Guillermo Kahlo, Frida Kahlo’s father, was born as Carl Wilhelm Kahlo on 26 October 1871 into the Protestant middle class in Pforzheim. Thanks to the business ties of his father, jeweler Johann Heinrich Jacob Kahlo, Wilhelm was able to travel to Mexico when he was 18 years old. Unlike most German immigrants at that time, Wilhelm—who went by the name of Guillermo after arriving in Mexico—married a Mexican woman in 1893 and became a Mexican citizen a year later. After his first wife died, he married Matilde Calderón in 1898. She would later give birth to Frida. He was employed by a number of German jewelry companies in Mexico, but soon tired of this work. In 1898/99, the German firm Boker, which still exists today, announced its plans to document the process of constructing and furnishing the luxurious department store in the center of the capital city. A young Kahlo seized this opportunity to demonstrate his masterful talents as an architectural photographer, particularly when taking interior shots, as he would soon announce in his advertisements.

Kahlo quickly became one of the most sought-after photographers in modern Mexico. Kahlo’s photographs captured the construction of Mexico’s modern quarter, numerous large public buildings and monuments—such as the vast Monument to the Revolution or the Angel of Independence on the Paseo de la Reforma—, the evolution of the railroad network and, not least, the country’s industrial facilities.

While his German compatriot Hugo Brehme, the Casasola brothers and many others were in their element photographing the revolutionary period, Kahlo focused his attentions on inanimate objects. In an advertisement that he placed in various journals, he presented himself as a “specialist for buildings, interiors, factories, machines etc.” Unlike most of his contemporaries, he had developed little interest in photographing the vibrant life on Mexico’s streets or markets. Kahlo’s pictures nearly always have a meticulously ordered look to them. People only ever appear in his carefully staged portraits (including numerous self-portraits [Franger/Huhle 2010: 73-125] and portraits of his daughter Frida) or as part of architectural compositions, where the viewer often has to look twice to spot them at all. Using his large-format camera, which he could only carry through the city and country aided by an assistant (often his daughter Frida in her younger years), he captured these carefully composed scenes in long exposure shots, resulting in an incredible depth of field which is still striking to this day. From the start of the 20th century, Kahlo focused above all on industrial photography.

La Tabacalera Mexicana, “Salón principal de envoltura”

This photograph – one of a series of six in total – depicts the atrium of the Palacio San Carlos in the center of Mexico, an old city palace built by renowned architect Manuel Tolsá, which today houses an art museum. Kahlo’s caption, however, refers to it as part of the tobacco factory Tabacalera Mexicana, which rolled cigars. A company founded by a Basque industrialist in 1898 had afforded itself the luxury of manufacturing its cigars in the
"La Tabacalera Mexicana, S.A. - Salon principal de envolture" (1907)
old palace and decided to use its luxurious premises to promote its products.

Kahlo presumably took the images in 1907 shortly after the inauguration of the Tabacalera’s new, grand rooms. They depict the space in a clinically clean light, with more the air of a palace than a factory. In 1917 the company was still using this photograph for its advertisements to demonstrate “where ‘Supremos’ brand cigars are manufactured”. Other photos by Kahlo are known to have been used for promotional purposes, yet this case is remarkable as the Tabacalera used Kahlo’s photograph to create a sketch for an advertisement ten years later.

Fábrica de cerillos “La Central” – Departamento de tren de cerillos

Kahlo’s unmistakable caption informs us that this is the room in the La Central match factory which houses the machines used to manufacture matches. The matches here are clearly wax vestas (cerillos), which were pulled over cotton threads – as can be seen in the picture – and then cut to size.

Kahlo’s photographs are not dated, but must have been taken around 1911 when the company relocated its entire production facilities to the capital. La Central was founded in Veracruz in 1885 and was Mexico’s first match factory and one of the earliest industrial enterprises in Latin America (ProMéxico 2010: 92 ff.). The IAI’s collections comprise four photographs of La Central’s production facilities, which presumably belong to a more comprehensive series. However, only the holdings of the IAI contain any record of this series to date.

