

Frida Kahlo continues to occupy the limelight as a choice subject for journalists, curators and academics. Sarah Lowe¹ looks at Frida from an art historian's perspective. Her book includes a short introduction, a brief biographical overview, a chronology and two main chapters: 1) The Self-Portraits and 2) Surrealism, "Primitivism" and the Still-Life Tradition.

The book is designed carefully, with color plates accompanying the text describing a particular work of art. In addition to beautiful color plates of Kahlo's paintings, there are also illustrations of related figures of codices, "ex votos" and other images, which the author uses to describe Frida's work.

Self-portraits

Lowe presents a conscientious analysis of each of the plates included in the book, although she does not explain her rationale for including or excluding work. Her detailed descriptions educate the reader's eyes to notice details. The narrative flows from the identification of a particular technique to the names of artists who have done similar work in other periods of history. The dates and artists mentioned span centuries and continents.

There is a concerted effort to interpret Frida's work and draw conclusions relating to her relationship with Diego Rivera, whom she married twice, and the medical problems she endured.

Surrealism, "Primitivism" and the Still-Life Tradition

Sarah Lowe's skill as an art historian is evident in this discourse on Frida

and Surrealism. She weaves in and out of "isms," focusing on elements which could place Frida into a tidy classification. Yet Kahlo's still-lives don't classify easily. Lowe is forced to conclude that Frida's work reflects her *mexicanidad*, that is her identity as part of the Mexican Renaissance of the 1920's and 30's.

Fruit, flowers and vegetables reminiscent of vendors' arrangements in Mexican open-air markets are redefined in terms of Surrealist concepts and feminist convictions. Odorless camelias become "sweet smelling" (p. 107), as if they were gardenias. In the description of "Unos cuantos piquetitos" (A Few Little Stab Wounds), a painting reminiscent of a José Guadalupe Posada engraving about a crime, Lowe inserts her own feminism:

Unlike surrealist art, which glamorized misogyny and in whose visual images women are portrayed with a stylized, sanitized elegance, Kahlo's painting serves as an explicit reminder of the concrete reality of daily violence in women's lives (p. 86).

The extensive analysis accomplishes the author's goal of placing Kahlo within the framework of art history, although the chapter might well have been called "Why Frida Kahlo Was/Wasn't a Surrealist." The material on "still-lives" goes beyond the careful classification of the self-portraits. Lowe asserts interpretations repeatedly, even assuming—when describing the Detroit painting *Store Window*, which includes a portrait of George Washington—that "It must have amused her [Frida] to think of this aristocratic-looking man as America's great revolutionary hero."

Images

The well-known Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska provides a

refreshing contrast to Sarah Lowe's position as a U.S.-trained art historian. Her essay is written as if Frida were the one expressing who she is and what she feels. Having personally known Kahlo, I have finally come across a text that is more like the Frida I knew. The text flows, chock full of irreverence and humor, without making light of the painful reality of the artist's body. Poniatowska alludes (on p. 20) to the collection of photographs presented in the book:

Look at my face, look at my eyes, much is written there, much is hidden from view. My real self is in my painting. I hate pity.

Carla Stellweg complements Poniatowska's text and Kahlo's images with a biographical essay, again including interpretations. She writes:

At the age of five, in a photograph taken by her father, Frida strikes a seductive pose, resting her round face with its dimpled chin on her chubby arm. Mischievously she looks out at the photographer.

The same image could project a defiant or bored Frida, depending on the conclusions one wants to draw about her.

The subjective voice

There is an old Mexican saying: "Nothing is true and nothing false. It all depends on the color of the lens one looks through." Lowe looks at Frida through the lens of a non-Mexican feminist art historian. Poniatowska, a Mexican journalist and novelist, presents her interpretations by speaking out for Frida. Carla Stellweg presents her interpretations as a foreign art curator and journalist who lived in Mexico for many years.

