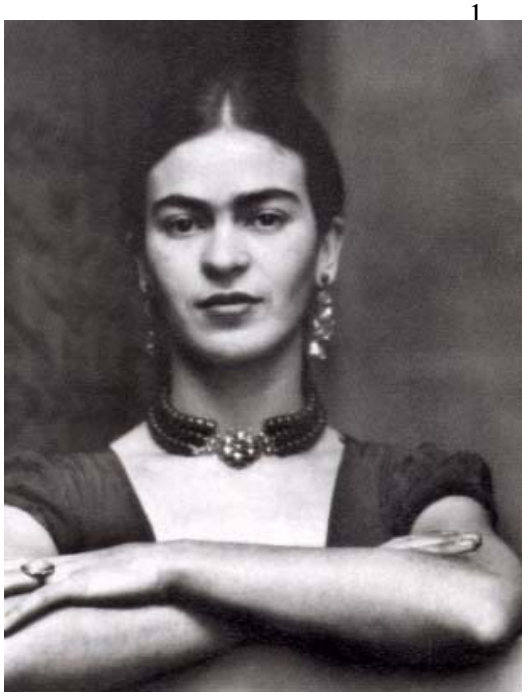
THE MEXICAN ARTIST'S MYRIAD FACES, STRANGER-THAN-FICTION BIOGRAPHY AND POWERFUL PAINTINGS COME TO VIVID LIFE IN A NEW FILM

By Phyllis Tuchman, *Smithsonian*, November 2002



The artist. c. 1930. bv Paul Julev

FRIDA KAHLO, WHO PAINTED MOSTLY SMALL, INTENSELY PERSONAL WORKS FOR HERSELF, FAMILY and friends, would likely have been amazed and amused to see what a vast audience her paintings now reach. Today, nearly 50 years after her death, the Mexican artist's iconic images adorn calendars, greeting cards, posters, pins, even paper dolls. Several years ago the French couturier Jean Paul Gaultier created a collection inspired by Kahlo, and last year a self-portrait she painted in 1933 appeared on a 34-cent U.S. postage stamp. This month, the movie *Frida*, starring Salma Hayek as the artist and Alfred Molina as her husband, renowned muralist Diego Rivera, opens nationwide. Directed by Julie Taymor, the creative wizard behind Broadway's long running hit *The Lion King*, the film is based on Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography, *Frida*. Artfully composed, Taymor's graphic portrayal remains, for the most part, faithful to the facts of the painter's life. Although some changes were made because of budget constraints, the movie "is true in spirit," says Herrera, who was first drawn to Kahlo because of "that thing in her work that commands you—that urgency, that need to communicate."

Focusing on Kahlo's creativity and tumultuous love affair with Rivera, the film looks beyond the icon to the human being. "I was completely compelled by her story," says Taymor. "I knew it superficially; and I admired her paintings but didn't know them well. When she painted, it was for herself. She transcended her pain. Her paintings are her diary. When you're doing a movie, you want a story like that." In the film, the Mexican born and raised Hayek, 36, who was one of the film's producers, strikes poses from the paintings, which then metamorphose into action-filled scenes. "Once I had the concept of having the paintings come alive," says Taymor, "I wanted to do it."

Kahlo, who died July 13, 1954, at the age of 47, reportedly of a pulmonary embolism (though some suspected suicide), has long been recognized as an important artist. In 2001-2002, a major traveling exhibition showcased her work alongside that of Georgia O'Keeffe and Canada's Emily Carr. Earlier this year several of her paintings were included in a landmark Surrealism show in London and New York. Currently, works by both Kahlo and Rivera are on view through January 5, 2003, at the Seattle Art Museum. As Janet Landay, curator of exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and one of the organizers of a 1993 exhibition of Kahlo's work, points out, "Kahlo made personal women's experiences serious subjects for art, but because of their intense emotional content, her paintings transcend gender boundaries. Intimate and powerful, they demand that viewers—men and women—be moved by them."

*In a 1928 photograph taken by her father, **Kahlo** stands (rear center) behind her mother; her sister Cristina sits at bottom left.*

In her naively charming My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (1936), Kahlo appears both as a 2-year-old (in family patio) and in utero.

