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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. 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 Automotretes 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 February 1940, at a moment very likely coincident with that of the work’s origins. “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] Wall, it will grow again, I hope!” Her misspelled choice of the word “fairy,” which Kahlo used to refer to an overtly feminized subject, demonstrates a subject with masculine and feminine qualities. It is this newly androgynous self that Kahlo meticulously documented in Automotretes con pelo cortado. Although Kahlo previously had painted one other portrait of herself with short hair, Automotretes con pelo cortado is the only work she ever made in which she chose to portray herself in men’s clothing. 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—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 divorces from Kahlo became final in November 1939. 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. Automotretes 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.7 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 poured Rivera’s absence.

**Note:**
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 Julian [Lee].”13 It is likely highly that one of the “small things” she subsequently started was Autoportrero 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 brochures 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 in it”—also be considered, given the painting’s numerous, slily ironic references to Sigmund Freud’s theories of fetishism, which were widely embraced by the Surrealists yet profoundly defined women in terms of lack.13

The lyrics Kahlo painstakingly inscribed in flowing, cursive script across the top of Autoportrero con pelo cortado sing of someone once loved for her hair, which is a classic Freudian fetish object or stand-in. The show kept Kahlo constantly on Kahlo’s mind, particularly when she depicted herself in a man’s suit with authority but of creating an intimate, corporeal, counter-language that placed her suit with authority but of creating an intimate, corporeal, counter-language that placed her

12. Kahlo’s letter to Jean Paul Slusser, February 4, 1943. The painting Kahlo described as “the kind of drawing that Kahlo most clearly signals both her engagement with and distance from, 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 artist historian Rosalind Krauss has described as “the kind of drawing that the French call écriture—a descriptive line pushed toward the abstract disembowelment of the written sign.”14 But at the same time they reject it. Kahlo also forced those lines in mimic signature, into the jobs of description and self-representation. It is perhaps in this hairy, calligraphic, floor-bound realm—a distance from the face that has, 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

2. Diego Rivera (Mexican, 1886–1957), Autorretrato con cabello corto (The Firestone Self-Portrait), 1941. Oil on canvas, 24 x 17” (61 x 43.2 cm). Collection: Michael Aulick and Yoko Kwon, Vancouver, B.C.