The Blue House: The Intimate Universe of Frida Kahlo

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

By delving into the knowledge of Frida Kahlo's legacy, one discovers the intense relationship that exists between Frida, her work and her home. 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 Coyoacan.

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 visited 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 her bed are framed images of left-wing politicians whose legacy was admired by the Frida, such as Lenin and Mao Tse Tung.

In the Studio, you will find the easel that Nelson Rockefeller gave to Frida, as well as her brushes and her books. The collection of framed butterflies that was a gift from the Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi, in addition to the photo-portrait of Frida by her friend and lover, the photographer Nickolas Muray, is kept in her Night Room.

Each object of the Casa Azul says something about the painter: the crutches, the corsets and the medicines are testimonies of her physical ailments, as well as of the surgeries to which the Mexican painter was subjected. The votive offerings, toys, dresses and accessories speak of a Frida who cared for and treasured objects as diverse as they were beautiful.

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. This space is evident testimony of the variety of stews that were prepared in the Blue House. Both Diego and Frida liked to entertain their guests with dishes of traditional Mexican cuisine.

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 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. After Frida’s death, Diego asked Carlos Pellicer - a close friend of a couple, a poet and a museologist – to open the house to the public as a museum.

In November 1955, Pellicer described the house in the following terms:

“Painted blue inside and out, 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 apprehensions 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 was not particularly spacious. According to the historian Beatriz Scharrer, Guillermo Kahlo, an immigrant of German origin, built the residence in the Mexican style of the second half of the 19th century, with a central patio and rooms surrounding it. It was Diego and Frida who, later, gave it a very particular elegance and, at the same time, reflected in the residence their admiration for the peoples of Mexico, filling it with bright colors and decorating it with popular Mexican art.
Beatriz Scharrer explains that, over time, the construction underwent some modifications. When the Russian politician Leon Trotsky, together with his wife Natalia Sedova, came to live in the Blue House, in 1937, the walls were bricked up and the 1,040 m2 property that the garden occupies today, was bought. This, in order to bring the Soviets visitors sufficient security space, since they were facing the persecution by Joseph Stalin.

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. For the covered patio of the Blue House Study, Diego and Frida designed mosaics for the ceilings, as well as embellishing the walls with sea snails and built-in jugs with the mouth in front, so that they could serve as dovecotes.

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 drawings give exciting clues about Frida's work. For example, illustrations were found on the womb and the human fetus development, as well as drawings on this subject. The round wooden frame sketch of the two Frida’s still lives that the artist painted in this shape (one of which is part of the permanent Museum’s exhibition) was also among these treasured objects.

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 Frida regarding this text had been doubted, nonetheless and thanks to this unveiled files, we now have the certainty that these beautiful words came from Frida's hands and mind.

All this is preserved in Frida's house, a building that constitutes a living spring of passionate experiences.

The Frida Kahlo Museum
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