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*Lincoln Cushing has at various times been a printer, artist, librarian, archivist, and author. He is involved in numerous efforts to document, catalog and disseminate oppositional political culture of the late 20th century. His books include *Revolución! Cuban Poster Art* (Chronicle Books, 2003), *Visions of Peace & Justice: 30 Years of Political Posters from the Archives of Inkworks Press* (2007), *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (Chronicle Books 2007), *Agitate! Educate! Organize! – American Labor Posters* (Cornell University Press, 2009) and an illustrated essay in *Ten Years That Shook The City – San Francisco 1968-1978* (City Lights Books, 2011). He was the guest curator at the Oakland Museum of California for the 2012 exhibition *All Of Us Or None – Poster Art of the San Francisco Bay Area*, and author of a catalog by the same title (*Heyday*, 2012). His research and publishing projects can be seen at www.docspopuli.org*



04.

PART FOUR

THE CUBAN POSTER

PRIDE AND DETERMINATION

by Lincoln Cushing



LINCOLN CUSHING



01.



66.

01.

(opposite)

“Neither Nations nor Men Respect Anyone Who Fails to Make Himself Respected”

1985, by Rene Mederos Pazos, for EP [DOR].

José Martí (1853–1895) was an author and Cuban patriot who dedicated his life to the overthrow of Spanish rule. He lived in exile in New York City from January 1880 to January 1895, where he founded a newspaper and a children’s magazine.

02.

(overleaf)

“Cuba 1952,”

1973, by René Mederos Pazos, for Editora Política [COR].

This visual exploration of the oppression suffered by the Cuban people under the Batista dictatorship is from the “Moncada” poster series. It is captioned with a quote from Fidel Castro’s “History Will Absolve Me” speech made in his own defense. Castro was on trial for his role in the failed attack on the military barracks on July 26, 1953, considered the beginning of the Cuban revolution: “To these people whose desperate roads through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayal and false promises, we were not going to say: ‘We will give you ...’ but rather: ‘Here it is, now fight for it with everything you have, so that liberty and happiness may be yours!’”

67.



LIFE
EN ESPAÑOL

Firestone



Kodak



Western Electric



DUPONT



PRESIDENTE

LIBERIA

FUBA

PAU
27

SENADOP

JUSTICIA

HAMBRE

HUESTRABAJO

MATERIA PEDIMOS T

ABAJO LA DICTADURA



Posters have played a long, distinguished and important role in public life in Cuba, going back as far as the start of the twentieth century. At that time, the immediacy of a poster was an essential element in a society where literacy rates were low. Poster art was art with a clear function: to deliver a message.

Its clearest antecedents in the modern age – the so-called Republican era – are to be found in graphic arts magazines such as *Carteles*, which was founded in 1902 and remained in print until the 1960s. The subject matter covered the usual range: theatrical performances and shows, seasonal and festive events, and of course, sales messages.

After the Revolution in 1959, however, many of those subjects changed, and artists were focusing on public issues and initiatives such as literacy drives, motivational or inspirational messages, political slogans and public health advice.

It is this late development of the genre that concerns the following essay by Lincoln Cushing – an authority both on the history of the poster and of the particular life it has had in Cuba for the past fifty years or so.

