

Antonieta Rivas Mercado: notable cultural promoter of the early 20th century.

Antonieta Rivas Mercado: notable promotora cultural de principios del siglo XX.

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Abstract:

This article examines the life and work of Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900–1931), not only as a tragic muse, but also as a decisive cultural agent in the cultural modernisation of Mexico. Through an analysis of her private correspondence, her political chronicle of the Vasconcelos campaign, and her financial and intellectual participation in projects such as the Ulises Theatre and the magazine Contemporáneos, her figure is reconstructed beyond the myth of her suicide in Notre Dame. It explores the tensions between her private and public lives, characterised by a constant challenge to folkloric nationalism in favour of a universalist culture, concluding that her writing and patronage constituted an act of resistance and a search for her own identity in a patriarchal and post-revolutionary environment.

Keywords: Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Teatro Ulises, artistic avant-garde.

Resumen:

Este artículo examina la vida y obra de Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900-1931), no solo como musa trágica, sino como agente cultural decisiva en la modernización cultural de México. A través del análisis de su correspondencia privada, su crónica política de la campaña vasconcelista y su participación financiera e intelectual en proyectos como el Teatro Ulises y la revista Contemporáneos, se reconstruye su figura más allá del mito del suicidio en Notre Dame. Explora las tensiones entre su vida privada y su vida pública, caracterizada por un desafío constante al nacionalismo folclórico en favor de una cultura universalista, concluyendo que su escritura y mecenazgo constituyeron un acto de resistencia y una búsqueda de identidad propia en un entorno patriarcal y posrevolucionario.

Palabras clave: Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Teatro Ulises, Vanguardia artística.

Introduction

A more extensive historical examination of the figure of Antonieta Rivas Mercado is necessary, as she is often limited to the tragic event of her death in Notre Dame Cathedral in 1931. Her cultural and intellectual contribution is highlighted, as well as her active participation in the cultural change of post-revolutionary Mexico. Her work as a patron and promoter of projects such as the magazine *Contemporáneos*, the *Ulises* Theatre and the magazine *Ulises* demonstrated a solid commitment to the modernisation of the arts and to questioning the prevailing nationalist models. Her vision allowed new aesthetic trends to be introduced into a milieu marked by ideological tensions and an official culture that privileged folklore. Added to this was her critical reflection on the role of women, whom she considered responsible for generating moral life and occupying an active place in the public sphere, challenging the passivity and docility imposed by the social structures of her time. This article analyses Antonieta as a key figure whose cultural action and thinking on female identity redefined the course of Mexican artistic and intellectual life at a crucial moment in its history.

Figure 1. Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900-1931)



Note: Photo by Tina Modotti, cited in González (2016).

Mentioning Antonieta Rivas Mercado immediately brings to mind her death when she decided to end her life on 11 February 1931 in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris.

But is this terrible event the most important thing in her life? Rivas Mercado was a great cultural promoter who challenged her time, and whose avant-garde work was key to the modernisation of culture in post-revolutionary Mexico. Without , it would have been impossible to conceive of the *Ulises* Theatre, the *Ulises* Magazine and the *Contemporáneos*

Magazine, cultural projects of which she was a patron and which were radically different from the movement represented by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros.

In 1928, Diego Rivera painted a mural in the Ministry of Public Education. It is striking to see Antonieta Rivas Mercado painted elegantly but with a devastated face, receiving a broom from the hands of a revolutionary woman, who points her finger towards a ribbon announcing the name of the painting: *El que quiera comer que trabaje* (He who wants to eat must work) (see figure 2). In the lower left corner, a character with donkey ears picks up items related to the arts and an issue of the magazine *Contemporáneos* from the ground; behind him, a boy bearing a strong resemblance to Diego Rivera kicks someone who could be Salvador Novo. "This mural by Rivera perfectly reflects the muralist's animosity towards the movement and ideology represented by *Contemporáneos*" (Secretariat of Culture, 2020, para. 3).

Figure 2. If you want to eat, you have to work. Panel from *Corrido de la Revolución Proletaria* (1928).

Fresco by Diego Rivera on the second floor of the SEP



Note: González (2016).

Let's go back to the beginning. Antonio Rivas Mercado (1853-1927), Antonieta's father, was a renowned architect at the end of the Porfiriato who, among other achievements, remodelled and completed the Juárez Theatre in Guanajuato and designed and built the famous Angel of Independence column that still stands today on Avenida Reforma in Mexico City.

Thanks to her father's economic position and the cultural environment that surrounded her, Antonieta had a privileged education. Her intellectual phase began in 1926, when she returned to Mexico after travelling for three years through Europe with her father and son. She took advantage of her time in the Old Continent to get closer to the world of art and literature.

