

History is Gay Podcast
Episode 20: More than meets the Eye(brow): Frida Kahlo

Introduction

Leigh: Hello, and welcome to *History is Gay!* A podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ [Intro Music] ♪

Leigh: Hello folks! I'm Leigh

Gretchen: And I'm Gretchen.

Leigh: Welcome back, Gretchen.

Gretchen: Oh, thank you. It's good to be back.

Leigh: Yes. And in this episode, we are talking about someone we've wanted to talk about for quite some time. The—one of the most iconic painters, in general, and certainly the most iconic Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo.

Gretchen: Yes. Bisexual disaster Frida Kahlo. [laughs]

Leigh: [laughs] Oh, I was gonna say bisexual queen of my heart, but I guess...

Gretchen: She can be both a disaster and Queen of our hearts, because she is both. [laughs]

Leigh: I mean, God knows we've never ever had anyone like that that we've talked about. [laughs]

Gretchen: No, everyone is always very distinguished,

Leigh: Distinguished, put together, have their lives in order.

Gretchen: No murders. No, you know, [laughter] bloody fake bloody massacres with dripping axes.

Leigh: Yeah, no.

Gretchen: Nope, not at all.

Leigh: Never never. [laughs]

Gretchen: Yep. And just in time for my birthday too. My birthday's in a couple of weeks. So...

Leigh: [cheering] Whoo!

Gretchen: Fun to be talking about an awesome queer woman of color, though I suppose we're giving things away.

Leigh: But I mean, hopefully. [laughter]

Gretchen: This is a queer history podcast.

Leigh: True.

Gretchen: So pretty much anyone we talk about is going to, at least at some level, going to be someone who we consider in that category.

Leigh: Yes. Well, and Frida Kahlo, especially as somebody I think whose queerness gets erased a lot.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: She is someone who has been, you know, known in terms of association with her most famous husband.

Gretchen: Yep,

Leigh: But we cared less about Diego Rivera and more about Frida Kahlo herself.

Gretchen: Yes, absolutely.

Leigh: So we're going to be talking about a whole bunch of stuff to do with her life, which involves some heavy things. So content warnings for this episode will include abortion, suicide and graphic depictions of physical pain and symbolic depictions thereof. We specifically wanted to get into talking about Frida Kahlo as well to start bringing in disability rights and advocacy into our conversation because we thus far have mostly talked about able-bodied people and Frida Kahlo is a really wonderful like icon for disabled folks. So, really excited to talk about her life.

Gretchen: Yeah. And she was not shy about discussing her disability or depicting it in her painting. And that's why we say graphic. And we know that these are very important like descriptions and depictions thereof, but there are—I mean, they are also can be pretty, you know, they might be, you know, they might be unsettling for—for folks to look at because she was very honest about her experience, and how it—how she felt about it and how she was internalizing it and processing it. And so, yeah. It's an important discussion, but one that we still want to warn people who might be a bit squeamish.

Leigh: Yeah. So this is going to be a people focused episode. We're going to give you some historical context like usual. We'll go into a brief bio of her life and we'll talk about why we think they're gay or in her case bisexual, and then we'll end the podcast with How Gay Were They? Our personal ranking about how likely it is that they weren't straight. Which is as you know, by now, we continually break our own scale.

Gretchen: Yep, scales don't matter.

Leigh: Have we ever—have we like ever gone beyond like below a five?
[laughs]

Gretchen: I may have given—I feel like I may have given maybe one of the pirates below a five.

Leigh: Oh yeah.

Gretchen: From like our first episode. Maybe Calico Jack?

Leigh: We've come so far.

Gretchen: I know. Now we just...

Leigh: This has almost been a year.

Gretchen: Almost a year. That's crazy to think about.

Leigh: Yeah. After this episode comes out. The next episode will have been a full— full year. We will have done this for a year! *History is Gay* will have turned one years old.

Gretchen: Oh, yay. Our podcast baby's growing up.

Leigh: We'll have to do something special.

Gretchen: Happy birthday, special birthday episode or something? Birthday announcement? Ah, yeah. Do we have any new business announcements other than I mean our last episode that we put out had a big major announcement. So?

Leigh: Yes. Yeah. If you didn't happen to listen to the mini episode that we just put out our first letters and queries bonus episode. We—in addition to bringing you the stories of many of our gay ghost listeners, told you that we're having a schedule change. We're going to be going down to once a month episodes for a while. We go through all of the reasoning and talking about it a little bit more in that. So if you didn't go ahead and listen to it, go back, listen to it and then have some good times listening to cute ghost stories from our listeners.

Gretchen: They're really, really delightful. They're great.

Leigh: Also, if you will be heading to PodCon in January, it's January 18th and 19th in Seattle. Gretchen is not able to make it but, I, Leigh will be there. I will be tabling with some other podcast folks, some other podnauts as we're starting to call each other and ourselves. So go ahead. Come on over say hi, if you're showing up there.

Gretchen: Yeah, yeah. And then in February, we are going to be, both of us will be at TGI Femslash, again, where the podcasts all got started.

Leigh: Our podcast parent.

Gretchen: Yay! And we will be doing another live episode.

Leigh: Yes. So more details to come about what that will involve but we're very excited.

Socio-Historical and Religious Context

Gretchen: Yes, that'll be fun. So let's get started with Frida Kahlo with some historical context. So the biggest thing to know when talking about Frida Kahlo's life is Mexico at the turn of the century. And the big thing is the Mexican Revolution. So the Mexican Civil War lasted from 1910 to 1920. And was a genuinely national revolution. A lot of recent research on the topic has focused on you know, local and regional manifestations of it but it was truly a, you know, national Mexican Civil War, all of Mexico was involved. And it began with a guy named José De la Cruz Porfirio Díaz Mori, and he was a Mexican general and politician who served seven terms as president of Mexico from 1876 to 1910.

So his regime actually had brought a lot of stability after the wars and conflicts that preceded him during the 19th century. But he grew unpopular due to civil repression and political stagnation. He was known for making policies that benefited only himself and his wealthy friends and foreign investors. And gee, doesn't that sound familiar to our current political climate, but we won't harp on that. [sarcastic laughter]

The many estates that he supported for himself and his wealthy friends led to a lot of death, about 600,000 workers died between 1900 to 1910. So by 1910, he was growing pretty unpopular.

Leigh: Yikes.

Gretchen: And because he hadn't institutionalized succession, and though he claimed to be in favor of democracy, he then declared himself president for an eighth term in 1910 by rigging the election, which triggered a succession crisis and calls for armed rebellion which were led by Francisco Madero, who was his opponent in the election. And Pancho Villa. And after several major losses to Madero's forces, Díaz was forced to resign in 1911 and was exiled to France.

So this was just the beginning. Because Madero and Villa, they lead calls for democratic election following the conflict, and Madero won by a

landslide in a free and fair election. His regime expanded the middle class, organized labor, did some good things, but opposition began almost immediately from many who were former revolutionaries who saw him as still too conservative. Madero and his vice president were forced to resign and then assassinated only two years later, in 1913.

Counter revolutionary forces led by General Victoriano Huerta then took power, who—he backed by a lot of businessmen and fans of Díaz's old order. Though he only remained in power for a year before he was then forced out. Then the constitutionalist faction rose to power and armed conflicts continued until 1920. And over time, the Mexican Civil War evolved from a revolt, specifically against Díaz, to kind of a multi sided civil war with a lot of factions and distinct regions who were fighting against each other.

The years from 1920 to 1940, were hugely significant. And although armed conflict was said to have ceased in 1917, it didn't entirely. And that 20 year period kind of afterward was spent consolidating, recovering, experimenting in social reform and organisation. And then from the '40s to the '80s, when it underwent a neoliberal reform, the Mexican government was fairly committed to social justice, like practising social justice as a regime.

So this, I mean, was a huge national crisis, national conflict. And this is all going on, Frida was born right before this. And so I mean, this would have been in her, she, you know, lived under it for the first early years of her life. And it really did shape a lot of what the young people of around her time, how they thought of themselves, how they thought of Mexican culture. I mean, it led to a lot of changes in the relationship between colonialist forces and kind of indigenous ideas of Mexican identity. So we really can't under emphasize the Mexican Civil War in the life of Frida Kahlo, but we don't have time to do the whole episode on that, so just a—that was just a summary.

Leigh: [laughs] Yeah, well, especially considering, you know, later on in Frida Kahlo's life, she becomes an intensely politically engaged figure. So a lot of this really is a very important basis for her political and communist ideals, and how she would eventually use her art and her own fashion as political markers as well. So speaking of her art, though, we want to talk a little bit about some art movements that were going on during her life. So let's talk about—talk about symbolism.

So this was a late 19th century art movement that held that art should represent absolute truths that can only be described indirectly. The goal was to describe a feeling or desire or longing and representative in symbolic language or art, cloaking truth in metaphor. So it was a reaction to realism and naturalism, which sought to depict reality and all of its grittiness and elevate the humble over the ideal. You saw when we talked a little bit about Claude Cahun, Claude Cahun started doing a lot of symbolist work that then eventually turned into surrealist. There's a kind of a natural progression there, right? Intensity. [both laughing]

Gretchen: Start with metaphors and then you just get weird,

Leigh: Then you—the shit gets weird.

