

Guide to Recurring Symbols

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Drawing from indigenous, Catholic, and communist imagery, the Zapatistas rely on a diverse symbolic language to communicate their message of resistance and solidarity. This key offers a more in-depth look at some of the recurring symbols present in Zapatista propaganda.



43: The number 43 represents the disappearance of forty-three students of the Ayotzinapa Teaching School, who, on September 27, 2014, went missing after an altercation with state police. "43" is shown like shadows on the grieving protesters, who vary in gender, age, and identifiability, suggesting a oneness with the forty-three student victims.



Maize: The people of Mexico have been farming maize for thousands of years, an ancestral heritage that positions the crop as a prized cultural icon. The signing of NAFTA jeopardized this longstanding practice, as it allowed U.S. agricultural conglomerates to sell corn at nearly 1/2 the price of Mexican farmers. Depictions of maize reflect the precarious state of the time-honored tradition in the context of global capitalism.



Red Star: The red star is a revolutionary symbol of communism as well as socialism. It has been used in movements and flags all over the world to represent the communist ideology. It is often used in EZLN posters and ephemera, and is also the most prominent feature on their flag.



Sickle: Another communist symbol; the constitution born out of the Mexican Revolution was socialist-inspired; Rivera promoted communist ideals and heroized leading communist figures such as Lenin and Trotsky in his murals, but he had complicated relations with the Mexican Communist Party, due to his own idiosyncratic politics and his opportunistic acceptance of the patronage of U.S. capitalists.



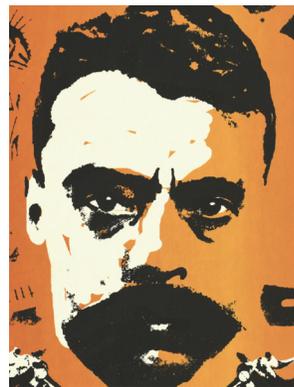
Skull: José Guadalupe Posada, a printmaker and engraver, used skulls, calaveras, and bones to make political critiques in the early half of the 20th century. It is thought that he is the creator of the calavera, humorous drawings of clothed skulls or skeletons engaged in various activities. The artists in this exhibition use skulls to criticize capitalism, consumerism, and to fight for indigenous political justice.



Mask: The Zapatistas use an iconic black ski-mask to identify themselves as part of the movement, simultaneously granting them anonymity and unity. The act of covering their faces makes them recognizable as activists and resisters against the establishment and its treatment of indigenous people. The presence of the Zapatista mask in later Mexican activist art articulates memories of persistent local injustice and revolution.



Paliacate: The paliacate is the red bandana worn by protesters, in a similar manner to the black ski masks.



Zapata: Imagery of folk-national heroes — particularly the peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata — constitute a symbolic language of transnational solidarity in its appropriation by the Zapatistas. As a leader of the peasant revolution and agrarian reform, Zapata was considered an outlaw during the combat phase of the Mexican Revolution. His image was later appropriated by the Mexican state as a symbol of the government's purported commitment to revolutionary reforms, which were never fully realized in the 20th century.



Sacred Heart: This multifaceted symbol can be tied to both Catholic doctrines involving the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and indigenous Mexican beliefs. The Aztecs thought that the heart contained the most personal and dynamic aspects of human will. Particularly in the Ayotzinapa posters, a realistically-rendered human heart appears frequently.