

FRIDA KAHLO

SUS FOTOS



FRIDA KAHLO

HER PHOTOS

FRIDA KAHLO
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Pablo Ortiz Monasterio
Edition and Page Layout

EDITORIAL RM



RM

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**Photographic
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The Bank of
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Carlos Phillips
Hilda Trujillo
Soto

Masayo
Nonaka
Gabriela
Franger and
Rainer Hule
Laura
González
Flores
Pablo Ortiz
Monasterio
Gerardo
Estrada

James Oles
Mauricio Ortiz
Horacio
Fernández

**Edition and
Page Layout**

Pablo Ortiz
Monasterio

**The Frida
Kahlo
Museum
Editorial
Coordinators**

Xochiquetzal
González

**Editorial RM
Editorial
Coordinator**

Isabel Garcés

**Typography
and Design
Adjustment**

Gabriela
Varela + David
Kimura

**Archive
Research**

María Elena
González

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Av. 5 de Mayo 2
Colonia Centro
Delegación Cuauhtémoc
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Editorial RM, S.A. de C.V.
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06700, CDMX, México

info@editorialrm.com

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Sepúlveda
Nieves Limón
Serrano

**Iconographic
Research**

Leticia Medina
Rodríguez

Restoration

Cecilia
Salgado
Aguayo
Liliana Dávila
Lorenzana
Diana Díaz
Cañas

Translation

Mario Murgia
(Spanish to
English)
Sandra Luna
(English to
Spanish)

**Copy-editing
and
Proofreading**

María Teresa
González

Pre-press

Agustín
Estrada Pavia

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PRESENTATION

Carlos Phillips

The Diego Rivera-Anahuacalli and Frida Kahlo Museums Trust Fund, as well as its Technical Committee, are honored to present the book *Frida Kahlo, Her Photographs*, which includes over 500 pictures from the Frida Kahlo Museum Archive. Pablo Ortiz Monasterio—a photographer, editor, curator, and eager promoter of photography in Mexico—was in charge of this selection.

Upon making his donation through the Trust Fund, the great artist Diego Rivera asked Ms. Dolores Olmedo to store the archive and only make it public fifteen years after his death. Ms. Olmedo kept the archive for over fifty years, and so, after her passing, the Trust Fund Technical Committee decided to open it, catalog it, and make it public. Both the recovery and the classification of materials were possible due to the generosity of ADABI (Department for the Development of Archives and Libraries in Mexico), an institution chaired by María Isabel Grañén Porrúa and Mr. Alfredo Harp Helú.

This is an important and original archive that will certainly allow us to delve into the life and works of Frida Kahlo. Out of the vast range of works discovered, the selection here presented constitutes a true expedition into Frida's intimate family life and also provides a good chance to know the artist's world through pictures taken by her father, other photographers, and Frida herself.

This book, published as a co-edition and generously supported by Ramón and Javier Reverté, chairs of Editorial RM, features seven different sections into which the photographic works have been divided: “The Origins,” “Father,” “The Casa Azul,” “Broken Body,” “Love,” “Photography,” and “Political Struggle,” which are accompanied by essays written by Masayo Nonaka, Gaby Franger and Rainer Huhle, Laura González Flores, Mauricio Ortiz, Gerardo Estrada, James Oles, and Horacio Fernández. These personalities are experts from different countries—Germany, Spain, the United States, Japan, and Mexico—who present to us their views on the materials gathered in this publication.

It is so, then, that the Diego Rivera Anahuacalli and Frida Kahlo Museums Trust Fund materializes Diego Rivera’s will—to preserve the artistic treasures donated to the people of Mexico and to render them accessible for a better understanding of the works by these great artists.



FRIDA KAHLO, HER PHOTOGRAPHS

Hilda Trujillo Soto
The Frida Kahlo Museum

Photography was a key influence on Frida Kahlo's work. This was because of the early contact she had with visual images due to her father's occupation, and later on, because of her close relationship with photographic artists whom she befriended, like Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Nickolas Muray, Martin Munkácsi, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Fritz Henle, and Gisèle Freund, among others.

