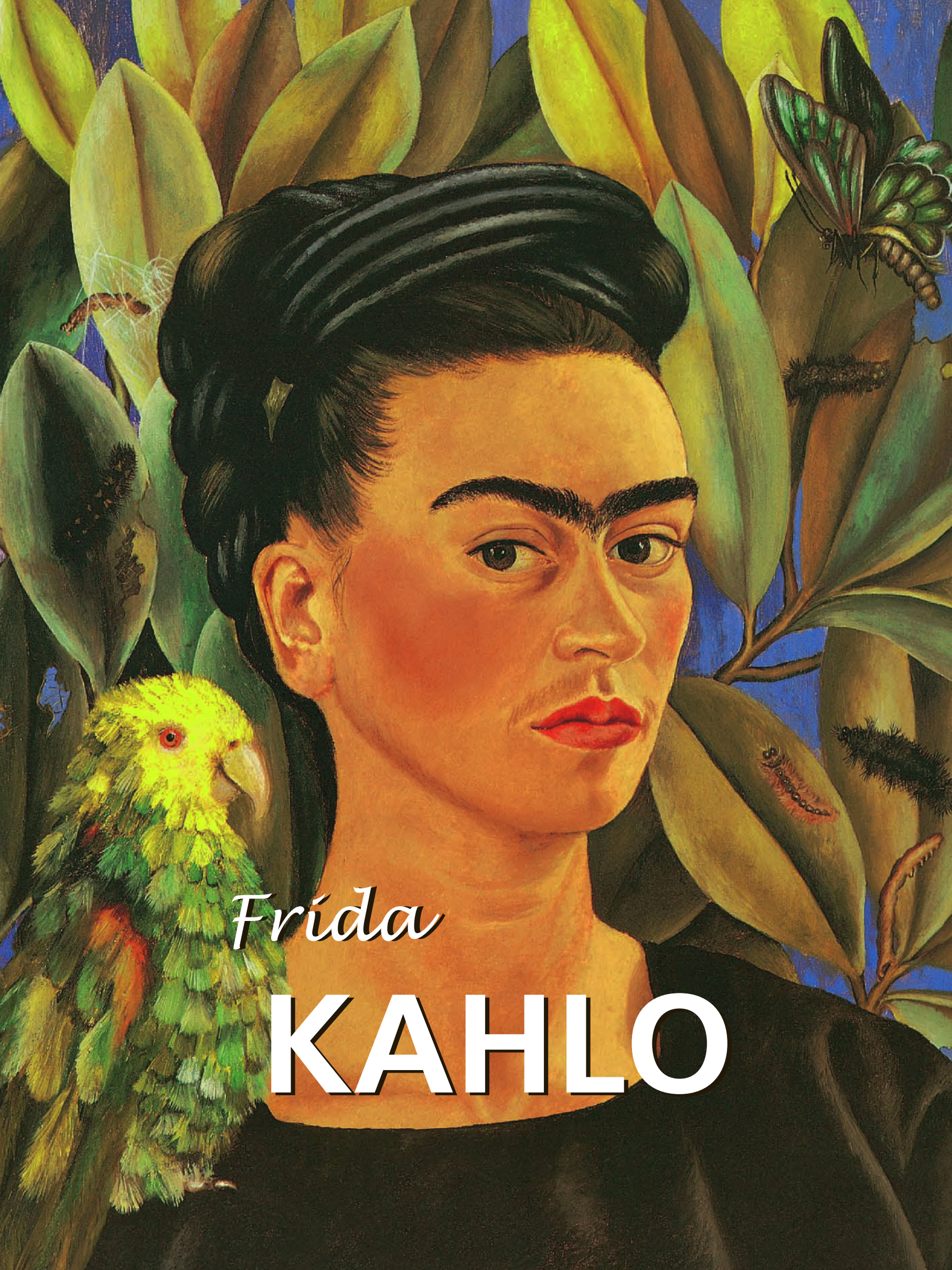




Frida

KAHLO

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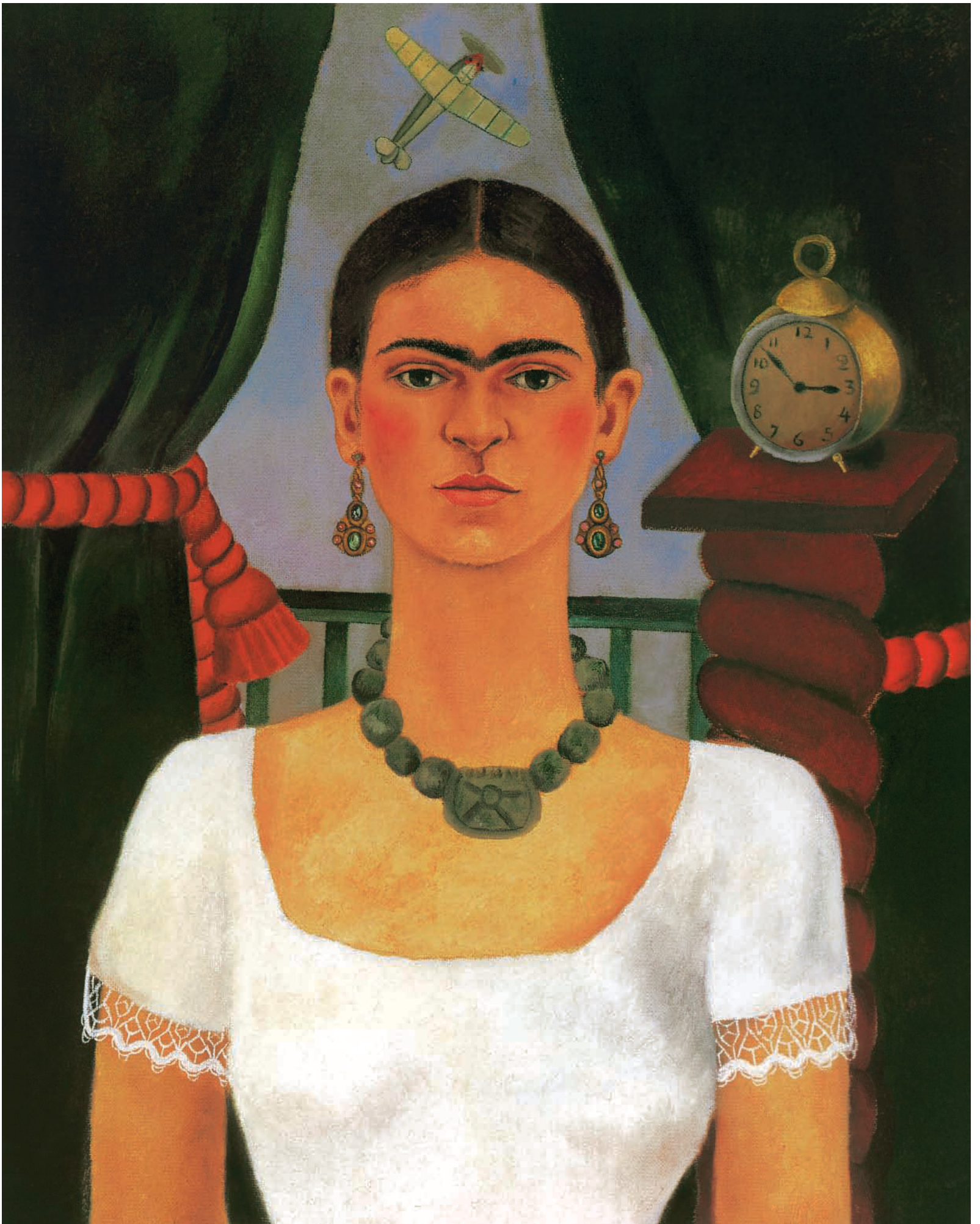
Gerry Souter

Frida Kahlo

Beneath the Mirror

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Introduction

Her serene face encircled in a wreath of flaming hair, the broken, pinned, stitched, cleft, and withered husk that once contained Frida Kahlo surrendered to the crematory's flames. The blaze heating the iron slab that had become her final bed replaced dead flesh with the purity of powdered ash and put a period – full stop – to the Judas body that had contained her spirit. Her incandescent image in death was no less real than her portraits in life. As the ashes smoldered and cooled, a darkness descended over her name, her paintings and her brief flirtation with fame. She became a footnote, a “promising talent” forever languishing in the shadow of her husband, the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, or as a *New York Times* art critic stated with a yawn over one of her works: “...painted by one of Rivera's ex-wives.”

