



The Women of Mexican Modernism

Grades 3-5

The Women of Mexican Modernism



Frida Kahlo

1907 Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico – 1954 Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico

Diego on My Mind (Self-portrait as Tehuana)

1943

oil on masonite

The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th - Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation

About the Artist:

Frida Kahlo is perhaps the most recognizable Mexican artist in history. Although she was known by many people during her lifetime, it wasn't until after her death in 1954 that she became the cultural icon she is today. Born in 1907 in Coyoacán, Mexico, to a Mexican mother and a German father, Kahlo lived an eventful life marked by tragedy and illness. At the age of six she contracted polio which caused permanent damage to her right leg and foot, and then, in 1925, Kahlo was involved in a horrible bus accident that left her terribly injured. Immobilized in a full body cast, Kahlo's recovery was long and painful. It was during this time that she began to paint. As she considered her future as a painter, Kahlo took some of her first paintings to Diego Rivera (whom she had met years before) to ask his opinion of her work. Rivera was encouraging and the two struck up a friendship that led to a tumultuous marriage. Although Kahlo only ever had one solo show in her lifetime (in the gallery of her good friend Lola Álvarez Bravo), the story of her resilience and creativity lives on in her work today.

About the Artwork:

“In this self-portrait, Frida Kahlo wears a headdress from Tehuantepec which is located in the state of Oaxaca. The starched lace folds that encircle her face draw attention to the portrait of Diego on her forehead. It has been read as a representation of Kahlo's desire to possess Rivera during a difficult time in their relationship. Rivera is trapped in her mind but Kahlo's intentions are unclear and complicated by the delicate threads that unwind from her headdress and the roots that sprout from her floral crown. We are left to wonder whether these emanations represent new growth spurred by Rivera's presence or a draining away of Kahlo's energy.”¹

Diego on My Mind is an excellent example of Kahlo's incredible skill at self-portraiture. She often painted herself into her work, having once said “I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.” Kahlo used symbolism in her art to reflect important ideas and events in her life.²

About the Artist:

Born Dolores Martínez in Jalisco, Mexico in 1907, Lola Álvarez Bravo was one of Mexico's most important photographers. In 1925 she married Manuel Álvarez Bravo and began work as a lab assistant in his newly opened photography studio. In her time working as an assistant, Álvarez Bravo learned the photographic skills that would serve her well for the rest of her career. Lola and Manuel separated after nearly ten years together forcing Lola to find work to support herself and her son.³ Over the course of her career Álvarez Bravo defied gender expectations and found work as an artist, a photojournalist, a commercial photographer, and, eventually, as the chief of photography at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature), a position she held for thirty years.⁴ Lola Álvarez Bravo was committed to capturing everyday scenes and people with as much honesty as possible.

About the Artwork:

"Lola Álvarez Bravo was a skilled portrait photographer, known for her images of Mexico's leading artists, writers, and cultural figures. In this portrait, she captured María Izquierdo with one of her paintings of the folk altars found in Mexican homes. Izquierdo and Kahlo were contemporaries and perhaps the most prominent female painters in Mexico in the mid-twentieth century. Both explored genres that had lost favor following the shift toward politically driven art, such as portraiture and still-life. They also each created a distinct visual language that was deeply personal, but that incorporated rich references to Mexican popular culture and traditions."⁵

Lola Álvarez bravo photographed María Izquierdo many times throughout her life. The two women were close friends, Álvarez Bravo even stayed with Izquierdo for a time after she separated from her husband. They had a lot in common, both women were single mothers working in a male dominate field. You can see Álvarez Bravo's respect for her friend in the way that she photographed her; Izquierdo's figure fills the frame with her head held high. The photograph is taken from a slightly low angle conveying a sense of strength in the subject.



