Frances Toor and the Mexican Cultural Renaissance

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Frances Toor, the *gringa folklorista*, was one of a host of political and cultural pilgrims who flocked to Mexico in the decade after the Revolution. In the same way that travelers, mostly European and American intellectuals, journeyed to Russia after the triumph of the Bolsheviks to see socialism in action and to find their long-sought Utopia, many North Americans headed for Mexico City to witness for themselves the new Mexico that Alvaro Obregón and José Vasconcelos were building after the revolution. Toor, along with visitors like Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Carlton Beals, D.H. Lawrence, and many others, sought to discover a Mexico which met their particular political or cultural needs. Others, like Julio Antonio Mella, came seeking refuge from persecution; still others, like Bertram Wolfe and Vittorio Videlli, came to Mexico for political reasons both altruistic and sinister. All these visitors had longings and needs which they believed Mexico could fulfill; few were disappointed in what they found there.

Toor, together with other *gringas* like Anita Brenner and Alma Reed, championed the cultural and artistic revival which flourished in Mexico in the decade of the 1920’s. These women made it their mission to explain the new Mexico to a suspicious United States and beyond, and to spread the word about the work of Mexican artists, composers, anthropologists, and educators who were bringing about this *renacimiento*. Even more, each of them made a deep personal commitment to Mexico and to the Mexican people; each had a life-long “love affair” with the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, ideals which were all too briefly and incompletely fulfilled by a recalcitrant government. A recent biographer of Tina Modotti summed it up in this way:

In 1923 Mexico City teemed with fanatics, bohemians, idealists, radicals, and visionaries. Intellectuals who had once looked to Europe for cultural revelation now turned their backs upon the old continent, embracing instead the genius of peasants and indigenous peoples whose inclusion in the Mexican community promised to bring forth the “regeneration and exaltation of the national spirit.” Military chieftains had retreated to their ranches or ensconced themselves in plush ministries. Artists and writers were unfurling the blueprints of a more authentic culture, forging new values and constructing a modern utopia.

Lured by such vibrancy and ferment, anticipating inspiration, and titillated by skirmishes between marauding guerrilla bands, foreign pilgrims shook off their own tired affairs to board trains and boats bound for Mexico. Some came as intellectual sightseers; others seized the opportunity to embroil themselves in the artistic, social, and political experimentation, the nation-building, and the fiestas.¹

Frances Toor was born in Plattsburgh, New York in 1890. She earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the University of California, Berkeley, (studying with Herbert Eugene Bolton, the father of borderlands studies), before coming to Mexico in 1922 to
attend the summer school at the National University. She admitted later that she knew little about Mexico, but was overwhelmed by an exhibition sponsored by the Secretariat of Industry, Commerce and Labor. She wrote almost twenty years later that “The beauty of it was one of the motivating factors in my remaining. I wanted to know more of the country in which humble people could make such beautiful things.”

Like most foreigners, when I came to Mexico I was ignorant of what Mexico really is. In those days there was not the literature that there is now on its history, culture, and art. But the Ministry of Industry and Labor had just financed the collection of an exhibit of folk art to be sent to the United States. Textiles, pottery, lacquer work, gold and silver jewelry had been collected by artists from the entire republic. I saw the exhibit many times, and I grew ever more enthusiastic over the beauty of an art produced by a humble and practically enslaved people and also over the work of modern artists, so alive, virile, passionate.

Another member of Mexico City’s Bohemian circles was Anita Brenner, who was in fact not a gringa at all, but a Mexican citizen, born in 1905 in Aguascalientes to immigrant Jews from Latvia. (She was delighted, much later in life, to be able to decline the Mexican government’s award of the Aguila Azteca on the grounds that she could not accept an award meant only for foreigners.) Her family were small landowners and merchants; they fled the Revolution’s fighting several times, the last time in 1916. They settled in San Antonio, where Anita was schooled at a Catholic girls school before attending the University of Texas at Austin for only a year. (As a Jew and a Mexican, she felt like a social misfit in Austin.) She managed to persuade her father to let her go back to Mexico in 1923 to finish her education at the National University. The head of the B’nai Brith office in Mexico City assured Isidore Brenner that the capital was now quite safe, inasmuch as Carranza, Villa, and Zapata were dead and Obregón was president. Brenner supported herself by teaching English in the capital.

Toor later related in a 1932 issue of Mexican Folkways how she founded her magazine. She came to attend summer school and stayed on, supporting herself like Brenner by teaching English in government schools, and attending the University. “Every vacation,” she wrote, “I visited some villages. As I knew enough Spanish to carry on a conversation, I made friends easily with the Indians, and became fascinated by their courtesy and customs as well as by their modes of artistic expression.” Because of my own joy in the discovery of an art and civilization different from any that I had previously known, I thought it would interest others as well. Thus I conceived the idea of the magazine.”

