

Frida Kahlo is one of the world's most renowned artists. Her self-portraits, love affairs, and life are as famous as her unparalleled works of art. This exhibition, a closer look at her life through her personal archives and clinical records, shows an artist most focused on her body, which was ravaged by illness and pain, and reveals the motives for her relentless artistic need to represent her body, physique, and psyche.



Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907–1954).
The Two Fridas, 1939. Oil on canvas.
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Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico,
D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York

One of Kahlo's best-known and most studied artworks is *The Two Fridas (Las dos Fridas)*. This 1939 double self-portrait by the Mexican artist features a heart outside the body of each of the Fridas, who are connected by holding hands and sharing a vein uniting the two hearts, which are drawn with anatomical similitude. Kahlo's interest in human anatomy was present before she engaged in her artistic career; she originally wanted to study medicine. Ironically, she spent much of her life with doctors and in hospitals after a bus accident in 1925, when she was eighteen years old.

Throughout her work, the heart is a frequent image, often linked to blood, and used as a metaphor for both physical and emotional pain as well as love and affection. The heart and her own image and body were artistic subjects and sources of constant inspiration.

Kahlo: An Expanded Body presents a journey through Frida Kahlo's body by examining aspects that she transformed into characters in her work. The exhibition expands the notion of the body, from the biological interior to the physical exterior, and then to the metaphorical and sentimental. Starting at the heart, heartbeat, and blood, and continuing to the torso, legs, back, and lips, and arriving to her loves and affections, this approach is possible through the inclusion of the artist's clinical files from the American British Cowdray Medical Center in Mexico City and her family archives.

The files, some of which are on public view for the first time, shed light on Kahlo's personal medical history. We learn, for example, that Kahlo's blood type was A+ and that her lower right leg was amputated because of gangrene in 1953, and from an X-ray of April 1954 we can see the terrible condition of her spine some three months before her death. These documents and the photographic images captured by Juan Guzmán and Raúl Anaya explore the artist's many hospitals stays and treatments after surgery, and thus the circumstances of her physical body.

While her depictions of the heart are seemingly anatomically accurate, for Kahlo this organ is also a symbol of love and affection. In her 1951 painting *Self-Portrait with the Portrait of Doctor Farill*, as seen in a photograph by Gisele Freund in the exhibition, the artist sits in her wheelchair beside an outsize portrait of her doctor; the paint palette she holds recalls popular imagery of a heart, suggesting the gratitude Kahlo felt for Dr. Farill. One of her favorite colors was carmine red, which, as she mentioned in her diaries, was associated with the heart and blood. This color appears in the letters sent to Diego Rivera and to her friend Dr. Leo Eloesser, in the stamping of her lips on the paper. The artist's affection and appreciation toward her family and Rivera, her life partner, was extended to her friends, lovers, and students—known as los Fridos—who visited her in the famous Casa Azul (Blue House), in the Coyoacán neighborhood, where she lived in the inseparable company of her Xoloitzcuintli dogs.

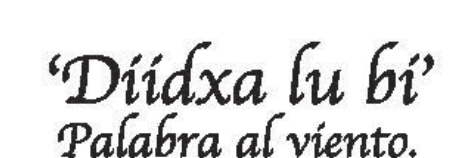
Frida Kahlo was photographed by the great Mexican and international photographers of her day. Included in this exhibition are works by Lola Álvarez Bravo, Florence Arquin, Imogen Cunningham, Gisele Freund, Nickolas Muray, Frida's nephew Antonio Kahlo and her father, Guillermo Kahlo.

Kahlo: An Expanded Body is a visual and documental journey through the life and health challenges (including 32 surgeries) that Frida experienced until her heart stopped beating, in July of 1954.

Kahlo: An Expanded Body is organized by Guest Curator Cristina Kahlo-Alcala and Parrish Art Museum Executive Director Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, with support from Guest Assistant Curator Javier Roque Vázquez Juárez, Curatorial Assistant and Publications Coordinator Kaitlin Halloran, and Curatorial Fellow Brianna L. Hernández.

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Nickolas Muray

American, born Hungary, 1892–1965

Frida with Shawl 1939

Facsimile

Museo de Filatelia de Oaxaca Collection

In her paintings, as in her personal life, Frida Kahlo had a strong connection with the color red. She kept notes in her diary that assigned meaning to the colors in her paintings. In these notes, we see spots of red on the page and such comments as: "Blood? Well, who knows!" Red represented the importance that blood had acquired for her, after the series of operations she endured and the miscarriages she suffered.

Red also happened to be one of her favorite colors. She liked to wear Everything's Rosy by Revlon, a pink lipstick with red tones. Carmine, a darker, purplish red, appears frequently on letters Frida sent to Diego Rivera and close friends: she would press her lips to the paper as a sign of affection.

