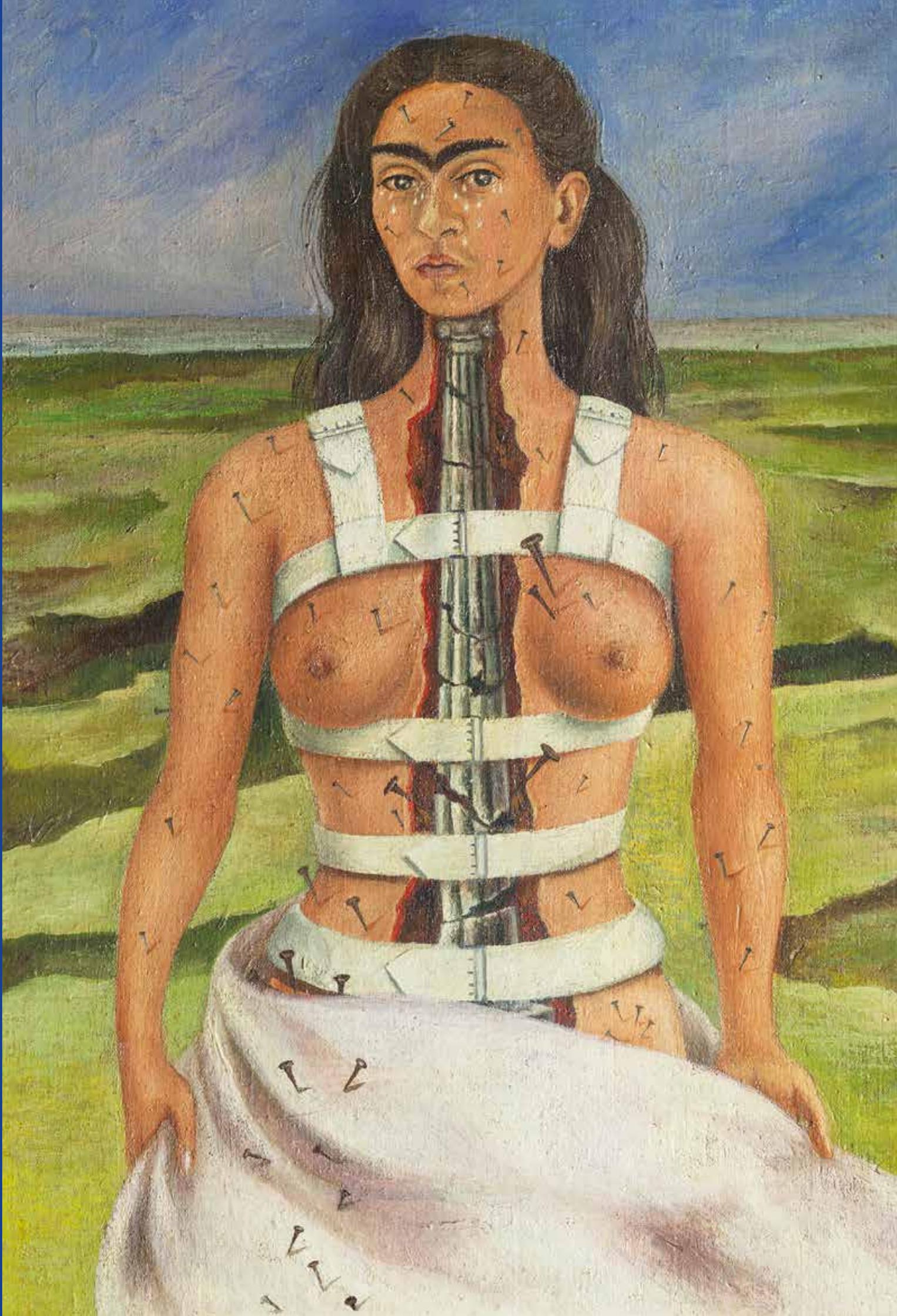


VIVA @ FRIDA! LIFE and ART of Frida Kahlo





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In her twenties she embraced traditional Mexican garb

