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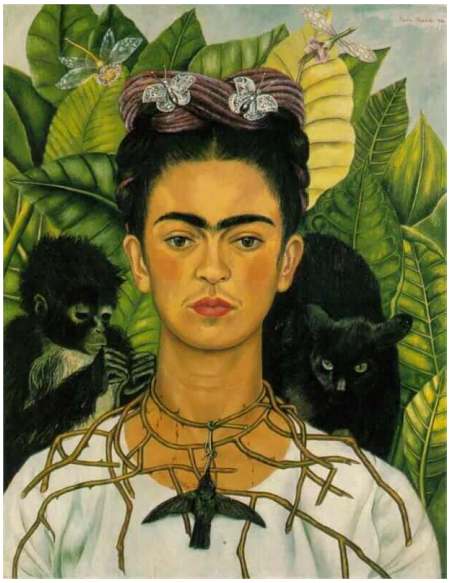
My aim for this essay is to discuss how Portraiture has been used by artists as a way of representing themselves. I intend to research the artists Frida Kahlo and Vincent Van Gogh, whose portraits are very influential in the portraiture world. As well as theorists such as John Berger for his influence in semiotics and allowing us to reflect on famous self-portraits and discover their deeper meanings and symbols.

Portraiture is a concept within the art world, with hidden symbols and deeper meanings. I intend to assess these meanings and how artists will use portraits to depict their struggles and personal life. “All portraits watch out and watch out for themselves, they survey themselves (their preservation) and look out for themselves (their demise)” Nancy (2018, p. 37). Theorists such as Jon Berger who developed ideas of deconstructing pieces of art has inevitably allowed us to use semiotics to analyse work, especially portraits, as knowing about an artists personal life helps us depict what is going on in the painting, “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled,” Berger (1972, p.7). This is exactly why portraits are so important as it not only gives us a visual image of what they look like, but also reflects how they would like to be seen, politically, socially and culturally.



(Figure One) Kahlo (1940) *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*

When looking at a self-portrait by Kahlo like figure one, you mainly see all the vivid colours that she is well known for and how she uses the paint, and her work highlights how if we knew what went on in her life, her paintings have a whole other meaning. The simplicity of little things in paintings like the colours can get lost when you do not know any context, which is why portraits are so important as a little glimpse into the artists lives Richetti (2022). Van Gogh is a perfect example, as you cannot really recognise the full worth of his portraits unless you knew about his traumatic life and how that had influence on his art. The same goes for Frida Kahlo, the symbolism in her work is just on another level, as a perfect example, she features monkeys in her work which is a reference to a Mexican symbol of lust, relating to her volatile divorce and affair, showing how she uses her culture to influence her work as well as current ongoings Bradley (2011). Both of their work is just consumed by the struggles they face and the intensity of the emotions you can feel whilst looking at their self-portraits. They have both equally had such an influence on self-portraits, as they faced very different struggles, but still managed to

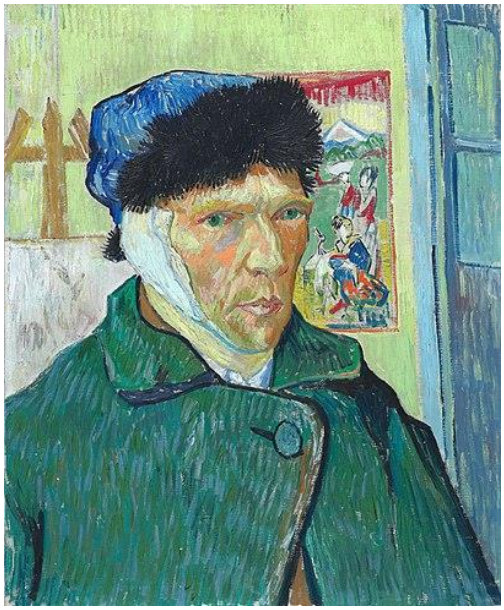
capture the essence of their emotions and pain in such a tragic but beautiful way. Which not only has helped them become influences in the art world, but it was also a form of therapy for them both, as a way of escaping from their own world.