That same year, Antonieta met the painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (1895-1971), with whom she struck up a close friendship, as evidenced by their extensive correspondence (1927-1931). These 87 love letters, a documentary testimony, are an invaluable source of information about her personality; "an example of writing whose spontaneity and immediacy do not detract from its beauty and depth" (González Luna, 2002, p. 410).

Antonieta's great love for Manuel is documented in the following letter she wrote to him:

Manuel: I am beginning to feel that life is the path to perfection, and you are that for me [...] Close to you, life becomes the narrow path that leads to heaven... whatever balance and spiritual maturity I have is rightfully yours. Without you, I would have lost myself (Rivas Mercado, 1987, p. 357).

In 1928, Manuel responded to the honour of meeting Antonieta:

An extraordinary woman from every point of view, due to her exceptional intelligence, strength, character, nobility, generosity and distinction. Due to our shared intentions, a positive friendship developed between us, and this extraordinary woman, who constantly questioned things, told me of her desire to do constructive work for Mexico, and who had a deep aesthetic sense rooted in her childhood through the practice of dance, once proposed to me the creation of a modern theatre that would place Mexico, in her view, on a par with the countries of Europe, from where she had just arrived (...) At that time, Antonieta Rivas Mercado became the centre of the Mexican artistic movement. (Rivas Mercado, 1975, p. 14 cited in González Luna, 2002, p. 414)

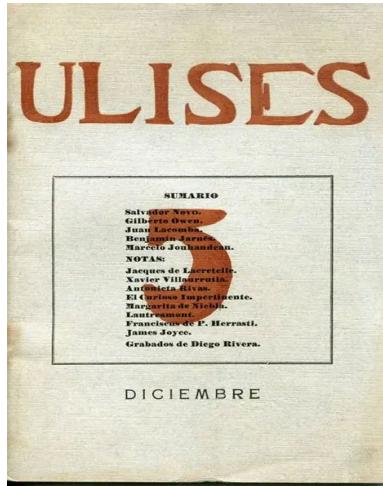
This relationship opened the door to the post-revolutionary intellectual world, as it was thanks to him that Antonieta met Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia. They, along with other writers, began to participate in cultural activities in Antonieta's own home under the name Grupo Ulises.

From these gatherings, Ulises: Revista de curiosidad y crítica (Ulises: Magazine of Curiosity and Criticism) emerged in May 1927, financed from its second issue onwards by Antonieta, in this:

The group of writers who participated in it, including Antonieta herself, sought to construct a Mexican literature that was free from the folklore, indigenism, and rejection of Hispanic culture that characterised other groups of post-revolutionary intellectuals, such as the muralists. (García 1998 cited by Olague Méndez, 2022, p. 463).

This led to the writers of Ulises being widely criticised in intellectual circles, with derogatory labels such as 'devoid of nationalism', 'traitors to the Revolution' and 'promoters of bourgeois values' being applied to them (Secretaría de Cultura, 2020, para. 6).

Figure 3. Cover of Ulises. Magazine of Curiosity and Criticism. Magazine no. 5, Mexico City, December 1927. (editors: Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia).



Note: González Matute (2019)

Figure 4. Cover of issue 1 of Contemporáneos. June 1928



Note: González (2016).

In 1928, Antonieta Rivas Mercado promoted the creation of the Mexican Symphony Orchestra's board of trustees, supporting Carlos Chávez as its director. That same year, the Ulises Group inaugurated the theatre company that would bear the name Teatro de Ulises, financed by Antonieta. She commented: "I felt the need to create avant-garde theatre, like those

that had emerged in Paris, New York and other cities... performing foreign plays that were in vogue at the time... with the aim of presenting modern theatre and shaking off cobwebs, which, although old, were not respectable" (Gamas, 2019, p. 163).

Figure 5. The Ulises Theatre



Note: Ortiz Bullé Goyri (n.d.)

Interviewed by the newspaper *El Universal Ilustrado* in May 1928, Antonieta stated that it was necessary to start with a Mexican theatre that was far removed from the stereotypes of "Mexicanness" promoted by other post-revolutionary intellectuals, because "what has come to be called Mexican theatre is a disgrace to Mexican intellectuals, since Mexican identity is not defined by traditionalist folklore" (García Gutiérrez, 1999, p. 617).

In *La mujer mexicana* (The Mexican Woman), published in *El Sol de Madrid* (February 1928), she presents, almost fiercely, her idea of women, accusing them of "passivity" and "docility" and insisting that: there is no representative model of Mexican women, because as such, they do not exist, since the Mexican nation is the sum of influences that pass through Spanish, American, French, and the sediment of those cultures, deposited on an indigenous background (García Gutiérrez, 1999, p. 620).

Figure 6. The Mexican Woman. Antonieta Rivas Mercado 1900-1931.

