

HIST 358J: Mexico Since Independence
Professor Gilbert Joseph

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. – Deborah Monti

Following Thread: Understanding History and Materiality in Frida Kahlo's Clothes
by Deborah Monti

Introduction: The Binary of Kahlo's Clothes

Frida Kahlo's distinctly Tehuana style is no secret: many scholars who have written about the artist have discussed the importance of her Tehuana wardrobe, and many see Kahlo's indigenous style as a modernization of the Mexican Revolution. She was an avant-garde artist living in a post-revolutionary Mexico, active during a 1920s renaissance in Mexican art that "attempted to construct a new society based on shared revolutionary values."¹ Artists began to paint murals and take pictures of the country, and many of these works of art sought to reimagine the implications of the 1910 revolution. To align herself with these values, Kahlo mimicked the women of Tehuanapec, since the matriarchal society exemplified the 'realness' of the Revolution, and according to Diego Rivera "the Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people..."² Kahlo's indigenous wardrobe, in this post-revolutionary society, was a modern form of interpreting the role of local culture at the center of revolutionary values: as Tace Hedrick says in his book about mestizo modernism, "the idea that counter-modern energies could be derived from a localized sense of tradition nevertheless contained within itself an implicit acceptance of the very tenants of modernity."³

¹ Flores, Tatiana. "Strategic Modernists: Women Artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico." *Woman's Art Journal* 29, no. 2 (Fall/Winter //Fall/Winter2008 2008): 12–III.

² Herrera, Hayden. *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo*. Harper & Row, 1983. 111.

³ Hedrick, Tace. *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-1940*. Rutgers University Press, 2003. 32.

The image of Kahlo as a modernization of mestizo culture has remained a strong theme in the scholarship on her. It has also reverberated into nonacademic representations of her, perpetuated by museums that exhibit her work with the Surrealist movement⁴ and through the re-modernization of her style in haute couture.⁵ Although it is true that Kahlo borrowed her look from the women of the Tehuantepec society, and that she purchased many of her clothes from the indigenous people of Oaxaca, the frequency to which she is described an icon of mestizo modernism in both scholarship and fashion discourse implies that Kahlo invented the idea of mestizo modernism and that she remains its only legacy. This implication, which respectively dwells on the pre-revolutionary and posthumous context of her clothing, has limited how she can be understood. Scholars who rely too heavily on interpreting Kahlo as a modernization of mestiza consequently overemphasize her Mexicanness or equate her alliance with the revolution as anti-US sentiment, when in reality her mestiza modernity both predated her and connected her to the shared stages of identity-reformation in the Americas.

The history and materiality of the clothes themselves reopen this limited focus, grounding her in a larger social and economic context. A closer look at the history of the Tehuana style reveals how the dress is already a form of mestiza modernity—one that Kahlo did not invent but is instead an iteration. And placing Kahlo's image in the context of the concurrent Cárdenas administration's cultural project provides interesting parallels between her aesthetic and the state-sponsored, tourist-driven idea of mestiza modernity. The study of silk shows how her mestiza modernity was made possible *in part* by the cultural project she lived through, and her convergence with American counterculture in the rhetoric and economy that surrounded

⁴ Cruz Porchini, Dafne, and Adriana Ortega Orozco. "The 1940 International Exhibition of Surrealism: A Cosmopolitan Art Di." Accessed May 1, 2018. <http://ir.uiowa.edu/dadasur/vol21/iss1/6/>.

⁵ "Givenchy Fall 2010 Couture Fashion Show." Vogue. Accessed May 5, 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2010-couture/givenchy>.

Oaxacan embroidery positions her as a precursor to the subsequent hippie iteration of mestiza modernity. Once Kahlo is placed into a larger context of mestiza modernity, we can better understand how the materiality of her wardrobe attaches her to the pre-revolutionary and posthumous lives of her clothing.

