

José Agustín Arrieta, 19th-century Mexican painter

A show of works by Agustín Arrieta was recently organized by the National Museum of Art, providing the public with a look at a facet of 19th-century art which had remained largely unknown until recently.

José Agustín Arrieta was born in 1803 near Puebla, in the small town of Santa Ana Chiautempan, famous for its

lovely *sarapes*, whose colors inevitably influenced the artist. It is said that Arrieta inherited the strong personality of his father, Tomás, a dentist who may have been an amateur painter.

Arrieta began painting at the Drawing Salon in the city of Puebla. At that time, rather than encouraging experimentation with new themes and techniques, the school—following

the pattern laid down by Mexico City's San Carlos Academy—had its students make copies of famous works by such classic masters as Rubens and Velázquez.

Since many of his paintings were undated and unsigned, it remains unknown whether it was then that Arrieta began dealing with the folk themes for which he is known today. Still, the small number of his works on religious themes would seem to indicate that his stay at the Salon was brief. Years later he was to work there as a teacher.

In the 19th century Puebla had lost its prominence as the second most important city in New Spain (as Mexico was called in Colonial times). The decline of its once bustling commerce was reflected in the city's streets, where ragged beggars and poor people proliferated.

It was these people, together with scenes of the city's street life, that Arrieta began to portray in his work. The painter found himself face to face with a world full of life and happenings: the insurgent soldiers who took liberties with the "*chinas*";¹ the ladies doing their shopping at the market, side by side with beggars asking for alms and dogs fighting; the beautiful women who sold water in a completely rural setting.

*Pulquerías*² and drunkards, madmen and beggars all reflected a reality which Puebla's conservative society circles did not want to accept, let alone display on their walls. Since during his own day his work was not highly sought-after, Arrieta's was not a life of luxury.

La china

Many legends surround Puebla's *la china* style. Some relate it to the arrival of an Asian princess in Puebla, who became a nun and was given the

¹ See below for a description of Puebla's *chinas*—literally, Chinese women; women who followed the *china poblana* style. (Editor's note.)

² Bars that sell *pulque*, a drink made from fermented cactus juice. (Editor's note.)



Water-Seller's Stand, 1860.



The "come-on."

name Catarina de San Juan. But according to Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *la china* was a type of woman that appeared first in Mexico City and later came to be characteristic of Puebla. The term *china libre* (free Chinese woman) —used to describe a well-dressed woman who goes out freely, telling nobody where she is headed— relates to this prototype.

Arrieta was drawn to portraying these women's beauty and sensuality in the context of their daily lives. Famous for their special way of dressing, the *chinas* belonged to different social classes; they could be anything from maids of wealthy families to mistresses of high-placed men of the day.

When Manuel Payno visited Arrieta's studio he took note of these

personages, much-painted by the Puebla master. He wrote: "The education '*la china*' received is no more polished than that of the men. She is taught to sew or cook in the local style and to read the catechism by rote. But by the age of fifteen she is well aware of her charms, and thinks of nothing but showing off that regional attire which is so elegant, so peculiar to Mexico, so full of lively grace. The *china*'s skin is pink and soft, as delicate as an otter's. Her eyes are olive, burning and explosive, her shape all rounded, svelte and well turned out... There is no public festivity where the *china* is not present, with her pretty little face full of charm; there is no street where she is not to be seen, attractive and elegant."

In his paintings *The Servant*, *The Surprise*, *Water-Seller's Stand* and *Horchata Vendor*³ Arrieta's brush, carefully delineating her shape and attire, pays tribute to the *china*'s beauty. Some say that the artist's wife was his model for these works.

