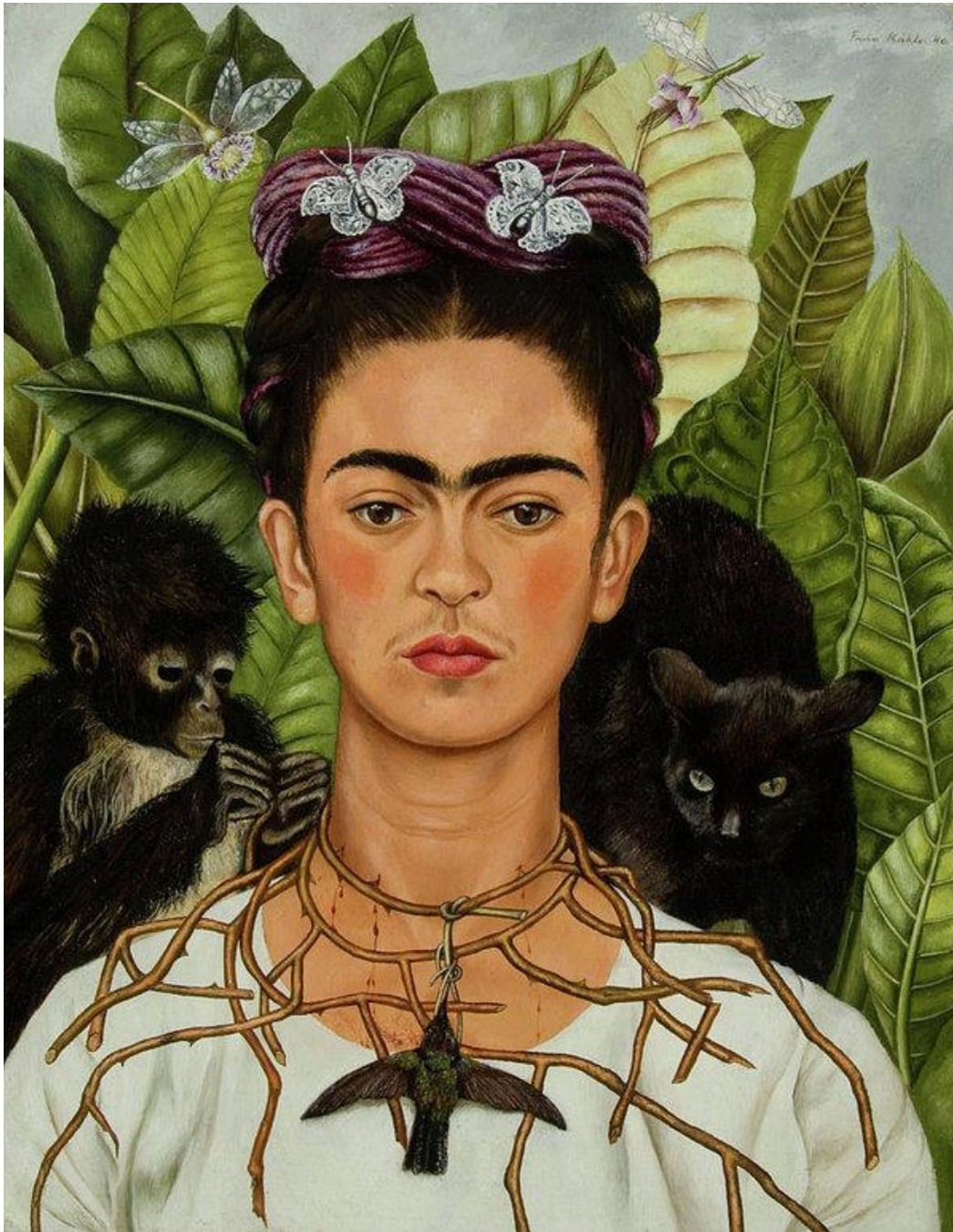


Partial Draft Critical Review of  
*Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and  
Hummingbird* By Frida Kahlo

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Grade10

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-*Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* by Mexican painter Frida Kahlo  
-1940  
-Canvas oil painting (92.7×73.6cm)  
-Artwork collection of University of Texas at Austin

Picture from:

