



Constructing Identity: Frida Kahlo and the Tehuana Dress Grades 3-5

Constructing Identity: Frida Kahlo and the Tehuana Dress



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 well known during her lifetime, it was not 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, leaving it considerably shorter than her left. In 1925, Kahlo was involved in a tragic bus accident that left her with terribly injuries that would plague her for the rest of her life. Kahlo used fashion to mask her injuries and to construct the image of herself that she wanted to present to the world. The long skirts and short, often brightly embroidered, *huipiles* commonly worn by Tehuana women, were an ideal way for Kahlo to hide her legs and direct attention upward to her face and hair which she wore in elaborate braids adorned with ribbon or flowers. Apart from just using Tehuana style clothing to disguise aspects of her physical appearance, Kahlo wore the distinctive dress from Tehuantepec to express aspects of her *Mexicanidad*. After the end of the Mexican Revolution (1920) there was a collective effort on the part of the new government and many of the people to redefine what it meant to be Mexican. One way that Kahlo chose to express her Mexican identity was through Indigenous attire, specifically through the dress of Tehuana women, from the Tehuantepec Isthmus, which was known to be a matriarchal society. Kahlo's preference of dress is immortalized in the countless photographs taken of her throughout her life and the many self-portraits she painted. She continued to dress in the Tehuana style until her death in 1954.¹

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.”²



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



Nickolas Muray

1892 Szeged, Hungary—1965 New York, New York

Frida on the Roof-Deck of Nick's Flat

1946

Gelatin silver print

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

About the Artist:

Born Miklos Mandl in Szeged, Hungary in 1892, Nickolas Muray was a celebrated fashion and portrait photographer and Olympic fencer. Muray first studied lithography, photoengraving, and photography in Budapest, Hungary before immigrating to the United States in 1913. In 1920 Muray opened a portrait studio in Greenwich Village, New York City; shortly there after, the art director for *Harper's Bazaar* commissioned him to photograph Florence Reed, a well-known Broadway actor. His photograph was well received and Muray became an overnight sensation and he soon found work as a fashion photographer for other magazines like *TIME*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*. Throughout his photography career, Muray took portraits of actors, writers, and politicians, many of whom he counted among his friends. It was one of these friends, Miguel Covarrubias, who, in 1931, introduced him to Frida Kahlo. Kahlo and Muray began a decade long romance that was survived by their genuine friendship and enduring affection for one another. In their time together, as romantic partners and then as friends, Muray photographed Kahlo more times than anyone else outside of his immediate family. Apart from achieving great success with his portraiture, Muray also made important advancements in color advertising for commercial photography. He died while fencing in a club in New York City in 1965.³

“Photography, fortunately, to me has not only been a profession but also a contact between people—to understand human nature and record, if possible, the best in each individual.”—Nickolas Muray

About the Artwork:

Over a ten-year span, Muray and 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 ⁴

The Women of Tehuantepec:

The women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a region of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, are known around the world for their colorful traditional dress, famously worn, and immortalized, by Frida Kahlo. Among Tehuana women, attire is an essential element of personal identity, it reflects their power and social status and represents cultural endurance in the face of globalization.⁵ The women of Tehuantepec are central to the cultural and economic life of the region; they typically earn more than their husbands in local marketplaces and are often responsible for managing the money in their households. This dynamic between the women and men of Tehuantepec is uncommon in other parts of Mexico. Many people view Tehuantepec as a matriarchy while others assert that it is simply a more egalitarian reality. In any case, this unconventional arrangement, along with the distinctive Tehuana dress, has garnered attention worldwide and turned the women of Tehuantepec into symbols of Mexican culture and identity.⁶

Lesson Description:

A look into how and why Frida Kahlo carefully constructed her own identity. Students will learn about the women of Tehuantepec and why Kahlo chose to wear Tehuana dress in both her daily life and in many of her self-portraits. They will write a first-person narrative from Kahlo's point of view and take time to consider their own cultural identities through group discussion and collage.

Duration:

1-2 Class periods

Content Area(s):

Language Arts, Visual Arts

Objectives:

Students will...

- Learn about Frida Kahlo and how she carefully curated her public and private images.
- Learn about the women of Tehuantepec and why Kahlo chose to dress in Tehuana clothing.
- Write a narrative from Frida Kahlo's point of view.
- Create a collage that reflects their own cultural identities and/or how they want to present themselves to the rest of the world.

Essential Questions:

- How did Frida Kahlo use the clothing and hair style of Tehuantepec women to contribute to her own identity? What was she trying to say with her clothing choices?
- In what ways do you express your own cultural identity?

