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# pulse

NORTH SHORE GUIDE TO ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Revolution and beyond

Presentation House Gallery displays the monumental legacy of Mexican photographer Agustín Victor Casasola – see page 24

visual arts



photo Agustin Victor Casasola



photo Agustin Victor Casasola

MARIA Zavala, nicknamed La Destroyer, a welder who consoled dying soldiers, circa 1915.

REBEL leader Emiliano Zapata, circa 1916.

# Casasola captured Mexico in transition

## Presentation House displays definitive work from archives

■ Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond — photographs by Agustín Victor Casasola 1900-1940. Exhibit runs until May 28 with an opening reception Saturday, April 22, from 4 to 6 p.m.

John Goodman

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JOURNALIST Pete Hamill first came across the work of Mexican photographer Agustín Victor Casasola in a photo shop half a century ago.

"His family owned the store but Casasola was long dead," recalls the veteran New York newspaperman. "You could go in and buy a print or postcards."

Hamill now splits his time between the Big Apple and Cuernavaca, but in 1956 he was just learning his way around Mexico City.

"I first went down there on the GI Bill. It was a much different city and country then than it is now. I was trying to understand, as a 21-year-old dope, what it was all about. There was not that much literature in English and my Spanish was preposterously bad but photography doesn't depend on the caption. Photography shows you something and you can write your own caption. It was one of the first things that I was drawn to."

Casasola was eminently qualified to fill in the blanks for Hamill and anyone else who wanted to learn about Mexico. From the turn of the century until the beginning of the Second World War he was a one-stop image bank for all things Mexican. Not only was he a first-rate photographer but he also had the foresight to set up a business to control the



photo Agustín Victor Casasola

REVOLUTIONARY leader Francisco I. Madero arriving at the National Palace escorted by military academy cadets, Mexico City, February 1913.

production and distribution of images.

The archive, purchased from his family and set up as the Casasola Photographic Foundation by the Mexican government in 1976, contains more than half a million negatives from a variety of photographers working between 1895 and 1972. Presentation House Gallery is displaying 92 images from the collection in a major new exhibit that runs at the North Vancouver art space through the end of May.

All of the photographs come from a book called Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond which was put together by photographer Pablo Ortiz Monasterio while scholars were attempting to identify the "definitive Casasola." Published by Aperture and featuring an essay by Hamill the book breaks down the photographs into eight categories

— The Porfirian Peace; The Revolutionary War; Trades; Modernity; The Eagle and the Serpent; The Night; Halls of Justice and Famous People. The photographer's name is given if known, otherwise images are credited to "Casasola." He attached his name to almost everything in the collection making it difficult for historians to attribute who was responsible for what in this goldmine of Mexican cultural history.

It is accepted that his brother Miguel "Miquis" Casasola shot most of the police and courthouse photos. Those sections reveal a photographer with a Weegee-like talent for documenting the underworld with an unblinking eye. A photograph of Miguel shows him working in the darkroom (ca. 1925) with a gun in a holster on his hip.

See Journalist page 25

## QUOTES

### The stuff left out of the movies

Hamill on the significance of Casasola's legacy: "Seeing the actual photographs I was able to imagine what that revolution was like. In some ways you look at Mathew Brady and you get a better sense of the Civil War then you sometimes get from Stephen Crane who also saw those photographs when he was writing the Red Badge of Courage. He couldn't have written that book without reference to those photographs to get a sense of what happened during the boring parts — What does an army do when it's waiting in the downtime? The stuff that's always left out of movies."

"The aftermath was as much history as the revolution itself. And therefore worth recording. And without the pretension of saying 'I'm an artist of the lens,' there was none of that. He might have said it across the dinner table but certainly not in public. He understood that this had to be recorded, it was something of value. That it was an ongoing thing. They're still dealing with some of the issues today that provoked the revolution — poverty and the marginalization of indians and the difference between the city and the countryside. All those things are still worth looking at and photographers today are continuing that work by going out and saying 'This is what it's like to live in a village that has no water. Take a look. Here it is.'"

# Journalist was there when the shooting started

From page 24

Starting out as a newspaper photographer Agustín Victor Casasola seemingly had access to everything. When the shooting started on Nov. 20, 1910, he was there to capture the revolutionary drama unfolding as both a newsman and a distributor of images. Photographs of Villa in the north and Zapata in the south all filtered through the collective lens of Casasola's burgeoning publicity machine.

"It was the beginning of what was a kind of press association," says Hamill. "There are about 500,000 photographs in what they call the Casasola Archive in Pachuca and it's hard to tell, particularly after the revolution, who shot what but obviously he was the guy with the baton in front of the orchestra. It's helpful as a kind of shorthand to figure out where they came from. They didn't come from AP.