Gisèle Freund (1908-2000), **Frida Kahlo works on the portrait of her father Guillermo**, 1951, photo, 25.5 x 28.5 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

Ricardo Ayluardo, **The Family of Matilde Calderón y González**, 1890, Inscriptions: in translation 'Mother (Oaxaca) Mathilde Calderón, age 7 1890' and 'Matilde Calderón, now Kahlo, with four daughters Matita, Adri, Frida and Cristi.', gelatin silver print, 20.2 x 25.2 cm, Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City

Bernard Silberstein (1905-1999), **Frida in Tehuana Costume, Coyoacán**, 1940, photograph, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, Throckmorton Fine Art, New York



acclaim was also fuelled by feminists in the second half of the twentieth century who took her as an example for sexual politics and post-colonial debates.⁵ Later, Julie Taymor's 2002 film *Frida* (featuring Salma Hayek); Gannit Ankori's book *Imaging Her Selves* (2002),⁶ which analysed Kahlo's paintings as deliberate examinations of her constructed identities, and a major 2005 retrospective at Tate Modern, London, followed by many worldwide exhibitions of her work likewise raised her international profile. Today a simple Google search yields over 46 million entries on Kahlo.

TEHUANA CLOTHING

The unlocking of the archive at La Casa Azul made it possible to learn more about Kahlo's construction of identity through her ethnicity, her disability, her political beliefs, and her art. We can examine how she used complementary modes of creativity – painting, photography, and her meticulously composed fashion – to express herself. As a teenager Kahlo dressed in unconventional ways to express her individuality and hide her damaged leg. In her twenties she embraced traditional Mexican garb, which she wore throughout her life. She affirmed this idea of 'otherness' as someone who made the unconventional the norm in her own way and on her own terms.

Even though she created a singular hybrid style, mixing elements from diverse regions and periods (garments from Guatemala, China, Europe, and the United States, for example), she especially identified with the indigenous women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. Prominent Mexican artists

She created her iconic self-image as 'La Tehuana'

and scholars, Kahlo and Rivera among them, were attracted to the isthmus, known for its matriarchal society and rich native culture that resisted European domination. Although Kahlo never visited the isthmus, she adopted its regional dress, creating her iconic self-image as 'La Tehuana'. Kahlo wore embroidered blouses, long skirts, elaborate hairstyles, and woven shawls from Tehuantepec in her own mesmerising version of *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness). At the same time, these sartorial choices deflected attention from her disabilities and injuries. Kahlo

VIVA LA FRIDA!



Unknown photographer, **Frida Kahlo** in **La Casa Azul**, circa 1950, photo, 5.9 x 7.8 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



TEHUANA OUTFIT

This top has criss-cross lines of stitching worked in chain stitch on a treadle sewing machine, and is worn with a cotton skirt with a band of machine embroidery. Tehuana women were fond of printed cotton, and large quantities were imported from Manchester, England, up until the 1930s.

Huipil (tunic), before 1954
Isthmus of Tehuantepec,
Oaxaca, Mexico, cotton
muslin with machine
embroidery (chain stitch)

Enagua (skirt) and **holán**
(flounce), before 1939
Isthmus of Tehuantepec,
Oaxaca, Mexico, skirt:
printed cotton with
machine embroidery (chain
stitch); flounce: cotton

Museo Frida Kahlo,
Mexico City (tunic and
skirt), colección Cibeles
Henestrosa (flounce)

LONG TUNIC AND SKIRT

Although peacocks are not native to Mexico, they became popular subjects for traditional needlework. This *huipil* was probably made to sell at the market, as the embroidery is on a larger scale than that of garments worn by the local community. The skirt is embellished with a wide band of satin and was made especially for Kahlo.



