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THE CALAVERA: In Popular and Political Mexican Print Traditions

CARLA STELLWEG

The Taller de la Gráfica Popular (Workshop for Popular Graphic Art), founded in Mexico City in 1937, continues a long, rich and at times beleaguered tradition of political satire and narrative graphics that began with the Mexican ‘penny press’ in the XIX century. The Taller’s creation coincided with the administration of one of Mexico’s most progressive presidents, Lázaro Cárdenas who in 1938 not only expropriated all foreign oil companies in Mexico, but began to finally implement many of the popular demands and promises of the Mexican Revolution. Cárdenas carried out the agrarian reform, dividing the ‘haciendas’ into “ejidos”, small land parcels run by farmers, promoted cooperative production through rural oriented credit banks, fostered unified labor movements, delivered railroad management in the hands of the workers, designed a national literacy program improving the educational system, in addition to establishing the Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, a printing/publishing house that was also to be operated by its workers.¹

All of these radical changes contributed at that time to propitiate an atmosphere of cultural and societal reformation that led among other things, to the formation of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR). Founded by the most progressive Mexican intellectuals, the LEAR set out to shape a program of artists collaborating on fresco-murals, but after heated debates, the LEAR was dissolved in 1937. Shortly thereafter the Taller de la Gráfica Popular came into being, with Leopoldo Méndez, Luis Arenál, Pablo O’Higgins as its initiators and encouraged by David Alfaro Siqueiros, other prominent Mexican artists joined.²

Following the historical example of penny journalism and broadsides, the Taller soon became the foremost vehicle for artists of all backgrounds to participate in the shaping of Mexico’s revolutionary identity. The type of narrative graphics of the earlier penny journalism, prior to the inde-

pendence in 1821, as well as that of the Taller became a constant testimony of a changing Mexico. While it is an inherently ephemeral form of communication, the penny press, the throw-away or “la prensa de a centavo”, did paradoxically become one of the most lasting of all artistic media in Mexico, perpetuated throughout the history of Mexican printmaking.³

Before the independence, the Mexican illustrated press already used woodcuts, etchings and engravings, but it was after the independence and with the hope for freedom of the press as well as the arrival of the lithography press in 1826, that this format of narrative graphics mushroomed all over Mexico. One of the very first of these penny publications was named “*El Calavera*” (The Skull); started in 1847, it already heralded the famous skeleton image as a means to emphasize burlesque and critical commentary on the political events of the times. The issue at hand was the war against the United States over Texas, and the *calavera* embodied the public/moral outlook while it also acted as a symbol of patriotism. The situations in which the skeleton appeared, accompanying verses/texts, were many: justice, the *pueblo*, the *patria*, traitors, the clergy, corruption, all subjects that remain current today and are the essential content of this type of journalism.⁴

Many of the artists who worked in the printshops remained anonymous, thereby avoiding persecution and imprisonment that was many times the fate of the editors. They would often be charged with promoting revolution, questioning the validity of the Mexican justice system, attacking public officials’ private lives, or arrested for the abuse of public figures’ physical handicaps for the purpose of “degrading” satire. While the caricature became more and more a political weapon that provoked censorship, the committed editors still found ways to start new periodicals, sometimes writing anonymous editorials about the issue of freedom of the press or linking this with honesty and truthfulness, as in publications like “*El Tío Nonilla*”, “*La Pata de Cabra*”, or the 1861 paper “*La Orquesta*”.⁵

Many art historians attribute the birth of the Mexican satirical press to European sources, yet there is no definitive proof to substantiate this.⁶ Several Hispano-European graphics and illustrated publications were circulating in Mexico at that time, but one can very well imagine that the Mexican humor and wit somehow existed in another type of popular format prior to the arrival of the Europeans, in pre-Columbian times.

