

The Museum of Modern Art

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MEXICAN ART AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

MEXICAN ART, an exhibition of more than 80 prints, paintings, and drawings chosen from the Museum's collection, will be on view in the third-floor Sachs Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art through June 29. The earliest works in the exhibition are engravings by Manuel Manilla who died in 1893; the most recent are two drawings from 1954 by José Luis Cuevas. The exhibition has been jointly directed by Alexandra Schwartz of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books and William S. Lieberman of the Department of Drawings.

Modern art in Mexico has developed along lines different from that in the United States and Europe. It is almost impossible to understand and appreciate Mexican painting and graphic art without an awareness of the social and economic history of the country and its people, for much of the best Mexican art comes from a popular and aggressively political tradition.

The art of the great printmaker José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), whose work is prominently featured in the exhibition, is emblematic of these concerns. Posada was a popular artist in the most meaningful sense: not only did he bring a marked class consciousness into his work, expressing there the desires, the anger, and the grim humor of the dispossessed, but formally too Posada's art arose from the people, from both the Indian and the Spanish roots of Mexican culture. Working from the popular tradition of caricature, ballad illustration and broadsides, Posada revitalized

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an art that had declined into pale academicism. In his scenes of crime and scandals, and in his macabre skeletons (calaveras), Posada explored the social and moral aspects of Mexican life. His work represents the beginnings of a truly national and modern Mexican art. As Alexandra Schwartz notes: "Of humble origins, with no formal art training, Posada created, in his more than 20,000 prints, a popular art that reflected the feelings of a striving people."

Posada provided the impetus for a succeeding generation of Mexican artists, notably the three great revolutionary artists of the 1930s-- Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. Paintings, drawings and prints by them are included in the exhibition. Like Posada, they saw their art, which was concerned with political and social issues, as a means of directly communicating with the still largely illiterate Mexican masses. As a result, they delivered their polemics and told their stories in strong, sometimes overpowering images. In 1937, the Taller de Graphica Popular was founded in Mexico City to unite artists and give them the opportunity to enlighten the masses through the same channels Posada had pursued. Proud of their lithography press, once used by the Paris Commune of 1871, artists such as Leopoldo Méndez and Alfredo Zalce often worked collectively in their fight against social and political injustice. Their prints, realistic and frequently bitterly aggressive, included anti-fascist posters and attacks on the press, religion, and the high cost of living, often issued in editions of a thousand or more.

Paradoxically, with the amelioration of social conditions in Mexico and the rise in literacy in the late 1940s, this truly popular national Mexican art began to decline, to be replaced by the more specifically

aesthetic endeavors of such accomplished and internationally recognized artists as José Luis Cuevas and Rufino Tamayo, also represented in the exhibition.

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