



MASTERS OF ART

KAHLO

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PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

Front Cover: Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait
(dedicated to Dr. Leo Eloesser), 1940

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Neumarkter Straße 28 · 81673 Munich

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Editorial direction: Constanze Holler, Stella Christiansen
Translation: Jane Michael
Copyediting: Vanessa Magson-Mann, So to Speak, Icking
Production management: Andrea Cobré
Design: Florian Frohnholzer, Sofarobotnik
Typesetting: ew print & medien service gmbh
Seperations: Reproline mediateam
Printing and binding: Litotipografia Alcione, Lavis
Typeface: Cera Pro
Paper: 150g Profisilk



Verlagsgruppe Random House FSC® N001967

Printed in Italy

ISBN 978-3-7913-8657-7

www.prestel.com

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INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons why Frida Kahlo is famous far beyond the field of fine art, and why she became a "style icon". Frida Kahlo's artistic life was indeed determined by her illness, her complicated relationship with Diego Rivera, her numerous love affairs, her close links with Mexican folklore and her Communist beliefs. One question remains, however: does her extraordinary biography also explain the remarkable aspects of her art, her own concept of art as such, and her resulting unique personal style?

Frida Kahlo portrays her physical suffering clearly in many of her pictures. It did not determine her stylistic development, however, and the result was not a pessimistic depiction of misery. On the contrary: Kahlo's pictures are a defiant contradiction, a hymn to life. Her appalling accident and her constant battle against illness had a lasting effect on her life, but did not affect her artistic development and her idiosyncratic pictorial language.

The strong psychological pressure which Diego Rivera exerted on Kahlo was overpowering in every respect. He played games with her—often cruel games—and she obeyed him in a mental and physical dependence which can only be described as neurotic. "In her diary she speaks of the frustration of not being a perfect complement and companion for Rivera. She was tormented by what she felt to be her own inadequacies. They deluded her into daydreaming; her longing detached itself from a world which was subject to the compulsion of rational possibilities. Kahlo's message addresses the psyche and defies logical explanations. It reveals the extent of her passion for Rivera, her obsession with belonging to him and being with him for ever." Nonetheless, she did not follow him artistically and was never his "disciple". While she was very dependent on Rivera as a man, she remained completely independent from him with regard to his art.

Kahlo's encounter with the Surrealists in Paris shocked her permanently, but not in the sense that she was overwhelmed by their art. No, in fact, she was shocked by the lifestyle of the Parisian *bohème*. "They bluster on all the time about *culture*, *art*, *révolution* and all sorts of other things, imagining as they do so, that they are God himself. They dream up incredible nonsense and poison the air with their theories, when anyone knows that they will never be realised. The next morning they have nothing to eat in the house, because nobody works. They simply live like parasites on a group of rich show-offs, who admire what they conceive to be artistic genius. But all it really is, is shit."

Kahlo's numerous love affairs also influenced her artistic development. This circle of people has been largely ignored to date in literature on Frida Kahlo, but for her they were an essential part of her life. The subchapter "Companions, Friends and Lovers" is dedicated to them. Who were these people to whom Kahlo was attracted? She studied their artistic work without ever resorting to plagiarism; she drew on these sources, but nonetheless transformed their influence and adapted them to her own sense of style. The photographer Nickolas Muray, the graphic artist Fernando Fernández, the "muralist" Diego Rivera, the American avant-garde artist Georgia O'Keeffe, the Japanese-American artist and designer Isamu Noguchi and the Catalan painter José Bartoli left a deep impression on her life. However, this cannot be detected at all, or only in heavily disguised form, in Kahlo's pictures. It is likely that Frida Kahlo pursued these friendly and sexual relationships with highly interesting women and men, as a way of counterbalancing the compulsive relationship which chained her to Diego Rivera throughout her entire life.

Her links with her native country, Mexico, were deep and genuine. Kahlo often dressed in traditional costumes and was surrounded by selected items of Mexican folk art in her studio. She painted herself on several occasions wearing a "resplendor", the festive lace collar which frames the entire face. "Her resplendent Tehuana costumes, eye-catching headdresses, hand-painted corsets and prostheses skilfully masked her physical disabilities, and were also a form of self-presentation and an extension of her art." Frida Kahlo wanted to live nowhere else but in Mexico; it was the only country in which she felt able to live. Her ties to her native land were one of the few constants in her life and the most important source of her painting.

Rivera, who at one point was Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Mexico, introduced Kahlo into this left-wing intellectual world. His efforts met with only modest success, however: for Kahlo the Communist ideology became a naïve substitute religion. Her identification with this political conviction was of no significance for her art.

