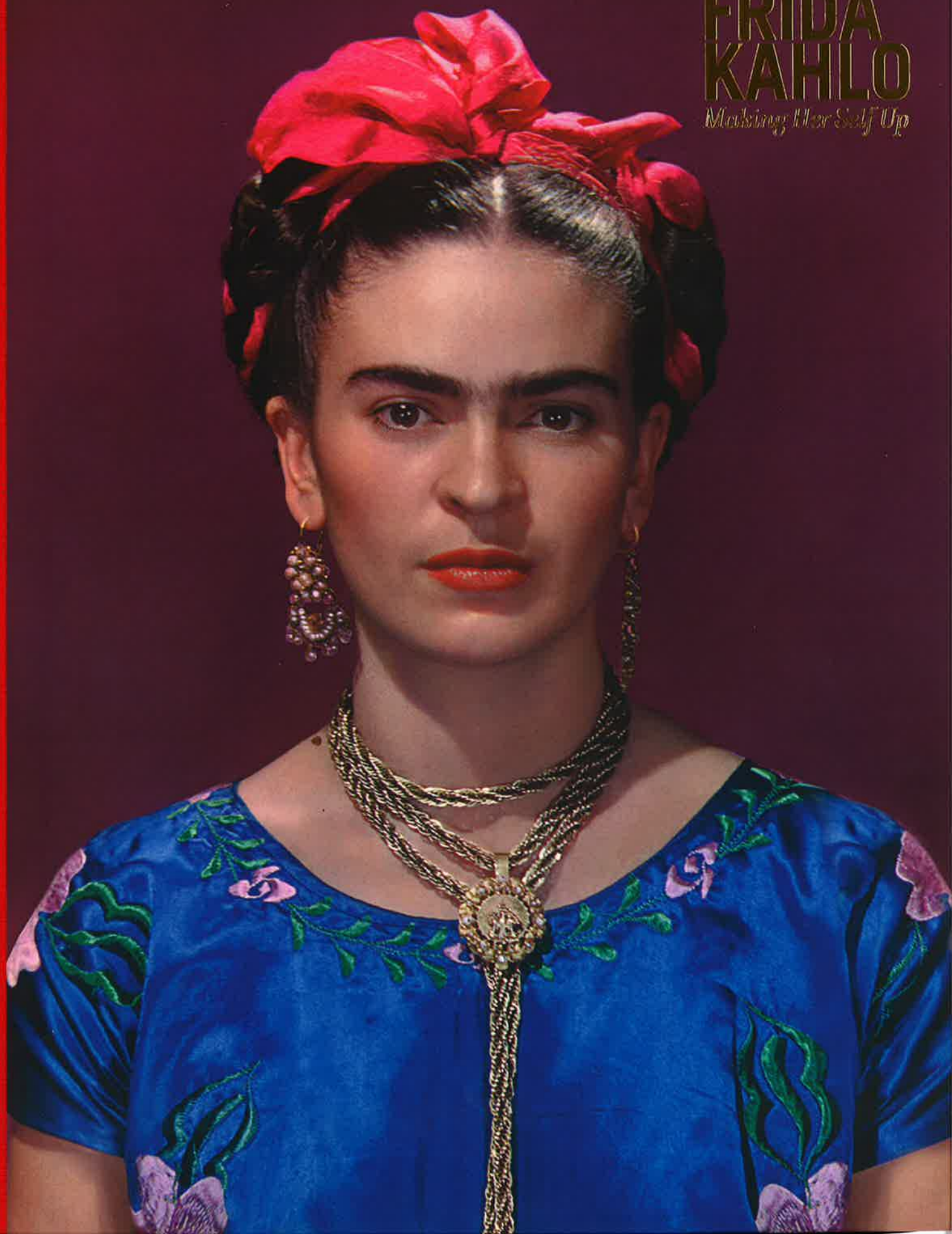


**FRIDA  
KAHLO**  
*Making Her Self Up*





## INTRODUCTION: FASHIONING FRIDA

CLAIRE WILCOX & CIRCE HENESTROSA  
*Co-Curators*

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) sits at her easel, fully robed in her Tehuana dress, with brightly embroidered blouse and full skirt billowing to the ground. In her right hand, she holds a fine sable brush, and in her left an artist's palette, which rests on her knee. Kahlo is intent on her unfinished painting, despite the looming presence of Diego Rivera (1886–1957) behind her, watching her paint. Kahlo depicts herself dressed in a *resplandor*, a festive headdress worn at weddings and on saint's days. The starched lace ruff forms an aura around her face, while her watchful eyes meet the viewer's. As with many of Kahlo's art works, the power of the self-portrait lies in its sense of anguish and a tense ambiguity about who is regarding whom.

*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)* [88], one of Kahlo's larger works, was not finished until 1943. By then, she had added a force-field of tendrils, adorned her hair with bougainvillea flowers and leaves, and anointed her forehead with Rivera's portrait, thus uniting three of the main preoccupations of her life: her Mexican identity, self-portraiture and her complex relationship with Rivera. Twenty-one years older than Kahlo, Rivera was the leading muralist of his time and together they were at the forefront of Mexico's artistic, cultural and political elite, even accommodating Leon Trotsky in the *Casa Azul* (Blue House) during his exile from Russia in the late 1930s.

The Blue House in Coyoacán, once a village on the outskirts of Mexico City, but now part of the city's suburbs, was the epicentre of Kahlo's life. Here we see her, with habitual cigarette in hand,<sup>1</sup> in the bright sunlit courtyard with her hairless *xoloitzcuintli* dogs<sup>2</sup> and mischievous spider monkeys,<sup>3</sup> or indoors, bejewelled and made up, lying atop carefully arranged bed covers and lace-edged sheets in her four-poster bed. Kahlo's sick bed functioned as both refuge and stage, for following a traumatic accident in 1925 in which she almost died, she spent extended periods encased in immobilizing plaster corsets, writing in January 1950, from hospital: 'Still corseted up and just a f...rigging mess! But I'm not discouraged and I'll try to start painting as soon as I can.'<sup>4</sup> In lieu of access to her easel, the plaster of her corsets became a three-dimensional canvas.

Unlike Rivera and other male artists who asserted their artistic freedom by being depicted in paint-spattered workwear, Kahlo rarely appeared casually dressed, even at her easel, for although underestimated

EMMY LOU PACKARD  
FRIDA KAHLO, 1941  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT. 27 x 27 CM  
*Emmy Lou Packard Papers, Archives of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution*

LUCIENNE BLOCH  
FRIDA KAHLO AT THE BARBIZON PLAZA  
HOTEL, NEW YORK, 1933  
*The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th  
Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation*

BERNARD SILBERSTEIN  
FRIDA KAHLO PAINTING 'SELF-PORTRAIT AS A  
TEHUANA' WHILST DIEGO RIVERA OBSERVES HER, 1940  
PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT. 24.4 x 20 CM  
*Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division*

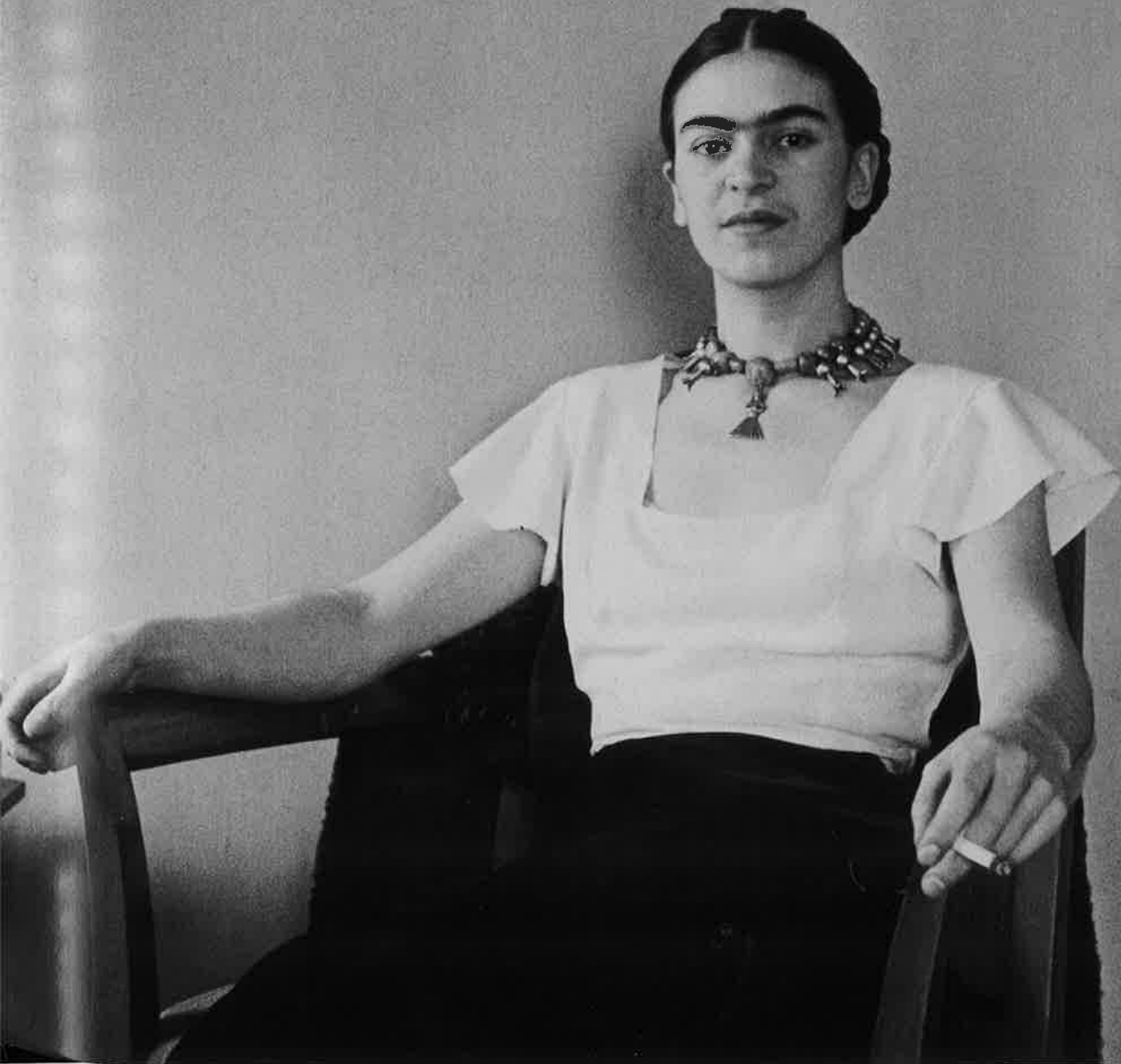
as an artist in her lifetime, she was frequently photographed at work. Her charisma and careful regard for the art of dressing offered a photogenic appeal that was at odds with the uncompromising nature of her art; as the founder of Surrealism André Breton observed, her painting was like 'a ribbon around a bomb'. The co-curator of this exhibition Circe Henestrosa has noted:

