

How Mexican Female Artists' Iconography in 1930s-1940s Present Their Understanding about Their Struggles and Confusion in Their Life

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Abstract. By analyzing representative iconographies by Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo, combined with the historical as well as religious background, Mexican female artists demonstrate a unique way to express their misery in unhappy marriage and motherhood. The dialogues are then established, between different female artists at that time for their shared experiences and between appreciators and artists for sympathetic resonance. Though the primary purpose is mainly individual emotional catharsis, the universal value of those works shouldn't be neglected. They opened a hole for people thereafter to peep into the Mexican society where women were burdened with heavy pressures and expectations.

Keywords: Mexican Art; Female Artists; Iconography.

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of art, few women have broken through in the male-dominated art world. A representative example of feminine voices bespeaking of their own feelings and thoughts is the group of Mexican female artists who were active in the art circle during the 1930s and early 1940s including Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo. These artists, rather than expressed felicity in their life frequently, mainly focused on the pain brought by the machista culture in the society. The prevailing themes in those Mexican female artists' works incorporated miserable marriage and frustrated motherhood. Though the delivery of emotions lied at an individual level, their works still played a role of political tool to fight against the toxic masculinity.

2. Historical Background:

The 1930s was a time full of political transformations and ideology changes. The collapse in United States stock market, the severe economic depression and Spanish Civil War came one after another. These events combined led to a surge in number of worldwide migrations, the appearance of totalitarian regimes in Spain, and an outbreak of unemployment. In Mexico, the seeds of feminist movement underwent an extraordinary growth as this land welcomed their new president Lazaro Cardenas in 1934. Although the proposal for female suffrage ultimately miscarried, a union called Unique Front for Woman's Rights organized an assemble to demand extended maternity leave and baby-care centers near workplaces. In the same year, the women in National Revolutionary Party won the voting right in internal party elections. The participation of women into politics opened a door for female artists to the art circle which was used to be male-exclusive.

3. Bursting of Girls' Bubbles for Ideal Marriage:

A popular theme for those Mexican female artists was their unhappy marriage. In 1930s, women were burdened with extremely high expectation from the society. Such expectation was closely related to the native culture. The Catholicism brought by Spaniards placed women in a position as subjects. Less like equal human beings as male does, women were closer to 'symbols of success and sexual objects', as portrayed by Octavio Paz. Until 1931, abortion was illegal and regarded as a blasphemy to the god. In such a religious context, the ultimate objective for a woman was marriage, especially for those uneducated and lack of opportunities to pursue a career. With long-lasting influence of religious belief, accompanied by the ideal marriage delineated in traditional stories, every

woman dreamed a happy matrimony since young. However, their naive illusion about marriage in childhood usually was brutally crashed by domestic violence and male dominance. In paintings focus on the unhappy marriage of women, artists called into questions about those traditions that rooted behind male dominance.

In addition, the growing cultural confidence was another reason why Mexican artists created such a sizable number of surrealist artworks. The native culture was once scorned during the War of Independence in the early twentieth century. After 10-year arduous struggle, Mexican people won the war. As a result, the public became more confidence for its own cultural inheritance and started to pay closer attention to their traditional myths and traditions. Under the literary influence of fantasies and original cultivation from their fertile land of surrealism, it's natural for Frida Kahlo to win a round of applause in artistic circle in her native country.

Traditionally, artworks focus on the theme of wedding usually involve the bride. However, *The Bride's Veil* was absent of such a leading role. Instead, the painting was a still life with many representative female objects of wedding including the veil, a bouquet, and gloves. These most characteristic marriage symbols were placed in a highly disordered way, creating a tense atmosphere combined: the pale, ghostly veil, the discarded bouquet on the floor, the fallen bridal wreath, and gloves in the margin. The random composition leads audience's attention towards the tiny gap in the curtains. With the aid of burgundy curtain and chaotic composition of those wedding objects, the painting implied the sexual consummation on the wedding day.

Even though the work was painted many years later after Maria got married, it's highly possible that *The Bride's Veil* served as an outlet to vent painful memories in her married life after her mother pushed her to the embrace of a much older man at a very young age. The relatively small table, large wedding objects and tall chair make the spectator to view this painting in a low perspective as a child, recalling a world of a little girl's childhood. Additionally, the wine-colored hat with decorative laces, jewels in the velvet box and perfume bottle on the right side of the painting, which all symbolize the sexuality of females, contrast sharply with the child-sized chair. The visual shock between those objects with the chair signifies the sexual maturity imposed suddenly on a naive girl and the disillusion of fantasies about marriage.

