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# STYLE

## Unique exhibit unites two women, two worlds

*Kahlo's works  
are illustrations  
of a singular life*

By Hunter Drohojowska

The great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was notorious for his relationships with many women, but two of them became essential parts of his personal history — Frida Kahlo, his wife and an extraordinary artist, and Dolores Olmedo Patino, his benefactor and friend. Now these women are brought together in an exhibition of Kahlo's paintings from Olmedo's collection, now at Plaza de la Raza through March 29.

Kahlo's art and life are nearly mythic in fascination. Born of German and Indian parents in Coyoacan, Mexico, she survived childhood polio and other illnesses, and at the age of 18 was involved in a near-fatal bus accident. She was left a cripple, having suffered multiple fractures of her spine, right leg and clavicle. Her pelvis was pierced by a hand rail, which prevented her from having children. She underwent 30 operations over the course of her lifetime and was plagued by recurrent illnesses.

Still, during her 47 years, she seemed to live enough for two Fridas. She produced some 150 compelling canvases, many of them autobiographical, married Rivera, who was 27 years her senior, the year following the accident, had love affairs with Leon Trotsky, Isamu Noguchi and others, traveled throughout this country and Europe and was known for her political activism and intellectual vigor. Olmedo first modeled for Diego Rivera



Dolores Olmedo Patino stands in front of two pieces of art by Frida Kahlo, wife of Diego Rivera, on display at L.A.'s Plaza de la Raza through March 29.

— to whom she refers as the Master — when she was 12. He painted her portrait many times, four times during the last three years of his life. You can see why, for even in advanced years, Olmedo is a striking woman, her coal-black hair swept back in a bun, her lips and nails painted

scarlet, wearing purple silk tunic and pants with high-heeled boots of matching hue. She also sports what look like very large diamonds in her rings and brooches.

She admits that she did not know Kahlo very well, except as the wife of Rivera. In Rivera's last years, she supported him

emotionally and financially, bringing him to her house in Acapulco, where he created a love letter to her in mosaic tile. When many of Rivera's paintings were about to come on the market because the collector

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# Patino

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had died, Olmedo bought them. Rivera died in 1957, leaving all of his work to the people of Mexico, and Olmedo was named president of the committee that cares for the art and for the Rivera Museum. Today, Olmedo owns the largest bodies of work by both artists, some 135 paintings by Rivera and 25 by Kahlo.

"Despite her accident," Olmedo says, "Kahlo was always enjoying life. She was even coquettish. She was not beautiful but she was very striking and knew how to dress herself. A lot of people were in love with her."

Kahlo was described by Andre Breton as being a natural surrealist, but Olmedo takes exception to that. "Everything in her paintings happened in her life! It's that tragedy that she paints."

That, perhaps, accounts for the eerie, weirdly voyeuristic thrill that Kahlo's paintings provoke. No matter how horrible the scene, we know it has some basis in her own unfortunate experiences. For example, "Hospital Henry Ford" is a scene after a miscarriage, when she and Rivera were in Detroit. She has represented herself in a hospital bed, tied by blood vessels to the lost fetus, the injured pelvis, a crumpled flower and other symbols.

"My Nurse and I" is a painting of Kahlo as a child suckling at the breast of an Indian nurse with the face of a Precolumbian sculpture. "The Broken Column" portrays Kahlo nude against a barren landscape, her chest cut open to reveal the fractured classical column that represents her spine, her body held together by heavy white straps and punctured all over by tiny tacks. Tears flow from her eyes but her expression is one of resistance and strength. At her only solo show, in Mexico City in 1953, she arrived by ambulance and presided over the opening reception from her hospital bed.

Although many of Kahlo's larger masterpieces are not part of this show, it is rare enough to see any of this artist's work. The last opportunity was in 1983, when a show of Kahlo's paintings and Tina Modotti's photographs was organized by the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Olmedo is making plans, however, to establish her 16th-century home in Xochimilco as a museum for her collections of Rivera and Kahlo, as well as her collections of Precolumbian and Mexican popular art.

"I want people from all over the world to know this work," explains Olmedo with a sly smile that must have been an inspiration to the Master Rivera.

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*Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.*