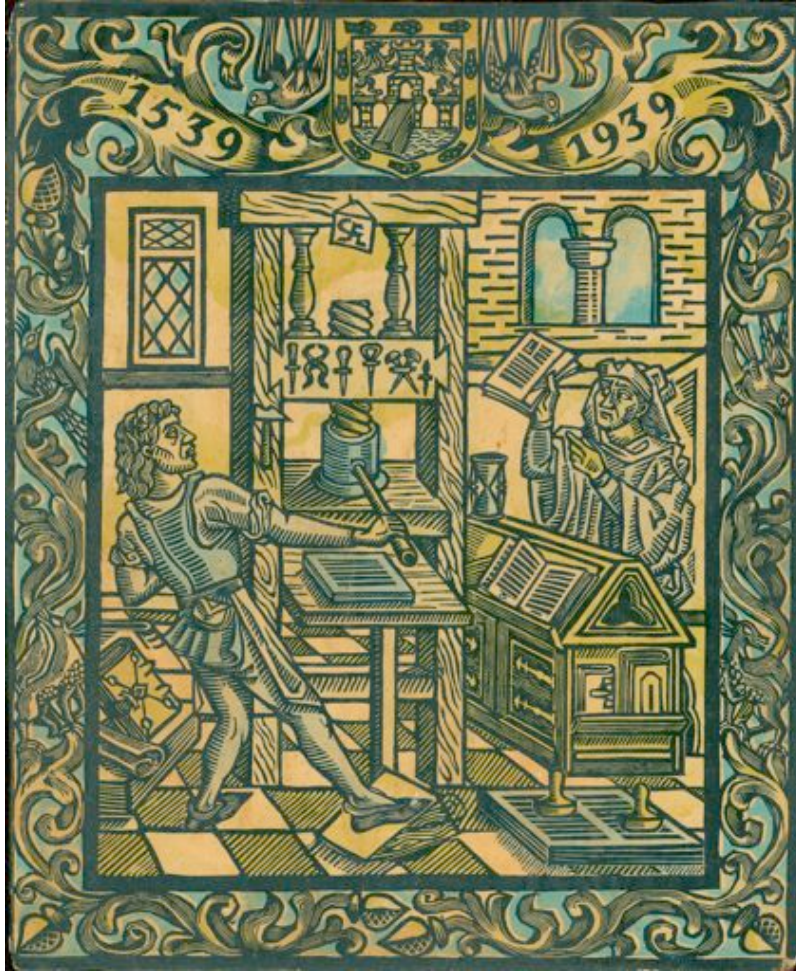


GABRIEL FERNANDEZ LEDESMA

AND THE FIRST PRINTED BOOK IN THE AMERICAS

by Don Swaim

An unusual artifact caught my eye at a flea market near Lambertville, New Jersey, on a rare, decent August day. A woodcut mounted on a quarter-inch thick board, about eight by ten inches. It depicts an early craftsman printing at a hand-press below the dates 1539-1939. On the panel's back is a label: "woodcut by Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma, July 1939." I bought it for a measly five bucks. An actual image:



My woodcut has lost much of its color, although the blues and yellows are still visible.

My first step was to identify Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma, which was easy to do as he was a prolific Mexican artist who was born in Aguascalientes in 1900 and died in Mexico City in 1983. He was a painter, printmaker, sculptor, graphic artist, and writer. Images of Ledesma's art abounded on the Internet.

My next step was to identify the woodcut. It was also easy. Ledesma created it to mark the 400th anniversary of the first printing press in the Western Hemisphere: "*Portada de Mexican Art and Life*."

That first press was set up in Mexico City in October 1539 by Juan Pablos, also known as Giovanni Paoli, who was born in Italy ca.1500. Pablos, who was employed by the printing house of Juan Cromberger in Seville, Spain, was sent to Mexico to establish a branch office. This was more than 100 years before the first book was printed in what would become the British colonies in North America.

The first title printed by Pablos was *Breve y mas compendiosa doctrina Cristiana en lengua Mexicana y castellana* (*Brief compenious Christian doctrine and more Mexican and Spanish-language*). No copies survive.

Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma's celebratory woodcut appeared on the cover of *Mexican Art & Life* magazine, issue No.7, July 1939, edited by the poet Jose Juan Tablada. The woodcut was printed in full color.



Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma was trained at the *Nacional de Bellas Artes* (National School of Fine Arts) in Mexico City after receiving a scholarship from the state.





Ledesma the younger & the elder

With Robert Montenegro, Ledesma designed the mural paintings on the walls of the Mexican Pavillion for the 1922 Centenary Exposition in Rio de Janeiro. He taught at the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, founded the Free School of Sculpture, and in 1926 founded the *Centro de Arte Popular* (Public Art Center). Ledesma was also a founding member of *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolutionarios* (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists).



Sources: Wikipedia and other Internet sites. Layout via Apple Pages, 2012