

MEXICAN PRINTS

By JEAN CHARLOT

Mexican prints and books since 1700 are being shown in the basement of Wing J. Most of the exhibition—indeed most of the Museum's distinguished collection of Mexican graphic arts—was either given by the painter Jean Charlot or else collected by him in Mexico for the Museum. Mr. Charlot has continued his helpfulness by drawing on his great and sensitive knowledge of Mexican art for this article.

The power of the graphic arts lies in reproduction, multiplication. And their multiplicity should put them into the hands of the people at large who share their quality of being many. This broad premise has been attacked by a few print-lovers, who claim, in dubious Malthusian fashion, that rarity is more desirable than

plenty. Perhaps the two theories may be reconciled if we admit two levels of art-making. Limited, numbered editions of prints are all very well for the kind of graphic art that is de luxe, in truth or in pretence, and thus proclaims itself expendable. Another kind of art may be a true necessity that it would be as senseless to ration as bread.

The story of the Mexican graphic arts parallels that of Mexico, whose history is not all pleasure and leisure. Mexican art was never meant to be a hothouse flower, coddled in the rarefied air of the studio for the delectation of connoisseurs only. Since the pre-conquest days of the *tlacuile*, who brushed painted magic on lime-coated paper, to influence the conjunction of planets and ensure the fullness of crops, Mexican aesthetics have remained enmeshed in practicalities.

The birth of a Mexican art as distinct from a

purely Indian art was attended by bloody travail. Yet the term "conquest," used to describe the forceful entry of the Spaniards in Anahuac, none too factual even on the military plane, is even more misleading if enlarged to describe the clash and the resulting blend of the two civilizations it involved. A cultural conquest required as its first step a taking stock of the Indian heritage. Of the men brave enough to

run the gauntlet of this mental hazard, none emerged intact.

The Spanish crown and its representative in Mexico, the viceroy, labored hard to smooth over the rough colony. When Baron von Humboldt visited Mexico in 1803, he marveled at the collection of Greco-Roman plaster casts housed at the Mexican Academy of Fine Arts

as a gift from the crown. Humboldt also witnessed how fragments of Aztec temple sculpture, when accidentally unearthed, were speedily buried again. This was perhaps because they were pagan, but more certainly because, for a taste attuned to eighteenth-century rococo, they were ugly. Baron von Humboldt voiced a mild reproof, "Why not, side by side with the Apollo Belvedere or its plaster counterfeit, admit the exhumed monsters reminiscent of the art forms of Hindoos and Egyptians?" What the German Baron visualized as a curiosity—the chance meeting of violently contrasting aesthetics—does in fact plague the inner eye of all Mexican artists. They hardly need see Apollo Belvedere and Coatlicue side by side to realize what potent tension results from the churning of bloods that begat them and their art.

Their quandary is illustrated by the career of the first graphic artist known to be of mixed

CONTENTS

November, 1949

MEXICAN PRINTS	By JEAN CHARLOT	81
RECENT ACCESSIONS OF GREEK TERRACOTTA VASES	By DIETRICH VON BOTHMER	91
REPRESENTATIONS OF SAINT TERESA	By MARGARETTA SALINGER	97



Bicycles. Wood engraving by José Guadalupe Posada (1851-1913). Gift of Jean Charlot, 1930

parentage, Friar Diego Valadez, born in Mexico of a Spanish father and an Indian mother. Grown to be a Franciscan missionary, well-traveled both in Europe and in his native land, Friar Valadez engraved a set of plates meant as visual aids to teach the Christian doctrine to unlettered Indian converts. His origin as well as his calling had familiarized his eye only too well with the squatting figures found in Aztec codices, hugging the earth, knees to their chin, like his savage parishioners, their folded bodies inscribed in a cube or seemingly gathered back into the sphere of the womb. Therefore Friar Valadez, though possessed of great technical proficiency and keen anatomical knowledge, could not be content to engrave the swollen muscles and the extrovert gestures stamped on art by the European Renaissance.