Next to the abundance of *calavera* images, populating most of Aztec architecture and sculpture, exists an equally numerous amount of scholarly research about the content of “death” in pre-Columbian Mexican art. This research has focused on the subject of the philosophy of death, or *la muerte viva* of the Mesoamerican people, with emphasis on human sacrifice as the sustaining force of life, with death as the source of vital energy that provides the basis for the world’s continuity.⁷

Many a visitor to Mexico is both startled and fascinated with what seems at first a bizarre obsession, the rich variety of *calavera* images that reflect the popular conception of death and the dead. The common saying “*A mi la muerte me pela los dientes*” (literally: death makes me peel my teeth = laugh), is telling of the close, humorous relationship Mexicans have with “*la pelona*” (the bald one).

But, above all, death is a cultural entity, differing from place to place, from time to time, depending on which eye captures its spirit and what kind of knowledge interprets its meaning. Contrary to Christian belief, where one’s hereafter is determined by the Final Judgment, Mesoamericans did not know the promise of heaven and hell: to survive after death did not depend on moral conduct; death was a consequence of the indestructible quality of living forces and for which it is needed to insure the continuance of cosmic energy. A Mexican ‘hell’, if anything, is here on earth, facing the uncertainty of elements beyond the individual’s control; and, not just the negative exists but is joined by the positive, as co-creators of the universe.

For the pre-Columbian Mexican, the *calavera* was not something frightening or horrifying but alluded to life’s immortality; a sign full of promise of new living. Therefore, the images of death, the dead, skulls and bones are not mere representations but are real, just as stones are real to a geologist or atoms to a physicist.

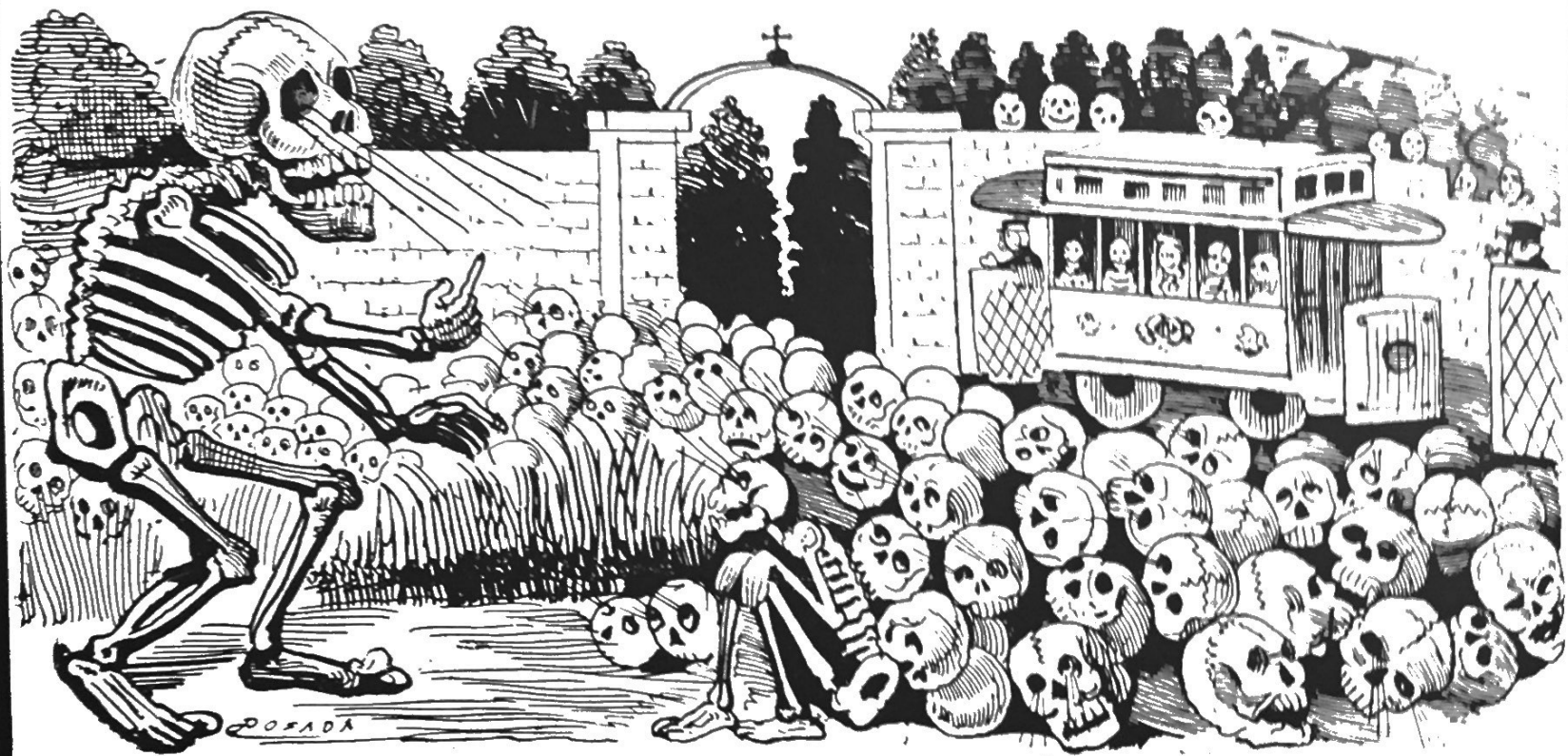
Within the Mexican penny press tradition prior to the Revolution, in the second half of the XIX century, José Guadalupe Posada is the one who appears to be the best at rendering a picture of his country. When Posada left Guanajuato to settle in Mexico City in 1888, the press was making increased use of an inflammatory pictorial language and issued larger editions, more and more frequently. Pictorial draughtsmen were in great demand, a population of illiterates were able to decipher from pictures what the printed word could not inform them with. Posada found regular employment in the workshop of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo while he also accepted commissions of other printers opposed to the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship.

