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Art as a Venue for Political Commentary: The Modern Mexican Printmaker and Social Consciousness

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The Modern Mexican Printmaker and Social Consciousness

THESIS

This master’s project addresses the relationship between the Mexican roots of the author and her personal artistic expression. Growing up in México, the author was greatly influenced by the artistic talent of her father, as well as the work of many iconic Mexican artists. From a very early age she recognized how the political climate surrounding the Mexican Revolution and the visual arts complimented each other. The murals of Diego Rivera (1886-1959) are evidence of the fusion of art and a visual depiction of the history of México. This exposure helped her appreciate the process of defining cultural identity through art (Goldman 101).

Art has been a venue for political statement throughout the history of the Mexican Republic. The complex history resulting from on-going political clashes and cultural contradictions has defined the Mexican persona. A collision between art and the Mexican revolution stimulated a climate for political change. The printmakers of the nineteenth century produced artwork that combined a search for personal identity with messages of popular discontent (Haight 1). The printmaker, José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) exemplified how popular Mexican artistic elements were able to become a vehicle for conveying a message of social protest.

Posada was one of the most important contributors to the type of illustrations used as political weapons against government oppression and public apathy during the period of the Mexican Revolution. His prints had an enormous impact on marginalized Mexicans. His illustrations promoted the sympathy needed to amass social support and active participation during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).
The Mexican Revolution was an armed struggle fought against the 30-year-long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. In those days México was characterized by immense poverty and inequality. It was even more pronounced than today. During the Díaz regime, the country began to expand economic growth. Industry and foreign investment were dedicated to building the infrastructure of the country; however, all efforts were centralized to benefit the ruling upper class. The entire politico-economic structure was concentrated in the hands of the minority elite. Most Mexicans were living in misery, under political repression without the possibility of building a better life for themselves (Hamnett 188).

This project examines the historical context necessary for understanding how the images created by José Guadalupe Posada became a source for stimulating nationalistic sentiment. It views *mestizaje* as a source for national identity. It explores how the people of México created their cultural identity by reinventing Mexican history through art. The work of Posada and his followers are used of as example of how art can have contemporary significance as a form of political expression. The author also reflects on her own art work as a representational fusion of the cultural background and personal experience defining her as a Mexican artist. The subject matter is past and current events that have influenced human thought. Even though the author’s prints are an expression of her own inner thoughts, they could be viewed as a reflection of the collective Mexican experience.

MÉXICO’S HISTORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Artistic expression has been a companion of every culture throughout history (Best Maugard 2). The motivation for this expression has often been influenced by historical events surrounding the artists who produce it. Mexican artwork historically represented more than an expression of historic events; it signified a quest for identity. The complex socio-political history
of México sparked a desire to rediscover México’s pre-Hispanic roots. The result was the nineteenth century effort to define what it meant to be Mexican (Brenner 229).

The turmoil that accompanies México’s history makes a historical time-line necessary for understanding the context in which printmakers like Posada became so influential. Perhaps more dramatic than the oppression, was the systematic annihilation of indigenous groups in México. The pre-Columbian population of México is calculated to have been 19 million. During the first 85 years after the conquest, 16.5 million died from war, starvation, genocide, and disease (Levak et al. 418). The remaining 2.5 million Mexicans were subjected to the dissolution of their political autonomy, culture, and religious identity. They were also forced to abandon their language, cease worshiping their ancestral deities, and embrace Catholicism. The artistic legacy expressed through indigenous architecture, music and visual arts was destroyed and banned. Losing their artistic expression was particularly difficult for indigenous people. Their art represented a set of aesthetic forms filled with symbolic meaning alluding to religious myths, idiosyncrasies, and personal beliefs (Fernandez 45).

The visual arts of pre-Hispanic México depicted a duality of life and death, laughter and sorrow. Death was depicted as a happy entity celebrating the human demise. It was viewed as liberation from human suffering and replaced solemnity with irony (Paz 54). Mexican art, Mayan art in particular, is characterized by a literalness that allows the viewer to read the artwork. Mayan art is not meant to be illustrations for a text. It is the text. For example, Mayan art was used to express metaphors and symbols, yet had utilitarian value. One example is the pottery from the Mayan Classic Period (see fig. 1). This pottery typically described mythological, political or religious ideas (Longhena 95). The cup is brightly painted and inscribed with a series of glyphs that explain the painted image. It narrates the life of its politically powerful owner. It is
a tangible celebration of the owner’s life and accomplishments. Other cups depict the history of the cocoa bean. Drinking chocolate from such a cup, the owner would celebrate the important role of chocolate in his life. During the pre-Colombian era chocolate was a drink only accessible to the rich and powerful (Longhena 80).

Perhaps the most well known example of the role of art in producing practical objects would be the Aztec calendar (see fig. 2). Today this massive stone is considered a superb work of art; for the indigenous people of México, it was a complex calendar used as a system of time keeping. Pre-Hispanic art objects were meant to be unique, yet personal and practical.

