

BIENAL TENNA

San Juan Biennial Scores a Philadelphia Connection: Third of Biennial Budget Set

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special To The STAR

This article was supposed to be on artist Antonio Frasconi in connection with his recent visit to Puerto Rico. The famous Uruguayan graphics master came here personally to deliver his works for two important events of the many arresting and new manifestations planned by the Puerto Rico Institute of Culture for its forthcoming Cuarto Bienal del Grabado Latinoamericano which will open May 28 and continue for three months.

Frasconi will be featured in two retrospective shows. In one the many books he has beautifully illustrated will be shown at La Casa del Libro and in the other, his independent graphics or prints will sparkle at the Museo del Grabado. Frasconi will act also as one of the biennial's jury members and will be moderator of a conference between artists and critics.

As the counterpart for the special guest from abroad, we will be represented at the Museo de Bellas Artes by our Puerto Rican master Jose R. Alicea in a retrospective of his work to date: both prints and illustrated books.

It's going to be a meaningful friendly competition much to the liking of us islanders. For artists, the whole point of the biennial is this taking stock of ourselves and of our Latin peers, plus of course its educational value for our people and for possible tourists.

This year all Caribbean islands are also invited, whether Spanish, English or French speaking including Cuba if they want to send works. The closing date for sending entries for admission by the Selection Committee is April 15. (Students and members of all art centers be alerted. Don't sulk later about not being invited. You are. Get your entry blanks at the institute.)

Since a visit by Frasconi to his old friend, Lorenzo Homar, at the latter's workshop in Miramar was featured on the agenda, I wanted to use this meeting between two friendly masters as the fulcrum of my story. I visualized them talking about the future

of art and of the world at large or about their latest work and technical searches or else discussing in due requiems those old friends who have fallen by the wayside, or celebrating the newly victorious ones. I guess I am naive. In any case it could not be: circumstances, serendipity intervened. I should have known better.

I tried to contact Franconi in various existential ways: he always seemed to have just gone out.

Messages strange to art and my profession flashed through my antennae: from "Claridad", about a month ago, an expected loyal enemy declaration of War Against the Bicentennial; from "El Dia" a week ago an expected, Biennial is paid for by Bicentennial money, we should be thankful to Uncle Sam; from an editorial at the STAR, "Some artists are grumbling about the biennial" (because of its Philadelphia Connection). "Alicea is rumored to have cancelled his show at the biennial" (because of the Philadelphia Connection). From my heart: "Grumbling warriors in the tribe we have always had. But Alicea? Impossible. He is not a knee-jerk reactor, no show-off mechanism. He wants to go to the people. The biennial is Puerto Rico's art offering to its people; how can he deny his art to it?"

So it became quite urgent to find out what Frasconi and Alicea were going to do about the biennial.

On Thursday afternoon I called Frasconi on the Convento Hotel house phone. He was in his room; he sounded tired, and harassed. "Please, I am very tired... I have to take a siesta... I don't want to speak to the press... I had a long night last night..." (Classic. THE game's brainwashing operation takes a long day or night.) But I felt very strange being called "the Press." Heretofore I've always thought of myself as an artist, a painter, a professor, an elder of the tribe, a surrogate figure used by students in their kill-father-off rite of passage into adulthood. Frasconi went on haltingly: "artists... should speak through their pictures... Let my works speak for me... When my shows open..." That's what I wanted to know! "When my shows open"! He went on: "Puerto Rican artists...

mumble mumble... work more... mumble" (house phones in a crowded lobby are gong gong).

Ay bendito! I told him, I know how it is. I'll see you later.

So he is not boycotting the biennial. This fact was later confirmed by Maria Somoza, who took Frasconi to the airport. And as for THE game, nice defense: Frasconi isn't talking to the press. If he did, THE game would gather momentum and he would need many siestas.

Later that night I approached him again at the hotel. He was coming out slowly, kind of haltingly. He begged the press off, then darted away — with an artist friend of mine who smiled ruefully at me but did not invite me either. (Boy, does "the press" get it!) At other times I'd have possessively invited myself in, like Juan Bobo, pretending I knew no better. But this time, as "the press" (the fourth power) I couldn't. Manfully, I winked at my friends as they sped away with Frasconi in the car. I wanted to let them know I understood they were playing THE game.

Everytime a celebrity comes to an island like ours we play THE game, especially in election years which by themselves are THE MASTER GAME of Puerto Rican-hood since in it we play at who we are. (Enthralling! Ages long!) In THE Game, we run away with the "guest-ball-of-fire-from-abroad," we shower him or her with attentions, we wash his or her brain with our particular hue and tone of political thought and if her or she salutes it, we put him or her on our personal banner. Then we proudly lift the banner up for all to see and wonder at our catch. If he or she doesn't salute our banner we are supposed to drop and pass the guest on to others. The idea is to get him to salute something of ours. Of course the game is risky, which is part of the fun, for the guest may innocently say independent things which are not quite the color of the particular banner he is on. This causes laughter in the tribe at the expense of the banner holder and then somebody with a differently-hued banner is supposed to run away with the guest, give him the works, and so on.

Since we always have a nice stable of political parties (at this moment, PIP, PSP, PNP, Nationalist, Communist, US Democrat, US Republican, US ADA, etc.) and since each party comes in many splendored hues and countless personal tones, the poor guest performer, — not including this time — goes gaga, doesn't even know what hit him or her. And then us natives chuckle: we have lost respect for the celebrity, he or she is no ball of fire. Similar defense mechanisms to cut "invaders" to size are developed in most islands and segregated but homogenous societies between mountains. Insularistic, isn't it?

After THE game is over, especially if no master game is on (no elections) friends with different colored banners get together. "What did you think of art critics Gaya Nuno, Marta Traba, or Herbert Read; politicians Eisenhower, Madame Roosevelt, Nixon Dick; economists Tugwell or Tobin, how did they take it?" That's when the wisdom of THE game shows up. We really pool a lot of information on the ball-of-fire-from-abroad. We can view him or her in the round with all the accumulated evidence from all the hues and tones, depending on how many banners he or she was on.

Of course some of our banner holders are bad losers; they refuse to meet others on the final summing up. What a pity! They never learn anything from the celebrant or event. They are islands unto themselves, which could be most admirable if they were not in a sulk, or had not tried so hard to put somebody on.

Enough of this game which is far too much a factor in our lives!

Let's slay some sulky politically tainted rumors running around unwholesomely about the biennial. Let's first check on its Philadelphia Connection, because there is an ethical point involved if anti-yanki Latin Americans are invited by us. Our Man in La Fortaleza, no lowly secretary or desk chief, says it's a matter of public record that \$20,000 of Bicentennial money was lately approved, I repeat, lately, for some biennial events such as the "museo rodante" of graphics to travel around the island plus the biennial catalog, and similar things. Does it pay for prize money? I ask

GALLERIES

CARNEGIE EXHIBITION HALL

Carnegie Library
Ponce de Leon Ave., Stop 1
Puerto de Tierra 724-1046
Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.
Saturday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Current show: Graphics by Aracelis Alicea

CASA DEL LIBRO

255 Calle del Cristo 723-0354
Open Mon. to Fri. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Sat. 2 to 5 p.m.

GALERIA BOTELLO

208 Cristo St. 723-2879 Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Sun. Oils, graphic, acrylics, sculpture and Santos. Work of Latin-American Artists.

GALERIA BOTELLO

(at Caribe Hilton) 723-1330. Open Mon. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Sun. Work by Angel Botello.

GALERIA COABEY

Calle San Sebastian 101
Graphics, Drawings and sculpture.
Current show: collective show of paintings, drawings and sculpture.

GALERIA DE LAS AMERICAS

152 Fortaleza Street 723-5787, 725-1455.
Open Tues. to Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Current show: Oils and drawings by Daniel Sera Badue

GALERIA MARIA RECHANY

Magdalena 1363 Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Mon. to Sat. 725-4828. Paintings, and prints by Puerto Rican artists.

