Frida Kahlo: Life And Art Making

Considered one of Mexico's greatest artists, Frida Kahlo, born on July 6, 1907 in Coyocoan, Mexico, transformed her life through self-portraiture. She grew up in her family's home, which was referred to as ‘the Blue House’, and later died there on 13 July 1954. Painting during the modern and surrealist period, Kahlo’s style of work has been labelled as surrealist, due to the realistic way in which she painted symbols and psychological messages. Kahlo, however, did not consider herself a surrealist, stating “my painting is real, it’s me, it’s my life.”

Frida Kahlo’s subject matter grew out of her personal thoughts, and gave expression to her feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, pain, love and isolation. Due to this, her main subject was herself. In complex, surrealistic images, she depicts desires and longings, along with the irreconcilable aspects of her life, presenting them in a powerful way to the viewer. Her intimate subject matter was very different to that of what other Mexican artists were painting at the time, most of whom painted murals for public display about Mexican history. Due to her personal subject matter, Kahlo’s intentions for her works were solely for herself, to find and express who she was. Despite this, her works continually resonate with a wide audience; due to the universal themes she personifies with such beauty, through her distinctive style and technique. The style of her works were surrealist, because they contained many strong symbols that expressed her life, emphasised through juxtaposition. Her evocative works were all expertly painted, often with bright, lively colours, depicting personal subject matter in a surrealistic style.

Both Frida Kahlo’s turmoil-filled life and the changing world around her greatly impacted her artmaking. Initially, she was influenced strongly by her childhood and family. She had a rebellious childhood, experimenting with different styles of dress and protesting against her strict Catholic upbringing. Her mother’s native Mexican background meant that she was often surrounded by Mexican folklore, and had a rich understanding of Mexican history. These important aspects of her upbringing significantly influenced her work, specifically evident through themes of her Mexican culture and of her Catholic background. Additionally, the changing Mexican political climate impacted upon Kahlo’s artmaking. She grew up during the Mexican Civil War, and was 3 years old when, in 1910, the Mexican revolution occurred. The resulting outburst of art in Mexico surrounded Kahlo during her childhood, and was a prominent influence on her artmaking.

A seminal moment in her life took place on 17th December 1925, when Kahlo was 16. A passing trolley-cart collided with the bus she was on, resulting in a rod from the bus severely injuring her. The rod skewered her left hip and pierced through her vagina, resulting in 11 fractures in her right leg, a dislocated right foot, a broken collar bone and pubic bone, two broken ribs and serious injuries to her spine and pelvis. There was very little hope that she would survive. Returning home after spending a month at the hospital, her life changed- she was unable to attend school anymore and she could barely move, limiting her from doing anything active. She spent all-day lying-in bed and was often unable to sit up, meaning she felt very hopeless. Kahlo’s mother fastened a mirror to her bed and gave her painting materials so that Frida was able to paint when she couldn’t her body. This began Frida Kahlo’s great love of art. However, the tragic accident resulted in many further health problems including multiple miscarriages, over which she grieved deeply. The constant suffering she felt during her life

prompted her to consciously decided to paint to express these emotions. Hence, pain is a significant theme in Kahlo's work.

Another significant influence on her artmaking was her relationship with Diego Rivera. Rivera was a renowned Mexican artist, and he met Kahlo at a party, where she showed him her works. This led to a romance between them, and they married when Frida was 21, and Diego was 41, despite her mother's protests due to Rivera's communist political views. The unlikely couple had a turbulent marriage. There were multiple affairs on both sides with well-known and attractive lovers, leading repeatedly to separations, which never lasted long. At first, Frida was enraged by Diego's infidelity, and her feelings of anger impacted on her artmaking. Many paintings depict her relationship with Rivera, both her extreme love for him, and her anger and sadness towards him. This is evident through The Two Frida's which depicts one Frida which Diego loved and one Frida that he doesn't. Frida Kahlo's relationship with Diego Rivera greatly influenced her work, as she used her paintings to express her emotions surrounding their relationship and her personal sense of self as a result of the relationship.

