Alberto Beltrán (1923–2002)
Alberto Beltrán grew up working in his father’s tailoring shop. As a teenager, he enrolled in night classes in graphic art at the Academia de San Carlos and the Academia de Gráfica Libre. His training in commercial graphics is reflected in the extremely visually communicative style of his work. While struggling to find a job, Beltrán briefly illustrated comic strips for a Mexican newspaper. In 1944, he joined the TGP and became involved in literacy campaigns, publishing flyers for a program through the Instituto Indigenista. Beltrán was also a founding member of both the Instituto de Bellas Artes and the Academia de San Carlos. After his retirement from the TGP, he became an editor at various liberal Mexican publications, including Abi va el golpe and Coyote emplumado. Beltrán died in 2002 in Mexico City.15

Francisco Dosamantes (1911–1986)
Francisco Dosamantes was a member of the LEAR before joining the TGP in 1937. Prior to working with the Taller, he studied at the Academia de San Carlos and, in 1928, was a part of the painters’ organization Treinta-treinta. Throughout his career, Dosamantes was active as a teacher, working in Mexico City high schools until 1940 and serving as the general secretary of the Unión de los Profesores de Artes Plásticas in 1941. From 1941 to 1945, like other TGP members, he dedicated himself to participating in cultural missions and teaching in rural schools. He painted several murals during his travels and acted as director at the school of painting in Campeche in the Yucatán peninsula. Dosamantes was also devoted to promoting literacy, a goal he advanced by illustrating books for the Ministerio de la Enseñanza Pública.17

Heavy modeling and a sharp graphic quality characterize Dosamantes’s prints. In his work with the TGP, he often depicted scenes of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and figures with an overt antifascist sentiment. His prints of rural communities particularly reveal the political attitude shared by members of the Taller, upholding these collective societies as examples of functioning Communism. Dosamantes used his bold, clear style to produce grand-scale promotional posters for the Taller de Gráfica Popular’s exhibitions.

Arturo García Bustos (1926–)
A student of Frida Kahlo (these students became known as “los Fridos”), Bustos’s early studies were in painting. Later he also worked as a printmaker and muralist. With his wife Rina Lazo, primary assistant to Diego Rivera, they were part of the political art scene in Mexico. Bustos joined the Taller in 1945. Arturo García Bustos is recognized as one of the greatest Mexican lithographers and as one of the best Mexican painters and muralists. His murals can be seen in the Oaxaca room of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico, the metro station at the UNAM, and the stairways of the Municipal Palace in Oaxaca, to mention only a few. Bustos’s work centers on social and political criticism and protest against injustice, as well as a constant fight for peace. Currently, Bustos lectures on Mexican art and is currently working on a new mural project.

Andrea Gómez (1926–)
Though she was born in Mexico City, Andrea Gómez soon moved with her family to Morelia, Michoacán. It was in Morelia that Gómez’s grandmother, the famous revolutionary author Juana B. Gutiérrez de Mendoza, encouraged her to pursue art. In 1940, Gómez returned to Mexico City to study at the Academia de San Carlos. There, she met Mariana Yampolsky, who urged her to join the TGP. Gómez, though, would not join the group until 1949, after marrying TGP artist Alberto Beltrán. Between 1940 and 1949, she worked as a commercial artist at various advertising firms. She was commissioned to make illustrations for organizations such as the Instituto Indígena Nacional and the Secretaría para la Enseñanza Pública. During her time as a member of the TGP from 1949 to 1960, Gómez focused mainly on creating pamphlets and posters for political rallies, union meetings, and anti-nuclear protests. Although it was rare for a female member of the TGP to contribute so heavily to prints for political campaigns, Gómez transferred her experience from advertising into these political works. In 1956, she won the Premio Nacional de Grabado for her print La Niña de la Basura. She also founded the Casa de Cultura del Pueblo and the Taller de Dibujo Infantil Arco Iris, two art centers in Mexico. Currently, Gómez is focusing on portraiture and studies of Flemish painting.

Jesús Escobedo (1918–1978)
Jesús Escobedo was born in the small Mexican town of El Oro but moved to Mexico City with his family. He began his painting education at the Santiago Rebull Centro Popular de la Pintura, and from 1935 to 1937 he was part of the LEAR, for whom he created antifascist posters. In July 1945, he became a member of the TGP. Also in 1945, he received a scholarship from the Guggenheim Foundation to live in New York State and work on a mural project for a school in Lexington. Escobedo’s work especially emphasizes large cities (such as Mexico City and New York City) and the idea that the individual is often sacrificed in favor of the industrial and modern. He has been included in several exhibitions in the United States, including at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Jules Heller (1919–2008)
An important printmaker and beloved teacher, Jules Heller was born in the Bronx and raised in Brooklyn. He first studied printmaking while attending Townsend Harris High School in Flushing, New York. After receiving a bachelor’s degree from Arizona State University, a master’s degree from Columbia University, and a doctorate from the University of Southern California, and serving five years as an instructor in the Army Air Forces during World War II, Heller pursued a career in collegiate education. Visiting professorships took him to Thailand and Argentina, and he later served as head of the Fine Arts Department at the University of Southern California. He went on to become the founding dean of the College of Arts and Architecture at Penn State University (1963–68), dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts York University in Toronto (1968–73), and finally dean of the College of Fine Arts at Arizona State (1976–85), before retiring in Scottsdale, Arizona. Besides teaching, Heller also wrote several textbooks that have remained a standard for the classroom, including Printmaking Today (1958). He received numerous prestigious honors and awards, including the Fulbright Fellowship, for his contributions to printmaking and art education, before he died of cancer in January 2008. The print room at Arizona State University, Tempe, is named after him.

