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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006
AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

Set No. 173 The Art of Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo was born in 1910 in Coyoacán, in the outskirts of Mexico City. She was a mixture of Spanish, Indian, German and Jewish blood. She grew up in Coyoacán, was a very bright and alert child, a tomboy who climbed trees, stole fruit, and was a headache for teachers, parents and friends.

During her high school years she met Diego Rivera when he was painting murals at the Preparatory School where she was studying. She developed a crush on Rivera, unknown to him, and announced to her friends that her life's ambition was to have Diego's baby. In time, after a few unsuccessful pregnancies, her girlhood desire became an obsession that converged into her canvases.

When Frida was 16 years old, a trolley car ran over her. The spine was injured, the pelvic bone was fractured in three places, a foot and leg were badly damaged. For a year after the accident doctors were unable to tell whether she would ever walk again.

She spent that year flat on her back in a plaster cast. To fight boredom she started painting, using a specially built easel. She had never painted before, nor had she received any special instruction, but, like many Mexican children, she had a fertile imagination and a sense of form and color. Naturally, her character was deeply changed. Perhaps the painter Frida Kahlo would have never existed were it not for that year of suffering and constraint.

When she was able to get up and walk again, she took her paintings to Diego Rivera for criticism. She was then 18 years old and quite a young lady.

Diego liked the paintings and the painter. He encouraged her work, used her as a model in some of his paintings and became interested in her as a woman. Finally, after a stormy courtship they were married. She was 19 years old and he was 43 and already established as Mexico's leading painter.

It was August 1929, the era of the renaissance of Mexican art when striking murals were being executed on Mexican walls.



After the revolution in 1910, Mexican artists and intellectuals began to discover their rich indigenous heritage. The muralist movement of the 1920's sprang from this and Rivera was a major force in the revaluing of Indian and meztizo customs and art. By the time Frida and Diego married, an intellectual revolution was in full force. The marriage of course opened the door for Frida into a circle of intellectual ferment, in this critical time in Mexico's history.

During the first ten years of her marriage, Frida painted about two dozen pictures. In 1932, while recuperating from the loss of her first child in Detroit--where Diego was painting murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts--Frida began to paint explicit works of art dealing with her miscarriage. Most of her paintings were done in oil on tin, a medium derived from the Mexican "exvoto," which she collected. ▽

An "exvoto" is a votive painting placed on a church wall to commemorate the recovery of the donor from a serious illness or danger. Usually, it is painted on tin by an artist whose work is often not too good, but whose rates are low. The small "exvotos" illustrate the danger, the saint or virgin who prevented the disaster, the name of the donor, place and date.

Frida's paintings tell the story of her life and suffering better than any words.

Like other Mexican artists, her work combines pre-Colombian past, Colonial history, Catholic images, popular art of Mexico and European avant-garde. Her confinement as an invalid was reflected in a similar confinement in the subject matter of her work. She painted mostly self-portraits.

Between 1937 and 1945 Frida painted her self-portraits with monkeys at least 8 times. In pre-Colombian times monkeys were associated with the deities of fertility and dance, two capabilities denied to Frida.

Frida was an intuitive surrealist. She had never seen an original painting by Salvador Dali until 1938, when she went to New York for her own show. It is easy to understand Frida's attraction for Surrealism since Surrealism depicts the darker side of the human psyche. Also, there is much compatibility between Surrealism and pre-Colombian thought. The Aztecs believed that only through human sacrifice life could be renewed and continued.

When André Breton, the surrealist critic, visited Mexico in 1938, he declared Frida, as well as all of Mexico, a surrealist discovery. Frida said that she was not, that she never painted dreams, that she painted her own reality.

In 1939 Frida exhibited her work in Paris with great success. Kandinsky, Duchamp and Picasso were impressed by her work.

When she returned to Mexico Diego suggested that they be divorced. Again, Frida painted her suffering. Dark, grey skies, images of herself with her long hair shorn, appeared on her canvases. Heartbroken, she lived alone and painted. A year later, the Riveras were married again in San Francisco.