The human form is at its loveliest skin-deep, awaiting only the added health and glow of Greek genius to become a Narcissus or a Galatea. The Aztec, immune to the sight of religious autopsies performed with a sacrificial knife, preferred to observe the same human body piecemeal, as a necklace of steaming hearts, or a basin full of blood, or a hill of

skulls. Unnice as death is in its plastic manifestations, it has inspired great art. In Europe bones, shrouds, and worms were the leitmotiv of medieval dances of death. In sixteenth-century America, the rattling of the imported Catholic skeletons was to find its perfect match in the staccato rhythm of the *teponastle*, the Aztec log drum. In colonial times, Death lorded over the showy triumphal pyres that Mexicans, with outer sorrow and perhaps secret pleasure, erected to the death of emperors and kings whose absentee power they experienced only at second hand. Crowned skeletons loom big in the engravings that adorn the resulting *pièces de circonstance*.

Early in the nineteenth century, Fernández de Lizardi, nicknamed El Pensador Mexicano, ministered at the birth of Mexican political independence with a rash of pamphlets—of four to eight pages each, on cheap paper—which he wrote, set in type, and distributed single-handed. A woodcut of a plain skull and crossbones, modeled with deep chiaroscuro, that embellishes one of his "Dialogues of the Dead," between the shades of the hero Hidalgo and the newly dead ex-emperor Iturbide, marks the

rise of the modern, wholly irreverent, comical *calavera* (skull). It is dated 1824.

This graphic *calavera*, passing through ever more complex forms, reached a climax in the metal cuts and relief etchings of Guadalupe Posada, an undoubted master, versed in the low-brow art of illustrating penny sheets. His work was realized in a sharp black and white

that spurned nuance, and, indeed, little nuance was needed as the engraver separated with a kick the goats from the sheep. With anarchistic gusto the brown-skinned master lined up before his graphic tribunal the mighty of this world, generals and bandits, and coquettes as well,

making of all a savory mess of mustachioed jaws and blunderbusses, of necklaces and collarbones, of ribs and ribbons. As the revolution, begun in 1910, entered into its giant stride it raised measurably the quota of sudden deaths among the great. Death and Posada became friendly rivals to see which could first transform a live potentate into a grinning skeleton.

Another rich source of graphic art is the political cartoon at large, quite as removed from the concept of art for art as the more specialized *calavera*. Mexico has a strong tradition of political newspapers, backed by the disinterestedness of men who have gone to jail, have seen their presses smashed, and have had their skulls cracked and their papers suppressed, all for the sake of keeping an opposition alive. When official art tended to freeze into decorum, when marble Venuses tickled the taste of the bourgeois in power, opposition cartoonists, aiming their sharp lithographic crayons at the liver of powerful opponents, kept alive the quota of dynamism and of unnicety without which Mexican art would quickly wither. Equally doomed by the success or failure of

their endeavor, these penny sheets could not outlast the issues they raised. Only their names have kept a sting: *The Mustard Plaster, The Black Widow, The Gut-Grater, The Ticksles, The Shark, The Carving Knife, The Loose-Mouthed, The Whip, The Scorpion, The Blind Man's Club.*

Milder-named and longer-lived than most

of them was the far from mild *La Orquesta* that featured Constantino Escalante's masterly lithographs. These cover the Juárez reform, the French invasion, Maximilian's empire, the two Juárez republics. Escalante was as a rule "against it." He dwelt lovingly on the picturesque Zouave uni-



The trolley-car hearse derailed. Relief etching by José Guadalupe Posada. Gift of Jean Chavlot, 1930

forms, but their unhappy owners were impaled on spikes of maguey, drubbed by barbed cacti. General Zaragoza funneled horse pills into a sick Napoleon III; a comical Maximilian lent his imperial foot to be kissed. Juárez was a tuna, the tasty fruit of the nopal, protected from French appetites by bristling vegetable bayonets. Mexico was a bronze-skinned, plume-skirted Indian maiden who lolled in a hammock tied between palm trees. She greeted the landing of the minute, pompous Frenchmen with a smile and a popular refrain, "Here come the monkeys."

Through this vast graphic work, as a kind of hieroglyph that stands for the mechanical progress featured in that mid-century, Escalante drew variations of the iron horse. His locomotives, their valves and pistons rearranged in quasi-organic fashion, chug and puff with an animal life all their own. In 1868, as the artist and his wife were returning from a party in Tacubaya, they both slipped under the wheels of the local they were to board, dying soon after.

