

Iconography and Stereotype: Visual Memory of the Soldaderas

By Benjamin C. King

There has been a significant amount of scholarship examining the various roles women played in the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution encompassed almost an entire decade, with large scale warfare beginning in 1910 and lasting on and off until 1917. During this time women were actively engaged in every aspect of the Revolution, contributing intellectual leadership as well as supporting soldiers on the battlefield. The romantic and historical image of these women which has made the largest impact on public consciousness, on a national and international level, remains the iconic *soldaderas*, who are widely represented in literature, film, song, and arts.

The term *soldadera* has grown to encompass a number of different roles which women played within the Revolutionary armies. On a most basic level, soldaderas were women who traveled with and supported the Revolutionary armies of generals like Villa, Carranza, and Zapata. Often coming from the lower classes, they were responsible for finding and preparing food for the soldiers, providing medical attention, and on occasion even fighting on the front lines of combat.¹ While sometimes referred to as simply “camp followers,” Anne Macias prefers the term “soldier’s woman” because it takes into account the fact that a soldadera existed in the army via a relationship with a soldier. It was for this soldier that the quintessential soldadera labored. Often, if that soldier died, she would find another soldier to accompany.² Macias has documented the truly monumental role which these women played for the Revolution; without them, the armies could not have existed, for they lacked the infrastructure and discipline which traditional armies use to support soldiers. Soldaderas provided the backbone of what was once referred to as “a people in arms”³

Various generals allowed women different levels of engagement with the armies, so leaders like Zapata included women in their intellectual circles as well as in the ranks of officers, while Pancho Villa largely limited women to support roles.⁴ The soldaderas themselves were varied in their origins, as well. Some soldaderas were rough urban types, streetwise and

¹Pablos, Julia Tuñón. *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*. Translated by Alan Hynds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) 86-89

²Macías, Anna. *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982) 40

³Ibid, 41

⁴Tunon Pablos, 92

proficient in brawling and knife-wielding. Others were simply rural poor displaced when their man left or was conscripted into the army.⁵ Soldaderas could engage in the same ruthless behavior that male soldiers were known for, stealing food and supplies in order to support their soldiers and themselves.⁶ Soldaderas as a group encompassed many different backgrounds and roles.

Over the years, the soldadera has attained an iconic status. Literature, song, film, and art depict soldaderas in largely stereotypical roles, which has distorted the public conception of female contributions to the Revolution. Among the most powerful influences on public conception are visual images. By examining contemporary photographs, revolution-era mass media, and post-revolutionary painting, we can begin to understand how public consciousness formed. In art and photography, soldaderas are most often either valiant, yet feminine, warriors or tragic, earthy peasants. Regardless of the stereotype, they can be representative of Mexico or the Mexican people. While many images of soldaderas challenge gender norms, these images also channel deviations from gender norms into non-threatening stereotypes. Artists tend to smooth over the diverse backgrounds and varied behavior of soldaderas in the pursuit of dramatic images. Photographs more readily present complex individual portraits, yet the photographs often present the same sorts of stereotypes as paintings.

Some of the earliest and most widely distributed images of soldaderas during the Revolution were the lyric sheets for *corridos*, or folk ballads, written about soldaderas. These lyric sheets were printed and distributed across the country. The image of a soldadera dominates one such song sheet printed in Mexico City in 1915, “Corrido de la



⁵Macias, 40-41

⁶Tunon Pablos, 87

Cucaracha”⁷. In some ways, the woman challenges gender ideals by presenting herself as a bold, slightly combative figure. She stands, arms akimbo, feet firmly planted in a wide stance. Her crossed shawls identify her as a soldadera, the same way that the crossed bandoleers became iconic for male revolutionaries. Despite this bold posture, this image still falls squarely within traditional feminine iconography and really does little to challenge the traditional gender ideas or present a realistic image. The viewer's elevated perspective and her slightly inclined head give her a monumental air, as though she were a statue. Her skin and facial features are European, as is her gently wavy hairstyle, and reminds one of Marianne of the French Revolution, an archetypal image of Liberty. Artistically, she is well within traditional western representations of women during wartime. She is less a historical figure than a representation of an ideal.

