

# LA FIESTA DE FRIDA

*Almost 60 years after her death, Frida Kahlo's legacy as a world-renowned Mexicanista artist and woman of influence is as profoundly relevant today as it was during her passionate life*



FRIDA KAHLO (1907-1954). *AUTORRETRATO CONMO TEHUANA (DIEGO EN MI PENSAMIENTO)* 1943.  
76 X 61 CM, OIL ON MASONITE. THE JACQUES AND NATASHA GELMAN COLLECTION OF MEXICAN ART  
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BY CAROLYN PATRICIA GRISOLD

**F**rida Kahlo's role as a mythmaker and enigmatic woman was evident throughout every aspect of her life – from the way she dressed in men's clothing for family photos, her involvement with the Communist Party, and even in changing her birth date to coincide with the start of the Mexican Revolution. With flaring passion and talent, Kahlo literally painted her own reality. And her influence has spread across the globe – including to the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, where from October 20, 2012, to January 20, 2013, many of Kahlo's creations will be exhibited in *Frida & Diego: Passion, Politics and Painting*.

"Frida Kahlo's work embodied an understanding of the importance of women's narratives for artistic expression. Through her creation of distinctive and emotionally-charged self-portraits, she paved the way for subsequent generations of women to make art about the body and the self," says Dot Tuer, guest curator at the AGO, when asked how Kahlo's influence changed the role of women in professional arts.

Born Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo Calderón in 1907, Kahlo's life was lived largely in the infamous Blue House (now Museo Frida Kahlo) in Coyoacán, outside Mexico City. It was her childhood home, and subsequently the home she shared with husband Diego Rivera. Kahlo's relationship with Rivera is without a doubt one of the most influential occurrences in her life, one that would guide, support, distance and shape her career as a painter, as well as her femininity. But it is equally, if not more, important to consider another prominent aspect of Kahlo's life – one that became the catalyst of her calling and body image, and what underlined everything that was to follow, including Rivera.

In 1925 Kahlo was severely injured when the wooden city bus she was riding in collided with a tram. After surviving polio when she was 6 years old, which left her right leg deformed, this accident would ultimately shape the person Kahlo would become and the art she would create.

For years Kahlo wore casts, was bed ridden and in constant agony. Paradoxically, the challenge of surviving this horrific crash and living through the subsequent years of pain helped propel a strong-willed girl into the determined woman we remember.

It was during the recovery period immediately following her accident that Kahlo took up painting, at the suggestion of her mother. Up until this point, Kahlo had not exhibited any particular talent or inclination towards art. By contrast, Rivera, the man she would come to marry in 1929 and idolize as a mentor all her life, had been recognized as an artistic genius from early childhood. Existing at Rivera's side, in the shadow of his fame, and yet still emerging as a reputable artist of her own right, demonstrates the strength of Kahlo's talent and the resolve of her drive for her own successful career as a painter.

What has come to be known as Kahlo's signature artistic style was strongly influenced by her Amerindian nurse and Mexican folk culture, by her passion for communism, by her previous desire to become a doctor – leading to an obsession with medical interpretations of her own body – and by the repeated devastating infidelities of her husband, which she countered with her own liaisons, including an affair with Leon Trotsky.

Influenced by all this passion and loss, Kahlo's paintings are raw and unnerving; whimsical in style yet realistically vulgar. Her works were first shown in New York City in 1938. In the preface of this show's catalogue, André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, wrote: "No other [painter] is so essentially feminine, for she fluctuates between wide-eyed innocence and sheer depravity."

It is important to note that Kahlo was not a product of, nor a precursor to, the Surrealist movement; her art came

from what she felt within the fiery woman she had become in spite of her circumstances – one who Breton famously described as "a coloured ribbon around a bomb."

After her NYC show, Kahlo's success was growing steadily. Yet it was not until 1953 that she was exclusively exhibited in Mexico, her only solo appearance in her homeland during her lifetime. Ironically, at what could be called the height of her success, Kahlo was at the nadir of her failing health, and she had to be literally carried into the gallery in her four-poster bed.

She would die the following year, mourned deeply by her admirers and husband.

In the AGO's *Frida & Diego* exhibit, for the first time in Canada, Kahlo and Rivera's works will be presented side-by-side.

"What was equally remarkable about Kahlo, wife of a far more famous muralist," says Tuer, "was her determination to pursue an independent vision by painting her reality, and to insist on her self-sufficiency by earning her living as an artist."

Even Rivera himself proudly stated shortly after her death, "Frida Kahlo is still the most important Mexican artist because her intense and profound work [...] represents one of the most powerful and truthful human documents of our times. It will be of inestimable value for future generations."

Out of a delicate, fragile body, Frida Kahlo became an epitome of strength, passion and determination. And although she surrounded herself with myth and legend, Kahlo ultimately painted what she knew; through her expression of grief and joy, she came to represent the struggle of Amerindians for a sense of identity, of Mexico for its independence, of art as an extension of experience, and of a woman to influence her world. ♦

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*Frida & Diego: Passion, Politics and Painting*, in collaboration with international partners, will feature 75 works by the artists drawn primarily from the collection of Mexico's Museo Dolores Olmedo. Tickets for the highly anticipated pre-launch Feast & Fiesta celebration on October 13, 2012, can be purchased by calling Nikole Fraser at 416.979.6660 ext. 552. For more information, please visit [www.ago.net](http://www.ago.net).