Throughout his career, Heller took a particular interest in Mexican printmaking, especially the works of Leopoldo Méndez. In 1947, he and his wife honeymooned in Mexico and worked at the TGP as visiting artists. This was just the first of many trips Heller made there. He spent significant time in Méndez’s studio, studying his works extensively and eventually writing his biography. “Before I ever met him, I was well aware of his powerful linocuts and lithographs,” noted Heller in the memoir. His study on Méndez was the first attempt to catalog the artist’s work and to distinguish him from other Mexican printmakers. Through his contributions to the TGP and his attentive biography of its founder, Heller helped to immortalize this significant moment in the history of Mexican art.18

Angel Bracho (1911–2005)
Angel Bracho, a member of the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios from 1933 to 1938, was one of the first artists to join the Taller de Gráfica Popular. He participated in all of their collective exhibitions and collaborated in their publications. Bracho worked in a range of graphic media, especially lithography. The lithograph Las Familias Huicholas in this exhibition exemplifies his fluid, rhythmic style. In 1948, he became a member of the Sociedad para el Impulso de las Artes Plásticas. He published El Rito del Sol de la Tribu de los Huicholas, an album of four lithographs, for the TGP in 1940. His close relationship with leading mural painters led him to collaborate with Alfredo Zalce and others.
Elena Huerta (1908–1997)

Elena Huerta was born in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico, and was the first of four Mexican-born women to join the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP). She began her studies in 1921 at the Academia de Pintura de Saltillo, under the instruction of Rubén Herrera. Upon moving to Mexico City in 1927, she enrolled at the Academia de San Carlos, where she took drawing, painting, and printmaking classes with Carlos Mérida for the next three years. In 1929, she also taught art classes at the Secretaría de la Enseñanza Pública. Huerta was a founding member of the LEAR in 1933. Along with several other artists, including Leopoldo Méndez, she began the first puppet theater group in Mexico. Huerta traveled extensively both before and during her involvement with the TGP; she lived and worked in the former Soviet Union from 1941 to 1946 and visited China and Cuba in the late 1950s, participating in numerous exhibitions.

Although Huerta was first invited to the TGP in 1939, she did not become a permanent member until 1948. She remained active in the group until 1953, meanwhile serving as the director of the José Guadalupe Posada and José Clemente Orozco galleries in Mexico City. Outside of her involvement with the Taller, Huerta also produced independent work, including a mural in her hometown of Saltillo. She devoted some of her time to illustrating books, and in 1960 she published a book of her illustrations on rural Mexican women.19

Leopoldo Méndez (1902–1969)

The son of a shoemaker, Leopoldo Méndez is considered the principal founder and leader of the Taller de Gráfica Popular. He was also an important painter, muralist, and teacher. Highly regarded during his lifetime, he won many honors and prizes and was given important exhibitions of his work early in his career. Méndez is known for prints depicting the atrocities of war, the hardships of the campesinos (peasants), warnings of the threat of international fascist factions, and satires of governmental corruption, as seen in plate 20. His works were published and exhibited internationally, bringing him and his colleagues worldwide recognition. In 1939 he received a Guggenheim grant, and in 1946 he won the First National Prize for Graphic Art in Mexico. Méndez illustrated the book Incidentes melódicos del mundo irracional (an edition of which is in the Snite's Hayes Collection) in 1944, and in 1947 he created ten engravings used for the movie Río escondido (many of these engravings are also part of the Museum's holdings). One hundred forty of his prints, including plate 36, were exhibited in 1945 by the Art Institute of Chicago.

Méndez was responsible for the survival of the TGP well into the 1940s. With the end of the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1940, the Taller's production of strictly political prints decreased somewhat, and the group turned to more commercial work such as books and folios. The workshop became a vital center for collaboration, with artists from all over the world coming to Mexico City to work. Opportunities to participate in creative collaborative projects with guest artists shifted the Taller's artistic focus toward broader subject matter, attracting the support of patrons in the United States. But as the artists moved from prints that addressed Mexican social issues to images that celebrated the history and society of the indigenous peoples and works that supported or condemned world politics, the group lost some of its popularity toward the end of the 1940s. Plates 25 and 26 illustrate Méndez's shifting focus.

Many members resigned during this time, but under Méndez's influence the remaining artists adapted their images to Mexico's changing political landscape. Around 1942, the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer became the Taller's business manager and established a publishing house for the workshop called La Estampa Mexicana. His leadership came at a decisive point in the TGP's history, as the group was beginning to struggle both financially and ideologically. He remained with the Taller until his return to Switzerland in 1949, but Méndez was always the group's spiritual and philosophical leader.

Adolfo Mexiac (1927–)

Adolfo Mexiac was the son of peasants. His humble upbringing greatly influenced his work, which has been recognized throughout the world for its imagery of friendship. He was able to channel his everyday childhood experiences into portrayals of rural life, often depicting working class people with social, political, and economic themes (plate 27). Mexiac trained at the Escuela de Bellas Artes de Morelia and then, upon moving to Mexico City, at the Academia de San Carlos. He also spent time learning the medium of graphic arts at the Escuela de Artes la Esmeralda. It was there that he studied under Leopoldo Méndez and Pablo O'Higgins, who—along with Posada and Chavez Morado—were some of his main artistic influences.

Mexiac is internationally recognized, showing in countries as wide-ranging as Mexico, Poland, the Czech Republic, Japan, Italy, Puerto Rico, Germany, and the United States. He is best known as an engraver and is especially revered for his xylography skills. In addition, he is skilled in mediums such as woodcut, color woodblock, illustration, and mural painting. Mexiac became a member of the Academia de Artes del Salón de la Plástica Mexicana in 1956 and showed frequently with the Taller de Gráfica Popular. He received an award of merit from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic for his promotion of friendship through his art.

