

## **JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA: SYMBOLS, SKELETONS, AND SATIRE OPENS AT THE CLARK ART INSTITUTE ON JULY 16, 2022**

*Exhibition provides comprehensive look at works by noted Mexican illustrator*

(Williamstown, Massachusetts)— José Guadalupe Posada, a tireless producer of caricatures and satirical imagery for the penny press that were one of the most popular forms of media in his homeland, has been widely recognized as “the foremost caricaturist, the foremost graphic artist” in Mexico for more than 125 years. A varied selection of the artist’s engaging and entertaining work will be presented at the Clark Art Institute in *José Guadalupe Posada: Symbols, Skeletons, and Satire*, a new exhibition opening July 16. Posada built his career in an era of political repression and lived to see the profound social changes brought by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The exhibition, drawn from the extensive collection of Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, showcases the vibrant visual culture of Mexico in its pre-revolutionary years and studies Posada’s influential role in informing and shaping popular opinion. The exhibition is on view at the Clark through October 10, 2022.

“I have long been intrigued and entertained by the works of José Guadalupe Posada and became very familiar with the wonderful collection at the Amon Carter Museum when I worked in Dallas,” said Olivier Meslay, Hardymon Director of the Clark. “As our curatorial team discussed possibilities for an engaging summer exhibition, we quickly turned to Posada as an artist with a fascinating story and an amazing body of work. Although his name is not particularly well known in the United States, many of his images are iconic and will be instantly recognizable as some of the lively characters who are a beloved and enduring part of Mexico’s visual culture.”

Posada’s pictorial contributions to broadsides, or ephemeral news sheets, provided a daily diet of information and entertainment to a public for whom images needed to tell the story since literacy was not widely prevalent during the late nineteenth century. Posada’s highly varied images in the popular press included *noticias* illustrating lurid crimes, current scandals, and other sensational stories, but these constitute only a part of his extensive output. Reused and reprinted, sometimes until the printing blocks and plates wore out, his beloved illustrations also encompass religious subjects, ballads, and children’s books and games. Posada is best known for his sheets of *calaveras* (skeletons), which figured in popular rituals around the Mexican celebration of the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) but were also adapted into satires of political figures and other individuals. Whether playful or trenchant, vernacular or surreal, Posada’s imagery continues to delight, and it still inspires the work of many illustrators working today.

“José Guadalupe Posada is a vastly influential artist who had an unfailing knack for creative, high-impact visual communication. His illustrations pack an instant punch yet also reward longer, closer inspection. Although his work is far from unknown, it deserves the widest possible audience, and we are thrilled to be able to offer this rich selection from the holdings of the Amon Carter Museum. Visitors to the Berkshires will immensely enjoy plunging into Posada’s vibrant world,” said Anne Leonard, exhibition curator and Manton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs.

### **ABOUT THE EXHIBITION**

José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) was only in his mid-thirties when his illustrations and caricatures won recognition as the preeminent graphic art of Mexico. Born in the provincial town of Aguascalientes, Posada demonstrated talent as a printmaker from a young age. His career took him first to León (Guanajuato) and then to Mexico City, where he was closely associated for more than two decades with the Vanegas Arroyo print shop, a mainstay of the penny press. An indefatigable illustrator, Posada produced thousands of images for ephemeral news sheets known as broadsides, which offered a sensationalist mix of crime reporting, lurid scandal, current events, and social satire.

These broadsides thrived at a time when literacy was not widespread, which meant that images held outsized importance in telling a story.

Posada's active years coincided with the rule of Porfirio Díaz, a leader who brought modernization and relative stability to Mexico at the cost of press censorship and political repression. Posada was the only caricaturist who worked through the most authoritarian years of Díaz's dictatorship and into the first years of the Mexican Revolution. Seldom overtly political, Posada's images catered to public taste for the sensational and shocking. Natural disasters and folk celebrations, bullfights and murders, icons of popular religion and caricatures of both individuals and social types—all were fodder for his illustrations. A remarkably flexible artist, whose imagination often veered toward the surreal, Posada remains best known for his *calaveras*, or skeletons, whose vitality and comic antics belie their macabre symbolism.

