



## The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo | Lesson Plan: Personal or Political?

"They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality." - Frida Kahlo The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo is an intimate biography of a woman who gracefully balanced a private life of illness and pain against a public persona that was flamboyant, irreverent, and world-renowned. Kahlo was an eyewitness to a unique pairing of revolution and renaissance that defined the times in which she lived. In this lesson plan, students will consider what makes art political, debate the relevance of the term "political art" to Frida Kahlo's work, and create their own self-portraits using the style of Frida Kahlo as inspiration.

### Lesson Summary

#### About the Film

Through the prism of her life and art, the film explores the ancient culture of Mexico; the Mexican Revolution; the wildfire of communism that burned through Latin America in the 1920s and '30s; the innovators in painting, photography, filmmaking, writing and poetry that congregated in Mexico City; and the revival of interest in popular culture for which Kahlo has become a symbol. Kahlo is best known for dozens of self-portraits through which she tells the story of her dramatic life. She was severely injured in a bus accident at 18, and her paintings reflect the debilitating effects she endured for the rest of her life: 35 operations, body casts, metal corsets, constant pain and the inability to bear a child. Kahlo's work also reflects her passionate love affairs (including a brief one with Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky), and her turbulent marriage to Mexican muralist painter Diego Rivera.

#### Time Allotment

90 to 120 minutes + Assignments

#### Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Consider what makes art political and create a working definition for the term
- Debate the relevance of the term "political art" to Frida Kahlo's work
- Create their own self portraits using the style of Frida Kahlo as inspiration

#### Prep for Teachers

Preparation for the Culminating Activity:

In advance of the lesson, ask students to submit a digital file of a photograph of themselves. Print the student photos for the collages as follows: use standard full 8.5 x 11 copy paper, print the images full size (one image per page), print in black and white, not color. Note: the prints do not need to be “photo quality” since they will be used as the basis for the collage and will be drawn on, cut, and manipulated.

## Supplies

- Film Module: [Frida Kahlo Personal or Political?](#)
- Computers with Internet access
- LCD projector
- Speakers
- Whiteboard or blackboard
- Pen and writing paper
- Art supplies
- [STUDENT HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION](#)
- [STUDENT HANDOUT B: SELF-PORTRAIT BRAINSTORMING](#)
- [TEACHER HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION ARTWORK](#)
- [HANDOUT: ABOUT THE FILM](#)

## Introductory Activity

### DO NOW: THINK-PAIR-SHARE

**Time:** 10 minutes

**Supplies:** Whiteboard/blackboard, markers/chalk, pens/pencils, writing paper

**Summary:** Students will engage in a guided discussion and debate about what makes art “political”

- Think-Pair-Share: Write the term “Political Art” on the board and give students two minutes to list three essential characteristics that make a piece of art political. Have the students pair-up, discuss their responses, and create a definition for “Political Art”. Ask pairs to share their responses and record the results on the board. Compare and contrast the definitions the students came up and ask volunteers to give feedback. Begin to refine the student responses into a single rough definition to be revisited and revised throughout the class period.

## Learning Activities

### ACTIVITY 1: WHAT IS “POLITICAL ART”?

**Time:** 30 minutes

**Supplies:** Whiteboard/blackboard, markers/chalk, pens/pencils, writing paper Handouts: [STUDENT HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION](#), [TEACHER HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION ARTWORK](#).

**Summary:** Students will engage in a guided discussion and debate about what makes art “political”. They will be introduced to a selection of existing definitions or descriptions for the term and three ways of framing political art as Portrayal, Promotion, or Projection. Using this discussion as a jumping-off point, the class will create a working definition for the term “political art”, which they will revisit and refine throughout the lesson. They will then view a selection of artwork that will include work by Frida Kahlo and will discuss which of these works are political and why, based on the definition they have developed.

