



Isabella Villaseñor, 1929–30
Photo: Manuel Alvarez Bravo



Double portrait Isabella Villaseñor/Frida Kahlo
Frida Kahlo's diary

the first solo exhibition of Frida's work in her gallery. Almost every major group show of contemporary Mexican art, be it in New York or in San Francisco, included both Frida and Chabela. Chabela even experienced similar crises as Frida: she suffered because of her unhappy relationships with men, she went through several miscarriages, and she had a melancholic streak. At the age of thirty-nine, she took her life.

⁹ "You understand everything. The ultimate union. You suffer rejoice love rage kiss laugh. We were born for the same thing. To discover and love what has been discovered. hidden. With the grief of always losing it. You are beautiful. I endow you with your beauty. Soft in your immense sadness. Simple bitterness. Arms you against everything that does not free you. Rebellion against everything that chains you. You love. Love me as the center. Me as yourself. I won't have anything but a prodigious memory of you passing through my life scattering jewels I'll only collect after you've gone. There is no distance. Only time. Listen to me, caress me with what you're looking for and with what you find. I'm going to you and to me. Like all the whole songs seen." *Diary*, 53.

The suicide of her friend deeply distressed Frida. Even before her death, Frida had dedicated several pages of her diary to Chabela. On page fifty-two, for instance, Frida drew a beautiful double portrait of herself and her dear friend, adding a dedication in which she later mystifyingly changed all the feminine "a" endings of words into a masculine "o" ending.⁹ After Chabela's death, more farewell pages followed, as well as words announcing her intention to travel the same path, obviously contemplating suicide:

Until I leave
Until I travel your path –
Have a good trip Chabela!
Crimson, crimson, crimson,

Life death
Deer doe
Long live Marx, Engels, Lenin
Long live comrade Stalin
You left us, Chabela Villaseñor

But your voice, your electricity,
 your enormous talent, your poetry,
 your light, your mystery
 your Olinka,¹⁰ all your being remains alive
 Isabel Villaseñor, painter, poet, singer,

Crimson, crimson, crimson, like the blood that runs
 When they kill a deer.¹¹

Then, toward the end of her life, the name of Stalin recurs conspicuously often in the pages of her diary. Quite abruptly, with the energy left to her, Frida Kahlo embraced Marxism. Apparently, such a great despair had come over her that she radically turned away from everything she had painted and thought before. She now even denounced Trotsky, whom she had once hosted at her home. She dismissed her own paintings as meaningless, because she felt they lacked social relevance. One would look in vain for a straightforward political statement behind her sudden reverence for comrade Stalin; instead, what seems to emerge here is an abandonment, a foreclosure of her entire life. As if in defiance, she commits what amounts to intellectual suicide. Compared to her earlier, sensitive self-portraits, her last paintings, in which she pays tribute to Marx, Engels, Lenin, and, in particular, Stalin, seem almost simplistic and crude. They articulate an absurd hope for redemption. Would, for instance, a transcendently transfigured Stalin be able to redeem her and all of humanity from suffering, as she states in her propagandistic painting *Marxism Will Give Health to the Ill* (around 1954). On March 3, 1953, Stalin died, too. In August of the same year, Frida Kahlo's lower right leg was amputated. Countless surgical procedures had irreversibly weakened her body, and yet not even alcohol and drugs were able to extinguish her active consciousness. With Marxism, Frida had erected for herself a last structure of hope that was soon shattered again. This new faith

¹⁰ Olinka is Chabela's only daughter.

¹¹ *Diary*, 119f.



Frida Kahlo, *Marxism Will Give Health to the Ill*, c. 1954
 Oil on Masonite, 30" x 24". Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico City



Frida Kahlo, *Pueblo de los Angeles*, 1952. Color pencil on paper, 8.6" x 11.3"
 Private collection Panama, Republic of Panama

¹² *Puebla de los Angeles*. Colored pencil on paper, 8.5 x 11.5 inches. Private collection, Panama. Reproduction in Sharyn Rohlfen Udall, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 291. She presented the drawing to her nurse Judith Ferreto. Having surfaced only recently, it is not listed in the catalogue raisonné.

