

# The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico

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## Review

**Mendoza, Edrea M.**

**Spring 2018**

**Smith, Stephanie J.** *The Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9781469635662

Stephanie J. Smith is an Associate professor of History at The Ohio State University. Her concentration is on Latin America and Mexico and she teaches courses on the History of Mexico, Latin American Revolution, and U.S. – Mexico Border history. In 2009, she released her first book *Gender and the Mexican Revolution: Yucatán Women and the Realities of Patriarchy*. In it she uses the state of Yucatán to explore the various ways women participated in the Mexican Revolution. On top her publications in the *Radical History Review* and the *Journal of Women's History*, Dr. Smith has also contributed numerous chapters in edited volumes from both the United States and Mexico.

In the first sentence of her acknowledgements, Stephanie J. Smith admits that *Power and Politics of Art in Postrevolutionary Mexico* was the book she always wanted to write. Her compelling way of storytelling highlights her devotion and passion for this book, and she brings to life the interweaving of art and politics from the standpoint of members of Mexico's Communist Party (PCM). Despite their small membership numbers, Smith argues that the artists and intellectuals that made up the organization were responsible in helping to influence Mexico's political culture and cultural production from its founding in 1919 through the 1940s. She analyzes the actions and reactions of the PCM to understand the political events that influenced the artistic community within Mexico during that time. According to Smith, these artists believed it was the PCM that would serve as the guiding light away from Mexico's corrupt past and into new opportunities.

In five chapters, Smith analyzes the relationship between members of the PCM, both verified and sympathizers, as well as those between the PCM and the Mexican State. She also investigates the role women artists played during this time, as members of the PCM and by moving away from stereotypically gendered roles to become political radicals and work toward political change. On a global scale, Smith details not only how Mexico's art and politics had international influences but, she also confirms Mexico's place as part of the international fight against fascism moving towards the 1930s and 1940s.

The PCM's journey is curious in many ways and, Smith does an exceptional job of highlighting some of the ways the party and its members struggled. She discusses how gender impacted membership and leadership in the case of Tina Modotti, and how every artists' motivation in joining was unique to their experience in the Revolution, leading to further

differences in opinion. The ever-changing political climate in Mexico also impacted the party, the Mexican government was often reliant on muralists and printmakers to encourage citizen's participation in new policies. We also see how the government itself served as a key player in the party's lifetime, serving sometimes as support for art that would unite Mexico but, also as enemy to an increasingly right-wing power that still relied on the influence of artists on Mexican society.

By choosing to write her monograph chronologically, Smith offers an easy trail for the reader to follow. However, there is a bit of a disconnect in her writing on gender. Chapters two focuses on the gendering of Mexico's cultural revolution beginning with the PCM's founding in 1919, and chapter four looks at how women artists like Frida Kahlo transitioned from working as revolutionary artists to contributors to Mexico's new society beginning in the 1930s. The fracturing of gendered ideas and perspectives in two non-sequential paragraphs is quite minor, especially since there is very little overlap in the artists mentioned. However, the ideas and politics of gender discussed in chapter two can easily be lost by chapter four without careful reading, especially considering all the fascinating discord she describes in chapter three. Despite this, Smith's book is incredibly well researched. Her evidence comes from archives and libraries in not only the United States and Mexico, but also in France, Holland, and Italy. This extensive collection of sources helps prove Mexico and the PCM's roles in international affairs and shows Smith's mastery of not only language but her ability to wade through political writings and government documents to uncover stories on Mexico others would so easily overlook in favor of larger names in Communism and Marxism during the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, a book about art would not be complete without examples and, while Smith does not use the work of the artists she focuses on excessively, the painting, prints, and photographs she did choose help serve as tangible evidence supporting her arguments and help the reader better understand the journey these Mexican artists went through, and the artists themselves.

*Edrea Maria Mendoza received her BA from the University of Denver in 2015, where during that time and after her graduation, she worked in public history before continuing to receive her MA from Louisiana State University in 2018. Her area of focus is on women's participation in the Mexican Revolution, and her thesis is an analysis of their various illicit roles during the violent phase of the war. She will begin her doctoral studies in the fall of 2018.*