

José Guadalupe Posada: Reenvisioning the Revolutionary Works of the Mexican  
Printmaker

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José Guadalupe Posada, a well known late nineteenth- early twentieth century Mexican artist, penetrated the layers of oppression with the usage of his satirical political cartoons, known as *calaveras*, which were inspired by the Aztec tradition of *Dia De Los Muertos*. Coming from a poor native agricultural center in Aguascalientes, Posada harnessed the qualities of a true revolutionary. Posada would depict scenes of Emilio Zapata affiliates being murdered by Porfilio Diaz's troops in the streets of Mexico City. Through the *calavera* cartoons he created, he managed to parody the upper class and their desire to be European.

Now for almost a century, it has been understood that Jose Guadalupe Posada had a hold on Mexico for decades while he was in existence. Since his death, he has inspired artists from around the world, including the Mexican Muralists and those who partook in the Chicano Movement. Posada's *calaveras* have become so well known that his, *La Calavera Catrina* (fig.1), has become a personification of Dia de Los Muertos. While working with publisher Antonio Vangeas Arroyo and countless publishers throughout Mexico City in his time, he managed to create numerous prints ranging from *corridos*, love poems, news broadcasts, advertisements, and satirical cartoons.

Posada has been named a political cartoonist by scholars and many of his satirical cartoons and associated articles have been used in a way that defends the Mexican Revolution. This usage of his work has been detrimental in understanding Posada. He is known as an artistic revolutionary, but being captivated by Posada and looking into his work, it is apparent that this narrative is not completely accurate. By shifting away from the archaic views on Posada, in this paper I will examine more principal and accurate aspects of his life. His personal philosophies, career, and the events following his death, demonstrate that Posada was in fact not a

revolutionary who chose sides, but someone who witnessed a time when Mexico was undergoing tremendous social upheaval.

This essay will examine Jose Guadalupe Posada's work without the revolutionary lens by looking at the contemporary political environment. I will then examine the work he created early in his career, when he moved to Leon and Mexico City. This essay will end by diving into the death of Posada and how the Mexican Muralists used his name and work to help assist them for their own political agendas.

Prior to investigating Posada, it is crucial to have a brief understanding of Mexico's political background. After three centuries of being ruled by Spain, a newly independent Mexico endured years of corruption. The clergy rose to power after Mexico's independence in 1821 and would eventually be ruled out in 1861. This had come after the Reform War (1858-1861) which was to separate church and state. War heroes and military leaders from the Reform War would be elected into office. Numerous unfulfilled promises and a lack of economic growth would take a turn on Mexico's native and poor population. It was clear that those who were in power would only benefit those who had money and those who conformed to the European status quo. In the mid to late 19th century, Mexico would witness a rise of several revolutionary groups that wanted to establish power. One of those revolutionary leaders was Porfirio Diaz. In the past century, Diaz would be viewed as an imperialist dictator and tyrant, however, this was not always the case, because in his youth he was a notable radical leader who had many sympathizers throughout Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Rafael Barajas, author of, *Posada: Mito y Mitote: La Caricatura Politica de José Guadalupe Posada y Manuel Alfonso Manilla*, writes that "Diaz's long regime changes over overtime and it actually had many governments; The period of 1877 to

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<sup>1</sup> Barajas, Rafael. *Posada: mito y mitote: la caricatura política de José Guadalupe Posada y Manuel Alfonso Manilla* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2009), 103.

1880 is not the same as the diet of the beginning of the 20th century.”<sup>2</sup> With Posada opening up his artistic career within politics it is important to understand that Diaz was not seen as an evil ruler and that Posada may have looked up to him especially within Diaz’s early stages of his political career.

Another historical importance is Emilio Zapata, a well-known Mexican revolutionary. Emilio Zapata, a leader of a peasant army, fought for agrarian reform. Zapata, by an act of the Mexican Congress, is an official national hero. Mexicans remember Zapata with hundreds of *corridos*, verses, speeches, books, portraits, murals, statues, and place names.<sup>3</sup> With the help of Porfirio Diaz, Venustiano Carranza, and most of the presidents between them, Mexico City papers portrayed Zapata as a womanizer, bandit, a terrorist, and a barbarian.<sup>4</sup> Besides the support of leftist communities fighting for agrarian reform it seems as though, with the help of propaganda, Zapata was not visualized as the hero he is today. With both Diaz and Zapata having this back and forth image of being heroes or villains, it is difficult to assume that Jose Guadalupe Posada would stick to one side throughout his lifetime. Hence why it is even more complex to label him as just a leftist or radical revolutionary.

When examining Posada’s philosophy, knowing how he was raised and what he was taught is important when analyzing his political work within his career. Jose Guadalupe Posada was born on February 2, 1852 in San Marcos, Aguascalientes, Mexico. His father German Posada was a baker and had many lessons to teach young Jose. One of the most important teachings being that, “life was hard and happiness for the poor did not consist in being happy, but in making precariousness somewhat tolerable, this quote from his father is something the young

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 104

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert, Dennis. “Emiliano Zapata: Textbook Hero.” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 19, no. 1 (2003): 127–59. Pg. 128

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Posada would take to his grave.”<sup>5</sup> Which will be seen throughout this essay. As one can see from this quote, Posada's family was not wealthy and had a level of tolerance when it came to change and injustice. As for Posada’s mother, Petra Aguliar, was a housewife and took care of him and his siblings, both her and German were of indigenous descent.

Arguably the biggest influence on Posada’s philosophy and the start of his artistic career is his older brother, Cirilo. Cirilo, a teacher, taught Posada how to read and write. He was a well known liberal and was active within the community and frequently spoke out against anything that was unjust. He was an advocate for education and would take his younger brother Jose with him on his political endeavors. One of Cirilo’s quotes to Posada is “Governments came and went... conservatives and liberals would fight to the death for control over a country, but nobody or almost nobody did anything worth remembering for education.”<sup>6</sup> This philosophy stayed with Posada and influenced most of his work, as will be demonstrated in this essay.

As a student, Posada enjoyed drawing his classmates. This is where his artistic journey began. Even though none of these drawings were saved, his older brother would take notice of this interest. From there, Posada began learning at the Municipal Drawing Academy of Aguascalientes. Barajas states that the Academy followed institutional academic norms, “imitating the classics, but saturated with that over the top romanticism and characterizes the life and customs of the 19th century.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that Posada did not have any political cartoonist in him, nor did he get this from his school since it was as traditional as those within Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> Serrano Gómez Jesús. *José Guadalupe Posada: Testigo y crítico De Su Tiempo: Aguascalientes, 1866-1876* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2001), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid,34.

