

# Posada Beyond La Catrina

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By Carla Santana

A century since his death, José Guadalupe Posada left a wide heritage, not only engravings and skull, but he was a pioneer of editorial and graphic design in México.



José Guadalupe Posada Aguilar was born on February 2nd, 1852 at 10 pm, in former Los Ángeles Street

–which nowadays is called Posada Street– 47 and 49 in Aguascalientes City. He was Germán Posada Cerna and Petra Aguilar Portillo's sixth child, and he was raised within a countryside and poverty context among childhood games and working at the family businesses (bakery and pottery workshop). In the latter he would develop an interest for drawing and form. His brother Cirilo, 13 years older, who was teacher at an elementary school persuaded him to become literate and learn catechism.<sup>1</sup> Cirilo took him to the Municipal Academy of Drawing. He was there for a short period of time, so it is not known how much he learnt there, maybe academic rules or copy prints to acquire drawing skills. Due to his family's poverty situation, he was expecting to learn an office career to give them economic support. At 15, José Guadalupe Posada became painter.

We can state that Posada is the most important mexican engraver artist of all times. His prolific graphic art (twenty thousand prints) and his extraordinary quality allowed him to become the first universal Latinamerican artist.

At 16, in 1868, he started to work at José Trinidad Pedroza workshop, one of the best graphic artists of Mexico in those days. Posada became an illustrator there, performing lithography with excellency. At an early stage, Posada created his own artistic language and style, based on the reality. Not for copying it but to capture its essence and transform it into art. His language is strongly linked to popular culture and his work emerges from popular imagery. It represents hangings, crime, fusillades, monsters. All his concepts emerge from daily life, he retakes them and makes them appear bigger than real ones giving a high expressive content.

At 19, 1871, Posada created his first well known piece: a lithographic serie about eleven local state matters for the *Jicote de Pedroza* newspaper. The release of the images was an important event, and it made him «the best cartoonist of Aguascalientes». This early pieces showed a glimpse of a skilled drawer, lithographs were the only prints with an approach to local topics and characters.

On May 15, 1872, he and Trinidad Pedroza established a workshop in León, Guanajuato on *Indio triste* Street, that was sold later by Pedroza in 1876. Posada made commercial assignments to survive: calligraphy, saints prints designs, illustrations for books, cigars, matches, wine and liqueur packaging designs, birthday cards and commercial and social adds, for local and nearby customers. There, Posada consolidated their knowledge and career as illustrator.

On September 20th, 1875, he married María de Jesús Vela, a 16 year old girl, they had no kids. Posada had a kid, Juan Sabino, his only son who was born in 1883 and died at 16. It is unknown why Posada moved to Mexico City. It was probably because of the catastrophic flood of 1888 when some members of his family died, or the desire to try fortune.

His biggest influence were Romantic Mexican and foreign artists. Imported French book illustrations were printed at the workshop, these illustrations were inside romantic international trend that reached all intellectual fields of creativity.

