

The world of Frida Kahlo



An exhibition on the late Mexican painter gives a glimpse into her life through her personal items

Toh Wen Li

An exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum will give people a glimpse into the colourful life of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo.

The late artist has been described as "the most famous female artist in history".

Today, she is held up as a feminist symbol, a gay icon and an inspiration to fashion designers.

Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up will open on Saturday and explore how the painter fashioned her identity, in a showcase of more than 200 objects from the Blue House in Mexico City, where she lived and died.

Her personal items were discovered in 2004 – 50 years after her husband and fellow artist Diego Rivera sealed them in the Blue House following her death in 1954.

This is the first time the collection is being exhibited outside Mexico.

The exhibition, says co-curator Circe Henestrosa, will give people "a big overview" of who Kahlo was and her personal universe – through her wardrobe, paintings and archives.

"It's very intimate – the nearest you would be able to (get to) seeing and feeling her," adds Ms Henestrosa, 42, who is also head of the School of Fashion at Lasalle College of the Arts.

Kahlo was born in Coyoacan, Mexico, in 1907, the daughter of a German photographer and a devout Catholic of Spanish-indigenous descent.

Known for her surrealist paintings, she was heavily influenced by indigenous Mexican culture.

Her life had more than its fair share of misfortune.

She contracted polio as a child, which left her with a damaged right leg. And at the age of 18, when she was planning to study for a medical degree, the bus she was in collided with a tram. A metal handrail pierced her abdomen and pelvis, shattered her spine and collar bone and broke her right leg in 11 places.

Kahlo, who began to paint portraits during her convalescence, had numerous operations and was unable to bear children.

A year before she died at the age of 47, her right leg was amputated due to gangrene.

The exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is also curated by the museum's senior curator of fashion Claire Wilcox, will feature a wide range of Kahlo's personal items.

Among them are 22 distinctive Tehuana garments, pre-Columbian necklaces Kahlo strung herself, intricately hand-painted corsets and prosthetics, and film and photography of the artist.

Her make-up – from her Ebony eyebrow pencil to her favourite lipstick, Revlon's Everything's Rosy –

will also be on display, along with her self-portraits.

Ms Henestrosa, who also curated the exhibition, *Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The Dresses Of Frida Kahlo* in 2012 at The Frida Kahlo Museum in Coyoacan – a showcase she describes as the "genesis" of this one – says her interest in Kahlo was sparked in part by her family's connection with the artist.

Her granduncle, famous Mexican writer Andres Henestrosa, was close friends with Rivera and Kahlo.

Examine Kahlo's art in the light of her personal items and a narrative of suffering transformed into self-empowerment starts to emerge.

She notes that the Tehuana dress Kahlo used to wear – from the Tehuantepec Isthmus, a matriarchal society – allowed her to portray her political beliefs and heritage while disguising her disability.

The long skirt was often worn with a heavily adorned headpiece. This drew attention to her face while masking her damaged leg.

While the artist depended on corsets and a prosthetic leg to support her body, she decorated them, making wearing them seem like a choice.

"She made out of her prosthetic leg a piece of art," says Ms Henestrosa.

"Her relationship to her corsets was one of support, her body was dependent on the medical intervention.

"But it was also one of rebellion. It was like a conscious fashion statement."

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(Top) Frida Kahlo with Olmec figurine, 1939.

(Above) Necklace made by Matilde Poulat, Mexico City, circa 1950. PHOTOS: NICKOLAS MURAY PHOTO ARCHIVES, FRIDA KAHLO MUSEUMS

BOOK IT / FRIDA KAHLO: MAKING HER SELF UP

WHERE: Room 38 and 38a, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, Knightsbridge, London SW7 2RL, United Kingdom

WHEN: Saturday till Nov 4

ADMISSION: £15 (\$26.80), concessions available; free for V&A members

INFO: To make an advance booking, go to vam.ac.uk/FridaKahlo or call +44 (0) 20-7942-2500 (booking fee applies)