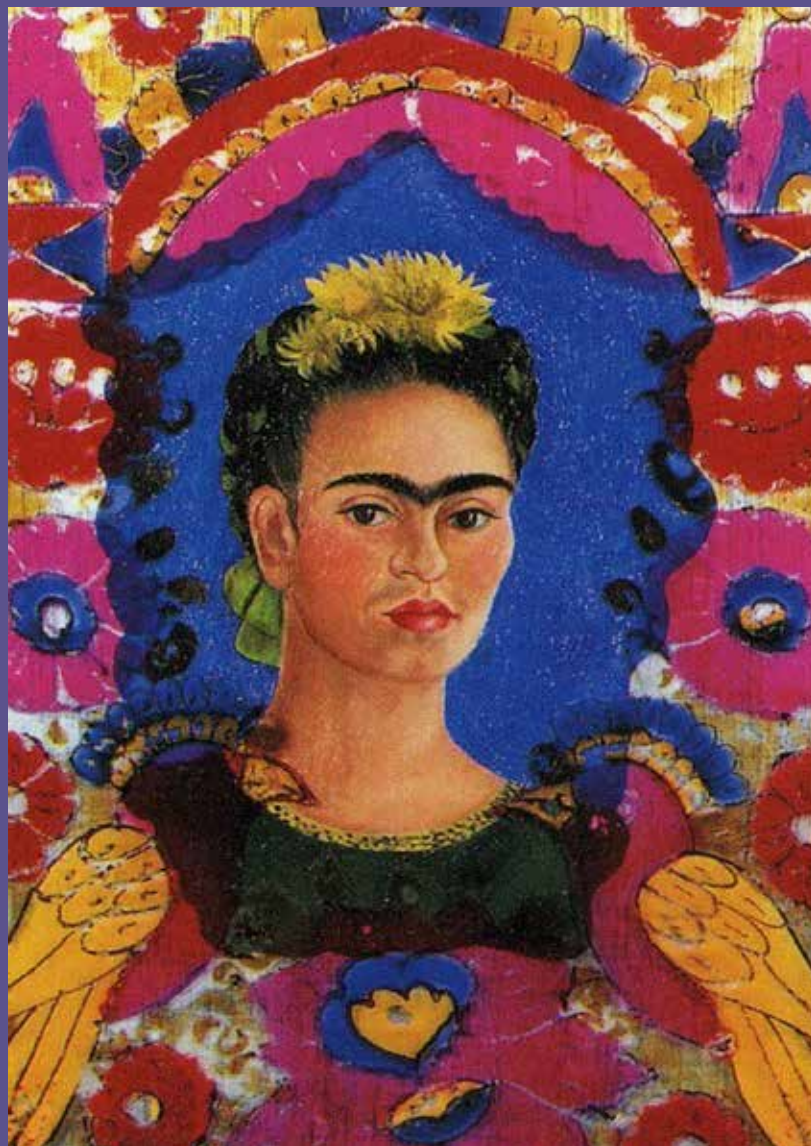


# Renewing the passion of Frida Kahlo



Self portrait, Frida Kahlo, 1938.

## Christopher Schifeling, MD

Dr. Schifeling (AOA, University of North Carolina School of Medicine at Chapel Hill, 2015) is a Geriatric and Palliative Care Physician at Denver Health Medical Center, and Assistant Professor, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver, CO.

Recently, the world has been inundated by Frida Kahlo's signature stoic gaze from tote bags to children's book displays to restaurant décor to gift shop tchotchkes. Her look has become iconic. She is deservedly famous for her lifelong struggle with serious illness, and how her paintings manifest and transform her pain. However, the vast proliferation of her image dilutes the ferocity of her depiction of suffering. Her painting, *The Broken Column*, depicts, while also portraying, the tremendous scope of her experience, and the raw power of her artistic expertise.

### A close look

In the painting (next page), her chest is bared and so is her body, which has been magically cut from her neck down to reveal a stone column like those from ancient Greece. The cracks in the pillar have an echo in the dark furrows in the barren, yellow-green landscape behind her. Construction nails of various sizes are scattered over her skin and extend in a line down her right leg. Her tears are reflected in the stormy clouds and sea, but not in her stoic affect. The slanted horizon creates a sense of disequilibrium. Unlike most of her other self-portraits, her hair is undone, she is alone without pets or plants, and she wears a white medical corset and a bloodied sheet at her waist rather than one of her favored Tehuana dresses.

