FRIDA KAHLO
1907 - 1954
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE - LIFE STORY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO - REACTION OF THE ART WORLD TO KAHLO’S ART WORK</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE - THE MAIN FEATURES OF KAHLO’S ART WORK</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR - ANALYSIS OF 2 SELECTED ART WORKS USING THE KEY DISCUSSION POINTS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis One – **THE TWO FRIDAS 1939**

- A discussion of the interpretation of subject matter and influences
- A discussion of the aesthetic qualities
- A discussion of materials and techniques
- A discussion of distinctive style

Analysis Two – **WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME 1938**

- A discussion of the interpretation of subject matter and influences
- A discussion of the aesthetic qualities
- A discussion of materials and techniques
- A discussion of the impact of cultural and historical context.

CHAPTER FIVE - SAMPLE RESPONSE

FORMAL REFERENCES

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This publication has been written by Therese Grant and Philip Grant, directors of 4cats Gallery, Melbourne as a resource document for Year 12 Studio Arts students. Therese Grant has 14 years senior teaching experience and she is also a practicing artist. She holds a Bachelor of Education (Visual Arts) and a Master of Education (Visual Arts) both from University of Melbourne. Therese has been a director of 4cats Gallery since 2002. Philip Grant established 4cats Gallery in 2000. 4cats Gallery operates as a commercial gallery. He has had extensive experience in public sector management, including arts facilities and programs. He has a Bachelor of Arts (art history), Bachelor of Laws and a Master of Laws (Copyright) all from the University of Melbourne. We appreciate the ongoing support of our Editor and co-contributor Helen Gilligan.

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INTRODUCTION

This Studio Arts education CD provides the student with an overview of the life and work of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. The information contained in this CD is designed specifically to address the criteria set out in the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Study Design. The Study Design for VCE Studio Arts requires a student to study art works that have been made by artists in more than one historical or cultural context. Frida Kahlo produced her significant works from the 1920’s to 1954 predominantly within Mexico and the United States.

The Studio Arts CD begins with an outline of the personal life of the artist and we have called this the ‘Life Story’. This is an excellent way to introduce the student to the life of Frida Kahlo. We have provided the student with a brief overview of some of the achievements, people and significant features in Kahlo’s life which have impacted on the production of her art works.

Following the life story we have collected a number of responses regarding the artist’s work which we have called ‘Reaction of the Art World to Kahlo’s Art Work’. This is an interesting chapter as it includes some of the views shared by art critics and a general overview of the world’s reaction to Kahlo’s work. Some artists create enormous reaction whilst others are less controversial. This chapter is an interesting study not only of the individual artist but also because it demonstrates how the art world and public interact and respond to different artists and why. It can act as a teaching tool to encourage discussion and expand a student’s view of Kahlo’s life and work.

Chapter Three presents the main features present in Kahlo’s work and is called, ‘The Main Features of Kahlo’s Art Work.’ This chapter provides the student with a general summary of the information required to learn about an artist’s work, such as the aesthetic qualities, the usage of materials and techniques, the subject matter and themes of the work, the development of a distinctive style, artistic influences and the relevance of historical and cultural contexts on the production of the work. We call these features, key discussion points. The Study Design also includes New Technology as a discussion point. However, we do not believe this is appropriate for the individual study of Kahlo’s work. A discussion of new technology is appropriate only when the artist is breaking new ground with technology.

In Chapter Four ‘Analysis of 2 Selected Art Works using the Key Discussion Points’ we study two of Kahlo’s art works and apply four key discussion points to each work. This provides the student with an insight into how different key discussion points can be applied to the same art work. This chapter helps a student learn what is relevant to discuss under each point and the type of language and material they could include in their responses. In this Studio Arts CD we have included a discussion of the following key discussion points; an interpretation of subject matter and influences, the use of aesthetic qualities, the use of materials and techniques, the relevance of historical and cultural contexts and the development of a distinctive style.
Chapter Five called ‘Sample Response’ is a sample exam response for the student. A sample response is provided to show a student how they might respond to a question related to one or more of the key discussion points related to the work of Frida Kahlo.

The final section in this Studio Arts CD lists the formal references that have been referred to in this CD.

The best reference book on Kahlo’s work is;


The best website to obtain online images of Kahlo’s work is:

www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo.html
CHAPTER ONE - LIFE STORY

Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderon was born on the 6th July, 1907 in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City, Mexico. Despite her grand name she was always known simply as Frida Kahlo. Kahlo can be seen as one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century, not just in her native Mexico, but worldwide. Largely self-taught, Kahlo repeatedly painted her own image. She built up a body of work that explored her identity as a disabled woman artist, a daughter, a political activist, a wife, a lover and a Mexican nationalist. Frida Kahlo’s paintings are an outward manifestation of her physical and emotional suffering, a visual diary of her life.

Kahlo was the third of four daughters from the marriage of Guillermo Kahlo, an artist/photographer of Hungarian Jewish descent and Matilda Calderon a devout Catholic of mixed Spanish and indigenous Indian ancestry. Kahlo also had two older half sisters from an earlier marriage between Guillermo Kahlo and his first wife who died in childbirth.

Kahlo’s father Guillermo was a photographer. He was a quiet and withdrawn man who suffered badly from epilepsy. Kahlo was always her father’s favourite and they sustained a warm friendship throughout his life. On the other hand Kahlo clashed with her mother who was a devout Catholic and committed housewife. Kahlo’s mother insisted on strict Catholic observance and her daughters attended mass almost every day. One of Kahlo’s sisters, Margarita became a nun. Kahlo resented her mother’s strict regime and secretly named her mother “my chief”. The family lived in a substantial home in the middle class suburb of Coyoacan in Mexico City. Because of the bright cobalt blue paint on the exterior it was always called the Blue House. The house had significant connections to Kahlo’s life because not only was she born and raised there, it ultimately became the Frida Kahlo Museum housing some of her works as well as the pre-Columbian urn holding her ashes.

At age seven, Frida developed infantile paralysis (polio) which left her right leg shorter than the left and she walked with a pronounced limp. Her father spoiled and indulged her. She would accompany him on photographic and painting excursions and became his surrogate son, learning how to use his camera and help him when he suffered one of his epileptic seizures. As his favourite child, Guillermo believed she was the most intellectual of his daughters and had great plans for her future. At 15, he enrolled her in the prestigious El Preparatoria the National Preparatory school in Mexico City where only the brightest young men were studying before they gained entrance to university courses. When Frida was accepted she was one of only 35 young women in a student body of 2000.

For Kahlo, The Preparatoria School represented an exciting new world after the confines of her mother and the Blue House. The school area teemed with shops, movie houses and buskers and musicians. Kahlo became part of a little clique of students called the Cachucas. The group of seven boys and two girls was led by Alejandro Gomes Arias (Alex). Although the members of the group, including Kahlo were bright students, they were also known for their silly pranks and complete disrespect for rules. As part of the group, Kahlo began to wear men’s clothing, cut
her hair short and started swearing and smoking. Kahlo’s ambition had always been to be a doctor and her studies at The Preparatory School were leading to medicine.

Whilst Kahlo was at The Preparatory School she came across Diego Rivera. Rivera (1886 - 1957) a gifted painter and muralist, was also a political activist. Many of the sumptuous murals he created in Mexico and throughout the world speak of politics, history, and the worker's struggle. Considered one of the 20th century's major artistic figures, Rivera created images especially those of rounded peasant women with braided hair, arms brim-full of calla lilies that have come to typify Mexico.

Rivera had been commissioned by the Mexican government to paint a large mural at the school to glorify the role of the revolutionaries in recent Mexican history. The Mexican Revolution was a period of political, social and military conflict and turmoil that began in 1910. The initial conflict culminated in the overthrow of the American backed dictator Diaz. The Diaz regime had confiscated large sections of land from the people of Mexico. The country was engulfed in civil war, as several political and armed groups fought each other for control of the country. A major step towards the end of armed conflict involved the creation of the present constitution of Mexico in 1917, the official end of the Revolution. The Mexican Revolution saw new land laws passed to give back the people what was rightfully theirs. The laws were seen as an important step in achieving a stable government and country. Kahlo always admired the values of the revolution with its largely socialist and communist ideas. She later changed her birth date to 1910 as symbolic of the start of the new Mexico.

At the time Rivera came into contact with Kahlo he was about 36 years old (to Frida’s 16). He was married at the time to his second wife Lupe Marin, who was also his principal artistic model. Rivera had a child with his first wife in Paris while in exile because of his communist beliefs. He later abandoned his first wife and child in Paris when the political situation changed in Mexico. After the revolution he was free to return as a committed communist. Rivera was a known womaniser and wild party man.

Kahlo and her group of Cachuchas took to annoying Rivera when he was painting the mural. They would soap his ladder steps in the hope that he would slip, burst water balloons over the heads of Rivera’s assistants and set fire to wood shavings on the floor to create smoke. Although she made a nuisance of herself, teased and annoyed the artist and his wife Lupe, Kahlo was fascinated by the figure of Rivera. She told one of her friends, “My ambition is to have a child by Diego Rivera”. With a mop of thick black hair, wearing a Stetson hat and carrying a gun in the belt around his large middle, Rivera was hardly the image of the romantic starving artist and as Kahlo would find in the future, after a night of heavy drinking, he could celebrate by pepper ing the room with a barrel load of bullets.

In 1925, aged 18, Kahlo was involved in a dreadful accident. The bus she was on collided with a tram car. Alex who was her boyfriend at the time was also on the bus. A section of the bus’s hand rail had gored Kahlo through her hip and according to medical records had damaged her pelvic region. She had also fractured her spine in three places, fractured her pelvis, dislocated a shoulder,
broken two ribs and broken bones in her right leg and foot. She was in almost unbearable pain, an agony that would persist for the rest of her life. Strangely her parents did not visit her in hospital for three weeks. When her father heard of the accident, his health deteriorated. Kahlo’s mother thought that the trip from the Blue House into Mexico City would be too much for them! Alex also did not visit her even when his own injuries had healed. It is reported Kahlo had been unfaithful to Alex in the months preceding the accident and at the time this would have given her an immoral reputation. At 18, Alex was obviously concerned with her behaviour and wanted to avoid her. Despite pleading with Alex over a period of some years, they were never reunited again. This was a devastating emotional blow to Kahlo which coupled with her physical pain must have been dreadful.

The accident meant a long convalescence and whilst recuperating from her horrendous injuries it was her mother who had an easel made and fixed it to the bed with a mirrored canopy so that Frida could see herself and be her own model. This was the start of her self portraits. “I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best.” Kahlo had little experience in art at this time. Just before her accident she had a brief paid apprenticeship with a printer Fernando Fernandez. He taught her to draw by copying prints. It has also been reported that Fernandez and Kahlo had a brief affair. Her first paintings in this period are of herself, her friends and her family.

In 1928 recovering from her injuries Frida joined a group of politically active young friends, who had gathered around the American expatriate photographer Tina Modotti. Modotti became Kahlo’s role model and sponsored her membership in the Mexican Communist Party. During the 1920’s, Mexico was a haven for many exiles. Artists, writers, and intellectuals went looking for a cheap way of life and armed with political idealism they came to a country in search of its own identity. Tina Modotti was an ex partner of Rivera, and it was through Modotti that Kahlo met Rivera again. Rivera and Kahlo began a tempestuous love affair. Rivera had divorced his second wife Lupe. Rivera found in Kahlo a person who shared his passionate interest in art, communism and the Mexican culture. They were married in a civil ceremony on August 21, 1929. Rivera was 20 years her senior. it is impossible to write about Frida Kahlo without Diego Rivera as he had a profound influence on her life. Some critics said that she used her pain to keep Rivera by her side but she was to say later, “I suffered two grave accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar knocked me down the other accident is Diego.”

Kahlo’s mother described it as a marriage between “an elephant and a dove” and their wedding portrait highlights the disparity in their physical appearance. Kahlo was pregnant at the time of her marriage but miscarried shortly after the wedding.

Financially well off, Rivera helped Kahlo’s parents pay off their mortgage on the Blue House whilst they themselves lived in a very elegant street in Mexico City. Rivera was a passionate painter and would work up to 14 hours a day and he soon became immersed in a major historical project. Kahlo played the dutiful wife bringing him lunch every day. She was not painting at this time and spent many lonely hours longing for a child to cement their relationship. It was not long before there were rumours of Rivera and an alliance with one of his assistants. At the end of 1929 Kahlo became pregnant again. Rivera who was violently opposed to having children and also out of fear for Kahlo’s health, persuaded her to have an
abortion. Kahlo was distraught and wept for weeks after the event.

Because of the social and political turmoil in Mexico, Rivera was not receiving any new work but his artistic reputation ensured him commissions in America. In 1930 Kahlo and Rivera set off for California. Rivera was the centre of attention everywhere he went. Kahlo was considered a beautiful appendage to her husband and quite unusual in her traditional dress, although she spent many hours alone in a strange country. Sometimes Rivera would disappear for days. She was unhappy and didn’t like America. Kahlo painted very little in America, although she did complete several portraits such as that of her doctor *Portrait of Dr Leo Eloesser* 1931 and *Portrait of Eva Frederick* 1931. Her painting *Self Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States* 1932 expressed her feelings. “I find that Americans completely lack sensibility and good taste. They are boring and have faces like unbaked rolls”.

Between 1930 and 1940, Kahlo and Rivera moved back and forth between America and Mexico where Rivera received commissions to paint murals in New York and Detroit. In 1932 Kahlo became pregnant again. Despite Rivera’s request for her to have an abortion she persisted with the pregnancy. However, she suffered a miscarriage. Just after this miscarriage she painted the gruesome *Henry Ford Hospital* 1932 in which she visualises her thoughts about her miscarriage. Around this time she started a massive project in which she declared she would make a painting of every year of her life. This project marked the beginning of her highly intense self portraiture exposing her physical and emotional pain. In *My Birth* 1932, she paints a grotesque image of a woman with a sheet over her head, giving birth to a large baby that is obviously Kahlo because of its joined eyebrows.

In 1935, Rivera embarked on a relationship with Kahlo’s sister, Cristina. Kahlo felt betrayed by the two people she loved the most in her life. She then retaliated with various love affairs including one with the Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky who had been offered refuge in Mexico.

In 1938 Andre Breton a French poet and leading figure in the Surrealist movement, met Kahlo and saw her work. It was through Breton that she was offered an exhibition at the fashionable *Julien Levy Gallery* in New York. The show was an immediate success and many paintings were sold. Breton then invited Kahlo to exhibit in Paris at the *Pierre Colle Gallery*. The exhibition was not a financial success, but received good reviews from art critics and brought Kahlo to the attention of famous artists such as Pablo Picasso and Vassily Kandinsky. One of her works *The Frame* 1938 was purchased by the *Louvre Museum*.

In 1939 Kahlo and Rivera divorced although they still appeared in public together. After months of painful separation Kahlo and Rivera were remarried a year later in December 1940 in America. They remarried on the understanding that it would be an open affair where both parties could have relationships. Their marriage was still a turbulent affair but they were able to remain friends, with Rivera a constant supporter of Kahlo’s work, which was being received in the art world with increasing enthusiasm. Her identification with the Mexican nation was influenced by the political and cultural developments following the Mexican revolution and after her marriage to Rivera she developed a passionate love for all things traditionally Mexican and dressed in the artistic tradition of the Tehuanantepic
Indians. Kahlo’s clothing and appearance was larger than life. Carlos Fuentes, who wrote an influential book about the diaries that Kahlo wrote, only ever saw Frida Kahlo once – at the opera. He describes his sighting of Kahlo in great detail in his book. Fuentes describes being surrounded by the grandeur of the Opera House at the Palace of Fine Arts and the entry of Frida Kahlo. He writes, “all of these splendours and distractions came to naught” on the arrival of Kahlo. “The jangling of sumptuous jewellery drowned out the sounds of the orchestra, but something beyond mere noise forced us all to look upwards and discover the apparition that announced herself with an incredible throb of metallic rhythms and then exhibited the self that both the noise of the jewellery and the silent magnetism displayed.”

In 1943 Kahlo and Rivera were invited to teach at The National School of Painting and Sculpture in Mexico City, a new art school for talented students from poor families. Kahlo found this to be one of her most fulfilling experiences. The students loved her because of her unusual approach to teaching and she tried to help them in their careers, but it was the start of a downward spiral in her health and she relied more heavily on drugs and alcohol to relieve the pain. With the onset of constant pain in 1944, she began a diary. It contains not only her thoughts over the last ten years of her life, but also many sketches, drawings and small paintings. Late in 1949 she returned to hospital. Rivera took a room next to her and spent many nights there but he was unable to change his ways and continued his affairs and long working hours. Frida would remain in hospital for a year, happy when Rivera was there, sometimes with a room full of friends, at other times distraught and lonely because of his absence. It was the start of a journey of operations, amputation, pain and drugs, and it became apparent that she would never recover.

In 1953 she was offered her first and only solo show in Mexico at the Galeria de Arte Contemporaneo. Her doctors advised her against accepting and it appeared that her ill health would prevent her from attending. In a great theatrical appearance, Frida arrived by ambulance with a motorcycle escort and sirens blaring and was carried into the show on a stretcher to an admiring and enthusiastic audience.

Kahlo’s last public appearance was in 1954. She participated in a Communist demonstration. She died on the 13 July 1954 at the age of 47. Her cause of death was reported as pulmonary embolism but many of her friends believed that Kahlo, who suffered enormous pain may have taken an overdose of pain killers. The last entry in her diary says, “I hope the exit is joyful and I hope never to come back - Frida.”

A year after Kahlo’s death, Rivera married Emma Hurtado, his art dealer since 1946. He died in 1957 at age 70 from heart failure.
CHAPTER TWO - REACTION OF THE ART WORLD TO KAHLO

In the early years of her art career, Kahlo received little recognition from the art world. Fernando Fernandez, the printer with whom she had a brief apprenticeship just before her accident, thought she had “enormous talent”. Arts writer Hayden Herrera, who is perhaps the most definitive biographer of Kahlo and her art works, says that the early paintings Kahlo completed after the accident, “while they showed originality they were awkward in the handling of space, gloomy in colour and stilted in composition”.

Rivera always thought that she had talent and was very supportive of her work. Kahlo’s time in America between 1930 up until her show in New York in 1939 brought little acclaim. The newspapers described her in terms of “Rivera’s petite wife who sometimes dabbles in paint”.

In 1938 Kahlo met Andre Breton a French poet and leading figure in the Surrealist movement. Breton was highly impressed by Kahlo’s work. It was through Breton that she was offered an exhibition at the fashionable Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1939. The show was a success and many paintings were sold.

Breton then invited Kahlo to exhibit in Paris. Breton organised for Kahlo to part of the Mexique exhibition held at the Pierre Colle Gallery in Paris in 1939. The exhibition included 18 of Kahlo’s paintings, photographs by Mexican Manuel Bravo and a selection of Mexican Pre Columbian art and contemporary ‘craft’ objects from Mexico such as toys, ceramics and baskets. Breton had written the catalogues for the exhibition and he described Kahlo's paintings as “ribbons round a bomb”. Herrera quotes Kahlo who says that at the opening of the exhibition she “received a big hug from Joan Miro, great praises from Kandinsky and congratulations from Picasso and Tanguy”. One of her works, The Frame 1938 was purchased by the Louvre Museum. This was the first painting of any Latin American artist to hang in the famous French museum. Art critic Jeanette Winterson quotes Pablo Picasso who in a conversation with Rivera said “neither Derain nor myself nor you, is capable of painting a head like those of Frida Kahlo”.

In 1940 Kahlo produced one of her greatest paintings, The Two Fridas 1939 for the International Exhibition of Surrealism held in Mexico City in 1940. In the 1940s Kahlo was included in prestigious group shows in the Museum of Modern Art, the Boston Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1946, she received a Mexican government fellowship, and in the same year won the National Painting Prize for Moses 1945, at the Mexican Annual National Exhibition.

In 1953 she was offered her first and only solo show in Mexico at the Galeria de Arte Contemporaneo. A local critic wrote: “It is impossible to separate the life and work of this extraordinary person. Her paintings are her biography.”

In 1958, after the death of Rivera, the Blue House was turned into the Frida Kahlo Museum by Rivera's wealthy patron and executor, Dolores Olmedo Patiño. She
owned 25 of Kahlo’s paintings. The eccentric Olmedo was openly dismissive of Kahlo's work, referring to it as “trashy”. She acquired her masterpieces, she admitted, “only because Rivera begged her to.”