"Ezra Pound once said, 'Literature is news that stays news,' and I think in that sense these photographs are like that. They were news of the moment. Diego Rivera who skipped the revolution and stayed in Paris, saw these photographs in Paris so obviously they were selling these around the world to press who could afford to buy them. Good photography does both things — it serves the paper on your table at breakfast and then it serves history."

While Casasola's photographs of the revolution are his most well-known images they are only a small portion of the collection. As a journalist he witnessed everything that was covered by a daily newspaper. And as far as Mexican cultural history goes he was in the right place at the right time to document the shift to modernity.

"Mexico was becoming a nation for the first time instead of a collage of regions," says Hamill. "That was the ambition of the mural movement to create a myth of one country. Also at the same time radio was developing so suddenly in the south of Mexico they were hearing mariachi music from the north. They had never heard it before — no mariachi bands ever said let's go play Juahaca."

There was a growing sense of a national Mexican identity and to Casasola's credit he recognized that and went or sent people to places they ordinarily wouldn't have bothered with. "At the same time he was like the official photographer for Mexico City," says Hamill. "His photographs give us urban Mexico as it began to develop. The Mexico City that he was looking at in the '20s and '30s was maybe a million and a half people. When I got there in '56 it was about three and a half million. It's now probably 20 million people including the suburbs.

"We see the first traffic jams, chorus girls, stores full of fashionable clothing on sale for upper-class women. I was familiar with the revolutionary pictures, which I think are masterly, but it was what followed that to me is the most fascinating in the whole group of pictures. The book is called *Revolution and Beyond* and the beyond is extremely valuable — particularly to people who are familiar with the revolutionary pictures but knew nothing about what followed."

Presentation House Gallery will host an opening reception for the exhibit tomorrow afternoon from 4 to 6 p.m. Agustín Victor Casasola — Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond, 1900-1940 continues through May 28. The gallery is open Wednesday to Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. and Thursday from noon to 9 p.m. For more details go to [www.presentationhousegall.com](http://www.presentationhousegall.com).



photo Agustín Victor Casasola

COLONE León Román during target shooting practice, Mexico City, circa 1924.

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ SATURDAY, MAY 6, 2006

# Weekend Review

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## Through a lens brightly

From revolutionaries to Sophia Loren, photography documents the icons and transforming forces of our time. Our special section celebrates the form. **R13**

Federal troops at Buenavista train station, Mexico City, circa 1914. Agustin Victor Casasola's innovative photographs capture the birth throes of modern Mexico, page R18.

## HISTORY AGUSTIN VICTOR CASASOLA

Serendipitous and innovative photographs capture the birth throes of modern Mexico

## THE MAN WHO SHOT REVOLUTION

ALEXANDER VARTY, VANCOUVER

Within the modest confines of North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery, an extraordinary thing is on view: the birth of a nation in black and white. The nation is Mexico, the medium is photography, and the artist, most of the time, is Agustín Victor Casasola, an entrepreneurial shutterbug who had amassed a collection of more than a half-million photographic negatives before his death, at 63, in 1938.

A lifelong newspaperman who worked as a typographer and then as a reporter before establishing his own photo agency, Casasola had the good fortune of finding himself in the middle of historic events, both political and technological.

The invention of half-tone reproduction towards the end of the 19th century created a huge demand for photographic images; the development of the flash allowed those images to be more striking and detailed than ever before. And with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, in 1910, Casasola found his subject: using portraiture, urban imagery, and action shots, he documented the transition from the autocratic rule of Porfirio Díaz to the fragile beginnings of Mexico's still-flawed democracy.

"Well, Casasola, his archive is definitely the richest archive about the revolution in the centre of the country," says Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, the editor of the exhibition's catalogue, *Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond* (Aperture, \$70).

On the line from his home in Mexico City, the photographer and historian points out that images from the revolutionary era make up only a small part of the Casasola holdings, but they are what the photographer is known for in Mexico today.

"Casasola is linked to the nation, to the formation of the identity of our nation," he says. "Casasola is among the big heroes; he's part of the big names that constructed our nation."

The revolutionary pictures are undeniably stamped by the blood and urgency of their time. From an elegiac portrait of the freighter Ipi-



AGUSTIN VICTOR CASASOLA / PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

Revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero arrives at the National Palace in Mexico City in February 1913.

ranga, which took Díaz into exile in 1911, to an exultant scene of the reformer Francisco I. Madero, smiling on horseback and surrounded by his sombrero-toting retinue, the Presentation House show draws us deep into Mexican history—and also gives us a few clues to the artistic victories Casasola and his camp would go on to win.

