FRIDA & DIEGO
PASSION, POLITICS AND PAINTING
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OF PASSION AND PAINTING
THE REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS OF DIEGO RIVERA AND FRIDA KAHLO

When Frida Kahlo married Diego Rivera on August 21, 1929, she was twenty-two years of age and a novice painter; he was twenty years her senior and at the height of his creative powers as a muralist. Between 1923 and 1929, he had completed more than 200 large fresco panels for the Ministry of Education courtyard in Mexico City and the National Agricultural School in Chapingo. In 1931, his solo exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City consolidated his reputation as a world-renowned artist. During their lifetime together, Rivera's fame as a muralist overshadowed Kahlo's creation of an intimate yet equally significant body of work comprising primarily self-portraits and still lifes. Whereas Rivera was academically trained and prolific—producing hundreds of paintings, watercolours, sketches, and lithographs, as well as covering the walls of Mexico's most important institutions—Kahlo was self-taught and painstakingly measured, completing fewer than 200 small works before her death in 1954 at the age of forty-seven. While her art was embraced by the Surrealist movement in the late 1930s, her first solo exhibition in Mexico did not take place until 1953, and she remained largely unrecognized in the broader context of modern art until the 1970s.

In recent decades, Kahlo's posthumous fame has eclipsed that of Rivera, who died three years after her in 1957. A proliferation of biographies, films, and websites has secured her cult status in popular culture. Numerous exhibitions have enshrined her as one of modernism's most profound women artists, whose self-portraits embody both the physical suffering she endured after a debilitating bus accident and the spiritual anguish caused by Rivera's infidelity and her inability to have children. In contrast, Rivera's reputation as an artist declined with the onset of the Cold War and the rise of Abstract Expressionism. By the 1960s, muralism had become the domain of community activism rather than the avant-garde, and Rivera's affiliation with Communism led to his murals being dismissed as political propaganda and cartoonish as often as they were lauded for their sweeping embrace of history and dense figuration. Despite
major retrospectives of his work in Mexico City, London, and Detroit since 1986, Rivera no longer looms larger-than-life in the public imagination as Mexico's greatest muralist accompanied by a much younger and diminutive wife. Instead, Frida is seen as the iconic artist with Diego cast in a minor role as her much older and philandering husband.

In bringing the work of Kahlo and Rivera together, *Frida & Diego: Passion, Politics, and Painting* explores the affinities as well as differences that shaped the dynamics of their relationship and distinctive oeuvres. As a couple, the early years of their marriage were emotionally volatile—Diego's compulsive seduction of women and Frida's affairs culminated in a year-long divorce at the end of 1939—while the latter years of their remarriage were subsumed by Frida's declining health. As artists, their shared belief in the revolutionary potential of socialism and the transformative values of *mestizaje* (the mixing of indigenous and European peoples and traditions) sustained their devotion to each other for a quarter century. Rivera's mission was, in his own words, to "reflect the social life of Mexico as I saw it, and through my vision of the truth to show the masses the outline of the future." Kahlo, who famously declared, "I paint my own reality," captured the complexity of gender and race relations through an autobiographical lens, which affirmed her independence as a woman and her mestiza identity. Together, their story is one in which their passion for painting was inseparable from a politics shaped by two great revolutions of the twentieth century: the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

When the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, Rivera was twenty-four years old. Born in 1886 in Guanajuato, he had demonstrated a precocious artistic talent that gained him entrance to the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, where he studied art from 1898 to 1905, and secured a scholarship to further his training in Spain in 1907. Kahlo was born the same year that Rivera left for Europe, but gave her birth date as 1910 to coincide with the birth of the revolutionary upheaval in her homeland that led to a decade of armed struggle, the assassination of most of the Revolution's leaders—including Francisco Madero, Emiliano Zapata, and Pancho Villa—and the loss of more than one million lives. In her diary, Kahlo claims that as a small child she witnessed street clashes between opposing revolutionary forces in 1914, relating that her mother sheltered and fed Zapata's soldiers, who had fled their adversaries by leaping into the living room of the Casa Azul (The Blue House), Kahlo's family home in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán where she was born and ultimately died. Whether Kahlo actually witnessed fictional fighting is doubtful, although Zapata's army did occupy the city in 1914. For Kahlo personally, 1914 was more significant as the year that she contracted polio, which permanently damaged her right leg. And while she and her family suffered economic hardship during the Revolution, they did not experience its carnage. This occurred primarily in the north of Mexico, where battles were waged for control of the country, and in the south, where Zapata's guerrilla campesinos (rural workers) fought bitterly for the promise of agrarian reform.

In his autobiography, Rivera similarly touts his revolutionary credentials, claiming that he fought on the front lines with Zapata. In fact, he was absent from Mexico for most of the revolutionary period. After briefly returning home from Spain in 1910, Rivera left for Europe the next year and lived in Paris until 1921. When Zapata was marching on Mexico City in 1914, Rivera was meeting Pablo Picasso in Paris cafés and following the Revolution's course of events through news reports and contact with Mexicans traveling overseas. Towards the end of his lengthy
sojourn in Paris, Rivera met David Alfaro Siqueiros, a young painter who had experienced the Revolution’s carnage first-hand, and who later became, along with Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, one of the three great Mexican muralists of the post-revolutionary period. During their time spent together in Europe, Siqueiros and Rivera discussed the need for an art that reflected Mexico’s social transformation. In 1923, they issued the Manifesto of the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors, which called for a monumental art of the people. Equally important for Rivera’s politicization as an artist was his ten-year relationship in Paris with Angela Beloff, whose circle of Russian émigrés influenced Rivera’s commitment to Communism born of the Russian Revolution and the seizure of power by Vladimir Lenin’s Bolshevik Marxists in October 1917.

As the Mexican Revolution drew to a close in 1920, Rivera was recruited by José Vasconcelos—one of the Revolution’s cultural ideologues and Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924—to participate in his plan to sponsor public murals in order to promote a cultural nationalism forged from popular folk traditions and the fusion of indigenous and Western civilizations. At Vasconcelos’s request, Rivera traveled to Italy in 1920 to study Renaissance frescoes, and then visited the Mayan ruins in the southern state of Yucatán after returning to Mexico in 1921. The next year Rivera joined the Communist Party and married Guadalupe Marin, with whom he would have two children. He also began work on his first mural, Creation, whose classical references and pyramid of corn were a hint of how he would synthesize European and indigenous artistic influences. It was while Rivera worked on this mural, located in the auditorium of the National Preparatory School where Kahlo was a student, that she first laid eyes on her future husband. It was not until 1928, however, when Rivera returned from a ten-month visit to the Soviet Union and separated from Marin, that he began to court Kahlo, calling on her weekly at her Coyoacán home and painting her as a young revolutionary distributing arms to the people in his fresco on the third floor of the Ministry of Education building.

In the intervening years, their fates could not have been more different. In 1922, Kahlo was admitted to the prestigious National Preparatory School, one of only thirty-five girls out of 2,000 students. Planning to become a doctor, she demonstrated an intelligence as precocious as Rivera’s artistic talent, and flouted social conventions, cutting her hair short like a pelona, a Mexican version of a flapper. Then, in 1925, her world was irrevocably altered when a trolley sliced through a bus she was riding on, breaking her spinal column, ribs, collarbone, and pelvis as well as crushing her left shoulder, fracturing her right leg, and piercing her abdomen. While Rivera was painting for sixteen-hour stretches at the Ministry of Education, surrounded by admirers who traveled from Europe and North America to watch him at work and train as his assistants, Kahlo’s life as an artist began in isolation. She made her first paintings during the months she lay immobilized in bed and spent several years at home convalescing from the accident. Although she made an astonishing recovery, she was left slightly crippled and continued to undergo numerous operations on her damaged spine and right leg in the decades that followed. By 1927, Kahlo was well enough to become involved in radical politics and bohemian art circles. Through her friendship with Tina Modotti, an Italian-American photographer and Rivera’s former lover, she joined the Communist Party in 1928.

While Kahlo and Rivera most likely met at one of Modotti’s parties, both artists tell another
story, one where Kahlo, paintings in hand, went to the Ministry of Education to demand of Rivera that he descend from his scaffold to give her an honest opinion of her work, upon which the great maestro obliged her by pronouncing, “You have talent.” The story may have been invented, but Rivera’s admiration for Kahlo’s creative vision never faltered. In 1938, he wrote to an American art critic to recommend her “not as a husband but as an enthusiastic admirer of her work, acid and tender, hard as steel and delicate and fine as a butterfly’s wing, lovable as a beautiful smile, and profound and cruel as the bitterness of life.” Kahlo’s support of Rivera’s public art for the people was equally steadfast. In “Portrait of Diego,” a lengthy essay she wrote in 1949 to accompany Rivera’s fifty-year retrospective at the National Palace of Fine Arts, Kahlo penned an impassioned defense of his Communist ideals and “special adoration of the Indians” as “the living flower of the cultural tradition of the Americas.”

That Kahlo felt compelled to publicly defend her far more famous husband on the occasion of his state-sponsored retrospective reflects the complex relationship that both artists had to Marxist politics during their lifetime together. Before Rivera married Kahlo in 1929, he had managed to remain on the government payroll as a muralist and as a card-carrying Communist during a period when Mexico’s post-revolutionary radicalism gave way to the consolidation of state power by conservative forces. By 1924, Vasconcelos had resigned as the Minister of Education and most of the artists he had commissioned to paint the walls of public buildings had been fired. Rivera survived the purge, despite the overt and contradictory political content of his murals. On one hand, his murals idealized Mexico’s indigenous peoples and the Revolution’s rural protagonists, whom his conservative critics derided as “Rivera’s monkeys.” On the other hand, they featured Soviet-style proletariat workers in overalls taking up arms against decadent capitalists. The former could only have been painted by an artist who had not witnessed the Revolution’s devastation, the latter by a Communist whose belief in the revolutionary potential of the industrial masses took precedence over the historical reality of a Mexico whose impetus for social change lay in agrarian reform and the legacies of colonial oppression.

Rivera’s remarkable juggling act of art and politics came to an end when he was expelled from the Communist Party in September 1929, just three weeks after he and Kahlo were married. The official reasons given for his expulsion were his acceptance of mural commissions from a government that, only months before, had declared the Communist Party illegal. As Rivera’s new wife, Kahlo resigned from the Party in protest. Thereafter, they shared a revolutionary politics opposed to Joseph Stalin’s ruthless grip of power over the Soviet Union and the international Communist Party. When Stalin’s ideological adversary, Leon Trotsky, sought refuge in Mexico in the 1930s, Kahlo and Rivera sheltered him for two years at the Casa Azul. After Rivera and Trotsky quarreled in 1939, ostensibly over political differences and probably because of Kahlo’s reputed affair with Trotsky, both artists renounced Trotsky and turned back to Stalin. Kahlo rejoined the Communist Party in 1948 at Rivera’s urging, but Rivera was not readmitted until 1954, shortly after Kahlo died.

While Rivera and Kahlo’s lifetime commitment to Communism was integral to their identity as artists, their political convictions did not deter them from strategically cultivating patrons and seeking celebrity status. For Rivera, this meant producing easel paintings and drawings in the 1920s to subsidize his meager pay as a muralist. In the early 1930s, it meant accepting
commissions to paint murals for the millionaire industrialists of the United States, a nation Rivera deemed pivotal to a socialist future where technology and nature would be joined in harmony. In his Detroit Institute of the Arts mural cycle, commissioned by Edsel Ford, the industrial rhythm of autoworkers and the clenched fists of the four races of the world (European, American indigenous peoples, Asian, and African) have vanished the breadlines and poverty of the Great Depression. In Man Standing at the Crossroads, the central figure of a worker stretches his arms to receive the fruits of science and the arts amidst the turmoil of war and revolution. When Nelson Rockefeller, who had commissioned this mural for the public lobby of New York City's Radio City building, demanded that Rivera remove a likeness of Lenin, he must have found Rivera's refusal to do so incomprehensible. Yet, for Rivera, a socialist future was unimaginable without Lenin standing on guard as the leader of the Russian Revolution, even if this resulted in Rockefeller suspending work on the mural in 1933 and ordering it destroyed the following year.