In the spring of 1938, André Breton, known to some as the father of Surrealism, and his wife, the artist Jacqueline Lamba, traveled to Mexico for four months to explore the country and present a series of lectures. Upon their arrival, Diego Rivera offered to host the couple at his and Frida Kahlo's home studio in the San Ángel neighborhood. During their time in Mexico, Breton and Lamba met the Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky and his wife, Natalia Sedova, who were staying at the Casa Azul (Blue House, Frida Kahlo's family home) in the Coyoacán neighborhood. Breton met with artists Manuel Álvarez Bravo, José Clemente Orozco, and, of course, Frida Kahlo. Breton affirmed that her work accorded with the Surrealist style.

During their four month stay in Mexico, Breton and Lamba visited Xochimilco and Teotihuacán, and Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán. Photographs document their travels and their time spent with Kahlo, and immortalize Breton sporting Mexican huaraches.

Later that year, in November, Kahlo attended her first solo exhibition in New York. The following spring in 1939, Breton organized an exhibition of her work in Paris, at the Galerie Pierre Colle.

Mexico's diverse customs are informed by its Indigenous culture and by influences from around the world. As a former colony of Spain, Mexico participates of Spanish traditions with their Arab heritage. The word *alfeñique*, which is Arabic in origin, refers to a confection made of a sugar paste molded into various shapes. Notable among the *alfeñique* figures prepared for Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, is the vividly decorated sugar skull. The sweet skulls are thought to derive from the pre-Hispanic Indigenous practice of honoring the gods by displaying human skulls in wooden racks called *tzompantlis*. Today, *alfeñique* skulls are sold in markets and street stands throughout Mexico in late October, reminders of the reality and significance of death. They are made in different sizes and colors, often adorned with flower imagery and interlaced designs. The skulls may be dedicated to the deceased and feature the name of the departed, or may be given as gifts, identified with the name of the recipient, humorous symbols of our collective and inevitable destiny.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, many foreign nations looked toward Mexico for commercial and investment opportunities. Weetman Dickinson Pearson, the First Viscount Cowdray, arrived from Britain in 1889 to carry out a public works commission, a railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific, at the invitation of President Porfirio Díaz.

To acknowledge his gratitude for the success of his business in Mexico, in 1919 Lord Cowdray and his wife donated funds to build a medical institution in the capital. The American Hospital had existed since 1886, and Lady Cowdray had helped found a medical facility in 1911. In 1923 the Cowdray Sanatorium opened its doors; it merged with the American Hospital in 1941 to become the American British Cowdray Hospital. It continues to serve Mexico City today, now known as the ABC Medical Center.

Frida Kahlo's medical journey entailed visits to a number of medical establishments in Mexico and elsewhere, but without a doubt the ABC Hospital constituted a notable chapter in her life. An important part of her medical history is preserved at the hospital. A portion of the photographs and clinical files in this exhibition come from the hospital and have served to reconstruct the daily life of the Mexican painter, particularly during her last years.

Dolores del Río was a Mexican actress who achieved fame in the United States in the 1920s and became one of the most popular figures of the golden age of Mexican cinema.

Del Río met many of Mexico's prominent muralists in the 1930s and forged a close friendship with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. In 1938, she was photographed by Rivera in his home studio in the San Ángel neighborhood. Later the actress recalled: "We started working at ten in the morning, we stopped at two, and we crossed the mysterious bridge that separated Rivera's studio from Kahlo's house. There she would prepare for me pumpkin blossom broth, huitlacoche tacos, refried beans, and Mexican salsas."

After Frida Kahlo and Rivera divorced in 1939, she had to ask friends for financial assistance. Kahlo apparently felt comfortable enough with del Río to ask her for help. In a telegram sent that year to the actress in Los Angeles, Kahlo asks for a loan of \$250 USD.

The relationship between the two women is captured in various photographs in this exhibition, which also highlight the contrast between their inimitable styles.

During Frida Kahlo's time as a student at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, she was a classmate of Aurora Reyes, who years later would be hailed as the first female Mexican-born muralist. Reyes's stay at the school was cut short when she was expelled. She subsequently attended the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City but had to leave this school as well. Yet she continued her studies—teaching herself. Reyes would later become an educator.

Besides being a visual artist and educator, Reyes was a poet and a political activist. She was a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR in its Spanish abbreviation) and the National Peasant Confederation. She stood out as a union leader, promoting the creation of nurseries for the children of female workers, and fought for women to obtain the right to vote and run for public office. She supported other leftist social and political initiatives, including the Mexican student movement of 1968.

Reyes painted seven murals in the Revolution School Center in the Doctores neighborhood of Mexico City, at the headquarters of the National Union of Education Workers, and in a council room of what is now the Coyoacán mayor's office.