Gretchen: Absolutely.

Leigh: We also have cubism. So everybody knows about this from, you know, they hear about Pablo Picasso. It was an early 20th century art movement that breaks up and reassembles the subject into multiple perspectives in an abstract form. Again, it was a reaction to romanticism and idealism, frequently associated with Pablo Picasso's pain and relationships, and the devolution of his perception of women based on his feelings about them, which were not great. Pablo Picasso was a little bit of a misogynist. Fuck

Gretchen: Just a little lot, a bit

Leigh: There's more to it than that, but we don't have time to get into it now. And neither one of us really wants to talk about Pablo Picasso.

Grethen: Nope. So not him.

Leigh: So yep. So, not him. Oh, boy. German words.

Gretchen: Neue Sachlichkeit.

Leigh: Yeah. Neue Sachlichkeit.

Getchen: Just choke on it.

Leigh: It's just super fun. It's a 1920s German art movement focused on a return to order and practical engagement with the world a quote, "*matter of factness embodied in art,*" sorry, a practical engagement with the world. A quote matter of factness embodied is a reaction to expressionism, which was focused on depicting emotional experiences rather than nature, and focusing on personal angst, alienation from society and questions of identity. That is like the most German thing I could ever imagine.

Gretchen: I know, right? Like German expressionism is just like so very German. And then the reaction is like, nope, nope, nope. Let's have some order and some structure. No feelings. None of this feelings nonsense.

Leigh: [laughs] Yes, yeah. So funnily enough, expressionism isn't mentioned as one of Frida Kahlo influences, but it seems like it would be, given her huge focus on identity, although she does have a focus on politics and engagement with the world as well. She also has an interesting perspective and relationship with like her own connection to Germany.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Which we'll get into. And then we have surrealism. 1920s art movement, best known for depicting illogical and or disturbing images with photographic-like precision. So we talked a whole lot about surrealism with Claude Cahun. So you can go back to our episode, which was our part two of our Nazi punks, fuck off.

Gretchen: Yeah, and the reason we bring up all these things is because art is complicated.

Leigh: [laughs] That's like such an understatement.

Gretchen: Right, like whenever you're trying to discuss an artist and their relationship with like art movements, you can never just pin them in one. And especially Frida Kahlo, which is something we'll get into. She doesn't really fit neatly into any art movement.

That brings us to Mexicanidad and Mestiza experience. So Mexicanidad was a romantic nationalism that developed in the wake of the Civil War, something we kind of hinted at earlier, and it resisted the mindset of cultural inferiority that was the legacy of colonialism, and put heavy,

heavy emphasis and importance on Indigenous Mexican culture. So prior to the revolution, Mexican folk culture was as Mestiza as Kahlo was herself. And Mestiza means a mixture of Indigenous and European, predominantly Spanish, European elements.

So this mixture was heavily disparaged by elites who claimed sole Spanish or European ancestry, and who thought of their own culture, their own European, you know, Spanish heritage as being superior to that of you know, what they deemed like Mexican peasants. So these elites also believed that Mexican culture should seek to imitate as much as possible the artistic movements and products of Europe rather than celebrate its own heritage.

Leigh: You know this sounds—This seems like a perfect place to perhaps introduce a new addition to our podcast brought to us by Lily Brown. Should we?

Gretchen: Yes, let's do it.

Leigh: Should we roll tape on our new jingle

Gretchen: Roll tape.

Jingle: ♪ Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, fuck colonialism♪

Gretchen: That. It brings me so much joy. Like, just listening to it.

Leigh: I want to make it my ringtone

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. [laughter] Or like a—like a—like an alert for a text message. That'd be great.

Leigh: Yes. We're gonna give this jingle out as a Patreon bonus to supporters. So stay tuned for that. But if you if you want to have Fuck, fuck fuck colonialism [laughter] as your own ringtone, then you should become a patreon supporter, because I want everybody to hear Lily's amazing, wonderful battle cry against it.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Great.

Gretchen: It is great. And it encapsulates all of how we feel about colonialism. That's it—that's it in a nutshell. So yeah, part of— so the Mexicanidad was a reaction against that colonialist mindset. And part of it, part of the the art movement, specifically Mexicanidad art movement, was muralism, which were these large paintings that had, you know, masses of people with clear strong political messages. Like in the vein of you know, Russian socialists, realists, if you've ever seen Russian communist or like socialist art, it's that kind of thing and, but they were big, large murals. Kahlo's husband—Frida Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera, was a muralist. So this was an important art movement that was going on at the time but Frida Kahlo had her own views about art, as we'll see.

Who were they? Bio Time

Leigh: So let's get a little bit into talking about Frida Kahlo herself.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: We're going to start off with discussing a little bit about her family and then we'll go into her early childhood. So Frida Kahlo de Rivera was born July 6th 1907, as Magdalena Carmen Freida Kahlo y Calderón and it was Freida F-R-E-I-D-A [sic] Her parents were German photographer Guillermo Kahlo, whom Frida claimed to be Jewish but who was actually Lutheran, that doesn't mean that he wasn't of Jewish ethnic descent. A lot of Jews converted over the years.

He had moved from Germany to Mexico and in 1891 after epilepsy caused an accident that ended his university studies. And fun fact, her father was responsible for naming her Frida which comes from the German word *friede*, which means peace. And in 1935 Frida actually dropped the E in her name specifically in order to avoid being associated with Germany during Hitler's rule.

Gretchen: I had no idea. That is a really fun fact.

Leigh: And that was one I really wanted to put in there like 'hey, by the way,' that's why you don't see the E in her name. She was like, 'okay, well, bye bye to this part of my heritage.'

Gretchen: Goodbye E

Leigh: Goodbye. Her mother was Matilda Calderón y González, whose father was Indigenous and her mother was Spanish, making her—we referred to earlier as Mestiza. So she had three full sisters Matilda, Adriana and Christina. She also had two half sisters from Guillermo's first marriage Maria-Luisa and Margarita, but they were raised in a convent.

Gretchen: Right. Yep. She did have a fairly difficult home life. Her parents were often sick and their marriage was, according to Frida, loveless. Her mother was intelligent and kind, but also according to Frida what she called calculating and quote, "*fanatically religious.*" Her father's business suffered a lot from the Mexican Revolution, as he'd been commissioned by the overthrown government. He was a photographer. And plus the long civil war limited his private clients. So his business, you know, she grew up with her father having a struggling business.

At age six, she contracted polio, which made her right leg shorter and thinner than her left. And having polio meant she was both isolated from her peers during her illness and then bullied afterwards for her disability. But the disability did create a very strong bond with her dad, who had epilepsy and left Germany because it got in the way of his studies. So they shared a lot of you know, they bonded over their shared experience with disability and their love for art. According to art historian Andrea Kettenmann's biography, Frida said of her father:

"He was an immense example to me of tenderness of work both as a photographer and also a painter, and above all, an understanding for all my problems."

Leigh: That's really sweet.

Gretchen: He taught her about literature and philosophy, he encouraged her to play sports, even though they weren't considered suitable activities for girls. He taught her photography and then she would help him retouch and recolor his photos. She started school later, I think because of her polio, so went from kindergarten to fourth grade, then was homeschooled for fifth and sixth grade. Her sisters went to convent school, but then she went to a German school because her father wanted her to, but she was expelled for disobedience. [laughs] I've been trying to imagine like German school, I imagine it was a very structured environment and just from what we know of Frida and all of her life, I can very well imagine her

[laughter] not taking well to having a very highly rigid structured environment like that. [laughs]

Leigh: She doesn't do very well with authority figures.

Gretchen: No, no, no. Yep, yep, you're absolutely right. I don't think she does. She then went to vocational teachers school, but left after she was assaulted by her female gym teacher. Were you gonna say something?

Leigh: No, I was just saying "boo!"

Gretchen: Yeah, boo. Don't do that. So there's our first content warning. We're not gonna get into more details. In 1922 she went to prep school to study natural sciences actually, with the aim of becoming a doctor the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, the National Preparatory School had only recently allowed women and she was one of only 35 female students out of 2000.

Leigh: Wow.

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah. She was a pretty voracious reader and a good student and became immersed in activism and social justice as the school promoted *indigenismo*, which is a part of the Mexicanidad movement. So it promoted a sense of national Mexican pride and Indigenous culture. She became pretty heavily involved in that.

Then she joined a political group known as the Cachuchas, which referred to the peaked cloth caps that they wore as the sign of subversion against the rigid dress code of the time. From the images—we have like an image of one of them and they look almost like driver's caps. So that's kind of, if you think Newsies that kind of a thing, so they would wear them.