Frida began wearing the regional dresses of her native country when she married Diego. The colorful, long, loosely fit dresses had the advantage of hiding the orthopedic corset which she usually wore. These costumes also hid the fact that one leg was shorter than the other.

In 1953 her health had deteriorated seriously. When her leg was amputated, Frida ordered a red velvet boot for her fake leg and embroidered it with bells.

Frida died on July 13, 1954. She was 44 years old and had produced about 150 paintings. Diego gave her house in Coayacán with its contents to the state as the Frida Kahlo Museum. The house was at one time the temporary refuge of Leon Trotsky.

Frida's highly personalized painting resembles no one else's work in the history of art. It combines the naive simplicity of a self-taught primitive with the sophistication of a poetic sensibility which might be called surrealist. It is a compacted nightmare and poetic fantasy indigenous to the Mexican spirit. A very unique and interesting art.

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A. 11 My Nurse and I (Mother Mexico) - Shows a strong, monumental, dark Mother Earth (or Mexico). The children being nurse is Frida with a baby's body. The life-giving fluid seen through the transparent breast is repeated in the giant leaf, at the right side of the picture. The earth is also being nursed --it is raining. Teluric, cosmic background. Perhaps, Frida was attempting to show the relationship between humans and nature.

✓
B. 12 Broken Column - Depicts the reality of the accident's damage to her spinal column. She is showing her breast and her tears. Her dark eyebrows are meeting at the center. The barren lunar landscape in the background reminds us of some of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings with mannequins.

Frida always presented herself gorgeously dressed in festive native costume and jewelry, projecting quite a different image than she does in this orthopedic corset.

✓
C. 13 Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair - Frida in one of Diego's oversized suits, surrounded by her shorn hair, still holding the scissors. She looks like a young man, with a slight moustache. Perhaps she felt that she had lost her femininity. The translated words that you see above, from a popular song, read:

"If I loved you it was for your hair--now that you have cut it off I don't love you any more."

14 Frida y Diego Rivera Autobiographical portrait painted two years after the wedding. Frida is wearing one of her dresses. Her features, in this early painting, are still soft. She portrays herself as a delicate, helpless, subordinate, adoring wife rather than as a painter. Her head towards the monumental, strong, protector Diego. Diego is holding a palette and brush. The outline of Frida and Diego echoes the initial D engraved in Diego's belt buckle. This is a very simplified, almost naïve style. Frontal figures, bright colors, stagelike space, typical of colonial and popular art in Mexico.

- E. ✓ The Two Fridas - Painted after her divorce. Protects aspects of her dual personality. The Frida in the white dress is the real Frida, with all her problems, trying to stop the hemorrhage with a pair of scissors. Her dress show blood stains. The Frida on the right is the person she would like to be.
- F. ✓ Detail of "The Two Fridas" concentrate on hands.
- G. ✓ My miscarriage - Very painful pictures dealing with her miscarriage. She wanted so much to have Diego's child. She painted the scene many times, sometimes painting blood out over the frame as if to warn us that and art cannot be kept apart. It is a naive painting with surrealist elements not integrated.
- H. ✓ In "Self-Portrait with Monkeys" two monkeys cling to Frida while two more peek from behind lush vegetation. In pre-Columbian times monkeys were associated with the deities of dance and fertility two capabilities denied to Kalho.
- I. An ironic portrait of U.S. capitalism in decay, "My Dress Hangs There" is a striking example of Kalho's surrealist expression. Unique in its lack of human or vegetable life, it is nevertheless densely crowded with the blatant symbols of modern industrial society, and oppressive with the depersonalization of fundamental human values. A toilet crowns a Doric column, a church is tied by a red noose to a graph of the plummeting stockmarket, and a telephone wire snakes its way through a multitude of skyscrapers.
- J. The Birth of Moses - It is a mural in miniature. A cosmic version of the birth of Moses that Frida painted after reading Freud's analysis of Moses' birth. It is more sophisticated than her earlier works. Diego's influence can be seen in the composition, especially in the grouping of people. These are groups of heroes (Carlos Marx, Nefertiti, Gandhi, Luis Pasteur, Stalin, Hitler, Napoleon, Christ, Ramses, Alexander, Buda, etc.)