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### Analyzing the Works of Frida Kahlo

For this essay, I look to critically analyze a few works from the artist Frida Kahlo by using ideas and principles from the movements of Surrealism and traditional Mexican art. My goal is to not just look at the meaning of her art, but to devise what artistic movements can be related to her work. From that, we can use this knowledge to then evaluate how she personally relates to the world of art. To do this, we will first need to look at the ideas present within both aforementioned art groups in order to create our academic opinion. Before devising and discussing the ideas present in both Surrealism and traditional Mexican art, let us first look at the 3 works from Kahlo that will be survey.

Piece Number One, Self Portrait Dedicated to Dr Eloesser, Oil on Masonite, 1940



Piece Number Two, Henry Ford Hospital, Oil on Metal, 1932



Piece Number Three, The Two Fridas, Oil on Canvas, 1939



The first artistic movement that I would like to discuss is Surrealism. Having been created in Paris, France, this movement quickly spread around to different parts of the world. Existing in times of peace, struggle, and war, the ideology of the movement remained strong and adapted its presentation to avoid punishment from outside threats, like World War II (Graubard, D'Alessandro 203). Many of the individuals of the movement, whether it be painters, poets, or photographers, found surrealism as new enthusiastic creative process that provided self-reflection and a more in-depth connection to their works of art. The looming authoritarian threat in Europe during the 1930's however, created a roadblock that denied these ideas of self-expression which forced the movement to go, "Under Ground," and far from the public eye (Graubard, D'Alessandro 204). One of the most crucial elements of Surrealism is a process called Automatism. The process of releasing conscious control of your artistic process to allow unconscious influence to guide your work can be seen in many pieces of art from the movement. Abstract imagery and near impossible events can be seen through a physical depiction that shows subconscious content and processes. Automatism within Surrealism can be eloquently described by artist André Breton, he says the Surrealism is, "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Morrisson 589). Another quote discussing Automatism gives us insight and the idea that it can even be used to create a subsequent narrative after creation, "These artists were experimenting with automatic methods of painting, the aim being to find or generate images from within the unconscious. If desired, these could then be developed or interpreted through

more conscious means” (Morrison 593). With the idea that Automatism can lead from unconscious influence to conscious narrative, we can now bring a bit more concrete understanding to our analysis of Surrealism within works.

After reflecting and growing our understanding of the ideas and principles present within Surrealism, let's shift our focus to another hub of artistic prowess, the world of traditional Mexican art. Traditional Mexican art can be seen as a loose term. To narrow it down, it can be found as an artistic tradition that contains elements from both Indigenous groups as well as Spanish immigrants that arrived during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Artistic traits from both groups combined together to create our perception of modern day traditional Mexican art. One of the most prominent artistic elements that can be found in both culture groups is imagery and symbolism. One physical element that is shown in these two worlds of art is the depiction of flowers and their deeper meaning. In traditional Mesoamerican culture, different flowers could be used symbolically in life as well as art to portray emotions such as respect or death. “The water lily helped to guard women of the chastity, the marigold, associated with death, was used in the autumn ceremony which honored the dead. Leaders were often given flowers as a sign of respect and acknowledgement of their high status” (Córdova 458-9). Flower head dresses can be found in both groups’ cultures and histories. Before colonial times, Spanish wedding ceremonies often crowned newlywed couples with flowers as a way of celebrating their unity. This tradition continued in post colonization Mexico, and even grew in significance thanks to the blending of Indigenous and Spanish cultures. In a piece by Juan Rodríguez Juárez depicting a colonial Mexican marriage, the just wed couple hold up floral staffs as they walk down the aisle. The bride and groom are also both draped in floral garland as well as a wreath around their

necks (Córdova 456). From this piece, we can see the symbolic significance that flowers have within traditional Mexican art and culture.

