

THE CULTURE TRIP: FRIDA KAHLO'S GARDEN AT THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

By Laura Farrell



A reimagined version of Kahlo's garden at the Casa Azul (Blue House) | FRIDA KAHLO: Art, Garden, Life | Photo by Ivo M. Vermeulen

An international symbol of Mexican culture and feminist identity, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) is best remembered for her surrealist portraits and still life paintings that explore themes of loss and renewal. She and her husband, Diego Rivera (1886-1957), were deeply engaged with the contemporary international art scene, and their tumultuous relationship – alongside Kahlo's lifelong struggles with debilitating injury and illness – had a profound affect on her work. Filled with vivid color, foliage and fruits, Kahlo's paintings frequently portray native plants and animals, Mexican folk motifs and pre-Hispanic objects. We take a closer look at how the New York Botanical Garden's spring exhibition of *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* reveals this larger-than-life artist's fascination with the natural world

Reconsidering Frida Kahlo's paintings through a horticultural lens, the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) displays a selection of her lesser-known still-life paintings in an effort to highlight the influence of Mexico's rich and diverse plant life on her work.

We wanted to delve into the story of the woman who has been examined through her pain and suffering and paint her in a different light.

– Karen Daubmann, Director of Exhibitions and Seasonal Displays



A scale version of the pyramid at the Casa Azul IFRIDA KAHLO: Art, Garden, Life I
Photo by Ivo M. Vermeulen

The garden attached to Kahlo's long-time home known as 'Casa Azul' (now the Museo Frida Kahlo) is reimagined in the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, featuring the vivid colors and textures of local flora as guests wander among flower-lined paths and indigo walls. A recreated version of a pyramid designed by Diego Rivera showcases traditional terracotta pots filled with Mexican cacti and succulents. A desk and easel is on display to commemorate the inspiration Kahlo drew from her garden.

Over a dozen original paintings and works on paper are on display at the LuEsther Mertz Library Art Gallery, introducing the first solo presentation of Frida Kahlo's work to New York City in over ten years. Alongside months of highly skilled horticultural preparation, this exhibition was curated in partnership with art scholar and historian Dr. Adriana Zavala, who saw this show as an opportunity to enrich our understanding of Kahlo's deep connection to the natural world.

“The research that has gone into building this multifaceted project demonstrates that Kahlo’s life, her times, and her work were, like the natural world itself, a crossroads of transcultural influences,” explains Zavala.

The exhibition is hosted from May until November. A series of programs will be held throughout its duration, including poetry readings, lectures, Mexican-inspired fairs, dining experiences and activities for children. Below we list the full scope of what to expect when visiting *Frida: Art, Garden, Life*.



Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940 | Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin | © 2014 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Kahlo's Works on View

14 borrowed paintings and works on paper from private collections highlight Kahlo's interest in botanical imagery and symbolism. Featured pieces include *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940); *Flower of Life* (1944); *Still Life with Parrot and Flag* (1951) and *Self-Portrait Inside a Sunflower* (1954). Large-scale photographs of Kahlo and the garden at Casa Azul are also on display.

An Artist's Rendition of *The Two Fridas*

Contemporary artist in residence Humberto Spindola presents a sculptural installation re-creating the dresses painted in Kahlo's double self-portrait titled *The Two Fridas* (1939) in the Britton Rotunda of the Library.

Frida and Diego's Mexico City

Frida and Diego's artistic and intellectual contributions to life in Mexico City are considered artistically, culturally and historically in the Arthur and Janet Ross Gallery. Sites include the Casa Azul, the functionalist pair of structures designed for the couple by Juan O'Gorman (1931-32) in San Angel (today known as the Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo), and various sites of Rivera's murals such as the Secretaria de Educación Pública, Palacio Nacional, Palacio de Bellas Artes, and the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso.

Poetry for Every Season: Octavio Paz Poetry Walk

Poems from 20th century Mexican poet and Noble Prize winner Octavio Paz (1914-98) are on display in the Ross Hall. On Saturday, September 19 at 2pm, Poetry Walk curator Rachel Eliza Griffiths will present a reading of selected poems that reference native plants and flowers.

NYBG Programming

Various complementary programs in conjunction with *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* include weekend music and dance performances, 'Frida al Fresco' exhibition lates, live music, cocktails, and Mexican-inspired dinner menus, lectures by Frida Kahlo scholars, textile demonstrations by female artisans hailing from Chiapas and Oaxaca, a self-guided Mexican plant tour, and an informative look at one of Mexico's most famous botanical contributions: tequila.

The Mobile Guide

NYBG has developed the *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* Mobile Guide for smartphones. Both on-site and virtual visitors are welcomed to explore Kahlo's home, life, and art through images, audio content, and videos. A virtual tour of the entire exhibition

combines archival and contemporary photos, a present-day video of the Casa Azul, an opportunity to create a Frida-inspired self portrait, and so on.

Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life is on display at the New York Botanical Garden from May 16th through November 1, 2015.



An evocation of Frida Kahlo's studio overlooking her garden | FRIDA KAHLO: Art, Garden, Life | Photo by Ivo M. Vermeulen



Frida Kahlo, Sun and Life, 1947 | Private Collection Courtesy Galeria Arvil | © 2014 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Frida Kahlo, *Two Nudes in a Forest*, 1939 | Collection of Jon Shirley | © 2015 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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