



LONDON
ART STUDIES

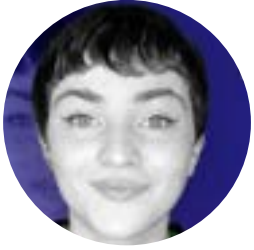


*Self-Portrait on the Borderline between
Mexico and the United States*

Frida Kahlo

1932

Age 14-18



Esme says:

'Kahlo once said "I paint my own reality" but just take a moment here to wonder whether she actually did or whether she painted the reality she wanted us to believe in.'



Who? This work was painted by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, born 1907.

When? It was made in 1932, almost three years after Kahlo moved to the United States.

Where? The painting is part of a private collection and sometimes gets loaned to museums around the world.

What? This is a self-portrait. The artist has represented herself on the border between her native Mexico and the United States, where she was living when she painted this work.

How? Kahlo used oil paint on metal.



An Expression of Ethnic Identity

When Kahlo painted this work, she was in the United States with her husband, the artist Diego Rivera. She was missing her native Mexico, a sentiment conveyed in this **self-portrait**. The artist shows herself on the border between the two countries, anchoring her body in an uncertain space, hovering between two identities: Mexican and American.

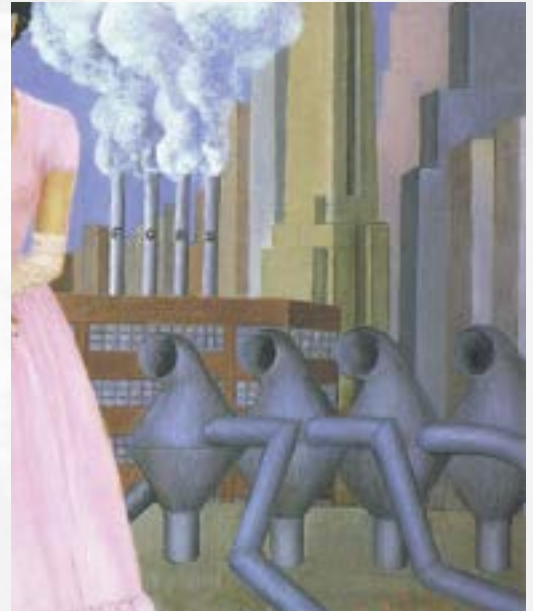
The composition of the work reflects these contrasting identities. Kahlo depicts a pre-colonial, Mexican landscape on the left side of the painting, while the right reveals capitalist, modern America.

Look at the elements which characterise the United States. Industrial, grey and dehumanised, the factories and machines almost resemble monsters, charging towards Kahlo. The letters 'FORD' at the back of the American cityscape are a clear reference to the increasingly corporate and capitalist nature of the USA.

By contrast, the **symbolism** in the Mexican landscape connotes a more tranquil and natural environment. An Aztec temple lies in the background, in front of which Kahlo has depicted indigenous deities, including a sculpture of a fertility goddess.

Focus on the artist's depiction of herself. Kahlo is wearing a typical colonial Mexican dress. While her body is tilted towards Mexico, she seems firmly anchored to the pedestal on which she stands. Her dress is stereotypically feminine – pink and frilly – and contrasts with what would have been considered less than 'lady-like' at the time, a cigarette.

Kahlo not only creates an image that illustrates the contradictions of her ethnic identity, but also uses the contrasts in her work to address gender identity.



Glossary

SYMBOLISM - The use of symbols to represent things or concepts.

SELF-PORTRAIT - A picture of yourself - like a selfie, but painted, drawn or sculpted.

Activity 1: Identifying the Contrasts

- Try and find as many elements as you can from either side of the painting. How do they contrast with one another?
- How do these contrasting elements help us to better understand Kahlo's identity?
- Do some historical research: are you able to find out more about the relationship between Mexico and the United States in the 1930s? Do you think any of these historical facts are reflected in the painting?

Activity 2: Identifying the Contrasts

Compare these two self-portraits by Frida Kahlo. What different aspects of her identity do you think Kahlo is trying to express in each painting?

Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, Frida Kahlo, 1940



Bonus Fact:

Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera, upon their return to Mexico in 1933, lived for a short while in a house designed by Le Corbusier's student Juan O'Gorman.

Quiz Questions:

1. What do you think is the main subject of Kahlo's *Self-Portrait on the Borderline...*?

- A. Mexican traditions
- B. Capitalism
- C. Ethnic and gender identity
- D. Political and artistic identity

2. How does the pyramidal form evoke great power and strength?

- A. It is reminiscent of the pyramids of Ancient Egypt
- B. The triangle is the strongest and most supportive shape
- C. It makes Kahlo the focal point of the painting
- D. It evokes connotations of the divine such as the Holy Trinity in Christianity

3. Which Aztec temple can be seen in the background of the painting?

- A. Templo Mayor
- B. Teotihuacan temple
- C. Palenque temple
- D. Monte Alban

4. What do the pre-colonial artefacts, flowers, sun and moon represent?

- A. Fertility and life
- B. Happiness and satisfaction
- C. Guilt and resentment
- D. Nature and man

5. How did Kahlo 'wed' herself to her nation, Mexico?

- A. She only wore the colours of the Mexican flag: red, green and white
- B. She refused to speak English
- C. She changed her birth date to match the Mexican Revolution
- D. She wrote a book on Mexican traditions

Answers: 1:C, 2:D,
3:B, 4:A, 5:C



