Para la Gente

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

Selected Works from the Charles S. Hayes Collection of Twentieth-Century Mexican Graphics
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Gina Costa

Snite Museum of Art
University of Notre Dame
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In 2005, the Snite Museum of Art received an important loan of works, which is now a generous gift to the Museum, from Charles S. Hayes, Notre Dame 1965 graduate. This collection came to be the Charles S. Hayes Collection of 20th-Century Mexican Graphics.

The images selected for this publication are drawn from this collection and survey the work by the Taller de Gráfica Popular, a workshop of politically engaged artists working in Mexico City from 1937 until about 1953, when they informally disbanded and were drawn into other programs, organizations or individual projects.

These artists worked in a period of immense political change as well as rich artistic activity. Their work reflects the issues of postrevolutionary Mexico's political and social upheaval. The political posters, broadsides, books, and political announcements created illustrate the TGP's direct and powerful style as well as their deep commitment and response to the agenda of political reforms that were part of the Cárdenista government in Mexico at that time.

This publication and accompanying exhibition attempt to advance growing interest in and scholarship about the artists of the Taller de Gráfica Popular by offering their interpretation of the dignity of the human condition in the context of the social reform movements of the time. Their depictions and representations of workers and farmers, and the social struggles of the people mark the TGP as important revolutionary agents in their own right.

It is not the intent of this publication to provide exhaustive interpretive analysis of the images presented, duplicating fine work already done by scholars in the field. Rather, the objective is to offer readers and viewers of the exhibition an introduction to the political context in which the works were created, and selective analysis of various prints as an example of how these artists used their media as a vehicle for social change.

In selecting the works from the Charles S. Hayes Collection to include in this exhibition and catalogue, my assistants and I studied the hundreds of prints in the collection. Great care was taken to select a variety of examples which best tell the story of these remarkable artists and the politically charged time in which they worked.

I would like to thank Charles S. Hayes '65 for generously gifting this collection of over 560 works of the Taller de Gráfica Popular to the Snite Museum of Art.

Heartfelt thanks to Nicole Paxton, Higgins Graduate Intern, for her unparalleled contributions to this publication. Nicole and Lauren Magnifico, Saint Mary's College '06, who kept the early years of this project on course, were invaluable assistants. Thanks also to undergraduate assistant Lauren Henderson, who tracked down hard-to-find historical information, doing an impressive job every step of the way. Very special thanks go to Michael Swoboda, MA '08 graphic designer, who designed this handsome publication and exhibition and who, along with Lauren Magnifico, shared with me his enthusiasm and keen sense of humor. Thanks also to Mary Cecilia Mitsch and Chris Andrews for their contributions. It was with great joy that I worked with my student assistants and interns.

I am indebted to Sarah Tremblay for editing the manuscript. Her gracious and generous comments were invaluable.

Special thanks to Gerta Katz who shared hours of phone interviews about her and her husband Samuel's time in Mexico working with the TGP. It was in 2004 that Charles Hayes acquired the Gerta and Samuel Katz collection of Mexican Graphics, which included 111 prints and 5 portfolios, forming the core of the Hayes TGP collection.

Thanks also to Master Photographer Antonio Turok who provided invaluable insight into the political dimension of the time in Mexico; to Miguel Zuniga for his assistance in locating hard-to-find publications and interviews in Mexico City; to Master Printer Joe Segura for his generosity in sharing interview transcriptions he had conducted with Jules Heller; and to Katie and Noah Kahn who shared reminiscences of their parents’ (Eleanor Coen and Max Kahn) time in Mexico working with the TGP.

And finally, thanks to my Snite Museum colleagues: Ramiro Rodriguez, exhibitions coordinator, Eric Nisly, digital archivist and photographer, and John Phegley, exhibition designer for their generous assistance.

— Gina Costa
Curator of the Charles S. Hayes Collection of 20th-Century Mexican Graphics
May 7, 2009
The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, takes great pride and pleasure in exhibiting and publishing highlights of the Charles S. Hayes Collection of Twentieth-Century Mexican Graphics. Hayes’s generous gift of over 500 prints produced by the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP) furthers the Museum’s ambition to create one of our nation’s finest collections of Latino art. That collection features premier pre-Columbian artworks, examples of Spanish Colonial art, Latin American photography of the 19th through 21st centuries, modest holdings of Modern Latino paintings and prints, and extensive examples of contemporary Chicano prints (courtesy of Gilberto Cardenas).

