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With four relief engravings by José Guadalupe Posada

Title page wood engraving by Fritz Eichenberg

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The four relief prints that are the reason for this essay were cut in Mexico City by José Guadalupe Posada in the very first years of this century. They are cut in metal, an alloy of zinc and lead used at the time by printers who cast and recast their own type. A genuine relic of Posada's immense *oeuvre*, they date from his mature period, after he had left his native León and come to the capital to work for Don Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Publisher Don Antonio specialized in broadsides, street gazettes, and penny sheets. His trade was aimed exclusively at lowbrows, and cheap printing methods were essential. Nailed unceremoniously to a wood base, the metal plate was raised to type height, and both text and cut were inked and struck in one operation on a hand-operated platen press. The paper used was of cheap grade and texture, dyed in eye-catching colors, favorites being a sulfurous yellow, a shocking magenta, and a deep solferino green. To match these plebeian methods, Posada coarsened a style previously nuanced by the subtleties of lithography. In Mexico City, he forged for himself a plastic language so forceful that unequal pressures, rough stock, or gaudy hues could not weaken its impact.

Posada thought of himself as a craftsman. When at work he did not wear the smock of the artist but the green visor and large apron of the printer. Nothing in his life and work suggests that he ever felt ill at ease at his job or resentful of its ever present didactical requirements. Posada's own personal convictions fitted him easily within the narrow confines of this plebeian layout. Deadlines set by his publisher and a voracious curiosity for recording street scenes left no time even for a sigh toward far-flung esthetic goals. Instead, Posada was ever eager to distribute his prints directly into the hands of the many, of the illiterate unwashed, of whom he was in a way the mouthpiece and for whom he lovingly evolved an alphabet of lines and values they soon learned to read fluently. Though, for most of Posada's fans, the roman alphabet was to remain forever an unplumbed mystery.

For him, esthetics never did exist in the abstract but only as the motor

that moved his heavy body and kept it for hours bent double at his workbench over a tiny plate. Art was as one with the quick motions of the small-boned Indian wrist, with the deft staccato of the stubby fingers holding burin or graver. Across the street from his workshop loomed the imposing Academy of San Carlos, where art had been correctly taught since the eighteenth century. A fugitive from its classes of perspective and of anatomy, the youthful José Clemente Orozco would visit Posada at work and shyly stuff his pockets with curled metal shavings picked from the floor. For him they held, as indeed they did, some essence of the master's stocky genius. Posada's posthumous fame threatens to enshrine his work in *catalogues raisonnés* and limit his public, outside Mexico, to curators and collectors. It is with Posada alive that I am most concerned, and how to outline his sturdy contours before they thin out in a haze of glory. Concerning his life, its climate and habitat, Arroyo's publications offer contemporaneous and articulate clues. From Don Antonio's own words—that Posada fancifully lettered in a relief etching—we learn of the publishing business that was his own as well:

*Founded in the year 1880 of the nineteenth century,
this ancient firm stocks a wide choice:
Collections of Greetings, Tricks, Puzzles, Games, Cookbooks,
Recipes for Making Candies and Pastries,
Models of Speeches, Scripts for Clowns, Patriotic Exhortations,
Playlets Meant for Children or Puppets, Pleasant Tales.
Also: the Novel Oracle,
Rules for Telling the Cards,
a New Set of Mexican Prognostications,
Books of Magic, Both Brown and White,
a Handbook for Witches.*

Posada illustrates this with a view of the Vanegas Arroyo pressroom. In what must be a self-portrait, with the familiar green visor and









printer's apron, the mustachioed master hands a proof sheet just off the platen press to bearded Don Antonio, splendid in a long overcoat, high collar, and high hat. On the floor lie bundles of penny sheets ready for wholesale distribution. Idlers and passers-by hint at the street on which the workroom opened.

Another relief etching tells the sequel. We are now in the part of the shop reserved for customers. A large counter separates it from the work area where workmen in caps and aprons turn the wheels of the busy presses. Matriarch of this establishment, Mrs. Vanegas Arroyo sits behind the counter, in lace collar and high hairdo, with puffed sleeves and a wasp waist. She has just sold some broadsides to a flock of newsvendors. The urchins, shoeless, coatless, straw sombreros frayed at the rim, scatter out into the street with armfuls of sheets, eager to cry their exciting wares. Two grown-up customers await their turn, one a country peddler, the other a city bureaucrat.

What these street vendors bought from Mrs. Vanegas Arroyo may well have been *calaveras*, or 'skulls,' specifically designed for All Souls' Day. Don Antonio, and after him his son, Don Blas, and after him, his son, Don Arsacio, struck from the same blocks, year after year, 'Dances of Death' brought up to date by topical allusions. In that regard the Revolution of 1910 proved a matchless boon. One day generals, bandits, and presidents were on top of the heap; the next day they were in the grave. Posada relished the epoch.

Our four pairs of skeletons are not of such exalted rank. A drunk loudly remonstrates with his loved one as she warns him of the dangers of the bottle (Pl. I). A policeman drags a prostitute to jail. His nightstick swings menacingly in one hand, but the other is busy pinching the fleshless buttocks of his catch (Pl. II). Chances are she'll swap love-making for an escape. The two other plates deal with a single couple. To read correctly the mind of these dead we may turn to the original broadside, dated 1906 and entitled 'A Cemetery of Lovers,' that features both of our cuts, together with many another 'skull.' For

subtitle, a ditty, probably penned by Don Antonio, is meant to whet the curiosity of the potential buyer:

Lovers lie under this sod.

Read, you who walk over it,

Of events, joyful or sad,

Stilled forever in the pit.

A street scene. A *charro*, all black leather and silver buttons, his modish pants open at the sides to reveal the flaring linen beneath. His broadbrimmed felt hat is set at a rakish angle. One fist manfully rests on the hip. He accosts a girl. She is in street costume, bell-shaped skirts, a shawl modestly hiding her bare skull (Pl. III). It is their first meeting. Don Antonio gives them voice:

He: Is your leaning amatory?

She: Each case depends on its merit.

He: Let's walk to the cemetery.

She: Cowboy, you talked me into it!

The next plate implies time elapsed. The two, now seated in a parlor, are in the midst of a lovers' quarrel. He half turns his back on her. Shyly she puts a hand to his shoulder (Pl. IV):

She: Desist from such mad jealousy.

He: What! You wish me blind or one-eyed!

She: Catch a beau under my balcony,

You may thrash him 'til he's died!

Posada's 'Dance of Death' is rooted in the Gothic version that Holbein was to make his own. In Europe, Death teases, haunts, and eventually kills unthinking and unwilling humans. Posada picks up the thread of the story. Now, man and woman have crossed the momentous threshold. Their flesh has rotted away. From being the haunted, they have become hauntees. Yet comedy clings to their bones more

articulately than does the implied tragedy. It is its very everydayness that gives Posada's version of the hereafter its unique flavor. The Gothic 'Dance' ruthlessly equated beggar with emperor. In Posada's netherworld, social niceties, and social lapses as well, are all punctiliously observed. The skeletal bourgeois walks hand in hand with his bourgeoisie, with cane and umbrella displayed, along what promenades exist on their funereal planet. They give a passing nod to other genteel couples of ghosts similarly occupied. The defunct general, all bones under his plumed shako and bemedaled uniform, still brags of victories. In hellish wineshops the busy waitress is still bussed by the drunk, even though her frame has long ago spilled its stuffing. Posada's manly art thrived on revolutions, the biological one that is death and the political one that engulfed him and his beloved Mexico. Yet he remained aloof from another revolution that raged literally at his door, one that had to do with art. At the old academy next door, youthful students besieged and eventually roundly routed their academic teachers. The banner these hotheads rallied under was that of impressionism. It was the one revolution that sophisticates and art lovers applauded. It was the one revolution on which Posada resolutely turned his back.

Jean Charlot is professor of art at the University of Hawaii and a noted authority on Mexican art. He was first to publish an appreciation of Posada, *A Precursor of the Revolution* (1923). In collaboration with Don Blas and Don Arsacio Vanegas Arroyo, he also published the portfolio *100 Woodcuts by Posada* (1947). His books on art include *Art from the Mayans to Disney* (1939), *Art-making from Mexico to China* (1950), *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos* (1962), *Mexican Mural Renaissance* (1963), and *Three Plays of Ancient Hawaii* (1963). He has also illustrated *Carmen* (1941) and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1962) for the Limited Editions Club. A painter and printmaker of international repute, Jean Charlot has recently completed murals in true fresco for the Catholic Mission Church of Naiserelagi, Fiji.

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