With no experience in publishing, she consulted friends who did; the Americans, like Ernest Gruening (who was then managing editor of The Nation and a reporter working in Mexico) tried to dissuade her; the Mexicans encouraged her efforts. Manuel Gamio, Sub-Secretary of Education, offered to contribute 100 pesos a month to support the effort, and wrote a piece for the first number. Toor remarked later that, as she was making seven and a half pesos a day (three dollars yanqui) as an English teacher, working
only ten hours a week, she had little to lose: “I had the time, and not much to lose if I were not successful, so I walked where angels feared to tread.” Writing seven years after she started her enterprise, Toor described her intentions:

I did not take existing folk-lore magazines for models. As I wanted Mexican Folkways to express the Mexico that interested me so keenly, it has not only described customs, but has touched upon art, music, archaeology, and the Indian himself as part of the new social trends, thus presenting him as a complete human being. And in order that the magazine might mean something to the Mexicans as well as to outsiders, everything has been published in both English and Spanish.⁶

Volume one, number one of *Mexican Folkways* appeared in June-July of 1925. The first issue carried an editor’s foreword, an article entitled “The Utilitarian Aspects of Folklore,” by Manuel Gamio, pieces on Mexican pottery, Coatlicue, an Aztec goddess, “the magic of love among the Aztecs,” the legend of Tzatzincio, and articles about the petate, “a national symbol” by Anita Brenner and the passion play at Tzintzuntzan by Toor herself. The government’s small subsidy did not suffice to pay for printing, and *Mexican Folkways* carried from its first issue through its last advertisements from various commercial enterprises operating inside Mexico, particularly those appealing to tourists. Thus the inside back cover had ads for the American Hotel Geneve, the Tlaepaque Art Store (corner of López and Juárez Avenues)—and a small ad for a photography studio operating at 42 Avenida Veracruz; the ad simply said “Photographs—Edward Weston-Tina Modotti.”

In her foreword, Toor spelled out her aims and objectives, and the philosophy underlying them:

“Ya se va pasando,” I am told wherever I go. Legends and stories are being buried with the “ancianos” and forgotten. Fiestas, dances, marriage customs and other celebrations are no longer as they used to be before the revolution. The Indians are coming more into contact with white civilization and they are growing self-conscious, ashamed.

In Mexico there are about ten millions, at least two-thirds of the population living in the remnants of their ancient civilizations. It is these ten million that President Calles has promised to incorporate into modern life. The task will be a tremendously slow and difficult one. But it would be even slower and more difficult if it were not that through his folkloric expression the Indian has kept alive that something which has prevented him from degenerating into a mere beast of burden, compatible with his mode of living. The poorest Indian women who lives with her whole numerous family, and perhaps with her animals also, in a one-room hut, who sleeps on the floor and has not a chair to sit upon, can embroider the most exquisite napkins or weave marvelously beautiful sashes or bags. Children of five begin to imitate their fathers in the artistic fashioning and painting of pottery; others weave fine, lacy baskets or serapes. The
primitive Indian producer has not made the unfortunate separation between utility and beauty which so greatly distorts our modern life.\textsuperscript{7}

Although to our post-modern sensibilities Toor may sound patronizing, her enthusiasm and delight in rural Mexican life swept up many collaborators who agreed to contribute to her magazine (almost certainly for little or no remuneration). Manuel Gamio (often called the father of modern Mexican anthropology) was especially encouraging, as was Franz Boaz, who urged that both Spanish and English be retained as the two languages of the enterprise. No doubt printing the magazine in both languages (with the attendant costs of translation and increased expense of more pages) placed a greater financial burden on Toor, but she hoped that \textit{Mexican Folkways} would be of use to high school and university students of Spanish as “material for the study of social background, which gives insight into language and literature, as well as to those who are interested in folklore and the Indian for their own sakes.” She did concede that much beauty might be lost in translating.\textsuperscript{8}

It is not my intention to catalog the many and varied topics which \textit{Mexican Folkways} explored during its ten years of intermittent existence, but rather to show how this magazine and its devoted band of contributing editors and authors typify attitudes and opinions in post-Revolutionary Mexico, and how \textit{Mexican Folkways} served as a sounding board for many prominent artists and intellectuals who tried to bridge the immense historical chasm between \textit{gringos} and \textit{mexicanos}. Suffice it to say that in a decade of existence, \textit{Mexican Folkways} explored indigenous dances, masks, village festivals, children’s art, the muralist movement, Mexican theater, pre-Colombian dieties, weaving, poems, \textit{corridos} and other folk songs, maguey and \textit{pulque} making, Tarahumara runners, Indian psychology, \textit{piñatas}, Zapotec rites, passion plays, the cult of the Virgin, Mesoamerican architecture and archaeology, burial customs, the day of the dead, Mayan symbolism, and a few hundred other topics. Frances Toor visited \textit{curanderas} and related her experiences. She and colleagues drove or rode pack animals into remote villages, always, she said, made welcome by the poorest of Indian peasants. \textit{Mexican Folkways} also reviewed recent books on Mexico (the reviews included a good-natured panning of D.H. Lawrence’s \textit{The Plumed Serpent}, entitled “Mexico through frightened eyes”; Toor wrote “Poor Lawrence! How scared he was in Mexico”).\textsuperscript{9}

Very quickly, \textit{Mexican Folkways} became the focus of those Bohemians who had taken up residence in the capital. Issue two carried a piece on the esthetics of Indian dances by Jean Charlot, who was actually the first artist to execute a public mural at the behest of José Vasconcelos. Dr. Atl, \textit{nom de pincel} of Gerardo Murillo, former head of the Academy of San Carlos and mentor of most of the muralists, contributed an article on the purple fabrics of Oaxaca. By issue three Diego Rivera was weighing in on the issue of \textit{retablos} as the true and only pictoric expression of the Mexican people; before \textit{Mexican Folkways} was a year old he was on the masthead as its art editor.

