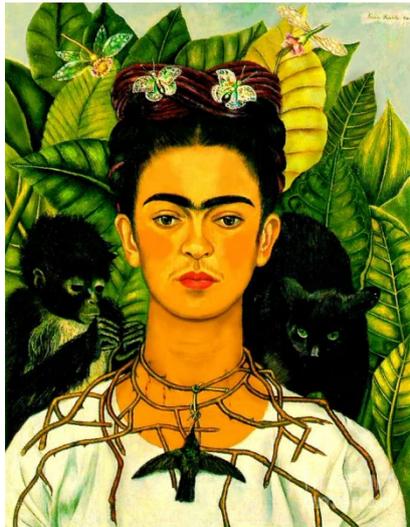


Frida Kahlo - Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird

by Madison Lambert

In this essay, I will be examining a painting; the overall subject, technical aspects, the artist, the purpose of the painting, context, my interpretation, and other source's interpretations.

This painting is by Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist, titled 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird' (1940). The format is portrait, the medium is oil on canvas, size 61.25cm x 47cm and located in the Harry Ransom Centre, University of Austin, Texas. Since it was painted, it has appeared in many exhibitions internationally.



Mexican artist Frida Kahlo is remembered for her self-portraits, passion, pain, and striking, vivid colours. She was born on July 6th, 1907 in Coyoacan, Mexico, and died on July 13th, 1954 at the age of 47.

Kahlo, who suffered from polio as a child, nearly died in a bus accident as a teenager. She spent most of her life in physical pain, suffering multiple fractures of her spine, collarbone and ribs, a shattered pelvis, broken foot, and dislocated shoulder. She became dedicated to painting whilst recovering in a body cast. During her lifetime, she underwent 30 operations to fix her broken body!

Life experience is a common theme in Kahlo's approximately 200 artworks. Of her 143 paintings, 55 are self-portraits. She depicted her physical and emotional pain and her tempestuous relationship with Diego Rivera - fellow artist and husband - whom she married twice.

“I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.” – Frida Kahlo.

Kahlo and Rivera divorced in 1939, but reunited a year later and remarried.¹

As you can see from the title, this is of a portrait genre and is of the artist Frida Kahlo herself, painted on a canvas support. Kahlo faces the viewer – she is the focal point – and is surrounded by tropical leaves in different tones of green and one bright yellow leaf placed behind her head. A black cat looks over her right shoulder and to the left, a spider monkey holds the thorn necklace encircling her neck, causing drops of blood to trickle from the piercings. A hummingbird is hanging in the centre of the thorns which are tied around her throat. Her hair has been styled on top of her head with a purple material in the shape of a figure of eight, with two butterflies placed on either side. Just above her head fly two dragonflies; these beautiful creatures add a pop of colour to the portrait, and bring movement to the picture, as the viewer would imagine them flying around. The artist has used a very eye catching and wide palette of colours and has mixed an excellent range of primary and secondary colours to recreate the beautiful colours of the rainforest. Black, green, and white are the predominant colours in the portrait; black traditionally represents misfortune, while green represents life and white symbolises purity.² The meaning behind black contrasts with the meanings of green and white, telling the viewer that the animals do not represent positivity in this painting. In addition, the black elements of the picture such as her hair, her

unibrow, the hummingbird, the cat and the monkey surround and frame her face directing the viewer to her expression. Kahlo is wearing a white top which stands out against her golden, sun kissed skin and her dark hair; this is a brilliant example of chiaroscuro, as the high value, white clothing contrasts with her low value hair and the surrounding black animals. Her expression is solemn and steady and she seems to be calmly tolerating the pain of the thorns.

The light source in the painting is the sun, as the setting is an outdoor forest where the soft, blue sky is visible. We cannot see the sun itself, however that is what is implied. The daylight coming from the sun provides great lighting so we are able to see the true pigmentation of the colours. This is an open picture, as the tropical scenery carries on into unseen distances (an example is not being able to see the sun) and there could be a lot more going on that the artist has not shown us.