One of the most striking of the revolutionary photos is also one of the most serene. It depicts a woman—nicknamed "La Destroyer" for her willingness to quickly dispatch her fatally wounded comrades—kneeling on a railway line, surrounded by campesinos and uniformed insurgents.

Both her posture and her otherworldly gaze suggest a renaissance Pietà, but this murderous Madonna holds only a rude bouquet, and is wearing men's trousers.

Casasola's blurring of gender lines, his conflation of high art and the snapshot, and his willingness to sanctify the unholy all find expression in the portraits that make up the bulk of his post-revolutionary archive.

Following the normalization of the political climate, Mexico City's newspapers appear to have shifted their focus to crime and entertainment; being a smart entrepreneur, Casasola followed.

At Presentation House, we see musicians, singers, circus perform-



PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

Casasola's portrait of a rebel: Emiliano Zapata, circa 1916.

ers, and acrobats, with one devil-horned trick cyclist looking like he's auditioning for a Tom Waits video. Policemen pose with their captured prey; one murderer still holds his bloody knife. Jailed homosexuals, all swishy bravado and Marcelled hair, camp it up for the camera. A supposed witch, looking downcast, cradles a skull in her lap.

Bizarre and beautiful, these images prefigure—and stand comparison to—the best of Weegee and Diane Arbus.

They also hold a small mystery: did Casasola take them? Agustín Victor was a skilled lensman, but he was known to buy other photographers' work and pass it off as his own. And Monasterio, for one, thinks the best of Casasola's later photographs were actually taken by his brother, Miguel.

"Agustín Victor was the older brother and the chief of the family and the one who had all the relationships and formed the agency," he explains.

"Miguel, he was more of a radical, and you can see that in his portrait in the show: He's processing film, but he has a gun in his belt. He went to the revolution to actually fight. And I have the impression— one cannot be sure—that the really great photographs, they must have come from him. He was more devoted to photography, while Agustín had too many other things to work with."

No matter who was behind the camera, however, this exhibition offers images powerful enough to suggest that both Casasola brothers deserve to rank with the masters of their art.

*Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond* runs until May 28 at Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chesterfield Ave., North Vancouver (604-986-1351).

Special to The Globe and Mail

# VIVA CASASOLA

CHRONICLES OF MEXICO | F3

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## A compelling archive of a nation's past

Mexico's human drama is brought to life in a series of historical photographs

**AUGUSTÍN VÍCTOR CASASOLA**

Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond, 1900-1940  
 Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chester Street  
 (North Vancouver), until May 28

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Augustín Víctor Casasola was a Mexico City photographer who worked in the first half of the 20th century, eventually assembling an archive of 500,000 negatives that document his country's progress from the ironfisted rule of Don Porfirio, through the revolutions of the teens, and on to the heady days of modernism and painter Diego Rivera.

This show at Presentation House Gallery of photographs from the Casasola archive comprises some 92 prints. Here we see revolutions and executions, soldiers and their female companions, soldaderas, politicians and prisoners, poets and artists, circus performers and taciturn peasants, women on streetcars and men on horseback, a barefooted man in court and a tough-eyed prostitute smoking a cigarette.

What is compelling about Casasola and his pictures, then, is

### VIEWFINDER

both the range of human drama that he captured and the details of the photographs themselves. As narrated by New York journalist Pete Hamill in the catalogue essay, Casasola began working first as a typographer, then as a journalist, in the closing years of the 19th century; at around 1900 he began taking pictures. This was shortly after the halftone process — which transformed a photograph into a series of dots — made the reproduction of photographs feasible for newspapers.

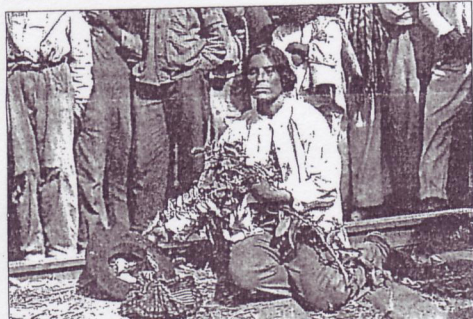
In the first decade of the 20th century, Don Porfirio was still in power, and there was little to no freedom of the press. Casasola's pictures from this period are fairly anodyne, but a few show the inroads of modern life, such as a large scale waterworks being constructed in 1910, or, from the same year, a class of young girls doing arithmetic on an abacus almost as tall as they are.

