

The Frida Kahlo Museum



At the beginning of the century, in Coyoacán—one of Mexico City's most beautiful and peaceful neighborhoods—Guillermo Kahlo built the house in which the story of one of the most interesting and controversial personalities of Mexican culture would unfold. It was there that Frida Kahlo was born on July 7, 1907. Her story—forty-four years of life—ends, prematurely and painfully, in the same place that it begins.

At fifteen she suffered an accident when a bus that was taking her to school collided with a streetcar. The handrail went through her, leaving serious consequences for the rest of her life. Triple fracture of the pelvis and severe damage to the spine condemned her to immobility and long years of pain. Her biographers speak of more than twenty operations performed on the self-taught painter, corsets that confined her to bed, barely allowing the most indispensable movement and, in the end, the amputation of one leg, two years before her death.

All this might lead one to view Frida's as a life full of limitations. Yet thanks to her vigorous spirit and indomitable character, she achieved her greatest aspirations—aspirations which took her to the margins of traditional values and morals. She lived as she wished, dressed as she wished, loved whom she wished, and there was practically nothing nor nobody that could keep her from expressing her feelings and passions in a way that, while others considered it extravagant, for her was full of meaning.

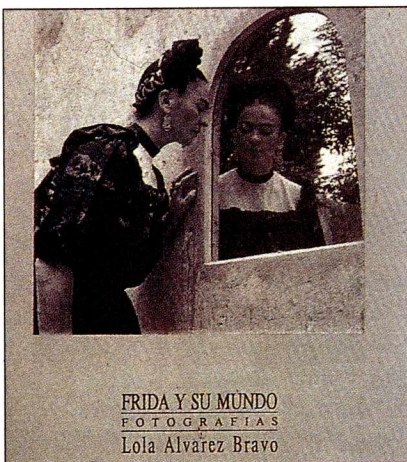


Stairwell with retablos.



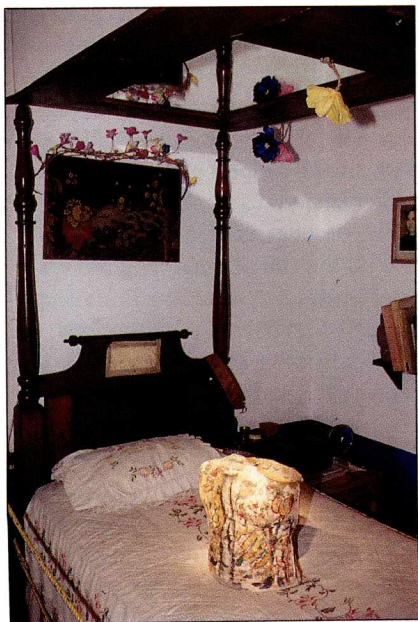
In the kitchen, Frida's and Diego's names are printed on tiny clay jugs.

Frida Kahlo's photo by Lola Alvarez Bravo.



Photos of "The Central Post Office" (issue # 28) were also taken by Arturo Piera. (Editor's note.)

Frida's bed.



Frida said: "Why do I need feet when I have wings to fly with?"





Entrance of the "Blue House."

While still very young she joined the Mexican Communist Party. In 1929 she married Diego Rivera, one of the greatest Mexican muralists, who had already gained international prestige.

Diego's unending fondness for women, combined with the painter's long romance with Cristina, Frida's favorite sister, caused the couple serious crises, which resulted in frequent separations. The most radical of these was in 1940 and led to divorce. Despite these episodes, their emotional dependence was so strong that on December 8th of the same year they were remarried.

It was then that they moved into the house in Coyoacán where Frida had spent her childhood with her parents and sisters. This house would eventually be converted into one of Mexico City's most charming museums.

The museum house

Shortly after Frida's death, the poet Carlos Pellicer was commissioned to make the Coyoacán house into a museum, in honor of one of Mexico's greatest women and artists.

While Pellicer succeeded in maintaining Frida's things where

they had been while she was alive, they were modified for the purpose of visibility. Closets, wardrobes and file cabinets exchanged their heavy wooden doors for glass ones so that visitors could see what was once part of an intimate domain. Small glass cases were designed in which visitors could see the contents of letters and messages. In the kitchen and dining room the clay pots, china and vases remain in their original places.