Cía. Fundidora de Fierro y Acero Monterrey, S.A. – Instalación de calderas

In 1903 an international consortium founded Latin America’s first steelworks in Monterrey, which went on to become one of the most important companies in Mexico before going bankrupt in 1986. Kahlo was commissioned to take photographs for the Fundidora from its first years in business until his last active year as a photographer in 1936. From a financial perspective, these commissions formed the core of his livelihood as a photographer. However, a number of the well over 100 photographs still preserved today undoubtedly also represent the pinnacle of Kahlo’s work as a photographic artist. These images are mainly stored in the Fundidora’s company archives. In the company’s early years, he produced a series of images documenting the various stages of the production process in the steelworks. Kahlo’s later commissions mainly involved documenting the construction of buildings using steel manufactured by Monterrey. This gave rise to a striking series of photographs between 1910 and 1936 depicting the standard method of construction at the time, which firstly involved erecting the steel skeleton of the building and then cladding it with stone or other materials. Quite a number of Kahlo’s most spectacular photos, which he took for the Fundidora up until the end of his career as a photographer in around 1936, are artistic compositions of these steel skeletons. As early as 1912, he produced a fascinating image of the completed steel skeleton of a building that was originally destined to become the parliament and today dominates the city skyline as a vast monument to the Mexican revolution.

The Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI) houses six prints of images depicting the manufacturing process taken shortly after the foundation of the company. As indicated by Kahlo’s caption and the state of the premises, the undated photo “Instalación de
“Fábrica de cerillos "La Central": Depart® de tren de cerillos.” (c. 1911)
“Calderas” (‘Installing the boiler’) was clearly taken while the facility was still under construction. The construction workers, including the child laborers, have been positioned rather casually by Kahlo’s standards along the side of the factory building, shovels in hand, almost all of them looking toward the camera. In later photos, Kahlo would arrange the workers on the construction sites in far more artificial constellations, almost making them blend into the architecture.

**Cía Fundidora de Fierro y Acero Monterey, S.A. – Convertidor Bessemer, soplando**

The IAI’s holdings also feature one of Kahlo’s most well-known photographs from the series on the *Fundidora*. According to the caption, it shows air being blown into a Bessemer converter. This heated up the iron in the converter to the temperature required to produce steel. By looking at the flame, the foreman would know whether the steel was ready to be poured out of the Bessemer. As was standard for Kahlo, he captioned the print with dry technical information and omitted to mention the feature that sets this picture apart from the others in the series: the figure of the foreman, who Kahlo has positioned so that the bulge of his stomach corresponds to the curve of the Bessemer converter. It was extremely unusual for Kahlo to give a person center stage in the foreground of a picture which was actually designed to illustrate a technical process. Whatever the reason for this shot, it demonstrates that he also had a sense of wit and irony, a character trait that was confirmed by accounts from people around him. The company liked the picture so much that it placed the image on the front page of its annual report to the shareholders in June 1910 (Franger/Huhle 2005: 215-233). This enables us to date the photograph back to 1910 at the latest, along with various other shots which were clearly taken under the same circumstances.

Indirectly, the *Fundidora* photographs in the IAI’s archives also tell us a certain amount about Kahlo’s working methods. The pictures have been numbered as well as captioned, as have similar photographs in the *Fundidora*’s archives. However, the numbers assigned do not match up. This would indicate that Kahlo compiled his pictures into series on several different occasions. The six pictures at the IAI belonged to a series that must have comprised at least 32 pictures (this is the largest number of photographs in any of the available series). It is not clear when and for whom the prints were made.

**Mexico’s cathedrals, D.F. – interior view**

In 1904, just a few years after he had embarked on his career as a photographer, Kahlo was awarded what was probably the largest contract in Mexico at that time. The government commissioned him to photograph all of the key national monuments to mark the centenary of Mexican independence in 1910. On the one hand, the assignment involved documenting all of Mexico’s important colonial churches; on the other, it aimed to depict the numerous magnificent buildings that had emerged during the Porfiriato, some of which were still under construction when Kahlo set off on his journey. In spite of his health problems, Kahlo spent the following years making numerous trips across the country in order to create this photographic inventory. Ultimately, the revolution thwarted the grand publication plans of Porfirio Díaz’s minister Limantour. However, this mammoth undertaking led to many of Kahlo’s best photographs, including the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, the general post office, various city palaces, and Chapultepec Castle and Park. Kahlo compiled several of these images into his own albums, which are viewed today as some of the most important artworks in his oeuvre.
Fundidora Monterrey [spelled Monterey by Kahlo], "instalación de calderas" 
(year unknown)
His long journeys through Mexico in search of colonial churches did, however, result in a publication many years later. From 1924 to 1927, the government published six large-format volumes featuring Kahlo’s photographs of churches, supplemented by watercolors by Dr. Atl (Atl/Benítez/Toussaint 1924-1927). The artistic qualities of his numerous images vary from picture to picture. There is a palpable tension between the responsibility of documenting the architecture and Kahlo’s desire to achieve an artistic composition, which he frequently resolved using very effective compromises. The six volumes published by Dr. Atl, however, in no way reflect Kahlo’s intentions or the scope of his photographic studies of the churches. Above all, they convey Atl’s own aesthetic vision and ideas about art history. He devotes an entire volume, for example, to church domes, yet only features the exterior shots that Kahlo often took from church roofs. Kahlo’s far more spectacular images from a photographic perspective, however, are his interior, high-angle shots of numerous domes, which demonstrate his feel for geometrical abstraction and elevate his art to new heights in the truest sense of the term.