¹³ The last words of her diary read: "Espero alegre la salida—y espero no volver jamás—Frida" (I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return—Frida), 160.

was doomed to fail, if only because her passionate desire to live life to the fullest, existing alongside the need for an intellectual superstructure, was irreconcilable with both Communist morality and the teachings of Buddha. A beautiful still life with pale pink genitalia, served, in all the splendor of their erotic forms, on a white plate and framed by the names of the heroes of Marxism-Leninism, pointedly illustrates this paradox.¹² But the ideological last straw proved deceptive as well. There was not much more left to her than to accept the reality of her physical infirmity. Who could have blamed her, after all the strokes of fate and all the suffering, when, at the end, she questions the meaning of life altogether and writes in her diary with resignation: "I hope never to return."¹³



Frida painting *My Father's Portrait* (plate 41), 1951. Photo: Gisèle Freund

Plates

Portrait of a Lady in White circa 1929

Oil on canvas, 47 x 32 inches (119 x 81 cm)

Private collection, Germany

The *Lady in White* is one of the few works of Frida Kahlo that remained unfinished; unfortunately, it cannot be dated with certainty, nor has the identity of the young woman portrayed been established so far. Lozano describes her as “a yearning, taciturn virgin.”¹

She was presumably a good friend of Frida. Perhaps the friendship broke up and the painting remained unfinished, although there is reason to believe that it would have been an extraordinarily beautiful portrait. It projects an intense, erotic mood.

There are, in this seemingly very peaceful image, a few disturbing elements that cause tension: for example, the sharp contrast between the sparkling white dress of the young woman and the dark and heavy-looking portiere which not only frames the image, but also confines the figure and in a way threatens her purity; or the delicate, naked skin of the upper arms which are literally squeezed by the thick cords and tassels of the portiere. The window in front of which she poses and which, in portraits, usually allows a view out into the open, here merely opens on to an opaque wall of fog. The view is fur-

ther obstructed by a wrought-iron railing. Consequently, there is no space left for the woman to move forward or backward.

The red necklace with its four strands, too, rests on her skin as if embedded in it. And her gaze, which is seductive to start with, becomes almost provocative because of the figure’s asymmetric hairdo, with small curls combed into the face, and a pink flower pinned at the nape of her neck. The very erect posture indicates pride and self-confidence.

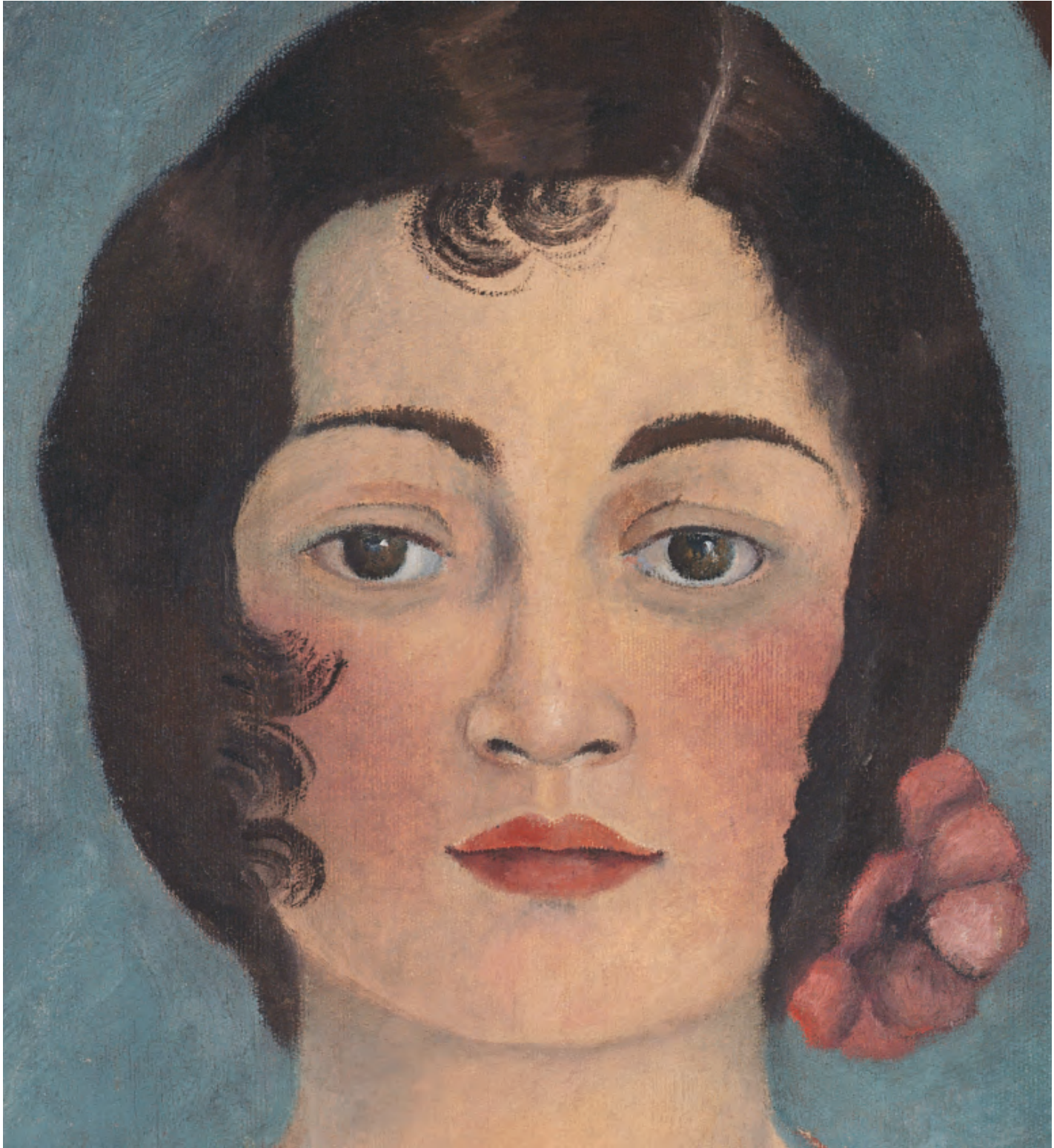
The most disturbing element of the image is undoubtedly the curtain and the peculiar way in which it drops—or rather the way in which it does not drop. A quite innocent prop here, on closer inspection, proves to be a painted vulva: its clitoris would be located above the banner, separated by it. The banner suspended above the figure has remained blank.

