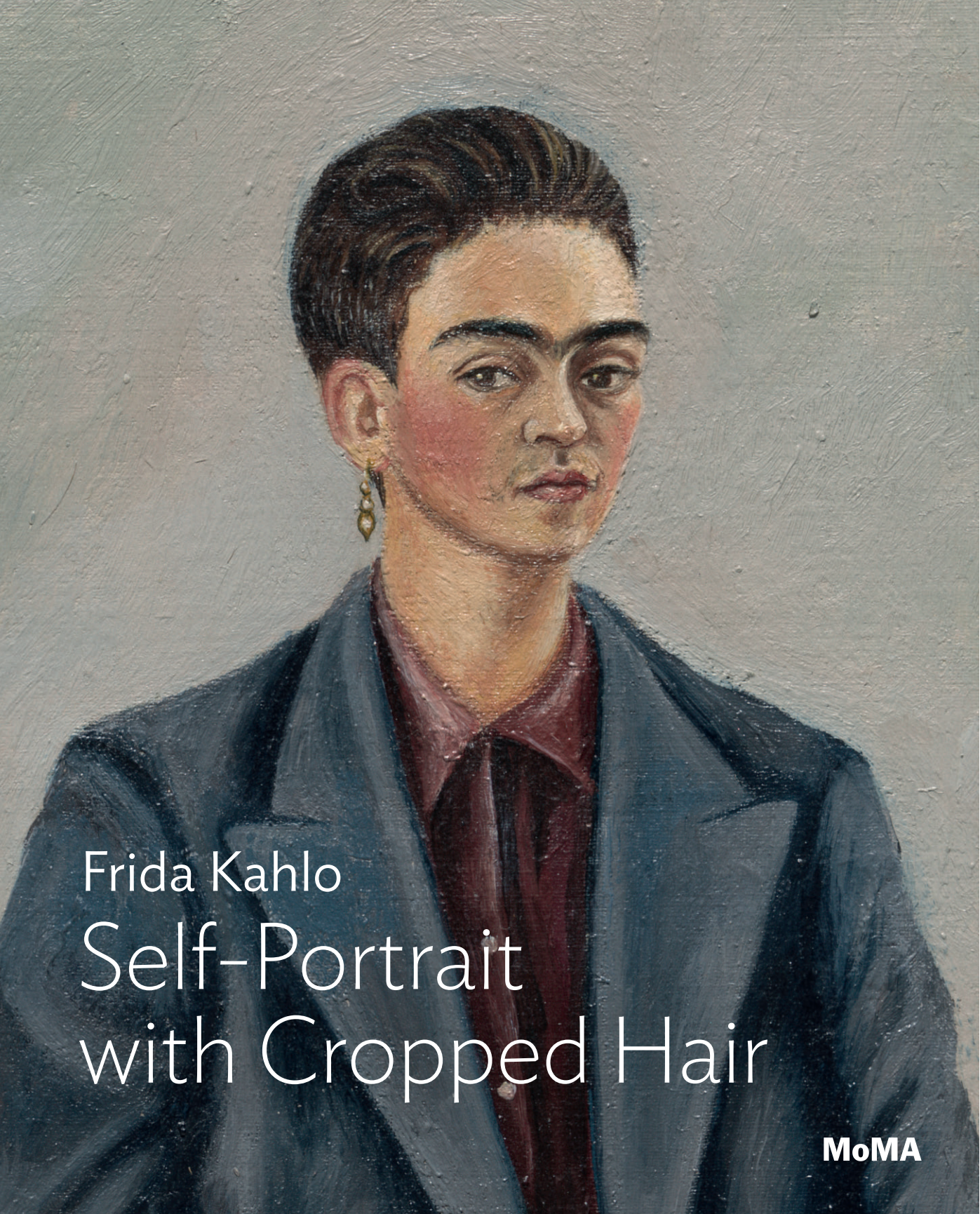

Frida Kahlo
Self-Portrait
with Cropped Hair
MoMA

FRIDA KAHLO
SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR

JODI ROBERTS

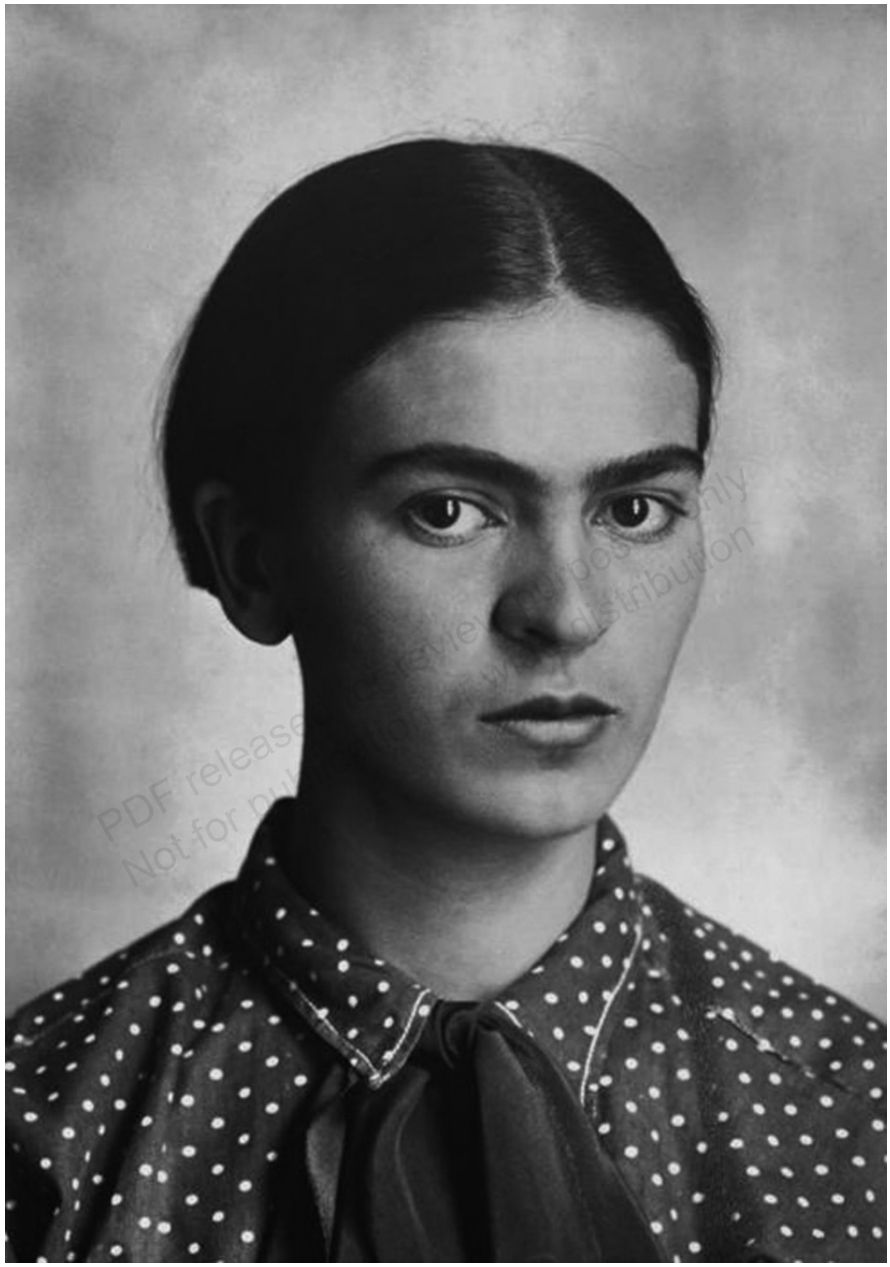
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

***SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CROPPED HAIR*, BY THE MEXICAN ARTIST FRIDA KAHLO,** counters what we have come to expect from her work. In place of the bright palette that enlivens many of her paintings, it is rendered almost entirely in neutral hues of brown, black, beige, and dusty pink. Her hallmark clothing—colorful shirts and skirts inspired by indigenous Mexican dress—has been exchanged for a dark, ill-fitting men's suit. Her long hair—often shown braided, piled atop her head, and laced with ribbons **[FIG. 1]**—is here reduced to a short, slicked-back crop. The monkeys, dogs, and other intriguing creatures that often populate her paintings have been replaced with long strands of hair that seem to wiggle on the floor and up the rungs of the chair with a life of their own. Where Kahlo's paintings often include inscriptions describing their subject matter and date of completion, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* features lyrics from a song popular at the time it was made: "Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo, ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero" (Look, if I loved you it was for your hair. Now that you're without it I no longer love you).

