

Rivera and Corridos: Teachers of the Mexican Revolution. MU11/HS117

What is Mexico? This was the question running through the minds of almost all the peoples of Mexico at the opening of the twentieth century. According to Meyer and Beezley's *Oxford History of Mexico*, by 1900, 90 percent of Mexico's industry was monopolized by foreign businesses and about 30 percent of Mexico's land was trapped in foreign hands (436). It is thus no surprise that the Mexican populace yearned and struggled to establish their true identity-their Mexicanidad-ironically in their own country. Utilizing the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as their classroom, some believed that they not only had the right, but also the responsibility to become teachers of a cultural distinctiveness. Musicians and painters alike took it upon themselves to fashion the ideal textbooks of Mexico's indigenous past, its turbulent present, and its promising future in order to "educate" the largely illiterate Mexican masses.

Music was an extremely important part of the early Mexican Indians' culture and life. They used it to teach the children of their rich history and preserve their native traditions. In fact, Reilly and Jermyn emphasize that the Mexican Indians believed that music was the key to keeping the world in motion (96), even in times of chaos. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was the most chaotic and bloody revolution in Mexican history. According to statistics in Miller's *Mexico, A History*, one million out of a population of 15 million died in the span of a mere ten years (293). Endless battles smeared blood across the country, government policies were thrown into complete disarray, countless bandits purged cities and towns, and civilians were utterly confused to which side they belonged. Whether they liked it or not, everyone in Mexico was absorbed into the mess of war, whether it was through their fight for freedom, their need for identity, or their desire to escape conflict. In tumultuous and bewildering times, the music of the corridos, or Mexican folk songs, was essential to ensure the continuation of life for the common people of Mexico. Guillermo E. Hernandez, an expert on corridos and Latin American popular culture, defines the corrido simply as "A narrative song composed in Spanish that recounts the historical circumstances surrounding a protagonist whose conduct serves as a model to a community in the U.S. or Mexico" (qtd. in Nicolopoulos 115). However, especially for the common people of Mexico living during the Revolution period, corridos were more than that. Their anonymity made them genuine "expressions of the heart" (Summers), written by the people for the people. They were vessels that carried stories that the war-torn Mexicans wanted to hear: valuable news to those who could not read, light-hearted entertainment to those who could not smile, and nationalistic spirit to those who could not fight.

A common Revolutionary saying was, "[pancho] Villa was hated by thousands but beloved by millions" (Miller 309). Throughout the Revolution, North Division commander Francisco "Pancho" Villa's charismatic bravery and innovative tactics inspired immense loyalty and even idolatry from a large portion of the Mexican population. His slogan of "Tierra y Libertad! [Land and Liberty]" (qtd. in Miller 292) promised the impoverished masses what they most desired and characterized him as a hero in a heroic age. In other words, he was the perfect protagonist for popular corridos. The song "Corrido de Durango" implements a mixture of fact and fiction that invokes a larger than life image of Villa, reflecting how he was thought of in the eyes of those he fought for. Its characteristic narrative opening and ending make the corrido sound like a story, which makes it easy to sing and easy to follow. However, while most corridos begin with a specific date and time of the occurrence, this one only reveals the setting: "In Durango he started.

.. " Other than Villa's political support for Pancho 1. Madero, there is actually very little specific information throughout the song, making it seem even more like a mythical story. Villa's statement in the song, "I don't know the meaning of fear" portrays him as a modern Hercules and a hero for the people who would face any obstacle to fight for his country, or at least the side he stood for. Although his "career as a bandit" may give him a negative reputation, during the Revolution, a bandit had a positive connotation for the Mexican revolutionaries and townspeople. Bandits could plunder towns and bring destruction, but they could also be symbols of defiance, freedom, and hope, which were important values during a time of restriction, chaos, and despair. According to the article "Pancho Villa: A Life in Corridos", the Mexican peoples were eager to hear of Pancho Villa's exploits throughout the Revolution (Sullivan). Therefore, the corridos he starred in were certainly the essence of Mexican nationalism, giving many of the poor a reason for celebration, determination, and pride.

