



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

Leopoldo Méndez
Las primeras luces
(The First Lights)
1948



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Leopoldo Méndez (Mexican, 1902–1969)

Las primeras luces (The First Lights), plate 8 from the series “Río Escondido,” 1948

Linocut

Image: 12 x 16 5/16 inches

Sheet: 15 5/16 x 19 13/16 inches

Museum Purchase: Marion McGill Lawrence Fund

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Leopoldo Méndez is among the best-known Mexican printmakers of the twentieth century. Born into a poor family in Mexico City and orphaned at a young age, Méndez dedicated his life and art to political causes. Méndez felt that art should advance social justice, rather than be an egocentric, money-making pursuit. Printmaking, which was able to reach a wide audience at minimal cost, perfectly suited his artistic aims. He was a founding member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (The Popular Graphic Art Workshop), commonly known as the TGP, a collective that created bold graphics in support of social reform. As their manifesto stated, this idealistic group believed that “in order to serve the people, art must reflect the social reality of the times and have unity in content and form.”

This dramatic image by Leopoldo Méndez depicts a woman and two children paying homage to Mexico’s former president Benito Juárez (1806-1872), who is represented in the print that the woman holds in her right hand. Juárez, who hailed from a Zapotec family, was the nation’s first president of Indigenous origin. He was venerated for his defense of independence and democracy, especially during the historic Battle of Puebla. On May 5, 1862, under-equipped and outnumbered Mexican troops defeated the French army under Napoleon III, who were fighting to place Mexico under the rule of Maximilian of Austria (This victory is celebrated on the Mexican-American holiday Cinco de Mayo). Juárez is remembered as the president who gave Mexico its first experience of stable, good government; resisted European efforts to recolonize the country; and laid the groundwork for modernization.

Méndez used the technique of linocut to create this bold image. Linocut is a form of relief printing, similar in technique and concept to woodcut and rubber stamps, in which the image area is raised and the non-image area is lowered. The artist uses a sharp tool, typically a V-shaped chisel or gouge, to carve into the linoleum support or “matrix.” Ink is then applied to the raised area with a “brayer” (roller), and a dampened sheet of paper is placed on top of the matrix, and rubbed with a baren (a disk-shaped hand tool). When the paper is removed, the design is printed in a mirror image of the matrix. The matrix could be re-inked in the same fashion to create more identical sheets, thereby allowing the artist to produce multiple impressions from the same matrix. In *Las primeras luces*, Méndez alternated short cuts with longer lines of his chisel to create a brilliant effect of light bursting from the background and uniting the figures in its glow. The artist suggests the tender feelings among the family members by their tight grouping and details such as the mother’s hand on the girl’s shoulder. Their quiet reverence for the print of Juárez and the boy’s Mexican flag indicate their love for their country.

This is one of ten linocuts Méndez created in conjunction with the feature film *Río Escondido (Hidden River)*, directed by Emilio Fernández. Méndez’s prints serve as the backgrounds for the title sequence. Their bold surfaces and humble subjects introduce the film and foreshadow the eventual triumph of the heroine and her fellow townspeople over the oppressive local boss. The reference to Benito Juárez would have resonated immediately with audiences in 1947, as Mexico emerged from World War II to pursue industrialization and civilian

rule. Méndez’s message speaks to viewers today as well. Significantly, the movie *Río Escondido* is about a physical thirst and a thirst for liberty—the cruel boss controls the community’s water resources. It emphasizes the importance of education and popular resistance—the heroine is a teacher who inspires the townsfolk to overthrow their oppressor. Water rights, sovereignty, education, and activism all remain vital issues for Indigenous communities in Mexico as well as the United States.

Art Terms adapted from the International Print Center New York (IPCNY) Glossary

Linocut: A relief technique using a sheet of linoleum from which shapes are gouged away using chisels or knives, leaving the printing image as the raised surface. Ink is transferred from the surface of the block by the application of pressure. Linoleum is softer and therefore easier to carve than wood.

Matrix: A physical surface (such as a sheet of linoleum or a block of wood) that can be manipulated to hold ink, which is then transferred to paper.

Baren: Hand tool used to firmly rub the back of the sheet of paper in order to pick up ink from the matrix.

Brayer: A roller used to spread ink on a matrix.

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Discussion and Activities

1. Look closely at this image for 30 seconds. Write down five words or phrases describing what you see. Look again for 30 seconds and write down five more words, noting any details that you didn’t catch the first time you looked. What do you think the relationships are between the people portrayed? How do you think the woman and children feel toward the man in the picture she holds? What elements of the image suggest their feelings?
2. Leopoldo Méndez belonged to an artists’ group that believed “in order to serve the people, art must reflect the social reality of the times and have unity in content and form.” How do you interpret this statement? What does it mean for art to “serve the people” or “reflect the social reality of the times”? What does it mean for art to “have unity in content and form”? How does this artwork fulfill this mission? What is the piece asking us to engage in politically or socially in order to create change?
3. Why do you think Méndez titled this work *Las primeras luces (The First Lights)*?
4. Write a story inspired by this scene. Why are these figures gathered together to look at this picture? Who are they? What happened just before this moment, and what will happen next?
5. Create a linocut print of your own. Experiment with the effects of short cuts and long, deeper cuts and more shallow ones. What new insights do you gain into Méndez’s work and his techniques based on your own experience?

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