Johnson, Rebecca. "Articles." *Ransom Center Magazine*, 21 July 2015



# Personal reactions and feelings

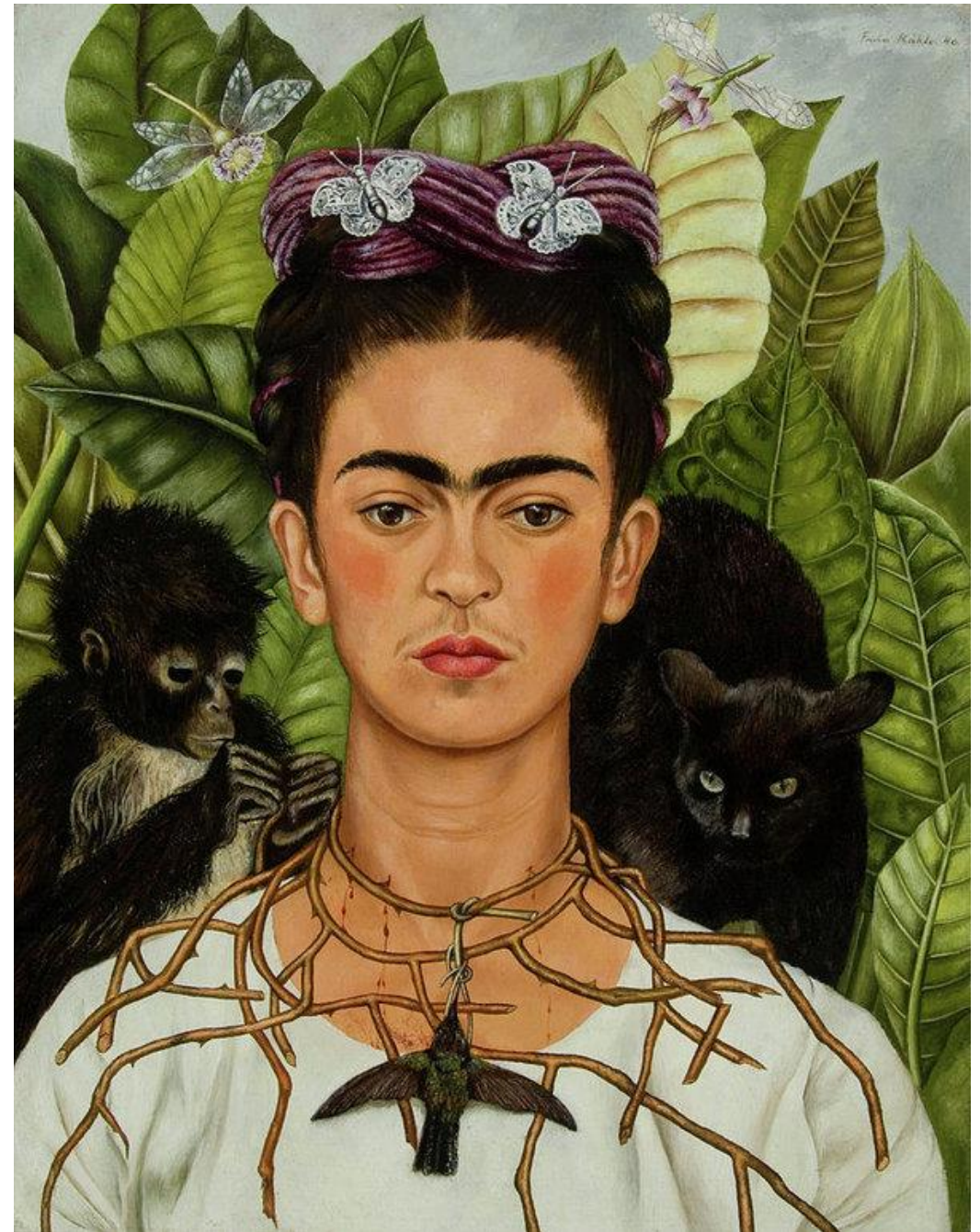
Weird- as an outsider where leaves don't really exist that large within my environment, this artwork makes me feel strange and unnatural.

A feeling of oppression-woman in the artwork with a serious expression and a certain composure on her face.

Funny-The woman in the artwork has a little beard.

I feel pain on her neck.

Those eyes make me have a feeling of certainty.

