Migrations and Connections
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2. Josep Renau’s Mexican Exile: Political and Artistic Crossings

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The publicity poster is a commission that one does for money….The political poster is the expression of an intimate feeling.

Josep Renau

Born in 1907 in Valencia, Spain, Josep Renau—graphic artist, muralist, and painter—lived most of his life in exile. Renau’s politically motivated exile from Spain to Mexico and his later exile to East Germany reflects the migrations that forced him to reconcile different times, spaces, mediums, and ideologies. He walked a tightrope between making money and promoting his political ideals. He also struggled to create a place for himself away from home and outside of the structures of the Communist Party. Recent attention to Renau’s life’s work reinvigorates discussions of migrations and connections not just between Latin America and Europe. Renau’s work also illuminates his troubled, but productive crossings between Mexico and the United States and, more importantly, between creating art for money and expressing intimate feelings.

Renau in Spain

Josep Renau lived and worked in three different countries: Spain until 1939; Mexico from 1939 to 1958 (nineteen years); and East Germany from 1958 till his death in 1982 (twenty-four years). His father, Josep Renau Montoro, was a painter and a professor of drawing at the Academia de Bellas Artes in Valencia. Renau attended this school and graduated in 1925. Unlike his father, Renau’s main interests were photography, posters, murals, graphic design, and photomontage. In school, he met a number of other young men and women who later formed the core of the Valencian avant-garde. Among them were Antonio Ballester, who also designed posters during the war, and Manuela Ballester, Antonio’s daughter—an accomplished artist in her own right, who Renau married in 1932. Renau was part of the broad artistic and political European life of the 1930s— influenced by the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, and particularly by German artist John Heartfield. Politically, he belonged to the leftist intelligentsia of the time.
In 1931, at the age of twenty-four, Renau joined the Spanish Communist Party. A year later, he created the Union de Escritores y Artistas Proletarianos and founded the journal *Nueva Cultura*. As the Civil War raged in Spain (July 1936–April 1939) he also became co-editor of the socialist journal *Verdad*. Renau, like other Spanish Republicans, believed in anti-fascism, international solidarity, brotherhood, and the liberation of man. At that time, the Soviet Union stood for all these ideals—even though Stalin never helped the Spanish Republic enough to survive. The Spanish Republic had few allies. Besides the Soviet Union, Mexico was its only other supporter. Even Mexico’s support was minimal, amounting largely to individual Mexicans inserting themselves into the Spanish Republican cause. Notable examples who later proved essential for Renau were Antonio Pujol, painter and printmaker, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, muralist and activist.3

As the Director of Fine Arts under the Spanish Republic, Renau combined his duty as a communist with his talent for graphic arts by promoting *talleres*. Many of the posters attributed to him were collaborative efforts in which artists shared equipment and responsibilities. Tools were important to Renau’s vision for the arts, especially in the mid-twentieth century, when machines occupied a central space, particularly for workers. Renau felt that photographic and other visual technologies had tremendous power. He thought artists should use reproduction within artistic production. To him, the photograph seemed a great opportunity for reproducing a real image from which true art could emerge and speak, not only to the bourgeoisie, but to any seeing individuals.4 It is important to note that the photograph was never the end-all for Renau. In his view, machines still needed the added benefit of the human experience. Renau adopted the responsibility of the artist/engineer using his skills for photography and photomontage to promote political ideas. He saw design as a solution to a problem, and it was an essential element of artistic production.5

Early in the 1930s, Renau utilized photomontage to demonstrate that a disconnected public could overlook or not notice the Spanish Republic’s promotional photographs of their social-service projects. He argued that snapshots were not enough to mobilize the urban and rural masses. Renau proposed that the Republican administration invest in something more than the photograph. He suggested an image that would jump off the page, grab the populace and wrestle them into action. In his view, photomontage was an ideal tool because it employed the photograph, which he saw as a reflection of the real, in the process of a design.6 Referring back to Soviet poster artist Georgi Plakhanov and filmmaker Vsvolod I. Pudovkin, Renau advocated three-dimensional images, suggesting they had more impact because of their visual presence and immediacy.7

Renau incorporated photomontage into murals, posters, and journal publications. While still in Spain, he designed many photo murals with photographic
elements blended into graphic representations so they would appear as if they were moving images, like films clips, but always three-dimensional. His posters incorporated the same ideas, blending elements of photography with practices in graphic design, always using at least three different planes, layered on top of one another, so images could travel from a point deep in the poster to a more immediate space up front.

