

## Frida Fighters

IN JUNE 2009 an item in the *New York Times* described a little-known group of works by the celebrated artist Frida Kahlo that was to be the subject of a book. The more than 1,200 paintings, drawings, letters, painted boxes, and other material belong to the Noyolas, antiques dealers in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, who claim to have

An ongoing debate over the authenticity of a group of possible Kahlos heats up.



Carlos and Leticia Noyola claim that this picture and other material they found are by Frida Kahlo.

purchased them between 2004 to 2007 from a lawyer, who had himself acquired them years before from a now-deceased wood carver who made frames for Kahlo.

Some years earlier several "discoveries" from the collection had appeared in the Mexican press and were questioned by art historians. Nevertheless, Princeton Architectural Press had set about publishing highlights from the trove in *Finding Frida Kahlo*, tout-

ing the works as "an astonishing lost archive of one of the 20th century's most revered artists." Three months before the book's release, in November 2009, 10 leading Kahlo scholars sent a letter to the press and to Mexican culture officials declaring all the documents and works "fakes" and appealing to the government to stop "this type of fraud and clarify the situation."

Illustrations in the book include depictions of Kahlo and of Kahlo-ish subjects, as well as letters to her husband, Diego Rivera, and journal entries that touch on all the hot-button topics of her life, from her alleged affair with Leon Trotsky to her lesbian activities. By filling gaps in her personal life, the archive seems designed to entice scholars and the general public. But *design* may be the operative word, according to the letter writers, who include Salomon Grimberg, the co-author of the Frida Kahlo catalogue raisonné; the New York Latin American-art dealer Mary-Anne Martin; and James Oles, a Wellesley art historian and curator of Mexican modern art. They object that the compositions are uncharacteristic of the artist. As for the documents, the handwriting does not match that on confirmed Kahlo holographs. Further these experts object not only to the forms of the various Kahlo signatures but also to their presence on every bit of paper, noting that it seems doubtful she would have signed diary entries and recipes. The owners of the

material, Carlos Noyola and his wife, Leticia Fernández, counter that Diego Rivera's granddaughter Ruth Alvarado Rivera and two of Kahlo's former students have supported the attribution and that a graphologist has declared the handwritten documents Kahlo's.

This past February a symposium, organized by Dallas Art Fair cofounder Chris Byrne in conjunction with the fair, brought many of the parties together for the first time. Participants included Grimberg, Martin, and Oles (this writer was the moderator). In a coup for Byrne, Noyola and Fernández came and brought materials for inspection. Noyola had complained that "none of the scholars that signed the letter [denouncing the collection] have ever... seen the material personally." Now they would be able to judge the works firsthand.

Grimberg and Martin dissected images they said were pastiches of known Kahlos, Martin focusing on one seemingly based on the famous 1946 *The Little Deer*, which depicts a Frida-headed creature pierced with arrows; the Noyola variant shows it collapsed in its death throes. The discussion grew heated when Oles voiced suspicions that the Noyola pieces had been created by the artist's former students. None of the experts altered their opinions after examining the two dozen items brought by the Noyolas. So there was an impasse.

"I felt very discouraged after the symposium was over," says Martin, "because I realized how futile it is to do battle with the fakers."

She notes that counterfeits multiplied in recent decades as prices for Kahlos rose to heady heights, citing the \$5.25 million paid privately in 2005 for a self-portrait that had brought just \$27,000 at auction in 1979 and the \$10 million appraisal for *The Little Deer*, now in private hands.

Carlos Noyola says that as a Mexican with 40 years' experience in the art business, he is a better judge than American experts who, according to his characterization, do not love art, do not love Mexico, and are in it for the money. He has sold some of the alleged Kahlos, including about 40 letters and drawings, but does not plan to sell more. The next step, he agrees, is to submit the collection to an appraisal by a museum or university.

Meanwhile, Mexico's attorney general is investigating the Noyola material in response to a complaint filed last fall by the Diego Rivera-Frida Kahlo Trust, which represents the artists' rights and is administered by Rivera's descendants in association with Banco de Mexico. Calling the denunciation baseless and claiming that he is considering suing the bank and the trust, Noyola says that a man from the government came to his shop in February and photographed thousands of the disputed objects. "The Ministerio Público in Mexico City now has a digital archive of the whole collection, and they have begun their investigation," he writes in an e-mail. "Hopefully all of this will let us reach a consensus here in Mexico soon." ■

JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN