

Lifestyle | Art

New York auction smashes record for Frida Kahlo work

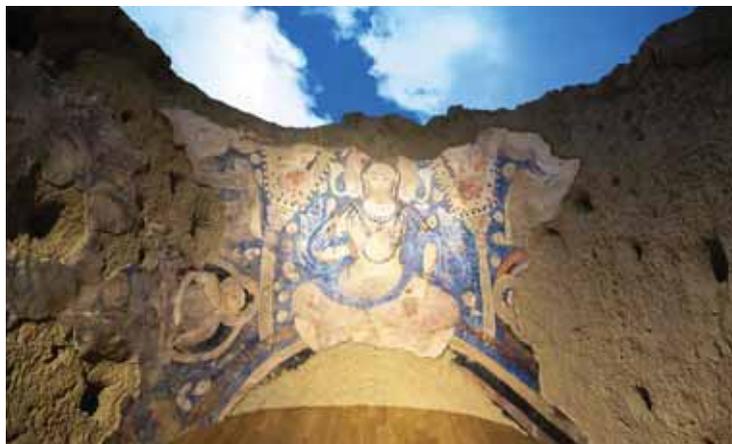
A rare painting by Frida Kahlo sold in a New York auction house for almost \$35 million, a record price for a work by the iconic Mexican artist. At the same sale, a painting by French artist Pierre Soulages also broke a record for his work by reaching \$20.2 million dollars. As expected, the self-portrait of Kahlo entitled "Diego y yo" ("Diego and me," 1949), where the face of the painter's husband Diego Rivera appears on her forehead, smashed the former record of \$8 million set by a Kahlo in 2016.



An art handler adjusts Frida Kahlo's final "Bust" Self-Portrait "Diego y yo" (Diego and I) at Sotheby's in New York City. — AFP

That made it the most expensive Latin American work of art in history sold at auction, the previous record having gone to a painting by Diego Rivera himself, whose work "Los Rivaes" (1931) sold for \$9.76 million in 2018. "Diego y yo" is emblematic of Kahlo's self-portraits, known for their intense and enigmatic gaze that made the Mexican painter, a feminist icon, famous around the world. In the painting, Rivera's face appears on Frida's forehead, above her distinctive eyebrows and dark eyes from which a few teardrops fall.

The depiction of Rivera, who at the time was close to Mexican actress Maria Felix, as a third eye symbolizes the extent to which he tormented her thoughts, art experts say. Kahlo and Rivera married each other twice. She died aged just 47 in 1954. "Diego y yo" last sold at Sotheby's for \$1.4 million in 1990. Soulages' painting, which had spent more than 30 years in a private collection, corresponds to the red period of the century-old French artist. It sold for \$20.2 million after a heated battle between several bidders, some of them in Sotheby's auction room and others on the phone, greatly exceeding the previous record reached in 2019 of \$9.6 million euros



This photo shows a replica of a cave painting of a blue Bodhisattva, part of artefacts destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, displayed at the Tokyo University of the Arts in Tokyo. — AFP photos



A replica of a cave painting of a blue Bodhisattva (left), part of artefacts destroyed by the Taliban.

Japan experts craft 'super clone' of destroyed Afghan mural

Japanese researchers have crafted a "super clone" of an Afghan mural destroyed by the Taliban, using a mix of traditional and digital techniques that they hope will salvage the work's "spirit" for future generations. Not a single fragment remains of the seventh-century cave painting demolished in 2001 along with two massive Buddha statues and other artefacts in Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley, sparking global condemnation.

But a precise replica, the result of three years of state-of-the-art reproduction efforts, went on display at a museum in Tokyo in September and October, just weeks after the Taliban returned to power in Kabul. The mural on the ceiling of a cave near the famous statues depicted a blue Bodhisattva-or someone on the path to becoming a Buddha. At six meters long and three meters high (20 by 10 feet), the intricate full-size copy has been dubbed a "super clone" by the reproduction team at Tokyo University of the Arts.

"We have succeeded in recreating a very precise representation in three dimensions," from its texture to the type of paint, said the team's co-leader Takashi Inoue. Japan is a major donor to Afghanistan and has long been involved in heritage protection efforts at Bamiyan, a crossroads of ancient civilizations considered to be one of the birthplaces of Japanese Buddhism.

The team digitally processed more than 100 photographs taken by Japanese archaeologists of the mural before it was desecrated, to create a computerized model of its surface. They then fed this data into a machine, which carved the exact shape into a styrofoam block. To complete the replica, artists applied a traditional paint in a lapis lazuli shade similar to the one used for the original mural. Through this process, "we can reproduce designs that are very close to the real ones again and again, to hand down their spirit to future generations,"

said Inoue, a professor specialized in Eurasian cultural heritage. "Let's stop vandalism. Let's preserve priceless culture-the heritage of mankind-together."

'Everything can be digitalized'

Days ahead of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August, the Taliban overran Kabul, sparking fears of a return to their brutal reign of 1996 to 2001. The new regime insists it wants to protect archaeological heritage from destruction. For historian Kosaku Maeda, a co-leader of the Tokyo reproduction team, the "massively shocking" images of the giant Buddhas disappearing into clouds of dust are still a vivid memory. "I was worried that such an act would be inflicted on the remains once again," said the 88-year-old, who has visited the valley repeatedly for more than half a century.

But their work shows that vandalism is "meaningless" in the face of modern technology, as "everything can be digitalized", he said.

On a recent visit to Bamiyan by AFP journalists, Taliban gunmen stood guarding the rock cavities that once housed the two Buddha statues.

Construction work on a \$20-million UNESCO-backed cultural center and museum was still under way in Bamiyan when the AFP team visited the area in October-although its planned inauguration this year was delayed by the Taliban takeover. Maeda said his dream is to build a separate "peace museum" in the valley and, if possible, display the replica cave painting there. "We can't put it back in its original place, but I want to bring it to Bamiyan as a historical legacy that local people can inherit," said Maeda, also a member of UNESCO's committee for the safeguarding of Afghan cultural heritage. "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive," he added, reciting the message written on a banner hung at the entrance of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. — AFP



Items related to Bamiyan and Afghanistan culture displayed at the Tokyo University of the Arts in Tokyo.