On entering the house visitors can see that the structure of the "Blue House" —so called because of the intense blue of its walls— is the same as that of the city's typical old houses: a central U-shaped patio surrounded by rooms.

During the most difficult stage of her illness, when she was close to death, Frida adapted this patio so that she could move more freely in her wheelchair. A ramp runs next to the stairs that lead to the first room of the museum, making it easy to imagine Frida descending in her wheelchair. The ironwork of the windows between the rooms and the patio is painted green, as it was when the house was lived in.

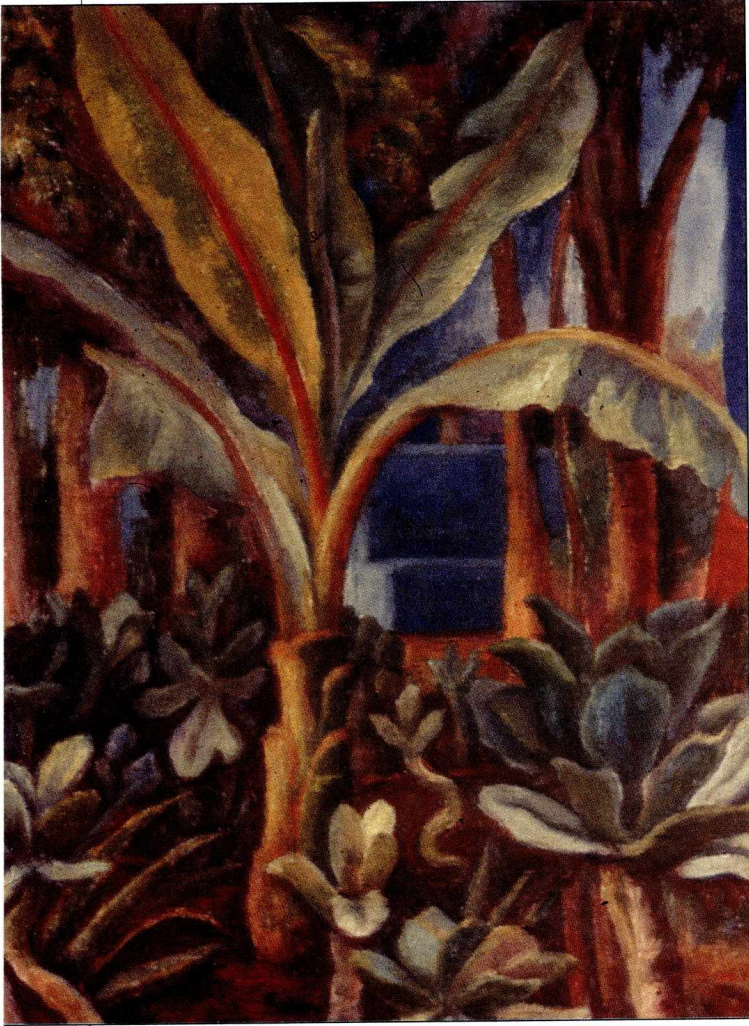
In the first room of the museum, which was the Kahlo family's living room and later Frida's first studio in the house, one can observe some of the painter's works. Not all are finished, but the "Portrait of Don Guillermo Kahlo" and "My Grandparents, My Parents and I" stand out, as do some drawings copied from Frida's diary, such as "Why Do I Need Feet When I Have Wings to Fly With?"

In the next room, which once functioned as a library, we are amazed at the collection of Olmec, Mixtec and Mayan pieces: carved jade and obsidian figures, earrings, necklaces, breastplates, and Oaxacan filigree jewelry. Many were part of Frida's daily attire.