Kahlo produced only about 200 paintings—primarily still lifes and portraits of herself, family and friends. She also kept an illustrated journal and did dozens of drawings. With techniques learned from both her husband and her father, a professional architectural photographer, she created haunting, sensual and stunningly original paintings that fused elements of surrealism, fantasy and folklore into powerful narratives. In contrast to the 20th-century trend toward abstract art, her work was uncompromisingly figurative. Although she received occasional commissions for portraits, she sold relatively few paintings during her lifetime. Today her works fetch astronomical prices at auction. In 2000, a 1929 self-portrait sold for more than $5 million.

Biographies of the artist, which have been translated into many languages, read like the fantastical novels of Gabriel García Márquez as they trace the story of two painters who could not live with or without each other. (Taymor says she views her film version of Kahlo's life as a "great, great love story.") Married twice, divorced once and separated countless times, Kahlo and Rivera had numerous affairs, hobnobbed with Communists, capitalists and literati and managed to create some of the most compelling visual images of the 20th century. Filled with such luminaries as writer André Breton, sculptor Isamu Noguchi, playwright Clare Boothe Luce and exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, Kahlo's life played out on a phantasmagorical canvas.

She was born Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón July 6, 1907, and lived in a house (the Casa Azul, or Blue House, now the Museo Frida Kahlo) built by her father in Coyoacán, then a quiet suburb of Mexico City. The third of her parents' four daughters, Frida was her father's favorite—the most intelligent, he thought, and the most like himself. She was a dutiful child but had a fiery temperament. (Shortly before Kahlo and Rivera were wed in 1929, Kahlo's father warned his future son-in-law, who at age 42 had already had two wives and many mistresses, that Frida, then 21, was "a devil." Rivera replied: "I know it.")

A German Jew with deep-set eyes and a bushy mustache, Guillermo Kahlo had immigrated to Mexico in 1891 at the age of 19. After his first wife died in childbirth, he married Matilde Calderón, a Catholic whose ancestry included Indians as well as a Spanish general. Frida portrayed her hybrid ethnicity in a 1936 painting, My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (above).

Kahlo adored her father. On a portrait she painted of him in 1951, she inscribed the words, "character generous, intelligent and fine." Her feelings about her mother were more conflicted. On the one hand, the artist considered her "very nice, active, intelligent." But she also saw her as fanatically religious, calculating and sometimes even cruel. "She did not know how to read or write," recalled the artist. "She only knew how to count money."

A chubby child with a winning smile and sparkling eyes, Kahlo was stricken with polio at the age of 6. After her recovery, her right leg remained thinner than her left and her right foot was stunted. Despite her disabilities or, perhaps, to compensate for them, Kahlo became a tomboy. She played soccer, boxed, wrestled and swam competitively. "My toys were those of a boy: skates, bicycles," the artist later recalled. (As an adult, she collected dolls.)

Her father taught her photography, including how to retouch and color prints, and one of his friends gave her drawing lessons. In 1922, the 15-year-old Kahlo entered the elite, predominantly male National Preparatory School, which was located near the Cathedral in the heart of Mexico City.

As it happened, Rivera was working in the school's auditorium on his first mural. In his autobiography—My Art, My Life—the artist recalled that he was painting one night high on a scaffold when "all of a sudden the door flew open, and a girl who seemed to be no more than ten or twelve was propelled inside.... She had," he continued, "unusual dignity and self-assurance, and there was a strange fire in her eyes." Kahlo, who was actually 16, apparently played pranks on the artist. She stole his lunch and soaped the steps by the stage where he was working.

Kahlo planned to become a doctor and took courses in biology, zoology and anatomy. Her knowledge of these disciplines would later add realistic touches to her portraits. She also had a passion for philosophy, which she liked to flaunt. According to biographer Herrera, she would cry out to her boyfriend, Alejandro Gómez Arias, "lend me your Spengler. I don't have anything to read on the bus." Her bawdy sense of humor and passion for fun were well known among her circle of friends, many of whom would become leaders of the Mexican left.

Then, on September 17, 1925, the bus on which she and her boyfriend were riding home from school was rammed by a trolley car. A metal handrail broke off and pierced her pelvis. Several people died at the site, and doctors at the hospital where the 18-year-old Kahlo was taken did not think she would survive. Her spine was fractured in three places, her pelvis was crushed and her right leg and foot were severely broken. The first of many operations she would endure over the years brought only temporary relief from pain. "In this hospital," Kahlo told Gómez Arias, "death dances around my bed at night." She spent a month in the hospital and was later fitted with a plaster corset, variations of which she would be compelled to wear throughout her life.