Leigh: Also gay.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. Yeah. Yeah very gay. Yes. Absolutely. So Frida and her classmates formed this group. The other key members included Alejandro Gómez Arias, José Gómez Robleda, Manuel González Ramírez, Carmen Jaime, Miguel Lira, Agustín Lira (who has no relation to Miguel), Jesús Ríos Ibañez y Valle, and Alfonso Villa. Most, almost all of them became leading figures in their respective fields including law, politics, medicine, literature, art. They were rebellious against anything

conservative and often pulled pranks, staged plays and debated philosophy and Russian classics, as you do. [laughs]

It was at this time that Frida actually started claiming she was born on the day of the Mexican Revolution, which was July 7th, 1910. And she would do that for the rest of her life. So she likely did it as a means of, you know, saying that she was a true daughter of the revolution. As well as aging herself to be roughly the same age as her classmates rather than being a couple of years older. Gómez Arias, González Ramírez, Kahlo and Lira maintained a pretty close relationship. I believe it was Miguel Lira actually hung a large board in his library, and he compiled like short poems and dedications from friends who visited him. And we have like, we'll have an image of that in our show notes. And there's this little—there are like 14 inscriptions and one of these is from Frida, where she has a little doodle of herself, like wearing one of the little like driver caps with a little note to her—who she called her soul brother, and it said, you know:

"To my soul brother, do not forget to cachucha number nine"

and it's this really adorable little doodle. So yeah, she was done with school in 1925. And she began working outside the home to support her family, first as a stenographer, and then as an engraver. And at this point, she still wasn't considering art. But that brings us to one of the most significant events in her life, probably, if not the most significant event in her whole life.

Leigh: So this is our first content warning, just talking about some graphic injuries. So one of the events that would forever shape Frida Kahlo's life was on September 17th, 1925. She and Alejandro Gómez Arias, her fellow Cachuchas and her boyfriend at the time, were riding home from school and the wooden bus that they were in collided with a streetcar. Several people died and Frida suffered near fatal injuries. She fractured her ribs, both of her legs, and her collarbone, plus an iron rail had impaled her through the pelvis, fracturing the pelvic bone. And it was really, really traumatic for her.

She spent a month in the hospital and two months rehabbing before returning to any sort of work. Pain and fatigue caused her to get an x-ray which revealed she had displaced three vertebrae and had to wear a plaster corset and be confined to bed rest for three months and unable to

walk. This essentially ended her potential career as a doctor and she lived with pain and illness from it for the rest of her life.

And she would incorporate this into much of her paintings. There's quite a few of them that depict her in her plastic corset. There's one that is really, really powerful that we'll put in the show notes on that, you know, it's called *Broken Column* or something like that.

Gretchen: I think it's called *The Broken Column*.

Leigh: I think it's called *The Broken Column* but it shows her in the plaster corset. And you've got this like Greco Roman column going down her body and it's broken in multiple pieces. Really evocative.

Gretchen: It's got like nails.

Leigh: Really evocative.

Gretchen: Of like her spinal injury and all the pain and yeah, it's a, it's a really powerful, powerful image.

Leigh: Yeah. So she—and actually while she was on bed rest too like, one of the things that she endured was being forced fed, as well.

Gretchen: Oh right, she's got a painting of that, too.

Leigh: She has a painting of that as well, too. So like this. These months when she was bedridden, were hugely influential on her, as it would be.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So she started at this point, doing medical illustrations, while she was bedridden. She had originally wanted to be a doctor, she had an interest in art, specifically relating to medical illustration, and she was bored and distraught. And she was like, 'Well, I guess I'm gonna paint.' So she had an adjustable easel made for her with a mirror above it so that she could actually see herself while she was painting and painting became a way for her to explore her illness, as well as more general questions of identity and her existence. She said of that time, that painting and her isolation gave her a desire, quote:

"To begin again, painting things just as I saw them with my own eyes and nothing more."

She mostly did self portraits and portraits of her friends and family, giving some of her earlier earliest works to members of Los Cachuchas. And by 1927, she was off of bed rest and was able to reconnect with friends as well as joining the Mexican Communist Party, which we will call PCM, from here on out.

Where she met other political activists and artists, including Diego Rivera, who is one of Mexico's most influential artists, and he was an influential PCM member. She actually, I believe, dragged—like dragged her paintings to him [sound of dragging] and asked if he thought that she had an artist—future as an artist, and he said yes. And at that point, they began a relationship, despite him being 20 years older than her and a professed womanizer.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: He also had an outward projection of *machismo*, which is a heightened, hyper masculinity whereby men were superior to women. And this was a central part of male Mexican identity at the time. It's still being fought against by many to this day. And this is something that Frida would eventually come to struggle with a lot. Frida is actually quoted once as having said:

"There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the trolley, and the other was Diego. Diego was by far the worst."

Gretchen: Oh, yikes!

Leigh: Oh, yeah, they had a very, very volatile relationship.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Her father jokingly referred to them as the elephant and the dove [snorting laughter] because of their vast difference in size. Kahlo was very petite and slim and Rivera was large and wide. Mother disapproved, but father approved because Rivera had money and he could support Kahlo due to her not being able to work and having expensive medical

treatment. He still wasn't a huge fan, but he was like, 'well, we're gonna marry somebody, at least he's got some money.'

Gretchen: Right at least. Well, I mean, I'm sure that must have been shaped by his own experience of being disabled, and his wife was ill a lot. So I can imagine him being like, 'well, at least he can support her' and she doesn't have to deal with the stuff that he and his wife had had to deal with.

Leigh: So shortly after their marriage, they moved to Cuernavaca, so he could paint murals for the Palace of Cortes. She resigned from the PCM to support Rivera, who had been expelled at this point for his support of the leftist opposition. During the Civil War. Cuernavaca had seen a lot of fighting and so living amongst the Spanish style province greatly shaped Frida's sense of Mexican identity and art, drawing more and more on native Mexican folk art, including lack of perspective and including both pre-Columbian and colonial elements, periods of art.

She also began at this point wearing traditional Mexican peasant clothing to emphasise her Mestiza heritage, as many other female political activists and artists did at the time, she specifically really wanted to emphasise her political and nationalist ideals with her clothing.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: She's actually a huge style icon.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep. Oh, and by the way, when we say pre-Columbian, that's Colombian in terms of Columbus, we just want to make that clear. That's what we mean by pre-Columbian.

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: So prior to colonialism, and then during and after colonialism.

Leigh: Yes. She especially favoured the dress of women from the allegedly matriarchal society of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which allowed Kahlo to express her feminist and anti-colonialist ideals. It also covered the signs of her polio and surgery on her body, she often preferred to wear long skirts to cover her leg. That was, you know, had been altered by polio. And it also appealed to Rivera who believed that

women who didn't wear traditional clothing were dependent on a foreign class, they wanted to belong to instead, you know, to that instead of their heritage.

Gretchen: Yeah. He thought it was bougie basically like colonialist and bougie, which is which I mean, it's [together] fair.

Leigh: Like, let your wife do what the fuck she wants.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep,

Leigh: Just so happens to have coincided so yeah. Her identification with this group and her clothing choices would remain a significant influence on her for the rest of her life. And her own dress is still a very important influence on the world of fashion nowadays too. Gretchen, want to talk about her moving around?

Gretchen: Yeah, traveling. So in late 1930, she and Rivera moved to San Francisco, where they were celebrated by clients and collectors. She met a lot of American artists like Edward Weston, Ralph Stackpole, Timothy Pflueger, and Miklos, also known as Nickolas Muray, the latter of whom, Muray, she would have an affair with, a very long affair that lasted quite a bit of her life.

Leigh: Yeah. He was a—He was a very famous Hungarian photographer. Many of the like most famous photographs of Frida Kahlo are done by Miklos Muray.

Gretchen: So this was a pretty productive time for her. And she continued to, you know, hone in on her folk art style, though she was, you know, mostly known publicly as Rivera's wife. Still she had her first exhibition during this time period, they returned to Mexico in the summer of 1931, then went on to New York in the fall, for an opening of Rivera's retrospective in the Museum of Modern Art. Then they went to Detroit for Rivera to paint murals for the Ford Motor Company.

By this time, Frida was interacting more with the press, even claiming that of she and her husband, she was the greater artist of the two. [laughs] And although productive, she didn't actually really enjoy being in America, she found the society colonialist and boring. She hated interacting with the capitalists that her husband was working with, like,

same, girl, same. I would not enjoy hanging around with them. [laughter] And she was angry that a lot of the Detroit hotels refused to allow Jewish guests.

So during this time, she got pregnant and a doctor agreed to do an abortion. She had actually had one previously in her marriage. She was really ambivalent about having a baby especially because of her accident and the damage that have been done to her pelvis. When the abortion failed, she agreed to have the baby but then miscarried, which caused a pretty serious hemorrhage and forced her to be hospitalized for two weeks. Less than three months later, her mother died from surgery complications in Mexico so this was pretty—yet another fairly traumatic time in her life.

At the same time, though Detroit was good for her artistically. She experimented with etching and frescoes and developed a stronger sense of narrative in her paintings. She also became emphasizing themes of terror, suffering, wounds and pain, understandably, given everything she was going through. Despite—so this is what—what's interesting about Frida is that, despite the popularity of the mural and muralism, especially in the Mexicanidad Indigenous art movement, her style was more akin to religious iconography.