The magazine itself reflected what one critic has called a quasi-official stance of “romantic nationalism.” \textit{Mexican Folkways}, with articles by linguists and writers, musicians and anthropologists, as well as professional and amateur folklorists, mirrored
the times, since post-Revolutionary Mexico “seemed to find its reflection in all things popular; poets, musicians, and painters all cultivated this approach.”

The journal, as befitted its name, concentrated on the rapidly changing culture of Mexico’s Indian, determined to record native arts, crafts, and customs even as its writers applauded the integration of the Indian into national life. *Mexican Folkways* carried a series of articles through the years about the new government programs in education; Moisés Saenz wrote “Without neglecting the city schools, preference has been given in the present administration to rural schools.” When Puig Casauranc replaced Vasconcelos as Secretary of Education in 1924, there were 700 functioning rural schools; by 1928 that number had been increased, according to the Secretary, to over 4,000. Calles’ call to incorporate the Indian into modern civilization” was reflected in both material resources and zeal: “…there has been a definite and intensive effort to make these schools really serve the community, according to the statement of aims by Moisés Sáenz, Sub-Secretary of Education…” Sáenz stated that “It is necessary to establish a spiritual relationship in the community, give the teacher a social conscience, make the school the home of the people and the village the home of the school. This is not an easy task.”

The Ministry, Sáenz reported, had been holding “Cultural Missions” for the previous two years for rural school teachers, with courses on educational methods, hygiene, agricultural and home industries, cooking, sewing, etc. Federal inspectors followed up these courses with inspection trips to see how well teachers were carrying out the new “socialized school of action.” Sáenz reported on a trip to the Puebla Sierra, where he visited 37 schools. “This,” he wrote, “is an entirely indigenous region, in which Aztec is spoken to the exclusion of Spanish, excepting in the schools. The people are ruled by an Aztec cacique, who represents the government, and they still conserve the customs of their ancestors before the Conquest.” Although everywhere he and his companions went they were received with courtesy, music, flowers, and fireworks, his conclusions on the state of the pueblos were largely negative:

In some the children were dirty and the scholarship bad; the social work insignificant. On the whole, however, the report on the schools is infinitely more hopeful than on the people. The standard of living is low. Due to primitive methods, the agricultural production is insufficient, even though the land is good. Alcoholism in this region, as in many another, is a scourge. Their *sic* is a resistance to the Spanish language, and the people cling to their primitive customs. Mr. Sáenz conclusion *sic* is that the school alone cannot uproot the old and implant the new, but that “The Ministries of Industry and Commerce, of Agriculture, of Communications and the Department of Health—all have their responsibility and their place in these regions. Unless all of them come with us to share in the work of the Rural School, our labor will be lost and within a few years we shall have another desilusion *sic* to hang on our necks.”

Sáenz went on to report that when inspecting schools in the San Luis Potosí region, he found some excellent and others in poor condition, but he was more hopeful
about their chances for improvement, as the inhabitants of this region were not Indians, but mestizos. The last paragraph of the report highlights the dilemma of both the government and champions of indigenous culture: “There are other Mexican scholars who hold the opinion that the Indians must become mestizos in order to progress.” Toor and her collaborators championed the old ways while urging greater integration of the Indian into national society, and while Mexican Folkways alludes from time to time to the contradictions inherent in such attitudes, it was never able to reconcile them.

A longer report on rural education placed the idealized school at the center of village life, alongside the church, a secular temple sometimes named the “House of the People.” In each village inspectors asked questions designed to elicit the desired information on the great project of national unity:

- How many children speak Spanish fluently?
- How many can read and write with ease?
- Is there a Mexican flag in the school?
- Do the children know about Mexico?
- Do they know the name of our President?
- What names of great Mexicans do they know?
- Do they raise chickens, pigs, bees, and silkworms?
- Have they a garden?
- Is there water in the school? Do they use it?
- Is the school socialized? In which grade?
- Has it a parents club?
- Does the teacher do any social work in the community?

Sáenz freely admitted that the school routine did not particularly interest the authorities, and questions of method and technique were of secondary interest. “…but we are passionately interested,” he wrote, “in having a vital school, contributing to social organization and national unity…in which the raising of chickens is as important as undertaking the learning of a poem.” 13 The teacher in these villages acted as pedagogue, librarian, correspondent, even pharmacist and rural doctor! Sáenz was careful to distinguish between a “socialist school” and a “socialized school,” which he said represented a community of effort between the government and the children and adults of rural Mexico. The Mexicans took their inspiration directly from the American educator and philosopher John Dewey, who visited the country at the invitation of the Mexican government and praised its program; he wrote that “there is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more of the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in this Mexican development.” He also praised the attention to music and design in the plastic arts, for which he said the Indians displayed a marked genius, which took place in many schools. 14

The aim of all this effort, Sáenz wrote, was to create in peasant classes a rural spirit:
To integrate Mexico. To incorporate into the Mexican family the millions of Indians; to make them think and feel in Spanish. To incorporate them into that type of civilization that constitutes Mexican nationalism. To bring them into that community of ideas and emotions that means Mexico.15

Between the path of segregation, which Sáenz believed would finally lead to annihilation, and of assimilation and mixing, the government chose the latter path. It was in this perhaps unrealistic belief that Toor and her collaborators on *Mexican Folkways* placed their faith.

