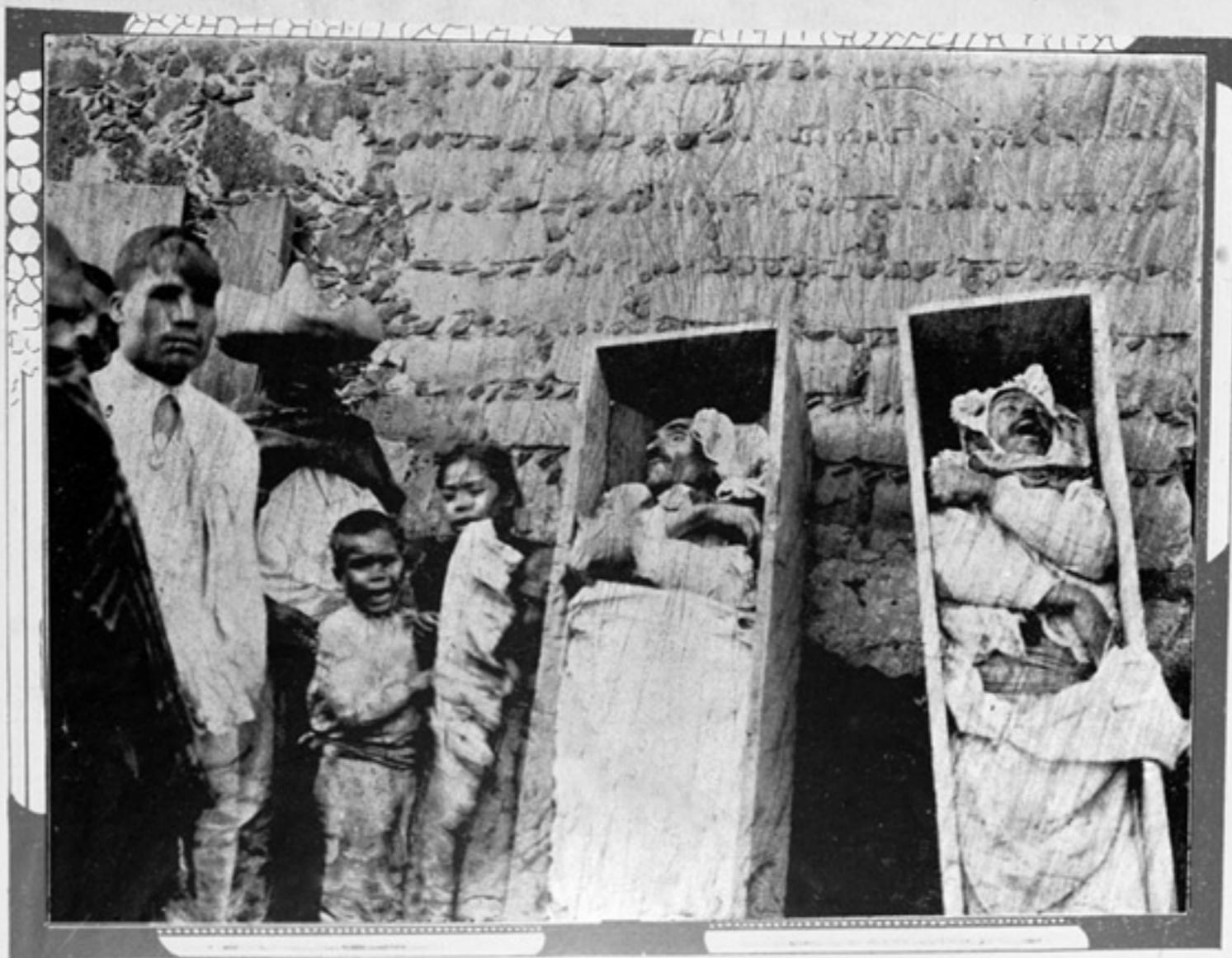


PHOTOGRAPHING THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION BY JOHN MRAZ



The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 was one of the most-photographed social struggles in history. This book tells the story of that photography, and is the first in-depth study of the imagery produced during a major revolution in the world. How did the photographers express their commitments visually? What were the aesthetic strategies they employed to take sides and offer their bit to the struggle? What identities and identifications were generated with their images? What sorts of fears must have been associated with appearing in photos, taking them, signing them, and circulating them? How did the “visual economy” function in terms of production, distribution, consumption, and conservation, both immediately and in the long run?

