



# Exploring Identity through Self-Portraiture Grades 6-8



## Exploring Identity through Self-Portraiture



### David Alfaro Siqueiros

1896 Chihuahua City, Mexico – 1974 Cuernavaca, Mexico

### *Siqueiros by Siqueiros*

1930

oil on canvas

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

### About the Artist:

David Alfaro Siqueiros was born in Ciudad Chihuahua, Mexico in 1896. He studied art at the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City and participated in a student strike against antiquated teaching methods in 1911. The strike was Siqueiros's first overtly political act, but it would not be his last. He spent his life in service of his political

beliefs. In 1914, Siqueiros enlisted to fight in the Mexican Revolution. In his travels across Mexico with the Revolutionary Constitutional Army Siqueiros discovered pre-Columbian art and witnessed the terrible living conditions of Mexican laborers, both would heavily inform his art. After the Revolution, Siqueiros moved to Europe where he met Diego Rivera; the pair shared a vision for the future of Mexican art free of the influences of Europe and the United States to embrace their own Indigenous roots and traditions. Siqueiros and Rivera, along with José Clemente Orozco (*los tres grandes*, the three great ones) pioneered the Mexican muralist movement that defined Mexican national identity in the decades that followed the Mexican Revolution. In the earlier part of his career Siqueiros painted on and off again, often abandoning muralism to focus on his political agenda, an agenda that would see him jailed and exiled several times throughout his life. Siqueiros spent the 1940s and 1950s travelling around Mexico and Latin American painting murals and spreading his Marxist political ideals. Although his politics continued to threaten both his art and his freedom, he continued to pursue muralism as a means of political activism through the early 1970s until his death in 1974.<sup>1</sup>

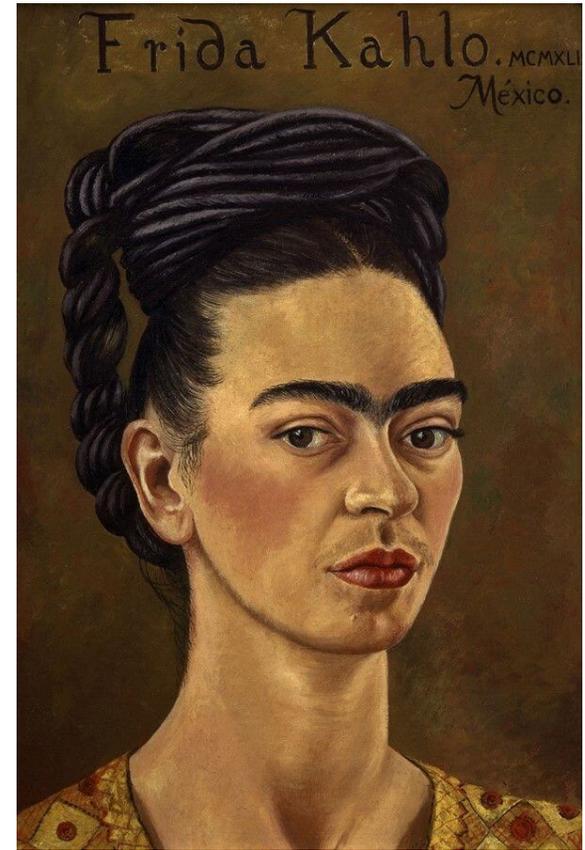
### About the Artwork:

“Siqueiros abandoned painting in 1926 to devote himself to political work. He later returned to art, creating this striking self-portrait in 1930 while visiting the city of Taxco. He would soon be arrested for his work as a labor organizer and imprisoned in Lecumberri Penitentiary. Thickly painted with an earthy tonality that is typical of Siqueiros's works from this period, his crossed arms and somber countenance express his status as a combative member of the proletariat rather than the cultural elite. After being released from prison Siqueiros returned to Taxco and lived there under a type of house arrest.”<sup>2</sup>



**Frida Kahlo**  
1907 Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico—1954 Coyoacán, Mexico  
City, Mexico  
*Self-Portrait with Braid*  
1941  
oil on canvas

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



**Frida Kahlo**  
1907 Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico—1954 Coyoacán, Mexico  
City, Mexico  
*Self-Portrait with Red and Gold Dress*  
1941  
oil on canvas

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 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. Immobilized in a full body cast, Kahlo's recovery was long and painful. It was during this time that she 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 painting "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>3</sup> Kahlo turned inward to tell intimate stories we can still connect to decades after her death.

