

# Frida Kahlo

(1907-1954)



## Contents

### *The Highlights*

Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress (1926)  
The Bus (1929)  
Frieda and Diego Rivera (1931)  
Henry Ford Hospital (1932)  
My Dress Hangs There (1933)  
Memory, the Heart (1937)  
Self Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky (1937)  
Self Portrait with Monkey (1938)  
The Suicide of Dorothy Hale (1938)  
What the Water Gave Me (1938)  
The Two Fridas (1939)  
Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird (1940)  
The Broken Column (1944)  
The Wounded Deer (1946)  
The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Señor Xolotl (1949)  
Viva la Vida (1954)

### *The Paintings*

The Complete Paintings  
Alphabetical List of Paintings

### *The Delphi Classics Catalogue*

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*Masters of Art Series*

**Frida Kahlo**



*By Delphi Classics, 2025*

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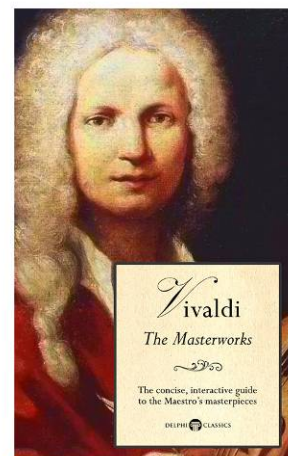
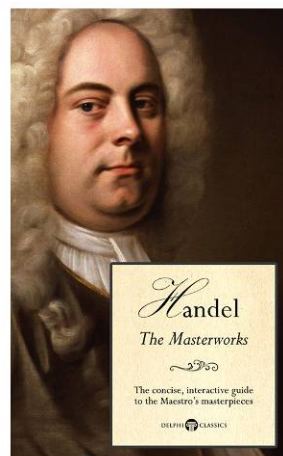
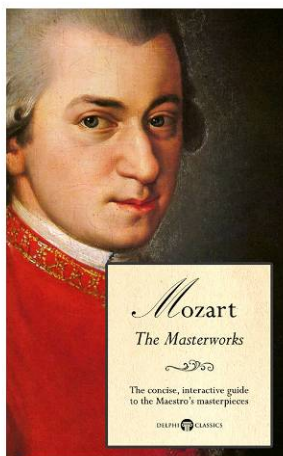
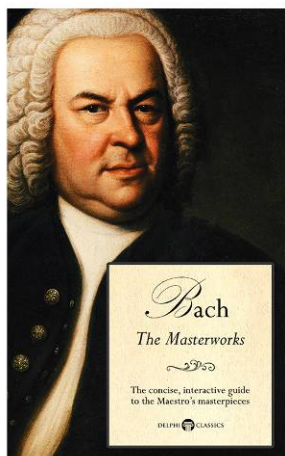
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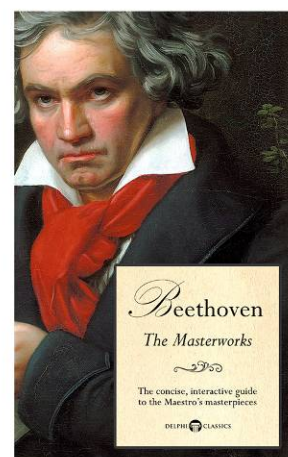
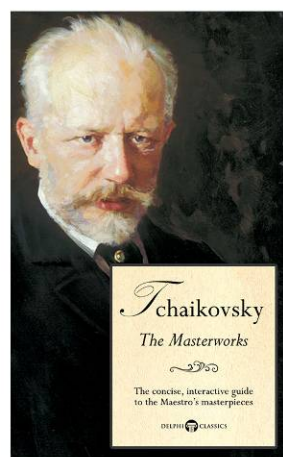
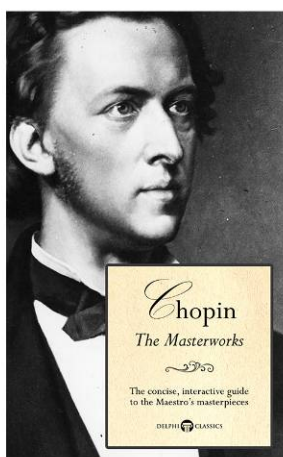
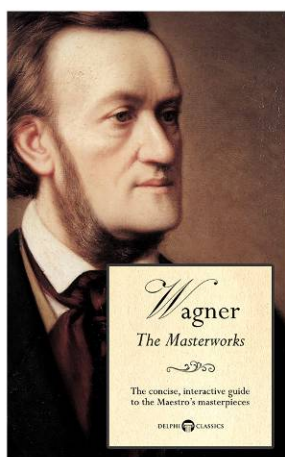
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## The Highlights