After we tie Kahlo's mestiza modernity to a larger global quest for authenticity, we can begin to reconsider the meaning of her clothes within her own art. Through her art, Kahlo was able to reimagine her wardrobe and blur the textiles of her dress with paint. The most famous piece that explores modernity and Tehuana garb is *Mi vestido cuelga allí*, a 1933 oil painting that features one of Kahlo's Tehuana dresses hanging among American visual iconography. In her 1991 biography of Kahlo, Hayden Herrera describes this work as Kahlo's "manifesto" against US capitalist values and as a defiant statement of her Mexican identity.⁶ In a 2014 article about Kahlo's fashion theory, author Alba F. Aragón reads the textile of the dress in a similar way: that "[the *huipil*'s] geometry adorns an absent, thus impenetrable, body, in an apparent refusal to [Mae] West's brand of feminine seduction and the masculine gaze it implies."⁷ Although there is no single way of interpreting *Mi vestido cuelga allí*, when considered in light of the history and materiality of her clothing, the painting can also come to symbolize a symbiosis between Tehuana culture and the global market. By situating Kahlo's clothes in a historical, context-based framework, one can begin to unearth multifaceted symbolism in her work as well.

⁶ Herrera, 98.

⁷ Aragón, Alba F. "Uninhabited Dresses: Frida Kahlo, from Icon of Mexico to Fashion Muse." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 18, no. 5 (November 2014): 517–49. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174114X14042383562065>.

Origins in the *China Poblana*

The first gap that arises in categorizing Kahlo's style as modern mestiza is the assumption that both of these ideas are static concepts: that she represents an 'old' Mexico and a 'new' Mexico that had never intersected before her. In her biography of Kahlo, Herrera says that "when [Kahlo] put on the Tehuana costume, she was choosing a new identity" and that "wearing Tehuana costumes was part of Frida's self-creation as a legendary personality." In truth, though, her new costume and personality did not appear out of thin air: many of her indigenous garments are based in an earlier form of fashion modernism called the *china poblana*, which Kahlo harkened back to in both her style and in her attitude. And the 'old' image of the *china poblana* was also present in the 'new' state-sponsored rhetoric of the 20th century, seen in posters and pamphlets that also used Tehuana costume to fashion a new nationalist identity.

The *china poblana* was a term originally used to describe 19th century Mexican women who first dressed in fine silk from China.⁸ The origins of how the *china poblana* style reached Mexico are muddled, but many believe the term was coined to describe the dress of a native Indian woman who was captured by pirates and worked as a servant in 17th century Mexico. This servant, the original *china poblana*, inspired indigenous women with silk fabric and a new style of dress. While the term *china poblana* demonstrates how foreign Asia was for Mexicans, who called the woman Chinese even though she probably was not from China, the style is unmistakable: the *china poblana* wore a white blouse with fringes and embroidery, a long silk skirt, a decorated scarf or shawl, and shoes embroidered with silk thread.⁹ *China poblanas* also

⁸ Finamore, Michelle. "My Dress Hangs There: Frida Kahlo as Fashion Icon." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2 November 2016.

⁹ "Traditions of Mexico - La China Poblana." Accessed April 25, 2018.
<http://www.houstonculture.org/mexico/lachina.html>.

often wore their hair in two braids. While its trendiness has waned, the *china poblana* style is still custom garb for formal events, and remains an iconic symbol of Mexican style:



China Poblana outfit from unknown artist. “China Poblana.” RISD Museum Catalogue.

By the 19th century the once peasant garb was transformed into an outfit for the upper class, and *china poblanas*, like the allure of their foreign clothes, were thought of as charming and well-traveled: “the china went to and fro, her charm a pleasure to the eye, kindling violent passions of the spirit...she was the quintessence of popular wit and charm.”¹⁰ According to scholar Joanne Hershfield, “la china poblana symbolized a particular brand of exotic femininity, one that was ‘made in Mexico’.”¹¹ The look morphed over time, but all of the iterations of the *china poblana* were rooted in a sense of foreign exoticism and Mexicanidad: the look was, at its core, a mixture between a modern energy of travel and a localized sense of tradition. As time went on Tehuana women largely adopted the style, and the terms ‘*china poblana*’ and ‘La Tehuana’ became

¹⁰ Orellana, Margarita de, Michelle Suderman, Gutierre Tibón, Pedro Ángel Palou, Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Guillermo Prieto, Richard Moszka, Ricardo Pérez Montfort, Jason Lange, and Emma Yanes. “China Poblana.” *Artes de México*, no. 66 (2003): 65–80.

