

After a four-year renovation, Casa Azul celebrates Frida Kahlo's spirit anew.

The Blue House

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"The one who gave birth to herself ...
who wrote the most wonderful poem of her life."

Frida Kahlo defined herself this way in her diary during the last decade of her life at Casa Azul, her beloved childhood home in Coyoacan, a wealthy southern suburb of Mexico City. The Mexican colonial-style Casa Azul, or Blue House, has a cobalt-colored façade that presides conspicuously over Londres Street and has recently reopened as the Frida Kahlo Museum after a four-year renovation.

Its two floors of light-flooded rooms, encircling a lush courtyard garden and filled with Kahlo's paintings and possessions, offer a rare, intimate glimpse into the life and art of one of the most original and provocative artists of the 20th century. Here, the German-Indian artist was born, lived out her turbulent marriage to the noted Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, suffered constant pain from a near fatal bus accident, and died forty years ago at the age of forty-seven. It was here, too, that she recorded on canvas the drama of her anguished life, producing some 200 works over nearly three decades beginning in 1926.

Kahlo is considered by many to be Mexico's greatest artist, and her status has grown considerably since her death. She has become a cult figure of sorts, a testimony to





Kablo's worktable in her studio holds an array of paints, an unfinished sketch, and a photograph of Rivera, far left. OPPOSITE — A 1951 photograph of Kablo by Imogen Cunningham.



the resilience of the human spirit in the midst of adversity. Now the subject of numerous biographies, exhibitions, and documentary films, not to mention souvenir T-shirts, calendars, and posters, Kahlo has attracted a following all over the world. For women and feminists, especially, she is a heroine of enormous strength who overcame great odds to create an identity for herself in art.

A visit to Casa Azul brings all the contradictions of Kahlo's life into focus, and her passion is present everywhere. One envisions her in her spacious, second-floor studio, propped in her wheelchair in front of the large easel, horsehair brush in hand, completing the portrait of Joseph Stalin that now rests there. Or she could just as easily be lying in the adjacent bedroom, in her four-poster bed, where she recovered from her many spinal operations, painting her reflection from the mirror inserted into the wooden canopy above. Crowding the bedroom

shelves and a large curio cabinet are her collections of dolls, decorative boxes, and toys. On the wall across from her bed are photos of Marx, Lenin, Engels, Stalin, and Mao, reminders of Kahlo's and Rivera's communist activism. (The exiled Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky and his wife, Natalia, were friends of the Riveras and lived for a brief time at Casa Azul in 1937.)

Kahlo also surrounded herself with photos and portraits of her family, herself, and Rivera, and always lived among an abundance of fresh dahlias, her favorite flower. Artificial dahlias are now scattered throughout the museum's rooms, along with the pre-Columbian fertility sculptures and popular art that she and Rivera collected. Kahlo decorated her home with rough-hewn Mexican colonial furniture, folkloric masks and paintings, glazed green and brown earthenware, and numerous tin paintings of saints called *retablos*.

Lurking around every corner and dangling from the walls and ceil-

ings are life-size Judas figures—papier-mache skeletons, devils, and half-man/half-animal creatures that Mexicans burn during the Easter fiesta. Along with Kahlo's wheelchair and crutches, these eerily whimsical creatures suggest the omnipresence of death in the flow of life—a major theme of Kahlo's paintings.

Adding to the festive ambiance of Kahlo's home are the yellow-painted tables and cabinets in the kitchen and dining room, and the long green-framed windows opening into the magnificent courtyard garden. Here, among lush palm, avocado, and fig trees, guarded by a menagerie of pre-Columbian sculpture, Kahlo and Rivera would take lunch on the volcanic rock patio or meet for coffee atop a small, red Aztec pyramid that Rivera built. Today, black cats wander stealthily through the garden; in Kahlo's day, it was her spider monkeys and a Mexican *itzcuintli* dog, which appear in many of her paintings.

Kahlo's presence emanates, too, from her coral and jade jewelry, colorful long dresses, and embroidered skirts and blouses on display in the museum's glass cases. It reasserts itself in the kitchen, where she spelled out FRIDA and DIEGO on the wall with small ceramic cups, and it lingers in her passionate love letters to Rivera, in the illustrated pages of her diary, and in twenty paintings exhibited at the entrance to the museum. Her spirit is so expansive that the walls of Casa Azul seem barely able to contain it; one senses even that it has spilled into the fuchsia bougainvillea along the streets of Coyoacan.

Rivera, too, carved a place for himself amid the peculiar magic of Casa Azul. One can imagine the rotund painter lumbering in and out of his first-floor bedroom, where his campaign hat and huge denim overalls hang. Also on display in the museum are a selection of his paintings—academic studies, portraits from the 1920s, and cubist compositions. Rivera's delightfully cluttered studio, in the nearby suburb of San Angel, is open to the public. It occupies the linked blue and pink modernist homes where Kahlo and Rivera lived for several years after their marriage in 1929.

“Diego: Nothing is comparable to your hands,” she wrote. “My body fills itself with you for days and days.”



OPPOSITE—In the kitchen, Kablo spelled out Rivera’s name and her own with small ceramic cups.

THIS PAGE—Rivera’s hat, denim overalls, and walking sticks preserve the artist’s presence in his bedroom.

