

Posters from the
GOLDEN AGE
of
MEXICAN CINEMA

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GALERIA DE LA RAZA/STUDIO 24

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These posters and photo stills are from the vast collection of Enrique Flores, owner of the Rio Theater in Mission, Texas. Xavier Gorena director of Xochil, a non-profit Culture Center which is housed in the Rio Theater, assisted in the selection and loan transaction of the posters.

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THE MEXICAN MOVIE POSTER:
ART, MYTH, ILLUSION, DECEPTION

BY RUPERT GARCIA

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This exhibition of Movie posters from the "Golden Age of Mexican Cinema" marks the Galeria de la Raza's second showing of the Mexican film poster. In 1970, the now co-director of the Galeria, Rene Yanez, marvelously curated our first presentation at the then 14th Street location in the Mission. That exhibition was a general survey. The posters of the present show represent those of the 1940's and early 1950's. It was during this "Golden Age" that the tremendously popular symbols of the Mexican silver screen were created and which colorfully adorned the numerous large wall posters of Mexico and the southwestern portions of the United States of North America.

The remarkably popular icons of these posters have historical antecedents going back to at least the first decade of this century. After briefly chronicling the development of these larger-than-life symbols, we will critically examine the role these deceptions of the "Other Mexico" played vis-a-vis the reality of Mexico's oppressed. We also will investigate and end with the "poster-reality" produced by the militant Taller Grafica Popular during the late 1930's up to the early 1950's which contradicted the silver screen icons of the movie posters of the "Golden Age of Mexican Cinema." No mention will be made regarding the mural renaissance during this period because the majority of these murals were painted inside official buildings and unlike the poster, did not aggressively seek out the public. The only murals that sought out a public like the poster were the popular "pulqueria paintings" that covered the inside and outside walls of establishments like saloons, restaurants, meat markets, and dairy shops.

From the first public Mexican film showing in August of 1896 and up to around the second decade of this century, the cinematic image of Mexico was "scientific." This accurate concern with depicting Mexico was a reflection of the philosophy then prevalent, Positivism. Positivism regarded reality as being that founded in "scientific historical truth." Thus Mexican cinema of this period began with documenting Mexico City, focusing on the tyrant president Porfirio Diaz (1877-1911), and with recording the Revolution of 1910 - 20, which deposed Diaz.

The anticipation of the later nationalistic and revolutionary reconstructions of Mexican history in film was seen in the following early productions: El Grito de Dolores (1908), Prison de Cuauhtemoc (1918), and Juan Soldado (1919). The first film was about the martyred revolutionary priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla who, on September 16, 1810 cried out for justice and struggled toward independence from Spain and the local exploiters of peasants and Native Americans. Prison de Cuauhtemoc dealt with the last Aztec emperor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan who was captured, tortured and then hanged by the Spanish conquistadores. Cuauhtemoc was one of Mexico's greatest military tacticians and who to this day is embraced by many Mexicans, South Americans, and Chicanos/Latinos alike as a symbol of resistance against oppression. The last film Juan Soldado was released by the Ministry of War and revered the feats of the rank and file soldier (men and women) of the Revolution.

The same year Juan Soldado was on the screen, Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary fighter and leader of the peasant and Native Mexican was led into an ambush by a traitor and met an untimely death. About four years later another soldier and leader of the revolution was assassinated, Pancho Villa. Following these deaths, Mexican cinema, after having been exposed to films from the United States of North America and Europe, started using elements of these two revolutionaries lives in films. However, the majority of these motion pictures do not reflect the real situations of Zapata's or Villa's revolutionary contexts. Instead, these films depict a "historical" and nostalgic concern

with "revolutionary Mexico."

Before sound is introduced into Mexican cinema in 1930, a sentimental and romantic version of Mexico is appearing on the silver screen. It was not, however, until the 1936 production of Alla en El Rancho Grande, starring Tito Guizar, that the idealized hero of the revolution is introduced to the Mexican public as the singing and courageous charro of the rancho (a la the singing western hero of Hollywood). This historically important film established the ideal type male hero that was used time and again. The 1941 film classic !Ay Jalisco No Te Rajes!, starring the ever popular movie idol Jorge Negrete, solidly etched in the romantic "singing charro" symbol even further. About fourteen years after its manifestation, the "singing charro" movie idol gives way to the more contemporary masked hero. This masked version of the hero of the revolution, however, seems clearly outdated and decadent.

