features, posture and background. All of these elements change before and after 1939.

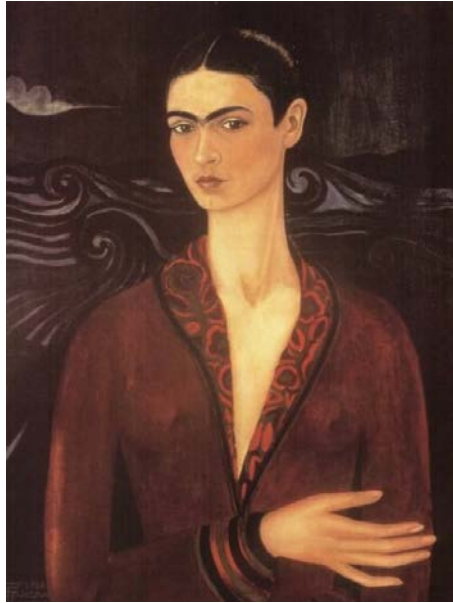


Figure 2: Self portrait in a Velvet Dress, 1926

First of all, the facial features has a tendency to change at this turning point.

Before 1939, the faces in Kahlo's self-portraits show a sense that is more 2D and less naturalistic. The features differ from the real person and there are more plainer color blocks lacking a sense of three dimension, such as one of her earliest self portraits in 1926 - Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress.

Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress (Figure 2) is one of Frida Kahlo's early portraits. This portrait implied the emotional tension. She used a token of love to regain the affection from her lover. She started working on this painting during the late summer of 1926 when her relationship with Alejandro is turning sour because Alejandro thinks she is too liberal. She wrote letter to him and promised that she will be a better person to deserve him. And when she finished this portrait in September of 1926 she wrote a letter to: "Within a few days the portrait will be in your house. Forgive me for sending it without a frame. I implore you to put it in a low place where you can see it as if you were looking at me. "

In this self-portrait, Frida was wearing a wine-red velvet dress and looks like a princess in it. She sent it to Alejandro and hope he will keep her in his mind. This painting worked: after Alejandro received this painting, they went back to be together again. But he left for Europe in March 1927 because his parents don't want him to be together with Frida. She wrote a lot of letters after they are apart and in those letters she call herself with her Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress, calling it "your 'Boticeli'". She wrote the letter with reference to this portrait: "You cannot imagine how marvelous it is to wait for you, serenely as in the portrait." It was obvious Frida was hoping her self-portrait has the magical power that can win back her love.

After 1939, however, Frida's self portraits have facial features that are more three-dimensional and more naturalistic, combining more detailed depiction of Frida's eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, and so on. Some even include more complex headdress such as twines of plants, such as *Thinking about death* and *Self-portrait as a Tehuana* in 1943.

In another 1940 Self Portrait, *Dedicated to Dr Eloesser*, Frida's necklace of thorns is just a single strand, but it draws even more blood. In the background, leafless broken-off twigs profiled against an opalescent sky look like the dead twigs woven into Frida's necklace in the self-portrait with the hummingbird. No doubt the dry white buds that mingle with the twigs (and that droop from Frida's headdress as well) likewise refer to her desolation. Although Frida has flowers in her hair and wears the earrings in the shape of hands that Picasso gave her when she was in Paris, she looks like someone dressed for a ball for which she has no escort.

Frida's work from the year in which she and Diego Rivera were separated demonstrates a heightened awareness of color's capacity to drive home emotional truths. Her palette came out of her love for the startling combinations of bougainvillea pinks, purples, and yellows seen in the

decorative arts of Mexico. She chose colors with exquisite aesthetic calculation. In later paintings the choice of colors is just as odd and often even more dissonant and complex. The soft, pearly sky and the bright flowers accentuate the chill of Frida's predicament. Their richness recalls the way statues of the scourged Christ in Mexican churches are often surrounded by flowers, lace, velvet, and gold.



Figure 3: Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940

This painting, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (Figure 3), was painted by Frida Kahlo in 1940. Although this painting has a small size (about 16x24), it draws lots of interests, since it contains so many aspects, which are symbolic to Frida Kahlo. In this portrait, Frida Kahlo faces the viewer with background of large green leaves and a yellow leaf right behind her. The thorns are around her neck like a necklace which is held by a black monkey. Her neck is bleeding from the piercing thorns. On right side behind her shoulder is a black cat. A humming bird is hanging on the thorn which knots around her throat. Her expression is calm and solemn. It also seems she is patiently enduring the pain.

Frida Kahlo put so many symbolic creatures in this painting. She was not painting a realistic scene but painting her feelings. A bird is often symbolizes freedom and life, especially hummingbird that is colorful and always hovering above flowers. But in this painting the humming bird is black and lifeless. This might be a symbol of Frida herself. Frida spent most of her life in physical pain after the bus accident happened when she was eighteen. After that she endured about thirty-five operations to fix her body. She spent so many years bedridden and cannot bear any children. This is a painting about her suffering.

Secondly, the posture of her paintings also changed.

Before 1939, Frida Kahlo painted herself more in bust, body from the waist to the head, or the entire body. The set of pictures also combine more “surreal” scenes and settings.



