

IMMERSIVE FRIDA KAHLO – PRE-SHOW AUDIO GUIDE

Listen and learn about the background of the artist in this piece written and voiced by Lighthouse Immersive’s Creative Consultant, Richard Ouzounian:

Frida Kahlo has never seemed more relevant than she does now.

No wonder that the record-breaking sale of her 1949 painting “Diego and I” at Sotheby’s on November 16th, 2021, earned \$34.9 million dollars and made it the most valuable work of Latin American art ever sold at auction.

After she died in 1954, she began to emerge almost immediately as a symbol of empowerment for so many kinds of individuals and became an icon in a few short decades.

Her struggles as a woman living in the shadow of an alpha male celebrity like Diego Rivera quickly made her a hero for the feminist movement, just like her unashamed embrace of her mixed-race heritage brought her to the forefront in today’s battles over diversity and inclusion.

The more we learned about her, the more powerful she became. Her constant battle with pain from disease and accident served as an inspiration to many fighting similar battles and her early embrace of gender fluidity proved her to be decades ahead of her time.

Kahlo lived her life as one giant journey of exploration and her art mirrored that journey. As her contemporary, José Moreno Villa, once wrote: “It is impossible to separate the life and work of this singular person. Her paintings are her biography.”

She was born in La Casa Azul - her family's home outside of Mexico City - on July 6, 1907, and died there on July 13, 1954.

During those 47 years filled with passion, pain, poetry and politics, she created a body of work which has established her firmly in history.

Her father, Guillermo was German, a moody man who suffered from seizures and only found happiness in his photographic career. Her mother, Matilde, was a mixed-race woman of indigenous and Mexican heritage with fanatical religious leanings.

When Frida was only three years old, the Mexican Revolution would begin, a bloody decades-long struggle that would replace the Federal government with a Revolutionary one and transform every aspect of Mexican life, most notably in its culture.

Frida would feel so strongly about the role of the Revolution in her life that she frequently insisted she was

born in 1910, the year it began, and spoke of those early times as “extraordinary.”

As if all that wasn't enough, Frida was suddenly stricken with polio at the age of six and confined to her bed for nearly a year, instilling in her awareness of pain, a sense of isolation and a vivid imagination that would all fuel her art in later years.

If there was ever a time in Frida's life when she was truly happy, it was probably during the years 1922-1925, when she began attending the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, which was devoted to throwing off the shackles of European culture and rediscovering Mexico's roots in its indigenous religion, something which resonated strongly with the mixed-race Frida.

She was also one of only 35 females in a student body of more than 2,200, which served to strengthen her sense of growing womanhood and power.

But then, on the afternoon of September 17, 1925, a freak accident between a streetcar and a bus changed Frida's life forever.

“The crash bounced us forward,” she recalled, “and a handrail pierced me the way a sword pierces a bull.”

Her torso was punctured, her pelvis was splintered, her spinal column shattered and her leg broken in 22 places. She

would have more than 30 operations as a result of that accident and spend the rest of her life in unendurable pain.

But it would also set her on the path to becoming the artist she was destined to be.

Confined to bed in a plaster cast because of her fractured spine, she thought of the box of oil paints and brushes that her photographer father kept in a corner of his studio and asked to borrow them. Her mother had a carpenter construct a kind of easel that would allow her to paint lying down.

And in this makeshift way, one of the greatest careers in modern art began. She did not paint because she chose to, she painted because she had to.

Now another inevitability would enter her life. Frida would later famously say that “I suffered two serious accidents in my life –the first when a streetcar ran me over and the second was Diego Rivera.”

While at school, she had encountered the famous artist while he was painting one of his sweeping historical murals. At that time, Frida merely found him intriguing, but six years later, she was a different woman.

She was an unknown girl of 21. He was 41, renowned for his insatiable appetite for work and his reputation as a womanizer. Frida came to him asking merely for his opinion

of her early paintings. He took the measure of her and her art and said, "No matter how difficult it is for you, you must continue to paint."

They fell in love and got married in on Aug. 21, 1929, even though they could not have been at two more different places in their lives.

He was the most famous artist in Mexico. She was just about to sell her first painting. He was a giant, energetic physical presence, and she was a wounded bird, blazing with hidden intensity.