In 1943, Flor Silvestre is made and a new symbol, related to the "singing charro," is created. All that is wonderful and beautiful of Mexico is idealized in song and through the great stars Dolores del Rio (her film debut) and Pedro Infante. Like the earlier "singing charro" icon representing Mexico, the new symbol of Flor Silvestre is repeated by the likes of Silvia Pinal and Jaime Fernandez and Antonio Aguilar and Elsa Cardenas.

During the early 1940's the Mexican actress begins starring in her own films. Until then, she usually played roles portraying the self-sacrificing woman whose importance is defined only by the needs of "her man." Although starring in their own films, leading women like Maria Felix, Dolores del Rio, Beatriz Penafiel, Elvira Rios, Sara Garcia, Dalia Iniguez and Isabela Corona represented stereotypes: the dominating woman, the overly idealized and dedicated mother and the dehumanized prostitute. Women also starred in musical extravaganzas and comedies. The 1943 movie Noches de Ronda, starring the dancer and singer Maria Antonieta Pons, introduced the sensational genre of the musical. Aguila O Sol of 1937 is Pons's antecedent, for it was in this film that

Margarita Mora performed her exciting dance routines and introduced the Busby Berkeley-type coreography. Some of the popular female comics featured during this time were Emma Roldan, Consuelo Guerrero de Luna and Sara Garcia.

The male comics of Mexican cinema are from two different life styles, the urban and the rural. Chato Ortin, Mexico's first comic of the cinema, introduced the urban "funny man" in Que Hago Con la Creature, made in 1935. The rural comic was initiated the following year with Chaflan's supporting role in Allá en la Rancho Grande. Chaflan was the first comic to star in his own film, Los Millones de Chaflan, 1938. Urban comics like Tin Tan, Cantinflas and Resortes mature as stars in the 1940's, with Chato Ortin probably being their predecessor. Cantinflas, since 1937, has portrayed the urban pelado, the lumpen proletarian. Cantinflas transforms the pelado on the screen into a clown with a big heart, but who has nothing. He is represented as surplus to the needs of the city; the city does not belong to him. Tin Tan, on the other hand, unfolds the Mexican of the city who wears the Zoot Suit and speaks Pocho and Caló. The Zoot Suit is the symbol of the "city slicker," the Pachuco a la Octavio Paz. Pocho, the intermingling of Spanish and English and Caló, the unique meshing of Spanish and English are the languages identifies with the Pachuco. In many of Tin Tan's films, the Hollywood musical is imitated, with the addition of fine women comics like Delia Magana or the dancer Amalia Aguilar.

While Mexico was experiencing this flowering of glittering movie stars of the "Golden Age of Cinema," the Mexican government was emphasizing the economic growth of the private sector (including the motion picture industry), encouraging foreign investment (especially that from the imperial power of the North), and was strongly de-emphasizing public welfare. Mexico's economy was becoming overwhelmingly controlled by the U.S. and by Mexico's own developing yet dependent capitalists. In other words, while the Mexican public was being dazzled by the flickering images of a mythological Mexico, economic growth for the few at the expense of the many transpired behind the film industry's facade.

Mexican cinema of the 1940's and 1950's was relatively progressive. They based virtually all of their screenplays on some concrete aspect of Mexico's heritage, history, folklore, revolution and popular culture. However, these films only partially reflect the truly revolutionary fervor and needs of the people that initially inspired the 1910 - 20 revolution and that spawned the national cultural movement of the 1920's. Carlos Monsivais, 1 the Mexican writer, critic and cultural historian, has said the inclusion of authentic Mexico into the cinema was, and is, to create a mythological Mexico and Mexican.

Monsivais goes on to say that the Mexican film is full of contemporary myths: the dominating woman (Maria Felix), the people as congenial, or the wise and charitable man (Arturo de Cordova). This "other Mexico" of the cinema's "Golden Age" is populated with grandiose heroes that, as a whole, are, in fact, impotent. They do not truly combat or challenge the basis of Mexico's dependence (economically and culturally) and development of underdevelopment. In 1945 the great Mexican muralist, David Alfaro Siqueiros commented on the colonial state of Mexican cinema (the "Golden Age of Mexican Cinema") after the first five years of his country's swing to the right and U.S. economic and cultural (i.e. the film industry) penetration into Mexico. Siqueiros said:

Mexican cinema has falsified life and the Mexican people. It has turned our horsemen into theatrical tenors or dolled up cowboys in a servile transcription of the "Mexican gunmen" invented by Hollywood. Our peasants have been "washed",licked clean, and dehumanized because of the stupid inferiority complexes of our producers, which have also turned our "aristocrats," our provincial bourgeois into an anxious, puerile, unsuccessful copy of the gentlemen of European and American "High Society." All this is totally alien to the people and things of Mexico. And to top all this off, Mexican cinema in its permanent intellectual servility towards the worst elements of European and American cinema has made the love idyll of the stars, the focal point of all its plots. Instead of making the people act in films and letting man play himself we have been given heavily made up, dehumanized actors. 2

With a few exceptions (Bunuel's 1950 Los Olvidados comes to mind), the Mexican film industry of the 1940's and early 1950's falsified Mexico's historical predicament like Siqueiros noted. Consequently, the posters advertising these same motion pictures illustrate a fraudulent Mexico. The Mexican movie poster of this era is a popular art of socio -esthetic contradictions. Though the poster as form, as with the motion picture, is a public art, its depiction of Mexico and the Mexican is ultimately reactionary. This uneven development of form and content is endemic to capitalist or developing capitalist societies. The role of the capitalist film poster is to seduce us into paying an exorbitant amount of money to see picture "a" rather than picture "b".

The Mexican movie posters of this exhibit attest to the time and effort required to make these monumental wall placards visually stimulating. Before we even read the title of the film, we are initially struck by the dramatic pictorial element through exaggeration. To attract our attention as we pass by the numerous other posters competing for our notice, these posters must be large, colorful, and dominant. The artists of these movie posters masterfully and sensitively exploit the offset litho surface with stencil and airbrush. With this technique, striking figures and supporting designs of bright contrasting colors are achieved. The hard edge shapes of solid color created by the stencil delicately moves into soft tones. The overall effect of the poster's surface is one of clashing and burning complimentary colors. Some of the most successful poster artists of this genre are Vargas (of Playboy magazine fame), Mendoza, Juanino, Eduardo Obregon, Vidal and Salinas. The great size of these announcements provide ample space for the use of a verbal message to "follow up and amplify the pictorial theme." The luring quality of the poster artist's technique and imagination allows the public to accept the romantic symbols of Mexican cinema almost without hesitation.

While the movie posters of Mexico's "Golden Age" seductively promoted movie-consumership and portrayed a falsified Mexico, posters and broadsides were produced by the critical and militant Taller Grafica Popular (the Workshop for Popular Graphics) and reflected a more realistic, imperfect, and struggling world. The Taller Grafica Popular (TGP) of this period published thousands of large posters (about the size of the movie posters seen in this exhibit) graphically denouncing U.S. imperialism

and domestic political exploitation of the people. Other posters were pro-worker's movement, anti-fascist, pro-Socialist, in favor of the oil expropriation in Mexico and against the Mexican press serving the imperialists.

Along with these posters and in the tradition of the popular printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852 - 1913), the TGP published numerous popular broadsides. "These colored broadsides criticized in a pointed way, the high cost of living or politics, or (told) of strikes or speculators, and thus communicated with men, and in helping them to form a opinion, evoke in them the desire for social justice."³

Even though the TGP printed these progressive and critical images and messages that countered the film poster, their overall impact was less successful than that of the movie poster. Unlike the TGP, the film industry was backed by the government and "big money," and therefore allowed the movie poster to be mechanically mass produced in multicolor and was widely distributed. As Susan Sontag commented, "...the overwhelming presence of posters used as commercial advertising generally indicates the degree to which a society defines itself as stable, pursuing an economic and political status quo...."⁴ In the case of Mexico during its Golden Age of the Cinema," the movie posters weighty presence concretely reflected who was in control of the economy and who was fraudulently defining Mexico for the sake of whom. Nevertheless and as in all class divided societies, the TGP posters represented the existence of a Mexico working and struggling to change the dominating social conditions and values perpetuating decadence and poverty.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Monsivais, Carlos, "Notas Sobre Cultura Popular en Mexico", Latin American Perspectives: Culture in the Age of Mass Media, Issue 16, Vol. V No. 1, Winter 1978, pp. 98-118.
2. Siqueiros, David Alfaro, "National Cinema: True or False?", Art and Revolution, translated by Sylvia Calles, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 89.

3. Peralta, Olivia, "Popular Broadsides", TGP Mexico, ed. Hannes Meyer, (Mexico City: La Stampa Mexicana, 1949), p. 145.
4. Sontag, Susan, "Posters: advertisement, art, political artifact, commodity," The Art of Revolution, by Dugald Stermer, (New York: McGraw and Hill Book Co., 1970), p. XI.

