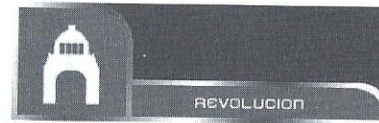


## Rosa Torre González

*Soldadera and Feminist*

SARAH A. BUCK



*Although the official monument to the Revolution of 1910 is located on the blue metro line in Mexico City, statues of revolutionary heroes—variably represented as men on horseback—can be seen in plazas throughout the country. Indeed, historians have described the Revolution as one of the high points of Mexican patriarchy, in which masculine heroes such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa fought climactic battles to determine the nation's fate. Even after the soldiers had put aside their rifles and cartridge belts, postrevolutionary governments distributed the benefits of land reform and labor protection primarily to men.*

*Nevertheless, women also made vital contributions in the decade of fighting as soldaderas, both camp followers and female soldiers, who cooked for the troops and in some cases actually carried weapons in combat along with men. Female activists took an equally important role in organizing labor unions and agrarian leagues to force the government to fulfill the reforms promised by the Constitution of 1917. As this essay shows, women used their patriotic service to demand equal rights of citizenship, in particular, the vote. Yet because of the prevailing gender roles and the scorn for camp followers held by many revolutionary commanders, women were forced to assert their voices in ways that perpetuated their inferior social status. Even the general monument at Revolución has become a crypt honoring great men and helping to bury the historical memory of the soldaderas who also gave their lives for the Mexican nation.*

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In March 1924, Rosa Torre González proudly wrote of her achievements as an elected representative to the *ayuntamiento* (city council) of Mérida, Yucatán. She celebrated her position as the first woman to "arrive to a councilman's post" in the Mexican republic, at a time when

women did not even have the right to vote. Although her two-year term was cut short by a military rebellion, she nevertheless worked to extend public services to the poor of Mérida, who had been largely ignored by the Porfirian regime. Torre González recognized that her experience held great significance for women seeking to gain equal rights of citizenship. Her career demonstrates how some Mexican women took advantage of the professional opportunities, political transformations, and social changes presented by the Revolution to expand the boundaries of women's action.

Biographers and chroniclers of the Mexican Revolution, who have followed Torre González in celebrating her position as one of the first women to hold political office in Mexico, have asserted that she was an early adherent of Francisco I. Madero's uprising against the Díaz dictatorship, a standard claim among revolutionary veterans, who used their service during the decade of fighting to justify their subsequent political power. This long-held republican connection between military service and citizenship led the same biographers to assert, in addition, that Torre González served as a *soldadera*, a term encompassing both camp follower and female combatant. Such sources have stated, without significant supporting evidence, that she acted as a spy, *soldadera*, and nurse in the first Yucatecan battles of the Mexican Revolution in the region of Mérida.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, all revolutionary armies depended on women to forage for food, and in battle, many women picked up weapons and fought alongside the men. Because so many women died in service to the Revolution, Torre González and other feminists (including some of her biographers) drew the natural conclusion that women had earned the rights of citizenship. Torre González dedicated the rest of her life to working as a teacher and political organizer to help forge a new revolutionary consciousness among Mexican men and women. Therefore, even if she or others had inflated her own military service record—like so many contemporary male politicians—she well earned the title of *soldadera*, if that term is defined simply as a combatant for the Revolution.

Like many other feminists of her age, Torre González mediated the desire to gain equal rights and opportunities for women with an emphasis on the benevolent, moralistic, and nurturing aspects of her political and social activities. Notwithstanding her claims to military service, she cultivated a maternal image of herself as a public mother working for the common welfare. Writing about her accomplishments in the *ayuntamiento*, she recalled having worked to censure immoral movies, to regulate Mérida's municipal department of health and hygiene, and to develop educational and social welfare projects, and cooperating with teachers to ensure children's school attendance, to organize literacy campaigns, and to create new children's parks. She also emphasized her work on behalf

of women, reeducating prostitutes and female prisoners for new occupations and more honorable life-styles. Torre González claimed that as a woman, she could administer public welfare, education, and women's issues as well as men could, and perhaps more effectively.

Torre González and many other women involved in revolutionary reform and feminist organizing built upon the professional, political, and social opportunities presented by the Revolution in the state of Yucatán to advance feminist goals on a regional and national level. They used maternalism, a political strategy glorifying women's maternal qualities, to expand their own spheres of action as well as the bounds of acceptable behavior for all women in Mexican society. Maternalism helped such women to secure legal changes ensuring their equal civil, labor, and political rights with men. Yet at the same time, this strategy limited the expressions of feminism and the style of women's action for years to come, by linking women's public behavior as civic actors to their private roles as mothers and caregivers. Consequently, up to the present day, women's wage labor and political participation have been largely relegated to areas that conform to an ideal vision of wives and mothers.

