Pixel Portraits

Ages: 5+ (Kindergarten–12)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials Needed: Graph paper, plain paper, and multi-colored construction paper; ruler; glue or tape; regular pencil, plus crayons, markers, or colored pencils; a source photograph or reference from the HRM's permanent collection.

Inspiration: Claudia Blanco (San Jose, CA). *8-bit Frida*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. Featured in *The World of Frida*, February 4–May 22, 2022, Hudson River Museum.

Introduction

A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the focus is the face and its expression. A self-portrait is a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist. Visionary Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) is known for her many portraits, self-portraits, and works inspired by nature and the vibrant colors found in Mexican culture and fashion. Contemporary artist Claudia Blanco (San Jose, CA) explores and celebrates her Mexican roots through creativity. Let's take a closer look at Claudia's portrait of Frida.

Look

- What's going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- What shape can you find within this portrait? How has the artist used this shape to build the image?
- Can you find any facial features or other clues hidden within the image?
- What colors can you find in this portrait? Where do you think Frida might be?
- What happens if you look at this image from far away? What happens if you look at this image up close?

Connect

Claudia Blanco wanted to celebrate Frida in a modern way. On the left is a photograph portrait of Frida Kahlo by Nickolas Muray, which is currently on view in *Frida Kahlo in Context*. Claudia Blanco utilized this work to create her pixel portrait. Claudia used a grid layout inspired by another artist, Chuck Close (American, 1940–2021), for the composition itself. This grid layout is a form of abstraction, or art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colors, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect. A grid is a network of lines that cross each other to form a series of squares or rectangles.

Compare the photograph with Blanco's painting. Do you notice grid lines? Can you find details from the photograph in the painting? What other similarities can you find? What differences do you see?

Left: Nickolas Muray. *Frida Kahlo on White Bench (2nd Edition), New York*, 1939. Gelatin silver print, 19 x 14.5 inches. © Nickolas Muray Photo Archives.
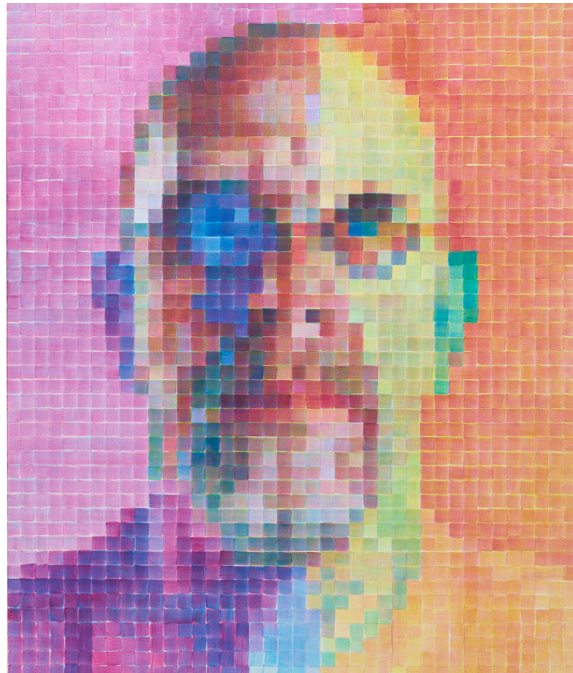
Right: Chuck Close. *Self-Portrait I,* 2015. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. © Chuck Close.

Do

1. First, think of a subject you want to celebrate through a pixel portrait. This can be a person you know, a family member or a friend, or it could be an artist, a fictional character, or even yourself!

2. If you have an existing photograph of that person, take several minutes to look closely at it. You can Google search for an image of your subject too. What colors can you find? What shapes do you see? What details about this person are your favorite? In a pixel portrait, will you want to recreate the entire image, or just a section?

3. If you have graph paper, use a ruler to make a series of marks 1 inch apart on the bottom edge of your paper. Do the same at the top. Then use your ruler to connect the marks bottom to top with a pencil. If you have plain paper only, follow this same procedure. Now, make a series of marks 1 inch apart along the left side of your graph paper, do the same on the right side, and connect the marks with your ruler and pencil left to right. Do the same if you are using plain paper. Note: you can experiment with the size of your grid if 1 inch resulting squares seem too small or large for you.

4. Using scissors and construction paper, cut a pile of 1-inch squares in the main colors you see in your source image.

5. Using plain paper and crayons, markers, and colored pencils, observe and re-draw a few key details from your source image that you would like to hide like clues in your pixel portrait.

6. Arrange your construction paper squares and your drawn details into a re-creation of your source image on your grid. Don't use glue or tape until you are happy with your arrangement!

Reflect

How does your pixel portrait compare with your source image? How is it similar or different? What clues did you include that help viewers know the subject of your portrait? Why did you decide to include these details? What do they tell a viewer about your subject? Why do you think Claudia Blanco left details like Frida's eye, mouth, and flower crown so clear in her celebration of the artist?

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