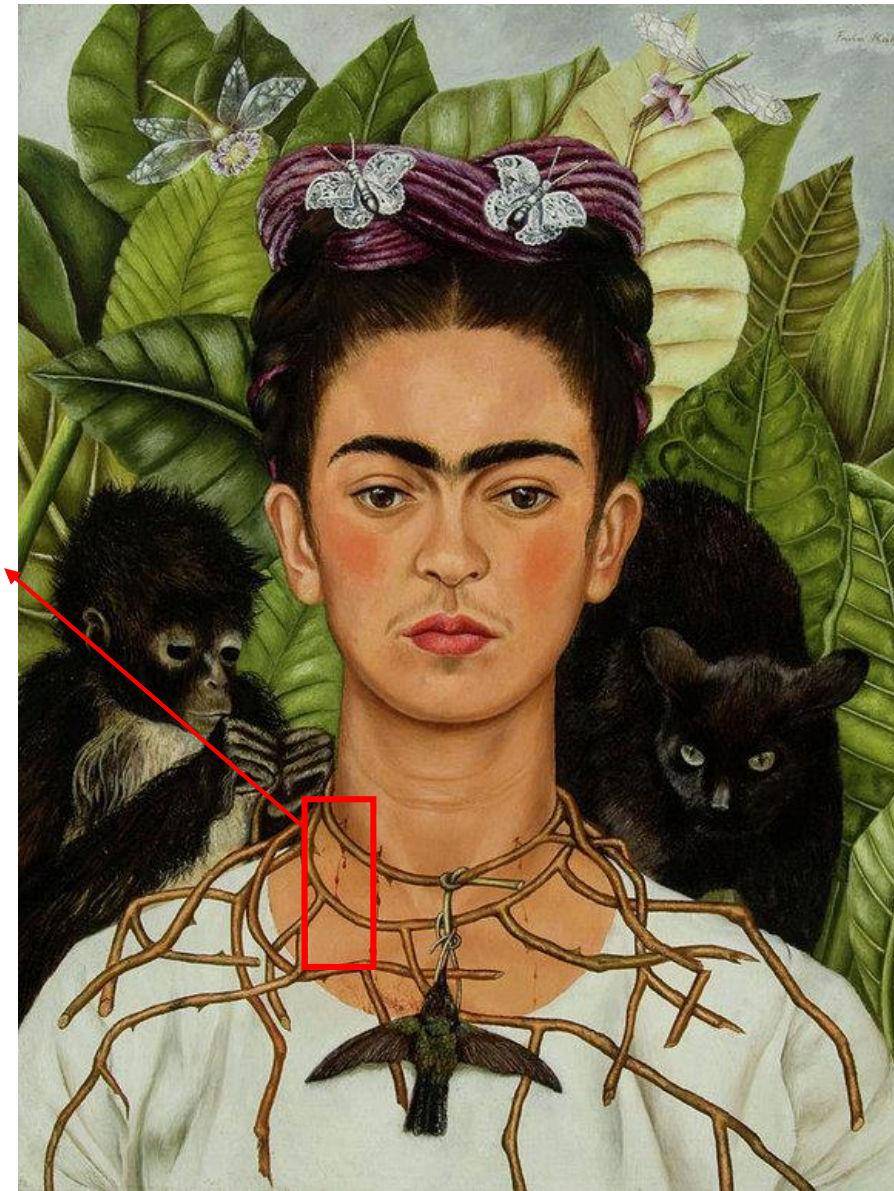




# Description

## What's true:

This is a self-portrait of the artist Frida Kahlo herself that shows her in a front posture, facing the viewer directly on the canvas. Other elements such as “a thorn necklace strangles her throat, trailing down her chest like the roots of a tree.” [1], a dead posture of the small black hummingbird hangs on the thorn necklace, a black monkey sits behind Kahlo's right shoulder, its eyes focused on its hands, tugging at the thorn necklace, making Kahlo to bleed, a black feline, surrounding insects, and a background with “lush and stifling big leaves that resembles Mexican plant species which give native indigenous folk art style of Mexico” [1] are all presented. Moreover, She is very masculine, with bushy eyebrows joined together, some moustaches and her hair is thick and black, which are supposed to be male physical features.



## Some formal qualities

All objects in the portrait are shown within a deep depth of space based on weak form due to being low abstracted, the values remain similar in the foreground and background, details are all shown, high color saturation remain at a same level, and object size suggest they are in close distance.

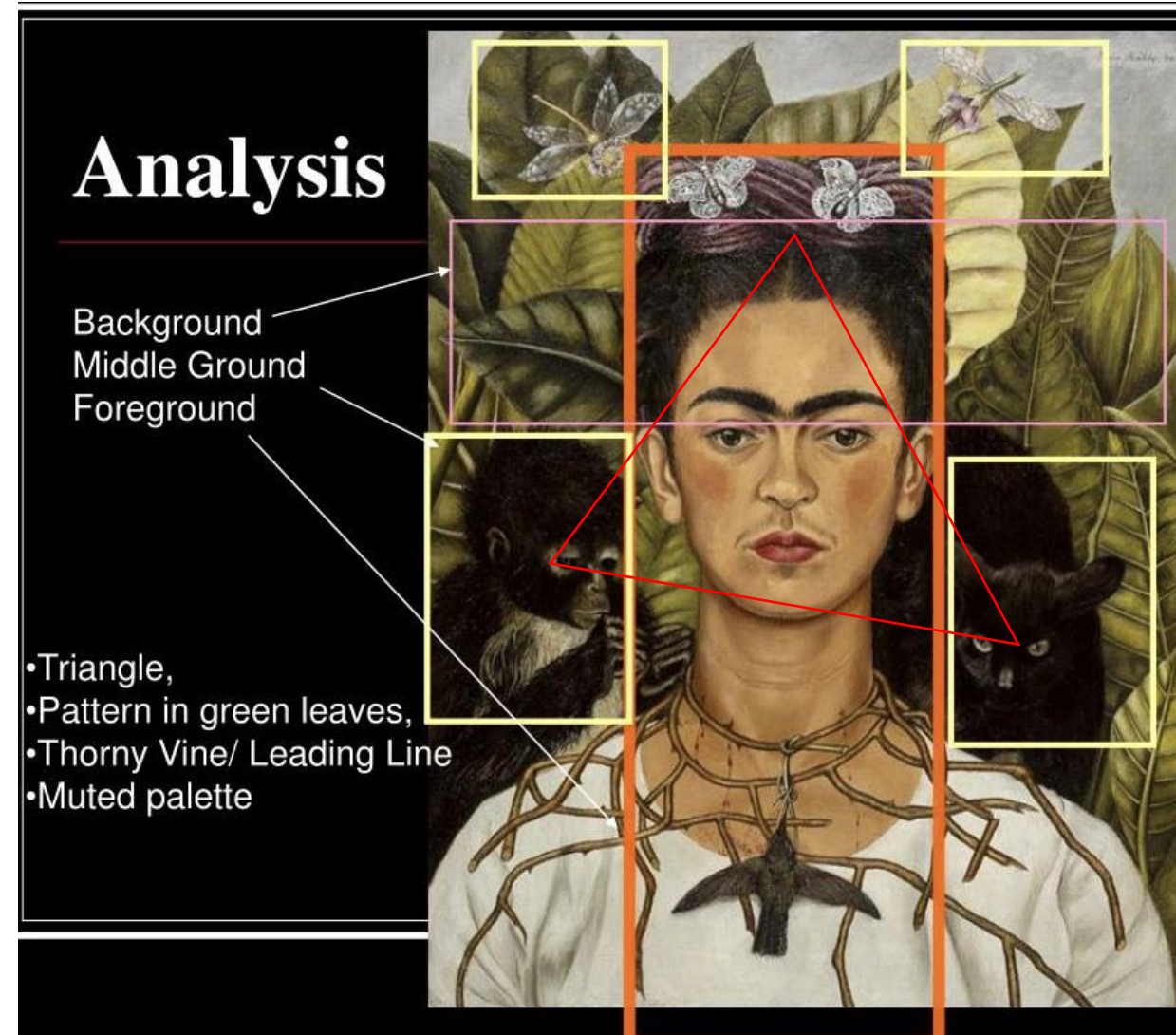
## Juxtaposition

I believe the artist applied juxtaposition to place these unrelated subjects, such as the monkey and feline and the humming bird, together that to some extent connect them together, and this technique supports the artwork's meaning.