<sup>7</sup> Barajas, Rafael. *Posada: mito y mitote: la caricatura política de José Guadalupe Posada y Manuel Alfonso Manilla* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica. 2009), 37.

Posada's career as a political cartoonist began when he and his brother joined the Chavez Club. The Chavez Club was named after a local liberal hero, Jose Maria Chavez, an uncle of one of Posada's future mentors, Trinidad Pedroza. Barajas says that at the national level the Chavez Club openly supported Porfirio Diaz and at the local level the members of the Chavez Club spoke out against Colonel Portugal Gomez, who was in opposition with Diaz's political agenda.<sup>8</sup> Jesús Gómez Portugal was a war hero and was celebrated as a liberal. He was someone who Cirilo and Posada supported until he fell short of his promises. Colonel Gomez, like most tyrants, had political agendas that would coerce those within Aguascalientes.

Once Cirilo and Jose joined the Chavez Club and were introduced to Miguel Velazquez de Leon, who was the leader within the club. Miguel Velazquez was a well respected individual within the community and was working on media coverage that aligned with the Club's philosophy. A newspaper would be created and it was named *El Jicote*. Miguel Velazquez, who took notice of Posada's art, would introduce him to Trinidad Pedroza who was known as one of the best printmakers in Aguascalientes.<sup>9</sup>

Typically scholars have argued that with Pedroza, Posada gained his political influence. Many historians have said that *El Jicote* was a liberal newspaper that outed local officials. This statement is not entirely false, but understanding that *El Jicote* was a political newspaper that supported Porifilo Diaz and his political allies is often what is left out of the story. For example , Ilan Stevens, argues that Pedroza, "supported the creation of a local government and spoke out against the ineffectiveness of city politicians—particularly the influential Colonel Jesus Gomez

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Serrano Gómez Jesús. *José Guadalupe Posada: Testigo y crítico De Su Tiempo: Aguascalientes, 1866-1876* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2001), 59.

Portugal.”<sup>10</sup> This is true, however, those that do not know who Colonel Gomez is may see this as a sign of liberalism while also seeing Diaz as a tyrant. In this case, the argument is not valid because not supporting Colonel Gomez in this case is supporting Diaz.

It is with *El Jicote* where Posada acts as a true Profirian combat cartoonist.<sup>11</sup> The first glimpse of Posada’s work within *El Jicote* began on June 11, 1871. An administrative decision was made within the Chavez Club to not participate in local elections, but rather to focus on media coverage on the corruption within Colonel Gomez’s circle. It was Pedroza who took notice of Posada's progress and conceived the idea of making him the cartoonist for the new newspaper.<sup>12</sup> Posada’s first caricature was of Juan G. Alcazar, an important person to Colonel Gomez. Alcazar was a local representative and director of *La Jeringa*, a political newspaper that advocated for Colonel Gomez and his allies. Posada, however, cleverly decides to use Alcazar’s time as a director of a civil hospital to his advantage. According to Jesus Gomez Serrano, Alcazar was unable to diagnose a strange fever to which many poor people fell victim. Posada depicts Alcazar on a donkey in *Nos alcanzan, doctor. Si, y ni rebuznar puedo ahora, companero* (fig.2), where he is trying to swat a wasp while the donkey gets stung by one. One can see in the cartoon that Alcazar’s medical belongings fall to the ground in which a large needle is shown and a coffin that dates 1861 which is a jab at the doctors' failed attempts to find a cure.

Posada continues to create these cartoons for *El Jicote* such as, *N. 9, he aquí la realidad* (fig.3) and in *Catedral del pueblo* (fig.4). This supports the idea that Posada was not in fact

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<sup>10</sup> Stavans, Ilan. “Jose Guadalupe Posada, Lamponer.” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 16 (1990): 54-56.

<sup>11</sup> Barajas, Rafael. *Posada: Mito y mitote: la caricatura política de José Guadalupe Posada y Manuel Alfonso Manilla* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica. 2009), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Serrano Gómez Jesús. *José Guadalupe Posada: Testigo y crítico De Su Tiempo: Aguascalientes, 1866-1876* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2001), 85.

against Diaz at this time and those that followed him, but actually in favor of those who ran under Profirian ideologies. The cartoons that Posada creates while working for *El Jicote* show the beginnings of his humor, ability to create accurate portraits, and deliver a message in an effective manner. Barajas states that Posada, “must have earned the young cartoonist a certain notoriety among journalists related to Diaz.”<sup>13</sup> Thus strengthening his connection to Diaz and his political movement.

In 1944, the Art Institute of Chicago held an exhibition, “Posada: Printmaker to the Mexican People.” In the exhibition catalog, Fernando Gamboa writes, “the active and independent participation of *El Jicote* in local politics forced Trinidad Pedroza to leave Aguascalientes and set up shop in Leon, Guanajuato, a rich state bordering Aguascalientes, where Posada followed him in 1872.” This statement on Pedroza and Posada leaving Aguascalientes because of their political work in *El Jicote* is largely accepted by scholars. Barajas makes the case that Pedroza would not have to fear or be forced to move from Aguascalientes since *El Jicote* was widely known as a combat newspaper supporting Diaz, and that Aguascalientes had Profirian candidates in the local office. Barajas suggests that since *El Jicote* closed down in 1871, Pedroza wanted to move to Leon because it was the main center of work and commerce in the interior of the republic.<sup>14</sup> He makes the statement that the move to Leon was not a commercial venture of political exiles, but the reopening of a printing shop in a well-known market.<sup>15</sup> This essay takes the position of Barajas in acknowledging that Posada and Pedroza were in fact not political refugees but rather artists seeking opportunities.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Barajas, Rafael. *Posada: mito y mitote: la caricatura política de José Guadalupe Posada y Manuel Alfonso Manilla* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica. 2009), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



After a year working in Leon, Trinidad Pedroza decided to make a move back to Aguascalientes, leaving the shop with Posada. Posada spent several years in Leon, where he would eventually purchase the workshop from Pedroza in 1876. In this new city, Posada met his wife Maria de Jesus Vela and became a teacher. In Leon, Posada created religious prints, illustrations for books, designs for cigarette packs, and numerous other commercial advertisements. It is difficult for scholars to pinpoint which illustrations within the newspapers are done by Posada, however, on an account by one of Posada's students, he mentions how Posada would create cordial competitions between two of his students which they would draw caricatures on paper sheets of the most well known people within Leon.<sup>16</sup> Although none of these were published nor saved, one can see that Posada maintains his passion for caricatures and humor for which the artist is known.

