

**OBJECTS TRAVEL THROUGH TIME, RESIGNIFYNG IMAGES AND SYMBOLS: THE BRADY-NIKAS COLLECTION AND THE POSADA ART FOUNDATION.**

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**1. Posada's "discovery" and internationalization.**

For almost every Mexican, the work of the engraver from Aguascalientes, José Guadalupe Posada, is not only known, but internalized as essential to the national visual/artistic identity. This is because, indeed, a great part of the artistic production identified as "Mexican" in the post-revolutionary period (1920-1940)<sup>1</sup> -which would found the bedrock of the Mexican School of Painting-, consciously adopted Posada as the "prophet of modern Mexican art"<sup>2</sup>.

This occurred in the midst of a complex panorama, where many interests and agents played, with political, economic, artistic and nationalist ideologies. On the contrary, Posada in life did not have much recognition. At that time, the job of engraver, as illustrator, unlike the "artist engraver" (such as Julio Ruelas, for example), was a worker who was part of the "productive" and daily activities of society, who worked for publishing houses and the dissemination of flyers, newspapers and magazines illustrating events, religious prints and day-to-day traditions<sup>3</sup>. The "academic" engraver (I call it that because of the difference in training and function) was a profession focused on being an "artist" and these individuals used to be from more affluent and intellectual social classes, studied at the Academia de San Carlos and, many of them as Ruelas or -later- Diego Rivera, lived and studied abroad for

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<sup>1</sup> The Mexico that began with the triumph of the Revolution in 1920 and ended with the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas and the arrival of developmental policies.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Brenner, *Ídolos tras los altares* (México: Domés, 1983) p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Alberto Manrique, "El proceso de las artes: 1910-1970" en *Una Visión del Arte y de la Historia*, Vol. 4 (México: UNAM, 2007) p. 85.

certain periods of time<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is quite obvious that Posada was never recognized as an “artist” in life, although he did have some success as an illustrator, being particularly liked by the people of the cities where he worked (Aguascalientes, Guanajuato and México City). However, despite having the success that an image producer might have, he had a humble death. During Posada’s time in Mexico City it could be said that he had a modest or moderate life because he did have a workshop and was able to find work in his profession. Diaz Frene and Cedeno Vanegas reported that Posada earned \$2.00-\$2.50 pesos per image from Vanegas Arroyo. In a 1929 interview by Anita Brenner, Blas Vanegas Arroyo said that Posada was paid \$3.00 pesos per which Vanegas Arroyo compared to a general. In 1900, annual salaries for primary school principals were listed about \$780 pesos<sup>5</sup>. It may be that there was a combination of revenue sources for Posada. I wonder about stating that Posada died in misery. That may be an interpretation that we can’t substantiate. Perhaps not so much in terms of money. So it would seem that for at least a portion of Posada was not impoverished but we know he died as a result of alcoholism and it may be that the loss of his son and wife as well as the affects of age and changes in printing technology were factors. Patrick Frank discusses this a little in his book. After Vanegas Arroyo dies in 1917, Posada’s body is dug up and ends up in a public or common grave, perhaps fitting as it could be said that have been united in death with the people that spent his life capturing in his images.<sup>6</sup>

His “discovery” would not be until a few years after his death (1913) and the triumph of the Mexican Revolution, where post-revolutionary artists and intellectuals, together with the government of President Álvaro Obregón, would turn him into the mythical and archetypal

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<sup>4</sup> Mauricio Montiel, et. al., eds., *El Viajero Lúgubre: Julio Ruelas Modernista*, (México/España: Editorial RM/INBA, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> United States. Congress. Senate. Select committee on wages and prices of commodities, and Henry Cabot Lodge. Investigation Relative to Wages And Prices of Commodities. Washington: Govt. print. off., 1911, page 1313.

<sup>6</sup> Agustín Sánchez González, *Fantasías, calaveras y vida cotidiana: José Guadalupe Posada* (España: Turpin, 2014).

figure of “Mexican” art that is today<sup>7</sup>. The first publication where he appears, posthumously, is the catalog, *Las Artes Populares de México (The Popular Arts from México)* made by Gerardo Murillo, “Dr. Atl”, in 1921-22, where Posada is included -without direct reference in his works- in the “corridos” section and, particularly, of the publications of the Vanegas Arroyo publishing house; one of the most important ones in the early twentieth century and in national graphic and printing history. Although Atl mentions Posada (but incorrectly names Posada as Posadas) one of the most talented engravers of the publishing house, he is just considered as one more of that tradition on the catalog<sup>8</sup>. It would be Jean Charlot, in 1925, who would write the first article dedicated entirely to the Mexican engraver, boasting about his “authentically Mexican style and essence”<sup>9</sup>. The text of Charlot would be followed by articles by Frances Toor and Anita Brenner in 1928<sup>10</sup>. Later, Brenner’s article would become a book, *Idols Behind Altars* (1930), the first book about the history of Mexican art. In the book, Brenner’s article becomes a chapter, where Posada is posed as the prophet of modern Mexican art. In this text, which even has biographical errors and confusion with some authorship of works, the mythologization of the character is already very clear. Later in the same year, the first catalog dedicated to Posada would come out, a monograph edited and written by Charlot, Rivera and Toor, compiled by Pablo O’Higgins.