# Formal Analysis

- Level of abstraction is very low abstract (the forms and proportions of the background leaves are abstracted from the N.O.P.E.. The portrait is only a 2D surface that dose show great details about 3D forms. More intense color for the skin tone that seems unnatural.)
- Strong unity (Have proximity—objects are placed close to each other in a triangle. Repetition of the leaves' color, pattern, texture in the background. Little continuation along the thorn necklace and the hummingbird.)
- Imperfect formal balance. The portrait of Kahlo is almost symmetrical, but the animals on the shoulder don't reflect symmetrically, they are informally balanced since they both provide visual importance—they are both black, they are placed on the same horizon/altitude, and they both give meaning according to the context.
- Positive space of Kahlo occupies a larges area of space. Only a little area of the sky is revealed. The entire design is created with space intergraded into each other, making the design looking very complex and many things are going on.
- Kahlo's neck to her face is the major focus—biggest object in the design, complementary colors, placed in the middle, human face, eyes that pose emphasize, contrast between dark and light, only person presented, very balanced.
- Everything in the design are created with biomorphic shapes and other elements, little geometric elements are presented.
- Motion is suggested with the monkey's action in play with the thorn necklace—once the monkey moves the thorn necklace, it harms Kahlo's neck since the thorns would cut her neck and leave out marks and may even bleed. The thorn necklace also form diagonals that suggest motion.



# Researches

## Use of symbolism

In Mexican folklore, panthers symbolize bad luck and death, hummingbirds represent good luck and falling in love. Two butterflies are pinned to her delicate hairstyle like hairpins, and two dragonflies are flying over her head, they symbolizing freedom and rebirth as insects. [2]

## Artist life and about her husband

The monkey pulling the thorns, it was actually a gift from her husband Rivera. This monkey represents Rivera himself, and each pull of the thorn necklace would make Kahlo feel pain [2], it represents Rivera's psychological effect on Kahlo.

From the moment Kahlo began painting while still bedridden after a bus accident that left her seriously disabled, she was focusing on portraying her inner struggles. This was initially pointed towards her medical issues, but was soon substituted by infertility and her troubled marriage with Diego Rivera.

Creating paintings, especially self-portraits, was a very therapeutic experience for her – it allowed the creation of a separate Kahlo on which to project her anguish and pain.

## Religious approach

The thorn necklace symbolizes the crown of thorns, which exists in the Bible about the crucifixion of Jesus —

“The account of Jesus Christ's crucifixion in the Gospels begins with his scourging. The Roman soldiers then mocked him as the ‘King of the Jews’ by clothing him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns and led him slowly to Mount Calvary, or Golgotha; one Simon of Cyrene was allowed to aid him in carrying the cross. At the place of execution he was stripped and then nailed to the cross, and above him at the top of the cross was placed the condemnatory inscription stating his crime of professing to be King of the Jews. On the cross, Jesus hung in agony.” [3]



