

## Posada's La Catrina

Who created La Catrina and when? What does she represent?

We know that the image most commonly known now as La Catrina was created by José Guadalupe Posada. We know this simply because Posada signed the printing plate on the lower right-hand side. But to date, no one knows for certain of the first appearance of the image. However, it may be that the first use was in 1912 as an undated broadside entitled, "Calaveras de la Cucaracha" (Figure 1). The assumption here is that Posada did not likely create La Catrina in 1913, which is the first known date associated with the image. It is more likely that the image was created sometime in and before November of 1912.



Figure 1 *Calaveras de la Cucaracha*

Using year 1912 as the origin date for La Catrina is based upon several factors: 1) Posada died on Jan 20, 1913 and since the first known **dated** appearance of La Catrina was in 1913 in the broadside with the title, "*Remate de Calaveras Alegres*" (Figure 2) it is not likely that he would have created La Catrina in 1913, which would have to have been in the first nineteen days of 1913. 2) Although possible, it is unlikely that the publisher (Antonio Vanegas Arroyo 1852-1917), who commissioned Posada to draw La Catrina, would have asked him to produce an image nearly a year in advance of the 1913 Day of the Dead. Why commit to



Figure 2 *Remate de Calaveras Alegres*

spending the money so early? Considering the necessity of frugality in the publishing business, it would have made no sense, particularly when there were so many other calavera images that were used or could be used if needed. Additionally, who knows what might come up more worthy of publishing between January and November 1913? There was also the possibility at the time, assuming Posada was available after his holiday break, for him to illustrate other calavera images.

To be fair, there are no known images of La Catrina with a date prior to 1912. Occasionally the date of 1910 or circa 1910 is used by some for the first publication date. However, there is little if any basis at all for this date as there is no known publication of the image bearing the date of 1910. There are, however, several other calavera images present in broadsides within the years 1910, 1911, 1912 and 1913, including at least three broadsides with calavera images appearing in 1912.<sup>1</sup> There are at least nine calavera images appearing in 1913 broadsides<sup>2</sup>, including the first dated La Catrina image. Over the years, printing plates might be used many times in broadsides, some with dates and many more without. The original La Catrina printing plate nor its only other known copy (see Figure 3) offer any

<sup>1</sup> Posada Art Foundation Archive, Calaveras

<sup>2</sup> Posada Art Foundation Archive, Calaveras

dates. Posada made acid etchings well before 1913, so plates alone provide little if any evidence for a date of publication.

Certainly, the date of 1913 could be used as the first appearance but as will be seen in the following review, 1912 seems the most likely first publication date for La Catrina.



Figure 3 La Cucaracha, zinc acid etching, working copy from Publisher Vanegas Arroyo, Posada Art Foundation Archive

In consideration of the above statements, it is necessary to review several key background elements. We know Posada produced many images for dozens of publishers, but his main employer was the Mexico City based publisher, Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Although little is really known about the depth of their relationship, there can little doubt that the two collaborated as might be expected of a publisher and his chief illustrator. Posada's association with Vanegas Arroyo lasted nearly twenty-two years, ending with the death of Posada in 1913. We know that Posada produced La Catrina for Vanegas Arroyo and when the founder passed away in 1917, his son Blas Vanegas Arroyo (1880-1950) assumed the role of editor. At the time of his father's death, Blas would have been thirty-seven years of age and after years of working at the printing house, the assumption follows that Blas would likely have

been familiar with Posada's habits and work.

In an interview with the writer historian, Anita Brenner, Blas Vanegas Arroyo described Posada's year end habit of taking time off from work to drink.

*"...On the twentieth of December he broke the bank and sent the money to Leon, to his family, and they bought for him with it big barrels of tequila, high as your waist. Then on New Year's Eve he began to drink, alone, and drank and drank till he finished all the barrels, which took from a month to a month and a half. For a fortnight after he couldn't work, because his hands shook."*<sup>3</sup>

Based upon Anita Brenner's interview with Blas, it follows that in the year of Posada's death, it would seem very unlikely that he would have been working while on his annual drinking holiday. Imagine there is a sixty-one-year-old Posada, on vacation, likely intoxicated, "hands shaking" and perhaps seriously ill (just prior to his death on January 20, 1913, of alcohol related acute enteritis). In consideration of these factors, how likely or logical is it for him to make La Catrina nearly ten months before it might be used for Day of the Dead in 1913? It makes more sense to eliminate 1913 as the date of its creation and assign 1912 as the year of creation for La Catrina.

