

BENDIGO ART GALLERY

Frida Kahlo:
In her own image

VCE document



Introduction

Founded in 1887 on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, Bendigo Art Gallery is one of the oldest and largest galleries in Australia. Today we are renowned for our dynamic program of exhibitions, education experiences and events that make a significant contribution to the cultural, social, creative, and economic life of our local community, the state of Victoria and beyond. This program showcases historic and contemporary Australian art from our collection, collaborations with living artists, and groundbreaking international exhibitions with a focus on fashion, textiles, and style icons that have shaped the visual culture of our time.

Bendigo Art Gallery's collection contains close to 5,000 works including paintings, sculpture, ceramics, furniture, photography, fashion, prints, drawings and video art. Spanning the mid-18th century to today, the collection includes First Nations art, colonial and 19th-century European and Australian paintings, 20th-century and contemporary Australian art and the newly established Australian Fashion Collection, featuring First Nations designers and leading examples of contemporary fashion, textiles and design.

Exhibition Rationale

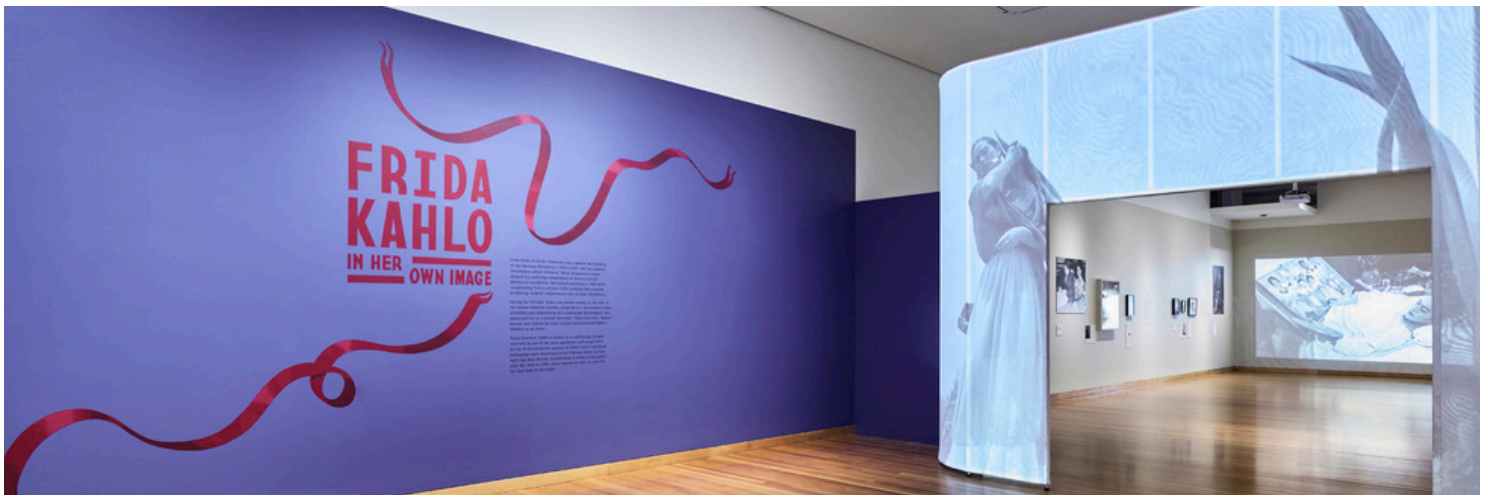
'Frida Kahlo: In her own image' is organized in collaboration with the Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico. Curatorial texts within the exhibition are written by exhibition curator Circe Henestrosa, advising curator Gannit Ankori, and managing curator Lauren Ellis.

'Frida Kahlo: In her own image' explores the revolutionary creative vision of one of the most celebrated and influential artists of all time, Frida Kahlo. Kahlo lived her formative years against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the cultural renaissance which followed. These momentous events shaped her enduring commitment to Mexico and her distinctive worldview.