Francisco Mora (1922–2002)

Francisco Mora was married to another artist associated with the TGP, Elizabeth Catlett. Their marriage lasted over fifty years, during which time they collaborated on many projects. Catlett notes that it was Mora's willingness to share in their professional artistic careers, as well as their home duties, that allowed her to work as prolifically as she did. Mora joined the TGP in 1941, and in 1947 he published a series of lithographs depicting the life of the miner. He also created award-winning prints as part of the Mexican government's campaign for literacy. Mora's involvement with the TGP included illustrating books, making posters for trade unions, and creating prints for magazines and newspapers.20

Isidoro Ocampo (1910–1983)

Isidoro Ocampo was born in Veracruz and moved to Mexico City as a child. At the age of eighteen, he began four years of study at the Academia de San Carlos. Before joining the Taller de Gráfica Popular in 1937, Ocampo was a member of the LEAR and worked for the Ministerio de Educación as a professor of the plastic arts in Mexico City.21

Pablo O'Higgins (1904–1983)

Another founding member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular, Pablo O'Higgins, an American by birth, connected the TGP to the American art scene and dedicated himself to depicting the Mexican working class. Born in Salt Lake City, O'Higgins was dissatisfied with academic, institutional methods; his desire to work in a communal setting led him to continue his art education in Mexico. In 1924, he arrived there to work with Diego Rivera. For several years, O'Higgins worked as Rivera's assistant, learning from him the techniques of mural painting. He left Mexico in the early 1930s to spend a formative year in the Soviet Union, cementing his commitment to defending the rights of the working class.22
O’Higgins established himself as a significant member of the art community in Mexico, and in 1929 he met and collaborated with Leopoldo Méndez. After forming a friendship, the two artists, along with Alfredo Zalce, founded the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios in 1934. Upon the dissolution of the LEAR in 1937, O’Higgins and Méndez continued their artistic collaboration with the formation of the Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico City. O’Higgins brought the expressive style of his mural work to the prints he contributed to the TGP. Working mostly in the lithographic medium, he developed a distinctive oeuvre. A loose, undulating line characterizes his work, in contrast to the typically more angular, graphic line of other TGP members. O’Higgins’s prints often depict quotidian scenes of Mexican workers, reflecting the artist’s obrerismo, or compassion for the struggle of the manual laborer (plate 29). He does not imbue these figures with an overtly propagandistic attitude but rather with a sympathetic, dignified character.

While living in Mexico and working with the TGP, O’Higgins retained ties to the country of his birth. He continued to exhibit his paintings and prints in the United States and received mural commissions in San Francisco and Seattle. Notably, he created an invaluable association between the Taller and artists in the United States. Through O’Higgins, the workshop was able to arrange exhibitions in the States, increasing American recognition of the Mexican art scene.

Alfredo Zalce (1908–2003)

Alfredo Zalce enrolled in the Academia de San Carlos in 1924, launching his multifaceted career. Continuing his studies at the Escuela de Tallab Directa in 1931, he concentrated on lithography with Carlos Mérida. He also worked as an instructor of art, in 1930 founding the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura in Taxco, Guerrero. In 1934, Zalce established the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios with Leopoldo Méndez and Pablo O’Higgins. As a member of the LEAR collective, he acted as a liaison to provincial artists and rural teachers. Beginning in 1932, he had been traveling throughout Mexico with the Profesores Itinerantes Institutos Federales as an instructor of art.26

During this time, Zalce dedicated himself not only to teaching but also to working in mural decoration and immersing himself in the culture of the rural working class. He traveled in 1945 to the Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo. Living in these areas, he developed an understanding and compassion for the social struggles of such communities that would characterize his work in the 1940s. Notably, he published a series of eight lithographs with the TGP, the Estampas de Yucatán, depicting everyday scenes of rural life.

In 1937, Alfredo Zalce, along with Leopoldo Méndez, Pablo O’Higgins, Luis Arenal, and Ángel Bracho, dissolved the LEAR and founded the Taller de Gráfica Popular. Zalce’s striking lithograph and linocut work furthered the political agenda of the TGP on both a domestic and an international front. His oversized, bold propagandistic posters best describe his contribution to the group’s political intentions (plate 32). Zalce used straightforward iconography to catch the eye of the viewer and quickly convey a concept. The figures represented in his posters are especially marked by a sense of heroism, and his prints act as emphatic statements designed to promulgate a proletarian identity.28

Zalce’s smaller lithographs, often characterized by cartoon-like caricatures, were also intended to disseminate information to the Mexican public and advance the TGP’s point of view. Much of Zalce’s work for the Taller is marked by a sense of turbid, dark comedy. This is especially evident in La Prensa al Servicio del Imperialismo (plate 31) and México se Transforma en una Gran Ciudad (plate 18), in which Zalce has distorted the physiognomy of his figures to create morose, chaotic compositions. In his significant work for the 1947 collective folio Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana, Zalce depicts anti-Cárdenas politicians through sordid, viliﬁing caricatures (plates 33, 34).

Zalce exhibited his prints independently both in Mexico and abroad and took part in all collective exhibitions of the TGP. He was especially praised during the exhibition of Mexican art at the Italian Court in Chicago. Due to political differences, Zalce left the Taller in 1947, shortly before the group’s informal dissolution. He subsequently worked in a wide variety of media, including sculpture, ceramics, jewelry, watercolor, mural painting, and printing. About a year before his death in January 2003, Alfredo Zalce’s contribution to Mexican culture was acknowledged with the National Art Award.
The railroaders fight for the Benefit of the People, 1942 Wall Street, 10 Cents more per hour, Wall Street! (Monopoly, Some Swallow a Lot and Slot Machine) and 4000 Homes without Bread: The railroaders fight for the Benefit of the People, Mexico

Francisco Dosamantes, Mexican, 1911–1986
Lithograph, 16.25 x 22.19 inches (41.3 x 56.35 cm)
Gift of Charles S. Hayes '65
2009.012.031

This early, large-scale poster publicizing a 1939 Taller de Gráfica Popular print exhibition epitomizes the graphic modeling and acute line characteristic of TGP work. Francisco Dosamantes’s image of an abstract eye, printed in red and black, dominates the composition. The poster is simple, designed to be prominent and to catch the attention of passersby. The date and location of the exhibition appear in alternating red and black ink, increasing the legibility of the notice. In his bold manner, Dosamantes has added the words exposición litografías to the lids of the striking eye, in tiny yet prominent red letters. The number 20 pierces the center of the pupil.
This 1957 print commemorates the twentieth anniversary of the TGP, announcing an exhibition of various TGP artists’ works in Mexico City’s Palacio de Bellas Artes. In the center of the poster, Alberto Beltrán depicts the hands of a TGP artist carving a linocut of a man seemingly brought to life as he rises from the printing plate. In the background, a wealthy calavera (living skeleton) drinks wine on the right, while on the left a peasant turns his head away from the calavera’s scandalous ways. Beltrán’s print serves as a social commentary on postrevolutionary Mexico, revealing the disparities that still existed among the various social classes.29
PLATE 5, opposite

