

FOREWORD

José Guadalupe Posada is placed at the narrow neck of an hour glass which every grain of sand must pass as it slides between past and future. The bulk of an ancient and rich tradition funnelled through his work at a time when it was fated to leaven modern formulas.

Artists of the generation of Rivera and Orozco acknowledge their debt to Posada, although he was not a teacher and would have been mildly skeptical had anyone addressed him as "Master." In 1894 his open studio, or rather his workshop, was tucked inside the disused carriage entrance of a private house in Santa Inés Street. Posada worked in plain sight of the passers-by, housemaids on their way to market, urchins astray from grade school, even loitering art students from the nearby San Carlos Academy.

The revolution was a Posada "still" come to life. Scenes he loved to portray—anti-Díaz meetings with bricks and bats flying, skulls bashed in, stabbings, shootings, chained prisoners hemmed in between men on horseback—what had been but a line inked on paper found its consummation in a true depth and a true bulk. This monstrous Galatea moved in a quick staccato akin to the tempo of early newsreels, with a dubbing of deafening sound effects, pistol shots, bullet whizzes, rankling of chains; screams, sighs. Arms, till then frozen in the delicate balance of an engraved design, let fly the stones hidden in their fists. Paper machetes became steel dug into the "wicked rich," easy to spot in the cowardly uniform that Posada had devised for him, high collar and high hat, gold chain dangling on a comfortable belly soon eviscerated.

Posada's work falls logically into three phases, conditioned by the three mediums that he adopted in turn: lithography, wood and metal cuts, relief etching. The blandness of lithographic crayon permeates his youthful provincial manner, marks its accurate drawing and delicate half-tones. These stones are political cartoons, big heads on spindly bodies in the taste of the French caricaturists of the 1860. A critic ignorant of the true sequence could point to Posada's first manner as an obvious refinement and elaboration of the cruder second manner. One expects a stylish cycle to go from simple to complex, from archaic

to baroque. Posada's lithographs are valued witness to the fact that he was one of the few who consciously order their lives from complexity to simplicity.

In the coarser second manner, he cut most of the illustrations made for the plebian tracts of publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. In the meantime Posada had suffered much. The widow of Don Antonio, a charming and able matriarch who used to call me with a twinkle "El Francesito," liked to recall Posada's often-told story: How in the floods of Leon in 1887, many members of his family drowned, how they would be carried past him by the churning waters and cry "Save us, Don José," until they sank.

The role of Don Antonio in the formation of Posada's new manner was crucial. As in the middle ages when the *Biblia Pauperum* edified countless humble souls, so did the penny pamphlets of Arroyo in Posada's Mexico. With customers to whom reading was slow work, the picture had to state the story in terms intense enough to smoke the Indian's penny out of his knotted kerchief. Horrifying, edifying, or comic anecdotes, broadslides on love and warfaré, are recipes of cooking and witchcraft, librettos of rustic plays, reached the remotest crags of the republic in the haversack of the peddler and the saddlebag of the pilgrim. Anthropologists who spy on remote Indian festivals and take down in phonetic shorthand the chanting, the pastoral skits, the cruel and length Passion speeches, the Mystery plays that evoke a world of sharp vertical hierarchy, man sandwiched between Heaven and Hell, might rather politely ask the coach or prompter for his book, much thumbed and yellowed, where the imprint of Vanegas Arroyo may still be deciphered.

The firm catered to the city mestizo as well as to the Indian peasant. Arroyo's *Gaceta Callejera* startled the city with extras as hot as the handsetting of type and the handcutting of the pictorial reportage allowed. Recurring headlines forced Posada to cynical economies. A standard picture "doubles" for every Horrendous Fire, a sign on the burning house being recut each time to fit the latest and best-selling conflagration. Another print shows a street demonstration. Men shout, women scream, fists fly, banners and streamers are displayed—left blank to allow the typesetter to dub in whatever rightist or leftist slogans, what-

ever religious or anti-clerical grievances, would transform the well-worn block into the news of the day.

Each year, for the Day of the Dead while children teased their appetites with sugar skulls and their elders prepared buffet suppers to be devoured on the family tomb, Arroyo's press let fly by the thousands broadsides known as "calaveras," the Mexican Dance of Death. With high glee, Posada conjured up the skeletons of politicians with tortoise-shell glasses and celluloid collars, of generals whose ribs sag under medals, of coquettes hiding their bald skulls under the funeral flowers of imported chapeaux.

The medium of this second manner is, more often, type-metal. The direct cutting with burin results in a white line on black ground. While in the making, the block was coated with azarcon. Digging into this red lead composition helped Posada to evoke all the more easily the flames that heat and the blood that splashes his visions. The furrowed line acquires a musculature that the lithographed one lacked. Journalistic deadlines, improvisations in a hard medium and an adjustment of his plastic vocabulary to a special audience, combine to give a primitive flavor that earned for this manner the approval of Paris.

Posada's third and last manner coincides with his discovery of relief etching, made in an effort to compete cheaply with the increasingly popular process of photo-engraving. In this unusual medium, zinc is drawn upon with an acid-resisting ink, all exposed parts hollowed in an acid bath. Unlike orthodox etching, the plate is inked with a roller like a woodcut. The only other well-known relief etcher is William Blake, who claimed to have received the secret of its process in a vision. The result is a black line penned on white ground, and Posada, in a swagger of calligraphic arabesques, celebrates his release from the exacting bondage of the burin.

Showing no trace of naivete, this last manner tends to irritate devotees of Posada who like to think of him as a Mexican Rousseau. Whereas the aging French master played "*Clochettes*" of his own composition on a three-quarter violin, we can picture the aging Mexican slapping his thigh and belching a Rabelaisian laugh as Death, his favorite model, tiptoes in.

Scarcest of Posada's prints are his woodcuts, a technique that he used for small vignettes or, outside his trade output, to portray his friends or transfer to the graphic medium a quick sketch from nature. In this book are collected proofs from the great majority of the original woodblocks still in the possession of the firm of Vanegas Arroyo. They are less blatant than the larger, better known metal blocks, neither loud in revolutionary flavor nor complex in their subject matter. They express even better than the more ambitious prints the linear mastery of an artist whose keen delight in human values never conflicted with an equally intense appreciation of abstract chords—played with endless variations on the single theme of black and white.

JEAN CHARLOT

100

original woodcuts by

POSADA

FOREWORD BY JEAN CHARLOT

published by

ARSACIO VANEGAS ARROYO

mexico, d. f.

1947

THE TAYLOR MUSEUM

COLORADO SPRINGS FINE ARTS CENTER

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO