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THE ICONOGRAPHIC PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IN MEXICO:  
FROM RESTRICTION TO SATIRE.

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SUBMITTED BY:  
GILLIAN BERRY

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The Art of ancient Mexico was basically a religious one, and in character with cultures theocratic development, was grotesque in representation and thanatoid-like in concept. Within the context of the theme of death in Mexican art, I present the notion of death, as represented primarily in a cult-like sense, essentially spiritual in intention and linked very closely to the Nahuatl indian's pessimistic view of the universe. Secondly, with regard to the socio-historic references given the motif of death, during the Revolution and the period just before it, I believe that death, was illustrated with the same urgency that has been attributed to the early beliefs of death in Chichen-itza, and that the concept of death during both Colonial and Revolutionary periods owes much, both visually and conceptually to the Pre-Columbian one. To exemplify the crisis, that was the Revolution, I have chosen Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), a printmaker, who worked more in the area of popular art rather than within the academic circle of that era, which was bound politically as well aesthetically to the dictations of American and European positivism.

But, positivism played no part on Pre-Columbian art. being essentially spiritual in character meant that its time and space could refuse to conform to lineal illusion, this refusal, in turn, assured its formal qualities and permitted art to exist at a multiplicity of levels, both real and above reality. In this sense it was an art of contradictory elements, in no way positivistic. This notion of opposing forces, is constantly present in Nahuatl symbolism and can be found in the early twentieth century in the work of Posada, Francisco Goitia and later still in the work of Jose Luis Cuevas. This "Union of Opposites", as it was known, was a sacred and important part of Maya and Aztec religious iconography, and was due in part to the native indian's pessimistic world view. As with many ancient civilisations, the gods of Meso-America, possessed multiple personalities, much in the same sense within which the christian idea of the trinity is represented to its members. But, the depiction of the Lord of Death Mictlantecuhtli, is the essence of this multilogic approach to the notions of death and contradiction. Cosmic awe or natural terror, invariable accompanies an even cursory examination of man's concept of death, and in his need to associate it with the demonic, we find the co-existence of death-like and demonic characteristics in the god Mictlantecuhtli. Significantly, this series of multiple combinations which controlled man's way of seeing the gods pertained particularly to the artist. It was his sacred duty to portray a facade which would be both,



awe-inspiring and decorative. It possessed Qualities of a circularity, of a perpetual return to an origin; and a peculiarly pessimistic attitude toward space and time.

Behind every great spiritual culture are its mysteries: A unified system of practices and beliefs based upon the wisdom and insights of its people. The civilizations of the Maya and Azteca, have long since gone but they retain a destiny that is still within the continuity of living transmission; for it is only through a reading of symbols, that a cult-like attitude toward death has come to infiltrate every conceivable area of creativity as well as attitudes and decisions of every day life. Even so, I am aware that there is a danger in attempting to interpret archaic values, and an even greater one in trying to relate these same interpretations to a modern technological civilization. The danger lies in that, the relationship between not only what is past and present, but also in the difference between Latin American and European or North American consciousness. What a Zapotec indian and a European would expect from the sculptural forms in Uxmal, in Mexico's Yucatan, will undoubtedly be different. I have learned, that Meso-American art is controlled by a secret tension, that cannot be opened by demanding a logical or positivistic thought. One must learn the ritual symbolism, which lies in form and colour, and discover that grotesqueness hides beauty, and death-life. Essentially, I believe that the spiritual or cultural awareness of a concept such as that of death does not change, rather obscures itself unable to escape its origin, revolving circularly. Manuel Acuna, the 19th Century poet, has in this poem "Written Before a Corpse" some astonishingly deep philosophy on this subject.

" Existence is a circle, we do ill  
When in our vain attempt to measure life,<sup>1</sup>  
we set the cradle and the grave as limits".

At the beginning of this introduction I have said that, because the art of ancient Mexico was essentially religious in character, it did not find it necessary to conform to pictorial reality, and that the visual language of Mexican art is symbolistic, allowing a secret tension to run throughout. No where is this problem more acute than in the mythological stories and epics, the iconographic symbols of work like the Popol-Vuh and Cosex Nuttall, enable one to obtain an unparalleled insight into a culture, which through its autocratic theologies, created in death, or more rightly in blood sacrifice, a mechanism, upon which not alone society, but the very continuance of the cosmos depended. To call a work a mythology is to raise

certain expectations, including not only an applicability to one's own life, but a vision beyond the bounds of normal thought. Mythological stories, often simple and vivid carry messages in their symbols. It should be said that though these symbols are cultural inventions they are not haphazard in any sense. The widespread use of certain imagery indicates a sharing or perhaps an inateness of the human mind, one finds for example in the Popol-Vuh the Maya using certain symbols we too know, the owl for mystery and wisdom and the skull for death. So, difficulty in understanding Pre-Columbian art lies less in the fact that its symbols are obscure, than in our own lack of religious sense. Belonging to a civilization whose activities are measured by external fact, in terms of events taking place within the corporal universe, it is not easy for one to understand motives dictated by the will to rise out of such an existence.

The idea of myth with its spiritual connotations leads to the role religious dogma played in the representation of death, during both pre-hispanic and Colonial (16th-18th) periods. During the age before the conquest, death was seen as a mere stage in a constant cycle of events, art and religion were indivisible. It was not until after the conquest that a religious and a secular art began to emerge. But death and its conception continued being equally important in the Colonial period as it had been in the period before the Conquest. The explanation to this is to be found in fact that the Spaniards and Indians were essentially spiritually alike. So that after the conflict of the Conquest, they mixed into one indivisible civilization, for their life was comprehensible only within a mystical context. The advent of Catholicism brought with it changes, especially with regard to the visual arts. The image of death in Church Art was outlawed, when the Spanish hierarchy discovered that death for the indigenous population signified the motif for blood sacrifice. But nevertheless, the plastic conception of death as a skeleton was the most frequent during this period. My intentions with regard to this era, are to examine the effects these restrictions had upon the depiction of death, despite the fact that the concept itself continued being important, its central spiritual conception changed. The metamorphosis which occurred during the time of the Conquest and even into the Colonial era, was to colour irreparably the notion of death during the Revolution and the period just before it.

Modern Mexican art, sprang from a combination of individual and environmental circumstances, all influenced particularly by its heritage. With Conquest, various European pictorial demands had to be met which resulted in the birth of Mexican Romanticism, while fashionable landscape and portraiture flourished, the popular



arts continued unnoticed. It would take a giant shock indeed, to motivate ancient roots into growth again. So it was that this combination of an individual in the person of Jose Guadalupe Posada and environmentally in the presence of the revolution of 1910, which lead to an upheaval aesthetically as well as socially of Colonial Mexico. Posada's skeletons and skulls were symbols in themselves: symbols of an ancient past and prophetic of the future turbulence of Revolution.

Jose Guadalupe Posada, was one of the first modern artists in Mexico, he was also one of the most ancient. When discussing the life and work of Posada, one must first understand the social and political environment of which this artist was to become such an intrinsic part. This is important because it was social and political instabilities which aroused the growth of revolutionary intellectualism during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Spontaneously and without plan a variety of pressures had built up against Porfirio Diaz, (who during the 1860's had seemed to be a progressive and liberal leader) growing into the Revolution that continues today in another plane. It remains the vision to which both Left and Right still refer (for some a genuine ideal, for others a gaudy cloak in which to dress opportunist political or artistic aims).

In the beginning the revolution had no formal program, nor was there any reason for such a scattered cross-section of society to be involved. The general air of reaction brought many creative people into the conflict, through the romantic and some what emotional out pourings of the recently returned exile, Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Atl, received a powerful impetus from young artist like Francisco Goitia (1884-19 ) Orozco, Siqueiros and others. Some like Goitia joined as recording artists while others wrote patriotic poems and speeches for the illiterate armies. But apart from the mass demonstrations of solidarity with the Revolution, which can be found for example in pancho Villias marching song "La Cucaracha" and Zapata's, "Quatro Milpas", the predominantly peasant armies fought to no definite purpose. The situation concerning civil liberties and cultural intellectual freedoms was, until then, non-existent. But the Revolution, however disunited, created a reaction to the earlier autocratic modes of Diaz dictatorship. And in a long term sense provided a new possibility for artists to work toward the native sources, which Dr. Atl had earlier advocated so passionately.

Identification of creative free-thinkers with the surging tide of nationalism is illustrated in Dr. Mariano Azuela's book "Los De Abajo", when one of the characters say;

"Villa? Obregon? Caranza what's the difference?

I love the Revolution like a volcano in eruption,



I love the volcano because it is a volcano, the  
Revolution because it is a Revolution! What do I  
care about the stones left above or below after the  
cataclysm? What are they to me? " 2

Azuélas book had an important effect upon artists who had actually engaged in combat. In it he makes one aware, less of social idealism than of man's inevitable suffering and cruelty and his mystical need for belonging to a vast cultural experience. Feelings similar to these were shared by Posada, who unfortunately never lived to see his sentiments enacted by the machine of Revolution.

Posada drew much of the stimuli for his imagery from the corrupt and stagnant Porfirian era (1876-1911). His prints, show particularly the influence of French caricature, a quality which his work retained always, even so characteristics of this nature were always kept of a minimum, Posada's graphic approach is neither naive nor realistic, it was created within the context of physical and intellectual restriction, (which of course reflected the time in which he lived) it was therefore easy to understand how feelings of sentimentality or even objectivism would rarely have become his concern, (echoing Laurette Sejorne's definition of the Aztec artists problematic social stance)<sup>3</sup>. Posada's interpretation of reality though satirical symbolism, would thus not seem displaced. Posada's vision of death can best be approached through the recurring notions of contradiction and negation; terms which must surely originate in the Aztec death cult. For this reason I described Posada as simultaneously possessing qualities of what is ancient and modern. It is not surprising then, that Posada's intentions concerning the image of death were in fact, dual in source. The first two have already been explained in brief, as socio/political. The Lithograph "Calavera Revolucionaria" or Revolutionary Skeleton, is a good example of this approach, the concept of a woman representing Death is an ancient one and traceable to the necrophiliac matriarchal origins portrayed in the goddess of death Miccaihuitl and the Aztec earth mother Coatlicue, the concept of Pre-Colombian theocratic logic bears reference to the second half of Posada's vision, simultaneously qualifying the term ancient. It would seem that Posada like his indigenous ancestors possessed an affinity with grotesque and sanguinary sides of man's nature. Despite his use of "Calaveras" as social reportage, as manifestos and as political satire, Posada's true references were infinitely more complex. They originated from both the Indian heritage (skulls, death-goddesses, skeletons and ritual blood sacrifice) and the Spanish heritage (the death-orientation of the monastic orders, the dance of death and memento-mori traditions), which have blended

into the average Mexican's stoic but far from humourless view of death.



A definition of the Death Cult would be as broad as it would be long. But in his poem, "Discourse on Flowers", Carlos Pellicer,<sup>1</sup> the native Mexican Poet, describes the ancient Nahuatl obsession with the dual concepts of death and contradiction in modern Mexican terms; he writes :

" The Mexican people have two obsession:  
liking for death and a loving for flowers.  
Long before any of us spoke castillian  
a day of the month was dedicated to death  
and to a strange event called "The Flowering  
War", and the alters spilled over good omens in blood".<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to the opinion of many, who base their views on the paralysing notion that all values are relative, it is in fact perfectly possible to judge the spiritual content of a bygone culture. For of all the qualities man may possess, spirituality is without doubt one of the most easily recognisable. It is obvious for instance that which is so moving in many Pre-Hispanic works of art is that transcendental quality within them. Take for example the Mayan sacrosanct unit of Uxmal<sup>3</sup>, on the Yucatan penninsula on the east coast (Plate:1 ). Although essentially religious in purpose, the theocratic function of this city is hidden within its murals and decorative elements. In this way religion is surpassed by an aesthetic form which contains far more than the theocratic pragmatism which inspired it. This is because the sense of Mexican Art consists of creating a great area, space and time, which may contain the implacable subsistence of the cosmos, as well as a circularity of a perpetual return to the notions of death, polarity and grotesqueness.