Explain that, although Political Art is a common term there is no universal definition for what that means. Share the following examples of definitions for “Political Art”, discuss each, then revisit the class definition and ask for feedback on how it can be revised and/or improved:

- “In the visual arts, work that contains political subject matter, takes a stand on an issue, addresses a public concern, or awakens viewer sensitivity. “ Encyclo.co.uk
- “Artists often deploy their work strategically to engage viewers in critical inquiry of social, economic, and political issues that define a particular moment. ... Art consistently toys with notions of power, whether to comment on the horrors of war, ...or to pay homage to powerful figures, as reflected in more traditional forms such as monuments, presidential portraits, and religious imagery. ...On the other hand, art can also serve the controversial function of propaganda” - Mark Mayer, Art and Politics: An Introduction, Art:21 Blog, January 2009
- “Every artwork is political in the sense that it offers a perspective—direct or indirect—on social relations. Andy Warhol’s images of Campbell’s Soup cans, for instance, celebrate consumer culture rather than criticize it. Jackson Pollock’s abstractions proclaim the role of the artist as a free agent unencumbered by the demands of creating recognizable images. The politics are almost invariably easier to spot in premodern works, such as portraits of kings or popes that frankly announce themselves as emblems of social power.” – The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MoCA)
- Discussion Questions:
  1. How does the class definition compare to these explanations for Political Art?
  2. What do you think MoCA means when it says that “every artwork is political”? Do you agree or disagree and why?
  3. Divide the class into groups of 3 to 5 students and provide each with STUDENT HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION.
  4. Ask the group to take five minutes to review and discuss the definitions on Page 1.
  5. Using the suggested artwork in TEACHER HANDOUT A: PORTRAYAL, PROMOTION, AND PROJECTION ARTWORK, ask groups to consider if and why each images is political art. Once the class has looked at all of the artwork, discuss their responses.
  6. Revisit the working definition for “Political Art” and ask if the class would like to make any further refinements based on this activity.

## **ACTIVITY 2: SCREENING THE FILM MODULE**

**Time:** 20 minutes

**Supplies:** pens and writing paper, LCD projector and/or DVD player

**Film Module:** Frida Kahlo: Personal or Political? (15:38 minutes)

**Handouts:** ABOUT THE FILM

- Provide students with ABOUT THE FILM handout and discuss briefly as a class. This handout can also be given as homework for students to read in advance of the lesson.
- Building on the group discussion from the prescreening activity, instruct the students to take notes while watching the video and ask them to note quotes, events, and terms that relate to the ongoing discussion of Political Art.

POST SCREENING DISCUSSION:

- Ask for volunteers to share their notes from the screening and discuss
  - Share the following three quotes from the film and give students two minutes to re-write one quote in their own words. Ask for volunteers to share their rewording of the quote and discuss the significance and what it means to them. (Students can choose a quote or the quote can be assigned. Students can also work with a partner to translate the quote into their own language.)
1. “Frida transformed her life by painting herself”
  2. “Frida improvised her own kind of freedom.”
  3. She made “her own life into a work of art.
- Further discuss the film using the following prompts:
1. What surprised you most when watching the film? Were you aware of Frida Kahlo before, and if so, did your understanding of her life and work change after viewing this documentary?
  2. If asked what type of person Frida Kahlo was, how would you describe her?
  3. Identify the ways Frida demonstrated her individuality (i.e., dress, artistic style, lifestyle, peers). Determine why Frida chose to present herself in these fashions (i.e., political and social statements, rebelliousness, artistic license, and personal and aesthetic style).
  4. Frida came of age following the Revolution during a period of time when “the nation was finding out what it looked like.” How did the changing attitude toward national history and national mythology affect Frida and her work?
  5. How did Frida's painting style change over time? For example, when did she primarily begin to paint self-portraits? What did they typically depict?
  6. Why did Frida choose herself as the principal subject of her art? What does this choice suggest about Frida, in terms of her character, outlook on life and personal experiences?
  7. Why is her attitude toward her disability seen as so radical?
  8. What impact, if any, did Frida’s political ideals have on her artwork? What political, religious, cultural and social references are embedded in her paintings? How was her

expression of her political beliefs in her artwork compare to other artists of the era such as Diego Rivera?