### Myriad health issues

As a consequence of childhood polio, a life-threatening streetcar accident when she was 18, and possibly spina bifida, Kahlo had numerous back surgeries throughout her life.<sup>1,2</sup> Recovery from several operations involved prolonged bedrest and a variety of medical corsets.<sup>1-3</sup> Kahlo painted *The Broken Column* during one of her periods of convalescence.<sup>2</sup>

### Spinal tap

The metaphor of the spinal column, is the central feature of the painting. It makes Kahlo's pain more concrete. Unlike in real life, in the painting, Kahlo can show her

broken column and validate her suffering. Viewer's see its cracks and worry that her head may fall off the crumbling pile of rocks. The white fractured column against a black backdrop is reminiscent of spinal X-rays, which lends a heightened sense of objectivity.

This is similar to how many patients with chronic back pain can list off all the findings of their back MRIs, even though there is little association between spinal imaging and symptoms. You have to see it to believe it.

In addition to fostering empathy for Kahlo's condition, the column metaphor elevates her suffering. The spirals, or volutes, at the top of the pillar mark this as an ionic column, which places it in the ruins of ancient Greece. In this context, the collapsing architecture is beautiful in spite of, or perhaps because of, its decay. Ionic columns were used for temples including one of the wonders of the world. With this creative device, Kahlo paints herself broken, beautiful, and scared.

### Just a flesh wound

If the broken column were not sufficiently rich, Kahlo goes a step farther with the nails studding her body. The distribution of the nails is intriguing. The band of nails going down her right leg points to her many problems with this leg. Due to sequela of polio and her streetcar accident, she developed chronic ulcers in her right foot, eventually leading to gangrene requiring an amputation.<sup>1-3</sup>

Alternatively, this radiation of nails, in the setting of a broken column, can portray sciatica or nerve pain that comes from the back and shoots down into the toes. Along this line of neuropathic pain, the spread of nails across her head, torso, and extremities can convey the process of central sensitization that can occur with chronic pain where prolonged discomfort leads to widespread pain well beyond the area of initial injury.

Another fascinating aspect of the nails is that they don't draw any blood. This is rather unusual for Kahlo as she does not shy away from blood in her paintings. In *The Two Fridas*, she paints anatomical hearts with an artery actively bleeding onto a white dress, and in *Henry Ford Hospital* she depicts the hemorrhage of her miscarriage.<sup>2</sup> So, the lack of blood here is significant. This further supports the notion of neuropathy and central sensitization where there is no physical signs of her pain.

The nails can also allude to the iatrogenesis of much of Kahlo's chronic pain.<sup>1</sup> There is a certain irony that the

## Renewing the passion of Frida Kahlo

nails could be used to repair some architectural defects, but provide no assistance for her broken column. Instead they are directed at her skin.

More than just another manifestation of her pain, the allusion of the nails to the crucifixion of Jesus builds on her belief in the sacredness of her suffering.

### The eye of the beholder

The Frida of this self-portrait submits herself to the medical gaze with its associated subjectivity, depersonalization and vulnerability. In addition to the corset, the white garment that she holds at her waist calls to mind a hospital gown, as well as a shroud.

Another contrast to the rest of her oeuvre is her solitude. Kahlo's usually accompanying pets are gone, and the landscape provides no adorning plants that are featured in her other paintings. While therapy animals are a growing presence in the clinic, loneliness remains a prominent element of the patient experience, especially in the hospital. In effect, Kahlo paints herself in the sick role, and, like a good patient, she willingly strips her identity and exposes her body with all its faults.

There are many elements of the painting that give Kahlo a greater sense of agency than the traditional patient experience. Having spent much time on bedrest and in wheelchairs, she shows herself standing. This not so simple act is a feat of resilience. Similarly, in spite of her tears, her face is stoic, and she meets the viewers' gaze. She seems to dare her audience to witness her suffering. She is not ashamed of her illness.

By translating her spine into a Greek ruin, she infuses her pathology with objectivity, beauty, and spirituality.



The Broken Column, 1944, by Frida Kahlo

While nudity in the medical context conveys vulnerability, in art history it heralds the presence of divinity.

Before her accident, Kahlo had planned to become a doctor. She started painting after her injury as a way to cope with her condition.<sup>1-2</sup> A mirror placed on the ceiling of her bed allowed her to create self-portraits.<sup>2</sup> The medical gaze of the painting is originally Kahlo's inspection of herself. She is both the patient and the clinician. *The Broken Column* is a subversive assessment and plan. It reveals the nature of Kahlo's suffering. It prescribes narratives of resilience.

### References

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The author's E-mail address is [chris.schifeling@gmail.com](mailto:chris.schifeling@gmail.com).