



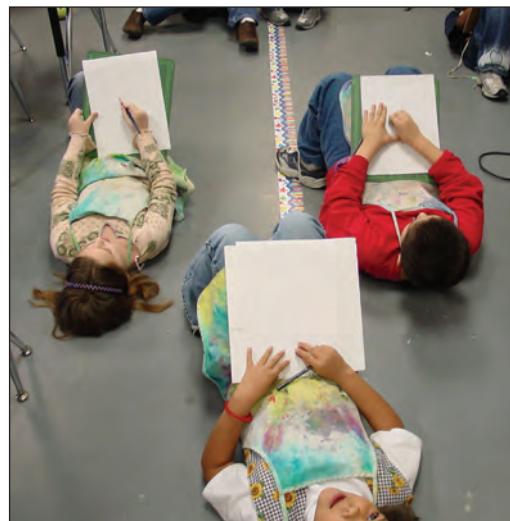
Feeling Like Frida

by Jeannette Smith Anthos

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The students will ...

- be introduced to famous Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo.
- learn about Frida Kahlo, critique her art, and create a self-portrait in the style of Kahlo (by emphasizing important personal characteristics).
- learn about facial proportions, subject themes, and "experience" Frida's way of creating art. Just as Frida created much of her art lying on her back, so will the students.



▲ Youngsters lay on their backs on the floor and drew, emulating Frida Kahlo's confinement to her bed.

▼ After initial pencil drawings, the children finished their portraits at their tables.



When I first started teaching at J. H. House Elementary School, I was excited to be doing what I love and couldn't wait to share my knowledge of art with my students. As my fourth-graders were working on a project, Ricky, a Hispanic child, asked me if there were any famous Mexican artists. I said, "Well, there's Pablo Picasso, but he wasn't Mexican, he was Spanish."

It was at that moment I realized I needed to learn a bit more about my students, their culture and their interests. This was very important to me because 60 percent of my school consists of Hispanic students. I designed many different units around Mexican art and artists, but one that I especially liked and enjoyed was the unit I created using the artwork of Frida Kahlo.

CONFESIONS OF A FRIDA FREAK The first time I saw Kahlo's artwork I thought, "Man, that is weird. What's the deal with the blood and stuff?" I didn't understand the purpose of her artwork. I started doing research about Frida Kahlo, her life and her struggles.

I learned that when she was 18, Kahlo was involved in a terrible bus accident. Her injuries resulted in many painful surgeries and her spending much of her recovery in bed, lying on her back

"Frida Freak." I read books, articles, watched documentaries, and later on saw the movie, *Frida*, starring Salma Hayek—which I loved! I was amazed at Frida's passion for her art.

I thought it would be good for my students to study not only a Mexican artist, but a *female* Mexican artist who persevered through her struggles. My third-grade students would be challenged to create a self-portrait, including in their background things that represented them and their personality. This project was going to be different from any kind of self-portrait we had done before, however, because the students were going to "experience" art as Frida had to do so often—by lying on their backs.

To introduce Frida Kahlo to my students, I created a PowerPoint presentation, which I showed using my classroom TV via a scan converter. The PowerPoint showed images of Frida, as well as many examples of her artworks, specifically her self-portraits. I referred to her as "Frida" to my students because it seemed to make more of a personal connection with them.

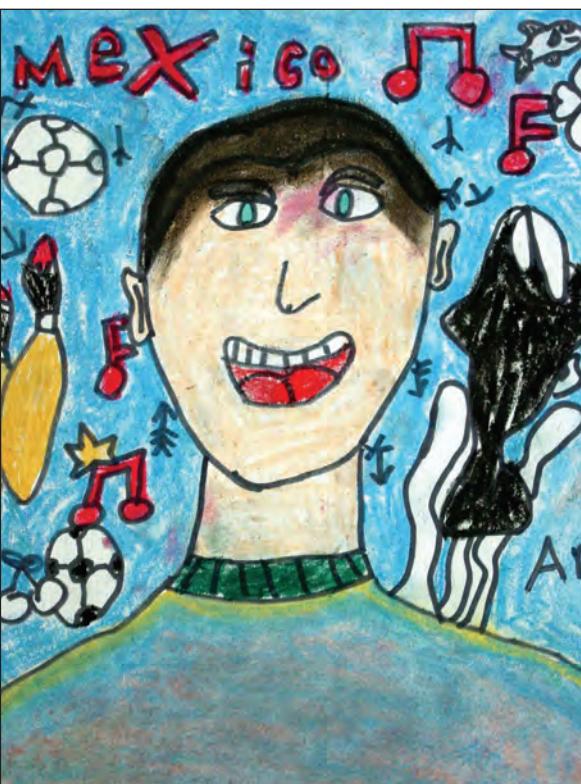
When I showed my students her painting titled *Self-Portrait* (1948), I asked them what they saw. One student mentioned the tear coming down from Frida's eye. We discussed why might she

MATERIALS

- 9" x 12" or larger white drawing paper
- Markers
- Oil pastels
- Pencil
- Drawing boards or book (some type of hard surface)



Through the "Feeling Like Frida" self-portrait project, students gained empathy for artist Frida Kahlo and admired her determination to be creative no matter what.



be crying, with students sharing answers that ranged from sad, mad and upset.

We also looked at an image in which Frida depicted her accident, *The Accident* (1926), which can be viewed at: www.pbs.org/.../worksofart/accident.html. I discussed with students what happened, how a pole pierced through her body, and we talked about how

much that would hurt.

Some educators may ask, "Do students need that much information?" but I felt it was important for my students to understand the severity of Frida's ailment. I talked to students about the surgeries she endured and how she was bedridden for long periods of time, sometimes as long as nine months, because her body had to heal.

We examined *Self-portrait with Monkeys* (1943), and discussed what the students saw. I asked them why they thought Frida put monkeys in

her picture, and we talked about how she put things in her art that represented her personality, her interests and current events of the time.

OUR OWN SELF-PORTRAITS

Then I told students they were going to create self-portraits. Most of them were excited but some were not because they don't like drawing themselves. However, I had not told them the best part yet—or at least what I considered the best part: They were going to draw themselves while *lying on the floor!*

They looked at me wide-eyed and open-mouthed, one asking "What!?" I explained that they were going to feel like Frida. Therefore, students used small Masonite boards, paper, and pencil and had to find a spot on the floor to draw. The first time I did this project, I allowed students to use mirrors. Many got broken, however, so we don't use mirrors any more. We now use our memory of ourselves that we saw in the mirror that morning.

Students had to lie on their backs and draw themselves, concentrating on the upper body. Students were also instructed to create a background that represented them. They could include drawings of things they like to do, see, play and so on.

I told them they were to make sure to give me "clues" about their personality. As they drew themselves, I would walk around commenting on their "clues." The rule was that while they were lying down, they had to keep their back and head to the floor, but could raise their knees up if they chose. This part can take one to two 45-minute class periods.

Of course, some students complained: "My neck hurts," "My back's sore" or "This is hard." My response was, "Yes, but think how Frida felt. She had to do this for months at a time, even as long as *nine* months. You only have to do it for 45 minutes." The children's eyes would get big and the complaining would stop. (Note: I put the PowerPoint presentation on "loop," so it continuously played on the TV, giving students

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inspiration.)

I really like incorporating music into art class when possible, so as students worked on their art I played Mexican music, such as the *Frida* movie soundtrack or *Mexico*, which is a part of the Putumayo music collection. Once the initial drawing was completed, students returned to their seats and colored their pictures in with markers.

ACHIEVING A PAINTERLY FEEL We talked about how we “paint” with markers, meaning we use lines of color, instead of “scribbling” the color in. This gives a nice look, as well as preserves the marker—and students love “painting” with a marker.

After using markers, students may embellish their art with oil pastels. Why both? The markers give a nice base, but the oil pastels add more texture to the art, giving it more of a painterly feel, like Frida’s oil paintings. Nevertheless, I have done this project using just markers, as well as only oil pastels. Whatever medium you choose, your students will have success.

Upon completion of the project, we regrouped and discussed the difficulty the students had in drawing themselves. They commented on the respect they had developed for Frida and her artwork. Jake said, “The hardest part is sitting like this and drawing” and Jacqueline said, “It must have been painful. She had surgeries a lot.” This experience gave students an empathy they wouldn’t have had otherwise.

Since completing this project with my third-graders, I’ve done it with first-, second-, fourth- and fifth-graders. As an introduction for the younger grades, I read them the book, *Frida*, by Jonah Winter. With some modifications, this lesson can be used in middle and high school as well.

SHARING MY SUCCESS Being a “Frida Freak,” I wanted to share my project with everyone, so I presented the idea at the 2003 Georgia Art Education Association (GAEA) conference in Athens. The state of Georgia has an increasing Hispanic population. In previous talks with art teachers, there seemed to be a need for lessons incorporating more Hispanic artists into the curriculum, but they weren’t sure how to do this.

When I first mentioned Frida Kahlo to teachers, they looked at me in shock and said, “You’re teaching *her*!?” I shared with teachers how we can teach

Frida Kahlo in our classrooms without going into all the details of her sexuality and Diego’s infidelities, amongst other things. During the workshop, I had the teachers experience “Feeling Like Frida” just as my students had. Many of them looked skeptical at first, but once they got into it, it really was a lot of fun.

I still have teachers who attended my workshop telling me their students loved the project and what a respect they now have for Frida’s art. It makes my heart so happy to know that I was not only helping *my* students, but other art teachers and students in the state.

“Feeling Like Frida” was a great project. It allowed students insight into an artist’s struggles as well as her determination to be creative. It was also a great vehicle for promoting art because the local newspaper came, photographed students, interviewed them and ran a story—wonderful publicity for Youth Art Month!

“Feeling Like Frida” was a project I thoroughly enjoyed teaching, and the students thoroughly enjoyed learning. I know this because those third-graders who are now in seventh grade still talk about it when they come back to the school to visit me. ■

Jeannette Smith Anthos teaches art at J.H. House Elementary School in Conyers, Georgia. To see more examples of student art, visit www.artsonia.com/jhhouse1 and click on “2003.”

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

BOOKS FOR TEACHERS

- Herrera, H. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. Perennial Press, 2002.
- Kahlo, Frida; introduction by Fuentes, C.; commentary by Lowe, S.M. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.
- Kattenmann, A. *Frida Kahlo*. Taschen, 2000.
- Taymor, Judy. *Frida: Bringing Frida Kahlo’s Life and Art to Film*. Newmarket Press, 2002.

BOOKS FOR STUDENTS

- Winter, Jonah. *Frida*, English Edition. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2002.
- Laidlaw, Jill A. *Frida Kahlo*. Franklin Watts Ltd., 2003.
- Frith, Margaret. *Frida Kahlo*. Grosset & Dunlap, 2003.

VIDEOTAPES/DVDS

- *Frida*. Miramax Films, 2002.
- *Frida Kahlo* (1983). Re-released by Home Vision Arts, 2000.