

Songs of Design

Languages of Republican Exile in Mexico

June 23 – October 13, 2023

Museo Reina Sofía, Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre, Space D

Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.



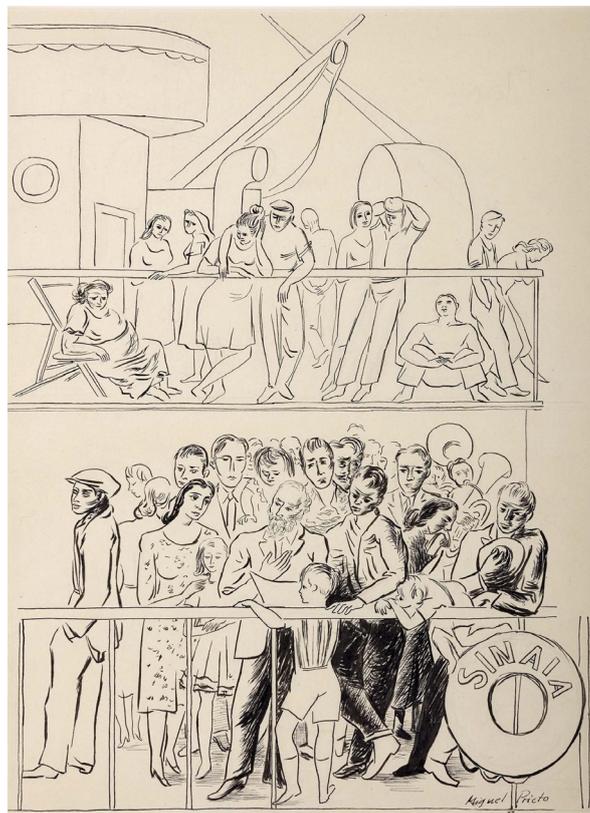
Miguel Prieto, program for the performance of dancer José Limón at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, 1951.
Miguel Prieto Collection. Museo Reina Sofía Library and Documentation Centre

In 1939, the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the printing press in America, Franco's dictatorship began, and with it a political and social repression that forced many Republican supporters into exile. One of the countries that took in the largest number of them was Mexico, thanks to an asylum policy implemented by the government of President Lázaro Cárdenas. The inclusion of these exiled Spaniards in the social fabric of Mexico, and especially that of artists and intellectuals, led to a cultural and artistic exchange in various fields and disciplines. *Songs of Design. Languages of Republican Exile in Mexico* proposes a reading of this exodus that shows the Mexican graphic production of the period, which allowed the continuation of an avant-garde creativity made impossible by censorship in Francoist Spain. On the basis of the collections of the Library and Documentation Centre of the Museo Reina Sofía, this exhibition is articulated around two case studies: the graphic designs of Miguel Prieto (Almodóvar del Campo, Ciudad Real, 1907 – Mexico City, 1956) and of Vicente Rojo (Barcelona, 1932 – Mexico City, 2021), artists who represent two generations of Republican exile in Mexico.

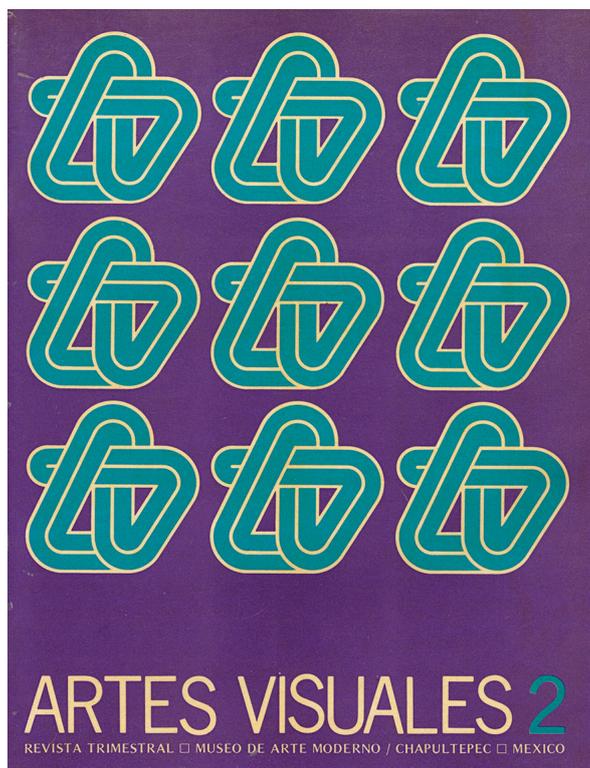
Mexico: art and politics in the first half of the 20th century

After the Revolution, which ended with the proclamation of the Constitution of 1917, Mexico went through a period of great cultural agitation fostered by new political movements that sought continuity for the revolutionary ideals. In this context, muralism was adopted by the state as the official artistic medium for representing the worker and peasant classes, displaying the indigenous past with pride, and so forging a new national identity after the rule of Porfirio Díaz. In the meantime, the creation of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (Popular Graphics Workshop) in 1937 led to the resumption of traditional engraving as a means of placing art at the service of revolutionary social causes like the struggle against fascism, forming a solid network of collaboration with various international artists. Over the following decades, however, the evolution of the PNR (Revolutionary National Party) into the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) and its uninterrupted hold on power until the year 2000 made the state shift away from left-wing ideals towards center-right politics. With the exhaustion of the subjects and values of muralism and the arrival of a new political and social context in the 1950s, a new generation of artists, often called the Generación de la Ruptura (Breakaway Generation), provoked a strong reaction through a production in which formal experimentation and aesthetic innovation prevailed over explicit political protest.