During her lifetime, Kahlo was known mainly as the wife of the famous Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. Her dramatic sense of style also positioned her as a fashion innovator. These roles may be seen as having overshadowed her identity as an artist; however, this exhibition explores the complex personal, political, and artistic dimensions of Kahlo's construction of identity.



Top of page and above: Bendigo Art Gallery's 'Frida Kahlo: in her image' installation photographs



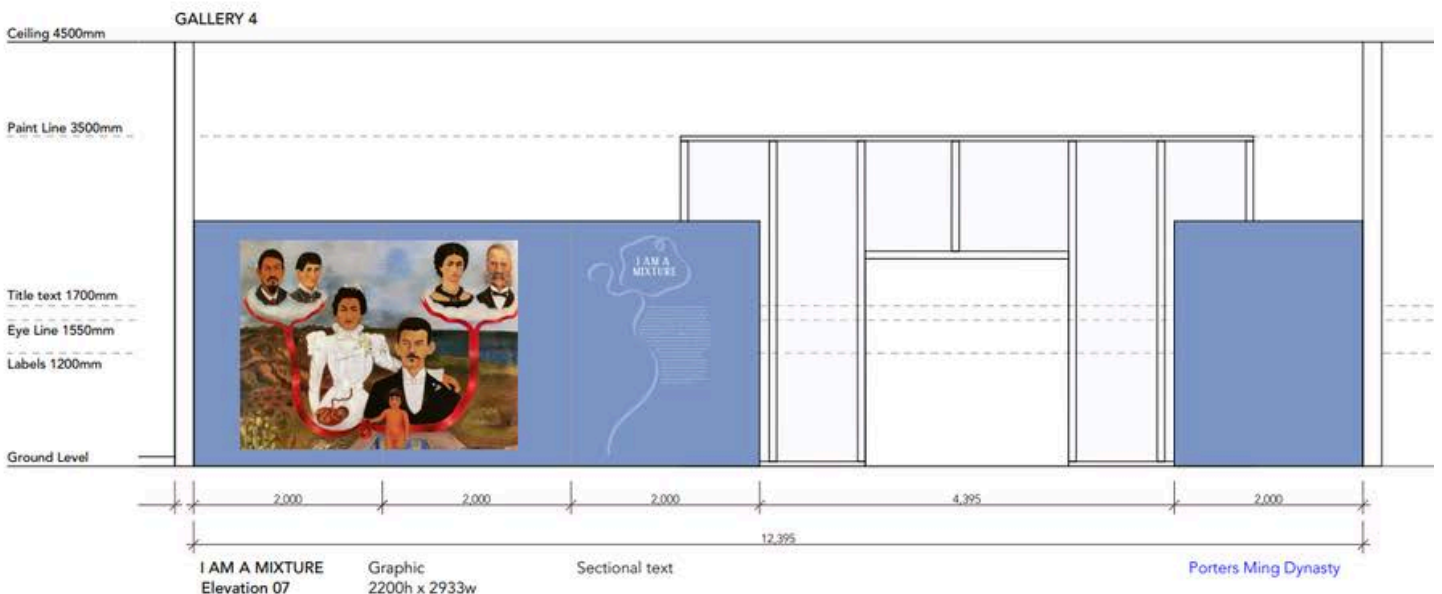
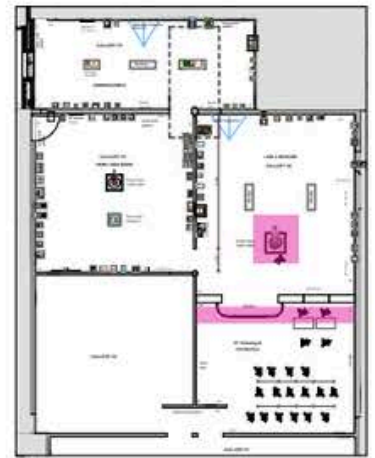
The exhibition highlights the connections between the events of her life, her work as an artist, her collaboration with photographers, and her iconic look, which continues to fascinate and inspire art, design, and pop culture today.

