



Learning to Appreciate Art: The Influence of Mesoamerica on Mexican Art

Curriculum Unit 99.02.08
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INTRODUCTION

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@Text:For the purpose of the high school course Latin America Art and Culture that I teach at Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School in New Haven, Connecticut, I will use this curriculum to expand what is offered in the textbook I use as part of this course. The information in the text is minimal and at times not very well presented.

The opportunity to teach, encourage and support my students who may become future artists has become a very important part of my life. Thus, teaching a course to young people aspiring to be artists is challenging and inspiring.

Art appreciation is a special learning experience. It gives one a sense of wonderment and excitement about almost everything that surrounds us. Artists and their work represent the creativity that human beings are capable of; and, for those of us who were not given that gift, understanding and appreciating beauty its and uniqueness can be a joy.

Through my own experience I recognize that my exposure to art appreciation did not come until late in my teen years. Consequently, I want my students to recognize the importance of art not just in their lives, but the importance that art plays in cultures.

For the purpose of this curriculum I plan to introduce students to native cultures of Mesoamerica; the influence of Mexican native culture on art, with special focus on the Maya. Of special note, how a Mexican woman artist, Frida Kahlo used the influences of the ancient civilizations in Mexico in her artistic creation in

many different ways. She was able to blend most effectively those native Mexican roots with a very modern European art development, surrealism.

Another reason why, I believe, Frida Kahlo is important is because as an artist she creates an energy, a sense of discovery, and provides an important sensitivity to art for my students. She links the ancient Mesoamerican past to the present.

EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCES

My exposure to art began in my family home where, in my father's library, there were paintings of my paternal grandfather and great-grandfather, done in the typical European style of portrait painting from the early years of this century. I believe my father had the portraits done, since he was extremely interested in genealogy.

In addition, he became an important supporter of a German refugee, Madame Minnie Schiller, who painted miniatures. My father commissioned her to paint each member of the family, and I still have the miniature painting of myself as a young child, about two years old. And, because of his interest in genealogy, he had her paint miniature paintings of a large number of our ancestors going back three generations. These hung in our home as a collection of both art and genealogy.

My father was also very interested in a young Colombian painter Gonzalo Ariza, who specialized in landscape scenes mostly related to lakes, mountains and fauna in the proximity of Bogota. In particular, there was a unique painting of a scene of the city in the late afternoon, with great billows of smoke in the background with a man and his burro riding out of the city. It was a haunting picture. I realize today it was a futuristic pre-ecological scene with the great gray smoke coming from large stacks in the background, giving the feeling of sadness and devastation and foreshadowing the environmental concerns that are now part of our daily public policy debate.

My father also had a portrait of my mother done by another artist who was popular at the time, Sergio Trujillo Magenat. It was a charcoal painting in a more modernistic style, which certainly did justice to my mother.

Thus I did have some exposure to art in this setting, but when I try to recall any other exposure to art I cannot remember any that made an impression on me. The other piece to this puzzle is that there was no class in art appreciation of any sort in our school in Colombia and it is also difficult to try and recall any mention of native art, or history as part of our learning process. It was simply not part of the curriculum in our all girls private school.

The most advanced and developed native culture in Colombia were the Chibchas. One fact that was part of my learning was that our capital city was named Santa Fe de Bogota. The name Bogota came from the "cacique" in power at the time of the conquest and his name was "Bacata", which then of course was written by the Spanish scribes as "Bogota". No history or background on the "cacique" or his people ever came with the explanation of how our city got its name.

The only opportunity to see native art was when trips were taken to towns outside of Bogota. These took place usually on Saturday or Sunday, and those were the days when there was the local gathering at the "plaza" in

the center of town, when the "indios" as they were called, came with their wonderful pottery, wools and produce to sell. I was quite young and could not wander off by myself to see those things that caught my attention, so I just had to see things as we passed by them. The "mantas" were the most interesting, made of wool with colors and designs that were unique to the town that we visited. The "Chibcha" designs and colors did not approach the brilliance or intricacy of Maya or Aztec textiles. Sombreros were also part of the creation of the natives. They were very much subdued compared to the Maya hats we see even today. But there were intricate designs and the colors which clearly were taken from the local fruits and plants available in that particular locale.