There is one other aspect of the origin and although somewhat ancillary, it tends to be supportive of the 1912 date. During the research conducted for the documentary *Searching for Posada—Art and Revolutions*, the descendants of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo (Raul and Angel Vanegas Cedeño, Pers. Comm. 2013) communicated that the idea for La Catrina came from Antonio Vanegas Arroyo and as we know, Posada executed it. If Posada and Vanegas Arroyo were in collaborative communication, for this to

<sup>3</sup> Page 189, Posada the Prophet, Anita Brenner, 1929

happen it would more likely have had to occur prior to November 1912, because it would be more likely that Vanegas Arroyo and Posada would have collaborated prior to Posada's leaving for vacation period of December 1912 and/or January 1913. This would also tend to support a 1912 origin.

### What does La Catrina represent?

There are many interpretations about what or whom La Catrina represents. The simplest is that she reminds us of our mortality and that no matter who we are, rich or poor, that we all will end in the cemetery. This message was communicated typically by describing habits and actions of people represented as calaveras detailed in the Day of the Dead broadsides which were issued each year around November 2. These broadsides were created by publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo and illustrated at the publishing house chiefly by José Guadalupe Posada and Manual Manilla.

In the cases of the two broadsides discussed here, as with other Day of the Dead broadsides, often a satirical message is carried not only by image but by accompanying text as well. The text might cover a variety of topics typically casting light on aspects of our human nature while pointing out the folly of what we do in our everyday lives. In some cases, an image or group of images is specific to the text(s) associated with it. Because an image may have the ability to stand on its own or if it is generic enough, it might be used a multitude of times for different purposes accompanied again by new verses written by the staff writers at the printing house of Vanegas Arroyo.

When examining the name La Catrina, it is important to know that it derived from Spanish and that it is the feminine form of El Catrin. The term can be used to ridicule someone and when used as such, may be translated from Spanish to the English simply using the word "dandy" for a man or woman whose habit is overly caught up with attention to dress, speech, and deportment. The first use of the term in print related to the image of La Catrina and the publishing house of Vanegas Arroyo may have been in the last stanza of *Calaveras de la Cucaracha*.

*De Muertes de hambre (caterines,) Of starving, dandies,  
De viejas de vecindad, Of old women of the neighborhood,  
De toreros, gachupínes, Of bullfighters, "arrogant prejudiced colonizer Spaniards(?)",  
Que rolan por la ciudad. That go around the city.*

The most recognized print appearance of the term was in the 1930 *Monografia de 406 grabados de José Guadalupe Posada*, on Page 160, edited by Francis Toor, Blas Vanegas Arroyo and Pablo O'Higgins (see Figure 4). Both Francis Toor and Diego Rivera provide written forewords. Although the artist Diego Rivera is often quoted as giving the image the name, there is no compelling evidence for the assignment. It could be argued that the name originated in a collective sense from the editors of the *Monografia*, or perhaps just from one member of the group, even Antonio Vanegas Arroyo or son Blas. Years later, in the 1947 mural, "Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Central Park", Diego Rivera would create a full-length image of La Catrina. Growth in popularity of the image may be credited to Rivera image, along with continued

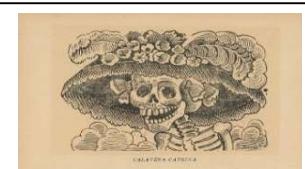


Figure 4 La Catrina  
1930 *Monografia de 406 grabados de José Guadalupe Posada*, on Page 160.

impressions of the original plate by the Vanegas Arroyo printing house and use of the image by the artists' collective the *Taller Grafica Popular*.

