

Hannah Reynolds, *Fabricating the Vox Populi: The Role of Art in Forging Mexican Identities After 1920.*¹

After the Mexican revolution, artists came to the forefront of rebuilding community spirit via murals showcasing ordinary Mexicans. Historiography takes muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros for granted as primary exhibitors of Mexican identity due to their reverence for famed “Printmaker to the Mexican people,” José Posada. However, most murals were painted inside buildings rural communities depicted would never visit. Contemporary need to present popular art as a reflection of Mexican communities overshadowed artists reluctant to exploit their subject matter, including culturally subversive Taller de Gráfica Popular. Artists became split between genuine mass interaction and a self-mythologising façade of representation that alienated people from their own portrayal. Resulting development in popular culture from art politics was therefore a process based in enduring symbolism, reactive interpretation, and not truthful representation.

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Figure 1 Diego Rivera, *Sueño de Una Tarde Dominical En La Alameda Central*, Fresco, 1946, Museo Mural Diego Rivera, Mexico City, <http://mundodelmuseo.com/ficha.php?id=1014>.

The revolution brought changes in politics and society for Mexico borne from consolidation of circumstance rather than values fought for.² By 1926, the Calles government was in power and found itself economically and politically secure enough to remove any semblance of genuine ‘land and liberty.’³ Instead, the indigenous populace were to be culturally assimilated through programs prejudiced against them.⁴ The muralists in particular became proponents of this romanticized indigenismo in their works.⁵ Their manifesto in *El Machete* laid grand plans to champion indigenous identity.⁶ In reality, the muralists masqueraded as a progressive voice of the people by only presenting a conflicted culture’s highlights in middle-class media.⁷ Rivera particularly fabricated their legacy to both contemporaries and historians.⁸ His Alameda Park mural is a vibrant epic depicting Mexican national community through history, yet he centres a childhood Rivera standing with Posada in a forced metaphor for the future of Mexican cultural artistry revolving around himself (**Fig. 1**).⁹ Ultimately, they failed to democratize art by taking a self-oriented approach that excluded people, though their works did trigger responses.

In the shadow of the murals, an offshoot of estridentismo known as the Taller de Gráfica Popular formed in 1937 to create art activism as a

² Hamilton, 1982: 67.

³ *Ibid*, 68.

⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

⁵ Knight, 2010: 228, 247-248.

⁶ Picot, 2007: 19-20.

⁷ Guerrero, 2018: 5.

⁸ Flores, 2014: 50.

⁹ Rivera, Wolfe, 1937:13, 20, 100 and 176.

profession under guidance of Leopoldo Mendez.¹⁰ They strove to make art more public and challenged the inaccessible murals.¹¹ Rather than reconstructing history, TGP artwork often featured social justice struggles due to their emergence within Cardenista optimism.¹² As successor to the LEAR they also brought forth the ‘neither Calles nor Cárdenas’ sentiment as adaptive opposition to society’s ills.¹³ The printed artwork of Mendez and those who followed was less a fabrication of idealised Mexico, but rather a display the country was suffering with a monument to the resilience of its people through dark yet generally simplistic imagery (**Fig. 2**). Due to their broader level of accessibility, both the TGP’s collective workspaces and styles became a haven for local and foreign artists of the oppressed.¹⁴ As a result, they began to embody the legacy of Posada on an international scale.

¹⁰ The Annex Galleries, 2019,

¹¹ Campbell, 2003: 159.

¹² Adès, McClean, 2009: 27.

¹³ Ibid, 29.

¹⁴ Herzog, 2012: 105-107.



Figure 2 Alfredo Zalce, *Posada and His Skeletons*, Woodcut print, 1948, Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/64476>.

Despite efforts to move away from Porfirian standards, the muralists became the new highbrow by comparison. Meanwhile, the PRI government prompted reactive social consciousness by trying to dictate national identity.¹⁵ The murals therefore may have been an attempt at cultural recovery, but so were counterculture efforts of students that defaced them.¹⁶ Highbrow artforms could not revive folk art suppressed by notions of ‘taste’ following independence.¹⁷ Rather, folk art returned with small artisans in dispute with their portrayal by larger artists, resulting in a post-revolution

¹⁵ Picot 2007: 156.

¹⁶ Knight 2010: 240.

¹⁷ Charlot 1989: 173.

culture that preferred small media as a means of identity transmission (**Fig. 4**). A popular example summarising developing counterculture was Rius's *Los Supermachos*, wherein political endeavours of the 1960s were satirically represented by a relatable rural village (**Fig. 3**). By minimising those in power, comics and dolls alike subverted that power and joined the visual narrative of anti-political activity succeeding the TGP. Genuine Mexican identity therefore came from cultural formation that resented dictation. Rivera fixed Muralism's place in history, however the ongoing art undercurrent produced by smaller communities of artists meant that larger influences remained plastic to interpretation and rebellion. Ultimately, few could claim to represent the masses when the masses came to represent themselves.



Figure 3 (Left) Eduardo Del Río, *Los Supermachos 'La Carta y Los Cuernos'* (Issue 61 Cover Featuring Don Perpetuo Del Rosal), Comic, 1967, Revistas Mexicanas Clasicas de los 60's, 70's y 80's, private online collection, <http://comicsmexicanosdejediskater.blogspot.com/2018/10/los-supermachos-de-rius-no-61-jueves-2.html>.

Figure 4 (Right) Cristina Potters, *Photograph of Catrina Dolls*, Digital Photograph, 2018, In 'Dancing with Death: José Guadalupe Posada and the History of the Catrina', The Mazatlán Post, accessed 25 June 2019, <https://themazatlanpost.com/2018/10/29/dancing-with-death-jose-guadalupe-posada-and-the-history-of-the-catrina/>.

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