

# EDUCATOR RESOURCE PACKET



## ZAPATA

1930

José Clemente Orozco

(Mexican, 1883–1949)

ART  
INSTITUTE  
CHICAGO

This resource packet is designed to guide K–12 educators as they integrate artwork into their curriculums. It focuses on a single work of art from the museum’s collection and provides information about the artwork, the artist, and the historical context of the piece. Suggested activities and discussion prompts, as well as keywords, references, and a glossary, are included as tools for educators to use and reference as they craft their lesson plans.

## TIPS FOR USING THIS PACKET

- As you prepare to discuss *Zapata* with your class, read the information on the work below and become familiar with the discussion questions that follow. For further direction on how to lead a discussion about a work of art, consult the [Art + History](#) page on the Art Institute’s website.
- After your students have had a chance to examine the details of *Zapata*, ask them to read the essay and, in pairs or small groups, explore the discussion and essential questions highlighted throughout the text.
- To deepen their understanding of the Mexican Revolution, prompt students to compare *Zapata* to the other historical sources listed in the back of this packet.

### Keywords

revolution            power  
dictatorship        representation  
identity              public art  
political

## ZAPATA: A COMPLEX HERO

### *Who was the artist?*

José Clemente Orozco was a leading figure of the **Mexican mural movement** during the 1920s and 30s. He studied painting at an art academy in Mexico City and later cited the satirical illustrations of Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) as one of his greatest inspirations. The start of his artistic career coincided with the Mexican Revolution (1910), and the atrocities he witnessed during this period greatly influenced his art and political views. The revolution arose in response to the growing gap between rich and poor in Mexico and was spurred on by rebels throughout the country who fought against the regime of the dictator in power, Porfirio Díaz.

### *What does it mean to be a revolutionary? Are revolutionaries always heroes?*

One of the rebel leaders was Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919), a peasant from southern Mexico who crusaded against the country’s wealthy landowners for the return of land to the peasants. In 1911 he led an uprising against Díaz’s troops and secured control of the southern part of the country. Particularly after his assassination, Zapata became

a heroic figure throughout Mexico. Some artists, such as Diego Rivera, were supportive of the revolution and its leaders, but Orozco held doubts about the conflict. Although he supported the ideas behind the revolution, he was deeply disturbed by its bloodshed. In the early 1920s, Orozco worked in Mexico on several **fresco** paintings depicting violence and social upheaval. After being strongly attacked by conservative critics, he moved to the United States in 1927 and became a pioneer of the public arts movement spurred on by the **New Deal**. During his seven-year stay in the United States, Orozco painted several murals and easel paintings, including one of Zapata.

### *How might artists shape our understanding of revolution?*

In the painting, Zapata appears as an ominous figure in the open door of a peasant hut. Silhouetted against a patch of bright sky, he is framed by the intersecting diagonals of outstretched arms and pointed sombreros. Given his heroic status, Zapata is curiously placed in the background of the composition, upstaged by the frightened, oppressed peasants and fierce, stalwart soldiers that dominate the painting’s crowded space. It is unclear whether the peasants

are beseeching the soldiers for help or asking them to leave them unharmed. Further challenging the conventions of heroic characterization, Orozco placed a sword point just under Zapata's eye. Other menacing details, including bullets and a dagger, allude to the dangers of the revolution and to Zapata's own violent death. The painting's dark reds, browns, and blacks, applied to the canvas in rough, **expressionistic** strokes, evoke the Mexican landscape and the bloodletting of its people. Rather than merely glorify the rebel leader, Orozco chose to depict a potentially critical view of the revolutionary and to emphasize the cause and community to which Zapata dedicated his life.

## LOOK, EXPLORE, AND DISCUSS

**Invite students to look closely at the image in silence for a sustained period of time (1–2 minutes, if possible).**

What do you notice about the figures in the painting, particularly their body language and physical relationships to one another?

**Ask for volunteers to pose like the figures in the work and to talk about how they feel.**

Based on their positioning, do you think the soldiers and Zapata have a positive or negative relationship? What about Zapata's relationship to the peasants? What have you seen or felt that makes you think this?

What other details can help you understand the nature of the relationships between the figures? What about the space? The colors? The brushstrokes? Do these aspects enhance or challenge your initial characterization of the relationships between the figures? Why?

