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# FRIDA KAHLO

*The Camera  
Seduced*



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Elena Poniatowska  
Essay by Carla Stellweg

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## THE CAMERA'S SEDUCTRESS

Carla Stellweg

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Whenever she could, Frida Kahlo took charge of her life and her history. Born in 1907, Frida changed her birth date to 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution resounded through her country. Her gesture identified her with the political upheaval of the next decade that was destined to return Mexico to the Mexican people. Labor and land reform laws forged a proud, new dignity for the Mexican peasants who had been oppressed by the self-serving dictator Porfirio Díaz.

Frida Kahlo was at the very center of the passion that inspired her country's revolutionary zeal; it was the same passion that shaped her ideas, her art, and her persona. It was in the context of Mexico's revolutionary culture that Frida emerged as a painter, developing her small-scale, intimate self-portraits alongside the aggressively masculine and politically dominating Mexican muralists, including José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the man she married twice, Diego Rivera.

"I paint my own reality," Frida declared. Although her art was not physically monumental, it was intense in its autobiographical content and profound in its understanding of her psychology and her native culture.

Frida Kahlo invented and recreated herself throughout her life with intelligence and verve. She fascinated people with her magnetism and intelligence and attracted many photographers who took on the challenge of picturing her dramatic spirit. Each tried to unravel Frida's ambiguity, her passion, her charm, and her seductive style. Some were her friends and lovers; others were acquaintances or professional photographers assigned to photograph her for magazines and newspapers. For all of them, Frida, with an innate sense of what she wanted to look like, molded her expression and positioned her body, angling her head and using her eyes to conjure a presence that left no one untouched. Her natural *mestiza* beauty—high cheekbones, pronounced jawline, and intense dark eyes framed by thick, curved eyebrows—encouraged the transformation of her face into an icon. What each photographer rendered is a woman whose identity cannot be mistaken; a person truthful about herself, unafraid to show what life has leveled at her, and proud of what she has made of herself.



Victor Reyes and Family, 1929, Coyoacán, Mexico. Kahlo and Rivera two days after their first marriage in 1929.



Guillermo Davila, n.d.

In nearly every picture Frida gives a mysterious, sensuous semi-smile. One wonders why we never see the fun-loving, raucous Kahlo laughing with abandon that her friends described. Perhaps no smile lightened her face before the camera because she was self-conscious about her bad teeth, which she had incised with gold and capped with diamonds for special occasions. Overcoming handicaps was an aspect of Kahlo's capacity to sublimate pain—to turn weakness into strength—and to become an active participant in the cultural, historical, and political events of her time.

Frida Kahlo was the daughter and granddaughter of photographers. Guillermo Kahlo, by Kahlo's account, took up photography at the suggestion of his second wife, Matilde Calderón, Frida's mother. Matilde's father had been a photographer, and it was with his equipment that Guillermo began to photograph. Early in his career Guillermo traveled around Mexico photographing indigenous Colonial architecture. From 1904 to 1908 he was commissioned by the government to record the country's architectural heritage. He produced 900 glass plate negatives that illustrated a series of large-format deluxe publications celebrating the centennial of Mexican independence. His accomplishments earned him the title of "first official photographer of Mexico's cultural patrimony."

In his studio he introduced his favorite daughter to photographic equipment, and from time to time Frida would assist him in retouching his glass plates. She and her family sat for official family portraits, even though Guillermo rarely photographed people, because, as he said, he "did not wish to improve what God had made ugly." At the age of five, in a photograph taken by her father (page 99), Frida strikes a seductive pose, resting her round face with its dimpled chin on her chubby arm. Mischievously she looks out at the photographer.

Frida described her childhood in her diary, "My childhood was marvelous because, although my father was a sick man (suffering from epilepsy), he was an immense example to me of tenderness, of work and, above all, of understanding for my problems." In 1952, shortly before her death, Frida used a photograph of her father in one of her paintings, *Portrait of Don Guillermo Kahlo*, as an homage to him. She placed his camera next to him, a third, all-seeing eye. Guillermo looks melancholically off to the side.