Therefore, we are extremely grateful to ND alum Charles Hayes ’65 for his most recent benefaction which adds strength and depth to Latino holdings within the Modern period.

I appreciate Gina Costa’s effective oversight of all aspects of receiving, documenting, exhibiting and interpreting the Hayes collection. Her essay provides a valuable grounding in the TGP and associated Mexican social and political history. She also shares new insight into connections between Chicago artists and the TGP. This was a labor of love for Costa, and I am thankful for her unflagging dedication to the Hayes Collection.

The Museum also appreciates the services of the individuals acknowledged in Costa’s introduction, who were essential to the success of this endeavor which underscores art’s principal values. That is, exhibitions such as this one assist societies and their individual members in understanding who they are, their common values, and what they aspire to become. It also demonstrates how people from different cultures, as well as individuals within the same society, differently perceive their physical, social, political and spiritual worlds.

— Charles R. Loving

Director and Curator, George Rickey Sculpture Archive

May 30, 2009
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Taller de Gráfica Popular (Popular Graphic Arts Workshop), or TGP, an important group of printmakers founded in Mexico City in 1937, created political prints and posters designed to galvanize audiences both in Mexico and around the world. As their country emerged from the Mexican Revolution, a bloody civil war that had pitted impoverished workers against wealthy landowners, these artists produced and circulated thousands of images that expressed the need for social and political reform for the Mexican oppressed. Their extremely successful public art highlighted the unjust treatment of farmers and peasants and satirized political abuses and excesses, reinforcing the reform movements initiated by the government during and after the revolution. In Mexico, prints had historically served as a critical tool in the struggle for social justice. The Taller continued this tradition of using graphic art as an agent of change, creating a public consciousness about the political and social state of the country.

The Mexican Revolution had broken out in 1910 as a resistance to the 1876–1910 dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, known as the Porfiriato. During Díaz’s presidency, 75 percent of the Mexican people lived in extreme poverty in rural conditions, with little or no access to education. Although his policies fostered this huge disparity among the social classes, Díaz did bring certain advances to the country. He developed the economy, especially through the construction of factories, roads, and industries, promoting the influx of foreign capital from countries such as England and France. His greatest achievement was the laying out of the Mexican railroad system. Díaz’s mistake, however, was that he accomplished these projects at the expense of the working classes, who suffered extreme exploitation. Wealth, political power, access to education, and ownership of land remained concentrated among a handful of families, mostly of European descent, who invested in these modernization programs.

In 1910, Francisco I. Madero and the now-legendary revolutionaries Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Emiliano Zapata came together in a joint effort to rebel against Díaz and his policies on behalf of the oppressed population. A ten-year period of fighting ensued. Villa commanded revolutionary forces from the north, while Zapata commanded forces from the south. Both men became renowned for fighting for the return of land to the poor and for promoting educational and cultural reforms. Eventually, these revolutionary leaders were assassinated, Zapata in 1919 and Villa in 1923. Madero ran for the presidency against Díaz in 1910, winning by a landslide and providing the momentum for the outbreak of the revolution. However, he too was assassinated in 1913.

Even as the various generals and revolutionary leaders fought against one another for control, they also promoted reforms to redistribute land, construct public schools, advance education, and rewrite the constitution. The new constitution, fathered in 1917 by President Venustiano Carranza, helped to bring an
end to the civil war in 1920. It abolished the unfair landowning, educational, and political structures established during the Porfiriato, providing the foundation for Mexico’s modern-day constitution. Still, political instability and unrest continued for some time under a succession of governments. Carranza was assassinated in 1920 in a coup by Álvaro Obregón, who was president from 1920 to 1924, who was reelected in 1928, and was himself assassinated later that year. In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas became president. Shortly after taking control, in 1936 he arrested his predecessor, Abelardo Rodríguez (president from 1932 to 1934), as well as dozens of other corrupt politicians and generals, and deported them to the United States. Cárdenas was greatly admired by the Mexican people for his progressive ideas and numerous social reforms, including his initiatives to redistribute land to the peasants, reinstitute unions, establish higher wages, and nationalize foreign oil companies. Many think that the end of his presidency in 1940 marked the conclusion, at last, of the Mexican Revolution.1

