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FRIDA KAHLO

PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York



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Context

Emiliano Zapata, Mexican revolutionary

**“IT’S BETTER TO DIE ON
YOUR FEET THAN LIVE ON
YOUR KNEES.”**

SPOTS

Profound political changes were sweeping through Mexico when Frida Kahlo was growing up. Peasants, workers, and native Indians were involved in a struggle for freedom that would give rise to a new government. Life, it seemed, would be better for everybody, and poverty would become a thing of the past. With their explicitly political murals, a group of artists known as the Mexican Muralists, led by the charismatic Diego Rivera, became the artistic spokesmen of the day.

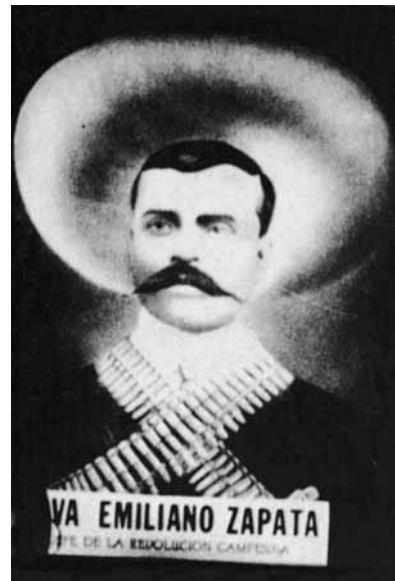
A love of folk art

Above all else, Mexican folk art is colorful. The clash between ancient Mexican cultures and Christian art of the European (particularly the Spanish) Middle Ages produced an extraordinary artistic synthesis. Frida Kahlo attached great importance to her Indian roots, and she loved the brightly colored works of folk art – an art created by and for the ordinary people. Throughout her

life, she was a keen collector of Mexican ceramics, whose radiant colors and playful forms occur in her own work. She was also familiar with the ancient cultures of Mexico and with their symbolism, and these too played an important part in her work.

A growing city

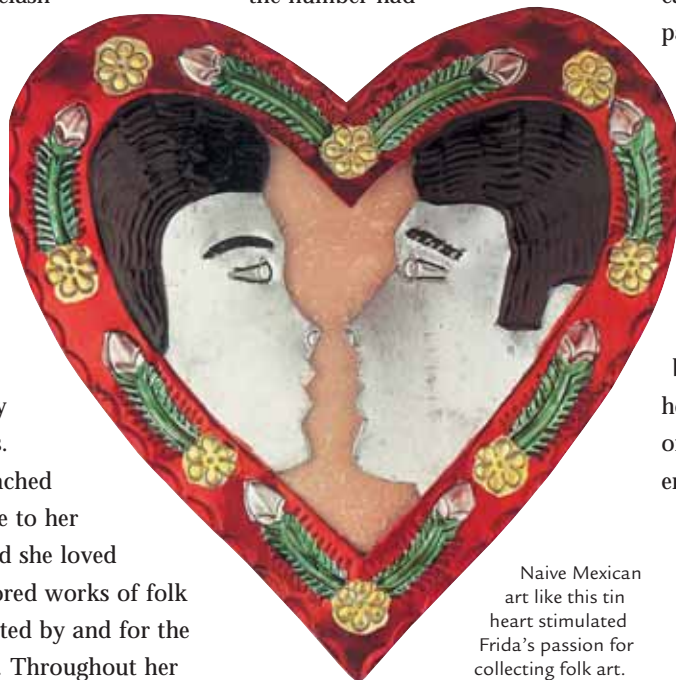
After the Revolution, Mexico City experienced a rapid growth in urban development. A program of slum clearance was followed by the construction of many new homes. By 1900, just over half a million people lived in the city, and within twenty years the number had



almost doubled. Frida grew up in a better-off residential area called Coyoacán, which became part of Mexico City only in 1950.

The Zapata myth

Frida was three years old when revolution erupted in 1910, the people of Mexico rising against the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Emiliano Zapata became their hero, and it was he, along with Pancho Villa, who organized resistance to the government. Their “army” consisted mainly of Indians and landless peasants. When government troops suppressed the peasants’ movement in 1919, Zapata was drawn into an



Naive Mexican art like this tin heart stimulated Frida's passion for collecting folk art.

ambush and shot. Legend surrounds his death to this day: according to one account, he was not shot at all, and will one day return to achieve his political goals.

Art for all

Mexico's new revolutionary government wanted a better life for the

country's people. The minister of education, José Vasconcelos, supported a group of artists who were to encourage political and social renewal through large-scale murals. The Mexican Muralist movement was born. Its themes were not just current political events, but also Mexican history, notably the *conquista* (the conquest of Mexico

by the Spanish) and its disastrous effects on Mexican Indians. José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros became central figures of the Muralist Movement, but it was the painter and active Communist Diego Rivera who took people's hearts by storm.

Aztec art

The Aztecs were one of the few Indian peoples whose language included a word for artist, *toltecatl*. According to an Aztec legend: "The artist is educated. He is the skilled one. The true artist works with joy in his heart ... he combines everything into one and makes a harmony." The Mexican Muralists were greatly inspired by their artist forefathers.

In 1900 ...

... a university education for girls was almost unthinkable in Mexico. When Frida attended a new school in 1922, she was one of the first thirty-five girls to be prepared for a university education.

... more than 50 percent of all Mexicans were illiterate.





“As always, Mexico is disorganized and has gone to the devil. The only thing that it retains is the immense beauty of the land and of the Indians.” — Frida Kahlo

¡Viva México!

For Mexico, as for many other countries worldwide, the early years of the 20th century were turbulent and often violent. Political revolution cleared the way for a new type of art whose pioneers became national idols. These heady years bred a rebellious spirit: Frida Kahlo.

— Art and revolution

Mexicans are fond of saying that their country has a long past and a short history. Even if it appears to be short, its history is still full of adventurers, heroes, and despots. Europeans wrenched South America from its paradisiacal state of primitiveness and left scorched earth behind them. After three centuries (and a brief spell of Liberalism), the colonial masters were replaced in 1877 by the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Under him, the military, “hacienda owners” (landowners), and foreign investors were now in power.

Just as regressive as General Díaz’s inflexible system of government was the art of the day, which drew heavily on the conservative Salon painting of Europe. European-trained artists painted florid works depicting events of national significance or extolling bourgeois virtues. Alongside this “high art” of the despised privileged classes there existed another type of art that cared nothing for academic rules. The masses loved colorful *retablos* and votive works that were offered to the saints by way of thanks for prayers answered. With its roots deep in Mexican history, this is painting that is original, naive, and emotionally charged. No one in Mexico paid any attention to the avant-garde art movements that were causing a sensation in Europe.

Time ran out for Porfirio Díaz in 1910, when the fury of the Mexican peasants, workers, and a bourgeoisie slowly gaining in power vented itself in a struggle for freedom that would last several years. Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa were the glorious heroes of this revolution, by the end of which a liberal constitution was drawn up. A newly installed minister of education was to tackle the problem of widespread illiteracy. In his battle against poor education, he found an important ally – art.

left
A Mexican custom: here Diego Rivera painted the traditional Easter custom of burning effigies of Judas.

right

Resisting dictatorship with sombreros and rifles: Mexican revolutionaries fighting for a liberal constitution at the beginning of the 20th century.

below

The dictator Porfirio Díaz was in power in Mexico for over thirty years. In 1910, he was finally toppled by a popular uprising that demanded freedom and reform.



— **Back to basics**

Art proved to be the best way to teach the masses about the history of their country. Pictures can both explain events and fire the imagination, and without using words. But how was art to find its public? By moving out of museums and becoming a part of everyday life. Instead of being on small canvases, paintings would now be on large public walls. Derived from the Spanish word for wall, *muro*, the new movement was called *muralismo* (Muralism). In no time at all, it enjoyed great success and was hailed as the Mexican Renaissance in art. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were the leading figures among the Muralists. Rivera had spent a number of years in Europe, where he had become familiar with the latest trends in art. But he had also studied the frescoes of the Old Masters in Italy before returning to his native Mexico. His work thus combined the traditional narrative art of the fresco with the idioms of modern art.

In their paintings, the Muralists reflected on their Mexican roots, and suggestions of the art of the Mexican Indians are present everywhere in their works. Murals were intended not only to please people, however, but also to educate them. The work of Rivera, Orozco, and their comrades-in-arms spread socialist ideas by making them more intelligible to a mass public. Painters, sculptors, and illustrators formed a trade union and expressed their aversion to “so-called easel painting and all the art of ultra-intellectual circles.” The



left

Popular art in Mexico is not concerned with academic rules. Frida Kahlo loved the bright colors and direct expression she saw in naive painting.

above

After the Revolution, the Muralists' socially critical work was popular with the Mexican people.

Ministry of Education, likewise, condemned “bourgeois European painting,” and argued in favor of “a Mexican art, public and accessible to all.”

Frida Kahlo grew up in this period of radical change. When the Muralists began their triumphant progress, she was a pupil at the National Preparatory School. The political aims of the Muralists filled her with enthusiasm, though she would never paint a mural herself. Instead, she was passionate about Mexican popular art with its colorful and simple *retablos*. In her eyes, panel painting was neither decadent nor “ultra-intellectual.”