foreword

Anita Brenner and the Mexican Renaissance

by Carlos Monsivais

IN 1923 Anita Brenner returned to Mexico, drawn by the revolutionary effervescence of the time and the echoes of cultural transformation. She was then a young woman of 18, having been born in Aguascalientes in 1905. Anita focused her energies on her studies, and essentially on proving to herself what she already knew: that she was not just another gringa, but a person responding to a rationally explainable deep fascination for a powerful and ancestral art, for a society that revolved around the balance between violence and the process of civilization—a process which endured and was contemplated by the crumbling of structures which had been rigid and constricting. Everything was chaotic, but the chaos was pristine. On the one hand the voracity for absolute power twisted and depressed; on the other hand national survival demanded a freer and more human order. Thus, the struggle to define key words was essential, and human was understood, from the perspective of a group of artists and intellectuals—more influential than they are now credited as having been—as the drive to get rid of traditionalism, to confront rampant racism, and to curb the myth that identified the revolution with machismo. Their agenda did not include much more, but this was of the utmost importance.

In 1923, Mexico was undergoing a merciless struggle between factions, a conflict between groups, regional parties, political bosses, and caudillos.

Yet in Mexico City there were those working on other projects who had drawn different conclusions from the experience. In 1974, Anita Brenner recalled life at that time:

It was a great moment in national life, a time when the world was beginning, we were making it in terms of "Here at last, something can be done, and we can do it." We believed that you could actually do something. Revolution was still real in the world.

As the century comes to an end, we witness a worldwide relentless need to evaluate a hundred years of politics, culture, and society. This assessment or, better stated, this restructuring of canon, through which a nation judges itself, simultaneously becomes an inventory of goods and a revision of society's normative criteria. In the area of culture, this leads to a study of works, authors, and representative figures. Some of the most famous are ratified in the process. In other cases, the last suddenly become the first, and that which was postponed or invisible vigorously joins the mainstream.

Among the most important recoveries are the lives and work of women, forgotten, marginalized, or not even perceived during a century of patriarchal despotism. A very special group rescued is that of exceptional women, who were either born in Mexico or arrived there during the 1920s. The group includes the outstanding Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti, Maria Izquierdo, Alma Reed, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Nahui Olin, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Lupe Marin, and, thanks to Susannah Glusker, Anita Brenner.

What do these unique women have in common? First, they shared two spaces of freedom, minimal in terms of what was required, but extraordinary when compared to what had been available in the country until then. Mexico City, with its demographic volume and cultural environment, was the only "free territory" in the country where women, protected by shifting social morals and by the permissiveness afforded to artists, explored behaviors, aesthetic trends, and historic or literary creations. The second space of freedom was the Mexican Revolution itself, which I define not only as the armed uprising overthrowing the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876–1911) and the subsequent integration and disintegration during the prolonged war between factions, but also as the direct and indirect stimulus of previously inconceivable attitudes and behaviors. The Revolution legitimized those attitudes and behaviors, or at least tolerated them. The Mexican Revolution also generated a field of surprising energies which

brought down the barriers of traditionalism. In an unequal fashion, amongst pressures and scandals, that which had been previously unthinkable for women in certain circles emerged: free love, independent criteria, creativity, flights of the imagination, political commitment, freedom of movement, and even bisexuality.

Almost without warning, a group—sector or form of alternative life—determined to distinguish itself, no matter what, from previous generations which had submitted to the strictest and most ridiculous notions of “respectability.” In exchange for social ostracism, the women of this bourgeois bohemia were granted the entitlements offered by the political moment— anonymity, and the opportunities awarded by a great city. There was also the prestige of having demolished an artistic past and having experienced the expression of the modern spirit in motion pictures, music, architecture, as well as a glimpse of a sexuality more in tune with the demand for freedom. A new culture and a new set of social morality could be appreciated in apartments, houses, exhibits, concert halls, magazines, books, lectures, animated social gatherings, and squabbles.

In addition to the revolution and the city, these women shared other fortuitous environments:

1. Muralism, or the Mexican School of Painting, determined to be the artistic version of the revolutionary epic, the visual phenomenon that would educate the masses, and allow for a rewriting of history. The challenge of muralism was so monumental that it stimulated the formulation of other specific challenges during the process of setting new “rules of the game” in art: If art was suddenly so different, why wasn’t everyday life?

The painter Diego Rivera, rotund, brilliant, and intractable, was at the center of muralism. In a period distinguished by its insolence, Diego is the insolent par excellence, the instigator, the eternal lover, the one who hungers for scandals, the provocateur of behaviors which under other circumstances would have been penalized by ostracism, at the very least. Even among those who despised or criticized him, the debt to Rivera was enormous. In many circles, his example impelled a discovery of the taste for transgression and for vital experimentation. He was especially good at instilling doubt and joy among women in the world of culture and politics. They loved him or they loathed him, but they recognized in him the audacity and courage to successfully thwart prejudice and hate campaigns.

