Josep Renau was born in Valencia in 1907 and showed his rebellion early in his career by refusing the traditional aesthetic. During the Spanish Civil War, as general director of Fine Arts he played a fundamental role in rescuing and preserving the works of the Prado Museum and other institutions threatened by the fascist bombings. After the war he had to leave Spain, and he spent the bulk of his career in exile. He moved to Mexico City and then to East Berlin, where he died in 1982.

His creative work, consisting of posters and large murals, is marked by an innovative language with a clear political purpose, a bold use of photomontage, and a clear social commitment. The life and works of Josep Renau can help us understand much of the violent and turbulent 20th century.

Exhibition in El Born CCM / 13.06.2019 - 13.10.2019
THE FIGHT FOR A NEW CULTURE

EXILE IN MEXICO
After the civil war, Renau chose to go into exile. After a period of confinement in the French concentration camp of Vichy-in-war. In June 1939 he arrived in the capital of Mexico with his wife, the painter Manuela Bartés, and two children. Expelled far from his country, like so many others in his situation, Renau experienced months of uncertainty. The international context also offered little hope with the rise of Naziism and the outbreak of World War II (1939-1945). His contact with muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros sharpened the intensity and tone of this early period. Renau’s stay in Mexico lasted twenty years, during which time he strengthened his communist principles and became involved in the context of Mexican society.

THE FORGING OF AN ARTIST FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE CIVIL WAR
The first stage of the artistic production of Josep Renau was closely linked to the art deco of the twenties of the time—he followed the trend to use simplified forms with flat lines and often vivid colors of subjects. In 1928 he presented his work in Madrid, where he achieved great public success. Soon, however, he began to structure his political thinking, and in 1931 he joined the Spanish Communist Party. The 1930s were a time of ideological confrontation: the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, the coup d’État by Francisco Franco (1936) and the outbreak of the civil war, followed by the repression of those on the losing side. Renau used his work as a propaganda tool at the service of Republican values and the fight against fascism.

THE YEARS BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN AND THE END
Renau left Mexico in 1939 after suffering two accidents or possibly attacks on leaving his studio. He moved to East Berlin, where he developed a political art at the service of the communist state. During his time in Berlin, he worked in public television and created murals for the cities of Rostock and Erfurt in order to communicate the socialist and technical revolution to all citizens. In addition to his political work, in the last years of his life he also focused on a series of female nudes. On the death of Franco in 1975, he returned to Spain after 37 years of exile but was unable to settle in Valencia. He died in Berlin in 1982.

THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE
The American Way of Life is a series of photomontages in which Renau criticized the mercantilist values of the consumer society and the destruction that it causes. It combines fragments of American consumer culture with aspects of American politics, such as the cold war rhetoric. Renau also dealt with issues such as racism and the marginalization of African Americans, imperialism, and the reaction of women. Formally, the work uses techniques close to advertising, with intense colors, opposed visual spaces and optical distortions. Renau worked on them in Mexico and East Germany between 1963 and 1975, and it is his best-known and most groundbreaking work in formal composition.
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