In 1887, a terrible flood decimated the city of Leon; several of Posada's illustrations were lost in the flood. By 1888, Posada made the decision to sell his workshop and move to Mexico City. Upon moving to Mexico City, Posada had created a name for himself as a graphic artist, journalist, and caricaturist. Several bourgeois publications and illustrated magazines would seek out Posada, but for unknown reasons Posada decided not to work for them. Instead Posada made the decision to work within the popular penny press publications that were aimed at the poorer, working-class population.

Before Posada's decision to work with penny press publications, he worked with editor and publisher Irene Paz. Paz, alongside illustrator and cartoonist Jose Maria Villasana, were militants in satirical Porfilian combat cartoons. Paz sought out Posada and had him work on two publications: *Revista de Mexico* and *La Patria*. According to Barajas, there is no doubt that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 55.

Posada collaborated for the main illustrated newspaper of the Porfiriato elite.<sup>17</sup> Illustrations Posada produced in *La Patria* contain little humorous remarks, but no political innuendos. Instead these illustrations contain what is known as “costumbrismo,” which Barajas states is a manifestation of Mexican Romanticism and is essential in the search of national cultural identity.<sup>18</sup> Mexican Romanticism is consistent with women's participation and representation, and in themes such as love, family, virtue, domesticity, and eroticism.<sup>19</sup>

Posada went to produce such themes for *La Patria* which displays his ability to create more traditional work for the bourgeoisie. One can see in *Los Gustos de la Mujer* (fig. 5) and in *Virtudes Cardinales* (fig. 6) that these illustrations that Posada creates insinuate the importance of social order. Only the utmost elite and those wearing European clothing are illustrated in these classist illustrations. This is a contrast from what Posada is known for and shows how deeply rooted he is within European traditions, both in artistic style and aesthetics. Posada's work with Paz only lasted for a few years until Posada, for unknown reasons, decided to work with penny press publications. Their work together did not come to a complete stop as they collaborated up until the early twentieth century. Posada made the move to Mexico City when he was thirty six and was still engaged with Pofirilian allies.

Within the late nineteenth century and earltwentieth century there was a rise within the working class. Alongside that were growths in new forms of media and accessibility to media that took place with the advancements of technology. Penny press newspapers, broadsides, and chapbooks would rise to target low-income families who were typically semi-illiterate. The enny

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pg. 76

<sup>19</sup> Shelton, Laura, 'Romanticism in Mexico', in William Beezley (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Mexican History* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 9 July 2020).

press editors and contributors offered up an education for workers.<sup>20</sup> Through the usage of art, those within the lower class were able to grasp what was happening without having to read. This gave rise and importance in finding artists who could easily tell a story through their work, including Posada.

The decision that Posada makes to work within penny press publications has been used by scholars to help justify him as a man of the people and supporting the liberal cause. Montserrat Galí Boadella (2008) explains that it would be erroneous to assume that this sector of the press, simply because it was addressed to the working class, served therefore as a mouthpiece for its struggles and demands.<sup>21</sup> She further explains that they almost always evaded serious editorials on political subjects, reserving them for workplace labor issues far from the center of power.<sup>22</sup> This supports the argument that Posada was not entirely engaged within the issues of the working class, but rather creating work that was humorous and easy to relate to, without the need to get too political.

Posada's move from working with Irene Paz to working in penny press publications is unknown. This essay would like to make an argument that Posada's decision to shift his work to penny presses is because of artistic freedom. While Posada was working with Paz, one can see Posada's traditional artistic ability come forth. This is important for scholars because it shows his ability to create art in a traditional sense and delegitimizes the theory that he is a Mexican self-taught artist, but rather someone who mastered European artistic principles.

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<sup>20</sup> Buffinton, Robert M. *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Posada José Guadalupe, Stals José Lebrero, and Reverté Ramón. *Posada: Mexican Engraver* (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 2008), 49.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

The argument that Posada shifted his focus from working with the bourgeoisie to the penny press is due to him meeting a fellow artist Manel Manilla. Manilla would not only introduce Posada to an artistic form that would change his career, but he would also introduce Posada to Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Arroyo founded his own printing press in 1880. Arroyo's penny press focused on anything ranging from songbooks to political events and he would hire Posada with a promise of complete artistic freedom.<sup>23</sup> Posada did not leave Irene Paz due to political conflict, but rather him having the ability to create what he wanted.

When analyzing Antonio Vanegas Arroyo's workshop, there are no significant signs of his publication being a revolutionary outlet. Arroyo's workshop fell in line with traditional European media outlets. Much so that, Montserrat Boadella describes how the work that Posada and Arroyo produced had a broad audience and how their work most likely would have made its way into the homes of the colonial elite.<sup>24</sup> Boadella further describes how much of the themes within Mexico followed with its European counterpart which could be seen within Arroyo's publishing house. These themes include: 1) devotional themes; 2) the world and its creatures (plants, animals, astrology, calendars); 3) human beings: virtue and vice, the vicissitudes of fortune, love and marriage, etc; 4) the afterlife and the cycle of the four ends of man, known as Novisimos in the hispanic world (death, antichrist, the last judgment, devils, purgatory, and death).<sup>25</sup> These themes describe much of Posada's work created when working with Arroyo.

These themes also demonstrate the versatility of Posada and why many publishers sought after him. *A la Milagrosísima Imagen de Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos* (fig. 7) is an

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<sup>23</sup> Stavans, Ilan. "Jose Guadalupe Posada, Lamponer." *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 16 (1990): 54-58.

<sup>24</sup> Posada José Guadalupe, Stals José Lebrero, and Reverté Ramón. *Posada: Mexican Engraver* (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Art Contemporáneo, 2008), 51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

example of Posada's ability to produce religious iconography. *¡Horrorosa noticia! Robo sacrilego y asesinato del señor cura en la iglesia parroquial del Pueblo de Zahuaya* (fig. 8) is one of many of Posada's depictions of a murder in Mexico. These themes are synonymous with those of Europe and do not fall under a particular political spectrum.

Antonio Vanegas Arroyo is not the only publisher that Posada worked for while in Mexico City. Merurio Lopez Casillas (2008) states that over a period of twenty-four years, Posada contributed to almost sixty different periodical publications.<sup>26</sup> He further goes on to say that Posada was an engraver who offered his services without constraints and that he would adapt himself to the demands of each publication. Posada was not interested in what a publication stood for politically, but rather, he focused on his craft and ability to illustrate for them. The politics of the agrarian revolution on whether he was pro Zapata or Diaz was not a concern for him and his workshop. During this period, Posada's work was still falling in line with traditional publications, highlighting what was happening in Mexico at the time and following the themes mentioned above.