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OTHER SOURCES

1. Franco, Jean, The Modern Culture of Latin America, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970, revised edition of the 1967 original).
2. Martinez, Jr., Santos G., "Mexican Movie Posters," (Huston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1979).
3. de Los Reyes, Aurelio, y otros, 80 Anos de Cine en Mexico, (Mexico D.F.: UNAM Difusion Cultural, Seris Imagenes 2 1977).
4. Reyes Nevares, Beatriz, The Mexican Cinema: Interviews with Thirteen Directors, translated by Carl J Mora and Elizabeth Gard, (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1976).
5. Schrank, Jeffrey, Snap, Crackle and Popular Taste: The Illusion of Free Choice in America, (New York: Delta Original, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1977).

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POSTERS FROM THE
GOLDEN AGE
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El Gran Calavera
con Fernando Solar y
Rosario Granados
Artist- Espert, 1946

Huracan Ramirez
con Tonina Jackson y
Anabella
Artist- Juanino-1946

Dona Perfecta
con Dolores del Rio
Artist- Juanino,1946

Pasion Jarocha
con Victor Manuel Mendoza
y Irma Torres
Artist- Unk. n/d

Ay Jalisco No Te Rajes
con Jorg e Negrete
Artist- Viejo, n/d

Dicen Que Soy Mujerieco
con Pedro Infante y
Sara Garcia
Artist- Juanino,1946

Ventarron
con David Silva y
Marta Roth
Artist- Juanino,1946

El Signo De La Muerte
con Cantiflas y Medel
Artist- Unk. n/d

Rasauro Castro
con Pedro Armendariz
Artist- Vidal n/d

Cararet Shanghai
con Rosa Carmina y
Roberto Romana
Artist- Unk. n/d

La Carne Manda
con Ester Fernandez y
David Silva
Artist- Unk. n/d

Mujeres En Mi Vida
con Augstin Lara
Artist- Unk. n/d

El Norteno

con Pedro Infante,
 Maria Luisa Zea,
 Victor Manuel Mendoza
 Artist- Upert n/d

Suenos de Gloria

con Miro Slava y
 Luis Aguilar
 Artist- Vargas, 1953

Lanoche es Nuestra

con Jorge Mistral y
 Emilia Guiu
 Artist- Vargas, 1951

Piel Canela

con Sara Montiel y
 Manolo Fabregas
 Artist- Juanino, 1945

Ay Que Rechulo es Puebla

con Antonio Badu y
 Sara Garcia
 Artist- Vargas n/d

Caminos de Sangre

con Luis Aguilar
 Artist- Mendoza n/d

Amor Salvaje

con Rosa Carmina y
 Victor Junco
 Artist- Cartaya, 1946

Una Mujer Caulquiera

con Maria Felix
 Artist- Juanino, 1946

Hechizo Tragico

con Maria Felix
 Artist- Unk. n/d

La Diosa Arrodillada

con Maria Felix y
 Arturo de Cordova
 Artist- Bregon n/d

Opio "La Droga Maldita"

con Rosita Quintana,
 Domingo Soler, Tito Junco
 Artist- Juanino, 1946

El Fanfarron

con Jorge Negrete
 Artist- Unk. n/d

El Rebozo de Soledad

con Arturo de Cordova
 Pedro Armendariz
 Artist- Veea, 1952

Nuestros Maridos

con Rafael Baledon y
 Emilia Guiu
 Artist- Unk. n/d

Necesito Dinero

con Pedro Infante y
 Sarita Montiel
 Artist- Renav, 1951

El Hijo Desobediente
 con Tin Tan y su carnal
 Marcelo
 Artist- Guap n/d

Tizoc "Amor Indio"
 con Maria Felix y
 Pedro Infante
 Artist- Mendoza n/d

Angelitos Negros
 con Pedro Infante,
 Emilia Guiu y
 Rita Montaner
 Artist- Juanino n/d

La Ciudad Perdida
 con Marta Roth y
 Roberto Romana
 Artist- Salina, 1946

El Rey Del Barrio
 con Tin Tan
 Artist- Unk. n/d

Dicen-Que Soy Comunista
 con Resortes
 Artist- Unk. n/d

Contra La Ley De Dios
 con Amanda Ledesma y
 Lina Montes
 Artist- Unk. n/d

No Me Quieras Tanto
 con David Silva,
 Marta Roth
 Artist- Cartaya n/d

La Marca Del Zorrillo
 con Tin Tan
 Artist- Unk. n/d

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