Heir to *La Orquesta* was *El Ahuizote*, named after a *nahuatl* monster whose voice lured men

to an aquatic death. It published Villasaña's great lithographs of the seventies. Truly a "blind man's club," it helped crush a democratic president, Lerdo de Tejada, and boosted as a hero young General Porfirio Diaz. A generation later, *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (*The Ahuizote's Son*), undid in the three decades that bridge the centuries what its father had done. It swatted mature Don Porfirio until his senile exile. From 1911 to 1913 a new *Ahuizote* kept its cartoons aimed at President Francisco Madero up to the minute when he was actually shot in the back. In this paper, on the future martyr Madero, Orozco cut his milk teeth to razor sharpness.

The Mexican mural renaissance was, in the twenties especially concerned with true fresco, the mural technique par excellence. But its artists had not turned muralists primarily through a love of fresco but rather in their desire to bring art to the people. In sharp contrast to what were then the tenets of the school of Paris, the Mexicans were bent on creating a didactic type of art aimed at a wider circle of men than the aesthetes. It is natural, then, that they should also try their hand at the graphic arts in an effort to reach an even wider public than the frescoes. Out of this purpose came *El Machete*, financed by the Syndicate of Painters, an irregular, blatant news sheet of extra-large format. For it the muralists Siqueiros and Guerrero literally carved planks into brutal woodcuts. They were run together with the type on a commercial plate press, minus the niceties of special inking, graded pressure, and rag paper, that one associates with art work. Poor as the resulting proofs undeniably are, these few woodcuts remain as a precious testimonial to a moment of heroic endeavor. They were done between mural tasks by men familiar with scaffolds and mortar and totally disdainful of what finer points may constitute the pride of collectors' portfolios. As a result, there is a bigness in them that no later work by these same men could quite recapture.

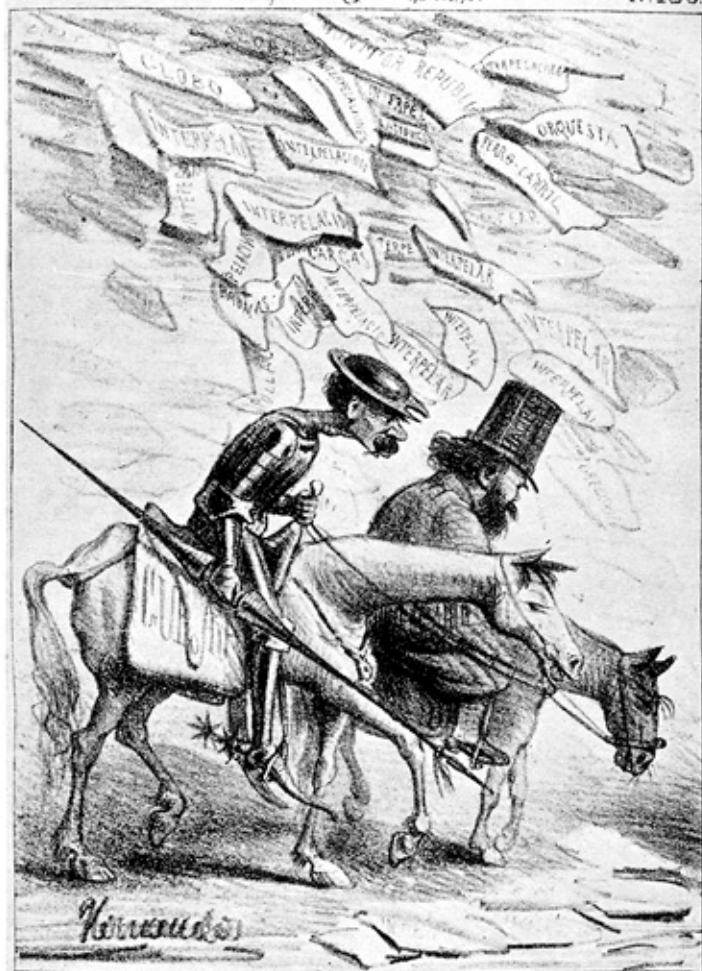
In the next decade, the pioneer muralists affirmed their technical proficiency and aesthetic maturity, mostly by hard, sustained work. And the new generation that was then born to art found itself hemmed in, as it were, by the

walls where their elders had frescoed brown giants shaking fists and holding banners loud with slogans. Naturally enough, adolescent scruples shied away from these hardened displays. The young artists took refuge from the very big into the very small. Leopoldo Méndez and others learned to cut wood so fine that a content equivalent to hundreds of square feet of *buon fresco* could be squeezed into prints the size of an *ex libris*. As a natural antidote Mexican graphic arts branched out then towards exquisiteness, a phase perhaps best expressed in the few prints, rustling with a meditative quiet, of short-lived Julio Castellanos.