She preferred these like small portrait sized paintings that were done on tin, rather than the big mural. So they—they were fairly religious iconography, if you've ever seen Catholic icons. In terms of size and composition, they had a lot in common with that, which was an interesting choice for her, especially being married to a muralist. So, she and Rivera returned in 1933 to New York, for him to paint yet more murals. If you can tell, one of the themes of Frida Kahlo's life for a lot of it was following her husband around for him to paint.

Leigh: Yep.

Gretchen: For at least—for a good portion of her life. That was what she spent her time doing. Then they returned to Mexico, by the end of 1933, because she was homesick which is fair. I wouldn't want to you know, given the kinds of people that her husband was painting for, she wanted to be back home with you know, more of the culture and society that she felt comfortable in.

Leigh: Yeah, so after they returned to Mexico, their residence in the wealthy San Ángel neighborhood became a meeting place for artists and political activists. It was two houses side by side joined by a bridge. Her house was blue, 'La Casa Azule' and Rivera's was pink and white. And at this point, she had continuing medical problems. She had an appendectomy, she had two abortions, and she actually had her gangrenous toes amputated. By 1935, her relationship with Rivera had become super strained; they were always extramarital.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: But she finally had enough when he had an affair with her younger sister Christina, and she moved to her own apartment, considered divorcing him, and she ended up having her own affair with American artist Isamu Noguchi. She and Rivera reconciled and she became a loving aunt to her sister's children with Rivera while both had relationships with other people.

Gretchen: It's just such an unusual—like if it worked for them. I don't know I would have a really hard time with it being my sister's kids. But...

Leigh: I just—I feel like these people should have just talked to each other and been poly and gotten it over with.

Gretchen: Right? Right!

Leigh: Just talk to each other!

Gretchen: Just communicate and be honest about what it is you want from each other and other people.

Leigh: Yeah. [laughs]

Gretchen: Anyway. [snorting laughter]

Leigh: Anyway, she became more politically active in 1936. And she and Rivera successfully petitioned the Mexican government to grant asylum to Leon Trotsky, even offering up La Casa Azule for him and his wife to stay; they did and Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky even had an affair. So he is one of the many people she is reported to have had affairs with.

Gretchen: It's just one of those fun facts about Frida Kahlo.

Leigh: There you go. Yeah, in 1937 and 1938. She painted more than she painted any previous years and she made her first significant sale in 1938. Did you want to talk about this a little bit Gretchen?

Gretchen: Oh gosh yes. I love this.

Leigh: Since you were, a little bit...[laughs]

Gretchen: This makes me very happy. So Andre Breton. He was a surrealist. He visited Rivera in 1938 and was very much impressed by Frida Kahlo calling her, he claimed her for the Surrealists, and described her work as quote:

"A ribbon around a bomb,"

which is an amazing description of Frida Kahlo's work. He arranged for her first solo exhibition in his gallery in Manhattan where she was exotified and condescended about, for being a woman and a non-White woman. And, you know, as you can imagine, people were pretty terrible about her clothing and the way she dressed and we're, you know, alternately condescending or otherising and exotifying of her. More fuck colonialism, more fuck the patriarchy, all of that.

Leigh: Eugh. Yeah.

Gretchen: But many famous artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, who we will talk about a little bit later, and Clare Boothe Luce had very strong positive reactions, so she got really strong positive reactions from other female artists. And though she didn't paint much while she was in New York, she was focusing on enjoying herself and having relationships with people. So she had a second but less successful exhibition in France, and had to cancel one in London due to looming World War II as well as financial constraints.

However, the Louvre purchased, this is where she made her first significant sale, was that the Louvre purchased her painting called *The Frame*. Which made her the first Mexican artist in their collections. And she was very warmly received from artists like Pablo Picasso and Joan

Miró. And the Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli actually designed a dress based off of Frida Kahlo style, and Vogue featured her in its pages and I think we have a couple of images from one of her Vogue photoshoots for you in our show notes.

So this is my favorite thing. This is one of the things I love most about Frida Kahlo. She like so André Breton is the one who sets us all up and he's a surrealist, and he claims her as a surrealist, but she actually doesn't like the surrealist, [laughter] like, in a letter to Muray her— her lover Muray, she called them quote:

"This bunch of cuckoo lunatics and very stupid surrealists who are so crazy intellectual and rotten that I can't even stand them anymore."

Leigh: Just lay it all out on the table.

Gretchen: How do you really feel about the surrealists? Frida Kahlo tells us, I'm not quite sure, [laughter] you seem ambivalent. So anyway, by the time she returns to New York, Muray ended their affair. And then when she went back to Mexico, Rivera requested a divorce. There's no reason that we know of, but it's— people presume it's because of their affairs that they, you know, both had so many mutual affairs. Though they remained friendly, and she actually continued to manage his money and correspondence even though they were no longer married.

Leigh: So at this point, she moved back to La Casa Azule in 1940, and began another one of her most productive artistic periods. She moved from small tin miniatures to large canvases, which were easier for her to exhibit. She also cut down on details and moved to quarter length portraits, which were easier to sell. She painted several of her most famous pieces in this period, Leon Trotsky at this point was murdered and she and Christina were actually arrested for believing to have been involved as they knew the killer. She was released and went to San Francisco for medical treatment for back pain and a fungal infection in her hand. Her medical conditions were exacerbated by her drinking, which she was doing pretty heavily at this time. And because of her continued spinal problems, she wore 23 different supportive corsets, ranging in materials anywhere from steel and leather to plaster. And she wore these between 1940 and her death in 1954. Usually if you will see some sort of like— if you see anything haute couture with like exposed like metal corset kind of things, chances are at some point like somebody drew upon

Frida Kahlo, and her silhouette and like her silhouette of her in those corsets as an influence.

Yeah. She became more influential both in the States and Mexico. She became a founding member of the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, a group of 25 artists commissioned by the Ministry of Public Education in 1942. To spread public knowledge of Mexican culture, planning exhibitions and exhibiting her own art. She accepted a teaching position in 1943 at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado. So the National School of Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking, and when her health made it hard for her to travel, she held classes in her home. Who want to go to like La Casa Azule

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: And learn about printing and sculpture making or sculpting and painting from Frida in like her house.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh, that would be amazing.

Leigh: That would be so cool. She struggled to make a living at this point with her art though, as she refused to accommodate her style to her clients wishes, and the government even commissioned her and then rejected what she created them. [laughter] It's like, 'Sure, I'll take your money and make stuff except I'm gonna make what I want to make.'

Gretchen: Right, which is basically just what she did. She wanted to paint what you wanted to paint. And...

Leigh: There you go. So she reconciled with Rivera in 1940, which was a year after they had divorced, and they actually remarried. They actually remarried as Frida's condition worsened, and a friend suggested that getting back together with Diego would actually help her heal. Frida agreed to remarry Diego under the conditions that she would continue to support herself financially and that they would not have sex. Frida said of Diego quote:

"He is not anyone's husband and will never be, but he is a great comrade."

[laughter] So, there you go. All right, you know, she's like, 'Alright, I'm gonna remarry you for companionship and because we're familiar to each other, but no sex.'

Gretchen: None for you.

Leigh: None for you. No sex for you. [snorts] I'm showing my age. So by the mid '40s, her health was so bad that she could no longer sit or stand continuously. In 1945, she went to New York again for an operation that would fuse bone graft to a metal rod to straighten her spine. But unfortunately, it failed. She also didn't rest and at one point she picked open one of her wounds in anger. All of her paintings from this time reflect her health issues and her frustrations.

For the last few years of her life. She devoted as much as possible to politics, even rejoining the Mexican Communist Party. She painted a lot of still lives with images that had political significance saying at this time, quote:

"Until now, I have managed simply an honest expression of myself, I must struggle with all my strength to ensure that the little positive my health allows me to do also benefits the revolution. The only real reason to live".

This, I love this.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: She had her first solo exhibition in Mexico in 1953. And initially, she was not able to go because she was on bed rest. But this was like a year before her death, right? So she is bedridden. But she says, 'No, we're going to do this.' So she ordered her bed, moved to the gallery, and then she arrived in an ambulance, like pulled up in an ambulance, like it was a limousine. And she was carried in on a stretcher and stayed in her bed in the gallery the whole exhibition.

Gretchen: like it's so extra.

Leigh: She made like this ridiculous grand entrance like a queen being carried on one of those things like, but she's like in a fucking stretcher, and I love her so much.

Gretchen: Yes. Yes.

Leigh: It's so good. Yeah. At this point her right leg—at this point, the one that had been shortened due to polio was amputated due to gangrene in 1953. And she became both depressed and more dependent on painkillers. In one image of her withered foot that she drew in her diary, which we'll put in show notes. She wrote:

"Feet. Why do I want you if I have wings to fly,"

trying to like make light of it, but it was obviously something that caused her a lot of turmoil. She attempted suicide by overdose when Rivera had another affair, writing in her diary in February 1954:

"They have given me centuries of torture and at moments I almost lost my reason. I keep on wanting to kill myself. Diego is what keeps me from it, though my vain idea that he would miss me, but never in my life have I suffered."

She was hospitalized in April and May and painted a bit while she was there. And then she came down with bronchopneumonia and was bedridden, though she did attend a political demonstration against the CIA invasion of Guatemala with Rivera in July that unfortunately worsened her health.

