

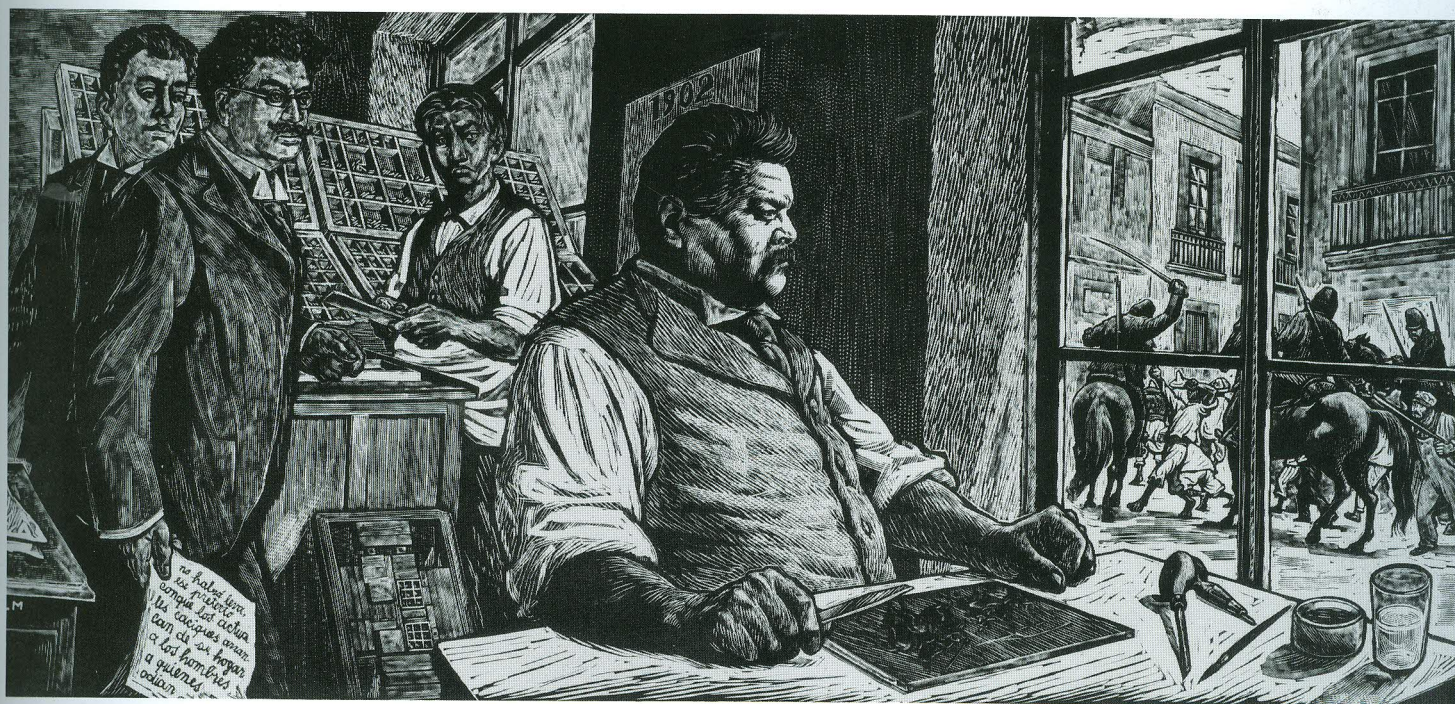
The *Taller de Gráfica Popular*

THE TALLER de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphics Workshop) was founded in 1937 by Leopoldo Méndez, Luis Arenal and Pablo O'Higgins. Its 'Declaration of Principles' (see Appendix, 8.1), which remained its only formal statement, announced it as 'a collective work centre for functional production'. It not only provided printmaking facilities but also guidance for artists not trained in graphic techniques.

