

Frida Kahlo & Ignacio Aguirre
Cartas de una pasión

(Letters of a Passion)

Luis Mario Schneider (preface)

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Glypho, Taller de Gráfica, S.C.

(pre-press production)

Editorial Trabuco y Clavel

Mexico City, 1994, 64 pp.

Much has been written about Frida Kahlo. Nevertheless, this volume of previously unpublished letters, in her own hand, helps reveal another of her facets. For Frida-followers this book is a new delight.

Ignacio Aguirre was a novelist and engraver from Jalisco. From 1915 (when he was only 15 years old) to 1917 he fought against Pancho Villa as a member of the forces commanded by Carranza. In 1920 he took up arms again, in support of General Alvaro Obregón. From 1921 to 1929 he worked in the Secretariat of Communications and the Office of the President of the Republic.

At the same time he devoted himself to art. He was one of the founders of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists in 1933 and the People's Graphic Workshop in 1937. In 1940 he won first prize in the Latin American Engraving Exhibit at the World Fair in New York, a city where he put on five exhibitions. He also showed his work in Washington in 1942.

He was a friend of the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, for whom he also posed as a model. A photo of him was even used for the cover of the catalogue for the photography exhibition held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1987.

He painted several murals, and the one he did in Mexico City for the Military Aviation Library—destroyed when the building was demolished—bore witness to his love affair with Frida Kahlo.

Their liaisons were held at Puente de Alvarado No. 45, where Aguirre

lived and where Frida addressed most of her letters (which were always stamped "For immediate delivery"), as well as in the aviation library or the home of very close friends.

Unfortunately none of Aguirre's letters have been found, although from one of Frida's we deduce that he did write her:

(August 19, 1935)

*I kept your letter like a treasure
 —Your voice gave me the purest
 joy—I didn't know what to do—
 and I sat down to write this letter
 which will be unable to tell you,
 with my words, everything I
 would like to say—everything you
 deserve for giving me so much!—
 your beauty—your hands—you.
 I wish I could be so pretty for you!
 I wish I could give you all that
 which you have never had, and
 even so you wouldn't know how
 wonderful it is to be able to love
 you. I will wait all the minutes
 until I can see you. Wait for me at
 six fifteen on Wednesday—below,
 in the big hallway of your house,
 because I think that's easiest—
 Call me tomorrow at six in the
 afternoon; I just want to hear
 your voice, even if only for a
 moment. If you call me, I will
 gather many little flowers for you
 and I will bring them to you on
 Wednesday, but if you don't call
 me I will bring them to you
 anyway—so many that they could
 make a garden on your chest—
 the color of humid earth.
 The frogs are still singing for us
 —and our river is waiting—the
 chaste town is looking at the
 Great Bear constellation—and as
 for me—I love you.*

While Ignacio Aguirre's letters to Frida Kahlo have not been found, the testimony of his love and admiration remains in the lecture he gave on her in 1986, four years before his death:

*... Frida is the event of each day,
 with birds and flowers, forget-me-nots,
 pelicans, marigolds, the moisture of the
 garden and the aroma of a burning*

*comal [traditional Mexican griddle]....
 One day (and I don't want to brag about
 the thousands and thousands of
 anecdotes I know about Frida) I was
 painting a mural for the Military
 Aviation Library, which was then
 located on Balbuena Street. Frida was
 helping me... today it's nothing but dust,
 a memory amidst the nostalgia of what I
 am..... When Diego Rivera had to go to
 New York to talk with Rockefeller about
 the mural he did, which was later
 destroyed for reasons all of you know,
 Frida went with him. Scandalously
 beautiful Frida... I haven't seen, heard
 or read anything about Frida Kahlo. I
 knew her so well, I was so close to her in
 her artistic work, her struggles and her
 life, that I wouldn't want to change or
 upset the image I have retained of her. I
 simply remain with the Frida I know,
 who I looked at and listened to for
 many years.*

Luis Mario Schneider's preface to *Frida Kahlo & Ignacio Aguirre, Cartas de una pasión* provides the historical context of this love affair and mentions the factors that may have begun and ended it. The book also includes Kahlo's manuscript letters, together with a typescript version of each one; the images which María Esther Velázquez Piña Aguirre gave the publishers, together with the letters; and the full text of the lecture Ignacio Aguirre gave on his beloved Frida.

