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# Analysis on the Semiotics for the Canvas of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera -Focus on the Icon·Index·Symbol of 3 classification Charles S. Peirce's Semiotic

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## **Abstract**

**Background and Objectives**: This study is a semiotic analysis of paintings sublimated to art and love by Frida Kahlo, female genius artist rising from despair, and Diego Rivera, master of Mexican muralist movement. **Methods and Statistical Analysis**: For the subject and scope of analysis, we selected total 10 pieces of art. We interpreted the pieces based on Charles S. Peirce's triadic model of semiotics such as icon, index and symbol. Their paintings and the hyperreality image of simulacra will present the standards for cultural meaning, social judgment and economic value as pop culture through practices of looking and way of seeing of visual language in signifying practices. **Findings**: The limitation of this study is that it added the emotions of researchers toward their paintings, as well as arbitrariness and polysemy felt in signification in the cultural sense. **Improvements and Applications:** This shows that there are limitations in subjective interpretant of a third party (researchers) to accurately capture the binomial relations of the différence in the extended sense of semiotics and infinite imagery and inspirations of artists with referents like connotative riddles in pictures (signs).

Keywords: Icon/Index/Symbol, Image, Sign, Signification

## 1. Introduction

This study analyzes the paintings sublimated to art and love by Frida Kahlo (1907~1954), female genius artist rising from despair, and Diego Rivera (1886~1957), master of Mexican muralist movement<sup>1</sup>. As Frida Kahlo said in 1939, "I couldn't express the things in paintings that I also couldn't with other means. This was all I wanted from painting." Her life that was the more real than the real is reproduced today, by movie directors, composers, choreographers and fashion designers, through the image of hyperreality with destroyed aura via simulacra that is more original than the original in the process of simulation constantly recalled with her paintings. Frida Kahlo challenged the Western Caucasian male-oriented art world<sup>1</sup> with her unmannered frankness and confidence by spiritualizing Western folk art and experience of personal pain, and her

abundant paintings are symbols of her own unique styles. Symbolic interpretation is complicated. Nonetheless, we must focus on symbols because they are the semantic system than only humans can create and interpret. Even if we cannot interpret or explain the meaning of each symbolism, the symbols are signified deep in our consciousness and enable sufficient communication<sup>2,3</sup>. Components such as paintings, advertisements, images and films can also be classified into icons (similarity), indexes and symbols. In particular, paintings are depictions of the inner world in the artist's environment. They visually cannot serve as symbols. Referents generally refer to natural objects out there. These are objects that will be symbolized in Peirce's triadic model of semiotics(Table 1). In this model, referent is in a conflicting relationship with reference. The sign represents the referent, and the sign always points at the referent that it represents<sup>2,4</sup>.

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Table.1 Triadic classification of semiotics according to Peirce's phenomenology

Phenomenological existenceTriadic relational structure of signs	1(possibility)	2(actual existence)	3(rule of existence)
Sign itself (unary)-hierarchical order of sign occurrence (language)	Attribute sign (Quallsign) Only attribute	Fact sign (sinsign)Actual existence	Rule sign (Legising) General rule
Semantic relationship with subject (binary)	Icon Sharing the same attributes	Index Physical proximity Causal relation (Cause /effect	Symbol Relationship according to customs and rules
Relationship with interpretant (ternary)	Rheme Interpretant substitutes attributes	Dicent Interpretant substitutes facts	Argument Interpretant substitutes rules
Semantic process	Know by seeing	Know by inference	Must learn
Case	Photos, maps, blueprints, etc.	Road signs, nose running-cold	Languages, national flags, mathematical formulas

Source: Kim Man-Ki, Pop Culture and Advertisements, Lyceum, 1.

By following the curious eyes under Frida Kahlo's signature thick eyebrows with the joy of semiotic interpretation, we will be able to see her colorful and alluring life and arts.

# 2. Research Subject and Method

The research subjects are 10 paintings by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (7 by Kahlo and 3 by Rivera). The method is a semiotic analysis of the paintings. To analyze the binary relationship between the subjects and signs, we interpret the paintings by substituting them to icon, index and symbol, the triadic model of semiotic according to Peirce's phenomenology (Table 1).

# 3. Interpretants: Icon, Index, Symbol

Semiotic interpretation is the main agent that interprets a painting or product sign, indicating the viewer of the painting or the consumer of the product. The viewers and consumers are categorized into audience, buyers and users according to the context of dealing with the products, and those repeatedly viewing and consuming the product signs are classified into audience and customers<sup>4</sup>.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are Frida Kahlo's self-portraits with fancy hair accessories and braids. The paintings show exotic and unique aspects of Kahlo. These paintings were done immediately after she reunited with Rivera. In the first painting, Kahlo portrayed herself as naked and weak.