Review of the broadside texts in which La Catrina first appeared carry a wealth of historical and cultural information or perspective regarding late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century attitudes toward women. In the examples of the two earliest known broadsides containing La Catrina, "*Calaveras de la Cucaracha*" and "*Remate de Calaveras Alegres*" there are references to women as *cucarachas* and *garbanceras*. Although there are differences in interpretation, neither term is particularly complementary of women and generally serve as commentary on the habits of some women with reference or bias toward Mexico's indigenous and or indigenous mixed with lighter complexioned ("white") peoples. This is not necessarily restricted to women with darker skin; "Women in particular are pressured to 'whiten' their bodies in adherence to beauty standards, as class and 'racial' classifications are fluid, relational and intertwined categories in Mexico." Krozer & Gómez.<sup>4</sup>

What the cucaracha represents symbolically is addressed by a number of researchers. There are a variety of interpretations. Since the word cucaracha is a Spanish word for cockroach, it is fairly clear that there is an analogy to the cockroach insect (its brown coloration or appearance and its ubiquitous habit in some respects). There is also the song, with a variety of lyrics, called La Cucaracha. In a historical review, the origins are muddled. Whatever the term's origin might be, there is a consistent association with people under specific circumstances likely relating to wars or socio-economic influences. Lastly, as far as the broadside *Calaveras de la Cucaracha* (1912?) is concerned, the cucaracha is female.

With respect to the times, under the generalized heading of "cucaracha" might be found the terms: camp followers, *soldaderas* or *adelitas*. These terms are clearly associated with the Mexican Revolution and impart a connection to varied women's roles ranging from surrogate wives, general camp supporters, soldiering and even as spies. But the term cucaracha also has more of a dual meaning. Despite the more noble roles above, the drawing "Dance of the Cucarachas" (see Figure 5) by José Clemente Orozco<sup>5</sup>, depicts the cucarachas with a bawdier licentious side. This less than complimentary view is echoed by Elizabeth Salas<sup>6</sup> 'La cucaracha' wanted money for alcohol and



Figure 5 Dance of the Cucarachas (1915)

marijuana. She was often so drunk or stoned that she could not walk straight."

Since the Mexican Revolution was very active in the time of the proposed date of 1912, the text of the broadside *Calaveras de la Cucaracha* may offer some clues to the meaning. The text has lines describing the cucaracha travelling around, dancing, drinking and playing music. This may fit in more with the Orozco depiction. The general tone of the text carries a strong note of merrymaking, even with Don Tonchito Vanegas, a priest and others. Reference to the cucaracha travelling to Vera Cruz may suggest that she (or others like her) may have been camp

followers or headed there because of the military conflict (in support thereof or to benefit from) related

<sup>4</sup> Krozer, Alice & Gómez, Andrea. (2021). Not in the eyes of the beholder: Racialization, Whiteness and Beauty Standards in Mexico Working Paper # 5 Project on Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> "Dance of the Cucarachas" (1915) by José Clemente Orozco, INAH Media Library

<sup>6</sup> Salas, Elizabeth (January 1990). *Mexican Military: Myth and History*. University of Texas Press.

to the Mexican Revolution or the American invasion of 1912. The hardships created by the revolution as well as socio-economic forces certainly drove many to adapt to extreme measures to survive. Anyone who has tried to exterminate cockroaches from their home knows of their survival skills. The end is clear, however, as no matter what the cucaracha is doing, the reasons or what the degree of merrymaking might be or with whom, death is the outcome.

In examination of the second La Catrina broadside from 1913, the bold headline of "*Remate de Calaveras Alegres*" reads: "*Las que hoy son empolvados Garbanceras pararan en deformes calaveras.*" or translated, "Those today that are powdered 'chickpeas, aka *garbanceras*' will end up in deformed skulls." This statement implies that whomever the intended target of the broadside was, at least in part referencing *garbanceras* or women holding menial jobs such as marketplace sellers (hawking chickpeas for example), that they were aspiring to appear whiter. Or maybe it is a play on words comparing not just the women with powdered faces to the dried white garbanzos (somewhat resembling small skulls) that they are selling but also indicting women in general who whiten their faces.

The chickpea or garbanzo was introduced from Spain and by the time of Posada and Vanegas Arroyo was certainly sold in many markets within Mexico. Since the garbanzo was introduced by the Spanish (ironically it is now a major cash crop in Mexico), but at the time likely eaten more by people with a stronger European (Spanish) food preference, (immigrants and people in general tend to gravitate to what they are used to eating), so it seems that the term *garbancera* had a negative connotation. If so, this would be a usage similar to the term *gauchupine* which could be used as a pejorative for someone from Spain who held their origin above a native Mexican. Vanegas Arroyo seems to use the term *garbancera* only in the feminine form. It appears in at least three other broadsides. In the 1913 broadside, with the same title as the one containing La Catrina, *Remate de Calaveras Alegres*, the reference again is to the powdered faced *garbanceras* that will end up as deformed skulls.