Frida Kahlo should have died 30 years earlier in a horrendous bus accident, but her pierced, wrecked body held together long enough to create a legend and a collection of work that resurfaced 30 years after her death. Her paintings struck sparks in a new world prepared to recognize and embrace her gifts. Her paintings formed a visual diary, an outward manifestation of her inward dialog that was, all too often, a scream of pain. Her paintings gave shape to memories, to landscapes of the imagination, to scenes glimpsed and faces studied. Her paintings, with their symbolic palettes, kept madness (yellow) and the claustrophobic prison of plaster and steel corsets at arm's length. Her personal vocabulary of iconic imagery reveals clues as to how she devoured life, loved, hated, and perceived beauty. Her paintings, seasoned with words and diary pages and recollections of her contemporaries, reward us with a life lived at a fractured gallop, ended - possibly - at her own will, and left behind a courageous collective self portrait, a sum of all its parts.

The painter and the person are one and inseparable and yet she wore many masks. With intimates, Frida dominated any room with her witty, brash commentary, her singular identification with the peasants of Mexico and yet her distance from them, her taunting of the Europeans and their posturing beneath banners: Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Expressionists, Surrealists, Social Realists, etc. in search of money and rich patrons, or a seat in the academies. And yet, as her work matured, she desired recognition for herself and those paintings once given away as keepsakes. What had begun as a pastime quickly usurped her life. Frida's conversations were peppered with street slang and vulgarisms that belied her petit stature, Catholic upbringing and conservative love of traditional Mexican customs. While strolling a New York street

Self-Portrait "Time Flies", 1929.

Oil on masonite, 86 x 68 cm,

Private collection, USA.

wearing her red-trimmed *Tehuantepec* dress, jewelry studded with thousand-year-old jade and with a scarlet *reboso* shawl across her shoulders, a small boy approached and asked, “Is the circus in town?” She was a one-person show in any company, a Dadaist collection of contradictions.

Her internal life caromed between exuberance and despair as she battled almost constant pain from injuries to her spine, back, right foot, right leg, fungal diseases, many abortions, viruses, and the continuing experimental ministrations of her doctors. The singular consistent joy in her life was Diego Rivera, her husband, her frog prince, a fat Communist with bulging eyes, wild hair and a reputation as a lady killer. She endured his infidelities and countered with affairs of her own on three continents consorting with both strong men and desirable women. But in the end, Diego and Frida always came back to each other like two wounded animals, ripped apart with their art and politics and volcanic temperaments and held together with the tenuous red ribbon of their love.