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<sup>7</sup> Renato González Mello, “Anita Brenner: Ídolos tras los altares” en *Arte, historia e identidad en América: visiones comparativas : XVII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, coord. Gustavo Curiel Méndez, Renato González Mello, Juana Gutiérrez Haces, Vol. 2, 1994 (México: UNAM/IIEs, 1994) pp. 599-601.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Atl, *Las Artes Populares de México*, Vol. 2 (México: Editorial Cultura. Secretaría de Industria y Comercio, 1922) p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Frank, *Posada’s Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery 1890-1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) pp. 232-233.

<sup>10</sup> Adolfo F. Mantilla Osornio, “José Guadalupe Posada: Transmisor”, en *José Guadalupe Posada: transmisor*, coord. Evelyn Useda Miranda et al. (México: INBA/MUNAL, 2013), 24., Renato González Mello, “Anita Brenner: Ídolos tras los altares” en *Arte, historia e identidad en América: visiones comparativas : XVII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, coord. Gustavo Curiel Méndez, Renato González Mello, Juana Gutiérrez Haces, Vol. 2, 1994 (México: UNAM/IIEs, 1994), 599-601; Jim Nikas, *Posada’s Resurrection* (2014) en la página web de la Posada Art Foundation, accesado el 20/06/20. <https://www.posada-art-foundation.com/single-post/2014/06/10/Posada%E2%80%99s-Resurrection>

These artists and intellectuals -and mainly Rivera-, would do a huge promotion of Posada's *calaveras* as a popular Mexican expression, and as part of the promotion of their own art and ideologies. Such was the promotion that Rivera made to Posada, that he invented that he had known the engraver personally, that Posada participated in the Revolution and , also, Rivera portrayed Posada in his mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* in 1947 (fig. 1), arm in arm with his *Calavera Catrina* (fig. 2) -name given by Rivera- and with Rivera himself, as a child, next to Frida Kahlo and holding the hand of *Catrina*<sup>11</sup>. He showed and promoted the work of the engraver both with Sergei Eisenstein and with André Breton and Paul Westheim in their respective moments in Mexican territory.<sup>12</sup>

The first great exhibition of Posada in the US, *Posada: Printmaker to the Mexican People* is worth mentioning as an important event. It was carried out in 1944, at the Art Institute of Chicago, organized by Fernando Gamboa and with pieces loaned by Blas and Arsacio Vanegas Arroyo (son and grandson of Antonio, the founder of the printing house and Publisher of Posada's work), among other collections<sup>13</sup>. From then on, one can see how the story "tells itself" down to international contemporary and massive expressions, such as the Pixar film *COCO* (Fig. 3), the Day of the Dead parade in *007:Spectre* (fig. 4) or the recent Mexican/Day of the Dead *Barbie* (fig. 5), to notice the archetypal influence that was made of the individual and his work. This is why I have become more and more interested in the history of Posada after Posada, and its internationalization and consequent massive commercialization. Now we can even speak of a transnational Posada.

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<sup>11</sup> Ron Tyler, "Posada's México" en *Posada's Mexico*, ed. Ron Tyler (Washington D.C. : Library of Congress/ Amon Carter Museum of Estern Art, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> Dawn Ades, Rita Eder, and Graciela Speranza, eds. *Surrealismo in Latin America: Vivísimo muerto*, (Los Angeles: Getty Institute, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Ver Fernando Gamboa, Carl O. Schniewind y Hug L. Edwards, *Posada: Printmaker to the Mexican People*, (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1944).

It is a strange phenomenon and I would dare to think, unique, in what I have studied in Art History, since the value and explanation of the artist's work is given very far from his life, both in facts and temporality and, actually, many of the characteristics or virtues that this group of artists and intellectuals saw in Posada were imposed or romanticized. Posada was critical of the Revolution and the armies of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa. It was, in any case, pro-Francisco I. Madero (and may not be the case, see 1910 Calavera de Francisco I. Madero broadside, also Rafael Barjas Duran reports that Posada supported Bernardo Reyes), after having been originally pro-Porfirio Díaz; this is noticed in many of his publications. It is possibly explained because Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, owner of the printing house and his colleague, employer and friend, was initially with the government of Porfirio Díaz. As we stated, In 1910, Vanegas Arroyo issues an unflattering Posada illustrated broadside of Francisco Madero as a calavera. Later there was a change, probably due to some personal altercation, and Vanegas radically changed his approach towards Francisco I. Madero<sup>14</sup>. I have seen a lot of Posada's engravings (maybe already close to all the existing ones) and none of them supports the Mexican Revolution besides Madero's presidency and, on the contrary, he always criticize it and even illustrated *La Jeringa de Zapata*, wich is a critical text that claims "death to the Revolution" and "death to Emiliano Zapata" (fig. 6). Therefore, we can realize that the romanticized image, represented in the engraving *Posada en su taller/Homenaje a Posada* (1953) by Leopoldo Méndez -where Posada appears alongside Ricardo Flores Magón, observing with indignation how the people are repressed-, it is, and it was, largely a fantasy that was necessary for that moment of the Mexican history (fig. 7).

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<sup>14</sup> Ver Fausta Gantús, "Posada y la política en la prensa porfiriana" en *José Guadalupe Posada: Transmisor*, Evelyn Useda, et al., coords. (México: INBA, 2013).

When I say it was necessary it is because in the end, despite the possible political or apolitical affiliation of the individual, his art did represent the conflicts of Mexico in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it did have a social conscience (if not “revolutionary”) and it did denounce injustices, including those perpetrated by the Zapatista army. The fact is that, if Posada was a “revolutionary” or not, it matters little today, since his art has transcended his person and has become a symbol of national identity, of the Mexican Revolution and of protest worldwide, even as a core visual element of Chicano art and, therefore, as representative of resistance and counterculture of Mexicans and Latin Americans in the global diaspora<sup>15</sup>. In one sentence: Posada may not have been a revolutionary, but his art was.<sup>16</sup>

It is for all these and several more reasons that my personal research has led me to look for Posada’s presence outside México and how he has been received, interpreted or valued since, although his *calaveras* are internationally known, their author is “virtually” unknown in the global perspective. In these dissertations was I, when suddenly a global pandemic made impossible for me to visit the José Guadalupe Posada Museum in Aguascalientes and, looking for how to continue my research, I came across the website of the Posada Art Foundation in San Francisco, California, home to the Brady-Nikas Collection; the largest private collection dedicated to the engraver (or at least, the largest as far as we know). When trying to look at the catalog of the collection, I realized that this archive was of private access, for members of the Foundation. For this reason, I sent an e-mail asking how I could access it, even if it was paying online and, to my surprise, it was the collector Jim Nikas himself

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Nikas, “Chicano Art, Imagery of Social Movements and José Guadalupe Posada”, publicado en 2015 en la página web de la Posada Art Foundation y Colección Brady-Nikas. Accesado el 02/07/20 [https://26258999-6129-4686-bc9d-67b53cdaef29.filesusr.com/ugd/8aa335\\_0382074ac79f4302ba3f4f9de79c27a2.pdf](https://26258999-6129-4686-bc9d-67b53cdaef29.filesusr.com/ugd/8aa335_0382074ac79f4302ba3f4f9de79c27a2.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Rafael Barjas observed that he felt Posada was not a revolutionary in the strict sense but the way he worked illustrating the people of Mexico could be called revolutionary.

who answered my e-mail and was very kind and willing to help me with my research. This collection has participated in multiple exhibitions in the U.S.A., Mexico and worldwide, and that is why I consider it important to understand the Posada's *calaveras* phenomenon at an international level.

## **2. The Brady-Nikas Collection.**

After this fortunate (and globally tragic) accident or casualty, I was not only able to access the catalog but also to interview Jim Nikas and maintain a relationship via e-mail. I think now is time to talk a bit about Nikas and the Collection as such.

Jim Nikas, in his own words, studied geology and paleontology, because since childhood he always had great interest in “dead” things and/or objects from past times. These studies led him to be interested in Mexican culture (pre-Hispanic, I suppose) and, later, Mexican art, evidently reaching Posada's work<sup>17</sup>. He says this in a conference for TED Talks, but in the interview that I was fortunate to be able to carry out, he reports that his mother was an artist and therefore he always had a relationship with modern art. Also, he always collected rocks, prints, fossils, butterflies, toys and various artifacts as a child, so collecting art seemed a very natural course of action<sup>18</sup>. As well, he explained to me that he had an interest in Mexican culture since the 60's and that his father is half Mexican, but he does not consider this factor as definitive for his interest, or no more than the investigative and aesthetic interest for the arts of Mexico and, eminently, the popular graphic of Posada with the Vanegas Arroyo printing house; he values and enjoys these objects, above many things, as is often common, and natural, in collectors.

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<sup>17</sup> Conference for TED at San Miguel de Allende:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj1VNGHMNpA&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj1VNGHMNpA&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>18</sup> Check interview in Appendages section.

For now, I would like to quote a phrase from Nikas that came out in the interview, which, despite its apparent simplicity, I think defines much of his way of thinking and confronting the objects in his collection:

Some people make things and some people collect things. I have done some making but mostly collecting. People collect what they like. I like Posada.<sup>19</sup>

He explains that in the eighties, his friend Ernesto Ravetto was close to Arsacio Vanegas Arroyo (Antonio's grandson). In this context, it seems that the family was going through a serious situation of economic instability and the publications were being placed indiscriminately in a variety of hands without regard. Both Nikas and Ravetto had been collecting publications containing images by Posada in bookstores, bazaars and auctions both in the US and Mexico for years and, realizing that the publications and materials held by the family could be irretrievably dispersed or even lost, Nikas and Ravetto decided to assemble the collection and thus acquired material directly from the family. Some years later, after their first exhibitions, they decided to found the New World Prints company, dedicated both to safeguarding the collection and selling high-quality prints/reproductions of the objects they owned. Afterwards, Ravetto seems to have also had serious financial problems and put his part of the collection for sale in 2008. His part of the collection was bought by Maryanne Brady, Jim Nikas' partner who shared a mutual passion and appreciation for Mexican culture with Nikas.