The Cuban Poster

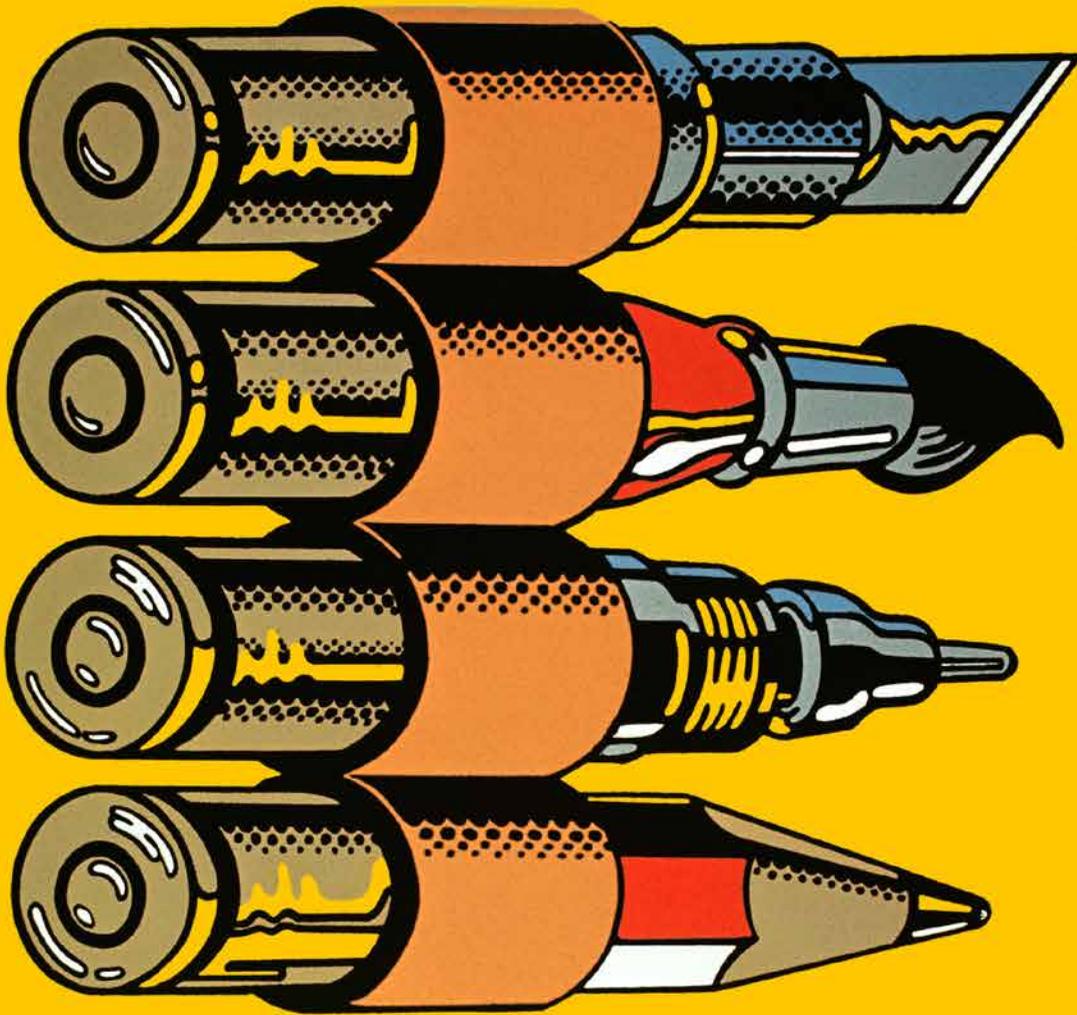
Cuba has long occupied a world presence in several things far out of proportion to its size – tobacco, rum, and revolutionary politics. To those, we should also add posters.

The 2001 catalog for “Troubled Images,” an exhibition about the conflict in Northern Ireland at Belfast’s Linen Hall Library, postulates that “Political posters may be propaganda, but they are as close to art as many in our society come.” There’s a lot we can learn about Cuba from the massive outpouring of these vibrant works. Most were produced during the “Golden Age” of Cuban posters, the period from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s.

The posters offer a significant insight into Cuban life. Impressive as they are as artistic artifacts, their deeper value lies in their ability to help us understand the Cuba of this period. It was one of those historical moments when human capital was more important than financial capital, when public voluntarism was commonplace, and self-sacrifice expected. Social experimentation was the order of the day. Many people’s lives were fundamentally transformed, and old political struggles were resolved as new ones emerged.

