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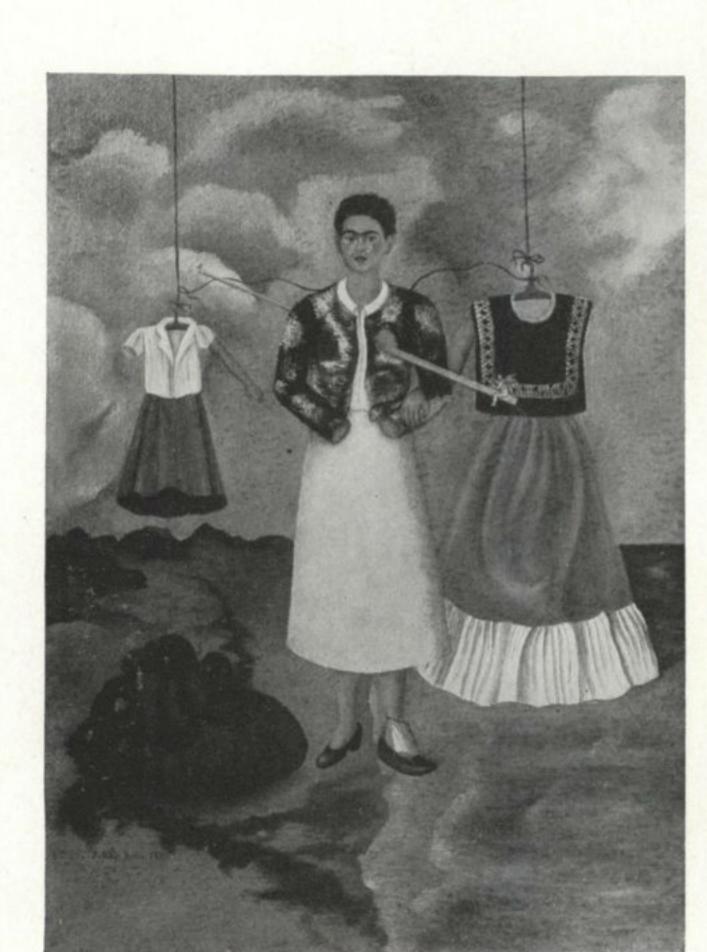
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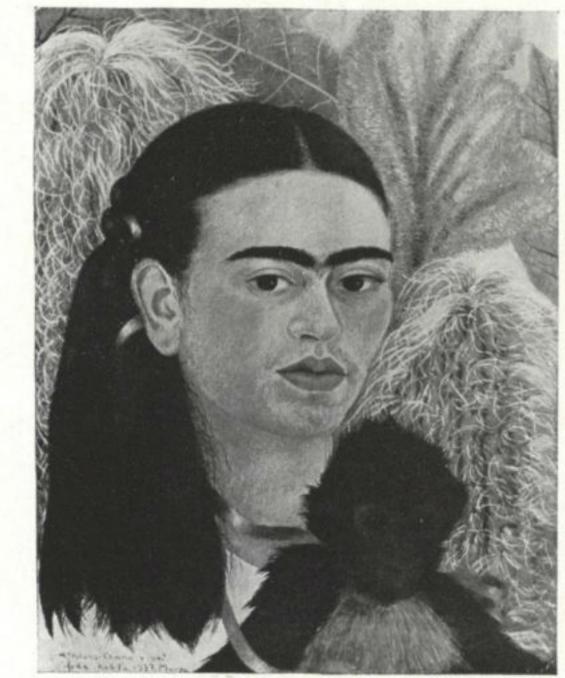
"PORTRAIT OF DIEGO"

Rise of another Rivera

by Bertram D. Wolfe



"SELF-PORTRAIT WITH HEART"



"FULANG-CHANG AND I"

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EWCOMER to the art galleries of New York is Carmen Frida Kahlo de Rivera, wife of the weighty and mighty Diego, the master painter of Mexico. She is now having her first American showing at the Julien Levy Galleries.

About this exhibit, she wrote: "I have never had an exhibition before. I was always shy and afraid to show my things. The first time in my life I sold a work was a few weeks ago to Edward G. Robinson. I gave as a present three or four paintings to people I like, and that is all. I never knew I was a Surrealist till André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration."

Those words give a clue both to Madame Rivera's personality and to her painting, for she is one of the most spontaneous and personal of artists. Though André Breton, who will sponsor her show in Paris, told her she was a surrealiste, she did not attain her style by following the methods of that school. Nor is she influenced by her husband's manner in her work. Quite free, also, from the Freudian symbols and philosophy that obsess the official Surrealist painters, hers is a sort of "naïve" Surrealism, which she invented for herself. Here and there, as in "Fulang-Chang and I," there seems to be a trace of the Douanier Rousseau, but even that influence may be accidental. It was not from other painters, nor from schools, but from within herself that she derived the matter and even the manner of her painting. Boredom and suffering during a year spent flat on her back in a plaster cast, after an automobile accident, made a painter out of her; and each of her paintings since has been an expression of a personal experience. Even when she does not herself appear in a canvas, she somehow pervades the picture.

