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Photo by Graciela Turbide

FRIDA'S

WARDROBE

The Story of a Discovery

Denise Rosenzweig*
Magdalena Rosenzweig*

In 1997, art collector Dolores Olmedo asked us to begin working in her museum on the collection of works by painters Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.¹ Before she died in 1999, she asked us to go to the Frida Kahlo Blue House Museum to restore the collection curated by poet Carlos Pelli- cer, which had not been touched since its inauguration in 1958. Despite being a museum with art objects on display, the house held great surprises: boxes with strange objects left by its inhabitants, an enormous collection of *exvotos*, small naïf paintings made by people to thank saints for granting their prayers, and the decoration displayed just as Frida and Diego

* Restorers at Mexico City's Art Restoration workshop, restauroshop@gmail.com and malatarosen@gmail.com.



Photo by Graciela Iturbide



▲ *Huipil* or tunic-like blouse from the Tehuantepec Isthmus made of machine-embroidered velvet using a one-strike technique; flounced skirt from the isthmus made in printed cotton.
Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.

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had arranged it. The house/museum was still steeped in the presence of these two people.

The bathroom in Frida's room was locked according to Diego's orders that it not be opened until 25 years after his death. After the death of Dolores Olmedo, in 2004, her son Carlos made the decision to open it and catalogue or, if appropriate, throw out anything inside that might be of no use.

When the door was opened, the room emitted a strong odor, both acrid and sweet, a mixture of everything inside, besides dust, humidity, and time. From the start, the discoveries were surprising: cleaning and beauty products, as well as a large amount of Frida's medications were in the drawers. The bathtub held all her different crutches and plaster corsets, as well as her prosthetic leg, but the most important find was a large amount of folded clothing piled in a small wardrobe.



▲ Cotton coat made of fabric woven on a foot loom with button-hole embroidery in yellow and purple silk from San Marcos, Quetzaltenango or Totonicapán, Guatemala; Mazatec cotton *huipil* or tunic-like blouse with embroidered yoke and strips of ribbon and lace, from Jalapa de Díaz, Oaxaca.
Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.

One by one, each piece revealed different moments in Frida's life: the shawl she is wearing in the magnificent photo taken of her by Edward Weston, the Tehuana blouse that we see in the painting *That's Where I Hang My Dress*, or the Tehuanan splendor of her self-portrait. It should be underlined that the pieces of clothing were not valuable solely because they had belonged to a great public figure, but because they had their own enormous historical relevance. Day after day for two years, we aired, examined and evaluated and made a first catalogue of the clothing stored for 50 years.

The wardrobe and the objects it contained could be read in multiple ways: with regard to Frida's person, they revealed a body a little under 5'3" tall, measuring 34"-25"-32", with a small foot only 9" long. The clothing and different objects also testified to a woman who spent a lot of time making herself

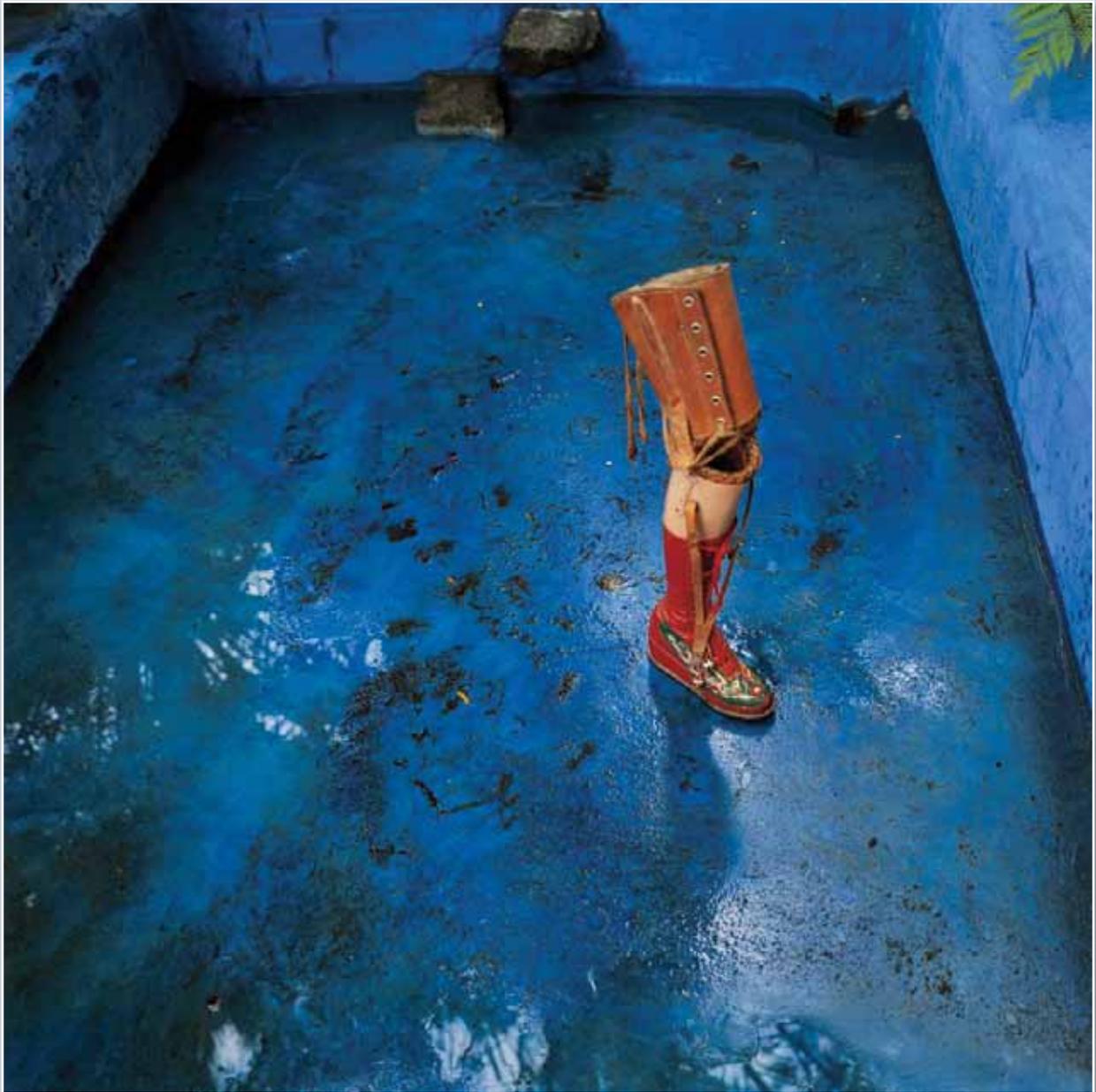


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There was also the painful, every-present aspect of the painter's life: corsets, medications, syringes, prosthetics, surgeon's scrubs, and ABC Hospital gowns stained with paint, since Frida painted during her long hospital stays.

beautiful: perfumes, creams, nail polish, ribbons of all kinds and colors, artisanal bags and purses. . . . Frida also took time to maintain a house every corner of which was fresh and colorful: we found bed linens, tablecloths, carpets, yarn, and pillow covers in bright colors, some embroidered with her initials.

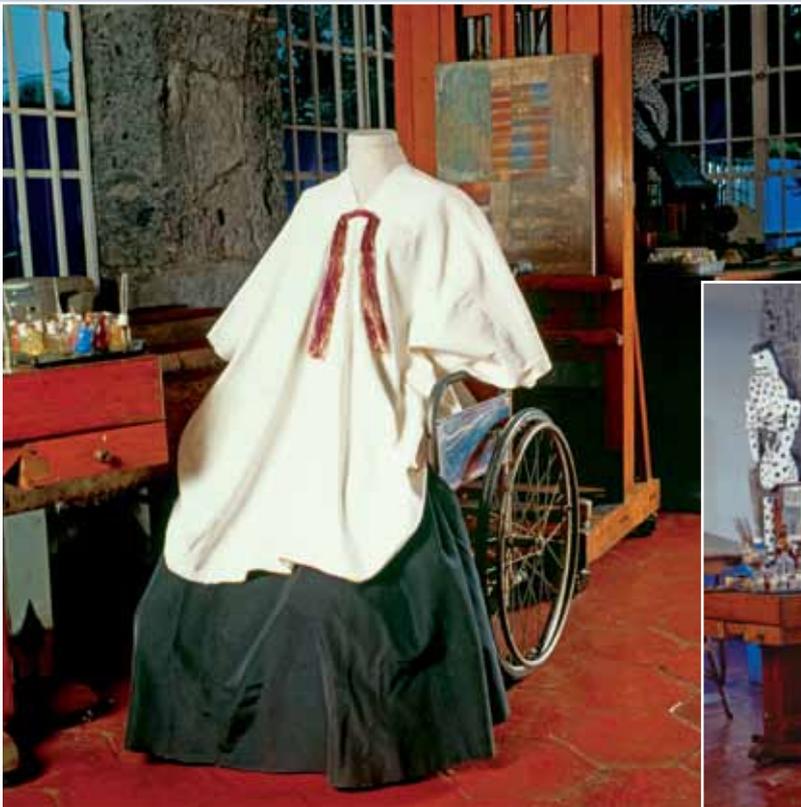
There was also the painful, every-present aspect of the painter's life: corsets, medications, syringes, prosthetics, surgeon's scrubs, and ABC Hospital gowns stained with paint, since Frida painted during her long hospital stays.

When we picked up and unfolded the pieces for the first time, we were invaded with the feeling that we were profaning them somehow, and we had to tone that down in the following work sessions. We decided to center on the clothing and research its provenance. We began by photographing each piece and then hanging it on a hanger and putting it in the

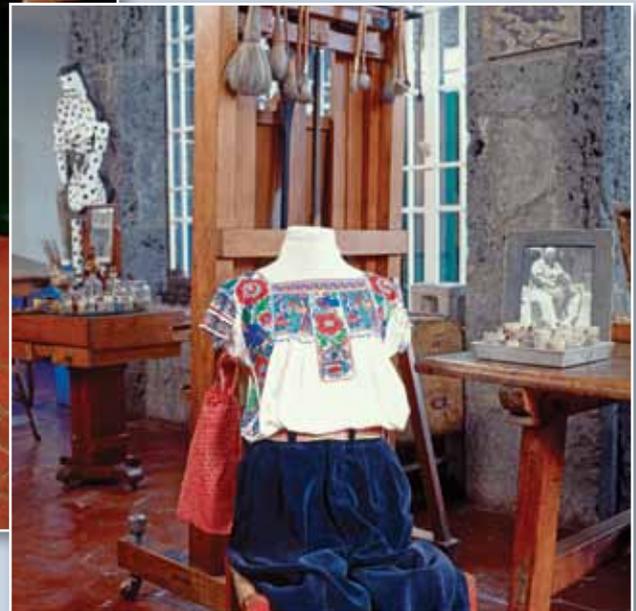
patio of the house. This also allowed us to establish the conditions each one was in. We selected a few to begin washing, and others to dry clean. When washed, the clothing emitted an even stronger smell than it had originally, as well as the aroma of Frida's perfume.

Simultaneously, we looked for financing to be able to put out a publication. We formed a multi-disciplinary team with historian Teresa del Conde, anthropologist Marta Turok, photographer Pablo Aguinaco, and designer Mónica Zacarías. The result, *El ropero de Frida* (Frida's Wardrobe), came out in summer 2007. Its texts continue to be relevant because they contain valuable information documented and photographed by experts who love their respective professions.

Teresa del Conde mentions in her article that in the 1920s and 1930s, some women in the cities wore traditional dress, but none of them wore the different versions of regional dress



◀ Dressy Zapotec *huipil* from Yalalag decorated with a Chardonnet silk braid and tassels; silk taffeta shirt. Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.



▲ Cotton *huipil* embroidered with beadwork from Chilac-Sierra Negra, Puebla; cotton and Chardonnet silk sash with Altepeji, Puebla warp work; and Nah Nu double woven woolen and cotton bag from the Mezquital Valley in Hidalgo. Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.

Details of items from Frida's bathroom in the Blue House, April 2004.



Photo, courtesy of Denise & Magdalena Rosenzweig

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with the same consistency and frequency that Frida did. “She insisted on wearing everyday regional dress, whether stylized old-fashioned or home-made, in public and in private, with special preference for Tehuana-style skirts and *huipil* blouses, although we found in the collection clothing from very diverse places in Mexico and Guatemala.” She adopted this look as her way of dress mainly, although not exclusively, after she married Diego Rivera on August 21, 1929. She also had several pieces of high fashion clothing in the French style of the late nineteenth century that probably had belonged to her mother or her maternal grandmother. She not only preserved them very carefully, but had a seamstress make appropriate alterations so she could wear them out at night. We also found silk skirts with Chinese embroidery in the wardrobe.

Frida herself said about her clothing, “In another time, I dressed like a boy: pants, boots, a jacket . . . but when I went to see Diego, I would wear my Tehuana outfit. I have never been to Tehuantepec, and Diego hasn’t wanted to take me. I have no relationship with the people there, but of all the outfits, it is the Tehuana form of dress that I like the best, and that’s why I wear Tehuana clothing.”

Even though she doesn’t mention it, wearing this kind of clothing (loose blouses and long skirts) probably also gave her much longed-for freedom of movement at the same time that it flattered her injured body.



Photo, courtesy of Denise & Magdalena Rosenzweig

▲ Frida's wardrobe (the “humble old thing”), April 2014.



▲ Silk camisole with lace ruffle at the neck and silk appliqué; overskirt with lace train.

Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.

In the mural *The Arsenal* (1927-1928), Diego portrayed his partner wearing the clothes of the revolutionaries, and in later paintings he always painted her wearing indigenous clothing. The last time he painted her was in the mural *Nightmare of War, Dream of Peace*, in 1952, wearing a Yalalag *huipil* from Oaxaca and a Tehuana skirt, sitting in her wheelchair. In the twilight of her life, Frida told her friend, photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo, how she should dress her when she died. She requested a Yalalag *huipil* and rings on her fingers. The *huipil* from that region is worn for the first time by Zapotec women on fiesta and wedding days.

Did Frida know the meaning that the clothing she wore originally had? Possibly, but she wore it as a mark of her personal expression and aesthetic projection. We agree with anthropologist Marta Turok that nothing was part of her attire by chance. When Frida included clothing in her paintings, she seemed to highlight the symbolic importance with which she imbued her professed “realism” —this, in response to André Breton’s intention of situating her as a surrealist— since practically all the clothing she painted can be found in the collection.

Marta Turok described her work for the publication as being done from the ethnographic perspective, which is why she situates the clothing of indigenous and mestizo origin, as well as its place of origin; this is how each piece acquires the name and face of ethnic groups and communities.

Diego and Frida had friends from the world over who came to stay at the Blue House and who gave them clothing from different parts of Mexico and the world. These included well-known figures of the time like actresses Dolores del Río and María Félix, singer-songwriter Concha Michel, dancer Rosa Roldán and her husband, the artist and dance promoter Miguel Covarrubias, painter-sculptor Carlos Mérida, poet Luis Cardoza, and writer Andrés Henestrosa and his wife Alfa from Juchitán and Ixhuatán, among others. The daughter of the latter two, Cibeles Henestrosa, talks about her mother giving Frida her first *huipil* from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; judging by the description, this particular piece is not part of the museum’s collection.

Frida was particularly fond of clothing from the isthmus. We can see this in her wardrobe, where she has 20 *huipiles* and 20 skirts of different styles all from that region, although none of them make up a formal dress, since the pieces are not coordinated. Some pieces are authentic from the region and others were sewn in the isthmus style using silk cloth and embroidered ribbon appliqué probably designed by Kahlo



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herself. Frida left her personal mark on the manufacture of some of these pieces of clothing, which can be seen by the amount of rolls of lace, embroidered ribbon, colored embroidery thread, and different lengths of cloth that we found carefully put away in baskets. In addition, in some of the interviews we did, people spoke of two seamstresses who did work for Frida, who frequented the traditional El Nardo notions store in old Coyoacán.

In her article, Marta Turok differentiates the clothing for everyday use and that used in ceremonies and rituals. She recognizes their origin, deciphers the borders and symbols, describes the ancestral techniques used to make them, some now extinct, narrating the subtle differences between the clothing of Tehuana and Juchiteca women. The textiles, with all their symbolism, color, and texture, are cultural testimony that transmits codes that allow the viewer to know at a glance different things about a woman's life without talking to her. For example, they indicate if she's a widow, single, or married. The most important thing is that Turok calls on readers to value the form of dress and speech of indigenous and mestiza women, their ancestral techniques and tools, and as a result, to understand the real cost and efforts of our great men and women artisans whose work enriches the entire society.

The work and intervention to conserve the pieces in the collection began in 2004 with the participation of a team of six restorers. The criteria for the intervention consisted in stopping or slowing the deterioration of the pieces of clothing without eliminating the traces of Frida's use of them, which are considered part of their essence: paint stains, cigarette burns, darning done by her or on her instructions, and methylene stains, among others. Finally, the conditions in which the pieces would be stored after the restoration and conservation process was a determining factor for their future preservation.

The first encounter with Frida Kahlo's clothing was recounted in the book *El ropero de Frida*, and, when that publication came out, we concluded our work for the Blue House museum. However, the collection continues to be intervened in with different processes even today, and the wardrobe of one of Mexico's most important artists continues to grow. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Dolores Olmedo was the main collector of Frida Kahlo's and Diego Rivera's work; Diego Rivera asked her to take charge of the Blue House and the Diego Rivera Anahuacalli Museum after his death.

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▲ Face-framing huipil (*bida ni quichi*) made of lace.
Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.



▲ Mazatec huipil made of hand-embroidered cotton cloth with ribbon appliques and faux lace sleeves from Huatla de Jiménez, Oaxaca; Mazatec wrap-around underskirt with hem border embroidered in a cross stitch, from Jalapa de Díaz, Oaxaca.
Photo by Pablo Aguinaco/Antecámara Photo.