Gretchen: I just love that. She's got bronchopneumonia and she's like, [imitating] 'I'm gonna go to a political protest. I gotta go.'

Leigh: 'I gotta—I gotta make my I gotta make my feelings known. I don't care how badly it affects my health. I have to do this.'

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: And so, unfortunately on July 13th, 1954, she was found dead in her bed by her nurse. The official cause of death was pulmonary embolism but the nurse stated that she had taken more than her usual dosage of pills and she had given Rivera an anniversary gift that night, a month early. So there's

Gretchen: Speculation that she may have committed suicide.

Leigh: Speculation whether or not she committed suicide. Her body lay in state under a communist flag hashtag goals,

Gretchen: Goals. Hashtag goals. [laughs]

Leigh: And her ashes are displayed in a pre-Columbian urn. Both it and her death mask are on display at La Casa Azule, which opened up as a museum in 1958. And that is—that is the life of Frida Kahlo, in as brief terms as we could give. We have so much more to talk about.

Gretchen: So much more. We're not even done. So next we wanted—I wanted to talk a little bit about her art style. So her early style was influenced by Renaissance masters such as Sandro Botticelli and Bronzino, as well as the Neue Sachlichkeit and Cubism as we discussed above, all of those art movements kind of have a little, you know, left their mark on her style, but she really does kind of defy categorization in a lot of ways.

Okay, so one funny thing before I deep dive into whether or not she's a surrealist and how to categorize her. What's interesting is that she's most well known for her self portraits, but only 55 of her 143 paintings actually are self portraits. The rest is still life. And a lot of them feature her own pet animals. We put this in here [laughter] because we just wanted to say this, but we had no idea where else to put it through like we'll put it in her art. [laughter]

Leigh: She had so many weird pets.

Gretchen: Do you—do you want to mention them before I dive into art style?

Leigh: Yes! So a lot of her—a lot of her art, like a lot of her own self portraits, too would depict her with her pets.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: So she had two spider monkeys named Furlong Chang and Caimito de Guayabal and actually monkeys are hugely symbolic in Mexican folk art and show up in a lot of her work. She actually has one self-portrait that's like self-portrait with three spider monkeys. And something else. I can't remember what it is. She has Bonito, the Amazon

parrot, a fawn. That's right, a baby deer named Granizo and an eagle. [snorts] This was my favorite, named Gertrudis Caca Blanca, aka Gertrude White Shit because I love her. [laughs] She had several other birds too. She had parakeets, macaws, sparrows and hens. She kept chickens. If it was a bird, Frida Kahlo probably loved it.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh.

Leigh: She also had lots of dogs. She raised, Mexican hairless Xoloitzcuintle. Xoloitzcuintle. I'm so sorry to everyone, for my pronunciation of that.

Gretchen: So, yeah. When you see all of those animals in her paintings. Chances are they were her pets.

Leigh: They were her pets.

Gretchen: They were her pets, because she had a lot of them.

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: So pets, which I mean, that actually does lead into the discussion of surrealism because surrealism is, as we, you know, mentioned with Claude Cahun, is very heavily based in symbolism and metaphor, visual metaphor. So Andre Breton, claimed her as a surrealist. So the question is, is she a surrealist? Does she qualify as one? For me the main reason why I wouldn't ever call her one is because she hated the surrealists. [laughter] She thought they were bougie and colonialist. So the last thing I would ever want to do is like call her art, something that she hated. That just seems like a horrible idea.

But you know, people have debated whether or not she belongs there any way, of course, because why listen to what she says. You know, people have tried to peg her as, you know, Symbolists because she was interested in portraying her inner experiences. Emma Dexter, who was an art historian, I believe, has argued that since she drew so much from Aztec mythology in Mexican culture, she should be considered a kind of magical realism painter, which combines—and magical realism is the idea of combining reality and fantasy. Magical Realism tends to have a flattened perspective, utilises bright colors, and clearly outlined characters, all of which are things that Kahlo evinces in much of her art.

Leigh: I can see that.

Gretchen: I can definitely see the magical realism. I think more than anything, that's probably a better fit. But I—for me, and I think, I mean, you'd probably agree with me that, I'd caution against really calling her a surrealist or really anything other than herself. Like her art can't really be contained within any of these various art movements because, yes, it's interested in personal identity but it's also interested in post and anti-colonialism. It asked questions about identity experience, but also like bodily pain and suffering. It questions gender, class, race in Mexican society. It's both deeply personal and experiential, as well as being highly political in nature. It's both of those things at once. She herself wanted to paint for the Mexican people wishing to quote:

"To be worthy with my paintings of the people to whom I belong and to the ideas which strengthened me",

actually, as a part of her life to enforce this kind of image. She hid her educational background and really tried to focus on cultivating an image of herself as a self taught kind of naive artist rather than someone who had gotten a formal education. So even though she'd gotten a good education because of her father, and especially in later life, she really tried to distance herself from that because she wanted to really focus on her Mexican heritage instead of like the European.

Leigh: She wanted to be a painter of the people.

Gretchen: Yes. Rather than someone who had this like education and like the European classical painter, she really wanted to focus on her Mexican heritage. So I mean, she drew on so many different influences, including Hermenegildo Bustos, who focused on Mexican peasant life and Rosario Castellanos, whose poems often chronicle a woman's lot in patriarchal Mexican society and have a concern for the female body, tell stories of immense physical and emotional pain.

So this is just another one of those influences and, and kind of a map for kind of placing Frida Kahlo is. She's got so many different influences she's drawing on. She depicts her own body quite a bit, using her body as a metaphor to explore her experiences, as well as challenge social roles. Some of her paintings can be, you know, as we mentioned, can be kind of

disturbing. She's willing to paint things like miscarriage, childbirth, bodily mutilation, almost in a sense, turning herself into an object of voyeurism by the viewer, forcing them to have a response to her image and her experience. She's really forcing people to have an opinion and reaction in response to what she's experiencing and suffering.

As we've mentioned, she drew a lot on pre-Columbian as well as Christian iconography and mythology, as well as Aztec and Mexican cultural traditions, folklore symbols. She really does kind of create her own unique symbolic language that suits what she wants to communicate, while drawing on these various sources that people can recognise. So people are rightly recognising these influences, but she's kind of telling her own story with them.

For example, one of her paintings that she painted in 1932, which is called *Henry Ford Hospital*, depicts herself as a weeping woman with kind of disheveled hair and exposed heart. And these—those two elements like the weeping and being disheveled, have been frequently considered part of the appearance of La Llorona, who is a character in Mexican folklore who murdered her own children. And the painting has traditionally been interpreted as simply a depiction of Kahlo's grief and pain over her failed pregnancies and her abortion.

But when we think about La Llorona and you know, Kahlo's own views of motherhood and the amount of pain that would have caused her, you know, from her letters, we can start to kind of interpret the painting potentially as depicting the unconventional and taboo choice of a woman remaining childless in Mexican society. So they're just layers and possible she could have meant all of those things.

Leigh: There's even more connection to La Llorona that we'll talk about later, too, when it comes to one of her lovers.

Gretchen: Yeah, that was a really powerful figure and character in Mexican folktales, for Frida Kahlo. In the end, she created her own style and art to suit her needs. And what she wanted to say, has nothing—I would say that nothing around her fully suited her medium or her experience or what or how she wanted to communicate so she creates her own. According to Paula Cooley, Kahlo made herself quote:

"The main character of her own mythology, as a woman as a Mexican, and as a suffering person, she knew how to convert each into a symbol or sign capable of expressing the enormous spiritual resistance of humanity and its splendid sexuality."

And I just thought that was one of the most beautiful summaries of Frida Kahlo's art, and also made me think of, you know, the contemporary musical artist, Janelle Monae.

Leigh: [whispers] Ah, yes!

Gretchen: Who is a queer woman of color, creating a mythology about herself using symbolism, making her own body and personhood into the subject of art. To tell a story about her experiences in a way that forces the audience to react to, and hopefully think differently and be challenged by, you know, her experiences as a queer woman of color. And I think that both of them will, in the end be transformative, I think Frida Kahlo was transformative. And my hope is to see the same for Janelle Monae. If people don't know this, if you don't know this about me, Janelle Monae is one of my favorite artists of all time.

Leigh: Same.

Gretchen: And so it was really cool when I was reading about Frida Kahlo to like see like a very similar way of approaching art and using art to create this story about themselves. That's also about not just their personal selves, but it's also very political, very transformative, very transgressive story, and it's just really, really, really cool.

Leigh: Politicizing—politicizing the consumption of their own story.

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: God, I wonder if Janelle Monae has mentioned Frida Kahlo as an influence at all, like, I would not be surprised.

Gretchen: Not at all. Not at all because there's so much overlap. And there seems to be so much overlap between the two.

Leigh: Well, especially considering a lot of German expressionism is an influence [both laugh] of Janelle Monae's, too, so like, there you go.

Gretchen: There you go. Whether it's...

Leigh: Metropolis it up.

Gretchen: Oh, man. Yeah. Anyway that feels like a nice segue into—speaking about queer women of color.