Victoria

Victory

1945

Angel Bracho, Mexican, 1911–2005

Linocut, 29.13 x 20.75 inches (73.98 x 52.76 cm)

Gift of Charles S. Hayes ’65

2009.012.021

PLATE 6

El Fascismo. 8th Conference

Fascism. 8th Conference

1939

Jesús Escobedo, Mexican, 1918–1970

Lithograph, 17 x 23.75 inches (43.2 x 60.3 cm)

Gift of Charles S. Hayes ’65

2009.012.022

Art, Politics, and Cultural Identity of the Taller de Gráfica Popular
Andrea Gómez’s print Tributo a Cárdenas (plate 7) demonstrates the respect and admiration the Mexican people felt toward their former president. This poster advertises a meeting to honor Cárdenas for his selection as a recipient of the Stalin Peace Prize. Created in 1949 by the Soviet government, the peace prize was awarded annually to an individual who “strengthened peace among peoples.”

Each of the four images of Cárdenas’s presidency in this print features a scene and a text glorifying him for his achievements. The passage under the stoic profile portrait at the top left states that Cárdenas had “expressed its [Mexico’s] most clear and resounding desires for liberty and social justice, friendship, understanding and peace for all the people.” The scene highlights many of the reforms Cárdenas enacted: the plow and oxen represent his agrarian reform, while the factories expelling steam symbolize his effort to improve labor conditions. The last image depicts a peasant family tacking a picture of Cárdenas on the wall of their hut; as the text below reads, “In the most humble shack of our country, there is always a place of worship for Lázaro Cárdenas.”
In this poster, Méndez endorses the 1950 and 1951 miners’ strikes against the American Smelting and Refining Company in Palau, Nueva Rosita, and Cloete. Small text at the bottom of the print urges the viewer to aid the miners in their struggle by sending donations to the union. Méndez presents a heroic depiction of a miner, identifiable by his helmet and mask, extending his arm to defend the woman and child behind him from a threatening bayonet. In his right hand, he grips a banner calling for a stop to “the aggression toward the working class.” Through this powerful imagery, Méndez evokes an emotional response from the viewer in order to strengthen support for the miners’ cause.

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The artists of the TGP led many initiatives in support of antifascist causes in Europe. Produced in 1939, toward the end of the Spanish Civil War, this print contains a strong antifascist overtone. The image, which has been attributed to both Isidoro Ocampo and José Chávez Morado, was printed in a popular serial in Mexican newspapers called the “Risa del Pueblo” [Laughter of the People], which often included political cartoons similar to this one. The artist is satirizing the notion of the free press in Mexico and denouncing Mexican journalists and newspapers with pro-Franco inclinations. Sprawled clumsily on the floor is a foul gachupine [an insulting nickname for Spaniards], whose feet are emanating a strong stench. The gachupine has manipulated the body of newspaper editor Miguel Ordorica into a horn, upon whose neck various names of pro-Franco Mexican newspapers have been etched. Fitted with a swastika earring, Ordorica is exposing the crimes that he and other pro-Franco newspapers have committed against the Mexican people, as the gachupine blows words such as calumnia (defamation) and mentiras (lies) out of his mouth. Located lower on the neck of Ordorica are the words prensa libre [free press]; the artist ridicules this notion by showing how easily the Mexican press can be manipulated by the gachupines.

Underneath the gachupine and Ordorica, on the lower left, is a poem lamenting the state of the Mexican press. The poem tells the audience that “the name ‘free press’ / which is neither free nor press / is paid by the gachupines / so they can write what they think.” Later, in the second stanza, it asserts that the pro-Franco Mexicans have “robbed us in fine form.” To the right of these verses, more text assures the viewer that the horn’s music is only for the “other side,” not for the Mexicans who oppose Franco. While it may have claimed to be free, the press had become, according to the TGP, a malleable horn used by the Franco sympathizers to spread their fascist beliefs. The label caricatures would have resounded with the viewing public. During the revolution, Pablo González was involved in a network of thieves called the Banda del Automóvil Gris, who broke into homes by wearing police uniforms and showing fake search warrants. González was also a politician, and in 1919 he made a bid for the presidential candidacy. In order to change his image, he produced an extremely popular movie, El automóvil gris. This plan backfired, however, only cementing his reputation as a dishonorable politician. The popularity of the film would have made Zalce’s reference to González as a synonym for corruption immediately apparent.

In the print, González sits at the front of the automóvil gris, with the late-1930s politicians Ossorio, I turbe, and Sierra behind him. By including the anachronistic figure of González, Zalce indicted these contemporary politicians as corrupt. The three were part of the Comité de Salvación Pública, a vehemently antimarxist and anti-Cárdenas group, and thus were opposed to the political ideologies of the TGP. Zalce has exaggerated their features to make them easily identifiable to the Mexican public. The stolen scroll tucked under González’s arm, labeled as articles 123 and 127 of the 1917 Mexican constitution, also refers to the dishonesty of these politicians. The theft of these articles—which preserved the right to strike and prevented government officials from increasing their own salaries while in office—highlights the threat posed by these politicians. At the bottom left, a poem further condemns the clownlike characters of the automóvil gris, denouncing the group as “not revolutionaries, nor even Mexicans.” Through this distinctive, morbid comedy, Zalce has created a recognizable propagandistic image and a defense of President Cárdenas’s politics.

Alfredo Zalce’s poster the Risa del Pueblo [plate 12] also takes on the aspect of a political cartoon. By juxtaposing text and image, the artist creates caricatures of contemporary political figures in order to denigrate them. Five figures—one a generic bandit and four labeled as Pablo González, Leon Ossorio, Iturbe, and Bolívar Sierra—are crowded into a gray car, the “automóvil gris.” They escape from a building they have raided, leaving a woman lying in the doorway.
"LA RISA DEL PUEBLO"

Una banda de rufianes la del Automóvil Gris, que tantos robos hizo antes vuelve de nuevo a salir.

Don Pablo va a la cabeza y lo sigue León Ossorio, Iturbe y Bolívar Sierra en ridículo joigorio.