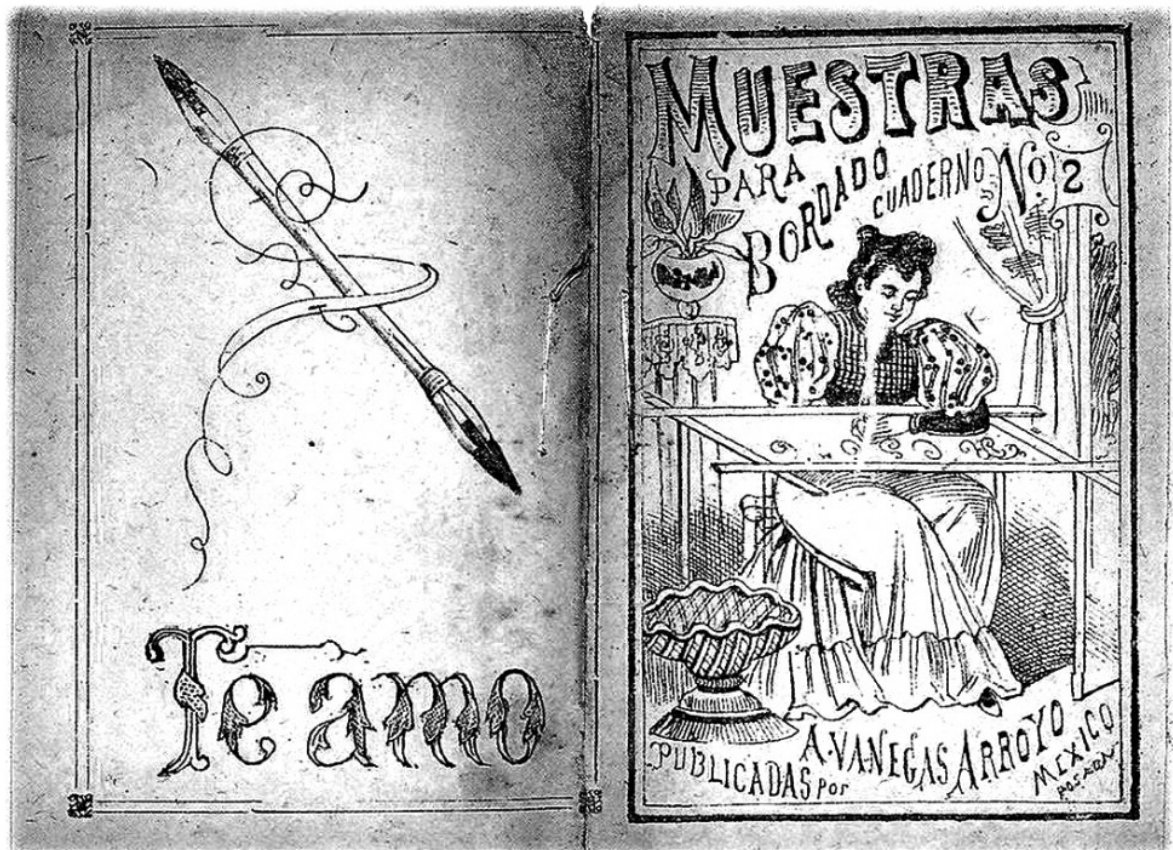
Lots of newspapers asked Posada to collaborate and his successful work meant more work everyday. The mastering of his skills as engraver allowed him to reach a vital and direct language beyond triviality of topics and far from picturesque and vulgarity. He worked for

several newspapers: El Jicote, El Teatro, La Gaceta Callejera, El Boletín, Gil Blas Cómico, El Popular, El Amigo del Pueblo, La Patria Ilustrada, el Diablito Rojo, La Patria Festiva, Revista de México, La Risa de El Popular, Entreacto, El Chisme, La Casera, El Diablazo, La Guacamaya, San Lunes, Aladino, El Padre Padilla, Almanaque de Doña Caralampia Mondongo, El Paladín, Almanaque del Padre Cobos, La Patria, Fray Gerundio and El Fandango among others.



«El Popular» newspaper, January 25, 1897, Posada illustrated lot of newspapers of those years.

In Mexico City near 1889, publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo hired Posada; both had in common their audiences and the population, Posada worked for 22 years near 300 booklets there. In those days, a worker earned one peso everyday, so people couldn't afford a book, but they could buy a cheaper booklet. The two supporters of editorial design then were Manual Manilla and Posada, text illustrated, songbooks, tales, riddles, epistolary, motto collections, kitchen handbooks, fancywork guides, syllabary, oracle, jugglery handbooks.



Booklet embroidery samples N° 2, by Posada while working at Vanegas Arroyo publisher.

Studying the origins of Posada iconography we found knowledge and visual education based on observation of popular facts of the time and the high culture acquired by oral and written transmission of ideas and techniques or the daily interaction with skilled colleagues. The XIX Century is the golden age of popular art. With the death of absolutist ideas of divine power of government authorities, political, social and religion thoughts were born and this allowed expression and creation liberty. Artist represented no censored artistic concepts, breaking rigid traditions established by state and clergy despotism. Posada also worked on popular concepts of the age: songbooks and *corridos* (popular songs from the Revolution), as well as classic children's tales.

A good engraving work, requires –needless to say–, a great deal of patience; and "Don Lupe", as he was called by his friends and coworkers, had that virtue to make his plates and give them the expression and the emotion needed.