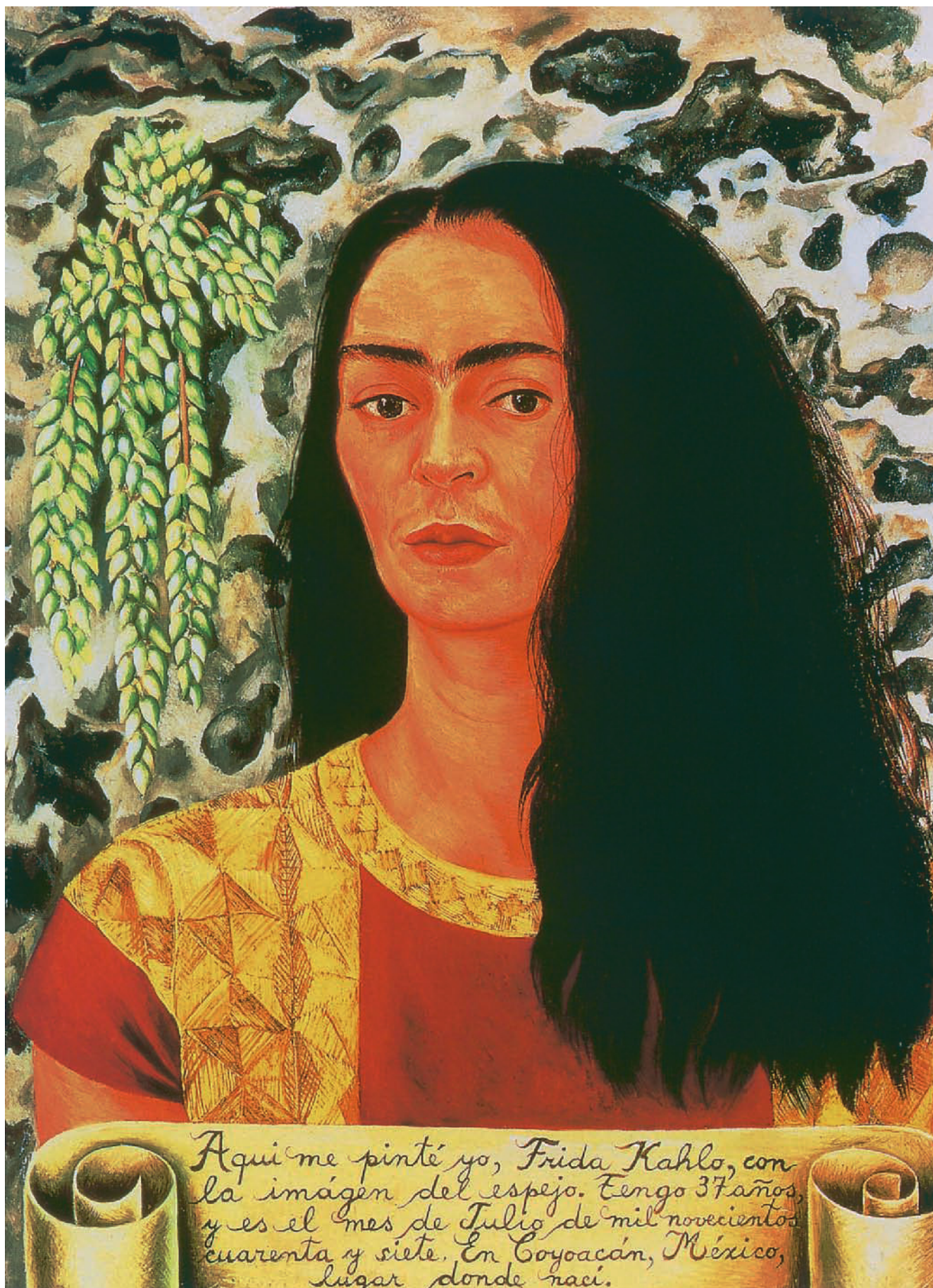
Her paintings on metal, board and canvas with their flat muralist perspectives, hard edges and unrepentant sweeps of local color reflected his influence. But where Diego painted what he saw on the surface, she eviscerated herself and became her subjects. As Frida’s facility with the medium and mature grasp of her expression sharpened in the 1940s, that Judas body betrayed her and took away her ability to realize all the images pouring from her exhausted psyche. Soon there was nothing left but narcotics and a quart of brandy a day.

*Self-Portrait with Thorny
Necklace, 1940.*
Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 49.5 cm,
Humanities Research Center,
University of Austin (Texas).

Diego stood by her at the end, as did a Mexico slow to realize the value of its treasure. Denied singular recognition by her native land until the last years of her life, Frida Kahlo’s only one-person show in Mexico opened where her life began and acted out its brief 47-year arc. When she was gone, the eyes of that life remained behind, observing us from the frame with a direct and challenging gaze.



The Dream or The Bed, 1940.
Oil on canvas, 74 x 98.5 cm,
Collection Isidore Ducasse, France.



Aquí me pinté yo, Frida Kahlo, con
la imagen del espejo. Tengo 37 años,
y es el mes de Julio de mil novecientos
cuarenta y siete. En Coyoacán, México,
lugar donde nací.

The Wild Thing

As a young girl, wherever she went she seemed to run as if there was so little time left to her and so much to be done. Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon was born on July 6, 1907 in Coyoacan, Mexico. At that time running, hiding, and learning to quickly identify which army was approaching the village were everyday survival skills for Mexican civilians. Frida eventually dropped the German spelling of her name, inherited from her father, Wilhelm (changed to Guillermo), a Hungarian raised in Nuremberg. Her mother, the former Matilde Calderon, a devout Catholic and a *mestiza* of mixed Indian and European lineage, held deeply conservative and religious views of a woman's place in the world. On the other hand, Frida's father was an artist, a photographer of some note who pushed her to think for herself. Guillermo was surrounded by daughters in *La Casa Azul* (the Blue House) at the corner of Londres and Allende Streets in Coyoacan. Amidst all the traditional domesticity, he fastened onto Frida as a surrogate son who would follow his steps into the creative arts. He became her very first mentor that set her aside from traditional roles accepted by the majority of Mexican women. She became his photographic assistant and began to learn the trade, though with little enthusiasm for the photographic medium. She traveled with him to be there if he suffered one of his epileptic seizures.