“La Cucaracha” does not present a historically accurate image. Again, she is decidedly European in appearance. Her dress is not elaborate, but is more complex than the simple dresses seen on peasants in photographs; this idealized presentation denies the brutal reality many faced in rural Mexico. She is also decidedly feminine. Her dress has numerous ruffles, and even a lace collar. Beneath her voluminous dress, she clearly has a plump, classically female figure. She wears slippers, something not seen in pictures of soldaderas, in which women typically appear either barefoot or in boots. *Corrido de la Cucaracha* depicts the soldadera as an iconic representation of the Revolution by using traditional artistic language, while also stereotyping and misrepresenting the soldadera as a bold yet soft middle class European. She is non-threatening, as any challenge to traditional gender ideals is subsumed by artistic tradition.

Some female participants in the Revolution probably contributed to this stereotype of the soldadera as a valiant and feminine representation of the Revolution. There are numerous pictures where women pose as soldaderas, yet do not appear to really have participated in actual fighting. In one, a group of women pose in staggered lines, similar to modern day elementary class pictures, outside a wooden building.⁸ Most of the women are dressed in clean white full length dresses, although several wear more elaborate dresses. One even has a large lace collar which drapes across half her torso, and they have their hair is done up nicely. Many of the women wear bandoleers, as well as patriotically colored ribbons. They all carry rifles, and a large Mexican flag, sans emblem, drapes behind them. While likely participants in the

⁷Posada, José Guadalupe. “Corrido de la cucaracha que no ha salido a pasear, porque no tiene cartoncitos que gastar” (Mexico City : Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, 1915) Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division LC-DIG-ppmsc-04550 <http://catalog.loc.gov>

⁸Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>

Revolution, these women were clearly middle class and most likely did not see combat action.

Another photograph depicts a group of women lined up on rugged terrain in three lines, each with a rifle aimed forward into the air.⁹ These women are less uniformly dressed, and most wear a blouse and skirt rather than a full dress. They all wear a bandoleer and also have a pistol at their waist. However, a woman on the left end of the line wears a ribbon in her hair, and the row of girls sitting in dresses the front row suggest that these women are not a combat unit. A closer inspection indicates that although most of the women appear to aim the guns correctly, many also hold the guns awkwardly, as if from inexperience with firearms.



The women aiming their guns could initially fool the viewer into believing that these women did fight because they are not as obviously middle class, which could in some way strengthen the stereotype. The woman in the front, for example, standing alone, makes a particularly dramatic figure. She holds the gun with familiarity, closing one eye to aim. Her weight is shifted to her back leg as she leans her torso up and back, which is counterbalanced visually as the wind blows her dress forward. The dark stripes on her dress even work stylistically with her bandoleer and pistol, a repeating contrast with the lighter shade of her dress. She is a feminine yet bold fighter for her country. Alone, one might believe that she is a soldadera. However, her presence subconsciously lends credibility to the more overtly middle class women behind her, suggesting that they, too, are representative of soldaderas.



Although it cannot be proved, one can speculate that the women in these photographs were members of the “women's clubs” which existed before and during the Revolution to support the various factions. The members of these clubs were often middle class women of feminist ideology.¹⁰ Such a club would have motivation to pose as fighters, perhaps a desire to show that their contributions were equal to those of the soldiers. The patriotic ribbons would suggest that these particular women were part of nationalist-themed club. Regardless of the motivation of the women posing in these pictures, the pictures themselves uphold many of the

⁹Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>

¹⁰Tunon Pablos, 91-93.

stereotypes found in *Corrido de la Cucaracha*. The viewer sees armed women, but this is juxtaposed with very feminine hairstyles and dresses, particularly in the case of the white-dressed club. The nationalist overtones of this picture also suggest to the viewer that the soldadera is really the embodiment of a national spirit, a proud defender of her country. She may not actually fight, but she is spiritually prepared to do so.

A similar image is presented in a photograph of a woman posing between two male soldiers.¹¹ In her right hand she holds a saber aloft, and a rifle rests in her left hand. On her torso she wears two crossed bandoleers, and a pistol rests on her waist. Still, this iconography cannot cover up the fact that her hair is immaculate underneath her hat, her dress appears sturdy and clean, and her shirt is accented with a ribbon along the collar. Her tiny waist heightens her feminine appearance. Additionally, in only one other photograph of soldaderas examined here does a woman smile. However, she is an older peasant preparing a meal, not a fighter. All the other armed women appear grim-faced. While it is possible that she has fought with the army, her cheerful well-groomed appearance makes it somewhat doubtful. Regardless of her actual level of participation in battle, the woman here has adopted the imagery of revolutionaries, claiming her place among the men as someone who is spiritually prepared to fight for her country. In fact, all women pictured armed as revolutionaries exert this claim to some extent. Unfortunately, what may be an attempt to claim equal status among revolutionaries visually supports a stereotypical image of women as solely spiritual warriors.