In 2011, they came up with the idea of making a documentary film about Posada, Vanegas Arroyo and Manuel Manilla's work<sup>20</sup>, since there was no documentary film in English language regarding the matter and, in his words at interview, "film can travel almost

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<sup>19</sup> Check interview in Appendages section.

<sup>20</sup> Mexican engraver and Illustrator who introduced Posada to Vanegas Arroyo's publishing house and with whom his work has often been confused, due to the use of *calaveras* for the Day of the Dead tradition.



anywhere”. As a result of the necessary research for the documentary film *Art And Revolutions* (2013), made for the centenary of Posada’s death (1913) -which was advised by Mexican researchers, scholars and experts in Posada, mainly Helia Bonilla and Mercurio López (but also guidance from Mariano González Leal, Rafael Barjas Duran, J. de Jesús Verdín Saldaña and Augustin Sánchez González) Nikas and Brady decided to create the Posada Art Foundation, dedicated both to the safeguarding of the collection and to its management for exhibition and research about the engraver including the promotion of his legacy.

The collection consists of 245 printing plates and 1863 publications and various objects, such as books or special printings (posters, board games such as *Serpientes y Escaleras* or *El Juego de la Oca*, etc.). It is divided into the categories: “Half Sheets”, “Broad Sheets”, “Covers”, “Chap Books”, “Miscellaneous”, “Books” and “Prints”. All the plates come from the Vanegas Arroyo printing house and are all certified by the family. In this cataloging, the only objects that differ from the others are books and posters, which include contemporary editions for consultation, and “ephemeral” (occasion posters, which have been used for exhibitions or events of the Foundation), contained in the “Miscellaneous” segment. The majority of the objects are originals from the epoch and, among the original printing plates, is the archetypal and legendary *Calavera Catrina*. Regarding this essential piece for Posada’s body of work, Nikas explained to me that to his knowledge, there are only two plates considered “authentic”, and the “original”, the original by Posada himself, is in the Posada Museum in Aguascalientes. The second plate, is contained in the collection and is a working copy made by the family likely to protect the original from wear. It too is authenticated by the family and according to Nikas, likely accounts for many of Catrina images circulating after Posada’s death.

Within the catalog, the collection has labels regarding the topics covered by the publications: “Popular”, “Religious”, Political and historical”, “Crimes and disasters”, “Calaveras”,

“Musical”, “Toast and greetings”, “Theatrical”, “Gameboards” “Riddles and esoteric games” and “Home and Kitchen”. Although I reviewed the whole 1863 pieces, in addition to the 245 engraving plates, it is evident that the items with the highest quantity are the “Calaveras”, “Popular”, “Religious”, Political and Historical” and “Crimes and disasters”, due to the fact that Posada’s work, as well as the subjects covered by the printing house were, eminently, those. Even though I spent a lot of time reviewing the catalog piece by piece, in order to locate these labels (since the catalog is divided into formats, not topics), I think it is more productive to talk about the collector and his relationship with his object of collection and, maybe, obsession.

### **3. Nikas and his objects**

In the interview, as in lectures I saw on YouTube and Nikas’ texts on the Foundation’s website -since he has become a true expert on the subject- he hints at many of his motivations for forming the collection and maintaining, displaying and promoting it. So now I will make a rough interpretation of the “collector’s profile” of Nikas.

One of the collector’s traits, according to Angela Vettesse and Phillipp Blom, is the obsession to possess/protect/preserve, which usually refers to childhood traumas of detachment<sup>21</sup>. I cannot, given my training and information, approximate an interpretation of Nika’s childhood, however, what we know is that he collected inert objects and corpses of animals, insects, fossils, shells and rocks since he was a child, which led him to study paleontology and geology. We can only assume, under the interpretations of the aforementioned authors and their relationship with childhood and collecting, that, maybe, there was some separation or feeling of non-possession or control in some event of his or

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<sup>21</sup> Angela Vettesse, *Invertir en arte: Producción, promoción y mercado del arte contemporáneo*, (Madrid: Ediciones Pirámide, 2002), 21-63; Philipp Blom, *To Have And To Hold: An Intimate History Of Collectors And Collecting*, (Nueva York: The Overlook Press, 2003), 158-174.

their childhood. But in this I can only speculate, and I'm not really interested in a psychological interpretation.

However, where I do see many recurrences that totally coincide, is in the “collector features” posted by Blom in relation with the collector Alex Shear, regarding the need to preserve something that he considers that, if not collected, would be lost to history; the fear of losing some historical record or some index of an era or culture, in which one has a passionate interest<sup>22</sup>. In his texts and talks, it is clear that he has a great interest in movements of revolution or popular uprisings in history<sup>23</sup>. He speaks with romantic tone about the Mexican Revolution, both linked by Posada, in his interpretation and collection. Also, he has big interest in Chicano culture as a form of resistance to the conservative status quo, probably because of his familiar and professional relationship with the neighboring southern country. Thus, he sees in Posada an artist that not only amalgamated Mexican pre-revolutionary and revolutionary moments, but he also understands that his value was given in the post-revolutionary period and, in that sense, we agree to consider the case of Posada as possibly unique in the history of Art, because his work's relevance, interpretations and influence were posthumous, regardless of the interests and life of the artist.

So, I see that Nikas has mainly an aesthetic and historical relationship with his collection. Aesthetic, because he answered every question I made him, about the reasons to collect Posada and no other, by emphasizing that he “likes” it a lot and considers it to be of great artistic value, which he does not see recognized sufficiently outside Mexico. His other answer, regarding this topic, is that he sees Posada's images as expressions of situations of social discontent and that, by the power of the image -in the most “Warburgian” sense-, they transcend times and cultures, always accompanying popular causes, be it the Mexican

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<sup>22</sup> Blom, *To Have And To Hold*, 169-174.

<sup>23</sup> In talks and texts he explains that, in fact, Arsacio, the grandson of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, was a fighter (luchador) and trained Ernesto Guevara (Che), Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos before they attacked the Moncada Barracks. Check the lectures and texts on the Foundation's website.

Revolution, (although he is aware this is not entirely true), the Cuban Revolution and multiple expressions of Chicano art<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, I think he seeks for his collection to be not only preserved, but also exhibited worldwide to convey both Posada's genius and expressions of resistance that exist within humanity itself. I would express his motivation for this collection as an attempt to rescue a past in danger of being forgotten and a (rebellious?) feeling in danger of being silenced by history. In the interview, he also speaks about the transcultural and transhistoric universality of the works of Posada -and the *calavera* symbol- as a big reason for collecting, preserving and exhibiting his legacy:

(...) Posada created images for dozens of publications and it is far more likely that the sum total of his work represents a period and culture uniquely Mexican but as for the unintended aspect reflecting a universal condition, it might be said that it is the creative energy of his work that symbolically travels beyond borders.

(...) Because there is timelessness and universality, especially in the calaveras who remind us of our mortality, offering a chance for viewers to find humility and perhaps a commonality in the futility of our human follies. Consider that perhaps, thanks to Posada's imagery and possibly in some cases the words, we are given an opportunity to connect with each other not as nationalities, races, or basis of political party or religion, but simply as people. History is about people and through its study we can see and learn much. The beauty of this is subtle and there is irony too, as the message comes from a man of humble origins buried without fanfare in a common grave. How could we not want to share this?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jim Nikas, *Chicano Art, Imagery of Social Movements and José Guadalupe Posada* en la web de la Fundación. <https://www.posada-art-foundation.com/posada-and-chicano-art>

<sup>25</sup> Check interview in Appendages section.

#### 4. Conclusions.

Although the Brady-Nikas collection as well as the Posada art Foundation were formed until the 21st century, it is relevant to think that it is a collection dedicated to Mexican modern art, almost entirely to a single artist, from the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, not any artist, as I expressed since the first section of this text, he is considered the “prophet” of modern Mexican art in the official nationalist narrative, product of the identity and unification programs by the post-revolutionary state. In this vein, it is interesting to think that is a collection made by Americans, not Mexicans. This could make us think, maybe, about feelings of exoticism and “otherness” in “revolutionary” aspects of Mexican modern art, I don’t know. I am interested in thinking about how the *Calavera Catrina*, for example, as the archetype of the national totem<sup>26</sup>, made by a 19th century “image worker”, has travelled in time and space, materially and conceptually, to the point of being in a private collection in San Francisco, as well as in Rivera’s mural, in Chicano art, and even in promotional signs for a touristic handicrafts store at Pátzcuaro, Michoacán (fig. 8); as well as thousands (or perhaps millions) of T-shirts, mugs, figurines and other handicrafts and/or tourist objects. This is what interests me about the collection: the temporal, cultural and conceptual journey of objects or images.

Now, I would like to recall Arjun Appadurai and his approach to the social life of things, together with their interpretations or social and political transitions, which end up acquiring exchange values in specific contexts, often variable over time<sup>27</sup>. In this sense, and given these explanations, I would think that Posada’s work exemplifies much of what Appadurai

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<sup>26</sup> This concept of Death as a “national totem” was first enunciated by Juan Larrea in the 40’s and later repeated by Luis Cardoza y Aragón. Claudio Lomnitz, *Idea de la muerte en México* (México:Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006); Stanley Brandes, *Skulls to the living, bread to the dead: celebrations of death in México and beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 66.; Lynne Ann DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland, “Day of the Dead”, in *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*, eds. Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck. (California: SAGE Publications, 2009), 263.

