ART INSTITUTE PRESENTS EXHIBITION OF MEXICAN POLITICAL PRINTS
BY THE TALLER DE GRÁFICA POPULAR
More Than 100 Mid-Century Works Were Drawn from
the Museum’s Extensive Collection of the Famed Workshop’s Production

In 1945, the Art Institute of Chicago commissioned Mexican printmaker and political activist Leopoldo Méndez to create a custom woodblock print that would be the centerpiece of the artist’s first major exhibition in the United States. Now, almost 70 years later, that print and the original woodblock Mendez carved are part of the exhibition What May Come: The Taller de Gráfica Popular and the Mexican Political Print, on view in the museum’s Jean and Steven Goldman Prints and Drawing Galleries in the Richard and Mary Gray Wing from July 4 through October 12, 2014.

The Taller de Gráfica Popular (the Popular Graphic Art Workshop), or TGP, created some of the most memorable images in mid-century printmaking. The Mexico City–based workshop, founded in 1937 by Méndez, Luis Arenal and American-born Pablo O’Higgins, took up the legacy of the famous Mexican broadside illustrator José Guadalupe Posada. The group created prints, posters, and illustrated
publications that were popular, affordable, legible, politically topical, and, above all, formally compelling.

In addition to the commissioned Méndez woodblock print, the exhibition includes more than 100 works from the Art Institute’s rich holdings—one of the most significant TGP collections in the United States. The range of works demonstrates why this collective boasted such international influence and inspired the establishment of print collectives around the world.

The TGP emerged and evolved in the crucible of antifascist and leftist politics in Mexico in the period surrounding World War II. This milieu shaped not only the workshop’s dedication to a collective printmaking model but also its production, which was aimed at both “the people” and discerning collectors, a strategy necessitated by the era’s quickly changing political tides. The collective created works for groups spanning the leftist and progressive political spectrum, including the government of Lázaro Cárdenas and his successors, the Mexican Communist Party, major trade unions, and antifascist organizations.

During the TGP’s heyday, from its founding until the 1950s, the workshop produced thousands of prints, primarily linocuts and lithographs, for everything from ephemeral handbills and newspapers to political and advertising posters to luxe portfolios and printed books. Favoring an expressive, realist visual language, its work addressed a wide range of socially engaged themes, including Mexican history and culture, political satires both local and international, rural and urban scenes of daily life, and agitprop prints. The members of the workshop, a core of about 40 during its height, produced both individual and collective works and welcomed numbers of foreign members and guest artists—from Elizabeth Catlett to Josef Albers—to use the workshop in order to collaborate on prints and create individual pieces.

Showcasing the TGP’s prolific and varied output, What May Come is organized into thematic sections such as Chicago connections to the TGP, antifascism, national history, daily life, caricature, and popular visual traditions.

A Spanish-English catalogue authored by guest curator Diane Miliotes accompanies the exhibition, which also features bilingual labeling and a bilingual audio guide. Victoria Sancho Lobis, Prince Trust Associate Curator in the Department of Prints and Drawings, was coordinating curator.

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