Guillermo Kahlo was a proud, fastidious man of regular habits and many intellectual pursuits from the enjoyment of fine classical music – he played almost daily on a small German piano – to his own painting and appreciation of art. His work in oil and watercolor was undistinguished, but it fascinated Frida to watch him use the small brush strokes of a photo retoucher to create scenes on a bare canvas instead of just removing double chins from vain portrait customers.

He rigidly maintained his own duality: outwardly active, but limited by his epilepsy, he would often regain consciousness lying in the street, having fallen from a grand mal seizure with Frida kneeling at his side holding the ether bottle near his nose, making sure his camera was not stolen. He played his music and read from his large library, but inside was constantly in turmoil about money to support his family. He wore what Frida described as a “tranquil” mask. She adopted that self-control, or at least the appearance of it, in the darkest moments of her life, never willing to display any public face that revealed what lay behind the stoic image.

Frida Kahlo was spoiled, indulged and impressionable. Her father's success landed him a job with the government of Porfirio Diaz, photographing Mexican architecture as a sort of advertisement to lure foreign investment. Since 1876 Diaz had enjoyed some

Self-Portrait with Hair Down,
1947.

Oil on hard fibre, 61 x 45 cm,
Private collection. (p. 10)

30 years as president of Mexico and adopted a Darwinian philosophy toward governing the Mexican people. This “survival of the fittest” concept meant virtually all government money and programs went to building up the rich and successful while ignoring less productive peasants. Mexico became the economic darling of international trade as countries took advantage of its mineral wealth and cheap labor. European customs and culture ruled while native Mexican and Indian traditions languished. Diaz personally selected Guillermo Kahlo to show the best side of Mexico to foreign investors, vaulting the photographer from an itinerant portraitist into the coveted middle class.

Kahlo wasted no time in buying a lot in the nearby suburb of Coyoacan on the outskirts of Mexico City and building La Casa Azul, a traditional Mexican wrap-around home – painted a deep blue with red trim – with its rooms opening onto a central courtyard. In 1922, to assure her a better than average education, he also entered Frida into the free National Preparatory School in San Ildefonso. She became one of 35 girls admitted to the school’s enrollment of 2,000 students and rose to become a class character alongside other male pupils who became some of Mexico’s leading intellectuals and government leaders. She devoured her new freedom from mind-numbing domestic chores and hung out with a number of cliques within the school’s social structure. She found a real sense of belonging with the *Cachuchas* gang of intellectual bohemians – named after the type of hat they wore. Leading this motley elitist mob was Alejandro Gomez Arias, who reiterated in countless speeches that a new enlightenment for Mexico required “optimism, sacrifice, love, joy” and bold leadership. His good looks, confident manner and impressive intellect drew Frida to him.

All her life, Frida attracted men of this type and, once conquered, each became enmeshed in her passionate, possessive web. But each conquest also puzzled the country girl as she pondered what these strong decisive men saw in her.

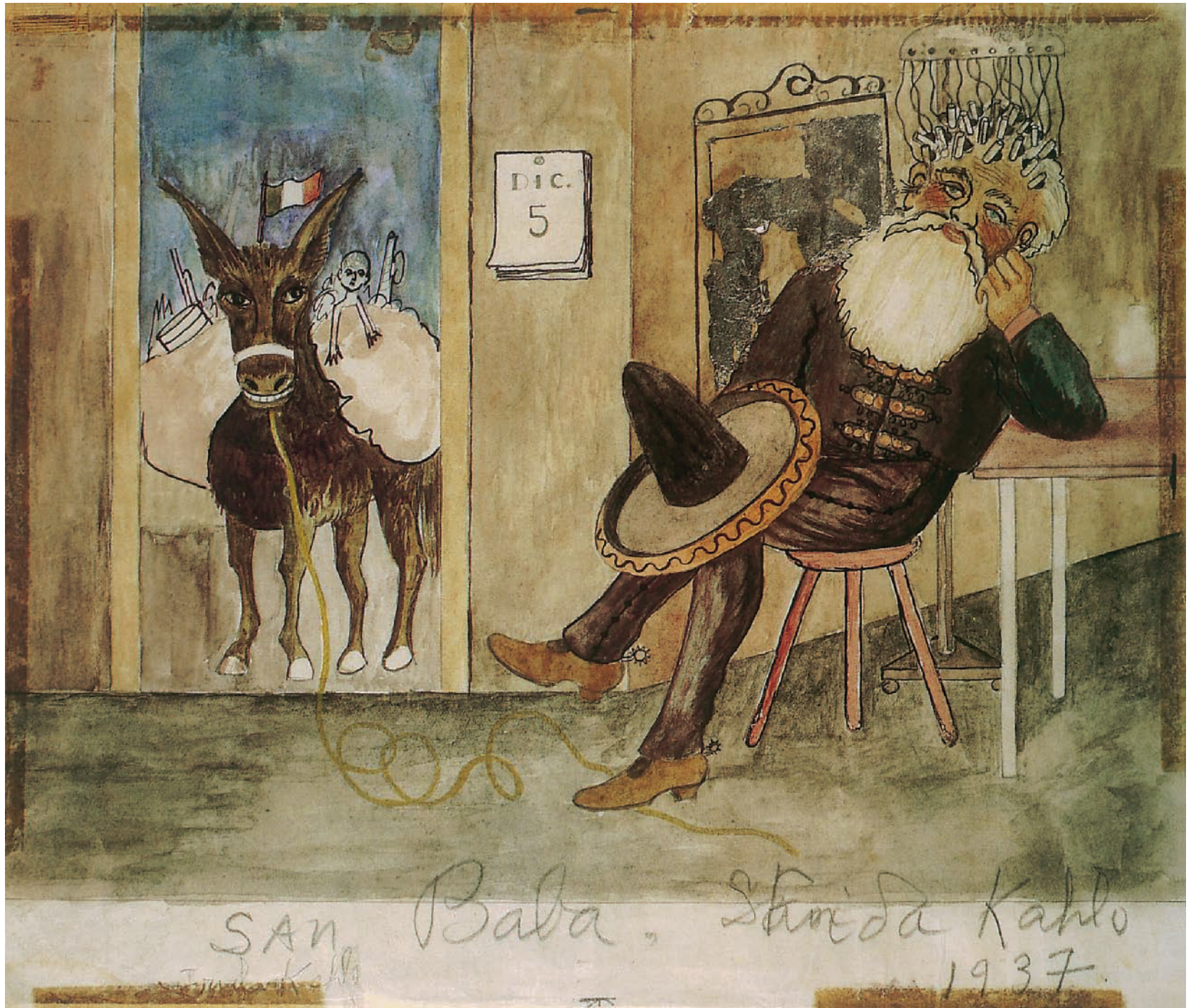
Saint Nicholas, 1932, dated 1937.
Mixed Technique, (watercolour, crayon) on paper, 23 x 27 cm,
Collection Juan Coronel Rivera,
Mexico. (p.13)