After her death, Kahlo largely disappeared from the mainstream art world for 30 years, until Hayden Herrera’s famous 1983 biography. Herrera’s biography sparked what is known as ‘Fridamania’. Since this time, many writers, singers and actors have been inspired by the tragic and highly emotional life of Kahlo. Her popularity exploded during the 1990’s and was highlighted once again after the release of the movie *Frida* in 2002. Stephanie Mencimer, art critic for the *Washington Post* wrote in 2002,

“Fridamaniacs are inspired by Kahlo’s tragic tale of physical suffering – polio at 6, grisly accident at 18 – and fascinated with her glamorous friends and lovers.”

Kahlo’s life and her art works have generated over 65,000 websites worldwide. There are reproductions of her art work on anything from paper to mouse pads to furniture, clothing and clocks. In 2002, the U.S Postal Service placed her photograph on a stamp which made her the first Hispanic woman to receive such an honour. During her lifetime she was largely ignored and overshadowed by the fame and charisma of Diego Rivera. Since her death she is now recognised as a talented artist. Very few would now dispute that she is more famous than her husband Diego Rivera. Carlos Fuentes says “whatever the reasons for her present popularity, the basic fact is that a great artist has been recognised worldwide. I think she’s even on matchboxes now, yes?”

In an article in June 2005, art critic Mike Gonzalez writes, “There is much power and beauty in the work of Frida Kahlo. Her own story is tragic and uplifting, her painting provocative, daring and strange. Indeed in some ways her paintings are chapters in a long autobiography, paralleled and matched by her diaries, which were published much later”.

Art historian Victor Zamudio-Taylor says, “she has become a model for Mexican Americans and Hispanics in the United States because she nurtures a sense of who we are and of a long history and of continuities.”

There are those who conscientiously object to Fridamania. Patricia Phelp de Cisneros, an important art collector from Venezuela, comments: “What we now have to fight against is the “chiquita banana” image. I am the founder of a virtual club called the “anti-Frida Kahlo Club,” and every time I say this in a conference, the reactions are interesting. My point is not whether or not Frida is a good painter; my point is that she embodies an image that leads the world to think that all Latin American art has to be completely picturesque, vividly coloured, tragic, and folkloric.”

Kahlo’s work has been collected by public galleries world wide. The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra held an exhibition in 2001 entitled *Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Mexican Modernism*. Kahlo’s 1943 portrait *Roots*, recently sold at Sotheby’s Auction House in New York for $5.62 million, setting a record as the most expensive Latin American work ever purchased at an art auction.
CHAPTER THREE - THE MAIN FEATURES OF KAHLO’S ART WORK

In this chapter we will deal with the following features of Frida Kahlo’s art work.

- The materials and techniques used by Kahlo
- The main subject matter, ideas and themes and influences that Kahlo expresses in her art work
- The aesthetic qualities and the distinctive style in Kahlo’s art work
- The relevance of historical and cultural contexts on Kahlo’s art work.

New technology is not discussed as a main feature in the work of Frida Kahlo as this key discussion point is not appropriate to the work of Kahlo.

The materials and techniques used by Frida Kahlo

Kahlo was predominantly a painter. She painted on canvas, metal and masonite. For example *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* 1936, is painted on a metal panel, 30 x 34.5 cm. *Self-Portrait with Monkey* 1940, is an oil painting on masonite, 43.5 x 55 cm.

Kahlo also produced a number of works on paper using coloured ink. Kahlo maintained a visual diary over the final ten years of her life which contained numerous drawings in pencil and ink. Throughout her painting career it is believed she produced approximately 200 works. Kahlo occasionally used collage in her paintings such as *My Dress Hangs There or New York* 1933, oil and collage on masonite 46 x 50 cm. In this painting Kahlo has collaged photographs of Depression-era unemployment, which constitute the lower part of the picture. One commentator says she compares "reality" with the "made-up" painting and thereby
highlights the vulgar display of American wealth and well-being as opposed to the poverty and suffering of the lower classes.

The scale of Kahlo's work is smaller and more intimate contrasted with the grand mural tradition of her time. Her work was often done in the style of Mexican street artists who painted “retablos”, small paintings on metal that offer thanks to the Virgin Mary or a saint for a miraculous deliverance from misfortune.

Kahlo used traditional oil paints from tubes combined with diluting and thinning materials such as turpentine. The most unique quality regarding Frida Kahlo's practice and technique as an artist was the way she managed to paint when she was bedridden. After her first bus accident her mother designed a special easel for her so that she could paint whilst ‘propped up’ in bed. There are many photographs of Kahlo lying in bed either using her special easel or simply balancing a canvas on her lap. Due to her back and pelvic injuries Kahlo spent many months in bed following her numerous operations. Over time she became very resourceful in her methods of working under extreme discomfort. Another tool Kahlo used was a mirror to help her see more clearly her own features whilst sitting or lying in bed. Some critics believe this technique may have obscured her vision and ultimately influenced her use of perspective but this has been debated. When her health had returned Kahlo would paint seated in a chair or in her wheelchair. She placed her canvas on an upright easel and used long handled paint brushes applying the paint taken from a timber paint palette.

The main subject matter, ideas and themes and influences that Kahlo expresses in her art work

As a woman artist Kahlo explored sexuality, fertility, cultural identity, marriage and the pain of the physical body as constant themes throughout her work presenting them with a brutal honesty. Kahlo’s drawings and paintings are vivid and sometimes gruesome snapshots of her physical and emotional life. The emotional content in her work is related to her individual character and her personal life story. Her work is centred upon her own experiences as a woman who suffered enormous physical and emotional pain in her relatively short life. The main subject matter explored by Kahlo was portraiture and figurative work. 55 of her 200 works...
were self portraits, although she did paint commissioned portraits and still life paintings. In her diary she refers to herself as “the one her gave birth to herself, who wrote the most beautiful poem with her life”.

Pirkko Siltala in his study of Kahlo writes, “The object of Frida's intense study was her own self. She painted self-portraits to be able to feel she existed. She built and created herself in painting. The bed-ridden Frida studied herself in mirrors like Narcissus in the water's surface—and became merged and separated. She lived literally in the tensions of life and death. Frida Kahlo's pictures are incarnated from life to life and become protective and supportive icons”.

Hayden Herrera believes that Kahlo differentiates herself from most other artists in the way she reveals such intimate details of her life in her art work. She makes the viewer face parts of themselves that have been unexplored. The viewer is able to see Kahlo recovering from an abortion, vomiting, laying naked on a bed, sleeping with a skeleton, cutting herself and exposing her human heart and spinal column. In other works we see calmness and beauty in her self portraits and gentle still lifes.

A common theme in Kahlo’s work is her tumultuous relationship with Rivera. The connections to Rivera can relate to love, jealousy, betrayal, motherly feelings and pride. In 1932 she painted *Frida and Diego Rivera*, a marriage portrait. Herrera says that the painting hints at what was to come. Rivera looks immense next to Kahlo and is holding his brushes and palette board. Kahlo looks like the “genius's adoring wife.” In 1940 Kahlo painted *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, shortly after her divorce from Rivera. She appears in a man’s suit with short cropped hair, which she has obviously cut off with the scissors she is holding in her hand. She is deliberately not wearing the Tehuana costume that gave Rivera so much pleasure. In *Diego and I* 1946, Kahlo paints a portrait of herself with Rivera’s face painted on her forehead. At this time Rivera was threatening to divorce her and marry Maria Felix a movie star. She is surrounded by her hair which is loose and as Herrera says “swirls around her neck suggesting strangulation.” As the years went on Kahlo took a more motherly attitude towards Rivera. In *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me and Senor Xolotl* 1949, Kahlo paints herself cradling a baby Rivera. Herrera says that in this painting “Frida is the earth mother nurturing the baby she could never have.”

One theme which features regularly in Kahlo’s work is her dual identity as a woman with European origins and one with native Mexican Indian origins. Kahlo’s mother was part indigenous Mexican Indian. In *My Wet Nurse and I* 1937, the split between her Mexican and European selves is apparent. Kahlo was breast fed as a child by a Mexican Indian wet nurse. Kahlo always felt that her physical weakness stemmed from her German blood. In this painting, a wet nurse with an Aztec mask nurses an infant Frida in European clothes with an adult head. Amie Gillingham believes that the nurse is possibly a symbol used by Kahlo to represent the stronger indigenous side of her personality lending strength and sustenance to her weaker, European self. Art critic Amie Gillingham says the “apex of Kahlo’s cultural duality” appears in *The Two Fridas* 1939. This painting features Kahlo's split cultural identity. The Mexican Frida in traditional Tehuana dress and the European Kahlo in a white European style dress from the turn of the century.
Kahlo was famous for wearing Tehuantepec style clothing. Tehuantepec is a region of Mexico which is famous for its indigenous Mexican culture. A woman who wore Tehuantepec clothing was called a Tehuana. Many of Kahlo’s paintings feature Tehuana dress. Kahlo kept up the style long after it had gone out of fashion to make it uniquely her own. Kahlo associated her indigenous self with Rivera. Hence, after their initial split, she abandoned her traditional costumes and cut her hair as an act of rebellion. In *Self Portrait with Thorny Necklace* 1940, Kahlo mixes indigenous Aztec tradition with Christian imagery. The thorn necklace echoes Christ’s Crown of Thorns while at the same it echoes Aztec practices where priests performed self-mutilation with thorns and stingray spines. The dead hummingbird is sacred to the god of sun and of war. The fearful Aztec goddess Coatlicue wears a necklace of skulls.

Kahlo wearing a Tehuana headdress  
*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on my Mind)* (1943)

Kahlo confronts childbirth and her inability to bear children from a number of perspectives. *My Birth* 1932, following her traumatic miscarriage in New York, was completed three months after her mother’s death. The painting is a radical rejection of conventional images of motherhood and a confrontation with the obstetric reality of childbirth. Dr Janet McKenzie, writing about an exhibition of Kahlo’s work at the Tate Modern in London in 2005, says that in this painting,

“The startling image is immediately perceived as a forbidden sight: It explodes two deep-rooted taboos as it displays the ‘unshowable’ sexuality of the mother and her vaginal blood. In addition to this, Kahlo blasphemously links these ‘impure’ images with the holiest Christian icon, as she places a portrait of the immaculate Madonna directly above the taboo body”.