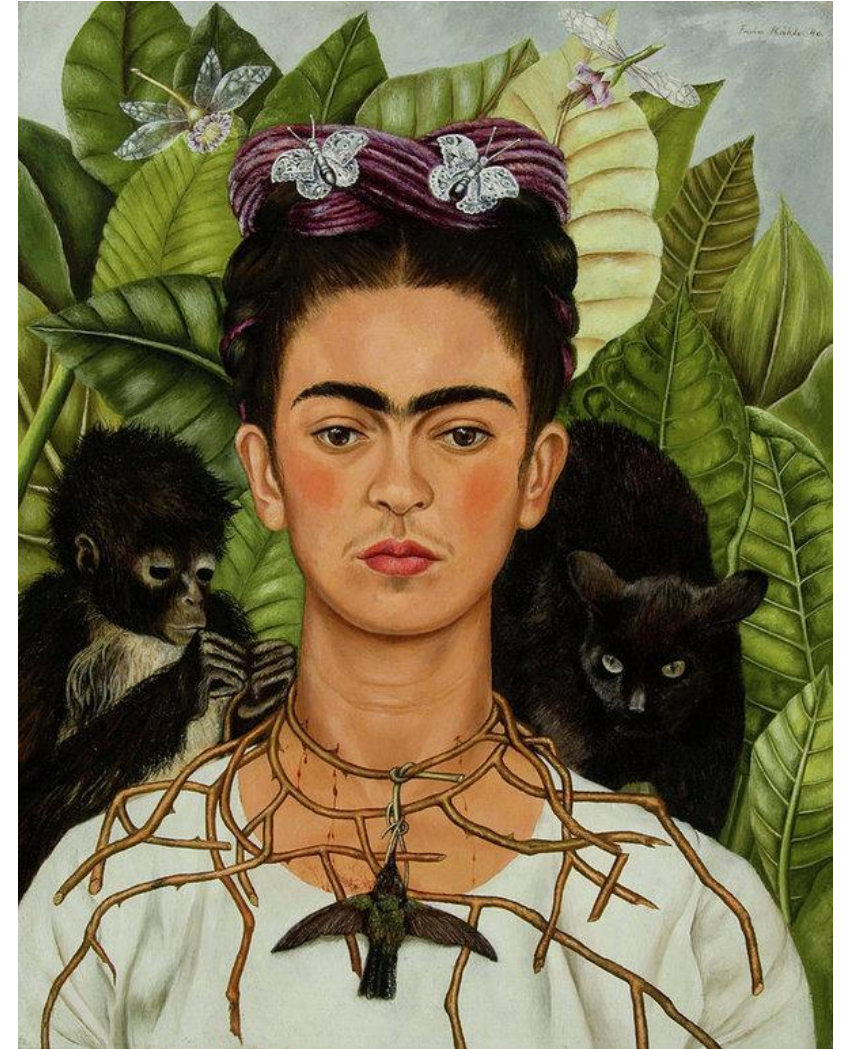
# Critical Hypothesis with Support

Kahlo shows her desire for a good relationship and her disappointment with her failed marriage.

This portrait is a symbol of death and struggle. The frightened eyes of the black cat/panther—**bad luck and death is around**, the dead posture of the hummingbird necklace—**no good luck and love suggested**, the butterflies and dragonflies had nowhere to hide, nowhere to fly—**limitation of freedom and reborn**, so Kahlo could only live the rest of her life under struggle and suffer. However, Kahlo's calm eyes in the portrait is bright. **From this calmness, we can observe the magnanimity of her feminist.**

Her spirit is dead, but her body is still suffering—**The monkey's movement (motion)** causes harms to Kahlo's neck (bleeding), dead spirit is suggested from that calm gaze, which has no emotions.

**As a feminist, she has been striving for and realizing freedom of life, freedom of sex, freedom of living and freedom to fight against patriarchal society in all her life.** However, the pain she got from her husband may have been too much to stand.



# Support (Continue)

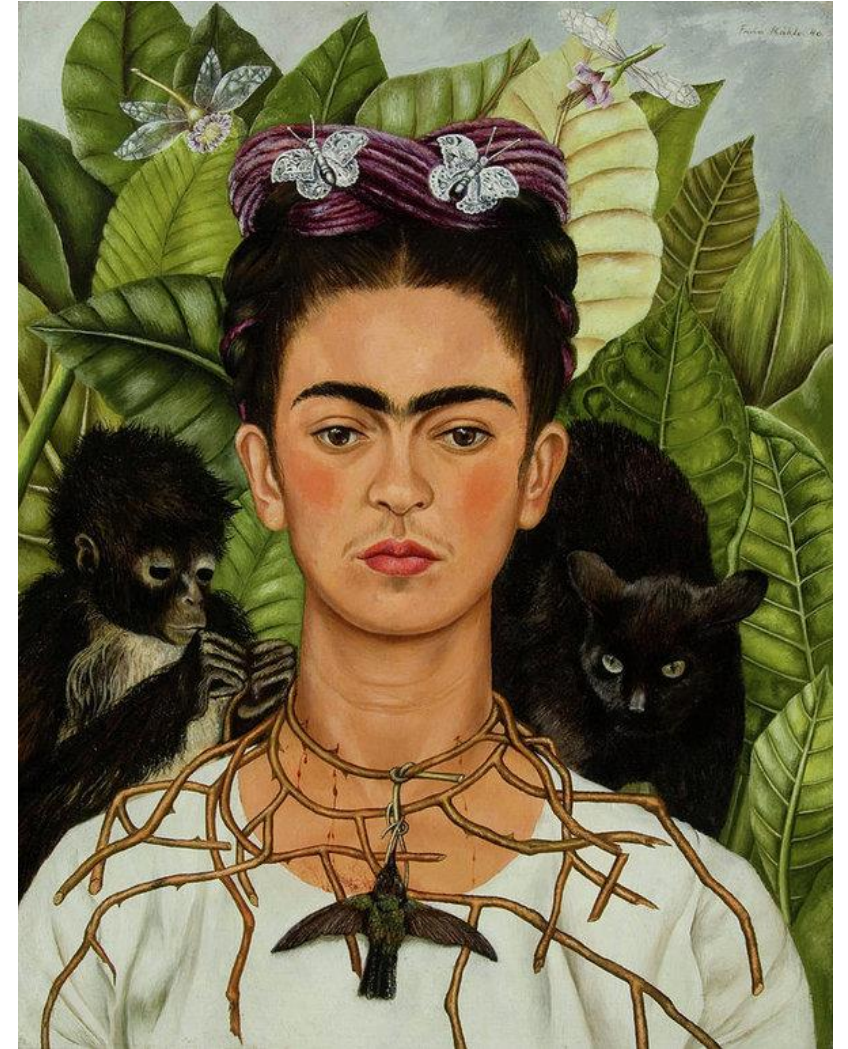
As mentioned in the research, the money represents Kahlo's husband, who gave her the necklace that intend to mean for love—but the hummingbird is dead, and the monkey is continuously hurting her, so we can tell Kahlo's inner pain based on this **conflicting relationship**.

