One of Frida Kahlo's corsets

The concealer revealed

Frida Kahlo's images of herself

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FRIDA KAHLO
Making her self up
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Frida Kahlo was eighteen when the bus she was travelling on crashed with a trolley car in Mexico City. The bus's steel handrail impaled her abdomen and uterus, and she suffered fractures to her lower spine, collarbone, ribs, pelvis and right leg. "It was a strange collision", she recalled in her diary more than twenty years later – "It was not violent but rather silent, slow, and it harmed everybody. And me most of all" – and she never really recovered from her injuries (she underwent more than thirty operations throughout her life). Bedbound for months, she turned to painting, in particular unidealized self-portraits, using a mirror set into the canopy of her four-poster bed and a folding wooden easel held in place on either side of her torso. "I'll paint myself", she said, "because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best." This fascination with her own image is the focus of the V&A's impressive exhibition *Frida Kahlo: Making her self up*, largely based on the hundreds of personal possessions and thousands of documents and photographs discovered in her bathroom in 2004, and which are on show for the first time outside Mexico. Her husband Diego Rivera had sealed them inside the bathroom when Kahlo died, and asked his patron Dolores Olmedo to keep it locked for at least fifteen years after his own death in 1957. Olmedo never opened it; she died in 2002.

Kahlo had experimented with her appearance from early on. At first, it was out of necessity: the exhibition's introductory room tells us that she contracted polio when she was six, which made one leg thinner and shorter than the other. To hide the difference, she layered three or four socks on her withered limb and built a higher-wedged heel on one shoe (a pair of fuchsia-coloured silk ankle boots embroidered with Chinese dragons, customized by Kahlo with strips of beading and a deeper right heel, is on show later on in the exhibition). She also sat often for her German father Guillermo, a photographer who had come to Mexico at the age of eighteen (she later used these photographs to paint from). A few of Guillermo's self-portraits are on display here. In one, from the turn of the twentieth century, he presents himself as an intellectual sitting in a library, but he wears an artisan's work jacket. Alongside this, a charming black-and-white family portrait taken by him on February 7, 1926, shows nineteen-year-old Frida standing commandingly in a three-piece suit and tie, with her hair scraped back and parted in the middle; her sisters wear conventional, European-style dresses, their hair in bob-cut waves.

In her twenties Kahlo, in tune with the country's flourishing sense of national pride following the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, began to embrace the region her mother came from – the isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, southern Mexico – adopting their vibrant woven shawls (*rebozo*), richly embroidered square-cut tunics (*huipil*), floor-length skirts (*enagua*) and pulled-back hairstyles braided with ribbon, yarn or flowers. There are several fascinating examples from Kahlo's collection of clothes in the final room at the V&A. The first record of her wearing this traditional dress is in a photograph on her wedding day in 1928; standing next to Rivera (more than twenty years older than her and dressed in an ill-fitting suit), she has wrapped a Tehuana *rebozo* gracefully around her shoulders. A cigarette dangles from her free hand, while the other interlocks with her husband's arm. Kahlo's parents described the marriage as the union between "an elephant and a dove".

Travelling across the United States with Rivera in the 1930s , Kahlo explored a mixture of identities. In a striking small-scale work, "Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States" (1932), she positions herself in the centre, wearing an American-style frilly pastel-pink dress, white Spanish lace gloves and a necklace made from round coral beads and pieces of spear-shaped jade. One hand, clutching a Mexican flag, is crossed delicately in front of her stomach over the other, which holds a cigarette. Her face is turned to the side slightly, her heavily painted eyebrows meet in the middle, and her hair is again pulled back with a centre parting. These features became central elements of her self-portraits, as did the hair on her upper lip; "I have the moustache and in general the face of the opposite sex", she said. Her body acts as a dividing line for the scenes behind her: to her left, Aztec structures and sculptures, cacti and flowers, a Day of the Dead skull; to her right, skyscrapers, generators and factories spewing fumes that encircle an American flag. A sun and a moon float inside two separate clouds overhead, joined together by a bolt of lightning. It anticipates Kahlo's well-known painting "The Two Fridas" (1939), strangely absent here, though represented by a tiny black-and-white image on a wall label and two outfits on Kahlo-lookalike mannequins – one in Tehuana attire, the other a European ball gown – positioned next to each other, as they are in the painting.