*Coyoacán, a former village, now part of Mexico City — Frida Kahlo's birthplace*



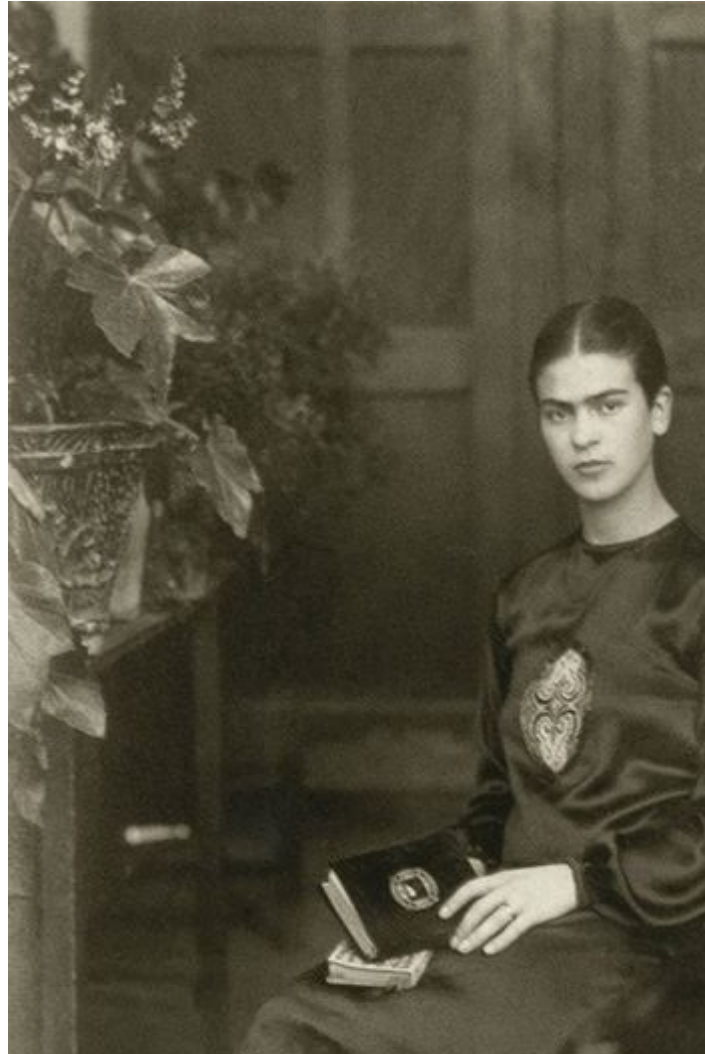


*The birthplace, known as the 'Blue House' in the Colonia del Carmen neighborhood of Coyoacán. This is where Kahlo, grew up, lived with her husband Diego Rivera for a number of years and where she died in a room on the upper floor. In 1957, Rivera donated the home and its contents to turn it into a museum to celebrate the life and work of Kahlo.*





*Kahlo in 1919, aged 11*



*Kahlo in 1926*

## **The Highlights**



In this section, a sample of Kahlo's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

## Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress (1926)



On 6 July 1907 the great surrealist master Frida Kahlo was born in the village of Coyoacán, now a suburb of Mexico City. She had a German father and a mestiza mother (of Purépecha descent). She spent the majority of her childhood and adult life at La Casa Azul, her family home in Coyoacán, which is now publicly run as the Frida Kahlo Museum. In her youth, she suffered a bout of polio that left her with a slight limp, which would trouble her for the rest of her life. Alas, poor health would haunt her for the rest of her life.

She was particularly close to her father, a professional photographer, often assisting him in his studio, which helped her develop a sharp eye for detail from a young age. Although she took several drawing classes, she was more interested in science and by 1922 she had entered the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, hoping to study medicine. The institution had only recently begun admitting women, with only 35 girls out of 2,000 students. She performed well academically, was a keen reader and became deeply immersed and committed to Mexican culture, political activism and issues of social justice. While there she met Diego Rivera, destined to become a noted muralist and who would be the enduring love of her life, though it would be a tempestuous relationship over the years. Kahlo had been a promising student when her life was inexplicably forced to take a very different direction.