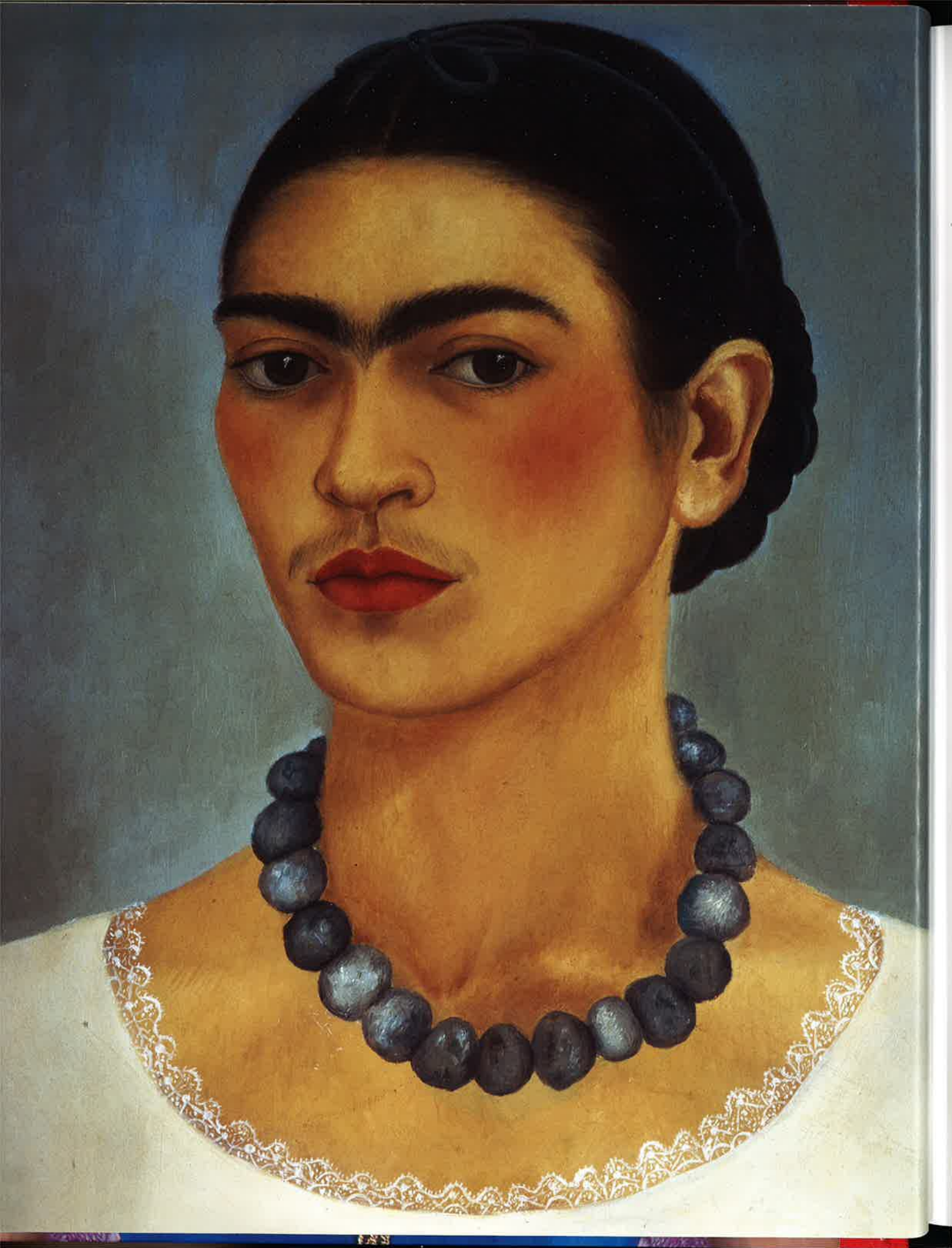
Kahlo's powerful style is as integral to her myth as her paintings. It is her construction of identity through her ethnicity, her disability, her political beliefs and her art that makes her such a compelling and relevant icon today. Her resplendent Tehuana dresses; striking headpieces, hand-painted corsets and prosthetics masterfully masked her physical impairments, but were also a form of self-expression and an extension of her art.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Gannit Ankori and Oriana Baddeley informed Henestrosa's exhibition *Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The Dresses of Frida Kahlo* at the Museo Frida Kahlo in 2012, designed by exhibition-maker Judith Clark, from which the V&A's iteration *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* has evolved. Ankori, who has also acted as consultant advisor to this exhibition, interrogates the relationship between photographs of Kahlo, her painting and her self-fashioning in her essay *Frida Kahlo: Posing, Composing, Exposing* while Baddeley's essay *Frida Redressed* summarizes Kahlo's remarkable impact on a digital world, which even she could not possibly have imagined. Their texts bookend Henestrosa's essay *Appearances Can Be Deceiving – Frida Kahlo's Construction of Identity: Disability, Ethnicity and Dress* which is informed by her own family roots in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, and the power of its dress.