When Frida Kahlo died in 1954, her lifelong home La Casa Azul (the Blue House) was transformed into a museum in her honour. On the instructions of her husband Rivera, the artist's personal collection of clothing, accessories, makeup, documents, photographs, as well as orthopedic and medical items, and original drawings, were sealed away in bathrooms and trunks where they remained, out of view, for 50 years. In 2004, they were unsealed - and in this exhibition - they are on display in Australia for the first time.

Exhibition layout and design

VCE Art Making and Exhibiting

An exhibition design is created for each exhibition at Bendigo Art Gallery to help visualise and plan the installation and ensure an engaging and organised experience for visitors. It allows the curator to consider connections between artworks, determine how many artworks will fit in the available space, and ensure a cohesive exhibition story. It assists the curator to collaborate with other gallery staff to prepare for installation, identify potential challenges, and figure out what display furniture (like plinths or specialised mounts) may be needed. It also helps to ensure safe movement of visitors through the space, especially large groups like school tours.



For major exhibitions, curators often collaborate with specialist exhibition designers to visualise how the artworks will be presented in the gallery. Designers use software to create scale drawings and 3D models of each gallery space to test the placement of artworks, furniture, and display features.

For 'Frida Kahlo: In Her Own Image', Anita Gigi Design developed detailed plans for every wall, plinth, and display case. These visuals were used by curators, installation technicians, and conservation teams to make sure the layout was safe, accessible, and visually powerful.

Designing an exhibition is about more than just layout. For this exhibition, the key design goals included:

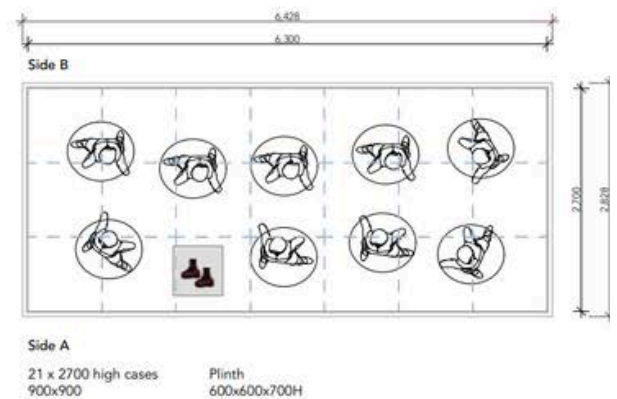
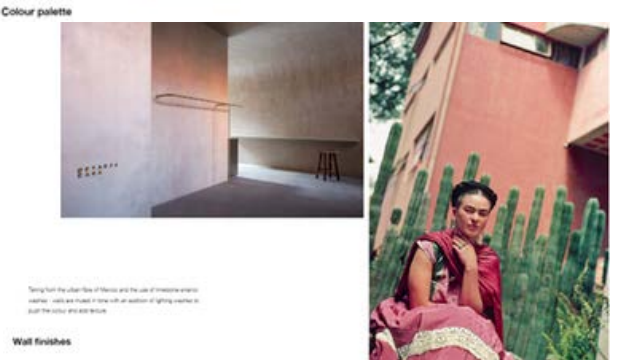
- Creating a sense of reverence and discovery,
- Evoking warmth, intimacy, and femininity,
- Reflecting the handmade, organic textures of Mexican architecture and Frida's clothing, and
- Avoiding clichéd or overused interpretations of Mexican culture.

The design also explored deeper themes from the exhibition, such as:

- The power of Frida's gaze,
- The play between concealing and revealing, and
- Her use of personal style and home decor to express political and cultural beliefs.

The designer worked closely with the curators, drawing on historic photos, Frida's home La Casa Azul, and traditional Mexican design elements to ensure the space truly reflected Kahlo's world.

Anita worked with graphic designer Cody Buchanan to develop visual motifs used throughout the exhibition. The motifs drew on symbols that were personal to Frida - like the hummingbird and the ribbon, which are both deeply symbolic and represented within featured artworks.



Above images & below left image: Gallery exhibition designs by Anita Gigi

Below right image: Final installation view





Alongside visual storytelling, the following practical concerns were considered:

- Space and positioning for smooth traffic flow,
- Comfortable viewing and accessibility for wheelchair users,
- Protection of objects through use of casing, lighting, and careful positioning,
- Availability of supplies in a regional location, and
- Sustainability through the re-use of existing furniture or materials where possible.

These more practical elements were balanced alongside aesthetic and experiential elements, such as lines of sight through to important moments and upcoming rooms; giving highlight works their own significant moment; shifts from black and white to colour images; creating a sense of intimacy for small personal items and building a sense of journey and discovery.

Anita consulted vintage books to explore historic typography. In a nod to the Mexican tradition of mural painting, singnwriters were engaged to paint the ribbons by hand on to the walls.

Curatorial considerations and thematic connections

The exhibition is the result of a long-term collaboration between Bendigo Art Gallery and international partners including La Casa Azul (Frida's home museum), curator Circe Henestrosa, and academic Gannit Ankori. Bendigo's Curatorial Manager, Lauren Ellis, led the project. Every decision in the exhibition—from object selection to label writing and spatial layout—was made through this collaborative process. Staff from La Casa Azul were present for installation, and both international curators travelled to Bendigo to finalise and launch the exhibition.



Top of page: Bendigo Art Gallery's 'Frida Kahlo: in her image' installation photographs
 Above: Bendigo Art Gallery's 'Frida Kahlo: in her image' Curatorial Manager, Lauren Ellis

The exhibition is divided into distinct chapters, each occupying a different gallery:

Room 1: I Am a Mixture

Room 2: Here I Was Born

Room 3: Gringolandia

Room 4: Composing Herself

Room 5: Art & Dress

Rooms 6 & 7: Disability & Creativity

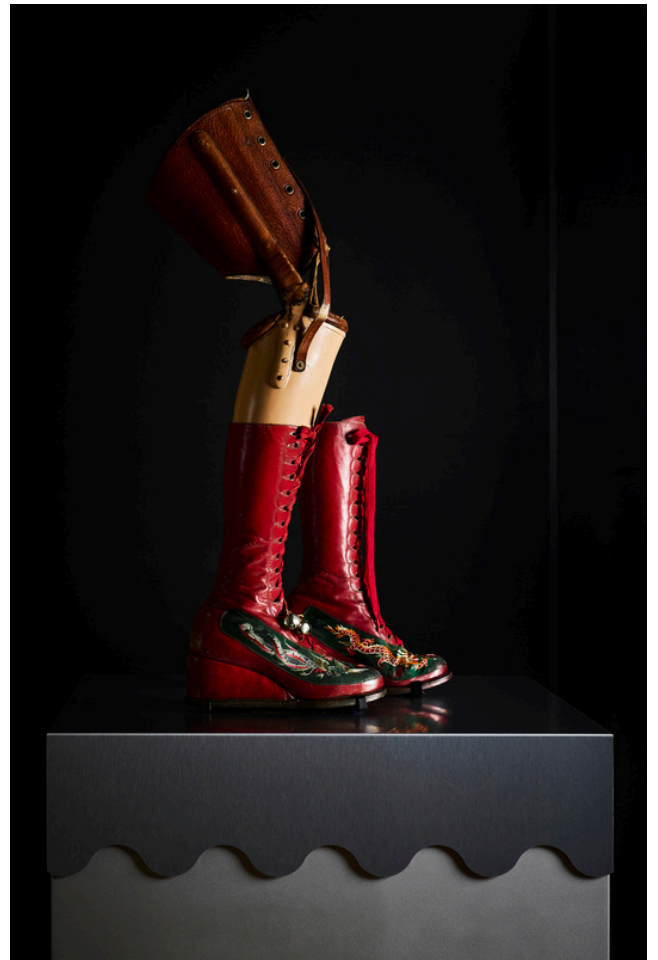
Room 8: Adornment

Room 9: Her Own Muse

Each room offers a different lens through which to explore Kahlo's self-expression, cultural identity, and enduring influence.

Throughout the exhibition design process, how the artworks and objects will work within the physical space of the gallery needs to be considered. An example of one of the key spatial decisions made was to use the smaller rooms of Rooms 6 & 7 to house the more intimate material of 'Disability and Creativity'. The scale and quietness of these rooms helped support a more personal connection with Frida's experiences of illness and resilience.

In comparison, the larger space of Room 5 allows for a dynamic experience for viewers to make their way through large scale showcases containing 16 mannequins dressed in some of Frida's most iconic garments.



Two top right images: Bendigo Art Gallery's 'Frida Kahlo: in her image' installation photographs
Above three images: Visiting staff from Museo Frida Kahlo preparing garments for display

Conservation Considerations:

Conservation in a public gallery involves careful environmental controls, such as regulating temperature, humidity and lighting levels to prevent any deterioration of artwork or items. Artworks must be protected from potential damage caused by exposure to light, dust, or fluctuations in humidity or temperature, which can lead to fading, warping or degradation of materials. In addition to environmental factors, galleries implement specific handling, storage and display methods to ensure the longevity of their collections.

As many of the artworks and objects in 'Frida Kahlo: In her own image' are considered national treasures of Mexico, their conservation and care was of utmost importance throughout every element of the process. Conservation efforts to safeguard artworks and objects for this exhibition include:

- Two days of acclimatisation upon arrival of freighted items to the gallery,
- Condition reporting completed for all artworks and objects,
- Temperature and humidity gauges installed within all rooms and within showcases,
- Lighting lux levels at no greater than 50 for all sensitive works such as textiles and paper,
- Use of Perspex, glass and showcases to protect artworks and objects, and
- Use of 100% stable archival materials in mounts and mannequins.

As well as conservation of artworks, their security within the gallery is of the highest priority, with protocols including security services, gallery attendants, and wired alarm systems.

Ideas and meanings

VCE Art Creative Practice

'Frida Kahlo: in her image' offers an engaging look at how the artist's personal life blends with wider historical and cultural forces. The display features Kahlo's artworks, clothing and personal items, showing how her struggles and triumphs deeply influenced her art. The exhibition invites viewers to consider Kahlo's self-fashioning as a vital part of her practice as an artist.

The presentation of paintings and drawings by Kahlo, alongside her personal belongings and traces of the world in which she moved, reveals how she developed her ideas and how she brought them to life. The exhibition highlights the ways in which she was engaged with a dynamic cultural movement, how she collaborated with photographers and traditional artisans, as well as deeply exploring her most personal experiences through her art.



Above images: Bendigo Art Gallery's 'Frida Kahlo: in her image' installation process photographs

At the heart of the exhibition is Kahlo's strong sense of identity. Her art reveals both her physical and emotional challenges, using personal symbols and meaningful objects. Items like her unique wardrobe and the transformed medical devices highlight how she used art to both hide and share her true self. This honest approach challenged societal norms and shows that art can be a powerful way to express personal and social truths.

The careful design of the exhibition helps to guide visitors on this journey of discovery. The layout is thoughtfully arranged to reflect Kahlo's creative process, making the experience both intimate and thought-provoking. The exhibition is a valuable opportunity to explore how personal experience and cultural history come together to create art that speaks to both individual and collective identities.

Historical and cultural context

Frida Kahlo's work offers a rich insight into how personal experiences blend with broader cultural and historical influences. Living through a time of major change in Mexico, marked by political shifts, cultural rediscoveries, and a reconnection with indigenous traditions, Kahlo's art becomes a powerful mix of her inner world and the story of her nation. Her creative process highlights how personal experiences, and social contexts can shape an artist's vision.

Kahlo's personal life deeply informed her work. She vividly displayed the physical and emotional hardships she endured, using symbolism that reflected both pain and resilience. Although critics often link her work to Surrealism, Kahlo herself rejected this label, insisting that her art was a truthful depiction of her own life rather than a venture into the realm of dreams or fantasy.

