Like the traditional Mexican dresses she usually wore and posed in, her distinctive attire can be considered in symbolic terms as a form of self-defining costume.

"The picture is certainly one of Frida's best, as well as an exceptional document," wrote Lieutenant Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of The Museum of Modern Art, referring to Frida Kahlo's *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* (*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*) (1940, no. 1).[1] Kaufmann and Barr had spent part of the summer of 1942 traveling together in Mexico, looking for works of art to acquire for the Museum's collection.[2] By early February 1943 Barr was able to report to Kaufmann—who was away, serving a tour of duty in the United States Air Force Intelligence Office—that "now we have practically every Mexican artist whom we would like to have well represented, with the exception of Frida Kahlo. I have my eye on the small self-portrait of Frida sitting in a chair with close cropped hair, the floor strewn with the hair she has just cut off, with some touching inscription up above, such as 'will you love me in December even with my hair cut off.' Do you think this is a good picture? Would it be something you would like to have your money spent on? I like it very much."[3]

1. *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* (*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*). 1940. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 11" (40 x 27.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.

Aside from Barr's overly saccharine translation of the Spanish lyrics Kahlo had carefully painted across the top of her canvas, his exchange with Kaufmann is revealing.[4] It testifies to the early priority he placed on acquiring a work by Kahlo as an important representative of contemporary Mexican art and to the strong impression Kahlo's *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* had made on both men. Although it is unclear exactly when and where Barr first saw the painting, Kaufmann had visited Kahlo at her home in Mexico in February 1940, at a moment very likely coincident with that of the work's origins.[5] "I have to give you a [*sic*] bad news," Kahlo wrote to her friend and erstwhile lover the photographer Nickolas Muray, on February 6, 1940: "I cut my hair, and looks just like a ferry [*sic*]. Well, it will grow again, I hope!"[6] Her misspelled choice of the word "fairy," which Kahlo used to refer to an overtly effeminate male homosexual in a way typical of 1940s-era homophobia, is telling: it conjures a subject with masculine and feminine qualities. It is this newly androgynous self that Kahlo meticulously documented in *Autorretrato con pelo cortado*.

Although Kahlo previously had painted one other portrait of herself with short hair, *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* is the only work she ever made in which she chose to portray herself in men's clothing.[7] Like the traditional Mexican dresses she usually wore and posed in, her distinctive attire can be considered in symbolic terms as a form of self-defining costume. Yet her dangling earring, delicately boned hands and face, and diminutive high-heeled shoes—along with the numerous tendrils of cutoff hair that carpet the floor—send signals that conflict with those of the close-cropped haircut and man's suit. Like Man Ray's photographs of Kahlo's friend and loyal supporter Marcel Duchamp in the guise of his female alter ego Rrose Sélavy, the painting presents us with an image of someone posing, not attempting to pass, as the opposite sex.[8] The deliberate ambivalence and resultant gender confusion contribute to the work's uncanny allure.

All who knew Kahlo well surely would have recognized the charcoal-gray, oversized suit and crimson shirt as attributes of her husband, the famed Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera, whose divorce from Kahlo became final in November 1939.[9] Identifying the garments as Rivera's complicates the work's psychological subtext: to put on the clothes of a former lover is a physically intimate act, simultaneously tender and aggressive. It involves, on the one hand, the potentially poignant touch of fabric against skin and, on the other, the assertive appropriation of another's (sartorial) identity as one's own. *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* was conceived and painted at a moment when Kahlo was particularly keen to establish her financial independence from Rivera and to make a living from her art.[10] It is, therefore, certainly plausible to view the work, as one early critic did and others subsequently have done, as a sign of Kahlo's "determination to compete with men on the same artistic level"—to assume the role of master, as opposed to wife, mistress, or muse, at the same time as she mourned Rivera's absence.[11]

In January 1940, probably just prior to cutting her hair, Kahlo reported to Muray, "I have to finish a big painting . . . [for *The International Exhibition of Surrealism* that opened in Mexico City on January 17, 1940] and start small things to send to Julien [Levy]."[12] It is highly likely that one of the "small things" she subsequently started was *Autorretrato con pelo cortado*. Kahlo always insisted on her work's documentary character and its intimate relation to real, lived events in her life.[13] Among these events, in addition to those directly linked to her biographical circumstances, the brouhaha over Mexico City's Surrealism exhibition—which prompted Kahlo's sarcastic remark that "everybody in Mexico has become a surrealist because all are going to take part on [*sic*] it"—should also be considered, given the painting's numerous, slyly ironic references to Sigmund Freud's theories of fetishism, which were widely embraced by the Surrealists yet problematically defined women in terms of lack.[14]

The lyrics Kahlo painstakingly inscribed in flowing, cursive script across the top of *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* sing of someone once loved for her hair, which is a classic Freudian fetish object or stand-in. The suggestively positioned pair of (castrating) scissors introduces a performative dimension, identifying Kahlo with the act that gave rise to the eerily animate locks of hair themselves. These liberated tendrils—black and fluid, like the writing—float up against the surface of the painting, refusing to conform to the dictates of recessional space. It is, perhaps, in her treatment of the hair that Kahlo most clearly signals both her engagement with and distance from Surrealism, by transforming the disengaged, spontaneous lines of the movement's celebrated automatic drawings into an obsessively detailed, exquisitely painted, deliberately referential network. The fine lines traced by her brush recall what art historian Rosalind Krauss has described as "the kind of drawing that the French call *écriture*—a descriptive line pushed toward the abstract disembodiment of the written sign."[15] But at the same time they reject it; Kahlo also forced those lines into mimetic service, into the jobs of description and self-representation.