Confined to bed for three months, she was unable to return to school. "Without giving it any particular thought," she recalled, "I started painting." Kahlo's mother ordered a portable easel and attached a mirror to the underside of her bed's canopy so that the nascent artist could be her own model. Though she knew the works of the old masters only from reproductions, Kahlo had an uncanny ability to incorporate elements of their styles in her work. In a painting she gave to Gómez Arias, for instance, she portrayed herself with a swan neck and tapered fingers, referring to it as "Your Botticelli."

During her months in bed, she pondered her changed circumstances. To Gómez Arias, she wrote, "Life will reveal [its secrets] to you soon. I already know it all. ... I was a child who went about in a world of colors. ... My friends, my companions became women slowly, I became old in instants."

As she grew stronger, Kahlo began to participate in the politics of the day, which focused on achieving autonomy for the government-run university and a more democratic national government. She joined the Communist party in part because of her friendship with the young Italian photographer Tina Modotti, who had come to Mexico in 1923 with her then companion, photographer Edward Weston. It was most likely at a soiree given by Modotti in late 1928 that Kahlo re-met Rivera.

They were an unlikely pair. The most celebrated artist in Mexico and a dedicated Communist, the charismatic Rivera was more than six feet tall and tipped the scales at 300 pounds. Kahlo, 21 years his junior, weighed 98 pounds and was 5 feet 3 inches tall. He was ungainly and a bit misshapen; she was heart-stoppingly alluring. According to Herrera, Kahlo "started with dramatic material: nearly beautiful, she had slight flaws that increased her magnetism." Rivera described her "fine nervous body, topped by a delicate face," and compared her thick eyebrows, which met above her nose, to "the wings of a blackbird, their black arches framing two extraordinary brown eyes."

Rivera courted Kahlo under the watchful eyes of her parents. Sundays he visited the Casa Azul, ostensibly to critique her paintings. "It was obvious to me," he later wrote, "that this girl was an authentic artist." Their friends had reservations about the relationship. One Kahlo pal called Rivera "a pot-bellied, filthy old man." But Lupe Marín, Rivera's second wife, marveled at how Kahlo, "this so-called youngster," drank tequila "like a real mariachi."

The couple married on August 21, 1929. Kahlo later said her parents described the union as a "marriage between an elephant and a dove." Kahlo's 1931 Colonial-style portrait, based on a wedding photograph, captures the contrast. The newlyweds spent almost a year in Cuernavaca while Rivera executed murals commissioned by the American ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow. Kahlo was a devoted wife, bringing Rivera lunch every day, bathing him, cooking for him. Years later Kahlo would paint a naked Rivera resting on her lap as if he were a baby.

*Rivera and **Kahlo** (left, c. 1930) shared a tempestuous 26-year relationship. Husband, lover and mentor, he was also her "baby." At every moment he is my child," she wrote in her diary, and so pictured him in her 1949* The Love Embrace of the Universe *(detail, right).*

With the help of Albert Bender, an American art collector, Rivera obtained a visa to the United States, which previously had been denied him. Since Kahlo had resigned from the Communist party when Rivera, under siege from the Stalinists, was expelled, she was able to accompany him. Like other left-wing Mexican intellectuals, she was now dressing in flamboyant native Mexican costume—embroidered tops and colorful, floor-length skins, a style associated with the matriarchal society of the region of Tehuantepec. Rivera's new wife was "a little doll alongside Diego," Edward Weston wrote in his journal in 1930. "People stop in their tracks to look in wonder."

The Riveras arrived in the United States in November 1930, settling in San Francisco while Rivera worked on murals for the San Francisco Stock Exchange and the California School of Fine Arts, and Kahlo painted portraits of friends. After a brief stay in New York City for a show of Rivera's work at the Museum of Modem Art, the couple moved on to Detroit, where Rivera filled the Institute of Arts' garden court with compelling industrial scenes, and then back to New York City, where he worked on a mural for Rockefeller Center. They stayed in the United States for three years. Diego felt he was living in the future; Frida grew homesick. "I find that Americans completely lack sensibility and good taste," she observed. "They are boring and they all have faces like unbaked rolls."