Figure 1. Self-Portrait with Braid, Frida Kahlo, 1941(left)



**Figure 2.** Self-Portrait with Monkeys Frida Kahlo 1943(right)

The only thing protecting her is the grapevine covering her naked body with leaves. Grape leaves are a cultural custom that has been regarded as a symbol of eternal life and a garment of heaven along with figure leaves since

the ancient times. Here, grape leaves are a metaphor of Diego Rivera. Her naked self symbolizes her weakness and implies a connotative meaning of wanting help. It also connotes eternity and that she is still in love. The number 8 above her head symbolizes eternity, and the grape leaves symbolize eternal life, 'expressing eternal love.' The necklace made of old stones, conch shells and pebbles shaped like a man's head symbolizes the essence of her relationship with Rivera<sup>5-7</sup>. The long stone symbolizes that Frida and Diego could not communicate due to their blocked intimacy between them, but that there was signification. The fantastic and distinctive hairstyle, which led to the agenda setting of the title, is interesting in that the wool stick up without bending Frida's stiff hair. The hair ornament is shaped like the number 8, which is a symbol of eternity in that it can be written in one stroke5-7. According to Peirce's concept, symbol is made by a cultural custom, rule or regulation as the relationship between sign and referent is arbitrary<sup>2,8</sup>. expressed this hairstyle as a spiritual concept of interpretant in an exaggerated way. The shape of 8 on her hair is a lemniscate curve that signifies infinity. There is nothing to be found that is similar to the concept<signified> of <eight> in the 8-shape<signifier> above the head. It is just a custom and promise that comes down. When rotated by 90 degrees, the 8-shape is the sign for infinity ∞. In heraldry, such entangled rope is interpreted as a knot of love replaced by Peirce's primary sign (rheme) interpretant(Table1). The two circles connected in the knot of love symbolizes the unity of lovers through marriage. Nonetheless, Frida Kahlo's hair is too messily tangled up to be a bride, and the way it does not seem elaborately trimmed seems to show how something inside her refuses to declare such eternity. The hair standing up in spikes from the knot of love implies that the couple's relationship has faced multiple difficulties. It is uncertain whether the second marriage will lead to true unity<sup>5-7</sup>. Kahlo's anxiety is shown in the naked body that represents weakness and need for protection, where grape leaves represent the victim syndrome that someone is protecting oneself or inwardly seeking an underdog who can help 9. This is her reunited husband Diego Rivera. (Figure 2) This self-portrait with monkeys is painted in 1943. This piece is a representative painting by Kahlo, and the white dress, traditional costume of Mexico, is a symbol of authority. The painting includes bird of paradise, leaves, four monkeys and white dress missing wool. It is taken away on purpose. The black wool on hair makes her proud with a bachelor's degree. The hair mixed with yarn symbolizes

her academic status like a graduation cap. She is a metaphor of queen, the bird of paradise is 'flower of the queen,' and the monkeys are her followers or her four students (Los Fridos). The monkeys have their mouths open, seeking Kahlo's teachings. Their tails are symbols of the four creators in the legend of the inner wheels in the Aztec calendar, and having such students implies confidence, and her eyes that calmly gaze like a queen vaguely reveal the hidden irony that cannot be seen through. Kahlo mocks herself by enjoying the conventional order that she has mocked5-7.

Kahlo's painting after miscarriage(Figure 3) is solemn and beautiful, and the pure white dress seems to transcend tedious things of daily life. Her eyes look directly at the audience, and the face is young and fresh with dignity and no signs of concern, when in fact her heart is heavy. The heavy antique necklace represents the way she cannot easily let go of her daily life. The mustache and monobrow are the index of strong and mature women who can broadly love both men and women. The monobrow symbolizes freedom and passion, and Frida represents independence and distance from her husband, changed back from her old signature that missed one letter to match the number of letters in Diego's name<sup>5-7</sup>. That is, it is an index symbol.