In this same room we come across copies of passages from her diary, messages and fond notes that Diego and Frida sent each other. The Tehuana dresses that Frida wore are majestically displayed inside a large glass case. In the kitchen and dining room, the visitor is overwhelmed by the intensity of colors and the variety of shapes that characterize objects destined for domestic use. A particularly Mexican flamboyance appears here as in no other part of the house. The simplicity and austerity of the furniture, painted in lemon yellow, highlight the incredible variety of utensils and objects: casseroles, jugs, clay pots in every size; candelabras with animal shapes; pitchers, glasses and crystal vases of blown glass in different tones of blue.

At the end of the dining room a door leads us to what was Frida and Diego's first bedroom. In the final days before her death they slept separately and this was Diego's room. His overalls and traditional sombrero hang on a hat rack, as if they were about to be used.

In the stairwell beyond the dining room visitors can admire one of the museum's most impressive collections. *Retablos*¹ with a

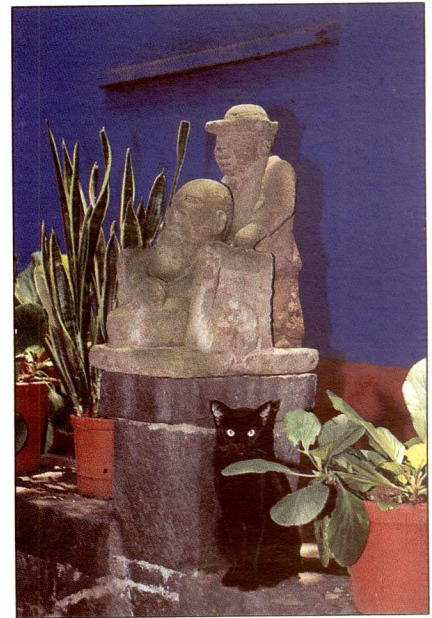


IIE/UNAM.

Diego Rivera, Frida's Garden, oil on masonite, 1944.



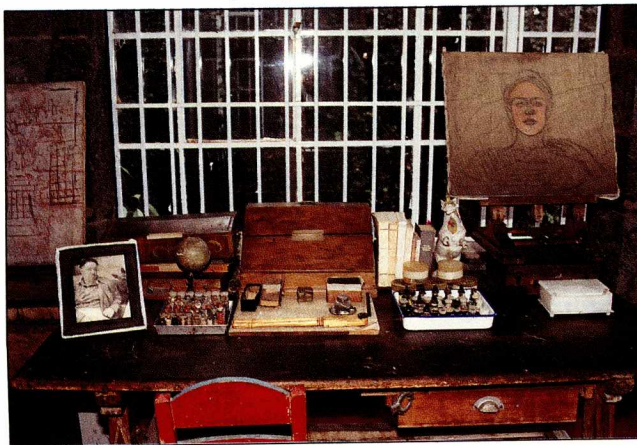
The museum's garden.



The visitor is overwhelmed by the intensity of colors.

Part of the collection of Olmec, Mixtec and Mayan pieces.

One can observe some of the painter's works.





Vestibule with large “Judases” and natural stone mosaic-decorated ceiling.

remarkable variety of requests hang on the walls, covering two of them completely. Once again, “Mexicanness”—in this case connected to a religiosity deeply rooted in the lower classes—is part of the surroundings Frida created tenaciously throughout her life.

The stairway leads to the newer part of the house, built by Diego around 1940. At the top is a long room in the form of an “L” profusely illuminated by three enormous windows, through which one can see the old ash trees in the garden; this was Frida’s studio. The objects are placed as if she were still living. In the center, on a large worktable, we see brushes and spatulas; further on, the wheelchair, an easel, and on a large

wall her books, imprisoned in large glass cases.

At the end of the studio, on the right, in a small space that for many years was the entrance hall, we come upon the bed from which, after having lost a leg, Frida could see the garden. The painting of a dead child with a bunch of flowers on its abdomen—Frida’s work—guards the head of the bed. From the opposite side we find images of Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, Marx and Mao.

