



# Frida Kahlo: Artist, Icon, Commodity Grades 9-12

## Frida Kahlo: Artist, Icon, Commodity



### Frida Kahlo

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

### *Self-portrait on Bed*

1937

oil on metal

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 well known 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 German father and a Mexican mother of Spanish and Indigenous descent, 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. In 1925, Kahlo was involved in a tragic bus accident that left her with terrible injuries that would plague her for the rest of her life, including the inability to carry a pregnancy to term. Immobilized in a full body cast, Kahlo's recovery was long and painful. It was during this time that she first began to paint. Kahlo is best known for her self-portraits, she even had a mirror fixed above her bed so she could paint herself while she was bedridden; she once said of her work "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best." In most of Kahlo's self-portraits she paints herself with same impassive expression and upright posture, it is the symbolism of objects around her that tell the story.<sup>1</sup> Kahlo turned inward for inspiration to share her most intimate stories that still ring true and resonate decades after her death.

### About the Artwork:

"This self-portrait has frequently been seen as emblematic of Kahlo's sorrow at her inability to carry a child to term, in large part due to the doll that sits alongside her, perhaps taken from Kahlo's sizable doll collection. Despite the past interpretations of this work, its meaning remains ambiguous. Kahlo does not hold or cuddle the doll as she would a child. Instead, both sit apart from one another facing outward, with Kahlo paused in the act of smoking a cigarette. Instead of yearning, the portrait may evoke the complex range of contradictory feeling that Kahlo likely held toward motherhood."<sup>2</sup>



**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 Icon:

Upon her death in 1954, Frida Kahlo was still best known for being the wife of Diego Rivera, it wasn't until the early 1980s that Kahlo began to resurface again in popular culture. This renewed fascination with the Mexican artist coincided with the rise of identity politics in the United States and a growing emphasis on representation. Since then, Kahlo has become an international symbol of resilience against adversity and oppression, a feminist icon (though she never identified as such during her lifetime), and as a cult figure in the queer community. Additionally, due to her carefully cultivated image, her own cultural background, and strong political ideals, Kahlo often found herself aligned with Mexico's marginalized indigenous communities. Both in life, and certainly since her death, Kahlo's multifaceted existence and her willingness to share herself through her art has made her an extremely accessible figure to those looking for representation.<sup>3</sup>

### 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."<sup>4</sup>

*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.



**Nickolas Muray**

1892 Szeged, Hungary- 1965 New York, New York

*Frida Kahlo on Bench #5*

1939

Carbro print

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

## About the Commodity:

Frida Kahlo's image is among the most recognizable of anyone in the world. Her likeness has been printed on everything from jewelry and tote bags to socks and baby onesies. This obsession with all things Kahlo is known as 'Fridamania' or 'Fridaltry'. While Kahlo's image is alive and well, her strong beliefs and ideals are rarely ever addressed or acknowledged in the commercial world, even her art takes a back seat to her striking visage. Kahlo has come to symbolize so much to so many people, but it is important that we not lose sight of the woman she was in life. It is hard to say with certainty how Kahlo would have reacted to witnessing the commodification of her image, on the one hand, she wanted to be seen, she painted herself repeatedly and posed for countless photographs. On the other hand, however, she was a life long communist and anti-capitalist. The danger of commodification is in reducing a whole complex human being down to a few recognizable features to turn a profit.

## About the Artwork:

Over a ten-year span, Nickolas Muray and Frida Kahlo worked together to create beautiful images; each photograph was a collaboration between photographer and subject. Muray's portraits of Kahlo are among the most captivating and memorable photographs ever taken of the artist. The images highlight the way in which Kahlo carefully curated her outfits and the care she took in choosing an impactful color palette. Muray, capitalizing on his experience as a fashion photographer, captured Kahlo's enduring spirit in full color, *Frida Kahlo on Bench #5* is among the most reproduced images of Frida Kahlo in popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

## Lesson Description:

Students will learn about the life and work of Frida Kahlo, discuss her status as an icon, and research and write a short essay on the topic of Kahlo's commodification.

## Duration:

1-3 Class periods

## Content Area(s):

Language Arts, Visual Arts

## Objectives:

Students will...

- Learn about the life and work of Frida Kahlo.
- Discuss how and why Frida Kahlo became an icon.
- Conduct research and write an argumentative essay addressing the commodification of Frida Kahlo's image.

## Essential Questions:

- What does it mean to be an icon? In what ways is Frida Kahlo an icon? How did she become an icon?
- How did your understanding of Frida Kahlo change throughout the course of the lesson?
- What does it mean to be a commodity? Has the commodification of Kahlo's image changed the way she is perceived by the general public?

