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# VIVA LA VIDA

## *Frida KAHLO* & *Diego RIVERA* & *Mexican Modernism*

MEXICAN MASTERPIECES FROM THE JACQUES & NATASHA GELMAN COLLECTION

29 JANUARY - 30 APRIL 2000, CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON



EXHIBITION BROCHURE



**DIEGO RIVERA**  
*Landscape with Cactus 1931*

In this well-known image, an icon of Mexico painted while he and his new wife Frida Kahlo travelled and worked extensively in the United States, Rivera explores the human-like qualities of cacti, assembling them into a group which resembles both a family and an operatic troupe. The bulbous plants mimic gestures of a sexual or dramatic nature. The surrealists—who arrived in Mexico in the 1930s and 40s—considered the cactus the embodiment of the ancient and irrational forces of Nature. Visually reminiscent of such inventions as the hand-grenade and the light-bulb, the cactus had, by the late 1930s, not surprisingly become a symbol of modernity.



**DIEGO RIVERA**  
*Self-Portrait 1941*

Likened on their wedding day to 'an elephant and a dove', Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were as dramatically different as artists as they were physically. Like polar opposites, they embodied, respectively, the public and the private aspect of the Mexican imagination. While Rivera was painting massive murals depicting the heroic struggle of Mexican society to forge its own future, Kahlo was gazing into a mirror, descending into the depths of her own being. Completed after a particularly stormy period in his life, during which he remarried Kahlo and was caught up in contentious political allegiances, Rivera portrays himself here as a man of the world, caught in a reflective moment.



**DIEGO RIVERA**  
*Calla Lily Vendor 1943*

Diego Rivera's works radiated 'mexicanismo'—a distillation of the essence of the Mexican people and their landscape with its distinctive colour and light. His major mural paintings were a visual ballad of Mexico, resembling the traditional corrido, a narrative in song. Alongside the murals, Rivera's easel paintings such as *Calla Lily Vendor* are also emblematic and timeless, with a profound understanding of, and respect for, the human condition. The lily has strong symbolic qualities in the Catholic tradition, representing purity as the emblem of the Virgin Mary. In this painting, we gain a sense of how closely the indigenous, pre-Hispanic culture of Mexico was connected to the rhythms of peasant life.



**FRIDA KAHLO**  
*Self-Portrait with Bed 1937*

At the age of 18, Kahlo experienced a horrific streetcar accident which smashed her spine in three places. She had to wear a metal spinal brace and was unable to have children. Abandoning plans of becoming a doctor, she began to paint in bed using a specially customised easel. Kahlo suffered throughout her life from complications caused by her injuries, involving a number of painful operations, as well as several miscarriages. Here the small figure of the doll beside her on the bed appears like a substitute baby. Diego Rivera commented: 'She was the first woman in the history of art to treat, with absolute and uncompromising honesty, one might even say with impassive cruelty, those general and specific themes which exclusively affect women.'



**FRIDA KAHLO**  
*Self-Portrait 1940*

Kahlo once said: 'I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.' She commonly wore traditional Mexican costume, which appears in many of her self-portraits, as an expression of her identification as an indigenous Mexican. In the centuries-old arts and crafts of the people, Kahlo and her contemporaries found a rich and colourful narrative tradition to tell the stories of the new Mexico. In this painting of 1940 she wears a black mantilla veil and a striking, pre-Columbian necklace (of which she had an impressive collection), a remnant from the era before European colonisation. Referring both to her work and to her individual style, Diego Rivera described his wife as 'the personification of all national glory.'



**FRIDA KAHLO**  
*Self-Portrait with Braid 1941*

In 1940, the year she and Diego Rivera were divorced, Frida Kahlo cut off her hair, renounced the exotic Mexican costume which her husband had so admired and painted herself dressed in an ill-fitting man's suit. Earrings were her only remaining symbol of femininity. For this self-portrait, painted after her remarriage to Rivera in December 1940, it was as if Kahlo gathered up the strewn hair and reattached to it to the braid on the top of her head, almost as if she was symbolically reclaiming the femininity she had renounced the previous year.



**FRIDA KAHLO**  
*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on my Mind) 1943*

Here Frida Kahlo wears a Tehuana headdress from the traditionally-matriarchal region of south-west Mexico, which frames her anxious face amid starched white lace and organic vine-like tendrils. An image of her husband Diego Rivera appears in the centre of her forehead, a troubling presence continually on her mind. While Kahlo's paintings refer to the events of her own life, it is their capacity to reach beyond their immediate circumstances that gives them power. Rivera described the common theme of her paintings as 'life that is always in flux... in its movement through the veins and through the universe... an endlessly branching web that extends through the centuries, full of the light and shadows of life.'



**FRIDA KAHLO**  
*The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me, and Señor Xólotl 1949*

This image positions Kahlo and Rivera within a cosmic framework of embraces that represent nature and Mexico. Kahlo combines rich mythological symbols with personal references. The animal in the lower left is Kahlo and Rivera's dog Señor Xólotl. He represents the canine of Aztec legend who guided the sun on its perilous journey through the night. This image also gives insight into the couple's stormy and intense relationship. In her diary Kahlo once wrote of her husband: 'At every moment he is my child, my child born every moment...' Here she depicts him as a cherubic Buddha or Christ Child figure.