One can best deepen one's insight into the peculiar predicament of the native artist and the manner in which he viewed his environment, if, considering first the religion of ancient Mexico, its characteristics and complexities, in a more indepth fashion. For example, how did the arts evolve within the context of religious and social restriction (with its nihilisms and love of paradox) and further, what was the aesthetic outcome of hte artists affinity with the forces of the demonic and the sanguinary? This question is of importance, and will be answered. But first, it is necessary to analyse the spiritual structure of this society.

It must be admitted, the at a glance the autocratic, death-orientation of Meso-American Religion would seem to portray a culture with a primitive sense of spirituality-bent to all intents and purposes upon its own self-destruction.<sup>4</sup> The endless feasts held the year round were no more than a series of atrocities, making the temples look like slaughter-houses.

Here, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, in his book, *Historia Verdadero de la Conquista de Nueva Espana*", gives testimony of this during the time of the conquest:

" There were a number of Braziers containing copal incence, and the hearts of three indians they had sacrificed that day were burning .....  
And all the walls of the temple were so black with the scabs of blood, and the floor also, that it stank very evilly".<sup>5</sup>

Others of Cortez expedition experienced similar sights, so much that, the Aztec priest robed with long blood matted hair, soon became part of the repertoire of the European horror stories. And so on through the eighteen months of their year, I need go no further in giving detailed description of ritual sacrifice, since they are well known and often quoted as for instance, (B.C. Brundage, 1979.<sup>6</sup>) Since the perpetuation of human or blood sacrifice was but a small part of Pre-Colombian religious development. In evaluating the spiritual and aesthetic problems faced by the indigenous artist it is imperative that an adequate understanding of this religious order should be reached. Since, the iconographic representation of death was most certainly the result of religious stimulation. To confuse ritual death with the ethical ideals set forth in the hieroglyphic works of the Popol-Vuh<sup>7</sup> and Codex Borgia,<sup>8</sup> would be like explaining away the Inquisition because it emanated from the Church.

The notion of polarity is often said to be the key to understanding Pre-Hispanic religious concepts. The gods possessed multiple aspects and often the same god was capable of both good and evil; although susceptible to human persuasion and following certain patterns, in the final analysis the gods were unpredictable. From the myths and scroll drawings (Plate:2 ) we get a very human picture of death, who is depicted in dual form as a Hun-Came and Vucab-Came, in the multi-logic sense that can be found in the Christian notion of the trinity. In some ways this theocratic development created its own negation, in order to know its self as different. Are men able to carry out the works of Gods or are Gods able to carry out the work of men ? The Greco-Latin philosophy gave an affirmative answer that the destiny of man is linked with that of god. The Quiche-Maya and Azteca answer differently, gods are different from men: a theocratic culture which affirms this separation. Venus and Apollo are vulnerable gods, vaginal and testicular, they penetrate and are penetrated by men. It would seem therefore, that the subtle and seductive qualities of Greek painting and sculpture would affirm the aesthetic form with its religious doctrine.



Necessity, is in itself proof of human insufficiency; Cosmic awe or natural terror, invariably accompanies an even cursory examination of man's relationship, both religiously and aesthetically to a cult-like conception of death, such as this one. This ideology can best be exemplified in man's need to create gods who were both grotesque and deathly (plate:6) This notion is of importance to this study because even in Mexico today despite the advent of Catholicism, only the most fierce gods have remained in the indigenous pantheon; Mictlantecuhli<sup>9</sup> and Huitzilopochtli<sup>10</sup>, gods of death and war, serve as examples. Sculptural representations as well as painting in the scrolls and codices give a clear picture of how the artist envisaged the demonic. One representation shows a monor god as a skeleton, (Plate: 3) with talons instead of hands and feet, the god has a rattlesnake for a penis and wears earrings of human heads and a necklace of bloody hearts. Generally these "tzitzimime", or demonic gods were women. (Plate: 4). The earth mother Coatlicue is an example. (Plate: 5) Besides gods who were cast deliberately as demons, the quality of the demonic was widely shared by almost all gods. If it is correct in asserting that religions, wherever found, see diety as creative, sustaining and demonic at the same time, then it is possible to believe that Aztec religious practise strongly emphasised the latter, perhaps more so than any other religion. It is in the fantasies of Aztec religious art, that one comes face to face with the overpowering demonic sense of the Mexican people (Plate: 6) Nahuatl artists strove with rare consistency to depict the gods as grotesque and complex in appearance. Though anthropomorphically conceived, however, the gods are still not presented as comprehensible beings. They remain buried under an aura of death-like and sanguinary symbolism rendered inanimate by ritual stylization. (Plate: 7)

A double sided tension or set of contradictions existed at the very core of Pre-hispanic religious dogma, called the "Union of Opposites" this principle was an important and sacred part of belief itself. It perpetuated constantly the mood of darkness and pessimism so characteristic of Mexican culture. This was not simply a subjective feeling; it was a specific emphasis which could be documented and was a concomitant of the emphasis on the demonic. In order to understand this principal more clearly, an analysis of the central myth associated with the creation of the sun is necessary.

This myth was not only known by the Aztecs, its origins are probably Olmec,<sup>12</sup> who antecede even the Maya,<sup>13</sup> and was solar in character, the myth, begins and ends in darkness. It insists on the episodic character of light and ends with the prediction and annihilation of the Fifth and final sun.<sup>14</sup> During the period before the conquest, death was seen as a stage in a constant cycle of events, and the myth of the Fifth Sun reiterates this cyclical or repetitive notion, being in essence only a small part of constant struggle between light and darkness: between the gods of good and evil or correspondingly brutality and intellect. It is how the sun is fed, which is of importance, so that it will always give its energy of which blood is its essential element, the generator of life and movement, and movement is also the key to the contradictions and negativities which confront the western mind in relation to the concept of blood sacrifice. It is not suprising therefore that the European conception of death is different. During the fourteenth through to the sixteenth centuries, the central theme of poetry, music, theatre and the visual arts (especially in Spain) was the dance macabre, that is the remembrance of a constant alternative between glory and hell. Death in this conception is not Dynamic, but rather Static; without movement. It was not considered to possess life generating qualities, and was sacrificial only within the context of religious martyrdom. The sun was the ultimate driving force behind the notion death and the origin of the indian's pessimistic attitude toward space and time. Sacrifice was considered a mechanism or an inner logic for continuance of the cosmos. But Blood Sacrifice, the method by which the stellar and atmospheric parts of the cosmos came into being created a problem: The created cosmos was finite its strength waned rapidly and constantly had to be revived. This renewal could only be accomplished by human sacrifice which soon became a ceaseless activity and an incumbrance to those who desired the continuance of the Cosmos.

The indians pessimistic outlook played a major role in his interpretation of the concept of diety. Fear of natural forces was an important characteristic of religious belief just as rhythm and form were essential factors in art. Although the Nahuatl artist was in no sense an naturalistic artist, (Plate:8) he strove to portray with feeling the awful urgency of the gods. They were more often shown in crisis then in statuesque poses. But in the sense of being personalized representations of the elements, the gods took on grotesque and destructive personalities. The gods were the products of an alienated form of despair, of creative minds restricted both creatively and spiritually within the boulderries of autocratic city states, (Eric Fromm: pp. 358)<sup>15</sup>.



Like that of Tenochtitlan <sup>16</sup>, or to the lessor degree Chichen-itza. If one considers the portrayal of the gods in particular, in terms of technical or aesthetic evaluation one will come nearer to understanding the ambiguous environment in which the artist who created these images dwelt. If Venus and Apollo are vaginal and testicular, Mictlantechtli and Coatlicue are monolithic, selves and wholly contained. Significantly Coatlicue, earth mother, is headless, and renounces to anthropomorphism. Also known as serpent skirt, her myth takes one back to the beginning of the universe and places her in the magic mountain of Cuchuachan, in the north, a place of origin <sup>17</sup>. The goddess is described as black, dirty and dishelved and of shocking ugliness, as befits a creature of the underworld. In the myth she is the mountain itself the earth mother who conceives in her cavernous womb, all the celestial beings. One concludes that in the myth, serpent skirt is a locus rather than a source of life, being the dark world from which pain and death come, and within whose body the terrible conflict takes place. When time and space meet within the gods they become a separate entity which does not blend with reality. In this sense, primarily inspired by nature Mexican art tends to be somewhat more than an illustration of nature (Plate:9 ). Thus Coatlicue is square, decapitated with her girdle of skulls and skirt of serpents, her hands open and lacerated. She has been created in the image and likeness of the unknown. Her decorative elements while they may be called skulls, hands, serpents actually submerge into a composition of the unknown, in their totality they do not wish to be known by name. Coatlicue is the symbol of a ritual culture, of scared repetitions impossible to renew historically (Plate:10).

The negative stance taken by the artist in the sculptural form of Coatlicue earth mother, serpent skirt, giver of life; is a culmination of an earlier stand, and can be exemplified to a more specific degree in the total iconographic symbol of death: Mictlantecuhctli. In a similar way, he too is multilogic, schizophrenic and contradictory. Death, as a concept, possesses all the qualities of the demonic and can only be understood as a dynamic force, constantly moving back and forth between the divine and the forces of destruction. The skull (Plate:11) was the most common motif in Meso-american art and may be considered in a symbolic sense, as a general calling together all that the Pre-colombian artist envisaged with regard to the cult of death. The skull was often used in a multiple manner, for example as decorative relief carvings like those found on walls of the cranium cemeteries in Chichen-Itza, (Plate:1 <sup>59</sup> 2) or in a symbolic way like those found in the Totanac burial mounds, or the

rock crystal skull found in the Tenochtitlan excavations<sup>18</sup>. (Plate:13) This unpretentious combination of the symbolic, characterises much of Pre-Colombian art, and can be seen particularly in architectural structure (Plate: ) The first representations of death, be it in skull or skeletal form, come from the Totenac civilization (A.D., 700-1000) (Plate:15). In delicate almost lace like sculptural forms, the Totenacs vision of death unfolds in seated skeletal figurines and half skull, half fleshed heads, portraying the dual concept of life and death. These early figures, although delicate/intricate in workmanship are never-the-less definitively grotesque. A quality, which infiltrates all art regarding the theme of death. As Meso-american society evolved to a more complex degree, did art take on a vastly more monolithic and awe-inspiring quality, coupled with societies autocratic stance towards la condition humaine. Within the confines of a social structure, that was essentially totalitarian, the arts had to move correspondingly to the ordains of that structure, and since it has already been explained that society was based upon the strengths of religion art would therefore be in essence, religious. But the form of ancient Mexican art was larger and more resistant than any of its contents, be they in essence religious or secular. It was precisely these formal qualities which assured its solidity and made larger the multiplicity of levels upon which it dwelt. The Uxmal ruins, an Olmec carving or an Aztec relief, all demand various interpretations, since they exist simultaneously at an historical, social, religious, psychological, physical aesthetic, and metaphysical level, both real and above reality. Pre-colombian art and in particular nahuatl art, was created within the constrictions of death-orientated city states like that of Teotihuacan (Plate: 16). In this was, it was never really possible for the artist to make a defiant stand against the complex and claustrophobic culture within which he lived, nor indeed would he have wished to do so, instead governed by a pessimistic and submissive nature, his art, in keeping with the cultures theocratic dogmas began to take on aspects of that doctrine: dark, heavy, brooding. Within its uncertainty of decorative and symbolic limitations, Meso-american art is complex and insistent. Its evolution progressed and became more aware to its theocratic value. But also, parallel to this is a subtle infiltration of an ambiguous nature, a dynamic urgency, particularly obvious in the linear drawings in the scrolls and codices (Plate:17). Here line takes on maze-like complexities, decoration becomes form and form decorativeness, body becomes indistinguishable from costume, and visa-versa (Plate:18). Within a culture of such strict, cult-like proportions the artist created a secret tension which could not be admitted by positivistic thought, since he attempted abstractly to suppress the contradictions between what



was real and what was myth. This is especially so regarding the portrayal of death (which had become degraded by the autocratic militarism and necrophiliac excesses the Aztec state) which Laurette Sejourné has pointed out in her book, "Burining Water".<sup>19</sup> The notion of the self, the individual, did not exist in ancient Mexican society, the place destined for the self was occupied by the gods and duty to them. Which would qualify the parallel between the geometric fatalistic characteristics of art and the socio-theocratic emphasis on regularity and individuation in indigenous society, Resulting in a deep self alienation despair, which must be defined as pessimism. In retrospect only if one can accept the divergent and contradictory elements and drives of this artist, will one come to understand this work. The skull is that of man himself but simultaneously Mictlantechtli, also iconographically the symbol for the Flowering War<sup>20</sup> thus the symbol for life, the circle thus being fully complete. (Plate:19).

