

Josep Renau - Artist

Josep (sometimes José) Renau was born in Valencia in 1907. His father Josep Renau Montoro was a painter, art restorer, and professor of drawing, so Renau's interest in the arts came naturally from his family. Indeed, after six years his father took him out of school and made him his assistant. Thus paintings by Velasquez, Goya, Titian, among others, passed through the young boy's hands. Later, as a student at the Fine Arts School in San Carlos, his father's institution, he met a number of other young men and women who would later form the core of the Valencian avant-garde. Among them were Antonio Ballester, who also designed posters during the war, and Manuela Ballester, who became Renau's wife.

After completing his studies in 1925 he worked as a painter, assistant to a lithographer, and graphic designer, producing numerous posters, magazine covers, and book jackets. Meanwhile he learned photography, which would prove central to his work thereafter. He moved to Madrid twice, in 1928 and again the following year, but did not feel comfortable there on either trip, returning each time to Valencia. Meanwhile, his paintings and posters were exhibited both in Madrid and in Valencia and sometimes won prizes. In 1932 he took a position as a professor of drawing in the San Carlos School, a position he held until civil war broke out, but it was not the primary source of his inspiration.

That inspiration came from the German expressionist and dadaist movements, from surrealism, and from the various projects fusing art and politics that swept across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Renau produced his first photomontage, "The Arctic Man," in 1929. With the advent of the Second Republic in 1931, experimental European art became increasingly available in Spain, and Renau discovered John Heartfield, George Grosz, and Otto Dix in the German magazine AIZ. He also studied the Russian constructivists Rodchenko and Lissitsky carefully and began to apply what he learned in his own work.

Renau also joined the Communist Party in 1931; all this together combined to convince him that art and politics needed to serve one another. Indeed, of all the progressive Spanish artists of his day Renau is unquestionably the most serious and ambitious theorist. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing for the rest of his life, his essays explore a number of issues in political art. He argues, for example, that artists can take possession of the manipulative techniques of advertizing and commercial exploitation, make them self-conscious, turn them against themselves, and make them instruments for the people's liberation. He also reflects on the satisfaction political artists can take in responding to external cultural priorities and needs, rather than their private impulses. In 1934, in the midst of the October revolutionary strike, he was arrested.

With the outbreak of the civil war, Renau became a public figure. He was already the editor of the magazine Nueva Cultura and in 1936 became co-director of Verdad, the Communist party newspaper in Valencia that made some unifying overtures to the Socialists. That same year the Republican government appointed him Undersecretary for Fine Arts. He was instrumental in appointing Pablo Picasso honorary director of the Prado Museum and in moving the Prado's paintings elsewhere to save them from the Nationalist air raids on Madrid. When asked to design the photographic displays for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, he took the job on with great industry. Indeed, he probably made the opening invitation to Picasso to contribute to the Pavilion. Picasso, of course, eventually painted "Guernica," his single most famous work, and exhibited it there in Paris. Meanwhile, Renau himself was producing some of the war's most memorable posters and photo montages. "The poster-maker," he wrote in 1937, "is the artist of disciplined freedom, of freedom conditioned by objective exigencies, that is to say, external to his individual will." His final wartime project was a series of thirteen montages titled The thirteen points of Negran, designed to illustrate the prime minister's plan for winning the war.

With the war's end Renau escaped to France and made his way to Mexico. There he collaborated with the Mexican painter and Spanish Civil War veteran David Siqueiros on a large mural for the Electrician's union. But it would be photomontage that would occupy him most deeply for the rest of his life. Given his proximity to the most powerful capitalist nation on earth, and given his interest in transforming and undermining commercial imagery, it is perhaps not surprising that he turned toward the United States and its popular iconography. The idea for a comprehensive satiric and critical photo montage of American consumerism and political ideology gradually took hold in him. He collected and categorized a vast quantity of illustrations from magazines like Life and Fortune and began cutting and assembling them in dramatic color collages.

The project took more than twenty years to complete. Meanwhile, in 1958 he left Mexico for East Germany. According to East German writers, he left because the C.I.A. was plotting an attempt on his life. A selection from his collage series, *Fata Morgana -- The American Way of Life*, was published in 1967 and the entire series of 69 images was finally issued in 1989. It explodes and ridicules American notions of gender, parodies and exaggerates the culture of consumerism, and indicts American racism with special force. But it also takes up specific topics, from the Korean war to the Klu Klux Klan to American popular culture. It is paralleled by another Renau collage series, *Äoerber Deutschland*, that takes the Federal Republic of Germany as its object.

Renau made his first return trip to Spain in 1976, the year after Franco died, ending thirty-seven years of exile and exhibiting his work in his homeland for the first time since the civil war. In 1978 the Catalan writer Joan Fuster wrote an open letter to him:

"All your life you have been an artist for the street: placards, posters, photomontages . . . You really aren't a 'painter.' You are a fighter whose weapons are the instruments of painters." Renau's collected essays were soon published in Spain, and he established a foundation in his name. He died in 1982.