In Manhattan, however, Kahlo was exhilarated by the opportunity to see the works of the old masters firsthand. She also enjoyed going to the movies, especially those starring the Marx Brothers or Laurel and Hardy. And at openings and dinners, she and Rivera met the rich and the renowned.

But for Kahlo, despair and pain were never far away. Before leaving Mexico, she had suffered the first in a series of miscarriages and therapeutic abortions. Due to her trolley-car injuries, she seemed unable to bring a child to term, and every time she lost a baby, she was thrown into a deep depression. Moreover, her polio-afflicted and badly injured right leg and foot often troubled her. While in Michigan, a miscarriage cut another pregnancy short. Then her mother died. Up to that time she had persevered. "I am more or less happy," she had written to her doctor, "because I have Diego and my mother and my father whom I love so much. I think that is enough...." Now her world was starting to fall apart.

Kahlo had arrived in America an amateur artist. She had never attended art school, had no studio and had not yet focused on any particular subject matter. "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best," she would say years later. Her biographers report that despite her injuries she regularly visited the scaffolding on which Rivera worked in order to bring him lunch and, they speculate, to ward off alluring models. As she watched him paint, she learned the fundamentals of her craft. His imagery recurs in her pictures along with his palette—the sunbaked colors of pre-Columbian art. And from him--though his large-scale wall murals depict historical themes, and her small-scale works relate her autobiography—she learned how to tell a story in paint.

Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States *(1932) was done in Detroit.*

Works from her American period reveal her growing narrative skill. In Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States, Kahlo's homesickness finds expression in an image of herself standing between a pre-Columbian ruin and native flowers on one side and Ford Motor Company smokestacks and looming skyscrapers on the other. In Henry Ford Hospital, done soon after her miscarriage in Detroit, Kahlo's signature style starts to emerge. Her desolation and pain are graphically conveyed in this powerful depiction of herself, nude and weeping, on a bloodstained bed. As she would do time and again, she exorcises a devastating experience through the act of painting.

When they returned to Mexico toward the end of 1933, both Kahlo and Rivera were depressed. His Rockefeller Center mural had created a controversy when the owners of the project objected to the heroic portrait of Lenin he had included in it. When Rivera refused to paint out the portrait, the owners had the mural destroyed. (Rivera later re-created a copy for the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City.) To a friend Kahlo wrote, Diego "thinks that every- thing that is happening to him is my fault, because I made him come [back] to Mexico .... " Kahlo herself became physically ill, as she was prone to do in times of stress. Whenever Rivera, a notorious philanderer, became involved with other women, Kahlo succumbed to chronic pain, illness or depression. When he returned home from his wanderings, she would usually recover.

Seeking a fresh start, the Riveras moved into a new home in the upscale San Angel district of Mexico City. The house, now the Diego Rivera Studio museum, featured his-and-her, brightly colored (his was pink, hers, blue) Le Corbusier-like buildings connected by a narrow bridge. Though the plans included a studio for Kahlo, she did little painting, as she was hospitalized three times in 1934. When Rivera began an affair with her younger sister, Cristina, Kahlo moved into an apartment. A few months later, however, after a brief dalliance with the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, Kahlo reconciled with Rivera and returned to San Angel.

In late 1936, Rivera, whose leftist sympathies were more pronounced than ever, interceded with Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas to have the exiled Leon Trotsky admitted to Mexico. In January 1937, the Russian revolutionary took up a two-year residency with his wife and bodyguards at the Casa Azul, Kahlo's childhood home, available because Kahlo's father had moved in with one of her sisters. In a matter of months, Trotsky and Kahlo became lovers. "El viejo" ("the old man"), as she called him, would slip her notes in books. She painted a mesmerizing full-length portrait of herself, in bourgeois finery, as a gift for the Russian exile. But this liaison, like most of her others, was short lived.

The Two Fridas *(1939)—European and Mexican—-reflects Kahlo's despair over her divorce.*

The French Surrealist André Breton and his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, also spent time with the Riveras in San Angel. (Breton would later offer to hold an exhibition of Kahlo's work in Paris.) Arriving in Mexico in the spring of 1938, they stayed for several months and joined the Riveras and the Trotskys on sightseeing jaunts. The three couples even considered publishing a book of their conversations. This time, it was Frida and Jacqueline who bonded.

