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Florida Museums Highlight Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Machu Picchu

Museums in West Palm Beach and Boca Raton present exhibitions of the Mexican artists and of Peruvian ceramics and gold and silver ornaments.

By Joseph B. Treaster

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera — the tormented lovers and heavyweight Mexican artists — are together again. This time at a museum here in West Palm Beach.

Their paintings, a batch of photographs and a replica of a Rivera mural are part of a pair of Latin American art exhibitions that create an elegant change of pace from the mostly contemporary work at Art Basel Miami Beach this year.

The Frida and Diego show at the Norton Museum of Art captures a segment of the modernist movement in Mexico from the 1920s through the 1950s that the museum director, Ghislain d’Humierès, said added another dimension to the Norton’s permanent collection of American and European modernism.

Down the coast a bit, the Boca Raton Museum of Art is presenting “Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru,” a dazzling collection of sculpted gold and silver ornaments, ceramic jugs and bowls, many dating back thousands of years.



A copper funerary mask with applications of shell and stone from the “Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru” exhibition. Boca Raton Museum of Art



A gold and turquoise nose ornament from the exhibition. Boca Raton Museum of Art

Andrew James Hamilton, a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, said the 192 works were among the finest examples of pre-Columbian art. “This is the cr me de la cr me,” he said in an interview. “These are the kinds of works that museums around the world are trying constantly to get on loan.”

The exhibition has been staged like a theatrical production with dramatic lighting, sparkling crystal glass display cases and a virtual reality feature that takes you on a swooping, plunging, magic carpet ride over the roofless ruins of the Inca citadel.

West Palm Beach and Boca Raton are an easy drive from Art Basel headquarters in Miami Beach, and there are lots of things to do in an overnight visit.

The exhibitions are touring shows. The Frida and Diego show was most recently in Denver. The pre-Columbian exhibition, in its first iteration in Boca Raton, is heading for Europe in the spring.

The intensity of the Frida and Diego exhibition strikes you as you enter their wing of the Norton. They gaze out from a giant, floor-to-ceiling blow up of a slightly grainy 1934 black-and-white photograph, almost, but not quite, cheek to cheek, Frida out front, Diego fixed on her with those irresistible eyes.

She admired his swagger and acclaim as a muralist and painter, 20 years her senior. He saw her raw talent. They were on fire, politically charged, seeing a better Mexico in Communism. They told each other marriage would not fence them in.



Frida's Kahlo's "Self Portrait with Monkeys" (1943). Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

But it was tough going. He slept with her sister. She slept with their friend, Leon Trotsky. They divorced, remarried and clung together until Frida died in 1954 at 47. Three years later, he was gone.

She painted stark portraits, many of herself. She painted him. He painted her. He put her in a mural, handing out rifles. His lighter hand softened the harsh contours of rural life with sprays of calla lilies and sunflowers.

The Norton is showing 29 of their paintings and three of their lithographs, 20 paintings by contemporaries and 90 photos, including two of her by Rivera, five by Nickolas Muray, one of her lovers, and nine by her father, Guillermo Kahlo, a professional photographer. Two photos show her in an open coffin at her funeral in Mexico City.

In a self-portrait called “Diego on my mind,” Kahlo planted a tiny portrait of Rivera on her forehead and framed her face in a tight oval of pleated white lace overlaid with long, thin, angling, undulating nervous lines suggesting, perhaps, a cracked mirror or jangled nerves.

“There’s a lot of energy there,” said Ellen E. Roberts, one of the Norton’s senior curators.



Diego Rivera's "Calla Lily Vendor" (1943). Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The pre-Columbian exhibition in Boca Raton opens with the oldest of the works, a ceramic jug representing the head of a revered shaman. It was excavated, like all of the other pieces, from a burial mound. It is from the Cupisnique culture, 2,000 to 3,000 years ago.

4 Other Names to Know in Latin American Art

Paving the way. Frida Kahlo is internationally renowned for the emotional intensity of her work. But she is not the only woman from Latin America to leave her mark in the art world. Here are four more to know:



Ushers in bright yellow jerseys start people on their journey through the museum with a four-minute video, giving the historical context. A side curtain rises, and the exhibition unfolds.

Dimmed, colored spotlights create a shadowy feel that focuses attention on the artifacts, set individually and in small clusters in specially built, tall, angular glass cases. The objects glisten in the beams of tiny, pinpoint LED spotlights embedded, out of sight, in the tops of the cases.



Gold ornaments from the “Machu Picchu and the Golden Empires of Peru” exhibition. Cristobal Herrera-Ulashkevich/EPA, via Shutterstock

One stunning set of gold funereal trappings set on a skeletal manikin slams you to a stop: a big, blazing chest covering, a gleaming crown and shimmering round disks for the ears.

“You feel the power of every object,” said Michelle Feuer, a director of a tech start-up from West Palm Beach, after spending part of an afternoon absorbing the pre-Columbian art.

The exhibitions are a natural, one-two combination. Both are going heavy on digital advertising. Nikos Sotirhos, a robotics expert in Fort Lauderdale, got an email promoting the Machu Picchu show as he was working his way through the Frida and Diego show. On the spot, he and his wife, Alexandra Karava, decided to head for Boca Raton.

At the exhibition in West Palm Beach, Kahlo is by far the big draw. “Diego is part of the story,” said Jay Stollman, a musician from Stuart, just north of West Palm Beach, as he was wrapping up a visit to the show. “But I think Frida is really the headline.”

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