## Activities:

### Active Viewing

1. Before providing students with background information on the artist and artworks, divide the class into three equal groups for discussion. Assign each group one of the pieces included in this lesson plan.
2. Instruct students to look at their assigned pieces with a critical eye. Ask them to interpret their piece as a group, identifying important visual themes and techniques, and make inferences about what the artist wanted to convey. Students should use a graphic organizer to record their observations, thoughts and ideas, and any questions that may arise throughout the exercise.
3. Ask each student to write one to two paragraphs about their interpretation of the piece they looked at as a group. Did they like the piece? Why or why not? What do they think the artist is trying to communicate with the piece? Why do they think the artist created the piece? What do they think the piece says about the subject?  
\* These paragraphs will be revisited at the end of the lesson plan

### Speaking and Listening

1. Share the background information on Frida Kahlo and the pieces provided in this lesson plan with the class.
2. Lead a class discussion about what it means to be an icon. What does it entail? How does it happen? Why is Frida Kahlo considered an icon? How did she become one? Who else does the class think qualifies as an icon?  
\* Consider allowing class time for students to conduct additional research in small groups into the impact Kahlo has on people from all walks of life before starting the class discussion. (see additional resources)

## Writing (homework)

1. Students will write a short 2-3 page paper about the commodification of Frida Kahlo's image.
  1. Essay prompt: Were she alive today, what would Frida Kahlo think about the ways her image is used in popular culture?
  2. Essays should include a strong thesis statement, a clear line of reasoning supported by evidence, and 2-4 properly cited sources.

## Visual Arts

1. Instruct students to revisit and revise the paragraphs they wrote after the active viewing activity. How have their perspectives and interpretations changed since learning more about Frida Kahlo? Does knowing more about the context in which the piece was created change the way they look at the piece? If so, in what ways? Do they think the piece holds different meaning now from when it was first created? If so, why? If not, why not?

## Suggestions for Younger Students:

- For younger learners, start a conversation about the commodification of Frida Kahlo by looking at examples of Frida merchandise. What do the images on the merchandise look like? Do they look like Frida's art? Do they look like Frida? If so, in what way? Do they have a message? If so, what is the message? Lead the class in a discussion comparing what you learned about Kahlo from the merchandise to what you can learn about her by looking at her art.

## Additional Resources for Teachers and Students:

- How Frida Kahlo Became a Global Brand- <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frida-kahlo-global-brand>
- The commodification of Frida Kahlo: are we losing the artist under the kitsch?- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/29/the-commodification-of-frida-kahlo-are-we-losing-the-artist-under-the-kitsch>
- Fridamania: appropriation and art museums- <https://www.art-critique.com/en/2019/07/fridamania-appropriation-and-art-museums/>
- How Frida Kahlo's Sense of Self Created an Icon- <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/how-frida-kahlos-sense-self-created-icon>
- Looking at Frida Kahlo as a Global Icon- <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/WALCrwz09w38KA>
- Commodifying Icons: The Commercialization of Frida Kahlo- <https://wp.nyu.edu/compass/2018/11/13/commodifying-icons-the-commercialization-of-frida-kahlo/>
- Frida Kahlo Curriculum Guide (From LAII-UNM)- <https://laili.unm.edu/info/k-12-educators/curriculum/frida-kahlo.html>

## Standards Addressed:

### Common Core Standards for English Language arts (grades 9-12)

#### WRITING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

#### SPEAKING AND LISTENING

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### Common Core Standards for Visual Arts (grades 9-12)

#### ANCHOR STRAND 11: RELATE ARTISTIC IDEAS AND WORKS WITH SOCIETAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING

VA:Cn11.1.1a- Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

VA:Cn11.1. Compare uses of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

VA:Cn11.1.IIIa- Appraise the impact of an artist or a group of artists on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a society.

## Notes:

1. Liv Constable-Maxwell, "What Frida Kahlo can teach us about the art of the selfie," *NewStatesman*, 9 July, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/07/what-frida-kahlo-can-teach-us-about-art-selfie>
2. Wall text from the "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism" exhibition.
3. Tess Thackara, "How Frida Kahlo became a Global Brand," *Artsy*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frida-kahlo-global-brand>
4. Wall text from the "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican
5. Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Uncovering clues in Frida's Private Wardrobe," *Collectors Weekly*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/uncovering-clues-in-frida-kahlos-private-wardrobe/>
6. "Photographing Frida Kahlo," V&A Museum online, accessed February 2021, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/photographing-frida-kahlo>

What do you see?

What do you think/feel?

What do you want to know?







