



'Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humming Bird' by Frida Kahlo is not a realistic scene, but features many symbolic elements to express her feelings. Frida was involved in a bus accident when she was 18 and had to have many operations to fix her body. She spent many years bedridden in a body brace recovering from fractures of her spine, collarbone, and ribs, as well as a shattered pelvis, shoulder and foot injuries. Kahlo spent the rest of her life in constant pain; this painting is about the suffering she endured.

This painting is about her divorce from Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. He had been her art teacher and they crossed paths again when she was recovering in hospital. They married when he was 42 and she was 22. Both Kahlo and Rivera had volatile tempers and

disagreed over where to live – Rivera loved America whilst she wanted to remain at home in Mexico. After living in America for a while, the couple arrived back home in Mexico, when Rivera had an affair with Kahlo's younger sister, leaving her feeling devastated. The couple succumbed to countless infidelities and betrayal, leading to their divorce in 1939, only to remarry a year later.

Subject Matter / Imagery

- In this portrait, Frida Kahlo faces the viewer with a calm and solemn expression on her face. It seems she is patiently enduring the pain she is suffering, both as a result of her divorce and her physical pain.
- The green leaves in the background are symbolic of fertility, contrasting with the deathly imagery in the mid-ground and foreground. This is significant because she could not have children as result of a metal pole piercing her pelvis in the bus accident, and suffered several miscarriages as a result.
- To fill the void of having no children, she had many 'pet babies', some of which feature symbolically in this painting. The black monkey over her right shoulder was a gift from Rivera. The monkey is symbolic of evil and Rivera himself, and is pulling on the thorn necklace making her neck bleed from the piercing thorns. This symbolises the pain Rivera has caused her.
- A bird is often a symbol of freedom and life, especially a hummingbird which is colourful, often found hovering above flowers. But in this painting the hummingbird is black and lifeless. This might be a symbol of Frida herself and how she is feeling. Because hummingbirds are a Mexican symbol of good luck in love, Kahlo has used this bird ironically.
- Behind her left shoulder is a black cat, a Mexican symbol for bad luck and death, which is waiting to pounce and kill any hope of reconciliation with her husband. This adds an element of movement to the piece.
- There are thorns around her neck like a necklace. The use of the thorn necklace links to the crown of thorns Jesus was made to wear on the cross, symbolising her pain.

Visual Impact

- This painting is visually striking due to the contrast created by the use of warm, advancing colours on her face in the foreground, and cool, receding colours in the background, on the leaves and sky. This ensures all attention is focused on Kahlo's face.
- Visual impact is also created by Kahlo's use of scale, with herself taking up the largest space in the centre of the painting, drawing attention directly towards her.

Frida Kahlo, "Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace & Humming Bird", 1940

Oil on canvas. 47cm x 61cm

Composition/Arrangement (including Focal Point)

- Frida has painted herself in the centre of the painting directly facing out. The deadpan expression and natural skin tones create an entrancing focal point. This makes her presence dominate the painting and makes the painting seem more intimate, due to her making eye contact with the viewer.
- The painting is visually very crowded, enhancing the intensity of the piece. Kahlo is surrounded by glossy leaves, which she often used in the background of her portraits to create a tight, claustrophobic space, using the symbolic element of nature / female fertility to contrast against the barren and deathly imagery featured elsewhere.
- 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humming Bird' is a balanced painting because the objects and colours balance each other out and are placed equally. The bird position, her mono-brow, her moustache, her solemn expression and her hair parting also divide the figure into two symmetrical halves. Two black mammals are situated either side of the artist, further creating symmetrical balance vertically.
- Black elements of the painting (her hair, the hummingbird, the cat and the monkey) surround and frame her face in a diamond shape, creating a frame around her face and directing the viewer towards the focal point in the centre.
- A blue band of sky at the top provides an area of calm in an otherwise busy composition. The blue band also provides a stopping place for the eyes and keeps the focus of the painting in the middle, on Kahlo herself.
- The vertical composition ensures the focal point is her face, which is established by placement, contrast and line. The mono-brow is vertically centred and almost horizontally in the middle. From the mono-brow, the eye then travels back down to the hummingbird, then back towards her hair and the butterflies.
- Use of leading lines in the thorns direct the viewer to her face, further enhancing herself as the focal point. The hummingbird also "points" upwards and has also been cleverly manipulated to imitate Kahlo's brow, drawing further attention to her facial features.
- The rule of thirds is evident in this piece, with Frida Kahlo herself taking up the central vertical third and the outer thirds dedicated to the background. Horizontally, the lower third contains the thorn necklace, whilst the top third features the natural elements of the butterflies, flowers and leaves. This helps to create a balanced painting.

