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# FASHIONING NATIONAL IDENTITY

## Frida Kahlo in “Gringolandia”

By Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep

**F**rida Kahlo's adoption of Mexican indigenous dress began on the day of her marriage to Diego Rivera, August 21, 1929, when she borrowed a skirt, blouse, and *rebozo* from a maid to wear to the ceremony in the city hall in Coyoacán.<sup>1</sup> Heretofore Kahlo's wearing of native clothing most frequently has been attributed to her desire to please her husband and hide physical deficiencies.<sup>2</sup> However, this dress can also be seen as a political statement: Kahlo's sartorial endorsement of postrevolutionary ideology. Photographs of her in native dress when she and Rivera first visited San Francisco, from November 1930 to June 1931, communicated Mexican revolutionary cultural tenets as clearly as did Rivera's murals.<sup>3</sup>

After the revolution, a ten-year struggle that ended in 1920, political leaders consciously developed programs to cultivate Mexican nationalism in education and the arts. The school system was expanded to serve indigenous and rural populations, and there was a surge in commissions of murals portraying the contributions of Mexico's indigenous peoples, past and present. Folkloric elements were rediscovered by composers, and architects returned to forms and materials from the past, exuding a spirit of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> From the outset the government exalted contemporary manifestations of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past while simultaneously directing attention to the rich diversity inherent in Mexican culture.<sup>5</sup> This glorification of indigenous peoples evolved into what Luis Villoro described as the dialectic of the *indigenista* mindset.<sup>6</sup> By emphasizing the unique and pristine nature of Mexican culture through the valorization of its native inhabitants, the leaders sought to elevate the “real” Americans against the rest of the world, and especially against the United States. The image of the native Mexican, viewed as the protagonist in the revolution, sustained the nationalist movement between 1920 and 1940.<sup>7</sup>

Appropriating *lo indígena*, however, was an ambiguous undertaking for the rest of Mexican society, as Villoro correctly pointed out in 1949. For while *lo indígena* embodied, both biologically and spiritually, the root, essence, or core of all “true” Mexicans, most indigenous people were isolated, both socially and economically, from the mainstream of Mexican society. Nevertheless, the ideal of *lo indígena* was perceived by post-revolutionary leaders as the root necessary to pinpoint Mexican cultural uniqueness. Ironically, *lo indígena* incorporates for Mexican society in general, on the one hand that which is most intimately Mexican, and on the other, that which is most foreign and separate.<sup>8</sup>

Given Mexican society's ambivalence about its original inhabitants, the risk was great of their “not getting it right,” i.e., of regressing into stereotypical representations when publicizing this aspect of nationalism. Depictions of native Mexicans in the theater, comic strips, popular music, and film during the twenties and thirties failed to convey the richness and spiritual depth of indigenous culture. Instead, popular representations continued to depict timeworn stereotypes characterized by their use of language, dress, gait, and general behavior.<sup>9</sup>

A particularly poignant example of the (ab)use of *lo indígena* was the case of *la India Bonita*, a beauty contest that took place in Mexico City in 1921,<sup>10</sup> sponsored by the periodical *El Universal Ilustrado*. Young women arrayed in their indigenous finery posed for photographers and promenaded in front of the judges, whose job it was to select “la más bella” (the most beautiful). The winner was described in *El Universal Ilustrado*:

*She arrived here accompanied by her grandmother, a pure “meschica” Indian, who doesn't speak any Spanish. She comes from the highlands where she was born and lives and she's even wearing a “huipal” tied at the waist. Today she's received three million pesos and an enormous amount of attention.... Her name is María Bibiana Uribe and she's 18 years old.*<sup>11</sup>

María Bibiana Uribe then had “five o'clock tea” with Alberto Pani, Secretary of Foreign Relations, and other dignitaries, and her native beauty was exploited to push “el Jabón Flores del Campo” (Wildflower Soap).<sup>12</sup> Other than this, there was no attempt on the part of the competition organizers to assimilate the indigenous culture they had wished to exalt and honor.

