CHAPTER 21

Celestina and Agustín Arrieta’s China Poblana: Mexico’s Female Icon Revisited

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And we shall not say, then, that Celestina has resuscitated, instead that she never died, and that from century to century, from age to age, from generation to generation, we see her prolonging her devilled life, renewing her tricks and giving them better dress, at the rhythm of the renewal of customs and uses.

Serafín Estébanez Calderón

Celestina, Spain’s famous bawd, witch, and go-between, is rarely considered alongside the china, “the legitimate and beautiful daughter of Mexico.” In the nineteenth century, Celestina became a costumbrista type in her country of origin but was not included in the repertoire of Mexico’s costumbrista national figures. In what follows, I explore how the china, as depicted by the renowned Mexican painter José Agustín Arrieta (1803–74), interplays with the Celestina type. The presence of celestinas—the word used for any go-between or procurer in Spanish beginning in the eighteenth century—in Arrieta’s paintings questions the autonomy that this national icon of femininity and desire was meant to represent. The china appeared as an icon during a turbulent era of political definition for Mexico, when writers and painters actively participated in the construction of national types against a backdrop of foreign invasions and internal strife between liberals and conservatives. As we will see, Arrieta’s

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1 “Y no diremos, pues, que Celestina ha resucitado, sino que Celestina nunca murió, y que de siglo en siglo, de edad en edad, de generación en generación, la vemos prolongar su endiablada vida, renovando sus trazas y dándoles otros y mejores aliños, al son y compás que las costumbres y usos se renuevan,” Serafín Estébanez Calderón (El Solitario), “La Celestina,” in Los españoles pintados por sí mismos (Madrid: Ignacio Boix, 1844), p. 169. Unless otherwise noted, the English translations of Spanish texts are mine.

inclusion of the old go-between in his paintings problematizes the independent stance that the *china* was originally meant to represent.

A number of male and female *costumbrista* figures that would serve to define *mexicanidad*, or the essence of what Mexico and being Mexican implies, began to emerge from the turmoil of the birth of the Mexican nation. This period of definition began in 1810 with insurgent violence that eventually led to the separation of New Spain from the Spanish Monarchy in 1821. Initially an independent empire under the rule of Agustín de Iturbide, Mexico became a republic in 1824. The following year, the Italian freemason Claudio Linati arrived in Mexico and established the first lithography press in the new republic. His 1828 *Costumes civils, militaires et religieux du Mexique* (Civil, Military and Religious Costumes of Mexico), published in Brussels, is the first collection of Mexican national types. Focusing mostly on Indigenous women of Chiapas, the Yucatán peninsula, and Michoacán, neither *celestinas* nor *chinatas* are included in Linati’s collection. Other foreign artists visited Mexico in these early years of the republic. The British painter Daniel Thomas Egerton focused on landscapes, but the German draughtsman Carl Nebel was, like Linati, interested in national types. Nebel’s *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la partie la plus intéressante du Mexique* (Picturesque and Archeological Journey to the Most Interesting Part of Mexico), published in Paris in 1836 with a preface by Alexander von Humboldt, contains an engraving entitled *Poblanas*, considered to be the first depiction of *chinatas* within the *costumbrista* tradition. At the entrance of a rural dwelling, a *ranchero* (rancher) removes his spurs and leather chaps while three women dressed as *chinatas*, with their typical skirt, blouse, scarf, and *rebozo* (shawl), are smoking, a common practice for women in Mexico at the time, but daring from a European perspective (see Fig. 21.1).

While liberals and conservatives fought over the basic principles that would govern Mexico, foreign interventions threatened the nation’s autonomy: in 1838, French troops occupied the port of Veracruz for three months during the so-called Pastry War. The following year, Spain for the first time sent an ambassador to Mexico. The letters of his Scottish wife, Frances Erskine Calderón de la Barca, were published in 1843 as a travelogue entitled *Life in Mexico During a Residence of Two Years in That Country*. The translation into Spanish of these letters to her family had a wide readership in a Mexico anxious to learn how the new country was being depicted abroad. In *Life in Mexico* we find the first descriptions of *chinatas*. Here the *china’s* bold stance makes her a polemical figure. When the letter writer is given the dress of a *china* to wear at a costume

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