Pottery was something that was admired and valuable, although it was not common to see decorated pots or dishes. They were better appreciated for the quality of the clay and its good useful design. But again, I cannot recall seeing very much painted or colored pottery. There is a well-known Colombian region, Raquira, where the natives are famous for their work in pottery.

The "Chibchas" were excellent jewelers. They were great designers of gold pieces they were small unique artistic creations. Today these gold pieces are very much appreciated and considered great works of art. They were not appreciated for centuries and, fortunately, the Spaniards left many of them, being more interested in the pure bullion which was readily available.

Today there is a "Museo de Oro" (Museum of Gold) where this great Colombian treasure is on exhibit. Growing up in Colombia you heard about these unique gold pieces but there wasn't the opportunity to see them, or admire them as art. As an adult I have come to understand that the Catholic Church made it clear that these pieces made by the Chibchas were "obscene". Most of them are figures of men and women in a variety of positions, dressed or undressed. In fact, there is a collection of pieces depicting sexual acts all made in gold. Conquerors discredited, destroyed or buried the treasures of the conquered people.

Thus I arrived in the United States at age fourteen without very much background in what were my native roots or much exposure to pre-Columbian art of the Americas.

It is interesting to note that as I entered high school in the United States, I did not speak English and I, am sure, looked very different from the students in a middle class New England school, I chose to make myself truly visibly different as soon as the cold weather started by wearing one of my native "ruanas", also called "mantas", of Colombia. Certainly, this was not because I had worn it at home previously on a regular basis.

In fact it was only worn if the weather became very chilly, or when we went on vacations which usually took place in the mountains where the climate was quite cold. My "ruana" obviously gave me comfort. It is interesting because it identified me not as a middle class Colombian but as native of the country from which I had emmigrated. In fact, I have worn "ruanas" for most of my life in the United States; I have a large collection of a variety of them, differing in colors, styles and materials, covering a range of materials coming from many different countries of Latin America.

Today there are some people who know me and if they have not seen me for a period of time, their first question is where is that beautiful "ruana" that you used to wear. That is their foremost recollection or memory of me, my native garb!

There is great significance in the relationship between what we choose for our clothing and our public presentation of ourselves, as we shall see in the outfits chosen by Frida Kahlo as part of her artistic image and her personal needs. During my integration into the "gringo" culture it became clear how different I was in the midst of a Yankee community. Those things that had been disdained and shunned in my life in Colombia became somehow very important and dear, things that were different and unique became intriguing and

something to admire.

Two years after graduating from high school, I was fortunate to have had an aunt who lived in New York City who was quite wealthy and liked the best things the city had to offer. Because she was lonely and her own children had gone away to school, she welcomed my visits. It was definitely a time of great opportunity and discovery and my introduction to art and art appreciation.

Her home was practically a museum with a great deal of art included in it. It was only the late nineteen fifties, and her avant-garde her husband had become a collector of African Art; not just one or two pieces, but that he had acquired a large number of them. I recall people coming to see him just to see his fascination with what was considered at the time, very strange and exotic art.

This was also my introduction to an artistic community. Their house was an artistic center, because it was in New York. Aspiring Latino artists came in search of their fortunes to the mecca of artistic development. Wealthy members of the Latino community, friends of my aunt and uncle, would have interaction in their home with new artists looking to sell their paintings or possibly find a patron.

The Museum of Modern Art was my next introduction into the world of creativity and art. Of course, for the first time I saw paintings by Diego Rivera and Orozco, and it was an eye opener. It was the first time that I could see the influence of the native culture actually put on canvass. The mood of the paintings, the colors were a fresh and different style, when it was compared to the European colonial styles that was prevalent at the time.

