

On Whom the Nation Rests:
Leopoldo Méndez's Allegory of Suffering

“To be an artist means never to avert one's eyes.”¹ This sentiment by Japanese filmmaker and painter, Akira Kurosawa, is echoed in the works of revolutionary Mexican printmaker, Leopoldo Méndez. The artist addresses the prominent political and social issues impacting his nation in the years following the Mexican Revolution by positioning women as representatives of a nation's grief. A key component of Méndez's prints is his recognition of women's role in society as reflected in the Mexican proverb, “la casa no se reclina sobre la tierra sino sobre los hombros de una mujer.”² Mirroring Mexican values, the proverb's acknowledgement that “the house does not rest on the ground, but on the shoulders of a woman,” illustrates the significance of the artist's stylistic choices. While scholars have recently explored Méndez's works through exhibition catalogues and books, his depictions of women have not been expressly considered. Through their portrayal in *La carta II*, (fig. 1) *El hambre en la ciudad de México 1914-15*, (fig. 2) and *Lucha entre los provocadores de una nueva guerra y en favor de paz*, (fig. 3) Leopoldo Méndez creates a moving allegory of Mexico's suffering by highlighting the pain of those often unseen, but on whom the country depends. In this essay, I explore the way in which the artist illustrates the role of women, as well as the personal and political motivations behind his depictions. In so doing, I reveal how Méndez creates an emblem of hardship through his

¹ John Madera, “To Be an Artist Means Never to Avert One's Eyes.” (Big Other, 2019), <https://bigother.com/2019/03/23/to-be-an-artist-means-never-to-avert-ones-eyes/>.

² María Fernanda Rodríguez Montaña, “Estado Actual De Las Investigaciones Sobre Mujer Casada, Profesional y Madre: Del Trabajo Remunerado Al Trabajo Doméstico.” (*Revista Científica Guillermo de Ockham* 6, no. 2 July 2008).

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representation of women as both symbols of Mexican ideals and a personification of the nation itself.

INFLUENCES OF EARLY YEARS

Leopoldo Méndez's childhood and artistic development were profoundly influenced by his working-class upbringing and the impact of the Mexican Revolution. He was born in Mexico City in 1902. The youngest of eight children, Leopoldo was orphaned by the age of two and raised by multiple aunts and his maternal grandmother.³ As noted by Jules Heller in *Codex Méndez*, "all of these women, workers in a cigar factory, were role models, demonstrating respect for others, generosity, fairness, and a certain generosity of Christian spirit wedded to a progressive political outlook."⁴ From a young age, he witnessed the Revolution's effects firsthand as his family endured hunger resulting from the war's food shortages. Méndez began his formal artistic training in 1917 at Mexico City's Academy of San Carlos and later attended The Open-Air Painting School in Chimalistac and Coyoacán where he became influenced by the prints of José Guadalupe Posada.⁵ With themes ranging from the Mexican Revolution and politics to social inequality, the work of Posada had an indelible effect on Méndez as he himself observed, "truly, Posada has had a great influence on my work. He has influenced me in every aspect, in every one of his disciplines. Posada was a great example. For the volume of his work and for the feeling he was able to give."⁶ That conveyance of feeling is likewise evident in the work of Méndez and responsible for the depth of emotion seen in his prints.

Méndez's political ideology shaped not only the content of his work, but also the manner

³ Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 11.

⁴ Jules Heller and Jean Makin, *Codex Méndez: Prints by Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969)*. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Art Museum, 1999), 18

⁵ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 12.

⁶ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 27.

in which it was distributed. While attending the Open-Air Painting School in Coyoacán, he met law student Manuel Maples Arce, founder of the Mexican avant-garde movement known as Estridentismo (Stridentism).⁷ Leopoldo Méndez would become one of the first, and youngest members of the group begun by Arce who, like Méndez, had witnessed the political unrest and social hardships caused by the Revolution.⁸ Stridentism sought to revolutionize art and literature, “[challenge] political and intellectual complacency ... [and] transform not only written and visual language but also everyday life.”⁹ This enlightened viewpoint, however, did not extend to a reimagining of traditional Mexican gender roles by the primarily male members of the movement. As a result, women were often depicted in both visual art and literature as a symbol of a shared female persona as opposed to individuals with varied experiences.¹⁰

The Strident desire to confront issues while transforming artistic expression motivated Méndez to form and participate in artistic collectives dedicated to the mass production and distribution of images for the purpose of informing and inspiring the Mexican proletariat. One such collective was the Taller de Gráfica Popular which the artist founded in 1937 with Luis Arsenal and Pablo O’Higgins.¹¹ As Dawn Ades asserts in *Revolution on Paper: Mexican Prints 1910-1960*, “the TGP’s conventional representation of women [was] passive and vulnerable,”¹² The works of Leopoldo Méndez accentuate that image and in doing so, communicate a message appealing to traditional values while underscoring the devastating effects resulting from events of the day.

⁷ Elissa Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico: The Avant-Garde and Cultural Change in the 1920s*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 1.

⁸ Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, 83.

⁹ Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, 1.

¹⁰ Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, 134.

¹¹ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, Caplow. *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 123.

¹² Dawn Ades, Alison McClean, and Mark McDonald, *Revolution on Paper: Mexican Prints 1910-1960*. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2009), 245.

REFLECTIONS OF “HOME”

Méndez’s depictions of women in these prints provide glimpses into scenes both intimate and public in nature. Through his ability to convey despair and isolation, the artist sheds light on the often-unperceived suffering of women resulting from acts of war as seen in *La carta*, social inequity as depicted in *El hambre en la ciudad de México 1914-1915*, and the geopolitical forces threatening women’s families and their nation’s strength as represented in *Lucha entre los provocadores de una guerra y en favor de paz*. At the heart of these representations is Méndez’s keen awareness of traditional Mexican gender roles which remained throughout the revolution and beyond, positioning women as caretakers and keepers of the home. Mexican revolutionary activist, Ricardo Flores Magón, echoes the secondary role of women in his article, “A la mujer” in which he advises women of their “duty to help man.”¹³ While it is unclear if Méndez was familiar with Magón’s piece, the Mexican society in which he lived was rooted in like-minded beliefs. As a result, the artist positions women as symbols of home and nation in need of protection as they bear witness to political and social crises. In doing so, he promoted a traditional and conservative moral identity.

The artist’s portrayal is characteristic of those from many of his TGP counterparts with the majority of the collective’s work depicting women in accessory positions. In her article, “Chronicles of Revolution and Nation: El Taller de Gráfica Popular's "Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana,” Theresa Avila notes that often, “these portrayals fall back on traditional notions of gender roles and engage stereotypical ideas about and images of women of the Revolution. This can likely be contextualized as representative of women’s lived experiences

¹³ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands*. (New York: W W Norton, 2022), 110.

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during this time."¹⁴ Avila's analysis of Fernando Castro Pacheco's *Epílogo de la huelga de Río Blanco. 8 de enero de 1907* (fig. 4) illustrates how the TGP's representation of women's traditional gender role positioned them as both the cause for which men fought and the heart of society mourning the consequences of men's actions.¹⁵ Faced with Mexican laws that barred them from careers and a Catholic Church that preached full commitment to home and family, the women of Leopoldo Méndez's Mexico were recognized as occupying a fundamental, yet subordinate, position.¹⁶

LA CARTA II: THE WEIGHT OF SORROW

As if viewed through a window, *La Carta II* from 1942 conveys desperation through what can and cannot be seen. Occupying the majority of the black and white print, a woman is seen in profile. She sits in a wooden chair bent over a wooden desk, holding her head in her large hands which hide her face. Her dark hair pulled back in a bun, she is dressed in dark clothing with only her wrists exposed. On the desk, sits an envelope which appears to have been opened but the contents of which are unable to be seen. The figure is accentuated by a lighter background that encircles her, save for the very corners which are somewhat darker.

The faceless, downcast woman conveys heartbreak through her posture as she contemplates the source of her pain. As Shirlene Soto emphasizes in *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910-1940*, some of the immediate effects of the revolutionary fighting—rape, pillage, death, disintegration of the

¹⁴ Theresa Avila, *Chronicles of Revolution and Nation: El Taller De Gráfica Popular's "Estampas De La revolución Mexicana" (1947)*. (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC, 2013), 340.

¹⁵ Avila, *Chronicles of Revolution and Nation: El Taller De Gráfica Popular's "Estampas De La revolución Mexicana,"* 252.