Lydia Whitlock, **Frida Kahlo at a sketch for the mural Pan American Unity that Diego Rivera is creating for San Francisco City College, 1940**, photo, 24.5 x 19.7 cm, Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City

Huipil (tunic), before 1954, Mazatec community, Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, Mexico, cotton with cotton-thread hand embroidery (stem stitches)

Skirt, before 1954, Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico, synthetic blend complex weave, applied satin ribbon

Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City







ECLECTIC COLLECTION OF RINGS

Kahlo's collection of rings was extensive, eclectic and constantly changing. During the final years of her life her rings featured particularly strongly both in photographs and written accounts. The photographer Gisèle Freund described how 'every one of her fingers bears enormous rings with finely carved precious stones', although many were of more modest value. Often exchanged as tokens of friendship, Hayden Herrera, Kahlo's biographer, described how 'people gave them to Frida, and with impulsive generosity, she just as often gave them away'.

Collection of rings, before 1954, Mexico, silver set with red layered agate; silver set with turquoise and jadeite; gold-plated copper; silver set with a fused glass plaque; gold set with rose-cut diamonds, Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City

Lola Álvarez Bravo (1903-1993), **Frida Kahlo**, 1952, gelatine silver print, 22.7 x 18.5 cm, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

Antonio Pineda (1919-2009) **Bracelet of silver and amethyst** Taxco Mexico, 1940s, Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City





Unknown photographer, **Frida Kahlo**, 1931, photo, 5.6 x 4.5 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



Unknown photographer, **Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera** in La Casa Azul, c. 1930, photo, 6.2 x 9.8 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

1932

Frida and Diego temporarily live in Detroit

1934

Diego is unfaithful to Frida with her sister Cristina

There have been two major accidents in my life. One was the tram and the other was Diego. Diego was the worst by far.

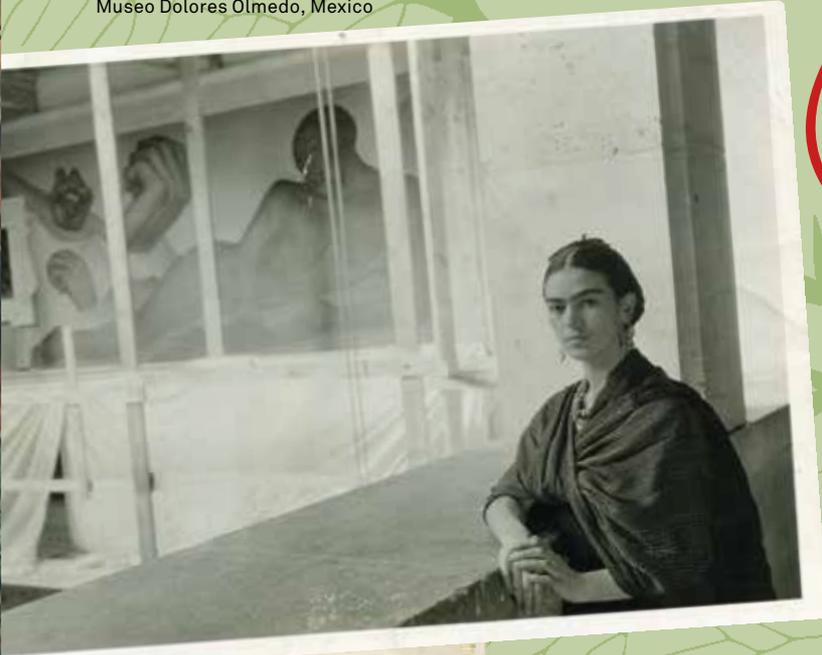
Unknown photographer, **Frida at the art academy in Detroit**, 1932, photo, 11 x 16 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

1933

Frida and Diego move into their new home in San Angel

1935

Frida and Diego break up



1936

Frida is operated on her foot

1938

Frida has her first solo exhibition in New York

1937

Frida makes a lot of paintings

Nickolas Muray (1892-1965), **Frida Kahlo with artist and ethnologist Miguel Covarrubias**, 1938, photo, 10.8 x 14.7 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



Lucienne Bloch (1909-1999), **Frida Kahlo on her way back from Detroit**, 1932, photo, 7.4 x 5.5 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



Unknown photographer, **Frida Kahlo**, c. 1933, photo, 8 x 5.2 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