Rosa Torre González was born in the southeastern state of Yucatán in 1896. Although she never wrote about her early childhood and even her exact birthplace remains unknown, she probably grew up in a comfortable middle-class family in Mérida—a surprising but relatively common experience for future social revolutionaries. By the turn of the century, Porfirian development projects had endowed the Yucatecan capital with all the accoutrements of a modern metropolis, from banks and newspapers to theaters and opera houses and from telephone and tram lines to sewers and trash collection. To bolster the city's reputation as the "Paris of Mexico," prominent residents hired French and Belgian architects to design elaborate mansions along the premier boulevard, Paseo de Montejo. The elite could afford such luxury thanks to revenues from Yucatán's primary export industry, henequen, a form of hemp used to make agricultural binding twine by the International Harvester Corporation.

While the estate owners passed most of their time in Mérida, peons labored beneath the beating sun to tend the endless rows of henequen. The work reached its peak at harvest time, when they chopped the stalks and, after removing the sharp spines, carried them off to mills to be shredded into raw fiber for export. The hacienda workforce included indentured servants from China and Korea as well as Yaqui Indians deported from the northern state of Sonora to toil as virtual slaves. Most of the workers, however, were indigenous Mayans who had once farmed the land in village communes, raising corn to support their families. As the market for henequen grew, wealthy hacendados used the liberal reform

laws to take over village lands and force the residents to become peons on the expanding estates. Despite their sense of grievance over the hard labor and lost land, these hacienda workers took a relatively minor role in the resistance against the Porfirian regime.<sup>2</sup>

The most active political opposition surfaced among urban sectors excluded from power by Yucatán's own *científico*, Governor Olegario Molina. During the early years of the Porfiriato, local elites had continued for administrative office, sharing the patronage of the state government among themselves while promising loyalty to President Díaz. Molina, however, had amended the state constitution to allow his own reelection in 1906, at the same time he used his contacts with International Harvester to monopolize revenues from the henequen bonanza. But the following year the export boom went bust, and in the depression that followed, urban workers ranging from longshoremen and teamsters to printers and teachers began to protest their declining real wages. Their discontent soon merged with Francisco Madero's antireelection campaign against the aging dictator. Madero attracted considerable popular support when he visited Yucatán in June 1909 on a national tour encouraging local opposition parties. These new political clubs, although tied to elite clans excluded from power by the Porfirian inner circle, nevertheless became an outlet for the political aspirations of the middle and working classes. Members published anti-Díaz newspapers, posted manifestos in public spaces, and discussed the need for democratic reform. It was probably by disseminating revolutionary propaganda that the fourteen-year-old Rosa Torre González joined the Maderista movement in 1910.

Yet the claim that Torre González served as a *soldadera* in the first battles against Díaz seems far more problematic, notwithstanding the Yucatecan tradition that the *primeras chispas* (first sparks) of the Revolution flared in the peninsula. In the fall of 1909, in response to increasing political repression, leaders of the two main rival factions plotted a regional uprising against the Molina administration. Known as La Candelaria, the conspiracy was soon infiltrated by police, who arrested hundreds of partisans. The following summer, at the height of the election campaign, a rebellion broke out in the town of Valladolid, but the Porfirian army quickly crushed this movement as well. Historians Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph have shown that the real beginnings of the Revolution in Yucatán came not from elite conspiracies but among campesino insurgents from free villages on the fringes of the henequen zone. Although financed at first by opposition elites, these smallholders in the southern hills of Puuc and east of Temax provided the bulk of revolutionary activity in the peninsula, thereby carrying on a Maya tradition of resisting Spanish control that dated back to the colonial period