Yet the work is unmistakably Kahlo's, not least for the face that stares resolutely at us from its surface. Kahlo's physiognomy is iconic: dark, piercing eyes crowned by full brows that meet in the middle; a short, slightly round nose; pert lips topped with a shadow of fuzz. The ready recognizability of the artist is due first and foremost to the dozens of self-portraits she made over the course of her career, but pictures of her made by others have also played a role. The camera, in particular, has been one of the principal ways in which her image has been disseminated. Her father photographed her during her younger years **[FIG. 2]**; later, she sat for celebrated modernists, including Edward Weston, Lola

Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907–1954). *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. 1940. Oil on canvas, 15 ¾ x 11" (40 x 27.9 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF EDGAR KAUFMANN, JR.


Frida Kahlo. 40.



OPPOSITE: FIG. 1. Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907–1954). *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*. 1940. Oil on canvas, 24 1⁄16 x 18 ½" (61.3 x 47 cm). HARRY RANSOM CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

ABOVE: FIG. 2. Photograph of Frida Kahlo by her father, Guillermo Kahlo, c. 1926. FRIDA KAHLO & DIEGO RIVERA ARCHIVE, MEXICO CITY

Álvarez Bravo, and Imogen Cunningham **[FIG. 3]**. She caught the eye of photojournalists and appeared in newspapers across Mexico and the United States. Since her death, in 1954, the myriad images of Kahlo created during her lifetime have been printed and reprinted en masse, feeding a phenomenon (known as "Fridamania") and a cultural industry that has produced a dizzying array of Kahlo-themed commodities.

Kahlo is celebrated as a master painter, but her personality and biography have also captured the imagination of millions of people. In no small part, this widespread love stems from the confessional nature of her work. Her self-portraiture, the genre she favored above all others, seems to divulge the subjective experience of an artist keenly attuned to her deepest psychological urges and core emotional truths. Kahlo insisted that her paintings flowed from an interior source: "My work consisted of eliminating everything that did not come from the internal lyrical motives that impelled me to paint," she explained in 1940, the year she made *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair.* "Since my subject [has] always been my sensations, my states of mind and the profound reactions that life has been producing in me, I have frequently objectified all this in figures of myself."[1] The people closest to the artist have confirmed that an urgent exploration of her inner workings formed the basis of her creative activity. As her husband, the painter Diego Rivera, explained, "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings."[2] Kahlo's willingness to render her most private sentiments with unflinching candor transformed her into a symbol of personal integrity.

The "sensations" and "states of mind" that inspired *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* were no doubt acutely painful. Kahlo made the work in the wake of her (short-lived) divorce from Rivera in 1939. After a volatile decade of marriage, their relationship had become untenable. But the work is much more than the lament of a hurt lover. Like so many works by Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* reveals the artist's remarkable ability to disclose her most private emotional states by drawing upon a trove of social signifiers with origins in the exterior world. Although Kahlo is invoked today as a patron saint by those seeking profound self-knowledge and uncompromising self-expression, her paintings betray a willingness to adopt and discard at will varied—and sometimes contradictory—modes of self-expression. With strategies that, in hindsight, seem extraordinarily prescient in their attempts to navigate the vagaries of

FIG. 3. Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883–1976). *Frida Rivera.* 1931. Gelatin silver print, 8 ¼ x 6 ⅛" (21 x 15.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALBERT M. BENDER

FIG. 5. Jean Charlot (French, 1898–1979). *Woman with a Child on Her Back*. 1924. Woodcut, 11 x 8 9/16" (28 x 21.7 cm). Artist's proof. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. THE HARRIS BRISBANE DICK FUND

The foundation of a new government in 1920 fueled these efforts to establish a Mexican culture that would account for the nation's multifaceted ethnic makeup and complex history while also embracing modernity in its varied social and cultural forms. Visual artists put their minds to creating new works that would strike a balance between the old and the new, the indigenous and the cosmopolitan. Jean Charlot **[FIG. 5]**, a French transplant to Mexico, for example,

FIG. 6. Germán Cueto (Mexican, 1893–1975). *Mask I*. 1924. Paint on cardboard, 16 15⁄16 x 9 1⁄4 x 7 3⁄8" (43 x 23.5 x 18.5 cm). COLECCIÓN ANDRÉS BLAISTEN, MEXICO

offered a sympathetic view of Mexico's peasantry in woodblock prints, a medium appreciated by modernists for the directness of its process and the force of its visual effects. Germán Cueto paid homage to Mexico's folk arts with masks **[FIG. 6]** that simultaneously allude to indigenous costumes and contemporary art movements such as Cubism. In *Maya Women* (1926; **FIG. 7**), Roberto Montenegro rendered his subjects heroic by simplifying the curves of their


Coyoacan, Febr. 7 de 1926.

that mysteriously transmutates between human and vegetal forms. In *The Four Inhabitants of Mexico City* **[FIG. 23]**, Mexico's pre-Columbian past coexists with folk customs of the present. In *What the Water Gave Me* **[FIG. 24]**, the magical and the literal intermingle in space and time.