Although Kahlo would claim her art expressed her solitude, she was unusually productive during the time spent with the Trotskys and the Bretons. Her imagery became more varied and her technical skills improved. In the summer of 1938, the actor and art collector Edward G. Robinson visited the Riveras in San Angel and paid $200 each for four of Kahlo's pictures, among the first she sold. Of Robinson's purchase she later wrote, "For me it was such a surprise that I marveled and said: 'This way I am going to be able to be free, I'll be able to travel and do what I want without asking Diego for money.'"

*Both Rivera and **Kahlo** (at a 1936 antifascist demonstration) were lifelong leftists.*

Shortly after, Kahlo went to New York City for her first one-person show, held at the Julien Levy Gallery, one of the first venues in America to promote Surrealist art. In a brochure for the exhibition, Breton praised Kahlo's "mixture of candor and insolence." On the guest list for the opening were artist Georgia O'Keeffe, to whom Kahlo later wrote a fan letter, art historian Meyer Schapiro and Vanity Fair editor Clare Boothe Luce, who commissioned Kahlo to paint a portrait of a friend who had committed suicide. Upset by the graphic nature of Kahlo's completed painting, however, Luce wanted to destroy it but in the end was persuaded not to. The show was a critical success. Time magazine noted that "the flutter of the week in Manhattan was caused by the first exhibition of paintings by famed muralist Diego Rivera's ... wife, Frida Kahlo .... Frida's pictures, mostly painted in oil on copper, had the daintiness of miniatures, the vivid reds and yellows of Mexican tradition, the playfully bloody fancy of an unsentimental child." A little later, Kahlo's hand, bedecked with rings, appeared on the cover of Vogue.

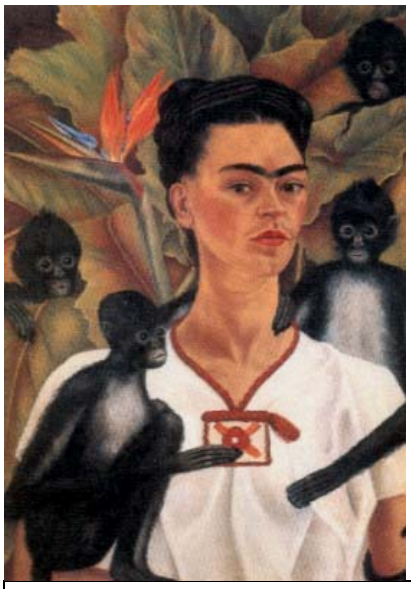
Heady with success, Kahlo sailed to France, only to discover that Breton had done nothing about the promised show. A disappointed Kahlo wrote to her latest lover, portrait photographer Nickolas Muray: "It was worthwhile to come here only to see why Europe is rottening, why all this people—good for nothing—are the cause of all the Hitlers and Mussolinis." Marcel Duchamp—"The only one," as Kahlo put it, "who has his feet on the earth, among all this bunch of coocoo lunatic sons of bitches of the Surrealists"--saved the day. He got Kahlo her show. The Louvre purchased a self-portrait, its first work by a 20th-century Mexican artist. At the exhibition, according to Rivera, artist Wassily Kandinsky kissed Kahlo's cheeks "while tears of sheer emotion ran down his face." Also an admirer, Pablo Picasso gave Kahlo a pair of earrings shaped like hands, which she donned for a later self-portrait. "Neither Derain, nor I, nor you," Picasso wrote to Rivera, "are capable of painting a head like those of Frida Kahlo."

Returning to Mexico after six months abroad, Kahlo found Rivera entangled with yet another woman and moved out of their San Angel house and into the Casa Azul. By the end of 1939 the couple had agreed to divorce.

Kahlo had a brief affair with Leon Trotsky (left, in 1937) while he and his wife lived at the Casa Azul. When it ended, Kahlo sent him a self-portrait (right) inscribed "with all love."

Intent on achieving financial independence, Kahlo painted more intensely than ever before. "To paint is the most terrific thing that there is, but to do it well is very difficult," she would tell the group of students—known as Los Fridos—to whom she gave instruction in the mid-1940s. "It is necessary ... to learn the skill very well, to have very strict self-discipline and above all to have love, to feel a great love for painting." It was during this period that Kahlo created some of her most enduring and distinctive work. In self-portraits, she pictured herself in native Mexican dress with her hair atop her head in traditional braids. Surrounded by pet monkeys, cats and parrots amid exotic vegetation reminiscent of the paintings of Henri Rousseau, she often wore the large pre-Columbian necklaces given to her by Rivera.