Ancient Mexican Art is representative of a spiritual ideal, the gods are spirits freed for ever from time and dividedness; therefore all that means life to us - expression, personality, movement in time is prescribed in these images and their forms, far from being ends in themselves, are hieroglyphs for concepts whose meaning is highly speculative. The meanest of the divine Nahuatl works, should therefore be compared to some symbolic whole, such as a cathedral rather than a painting or a sculpture (Plate:20) It is therefore natural that many of these works should leave the viewer indifferent, until it is possible to discern the meaning of their language. Take for example the linear drawings of the codex Borgia<sup>21</sup>, and in particular one such drawing which represents Quetzalcoatl, in his creative state as god of wind and performer of miracles: he is depicted holding a skeleton, while simultaneously being one, with the skeletal form (Plate:21) Into this figure, he breaths life. The result of this magical operation, is the heart which emerges from the skeleton's fleshless sides. Moreover, within the same death-like context, one of the most unusual symbols for Quetzalcoatl is a shinbone in flower, and in the Codes Magliabelli he is said to be: "son of another god they call Mictlantecuhctli who is lord of of the land of dead"<sup>21</sup> This is an obvious illusion to the doctrine which teaches that matter can itself only be redeemed by dying. The dual concepts of life and death, found in this drawing would obviously suggest germination, although these two gods are the epitome of destructiveness. It should be mentioned at this point, that the concept of duality is a characteristic one of ancient Mexican Art, and becomes evident first in the sculptural forms of the Tlatilco Indians, who expounded this theory in figurines of two-headed women (Plate:22). Some of these give the impression of Picasso paintings, for they are seen in full

face and in profile simultaneously. The most important of these dual images are the life-death statuettes. Split down the middle and ranging in height from six to twelve inches, they dramatically show fully fleshed living persons on one side and a skeletal figure representing death on the other. Such figures depict babies, children and adults in the dual state of life and death (Plate:23). This theme is repeated with varying degrees of emphasis, through out each period of Mexican culture, culminating in the early twentieth century in the living skeleton caricatures of Jose Guadalupe Posada. Death is taken seriously or lightly, but it is always with the people:- in their art, their legends and their religion. Death is not a mysterious and fearful presence, but a realistic recognizable character, as much a part of life as life itself.

It is obvious that at first sight both the figurines and the later drawings must appear only an utter extravagance, but if it is known that this image speaks with absolute precision of the cosmic unity, then perhaps the first impression will change to admiration for the perfect ordering, the equilibrium, and the sobriety of the composition. Born of the revelation that the spirit redeems the individual from the void, Nahuatl religion at first devoted itself entirely to exalting this miracle. Again similarly implying an explanation for the skull representations in the motif for the ritual Blossoming or Flowering War pictorial forms (Plate:11). The skull, here issues forth simultaneously the symbols for War and Life, both from its mouth and cranium. This hieroglyph like concept of Duality appears frequently in all Meso-American cultures, but was perpetuated especially by the Aztec Indians. The hieroglyphic symbols present in the skull would thus contain the whole doctrine of Nahuatl religion and its aesthetic form.

From the Popol-Vuh,<sup>23</sup> the great mythological epic of the ancient Maya, it is possible to obtain an unparalleled insight into the Indians relationship with the notion of Death and the corresponding area of birth. Though these hieroglyphic stories also, the evident debt the Aztec owed the Maya through their close links with Death, as a ritual entity, becomes obvious. There is one passage in particular which tells of the miraculous impregnation of the daughter of Gathered Blood, one of the Lords of Death and the underworld, it beings when the hero of the story, Hun Hunaphu, one of twin brothers slain by the Lords of Death. His lifeless head flung into a barren tree, which upon impact, supernaturally brings forth hollow fruit, similar in shape to that of a skull, the story continues:

" A girl heard of this tree and came to see for herself. She was the daughter of Gathered Blood, one of the Lords of the Underworld. Her name Xquic, Little Blood; woman's blood. She came and stood near the tree and gazed up into its branches.

" Such strange fruit", she murmured.



" It's possible that I should die for picking one".

Then the skull that nessed in the graveyard of the branches spoke.

" What do you want? Skulls are the fruit of this tree. Is that what you want, a skull?"

" Yes, give me one", the girl answered.

The girl reached upward, ready to catch the fruit. The skull let a few drops of spittle fall directly into her palm. She looked quickly into her hand, but the spittle had disappeared into her flesh.

" In my saliva and spit", the voice came again from the tree, " I have given you my decendants. My head has a different look now without flesh, for the beauty of men lies in their flesh. When Death takes a handsome prince, men are frightened by his bones. But decendants are saliva and spit. Saliva and spit are the sons of kings, and when they die they keep their substance". <sup>24</sup>

From this hieroglyphic record it is possible to obtain a sensation of bold charm and human sympathy, from which irony is not altogether absent. Also from the Popol-Vuh, comes one of the first manifestations of Death, as an individual diety, personified, as many of the gods are in actual humanistic terms. Hun-Came and Vucab-Came, as death is termed in the Popol-Vuh, were technically one and the same god, once more this calls to mind, the christian notion of a trinity of god-heads; and Ego and Alter Ego. The presence of these dual ideals in Mixteca<sup>25</sup> art, would qualify the explanation of the constant existance of contradictory elements embodied, for example in a work, like that of Quetzalcoatl breathing life into the skeleton.

None of the dogmatic persistance in favour of thanatos would have retained monentum if the restrictive forces of Meso-American culture had been inoperative. The self-alienating and pessimistic nature of the ancient Mexican would have had no genuine source. It will become evident, that later in the Clolnial and Porfian Eras, the restrictions upon aesthetic development became political as well as social, once more bringing the ancient fatalistic sentiments to the fore. Death takes on urgent tones through allegorical satire, early in the Colonial Era, manifesting itself ultimatly in Posada's "calavera" prints of the Revolutionary Epoch, owing much in conception as well as in aestheticness to the arcaic ideal. Undoubtedly the Nahuatl artists afinity with the grotesque and the demonic sides of nature contributed much to this pessimism, itself a product of restriction.

Through analysis it may be discerned that the individuality of the self denied theoretically through religious dogma, emerged none the less unscathed in the visual arts. Boundless excessiveness would seem to have been the artists weapon against strict rules regarding portrayal (Plate:24). Symbolism abounds and it adheres to the pictorial demands made by the priests, but decoration obscures the

true intentional messages, producing a confused metamorphosis. The story of Xqic, Little blood, demonstrates in retrospect, the crisis concerning individuality in hieroglyphic representation and later through its translation into oral story-telling. The individual conquers Death by conceiving the same life, which has been taken away through Death. Here again, it is possible to cite the reference of Quetzalcoatl who breaths life into one who is already dead. Death and Germination are one and the same, part of a cycle which constantly rotates. It is not surprising then, that when a victim met his death on the sacrificial stone, he was thought of as gaining spiritual life, of resurrecting as it is defined in Christianity. In this way, the Mexican Death Cult, however excessive on the surface, truly attained to the height of a spiritual gain.

Education in a technocracy like ours, often consists of watered down science and pragmatic knowledge assembled by rote, at the expense of imagination. Whole nations of scribes are created. The cure for worm in the tooth as Darwin defined it, remains the same under any philosophical system; the sharp beak of the woodpecker. Mexican history was married to the Mexican world view. History was not seen as a progression, but as a cyclical unfolding: everything that has happened, has happened before and will happen again in the complicated face of the gods. The turning wheels of the calendar present all knowable history past present and future. In conclusion, this would seem to imply a certain degree of determinism, with a corresponding limit to free-will: man is part of the exact scheme of shuffling days, what an individual can dream up or accomplish is very little. Fate is settled, locked into the ancient calendar.



-FOOTNOTES-

1. Carlos Pellicer, one of the most outstanding of Modern Mexican Poets of the older generation.
2. "Discourse on Flowers", p. 77-79, Irene Nicholson "Mexican Poetry: Ancient and Modern
3. Uxaml, founded around 1007 and its ruins are one of the most impressive examples of Maya architecture.
4. Caurette Sejourne in Burning Water. Shambhala Publications '79 p. 29-31.
5. Bernal Diaz Del Castillo; p. 128
6. The Fifth Sun, B.C. Brundage (1979) p. 112-116 (ritual) 152 (Mechanisms).
7. Popol-Vuh, Mythological Epic of the ancient Maya (translation by Ralph Nelson, with Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston. 1976)
8. Codex Borgia, Aztec Codice like the Popol-Vuh, it too is hieroglyphic., with later evolution into oral tradition.
9. Mictlantecuhli, Lord of the Underworld, depicted often as an evil force, but in Mexico to-day he often appears in petition pictures on the outside walls of churches or on the doors of the same buildings. For a more detailed survey on the depiction of this diety see: *EL CUETO DE LA MUERTE pp 17*
10. Huitzilopochtli god of war is unique to Mexteca nd Aztec cultures Ref: *BURNING WATER. pp. 25-29.*
11. Tzitzimime demons are generally found in sculptural form and usually miniturized.
12. Olemec predesessors of the Maya Civilization. Remains of their culture can be found in Tula on the East cost of Mexico and also in Guatemala (800 B.C.-300 B.C.)
13. The Maya were undoubtedly hte most influental of the East coast civilizations. Their cultures chronological table streaches from 1530 B.C. 1500 A.D. the empire encompassed the whole of the Yucatan with futher provential centres through to the Pacific Coast.