We enter the large rectangular room that was Frida’s previous bedroom. The canopied bed is adorned with figures of death made of glue and paper, small “Judases” and a neat collection of dried butterflies hanging from the ceiling. An infinite collection of diminutive objects—sugar skulls, carnival toys, little boxes, paper

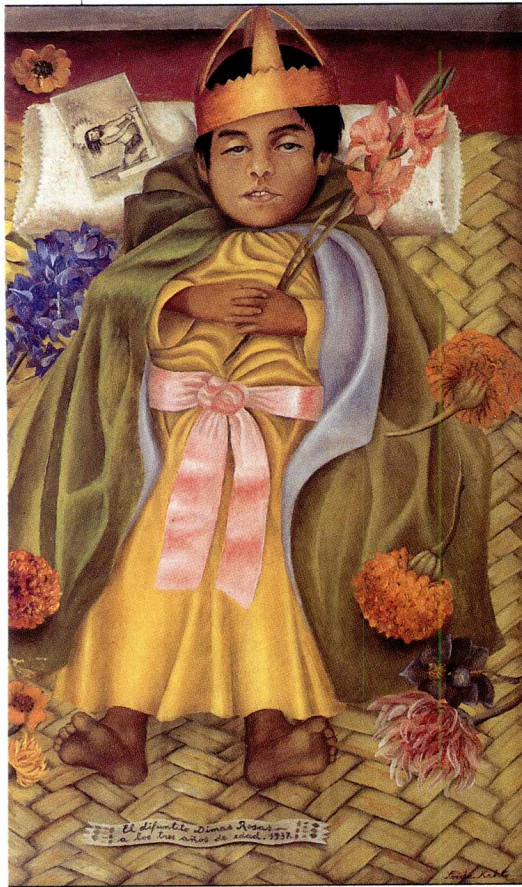
flowers and masks—look at us from inside several glass cases.

We descend to the garden, finding some large “Judases” and enormous cardboard heads adorning the vestibule. The ceiling is decorated with a natural stone mosaic of the Communist hammer and sickle as well as a comet. Juan O’Gorman acknowledged that this mosaic was an important antecedent for the murals he created using this technique in the central library at the National University campus.

Leaving the vestibule, on the upper part of the walls we see inlaid clay pots; a high wall leading to the roof has enormous sea shells embedded in the stones.

At the end of the garden, the vision of a pyramid brings us back to other ages and places. It is a stepped pyramid, on which Diego placed some

¹ Popular paintings made to give thanks to God or the Virgin for some favor.



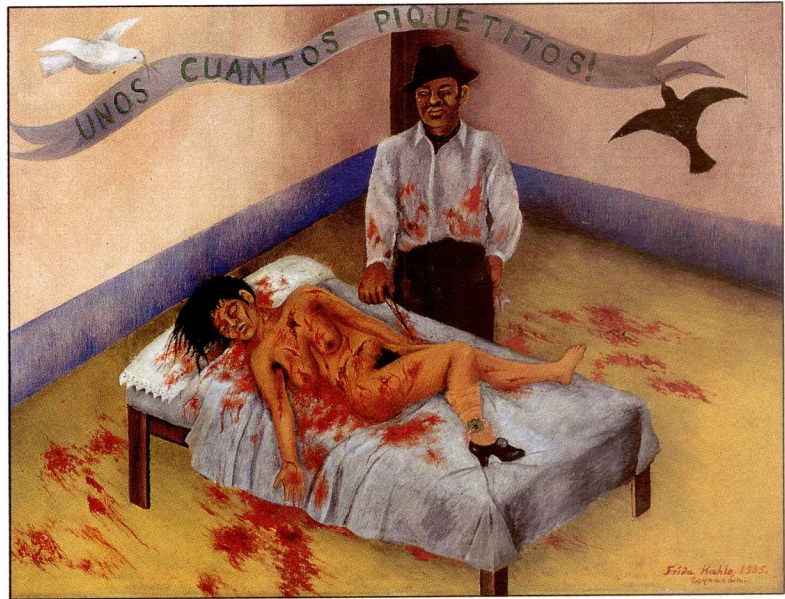
The Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection.

The Deceased Dimas Rosas (at 3 years of age), oil on masonite, 1937.