That faith was a compound of fierce Mexican nationalism and an undoctrinaire, simplistic Marxism of the 1920’s. The people with whom “Paco” Toor mixed in Mexico City were mostly unabashed admirers of the Russian Revolution, as well as Americans fiercely opposed to their own country’s colonialism in Latin America. *Mexican Folkways* was first and last a magazine dedicated to showing Americans the “true” face of Mexico, through its arts and folkcrafts. It was never a political journal. While many who contributed to it were without any doubt “reds” (in the sense that they belonged to the Mexican Communist Party), neither Toor nor her journal could be said to be so. But both might be said to have been slightly “pink.” The American ambassador to Mexico, James Rockwell Sheffield (a New York Republican with no diplomatic experience who was convinced that the Calles government was radical, fanatically anti-American and altogether too cozy with the Soviet Union), described Toor as a Mexican agent, a Soviet sympathizer, and a close friend of Alexandra Kollentai, the first ambassador of the U.S.S.R. to Mexico.16 Toor even permitted Diego Rivera to draw a cover for her magazine which featured two stylized Mexican peasants flanking an eagle with an ear of corn in its mouth; on second glance, one notices that one of the Indians holds a hammer, the other a sickle!

From time to time the naïve sentiments of revolution showed up in the pages of *Mexican Folkways*. The same issue which published Moisés Sáenz’s report on rural schools also carried a song entitled “*Corrido del ejido de ‘Garrapata y Misión Unidas,*” a song which celebrated land reform and included the verse

\[
\begin{align*}
Gritaban los agraristas \\
Cuando estaba la reunión \\
¡Que viva el problema agrario \\
Y que muera la reacción!
\end{align*}
\]

Somewhat more blatant was a ballad in the October-December 1929 issue, entitled “Thus Will be Proletarian Revolution,” accompanied by a photo of a Diego Rivera fresco entitled “The Insurrection,” which showed Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti handing out rifles and ammunition to the workers. The song celebrated the time when

the people overthrew the kings
And the mercenary bourgeois governments.
And installed their councils and laws
And established the proletarian authority.¹⁷

But mostly Mexican Folkways stuck to an optimistic hope (ofttimes misplaced) that the Mexican government would live up to its revolutionary ideals and promises to the people. More typical of its political philosophy was a corrido entitled “El 30-30”, which is a common caliber of rifle ammunition. The short song expressed all the disappointed hopes of frustrated farmers:

How poor we are all,
Without bread to eat,
Because our bread is spent
By the boss in his pleasure.

While he has clothes
And palaces and money,
We go about in rags
And live in pig-stys

Everything we sow
And everything we reap,
But, all the harvest
Is for the good of the masters.

Everything we suffer,
Exploitation and war;
And yet they call us thieves
Because we ask for land!

And then the mean little priests
Excommunicate us…
I suppose they think that Christ
Was like our bosses!

Comrades of the hoe
And of all the tools of labor,
Only one way is left us:
To grasp the thirty-thirty.¹⁸

Still, the editor’s note to the song explained that the agraristas who sang it were ready to fight for President Calles during the Cristero rebellion. The rebels, explained Toor, hoped to find support in Morelos, Puebla, and Veracruz, but met with defeat, “because the peasants are for Calles and Obregón, the two presidents who have already given them land, irrigation, roads, and schools.”¹⁹ (When Bertram Wolfe, who was ostensibly in Mexico to teach English, but had been secretly ordered by the American Communist Party to Mexico to bring some order to the quarreling factions of the
Mexican Communist Party, was expelled from the country without a hearing under Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution as a “pernicious foreigner,” the police, upon detaining Wolfe, asked him whether he preferred “33” or “30-30”!

But Toor never quite bit the hand which subsidized her. A year into the magazine’s existence, Toor celebrated *Mexican Folkway’s* financial survival, and carried a tribute from the highest levels of the Mexican government. President Calles, upon examining several numbers, wrote “…besides being very original in its class, it is making known to our own people and to foreigners the real spirit of our aboriginal races and the expressive feeling of our people in general, rich in beautiful traditions.” Similar accolades, she proclaimed proudly, had been given the magazine by the Secretary of Public Instruction, J. Manuel Puig Casauranc, Sylvanus Morley of the Carnegie Institution, Franz Blom of Tulane, K. L. Krober [sic-A. L. Kroeber] of Berkeley, and Franz Boaz and John Dewey of Columbia.

Toor always steered a path between outright criticism and complete exoneration of the government:

Everyone knows by this time that the Mexican Revolution of 1920 has brought about a social change…The change got under way with the first of the Revolutionary-Reconstruction Governments, beginning with the incumbency of General Alvaro Obregón in 1920, and has continued down to the present time.

The change thus far consists chiefly in an attitude. By this I mean that the Revolution has not yet made good in an economic sense all its promises to the people. It has been perhaps unnecessarily slow in its reconstruction work, and the Indian is still poor and illiterate. But at least he has been recognized as a human being.

Toor’s editorializing merely reflected mixture of radical rhetoric and caution which occasionally proceeded from the highest levels of the government itself. In a report on a visit by the Secretary of Education, Ezequiel Padilla, and the President of the Republic, Emilio Portes Gil (a maximato puppet put into office after Obregón’s assassination) to a rural school in Tepecoacuilco, Guerrero, Toor reproduced the speeches of the President himself:

We wish to socialize the peasant classes, unifying them as much as possible, so that they may forma united, insuperabl[e] front against exploiting capital. We are not enemies of capital, but of capitalist systems that have been the most formidable extortionists of our workers, our women, our children…In our proceedings to socialize the workers, we shall not, in connection with the peasants, arbitrarily despoil of property, but only restore within the law the lands formerly wrested from the villages, the legitimate owners, who still need them…

One of the greatest values of *Mexican Folkways* lies in its contemporaneous nature. Toor and her friends were present “at the creation,” so to speak, of a remarkable
marriage of the artistic and the political. They were also witnesses to the dramatic integration of the Mexican peasant into the fabric of national life, and the subsequent erosion of traditional values in the campo. The photos of Indian peasants in their huaraches and calzones (“traditional” clothing into which they had been forced centuries ago by the Spanish missionaries) are mute testimony to the disappearance of a way of life which had existed since before the colonial period. Also, here and there in the pages of Mexican Folkways can be glimpsed newsworthy events in Mexico in the 1920’s, including the union of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and the assassination of ex-president Obregón.

