

Commercialisation of Frida Kahlo

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INTRODUCTION

In my research, I explore the multifaceted realm of Frida Kahlo, focusing on the intersection of her early life, unique art form, the socio-political context she navigated, and her subsequent iconization and commercialization. My literature review meticulously examines how Kahlo's personal tribulations and political convictions are intricately woven into her art, transforming her into a symbol of resilience and rebellion. Furthermore, I explore the commercialization of her image and artwork, analyzing its implications for cultural commodification and the preservation of her legacy. This inquiry is supported by a comprehensive methodological approach, where I extensively review various scholarly articles, aiming to synthesize diverse perspectives on Kahlo's enduring influence in both the art world and popular culture.

Early and Personal life of Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo's identity

Frida Kahlo was of mixed heritage. She had both European and Indigenous Mexican ancestry. Her father was German-Mexican, and her mother was of Indigenous Mexican and Spanish descent. Her roots are strongly reflected in her art, which has often celebrated her Mexican heritage, including Indigenous culture, and she identified strongly with her Mexican roots (Calabró, 2016). Frida Kahlo's formative years were spent at national preparatory school in Mexico City. It was here that she developed her interest in art and began associating with politically and creatively influential circles. Her life took a massive turn in 1925 when a near fatal bus accident left her injured, causing lifelong physical pain and confinement to bed. During her recovery is when she turned to art as a means of self expression. Discussing Kahlo's time in the US, in Detroit and San Francisco, she experienced challenges in this foreign environment including her relationship with Diego Rivera. She observed the social inequalities and injustices in the United States and the amalgamation of her Mexican heritage and American experiences contributed to her unique artistic voice. Frida's husband, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo had a longstanding desire to convert Kahlo's house into a museum, a plan they discussed at length before her death in 1954. The Frida Kahlo museum, is her former home in Coyoacan. (Jean Tapia-Lynch, 2016)

Kahlo drew inspiration from Mexican pictorial storytelling traditions. Kahlo's paintings, coupled with her writing, explores the human body's resilience and vulnerability. She was said to blend elements from her ancient past with her contemporary experiences, incorporating animals, mythical beings, and plants into her work. Highlighting how Kahlo's art aligns with post revolutionary Mexico's nationalist ideology, emphasising the reevaluation of indigenous traditions. She seeks to redefine the modern mestizo/a (mixed race) identity through personal introspection. Frida Kahlo's appearance played a significant role in shaping her identity and her artistic express. She went against conventional beauty standards of her time, notably with her prominent uni brow and facial hair, she used these natural aspects of herself, using them as elements in her self portraits. (Calabró, 2016)

Socio-Political Context

Frida Kahlo was a post revolutionary artist and she authentically captures the essence of Mexican political transformation in her work, for example, her painting "my dress hangs there" (1933). In this artwork, she uses symbolism to comment on socio-political situations in both Mexico and the USA during the Great Depression. The Great Depression, spanning from 1929 to the late 1930s, was a severe worldwide economic downturn marked by widespread unemployment, financial instability, and a significant decline in economic activity, leading to enduring hardships for millions.

Frida Kahlo's art reflects the emotional impact of the Great Depression through her portrayal of suffering, pain, and the struggles of the working class, capturing the era's societal turmoil and economic hardship. These artworks that were influenced by the Mexican revolution, addresses the struggle of feminism, and social justice during this period in Mexican history. During the Mexican Revolution, feminist perspectives like those represented by Frida Kahlo were crucial in advocating for women's rights, as the revolution aimed to address broader societal issues, such as land reform, political change, and social justice. Women's participation in the revolution provided a platform to assert their own demands, including suffrage and equality, amidst the larger push for societal transformation. Kahlo's art and activism played a pivotal role in highlighting these feminist concerns within the context of the Mexican Revolution.

This article emphasises the figure she became as a symbol of a changing nation shedding light on her impact on Mexican art history and politics. *In Frida Kahlo's time, Mexican politics had a complex relationship with indigenous people. The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 brought promises of land reform and social justice, potentially benefiting indigenous communities, while the 1917 Constitution included provisions for indigenous rights. However, the implementation of these rights and the overall treatment of indigenous populations varied significantly. Despite efforts to promote indigenous culture and address their issues, discrimination and challenges persisted, making Frida Kahlo's celebration of indigenous culture through her art a notable contribution to the ongoing discourse around indigenous rights and identity.*