Where are you, the viewer, in this painting? How does the artist involve you (or not involve you) in this moment?

How does Orozco convey his conflicted opinion about the revolution?

Compare *Zapata* with the images in this packet by Diego Rivera and José Guadalupe Posada. What do you see that is similar or different between them?

After studying these images, what new ideas or questions do you have about Mexican history and the revolution? How might you further explore these ideas and questions? What other sources might you consult?

## EXPLORE RELATED HISTORICAL SOURCES

These resources provide additional perspectives on Zapata, revolution, and artistic practice in Mexico in the period of 1910–30.

\*Included in this packet

Campobello, Nellie. *Cartucho and My Mother's Hands*. Translated by Doris Meyer and Irene Matthews. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988.

\*Posada, José Guadalupe. *Revolutionary Calavera* (about 1910). Photo-relief etching (drawing style) in black on green wove paper. 400 x 300 mm. William McCallin McKee Memorial Endowment, 1943.1288.

Orozco, José Clemente. *An Autobiography*. Translated by Robert C. Stephenson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962.

\*Rivera, Diego. *Zapata*, 1932. Lithograph in black on paper. Print Sales Miscellaneous Fund, 1935.230. © 2018 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D. F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## GLOSSARY

**Mexican mural movement:** A rise in the production of murals (large paintings applied directly to the walls and ceilings) that powerfully portrayed the history and struggle of working-class Mexicans. Inspired by the Mexican Revolution of 1910, these works exhibit a narrative style, incorporating elements drawn from native folk traditions and pre-colonial art, making it an “art of the people.”

**fresco:** The technique of painting large-scale scenes directly onto walls, developed by the ancient Romans and made popular in the Italian Renaissance. Painters applied pigments to wet plaster to decorate architectural features in Italian villas or churches. One of the most famous examples is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling at the Vatican in Rome.

**New Deal:** Domestic policies introduced under the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1932–45, which stressed government aid and special programs to help people in need and improve conditions for workers.

**expressionistic:** Of or pertaining to an artistic style that seeks to intensify emotion or mood through distortions of formal elements, such as color, shape, and space.



# CALAVERA



# REVOLUCIONARIA



La calavera valiente

*Hoy acaba de llegar,*



Todos quítense el sombrero

*Que así la deben mirar.*



¡Ya vinieron! ¡Ya vinieron!  
las terribles Calaveras  
que nos traen en este año  
la "Parca" muy traicionera!

Ya ven llegar a Serrano  
que quería ser Presidente:  
¡Allí viene en aeroplano  
este General valiente!

La Parca pudo más que él  
pues se lo echó de veras,  
y en compañía de "Miguel"  
hoy los dos son Calaveras.

¡Allá el general Vidal  
va llegando a la carrera;  
por que una bala fatal  
lo hizo también Calaveral!

Mi General H. Almada  
también no se ha de escapar:  
pero este no de una bala  
se lo debo de desear.

Pero si la muerte flaca  
le llegará cualquier día,  
lo cargará en su petaca  
y hasta el centro de la tierra,  
con su eterna felonía  
postrará su Calavera.

El Señor General Gómez  
que también está presente  
también irá a los Panteones  
en compañía de su gente.

Por ahora, Dios lo guarde,  
y lo conserve cien años,  
pero, aunque tarde, muy tarde,  
la muerte con sus engaños,  
lo echará en su faltriquera  
y a la tierra, entre gusanos,  
dejará su Calavera.

5 CTS.

Los Generales Azuara,  
Celis, Medina, Aguilar,  
—no siendo cosa de bois—  
al Panteón han de ir a dar.