No son revolucionarios ni mexicanos siquiera, son sólo unos mercenarios que se alquilian a cualquiera.

Son bribones chantagistas que viven de cosas ruines, sirviéndole a los callistas y estafando gachupines.

El Retorno del 'Automóvil Gris'
In contrast to Heller’s glorification of a revolutionary hero, Fernando Castro Pacheco’s print (plate 14), also a part of the Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana, focuses on Victoriano Huerta, who was the dictator of Mexico from 1913 to 1914. After graduating from the Colegio Militar de Chapultepec in 1877, Huerta began his career as a military engineer. By 1902, he had ascended to the rank of brigadier general. When Francisco Madero became president in 1911, Huerta disagreed with his proposals for democracy and began planning to get rid of him. On February 18, 1913, Madero was arrested in the national palace during a military revolt, and he was murdered shortly thereafter. Huerta immediately proclaimed himself president and became a tyrannical ruler. Eventually, he was forced into exile by an uprising, and he died in 1916 of cirrhosis of the liver.

Huerta is satirized in this print, depicted on a religious standard held by the oversized hand of a cleric, with a halo crowning his image. The clergyman’s hand prominently displays an expensive jeweled ring, and his smiling face appears grotesque as he waves the standard of Huerta. This image of an overbearing cleric represents the ongoing power conflict between the church and state in Mexico, which was exacerbated by the creation of the 1917 constitution. During this time of political turmoil, the church was attempting to gain more power, and the constitution heavily restricted its involvement in politics. Pacheco’s print shows a crowd of peasants on the right behind the standard and, on the left, members of the bourgeoisie venerating Huerta’s image, all with grins fixed on their faces. Through this scene, the artist satirizes not only Huerta but also the people who supported him: the church and the ignorant bourgeoisie and peasant populations.

Jules Heller’s print Francisco I. Madero, Candidato Popular was made for the Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana. It depicts Madero as he victoriously addresses the Mexican people during his attempt to capture the presidency. Alberto Morales Jiménez’s Indice de los grabados con notas históricas states that Madero is shown traveling across the country to inform the people of his new program of government. In a propagandistic tone, he suggests that Madero, along with his vice-president José María Pino Suárez, will promote freedom and solve all of Mexico’s problems. The print and its accompanying explanation emphasize that Madero was elected as a result of a free and spontaneous vote.

Madero is portrayed waving to a group representative of Mexican society from a balcony. A banner to the right emblazoned with his image reads, “Partido Democrático.” Heller’s representation of the reformist candidate reflects the TGP’s political inclinations and reinforces the ideal of a revolutionary spirit that the group sought to convey in the Estampas. As a tribute to the Mexican Revolution, the folio was intended to fortify the reputation of President Cárdenas, whose successors in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) were the current ruling party.
In her Constitución del ‘17, Elena Huerta creates a portrait-like representation of the historical figures who contributed to the formation of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. The print does not illustrate an actual historical event but rather a fictional gathering of the constitution’s supporters. These political personages are depicted in the established stereotyped form used by the Taller de Gráfica Popular in their many pamphlets, posters, and book illustrations to make the figures’ identities easily recognizable to the viewer.

Venustiano Carranza, who served from 1917 to 1920 as the first president elected under the constitution, is depicted at the center of the group, presenting the new document of law. Pancho Villa, the fourth figure from the right, and Emiliano Zapata, on the far right, represent the factionos who, while supporting the constitution, eventually did not accept President Carranza’s reforms. Indeed, Zapata would later be assassinated on Carranza’s orders. The other figures in the scene represent conservative Catholics and reactionary landowners who similarly did not agree with Carranza’s ideas.
This print depicts Obregón on his last day alive, while he was celebrating his reelection at a banquet in his honor. The remnants of his meal sit in front of him, as does a piece of paper on which his portrait is sketched. His assassin, José de León Toral, had presented an unfinished version of the sketch to Obregón in the restaurant. León Toral had then pretended to continue sketching next to Obregón before shooting him five times in the face. Although the figure holding the pistol in the print is hidden under a sheet, the identity of the assassin is indicated by the clerical figures surrounding Obregón. After working so tirelessly to limit the power of the church, Obregón was ultimately the one made powerless, while the Cristero War continued after his death.

The TGP’s heroic portrayals of revolutionaries such as Pancho Villa contributed to the promotion of Mexicanidad by celebrating Mexico’s historic struggle for social equality. This print by Alberto Beltrán was included in the 1947 portfolio *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana*. As leader of the Division of the Art, Politics, and Cultural Identity of the Taller de Gráfica Popular, one of the private revolutionary armies that fought to topple the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz, Villa was revered by the Mexican people as a hero. His fight “for the people” parallels the TGP’s goal of producing accessible art depicting the struggles of the working class. Beltrán’s portrayal of Villa as a liberator is emphasized by the prominent bandolier running across his chest and by the white outline that surrounds the revolutionary and his horse, as if they were emanating light. The artist achieves a strong sense of motion in the print, giving the impression that Villa’s horse may take off into battle for the people at any moment.
The transformation of Mexico City was not all positive. *México se Transforma en una Gran Ciudad* reflects Alfredo Zalce’s experiences in the city, where he spent most of his life. The artist created the linocut as a reaction to an autobiographical event that occurred while he was living in Mexico City’s Santa María colony. Zalce recounts that in 1947, trash had been left to pile up on the streets while skyscrapers were being constructed. Late one night, he observed a man trying to find food in a heap of trash. When a dog came to look in the same pile, the man said, “What do you want here? Bones, meat? I don’t even have food and I have to feed a family.” In his print, Zalce displays the man prominently, crouched over and picking through the debris with an exaggeratedly large hand, while the emaciated dog, mimicking the man’s gestures, stands in the center of the composition.

The artist has created a chaotic image, where the figures—reduced to the struggle for survival—interact between towering buildings and still incomplete skyscrapers. Zalce heightens the grotesqueness by deforming the figures’ physiognomies and distorting the proportion: an emaciated child stands as tall as a building, and an enormous pair of legs cuts across the composition horizontally. In this macabre pathos, Zalce articulates his regret at Mexico City’s transformation into a “great city,” a title that, in itself, expresses bitter irony.