The indigenous populations of colonial México were confronted with the need to adapt to the expectations of the colonial power and interpret the hegemonic culture imposed on them in a way that was understandable to them. Even confined to a life of slavery and extreme poverty, they felt the need to find meaning for their existence. The indigenous groups were outsiders in their own land. They wanted to find meaning by creating a place for themselves in society. They wanted to fit in, but were forced to be subservient to the Spanish ruling class (Miller 24).

Fredric Jameson stated in *The Political Unconscious* that the search for identity through nationalism or populism is caused by what he calls Latin American “castration.” The quest is achieved through “psychoanalytic interpretation.” (266) The result was the creation of what anthropologists call “cultural memory,” referring to the capacity to remember, adapt, and reconstruct one’s past in order to find relevance for their place in society. There is a human need for social interaction. People have a desire for belonging to a group. They want to be able to identify with others. They seek a bond of commonality.

Cultural memory can be viewed as an auto-creation that ensures the survival of a historically marginalized group of individuals using spirituality and art into a form of resistance
By creating cultural memory, Mexicans wanted to recuperate their lost civilization. They had hopes of liberation. At the same time, their assimilation of western culture was visible in many aspect of everyday life. The result was a culture filled with auto-confrontation, separations, revolutions, contradictions, and reinvention (Lozano & Craven 26). “La plaza de las tres culturas” (The plaza of the three cultures) is a concrete example of the meaning of mestizaje. The main square of Tlatelolco in México City is surrounded by a pre-Hispanic pyramid, a church with a Baroque facade from the colonial period, and a modern high rise. In the middle of the plaza, there is a memorial that reads “On August 13 1521, Cuauhtemoc heroically attempted to defend Tlatelolco against the power of Hernan Cortez. The result was neither a triumph nor defeat. It was the painful birth of the mestizo land known as México” (Author’s translation). Mestizaje is the Mexican expression of cultural memory. It became an important factor in making sense of the Mexican identity. Being Mexican meant to embrace the defeated and the oppressors as equal partners in the formation of a new culture. As a result, mestizaje, understood as the integration of two cultures, became the central line or essence of what it meant to be Mexican (Miller 7).

During the colonial era, Mexicans were forced to conform to western artistic norms. The Mexican version of Baroque art, with its introduction, acceptance and integration of new art models, gave rise to the mestizo originality and the Mexicanism that it characterizes. The viceregal art from México soon distinguished itself from European art, especially during the Mexican Baroque period (Smith 193). During the period of Spanish colonization, there was very little room for natives to express themselves through artistic venues. There was no recognition of artesian crafts as a form of art. As a result, works like “the Mass of St. Gregory” (see fig. 3) were created with touches of native character discretely presented (Charlot 50). “The Mass of St.
Gregory” (feather mosaic on wood) is an example of the indigenous interpretation of a Christian oil painting. In this artwork, the Mestizo influence was present; however, it did not reflect the idiosyncrasy of the creators. The subject matter is Roman Catholic tradition. The technique is entirely indigenous (Fernandez 116).

Even though pre-Hispanic representational objects and subject matter were banned by Spanish ruling class, some techniques remained intact, especially in the area of ceramics, textiles, lacquerwork, feather mosaics and corn pith sculpture. The feather mosaic technique was used to produce bishop’s miters with images copied from oil paintings. Even sculptures of Christ were produced using pre-Hispanic corn pith technique (Smith 237).

*The Struggle for Freedom.* México’s independence from Spain was initiated in 1810. The war for independence lasted eleven years (1810-1821). This chapter of the history of México was a defining moment for art and symbolism. As Mexicans fought for their right to self-determination, they also found a need to consolidate their identity. Searching for identity and recovering their lost civilization became as important as fighting for liberty. Miguel Hidalgo, a priest and leader of the movement for Mexican independence, used the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe (a mestizo version of the Virgin Mary) in public meetings. Hidalgo presented a banner with the Virgin’s image as the official flag of the struggle. She soon became a symbol of rebellion and her image was adopted as a symbol of uprising that remained long after independence was achieved. For the first time, native Mexicans felt free to explore their cultural identity and define what it meant to be Mexican (Hamnett 103).

*Awakened Social Consciousness that Led to the Mexican Revolution.* The eighty-nine-year period between México’s independence from Spain and the Mexican Revolution (1821-1910) was characterized by frequent, intermittent uprisings by the people against the oppression of
dictatorship. During this period, a wealthy minority ruled the country. The majority of Mexicans experienced extreme poverty. They lived in severe deprivation. With only a limited ability to meet basic human needs for food, water, sanitation, and shelter the population was left with no hope of overcoming their plight (Tunon-Pablos 83). There was a sense of disenchantment and disillusionment among the masses. The people experienced a fear of violent reprisals if they were to speak-out against tyranny from the repressive dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The oppression resulted in a general consensus that life was hopeless. The fate of Mexicans was often depicted in folk art and cartoons as a man, sitting on the ground, resting his back against a cactus, his head covered by a *sombrero* and a *sarape* covering his frame. This image is an example of how an illustration can convey the symbolic message of surrender translated to complacency.