The taller de Gráfica Popular emerged during Cárdenas’s presidency. Their images documented and supported European exiles in Mexico who had emigrated for political reasons. Many of the posters they produced were a weapon . . . I’m talking about the collective use of the tall.2 They worked on a lithographic stone. The second room, or one of the rooms, was filled with portfolios of the individuals’ private works. And the third room was where the press was and all of its equipment and all the necessary peripheral stuff for printing took place. So it was always three rooms, and remember, they moved from one place to another because they had to pay rent and it was never very profitable . . . They did prints that referred to local phenomena, like a strike, like helping agricultural workers get higher pay. All the social and political phenomena of the day became the content, the essence of their black and white prints . . . They were all, to varying degrees, what we call progressive politically and socially . . . they were all committed to what we could call left-wing politics, and specifically directed to the Mexican experience . . . They did group projects. They would decide on a theme . . . on Friday nights the group would get together, in terms of this group project, one at a time you’d put the present state of your work in the middle of the floor, and people would gather round and look at it. And whether you were eighteen years old or you were the well-known Leopoldo Méndez, all questions and all comments were welcome and accepted, but they were all welcome. Leopoldo and the group saw the purpose of the Taller . . . always believed and said, “These [prints they produced] were a weapon . . . I’m talking about the collective use of the Tall.” He said, “Art is a weapon. You can use it constructively, destructively; you can use it in a zillion ways. The Taller, as I [Jules] mentioned earlier, tried to use it constructively to educate, to propagate, to reveal an attitude that they as a group had toward a specific problem in society. They had the courage and the wherewithal, because of the equipment and tools and the talent. 

Printmaking had a long tradition in Mexico as the most effective tool of social commentary and political protest. The intersection of graphic art and political propaganda that defined the work of the TGP had been part of the country’s visual vocabulary since the time of José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), the father of the modern Mexican print. Posada was the preeminent printmaker in prerevolutionary Mexico, producing more than fifteen thousand prints in his lifetime and gaining fame as a kind of popular hero in the 1920s. His bold, simplified, and direct manner of communicating his political views, and his deep commitment to the indigenous people, had a profound influence on the work and ideology of the TGP. Prints were effective tools because they could be quickly and cheaply mass-produced and because they presented clear messages that could easily be disseminated to an often-illiterate public (plate 3). The Taller artists generally used wood blocks and linoleum cuts, which favored a simple and direct working method. Their straightforward and expressive style, marked by strong angular outlines, dramatic light and dark contrasts, and easily recognizable imagery, ultimately became the workshop’s trademark.

One of the primary objectives of the Taller’s politically charged prints was to provide visual imagery supporting Cárdenas’s socialist government, as well as the Communist party abroad.3 Most of the TGP artists, with the exception of Alfredo Zalce, were members of the Mexican Communist party. Unlike in the United States, Communism was a fundamental philosophy that was historically part of the political, social, and cultural thinking in Mexico. The Taller was sympathetic to European antifascist causes and supported European exiles in Mexico who had emigrated for political reasons. Many of the posters the artists created addressed the spread of fascism, Nazism, and militaristic regimes such as that of pre-World War II Japan (plate 4). This engagement with issues of social justice beyond Mexico’s own borders contributed to the international appeal of the Taller’s images and the global reputation of the group.

The well-known New York teacher, printmaker, and author Jules Heller and his wife Gloria, combined their honeymoon with a stint as visiting artists at the Taller. Here, Heller recounts his time working with the Taller. They had gotten together because if you’re a printmaker you have to have access to a press, obviously, and to equipment that most individual artists don’t have. They, I think, thank God for the presence of Leopoldo Méndez who spent about a year finding about 50 lithographic stones and a press that had a great big plaque on the front of it, on the yoke, that said 1871, and he was convinced that Daumier had printed on that press, because it came from Paris. When we were there in 1947, the Taller de Gráfica Popular was in an apartment building, and was composed of three rooms. One was a room in which printmakers engraved linoleum or copper or wood or whatever or worked on a lithographic stone. The second room, or one of the rooms, was filled with portfolios of the individuals’ private works. And the third room was where the press was and all of its equipment and all the necessary peripheral stuff for printing took place. So it was always three rooms, and remember, they moved from one place to another because they had to pay rent and it was never very profitable . . . They did prints that referred to local phenomena, like a strike, like helping agricultural workers get higher pay. All the social and political phenomena of the day became the content, the essence of their black and white prints . . . They were all, to varying degrees, what we call progressive politically and socially . . . they were all committed to what we could call left-wing politics, and specifically directed to the Mexican experience . . . They did group projects. They would decide on a theme . . . on Friday nights the group would get together, in terms of this group project, one at a time you’d put the present state of your work in the middle of the floor, and people would gather round and look at it. And whether you were eighteen years old or you were the well-known Leopoldo Méndez, all questions and all comments were welcome and accepted, but they were all welcome.
To understand the importance of the Taller Gráfica Popular and the images its artists produced, one must consider the political and cultural context in which they worked. Artists do not live in a vacuum; their works, generally speaking, respond to, criticize, and comment on the social, political, and cultural conditions of their time. The TGP came together with the very specific intention of documenting and commenting on the social and political reforms of the Cárdenas presidency. As a result of their intense involvement with these issues, the workshop’s members became not only agents of social change within Mexico but perhaps the most important group of politically motivated artists in modern art history.