Stellweg invites the viewer to "penetrate the mask [Kahlo] consciously designed, and to be

¹ Doctoral candidate at the City University of New York (CUNY), currently writing a thesis on Tina Modotti.

emotionally moved by the ways in which she shifted and changed to create her persona.”²

There are many wonderful photographs of Frida taken by professionals, novices, friends and family members, among them Ansel Adams, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Lucienne Bloch, Imogen Cunningham, Hector García, Nickolas Muray, Bernard G. Silberstein and Edward Weston. Stellweg’s essay discusses the role of each photographer in Frida’s life and singles out Lucienne Bloch:

*Kahlo and Bloch enjoyed each other’s company; they went to the movies, drew together, cracked jokes, and sang off-color Mexican songs. Bloch made a unique series of photographs of Kahlo showing off, having fun, mimicking for the camera expressing the fun-loving daredevil side she usually hid from photographers.*³

Who is Lucienne Bloch? The captions document the backgrounds of most of the photographers, but not Bloch, who is mentioned but not identified as an artist who created many fresco murals of her own, together with her husband Stephen Dimitroff. They learned the technique working with Diego Rivera as assistants, apprentices and friends. Bloch’s images are outstanding: Frida is alive, a real person, not an enigmatic, mysterious myth!

More than twenty-five books and papers have been written about the “mythological Frida” since Hayden Herrera’s biography was published ten years ago—most of them by women. If Frida were alive today, I suspect, she would poke fun at the growing bibliography and plethora of

interpretations. She would probably go out of her way to become more outrageously cryptic for “interpreting scholars and journalists.” Or she might get bored with it all as she did with the monumental “old man,” Trotsky.

Susannah Glusker

Doctoral candidate studying the “Relationships among Intellectuals in Mexico and the United States” at Union Institute.

Frida’s Fiestas. Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo

Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle Ignacio Urquiza (photography) Spanish edition, Mexico City: Promexa, 1994, 223 pp. (English version, New York: Pavilion Books Limited, 1994, 224 pp.)

Each time we open the trunk of memories of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera we find a reason not only to talk about them but to put out a new book about them. This time Diego’s daughter Guadalupe Rivera joins with Marie-Pierre Colle to show us the salt and pepper in these two artists’ lives: the gastronomy and the parties.

Without being a novel, *Frida’s Fiestas* maintains an intimate link between characters and recipes. Rather than a simple book about the couple’s favorite dishes, this volume shows some of the ways in which Frida expressed her love for all things Mexican, for Diego, for her friends and—as she always said—for life in general.

Guadalupe Rivera lived with the couple and as a result, this book describes a loving and enthusiastic Frida who was generous with her support, even organizing parties so her university friends could meet the famous painter of the

Revolution and his wife, painter of scandalous canvases.

The book also reveals little-known anecdotes, such as the relation between Frida and Diego’s first wife, Guadalupe Marín (mother of Guadalupe Rivera), who prepared the food for her ex-husband’s wedding, since she knew which were the favorite dishes of the demanding Diego. The wedding ended with a scandal *a la mexicana*.

Famous personages passed through the dining room of the “Blue House” more than once. Tina Modotti, Juan O’Gorman and Trotsky, among many others, enjoyed the famous *chiles rellenos*, *chiles en nogada*, *pozoles*, *enchiladas*, *pulques* and *tequilas*. The cause for celebration mattered little—it could be anything from a political meeting to the Day of the Dead.

The Riveras’ lives were dedicated to reviving Mexican traditions, and they carried this out in many ways as part of their daily lives, from their way of dressing to how they celebrated and, above all, what they ate.

In a time when it was fashionable for women to wear short hairstyles, with heavily made-up eyelids and mouths and straight knee-length dresses, Frida Kahlo deliberately broke away with her original way of dressing, using regional outfits from the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz as well as the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Dressed in this special way, she made the rounds of the flower and fruit stands in the Coyoacán market several times a week.

Frida’s Fiesta was printed in August, the month the book begins with a listing of the special dates the Riveras celebrated throughout the year, each with its own menu and recipes and a short story for dessert.

Mónica Ching
Assistant Editor.

² Poniatowska and Stellweg, page 118.

³ *Ibid.*, page 112.