Posada not sticking to one political perspective is what makes it difficult for scholars to distinguish Posada's philosophy. A couple examples of this is Posada's, *El ahorcado- Revolucionario ahorcado por los hacendados* (*The hanged man- Revolutionary hanged by the landowners*) (fig. 9) and *Corrido de los cuatro zapatistas fusilados* (*Corrido of the four Zapata followers executed by firing squad*) (fig. 10). These prints along with several other works show the struggles and triumphs of revolutionaries at the time and can help support the argument that Posada was a revolutionary. On the other hand, Posada is one to praise and show the triumphs of President Diaz. In *The Battle of May 5, 1862: The Great Triumph of Mexico over France!* (fig.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

11) Posada renders Diaz in a noble way with Diaz standing upright, waving his hat, and wearing military attire. This broadside in particular highlights Mexican triumph over the French army which happened on May 5th, 1862. This broadside celebrates Diaz as a hero and highlights sacrifices he made in his early life as a general. The end of the broadside reads, “Self-denial has always dominated his spirit, since innumerable times he has been seen sacrificing his interests and his life to save the lives of Mexicans.” With a circa 1900-1913 this broadside was not made in Posada’s early life. One can see well into the early-twentieth century Posada celebrates Porfiro, even going as far to say that he has sacrificed so much for the Mexican people.

As one can see it is difficult to know where Posada’s political ideology landed. According to Boadella (2008), working with Antonio Vanegas Arroyo is an example where Posada can be seen being on both sides of the political atmosphere. In 1897, Arnulfo Arroyo Romero was arrested in the alleged assassination attempt of General Porfiro Diaz and Posada did not indicate any sympathy or rejection for the assassin. A month later Posada published two depictions of Arnulfo Arroyo’s corpse who had been murdered with impunity seen in *El Cadaver de Arnulfo Arroyo* (fig. 12). Following those depictions Arnulfo Arroyo was the subject of a *calavera*, with verses by Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, which places him rather in a role of a victim as seen in *Un Recuerdo, Mis Amigos, del que ya es hoy Calavera* (fig. 13).<sup>27</sup> This shows that on one account Posada showed no political support for Arnulfo Arroyo, but then creates his *calavera* knowing that the depiction would show him as a victim. Those that see Posada as a revolutionary pick and choose work that he did that strengthen their argument, but Posada’s work depicts two perspectives of the same event.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 54.

Posada is most known for his *calaveras*. The translation of *calavera* is “skull.” In the case of Posada and many of his contemporaries, *calaveras* were personifications of people within their time. These *calaveras*, widely used and known for Dia de los Muertos, were used in a satirical manner to poke fun at the upper class. Most of Posada’s *calaveras* were used in a sense of a remembrance of one's death which can be attributed to the European concept of, *memento mori*, which is an object serving as a warning or reminder of death. The most profound object used in the visualization of *memento mori* is a skull. In the case of Posada and his contemporaries, Posada turns to *calaveras* to criticize the exercise of power, to portray the common people, to praise friends, and colleagues, and to celebrate the inevitable triumph of death of the living.<sup>28</sup> These *calaveras* are what helped scholars argue that he is a revolutionist.

In *Calavera Revolucionaria, 1910* (fig. 14), Posada depicts a female soldier on a horse with her fist high up in the air and followers beginning to moving along with her, this an example of one of these revolutionary *calaveras* that shows the perspective of the radical side in a positive manner. Posada also created *Calavera de un revolucionario zapatista, Broadside, 1910-12* (fig.15), where he depicts a follower of Zapata, holding a rifle and a sword reinforcing his support for the liberal cause. These examples are a part of a large group of work that Posada created showing the power of the Revolution. Posada, as stated above, also creates *calaveras* that show everyday people. For example, in *Calavera de los patinadores* (Calavera of the street cleaners) we find four *calaveras* sweeping up a street within a town (fig. 16). Examples like *Calavera de los patinadores* are what everyday people could relate to, strengthening his connection with his audience and reinforcing the argument that he is not only for the people, but that he is making revolutionary political statements in his work.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 87.

*Calaveras* are what Posada is most known for. His unique, simple, yet powerful ability to tell stories is what helped bring his *calaveras* to the forefront compared to his contemporaries. Although these *calaveras* are what Posada gained notoriety for, he only treated this subject once a year during Dia de los Muertos, and the total number of engravings of skull and skeletons only account for two percent of his surviving works<sup>29</sup> The claims that other scholars make that he is a revolutionary is difficult to justify because they only look at this small percentage of his work. Even within the limited scope of his surviving works, one can see that he is not truly antagonizing the Porifian establishment.

In *Revueltas Calaveras*, one can see that Posada is not leaning towards a participatory political agenda (fig. 17). In the text, he refers to several types of people from a police officer, to a general, and even a young girl. Toward the end of each description of each person he states that they will too become a *calavera*. Thus, he reinforces that regardless of identity, values, and politics, everyone will die and become a *calavera*. When studying this piece one can argue that Posada is invoking his brother, Cirilo's philosophy of, "Governments came and went... conservatives and liberals would fight to the death for control over a country, but nobody or almost nobody did anything worth remembering for education."<sup>30</sup> Although in this, there is not a remark on education within the broadside, the idea that political beliefs came and went and one work would hardly be remembered stands true to the statement.

Casillas gives Posada's life an analysis in chronological order, from his time in Aguascalientes to his death in 1913. Throughout this description one can see that Posada was not living in the heart of Mexico City, but rather moving further away from it, living in number 6

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Serrano Gómez Jesús. *José Guadalupe Posada: Testigo y crítico De Su Tiempo: Aguascalientes, 1866-1876* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2001), 34.



Avenida de la Paz (later known as Jesus Carranza). The reason behind Posada losing money and needing to move to a low income environment is unclear. This pattern, however, forms the question that if he was this prolific revolutionary artist, then why was he so poor and how come nobody did anything to help him? This question has yet to be answered.

On January 20th, 1913, Posada passed away and was buried in a pauper's grave by two neighbors and a printer friend. Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, who had worked with Posada for twenty years, learned about his death three years later.<sup>31</sup> Posada moving further away from Mexico City with little to know money is surprising when knowing his impact within the Mexican visual culture. The most impactful aspect of his death is how Antonio Vanegas Arroyo did not know until 1916. For a revolutionary artist that was famed for his work ethic, caricatures, and versatility, it is surprising that no one knew of his death. This reinforced the idea that Posada was never a threat to Diaz's establishment, nor was he a threat to those individuals in the penny press industry. According to Stavans (1990), seven years after Posada's death, no one claimed Posada's remains, and his bones were exhumed and tossed in a communal grave.

Posada's death and aftermath captivate scholars. While Posada's death may have gone unnoticed, a new political movement was awakening in Mexico. This new awakening was one that began long before Posada's death and was really at its tipping point just before he died. In May 1911, President Porfiro Diaz resigned from his almost thirty-five year long reign. His successor, Francisco I. Madero, an advocate for the agrarian revolution and workers rights was assassinated by Emilio Zapata. Mexico was going through a violent civil war with little to no peace.

