

Life & Times Exhibition

Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up

V&A, London,

16 June to 4 November 2018

ENTRY-LEVEL FRIDA

Before there was Tracy Emin and her unmade bed, there was Frida Kahlo.

My introduction to her work was reading about a painting of hers owned by Madonna. The title of this was *My Birth* (1932) and depicts Frida, quite literally, giving birth to herself, watched over by an agonised Virgin Mary. It's a disturbing, unforgettable image and sums up Frida's art very aptly: direct, raw, painful, and unapologetic.

Madonna later said in an interview with *Vanity Fair* that she used this painting to suss people out: 'If somebody doesn't like this painting then I know they can't be my friend.' I am sure Madonna and Frida would have got on well.

This exhibition is a real feather in the V&A's cap. A mighty archive of documents, photographs, and personal possessions were discovered in 2004 (sealed up in a room in

Prosthetic leg with leather boot. Appliquéd silk with embroidered Chinese motifs. Photograph Javier Hinojosa. Museo Frida Kahlo. © Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Archives, Banco de México, Fiduciary of the Trust of the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museums. *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, 16 June to 14 November 2018. Sponsored by Grosvenor Britain & Ireland.



Mexico since the 1950s) and it is this material on offer at *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*.

It soon becomes apparent that the art is good but it is her image that pervades. That face. Wandering through rooms accompanied by eerie womb-like music, everything is smaller than you expect, such is the aura and hype surrounding her.

Nonetheless, the photographs (an adolescent Frida dressed in male garb in a family portrait, unsmiling and challenging as ever), shawls and skirts, jewellery, medicines, and make-up are fascinating to pore over. What is obvious is the depth of her disability and physical suffering (her braces and torturous-looking surgical corsets are on display), but also her great strength and creativity to turn such suffering and misfortune into art.

In the poem 'Kindness' (1963), Sylvia Plath wrote: 'The blood jet is poetry, There is no stopping it', a sentiment that can be readily applied to Frida's art.

As a child she contracted polio but failed to receive proper treatment. Her right leg subsequently became thinner and shorter, placing stress on her pelvis and back. Later, a bus crash in 1925 shattered her spine — putting paid to Kahlo's dreams of becoming a doctor and leading to pain and illness for the rest of her life.

During her recovery, she began to paint. It became a way for Kahlo to depict her life, her marriage problems (with the towering, unfaithful muralist Diego Rivera), her miscarriages, her love affairs (with both men and women), her Communist sympathies, and her identity beyond (and within) her suffering. Her innate self-exposure makes today's



Self-Portrait, Frida Kahlo, 1941 © The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th Century Mexican Art and The Vergel Collection. *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, 16 June to 14 November 2018. Sponsored by Grosvenor Britain & Ireland.

attention-seeking Instagrammers look like cloistered nuns. I would argue she made a better surrealist than Dalí but Frida herself did not accept the term as applied to her work.

Always given to theatrics, at her first solo exhibition in Mexico at the Galería Arte Contemporáneo in April 1953 she received plaudits and guests while bed bound. Her four-poster bed was moved from her home to the gallery, she arrived in an ambulance, and was carried on a stretcher to the bed, where she stayed throughout the party.

Her legacy will continue because in her we see strength, rebellion, and an alluring yet unconventional beauty. She was always ahead of her time and there is no one like her now.

After enduring 30 operations Frida sadly died in 1954 aged 47, possibly by her own hand, leaving us her art, her traditional Tehuana dresses, and her indefatigable spirit.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X698225>