¹¹ Hershfield, Joanne. *Imagining La Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917–1936*. Duke University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389286>.

interchangeable.¹² Although Kahlo's style is now considered to be Tehuana, it has obvious roots in the *china poblana*. These roots reveal how Kahlo's Tehuana style was already a form of mestiza modernity in itself, and frame Kahlo's style as an iteration—not as an invention—of mestiza modernity.

Like the *china poblana* Kahlo had the luxury of travel, and often mixed the clothes she bought in different countries. While in the United States, she sought out new and exciting stores: “she adored department stores, shops in Chinatown, and dime stores...Frida briefly gave up her long native skirts for the amusement of wearing chic Manhattan modes—even hats—and twitching her hips...”¹³ When her wardrobe was unlocked in 2004, scholars did not find any complete Tehuana outfit, but instead came across dozens of different textiles.¹⁴ In the likeness of the original *china poblana* Kahlo flirted with different styles of clothing, and her attitude towards international style embodied the spirit of the women before her. Through mixing and matching Kahlo created looks very similar, but not identical, to the *china poblana*:



Frida Kahlo during a 1937 photoshoot for *Vogue* Magazine

¹² Finamore, Michelle

¹³ Herrera, 163.

¹⁴ Rosenzweig, Denise, and Magdalena Rosenzweig, eds. *Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress: Frida's Wardrobe: Fashion from the Museo Frida Kahlo*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2008.

Just like the *china poblana* was formed and influenced by Asian aesthetics, Kahlo's Tehuana style was also created with the help of cultural borrowing. By engaging in the same foreign influence that created the original look, she aligned herself with the history of the *china poblana*.

Kahlo was not the only one bringing back the image of the *china poblana* during the first half of the 20th century. The new, post-revolutionary government was taking on an intensely nationalist cultural project as part of its state-building efforts to construct a new sense of nation, and these years coincided with the formative years of tourism.¹⁵ The result was the creation of a cohesive and marketable Mexican identity. To create this new identity, the Cárdenas administration "turned the particularities of ethnic cultural expression into a larger category of 'type.' That is, what is unique to a specific region or ethnic group becomes 'typically' Mexican."¹⁶ The *china poblana* was one of these particularities that became exported as a state-sponsored marketing strategy: "government-funded tourist advertisements revealed the slide toward the use of 'stock' images of Mexican culture and life, for example, Mexican maidens in *china poblana* costume...certain images [like the *china poblana*] gradually assumed primacy in the representation of Mexicanidad."¹⁷ During the 1930s and 1940s, the *china poblana* became an image used in state-sponsored tourism as a means of state building and as a way of promoting Mexican identity through revolutionary nationalism.¹⁸

The similarities between Kahlo's *china poblana* style and the *china poblana* of tourist advertisements complicate her as the modernization of mestizo culture because they place her within a social environment that was doing the same:

¹⁵ Joseph, Gilbert M., and Anne Rubenstein. *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, 2001. 92.

¹⁶ Ibid, 93

¹⁷ Ibid, 100.

¹⁸ Berger, Dina Michele. "Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946," 2002. <https://arizona.openrepository.com/handle/10150/279951>.



(left) Jorge González Camarena (Mexican, 1908–1980), poster for Mexican tourism, published by Tourist Department of the Mexican Government, *Visit Mexico*, 1940s–1950s. (right) *Frida, Countryside* by Nickolas Muray, 1938.

Even though Kahlo was part of the Mexican Communist Party, her and the Cárdenas administration used many of the same visual elements of Tehuana style, including braided hair, flowers, Aztec symbolism, and a specific cut of dress. The similarities between her style and the new national identity suggest that Kahlo's self-creation was influenced by the larger Mexican imagination. The context in which she wore Tehuana costume suggests that she did not singlehandedly modernize a static concept of mestizo culture, but was instead implicitly part of a statewide reimagining of identity.

