

Humanities

This passage is adapted from the article "The Trouble with Frida Kahlo" by Stephanie Mencimer, which appeared in *Washington Monthly* (©2002 Washington Monthly).

Never has a woman with a mustache been so revered, or so marketed, as Frida Kahlo. Like a female Che Guevara, she has become a cottage industry. Feminists might celebrate Kahlo's ascent to greatness-

05 if only her fame were related to her art. Instead, her fans are largely drawn by the story of her life, for which her paintings are often presented as simple illustration. Fridamaniacs are inspired by Kahlo's tragic tale of physical suffering-polio at six, grisly accident at 18-and

10 fascinated with her glamorous friends and lovers. But, like a game of telephone, the more Kahlo's story has been told, the more it has been distorted, omitting uncomfortable details that show her to be a far more complex and flawed figure than the movies suggest. This

15 elevation of the artist over the art diminishes the public understanding of Kahlo's place in history and overshadows the deeper and more disturbing truths in her work. Until the 1970s there were almost no "great"

women artists. As the feminist movement gathered steam,

20 women sought to rectify that problem. Historically, women's limited opportunities meant there were few women artists to begin with, and even fewer whose work had been collected and could be definitively attributed to them. Once scholars did identify significant women

25 artists, they had to demonstrate that those artists met the male standards for admission to the canon-i.e., they had to suffer and be mostly ignored during their lifetimes. It was also helpful if the emerging female artists were beautiful and had glamorous friends.

30 Kahlo made a perfect candidate. As if her bodily injuries weren't compelling enough, Kahlo's drama was enhanced by what she referred to as the second accident in her life: Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican muralist to whom she was married for 25 years. Rivera was a notorious

35 womanizer, a habit he did not abandon after marrying Kahlo. Both Kahlo and Rivera were active in the Communist Party and Mexican politics. Kahlo's paintings often reflect her tumultuous relationship with Rivera, as well as the anguish of her ever-deteriorating health.

40 Between the time of her accident and her death, Kahlo had more than 30 surgeries, and a gangrenous leg

was eventually amputated. She dramatized the pain in her paintings, while carefully cultivating a self-image as a heroic sufferer.

45 While Kahlo's work never attracted the attention her husband's did, it did win some critical acclaim. Eventually, though, her failing health left her addicted to painkillers and alcohol. She continued to paint, but the addiction destroyed the controlled, delicate brushwork

50 that had characterized her best work. In 1954, suffering from pneumonia, Kahlo went to a Communist march. Four days later, she died in what may or may not have been a suicide.

If the focus of the art business must be on biography,

55 that biography should at least include the artists' warts.

Many of Kahlo's surgeries may have been unnecessary.

She also made several suicide attempts and spent much of her adult life addicted to drugs and alcohol. More importantly, though, Kahlo's Communism, now treated

60 as somehow sort of quaint, led her to embrace some unforgivable political positions. Less scandalous but worth noting is that Kahlo despised the very gringos who now champion her work, and her art reflects her obvious disdain for the United States.

65 Neglecting the dark side of the artist's narrative deprives the public of a full appreciation of the art.

Without knowing that by 1953 Kahlo was so strung out that she could barely pick up a paintbrush, how can the public possibly know why some of her late work is so

70 bad Which is the really tragic part of Kahlo's story.

Because when you sweep away the sideshow, ignore the overwrought analysis, and take a hard look at what she painted, much of it is extraordinary. Her paintings tap into sex and violence, life and death, in original and profound

75 ways. So while women might celebrate Kahlo's success, it may be that real progress has come when a woman can be remembered both as a great artist and as a despicable cur.