The Taller’s powerful prints depicted subjects ranging from the harsh and oppressive conditions of the peasant class to the atrocities of war, social injustices resulting from corrupt capitalism, and international political conflicts. These images ultimately served to reinforce the progressive policies of President Cárdenas. From the age of eighteen, Lázaro Cárdenas had fought for various Mexican revolutionary armies. In 1925, the twenty-nine-year-old was appointed brigadier general, becoming the youngest person ever to hold that rank in the Mexican army. By the time he was elected governor of Michoacán in 1928, Cárdenas had earned the affectionate nickname “Tata Cárdenas” (Dear Uncle Cárdenas) (plate 7). As governor, he worked to bring about the unrealized goals of the Mexican Revolution, such as the redistribution of land among peasants and the construction of new roads and schools. As his term as president, from 1934 to 1940, Cárdenas showed his concern “for the people” by cutting his salary in half and living in his own house instead of in the presidential palace. In 1938, he nationalized foreign oil companies, helping Mexico to become more economically independent. Cárdenas knew the potential of art as a vehicle for reformist ideals, often using satire and caricature to convey their message. One of their most comprehensive works on this topic was a folio entitled Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana. Conceived in the early 1940s and completed in 1947, this collaborative project comprises eighty-five prints designed as social and political commentary on the revolution (plate 17). It was also an income-generating venture for the group, made possible in part by the direction of Hannes Meyer, a former director of the Bauhaus school in Germany who was instrumental in the 1940–43 reorganization of the TGP and the establishment of an in-house publishing company, La Estampa Mexicana. The folio is loosely organized into four thematic sections: the revolution, the postrevolutionary phase, the administrations of the 1920s and early 1930s, and the government from 1940 to 1947. The historical events commemorated in each print are explained at the beginning of the collection in the Indice de las grabados con notas históricas, written by Alberto Morales Jiménez. As the folio progresses, the prints alternately espouse the heroic virtues of revolutionaries such as Francisco Madero, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata and vilify the immorality and corruption of dictators such as Porfirio Díaz and Victoriano Huerta. President Cárdenas is portrayed as the redeemer of Mexico.

Francisco Madero was one of the main protagonists of the revolution, best known for “freeing” Mexico from Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship and its cruel treatment of the Mexican people. Taking a stand against Díaz, Madero wrote the inflammatory book La sucesión presidencial en 1910 and formed the Partido Nacional de Antireeleccionistas. His actions motivated a revolutionary spirit in the public, who nominated him to run for the presidency in April 1910 (plate 13). After fleeing to San Antonio to escape arrest by Díaz, Madero declared himself a revolutionary president and promised to redistribute the lands usurped by Díaz. He officially ascended to the presidency on November 6, 1911, but his administration ended abruptly when General Victoriano Huerta first forced his resignation and then had him assassinated in February 1913. Huerta went on to be a brief but oppressive dictator of Mexico.

The years that followed the violent first phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) saw a series of social and political reforms established. The constitution that had been drafted in 1917 had facilitated the end of the war, and the military figures who had dominated the revolution’s conflicts began to form political parties. Out of the many factions that had existed up until 1920, one culture—one nation was coming together. In 1920, Álvaro Obregón, the leading general to then-president Venustiano Carranza, conducted a successful coup against Carranza. Elected to the presidency in December of that year, Obregón ushered in a period of calm and stability. He also set into motion the reforms of the important 1917 constitution, which he had shared a crucial role in developing (plate 15). Establishing minimum and maximum wages, restraining the role of the Catholic Church, reforming education, and redistributing land to peasants were some of the improvements Obregón put into place. In 1924, Plutarco Elías Calles, Obregón’s close friend, assumed the presidency, continuing many of the reforms enacted by his predecessor. Obregón decided to run again in 1928. By his second term as president, he had developed an adversarial relationship with the Catholic Church, resulting from his earlier efforts to enforce the articles of the 1917 constitution that limited the church’s power; he would ultimately be assassinated (plate 16). Like the early events of the revolution, these historical developments were documented in the TGP’s images.