LA HOJA VOLANDERA

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NO. 180

LA MUJER MEXICANA

Antonieta Rivas Mercado
1900-1931

Maria Antonieta Rivas Mercado Castellano Hoff (nació en la ciudad de México, el 21 de agosto de 1876 y se suicidó en París, Francia, el 11 de febrero) desempeñó un importante papel en la vida cultural y política de México en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Poco fundamental su aporte en la fundación de mecenazgos para la fundación de la revista *Contemporáneos* y del Teatro Ullán, como también en sus numerosos artículos periodísticos, ensayos y textos políticos. Una de sus grandes preocupaciones se refiere al tema de la mujer. Una muestra de ello es veremos en la sección "La mujer mexicana" en un ensayo de L. Mario Schenck en sin duda el escrito más ilícito que sobre el tema haya realizado una feminista nacional".

El hombre hace la historia; la mujer hace al hombre
G. Marañón

Quinquiero que intente encontrar en nuestro pintoresco medio social un tipo representativo de mujer mexicana, fracasará. La mujer mexicana no existe. Esto se explica fácilmente. Como nació la cultura mexicana, así nació la mujer mexicana, a la cual debemos el ser, hasta la norteamericana, habiendo pasado por la francesa. El sedimento de estas culturas, depositado sobre la cultura indígena, ha fundido un México que por suaje y costumbres parecen arrancadas de medios europeos, ya español, ya francés. Otras suelen el lenguaje de la cultura europea, pero con el color de pelo hasta la manera de diversificarse. Y la mujer indígena vive tal como cuando los conquistadores establecieron el reino de la Nueva España. En

Méjico todo se está haciendo. No hay que buscar en el todavía un tipo general de mujer. Esto corresponderá al momento histórico en que todas las manifestaciones nacionales sean fundamentalmente norteamericanas. Sin embargo, en Méjico hay mujeres. Las encontramos agrupadas en torno a totales representativas de potencia económica. Preguntar no se necesita de castigo, porque los acontecimientos políticos se suceden con rapidez, tal que no permiten cristalizaciones duraderas. Una pregunta adicional diría que es un factor social, que lógicamente debiera servir de amalgama a las mujeres mexicanas, de hecho se ha mostrado que no. Se ha referido a las campañas de cada una. Me refiero a la cultura. En Méjico, todas las mujeres son católicas, ya que no vale la pena tomar en consideración a las que pertenecen a otros credos. La cultura católica es la que impone la fabrica de trajes a la medida, y en cada suvierte las artistas sociales.

La aristocracia vive en casa de planta europea, vive en casa de Paquin, come a la francesa y cree igualmente en los artículos de la fe. La India vive en el jaco, de loto a punto, viste de manta, come de la fragua y cree igualmente en los artículos de la fe. Aquella, cuyo alimento espiritual son las películas americanas, cuyos hermanos se quedan en la cama a escuchar el jazz, tampoco tiene inconveniente en aceptar los dogmas católicos. Pero ¡qué lejos se encuentran este mundo entre ambos!

En Méjico carecemos de esas fábricas de educación que tan eficaz resultado han dado en Norteamérica. Entre nosotros, la educación también es una industria, pero asociada con el poder económico. El Gobierno no ha tenido el vigor suficiente para centralizar y dar un tipo superior de escuela el que asistieran democráticamente los hijos

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Mayo 10 de 2004

Note: Montes García (2004).

Her feminine ideal included the recovery of the Hispanic Catholic past as a cultural amalgam for the consolidation of Mexican feminine identity. This pro-Catholic stance was articulated when the Cristero War (1926-1929) was at its height, and they advocated the struggle for the defence of Catholic religious freedom, thereby launching a direct attack on Plutarco Elías Calles and his government.

This is the meaning behind Antonieta's statement: "It is necessary for women to put themselves in a position to give moral life. Let women become capable of giving moral life to men!" (Gamas, 2019, p. 142, cited by Olague Méndez, 2022, p. 469). In this regard, Olague Méndez (2022) explains, "In other words, evidence of women's participation in public life in Mexico would be reflected through women's influence on men, whether they were sons, husbands, fathers or brothers" (p. 269).

Rivas Mercado's cultural work was very diverse, as in addition to being a cultural promoter, she was the editor of books such as *Dama de corazones* by Xavier Villaurrutia, *Novela como de Nube* by Gilberto Owen, and *Los hombres que dispersó la danza* by Andrés Henestrosa (Rivas Mercado, 1975, p. 14).

Antonieta and Vasconcelos knew each other by name—both were icons of Mexican culture—and met for the first time on the afternoon of 10 March 1929 in the lobby of a hotel in Toluca, in the midst of the presidential campaign. Samuel Ramos

introduced them. They were instantly captivated by each other. She was dazzled by this man of illustrious and quick thinking, who had intentions of changing public life in Mexico.

