

Gift of the Skeletons

Anonymous

While many of the realities of the Porfiriato were grim, the regime was not able to suppress a vibrant popular culture. Anonymously written poetry often ridiculed the pretensions of the rich, lampooned the great dictator, or commented wryly on the injustices of early-twentieth-century Mexico. The *calavera*—the dancing skeleton or grinning skull—was a staple in the popular etchings of José Guadalupe Posada, which often illustrated popular political verse of the day. These skeletal figures served to remind Mexicans that death (perhaps catalyzed by popular revolt) would level even the most extreme social hierarchy.

The Englishman's a skeleton,
So's the Italiano.
The Frenchman is a skeleton, too,
Even Maximiliano.
The cardinals and dukes and counts,
The Pope himself in Rome;
The Presidents of Nations
And kings upon their thrones—
In the grave, they all are equal:
Just a heap of bones.

The general is a skeleton,
And all the general's men.
The colonels and comandants,
And the crazy *capitán*.
The sergeants are all lined up
In military style;
Next will come the corporals
And the other rank-and-file—
Soldiers by the hundreds
Are just skeletons in a pile.



Artist José Guadalupe Posada achieved tremendous popularity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexico with his famous *calavera* etchings. (From Roberto Berdecio and Stanley Appelbaum, eds., *Posada's Popular Mexican Prints* [New York: Dover Publications, 1972], 3)

The drunken little martyrs
Are souls free of sin,
Because they've paid their debts
In this world that we are in.
The innocent children suffer,
In the cold, hard earth so deep,
While the sick or those in prison
Find no comfort as they weep.
They should be angels up in heaven,
Not just skeletons in a heap.