

BOOK REVIEW

Susannah Glusker *Anita Brenner, A Mind of Her Own*, University of Texas Press 1998
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WORLD-SHAKING EVENTS frequently intersected with the life of the journalist and art critic Anita Brenner (1905 - 1974). As a child she experienced the Mexican Revolution during the teens, while living on her father's ranch in Aguascalientes. As a young college student she participated in the flowering of the Mexican Renaissance and was a significant contributor to the collective activities of the early twenties as a writer and an activist. As a young woman and doctoral student she was thrown into the midst of the political activism of New York in the early 1930s. As a journalist she reported on events that led to the Spanish Civil War. As a result of these conjunctions, by the mid thirties in New York, Brenner was an articulate art critic who boldly argued that artists should be involved with society and communicating with the average person, rather pursuing an elitist practice that produced commodities for the wealthy.

Susannah Glusker's biography of her mother's life places Brenner's career in an historical context and carefully provides the reader with necessary background, but it also fills out the personal dimension of Brenner's life. Glusker had access to enormous archives including copious diaries from the early 1920s, personal letters, a huge photographic archive, and, of course, her own personal recollections of the famous people, like Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Frida Kahlo, that her mother still socialized with when Glusker was a child growing up in Mexico in the 1940s. Glusker's amusing prologue details her refusal as a teenager to allow Diego Rivera to paint her in what was to have been a joint portrait with her brother. Such an anecdote situates Glusker's own early resistance to her mother's celebrity status, when, as a young woman, she was establishing her own identity. When her mother suddenly died in a car accident in 1974, Glusker found herself discovering just how impressive her mother was through her obituaries, and thus the seeds for this book were planted. After many years of work, she here presents a detailed story that gives us Anita Brenner as woman, as intellectual, as journalist, as art critic, as friend, as mother, and as Jew. Glusker particularly emphasizes throughout the book that Brenner was an advocate of Jewish causes and cared deeply about her Jewish identity. Brenner is best known as the author of two books on Mexican art, *Idols Behind Altars* and *The Wind that Swept Mexico*. The first book, published in the late 1920s, is a passionate and polemical account of the cultural roots of Mexican art with an overview of its various stages and a particular emphasis on the popular arts that were celebrated by the artists of the Mexican Renaissance.

The Wind that Swept Mexico is a photographic and journalistic account of the Mexican Revolution. Brenner's passionate voice recounts the stirring events of the long years of fight for the rights of the peasant and the worker. It is still in print. Quite a different and little known contribution is Brenner's art criticism for New York newspapers and other publications in the mid 1930s. The Mexican artists and their utopian ideology of the early 1920s were her template for the appropriate role for artists in society as activists who spoke for and to the people. Brenner celebrated the New York artists who identified as 'common people' in the years of the Popular Front and the American Artists Congress.

She supported culture as a product of social and economic forces. In this campaign she was part of a community of activist art critics of the mid thirties that included Elizabeth McCausland, Charmion von Wiegand, and many others, a community that Glusker has not detailed.

Brenner is one of many art critics of the thirties who promoted a new social engagement for art, but who were lost to history as a result of the hegemony of modernism immediately after World War II. Although Glusker does provide historical context for her mother's career, these contexts ring with an intimate perspective. For example in discussing the exciting intellectual environment in Mexico City in the early twenties or at Columbia University in the late twenties, the book emphasizes Brenner's friends and affiliations, more than her intellectual explorations. In combining her personal life with her professional life, Glusker gives a fascinating view of the woman behind the writer.

At times, though, the personal aspect is overemphasized and even seems to give Brenner less stature than she deserves. For example at the time of Brenner's publication of *Idols Behind Altars*, Glusker talks about Brenner going shopping. When the photographer Tina Modotti's Cuban lover, Julio Mella, was assassinated and Modotti stood accused of the crime, Glusker characterizes Brenner's response as an 'amusing Tina anecdote.' Aside from this predictable difficulty of achieving a balance of the personal and the political, the private and the public, Glusker's biography succeeds in filling in a gap in our knowledge of significant twentieth century intellectuals. She also tells the neglected story of one of the many powerful women of the Mexican Renaissance. While we are already familiar with Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Tina Modotti, Lola Bravo, and Frida Kahlo (the latter two actually enter the story in the late twenties, after the Renaissance), I look forward to when we will have a book on some of the other even more neglected but powerful women in this circle as well, like Graciela Amador, Nahui Olin, Blanca Luz, Angelica Arenal, Frances Toor, and Lupe Marin.