The desire to appear whiter was driven by two factors: 1) wealth was concentrated more in the hands of fair skinned population and 2) the ability to advance socially was color biased toward the advantage of whiteness. The Mexican census of 1921<sup>7</sup> estimated that roughly 29% of Mexico's population was considered pure indigenous, 60% indigenous mixed with white and 10% white. It seems reasonable to speculate that these ethnic percentages in 1912, might have been similar or even more exaggerated, and accordingly it would be fair to suggest that although the image in the broadside might apply mainly to the larger indigenous segment of the population, it would likely not exclude anyone in the population, even the wealthy or privileged.

Putting powder on one's face to appear whiter was not restricted to anyone of a particular color or race. It was considered desirable as white was perceived as more beautiful. The lightness of skin has been associated with people who do not labor under the sun. Usually, the upper class or wealthy who can afford to pay for menial labor were



Figure 6 Lily Raigosa de Diaz, daughter-in-law of Porfirio Diaz, Mexico City, Ca. 1897. Large hat in French style, adorned with exotic plumage. INAH Media Library

<sup>7</sup> 1921 Mexican Census, <https://en.www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/1921/>

able to avoid working out under the sun.<sup>8</sup> In addition, President Porfirio Diaz, over the twenty-four some odd years of his presidency helped introduce French culture to the population. People in the lower ranks of society might naturally have wanted to aspire to or to emulate those at the top. The image of Porfirio Diaz's daughter-in-law, Lily Raigosa (see Figure 6), might easily have served as a model for La Catrina *sans calavera*. For the *garbancera*, or any woman for that matter, wearing large wide brimmed hats helped keep the sun off of skin thereby preventing darkening of the skin. Hats adorned with costly decorations of flowers and ostrich feathers was also a display or sign of wealth.

For whatever reason(s) Vanegas Arroyo elected to target women in the two broadsides reviewed here. Vanegas Arroyo and Posada are diplomatic about what they have given us. Together whether labelled as cucarachas or garbanceras, we are shown that although some may be considered economically disadvantaged and some rich, white or dark skinned, in death we all equal.

### Closing Reflections

In reference to the first publication date of the La Catrina image, since the terms *cucaracha* and *garbancera* are similar, if the first appearance was in 1912, it might be that after Posada's death, Antonio Vanegas Arroyo decided to run the image again in 1913 but with a date, along with at least nine other calavera image all dated 1913. Why? Perhaps he was in some way memorializing the year of Posada's death with a tribute using what would ultimately become Posada's most iconic image? We will likely never know.

What inspired Posada and Vanegas Arroyo to create La Catrina? This is difficult if not impossible to answer. There are no known surviving quotes from Posada and no known explanations or reasons provided by Vanegas Arroyo. Why did they use calaveras as illustrations? The use of calaveras is covered by a variety of authors and in the article: "Posada and the Day of the Dead" <https://www.posada-art-foundation.com/posada-s-day-of-the-dead>. They were not the first to employ the use, but they were commercially successful at it.

Today, sometimes La Catrina is referred to as the Grand Dame of Death or the embodiment of *Mictēcacihuātl*, the Aztec goddess of death. The Grand Dame of Death is a modern moniker, among many and whether Posada or Vanegas Arroyo were even remotely thinking specifically of *Mictēcacihuātl* when La Catrina was created is speculative. Why did Vanegas Arroyo decide to lampoon women as *cucarachas* and *garbanceras*? We know that Vanegas Arroyo liked to express moral perspective<sup>9</sup> via many of his publications, perhaps La Catrina was a way to remind women or readers in general that a more correct path might be available. Who can say? Lastly, the image of Porfirio Diaz's daughter-in-law comes to mind as it could easily have served as a model for La Catrina's hat but then so might hats from any number of women from harlot to aristocracy, again the theme of death as the great equalizer is ever present.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/gesundheit/psychologie/helle-haut-warum-hautbleichmittel-weltweit-boomen-a-917876.html>

<sup>9</sup> Page 6, Frank, Patrick. Posada's Broadsheets: Mexican Popular Imagery, 1890-1910. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998.