and the nineteenth-century Caste War. These peasant soldiers seem highly unlikely to have needed the service of a middle-class *soldadera* like Rosa, who perhaps could not even cook a decent tortilla.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the main current of the Revolution proceeded in northern and central Mexico, where Madero first drove Díaz from power and then failed to consolidate a stable administration. When the dictator refused to allow a free election in 1910, Madero called for a revolutionary uprising that spread widely in the spring of 1911. Unable to contain the insurgency, Díaz left for exile in Europe, allowing Madero to win a new election held that fall. Nevertheless, the incoming president failed to redress the grievances of peasants who had lost land to the old oligarchy, and nowhere more so than in Yucatán, where the planter elite quickly regained control of the state government. As a result, former partisans such as Emiliano Zapata declared themselves in revolution once again, and Madero ordered the federal army to suppress them. His trust in the Porfirian establishment proved fatal, however, when General Victoriano Huerta seized power in a military coup in February 1913. Revolution again spread through the countryside, except in Yucatán, as insurgent forces under Zapata, Francisco Villa, Venustiano Carranza, and Alvaro Obregón took arms to restore constitutional government. They deposed Huerta in July 1914, but the revolutionary coalition fell apart soon thereafter. The civil war reached a climax in the spring of 1915 as the popular forces of Zapata and Villa struggled against the professional armies of Carranza and Obregón to determine the future of the Mexican Revolution.

Throughout these campaigns, both federal and rebel soldiers alike depended on the work of *soldaderas*, as Torre González and her biographers recognized. The name derived from the *soldada* (wage) given to common soldiers, and historically these camp followers were often paid servants. Many volunteered to join the revolutionary armies, following husbands or other family members, but others were conscripted; the federal army, in particular, rounded up women as well as men in their *leva* drafts. The troop trains of the Villista army contained large numbers of women, prompting historian Friedrich Katz to describe it as a "folk migration."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the *soldaderas* often formed the vanguard of the army, foraging ahead of the troops, as an Englishman observed: "Like locusts they descended upon the outraged villagers, robbing the roosts, capturing squawking fowls and even squealing piglets, gathering the scanty sticks for the fire over which to have a black pot simmering and flat maize 'tortillas' heating on the embers as soon as the dust-masked troopers might be ready for their fare."<sup>5</sup> Preparing those tortillas was one of the most onerous duties in the army, for women still ground the corn by hand while kneeling over the three-legged metates (grinding stones), a

backbreaking chore that took hours each day. Elena Poniatowska writes: "without the soldaderas there is no Mexican Revolution: they kept it alive and fertile, like the land. . . . Without the soldaderas, the men . . . would have deserted."<sup>6</sup>

A few bourgeois and urban working-class women contributed to the Revolution in more professional ways. The Villista army, for example, maintained a modern medical service with trained doctors and nurses who were equipped with the latest surgical appliances and housed in four railroad boxcars. Women also spread propaganda for the Revolution, as did Juana Gutiérrez de Mendoza, described in a previous selection, who was arrested several times for supporting the Zapatista cause. At the same time that they encouraged people to support the cause, women provided intelligence information that might be useful to rebel armies in the field. Apart from those who served as nurses, spies, and propagandists, some middle-class women simply posed for the cameras with the bandoleers, rifles, and sombreros of revolutionary troops. Such images had a clear, if often overlooked, political purpose, staking a claim to the rights of citizenship for women. Nevertheless, it was the anonymous, working-class *soldadera*, like the common soldier, who made the Revolution.

Although camp followers have supported armies throughout history, the Mexican case is perhaps exceptional for the degree to which *soldaderas* blended the "masculine" roles of soldier with the "female" support services. Zapatista *soldadera* Angela Jiménez demonstrates the fluidity that existed between these duties as she dressed as a man to follow her father into the revolutionary ranks. Her skill in combat eventually earned her the rank of lieutenant; nevertheless, she returned at times to women's clothing to spy on the federal army. When her unit was captured, she ordered fellow *soldaderas* to steal enemy weapons and conceal them in laundry bags, thereby allowing the male soldiers to escape. As an officer in charge of male troops, Jiménez expressed a sense of maternal duty by personally preparing food that they seized from haciendas. She later recalled: "I could not ignore that since I was the only woman around I felt it was my obligation to feed the men who had been near starvation."<sup>7</sup>

The Revolution finally returned to Yucatán in 1915, when Carranza ordered General Salvador Alvarado to occupy the peninsula in order to ensure a steady stream of henequen revenue to pay for the war against Villa and Zapata. The Constitutionalist chief sought to limit Mexican populism, but Alvarado proved far more than simply a conservative consul. He carried out wide-ranging social reforms to win popular support for the revolutionary cause, beginning by freeing slaves on the henequen plantations. A middle-class reformer committed to capitalism, he nevertheless formed the Yucatecan Socialist Party and enacted

sweeping moral reforms, closing bordellos and banning alcohol. Alvarado also had a progressive agenda for women's rights, including coeducation and a liberal divorce law. Essential to implementing this ambitious program was the process of mobilizing popular support through workers' unions, peasant leagues, women's groups, and political parties. By encouraging such organizations, he consolidated his own regional power base while also helping to reeducate the Mexican masses into revolutionary men and women who would form a productive and loyal citizenry. Alvarado made Yucatán a "laboratory for the Revolution," and many of his reforms were later enshrined in the Constitution of 1917.<sup>8</sup>