Compared by many art historians to Daumier and Goya, Posada was first of all profoundly Mexican. One need only study the precision with which Posada selects the imagery to narrate the small and great events, such as fires, earthquakes, traffic accidents, famous and sensational assassins, crimes of passion, kidnappings, political exploits, etc., to find that he remains even today to be an outstanding observer who exposed a national identity with acute psychological realism.⁸

Although Posada’s wealth of prints, caricatures and satires, with or without *calaveras*, numbering approximately 15,000, are the most accepted and identified with the Mexican character, there were many precursors, such as Manuel Manilla who was his predecessor and instructor at Vanegas Arroyo’s printshop.

The publications that emerged in opposition to the Diaz dictatorship were an opportunity for a new style of illustration, and Posada’s work greatly evolved, merging political satire with the informational/didactical and the historical genre, as can be seen in *El Popular*, *El Ahuizote*, *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, *La Patria Ilustrada*, *El Colmillo Público*, etc.⁹

While some periodicals shied away from what was called “populismo” and “costumbrismo”, other papers, with artists like Posada who was by then working for at least 27 publications, interchanged ideas and techniques based on the “popular”. The search for folk or popular art became apparent and had to do with the distinction between rural and urban life. For the penny press however, since its audience—whether rural or urban—were mostly illiterate, the “popular” meant that its audience was at last able



Jose Guadalupe Posada
"Gran calavera electrica" (Big trolley calavera)

A cemetery, presumably crowded with victims of the then fairly new electrical conveyances. Broadside; zinc relief etching, 1907.
5 3/4 x 11



Jose Guadalupe Posada
"Calavera"

Depicting contemporary newspapers as skeleton cyclists.
Broadsheet; type metal engraving; between 1889 and 1895. 7 x 11¼

to “read”. With and for this audience, the illustrations came straight from their sources, as did the verses/text, the “*corridos*”. This popular, oral tradition was coincidentally born at the same time as Posada.

Connected to the Spanish romances, these *corridos*—ballads in folksongs—were transformed out of the rigid eight syllable metre into simple quatrains. The way in which the “*corridos*” apostrophize some of Mexico’s historical events, is so magnificent that they continue to be sung today.

