



The Blue House: Frida Kahlo's Private Universe

"Never in life will I forget your presence. You found me torn apart and you took me back full and complete."
Frida Kahlo

As one explores Frida Kahlo's work more deeply and enjoys the privilege of getting to know her home, one begins to discover the intense interrelations between Frida, her work, and her house. Her creative universe is to be found in the Blue House, the place where she was born and where she died. Following her marriage to Diego Rivera, Frida lived in different places in Mexico City and abroad, but she always returned to her family home in Coyoacán.

Located in one of the oldest and most beautiful neighborhoods in Mexico City, the Blue House was made into a museum in 1958, four years after the death of the painter. Today it is one of the most popular museums in the Mexican capital.

Popularly known as the *Casa Azul* (the 'Blue House'), the Museo Frida Kahlo preserves the personal objects that reveal the private universe of Latin America's most celebrated woman artist. The Blue House also contains some of the painter's most important works: *Long Live Life* (1954), *Frida and the Caesarian Operation* (1931), and *Portrait of My Father Wilhelm Kahlo* (1952), among others.

In the room she used during the day is the bed with the mirror on the ceiling, set up by her mother after the bus accident in which Frida was involved on her way home from the National Preparatory School. During her long convalescence, while she was bedridden for nine months, Frida began to paint portraits.

At the foot of the bed –a reminder of those days– are the portraits of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung. In the studio, is the easel given to Frida by Nelson Rockefeller, along with her brushes

and books, and in her nighttime bedroom is a collection of butterflies –a gift of the Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi–, as well as a portrait of her by her friend and lover the photographer Nickolas Muray.

Every object in the Blue House tells us something about the painter: the crutches, corsets, and medicines attest to her physical sufferings and the many operations she had to undergo. The ex-votive tablets, toys, clothing, and jewelry reveal a Frida who was obsessed with hoarding objects.

The house itself speaks of the artist's daily life. The kitchen, for example, is typical of Mexican colonial houses, with clay pots hanging on the wall and casserole dishes set out on the range: a testimony to the variety of cuisine prepared in the Blue House. Both Frida and Diego enjoyed offering their guests a whole range of traditional Mexican dishes.

Many prominent cultural figures and outstanding artists gathered around the dining table: André Breton, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Lev Trotsky, Juan O'Gorman, Carlos Pellicer, José Clemente Orozco, Isamu Noguchi, Nickolas Muray, Sergei Eisenstein, Dr. Atl, Carmen Mondragón, Arcady Boytler, Gisèle Freund, Rosa and Miguel Covarrubias, Aurora Reyes, and Isabel Villaseñor, among many others.

The Blue House was transformed into a synthesis of Frida and Diego's tastes and their admiration for Mexican art and culture. Both painters collected traditional folk art with a sure esthetic sense. Diego in particular had a love for pre-Hispanic art, as witnessed by the decoration of the gardens and interior of the Blue House.

Frida's home was turned into a museum because both Kahlo and Rivera cherished the idea of donating their works and possessions to the Mexican people. Diego asked the poet and museographer Carlos Pellicer to redesign the space so that the house could be opened to the public as a museum.

In November 1955, Pellicer described the house in the following terms: "Painted blue within and without, it seems to harbor a little bit of sky. It is the typical tranquil village house where good food and deep sleep give one the energy needed to live without serious alarms and to die in peace."

Diego Rivera also lived in the Blue House for long periods. It was the muralist who ended up buying the property, paying off the mortgages and debts left by Guillermo Kahlo. Frida's father had been an important photographer during the Porfiriato, but his fortunes had declined in the wake of the Revolution. Moreover, the medical costs incurred as a result of Frida's accident left the family in debt.

Built in 1904, the house is not particularly spacious. It now has a constructed surface area of 800 square meters on a lot of 1,200 square meters. According to historian Beatriz Scharrer, Guillermo Kahlo (who had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire) built the house in the style of the age: a central patio surrounded by the rooms. The exterior was designed in a thoroughly French style. It was Diego and Frida who later gave the house its distinctive air and who imprinted on it –by means of colors and traditional decorative elements– their admiration for the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

Beatriz Scharrer has explained how the construction underwent certain modifications over the years. When the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky lived with Diego and Frida in 1937, the blue-painted exterior walls were erected to enclose a newly-purchased lot of 1,040 square meters now occupied by the garden, thereby affording the Soviet intellectual a measure of protection from the pursuit Josef Stalin's hired assassins.

In 1946 Diego Rivera asked Juan O'Gorman to build a studio for Frida, proposing that he use local materials such as basalt, the volcanic stone employed by the Aztecs to build their pyramids and carve their ceremonial pieces. The studio was designed in a functionalist style and decorated with works of Mexican folk art. In this part of the house, Diego lined the ceilings with mosaics and the walls with seashells, also embedding clay pitchers in the exterior walls to provide nesting spaces for doves and pigeons.

Before he died, Diego asked Dolores Olmedo, his friend and patron, not to open the bathroom of his own bedroom in the Blue House for a period of fifteen years. Time passed, and Lola respected the wishes of her friend during her own lifetime. She kept the space locked up, as well as the bathroom of Frida's bedroom, a small storage space, and various trunks, wardrobes, and drawers. Diego had left a brief inventory of the objects stored in his bathroom, but until just recently nothing was known about the contents of the other spaces.

For almost three years, with the support of the non-profit organization *Apoyo al Desarrollo de Archivos y Bibliotecas de México* (ADABI), which provides financial aid to archives and libraries, a group of experts was able to organize, classify, and digitalize the newly-discovered collection: 22,105 documents, 5,387 photographs, 3,874 magazines and periodicals, 2,776 books, dozens of drawings, personal objects, clothing, corsets, medicines, toys.... The task of making this archive public coincided precisely with the centennial celebration of the birth of Frida Kahlo and the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Diego Rivera. The archives and objects brought to light were genuinely fascinating, providing clues that will enrich the biographies of both artists. Many scholars visiting the exhibition have commented in surprise that the stories of Frida and Diego need to be rewritten, since many suppositions have been proven false or misleading.

These documents and drawing provide fascinating clues about Frida's work. They include, for example, illustrations and drawings of the womb and the development of the human fetus, which would later be used to decorate the wooden frame of the diptych *Still Life*. Hidden away in the back of the closet, behind some books, was a small sketchbook containing the small but important drawing *Appearances Can Be Deceiving*. Stored in the same place were several drafts of the text Frida wrote about Diego ("Portrait of Diego Rivera") for the tribute to the muralist held at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. The authorship of this text had been questioned (and even attributed to Alfonso Reyes), but thanks to this new archive we can now be sure that Frida herself wrote it. All this is preserved in Frida's house, a building that constitutes a living spring of passionate experiences.

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