Education became a pillar of postrevolutionary reform and state-building projects, yet the revolutionary man and woman had decidedly different roles. Teachers and activists disseminated new social, economic, and political ideas and practices by building urban and rural schools, by organizing civic and political groups, and by holding lectures, showing films, and printing pamphlets for the public's benefit. This revolutionary educational project, like the Constitution and the political-social order that it sought to promote, was shaped by assumptions about proper gender roles. The new Ministry of Education sought to provide domestic education for females, and schools offered classes in crafts that could be practiced independently at home, such as sewing and embroidery, soap-making, cooking, and dessert-making. In contrast, males were educated to work outside the home in manual labor and the professions and to be civic actors. These assumptions reflected gender differences embedded in revolutionary legislation, which assumed that men would be the main wage earners for their families, the main recipients of land reform, the voters and civic actors, while women would be wives and mothers.

Despite these limitations, women teachers and activists often worked consciously and unconsciously to subvert the patriarchal aims of postrevolutionary schooling. As a single, professional woman, Torre González presented an alternative model to the ideal of the wife and mother. In her classes at the state normal school in Mérida, she encouraged change, mobility, and new opportunities for women and youth. She also helped organize the first two feminist conferences in Mexico, which were called by Governor Alvarado in 1916. The general stipulated that delegates must have at least an elementary school education, which limited participation primarily to teachers. Nevertheless, Torre González acted as a propagandist for the conference, traveling around the countryside, encouraging qualified women to attend from towns such as Acanceh, Temax, and Motul, in order to maximize the conference's influence. Not surprisingly, given their backgrounds, delegates focused largely on broadening women's educational opportunities as a means to open other fields of social action. They advocated a rationalist

educational curriculum to counter the conservative influence of the Church, and also emphasized social hygiene to improve the living standards of the popular classes. Conference attendees discussed women's suffrage, but could not agree on a resolution supporting the issue.<sup>9</sup>

Upon returning home, delegates implemented the tactics they had discussed at the conferences. They organized female neighbors and helped establish cooperative kitchens to feed working women and their children. In addition to promoting literacy and hygiene, teachers helped implement the progressive family laws that Alvarado had created. The Yucatecan conferences also provided a foundation for disseminating feminist principles throughout Mexico and Latin America. Activists protested the failure of revolutionary legislation to grant women political rights, pushed for increased labor protection for women, and challenged the ways that marriage and divorce laws discriminated against women.

In an attempt to limit the spread of Yucatecan socialism, President Carranza transferred Alvarado to a new assignment in 1918, but this merely set the stage for even more radical reforms under Felipe Carrillo Puerto. A native of Motul, in the heart of the henequen zone, he had been the leading organizer of agrarian leagues and urban unions, known collectively as *ligas de resistencia*, which he spread far more actively than even Governor Alvarado had desired. In 1919, Rosa Torre González had helped found a League of Resistance for women, which was named after Rita Cetina Gutiérrez, a prominent Yucatecan educator. These leagues received a boost when Carrillo Puerto shrewdly became an early supporter of Alvaro Obregón in the presidential election of 1920. Two years later, the young socialist won the gubernatorial election and, even before assuming office, he continued to consolidate the state's revolutionary administration. In 1921, he presided over Yucatán's Second Workers' Congress, held at Izamal, which coordinated the various workers' leagues and called for the state government to socialize the means of production. As treasurer and propaganda officer for the "Rita Cetina Gutiérrez" League, Torre González attended the Izamal Congress along with three other women, including Elvia Carrillo Puerto, Felipe's sister, who was known as La Monja Roja (the red nun) for her radical beliefs. Encouraged by their arguments, conference delegates added women's issues to the agenda and ultimately passed resolutions for the establishment of night schools for women workers and for the creation of rural libraries when local leagues had sufficient funds.<sup>10</sup>