The portrait of the unknown woman could be a likeness of Frida’s first lesbian lover, a relationship terminated through parental intervention.

¹ Luis-Martin Lozano, *Frida Kahlo*, (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2002), 68.







Portrait of Luther Burbank 1931

Oil on Masonite, 34 x 24¼ inches (86.5 x 61.7 cm)
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, Mexico City

The *Portrait of Luther Burbank* is the only portrait Frida painted of a person long dead, that is, of someone she did not know personally, suggesting that he or his theories must have preoccupied her to a considerable degree.

Luther Burbank (1849–1926), who described himself as a “genius of selection,” experimented all his life with plants, in order to alter and redesign their genetic make-up. Remaining unmarried and childless after having been unhappy in love as a youth, he dedicated himself exclusively to an idea that downright obsessed him: the recreation of species and the “breeding of man.” Burbank had an unshakeable faith in progress and was an early specimen of the breed of scientists which today realizes things far more uncanny in genetic research, making his experiments of the time appear modest in comparison. The Burbank potato, large, white, mealy, and suitable for storage, soon replaced the small, reddish potato; he cultivated plums without pits, peas that all ripened simultaneously for canning, thornless blackberries, and cacti without spikes, as well as many other things. The hybrid seeds developed by him were shipped all around the globe and transformed horticulture in the entire civilized world. In spite of quite a few lawsuits in which he was charged with blasphemy, as well as several campaigns against him, he never wavered in his view that man is capable of anything, if only he were finally subjected to proper “breeding.” Of a thousand people, according to Burbank, usually only one deserved to survive: “cultivating the human plant” should become the guiding principle of mating and the fundamental principle of education. This would guarantee a steady increase in knowledge, with happiness, money, and power as the automatic outcome. In California today, streets, schools, and entire towns are named after Burbank.

Diego Rivera, who was working on his mural for Detroit, also concerned himself with Burbank’s ideas at this time, and both he and Frida would have read his autobiography, his most famous work.

The topic of procreation must have preoccupied Frida particularly after going through her first abortion in Mexico after the miscarriage in Detroit. Confronted with a renewed pregnancy, she was deliberating whether she should have the baby or not, writing on May 26, 1932, to Dr. Eloesser: “In the first place, with this heredity in my blood, I do not think that the child could come out very healthy.” The alarming “heredity” to which Frida refers is her father’s epilepsy, compounded in later years by her mother’s crises. Even though she wondered if a predisposition such as this would put an all too heavy burden on the child’s future, the idea of plain selective breeding from a purely physical perspective struck her as an evil product of a cold scientific male mind.

