



## TRANSCENDING HER MOST MODERN LEGACY

By: Circe Henestrosa, curator of the exhibition "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The dresses of Frida Kahlo"

We couldn't have found a better, more complete, or more timely muse to inspire us all. Her characteristic and hybrid Tehuana style, featuring extraordinarily elaborate hairstyles, multicolored ribbons, and braids, has captured the attention of feminists, photographers, stylists, artists and fashion designers, not to mention contemporary culture as a whole. From Mexico to San Francisco, from Paris to New York, Frida Kahlo caused a sensation with her enigmatic, flirtatious, dark brown eyes, capable of holding gazes for extended periods of time: controlling, even inquisitive, yet fragile. Her characteristic monobrow and those brilliant, daring Tehuana dresses formed the personal elements of a contemporary icon. It was the Tehuana dress, originally brought in from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec located in southeastern Mexico, that Kahlo chose as her most characteristic ensemble, eventually defining both her identity and her cultural heritage. Carlos Fuentes recalls in his introduction to the *Diary of Frida Kahlo* how the artist arrived at the Palace of Fine Arts in her tinkling jewelry, how she succeeded in surpassing this architectural marvel, its paintings, and even the concert music performed there with her intense presence. Some of her closest friends describe the special care Kahlo took in selecting each of her garments and accessories. She would often ask her closest friends, "Does this work?"

And yet Frida put a lot of effort into creating her own style from head to toe, bedecking herself in spectacular silks, shawls, ties, and skirts always accompanied by pre-Hispanic jewelry in silver or gold. When children in the street would ask her, "Where's the circus," she would merely smile and gracefully continue on her way. This artist, who has left such

a lasting impression on us through her work, has also bequeathed images that will remain indelibly marked on our retina, thanks to her personality and style.

First came *Vogue* in October 1937, a significant date in terms of Frida's future influence on fashion. Edna Woolman, the visionary director of the magazine from 1914 to 1952, portrayed her for the first time in its pages. Through his lens, Toni Frissel captured the image of a woman who would become one of the most emblematic artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Obsessed with this visual dimension of herself, even before her first individual exhibition Kahlo captured the attention of fashion magazines with her personality and artistry, and she has continued to do so over the past 75 years, providing inspiration to a great many designers.

In 1939, André Breton organized the first exhibition of Kahlo's work in Paris titled *Mexique*, where her Tehuana ethnic dress caused a great sensation among the European elites. It is said that Elsa Schiaparelli, a star designer at the time, created a dress called the *Robe Madame Rivera* (the Madame Rivera Dress) in her honor. Over the past 20 years, Frida's image has spread everywhere like wildfire.

In 1998, the international designers Jean-Paul Gaultier and Christian Lacroix would pay homage to Frida Kahlo on their Spring-Summer runways. Inspired by her painting *The Broken Column*, Gaultier portrayed her in one of his most iconic examples of haute couture. Gaultier has his own views with regards to the significance of Kahlo's image. His is the perfect example of post-modern deconstruction, creating a burlesque exoticism of sorts while at the same time, portraying one of the many symbolisms Kahlo represents today. For his prêt-à-porter collection in Fall 2002, Kris Van Assche presented a subtler collection inspired by Kahlo, using light cottons, piqués and silks. To Van Assche, Kahlo represents something more fanciful than the usual imagery of pain and torture; hence he chose to capture some of the more amusing facets of her personality. Frida laughed a lot in spite of it all, a fountain of joy that counterbalanced her passionate intensity as shown by her use of bright colors: sky blue, yellow, orange, and white. After Fridamania took off in 2005, the British designers Clements Ribeiro and Temperly London showed a more surrealist side of Kahlo in their collection of vintage dresses, platforms with butterflies, Mexican boots, big bags, high heels and hair ornaments in red velvet, recreating the painter's exuberant style. Ribeiro's use of platforms and short boots remind us of the aftermath of Kahlo's bout with polio and how she wore boots with a special heel in order to conceal her physical imperfections.

Rei Kawakubo's disciple Tao Kurihara is always unpredictable. In her prêt-à-porter collection from 2009, she presented Scandinavian dolls that referenced Frida with their red monobrows. The representation of Frida in this collection is eclectic, enigmatic, and audacious. Rei Kawakubo herself presented White Drama, her prêt-à-porter collection for Spring-Summer 2012 for Comme des Garçons, with a touch of religiosity. Through color and materials such as white lace and satin, Kawakubo led the viewer on a journey into Frida's universe.

Using fashion tailored from the 1950s and cages of lace, followed by flower-covered garments that recall Kahlo's splendid hair ornaments -items that in the past, were used in Catholic baptisms- Kawakubo reflects different aspects of Kahlo's life as well as the bond between body, form, and material that encompassed all her work.

In the arena of couture, the most impressive Kahlo-inspired collection in recent history was doubtless the Fall-Winter 2010 collection by Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy. By presenting the most exquisite examples of ornamentation, as a result of this impeccable collection Tisci succeeded in positioning himself among the most important names in houses of haute couture today. As Tisci himself declared, this collection was inspired by "Frida Kahlo and her three great obsessions: religion, sensuality, and human anatomy as a result of her life-and-death battle with back pain." Examples of the mastery of this collection may be found in the Chantilly petit-pointe, dégradé, hair ornaments, and fringe exhibited in the show "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The dresses of Frida Kahlo."

Simply put, this exhibition is the first to present the artist's wardrobe. It seemed that there was little more to be said or learned about Frida Kahlo when in April 2004, the wardrobe of Latin America's most renowned female painter was rediscovered in the Blue House, today the Frida Kahlo Museum. For 50 years, by order of her husband, Diego Rivera, the artist's dresses and personal items remained locked in her bedroom, located in the upper part of the house adjacent to a white-tiled bathroom, where nearly 300 personal accoutrements were found in relatively good condition: accessories, traditional and non-traditional dresses, jewelry, shoes, medicines, and orthopedic devices. A treasure trove!

Now, 75 years after her first appearance in *Vogue*, this is the first exhibition to display Kahlo's personal items and moreover, examine the construction of her identity through

her handicap as well as the use of traditional elements, fashion, and dresses. Divided into five thematic salons, the exhibition focuses on the construction of Kahlo's style through handicap and ethnicity, showing the artist's original ensembles and personal items that form part of the Frida Kahlo Museum collection. The discovery of Kahlo's personal items has opened up a series of new possibilities for the interpretation not only of her oeuvre, but also of her multi-faceted personality through her choice of dress and its relationship with her own body. In this way, a complex identity is established that casts a new light on Kahlo's art, generating novel lines of research.

Frida never lacked motivation. Much has been said about love as the main impulse behind her choice to wear Tehuana dress as a characteristic identity trait, and most experts have suggested that Frida Kahlo dressed in the Tehuana style in order to please her husband, Diego Rivera. While the thesis of the exhibition does not deny this fact, it explores other intrinsic reasons for the use of this form of dress. Of vital importance in this sense is the rediscovery, once the wardrobe was opened, of an image depicting her maternal family. This image shows Frida's mother and her family dressed in the Tehuana style, revealing thus a relationship sustained by Kahlo with that form of dress long before she met Rivera. The search for identity in Frida thus becomes more evident; likewise, her sense of identity reinterpreted through family habits, political convictions and also, Mexican tradition.

The discovery of this photograph leads us, therefore, to reexamine other traumatic events in Frida's life, advancing a far stronger argument with regards her decision to wear traditional Mexican dress. She did not do this to please Rivera, or at any rate, not only because of that. Kahlo's style and form of dress were the result of her strong sense of identity, an identity carefully constructed out of physical pain, something so obviously reflected in her work. Indeed, why should her wardrobe be any different than what she painted?

Two tragedies that Frida experienced even before she reached adulthood would have an influence on her wardrobe, afterwards forming the cornerstone of her existence and her art. At the age of six, she came down with polio, a disease that would leave her lame for life with a useless right leg. As if her bout with polio were not enough, at the age of 18, on September 17, 1925, she suffered a terrible accident. She was traveling in a bus when it collided with an electric streetcar. One of the metallic tubes passed through the left side of her body, exiting through her vagina. Her collarbone was fractured, as were her right

leg and foot. Two ribs and her spinal column were broken; her left shoulder was dislocated.

From that time on, Frida's life became a struggle against the relentless deterioration of her body. Her worsening handicap and fragility confined her for long periods of time to a wheelchair or left her bedridden, forced to wear corsets of leather and plaster. This had an influence on her wardrobe, just as polio had already and her political beliefs, relationships, and Bohemian spirit would afterwards.

**Circe Henestrosa**

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