



TRANSCENDING HER MOST MODERN LEGACY

By: Circe Henestrosa, curator of the exhibition "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The dresses of Frida Kahlo"

We couldn't have found a better, more complete, or more timely muse to inspire us all. Her characteristic and hybrid Tehuana style, featuring extraordinarily elaborate hairstyles, multicolored ribbons, and braids, has captured the attention of feminists, photographers, stylists, artists and fashion designers, not to mention contemporary culture as a whole. From Mexico to San Francisco, from Paris to New York, Frida Kahlo caused a sensation with her enigmatic, flirtatious, dark brown eyes, capable of holding gazes for extended periods of time: controlling, even inquisitive, yet fragile. Her characteristic monobrow and those brilliant, daring Tehuana dresses formed the personal elements of a contemporary icon. It was the Tehuana dress, originally brought in from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec located in southeastern Mexico, that Kahlo chose as her most characteristic ensemble, eventually defining both her identity and her cultural heritage. Carlos Fuentes recalls in his introduction to the *Diary of Frida Kahlo* how the artist arrived at the Palace of Fine Arts in her tinkling jewelry, how she succeeded in surpassing this architectural marvel, its paintings, and even the concert music performed there with her intense presence. Some of her closest friends describe the special care Kahlo took in selecting each of her garments and accessories. She would often ask her closest friends, "Does this work?"

And yet Frida put a lot of effort into creating her own style from head to toe, bedecking herself in spectacular silks, shawls, ties, and skirts always accompanied by pre-Hispanic jewelry in silver or gold. When children in the street would ask her, "Where's the circus," she would merely smile and gracefully continue on her way. This artist, who has left such a lasting impression on us through her work, has also bequeathed images that will remain indelibly marked on our retina, thanks to her personality and style.

First came *Vogue* in October 1937, a significant date in terms of Frida's future influence on fashion. Edna Woolman, the visionary director of the magazine from 1914 to 1952, portrayed her for the first time in its pages. Through his lens, Toni Frissel captured the image of a woman who would become one of the most emblematic artists of the 20th century. Obsessed with this visual dimension of herself, even before her first individual exhibition Kahlo captured the attention of fashion magazines with her personality and artistry, and she has continued to do so over the past 75 years, providing inspiration to a great many designers.

In 1939, André Breton organized the first exhibition of Kahlo's work in Paris titled *Mexique*, where her Tehuana ethnic dress caused a great sensation among the European elites. It is said that Elsa Schiaparelli, a star designer at the time, created a dress called the *Robe Madame Rivera* (the Madame Rivera Dress) in her honor. Over the past 20 years, Frida's image has spread everywhere like wildfire.

In 1998, the international designers Jean-Paul Gaultier and Christian Lacroix would pay homage to Frida Kahlo on their Spring-Summer runways. Inspired by her painting *The Broken Column*, Gaultier portrayed her in one of his most iconic examples of haute couture. Gaultier has his own views with regards to the significance of Kahlo's image. His is the perfect example of post-modern deconstruction, creating a burlesque exoticism of sorts while at the same time, portraying one of the many symbolisms Kahlo represents today. For his prêt-à-porter collection in Fall 2002, Kris Van Assche presented a subtler collection inspired by Kahlo, using light cottons, piqués and silks. To Van Assche, Kahlo represents something more fanciful than the usual imagery of pain and torture; hence he

chose to capture some of the more amusing facets of her personality. Frida laughed a lot in spite of it all, a fountain of joy that counterbalanced her passionate intensity as shown by her use of bright colors: sky blue, yellow, orange, and white. After Fridamania took off in 2005, the British designers Clements Ribeiro and Temperly London showed a more surrealist side of Kahlo in their collection of vintage dresses, platforms with butterflies, Mexican boots, big bags, high heels and hair ornaments in red velvet, recreating the painter's exuberant style. Ribeiro's use of platforms and short boots remind us of the aftermath of Kahlo's bout with polio and how she wore boots with a special heel in order to conceal her physical imperfections.