By contrast, when the young, vibrant, native-Mexican-attired Frida Kahlo accompanied her husband to San Francisco in mid-November 1930, she immediately was recognized as *una Mexicana, muy bonita*. Photographer Edward Weston describes his first encounter with Kahlo, on December 14, 1930:

*I photographed Diego again, his new wife—Frida—too: she is in sharp contrast to Lupe [Guadalupe Marín, Rivera's second wife], petit, —a little doll alongside Diego, but a doll in size only, for she is strong and quite beautiful, shows very little of her father's German blood. Dressed in native costume even to huaraches, she causes much excitement on the streets of San Francisco. People stop in their tracks to look in wonder.*<sup>13</sup>

In San Francisco, according to Rivera's biographer Bertram Wolfe, “Diego and Frida were feted, lionized, spoiled.” He continued: “Parties everywhere, streams of invitations to teas, dinners, week-ends, lectures with great audiences coming to get a glimpse of them and listening, astounded, to Diego's words on art and social questions.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the 23-year-old Kahlo apparently was not interviewed by the media during her stay in California, we can extract from the carefully staged formal photographs taken at this time that her fashion was her public statement. In Weston's photograph (1930; Fig. 1) she wears the loosely draped fringed *rebozo* around her shoulders and heavy beads of jadeite—the green stone was a favorite stone of Aztec sculptors—around her neck. The muted, very light background seems to indicate an outdoor setting, which is confirmed in another Weston photograph with Rivera in front of one of his frescos in progress. Kahlo's hands rest gently but firmly



Fig. 1. Edward Weston, *Portrait of Frida Kahlo* (1930), photograph. Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents.



Fig. 2. Edward Weston, *Portrait of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera* (1930), photograph. Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents.

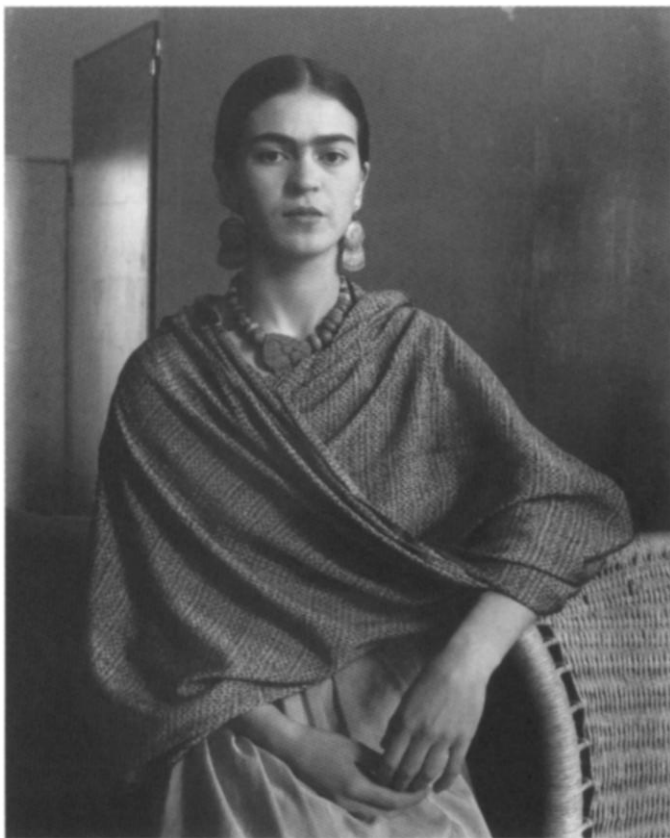


Fig. 3. Imogen Cunningham, *Portrait of Frida Kahlo* (1930), photograph. The Imogen Cunningham Trust, Berkeley.



Fig. 4. Dora Maar, *Portrait of Frida Kahlo* (1939), photograph. Courtesy Mark Kelman.

in her lap; her gaze is pensive and diverted from the camera; she is self-absorbed and proud. In the formal pose with Rivera (1930; Fig. 2), the giant muralist dwarfs his young wife, who appears relaxed, with a hint of a smile, but still in full control of her photographic statement.