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<sup>31</sup> Posada José Guadalupe, Stals José Lebrero, and Reverté Ramón. *Posada: Mexican Engraver* (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Art Contemporáneo, 2008), 99.

In 1917, a new constitution was created, and President Venustiano Carranza was elected. By 1920, Carranza had been assassinated by his former ally, General Alvaro Obregon, who became the new president of Mexico. Obregon inherited a country that had been through years of turmoil, and after a ten-year civil war, the Mexican people were tired of oppressive regimes and had little to no hope. When Obregon began his presidency, he focused on the reconstruction of Mexico, which paved the way for several artists. Obregon's first order was to appoint José Vasconcelos as the minister of the newly created Ministry of Public Education (SEP). Vasconcelos's job was to assemble as many artists as possible to create murals that decorated Mexico, which told the stories of what it meant to be Mexican.

These artists helped recreate Mexico, but what they created was not just telling the story of Mexico's past. According to Dafne Cruz Porchini (2016), the ministry wanted to embody the philosophical ideas of functionaries, intellectuals, and artists.<sup>32</sup> This embodiment helped create the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors (SOTPE). The SOTPE was not afraid to express their political thoughts and was known for their profound work that inspired not only Mexicans, but also an international community. The SOTPE affirmed in *El Machete*, the syndicate's journal, and the Mexican Communist Party that art of the Mexican people "is great because it surges from the people; it is collective, and our own aesthetic aim is to socialize artistic expression, to destroy bourgeois individualism."<sup>33</sup> As one takes a deep dive into the SOTPE, they will realize that although their work was approached differently, they all held the same political agenda described above.

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<sup>32</sup> Affron, Matthew, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini, and Renato González Mello. *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2016), 271.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

The SOTPE consisted of several artists, including Diego Rivera (1886-1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), Jean Charlot (1998-1979), and Xavier Guerrero (1896-1974). Their work united aesthetics with ideological propaganda and used Mexican history as a vehicle for inspiration. José Guadalupe Posada was one of the main influences on these artists, as they viewed him as the precursor of revolutionary commitment and supposed opponent to the dictatorship of the President Porfirio Diaz.<sup>34</sup> However, as explained in this essay, Posada was not opposed to the dictatorship and actually produced work that can be viewed as celebratory of the former president.

The person credited with popularizing Posada is Jean Charlot, a French artist who was fascinated with Mexican culture. Having relations with most of the Mexican Muralists such as Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, Jean Charlot was a crucial member of the movement. In 1921, Charlot had his first encounter with Posada's work. Having been trained in graphic art, Charlot was fascinated by Mexico's deeply rooted history in printmaking. He was especially interested in the penny press industry and stumbled upon Posada's work. Although many Mexican people were acquainted with Posada's art, they did not connect his name to the work. Making an appearance in Dr. Atl's *Las artes populares en México, Volume 2*, Jean Charlot is the key reason as to why Posada's name is known to us today as he shared his discoveries not only with the world, but most importantly, the Mexican Muralists.

In 1925, Charlot came out with an issue called *Revista de Revistas*, which heralded Posada, stating, "Posada was the bottleneck through which the Mexican artists must pass to get from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century."<sup>35</sup> He believed that what he had found was a key piece to what the SOTPE was looking for, believing Posada was, "the printmaker of the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>35</sup> Tyler, Ron. "Posada's Mexico," Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data. 1979, 5.

Mexican people.”<sup>36</sup> Charlot praised Posada’s versatility, both in his style and the content that he produced. Charlot’s enthusiasm for Posada helped inspire artists like Diego Rivera, who was seen as the leader of the Mexican Muralist movement.

Diego Rivera was a key figure not only in the artistic movement in Mexico, but also in the political philosophy movement, as he adopted the likes of the Soviet Union. He was not in favor of capitalism, but rather looked to the ideas of Karl Marx. In his eyes, and those within the Muralist Movement, Profirio Diaz was a symbol of greed, a capitalist, and one who allowed foreign countries to abuse Mexican resources that took advantage of the Mexican people. Emilio Zapata was viewed as a hero in his fight for reform and his constant aggression towards the establishment of Diaz.

When uncovering Posada, Rivera was fascinated not only by his style, but also by the fact that he was authentically Mexican. He admired the fact that Posada portrayed Mexico’s famous traditions, social life, and political news in the span of almost fifty years. It is important to note that although Rivera is mostly known for his work within the Mexican Muralist movement, he spent much of his early career abroad. He traveled to Spain, Paris, and Italy, where he admired the works of Giotto, Goya, El Greco, Picasso, and Braque. Notably, he spent his time in Italy looking at Renaissance and Baroque art, taking an interest in fresco painting. When analyzing Rivera’s relationship with Posada, it is vital to understand Rivera’s background and how it was not entirely influenced solely by Mexican culture, much like Posada himself with his traditional Eurocentric work done in the city of Leon and in *La Patria*

One of the major examples of Posada’s influence on the Muralists is Diego Rivera’s *The Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda Park* (fig. 18). In this mural, Diego Rivera depicts

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 4.

an ideal day in Mexico with his important figures. These figures helped shape him into who he was and this painting serves as a symbol of gratitude. Here, Rivera depicts himself as a young child, with his wife Frida Kahlo behind him holding what appears to be the yin/yang symbol. Rivera holds hands with La Muerte Catrina or La Calavera Catrina. With her left hand, she holds the left elbow of José Guadalupe Posada. The symbolism in this painting is that La Catrina and Posada are the parents of Rivera. At the time, La Catrina would have been a symbol for human vanity, and Posada's engravings were what first inspired Rivera as an artist. Lastly, one can see an equestrian figure in the back right of the painting, which is largely thought to represent Emilio Zapata, and the painting has Benito Juárez in the back left.

Though there are many references to Posada and his influence on the Muralists, this is the first mural to feature a full body portrait of him. Rivera even alludes to Posada being his father in this painting. This mural strengthened Posada's ties to Rivera, and the inclusion of these political figures in the painting also connects Posada to these movements. The painting not only depicts Posada as Rivera's father, but also allows viewers to see him as a political sympathizer with Rivera.

*El Machete* also incorporated Posada into their monthly publications. In August 1924, *El Machete* printed one of Posada's original block prints depicting an ambush of Federal troops on Zapatistas. The print reads, *Desde 1910 a la fecha, el pueblo los ha venido varias veces* (From 1910 to date, the town has visited them several times) (fig.19). This is yet another way the Muralists incorporated Posada into their revolution. Posada often created illustrations of battles, as seen in *Combate de los federales contra los zapatistas* (fig. 20), which closely resembles the one the Muralists used in *El Machete*. This reinforces the idea that Posada was simply a commercial artist reporting what was happening at the time.