There was great interest on the part of my uncle in the Museum of Modern Art because, at the time, he had taken under his wing, a young Colombian painter, Fernando Botero, whom he was helping to enter the art world in New York. Botero's enormous oversized people were considered monsters by some, but as time has shown he certainly followed and reflected the historical culture of the native populations of the Americas. In his vision large massive pieces are to be public art and not something confined to small museum rooms.

As part of this experience, I also visited the Museum of Natural History where the art and lives of the native in the Americas were exhibited. Again, this was the first time that I had seen the lives and the creations of natives presented as a very important historical perspective of our historical past. In some ways it made me sad because, for the first time, I recognized the terrible injustice done to those ancestors in the Americas who had created so much to offer to future generations. A whole important part of my past which had been hidden was almost lost. The Spanish heritage was the only important and real ancestry that had been presented to me.

This was the start of my art education at age seventeen. I have always felt very lucky and fortunate to have had such an experience and introduction so that my appreciation of all artistic expression is filled with awe and artists are unique and special.

UNIT WORK I - ART APPRECIATION

1. DISCOVERING ART AND ITS IMPORTANCE -

a. Introduction of art appreciation to students.

- b. Short survey of students familiarity with exhibits, museums and art in their everyday life.
- c. Students will write an essay about their introduction and experiences with art.

PRESENTATION AND EXPLANATION OF LOCAL MUSEUMS

- a. Students will become familiar with the different types of museums available locally.
- b. A group of two students as partners will research a museum and give a report to class.

NATIVE CIVILIZATIONS IN MESOAMERICA

The area of what is today Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize was an important and outstanding area where Mayas made their mark. They were great communicators and considered their artists very important elements in their societies. Great pyramids and temples with artistic and historical pictographs are part of their cultural heritage, but also they are still great weavers today.

Mesoamerica was an extensive region extending from the Southwestern region in North America all the way through Central America into Panama. At this point we meet another ancient civilization the Chibchas which occupied the northwestern top of South America in what is today Colombia. They were known as jewelers; their expertise was working with great skill in gold.

Moving further south on the western region of South America we encounter another great civilization, the Incas. They were a powerful and important culture, their influence and kingdom extending through Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. Their great wealth was in silver and gold, and they were excellent potters as well as weavers.

At the southern most point in the Americas, in what is now Chile and Argentina, there were a group of fierce natives the Araucanians that were never conquered

Another group of natives who maintained their own identity and were able to maintain their culture were the Paranis in Paraguay, Uruguay, and Southern Brazil. Though they were not able to stop the conquering armies of Spain, they maintained their culture and managed to be recognized three hundred years later as a very important segment of the political life in Paraguay.

This leaves the northeastern region of South America, dominated mainly by the Amazon River and what is jungle which was almost impossible to penetrate by the conquerors. The natives of these areas up until fifty years ago had not really been penetrated by modern day societies; their customs and culture were still totally primitive without the influence of conquering cultures. Beautiful feather headdress and customs, as seen in an exhibit at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in 1998 expressed their art.

It is believed that the Arawak natives who lived on the coasts of northeastern South America traveled through the strings of islands on the Caribbean Sea and populated the islands where the very first conquerors landed. Their artistic abilities were expressed in woodcarvings and their carved canoes which allowed them to travel freely throughout the islands.

Thus we have a picture and a review of the native populations of the land that was first colonized by Christopher Columbus and those who followed to emasculate the great civilizations native to this new continent.

UNIT WORK II - NATIVE POPULATIONS OF MESOAMERICA

1. MAP OF THE AMERICAS

a. Early Map review

b. Modern day map of the Americas

2. WITH MAP OF LATIN AMERICA ON OVERHEAD PROJECTOR

a. Each student will have his own map, he will find geographical locations for the above mentioned cultures.

b. Using colors he will fill in each region using it as a guide.