In both photographs Kahlo wears a *rebozo*, a rectangular woven shawl of cotton, wool, or silk, sometimes embroidered and with long fringes. Of uncertain origin, the *rebozo* was worn by all social classes, distinguished only by type of material.<sup>15</sup> In Weston's photographs, Kahlo's *rebozo*, as well as her dress, appear to be of heavy silk, thus identifying her with the upper classes. The opulent strands of Aztec stone beads simultaneously establish a firm link to pre-Hispanic Mexico.

A photograph taken by Imogen Cunningham around the same time (Fig. 3) makes a quite different statement. Again the *rebozo* is featured, but this time it is draped across the chest in the manner of the revolutionary *soldaderas*. It appears to be woven of cotton or light wool, and the ornamental fringes are hidden. Her ringless hands appear relaxed and the casual support of the elbow on a cane-backed chair lends the photograph a proletarian air. Centered in her less elaborate, one-strand necklace is a stone bearing two Aztec symbols: a circle and cross superimposed on two crossed bands. According to Janice Helland:

**The circle and cross on the necklace represent the Aztec glyph "movement" or "setting in motion" (a beginning). However, the crossed bands are associated with the Aztec god of death (or sacrifice), Michlantecuhltli, often found on Death Stone boxes. Considering Kahlo's interest in Mexico, emphasis upon Aztec, and fascination with the life-death cycle, it is not surprising that the work combines two symbols—the "setting in motion" or beginning with death and sacrifice—into one.**<sup>16</sup>

In the Cunningham photograph Kahlo assumes for the first time what became her trademark posture: Solitary, confident, and confrontational, she gazes directly into the photographer's lens and the viewer's eyes.

In the costumes flaunted by Kahlo in these California photographs, she embodies the two main goals of postrevolutionary Mexican leaders: She exalts contemporary manifestations of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past (the Aztec jewelry and her achievement of a "native look" with her simple coiffure) and simultaneously directs attention to the rich diversity in Mexican culture (the different types of *rebozo*, her dress, pose, and props). Although Kahlo's father was by birth a German Jew, her mother was a Mexican Catholic, and it is the latter ethnic heritage she chose to promote (although she never denied her Jewishness).<sup>17</sup> Rivera, too, expressed pride in his "Indian-Spanish-Mexican parents."<sup>18</sup>

Kahlo began creating her authentically Mexican "look" during the first years of her marriage. Her conscious appropriation of both ancient and contemporary cultural signs and symbols reflects her transition from a single woman to a married woman, from a private person to the public role of spouse of a well-known artist, and from an invalid to an artist.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, her personal transition mirrors Mexico itself, in a "phase of self-examination and self-definition after the Revolution."<sup>20</sup> The transitional aspect of her costuming becomes apparent when compared with her eventual adoption of the orthodox Tehuantepec style, as shown in a photograph by Dora Maar, taken at the time of Kahlo's 1939 exhibition in Paris (Fig. 4).<sup>21</sup> Considering the high degree of her conscious devotion to political engagement, Fredric Jameson's hypothesis of third-world literary texts can perhaps be applied to Kahlo's fashion as text. Jameson explains:

**Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.**<sup>22</sup>

Clearly Kahlo combines the private and public aspects of her life in her sartorial allegory of postrevolutionary Mexico.

Yet another goal of Mexican leaders after the revolution was to uphold a unique Mexican presence in the face of European and especially North American cultural and economic colonization. A playful and at the same time staged photograph by Peter A. Juley, also taken in 1930 (Fig. 5), portrays Kahlo and Rivera with Lucille and Arnold Blanch, with whom they stayed while in San Francisco.<sup>23</sup> The contrast between the women's dress and poses is striking. Especially revealing is the casual, even submissive pose of Lucille Blanch on the lap of a spread-legged and smiling Rivera, who firmly holds her against his body. The strategic placement of her hand, posed in easy reach of Rivera's genitals, should not be overlooked. Both Blanch and Rivera here confirm stereotypes of the "macho" Latin and the American female adventurer. Kahlo, by contrast, dressed in Mexican (but not peasant) garb, sits sedately on the knees of Arnold Blanch, her hands resting firmly on her lap. Her body does not yield to this American man and his encircling hold, which is relaxed and not confining. Kahlo's carriage and concentrated gaze elevate her head above the others and isolate her within the foursome. Kahlo's sartorial declaration and posture are meant here to be read as a public affirmation of *Mexicanidad* and postrevolutionary Mexico's attitude toward U.S. economic and cultural colonization, the same message found in Rivera's contemporaneous murals.

Similar messages can be found in her self-portraits of the period. In *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* (1932; Fig. 6), painted during her stay in Detroit, Kahlo places herself at a crossroad, elaborating on and concretizing the personal and political positions evidenced in the Juley photograph with the Blanches. In the painting Kahlo also portrays herself in "colonial-style" dress and austerely coiffed hair, adding a Coatlicue-like beaded necklace with bones. There is a considerable irony in Kahlo's sartorial manipulation of culture, for she is also wearing lacy fingerless gloves of a kind she favored throughout her life.<sup>24</sup> Further, her stern, dispassionate gaze contradicts the message evoked by the trace of nipples discernible beneath the bodice of her dress; her stiff pose contrasts with the cigarette casually held between two fingers of her right hand; and the miniature paper cut-out flag in her left suggests a party or parade. In juxtaposition to the Star Spangled Banner partially hidden by clouds of industrial smoke and removed from human connection, this lace-backed political icon conveys, through its central position in the painting, a vibrant personal element in Mexican nationalism. On the smokestacks are written the letters F O R D, and on the pedestal on which she stands is carved her newly adopted name, "Carmen Rivera."<sup>25</sup> Boldly, Kahlo has placed herself, a Mexican woman, as pendant to Henry Ford, the industrialist. The red leather shoes that peer out discreetly from beneath her ruffle-trimmed skirt complete the construction of this head-to-toe enigma. In this self-image Kahlo sends a mixture of moods, styles, and messages, representing no particular culture, place, or time. In situating herself, the female artist, on the border between Mexico and the United States, she takes up a position not previously occupied by a woman. A postcolonial subject, she has abandoned her culturally assigned and internationally dictated "place." The motley nature of her adornment at this particular time and space rep-

resents an individual and, allegorically, a nation in transition. The force of the painting lies not only in the juxtaposition of industrial sterility and pre-Columbian fertility, as critics insist,<sup>26</sup> but rather in the political impact of the location and “look” of the female artist.

Not only does Kahlo place herself at a strategic site on the border between Mexico and the United States, but this location is represented as central and specific within the painting.<sup>27</sup> Although as a “Mexican and a woman Kahlo represents a dual form of marginalization within the essentially patriarchal norms of modernism,”<sup>28</sup> she actually adds a third dimension to her representation of marginalization: a resolute association with indigenous culture, which she displays in nearly every photograph of her and in almost all her self-portraits. It seems evident that Kahlo’s sojourn in the United States caused critical self-reflection and helped crystallize her self-image.

By deliberately constructing a “critical subject,” Kahlo is able to speak from several places at once and, in so doing, to center the marginal, respond from both inside and outside of hegemonic structures, and question the norm by imbuing it with that which is “other.” Not only does she connect boundaries with her physical location—on the border—but she does so as well with her carefully constructed costume.

*Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* also exhibits Kahlo’s propensity for representing binary systems in her works. As Kettenmann has pointed out, Kahlo derived this idea from the Aztec belief in an ongoing conflict between the white god Huitzilopochtli and his opponent Tezcatlipoca—a struggle of opposites that contrasts white/black, day/night, summer/winter, south/north.<sup>29</sup> The divided backgrounds in the paintings *Diego and Frida, 1929-1944* (1944), *Tree of Hope* (1946), and *The Love Embrace of the Universe* (1949) typify



Fig. 5. Peter A. Juley, *Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Lucille and Arnold Blanch* (1930), photograph. Peter A. Juley & Son Collection, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

unique cultural heritage as exemplified in the *India Bonita* contest, Kahlo’s donning of native Mexican clothing testifies to her sustained devotion to revolutionary ideas. She embodied what the revolutionary leaders preached, and personified a nation in transition.



Fig. 6. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* (1932), oil on canvas, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Maria Reyer Collection.

Kahlo’s application of this dualistic principle.