"My parents did not like this," Frida later wrote. "They said that it was like a marriage between an elephant and a dove."

Less than a year after their marriage, they moved to the United States, due to the fact that Mexico had become increasingly inhospitable to their politics. Twenty years into the revolution, the government had swung to the right and found Rivera's left-wing politics increasingly hard to stomach.

But on the other hand, the Mexican Communist Party thought Rivera was in the pocket of the political establishment who kept commissioning murals from him. And so, beleaguered on both sides, they decided to accept commissions that were being offered in America.

The kind of leftist worker murals that Diego had built his career on were suddenly very much in vogue in the United States and so he found himself hired by giants of industry like John D. Rockefeller.

But the next few years were a time of tremendous pain for Frida and Rivera – physical, emotional, and professional.

It all began in the spring of 1932 when they arrived in Detroit where Diego was to paint an elaborate series of murals for the auto magnate, Henry Ford and Frida discovered she was pregnant. Any kind of reproductive issues caused her tremendous physical and psychological pain because of the streetcar accident in her youth.

She had already had an abortion in 1930, shortly after her marriage to Rivera and she planned to do the same this time around, but after a local doctor failed to do it chemically, she decided to go ahead with the pregnancy.

Then Frida miscarried with numerous painful complications that kept her in the hospital in Detroit for 13 days.

Rivera was nearing the end of his Henry Ford commission and looking forward to two additional ones in New York: one for John D, Rockefeller and one for the New York World's Fair.

But his life began to unravel as well. As soon as the Ford mural went on display, there were cries against its Marxist content. Rockefeller found the same troubles with the artist's work and publicly fired him while it was being painted. Naturally, the World's Fair commission was withdrawn as well.

They returned to Mexico at the end of December 1933, with a sense of relief. But that relief was to be short-lived.

Over the next five years, Frida underwent an emergency appendectomy and two more abortions, as well as having several gangrenous toes amputated, a precursor of the trouble her damaged limbs would continue to give her over the years.

But it was the emotional damage which Frida would find the hardest to recover from.

Both her and Rivera had been unfaithful to each other frequently since their marriage, but these were relationships with little or no emotional investment, easier to accept and forgive.

Now, however, Rivera's eye was caught by Frida's younger sister, Cristina, who was living with her children in La Casa Azul after her husband abandoned her.

Rivera later wrote “If I loved a woman, the more I wanted to hurt her,” and his affair with Cristina caused Frida tremendous psychological damage.

She responded by separating from Rivera, but after a while they were all living together again, a pattern that would keep repeating until they finally divorced in 1939. During those years, Frida would have several prominent affairs, most notably with the Russian Revolutionary, Leon Trotsky.

Frida now entered into one of the boldest periods of her creative life, producing some of her most intensely personal works, as her artistic self became stronger and stronger.

But her physical injuries grew worse and worse, until by 1944 she found herself unable to move with any ease and a series of orthopedic corsets were created for her.

The final years of Frida’s life were spent in ever-increasing pain, which she tried to dull with copious amounts of liquor and drugs. “I drank to drown my sorrows,” she wrote, “but the damned things learned how to swim.”

Her first solo exhibition in Mexico took place in April, 1953 and brought her great acclaim, including major coverage around the world which led to the Tate Gallery in London presenting five of her works later that year.

“My painting carries with it the message of pain,” said Frida and that pain was now dominating her existence, finally resulting in the amputation of her right leg, which plunged her into despair.

The last entry she wrote in her diary says : “I hope the exit is joyful and I hope never to return.”

It has been suggested by many, including her biographer, Hayden Herrera, that Frida finally took an overdose of pills to end her life. But whatever the cause, she left the world on July 14, 1954 at the age of 47.

The Mexican government declared her works a sacred part of their national cultural heritage and today, she is regarded as one of the major artists of the 20th century, because of the sheer complexity of the woman and her works, both of which continue to reveal themselves to us over the decades.

Fridamania is not a fad, nor a surface embrace of the externals that surround Frida Kahlo. She has captured our admiration with the power of her art and she will hold her place there as long as oppression, fear and pain still exist in the world.