Nearly all of the church photographs in the IAI’s collection are also part of the volumes put together by Dr. Atl. In technical terms, the quality of the prints is greatly inferior to many other copies that still exist today. Nevertheless, photographs such as the interior view of Mexico cathedral demonstrate a number of the qualities that make Kahlo’s images so distinctive. In this picture, Kahlo takes a highly original approach to the challenge of central perspective. In his architectural shots, Kahlo nearly always shifted the camera very slightly – and almost imperceptibly – out of the central perspective in order to soften the rigidity of this angle without undermining its impact on the depiction of space. In this photograph, it is also clear that the camera has shifted slightly to the right of the center of the aisle, looking toward the altar. However, the daylight casts a shadow of the gates into the aisle and thus also positions the camera at the center of a kind of secondary central perspective. This double perspective brings movement to the entire scene and imbues the austere subject with a unique dynamic, while still objectively documenting the building. These types of effects are certainly no coincidence, rather they bear testament to Kahlo’s skill as a photographer and his artistic aspirations even when working on commissions.

Relatively little research has been done on Kahlo’s oeuvre, in spite of his famous daughter and the broad recognition his photographic art has received today for its role in developing a modern approach to photography in Mexico, in contrast to the widespread romanticized portrayals of típicos. In 1993 Juan Coronel Rivera led the way with his research for the first major exhibition of Guillermo Kahlo’s photographs (Coronel Rivera 1993). In 2005 Franger/Huhle produced the first monograph on Kahlo featuring a biography supported by historical sources (Franger/Huhle 2005). His body of work, however, is scattered across many different locations. Although the Fondo Guillermo Kahlo at Mexico’s Fototeca Nacional cites a holding of 2,435 images, it has yet to be divided into themes and also contains numerous pictures that can merely be attributed to Kahlo. The IAI’s relatively small, but thematically indexed collection comprises 33 of Kahlo’s images. Six photographs can be attributed to the series “Fundidora de Fierro y Acero de Monterrey S.A.,” four to the series “Fábrica de Cerillos la Central,” and six to the series “Tabacalera Mexicana”. The collection also features 17 interior and exterior shots of churches, some of which were published in “Iglesias de México” (Atl/Benítez/Toussaint 1924). The factory shots and several images of churches were acquired by Hermann Hagen in 1926 in Mexico. Esperanza Velázquez Bringas donated 13 of the church photos to the IAI in 1932. Other larger and smaller private and company archives also house important
Fundidora Monterrey [spelled Monterey by Kahlo], “Convertidor Bessemer, soplando” (c. 1910)
holdings which have yet to be examined. While there is no doubt that Kahlo was first and foremost an industrial and architectural photographer, his images frequently feature new and unexpected subjects, illustrating that his body of work is far more diverse than often thought.

1 E.g. in El Mundo Ilustrado, 24 February 1901.

2 See the images in Franger/Huhle’s monograph 2005, p. 170. It also provides more detailed information on the Tabacalera Mexicana.

3 Roberto Ceamanos Llorens (2001-2002) describes this production method in great detail using the example of a Spanish match factory from 1915, i.e. around the same period.

4 This information can be found on the website of the company, which today operates under the name of Compañía Cerillera La Central: <http://www.lacentral.com.mx/index.php/nosotros/historia-de-la-central/> (accessed on 25 February 2014).

5 Kahlo uses this spelling throughout.

6 After the plant went bankrupt, the facility was transferred to a cultural foundation, the Fideicomiso Parque Fundidora, which also manages the archive.

7 The six volumes are available in the IAI’s library. In 1979 Banco de México issued a reprint.


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Interior of a church in Mexico (between 1904 and 1910)