¹¹Martínez, Oscar J. *Fragments of the Mexican Revolution: Personal Accounts from the Border* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1983) photo courtesy El Paso Public Library, Photograph Collection

Images do exist, however, of armed women that suggest they did see combat. One photograph shows federal soldiers and three soldaderas resting in rugged terrain.¹² The scene is posed, but does not appear as contrived as other pictures. Several soldiers lie relaxed on the ground, and the landscape appears remote. The women here are posed, but stand informally with weapons and ammunition. They are not dressed uniformly, and instead wear simple dresses or skirts, along with a shawl tied around their waist or shoulder. These women wear hats, but pulled low so that there is no hair visible. One woman looks away from the camera, and the two others look at the camera with hardened faces. This picture is likely a more accurate presentation of real soldaderas.



Instead of striking a dramatic pose they simply line up. This photograph presents a different image of the soldadera. While they wear dresses and are obviously female, they are not feminine like the women discussed earlier. Their faces are dirty, and their weapons and ammo appear functional rather than simply as props. The woman in the center is overweight, far from the iconic feminine figure seen earlier. One must confront the likelihood that these women killed other people on the field of battle.

I have not seen this complex presentation of soldaderas as hardened soldiers paralleled in art, nor does Elizabeth Salas mention any similar representation in a summary of soldaderas depicted in art.¹³ Harsh caricatures of armed soldaderas do exist, however, such as Jose Clemente Orozco's lithograph *Cucaracha* from 1928¹⁴. The name refers to both soldaderas and the folk corrido “La Cucaracha,” the lyrics of which were printed and distributed across Mexico.

¹²Salas, Elizabeth. *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990) 84 (image courtesy Fondo Casasola, Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, Pachuca Hidalgo)

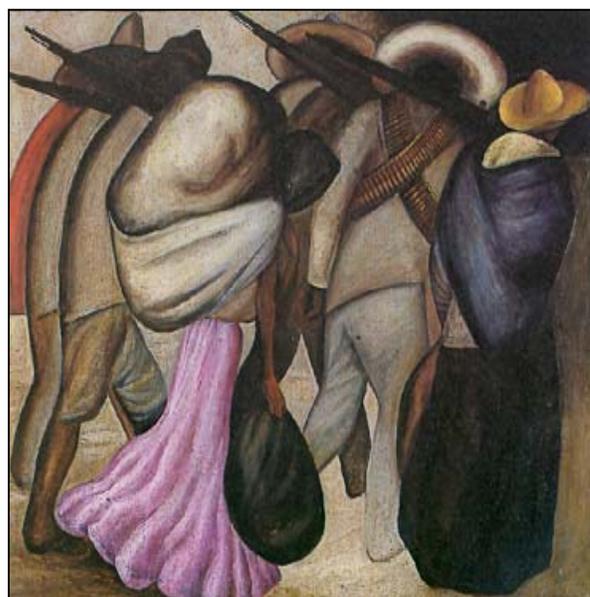
¹³Salas, 97.

¹⁴Orozco, Jose Clemente, *La Cucaracha*, “Mexico in Revolution” series, 1928.

Other Mexican artists depict soldaderas in their art, but Orozco's works are worth examining because his art is often described as representing an authentic Mexico.¹⁵ Furthermore, Orozco participated in the Revolution, working as a cartoonist for a revolutionary army newspaper.¹⁶ Orozco's images of the war, then, have the potential to powerfully influence public consciousness because of a perceived validity born of his reputation and experience.

