



La Catrina, engraving on lead plate, black and white.

Courtesy of the Aguascalientes Cultural Institute's José Guadalupe Posada Museum.

José Guadalupe Posada

Strokes of Life and Death

At the same time that the José Guadalupe Posada Museum is celebrating its fortieth anniversary in the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico's most famous *calavera*, or skull sketch, the *Catrina*, is celebrating its first 100 years after being created by one of Mexico's most renowned illustrators.

The traditional neighborhood Encino, also known as Triana, was the first place people settled in what became the city of Aguascalientes. An area covered with orchards in its early days is now the heart of the city. In the priest's quarters next to the church of Our Lord of the Encino (or Holm Oak) is the José Guadalupe Posada Museum. It is a colonial-style house, sober, but splendid, which boasts a permanent collection of the illustrator's vast body of work. Posada knew how to read and use his pain-, humor-, and irony-laden pen strokes to face down social injustice and the sometimes tragic events of early twentieth-century Mexico. While the best known parts of Posada's work are the *calacas* (skull-headed figures) that are today part of the country's folk art associated with the celebration of the Day of the Dead, this artist's pen also used these figures to portray tragic events and day-to-day grotesqueries, sometimes with natural causes and other times sparked by political and social injustices.¹



In addition to housing Posada's work, the museum has very special meaning since it was the first art museum in the city of Aguascalientes. From that time on, it has been home to many cultural projects involving engraving: from a workshop to the recently announced José Guadalupe Posada International Engraving Biennial.

The museum's collection includes more than 3 000 pieces, the majority by Posada and his fellow illustrator Manuel Manilla. Also included are works by others, from Mexico and abroad alike, such as José Fors, Rufino Tamayo, and Mimo Paladino. Any visit to this museum must include time spent in front of its true leading character: that national icon, the Catrina.

This work was created in 1912, but for unknown reasons was published 10 months after Posada's death, in 1913. In the words of the architect José Guillermo Saucedo, the museum's director, "It is curious that this *calavera* would be



Revolutionary *calavera*.

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The Kiss or The Farewell.

published posthumously; at the time, it was no more than one of the many that Posada did at the request of his editor, Antonio Venegas Arroyo, to illustrate the literary *calaveras* written year after year as part of the celebrations for the Day of the Dead."²

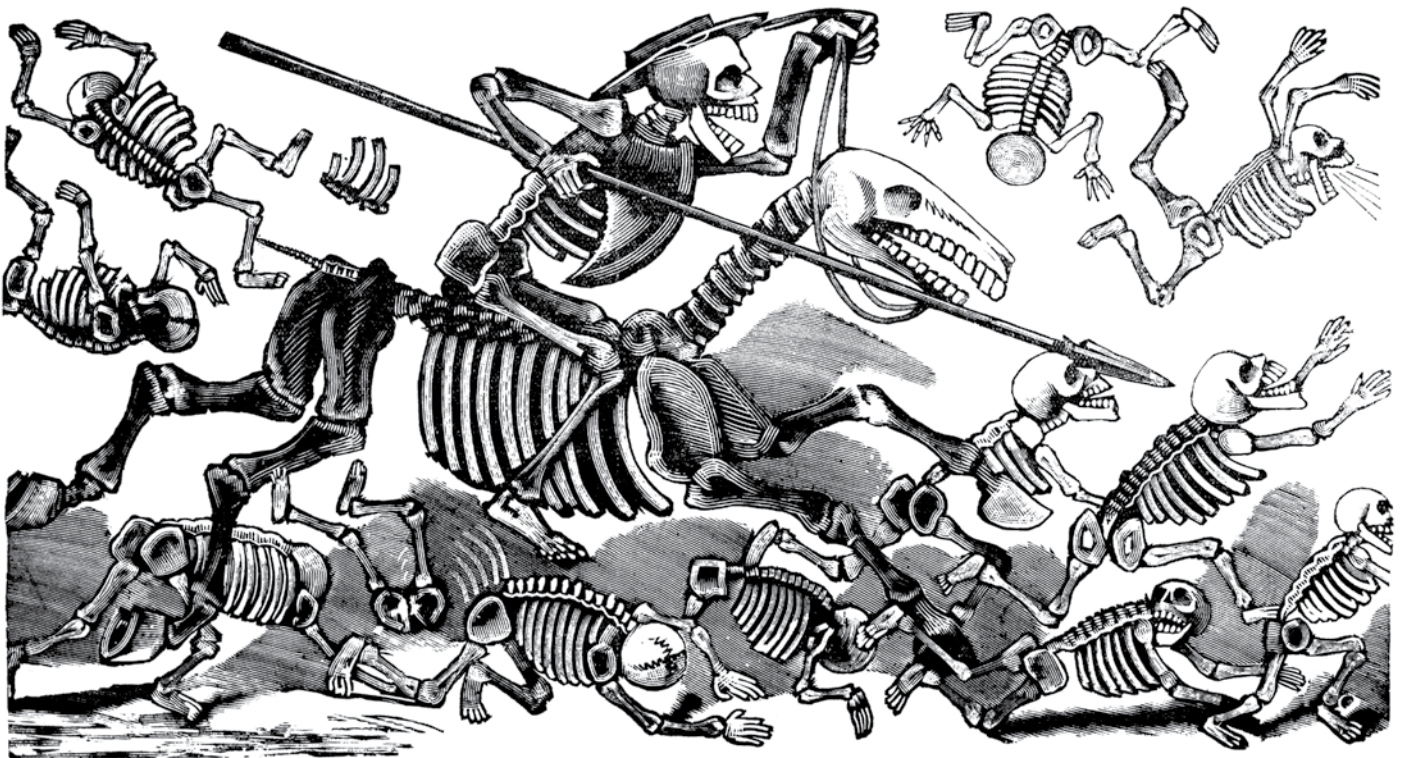
Confusion generally reigns about the origin of the Catrina: most people believe he created the figure as a criticism of the aristocrats of his time, but actually, it is a satirical view of domestic workers, who, on their days off, would go out dressed up to try to look like members of a social class they did not belong to. This is borne out by the title of the *calavera* poem that went with it: "Auction of Happy, *Sandunga*-dancing *Calaveras*," and, below, in a kind of introductory verse, he indicates who the poem is dedicated to: "Those women who are today dusty *garbanceras* [garbanzo-eaters]