The catalyst for the Mexican people embracing of the pre-Hispanic art was the Mexican Revolution (Brenner 186). The similarity between the cultural, social and religious tendencies that characterized pre-Hispanic cultures remained practically unchanged from the time of the Olmecs until the final collapse of Mesoamerica. This continuity of cultural forms and political/religious institutions facilitated the embrace of Mexican ancient art (Paz 80).

Octavio Paz describes pre-Hispanic art as “…art that speaks.” (41) Reading and contemplating are two acts that are closely associated in Mesoamerican cultures. In his comment, Paz alludes to the strong meaning of Mexican art. The triumph of the Revolution was met with a desire to bring Mexican history to light. The majority of Mexicans at the beginning of the twentieth century were illiterate. The new government relied heavily on art to depict important scenes of Mexican history as a vehicle for uniting the people. It was the only way the majority of Mexicans could learn about their history because of wide-spread illiteracy.
The Mexican Revolution followed the emergence of an international “Modernists” movement that had started around 1830 in France. The movement included the explorations of new aesthetic ideas that were promoted with the intention of defying and confronting social and artistic norms (Davidson 29). The agenda of the European Modernism included probing into subconscious forms of expression. Modernism in Latin America, in the other hand, as Ilan Stavans explains in Davidson’s *Latin American Posters*, represented a quest to find a voice of its own (28). Octavio Paz in his *Essays on Mexican Art* asserts that México’s adoption of Modernism was achieved through the exploration of what he called “the psychic subsoil” of México (2). México embraced modernism because it coincided and complemented the country’s desire to reshape its identity.

**JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA.**

Among the artists who adopted Modernism was José Guadalupe Posada. He is the most widely known and artistically appreciated printmaker of his time and is referred as the father of Modernism in México. Many of the printmakers from the nineteen century in México were part of a group of liberal dissidents. Posada, like many of the printmakers, used his skill to draw attention to the cruel and unfair living conditions of the majority of Mexicans (MacPhee and Reuland 27). Posada, like many other printmakers of his time collaborated with liberal newspapers. Their prints, drawings, and lithographs included cartoons that depicted the president and other political figures frequently as “deformed.” The prints, typically, carried a malevolent tone. Instead of verbally criticizing the political actions of members of the government, they offered visual perceptions of selfish politicians who lacked interest in the well-being of the nation (Clark 39).
As an artist, José Guadalupe Posada, used his illustrations as political weapons against oppression and apathy during the Mexican Revolution. He is considered one of México’s most accurate representational artists. He graphically depicted the harsh living conditions of the masses (Ades 111). Posada was born in Aguascalientes, México in 1852. The son of a baker, he was born into an environment of resentment towards the United States, due to the U.S. interventionism (known in the U.S. as the Mexican-American War). That intervention resulted in México losing almost half of its territory to the United States. Posada was witness to the Reform period in México, the French intervention, the fight by Benito Juarez against dictatorship, and the first year of the Mexican Revolution.

Posada’s family was extremely poor and never received any formal artistic training, however, the census of 1867 listed him as a “painter.” In 1868 he became an apprentice at the printing shop of José Trinidad Pedroza. Pedroza, an accomplished printmaker, offered Posada practical experience and greatly influenced Posada’s printmaking, engraving, and lithography technique (Miliotes 10).

In the later part of the nineteenth century, Posada became owner of his own printmaking shop. His work primarily focused on commercial art assignments such as label-making and publications requiring a great deal of religious imagery. He also taught lithography at a secondary school in León, México. In 1888, a series of devastating floods caused Posada to move from his home in León to México City where he opened another print shop. He continued his commercially-oriented jobs but also focused on creating prints for reproduction in politically liberal newspapers (Berdecio and Appelbaum 8).

Posada was a quiet man who drank heavily. Being a widower and having lost his only child, he dedicated his life to printmaking. He used his art as a venue for venting his opinions.
His work attests to his political inclinations and populists views. Posada’s printed pamphlets became a source of communication about social injustice and a symbol of his protest against government abuses (Rodriguez 167). He died alone at the age of sixty-one. An analysis of Mexican history would not be complete without studying Posada’s work.

**Posada’s Social Contributions.** The unique thematic of Posada’s prints has become a source of inspiration for modern art and contemporary printmaking around the world. Posada’s influence on future artists comes from his open recrimination of political corruption and social oppression. The French artist Jean Charlot who lived in México most of his life, embraced Posada’s use of *Calaveras* (skulls and skeletons) to depict historical events, such as those related to the Mexican Revolution (Hagelstein 254). The Mexican artist Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) depicted scenes from the Holocaust in a style similar to Posada’s, using suffering and death to convey the harsh realities of war. European artists like Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and Frans Maserel (1889-1972) not only used *Calaveras* in their prints, but depicted scenes from the Mexican Revolution using the style of Posada. These artists embraced Posada’s work because they valued not only the potential for conveying social commentary but also because they appreciated his artistic abilities (Craven 69).

Posada’s images cannot be separated from the politically significant events of his day. Posada’s art created a critical view of historical events and the harsh realities of his time. For example, in the print titled “Zapatista,” Posada glamorizes the revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata or one of his soldiers in a scene depicting death and war (see fig. 4). Miliotes said of Posada that “he knew how to apply the personal touch of originality to his work…his art is full of the wisdom and moral charge of a great observer, always attentive and reflective.” (9) His art sprang from the highs and lows of Mexican history. He depicted catastrophes that fell upon
México, as seen in his print “El fin del mundo” (see fig. 5). Although this print does not refer directly to a specific event, it seems to be a depiction of the floods, earthquakes and death that he witnessed during his life. This print is suggesting a religious theme overshadowing the “End of the World” scenario heralded by natural disasters.

*Posada’s Artistic Contributions.* Posada’s prints have influenced modern artists and contemporary printmaking enthusiasts around the world (see fig. 6-7). International artists have embraced the innovative use of *Calaveras* to express human emotion. This type of art can convey the human side of love, anger, and fear with a powerful symbolism that has demonstrated universal appeal (Ittman 6).

Posada’s open recrimination of the Díaz regime and his fervent enthusiasm in support of the Mexican Revolution has influenced artists such as Leopoldo Méndez to use this style of social commentary. The nature of Posada’s work can be considered mytho-poetic because he relied on images and symbols that communicated current events as critical reflections. The symbolic imagery of his art communicates a sense of sympathy for human suffering. His artwork, along with his depiction of the Mexican life, is freely expressionistic from a formative view. His free expression comes from his distortion of reality in order to convey an emotion. The formative view of Posada’s work refers to his responsiveness to the current events of his day, depicted through summarizing his personal interpretation of those events (Rodriguez 187).

The muralist Diego Rivera worked as a young man in Posada’s workshop. Rivera, along with muralist José Maria Orozco, recognized Posada as being responsible for preserving the art of engraving in México. During their lifetime, both artists openly expressed great admiration for Posada and his artistic talent. They also recognized Posada’s influence on their own work. In the last mural painted by Rivera, he is depicted as a child holding hands with a “Catrina” by his side.
Next to the *Catrina*, Rivera depicted José Guadalupe Posada (see fig. 8). The *Calavera* included in the mural is Rivera’s way of paying homage to his mentor, Posada. Diego Rivera wrote essays about Posada where he recognized Posada’s talent as an artist and his contribution to popular Mexican art. During Posada’s time photomechanical reproduction techniques were rapidly making lithography an extinct art form. Rivera credited Posada with preserving the art of lithography in México (Berdecio and Appelbaum 17).

It is likely that Posada was not aware of the influence he would have in shaping Mexican Modernism as an art current. During his 40-year career, he never referred to himself as an artist, but rather an artisan. However, scholars do not view Posada’s work as a primitive style of expression nor do they see it as folk art. His prints are filled with draftsmanship, composition and graphic technique typical for Mexican artists of his era. Mexican art historians credit Posada with closing the romantic period of Mexican art and opening the modern period (Smith 255).

**Posada and the Creation of National Identity.** Posada became a major contributor to an awakening of a national pride by instilling social messages in his traditional prints. During his career, Posada not only produced prints for commercial and religious use, he also circulated satirical illustrated cartoons with *Calaveras* addressing political and social themes. *Calaveras* are a form of inspiration for many Mexican artists. They represent a visual subject matter commonly displayed at religious and secular festivities. Most often prints that depicted *Calaveras* were prepared to be sold during the day of the dead celebrations. The “Day of the Dead” is a syncretism for honoring All Souls Day. The celebration is a mixture of the pre-Colombian Indian heritage that pays homage to the gods of the dead and the Roman Catholic heritage that emphasizes the obsession with death that evolved from the Spanish monastic orders of the middle ages (Fernandez 47).
While he intentionally expressed his discontent with the status quo, he did not realize that he was sparking an artistic or political movement. Posada extended the meaning of the images he created to include social reportage, political manifestos, and social satire and this drew attention to his art (Caplow 3). For these transgressions, he was thrown into jail on several occasions. Yet, while he was alive, tens-of-thousands of Posada’s prints were distributed to the marginalized poor and politically under-represented masses throughout the country sparking an elevated social consciousness.

