

V&A

Teachers' Resource:
**FRIDA KAHLO:
MAKING HER SELF UP**

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Key Stages 3 – 5: Art & Design

Frida Kahlo on a bench,
carbon print, 1938.
Photograph by Nickolas Muray.
The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection.

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Introduction

This exhibition presents an extraordinary personal collection belonging to the iconic Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. The collection had been locked away for 50 years following Kahlo's death in 1954, according to the wishes of her husband, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Thousands of photographs and letters were found, alongside medicines, orthopaedic corsets and even her prosthetic leg. Most remarkably, around 300 items of Kahlo's clothing (including the brightly-coloured Mexican garments familiar from Kahlo's self-portraits) were discovered intact. Self-image was important to Kahlo. In blending styles from different regions in Mexico and beyond, she constructed an inimitable identity.

This resource is suitable for Key Stages 3–5 Art & Design students and explores some of the key themes from the exhibition. It aims to unpick how Kahlo crafted her identity through dress, painting and photography and encourage students to reflect on their own heritage and identity.

Pre-visit activities

Explore contemporary and historical Mexican culture before visiting the exhibition. Ask your pupils to create a moodboard or fill pages in their sketchbook reflecting the colours, patterns, symbols and icons found in their research. Areas of focus could include: Tehuana clothing, Pre-Columbian imagery, the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) and *La Casa Azul*.

The museum visit

Use this resource to introduce the key themes and ideas explored in the exhibition and get ideas for discussion points and activities which can be developed further into project work back at school.

Roots

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón was born on 6 July 1907 in Coyoacán, near Mexico City, to Guillermo Kahlo and Matilde Calderón y González. Her father was born in Germany in 1872 and emigrated to Mexico when he was 18, while her mother was born in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, in 1876, and was of mixed Spanish and Indian descent.

Sickness

Two events occurred in Kahlo's youth that affected her health for the rest of her life. At the age of six, she contracted polio. Confined to her bed for months, she made an imaginary friend, a 'double' that accompanied her throughout her life. On 17 September 1925, Kahlo suffered another serious blow to her health when a bus on which she was travelling collided with a tram. She was impaled by a handrail, a violent injury that would lead to a series of further complications. Bedbound and unable to continue her studies, she began to paint.

Self-Portraiture

As Kahlo grew older, her father allowed her to help in his darkroom and accompany him on photographic assignments. Kahlo used many of the photographs her father had taken of her during this period as source material for her own work. Her self-portraits became very personal and told stories of her life, exploring her battle with sickness and injury and often depicting pain and sadness.

The Blue House

Frida Kahlo was born in *La Casa Azul* (Blue House) in Coyoacán, on the outskirts of Mexico City, and lived there for most of her life. It was also where she died in 1954. When Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera, moved there in the 1930s, they painted the walls vibrant blue and filled it with votive paintings (paintings expressing thanks for religious miracles), archaeological finds and Mexican folk art. In her garden, Kahlo kept brightly-coloured plants and exotic animals, including her pet spider monkey. Here she spent time painting and teaching others. Many consider *La Casa Azul* to be one of Kahlo's works of art.

Picturing Mexico

Kahlo's formative years were lived against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution (around 1910–20) which lasted more than a decade and coloured her political outlook. Following the Revolution, Mexicans embraced their culture with a new sense of pride. Artists, writers, photographers and documentary filmmakers from around the world flocked to Mexico in search of social and artistic freedom. It was in this setting that Kahlo established herself as a contemporary artist proud of her Mexican heritage.

Art and Dress

Kahlo embraced traditional Mexican dress from the age of 21 and wore it for the rest of her life. Although her wardrobe mixed elements from different regions, she identified particularly with the culture and clothing of the women of the Tehuantepec region in Oaxaca, southern Mexico. Kahlo adopted the Tehuana's richly embroidered blouses, floor length skirts and woven shawls, their elaborate hairstyles and gold jewellery.

Find out more

Explore self-portraiture and identity further by visiting our Prints & Drawings Study Room to view the '[Cultural Identity and Photography](https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/study-rooms)' educational resource. This box contains photographs that explore cultural identity and can be used to discuss and compare themes linked to Kahlo's work. [vam.ac.uk/info/study-rooms](https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/study-rooms)



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Frida Kahlo, about 1926.
Museo Frida Kahlo.
Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Archives.

Roots

Frida Kahlo was fascinated by her mixed heritage and made paintings of her family, her home and herself. In thinking about her heritage and family background, Kahlo explored the idea of self broadly, considering where she had come from and what role that played in constructing her identity.

Activity:

Look back at your family history, your home and your life journey so far. What does it tell you about your own heritage and identity? Find a visual way of representing this story of yourself – you could use photography, painting or other media. You might want to ask your relatives or friends to sit for you so you can make drawings or take photographs of them to include.