The book begins by correcting a fundamental misconception: that Agustín Víctor Casasola was THE photographer of that war; one might say that Casasola monopolized the photography of the revolution as the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) monopolized the revolution itself. In order to produce a new history, it clears away the myths constructed by the Casasola family with the multiple picture histories that were published from the Casasola Archive over many years, beginning in 1921. The archive was formed by Agustín V. Casasola in different ways. On one hand, he acquired archives, among them that of the newspaper *El Imparcial*, which closed in 1914, and that of photojournalist Gerónimo Hernández who left photography to join the revolution, giving his archive to Casasola. However, on the other hand, he evidently rephotographed published images from illustrated magazines that had been made by other photographers, such as this picture of terrified children sobbing next to their father, a Zapatista executed in 1913, an image taken by Samuel Tinoco, and published in the illustrated magazine, *Novedades*, 22 de enero de 1913 (see figure 1). According to my research, Abraham Lupercio and Antonio Garduño received many more credits for photos during the revolution than did Agustín Víctor, and photojournalists such as Ezequiel Álvarez Tostado, Eduardo Melhado and Samuel Tinoco were much more recognized in the modern media. Hence, it is now clear that the Mexican Revolution was photographed by many photographers, some of whom were foreigners.



LA BESTIA HUMANA EN AYOTZINGO.—Cudros son que ponen terror en el ánimo, los que se desarrollaron en ese desdichado pueblo, al sufrir un asalto por los feroces bandidos zapatistas que, como la mala hierba, crecen y se desarrollan, sin que sea posible destruirlos. Cómo quedó el Palacio Municipal después del furioso asalto, lo muestra elocuente-

Figure 1

Even more important than the question of authorship, the photography of the revolution was characterized by commitment on the part of different photographers to all the causes, rather than the ostensible “objectivity” of the so-called Casasola imagery. To me, this is one of the most interesting part of the book, that of finding agency among the photographers on the slimmest of evidence: the few scattered surviving photographs in archives, the illustrated media that can be located, the chance reference that can link a photographer to a cause.

Caudillos quickly developed consciousness of the importance of mass media, and recruited photographers to construct their image: one might say that the caudillos ordered, the photographers proposed. Photographers saw the opportunity to express their points-of-view, and to finance their photography. We want always to be clear that one difference between writing and photographing is that photography costs money to produce. So, when we turn Jean-Paul Sartre’s question – “For Whom does one write?” – in the direction of photography, the answer is complex and revealing. In the Mexican revolution, one photographed for a caudillo; for an illustrated magazine or newspaper; for postcards that were sold as news to periodicals or in stores, or as souvenirs to the very people who therein appeared. One photographed for the individuals that came to a studio to have portraits made, or for close associates and/or friends and/or family.

And, there is a revolution.... Among other things, what makes the photography of the Mexican Revolution unique is the fact that – alongside those photojournalists that were ostensibly “neutral” (but in fact were committed to media owned by old Porfirian supporters) – you have photographers committed to revolutionary causes that are at war with one another. Hence, the photography of Jesús Abitia, “The Constitutionalist Photographer,” is as revolutionary as that of Amando

Salmerón, Emiliano Zapata’s photographer, or the Cachú brothers, who were linked to Francisco Villa; all represent popular movements that are fighting against one another. I am not aware that this is the case in the photography of other revolutionary situations.

The challenge of determining commitment is made difficult by the fact that many images can be found with the signatures of various photographers. This is particularly true of postcards, then a media of much importance and one of the few ways news imagery circulated. The methodological difficulties notwithstanding, it seems clear that the agency of Heliodoro J. Gutiérrez is the first photographic protagonist of the revolution in its commitment to Maderismo. Until about a year ago, Gutiérrez was just a name on a lot of photographs. However, Gutiérrez has been identified as an individual who founded an agency that employed various photographers, and which produced picture postcards, a crucial media at the time for spreading news.

One photographer, Aurelio Escobar, went to cover the Madero revolt in Chihuahua and, though he took no images of combat he did take some that are expressive of the postcard aesthetic. It is at least ironic that postcards advertised the Maderista challenge to the Porfiriato, because the first Mexican postcards devoted a disproportionate attention to Porfirio Díaz’s administration, glorifying it and praising the country’s progress under his rule. Its prior function notwithstanding, the medium would now serve other masters: Escobar arrived in the north at the beginning of April, 1911, and the first photo that registered the presence of the H.J. Gutiérrez agency in the revolution was taken in the middle of that month in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, documenting a group of Maderistas in front of what must have been a Wells Fargo office of messenger service and transportation (see figure 2).