As she grew older, photography was a popular art that Kahlo treasured. She loved the imagination and craft of the street photographers who, using different backdrops, set up shop next to churches or in the parks of Mexico City. Her house was filled with images. On the headboard of her bed and on her walls she pinned pictures of her family, her friends, children she loved, the Mexican Revolution, and famous people who fascinated her, among them Marx, Engels, Lenin, Einstein, Freud, and Mao Tse-tung. She also displayed pictures of herself by the photographers who sought her out.

From childhood on, Frida collected dolls, including papier-mâché *Judas* and *calaveras* figures that she dressed up. She owned over 500 *retablos*, small, traditional tin paintings made to thank a patron saint for a recovery from illness, for surviving an accident, or as a gift for a miracle invoked. Images and objects were a rich source of inspiration for her, and are evidence of her native aesthetic preferences.

In Frida's art one sees the extent to which she incorporated popular images. Her paintings often draw

on existing photographs, including *Memory, My Dress Hangs There or New York*, and *Moses*. Her attention to detail, her tiny brush strokes, the colors she chose, and even the formality of her small-scale works can be credited to her appreciation of, and involvement with, photography and popular art.

It was the painful circumstances of her life, however, that infused her art with its spirit and its meaning. When Frida was six years old, she contracted a mild case of polio that left her right leg less developed than her left. She compensated for the deformity by becoming a fine athlete. In her black bloomers she played soccer, boxed, skated, and became an excellent swimmer. Her childhood friend, Aurora Reyes recalled, "When she walked, Frida made little jumps so that she seemed to float like a bird in flight."

In 1925 when she was eighteen years old, Kahlo's spine, leg, and foot were badly broken in a grotesque streetcar accident by an iron handrail bar that pierced her body. During her lifetime she would have more than thirty-two operations to alleviate the pain from the consequences of the accident: she also tried to lessen the pain with medication, alcohol, or other drugs.

In a photograph taken by her father the year following her accident, Frida is pictured with her mother, sister Cristina, and other family members (pages 102–103). She wears a three-piece man's suit, a radical costume for a woman in the male-dominated Mexican society with strict Catholic morals. Kahlo is relaxed, one hand casually in her pants pocket. Her eyes question and seduce the photographer who is none other than her father. Clearly, Frida consciously decided she was going to look different from the rest of her family who pose conventionally. Aloof and preoccupied, she seems ready for whatever might come her way.

Even before the accident Frida dressed in blue overalls, ties, and black boots. Her cropped, thick hair and the gaze of her dark, mocking eyes provoked the mothers of fellow students to call out, "*Que niña tan fea!*" (What an ugly girl)! Demonstrating an attitude of irreverence, she cultivated the company of male *cuates* (pals) to that of the girls she called *cursí* (tacky and gossipy).

During the years she convalesced from 1925 to 1927, photographs of Kahlo do not reveal the intense transformation of her personality that was taking place. In one of her letters to her boyfriend Alejandro Gómez Arias, she described how she was shaping a vision of herself:

"Why do you study so? What secret are you looking for? Life will reveal it to you soon. I already know it all, without reading or writing. A little while ago, not much more than a few days ago, I was a child who went about in a world of colors, of hard and tangible forms. Everything was mysterious and something was hidden, guessing what it was a game to me. If you knew how terrible it is to know suddenly, as if a bolt of lightning elucidated the earth. Now I live in a painful planet, transparent as ice; but it is as if I had learned everything in seconds. I became old in instants and everything today is bland and lucid. I know that nothing lies behind, if there were something I would see it."



Photographer unknown, 1931. Kahlo and Rivera with Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and collector Francis Flynn Paine.

Following pages: Photographer unknown, 1929. Marching with Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors.



Ansel Adams, 1930, San Francisco. The Trustees of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All Rights Reserved.

Frida's boyfriend, "beloved Alex," succumbed to his family's pressure and broke with Kahlo during the period when she was convalescing. She faced her loss by tapping into her intense desire for life. When she returned home after three months in the hospital, Frida began to paint with her father's oils on an easel specially designed so she would not have to sit up. "I paint myself because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best," she said.

