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Frida Kahlo.
Picture: Hulton
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PERSONAL FINANCE

Plenty of sensible advice on making your money work for you

Birth of an icon

JACKIE MCGLONE

A WOMAN dressed in head-to-toe Prada is threatening to mug me. I am walking speedily along New York's Fifth Avenue when this elegant stranger accosts me, grabs my arm in a vice-like grip and hisses, "Where did you get that pin? I want it!" Her manicured hand moves to my collar as if she is about to pluck the coveted item from my clothes.

The pin in question is a cameo-like beaded brooch that bears a self-portrait of Frida Kahlo, albeit a colour photocopy. It's not the first time that someone has tried to steal this treasured little object, which I wear most days because it was a gift from my late mother, and which intrigues everyone I meet, from articulate nine-year-old boys to ageing Hollywood screen legends. They all know who Kahlo is, especially since a hirsute Salma Hayek played her in the Oscar-nominated biopic Frida.

The volatile Mexican artist's glamorous, haunting image has become almost as ubiquitous as that of another Latin American revolutionary. Today, Kahlo's imperious, mono-browed gaze stares back at us from a host of everyday items - mouse mats, fridge magnets, cigarette holders, designer-label clothing and, yes, trivial accessories like my precious brooch.

A few days after the incident on Fifth Avenue, I go for

afternoon tea to a friend's home in the city. She has invited a group of expat Scottish women artists along - and one is carrying a bag decorated with a sequined version of yet another of Kahlo's haughty self-portraits, a present from her students. It's a provocative image that has been used not only on fashion accessories, but also to advertise Volvo cars. The US Postal Service put it on a postage stamp to show "commitment to diversity". The artist's 75-year-old niece, Isolda Pinedo Kahlo, even launched Frida SA last year, a line of sunglasses, necklaces and pashminas inspired by her aunt's signature flair for folkloric fashion. They cost upwards of 100 (£55), and were marketed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the painter's death in July 1954.

With an image as plundered as those of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Princess Di, Kahlo has become the most over-exposed female artist in the world. She's undeniably the most famous in history - the first woman ever to sell a painting to the Louvre, for instance. And this year there will be no let-up in the craze for Kahlo: her carnivalesque clothes, her visceral art, her passionate political beliefs, her on-off-on marriage to the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, her tempestuous love affairs with both men and women, her unmitigated pain and suffering after a horrific tram accident as a teenager, and an incredible life story that has been so mythologised and bowdlerised.

For this will be the year of Kahlo, despite the fact that the centenary of her birth does not fall until 2007. Next month she is being given a major retrospective at Tate Modern - only the second big show devoted to a female artist since the gallery opened five years ago - and she is the first Latin American to be so honoured. The current Portraits of an Icon exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, featuring 50 remarkable photographs of Kahlo, was literally mobbed when I visited it on a recent Monday afternoon.

There are tie-in publications, too, catalogues and the like for both shows, although none will come close to Hayden Herrera's definitive 1980s biography, *Frida*, which Bloomsbury republished in paperback in 2003 to mark the release of the movie of the same name.

Kahlo has also been the subject of plays (one by Robert Lepage, and several one-woman productions on the Edinburgh Fringe) and novels, such as Meaghan Delahunt's ambitious *In the Blue House*, about Kahlo's affair with the exiled Russian Leon Trotsky, set in her lapis-coloured home in the Coyoacán district of Mexico City. Scholarly studies of Kahlo and her work have been produced by legions of feminist art historians, while a slew of TV documentaries has been made - one of the most recent, *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*, premiered on America's PBS channel at the end of March.

Be prepared, too, for a spate of homages in the fashion pages to Kahlo's uniquely flamboyant style - all those vividly patterned, floor-length Tehuana dresses, and swags of native beads. Forget Kate Moss and Sienna Miller's hyped-up hippie glamour; Frida Kahlo is the woman who refused to exfoliate -

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PHOTO GALLERY

who can forget that moustache, those unplucked eyebrows? - but who nonetheless became a style legend. She virtually invented boho-chic: swirlly tiered skirts, fringed shawls and improbable headdresses, worn with an insouciant slash of scarlet lipstick on her sensuous lips.