There are also accounts of Posada creating illustrations where Zapatistas are portrayed as “bandits.” In the double-sided broadside, *Asalto al tren de Cuernavaca por los execrables bandidos Zapatistas* (fig. 21), an assault carried out by Zapatistas is described, and 182 people were found dead and 17 wounded. The bottom right of the broadside reads, “The Zapatista barbarians rushed at the ladies and girls, vilely inflicting their honor on them.” This broadside was printed in 1910, the same year as the broadside the Muralists used. This proves that they selectively picked and chose which works by Posada helped with their political agenda. They also made a point to mention how the Federal troops used European Military academies, which would differentiate them from the Zapatistas and make them appear less Mexican. As mentioned earlier, Diego Rivera and most of the Muralists received a traditional European education in the arts.

One of the most well-known portraits of Posada was created by Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) called, *Homage to Posada* (fig. 22). It depicts an idolized, seated Posada watching a riot ensue before his eyes. Mendez, the founder of Taller de Grafica Popular, was heavily inspired by Posada and his craft. He portrays Posada in a contemplative way, with an etching in front of him as he watches Diaz’s troops beat down on peasants in the streets. This was a symbol of the oppressive Diaz regime. Behind Posada are his printer and the Flores Magón brothers, two revolutionary philosophers from the period. Above Posada’s head is the year 1902 – the year Mendez was born.

Looking deeper into this portrait, one can see that Mendez used one of Posada’s illustrations of a riot and used it within the piece. This work is *Continuación de las manifestaciones anti-reeleccionistas* (fig. 23), which depicts a demonstration protesting against

reelections. This is yet another example where Posada's imagery and name are used to portray him as a revolutionary.

As one can see, the Mexican Muralists and those involved in the reconstruction of Mexico played a crucial role in reshaping the perception of Posada. They collected many of his works that illustrated Emilio Zapata's victories and the brutality of Diaz's regime. However, they failed to provide a clear perspective that filtered out their revolutionary propaganda, thus depriving audiences of a broader understanding of Posada. As evident in *Asalto al tren de Cuernavaca por los execrables bandidos Zapatistas* (fig. 21), Posada not only created works that highlighted the victories of revolutionaries, but also provided an accurate perspective of what was happening in Mexico during his lifetime.

José Guadalupe Posada's work has impacted artists and audiences on a national and international level for over a century. No matter how much we evolve as a society, Posada's work has always remained raw and relatable. Throughout this essay, I have argued that Posada has undergone various identities. When uncovering who he is and what he stood for, it is evident that the ability to do so is difficult, as he left this world with no writing to his name. This circumstance has left those that came after him to shape his legacy.

Known as a political cartoonist for his early caricatures in Aguascalientes, illustrations of the political climate in Mexico City, and for his satirical *calaveras*, it is easy to visualize Posada as a revolutionary figure who helped portray the struggles of the agrarian revolution. It is also possible to acknowledge the limited work he did to promote the civil war that broke out in Mexico towards the end of his life in 1910.

Throughout this essay, uncovering the work that Posada produced in Aguascalientes, Leon, and Mexico City, one can see that Posada was not a revolutionary figure. This viewpoint

was strengthened, when dissecting the political approach the Mexican Muralists had in their usage of political propaganda that propelled Posada to fame in a misleading way. Instead, when trying to understand Posada, it is clear that he was in fact not a partisan revolutionary, but someone who witnessed a time when Mexico was undergoing tremendous social upheaval.

Viewing Posada as a witness rather than a revolutionary can be difficult, as his work electrified artists to pursue a political artistic career. However, in this essay I have aimed not to reduce his artistic influence to one of a political cartoonist, but to uncover the reality of Posada's life and how important it is to not reshape his identity. As we evolve as a society, we begin to notice manipulations that have been passed down through generations. These biases, over time, begin to become one's truth and it is our responsibility to remove them to see an artist for who they really are. Posada being known as a witness to his time has been heard of before, but due to language barriers and how Posada's work is being taught, Posada being known as a revolutionary cartoonist still stands today. This essay's aim was not only to uncover Posada's life, but to bridge the language gap and to spark a new identity for Posada that is not being highlighted in our lives today.



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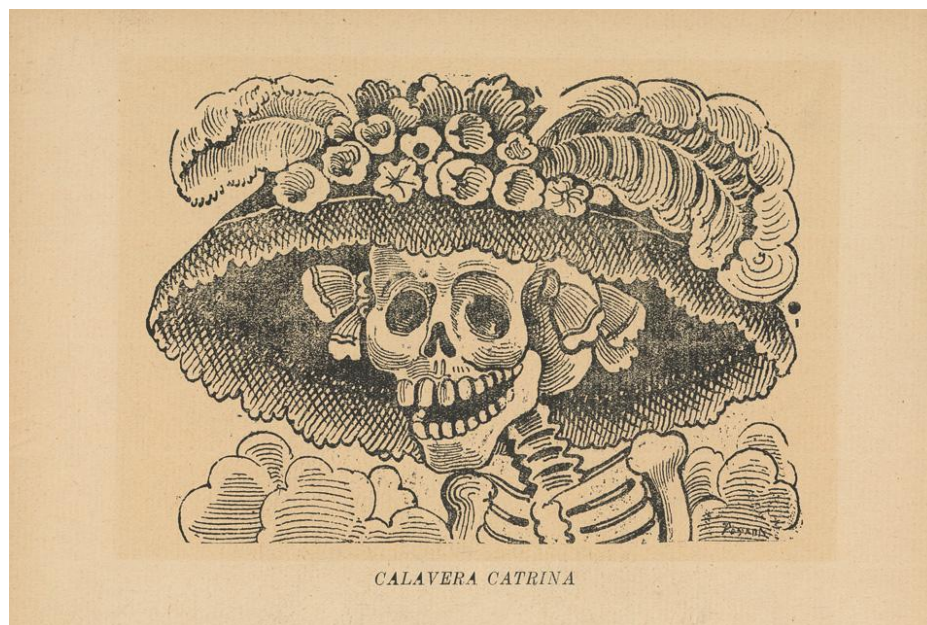
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**Illustrations**



**(Fig. 1)** José Guadalupe Posada, *La calavera catrina*, from the portfolio 36 Grabados: José Guadalupe Posada, published by Arsacio Vanegas, Mexico City, c. 1910, zinc etching, 34.5 x 23 cm.