2. The revolutionary nationalism of the twenties was far removed from the eccentricities of folkloric nationalism and chauvinism. This revolutionary nationalism claimed no superiority for Mexico, except that of being the country where the first revolution of the century was fought. (At that time an understandable reason for pride, which today becomes a fact for the Guinness Book of Records.) Nationalism in some forms squanders symbols, native faces, heroes, unforgettable images, and venerable sites. That is why it makes sense to underscore what is truly national, because it encourages the ability of the Mexicans and the pleasure that they take in the great tasks of culture. Ultimately, this nationalism is equivalent to a number of revelations concerning the originality and the value of the overlooked. What was overlooked was there all the time (folk art), or was emerging art. The message was clear: "Certain traditions, works, and authors should be taken into account, not because they are from Mexico, but because they were never taken seriously due to the prejudice against that which is 'made in Mexico.'"
3. Radicalism—that is, the certainty that the proletarian revolution and the struggle against fascism generated the first international mentality in history, the liberation of oppressed nations and sectors, among them women. Radicalism was roused by the rise of fascism throughout the world.
4. The break with traditional art and with the bourgeois view of the artist. Diego Rivera is the antonymous celebrity of this period: he becomes a friend of motion-picture stars and foreign notables, he challenges the right wing, and he is always an extremist because of his communism, his habits, his atheism, and his "promiscuity." And he does not stop producing great quality art which the academic world abhorred. That attitude is even sharper when it comes to women such as Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti, and Maria Izquierdo.

Anita Brenner tagged the surging mood, the new concurrence of attitudes and works, as the Mexican Renaissance, the Mexican Renaissance. The root of the name is obvious: it provides a luxurious comparison of events in a peripheral country with the great moment of Italian art and culture, as well as attributes to art the resurrection of the country. The Mexican Renaissance included both Mexicans and foreigners who came mainly from the United States, Italy, England, and France. Diverse media now looked

with awe and admiration at the emerging copper masses within a country previously represented by the Europeanism of its elite. Thus painters, photographers, writers, designers, political organizers, engravers, sculptors, and musicians went to Mexico to discover Pre-Hispanic art (the strongest attraction). They were excited by the strength of muralism's outreach to the community; it communicated with the energy of a country which included a majority of indigenous peoples. In labor, although it was true that opportunities were scarce, stimuli abounded. Mexico, viewed from the perspective of the voyager, was a condensed utopia; some fled from racial intolerance; most took full advantage of the opportunities for adventure and the paradoxes offered by a convulsed and "magic" country—with the magic of the unexpected. They formed a small community in Mexico, presided over by Diego Rivera, and which also included other artists (Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Roberto Montenegro, Xavier Guerrero), as well as writers, musicians, anthropologists, and historians.

Who were the foreign women? The Italian, Tina Modotti, tried her luck in Hollywood, became a member of artistic circles in San Francisco, and accompanied Edward Weston, from whom she learned the photographic skills she went on to dominate masterfully. Finally she became so radical as to destroy herself in Stalinism. The American, Alma Reed, arrived in Yucatan in 1921 to observe the revolution, and in Merida met the revolutionary governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who courted her; later, in New York, she became the tireless promoter of Jose Clemente Orozco. The Russian painter Angelina Beloff met Rivera in Paris, had a son by him, and, after they had separated, came to Mexico.

The Mexicans were extremely unique. There was Antonieta Rivas Mercado, daughter of an eminent bourgeois architect, Antonio Rivas Mercado. She wanted to live removed from the conventions of her social class; she produced theater; and she fell in love with a homosexual painter, Manuel Rodriguez Lozano. When he did not reciprocate her love, she became the lover of Jose Vasconcelos, the intellectual former secretary of public education and candidate for president of Mexico in 1929. Defeated by the official machine, Vasconcelos went into exile and Antonieta followed him to Paris, where, ill and disillusioned by the barbarian country, her family ties broken, she shot herself in the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Frida Kahlo, wife of Diego Rivera and victim of a traffic accident which would be a life-long source of torture, intuitively created unique work known worldwide, where she represented herself as a tender soul in pain, full of loving pas-

sion immersed in a sea of symbols. Maria Izquierdo, a painter, was determined to re-create a province of virgins, saints, children's games, circuses, and brightly colored architectural shapes of villages. Lola Alvarez Bravo, first wife of the great photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo, worked tirelessly as a photographer, exacting, with a sense of irony, as well as a sense of composition and sensuality. Yet her work was not recognized until late in her life. Nahui Olin (Carmen Mondragon), daughter of a counter-revolutionary general, provoked conservatives, posed nude, and painted.

I dwell on these outstanding women of the period because Anita Brenner in Mexico takes full advantage of and benefits from the atmosphere of opening—defined by the struggle, almost always silent, determined, without much support, by women determined to lived in a different way. There is no doubt that before the explosion of temperaments and attitudes during the twenties, nothing that Frida Kahlo or Tina Modotti did would have been possible; it is also true that a journalist as serious and pugnacious as Anita Brenner would have been inconceivable.