Vasconcelo described their first encounter as follows:

The hotel lobby lit up when I was introduced to her... a perfect understanding immediately and naturally developed between us... one of the greatest women the country has produced in recent times... she squandered her fortune on supporting a symphony orchestra, publishing select literary magazines, and funding a minority theatre company called "Ulises".
(Vasconcelos, 1946)

Figure 7. José Vanconcelos and Antonieta Rivas Mercado. December 1929.



Note: González Méndez (2018)

During the months of the election tour, a romantic relationship developed between the two, which was recorded in the *Diario de Burdeos*, where Antonieta presented Vasconcelos as the 'messenger of good news', the man whom 'the people enveloped with their adoration, because he was the redeemer that Mexico needed to free itself from the burden of Plutarco Elías Calles' dictatorship'. (Rivas Mercado, 1987, p. 245).

Her intellectual work in Mexico ended in September 1929, "due to the intensification of attacks against supporters and collaborators of Vasconcelos' campaign. She then decided to leave the country" (Olague Méndez, 2022, p. 470).

It was during this exile, in New York, Los Angeles and finally Bordeaux, France, that Antonieta devoted most of her time to writing and produced several of her works, some of which she left unfinished due to her premature death (Olague Méndez, 2022).

In the diary she wrote in Bordeaux, Antonieta explains:

[...] that surrendering to the "political storm" represented by Vasconcelos' campaign left her in a precarious state of mind that even led to her hospitalisation —this added to other personal problems— which shows that her participation in the campaign was much more active than is traditionally recognised. (Olague Méndez, 2022, p. 477)

Olague Méndez (2022) points out that:

It can be assumed that she had to force her way into this world that was so different from her own, due to her position as a woman on the one hand and, on the other, because she was part of an intellectual group that went against the grain. Added to this was the fact that her participation in the Vasconcelos movement placed her in direct opposition to Callism, forcing her into exile (Olague Méndez, 2022, p. 477).

Months later, in Paris, she met Vasconcelos again. The words in which she recounts their last conversation are devastating:

He doesn't need me, he said so himself when we talked long into the night on the night of our reunion here in this very room. At the height of the conversation, I asked, "Tell me if you really, truly need me." I don't know if he sensed my desperation or if it was out of excessive sincerity, but he reflected and replied, "No soul needs another, no one, neither man nor woman, needs more than God. Each person's destiny is linked only to the creator" (Rivas Mercado, 1987, p. 435).

On 11 February 1831, a thunderous crash was heard inside the religious enclosure of Notre Dame in Paris. A woman fell, covered in blood. Antonieta Rivas Mercado was buried on 16 February in the Thiais cemetery on the outskirts of Paris. Her family disowned her. Five years after the sad event, in 1936, the body, having not been claimed, was exhumed and transferred to a common grave.

Conclusions

At the end of this journey through the life of Antonieta Rivas Mercado, it is imperative to transcend the romantic and victimised image that has dominated the popular narrative, in order to rescue the active and challenging intellectual. As has been evident throughout this article, Antonieta was not a passive character in the cultural history of Mexico; she was an architect of modernity in a country struggling to define its identity after the Revolution.

Her work was not limited to opening her purse to finance the dreams of others; her patronage was a critical intervention, an aesthetic and political stance that sought to insert Mexico into the century that saw us born.

A review of her letters and unfinished texts reveals that the dichotomy between her public and private life is, in reality, a false separation. In her correspondence with Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, we see how writing becomes a space where writing and biography merge and serve as a mechanism for survival. The letters are not only testimonial documents of an unrequited passion or devotion or submission to the male figure of the artist; they are also the laboratory where Antonieta sharpens her pen and her critical thinking. In them, she dissects the cultural environment of her time, criticising the superficial folklorism that prevailed under the tutelage of the official muralists. This lucidity shows that her personal anguish did not nullify her analytical capacity and that, on the contrary, her pain seemed to sharpen her vision of her surroundings.

It is crucial to highlight the publisher who published fundamental works by Villaurrutia and Owen, the translator who brought the French avant-garde to Mexico, and the chronicler who documented the end of the democratic illusion. Her unfinished novel, *El que huía* (The One Who Fled), promised to be a profound exploration of Mexican identity, but without folklore, foreshadowing the reflections that Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos would later make.

Antonieta Rivas Mercado was undoubtedly a defiant woman who, as she herself wrote, felt it was her duty to write and leave a testimony of her passage through a world from which she felt exiled. By rereading her texts and reconstructing her projects, the forgotten writer is recovered to complete the cultural map of a Mexico that cannot be explained only through its murals, but can also be observed in its cracks and dissident voices. Her legacy lies in that unbreakable will to be, to act and to create.

May this research serve to remember a great cultural promoter of the early 20th century, who knew how to overcome social and gender barriers, enriching the cultural life of post-revolutionary Mexico beyond the prevailing folklore; a woman who earned her place in history on her own merits.

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