

# Mexican artists and revolution

Coming together in common cause to express values and concerns can provide a formidable impetus for social reform.

This was brought home to me in an uncanny way this week as, juxtaposed with the widespread political actions that have been taking place throughout the U.S. right now — marches! rallies! hearings! tweets! — I was transported 100 years back while reading a cultural history on political unrest in our neighboring country to the south.

“Picturing the Proletariat” examines how artists and labor tried to impact change in Mexico in the tumultuous first half of the

20th century. The author of this meaty study, John Lear, is a professor of history and Latin American studies at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma.

Certainly “los tres grandes” — José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros — the Mexican artists who garnered international acclaim as muralists, are given their due in this carefully researched work. But Lear shines a spotlight, too, on their lesser-known peers who were also plying their art as a force for change, if not outright revolution.

Early on, however, the author contends that Mexico’s revolutionary

artists were male, and that the most talented women artists in Mexico during that period, such as Frida Kahlo, were denied mural commissions and so “painted largely in the shadow of male artists.” He goes on to discuss how gender roles were depicted in the prevalent art of that time.

Although Lear makes a case, not all readers will accept it. This isn’t the first time women’s contributions have been dismissed by history. Perhaps another scholar will find this topic and time period need to be reexamined through a feminist lens.

Lear’s introduction is a bumpy read, but the first

chapter is fascinating. It focuses on the works of Saturnino Herrán and José Guadalupe Posada — both of whom, prior to the revolution in 1910, were pioneering distinctive approaches to representing the previously invisible Mexican worker.

Classically trained, Herrán painted scenes that conveyed the physical exertion of labor while adhering to European conventions of form and medium.

Posada’s audience was less rarefied — in his work for penny presses, he created rambunctious, cartoon-like engravings depicting downtrodden workers.

With the advent of revolution and an ensuing decade of military conflict, Mexican artists suffered everything from dislocation, to the shutdown of traditional sources of employment, to shortages of paint.

But Lear demonstrates that the era also led artists to discover new subjects and to become increasingly politicized. New aesthetics were emerging and new techniques were being employed. Printmaking emerged as a powerful new form of expression, as did photographs, posters and murals. Artist collectives became influential.

This book contains more than 100 illustrations. The

“Picturing the Proletariat”  
By John Lear  
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quality of reproductions is rarely top-grade, but the content of the images is terrific.

While “Picturing the Proletariat” has limitations, it is still intriguing to use art as the portal to learning more about the historic struggles that have led to Mexico’s current identity and outlook.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at [bkmonger@nwlinc.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwlinc.com).

## Wild Side

### Anna’s hummingbird

By LYNETTE  
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FOR COAST WEEKEND

The only bird of its kind to live year-round on the Pacific coast of North America, Anna’s hummingbird makes its home from British Columbia all the way south to Baja California — a permanent, all-weather resident on every section of shoreline, including our own.

Considered of medium size (by hummingbird standards), this hardy species averages 3 to 4 inches long and can weigh a whopping four grams, essentially having the

same relative mass as a ping pong ball. But be assured: Whatever *Calypte anna* lacks in size, it more than makes up for in style.

Named to honor Anna Massena, a 19th century Italian duchess whose husband was an avid bird collector, this tiny flier is covered head to tail with green and gray iridescent feathers that shimmer and shine with every turn of the light. In males, who are almost 20 percent smaller than females, the crown and throat feathers become a deep rose color at maturity, helping catch the eye of potential mates.

With the exception of



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A flying Anna’s hummingbird ready to feed

insects, hummingbirds have the highest metabolism of any animal on Earth, consuming up to three times their weight in food per day just to keep themselves in flight.

From within their long, thin beaks, a spring-loaded tongue darts out into a flower, trapping sugary nectar inside fringed tongue-tubes that work like a pump to draw liquid into the bird’s

mouth. Within 30 minutes, the sugar is converted into usable energy — just in time to supply the heart, which contracts up to 1,200 times per minute, and the wings, which beat at a rate of 80 times per second.

Masters of flight, hummers can hover in midair and fly in all directions, including backwards and upside down, maneuvering at speeds up to 35 mph.

Male Anna’s hummingbirds are also famous for a special mating dive, in which they skyrocket an astounding 130 feet above the ground, then dramatically spiral down at speeds exceeding 75 mph, enduring G-forces that would render trained human fighter pilots unconscious. That flamboyancy is short-lived, however, as once mating has occurred, males lose all interest in domestic life, leaving matters of parenting entirely to the female.

Using plant fibers held together with spider’s silk and camouflaged with bits of lichen, mother hummingbirds construct nests roughly the size of a half-dollar, and sit for two weeks out of the year on two eggs that are slightly smaller than jellybeans. Once they hatch, she feeds them at least every four hours by regurgitating into their beaks a specialized formula of partially digested insects and spiders mixed

with sweet nectar. Guzzling down as much of this delicious concoction as they can manage, for the first two weeks of their lives the little chicks will double in size each day, and their flexible nest will expand to accommodate them.

A native species of the New World, hummingbirds are found only in the Western Hemisphere and can live up to 12 years in the wild. Since the 1950s, Anna’s hummingbirds have greatly extended their range, adapting readily to suburban gardens replete with planted flowers and hanging feeders.

To attract more of them to your own yard, especially during winter when blossoms are scarce, the Audubon Society recommends a make-at-home nectar of one part sugar to three parts water, without the addition of red dye, which is not only unnecessary but may even be harmful. 