Cuba is a literate nation of eleven million people. Havana itself is a cosmopolitan capital of one million, and has been a cultural nexus between the Old World and the new ever since the “discovery” of the Americas in 1492. From the beginning, Cuban artists and intellectuals have been active in creating their own national culture. During the intense period before the 1959 revolution, artists of all stylistic persuasions were adding their skills to the overthrow of the dictator Fulgencio Batista. Afterwards, posters evolved to a world-class level.





**PRIMER ENCUENTRO DE DISEÑO
GRAFICO DE LA UNEAC
Marzo de 1979
Sala "Rubén Martínez Villena"
Calle 17 esq. a H, Vedado**

03.

(opposite)

**"First conference of UNEAC
graphic design"**

1979, by Francisco Masvidal

*Cubans take their revolutionary
culture very seriously, as
evidenced by this poster for the
National Union of Writers and
Artists of Cuba.*



04.

"Cut Until the Last Cane"

1971, by Gladys Acosta, for EP [COR].

*Sugar and tobacco were Cuba's colonial legacy monoculture
crops, and remained very important in the post-
revolutionary economy. The U.S. imported a third of its
sugar from Cuba until the government imposed an economic
embargo in 1960. Sugar beets grown elsewhere now rule, and
Cuba's world dominance has faded. This striking poster uses
the text as a machete to cut the artistically-enhanced cane.*

It didn't happen right away. In the years immediately following the Revolution there was no sign that this art form would blossom. Early public artwork was generally described as unimaginative and hackneyed. In the words of one observer, "commercial standards of realistic illustration of the Batista era were [simply] given a new political orientation." By the mid-1960s the Cubans managed to avoid mimicking the socialist realism typical of Soviet propaganda and were well on the way to establishing their own unique style. Given that the two countries were in the process of building deep political and economic ties, this was a highly visible indicator of Cuban independence. Poster-making blossomed because of a long tradition of international influence in Cuban artwork and a revolutionary government that was relatively open to experimentation and innovation.

The poster producers

Most Cuban posters have been produced under the auspices of three agencies: ICAIC (the Cuban Film and Cinematic Industries Institute, more commonly known as the Cuban Film Institute), Editora Política and OSPAAAL (the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America). Although each agency developed its own area of specialization, individual artists often created work for all of them.

ICAIC is responsible for producing posters for all films made in Cuba, as well as for foreign films shown in the country. Its posters have all been of identical size to fit in special kiosks throughout Havana and other cities. Movies have always been enormously popular in Cuba, and before the Revolution, film posters, like the films themselves, usually were designed and printed outside the country. Afterwards, ICAIC played a key role in the emergence of a uniquely Cuban style of poster art. Saúl Yelin was a visionary publicist when ICAIC was created in March 1959, and he was instrumental in turning the fresh, new film institute into a significant international cultural presence. In keeping with the spirit of the times, the contribution of the individual designer was less important than the content of the poster, and dozens of idealistic and talented artists applied their professional skills to this new enterprise.

Editora Política (EP), the official publishing department of the Cuban Communist Party, started out as the Committee of Revolutionary Orientation (COR, 1962–1974), then became

the Department of Revolutionary Orientation (DOR, 1974–1984), and finally settled on Editora Política in 1985. This agency is responsible for a wide range of mostly domestic public-information propaganda in the form of books, brochures, billboards and, of course, posters. Many other government agencies used the resources and distribution powers of EP for their own work, including the Federation of Cuban Women, the National Confederation of Workers and the National Union of Students in Latin American and the Caribbean.

OSPAAAL (Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America) is a United Nations non-governmental organization based in Havana. It was the primary source of solidarity posters produced in Cuba and aimed at activists around the world. Between 1966 and 1990, OSPAAAL published *Tricontinental*, a monthly magazine with a circulation that in 1989 peaked at 30,000 copies. *Tricontinental* was produced in English, Spanish, French, and Arabic, and was mailed to 87 countries. Many issues – especially during the early years – included a poster. This simple act, of violating the conventional formal purity of a poster by folding it up for mailing, was the key to what became the most effective worldwide poster distribution system ever.

Poster messaging

Cuban artists have used alternative and creative approaches to graphic representation, producing a distinctive and rich poster genre. Rather than serving commercial interests, these posters promote social services and community-building. National pride is a deep underlying theme, honoring fallen patriots as well as movements and events.

International solidarity is an important part of the national culture, especially because Cuba has had its own long fight against U.S. influence. This deep connection to other underdeveloped countries struggling for self-determination resulted in many works succinctly and elegantly showing resistance against colonialism and U.S. power. In 1969 and 1971 Editora Política sent the artist René Mederos to Vietnam, where he spent several months experiencing the American war on the ground. He created two stunning series of paintings, many of which were turned into silk-screen prints and offset posters.

LA EDUCACION: UN ARMA CONTRA EL ENEMIGO

05.

(opposite)

“Education: A Weapon Against the Enemy”

1972, artist unknown, for the Ministry of the Interior.

Cuban literacy levels were historically higher than many of its neighbors, but in 1961 a massive and effective campaign not only brought literacy to world-class levels, it helped break down the urban-rural divisions that hampered national social progress.



06.

“12th Anniversary of the Federation of Cuban Women”

1972, by Heriberto Echeverria, for Editora Política.

As described in the accompanying essay by Mariela Castro Espín, women were involved in the overthrow of Batista as well as the post-revolutionary social transformation of the nation.

Many posters include visual references to Africa and to the struggle against slavery and racism. Cuba is extraordinarily racially integrated, a feature that can be traced to wars of independence in which trust and respect between Spanish-origin criollos and Afro-Cuban leaders and troops were essential to victory against the Spanish. Historical events from Cuba's own revolution are also regularly portrayed, including the 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks, the 1955 voyage of Fidel Castro's forces from Mexico to Cuba aboard the *Granma*, and the 1961 repulsion of the U.S.-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

Che's iconic image

The most common portrait on Cuban walls is not that of Fidel Castro or José Martí – it's Ernesto "Che" Guevara. He's seen as representing the purest spirit of the Cuban revolution, –a hard-won status for the asthmatic Argentine-born physician. He joined up with Castro during his exile in Mexico after the failed 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks, and was one of the 82 revolutionaries packed aboard the cabin cruiser *Granma* in 1956 when Fidel returned to Cuba.

After the revolution, Che assumed various roles within the government, eventually leaving Cuba in 1965 to promote revolution abroad. He was captured in Bolivia by CIA-assisted forces and executed on October 9, 1967.

Art historian David Kunzle describes the singular iconic graphic of Che as the "Korda matrix." The original photograph was taken by Korda (Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez, 1928–2001), on March 4, 1960. Korda was at an event honoring victims of a sabotage explosion of a French freighter in Cuba, attended by luminaries including Fidel Castro, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Korda only snapped off two photos, and didn't use the famous shot until May or June of 1967, when Che was in Bolivia. Korda gave a print to the leftist Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who produced a bare poster using just the photo without text.

Soon after Che's death, Korda's photo was used for numerous public displays, and the photograph was simplified into a high contrast image poster by the artist Ñiko (Antonio Pérez González). Ñiko kept the beret with the distorted four-pointed star, assembled

a collage of seven of the portraits, and added the famous phrase "Hasta la victoria, siempre!" ("Ever onward to victory!"). It was published by the Cuban Communist Party propaganda department as a large screen-print.

The Ireland connection

One of those responsible for the proliferation of Che's image is Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick claims that as a teenager he met Guevara in 1961 or 1962, in a chance encounter at the Royal Marine Hotel bar in Kilkee while Guevara's flight was delayed at Shannon Airport. They talked about Guevara's Irish lineage, which can be traced to Patrick Lynch, who emigrated to Argentina in the 1740s. Soon after Che's death, Fitzpatrick produced a hand-drawn stylized black and red screen-printed poster version, based on Korda's photo in Amsterdam's anarchist *Provo* magazine. It was ripped off by Andy Warhol, which helped elevate Fitzpatrick's role as one of the originators of the "Korda matrix." Just last year, Fitzpatrick's Che image was issued as an official postage stamp for the Republic of Ireland, which expectedly drew criticism from the Cuban exile community.

Kirkpatrick's fierce promotion of Che's legacy is one of many examples of Irish pride in this defender of the downtrodden. Dave Helvarg, a veteran journalist colleague, recounted this encounter in the spring of 1973:

"It was the height of 'The Troubles.' I was invited to attend a meeting of the political wing of the IRA in the town of Armagh, one of the most active areas that the British Army referred to as 'bandit country.' The meeting was in a centuries-old building off a stone street. We went in through a pub and upstairs and then up a steep ladder into the building's garret. Following a couple of young IRA men and women, I popped my head into the attic space and the first thing I saw were three posters on a facing wall: Angela Davis, Black Panther Bobby Seale – and Che Guevara."

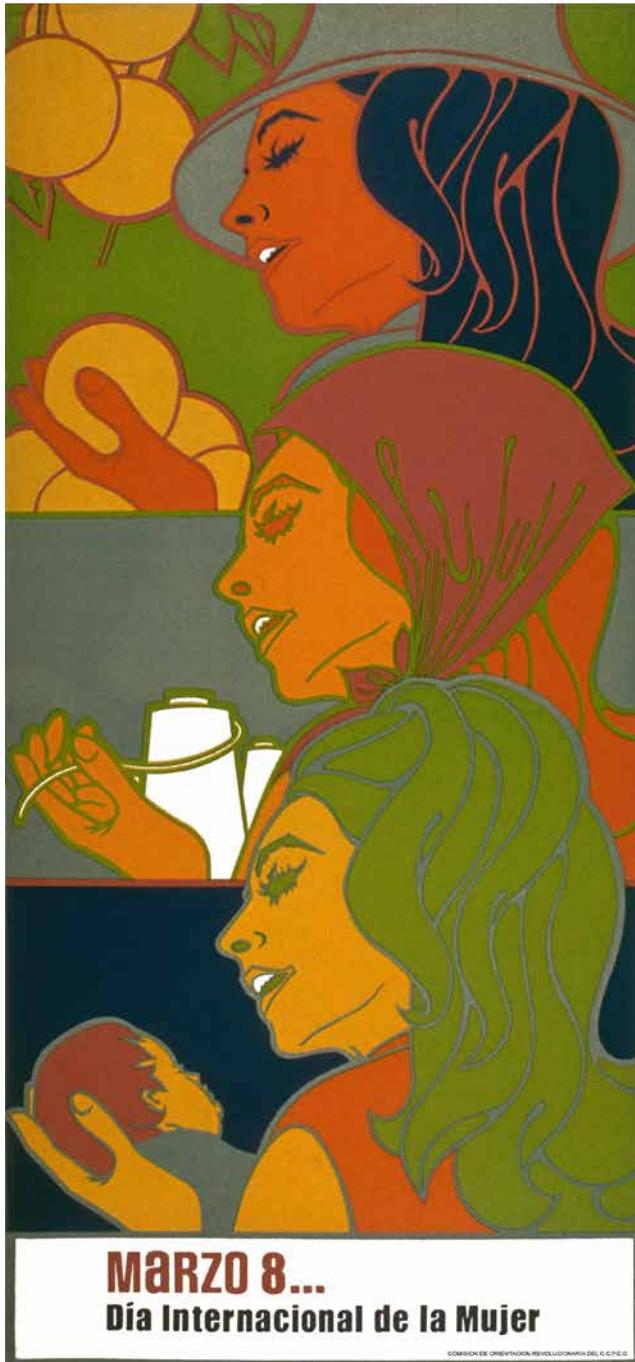
Hasta la victoria, siempre!