‘Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird’ is a balanced painting because the objects and colours balance each other out and are placed equally. Her solemn expression is symmetrical, likewise is her hairstyle with the butterflies and the dragonflies hovering above. Two black mammals are situated either side of the artist and the curved shape of the hummingbird corresponds with her brow.

Arch-like lines are used to create movement and depth. The lines of the thorn necklace create movement while the veins of the leaves created with curved lines create depth. The arched lines are used repeatedly in the painting. We can see this in her black unibrow and it is again echoed in the wings of the hummingbird. Also, they have been used in the shape and veins of the leaves in the background. Without these lines, the leaves would be nothing more than green and yellow splodges.³

Along with many others, ‘Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird’ represents the pain Kahlo went through during her life. The central position of Kahlo makes her the focal point of the picture and her direct stare engages the viewer.⁴

In the painting, the artist included many symbolic creatures and objects. She was not painting a realistic scene, but used symbolism to express her feelings.⁵ Multiple sources say the thorn necklace represents Jesus Christ’s crown of thorns worn as he was dragged to the cross, and this signifies her self-representation as a Christian martyr and the enduring pain from her failed marriage.⁶

Hanging from the thorn necklace around Kahlo’s neck is a hummingbird. Generally, the bird is thought to symbolise freedom; they can walk on the earth and swim in the sea as humans do, but they also have the ability soar in the sky. Birds are free to roam the earth and atmosphere. Many cultures believe that they symbolise eternal life; the link between heaven and earth.⁷ Especially the hummingbird which is colourful and always hovering above flowers. Some critics say that this a positive symbol and that it means hope and good luck because of what hummingbirds are associated with⁸, but other critics say the humming bird is black and lifeless – juxtaposing with the colourful idea of a hummingbird - perhaps referencing to Kahlo herself and the traumatic experiences she had during her lifetime.⁹ To a certain extent I agree with interpretation that the hummingbird hanging from the necklace referencing to the trauma throughout her life, as it is dark and there is no sign of life. However, I agree with interpretation that the hummingbird is a sign of positivity, freedom,

and good luck to a lesser extent because the symbol is there, but the way it has been presented puts it into a different context.

In addition to agreeing with the above, my interpretation is that it means the opposite of freedom (which is usually associated with birds) because it is trapped on the necklace of thorns and has no escape. Also, from my perspective, the hummingbird resembles the shape of the cross Jesus was crucified on, linking back to the idea of representing Christianity.

A monkey is found in many of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits often on her shoulder. A spider monkey was bestowed by Rivera to Kahlo as a pet. The monkey in this painting could be a symbol representing him, as the monkey grasps onto the end of the thorns; but is he freeing her or is he pulling the necklace tighter?¹⁰ This ambiguity may indicate Frida's uncertainty about whether she will overcome the pain of her divorce or linger in it.¹¹ Some suggest the primate symbolises their tormented romance because it is the one tugging at the thorns tight enough to make the wearer bleed.¹² I believe that perhaps the monkey is trying to strangle her and the thorn necklace is a metaphor for a rope ending Kahlo's painful life.

A black cat - symbolic of bad luck and death - crouches behind her left shoulder. Similarly to Kahlo, it stares at the viewer with its alert, emerald green eyes, looking as if it is creeping up behind Kahlo. This adds an element of movement to the picture.

Despite the subjects being represented in a realistic way, this is a surrealism painting. The way the artist represents herself like a Christian martyr is what makes it surreal. A necklace of thorns with a dead hummingbird charm hanging from it pierces Frida's neck, yet her face shows no emotion. A black cat and monkey are unusually positioned on her shoulders and butterflies and dragonflies surround her head. Tropical leaves in the background are in contrast with the figure of Frida and the animals that express a dramatic scene.¹³

In conclusion, I believe Frida Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird' depicts aspects of her life and her Christian beliefs. The elements of the picture represent ideas personal to her and a wide range of technical and contextual techniques to create a beautifully crafted work of art. There are many different interpretations of different parts of the painting, and I have brought some of these ideas together to create my own interpretation.

References

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