In *Self-Portrait on the Border*, the dual nature inherent in Aztec-Mexican culture is in contrast to a monolithic North American culture that worships but one god: industry. The magnificence of Mexican culture shines forth more brightly when it is set in an international context. Positioning herself between two distinct worlds, Kahlo highlights her role as intermediary in the sense of one who is knowledgeable of both cultures and seeks to facilitate an apt representation of each.

When Kahlo accompanied her husband to San Francisco in 1930, attired in authentic Mexican clothing, displaying Aztec jewelry, and wearing her dark hair pulled tightly away from her face, she exuded a distinctly festive air. She was celebrating Mexico at a time when “Anglo” tastes were the height of fashion for women of her class at home,<sup>30</sup> as by 1930 the ideological spirit that had precipitated Kahlo’s adoption of Mexican dress was losing ground. In contrast to commercial spotlights on Mexico’s

unique cultural heritage as exemplified in the *India Bonita* contest, Kahlo’s donning of native Mexican clothing testifies to her sustained devotion to revolutionary ideas. She embodied what the revolutionary leaders preached, and personified a nation in transition. As an unofficial ambassador of postrevolutionary Mexico in the United States, she proved that the personal truly is political, right down to the “ribald Mexican sayings” she embroidered on her petticoats.<sup>31</sup>

Kahlo was keenly aware of the ability of clothing to communicate information about the tastes, principles, character, and moods of a nation. The Mexican Revolution itself had not created a sense of national identity, but subsequent political leaders tried to forge a model of national identity by initiating programs in education and the arts. Frida Kahlo fashioned her own interpretation of revolutionary ideology from remnants of Mexico’s

indigenous past and ethnically diverse contemporary scene, situating herself, and therefore her Mexican revolutionary ideals, in a broad international setting for the world to see and ponder. As a friend noted: "She was like birds and flowers and knitted quilts, a Mexican mood concentrated in an epoch and all expressed through her."<sup>32</sup> ●

#### NOTES

1. See Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 99. In a later work Herrera claims that "Frida was one of the first women in the Mexican art world to wear regional costumes"; see her *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 48.

2. See Herrera, *A Biography*, 111-12.

3. See Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 300. For a detailed account of Rivera's mural paintings in the U.S. during this period, see Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America*, with an explanatory text by Bertram Wolfe (New York: Covici, Friede, 1934).

4. See Leonel Duran, "Las culturas indígenas de México y su proceso de cambio e identidad," in José Alcina French, ed., *Indianismo e indigenismo en América* (Madrid: Alianza, 1990), 245-46.

5. See Roberto Blancarte, "Introducción," in Roberto Blancarte, ed., *Cultura e identidad nacional* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las artes, 1994), 19.

6. See Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (Mexico City: La Casa Chato, 1949; rpt. 1979), 10.

7. See Richard Pérez Montfort, "Indigenismo, hispanismo y panamericanismo en la cultura popular mexicana de 1920 a 1940," in *Cultura e identidad nacional*, 344, and Frederick C. Turner, *The Dynamic of Mexican Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1968), 172-77.

8. See Villoro, *Los grandes momentos*, 196, 207.

9. For individual examples from each genre see Pérez Montfort, "Indigenismo," 347, 349, 353-63.

10. See *ibid.*, 353-55.

11. *El Universal Ilustrado*, quoted in *ibid.*, 353. (Author's translation.)

12. For further examples concerning the misappropriation of *la India Bonita*, see *ibid.*, 354-55.

13. Nancy Newhall, ed., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston: I. Mexico II. California* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 198.

14. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life*, 287-88.

15. See Donald and Dorothy Cordry, *Mexican Indian Costumes* (Austin: University of Texas, 1978), 11, 130, and Chloë Sayer, *Costumes of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas, 1985), 106-09. Salomon Grimberg claims the *rebozo* is the Mexican response to the Spanish mantilla. (Comment to editor.)

16. Janice Helland, "Aztec Imagery in Frida Kahlo's Paintings," *WAJ* (F90/W91), 9.

17. For a fascinating look at Kahlo and her Jewish heritage, see Gannit Ankori, "The Hidden Frida: Covert Jewish Elements in the Art of Frida Kahlo," in *Jewish Art* (1993/94), 225-47.