In the painting, the figure of Luther Burbank is seen rising from parched earth against an overcast sky. He grows as a hybrid from a tree stump whose roots feed on a skeleton—maybe his?—that, together with its sepulchral cave occupies the lower half of the image. The Burbank tree indeed receives its vital sap from the carcass. Above the cave, Burbank stands holding a plant in his hand; it is an ornamental plant, a philodendron variety named *monstera* (monster), a climber with aerial roots characterized by an excessive growth habit. Two of the five leaves are shown reversed, suggesting a double meaning, and two are almost colorless, blank leaves.

Kahlo, in this painting, illustrates the ambivalence of Burbank’s endeavors: his ideas have indeed survived him, but they derive their existence from the forces of death. The beautiful green apple tree becomes a puny little stump with six abnormally large fruits. Frida characterizes Burbank’s thinking, his idea of breeding aimed at man and plant alike, as a monstrosity, clearly rejecting both technological, scientific thought and the blind faith in progress governing North American society.

¹ Luther Burbank and Wilbur Hall (co-author), *The Harvest of the Years*, posthumously published in 1926, reprint: The University Press of the Pacific, 2000



34 x 24 1/4 IN.
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Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States 1932

Oil on metal, 12½ x 13¾ inches (31 x 35 cm)
Manuel and Maria Reyer Collection, New York

Frida portrays herself, standing on a small stone pedestal, as a young, twenty-five-year-old wife in elegant attire. The pink dress with a long skirt and ruffles is an evening gown of the kind she probably used to wear at the time; some contemporary photographs of her show gloves of fine white lace. Her jewelry, too, is exquisite: a coral necklace with pendants made of silver or gemstones, a typically Mexican handicraft. At the time, she was frequently invited to parties together with Diego Rivera, and since he was a socially acclaimed and successful painter, she, as his wife, had to appear accordingly distinguished. Consequently, she portrays herself as a statue, Madame Rivera. Tellingly, she does not provide her own name, Frida Kahlo, on the pedestal, but that of Carmen Rivera, undoubtedly expressing a certain distance to herself in this role. On the other hand, she allows herself to be gazed at, going along with this game and indicating, moreover, that she is proud of her famous husband. Her pose is reminiscent of one of those paper dress-up dolls with clothes that can be changed at will.

The Frida doll, with her superimposed dress and her “fake” name, all made up for an evening party with Diego, stands on what seems to be the front edge of a stage with a backdrop that has often been interpreted as Kahlo’s political-historical reflection on the concept of Mexican *nacionalidad*, as well as a commentary on progress-driven North American society.¹

Dualistically divided in two, the left half of the backdrop shows Frida’s Mexican past and the right half her North American present. When she painted the canvas, she had already been living in the United States for three years, watching Rivera go about his work, but by no means standing on the side. Rather, she was enjoying her own first successes as a painter and making friends with whom she would keep in touch until the end of her life. Through Rivera, moreover, she established contacts with galleries, museums, and collectors. On the other hand, 1932 was a year of great emotional strain for Frida because of her pregnancy and the miscarriage at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Surprisingly little of this shows in the painting—indeed she hardly addresses it all, as if she had gotten over it. The Mexican half shows exclusively motifs from Mexico’s

Pre-Hispanic period: the tension between the mighty sun, with its mouth dripping with blood, and the waning moon—that is, between the female and the male elements—releases itself in thunder and lightning. Below the lightning bolt is a crumbling pyramid, or rather the altar of a step pyramid, on which, in Aztec times, hearts were sacrificed. In front of it is a pile of rocks, the rubble of a building. And, finally, there are two female clay figures: one, white and childlike, in all innocence exposing her private parts; the other, dark, carrying a headless child in her arm. Both figures again represent the two Fridas: Frida as a young girl and as a woman who has just lost her baby. And then there is a ghostly stone head, rolled off to the side.

In the right half, Frida shows Detroit. Rivera, who had just had a very successful solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was now working on a major commission in Detroit. Frida incorporates in her painting motifs from several of the murals he created in the United States: the four thick, round smokestacks, for instance, appear both in the *Allegory of California*, which he painted in 1930–31 at the Pacific Stock Exchange Luncheon Club in San Francisco,² and in *The Building of a City*, painted in 1931 at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). Both Frida and Diego “greatly admired” technological and industrial development in the United States, as she wrote to Dr. Eloesser. And that is exactly what she paints: the Star-Spangled Banner appears in the smoke rising from the smokestacks.