In the midst of this panorama, the exiled Spaniards who were devoted to the graphic arts in Mexico endeavored to materialize initiatives for political militancy and cultural production affiliated to Spanish Republicanism, which needed a visual support for their circulation. In particular, the exiled artists found the publishing industry to be one of the fields that developed most over the 1940s and 1950s, giving rise



Miguel Prieto, *Cómo llegué a México* (How I Arrived in Mexico), 1945. Museo Reina Sofía



Vicente Rojo, *Artes Visuales*, no. 2, 1974. Museo Reina Sofía Library and Documentation Centre, Museo Reina Sofía.
© Vicente Rojo Almazán, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

to the publication of books, leaflets, posters, magazines, and newspapers reflecting the artistic and ideological concerns of the time.

Miguel Prieto

Our first case study is Miguel Prieto, a member and militant of the Spanish Communist Party, and one of those who sailed into exile on board the ship *Veendam* in 1939. Together with other exiles like Josep Renau and Manuela Ballester, Prieto contributed to Mexican graphic art through editorial design. One of his foremost projects was the fortnightly magazine *Romance* (1940–1941), founded together with José Herrera Petere, Juan Rejano, Adolfo Sánchez Barbudo, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, and Lorenzo Varela, which operated as a vehicle of expression for the exiled intellectuals and a meeting point for authors from both continents.

Later, in 1947, Prieto joined the editorial office of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA, National Institute of Fine Arts), where he produced catalogues for institutional exhibitions and designed invitations for various cultural events. His work, characterized by the incorporation of new typefaces, the balance between text and image, and the poetic character of the illustrations, contributed to the evolution of the specialty. This is exemplified by volumes of poetry like Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (General Song, 1950) and Rejano's *Canciones de la paz* (Songs of Peace, 1955), where he attached equal importance in his layout to the visual and textual aspects, suggesting new possibilities for Mexican editorial design.

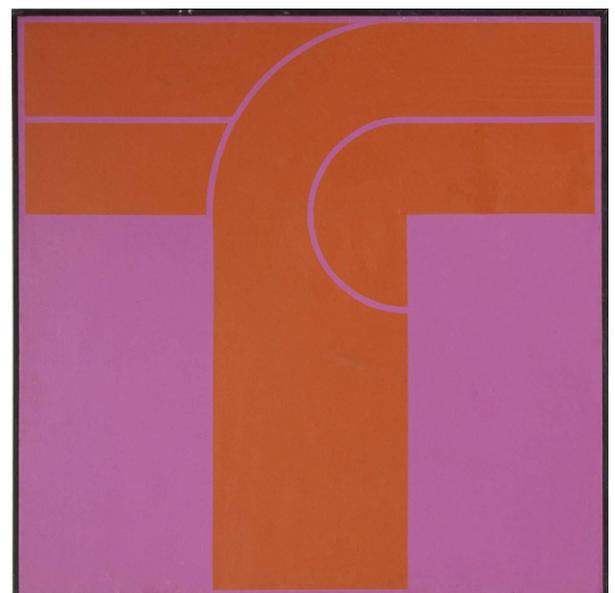
Vicente Rojo

Our second case study, Vicente Rojo, arrived in Mexico in 1949 at the age of seventeen, and so represents the second generation of exile in that country. His graphic production meant a significant development from the aesthetic and political principles of Prieto, with whom he started to work as an assistant at the INBA in 1950. Years later, with the designs he produced for various literary works, Rojo experimented with geometry applied to typography, and proposed alternatives to traditional book formats. Outstanding examples include fold-out objects or non-linear models of reading, like *Marcel Duchamp o el castillo de la pureza* (Marcel Duchamp or the Castle of Purity, 1968) and *Blanco* (White, 1972), both in collaboration with Octavio Paz.

In 1960, he founded Ediciones Era with the Espresate siblings (Jordi, Neus, and Quico) and José Hernández Azorín, exiled Spaniards linked to anti-Francoist positions (like other publishing houses such as Imprenta Madero, Xóchitl, Rex, EDIAPSA, Grijalbo, and Leyenda). All these publishers articulated a cultural and political shift aligned with the so-called New Left of the 1960s, distanced from the militancy of Prieto



Miguel Prieto, poster for the launch of the magazine *Romance*, 1940. Courtesy of the Fundación Pablo Iglesias



Vicente Rojo, *Negación 18* (Negation 18), 1973. Museo Reina Sofía. © Vicente Rojo Almazán, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

and his generation and preoccupied with new social demands, such as the struggle for civil and political rights, gender equality in all spheres, and the anti-colonial and indigenist movements. The publications of Editorial Era also helped to disseminate the works of Latin American authors like Salvador Elizondo, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Monsiváis, and Augusto Monterroso.

Rojo was also a recognized abstract artist who belonged to the aforementioned Breakaway Generation. Among his most outstanding visual projects is *Negaciones* (Negations, 1971–1974), in which he produced a wide diversity of plastic variations on the letter T. In 1973, the MUCA (University Museum of Sciences and Art) exhibited this series of paintings under the title of *El cuaderno escolar de Vicente Rojo* (The School Exercise Book of Vicente Rojo), with a catalogue that reflected different ways of subverting the use of typographic space. This process of serial and mechanical creation, with its underlying intention of negating authorship itself and its marks of style, shows the typically modern tension between the desire for individual artistic expression and social commitment.

Through different projects carried out by Prieto and Rojo, like magazines, leaflets, artist's books, photobooks, and illustrations, *Songs of Design* attempts to outline the development undergone by the Mexican editorial design industry during this period, exploring both the aesthetic and the political analogies and divergences of the graphic languages used by both generations of exiled Republicans in Mexico.



Octavio Paz and Vicente Rojo, *Marcel Duchamp o el castillo de la pureza* (Marcel Duchamp or the Castle of Purity), 1968.
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Organized by

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Program

Documentary exhibitions, Library and Documentation Centre.

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