In today's Mexico it can be said that the function of public speaking so ably performed in the twenties by murals has been taken over by the printed poster. Perhaps simply because photoengraving remains more expensive than obsolete methods, posters are still in Mexico mostly handmade process or relief cuts. The print-lover would do well to follow the over-alled man that walks the streets with a paste-pot, a brush, and a sackful of new posters that he slaps all over the walls of the capital. The yellow, pink, or purple sheets, besides advertising a sporting event or denouncing a politico, may also be first editions, strictly unlimited, of the original graphic work of some famous artist.

Another branch of the arts to which, indirectly, the revolution gave a boost, is book illustration. It started with the same practical intent as many another endeavor in which art constituted, so to speak, no more than a side product. Modern book illustration was linked early with the campaigns launched by successive presidents to teach an increasing number of citizens how to read and write. A typical example is Rivera's childish primer, *Fermin Lee*, with its exquisitely primitive line drawings. Printed by the state, it was distributed free to rural schools.

More sophisticated and aimed at a smaller circle, the best of the later books still hold that technical excellence and human values are interdependent. Such is *El Sombrero*, illustrated by Alfredo Zalce, shown here together with the preparatory studies that preceded the final line cuts. It may come as a surprise to some to see how the artist's mind worked; how complexity



Valor Sancho amigo, que si mal trato nos dan, su dinero les cuesta.

LEFT: "Courage, my friend Sancho, however ill they treat us it's costing them money." Lithographic political cartoon by Hernandez from the magazine "La Orquesta." RIGHT: The Barber, lithograph by H. Iriarte from "Los Mexicanos pintados por si mismos," Murguía, 1854. Whittelsey Fund, 1946



EL BARBERO.



LEFT: *Our Lady of Solitude of the Ranch of Saint Ines, engraving by Garcia, XVIII century.*
 RIGHT: *Holy card from a sample book, Murguia Lithographic Press, 1889. Whittelsey Fund, 1946*

meant for him a first step towards simplicity.

In the effort to single out of Mexico what will seem, to an outsider, the most Mexican trends, there lies a danger of distortion. It is true that much Mexican art was, in the twenties, clashing with much Parisian art about the why of art-making. It is also true that Mexican artists contributed their share to round out the international school. Rivera could hardly have become as convincingly the local realist that he is were it not for his earlier connection with analytical cubism, which checked later all backward glances towards Paris. In the work of Carlos Mérida, of Mayan Indian stock, the knowledge of modern art acquired in Paris when he shared a studio with Modigliani is combined with racial lores, with which he can communicate simply by closing his eyes. This is true of his wash drawings on stone for *Popol-Vuh*, which are, besides, a complex technical feat.

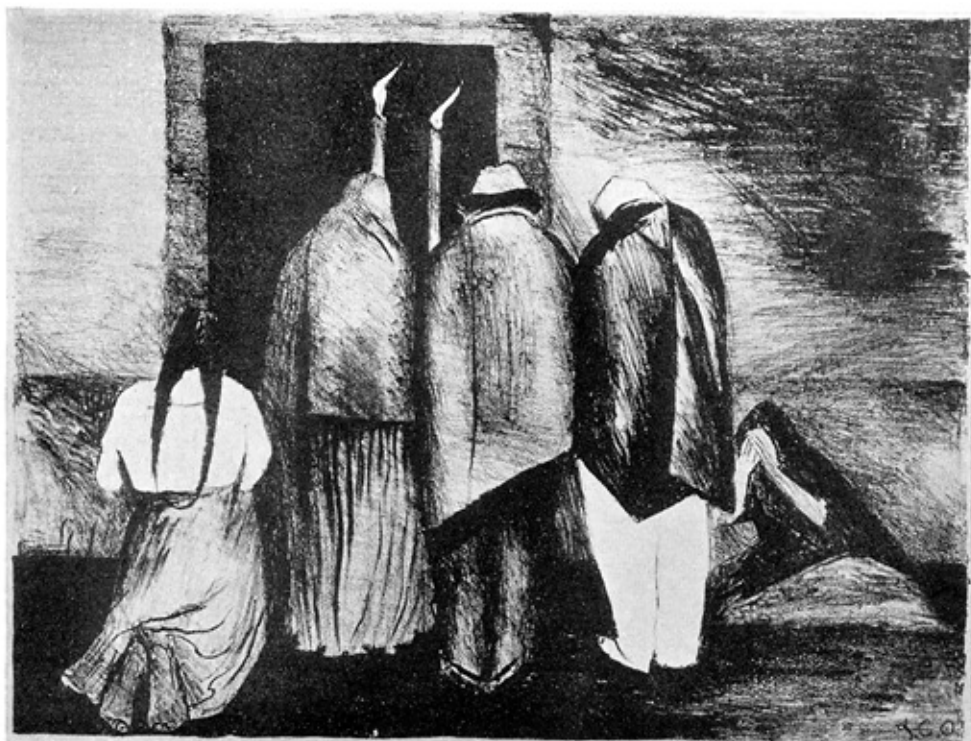
If I had to choose, out of the whole panorama of the Mexican graphic arts, a single print it