Aside from his depiction of everyday life, Posadas’ art can be viewed as an artistic refinement and inspiration that has permeated Mexican art, culture and identity. His artwork has been pivotal for subsequent generations. It was used as a model for how art can be a meaningful tool for instigating social change. One example of Posada’s influence on twentieth century publications is *El Machete*. First published in 1924, this newspaper focused on promoting the issues that resulted in the Mexican Revolution. Its printers and illustrators followed Posada’s themes and style. *El Machete* became the blank canvas for distributing art to the masses. This type of publication became a major component of México’s effort to create a cultural identity and to fight for social equality. While other newspapers became highly political, *El Machete* focused on offering a venue for the lower class to learn about Mexican history, human rights, and the contributions of the working-class to creating a cultural identity. (Azuela 82). Anita Brenner in her book *Idols behind Altars* points out the irony of Posada dying on the eve of the Mexican Revolution. Brenner considered him a prophet for depicting scenes of the arm struggle that was yet to come (187). While Posada intentionally utilized pre-Hispanic icons and popular images as an appeal to the masses, it is doubtful that he made a conscious effort to start a new artistic movement or contribute to the cultural identity of México (see fig 9). It is unlikely that he was
aware of the impact his “Calaveras” would eventually have on Mexican contemporary sculpture and art crafts (see fig. 10). Although he would not live to see it come to pass, Posada’s prints pioneered the creation of modern art and contemporary printmaking around the world.

Contemporary Significance. Posada’s work exemplifies art as a universal language. It breaks the barriers to communication. It directly appeals to human emotion. In a profoundly powerful way a picture can depict the scars and anxiety generated by domestic violence, hunger, social isolation, displacement, and the violence resulting from armed conflict. It takes a person seconds to look at a painting, print, or sculpture that depicts human suffering and identify empathically with it.

Visual images of pain and human struggle can generate emotions that invite people to be more sensitive to the suffering of others. Art can be a vehicle for sparking people’s curiosity about the human experience. That curiosity, in turn, may lead to an awareness that demands action.

Posada’s Calavera de Don Quijote (see fig. 6) is as valid today as it was when it was first published. In the book Puro Muerto (no author), contemporary printmaker Artemio Rodriguez added to Posada’s Quijote a newer version of aggression against Mexicans. In the Rodriguez print, an American horseman is chasing a skeleton fleeing from the U.S. border back to México. The subject matter has been transformed to address a more contemporary issue. This alteration of Posada’s original print can be interpreted as paying homage to the unique style of Posada that is even valid for the political issues of today. The indigenous communities of Chiapas are an example of how popular art like Posada’s can empower displaced communities. Zapatistas from Chiapas use art as a venue for expressing their ideas and voicing their concerns. These groups, living in communal societies, gather to sell via internet art that not only reflects their cultural legacy but also sends a message of empowerment to the international community. They are using
visual arts, music, and literature to publicize their cause. Simultaneously, they are reaching the public-at-large to seek solidarity for their cause.

*The Message.* The history of the indigenous people of Chiapas has consistently been characterized by oppression. The indigenous people of México were colonized, tortured, persecuted and enslaved by their conquerors. For over 500 years they have suffered from poverty, disease, illiteracy, discrimination, and a lack of means to communicate their plight to the outside world (Rodriguez and Fortier 115). The Indians (a term used by the Spaniards referring to the native Mexicans) did not benefit from the modernization that came with the “Porfiriato” at the end of the nineteenth century. The industrialization of México enabled landlords to develop Haciendas that institutionalized forced labor. The Mexican Revolution brought rhetoric of hope for land ownership to the indigenous people. In most cases, the “rights” guaranteed by agrarian reform did not solidify. During the 1980’s, the decrease in oil prices, México’s external debt, the collapse of México’s stock market, reform of the national economy, and the introduction of a neo-liberal framework deepened the marginalization of the Mexican Indians. The 1993 worldwide drop in the price of coffee (the primary cash crop of the rural poor) made the situation even worse. Additionally, an agrarian conflict between the *ejidatarios* and the government, resulting from a reversal of the 1917 constitutional clause that had guaranteed peasants the right to own land, made indigenous groups vulnerable to paternalistic social programs that included forced relocation. The Catholic Church aided the indigenous people to organize and exercise a cultural resistance that eventually resulted in an armed struggle. Government-sponsored attempts to suppress indigenous groups continued and resulted in countless human rights violations against these groups by the government and paramilitary forces sponsored by the landowners (Rodriguez 233).
As México continues to embrace a global economy without providing support to or autonomy for the indigenous groups within its borders, the gap between the wealthy minority and the impoverished majority will widen. In spite of the obstacles, small groups of indigenous people have been able to devise a self-sustaining existence using alternatives to a capitalistic global economy. For example, the indigenous movement in Chiapas led to the formation of cooperatives, similar to the concept of the Israeli kibbutz, which embraces religious autonomy and civil “cargos” (responsibilities). The plan of these indigenous groups is to create a social movement that challenges globalization by creating a parallel economy (Bonner 149). The Indians have created ties with global markets and are able to negotiate agreements that they consider fair and equitable (Earle and Simonelli 84).

The Indians have a desire to maintain their culture and their environment. Globalization from above does not tend to support preservation of indigenous culture while engendering respect for the ecosystem, but globalization from below can facilitate the creation of networks that support these concerns. The indigenous struggle against globalization has opened the door for oppressed Indian groups to actively participate in an unarmed fight for their rights. The Indian woman has acquired visibility and openly fights for ideals of liberty and equality. While globalization can be defended for its benefits to developed countries such as the U.S., England, and Canada, it fails to protect the marginalized populations of developing countries (Stiglitz 79).

As a Mexican artist, the author believes that creating artwork that communicates a social message is imperative. Globalization is shrinking the world. Regardless of ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigration status, identity, social, cultural, or political ideology people want to be allowed to choose their own destiny. Yet, there is a commonality in the human experience, whether it begins in the home at a family level or is extended into the global village. Finding
commonalities that assist societies in understanding the interconnectedness of people, instead of focusing on cultural differences and individualism, will help to support the environment and indigenous groups who have been marginalized simply because they are different (Miller 38).

The activism of indigenous people has moved toward a commitment to non-violent means of fighting for their freedom. This trend is evident in Mexico with the Zapatista Army, which in 1994, after 14 days of fighting government forces, laid down their arms and vowed to use words as their weapon against tyranny. (Ponce de Leon, 18) Indigenous groups have organized themselves for participation in a collective action against repression that looks beyond differences in age, ethnicity, and religion in order to more successfully pursue their common goal. During the winter of 2009 Brazil hosted an indigenous global summit, *Foro Mundial Social*, an alternative conference to the G20 Summit, which took place at the same time in London. Latin American leaders like Evo Morales from Peru, Luis Inácio Lula Da Silva from Brazil, Rafael Correa from Ecuador, Hugo Chavez from Venezuela, and Fernando Lugo from Paraguay were active participants of this conference. Latin American leaders are leaning more towards defending the inherent rights of indigenous groups by prioritizing the welfare of their nation against the interests of super power economies. The aim was to focus attention on this Latin American union’s desire for preservation of the eco-system, their common cultural legacy, and the promotion of human rights. Their goal was to symbolically challenge neo-liberal markets as the sole path to economic salvation. The average Mexican has been denied the right to self-determination since the colonial period. The struggle of the indigenous people to secure their human rights continues today with the Mexican government’s unwillingness to include them at the bargaining table when addressing land disputes (Wise, Salazar, and Carlsen 232).
Communication technology has allowed indigenous groups to connect in ways previously unimaginable. The Zapatistas from Chiapas are connecting, through the internet, with indigenous groups from different parts of the world. These ties have led to mutual support and an exchange of problem-solving ideas. A group identity has emerged that offers an embryonic sense of community empowerment. The Zapatista men and women of México have reshaped the role of Mexican indigenous groups emanating power from below. This group is transforming their identity and self-perception through their insistence in political participation. They are no longer willing to adopt a subservient role. One of their most important contributions has been the first declaration of the “Selva Lacandona” which voiced their demand for the right to work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace (Ponce de León 12).

Even though globalization can bring people together, people should be allowed to determine their own identity. Challenging anthropological definitions, ethnicity can be a subjective label. Ethnicity can create artificial boundaries between people. The fact that the indigenous people of México remain a marginalized group tends to institutionalize ethnic segregation. Forced political and economic marginalization has become a battle-cry of grassroots movements, empowering them to make their voices heard around the world. Schools for Chiapas is a website that promotes the Zapatista educational system. Its focus is to promote literacy, health education, and eco-friendly agriculture. The website also promotes their ancestral language. The cultural development of the Zapatistas is centered on dignity, democracy, and justice. Schools for Chiapas assists in coordinating travel arrangements for members of the international community to visit Chiapas, serve as volunteers, and experience the life of the Zapatista community. The site also has a store that sells artwork created by Zapatista men,
women, and children. In essence, they are using the internet to sell the idea of resistance through art while marketing their products to support their cause.

Art, whether in the form of literature, textiles, crafts, painting or music has played a significant role in conveying a message of resistance to oppression. The Zapatistas’ spokesperson “Subcomandante Marcos” has written fiction, poems, and children’s stories that depict the struggles of indigenous people. These books are illustrated with paintings made by indigenous artists. When Marcos’ literature is combined with artwork, it provides a window to the suffering of the indigenous people of México and invites the reader/viewer to become an active participant in the struggle for autonomy. The venues for conveying the message of the indigenous people of México has been limited to the internet, literature, the visual arts, and radio programming on clandestine airwaves. Art has become the movement’s most powerful weapon against marginalization. Even in present day México, human rights activists continue to be murdered and radio stations must be frequently relocated when they are destroyed by government or government-sponsored terrorist groups. The crimes often go unpunished. The unfortunate lack of response from the government reinforces the need to continue the struggle, airing songs of protest on radio stations and selling books about their struggle on the internet. This group’s use of art as a tool of social resistance has strengthened its ability to communicate its message in spite of language barriers (Ponce de León 195).