3. OTHER GEOGRAPHICALLY SIGNIFICANT AREAS WILL BE IDENTIFIED .

4. STUDENTS WILL BE INTRODUCED TO ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS BY MOST OF THESE NATIVE CULTURES.

a. Students will decorate map with artistic drawings or with photographic examples of native art for 3 native cultures.

5. THESE MAPS WILL SERVE AS A DISPLAY IN CLASS.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MAYA

There has been a fascination in my life and experience with the colossal force of Maya Art in Mesoamerica. This has become very clear as more archeological discoveries in the mid and late twentieth century have been made in Mexico and Guatemala. As more and more neglected sites in the jungles were investigated and studied, it became a body of work that was recognized as a major cultural heritage, it became an important discipline for others, like linguists and historians who needed to review, rewrite, and correct the erroneous historical picture created by the conquistadors.

The importance of these ancient artists, their development, the intelligence of the early populations throughout this new-found land is finally receiving the recognition it deserves. The recent work of art historians has brought important information about the work of the Maya, their artists and their culture.

At first it was acknowledged that the Maya had very sophisticated hieroglyphics. The code, which they used,

remained a mystery for more than four hundred years.

They were, above all, great communicators. It was very important for them to tell the history of their religion and their gods, about rulers, many of their customs, sports and their society as a whole.

In their works we can recognize the importance of corn for their society, as the most basic source of food and sustenance. We can see the everyday life of their people depicted in their pottery, in their sculpture, and in their murals, describing important events happening to their rulers and the general populus.

The idea that they were mathematicians must have been a serious threat to the "conquistadors". The Maya had the concept of zero, and were excellent accountants by the way they kept running figures on the wealth of many of the rulers. "Cacao beans" were a representation of an individual's wealth, along with many other significant designations; they kept track of almost everything in their culture.

What is very important in this day and age is that after four hundred years we are finally learning the greatness of their work, the intelligence of their leaders, and the massive civilization that they had created.

Today it is recognized that the Maya developed the highest native civilization of the New World, a civilization that rivaled ancient ones in Egypt and Greece.

UNIT WORK III - INTRODUCTION TO MAYA ART AND VISIT TO A MUSEUM

- 1.The class led by teacher will visit an exhibit of Maya Art at a local museum to become acquainted with pieces of Maya Art. If possible students will hear a lecturer who is a specialist on the exhibit. In New Haven, calling the Education Dept. of the Yale University Art Gallery or the Peabody Museum can make special arrangements.
- 2.After students have reviewed the exhibit, either with a partner or individually a particular piece will be chosen. Students will write what they learned about it and their impressions about the piece. For example: A pot for cooking chocolate, describe shape, colors, and use.
- 3.Assignment - Each student will read, research and prepare a presentation on Maya life on something of interest to the student. For example: Life of young men in the Maya culture, responsibilities and ways to have fun.
- 4.Presentation - Every student will make a presentation to their class based on their area of research.

ARTISTIC MEXICO

It is fascinating to review the history of Mexico with so many changes and battles through a colonial history and even after their independence from Spain. Whereas the textbook focuses on this political history, what becomes a more interesting question for this unit is how the country and its people have maintained their artistic roots in spite of a continual upheaval.

The tenacity of the Mexican people and its artists is to have maintained their love of those artistic roots handed down by their ancestors and their culture. Over and over again their ability to recognize the

importance of history and its painful past, thus creating a base to stand on, is a testimony to its profound cultural significance.

Colors had a specific and definite meaning for the Maya, and these influenced the artistic development of Mexico's artists. Again a tradition handed down which has been applied and used by them.

Pottery

As we have seen in our exploration of the Maya, they handed down to generations the importance and the techniques for creating beautiful pottery all built by hand and painted with clay slip. Generation after generation continued to keep this important trade alive and to excel in pottery making, creating useful pieces were an important part of the everyday life, but served as a decoration in most households. I believe at the same time it served as a reminder of ancestry, and because so much of the colors and styles of most of the pottery comes from specific regions, it helped individuals to keep that connection alive.