18. *New York Herald Tribune*, November 14, 1931, 15. Bertram Wolfe recounts that in 1952 Rivera told a Jewish reporter "that he was 'three-eighths Jewish,' his paternal grandfather being Anastasio de la Rivera Sforza, son of an Italian Jew born in Petrograd." Wolfe states in a footnote on the same page: "I have followed the parental marriage license in which none of these interesting permutations shows up"; see *The Fabulous Life*, 13-14.

19. Kahlo's initiation into the world of painting actually began during her convalescence after her 1925 accident. Rivera encouraged her to paint throughout their long relationship. See Herrera, *A Biography*, 62-64.

20. Claudia Schaefer, "Frida Kahlo's Cult of the Body: Self-Portrait, Magical Realism, and the Cosmic Race," in *Textured Lives: Women, Art and Representation in Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1992), 3.

21. Self-portraits from this later period with the Tehuantepec costume include *Me and My Doll* (1937), *Memory* (1937), *Itzcuintli Dog with Me* (c. 1938), and *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938). Most Kahlo scholars agree that the legends surrounding the Tehuantepec women, a matriarchal society, influenced her choice of this costume; see, among other sources, Herrera, *A Biography*, 109-10, and Helland "Aztec Imagery," 10. However, a pertinent but overlooked fact concerning the Tehuantepecs is the presence of rich ethnic mixing in this region. Miguel Covarrubias, in his *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (New York: Knopf, 1946), writes: "The *tehuanos* are in the majority Zapotec Indians with a good measure of blood from practically every race in the world." (243). Furthermore, the vintage of Kahlo's Tehuantepec costume was not ancient. In pre-Victorian times, the women wore a rectangular wrapped skirt that was held tight at the waist by a sash and prior to 1850 they went bare-breasted. It was during Victorian times that silk, velvet, and brocades were adopted for their elaborate skirts, an obvious European influence. What Kahlo adopted was a culturally mixed costume from a racially mixed people.

22. Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," in *Social Text* (Fall 1986), 69. Schaefer also quotes Jameson in reference to the private allegory of the visual images of Mexican social and political history in Kahlo's paintings; Schaefer, "Cult of the Body," 5.

23. Herrera identifies the American couple as the Stackpoles in *The Paintings*, 67. In *Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), 120, editors Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman identify the couple as Lucille and Arnold Blanch. Dr. Salomon Grimberg concurs.

24. Kahlo also wears lace gloves in a 1936 photograph reprinted in Erika Billeter, ed., *The Blue House: The World of Frida Kahlo* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1993), 251, and in a 1938 photograph, standing in front of *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), reprinted in Herrera, *A Biography*, Fig. 51.

25. With the rise of Nazism, Rivera encouraged Kahlo to use her second name, Carmen; see Herrera, *A Biography*, 134.

26. See, among others, Helland, "Aztec Imagery," 9, and Herrera, *The Paintings*, 94-96.

27. We are indebted to Joan Borsa for her astute study of female subjectivity and the politics of location in "Frida Kahlo: Marginalization and the Critical Female Subject," in *Third Text*, III (1990), 21-40.

28. Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, "The Politics of Latin American Art," in *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America* (London: Verso, 1989), 92.

29. See Kettenmann, "Selbstdarstellung im Spiegel mexikanischer Tradition," in Helga Prignitz-Poda, Salomon Grimberg, and Andrea Kettenmann, eds., *Frida Kahlo: Das Gesamtwerk* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1988), 29-30.

30. See Anita Brenner, *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), 81-82. Brenner describes the cumulative effect of this trend under President Abelardo Rodríguez (1932-34): "The President conversed in fluent English and pitched the first ball in baseball games. Wives of politicians bought mink coats and learned to play bridge; their mistresses bought Lincolns."

31. "Layers of petticoats, their hems embroidered by Frida herself with ribald Mexican sayings, gave her walk a special grace and sway"; Herrera, *A Biography*, 110.

32. Lola Alvarez Bravo, quoted in Salomon Grimberg, *Lola Alvarez Bravo: The Frida Kahlo Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum for Women in the Arts, 1991), 7.

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