Lola Álvarez Bravo

1907 Lagos de Moreno, Mexico—1993 Mexico City, Mexico

María Izquierdo

1946

gelatin silver print

The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th - Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation



María Izquierdo
1902 San Juan de los Lagos, Mexico—1955 Mexico City, Mexico
Bride from Papantla
1944
oil on canvas

The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection of 20th – Century Mexican Art and the Vergel Foundation

About the Artist:

María Izquierdo was born in San Juan de los Lagos, Mexico in 1902. In 1916, at the age of 14, Izquierdo married army colonel and author, Candido Posadas with whom she had three children. The couple moved with their family to Mexico City in 1923 where Izquierdo began her career as a painter.⁶ She briefly studied at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Academy of Fine Arts) under the directorship of Diego Rivera who recognized her talent and supported her in her career. Izquierdo quickly gained the recognition and respect of her field and, in 1929, she became the first Mexican woman to have a solo exhibition in the United States. Like Frida Kahlo, Izquierdo showed a great interest in Mexico's indigenous culture, she committed her life to creating art that celebrated and explored her Mexican roots. Despite her success, Izquierdo faced many obstacles, both personal and professional, throughout her career. She died in Mexico City in 1955 after a long period of declining health.

About the Artwork:

“This colorful portrait depicts a young bride from Papantla, a region in the state of Veracruz. Brides there traditionally wear a white covering over their back called a quexquémitl, as well as a long white veil and floral headdress. Izquierdo's interest in representing Mexico's diverse clothing traditions in her work, as well as wearing them herself, mirrors Kahlo's own practice. Both were part of a larger trend of wearing traditional attire that became prevalent in the decades following the Mexican Revolution and was a means of paying homage to Mexico's native cultures while also engaging with sentiments of national identity that were dramatically changing.”⁷

Izquierdo, herself once a young bride, paints her subject seated alone in a traditional wedding dress. It is notable that the bride in the painting is wearing an unreadable expression; some people interpret the painting as autobiographical, suggesting that Izquierdo drew from her own experience as a reluctant bride at age 14 when she painted this piece.⁸

Lesson Description:

An introduction to the lives and work of Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Lola Álvarez Bravo with a focus on the representation of women in their art. Students will learn about and discuss representation, write a short narrative inspired by a work of art, and create a portrait or self-portrait that reflects what they have learned.

Duration:

1-2 Class periods

Content Area(s):

Language Arts, Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will...

- Learn about the lives and work of Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Lola Álvarez Bravo.
- Participate in a class discussion about the importance of representation in art.
- Write a short fictional narrative focusing on descriptive details and the sequencing of events.
- Create a portrait or self-portrait that reflects what they have learned.

Essential Questions:

- How did Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Lola Álvarez Bravo contribute to Mexican art?
- Why do you think representation in art is important?
- Who did you choose to include in your portrait and why?

Vocabulary:

- Portrait- a painting, drawing, photograph, or other artistic representation of a person, usually showing the person's face
- Self-portrait- a portrait of oneself
- Representation- the act of speaking or acting on behalf of someone else; it can also mean the description of someone or something in a particular way.

Activities:

Active Viewing

1. Before providing students with background information on the artists and/or artworks, lead the class in an exercise of active viewing using one or more of the pieces provided in the lesson plan. Instruct students to use a graphic organizer to record their thoughts, impressions, and questions about the piece as they arise; students should be as specific as possible and use descriptive language. Consider the following questions as you lead the discussion to help guide your students in their viewing: What do you see? Who is the focus of the artwork? What does the subject look like? What are they wearing? What do you think their clothing says about them? How are they posed? What do you think they are thinking and/or feeling and why? Why do you think the artist created this piece? What do you think the artist is trying to say with this artwork? What questions do you have about the artwork and/or subject? What does the piece make you wonder about the subject? You may choose to repeat the active viewing exercise with each piece or ask students to complete the activity with a different piece on their own or in groups.
2. Share background information about Frida Kahlo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, and María Izquierdo and their work with your students. Ask them to revisit their graphic organizers, is there anything they want to add? Do they see something in a new light that changes what they think about the piece and/or subject? Has their interpretation of the piece changed? Did they learn any answers to questions they asked? Do they have new questions?