14. The fifth Sun represents a dramatic overview of the Aztec conception of the universe it became the climax of the act of creation, its final phase. In iconographic terms it is symbolically represented by the face of man. It was also a pervasive part of the cult of human sacrifice and cult of death.
15. Fromm defines this alienated form of despair as pessimism in his anatomy of Human Destructiveness (p. 358). I am in agreement with the notion that pessimism was the hallmark of the Aztec artist. Under this autocratic system governed by harsh religious as well as aesthetic demands, duty came before desire and in the final analysis it deprecated his humanity (B.C. Brundage p. 194-5).
16. Tenochtitlan sacrosanct unit of the Toltecs and later the Aztecs.
17. Cuchauachan was thought of as the original home of the Aztec peoples, also known as Azatlan. Ref: Laurette Sejourne's Burning Water.
18. The skull is thought to be the upper component of a staff. It was carved in one complete piece and is from the Aztec culture.
19. Sejourne bases her argument upon material of an iconographic nature. Proving that although spiritually pure the Aztec culture degraded the central figure of their religion Quetzalcoatl by military excesses and political ambition. Thus giving emphasis to the cult of death and sacrifice to subdue was - like neighbours (Burning Water, p. 36.51.70)
20. The Flowering of Blossoming Wars were a device used by the Aztecs to perpetuate war. Disguised as primarily religious these wars provided the necessary victims for sacrifice to continue the Cult of Death. (Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, Historia Verdadera De La conquista De Nueva Espana, p. 164-170)
21. The drawings are primarily hieroglyphic and provide first hand information concerning the cult of Quetzalcoatl.
22. Laurette Sejourne, Burning Water p.17.
23. The story describes the descent of two brothers into the land of the dead.
24. Popol-Vuh p. 32.
25. Mixteca, name originally used by the Aztecs, used later because of its historical importance to name the country Mexico.



"To those who live , unlearned from me  
 what goes form yesteryear to nowadays  
 as you see me now is how I was yesterday,  
 But I am a skull today".<sup>1</sup>

The Conception of Death in Colonial Mexico presented an aesthetic repture with the Pre-Hispanic past. This break despite its rapacity and efficiency culminated in a systylous which was quite unpresented for this period, can be felt most strongly in the area of the visual representations which have their roots in the cult of death. paradoxically, it was the autocratic and restrictive attitudes of the conquerors themselves which led eventually to the marriage of the archaic Mexican death principals and the hispanic "Memento-Mori" traditions. Unified conceptually or physically through a basic spiritual likeness, the actual pictorical representation of death in Pre-Columbian Mexico had been torn from its roots.

From the staggering quantity of official records available in the archives De Los Indios in Spain, the Archivos De Nueva Espana in Mexico city, the compilations of the history of New Spain made by Sahagun and his friars, the books of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the letters of Cortes to the Emperor Carlos V and others. It is possible to illustrate that the Spanish conquest of Mexico was the most brutal in the history of the New World. But it is equally possible from the same original sources, to demonstrate that the Spanish were more enlightened and humane in their colonization then their European counterparts. In fact considering the period,<sup>2</sup> the fervour of religious belief, the prevalence of witchcraft, superstition and sorcery, the barbaric rules governing warfare, and the political and social climate of Europe the Spanish were relitively intelligent and compassionate colonizers. This, however does not excuse them for their rapacity, but it will help to put Spain's conquest of Mexico in better perspective.

As Colonial administrators and missionaries, if not as conquistadors, the Spanish developed a sense of reponsability toward the conquered, unique for their time. One way to decide whether an empire colonized well or badly is to examine the results to the native population, and it is to the credit of Spain that in her colonies, the native population and the rich indian heritage were not exterminated. In New Spain education and christianization were a primary aim. Inter marriage was encouraged: language and custom were both absorbed and imposed. In this way the earlier physical rupture was slowly qualified by a systylous, both infusion and confusion playing a major part. Within three hundred years, the coliny had the will and the strength to break apart from the parent country. Within another fifty, it

was able to elect a pure-blooded Zapotect indian as president of its republic (Benito Juarez, D. 1872). No other colonial possession had ever shown such results.

Another way to evaluate the contribution of an emperial power, is in terms of the cultural level of her colonial possessions. The carefully formulated and slowly evolved aesthetic principal of indigenous awareness most certainly underwent a metamorphosis with the influence of the Spanish. With equal certainty, this unpretentious creativity was never crushed, the nineteenth century printer Jose Guadalupe Posada<sup>3</sup> gives testimony to this. I refer here to the Pre-Hispanic orientation toward the arena of spirituality, which undoubtedly must have been dubious at first,<sup>4</sup> concealed under an aura of blood sacrifice and a dedication to the grotesque: yet the hispanic culture too, possessed these same qualities which manifested themselves particularly in the arts. But it was in the area of religious dogma, that the unification really met with ease. It has already been explained that pre-Colombian art was primarily theocratic in function and grotesque in character, especially with regard to its architectural and sculptural formulations. (Plate: 14) Coupled with the presence of purely decorative and exuberant elements, it was the product of a genuine creative drive. The Spaniards themselves recognised that they had infiltrated both a highly complex and developed world, which internally was very similar to their own.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this awe inspiring admiration, the Conquest and the subsequent coming of Catholicism, were to virtually reject the indigenous values. They imposed certain European pictorial demands, which were ultimately evident in a formal court and hazienda art format. Culminating in the birth of Mexican Romanticism which overshadowed, and unknown to itself protected the lesser and more ancient traditional popular arts. The responsibility for the perpetuation of this protective screen lay with the church, the most important and influential patron of the arts, which formed the rearguard of the Conquest. The success of the presence of the missionaries, was due to the contrast they offered to the armed soldiers mounted on their huge horses, an altogether terrifying sight for a man who had never seen a horse. The friars and priests were men the indigenous population could immediately identify with, like their own priests, they were robed, celibate, moralistic and devoted totally to the propagation of faith. They were also the first to learn the Mexteca language.

It is not surprising therefore, that within a comparatively short period of time a whole new set of cultural values and new religious dogma had been successfully incorporated into the more ancient ones. The advent of Catholicism would bring with



it changes, especially with regard to the visual arts. (Plate:25). The first evidence of this type occurs when a definite secular art emerges as separate from the ecclesiastic art form, portraiture, landscape and illustration, unknown before the conquest, and now controlled by different laws of interpretation the laws of Spanish culture. (Plate:26). Due to his sudden initiation the Indian artist was, at first unable to absorb the totality of this polar conception. The first evidence of this change in the work of the Nahuatl artist, occurred when a crisis was reached in the area of the religious art of Spain.

The new missionaries soon found themselves at a disadvantage when similarities far beyond natural foresight could have been predicted, emerged between the Nahuatl Cult of Quetzalcoatl<sup>6</sup> and the Christian cult. The culture which had transposed itself in entirety from Spain to the New World, encountered an alter-culture in extremity. The notion of multiplicity of the godhead or a trinity as Catholicism had defined it, existed in Nahuatl religion (Plate: 7). Not once but ad finitum, multiplicity was the logical explanation for the coherence of the Cosmos, not only Quetzalcoatl but all the indigenous pantheon possessed this quality (Plate: 5). It was to be in the area of Death, that the crisis gathered momentum. The symbolic representation of the crucifixion embodied all the elements that the missionaries had hoped so easily to crush; Christ the motif of human or blood sacrifice, the partaking of his body and blood - the ritual cannibalism after ritual killing, the bones of Adam at the foot of the cross - the symbolic representation of the Lord of Death, and the Cross itself - the four cardinal points of Nahuatl strength, reflection the elements embodied in the Aztec ceremonial calendar (Plate:27). For each positive element in Catholic Doctrine, there existed a correspondingly negative clause in Nahuatl thought<sup>7</sup>.

Although the surface conveyance of all of this, common - held spirituality and iconographic symbolism, at the core of the devotion to an alien doctrine were elements, external to the nucleus of orthodox Christianity. The serpent, Satan represented Quetzalcoatl's third incarnation, symbolizing salvation not damnation. The urgency of the situation had to be met correspondingly (Plate:29). This revision, of what iconography in fact should be maintained and what should be eliminated was a problematic area. Throughout the 16th century through to the 18th century many attempts were made to solve this problem, each less successful than the other. The result today is a peculiar and fascinating one, it is common to find both indigenous and Spanish Catholic principals at work together. Miclantecuetli, Lord of Death is petitioned still through the miracle paintings on the inside doors of churches, while simultaneously, Christ is devoted in the inner sacristy (Plate:30).

On the Day of the Dead November 2, Catholicism no longer is present, ancestors are venerated in the ancient way, copal<sup>8</sup> incense is burned for their spirits and food and drink offered to their keepers in the Underworld. Thus at least once a year, the Dead rise again in the old way<sup>9</sup>.

Attempts to stamp out or at least control the Cult of death during the 17th and 18th Centuries in Colonial Mexico failed; really the plastic conception of Death during this period is the most frequent and indeed more closely related to the older concept.

Attempts were made to utilize Christ as a defensive weapon by placing all aesthetic attention on his portrayal, in the hands of native craftsmen and artists, his image took on all the ancient attributes of the grotesque. The native fascination with morbidity culminated in the 18th Century Christs, using real hair, glass eyes and draped textiles, Christ truly became a corpse, there is no romanticism portrayed and above all, little hope of his resurrection (Plate:31). With obvious defeat behind them, churchmen hoped that stylization would take its course, mellowing toward a more sympathetic portrayal as the Indian population became impregnated by the Spanish. Many, like San Carlos Borromeo<sup>10</sup> intended fighting against this ideal, against the pagan concepts which had manifested themselves in the Aztec crystal skull and the relief paintings and carvings on the Tombs in Palenque (Plate:34). He thought, that from the Christian point of view, death should have been symbolised by an angel carrying a golden key. Borromeo's intentions were influenced by the metamorphosis which the concept of death had undergone iconographically in Europe in the 17th Century<sup>11</sup>. During this period Death became transfigured from being a common motif in both Church and Secular Art, to something of an antithesis of the Former. It was to be disguised symbolically and presented allegorically. In this way, Death could no longer be portrayed as the Transi or worm hidden corpse<sup>12</sup>, or as an empty skeletal shell, the emphasis was placed more on a hedonistic theme.

Eventually themes concerning the notion of death took on a new and erotic meaning. In the oldest dances of death, death scarcely touched the living to warn him and to designate him. But, in the new iconography of the 17th century Death raped the living<sup>13</sup>. From now on countless scenes in art and literature associate Death with love, Thanatos with Eros. These manifestations are in essence, erotico-macabre themes, or simply morbid ones. They reveal extreme complaisance before the spectacles of death, suffering and torture. The Baroque theatre staged its love scenes in Tombs, such as that of the Capulets<sup>14</sup>. Like the sexual act, death was increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his



daily routine; rational society, monotonous work, in order to allow him to undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into this irrational, violent and seemingly beautiful world. This idea was something completely new. Until this point was reached stress had been placed upon familiarity with death and the dead<sup>15</sup>. This familiarity had not been affected, even by the upsurge of individualism beginning in the twelfth Century.<sup>16</sup> It was neither morbid nor obsessive - that notion of a break was born in the world of erotic fantasy, eventually sublimated and reduced to the notion of Beauty. Death was no longer desirable as in the macabre novels, but rather it was admirable.

Borroneo's desire, to see death take on a different and more enlightened face was symptomatic of the crisis facing the representation of death, it should not be forgotten that the exalted and emotive nature of the cult of death, both in Europe and in the Americas did not have a Christian origin. Rather it possessed a negative one, and the Catholics rallied to it so perfectly that they thought it indigenous to their own religion. It was due to this factor that in retrospect, the visual portrayal of death took so many different directions, some were in essence quiescent or static, all generally portray a profound fear of handling the theme internally. This would seem to be the origin of the Memento-mori Tradition brought from Spain to Mexico (a romanticised approach to a theme, which does not give itself lightly to romanticisation). A notion which was in stark contrast to the indigenous view-point, which the Mexican historian Laurette Sejourné<sup>17</sup> terms as contra-static, or dynamic. In short, death and life, which in any case are dual notions, represented symbolically in the hieroglyphmovement. Yet despite Borroneo's passionate out-cries against such "pagan concepts", the figure of death as a skeleton predominated in all plastic manifestations in new Spain (Plate:32).