The verses were an emotional document, sung with a guitar in the neighborhood patios and communities, to inform people of the most sensational “headlines” of the day. They were at the same time a virtual X-ray of the Mexican sensibility seeking to express the scandals, abuses, excesses of both power figures as well as the common man.¹⁰

Parallel to this popular aspect, is the *calavera*. Understood by everyone, it is not surprising that this image has acquired such a predominant presence in Posada’s prints. The well-known confluence of Hispano-Christian symbolism and that of the indigenous are again fused this time in the profound interpretation Posada developed. With the *calavera*, Posada could represent and invent the heroic as well as tragic destiny of his country in a time of conflict.¹¹

This is perhaps why every graphic artist since Posada has followed his example of depicting death “Mexican style”. His work was forgotten, oddly, until Jean Charlot, while painting murals with Diego Rivera in Mexico City after the Revolution, re-discovered Posada in 1921, and coined his contribution: “the printmaker to the Mexican people”. Of the many memorable homages to Posada, the one most acclaimed is the *Calavera Catrina* Rivera painted holding hands with the artist and Frida Kahlo. José Clemente Orozco said that when he began to draw, he “became one of the most faithful customers in Vanegas Arroyo’s printshop”. It seems to follow that the Mexican muralists should single him out, particularly since his work was effectively political and aimed at communication with the masses, the major objective of the muralists. Yet, the frescoes of Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros could never compete with the immense distribution and acceptance the penny press enjoyed among the working classes, with as many as 28,000 prints from one single plate.¹²



Jose Guadalupe Posada: Central detail from Diego Rivera’s mural in the Hotel del Prado in Mexico City, *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Park). Posada is depicted arm in arm with a skeleton figure. The skeleton’s right hand is held by Rivera himself as a boy. Directly behind him, with a hand on his shoulder, is seen—as an adult—his wife, the painter Frida Kahlo. (Next to her is the Cuban patriot José Martí.)

The heir of those theories of mass-oriented art through a wide distribution was the Taller de la Gráfica Popular. The Taller did not only admire Posada's example but studied other XIXth century artists as well, such as Casimiro Castro—one of the creators of "*México y sus alrededores*", 1855-56 and the illustrator of "*Album del Ferrocarril Mexicano*", 1877, or Celestino Escalante, José María Villasana and Santiago Hernández.

Perhaps more than any one influence on the Taller, was Jean Charlot who inspired the majority of the Mexican artists of that time to start printing. Fernando Leal, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Carlos Orozco Romero, et al, were all taught the woodcut technique that Charlot had started to use in 1916, before arriving in Mexico from France.¹³

Between 1922-25 Charlot produced many woodcuts for the avant-garde Mexican group "*Los Estridentistas*" based in Xalapa, Vera Cruz. Also printed in Xalapa was "*El Machete*", a large format journal sponsored in 1923 by the LEAR and edited by Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero and David Alfaro Siqueiros. *El Machete* was again an inexpensive publication that followed the penny press, addressing the working classes with incisive illustrations by the best Mexican artists. In 1924, *El Machete* was passed on to the Communist party and it remained the official party publication until 1938.

The experience of the early *El Machete* woodcuts was continued in the Taller de la Gráfica Popular from its outset in 1937.¹⁴

By 1939 the Taller's members actively engaged in producing prints against fascism, Franco's Spain and the people's terror of the Nazi threat. Again the *calavera* was incorporated in many dramatic ways, such as the portfolio of twelve prints by Raul Anguiano, Xavier Guerrero and Luis Arenal, and the two poster campaigns printed in 16 weeks by all the members of the Taller in 1939, against the internationalization of fascism. These were done on the one lithographic printing press the Taller had started with in 1937, inscribed with 'Paris 1871', which made the members name it "Paris Commune Press", much in the spirit of how the Taller operated.

