

José Guadalupe POSADA

EL GRABADOR MEXICANO



Even ninety years after his death, the Mexican illustrator and engraver, José Guadalupe Posada (Aguascalientes 1852 - México D.F. 1913) is still little known in Spain, despite his acknowledged influence on artists such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Rufino Tamayo. This exposition of his work offers a multidimensional vision of the artistic production of a man, who can best be described as an imaginative, inspired, and versatile creator. According to Mercurio López, he was a specialist in images, who more than an artist, regarded himself as an artisan.

He was the inheritor of a popular literary and graphic tradition that had its origins in Europe during the lower Middle Ages (and which arrived in America thanks to the important printing and merchant dynasties in Seville, such as the Cromberger Family). A reflection of the Mexican cultural context of his time, Posada's engravings spoke for those sectors of Mexican society that had no public voice to express their views and feelings. José Guadalupe Posada was an eloquent reporter of both the troubles and hopes of Mexico during the final years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. (These were the three decades when General Porfirio Díaz ruled the country). It was a crucial and dramatic period in Mexican history, during which the people, feeling perplexed yet hopeful, underwent the physical and symbolic transition from a rural setting to a more metropolitan context.

Without really seeking such an honour, José Guadalupe Posada became an incontrovertible reference for various future generations of Mexican artists. Many saw in him a perfect example of the cultural idiosyncrasy of his country with its contradictions, lights and shadows, virtues and misfortunes, with its explosive mixture of tradition and modernity. Others underlined his artistic, social, and political commitment to the underprivileged classes, something which made him the most emblematic representative of a purely revolutionary Mexican art, uncontaminated by European influence. There were also many people, who focused their admiration on the aesthetic quality of his work, his technical and stylistic craftsmanship, and his uniquely personal ability to develop new topics and styles within the framework of traditional graphic art.

In a certain sense, the diversity of readings and interpretations that Posada's work generated (and still generates) constitutes an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon, whose study is of great interest for the analysis of the social, political, and aesthetic function of artistic practices in the modern world. Broad-sides, newspaper and book illustrations, paperback novels, posters, songbooks, advertisements, and pamphlets are creative forms that he voluntarily divested of any possible artistic aura. As such, they are closely related to daily life and reflect the desires and vicissitudes of the people of his time. His work advances some of the premises developed by the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th Century, which allows us to reflect on the notion of the visual artist in the era of technical reproducibility (to quote Walter Benjamin) as a producer, mediator, and manipulator of images, and not as an individualistic, self-sufficient genius whose creation suddenly materializes from nothing.

According to Diego Rivera, Posada was as talented as Goya or Callot, and could be regarded as the forerunner of a new type of artist, who critically reflects on the relationship between citizens and power. Rivera points out that his illustrations express the sadness, joy, and anguished hope of the Mexican people. Six hundred fifty pieces of his work have been selected for this exposition, fifty-four of which are original engravings, which, have never been shown outside of Mexico. This wide selection allows us to encompass all of the different phases of Posada's graphic production. It includes engravings made by manual transfer on wood or metal as well as by photomechanical transfer, and which have been printed by means of a variety of different techniques. Such a wide selection also makes it possible to survey the main themes that the artist developed throughout his career, ranging from news reports to love letters. This diversity can be seen in the areas covered, which include popular ballads, political caricatures, technical manuals, religious picture postcards, bullfighting illustrations, and children's stories.

José Guadalupe Posada began work as a lithographer in the print shop of José Trinidad Pedroza in 1868. Shortly afterwards, he published his first political caricatures in a local paper *El Jicote* [The Hornet], described by its editors as a talkative, but truthful newspaper, very critical of the government. In 1872 he moved with Pedroza to León, Guanajuato, where for sixteen years he devoted himself to all kinds of lithographic work from labels for medicines, cigars, and matchboxes to religious postcards, business cards, illustrations for books, and maps of the city. All of this work is very elegant and markedly academic, a far cry from the incisive style that characterizes his later graphic production.