The cultural climate of the 1930s was just as important to the TGP’s development and character as was the political climate. It was during this period that the concept of Mexicanidad (Mexicanness) was born. This idea expressed, reestablished, and celebrated all aspects of Mexican culture, history, and heritage. Before the revolution, Porfirio Díaz had endeavored to Europeanize Mexican culture. Seeking to do away with the rich artistic and cultural traditions that defined the Mexican people, Díaz looked to European, especially French, models to shape the country. It
was only with his ultimate resignation and exile and the election of Francisco Madero to the presidency in the early years of the revolution that Mexicans once again began to rediscover their vibrant heritage. Mexicanidad sought to reverse the prevailing European models and reinvigorate the people’s ethnic identity. This effort led to a newfound freedom and an explosion of artistic expression, setting into motion a renaissance in Mexican art. Teachers, activists, anthropologists, filmmakers, and artists joined in the campaign to reclaim and champion their cultural legacy. The movement sought to unite all Mexicans, not just the intellectuals or the wealthy but also the poor and indigenous. No longer did European models and styles set the standard for Mexican culture; Mexicans now looked to their own patrimony for a sense of identity. As a more united national consciousness evolved, the arts community sought to reexamine and redefine its heritage and its role in this new cultural character (plate 18).

In 1920, José Vasconcelos was appointed director of the Universidad Nacional. A philosopher, writer, and politician, Vasconcelos had a significant influence on the intellectual thought throughout Mexico. He created the Ministerio de Educación to address the problems of widespread illiteracy and lack of education for the poor. Vasconcelos was responsible for bringing art, music, and classical literature to the Mexican people. He enlisted artists in a national program, ushering in a flourishing of the arts during the 1920s and ’30s. It was at this time that the murals of Los Tres Grandes—the Three Big Ones—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—captured the imagination of the world. Vasconcelos’s idea was to educate the people by using paintings on walls, posters, and prints, and other easily disseminated and accessible media to bring the arts to all Mexican people. Images celebrating important events in Mexican history and politics reinvigorated and reinforced the Mexican people’s sense of pride in their history and traditions. The TGP artists, along with the mural painters and the important photographers who were working in Mexico City during this time, participated in this effort to document and celebrate Mexico’s cultural and political achievements.

As a result, Mexico City became a vibrant center of artistic activity beginning in the mid-1920s. Artists, writers, and intellectuals from all over the world converged on the city. American artists Edward Weston, Marsden Hartley, and Paul Strand and Italian photographer Tina Modotti were just a few of those who traveled there. Leftist sympathizers found a like-minded community in Mexico City, as did European intellectuals trying to escape the growing fascist and Nazi terror at home. With their leftist politics and their intellectual ambivalence toward religion and government supremacy, avant-garde European artists found refuge in the fertile cultural soil of postrevolutionary Mexico. In the United States, foundations such as the Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation sent American artists to Mexico as part of a larger cultural exchange program. Painters, photographers, and writers all traveled to the country seeking its freedom of ideas.

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**POSADA AND THE CALAVERA**

The politically minded graphic artists who formed the TGP are generally regarded as the artistic heirs to the great Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. Born in the early 1850s, Posada lived at a tumultuous time in Mexico’s history. During Posada’s childhood, the liberal Benito Juárez commanded a governmental revolt, and after becoming president he enacted many reforms in the country’s constitution. By 1876, though, the political climate of the country changed drastically with the oppressive dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Influenced by these events, Posada initiated what became a tradition of making satirical prints, which appeared in newspapers, journals, and editorial cartoons, often based on contemporary events. He is best known for his broadsides and calaveras—living skeletons that served as a substitute for the human figure in order to comment on political and social issues.

With roots in pre-Columbian imagery, calaveras enabled Posada’s prints to resonate with Mexican viewers by referencing longstanding folk traditions. The artist used these skeletal caricatures to satirize all strata of Mexican society, but especially the upper class, public figures, and government officials. They demonstrated that, although there may be great discrepancy between the hardships of the poor and the luxuries of the wealthy in life, ultimately death equalizes the classes. Posada’s works had an enormous influence on generations of subsequent artists both in Mexico and in the United States. Even today, the Chicano art movement is indebted to his humorous, biting satires of social and political injustices. And calaveras are still a pervasive image in Mexican culture, most commonly depicted in early November during celebrations for the Día de los Muertos [Day of the Dead]. Leopoldo Méndez was one of Posada’s greatest admirers [plates 19, 21]. He wrote extensively on the master’s work, creating one of the most iconic images of him.