On 17 September 1925, Kahlo and her boyfriend Alejandro Gómez Arias were on their way home from school. They boarded one bus, but they alighted to look for an umbrella that she had left behind. Therefore, the second bus they boarded was much more crowded than her usual choice and they sat in the back. The driver attempted to pass an oncoming electric streetcar, which crashed into the side of the wooden vehicle, dragging it a few feet. Several passengers were killed in the accident. While Arias only suffered minor injuries, Kahlo was impaled by an iron handrail that went through her pelvis. She later described the injury as “the way a sword pierces a bull”. The handrail was removed by Arias and others, which was incredibly painful for Kahlo.

She suffered many injuries: her pelvic bone had been fractured, her abdomen and uterus had been punctured by the rail, her spine was broken in three places, her right leg was broken in eleven places, her right foot was crushed and dislocated, her collarbone was broken and her shoulder was dislocated. She spent a month in hospital and two months recovering at home before being able to return to work. As she continued to experience fatigue and back pain, her doctors ordered X-rays, which revealed that the accident had also displaced three vertebrae. As treatment she had to wear a plaster corset that confined her to bed rest for the better part of three months.

This tragic bus accident had been so serious that Kahlo underwent more than 30 medical operations in her lifetime. During her slow and long recovery, she sought solace in her childhood interest of art and began to favour the idea of becoming an artist, now that a medical career was out of the question. In this extended period of convalescence, her parents gave her an easel and painting supplies, fixing a mirror to the ceiling above her bed so that she could view herself while lying on her back. Undeterred by her situation, Kahlo taught herself to paint and complemented her studies by reading art history and analysis of the works of the Old Masters.



*Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress* is a product of this convalescent period, being one of her first self portraits — a genre that would epitomise her life's work, much like Rembrandt 300 years before. The canvas was intended as a gift for her boyfriend Arias. They had met back in 1922 when she started classes at the National Prep School. The young couple had soon fallen in love and were inseparable for the next three years. It is believed that without Arias' insistence with the doctors to attend to Kahlo after the bus accident, she may never have survived. She began working on the painting in late summer of 1926 after their relationship had become strained. It served as Kahlo's attempt to win back her lover's affection, after he had accused her of being "too liberal". On completing the painting and dispatching it to him, she included a note that said:

"Within a few days the portrait will be in your house. Forgive me for sending it without a frame. I implore you to put it in a low place where you can see it as if you were looking at me."

It appears the gift initially had its intended effect and the couple were reunited, though Arias would eventually move to Europe and Kahlo would remain in Mexico to begin her painting career.

The artist appears half length, wearing an elegant velvet dress, set against a background of stylised waves. She is presented in an attractive manner, hoping to win the affections of her estranged lover, while her hair is neatly parted in the centre and combed into a chignon, accentuating her oval face and symmetrical features. The prominent monobrow would become a staple feature of her self portraits. Her compelling gaze, heightened by strongly defined brows and wide eyes, directing an unflinching gaze at the viewer, expresses a bold challenge. Clearly, the subject has confidence in both her physical appearance and her artistic talents. The intensity of her gaze reveals the fiery spirit and passion that recurs throughout her masterpieces.

Her oldest surviving self portrait, its style is clearly reminiscent of the aristocratic and melancholic character of early Renaissance art. In a letter to her lover, she refers to the canvas as 'your Botticelli'. The red dress and the slender elegant fingers recall elements of Botticelli's technique. The subject's stiff pose and long neck are also suggestive of the modern elongated style of Amedeo Modigliani. The influence of European painting in this early canvas contrasts strongly with the indigenous Mexican themes of Kahlo's later and more famous works.





*Detail*





*Detail*





*Detail*



*Detail*





*Kahlo (on the right) and her sisters Cristina, Matilde and Adriana, photographed by their father, 1916*



*Probable self portrait of Botticelli, in his 'Adoration of the Magi', 1475 — the Florentine master's work would influence the young Kahlo*





*'Primavera' by Sandro Botticelli, Uffizi Gallery, c. 1482*



*Kahlo's portrait of her boyfriend Alejandro Gomez Arias, 1929*



*Kahlo photographed by her father in 1926*

## The Bus (1929)



For Kahlo, painting became an outlet to explore questions of identity and existence. She later explained, “I paint myself because I am often alone and I am the subject I know best.” She went on to explain that the accident and the isolating recovery period made her desire “to begin again, painting things just as I saw them with my own eyes and nothing more.” The majority of the paintings she executed during her early career were portraits of herself, her sisters and her school friends. These canvases reveal the inspiration she drew from European artists, in particular Renaissance masters, as well as from avant-garde movements, such as *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Cubism.

The accident had ended Kahlo’s dreams of becoming a physician and caused her pain and illness for the rest of her life. Her bed rest was not over until the winter of 1927, when she began socialising with her old school friends again. They were now at university and heavily involved in student politics. She joined the Mexican Communist Party and was introduced to a circle of political activists and artists, including the exiled Cuban communist Julio Antonio Mella and the Italian-American photographer Tina Modotti. At one of Modotti’s parties in June 1928, she met Diego Rivera once more, after their brief meeting in 1922 when he was painting a mural at her school. Kahlo asked Rivera to judge whether her paintings showed enough talent for her to pursue a career as an artist. He was impressed by her work, stating that her paintings revealed:

“...an unusual energy of expression, precise delineation of character, and true severity... They had a fundamental plastic honesty, and an artistic personality of their own... It was obvious to me that this girl was an authentic artist”.

Kahlo soon began a relationship with Rivera, who was 21 years her senior and already had two common-law wives. They were married in a civil ceremony at the town hall of Coyoacán on 21 August 1929. Her mother opposed the marriage and both parents referred to it as a “marriage between an elephant and a dove”, referring to the couple’s differences in size; Rivera was tall and overweight, while Kahlo was petite and fragile. Still, her father approved of Rivera, who was wealthy and able to support Kahlo, who could not work and required expensive medical treatment. The wedding was reported by the Mexican and international press and the marriage was subject to constant media attention in Mexico, with articles often referring to the couple as simply “Diego and Frida”.

Soon after the wedding in late 1929, the couple moved to Cuernavaca in the rural state of Morelos, where Rivera had been commissioned to paint murals for the Palace of Cortés. Life in the Spanish-style city of Cuernavaca helped sharpen Kahlo’s sense of a Mexican identity and history. Like many other Mexican women artists and intellectuals at the time, she started wearing traditional Indigenous peasant clothing to emphasise her mestiza ancestry: favouring long and colourful skirts, elaborate headdresses and lots of jewellery. She particularly liked the clothing of women from the allegedly matriarchal society of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, who for many had come to represent an authentic and indigenous cultural heritage in post-revolutionary Mexico. The Tehuana outfits enabled her to express her feminist and anti-colonialist ideals.



Completed shortly after her arrival in Cuernavaca, *The Bus* portrays a typical scene of the buses of her time, with a wooden floor and passengers sitting on a bench side by side. The scene is depicted with a straightforward sense of realism, combined with a naive style characteristic of primitivism. Each character in the painting represents different segments of society, illustrating the diversity of the Mexican social classes. From the far left, there is a housewife holding her shopping basket, a man in an overall, a barefoot Indian woman nursing a baby, a small boy looking out through the window, a blue-eyed merchant grasping his money bag and a young girl with a shawl around her neck. In keeping with her political views, Kahlo paints the barefooted Indian mother in a Madonna-like posture, while she bestows on the capitalist a proud stance and stereotypical blue eyes. Rivera's influence on Kahlo's political attitudes, especially on capitalism and communism, is manifest in the picture. The canvas signals the startling differences of the Mexican community, stressing her sympathy for the poorer classes.

Of course, many critics view the painting as a means for the artist to process the tragic bus accident. She never spoke of the ordeal to her friends, except by describing it as one of the "grave incidents" of her life. As she found an escape in her art, she liked to express her life stories and experiences through her paintings. Still, it is important to note that this bus scene is a far cry from the hectic bus ride she took that fateful afternoon back in 1925. The canvas depicts a tranquil scene, though perhaps one threatened by a sense of impending calamity. Kahlo depicts different members of society blithely going about their usual daily commute. The young boy is enjoying the scene of beautifully lined trees and grass fields on what appears to be a cloudy day. Kahlo is known for the dark humour she instils in her paintings, so an interpretation that *The Bus* summarises the moment before the accident could well be correct.