Leopoldo Méndez had been director of the Plastic Arts division of the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, LEAR), which was founded in 1933, but disagreements led to his breaking away to found the Taller de Gráfica Popular, and the League dissolved the same year. He, Arenal and O'Higgins had all been active contributors to LEAR's magazine *Frente a Frente*. However, it is notable that *Frente a Frente* included photographs and photo-montages in the John Heartfield and Russian Constructivist tradition – the fourth issue, for instance, contained among others Gustav Klutis's photomontage, *The USSR is the shock brigade of the world's proletariat*, while the Taller de Gráfica Popular concentrated on prints – lino-cuts and woodcuts, as well as lithographs. There was a sense among the

8.1 Detail of Pl. 8.9

8.2 Leopoldo Méndez, *Homage to Posada*, 1956, engraving in linoleum, 36.2×78.5 cm., Collection José Sánchez Aguilar.

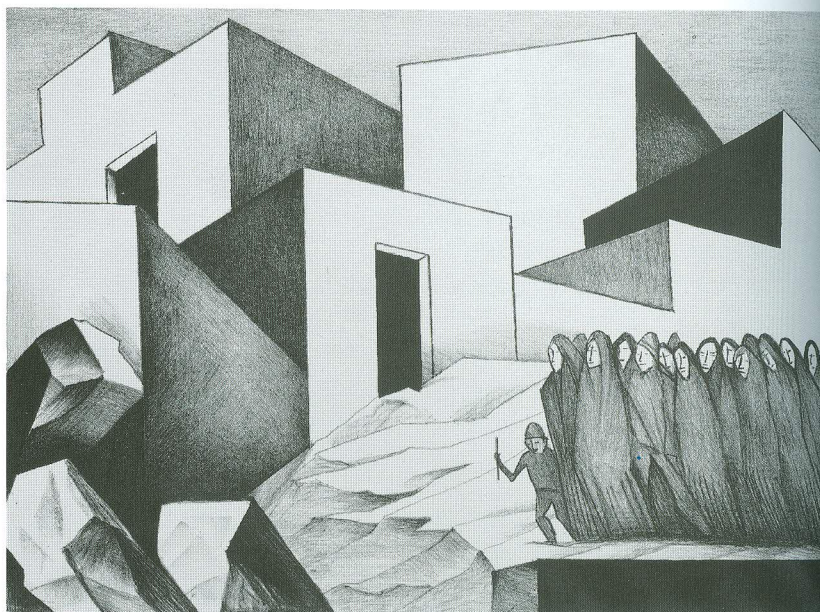


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artists that this was part of a particularly Mexican tradition, going back to the nineteenth century, with Posada, above all, acknowledged as the forebear: Méndez made a *Homage to Posada* in 1956 [Pl. 8.2]. Printmaking was an appropriately public, popular medium for the politically and socially concerned artists.

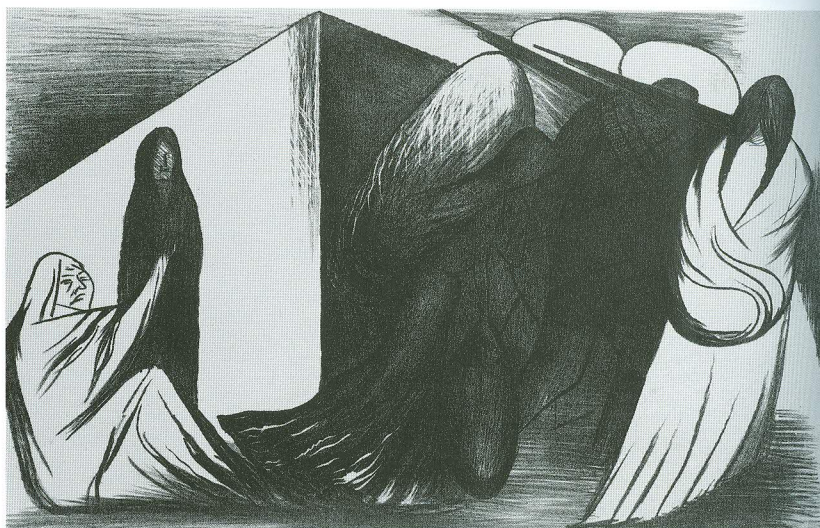
Jean Charlot, who had arrived from France in 1921, and who met Fernando Leal at the open-air school of painting in Coyoacán, was, it appears, responsible for the introduction of woodcuts to artists who were also involved in the mural renaissance [Pls 8.3,4,5]; bringing with him admiration for the popular coloured 'Images d' Epinal', and probably a knowledge of German expressionist prints,¹ it was also Charlot who directed attention to the street prints of Vanegas Arroyo, and led the revival of Posada's work. In 1924 the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors financed 'a large-format sheet stamped with bold black, white and