In 1936, Renau became Director General de Bellas Artes and during the Civil War he worked as Director de Propaganda Gráfica del Comisariado General del Estado Mayor del Ejército Popular for the Republican side. During this period, he created political posters for the Spanish Communist Party using mixed techniques: painting, drawing, and photomontage. His intent was to join art and politics by creating posters to promote the Republic’s cause. One of his first jobs was to create a poster to recruit soldiers for the Fifth Regiment. In early 1937, David Alfaro Siqueiros and a group of other Mexican artists arrived in Valencia to support the Republic. Renau received them warmly and organized a conference in Siqueiros’s honor. He found that the Mexican artist’s techniques matched his own—politically, esthetically, and technically.

The Republican movement failed to stave off Franco’s advance. Renau escaped to France, and arrived in 1939 at the refugee camp of Argelès-sur-Mer. There he had to choose a country of exile and was offered France, the Soviet Union, the U.S., or Mexico. He naturally chose Mexico. Mexican president Lázaro Cardenas had opened his country to Spanish Republicans and offered them the possibility of taking Mexican citizenship. Renau, reunited with his wife and children, traveled with them to Mexico via New York.

Renau’s Mexican Exile

Renau was thirty-two years old when he arrived in Mexico with no clear prospects for employment. He looked to past acquaintances for ideas. While his old chum Siqueiros welcomed him, the Mexican artist had no job to offer. Renau eventually found a job with the printing firm Imprenta Galas, which specialized in making calendars. It was far from Renau’s vision of intimately expressing political ideas, but it put food on the table. Renau became a Mexican citizen in 1940 and mingled with the dynamic and creative group of artists living in Mexico at the time. This group included Mexicans, Europeans in exile, and Americans. Ultimately, Renau found work with Siqueiros and other artists as the Mexican government commissioned them to paint the mural Retrato de la burguesía in the main stairwell of the Mexican Electricians’ Syndicate in Mexico City.

As Jennifer Jolly adeptly demonstrates, Siqueiros and Renau were initially in agreement about their goals for this mural. They saw the commission as an opportunity to reestablish a communist presence in the Mexican Muralist movement. Both thought the mural and its team of painters could rescue other Mexican muralists from individualist, foreign, avant-garde and
bourgeois influences. Each of them felt that such projects failed to resonate with working folks and betrayed communism as a result.\(^8\) The *Retrato* team which included other painters such as Luis Arenal, Antonio Rodríguez Luna, Miguel Prieto and Antonio Pujol split, however, in the wake of Siqueiros’s forced exile in 1940.\(^9\)

While the original idea behind the joint project fit Renau’s version of a proper artists’ collective, the reality was wrought with problems. Siqueiros seemed more apt to distribute or dictate tasks than he was to share them. He also shied away from using photographs and from creating a montage of different styles, while Renau embraced them. Needless to say the final result, under Renau’s tutelage, angered Siqueiros, who chided Renau publically for prioritizing his Spanish, European ideals over the Mexican style.\(^10\)

Nationalism was the Mexican ideology of choice. What it meant in terms of Mexican art varied though, in part because of the freedom artists enjoyed and also because of their different backgrounds. Some artists saw nationalist art as non-European or, in their eyes, authentically Mexican, which either signified indigenous or mestizo themes. Others saw nationalism as a collective movement for promoting forms that were Mexican, not so much in terms of their subject matter, but in terms of their grand scale. Muralists’ works occupied primary real estate in most major public spaces, reaching beyond the bourgeois gaze into a more public milieu.\(^11\) Likewise, nationalist printmakers enjoyed broad distribution through public graphic arts collectives. The artistic collaboration and national funding in both of these media was extensive, drawing on numerous talents through syndicates. Renau appreciated the Mexican notion of a people’s art. Nonetheless, he remained an outsider in Mexico, despite his citizenship.

