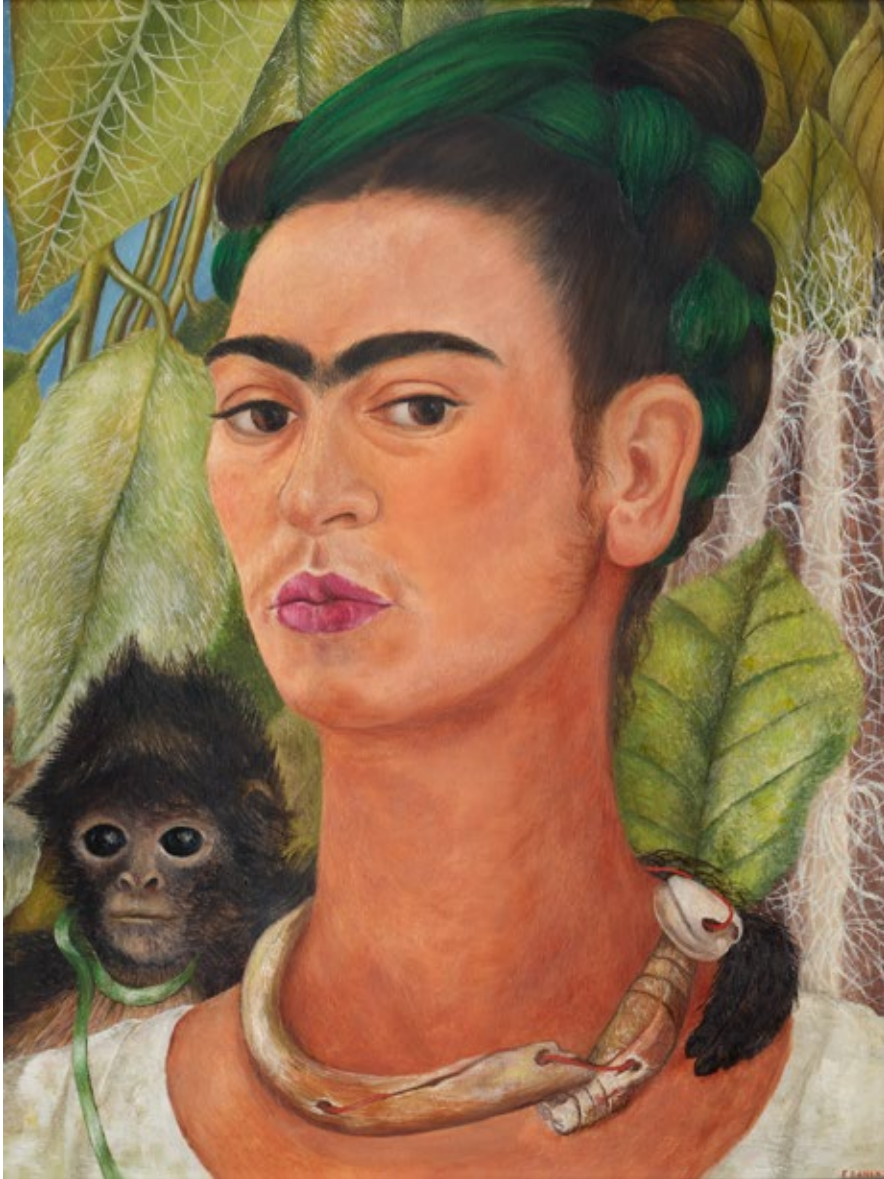


BUFFALO AKG ART MUSEUM

Lesson: Symbolic Self-Portrait



Artists: Frida Kahlo

Artwork: *Self-Portrait with Monkey*, 1938

Period/Movement: Self-portraits, Surrealism

Grade Level: K-12

Enduring Understanding 2.3:

People create, respond to, and interact with objects and places in ways that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives.

Essential Question: How do objects and places shape lives and communities?

Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907-1954). *Self-Portrait with Monkey*, 1938. Oil on Masonite. 16 x 12 inches (40.6 x 30.5 cm). Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum. Bequest of A. Conger Goodyear, 1966 (1966:9.10). © Banco de Mexico Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LESSON

Conceptual Basis:

Frida Kahlo was largely known for her symbolic self-portraits reflecting her life, loves, joys, and sorrows. Influenced by her Mexican culture, Kahlo uses vibrant color and meaningful imagery to portray her self-identity to the viewer. In this lesson, students will make connections to the artist while creating a self-portrait celebrating their own self-identity.

About the Artist:

[Frida Kahlo](#) (Mexican, 1910–1954) was a self-taught painter, best known for her self-portraits. A survivor of polio, Kahlo entered a pre-med program in Mexico City. At eighteen years old, Kahlo was seriously injured in a bus accident; she had to recover in bed for more than a year. During this time, Kahlo began to pass the time by painting still life and self-portraits. Painting “her own reality,” the artist shares her personal experiences and feelings in her paintings. The self-portraits reflect Kahlo’s life, loves, joys, and sorrows. Influenced by her Mexican culture, she uses vibrant color and symbolic imagery. An animal lover, the artist often depicts pets such as monkeys and parrots in her portraits as well.