will end up being deformed skeletons.” In Mexico, house servants or domestic workers were not usually called *garbanceras*. But in his book *Posada*, Agustín Sánchez González explains, “The *garbanceras* were indigenous women who ate garbanzo beans and who despised their own social class, wanting to be like their Spanish employers. In that engraving, like in most of the engravings he did, José Guadalupe Posada was making a social critique of those who despised their own Mexican-ness.” And the text of the *calavera* poem itself reads, “There are beautiful *garbanceras* wearing corsets and high heels/But they must be *calaveras*, *calavera*-skeletons just like all the others.”

During Posada’s lifetime, the image was one of his many illustrations alluding to a specific sector; however, since the printers did not throw the plates away and usually reused

them, in 1924, the image of the *Catrina* reappeared in a leaflet, illustrating the verse “El panteón de las pelonas” (Graveyard of Bald Women), which now had another meaning: “Thou hast past on the other day, my little bald love, leaving my soul stricken with enormous pain.” This indicates that the image of this celebrated *calavera* had begun its path to immortality. In 1930, scholars discovered Posada’s work, underlining his great contribution: a new language that enriched the discourse of national visual arts. Among these artists was Diego Rivera, who would re-create the *Catrina* in his famous mural, *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon at the Central Alameda Park* (1948), giving her a body and dressing her in fancy clothing, because the Posada’s original *Catrina* was merely a sketch of the bust, and Diego Rivera drew her entire body, as she is known today.

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Quijote-like *calavera*.

More about Posada's life

José Guadalupe Posada was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico, February 2, 1852, at a time in which epidemics, famines, and floods were a constant. His father was a baker, a trade that did not make him enough money to support a family of nine.



Posada and his son, Juan Sabino.

José learned to read, write, and draw thanks to his brother Cirilo, a teacher. At 15, he began his career as a graphic artist when he enrolled in the Aguascalientes Municipal Drawing Academy. After mastering some basic notions, in 1868 he joined the "El Esfuerzo" lithographic print shop, apprenticed to José Trinidad Pedroza, where he learned engraving, photography, and book-binding techniques. In 1871, he began publishing political cartoons in the newspaper *El jicote* (The Wasp), which only put out 11 issues before it was closed by the censors. After that incident, both teacher and apprentice were forced to leave Aguascalientes. Pedroza set up his workshop in León, where José illustrated books and made other engravings, but in 1875, Pedroza returned to Aguascalientes, leaving the workshop to the young illustrator. However, with the great flood of 1888, he lost everything and moved to Mexico City, where he began working with other techniques, like engraving on metal plates, with Antonio Venegas, celebrated printer and publisher of broadsheets. Posada began using the symbolism of the *calaveras* for political satire. In 1912, Posada created the celebrated Catrina, which would be used later by muralist Diego Rivera, making it an icon of Mexican art and the popular imaginary. On January 20, 1913, José Guadalupe died in total poverty. However, 20 years later, painter Jean Charlot rediscovered him and re-published his work. Since then, Posada has been on the front line of Mexican visual art. **NMM**



Madero-follower *calavera*.

What Posada achieved with this new graphic art was to create a language through which people who couldn't read or write could understand what was going on around them.



José Guadalupe Posada Museum.



Calaveras selling broadsheets.

Even before the creation of this “skeletal young lady,” the images of “living skeletons” were Posada’s favorite expressive vehicle, not because he had a particular penchant for the theme of death, but because he lived in a century in which death was a constant. In everything from the plague, floods, and the 1910 Revolution, death roamed the country.

However, in addition to answering the requests of his editors, Posada managed to infuse his *calaveras* with many characteristics, some real and others mere stereotypes of Mexicans. We can see in his *calaveras*, for example, more than manifestations of pain or sadness, a festive spirit, and that is what our celebration of the Day of the Dead has finally turned into, which obviously is a reflection of a particular conception of death, as a reminder of our dead loved ones that paradoxically celebrates life and death simultaneously.

In an up-to-date assessment not only of the emblematic Catrina, but of all the illustrator’s creations, José Guadalupe Posada Museum Director Saucedo, underlines the significance and importance of his work: “What Posada achieved with this

new graphic art was to create a language through which people who couldn’t read or write could understand what was going on around them. That is, he created a graphic alphabet through which people could visually read about the events of their time.” This contribution was very significant for creators who followed him, above all the Mexican muralists. **MM**

Teresa Jiménez
Editor

NOTES

¹ The exact date each engraving reproduced here was made is unknown. It is known, however, that all are from the first decade of the twentieth century. None of the illustrations exceed the size of a standard broadsheet, since that is what they were made for.

² Literary *calaveras* are humorous verses alluding to death and dedicated to an individual, not necessarily to anyone dead. They are traditionally written in November to celebrate the Day of the Dead.