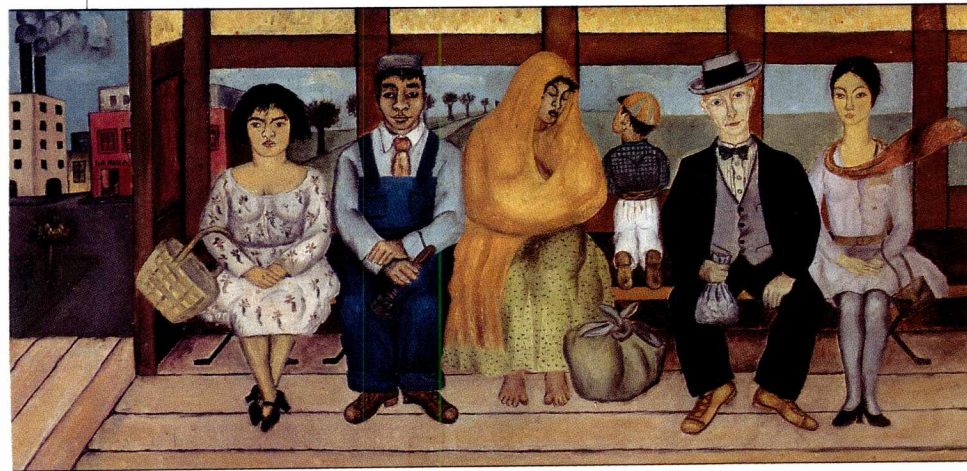
Henry Ford Hospital, oil on lamina, 1932.

The Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection.



The Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection.

A Few Pricks, oil on lamina, 1935.



The Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection.

The Bus, oil on canvas, 1929.

of the figures from his collection of archeological pieces, which numbered around 55,000.

Frida's personality

In order to learn more about the artist we interviewed Diego's daughter, Guadalupe Rivera Marín.

- What can you tell us about Frida's personality?
- Frida was a very active person, very enthusiastic, with a very broad

social life. She liked to share a few drinks with her friends in places with mariachi bands, go to the movies and the theater. She was very cheerful. In reality she had nothing to do with the current image people have of her. Yes, there was a certain extent of neurosis, which she handled very well. She was not explosive; she didn't have violent outbursts or hysterical attacks. All this neurosis—which got worse in the final years of

her life when they amputated her leg—she managed to channel into her painting.

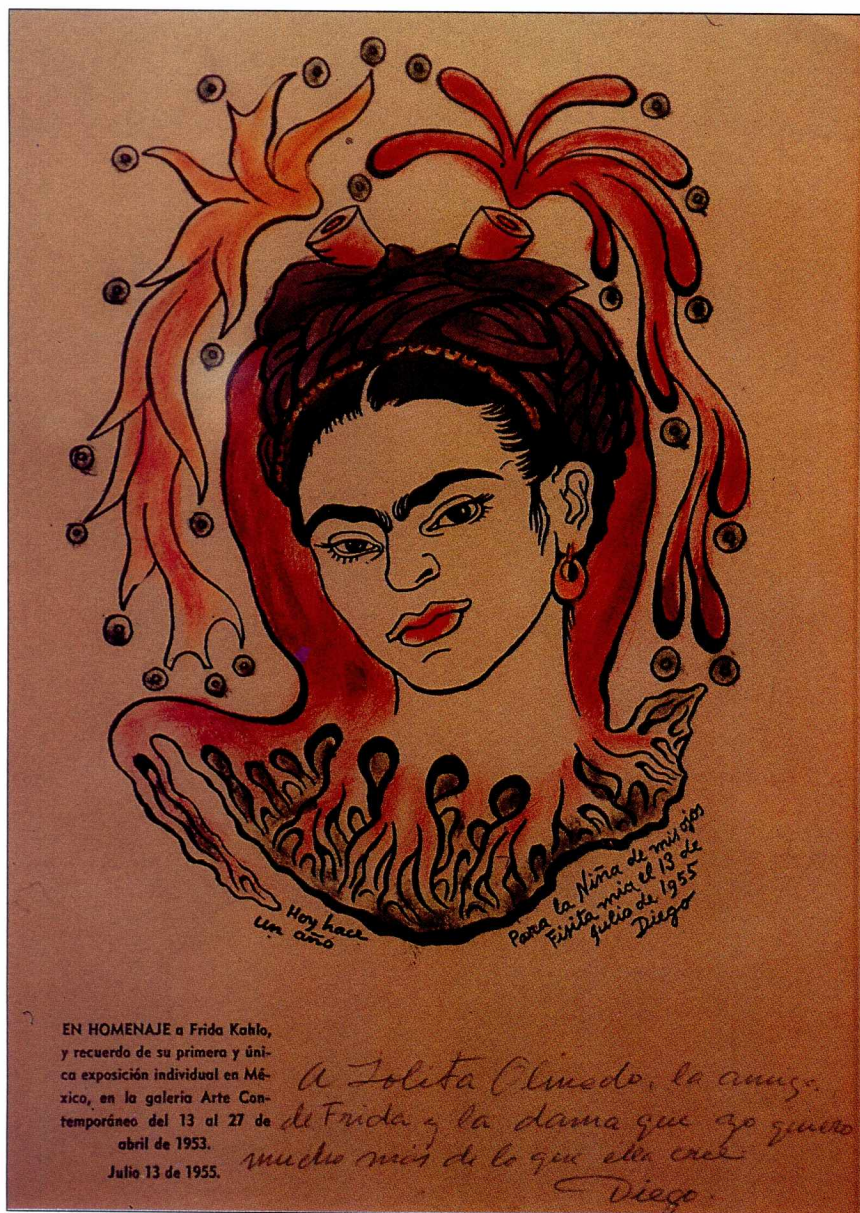
- What else can you tell us about her final years?
- When they amputated her leg she began to fall apart. Even though she used a prosthetic leg and later began to walk again, she never was able to integrate herself into life as she had before. She could never overcome this mutilation of her body; she let herself go more and more, until she finally died.
- Where did this neurotic tendency come from?