The world and his wife are in the grip of Fridamania. There's a queue of renowned authors and artists, Jeanette Winterson and Tracey Emin among them, lining up to write about her and the Tate show, while the wealthy and famous are also busy worshipping the cult of Kahlo. Madonna, who has said she "identifies with Frida's pain and sadness", is an avid collector of her work, for which auction prices rocketed during the 1980s and 1990s - putting her in the same league as Picasso, Warhol and Van Gogh - and has loaned two paintings to the Tate exhibition: *Self-portrait with Small Monkey* (1945) and *My Birth* (1932).

One of the most awesome images of childbirth ever made, *My Birth* shows the infant's large head emerging from between the mother's spread legs from the doctor's vantage point. Heavy, joined eyebrows identify the child as Kahlo. Blood covers the inert, drooping head and skinny neck. The baby looks dead. You won't find this deeply disturbing painting on any designer-label T-shirt. But it is important works such as this (Kahlo places a portrait of the immaculate Virgin Mary directly above the taboo body) that set Kahlo in an artistic context for the curators of the Tate show - Emma Dexter, senior curator at Tate Modern, and Tanya Barson, curator at Tate Liverpool. They have edited the glossy new publication that accompanies the exhibition of more than 70 of Kahlo's works. She was not a prolific artist. In her 47 years she painted and drew fewer than 150 pieces, more than 60 of them self-portraits. Some are lost anyway, although the thrilling discovery of a hidden cache of treasures in a locked room at the Blue House - including thousands of letters, 180 of her moth-eaten traditional dresses, and one of the famous 'hand' earrings reputedly given to her by Picasso - has excited art historians since it was disclosed early last month.

However, says Dexter, no artefacts, no memorabilia and none of Kahlo's collection of frocks will be included in the Tate retrospective, the centrepiece of which is the extraordinary 1939 oil, *The Two Fridas*, a double self-portrait of chilling loneliness, which she was finishing on the day her divorce papers from Diego Rivera came through. The Frida in a European white Victorian wedding dress is the one Diego no longer loves; the other wears a Tehuana skirt and blouse. Both have their hearts exposed - the unloved Frida's blood-spotted lace bodice is torn to reveal her breast and her broken heart. The other Frida's heart is whole.

"Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings," Diego said of her. "The only woman who has expressed in her work an art of the feelings, functions and creative powers of women." (They remarried in 1940, exactly one year after the divorce.)



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Her most famous painting, *The Two Fridas* is one of only two large-scale works she ever made - diminutive herself, she worked on a small scale. Many of her paintings are tiny and jewel-like; one is no larger than my brooch. "Some of Frida's paintings are so small," says Dexter, "that the viewer has to get up close to them and therefore really engage with them."

As we look at the layout of the Tate exhibition, which is divided into 12 rooms, Dexter talks eloquently about the marvellous self-portraits, in which Kahlo painted herself bleeding, weeping, cracked open, yet tempered with humour and fantasy, and about some of the lesser-known works, such as her only collage, *My Dress Hangs There*(1933), "an eviscerating portrait of the United States during the Depression years".

For Dexter, the personal is political in Kahlo's oeuvre. In her catalogue essay, *The Universal Dialectic of Frida Kahlo*, she begins by quoting something the artist told a friend, Raquel Tibol, in 1953. "I've done my paintings well... and they have a message of pain in them, but I think they'll interest a few people. They're not revolutionary, so why do I keep on believing they're combative?"

Dexter is also fascinated by Kahlo's gorgeously erotic still lifes. "I can't look at this painting without blushing," she says, showing me a colour photocopy of one of Kahlo's lush phallic portrayals of a priapic vegetable. "It's just so hairy," exclaims Dexter, whose cheeks are indeed now pink - as are mine.