Breton helped establish the terms by which international viewers understood Kahlo's work and the context in which it was made, suggesting that her art, her persona, and Mexico's long history converged to affirm the transnational and transhistorical validity of Surrealism. Breton's proclamation that Kahlo herself was "like a fairy-tale princess, with magic spells at her finger-tips . . . an apparition in the flash of light of the *quetzal* bird which scatters opals among the rocks as it flies away" no doubt had an impact—on Levy, for example, who described her as a "mythical creature, not of this world."[14] The reviews of the New York show reiterated this fascination with Kahlo's exoticism and insisted on her naivete and untainting by European artistic training. Her works "had the daintiness of miniatures," wrote a critic in *Time*, with "the vivid reds and yellows of Mexican tradition and the playfully bloody fancy of an unsentimental child."[15] In *Vogue*, Kahlo's friend Bertram D. Wolfe described her paintings as "a sort of 'naïve' Surrealism, which she invented for herself"; her works, further, were not

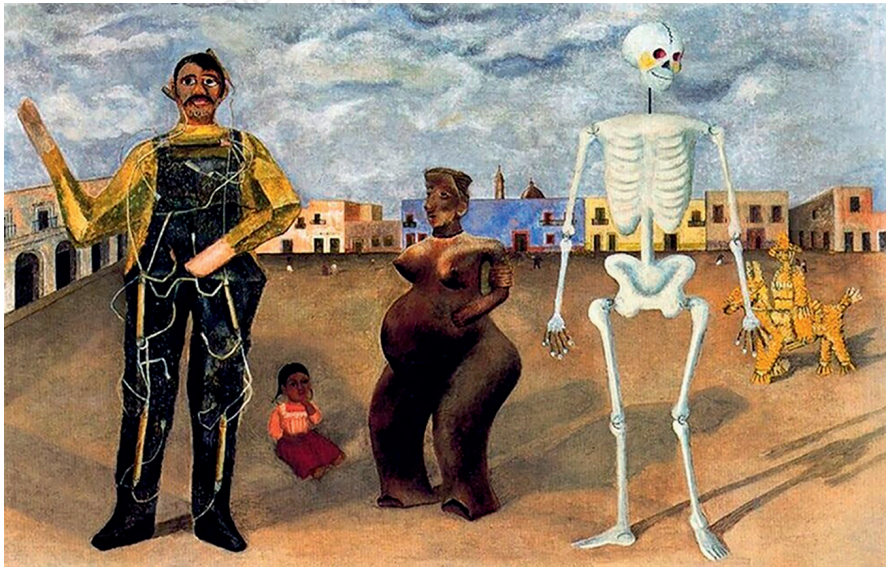


FIG. 23. Frida Kahlo (Mexican, 1907–1954). *The Four Inhabitants of Mexico City*. 1937. Oil on metal, 12 ¾ x 18 ¾" (32.4 x 47.6 cm). PRIVATE COLLECTION