9. In your opinion, what largely drew attention to Frida - her artwork or lifestyle or relationships? She is now a recognized and valued artist, but during her lifetime, Frida's paintings did not get much attention. To what do you attribute this late recognition and current popularity of her artwork?
10. Do you think Frida is a political artist? Why or why not?

### **ACTIVITY 3: PERSONAL OR POLITICAL?**

**Time:** 40-60 minutes

**Supplies:** Whiteboard/blackboard, markers/chalk, pens/pencils, writing paper

**Summary:** Students will consider Frida Kahlo's work in the context of the class' working definition of "Political Art". They will be introduced to the political argument "the personal is political" which came to prominence through the feminist movement of the 1960s and discuss the relevance of this idea to Kahlo's work. They will work in groups to examine paintings by Frida Kahlo and to develop arguments for and against identifying the images as political art.

- Write "the personal is political" on the board and ask students to take one minute to re-write the phrase in their own words in a way that describes what it means to them. Ask for volunteers to share and give feedback.
- Explain that the "the personal is political" is a political argument that came to prominence through the women's movement of the 1960s and states that consciousness-raising (the activity of seeking to make people more aware social, political, and personal issues) is a form of political action because it raises discussion about topics that are not always seen as political such as women's roles in relationships and marriage, body-image, and feelings about childbearing and child rearing. This idea was popularized by the women's movement, but was intended to extend beyond gender to understandings of race, class, economics, etc. Discuss using the following prompts:
  1. Do you agree with the argument that "the personal is political"? Why or why not?
  2. Can you give an example to support or disprove this concept?
- Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students (mix-up the groups from Activity 1, if possible) and assign each group one of Frida Kahlo's paintings to examine. Images can be found at the following websites:
  1. [PROA Fundacion: Frida Kahlo Works](#) - View fourteen of Frida's most famous works. Titles and captions are in Spanish.
  2. [Frida Kahlo and Contemporary Thoughts](#) - An extensive site dedicated to Frida where you will find links to paintings, critical essays and a bibliography. Also has an interesting flash movie using images and quotes from Frida. <http://www.fridakahlo.it/>

- Each group will need to use the working definition of Political Art and the responses from the class discussion to develop an argument for and against identifying their image as an example of political art.
- Have each group present their results to the class and engage in a guided discussion about what they discovered using the following prompts:
  1. Is Frida Kahlo a political artist? Why or why not?
  2. Does it matter if her art is political or personal? Can it be both?
  3. How has your understanding or expectation of Political Art changed since the beginning of this lesson?
  4. Do we need to revise our definition of “political art” based on what we have experienced and observed through this lesson?

## Culminating Activity

### THE LIFE AND TIMES OF YOU

**Time:** 30 minutes + Assignments

**Supplies:** Student photos, old magazines, drawing paper, art supplies (markers, scissors, glue sticks, color pencils, etc.), computers and photo editing software (optional)

**Handouts:** STUDENT HANDOUT B: SELF-PORTRAIT BRAINSTORMING

**Preparation:** In advance of the lesson, ask students to submit a digital file of a photograph of themselves. Print the student photos for the collages as follows: use standard full 8.5 x 11 copy paper, print the images full size (one image per page), print in black and white, not color. Note: the prints do not need to be “photo quality” since they will be used as the basis for the collage and will be drawn on, cut, and manipulated.

**Summary:** Students will be guided through the creation of their own self-portrait collage using Frida Kahlo’s work as inspiration.

- Review and explain: Frida Kahlo used self-portraiture and symbols to express her thoughts, emotions, values, and experiences and to convey her personal identity within the cultural and political climate in which she lived. We will use Frida Kahlo’s work as the inspiration to create our own self-portraits.
- Distribute STUDENT HANDOUT B: SELF-PORTRAIT BRAINSTORMING or ask students to draw a large circle on a blank sheet of paper.
- Tell students that they will have 1 minute to think and write down of all the external influences that have shaped who they are and how they understand their world (for example: cultural traditions, family, the place they live, music, world and local events, social issues, movies, etc.). They should write their responses on the outside of the circle. Ask students to be specific (if movies have influenced them list the name of a specific movie or movies). When time is up ask them to share their responses with a partner and ask for volunteers to share with the class.
- Repeat the process but have the students write words or phrases that describe themselves inside the circle. Be specific and ask them to steer clear of superficial

descriptions such as “cute” or “tall”. Their responses can include descriptions of how they see themselves as well as how they think other people see them. When they finish, ask them to share their responses with a partner and ask for volunteers to share with the class.