Although Rivera subsequently reproduced Man Standing at the Crossroads on a smaller scale in Mexico for the Palace of Fine Arts, the destruction of his original work deeply affected him as an artist. With the exception of his frescoes depicting the history of Mexico in the National Palace stairwell—which Rivera began in 1929 before leaving for the United States and finished after returning home to Mexico in 1934—he would never again achieve the same degree of plasticity or synthesis of content in his murals. Nor did he obtain another mural commission in the United States until 1940, when he painted Pan-American Unity in San Francisco. In the 1940s and 1950s, he supported himself through commissioned portraits of patrons and children. He manifested his "special adoration of the Indians" by portraying campesinos bent over with flowers in his later paintings and rendering bucolic visions of a pre-Columbian past in his later murals.

Kahlo's political convictions found a different form of expression. She did not share Rivera's admiration for technology, perhaps because the trolley that shattered her body was heralded at the time as industrial progress, or because medicine could neither cure her spine nor save her from miscarriages or the amputation of her right foot the year before she died. Nor did she idealize Mexico's indigenous peoples. Instead, she derived her inspiration from popular culture, where to dress as an indigenous Tehuana woman in Mexico City was to signify overt sexuality rather than humble modesty, and to make small paintings was to reference the tradition of anonymous ex-votos and retablos asking the Virgin Mary for divine intervention or recording some tragedy, such as Kahlo's portrayal of her Detroit miscarriage in Henry Ford Hospital. While Rivera's synthesis of indigenous and European cultures looked outward to represent the rural protagonists of the Mexican Revolution, Kahlo's embrace of the transformative values of mestizaje turned inward to reflect upon her dual heritage. For Rivera, nature was aligned in harmony with an indigenous universe and represented by flowers; in Kahlo's self-portraits, it oscillates between parched earth and enveloping vegetation. Where Rivera idolized the revolutionary masses, Kahlo kept company with animals and dolls.

Yet despite these differences in their creative visions—his expansive and historical, hers internal and personal—Kahlo's lifetime commitment to Communism was no less passionate than Rivera's. Large portraits of Communist leaders hung in her bedroom in the Casa Azul, where Kahlo resided from 1939 until her death in 1954. Her painting Marxism Heals the Sick
attests to her faith in a socialist future, which sustained her battles with chronic pain as much as it sustained her bond with Diego. Of her many masks, Communism was not one of them. It lay behind the persona she created, keeping her company in the darkness of the night when her elaborate costumes were stripped from her body and replaced by corsets. It led her to disobey her doctor’s orders and leave her sickbed to demonstrate against the overthrow of Guatemala’s socialist president by a CIA-engineered coup only weeks before she died. For Kahlo, as for Rivera, politics embodied the quest to realize a "vision of the truth" for an art of Mexico and of the people.

While the great revolutionary upheavals that shaped Rivera’s and Kahlo’s Marxist beliefs and passion for Mexican culture are now shrouded in history, what belongs to the present is the legacy of their creative vision. Their spirit lives on in the social panorama of Rivera’s public murals and Kahlo’s riveting gaze in her diminutive self-portraits; it comes alive in the Casa Azul, preserved as a memorial to their years spent together inside its garden walls; it persists through their own writings and of those who knew them well. Bertram Wolfe describes what a strange couple they made when they first met:

This frail, slender, dynamic girl with her colorful raiment, jewels, ribbons, and make-up resembling some pre-Conquest Indian princess, with the ribbons in her hair barely coming up to her male companion’s shoulder, accompanying this lumbering giant of a frog-faced man in a huge sombrero, ill-fitting tweeds, or paint-stained overalls…. Yet nobody laughed at their unusual appearance; even those who had never seen their pictures nor heard their names felt that they were contemplating an extraordinary pair.8

By the end of their lives, the confluence of passion and politics had made Kahlo’s and Rivera’s art as extraordinary as their pairing.

4. Rivera, My Art, My Life, p. 50.