The Tradition of Silk

Many of Kahlo's Tehuana outfits are made out of silk, a materiality that further grounds Kahlo within a Mexico that was attempting to reimagine itself. Silk was neither indigenous to Mexico nor did it initially grow well in the region; the fabric originally came from Asia as a

result of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and quickly became part of Mexico's rural stylistic identity. For a period of time after the Spanish conquest Mexico was producing large amounts of silk cloth, especially in the city of Oaxaca, but the use of traditional silk waned by the early 19th century. According to historians Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodriguez, the decline of silk occurred partly because of human suffering: "the indigenous population, decimated by epidemics and overwork, became insufficient to service this labor-intensive industry."¹⁹ Several measures were tried to revive the silk economy, and in the 1970s the government solved this problem by introducing smaller trees that grow faster and silkworms that form cocoons faster.²⁰ They also paid for silk weaving teachers and provided grants and loans for the purchase of electric spinners and floor looms.²¹

Funding silk production in Oaxaca was also part of the 1930s and 1940s PRI cultural project. The PRI implicated the local and the indigenous in the construction of "lo mexicano," and honed in on native forms of cultural production as a "specialty" of Mexico.²² Local authorities invested in practices like silk weaving in Oaxaca and then showcased the resulting silk garments in expositions, pamphlets, and articles for government-sponsored tourism.²³ Many curators in Mexico City also moved their trainees to provincial posts in order to enhance ties between local institutions and state-sponsored heritage programs.²⁴ Because of its history and contemporary production methods, silk symbolizes a mestiza culture that is both authentic and fabricated. It remains an indigenous craft, but its success relied on the shipment of raw materials and the promotion from a government eager for tourist spending.

¹⁹ Sayer, Chloë. *Mexico: Clothing & Culture*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2015.

²⁰ Armitage, Carey Patricia. "Silk Production and Its Impact on Families and Communities in Oaxaca, Mexico." Iowa State University, 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joseph, Gilbert M., and Anne Rubenstein. *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, 2001. 95-99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The eccentricity of Kahlo's wardrobe partly depended on the money that came from American tourists and on the cultural project of the PRI, since both were necessary in the continuous creation of silk garments. The silk she used to craft her Tehuana identity was economically entangled with that of the state, and links her to a global market centered on the idea of modernizing a mestiza culture. By wearing outfits made out of silk but recognizably in Tehuana style, Kahlo complicates historical and art historical interpretations that read her modernization of mestiza culture as anti-United States.

An example of the oversimplification that happens when scholars overemphasize Kahlo's modern mestiza can be seen in the work of Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep. In analyzing a photo of Frida Kahlo sitting on the lap of American painter Arnold Blanch (shown below), Block and Hoffman-Jeep use the rhetoric of indigeneity and Mexicanness to insist that Kahlo's posture represents a resistance to Western colonialism:

By emphasizing the unique and pristine nature of Mexican culture though the valorization of its native inhabitants, the leaders sought to elevate the "real" Americans against the rest of the world, and especially against the United States...Kahlo's sartorial declaration and posture are meant here to be read as a public affirmation of Mexicanidad and postrevolutionary Mexico's attitude toward U.S. economic and cultural colonization.²⁵

²⁵ Block, Rebecca, and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep. "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia.'" *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1998): 8–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358399>.



Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo with Lucile and Arnold Blanch, San Francisco, California
[photograph] / (photographed by Peter A. Juley & Son). 1930 or 1931

Kahlo wore Tehuana clothing to ally herself with the native inhabitants and to belong with the people, but it was not a Mexican culture that was “unique” or “pristine.” She could not have worn a Tehuana style that was pristine because there was no pristine Tehuana style. She was part of the evolution of the *china poblana*, made possible by US tourism and Mexico’s own cultural colonization. And although her style was her own, versions of it were also appearing in most government-sponsored tourist pamphlets and posters.

Reading a photo of Kahlo in a similar way shows how easy it is to complicate the anti-US interpretations. Take for example this 1947 photograph of Kahlo lounging in silk and linen Chinese pajamas:



Frida in the Casa Azul, 1947 (photograph by Antonio Kahlo)

If Kahlo's posture with *Blanch* is meant to be read as a public affirmation of Mexico's attitude toward U.S. economic and cultural colonization, this photo can be interpreted as an acceptance of the commercialization of silk for U.S. tourism. Just like *Blanch* symbolizes U.S. colonization, the outfit Kahlo wears in this photograph symbolizes the state-sponsored cultural colonization of rural silk spinning, and her relaxed posture could suggest an acceptance of the material's new significance.

