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SFMOMA PRESENTS FRIDA KAHLO
Exhibition Highlights Kahlo's Self-Portraits

From June 14 to September 28, 2008, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present the exhibition *Frida Kahlo*. Organized by world-renowned Frida Kahlo biographer and art historian Hayden Herrera, the presentation will include approximately 50 paintings from the beginning of Kahlo's career in 1926 to her death in 1954. The San Francisco presentation is organized by John Zarobell, SFMOMA assistant curator of painting and sculpture.

While concentrating on Kahlo's hauntingly seductive and often brutal self-portraits, the exhibition also will include those particular portraits and still-life paintings that amplify her sense of identity. The peculiar tension between the intimacy of Kahlo's subject matter and the reserve of her public persona gives her self-portraits the impact of icons. As her practice progressed, her images grew in confidence and complexity, reflecting her private obsessions and political concerns. Kahlo struggled to gain

visibility and recognition both as a woman and an artist, and she was a central player in the political and artistic revolutions occurring throughout the world.

The exhibition also will feature photographs that once belonged to Kahlo and Diego Rivera from the Vicente Wolf Photography Collection, many of which have never before been published or exhibited. Emblematic images of Kahlo and Rivera by preeminent photographers of the period (Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Gisele Freund, Tina Modotti, Nickolas Muray) will be on view alongside never-before-seen personal snapshots of the artist with family and friends, including such cultural and political luminaries as André Breton and Leon Trotsky. These photographs—several of which Kahlo hand-inscribed with dedications; effaced with self-deprecating marks; and kissed, leaving a trace of lipstick—pose fascinating questions about an artist who was both the consummate manufacturer of her own image and a beguiling and willing photographic subject.



Frida Kahlo, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, 1931; Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, Gift of Albert M. Bender; © 2007 Banco de México, Trustee of the Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust. Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F.

During her lifetime, Kahlo was best known as the flamboyant wife of renowned muralist Rivera. Today she has become one of the most celebrated and revered artists in the world. Between 1926, when she began to paint while recuperating from a near-fatal bus accident, and 1954, when she died at age 47, Kahlo painted some 66 self-portraits and about 80 paintings of other subjects, mostly still lifes and portraits of friends. “I paint my own reality,” she said. “The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to.” Her reality and her need to explore and confirm it by depicting her own image have given us some of the most powerful and original images of the 20th century. Paradoxically, her work allowed her to both express and continually fabricate her own subjectivity.

Kahlo was born in 1907 in Coyoacán, then a southern suburb of Mexico City. Three years after the 1925 bus accident, she showed her paintings to Rivera. He admired the paintings, and the painter, and a year later they married. Theirs was a tumultuous relationship: Rivera once declared himself to be “unfit for fidelity,” and Kahlo largely withstood his promiscuity. As if to assuage her pain, Kahlo recorded the vicissitudes of her marriage in paint. She also recorded the misery of her deteriorating health—the orthopedic corsets she was forced to wear, the numerous spinal surgeries, plus a number of miscarriages and therapeutic abortions. Her painful subject matter is distanced by an intentional primitivism, as well as by the canvases’ small scale. Kahlo’s sometimes grueling imagery is also mitigated by her sardonic humor and extraordinary imagination. Her sense of fantasy, fed by Mexican popular art and pre-Columbian culture, was noted by surrealist poet and essayist Breton when he came to Mexico in 1938 and claimed Kahlo for Surrealism. She rejected the designation but clearly understood that doors would open under the surrealist label—and they did: Breton helped secure exhibitions for her in New York in 1938 and Paris in 1939.

Soon after Kahlo returned from attending her Paris show, Rivera asked her for a divorce. They remarried a year later. In the second half of the 1940s Kahlo’s health worsened; she was hospitalized for a year between 1950 and 1951, and in 1953 her right leg was amputated at the knee due to gangrene. Her insistence on being strong and joyful in the face of pain sustained her, however; she drew a picture of her severed limb in her journal and wrote, “Feet, what do I need them for if I have wings to fly?”

Kahlo had her first exhibition in Mexico in 1953. Defying doctor’s orders, she attended the opening and received guests while reclining on her own four-poster bed. Because she could not sit up for long and she suffered severe effects from prescribed painkillers, her paintings in the period from 1952 to 1954 lost the jewel-like refinement of her earlier works. Her late still lifes and self-portraits—many of which proclaim Kahlo’s allegiance to Communist doctrine—testify to her passion for life and her indomitable will, however.

Frida Kahlo brings together works such as *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), depicting the artist’s miscarriage in Detroit (a first in terms of the iconography of Western art history), and *The Broken Column* (1944), painted after she underwent spinal surgery. It also includes self-portraits such as *Me and My Doll* (1937) and *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* (1943), both of which explore the theme of childlessness. The artist’s suffering over Rivera’s betrayals is reflected in paintings like her masterful double-portrait *The Two Fridas* (1939); created during her separation and divorce from Rivera, the work presents a powerful depiction of pain inflicted by love and Kahlo’s divided sense of self. Collectively, these images suggest the extent to which, for Kahlo, painting served as catharsis, as well as an opportunity to redefine and critique modern bourgeois society.

Collectors of Kahlo's work can be found around the world—the paintings in the exhibition come from some 30 private and institutional collections in France, Japan, Mexico, and the United States. Several paintings have never before been on public view in the United States. Two of the most important and extensive collections of Kahlo's work—the Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño Collection in Mexico City and the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art, currently housed in the Centro Cultural Muros in Cuernavaca—have loaned some of their most treasured Kahlo paintings to the exhibition.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated 304-page catalogue featuring more than 100 color plates, as well as critical essays by Herrera, exhibition co-curator Elizabeth Carpenter, and Latin American art curator and critic Victor Zamudio-Taylor. A separate plate section is devoted to works from the Vicente Wolf Photography Collection. The catalogue also includes an extensive illustrated timeline of relevant socio-political world events, artistic and cultural developments, and significant personal experiences that took place during Kahlo's lifetime, along with a selected bibliography, exhibition history, and index.

Frida Kahlo is organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in association with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is co-curated by Hayden Herrera and Walker Art Center Associate Curator Elizabeth Carpenter. The national tour of *Frida Kahlo* is sponsored by Bank of America and Fundación Televisa. Major support for the national tour is provided by Margaret and Angus Wurtele and the Fundación/Colección Jumex. Additional support is provided by Craig Baker. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the U.S. Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Additional support is provided by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA) and the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), Mexico. The San Francisco presentation is made possible by support from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and the Evelyn D. Haas Exhibition Fund.

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