Producing illustrations for almost sixty different periodicals in total, Posada went from one print shop to the next in search of assignments but had little control over his own legacy. His publishers decided what use to make of his images, what titles and texts to append to them, and how many copies to make. And yet, Posada's decisive achievement and enduring influence make him a pivotal figure in modern Mexican art—according to one writer, “one of the most many-sided artists that Mexico has ever had.”

## PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

Posada trained first in lithography. Despite his proficiency in the medium, when he moved to Mexico City around 1888, he switched to relief printing on metal plates. Relief etching allowed Posada to draw directly on the plate with an acid-resistant ink. When the plate was bathed in acid, this process left the finished design behind, raised up in relief, which made for easy inking. Once ready for printing, the metal plates were nailed to woodblocks that raised them to the same level as typeset text blocks; text and image could then be arrayed together to form a single broadsheet page.

Because his etched plates were printed thousands of times—even until they wore out—assigning precise dates to Posada's works is often difficult. Certain kinds of prints, such as devotional imagery connected with Catholic saints' days and religious festivals, were in perennial demand for city churches as well as home altars. Other illustrations, designed to accompany specific news incidents, could be reused or adapted as needed to fit new circumstances.

## THE CALAVERAS

Some of Posada's most familiar and beloved images are the *calaveras*, or skeletons, associated with the Day of the Dead (*El Día de los Muertos*). Each year on November 2, demand soared for both printed and sculpted *calaveras* that Mexican families would bring to the cemeteries where their loved ones were buried. Although *calaveras* derived from Catholic devotional iconography, in Posada's hands they became distinctively Mexican, bound up with local popular traditions. For example, *calaveras* enabled Posada's publisher, Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, to speak about living people as if they were already dead and use verses that parodied genuine epitaphs. Although a contemporary of Posada's, Manuel Manilla, first adapted the *calavera* for broadside use, it was Posada who greatly expanded its humorous and satirical potential. Despite their renown and popularity, *calaveras* represent only about two percent of his surviving works.

One of Posada's best-known images, the *Calavera Catrina* (c. 1890–1913) is a satire of a female dandy. She was originally called *La Garbancera* (*The Garbanzo Vendor*), in a reference to ordinary women who put on refined, high-society airs. A verse that accompanied this image deflated those aspirations and reduced all human beings to the same condition with the message “You're just another pile of bones.” Catrina's fame grew exponentially when Mexican painter Diego Rivera incorporated her character into the mural called *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda*

*Central* (1947). In that painting, where she is recognizable by her plumed hat and wears a showy white gown, Catrina stands between Posada himself and Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo.

### FROM REAL TO SURREAL

Crime was the bread and butter of the illustrated news sheets—the more sensational, the better. In developing images for these criminal episodes, Posada usually had very little visual material to go on. Without photographs of the event or the perpetrator, most details were left to his imagination. In addition, the crimes being reported were, more often than not, several weeks old, as the Mexico City broadsheets tended to cull items from provincial newspapers that arrived by mail. To ensure that they still had relevance and conveyed a message, the events were subject to creative embellishment and moralizing commentary. Some were expressly described as *ejemplares*, or examples, to steer readers away from crime and toward the straight and narrow. Posada's illustrations of these incidents required instant legibility, dramatic excitement, and narrative compression—all hallmarks of his visual style. From these images based on reported news, it was but a short step to extraordinary scenes of his own invention, running the gamut from playful to terrifying. Works featured in the exhibition illustrate horrific news events including the attempted assassination of a priest in St. Peter's Basilica, the notorious suicide of a wealthy Mexican businessman, and the serial murder of a Mexican family, along with more commonplace occurrences like prison fights and executions.

The broadsides also focused considerable attention on people and activities that captured the nation's attention, including bullfighting (which was prohibited in Mexico until the 1890s), famed bullfighters, and of course, grisly details of the woundings and deaths of the matadors who starred in the arenas.

The celestial appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910 was natural fodder for the popular press, capturing the excitement of the highly anticipated event even as it stoked public fears about the comet's portent. The comet's passage coincided with the centenary of the Mexican independence effort against Spain in 1810 and is the subject of *El Cometa del Centenario de la Independencia, México 1810–1910* (*The Comet of the Centenary of Mexican Independence, 1810–1910*) (1910). Hoping to use the coincidence of the comet's appearance to his advantage, Mexican leader Porfirio Díaz mounted a large anniversary event celebrating his rule. A revolution attempting to overthrow the Díaz government followed those celebrations by just a few months, which significantly altered the perceived symbolism of the comet. In a related print, called *The End of the World Has Arrived* (c. 1910), Posada conjures up a night sky filled with comets, lightning, and other streaking and flying objects, under which a crowd of people flee a cityscape in all directions, arms outstretched in shock and fear.