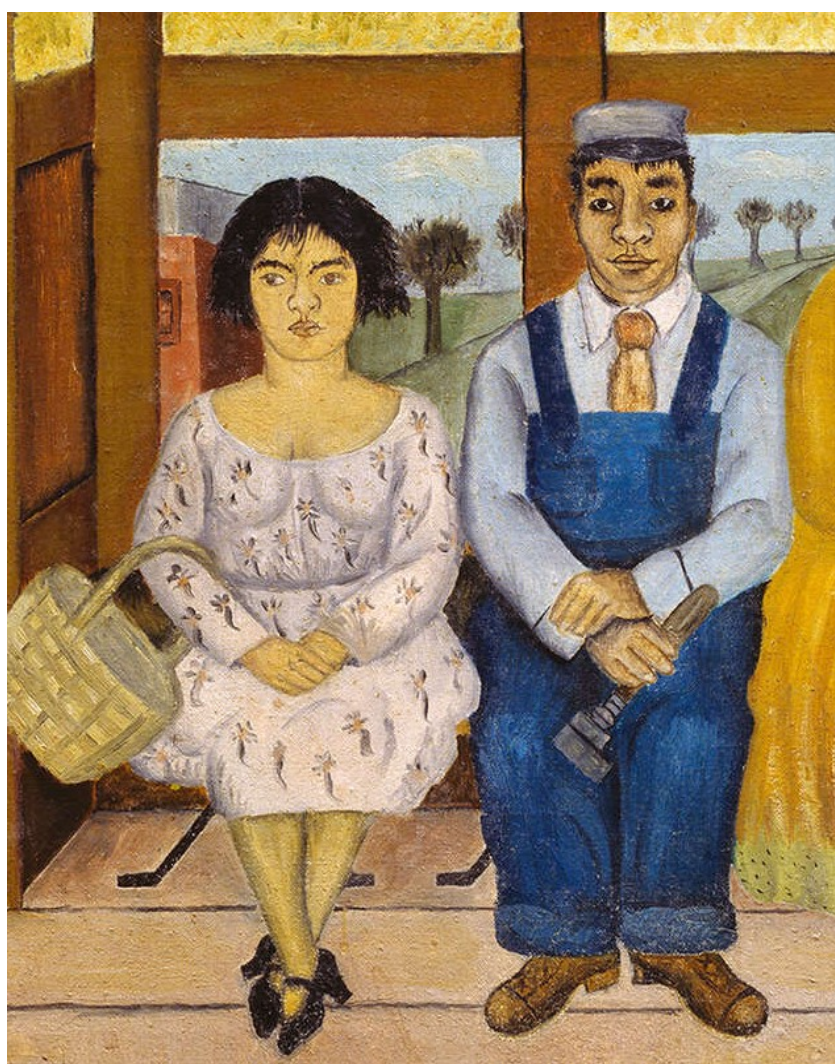


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*Detail*



*Kahlo and Rivera on their wedding day*

## Frieda and Diego Rivera (1931)



After Rivera had completed work on his commission in Cuernavaca in late 1930, the couple moved to San Francisco, where he painted murals for the Luncheon Club of the San Francisco Stock Exchange and the California School of Fine Arts. On their arrival in the US, they were warmly received by influential collectors and clients. It is believed that Kahlo commenced a long love affair with the Hungarian-American photographer Nickolas Muray around this time. Kahlo was introduced to American artists such as Edward Weston, Ralph Stackpole, Timothy L. Pflueger and Nickolas Muray. This six-month period spent in San Francisco was a productive period for Kahlo, who further developed the folk art style she had adopted in Cuernavaca. In addition to painting portraits of new acquaintances, she executed the following double portrait, *Frieda and Diego Rivera* (1931), based on their wedding photograph, as well as *The Portrait of Luther Burbank* (1931), which depicted the eponymous horticulturist as a hybrid between a human and a plant. Although she still publicly presented herself as simply Rivera's spouse, rather than as an independent artist, she participated for the first time in an exhibition, submitting *Frieda and Diego Rivera* in the Sixth Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Society of Women Artists in the Palace of the Legion of Honor.