![A detail of Concierto Sinfónico de Calaveras by Leopoldo Méndez shows the influence of calavera figures within the work of the TGP artists.](image-url)
3. THE TALLER DE GRÁFICA POPULAR AND CHICAGO

The Taller de Gráfica Popular’s artwork commented on social issues and political events not only in Mexico but also in the United States and elsewhere. During the 1930s and ‘40s, the United States was experiencing its own political and economic turmoil. The events of the Great Depression and World War II led to an American interest in socially conscious art that aligned with the Mexican artists’ agenda (plate 30). The economic conditions of the Depression had special implications for artists, art programs and institutions, and welfare services all over the country. It was during this time that the Works Project Administration [WPA] and the Farm Security Administration [FSA] were born, in an attempt to put unemployed people, including artists, back to work. Many American photographers, especially those employed by Roy Stryker at the FSA, sought to record the plight of the American farmer and laborer. Dorothea Lange’s powerful and moving photograph Migrant Mother, of 1936, is still considered the seminal visual symbol of this desperate time in America. The goal of these artists was the same as that of the TGP in Mexico: to become agents of social change by documenting the conditions of poverty and suffering. As a result of this shared concern, a rich and important connection developed between artists in Mexico and in the United States, who often traveled to each others’ countries to study and work.

Interviews that I have conducted with surviving artists, their families and children, and others who worked with the Taller de Gráfica Popular suggest that Chicago, more than any other American city, had a special relationship with the workshop. To date, no study has fully explored the TGP’s significant relationship with Chicago artists and art institutions. While it is outside the scope of this publication to fully address this topic, I would like to briefly survey the relationship here. Chicago was uniquely positioned to be receptive to socially committed Mexican artists working in the United States. While New York City was the artistic center of the country and Los Angeles had ethnic ties with Mexico, Chicago was distinguished by its working-class roots, its political unions that fought for the rights of workers, and its down-to-earth, unpretentious work ethic. Alfredo Zalce explained to friend and art collector Gerta Katz that because of these qualities, the city offered an artistic environment that paralleled that of Mexico City and appealed to Mexico’s politically and socially engaged artists. Zalce was among the many Mexican artists who spent significant time in the city, exhibiting, teaching, and producing art.

The likeminded spirit worked both ways: politically and socially minded artists in Chicago simultaneously looked to Mexico as a safe and receptive place to work—especially toward the end of the 1940s as the age of McCarthyism, with its intense anticommunist suspicion, commenced. It was in part the reorganization of the Taller around 1940–43, under the leadership of Hannes Meyer, that made Mexico City so attractive to American artists. Like many Jewish artists, Meyer, a former director of the Bauhaus school in Dessau, fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution. Instead of joining many of his colleagues in the United States, he accepted Leopoldo Méndez’s invitation to come to Mexico City to work with and lead the TGP. Postrevolutionary Mexico proved an ideal political climate for leftist, socially conscious, and Jewish refugees, including an influx of such artists from Chicago.

Added to this was the aesthetic and intellectual love affair with all things Mexican that swept the American imagination beginning in the 1920s. This was partially due to the representation of important Mexican artists in galleries and exhibitions, first in New York City, Chicago, and Milwaukee, and soon in other parts of the United States. The Weyhe Gallery in New York City bought and exhibited works by Tamayo, Siqueiros, Rivera, Orozco, and others throughout the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s. Additionally, as early as 1916, Rivera participated in group shows at other U.S. art venues. In 1932, the Milwaukee Art Institute held a two-man exhibition of Leopoldo Méndez’s and Carlos Mérida’s works. The presence of the Mexican muralists’ and printmakers’ politically-charged works in the United States, combined with Americans’ own romanticized mythologies, fueled individual artists’ desire to look south of the border for a cultural tradition that merged art and politics. During this time and through World War II, the U.S. government also sponsored cultural exchange programs with Mexico (and the rest of Latin America), in an effort to consolidate the loyalty of its southern neighbor as an ally.

Chicago artists Eleanor Coen (Coney), Max Kahn, Morris Topchevsky, Charles White, and Mariana Yam Polsky were among those who fell under the spell of the Mexican muralists and printmakers. They and others traveled to Mexico City to directly experience the TGP. For example, Chicago social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin (originally from Buffalo, New York) and his wife Anne went to Mexico in the early 1950s, meeting and working with members of the TGP, particularly Raul Anguiano. Rogovin was known in the United States for his socially critical images, and he photographed the poor and indigenous cultures in Mexico with the intent of circulating his images to American audiences. He found a strong kindred spirit in the work he encountered at the Taller. Acquiring some of their prints, he brought the works back to Chicago and shared them with his colleagues and the art world there—thus furthering the American fascination with the group.

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

The Art Institute of Chicago played an important role in bringing Mexican art to the city. In 1943, under the advice of then curator of prints and drawings Carl O. Schniewind, the AIC acquired the collection of Mexican prints formed by its famed curator Katharine Kuh, whose private Chicago gallery featured European, American Modernist, Mexican, and Latin American art. This acquisition formed the basis of the AIC’s holdings of Mexican art—one of the most significant collections of Mexican prints at that time. The AIC acquired most of its prints by Leopoldo Méndez, Alfredo Zalce, Jesús Escobedo, Angel Bracho, Raul Anguiano, and Francisco Dosamantes, as well as works by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, during this period.

In 1944, Kuh organized at the Art Institute the first comprehensive exhibition of José Guadalupe Posada’s work in the United States. Through this show, the American public began to understand the deep and complex relationship Mexican printmaking had with the cultural and political agenda of that nation. This 1944 exhibition at the AIC was followed by another in 1945, organized by Schniewind, featuring the prints and drawings of Leopoldo Méndez (plate 36). This print by Méndez is a complex self-portrait commissioned by Carl O. 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.
ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION WITH A CHICAGO CONNECTION

Eleanor Coen [Coney] (1916–)

Eleanor Coen and her husband Max Kahn were at the forefront of the Chicago art scene in the 1940s and '50s, as well as leaders in the city's involvement with the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP). Coney, as she liked to be called, met Max Kahn at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where she took lithography classes under his direction. She also studied painting with Boris Anisfeld and printmaking with Francis Chapin, later becoming Chapin's assistant. Both Coney and Kahn were involved in the WPA's Federal Art Project in Chicago from 1939 to 1940. This program, which hired artists to provide art for government buildings and to document the harsh economic conditions of the time, was a great opportunity for the two to develop their skills and styles, since they were under no pressure to sell their work [plate 37].

In 1941, Coney became the first woman to win the James Nelson Raymond Traveling Fellowship, which was awarded to the Art Institute student with the best work. She chose to study in Mexico, even though recipients of the fellowship traditionally studied in Europe. Coney and Kahn made the decision to go to Mexico primarily to avoid the inhospitable atmosphere of Europe during World War II. Mexico was a logical choice for the pair because of their support of leftist political movements. In addition, a growing number of their fellow Chicago artists were traveling to Mexico during the 1930s and '40s.

They drove to Mexico with Julio de Diego, another artist from the city, in a Ford Runabout with a rumble seat, where Kahn sat [Coney loved to drive].35 Leaving the car at the border, they quickly inserted themselves into the Mexican lifestyle and political culture while living with Alfredo Zalce, their closest friend in Mexico City. The couple also became friends with Leopoldo Méndez, Pablo O'Higgins, and Angel Bracho. Coen and Kahn soon became active members of the TGP and encouraged other Chicagoans, including Morris “Toppy” Topchevsky and his brother “Top,” to follow. Coen was in fact the first woman to work with the TGP, and it was she who influenced Mariana Yampolsky, another Chicago-area artist, to come to Mexico and join the group.

Coney and Kahn were married in 1942 after returning to Chicago, and they remained a vital part of the city’s art community throughout their lives. Having studied with Francis Chapin at the SAIC, Eleanor and Max were at the vanguard of the printmaking community. In fact, in the 1940s, they mounted the first color lithography exhibition in the United States, showing their work at the Weyhe Gallery in New York City. They returned to Mexico for several summers after 1941, staying in Campeche with artist Frank Varvushka, a former classmate of Coney’s at the SAIC. The couple traveled throughout the Yucatán, painting, drawing, and visiting other TGP members.

Both Coney and Kahn created many works in Mexico City with the Taller. In addition, Kahn set up a printmaking studio in San Miguel de Allende and taught printmaking there, while Coney painted. She completed a mural on one wall of the school in San Miguel that was later damaged by building repairs and vandalism but still exists today. The school has since become a national monument. Their artistic involvement in both the United States and Mexico paved the way for other American artists to become active in the TGP and contributed much to the strong international dimension of the workshop.
Mariana Yampolsky (1925–2002)

Mariana Yampolsky was one of those who became captivated by Chicago artists Eleanor Coen and Max Kahn’s stories of working with the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), ultimately leaving her homeland to join the group. The daughter of a sculptor, she grew up on a 123-acre farm in Crystal Lake, outside of Chicago. At an early age, she enrolled in art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and by age twelve she was drawing and engraving with great skill. Her father introduced her to photography, allowing her to develop portraits he had made of the family on his camera. Mariana is best known for her powerful and deeply moving photographs of the people, customs, and cultural heritage of Mexico.

