



Exploring Self and Culture through Self Portraits and the Work of Frida Kahlo

Lesson Description: Self portraits are often considered one of the hardest pieces for an artist to create. Not only is it difficult to accurately portray the face and body one sees the most, but self portraits also force the artist to examine themselves more closely: often, they have underlying themes which represent a deeper truth about the artist themselves. Everything from the position in which the artist portrays themselves to the colors they use tells viewers something important about the lens through which they look at themselves. Thus, self portraits have become unapproachable and scary for artists to even think about.

However, with this project, students should aim to create a self portrait without much prior thought. They will be given the task of drawing themselves while representing an aspect of their culture important to them, a common theme in Frida Kahlo's work. They will examine the work of Frida Kahlo and the impact her Mexican culture has had on it. However, as a teacher, you should emphasize the creation of this piece with little preparation beforehand. Have students draw what comes to mind when they think about themselves and their culture in order to encourage the most raw representations of themselves and create a low-stress, fun environment for the creation of art.

Lesson Objective: By doing this project, students should learn about the work of Frida Kahlo and her self portraits. They should use her work which was influenced by her culture to create their own self portraits which somehow include an element of their culture. In order to alleviate some of the stigma around self portraits and their difficulty, teachers should encourage this project as a fun, low-stress exploration with a more "raw" quality (as in, little preparation beforehand).

Art History/Theory Relation: Frida Kahlo was a 20th century Mexican painter whose works have risen to great prominence and fame. Her most famous paintings are her self portraits, which express different aspects of her life and her emotions at various points.



One of her most famous works, "The Two Fridas" (1939), is a self portrait which shows two Fridas sitting side by side, with both of their hearts visible. The Frida on the left's heart is torn open and the main artery protruding from it has been cut by the surgical pincers in her hand and is bleeding onto her white dress. This painting was finished around the time she divorced Diego Rivera and is said to represent the loneliness and desperation she felt without him. In addition to being an important expression of emotions, Frida also represents herself wearing traditional Tehuana clothes in her portrayal of herself on the left. Tehuana women descend from the Zapotec Culture and are highly honored among Mexican women. Frida took great inspiration from them, similar to how students will find an aspect of their culture that inspires them and incorporate it into their pieces.

In addition, the emphasis on creating "raw" art will allow students to create a self portrait which better portrays themselves and their emotions, as opposed to a more polished piece in which important thoughts and feelings may be cut out.



"The Two Fridas," 1939




Materials Needed:

NOTE: All for Art lesson plans are always flexible with materials and students can use whatever they have on hand! We always strive to make art available to everyone, no matter how limited the resources available to them are. Thus, the following list is simply an ideation of possible materials for the above project.

1. Paper
 - a. Colored/construction paper makes the portraits more fun!
2. Crayons
3. Markers
4. Colored Pencils
5. Mirrors (for students to look at while drawing themselves)
6. Anything else you have on hand!

Step-by-Step Procedure:

1. Introduce students to the life of Frida Kahlo and her work, especially the influence of Mexican culture on her art.
 - a. This short video is a fun, engaging introduction to her and her work:
 [Frida Kahlo: The woman behind the legend - Iseult Gillespie](#)
 - b. This website contains a great biography of her:
[The Complete Works - Biography - frida-kahlo-foundation.org](https://www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org/)
2. Introduce the project to students and give them 10 minutes to brainstorm how they're going to draw their portrait and what aspect of their culture they'll include.
 - a. If students are stuck, ask the following questions:
 - i. What part of your culture is the most important to you? How has it shaped your life thus far?
 - ii. What emotion are you feeling right now? When you think of/feel that emotion, what imagery comes to mind? How can you show yourself feeling that emotion?
 - iii. What's your favorite cultural food? Do you have any specific memories associated with it?
 - iv. What's important to you? Your family? Friends? In what ways do the things important to you have influence on you? How could



you represent yourself in a way that shows what's important to you?

3. Give students time to work! Always offer encouragement and feedback.

What Students Should Aim to Accomplish with their Final Piece:

1. Students should have created a self portrait with very little (less than 20 minutes) of preparation (brainstorming, planning, etc.).
2. Students should have included a certain aspect of their culture in their self portrait or have used some sort of cultural influence.
3. They should be able to explain WHY they were inspired/influenced by this part of their culture.
4. Most importantly, they should have fun creating their piece!