Another still life, *Fruits of the Earth* (1938), Dexter remarks, has many obvious visual echoes of male and female genitalia - bloody, wounded and sliced nopal fruits, which also echo Kahlo's own wounded body, "or form an expression of national pride and identity".

Those Kahlo produced towards the end of her life, such as *Sun and Life*, offer a much more rounded view. "An active, rudely fecund nature is depicted: the inner organs of the plants are quite unequivocally ejaculating male genitalia, while opening vulva and a lone foetus hidden in a plant interior seem to be weeping," Dexter writes.

Several other contributors to the Tate catalogue also maintain that what has been overlooked in Kahlo's work has been "her active role in the formulation of a language of art which questioned neo-colonial cultural values". But all of her work is political, insists Dexter, who clearly hopes that the retrospective will encourage serious debate on this issue.

These radical, political messages, she believes, can be found in everything "from a humble still life of fruits and vegetables, which is in fact an expression of pride in Mexican produce and identity, to paintings that delineate the power relationship between Mexico and the US, to a series of works in which her broken body mirrors the shattered dreams and promises of Mexican liberation and revolution".

It is nigh on impossible, though, to engage with Kahlo's artistic reputation without being aware of the famously

shocking facts of her life, as Dexter acknowledges. For Kahlo's life was a street accident that lasted 47 years.

BORN near Mexico City in 1907 - at school she shifted the date forward to 1910, either to stay on as a student or to identify herself more closely with the Mexican revolution - Kahlo was the daughter of a German photographer and his Mexican wife from Oaxaca. She grew up in a repressive Victorian culture, in which the word 'legs' was considered too titillating to utter. However, Kahlo was a rebel, with an infectious sense of fun, often dressing as a boy.

Crippled in her right leg by polio when she was a child, she was 18 when the bus that took her home from school was rammed by a streetcar in Mexico City. Literally impaled through the abdomen by a metal rail in the wreckage, her spine was fractured, her pelvis crushed - the iron bar exited through her vagina - and one foot was broken. From that day until her death 29 years later, she lived with pain and the constant threat of illness. "I hold the record for operations," she said. Unable to move, she began painting during her long recuperation.

Four years after the accident, she married the 41-year-old Diego Rivera, whom she idolised and with whom she was fervently involved in left-wing causes. He was unfaithful to her over and over again in the following years, even having an affair with her beloved sister Cristina. As Hayden Herrera writes in Frida: "She lived [as well] with a yearning for a child she could never have - her smashed pelvis led only to miscarriages and at least three therapeutic abortions - and with the anguish of being often deceived and occasionally abandoned by the man she loved."

She transmuted her pain into art, creating an autobiography in paint that has a peculiar intensity and strength. Yet, as Dexter remarks, it's the charismatic self-portraits that have fixed Kahlo's image within the public domain. They chime with the contemporaneous fascination for the cinematic close-up of feminine beauty, she believes, as well as the mystique of female otherness expressed in film noir. Kahlo loved Hollywood films and befriended many stars, such as Dolores del Rio. One of her first collectors was Edward G Robinson, the star of many a gangster movie of the era.

Nevertheless, Dexter believes that Kahlo's self-portraits are "exercises in personal and political denial", he says. "They occur at the moment when the Mexican revolution is losing its way - so she politely turns her gaze exclusively upon herself."

As an art historian, Dexter is clearly sceptical of the way that artistic fame today depends upon biography. But, in that recent documentary *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*, the author Carlos Fuentes sums up the painful physical and emotional realities of an artist who insisted, "I never painted dreams. I paint my own reality." Fuentes concludes, "Frida found a way of painting pain, of giving her pain through her painting, permitting us to see pain, and in so doing reflecting the pain of the world." And it's a pain that sears our hearts

and our souls.

Frida Kahlo is at Tate Modern, London, from June 9 to October 9; Frida Kahlo: Portraits of an Icon is at the National Portrait Gallery, London, until June 26

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