Thoroughly and lovingly, Frida amassed a vast photographic collection. In it, we can find photographs that must have belonged to either her family or Diego Rivera. However, it was she who took the trouble to keep them. The artist was undoubtedly fond of these beloved objects—she would alter them by adding colors and lipstick kisses, by mutilating them or by writing her thoughts on them. She cherished them as substitutes for the people she loved and admired, or as images portraying history, art, and nature.

Through the means of photography, devised in the 19th century, Frida knew and used the artistic power of images. Either in front or behind the camera, Frida Kahlo developed a strong, well-defined personality, which she managed to project by means of an ideal language—photography. Her relationship with Nickolas

Murray, an outstanding fashion photographer for magazines like *Vanity Fair* or *Harper's Bazaar*, illustrates the way Frida established a natural connection with the lens. Many of Frida's finest and best known pictures were taken by the Hungarian-born American photographer. However, the photographs that Murray took while Frida was in the hospital, painstakingly painting her pictures, also stand out for their crudeness. These images greatly contrast with those in which we can see her before her surgeries, flirty and challenging, as she naturally was. Despite the excruciating pain that tormented her, Frida never lost her fascination for the camera, a device she always thought of as an instrument for portraying her vitality and strength.

Thanks to Frida's photographic collection, we can now state that her father's fascination for self-portraits was a fundamental influence on both, the artist's work and the way she always posed for the camera. Even in the childhood portraits taken by her father we can sense Frida's astonishing talent for exploiting her best angles and poses.

A piercing frontal stare, always focused on the objective, was the look Frida would always sport, both in her paintings and in the pictures taken by the greatest photographers of the 20th century—Imogen Cunningham, Bernard Silberstein, Lucienne Bloch, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Gisèle Freund, Fritz Henle, Leo Matiz, Guillermo Zamora, and Héctor García, among others. Many of these images were published at the request of Claudia Madrazo in the book *La cámara seducida* (*The seduced camera*, published by Editorial La Vaca Independiente), in 1992. Similarly, the

exhibition *Frida Kahlo, la gran ocultadora* (*Frida Kahlo, the Great Pretender*, 2006-2007), presented in Spain and London at the National Portrait Gallery, showed over 50 original photographs, most of which were the only surviving copies. They were part of a collection belonging to Spencer Throckmorton, an American art dealer, who has collected many of Frida's pictures over the years. To a great extent, the artist's self-made character is owed to the great influence that photography exerted on her.

Even if once she said that she was a painter rather than a photographer, Frida, like her father, knew and handled the principles of photographic composition with great dexterity. She even experimented with the camera, as is witnessed by the images found in the Casa Azul archives. She is the author of three pieces, which she also signed in 1929. Nevertheless, there are many more that remain anonymous, but which can be attributed to her given certain features shared by her paintings. One of the pictures signed by Frida is a portrait of Carlos Veraza, the painter's favorite nephew. The other two photographs are undeniably thought-provoking. The first one is reminiscent of Frida's traffic accident at the age of 18, which would become the core obsession in her pictorial work. The piece shows a rag doll lying on a mat, next to a riding horse and a wooden cart at the side. The second appears as a very modern still nature where the objects may have been set out to be photographed in the fashion of modernist compositions by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Tina Modotti, or Edward Weston.

The stack of unsigned photographs includes one that stands out for its evident visual intention. It is a provocative image showing a huge cardboard-and-wire skeleton lying on a lawn.

The artist's interest in photographic technicalities becomes evident in a letter from Tina Modotti containing instructions for Frida. Modotti answers Frida's questions regarding certain aspects she would need to take into account in order to copy three negatives of Diego's mural in Chapingo. "I have just received your questions, and I'm answering right away because I can imagine how difficult it must be for you to make the copies. Had I known you would make them yourself, I would have given you some personal directions [...] I should say only one thing. Pan-chromatic film must be developed in a green light, not red, since red is the most sensitive color on this kind of film."

