Masterpiece: *Self Portrait with Monkey*, 1938
By Frida Kahlo

Pronounced: FREE-da KAH-lo
Keywords: Form, Space, Emphasis
Grade: 4th Grade
Month: September/October
Activity: Retablo Self Portrait
TIME: 1.25 hour

What is a Retablo?
Retablos are paintings, often on rectangular sheets of tin that would have a special shiny effect when contrasted to the paint on the tin. Retablos typically illustrate religious images or scenes. In Mexican folk religion, they were created as a way of showing devotion or appreciation to patron saints or divine spirits for causing or supporting good fortune such as health, abundant crops or peaceful living.

Meet the Artist:
- Born Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon in 1907 in her parents house known as La Casa Azul (The Blue House) in a small town outside of Mexico City.
- When she was six, Frida contracted Polio, which left her right leg thinner than the left but this didn't stop her from participating in boxing and other sports.
- At 15, she was a student in a prestigious Prep school in Mexico City, where she was one of only thirty-five girls. During this time, she met the famous Diego Rivera who was working on the Creation Mural in the school's Bolivar Amphitheatre and although there was a huge difference in age, she decided at that time she would be his future wife.
- At 18, she was riding in a bus when it collided with a trolley car. She suffered serious injuries including a broken spinal column, broken collarbone, ribs, pelvis, multiple fractures in her right leg and a crushed right foot. These injuries left her bedridden in a full body cast for months. She was continually plagued by extreme pain for the remainder of her life and underwent as many as 35 operations, mainly on
her back, right leg and foot. Sometimes the pain was so intense; she was confined to a hospital or to her bed for months at a time.

- After the accident, she taught herself to paint to occupy her time during her recovery period. Her mother has a special easel made for her so she could paint in bed and her father gave her a box of oil paints and brushes. She painted what she knew best - herself.

- She eventually married the muralist artist, Diego Rivera when she was 22. As a couple, she was considered the “Walking Flower next to the Frog Face.” In addition to being 20 years older, Diego was over 6 feet tall and over 300 pounds while she was very fragile in nature and a foot shorter than him.

- Her art bordered between realism and surrealism, as if her images were from dreams. However, of her 143 paintings, 55 are self-portraits which include symbolic images of the physical and psychological events that really happened throughout her life. She also painted the flora and fauna of Mexico, shown as cacti, plants of the primeval forest, volcanic rock, parrots, deer, monkeys and dogs - animals which she also kept as pets and which appear in her pictures as symbols or companions of her solitude.

- Many of her paintings were done retablo style and included a painted frame.

- Less than a year before her death, she was too ill to leave her 4 poster bed. She was to have an exhibit of her artwork, but instead of missing it, she made herself a part of the exhibit by having her bed transferred to the gallery.

- She died at the age of 47 after having her right leg amputated. She painted even while she was trying to recover in a wheelchair.

- The painting "Self-Portrait with Monkey" is actually a painting that Madonna owns and has lent out to museums. Today, many consider Frida Kahlo to be a leader of the Mexican art revival movement.

Definitions:

- **Form and Space:** Space is the element that surrounds us. Forms have substance and occupy space.

- **Emphasis:** This calls attention to an important area or areas of a design and subdues other elements of that design. This can be created by using bold colors, shocking details, unusual texture, etc.
Possible Questions:

- What is the form in this painting?
- What is the space?
- What is the emphasis? A Spider monkey.
- Why do you think she used the monkey for emphasis? In Mexican mythology, the monkey is the patron of the dance. In this work, Frida portrays the animal in such a way that it becomes the only truly living, tender and soulful being; its arm placed protectively around her neck.
- What do you think the artist is trying to communicate?
- What would you title it?
- What do you find most interesting about it?

Activity: Retablo Self Portrait

Materials Needed:

1. Cardboard frames
2. Pre-cut aluminum foil (slightly smaller than the dimensions of the frame)
3. Masking tape
4. Sharpies
5. Oil pastels
6. Hand mirrors
7. Pencils
8. Photo resources of animals or personal pets.

Process:

1. Give each student a cardboard frame, a piece of aluminum foil, and a hand mirror. At each workstation place Sharpies, oil pastels, rolls of masking tape and photo resources of animals.
2. Have students place the cardboard frame on the desk and put the tin foil, dull-side-down, on top of the frame. Tape the foil in place on the frame—four small pieces of tape work fine. Have students write their name on the back of the frame. When they turn over the frames, the dull side of the foil should be showing in the cut out windows.
3. Have the students carefully do a self portrait using the oil pastels and Sharpies. Try not to puncture the foil.
4. Next, have them fill in the space with a drawing of their pet, dream pet or symbolic animal. It is OK for the images to "spill" onto the frame.
5. Finally, have them further fill in the space around their self portrait with drawings of other images they would want associated with them. Encourage them to leave some unpainted space on the tin so it will shine through adding a retablo technique.
Photographs of Frida Kahlo and other paintings

Self Portrait – The Frame, 1938
El Autobus, 1929

Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress, 1926