Like many other cultures; pottery is a treasure that serves as a reminder of ancestors. In many cases its use is connected to a ritual or local costume. For the Maya the drinking of chocolate was one of the highest rituals, and pots created for this particular purpose were of importance.

Textiles

Another way that ancient Mayas measured their wealth was by the quantity and quality of textiles such as beautifully decorated "mantas". Modern day art historians believe that owning textiles was an indication of nobility. This skill and creation is still a modern day tradition practiced by Maya descendants and many others in Mexico and Guatemala. Very intricate patterns and colors are used in the creation of "mantas" "huipils" clothing, blankets, blouses and rugs.

Murals

Paintings on walls were important to the Maya; these told us their history. The pre-Columbian art survives even today throughout Mexico. Murals are one of the most interesting artistic gifts given to modern day art by ancient Mexicans especially in the New World.

This has been accomplished in particular through the works of Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, both important Mexican painters, who influenced many other artists to come after them.

Rivera's work gives us the historical perspective of what was happening at the time of his artistic career. His influence and use of murals moved North to the United States. He became the example and leader in the WPA Program during the Depression, which gave projects to artists throughout the nation, to paint murals in many cities. Rivera created a public history in which the working man was dignified and important. In his murals he included not just the "caciques," or high ranking political rulers of the moment, but the common individual who was part of the everyday life, with the changes occurring in the world.

Frida Kahlo, wife of Diego Rivera and an unique artist in her own right, made the use of colors an intricate part of her work. I shall explore not just how she used this ancient artistic theory, but many other both her European paternal influence but also her maternal Mexican ancestry. She incorporated them as part of her creativity and painting.

During the 1930' and 1940's the influence of Mexican artists was prevalent not just in the United States, but also in the major European centers of art. Mexico became a center for artists; for reasons of creativity, but I believe also because of the devastated world economical situation due to the depression and the Nazi

influence in Europe. These circumstances helped to make Mexico an oasis that enabled many to survive both artistically and economically .

In this atmosphere both Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were at the apex of their influence. They created an artistic community that encouraged creativity, important influence and support.

UNIT WORK IV INTRODUCTION TO MEXICAN ART

1. Maya Colors - Introduce students to the Maya color concept and how it relates to Mexican pottery and textiles.

2. Pottery - Examples of modern day Mexican pottery will be presented to students. Students will discuss the Maya color concept and try to correlate it to the pottery.

3. Textiles - Students will have the opportunity to see woven pieces with designs and colors. Students will write a short essay on their observations, and if there is any Mexican influence.

4. Murals - The class will take a trip to see a mural. Locally in New Haven there is one honoring Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos located at the Yale Center for Puerto Rican students. Students will make a note of their own reactions specifically to the colors in the mural, style, and anything else that is important to them. There will be a presentation in class by students. A discussion by the whole class will also be part of the exercise.

FRIDA KAHLO A MEXICAN ARTIST FOR THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Mexico was one of the world centers of art during this century. Diego Rivera, played a key role with a very distinctive style of his own. His imposing and controversial murals were both revered and hated, for he went against the establishment both politically and artistically. Under this shadow of a huge artist, both figuratively and in reality, young artists in Mexico longed to glimpse and study the giant. His influence in Mexico City was not lost on a young art student Frida Kahlo.

Frida was born in Mexico City, the daughter of Mexican woman and a German immigrant. Her father was a photographer, a trade that was new and interesting, because photography was still in its developmental stages at the time when Frida is born. The family must have been financially comfortable since her parents owned the home where they lived.

From some of her paintings and what we already know about her life, Frida had a nursemaid, as well as domestic servants as part of the household. It is important to know who were her early caretakers and their influences, because she internalized these experiences and later as an artist she was able to use them as a theme in creating her canvasses.

