



The Self Portrait in Art History

Lesson 1: A short introduction to some of the most significant self portrait artists in history.



"I don't paint dreams or nightmares, I paint my own reality."

Frida Kahlo (1907- 1954) was a Mexican artist, known for her self-portrait paintings. Already suffering from chronic health problems, at the age of 18 Kahlo was involved in a bus incident which left her severely injured. It was during her recovery that she began to paint, depicting how her life experiences shaped her identity. Many of her paintings explore themes of national identity, female identity and grapple with both the emotional and physical pain endured throughout her life.

Image: Itzcuintli Dog with Me, 1938. Frida Kahlo



“I put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process.”

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) was a Dutch impressionist artist. Van Gogh drew and painted over 40 self portraits in his career, each portrait speaks of the relationship with himself at the time. Van Gogh found solace in painting despite his illnesses. Suffering from depression, Van Gogh took his own life at 37 years old. It wasn't till after his death that Van Gogh was acknowledged and celebrated for his work. He is now noted as one of the greatest artists in history.

Image: Self Portrait 1889, Vincent Van Gogh



“I do not paint a portrait to look like the subject, rather does the person grow to look like his portrait”

Salvador Dalí was a Spanish surrealist artist. Many of his paintings were inspired by his own dreams. Known as an extremely outspoken and extravagant man, Dalí took his avant garde aesthetic into mediums such as film and fashion. Dalí's less traditional approach to the self portrait saw him painting an 'assemblage' of items which each represented him.

Image: Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon. Salvador Dalí



"The still must tease with the promise of a story the viewer of it itches to be told."

Cindy Sherman is an American photographer widely known for her self portrait based works. Sherman toys with the idea performance and identity, causing the audience to question common stereotypes they may have. In many ways her work is a social commentary, using herself as subject, to confront political, cultural and gender based biases.

Image: Untitled Film Still #21 by Cindy Sherman, 1978