

Frida

The First Hundred Years

Roxana Velásquez Martínez del Campo*

This year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Frida Kahlo's birth. Commemorations have proliferated, not only in Mexico, her homeland, but around the world: in the United States, Cuba, Russia, Argentina and several countries in the European Union. *Voices of Mexico* joins this homage with a brief sampling of her work exhibited in Mexico City's Fine Arts Palace. This was the largest exhibition ever mounted of her work, photographs and letters, many of which are from private collections and were displayed publicly for the first time.

We have also added a brief description of the exhibit "Treasures of the Blue House: Frida and Diego," shown at Frida's house in Coyoacán, where she spent her childhood, lived for a time with Diego Rivera and died in 1954.

INTRODUCTION

Frida Kahlo's personality stands out in Mexico's cultural panorama in the first half of the twentieth century, whose art was dominated by revolutionary nationalism. She created a unique, powerfully expressive body of work that has left no viewer indifferent. Kahlo's painting impressed Breton, Kandinsky and Picasso alike, and with the passage of time, it has become a symbol of freedom for women throughout the world. Thousands of people go to her exhibits, wherever they are held, and her work is the most sought-after in the Latin American art market. Today, Frida is an icon of universal culture, with all the commercial implications this inevitably brings with it. However, her work undeniably expresses a profound poetic, pictorial truth emerging from a constant reflection about her self, always capable of showing an authenticity filtered only by the fire of her imagination. Aware that her infirmity made her different from others, she turned adversity into the main driving force behind her creative process and the impetus of a vitality in which sensuality, Eros and humor occupied a place of privilege.

THE EXHIBIT

Frida Kahlo Calderón was born in Coyoacán, July 6, 1907, although for two reasons she liked to say she had been born in 1910: that was the year the Mexican Revolution

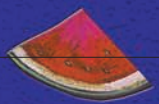
* Director of the Fine Arts Palace Museum.

Frida Kahlo's work is reproduced by permission of Banco de México.

D.R. © 2007 Banco de México, "Fiduciario" en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Av. Cinco de Mayo núm. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F.



The Two Fridas, 172 x 172 cm, 1939 (oil on canvas). Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art Collection, Conaculta-INBA.



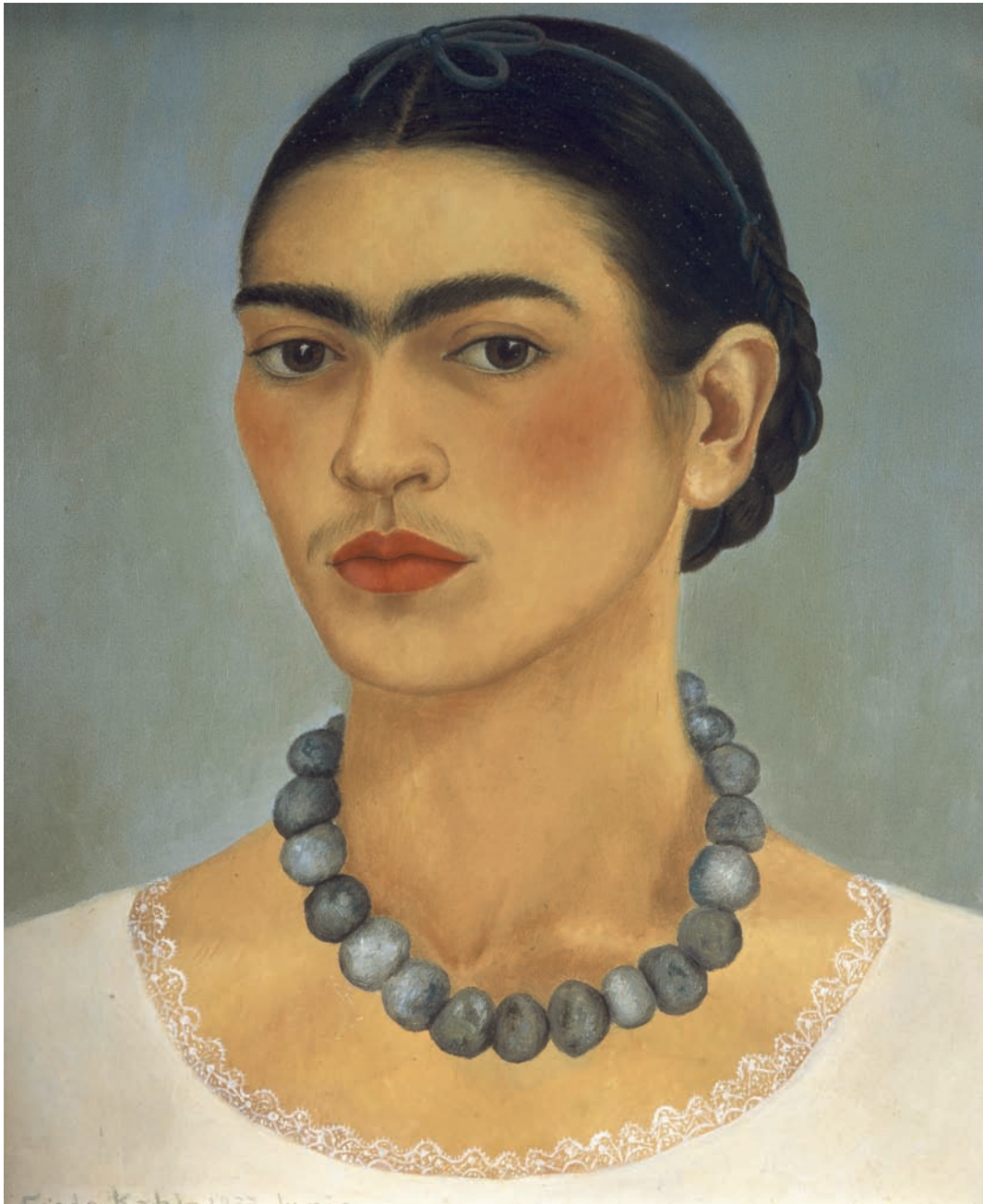
began, and for reasons of feminine vanity, which she undoubtedly had her share of. In honor of her centennial, the National Council for Culture and the Arts organized the “Homage to Frida Kahlo Exhibition (1907-2007)” in the Fine Arts Palace Museum, through the good offices of the National Fine Arts Institute. This undertaking’s importance and complexity required bringing together a Curatorial Committee made up of Juan Rafael Coronel Rivera, Salomón Grimberg, Cristina Kahlo and Américo Sánchez.