The entire design is composed with biomorphic elements, representing the randomness and chaos within her mind—(no geometric elements that represent logic and order).

The thorn necklace causes agony to Kahlo, it brings her pain and suffering, referring to Jesus's extreme pain while being crucified. But in this context, it's his husband that makes her painful.

With major focus of Kahlo's face that forms complementary colors with the vibrant jungle background, it can better make contrast and emphasize the inner quiet and death and conflict despite of her placid expression.

Little positive space of the sky is revealed, suggesting the hopelessness of Kahlo's attitude towards life. While the design is unified with proximity mostly in which makes spaces of different objects intergrading into each other, it further suggest the close connection between each event that finally led to her mental collapse.





# Different Interpretations

1st: Kahlo wants to depict her desire to seek for death, wishing death to set her soul free. The joy and happiness emitted from the hummingbird is discounted by the presence of the black feline (could be the black panther) that suggests death and misfortune, no joy left to the soul, but the torso is still under pain, so only death can set her free.

2nd: Kahlo wants to show her true feelings to the audiences about her life situation.

3rd: A hummingbird is a symbol of male reproductive organ. Kahlo herself in the portrait has lost the ability to create new life. More importantly, she has lost her vitality and spiritual freedom.

4<sup>th</sup>: People with or without knowledge to those cultural symbolism and related subjects may have different interpretations

5<sup>th</sup>: People with different ecology knowledge may interpret those giant leaves differently, which those leaves do exist in life where Kahlo lived.

# Practical Application

Here are some ways I can apply techniques/methods used in Kahlo's portrait into my design:

## About concept

Kahlo's portrait depicts her loss in life that causes her the lifetime of inner pain. The concept of people's losses is interesting to me; however, the losses don't necessarily need to be spiritual, but it can be materialistic of any regret in life. I'd like to focus that as the meaning of my design, an option for a conceptual objective

## Juxtaposition with symbolism

It's interesting that Kahlo paints down the black feline, monkey, hummingbird, thorn necklace, and insects that employ symbolism according to her own identity, self, and exotic culture references. On a superficial level, these subjects placed with Kahlo in close proximity is juxtaposition, but once we understand their culture/background meanings, we know can conclude a tragic story about Kahlo. So applying such technique can install interest to the audience and meaning to the artwork, which is why I'd want to try such similar methods in my design.

## Lack of geometric elements with largely intergraded spaces

The portrait may express the chaos and randomness in the world, and Kahlo did it through no geometric elements and many intergraded spaces within three layers of closely connected spaces. This idea really does kind of mess up the structures of the design, which could try to apply to my design.

## Colors

I found that colors are used a lot in the portrait. However, this inspired me of preferring to show the concept of loss with little color for expression, the opposite of what Kahlo's done.



# Reference

1. [wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait\\_with\\_Necklace\\_of\\_Thorns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_with_Necklace_of_Thorns))
2. McQuillen, Charles. "Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird: A Cross-Curricular Lesson Plan"
3. From [Britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)