Figure 2

Escobar may have had a political commitment to Maderismo, while Gutiérrez's motivation might have been more economic: that of having pictures of the scintillating struggle going on in the north to sell as postcards. It is interesting that postcard makers anticipated the arrival of Mexican photojournalists, who only arrived in Chihuahua after everything was over. The illustrated magazines – which largely survived on government subsidies – had no interest in advertising the Madero revolt, but the postcard studios saw profit to be made by picturing the news. However, Gutiérrez may have been moved by more than profit, because his studio had been documenting the urban struggle against Díaz.

The rebellion of Pascual Orozco against President Madero in 1912 was essentially an extension of Maderismo, at least in its beginning. The photographer most committed to Orozquismo could have been he who called himself “El gran lente” (The Great Lens, Ignacio Medrano Chávez). According to historian Jesús Vargas, “He was as Orozquista as all of Chihuahua in 1912, [although] his position was not as defined as those of other artists.” Medrano Chávez was a cineaste as well as photographer, and he had filmed the 1911 entrance of Maderistas into Chihuahua city. Vargas sustains that, “He was the most important photographer in Chihuahua during the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the photos that became known during the revolution bear the signature of his studio.” It would appear that he had a close relationship with the rebels, as he made some photos in Chihuahua, 6 March 1912, of Orozquista followers waiting for their leader, and General José Inés Salazar signing Orozco's protest against Madero (see figure 3).



Figure 3

The Zapatista movement has often been characterized as that which least understood the power of modern media, but it appears that this is not the case. In fact, there were several Zapatista photographers: Amando Salmerón, Cruz Sánchez, and Sara Castrejón, who is probably the only Mexican woman photographer of the Revolution.

The best known is Amando Salmerón, a member of a family photography business in Guerrero. He documented the triumph of campesino forces linked to Madero's movement in 1911. In one of the few written documents from a caudillo directed to a photographer, Zapata asked Salermón in a 1914 letter to become the image maker for his army, charged with registering, "The principle points of combat, and the leader, officers, and soldiers of the bad government who fall prisoner." We know little about Cruz Sánchez, but a book on Sara Castrejón by photo historian Samuel Villela has recently been published in Spanish (see Figure 4).



Figure 4

There were more Constitutionalist photographers and they took more pictures for the same reason that movement won the war: they had more money. The number of photographers and images is a testimony to the leaders' vision of modern media usage, in particular the bilingual magazine, *The Mexican Review* *Revista Mexicana*. The revolutionary photographer who has been most studied is Jesús Abitia, the "Constitutionalist Photographer," but this is basically because he was a filmmaker, and because he was on the winning side. Abitia saved Madero's life when he was campaigning against Díaz, and was boyhood friend of Álvaro Obregón, of whom he made one of his images that is most openly propagandistic: that of the Heroic General seated on his horse; taken against a backlighting that frames his silhouette against the landscape, the revolutionary leader contemplates the future country he will create (see figure 5). The most consented of the revolutionary photographers, he was given a caboose to haul around his equipment, which he would buy on trips to Havana. Entrusted by Obregón with printing up the Constitutionalist money, he placed his photographs on the bills.



Figure 5

The metropolitan photojournalists must have generally accorded with the Constitutionals, above all when they had to choose between them and the Conventionists. Some, such as Gerónimo Hernández and Luis Santamaría, enlisted directly in the Carrancista army; there is no evidence that they were military photographers. Agustín Víctor Casasola asserted that he had participated “very particularly” in the Constitutional Congress of 1917, during which he “spent a long time” in Querétaro. Other photographers utilized their art for this cause. José Mora was the official imagemaker for Pablo González, while Fernando Sosa appears to have been very close to Venustiano Carranza. Among other Constitutionalist photographer are the brothers José and Pedro Mendoza, José Cruz Salazar Cázares, L.O. She, and Refugio Z. García.

The Cachú brothers have been identified as the most important of Villa’s photographers, although they are a bit problematic. They earned their living in Michoacán during 1913 – known as the “Year of the Hanged,” because of the repression carried out by dictator Victoriano Huerta – taking photos for family members of hanged revolutionaries because it was forbidden to take them down (see figure 6). Later, they linked themselves with agrarian revolutionaries such as General Alberto Carrera Torres. Reconstructing the story of the Cachús and their commitments demonstrates the complexity of historicizing the revolution’s photography from “survivors.” For example, their link to Villismo is clear in the University of Puebla archive, for there are

numerous images of Villa’s personal train car, both without and within, as documented in photos of his personal bathroom, his furniture with “PV” engraved upon it, and his photos on the wall. They probably joined the División del Norte at the end of 1914. Having studied medicine, Antonio entered into a medical brigade. Juan also had a medical background, but it appears that he gained Villa’s confidence, and was entrusted with confidential commissions. Their photography always retained something of a studio style, but it became more documentary; for example, it seems they took various scenes during the battle of León, Guanajuato, which include at least one spontaneous shot of the Red Cross “fulfilling its duty” by collecting bodies. Photo historian Miguel Ángel Berumen says, “The Cachú’s sympathy for Villismo was famous, and they became objects of political persecution as the movement lost ground in the country’s south and center. Juan was apprehended in Pátzcuaro at the end of 1916.” Antonio had died in 1916, and Juan may have decided to join the Constitutionals after being captured; certainly, the photos from the Televisa archive would seem to point in that direction. One is of a regional gathering of the Casa del Obrero Mundial, the workers’ organization closely linked to Obregón, and, in another image, though it is difficult to determine the troops pictured, the officers look like Constitutionals. Juan moved to Mexico City in 1918, where he opened a studio, and was named a “Photographer of Health Inspection” for the Council of Health by an order signed personally by President Venustiano Carranza.

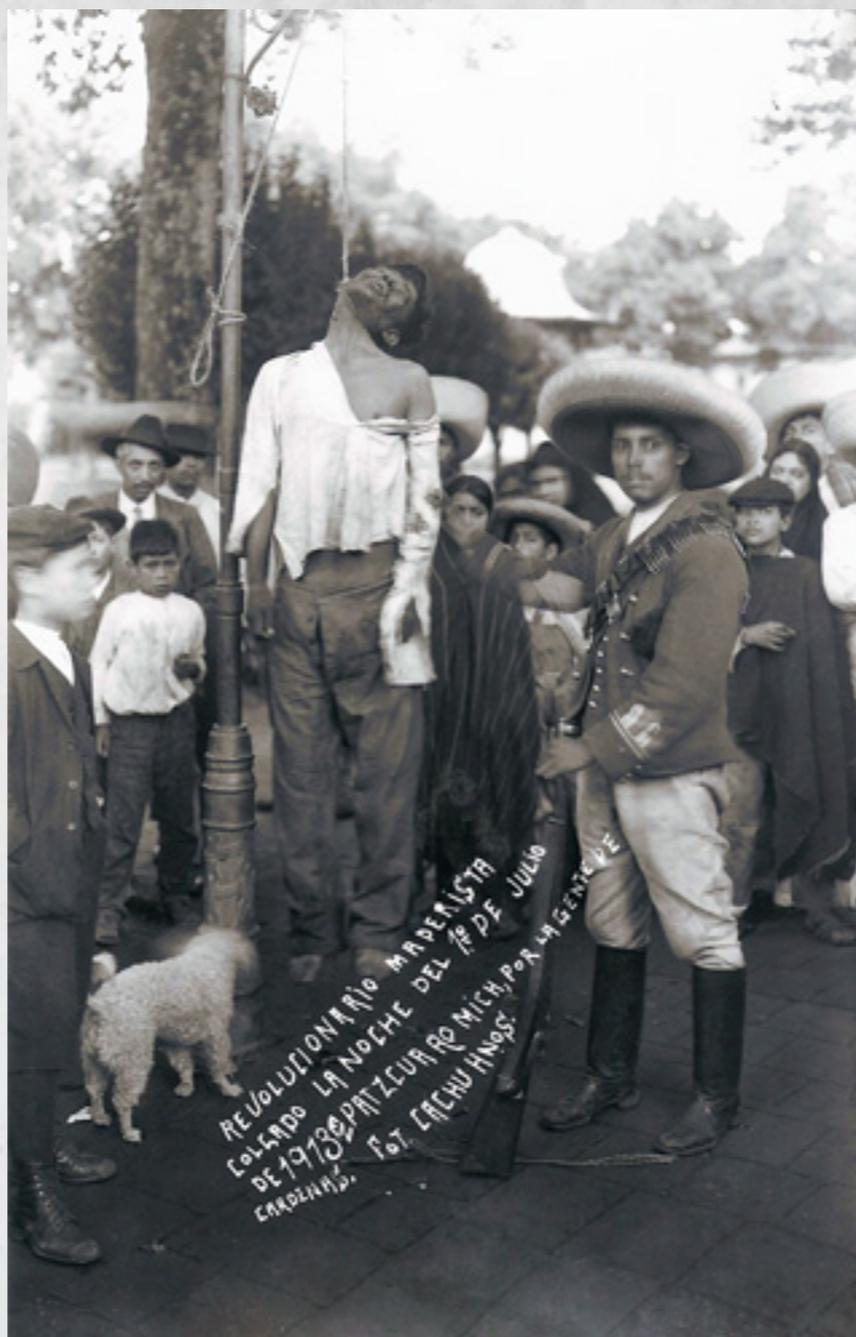


Figure 6

Finally, a photographic link to Victoriano Huerta may have been identified, Eduardo Melhado, a Mexico City photojournalist. I have not been able to identify many Melhado photos of the Decena Trágica, but one of Felicista soldiers demonstrates his political position, his extensive experience, and his modern vision (see figure 7). The image has a force that is unusual in the revolution's photography: with great technique, he focused on Felicista soldiers who are circumscribed within a brick wall, creating a play between their visages and the structure. Aesthetically successful and eminently pictorial, the photo reminds me of images that great photographers such as Paul Strand and Walker Evans would make in later decades by framing people against houses of weathered wood. As a metaphor, the relation developed between the "hard wall" and the "hard men" asserts that these Felicistas are going to be man enough to put down social uprisings such as the Zapatista, and restore the Porfirian peace. Conservatives accused a "weak" Madero of lacking the toughness that these soldiers incarnate. Alarmed by a chaos that extended, those that had something to lose looked for a new Díaz, and the Tragic Ten Days seemed to resolve that situation. Photo historian Rosa Casanova has hypothesized that there were "posterior stagings mounted for the triumphant group;" this photo could belong to that media operative.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Some of the photographs made during the armed struggle have become icons with their reiterated appearances over time and in different places: on political banners both officialist and dissident; in the pages of picture histories, newspapers, illustrated magazines, books, and broadsheets, national as well as international; on the walls of government buildings, banks, and restaurants; on T-shirts and coffee mugs; and in murals painted during the post-revolutionary effervescence, as well as more recently. I find five to be of particular interest: Emiliano Zapata standing solidly in charro raiment, a sash across his chest, with a carbine in one hand and the other on a sword (see figure 8); “Adelita-the-soldadera” peering intensely from the train (see figure 9); Francisco Villa galloping toward the camera (see figure 10); Villa lolling in the presidential chair next to Zapata (see figures 11 and 12); and Victoriano Huerta hidden in the shadows together with his General Staff (see figure 13). All these icons have been attributed to Agustín Víctor Casasola at one point or another, but the stories of their authorship are much more interesting.



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

Why these particular images have become icons – and not, for instance, any photos of Madero, Obregón or Carranza – is complex. All but the last are largely products of popular sentiment, a consensus among the rank and file (both national and international) as to the attraction of the referents themselves as historical actors, and hence as ocular spaces in their imagination that must be filled: the social revolutionaries *por excelencia*, Villa and Zapata, and the massive (and unrecognized) participation of women. These functions have largely been carried out through mass media: broadsheets, illustrated magazines, newspapers, books, and television. However, they have also been included in works of public art, such as the murals and lithographs.

The incorporation of these images as art, and their very attraction to their public, is also a tribute to their visual power. All these icons pack an aesthetic punch. Three of them capture a sense of movement characteristic of modern photojournalism: “Adelita” seems to lean into the frame, straining to locate her loved one; Villa-the-centaur gallops toward the viewer, dust kicking up at his mount’s hooves; Villa appears to luxuriate in the presidential chair. The other two are posed, and might be thought of as images with little interest beyond their referents. Nonetheless, the portrait of Zapata would be a splendid picture, even if it were of a regional chieftain whose name and exploits remained unknown. And, the Huerta photo(s) “prove” the importance of the aesthetic imperative: the image that has become historical is the “failed” photo with an expressive lighting technique only fully appreciated after the experience of *film noir*. Within the visual historiography of the Mexican Revolution, these icons are symbols: of popular struggle, of women’s participation, and of counter-revolutionary evil.

In sum, photographs of the Mexican Revolution can be analyzed as expressions of the photographers commitments and they can be studied in terms of their histories as icons. If used rigorously, employing the methodologies adequate to the ways in which they are being interrogated – and not relegated to serving as mere illustrations – photographs can open new windows onto yet unknown pasts, as this book opens up vistas of revolutionary photography not seen before.

Fotografiar la historia

by John Mraz

This book was published in Spanish by INAH in 2010 and it will be published by the University of Texas Press in 2012.