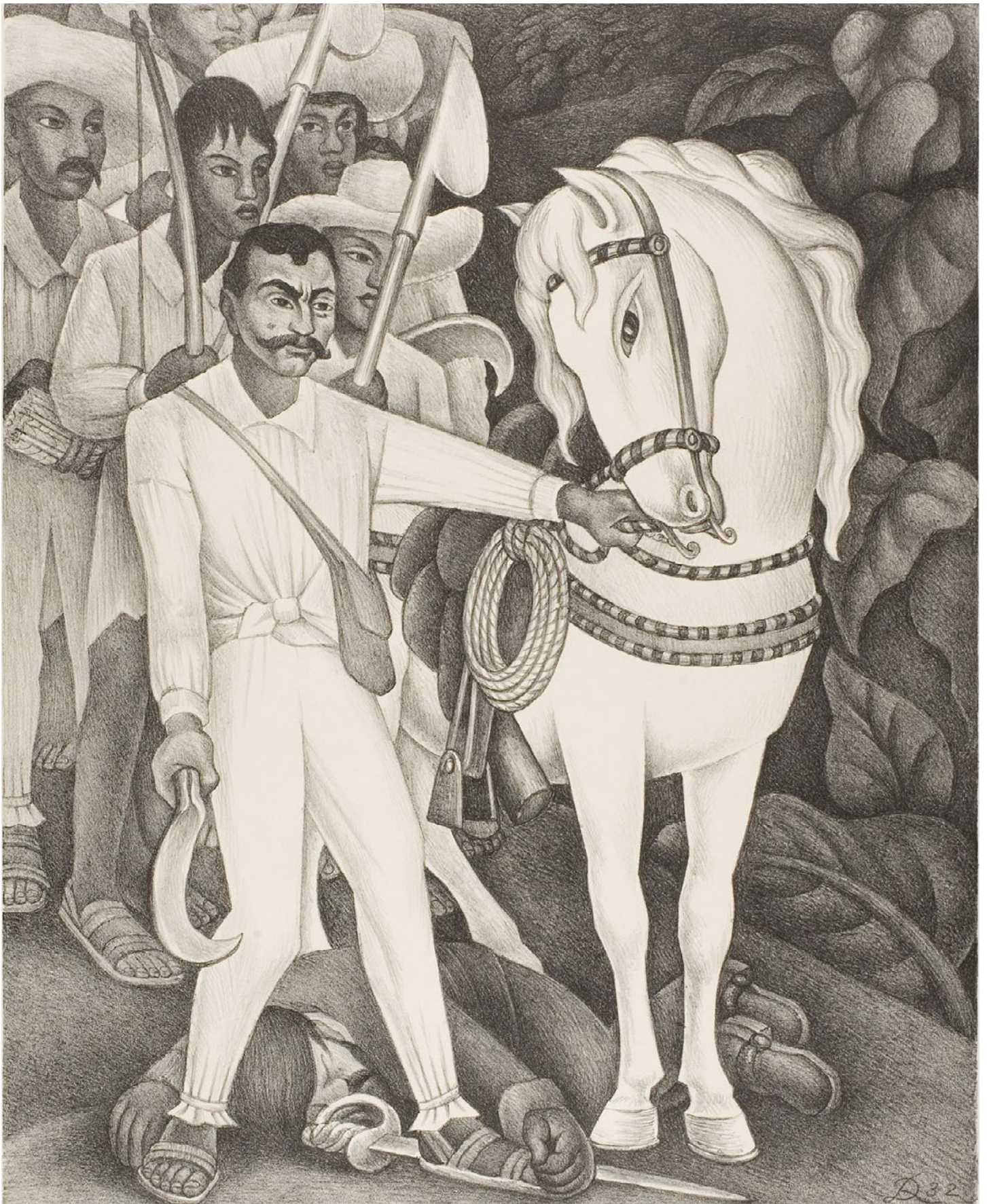
Que venga la muerte y su ha-  
y los sigue con cuidado, cha  
y como una eucaracha  
en los antros de la tierra,  
¡hasta el último soldado  
los convierta en calavera!

En fin, todos, todos todos:  
los que han muerto en rebelión,  
va van llegando al Panteón  
amarraditos de codos.

¡Todos! ¡Ivan al Panteón  
por esas lejanas calles  
y yo mismo por bufón  
¡no exponer más detalles;  
volvamos a la tierra  
aunque sea de aquí a cien años,  
y convertida en gusanos  
¡nuestra Sacra Calavera!



José Guadalupe Posada. *Revolutionary Calavera* (about 1910). Photo-relief etching (drawing style) in black on green wove paper. 400 x 300 mm. William McCallin McKee Memorial Endowment, 1943.1288.



Diego Rivera. *Zapata*, 1932. Lithograph in black on paper. Print Sales Miscellaneous Fund, 1935.230. © 2018 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D. F. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



José Clemente Orozco. *Zapata*, 1930. Oil on canvas. 198.8 × 122.6 cm (78 ¼ × 48 ¼ in.). Gift of Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1941.35. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SOMAAP, Mexico City.

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