Revolution burst onto Mexico in early 1911, however, in the form of Francisco Madero crossing the Texas border from the north, soon to be joined by the more radical Emiliano Zapata south of Mexico City and Pancho Villa, also to the north. The pictures from this period depict both the government — as well as the revolutionaries and their soldaderas. Madero's troops riding into a town they have captured, raising their sombreros as they gallop along the stony train tracks, is an image we have all seen: even the horses, their heads straining back as they try to avoid the photographer, seem excited. In another picture, men stand on a streetcar, cheering the departure of Porfirio, who went into exile in France within seven months of the coup.

There are bodies here too: fed-



A woman in a Mexico City prison, circa 1935, rolls her eyes.



La Destroyer, circa 1915, helped wounded soldiers to die faster.



Emiliano Zapata, circa 1916, is prominent among the revolutionaries photographed.



Homosexuals camp it up in a Mexico City police station circa 1935.



Francisco Madero's revolutionary troops ride into a town they have captured.

eral troops lying at a train station, men collapsing in a dusty cloud of gunpowder at an execution. And along with the men, the women, including a proud soldadera posing with her pistol and ribbons, and another photograph of La Destroyer, who, we are told, "was famous for helping those who had fallen in battle to die a more rapid and less painful death."

But after the revolution and shooting, there was the city life

for Casasola to take pictures of. We see arrested homosexuals camping it up for the camera, as defiant as the drag queens at Stonewall decades later. A diva poses with her lapdog, while her chauffeur sits next to a more utilitarian guard dog. We see a bizarre typing examination in which the women, at what appear to be chrome typewriters, are blindfolded.

Masked or blind or blindfolded

subjects appear a few times in the selection of Casasola's pictures here, as if the irony of us looking at those who cannot look was tempting to photographer or curator. Thus there is the blind orchestra, or the blindfolded man trying out a police chair of unimaginable purpose. Or the masked bathing beauties advertising the newspaper *El Sabado*. And the most truly weird photograph has to be that of two police

officers searching a murder victim's house. One wears a kerchief over his face robber-style; the other has a gas mask on, and stands there holding his straw boater in one hand while he reads a letter. It looks like an outtake from a David Cronenberg movie.

There are quite a few policemen and crooks and prisoners in the pictures here, and they act, as it were, as the latter day version of the peasants from the countryside

that Casasola also photographed. Pairs of young men or muchacho pose with their pistols or knives. A young couple looks shocked at their fate. And in a picture of what-me-worry? insouciance, young woman behind bars roll her eyes toward her pencil-perfect eyebrow, her Betty Boop lip closed, keeping her secrets, forever.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver author and educator.

# THE GEORGIA Straight

VANCOUVER'S NEWS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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## Mexico's history frozen in time

### VISUAL ARTS

**AGUSTIN VICTOR CASASOLA: MEXICO**

At Presentation House Gallery until May 28

◆ Four turbulent decades of Mexican history are compressed into the current exhibition at Presentation House Gallery. With an immediacy that is startling even now, the 89 photographs in *Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond* stride from city streets and produce markets to railway yards and factories, from politicians and revolutionaries to typists and circus performers, and from power and privilege to poverty and deprivation.

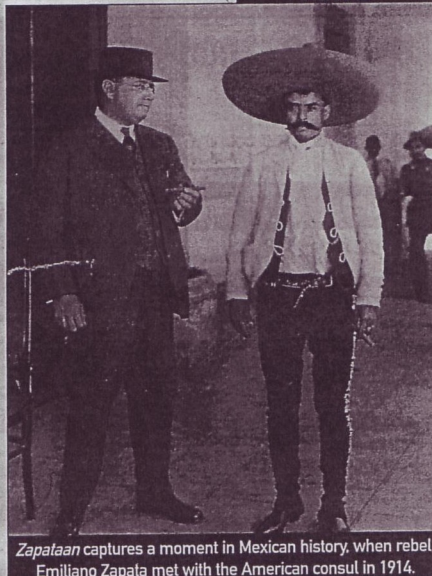
Agustín Víctor Casasola's subjects embrace the living, the dead, and the about-to-be dead. One of the most powerful shots here is of a young man, Fortino Sámano, having a last smoke before his execution by firing squad in 1917. Cigar clenched in teeth, hands in pockets, he stands in front of the rough brick wall that will soon be splattered with his blood. The photograph vibrates with terror and bravado.

Born in Mexico City in 1874, Agustín Víctor Casasola worked as a typographer and a reporter before picking up a camera about 1900. Taking immediate advantage of the then-brand-new halftone technology, which allowed photographs to be mass-reproduced in newspapers, Casasola was in the vanguard of his craft. He was also historically placed to witness the overthrow of dictator Gen. Porfirio Díaz in May 1911 (there's a shot here of the steamship *Ipiranga*, smoking out of the port of Veracruz, carrying Díaz to exile in France) and the triumph of the revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero (there's also an image of Madero's joyful troops storming into a dusty Mexican town on horseback).

