

Sara's *Revolution*: Art and Memory

By V. Geetha

The art of Sara's *Revolution* is part of a unique visual tradition – and one which has helped connect memory and history, the past and present. This tradition comprises graphic and poster art, book illustration, iconoclastic art, photographs... Rich and varied, these very public art forms have helped keep revolutionary memory alive, in much the same way that Sara's remarkable picture book reminds us through its graphic power, of the historically distinctive nature of revolutionary protest, of that 'ancient right of rebellion against tyranny'.

Sara's work is particularly important in today's context, when the exigencies of public taste and political fashion threaten to foster a historical forgetting. For, we are living at a time when even the most radical of past images, of personalities who refused to fall in line with the imperatives of authority, are made subject to the lure of the market and the media. Take the insistently familiar figure of Che Guevara, for instance: this youthful icon, in his beret and faraway look is familiar to many of us. While he remains a symbol of political rebellion for most possible, a radical who challenged the might of the United States of America, there are many who sport his image, because it is 'cool' and 'trendy', and representative of a certain sort of youthful, and often inarticulate, defiance.

But Che lives on in other contexts – not as a t-shirt image or a badge to be worn, but as a man who inspired political fraternity on the streets, and who was willing to raise the flag of protest across the world, whether in South America or Africa. In this sense, he has his place in a vast and long line of rebels, the latest of whom is another familiar icon, the masked man who is the public face of the Zapatista rebels in Mexico – Subcommandante Marcos... And in this instance, it is revolutionary memory, capsulated in poster art and photographs, in humble scrap books and pamphlets, which has kept him alive to a tradition he embodied for an entire generation.

Interestingly, revolutionary memory works to a certain visual grammar. For instance, Che has persisted as an icon across time and place, and especially for political combatants, because he represented the inevitability, the naturalness of revolution – it is not accidental that in vastly different contexts, revolutions were referred to in vegetative terms, as causing things to bloom, flower, as being responsible for life returning to a dead and moribund earth. Thus the 1848 revolutions in Europe were known as 'the springtime of peoples'. A book on the young revolutionaries who set the streets of eastern India on fire in the 1960s was aptly titled, *Spring-thunder in Naxalbari*... Not surprisingly, the French revolutionaries who saw themselves heralding a new world envisioned liberty as a tree, as something that would grow and spread.

There are other parts to this visual syntax, and we see how these have been passed down. The colour red, for example, continues to this day as the colour of revolution, and Sara uses it to great advantage in *Revolution*. In Vietnam and China, in the erstwhile Soviet

Union and in Nepal, a red flag calls attention to an entire history of opposing and standing up to tyranny. And red was the colour of the world's first modern revolution, the French revolution, when defiant citizens wore the colour proudly in their plebian caps! It is surely significant that Sara's protagonist sports a red scarf! Sara appears to have drawn on other French motifs from that revolutionary time – her lion, which in her words recalls the freedom of the savannah, was the symbol of force and dynamism in 1789 France.

There are other visual motifs in Sara's work that appear and reappear in revolutionary art worldwide – the upraised hand, holding the flag recalls Delacroix's Liberty on a Horse and holding aloft a flag. The upraised hand also features in Daumier's depiction of the revolutionary of 1848. The defiant art is a standard motif in Russian poster art – upturned, it protests old injustices, open and welcoming it calls the new world in to being!

This brings us to another important moment in revolutionary art: the manner in which artists usher out the old world and ring in the new. Russian artists, for instance, did this in ingenious ways. Poster artists called for an end to the world of fantasy and beckoned in the world of science and the machine. Artists such as El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich bent the laws of form and perspective to produce art that represented the brisk, new, revolutionary age – squares, lines and rectangular forms stood in for an array of objects, including the human form! In Sara's work, we find this tension between the past and present played out in unusual ways. Her protagonist is unisexual, and she makes it clear that she wants it just so. This is not quite in keeping with the traditions of French revolutionary art, which depicted liberty and justice as stately female forms. On the other hand, her delineation of the rebel as a shape that is sketched in black, white and red recalls Malevich's peasant woman, who is frozen into an odd oblong of red!

The art of revolutions, which hearkens to the past to complete the present and yet looks to build the future is, as is clear from Sara's work, at odds with its time – it is of the present, yet already in the future, and it is not accidental that Sara's book begins with one raised flag and ends with another – but in either instance, it is a different moment that holds the flag.