Speaking and Listening

1. Lead the class in a discussion about the representation of women in art. Begin your discussion by asking students if they know the names of any female artists (apart from the three featured in this

Speaking and Listening continued...

lesson plan), then ask them if they know the names of any male artists. Depending on age and prior exposure, students may not be familiar with artists of either sex, that's okay, everyone should be encouraged to bring their own experiences and knowledge to a group discussion. Historically male artists have been, and still are, much more recognized and celebrated than their female peers. Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Lola Álvarez Bravo found success in a male dominated field and were able to make important contributions to Mexican art. Aside from being women, all three artists often featured women in their work; ask students to think about why women artists might choose to make women the focus of their work. How might their representation of women be different from that of a male artist and why?

Writing

1. Instruct students to choose one of the three images included in the lesson plan. Ask students to write a short story inspired by the woman in the piece that they select. Students should include in their narratives a character introduction, a clear sequence of events as indicated by the use of transitional words and phrases, and descriptive details (encourage students to refer to their chosen artwork and their graphic organizers to help them choose descriptive language).

Visual Arts

Materials: pencil and paper, art supplies of your choice (including a camera), completed graphic organizer from active viewing activity

1. Direct students to select one of the three pieces included in the lesson plan (if students completed the writing activity, suggest they choose a different image). Ask them to review their graphic

Visual Arts continued...

- organizers and decide what they think are the most important elements of their chosen piece (this might include background, pose/posture, clothing etc.) Ask them to write one or two sentences about each element explaining their choices.
2. Instruct students to create a portrait (or self-portrait) of someone they admire in a medium of their choice. Students should use the pieces they chose and their graphic organizers as inspiration. Ask students to focus on representing the elements that they deemed most important in the original piece from their own unique perspectives. For example, if students choose clothing as an important element, suggest they create a portrait featuring clothes that are important to them, if they choose pose as an important element, ask them to depict their subject in a pose that says something about who they are etc.

Suggestions for older students:

- Ask students to conduct research and write a report on one of the artists featured in this lesson plan. How did their chosen artist contribute to the history of Mexican art? What role did their gender play in the creation and reception of their artwork? Why is it important to recognize and celebrate women artists?

Additional Resources for Teachers:

- Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico- <https://theseenjournal.org/lola-alvarez-bravo/>
- María Izquierdo—Monumento Artístico De La Nación- <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1075-maria-izquierdo-monumento-artistico-de-la-nacion/>
- Frida Kahlo Curriculum Guide (From LAII-UNM)- <https://laili.unm.edu/info/k-12-educators/curriculum/frida-kahlo.html>
- Exploring Female Identity in Mexican Modernism- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkt6luYitBU&t=325s>
- Representations: The Female form and Self-portraiture in Art- <https://acca.melbourne/education/resources/unfinished-business-resources/12091-2/>

Standards Addressed:

Common Core Standards for English Language arts (grades 3-5)

WRITING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Common Core Standards for Visual Arts (grades 3-5)

ANCHOR STRAND 7: PERCEIVE AND ANALYZE ARTISTIC WORK

VA:Re.7.2.3a- Determine messages communicated by an image.

VA:Re.7.2.4a- Analyze components in visual imagery that convey messages.

VA:Re.7.2.5a- Identify and analyze cultural associations suggested by visual imagery.

Notes:

1. Wall text from the “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” exhibition.
2. “Self-Portrait as a Tehuana by Frida Kahlo,” kahlo.org, 2019, <http://www.kahlo.org/self-portrait-as-a-tehuana/>.
3. Annette LePique, “Lola Álvarez Bravo: Picturing Mexico,” *The Seen: Chicago’s International Journal of Contemporary and Modern Art*, January 3, 2019, <https://theseenjournal.org/lola-alvarez-bravo/>.
4. Ibid.
5. Wall text from the “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” exhibition.
6. María de Jesus González, “María Izquierdo: Portrait of an Artist,” *The Latin Americanist* 47 no. 3-4 (winter/spring 2004): 29-30.
7. Wall text from the “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” exhibition.
8. “Women of Mexican Modernism,” Denver Art Museum, 2020, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/es/node/11242>.

What do you see?

What do you think/feel?

What do you want to know?





