In April, 1953, less than a year before her death at the age of forty-seven, Frida Kahlo had her first major exhibition of paintings in her native Mexico. By that time her health had so deteriorated that no one expected her to attend. But at 8:00 P.M., just after the doors of Mexico City’s Gallery of Contemporary Art opened to the public, an ambulance drew up. The artist, dressed in her favorite Mexican costume, was carried on a hospital stretcher to her four-poster bed, which had been installed in the gallery that afternoon. The bed was bedecked as she liked it, with photographs of her husband, the great muralist Diego Rivera, and of her political heroes. Papier-mache skeletons dangled from the canopy, and a mirror affixed to the underside of the canopy reflected her joyful though ravaged face.

The majority of her paintings are small—twelve by fifteen inches is not unusual; their scale suits the intimacy of her subject matter. With very small sable brushes, which she kept immaculately clean,
she would carefully lay down delicate strokes of color, bringing the image into precise focus, making fantasy persuasive through the **rhetoric** of realism....

In the fall of 1977, the Mexican government turned over the largest and most prestigious galleries in the Palace of Fine Arts to a retrospective exhibition of Frida Kahlo’s works. It was a strange sort of homage, for it seemed to celebrate the exotic personality and story of the artist rather more than it honored her art. The grand, high-ceilinged rooms were dominated by huge blow-up photographs of incidents in Frida’s life, which made the jewel-like paintings look almost like punctuation points.

The art—the legend Frida herself had created—won out in the end, however. Because her paintings were so tiny in relation to the photographs and to the exhibition space, the spectator had to stand within a few feet of each one to focus on it at all. And at that proximity their strange magnetism exerted its pull. Taken from separate, poignant moments in her life, each was like a smothered cry, a nugget of emotion so dense that one felt it might explode....