On the other hand, and putting aside the technicalities of photography, this artistic means reflected Frida's love and devotion. The artist altered some of her portraits and colored certain images or reproductions of her work, as is evident a photograph of her painting *Self-portrait in a Velvet Suit* (1926), which she lovingly called "the Boticelli." This was a canvas painting dedicated to her first flame, Alejandro Gómez Arias.

In some other cases, Frida would cut out, fold away, or even tear up the photographs after being involved in conflicts with their subjects. And so happened with Carlos Chávez, who, as Director of the Institute of Fine Arts, refused to display Diego Rivera's mural *A Nightmare of War, A Dream of Peace* (1952). This compelled Frida to

send him an aggressive letter of rebuke and to banish him from her private album. Another example is the artist's portrait with Lupe Marín, Diego's second wife, which Frida carefully folded in two, thus detaching herself from the muralist's ex-wife. It may be thought that Frida half-displayed the picture, hiding Lupe's image yet keeping from destroying it, as she did in the case of Carlos Chávez's picture.

Frida's illnesses prevented her from spending much time outside and from entertaining her models for long periods of time. This is why she would use photographs to portray the characters on her canvases. In the Casa Azul archives were found, among many other examples, pictures of Stalin, which she would use for her unfinished painting *Frida and Stalin* (1954) and for *Marxism Shall Cure the Sick* (1954); portraits of Nickolas Muray's daughter, which she would also use in one of her paintings; family pictures, on which she based the genealogy tree in *Family Portrait* (ca. 1950); photographs of her physician and friend Leo Eloesser; images of her pets, which she would portray in *The Little Doe* or *Wounded Deer* (1946); and several self-portraits with her parrot, her *xoloescuintle* dog, or *Fulang Chang*, her monkey.

Frida replicated in her paintings some photographs that would prove especially shocking or moving for her. Such is the case of a portrait featuring a small child lying dead on a mat, which she would then reproduce on canvas in *Dimas Rosas, a Deceased Little Child* (1937). Frida even used photographic fragments in some of her paintings, such as

My Dress Hangs There (1933), where she accurately reproduces the image of the photographed crowd.

The great variety of photographs in this archive also accounts for the intellectual restlessness of a woman interested in topics ranging from biology and medicine to science and history, and particularly, art history. Frida utilized photography to put together a series of images she found in books and magazines, which she would later on re-use in her paintings. Those she obtained from gynecology books to illustrate female anatomy and childbirth are also decidedly outstanding.

The photographs in this book—a brief display of the thousands that Frida treasured—bear witness to the multiple purposes that the artist put them to. They are objects that throw new light on Frida Kahlo's work. These images pave the way to the understanding of social life in the Casa Azul and also provide information on the personality and intelligence of one of the most renowned artists of recent times.



Introduction

Pablo Ortiz Monasterio

I. A Hidden Photographic Archive

There are in Frida's archive over six thousand photographs. They have lain locked in wardrobes and drawers, next to drawings, letters, dresses, medicine bottles, and many other things. When Frida died in 1954 Diego Rivera decided to donate the Casa Azul to the people of Mexico so it would be converted into a Museum celebrating Frida's work. He asked poet Carlos Pellicer—a friend of the couple's—to design the project, and also selected some of Frida's paintings, including an unfinished one, a portrait of Stalin. He left the portrait in the studio where Frida used to work: It was placed on her easel, beside her paintbrushes and paints. He also picked out some of her sketches, hand-made pottery, her votive offerings, a painted girdle, books, some photographs, documents, and various objects. He put the rest away. The mythical bathroom in the Casa Azul was bound to become the most important art repository in Coyoacán and its surroundings. Years later, Diego Rivera would legalize his gift to the people of Mexico, including the Casa Azul and the Anahuacalli, a massive structure built on and out of volcanic rock and designed by Diego himself to house his collection of pre-Hispanic "dolls."

Shortly before his death, Diego asked his friend and executor Lola Olmedo not to open his personal archive before 15 years had passed. When the time came to do it, Lola decided that, if it wasn't her friend Diego's wish to

open it, she wouldn't do it either. So, the treasure was secluded for fifty long years. It remained asleep, like in *La bella durmiente* story, waiting to be given the breath of life. The enormously talented and industrious Hilda Trujillo, the museum's current director, finally breathed new life into it.

This archive is the result of Frida's tenacity—she put it together, worked on it, and enjoyed it over the years. It contains Frida's photographs as well as many other pictures that she kept for Diego. It clearly reflects the interests that Frida nurtured over the course of her tormented life: Her family, her fascination for Diego and other flames, her wrecked body and medical science, her friends and several foes, her art and political struggle, her images of Indians and Mexico's pre-Hispanic past. All of these were amassed with Frida's burning passion for Mexico and everything Mexican.

From childhood, Frida was close to photography. Her father, Guillermo Kahlo, a German-born photographer, used to carry around a huge camera with delicate negative-film glass plates to shoot Mexico's Colonial architecture. He did this with such precision and elegance that President Porfirio Díaz even commissioned him to photographically record Mexico's cultural heritage. As part of the celebrations for the centennial anniversary of the Mexican independence in 1910, a photography book with Kahlo's shots would be published. Due to her father's occupation, little Frida became familiarized with photographic techniques and the basic principles of photo compositions. Guillermo's daughters would assist him in the dark room, touching up photographic plates with delicate brush

strokes and also occasionally accompanying him to take the pictures.

Frida treasured some of the pictures belonging to her maternal family as well as some of the pictures that her father had brought from Germany. Of course, she also kept those pictures her father made of her, her mother, her sisters, and her close friends. From this set, what stands out is the series of self-portraits that Frida's father made from a very young age and over the course of his whole life. Mr. Kahlo cultivated the self-portrait genre, which would turn into a fundamental expressive tool for Frida —her unbrowed face would soon be transformed into a looking glass where her esthetic, political, and vital concerns were mirrored. In the set of photographs pertaining to Matilde Calderón, Frida's mother, we can immediately see where the artist's taste and style of dressing came from. It should be said it was precisely this trait that made Frida famous—in certain circles she was better known for her garments than for her paintings.

II. *To Keep Them Close*

With the invention of photography in the early 20th century, the access to images was massively popularized. Common people could have their pictures taken and kept on surfaces coated with silver emulsions. These were likenesses that reproduced their physical appearance with uncanny precision. Years later, in 1854, A. Disdéri patented in France the *carte de visite*, an innovative system with which eight little pictures could be printed onto a single plate. It was then that the habit of exchanging photographs was born. Frida and Diego eagerly shared in this habit, an already old practice at the time. They would exchange and collect photographs of close friends and famous personalities whom they either admired or reviled, like Porfirio Díaz and Zapata, Lenin and Stalin, Dolores del Río and Henry Ford, André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, José Clemente Orozco and Mardonio Magaña, *El Indio* Fernández and Pita Amor, Nickolas Muray and Georgia O’Keeffe, among many others.

Many letters written by Frida betray an interest in the pictures of friends and acquaintances. As she used to say, their photographs served to “keep them close” and so maybe eschew loneliness. She also used her photographs as models. In 1927 she wrote the following to Alejandro Gómez Arias, an old flame from her teenage days: “[...] Next Sunday my dad will take my picture with ‘cañita’ so I can send you its effigy, huh? If you can have a nice picture taken, please send it to me one day so I can paint you a portrait when I feel a tad better.”

She wrote to Ms. Rockefeller from Detroit, in 1933, “[...] I can’t begin to thank you for the wonderful pictures of the children that you sent me [...] I can’t forget the sweet face of Nelson’s baby, and the picture you sent me is now hanging on my bedroom wall.”