1939 Frida participates in a Paris exhibition

1939 The Louvre buys her self-portrait *The Frame*

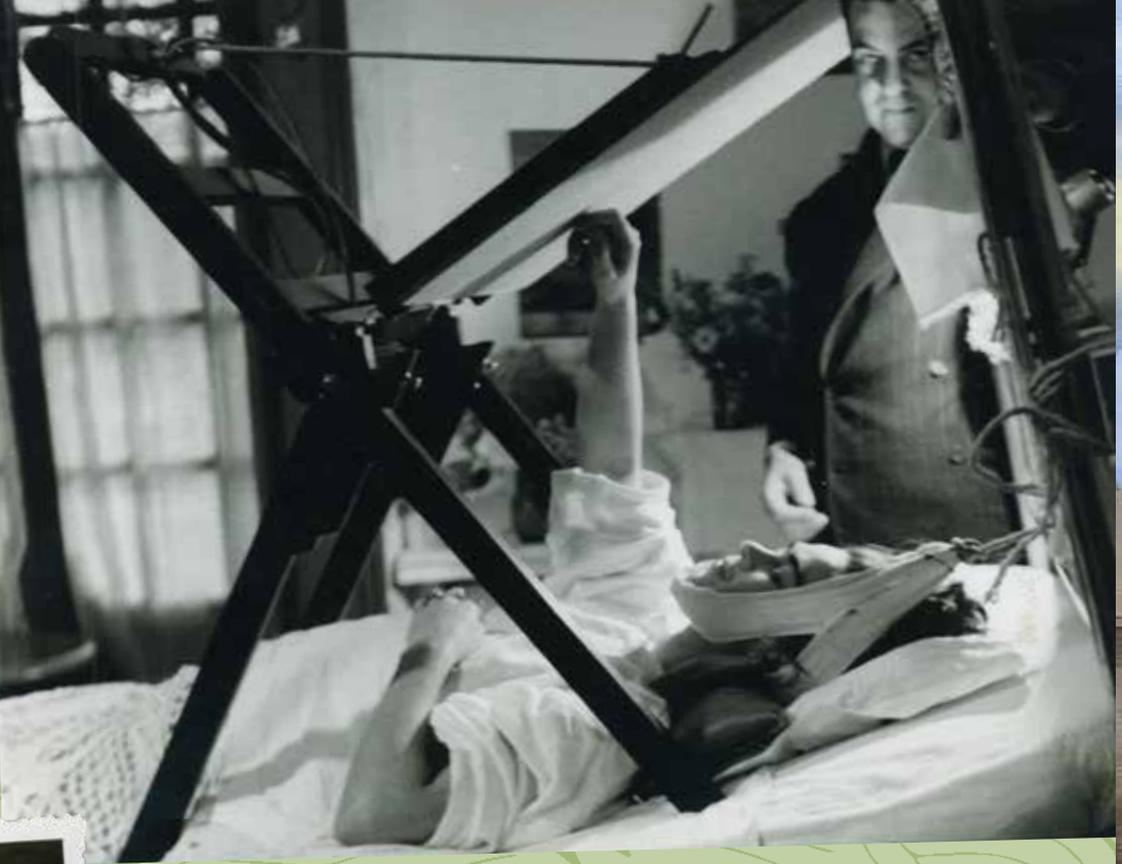
'Frida Kahlo's art is like a ribbon around a bomb'

— André Breton

1939

1940 Frida and Diego get a divorce

Frida and Diego remarry



Why did I call you 'my Diego'? You never were and never will be mine. You are your own ...

Nickolas Muray (1892-1965), *Frida Kahlo painting on her back at the Mexico City hospital, with Miguel Covarrubias looking on in the background*, 1940, photo, 11.9 x 15.2 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

1941

1941 Frida and Diego move back to La Casa Azul

1942

1942 Frida starts teaching at the art academy La Esmeralda



Unknown photographer, *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo on the Casa Azul terrace*, c. 1945, photo, 5 x 7.5 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

Guillermo Zamora (1915-2002), *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo at La Casa Azul*, c. 1952, photo, 12 x 17.5 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico





Nickolas Muray (1892-1965),
Frida Kahlo in blue blouse, 1939,
photo, 32.4 x 24.1 cm, Throckmorton
Fine Art, New York