Within the Baroque style however, there were certain representations in circulation; one of these being "The Victory of Death" (Plate:33). Within this format, death was shown seated on a throne, wearing a crown and holding a sickle in the right hand by way of a scepter. Images of this type had been seen before the period of the Conquest, in the Totanec Civilization (Plate:6) - death as a ruler or a diety, these figurines date from 1000 a.d. throughout the 18th Century, death appears as a ballet figure, a direct link with the earlier ideals set forth in the Dance Macabre, an area which the Mexicans adapted to their own use, calling it "Pastorales". In this context, death has begun to lose its imposing appearance which was a common concept in the paintings of Valdes Leal<sup>18</sup> who's usage of satirical and caricatural mannerisms were to lead to important developments in the 19th Century, when, in the hands of the printer Jose Guadalupe Posada, the satirical representation of death

was to take on new dynamic dimensions. Posada's inexpensive hand-out lithographs echo much of the earlier colonial satire, which had drawn as much from the Indians stoic but far from humourless view of death. As the elements of Posada's extrodinary prints are analysed, their kinship with the colonial satirical representation, not alone in their powerful Baroque style, but also in folk customs, emblematic allegory, literary sources and proverbial sayings will become far more obvious.

The notion of death as a subject for allegorical satire is a common and important one during the Colonial Epoch. One of the best, although perhaps not quite the most important examples, are the eleven funerary panels from Toluca, near Mexico City (Plate:34). The source of this work can be found in a series of prints entitled "The prodigious Life of Death-Emperess of the Tombs-the Lady of all Humanity". (Plate:35) Subtle by necessity, the notions of Thanatos and Eros are still evident in these tiny prints. From the delicate handling of line and the simplification of all external, and thus irrelevant activities two peculiar developments can be discerned. The first and most obvious point is that the image of Death has reverted to its indigenous interpretation of being female. Indeed later on, the Lady Death is shown in bridal regalia and becomes the dubious subject of ballads or "Corridos" of popular street musicians. But during the Colonial Epoch, she is divested, but holds no threat, this is a humorous prelude to the advent of popular "Calavera" or skeletal satire.

Unlike the earlier works on this theme, there is no religious reference, death has been given a totally secular stance, and in this sense is a purely popular art manifestation. Within the framework of "The Prodigious Life of Death", (Plate:35) the subject can be seen to enact her daily duty with a certain dubious grace, she topples the male tower of pride or assaults the battlements of a woman's vanity; yet the artist tactfully refuses to reveal the obvious consequences of this action. Presuming rightly that the viewer understands the efficiency with which Death operates. The Moralistic view taken has been carefully altered, through the inoptrusive story board lay-out, altogether proving itself to be very human and sympathetic to the theme. This raises the second development, referred to earlier; it can be discerned from the series, that by now the image of death had a tangible aspect, characteristics, habits. It was a creature of sorts, whether Miclantecuetli in indigenous mythology and religion or the "Lady of all Humanity" in the prodigious life of death. (Plate:36) The need to create or rather invent evidence of this nature is an understandable one, perhaps not to twentieth century industrialized minds but surely to Colonial intellect. In any case through this series hope of



some kind is provided within the Baroque setting, while simultaneously not neglecting humour.

There is a lesser known work centered around the problematic area of mortality entitled Relox or Reloj, (Plate:37) meaning clock or watch, and concerns itself primarily with the time allotted to man during his temporal existence. The aesthetic representation is hispanic, but it is the concept behind the aesthetic which is of interest. In character being simultaneously cyclical and fatalistic, alike in notion to the indigenous pessimistic view of time and space, with death viewed as a mere stage in a constant cycle of events. These notions Relox Representation is a frontispiece:

" Human life is but a clock  
(Mortal Man), and it warns you  
That its main wheel turns quickly  
And upon ringing the bell:  
The sickle shows the hour of death"<sup>19</sup>.

Effectively the centre of the wheel of the clock shows a skeleton which moves the hands of the clock, a second skeleton winds it, while a third is about to ring the bell, which signifies the end of life, symbolized by a boat sailing into port. The justice of God, that is Divine Providence, represented in the triangle with an eye in the centre from which hangs human life precariously balanced by justice. From the conceptual point of view, this allegorical work presents a marked development from the earlier indigenous demonic death concept, not only in that it is strikingly Christian in bearing, but also in that it has utilised much of what can be found in the Pre-Colombian death Cult. It demonstrates efficiently, the continual usage of death as a skeleton during this Epoch. More importantly it does not mystify overly the earlier notion. It should be remembered that the hispanic traditions concerning the conception of death and the ritual of dying (Momoneo-mori) were both strong and ancient ones, the more it is feasible to investigate the multiplicities of these two cultures, the more their differences merge into similarities. This has already been adequately demonstrated in the essential structure of their religious values and can also be similarly extended to the socio-political arena. For example, the urgency to extend territory to colonise, which was characteristic, particularly of the Aztec state. These comparable characteristics recur again and again in the aesthetic manifestations during this period the Relox is just one such example.

The ideals set forth in the Relox, were to inspire a few years later one of the

most intriguing and representative works of hispanic-Mexican aesthetic expression upon the subject of death. Known as the Polyptich of Death, because it consists of several fold-out sheets or leaves, the principal theme, again is Death (Plate:38). If any of the Pre-hispanic obsession for the grotesque had lost momentum in the Relox or the Prodigious life of Death, it most certainly had gained ground here. The Frontispiece image alone, is a remarkable example of colonial Mexican Death portrayal. Heavy with accategorical symbolism, the central figure, Death, is illustrated, standing inert and absolute. Intruding from the dark void behind the figure, are Tableau-like symblos. Beginning with the top left-hand corner of the frontispiece, again present, is the motif of the eye within a triangle, the symbol of Divine Providence. From the triangle a thread extends, falling eventually upon the head of a cherub, further below are two clocks, one a sun dial, the other a sand clock. Beneath this a cranium and two tibias lie on a book, which could signify culture or indeed, the Book of Life, a motif, which occurs frequently in pictorial representations of the Last Judgement. Finally in the lower right hand corner a hieroglyph with two eyes dripping blood, and ear, a pair of closed lips held with a padlock and a tongue pierced by two arrows.

On the upper right hand corner is an open window, above which is a spiders web. One of the strands of web extends to a heart, below it, from the top of which grows a flower<sup>20</sup>. In the centre is another cranium. The heart pierced by two arrows rests on a globe, which is encompassed by various other iconographic images: a violin and a bow, a trumpet, two coins, one of gold and one of silver, and allegory of all that the heart could desire, power, money, love and the delights of music; but all of these may be dissipated as quickly as the spiders web may be cut, for next to it is a hand baring a sharp cutlass ready to cut the web.

In the second leaf, (Plate:38) the viewer is introduced straightforwardly to death itself. A quarter in the lower part of the painting gives the theme of the painting:

" Earth is my centre  
And, in this, all looks, reflects, observes  
All I have  
within me"<sup>21</sup>.

The foremost and predominant image is, the skull, which through its enormity and formal representation is an immediate threat. The painter was able to express this situation exactly. The cranium is on a grave stone, between two candles one of which still burns, the other, extinguished. "Human Life is like a shadow", and



so a shadow of a body on the lower part of the skull. Henceforth, it is possible to discern what the earth really encloses: A corpse, already reduced to a skeleton, this is an attempt to recreate the Transi or decayed corpse which Philippe Aries explores in his *Western Attitudes toward Death*<sup>22</sup>. The morbid, yet unpretentious attitudes of the European middleages have not yet died out in the Spanish conception of Death. The moralistic inscriptions beneath the dead man, bare this also. An attempt to translate them, will not be possible here, but in short, they make reference to love and mortality, concluding, that man will become no more than "Shadow, dust, wind and finally, nothingness"<sup>23</sup>. The third leaf deals with the Brevity of life, it is perhaps the most poignant of all the six leaves man is shown face to face with his own death, which apparently is near. There is reference to beauty and death and above it all, the Relox of earlier adding finality to the piece (Plate:44).

The fourth leaf of the Polyptych (Plate:39) shows the last judgement, Christ and all the Saints are present in a numerous assembly. They are so well characterised that it is easy to recognize them all. References are made to the weighing of souls again an image from the medieval period.<sup>24</sup> The dead as mummies rise from their graves while a demon and an angel quarrel over a soul, others rapidly carry souls away to hell, the demons symbolized as monsters with open gullets. It is interesting to observe the numerous Medieval stylizations present in this painting, all this would seem to have been transported to the 18th Century, resembling the portico of a 13th Century European Cathedral.

The next plate presents the Death of the Just. (Plate:40). This piece is a true transposition of the Spanish *memento-mori* interpretation of the ritual death-bed scene. Centered around the figure of the dying man are his grief stricken relatives, two priests, an angel, a red lurking demon (emerging from beneath his bed) and death who bares a bow and arrow in cupid-like fashion. The representation of the act of dying here is a traditional one, The two most crucial figures being the dying man, who retains control over the proceedings, knows the ritualistic protocol and thus is performing the Art of a good death - *Ars Bene Moriendi*,<sup>25</sup> ready to receive the arrow, from death's bow, which will take his life: A subtle play on the *Thanatos-Eros* concept. The origin of this notion of *ARS Bene Moriendi*, are to be found in Europe through the *Dance Macabre*, which later manifests itself in France of the 13th Century and 14th Century. Here one is reminded that there is a passage in "*Don Quijote De La Mancha*"<sup>26</sup> in which the Don and Sancho Panza meet a troop of theatrical performers who enact a work called "*The Court of Death*". They are dressed

for their parts: one as Death, one as an Angel and one as a Demon. It is a Spanish version of the "Ars Bene Moriendi", in which in lookers participated, dancing with skeletons, as a reminder to those dedicated to the carefree pursuit of earthly pleasures that death may come unexpectedly should they not give thought to their salvation<sup>27</sup>.

In the final part of this multiple painting, the onlooker comes face to face with an image of a young woman, an incarnation of 17th Century beauty. The handling of the work is similar in style to the popular court portrait of the epoch. Despite her seeming purity and beauty, the Quatrain warns that this young woman has already died and is now a decomposing "Calavera" (skeleton). Her portrait provides a suitable finish to the Polyptych, which correspondingly, could be called the victory of death (Plate: 41).

In these three major aesthetic manifestations: the Polyptych, the Prodigious Life of Death and the Relox, it is easy to discern the continual importance of the death motif in Colonial Mexico, be it skeletal, angel or cupid. It is represented as a subject of satire within the Baroque Allegorical context, but in none of these pictorial areas is Death either discreet or forbidden as it will become in the 19th Century. (With the exception of the heretical Posada). Toobos upon the subject most certainly existed<sup>28</sup> but these were negligible in comparison to those which exist within the same framework today. By the very manner in which the subject is undertaken, whether with wry humour or obvious anxiety, it is always dynamic vivid. The mind opens here to a deep rooted sense of fatalism - a total acceptance of that which is quite inescapable - one's own death.

It should be stated that the Religious or ecclesiastical interpretation of death, has been somewhat neglected in favour of the more popular art interpretations on the subject. This neglect has been necessary for a special reason. During the period following the Conquest, Church and secular art became distinctly separate both in manner and concept, which was something they were not before this period. The resulting separation tended to make church art more formidable to the indigenous craftsman who were responsible for its perpetuation in the decorative area. It soon emphasised the boundary in aesthetic terms between itself and the area of fine arts, dictating the separation by its own static formality and limited persuasion.