(Fig. 2) José Guadalupe Posada, Nos alcanzan, doctor. Si, y ni rebuznar puedo ahora, compañero (They catch up with us, doctor. Yes, and I can't even bray now, mate), c. 1871, Aguascalientes, Mexico

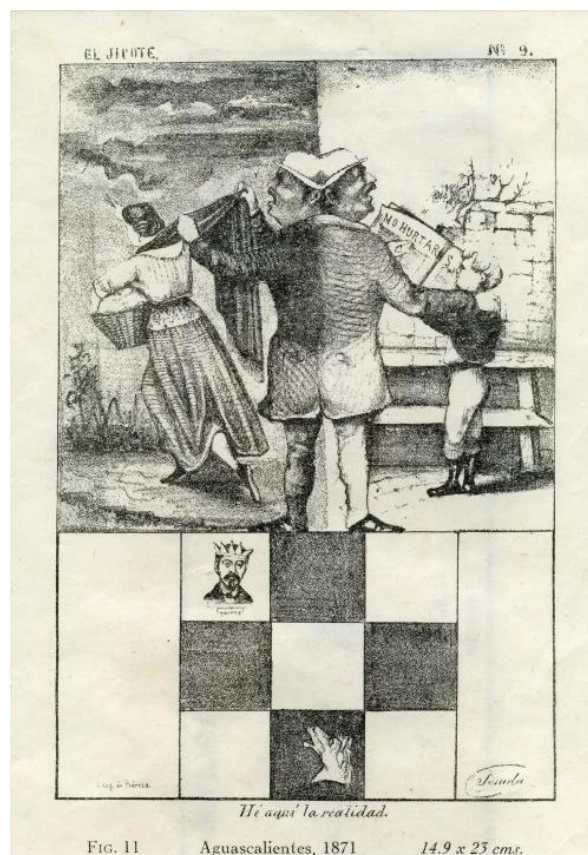
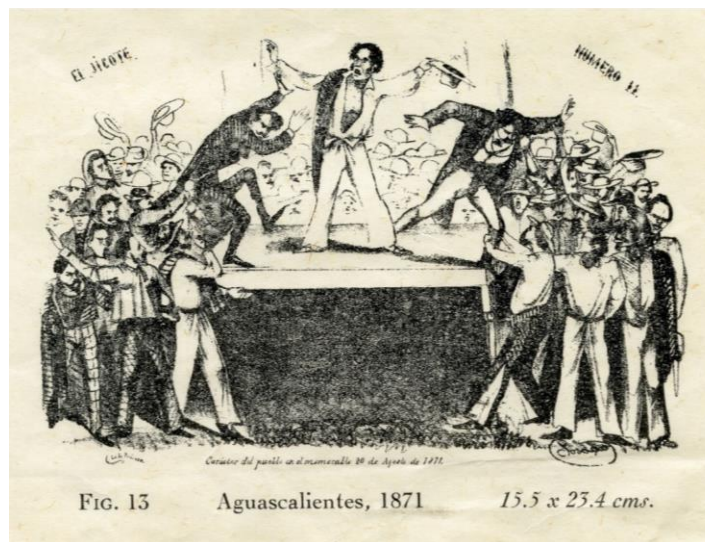


FIG. 11 Aguascalientes, 1871 14.9 x 23 cms.

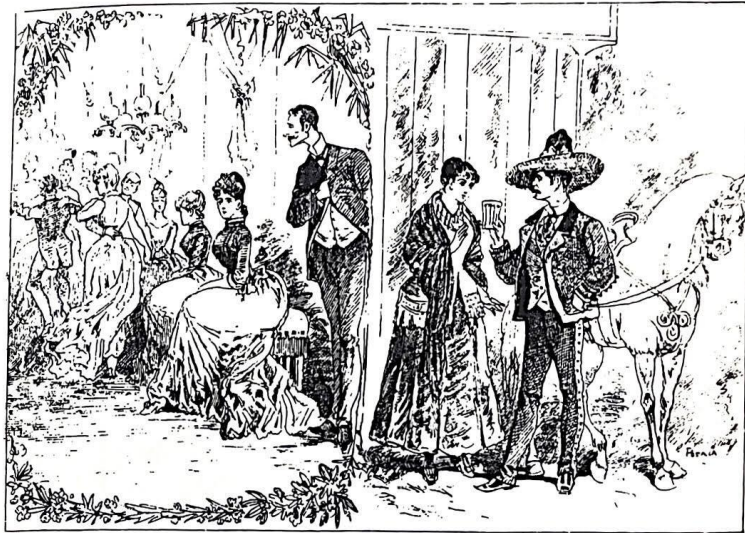
(Fig. 3) José Guadalupe Posada, *N. 9, he aquí la realidad, fig. II, El Jicote*, c. 1871, Aguascalientes, México



(Fig. 4) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Catedral del pueblo, El Jicote*, c. 1871, Aguascalientes, Mexico



(Fig. 5) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Los Gustos de la Mujer*, La Patria Ilustrada, c. 1889, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 6) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Virtudes Cardinales*, La Patria Ilustrada, c. 1889, Mexico City, Mexico



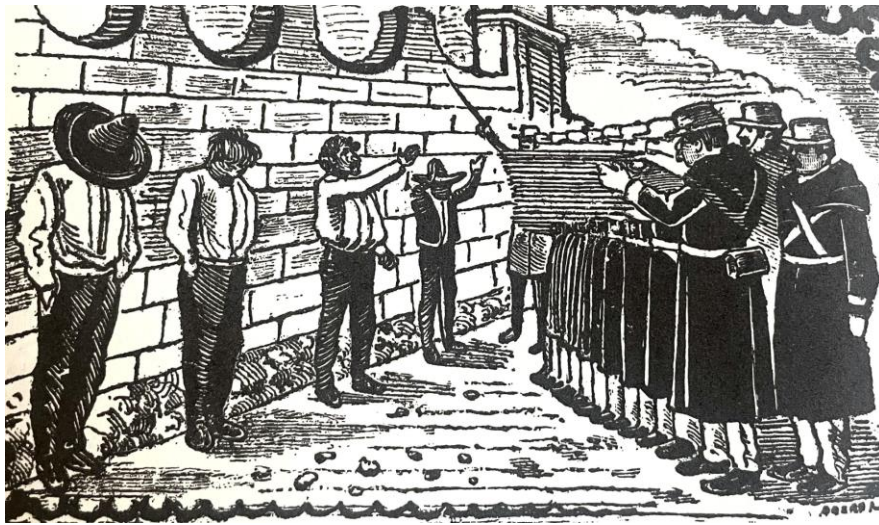
(Fig. 7) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *A la Milagrosísima Imagen de Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos*, c. 1890-1920, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 8) José Guadalupe Posada, *¡Horrorosa noticia! Robo sacrilego y asesinato del señor cura en la iglesia parroquial del Pueblo de Zahuaya*, c. 1910-1920, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 9) José Guadalupe Posada, *El ahorcado- Revolucionario ahorcado por los hacendados* (*The hanged man- Revolutionary hanged by the landowners*), c. 1910-1912, Mexico City



(Fig. 10) José Guadalupe Posada, *Corrido de los cuatro zapatistas fusilados (Corrido of the four Zapata followers executed by firing squad)*, c. 1910-1912, Mexico City

**Batalla del 5 de Mayo de 1862**  
**Gran Triunfo de México sobre la Francia!**

EL GENERAL  
**PORFIRIO DIAZ**  
 Presidente actual de la República Mexicana.