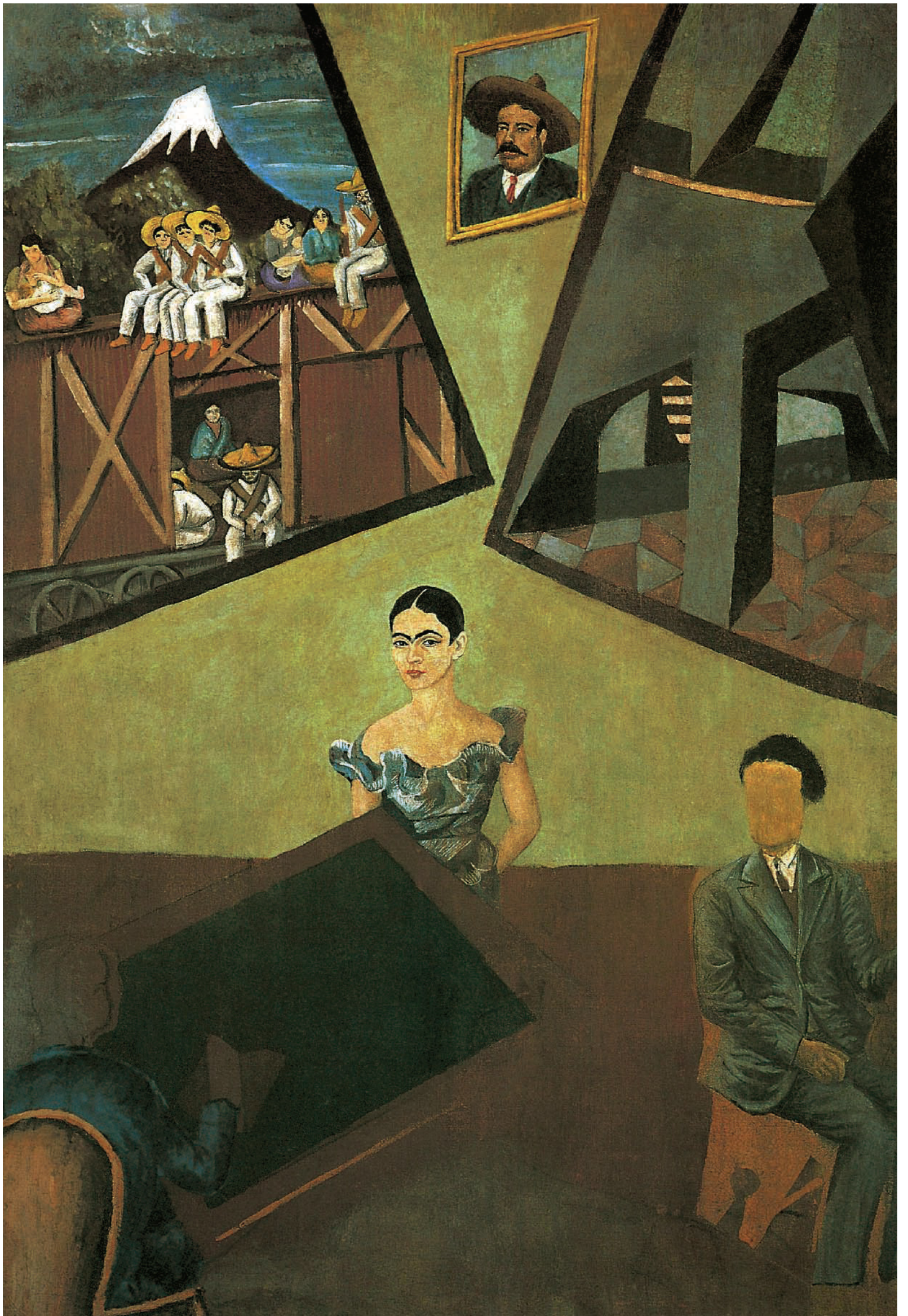
Pancho Villa and Adelita, c.1927.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 45 cm. (p. 14)

Portrait of Miguel N. Lira, 1927.
Oil on canvas, 99.2 x 67.5 cm,
Instituto Tlaxcala de Cultura,
Tlaxcala. (p. 15)

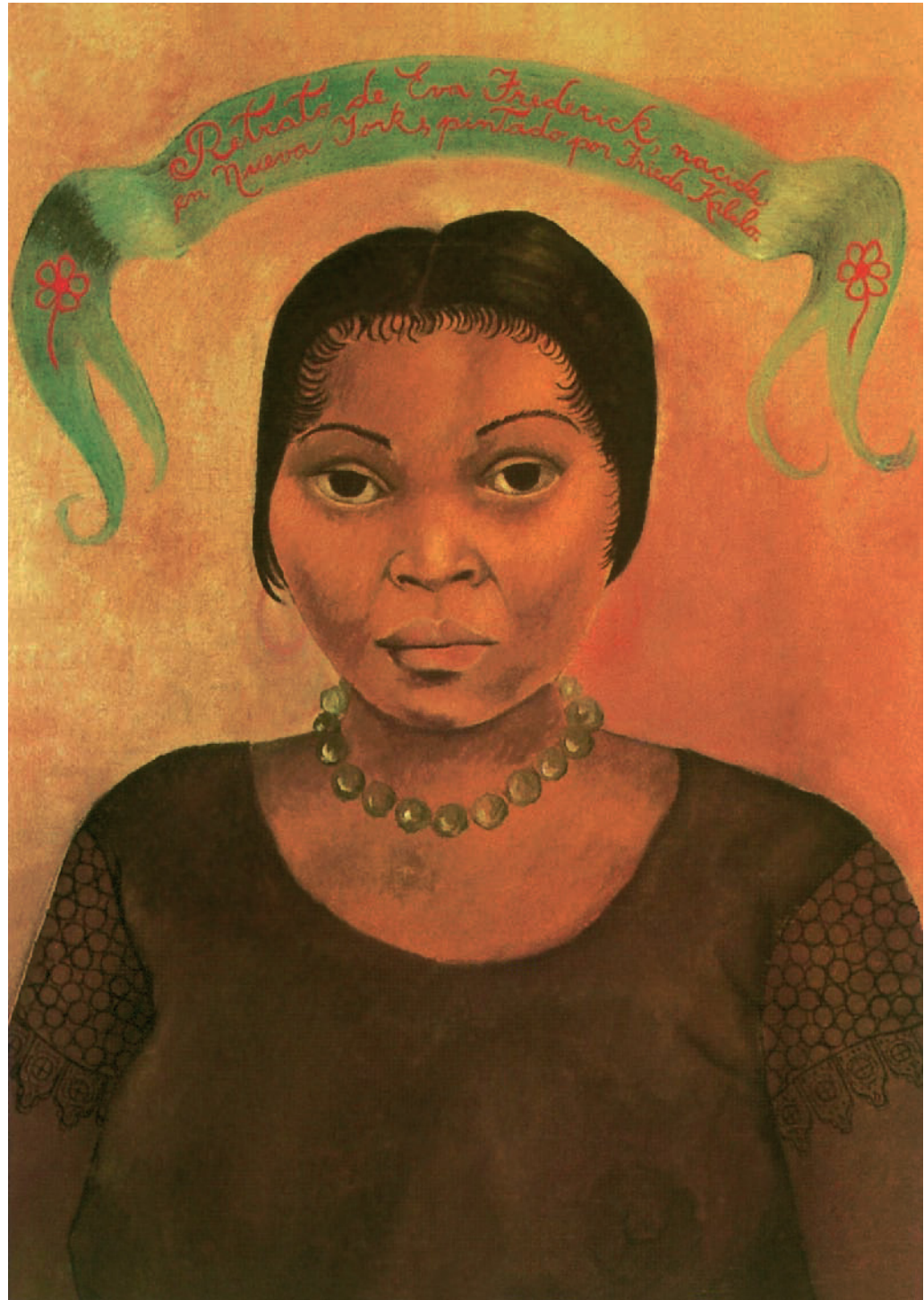
She was short, dark, slender and a cripple. At age 13, Frida had been felled by a bout of polio that withered her right leg leaving it shorter than her left. Neighborhood children taunted her with shouts of, “*pata de palo*” or “*peg leg*”. To conceal her affliction, she wore layers of stockings on her thin leg and had a half-inch added to the heel of her shoe. Considering the state of medicine in Mexico of the 1920s – hot walnut oil baths and calcium doses – she was lucky to be alive. To further compensate for her limp, she plunged into sports: running, boxing, swimming and wrestling, every strenuous activity available to girls. But her greatest sport was intellectual debate, and with Arias she found a true soul-mate.

By 1923 they were lovers and sharing hours at the Ibero American Library, absorbing Gogol, Tolstoy, Spengler, Hegel, Kant and other great European minds. From these sessions and her own reading, she gradually developed a deep-seated affinity for









socialism and the uplifting of the masses. To her in that circle of social climbing students, these two concepts were abstractions for lip service, but she remained a committed and vocal Communist for the rest of her life. She even substituted the 1910 date of the start of the Mexican Revolution for her actual birth year, 1907, as an affirmation of her commitment to revolutionary ideals.

Portrait of Eva Frederick, 1931.

Oil on canvas, 63 x 46 cm,
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño,
Mexico City.

The atmosphere in Mexico City was alive with political debate and danger as volatile speakers stepped forward to challenge whatever regime claimed power only to be gunned down in the street, or absorbed into the corruption. Diaz fell to Madero who