would not be one by any famous master. Personality is often emphasized as a paramount ingredient of art, but the more defined the personal idiosyncracies, the more restricted the public that art reaches. I do not speak of the outward marks of appreciation that can always be conjured up by published critical estimates or the attendant publicity drummed around big names, but rather of the inner conformity of a work, felt when one is alone with it and just looking. For the same reason I would not choose either the biggest print or the loudest, impressive as these are in the Mexican version.

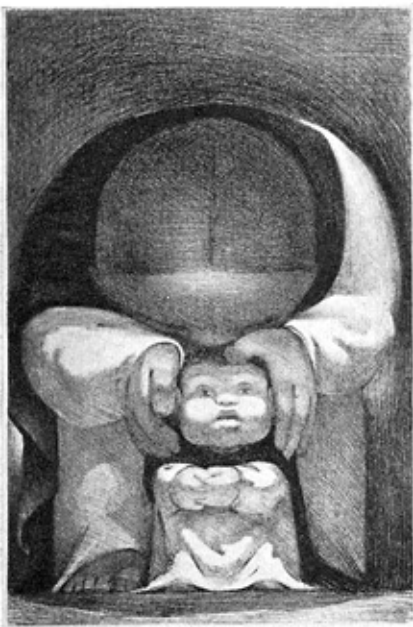
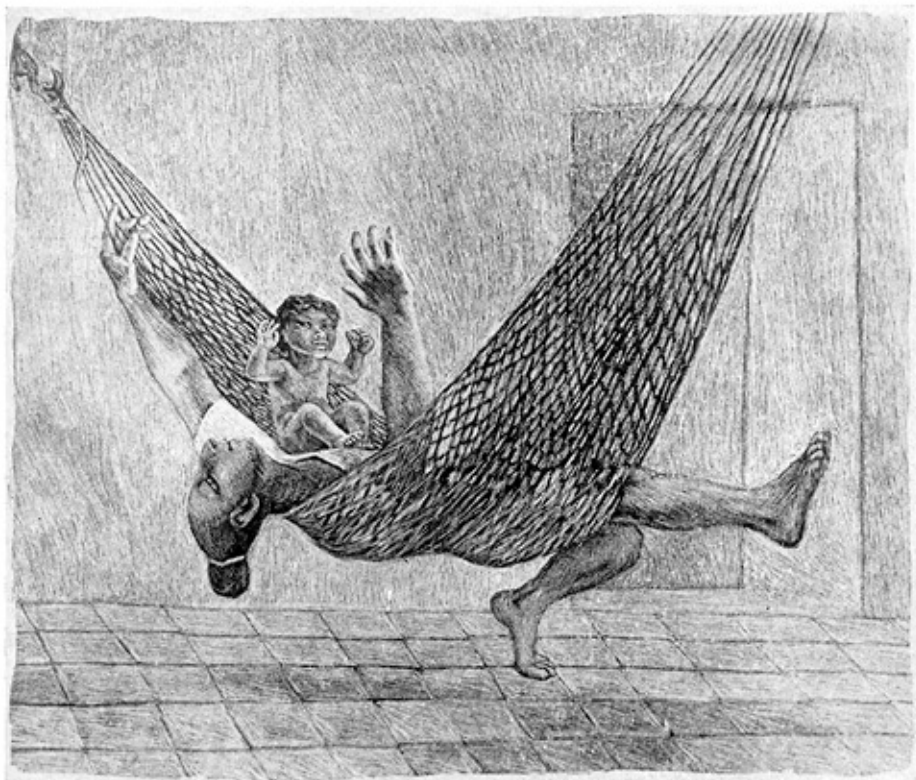
Of all the prints in the Mexican collection of the Museum, the ledger of samples of the lithographer Murguia moves me most, and in it the set of saints, or rather of *santos*—as stylized, as geometrized as an ABC. These pictures, pyramidal Virgin or beribboned crucifix, are anonymous chips from a truly functional form of art, rich in didactic clarity, meant for the people at large. One of these would be my choice.



