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Teaching Support Sheet

Presenter: Dr Warren Carter

Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, 1932
Collection of Manuel Reyer, New York

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-frida-kahlo-self-portrait-along-border-line-between-mexico-and-usa-1932>

In this short film Dr Warren Carter discusses the 1932 *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. She produced many self-portraits during her lifetime but it was those that she painted whilst in the United States in the early 1930s that are perhaps the most fascinating. Dr Carter provides a close iconographic reading of Kahlo's painting before looking at what it might say about the complex relationship between Mexico and its more powerful northern neighbour during the depths of the Great Depression. He then finishes by looking at the work's contemporary relevance in light of ongoing political debates about the Mexican/United States border, one of the most significant international border zones in the world.

[Before watching the film](#)

Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class: <http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/worksofart/borderline.html>

Question to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. [What do you know about the artist Frida Kahlo?](#)

Born near Mexico City in 1907, Kahlo is considered one of Mexico's greatest artists. She took up painting after a traffic accident left her severely injured. She was married to the celebrated muralist Diego Rivera. She is now one of the most recognised artists of the 20th century.

2. [What genre of painting is this? What can you tell about the subject/sitter at first look?](#)

This is a self-portrait, as were most of her works. You might comment on the fact that she is depicted wearing a combination of indigenous and colonial style costume.

3. [How has the artist depicted her home country of Mexico and its northern neighbour the United States, where she produced the work? What might the flowers in the foreground suggest?](#)

On the left, the pre-Columbian temple in the background suggests a possible rejection of European traditions to instead explore the ancient, indigenous roots of Mexico itself. On the right the steel skyscrapers, smoke-belching smokestacks and alien-looking machines could be interpreted as depicting an industrialised United States that is cold and unwelcoming.

4. Does the subject matter have any contemporary resonance? ??

It's linked to the ongoing political debates about the Mexican/United States border, one of the most significant international border zones in the world.

After watching the film

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What effects (aesthetic, social, political etc.) do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work?

Kahlo was using her experience of travelling to the United States (with her husband Diego Rivera) to produce a powerful commentary on the unequal relationship between the two countries either side of the border, which she straddles. Her small-scale and intimate painting clearly problematised the relationship between Mexico and the United States: nature vs manufacture, life vs death, dream vs reality etc.

2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

In comparison to the monumental murals produced in Detroit by Rivera, Kahlo's work is clearly more small-scale and as a self-portrait certainly more intimate.

3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

You get the sense that, unlike a mural, this oil on canvas has a more personal function, perhaps the means by which the artist could make sense of her time in the United States away from the country of her birth. The work is highly relevant to the decade in which it was painted in terms of the North American fascination with all things Mexican.

4. How has this film helped your understanding of self-portraiture?

The film demonstrates that the genre of self-portraiture can say as much about the political, economic and geographical context in which it was painted as it does about the emotional state of the artist that painted it. She wears colonial dress and an indigenous necklace. She is depicted as a hybrid product of both Mexico and the United States that suggests not only an organic link between the two countries but perhaps also an interdependency? She is using small-scale portraiture to explore herself and her cultural roots.

5. What is its relevance for today?

The painting is relevant today because the border between Mexico and the United States has become even more politicised since the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. It was at this time when the painting travelled from its private collection in New York to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for an important show on Mexican modernism after the revolution.

Comparative analysis

Compare Kahlo's self-portrait with how she was depicted by Rivera in the panel *Distributing Arms*, 1928, in the Secretariat of Education building in Mexico City. [https://www.diegorivera.org/diego-rivera-murals.jsp#prettyPhoto\[paintings\]/58/](https://www.diegorivera.org/diego-rivera-murals.jsp#prettyPhoto[paintings]/58/) [link only works if you copy and paste]

Please see the grid at the end of this document.

Online Activity

Watch the documentary that was produced to accompany the important 1983 show on Kahlo and Tina Modotti at the Whitechapel Gallery in East London.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsq2umalJbw>

Some observations:

The film offers a fascinating account of Kahlo's life and work in the context of post-revolutionary Mexico as well as offering an interesting counterpoint in the revolutionary photography of Tina Modotti.

Bibliography

Andrea Kettenmann, *Kahlo* (Koln: Taschen, 1992), Margaret Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), Peter Wollen, 'Fridamania', *New Left Review*, no.22, 2003, pp.119-30.

Resources online

<http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/840.html>

A link to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's webpage relating to the show on Mexican Modernism in which a cropped image of Kahlo from the painting is used. The site also has a short preview film and slideshows relating to other works in the show, which will help contextualise Kahlo's painting in relation to the art of her contemporaries. These examples could be used to populate the comparative analysis table below as an alternative to Rivera's *Ballad of the Revolution* if preferred.

Comparative Analysis Table

Frida Kahlo, <i>Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States</i>	Diego Rivera, <i>Distributing Arms, the Secretariat of Education building in Mexico City</i>
1932	1928
Self-portrait	Detail of a larger mural scheme
Oil on metal	Fresco
31x25 cm	2.03x3.98m
Self-portrait on the border between Mexico/US	Portrait of Kahlo given out arms to revolutionary soldiers during Mexican Revolution
Private collection	Public building
Passive looking out of the picture	Actively distributing arms
Static	Active
Excellent condition as befitting such a valuable painting	Excellent condition as befitting a public mural that draws tourists
Personal	Public and propagandistic