

Paper Mache for June 5 by David Read

Few artists are as iconic as Frida Kahlo. Her work is immediately recognizable, as is her image. In many ways, she has surpassed even her famous husband, the renowned muralist Diego Rivera, in popular culture. Together they were one of the art world's great power couples. And now, get a load of this, a Frida Kahlo opera! I love it. What better way to celebrate her life than through music and theater? Even more fitting, it's being performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, where Frida and Diego lived and worked intermittently during the 1930s.

There are certain artists whose stories refuse to fade with time. Nearly 70 years after her death, the Mexican painter with the flowered hair, fierce gaze, and deeply personal artwork continues to inspire books, films, exhibitions, and college courses. This month, the Met unveiled their new production of *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego* ("The Last Dream of Frida and Diego"), a magical-realist opera by composer Gabriela Lena Frank and libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz.

The opera imagines a reunion between Frida and Diego on the Day of the Dead, blending myth, memory, and Mexican folklore into a visually rich theatrical experience. Critics have praised its dreamlike staging, emotional score, and embrace of Spanish-language storytelling on one of the world's most influential cultural stages. The work also reflects a broader shift in the arts; a growing recognition that Latin American voices, stories, and aesthetics are not peripheral to American culture, but central to it. Frida Kahlo seems uniquely suited for opera. Her life contained all the ingredients of grand drama: physical suffering, passionate love, political conviction, betrayal, creativity, and relentless self-invention.

Perhaps even more fascinating is how Frida Kahlo has evolved from artist into cultural symbol. Universities, museums, and arts organizations increasingly study not only her artwork but also the phenomenon often called "Fridamania," the transformation of an artist into an international icon whose influence extends into fashion, politics, education, and popular culture. Here in Yuba-Sutter, we even hosted a daylong cultural celebration called "For the Love of Frida" that drew enthusiastic community participation.

That growing academic interest is not limited to New York or major coastal institutions. In California's Central Valley, the University of the Pacific in Stockton has been developing interdisciplinary curriculum initiatives that connect arts, culture, identity, and community engagement. Programs like these recognize that contemporary arts education increasingly crosses traditional boundaries, allowing students to explore how visual art intersects with music, storytelling, history, and social issues.

In many ways, the Frida opera and these emerging educational efforts are connected by the same larger question. Whose stories do we preserve and celebrate? For decades, opera in the U.S. was often viewed as a distinctly European, elitist art form, disconnected from the lived experiences of many Americans. Productions like *El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego* challenge that assumption. They demonstrate that opera can embrace contemporary cultural narratives while remaining emotionally powerful and visually spectacular. At the same time, universities are rethinking how arts education can better reflect the diversity of modern America. Students increasingly seek curriculum that feels relevant to their own communities and experiences. Frida Kahlo's enduring popularity helps explain why. Her work was deeply personal, deeply political, and deeply rooted in place, qualities that continue to resonate in an era when authenticity often feels in short supply.

The arts are always evolving. Sometimes that evolution happens on a grand opera stage in Manhattan. Sometimes it happens quietly in a classroom in Stockton. Either way, the message is remarkably similar. Culture is not static. It grows, adapts, and finds new audiences, generation after generation. And somehow, through paintings, music, and memory, Frida Kahlo continues to speak to all of them.