### POSADA'S CORRIDOS

The broadsides in greatest demand from Vanegas Arroyo's print shop were the *corridos*, or ballads, illustrated by Posada. *Corridos* became part of an oral tradition through their mode of distribution: roving troubadours, often blind, would purchase the broadside sheets and sing the verses with guitar accompaniment in markets and public squares. They then sold the broadsides for a few *centavos* to listeners who, for the most part, were unable to read the words. Illustrations were therefore crucial to the flourishing of this oral tradition of popular ballads. Legendary characters like heroes and bandits dominated the subject matter, though ballads could also involve current events and political figures. Posada's images, despite their sensationalism calculated to boost sales, always emphasized the humanity of the common people.

### FOR CHILDREN

Board games such *El Nuevo Coyote* (c. 1904) and *Juego de la oca* (*Game of the Goose*) (c. 1890–1913) have been called the “best of José Guadalupe Posada's work in the broadside genre.” Versions of the *Juego de la oca* exist in cultures the world over and are ancient in origin. Their basic

principle is for players to move pieces around a board through a series of squares, with surprise advances and setbacks, to a pre-established endpoint. Posada's design includes sixty-three squares, with movement determined by a throw of the dice. Players encounter situations including weddings and funerals but can also be met with obstacles such as pickpockets, labyrinths, and *calaveras*.

In 1900, the Maucci Brothers—a Barcelona-based publisher with an important Mexico City branch—commissioned texts by Heriberto Frías and illustrations by Posada for a series known as the *Biblioteca del Niño Mexicano*, aimed at young readers. On the covers of 110 miniature booklets, Posada's chromolithographs added drama and vibrancy to landmark episodes in Mexican history. The series was divided into five sections: Ancient Mexico, Discoveries and Conquests, After the Conquest, Independence, and The Present Day. The skulls in the background of a Hernán Cortés print express all too eloquently the depredations of the Spanish conqueror and the large proportion of the Indigenous population that was wiped out as a result. Another title, "Los horrores de la guerra," (The Horrors of the War) describes the United States' seizure of more than half of Mexico's land—territories that later became the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

A wide-ranging series of events and activities related to the Posada exhibition will be hosted at the Clark. The exhibition's July 16 opening day coincides with the Clark's popular community day event, offering free admission throughout the day and an afternoon of fun for all. See [clarkart.edu/events](http://clarkart.edu/events) for further details.

*José Guadalupe Posada: Symbols, Skeletons, and Satire* is organized by the Clark Art Institute and curated by Anne Leonard, Manton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs. This exhibition is drawn from the extensive Posada holdings of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas.

#### **ABOUT THE CLARK**

The Clark Art Institute, located in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, is one of a small number of institutions globally that is both an art museum and a center for research, critical discussion, and higher education in the visual arts. Opened in 1955, the Clark houses exceptional European and American paintings and sculpture, extensive collections of master prints and drawings, English silver, and early photography. Acting as convener through its Research and Academic Program, the Clark gathers an international community of scholars to participate in a lively program of conferences, colloquia, and workshops on topics of vital importance to the visual arts. The Clark library, consisting of more than 285,000 volumes, is one of the nation's premier art history libraries. The Clark also houses and co-sponsors the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.

The Clark, which has a three-star rating in the Michelin Green Guide, is located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Its 140-acre campus includes miles of hiking and walking trails through woodlands and meadows, providing an exceptional experience of art in nature. Galleries are open 10 am to 5 pm Tuesday through Sunday, from September through June, and daily in July and August. Advance timed tickets are recommended. Admission is \$20. Admission is also free on a year-round basis for Clark members, all visitors age twenty-one and under, and students with a valid student ID. Free admission is available through several programs, including First Sundays Free; a local library pass program; and EBT Card to Culture. For more information on these programs and more, visit [clarkart.edu](http://clarkart.edu) or call 413 458 2303. For details on health and safety protocols, visit [clarkart.edu/health](http://clarkart.edu/health).