Just as her daughter, Susannah Glusker, describes in this objective and very readable biography, Anita Brenner was part of at least three different communities: that of the Jewish diaspora, emigrants who arrived in Mexico and settled in Aguascalientes; that of the Mexican Revolution and the struggle for the development of civilization; and that of radicalism in the United States. She also participated in the birth of another tradition—that of modern art in Mexico. This ability to integrate cultural, idiomatic, and political legacies allowed her to accept from within and from without the complexity of what is Mexican, as well as the agonizing relationship between art and politics. Both of her classic books, *Idols behind Altars* and *The Wind That Swept Mexico*, reflect a deep understanding of the process of integrating historical periods, religious currents, opposite civilizations, cultures, and ideologies. The syncretism, the melting pot so magnificently described in *Idols behind Altars*, is a plausible way of uniting opposites in a country ruled by the most drastic authoritarianism and intolerance. What Anita observed and transmitted is the result of studying at Columbia University, living as a Jew in anti-Semitic environments, and having been part of the artistic vanguard in Mexico. What is most notable in *Idols behind Altars* is the determination not to accept predominant ideas or prejudices. Brenner limits herself to analyzing the course of artistic and creative currents.

The Revolution burst into the life of the Brenner family, landowners who ended up leaving Mexico for the United States. At school in Texas, Anita recovered, or, better yet, for the first time chose and purged her loyalties to traditions, histories, and behaviors. Citizen of the world, as they used to say, Anita chose her Jewish and Mexican identity. Her identity as a Jew was a very powerful living experience: the legacy of a racial community loyal to its past, with great ability to overcome the yoke of persecutions and victimizations. Her Mexican identity, introduced by her nanny, was acquired over time.

In 1923, Anita faced an astonishing panorama. Never before in the history of the country, or more specifically the city, had women aspired to a life of their own, not one controlled in every detail by a patriarchy. Even when they were still neglected within the public scenario, they were accepted and respected within the social and artistic world. Anita taught and came in contact with the cosmopolitan sector of the capital—the communists, the revolutionaries, the eccentrics. She believed she was in utopia. She wrote her friend Jerry Aron:

Artists, sculptors, writers, socialists, musicians, poets—intelligentsia, but not the imitation of it that we have, Jerry. They are not a bit startling. That love is free is a matter so accepted that no one ever thinks to bother to state so. They all speak the same language, that is, all understand each other, whether they approve or not. . . . Of course I bask in it. . . . No snobbishness, prejudice, of any sort—racial, monetary, apparent. As to racial, there couldn't be. There are too many shades of skin and flag represented. As to monetary—well, practically all of them have their 'nombramientos' [contracts] which means an hour or two of work at the government schools, which means much politics and a haphazard chance of being paid. Everybody is always borrowing from everybody else which is quite comfortably like home, you know. But it is so real, so easy, so unconstrained and not at all hectic, that I feel like lifting wings, putting my typewriter under my arm and going to heaven or to some quieter place to achieve a masterpiece.

For a young intelligent woman, repulsed by prejudice, with a sense of irony and a fair dose of frivolity (or the love for fashion), Mexico during the twenties offered a variety of things. The first was the phenomenon of

a society with a vocation for rigidity facing the contradiction of introducing modernity in art, architecture, cosmopolitan living, and the initial testimonies of sexuality without guilt feelings. Anita met well-known people, affirmed her confident and critical position, participated in an outstanding support for new Jewish immigrants, expressed her vision of Mexico in publications in the United States, and, throughout it all, refrained from moralist judgments. Her activism had little place for ideological condemnations.

Anita was one of the main people to reveal the changes in a country marked by inequality, violence, the cult of authoritarianism, and the power of art. Like her teacher, Ernest Gruening, Anita wanted to dissolve the racist and paternalistic vision of Mexico and, on her own account, to contribute panoramic visions of art, culture, and history. When a revolutionary spirit decides to discover everything as if it were seen for the first time, there must also be a view of the whole that dissolves the burdens of anecdotes, apocalyptic versions, and racist slanders. Such was the origin of *Idols behind Altars* and *The Wind That Swept Mexico*: the drive to organize information about artistic processes and create a national history. The combination illustrates both the unity and the multiple interests of Anita Brenner: nothing primordial was foreign to her.

In the United States, Anita became part of the elite of radical thinking, and the liberal wing of the Jewish community. However, her radicalism was not an orthodox one; she had a profound dislike of Stalinism, way before the revelations of the Moscow trials. Anita's moral and political position was truly magnificent, ranging from denouncing Stalinist crimes in Spain during the Civil War to her ties with Carlo Tresca, the "pet hate" of the Stalinists. In Spain, Anita denounced the criminal purges of anarcho-syndicalists and Trotskyites. The Cheka intervened with its typical fury, and few protested from the left against the ominous persecution of the dissidents and the perverse lies of the communists. Anita supported the republicans without being a Stalinist accomplice.

In 1974, Anita Brenner died in Mexico in an automobile accident, ending a very full life. Strongly representative of the Mexican Renaissance, Anita was among the best women radicals of her time. Her daughter, Susannah Joel Glusker, pays her fair tribute in this book. On reading these pages, you will encounter a fascinating phase of history, a unique person, and the restless nature of the process of integrating women into the public life of a nation.