It is perhaps in this hairy, calligraphic, floor-bound realm—at a distance from the face that has, by now, become so famous that its celebrity makes it difficult to see her art—that Kahlo the master artist most powerfully emerges, as a figure not only capable of wearing her then-more-famous husband's suit with authority but of creating an intimate, corporeal, counter-language that placed her private, personal experiences at the center of her public practice, redefining, in terms of a very particular feminine subjectivity, what can be considered subject matter for the making of serious, universal art.

2. **Diego Rivera** (Mexican, 1886–1957). *Autorretrato* (*The Firestone Self-Portrait*). 1941. Oil on canvas, 24 x 17" (61 x 43.2 cm). Collection Michael Audain and Yoshiko Karasawa, Vancouver, B.C.

1. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., letter to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., February 25, 1943. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.97, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
2. Barr, draft report on his summer 1942 trip to Mexico and Cuba, undated. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, 10.A.47, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
3. Barr, letter to Kaufmann, February 4, 1943. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.97. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
4. For a closer translation see *MoMA Highlights: 350 Works from The Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 181: "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore."
5. Frida Kahlo, letter to Julien Levy, February 28, 1940. Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives. In this letter Kahlo reports that Kaufmann had recently visited her and had purchased the painting *"Child birth"* (1932) (now more commonly known as *Mi nacimiento* [*My Birth*]).
6. Kahlo, letter to Nickolas Muray, February 6, 1940; reprinted in Kahlo, *Escrituras*, ed. Raquel Tibol (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 2004), p. 241.
7. For the most extensive discussion of *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* to date, including mention of the earlier *Autorretrato con cabello corto y rizado* (*Self-Portrait with Curly Hair*) (1935) and a useful overview of critical responses to the work, see Gannit Ankori, *Imaging Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 175–87. I am indebted to her observations throughout, although because she interprets *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* as evidence of what she seeks to establish as a long-standing interest on Kahlo's part in assuming a "masculinized" identity, the work's anomalous status within Kahlo's oeuvre goes unmentioned. Kahlo did pose in a man's suit in 1926, fourteen years earlier, for photographs taken by her father, Guillermo Kahlo, but *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* is the only known instance where she depicted herself as a dandy in masculine attire and short hair.
8. On Kahlo's close relationship with Marcel Duchamp and her likely familiarity with Man Ray's photographs of Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy, see ibid., p. 184. For a useful discussion of the distinction between posing and attempting to "pass," see Jennifer Blessing, "Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography," in *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 23.
9. Ankori argues against identifying the suit with Diego Rivera and suggests that Kahlo may have loosely based the painting on a photograph of herself, seated in a similar chair, wearing pants and a woman's embroidered Mexican shirt. Ankori, *Imaging Her Selves*, p. 177. It can be noted, however, that when Rivera painted *Autorretrato* (no. 2), commissioned as a pendant to Kahlo's *Autorretrato dedicado a Sigmund Firestone* (*Self-Portrait Dedicated to Sigmund Firestone*) (completed by February 15, 1940), he portrayed himself dressed in a gray suit with a crimson shirt just as Kahlo does in *Autorretrato con pelo cortado*. See Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, eds., *Frida Kahlo* (London: Tate, 2005), plate 35 and fig. 102. And when Kahlo painted Rivera's portrait set within her own face in *Autorretrato como tehuana* (*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana*) (1943), she rendered him in the same crimson shirt and charcoal-gray wide-lapelled suit, further supporting an association between these garments and Rivera. Ibid., plate 42.
10. See Kahlo's letters to Muray, December 18, 1939, January 1940, and February 6, 1940, in *Escrituras*, pp. 238–41, on her determination to rely only on her own art for money and for references to how hard she was working in anticipation of a second one-person show at the Julien Levy Gallery, New York. See also Kahlo's letters to Levy, February 7 and February 28, 1940. Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives. The show kept being postponed, and Kahlo eventually suggested to Levy that he offer her February 1941 slot on the exhibition schedule to the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Kahlo, letter to Levy, August 30, 1940. Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.
11. Ben Bindol, "Exhibition by 31 Women," *Aufbau* 9, no. 3 (January 15, 1943): 14; archived in Press Clipping Volumes, Peggy Guggenheim Museum, Venice. Kahlo's *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* was included in a show titled *Exhibition by 31 Women* at Peggy Guggenheim's recently opened gallery Art of this Century, New York, January 5–31, 1943. I am indebted to Robert Storr's suggestion that in Kahlo's *Autorretrato con pelo cortado* she kills the muse to become the master. Storr, "Frida Kahlo autoportrait aux cheveux coupés," *Art Press*, no. 113 (April 1987): 84.
12. Kahlo, letter to Muray, January 1940. The big painting Kahlo referred to is most likely *La mesa herida* (*The Wounded Table*) (1940), now lost.
13. See Kahlo, letter to Carlos Chávez, October 1939, in *Escrituras*, p. 231, for an early, manifestolike description of the intimate relation between her art and her life.
14. Kahlo, letter to Muray, January 1940.
15. Rosalind Krauss, "Magnetic Fields: The Structure," in Krauss and Margit Rowell, *Joan Miró: Magnetic Fields* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1972), p. 11.