Members of the TGP looked to Posada’s prints and appropriated the vernacular tradition that he had popularized. In *Derecho de la Clase Obrera*, Pablo O’Higgins borrows his predecessor’s signature motif of the *calavera* to communicate his own message of social satire. O’Higgins may well have printed this small 1951 lithograph during the *Día de los Muertos* celebrations. His image parodies the division between the working and upper classes. A scholar and a woman, depicted as living skeletons, laugh as they dance in a frenzy; they represent education and luxury cavorting out of reach of the working class. Not only does O’Higgins quote Posada’s *calavera* but he also evokes the titles or labels that Posada often included in his prints: in the bottom left corner, he adds a scroll reading, “the rights of the working class.”

O’Higgins, along with Leopoldo Méndez, was a devoted student of Posada’s iconographic language. In 1930, he selected and edited a collection of prints by Posada entitled *Monografía*. Other members of the workshop also regularly used the trope of the *calavera* in their prints, which often championed the working class encumbered by daily struggles. By incorporating this well-known motif from Mexican folk tradition, they could ensure that their politically motivated works would be easily read and understood by both the rural peasant and the urban working class.
The prints by Méndez in this catalog illustrate the direct and powerful style he used to depict the social injustices faced by peasant laborers. For example, in *El Dueño de Todo*, dated to 1948, Méndez portrays a political gangster boss giving orders to a line of overburdened workers, as he rests his feet on a table, relaxing. The large, menacing figure of the owner—defined by heavy, bold, angular lines—is set in the foreground of the scene, while the workers appear as a tiny row of animals in the background. The image clearly supports the labor reforms that President Cárdenas’s administration was implementing at the time. By citing the oppression of the Mexican people, Méndez levels harsh criticism at the government’s former policies and the landowners.

This image was first published as a cover for the journal *Frente a Frente* in 1934, while Méndez was still an active member of the LEAR. *Frente a Frente*, which translates as “Head to Head,” was a leftist journal started by the LEAR during Cárdenas’s presidency as a means of promoting art with a social message.\(^4\) The print shown here is a somewhat later edition that appeared as part of a series of images in one of Méndez’s portfolios. It is among the first examples in which Méndez recognizably employs Posada’s iconography of the calavera to satirize the bourgeois class. In this instance, he uses the device to parody the inauguration of the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, deriding the bourgeois excess of this historical event. Méndez depicts the muralist Diego Rivera as the calavera on the left and Carlos Riva Palacio, the president of the newly formed Partido Nacional Revolucionario, as the calavera on the right. The two men’s perceived dedication to capitalist culture is illustrated by the markings of a dollar (or peso) sign and a swastika, respectively, on the backs of their chairs. The program on the floor by Rivera’s foot translates to read, “Today, ‘The Sun’ Proletarian Series, tickets $25”; this inclusion draws attention to the inflated price of admission to the event, which was apparently intended for the middle class.
El Fin del Zopilote narrates the death of El Zopilote and the liberation of Doña Caracol. El Zopilote hangs lifelessly from the branch of a bare, twisted tree, while the snail woman’s saviors rejoice and dance in the glow of several bonfires.

Méndez’s contribution to this book, marked by pre-Columbian imagery and a fantastic, otherworldly quality, may seem exceptional in his usually political and socially-minded oeuvre. However, he never lost sight of his Aztec and Mayan ancestry, using symbols from this fertile cultural tradition increasingly over the course of his career, especially after 1947. And even these folk images served his political message: El Zopilote has been seen to represent the oppressors of the Mexican people and leftist thought—capitalism, imperialism, and fascism.

Méndez made this print, which depicts the brutality of a Nazi prison camp, for the cover of Anna Seghers’s Das siebte Kreuz (The Seventh Cross). Published as a Spanish-language edition in Mexico in 1943 by El Libro Libre, the book recounts the imprisonment of seven German socialists and their attempted escape from Nazi violence. Seghers, a German Communist and renowned author, fled Nazi oppression herself, living in exile in both Mexico and the United States.

Through Das siebte Kreuz, she exposed the Nazi aggression that targeted the Left in the 1930s. One of her most important works, the book was critical for revealing the realities of pre–World War II Germany to the public in the Americas.

In his cover illustration, Méndez reflects the dark cruelty described by Seghers. A Nazi soldier, identifiable by his black books, uniform, and swastika armband, grabs for his gun as he disappears behind a dead tree trunk, the wood of which has been fashioned into an implement of torture for one of the seven escapees. This “seventh cross,” which bears the author’s name and the book title, dominates the composition through its abrupt placement in the immediate foreground. Méndez’s use of bold black line and sadistic imagery replicates the sinister tone of Das siebte Kreuz in visual form.
PLATE 24
La Venganza de los Pueblos, Homenaje al Heroico Ejército de Guerrilleros Yugoslavos
The Revenge of the People, Homage to the Heroic Army of the Yugoslavian Guerillas
1942
Leopoldo Méndez, Mexican, 1902–1969
Linocut, 9.75 x 7.94 inches (24.77 x 20.16 cm)
Gift of Charles S. Hayes ’65
2009.007.025

PLATE 25
No Queremos la Guerra (Los Deseos de la Paz)
We Do Not Want the War (The Desires of Peace)
Date unknown
Leopoldo Méndez, Mexican, 1902–1969
Linocut, 5.75 x 8.5 inches (14.6 x 21.6 cm)
Gift of Charles S. Hayes ’65
2009.007.023
The prints *No Queremos la Guerra* (Los Deseos de la Paz) (plate 25) and *Resistencia* (plate 26), which probably date from about 1949 to 1951, may have been created as part of a campaign to promote peace conferences in Sweden and Poland. The TGP artists Pablo O’Higgins, Leopoldo Méndez, Marianna Yampolsky, Adolfo Mexiac, and Francisco Mora composed large portfolios to decry the nuclear armament of world nations. In *Resistencia*, Méndez brings together images of the working class from many countries, united against fascism as symbolized by the soldier in the foreground. The figure on the ground may be a metaphor for the innocent victims of political aggression.

The main figure in *No Queremos la Guerra* symbolizes all the working people of the world who protest the threat of atomic war. This individual presents petitions reading “All the people of the world sign against the atomic war” to the world leaders planning nuclear warfare, who are reduced in size at the left of the composition.

This print epitomizes Mexiac’s well-known imagery of friendship and solidarity. Here, members of the Federación de los Trabajadores del Distrito Federal march together in support of Ruiz Cortines, who was president of Mexico from 1952 to 1958. A banner in the background reads, “for the increase of wages” — referring to just one of Cortines’s many initiatives to help the working class. As he took the presidential oath on December 1, 1952, Cortines swore, “I will not permit the principles of the Revolution or the laws that guide us to be broken.” One of the president’s major achievements was in the area of women’s rights: he gave women the right to vote in all Mexican elections. Thus, although he ruled years after the Mexican Revolution, Cortines continued to implement its ideals while looking toward the future.
In this poster advocating a peace treaty among the Big Five, the influence of Beltrán’s former employment as a comic strip illustrator is clearly evident in his skillful blending of text and image. The Big Five countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, the USSR, China, and France—formed a council after World War II in the hope of drawing up peace treaties with former Axis countries. Although they held more than thirty meetings to achieve this, they only reached a stalemate. Beltrán’s poster advertises a meeting of Mexico City’s youth, listing the names of various students scheduled to speak in demand of peace. The exigency of their request, visualized in the artist’s broad, forceful cuts into the printing plate, is further amplified by the fact that this poster was produced six years after the meetings of the Big Five began.

Ladrillero exemplifies the style and subject matter typical of O’Higgins’s work. Reminiscent of Honoré Daumier’s scenes of peasants, the print demonstrates the loose, rhythmic line that activates O’Higgins’s surfaces and brings movement to his figures. A man and a young boy each take on an equal share of work stacking bricks. O’Higgins monumentalizes the figures, instilling their otherwise humble task with noble dignity.
The state of international relations between Mexico and the United States in the early 1940s is reflected in this print, which depicts Benito Juárez (Mexican president, 1861–63 and 1867–72) and Abraham Lincoln (United States president, 1861–65) in front of their respective national flags. Although no historical evidence suggests a political friendship between Juárez and Lincoln, their kinship as liberators of the common man had become symbolic of accord between the neighboring countries.61 Between the depictions of the presidents in O’Higgins’s print, two figures representing the working classes of Mexico and the United States shake hands in a gesture of goodwill.

O’Higgins uses this “historic” unifying iconography to express the current attitude of the Mexican Communist movement, which corresponded with that of the TGP, toward the United States. Since the end of the Stalin-Hitler pact and the establishment of the Sixth Period of the Communist International in 1941, the Taller had begun to engage more with the capitalist United States. Members of the workshop actively participated in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy during the years of World War II.62 Designed to create an open, positive exchange between the United States and Latin America, the cultural programs of the Good Neighbor program allowed the TGP artists to make connections with American artists, particularly in New York and Chicago. O’Higgins’s print symbolizes the Taller’s interest in establishing a dialogue with like-minded artists across the border.

Zalce’s lithograph reflects the international, rather than domestic, concerns of the TGP. Indeed, the function of this poster is to promote an international proletariat against the common enemy of fascism—in this case, creating a particular bond with the USSR. Explaining this bond in an interview commenting on Leopoldo Méndez’s visit to Moscow, TGP member Marianna Yampolsky stated, “The references in all of the talks were about the twin or sisterly feeling between the two groups—the one in the Soviet Union and the one in Mexico.”63 The emphatic ¡Ayudemosla! or “Let’s Help,” also connotes a sense of unity within Mexican society. The Soviet agitprop poster movement of the 1920s was a particularly apparent source of influence for this lithograph, as for all of the TGP’s propagandistic posters. Zalce would most certainly have looked to examples of these Soviet posters in creating his own iconography of the soldier heroically poised to defend against the implied threat of fascism.

In this large poster from 1941 exhorting the Mexican public to help the USSR “defend the freedom of the world,” Zalce’s chaotic, caricatured style gives way to a bold, clear approach. Unlike his smaller, more complex posters such as the Risa del Pueblo (plate 12), this print was meant to be read in an instant by working-class Mexicans. There is no sarcasm or dark comedy to convey an unjust situation, simply a call to action.
Matarlos en el Calor ([plate 32]) and El Criminal, Victoriano Huerta, Se Aduena del Poder ([plate 33]) are two of the images that Alfredo Zalce contributed to the folio Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana. The two prints in the Charles S. Hayes collection, however, were not produced for the published book. They are printed on thicker white paper, whereas the published series was printed on rather thin multicolored paper. These two editions were most likely made before the establishment of the TGP publishing company and the publication of the Estampas.

The Estampas’s historical outline tracing the revolution and its aftermath was intended to strengthen the legacy of President Lázaro Cárdenas and his successors in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the current ruling party. In its iconography, this collection of prints champions the politics of the Frente Popular de Cardenismo, around which the members of the TGP had rallied during the presidential campaign of Miguel Alemán Valdés. Indeed, the government endorsed this project, printing the Estampas in the official party newspaper, El Nacional, in a three-month serial and thereby affording the TGP its largest audience to date.

In Matarlos en el Calor, ([plate 32]) Zalce recounts the events surrounding the Veracruz Massacre of 1879, condemning Porfirio Díaz for his tyranny and betrayal. In order to ameliorate the Mexican economy, President Díaz had made a law that re-defined smuggling as a penal offense. This law caused unrest in Veracruz, and an unsigned telegram written in cipher was sent to the state’s military governor, General Mier y Terán, instructing him to “Kill them in the heat.” The general obeyed the order (thought to have been sent by Díaz), executing an estimated nine to fifteen people.

