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FORTHCOMING

Amedée Ozenfant discusses the problems of modern mural painting.

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Posada: CALAVERA OF DON QUIXOTE, relief engraving on metal, $5\frac{13}{16} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$. Humorous broadside celebrating Mexican "Day of Death."

JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA: PRINTMAKER TO THE MEXICAN PEOPLE

By JEAN CHARLOT

THE Mexican pictorial renaissance of the 1920s and the re-birth of Mexican fresco coincide with the rediscovery of a Mexican tradition, an adventure that proved to be fully as exciting as the making of the pictures themselves. Part of this tradition had always been in plain sight, but some of it had to be hunted down the burrows of the past and especially of the near present. The muralist claimed affinity with Mexico's public monuments which bridge a stupendous time span from archaic Totonac terracottas to the walls that Tres Guerras frescoed in Celaya in 1810, at the moment that Hidalgo shook the Spanish yoke from a proud neck. Just weaned from cubism, the young artist looked with loving awe at the work of those Toltec and Aztec sculptors who plied cube, pyramid, sphere, and cylinder with a taut passion beside which Cézanne's own brand of geometry retains something of the pedagogical mustiness of the classroom.

The statues and *rebedos* of the Hispanic period also proved masterly models of plastic elocution for the fresco painter of the twenties groping towards a formula for public speaking in paint. He now dared, as had the Colonial sculptors, to offend the rules of good taste and of plastic propriety in his urge to preach, to convert and convince. The would-be painter to the people undertook to forge a secular equivalent to the full plastic vocabulary used in the church: filigree halos, stuccoed fingers that point, bless, or damn, glass eyes bulging with extasis, clotted blood, flayed skins, gold damasks.

Paradoxically, the period of national independence ushered in a meagerness of taste that makes most 19th century art, at least the art that was taught at the Academy, discussed in cul-

tured circles, and hung in drawing rooms, little more than a provincial reflection of Europe. To the casual eye, the link with the past snaps. However, the great national tradition did not die, but went underground. Branded as folk art, a label that made it unpalatable to collector and connoisseur alike, Mexican art humbly persisted in the church *retablos* that were the people's pictures, in the *pulqueria* paintings that were the people's murals, and in the graphic works of penny-sheet illustrators, rich in political and human implications.

While murals and ex-votos remain veiled in anonymity, graphic works conjure up the name of one man, Guadalupe Posada, who appears placed at the narrow neck of an hour glass which every grain of sand must pass as it slides between past and future. The bulk of an ancient and rich tradition funnelled through his work at a time when it was fated to leaven modern formulas. That Posada's stature proved equal to this task is one reason why the painters of the 1920s failed to collapse into antiquarianism as had the Preraphaelites and the men of Beuron.

Artists of the generation of Rivera and Orozco acknowledge their debt to Posada, although he was not a teacher and would have been mildly skeptical had anyone addressed him as "Master". In the 1890s his open studio, or rather his workshop, was tucked inside the disused carriage entrance of a private house in Santa Inez Street. Posada worked in plain sight of the passers-by, housemaids on their way to market, urchins astray from grade school, even loitering art students from the nearby San Carlos Academy. To this day Orozco, then 10 years old, remembers the fat brown man in an ample white blouse, who

drew and carved on metal plates with a single motion of his engraver's tools such perennial best sellers as *The Man Who Eats His Own Children*, *The Two-Headed Stillborn*, *Lovers Go to Hell on Account of a Dog*, *Woman Gives Birth to Four Lizards and Three Boys*. At times the shy lad would summon up enough courage to enter the workroom and purloin pocketfuls of the master's metal shavings.

A little further on as he ambled to school, young Orozco passed the shop where publisher Vanegas Arroyo sold Posada-illustrated penny sheets—wholesale to city newsboys and rural peddlers—retail to houseservants and schoolboys. The plates, now become pictures, were hand tinted in sight of the customers by the women of the Arroyo clan, armed with stencils and gaudy glue pigments. One could admire in the final display such exciting subjects as *The Massacres of Chalchicomula*, piles of pink corpses gashed with scarlet wounds, trampled under the *guaraches* of stretcher bearers, faces averted under yellow *petate* hats. Hero of the guerrillas against Maximilian, a maroon charro lassoed an orange gun and galloped away with his booty, leaving behind him discomfited French Zouaves who blushed to match their scarlet pants. Skies remained ever serenely blue.

The bold, brusque line of Posada, all the more muscular for being dug in metal, the blatant color patches smeared on a black and white web, made so strong an impression on Orozco that later years of studying anatomy and perspective at the art school could not unroot them from his mind or from his hand.

