Contributor: Deborah Caplow

**Méndez, Leopoldo**

Born: Mexico City, 1902; Died: Mexico City 1969

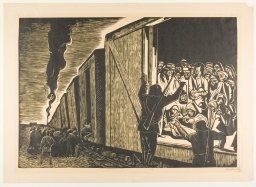
Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969), though relatively unknown today, was one of the most important printmakers of the twentieth century, active in a number of artistic and political groups in Mexico. He also created murals and easel paintings, worked as an art teacher in Mexico City’s public schools, and established the first art book publishing company in Mexico. In the 1920s, as a member of the Stridentist Movement, Méndez began to create images based on the Mexican Revolution. In the 1930s, Méndez was a cofounder of two artists’ organizations, the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers, LEAR) and the Taller de Gráfica Popular (the Popular Graphics Art Workshop, TGP). Méndez developed a distinctive body of work that supported Mexican revolutionary ideals and expressed his opposition to fascism and imperialism. Méndez developed his art in the context of the Mexican artistic renaissance during the 1920s, and created a body of high-quality graphic images centered on Mexican and international political and historical events. He was one of the first graphic artists to incorporate influences from the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada into his art, beginning to use Posada-inspired *calavera* (skeleton) imagery in the early 1930s.

Méndez was a child during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and he was deeply disturbed by its violence and brutality. From a working-class background, he showed early artistic talent and entered Academia de San Carlos (Academy of San Carlos) in Mexico City after high school. In 1919 he graduated from the Academy, where his classmates included Rufino Tamayo, Fermín Revueltas, Julio Castellanos and Antonio Ruíz.

In 1921, Méndez joined the Movimiento Estridentista (Stridentist Movement), a group of avant-garde artists and writers in Mexico City inspired by Italian Futurism and Dadaism. He contributed numerous prints to Stridentist magazines and books, including German List Arzubide’s *Zapata: Exaltacion*, the first biography of Revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata. After the Stridentist Movement ended in the late 1920s, Méndez returned to Mexico City. In the early 1930s, the artist worked with the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Ministry of Education, SEP) illustrating the publications *El Sembrador* and *El Maestro Rural*, and also participated in the SEP’s Misiones Culturales (Cultural Missions). He taught art in Mexico City schools and promoted puppetry as an education art form.

In 1933 Méndez, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Pablo O'Higgins and others founded the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios. Méndez’s Posada-influenced *Concerto Sinfonico de Calaveras* (Symphonic Concert of the Calaveras) illustrated the cover of LEAR's newspaper, *Frente a Frente*, (*Face to Face*) in November 1934. Satirizing Rivera, Méndez depicted him as a *calavera* at the opera house in the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts), critiquing Rivera’s politics and his relationship with the government. In LEAR Méndez created prints for publications, flyers and broadsides, as in his woodblock prints *Fascismo I* and *Fascismo* II that depict assaults on striking workers in Mexico City by right-wing paramilitary forces.

When LEAR dispersed in1937, Méndez, O’Higgins and artist Luís Arenal started the Taller de Gráfica Popular. Méndez was the acknowledged leader of the TGP and participated in the collective until the end of the 1950s, producing political posters, pamphlets, broadsides, brochures, portfolios and books. In the early 1940s, the artist worked closely with Hannes Meyer, former director of the Bauhaus, now the TGP’s manager. The press they established published the prize-winning illustrated book *Incidentes melodicos del mundo irracional*, with prints by Méndez and text by writer Juan de la Cabada. During the war years, Méndez created many images denouncing international fascism. Méndez’s 1942 powerful linocut *Deportación a la muerte* (Deportation to Death) is an image of a train taking Jewish prisoners to a concentration camp; it is one of the earliest artistic images of the Holocaust produced by someone outside the camps.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Deportación a la muerte* (Deportation to Death), linocut, 1942

[http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/49624?search\_no=7&index=54](file:///C:\Users\doctor\AppData\Local\Temp\%22)

The print illustrated *El libro negro del terror nazi en Europa* (The Black Book of Nazi Terror in Europe, a book published by European exiles in Mexico. In 1945 Méndez created a self-portrait for an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. This image is a record of Mexican history, picturing Méndez lying on a book of Posada prints, the Mexican eagle crucified on a swastika behind him, with Colonial Mexico City in the background.



Lo que no puede venir (That Which Must Not Come)

<http://www.aguascalientes.gob.mx/temas/cultura/webua/catalogo/img/mexicano/LeopoldoMendez1.jpg>

Méndez’s 1956 *Homage to Posada*, shows Posada at his worktable holding an engraving tool like a dagger, looking at a demonstration in the street outside. In this print, Méndez incorporated Posada into the revolutionary tradition of Mexico, expressing Rivera’s concept of “art as a weapon.”

In 1959 Méndez left the TGP, and established the Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana, the first art book publishing company in Mexico. He produced *La pintura mural de la Revolución Mexicana* (Mural Painting of the Mexican Revolution) a lavishly illustrated book about Mexican mural painting. Because Méndez adhered to the idea that artists should work collectively and anonymously for the benefit of society he does not have the fame he merits. However, his reputation has grown in recent years, with a number of publications and exhibitions since his death. He is sometimes mentioned by his contemporaries as the fourth of “Los Tres Grandes”—the muralists Rivera, Siquieros and Orozco.

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**List of Works:**

Leopoldo Méndez*, Calaveras del Mausoleo Nacional* (Calaveras of the National Mausoleum), 1934, woodcut, 23x17 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *El Fascismo I*. (El Fascismo – Los Dorados (Ayuda a los revolucionarias perseguidos) (Fascism – The Goldshirts (Help the Persecuted Revolutionaries), 1936, woodcut, 15x17 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *El fascismo II* (El fascismo y al represión (Fascism and Repression), 1936, woodcut, 13.5x12 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Deportación a la muerte* (Deportation to Death) (Tren de la muerte (Death Train)), 1942, linocut, 35.2x51 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Serpiente Cascabel* (The Rattlesnake), wood engraving, 13.5x13.5 cm., from *Incidentes Melódicos del Mundo Irracional*, 1944.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Lo que no debe venir* (That Which Must Not Come), 1945, wood engraving, 31.8x41.9 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Homenaje a Benito Juárez* (Homage to Benito Juárez), 1947, lithograph, 58.8x44.4 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Calaveras Televisiosas* (Calaveras Depraved by Television), 1949, linocut, 23x34 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Paremos la agresión a la clase obrera! Ayude usted a los huelguistas de Palau, Nueva Rosita y Cloete* (Stop the Agression against the Working Class! Help the Striking Workers of Palau, Nueva Rositat and Cloete), 1950, linocut, 70 x 85 cm.

Leopoldo Méndez, *Homenaje a Posada* (Homage to Posada), 1956, linocut, 35.5x79 cm.