Art Form

Frida Kahlo's Tehuana dress holds political significance as a symbol of her Mexican identity and feminist stance. By wearing traditional clothing, Kahlo challenged societal norms and embraced her indigenous culture, that she gained from her marital lineage as a Mexican indigenous, and further promoted cultural pride and gender equality in post revolutionary Mexico. One of her self portraits called "Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird" is her wearing a Tehuana dress which is significant as it symbolises her connection with Mexico (Calabró, 2016). The hummingbird is a symbol of life and death in Mexican folklore. Furthermore, discussing the influence of surrealism on Kahlo's work. It highlights shared political views between Kahlo and some surrealists, both of whom were communists. Frida Kahlo incorporated elements of Surrealism into her art by using dreamlike and symbolic imagery to explore her inner world and emotions. For example, in her painting "The Two Fridas," she presents two versions of herself, one with an exposed heart, symbolizing her emotional pain and inner turmoil. This dual self-representation, a hallmark of Surrealism, conveys her inner conflict and emotional complexity. Additionally, in "The Broken Column," she portrays herself with a shattered column for a spine, blending the physical and emotional pain she experienced, which is a surreal representation of her suffering and resilience. Kahlo's ability to merge reality and the subconscious in her art is a striking example of her incorporation of Surrealist elements. (Bryson, 2023) Furthermore, exploring how the Tehuana dress, which represents cultural values juxtaposes the intrudrializaion of consumerism in America. The article stalks about kahlo's dissatisfaction in the U.S influencing her political attitudes as seen in her painting "my dress hangs there", with it being empty symbolising absence and displacement as she did not feel she belonged in the United States and this choice of dress enforces a deliberate expression of her political beliefs and culture. The article also tells us about this choice of dress being representative of Zapotec women who were known for their majesty, beauty, courage and strength. The article also talks about Frida Kahlo's nationalism which is emphasised through her focus on Aztec tradition and anti materialism, which can be seen in works like "The Two Fridas". It is representative of her dual heritage as European and Mexican. (Jason Edward Kaufman , 2010)

The Commercial Lens Applied on Political and Social Leaders - Iconisation and Commercialisation of Frida Kahlo

Kahlo's image and legacy have become a global phenomenon. She was admired for her resilience against adversity and her defiance of patriarchal norms. Her influence extends to various facets of popular culture, including fashion. Frida Kahlo's art and life has continued to aspire to feminism, alternative identities and ethnic pride; she has become a symbol of empowerment for diverse groups, like the LGBTQ+ community, political activists, and even celebrities. Two icons such as Madonna and Beyonce have paid homage to Kahlo's looks emphasising the iconisation. Her influence can be seen in the contemporary feminist movement where her quotes and imagery are often used to highlight issues of gender equality, for example, the Women's Marches which took place globally in 2017, you can find signs and artwork featuring Kahlo's likeness alongside slogans promoting gender inequality and women's rights. Her iconization in the modern age is not confined to art galleries but extends into everyday life, fashion, and the ongoing struggle for equality. Kahlo's paintings, such as "The Two Fridas" and "Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird," embodied her feminist ideologies and challenged societal norms. Her canvases were an amalgamation of personal anguish and a mirror to the struggles faced by marginalized groups, particularly women. The political undertones in her work transcended conventional artistry, acting as a catalyst for societal change and gender discourse. (Sekhar and Michael, 2020)

Analysis

Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist known for her introspective and politically charged paintings, created artworks that intimately delved into her physical and emotional pain while intertwining elements of Mexican culture and political activism. Her artistry was a profound expression of societal and political issues, becoming a potent voice for feminism, cultural identity, and human suffering.

Beyond the realm of art galleries, Frida Kahlo's image has transcended into various commercial domains, becoming a widely recognizable emblem synonymous with empowerment, cultural heritage, and defiance. However, this commodification of her image, often carried out by corporations and commercial entities, has become increasingly disconnected from the authentic essence of Kahlo's art and political activism.

The commercial use of Kahlo's image has become a phenomenon separate from her body of work. Key moments contributing to Fridamania include an exhibition of Kahlo's work at London's Whitechapel Gallery, her Tate Modern

retrospective, and Madonna's championing of Kahlo. Hayden Herrera's biography and the subsequent Hollywood movie have influenced the popular narrative of Kahlo, sometimes overshadowing her politics and artistic innovations. (Thackara, 2017). The widespread use of Kahlo's image, even by those with opposing ideologies, illustrates how distant the popular perception is from Kahlo's political and avant-garde identity. Products adorned with Kahlo's face, from t-shirts to accessories and consumer goods, have proliferated in the mainstream market. This commercialization oversimplifies her multifaceted identity, reducing her complex artistic legacy to a mere symbol of aesthetic appeal, diminishing the essence of her art's socio-political depth. For example, in 2019, Vans released a collecting featuring shoes, inspired by Kahlo's "Self Portrait with Thorn Necklaces and Hummingbird". Advertising campaigns for the Nissan Leaf in 2014 used Frida Kahlo's image.