As the artists of the Taller pursued faster and cheaper duplication systems, they came to prefer the linoleum cut. Good wood blocks were hard to find and expensive, and big lithography stones were not only scarce in Mexico but required a costly process.

In 1957 recalling the lithography press, Pablo O'Higgins commented "The press that we had in the early days of the Taller allowed us to put out huge editions of handbills in the unions' and the peasants' struggles". And Leopoldo Méndez added "it was... our romantic desire to collaborate with the Mexican people with the greatest number of issues possible, that led us to acquire the lithographic press... It was romantic indeed to have bought that machine, because even though almost all of us were capable of working it, we were never able to get away from the need of a technical operator and when editions went beyond 40,000 and 50,000 issues, we had to take on a whole team. This machine came to a very sad end: it was sold as scrap".¹⁵ In 1949, Hannes Meyer, a Swiss artist who organized the distribution of the Taller's books and prints, stated "All the Taller's publications since 1947 were produced in the presses of a medium sized publishing house, on a mechanical vertical press that allowed for individually controlled linoleum cuts". The lithography press had become obsolete.

After World War II ended, and with it, it was hoped, fascism, a more peaceful period began in which nonpolitical subject matter appeared, such as Alfredo Zalce's "Prints of Yucatán"; meanwhile the socially concerned printmaking was continued as well. "85 Prints of the Mexican Revolution" was produced by a group of 16 Taller members, in addition to graphic illustrations accompanying the literacy campaign started in 1944. Soon artists such as Alberto Beltrán collaborated with anthropologists, illustrating their findings in popularly distributed graphics of 'forgotten' Mexicans, like the Totzil Indians.¹⁶

The Taller also envisioned creating a type of 'composite-mural' that could be assembled in sections and sold at a low price to schools, "ejidos", workers' and farmers' organizations.¹⁷

At this time, however, with the exception of the *calaveras*, fliers and broadsides, the Taller did not produce inexpensive popular editions in the tradition of the penny press. The photo offset press had by the 1950s become a favorite of the newspapers, and the foto novellas replaced and addressed the early graphic illustration of the sensational and the catastrophic that continued to be in huge demand. By that time, the adaptation and adoption of the Western comic strip was also becoming popular and counted with an immediate following.

Nonetheless, the Taller remained faithful to its production of socially oriented printmaking, reflecting on the conflicts from within Mexico as well as those caused by its neighbor, the United States. Rather than relying on popular sources, the Taller came to develop a close relationship with popular organizations in the face of political conflicts.

Several cultures, especially today, face the notion of death as a tribute to a cause, as part of a religious belief, others consider it the definitive limit, or see death as a state of transition, and still others may consider it the ultimate nothing, and fear and reject it.

“Dime como mueres y te diré eres”, writes Octavio Paz in the ‘The Labyrinth of Solitude’. Today, although confronted with ever more images of death, genocide, homicide, suicide, parricide, regicide, etc., engraved on our collective visual memory, we seem to know less and less about those dead individuals or about the meaning of their death. As such the *calavera* in today’s Mexican art has also transformed and the Taller de la Gráfica

Popular’s artists now place the *calavera* amidst Mexico’s current foreign debt, corrupt politicians, homeless and street vendors, military oppression, as well as, of course, continue to print the traditional Day of the Dead *Calaveras*: all of which remain at the heart of the Taller’s mission.

Of those members that are here shown at the Alternative Museum on occasion of the Day of the Dead are: Angel Bracho, Alfredo Mereles, Mariana Yampolsky, Praxedis, Adolfo Mexiac, Jesús Galván, Manuel Díaz, Mariano Paredes, Luis Beltrán and Gregorio Cardenas Hernandez.

To conclude, the Taller de la Gráfica Popular has made and continues to make an invaluable contribution to create a visual counterpart to the popular Mexican politics, with a realistic art unique of its type anywhere, and to insist on the need to educate by way of the image, the Mexican image, such as the *Calavera*.¹⁸ ■

Carla Stellweg

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