-FOOTNOTES-

1. The Polyptich of Death, final Plate.
2. The period referred to is the Colonial Era (17th through to the 18th century).
3. Posada is described by many art historians as an artist who exemplifies this aesthetic evolution perfectly. He embodies all the characteristics of both the ancient artists approach and the colonial awareness of spirituality in the visual arts, all with the specific area of the Cult of Death.
4. Reference is made here to the opening page of chapter 1.
5. " I do not wish to say more than in its amenities and the bearing of its people there is almost the same manner of living as in Spain, and with as much convenience and order as there, and considering this people to be barbaric and so far from the knowledge of god, it is an admirable thing to see what they have in things".  
Hernan Cortes, Cartas De Relacion De La Conquista De Mexico Espasa Calpe, Argentina. S.A. p. 87-91.
6. Cult of Quetzalcoatl, nahuatl cult common to many Meso - American cultures, the corner stone of Aztec thought.  
Laurette Sejourne, Burning Water p. 72-85.
7. Nahuatl doctrine was wholly negetitive, but genuine in its philosophy. The comparisons made throughout the study can be backed up with information provided by Gonzalo Obregon in the Conception of Death in Colonial Mexico, artes de Mexico. S.A. 16. mexico '79. p. 90-93.
8. Copal, sacred incense of the Maya nad Aztec. it is said to contain protective qualities.
9. A through description of death rites and veneration of the dead appears in the conception of Death in Mexico today,  
Mexico en el Arte, Mexico D.F. 12 '70 p. 26-30
10. Borremeo was a 17th century churchman and historian. Gonzalo Obregon, Conception of Death in Colonial art.

11. In Europe, Particularly in France during the 17th centuries Death in art became a forbidden theme. Philippe Aries, Western Attitudes toward Death, Open Forum, 1979 p. 33-62.
12. This manifestation was an extreme and morbid one, its origins are not clear.
15. Among undeveloped societies a closeness with death is common for example one dies in one's own home and buries eventually near the home.
16. It should be remembered that the art of death, still possessed an appropriate ritual and protocol controlled by the Dying person and his family.
17. Sejourne's definition is a theological one. She qualifies the theme by drawing an analogy between the hieroglyph movement which represents a condensed definition of the death cult and present day theories on Death. Burning Water, Shambhala press, Berkeley '79 p. 43-45.
18. Valdes Leal, Mexican Romantic landscape painter 17th century.
19. Polyptich of death. Third Plate.
20. Hearts and Flowers are symbols from the Nahuatl culture, sacrifice and spirit. This would suggest an knowledge of Nahuatl iconography on the part of this Colonial artist.
21. Polyptich of Death second plate.
22. Phillippe Aries, Western Attitudes Toward Death from the middle ages to present day Open forum '79 p. 33-5.
23. The translation is only an approximate one. Polyptich of death second plate.
24. The depiction of the last Judgement was a favourite with medieval artists-The presence of the image here would suggest a transposition of ideas from Spain to the New World.
25. Phillippe Aries, Western Attitudes toward Death p. 110-2.



26. Don Quijote de la Mancha. pp. 331

27. This notion recurs in Mexico today, through the pastoral plays of christamas time. Death, angles nd demons attempt to claim the souls of the audience.

28. These taboos stemed from fear ofdeath, of the unknown and have their origins in folkelore and th archaic.

It is difficult nowadays to realise what tremendous power the satirical draughtsman once exercised upon social and political attitudes as well as everyday life. The influential political and social cartoonist no longer exists. During the last half of the nineteenth century there existed in Mexico, a whole body of such gifted draughtsmen satirists, among them Jose Trinidad Pedrozo,<sup>1</sup> Manuel Manilla,<sup>2</sup> (Plate:42), and Jose Guadalupe Posada. Posada is accepted as being the most important of these, and is comparable to Goya and Daumier. This undoubtedly is just assesment, but it should not be assumed that, talented though he was, Posada never reached the hights of pure draughtsmanship attained by these two. He was of a different calibre, but in his own scale marvellously well equipped. He had a capacity for prodigious work and was never satisfied until his drawings exactly expressed what he was determined to say, and in the most immediate and economical terms. Through fierce self-discipline, his observation became deeply penetrating and his memory so firm that later he did not find it necessary to make sketches in the Porfirian<sup>3</sup> courtrooms and courtyards, where firing squads dispatched political activists to the deaths with daily frequency. Posada's broadsheets<sup>4</sup> are as important as his newspaper illustrations, but it is nigh well impossible for the foreigner to judge the subtlety of their nuances, and the finer points of their topical content may be freely sensed only by a native. But this problematic area is not truely the concern of this analysis, it is Posada's "Calavera" or skeleton, prints which are the main concern here. Humour is one of those traits which, perhaps more than any other, defies the breaking down of national or cultural barriers: its roots too deeply embedded in centuries of history and racial characteristics for them to be penetrated by any non-national. Partisanship is another necessary component in the equipping of a cartoonist, but Posada went a step further. He seems to have prided himself in being an inflexible character<sup>5</sup>. Once he decided upon who and what was right, who and what was wrong, nothing could alter his opinion. He confused rigidity with strength. Posada, had by the 1890's, reached his heights as a draughtsman, this period was one of marked instability and unrest in Mexico. The atmosphere was ripe for political and satirical reportage, much of which was directed toward the Dictator Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915).

The etching and lithographic prints made for the publishing house of Venegas Arroyo revealed Posada as a fully equipped draughtsman. The expressiveness with which he handled the human form, could be criticised as morionette like or somewhat primitive, but this characteristic stems form his association with ancient Mexican Art, which during the latter part of the nineteenth century was being rediscovered<sup>6</sup>. The various borrowings from other Mexicans like Manilla and also,



especially from the influential area of French caricature, had by 1900, become absorbed and translated into entirely personal terms, like that of "Calavera of Don Quijote", (Plate: 43). A broadsheet on type metal, these drawings are true Posada declaring that it is the aesthetic as well as the model issues that are of consequence.

Most themes in caricature can be traced back into archetype and folklore, this situation is also applicable to Posada's work. His primary use of the "Calavera", or skeleton and its manner of portrayal can be traced back to the evident obsession and dedication to the Cult of death, which the ancient Mexican possessed. The meaning and origins of the skull motif and its associated images has already been explained in full, this reference only serves as a reminder. Thus, from the tiny characterised skeletal figurines of the totenacs (Plate: 6), more than a thousand years before, and through the Aztec obsession with the demonic, there is a slow but sore involvement with the theme of death.<sup>7</sup> Posada's commitment to the ancient notions culminates in a total statement made by Diego Rivera in his mural in the Hotel Prado in Mexico City, entitled "Sueno de Una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central"<sup>8</sup> (Plate: 44). In the mural Rivera depicts Posada arm in arm with the Lady Death, the figure being based directly from Posada's (Plate: 45) "Calavera of a Fashionable Lady". It is possible to see from this mural, just how popular a figure Posada was, also present in the Mural is Rivera himself as a boy, behind the foreground figures are some of the most illustrious names in Mexico's History.<sup>9</sup> But Posada and the figure of Death are definitely the predominant figures.

Before entering into a more detailed analysis on the work of Posada, the influence his images held upon the aesthetic Revolution of the 20's and 30's (Muralism) and also the factors which helped mould Posada himself, be they, socially cultural, or political; the notion of caricature itself must be clarified. The broad-sheet or frontpiece caricatures based on analogies, taken from either actual, feared or desired events, assumed a common knowledge, not so much of the real appearance of the people they represented as of the symbolic positions they occupied. Take for example, Porfirio Diaz, (since he was a central figure to Mexican politics), was often hit quite hard, shown decked out, as either a fountain of wisdom and benevolence or as a raving anti-christ and despot. Characters were concocted from allegory, nicknames, old testament similes and sheer prejudice. In the perpetual struggle everyone conformed to type: Haloes for some, for the rest, squints, hunch backs, obesity, gout outward manifestations for their inner moral deformities.

Characters took on extreme dimensions, the poor and starving, were made skeletal ghosts, the rich had fat impossibly distended. The exaggeration of scale and temperament meant that any one signed out for the treatment was bound to be made to look a freak. In broadsheet caricature personalities were emphasised by uniform, badges, tools of trade, together with distinguishing features. Porfirio's medals and mustache, Maderos<sup>10</sup> beard and meek posture or the revolutionary Zapatas<sup>11</sup> altogether unique appearance (Plate:46).

In a closed society caricature amounts to idle entertainment or to backbiting, but this description is not wholly applicable to 19th Century Mexico. Although closed it was and autocratic also, society was never the less unstable and easily threatened by a media like satirical caricature. Mexican caricature emerged from the street not the drawing room, holding sway over a vast illiterate population who were preparing to instigate the Revolution of 1910. At any given time liable to turn itself into a vast propaganda machine, the art of caricature and the position of the satirist, became two very important factors, which helped an artist like Posada to act with a degree of freedom, denied to many of the arts and in particular the theatre. Inevitably satisfaction or support from one sector of a satirist's audience will balance itself by a corresponding degree of dissatisfaction from the other sector, both responses are necessary in order to produce a positive result: There must always be a scapegoat, for societies malfunctions and shortcomings. In order to hold a position of strength the caricaturist must always have the upper hand, by either upholding justice, where wrong has been done or by craftily playing both sides off against each other, as in the case of Mexican politics. Perhaps, for this reason it is possible to find in the aesthetic and moralistic strivings of the satirist Posada, a loosening of stones that will culminate eventually, in a revolutionary avalanche within the academic art circles of the early twentieth century. Showing itself firstly, in the area of illustration which is a close relative of caricature. The identification of free thinking intellectuals with this revolutionary spirit shows itself, in nationalistic terms in Dr. Mario Azuela's book "Los De Abajo"<sup>12</sup>, the young Orozco provided illustrations for the book and so exemplified the involvement of professionals and intellectuals in the growth of progressive thought during that period. We find a similar involvement in the expressionistic painting and graphic work of the soldier/artist Francisco Goitia<sup>13</sup>, (Plate:47) (1884-1936), who had inherited so much of Posada's unique approach to death through social reportage (Plate:48). Finally, the emergence of Muralism, initiated by Roberto Montenegro, Diego Rivera and Alfaro Siqueiros in the



early twenties, compleated the revolutionary cataclysm.<sup>14</sup> Posada's work takes us away from the early picturesque nativism so characteristic of Joaquin Clausell (1866-1918) whose work marks a transition between French and Spanish influenced landscape schools and the more realistic, if acid attitude of the next epoch. In retrospect, the contact Posada's work established with the people expressed a desire for a more broadened and sympathetic visual effort, which resulted in an expanding aura of nationalism. Even painters who were not in Mexico at the outbreak of the Revolution, realised in this spreading of nationalism, that they too, had indian roots. Thus Mexican modernism springs from this culmination of the environmental and the individual and since the Revolution, art has continued to be affected overwhelmingly by political and social milieu, which provides a general background for most painters, and it must be added that without few exceptions they are Revolutionary painters.

But what is known of Posada himself? His artistic vocation, his rise to fame and his unique use of death within the context of political and social symbolism? To begin with, Posada was born in the state of Aguascalientes in central Mexico on February 2, 1852, the son of a baker. As a child he assisted an elder brother who was a school teacher and an uncle who was a potter. It is not known whether Posada ever attended art classes, but a neighbourhood census of 1867 lists him as a "painter" (Ref: J.G. Posada, ilustrador de la vida Mexicana, '63)<sup>15</sup> The following year was a decisive one for him: Becoming an apprentice in the workshop of the progressive painter, publisher, and graphic artist Jose Trinidad Pedroza, who was responsible for giving the young Posada a thorough grounding in printmaking techniques, - engraving on wood, metal, and lithography.

