

Sotheby's Catalogue Notes for May 25, 2011 Auction of
Frida Kahlo (1910-1954)

AUTORRETRATO EN MINIATURA

signed *Mara* and dedicated *Para Bartoli con amor* on the reverse
oil on thin panel with tin border

2 by 1 5/8 in.

5 by 4.2 cm

Painted c. 1938.

Frida Kahlo's oval *Autorretrato en miniatura* is the smallest painting she ever made. It is also one of her most powerful. The power does not come, as it does in her portraits of herself injured or in tears, from the urgency with which she presents her predicament. Rather it comes from the force of her presence. Within this tiny oval she has packed a charge of energy that brings to mind the Surrealist poet André Breton's description of her art as "a ribbon around a bomb."

Dressed fit to kill in a red Tehuana blouse, ornate silver earrings and an exotic necklace, Frida looks ready to take on the world. Her sartorial choices had complex motives. When she married the muralist Diego Rivera in 1929 she began to dress in native Mexican costumes, in part to please her husband, in part to assert her Mexican identity and her allegiance to *la raza*, and in part to hide her slight limp cause by a childhood bout with polio and a bus accident at the age of eighteen. No less important, she loved the sensation her picturesque clothes made as she played beauty to Rivera's beast.

Frida's long black hair, braided and pinned to her head, is topped by an outlandish bunch of poppy-like flowers with dark centers. The flowers are arranged so that they look visceral. In the top center of the miniature *Autorretrato en miniatura* red petals come together to form a dark crevasse that suggests female genitals. In Kahlo's work such fleshy flowers could signify pain or joy. In the case of the miniature, I believe they stand for passion. The way Kahlo painted the flowers out onto the picture's frame makes her presence immediate and palpable. She bursts out of the picture and into our space.

That is where she wanted to be; unlike paintings in which Kahlo confronts the viewer (and her own self) with her sufferings, this tiny self-portrait had a happy purpose. It was almost certainly made as a gift for a friend, but not necessarily for the friend, artist José Bartoli, to whom she finally gave it. Her self-portrait was a substitute Frida that placed her close to someone she loved. In that way it recalls the oval photographic portraits of the Victorian era, especially to photographs which were inserted in lockets. Kahlo's photographer father must sometimes have taken such portraits and, as his assistant, Kahlo must have learned to retouch them.

Some time in the mid-1940s Frida Kahlo gave this miniature *Autorretrato en miniatura* to her lover, Catalanian artist Jose Bartoli (1910-1995) who lived in Mexico from 1942 to 1946. Bartoli was handsome, intelligent, humorous, and passionately political. His voice was deep and soft; he is remembered as having been exceptionally gentle but at the same time strong. He was also a great story-teller with a dramatic past about which to recount tales. Having fought in the Spanish Civil War, he fled from Spain in 1939, and then suffered horrors in prisons and in concentration and refugee camps in France and Germany. After escaping to South Africa in 1942 when he was thirty-two he made his way to Mexico. In the following year, along with the Mexican painter Alberto Gironella and other friends, he began to put out the magazine *Mundo en México*. In 1944 he published *Campos de concentración* (concentration camps), a group of drawings he made secretly in the French and German camps and that document the cruelties to which he had born witness.

Exactly when her love affair with Bartoli began is not known. They definitely were involved with each other in 1946 and the relationship had probably gone on for at least a year before that. It is said that they talked about running away together and going to Paris, but their mutual friend Ella Wolfe warned Frida that she would be miserable, for the real love of her life was Rivera.

Among Kahlo's twenty or so letters to Bartoli is a love letter dated "August 29." She did not give the year. After the day and month she wrote: "our first afternoon alone," which suggests that this letter was written the day after they first made love. The letter's passion and its frank sensuality is reminiscent of the love notes to Rivera that Frida wrote in her diary in the second half of the 1940s. There is something about the directness with which she lay bare her feeling that makes the unflinching honesty of her autobiographical paintings more understandable. She began her letter to Bartoli with: "Bartoli, last night I felt as if many wings caressed me all over, as if your fingertips had mouths that kissed my skin. The atoms of my body are yours and they vibrate together so that we can love each other."