**MARÍA IZQUIERDO**  
*Horses 1938*

María Izquierdo's spirited horses were inspired by the small circuses that travelled through Mexico during her childhood. Raised in the town of San Juan de los Lagos, Izquierdo entered an arranged marriage aged 14. After moving with her husband and three children to Mexico City in 1923, she separated from him and began a new life as an artist. Like Frida Kahlo, Izquierdo basked in the Mexican cultural revival from the 1920s onwards, frequently wearing traditional clothing and jewellery. Because of their use of symbols and heightened colour, both artists have been described as 'visionary realists'. Influenced by what Antonin Artaud called 'a sort of pagan Catholicism', Izquierdo's paintings are an intuitive exploration of both ancient myths and contemporary reality.



**JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO**  
*Self-Portrait 1932*

On his return to Mexico from the United States in 1920, Orozco was enlisted to work alongside Rivera and Siqueiros establishing a national school of mural painting. (These artists became known as 'Los Tres Grandes', or the 'big three'.) Thereafter Orozco devoted himself completely to the ideals of socialism and public art, renouncing the commercial artworld and destroying all his early canvases. Painted during a period of great social change, this is a self-portrait of a man fully aware of the personal challenge of political beliefs. 'Art', commented Orozco, 'is knowledge at the service of emotion.'



**DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS**  
*Self-Portrait 1930*

This is a self-portrait by David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the great Mexican muralists. Siqueiros urged Mexican artists to follow his example and spurn 'so-called easel painting and every kind of art favoured by the ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property'. Exiled from Mexico during the 1930s, Siqueiros worked in the USA, where he started painting with an airbrush and exploring other new technologies. He was an important influence on the young Jackson Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists of the New York School. He returned to Mexico in 1940, only to have to flee the country when he was involved in a failed assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky.



**RUFINO TAMAYO**  
*Portrait of Cantinflas 1948*

'Cantinflas'—also known as Mario Moreno—was a famous Mexican comic actor who frequently portrayed a naïve rural peasant completely confused by the fast life in Mexico City. A cameraman is pictured at the lower right of the image, recording the brilliantly lit, gesturing figure. Jacques Gelman, who with his wife Natasha assembled the art collection which has been brought to Wellington for this exhibition, established a film production company in Mexico City in 1941. They produced many movies starring Cantinflas, a figure of fun who nonetheless represented a familiar theme of political solidarity to many in the Mexican audience, at a time of cultural change through the spread of industrialisation and Western style modernity.



**GUNTHER GERZSO**  
*The Cat from London's Street 1954*

Gunther Gerzso's work was influenced by the group of European Surrealists who arrived in Mexico as refugees from the Second World War. The surrealist artists were interested in exploring another plane of reality beyond the everyday, which they found in dreams and through the workings of chance and accident. Like European surrealism, Mexican folk art had its roots in the irrational and often visionary aspects of the human mind and soul. The traditional artforms—which frequently pictorialized dreams, nightmares, superstitions and the spectral presence of Death—were to provide a source of renewal not only for native-born Mexican painters throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but for many artists visiting the country.



**CARLOS MÉRIDA**  
*Festival of the Birds 1959*

Carlos Mérida was a Guatemalan-born artist who moved to Mexico in 1919. Working for a time as Diego Rivera's assistant in the 1920s, Mérida became part of the Mexican Muralist movement. Characteristically, his work combines decorative motifs of Mayan textiles with what is known as 'biomorphic abstraction', or forms abstracted from nature. Here Mérida reduces three dancing figures to an arrangement of simple forms. The smooth texture of this painting is produced using a uniquely Mexican technique known as 'tablero pulido', where brushstrokes are rendered invisible and flat areas of pure colour are applied so the artwork, when varnished, resembles a polished panel.



**FRANCISCO TOLEDO**  
*Rabbit of the Scorpions 1975*

This painting demonstrates the legacy of Mexican modernism, reinterpreted by a new generation of Mexican artists. This is a contemporary oil painting by Francisco Toledo who is of Zapotec Indian descent and trained under the artist Arturo García Bustos, a student of Frida Kahlo's. Toledo is commonly regarded as the most significant contemporary Mexican artist. His work often merges decorative traditions with animal and human forms, investing them with a symbolic significance. In this painting his scurrying scorpions are invested with the power and energy of Mexican myth and legend, in which animals have played a powerful role.

## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Eight days before her death in 1954, Frida Kahlo completed her last painting: an unassuming still life comprising seven slices of watermelon. It might be an inauspicious work with which to end such a turbulent and brilliant artistic career but for one detail: the inscription on the foremost piece of watermelon. Carved into the pink flesh of the fruit are the words, 'Viva La Vida'—Long Live Life—a statement which brings to an affirmative, heroic conclusion a life of suffering, disappointment and sadness.