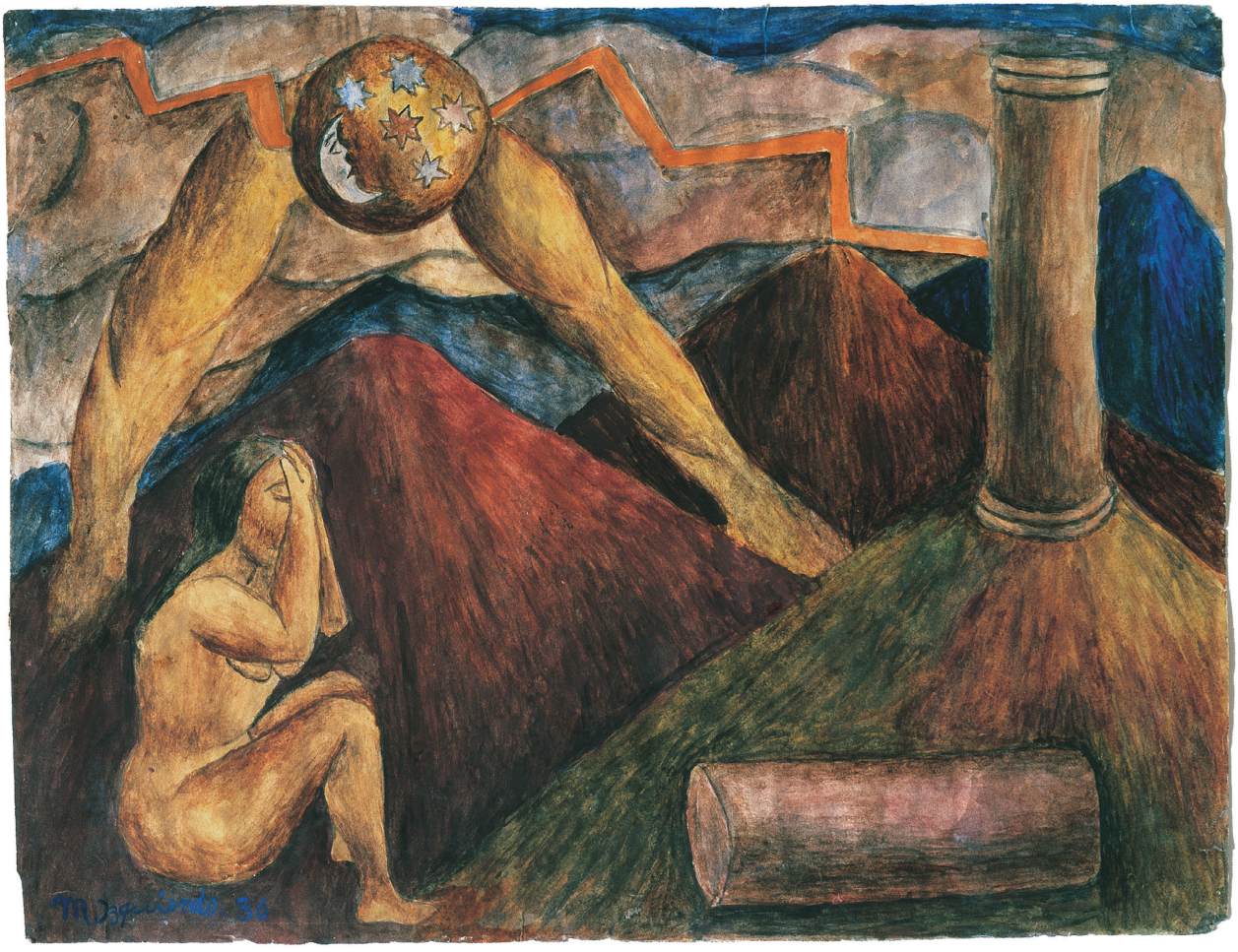


FIG. 29. María Izquierdo. *Allegory of Work*. 1936. Watercolor and tempera on paper, 8 ¼ x 10 13/16" (21 x 27.5 cm). COLLECIÓN ANDRÉS BLAISTEN, MEXICO

Kahlo was not the only female artist in the male-centric world of international Surrealism, and Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century was a locus of women working in a Surrealist vein. These included María Izquierdo, who began painting nudes in fantastic landscapes **[FIG. 29]** in the 1930s and whose works were among the "discoveries" of the French writer Antonin Artaud, who promoted them in Paris after meeting her in Mexico in 1936. The Spanish-born painter Remedios Varo immigrated to Mexico during World War II and began painting dreamlike scenes inspired by alchemy and the occult that were

Produced by the Department of Publications, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

This publication is made possible by Fernando, Nadine, Ali, and Anisa Estrada-Karachi.

Edited by Emily Hall
Designed by Miko McGinty and Rita Jules
Production by Matthew Pimm
Printed and bound by Ofset Yapimevi, Turkey
This book is typeset in Ideal Sans. The paper is 150 gsm Magno Satin.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018968465
ISBN: 978-1-63345-075-2

Published by The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street
New York, New York 10019-5497
www.moma.org

Distributed in the United States and Canada by Artbook | D.A.P.
75 Broad Street, Suite 630
New York, New York 10004
www.artbook.com

Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson Ltd
181A High Holborn
London WC1V 7QX
www.thamesandhudson.com

Cover: Frida Kahlo. *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. 1940. Oil on canvas, 15 ¾ x 11″ (40 x 27.9 cm).
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF EDGAR KAUFMANN, JR.

Printed and bound in Turkey

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