Nickolas Muray (1892-1965), Frida Kahlo
in New York, 1946, photo, 36.8 x 27.3 cm,
Throckmorton Fine Art, New York





FRIDA'S LOVE FOR DIEGO

There are two near-identical versions of *Diego and I* commemorating Frida and Diego's marriage. Kahlo painted one version for Rivera (this painting) and another for herself. The special shell-encrusted frame bears two dates: 1929, the year of their marriage, and 1944, the current year in which they celebrated their fifteenth anniversary. Kahlo did not count the period that they were divorced (from the end of

1939 until their second marriage in December 1940). All that mattered was that they were reunited and belonged together. The portrait itself depicts this close connection. The two halves of their faces together form a whole. That their marriage was not always rose-coloured is symbolised by the thorny yet intertwined roots binding the couple together. The shells represent the male and female sex organs. This painting is not only about Frida's love for Diego but about the relationship between men and women in general. This is reinforced by the female moon and the male sun depicted at the upper right.



Unknown photographer.
DIEGO RIVERA IN LA CASA AZUL.
 c. 1945. photo. 24.8 x 20.3 cm.
 Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico

Lola Alvarez Bravo (1903-1993).
FRIDA WITH DOG. 1944. photo.
 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Jhrockmorton
 Fine Art, New York



Diego and I, 1944,
 oil on masonite,
 12.3 x 7.4 cm,
 Private collection

MODERN MARTYR

In *Self-Portrait with Small Monkey*, Frida Kahlo presented herself surrounded by her favourite animals: the monkey draping its arms around her shoulder and the dog Señor Xólotl (named after the Aztec god of death). The artist owned many animals and considered them to be the children she would never bear. Three pairs of eyes look at the viewer with a piercing gaze. Kahlo's hair is coiffed in the authentic style of Southeast Mexico. The thick unibrow and hairy upper lip underscore her unconventional beauty. The work also features a number of disconcerting elements. For example, the Pre-Columbian figurine on the right refers to the – for Kahlo – authentic Mexico to which she felt bound. They are all connected by a ribbon looped around a nail that seems almost real. This is not only an illusionistic artistic device called *trompe l'oeil* but probably also a reference to the Catholic faith as experienced in Mexico. The nail symbolises the martyrdom of Christ. Kahlo presented herself as a modern martyr in several paintings, as is probably the case here too. This is without question one of her best self-portraits.



*What does
not kill me,
nourishes me*

GAVAGE

The oak easel which would have normally held Kahlo's canvas is now a structure supporting a huge funnel bursting with an enormous amount of food that is being stuffed into her, including whole chickens, pigs, fish and sausages. There is also a sugar skull bearing Kahlo's name that she had received from Diego while in hospital. In the painting, Kahlo lies under a cover of microscopic organisms that probably allude to the frailty of the human body. She had become emaciated because of her illness and the many treatments, for which the doctor prescribed absolute bed rest and force-feeding. On the back of the painting the artist wrote: 'A mí ya

no me queda ni la menor esperanza... todo se mueve al compás de lo que dicta la panza...' ('Not the least hope remains to me ... Everything moves in tune with what the belly contains...'). Frida's bed is set in a desolate volcanic landscape, and the many cracks in the ground symbolise her broken body. The sun and moon refer to the Aztec conception of the eternal battle between light and dark.⁶

Without Hope, 1945, oil on canvas on masonite, 28 x 36 cm, Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico



Sun and Life, 1947,
oil on masonite,
40 x 49.5 cm, Private
collection

FRUIT

Kahlo's traumatic miscarriage at Henry Ford Hospital in 1932 had made it painfully clear to her that although she could become pregnant, she would probably never be able to carry a child to term. Once again she had lost a baby, this time not Diego's but that of a lover. She painted *Sun and Life* shortly after this event. It features a number of plants in the form of male and female genitals, all in a different stage of reproduction

and pregnancy. In one of the flowers, a foetus can be discerned shedding tears, just like the eye in the sun she painted under it. The sun is a familiar symbol of fertility. The painting is reminiscent of the *Flower of Life* she made a few years earlier.