Now shifting our focus onto another element of Mexican art, we can look at the concepts of space. When viewing traditional Mexican art, Alberto Ruy Sánchez argues that we need to prioritize the observation of space and how it is applied to art. This looks at both an artist's viewpoint as well as a viewer's perception of space. In his effort to do so, Sánchez collects a series of essays from various art theorists, one being Henri Focillon. In his essay, he focuses on the various spaces of art. The spaces of art presented in his essay that I believe best connect with the culture of Mexican art are, ornamental space and internal mass. Focillon describes ornamental space as the first space that is capable of being used in different artistic techniques. He describes ornamental space as, "A shape that straightens and stabilizes the bare and arid field on which it is inscribed" (Sánchez, Focillon 2). Ornamental Space has the power to shape its environment and create a narrative. I believe that this strongly connects with the ideas of symbolic imagery that is commonly found in traditional Mexican Art. Certain symbolic imagery can have an undertone which is the true message of a piece. It creates the message that it wants you to take from it, similar to ornamental space. The principles of internal mass also hold some relevance to the ideas in traditional Mexican art. Focillon's observation of internal mass focuses primarily on the relationship between internal and external mass. The two are linked to each other but one can have more narrative value than the other, this normally being internal mass (Sánchez, Focillon 2). The relevance to Mexican art can again be found through symbolic imagery. Certain flowers having a deeper meaning, like marigold and

their relation to death, relate to the ideas of internal mass. The presentation and depiction of a flower is its external mass, but its relation to a specific emotion is its internal mass.

After completing our look at some of the central aspects of Surrealism and traditional Mexican art, we can now start analyzing how these two fields of art relate to the works of Frida Kahlo. Let us first look her piece titled, "Henry Ford Hospital." In this work, we see a depiction of Kahlo laying in a hospital bed. Floating around her, we find multiple images pertaining to elements of her life that also reflected her mental state at the time. The pelvis can be representative of the catastrophic bus accident that she was involved in. Aarathi Prasad's article discussing Kahlo's life and art can give us a more detailed explanation of the event, "Impaled by an iron handrail that entered her left hip and exited through her pelvic floor, she sustained abdominal and vaginal wounds. Her clavicle, ribs, spine, elbow, and leg fractured" (Prasad). This accident also left Kahlo with infertility issues as a result of her injuries. This can be represented through the fetus and flower that are shown in Henry Ford Hospital. The same year that she created this piece, Kahlo suffered a miscarriage. The orchid flower is also meant to imitate the shape of her uterus. The depiction of the images the space used to show them, and the double meaning present in the flower, gives us tie ins to both Surrealism and traditional Mexican art. We can find a continuation of these elements in her two other pieces that I selected.

In her work titled, "Self-Portrait to Dr. Eloesser," we can see Kahlo crowned with flowers. Calling back to historical presentation, his depiction of Kahlo is reminiscent to that of a newlywed bride. This could be seen as commentary on her troubled marriage with fellow artist Diego Rivera. Also presented in this work, we can see a strand of thorns wrapped around her

neck, drawing blood. This linework reminds me of the automatic drawings found within Surrealism. An even better example of Automatism I think can be found in the work, "The Two Fridas." Wrapped around two versions of Kahlo is a winding vein connecting to both of her hearts. This free and flowing vein, to me, has elements of automatic painting as it coils around one of her arms like a creeping vine. The overall emotional ambiguity of the backgrounds in the past two works also presents an easily identifiable relation to Surrealistic works from the same time. Implications of internal versus external space can also be found in The Two Fridas. One of the Fridas is dressed in a traditional Mexican dress, while the other one can be seen in a more European style of dress. This can be observed as commentary on her split heritage from her parents and an over struggle of self-identity.

Looking back at the work of Frida Kahlo, I believe that we can find her art as a blend of both European Surrealistic art and traditional Mexican art. As previously discussed, she was able to take elements from both movements to create emotionally valuable pieces of work that gave narrative reflection on the events of her life. Kahlo wasn't afraid to be emotionally raw in her works but choose to show it in a way of double meanings, similar to the idea of flowers in Mexican culture. She was also able to present experiences in abstract manners. Floating imagery, automatic painting, and unique environments used throughout her works is very in tune with the elements of Surrealism. The way that she blends both of these artistic movements to create her own style shows me that she deserves to be presented in her own individual artistic style. We can look to both associated movements for insight, but the analyzing of her works should be done by using a unique lens of observation.

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