Cucaracha depicts a celebration where several soldaderas dance before a ballroom full of soldiers. The soldaderas here are more prostitutes than soldiers. They wear pistols on belts full of ammo, and dance half-garbed in a room packed with soldiers. Instead of representing a feminine ideal, these soldaderas are everything that a Mexican woman should not be. This image may have some small historical precedence. Anna Macias tells the story of La Coronela, a woman convicted of murder who became a colonel in Zapata's army. La Coronela “smoked, drank, gambled, and feared no man.”¹⁷ However, La Coronela and many other female soldiers dressed as men during their time in the Revolution, and their stories often contain poignant elements which remind us that they were actually remarkable figures of the era.¹⁸

More often in art, soldaderas are depicted with a different stereotype, that of the poor, suffering wife. Orozco's painting *Las Soldaderas*, from 1926, is an excellent example of this stereotype.¹⁹ *Las Soldaderas*, which currently resides in the Mexico City Museum of Modern Art, depicts a group of Mexican revolutionaries trudging along during what appears to be a long march. Four men carry rifles, one of whom wears iconographic crossed bandoleers. In the focal point of the painting the soldadera, a slim female figure wearing a bright pink dress, carries a large load upon her back.



¹⁵Gonzalez Mello, Renato and Diane Militos, Ed. *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934* (New York: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, copublished by W.W. Norton, 2002), 16-17.

¹⁶Orozco, Jose Clemente. *Jose Clemente Orozco An Autobiography*. Trans. Robert C. Stephenson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 52-53.

¹⁷Macias, 43.

¹⁸Macias, 42-43. Macias implies that La Coronela only cross-dressed during the Revolution, although she remained very much a rebel throughout her long life.

¹⁹Orozco, Jose Clemente, *Soldaderas*, 1926, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City

To the far right another soldadera dresses in a dark colored dress and hat and carries a sack in her left hand. The group displays their backs, a traditional sign of retreat. They are all bent over, even though the men do not carry loads. The man in bandoleers cannot lift his leg, instead almost drags it after his body. The colors are all shades of brown, even the sky is drab, dusty beige. The central soldadera wears a black hood, which may allude to the veiled imagery of a grieving widow. The scene as a whole expresses a deep sense of sadness, exhaustion, and loss. Orozco focuses on the Revolution's years of suffering and toil.

Las Soldaderas' focal point is the slim, pink-gowned soldadera. She travels behind the soldiers and carries the heaviest load. The pink dress, so out of place among the monochrome of the rest of the painting, as well as her youthful figure symbolize femininity and innocence. Orozco turns the soldadera into a tragic heroine, a figure to be pitied. Of all the sacrifices during the revolution, *Las Soldaderas* particularly laments this loss of innocence and youth. The stereotype of the soldadera here is drastically different from the iconic feminine warrior seen earlier. Here, the soldadera becomes a tragic victim of the Revolution. Perhaps her contribution should be honored, but only from within a traditional understanding of what women could contribute to the war effort.

Like the soldadera in *Corrido de la Cucaracha*, *Las Soldaderas* depicts the soldaderas on a national level. While *la Cucaracha* relied on traditional iconography to make its soldadera representative, *Las Soldaderas* is representative because of its more realistic presentation of the suffering and loss the revolutionaries endured. The artist clearly draws a connection between these people and the land—with Mexico itself. The central soldadera's arm is similar in color to the surrounding ground, indicating her ancestry and kinship with the land. The overall earth-tones of the painting add to this connection. Furthermore, because the soldadera is anonymous, she can represent any and all participants of the Revolution. *Las Soldaderas* depicts not only the suffering of these revolutionaries, but the suffering of all of Mexico and her people during the years of fighting.

We have seen earlier how photographs of armed women can visually support a stereotypical image of soldaderas. Photographs can also reinforce the stereotype of soldaderas as victims. One such photograph captures the roof of a train covered with women.²⁰ The women sit amongst a jumble of baskets and supplies. Shawls cover most of the women's faces. The

²⁰Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>

overall impression of the photograph is of squalor. One realizes that these soldaderas rode the trains this way, exposed to the elements. There is little chance of finding our colorful, ribbon clad patriots on board this train. These women lead lean, difficult lives. They stand in sharp contrast to the prim middle class women photographed as a group earlier. The clean white patriotic uniforms are here perversely reflected in a uniformity born of poverty, of dark shawls and ragged dresses. Disorder has replaced the neat lines of clean young women.