Figure 4: Memory, the Heart, 1937

In this self-portrait, *Memory, the Heart* 1937 (Figure 4), Frida Kahlo expressed her misery and resent over the affair happened two years ago between Diego Rivera and Cristina. In this painting, her face has no expression but with all tears. She cropped her hair and was wearing the European-style clothes, which was her typical style when she was separated from Diego Rivera. And as always, she used the physical wounds to imply her psychic injuries.

In the background, her schoolgirl outfit and her Tehuana costume and each set of clothes has one arm, with Frida Kahlo standing there without arms and seems helpless. She stands there with one food on the ground and the other in the sea. The foot put over the sea wears an apparatus and suggested the recent food surgery she was undergoing.

Memory, the Heart delivered a direct and simple message: she was heartbroken. Her huge heart lies on the ground at her feet and was pumping rivers of blood in the background landscape. Her body was pierced but a steel rod with seesawing cupids on either end, which created an accurate visualization of the sensation of pain.

After 1939, meanwhile, Frida Kahlo painted pictures with mostly frontal or three-quarters perspective, from her chest to above or simply her face in the middle of the portrait.

Thirdly, the background of Frida's painting also matters.

Before the year of 1939, Frida painted more indoor scenes with pieces of furniture such as bed, chair, and tables.



Figure 5: Me and My Doll, 1937

Frida was known to be not able to bear children due to the bus accident happened in the year of 1925. And at the time this painting was painted, she has lost three unborn children. She has been collecting dolls and keeping pets on which she gave her love to.

This portrait, *Me and My Doll* (Figure 5), depicts Frida sitting on a bed with a doll. But she seems distant and disconnected with the substitute of her baby. She seems to be posing for the camera and doesn't care about the doll at all. Also she was smoking a cigarette, which people usually don't do while a baby is around. It seems she knows the doll is not her own real child and she shows no attachment to it at all.

However, after 1939, the scene or setting becomes more blur and there are more animals such as monkeys and birds, combining with natural scenes of leaves and trees twines.



Figure 6: Me and My Parrot, 1941

Frida remarried to Diego Rivera in December of 1940 after they separated for a few years. After this Frida's life seems to be settled down to some extent of calmer routine. They remained live separable and Frida still lives with her animals, dolls and flowers at countryside that she is interested in. They are still the main part of her life.

She drew many self-portraits with her pets and this is one of those and she included her parrots in this painting (Figure 6). When this portrait was painted she was just remarried with Diego but was having a love affair with Nickolas Muray, who helped Frida with her first exhibition in New York in 1938 and was a successful portrait photographer. They met in Mexico at that time.

3.3 Life and Art

Whether the artist acknowledges it or not, their styles of art alters when their stages of life alters. Experiencing different emotions and thoughts via diverse events, the people reflect different kinds of color, brushstrokes, or overall style in their paintings consciously or unconsciously. As a brilliant example, Frida Kahlo's artworks reflect her own experiences and stories, also suggesting an interest in both Mexican popular art and folk art. She painted many of her own self-portraits by reflecting on her own self, her passion and pain, her happiness and sorrow. The small scale and intense emotions of retablos suited her narrative impulses.

The examples of illustration and comparison utilized in this paper are used as evidence for observed proof and further study on how the important events of the artists' life influence their artistic creations and how we can look at the different paintings through their artistic career to look at or see through their life. Our understanding of art history should be combined with the artist's life to understand painting. Whether art is complex and touching is largely due to the complexity of the

artist's life experience and it is biased when we just look at a single part of the social or individual influence.

Kahlo made it legitimate for women to outwardly display their pains and frustrations and to make steps towards understanding. It became crucial for women artists to have a female role model and this is the gift of Frida Kahlo.

When one first looks at Frida's artwork, it is easy to say that the artwork is very dreamlike, possessing enigmatic traits and abstract thoughts meshed together. "Surrealism was a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined by the everyday ration world in an absolute reality, a surreality". However, after studying Frida's life, it does not seem like as surreal anymore because many of her life events are expressed in the paintings, but they are expressed in such a way that looks dreamlike. For example, she often has floating figures and objects that are not normally found in the theme. Hence, Frida can be labeled as a surrealist, but it is important to remember that her paintings are not dreams, they are her reality.

4. Conclusion

When one first looks at Frida's artwork, it is easy to say that the artwork is very dreamlike, possessing enigmatic traits and abstract thoughts meshed together. "Surrealism was a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined by the everyday ration world in an absolute reality, a surreality", André Breton said. However, after studying Frida's life, it does not seem like as surreal anymore because many of her life events are expressed in the paintings and all the dream-like scenes are elements of her own memory. Hence, Frida can be labeled as a surrealist, but it is important to remember that her paintings are not dreams. They are her reality.

Frida Kahlo endured a vast amount of special experience that is unique to her. It is exactly those events- the tragedy, the pain, the relationship, and the love – that builds up such a complete character as Frida Kahlo. Frida Kahlo died on Tuesday, July 13th 1954. "I hope the exit is joyful and I hope to never come back," she said, "live life." Her paintings mark the turnings in her life, and her reality is the muse of her greatest art.

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