Although he collaborated regularly with Mexican muralists and printmakers, Renau never penetrated their inner circles, at least never enough to gain acceptance among them as a real Mexican. So, he worked on the fringes of Mexican political art, unable to communicate his intimate feelings to Mexican colleagues. One political work, for which the Mexican Ministry of Popular Education commissioned Renau, does reflect some of the rigidity that Siqueiros attributed to him. In this piece, entitled *La patria mexicana*, strong, heavily shaded and intensely angled hands hold a bayonet erect against the angled backdrop of a pyramid. The eagle perches above the architectural structure, snake secured in his mouth. These images all stand upon three vertical rectangles colored for the Mexican flag.\(^12\)

The Mexican symbols are all there, but the piece does seem to fall short of an emphatic Mexican nationalist statement. While the colors of the Mexican flag set the stage, Renau’s placement of the eagle and serpent on top of the pyramid, just above their standard position in the middle of the Mexican flag, rejects the opportunity for nationalist reproduction. More prevalent is the space at which the hands, bayonet, and pyramid meet directly below the apex of
the triangle, emphasizing the worker/soldier rather than the mystical Mexican figure of the eagle carrying the serpent. Renau, thus, prioritizes his statement of international worker solidarity over Mexican nationalism.

Renau’s other major attempt at integrating into the Mexican canon, so to speak, may come in our day, as a direct conflict with capitalist consumption ironically places his art between destruction and preservation. With his wife, Manuela Ballester, and Mexican painter Dr. Atl, Renau gained a commission to work on the central piece in Cuernavaca’s Casino de la Selva. This former hotel housed the largest collection of murals outside of Mexico City. After many years of neglect, COSTCO and a food chain aptly named California bought the property in 2001 and proceeded to demolish the vandalized and crumbling monument. Protesters convinced the U.S.-based wholesale company, however, to preserve and repair the murals, which was underway in 2004 and slotted for an adjacent cultural center right next door.

These mural commissions and other work enabled Renau to improve his financial situation. He moved to a better part of town and started a new business, Estudio Imagen Publicidad Plástica. This was a family affair; his wife Manuela Ballester, two of his sons Ruy and Totli, Rosita and Fina Ballester, Manuela’s sisters, and Renau’s brother Juanino, all worked in the business. They produced advertisements, signs, labels, displays, logos, threefold fliers, adhesive posters as well as covers for books, magazines, and records. During those years, Renau and his family designed many covers for Mexican magazines as well as commercial movie posters. Renau is best known in Mexico for his commercial efforts to promote Mexican films and for the anti-capitalist photomontage he began in Mexico but published later in Berlin as Fata Morgana.

Renau had little choice in Mexico but to create publicity posters and collect fuel for a more politicized fire during his free time. Thus, he turned to printmaking, where he emerged as a highly successful poster artist, doing more than two hundred Mexican film posters between 1945 and 1954. While some of this work reflected his artistic skill, the commercial purposes of these posters were far removed from his philosophical commitment to expressing intimate feelings of political/social ideals.

However, with few government-funded art projects and no official position in the regime, Renau needed to make money, and films were his ticket. His brother Juanino had already proven a talented poster artist in Spain, where Renau also had dabbled with film posters in 1937. Renau’s most prolific production came in the latter half of what many call the golden age of Mexican cinema, from 1935 to 1956. At that point, Mexican film began to transition from independent work to highly commercial pieces, several of which helped develop television stations, three of them in the early 1950s.

As private collector Rogelio Agrasanchez notes, Renau’s film posters sometimes featured his signature inclusion of black and white photographs
against a high-contrast color palette. Their dramatic play of light also cast reflections and shadows over intensified cubist compositions. Also present were Renau’s three-dimensional images and efficient use of multiple planes.  