It was through the self-portrait that Kahlo “gave birth to herself.” Each stage in her life—her severe illnesses, her impassioned love for Rivera, and his betrayals—required her to chart the raw landscape of emotion. She handled each trial with unflinching honesty, simultaneously expressing and purging her pain. In one portrait after another, Kahlo enchants us with her dark-skinned beauty, her thick, wing-spread eyebrows and beribboned ebony hair, the slant of her eyes and the fullness of her lips.

“I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best,” Kahlo said. “I paint my own reality. The only thing that I know is that I paint because I need to.” Kahlo’s self-portraits reveal her dual existence: The more miserable she was, the more she adorned herself with colorful Mexican costumes, ribbons, and jewelry.

She began painting at eighteen while recovering from a bus accident in which a metal handrail pierced her abdomen, leaving her with serious spinal and pelvic injuries. From that moment, her life became a succession of operations and convalescences, worsened by the after-effects of a childhood bout with polio. She spent months at a time hospitalized or bedridden in a plaster corset, a routine which she called her “martyrdom.”

The image of Kahlo as a secular saint has become her most enduring legacy. Kahlo painted herself with thorny vines clutching at her neck (one of her many references to Christian iconography), sleeping with a skeleton, and holding her extracted heart in her hand. In a letter to her childhood sweetheart, she wrote of the transforming effect of the accident:

“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. ... If you knew how terrible it is to know suddenly, as if a bolt of lightning illuminated the earth. Now I live in a painful planet, transparent as ice; but it is as if I had learned everything at once in seconds.”

Her preoccupation with death is rooted as much in her own experience as in the collective Mexican consciousness, which is shaped by the Aztec belief in a dualistic universe of light and dark, male and female, life and death. In his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican poet and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz writes:

“We are seduced by death. The fascination it exerts over us is the result, perhaps, of our hermit-like solitude



Kahlo's bedroom had a mirror above the bed so she could paint herself in comfort. Her plaster corset stands on the bed as a reminder of the constant pain she endured because of a bus accident. OPPOSITE—Kahlo's portrait of Stalin (top) symbolizes the couple's longtime devotion to communism. Bottom: Rivera's bedroom, with one of the pre-Columbian statues he collected.



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and of the fury with which we break out of it.... solitude and communion, individuality and universality are still the extremes that devour every Mexican. This conflict characterizes our most intimate selves and gives a special color--alternately dark and bright—to our private conduct and our relationships with others;... it has a profound effect on all our political, social and artistic efforts."

Rivera, the other locus of her suffering, was ever present in her thoughts and appears in miniature on her forehead in paintings such as *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (1943) and *Diego and I* (1949), or as a child in her maternal embrace. Kahlo once called Rivera "the other accident" in her life, and she lamented her inability to possess him completely. Her diary entries and the love letters preserved at Casa Azul reveal her lifelong obsession with her husband, whose constant philandering included an affair with her younger sister, Cristina. "Diego: Nothing is comparable to your hands and nothing is equal to the gold-green of your eyes," Kahlo wrote. "My body fills itself with you for days and days."

Kahlo's agony over Rivera's betrayals was compounded by her inability to have a child. The loss she experienced in several miscarriages became a theme in paintings such as *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), which depicts a naked Kahlo weeping and hemorrhaging on a hospital bed.

Her psychic pain undoubtedly intensified her artistic vision. By the time she was thirty-two, her work was being exhibited in Paris and New York and praised by the likes of Picasso and Kandinsky. Surrealist poet Andre Breton enthusiastically proclaimed her a surrealist and referred to her art as "a ribbon around a bomb." Rivera, who called the self-taught Kahlo "a superior painter," also said, "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings."

When Kahlo returned to Mexico in 1939 after her successes abroad, she and Rivera divorced. While she had her own share of infidelities, counting Trotsky and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi among her lovers, Kahlo was devastated. Her health deteriorated, yet she continued to paint.

In *The Two Fridas* (1939), on display at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, two Kahlos are connected by a red vein linking two hearts—one whole and one broken and bleeding. Although she and Rivera remarried in 1940, Kahlo re-

turned again to the theme of the double self-portrait in *Tree of Hope* (1946) as her physical condition worsened. Aware of the nearness of death, Kahlo depicted an alternately light and dark landscape where a healthy Frida keeps watch over an anesthetized, surgically wounded double.

As Kahlo has increasingly become an icon, her paintings have skyrocketed in value—from tens of thousands of dollars in the late '70s to the 1991 sale that set her auction record: \$1.65 million for *Self-Portrait with Loose Hair* (1947). While Kahlo's works seldom appear for sale, more are now available for viewing. Mexican art patron Dolores Olmedo, owner of the largest private collection of Kahlo's paintings, recently opened her home, La Noria, to the public. The restored 16th-century monastery is about fifteen minutes from Casa Azul.

And it is at Casa Azul, home of her beginning and her end, where Kahlo's spirit resides. Her painted plaster corset still sits atop her bed, where, after several attempts at suicide, she reportedly died of a pulmonary embolism. On her pillowcase she embroidered the words, "Don't forget me, my love"; in her studio, a frog-shaped pre-Columbian urn holds her ashes. Her last painting, *Viva La Vida* (1954), or "Long Live Life," a sensual still-life of sliced watermelons, hangs among the museums other paintings.

Despite her pain, Kahlo celebrated life even at her death. "I have achieved a lot," she wrote during her last months. "I will be able to walk. I will be able to paint. I love Diego more than I love myself. My will is great. My will remains."

Further Reading

A complete study of Kahlo's life and art can be found in Martha Zamora's book *Brush Of Anguish* and Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo and Frida Kahlo: the Paintings*.