This book's aim is to show what constituted Kahlo's artistic independence and how hard she had to fight for artistic self-determination. Only in her late work was she able to truly discover herself; in her "painted diary" she freed herself of all shackles and her art became expressive and strongly abstracted. She threw all conventions to the wind and took no account of public taste or the opinion of her fellow artists, thereby overcoming not only her role model Rivera but also her penchant for folklore.



LIFE



Frieda becomes Frida

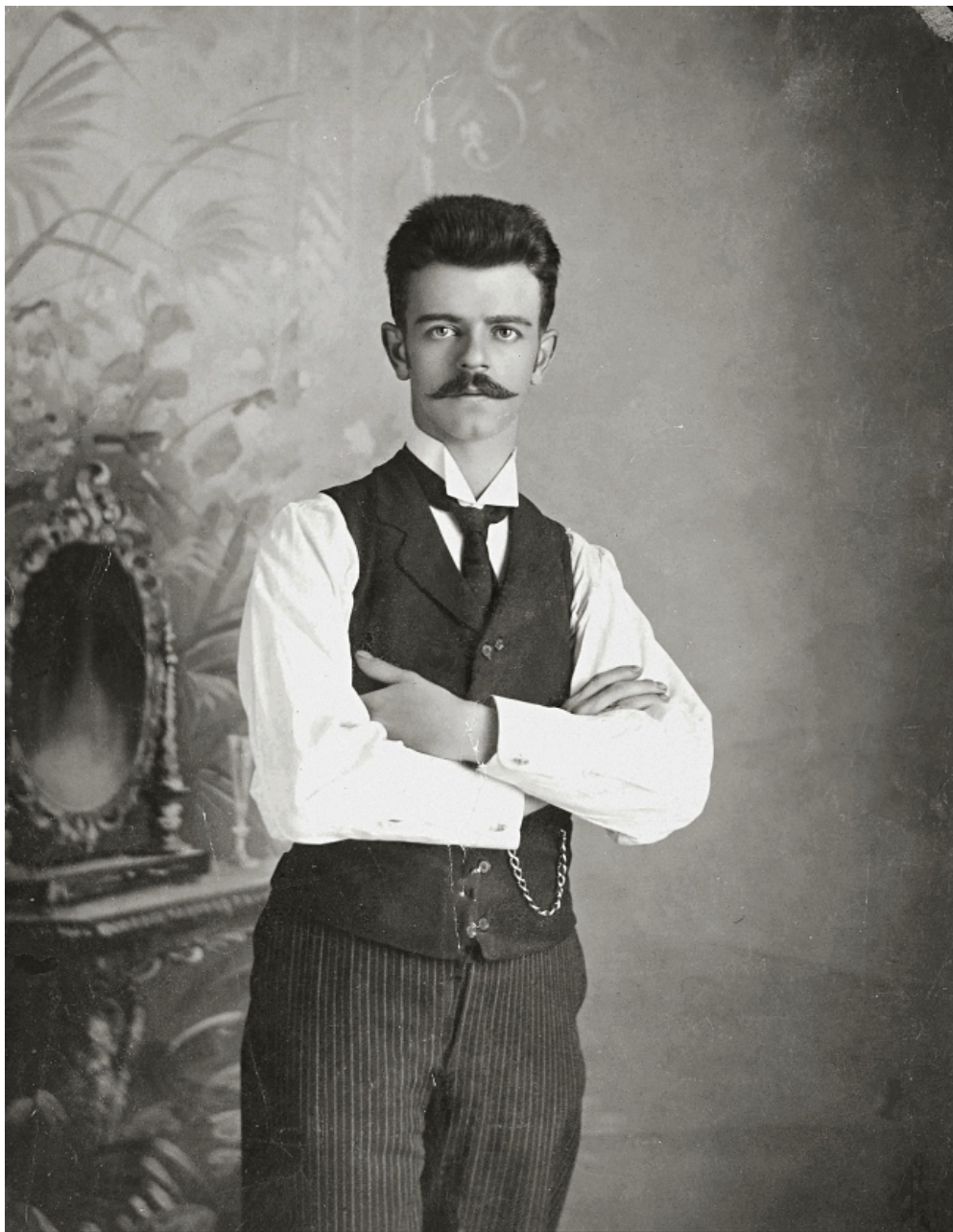
A sheltered upbringing in the "Blue House": childhood and youth in Mexico 1907–1921