*Crimen y castigo* (1950) advertised Fernando de Fuentes’s film version of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous psychological novel, *Crime and Punishment.* It seemed a likely endeavor for Renau. More than an opportunity to make a few bucks, it enabled him to work with fellow expatriate and member of the Generation of ’27, Paulino Masip Roca, who had written the screenplay. It also put him in contact with Fuentes, who was already well recognized as a fierce Mexican nationalist. Fuentes avidly rejected Hollywood, as did Renau. Fuentes argued that “Mexican cinema ought to be a faithful reflection of our severe and tragic way of being, not a poor imitation of Hollywood.”

Dostoevsky’s acclaim as a notable Russian writer held appeal in Mexico as well because ideological debates often centered on Russian characters, many of which seemed to disagree as often as Mexicans.

The main character in the story orchestrates the murder of a greedy female money lender. This, too, must have spoken to Renau. The film’s attack on greed and excess propped up against the lonely psychosis of one individual resonated strongly with him. It was no secret in 1950 that the Mexican avant-garde, in which muralists had been most prominent, broke from its collective roots because of individualism and self-absorption. Mexicans so enjoyed the character Raskolnikov, that they nominated the film’s leading man, Roberto Cañedo, for Best Actor Ariel in 1950. *Crimen y castigo* was perhaps the most artistically acclaimed film with which Renau was associated while in Mexico.

Despite the absence of Renau’s signature photomontage in *Crimen y castigo*, the poster does layer different planes on top of a stylistic portrait of Raskolnikov. This character’s image is obscured in part in the foreground with a cutout of a large blot of red, presumably the blood of his victim, which haunts his guilty conscience and serves as the primary action in the story. High contrast colors predominate here, with red and green opposing and complementing each other. Renau’s use of grey emphasizes the ax’s shadow on Raskolnikov. The green and red light on the angled face reflects Renau’s cubist influences.

Renau’s poster *Médico de guardia* (1950) cited with many others in *Cine Mexicano: Posters from the Golden Age, 1936–1956/ Carteles de la época de oro, 1936–1956*, has the same design elements as *Crimen y castigo*, but far less intensity, perhaps because the story line was less appealing to Renau, and more run of the mill. In this poster, Renau employees a stylized and colorless portrait of Armando Calvo, the lead male in the film, layered behind another artistic representation of the lead female, Lilia del Valle’s photograph. She completes the foreground in this poster, which is further emphasized by the color in her face and the grey shadow of a skeletal hand holding a bloodstained check above her. This poster offers less by way of contrasting color palettes. However, its cool blue background does contrast with the warm red lettering...
in the foreground. Aside from an apparent association of the bank with death, this poster offers little by way of artistry or commentary. Most of his movie posters seem to fit this bill, which must have been frustrating for Renau.

In 1952, however, Renau did engage his passion for photomontage in *El enamorado*. This film starred the highly successful Spanish, later turned Hollywood sensation, Sarita Montiel and Pedro Infante, the famous Mexican actor/singer. In fact, though not for his work in this film, Infante later won the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1957, one year before Renau traded in his Mexican home for one in the East German city. This particular film must have struck a chord with Renau because it featured the still photography of Gabriel Figueroa against the backdrop of the moving image. This feature encapsulated Renau’s ideas on using technology to incorporate the means of reproduction into those of production.

The poster has many of the qualities in Renau’s more appreciated works—both before and after Mexico. Like these others, it is three-dimensional, but unlike them, this one mixes media to create more texture. Far in the background is what appears to be a still photograph in black and white—perhaps a memory from the Mexican Revolution—bathed in green ink, and set as a backdrop for the impassioned and turbulent relationship of the lead characters. The next layer features a very colorful, full of life representation of Pedro Infante’s character, the cowboy and renegade revolutionary. Moving forward from that image is another cutout of Sarita’s character—colorless, with the exception of her sexualized lips. The faceless and sexed female image became a common motif in Renau’s latter and perhaps best recognized work, *Fata Morgana*.