Since she could not be a mother, Kahlo lavished her attention on her many pets: dogs, cats, monkeys, and birds, as well as on her plants. Her plants and animals are often featured in her self-portraits, taking the place of children. Herrera says that Kahlo may have intended the monkeys in her paintings to symbolise lust and
sexuality because she herself was very open about sex. She binds herself to the spiders with ribbons, which in Kahlo’s visual language are life lines. Herrera says that although the monkeys often have their arm around Kahlo, they actually highlight her isolation because they are neither children nor her beloved Rivera.

Kahlo had a strong sense of life and death and the connectedness of life. This is evidenced in her painting *Roots* 1943, which shows her desire for fertility and to be a part of the life cycle.

Kahlo also depicted her bisexuality. Although she twice married Rivera and had many affairs with men, she also had affairs with women. She spoke of her bisexuality openly. Generally, she referred to her bisexuality more indirectly in her work. The most direct reference is in her painting, *Two Nudes in a Forest* 1939, which shows a pale skinned woman with her head on the lap of a darker skinned woman. The figures are watched by a spider monkey, a symbol of lust, yet the painting also has two other titles (Earth Herself and, My Nurse and I) perhaps from a desire to maintain ambiguity. These two nude figures also appeared in an earlier work *What the Water Gave Me* 1938.

Kahlo had 32 operations in an attempt to relieve some of her lasting pain from the accident. She lived with bouts of pain and discomfort throughout her life and was often bedridden and or hospitalized for periods of time. In addition to the operations to alleviate her pain, she also wore different kinds of corsets and was subjected to mechanical "stretching" systems. Time and again, Kahlo graphically paints her physical pain. *The Broken Column* 1944, is probably the best example of this. The column which is broken symbolises her crushed spine and one of the sources of her pain. The nails in her body show in a physical way the pain she was enduring, and the tears in her eyes show that her pain was excruciating. Carlos Fuentes, says that:

“Frida found a way of painting pain – of permitting us to see pain and in so doing, reflecting the pain of the world. … She is a figure that represents the conquest of adversity, that represents how – against hell and high water – a person is able to make their life and reinvent themselves and make that life be personally fulfilling”

As a woman in a male dominated world Kahlo also used pain and wounds to describe collective suffering. In *A Few Small Nips* 1935, Kahlo paints a dead woman on a bed, naked but for one shoe and stocking, her body slashed and bleeding, while a man, fully dressed, stands calmly at her side. The painting was inspired by a real-life murder story. The murdering husband told the judge that the wounds on his wife were “only a few small nips”. The painting stands as wider commentary on the gender inequalities within Mexican society, as well as echoing the hurt she herself endured at the hands of her husband Rivera.

Even though Rivera worked for the great American capitalists, Rockefeller and Henry Ford, painting murals, Rivera and Kahlo were advocates of Marxism and Communism. When she died in 1954, Kahlo’s coffin was draped with a large flag bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle superimposed upon a star. Kahlo’s painting *My Dress Hangs There* 1933 reflects Kahlo’s rejection of American capitalism. Kahlo’s trips to the United States furthered her conviction that she must fight to maintain the indigenous culture of Mexico instead of allowing what she called the
capitalist way of life to take over. Expressing her feelings about the growing capitalist influence in Mexico, Kahlo painted *Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States* 1934.

Still life painting was an important part of Kahlo’s artistic practice. Kahlo used her still-life as a type of indirect self-portraiture. The symbol of the ripe fruit, splitting to reveal fleshy interiors, suggest body parts and emotions felt, and carry an undercurrent of eroticism. The positioning of ripe fruit and corn cobs contrasted with a dried-up husk also imply the cycles of life, the beginning and the end. The theme of mortality is present in the painting *Still Life with Pitahayas*, 1938, with the inclusion of a white toy skeleton. This little skeleton is called a Calavera and is often seen in Mexican culture to represent the humorous side of death. It is a bit like a laughing grim reaper. Gerry Souter, who wrote the 2005 book *Frida Kahlo: Beneath the Mirror* writes:

“Another outlet for Frida’s increasing introspection into her own mortality and the fragility of life appeared in her ongoing still life paintings. These works first appeared in the late 1930's with that erotic gem, *Flower of Life*. They allowed her to explore uncomfortable internal ideas using benign subject matter that didn’t immediately scare away potential buyers.”

It has also been suggested that Kahlo’s still life paintings represent her nationalist sentiment by her use of locally grown Mexican produce such as the prickly pear and corn cobs.

Author Nelson Goodman, in his book *Languages of Art*, explains, “Negative emotions of fear, hatred, disgust may become positive when occasioned by a play or painting." He believes that tragedy in art has the ability of transporting the viewer and sometimes cleansing them of their most horrifying thoughts. Diego Rivera also made similar references to the power of transformation in Kahlo’s work. In 1953, Rivera said tragedy was not the focal point of Frida’s art but instead a dark background by which she could further illuminate her great strength and endurance. Rivera said that that Frida was "teaching her comrades, human beings, how to resist opposing forces and triumph over them to reach a higher joy."

In her work there is a balance between the beauty of life and the brutality of existence. Her work contains a tension shifting between the beauty of Frida herself, the charm of Mexican culture and costume alongside an anguished scene of physical damage and surreal distress. In many ways Kahlo’s work is quite exotic. Her portrait paintings feature exotic backgrounds of fruit and plant life. She embellishes herself with beads, colourful headdress, embroidered garments and dangling earrings, a scene which defies her inner torment and unhappiness. Her use of plant life, pulsating veins and blood remind the viewer of the vulnerability of life and the loose thread that joins us between life and death.

Elements of Kahlo’s work are mysterious. Her use of text could be both ironic, an expression of love or an attempt to create pure horror and disbelief within the viewer. At times, the text in her paintings is clearly intended to shock the viewer as seen in the painting *Suicide of Dorothy Hale*. In other works, Kahlo used text more directly as a tool to explain her family roots, her political beliefs or to express
her desire to remain positive and hopeful in times of great emotional or physical pain.

Kahlo never received any formal art training but she had a range of artistic influences. One of Kahlo’s early artistic influences was her father. He encouraged her to appreciate a creative life through his occupation as a photographer. He became the First Official Photographer of The Cultural Patrimony of Mexico. He was commissioned by the Secretary of the Treasury to take photos of historically important buildings and monuments. At an early age Kahlo would accompany her father on his photo shoots and later became employed with another photographer as an assistant. She began a paid apprenticeship in engraving with Fernando Fernandez and he appreciated her ability to copy prints.

Following her first marriage to Rivera Kahlo established her own studio space at their home. Her studio was filled with books and other objects of art and popular culture. Kahlo was surrounded by grotesque masks, pieces of traditional Mexican pottery, traditional retablo’s, folkloric paintings and Pre-Columbian art works. Pre-Columbian sculptures were always present in Kahlo’s studio as Rivera was an avid collector. Evidence of influence can be seen in Kahlo’s use of pre-Columbian icons in her paintings. Critics have compared the famous Aztec sculpture of goddess Tlazolteolt from the sixteenth century to the mother giving birth in Kahlo’s painting My Birth 1932. Various pieces of pre-Columbian art appear in her paintings such as the mask in My Nanny and I 1939, a masked head in What the Water Gave Me 1938 and various sculptures appear in Self Portrait along the Border and the United States.

Artistic influences on Kahlo include Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) and French artist Henri Rousseau (1844–1910).

Henri Rousseau  The Dream  1910  oil on canvas

Henri Rousseau like Kahlo was a self-taught artist with a unique style, perhaps best exemplified in his visionary jungle scenes. He captured the lushness of plant and animal life, while at the same time unsettling the viewer with a combination of both the exotic and romantic aspects of life, not unlike Kahlo. Kahlo demonstrates
a similarity of subject matter and style with Rousseau in works such as, *Self Portrait with Thorny Necklace* 1940 and *Self Portrait with Monkey* 1940. Kahlo used the same style and placement of plant forms and animals in many of her portraits. Her painting technique and style is also slightly reminiscent of Rousseau. Kahlo also had an appreciation for Oriental Art and the Mexican painter Adolfo Best Maugard. Another great influence on Kahlo was her friend Tina Modotti. Modotti, an American photographer first introduced Kahlo to the art world.

Arguably one of the most influential individuals in Kahlo’s life was the Surrealist poet and essayist Andre Breton. Breton took a liking to Kahlo and quickly accepted her into the world of Surrealism of which he was the leader. He provided not only exhibition opportunities but held great plans to promote her as a Surrealist artist. He went on to write an introduction to the catalogue for her show in New York and then sponsored her show in Paris in 1939. Later Breton organised the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* at the Gallery of Mexican Art in Mexico and invited Frida to also participate. He described her work as a “ribbon around a bomb”. However, Kahlo herself denied ever being a member of the Surrealist group. “I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality”. Hayden Herrera says, “Surrealism encouraged Frida to follow her own fantasy, a fantasy deeply embedded in her native culture”.

Another significant influence on the art work of Frida Kahlo was her overseas travel. Throughout her travels she met different artists and each encounter played an instrumental part in her future success and notoriety as an artist. Frida had opportunities to meet individuals such as Vassily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso, all of whom she met in 1939 in Paris at the *Mexique* exhibition. In 1940, Frida also met Salvador Dali, another Surrealist, whose works were being exhibited alongside hers in the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* held in Mexico.

**The aesthetic qualities and the distinctive style in Kahlo’s art work**

The most significant aesthetic qualities present in Kahlo’s work include her use of organic colours, her application of flat areas of paint, her use of vibrant colours such as red and yellow, areas of tonal painting and her application of implied tone to create texture. Other important aesthetic qualities include her use of a dense and often cropped composition. Her paintings are generally balanced compositions. For example, Kahlo may use two opposing figures as in *The Two Fridas* or frame her compositions with plant life, foliage or animals as seen in *Self Portrait with Thorny Necklace*.