The inscription to Bartoli on the back of the miniature is rather crude. It recalls some of the words scrawled in her diary written when she was euphoric from drugs or alcohol (in her last years Kahlo became addicted to the painkillers her doctors had prescribed.) By contrast, though it is lusciously painted, the portrait is jewel-like and highly refined. I believe that it was painted around 1938, not in 1946, the date it is sometimes given because that was probably when she gave it to Bartoli and because of the portrait's resemblance to the Tehuana Frida in *Tree of Hope*, 1946. The red flower in the miniature does indeed look like the red ribbon in *Tree of Hope*, but Frida's head in the latter is more doll-like, schematic, and wooden compared to the soft and tactile Frida in the miniature. In the miniature Frida looks young, healthy, happy, and self-confident. She is a woman in full possession of her sexual power. I would therefore place this painting with a group of self-portraits that includes *Fulan-Chang and I, Self Portrait* (dedicated to Leon Trotsky), both 1937, and *Itzcuintli Dog with Me*, and *The Frame*, all 1938. The Frida we see in the miniature also bears a close resemblance to the beautiful and self-possessed Frida, often bedecked with huge flowers and bows, that we see in photographs taken in 1938 by Kahlo's friend and lover Nickolas Murray. In one of those photographs she wears the same necklace that she wears in the miniature. Its central silver plaque with plant shapes done in repoussé is suspended from a string of corral and silver beads.

Other details that reinforce my guess that the miniature is from around 1938 have to do with the impression Frida makes – her aura, so to speak. In the miniature Frida's face is rounded. It is not yet tense and toughened through suffering. Her lips are, as always, carnal and painted red. They are surmounted by a moustache that was less obvious in life than it was in her self-portraits. Her dark slanted eyes beneath heavy eyebrows joined over her nose to look like a bird in flight, do not yet have that wary expression that they took on after Rivera divorced her for a year in 1939. In paintings after 1939 Kahlo's eyes bore into you as if she is challenging you to recognize her anguish. In the miniature and in other paintings of ca. 1938, Kahlo simply wants you to take notice of her extraordinary force of character and her female magnetism. This is the Frida that astonished André Breton when he came to Mexico in 1938 and discovered a woman full of "candour and insolence," a woman "endowed with all the gifts of seduction." He admired Kahlo's art in the same way that he admired the art's maker, and he caught the spirit of the oval *Autorretrato en miniatura* when he wrote in 1938: "I would like to add now that there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible, it is only too willing to play alternately at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious."

According to Bartoli's memory, he actually lived for a time with Frida and Diego in Kahlo's house in Coyoacán, a southern district of Mexico City. Rivera, he said, did not object, which is hard to believe, because Rivera was violently jealous of Frida Kahlo's liaisons with men, whereas he tolerated her affairs with women. On May 21, 1946 after being semi-bed-ridden for months, Kahlo flew to New York to consult with the wellknown surgeon Dr. Philip Wilson who advised her to have a spinal fusion. Between her arrival and her hospitalization she spent time with Bartoli. It was probably in the second week of June that Dr. Wilson performed a spinal fusion at the Hospital for Special Surgery. Bartoli was among the friends who visited her in the hospital. When she was released from the hospital after more than two months, she returned to Mexico where she was first confined to her bed and then enclosed in an orthopedic corset for eight months. Bartoli was almost certainly in Mexico in early autumn.

Given Kahlo's frail physical condition, it seems unlikely that her letter to Bartoli about their first afternoon of intimacy could have been written on August 29, 1946, which was only about two and a half weeks after she left the hospital. The first afternoon must have taken place during the previous year. Although Bartoli left Mexico in 1946, he returned for long stretches of time and his romance with Frida continued for four more years. When he was gone and was traveling in the United States in October 1946, she wrote to Ella Wolfe to ask her if she could use her New York address as a mail drop for her letters to Bartoli. On October 23 she wrote to Ella: "I beg you to tell me how he is, what he's doing, if he is happy, if he takes care of himself. etc... To you I can say that I truly love him and that he makes me feel the desire to live again. Speak well of me to him, so that he should be happy, and so that he knows that I am a person who is, if not very good, at least *regularcita* (OK)." Bartoli knew that Frida was better than *regularcita*. Devoted to her memory, he kept the little oval portrait and everything else that she gave him for the rest of his life.

Hayden Herrera

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/a-discerning-eye-latin-american-n08794/lot.12.html>