This painting(Figure 4) is in the theme of a traditional still life painting of 'memento mori' that tells the audience to remember death, revealing the bride that is frightened when she sees life open. With various literary materials, the painting portrays complicated thoughts and emotions about sexual desires and love. The sensual arrangement of various fruits reveals the essence of all things. Two halves of watermelon and two coconuts morphologically form the sign of 'yin and yang,' and 'yang' that indicates male is symbolized with the bananas below, while 'yin' that repre-



**Figure 3.** Self Portrait with Necklace



**Figure 4.** The Bride Who Became Frightened When She Sees Life Open, Frida Kahlo, 1943(Right)

sents female is expressed as papaya cracked open at the top. Both sides complement one another, but can never become one. This is dualism and binarity. The two halves of watermelon in the painting are not a single piece cut into halves, thereby unable to become one. An owl is sitting in front of the fruits as if thinking carefully about the arrangement of the fruits. A katydid is trying to catch the owl's attention. This scene describes the story of the owl and katydid from Aesop's fables. In the fable, the owl invites the katydid that cries loudly with annoying sounds and eats it up. The two pieces of watermelon cracked open in a fan shape show greedy lust and eternal desire for symbiotic mutuality, but putting the two pieces together does not lead to actual harmony or satisfaction. Like many other paintings done by Kahlo, this painting is a symbol of her life in 1943. With her energy and spirit exhausted by Rivera's love, Kahlo desires to build a symbiotic relationship with him. At the same time, she suffers from great inferiority complex. The katydid in the painting tries to attract the owl's attention, but the attempt is not very successful. But if the owl recognizes the katydid at one point, the result will be fatal like in Aesop's fable, because death is the only possible ending<sup>5-7</sup>.

The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Senor Xolotl (Figure 5) is based on the two iconic motifs of Christianity and Buddhism, with Virgin Mary as Mexico's earth goddess flowing from the rich breasts. She is holding Rivera. The pet dog Senor Xólotl is peacefully asleep in the arms of the universe that embraces and protects everything. Xólotl is on the knees of Virgin Mary, the myth of the 'third eye' of Shiva. The painting seeks sympathy and compassion, worship and mysterious identification, power and will of the universe, request for help as well as sympathy and compassion. The sun and the moon are embracing hurt and lonely Kahlo

with yin and yang. The relationship between Frida and Diego that reunited after divorce became more like maternal love, and Frida's obsession over Diego grew bigger<sup>5-7</sup>.

Cruel Fate (Figure 6) was painted by Frida in July 1932. Frida had to be hospitalized at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit due to miscarriage. Lying in bed with endless tears, red strings like umbilical cords grow out of Frida's body, connected to shapes symbolizing miscarriage or other sexual symbols such as snail or flower.

With Frida as if floating in the air the background shows a desolate industrial complex that more intensely reveals the despair and loneliness felt by Frida<sup>5-7</sup>.



**Figure 5.** The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico) Me and Senor Xólotl, Frida Kahlo 1949 (Right)



Figure 6. Cruel Fate, Frida Kahlo,1932(Left)



Figure 7. Sunflowers, Diego Rivera, 1943 (Right)

This painting (Figure 7) shows children playing with big decorative sunflowers in the background. A boy is holding a mask in his hands, and a girl is looking at the broken leg of the doll in her arms with sad eyes. In the middle of this monumental painting, there is Rivera planting the tree of life with actress Goddard. On one side, Frida is standing with an easel, while on the other side there is the boy and girl watching this scene<sup>5-7</sup>. The characters and similar children in this painting symbolize the harmony of conflicting things and promising future. Calla Lily Vendor (Figure 8) shows 'lingam and yoni' in Buddhism (symbolizing reproductive organs of male and female in Hinduism), and the sensuality of rich and abundant nature filled with countless petals<sup>5-7</sup>.

Landscape with Cacti (Figure 9) shows the love triangle between Kahlo, Diego and Nicholas Murray. One cactus is shaped like breasts, with two other cacti seemingly



Figure 8. Calla Lily Vendor, Diego Rivera, 1943(Right)



Figure 9. Landscape with Cacti, Diego Rivera 1931(left)



Figure 10. Fulang-Chang and I

shooting admiring and amorous glances. Fulang-Chang and I (Figure 10) was painted by Frida in the year she met Leo Trotzki. The cactus shaped like a penis or monkeys symbolizing promiscuous sexual relations or desires reveal subtle eroticism<sup>5-7</sup>.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study semiotically analyzed the paintings sublimated to art and love by Frida Kahlo, female genius artist, and Diego Rivera, master of Mexican muralist movement. As shown in these paintings, Frida's and Diego's works are all symbols of inner emotions toward the two paintings such as love, hate and pain. Thus, we found connotative and implicative meanings of these paintings.

This study is a hyperreality world of connotative simulacrum about these paintings. This world is 'a world more real than reality' 10, 11. This is a cultural interpretation and social judgment as pop culture through practices of looking and way of seeing of visual language in signifying practices. It also provides the clues to judge economic value. The limitation of this study is that, as Frida said in the movie Frida, "women's tears cannot be trusted." 2,12. As such, arbitrariness and polysemy felt in the researchers' emotions and cultural interactions toward their paintings must be added to this study, which is also a characteristic of semiotics and the artists' paintings.

# 5. Acknowledgement

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