Today, the Blue House is a museum, but it still feels like a home, overflowing with Kahlo's collections of Mexican popular arts and crafts. The rooms are filled with pre-Columbian sculpture, walls are lined with *ex-votos* (devotional paintings),<sup>6</sup> the kitchen retains its colourful tiles and glass display cases are crowded with pottery figures, dolls and toys. Family photographs still dot the walls, along with heroes of the Russian Revolution, while Kahlo's erudition is reflected in the Spanish, English







and German volumes on art, anatomy and political history, and the novels and poetry that line her book shelves.

Kahlo and Rivera's lives and art are impossible to comprehend without an understanding of their political ideology following the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, and the community of artists that was drawn to Mexico during the 1930s. Adrian Locke articulates this in his essay *Quetzalcoatl's Grin: The Changing Face of Art and Culture in Frida Kahlo's Mexico*. Despite her atheism and commitment to Communism, Kahlo's work was imbued with Catholic imagery, which Kirstin Kennedy explores in her essay on the traditions and meanings of the *resplendor*.<sup>7</sup>

Many individuals in Mexico have helped to make this exhibition possible, but we are grateful particularly to Hilda Trujillo Soto, the Director of the Museo Frida Kahlo. Her essay *Treasure in the Blue House* tells the remarkable story of the opening of Kahlo's bathroom in 2004, and the discovery of an extraordinary collection of jewellery, surgical corsets, medicines, cosmetics, photographs, letters and, above all, clothing. These objects are so familiar to art historians from her self-portraits and the countless photographs that exist of Kahlo. Locked away by Rivera on her death in 1954, they remained undisturbed until 2004, and the V&A is privileged to be the first to show these priceless artifacts, outside Mexico.

Co-curator Claire Wilcox has brought added depth to this exhibition, while her exploration of Kahlo's love of cosmetics, interleaved here with new photography by Javier Hinojosa, offers a unique perspective on how Kahlo faced the world. Clare Phillips also offers new research into the history of Kahlo's eclectic and bold taste in jewellery; ranging from pre-Columbian to modern, it was indelibly associated with her uniquely individual appearance. The inclusion of numerous family photographs of Kahlo has also helped determine the structure of this book which includes six inset booklets containing archive photographs and personal items, while larger pages contain the paintings and newly conserved ensembles, mounted on mannequins.

In November 2017, a team of conservators, mount-makers and curators visited the Blue House to prepare for the exhibition at the V&A which would reunite Kahlo's clothing with some of her self-portraits.

Whilst there, they detected many traces of pigment on the skirts upon which Kahlo rested her palette and brushes; some are stained with red paint and small splashes of blue and black ink (Kahlo was an inveterate letter writer), while others have paint embedded in the textile fibres or faint brushstrokes of paint across the surface of the fabric.

Kahlo's commitment to the Tehuana dress of her native Mexico was not for show, or for staged photographs, but an integral part of her daily dress, as the many darns, cigarette burns and stains demonstrate. Perhaps one of the most moving discoveries was the realization that a dash of green paint on one of Kahlo's pre-Columbian necklaces, consisting of jade beads unearthed from archaeological excavations which the artist had strung herself, and which are similar to those featured in her 1933 *Self-Portrait with a Necklace* [p.16], is in fact a deliberately applied brushstroke of green paint. It is tempting to speculate that Kahlo was trying to match the colour of the stones while painting herself.

The symbiotic relationship in Kahlo's life and work between her art and dress cannot be overestimated. Kahlo, as always, forged new ground, meaning that art historians and costume historians have been brought together by the remarkable legacy of both Kahlo's art and wardrobe: the material properties of her clothing bring her paintings to life, while the paintings offer dress in all its symbolic meaning, thus changing the fields of biography, self-portraiture and sartorial expression forever.