## About the Artwork:

"Kahlo painted these self-portraits in what would prove to be a dark year. Her father Guillermo died in April and her health deteriorated. At the same time, the world was engulfed by war, causing anxiety about the future. In *Self-Portrait with Red and Gold Dress*, Kahlo's elaborate hair is complemented by the colorfully patterned fabric of her *huipil* blouse while in *Self-Portrait with Braid* the artist appears topless—her torso covered and encircled by vegetation. Yet in both paintings, Kahlo's expression is hardened, her face is turned yet her eyes are looking forward as if confronting the events of the world around her."<sup>4</sup>

Kahlo painted *Self-Portrait with Braid* in 1941 shortly after she and Diego Rivera remarried. A year earlier, upon their initial separation, she cut her hair very short and temporarily stopped wearing the Tehuana dresses Rivera was so fond of.<sup>5</sup>

## Lesson Description:

Students will learn about the life and art of Frida Kahlo and David Alfaro Siqueiros. They will interpret and compare self-portraits by Kahlo and Siqueiros, consider how each artist represents themselves through art, and create their own self-portraits and artist statements.

## Duration:

1-3 Class periods

## Content Area(s):

Language Arts, Visual Arts

## Objectives:

Students will...

- Learn about the lives and work of Frida Kahlo and David Alfaro Siqueiros.
- Interpret and compare self-portraits by Kahlo and Siqueiros.
- Create a self-portrait and an artist statement.
- Interpret a classmate's work and reflect on their own self-portraits.

## Essential Questions:

- What did you learn about Frida Kahlo and David Alfaro Siqueiros from looking at and comparing their self-portraits.
- What elements from Kahlo and/or Siqueiros paintings did you use to guide you in creating your own self-portrait?
- What did you learn about yourself and your art from reading a classmate's interpretation of your art?

## Activities:

### Active Viewing

1. Before providing students with background information on the artists and artwork, lead the class in an exercise of active viewing of 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 used? What do you think the subject is thinking and/or feeling and why? 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? Ask students to repeat the active viewing exercise with a partner using a different piece.
2. Share background information about Frida Kahlo and David Alfaro Siqueiros and their respective self-portraits with your students. Ask them to revisit their graphic organizers, is there anything they want to add? Do they see something new or see the subjects in a different way? 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. Instruct students to work together in pairs to fill out the Venn diagram comparing Siqueiros's self-portrait, *Siqueiros by Siqueiros*, to Kahlo's self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with Braid*. Students should reflect on their graphic organizers and on the background information they learned about each artist and each piece to complete the Venn diagram.

### Writing

1. Ask students to use their graphic organizers and their Venn diagrams to write a 1-2 page paper comparing the self-portraits of Siqueiros and Kahlo. Students should refer to the specific pieces, make clear and reasonable inferences, and use descriptive language. The paper should include: an opening paragraph, a description of each piece they are comparing, the ways in which they think the pieces are similar, the ways in which they think the pieces differ, and a concluding paragraph. This assignment is an exercise to get students comfortable, looking at, interpreting, and writing about art.

### Visual Arts

Materials: Art supplies of your choice

1. Instruct students to reflect on their completed graphic organizers, what did they like most about the piece(s) they looked at? What did they like least? What did they find to be most captivating?
2. Direct students to use their graphic organizers to guide them in creating their own self-portraits.
3. Ask students to write an artist statement to accompany their work (see additional resources).

Visual Arts Assessment-

1. Have students trade self-portraits with a partner; each student should take 10-15 minutes to look at their partner's work, read their artist statement, and fill out a graphic organizer with what they see, think/feel, and wonder about their classmate's artwork.
2. Direct students to review the graphic organizers their partners filled out in response to their work, ask them to write one to two paragraphs about what they learned about themselves from their classmates' observations. Does learning how someone else sees their art make them think about their work in a new way?

Visual Arts continued...

If they were to create a new self-portrait after reading their partners' comments, would they make different choices? If so, what choices would they make?

### Suggestions for younger/older students:

- For younger learners, ask students to compare Kahlo's self-portraits to each other, make a list of the similarities and differences, and then create two self-portraits reflecting those similarities and differences.
- Divide older students into groups, assign each group one of the three self-portraits included in this lesson plan, ask them to work together to research and interpret the artist and piece they are assigned and to present their findings to the class.

### Additional Resources for Teachers:

- David Alfaro Siqueiros—Biography and Legacy  
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/siqueiros-david-alfaro/life-and-legacy/>
- What Frida Kahlo can teach us about the art of the selfie  
<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/07/what-frida-kahlo-can-teach-us-about-art-selfie>
- Frida Kahlo's Paintings
- <https://www.fridakahlo.org/frida-kahlo-paintings.jsp>
- How to Write an Artist's Statement  
<https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-write-an-artist-statement/>
- 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 6-8)

##### WRITING

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

##### SPEAKING AND LISTENING

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CSSC.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

##### ANCHOR STRAND 3: REFINE AND COMPLETE ARTISTIC WORK

VA:Cr3.1.6a- Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.

VA:Cr3.1.7a- Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

VA:Cr3.1.8a- Apply relevant criteria to examine, reflect on, and plan revisions for a work of art or design in progress.