The wedding portrait depicts the artist standing next to her husband, also portrayed as a painter, holding a palette and four brushes in his right hand, while his wife tilts her head towards him. Both are looking out toward the viewer, unsmiling and surprisingly serious in their expression. Kahlo delicately holds her bright red shawl with her left hand, while she holds her husband's hand with her right hand, symbolically in the centre of the canvas. Rivera is represented as physically much larger than his spouse. The pigeon or dove in the upper right section holds a banner in its beak, bearing an inscription translated as, "Here you see us, me Frieda Kahlo, with my dearest husband Diego Rivera. I painted these pictures in the delightful city of San Francisco California for our companion Mr. Albert Bender, and it was in the month of April of the year 1931." From the beginning of their stay in San Francisco, the art collector Bender was a fervent supporter of Rivera and his wife.

It could be argued that the painting captures the essence of what their marriage would become. Rivera stands as a solidly planted form, colossal beside his tender wife. He turns slightly away from her, as if partly rejecting her, as he shakes his palette and brushes. At this point in time, he is the renowned artist and she is merely regarded as his talented wife. Nowadays, it is the converse: she is world-famous and he is only famous for being her partner. Some have been quick to identify how softly she holds his hand, suggesting already a distance exists between the husband and wife, two years after their wedding. Even while she worked on this portrait, Rivera was having an affair with the tennis champion Helen Wills — he painted her nude image on the ceiling of the Luncheon Club of the Pacific Stock Exchange.

Kahlo later remarked on her relationship with her husband:

"Being the wife of Diego is the most marvellous thing in the world... I let him play matrimony with other women. Diego is not anybody's husband and never will be, but he is a great comrade."



This curious mixture of adulation and pride of her husband, the great maestro, and an unmistakable detachment she felt between the two gives the image a surreal and ambiguous character. The composition continues to fuse debate over possible interpretations.

In 1936 Bender gave the painting to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, where it forms part of the permanent collection and is generally on public display today.





*Detail*



*Detail*





*Detail*



*Detail*



*Detail*



*The artist and her husband, c. 1932*





*The noted art critic Albert M. Bender, who commissioned the double portrait*

## Henry Ford Hospital (1932)



Following the completion of Rivera's commission in San Francisco in 1932, the couple relocated for a time to Detroit, where Rivera had been commissioned to paint murals for the Detroit Institute of Arts. In this city Kahlo experienced numerous health problems due to a failed pregnancy. Although she developed a dislike for the capitalist culture of the United States, her time in Detroit was beneficial for her artistic expression. She continued to experiment with various techniques, such as etching and frescoes, and her paintings favoured a stronger narrative style. From this point on, she placed a special emphasis on such themes as terror, suffering and pain. Despite the current popularity of the mural in Mexican art, she adopted a diametrically opposed medium, including votive images known as *retablos* — religious paintings made on small metal sheets by amateur artists to thank saints for their blessings during a calamity. Amongst the works she executed in Detroit in the *retablo* manner are *Henry Ford Hospital*, appearing in the following plates, *My Birth* (1932) and *Self Portrait on the Border of Mexico and the United States* (1932). While none of them appeared in exhibitions in Detroit, she gave an interview to the *Detroit News* on her art.

The year spent in Detroit was a difficult time for Kahlo. Although she had enjoyed visiting San Francisco and New York City, she disliked colonial aspects of American society. She disliked socialising with capitalists such as Henry and Edsel Ford, and was angered that many of the hotels in Detroit refused to accept Jewish guests. In a letter to a friend, she wrote:

“...although I am very interested in all the industrial and mechanical development of the United States... I feel rage against all the rich guys here, since I have seen thousands of people in the most terrible misery without anything to eat and with no place to sleep; that is what has most impressed me here, it is terrifying to see the rich having parties day and night while thousands and thousands of people are dying of hunger.”

Yet, Kahlo's time in Detroit would always be spoilt by her failed pregnancy. Due to complications, her doctor advised an abortion, but the medication used was ineffective. She was deeply ambivalent about having a child and had already undergone an abortion earlier in her marriage to Rivera. She had reluctantly agreed to continue with the second pregnancy, but miscarried in July, which caused a serious haemorrhage, requiring her to be hospitalised for two weeks. Less than three months later, her mother died from complications of surgery in Mexico, adding to her dismay.