8.3 José Clemente Orozco, *Mexican Pueblo*, 1930, lithograph, 27.7×38.8cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.



8.4 José Clemente Orozco, *Mexican Soldiers*, 1929, lithograph, 28.3×45.7cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

8.5 David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Storm or Latin America*, n.d., lithograph, 30×22.8cm., sheet 49.5×32.6cm., Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin; Gift of Thomas Cranfill, 1966.





8.8 (facing page top) Isidoro Ocampo, *Fascism, 5th Lecture: Spanish Fascism*, 1938, lithograph and letterpress, printed in colour, 32.1×45.7 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Inter-American Fund.



8.6 Pablo O'Higgins, *Brickmaker*, c. 1940, lithograph, 35.5×29 cm., sheet, 44.5×38 cm., Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Organization of American States.

8.7 Pablo O'Higgins, *The Market*, c. 1940, lithograph, 29×36 cm., sheet 38×44.5 cm., Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Organization of American States.



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red woodcuts'.² *El Machete*. Siqueiros, Orozco, Guerrero and others produced *El Machete*'s illustrations.

Only because they wanted to put across a message did the muralists turn engravers. They were awkward at their new craft. The desire to enunciate clearly, the strong mural style regardless of scale, the authentic primitivism of engravings carved with a pocket knife, rich in art and short on skill, the unequal pressure on inked blocks hardly level with the type and the resulting coarse printing, even the tone blocks that smudge with red the design – all combine to make an effective impact.³

At the end of 1924 the Communist Party took over *El Machete*, trimmed its size and dropped the woodcuts in favour of half-tone illustrations. In the same year Charlot, Méndez, Revueltas, Guerrero, Máximo Pacheco and Alva de la Canal produced prints and drawings for the first *Estridentista* exhibition (see chapter 6), Charlot illustrated Maples Arce's poem *Urbe*, and Díaz de León did the first lino-cut prints in Mexico. The '30-30' artists' group (see Appendix, 7.4) continued to promote printmaking, and in 1935 the LEAR founded a workshop/school for mural painting and graphics. It was the Taller de Gráfica Popular, however, that provided the most active and long-lived collective centre for printmaking, and stamped its mark so strongly on the medium that artists from the modernist tradition of the New York School felt inhibited from using it.

Visiting galleries with Franz Kline around 1955, I asked him how he felt about making prints, perhaps lithographs, thinking that his vivid white and black image could be perfectly suited to the velvety inks and papers of the medium.

'No', he said, 'printmaking concerns social attitudes, you know – politics and a public . . .'

'Politics?'

'Yes, like the Mexicans in the 1930s; printing, multiplying, educating; I can't think about it; I'm involved in the private image' . . .⁴

The first headquarters of the Taller de Gráfica Popular was set up in three rooms, with exhibition, workshop and machine space. Their first lithographic press, apparently, was inscribed 'Paris 1871', and was believed to have served the Paris Commune. Around Méndez, Arenal and O'Higgins [Pls 8.6,7] gathered a group of artists including Ignacio Aguirre, Raúl Anguiano, Ángel Bracho, Jesús Escobedo, Everardo Ramírez, Antonio Pujol, Alfredo Zalce and Isidoro Ocampo. Numbers grew, and continued to remain at between twelve and fifteen until the Fifties.

The Presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, who instituted a programme of radical reforms between 1934 and 1940, was particularly favourable to them; besides the continuing mural programme, the printmakers, working in the more pugnacious, ephemeral and easily distributable medium, supported Cárdenas' programme,

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with posters and broadsheets on the expropriation of foreign-owned oil companies, as well as a major poster campaign attacking fascism [Pl. 8.8]. (In 1942 Mexico entered the Second World War on the Allied side.) After the war they became actively involved in the literacy campaigns established by the government in 1944.

But beside the frequently satirical and grotesque posters, the Taller de Gráfica Popular produced numerous portfolios of lithographs and woodcuts exposing the exploitation of the poor, attacking the abuses of peasant rights, and the continuing 'latifundio' land-ownership system [Pl. 8.10]. These powerful single images provide a counterpoint to the murals, which often, on their huge scale, treated Mexican society in generalized or allegorical terms.

Méndez defended persistent criticism of their use of woodcut and lino-cut, on the grounds of practical necessity, because they were cheap.⁵ Lino-cuts in particular were cheap and flexible: large-scale prints could easily be replaced, unlike the precious lithographic stone or wood blocks. Linoleum was also an extremely effective



8.9 Leopoldo Méndez, *The Merry-go-round*, n.d., linoleum cut on paper, 30.5×41.9 cm., sheet 50×64 cm., Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin, University Purchase, 1966.





8.10 Alberto Beltrán, *Song of the Miners' Parade*, n.d., linoleum cut on paper, 17.8×13 cm.; sheet 36.2×28.5 cm., Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin; Gift of Thomas Cranfill, 1972.



8.11 Newton Cavalcanti, *Christ*, c. 1945, woodcut on Japanese paper, 28.1×18.9 cm., Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.

8.12 Leopoldo Méndez, *The Serpent*, from Juan de la Cabada, *Melodic Incidents of the Irrational World*, 1945 wood engraving on paper, 13.2×13.5 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Inter-American Fund.



8.13 Ángel Bracho, *The Bridge of Nonoalco or The Bridge and the Pedlar*, 1944, lithograph, 46.5×58.4 cm.; sheet 49.5×64.8 cm., Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin; Gift of M.K. Hage Jr., 1970.

8.14 Anonymous, *Cordeles* (pamphlets with woodcuts), c. 1970, pamphlets and leather suitcase, Museu de Folclóre Edison Carneiro, Instituto Nacional do Folclóre/Fundação Nacional de Arte, Rio de Janeiro.

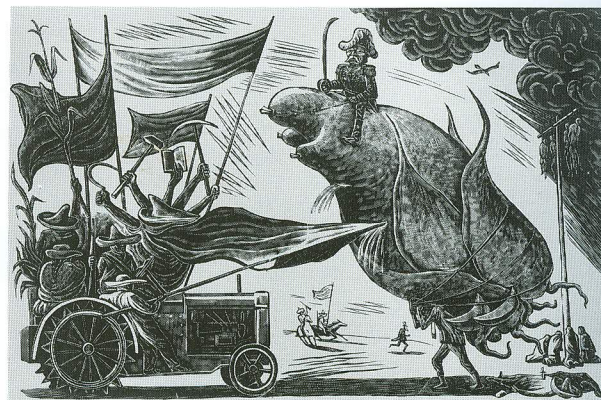


medium, which they exploited to the full, working over the whole surface with sharp strokes to create a multitude of tones and textures, the lively and varied patterns of the marks offering greater scope for imaginative invention than the relatively sober and conventional lithograph [Pl. 8.9].

The Taller de Gráfica Popular produced several portfolios devoted to Indian life in Mexico: Bracho's *Rito de la Tribu Huichol*, for instance, and Zalce's *Estampas de Yucatán* [Pls 8.13, 15, 17].⁶ Méndez' illustrations to Juan de la Cabada's *Incidentes Melódicos del Mundo Irracional* [Pl. 8.12] are wood engravings which present myths and rituals, mingled with fantasy. One of the most important of the Taller de Gráfica Popular publications, which contained 85 linocuts by a number of Taller de Gráfica Popular artists, came out in 1947: *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana*.

The Taller de Gráfica Popular, as well as Mexican muralism, had a considerable impact in other countries in America and Europe during the Thirties. Contacts were established with the WPA/FAP (Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project) in the USA, and the direct influence of the Taller was felt in Czechoslovakia, Italy, Brazil, Ecuador and Guatemala.⁷

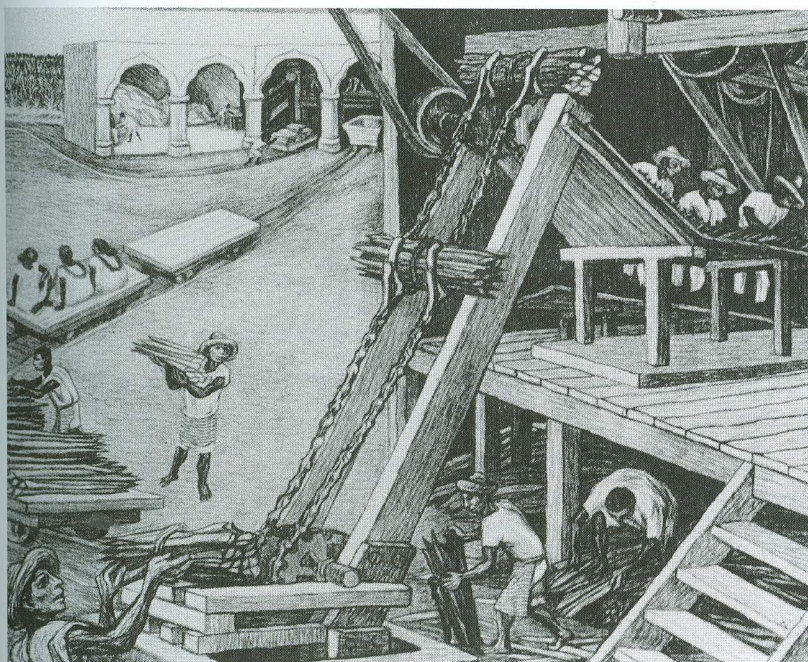
In 1946, the Taller de Gráfica Popular published a portfolio of prints by the Ecuadorean artist Galo Galecio, who had studied engraving and fresco paintings in Mexico [Pl. 8.18]. In Brazil, the most significant development was the founding of two engraving



8.16 José Chávez Morado, *The Skirmish*, 1945, wood engraving on paper, 26.8×42.1 cm., The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Inter-American Fund.

8.15 Alfredo Zalce, *Untitled*, c. 1940, lithograph, 29×35 cm.; sheet 38×44.5 cm., Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Organization of American States.

8.17 Alfredo Zalce, *Untitled*, c. 1940, lithograph, 28×35 cm.; sheet 38.5×44.5 cm., Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, Organization of American States.



8.18 Galo Galecio, *Burial of the Black Girl*, n.d., woodcut on paper, 33×33 cm., Museo de Arte Moderno, Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, Quito.

clubs, both of popular leftist persuasion [Pl. 8.20]. The Clube de Gravura de Porto-Alegre was started in 1950, by Carlos Scliar and Vasco Prado [Pl. 8.19], who met Leopoldo Méndez, and in 1951 the Clube de Gravura de Baje. In 1952 a volume entitled *Gravuras Gauchas* was published. Nourished by the Brazilian popular tradition of the *Cordeles*, cheaply printed sheets or pamphlets of popular verses or stories with woodcuts on the cover [Pl. 8.14], as well as by the Mexican example, the engraving clubs attracted a wide range of artists, but were relatively short-lived, though printmaking on an individual basis has continued to flourish [Pl. 8.11].



**HOMENAGEM DO CLUBE
DE GRAVURA AO**



**IV CONGRESSO
BRASILEIRO
DE ESCRITORES**

DE 25 A 30 DE SETEMBRO 1951

PORTO ALEGRE

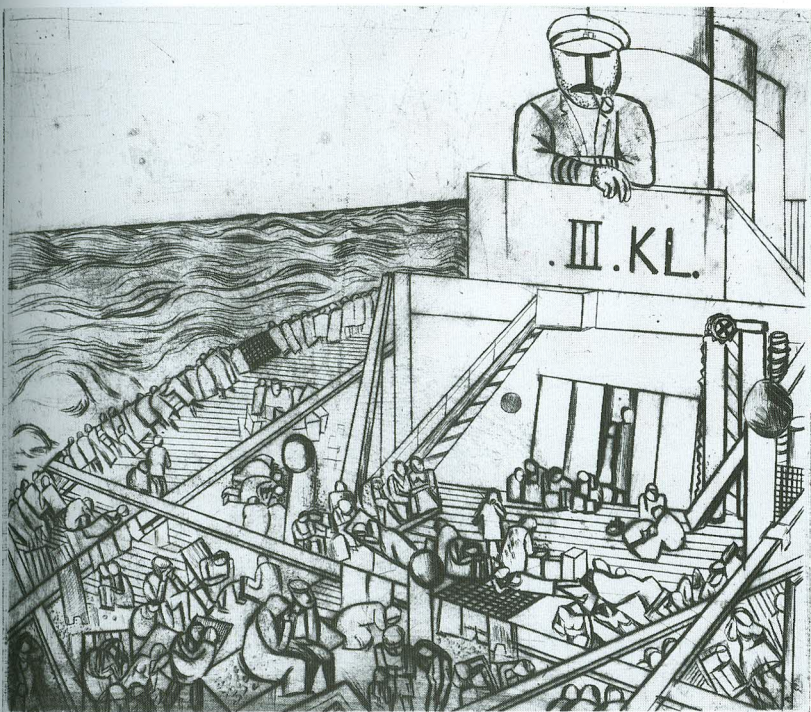


In Uruguay, Carlos González was a solitary, self-taught printmaker. Although he produced his best woodcuts between 1935 and 1945, it is not clear how much contact he had with the Mexicans. He worked in a simple powerful style, carving the wood with a knife, with the emphasis on clear strong lines and patches of white and black, with large-scale figures often set in a frame which contains little narrative scenes, drawing here more on a folk manner than on the social realism of the Mexican printmakers [Pl. 8.22]. González rejected the urban and Europeanized culture of Montevideo for a rural and regional world. In *The Duel* [Pl. 8.21], the central image is of two peasants – perhaps brothers, they are dressed so alike – about to fight, but separated by a third figure, who, although the peace-maker, seems to concentrate in himself the violence of the scene. Round the edge are images of the history of America: at the bottom, a missionary is paired with an armed knight killing Indians, while on the two crucifixes in the corners hang Indians of the river Plate, who were virtually wiped out during the nineteenth century,

8.20 Henrique Oswald *Inflation*, 1944-50, aquatint, etching and drawing point, 23.1×31.8 cm.; sheet 28.8×36.7 cm., Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo.

8.19 Vasco Prado, *Tribute to the Engravers Club at the Brazilian Writers' Congress*, 25-30 September 1951, woodcut on newsprint, 47.5×33 cm., Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.





having fought with particular bitterness against the European settlers. Possibly it was the sense of isolation that led González to abandon his work, which he always intended to have a didactic function: 'The task I undertook – doing research into our national reality – should have been a co-operative effort undertaken by us all; instead, the trends in fashion in my time went against my language.'⁸

8.22 Carlos González, *Death of Martín Aquino*, 1943, woodcut on paper, 39×48 cm., Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Montevideo.

8.24 Lasar Segall, *Third Class*, 1928, drypoint on paper, 28×32.5 cm.; sheet, 38.5×56.5 cm., Museu Lasar Segall, São Paulo.



8.23 Lasar Segall, *Woman from the 'Mangue' with Persiennes*, 1942, woodcut on Japanese paper, 15.5×8.5 cm.; sheet 46×30.5 cm., Museu Lasar Segall, São Paulo.

8.21 Carlos González, *The Duel*, n.d., woodcut on paper, 50×39 cm., Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Montevideo.