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Leather corset with metal frame.
Museo Frida Kahlo

Sickness

Frida Kahlo endured numerous operations and medical procedures and was forced to wear a variety of orthopaedic corsets made from leather, steel and plaster. Although Kahlo's relationship with her corsets was one of support and need, she decorated and adorned them and incorporated them into her paintings as if she had explicitly chosen to wear them. Later in life, when she had to have her right leg amputated, Kahlo even designed a brightly-coloured prosthetic leg adapted to match one of her existing red leather boots. She said, 'I am not sick, I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint'. Kahlo was defiant in the face of illness and injury and has become an icon for disability.

Discussion:

Why do you think Kahlo is considered an icon for disability? Find and share examples of objects, paintings and photography which highlight her physical disability. How are these discussions reflected in her work? Do you think the artworks portray disability positively or negatively? How do you think disability was talked about at the time? Do you think it would have been different to how disability is portrayed and talked about today?



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The Broken Column, 1944.
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patino, Mexico City

Frida Kahlo

Self-portraiture

Due to Frida Kahlo's ongoing sickness and her near-fatal accident at the age of 18, she was bedbound and immobilised for large periods of her life. She began to paint using a folding wooden easel and a mirror inset into the canopy of her four-poster bed. Self-portraiture became the primary focus of Kahlo's art. Her work was very personal – through her painting, she explored her thoughts and feelings about what was happening to her. In her short life, Kahlo painted 55 self-portraits altogether.

Activity:

Make a series of studies of yourself using a mirror in preparation for a self-portrait. Start by folding a large piece of paper into four sections. In the first section, make a quick continuous line drawing of yourself. In the second, make a more detailed line drawing of yourself using only three colours. In the third section, make a tonal sketch of your face, avoiding using lines but instead shading in where you see light and dark on the contours of your face. Finally, in the fourth section, draw four objects that you feel represent you. These can act as symbols for your personality, heritage, environment or feelings. Use all four studies as input for a final self-portrait, thinking about line, tone, colour and symbolism.



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Frida Kahlo with Olmec figurine, 1939.
Photograph by Nickolas Muray.
Nickolas Muray Photo Archives

The Blue House

Colour was an important feature of *La Casa Azul* as well as in Frida Kahlo's clothes and paintings – it helped to form her unique sense of self. Kahlo even developed her own colour theory which she used in all aspects of her life, from her home to her dress. In one of her journals (reproduced in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*), she explained the symbolism she attached to colour:

Green

Good warm light

Magenta

Aztec. old TLAPALI blood of prickly pear, the brightest and oldest

Brown

Colour of mole, of leaves becoming earth

Yellow

Madness, sickness, fear, part of the sun and of happiness

Blue

Electricity and purity, love

Black

Nothing is black - really nothing

Olive

Leaves, sadness, science, the whole of Germany is this colour

Yellow

More madness and mystery all the ghosts wear clothes of this colour, or at least their underclothes

Dark blue

Colour of bad advertisements and of good business

Blue

Distance. Tenderness can also be this blue blood?

Discussion:

Do you agree with Kahlo's interpretation of colour? Kahlo used colours closely affiliated with Mexican culture. Which colours represent you, your family and your home?

Activity:

Develop your own colour code and use it to make a personal painting or drawing of your garden, bedroom or other favourite place at home.



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Cotton blouse embroidered with glass beads.
Museo Frida Kahlo

Picturing Mexico

A new sense of pride in Mexico's heritage and the dignity and history of its many indigenous peoples emerged following the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. Frida Kahlo, her husband Diego Riviera and other artists and writers of the time aligned themselves with their Mexican identity or *Mexicanidad*.

Discussion:

The Mexican Revolution served as a backdrop to a significant part of Kahlo's life. How is this shown in the work she created?

Think of a key cultural or historical moment in your life or in the history of your home country – it could be anything from a political change to a cultural festival. What influence did it have on you and others at the time? Describe the colours, clothes, objects, music or emotions you associate with this.



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Cotton huipil,
printed cotton skirt.
Museo Frida Kahlo

Art and dress

Frida Kahlo expressed herself through dress, constructing her image as a strong Mexican woman and artist. Several important garments made up Kahlo's iconic image. Central to her look was a headpiece, often made up of flowers and worn in conjunction with braids or other traditional Mexican hair styles. Her clothing would be typically made up of a *Huipil* (square-cut tunic) and an *Enagua* (skirt) with an *holán* (flounce) which would cascade down beyond her long skirt.

Kahlo's unique sense of style is as recognisable today as it was when she wore it and has inspired countless other artists, designers and musicians.

Activity:

Research the traditional textiles of Mexico. How could you update these to create a contemporary look, textile design or accessory? Think about colour palette, material, making techniques and blending styles from other cultures with traditional Mexican designs. You could extend this by bringing cultural influences that are part of your own identity.