Further reading:

Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art, Lincoln Cushing, 2003.

Che's Afterlife, Michael Casey, 2009.

Troubled Images: *Posters and Images of the Northern Ireland Conflict from the Linen Hall Library, Belfast*, edited by Yvonne Murphy, Allan Leonard, Gordon Gillespie, and Kris Brown, 2001.



07.

“March 8 – International Women’s Day”

1971, by Heriberto Echeverria, for Editora Política.

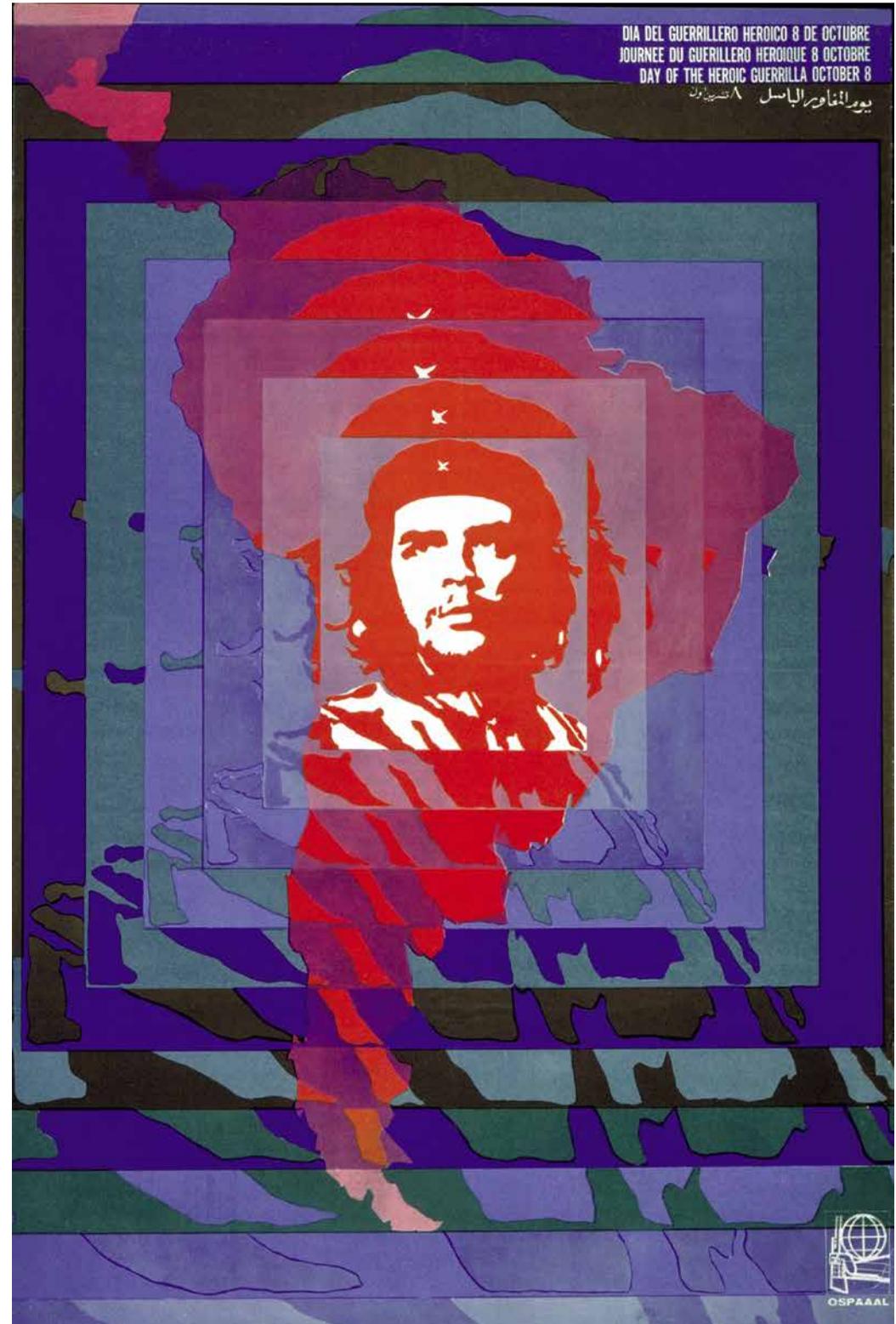
The first “National Woman’s Day” was held on February 28, 1909 in New York, organized by the Socialist Party of America. The idea took off, and it’s now more celebrated in other countries than in the US.