He designed posters and play bills to promote public shows of the late XIX - early XX century Mexico. The playbills were hand delivered on the streets promoting bull fighting, circus, cinematographic projections, plays and cockfighting. Posada would work mainly for neighborhood stages, mostly for the Guillermo Prieto Theater. Playbills were usually printed on color China paper in small dimensions to avoid bothering the person on the next seat. The thinnest and smallest playbills were known as *tiras* (strips).<sup>2</sup>

Posada then moves on to formal, social and political experimentation of the *calaveras*;

drawing Death makes it easier for everybody to make blunt critics and makes us all equal before death. Hence, the biggest heritage of Posada are skulls, final synthesis of our own heritage.

Who is La Catrina? This image has become a picaresque icon of death due to its flirty and joyful character. Created 101 years ago, during presidency of Porfirio Díaz, continues representing a mexican social class, and is also part of mexican culture. Quality of each of Don Lupe´s skulls, is remarkable, nevertheless, mexican people taste, choose one that had become national symbol: La Calavera Catrina. It was born called «Calavera garbancera», from "garbanceros" –rude, ordinary people– usually indigenous people who renegade from their culture and nationality, but at the same time, they use and imitate european habits. It has no wear, just a french style hat.

Using this image, Posada criticized those who pretend a lifestyle that do not belong to them; sarcastic, mocking and beautiful *calaveras* testify the life as something unworthy to take it seriously. Globally known, they are the most complete sample of his art and style.

# REMATE DE CALAVERAS ALEGRES

Y SANDUNGUERAS

Las que hoy son empolvadas GARBANCERAS,  
pararán  
en  
deformes  
calaveras.



Hay hermosas garbanceras,  
De corsé y alto tacón;  
Pero han de ser calaveras,  
Calaveras del montón.

Gata quite pintas chapas  
Con ladrillo o bermellón:  
La muerte dirá: «No escapas»,  
«Eres cráneo del montón.»

Un exámen voy a hacer,  
Con gran justificación,  
Y en él han de aparecer  
Muchos cráneos del montón.

Hay unas gatas ingratas,  
Muy llenas de presunción  
Y matreras como ratas,  
Que compran joyas baratas  
En las ventas de ocasión.

A veces se llaman «Rita»,  
Otras se llaman «Consuelo»,  
Y a otras les dicen «Pepita»;  
A esas la muerte les grita:  
«No se duerman, que yo velo»;  
«Y en llegando la ocasión,  
«Que no mucho ha de tardar,  
«Heridas por un torzón,  
«Calaveras del montón,  
«Al hoyo iréis a parar.»

Hay unas «Rosas» fragantes,  
Porque compran «Pachuli»  
Unas «Trinis» trigarantes,  
Y unas «Choles» palpitanes,  
Dulces como un piruli;  
Pero también la pelona  
Les dice sin emoción,  
«No olviden a mi persona,  
«Que les guarda una corona  
«De muelas en el panteón.»

Vienen luego las mañosas  
Que «Conchas» se hacen llamar,  
Y que aunque sean pretenciosas,  
No tienen perlas preciosas,  
Sino migre hasta más dar.  
A éstas y a las Filomónas,  
Que usan vestido zancón  
Y andan de algodón rellonas,  
Les ha de acabar sus penas  
La Fata con su azidón.



Siguen las Petras airosas,  
Las Clotildes y Manueles,  
Que puercas y maitecosas,  
Son flojas y pingajosas  
Y rompen muchas cazuelas.

La enlutada misteriosa,  
Que impera allá en el Panteón,  
Y es algo cavilosa,  
Con su guadaña filosa  
Las echará al socavón.

Las Adelaidas traidoras,  
Que aparentan emoción  
Si oyen frases seductoras,  
Y que son estafadoras  
Y muy flojas de pilón;  
Se han de ver próximamente,  
Sin poderlo remediar,  
Sumidas enteramente  
En el hoyo pestilento  
De donde no han de escapar.

Las Enriquetas melancólicas,  
Unidas a las Julianas  
Y a las Virginias tramposas,  
Que compran baratas cosas,  
Aunque resulten mal sanas;  
Pagarán su picudez  
Y sus mañas de agiotista,  
Sumiéndose en la estrechez  
Y en la inmundicia lobreguez  
Porque la muerte es muy lista.