Considering the history and production of the silk Kahlo wore is meant to complicate existing binaries of interpretation, not to serve as an end-all answer to questions posed about her. But if scholars want to create a posthumous fashion identity for a woman who left little clue about her closet, it is important to consider the materiality she chose. Aforementioned scholars like Block and Hoffman-Jeep who describe Kahlo as the culmination of Mexican colonization and mestiza culture seem to look only to her Tehuana style, but not at her overwhelming preference for silk. A closer look at the historical and cultural context of silk reveals how

Kahlo's mestiza modernity economically connected her to both contemporary Mexico and to American tourism.

Embroidery and Tourism

Just like Kahlo is part of the historical traditions of Mexico and the Mexican imagination of the 1930s and 1940s, she is also connected to 1970s Mexico through US counterculture tourism. Kahlo and the American hippies who visited Mexico shared similar attitudes about clothing and a mutual support of Oaxacan embroidery, and the parallels between the rhetoric of the materiality show how the counterculture movement was also a reinterpretation of the modern mestiza. Within this context Kahlo's style can be redefined as part of global desire to reimagine nation, one that extends past a post-revolutionary understanding of the Mexican Revolution and feeds into a larger discourse on using style to re-craft state identity.

American counterculture tourists in Mexico, many of whom considered themselves to be hippies, sought out the same 'premodern' experience that Kahlo seemed to embody. It was the aspect of 'untouched indigeneity' that most excited them, and they came in search of the more authentic folklore of Mexico. They wanted to see a more 'real Mexico,' which they similarly interpreted as rural Mexico, and spent time in the Mayan lowlands of the Yucatán peninsula and in the highlands of Oaxaca.²⁶ And they were appeased and excited by the authentic crafts they found there: "the new demand for the folk artistry that emerged in the 1960s and peaked in 1978 was fueled by a counterculture movement that prized uniqueness and originality and that wanted

²⁶ Waterbury, Ronald. "Embroidery for Tourists A Contemporary Putting-Out System in Oaxaca, Mexico," 243–71, 1989. 244.

handmade or quasi-handmade goods.”²⁷ These were the same handmade goods that Kahlo frequently purchased and proudly wore: wide skirts, silk *rebozos*, and detailed *huipils*.²⁸

The rhetoric of the counterculture movement also mimics that of Kahlo. Like Kahlo did with her style, these tourists saw the development of American style as a “transcendental tool towards self-realization, enlightenment, and freedom from conventions.”²⁹ Many of the hippies were white middle-class citizens who linked American authenticity with a return to pioneers in nature.³⁰ Their desire to get “back with the land” informed their own style—which was largely appropriated from Native American culture—and was even promulgated in their own publications: “from the smallest independent presses to *Rolling Stone* began to feature representations of the city as evil, of rural space as pure and good, and, perhaps most surprisingly, of members of the counterculture as stand-ins for the pre-modern rural Folk.”³¹ This “back to the land” mentality mirrors Kahlo’s own desire for Tehuana garb, and the role of American cultural production in creating a new sense of identity sounds strikingly similar to that of postrevolutionary Mexico.

Kahlo is also economically linked to the counterculture movement that visited Mexico; she purchased many of her embroidered garments in the same places where counterculture tourists visited, namely the city of Oaxaca, and the subsequent putting-out systems that developed there place Kahlo’s embroidered pieces into a larger discourse on global trade. The economic history of Oaxaca drastically changed with the boom in counterculture demand for embroidery and with the exportation of the craft. In his essay *Embroidery for Tourists*, scholar

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rosenzweig, 102

²⁹ “Counter-Couture: Handmade Fashion in an American Counterculture.” Accessed May 1, 2018. <http://madmuseum.org/exhibition/counter-couture>.

³⁰ Tinkle, Adam. “Back to the Garden: Pastoralism, Country Rock and Authenticity in the U.S. Counterculture, 1968-1970.” Wesleyan University, 2008. 6.

³¹ Ibid.

Ronald Waterbury describes how the women embroiderers of Oaxaca were exploited in the 1960s with the new obsession over authentic embroidery. He describes the creation of a putting-out system in the city, a sort of “protoindustrialization” stage where American merchants controlled the supply of raw material and the marketing of the completed product in order to make the most profit from it.³² The putting-out system was a direct response to the counterculture’s burgeoning demand for handmade goods, and resulted in an exorbitant profit margin for American entrepreneurs: the Oaxacan women who embroidered made 10 cents an hour for a common-quality dress that sold for \$50 in the import boutiques of North America.³³

Although Kahlo had passed away by the time the putting-out system developed, many of the garments found in the 2004 unveiling of her wardrobe were embroidered by the people of Oaxaca.³⁴ While there are no direct lineages between Kahlo’s fame and the rise of the putting-out system, the congruence in years suggests that embroidery was more than just a modern symbol of Kahlo’s mestiza culture. Her embroidered pieces symbolize both the rise of new interest in authentic craft and the moments before a surge in global consumerism. While Kahlo cannot be credited for luring beatnik tourists to the same places where she purchased her own clothing in Oaxaca, the fact that she wore some of the same hand-embroidered outfits as American hippies shows how she fits into a larger trend. These embroidered skirts and blouses fiscally tie her into a larger moment of both Mexican and North American cultural colonization, and allow her to symbolize a shared attempt at crafting new forms of state identity.

³² Waterbury, Ronald. “Embroidery for Tourists A Contemporary Putting-Out System in Oaxaca, Mexico,” 243–71, 1989. 244.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rosenzweig, 101.

Painted Clothes and New Interpretations

Understanding the materiality of Kahlo's wardrobe not only helps us understand her iconography, but it also creates room for new interpretations of her art. Just like the history and materiality of the textiles Kahlo wore complicate the narrow reading of her as a modernization of mestizo culture, the ways in which she painted her clothes also nuance the binary of interpretation. Many of her paintings about Mexicanness and indigeneity can be interpreted through the same lens. Perhaps they, too, show how Kahlo artistically grappled with the relationship between mestiza clothing and state-sponsored culture.

One can begin by reanalyzing the 1933 painting *Mi vestido cuelga allí*, the piece that scholars most often see as representing modernization, mestiza culture and anti-US sentiment:



Mi vestido cuelga allí, Frida Kahlo, 1933

At first glance, the painting evokes a disenchantment with America; Kahlo is missing, but her Tehuana dress hangs among U.S. symbols and landmarks. The dress seems to be in a different world, suspended from a trophy and a toilet but unmoving and unaffected by the surrounding

chaos. Its bright colors contrast with the smog of industrialization, and its placement in the center separates it from the surrounding visual stimuli. At the same time, though, the dress can also be interpreted as part of the larger visual economy, since it both physically and metaphorically links Kahlo's dresses—her little pieces of Mexico—to the United States. The Tehuana dress seems to almost emerge from the rubble at the bottom of the piece, borrowing its color from the red of the brick behind it and rising with the seemingly endless columns. Perhaps Kahlo is suggesting that although the Tehuana dress is separate from the surrounding city, it also exists partly because of it.

There is no single way of interpreting Kahlo's fashion and work, but one way to understand her complexities is to look closely at the smallest details she left behind. While we might not know much about Kahlo's life, it is obvious that she did everything with intention. According to Herrera:

People who watched the ritual of her dressing recall the time and care she took, her perfectionism and precision. Frequently she tinkered with a needle before donning a blouse, adding lace here, a ribbon there. Deciding what belt would go with what skirt was a serious matter. 'Does it work?' she would ask. 'Is it good?' 'Frida had an aesthetic attitude about her dress,' painter Lucile Blanch remembered. 'She was making a whole picture with colors and shapes.'³⁵

Her decidedness, besides being about colors and shapes, also included choosing which fabrics to wear. By understanding the implications of the different textiles, and by looking closely at the histories within her wardrobe, one can see how Kahlo's mestiza was inherently connected to her modernism, and how her modernism was connected to a larger social moment and economic

³⁵ Herrera, 110

system of identity-creation and cultural trade. What this means for analyzing Kahlo's jade earrings or velvet skirts or her paintings beyond *Mi vestido cuelga allí* is still open for interpretation, but hopefully it is an interpretation that treats all of Kahlo's stylistic and materialistic decisions as both idiosyncratic *and* as reflective of her time.

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