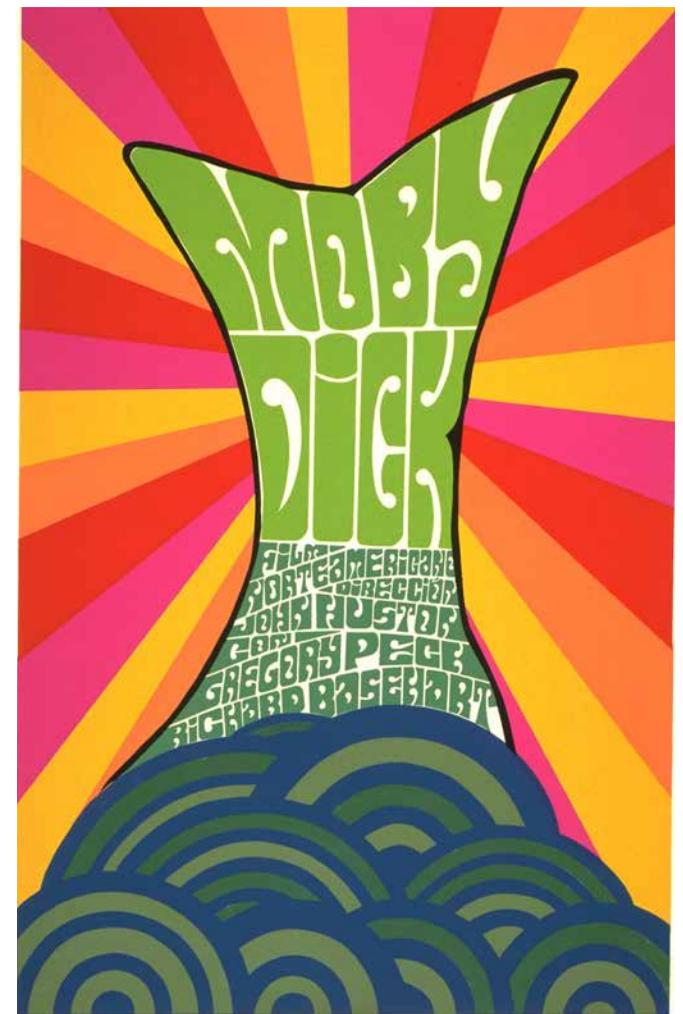
08.

“Day of the Heroic Guerrilla”

1968, by Elena Serrano.

The iconic graphic image of Che Guevara is radiating out of Latin America. The date is that of Che’s assassination in Bolivia.





09.

(opposite)

“Working for the 10 Million for Full Health”

1970, by Daysi Garcia, for Editora Politica.

In 1952, young medical student Che Guevara took an iconic motorcycle trip through South America and learned about rural healthcare disparities. In 1960, the Cuban Rural Medical Service was established, which dispersed hundreds of newly graduated physician volunteers in remote areas over the next decade to improve public health. Some rode motorcycles.

10.

“Moby Dick”

1968, by Antonio Reboiro, for ICAIC.

The Hollywood poster for this 1956 classic focuses on the grimacing face of Gregory Peck, about to harpoon the title character. It's no fluke that the artistic and psychedelic Cuban version highlights the underdog.