As Renau struggled to make ends meet with film poster commissions, he collected clippings from major U.S. magazines to construct a photomontage series entitled *Fata Morgana USA/The American Way of Life*. The pieces portray the U.S.’s dark side, its fascination with consumerism, racism, sexism, brutality, and arrogance against the Third World. In these works, Renau depicts a country arrogantly projecting its military power across the globe. He represents the U.S. as a land enthralled with the rise of mass media and hyper-consumerism, embroiled in anticommunist witch-hunts, and terribly divided along racial lines. Renau uses pictures from *Look, Fortune, Holiday, National Geographic*, and *Life Magazine*, and redirects them against U.S. consumerism. Since he never lived in the U.S., he saw the place as an outsider, a Spanish exile and Mexican national living next door. In this case, exile offers him an ideal vantage point. He finally completed his series in 1976 and published it in Berlin.

Renau’s pronouncements against the U.S., especially in the context of the Cold War, reflect values held by many Western intellectuals. Like most leftist intellectuals of the twentieth century, there is no criticism of the Soviet Union, because being communist allowed them to define themselves as an opposition entity. The magnitude of Stalin’s tyranny—or indeed its very existence—was
scarcely acknowledged. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, the Western intellectual pro-Soviet stance did not change. Their ideology overrode any concerns for human rights, expansionism, and brutal repression. That may be the reason why Renau, like Picasso, stayed a member of the Communist Party and did not criticize the Soviets. Marxist-Leninist ideology defined Renau’s work so profoundly that he could not afford to discard it or his art would become meaningless. He remained defined by anti-fascism throughout his life, even though Marxist-Leninist ideological influence on the West would fade and ultimately end in the late 1970s.

**Renau’s East German Exile**

In 1958, at the age of fifty-one, Renau moved to East Berlin. His wife joined him a year later with his two youngest children. It is not clear why he moved there, though some biographers suggest he feared for his life in Mexico and that he tired of struggling to survive. Perhaps it was the offer from the East German Communist Party to work in television or a desire to pursue his politically impassioned photomontage, *The American Way of Life*. Unlike other Western intellectuals, Renau “walked the walk” by moving to Communist East Germany. However, over time, the walk proved to be too tough. One wonders how many East Germans were disgusted with *The American Way of Life*, or if they dreamed they, too, could live the American way of life. East German censors understood this and suppressed some montages with photos of food, lingerie, and consumer goods—goods that were not accessible to East Germans.²⁸

In the 1970s, his political activism faded and he became disillusioned. Was Franco’s Spain actually better than Honecker’s East Germany? Starting in 1976, Renau took several trips to Valencia. As a Mexican national, he was less likely to be arrested or harassed. East German citizens did not have the luxury to leave the country and must have resented the rights and privileges enjoyed by Renau. He died in East Germany in 1982.

In Spain, Renau’s art production was closely aligned with the ideology of the Spanish Republic—making political posters and defending the national treasury of art—and in East Germany, he worked as an official artist under the auspices, direction, and censorship of the German Democratic Republic. Unlike during his time spent in Spain and East Germany, Renau did not work as an “official” artist in Mexico. This difference makes his Mexican period that much more interesting, because it is here that we can see Renau’s true creative, artistic, and intellectual interests.

**NOTES**


5. Generally speaking, Renau expressed his ideas about the role of artists and their tools in letters published in Nueva Cultura. One heated debate between Renau and Ramón Gaya which emerged from that publication and captured his ideas poignantly is reprinted in Miguel A. Gamonal Torres, Arte y política en la guerra civil española: el caso republicano (Granada: Diputación Provincial de Granada, 1987), 166–80.

6. Ibid., 168–69.

7. Ibid.

8. Jolly, “Art of the Collective,” who cites “Carta abierta a los escritores y artistas españoles radicados en México,” October 6, 1945. Upon his return to Mexico, Siqueiros turned on Renau and other Spaniards. As Jolly notes, at “the centre of his critique was the Spaniards’ inability to function within a collective and their lack of appreciation for the Mexican Mural Movement.” 132.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


22. Antonio Para, Mexican Cinema puts the movie industry in the context of several different time periods and notes that the early 1950s saw the popularity of numerous international novels and film adaptations, 38–42.