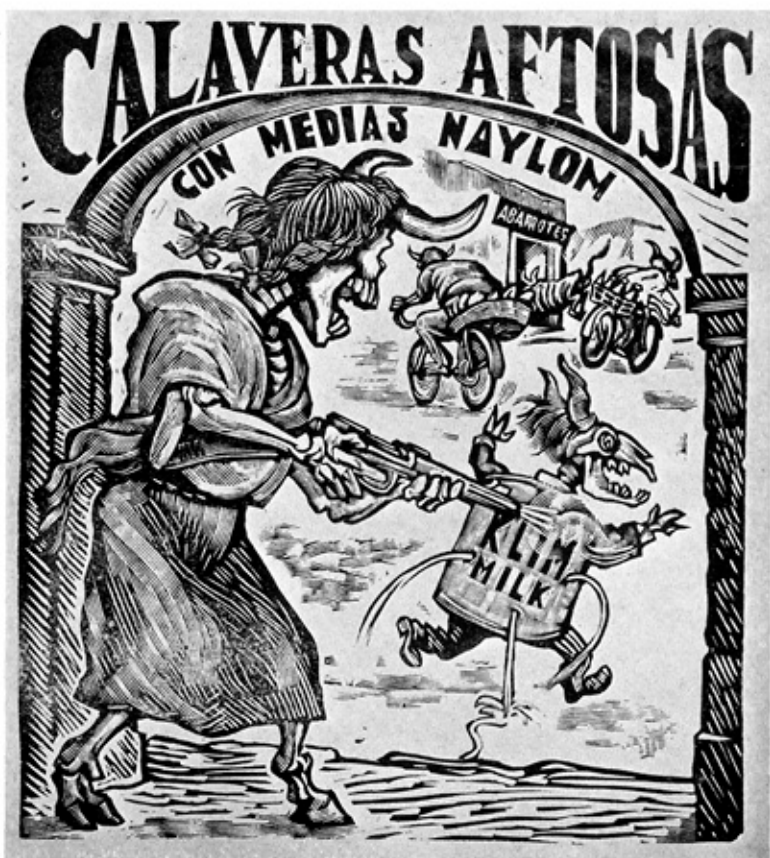
ABOVE: *The wounded guerrilla*, woodcut by Alfredo Zalce. Whittelsey Fund, 1946.
BELOW: *Night School*, woodcut illustration from the "Libro de lectura para uso de las escuelas nocturnas para trabajadores, 20. grado." Mexico, 1938. Gift of Jean Charlot, 1939. Illustration by Leopoldo Méndez for "El Mundo Gráfico." Whittelsey Fund, 1946



ABOVE: *Requiem for the Dead*, lithograph by José Clemente Orozco. Dick Fund, 1929. BELOW: *Head of a young girl*, lithograph by Francisco Dosamantes. *Head of a man*, lithograph by Emilio Amero. Gift of Jean Charlot, 1931



ABOVE: *Mother and child*, lithograph by Alfredo Zalce, from his "Estampas de Yucatán," 1946. Whittelsey Fund, 1946. BELOW: *Sleep*, lithograph by Diego Rivera. *First steps*, lithograph by Jean Charlot. Dick Fund, 1933 and 1940



ABOVE: *Detail of a lithographic poster by José Chávez Morado. Gift of Jean Charlot, 1940.* BELOW: *Part of a ballad sheet for the Feast of the Dead. By Leopoldo Méndez. Whittelsey Fund, 1946*