The exhibit’s purpose was to present different aspects of Kahlo’s work: paintings, sketches, watercolors and lithographs showing her formal creativity and the different symbolic references underpinning her visual language. More than 50 of Frida’s original letters were also included, as well as a virtual show of her Diary —the original is in the Frida Kahlo House Museum and cannot legally be permitted to leave the premises— an autobiographical and pictorial document considered one of her main works. More than a hundred personal photographs and documents were also gathered to situate her artistic endeavors in their historical, social, political and biographical context.

A visit to the exhibition began with *Portrait of Luther Burbank*, which brings the viewer into the symbolic world, approaching the sources from which Kahlo drank to create her work. A careful analysis of her pictorial or mythological references shows that Frida was a woman with a solid literary and visual artistic background. This portrait is one of the few cases in which we have sketches and documents allowing us to follow the artist’s entire creative process: from the first sketch in which she contextualizes the original idea, to the second, more detailed study exhibiting an advanced version of the development of the canvas’s visual and ideological subject matter, to the finished work.

Two rooms were dedicated to painting. Sixty-four oil paintings showed us the different genres Frida worked in: self-portraits, portraits, still lifes, allegories and one urban scene. *The Two Fridas*, painted in 1939, her famous double self-portrait, evidence of her split personality, was the central axis of the exhibit’s museology. Her paternal heritage (conservative, nineteenth-century and European) is represented by the white-clad figure on the right side of the canvas; while the Frida dressed as a Tehuana personifies her internal break sparked by meeting Diego Rivera in 1929 and intensified by her divorce from him, all of which led her to paint herself twice on the same canvas. The whole is made up of portraits of a vast array of key figures in the cultural world, society and the artist’s family, plus the self-portraits, the central nucleus of her production. Through introspection-made-painting, Frida showed the depths of her being, simultaneously suffering and alive, with a psychological intensity only comparable to the force of her visual expressiveness. The sensual, erotic facet of her genius is expressed in her still lifes.





Self-portrait with Necklace, 35 x 29 cm, 1933 (oil on metal), Jacques and Natasha Gelman Mexican and Contemporary Art Collection. Courtesy of the Vergell Foundation; Muros; Costco/Comercial Mexicana.



Courtesy of the Fine Arts Palace Museum.
Photograph by Gustavo A. García

I would like to be able to do whatever I feel like behind the curtain of “madness.” So, I would arrange flowers; I would paint pain, love and tenderness all day. I would laugh my head off at other people’s stupidity and everyone would say, “Poor thing! She’s crazy!” (Above all I would laugh at my own stupidity.) I would construct my world that, as long as I lived, would jibe with all the worlds. The day or the hour and the minute I lived would be my own and everyone else’s.

FRIDA KAHLO'S DIARY



The Suicide of Dorothy Hale, 50 x 40.6 cm, 1938-1939 (oil on masonite), Phoenix Art Museum Collection.



Courtesy of the Fine Arts Palace Museum.
 Photograph by Gustavo A. García



Another room showed her work on paper: 46 pencil and ink drawings, plus engravings and 11 watercolors. The sketches show Frida's technical ability, as well as the first creative moment of some of her best-known works. This room is completed with five copies of the only two graphic illustrations that she did: *Two Women* (1925) and *The Miscarriage* (1932).



A script detailing Frida's ideological development and political activism explains the historical, political and social environment in post-revolutionary Mexico in which she and Diego played an important role. A wide array of documents, newspapers, photographs, previously unpublished texts and unique objects (like the plaster corset, painted by the artist herself) show the different directions she took throughout her life: her Catholic upbringing, present until the first years after her 1925 accident; her belonging to a group called "The Cachuchas"; her emotional, rather than ideological closeness to Trotsky; and her adherence to Stalinism, the prevailing doctrine in the Mexican Communist Party (PCM).

In addition to being biographical and literary testimony of the first water, 51 letters revealed how important Asian calligraphy was to Frida. Using her own idea of "words that fly," her letters were hung in the air for the public to read and walk among. This concept was intended to emphasize the aesthetics of their calligraphy, which is why a few illustrated letters were also reproduced.



Two rooms were taken up by 100 photographs by different people like Lola and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Nickolas Muray, Leo Matiz, Edward Weston, N. Winter, Florence Arquin, Esther Borm, Imogen Cunningham, Lorenzo Guerrero, Héctor García, Bernard Silberstein, Lucien Bloch, Francisco Díaz de León and Kati Horna. They provide a portrait of Frida's social, family and artistic surroundings. Her father's influence was determinant in her artistic creation, and so the exhibit also includes photos by Guillermo Kahlo. For Frida, photography had been very important since her childhood: she was often photographed and was a model for distinguished photographers. Photography also became an indispensable tool for painting many of her oils.



THE CATALOGUE

Bibliography about Frida is vast: in recent decades she has been the subject of many publications and expositions in Europe, the Americas, Asia and even Oceania, and her work occupies a privileged place in national and international collections. Specialized studies, exhibit catalogues, the annotated catalogue, psychological and aesthetic analyses, the publication of her diary and letters, and movies and documentaries have all contributed substantially to disseminating her life and work.



Frida's work undeniably expresses a profound poetic, pictorial truth emerging from a constant reflection about her self, always capable of showing an authenticity filtered only by the fire of her imagination. Aware that her infirmity made her different from others, she turned adversity into the main driving force behind her creative process.





The Bus, 26 x 55.5 cm, 1929 (oil on canvas), Dolores Olmedo Museum Collection.



Self-portrait with Velvet Suit, 78 x 61 cm, 1926 (oil on canvas), private collection.



Courtesy of the Fine Arts Palace Museum.
Photograph by Gustavo A. García



My Dress Hangs Here, 46 x 50 cm, 1933-1938 (oil and collage on masonite), FEMSA Collection.



Self-portrait with Medallions, 50 x 40 cm, 1948 (oil on masonite), private collection.

The catalogue published for the commemorative centennial exhibition aimed to bring together a select multidisciplinary group of Mexican and foreign authors to focus on Frida's suggestive universe from very diverse points of view. Historians, art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, architects, sociologists, doctors, psychiatrists, writers and critics all contribute their ideas, sensations or reflections about the indivisible binomial of Frida Kahlo's life and painting. Each author analyzes one or more of the exhibition's 64 oil paintings, presented chronologically in the catalogue. Whoever thought that everything had already been said about Frida Kahlo will discover here that her art is as inexhaustible as is unpredictable the dialogue established between the viewer and her work. These essays demonstrate the wealth and variety of the aesthetic experience that Kahlo's canvases produce. In addition to literary pleasure, the reader will make discoveries, new threads of interpretation or even uncover a hidden mystery among the tall symbolic brush in which the painting of the century-old and eternal Frida Kahlo resides. **VIM**