Photographs document the difficulties which soldaderas faced on an individual level, too. One photograph catches several women exiting a train.²¹ On the right, a young woman stands barefoot, while next to her a pregnant woman looks skeptically at the photographer. To the left another young woman leans forward, looking worriedly around, perhaps for her soldier. Her skirt may have once been white, but is now smeared with dirt. A shawl holds back her unkempt hair. The emotion on the face of the woman leaning forward is real. Unlike the picture of the train top, this photograph brings the effects of war to a personal level. In many ways, the photograph can reinforce the stereotype of soldaderas as victims.

²¹Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>

However, a careful examination reveals characteristics which are not found in Orozco's *Las Soldaderas*. The woman's position leaning forward is a dynamic position. Her taut forearms confer strength and determination, and her eyes survey the area intently. She does not display the same defeatist body language Orozco uses in *Las*



Soldaderas. Instead, she appears to be actively fighting, refusing to let the war destroy her life. The photograph is complex, but seeing the underlying strength of the soldadera on the left requires more time to examine than the ordinary viewer may spend. If seen within a cultural context of *Las Soldaderas* and the photograph of the train top, this photograph becomes just another scene of destitution.

Of course, there are some photographs from Revolutionary Mexico which show complex portraits of women involved in the war that are not as easily dismissed. In one such picture, two women pose with their soldiers.²² One man stands nervously at attention for the camera, while the other man slouches in his chair, gazes off camera, and holds his gun weakly. The women, conversely, are not afraid to confront the camera. One woman looks at the camera almost combatively, and both women appear grim and unenthusiastic. Both are dressed simply in clean but worn dresses, with their shawls tied around their torsos in imitation of the soldiers' bandoleers. Their facial expressions are serious, but do not appear forced or exaggerated. Like the federal soldaderas discussed earlier, rather than trying to project an aura of toughness, these soldaderas instead project an unconscious confidence born of experience. Also like the federal soldaderas, these women do not fit neatly into an idealized stereotype. They are not armed, yet they project an authoritative presence. They are feminine, but not in an exaggerated manner.

²²Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>

They clearly support their soldiers, but without seeming to be stereotyped as victims. Instead, they stand as equals, contributing in a way that is different, but no less important than the soldiers.

Photographs and paintings present powerful images of the soldaderas. However, two main stereotypes of soldaderas exist because of these visual depictions. Most art diminished soldaderas' contributions and channeled women's participation into non-threatening stereotypes. While some women did fight in the armies, in art this contribution is reduced to a symbolic level. Supported by the misrepresentation of soldaderas



by middle class women, women in arms appear to be spiritual fighters rather than actual soldiers. This helps create a sensational effect which ignores the difficult reality for many soldaderas and supports the pre-existing image of soldaderas as emblematic of Mexico's revolutionary spirit rather than full fledged revolutionaries. Alternately, when their contributions are honored in art, soldaderas are limited to domestic roles in fairly anonymous fashion. They are still treated as representative figures as opposed to equal contributors. Photographs which focus on scenes of poverty and struggle can support this depiction. These depictions ignore women who fought and participated equally in the war. Fortunately for us, photographs hint at the diverse and complex roles which soldaderas played in the Revolution.

Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Gonzalez Mello, Renato and Diane Militos, Ed. *Jose Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*. New York: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, copublished by W.W. Norton, 2002

Macías, Anna. *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982

Pablos, Julia Tuñón. *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*. Translated by Alan Hynds. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999

Salas, Elizabeth. *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990

Primary Sources

Martínez, Oscar J. *Fragments of the Mexican Revolution: Personal Accounts from the Border*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1983, photo courtesy El Paso Public Library, Photograph Collection

Orozco, Jose Clemente, *La Cucaracha*, “Mexico in Revolution” series, 1928

Orozco, Jose Clemente, *Soldaderas*, 1926, Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City

Orozco, Jose Clemente. *Jose Clemente Orozco An Autobiography*. Trans. Robert C. Stephenson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962

Posada, José Guadalupe. “Corrido de la cucaracha que no ha salido a pasear, porque no tiene cartoncitos que gastar” (Mexico City : Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, 1915) Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division LC-DIG-ppmsc-04550 <http://catalog.loc.gov>

Salas, Elizabeth. *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990, image courtesy Fondo Casasola, Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, Pachuca Hidalgo pg. 84

Soldaderas in the Mexican Revolution, <http://www.ojinaga.com/soldaderas/>