III. *Reaching Eternity through the Instant*

The first half of the 20th century was an extreme period. Revolutions were made and world wars were waged. Radical artistic movements arose and surprising vanguards sprang up. Photography took on a decisive role in culture as a means of communication and artistic expression.

Frida Kahlo was befriended and photographed by some of the greatest artists of the time: Nickolas Muray, Martin Munkácsi, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Fritz Henle, Gisèle Freund, Edward Weston, Lola Álvarez Bravo, Pierre Verger, Juan Guzmán, and a long etcetera. Her archive includes works by these artists and many more. These are not really pictures of Frida taken by them, but rather outstanding photographs of their authorship on various subjects. Paradoxically, Frida’s portraits do not abound in this lavish collection. It is not difficult to think, therefore, that she would repay her friends’ photographic gifts by sending them her own pictures. However, the set does contain the photographs that Frida gave to Diego. The formidable portrait that Martin Munkácsi took of Frida and Diego’s faces for *Life* magazine—a close-up—is not included here; nevertheless, there is the hissing black cat that Frida painted in *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humming Bird* in 1940, as well as the famous photograph of a

motorcyclist riding through a puddle, two emblematic images by Hungarian master Martin Munkácsi. Referring to a picture by Munkácsi, Henri Cartier-Bresson remarked, “[...] *with his work he made me understand that a photograph could reach eternity through the instant.*”

Many pictures in this archive have inscriptions on them—names and dates that, on occasion, have been crossed out and rewritten, as those on photographs corresponding to Frida as a child. When, as an adult, the artist decided she would take three years off her real age, she altered the dates on some of these images to serve her rejuvenating purposes. Among these documents there are also notes, invoices, and lipstick stains in the shape of Frida’s lips, which add to the papers’ amorous undertones.

There is a tiny photograph, a very intimate one, of old Guillermo, her father, sitting down with a sad stare on his face. It reads on the front, “Herr Kahlo after crying.” In using the German word *herr*—which the dictionary translates as sir, master, boss, gentleman—to address her “dear dady” [*sic*], Frida describes the mood crudely and somewhat ironically. She hints at the strategy she would often resort to in order to face pain—either her own or other people’s—; it is as if by bluntly naming, writing, or painting things the artist would be able to chase away the pain, or at least make it more tolerable. Ida Rodríguez hit Frida’s home when she wrote, “[...] it is truth told in such a way that it seems a lie.”

When we analyze *Herr Kahlo*’s photograph—or that of Frida with her head leaning on the back of a couch and a vacant stare on her face—we can imagine the difficult

times that the Kahlos went through in their lives. Frida gathered and kept visual testimony of that suffering, and maybe it was even she who proposed taking photographs so that she could look at them directly, name them and perhaps recycle them through her art. Physical pain and suffering were for her artistic incentives. Irony, beauty, and passion were tools for personal expression, while painful autobiography was the basis of her whole life. It had to be painted, photographed or written as it was—utterly beautiful and crude.

IV. The Painter Takes Pictures

Frida's interest in photography arose early in her life, inspired maybe by the love and admiration she felt for her father. Frida's close, endearing relationship with Guillermo becomes evident in the letter he wrote to Frida while she was in Detroit in 1932 "[...] your grateful father greets you and loves you very much as you know, right? Even if the others get a bit jealous." Months later, Frida wrote on the back of a picture she sent back to her father: "Dear dady, here's your Friducha so you can put her on top of your desk and never forget her."

There was always a camera in Frida's house so that important moments, picturesque places, and gatherings with friends, animals, and acquaintances could all be recorded. If Frida was interested, these characters and objects would be used as models for her paintings. There are the portraits of Griselda, her niece, with Hail, the little doe they kept for a while in the Casa Azul. Attributed to Nickolas Muray, these images may have been of great help

to Frida when she painted the emblematic picture *The Little Doe in 1946*.