In contrast, the Academy of Fine Arts offered the young painter art of a far weaker character. Its halls were hung with lithographed charts of feet and eyes, clusters of ears and noses that he was enjoined to duplicate neatly in charcoal. One graduated to the copy of plaster casts, first in low relief, then in high relief, and lastly in the round. Relaxation was provided by a class in landscape drawing—after prints and photographs. The seasoned student then began life drawing. The model kept one pose for months at a time, a system of pulleys and ropes easing the strain of protracted action poses. At the long drawn out end of a pose a photographer was called in to provide the paragon against which students could assess their drawings. After that, one entered the painting classes thoroughly housebroken.

Such methods reached a zenith under the Catalan painter Fabres, imported by Diaz. His iron fisted tenure whipped Mexican artists into self-assertion at the very time when Spanish overseers were unwittingly driving Indian peons to arms. The revolution was a Posada "still" come to life. Scenes he loved to portray—anti-Diaz meetings with bricks and bats flying, skulls bashed in, stabbings, shootings, chained prisoners hemmed in between men on horseback—what had been but a line inked on paper found its consummation in a true depth and a true bulk. This monstrous Galatea moved in a quick staccato akin to the tempo of early newsreels, with a dubbing of deafening sound effects, pistol shots, bullet whizzes, rankling of chains, screams, sighs. Arms, till then frozen in the delicate balance of an engraved design, let fly the stones hidden in their fists. Paper machetes became steel dug into the "wicked rich", easy to spot in the cowardly uniform that Posada had devised for him, high collar and high hat, gold chain dangling on a comfortable belly soon eviscerated.

The revolutionary themes of Orozco paraphrase Posada not only because of his youthful affection for the master, but much more because the revolution was first rehearsed within this balding brown head, and its tableaux charted by this able brown hand before it had even begun. In 1922, as the scaffolds of the muralists mushroomed against the startled walls of ancient San Ildefonso, Orozco (who was far from knowing that he



Posada: THE HANGED MAN, relief etching on zinc, 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{8}$. Included in the exhibition, "Posada—Printmaker to the Mexican People," originated at the Art Institute of Chicago and subsequently shown at the Brooklyn Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Posada: MIRACULOUS APPARITION OF THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE IN A MAGUEY, relief engraving on metal, 3 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$.

Posada: CALAVERA OF ARTISTS AND ARTISANS, relief engraving on metal, 5 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{16}$.



too would soon paint murals) smiled at the juvenile enthusiasm with which we denounced ivory towers and groomed ourselves for the role of painters to the masses. "Why paint for the people? The people make their own art." This aphorism by Orozco, which we did not relish at the time, remains the most straightforward appraisal of Posada's function.

Posada's work falls logically into three phases, conditioned by the three mediums that he adopted in turn: lithography, wood and metal cuts, relief etching. The blandness of lithographic crayon permeates his youthful provincial manner, marks its accurate drawing and delicate half-tones. These stones are often political cartoons, big heads on spindly bodies in the taste of the French caricaturists of the 1860s. A critic ignorant of the true sequence could point to Posada's first manner as an obvious refinement and elaboration of the cruder second manner. One expects a stylistic cycle to go from simple to complex, from archaic to baroque. Posada's lithographs are valued witness to the fact that he was one of the few who consciously order their lives from complexity to simplicity.

In the coarser second manner, he cut most of the illustrations made for the plebian tracts of publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. In the meantime Posada had suffered much. The widow of Don Antonio, a charming and able matriarch who used to call me with a twinkle "El Francesito", liked to recall Posada's often-told story: How in the floods of Leon in 1887, many members of his family drowned, how they would be carried past him by the churning waters and cry "Save us, Don José", until they sank.

The role of Don Antonio in the formation of Posada's new manner was crucial. As in the middle ages when the *Biblia Pauperum* edified countless humble souls, so did the penny pamphlets of Arroyo in Posada's Mexico. With customers to

whom reading was slow work, the picture had to state the story in terms intense enough to smoke the Indian's penny out of his knotted kerchief. Horrifying, edifying, or comic anecdotes, broadsides on love and war, recipes of cooking and witchcraft, librettos of rustic plays, reached the remotest crags of the republic in the haversack of the peddler and the saddlebag of the pilgrim. Anthropologists who spy on remote Indian festivals and take down in phonetic shorthand the chanting, the pastoral skits, the cruel and lengthy Passion speeches, the Mystery plays that evoke a world of sharp hierarchy, man sandwiched between Heaven and Hell, might rather politely ask the coach or prompter for his book, much thumbed and yellowed, where the imprint of Vanegas Arroyo may still be deciphered.