¹⁶ Shirlene Ann Soto, *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910-1940*. (Denver, CO: Arden Press, 1990), 140.

family—were particularly devastating to women. Women’s traditional existence as wife and mother were disrupted by separation, death, and the establishment of new liaisons.”¹⁷ This stylistic approach can also be seen in Santos Balmori’s Mexican World War II poster, *Recuerda El 13 De Mayo De 1942*, from the same year, (fig. 5), “in which the nation is portrayed as a female victim,” and, as recognized by Caplow, the work of Käthe Kollwitz in *The Widow* from 1922 to 1923. (fig. 6)¹⁸ Méndez’s print similarly positions his subject as a mirror of events and their consequences but not central to revolution and social change. In this way, he communicates trauma by portraying the inherent suffering of the experience while not making direct reference to the specific cause.

In contrast, an earlier version of Méndez’s print is decidedly political with themes that extend beyond his country’s borders. While *La Carta II* lacks any direct references to political ideology or military conflict, his earlier work, *La Carta*, also from 1942, is distinctly more outspoken. (fig. 7) A lone front-facing woman with dark hair and dark clothing sits bent over a wooden desk, but this time her hair is down, and her face is hidden by only her left hand as it supports her head. An envelope appears on the desk near her right elbow as her right arm extends across the desk in front of her. Her right hand clutches a letter which lies open but whose contents are illegible. The most noteworthy difference in this black and white print when compared to *La Carta II*, is the background containing a banner complete with Nazi swastika and multiple framed photographs in the right corner of the room; one of which portrays a figure giving what appears to be a Nazi salute. While the upper right corner displays the banner and photographs on what appears to be a dark wall, the remainder of the background is light with

¹⁷ Soto, *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910*, 140.

¹⁸ Monica A. Rankin, “Mexicanas En Guerra: World War II and the Discourse of Mexican Female Identity.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 2 (2011): 83. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.32.2.0083>. 90.

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what Deborah Caplow observes to be “[floating] small, indistinct shapes; ... [giving] the effect of chaotic inner thoughts propelled by the strength of emotion.”¹⁹ In this original *La Carta*, Leopoldo Méndez employs a sorrowful depiction of a woman victimized by “fascism, regardless of the political orientation of her family.”²⁰

Méndez’s depiction of the desperation and pain caused by war²¹ in *La Carta* is also similar to Kollwitz’s *The Widow* for its allusion to questions of accountability. As Jay Winter notes when discussing the work of Kollwitz in *Artistic Representations of Suffering*, one can also appreciate “the disturbing question as to whether she, the anguished mother, was either directly or indirectly responsible for the death.”²² In this way, I believe that Leopoldo Méndez presents female suffering as both an illustration of the horrors of war as well as a catalyst for introspection and a consideration of the degree to which we are all responsible for the resulting pain.

EL HAMBRE EN LA CIUDAD DE MÉXICO 1914-15: ECHOES OF HARDSHIP

In contrast to the intimacy of both *La Carta* and *La Carta II, El hambre en la ciudad de México 1914-1915* from 1947 depicts a public display of desperation. The center foreground of the black and white print contains a large calavera dressed in a dark hooded cape and long skirt. She appears in profile with only a slight portion of her “face” and hair visible. Her hands are held up before her in a prayerful pose. She is accompanied by a small, hairless dog in front and to her right three small children also appear in profile. The figures are barefoot, and their clothing is

¹⁹ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 160.

²⁰ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 160.

²¹ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 161.

²² Jay Winter, “Beyond Redemption: Käthe Kollwitz and the Tragedy of War.” Essay. In *Artistic Representations of Suffering: Rights, Resistance, and Remembrance*, edited by Curtis Hutt and Mark Celinscak. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.) 84.

tattered. Each look to the left of frame as two men, dressed in sombreros, white shirts, and dark pants, slaughter a horse lying on the ground to the left of center. In the background stands recognizable architecture of Mexico City including the Huntress of Diana fountain at far left.²³

Women's role as both witness and victim are central to the artist's message. The veiled calavera alludes to the Virgin Mary. As with others from the same TGP portfolio, *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana*, the print presents an association with the Virgin Mary in what Theresa Avila believes to be the Mexican "model of proper behavior and qualities historically imposed upon and embraced by women. Thus, the female as symbolic of the Virgin evokes the sacrifice and acceptance of social structures."²⁴ The inclusion of the Huntress of Diana fountain, commemorating the Roman goddess of the hunt,²⁵ is significant for its identification with Mexico City and association with the print's theme of hunger and scarcity. Further symbolism can be found in the small hairless dog that, for the Aztecs and Mayans, represented a warning of life's dangers as well as assistance in the afterlife.²⁶ In discussing the print with author Caplow, TGP artist Mariana Yampolsky drew a connection to Méndez's childhood and personal experiences of hunger. The calavera alludes to a suggestion of his aunt Manuela, with whom he searched the city streets for food, while the boy to her immediate right is thought to be a young Leopoldo and "thus is a kind of self-portrait."²⁷ I agree with Yampolsky's impression and believe that such a personal portrayal by Méndez communicates not only his connection to the

²³ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, Caplow. *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 200.

²⁴ Avila, *Chronicles of Revolution and Nation: El Taller De Gráfica Popular's "Estampas De La revolución Mexicana,"* 282.

²⁵ "Diana (Mythology)." New World Encyclopedia. [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Diana_\(mythology\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Diana_(mythology)).

²⁶ Joshua J Mark, "Dogs and Their Collars in Ancient Mesoamerica." World History Encyclopedia. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1714/dogs-and-their-collars-in-ancient-mesoamerica/>.

²⁷ Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, Caplow. *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, 200.

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emotionality of the piece but also his recognition of the valuable artistic role served by those who stand as witness and victim.

LUCHA ENTRE LOS PROVACADORES DE UNA GUERRA Y EN FAVOR DE PAZ:
THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

Although different from the others discussed for its decidedly political nature, the print *Lucha entre los provocadores de una guerra y en favor de paz* from 1948 continues the theme of female suffering through a personification of Mexican peace. The black and white print depicts three figures atop the globe. A man at left is dressed in clothing indicative of those working in the oil industry. His left hand holds a wooden sign with the letters “FSM”, signifying Frente Sindical Mexicano—the Mexican union front.²⁸ His right hand grips the right arm of the man at center whose face resembles a calavera. This figure is dressed as Uncle Sam wearing a top hat adorned with the words “wall street” as he stands in what appears to be an oil slick coming from a well in the background. While holding a pistol in the hand that is restrained, his left-hand pushes down on the forehead of a woman kneeling before him at the right of the print. She wears a long dress and is tied by a rope to a cross marked with the word “paz” (peace). Her long dark hair frames her anguished facial expression as in the background, fire surrounds the oil wells. The image is one that juxtaposes the aggression of the men and threat of fire with the stillness and submission of the woman.

This print appeared in *The C.T.A.L. Portfolio of 1948* celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the Latin American Federation of Labor.²⁹ Dedicated to improving the lives of the Latin American working-class, one of the union’s main goals was the “control of foreign capital

²⁸ Erica S. Simmons, “Index.” Index. In *Meaningful Resistance: Market Reforms and the Roots of Social Protest in Latin America*, 219–26. Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

²⁹ *The C. T. A. L. Portfolio, 1948*. Graphic witness: Visual arts & Social Commentary.
<https://graphicwitness.org/group/tgp14.htm>.

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investments ... to prevent cheap foreign purchases of raw material, which when manufactured are sold back at sky-high prices to the Latin American market.”³⁰ Through his female personification of the nation’s peace, Méndez addresses relevant political and economic issues while also reflecting the victimization of women and danger of national instability in times of unrest.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

The submission of Mexican peace in *Lucha entre los provocadores de una guerra y en favor de paz* is antithetical to Celia Calderón’s personification of the country in *La nación no acepta bases extranjeras* from 1960. (fig. 8) Portraying a larger-than-life embodiment of Mexico, Calderón’s heroine appears with outstretched arms as she holds back war planes and a diminutive symbol of the United States in the guise of Uncle Sam. While both artists confront the impact of US involvement in Mexico, in contrast to Méndez, his TGP counterpart, Calderón, presents a woman of strength who is resolute in her resistance. One may argue that the martyr of Méndez’s print communicates a powerlessness that reinforces a narrative of female subjugation as opposed to Calderón’s powerful image of defiance and liberation. Shouldn’t artistic depictions of women portray their inherent power? If so, is that only communicated in works where they rise above or fight back? I assert that Méndez’s print does not devalue the role of women but instead capitalizes on their abiding fortitude and ability to endure. The defeated posture of peace in his work only serves to accentuate the weight of forces threatening the strength and stability of Mexico. What better symbol for peace than the “heart” of the nation? Both Méndez and Calderón create powerful female images appealing to Mexican nationalism in the face of world events. It's

³⁰ Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *CTAL, the War and the Postwar*. (Mexico City, D.F: Conf. de Trabajadores de A.L, 1945), 115-116.