In retrospect Frida Kahlo's life appears highly unusual. However her childhood and youth in Mexico were normal and even unspectacular. Her father, Karl Wilhelm Kahlo, was born in 1871 into a middle-class family that lived in Pforzheim and later in Lichtental. Nothing is known of his schooldays. His eldest sister died in 1877 and his mother the following year. We can surmise that these tragic events must have been a hard blow for Karl Wilhelm and may have contributed to the boy's decision to leave his home country permanently. He set off for Mexico in 1890, soon after reaching adulthood. We do not know through whom or where he trained as a photographer, but the works he produced indicate that he focused on portrait photography from an early stage and that he was very knowledgeable in this field. He found a job with a jeweller and married María Cardena Espino, with whom he had two daughters, Matilde and Adriana. María died in 1898 during the birth of their second daughter.

The stars were more favourable for Karl Wilhelm's second marriage to Matilde Calderón y Gonzáles during that same year. Wilhelm, who now called himself Guillermo, got on well with his new father-in-law, a famous photographer. Since Guillermo Kahlo had already begun to take an

interest in the new medium of photography while he was still in Germany, he was pleased to accept his father-in-law's suggestion that he should accompany and assist him during an extensive photographic trip through Mexico. He became a highly respected photographer and his family was able to live from his work without financial worries. The construction of the "Blue House", in which Frida and her sister Cristina were to grow up, began in 1904. The single-storey building with three wings surrounded an attractive inner courtyard in which a garden had been planted—rather like a "hortus conclusus", an enclosed "Paradise Garden" of the kind that we recognise from the pictures of medieval masters. The house and garden became a sheltered space for Frida, remaining a retreat and the subject of many of her pictures throughout her life.

Frieda is listed in the register of births in Mexico City with the German spelling of her name which she later changed from "Frieda" to "Frida". She was her parents' elder daughter and born in 1907; her sister Cristina followed in 1908. "Frida maintained a close relationship with Cristina throughout her entire life, in which she, as the elder of the two—and later the successful one—called the tune. They attended kindergarten and school together and also agreed that they would regard their mother's religious convictions with scepticism and would even make fun of them at times." But Frida's carefree childhood was to be short-lived. At the age of six she became ill with polio, which confined the child to her bed for nine months. In those days polio was a severe



Karl Wilhelm ("Guillermo") Kahlo, *Self-portrait*, c. 1900



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Girl with a Yellow Wreath in her Hair*, 1902



Portrait of Virginia (Niña), 1929

When the journey finally began in November 1930, Kahlo was full of happy anticipation. The couple's first destination was San Francisco, where Rivera soon began work on his large-scale fresco in the City Club. Apart from Rivera, all the artists working on the magnificent Art-Déco building were from the United States, and included Adeline Kent Howard, Robert Boardman Howard, Otis Oldfield, Ralph Stackpole and Clifford Wright. It is hardly surprising that the presence of the famous Communist artist from Mexico was the subject of gossip in San Francisco's society circles. The "exotic" couple appeared in public, was courted and received invitations. Accordingly, Kahlo became acquainted with a number of interesting conversation partners during the first months of her sojourn in California, especially the photographer Edward Weston and the surgeon Dr. Leo Eloesser.

Edward Henry Weston, one of the co-founders of the Group f/64, is regarded as one of the most important American photographers of the twentieth century. His landscapes, still lifes, portraits and nude photographs show him to have been a master of black-and-white photography. He used an 8-by-10-inch plate camera for the most part. His pictures were always expressive but never exaggerated, full of life, and American through and through. He had a low opinion of artistic theories: "To study the rules of composition before taking a picture is like studying the laws of gravity before going for a walk." This comment—whether substantiated or not—certainly reflects his artistic attitude very precisely.

In a diary entry dated 4 December 1930 Weston described seeing Diego Rivera again and his first impressions on meeting Frida Kahlo: "I took some photos of Diego, and also of his new wife—Frida: she is tiny—a doll beside Diego, but only as regards size, because she is a strong personality [...]. She wears Mexican clothing, even *huaraches* [traditional Mexican sandals], and when she walks through the streets of San Francisco in this costume, the people stop in their tracks and watch her pass."

The relationship which Kahlo established with Dr. Leo Eloesser was based on a very particular kind of trust. She contacted the consultant at the San Francisco General Hospital because of severe back pain and instinctively had confidence in him. From then onwards she asked his advice in all matters relating to health. In 1931 Kahlo painted the *Portrait of Dr. Leo Eloesser*, (page 24) on which he can be seen with a model ship. Eight years later—in the year of her separation from Diego Rivera—she gave Leo Eloesser a *Self-Portrait*, (page 25) to which she added a personal dedication. The inscription was: "Pinté mi retrato en el año de 1940 para el Doctor Leo Eloesser, mi médico y mi mejor amigo. Con todo mi cariño. Frida Kahlo" ("I painted my portrait in 1940 for Dr. Leo Eloesser, my doctor and best friend. With all my love. Frida Kahlo").

At first sight the two pictures go very well together: their colour scheme is strikingly similar. As regards form, however, they are worlds apart. In artistic terms nothing—absolutely nothing—is painted correctly in the portrait of Dr. Eloesser.





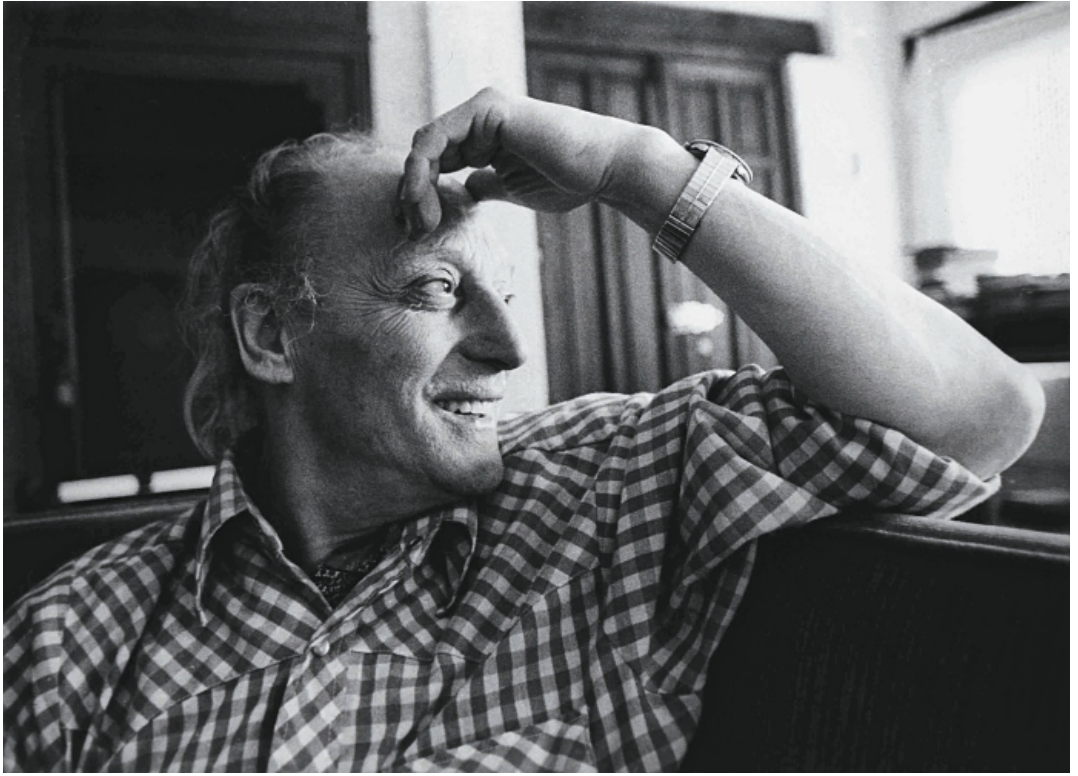
Portrait of Dr. Leo Eloesser, 1931



Self-Portrait (dedicated to Dr. Leo Eloesser), 1940



Frida Kahlo with Emmy Lou Packard, 1941



José Bartoli

Kahlo's last great love: José Bartoli 1943–1946

The Catalan artist José Bartoli was born in Barcelona in 1910. During the Spanish Civil War he fought on the side of the Republicans. He was taken prisoner but was able to escape during transportation and made his way to France. He arrived in Mexico after various adventures in 1943 and met Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Kahlo and Bartoli embarked on a passionate love affair which they succeeded in keeping secret for many years.

When Bartoli died in 1995, his family found a chest with his souvenirs of Frida Kahlo: hair ribbons, scarves, letters, sketches, and a little oval medallion measuring about 5 by 4 centimetres. On the back of the miniature painted in 1946, Kahlo had written in red: "para bartoli con amor—mara". "Mara" was the name with which Frida had signed all her love letters to Bartoli "as a precautionary measure".



Portrait of Dr. Leo Eloesser, 1931



Self-Portrait (dedicated to Dr. Leo Eloesser), 1940