Las pulidas Carolinas,  
Que se van a platicar  
En la tienda y las esquinas,  
Y se la echan de catrinas  
Porque se saben peinar:

Han de dejar sin excusa  
Los listones y el crepé,  
Y en un hoyo cual de lusa,  
Se hundirán con todo y blusa,  
Con choclos y con corsé.

Las Marcelas y las Saras,  
Que al Cine van a gozar,  
Vendiendo hasta las cucharas,  
Y se embaduman las caras  
Porque pretenden gustar,  
Serán indudablemente,  
Sin ninguna discusión,  
De improviso o lentamente  
Esqueleto pestilente,  
Calaveras del montón.

Y las gatas de figón,  
Que se hacen llamar «Carmela»,  
Por producir emoción,  
Y tienen el bodegón  
Tan sucio que desconciela;  
Han de pagar su pereza  
Que dá mortificación,  
Sumiéndose de cabeza  
En el fondo de la mesa,  
A sor cráneos del montón

En fin, las Lupes y Pitas,  
Las Eduwigis y Lulas,  
Las perfumadas Anitas,  
Las Julias y las Chuchilas,  
Tan amantes de las galas;  
Han de sentir por final,  
Diciendo «Miran que caso»,  
El guadaño fatal,  
Y liadas como tamal,  
Verán que llegó su ocaseo.

Pero no quiero olvidar  
A las lindas Margaritas,  
Tan amantes de bailar,  
Y a quienes gusta ostentar,  
Porque se creen muy bonitas.  
La muerte las ha de herir,  
Sin mirar su presunción,  
Y aunque se van a afiligr  
Yo les tengo que decir  
«Calaveras del montón.»

Las Gumesindas e Irenes,  
Las Gilbertas y Ramonas,  
Que quieren siempre ir en trenes,  
Y que alzan mucho las sienes  
Porque se juzgan personas;  
Las Melquiades y Rebecas,  
Las Amalias y Juanitas,  
Que unas son sucias y mecas  
Y otras se juzgan muflas  
Y presumen de bonitas;

Las Romanas y Esperanzas,  
Las Anastasias famosas,  
Que son gurbias y muy lanzas  
Y parecen gatas mansas,  
Porque son muy labiosas;  
Todas, todas en montón,  
Sin poderlo remediar,  
En llegando la ocasión,  
Calaveras del montón.  
En la tumba han de parar. X.



Imp. de A. Vanegas Arroyo,  
2ª de Sta. Teresa núm. 43.  
México. — 1913.

Promotion of happy and sanduqueras skulls.

An unusual feature of Posada images –unusual as well in popular art– are not masterly descriptions of poor people world, different popular characters or everyday life scenes. The extraordinary and where resides his historic sociocultural and artistic relevance is the fact that he represented that world with the same glimpse of the poor people: street people,

*pulquerías*, or women in kitchen or market. In his engravings are expressed the thoughts and pulse of Mexican people.



0 | José Guadalupe Posada a la entrada de su taller, ca. 1898-1899.

José Guadalupe Posada at his workshop facade in Mexico city. ca. 1898-1899.

As member of population as he was, he sought and expressed himself with solidarity. He was a typical and totally mexican engraver whose characters were main characters, and he, with his art talked to people about their topics, struggles and needs, with their own imagery and feelings.

He made his work without a clear political ideology, but spontaneity and imagination, with empathy with his own people, whose he still evokes since his own thumb at *Panteón de Dolores*.

Posada left printed on several publications news, love, rage and sarcasm, the conciousness of his generation and a part of history of mexican art as one of the most important artist unintentionally.

Posada died on January, 20, 1913. His death certificate states that at 9 am José Guadalupe Posada have died because a acute enteritis and it was allowed to be buried freely at the sixth class of Dolores mausoleum.

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1. *José Guadalupe Posada a 100 años de su partida*. México, Índice Editores/ Iconos de Siempre. p. 22
  2. De los Reyes, Aurelio (2010) *iTercera llamada, tercera! Programa de espectáculos ilustrados por José Guadalupe Posada*. México, Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes. p. 13

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