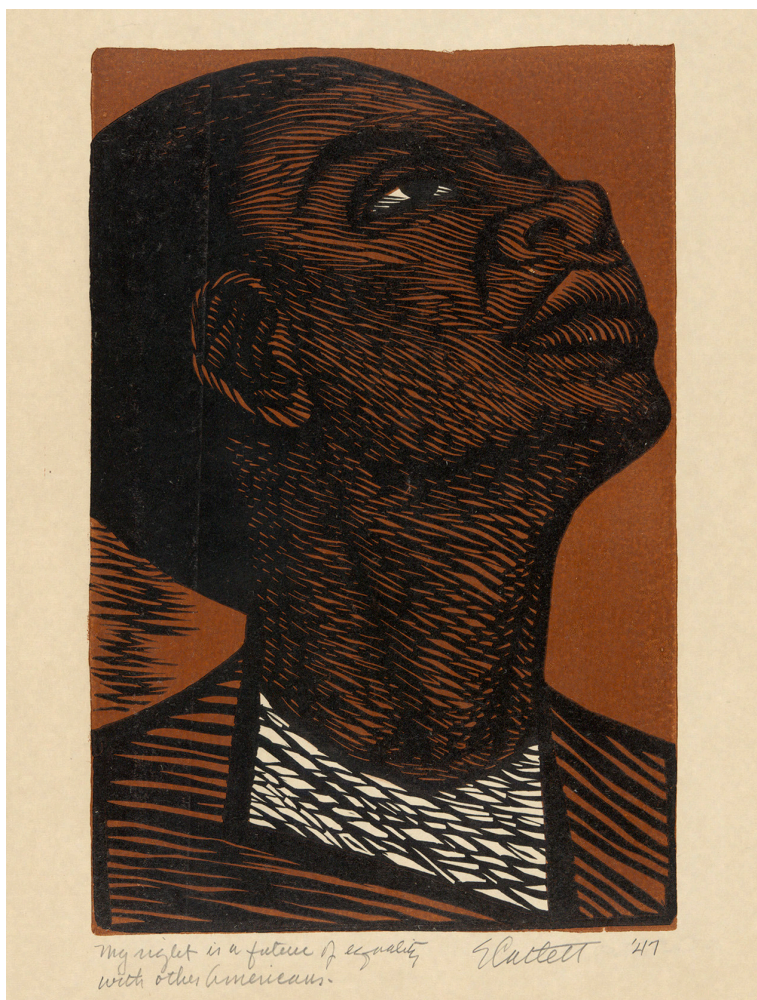


**Exhibition** March 23 – August 29, 2022

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

# From Posada to Isotype, from Kollwitz to Catlett



Elizabeth Catlett, *My Right is a Future of Equality with Other Americans*, 1947, Ywo-color linocut. Yale University Art Gallery, Leonard C. Hana, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund (1995.5.3)  
© Catlett Mora Family Trust/VAGA, NY/VEGAP

The exhibition centers on the development and exchange between various purportedly obsolete and anti-technology print media — woodcuts, wood engravings, linocut, and lithography — and their roles and means of distribution in divergent geopolitical and social contexts. The show is articulated around four major areas, starting with early examples by Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada and German artist Käthe Kollwitz, two major figures in printmaking at the end of the nineteenth century; moving on to German expressionism and the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphics Workshop) from Mexico; and ending with the Austro-German Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education) project of Otto Neurath, Marie Reidemeister-Neurath, and Gerd Arntz.

The exhibition could also have been called *From Danse Macabre to Diagrams*, since one of its primary pursuits is to trace the dramatic changes and exchanges in representations of the collective subject in the print cultures of Germany and Mexico in the twentieth century. Both countries were “belated nations, (and belated democracies) and thus lacked the differentiated conventions of critical and political caricature that had developed in England and France in the nineteenth century. Thus, images of collectivity and images of the people resisting oppression emerged in parallel yet

fundamentally different ways in the two geopolitical contexts. Posada's great achievement was to have imagined and mobilized political resistance against power and exploitation by developing the grotesque negative utopia of the *danse macabre* into the *calaveras*, the ultimate guarantee of future justice and social equality. By contrast, Kollwitz's project aimed to demythify the pervasive images of death in nineteenth-century culture and to instead socialize and politicize them, situating them within the concrete conditions of gender and class and in the war economies of capitalist societies.



José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera revolucionaria (Adelita)* [Revolutionary "Calavera" (Adelita)], ca. 1910/1930, woodcut  
Andrés Blaisten Collection, Mexico



Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Witwe I* [The Widow I], from the portfolio *Krieg* [War], 1922–1923, woodcut  
Private collection, Cologne, Germany

The second register of the exhibition (German expressionism) traces, through the first decades of the twentieth century, the spectrum of graphic genres and techniques and their investment in ever more conflicting and explicit political claims. Did Kollwitz's socialist empathy with the victims of class war mobilize and agitate more successfully, or did George Grosz's and Otto Dix's grotesque derisions of the victimizers perform political enlightenment and induce revolutionary resistance more efficiently? These conflicts were concretized not only iconographically but through pervasive discussion of graphic techniques. At

issue was whether photography and modern technological print media could communicate more productively with the collective or whether — given the asynchrony of visual and textual literacy in each geopolitical and social situation — a return to obsolete artisanal media such as the woodcut would engage and activate the largest possible audience within the relevant social strata and geopolitical spheres. Thus, the end of the exhibition confronts viewers with yet another model of how to think the representation of collectivity in the twentieth century: the invention of figurative constructivism by the Cologne Progressive artists Franz



International Foundation for Visual Education (design); Otto Neurath (author) *Modern Man in the Making*, 1939  
 Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, UK

Wilhelm Seiwert and Gerd Arntz. Both artists tried to fuse figuration with the sign languages of abstraction that had promised (and failed) to deliver universal access to communication across the ideological and identitarian boundaries of class and nation-state. Their work was in turn adopted by Otto Neurath and Marie Reidemeister-Neurath to engender the Isotype system in Vienna in 1926. This innovative diagrammatic language of visual statistics would offer the most productive medium for collective emancipation by providing knowledge and access to enlightenment about a society's economic, social, and political principles concerning the division of labor, the production of value, and the distribution of wealth.

The third register of the exhibition (Taller de Gráfica Popular) addresses conflicts between internationalist and regionalist, if not nationalist, claims made at different moments in the twentieth century for artistic graphic genres and techniques. These shifted from caricature to photomontage, from expressionist outcry to didactic diagram, from agitation based on emphatic social compassion to programs for enabling self-determination and agency. In the same manner that Posada's imagery influenced Sergei Eisenstein and André Breton to recognize the specific revolutionary resources within a population's mythic cultures, Kollwitz's class- and nation-specific



solidarity with the German proletariat of the nineteenth century served as a model that could be transferred to the Mexican context. Thus, artists such as Leopoldo Méndez in the late 1930s and Elizabeth Catlett in the late 1940s cited Kollwitz to initiate their pedagogical and agitational graphic campaigns and to encourage their audiences' emancipation from persistent entanglement in mythical thinking. Eventually, with the rise of fascism, the potential of print culture to operate as emancipatory pedagogy in regionally and nationally specific terms was inverted under the pressures of international history. The very practices that had served to instruct indigenous communities in the formation of postcolonial and secularized nation-state identities, would now be deployed to publicly oppose the internationalization of fascist policies. German, Austrian, and Spanish antifascist writers and artists living in exile in Mexico were now supported by Mexican artists who published both internationally in the fight against fascism, and locally to continue their projects of political enlightenment and economic emancipation of the people.



Leopoldo Méndez, *The Symphonic Concerto of Skeletons*, from the portfolio *25 Prints*, 1943. Linocut  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.  
Long-term deposit of Fundación Museo Reina Sofía, 2017  
© Leopoldo Méndez, VEGAP, Madrid, 2022

### Related activity:

#### Encounter

**Benjamin H. D. Buchloh  
and Michelle Harewood**

Wednesday, March 23, 2022, 6:00 p.m.  
Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200

More information: [www.museoreinasofia.es](http://www.museoreinasofia.es)