Due to the encouragement of Diego Rivera, on September 23rd, 1927, Frida submitted 4 works to a competition, where they attracted the attention of Andre Bretton. Bretton was a prominent surrealistic figure, and his presence in Kahlo's life was another influence on her artmaking. Bretton thought Kahlo's works to be pure surrealism, and he brought her to New York to do a show. This was a huge success, and she continued her show to Paris, where it also was critically acclaimed. However, at age 37, after spending time in hospital overseas, Kahlo had to return to Mexico due to the rapid decline of her health. She was put into a metal corset, and spent long periods of time confined to her bed.

One of the works which expresses her pain, especially near the end of her life, is The Broken Column, painted in 1940. It is an oil painting on Masonite. The work is a self-portrait, depicting Kahlo standing in the middle of an arid landscape, with her torso encased in metal belts and an Iconic column replacing her spinal column, whilst metal nails pierce her body.

She uses symbolism in the painting to convey more about her life to the viewer. The nails piercing her body are suggestive of her Catholic upbringing, as they are similar of the nails that pierced Jesus on the cross. This shows her connection to her Mexican heritage. They , also symbolise the personal agony she is experiencing, a symbol of the constant pain she faced due to the accident in 1925. Some of the nails are piercing the skin over her heart, symbolising that her suffering is also emotional. The idea of the pain caused by the accident is further conveyed by having the largest nails, along the column, mark the damage caused by the pole that pierced her body. Juxtaposed with this is her bold, brave face, which although bathed in tears, doesn't reflect a sign of pain, symbolising her strong defiant approach to life, even in the face of great suffering. Yet in spite of this, another key theme in the work is a sense of hopelessness and brokenness. This is shown through the background, which portrays a vast land, symbolising her loneliness and helplessness as a result of her pain. Kahlo's hopelessness is also symbolised through the metal corset embracing her body, which seems to be the only thing holding her together. The Broken Column was painted shortly after Frida had undergone surgery on her spinal column, leaving her bedridden and "enclosed" in a metallic corset. Her broken and helpless state is also symbolised through the broken Iconic column – in place of her damaged spine – as it is fractured and broken in several places, seemingly about to break. Thus, through the multiple symbols in the work, Frida Kahlo conveys more her pain and suffering as a result of the accident in 1925.

Frida Kahlo’s work has often been described as surrealist. This is demonstrated in The Broken Column through the emotional intensity and imaginative scope of the work. This work is surrealist because it is filled with symbols that address Kahlo’s psychology and mindset, yet is painted in a very realistic way.

The work is composed in a symmetrical and balanced way, contradictory to the turmoil in her life that the work conveys. Kahlo’s has composed the work so that she is central to the composition, as she is placed at the focal point of the work in the foreground. The audience’s eyes are first drawn to her face, which conveys her strong will, as it is juxtaposed against the blue of the sky. This highlights one of the main messages Kahlo expresses through The Broken Column, - her bravery and strength in the face of great pain and suffering.

Kahlo uses muted colours in the background to express her despair. The darkness of the background, her hair and her wound are juxtaposed with the brightness of the sky, white corset and tears. This expresses that despite her pain, she remains strong-willed. The themes Kahlo addresses in her work are clearly intimate, and the small scale of The Broken Column - 39.8cm by 30.6cm - highlights the vulnerability of the paintings. This also impacts the audience’s appreciation of the work, as it draws the viewer in and makes the work more personal.

The space within the work is painted from an extended perspective, as the majority of Frida’s figure is showing. The space is organised to add depth to the work, especially the background, which seems to go on forever, symbolising her feelings of loneliness and her never-ending pain. Frida Kahlo uses incredible detail and fine painting to represent a variety of textures. Many of the textures contrast, such as the sharpness of the nails with Frida’s soft skin, which makes the painting look realistic, but the emotional symbolism is surrealistic.

Thus, through using a variety of artistic techniques and symbolism, Frida Kahlo communicates how, despite her suffering, she is still brave and strong willed. The painting seems to personify her pain, and conveys a key part of her life- her pain. Kahlo expertly uses artistic techniques to convey this. Her works near the end of her life showed how she still found joy in living. In 1954, at the age of 47, Frida Kahlo died in her bed. Thus, Kahlo’s life experiences contributed towards the themes she depicted in her works.