



Vol. 5, No. 3, Spring 2008, 257-262

[www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente)

## **Review/Reseña**

Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

## **Print Art and Revolution in Mexico**

### **Lincoln Cushing**

Art Historian

Although Mexico's contribution to social-movement murals is well documented, much less is known about Mexico's activist graphic arts history. Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) was a printmaker and activist in numerous political and artistic groups, but he reached his incandescent peak as founding member and de-facto leader of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (variously translated as Popular Graphic Arts Workshop or People's Graphic Art Workshop, TGP). It is a resounding tragedy that the TGP, one of the most significant loci of mid-20th century social movement printmaking, is virtually unknown in the United States. This is only partly explained by the usual disability of Anglocentrism; the deeper roots have to do with academia's discomfort with political activism and with the general

lack of scholarship in this country about political printmaking. Deborah Caplow's excellent book goes a long way toward informing us about the explosive combination of art, artists, politics, and printmaking in Mexico during the mid-1900s. More than any previous work, Caplow's book explains Méndez in the context of his time, analyzed through the organizations in which he participated and the other artists with whom he collaborated.

Mexico has a long history of printmaking in the service of social change, largely credited to the seminal work of José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), who was a printmaker and social critic during the Mexican Revolution. The TGP was founded in late 1937 after the collapse of the four-year-old Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR, Revolutionary Writers' and Artists' League). It brought together a dedicated cadre of political activists who happened to express themselves as printmakers. They worked collaboratively, issued editions as both fine-art prints for raising funds and free or cheap street posters for propaganda, and engaged in strategic acts of support for progressive candidates and issues. Although they occasionally generated lithographs, screenprints, and other media, their trademark expression was through linocuts –one or two color relief prints created from hand cut linoleum mounted on blocks. Prints were generally single sheet items, although some works are quite large for this medium (35 x 90 cm) and some were printed as two sheets and pasted together into one large poster.

The TGP created exemplary images on such social justice topics as land reform, progressive electoral candidates, anti-war and anti-imperialist movements, opposition to fascism in Japan and Germany, solidarity with foreign struggles, folk life, labor and trade unions, Mexican revolutionary history and heroes, and other progressive causes. The Taller became a magnet in the progressive design community, and several resident and guest U.S. artists (including Elizabeth Catlett, Pablo O'Higgins, and Mariana Yampolsky) produced work there. In fact, the constant ebb and flow between the U.S. and Mexico of artists, commissions, and exhibits was one of the TGP's manifestations of artistic internationalism.



“Primero de mayo—CTM 1947”, linocut. From the collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

The absence of published material on what is arguably the single most significant graphics workshop in the Americas is profound and perplexing. The University of New Mexico, which holds a sizable collection of TGP prints and ancillary documents, planned the publication of an anthology in 2005, but the project was never completed. The Philadelphia Museum of Art produced the exhibit “Mexico and Modern Printmaking: A Revolution in the Graphic Arts, 1920 to 1950” in 2007. The core of this exhibit was prints from the TGP, and resulted in a lavishly-illustrated catalog with an essay on the TGP and several on participating artists. But most scholarship on the Taller is buried in a handful of unpublished doctoral theses.

Organized chronologically, Caplow’s book traces Méndez’ prolific and influential trajectory, noting artistic and political influences that affected his practice. The artistic inspirations were both domestic (Posada, of course, at the top) as well as North American (Thomas Nast) and European (Käthe Kollwitz and John Heartfield). Although there is a deep link with refugees from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, there is less documented evidence or analysis of artistic influences being swapped with other Caribbean or Latin American countries. (Such links exist—recently deceased Puerto Rican painter and printmaker Rafael

Tufiño was born in Brooklyn and went to art school in Mexico under the G.I. Bill, where he studied under several TGP printmakers). Caplow notes that Méndez was the first of that generation’s Mexican graphic artists to emulate (and later expand upon) Posada’s iconography and satiric visual approach, reintroducing the fundamentally Mexican image of the *calavera*.

Méndez expressed himself in many media. He produced some murals, and although the published text states that all of them appear to have been lost, the author has been pleased to find out that it turns out the murals painted by Méndez, Zalce and O’Higgins at the National Printers’ Workshops has been rediscovered and reinstalled at the UNAM in 2007. He also published essays on Mexican art and culture. But, starting with woodcut prints in 1925, he quickly embraced the democratic possibilities of printmaking. Caplow points out that rather than employing a simply iconic treatment, Méndez often integrated narrative text into his imagery in the form of background banners and captions.



“Paremos la agresión a la clase obrera!” 1950, linocut. From the collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Caplow also uses Méndez’ experiences to explore some of the challenges faced anywhere by political arts groups operating under capitalism. How shall collective work be balanced by individual work? How much work should be done for free or cheap as propaganda versus high-

priced fine art prints for sale at galleries? To what extent does it hurt or help the Taller to become affiliated with a specific political candidate or party? In which sort of major equipment should a “people’s workshop” invest, and what are the political consequences of such choices? Caplow treats us with Mendez’ observations on this issue, as observed later in his life in 1963:

...To me it [getting an offset press] has always been and continues to be a worthy idea, but it does not fit into the reality of the Taller. A machine of this type prints four thousand copies an hour. In one day of work one could run a great quantity of drawings given that five, six, seven drawings can be printed on one plate. That is to say in one hour—if one makes four prints in one plate—sixteen thousand copies of a print can be printed. This requires a very efficient apparatus of distribution such as belongs to a big business, and we have never been big businessmen! In addition, a machine can not be idle; it is necessary for it to work constantly to justify its existence and to pay for itself. Neither are artists going to run it. It would be absurd to ask artists to manage it themselves. For this reason I am against the mechanization of the Taller as it is today. [from “Los 60 años de Leopoldo Méndez,” by Elena Poniatowska, in *Artes de Mexico*, July 1963.]

Readers unfamiliar with printmaking techniques will not learn much about nuances of the media in this text. The Mexican graphic artists appropriated a wide range of methods, each involving different levels of artistic skill, adaptability, and cost. The TGP even developed a domestic variant of this process known as “suelografía,” using the cheaper industrial material “Neolite” manufactured for shoes and sandals. And unfortunately, the economics of modern publishing has limited the visual wealth—although here are sixteen pages of color reproductions, and many of the images presented were black and white to begin with, still many of the images presented lose some of their impact when devoid of their original coloration, and no notation is offered to indicate which ones suffered this cut.

But these are minor concerns. The book was researched with care, and includes fourteen interviews that bring the immediacy of participants voices into the mix. It is also meticulously footnoted, with an extensive bibliography and index. The author also did an excellent job of personally photodocumenting a large body of material encountered in her research and fieldwork. The aggregate whole of this book—the illustrations,

research, and original analysis—makes it an essential resource for anyone trying to understand the dynamic and stirring history of Mexico's graphic art tradition.