Marybel Toro Gayol.
 Managing Editor.

**Frida Kahlo: Images
 and Icons**

Frida Kahlo

Sarah Lowe

Universe Publishing

New York: 1991, 128 pp.

Frida Kahlo: The Camera Seduced

Elena Poniatowska and Carla
 Stellweg (essays)

Chatto & Windus Ltd.

London: 1992, 125 pp.

Frida Kahlo continues to occupy the limelight as a choice subject for journalists, curators and academics. Sarah Lowe¹ looks at Frida from an art historian's perspective. Her book includes a short introduction, a brief biographical overview, a chronology and two main chapters: 1) The Self-Portraits and 2) Surrealism, "Primitivism" and the Still-Life Tradition.

The book is designed carefully, with color plates accompanying the text describing a particular work of art. In addition to beautiful color plates of Kahlo's paintings, there are also illustrations of related figures of codices, "ex votos" and other images, which the author uses to describe Frida's work.

Self-portraits

Lowe presents a conscientious analysis of each of the plates included in the book, although she does not explain her rationale for including or excluding work. Her detailed descriptions educate the reader's eyes to notice details. The narrative flows from the identification of a particular technique to the names of artists who have done similar work in other periods of history. The dates and artists mentioned span centuries and continents.

There is a concerted effort to interpret Frida's work and draw conclusions relating to her relationship with Diego Rivera, whom she married twice, and the medical problems she endured.

Surrealism, "Primitivism" and the Still-Life Tradition

Sarah Lowe's skill as an art historian is evident in this discourse on Frida

and Surrealism. She weaves in and out of "isms," focusing on elements which could place Frida into a tidy classification. Yet Kahlo's still-lives don't classify easily. Lowe is forced to conclude that Frida's work reflects her *mexicanidad*, that is her identity as part of the Mexican Renaissance of the 1920's and 30's.

Fruit, flowers and vegetables reminiscent of vendors' arrangements in Mexican open-air markets are redefined in terms of Surrealist concepts and feminist convictions. Odorless camelias become "sweet smelling" (p. 107), as if they were gardenias. In the description of "Unos cuantos piquetitos" (A Few Little Stab Wounds), a painting reminiscent of a José Guadalupe Posada engraving about a crime, Lowe inserts her own feminism:

Unlike surrealist art, which glamorized misogyny and in whose visual images women are portrayed with a stylized, sanitized elegance, Kahlo's painting serves as an explicit reminder of the concrete reality of daily violence in women's lives (p. 86).

The extensive analysis accomplishes the author's goal of placing Kahlo within the framework of art history, although the chapter might well have been called "Why Frida Kahlo Was/Wasn't a Surrealist." The material on "still-lives" goes beyond the careful classification of the self-portraits. Lowe asserts interpretations repeatedly, even assuming —when describing the Detroit painting *Store Window*, which includes a portrait of George Washington— that "It must have amused her [Frida] to think of this aristocratic-looking man as America's great revolutionary hero."

Images

The well-known Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska provides a

refreshing contrast to Sarah Lowe's position as a U.S.-trained art historian. Her essay is written as if Frida were the one expressing who she is and what she feels. Having personally known Kahlo, I have finally come across a text that is more like the Frida I knew. The text flows, chock full of irreverence and humor, without making light of the painful reality of the artist's body. Poniatowska alludes (on p. 20) to the collection of photographs presented in the book:

Look at my face, look at my eyes, much is written there, much is hidden from view. My real self is in my painting. I hate pity.

Carla Stellweg complements Poniatowska's text and Kahlo's images with a biographical essay, again including interpretations. She writes:

At the age of five, in a photograph taken by her father, Frida strikes a seductive pose, resting her round face with its dimpled chin on her chubby arm. Mischievously she looks out at the photographer.

The same image could project a defiant or bored Frida, depending on the conclusions one wants to draw about her.