Throughout her life Kahlo was bedridden for long periods of time and fitted with body casts. The compound injuries and pain would eventually take their toll, resulting in her death at age forty-seven in 1954. Her friend the photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo explained that after the streetcar accident, "The struggle of two Fridas was in her always, one dead Frida and one Frida that was alive." By Kahlo's own account, she considered the two major events in her life to be accidents. "The first," she said, "was when a streetcar knocked me down, and the second was Diego."

Frida first met Diego Rivera in 1922 when he was thirty-six, world-famous, and had just returned from Europe. He was working on *Creation*, his mural for the National Preparatory School where Frida attended classes. Their relationship, however, did not begin until 1928 when they met again at gatherings held at Tina Modotti's apartment in Mexico City. Modotti, who had come to Mexico in 1923 with Edward Weston, became a photographer and stayed on after Weston's return to California. She modeled for Rivera for his National Agricultural School murals and, some believe, had an affair with him.

Kahlo and Rivera's relationship was tempestuous, full of passion, camaraderie, betrayals, and tenderness. Perhaps the best description of the strong bonds between them is conveyed in Frida's "Portrait of Diego," which she wrote in 1949:

Diego. *Beginning*  
Diego. *constructor*  
Diego. *my baby*  
Diego. *my boyfriend*  
Diego. *painter*  
Diego. *my lover*  
Diego. *"my husband"*  
Diego. *my friend*  
Diego. *my mother*  
Diego. *me*  
Diego, *universe*  
Diversity in *Unity*  
Why do I call him *My Diego?*  
He never was not ever will be mine.  
He belongs to himself.

It was only after Frida's marriage to Diego in 1929 that she began to wear traditional Mexican dress. She had become a member of the Mexican Communist party and emphasized her *mestiza* or half-Indian ancestry and her *mexicanista* sympathies. Frida's costumes added to the theatricality of her life. According to the writer Luis Cardoza y Aragon: "Frida was grace, energy, and talent united in one of the beings who has most stirred my imagination to enthusiasm. Diego and Frida were part of the spiritual landscape of Mexico, like Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl in the valley of Anáhuac."

While most famous Mexican movie stars of the time, including Dolores del Rio and María Felix, only wore *mexicanista* clothes in their Hollywood films, preferring the fashions of Paris and New York, Frida chose traditional Mexican dress as part of her lifestyle. Gliding through the streets of New York, San Francisco, or Paris, Kahlo emanated a strange and magical beauty. Rivera, who encouraged and supported her choice of traditional dress, said: "The classic Mexican dress has been created by people for people. The Mexican women who do not wear it, do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, to the great American and French bureaucracy." Frida herself admitted that while she often wore pants, when she took Rivera his lunch at one of the mural sites she would wear the Tehuana costume, from the matriarchal culture of the region of Oaxaca. Bernard Silberstein posed Kahlo in this costume in 1943 (page 53). Standing out from the objects she resembles, Kahlo seems caught in time, alone, impassive, and strangely dispassionate, her face the mask she so often painted.

She took great care in styling her long, dark hair, braiding it in various styles with brightly colored woolen yarn like the Cuetzalan, Puebla, and *Otomie* women, or using a variety of *peinetas*, popular, small, decorative combs she would buy in the market. Along with fresh flowers from her garden, these decorative accessories added to the *mexicanista* look. When Imogen Cunningham made an early series of portraits of Frida in San Francisco in December 1930, it was Kahlo's first trip outside of Mexico (pages 13 and 25). In these pictures Frida is adorned with pre-Columbian jewelry—heavy beads, a jadeite Olmec pendant, Aztec motif earrings—and a *rebozo* or shawl. She projects an ethnic pride and could be of royal Mexican ancestry.