Madero was only the first of many doomed revolutionaries portrayed by Casasola. For the next decade, a succession of assassinations, insurgencies, coups d'état, and bloody civil wars in Mexico took a million lives and shredded most of that country's social and economic fabric. Casasola took portraits of Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata. He recorded federal armies on the run and revolutionary armies on the march, accompanied in both instances by *soldaderas*, the women who laboured alongside their troops. He took shots of dead soldiers sprawled in the dirt and of "La Destroyer", a kind of solidarity sister of mercy, dressed in men's clothes, who eased the dying into the next life.

In addition to documenting the impacts of dictatorship, revolution, and modernization upon a developing nation and its peoples, the Casasola show telegraphs a story of the early years of photojournalism and connects a contemporary northern audience with one of

### ARTS



Zapalaan captures a moment in Mexican history, when rebel Emiliano Zapala met with the American consul in 1914.

Mexico's most important historic photographers.

At the same time, it introduces us to the idea that other photographers, including Agustín Casasola's younger brother Miguel, contributed to his huge reputation and vast productivity. Nearly half a million images are contained in the Casasola Archive, derived from the photographic agency Agustín Casasola founded in 1912. Scholars report that he erased photographers' names from thousands of negatives and inserted his own. Megalomania? A desire to consolidate his agency's identity? The reason is unclear.

Still, most of the photos here are strongly identifiable by style and content as Agustín's, PHG's Dennis Kulpas pointed out in a recent exhibition tour. Often, these are group shots of unidentified people in their work environments: soot-covered railway workers gathered around a locomotive, or grubby newspaper vendors bundling their wares in a dark enclosure. As well, Agustín produced portraits of artists and entertainers, high and low. An unsentimental frankness informs all these photos, a kind of four-square address of their subjects' humanity.

An introductory photo in the show is labelled "Miguel Víctor Casasola in his darkroom with the tools of his trade, Mexico City, ca. 1925." It's amusing to note that one of those tools is a pistol in a holster at his hip. Whether that pistol was necessitated by his crime beat, the violent time and place in which he lived, or anger at his more famous brother, well, who now knows?

> ROBIN LAURENCE

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## bright lights by Victor Aberdeen

## Agustin Victor Casasola reception



**Doug Curran and Jim Breukelman**, both Vancouver photographers, check out some of Casasola's work.

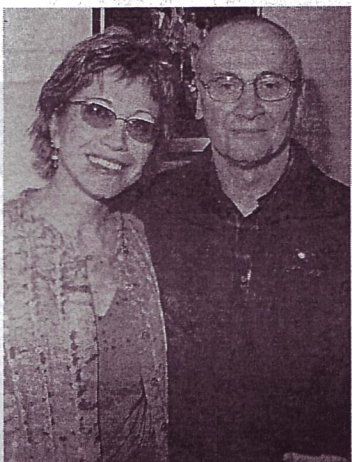


**Robyn Humphreys and Zoe Black** enjoy the photographs.

The Presentation House Gallery was packed on April 22 for a gallery tour and reception to see the amazing work of Agustin Victor Casasola. The Mexican consul general attended with several members from the Mexican Consulate who enjoyed showing their pride in the collection of historic photographs. Guests were entertained with authentic Mexican music and food adding to the Latin atmosphere. The exhibition continues until May 28.



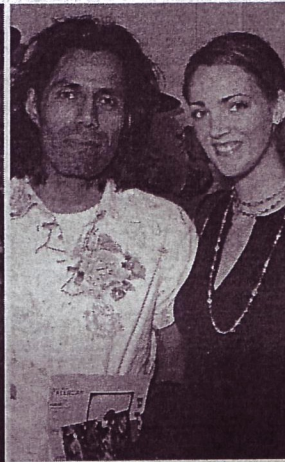
**Salvadore Huerta, and Alexandra and Stanley Sirutis** enjoy the day at the gallery.



**Julie Prescott** from the Rick Hansen Foundation poses for a pic with photographer **Joaquin Pedrero**.



Deputy Mexican trade commissioner **Fernando de la Mora-Navarrete** enjoys the exhibition with his wife **Carmen**.



Vancouver Latin Film Festival director **Victor Martinez** attends with wife **Tara**.



**Alice Rich and Paul Vassallo** of the Presentation House Gallery visit with **Federico Goroztieta** from the Mexican consulate.

Please direct requests for event coverage to Bright Lights c/o North Shore News.  
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