Still lifes

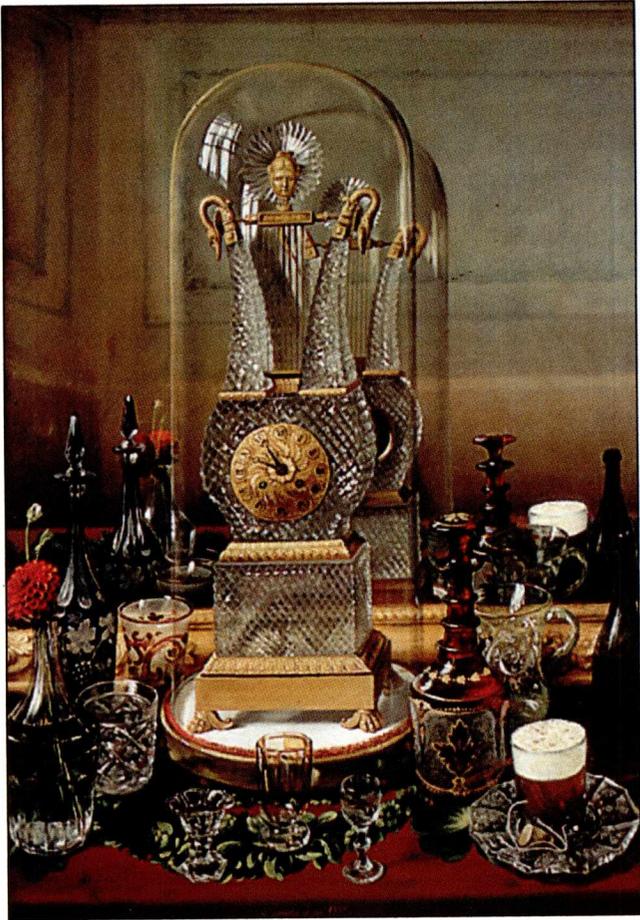
In Spanish there are many names for still-life paintings showing kitchenware, food, flowers and animals —themes taken up in much of Arrieta's work.

It is likely that he painted these various still-life studies in order to earn his livelihood. The selection of elements —crystal and European objects, contrasting with Puebla's own Spanish-style ceramics— bears witness to mid-19th century Mexican tastes.

English soup tureens, cups filled with olives, Parisian vases, clay utensils, wine bottles, woven baskets, glassware, cats, parakeets, chickens and cans of sardines were key elements in his still-life works.

The chroniclers of his time relate that Arrieta was known as "A poor, old painter, quite romantic, bohemian, given to staying up all night but never

³ *Horchata* (orgeat) is a popular almond-flavored, non-alcoholic drink. (Editor's note.)



Still Life, 1859.



Still Life, 1859.

drunk. Since he was always mocking the vain social prejudices of the day, backward-looking and envious people began calling him a low-class artist. Later, when his liberal views became known, he was called a 'Jacobin', which led to his rejection by the well-to-do."⁴ After his wife's death in 1868, he asked to be allowed to stay in a room at the poorhouse, where he gave painting classes.

Many legends surround the painter. Some say that he hung the elements for his still lifes from the ceiling of his room since he lacked even the necessary furniture. But in one of the few photographs of Arrieta, showing him painting one of his still lifes, we see a comfortable and

relatively prosperous scene. This photo also clears up questions relating to his origins, since his birth certificate was confused with that of an Indian who was born the same year. During his last years he eked out a meager wage working as a janitor for Congress.

His work attracted the interest of foreign buyers, fascinated by Mexico's culture and traditions. When the French army arrived in 1867, the troops were so drawn by the images of strange characters and exotic themes that they kept the paintings for themselves. This explains why so few of Arrieta's works are to be found in Mexico.

His paintings *The Drunken Women*, *The Man from the Coast* and *A Happy Marriage* are currently considered masterpieces, not only as testimony to their times, but because of the mastery of their composition as well as their sense of volume and color.

The almost choreographic grace of Arrieta's paintings — as the Modern Art Museum's Director Teresa del Conde calls it — remains little known. It was only on the 120th anniversary of his death that enough of his work had been brought together to provide a look at this artist, who, together with others of his generation, laid the foundations for the subsequent rise of the Mexican School of painting, led by Diego Rivera.

José Agustín Arrieta died on July 23, 1874, in the city of Puebla. One of his final works is entitled *Last Love*; it shows an old woman petting a cat. She is said to have been a friend he spent time with in his old age, who had a free and happy past like that of the young *chinas* he so enjoyed painting. ❧

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⁴ Efrain Castro Morales, *Homenaje Nacional José Agustín Arrieta (1803-1874)*. Patronato del Museo Nacional de Arte, p. 35.



Dining Room Scene, 1858.