The oil-on-metal painting of *Henry Ford Hospital* offers an intensive account of her experience delivering a dead male fetus on 4 July, when she was approximately 31 months pregnant. Depictions of childbirth, abortion and miscarriage are rare in the canon of Western painting and so Kahlo is one of the only major artists to directly tackle the subject and her resulting grief in a visual representation. For many critics, this bloody painting launches a defining period in her career. In the surrealist self portrait the artist is depicted lying in a floating hospital bed, surrounded by blood and totems connected with her harrowing experience. The most striking of these symbols is the fetus itself, which appears in the centre of the composition, rising from the bed in a sacred manner. Reportedly, while still in the hospital, Kahlo had sought medical illustrations of a fetus and the human biology of pregnancy loss, though the doctors

refused her request. Instead, her husband found several human anatomy textbooks to aid her in her studies. Modern day obstetricians have described Kahlo's depictions of female anatomy and reproductive experiences as strikingly accurate.

A severe horizontal line cuts through the background of the painting, as the light blue sky contrasts strongly with the dull browns of the earthen floor. In the distance Ford's River Rouge complex is portrayed, the lifeless grey buildings serving as the sole observers of the event. She depicts herself as naked, with her breasts and pubic hair exposed, as she weeps openly at her ordeal. Her body is tethered by several red threads to a teaching model of female reproductive anatomy, a snail (a private allusive reference), a piece of steel-gray medical equipment, likely an autoclave, a purple orchid and a human pelvis bone. The tether to the fetus is the only one that appears without an ornate bow, indicating it is attached to an umbilical cord. The fetus has male genitalia and translucent eyelids.

The Cattleya orchid in the lower section was a gift from Rivera — it is the only time that an image of an orchid appears in Kahlo's work. In her personal fashion, garden and art, Kahlo often relied on native Mexican flower species. Mexico is home to an extensive list of New World orchid genera. Her husband loved orchids and went out of his way to find and present them to her as gifts. Cattleyas reveal how resilient, yet fragile orchids can be — much like Kahlo herself. The sheaths on new growth emerge slowly at first and can often go awry. The sheath may be "blind" (carry no flower), the bud may be attacked by insects or the flower may come out deformed. Therefore, this sole inclusion of a cattleya reminds us of the mutability of both the flower and its artist, suggesting a warning of the dangers of reproduction.

In spite of the tragic circumstances surrounding *Henry Ford Hospital*, it would become a solid foundation for the rest of Kahlo's oeuvre. Following her prolonged hospital stay, the remainder of the year that Kahlo spent in Detroit was one of the most artistically productive periods in her life. With motherhood being denied her, she would prove to be more fertile than ever.