The organizing efforts of Yucatecan feminists not only improved the standard of living for women throughout the state but also earned government support for their long-term goal of suffrage. Torre González and her comrades had helped found nearly fifty feminist leagues by 1923,

one-tenth of the total of more than 470 socialist leagues in Yucatán. They established libraries and schools, sponsored literacy and temperance campaigns, and gave lectures on birth control, hygiene, child care, and the evolution of the feminist movement. Torre González personally spent her evenings teaching women to read in the O'Horan Hospital and the Ayala Asylum. The feminist leagues also contributed to the welfare of rural communities by pooling resources to purchase cooperative sewing machines. Members of the "Rita Cetina Gutiérrez" League also visited and inspected schools and hospitals and helped establish a state orphanage.<sup>11</sup> In 1922 they returned to the suffrage question, left pending since the 1916 feminist conferences, and began to petition the state legislature for the right to vote. In response to their lobbying efforts and the many articles published in the socialist press, Carrillo Puerto agreed to grant women de facto permission to hold office. Although he delayed in amending the state constitution, he nominated four women to run in the 1922 election. All four won their ballots, including Elvia Carrillo Puerto, who became a state representative, and Rosa Torre González, who entered the Mérida city council.<sup>12</sup>

In her year of service at the *ayuntamiento*, Torre González worked hard to ensure that the Revolution reached all the people of Mérida, not just the elite who had benefited from Porfirian development programs. Although fin de siècle construction projects beautified some sections of the city with paved streets, sidewalks, hospitals, and theaters, dwellers in poorer neighborhoods had difficulty finding affordable housing and lacked basic sewers and wells. Torre González advocated reforms to the sanitary code to improve basic services to the poor, and proposed a new meat inspection station to prevent the sale of rotten and adulterated food. She also continued her work to provide education and welfare programs for poor children. Meanwhile, at the state level, Carrillo Puerto launched an ambitious land reform initiative intended to provide campesinos with farms capable of sustaining their families.

Yet despite its popular appeal to the laboring classes of Yucatán, Carrillo Puerto's socialist experiment came to an abrupt halt when a military rebellion engulfed Mexico at the end of 1923. Large numbers of federal army officers rose up in favor of a failed presidential aspirant, Adolfo de la Huerta, and the peninsula's planter elite cooperated with the rebels to topple the local regime. Governor Carrillo Puerto and some of his closest allies were captured and executed, and Torre González and other sympathizers were harassed in the belief that they helped to hide socialist leaders. Troops loyal to Obregón ultimately defeated the rebels, but a decidedly more conservative state administration was formed through appointment and election. The women who had been entrusted

with government positions were forced to step down from their offices and Yucatecan feminism went underground, not to reemerge for another decade.

This setback notwithstanding, women in Yucatán began organizing openly again by the mid 1930s, but they divided between those who focused on suffrage and political rights and those whose concern was social, welfare-oriented labor. Groups dedicated to welfare provision outnumbered those pushing for suffrage because of the more pressing need for cooperative economic resources, such as corn mills and sewing machines. Social feminists also lobbied for the construction of schools, hospitals, clinics, day care centers, and public dining rooms. Such services could help liberate women and their families economically and provide time for other economic, political, and recreational activities. Welfare-oriented feminist action also tended to highlight women's maternal functions, both as maternalist feminists and welfare activists, and as the wives and mothers who utilized such services to aid them in their roles as providers and caregivers.

Although these activities built upon the foundations established a decade earlier by Rosa Torre González, there is no record of her contribution to this stage of the women's movement, in Yucatán or elsewhere. She does not appear in the archives again until the 1940s, when she belonged to a Mexico City affiliate of the Inter-American Commission on Women, a middle-class group dedicated to world peace rather than class conflict. Maternalist claims that women would exert a positive moral influence on politics also inspired the Technical Feminine Commission, another group in Mexico City, in which she worked to mobilize support for suffrage. Partly as a result of such organizing, the Mexican government finally granted women the right to vote in municipal elections in 1947 and in presidential elections in 1953. Thus, Mexican feminists ultimately achieved the goal of effective suffrage, one of the original reforms demanded by Francisco Madero in 1910.

Throughout her career, Torre González took a leading role in politics and social reform, yet to justify these actions, she tended to use certain kinds of arguments, especially maternalist claims emphasizing women's roles as mothers. As a result, the increased participation of women in politics and the workforce has been concentrated in roles that most closely resemble women's unpaid labor in the house. Women have been most highly represented in service industries, including domestic labor, food preparation, and the expanding professions of education and health care, while men continue to dominate the workforce in industry, manufacturing, and highly paid professions. Political opportunities for women have been similarly constrained, particularly in the executive

branch, which has dominated Mexican political decision making. Those women who have gained positions at the cabinet level and as undersecretaries have tended to receive portfolios such as tourism, education, labor, and foreign relations. Yet despite the ongoing gender discrimination, Mexican women have continued to struggle for equality following the example set by Rosa Torre González.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. The *Diccionario histórico y biográfico de la Revolución Mexicana* makes such claims, citing the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, yet failing to point to specific documents in this archive (see "Rosa Torres [sic] González," *Diccionario histórico y biográfico de la Revolución Mexicana*, CD-Rom, INEHRM). See also "Rosa Torres [sic] González," in Aurora Tovar Ramirez, *Mil Quinientas Mujeres en nuestra conciencia colectiva: Catálogo biográfico de mujeres de México* (Documentación y Estudios de Mujeres, A.C., 1996), 626–27, which cites the former.
2. Gilbert M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1924* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), 71–82; Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester, 1860–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), chapter 6.
3. Allen Wells and Gilbert M. Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876–1915* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), chapter 7.
4. Quoted in Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 39; see also xii, 36–52.
5. Patrick O'Hea, *Reminiscences of the Mexican Revolution* (Mexico, 1966), 85.
6. Elena Poniatowska, *Las soldaderas* (Mexico: Conaculta/INAH, 1999), 14.
7. Quote from Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military*, 74. See also Esther R. Pérez, James Kallas, and Nina Kallas, *Those Years of the Revolution, 1910–1920: Authentic Bilingual Life Experiences as Told by the Veterans of the War* (San José, CA: Aztlan Today, 1974), 161.
8. Joseph, *Revolution from Without*, 99–115.
9. *El Primer Congreso Feminista de Yucatán: Anales de Esa Memorabile Asamblea* (Mérida: Talleres Tipográficos del "Ateneo Peninsular" Plaza de la Independencia, 1916), 45, 52.
10. Juan Rico, *El congreso obrero de Izamal* (Mérida, 1922), 8–11, 122–28; idem, *La huelga de junio* (Mérida, 1922), 92–94. I thank Piedad Peniche for bringing these passages to my attention.
11. *El Popular*, February 24, 1922; *Tierra*, August 5, 1923.
12. *La Revista de Yucatán*, April 19, December 23, 1924.
13. Teresa Rendón, "El trabajo femenino en México: tendencias y cambios recientes," *El Cotidiano* 53 (1993): 4; Roderic Ai Camp, "Women and Men, Men and Women: Gender Patterns in Mexican Politics," in *Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life*, ed. Victoria E. Rodríguez (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 168.

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## Nabui Olin

## The General's Daughter Disrobes

ANNE RUBENSTEIN



Chapultepec Park, conveniently accessible on the pink metro line and a favorite location for Sunday picnics or visits to the zoo, provides the art lover with a stunning tour of Mexican history. The anthropology museum, one of the world's finest, displays the glories of the pre-Hispanic world, an easy walk from the hilltop castle and its historical museum, highlighted by the nineteenth-century collection of Maximilian and Carlota. The Rufino Tamayo Museum of Modern Art, appropriately located midway between them, mediates these two worlds with some of the finest works of Mexico's twentieth-century artistic renaissance.

The origins of this cultural flowering lie in the social revolution of 1910. Inspired both by modernist painters such as Picasso, who scandalized European society, and by the peasant armies of Zapata, who tramped through the salons of Mexico City, a revolutionary generation of Mexican artists broke free of staid nineteenth-century conventions. Building on changes already under way during the Porfiriato, they began to experiment with new methods of representation as well as with the vernacular traditions of Mexican folk art and the remains of pre-Hispanic art, and they reached out to new audiences who had never before had access to visual art. This renaissance is often associated with the great muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who explicitly intended their monumental, public art as revolutionary propaganda. Nevertheless, the artistic community of the 1920s was not limited to those three; countless other artists, intellectuals, and even primary school art teachers helped create the public image of the revolution and therefore shaped its future meaning. Carmen Mondragón, a Porfirian socialite rebaptized as the Bohemian artist Nabui Olin, engaged the contemporary debates over the significance of the Indian in Mexican society and over the struggle between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Although she was often dismissed as simply a beautiful muse for male genius, this essay shows how Nabui Olin took an active role in defining her own image, in life and art.