## Notes:

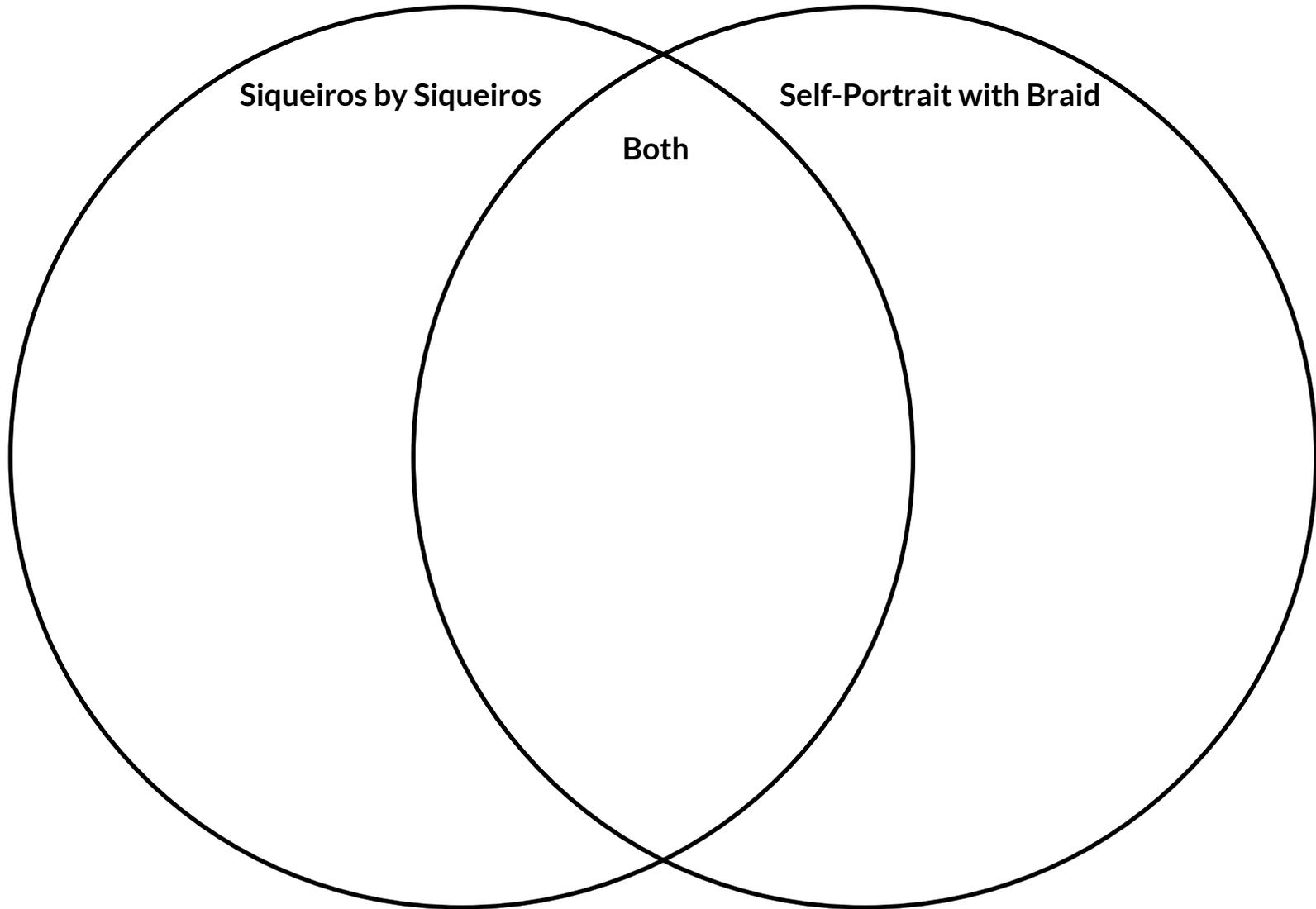
1. “David Alfaro Siqueiros—Biography and Legacy,” The Art Story, 2021, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/siqueiros-david-alfaro/life-and-legacy/>
2. Wall text from the “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” exhibition.
3. Liv Constable-Maxwell, “What Frida Kahlo can teach us about the art of the selfie,” *NewStatesman*, 9 July, 2015, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/07/what-frida-kahlo-can-teach-us-about-art-selfie>
4. Wall text from the “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism” exhibition.
5. “Self-Portrait with Braid,” kahlo.org, 2019, <https://www.fridakahlo.org/self-portrait-with-braid.jsp>

What do you see?

What do you think/feel?

What do you want to know?

# Compare and Contrast



Siqueiros by Siqueiros

Self-Portrait with Braid

Both



Apudang na Apudang  
1990 - 1991



Frida Kahlo, MCMXLI  
México.