The firm catered to the city mestizo as well as to the Indian peasant. Arroyo's *GACETA CALLEJERA* startled the city with extras as hot as the handsetting of type and the handcutting of the pictorial reportage allowed. Recurring deadlines forced Posada to cynical economies. A standard picture "doubles" for every *Horrendous Fire*, a sign on the burning house being recut each time to fit the latest and best-selling conflagration. Another print shows a street demonstration. Men shout, women scream, fists fly, banners and streamers are displayed—left blank to allow the type-setter to dub in whatever rightist or leftist slogans, whatever religious or anti-clerical grievances would transform the well-worn block into the news of the day.

These uninhibited short-cuts often result in extravagant fantasies. In the first state of *The Death of General Manuel Gonzalez, Ex-President of The Republic* the bearded corpse, elegantly clad in black, lies in state against a sober background of thick drapes. A few days later a second state and a new title bring the subject up to date. In *The Burial of General*

Posada: REVOLUTIONARY CAPTURED BY THE RURALS, relief etching on zinc, 3 1/8 x 5.





Posada: THE HORRIBLE DEATH OF AN INVIDIOUS RICH MAN, relief engraving on metal, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{16}$.

Manuel Gonzalez, Ex-President of The Republic a plumed hearse and high-hatted mourners, hatched out of the dark curtain, slowly cross the background of the funeral parlor with their burden and fade into its wall, watched by the corpse itself, a relict of the first state.

Each year, for the Day of the Dead, while children teased their appetites with sugar skulls and their elders prepared buffet suppers to be devoured on the family tomb, Arroyo's press let fly by the thousands broadsides known as "calaveras", the Mexican Dance of Death. With high glee, Posada conjured up the skeletons of politicians with tortoise-shell glasses and celluloid collars, of generals whose ribs sag under medals, of coquettes hiding their bald skulls under the funeral flowers of imported chapeaux.

The medium of this second manner is wood, or more often, type-metal. The direct cutting with burin results in a white line on black ground. While in the making, the block was coated with *azarcon*. Digging into this red lead composition helped Posada to evoke all the more easily the flames that heat and the blood that splashes his visions. The furrowed line acquires a musculature that the lithographed one lacked. Journalistic deadlines, improvisations in a hard medium and an adjustment of his plastic vocabulary to a special audience, combine to give a primitive flavor that earned for this manner the approval of Paris.

Posada's third and last manner coincides with his discovery of relief etching, made in an effort to compete cheaply with the increasingly popular process of photo-engraving. In this unusual medium, zinc is drawn upon with an acid-resisting ink, all exposed parts hollowed in an acid bath. Unlike orthodox etching, the plate is inked with a roller like a woodcut. The

only other well-known relief etcher is William Blake, who claimed to have received the secret of its process in a vision from above. The result is a black line penned on white ground, and Posada, in a swagger of calligraphic arabesques, celebrates his release from the exacting bondage of the burin.

Showing no trace of naiveté, this last manner tends to irritate devotees of Posada who like to think of him as a Mexican Rousseau. Whereas the aging French master played "Clochettes" of his own composition on a three-quarter violin, we can picture the aging Mexican slapping his thigh and belching a Rabelaisian laugh as Death, his favorite model, tip-toes in.

Not all of Posada's work are prints. The widow of Don Antonio knew of two large ledgers in which the artist had sketched many scenes, "Some very nice, some very horrible," as she remembered them. A humble man, Posada did not scorn such menial tasks as came within the scope of his craft. I saw one of his circus signs still in use in the 1920s. Painted on unsized canvas and fully signed, it represented the floods of Leon with his own people drowning. This use of a personal tragedy to drum crowds under the big top is a reminder of how deeply different good neighbors may be.

It has become trite to remark that Mexican murals export badly, that they need for a frame hispanic patios and arcades, and for lighting effects the crystalline silver of Mexico's plateau or the golden pathos of its tropics. But Mexican graphic art, uprooted, labelled, priced, caged behind glass, fares none too well either. Will the visitor to an American museum understand Posada's prints proven function? Will he believe that the guns shoot, the blades rip, that the ink is blood?

And if he does, will he not feel cheated of an expected esthetic delight?



Posada: CALAVERA OF A COQUETTE, relief etching on zinc, 4 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$.

Posada: BALLAD OF THE FOUR EXECUTED ZAPATISTAS, relief etching on zinc, 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{16}$.



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