The subjective voice

There is an old Mexican saying: "Nothing is true and nothing false. It all depends on the color of the lens one looks through." Lowe looks at Frida through the lens of a non-Mexican feminist art historian. Poniatowska, a Mexican journalist and novelist, presents her interpretations by speaking out for Frida. Carla Stellweg presents her interpretations as a foreign art curator and journalist who lived in Mexico for many years.

Stellweg invites the viewer to "penetrate the mask [Kahlo] consciously designed, and to be

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emotionally moved by the ways in which she shifted and changed to create her persona."²

There are many wonderful photographs of Frida taken by professionals, novices, friends and family members, among them Ansel Adams, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Lucienne Bloch, Imogen Cunningham, Hector García, Nickolas Muray, Bernard G. Silberstein and Edward Weston. Stellweg's essay discusses the role of each photographer in Frida's life and singles out Lucienne Bloch:

Kahlo and Bloch enjoyed each other's company; they went to the movies, drew together, cracked jokes, and sang off-color Mexican songs. Bloch made a unique series of photographs of Kahlo showing off, having fun, mimicking for the camera expressing the fun-loving daredevil side she usually hid from photographers.³

Who is Lucienne Bloch? The captions document the backgrounds of most of the photographers, but not Bloch, who is mentioned but not identified as an artist who created many fresco murals of her own, together with her husband Stephen Dimitroff. They learned the technique working with Diego Rivera as assistants, apprentices and friends. Bloch's images are outstanding: Frida is alive, a real person, not an enigmatic, mysterious myth!

More than twenty-five books and papers have been written about the "mythological Frida" since Hayden Herrera's biography was published ten years ago—most of them by women. If Frida were alive today, I suspect, she would poke fun at the growing bibliography and plethora of

interpretations. She would probably go out of her way to become more outrageously cryptic for "interpreting scholars and journalists." Or she might get bored with it all as she did with the monumental "old man," Trotsky.

Susannah Glusker

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Frida's Fiestas. Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo

Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle
Ignacio Urquiza (photography)
Spanish edition, Mexico City: Promexa, 1994, 223 pp.
(English version, New York: Pavilion Books Limited, 1994, 224 pp.)

Each time we open the trunk of memories of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera we find a reason not only to talk about them but to put out a new book about them. This time Diego's daughter Guadalupe Rivera joins with Marie-Pierre Colle to show us the salt and pepper in these two artists' lives: the gastronomy and the parties.

Without being a novel, *Frida's Fiestas* maintains an intimate link between characters and recipes. Rather than a simple book about the couple's favorite dishes, this volume shows some of the ways in which Frida expressed her love for all things Mexican, for Diego, for her friends and—as she always said—for life in general.

Guadalupe Rivera lived with the couple and as a result, this book describes a loving and enthusiastic Frida who was generous with her support, even organizing parties so her university friends could meet the famous painter of the

Revolution and his wife, painter of scandalous canvases.

The book also reveals little-known anecdotes, such as the relation between Frida and Diego's first wife, Guadalupe Marin (mother of Guadalupe Rivera), who prepared the food for her ex-husband's wedding, since she knew which were the favorite dishes of the demanding Diego. The wedding ended with a scandal *a la mexicana*.

Famous personages passed through the dining room of the "Blue House" more than once. Tina Modotti, Juan O'Gorman and Trotsky, among many others, enjoyed the famous *chiles rellenos*, *chiles en nogada*, *pozoles*, *enchiladas*, *pulques* and *tequilas*. The cause for celebration mattered little—it could be anything from a political meeting to the Day of the Dead.

The Riveras' lives were dedicated to reviving Mexican traditions, and they carried this out in many ways as part of their daily lives, from their way of dressing to how they celebrated and, above all, what they ate.

In a time when it was fashionable for women to wear short hairstyles, with heavily made-up eyelids and mouths and straight knee-length dresses, Frida Kahlo deliberately broke away with her original way of dressing, using regional outfits from the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz as well as the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Dressed in this special way, she made the rounds of the flower and fruit stands in the Coyoacán market several times a week.

Frida's Fiesta was printed in August, the month the book begins with a listing of the special dates the Riveras celebrated throughout the year, each with its own menu and recipes and a short story for dessert.

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² Poniatowska and Stellweg, page 118.

³ *Ibid.*, page 112.