



Frida Kahlo

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Since Hayden Herrera published her 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo, the artist, hitherto little known outside her native Mexico, has become internationally recognized. In 1984 the government of Mexico declared her work to be national patrimony because of its “unquestioned aesthetic value and...unanimous recognition within the national artistic community.” In 1990 the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition, “Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries,” gave museum visitors in New York, San Antonio, and Los Angeles an opportunity to view her work. Now Herrera provides readers with that opportunity in FRIDA KAHLO: THE PAINTINGS.

Frida Kahlo started painting in 1926 while she was recuperating from an accident when a trolley collided with the bus in which she was riding; she was impaled by a steel rod and nearly given up for dead. The injuries left her a partial invalid for the rest of her life and contributed to the gradual spinal deformation that caused her death in 1954 at the age of forty-seven.

The accident transformed Frida Kahlo from a mischievous and passionate adolescent studying for a medical career into an artist trying to re-create a wholeness within herself by painting self-portraits that chronicle her perceptions “in terms of things done to her body.” Herrera’s book is a bountiful catalog of Kahlo’s paintings, drawings, and notebooks, accompanied by more than one hundred photographs and a biographical analysis. It is an unparalleled introduction to this intriguing and enigmatic artist. The paintings are beautifully presented in full-page reproductions: Kahlo’s face stares out at and challenges the viewer on page after page. There is at once self-exploration and confession in these self-portraits.

In the accompanying text, Herrera provides interesting background on Kahlo’s family; her relationship with Diego Rivera; her affairs with Trotsky, sculptor Isamu Noguchi, and photographer Nickolas Muray; and the endless operations and hospitalizations she underwent. Herrera’s interpretations of the paintings contain much useful information on Kahlo’s incorporation of pre-Columbian and contemporary Mexican imagery and her connections to the French Surrealists; they also rely heavily on psychological speculations that at times seem a bit strained. Overall, however, Herrera’s book is very successful in illustrating how Frida Kahlo went about creating “the most wonderful poem of her life.”

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