A medida que transcurre el tiempo, todos los mexicanos vamos comprendiendo y corroborando más y más los grandes progresos que se realizan en nuestra amada Patria, progresos que son debidos a la eficacia y actual Magistratura. ¡El General Porfirio Díaz! Nadie cual él ha logrado sostener la verdadera paz de la República, y esta paz como es natural ha traído por consecuencia inmediata la cultura y el adelanto de los hijos de México. La moralidad de nuestro pueblo ya se hace palpable en cuanto a las circunstancias y al medio en que vive. Los vicios y los crímenes, aunque todavía se encuentran en la clase ínfima de la sociedad han disminuído considerablemente. Y es porque nuestro Primer Magistrado toma un activo empeño en proteger las artes y proporcionar a la referida clase humilde todos los medios posibles para que se moralice, conociendo sus derechos y deberes de ciudadano libre y civilizado. Comparad el México de hace veinte años, por ejemplo, con el México de hoy. La diferencia es notabilísima. El carácter de la población cambia, ostensiblemente, el progreso se realiza a grandes pasos.

El General Porfirio Díaz no perdona medio alguno para beneficiar a la Nación que tiene a su cargo. Desde las primeras fases de su vida militar se notó en él aquella tendencia, aquella actividad en conservar los inalienables derechos de la Patria Mexicana. Su valor fué no de los vulgares, sino un valor bien entendido y fundado lógicamente. La abnegación,

siempre dominó en su espíritu, pues innumerables veces se le ha visto sacrificar sus intereses y su vida por salvar la de los mexicanos. Fué guerrero no por sensualidad, no por ánimo de destrucción, no por conveniencias ó amor propio, ni tampoco por el afán del triunfo; fué guerrero por salvar los derechos del pueblo, por emanciparlo de toda dominación extranjera, por



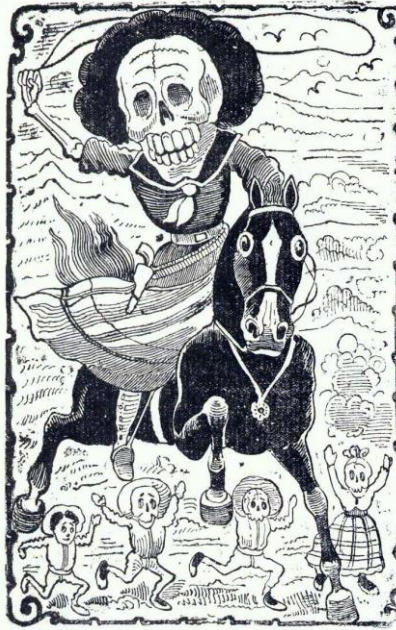
**(Fig. 11)** José Guadalupe Posada, *La batalla del 5 de mayo de 1862: ¡El gran triunfo de México sobre Francia!*, México (*The Battle of May 5, 1862: The Great Triumph of Mexico over France!*, Mexico), c. 1890-1913, Mexico City



**(Fig. 12)** Jose Guadalupe Posada, *El Cadáver de Arnulfo Arroyo*, c. 1897, Mexico City, Mexico



**(Fig. 13)** Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Un Recuerdo, Mis Amigos, del que ya es hoy Calavera*, c. 1890-1913, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 14) José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera Revolucionaria*, c. 1910, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 15) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera de un revolucionario zapatista*, c. 1910-1912, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 16) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera de los patinadores* (*Calavera of the street cleaners*), c. 1910, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 17) José Guadalupe Posada, *Las Revueltas Calaveras*, c. 1910, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 18) Diego Rivera, *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (*Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Central Park*), c. 1947, Mexico City, 4.8 x 15 m



(Fig. 19) José Guadalupe Posada, *Desde 1910 a la fecha, el pueblo los ha venido varias veces* (*From 1910 to date, the town has visited them several times*), c. 1924, Mexico City, Mexico,

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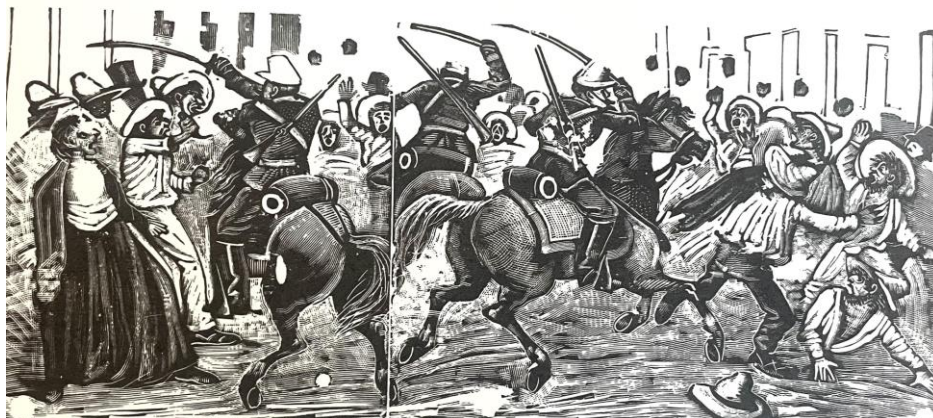
(Fig. 20) José Guadalupe Posada, *Combate de los federales contra los zapatistas (A battle between federal forces and zapatistas)*, c. 1910-1912, Mexico City, Mexico



(Fig. 21) José Guadalupe Posada, *Asalto al tren de Cuernavaca por los execrables Bandidos Zapatistas (Assault on the Train from Cuernavaca by those execrable bandit Zapatistas)*, c. 1910, Mexico City, MoMA



(Fig. 22) Leopoldo Méndez, *Posada en su taller (Homenaje a Posada) (Posada in His Workshop (Homage to Posada))*, c. 1953, Art Institute Chicago



(Fig. 23) Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Continuación de las manifestaciones anti-reeleccionistas (Continuation of the anti reelection demonstrations)*, c. 1892, Mexico City