

## **Oil Painting Class**

### **The Hybrids: Modern Painting in Mexico**

Hey Art Class!

We are going to head off today to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and begin to look at what was happening there in oil painting in the early 20th Century.

At the end of the 19th Century in Europe and United States, industrialisation had produced new means of construction and manufacture. Mass production and innovative materials meant that the space of everyday life was changed forever. Cities expanded into megacities and consumer goods were more available.



Frida Kahlo in New York City

Architecture reflected this, appearing like futuristic apparitions from the dynamic economies of the industrialised world. Unlike traditional towns and villages, the city streets were places of chance encounters, and unfamiliar juxtapositions. It is hard to imagine just how disorientating and thrilling the new urban spaces were and how they drove creativity across the arts. Migration, colonisation and new trade routes also meant that artists could move across the globe, and as a result there was a great deal of what you could call 'cross fertilisation'.



Frida Kahlo in New York City

And here we have someone you will probably all recognise, Frida Kahlo on a roof top in New York City. New York City is like the metropolis's metropolis, and this image encapsulates the dynamic clash of cultures that produced modern painting in Central



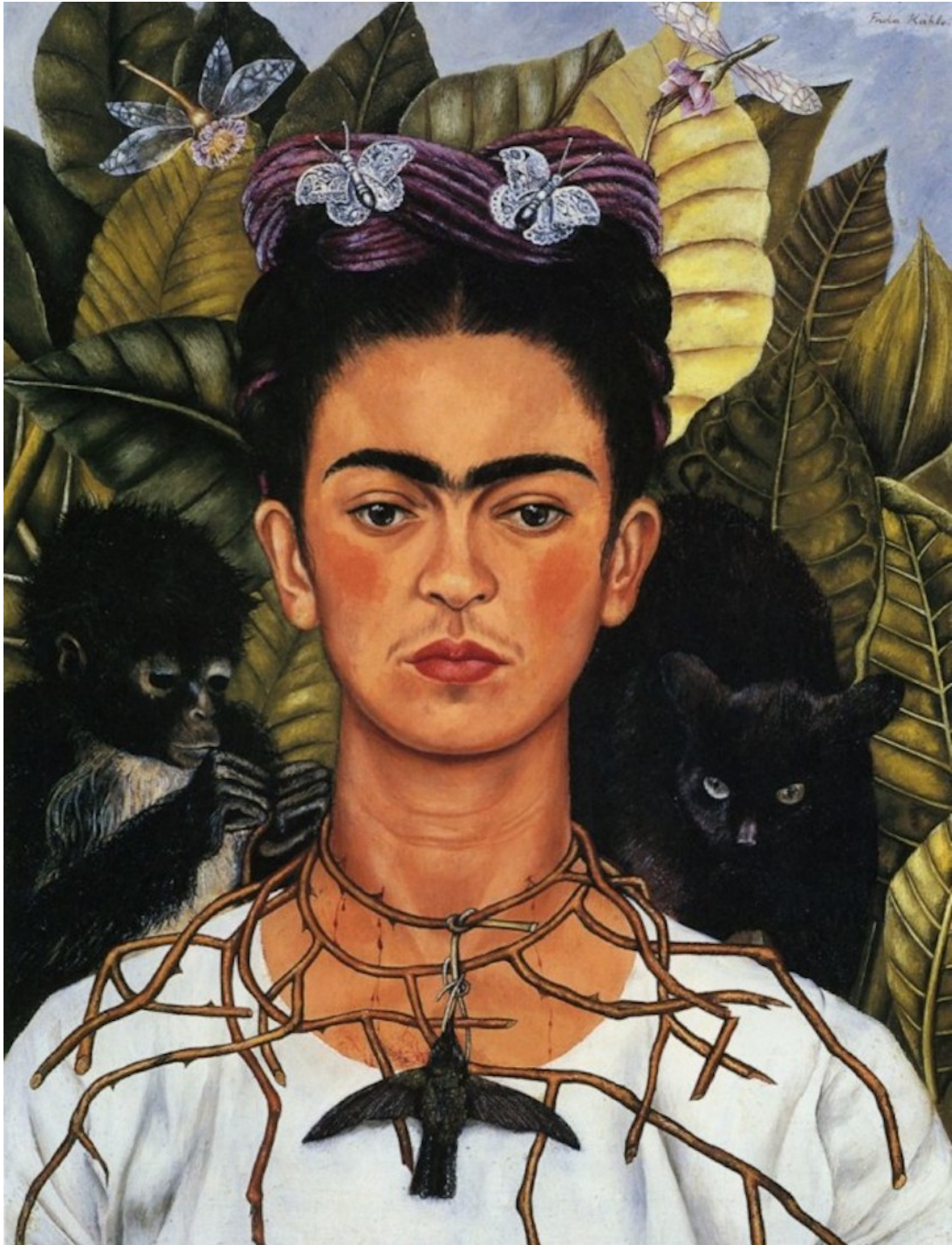
America and the Caribbean. Kahlo was born in Mexico City at the turn of the century. Emerging as an artist in a country which was economically poor and less developed than the United States, much has been made of her folk-art roots and her references to nature and the religious artefacts of Mexico in her oil paintings.



Frida Kahlo *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* 1936. Oil and tempera on zinc

Whilst she certainly made use of pre-Columbian and folk-art traditions, Kahlo was a cosmopolitan artist, fired up by her encounters with the European avant-garde movements - Surrealism, Cubism and Russian Cubo-Futurism - as well as her involvement with the Mexican Muralists. She travelled widely and her work is a hybrid of South American history and traditions and the device of the 'dreamscape' that we find in Surrealism. Her self-portraits often have the kind of shallow pictorial space we have come to know from Cubist inspired paintings. Here the lush vegetation curves around Kahlo's head, framing her face along with a monkey and a cat.





Frida Kahlo, Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird, Oil on canvas 1940

Let's talk about Mexican Muralism. This development in art began in the the1920s, as part of efforts to reunify the country under the post-Mexican Revolution government. At the time, a large section of the Mexican population were more or less illiterate and the government sought a means to promote the ideals of the Mexican Revolution through pictorial means. Images promoting nationalistic, social and political messages were created on public buildings, starting a tradition which continues to the present day.





Mural by Diego Rivera depicting all of Mexican history, the National Palace, Mexico City



Detail of a section of the mural by Diego Rivera depicting all of Mexican history, Mexico City

Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, were commissioned by José Vasconcelos to paint social and political messages in large scale frescos and murals which were influenced by the kind of flattened





Gabriel Orozco, Barricade, Oil on Canvas, 1920

and compressed pictorial space that evolved out of Cubism, Constructivism and Russian Cubo-Futurism. The Russian Revolution in 1917 had made a big impact on left-wing politics in Central America, and artists felt a kinship with the avant-garde styles promoted by the Soviet Union before Stalinism. Socialist Realism under the dictatorship of Josef Stalin, which replaced the early Russian avant-garde, is another story however...!



Diego Rivera, *The Uprising*, fresco on panel (1931)

Kahlo had a tempestuous romantic relationship with Diego Rivera. Despite his colossal presence as an artist in Mexico it is Kahlo's astonishing and visionary paintings that are now legendary and iconic. In "The Two Fridas" from 1929 we see, as well her traditional dress, a big dollop of something called 'Magic Realism'. Magic Realism - which we also encounter in the literature of Gabriel García Márquez and José Luis Borges - allows personal narratives and political ideas to be expressed in ways that might not be possible through more conventional literary forms. Author Salman Rushdie describes Magic Realism thus:

"El realismo mágico", magic realism, at least as practised by Márquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely "Third World" consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called "half-made" societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new, in which public corruptions and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called "North", where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the



surface of what's really going on. In the works of Márquez, as in the world he describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun.”



The Two Fridas, Oil on Canvas 1929

In “The Two Fridas” we can also see the device of ‘doubling’ courtesy of the legacy of European Surrealism. ‘Doubling’ - for instance when you encounter someone who looks like you, your “doppelganger” - is uncanny and the stuff of dreams. In a nutshell, Surrealism makes everyday life extraordinary and the extraordinary every day.

Next time we are back in Mexico to see what the Surrealists were up to!



