



Today's Masterpiece: Leopoldo Méndez (Mexican, 1902 – 1969), [La carreta \(The Cart\)](#), 1953. Linocut on paper. Gift of Forrest D. Colburn, 2019.11.

Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA!** I'm your host, **Michael Brown**, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is by Leopoldo Méndez, the Mexican-born printmaker and political activist whose impact on twentieth-century art in the Americas rivaled that of Diego Rivera and the Mexican Muralists.

Born in Mexico City in 1902 and raised in poverty by his extended family after the death of his parents, Leopoldo Méndez never achieved the fame of his great muralist contemporaries, nor did he seek it. After attending the prestigious Academy of San Carlos with the leading painter, Saturnino Herrán, Méndez went to study with the realist Alfredo Ramos Martínez before briefly joining the Estridentismo movement in the mid-1920s. The revolutionary group also attracted French polymath Jean Charlot, as well as photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston.

Méndez became interested in printmaking as a means of illustration – unlike his academic training, it offered him the opportunity to depict people in action. He would dedicate the rest of his life to this medium, founding the influential Taller de Gráfica Popular (the TGP, or Popular Graphics Workshop) in 1937 and carrying out over 700 individual designs, most notably in lithography and linoleum engraving. For Méndez, art-making was a collective activity inseparable from political agitation; printmaking, while perhaps lower-profile than mural-painting, found an even bigger, broader audience based on its large production and ease of dissemination. Like the Muralist movement, the TGP was dedicated to sociopolitical causes such as workers' rights, Indigenous heritage, and anti-Fascist propaganda.

In this expressive linocut, Méndez depicts a family of agrarian laborers as they move slowly through a rugged landscape towards a setting sun. Wearing the familiar campesino straw hat, the male figure at left drives a team of oxen pulling a wooden cart or wagon in which a weary mother comforts her sleeping child. Drawing on Renaissance images of the Pietà and his own autobiography (Méndez's Indigenous mother was herself a farm worker), the artist elicits a powerful empathy in the viewer.

The left side of the composition is dominated by a mature, firmly-rooted nopal or 'prickly pear' cactus, which both looms over and embraces the family group. The tree's depiction is dramatically incised and heavily inked, as Méndez takes full advantage of the expressive contour lines allowed by the linocut medium. The stalwart presence of the cactus serves as a frame and milestone of the family's slow but determined progress.



Contemporary viewers would have immediately recognized the nopal as an enduring symbol of Mexico itself, appearing not just as it does on the national flag – crowned by an eagle – but also in numerous sixteenth-century Indigenous and early post-conquest manuscripts such as the Mendoza Codex, in which it symbolized the Nahua capital of Tenochtitlán and its people.

This has been **Michael Brown** with **Masterpiece Minute** – thanks for listening here on **Virtual SDMA**.



Today's Masterpiece: Leopoldo Méndez (Mexican, 1902 – 1969), [La carreta \(The Cart\)](#), 1953. Linocut on paper. Gift of Forrest D. Colburn, 2019.11.