Yampolsky studied at the University of Chicago, graduating in 1944. The events of the period—the Great Depression, social turmoil, war—forever shaped her deep interest in the social and political displacement of peoples. It was in 1944 that Mariana listened entranced, as she would later describe, to a life-changing lecture by Coen and Kahn, after the couple had returned from working in Mexico City with the TGP. This lecture determined her destiny, for she too wanted to be involved with artists who were committed to social and political protest. That year, at the age of nineteen, she left for Mexico City to work with the Taller, becoming the group’s first permanent female member. She also enrolled at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura, and later took photography classes with Lola Álvarez Bravo at the Academia de San Carlos.

Later in life, Yampolsky stated that O’Higgins and Leonel Méndez, who was then the Taller’s leader, were her chief influences. Her first works for the TGP were a series of prints for the annual May Day celebration and a banner for a 1946 meeting of the railway workers union STFRM. Both projects were important, high-profile assignments, suggesting that Yampolsky was well regarded by the workshop. During her fifteen years with the TGP (she left in 1959), she executed over sixty works, making her one of the group’s ten most active members.

Yampolsky considered peasants harvesting, workers laboring in the fields, and women selling their wares—all of which she depicted in her prints—more in terms of the creative process involved in these activities than as merely quotidian chores of life. Her commitment to social issues was demonstrated in her activity for the Mexican Ministerio de Educación, for which she designed free textbooks for children. She also helped children learn to read and edited the Enciclopedia infantil Colibrí.

Yampolsky’s photographs, for which she is best known, exhibit a keen, empathetic relationship with her subjects. It is interesting to note that Hannes Meyer, who became leader of the Taller upon Méndez’s invitation, asked her to photograph the members of the workshop for a memorial edition of his 1949 book celebrating the group’s twelfth anniversary. She continued to take photographs, curate exhibitions, design books, edit, and make prints until her death in May 2002.

Alfredo Zalce (1908–2003)

Alfredo Zalce was perhaps the TGP artist with the strongest ties to Chicago. Zalce was married to Chicago painter Frances du Casse, and he spent much time in the city teaching, exhibiting, and working with other area artists. He acquired his first press roller in Chicago and brought it back to Mexico, where he had a whole press built around it. In 1934, the Italian Court in Chicago held an exhibition of his drawings and watercolors, which received an enthusiastic response. Also in 1934, Zalce became a member of the Associated American Artists. Gerta Katz recalls that Zalce had close relationships with other Chicago artists. Several of his prints in this exhibition came directly from Samuel and Gerta Katz’s collection and Max Kahn and Eleanor Coen’s collection of works by their TGP colleagues.

Elizabeth Catlett (1919–)

Of the women artists associated with the TGP, probably the best known to American audiences is African-American printmaker and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett. Born about 1919 in Washington DC, Catlett was married briefly to Chicago artist Charles White. The two met in 1941 while Catlett was working in the city with friend Margaret Goss Burroughs, one of the founders of the Chicago South Side Community Center, a vital hub for African-American artists and writers. Catlett had won first prize at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940 for a sculpture of a mother and child. In 1946, she received a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship that allowed her and Charles White to travel to Mexico to work with the TGP. Their marriage did not last long, and by 1947 she was married to Taller artist Francisco Mora, after which she often referred to herself as Betsy Mora. Both Catlett and Mora worked in Mexico with the TGP until 1966. Even before she arrived in Mexico, Elizabeth Catlett was deeply involved in political activism. She moved there at the height of McCarthyism, and had she stayed in the United States, she would have been targeted for her leftist political views. Already an established artist, Catlett was immediately asked to collaborate on several important Taller initiatives, including the national literacy project and, later, Vicente Lombardo Toledano’s 1952 presidential election campaign and the 1960 series 450 Aniversario de la Revolución Mexicana.

Images of strong women form the central theme of her work, and though she was deeply committed to the artistic ideals of the TGP and to her adopted country of Mexico, where she lived for thirty years, she never lost her connection to her African-American identity, continuing to create works that celebrated the black woman throughout her career.