■ I think she had this illness from the time she was very young. Even then her way of life caused a scandal in Coyoacán. None of the little girls rode bicycles or skated, but she did. She was very rebellious. She went to school by herself. She took the streetcar to go all the way to Mexico City, which was a long ride in those days. For the people of Coyoacán, her behavior seemed somewhat antisocial. I think she must have inherited something from her father's epilepsy, something like a deformation of her character.

● About the life of Frida and Diego, much has been written, a myth has been created. What do you think about this?

■ The Frida phenomenon was artificially created. During the retrospective of Diego Rivera's work in Berlin in 1986, a friend from Berlin told me that German women took Frida as a model for their own liberation, because she was a painter with German roots, a very liberated woman for her times; because her suffering gave her a special halo, and because her lesbianism was another example of her liberation. I attribute all this to the gay movement's need to raise an international banner. In reality she was bisexual, because she had relationships with my father and with other men.

● Much has been said about the relationship between Frida and Diego.



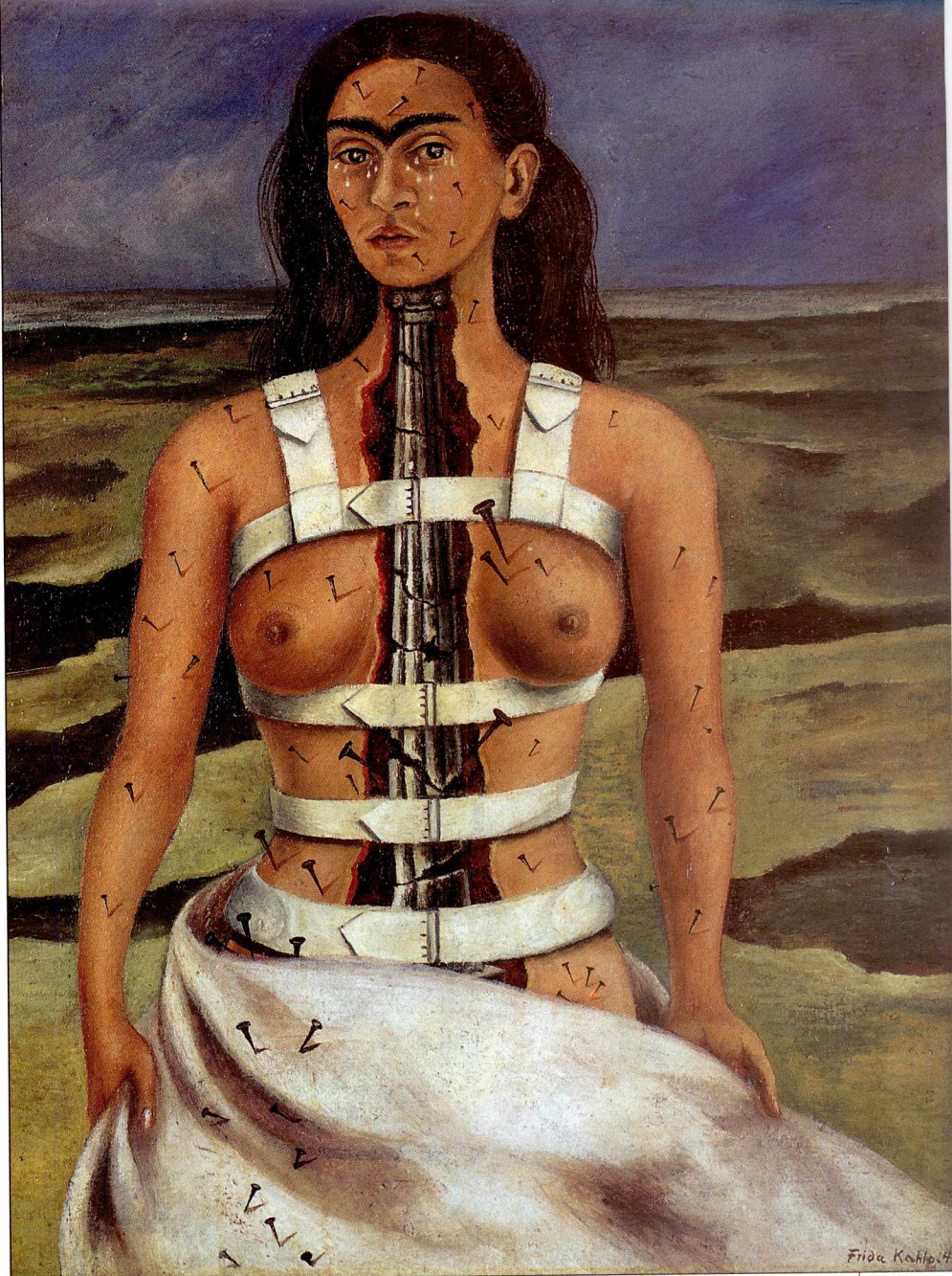
Diego Rivera, Portrait of Frida Kahlo, offset of an engraving, 1955.

However, as someone who lived with them for a short time and had a relationship with both of them, could you add anything new?

■ It was a complex relationship, because neither handled married life as an adult, with adult responsibility. In a psychological sense, they did not take responsibility with each other. They spoke of a very strong love, but it was a pretty infantile relationship; it wasn't the emotional giving of a couple that lovingly develops a sensual, sexual, passionate life. Even though they did have a sexual relationship, it was more a game of appearances between them —not because they cared about others' opinions, since each of them lived their own passions.

● During my tour of the museum I was wondering how similar Frida and Diego were in their taste for Mexican things.

■ Frida did not have this taste originally. It was my father who instilled it in her. Frida and her family led a very traditional kind of life. She studied in the German school and dressed like a German, with plaid skirts, blouse and sailor hat. Her family had a strong European influence, but Frida changed due to her relationship with my father. All this Mexican influence in Frida's painting has to do



The Broken Column, oil on masonite, 1944 (The Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection).

Death mask of Diego Rivera.



with Diego. He asked her to dress like a Tehuana, and bought her clothing from Tehuantepec. Frida's personality, in this sense, is a product of the symbiosis with Diego, absolutely.

Nevertheless, the Frida Kahlo Museum would not exist if this house had not been inhabited by Frida with all the power of her spirit and personality ✕

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Staff Writer.

Photos by Arturo Piera.