It was as a litographer that Posada first made his mark, and lithography was to be his chief concern up to 1888. This graphic technique was the most widely practised in Mexico in the nineteenth century, largely under the influence of the great European practitioners<sup>16</sup>, Posada's work especially, that of this period, was particularly influenced by the delicate French caricature of the 50's and 60's, which was a period of French ascendancy in the art of satire. But naturally the influence of France was not only felt in cartoon, but also present in architecture, food, dress and general life-style, attitudes brought to Mexico by Maximilian of Austria, during the French intervention in Mexico (1862-'67). But meanwhile, Posada found particularly interesting, the work of Honore Daumier (1808-1879), Constantin Guys, Philipon and Monnier. Daumier's contribution to caricature was very much akin to Posada's. He delighted in complacent shopkeepers, screaming housewives and

dyspeptic Judges. He preferred foibles to vices, petty weakness to major crimes. His use of lithographic crayon brings out the greyness in the street, the gloom of the courts. With the arrival of total censorship on political subjects, Daumier turned to social satire. His depiction of episodes in the lives of city dwellers are very similar in intention to Posada's "Don Chepito Marihuano" (Plate: 49) series which chronicle the misadventures of a ludicrous middle-class bachelor, a character created as a vehicle for poking fun at different social foibles. In 1871 Posada contributed eleven lithographic cartoons lampooning local political bosses to the periodical *El Jicote*<sup>17</sup> (The Hornet), published by Pedroza and others; these cartoons already reveal enormous skill in drawing - with great inventiveness and humor.

In 1872 Posada accompanied Pedroza in his move from Aguascalientes to the city of Leon De Los Aldamas in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato. Pedroza returned to Aguascalientes in 1873, leaving Posada in charge of the shop, and in 1876, sold the shop to him altogether. Leon was a prosperous town with several light industries, and Posada was kept busy with commercial art assignments, like labels and adds for cigar, wines and liquors. He also produced lithographic reproductions of paintings for publications, and turned out a great deal of religious imagery. From 1884 to 1888 Posada taught lithography in the secondary school in Leon. He had married there in 1875, but the couple seems to have remained childless. The son whom Posada dearly loved, and who apparently died in his teens, shortly after 1900 was not born to Posada's wife. This boy appears in one, or perhaps two of the known photographs of Posada. (Ref: Posada's Mexican Prints, Dover. N.Y. 72).

In 1888, Posada left Leon for Mexico City. The exact reasons for his departure are a matter of conjecture, but it may have been connected with the disastrous floods that devastated Leon in the spring of that year upon which Posada based a print (Plate: 50). In any case, the capital offered more opportunities to an impoverished artist. In Mexico city, Posada continued doing commercial jobs, but also managed to produce much original and reproductive work for a variety of newspapers and periodicals, most of them, champions of the liberal cause, like the publication "El imparcial", (Ref: p.9 248. Mexico: A history in Art. B. Smith Publication 1979?) By 1890 however, Posada had formed the association that was to be the most important of the remainder of his life - he became a staff artist, and soon the chief artist of Antonio Venegas Arroyo, an enterprising publisher of broadsheets and chapbooks, that were hawked throughout Mexico. Arroyo's firm produced a varied assortment of books, tricks, games, patriotic speeches, songs, plays and books on black and white magic. Such were the products for which Posada designed covers and sometimes additional illustrations (the storybook illustrations were often hand coloured by stencils).



But the Posada/Vanegas Arroyos association is best remembered for its broad-sheets, printed on cheap paper in garish colours, commemoration all sorts of crimes, disasters and miracles occurring anywhere in Mexico, glorifying great popular figures past and present cusually bandits-regarded as anti-establishemnt heroes-or perpetrators of crimes of passion. reporting on political or social current events, picturing the daily pleasures and chagrins of the common people-from a proletarian or lower middle - class point of view in a word, fulfilling all the functions of a similar street literature for the barely literate that had existed in all countries since the invention of printing.

In Mexico City Posada abandoned lithography. For alsmos a decade or so with Vanegas Arroyos, he seems to have applied himself to a technique that had already been employed by his predecessor as the publishers chief artist, Manuel Manilla and that he himself had used in Aguacalientes. This technique was, engraving on type metal (a lead alloy) with a multi-pointed burrin which leaves furrows which print white after the block is inked. This device has been traced back to the eighteenth Century (Ref: Posada: Popular Mexican prints p. 25); the results are similar to a rough, vigorous woodcut (or to lino cut). In this technique Posada became a master of chiaroscuro and of a wide range of gradiations of grey and surface treatments, in the same way that Daumier used the lithographic crayon. These type-metal prints exhume a sense of monumentality and force, and display a rare feeling for grouping figure compositions with exciting "negative" spaces. From about 1900 on (though there is some overlaping of the two techniques around 1900, and the use of one or the other is not a conslusive guide to dating ) Posada employed, almost exclusively, an even speedier technique (there was strong competition from photogravure at that time) one that allowed him to return to the purely linear and calligraphic draughtsmanship of his earlier years, and give it an even fuller expression then before - relief etching on zinc, a technique used in France in the mid-18th century. In this technique the printer drew directly on to the zinc plate with an engraving pen and greasy acid resistant inks. then gave the plate an acid bath that left the inked and other protected areas to stand in relief. This method was freer and infinitely more casual then the engraved "Calavera" prints, the latter being necessarily more primitive and naive. It must be remembered that similtaneously, without complicated methods, Posada also used the older and more simple techniques like wood cut, which suited the strong linear qualities of his work .

It has already been stated that Posada's subject matter was extreamly varied, from the Calavera and Miracle prints to the socio/political broadsheets. The historical and contempory themes of the broadsheets were drawn in bold line and hand

painted in blatant colour, gaudy and eye-catching and needless to say, in violent contrast to the academic approach of the state-sponsored art schools. It was from these hand-outs that Orozco and Rivera were later, to derive much stimulation and to admit open indebtedness to Posada.<sup>18</sup> After the early lithographic approach, Posada used a second technique, designed especially for these penny-pamphlets.<sup>19</sup> It possessed coarser and more naive qualities and highly suitable to this "poor man's bible" for the nearly illiterate, and since that meant a high percentage of the population, it was essential that these prints were immediate and forceful - either horrible or ludicrous, or both. During this period Arroyo also launched a "Gaceta Callejera", a newspaper of the streets, illustrated with hand cut prints, similar in appearance to those published in the United States in the Late 19th century. The spread of compulsory elementary education in the United States and Europe from 1870 onwards, coupled with universal (albeit adult males only) suffrage, created an enormous newspaper readership electorate. Cartoons were the most vivid and popular means of putting political and social issues across. Leading articles could urge and fulminate but only the caricaturist could exaggerate regardless insinuate without fear, sneer and tease at will, and dish out otherwise unthinkable retribution. The American approach, although different in intention provided an example for Arroyo's "Gaceta Callejera" as well as for others of that period. Arroyo remaining true to north American examples, providing bonus extras as incentives for buying the newspaper, by including exciting extras i.e. street demonstrations, fights, murders, religious phenomena and providing visual courage of these. This would explain the presence, amidst his work dealing with political and social injustices, of prints illustrating grotesque and sensational events. Such as natural disasters, freak births supernatural occurrences, executions the list continues. Often as a special feature, a murder, for example would have been given special coverage with a follow up of its aftermath, with specific explanations and commentary provided in the captions. Among the supernatural and murder prints, are several known generally as "Ejemplos"<sup>20</sup> moral lessons in the form of horrible examples of behaviour drawn from current events. As for the executions, it has already been explained that they were frequent in the Diaz regime, the firing squad being the most commonly used method for both ordinary criminals and political offenders; Posada draws the execution scenes from a variety of visual angles, but never repeats himself exactly.

Among the most exciting and imaginative facet of Posada's production, was the image of the Cacavera, the best known and most widely used symbol in Mexican cul-



ture. The spanish work Calavera means skull, and by extension skeleton. In this case it designates caricature in which all the characters are skeletons. The influences with regard to the calavera content of Posada's work stem primarily from the corrupt and stagnant Porfirian Epoch. Its obsessions with French cultural manifestations and Spanish Religious Memento-Mori traditions. But also the influence of the moralistic engravings of the Colonial era can be felt. In the world Posada creates, skeletons mime almost every aspect of political and social existence, they attain qualities of the grotesque, in the pre-Colombian tradition, while retaining still the peculiarities of Spanish humour. The notion of using death, in this sense, brought the popular, and thus more ancient arts into a new dimension. The Calavera symbolised all that was uniquely Mexican and yet was an ideal neutral area within which to confront the imposing authoritarianism of Mexico's immediate situation. The Calavera prints were prepared for sale on or around All Souls Day, November 2nd. or as it is known in Mexico, Dia De La Muerte <sup>21</sup> (Plate 51). On this day it is customary to sell figurines, toys, cakes and sweets in the shape of skulls and skeletons and to make elaborate offerings to dead relatives. As we have already discovered this tradition has its origins in Pre-hispanic Mexico tradition and even to this day has not diminished in importance or intent or become abridged in any way, despite the advent of Catholicism, political or social ideologies and the general ambient of positivism which progress generates.

Posada used his calaveras, primarily as political satire, drawing simultaneously from the vast store of Nahuatl symbolism and tradition, with its death orientated dieties, total disregard for the individual and and peculiar affinity with the grotesque. The stock from which every Mexican child draws his imaginative abilities. In retrospect Posada's Calaveras are infinitely more than they appear and it was this secret tension or sensitivity which breathed life into these otherwise inanimate caricatures: Being in a word not caricatures at all but a living component of every Mexican.

Thus as we progress into our analysis we are confronted by the complex notions of negativity and contradiction, coming to fore, as constantly they have with regard to the whole and complete conception, aesthetically or theocratically, of death in Mexico. But unlike the Pre-Columbian stance, this is a more specific one and can be isolated from those other areas of which Posada derived stimulus. Undoubtedly the Calavera stands out as different, as characteristic; emerging not from the then fashionable and influential French and English art of caricature, through Daumier, Guis, Spy, Nast <sup>22</sup> and others, (Plate 51) but from within Posada himself: Posada the "indio" <sup>23</sup>, his background, superstitious and cultural heritage,

thus in this sense, he is simultaneously ancient and modern. In his book the "Labyrinth of Solitude"<sup>24</sup>, Octavio Paz has demonstrated that Mexican history and art develops through ruptures. Each new historical phase not only obliges it to start again, in a cyclical run, much in the same way that the ancient Maya and Azteca viewed time and the cosmos. The conquest tried to wholly deny the existence of the indigenous world, the period of independence denied the colonial world and the Revolution rejected 19th Century positivism. While at the same time claiming to be orphaned by the previous era, thus being open to contamination to the traditions thus denied. The autocratic Aztec tradition though rejected persists in the uninterrupted exercise of centralised power. The pyramid structures of the Anahuac and Castile persist behind the democratic horizons of the various constitutions. The plan for independence gave a new meaning to the political novelties initiated by the French and North American Revolutions, which in turn, proposed a rationalist, humanist and positivistic approach to culture. Art in Mexico from the Neo-Classists to the muralists was a transposition of this thought to the aesthetic area<sup>25</sup>.

Whether naive or academic most artists participated in this attitude, with the exception of two heretics: Posada and Goitia, who both discovered the lack of symmetry behind the positivistic approach (just as later Flores Magon and Zapata discovered the lack of proportion behind the symmetrical theories of Gavino Barreda and the inconsistent actions of Diaz). The paintings of Goitia tell us that the positivistic perception of reality is as fragile as a dream and that reason does not account for the whole man, or for the painter Goitia (Plate:47), who in 1927 makes a reference to his painting "Tata Jesucristo"; he writes:

"I tried my models sitting this way and that, but no, I didn't feel it exactly right. At last I investigated everything I could about them. I then made them come and sit for me on the Day of the Dead. When of their own accord they would be dwelling on sorrow, and little by little I discovered their sorrow and the revolution of their dead. And they withered and one turned her foot in pain-then I knew I had it! Those hands and feet gave their grief a genuine form. I would never have thought of it myself but that is the way grief is and so I was satisfied at last. They weep tears for our race, pain and tears, our own and different from others, all the sorrow of Mexico is there".<sup>26</sup>

(Ref: Anita Brenner: "Idols behind alters". Payson and Clark N.Y. 29, p. 297)

Posada in one leap demolishes the distance between what is real and what



appears to be, in his work a union of traditionally Mexican opposites separates liberal positivism: Death becomes a fiesta, a long night of smiling skulls, whose rays are obsidian daggers. Love and Death, everything is possible if we participate in this union of opposites. (Plate: 3) Within this conception, the work produced would undoubtedly be typically Mexican, with its contradictory yet coexistent combination of past and present, Indian and Spanish, Life and Death sensitivities. Posada hints at the corruptibility of society and at the underlying growth of national consciousness. Santiago Hernandez<sup>24</sup> had influenced Posada's aesthetic vision of the Calavera, Hernandez being influenced in turn by the Colonial "Polyptych of Deaht", itself the product of Aztec hands employing alien hispanic cultural devices, the roots continually sinking deeper into Mexican tradition (Plate:33) Culminating in a most unlikely manifestation: Caricatural skeletons. The contradiction itself being complete.

Here at an early stage, Posada takes on the role of a political prophet, a social realist, avant la lettre, and within a very short time many of his prophetic scenes were to come true<sup>28</sup>. For example his portrayal of general Huerta<sup>29</sup>, in the "Calavera Huertista" print, illustrates once again his exploitation of the calavera as a neutral and ambiguous area in which to activate political fury. Victoriano Huerta, becomes a giant man-eating tarantula, devouring skeletal victims. The skull is a human one but the body arachnid-like body gives testimony to the ancient attributes of death-like and grotesqueness. Bearing no resemblance to naturalistic portrayal. Posada's most vicious prints were totally devoid of colour, being stark and often primitive. Again a prophetic gesture is evident in his "La calavera Oaxaquena" - the Oaxaca skeleton (Plate: ), a fine type-metal print of 1910, a virtuosity of line becoming more apparent, but not taking in any way from the savagery of the intended message: Revolution is in the air, the calaveras blood dagger testifies to this. It can be said that the ideal of the people's art, sought after so ardently by artists of the Revolutionary generation, was already present in art of Posada<sup>30</sup>. But perhaps, the most pathetic of all the calaveras prints, is the one of Francisco I. Madero (Plate:52) a wealthy lawyer from the North of Mexico, who by 1910 had crystallized around himself the opposition to Diaz's re-election. Madero, with the backing of Pancho Villa, had descended on Mexico city after the outbreak of the Revolution (November 20th 1910) and entered the capital in triumph in the spring of 1911 becoming President a few months later. Too honest; and trustworthy for their turbulent time, Madero had been brutally murdered by Huerta, a month after Posada's death in February 1913 But by 1910, Posada envisaged Madero, dressed as an unfortunate skeletal drunk, his beard and stooped posture the only

distinguishing features, entitled "Skeletons on the heap"<sup>31</sup>, very little elaboration was necessary and illustrates aptly Posada's prowess as a political reporter and message barer.

Posada's roots lie in the 19th century not the 20th century, he viewed the coming of the new century, not with optimism but with characteristic pessimism. We might get a hint of his personal view, from the type - metal broadsheet 20th century calavera (Plate:53). This tiny print bares no debt to the French influenced caricature style of earlier. Its req linear qualities providing a powerful contrast to the white negative space behind. Proportions are confused, foreground and background merge. The central figure of the skeleton is larger then the pathetic human figures along side, once more we become confronted with the indian codices and scrolls, the indigenous aesthetic concepts<sup>32</sup> miniture men monumental dieties and spirits. The 20th century is death upon death, the running skeleton carries his own skull and cross-bones upon his back, the image is confused , form takes on limitless dimentions, in the way aztec ritual representation confuses form and decorativness. Both skulls scream or laugh, and on-lookers are helpless. The origins of this image are obvious ones, linked to the indian's pessimistic view of time. There is no attempt made here to reconstruct the ancient theogonies and dogmas, they are alive. What we see here is the emotional liberation of an ancient fear, one associated with time, cosmos and the individual, all viewed, not in social or political terms, although these factors too, have their part. But it is more specific and more Mexican. It is in fact what Octavio Paz suggested earlier that Mexican culture develops through ruptures, rejection and repetition, constantly contradicting itself.

Much of that which is presented to us in Modern Mexican art, has its roots in what would appear to be an idealistic struggle for the emergence of the all important self, the individual. We find this notion recurring again and again throughout the history of art. Posada is the corner stone or edge of what the Mexican struggle, both ancient and modern is about. Finding its own varied expression through the restrictions of death-orientated dogmas as well as in socio/political areas: the individuality of the Maya and Aztec city states, the religious and social barriers of the Colonial Epoch and the political restrictiveness of the Revolutionary period. In his autobiography, (Ref: Mes. D.F. Edicioniones occidente 1945 156 p.p. ) J.C. Orozco give an account of his first contact with art. In this memoir he did not talk about the magnificent opulence of the Colonial Baroque churches in the city (Mexico) - full of sculptures shrines and paintings



(Plate: 54) which strike any visitor, but rather, of the memory of passing every day on the way to school the workshop of Posada which was situated in the oldest part of the city behind the cathedral, where he saw him working on his crudely coloured and mass produced broadsheets. Orozco described this experience as "his awakening to the existence of the art of painting " <sup>23</sup> which is a little surprising as Posada was first and foremost a popular draughtsman. It is significant that, with the benefit of hindsight, Orozco saw in the work of Posada, the popular genre draughtsman, a model for what art could and should be. But at this time Posada could not have been considered a serious artist. Mexico, like every other "Civilised" country had its own academy of fine arts, but this, wholly in tune with the modernising and Europeanising spirit of Diaz regime, looking to Europe and especially Paris, for a lead. But whether academic or revolutionary in aspiration from Orozco to Cuevas, all aspiring artist had to pass through this academic system, invariably all expressing their dissatisfaction and frustration, either visually: Orozco and Rivera or verbally: Siqueiros (art and Revolution '75 Lawrence Wishart. <sup>34</sup>) From 1910 until the mid 1920's Orozco began to take seriously the art of caricature, mainly political and social in direction. It is here that the debt to Posada is most evident. Orozco continues to use the Calavera image simultaneously with more conventional satire. Even at this stage Orozco combined opposites both in irony and as a form of dialectic. An appreciation of this methodology, is crucial to an understanding of this mature murals.

Rivera claims a similar debt to the art of Posada. By the very fact that both these artists, along with Francisco Goitia (Plate 47), sought to solve their problematic dilemma through Posada's work proves his enormous stature among working artists, if not by the more academic circles. His presence is tantamount to the influence Goya held over draughtsmanship in general. Reference has already been cited to this influence in Rivera's Cafe Prado Murals, in which Posada looms like a demi-god hand in hand with the lady Death. Despite this tribute (to both death and Posada), the visual interpretation of this theme has changed, undergone a metamorphosis which remains until the generation of Juan Rulfo and Jose Luis Cuevas (Plate 35) emerge as a significant creative force (50's and 60's) a dissolution partly with the, by then total acceptance of the power house of Revolutionary motifs, propagated by Muralism, evident especially in the work of Siqueiros and also more specifically, with its acceptance at face value: state art (as by then it was) is generally not probed or dissected since theoretically it is total. The ancient motif had become no longer solely Mexican, But

against its will attained to universal Revolutionary heights; as with Siquieros specifically it is Marxist.<sup>35</sup> The enormous area the image of death once covered had to be rediscovered - a more mature criteria reached. It was obvious that this chance should take metaphysical directions, becoming as it had during the (17th and 18th Centuries - colonial Epoch) a secluded and intellectual activity. This was, paradoxically, more in - keeping with ancient modes then for example, the muralists attempts with the notion of death. But this approach had one disadvantage it took art from the people, their comprehension was not necessary, Posada's example had been forgotten, in the attempt to wipe clean the slate of Muralism (Plate:56)

Another factor influencing this change of direction had been the coming of abstractionism, as a major art movement. Alfari Siquieros had realised, with remarkable foresight, the effects its coming would have on public partisipation in art. Whether needed or not his passionate pleas made little difference. Perhaps the notion of abstraction came to easily to Mexicans. It's foundations lay deeply in the Mexican tradition further back then the Maya and Azteca facination with geometry Not alone in functionality: decoration, this is a universal notion, but also in theory, in actual representative terms i.e. depiction of diety. So even if abstract-ionist dogma eliminated the man in the street, it produced a more pure conception of what, actuality the Pre-hispanic notion of death was, but more importantly it proved that this concept had remained intact. Thus it can be stated fairly that Rojo for example refined Posada's views (not in aesthetic terms but in conceptual ones) Or correspondingly, that the native artist's utilization of the image of death had remained with its taboos intact in the 19th century manifestations of Posada.



- FOOTNOTES -

1. Jose Trinidad Pedrozo "Popular Mexican Prints" Roberto Berdecio and Stanley Appelbaum Dover Publications, N.Y. '72, p.6.
2. Manuel Manilla, I.B.I.D. p.10.
3. Term describing period ruled by the dictator Porfirio Diaz.
4. Cheap hand-out printed matter.
5. R. Berdecio and S. Appelbaum, report that this inflexibility was due to Posada's background, Jose Guadalupe Posada: Ilustrador de la vida Mexicana, fondo Editorial de la plastica Mexicana '63 p 22.
6. Archaeological explorations in the teotihuacan area near Mexico city during the period 1864-1900 have been documented in Jorge Acosta's Teotihuacan lugar de Dioses, artes de Mexico D.F. 12 '60.
7. Miccaihuitl: El Culto de la Muerte, artes De Mexico, Mexico D.F. 12 '79, p.6-37.
8. English title: Dream of a sunday afternoon in the Alameda Park".
9. Included in this mural are Riveras wife the painter Fredakahlo and next to her is the cuban patriot Jose Marti.
10. Madero I Francisco (1873-1913) president of the Mexican Republic 1911-1913.
11. Zapata: (1873-1919) Agrarian reformer and guerrilla leader, Posada's sympathetic portraits of Zapata have fixed his image in all of mexican art.
12. Mario Azuelas "Los de Abajo" or the under dogs translated by Mungia Brektanos N.Y. 1929 p. 207.
13. Francisco Goitia. Anita Brenner, Idols behind Alters.
14. Art and Revolution D.A. Siquieros p. 280-95.
15. Also referr to Posada's Popular Mexican prints '78 p. 12.

16. Guys, Philippon Daumier.
17. El Jicote, was among a series of periodicals distributed throughout Mexico during this period J. Womack gives an excellent account of its purpose and effects.
18. Orozco's letters in University of Oxford Catalogue '80 provide proof.
19. Broad-sheets.
20. Examples or moral tales.
21. Day of the dead.
22. Thomas Nast, chief cartoonist for the N.Y. times during the 1890's.
23. Indian origin.
24. Octavio Paz the Labyrinth of solitude p. 166-280.
25. Posada's Popular Mexican Prints p. 16-20.
26. Anita Brenner, Idols behind alters . Payson and Clark '29 p. 297.
27. Santiago Hernandez Posada's popular Mexican Prints p. 4.
28. Victoriano Huerta, general in the Revolutionary army ref: John Womack, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution p. 800-805, 20 16n 24.
30. I have already cited reference to the debt owed to Posada by the later generation of Revolutionary artists.
31. Goitia later painted the same theme, 27.
32. Undoubtedly proving Rosada's knowledge of the earlier notions.
33. Orozco catalogue University of Oxford '80 p. 160
34. p. 120-5.
35. Art and Revolution - p. 65.



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