With her artwork and personal history reflecting an anticapitalist stance, the widespread commodification of her image raises questions about her hypothetical approval. Kahlo's 1932 painting, "Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States," starkly contrasts indigenous Mexican symbols with the industrialization of a Ford factory, revealing her critical views on capitalism. However, the proliferation of her face on various products invites comparisons to the commercialization of Che Guevara, which his daughter condemned as contradictory to his socialist ideals. Nevertheless, Kahlo herself actively participated in crafting her image from a young age, displaying a penchant for personal branding. The commercial exploitation of Frida Kahlo's image has seen her iconic persona utilized by numerous companies, often with no tangible connection to her feminist ideology or cultural principles. For instance, a variety of corporations in the fashion and beauty industries have featured Kahlo's likeness in their marketing campaigns, leveraging her unique visual style for profit without acknowledging her profound political artistry. Cosmetic brands, apparel companies, and merchandisers often prominently display Kahlo's image on products or as branding elements, dissociating her identity from the feminist, cultural, or political causes she fervently championed. These entities capitalize on her popularity and aesthetic appeal while disregarding the depth of her artistic expression or her activism for women's rights and marginalized communities. The commercial use of her image by these corporations serves as an illustration of the detachment between Kahlo's revolutionary ideology and the profit-driven motives of the commercial market.

A few examples are:

Zara: The clothing giant released a Frida Kahlo-inspired collection without authentically acknowledging her political views or championing her feminist ideals.

Sephora: The beauty brand released a makeup line featuring Kahlo's image on the packaging without respecting the depth of her artistry or acknowledging her advocacy for women's rights. (Sephora, 2024)

Mattel: The toy manufacturer produced a Frida Kahlo Barbie doll, which sparked controversy due to concerns about how it represented Kahlo's features and did not adequately honor her legacy as an artist and feminist. "In 2018, Kahlo's family accused Mattel of distorting Kahlo's appearance and values." (Jefferies, 2022)

Urban Outfitters: The fashion retailer has marketed various products featuring Kahlo's image, such as t-shirts or accessories, without properly recognizing her beliefs or contributions to feminist art. (Urban Outfitters, 2023)

These examples showcase how Frida Kahlo's image has been commercialized by well-known brands, often simplifying or overlooking her feminist and political stances for commercial gain.

The Frida Kahlo Corporation, responsible for licensing her image, focuses on portraying her as a symbol of female strength and empowerment. Despite the corporation's commitment to donating a portion of profits to charities supporting women and children, the commodification of Kahlo's image for mass consumption raises concerns about her authentic representation and whether her intended essence aligns with the corporate branding strategy.

Priya Prasad's article, "Commodifying Icons: The Commercialization of Frida Kahlo," presents a comprehensive examination of Frida Kahlo's image's commercialization and distortion. The introduction contextualizes the retail landscape of women's apparel, which often features symbols of feminism and empowerment, including Kahlo's image. Prasad raises concerns about the appropriation of feminist ideals for commercial gains, sparking an inquiry into the historical use of feminist rhetoric in capitalism. (Prasad, n.d.) This leads to an exploration of Susan Douglas's concept from "Narcissism as Liberation," discussing the co-optation of feminist rhetoric by industries in the 1980s, turning the women's liberation movement into individualistic consumerism.

She filed suit against FKC in response to the Corporation's May 27 submission of a "notice of intellectual property infringement" to online arts and crafts retailer Etsy, where she sells her creations. Shope handmakes a variety of "embroideries and dolls", (Shope, n.d.), many of which represent Frida Kahlo and are sold using her name. FKC submitted the notice against several of Shope's dolls, which resulted in an automatic removal of those listings. (Thackara, 2017).

The article delves into Frida Kahlo's life and art, highlighting her multiracial heritage and disability as pivotal components of her self-representation. It emphasizes how Kahlo's artwork integrated her physical pain, political activism, and anti-capitalist beliefs, forming a profound connection between her identity and her artistic expressions. Prasad then scrutinizes the Frida Kahlo Corporation, examining its licensing of Kahlo's name and collaborations with major retailers to produce merchandise bearing her image. This section critically evaluates how the corporation's actions erase Kahlo's political ideologies and cultural significance, turning her art into mere aesthetics for economic viability. Intellectual property law expert Rebecca Tushnet discusses the complexities of who controls the interpretation of deceased celebrities like Kahlo. The Panama-based Frida Kahlo Corporation claims the rights to her image, having bought them from Kahlo's niece, but this raises ethical concerns about commercializing her image for profit. (*Green, 2018*)

Furthermore, the appropriation of Frida Kahlo's image by profit-driven entities has raised ethical concerns. Several companies employing her likeness have been criticized for labor exploitation, insensitivity to cultural nuances, or overlooking Kahlo's advocacy for the marginalized. This disjuncture between Kahlo's principled activism and the practices of corporations commercializing her image embodies the stark contrast between genuine political artistry and superficial commercial motives.

Her art purposefully emphasized her racial heritage, ethnic identity, and facial hair, serving as a symbol of rebellion against societal norms. However, in the digital era, corporations have appropriated Kahlo's iconic appearance, reshaping her image into a normalized, white, and able-bodied figure while capitalizing on the very identity that initially propelled Kahlo to fame. This distortion reflects a pseudo-feminism aligned with neoliberal politics, substituting Kahlo's image for genuine rebellion against societal inequalities. This commercialization undermines the essence of what Kahlo historically represented—an embodiment of multicultural feminism acknowledging the intersectionality of identities and the relational nature of oppression and empowerment.

Despite the commercialization, Kahlo's resonance with female admirers remains profound. Her portrayal as a gloriously unique figure, embracing her identity as a bisexual, disabled woman of color, inspires many. Some artists use her as an inspiration, creating tributes to her distinctive appearance and artistic legacy, while others, like Melbourne artist Liz Jones, aim to preserve her personal meaning and artistic legacy amidst mass reproduction. Additionally, artists like Louise Saxton reinterpret Kahlo's image. Saxton's reinterpretations often critically address how Kahlo's persona and body have been commercialized, suggesting a nuanced exploration of how female artists' bodies and identities are commodified differently from their male counterparts. (*Valentish, 2018*).

CONCLUSION

The examination of Frida Kahlo's image throughout various reproductions reveals a recurring theme of erasure that alters, softens, and eliminates the aspects of her non-normative body. This transformation is propelled by the pervasive societal need to conform to an elusive ideal of femininity, as articulated by Susan Bordo, where women's bodies are meticulously regulated to match cultural norms. Bordo contends that this constant pursuit of an ideal feminine body feeds into consumerism, compelling women to endure exhausting and painful body management practices. This ideal portrayal, often reflected in visual culture, contrasts starkly with Kahlo's intentional defiance of gender norms and Eurocentric beauty standards in her self-portraits. (Prasad, n.d.) Cultural icons like Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Che Guevara, Vincent van Gogh, and Elvis Presley have transcended their original contexts to become symbols in the global marketplace, much like Frida Kahlo. Monroe's image embodies timeless glamour and allure on merchandise ranging from apparel to beauty products. Einstein's iconic photographs, especially his playful expressions, are replicated on educational tools and quirky gadgets, symbolizing genius and creativity. Che Guevara's visage, particularly the iconic "Guerrillero Heroico" portrait, adorns countless products, often detached from its revolutionary roots, to signify rebellion and counterculture. Van Gogh's vivid paintings and self-portraits are commercialized as prints, clothing, and even interior decor, celebrating his artistic genius and emotional depth. Elvis Presley's likeness and signature style are marketed on a variety of memorabilia, capturing the essence of rock and roll and 20th-century American culture. These figures, alongside Frida Kahlo, share a common fate in the realm of commercialization; their images are imbued with layers of meaning that are often simplified or overlooked in the process of commodification.

This widespread representation of Kahlo has transformed her into a symbol of modern feminism, with her image adorning various merchandise that often bears feminist slogans. However, the co-optation of her image by different political figures and the use of Kahlo-inspired products by conservative figures, such as former UK Prime Minister Theresa May, raises questions about the true understanding and representation of Kahlo's ideologies. Her portrayal as a feminist icon contrasts with her utilization by various political and social entities, potentially diluting the intended essence of her image. The discrepancy between Frida Kahlo's original intentions and the commercialization of her image highlights the ethical implications of this commodification. It dilutes the essence of her artistic expression, separating it from its inherent socio-political significance. The appropriation of Kahlo's image by corporations detached from her values perpetuates a distortion of her legacy, reducing her intricate and profound artistry to a marketable brand.

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