

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Frida Kahlo: Portrait of the Artist as a Fashionista

Stephen West · Wednesday, October 28th, 2020

San Francisco museums are starting to reopen after the virus pandemic shut down everything for seven months, and one of the first new exhibitions is *Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving* at the [de Young Museum](#).

Originally scheduled for a March debut, the show is as much a portrait of the artist as a conventional display of her work. It offers a sampling of her paintings and drawings, as well as dozens of examples of her traditional Mexican costume designs, jewelry and accessories, which she wore daily and established her image as a fashion icon.

Much of the exhibition presents photographs, documents, and artifacts that illustrate her life, her marriage to the muralist Diego Rivera, and their circle of friends among the leftist avant-garde of Mexico City. These include a series of color photos of Kahlo by Nickolas Muray, including the striking *Frida With Olmeca Figurine, Coyoacan* (top image) of 1939, and a fine formal black-and-white portrait by Imogen Cunningham.

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) grew up in a prosperous family, the fourth daughter of an immigrant German photographer, Guillermo Kahlo, and his wife, Matilde. His pictures of Frida and the family, as well as self-portraits and local sights such as the Mexico City cathedral, serve nicely as an introduction to her troubled life. Frida was stricken by polio at the age of 6, and she almost died in a bus crash when she was 17, leaving her with physical disabilities that affected her for the rest of her life. While recovering, she began to dabble in drawing and painting.

The show expands with her marriage to Rivera in 1929 and the couple's life at the Casa Azul, or Blue House, in Mexico City. There's a photograph of Kahlo working on her famous surrealist painting *The Two Fridas* of 1939, which shows the pair of Fridas seated, holding hands, clothed in long Mexican dresses, with anatomically correct hearts exposed on their chests and connected by a blood vessel. There's Rivera's great 1931 painting of the revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata standing next to a magnificent white horse, his foot on the sword of a fallen enemy and followed by a group of peasant soldiers. There's even a short film of Rivera and Kahlo meeting the Russian communist Leon Trotsky at the Casa Azul in 1937.



Frida Kahlo, *El suicidio de Dorothy Hale* (*The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*), 1939, oil on Masonite with painted frame; collection of Phoenix Art Museum, gift of an anonymous donor. © 2020 Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico City / Artists Rights Society, New York.

The major Kahlo paintings in the show also include *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* of 1939, a gruesome scene in which the socialite Dorothy Hale jumps to her death from a high-rise New York apartment building. Partly obscured by swirling white clouds that cover much of the picture and its frame, Dorothy is shown twice during her fall and again at the bottom of the picture, lying dead in a pool of blood, clothed in a chic black cocktail dress. It's a disturbing image.



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Leo Eloesser*, 1940, oil on Masonite (?); private collection. © 2020 Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico City / Artists Rights Society, New York.

Self-Portrait Dedicated to Dr. Leo Eloesser of 1940 appears at first glance to be a more conventional head-and-shoulders picture. Kahlo is dressed in a brown top, with colorful flowers in her hair and a jungle of greenery in the background. But a closer look reveals some very creepy accessories, an earring in the shape of a small hand (severed from a small body?) and a tight necklace made of a vine of thorns that leaves her neck discreetly bleeding.



Frida Kahlo, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*, 1931, oil on canvas; collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender. © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico City / Artists Rights Society, New York.

A less obviously troubled image is *Frieda and Diego Rivera* of 1931, an almost cartoonish portrait of the standing couple holding hands against a neutral background. Diego, dressed in a dark suit and blue shirt, holds an artist's palette and brushes in his right hand. Frida, in a green dress, red shawl, and two necklaces, tilts her head slightly to the side. He looks wary. She looks infinitely sad.

Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving runs through February 7, 2021, at the de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Timed tickets are required, and all visitors must wear masks and observe social distancing. For more information, click [here](#). Earlier versions of the exhibition were organized in 2012 by the Museo Frida Kahlo in Mexico City and in 2018 by the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. An extensive catalog is published by V&A Publishing.



Installation photograph of *The de Young Open* at the de Young Museum, September 2020; photo by Gary Sexton; image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Bay Area Salon

The de Young also has mounted an intriguing (and overwhelming) survey of works by Bay Area artists called *The de Young Open*. Over the summer it called for submissions and received offers of more than 11,500 works by more than 6,000 artists. These were whittled down by a jury to a final list of 877 works by 762 contributors, which are now displayed salon-style, three or four works high, across nine large, white-walled galleries.

The works are grouped by themes, ranging from topical issues like the Corona virus and the Black Lives Matter movement to timeless subjects like the human figure, abstraction, and nature. The technical quality of most of the works is remarkably high, with echoes of a wide range of

established artists.

Among the realist works, for example, the visitor gets whiffs of Edward Hopper, Wayne Thiebaud, and Ed Ruscha. Among the abstract paintings, the influences range from Piet Mondrian to Jackson Pollock to Frank Stella and more. One work mimics Henri Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe* with a perfectly painted pipe and a caption that says "This Is a Pipe."

The exhibition, needless to say, contains far more works than can be absorbed in one visit, but even an hourlong stroll through it can be amusing and absorbing and baffling all at once.

The de Young Open runs through January 3. The entire lineup of works is available for sale and can be viewed online [here](#).

(Featured image: Nickolas Muray, Frida With Olmeca Figurine, Coyoacan, 1939, color carbon print; collection of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of George and Marie Hecksher in honor of the 10th anniversary of the new de Young Museum. © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives.)

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