(Figure Two) Kahlo (1932) *Henry Ford Hospital*

Frida Kahlo's paintings, specifically her portraits, tend to symbolise her struggles, medically with fertility issues and going through a divorce with references to Mexican Culture, "Her life was emotionally and physically torturous, and her paintings accordingly are interpreted as documents of her pain" Lindauer (1999, p.3). The painting figure one is very significant with many signs hidden away and these signs can be seen as Icons according to Charles Sanders Peirce, as it "resembles its referent in a visual way" Sebeok (2001, p.10). As soon as you look at the portrait, you almost feel suffocated with the thorn necklace around her neck, being tugged by the monkey and then the bustling of the bugs and insects in the background. The Hummingbird hanging from her necklace is a reference to a Mexican symbol of good luck and falling in love which is quite appropriate for her divorce with Diego Riviera and the end of her affair. The butterflies that appear in her hair also have a meaning, butterflies are known to symbolize resurrection, which is quite poignant as she

appeared resurrected after her traumatic accident with a bus, Maranzani (2020). The thorn necklace she wears could be a way of portraying hints to being resurrected with the idea of Jesus on the cross wearing a thorn crown.

“I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.” Baker (2018). Kahlo suffered mentally and physically, and this was further pulled down by several miscarriages and abortions (Huckleberry Fine Art, 2022). She used her art as a way of escaping and filling the hole inside her that was left when she lost those 3 children. *Henry Ford Hospital* was created in Detroit after her second abortion, it represents the idea of her holding onto these strings attached to six objects relating to the abortion Woodcock (2002). The red string coming from her hand, combined with the idea of an abortion portrays the idea that these strings could possibly be umbilical cords. The snail is the one thing I was unsure about being related to the abortion, but it symbolises the painful slowness of the abortion and giving birth to her dead baby. It is such a tragic self-portrait; you can almost feel the grief that she felt during that time with all of the symbols in the painting. I believe that both paintings with their symbols are perfect examples of how using semiotics to analyse paintings as well as understanding context in that time, shows how we can learn from portraits and the harsh realities that went on in her life that led her to create these symbolic paintings that allowed her to express her pain and sorrows which transformed them into beautiful pieces of art.



(Figure Three) Van Gogh (1889) *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*

Frida Kahlo and Van Gogh are well known for their self-portraits that depict great meanings of what is going on in their current individual lives. As said previously, the painting of *Henry Ford Hospital* portrays Kahlo's struggles with fertility and miscarriages (1932) and likewise with the painting of Van Gogh "Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear" (1889) illustrates his struggles with mental health. He had suffered with his mental health long before he cut part of his ear off, but it shows how his mental illness resulted in him harming himself Sooke (2016). He is one of the most famous artists who have shown their personal battles with mental health so vividly to the public. Berger came up with a great way of explaining artists such as Michelangelo and Van Gogh, "This great artist is a man whose lifetime is consumed by struggle: partly against himself. He is imagined as a kind of Jacob wrestling with an Angel." Berger (1972, p.110). I think this truly gives us more of an idea about Van Gogh fighting his own battles, whilst creating art, as it is said he had phases of high productivity developing his pieces, and then psychological struggles, with many speculating he suffered with bipolar and psychosis (Psych Central, 2022).

“Kahlo is a feminine "equivalent of Vincent Van Gogh." Lindauer (1999, p. 167). Whilst this quote suggests the similarity between Van Gogh and Kahlo, Van Gogh had a very traumatic and troubled life and was perceived to use his suffering to benefit from his art, but he was not actually famous until after his death (Van Gogh Museum, 2022). Whereas Kahlo was seen not to use her pain as a way of getting an advantage, whether that was personal, financial or a way of escapism. His *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear* was highly influential as it shows how severe his mental state had reached and also how he used art as a form of therapy. This portrait is a perfect example of how we have been given a glimpse into his life and now on reflection having appreciated historical context, we can see hidden meanings. Like his ear being bandaged from self-harm, almost foreshadows his suicide as he was unable to control his thoughts. The portrait also appears quite cold with all the blue undertones, which portrays the idea of him feeling cold and empty inside, which is further contributed to by his furry coat and hat.

To conclude, this essay has highlighted many key points within portraiture and using two of the most well-known portrait artists to show how they portray themselves with symbolism. With the use of hindsight and semiotics it allows us to read into symbols which reflect context at the time the portrait was made, we otherwise wouldn’t have known about. This will be very beneficial for me in my practice as I can use things going on in my own life to fuel my work and create deeper meanings within it, as well as using my art as a form of escapism, like Kahlo and Van Gogh did.

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