Exotic clothes had their advantages. Kahlo's style of dress was an artwork in itself and, as Gannit Ankori writes in his essay in the excellent accompanying catalogue, she "thrived in the limelight". "All the painters want me to pose for them", she wrote in a letter to her mother from San Francisco in November 1930. "The *gringas* really like me a lot and pay close attention to all the dresses and *rebozos* that I brought with me, their jaws drop at the sight of my jade necklaces." One such person was the Hungarian-American photographer Nickolas Muray (with whom she had an affair for eight years) whose portraits of Kahlo appear throughout the show. In "Frida Kahlo in New York" (1939) the saturated colours of her Mexican clothes (a blue-and-white embroidered *enagua*; a red, yellow and black patterned *huipil*; and her hair braided with huge blue ribbons, tied on the top of her head) contrast with the bare brick and hazy greys of the New York skyline behind her. She holds her cigarette between bright red nails; her lips also pop with red (a well-used stick of "Everything's Rosy" by Revlon appears in the exhibition). In Muray's best-known photograph of her – "Frida on a White Bench", 1939 – she gazes dead-pan into the camera; the white flowers on her black *enagua* blend into the unreal backdrop, removing a sense of perspective so that she seems otherworldly.

The extent of Kahlo's chronic ill health is staggering. In a powerful room titled "Endurance", glass display cases in the shape of small four-poster beds contain the medical devices she wore after her surgeries: steel spine braces with heavy rigid leather paddles that sat below her collarbone, forcing her shoulders back to encourage an upright posture, and orthopaedic corsets, made by dipping bandages in plaster and wrapping them around her torso while she was hanging upside down, tightening as they dried. Kahlo beautifully decorated the corsets with little round mirrors and images of flora, fauna and the hammer and sickle. A disturbing one has a circular hole over the abdomen, perhaps for ventilation or to suggest the lack of a foetus (Kahlo suffered a number of miscarriages).

Spacious, slip-on *huipils* sat easily over these devices, and wouldn't ride up when she was in a wheelchair. By wearing bold jewellery and make-up (she used a Revlon "Ebony" eyebrow pencil to enhance that distinctive brow), she further drew people's attention away from her broken body towards her face. In her diary and letters to Rivera, she called herself "The Great Concealer". Yet in her paintings, she unflinchingly bares all. In the same room hangs "Appearances Can Be Deceiving"(1944–54), an incongruously colourful charcoal and pencil drawing found at the back of a cupboard, where she exposes her brace-supported body underneath her billowing Tehuana clothes, like an X-ray: her spine is a crumbling Ionic column, her right thigh has a raw scar that stretches down from her pubic bone and her good leg is tattooed with blue butterflies.

The two latest and most evocative paintings appear towards the end. "Self-Portrait as a Tehuana" (1943) features a close-up of Kahlo's head surrounded by a comically large white lace *resplandor*, a religious headdress worn on ceremonial occasions (Kahlo abandoned Catholicism in her youth, but still enjoyed its dramatic aesthetic). Instead of showing allegiance to God, she embeds a haunting bust of Rivera in the centre of her forehead above her eyebrows. Her expression is pained, her mouth taut. A web of claustrophobic tendrils, sprouting from the starched *resplandor* and the garland of flowers in her hair, twist to the edges of the canvas. An almost identical portrait, created five years later, hangs alongside, but in this one Rivera has gone – instead, there is a bird trapped inside an oval brooch, which is pinned to the fabric below her chin. Three iridescent tears fall from Kahlo's eyes like the pearls set into the brooch either side of the bird. Just before she died aged forty-seven from the amputation of a gangrenous leg, Kahlo told *Time* magazine, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality".