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Capturing the Love, and Psyches, of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

By Rena Silverman May. 24, 2016 4

Marcel Sternberger and his wife, Ilse, traveled to Mexico in 1951 to photograph President Miguel Alemán Valdés and other prominent politicians and businessmen. But the highlight of the trip came when they befriended two Communist radicals: Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Mr. Sternberger eventually photographed them using his portrait approach, which was a unique blend of psychological and photographic techniques.

“While Sternberger generally developed good relations with all of his sitters and went on to correspond with some of the most famous personalities of the day, a special bond developed with Frida and Diego,” said Jacob Loewentheil, author of “The Psychological Portrait,” a new monograph

published by Rizzoli with 206 photographs of notable figures, including Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud and George Bernard Shaw. “The Sternbergers spent approximately the next five years traveling from New York, where they lived, to la Casa Azul.”

It was important to Mr. Sternberger to develop a close rapport with his subjects, many of whom were, like himself, Jewish. According to Mr. Loewentheil, this (and some Communist theory) may have been part of the instant connection between Mr. Sternberger, his wife, Ms. Kahlo and Mr. Rivera, who both claimed Jewish heritage, even though that was later disproved.

In Mr. Sternberger’s portraits, Mr. Rivera is often making funny faces. According to a 1952 taped conversation between Mr. Rivera and Mr. Sternberger, obtained by Mr. Loewentheil, he often made these faces in front of the mirror to study facial muscles and features.

“Diego mimics many different faces and personas in his pictures,” Mr. Loewentheil said. “Some show him with his eyes rolled back in his head; in one he attempts to portray Buddha; in another he remarks that he sees some of the Mexican wind god in the portrait.”

Ms. Kahlo appears more poised. Despite her serious back

injuries, which she sustained in 1925, she is seated upright, almost forcefully so, with dangling earrings and her crown of flowers.

“She wanted herself presented with a royal bearing,” Mr. Loewentheil said. “Keeping in mind that her back was terribly injured in a childhood trolley car accident, which left her bedridden for much of her life, I think she always wanted to show herself as straight-backed, as being able to hold herself up.”

There is no record of how Ms. Kahlo felt about the portraits, but the taped conversation reveals Mr. Rivera’s opinion.

“First of all, these photographs, I think never have been done such good photographs of me and by the first time I have seen the real me, that part of me in photographs, most of the part of my psychology, my dreamy way to be in behind the mask I have all the time, in everyday life,” he told Mr. Sternberger.

Though Mr. Sternberger’s project was abandoned after he died in a 1956 car accident while returning to New York from Mexico, his psychological and photographic methods were detailed in a subsequent manuscript that was never published. “The Psychological Portrait” includes excerpts from that manuscript covering the photographer’s precise

instructions: There are 10 traits that he believed every good portraitist should have, including “a good educational background, so that you may share a maximum number of interests with your sitters.”

“Sharing knowledge of topics of importance to his subjects was the means through which he engaged them in conversation,” Mr. Loewentheil said. “Once the sitters were occupied with a conversation, Sternberger used their resulting engagement in the discussion to elicit internal emotions and produce the unique portraits that were his hallmark.”

It’s hard to know exactly the conversations among Ms. Kahlo, Mr. Rivera and Mr. Sternberger. But Mr. Loewentheil says he believes that Mr. Sternberger was able to capture an emotional bond between the famous couple that has long been overshadowed by the narrative of their tumultuous relationship.

“I think you can see from the portraits of Diego and Frida that — to the Sternbergers — the couple was a loving one,” he said. “There are some quite beautiful intimate moments between the two detailed in the book. The historical narrative we have handed down to us is usually narrowed by the need for brevity. Biographers of the couple may emphasize one side of their relationship, but the truth was more complicated.”

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