During this trip to San Francisco Kahlo met the photographer Edward Weston, whom she had learned about from Tina Modotti in Mexico (page 104). Impressed with Kahlo, Weston wrote in his diary:

"His [Rivera's] new wife—Frieda [sic]—too: she is in sharp contrast to Lupe [Marín, Diego's third wife] . . . petite—a little doll alongside Diego, but a doll in size only, for she is strong and quite beautiful, shows very little of her father's German blood. Dressed in native costume even to *huaraches*, she causes much excitement in the street of San Francisco. People stop in their tracks to look in wonder."

From California, Kahlo and Rivera traveled to New York where they met Lucienne Bloch, the photographer and artist who became Frida's close friend, her American *cuate*. Bloch assisted Rivera with his Rockefeller Center murals, photo-



Lucienne Bloch, 1933, New York City. Kahlo and Rivera at the New Workers School.



Photographer unknown, 1940s. Kahlo on a visit to the United States.

graphed the process, and took the last pictures of the murals before Nelson Rockefeller ordered them destroyed because they had incensed a public who found them anti-capitalism. Kahlo and Bloch enjoyed each other's company; they went to the movies, drew together, cracked jokes, and sang off-color Mexican songs. Bloch made a unique series of photographs of Kahlo showing off, having fun, mimicking for the camera—expressing the fun-loving daredevil side she usually hid from photographers (pages 33 and 39–41).

While Frida and Rivera were in Detroit in 1932, where Rivera was painting murals for the Ford Motor Company, Kahlo's mother became ill. Bloch accompanied Frida by train on her return to Mexico. Bloch, whose Leica camera had broken, took several pictures of her friend with the Kodak Brownie snapshot camera she had brought along (pages 28–29). In these pictures, Kahlo resembles a *soldadera Adelita*, one of the Mexican peasant women who accompanied their husband by train during the

revolution. Frida wears the long, cotton ruffled skirt and *rebozo* typical of the *Adelitas*.

A few days after her mother's death, Frida's father made a portrait of his daughter in which she is on the verge of tears, unashamedly revealing her grief (page 26). Although she rejoined Rivera in the United States, Frida soon became homesick; she missed her family and friends and her country. On her insistence, Rivera agreed to return to Mexico, where their friend, the painter and muralist Juan O'Gorman, had redesigned their San Angel home and studio with a new connecting wing for Frida. There they settled back into life in Mexico.

Sometime during 1934 Rivera began an affair with Kahlo's sister, Cristina. Frida moved out of their home, rented a small apartment in Mexico City, and took off for New York with friends, where she met up with Bloch, who had married Stephen Dimitroff, an assistant to Rivera. Two photographs by Bloch during this period capture Kahlo's remarkable spirit (pages 34 and 35). "She had cut her hair and wore American clothes as a reaction to Diego's affair with Cristina," Bloch remembers. In one picture Kahlo has covered her short hair with a lace doily in the style of the Tehuana headdress. Her expression is melancholic, mixing outward humor with inner pain, but her eyes reveal her ever-present pride.

In another photograph by Bloch, Kahlo stares mistily into the lens, cradling a bottle of Cinzano like the baby she was not able to have (page 35). Frida points to the bottle as if it might offer the answer to her emotional wounds. Bloch knew that Frida wanted a child with Rivera and that the two medical abortions she had undergone had only increased her desire to become a mother. But poor health made a successful pregnancy impossible. Having just given birth to a child of her own, Bloch asked Frida to become her baby's godmother, which Kahlo accepted.

Except for *Self-Portrait with Curly Hair* and *A Few Small Nips*, Frida did not paint much that year. It was a traumatic time in her life, but she was determined to maintain her marriage with Rivera. She returned to Mexico and forgave her sister. Referring to Rivera's infidelities, she said, "I cannot love him for what he is not." Kahlo was beginning to understand that only by becoming an independent woman would she win Rivera's true admiration.