Materials / Media Handling / Techniques (including Working Methods)

- Kahlo has used oil paint in a careful and controlled way to create a highly detailed portrait. As oil paints take a long time to dry, this would have enabled Kahlo to carefully blend colour and tone where needed, and allow for building up of texture, particularly on the animals.
- On the face and body she has used smooth and controlled blending to create subtle tonal transitions that adds to the realism of the piece.
- In the sky she has used a dabbing or stippled effect to create a patchy texture, which contrasts with the smooth leaves below.
- The hair in both animals has been meticulously painted by layering short, fine, linear brush strokes, creating a realistic texture of the animals' fur.
- Kahlo has used differing brushstrokes throughout this painting. Kahlo's face looks to have been painted with a variety of brush sizes; larger brushes to block in the tones and highlights; medium brushes for blending the skin tones and texture; and small brushes to record detail in areas such as the eyes and hair.

Viewpoint / Perspective / Scale

- This is a small scale painting at only 47cm x 61cm. This forces the viewer to look closely at all the detail captured in the painting, making it feel very personal.
- The painting's small size compared with the large amount of detail crammed into it also adds to the overall visual impact of the piece giving a claustrophobic feel.
- The small scale means that Frida Kahlo would have used a variety of brush sizes, ranging from large and medium sized brushes for the larger areas, to small brushes for the finer details.
- The viewpoint of the painting is at eye level, enabling Kahlo to connect more with the viewer.
- Close cropping and a focus on Frida's head and shoulders adds to the drama of the painting.
- The overlapping leaves in the background create slight perspective/depth, but they are very close together enhancing the claustrophobic, crowded appearance.

Style

- Frida Kahlo's works, mostly self-portraits, were inspired by the nature and artefacts of Mexico. Influenced by the country's popular culture, she employed a deliberately naïve folk art style, creating paintings filled with the bright colours and flattened forms of the Mexican folk art she loved, to explore questions of identity, politics, gender, class and race in Mexican society. In "Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humming Bird", this influence can be seen by her use of bright colours and the simplified, flattened forms of the leaves.
- Her use of traditional Mexican influences yet her modern approach have caused the materials to be used in both a traditional and contemporary manner. The paint has been applied boldly, incorporating the traditional use of colour in indigenous Mexican art. Her face and the animals have been painted quite traditionally, with realistic results, whereas her approach to the background is more modern.
- Kahlo's paintings show a strong narrative style; her self-portraits in particular were often an expression of her life and her pain. In this painting, she is telling a story about the pain caused by her divorce and the upset of not being able to have children.