In fact, beneath their unsettled and often unsettling surfaces, Kahlo's paintings—of which we are privileged to present 12 masterworks in this exhibition—bear within them an immense belief in the life force. Like those of her husband, Diego Rivera, and so many of the other Mexican painters of the modern era, the works are permeated with the vivaciousness and colour of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico, a country undergoing radical political, social and cultural change.

Alongside the famous works of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, *Viva La Vida* is a show remarkable for some of its lesser-known figures. As many of the artists aren't household names, viewers will be surprised and enlightened by these works. These are heady works, full of love and torment, hope and despair.

It is this kind of warm-blooded engagement with life itself which makes these paintings and photographs so intoxicating and moving. *Viva La Vida* is a fitting exhibition with which to begin the new millennium. The paintings say much about the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they also point to the future. In so doing, they assert the pre-eminence of the poetic and the imaginative aspects of the human life.

*Viva la Vida* has been selected from the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, one of the most significant collections of Mexican modern art in the world, and the City Gallery Wellington is very proud to be the sole Australasian venue on its Southern hemisphere tour.

*Diego y Frida—Amores y Desamores: Diego and Frida—Passion and Pain*, the accompanying exhibition also offers a unique experience. Eighty photographs on loan from the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio Museum in Mexico City, taken by American and Mexican master photographers, document Frida and Diego's passionate and turbulent 25 year relationship, which, like their art, has become legendary.

Bringing these two exhibitions to Wellington has been a complex and ambitious undertaking and was totally dependent on the generous assistance and commitment of a large number of individuals, organisations, institutions and corporations. We are deeply grateful to all involved in this enterprise.

We hope that the presence of these life-affirming works of art will reward and enrich your visit to this extraordinary exhibition.

*Paula Savage*

Paula Savage  
Director, City Gallery, Wellington.



Diego Rivera, *Portrait of Natasha Gelman, 1943, oil on canvas*

## PUBLIC EVENTS

In association with the exhibition, we offer an exciting programme of public events featuring:

- ~ A rare opportunity to hear special guest speakers from Mexico, including leading commentators and writers on the arts in Mexico.
  - ~ A wide-ranging and provocative lecture series featuring notable artists and scholars from New Zealand, including Annie Goldson, Elizabeth Knox, Fiona Pardington, Séraphine Pick, Pamela Gerrish Nunn and Jonathan Mané-Wheeki.
  - ~ 'Here, I Paint Myself Frida' (April 14 & 15): Jillian Tipene's internationally acclaimed one-woman show.
  - ~ Mexican poetry readings and musical performances of Mexican works.
- Contact the City Gallery Wellington for full details.

## DIEGO Y FRIDA: AMORES Y DESAMORES DIEGO AND FRIDA: PASSION AND PAIN

*Amores y Desamores* reveals the legendary love story of Diego and Frida with 80 images of the couple captured by renowned American and Mexican photographers. Included in the show are images by American master photographer Edward Weston who worked in post-revolutionary Mexico; and Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Mexico's foremost photographer who was recently shown in a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Curated by Director Señora Blanca Garduno, this exhibition of contemporary prints has been loaned to City Gallery Wellington by the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Studio Museum, Mexico City. It is generously sponsored by the Embassy of Mexico.

If *Viva la Vida* reveals the extraordinary artistic legacy of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, *Amores y Desamores* explores the lives of this famous couple, who were intimately linked through a passionate love affair and through their shared political and artistic convictions. One of the first photographs of the couple pictures portly Diego striding alongside diminutive Frida on a march for workers' rights in 1929. Two formal studio portraits record their marriage four months later and several photographs show the couple travelling and working together.

In the photograph which Frida's father took after her horrific traffic accident Frida saw a 'battlefield of suffering' in her eyes. 'From then on,' she resolved, 'I looked straight at the lens, unflinching, unsmiling, determined to show that I was a good fighter to the end.' Thus, Frida was frequently photographed with the same mask-like pose which characterises her self-portraits featured in *Viva La Vida*. Like the photographs of her propped up in bed painting or wheel-chair bound at a demonstration against American intervention in Guatemala just days before her death, the face she presented to the camera conveys her indomitable spirit.

Yet the personal relationship between Diego and Frida and some of their photographers lends other photographs in this exhibition an apparent snap-shot quality. Moments of unguarded intimacy enable us to tease out aspects of the couple's enduring, if tumultuous, love. For instance, we see Frida lovingly adjusting Diego's tie, the couple at home with their pets and embracing at the kitchen table. The photographs of Nickolas Muray, who began a passionate affair with Frida in 1938, are among the show's most intimate images.

*Amores y Desamores* is an intimate photo-album, portraying the people behind some of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's most compelling paintings, and offering a personal insight into the passion which underpinned Diego and Frida's work.



Ernesto Reyes, *Frida and Diego on the day of their wedding, at the Reyes Studio in Coyoacan, Mexico City, 21 August 1929.*

Conaculta, INBA

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Cover image: Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Monkeys*, 1943, oil on canvas

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