Kahlo used many decorative elements in her work. The decorative features counterbalanced the anguish. Although the content of her paintings was generally tragic and sometimes outwardly gory the surrounding landscape or background foliage was often full of hope and energy. Organic tones and warm colours were a dominant feature of her compositions. Green, yellow ochre, orange, brown and flesh tones were always present in her paintings. Her use of colour was highlighted with strong areas of red usually on the lips of the figure or from dripping blood. The application of a soft yellow paint was also present in many of her paintings, such as, the yellow of the bird in *Self Portrait with Bonito* 1942. The yellow in her work represented her desire to remain hopeful.
In some paintings Kahlo uses Spanish text. Text is generally presented like handwriting. This often adds a personal or conversational tone to the work. For example in _Self Portrait with Cropped Hair_ 1940, Kahlo includes the lyrics to a popular Mexican song which reinforces her message in the painting that men see a woman without long hair as unlovable or unwanted.

Kahlo used a combination of tone, texture and flat colour in her work. Her use of tone created not only a mood but provided shape in her figures, the face of her subjects and her exotic items of clothing. Her use of line to create texture was quite detailed particularly in the clothing worn by her subjects and in her handling of foliage in the background areas of her portrait works. Her Rousseau inspired leaves, flowers and branches are delicately veined with fine decorative lines as seen in works such as _Fulang-Chang and I_ and _Self Portrait with Monkey._

Kahlo painted in a naïve style where perspective and the detail of images were often simplified. She represented her figures and objects realistically but at times drifted towards a dreamlike ‘surrealistic’ approach. The distinctive elements in her work are her use of subject matter, the impact of naïve folkloric painting on her painting style and the cultural aspects of her work.

Kahlo was a realistic painter who combined reality with an array of dreamlike images in her paintings. Her distinctive style is very dependent on her subject matter. Fundamentally, it is her choice of subject matter and her use of the naïve painting style that make her paintings distinctive. Her manipulation and use of the aesthetic qualities is not a major contributing factor in her development of her distinctive style.

The viewer is able to easily identify a Kahlo painting because it usually contains an image of Kahlo herself or an image of Rivera. Her self portraits are distinctive images of strong women, with dark hair, red lips and very distinctive eyebrows. She often represents herself as the tortured women both physically and mentally. Her paintings are distinctive also because of her use of the naïve, folk art method of painting. Folk art is generally made by people with little or no formal training like Frida herself. Folk art is a style which is ‘handed down’ through generations and often portrays a particular region. This painting style is characterised by the careful simplification of its subjects, a non scientific approach to perspective and a literal depiction of imaginary scenes. Henri Rosseau is an excellent example of naïve folk art painting.

The various cultural influences and content in Kahlo’s painting help to create her distinctive style. In most of her self portraits she is dressed in the traditional Mexican dress. In her still life paintings, Kahlo uses the plant life, fruits and animals distinctive to her life as a Mexican woman. Most importantly, Kahlo has used the idea of the traditional retablo as a feature in some of her works. Kahlo’s use of the retablo helps to create a distinctive style in her work. Kahlo created retablo like images in some of her paintings such as, _The Two Fridas_ and _Thinking about Death_ , that captured a small memento of her suffering, sometimes elevating her subjects (usually herself) to a kind of iconic image not unlike the suffering Jesus Christ.
The retablos pictured above are typical examples of a traditional Mexican retablo. The influence of retablo painting in Kahlo’s work is often mentioned for two reasons. Firstly and most obviously she would paint a small retablo as part of her larger composition. For example, we can see a small retablo placed on the forehead of Frida in her self portrait work, *Thinking of Death* 1943. This small retablo features a skull and bones in a landscape. In *The Two Fridas*, Kahlo has venerated Diego in a small retablo placed in the palm of her hand. The second reason why retablo’s have influenced the work of Kahlo is through the subject matter and style of her paintings. Kahlo often created in her work an almost sacred representation of herself. The drama and tragedy in her work reminds us of the devotional retablos of the suffering Virgin Mary. For example, in *My Birth* 1932, a portrait of the Virgin Mary weeping above the bed on which Frida is born, is meant to foretell the hardships of Kahlo’s own life.

**The relevance of historical and cultural contexts on Frida Kahlo’s art work**

Kahlo was heavily influenced by the Mexican Revolution which began in 1910 when she was only three years of age. Frida later claimed (falsely) that she was born in 1910 so that people would associate her birth with the commencement of the revolution. In some of her writings she recalls the sounds of gunfire and her mother would usher both her and her sisters safely inside. The ideals of the Mexican Revolution and the survival of indigenous culture became central to her practice as an artist.

Kahlo was proud of her Mexican culture and tradition. She maintained a devoted desire to promote her Mexican culture and the importance of indigenous culture and this passion remained evident in her work until her death in 1954. One theme which features regularly in Kahlo’s work is her dual identity as a woman with European origins and one with indigenous Mexican Indian origins. Kahlo’s mother was part indigenous Mexican Indian. In Mexico people with mixed European and indigenous blood were called mestizas. In the 1920s and 1930s after the Mexican revolution, Mexicans started trying to redefine their national and cultural identity and remove the stain of the Spanish conquest. Mexicans became interested in the
Pre Columbian period of Mexico’s history which occurred before the Spanish invasion in the 1500s. All things European became unpopular. Arts writer, Amie Gillingham in her article *Frida Kahlo: Identity/Duality* says that Kahlo as a true believer in the future of Mexico “had the task of trying to reconcile her Mexican self with her European self in her search for wholeness.”

In her early painting career, Kahlo was exposed to the paintings of the ‘three Mexican muralists’, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco. The three muralists were very famous in Mexico at the time. They painted scenes of Mexican life and the life of the indigenous people. These images influenced Kahlo’s political beliefs and her pictorial content.

Amie Gillingham says the ‘apex of Kahlo’s cultural duality’ appears in *The Two Fridas* 1939. This painting features Kahlo’s split cultural identity. On the right is the Mexican Frida in traditional Tehuana dress. On the left is European Kahlo in a colonial white dress, possibly intended to be a wedding dress.

Kahlo was famous for wearing Tehuantepec style clothing. Tehuantepec is a region of Mexico which is famous for its indigenous Mexican culture. A woman who wore Tehuantepec clothing was called a Tehuana. Arts writer Jeffrey Belnap says that Kahlo and other intellectual women like her wore the Tehuana dress because it symbolised a resilient indigenous tradition where women were believed to have maintained a strong economic and sexual autonomy in spite of colonial history. It is interesting to note that Rivera encouraged Kahlo to dress in the Tehuana style. Kahlo kept up the style long after it had gone out of fashion to make it uniquely her own. Kahlo associated her indigenous self with Rivera. Hence, after their initial split, she abandoned her traditional costumes and cut her hair as an act of rebellion. Arts writer, Elizabeth Dexter says that “by dressing as a Tehuana in the heart of New York, Mexico City or Paris, Kahlo gave a sign of solidarity with the ordinary oppressed of Mexico and it was also a sign of recognisable national tradition in the face of a changing world of social, political and economic modernisation.”

As indicated earlier Kahlo was highly influenced by Mexican retablos. They are small oil paintings on tin, zinc, wood or copper which venerate the saints. Retablos were used in home altars and churches as devotional icons and were commonly invoked for protection against plagues, fires, temptation, poverty, infertility and sin. The Spanish word retablo is derived from the Latin retro-tabulum, meaning *behind the table*. These small paintings were generally purchased by middle and lower-class mestizo families rather than the wealthy classes. Kahlo’s use of the retablo as subject matter indicates her cultural connection to the everyday Mexican.

Even though Rivera worked for the great American capitalists, Rockefeller and Henry Ford, painting murals, Rivera and Kahlo were advocates of Marxism and Communism. Kahlo had an affair with Trotsky who was one of the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 which brought in communist rule. When she died in 1954, Kahlo’s coffin was draped with a large flag bearing the Soviet hammer and sickle superimposed upon a star. In line with her communist leanings, Kahlo was always sensitive to the needs of the poor and the oppressed. Kahlo’s painting *My Dress Hangs There* 1933, reflects Kahlo’s rejection of American capitalism. Art critic Janice Helland says that Kahlo scourges the United States
with representations of the bourgeois life-style including a toilet, a telephone, and a sports trophy. Kahlo indict the hypocrisy of America by wrapping a dollar sign around the cross of a church. During her absence from Mexico Kahlo painted about her homesickness. Kahlo’s trips to the United States furthered her conviction that she must fight to maintain the indigenous culture of Mexico instead of allowing what she called the capitalist way of life to take over. Expressing her feelings about the growing capitalist influence in Mexico, Kahlo painted *Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States* 1933, in which she is standing between the ruins of Mexico and the industry of North America holding a Mexican flag in her hand. This indicates how strongly Kahlo disliked the industrialisation and technological development she saw in the United States and the fact that she feared Mexico would soon fall into the same trap. This potential loss of her indigenous cultural life was an important concern for Kahlo.

Feminists often criticise Kahlo because she was so centred and obsessed with her life with Rivera. Feminist art critic Jeanette Winterson says that Kahlo’s work cannot be labelled as feminist art by today’s standards because “her representations of her own body put her on the side of ‘women’s work’; personal, confessional, small in size and carefully defined by their own concerns.” However, Winterson says that Kahlo was ahead of her time as a female artist because she believed her own life and her own body were the proper subjects for art. Kahlo was speaking to other women, about physical pain, sexual rejection, medical intervention, marginalisation, family life and gynaecology, in a time when these things were taboo. Winterson says Kahlo “is a great painter. She returns to the Renaissance truth of the body as the centre of all things, and anticipates the ultra-modern interpretations of Tracy Emin, Antony Gormley, Sam Taylor Wood, among others, who have turned their own bodies into their work.”

Professor Whitney Chadwick also says that Kahlo should not be criticised on the grounds of a modern feminist critique of her strong attachment to a male figure (Rivera). Chadwick says that Kahlo forged her own feminine identity in an age when there were no role models. Fiercely independent in life, she resisted the prevailing professional and sexual restrictions placed on middle class women. An advocate of sexual freedom for women, she planned to enter medical school at a time when women doctors were an anomaly. Given these facts, one would have to focus instead, not exclusively on Kahlo’s representation of herself as Rivera’s wife, but on the gap between her pictorial self-representation and the independence she exhibited in her personal life. She says that *The Two Fridas* was painted by Kahlo specifically for the 1940 International Surrealist exhibition in Mexico. It was her largest work and she says that it can be seen as “Kahlo’s most public, and monumental declaration of her importance as a Mexican artist, without Rivera’s help”.
CHAPTER FOUR - ANALYSIS OF 2 SELECTED ARTWORKS USING THE KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

TITLE: The Two Fridas
DATE: 1939
MEDIA: oil on canvas
DIMENSIONS: 173.5cm x 173cm
COLLECTION: Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.

THE TWO FRIDAS – THE INTERPRETATION OF SUBJECT MATTER AND INFLUENCES

The interpretation of subject matter is a key discussion point which requires a student to visually analyse the subject matter or objects contained in the art work and then interpret their meaning. Artists do not work to a formula and often works contain a mixture of subject matter for example a portrait and a landscape. Other
works like abstract art works may have no evidence of identifiable subject matter and without prior knowledge of the artist’s intentions it would be difficult to interpret. The identification of subject matter or the objects featured in The Two Fridas is relatively easy but an interpretation of subject matter requires more careful consideration.

What we see in The Two Fridas is a double self portrait of Kahlo. On the right is the Kahlo figure dressed in traditional Tehuana costume and on the left is Kahlo dressed in a European dress from the turn of the century. The two images of Kahlo are seated side by side and placed in an open empty space, framed by a dull cloudy sky. The subjects are linked by holding hands and are treated as two separate people. Each figure has an exposed heart and a vein runs between the two bodies feeding blood from one heart to the other. The Mexican Heart is whole and the European heart is savaged. The vein is linked to a small ‘retablo-like’ picture of Rivera held in the palm of the Mexican Kahlo’s hand. In the palm of the European Kahlo she holds a clamp to try and stop the dripping blood from the open vein.

Whatever the interpretation of subject matter is it is ultimately connected to the emotions surrounding Kahlo’s separation from Rivera. This marital crisis left Kahlo feeling fragile.

In this painting, the double Frida symbolises the different images she had of herself. She felt great tension between her Mexican and European identity. They were two different worlds. The European identity is symbolised through the white lace dress, her mother’s wedding dress. This dress represents the values and way of life within her European tradition. These values were espoused by her mother through her Catholic faith and rigid belief systems. She felt both a connection to Europe through her beloved father and at the same time strong resentment towards the European ways. The other side of Frida possessed a passionate sexual nature and a fondness and political fervour for Mexican culture and expressed this by wearing the traditional Tehuana dress. The Mexican Frida in The Two Fridas looks independent and comfortable with her own body and sexuality. The exposed arms, low neckline and open leg stance indicate this. This contrasts with the stiff formality of the high neckline and longer sleeves of European Frida’s clothing and the demure, repressed persona she gives off. Kahlo knew that Rivera preferred her Mexican image and it pleased him when she dressed herself in traditional costume. Her personal conflict was related to her love for Rivera and her ultimate fear of his betrayal, which she felt was in some way associated with her ‘European’ identity as a nagging, uptight wife. Gerry Souter in his biography of Frida Kahlo writes, “In The Two Fridas, the mirror duality becomes a schizophrenic visualisation”.

A strong sense of doom surrounds these women. The grey dull background appears to signal a coming storm. This creates a sense of unease in the painting. The exposed hearts and the strong gaze of the two women symbolise an empty and broken hearted world. The way Kahlo has connected the network of veins to a small ‘retablo-like’ image of Rivera, leads the viewer to believe that Kahlo sees Rivera as her only source of life. Without Rivera she will die. Jane Burton a curator with the Tate in London writes, “The motif of ribbons or threads that Kahlo used suggest emotional ties”. The Frida dressed in white has a white ribbon and bow on
her chest. The bow sits above an opening in her dress which appears to symbolise a split in her heart or a physical or emotional gash. Kahlo often used an opening of flesh or flowers in her paintings as a sign of vulnerability.

The interpretation of subject matter in this work is strongly connected to her life at the time she completed the painting. Throughout the creation of The Two Fridas Kahlo had immersed herself in her painting due to her impending divorce from Rivera. She had decided to accept no financial support from him. Her work during this period carried the despair of her divorce, which was finally legalised on November 6, 1939. Rivera wrote in his diary, “The situation between us grew worse and worse. I telephoned her to plead with her for her consent to a divorce.… It worked and Frida declared that she too wanted an immediate divorce. I simply wanted to be free to carry on with any woman who caught my fancy…What she could not understand was my choosing women who were unworthy of me, or inferior to her”. The frustration and confusion Kahlo experienced at this time is reflected in the subject matter of The Two Fridas.

THE TWO FRIDAS – DISCUSSION OF THE AESTHETIC QUALITIES

This key discussion point requires a student to visually analyse the aesthetic qualities present in the art work. Meaning and messages can often be derived from how the art work ‘looks’ or how it has been ‘put together’ by the artist. A discussion of the aesthetic qualities includes a discussion of the formal elements such as the use of colour, tone, texture, shape, line and aspects of the composition which relate to things such as scale, balance, proportion, movement and contrast.

Kahlo has used a mix of cool and warm colours in the Two Fridas to create emphasis. The cool grey, blue and white sky creates a sense of distance and emptiness. The cool green bench where the figures are seated also contributes to the coldness in the work. The dull brown of the foreground suggests aridity and emptiness. Warm tones are present on the flesh of the two figures, the two red hearts and threadlike veins. This creates a visual contrast next to the blue and white in the clothing. Red is probably the most dominant colour in this painting. The viewer is drawn to the figures’ hearts and the dripping red blood from the open vein. The delicate flowers on the white dress also in red and yellow somehow remove some of the horror felt by the red dripping blood on the lap of the European Frida.

Despite the fact that many aspects of the two figures are identical or very similar, Kahlo has used clothing to create a contrast between the two Fridas to highlight a dual but possibly conflicting identity within Kahlo herself. The blue, gold and brown of the Mexican Frida’s clothing contrast with the stark white of the European Frida’s clothing.

The use of tone in The Two Fridas is also a significant element in the work. Kahlo has used fine brushstrokes to illustrate gradual changes in light and dark. The tone applied over the background sky creates a haunting sensation and warns the viewer that change is in the air. The application of tone in the figures’ clothing creates shape in each body and provides a graceful flow in the fall of the full skirts
worn by the seated figures. Tone also indicates to the viewer the position of the legs in both the figures. The Mexican Frida has her legs placed apart almost like a man would and yet her European double appears to have her legs placed to the side in a more demure manner. Kahlo has applied a darker tone on the upper lip of the Mexican Frida to emphasize her famous moustache. The application of slightly lighter tones in the face of the European Frida suggest the application of makeup and a more refined European look than the earthier tones in the Mexican Frida.

Kahlo has used line extensively in *The Two Fridas*. The lines used for the veins are striking. This visually links the two Fridas and the viewer follows the path of the veins to make sense of the composition.

Kahlo also uses line to create the sensation of texture in the clothing of the two Fridas and in the woven seat material. The use of line to create texture is most effective in the lace top of the European Frida and in the hem of the Mexican Frida’s dress and on the frill of the skirt. Kahlo has applied the paint in delicate lines to create the effect of an intricate lace pattern. The lace around the neck of European Frida sits high and curves gently towards her chin.

*The Two Fridas* is a painting displaying symmetrical balance. The use of two figures of the same size and seated holding hands creates this balance. The linkage of the hands and the interconnecting vein create direction in the painting as the viewer moves from one figure to the other to discover the differences between them. The double Frida is in many ways a signature piece for Kahlo. In this work she has manipulated her regular use of the mirror to create a reflection of herself on the canvas. The centre of the work is balanced with the embracing hands of the two figures. An inner triangle is seen between the two figures and is balanced by the side border of skyline and the foreground earth in front of the two figures. The low horizon line creates a sense of movement but the two figures are grounded by the woven seat where they are rigidly seated.

**THE TWO FRIDAS – THE USE OF MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES**

This key discussion point requires a student to visually analyse the use of materials and techniques present in the production of an art work. A student would begin by outlining the materials the artist has applied, for example the type of paint used and the surface material used. Secondly, a student would discuss the various techniques and processes applied by the artist, for example tonal painting or textural effects. Finally, an interpretation of materials and techniques involves a discussion of how the artist has combined his use materials and techniques to enhance the art work.

The materials used in *The Two Fridas* are oil paint on canvas. The canvas is 173.5 x 173cm and is one of the largest scaled works that Kahlo ever produced. Her paintings were usually much smaller and intimate.

In order to apply, mix and create the subtle tonal areas Kahlo would have used a thinning agent with the oil paint to achieve this effect. Kahlo used a combination of brushes and a palette knife but most of the paint was applied and the tonal areas developed through the use of a brush. Evidence of the kind of brushes Kahlo used
is seen in photographs of Kahlo in her studio. Many of her brushes were long handled and she used a range of brush sizes and shapes. It also appears from studio photos that Kahlo would often start her painting with a chalk or pencil outline onto the canvas. She would start with the painting of her main figure and finish the painting with the background colour or landscape. Her process of art making also involved many drawings.

Kahlo has employed a relatively traditional approach in the application of the paint on the canvas. The figures in *The Two Fridas* are painted realistically but contain a surrealist element with the inclusion of the open hearts and veins that appear as though the body has a transparent skin. This painting technique was part of Kahlo’s distinctive style where she sometimes overlaid flowers or objects and submerged elements using Surrealist techniques within the picture. Her painting technique was largely based on her use of tone to create the shape and mood of the central figures. The painting technique used in the background of *The Two Fridas* is loose and contains qualities of expressionism with the free open strokes of paint in the whirling clouds. This is in contrast with the tight, controlled painting technique used for the figures and their clothing.

**THE TWO FRIDAS – THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DISTINCTIVE STYLE**

This key discussion point refers to a discussion of an artist’s distinctive or unique combination of subject matter, aesthetic qualities, materials and techniques and their influences. In other words what are the things in this work that let us know that this is a painting by Frida Kahlo?

The work of Frida Kahlo is very distinctive and this is evident in *The Two Fridas*. One of the main reasons why her paintings are so distinctive is related to her use of subject matter. Her works are very easily identified because they generally contain an image of her. *The Two Fridas* is often called Kahlo’s signature work. It contains many of her favourite elements.

Kahlo herself appears in most of her paintings and is undoubtfully a very unique subject. Her identity is expressed through her repeated use of her own face. Her famous single eyebrow, her thick black braided hair, her red lips, her Tehuana Mexican dress, her earrings, her necklaces and her hair ribbons became so powerfully “Kahlo”. In *The Two Fridas* we see not one but two images of Kahlo as her favourite subject matter. Kahlo also created a series of motifs and images which she repeated throughout her career such as Pre Columbian masks, native animals and plant life, the naked figure and the inclusion of exotic headdress. These motifs were merged with her own identity as the main subject matter in her art work.