ANALYSIS OF THE AUTHOR’S ART WORK AS INFLUENCED BY POSADA

The author’s prints reflect the desire to send a message through art as a universal language. Art has been a vehicle for chronicling the brutal living conditions of everyday life in México and around the world. When painting or creating prints, the author uses a fusion of influences from her native country to communicate a specific message. This project is a
demonstration of how art, as a source for social commentary, can be utilized to strengthen the message that indigenous people must not be forgotten. This project hopes to raise awareness of the intolerable living conditions of marginalized people like the indigenous groups in México who have suffered from economic roadblocks and social discrimination for over five hundred years. In an era when Zapatistas have put down their guns and use words as a weapon against tyranny, art can be a complement to the messages of peace and respect for human rights emanating from the jungles of Mexico.

The author was born in Mexico City during the sixties in a time of political repression against students. Ché Guevara, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X had been assassinated. The 1968 student massacre of Tlatelolco, that claimed hundreds of lives, overshadowed the Olympic Games in Mexico City. People began to fear the political-military establishment of México that with the backing of the U. S. government suppressed even non-violent protests in the country (Poniatowska 278).

The CIA had begun backing military coups a decade earlier in Latin America. For example, in Guatemala in 1954 the CIA orchestrated a coup against the democratically elected government of President Arbenz. The political environment was tense as the U. S. government used oppressive measures and covert operations to gain absolute control of governments throughout the region. Aside from the political environment into which she was born, there are several other factors that have been pivotal in shaping the author’s political character and artistic inclinations. First, her father, an architect, violinist, and artist fostered her love for art from a very early age. Drawing became, not just a childhood pastime, but an important activity that has continued to this day. One particular experience that shaped the author’s desire for promoting social justice was the many hours she spent as a child listening to the personal stories of veteran
revolutionaries. In 1975, the author had the privilege of meeting Zapatista soldiers (Soldiers from the Mexican Revolution who fought under the command of Emiliano Zapata). Listening to the Zapatista veterans describing their participation in the Mexican Revolution as young, socially conscious teenagers left a great impression on the author.

While she was growing up, the author never heard her father making any distinction between groups of people based on their social status or ethnic background. It was very shocking for her to later realize that there was a significant problem with racial and social discrimination in México. The author vividly remembers two good friends from her childhood: one being the daughter of a “Cacique” (the owner of haciendas) and the other being the daughter of the peon in charge of supervising the construction of one of her father’s warehouses. There was very little ethnic difference between her two friends. Perhaps one had more indigenous ancestry than the other, but the divide was much stronger than any marginal difference in skin color, economics or social status. The author recalls significant emotional struggle over the social taboo against bringing both of her friends together at the same time. That experience kindled a desire to dissolve discrimination that separates people and divides the world.

At age 12 the author’s mother denied her the opportunity to travel to Cuba for a trip that had been organized by her school. Her mother’s rationale was that if the author entered Cuba, she would be denied entrance to the United States and possibly other countries, as well. The purpose of the trip was for student exchange and exploration of differences in the educational models of the two countries. It was difficult for a 12 year old to understand how political conflicts could divide people and limit her opportunity to explore the world. Her frustrations are reflected in “Posada’s World” (See fig 16). This print depicts the different social classes representative of Mexican society. While they are all gathered together in apparent harmony,
characters are etched as if they have a pre-determined destiny that cannot be changed. The peasant woman will remain sitting on the floor selling pottery while the elegant “Catrina” will expect to be served by others. The poverty is evident by the child’s torn pants. He represents the fulfillment of predestination and an internalized resignation of his plight.

As a youth, the author was deeply inspired by her grandmother’s story. At age sixteen, her grandmother took care of six relatives when they were orphaned by the death of their mother. The youngest child was only 40-days-old. As not much more than a child herself, the author’s grandmother became a single parent and the sole breadwinner for her adopted family. Her story was an inspiration for the author’s active involvement in helping others. These exposures have been a catalyst for the author’s interest in using art as a vehicle for depicting the type of social and political struggle that are seen in the murals of Diego Rivera. The author uses her art to communicate a social message. This desire for fostering social consciousness is shared by intellectuals, artists, and social activists throughout Latin America. With the exception of the ruling minority, there is a national desire for building a more fair society. This desire is expanding throughout the region. Joaquín Salvador Lavado (alias “Quino”) created a comic strip featuring Mafalda. Translated in over 30 languages, it ran from 1964 to 1973. Reading “Quino’s” cartoons as a child reinforced the author’s appreciation of how art, satire and, political commentary can become entangled in a symbiotic relationship. Mafalda is the story of a very young girl who is often trying to make sense of an authoritative world. She is a venue for political criticism. The character of Mafalda became the UNICEF spokesperson for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. She is still a symbol of the struggle for human rights.