Ectopia cordis is a rare condition in which the heart is positioned outside the chest. It has been associated with defects in the diaphragm and breastbone, and in most cases, with heart disease.

In 1951, Frida Kahlo gave Dr. Juan Farill the book *Complete Anatomy of Man* (1768), a volume that summarizes a series of descriptions of the human body. One of the illustrations in the book depicts the deformation of ectopia cordis. In the image, a figure appears with an exposed heart on the left side of their chest.

It is possible that Kahlo studied this and other images in preparation for her work *The Two Fridas* (Las dos Fridas), which she painted in 1939. In the painting, the Frida on the right shows an exposed heart as if it were an anatomical illustration from the XVIII to represents her link with Diego Rivera, who is depicted in a medallion in her left hand.

Frida Kahlo was admitted to the American British Cowdray (ABC) Hospital in Mexico City for increased problems with gangrene of the toes and right foot on July 28, 1953. Surgery was not performed right away, but she was observed for about two weeks. On August 11, 1953, she underwent amputation of the right foot for gangrene, what is also called a below-the-knee amputation by her long-time surgeon, Dr Juan Farill. The surgery took about two hours. She appeared to do well overall other than a fever for a couple of days after the operation. She was given a number of medicines for pain and infection, initially including chlorpromazine (trade name Thorazine) for sedation, as well as antibiotics penicillin and gentamicin. By August 28, she was allowed outdoors to the hospital garden, and was allowed to leave the hospital for a few hours on August 31. She was later treated with vasodilator hydergine to improve blood flow to the leg; a barbiturate presumably used for sleep; and insulin, which may have been given to try to speed the healing process. She convalesced in the hospital for nearly two months, until October 7, 1953, when she was discharged home just ten months before her death.

The year 1938 was significant in Frida's artistic career. For several months, she prepared her first solo exhibition in New York City, at the Julien Levy Gallery. In an exhibition text, André Breton linked Kahlo's paintings to the Surrealist movement: "My amazement and rejoicing knew no limits when, once I arrived in Mexico, I discovered that her work had flourished, producing pure Surrealism in her latest works."

The exhibition opening was notable for the attendance of the artist. Among others present was American painter Georgia O'Keeffe. The local press published many favorable reviews, and as Kahlo noted to her friend Alejandro Gómez Arias, *Vogue* magazine reproduced three of the paintings. With the exhibition, Kahlo was deemed "a painter in her own right."

Political struggles between the revolutionary leaders Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky led to the latter's expulsion from the Russian Communist Party and his exile. After some time in Europe, Trotsky arrived in Mexico in January 1937, with his wife, Natalia Sedova. This was in part thanks to Diego Rivera—a member of the International Communist League—who intervened with the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas.

Trotsky and Sedova arrived at the port of Tampico, where Frida Kahlo was waiting to accompany them to Mexico City and settle them temporarily into her Casa Azul (Blue House) in the Coyoacán neighborhood. As a sign of Kahlo's admiration, she gave Trotsky a signed and dated self-portrait in November 1937. Trotsky and Sedova lived in the Casa Azul (Blue House) for two years, until a quarrel with Rivera compelled them to leave.

Trotsky and Sedova moved to their new address a few blocks away, in the same Coyoacán neighborhood. Trotsky was assassinated there in August 1940.

In this group of images Frida Kahlo is photographed smoking cigarettes—something that for decades was exclusively a male practice in Mexico, particularly in public. While the women's movement in Mexico gained strength in the 1970s, groups of women in the early twentieth century had already begun to express their views against a society with rigid traditional gender roles and behavior.

Kahlo is seen in several portraits with a cigarette in hand, seemingly expressing her disagreement with the social construct by which only men were allowed to smoke. Of particular note is a photograph from 1953 of the artist smoking in her hospital room in Mexico City, a nurse at her bedside.

In the mid-1940s, the Free School of Sculpture and Direct Carving, founded and directed by sculptor Guillermo Ruiz, modified its criteria and curriculum to become the National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Engraving La Esmeralda, under the direction of Antonio Ruiz, known as "El Corcito."

Within the teaching staff convened by Antonio Ruiz to be part of La Esmeralda were notable artists including Federico Cantú, Germán Cueto, María Izquierdo, Carlos Orozco Romero, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Frida Kahlo.

Frida Kahlo taught classes regularly for six months, but then her health problems worsened. In 1944, to relieve her physical discomfort, she was fitted for a steel corset, and this prevented her from teaching at La Esmeralda. She proposed to her students to continue the school year at her Casa Azul (Blue House) in the Coyoacán neighborhood. During classes, Kahlo introduced the group to plein air painting on the patio of the Casa Azul, in nearby neighborhoods such as El Pedregal, and on excursions that Diego Rivera sometimes joined.