A piece on “Mexican Ballads” by Anita Brenner explains how the corrido is a “unique and characteristic product of native mood tragedy, impersonally, and often sardonically recorded; events of casual journalistic category etched upon a background of fatalistic sorrow.” A collection of corridos, she writes, is a truer record of Mexico, a truer mirror of its people, than any text yet written. Mexican Folkway’s corridos reflected both the mood and the news of the country. On July 17, 1928, ex- and future president Alvaro Obregón was shot at a banquet in a suburb of the capital by a religious fanatic and sympathizer with the Cristero rebels. In the next number of the journal (mysteriously dated April-June, 1928, but presumably printed after the cover date), there appeared a corrido entitled “Trágica muerte de General Obregón,” which called the assassin a treacherous cur. The song mourned

Oh beloved country of mine
Look at the condition you’re left in!
They have killed General Obregón
Your own and favorite son

Who would have foretold
That after having triumphed
And having rid himself of enemies
A traitor was to murder him

Oh country of mine
At this time you suffer so;
The unkindness of your sons
Offers you new grief to mourn

It seems that so much blood spilled
By others in the past everywhere
Has not been enough, poor country

Nuestra madre, qué más faltará de hacer?26

A few months after an uprising in Sonora in 1929, Toor published a corrido entitled “Occupation of Chihuahua by Federal Forces,” which related how on the third of the month of March, “day of blackest abuse, there broke out a new revolution in Sonora and Veracruz,” and how Manzo in Sonora, Aguirre on the coast, and Escobar in Torreón,
betrayed the revolution. The cause they proclaimed as the pretext for their action, “fué suponer que Ortiz Rubio fué impuesto en la Convención.” The song related at length how Calles crushed the rebellion, and concluded by cynically observing how the defeated generals would fare:

Well, they’ll pass over to the North,
To buy pleasure with their money.
Eight millions of pesos
Was the profit from the job. 27

And after Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the left-leaning agrarista governor of Yucatán was murdered by delahuerista rebels in 1924, Mexican Folkways printed a corrido (translated by Anita Brenner) entitled “The Death of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Martyr of Yucatán,” which mourned the death of a son of Yucatán, killed by the Reaction (with a capital “R”), and concluded

Mother mine of Guadalupe,
The blood of that execution;
Colors for us to remember,
Red and black of our revolution!

Felipe Carrillo Puerto,
Murdered for keeping his faith… 28

Politics aside, Mexican Folkways was also instrumental in publicizing the renaissance in Mexican arts spurred largely due to the efforts of José Vasconcelos and his successors in the Ministry of Education. From its inception a number of the muralists, including Jean Charlot, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco, contributed to the magazine in the form of articles, illustrations, and photos of their recent works on government walls. (Tellingly, David Alfaro Siqueiros, the most Stalinist of the muralists, except perhaps for Xavier Guerrero, never had anything to do with “Paco’s” crowd.)

Diego Rivera, who was on the masthead of the magazine as art editor, contributed articles on pulquerías, retablos, and Mexican painting in general. Mexican Folkways published an article by painter Ray Boynton in 1926 which openly spoke of a renaissance in art symbolized by Rivera’s frescoes, which Boynton compared to the work of Giotto. The magazine further honored him with an homenaje in 1930, dedicating a whole “fresco issue” to his work, particularly the Cuernavaca frescos which had been painted at the behest of Dwight Morrow, ambassador to Mexico and a man determined to redress some of the injuries caused by less progressive and sympathetic American diplomats. Accompanying the photos of the murals was an effusive tribute by William Spratling, which declared that Rivera “has not only fed on the Mexican revolution but been a conscious part of it; in his painting he has given flower and fruit to it.” 29 Later on, when Rivera got into trouble for the radical iconography of his Detroit and New York murals (the latter was destroyed by the Rockefellers after Rivera refused to remove Lenin from
the Radio City fresco), Toor defended her friend on the grounds that the quality of his art lifted it above pure politics. But Toor did more than publicize the muralists. She dedicated an issue in 1928 exclusively to the work of José Guadalupe Posada, writing that long before the modern movement in Mexican art found its inspiration in the Mexican people’s struggle for a better social order, Posada had had the same conception of art. “He worked alone and unrecognized,” wrote Toor, “yet he was the greatest artist produced by the Revolution.” His engravings, she declared, crystallize all the stirring events of the first years of the Madero Revolution—the inevitable struggle of the middle class against feudalism and the reaction of the masses to politics, sport, miracles, crime, the parasitic church and budding imperialism. “His ensemble of proportions reflect his inheritance from the greatest artists of the Americas, the indigenous masses of Mexico.”

Other articles trumpeted the talents of Rufino Tamayo, and María Izquierdo, the latter lingering in the shadow of the much better known Frida Kahlo in spite of a similar style and subject matter. (She was assigned to do a public mural, but some of los jóvenes got wind of it and torpedoed her efforts before she could begin; few women ever joined the exclusive club of los muralistas.) Manuel Alvarez Bravo photographed frescoes for Mexican Folkways, and Miguel Covarrubías contributed caricatures. Carlos Mérida, a bona fide muralist, wrote of the new modern art gallery founded in the capital in 1929. After Dwight Morrow organized an exposition of Mexican arts, sponsored by the Carnegie Art Corporation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1929, a Mexican Art Association was founded in that city to maintain a permanent exhibition of Mexican applied arts and to sponsor special exhibitions of fine and applied arts of Mexico in the United States.

But Mexican Folkways did launch one artist whose talents might never have been discovered if not for the encouragement of Frances Toor. Tina Modotti, the Italian immigrant to San Francisco who acted in minor Hollywood films and hung out with an artsy Los Angeles crowd, came to Mexico as the lover and assistant of a more established artist, Edward Weston, who took temporary leave of his wife in California, and, along with son Chandler and lover Tina, set up a home and photographic establishment in Tacubaya. Even given that the population of Mexico City in the early 1920’s had a population of about 625,000 persons, it seemed as if within the shortest time everyone met everyone else worth knowing in the capital. Modotti and Weston dined with an American named Robert Turnbull, who had provided photographs for the text of a folk art exhibit written by Katherine Anne Porter, who was having her own love affair with Mexico; they dined at a restaurant owned by the brother of José Clemente Orozoco. Diego Rivera had been supposed to dine with them, but he failed to show up, so Xavier Guerrero (later Tina’s lover and a fiercely-dedicated member of the Mexican Communist Party) and his wife joined them. Guerrero was a full-blooded indio and a member of the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Technical Workers who had rediscovered lost fresco techniques and had convinced Rivera to abandon the encaustic method for the fresco.
Tina and Edward Weston’s home became a new center for Saturday night gatherings in the capital. As one Modotti biographer wrote

...the Modotti-Weston household became the prime venue for the raucous gatherings of Mexico City bohemia. Mexican and foreign artists, writers and folksingers rubbed shoulders with cabinet ministers, Communist militants and Mexican generals, who sometimes bared their anatomies after a few drinks to compare war wounds. There was little attempt at serious discussion— it was the ‘art’ of having a good time that mattered. The eating, drinking, and dancing lasted all night, occasionally deteriorating into pistol shots at dawn as party guest became over-excited.33

Edward Weston kept a diary of his Mexican days, and recorded his thoughts on one typical gathering:

To Monna’s and Rafael’s for chocolate. In Mexico it is 6:00 o’clock chocolate, instead of 5:00 o’clock tea. A Mexican Senator was there, he and his guitar, a tall handsome charro. He had fought in the revolution, two years with Villa; everyone here seems to have been in the fight. “Villa was the best loved man in Mexico,” said the Senator. “He was an outstanding personality and made a gallant fight for the oppressed.” And we in the United States, thanks to our controlled press, think only of “the bandit Villa.” Lupe and the Senator sang Mexican popular songs all evening—some were in memory and love of Pancho Villa.

Diego was there. I watched him closely. His six shooter and cartridge belt, ready for service, contrasted strangely to his amiable smile. He is called the Lenin of Mexico. The artists here are closely allied with the Communist Movement; it is no parlor politics with them.34

Anita Brenner also kept accounts of gatherings for her journal:

…our first semi-pretentious affair. Wild success. House full of notables, smoking and talking. All elements, from art to Charleston. Diego, sitting in one corner and explaining Mexico to admiring gringos...Frank Tannenbaum in one corner, paternally blesssing our heads...Salvador Novo examining books and offering awkward gallantries. I think he is reforming his preferences and now has more use for females, especially among them Lupe [Marín], beautiful in electric blue with her dark skin and large deep grey eyes and black close cropped hair...Carlos Merida & Mrs. Carlton [Beals], Frances [Toor]...Edward [Weston]...Tatanacho [Ignacio Fernández Esperoón], lean,
sensual, shy; many others, some of whom I don’t know and many whom I don’t remember.\textsuperscript{35}

At another time Weston wrote:

As usual, last evening, the ‘reunión.’ At midnight, Frances said to the few lingering ones, ‘Let us go dance at the Salón Azteca. It’s a tough joint; we’ll have fun.’ There were Anita, Frances, Tina, and there were Charlot, Federico, a couple of Americans, and myself who went to the ‘Gran Salón Azteca.’ It was as tough as promised. Logically then it was colorful. Since no restraint of style and method were placed upon the dancers, one saw an unrestricted exhibition of expression, desires, passions, lusts, mostly crude unvarnished lusts—though that French cocotte was subtle indeed and beautiful too. One could not but wonder why she was in such a place among cheap and obvious whores.\textsuperscript{36}

Still later Weston recorded: “The evening, Frances took us,—which meant Carleton Beals and the Weston-Modotti household—to Teatro Lírico. Too much ‘carne’—though I am not moralizing. I was finally bored by all the wiggling arses and wobbling tits.” \textsuperscript{37}

All was not fun and games, however; Weston was to stretch the boundaries of his art in Mexico, and Modotti to discover her own talents. In the April-May 1926 issue of \textit{Mexican Folkways}, Diego Rivera applauded their collaboration in extravagant terms (although he paid Weston a rather back-handed complement by writing “Any day that Weston may wish or any day that some outside force may break through the modesty and indifference that are characteristic of him, he will astonish…the poor intellectual bourgeoisie of Mexico with his work.”) Of Tina, he wrote “Tina Modotti, his pupil, has done marvels in sensibility on a plane, perhaps, more abstract, more aerial, even more intellectual, as is natural for an Italian temperament. Her work flowers perfectly in Mexico and harmonizes exactly with our passion.” \textsuperscript{38}

Weston and Tina traveled throughout Mexico with Anita Brenner taking the photographs which would ultimately illustrate Brenner’s ground-breaking work, \textit{Idols Behind Altars}. But they grew apart; Weston missed his wife and family in Los Angeles, and could never share Tina’s growing radicalism, which flowered dramatically in the fertile soil of Mexican communism and anti-imperialism. After he departed for the States, Tina moved into the same apartment building in which Frances Toor lived and edited her magazine, and Toor gave her commissions and put her on the masthead of \textit{Mexican Folkways} as a contributing editor. In 1929 Toor wrote an article on an exhibition of Modotti’s photographs in the Library of the National University. She praised Tina for making art with a social conscience: “Her recent work has a very definite place within the Mexican modern art movement. In subject matter and emotional content is comparable to that of the best revolutionary artists. She too, has caught and expressed the social unrest of the Mexico of today.” \textsuperscript{39}
Modotti followed that piece with her own, “Sobre la fotografía.” Although she had had little formal schooling, and throughout her life always felt at a disadvantage socializing with people better educated than herself, her intimate association with artists over the years had given her an appropriate esthetic vocabulary. This vocabulary, coupled with her commitment to social justice, led to criticize what she termed “dishonest” work, photography which strove to impress with distortions, manipulations, and other “artistic” effects (in this regard she seems to have been particularly attacking the avant-garde photography of the Europeans, especially the Dadaists—she referred to superimposing “effects and falsifications that can only please those of perverted taste.”) Modotti’s objectives were to register objective life in all its aspects; from this, she declared, comes its documentary aspects: “Creo que el resultado es algo digno de ocupar un puesto en la producción social, a la cual todos debemos contribuir.”

Tina Modotti’s path away from photography and into Stalinist politics has been well documented in a number of biographies. After her split from Weston, she had a brief fling with Diego Rivera, a more serious affair with Xavier Guerrero, and then the most intense relationship of her life, with Cuban exile and anti-Machado Communist Julio Antonio Mella. The night that Mella was shot in a Mexico City street while walking with Tina, (almost certainly by a machadista gunmen), it was Frances Toor, Diego Rivera, and Carlton Beals who waited with Tina in the San Jerónimo hospital; when Mella died, Tina collapsed weeping into Frances Toor’s arms.

Toor’s efforts, although almost universally applauded, with not rewarded with commensurate commercial success. *Mexican Folkways* staggered along in a financially perilous state, published with lessening frequency as the new decade of the 1930’s began. A bibliography of Latin American folklore by Ralph Steele Boggs commented of *Mexican Folkways*, “Most of the numerous contributions to Mexican folklore of the editor, Frances Toor, appear here. I have encouraged her to continue this very vivid record of Mexican folk life, but she believes its support is insufficient.” Perhaps *Mexican Folkways* could not find a sufficient “niche” from which it could appeal to both the serious anthropologist and the sympathetic North American; it could not help that at the same time another English-language journal calculated to appeal to gringos, *Mexican Life*, was also being published.

A review of the magazine appeared in the April-June, 1927 issue of *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. The reviewer, a professor at Barnard College, called *Mexican Folkways* a small bright periodical, its aim to record the customs of the Mexicans “which are slowly dying out through the superimposition of white culture and its attendant assimilation.” Professor Reichard noted with approval that there was no limit to the type of material which subsequent numbers of the paper had treated, citing pieces on archaeology, history, witchcraft, ceremonials, animal stories, legends of Holy Saints, poetry, song, and drama. Besides contributions to the imaginative arts, one of the main purposes of the journal, she wrote, is to call attention to achievements and trends in the graphic arts. “This periodical,” she went on” because of its interest in all things Mexican., should appeal to all who have even the slightest interest in Mexican affairs.”
For some time the Mexican government has hoped that by recognizing and making a conscious effort to assimilate the ancient primitive customs a happier adjustment of peoples might be made. Most nations proceed on the policy that to govern is to crush all that is indigenous. For this reason the Mexican government is being watched by those who believe that every primitive society has some rights to the culture it has developed.

The reviewer concluded “The publication, by its quaintness and sympathy with the Mexican natives does much to obliterate the rancid smell of oil which has lately accompanied our notions of Mexico gained from our own periodicals which treat of political matters.”

In 1929 William Spratling published a piece on the Mexico City scene in *Scribner’s Magazine* entitled “Figures in a Mexican Renaissance, Being Various Encounters Among the Intelligentsia Mexicana.” After praising the work of Rivera, Orozco, Moisés Saenz and Dr. Atl, Spratling termed Frances Toor “the one American...who has consistently devoted herself toward preserving what is traditionally and indigenously Mexican in art, and not only this, but to the cause of the artists as well. Hers is almost entirely a work of co-ordination and research, and at the same time she is thoroughly in touch with all the various movements and maintains a certain relationship between the departments of the government and the intelligentsia. The newspapers in Mexico like to refer to her as “la editora fecunda y sapiente,” an appellation which both she and I found vastly amusing.” This editora, he reported, was close to the Indian. “She has traveled alone through many remote regions in Mexico for her material, and the results of these trips have occasionally formed priceless chapters in folkloric research.”

But Toor’s energy and enthusiasm could not make up for the lack of a secure financial base for her magazine. In several editor’s notes she alludes to the difficulty of finding funds to continue publishing. At the end of 1932, she wrote “As nearly always at the end of the year, I find myself without any assurance of being able to continue publication. But Mexico is a land of miracles. Seven have already been conceded me in my seven volumes of Mexican Folkways. Perhaps there will be an eighth!” In “El Milagro...!!” in January, 1933, she rejoiced at her salvation, in the form of a Mr. and Mrs. William Carr of New York, who had bought some bound volumes of *Mexican Folkways*, and who had been disappointed at being told that publication had been suspended due to lack of funds. They were put into contact with Toor, and proposed subsidizing the magazine’s continued existence.

*Mexican Folkways* managed to stagger along for another three years; the last issue to appear is dated August, 1935, a special number devoted to Mexican popular arts. In her editor’s note, she restated both the dilemma that modernization presented the indigenous people of Mexico, and the systems of belief which had kept her in Mexico for more than a decade on her labor of love:
This, like all other special numbers of Mexican Folkways, is an attempt to present the subject in a general way, with as many specific examples and details as space will permit. It is not a plea nor a wish that the Indian continue forever making objects for the delight of our esthetic taste, if it means poverty and a low standard of living.

Anyway, no opinions or wishes are going to stop the march of history. Economic forces are at work in Mexico as everywhere else in the world. It is certain that to the extent that the Indian becomes incorporated into modern life, his desire for modern things will increase. He will have to look for higher wages than the handicrafts can yield and will abandon them. And with them will go his time for festivals, and, perhaps, also his capacity for the enjoyment, of leisure and beauty.

There are two classes of North Americans to whom this realization is appalling. First, the sentimental unthinking ones, who at all costs to the Indian, would like to see him remain picturesque and producing lovely handmade things for their delight, without wishing to pay for their value. Second, those who think and feel but have before them the terrible example of a highly industrialized and mechanized civilization in their own country.

…the important question concerning the future of the Mexican Indian is: What will the inevitable change bring him? Will he sell his heritage for the miserable life of the mechanized laborer? Or, will his natural wisdom help him to salvage his intense and virile love of life and beauty? 49

The magazine went out still proudly listing on its masthead its contributing editors: Pablo González Casanova, José de J. Núñez y Domínguez, Elsie Clew Parsons, Robert Redfield, Miguel O. de Mendizabal, Moisés Saenz, Carlton Beals, Carlos Mérida, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Enrique Juan Palacios, Miguel Covarruvias, and Rufino Tamayo. Its art editor remained Diego Rivera.

Frances Toor continued to live and work in the capital after her magazine folded. She continued to write books dedicated to folklore and to acquainting her countrymen with Mexico and its arts. She published several guidebooks to Mexico, a Spanish language and vocabulary book for Americans traveling in Latin American, and from the Frances Toor Workshops, a series of monographs on Mexican artists and muralists. In 1947, her masterpiece, A Treasury of Mexican Folkways: The Customs, Myths, Folklore, Traditions, Beliefs, Fiestas, Dances, and Songs of the Mexican People, appeared, illustrated with over a hundred drawings by Carlos Mérida. Like Anita Brenner, she was awarded the Order of the Aztec Eagle for her lifetime achievements on behalf of her adopted patria; but unlike Brenner, she did not decline the honor, as she was born and remained a gringa her whole life. She died in New York in 1956 at the age of 66. Her obituary in the New York Times neatly summed up a lifetime in pursuit of la indígena y el auténtico:

She went to Mexico for a brief visit, fell in love with the land, and stayed on to become better acquainted with its folkways. On foot, horse, and
mule, on bus, auto, train, and plane, Miss Toor wandered up and down the
countryside collecting treasures of folklore. Although she was a popular
writer, her works on Mexican Folkways became source books for
anthropologists. She was especially interested in the fiestas, which she
followed round the calendar of Mexican days. She joined in pilgrimages to
shrines, feigned illness to be cured by healers and witches, questioned
local inhabitants and aged storytellers, rummaged through the literature of
padres and conquistadors, and published her own magazine...

Frances Toor, the gringa folklorista, made a lifetime pilgrimage, leaving as her
legacy a visual record of an era of transition in Mexico for the Indian, between tradition
and modernity: as well as a body of socially conscious work as testament to an idealistic,
if ephemeral, union between art and politics.

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2 Frances Toor, Mexican Popular Arts (Mexico City: Frances Toor Studios, 1939), pp.10-11.
6 Ibid., p.208.
7 Frances Toor, “Editor’s Foreword,” MF, v.1, no.1 (June-July 1925), p.3.
8 Ibid., p.4.
12 Ibid., pp.74-75.


19 “Editors, note,” Ibid., p.188.


21 “Nuestro aniversario,” MF, no.7 (June-July, 1926), p.4.

22 Ibid.


31 Frances Toor, “Guadalupe Posada,” MF, v.4, no.3 (July-September, 1928), p.140.

32 Ibid., p.142.


35 Brenner journals, April 17, 1926; cited in Glusker, op. Cit., p. 43.

36 Ibid., p.80.

37 Ibid., p.134.


45 Ibid.


47 Ibid.