Kahlo’s distinctive style is also found in her ability to express and expose her emotions at such an intense level. Her work often contains gruesome or “taboo” subject matter. In *The Two Fridas* we see a gruesome scene of ripped out hearts and open dripping veins. Most significantly, Kahlo has been able to express these emotions in a visual language which can be easily read and understood by a large number of people. This is not an easy task. Many artists express emotions in their
work but are often unable to find a visual language people want or are able to engage with. It is not surprising that at the time Kahlo was painting she was often criticised for the gruesome “obstetric” content of her work. However, in the 1980s and 1990s when feminism, sexual liberation and a better appreciation of psychic pain were in place, it is not surprising that her works became so popular. In this respect, Frida Kahlo developed a distinctive style which has endured well after her death.

There are other elements contained in Kahlo’s work which create a distinctive style. Kahlo often uses a powerful horizon line across her paintings. This strong horizon line appears in many works and is a significant part of The Two Fridas. The horizon line attempts to ground the two figures and connect them to the earth. The use of tone below the horizon line takes the viewer beyond the seated figures into an unknown world. Kahlo often uses the third dimension created through the meeting of the sky and the horizon line to take the viewer away to an imaginary place.
ANALYSIS OF ‘WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME’

TITLE: What the Water Gave Me
DATE: 1938
MEDIA: oil on canvas
DIMENSIONS: 91 x 70.5 cm
COLLECTION: Isidore Ducasse, France.
**WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME—**  
**THE INTERPRETATION OF SUBJECT MATTER AND INFLUENCES**

*What the Water Gave Me* is an unusual painting for Kahlo. Most of her works have a central figure or focal point whereas in this painting there are a range of competing objects. In this painting Kahlo has created an interesting self portrait where the viewer can share the same viewpoint that Kahlo has when she looks out on the world. The viewer, in effect is in Kahlo’s “head” with her lying in a bath.

As the viewer, we join Kahlo looking at her lower body in the bath and we are fully aware of her physical presence in the bath with her bloody deformed toes. This is the “real” part of Kahlo that she (and we as the viewer) sees. The painting also consists of a multitude of objects that “float” across the surface of the bath. It is obvious that these are the dreams and thoughts of Kahlo as she lies in the bath. We as the viewer join her in her daydream and her inner world as well as her physical world. Herrera says that when Kahlo was a child she played with toys in a bath tub and created dreams and fantasies about these toys in the bath. Kahlo stated that *What the Water Gave Me* was about how all her dreams had turned into a sad ending. As a mature woman, Kahlo sits in the bath looking at her wounded body and sees what life has actually given her. This painting is essentially about the death of her dreams and aspirations. Death is symbolically represented by the dead bird in the tree and the little Caldera skeleton.

Perhaps the most symbolically loaded feature of this painting is the smallish image of a dead or dying naked woman with ropes around her neck and waist. This figure is often called “the strangled Tehuana”. Insects crawl over her face and blood drips from her mouth. Her thick black hair and Botticelli shaped body are draped above the water in a lifeless and cold manner. It is commonly stated that the strangled Tehuana clearly symbolizes Kahlo and the way that she was strangled and pulled by conflicting forces in her life. It also symbolizes the way she was wracked by pain and physically stretched in plaster corsets and stretching machines to try and alleviate her pain. We are forcibly reminded of Kahlo’s physical deformities by the bleeding crooked toes of the right foot which features prominently in the top of the painting. It is not clear if the strangled Tehuana is dead. However, she is in mortal danger.

The painting reveals many of the destructive aspects of Kahlo’s life as if they have all conspired to strangle her. Kahlo must have been feeling particularly depressed or without hope when she painted *What The Water Gave Me*. In 1938, marital relations between Kahlo and Rivera were extremely strained and the couple were heading for their separation and divorce which occurred in 1939.

The composition of the objects in the frame created by the outline of the bath water is loosely based around an island and sea landscape. The bathwater roughly approximates to the sea level in the composition. Objects are not in proportion to each other and this highlights the “dreamlike” quality of the composition. The island in the right of the composition, which sits above the bath water line, has a volcano on it. From the cone of the smoking volcano emerges a white skyscraper resembling the Empire State Building in New York. Also on the island is a tree with a large dead bird lying upright. Near the tree in the top left of the island is a phallic
shaped rock outcrop. In the lower left side of the large island there is a reclining figure with a mask leaning against a large rock head. There is also a little white skeletal figure commonly described in Mexico as a *Caldera* in the bottom right of the big island.

To the left of the big island is a phallic shaped rocky outcrop which incorporates a large shell object with holes that are leaking water. To the left of this outcrop is a white sailing ship which reinforces the floating feel of this painting. The phallic shaped rocks are references to the men in her life like Rivera who ultimately strangle her. The shell like object is commonly believed to be a symbol of Kahlo’s failure to have children.

In the lower centre of the composition between the big island on the right and the outcrop on the left is the strangled Tehuana. Kahlo has painted the strangulation coming from straight lines of ropes that are connected horizontally between the two phallic outcrops, vertically down from the left outcrop to wrap around the neck of the woman and then across to the reclining figure on the big island who is holding the rope in his hand. The line of the ropes creates an inner triangle within the composition and is the main device used to create the psychological tension in *What the Water Gave Me*.

It is generally agreed that the semi naked figure reclining on the shore of the island is Rivera. He is holding the rope which creates the strangulation of the Tehuana. It is argued that this is Rivera because the male figure is wearing a mask very like the face of the *Chacmool* an ancient sculpture found in Mexico. Rivera was an avid collector of Pre Columbian art. The casual relaxed pose of the figure is also symbolic of Rivera’s promiscuity which “strangled” Kahlo so badly.

There are various other objects in the composition which we know relate to Kahlo’s life. Kahlo has painted the figures of her mother and father behind lush looking leaves. There are two naked female figures lying together on a spongy bed floating on the surface of the bathwater probably symbolizing Kahlo’s bisexuality and/or feminine nurturing side.

The tiny little ballerina on the tightrope created by the ropes, references her traumatic accident on the bus and also her first love Alejandro. After the impact when she was laying on the road, a little boy mistook her for a ballerina, because she was covered in gold dust accidentally released from a container carried by another passenger. The tightrope symbolises Kahlo’s sense of the fragility of her life and the balance between hope and despair. Like Kahlo’s life, the ballerina’s balance is tenuous and fraught with physical danger. Her body is positioned looking away from the rope, not along it. There is no where to move. She could fall at any time. The insects crawling along the same tightrope do not appear to suffer from the same unpredictability. Their grip is more flexible and natural. They crawl along the tightrope and know where they are going. They will not fall. Alejandro rejected Kahlo because she was flamboyant and unconventional. He wanted a “safe” life and like the insects he knew where he was going in life.

Kahlo often featured native Mexican plants and animals in her paintings. In *What the Water Gave Me*, Kahlo includes three sprouting prickly pear cacti and a range of lush vegetation and spiralling curling roots.
WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME–
DISCUSSION OF THE AESTHETIC QUALITIES

In this painting Kahlo has created the illusion that the viewer is in Kahlo’s head with her lying in a bath. This illusion is achieved by only representing her body from the thighs down. The edge of the water line in the bath essentially provides a horizon line or framing device for the composition. From the bottom of the composition the viewer can see two leg shapes which outline the thigh and rise vertically to the top third of the composition where the water line has been drawn horizontally to represent the end of the bath. The feet of the figure are braced against the end of the bath and the toes of each foot are the only part of the legs that appear above the water line of the bath. To confirm the illusion of the bath, the toes are painted in a mirror image below the water line. This creates a strange sensation of 10 toes on each foreshortened foot.

In What the Water Gave Me, Kahlo has used a range of colours. Kahlo has used two main background colours—a light grey to outline the bath and a greyish blue to represent the water. One of the most striking applications of colour is red. It appears in the toe nails, the dripping blood, the bodice of the Tehuana dress, the red head and legs of the dead bird, the fire of the volcano and the foliage in the plant in the foreground of the painting. Pure white appears in the sails of the ship and in parts of the sky scraper. Most of the colour in this painting is of low intensity because the colour is made up of mixtures of primary colours and this gives the colour an organic or real effect such as in the brown/green landscapes, the foliage and the flesh tones of the figures.

Kahlo uses contrasts in colour to good effect in What the Water Gave Me. For example, the contrast in colours between the white/grey of the bath and the flesh colour of the feet and the red of the toenails provides a dramatic focal point. The contrast between the colour in the bath and that of the water creates the realistic effect of a bath and its water line.

As in most of her works, Kahlo uses tone extensively in this painting. Kahlo’s use of tone in What the Water Gave Me provides a sense of distance and shape and form to the objects and figures in the composition. Her application of tone on the figures creates a powerful expression in both the face and body of the figures. In particular, Kahlo has captured the tortured expression of herself as the strangled victim in the centre of the painting. She has skilfully shaped the Tehuana dress through her application of tone and created an exotic appearance in the foliage. Very subtle tone has been applied over the submerged legs to create the transparency in the water. Tone and shape work in unison in this work. Kahlo’s use of tone forms the shape of the rock face, the feet of Kahlo, the plant life and the figures. Subtle applications of tone around the edges of the bath give it its characteristic rounded porcelain appearance.

Kahlo has relied upon her use of line in this work to create shape and detail in the finer areas of the painting. Strong lines have been created around the edges of the bath water through a shift in colour and tone. Line has been applied in the rope which creates a square shape in the centre of the composition. In some respects
this square is the focal point. Line is also an important element in representing the
detail in the skyscraper, the skeleton, the insects and the veins of the foliage and
the spiralling root like forms.

Kahlo has used several techniques to create implied texture in *What the Water
Gave Me*. Line and tone has been used to create the satiny texture of the skirt of
the Tehuana dress and the ribbed, pleated texture of the hem. The spotty
application of different coloured paint gives the floating bed its spongy porous
texture. The way Kahlo has painted the curling line of the wire in the ring at the end
of the bath and the little shapes to represent dripping blood, give the wire a
menacing, sharp cutting texture. The use of contrasting colour applied in gentle
little patches has created the soft feathered texture of the dead bird. The use of tiny
white lines of paint from the prickly pear plant give a prickly texture sensation. The
way Kahlo uses grey, brown tones in the figure of the strangled Tehuana gives us
a chilling sensation of coldness and that the body would be ‘cold to the touch.’

The bath and the bath water create the overall shape in this painting and
encourage the eye to move around the edges of the picture. Within the
composition several curved semicircular lines have been created which not only
shape the bath but also lead the eye around the picture plane. The placement of
the ropes in the composition creates movement in the painting as the viewer
follows the insects around the rope. Upward movement has been created by the
flames and the smoke that licks around the skyscraper.

In most of her works Kahlo would centre her figure and generally portrayed her
subjects face-on. In *What the Water Gave Me* Kahlo has painted her objects using
a slightly aerial view.

**WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME –
THE USE OF MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES**

*What the Water Gave Me* is an oil on canvas painting. It is a relatively large
canvas for a Kahlo painting and is 91 cm x 70.5 cm.

In order to create the effect of water and the floating transparency of liquid Kahlo
has created a veiled surface with her paint application. This effect has been
achieved through the use of thinning agents mixed with the oil paint. Hayden
Herrera writes, “The canvas’s subdued tones and thin, relatively transparent paint
surface enhance the mood of reverie.” These muted tones also reveal the legs of
Kahlo which remind the viewer that a figure is indeed laying beneath the story
above.

This painting has largely been executed using brushes. This is evident because of
the thin muted tones applied and the smooth finish of the paint surface. In many
parts of the painting the artist has created detailed areas of tone, such as the skirt
of the dress and the facial features of the figures. This also indicates the use of
small brushes. Many objects in the painting have been merged into the bath’s
water through the use of thinning agents in the paint. This appears at the bottom
of the small mountain, at the base of the dress and around the falling spurts of water.
Kahlo has employed a relatively traditional approach in the application of the paint on the canvas. The figures and objects in *What the Water Gave Me* are painted realistically. Kahlo has painted this work very finely and tightly and there is little evidence of free expressionistic brushstrokes, except perhaps in the volcano.

**WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME – THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

The meaning of historical and cultural context in terms of discussing art refers to the time, place and conditions in which an art work is created. It can also refer to specific cultural or historical factors contained in the subject matter of the art work. Historical and cultural context may be related to things such as the artist’s involvement in a particular art movement, the social and cultural traditions influencing the artist or a particularly significant event such as a war or political crisis.

*What the Water Gave Me*, was painted by Frida Kahlo in 1938. During this year of her life Kahlo had her first solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Carlos Fuentes writes, “Kahlo’s decisive shift from amateur to professional painter came in 1938, when she sold her first paintings (4 to Edward Robinson) and 25 works at the Julien Levy Gallery. Levy’s interest in Kahlo coincided with his abiding preoccupation with Surrealism, as subsequently she came to be seen as a Surrealist artist”. It was also the year that Andre Breton stayed with Kahlo and Rivera in Mexico.

Given that so much of Kahlo’s work is about herself, historical references are usually about significant events in her life. The presence of the little ballerina refers to her accident in 1925. Her parents are represented in their wedding clothes from 1898. The white ship could well refer to the Spanish invasion of the Americas which was started by Christopher Columbus in 1498. The presence of the Aztec masks refers to ancient Pre Columbian Aztec and Mayan cultures. The Empire State building was completed in New York in 1931 and for 40 years held the record of the largest building in the world. At the time *What the Water Gave Me* was painted in 1938 it was a world wide symbol of American capitalism and growth.

*What the Water Gave Me*, presents a range of cultural connections to the life and values of Frida Kahlo. When we view this painting it is easy to identify the cultural links with Mexico.

The presence of the Tehuana dress in *What the Water Gave Me* is typical of Kahlo’s work. Most of her paintings include the Tehuana costume in one form or another. It represents her life as a Mexican woman but more importantly it is a symbol of the indigenous Mexican traditions which she loved and admired. Tehuantepec is a region of Mexico which is famous for its indigenous Mexican culture. A woman who wore Tehuantepec clothing was called a Tehuana. Arts writer Jeffrey Belnap says that Kahlo and other intellectual women like her wore the Tehuana dress, because it symbolised a resilient indigenous tradition. The Tehuantepec women, despite the imposition of Spanish colonial rule with its strict
moral codes for women were considered as being relatively equal to men in their local society and they were also sexually liberated. It is interesting to note that Rivera encouraged Kahlo to dress in the Tehuana style. Kahlo associated her indigenous self with Rivera. Arts writer, Elizabeth Dexter says that by dressing as a Tehuana, Kahlo not only pleased her husband Rivera, but also gave a sign of solidarity with the ordinary oppressed of Mexico. It was also a sign of recognisable national tradition in the face of a changing world of social, political and economic modernisation.

The little white skeleton is a Calavera a little image of death popularised in Mexican culture. The Aztec mask worn by Rivera is a reference to the Chacmool an ancient sculpture found in Mexico. An influence of culture is also seen in the plant life. Most of the plants and foliage are based on native Mexican plants. Kahlo enjoyed using cactus plants such as the two groups of flowers in the centre of the composition.

In What the Water Gave Me Kahlo paints a smoking volcano with the Empire State Building emerging from the cone. The building obviously symbolises America. Most critics agree that the volcano represents the volcanic nature of Mexican culture, passionate, violent, and rebellious and ever changing from calm to explosion. Hayden Herrera says that the building in the volcanic cone represents the political and economic rape of Mexico by America. To Kahlo, American capitalism represented a real threat of the invasion of commercialism into Mexico which was predominantly a culture of indigenous traditions. Jeffrey Belnap says that the skyscraper in the volcano represents to Kahlo the belief by Americans and the wider international art world, that Mexican art and culture and politics is volcanic and exotic. From a personal perspective Kahlo was irritated by the way Americans and other nationalities perceived her and her art as “exotic” and little else. The building may also symbolize her dislike of America and possibly her resentment of having to spend so many unhappy times there with Rivera in the 1930s.
CHAPTER FIVE - SAMPLE RESPONSE

Question: Discuss the art works of one artist you have studied this year making reference to at least two of the factors listed below to explain how the artist has achieved a distinctive style.

- The subject matter they use.
- The materials and techniques they use.
- The influence of historical and/or cultural contexts
- The influence of new technology.

I will discuss the work of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo who was born in 1907 and died in 1954.

Kahlo created a distinctive style in her work primarily because of the subject matter in her works and her repeated use of cultural influences from her home country of Mexico. Kahlo’s distinctive style was not created by any new technology and she used traditional painting techniques.

Kahlo was a realistic painter who combined reality with an array of dreamlike images in her paintings. Her distinctive style is very dependent on her subject matter. Fundamentally, it is her choice of subject matter and her use of the naïve painting style that make her paintings distinctive. Kahlo’s drawings and paintings are vivid and sometimes gruesome snapshots of her physical and emotional life. Kahlo suffered polio as a child and a horrific accident at age 18 which left her in permanent pain. She was a flamboyant person who had many love affairs, although the longest and most torturous was with her husband Diego Rivera. Her work is centred upon her own experiences as a woman who suffered enormous physical and emotional pain in her relatively short life. The main subject matter explored by Kahlo was portraiture and figurative work. 55 of her 200 works were self portraits, although she did paint commissioned portraits and still life paintings.

Hayden Herrera, Kahlo’s biographer believes that Kahlo differentiates herself from most other artists in the way she reveals such intimate details of her life in her art work. She makes the viewer face parts of themselves that have been unexplored. The viewer is able to see Kahlo recovering from a miscarriage, vomiting, laying naked on a bed, sleeping with a skeleton, cutting herself and exposing her human heart and spinal column. In other works we see calmness and beauty in her self portraits and gentle still life paintings which often featured the distinctive plant life of Mexico. Kahlo often painted herself with monkeys and animals which she was fond of.

The viewer is able to easily identify a Kahlo painting because it usually contains an image of Kahlo herself or an image of her husband Diego Rivera. Rivera. Her self portraits are distinctive images of a strong woman, with dark hair, red lips and very distinctive eyebrows. For example in her famous painting The Two Fridas she presents a double image of herself, with these distinctive features, although the two figures are dressed differently to contrast her emotional and cultural conflicts.
Kahlo often represented herself as the tortured women both physically and mentally. The most disturbing aspect of *The Two Fridas* is that both Fridas have their hearts exposed. This tells the viewer in a pretty obvious way that Kahlo is ‘heartbroken’. At the time Kahlo painted *The Two Fridas* she was separated from her husband Diego Rivera. In her painting *What the Water Gave Me* 1938, Kahlo paints herself in a bath imagining all the misfortunes of her life. The painting presents her as a naked woman strangled around the neck by ropes coming from imaginary figures and objects. It also contains references to her tragic accident, her unfaithful husband, a past boyfriend who rejected her, her inability to have children, her bisexuality, her parents and her love of Mexican culture. Links are often made between this painting and the influence of Surrealism. However, Kahlo rejected the label and in any event her works are too obviously connected and documented within her own life and reality to be considered surrealistic.

Kahlo’s distinctive style is heavily influenced by her love of Mexican culture. Kahlo often incorporated Pre Columbian sculpture and masks in her work and objects related to Mexican culture. For example in *What the Water Gave Me*, she features the Chacmool which a famous Aztec sculpture. She also features a Calavera, which is a little white skeleton popularly known in Mexico as a little figure that laughs at death.

One theme which features regularly in Kahlo’s work is her dual identity as a woman with European origins and one with indigenous Mexican Indian origins. Kahlo’s mother was part indigenous Mexican Indian. One of Kahlo’s distinctive icons in her works was the Mexican Tehuana dress which she wore. Kahlo wore the Tehuana dress because it symbolised a particular region in Mexico where the local women had maintained their equality and sexual freedom despite the coming of the Spanish colonisers in Mexico. In *The Two Fridas* Kahlo represents the ‘good’ side of her personality as the Mexican Tehuana and the ‘bad’ side as a European.

Kahlo often featured Mexican retablos as subject matter in her work. Retablos were little devotional paintings popular with the working classes in Mexico. Retablos often featured saints or the Virgin Mary and were meant to protect the viewer. Because they were often related to suffering and misery they were useful devices in Kahlo’s work to reinforce her often tragic or emotional messages.
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