

The Secrets of the Señoritas Revealed

The truth behind two of Mexico's most recognizable women on notes

by Peter Symes

For many years, two of the lowest denomination notes circulating in Mexico were adorned with portraits of women. The 5-peso note bore the head of a lady garlanded with jewellery while the 10-peso note depicted a young woman in an ornate headdress. Both women appear on notes printed by American Bank Note Company for *El Banco de Mexico* (the Bank of Mexico), but one woman is not even Mexican; both women have been the subject of debate, but for entirely different reasons; and both women have been identified, but, for the identity of one, a legend continues to supplant the truth.

A Woman of Questionable Virtue

The first of the two women to be immortalized appeared on the 5-peso notes of the Bank of Mexico, issued in various date varieties and series from 9 January 1925 until 22 July 1970. Immediately following the first issuance, rumour spread regarding the vignette of a woman, initially referred to as *la gitana* (the gypsy). While the identity of the gypsy was never officially disclosed, it was not long before the lady was presumed to be Gloria Faure, a Catalanian "artiste" performing—along with her sister, Laura—in Mexico at the time. The women were reported to have shared their favours with a number of influential men in Mexico. Gloria was said to be the mistress of Alberto J. Pani, then the minister of finance in the Mexican government. Though married with one daughter, Pani was known for his

philandering, and speculation asserted that it was his mistress who had posed for the portrait of the gypsy.

In September 1925, Faure followed Pani to New York, where he was negotiating a financial deal with the United States on behalf of the Mexican government. Unfriendly Mexican residents of New York complained to local authorities that Pani was in violation of the White-Slave Traffic Act of 1910, better known as the "Mann Act," which prohibited the interstate transport of females for "immoral purposes." His hotel was searched but no charges laid. However, the scandal had broken and Pani offered to resign, but President Plutarco Elías Calles refused his resignation, reportedly having told his deputies that he did not want a cabinet of eunuchs.

President Calles' support for Pani was possibly due to his similar penchant for the fairer sex. Indeed, Calles was also suspected of having accepted favours from Gloria Faure. This brought accusations that the appearance of Faure's portrait on the banknotes had been orchestrated through the efforts of the president and not through the intervention of the finance minister. No matter who was responsible, it was widely accepted as fact that Gloria Faure had posed as the gypsy.

Truth, of course, is often not nearly so exciting as fiction. In 1976, the head of the numismatic museum at the Bank of Mexico, Professor Guadalupe Monroy, wrote to American Bank Note Company asking for details on the portrait that appeared on



This 5-peso note carries the portrait of the "gypsy," often incorrectly identified as Gloria Faure.

the 5-peso notes. The reply indicated that the original engraving was created by Mr. Robert Savage as a stock vignette and was titled "The Ideal Head of an *Algerian* Girl." More importantly, the portrait was engraved in 1910, fifteen years before the 5-peso notes were issued, and long before the era of Gloria Faure's great popularity. Despite the efforts of Professor Monroy in seeking the truth, the legend of Gloria Faure lives on, with many dealers' lists and catalogues continuing to incorrectly identify the portrait as that of the Catalanian artiste.

A Woman of Unquestionable Beauty

The second woman to be immortalized is Maria Estela Ruiz Velázquez, who appears on the 10-peso notes issued by the Bank of Mexico from 22 September 1937 until 10 May 1967. During this time she became one of the most recognizable faces in Mexico, but how did she come to appear on the banknotes?

In an age when people of fame and national significance are placed on the banknotes of many countries, it may come as a surprise to learn that Estela Ruiz earned her way onto Mexico's notes by winning a beauty contest! What would the organizers of the Miss World or Miss Universe pageants give to be able to offer such a prize today?

It appears that the decision to run a contest was taken by officials of the recently elected government of General Lázaro Cárdenas, who had been elected president of Mexico in 1936, succeeding President Calles. The contest was specifically orchestrated to select a woman to appear on the 10-peso banknote, with the contestants dressed in the traditional costume of *La Tehuana* (a woman from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca, well known for their traditional dress). The costume pageant was won by Maria Estela Ruiz Velázquez. When her winning photograph was shown to General Cárdenas, he was

reported to have been enchanted with the image.

The photograph of Estela Ruiz in the winning costume was provided to American Bank Note Company, who then reproduced it on the 10-peso note. The ornate, traditional dress worn by Estela Ruiz is made of black velvet with embroidered flowers in various colours. Sometimes the flowers on these traditional dresses are enhanced with threads of pure gold. The underskirt is made of lace and, as can be seen in the portrait on the banknote, so is the elaborate headdress.

Little else is known about the beauty queen. Despite winning the beauty contest, Estela Ruiz never married. She worked for years as a schoolteacher in Mexico City, and spent many years living with her sister Delia, a dancer, and her father. She died penniless in April 2004, at 92 years of age. Estela Ruiz was never paid for having her portrait on the notes, or for winning the beauty contest. However, Estela Ruiz expressed a sense of humour when acknowledging the wide circulation of her portrait, reportedly having quipped "No woman has been in the hands of so many horsemen as I."

Needless to say, not everyone in Mexico was in favour of placing the portrait of a beauty queen on the country's banknotes, and the move caused discussion and debate amongst the public. However, despite some dissent, the portrait of the pageant winner remained on the 10-peso notes for 30 years.

In the modern era, when banknote designs are frequently refreshed, it is worth pondering a time when individual designs could be issued unchanged for almost half a century. Was it just the era that kept these two notes in circulation for such a long time? Perhaps the subjects of the notes—a lady with a questionable reputation and an unquestionable beauty—helped to stem any thought of change.



The portrait of beauty queen Estela Ruiz Velázquez appears on the front of this 10-peso note.