Current show: Group exposition by Puerto Rican artists

GALERIA SANTIAGO

207 Cristo St. 723-4895. Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Sun.

Felix Bonilla Norat, who has taught painting and color at the University of Puerto Rico for 20 years, is covering the biennial for the STAR.

aid To Be Bicentennial

and add: Sulky Latins may feel offended.

"No! Puerto Rico taxpayers money was allocated by the legislature for the central event, the biennial itself and its prizes. Federal monies pay for extras and other activities. No reasonable Latin should feel offended; we are Latins too! But I feel I should know the proportion of Federal Bicentennial money to the whole budget." "I don't have it now; but they should know at the Institute of Culture."

I called Rodriguez Morales' office to say, "I need a resume of the financing both insular and federal for the 1970, '72, '74 and now the '76 biennial. A call to my home the next day, Friday, "The information you ask for will be ready by next Wednesday, come and get it then."

That's too late for this article. But I promise my readers I'll publish it complete, soon. The sulky rumor has to be slain with the naked truth.

But there are other rumors: Alicea. Jose Alicea wants to exhibit, he tells me, unless a reasonably representative group of artists boycotts the affair, in which case he as a fellow artist, may have to reconsider. A meeting Friday, (March 12) will decide the affair for good.

I go over to Maria Somoza's small office at the Institute of Culture. She is heading the lately created Plastic Arts Programs office. They have to put up all the Institute art shows plus the biennial. It's a hell of a demanding job. Because we artists are a hell of a demanding fraternity. This past Sunday she had to lick 200 stamps and write 200 addresses for invitations to Myrna Rodriguez nice "painfully" graphics show at the Museo del Grabado. Maria's is what's called a part-time job in our fraternity. You work or think all week about it, then Saturdays and Sundays too — run of the mill situation!

Maria, I understand you are meeting some questioning warriors tonight. Need any help?

"No, I can handle it."

Maria, about the \$20,000 Philadelphia Connection.

"That's roughly one third of the Biennial budget, we got it approved lately."



LORENZO HOMAR



MARIA SOMOZA



ANTONIO FRASCONI

Did Washington or Philadelphia have to approve?

"They had nothing to say about it" said Miss Somoza, "the all-Puerto Rican Bicentennial Commission of the Puerto Rico Government here in Old San Juan approved it. No strings are attached to its us. By that I mean that not conditions or compromising rituals are attached, such as having to put the bicentennial logo on our literature. If we put their logo on we would also have to put the logos of our Senate and House of Representatives, of the National Foundation for the Endowment of the Arts, of individuals and businesses, plus especially the Institute of Culture. Too many logos! A simple discreet line somewhere is the usual thing."

(Dear Uncle Sam is wiser than the 300 per cent Americans we breed here, such as Cherson of "El Dia." I personally never met an American who was more than 75 per cent for "America." But here! We have got special fertilizers... The Master Game, you know!

Why was the date for the biennial changed to May from the original January? I asked Maria, Sulky warriors of the tribe are suspicious of July 4 and July 25 connections.

"We are new in this newly created office, and we spent too much time on the '20 years' Institute of Culture anniversary show," said Maria Somoza, "By December our Consultant Commission was working on the present biennial 'Reglamentos.' You will notice important changes about the jury system. We really have tried to meet all criticisms about former biennials. It takes time. Artists always are in divine discontent. We thought by March, then April, then it had to be May because of new events we are adding to the original biennial, including invited countries, and yet we want less works on the walls, too. It's hectic but interes

I laugh, because initially before the '70 biennial many of us thought May was the best month to hold the biennial in. Tourists come here for our climate in January. In the late spring and summer we need such things as the biennial and the Casal's Festival as hopeful beckoning attractions for

tourists, though we would be a strange country if we put our hopes on rare birds rather than on hard silent productive work in art and other fields.

"Yes," continues Maria "I am beginning to think the biennial should always be from May on, for many such reasons, including summer school vacation visitors from out on the island."

Later, on Friday, after work hours, Miss Somoza met alone with a group of questioning artists. She evened out, they evened out, and art with its serenity prevailed. The most disident warrior was heard later in at San Jose plaza saying that "Art has to go to the people." Alicea was present at the meeting. We are not such a foolish tribe after all. Maria and Alicea are happy. So is Frasconi, I imagine.