Vocabulary:

- *Huipil*- A blouse-like garment worn primarily by indigenous women in Mexico and Central America
- Cultural identity- the identity of belonging to a group of people that share a culture
- *Mexicanidad*- Mexican cultural/national identity

Activities:

Active Viewing

1. Before providing students with background information on the artist(s) and/or artwork(s), 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(s) 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 colors and patterns are present? What do you think their clothing says about them? What do you think they are thinking and/or feeling and why? Why do you think the artist created this piece/took this photograph? 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.

Speaking and Listening

1. Share background information about Frida Kahlo, Nickolas Muray, and the women of Tehuantepec 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(s) and/or subject? Has their interpretation changed? Did they learn any answers to questions they asked? Do they have new questions?
2. Divide the class into small groups. Ask students to discuss why they think Frida Kahlo was so careful in crafting her identity.

Speaking and Listening continued...

Why did she choose to express her identity through the clothes that she wore? Why did she choose to dress in Tehuana attire?

3. Instruct students to think about and discuss their own cultural identities. What are some of the ways they express their cultural identities? Is it through clothing like Kahlo? Is it through traditions? Food? Language? Music?
* Remind students that everyone expresses their cultural identities in different ways and encourage them to listen and speak to each other with respect.
4. Ask students to share one way that they express their cultural identities with the rest of the class.

Writing

1. Show students Muray's photograph *Frida on the Roof-Deck of Nick's Flat*, then ask them to write a journal entry from Frida Kahlo's point of view describing the day that she posed for that portrait. Encourage students to use their imaginations to write a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, to use transitional phrases, descriptive language, and to return to the photograph (and their graphic organizers if they used this photograph in their active viewing exercise) to remember details.

Visual Arts

Materials: paper, pencil, cardstock, posterboard, or cardboard for the base of the collages, magazines to cut and/or tear, colored paper, scissors, glue, additional art supplies of your choice

1. Ask students to spend a few minutes reflecting both on how and why Kahlo chose to express her cultural identity and on their group discussions about their own identities.
2. Instruct students to create a mixed-media collage about their

Visual Arts continued...

cultural identities and/or the way they wish to present themselves to the world. Students can cut images out of magazines, create new images by cutting shapes from colored paper and gluing them together, or draw/paint images that represent who they are.

3. Ask students to write a short paragraph about their collages. What images (figurative or abstract) did they include in their collages? Why? What does their collage say about their cultural identity?

Suggestions for older students:

- Lead students in a discussion about cultural appropriation. Frida Kahlo's image and likeness is often appropriated into mainstream culture, but it can be argued that Kahlo herself also participated in cultural appropriation. Although her paternal grandfather was of Indigenous descent, Antonio Calderón was from Morelia, Michoacán and not Oaxaca. Ask students to think about why Kahlo chose to dress in Tehuana attire when she had no cultural/ethnic connection to Tehuantepec. How did she use Tehuana culture? Was she wrong to do so? Why or why not?

Additional Resources for Teachers:

- Uncovering Clues in Frida Kahlo's Private Wardrobe <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/uncovering-clues-in-frida-kahlos-private-wardrobe/>
- Nickolas Muray, Biography <https://nickolasmuray.com/>
- How the Women of Tehuantepec Inspired a Nation <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/mexico/articles/how-the-women-of-tehuantepec-inspired-a-nation>
- Should Frida Kahlo be accused of cultural appropriation? <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/culture/article/2020/07/31/should-frida-kahlo-be-accused-cultural-appropriation>
- 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 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 2: ORGANIZE AND DEVELOP ARTISTIC IDEAS AND WORK

VA:CR2.1.3a- Create personally satisfying artwork using a variety of artistic processes and materials

VA:CR2.1.4a- Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches.

VA:CE2.1.5a- Experiment and develop skills in multiple art-making techniques and approaches through practice.

Notes:

1. 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/>
2. Wall text from the "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism" exhibition.
3. "Nickolas Muray," biography, accessed February 2021, <https://nickolasmuray.com/>
4. "Photographing Frida Kahlo," V&A Museum online, accessed February 2021, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/photographing-frida-kahlo>
5. Carolina Rodríguez Monclou, "Tehuana Woman: cultural icon of femininity and empowerment in Mexico," *LatinAmerican Post*, July 27, 2020, <https://latinamericanpost.com/33791-tehuana-woman-cultural-icon-of-femininity-and-empowerment-in-mexico>
6. Stephen Woodman, "How the Women of Tehuantepec Inspired a Nation," *Culture Trip*, September 15, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/mexico/articles/how-the-women-of-tehuantepec-inspired-a-nation/>



MUSEUM
STUDIES
PROGRAM



LATIN AMERICAN
& IBERIAN INSTITUTE



ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM

What do you see?	What do you think/feel?	What do you want to know?