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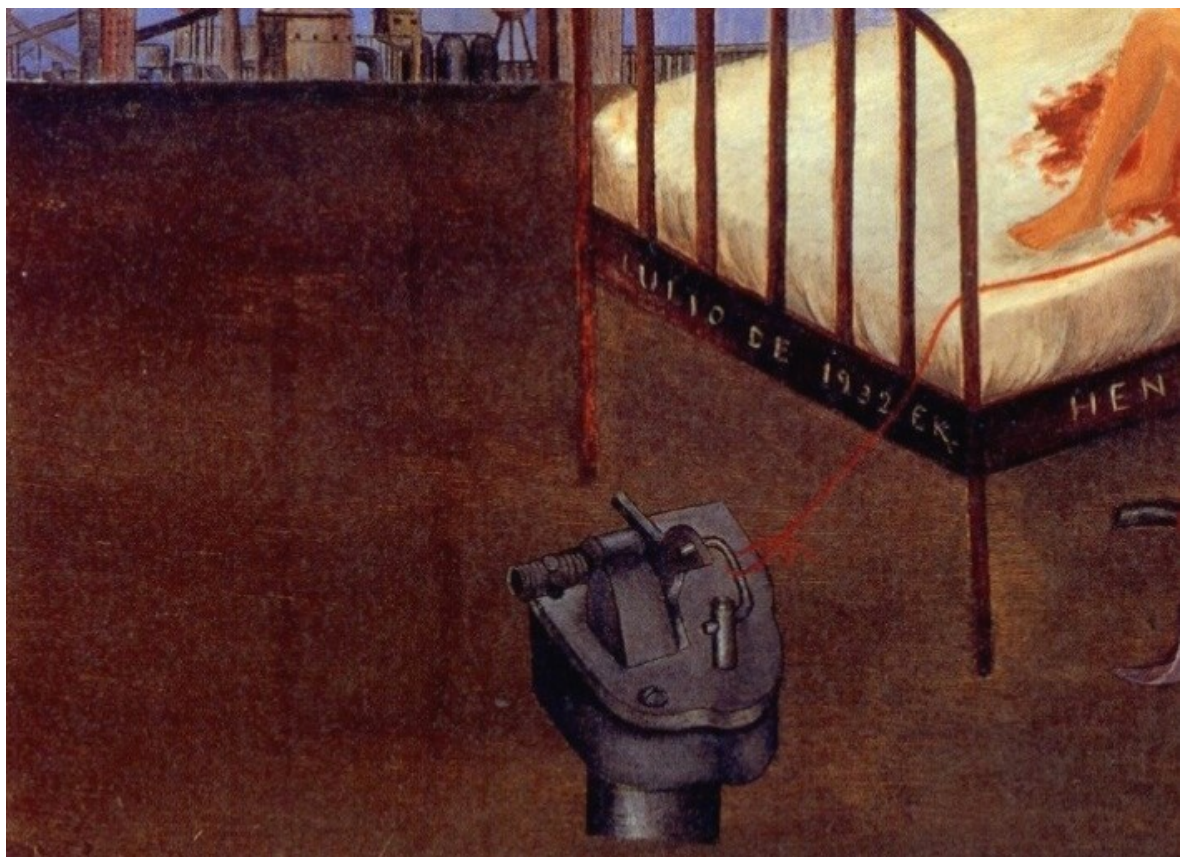
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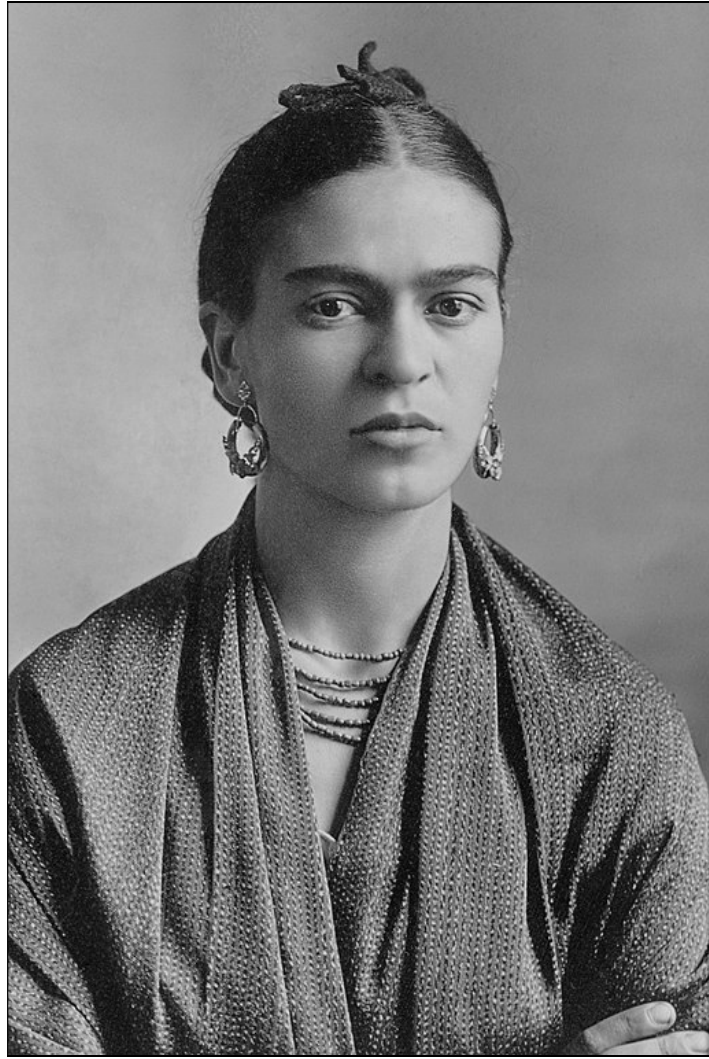




*Detail*



*Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit*



*Kahlo, 1932*



*End of Sample*