Hayden Herrera wrote for Frida's 1985 exhibition in Spain,

Besides the dolls, which she avidly collected, Frida found other substitutes for children—her many animals, for example. In her self-portraits, her most faithful companions were monkeys. Even if their ape-like features betray a tongue-in-cheek resemblance to her own—and seem to console her—, what they really do is highlight her loneliness. The monkeys' mobility does nothing but intensify the explosive energy that viewers can sense under Frida's skin. These monkeys do not fill her life; instead, they point at the gaping holes there are in it.

One of the great surprises in this archive is the four 1929 photographs signed by Frida Kahlo. In 1929 Frida married Diego and traveled to the United States. It was a pivotal year in their lives. Frida surely took many more pictures, like the low-angle shot of a New York building, or the *Judas* skeleton lying on its flank, which served as a model for her 1940 painting *The Dream*. We cannot be sure whether Frida herself took those pictures, but we can certainly assure that many of these images relate to her paintings. Even if she did not take them herself, she did recycle them in her work. The photographs she decided to sign are a portrait and two still natures (objects arranged to be photographed), modeled on Modernist compositions by

Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, and Agustín Jiménez. There is a fourth picture we know Frida did take —the photograph of a dog. On the back, Frida wrote to Diego, “Little brother: She is a bit sad because she was asleep and I woke her up, but she says she was dreaming that Diego would come back soon. What do you say? I’m sending you lots of kisses, and also *la Chaparra*.” The picture of the rag doll and the horse cart on the mat—apart from being overtly modernist—boasts Frida’s signature, one that appears in almost all of her works, whether they be paintings, sketches, texts, and now photographs too. These pictures represent, on the one hand, the narrative tendency to put forward the traumatic events she went through and, on the other, her obsession with her broken, handicapped body.

The camera was always familiar to Frida Kahlo. She seems to have felt comfortable in front of it. She even learnt to look into the lens to put across what she wanted and managed to reinvent her own image through photography. I like to think that the stack of photographic portraits in which Frida’s life is recorded constitutes another one of her masterpieces. The painter once wrote about her strategy in front of the camera. “I knew that the battlefield of suffering was reflected in my eyes. Ever since then, I started looking straight into the lens, without winking, without smiling, determined to prove I would be a good warrior until the end.”

v. The Broken Body

Frida Kahlo embodies both Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalsky, played by Vivian Leigh and Marlon Brando in the film *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Elia Kazan. She is fragile and pathetic like Blanche DuBois yet strong and seductive like Stanley Kowalsky. She is herself a *streetcar named desire*, wrecked in an accident.

In a 1946 letter addressed to engineer Eduardo Morillo, Frida wrote about the painting *Tree of Hope, Stand Firm*,

I'm almost finished with your first painting, which, of course, is but the result of the damned surgery! It's me—sitting on the brink of a precipice—holding the steel girdle in one hand. Behind that, I'm lying on a hospital gurney—with my face turned to a landscape—, a small part of my back uncovered, where you can see the scars from the surgeons' stabs. "Darn SOB's!" It's a daytime and nighttime landscape, and there is a "skeletor" (or death) running away from my strong will to live.

In the archive that Frida so zealously kept there is a series of black and white shots showing the painter on her bed. She used them as references to paint engineer Morillo's picture. It can be sensed in them that Frida lived a good part of her life lying on that bed—it was there that she would paint, socialize, speak on bulky Ericsson phones, laugh, cry, eat, dream, and above all, suffered long and intense pain. Carlos Monsiváis summarizes this in plain words when he says, "In Frida Kahlo's development there is

not only an artistic and cultural improvement that allowed her to exploit her vast talent, her intense relationships with various people, and a strong sense of sensible refinement. There is also, and very essentially, a letting go resulting from uncontrollable suffering and the contemplation of reality through pain." A detailed study of this archive will certainly produce new versions of the legendary painter from Coyoacán. This is why we are ready to offer you this collection of photographs where Frida's voice can be heard. It seems to whisper, "Long live life!"



I

THE ORIGINS