- Explain: Your responses to this activity will guide the creation of your self-portrait collage. Think about the external influences that have shaped who you are and the words you used to describe yourself. What images, symbols, colors, or objects can you use to illustrate these ideas?
- Student collages should start with a photograph or self-portrait drawing that can be developed through the addition of drawings or magazine cutouts. If computers and software are available, students could create digital collages using sample images, GIFs, and digital drawing.
- Once students have completed their collages, ask them to swap with a partner and repeat the process from Activity 2.
- Writing Assignment: Have students write an artist statement that describes the process and meaning behind their individual work as well as its relationship to their understanding of Political Art.
- Complete the project by exhibiting the student’s work and artist statements in the classroom or communal areas of the school. Student work can also be displayed and celebrated on a class webpage or school blog.

## **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

### **A Likely and Unlikely Match: Frida and Diego**

*Adapted from The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo website Educational Guide*

Have students explore the relationship between Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and explore how each incorporates their relationship and their politics into their work. Students can further explore the contrast in Frida and Diego’s expression of their life experiences by making a second self-portrait in the style of Diego Rivera. Visit the website for additional discussion questions and activities:

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/guides/teachers\\_match.html](http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/guides/teachers_match.html)

### **The Real and Surreal in Frida’s Life and Art**

Although Frida Kahlo’s work has been described as surrealism, she once wrote that she never knew she was a surrealist "until André Breton came to Mexico and told me I was one." However, Frida eschewed labels while Diego argued that Frida was a realist. Have students research the surrealist movement and manifesto and compare and contrast the aesthetic and ideals of this movement with Frida’s work. What cultural and social changes influenced the development of the surrealist philosophy? Was surrealism a “new idea” or an adaptation of existing aesthetics and traditions? What influence, if any, does Frida’s

cultural heritage have on her expression of her reality? Does the label “surrealism” apply to Frida?

## **The Influence of Battle**

*Adapted from The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo website Educational Guide*

The Mexican Revolution played a key role in Frida's life and art. She lived through it and experienced many aspects of the war firsthand. In fact, she and her mother tended the wounded in their home. Discuss what impact the revolution had on Frida, her family, and on Mexico. Compare/contrast Frida's expression of this revolutionary period with examples of political art by her contemporaries (Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros) and discuss the similarities and differences in their style and goals. Visit the website for additional discussion questions and activities:

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/guides/parents\\_act2.html](http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/guides/parents_act2.html)

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Websites**

- PROA Fundacion: Frida Kahlo Works - View fourteen of Frida's most famous works. Titles and captions are in Spanish. <http://www.proa.org/exhibicion/mexico/fr-exhibi-4.html>
- Frida by Kahlo - View Frida's work in the context of her life. <http://www.fbuch.com/fridaby.htm>
- Frida Kahlo: Self Portraits - This site focuses on the self portraits. [http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/travel/jcummings/ph56frida.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/jcummings/ph56frida.html)
- Frida Kahlo and Contemporary Thoughts - An extensive site dedicated to Frida where you will find links to paintings, critical essays and a bibliography. Also has an interesting flash movie using images and quotes from Frida. <http://www.fridakahlo.it/>
- National Museum of Women in the Arts - Artist profile of Frida as well as a description of "Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky" can be found at this site. <http://www.nmwa.org/collection/profile.asp?LinkID=471>

### **Books**

- Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.
- Herrera, Hayden. *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Kettenmann Adrea. *Kahlo*. Köln, Germany: Taschen, 2000.



- Udall, Sharyn Rohlfen. Carr, O'Keefe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.

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