<sup>27</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introducción: las mercancías y la política del valor”, en *La vida social de las cosas: Perspectiva cultural de las mercancías*, Arjun Appadurai, ed., (México: Grijalbo, 1991) 17-88.

proposes, although he does not focus on “art” and, in this sense, the publications where Posada’s illustrations are found -in their commercial and social value/function- were not “art” when they were produced and put into circulation. They were “merchandise”, in the basic sense of the concept, that was bought for their use value, which was to inform or complement daily activities. At that time, we can easily imagine individuals who did not throw away these broadsheets because they wanted to keep them and many of the prints that we have today exist because there were people who “collected” them. At that moment, these prints were already out of commercial circulation and their function as “merchandise” changed to that of a precious object, not for sale but for personal consumption.

Thereafter, with the “prophet’s discovery”, these printed publications and flyers, acquired a symbolic value linked to national history and, evidently, they acquired their status as “art” and, therefore, they returned to be merchandise, but already of a different type, in which the value is not assigned by the use, but by the meaning given to them. The exchange becomes very different since the people interested in acquiring them, like Nikas, don’t do it for their use, but for a capital and exchange of cultural, political, intellectual and aesthetic status. They have become objects of luxury, such as art, but not a luxury of ostentation like cars or properties, but a luxury of culture and history. Nikas, aware of who Posada was and knowing its importance, in addition to owning his collection, has cultural capital and I believe that applies to all art collections. The interesting thing about the Brady-Nikas Collection and Posada’s works is that they are objects that were originally of the most ordinary kind, to be transformed, within a century, into pieces of art that are both monetarily, historically and culturally invaluable, for their artistic and symbolic values.

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## APPENDAGES

### Appendage 1. Images.



Fig. 1. Diego Rivera, detail from the mural painting *Sueño de un paseo dominical en la Alameda Central*. 1947.



Fig. 1. José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera Catrina*. Without exact date.



Fig. 3. Still from the movie *COCO*, where we can see Frida Kahlo as a “*Calavera Catrina*” or “*Posada’s calavera*”.



Fig. 4. Stills from the movie *007: Spectre* (2015).



Fig. 5. Barbie, Day of the Dead special edition. 2019.



Fig. 6. José Guadalupe posada (illustration), *La Jeringa de Zapata*. 1912.

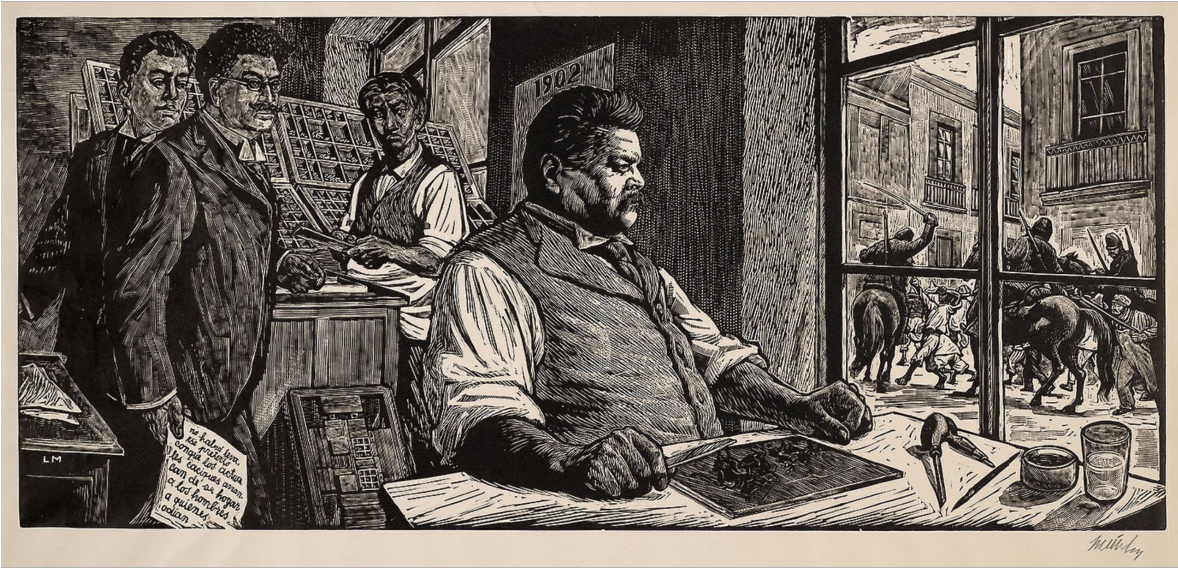


Fig. 7. Leopoldo Méndez. *Posada en su taller/Homenaje a Posada*. 1953.



Fig. 8. *Calavera Catrina* in sign for a tourist handicraft store at Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. 1990-2004. Photograph by Dana Salvo.

## **Appendage 2. Jim Nikas written interview, by Emiliano Lazo.**

EL: If I'm correct, you studied paleontology and geology. I assume this because I recall you saying so in your TED conference. When, how and why you decided to become an art collector, curator and connoisseur?

JN: My mother was an artist and as a child I was exposed to modern art through her and many of her artist friends. I have always collected things like stamps, rocks, fossils, butterflies, various toys and artifacts so art seemed a natural thing to collect. Some people make things and some people collect things. I have done some making but mostly collecting. People collect what they like. I like Posada.

EL: How did your interest and passion for Posada's works began and developed?

JN: I began travelling to Mexico in the 1980s but my interests in Mexican art goes back to the late 1960s and 1970s. I could say that my interest in Posada came about because my father is one-half Mexican but I think it is really just something that I like and value.

EL: Is yours the biggest private collection dedicated to Posada's artworks in the world?

JN: Ours may be the biggest. It is certainly one of the biggest private collections. There may be a bigger one in the world but I can only say I am not aware of one that is bigger. It is important not because of its size but because it contains many aspects of Mexican history and culture that together record significant times and events related to Mexico's culture as expressed in print.

EL: Do you collect other art, besides the Vanegas Arroyo publications and Posada's artworks?

JM: Yes.

EL: Do you know if there is another printing block of "La Catrina"? Did you get yours from the Vanegas Arroyo family as well?

JN: To my knowledge, there are only two printing blocks of the La Catrina. It is my understanding that the original is in the Posada Museum in Aguascalientes. I have examined it as a scan. The director of the Museum told me that it is the original and this was confirmed by two members of the Vanegas Arroyo family (Raul and Angel Cedeno Vanegas). We have the other La Catrina in our collection which is from the Vanegas Arroyo family. Angel Cedeno Vanegas and Irma Vanegas confirmed it as a copy.

EL: Do you have any relationship or knowledge about the José Guadalupe Posada Museum or the National Museum of Death in Aguascalientes?

JN: No specific relationship. I have visited the Posada Museum and have spent research time there. I have never been to the National Museum of Death.

EL: Has your collection been exhibited in México?

JN: Yes

EL: Would you be interested in establishing any kind of relationship with Mexican cultural institutions?

JN: Sure, I have tried but often the administrations change every six years so continuity can be a challenge. We have had exhibitions at the Consulados de Mexico en San Francisco and San Jose, California. These represent a very small number of the consulates but there are dozens in the United States and a relationship with the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores CDMX) would perhaps provide opportunities to help bring Posada and Mexican culture to many people in the US. I would certainly be interested in exploring that opportunity.

EL: If is not personal or private information, can you tell me a little bit more about Maryanne Brady and her involvement with the collection and the Foundation?

JN: Maryanne is my wife and is passionate about Mexican culture, she has supported my interests in Posada and co-produced the documentary we did about Posada.

EL: Also, can you tell me a little bit more about Ernesto Ravetto, your relationship with him, Arsacio Vanegas Arroyo and the creation of New World Prints?

JN: Ernesto and I met back in the 1980s. He introduced me to Arsacio and to the Vanegas Arroyo family. He was friends with Arsacio. I started New World Prints just after Ernesto and I participated in our first exhibition in 2002. We thought it would be way to let people know about Posada and to connect with people who had similar interests.

EL: What were you researching, working, reading, watching and/or thinking by the time you and Ernesto Ravetto bought the Vanegas Arroyo lot of publications?

JN: I was involved mainly with business and scientific interests prior to the acquisition. For many years Ernesto and I acquired works from the Vanegas Arroyos and a few other sources mainly in Mexico and the USA. We acquired Ernesto's part of the collection in 2008. In 2011, I decided to start looking into making a documentary about Posada. As I researched Posada and Manilla for the documentary, I thought to form the foundation and put the collection online. I also spent much more time exhibiting the collection, making loans of it with the hope of building a touring exhibition which we initiated last year. The exhibition is booked for various dates in the USA through 2023. I am very excited about the opportunity these exhibitions represent.

EL: Can you tell me a little bit more about the documentary project "Art And Revolutions"? What do you think about the relationship of popular art and social or political uprisings and contexts?

JN: Around 2009 there was no documentary about Posada in English and nothing very good even in Spanish. I believe there was a need and value to tell some aspects of Posada's story in a documentary because a film can travel almost anywhere. So I started to research it. Helia Bonilla and Mercurio Lopez were extremely helpful in my early research. I felt the Vanegas Arroyo family history in relationship to Posada should be a part of Posada's story. Funding for the film was very limited and many of the members of the Vanegas Arroyo family were in poor health and or elderly, so we hurried to get their story before it was too late. Many of them have since passed away. Restricted funding limited the film to 41 minutes. There are many aspects of Posada's life and influence that still could be explored in a longer detailed documentary, but we wanted to have testimony from the Vanegas Arroyo family before it was too late to record and with the 100 year anniversary of Posada close, we wanted to have something to show in 2013.

There is much we could not include, such as recorded interviews with Arturo Garcia Bustos and Rina Lazo also. We missed interviews with other remaining original TGP members to get their perspective. But there are many artists and historians that could be interviewed to help demonstrate Posada's ongoing influence. The article I wrote that appears in the website explains some of the influence or relationship Posada has had on the art of social movements. I refer you to that. I suggest that the relationship of the TGP to the popularity of Posada and the calavera is important and an area worth exploring.