Dr. Juan Farill Solares was a pioneer of orthopedics in Mexico; he introduced the specialty at the Children's Hospital of Mexico. He was director of the National Institute of Rehabilitation and founder of the Latin American Society of Orthopedics and Traumatology. In 1932 he received a Guggenheim fellowship, and throughout his career he was recognized by many national and international societies.

Frida Kahlo met Dr. Farill in 1939. He operated on her seven times over the years, and they established a close friendship. The artist expressed her gratitude to the doctor through letters, in her diary, and in at least two paintings.

During the winter of 1940, Frida was sick and depressed; a fungal infection on her hand was preventing her from painting. In a photograph by Nickolas Muray, *Frida in Traction*, the artist is seen in bed supported at the chin and the neck with an apparatus prescribed by Dr. Farill to extend her spine and reduce her pain.

A photograph taken in 1951 by Gisèle Freund at the Casa Azul (Blue House) that commemorates a visit by the doctor to Kahlo's studio. She sits in a wheelchair, paintbrushes in hand, Dr. Farill to her right. On a table is a self-portrait in a wheelchair, with a larger-than-life portrait of Dr. Farill at her side. In the painting she holds a paint palette in the shape of a heart, symbolizing her affection for Dr. Farill.

More than just a medical adviser, Dr. Leo Eloesser was Frida Kahlo's friend and confidant. They met in the mid-1920s, and she started consulting him as a specialist around 1930. Kahlo placed her total trust in him, as is evident in the correspondence they maintained over the years. In her letters, the painter asks him about the ills afflicting her; it was Dr. Eloesser who diagnosed the congenital deformation in her spine.

A pioneer in thoracic surgery, orthopedics and rehabilitation, Dr. Eloesser practiced at Letterman Army General Hospital and San Francisco General Hospital and was a professor at Stanford Medical School. He was known for his attention to the indigent, and he offered his services outside the United States; he assisted the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War and worked in China and the Soviet Union.

In 1930–1931, Kahlo and Diego Rivera were living in San Francisco. Dr. Eloesser treated Kahlo at that time, and in 1931 she painted his portrait. This is one of her first works marked by a notable sobriety, yet without any loss of honesty or respect toward her subject.

The sincere admiration that Kahlo felt toward her friend was evident in that portrait and in the fact that she dedicated to Dr. Eloesser her 1940 Self-Portrait with Necklace of Thorns. Her hair adorned with flowers, she wears the striking earrings that Pablo Picasso had given her.

In the early 1950s, Dr. Eloesser retired and moved with his partner, Joyce Campbell, to San Miguel Tamácuaro.

Juan O’Gorman was artistically and ideologically influenced by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. He met them both at the National Preparatory School (today the Old San Ildefonso College) in Mexico City, while pursuing his high school studies at the same time as Frida Kahlo. Rivera was at the school painting his famous mural *The Creation* in the campus amphitheater.

O’Gorman graduated with an architecture degree in 1924 and was also a self-taught painter. While a student, he discovered Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture*, which introduced him to the notion of functional architecture, countering the notion of a strictly academic pursuit. A house, Le Corbusier said, was “a machine for living in”; this inspired O’Gorman to design a functionalist house in 1929, now considered the first contemporary house in Mexico.

Given the friendship he had established with Rivera, who became his mentor, O’Gorman immersed himself in the artistic environment and socialist ideology of the time. Shortly after he completed his first house in the neighborhood of San Ángel, O’Gorman invited Rivera to visit: “I showed him the land on the corner of Palmas and Altavista and explained that I had bought the land and would sell it to him for the same price if he commissioned me to build his house and studio there. Rivera accepted and also commissioned the construction of a house for Frida Kahlo.”

Antonio Kahlo was the son of Cristina Kahlo Calderón and Antonio Pinedo Chambon. His original surname, Pinedo, was legally changed to Kahlo when he became an adult. His mother was Frida Kahlo's younger sister.

Like his grandfather Guillermo Kahlo, Antonio became a photographer. Self-taught, he documented his family in numerous images. During his youth, he devoted himself to portraits, several of which are among the most emblematic images of his aunt Frida. Professionally, he was commissioned by a national bank to document agriculture in Mexico. Guillermo Kahlo eventually worked for an electronics company, but he never abandoned photography. Of his three children, Cristina Kahlo Alcalá (co-curator of this exhibition) and Guillermo Kahlo Alcalá followed in his footsteps and those of their great-grandfather, both becoming professional photographers.

Kahlo: An Expanded Body includes various images of an infant Antonio Kahlo with his mother Cristina, his aunt Frida, and his sister Isolda. In a photograph taken around 1932, Frida carries her young nephew in her arms. This image reveals Frida's maternal instinct and was the springboard for a preparatory drawing for her painting *The Embrace of Love of the Universe, the Land, Me, Diego, and Mr. Xólotl*, where she replicated the figure of a mother carrying her son.

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