Visual Elements

<p>Shape</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rounded arched shape is repeated throughout the composition. It is seen in the wings of the hummingbird, the shapes on the leaves, the moustache, the eyebrows, the hair braid, and in the wings of the insects. This technique creates a strong pattern and has been used to tie all the elements of the painting together. • The necklace of thorns around her neck features triangles, which help to lead the viewer's eye upwards towards Kahlo's face. The hummingbird also takes a triangular form and points upwards, like an arrow. • Throughout the painting, Frida Kahlo has used naturalistic, curved shapes, enhancing the nature contained within the painting. 	<p>Colour</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black, green, and white are the predominant colours in the portrait; black traditionally represents misfortune, whilst green represents life and white symbolises purity. The meaning behind the use of black contrasts with the meanings of green and white, telling the viewer that the animals do not represent positivity in this painting. In addition, the black elements of the picture such as her hair, her mono-brow, the hummingbird, the cat and the monkey surround and frame her face directing the viewer to her solemn expression. The black colouring also sharply contrasts against the paler colours used elsewhere in the painting. • Kahlo has framed herself with a background of glossy leaves in yellows and greens, which acts as a contrast between the bright white of her shirt and black fur of the animals, bird, hair and eyebrows. This draws attention towards the background. • The colours used on Kahlo are warm with pink cheeks and red lips, whilst the background features mostly cool colours. Use of advancing warm colours on the face, combined with the use contrasting receding cool greens / blues, separates the figure from the background, creating visual impact. • Kahlo creates contrast by using white for her shirt and black for the animals. White is used to further link her to the idea of her as Jesus and black is used in the animals as they represent devils or demons. Kahlo is wearing a white top which stands out against her golden, sun kissed skin and her dark hair; this is a brilliant example of chiaroscuro*, as the bright, white clothing contrasts with her dark hair and the surrounding black animals. • The artist has used a very eye catching and wide palette of colours and has mixed a range of primary and secondary colours to recreate the realistic colours of the subject and the rainforest in the background. • The light source in the painting is the sun, as the setting is an outdoor rainforest where the soft, blue sky is visible. Although we cannot see the sun itself, it is implied. The daylight coming from the sun provides great lighting so we are able to see the true pigmentation of the colours. <p><small>* chiaroscuro - the fine art term "chiaroscuro" (from the Italian for "light-dark") describes the prominent contrast of light and shade in a painting, drawing or print, and the skill demonstrated by the artist in the management of shadows to create the illusion of three-dimensional forms.</small></p>	<p>Line</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thorn necklace creates a series of leading lines which leads the eye towards the deadened expression on her face. This helps us recognise the face as the focal point. • Fine precision lines have been painted in the hair of the animals and her hair to create realistic texture. • Kahlo has also used fine precision lines in the spines and details of the leaves, giving the leaves an interesting pattern and creating a busy background. The veins of the leaves, created with curved lines, provide definition and give the background some depth. • An exaggerated long neck creates a long line from the shoulders to the head and adds to the drama of the cuts in her neck. • Arch-like lines are used to create movement in the thorn necklace. Arched lines are used repeatedly in the painting, also seen in her mono-brow and, again, echoed in the wings of the hummingbird creating rhythm in the painting. 	<p>Atmosphere (Mood)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The expression on Kahlo's face is deadpan and emotionless, which emanates an uneasy feeling. It appears that Kahlo is staring right through the viewer, which could suggest she is troubled or has something on her mind. • The thorns around her neck are obviously causing her to bleed and be in pain. This makes the viewer feel sorry for her as she seems to be enduring the pain in a very calm and emotionless way. • The cat sitting on her left shoulder has a menacing expression on its face. It is also positioned to pounce which gives the viewer a sense of unease, as if something is about to happen. • The dominating use of cool colours in the background creates an overall calm atmosphere. • The 3 black animals, the monkey, cat and humming bird, create an overall feeling of bad luck / misfortune in the painting.
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<p>Texture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of smooth blending has created a glossy shiny appearance in the leaves, making them appear healthy and fertile. • Careful blending on Kahlo's face makes her skin appear smooth and youthful, suggesting her age at the time of the painting being completed. • Short, sharp, linear brush strokes have created a realistic furry texture in the animals, contrasting with the smooth areas of the painting, such as the background and her face. • A patchy appearance is evident in the sky, giving the impression of light clouds. This creates contrast against the more blended areas. 	<p>Tone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of blended tonal areas gives a realistic finish to the main parts of the painting. This can be seen in the subtle shifts between white and grey in the creases of her tunic, and in the skin tones in her neck and face. • Around her jaw line she has used darker tones to create strong contrast which helps create the illusion of depth. • The use of tonal highlights in the leaves help them to look glossy and also give them a natural curved form. Exaggerated tonal variations in the leaves also makes them look unrealistically represented. 	<p>Form</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three dimensional form has been created on Kahlo herself through shadows and highlights, and careful blending. In particular, around her jawline and neck features darker areas of shading, helping make her face stand out in the centre. • The form of Kahlo's neck has been exaggerated (i.e. it is unrealistically long) which helps draw the eye to this area, emphasising the thorns and the cuts on her neck. • The form of the leaves in the background has been created through dramatic use of tone and very regular shapes, making them look unrealistically represented. 	<p>Pattern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated shapes and lines used on the spines of the leaves creates pattern, drawing the eye towards the background and making it appear busy. • A curved linear pattern of bold stripes suggesting the braids in her hair help to draw attention to this area which, in turn, helps to make the butterflies and flowers more noticeable.
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Cultural, Social and Other Influences

- Kahlo used the pain from her life to inspire her work. She would often paint a self-portrait when she was troubled. This particular portrait was inspired by her divorce from Diego Rivera. The monkey on her shoulder, known to be a gift from her husband Diego, symbolises evil and Diego himself and the pain he has caused her. This is further shown through the way the monkey is pulling the thorn necklace causing Kahlo pain. The use of thorns digging into her neck symbolises the constant pain she has had to endure during her divorce, and perhaps the pain she suffered as a result of the injuries she sustained in the bus accident.
- Kahlo was heavily influenced by traditional Mexican folk art, evident through her primitive use of flat forms and bright, bold colours. This influence can be seen by the unrealistic representation of the bright green leaves in the background.
- The work features elements of Realism in the details in Kahlo's face, the monkey and the cat, yet some elements are perhaps more influenced by Surrealism, such as the strange butterflies and flying flowers.
- Kahlo was influenced by indigenous Mexican culture. The humming bird is a Mexican symbol for good luck and hope and could be interpreted as hope for her failing marriage. Generally, the bird is thought to symbolise freedom, so the fact the bird is black and lifeless could symbolise that she feels trapped.
- There is also a black cat on her shoulder, a Mexican symbol for bad luck and devils / demons, waiting to pounce and kill any hope of reconciliation with her husband. This adds an element of movement to the painting.
- Kahlo has used the resurrection of Christ as an influence in this painting and directly compares herself to Jesus through the use of the thorn necklace, which links to the crown of thorns Jesus was made to wear on the cross. Her use of butterflies in her hair further shows us this as they are a symbol of resurrection in Mexican culture, which could be a sign that Kahlo hopes for her marriage to work. The butterflies also supposedly represent the souls of Aztec warriors.
- The political and gender-based message of feminism and nationalism is shown through the unconventional exaggeration of her mono-brow and moustache. The exaggerated moustache and mono-brow are political statements towards feminism, as in Western culture they are seen as undesirable and so are purposely emphasised.