About the Art:

Bright colors, an exotic landscape, and the traditional dress depicted in [Self-Portrait with Monkey](#) reflect Kahlo’s interest in her cultural identity and Mexican heritage. Featured in this self-portrait is Kahlo’s pet spider monkey, Fulang-Chang. The monkey’s arm is draped across the artist’s shoulder in a tender and protective way. A variety of large green leaves illustrate the lush vegetation and warm climate of Mexico. Kahlo’s warm skin tones against the cool colored greens and blues creates emphasis and contrast in the painting. Kahlo is painted wearing a traditional Mexican blouse, bone necklace, and an elaborate hairstyle with a green ribbon, which further represents her Mexican heritage. Self Portrait with Monkey was commissioned in 1938 by A. Conger Goodyear after he admired a previous painting of Kahlo and Fulang-Chang. Goodyear later bequeathed the painting to the Albright-Knox in 1966.

Building Visual Literacy: Art Detectives

Breaking down the various elements in an artwork enables students to build abstract thoughts based on their concrete observations. It is an interactive way to teach visual literacy in your classroom. Explain to students that Frida Kahlo created numerous self-portrait paintings which contain symbols and clues about the artist’s background and feelings. Have students investigate the different elements in Self-Portrait with Monkey. Like detectives, students can piece together a conclusion about the artwork based on discussion and observations.

Study the two subjects in the artwork: Frida Kahlo and the spider monkey. Are the two subjects interacting with one another? What might their relationship be based on their observations? Inform students that the monkey is Fulang-Chang, a beloved pet of the artist. Why might Kahlo want to paint Fulang-Chang?

Investigate what Kahlo is wearing in the painting. Do her outfit, hairstyle, and necklace appear to be modern? Where might you find the fashion shown in the painting? Why might Kahlo paint herself wearing these clothes? Connecting to her fashion, study the background. Ask students if they can identify the setting of the painting. Examine the leaves and plants behind Kahlo. Where could these plants be located: a warm or cool climate? Does the sky look blue or cloudy? What season might it be?

Once students have observed, discussed, and investigated the painting, ask students to construct a conclusion about the painting. Why did Frida Kahlo create this self-portrait? Students may conclude that Kahlo wanted to depict the pride she has in her Mexican heritage and the love of her pet.

What types of objects or images might have personal meaning to students? Have students share what types of things they would include in a self-portrait. Making connections to

Kahlo's Self-Portrait with Monkey; inform students that personal identity is reflected in their heritage, interests, and more. Students can begin brainstorming different objects or symbols that represent their own identity. Students can even add portraits of their pets. Special keepsakes, favorite things, and activities can be drawn into their self-portrait to add personal and symbolic meaning to their artwork.

Artmaking Activity

Students can create their self-portrait in a variety of ways. These techniques can be used for different skill levels and grades. The formal way of creating a self-portrait is to use a mirror as a reference when drawing oneself. Students can also work from a picture when drawing. Younger students can draw themselves as they imagine in their self-portrait. Encourage students to draw their self-portraits interacting with their symbolic imagery. For example, Fulang-Chang drapes his arm around Kahlo while she wears a traditional Mexican necklace. The background is reminiscent of the tropical lush nature found in Mexico. Once students have drawn their composition, they can color it in using materials of the teacher's choice or of the student's choice depending on grade level and proficiency.

Lesson Tips

- This lesson can be tailored for your curriculum specifications. For Social Studies, instead of creating a self-portrait in modern times, students can create a self-portrait imagining they had lived during another time in history. For example, in a lesson on Ancient Egypt, students can create a period self-portrait emphasizing the fashion, scenery, and symbols of the era.

Optional Reflections and Lesson Wrap-Up

- Students can share their self-portrait with their classmates, describing the symbols and objects they included that reflect their personal identity.
- In a writing assignment, students can write a letter about themselves and their life to a person in the future. Have students reference their artwork, describing the elements in their self-portrait.

Materials:

Mirror or photograph to work from

Pencils and Erasers

Drawing paper

Coloring materials: may include colored pencils, paint, markers, pastels, or crayons.

Vocabulary:

self-portrait: a portrait of an artist created by that artist

self-identity: awareness of oneself as an individual

symbolism: use of symbols to represent ideas

New York State Standards:

Grade	Code	Standard
1	VA:Cr2.3.1	Create art that represents natural and constructed environments.
2	VA:Cr2.3.2	Repurpose objects or materials to make something new.
3	VA:Cr2.3.3	Individually or collaboratively construct representations, diagrams, maps, or places that are part of everyday life.
4	VA:Cr2.3.4	Identify, describe and visually document places or objects of personal significance.
5	VA:Cr2.3.5	Document, describe, and represent constructed environments of regional or historical significance.
6	VA:Cr3.1.6	Reflect on whether personal artwork effectively communicates meaning and revise accordingly.
7	VA:Cr2.3.7	Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art or design that clearly communicates information or ideas.
8	VA:Cr2.3.8	Select, organize, and design images and text to make visually clear and compelling artistic work.

Standards:

The New York State Visual Arts Standards for High School Students are divided into 3 categories, Proficient, Accomplished, and Advanced rather than by grade level. Please feel free to choose the standard that best applies to the needs of your students and class curriculum.

Grade Level 9-12	Code	Standard
Proficient	VA:Cr3.1.HSI	Apply relevant criteria and the feedback of others to revise and refine works of art and design in progress.
Accomplished	VA:Cr3.1.HSII	Engage in constructive critique with peers; then reflect on, reengage, revise, and refine works of art and design in response to personal artistic vision.
Advanced	VA:Cr2.3.HSIII	Demonstrate in works of art or design how visual culture and material culture define, shape, enhance, inhibit, and/or empower people's lives.

Teacher Example:



Artwork by School Program Coordinator Kelly Macagnone.