In 1888 he moved to Mexico City, and learned zinc engraving, which turned out to be a decisive step in the development of his creative production. Initially, when he first began working in the capital, he made drawings and illustrations for publications such as *La Patria Ilustrada* and the *Revista de México*, a magazine with a principally middle-class readership. This early work was still clearly academic, meticulous, and sophisticated. However, he soon began to gravitate

towards a much more popular style in his satirical vignettes for weekly and daily newspapers aimed at the working classes, e.g. *La Guacamaya*, *El Diablito Bromista*, *Don Cucufate*, *El Periquillo Samiento*, *San Lunes*...

In 1890 he began to work with Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, owner of a publishing house specializing in literature for the masses. Posada made hundreds of illustrations on a wide range of topics. In this work, his graphic language crystallized into its definitive form, incorporating innovative elements in pre-existing genres such as broadsides. These elements included illustrations of political events, thefts, murders, and natural disasters (from the death of Pope Leon XIII to the fall of Porfirio Díaz, as well as parricides, train derailments, and sacrilegious acts); *corridos* or popular ballads, many of which offered testimony of the early stages of the Mexican Revolution (in fact, they have often been used to illustrate Mexican history); or the skulls, a genuinely Mexican genre that has become irrevocably tied to the work of José Guadalupe Posada.



The medicine from beyond the grave,
12 x 20.5 cm.

Montserrat Galí Boadella highlights the fact that Posada's skulls resemble the work of other Mexican artists who also cultivated this kind of iconography, in that they are not a reflection on death in its religious or transcendental sense, but rather a reaffirmation of life, its troubles, weaknesses, and vices. Whether in formal dress, on horseback or bicycle, or representing historical personages (Zapata, Victoriano Huerto...), literary figures (Don Quijote, Don Juan Tenorio..., or members of high society, Posada's skulls reflect the political and social corruption of Mexico at that time.



The execution by firing squad of Bruno
Martinez, 15 x 24 cm.

In the publishing house owned by Vanegas Arroyo, Posada also designed many cards with religious scenes and saints (which were often used to adorn domestic altars). He also created cards with patriotic events and figures, as well as illustrations for board games (*La Oca*, *La Lotería* o *Los Charros Contrabandistas*...), pictures of famous bullfighters (Diego Prieto, Fernando Hernández, Lino Zamora, Bernardo Gaviño...) or engravings for paperbacks (inexpensive publications) with recipes, children's stories, popular songs, love letters, sewing patterns, as well as religious prayers and invocations



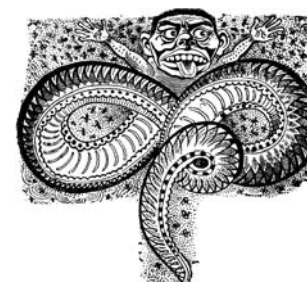
The seven capital sins, 9 x 15 cm.



La catrina, 12.8 x 18.3 cm.

As an independent, specialized worker who endeavoured to meet the demands of his editors, Posada never gave any of his work a specific title. Neither did he control the captions, accompanying text, or the number of copies made of it.

Besides working for Vanegas Arroyo, he did jobs for other publishing houses as well. For Ireneo Paz, he illustrated two books with lithographs made with feather quill pens (the novel *Sofía* by Arturo Pax, and the anthology of poems *La Campaña* by Schiller). For *Casa Maucci*, he designed the book covers of the *Biblioteca del Niño Mexicano*, a popular paperback collection of children's stories. At the same time he worked for at least ten other printers, creating hundreds of posters (often in the form of narrative compositions) which announced theatrical productions, bullfights, circus performances, magic shows, cockfights, sports events, and dances. He also made the illustrations for numerous advertisements and pamphlets which, given the ephemeral nature of the genre, are unfortunately no longer available.



Snakeman, 14.5 x 16 cm.



This is the second part of the poem by
Ponciano Díaz, 24.9 x 16.6 cm. (detalle).



Paperback, 12 x 10 cm.



Leaflet, 36 x 26 cm.

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