In one of only two large canvases ever painted by Kahlo, *The Two Fridas* (above, p.5), a double self-portrait done at the time of her divorce, one Frida wears a European outfit torn open to reveal a "broken" heart; the other is clad in native Mexican costume. Set against a stormy sky, the "twin sisters," joined together by a single artery running from one heart to the other, hold hands. Kahlo later wrote that the painting was inspired by her memory of an imaginary childhood friend, but the fact that Rivera himself had been born a twin may also have been a factor in its composition. In another work from this period, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), Kahlo, in a man's suit, holds a pair of scissors she has used to sever the locks that surround the chair on which she sits. More than once when she discovered Rivera with other women, she had cut off the long hair that he adored. Despite the divorce, Kahlo and Rivera remained connected. When Kahlo's health deteriorated, Rivera sought medical advice from a mutual friend, San Francisco doctor Leo Eloesser, who felt her problem was "a crisis of nerves." Eloesser suggested she resolve her relationship with Rivera. "Diego loves you very much," he wrote, "and you love him. It is also the case, and you know it better than I, that besides you, he has two great loves—1) Painting 2) Women in general. He has never been, nor ever will be, monogamous." Kahlo apparently recognized the truth of this observation and resigned herself to the situation. In December 1940, the couple remarried in San Francisco.



Her Self-Portrait with Monkeys*, 1943, is one of many painted with the spider monkeys she kept as pets.*

Kahlo (in Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940) cut her long locks, which Rivera loved, after one of their breakups.*

The reconciliation, however, saw no diminution in tumult. Kahlo continued to fight with her philandering husband and sought out affairs of her own with various men and women, including several of his lovers. Still, Kahlo never tired of setting a beautiful table, cooking elaborate meals (her stepdaughter Guadalupe Rivera filled a cookbook with Kahlo's recipes) and arranging flowers in her home from her beloved garden. And there were always festive occasions to celebrate. At these meals, recalled Guadalupe, "Frida's laughter was loud enough to rise above the din of yelling and revolutionary songs."

During the last decade of her life, Kahlo endured painful operations on her back, her foot and her leg. (In 1953, her right leg had to be amputated below the knee.) She drank heavily—sometimes downing two bottles of cognac a day—and she became addicted to painkillers. As drugs took control of her hands, the surface of her paintings became rough, her brushwork agitated.

In her depiction of herself in a journal entry with the inscription "broken wings", Kahlo suggests a vulnerability that was never far from the surface.

Mexican-born actress Salma Hayek (as Kahlo) was impressed by the way the artist "bared her soul in such an honest way."

In the spring of 1953, Kahlo finally had a one-person show in Mexico City. Her work had previously been seen there only in group shows. Organized by her friend, photographer Lola Varez Bravo, the exhibition was held at Alvarez Bravo's Gallery of Contemporary Art. Though still bedridden following the surgery on her leg, Kahlo did not want to miss the opening night. Arriving by ambulance, she was carried to a canopied bed, which had been transported from her home. The headboard was decorated with pictures of family and friends; papier-mâché skeletons hung from the canopy. Surrounded by admirers, the elaborately costumed Kahlo held court and joined in singing her favorite Mexican ballads.

Kahlo remained a dedicated leftist. Even as her strength ebbed, she painted portraits of Marx and of Stalin and tended demonstrations. Eight days before she died, Kahlo, in a wheelchair and accompanied by Rivera, joined a crowd of 10,000 in Mexico City protesting the overthrow, by the CIA, of the Guatemalan president.

Although much of Kahlo's life was dominated by her debilitated physical state and emotional turmoil, Taymor's film focuses on the artist's inventiveness, delight in beautiful things and playful but caustic sense of humor. Kahlo, too, preferred to emphasize her love of life and a good time. Just days before her death, she incorporated the words Viva La Vida (Long Live Life) into a still life of watermelons. Though some have wondered whether the artist may have intentionally taken her own life, others dismiss the notion. Certainly, she enjoyed life fully and passionately. "It is not worthwhile," she once said, "to leave this world without having had a little fun in life."

"I never painted dreams," said Kahlo (at Casa Azul, 1943). "I painted my own reality."

By Phyllis Tuchman

New York-based art historian Phyllis Tuchman wrote on Alexander Calder in May 2001.