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important to remember that while approached from different artistic perspectives, female endurance can be conveyed in a multitude of representations.

PURPOSE IN GRIEF

In *La Carta II*, *El hambre en la ciudad de México 1914-15*, and *Lucha entre los provocadores de una nueva y en favor de paz*, Leopoldo Méndez presents women as allegories of heartache and suffering, thereby illustrating the subordinate role of women while simultaneously appealing to a traditional sense of reverence for their foundational position in the Mexican home and society as a whole. Influenced by his difficult childhood and strength of the women who raised him, the artist created powerful works that appeal to their viewers for recognition of the pain depicted while also serving as a call to action for attempts to prevent its continuation.

While some may argue that the artist's images ignore the more "meaningful" contributions of women throughout the Revolution and beyond, I believe the women of Méndez's prints are equally heroic for their perseverance in times of struggle. In choosing to not turn away from the plight of women, Leopoldo Méndez focused the eyes of his nation and the world on the events responsible for their pain; both in Mexico and the world at large. In doing so, he demonstrated that images of great suffering can also convey great courage. What better way to highlight that which affected his country's soul than by depicting those who bore the weight?

Figures

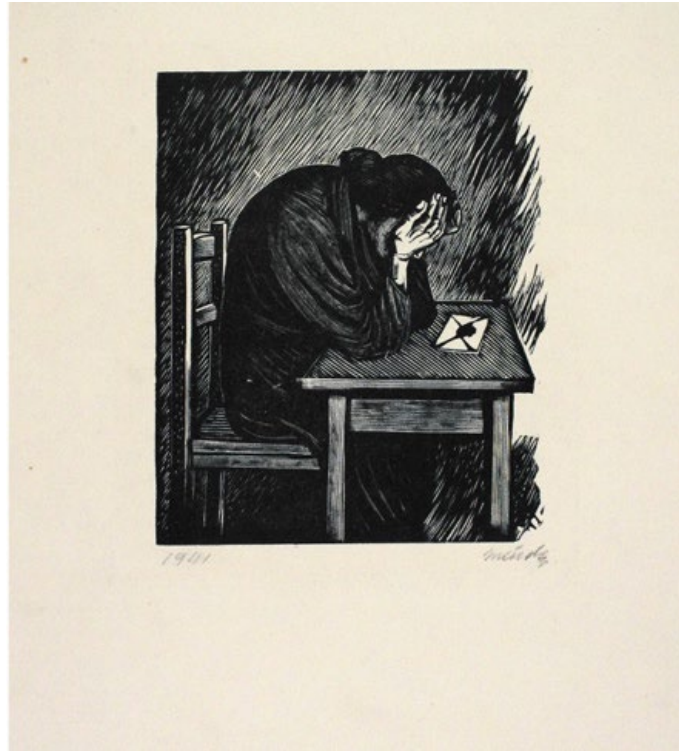


Figure 1

Leopoldo Méndez, *La carta II, (The Letter II)* 1942
Woodcut on laid paper, 14.6 × 13 cm



Figure 2

Leopoldo Méndez, *El hambre en la ciudad de México 1914-15, (Hunger in Mexico City)* 1947
Linocut, 26.99 × 40.01 cm



Figure 3

Leopoldo Méndez, *Lucha entre los provocadores de una nueva guerra y en favor de paz*,
(*Struggle Between the Provocateurs of a War and in Favor of Peace*) 1948

Linocut, 33.34 × 40.32 cm



Figure 4

Fernando Castro Pacheco, *Epilogo de la huelga de Río Blanco. 8 de enero de 1907*
(*Epilogue to the Río Blanco Strike January 8, 1907*) 1947

Linocut, 40.01 × 26.99 cm



Figure 5

Santos Balmori, *Recuerda el 13 de Mayo de 1942*, (*Remember May 13, 1942*)1942
Ink on paper-color lithograph



Figure 6

Käthe Kollwitz, *The Widow*, 1922-1923
Woodcut, 66 x 47.7 cm



Figure 7
Leopoldo Méndez, *La carta*, (*The Letter*) 1942
Woodcut, 10.8 × 9.7 cm



Figure 8
Celia Calderón, *La nación no acepta bases extranjeras*,
(*The Nation Does Not Accept Foreign Bases*) 1960
Linocut

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