

Applied Humanities

Vernon Lamb 

Themes in Visual Art

Kahlo

By James Romaine

2 Theme: Introduction to the Humanities (week 2) / Page 2.1.5 Kahlo

On this page: 0 of 10 attempted (0%)

Objective: Analyze a painting by Frida Kahlo to identify its theme.

Here we come upon our most challenging example: Frida Kahlo's use of symbols that have multiple meanings, and the complex relationship between the artist's life and art, make the act of interpreting the painting particularly personal for the viewer.

Use the images and information provided to answer the questions below.

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird



This is an oil painting the artist, Frida Kahlo, made of herself. The background has large green leaves and one yellow leaf behind the artist's head. There are two dragonflies each on a leaf almost symmetrically on each side of Frida's head. There is a black cat behind Frida's left shoulder. There is a monkey behind her right shoulder. Frida is looking directly out from the painting. She has dark hair, dark eyebrows almost joined in the middle, and a slight mustache. Her lips are red. She has a solemn expression. Her hair is braided and wrapped around her head. She has a red ribbon woven through her hair. There are butterflies on the ribbon, one above each eyebrow. Frida is wearing a white top. She has a necklace of thorns around her neck which rests on her shoulders and has tendrils down her chest. The monkey is holding onto the necklace. The thorns are making Frida bleed. There is a hummingbird hanging from the middle of the necklace.

[Click to enlarge](#)

© 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Frida Kahlo

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, 1940

Era/Culture/Movement: Modernism

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 2' × 1' 6.5"

Location: Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

By transforming Christ's crown of thorns into her own necklace, Kahlo explores a paradox between feminine beauty and suffering, between death (the dead hummingbird) and new life (the butterflies in her hair).

The genre of self-portraiture was central to Frida Kahlo's art: she painted at least 55 self-portraits, including some of the most memorable self-portraits of the 20th century. She said, "I paint myself because I am so often alone, because I am the subject I know best."

Kahlo herself is immediately recognizable from her distinctive black unibrow, which for her was a sign of her Mexican heritage and a statement of her independence from the expectations of others (in this case, expectations associated with a particular conception of feminine beauty). On her shoulders are a monkey and a cat. Although the subject of this painting is the artist herself, the image is much more than a visual representation of Kahlo's appearance. Demonstrating how a work of art is about more than creating a depiction of appearances, this self-portrait explores aspects of Kahlo's personality and sense of personhood that are not visible. For example, by transforming Christ's crown of thorns into her own necklace Kahlo, explores a paradox between feminine beauty and suffering, between death (the dead hummingbird) and new life (the butterflies in her hair). The interpretation of this work is complicated by the fact that Frida Kahlo employs symbols that are personal to her.

While there is, of course, always a connection between an artist's life and art, Kahlo made this connection central to her project. By 1940, the year that she painted *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, Kahlo had survived a near fatal traffic accident and a tumultuous marriage to the artist Diego Rivera. (At the time she painted this particular work, Kahlo was divorced from Rivera. They would remarry in December 1940.)

Kahlo was born to a German father and Mexican mother; this mixed heritage was important both to her identity and to her art. In *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, Kahlo develops a visual language, combining elements of native Mexican art and European modernism, that is uniquely her own. When the French writer André Breton, founder of the Surrealist movement, wanted to include Kahlo in that group, she said, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted

dreams. I painted my own reality.” Indeed, in her art (through her unique visual language), Kahlo created her own reality.

Throughout history, artists have employed mirrors to create self-portraits. Although, as a 20th century artist, Kahlo also had access to photographs of herself, the act of painting a self-portrait requires the artist to look at oneself. Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* combines intimacy and confrontation. The thick vegetation in the background creates a shallow space that pushes Kahlo toward the viewer (there is only a bit of open space at the top of the composition to offer some visual relief).

The directness of the artist’s gaze (at the viewer and at herself) seems to evoke the questions “who am I?” or “who do you think that I am?” Kahlo’s work of art deliberately, and successfully, evades answering these questions.

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird



This is an oil painting the artist, Frida Kahlo, made of herself. The background has large green leaves and one yellow leaf behind the artist's head. There are two dragonflies each on a leaf almost symmetrically on each side of Frida's head. There is a black cat behind Frida's left shoulder. There is a monkey behind her right shoulder. Frida is looking directly out from the painting. She has dark hair, dark eyebrows almost joined in the middle, and a slight mustache. Her lips are red. She has a solemn expression. Her hair is braided and wrapped around her head. She has a red ribbon woven through her hair. There are butterflies on the ribbon, one above each eyebrow. Frida is wearing a white top. She has a necklace of thorns around her neck which rests on her shoulders and has tendrils down her chest. The monkey is holding onto the necklace. The thorns are making Frida bleed. There is a hummingbird hanging from the middle of the necklace.

[Click to enlarge](#)

© 2016 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Short-Answer Question

A painting is something that you look at; its appearance is everything. And yet, as a work of art, this image goes beyond mere depiction of Frida Kahlo. How does this work go beyond appearances?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Self-portraiture, as a genre, treats the artist as the central motif of the work. Are there any events in Frida Kahlo's life that might be referenced in this painting?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo's use of thorns makes an iconographic reference to what?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

The necklace is a motif associated with beauty. Does a necklace of thorns comment on the burden of beauty? Notice that the thorns are piercing Kahlo's neck. What does a necklace of thorns say about beauty?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo said, "They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." What do you think she meant by "painting [her] own reality"?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Kahlo was married to the artist Diego Rivera, and they knew each other's work very well. What are some similarities, in subjects and visual methods, between their art? What are some differences?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

In art history, not only in Kahlo's art, butterflies are often symbols of rebirth or resurrection. Why might butterflies be used in this way?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

It has been suggested that the monkey, which in Mexican iconography can be a symbol of lust, is there to represent Diego Rivera. Note that the monkey is pulling on the thorns, causing Kahlo to bleed. Why might Kahlo use the monkey to symbolize her ex-husband?

No response saved yet.
Short-Answer Question

Notice how Kahlo stares straight ahead but does not make eye contact with the viewer. Does the picture suggest someone looking at herself in a mirror or someone interacting with her viewer?

No response saved yet.

- Response Board

How does this painting make you feel? Does it encourage you to adopt the feelings of the artist?

No response saved yet.