Why do we think they're gay?

Leigh: Wow nice segue into why do we think they're gay. So we've got a couple of different sections, we'll start talking a little bit about young, androgynous Frida.

Gretchen: Ah, man.

Leigh: So, although she's known primarily for her Mexican Indigenous dresses and shawls, and that part of her fashion identity has been, you know, hugely influential and political. She did occasionally, especially in her younger life, dress in men's clothing, both for work and in her paintings, especially early in her life. There's this really, really fantastic family photo from 1926, where she's actually wearing her father's suit. It's not like, you know, feminized versions of suits. She's just just wearing her father's suit.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Another photo from that same day depicts her in the middle of a family line made up of the women in the family and a younger male cousin, and she's still in her suit with a cane. And she's essentially being depicted as the dominant male in her family, her father's successor.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: While this doesn't necessarily mean anything in regards to somebody's sexuality, it does highlight her ongoing, complicated relationship with gender and gender roles, which we'll see throughout her art in various different ways. She actually painted a self portrait of herself in a suit as well. And in it, her hair is on the ground, disheveled and in pieces, and she actually is depicted holding a pair of scissors to her groin. And I thought this was really interesting, historians have suggested that

this is like a threat to Diego for his infidelity. Or they thought it was, you know, a message of self hate, could have a lot to do with her own feelings about her abortions and her miscarriages and the damage done to her pelvis, but we'd be remiss to neglect mentioning the idea that it could have any, you know, some sort of implication of Frida's understanding of our own gender. Like I'd say, you know, if it was one and not the other, if it was the hair and not the scissors or vice versa, but the two of them together, combined with the fact that she would continue, like, frequently dressed in masculine clothing says something to me about her own understanding of gender.

Gretchen: Right, right. And it seems like the kind of thing that would be overlooked by art historians for uh—for various reasons that would be that they'd be like, [imitating]'Oh, well, clearly this was about her husband's, you know, clear, this isn't about gender.'

Leigh: [imitating historians] Clearly this can't be about her. It must be about her husband.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which, you know, most people think most things about Frida Kahlo. Like I learned in school so much about Diego Rivera. And all I knew about Frida Kahlo is she painted pictures of herself with a unibrow like...

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: I didn't know any of this stuff when I was growing up. And it was only the last couple of years. It was like, 'oh, god, she's like, a huge figure for depiction of disability.' And she was queer and she was a huge, you know, political figure. Diego even depicted her androgynously in his own 1929 mural from the Ministry of Education, depicting her with short hair, flat chest and a more quote "*masculine*" body frame.

Gretchen: She's roughly the same size as the other male figures, body wise. Like arm size, everything is the same, pretty much the same size as the other male figures. When you know in real life, Frida Kahlo was a very petite, dainty, small woman. And so it's interesting that he painted her like, basically exactly like the men in the mural just with like, a dress on

Leigh: I love it.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: However, despite the fact that he painted her this way, Frida essentially laid aside her male attire after their marriage. So as we discussed earlier, right, like, Rivera liked her better in her Mexican peasant clothing than anything else, which can't we have both?

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: Can't we have both?

Gretchen: And we can't overlook the political importance of her clothing choices too. That like yeah, as much as you may have had varying ideas about gender, the clothing choices were also a political statement. And, you know, suits may have been more associated with you know European colonialist ideas, even if they were also expressions of gender. So it's not... It's so much like that's what's so fascinating.

Leigh: It's complex.

Gretchen: Yeah, it's complicated and that's what's so interesting to me about Frida Kahlo is because it's complicated. So there are many paintings we could look at that are evocative in some way. One that we will again put in our show notes is called *Two Nudes in a Forest*. It is from 1939 and it's two naked women in a very intimate pose together and it's not two Fridas.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: If that makes sense. Like it's not two—because she does have her portrait called *The Two Fridas* and it's like two paintings of herself. This is clearly two very different women who are naked and one is like reclining on the other. It actually made me think of some of the paintings that we have of Sappho.

Leigh: Oh yeah.

Gretchen: With like Sappho and friends, or however they label it.

Leigh: Even a little bit of the photo by Nicholas Murray of her and Chavela Vargas...

Gretchen: Yes!

Leigh: Laying on each other on the grass. Which I want to talk about.

Gretchen: Yeah. So she also had some relationships with ladies or lots, lots and lots of rumors.

Leigh: Yes. Well, so I mean, several that were confirmed. So Diego and Frida had lots of extramarital affairs among them. He didn't so much mind her having affairs with women because [laughs] double standards. It bothered him when she would sleep with other men. There's that *machismo*, but so according to biographer Herrera, Frida's motto was:

"Make love, take a bath, make love again,"

Which is a good thing to live by. Her name has been connected with many women, including her husband's mistresses and actors Dolores del Rio, Paulette Goddard, and Maria Felix. So she was sleeping with her husband's mistress right? That's always fun.

Gretchen: Yeah, my favorite is Georgia O'Keeffe. [laughter] Which would make me— like that just delights me because like— power couple. Gosh, of all of the women. Like it—Simultaneously sounds really stereotypical, but in like the best way like of course, Georgia O'Keeffe. The woman who paints vulvas all the time, disguised as flowers would have an affair with Frida Kahlo like that just like— I just— It's everything that I want.

According to Amy Fine Collins, Frida quote:

"habitually neutralized rivals, usually Diego's mistresses, with a disarming camaraderie which in this instance may have blossomed into a physical relationship."

So this was a discussion of Frida's relationship with Georgia O'Keeffe, because when they first met Frida was fairly jealous of Georgia O'Keeffe and saw her as an artistic rival. So art dealer, there's an art dealer named Mary-Anne Martin, who has in her possession, an unpublished letter that Kahlo sent to a friend in Detroit, and it's dated New York, April 11th,

1933. So this is while she's in New York, when she would have met Georgia O'Keeffe for her art exhibition, and it contains this passage, quote:

"O'Keefe was in the hospital for three months, she went to Bermuda for a rest. She didn't make love to me that time, I think on account of her weakness, too bad. Well, that's all I can tell you until now."

[laughter] Yeah

Leigh: All of it.

Gretchen: So yes, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe. I'm here for it.

Leigh: Yes.

Gretchen: I ship it.

Leigh: You ship it. Do you want to talk about, potentially Josephine Baker as well?

Gretchen: Oh, yes. Because you want to talk about Chavela Vargas.

Leigh: I wanna talk about Chavela Vargas.

Gretchen: Okay, so. I guess okay. So Josephine Baker is a potential if you type in. We will tell you this right now. Like if you type in 'was Frida Kahlo a bisexual', the person that you will most likely get to come up as a potential lover is Josephine Baker.

So this would be the most widely rumored relationship. Josephine Baker was born June 3rd, 1906, died April 12th, 1975. She was born as Freda Josephine McDonald in St. Louis, Missouri. She was one of the most famous entertainers in the 1920s and '30s. Started her singing career in St. Louis chorus, vaudeville show and toured around the United States, but faced a lot of challenges and rejection due to racism. And thus left the US in early 1920s for Paris. So another one of the Paris set, everything comes back to the Paris set. Oh my goodness.

Leigh: Oh, yes.

Gretchen: Quote:

"One day I realized I was living in a country where I was afraid to be black. It was only a country for white people, not black. So I left. I had been suffocating in the United States. A lot of us left not because we wanted to leave but because we couldn't stand it anymore. I felt liberated in Paris."

So Josephine Baker gains huge success in Paris as a start up stage and screen and became known for her dance routines, and revealing outfits gaining nicknames like Bronze Venus, Black Pearl, and Creole Goddess, as cringey as some of them might sound.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: She was married four times. Her first was an abusive marriage at the age of 13, to Willie Wells. Which she ended and then married Willie Baker in 1921, whose name she took and kept since it coincided with her rise to fame. She married John Lion in 1937, gaining her French citizenship. Tnd then lastly married French composer Jo Bouillon, who was queer as well, and they were essentially beards for each other. He eventually left but never divorced her. Adopted 12 children in the 1950s That's a lot of children.

Leigh: Yep.

Gretchen: After having several miscarriages earlier in her life. All of the children had different ethnic backgrounds and races and she referred to them as "The Rainbow Tribe," which is adorable.

Leigh: Yeah, yeah.

Gretchen: And, and kind of gay. [laughter] Mostly adorable.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So she gets super duper interesting. So she becomes a spy for France during World War II. And eventually would return to the US to perform. She put on her final performance in Paris in 1975 at the age of 68, which is badass, but then died a few days later. So, possible relationship with Frida. Josephine Baker's son, Jean Claude Baker,

confirms that his mother had several affairs with women and names many of them in his biography of her including Claire Smith, Evelyn Sheppard, Bessie Alison, Mildred Smallwood, Ada "Bricktop" Smith and Colette. There we go. There's and Colette brings us to Dolly Wilde and there it's just it's the ouroboros of gay.

Leigh: Ouroboros of gay. [both laugh]

Gretchen: So, he didn't include Frida Kahlo in his book, but confirmed their affair later, though there don't seem to be any other primary sources detailing anything about this. But we do know that in 1939, Frida traveled to Paris for an exhibition of her work after separating from Diego and the two may have met in a nightclub after Josephine performed. The film *Frida*, which we will mention below suggests that they had a relationship and even depicts it. But most of the sources we can find just cite each other in an endless rumor mill. You know, everyone is saying what everyone else is saying. But it's really, really hard to find a primary source for it.

Leigh: Yeah, they're mostly just like going back to Baker like Baker's biography, and it's just our friends over at Queer as Fact, when they did an episode on Josephine Baker, which I'm sure we will do in the future, ran into this problem where they're like, 'God, I keep hearing this amazing thing about Josephine Baker and Frida Kahlo having slept together.' But when you really dive into it, everything just kind of circles in on each other on Hey, did you know that they had this relationship? Read it and this article that says, Hey, did you know they had had this relationship? Read that—read about it, and this article and so it just kind of circles around.

Gretchen: Yep. Um, we do have photographic evidence that they did meet in 1939. But like you said, we don't really have anything else to go on. There's no written correspondence that confirms a relationship between them. So Josephine Baker was definitely super bisexual, as was Frida Kahlo, but not sure whether or not they had a relationship with each other.

Leigh: But they met. And were two bisexual powerhouse women. And that in itself is like, delightful.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: So they met, there's a picture of them meeting together, and it's lovely and wonderful. So there's at least that. We can dream.

Gretchen: Yes, we can we can ship it too as a crack ship. Yes. So Leigh, would you like to tell us about Chavela Vargas?

Leigh: Yes. I will talk about Chavela. So she was born April 17th, 1919. And died August 5th, 2012.

Gretchen: Woah!

Leigh: She—yeah, right? She's like almost 100 years old, badass lady. So she is or was one of Mexico's most iconic folk singers. She was born in Costa Rica. But she made Mexico her adopted home in the 1930's and talking about Chavela Vargas we're gonna quote a lot this Professor of Music at the University of New Mexico, Ana Alonso-Minnutti and she actually said of Chavela, quote:

"Everyone knows who she is. But not everyone is conscious of or wants to talk about her queerness; she's a very, very iconic figure in Mexican music history. But not a lot of people talk openly about her queerness,"

which is funny because she herself was pretty open about it.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: She's famous for singing traditional Mexican songs also known as *canciones rancheras*, which are songs that are typically sung by men. And she performed them dressed like a man. She was queering conventions because she refused to present herself femininely; she was quote:

"Presenting herself with poncho, trousers, sandals, hair up, no makeup."

In addition to that, she had this like raspy masculine voice and she would sing directly to the women in the audience. Hmm. Who does this remind me of? Perhaps everything about Gladys Bentley?

Gretchen: Oh my god.

Leigh: From the Harlem Renaissance, just dressing up in a tux and having masculine raspy voice singing directly to the women in the

audience. This is my new power ship. This is my new OTP. Can we please ship these two iconic singer ladies together? That's my new ship, is Chavela Vargas and Gladys Bentley.

Gretchen: If you had a nightclub where they were both singing there would not be...

Leigh: Be a heterosexual in the house?

Gretchen: No, no, no.

Leigh: If there were in the beginning of the night there would no longer be by the end.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep. They would. They would make you gay in the best way. Oh god.

Leigh: So she began her career performing in Mexico City cabarets, but by the end of her life, she was a household name and she was singing on world stages, like she even performed at Carnegie Hall. So she and Frida Kahlo met sometime in the early 1940s when Vargas was invited to a party at Casa Azule. And Frida invited her to stay overnight because Chavela lived in a different part of the city. How nice, how thoughtful. And so this started their relationship. They had a pretty significant age difference, that May December. I think Frida was 15 years older than her. And so, Vargas never actually hid her sexuality. She was pretty open about it, but she didn't officially, publicly come out until she published her autobiography in 2002, at 81 years old.

Gretchen: Wow.

Leigh: And in it, and in a couple of other her— of her biographies. She had many, many, many lovers throughout her life, but not all of them got an entire chapter in her autobiography devoted to them like, Frida did, so there you go. The most detailed account of their relationship, however, comes from an interesting source. It actually comes from an interview that she did with Elliot Goldenthal, who was the composer for the score of the film, *Frida*, done by Julie Taymor, and it's actually you can watch it. It's included as a special feature on the DVD for that film, which is nice. If we can find a link to it on the internet, we will link it. So in it, Chavela described Frida as *Mi Grand Amore*. So my greatest love and said that at

one point their relationship was so intense that Frida said I gave birth to you. Which that's a little weird, Frida. But okay.

Gretchen: Some people are into that.

Leigh: There you go. Yeah. When asked about her relationship with Frida and the intensity of their relationship and like these love stories between them, she was quoted as saying,

"Well whoever wants to find out my story should open my chest and find my memories,"

because she apparently burned many letters from Frida. There's also a letter that Frida allegedly wrote to the poet Carlos Pellicer, describing Chavela, though the authenticity in the last you know, several years has been questioned, but it's I believe it is actually on display at the Casa Azule. It's fun to read, regardless of whether or not it's actually authentic because I love this. It reads,

"Today I met Chavela Vargas, an extraordinary woman, a lesbian, and what more I desire her I do not know if she felt what I did. But I believe she was a woman who was liberal enough that if she asked me, I wouldn't hesitate to undress in front of her. Was she a gift sent to me from heaven?"

Gretchen: Hmm.

Leigh: That's gay, Frida.

Gretchen: That's very gay.

Leigh: That relationship may have had a profound effect on Vargas' music and she would apparently sing song after song after song while Frida was painting. And one of Frida's favorites was *La Llorona*, bringing it back to that. It was one of one of Frida's favorites and was actually a song that was highly popularized by Vargas and so, if you don't know like the details of the story of La Llorona, we talked a little bit about it before but it's basically the tale of a woman who's betrayed by her male lover and drowns her children in a river in an act of anger and revenge. So this professor of music Alonso-Minutti notes quote:

"It's very interesting to look at the life of Frida Kahlo in that lens as we know Frida couldn't have children. She had an abortion, she had a miscarriage, and she mourned the death of her unborn children."

So she suggests that maybe when Chavela is singing *La Llorona*, she's singing to and about Frida. And that the song is, you know, a popular folk song. And so there's multiple versions, and many different artists choose to emphasize and perform certain verses and not others. And when Vargas was singing it, she frequently improvised verses where it said that she could have been articulating her feelings about Frida. And then you could also look at like *The Broken Column* painting as being connected to *La Llorona* like her other painting you mentioned.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: Where she's also shown weaving and she's in this like barren landscape behind her. There's like this super cute photo of Frida and Chavela lying on the grass together laughing, which I love. And we'll put it in our show notes. It's dated about 1945 and is taken by Miklos Murray, unsurprisingly.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: And like I said, Chavela was 15 years younger than Frida, and she was just starting her career when they met. So that could perhaps be why they ended up parting ways. There's not really a lot on it. But Alonso-Manutti thinks that Chavela needed to kind of depart from the safe haven of Casa Azule and break out and find her own voice and her own path. Wanted to make sure she didn't get you know stuck underneath somebody else's shadow perhaps or she wanted to go out and make her own world and make her own life. She became a household name and Mexico's most iconic singer. So she said that when she left, Vargas said that when she left Frida was sad, but she asked that she always remember her.

Gretchen: Aww.

Leigh: Excuse me while I cry because they're perfect. And I love them.

Gretchen: Aww. They are pretty perfect.

Leigh: Yeah.

Fun Segment: Pop Culture Tie-in

Gretchen: Yeah, and as we've mentioned several times, here's our little mini pop culture tie in. We've brought the movie up a couple of times as we've been talking, but there is a movie called *Frida* from 2002, which stars Salma Hayek as Frida Kahlo; Alfred Molina as Diego Rivera, and Karine

Leigh: Planadit-Bageot

Gretchen: Planadit-Bageot

Leigh: Sure.

Gretchen: As Josephine Baker, and Chavela Vargas also appears in the film performing *La Llorona*.

Leigh: She's like—she's like 80 years old. And she's in it and she's like, performing and she's super badass. It's great.

Gretchen: It's so yes, the actual Chavela Vargas is in it. So yeah! Should be fun to watch.

Leigh: She insisted on being. She wasn't approached, she insisted, apparently. I love her.

Gretchen: Das gay.

Leigh: Yes. Gay.

Gretchen: That's very gay.

Leigh: She's great.

Gretchen: She's very great. So that's all that's all the pop culture I think that we have right now. But Chavela Vargas insisting on being in a movie about her lover Frida Kahlo. Speaking of that, being gay, that leads us to *How Gay Were They?* So Leigh, how gay was Frida Kahlo?

How Gay Were They?

Leigh: Oh, gosh, you know, I'm, I'm gonna give Frida Kahlo. 12 out of 10 Spider Monkeys.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh, you read my mind? [laughter] I was literally thinking 12 out of 10 spider monkeys like I'm not even joking. Like I'm absolutely serious.

Leigh: This shows—[laughter] this shows that we're the perfect people to be doing this podcast with each other.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. We immediately think, oh my gosh.

Leigh: 12 out of 10 Spider Monkeys because whether she was having relationships with ladies, or dressing in her father's suit, or even just like queering the narrative of ability.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: I think there's a lot of things about Frida Kahlo that fit into a non-heteronormative dialogue.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: She was so political in so many facets of her existence; in her dress, in her nationality, in her Indigenous dress, in her Mestiza heritage, in the way that she loved. And there's just so much about her that is not conventional. [in a sing-song way] And I wish that we learned more about her than this lady, you can buy her face on a bunch of different pillows like she was so anti-capitalist and I'm so sad that like she's basically become the new like Che Guevara in terms of like...

Gretchen: Oh my gosh.

Leigh: Trendy thing to wear on a t-shirt. Which, I mean, I enjoy the fact that like her image has become iconic. And people are celebrating this and like celebrating the image of a Mexican, Indigenous woman who refused to ascribe to Western beauty ideals. But at the same time, she's being so commodified...

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: That it's uncomfortable. I don't think she'd be very happy with it.

Gretchen: Oh, I think she'd hate it.

Leigh: Yeah, she'd be pretty upset. But to me, she is a queer icon. And I love her.

Gretchen: Yeah, absolutely agree with everything.

Leigh: 12 out of 10.

Gretchen: Yep. Yeah. So 12 out of 10 maybe not spider monkeys. Um 12 out of 10 umm cut up pieces of hair. I don't know.

Leigh: 12 out of 10 pissed off surrealists.

Gretchen: Yes! 12 out of 10 Pissed off surrealists. Because I love everything you just said because she is very— I think to boil down her queerness to just her relationships with women or even like her decision to wear men's clothing when she was younger, doesn't do justice to the ways in which she—when you read about her it just feels like she never wanted to be categorized in more than just that.

Like she refused to exist for other people's comfort in so many ways, whether it was being, you know, honest about her disability, about her pain, about her suffering, about her existence, in terms of her gender and her race and her sexuality and her political leanings. She flagrantly refused to let other people be comfortable with her experience. And like there's no way to in my mind to like, separate out her, like her her gender and sexuality from the other ways in which she, like intersects with things like disability, with political activism with anti-colonialism with like you said like her Mestiza heritage, like it's everything influences each other.

She would not be—she could never be one of those things like she was always going to be all of those things at once in a way that you can't neatly distill into like one or two things. You have to talk about all of them because, because that's how she existed as all of them at once. And we see that in her art. Like her art, is just the expression of who she was as a person, which is all of those things. Being someone who is both

experiential and political and intersecting in so many different, you know, marginalizations and in her society.

And I just like, love her and I'm totally with you like it, like kind of makes me angry. When I think about how much I didn't know about her. And like, how all that everyone—likes most of the time, like, even before doing this, like doing all this research, what I knew her best for was her unibrow which is not the things she should be known for. Like she should not be known for having hair between her like eyebrows, like that's dumb reason to know Frida Kahlo, like.

Leigh: And when people even do like to talk about her art, they focus so much on those elements of her self portraiture and don't talk about how much in her artwork she specifically went into disability and pain. And there's a huge intersection between the LGBTQ community and disability. There was actually in an article that I read that was published earlier this year in June, it actually quotes saying that:

"Among lesbian, gay and bisexual adults, 30% of men and 36% of women have a disability."

There's a huge intersection between these two communities and who better to be an iconic representative of that experience than Frida Kahlo, and it's so upsetting that I mean, I knew Frida Kahlo was queer before I knew that she suffered from a broken spine.

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: That's really stupid. [laughs] That's so disheartening to think of, especially considering that was such a cornerstone of her work.

Gretchen: Right? Because she wouldn't be—she wouldn't have become an artist, were it not like her? I think it's fairly safe to say that, like her disability, defined her artistic career. Like it defined her as an artist in a lot of ways. And that's something that we should talk about, because there aren't a lot of artists who get focus placed on their disabilities, much less like queer artists who are disabled, much less like queer women of color, like an artist who is a queer woman of color, who is also disabled, like, I just want to like throw a parade and be like, let's talk about Frida Kahlo. Like, can we just talk about how important she is?

Leigh: I'm just thinking of that, like, terrible, like that meme? Of like, 'this is the future liberals want.' It's like, yeah it is.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: Let's talk about people with multifaceted experiences.

Gretchen: Right? Like the future I want is where she's not just like a face on a mug. But where like, she's as much of like a household name as Pablo Picasso. That like people would know, as much about like her life and experience and art as people know about Pablo Picasso being a misogynist, who hated women and therefore drew ugly pictures of women because he was mad at them.

Leigh: [imitating] And a lot of people don't know that.

Gretchen: Like I know that. I can rattle that off the top of my head that Pablo Picasso painted ugly pictures of women because he was mad at them because of his failed relationships. But like I couldn't have done that about Frida Kahlo. Like I, you know, the future I want is where she's better known than some of the horrible, awful male painters that everyone seems to know all about because of sexism and all of the reasons why someone like her wouldn't get the attention for being such an intersectional artist.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So yeah, in short, talk about Frida Kahlo.

Leigh: Talk about Frida Kahlo. I also kind of want to end on this. I just think this is really evocative is a couple of days before she died. She actually wrote in her diary:

"I hope the exit is joyful. And I hope never to return - Frida."

What a way to make an exit!

Gretchen: Yep. Yep. I hope I have a good time leaving and I'm not coming back.

Leigh: And peace! See ya.

Gretchen: Bye everybody. She really is great. I love Frida Kahlo. So that's it.

Closing and Where to find us online

Leigh: That's it for today's episode. You can, as usual, find us online individually you can talk to us on the internets. It's a question where can people talk to you upon the world wide web?

Gretchen: Well, when I am not talking about disaster bisexual artists who are intersectional and amazing, I am writing nerdy media analysis and fangirling over A Song of Ice and Fire, Star Wars, Steven Universe for TheFundamentals.com and my personal website gnellis.com You can find me on Tumblr maybe, maybe for the next couple of weeks. I don't know or on Twitter @gnelliswriter all one word. And you can find me on YouTube as at Ba'al the Bard for my A Song of Ice and Fire analysis and song parodies. What about you, Leigh?

Leigh: So I'm Leigh and when I'm not nerding out about bisexual spider monkey having fun hugging badass painter ladies from Mexico. I am usually talking about comics and queer TV over [@aparadoxinflux](https://twitter.com/aparadoxinflux) on Twitter and editing these episodes and doing fun stuff.

Gretchen: Going to cons

Leigh: Going to cons, trying to continue helping a friend coined the word Podnaut which is like astronaut but pod because we folks who work on podcasts do so much more than just host or edit or write. We do all these things. So those of you in podcast land, think of yourselves as Podnauts. We'll be handing out cool stickers at PodCon.

Gretchen: Sounds pretty awesome. You can find *History is Gay* podcast on Tumblr, [@historisgaypodcast](https://twitter.com/historisgaypodcast), Twitter [@historisgaypod](https://twitter.com/historisgaypod), and you can always drop us a line with questions suggestions or just to say hi at historyisgaypodcast@gmail.com.

Leigh: Yeah, and if considering the shitshow that is Tumblr right now, please do let us know if any of our posts become flagged. We want to keep an eye on some of that, especially some of our posts that have some Not Safe For Work art on them. We want to make sure that they are still

accessible to people. All of these things also can be found on our blog, on our website

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: At historyisgaypodcast.com. So never fear you can see all those things there. And if you enjoy the show and want to support us and continuing to make it you can support us on Patreon where you can get access to Sappho Salon minisodes, special sneak peeks and just like you heard in our letters and queries episode, the opportunity to have your voice show up on the show. And even more cool things like our fuck colonialism jingle. You can become a patron by going to the [support](#) section on our website and you can join the ranks of our patron community along with folks like the amazing Haley Hode or Houde. I'm sorry if I mispronounced your name. This person is our newest patron so thank you so much.

Gretchen: Thank you Hailey!

Leigh: We couldn't do this without you.

Gretchen: Nope.

Leigh: Also, congrats on your super awesome name.

Gretchen: Yes, love the alliteration. We are big fans of alliteration around here. If you don't know you can also buy awesome merch at a history is gay store. Whoo. If you're on our website, click on [shop](#) and you can find our history as gay T-shirts, hoodies, bags. We also have our geographic queers collection with the coastal bisexual, land gay and ocean lesbian. Designed by the amazing, lovely and talented V. They do such a great job for our art.

Leigh: And we've been seeing some really awesome notifications come through that some of y'all have bought these things, please share them with us. Tag us on Twitter or Tumblr or Facebook. Wherever you do your social media wearing your *History is Gay* gear, we want to see it. We want to share it. It's exciting. It's cool to see like the names come through. But we want to see the people attached.

Gretchen: Yes. Ys. Yes.

Leigh: If you really want.

Gretchen: That would be really awesome. So yeah, also, please, if you can rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts it helps us get our name out and help more people find the show and we can expand our awesome community, which is pretty awesome.

Leigh: Yes, we love you all. We do. And so that's it for *History is Gay*.
Until next time,

Gretchen: Stay queer

Leigh: And stay curious.

♪ [Outro Music] ♪