On neither side does one see any people. One senses that Kahlo missed the closeness of people familiar to her. It is, however, a matter of interpretation, whether one thinks that she represents the Mexican side more favorably.

Also crucial for an understanding of the painting is the edge of the stage that Frida is standing on. On the Mexican side, blooming exotic plants are visible, that, on closer inspection, turn out to be poisonous and dangerous. Among them are

¹ An excellent survey of previous interpretations can be found in Margaret A. Lindauer, “Unveiling Politics,” in *Devouring Frida* (Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 128–33.

² This mural also includes the image of the botanist Luther Burbank, whom Frida painted that same year (Plate 2).



some prickly succulents, with their beautiful but rare blossoms, as well as some flowers that grow straight out of the earth, without a stem or protective foliage. In the center, below the young girl's private parts, is the cuckoopint, in all parts an extremely poisonous plant, causing skin irritation at the lightest touch; its consumption can cause inflammation of the mucous membranes and could even lead to lethal poisoning. Right next to herself, Frida placed the pulsatilla, the pasqueflower, also a poisonous plant that used to serve multiple medical purposes, such as inducing abortion, albeit with frequently fatal consequences for the women. The roots of all the plants are clearly visible, indicating that not long ago there was still soil there that has now disappeared, as it has in several other of Frida's paintings: the interior is now clearly exposed.

On the U.S. side, we see the energies that are imperceptible to our senses: the magnetism of the rotary engine, the electricity in the spotlight, and the waves of the sun lamp's red light. These three energy sources are fed through cables by earth forces just as plants are through their roots. The energy of the earthbound, technology-driven world on the right corresponds to the cosmic energy of the heavenly bodies on the Mexican side. Frida herself derives her energy from both worlds:

through an electrical outlet in her pedestal and through roots.

Frida Kahlo always had an eye for the psychological and spiritual forces that are at work in this world undetected by sensory perception: the destructive element in the cosmic energy of ancient Mexico, the poison in the beautiful plants, the warming and healing forces in cold technological equipment. Frida sees herself in the center of this world as a part of the whole, just like Walt Whitman in his "Song of Myself," one of her favorite books, which she liked to give to others as a present:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars... And [I] have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,

And call any thing close again when I desire it.³

What is essential in Frida's painting is not the criticism of one country or the other, but rather the connectedness of the cosmic and the sensuous, the idea of being one on the border between the "old" and the "new" worlds, between the conflicting elements within herself.

³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 55.



My Birth 1932

Oil on metal, 12 x 13¾ inches (30,5 x 35 cm)
Private collection, United States

The naked, blue¹ room in this painting has often been described, although it does not contain much that is worth describing. The sturdy wooden bed standing in the middle of the room is without posts, a modern bed of the 1930s and not, as frequently suggested, the old-fashioned bed of her mother, nor, for that matter, Frida's own bed.² The pale blue bed linen has as its only decoration white lace trim, as if it needed special emphasis that something is being pushed to the extreme here.

The painting is titled *My Birth*, and not "The Miscarriage," or "The Still Birth," or "The Death of My Mother." Any speculations along these lines are misconstrued. In her diary, Frida described herself as "The one who gave birth to herself."³ And as Herrera notes, Frida Kahlo herself explained that it was her own head which she covered with a shroud.

Behind the mask of the small dress-up doll from *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*, Frida Kahlo in 1932 was obviously in such bad shape that she wanted nothing more than to forget everything from the past and start from scratch. In my opinion there can be no doubt that Frida here paints her desire to literally shed her own skin, to finish with the past, and to start afresh. Everything she had to go through in this year—apart from the long-term consequences of her traumatic childhood experiences and the terrible accident, now the death of her mother and the loss of her own child—indeed exceeded the limits of what a human being can take. And so she turns to the higher powers, in this case the Catholic Mater Dolorosa, the sorrowful mother of God, whose image hangs above the bed.

*Stabat Mater dolorosa
Juxta Crucem lacrimosa
Dum pendebat Filius⁴*

Thus begins an old hymn to the Virgin Mary, which, according to Catholic custom, is chanted by believers during processions on the occasion of the Festival of the Seven Sorrows, that take them along the Stations of the Cross. Its concluding lines are:

When I am to die, Christ, grant me that
Your Mother leads me to the palm of victory.
And when my body dies, see that my soul finds
redemption in Paradise.⁵

Frida Kahlo modeled the image in the style of a votive painting, a genre not specific only to Mexico, but rather widespread in the Catholic countries of Europe and the Americas. In votive paintings, so-called *ex-votos* or *retablos*, as they are called in Mexico, devout believers express their gratitude for the fulfillment of their pleas to be cured from an illness or to be saved from danger. A banner with the image of the invoked saint or the Madonna in the aureole hovering above it contains a description of the events or words of gratitude for the mercy granted. Frequently, an image of the sick man or woman is included as well, making a bed the centerpiece of many votive images. What is it that distinguishes Frida's painting from these purely religiously motivated *ex-votos*? For one thing, the banner has remained blank: the painful feelings and experiences Frida recounts here cannot be expressed in words. The room also has nobody transcendently hovering in it, that is, no otherworldly being has helped her regain her health or achieve

¹ Blue is the color of the cloak of the Virgin Mary and consequently the dominant color of all *retablos*. In Kahlo's color system, blue stands for electricity, purity, love.

² According to Hayden Herrera, Frida Kahlo herself launched this story regarding the bed of her mother. One does not have to take it at face value, since Frida often came up with misleading stories, only to distract people from her real problems. And this painting cuts very close to her serious personal trauma. On the other hand, she herself stated that she had painted her own birth and covered her own head with a sheet. Unfortunately, Herrera has not provided evidence for any of these claims.

Grimberg sees in the painting a straightforward depiction of her own birth during which her mother could have died. He implies that this is how Frida perceived her childhood analytically. As an adult, however, she undoubtedly merely felt the effects of her wretched childhood. She never underwent an analysis, nor did she ever entertain a male perspective on her birth or her mother.

³ "La que se parió a sí misma." *Diary*, 49.

⁴ The mother was standing full of sorrow by the Cross and cried, while her son was hanging there.

⁵ "Cuando, Cristo, haya deirme, concédeme que tu madre me guíe a la palma de la victoria. Y cuando mi cuerpo muera, haz que a mi alma se conceda del paraíso la gloria."



rebirth. Finally, the extraordinary clarity and explicit nature of the birth scene is striking. Frida's blunt depiction is indeed unique:⁶ the head of the baby has just emerged from the vulva; the birth process is still ongoing.

There are countless *retablos* giving thanks for a birth without complications, but invariably the happy mother is demurely covered with a cloth, and the child is lying in a little basket next to her or in her arms. And the corresponding saint image is, of course, not that of the Mater Dolorosa, but rather the blissful mother of Christ holding the child on her lap. Frequently, the helpers, such as the doctor, the midwife, or the mother of the woman giving birth, are included in the *retablo* as well.

Frida Kahlo, in her painting, is completely alone. She probably sensed that this was the only way for her to renew herself, that is, by herself. The feeling that, in the end, nobody is able to help her consequently becomes the central message of this image.

⁶ Whereas in Christian art, no direct representations of birth scenes are known, numerous such images can be found in Islamic miniature painting. There are decidedly detailed and yet beautiful depictions of birth scenes from the treatises of the famous Arab medics. But both these images as well as the often-cited image of the Aztec Tlazolteotl differ from Frida's image in one essential aspect: only in Frida's painting is the woman giving birth already dead.



Self-Portrait with Necklace 1933

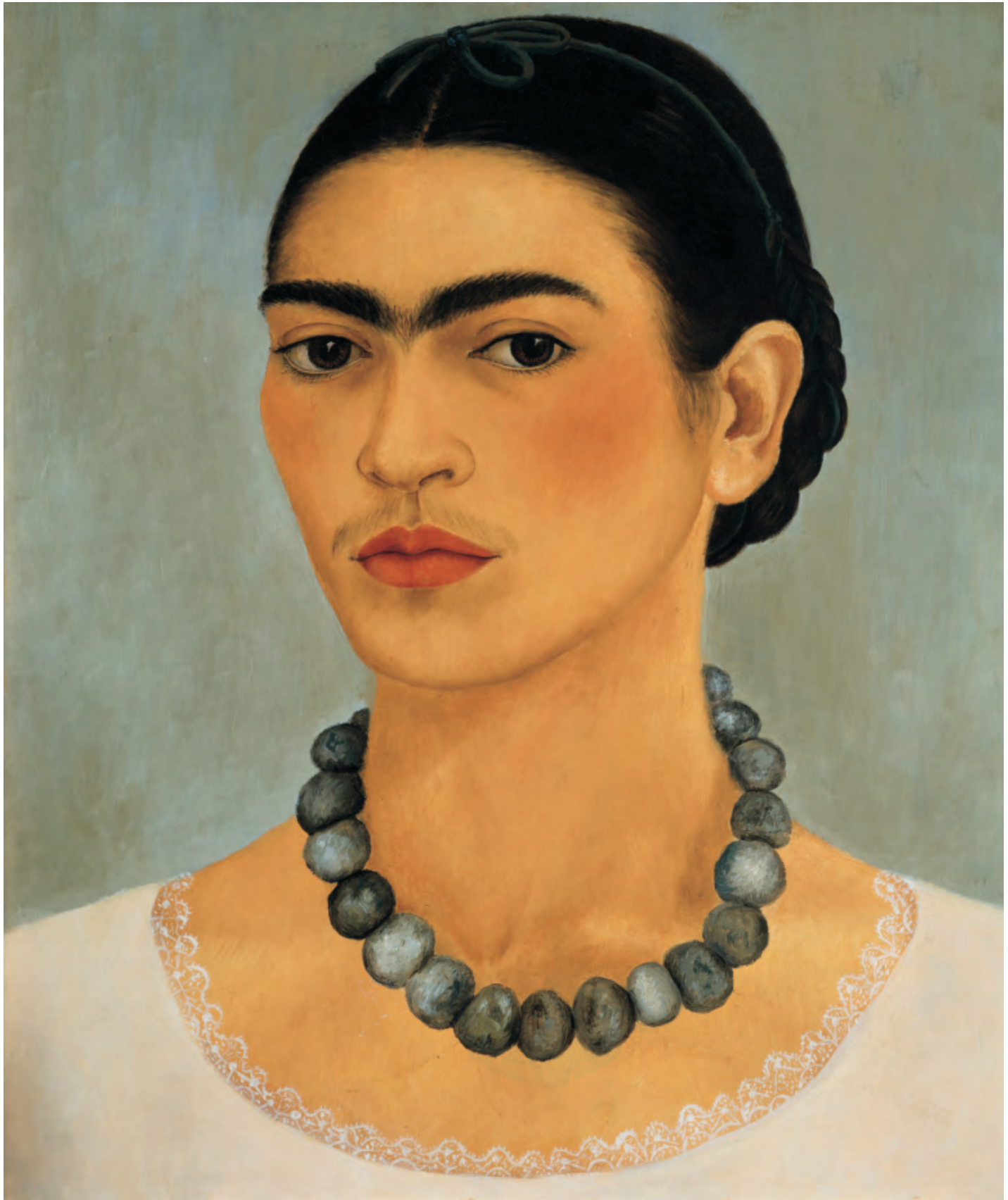
Oil on metal, 13½ x 11½ inches (34.5 x 29.5 cm)
 Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection, Mexico City

In June 1933, Frida Kahlo painted one of her most beautiful self-portraits in New York, at a stage in her life that was relatively successful for her: she found recognition as a painter, her works were selling well, and life in the United States provided her with new experiences. And she was still happily married; Diego had not yet cheated on her with her sister. On the other hand, she probably had not yet fully come to terms with her first abortions and miscarriages, and her mother had died in September 1932. The portrait shows a serene expression, but one in which much pain is still present. After her mother's death, moreover, she must have been increasingly preoccupied with her own gender identity.¹

Her hair is done with care and it looks natural. Some rouge on her cheeks brightens her pale complexion. She wears a

white blouse, which lends the image a trace of light and purity. And, in spite of the formal pose, the viewer's attention is drawn to what has been painfully repressed through a few details: the heavy necklace of dark stones—whether they are black clay from Oaxaca or old Pre-Hispanic stones, is hard to tell—lies tight around the bare neck. The necklace probably weighs quite heavily on her, just as the painful memories. And the typical mustache appears here for the first time in a self-portrait. The androgynous expression this lends to her features casts a shadow over the face of the young woman longing for purity, for redemption from the gender conflict within her.

¹ I am very grateful to the psychologist Dilek Çetinyol for providing psychological advice regarding the interpretation of numerous paintings.



13½ x 11½ IN.
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