Anti-climax? No! Situation: normal...

And so, dear Alice, there is a Santa. I mean! The Biennial is coming for sure! I wish it were strictly a Puerto Rican affair moneywise but it is very difficult to get merchants or others to donate almost \$60,000 every two years. Our government puts in as much as it can. Would you settle for a smaller insular affair, more within our means, dear Alice?

Speak up, Alice and Juan in Wonderland! Think about our games and facts, life and of how in some tribes the children belong to the maternal uncle, not the father if the mother dies. Is something dead within us? Would you not bring Art to our people? Should bringing Art BE — at least in part — another coupon from uncle or a "Situated" from Mexico?

Shouldn't we work and produce more and talk less? Don't look at me... I am trying to produce as a teacher. I simply want to see the 100th biennial.

Post Datum: I have read Lorenzo Homar's letter (which appears on this page) to the STAR. It is an open straight-forward exposition of his doubts — I hope not congealed — about the biennial's Philadelphia connection. I felt like him when I started digging out the facts about the ethical point involved. I hope my findings,

which I don't think were a brainwashing, may make him reconsider his position about the biennial.

Miss Somoza has promised to make a final call to artists to enter the biennial before April 15. She will also make an explanation of the funding.

LETTER FROM HOMAR

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

Apparently Miss Maria Somoza, the coordinator for the Fourth Biennial of Latin American and Caribbean Prints has not informed you that this year our biennial will be, in part, subsidized by the Bicentennial Commission which is the organization in charge of celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the independence of the United States of America. Such a celebration, as noble as it is, becomes an arrogant act in Puerto Rico which is a colony of the United States. This condition can not be accepted and it is for this reason that I am not participating in the Fourth Biennial of San Juan. I believe in the struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico and the dignity of maintaining this, the highest of ideals.

It is also painful to me to have to withdraw the introduction for the catalogue of Frasconi's exhibition which he asked me to write. He is an old friend. We share many ideas on art and society. But he did not like my actions and I am very sorry about it. However it is also his duty to seriously consider the situation. His exhibition would have taken place even if the biennial had to be reduced in prizes and invitations because of the economical crisis.

In Puerto Rico we can not be humble we have to be BIG SHOTS, always! The trouble with this "save face philosophy" is that we do not care how to "arrive" as long as we get there. But we all have to live and answer to our consciences, otherwise our lives, our work are nothing.

Lorenzo Homar
Miramar

GALERIA GUARAGUAO

Callejon de la Capilla
Corner of San Francisco
Current show: Abstract paintings by Joseph Baumgartner, "El Cartereto."

LA GALERIA

Callejon de la Capilla, Old San Juan.

MUSEO DE LA FUNDACION

Behind Tapia Theater, Plaza Colon
725-5962. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Mon. Indian Artifacts and sculpture.
Current Show: Pre-Columbian Meso American Art

MUSEO DE BELLAS ARTES

Instituto de Cultura 253 Cristo St.
723-2320. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oils, prints and graphics.

MUSEO DE ARTE

Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras
764-0000, Ext. 2452 or 2456. Open Mon. to Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sat. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Sun.
Current show: Hispanic paintings of the 17th through the 19th centuries

MUSEO DE LOS SANTOS

Instituto de Cultura, Casa de los contrafuertes, Plaza San Jose. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

MUSEO DEL CONVENTO DE SANTO DOMINGO

Instituto de Cultura. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Corner Cristo and Norzagaray. Plaza San Jose, 724-0700, 724-0702.

MUSEO DEL GRABADO LATINOAMERICANO

Casa de los Contrafuertes, 101 San

Sebastian St., Plaza San Jose second floor. Open every day 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

PONCE MUSEUM OF ART

Las Americas Ave. 842-6215. Open Wed to Sat. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sun. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mon. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Closed Tues.

EL YUQUIYU

250 Cristo St. Open daily.
Current Show: Works by Ed Eisman