The artwork that appeared around the time of the Mexican Revolution was just as much a visual ballad as the corridos were an audio one. It incorporated valiant heroes and malicious villains, glorified myths and terrible truths, shattered hopes and uplifting dreams. Then it unfurled itself out on the walls of public buildings, hospitals, and schools to teach the Mexican world-and the whole world-what Mexico was, is, and will be. One of the most influential artists of the time was Diego Rivera. He, along with Jose Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros, were the founders of the artistic movement called, perhaps somewhat pompously, the Mexican Renaissance. Rivera, however, was different from his painter colleagues. As Rivera expert Pete Hamill indicates, when the Revolution broke out, Siqueiros gave up painting and joined the Constitutionalist Army, Orozco served as a field artist and walked among death, but Diego Rivera went to Paris (44). In other words, Rivera's life was as chaotic and contradicting as the Revolution itself. Although he was a painter of Mexican Revolution art, he was a communist during a revolution where communism had little relevance, and he was not even in Mexico during the bloodiest years of conflict. He claimed to endorse the Revolution sentiment and support the common man, but, arguably, Rivera worked for a primarily personal gain. Though he often had little money in his pockets, he was a huge man with a huge ego. Unlike the authors of corridos, Diego Rivera was not "the people", but rather, he was above the people. He was a divine professor who painted to instruct rather than to relate and to give rather than to share.

Yet, for some reason, Diego Rivera was one of the most influential artists of his time and his art has become a characteristic symbol of the Mexican Revolution. Former director of the Museum of Latin American Art, Gregorio Luke even goes as far as to say, "When people close their eyes and think of Mexico, most of the time, they imagine a world similar to that described by Diego Rivera in his paintings." One reason for this is that, despite his complex background and arrogant personality, Rivera had indisputable skill as a painter. In such works as "Dance in Tehuantepec", his vibrant colors and socio-cultural themes bring his paintings to life and have the power to captivate an audience, both Mexican and foreign. In the painting "Agrarian Leader Zapata", the traditional clothing, peasant tools, and gallant, white horse portrays the Revolution leader as a respected persona of the people. The children in such murals as "Ribbon Dance" are active and plump while in reality they were often sick and starving. Each work forcefully struggles to portray an image of an ideal Mexico full of energy, tradition, and strength during a time when the real Mexico remained flooded in confusion, poverty, and death. Also, the fact that Rivera started painting his famous murals of the Mexican Revolution three years after it ended is

significant. By this time, the people's memory of it did not change, but their thoughts and ideas of it did. Those of authority, especially, manipulated the nationalistic and agrarian principles of the Revolution in order to better the peasantry and unite the country under a single "Mexican" identity. Rivera's main employer, Jose Vasconcelos, was himself an ambitious man full of contradictions. He was a racist and a mystic and yet he wished to thrust Mexico into a new age of modernity. According to Pete Hamill, "Vasconcelos would teach Mexico to read. He would give it great art. He would restore its vanished cultural grandeur. He would create, in short, a Mexican renaissance" (81). Through art, both Vasconcelos and Rivera believed that they could sketch a distinctiveness for the people, paint a utopia for the future, and thus create a heroic image for the country that they could boast to the world. Once the last coat of paint had dried, not only was Mexico given an identity, but its Revolution was also given a new outlook.

Although corridos came from below and murals came from above, they both met in the middle as a form of Mexican Revolution propaganda. Were they entirely factual? Not at all. Were they objective? Of course not. On the contrary, events were highly exaggerated, figures were gloriously ornamented, and history was reenacted to gain public support. The purpose of the Mexican music and artwork that began to appear during the early 1900s was to idealize the Revolution, perhaps even simplify it, in order to focus the Mexican people's minds on the future they needed to define for themselves and for their country.

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