EL: What and how is your relation to or with art historians and Posada experts, Mercurio López and Helia Bonilla?

JN: First, please let me say they are wonderful people and have been extremely generous with their time and expertise. I am grateful that we can contact each other as research references as needed. Others have also contributed to my knowledge and research but they have been the most supportive, especially Helia.

EL: Finally, can you tell me more about your collection, what it means to you, and about the Foundation itself? Are you planning exhibitions in the near future?

JN: The collection is a treasure and invaluable to me. It is Mexican in origin but represents or reflects the human condition universally. So from a humble man in a small Mexican town we find images that have relevance and connections throughout the world. Crime, love, passion, war, peace, corruption, greed, religion, so many human things represented no matter who you are in the world and of course calaveras! For exhibitions, please look at the website link: <https://a-r-t.com/posada/#sched>

I think one of the very important issues worth mentioning is the representation that Posada and his publisher gives us of the human condition. This is likely unintended as it would have necessitated a purposeful effort in a collective sense. But we know Posada created images for dozens of publications and it is far more likely that the sum total of his work represents a period and culture uniquely Mexican but as for the unintended aspect reflecting a universal condition, it might be said that it is the creative energy of his work that symbolically travels beyond borders. One might dismiss it all as low brow or common work. Follow that with the cheap paper that sold for a few centavos and then the idea that none of it was meant to

last. Yet it has. Why? Because there is timelessness and universality, especially in the calaveras who remind us of our mortality, offering a chance for viewers to find humility and perhaps a commonality in the futility of our human follies. Consider that perhaps, thanks to Posada's imagery and possibly in some cases the words, we are given an opportunity to connect with each other not as nationalities, races, or basis of political party or religion, but simply as people. History is about people and through its study we can see and learn much. The beauty of this is subtle and there is irony too, as the message comes from a man of humble origins buried without fanfare in a common grave. How could we not want to share this?

EL: Has the Foundation's running been affected by the pandemic? What do you think about your collection and Posada's legacy in the current context?

JN: The Pandemic has hit museums very hard. Our most recent exhibition at Arion Press [www.arionpress.com](http://www.arionpress.com) was cut short due to the virus but had a great opening. Where it will go next is uncertain and will be determined by the way the virus evolves. In the meantime, we are still online and research continues.

Posada's legacy has survived the 1918 Pandemic, revolutions, World Wars, economic depressions and much political turmoil. I suspect Posada's legacy will outlive us all and to the extent that the collection can represent and reflect our collective human condition, it will also.

### **Appendage 3. Extended answer to question no. 14, "(...)can you tell me more about your collection, what it means to you?"**

EA: Can you tell me more about your collection, what it means to you?

JN: I am glad you asked me that question. Part of the answer comes from my perspective regarding the art of social movements. One of the beautiful aspects of art is that no words are required. Art has the ability to move seamlessly through the senses of people. It communicates messages that in the case of social movements can reveal and represent the soul of people who are excluded or disenfranchised. Sadly, there are injustices in the world, racism, economic disparity, sexism, graft and corruption to name a few of the ills that plague us as people. Art can speak to our souls, it can restore color to the world even in times when the light of justice is but a dim flicker.

So with this brief introduction I address the main question, "What does the collection mean to me?" Contained within its unpretentious broadsheets, posters, tiny books and myriad facets of the collection are the representations that Posada and his publisher give us of the human condition. This is likely unintended as it would have necessitated a purposeful effort in a collective sense, but we know Posada created images for dozens of publications. Each image can therefore be said to represent a snapshot in time revealing a fractional component of a great continuum within a culture which is generally in this case, uniquely Mexican. But there



is, more importantly, this unintended aspect reflecting a universal condition, it is of a collective nature and resultant of Posada's creative energy that symbolically travels beyond all borders.

One might dismiss it all as low brow or common work. Follow that with the cheap paper upon which the images were printed, selling for a few centavos and then the idea that none of it was meant to last. Yet it has lasted, for over one hundred years and it has inspired the work of hundreds if not thousands of artists. Why? Because there is timelessness and universality in the imagery, especially in the calaveras who remind us of our mortality, offering a chance for viewers to find humility and perhaps a commonality in the futility of our human follies.

Through Posada's imagery and possibly in some cases the words that accompany the images, we are given an opportunity to connect with each other not as nationalities, races, or basis of political party or religion, but simply as people. In some cases, the imagery reveals the biases of the times but more deeply, echoed are the timeless cries of people, the exploited, disenfranchised and excluded upon whose plight Posada shines a light. If history is about people and through its study we can see and learn much, then what does the narrative of Posada's images show us of our history and perhaps destiny?

So, you ask me about what the collection means to me. The collection is a treasure. Further, there is a serendipitous beauty in Posada's work and irony too, as unexpectedly he delivers his message to us. He is a man of humble origins, a messenger of light armed solely with a pen and burin, yet he would be buried one day without fanfare, in a common grave. How could we not want to preserve and share this story?