Zalce presents the episode in two registers. In the top level, he has created a stoic portrait of the instigators of the massacre. Porfirio Díaz, recognizable from his distinctive moustache, is dressed in full regalia, gripping his sword and donning a plumed hat and medals. The expressions of the figures are indifferent; indeed, the only hints of the events shown below are the telegram reading “Matarlos en caliente” in Díaz’s hand and the sinister figure, presumably of Mier y Terán, who glares out from under the dark shadow of his hood. Below, a predella-like register vividly depicts the gruesome consequences of Díaz’s order. By contrasting the horrific actions of shooting, whipping, hanging, and stabbing with the detached portrait above, Zalce effectively places condemnatory blame on Díaz and his conspirators.

El Criminal, Victoriano Huerta, Se Aduena del Poder ([plate 33]) exemplifies the morbid cynicism typical of Zalce’s work. This print portrays the dictator Victoriano Huerta sitting in an imposing chair, with a menacing army of men bearing knives, guns, and rifles behind him and two men lying slain at his feet. Zalce creates an effectively pernicious and malevolent characterization of Huerta by surrounding him with shadowy figures that look out at the viewer. Huerta had usurped the Mexican government from President Francisco Madero, who was subsequently murdered—a fate that many rivals of Huerta shared. Zalce depicts the dictator as a drunkard, with legs crossed and eyelids drooping. Already inebriated, he grips his throne with his right hand and holds a bottle in his left— a visual expression of his immorality and unjust usurpation of power.
Following the decrease in political engagement that marked the TGP’s activities after the end of President Cárdenas’s administration, the 1946 elections gave the group an opportunity to support a political candidate and reassert their interest in social concerns. With no other likely leftist candidate, the TGP threw their support to Miguel Alemán, who would serve as president from 1946 to 1952. Alemán’s presidency allowed the workshop to restore its relationship with the ruling party of the Mexican government and once again legitimate them to create politically critical prints.70

Alfredo Zalce created La Prensa al Servicio del Imperialismo at the dawn of this new political atmosphere. The print condemns the press’s support of imperialist and fascist governments. Imperialism is represented as a monstrous, anthropomorphic balloon plastered with newspapers—the Universal, El hombre libre, La prensa, Excélsior, and Omega. By identifying specific, well-known papers, Zalce derogates the authority of the press in the mind of the viewer. As Imperialism rises over the figures below who inflate him with multiple pumps, he waves a menacing fascist salute. Zalce enhances the threat imposed by this monster by girding him with a bandolier and setting him against a dense, vertiginous sky. Typical of Zalce’s work, the other figures also have grotesquely exaggerated physiognomies. Their bulging eyes and gaping mouths embody the artist’s vilification of the press and the supporters of imperialism. Through La prensa, not only does Zalce support the ideals of the new presidency but he also reestablishes the TGP as the true “press” of the Mexican people.

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Art, Politics, and Cultural Identity of the Taller de Gráfica Popular

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69
Executed in 1945, toward the end of World War II, Méndez’s *Lo Que No Puede Venir* (plate 36) is a complex self-portrait commissioned by Carl D. Schniewind for his 1945 exhibition at the AIC. Schniewind had previously gone to Mexico to visit the TGP, purchasing works by several artists with the intention of exhibiting them back in Chicago. Méndez created this piece for Schniewind while working in Chicago.

Méndez produced only three self-portraits during his lifetime, this being the first. The imagery in this woodcut uses one of the denser schemes he had employed to date. We see the artist in the lower portion of the print, lying on a sea of portfolios by Posada. Seemingly lost in a daydream, he writes his name and the year, 1945, on the top page. Deborah Caplow, in her study of Méndez’s work, observes that “this is not only a portrait of Méndez but also a portrayal of Mexico at a precise moment in history at the end of World War II… The artist lies in front of a wall of cactus, from which we see emerge a rattlesnake and cross with an eagle crucified hanging from it, its wings pinned by crossed daggers. Blades in the shape of a swastika extend from the four directions of the cross.” The variety of images and symbols that Méndez includes are drawn from pre-Columbian iconography and nineteenth-century cultural history. By using them here within the context of a self-portrait, he situates himself and his fellow artists within the heady political climate of Mexico City at the end of World War II.
PLATE 37
Mujer y Niño
Woman and Boy
1942
Eleanor Coen, American, 1916–
Color lithograph, 13.25 x 7.5 inches (33.7 x 19.1 cm)
Gift of Charles S. Hayes ’65
2009.020.002

Along with fellow TGP artists Alberto Beltrán and Arturo García Bustos, Mariana Yampolsky worked for one year as an apprentice to Pablo O’Higgins and Alfredo Zalce. This poster is an example of her early work with Bustos. It was created for the Continental American Congress for Peace in Mexico City in September 1949. The work is typical of the posters the Taller created for rallies, conferences, organized demonstrations, and other gatherings for social or political causes. Here, a Mexican peasant family is set in the foreground of the image. The mother holds an infant child as the father confronts the swords of the militia, his sledgehammer raised to defend his family. This type of subject matter became emblematic of the TGP and their work.
This linocut celebrates the noble dignity of the campesinos (peasants). Catlett elevates their mundane tasks and celebrates their importance to the social fabric of the culture. Many of her works with the Taller referenced popular photographic images of the Mexican people, images that would have been immediately recognizable to the primarily illiterate Mexican working class. Catlett’s moving prints, commenting on the exigencies of the human condition, gained her the Art Institute of Chicago’s first Legends and Legacy Award in 2005.1


59 Ibid., 613.  


62 McClean-Cameron, “El Taller de Gráfica Popular,” 215. McClean-Cameron discusses the proletarian identity and the influence of German and Soviet poster workshops on the TGP. 

63 Ittmann, Mexico and Modern Printmaking, 165–70. 

64 Caplow, Leopoldo Ménéd, 147. 

65 Turok, personal communication, November 21, 2008. 

66 Caplow, Leopoldo Ménéd, 147. 

67 Caplow, personal communication, November 21, 2008. 


69 Alfonso Zalce, Marianna Zalce, Alfredo Zalce: Un arte propio (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997). 


71 Caplow, Leopoldo Ménéd, 177–81. 

72 Ibid. Caplow notes that El Zócalo’s attributes of a top hat and coat suggest that he represents capitalism and imperialism. 

73 Melanie Anne Herzog, Elizabeth Cottrell: In the Image of the People, exhibition catalog, Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, New Haven: distributed by Yale University Press, 2005), 7.
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