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, declared by André Breton to be Mexico's preeminent surrealist photographer, made several portraits of Kahlo around this time. In one, Frida sits beside a large reflecting ball, resting as if in a Flemish painting, elegant and timeless, an inhabitant of her own world (page 37). Another photograph features a ripped dress flapping from a clothesline on the roof of Kahlo's house (page 47). Kahlo had already painted *Memory or the Heart* and *My Dress Hangs There or New York*. Alvarez Bravo identified Kahlo with the peasant dignity of labor and the rural Mexican women who spend a good deal of their time washing clothes by hand. On another level, the picture conjures up the absence of a body to fill the dress. Frida, very much alive, stands in contrast.

In the late 1930s, after Rivera's affair with Cristina, Kahlo slowly evolved into a more independent woman and emerged as a more complex personality. Raquel Tibol, the Argentine-born, Mexican art critic and writer, has commented, "Their marriage was not one of 'free love,' but an open marriage."

It was a period when life was an experiment for Frida, who from childhood on had been a curious, adventuresome, agile-minded student, rejecting what she considered to be middle-class hypocrisies. Frida began to flaunt her identity, as a woman, a Mexican, and a sexual person. Her friend Lucienne Bloch recalled: "Diego astonished me when he pointed at Frida and said, 'You know that Frida is a homosexual, don't you?'" She flirted with Georgia O'Keeffe and Jacqueline Lamda, André Breton's wife, both of whom she wrote about openly in her letters. She used her sister Cristina's and other friends' houses to meet lovers, keeping her affairs—with men and women—discreet because of Rivera's intense jealousy.

From the 1930s until the end of World War II, Mexico was a magnet for artists and intellectuals who were escaping from fascism or exploring Mexico's diverse cultures. Marsden Hartley, John Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, Antonin Artaud, Louise Bourgeois, André Breton, Leonora Carrington, Sergei Eisenstein, Isamu Noguchi, Milton Avery, Philip Guston, D. H. Lawrence, and others came to Mexico and met Kahlo and Rivera.

Frida, in her ornate Mexican attire, became a center of attention among the intellectual celebrities who sought out the great muralist Rivera. In January 1937 Leon Trotsky, who had been invited by Rivera to take up exile in Mexico, arrived with his wife Natalia Sedova. Diego, recently hospitalized with kidney problems, sent Frida to meet the couple's boat in Tampico harbor. Soon the Trotskys settled into Casa Azul, the house in which Frida was born and had recently refurbished. Trotsky's reputation, his intellect, and his love of women attracted Kahlo, and shortly after their arrival Frida and Trotsky began an intense, short-lived affair. When Frida broke off the relationship, she said, "*Estoy muy cansada del viejo*" (I am tired of the old man). According to Trotsky's secretary, "It was impossible to go on without committing themselves or without an incident with Natalia, Diego, or the Party [Communist party]." One of Frida's self-portraits, which she dedicated to Trotsky after their affair had ended, prompted Breton to write, "Frida Kahlo's paintings are like a ribbon around a bomb."



Emmy Lou Packard, ca. 1940, San Angel, Mexico City. Kahlo with Helena Rubinstein at Rivera's studio.

Following pages: Photographer unknown, 1937, Tampico harbor. Kahlo en route to meet Leon Trotsky on his arrival in Mexico.

Between 1937 and 1938, Kahlo painted twenty-seven paintings and was invited to exhibit at the prestigious Julian Levy Gallery in New York. It was there that her relationship with Nikolas Muray, a photographer for *Vanity Fair*, began and flourished. They had first met in Mexico, probably through the painter and caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias, who was a colleague of Muray's at the magazine. Muray's portraits of celebrities had made him successful, and the images he took of Frida glamorized her by heightening her *mexicanista* style. Muray asked Frida to tilt her head so that her already feline eyes took on the quality of the female faces in Rivera's murals. At the same time Kahlo's eyes steadfastly and seductively held the eye of Muray's lens.

Kahlo wrote to Muray from Paris where she traveled to attend a show organized by Breton that included her paintings, "I am so happy to think I love you to think you wait for me—you love me." Although deeply in love with Muray, she missed Mexico and Rivera. Frida was unhappy in Paris; she did not speak French well or get along with Breton. She ended up in a hospital with a kidney infection from drinking more than a bottle of cognac a day while she was waiting for the show to open. According to Frida, the show had lots of "junk Breton bought at the market, plus fourteen portraits of the nineteenth century and thirty-two photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. They make me vomit. They are so damn intellectual and rotten that I can't stand them any more. It is really too much for my character. I'd rather sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than to have anything to do with those 'artistic' bitches of Paris . . ." She met "*las grandes cacas del surrealismo*" (big surrealist shits), but disclaimed publicly that she was one of them. She did, however, like Marcel Duchamp and his friend Mary Reynolds with whom she ended up staying.

After her return to Mexico in 1940, Frida and Diego divorced. The reasons reported were manifold, but it was Diego who promoted the break. To make matters worse, Muray had also broken with Frida and married someone else.

Rivera left for San Francisco to complete a commissioned mural for the San Francisco Golden Gate International Exhibition, "Art in Action." In May 1940 his car and chauffeur in Mexico were involved in



Photographer unknown, 1946, Coyoacán, Mexico. Kahlo and her sister Cristina.

Trotsky's assassination. Frida's bad health deteriorated drastically after Trotsky's death, and Diego became increasingly concerned. Through Dr. Leo Eloesser, Kahlo's doctor and trusted friend, he asked Frida to remarry him. After the suspicions circulating about Rivera's involvement in Trotsky's death were dispelled, Frida flew to San Francisco where she was hospitalized. When she was released she traveled to New York with Heinz Berggruen, an art dealer to whom Rivera had introduced her. In New York they stayed at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel and had a tumultuous two-month affair while Kahlo was planning her show at the Julian Levy Gallery. Finally she agreed to remarry Rivera on his fifty-fourth birthday, December 8, 1940, in San Francisco. Frida's former lover Muray made a series of wedding portraits following the ceremony. They show a respectable couple, with Rivera holding his trademark Stetson hat (page 49), and two fun-loving people kissing and holding hands (pages 48, 50–51).

By contrast, the photograph by Fritz Henle made three years later in

1943 of Frida painting in her Casa Azul studio, reveals a woman as intense and still as the pre-Columbian objects that surround her (page 66). Inner explosiveness boils behind her mask-like face.

The only portrait in which Kahlo emits the serenity that her second marriage to Rivera brought her is the photograph by Emmy Lou Packard (page 56). Frida, dressed in blue jeans and a boy's plaid jacket with fresh flowers in her hair, hugs her husband in their dining room. These were the years of World War II during which Kahlo and Rivera's struggle against fascism was curtailed by Rivera's relationship with the Communist party. Kahlo's health suffered, and she mourned her father who had died in 1941. Deeply depressed, she saw the outer world as a chaos of destruction and death.

In her own slightly more controlled world, Kahlo kept all sorts of pets—her spider-monkeys Fulang-Chang and Caimito de Guayabal; Granizo, a deer; Bonito, a parrot; Sr. Xolotl, her izteuintli dog; and Gertrude Caca Blanca, a pet eagle. She cultivated assorted native plants, cacti, and a small *milpa* (corn patch). On the patio of Casa Azul, Frida placed pre-Columbian stone carvings and inserted abalone seashells into the walls along with Mexican blue sheet-metal mirrors.

Gisèle Freund, a French photographer working in Mexico from 1951 to 1952, photographed Kahlo in her garden as an integral part of nature, in unity with her environment. Freund's photograph of Frida on her patio (pages 64–65), showing her smoking next to a pre-Columbian statue, is a portrait of an ancient, silent witness whose presence underscores Frida's battle with exhausting emotional and physical pain. In an embrace with her spider-monkey Fulang-Chang, another portrait by Fritz Henle made in 1943 (page 63), Frida's eyes seem to stare inward, projecting a mood similar to the mask-like face she painted that same year in *Self-Portrait Thinking About Death*.

As Frida became increasingly confined to her home due to deteriorating health, the spiritual, healing aspects of nature comforted her, bringing her back to her roots, to nature's cycle of life and death. In 1947 Frida's nephew Antonio Kahlo photographed her dressed in Chinese pajamas smoking her ubiquitous cigarette, which was often marijuana (page 73). The photograph, showing Kahlo's hair loose, is as unusual as her painting *Self-Portrait with Loose Hair* that Frida made the same year in celebration of her fortieth birthday.

Hector García, a renowned Mexican photojournalist, spent time with Frida at Casa Azul in 1949 when she was often confined to her bed. In the photographs her depression and anxiety are apparent (pages 74–77); she seems absorbed with her agonizing pain. Spinal operations, morphine, and other drugs have taken their toll. It was the same year that Rivera began an affair with the actress María Félix, whom he asked to marry him. When she refused, Rivera returned to Kahlo.

In the painting *Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Sr. Xolotl*, seen next to Frida in García's photograph (page 79), Kahlo portrays herself as Rivera's mother, an ancient goddess holding Diego like an Olmec baby. The division of light and darkness, the sun and the moon, and the cycles of the universe are a part of her, and she is a part of them. Diego, to whom she has given



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, 1944, Mexico City. At a Picasso exhibition at Sociedad de Arte Moderno.

birth, is represented as a continuation of herself. In another photograph García captured the mood of the painting when he photographed Frida cuddling with her dog Sr. Xolotl on her bed, covered with Mexican textiles. In the photograph, she is at one with the universe, the life giving force of creation, the center.

The sensitive photographs of Frida's friend Lola Alvarez Bravo, taken from the early 1940s until 1953, project a mature Frida, emerging during the years of psychological and physical upheaval (pages 8, 70–71). They portray a woman reconciling herself with life and drawing on a wisdom that gives her a measure of peace. By Bravo's account, when Frida was not feeling well, Rivera would telephone Bravo and ask her to visit. Bravo would bring her camera, and the two friends would talk while Lola made photographs.

In 1950 Kahlo spent most of the year in the hospital due to an infection provoked by a spinal insert. By mid-April she had already undergone two operations. With the help of Demerol injections, casts, and visits from family and friends, she managed to paint and eventually return to her home, but only after five more operations.

One of her preferred doctors at that time, Juan Farill, founder of a hospital for lame children, was the inspiration for her 1951 *retablo* painting *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Dr. Farill*. The painting is Frida's testimony that Farill had saved her life, and in the work she offers him her heart-shaped palette in affectionate appreciation. Gisèle Freund portrayed the doctor and his patient in a pose similar to the one that Kahlo depicted in her *retablo* (page 83).

As Frida's health continued to decline, she became more and more dependent on Rivera, the world of Casa Azul, and the people who visited her. She expressed an urgent need to serve the Communist party when she said: "I should struggle with all my strength for the little that is positive that my health allows me to do in the direction of helping the Revolution. The only real reason to live." She continued to want to transform her art into something "useful," but painting became increasingly more difficult. Finally, in 1953, her right leg was amputated.

In the photographs by the Brothers Mayo, important Mexican photojournalists, Frida represents the Mexican revolutionary woman with an undefeated physical presence (pages 92–96). Her face is marked with years of suffering, but she projects a masculine strength, dragging on her cigarette as if she were drinking and debating with her *cuates*. Her pronounced mustache and peasant *Mazahua* dress accentuate the image of a politically committed woman. At the time she said, "I continue to be a Communist, absolutely, and now, anti-imperialist, because our line is that of peace."

Throughout her demanding and difficult life, Frida shaped and modeled many roles, defining her ethnic origins, her passion for and devotion to Diego, and all that she loved around her. In these many photographs taken during her life, the viewer is invited to penetrate the mask she consciously designed, and to be emotionally moved by the ways in which she shifted and changed to create her persona. Although she often seemed to live on the center of a theatrical stage, Frida's face revealed the truth she lived and struggled for. Together these photographic portraits show Frida Kahlo as the irresistibly sensual, multifaceted, mythological woman she became. Admired by the people who photographed her, she fulfilled their desire and became an emblematic reference for artists and art historians. For many others Frida became immortal, an icon.