Rei Kawakubo's disciple Tao Kurihara is always unpredictable. In her prêt-à-porter collection from 2009, she presented Scandinavian dolls that referenced Frida with their red monobrows. The representation of Frida in this collection is eclectic, enigmatic, and audacious. Rei Kawakubo herself presented White Drama, her prêt-à-porter collection for Spring-Summer 2012 for Comme des Garçons, with a touch of religiosity. Through color and materials such as white lace and satin, Kawakubo led the viewer on a journey into Frida's universe.

Using fashion tailored from the 1950s and cages of lace, followed by flower-covered garments that recall Kahlo's splendid hair ornaments -items that in the past, were used in Catholic baptisms- Kawakubo reflects different aspects of Kahlo's life as well as the bond between body, form, and material that encompassed all her work.

In the arena of couture, the most impressive Kahlo-inspired collection in recent history was doubtless the Fall-Winter 2010 collection by Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy. By presenting the most exquisite examples of ornamentation, as a result of this impeccable collection Tisci succeeded in positioning himself among the most important names in houses of haute couture today. As Tisci himself declared, this collection was inspired by "Frida Kahlo and her three great obsessions: religion, sensuality, and human anatomy as a result of her life-and-death battle with back pain." Examples of the mastery of this

collection may be found in the Chantilly petit-pointe, dégradé, hair ornaments, and fringe exhibited in the show "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The dresses of Frida Kahlo."

Simply put, this exhibition is the first to present the artist's wardrobe. It seemed that there was little more to be said or learned about Frida Kahlo when in April 2004, the wardrobe of Latin America's most renowned female painter was rediscovered in the Blue House, today the Frida Kahlo Museum. For 50 years, by order of her husband, Diego Rivera, the artist's dresses and personal items remained locked in her bedroom, located in the upper part of the house adjacent to a white-tiled bathroom, where nearly 300 personal accoutrements were found in relatively good condition: accessories, traditional and non-traditional dresses, jewelry, shoes, medicines, and orthopedic devices. A treasure trove!

Now, 75 years after her first appearance in *Vogue*, this is the first exhibition to display Kahlo's personal items and moreover, examine the construction of her identity through her handicap as well as the use of traditional elements, fashion, and dresses. Divided into five thematic salons, the exhibition focuses on the construction of Kahlo's style through handicap and ethnicity, showing the artist's original ensembles and personal items that form part of the Frida Kahlo Museum collection. The discovery of Kahlo's personal items has opened up a series of new possibilities for the interpretation not only of her oeuvre, but also of her multi-faceted personality through her choice of dress and its relationship with her own body. In this way, a complex identity is established that casts a new light on Kahlo's art, generating novel lines of research.

she met Rivera. The search for identity in Frida thus becomes more evident; likewise, her sense of identity reinterpreted through political convictions and also, Mexican tradition.

The discovery of this photograph leads us, therefore, to reexamine other traumatic events in Frida's life, advancing a far stronger argument with regards her decision to wear traditional Mexican dress. She did not do this to please Rivera, or at any rate, not only because of that. Kahlo's style and form of dress were the result of her strong sense

of identity, an identity carefully constructed out of physical pain, something so obviously reflected in her work. Indeed, why should her wardrobe be any different than what she painted?

Two tragedies that Frida experienced even before she reached adulthood would have an influence on her wardrobe, afterwards forming the cornerstone of her existence and her art. At the age of six, she came down with polio, a disease that would leave her lame for life with a useless right leg. As if her bout with polio were not enough, at the age of 18, on September 17, 1925, she suffered a terrible accident. She was traveling in a bus when it collided with an electric streetcar. One of the metallic tubes passed through the left side of her body, exiting through her vagina. Her collarbone was fractured, as were her right leg and foot. Two ribs and her spinal column were broken; her left shoulder was dislocated.

From that time on, Frida's life became a struggle against the relentless deterioration of her body. Her worsening handicap and fragility confined her for long periods of time to a wheelchair or left her bedridden, forced to wear corsets of leather and plaster. This had an influence on her wardrobe, just as polio had already and her political beliefs, relationships, and Bohemian spirit would afterwards.

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTITY THROUGH DRESS: FRIDA KAHLO

Originality and creativity resided not only in Frida Kahlo's work. She did far more than paint, draw, and write; she intervened and transformed everything around her, including herself. She created her own image, constructing her personality by way of fashion.

She proudly wore garments from different regions of Mexico, as well as a few items of her own creation. It is true that her style of dress allowed her to conceal the shortness and thinness of her right leg, affected by a bout with polio she suffered at the age of six. Above all, it allowed her to find vindication as an independent woman without prejudice, someone who was proud of her cultural heritage.

Frida valued her rich heritage and collected garments from different regions across the country. She intervened some of them using Spanish cotton fabrics and French silks to design her look, lending them an indigenous style. Not long ago, while traveling to Huejutla to purchase textiles for the Altar for the Day of the Dead created each year at the Anahuacalli and Frida Kahlo Museums, we found ourselves in the home of one of the craftswomen viewing a photograph depicting André Breton, Frida and Diego, proving that they had been there, doubtless acquiring garments from a region that today, continues to fashion them masterfully.

Frida's mother was, moreover, an excellent seamstress. Her taste for fine fabrics and the interplay of textures and colors was inherited by the artist, providing a better understanding of why, years later, the painter would design and even intervene her own clothes. Frida's

wardrobe holds interest and value not only because of this, but also as a testimonial to the textile treasures of Mexico that all too often, have gradually disappeared as certain items are no longer made. It is worthwhile noting here that thanks to the combined efforts of *Artes de México*, or Remigio Mestas of Oaxaca, designs have been salvaged that were considered to be lost forever. Above all, Frida used Mexican garb to create her identity, fashioning her own uniqueness. She was so good at it that she drew attention everywhere she went. Notably, the prestigious magazine *Vogue* published a photograph of her in October 1937. Diego and Frida were friends of Rosamon Bernier, the legendary editor of *Vogue* in the United States. Frida also inspired the Italian designer Elsa Chiaparelli to create a "Madame Rivera" dress. Her liking for Mexican colors and textures has continued to inspire creators of contemporary fashion such as Jean Paul Gaultier, Dai Rees, Alexander McQueen, Riccardo Tisci –for Givenchy–, Rei Kawakubo –for Comme des Garçons– and the Dutch duo Viktor & Rolf, among many others. Especially Gaultier, who presented in 1998 his *Tribute to Frida Kahlo*.

Clothes were also a strong symbol and major theme in Kahlo's painting, as can be seen in her *Self-portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky* (1937), *Self-portrait along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932), *Roots* (1943), *Iztcuincli Dog with Me* (1938), *Self-portrait* (1948), *Self-portrait of Frida and Doctor Farill* (1951), *The Two Fridas* (1939), *Memory* (1937), and *My Dress Hangs There* (1934), to name only a few.

For Frida, her way of dress comprised a quest for her own identity. This is demonstrated by instances where she appears dressed as a man, for example in a family photograph taken by her father, Guillermo Kahlo, or as a worker-artist wearing a cap and denim shirt. Through her wardrobe, we may observe a metamorphosis among her inner circle of intellectual friends –Los Cachuchas– and the political-artistic awakening that would indelibly mark her life –in another photograph, dressed as a worker, she marches next to Diego Rivera, her fist raised in a sign of protest– and afterwards, during her transformation as she wore with regal bearing garments from different parts of Mexico. It really must have been something to see her proudly strolling alongside Diego through San Francisco, Detroit or New York, decked out in dresses and jewels. It is said that cars would stop to get a better look at her. Later on, when she divorced Diego, Frida cut off her hair and would wear men's suits as well as traditional

garments. Dating from this period is a work at the MoMA in New York titled *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). However, if there is one garment Frida identified with, it was her beautiful Tehuana costume. This dress, highly prized in the painter's wardrobe, holds special interest because while wearing it, the artist was immortalized both in her own paintings and in photographic images –such as the one taken in 1939 by Bernard Silberstein. Many other photographers portrayed Frida Kahlo, attracted by her personality and fashion: Edward Weston, Nickolas Muray, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Imogen Cunningham, Lucienne Bloch, Guillermo Dávila, Fritz Henle, Emmy Lou Packard, and Leo Matiz, among others.

In her manner of dress, Frida's creativity and profound understanding of color may also be recognized. Her style, in addition to being in and of itself a means of concealing physical and emotional weakness, conveyed her temperament. Her style was a fundamental element in the construction of a strong personality, one that has helped her stand out in the history of 20th century painting.

MUSEO FRIDA KAHLO

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