Little more than half as old as Diego Rivera, she is his third wife, and on good terms with both her predecessors. In fact, she has done a portrait of Lupe, the wife she succeeded. But that was one of her earlier and less interesting works. Each of Rivera's former marriages went on the rocks during its seventh year, and, in the same fateful seventh year, Madame Rivera's marriage also came near suffering shipwreck. A lonely and miserable time followed for both of them—recorded in her "Self-Portrait with Heart" shown here—but that quarrel ended with a deeper understanding and a greater mutual dependence.

They first met in 1922, when Frida Kahlo was a dynamic, mop-haired little nuisance at the National Preparatoria School. She was thirteen, a tomboy, ringleader of a gang of boys and girls who made the school halls ring with their escapades. And Rivera was thirty-six, and had come to the Preparatoria to do his first Mexican mural. In the heavy painter, she found a particularly promising target for her pranks. Hopefully she soaped the stairway down which he had to descend from the auditorium stage. Then she hid behind a pillar. But the slow, work-weary painter didn't even slip. But when, on the following morning, the director fell down the stairs at assembly time, she felt that the soap had not been wasted.

So many and wild were her plots that eventually the director expelled her. But the Minister of Education himself, moved by her disarming appearance and scholastic record, ordered her reinstatement. "If you can't manage a little girl like that," he said to the head of the school, "you are not fit to run an institution!" (Continued on page 131)



Self-portrait by Madame Diego Rivera a recent painting by the wife of the famous Mexican painter



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RISE OF ANOTHER RIVERA

(Continued from page 64) Not content with such minor pranks, she then began interfering with Rivera's love-affairs. He was, at the time, courting Lupe Marin, soon to become the second Mrs. Rivera. It was Frida's delight to hide near the door. When she saw the beautiful model coming, she would cry out, "Look out, Diego, here comes Lupe!" as though Rivera were entertaining a woman visitor.

One day, when she and some classmates were discussing their plans, she calmly announced, "My only ambition is to have a child by the painter, Diego Rivera." Her girlhood desire to become a mother became almost an obsession with her. Indeed, it is the subject of many of her paintings and colours the mood of a number of them. The most striking is the self-portrait dealing with childbirth, which gives a clue to her unhappy obsession.

So intimate in their import are her paintings, that we could easily reconstruct her life and personality from them. There is a picture of hers called "My Family," which shows her parents and grandparents (arranged in the form of an amusing family tree). In this painting, there is also a number of playful self-portraits—Frida before she was born; Frida as a nude little girl.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Remembering the time when her parents dressed her in a white robe and wings to represent an angel (wings that caused her great unhappiness because they would not fly), she painted her charming "Girl with Airplane." Another child memory is celebrated in the strange painting, "I and My Nurse." But, as childhood memories are often distorted by the experiences of later life, she has painted herself in her Indian nurse's arms, with a child's body, but her present adult face. Her "Portrait of Diego" is revealing, not merely as the likeness of the celebrated painter, but for what it tells of her feeling for him. Only the eyes of love could create this romantic and curly-headed version of the man.

While official Surrealism concerns itself mostly with the stuff of dreams, nightmares, and neurotic symbols, in Madame Rivera's brand of it, wit and humour predominate. Even her saddest experiences become subject for laughter. This is attested by the little angels playing seesaw on the stick that pierces the empty place where once was her heart. There is the sly stressing of resemblance between her own features and those of her pet monkey, in "Fulang-Chang and I."

She seems to come closest to Surrealism in those of her paintings which deal with accident, disaster, and death, but they come rather from a deep-rooted Mexican tradition, as does her favourite medium—oil on tin—in which she paints.

In her imperfect English, she wrote a friend a few facts about herself:

"Here it is all my 'important' history. I was born in Coyoacán the 7th of July of 1910. My father is German, my mother Mexican. I never thought of painting until 1926, when I was in bed on account of an automobile accident. I was bored as hell in bed, with a plaster cast (I had a fracture in the spine and several in other places), so I decided to do something. I stoled from my father some oil paints, and my mother ordered for me a special easel because I couldn't sit down [she means 'sit up'], and I started to paint. Before that accident, I was in the preparatory school. I wanted to study medicine.

"When I recovered more or less, the doctors didn't allowed me to come back to school. So I could paint all the time. Diego was painting in the Secretariat of Education, and I went often to watch him. Once I took my three first paintings to show to him. He liked them quite well."

From the bright, fuzzy, woollen strings that she plaits into her black hair and the colour she puts into her cheeks and lips, to her heavy antique Mexican necklaces and her gaily coloured Tehuana blouses and skirts, Madame Rivera seems herself a product of her art, and, like all her work, one that is instinctively and calculatedly well composed. It is also expressive—expressive of a gay, passionate, witty, and tender personality.

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