These women who influenced Frida as a child were native women who came from the country to work as household help. Most of them had come from a culture that through story-telling kept their important history alive. These stories had mystical references to the lives of their "antepasados"--ancestors--as a very real part of daily life. Undoubtedly, these women shared their stories with Frida as a child. These women were illiterate,

since they came from regions in the country where public education was extremely limited, and young women had even less chance of such an education. Consequently, all of their education was based on oral history, and exposure to a visual culture handed down by their Maya, Aztec, and Mixtec ancestry, important native cultures in Mexico. As we know today, children understand, learn and process a great deal of information in the very early stages of development. I believe that these early learning experiences were internalized by Frida, which in turn helped her to feed her creativity. As she developed her artistic themes she definitely shows her strong identity with her Mexican roots and its historical perspective.

This has been substantiated by Erika Billeter, editor of the book *The Blue House, The World of Frida Kahlo*, in it she notes:

"Everything in her work that seem surrealistic to us has a profound bases in Mexican thought. The "reality" of Mexican history, which is her cradle, is reflected in the subjects of many of her paintings".

..."Pre-Columbian iconography roots of this portrayal, which from the Middle Ages until now has been unthinkable in European art."

Frida entered the University. She must have been in the minority, because not too many women were allowed to pursue their education. This must have been an exciting and challenging experience, which gave her the opportunity to develop a strong identity. It would serve her well to survive the many difficult circumstances of her life.

Pain and physical discomfort became part and parcel of Frida's life after a major bus accident while she was traveling between school and home. Her Germanic heritage and her close relationship with her father must have given strength to deal with pain and suffering. What is a reality is that she overcame major adversity to emerge as an artist in spite of these difficulties.

What is most fascinating in her art is that she used Mexican traditional art and a historical perspective to show us her suffering. It is well known and documented that bloodletting was a ritual of the Maya, both as a ceremony and as an offering to the Gods. [Frida in more than one painting shows herself with this concept clearly depicted as the theme.]

In one of her gory paintings, she paints herself as an offering in the "altar" - a bed, with blood dripping from many different part of her body. The starkness of the presentation makes it a totally spiritual experience, the offering of a young woman as victim. It also carries the theme of exalting the figure, in this case Frida herself, to that of a goddess, offering herself as an heroic victim. This has a historical perspective referring to Christian beliefs. What is a new concept and surrealist impression is that is a woman presented on the altar as an offering.

This brings us to the importance of Frida's work as it relates to herself as a woman artist but also to her presentation of women's issues never before presented by artists from a Catholic or European tradition. She once again recognizes her mixed ancestry. In Pre-Columbian art the female subject has been found in many different artistic creations, and they appear as an important part of the culture. Goddesses were important figures in the pro-creation of the Maya native mythological stories.

In the ancient Aztec artistic repertoire there are many stone sculptures of goddesses giving birth, it is one of the most popular themes, and their importance is clear for the Mexican culture. Frida was able to tap her

knowledge of early Mexican sculpture and her own creative ability by showing us:

"Birth, the coming together of beginning and end, the fleeting moment when life and death meet. Source of the original sin of Christian mythology, and of its redemption. Locus of the sacred and of lust, Earth, creation and woman who, at the moment of giving birth conquers the Phallus.

Frida Kahlo's contribution to Surrealism was her unique way of bringing to light the hidden secrets of a woman's soul by combining popular and pre-Columbian art forms with her knowledge of Western Art."

Frida Kahlo: My Birth by Irene Herner de Larrea in *The Blue House THE WORLD OF FRIDA KAHLO*, Billeter, Erika, Ed.

What is amazing is that Frida was able to do this long before the modern women's movement began. She did this painting in 1932, and in conservative, tradition-bound Mexico. This was long before there was a movement to awaken women's awareness of rights to their own bodies or the importance of artistic freedom to present in bold and realistic ways unique issues for women.

Frida represents a very important role model for women in this century. She transcends the taboos of the period in which she lived and creates the reality of womanhood with all its pain and despair in her art. But she also elevates it to a religious, cultural experience by returning to a "communal historical perspective".

There is another theme that Frida uses in her paintings. The use of monkeys in her work is fascinating, students always ask why they appear in her paintings.

Continuing to recognize that Frida used her knowledge of ancient Mexican stories and art, it would be logical that the use of monkeys in her paintings relates to the importance of these animals throughout the mythology of the Maya. Howler twin monkeys were represented as gods of the scribes, as the artists and creators.

Writing and pictography were very important in Maya society, a skill reserved for the privileged members of society. In many of their painted historical stories monkey represented artists and scribes.

Frida used this knowledge to create a unique visual reference to herself by incorporating monkeys in many different situations. They are whimsical and very personal. They are part of a mystical and regal representation of her persona. One definitely gets the feeling that these "gods" that surround her are an important part of her life, and they elevate her to the status of a goddess. Through the inclusion of monkeys in her paintings, the physical connection between the central figure, Frida, and one or more of the monkeys becomes part of the composition.

Is Frida's fascination with monkeys related to her own personal life? One of Frida's great problems was that she was unable to have children. Although she did get pregnant she was unable to carry the child to full term. How much are these monkeys her children? Do they not only represent her creativity, as part of the iconography of ancient Maya gods, but also fill a void in her barren life?

Monkeys gave her the opportunity to pamper and care for them under the conditions of her restricted

existence.

"The lovely garden, filled with cacti of every variety, was a jungle for her beloved pet monkeys".

The Blue House THE WORLD OF FRIDA KAHLO, Billeter, Erika, Ed.

Frida's painting "Self-Portrait with Monkeys, 1943", shows her with four monkeys surrounding her among leaves and a bird of paradise flower. She wears the typical headdress of the ancient Mexican figurines found in tombs and depicted on painted artifacts, most of them believed to be important ruling class members.

It is my theory that through this painting Frida is presenting the five senses. Each monkey represents one of the senses. She herself at the center of the painting represents the brain and ability to think. There is a bird of paradise flower right next to Frida's head, or as if it is part of it. In Latino lore, this flower has always meant freedom. It seems in this composition that it indicates the freedom of thought.

It has been suggested that this painting shows Frida as "sexual victim". I disagree, because I believe that Frida's use of monkeys was related to her creativity and a symbol of herself as a Goddess as indicated by Robin Richmond:

"She was an irreverent High Priestess of Art, cloaked in magical raiments, who giggled behind her mask and fidgeted under her robes...and was faithful to her own-image-some would say too faithful" .

Robin Richmond, Painters and Places.

FRIDA KAHLO IN MEXICO, 1944.

This is especially important because this painting was her greatest accomplishment and, under her circumstances her saving grace.

There is another connection with the representation of monkeys in Frida's paintings. One great ethnic group in Mexico, is called the Mixtecs. They have an important story about a heroine, a part of their culture which is called "Six Monkey". This story is included in the Codex Selden, the historical manuscript that tells the history of the Mixtec. It describes a very strong woman who avenges the death of her father and brother, and she becomes an important figure in their mythology.

It is highly probable that Frida had come to know about this story. With all her knowledge of native culture and mythology, it is possible that she also had heard the story through one of the women who might have been Mixtec, and who were part of the household servants, or her nanny. The story of "Six Monkey" must have been an important oral history piece, especially for the women of the region. Because "Six Monkey" was a figure of strength and leadership, I believe this suited Frida very well, and she used this story in her paintings. In addition, a Mexican scholar, Alfonso Caso, in the 1930's identified this story. It had been lost but Caso deciphered the manuscript. This period would be within Frida's time frame of research and development.

Once again I base these ideas on my own personal experience, during the forties, as a young girl living in

Colombia and having native women from different regions come to work at our house. It was common to have them tell important and imaginative stories about their families, heroes and heroines from their particular region. Most of these beliefs were based on their native heritage, their rituals and experiences. These type of stories were not encouraged by parents, and children were able to hear these stories when parents were away, as a kind of "underground" learning done during the long hours that were spent with nannies and other caretakers.

This "underground" learning was perhaps, one the few opportunities to learn about the native cultures. It had a magical and unique feeling in that it was a sense of a culture that was hidden and forbidden. Latin American writers are a group of artists who have consistently used these stories that were told to them as part of their life experiences.

The last theme of Frida's work was her use of native clothing as part of her paintings and her persona. Native clothing gave her a strong attachment to the native cultures of Mexico. Her customs were creative and beautiful, but Frida wearing this type of clothing was out of the ordinary in Mexican society. It is said, that when she appeared in public her whole appearance made people stop to look at her, it was so unique and beautiful.

UNIT WORK V - FRIDA KAHLO AS AN ARTIST

1.INTRODUCTION OF FRIDA KAHLO AND HER ART

2.REVIEW OF SURREALISM AND WHAT IT MEANS

3.PRESENTATION OF PAINTINGS - DISCUSSION OF UNIQUE FEATURES OF FRIDA KAHLO'S TECHNIQUES AND THE WAY SHE USED NATIVE MEXICAN CULTURE IN HER WORK.

4.FRIDA KAHLO'S PAINTING HOLDING DIEGO RIVERA IN HER LAP WILL BE PRESENTED. IN THIS EXERCISE THE CLASS WILL READ AND DISCUSS A SHORT ESSAY WRITTEN BY AUTHOR OF THIS CURRICULUM, AS A WRITING PIECE AT A YALE WORKSHOP. AUTHOR CHOSE THIS PAINTING AND WROTE THE FOLLOWING:

OFFICIAL NAME OF PAINTING:

The Love Embrace of the Universe

"My world is one of fantasy. In the dark side I can feel the cold night which makes the cactus and its spikes pierce my skin as I walk along. It is a reminder that I am alive. Suffering has been my companion and black death is always at my back reminding me that it has granted me some type of life. Barren of children, my intense feelings of love have turned to nature, giving me roots that keep trying to reach the ground, and what feeds them is my tenacity to cling to the world.

My feelings have found a man that I hold in my arms, with the help of my friend black death. She is stronger than me, and her embrace keeps him on my lap like a child. Below him is an ugly dog that is a symbol of ugliness and distrust.

In the light and dreamy side of my painting I live in the clouds. My red fire ball reminds me of anger and furies, the place to create in the sky. The green and white feels like the meadows where I cannot walk but only dream of.

Black and green that is how my life feels. Completely surrounding my world of plants, of love, of suffering, helping me to carry my burden, making my universe complete.

5. STUDENTS WILL CHOOSE A PAINTING. BASED ON THE ABOVE EXAMPLE AND AFTER A DISCUSSION, STUDENTS WILL WRITE THEIR OBSERVATIONS, IDEAS AND FEELINGS ABOUT IT.

CONCLUSION

My experience in looking in depth at Mexican art history has opened up a whole new perspective, giving me the insight to recognize the importance of the influences of native cultures, not only in Mexico but in all of the Americas.

For me personally the opportunity to work and learn in depth about the art of Mesoamerica has been an experience that I will carry with me. Continuing to grow both in my teaching, but also exploring in depth my native roots and the importance that they play in my life, including them in whatever endeavors I decide to follow.

One endeavor that I want to continue working on is the story of "Six Monkey". To be able to bring this story to light would be an excellent example for young women of today to follow and emulate.

So I end this curriculum plan with the sense that I will give students a sense of art history and a better understanding of the influence of native cultures in Mesoamerica.

The work and life of Frida Kahlo is of special importance, because few women artists receive enough recognition. Frida Kahlo's work has only achieved international acclaim and recognition in the last twenty years. She is a role model for young women who are trying to become artists today. Again, my experience is that Frida Kahlo is of great interest to my students who are studying the arts, because of her tenacity, her creativity and the way she made linkages to early native cultures and her roots.

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A resource for art teachers, as well as those wanting to integrate art in their curriculum, and for schools. Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 600, Los Angeles, CA 90049.

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