Painting from observation became a difficult task for the author. The artist’s cultural background made it impossible to depict an image without conveying a message. There are
reoccurring themes in her work. *Calaveras* are prominent in her prints and paintings. Most of the *Calaveras* depict the duality of life and death; some of her *Calaveras* are lively dead characters. “Banana Empire” (see fig. 13) illustrates the human rights abuses perpetrated by the United Fruit Company in Latin America. The American company is represented by a big shoe about to crush a family represented by skeletons. In the background a banana tree is sustained by skulls of workers. The family composed of a couple and their baby becomes a dichotomy depicting the dead being killed. It can be interpreted also as killing any hope that oppressed workers might have. While “Banana Empire” addresses ongoing aggression from the mid-nineteen hundreds to the present, “Gaza” (see fig. 13) focuses on a more contemporary issue. This print addresses the human rights violations perpetrated by Israel towards Palestine in 2009. The involvement of the United States is implied by the “Made in USA” bomb surrounded by over a hundred skulls of civilian Palestinians. Some of the skulls are visibly smaller, representing the children who became victims of the Israeli attacks. A snake with pre-Hispanic characteristics represents the unfortunate response of Israel towards Palestine. The sign displayed by the snake suggests the principle of retribution justice known as “An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” This phrase, taken from the Book of Exodus justifies “equitable” retaliation.

Most of the prints presented in this project are a cry for democracy and equality. “Three Women” (see fig. 14) is a depiction of a multigenerational group of women. The roles of women are illustrated as a grandmother who is actively involved in the family’s struggle for survival. The mother carrying a child symbolizes the biological need for proximity that exists between an infant and its mother. The woman is also carrying an agricultural tool that can be used for farming or as a defense in the struggle against oppression. The young girl is carrying a child on her back. She is looking up to her mother, both literally and figuratively. Most indigenous
children can only aspire to grow strong so that they are able to survive and provide subsistence needs of their family. The group is comprised mostly of women because gender inequality makes their struggle even more complicated. This print can be compared with Posada’s everyday life depictions. As can be interpreted from Posada’s prints, “Three Women” is intended to be a social commentary that pays close attention to the costumes and roles of women from rural México.

“Posada’s World” (see fig. 15) is a personal interpretation of a pantheon populated by the author’s rendering of actual sculptures based on Posada’s prints. This illustration exemplifies the duality of a lively cemetery where different characters from different social classes gather together. The tombs of Frida Kahlo and José Guadalupe Posada are prominent in the background. Including Posada’s grave to this imaginary world is the author’s way of acknowledging her admiration for Posada’s prints.

Latin American art is typically characterized by its strong, sometimes harsh, meaning. Its voice and message cannot be disconnected from the images that the viewer sees. Just as Mexicans rediscovered their roots after the Mexican Revolution, modern artists have found Posada’s Calaveras an inspiration for highlighting political issues in contemporary society. The author, like the people of México, uses images to depict political realities and voice a discontent that hopes to be heard. As in the past, art continues to be a venue for political commentary and has secured a role for itself as a fundamental tool for promoting social consciousness and respect for human rights.
Works Cited


ILUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Vase K1183. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

Fig. 2: Aztec Calendar: Unknown artist México City. Ca. 1479 CE

Fig. 3: Unknown artist. “The Mass of St, Gregory.” Feather mosaic on wood, with added carved and painted elements; 26 3/4 x 22 in.
Fig. 4: José Guadalupe Posada: “Zapatista”

Fig. 5: José Guadalupe Posada: “El fin del mundo” (The end of the world).
Fig. 6: Etching. José Guadalupe Posada. *Calavera de Don Quijote*

Fig. 7: Etching. José Guadalupe Posada. *La Calavera Oaxaqueña*

Fig. 8: Diego Rivera. “Dreaming of a Sunday Afternoon”. Oil on gesso (mural)
Fig. 9: Unknown artists. Depiction of a Tzompantli or wall of skulls.

Fig. 10: Calaveras from Capula, México: Various unnamed artists.

Fig. 11: José Guadalupe Posada: “La Catrina”
Fig. 12: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. Banana Empire

Fig. 13: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. Gaza
Fig. 14: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. Three Women.

Fig. 15: Etching. Gabriela Pickett. Posada’s World.
Fig. 16: Collograph. Gabriela Pickett. *Mexican women’s roles.*

Fig. 17: Woodcut. Gabriela Pickett. *Santo de mi devoción.*
Fig. 18: Woodcut. Gabriela Pickett. *Cost of a democratic movement*.

Fig. 19: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. *Mi abuelo el Poeta*.
Fig. 20: Woodcut. Gabriela Pickett. Che.

Fig. 21: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett Victor Jara.
Fig. 22: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. *Democracia*.

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Fig. 25: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. Los maestros Frida y Diego.
Fig. 26: Linocut. Gabriela Pickett. *Mexican justice*.

Fig. 27: Woodcut. Gabriela Pickett. *Mexican democracy*. 