



LITERATURES OF THE AMERICAS



The Women of Mexico's Cultural Renaissance

Intrepid Post-Revolution
Artists and Writers

Elena Poniatowska

Translation and Introduction by
Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

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Literatures of the Americas

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The Women of Mexico's Cultural Renaissance

Intrepid Post-Revolution Artists and Writers

with translation of Elena Poniatowska's essays from *Las siete cabritas*

palgrave
macmillan

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Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez



Fig. 0.1 Credit: Elena Poniatowska and Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez (Photo taken in Mérida, Yucatán, 30 Dec. 2021, by Poniatowska’s daughter, Paula Haro)

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Introduction

Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

Frida Kahlo may appear to be the sole female artist in Mexico's early twentieth century, but she had plenty of company. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican women were active politically, they advocated adamantly for the right to vote, and insisted on exercising their talents. Access to the vote was promised and reneged on again and again, while artistic opportunities and distinction were extended mostly to their male cohorts. Yet they remained true and relentless in their production, and more women followed. The very first female artist to exhibit internationally, in 1930 in New York, was **María Izquierdo**. In 1937 Izquierdo, and then Frida Kahlo in 1939, were the first Latin American women artists to exhibit in Paris. In 1936 there was a solo exhibit in Spain for Carmen Mondragón, who used the pseudonym **Nahui Olin**, who, in addition to painting, wrote poetry and composed music.

In the late twentieth century, scholars and art curators began to rediscover and highlight such talented Mexican women. This collection of essays by the marvelous chronicler of Mexico, Elena Poniatowska, in English translation for the first time, provides examples of their lives and work, describing the artists and writers as well as other prominent

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characters of that era. The introduction relates background on Mexico's cultural renaissance of the early twentieth century, with insights from critical sources, published since Poniatowska's essays.

Izquierdo began painting in the 1920s in Mexico City; other women artists in those years were Isabel Villaseñor, Olga Costa, Andrea Gómez, Dolores Cueto, Rosario Cabrera, Aurora Reyes, Rosa Rolanda, Cecilia Calderón, and the artistic photographers Lola Álvarez Bravo and Tina Modotti,¹ who helped document and build an archive on several cutting-edge muralists and artists. Some of these artists, and prominent actresses, also modeled for the male muralists. A second wave of women artists and writers would emerge in the 1940s–1960s, joined by a few refugees from Europe: Leonora Carrington, who became a Mexican citizen in 1942, Kati Horna, Remedios Varo, and Alice Rahon.

As Mexicans thronged to Mexico City after the battles of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, a new government was being established and opportunities opened to participate in projects demonstrating the nation's true cultural roots. Artists helped construct the new ethos, finding ways to express a more authentic Mexican identity, the primary example being Diego Rivera's murals. New cultural projects were launched, sprouting work by a great number of artists and writers. Dubbed internationally the era of the great muralists, in Mexico the new painting style was called *Escuela Mexicana*, an artistic and cultural movement as had not occurred previously. Male artists featured male revolutionary heroes, male indigenous deities, and the last Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc, with women figures as bystanders. Female artists featured women in primary roles as *curanderas*, nursing maids, women performers in the circus, scenes with children, kitchens, and pantries, with Native symbology relating to the female.

Mexico became visible internationally in the 1920s–1930s, beginning with attention to the murals. Europeans flocked to Mexico to view work in progress, to climb the “pyramids” newly opened to the public, to attend

¹While not Mexican-born, Tina Modotti (born in 1896), who arrived in Mexico City in 1922, was an important participant in the early artistic movement. With Edward Weston, she opened a photography studio and between 1924 and 1928 she took hundreds of photographs of Diego Rivera's murals, helping promote his work. In 1926 she and Weston were commissioned to travel around Mexico photographing an array of people for a book by Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*. After 1927 her work appeared in Mexican and international publications, and in 1929 a one-woman exhibit of her photographs was featured at the National Library in Mexico City. In 1930, Modotti was forced to leave Mexico in exile. After 1931, she stopped photographing, fought for the republic in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939, returned to Mexico City afterward, and died of heart failure in 1942.

community fiestas, and to finally appreciate indigenous civilization and culture. French surrealist Antonin Artaud arrived and traveled around Mexico between 1935 and 1937. In Mexico City he found María Izquierdo's work most fascinating; upon returning to France, he organized and hosted her solo exhibit, and wrote about her work.

Multi-talented like Nahui Olin, **Nellie Campobello** was commissioned by the Minister of Culture José Vasconcelos to visit all regions of the nation and document dance steps, to prepare a choreography of national dance. A skilled ballerina since childhood, she created the first national dance company and the presentation now internationally recognized as *Ballet Folclórico Nacional*. An avid writer who published books of poetry, Campobello also created a novel released in 1929 about the experience of the Revolution, the prevalent topic of the era: *Cartucho* is a text of brief chapters in poetic form, with sharply realistic details, which Hemingway would soon be recognized for. Her book memorializes peasants and villagers caught up in the Civil War struggle, poor people from the rural area who remained unrecognized.

In the early 1930s, **Elena Garro** was one of few women students at the National University, UNAM, in Mexico City. During her studies she participated in dance and theater, and published newspaper articles which continued over the next decades, despite travels with her husband, Octavio Paz. Garro, like Lupe Marín, spoke her mind openly, to the annoyance of some and delight of many others.² In the 1950s she created a novel now recognized for its magical realism, *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, but was unable to get a publisher until in 1962, the era when male writers, and not women, were being saluted for a new literary form.

Born a few years after Garro, **Rosario Castellanos** broke terrain in the 1950s–1960s by bringing focus to issues of social justice and indigenous communities. She became an important influence to women writers in the ensuing generations because of her MA thesis, *Sobre cultura femenina*, and a strong speech about women's intelligence before a distinguished gathering at the Anthropology Museum in 1971, a discourse offered when she was named Ambassador to Israel.

Guadalupe "Pita" Amor was a sharp-witted discussant and noted personality who appeared regularly as a commentator on television in the 1960s, a medium dominated by men. She published her first book in

² Marín's semi-autobiographical novel with erotic details, *La única*, published in 1938, was banned by the government for many years.

1946, followed by 11 masterful works in poetry with metaphysical themes, and the male literary greats sang her praises. Amor, like Nellie Campobello, chose not to marry; the other women highlighted here were divorced, all of which added to negative commentary, but may have aided in their artistic and literary production.

Mexico's long-term journalist and chronicler **Elena Poniatowska**, born seven years after Castellanos, interacted with some of the women described in her essays, interviewed most of them, and sought to highlight their intellectual thought and creative work, as well as their presence and impact on Mexican society. From her earliest newspaper writing to her numerous books, Poniatowska has been dedicated to observing people, listening to their way of talking, studying their personalities, and finding ways to relay their human qualities. She creates essays through a hybrid style of writing, combining interviews from a variety of witnesses, family members, and friends. Poniatowska demonstrates how each artist or writer plunged ahead in spite of roadblocks and notwithstanding their at times irreverent or rebellious behavior, but most significantly, she describes their lives, the particulars of their talents and passions, the neighborhoods they walked, the era in which they lived, and the both amusing and terrible things that happened to them.

She herself faced roadblocks and hardships, yet relentlessly continued to write, revealing those on the peripheries of society: squatters seeking their own piece of land, people jailed by the government, protestors, and Mexicans left outside official recognition. The noted cultural commentator Carlos Monsiváis has called Poniatowska Mexico's greatest chronicler. In the earliest English-language study of Poniatowska's writing, Beth Jorgensen traces a meticulously developed strategy of political testimonial writing that is subtle and consistent in interpreting social consciousness, that blurs the boundaries of conventional literary form. Marjorie Agosin called Poniatowska's work a "literature of witness," where she "acquires the essential component of her artistic legacy, [in] the very alliance with the disposed" (33).³

³In one of the essays in *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980), Poniatowska expresses heartfelt personal reflections on creating her book about the military assault and massacre of protesters in 1968. In that era, she began interviewing people at the infamous Lecumberri prison in Mexico City, often incarcerated for years and years for their protest.

BUILDING CULTURAL CHANGE AFTER A TERRIBLE CIVIL WAR

As the years of struggle in the 1910 Revolution subsided, the victors pledged a new society and new type of government with freedom and rights for all. The revolutionary ideology developed in the 1920s was that Mexico was no longer steeped in colonial practices and now espoused a *mestizo* consciousness, acknowledging the history and presence of indigenous heritage and culture. Revolutionary goals promoted the eradication of social barriers and access to education and to the political process. Peasants and workers left without employment, ranch work, or food, and many young women, left war-torn areas to converge on Mexico City, believing in the promise of new opportunities.

In 1917, a national convention and several meetings were held to enact the new Constitution, with invitation open to all participants. Afterward, cultural ministers launched new initiatives, like the murals project, to interpret the new philosophy. Women had served as traveling nurses, cooks, and companions, carried loads and ammunition, and became soldiers when their spouse was killed, or by dressing as men. Now they expected to continue in those freedoms and have their equal citizenship recognized. They participated enthusiastically and raised their voices at the 1917 Convention, but after hearing their proposals for the right to vote same as the men, the matter was met with derision and dropped.⁴ Since 1910, women had been publishing articles in the first feminist magazine in Mexico, *Mujer Moderna*; now they organized political rallies, and women's congresses sprung up in major cities.⁵ During the volatile, short-lived administrations that followed, women continued to lobby for their voting rights, finding politicians who made promises, but nothing went further.

Finally, in 1937, a hunger strike that lasted 11 days convinced the president, Lázaro Cárdenas, an early advocate for women's rights, to sponsor a new constitutional amendment, which ultimately failed to be approved by the legislature. Ten years later, another president offered a constitutional amendment giving women the vote in municipal elections; then yet

⁴ See *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910–53* (2006), by Stephanie Mitchell and Patience A. Schell.

⁵ The first Feminist Congress was convened in 1916 in Yucatán, even as the revolutionary struggle continued. Yucatán recognized women's right to vote in 1923, but soon women were forced to resign from political posts and the new law was nullified. A similar victorious trajectory in the northern state of Sonora was also nullified.

another proposal to reform the Constitution to allow for universal suffrage languished, inconclusive, until in 1953, women's right to vote was enacted by presidential decree.

The new government ministries provided commissions for new artistic and cultural ventures during the 1920s–1930s, but few women were granted major projects. Even then, a commission for a series of murals already granted to María Izquierdo in the early 1940s was withdrawn, as Poniatowska discusses, when Izquierdo was already at work on the process, because complaints were launched by members of a review board that the project should have gone to a male artist. In her landmark book *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco observes that revolutionary ideology “constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated” (102).

Artists involved in transformative movements tend to write manifestos about their goals and avant-garde inclinations; during Mexico's cultural renaissance, women were not acknowledged or permitted to participate in expressing these ideas (later Nahui Olin wrote her own manifesto). The initial manifesto about the murals project, dated December 1923, was written by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. They declared that art must prioritize Mexican features, and indigenous-origin culture and traditions, rather than those of European origin. They stated that revolutionary art should be realistic, social, and polemical and they rejected easel painting and what they called bourgeois taste.⁶

Fifteen years later, in 1938, a second manifesto was written by Russian exile Leon Trotsky, in discussions with Diego Rivera and André Breton, and signed by all three. Titled, “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” this treatise looked to the future and classified art as that of the worker in a worker society. Easel work was not mentioned, but now individualism was encouraged, warning artists to beware letting governments determine artistic content. In a book published in 1945, Siqueiros described the artists' early artistic goals as wanting a monumental, heroic, and public production, different in nature and concept from any previous work; he also

⁶Although the word “mural” is not in this manifesto, by 1923 most of the signatories were already painting murals at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. See initial section of the excellent book study on Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo by Nancy Deffebach, which amply discusses the manifestos.

implied that good art was masculine, while “bad art” was *chic* and “domestic” (Deffebach 13). Siqueiros does not discuss women artists. Despite their innovative work and following similar themes, women were barely acknowledged in discussions of the cultural renaissance.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, when women writers appeared to burst on the scene with bestseller novels, Ángeles Mastretta with *Arráncame la vida* (1986) and Laura Esquivel with *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), it created an opening to remember artists and writers of the early twentieth century. Around that time Frida Kahlo was becoming popular in Mexico, as books were released by scholars,⁷ and soon also in the US. Biographies were published on Nahui Olin in 1993 and Guadalupe Amor in 1994, then Rosario Castellanos’s personal letters, *Cartas a Ricardo*, in 1995, each book with a foreword by Elena Poniatowska, who had just published a novel on Tina Modotti, *Tinísima* (1992). She was also asked to provide the prologue for *Frida Kahlo, la cámara seducida* (1992).

In 1985 in the US, the first book study on Castellanos’s work was issued and in 1992 an updated translation of Castellanos’s first novel (a book of her poems in translation had come earlier). In 1988, Nellie Campobello’s first two books were released in English translation as one volume: a first study on Elena Garro’s works in 1990, a first book study on Poniatowska’s writing in 1994, and in 1995, a new study of Castellanos’s prose (see titles below). Noticing renewed interest in women’s work, Poniatowska prepared essays about seven talented women of the early twentieth century, collecting them in a book titled, *Las siete cabritas* (2000), a colloquial reference for the Pleiades constellation (English-language speakers tend to use “the Seven Sisters”),⁸ an apt term to describe women as guiding stars for other women. Showing they are forerunners to contemporary women artists and writers, Poniatowska relates their lives, their frustrations, delights, provocations, command of the issues in their

⁷ Raquel Tibol published the first book about Frida Kahlo in 1977; a biography in English by Hayden Herrera came in 1983; in 1992, Mexican art curator Carla Stellweg published *Frida Kahlo: la cámara seducida*, with a version in English. In 1999, Margaret Lindauer released a scholarly work, *Devouring Frida*.

⁸ The Pleiades is a hot and luminous star cluster (“blue giant” in astronomy) which, due to its proximity to the earth and visibility to the naked eye, served as a useful early navigation guide; the translation of her title can denote the seven little goats, and perhaps stubbornness, but Poniatowska declares she was thinking only in terms of astronomy, noting that her husband Guillermo Haro was an astronomer.

day, the men they loved and those who diminished them, and perhaps why the few who lived to old age appeared to retreat into madness.

Curators also began taking interest in locating earlier work by women artists, and major exhibitions opened in Mexico on Izquierdo's work in the late 1980s, and on Nahui Olin in 1993, with a more extensive exhibit on Nahui Olin in 2018. In the US, collaborative retrospectives were organized on María Izquierdo in Chicago in 1996 and New York City in 1997, with books on the exhibitions published by Elizabeth Ferrer, Luis-Martín Lozano, and Teresa del Conde.

Today a line of continuity can be drawn from the women artists and writers of Mexico's cultural renaissance to a few courageous women writers of the mid-twentieth century, to the rise of new Mexican women writers in the 1970s, and the bestseller novelists of the late 1980s. In all cases they are intrepid women who defied obstacles put before them, contested the idea that art is masculine, or that writing and publishing belonged only to men. They refused to quit or go away when sidelined from projects, and endured despite being denied tribute and awards. Despite little or no interactions between the seven women in Poniatowska's essays, each stands out as symbolic navigational guides, with their marvelous talent, feistiness, and unrelenting spirits, remembered in these chronicles by Mexico's current greatest woman writer.

Since Poniatowska's essays are not encyclopedic biographies, the following segments attempt to fill in biographical details, adding details from critical sources published since her collection of essays was released in 2000. It is hoped that these notes will be helpful before or after reading Poniatowska's essays. My translation follows her format in the original edition, some essays have subheads, others none, and I have followed her practice of stating the full name of each person in each and every instance.

* * *

Frida Kahlo

Born July 6, 1907, in Coyoacán, now part of Mexico City

Died 1954

Before she was Frida Kahlo the artist, in the 1920s she was one of only 35 women among some 2000 students at the nationally prestigious Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, planning to do university studies in medicine.

Remarkable from the time she was a child, Kahlo also endured great physical pain throughout her life. As a child she survived polio, then a terrible accident when she was 16 years old, when the streetcar she was riding collided with a train. Her body was impaled by a metal handrail, straight through her torso and lower body. These tragedies only deepened Kahlo's resolve to live and to find happiness by participating as fully as possible in life. When she was confined to her bed with polio, her father gave her a tablet on which to draw and paint; after the terrible streetcar accident, she chose painting as her vocation. Marriage to Diego Rivera is not the reason for her achievements in art, she carved that path herself. When they married the second time, she stipulated that she would support herself.

Born in 1907 in the home where she later hosted a variety of visitors and where she would die, Kahlo was enthusiastic about Mexico's new political environment, the cultural changes, and the opportunities for art that would transform Mexican society. Although today her self-portraits grace an array of paraphernalia and popular art, and her designs, and even attire, are regularly featured at museums, during her lifetime she had little access to exhibitions. Likely because of Kahlo's recognition, Poniatowska's publisher chose to place this essay first in *Las siete cabritas* (2000). It is different from Poniatowska's other essays here, in that she wrote it in first person. She states that it simply came to her that way. Poniatowska had recently completed the foreword for a book of photographs by Carla Stellweg, *Frida Kahlo: la cámara seducida* (1992). Soon afterward, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* was released, with an introduction by Carlos Fuentes.⁹ This diary is not from her early life, but one she began late in life: after the death of her beloved father, after she had divorced and remarried Diego, and after the numerous medical procedures on her body. She was likely reconciling herself to the fact that her health would never improve. An illustrated narrative attesting to the chronic pain which shaped her outlook, equal only to her strong desire to participate in society, it serves as testament to Frida's physical decline during the last ten years of her life. In her essay, Poniatowska imagines Frida's voice, her reflections on life, and a final trip outside to celebrate with students and friends, limping along despite knowing the price she would pay for doing it.

⁹ Released simultaneously in Spanish and English-language versions, in 1994 (in the US, it was preceded only by a biography by Hayden Herrera in 1983). Reissued in 2005, Frida's diary is regularly found in museum gift shops.

In his extensive introduction to *The Diary*, Fuentes creates a fascinating analysis where he describes Diego and Frida as two sides of a coin in post-Revolution Mexico: “He paints the cavalcade of Mexican history, the endless, at times depressing, repetition of masks and gestures, comedy and tragedy. ...But the internal equivalent of this bloody rupture of history is Frida’s domain. As the people are cleft in twain by poverty, revolution, memory, and hope, so she, the individual, the irreplaceable, the unrepeatable woman called Frida Kahlo is broken, torn inside her own body much as Mexico is torn outside” (Fuentes 9).

Elena Poniatowska’s imagined Frida speaks directly to the reader, and the essay serves as a memoir of sorts, describing her teenage hoodlum years, the streetcar accident, and her life as a professional painter. This Frida recalls the kids in school making fun of her, her family’s lack of understanding about the polio she contracted at age six, and how, after the dreadful streetcar accident when she was a teenager, they fully expected her to die. Poniatowska describes Frida’s skinny body covered in gold dust someone was carrying in a bag which flew, sticking to her bloody body, causing someone to refer to her body as “the little angel.” Her description of the handrail being yanked out leaves a harrowing image. Poniatowska’s observations come from newspaper accounts and from the diary itself, as well as those who knew Kahlo, especially Carlos Pellicer, who converted the Kahlo studio into a museum, and Raquel Tibol, who interviewed Kahlo in 1953 and published the first book about her in 1977.

This Frida describes how she feels about the surgeries, the dreadful stretching of her spine, the braces (corsets) around her torso, the “little boot” for her foot, how she loathed doctors who experimented on her, and how she was received by the French,¹⁰ who found her “extravagantly beautiful,” when in Coyoacán, Frida says, she was “no more than a cripple.” Conjuring Kahlo’s rage, passion for life, and connection to her “Judas,” the skeleton figure hanging above her bed, Poniatowska’s essay relates her delights in what she can see, savor, and smell, as well as her acute, “ongoing pain.” Frida observes her cremation, hears her interns

¹⁰Poniatowska states that Kahlo’s exhibit was organized by André Breton, who in 1938 extended the invitation while he was in Mexico. What is not generally known is that when she arrived in January 1939, Kahlo discovered that Breton had failed to make any preparations. It was Marcel Duchamp who jumped into action, got her paintings out of customs, and quickly organized a show on Mexican art at the Renou & Colle Gallery (see Deffebach 12–13).

intone the communist anthem, and assesses “two Fridas,” one that has gone and one that remains on the canvas, “the one dearly loved by life.”

Frida Kahlo did not attend art school, but she studied avidly and was highly well read. Her painting came from heart and intellect. As with other artists of the cultural renaissance, she searched for Mexican roots in indigenous cultures. She brought attention to Native heritage through her attire, her jade necklaces and headdresses, and through the symbology in her art: monkeys, hummingbirds, deer, and the hairless dogs, each invoking ancient values (see Deffebach). Two of her earliest and important paintings incorporated popular arts in the use of oil on tin: *Unos piquetitos* (1935), about her miscarriage in Detroit, and another about violence to women. Native imagery is strong in *Mi nana y yo* (1937), with her adult head placed on the body of a baby, nourished at the breast of a dark-skinned woman whose face is covered with a Teotihuacan-style mask, traditionally laid on a person’s face at burial. Later Kahlo reproduced colonial retablo style with small ex-voto pieces, a practice where a layperson depicts a miracle, often a healing, in a small, painted design.

After 1937 her work took on greater complexity. Upon reading a book on Freudian thought about life cycles and the birth of heroes (only males), Kahlo created *Moisés* (1945; a work she also called *Núcleo solar*), named for one of the “heroes” discussed early in that book. Philosophic in nature and intricate as a mural despite its 20 × 37 inch size, the baby Moses floats in his basket; above him are a fetus, ovaries, and a bright sun; along the sides are colorized fragments from the mother goddess Coatlicue. Juxtaposed against an array of male historical and mythological figures, she invites the question of where heroes come from. When asked about it, Kahlo said, “the reason people need to invent or imagine heroes is mitigated... Like Moses there have been and there will be a great number of ‘higher ups,’ transformers of religions and of human societies ... messengers between the people they manage and the ‘gods’ invented by the managers” (Deffebach 11–12). Kahlo recognized systemic manipulations.

She enjoyed only two solo exhibitions during her lifetime: the first in Paris in early 1939, the other at the Lola Alvarez Bravo gallery in 1953, shortly before her death. Kahlo participated in three important international group exhibitions for Mexican artists: “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” in 1940 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where she and María Izquierdo were the only two women whose works were exhibited alongside several men; the exhibit “Mexican Arts Today” in 1943 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, featuring Kahlo, Izquierdo,