Her works also echo the larger forces at work in society during her lifetime. The early twentieth century in Mexico was a period of transformation, and Kahlo's creativity mirrored these changes. By incorporating familiar elements from Mexican popular culture and indigenous heritage into her art, she both celebrated her roots and questioned established ideas. This creative blending shows how an artist can reflect and even challenge the structure of the world around them.

Using symbols such as animals, nature, and elements of folklore, Kahlo created a personal visual language that spoke to her cultural background. These recurring images are not just decorative; they carry deep meanings related to Mexican spirituality, history, and identity. In her work, the personal meets the political, creating a narrative that feels both unique and universal. This exploration encourages viewers to consider how art expresses both individual emotion and collective memory.

Some of the most powerful items in the exhibition are Kahlo's orthopedic and prosthetic devices, and medical items. The curators of the exhibition, along with the staff of her museum, thought carefully about the ethics of exhibiting this intimate material – and were guided by what Kahlo herself chose to show the world in paintings and photographs.

Kahlo's wardrobe and construction of identity deliberately played with concealing and revealing in relation to her disabled body. Kahlo documented her experiences of disability, illness, and medical intervention with photographers, adorned and embellished her prosthetic and orthopedic items, and transformed some into works of art in their own right.

A drawing discovered at La Casa Azul in 2004, titled 'Appearances Can be Deceiving', gives us an x-ray view through her clothing. Kahlo reveals what is concealed beneath her signature silhouette: her thinner right leg, crumbling spinal column, and orthopedic corset. In this drawing, Kahlo shows us that her clothing is an elaborate sartorial mask, simultaneously disguising her physical differences, informing her silhouette, and projecting her artistic and political beliefs to the world.

Structural, Personal and Cultural Lenses

VCE Art Creative Practice

Consider the prompts below. These may be used to facilitate group discussions, visual analysis activities, written responses, or further support your gallery visit.

Structural Lens:

These questions encourage students to analyse how Kahlo used art elements, materials, techniques, and symbolism to communicate meaning:

- What materials and techniques did Frida Kahlo use in her self portrait, and how do they help express her ideas or emotions?
- Can you identify any repeated symbols or elements and principles across different works or objects in the exhibition? What do you think their purpose might be?
- How might Kahlo use art elements like line, shape, and colour to highlight certain parts of her body or face in her artworks? What effect does this have?
- How does the style of the artwork represent the period of time in which Kahlo was living?
- Consider the physical aspects and/or presentation of a chosen work. What symbolic meanings are evident? Consider art elements and principles, compositional arrangement of subject matter as well as materials, techniques and processes used by the artist.

Personal Lens:

These questions encourage students to reflect on Kahlo's personal experiences, beliefs, and how their own perspectives influence their interpretation:

- What aspects of Frida Kahlo's personal life (such as her experience with disability, pain, or relationships) can you see reflected in the works on display?
- Are there symbols or objects in her art or personal belongings that you think have personal meaning for her? Why might she have chosen to include them?
- How do you think Kahlo used clothing and fashion to express her identity? What do her choices say about her personality or beliefs?
- Do any of the works or themes in the exhibition remind you of your own experiences or emotions? How does this connection shape your interpretation of her work?
- After learning more about her life, does your opinion of her artwork change? Why or why not?

Cultural Lens:

These questions guide students to explore the cultural and historical context of Kahlo's work and how it shapes meaning:

- How does Kahlo's Mexican identity and pride in her heritage show up in the works and objects on display?
- What role do traditional symbols, clothing, and colour play in expressing cultural beliefs or political ideas in her work?
- How did the time period in which she lived—such as the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution—shape the messages and ideas in her art?
- Why do you think Kahlo chose to represent herself in such a strong and powerful way during a time when women were often expected to behave differently?
- How might her work have been received differently in her own time compared to how it is viewed today? What cultural or social changes influence how we understand her art now?