In a similar way, *The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened* by Frida Kahlo also delivered fear, dismay, and fallen hopes about a romantic relationship through the usage of a series of symbols. The veiled bride in the painting appears as a doll in the upper corner. Resembling of an inanimate doll, the bride is the one of passive nature, being manipulated by men and have no choices for their own life path.

The sexual act in a marriage is implied evidently through two kinds of fruits opened in the air, creating an alluring atmosphere. Combined in a circle, bananas and papaya symbolize the genital organs of males and female, respectively. Also, the bright colors used in the painting adds more erotic and sexual undertones to this still life. The fragile doll stares at those huge, threatening open fruits, portraying the fledgling girl who is forced into a marriage and get frightened by sexual acts common for a couple. The owl, which symbolizes the death in Aztec mythology, adds a bolder stroke to the aggressive atmosphere.

For Carlo, the painful experience of marriage was always a driving force for creation, enabling her to pursue the perfection of self-image in the spiritual world with extraordinary perception and understanding of the world, and then form a unique artistic style. Kahlo transplanted her physical and spiritual pain into her artistic creation and told her story sincerely and frankly in a way of humorous and fantastic personal painting.

And for the most representative work of Frida Kahlo unfolding her misfortunes in matrimony, *Two Fridas* was painted in 1943 when her marriage in 1929 to Diego Rivera, one of the three masters of Mexican frescoes came to an end. this marriage added insult to injury for Carlo's woes, as it was marked by multiple times of separation, divorce, and remarriage.

In 1939 Frida and Rivera arrived on an agreement for divorce as Rivera made an excuse that Frida had difficulty achieving orgasm during sexual intercourse. This was the deepest fear in Frida's heart,

who was physically destroyed by a car accident in her youth, unable to carry her pregnancy through, and still haunted by a sense of guilt that she was "barren" compared to Rivera's fertile and beautiful sexual partners.

Shortly after Frida and Rivera divorced, Carlo painted this renowned self-portrait titled 'Two Fridas', alluding to Carlo's mental torture and surgical operations, expressing the pain she suffered in her life.

Frida and Diego began their relationship in 1928, but according to Frida's biography, 'between the summer of 1928 and the summer of the following year Diego had more affairs than ever before.' Diego cheated her frequently after the marriage. Among them, the most devastating one for Frida was Diego's illicit relationship with her favorite sister Christina. This double betrayal almost destroyed Frida and left her with indelible mental shock. Frida once said: "I was tortured twice in my life, once by the accident and another by Diego."

The painting was a slightly larger than life canvas. At this point Frida has developed her mature artistic style to delineate her contradictory dual selves. As what reveals in its name, the portrait is composed of two distinct selves, in which the two Fridas wear different clothes and hold corresponding props to establish two completely different characters with opposite identities. Frida, on the left, wears a white Victorian lace dress, which represents the dress she wore in her wedding with Diego and a self with European tradition. The left Frida has a blank facial expression, resembling a painless, life-size doll. The indifferent face forms a clear contrast with her incomplete lace top and bloodstain on dress, which combined deliver a clue for her loss of virginity. Above the top is a fist-sized heart exposed like a medical anatomy which symbolizes Frida being torn by her lost love and broken marriage. However, she deadpans, pain to numb, and silently sits, with her left hand holding another Frida's hand and right-hand holding forceps clipping her bleeding artery. The bleeding heart, a traditional symbol of sacrifice in Catholic and Aztec rituals, alluded to Carlo's constant pain and frequent surgical procedures.

Frida, on the right, wears a blue top decorated with earthen yellow ribbon stripes and an olive-green dress with ruffled edges. This Frida symbolizes Diego's Mexican wife and a Tawana mother. She has an intact heart, and she holds Diego's egg-shaped portrait when he was a toddler. A blood vessel connects the heart to the egg, as if the heart's blood were feeding the egg. In addition to holding hands, the two Fridas were connected by blood vessels extending from each other's hearts. In the past, Frida even changed her dress style after marriage to please Rivera. When Frida got married in 1929, she specially chose the traditional Mexican dress, which not only satisfied Rivera, but also symbolized the victory of Indian women's freedom. Without realizing it, Frida has let the Mexican tradition develop into her second identity and physical persona.

The background of the painting is composed of the sky and the land. The thunderous sky is filled with woolly clouds. The inky blue-sky hints at Frida's anguish and inner turmoil. Frida switches between the two roles.

4. Feeling of Endless Loss from Miscarriage

Another worth-noting and enduring topic in Mexican culture was the motherhood. In 1936, Mexico's First General Law which is drafted based on the Constitution of Mexico and follows the tradition in civil law, was ratified in interests of a population growth. Consequently, civil organizations in Mexico responded to the call by propagandizing the glory image of fertile mother. The virtuous motherhood, shining with maternal brilliance was soon rooted and spread through books, journals, and other entertainment mass media. Whereas on the other hand Mexican female artists managed to destruct the idealized motherhood and spoke of anguish and feelings of chaos on behalf of themselves, unveiling those frustrated but real experience to the public.

In Frida Kahlo's *Me and My Doll*, the female artist depicts a woman sitting on a child-sized bed with a naked doll aside. Because of the bus accident in 1925, Frida became incapable of carrying children and she had experienced three miscarriages before she created this work. To compensate the

sadness for losing children and abreact her affection which was nowhere to vent, Frida developed an interest to collect dolls and pets as substitutes. This explains the existence of the doll in the picture, which shows the woman's strong impulse to carry a baby and to memorize the lost baby. Correspondingly, the woman, which represents Frida herself, has a face filled with loneliness, dissatisfied with her own tragic fate and an infertile, childless life. However, even though the doll may give her some consolation, the woman in the painting shows no attachment to the doll and smoke in front of it, which proves that she still feels unfulfilled because she knows the doll cannot replace her lost child.

Moreover, the cigarette held in woman's hand symbolizes the penis in psychoanalytic theory. According to Sigmund Freud, girls have a penis envy as they feel castrated after the discovery of their absence for a penis. Later when girls grow up to women, this envy complex turns to be the obsession to have a baby with their husbands. The birth of a child confirms a woman's female identity in this way. Otherwise, as Frida suffered, infertility leads to the failure of a woman to fully identify her own motherhood. Hence, this phallic symbol might symbolize her mind's wandering to her childhood in which she questioned her own identity as a girl.

In addition, the stark bedroom with no other furniture and decorations represents Frida's emptiness inside after several miscarriages. The use of drab colors and the rough texture of straw bed combined to emphasize the artist's confused understanding about her own sexual identity. This identity crisis can be traced to her childhood. Frida's mother had given birth to Frida with a wish to have a son, thus she was often neglected during her infancy. According to Frida's autobiography, she was nowhere to be found when her family were about to take a family photo. Frida was dressed up like a boy with her hair was heavily gelled and pulled back. Frida's father was satisfied and said he had wanted for a son. Frida's cold relationship with her mother and her father's tacit aversion both posed a subtle influence on her masculinity.

Frida seems to be particularly disarmed in another painting called *Flying Bed*: she lies naked in a hospital bed. Bright red blood flows on white sheets and a large drop of tear runs down her cheek. These pictorial depictions show her pain from miscarriage. Her hands are placed on her swollen belly with six blood-red ribbons. Every end of each vessel-like ribbon symbolizes a different kind of emotion. One is an orange-red torso with town spines and few sperms, which according to Frida's explanation symbolizes her thinking about inside part of a woman; another one is a male fetus which perhaps symbolize the unborn 'Diego'. Her broken pelvis drawn on the painting was the main cause of her miscarriage, the violet was given by Diego, and another mechanical device is more controversial. Lucina Brock claimed that it represents Frida's buttocks whereas Bertram Wolff said it signifies her misery and doom. The six objects with different symbolic implications embrace Frida's bed. The vast and barren land on the ground, on the other hand, emphasizes Frida's loneliness when she suffered from both mental and physical torments. Compared to the bed, Frida painted herself in a smaller size. Her naked body implies her lack of emotional belonging and feeling for being unprotected. The space in Frida's self-portrait is filled with mild sadness, manliness, and doubtful but expectant femininity. This ambivalent mind state intensifies the illusion audience feels in the picture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, conflicting ideologies between religion and feminism campaigns contributed to this series of biographic iconographies, as to paint, straightforwardly or implicitly, become the channel for Mexican female artists to openly acknowledge and make peace with their unspeakable pains and growing self-awareness. The dialogues are then established, between different female artists at that time for their shared experiences and between appreciators and artists for sympathetic resonance. Though the primary purpose is mainly individual emotional catharsis, the universal value of those works shouldn't be neglected. They opened a hole for people thereafter to peep into the Mexican society where women were burdened with heavy pressures and expectations.

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