

SUNDAY

THE SAN JUAN STAR

SEPTEMBER 5, 1976

ANTONIO
FRASCONI

OBRA
GRAFICA

MUSEO
DEL GRABADO
LATINOAMERICANO
SAN JUAN
PUERTO RICO

1943
1975

27 DE AGOSTO
AL
17 DE OCTUBRE
1976



Sept. 5, 1976



ANTONIO
FRASCONI

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

The Fourth Biennial of Latin American Graphics is now fully dead due to the inertia and timidity of our Institute of Puerto Rico Culture, its board of directors and its executive director. Inertia and timidity were also demonstrated by Sen. Ruth Fernandez of the Senate Culture Committee and Rep. Cirilo Tirado Delgado, of the House Education and Culture Committee.

Curiously lethal was the ambivalence of some of our graphic artists who were awfully patriotic about U.S. money in connection with their "biennial bride" but remain timidly silent now that she has been murdered and her parts disposed of through the U.S. mails. "Better dead than tainted with federal Bicentennial funding" is a curious lover's attitude — inherited from Spanish medieval times and romantic drama. As conceptual art, "The Murder of the Biennial Bride" doesn't seem to merit a high mark. It may be a purgative, like Ex-lax but it carries no real catharsis.

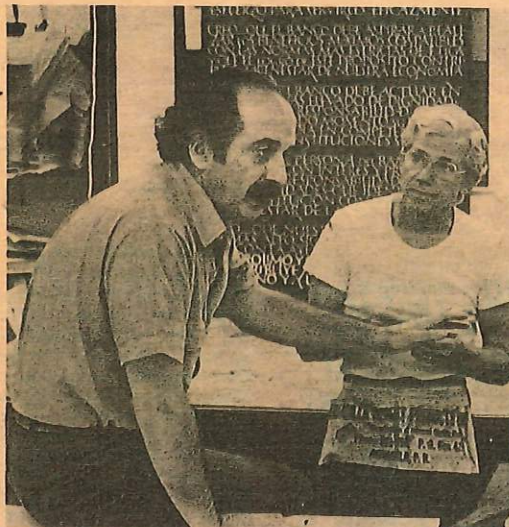
Our nation's international historical commitment to hold a biennial was forgotten for no sound reason except timid fear. The institute's compact with the artists to hold a biennial was broken and the artists do not protest. The timid public masses were shown that a vocal minority can easily destroy the biennial one of our established institutions. The vocal minority was not allowed to enjoy a well earned ethical triumph. And public moneys were used for naught in an austerity year.

Goodby, dear darling Biennial Bride,



From "Selections from the Poems of Herman Melville 'On the Slain Collegians,' (edited and with woodcuts)

OBRA GRAFICA



Antonio Frasconi,
with Lorenzo Homar
in Homar's workshop.



Sean O'Casey (1956)

killed within hallowed convent walls.
How afraid were your insular lovers.
They are designing a very timid Republic
if they accept such comedies.
Goodby, Blenallital Welcome, Antonio Frasconi!

Frasconi's two biennial events opened this past weekend at the Casa del Libro and the Museo del grabado Latinoamericano — instead of last May — and they are like a springtime day coming five hurricanes late in August. Nice weather so far, nice art on the walls, nice fellow Frasconi, artist and man.

No painter is he but a marvellous illustrator and graphic artist. Frasconi's work is very handsome and life enhancing. His compositions are open, not cramped; his spatial sense goes from infinity to macro-closeups including daring figure-cropping as Degas might do. His tactile values are very rich, accidented on purpose and mostly woodsy. His is the touch — and the sound — of warm wood.

Wood is his medium. His works done with metal and lithographic stone come out like dutiful jobs. Compare his 1967 xylographs wood engravings in his book on Federico Garcia Lorca's "Llanto por Sanchez Mejias", at the Casa del Libro show with his 13 1962 lithographs, "Ode to Lorca," at the Museo del Grabado. The lithos seem understated and too lineal. There are not many mysterious granular grays as are so natural in litho, just pen and ink hatchings to produce grays and violent tusche brush strokes. The latter are rhythmic, the former are not — they are fillers of space.

With the above two works, compare
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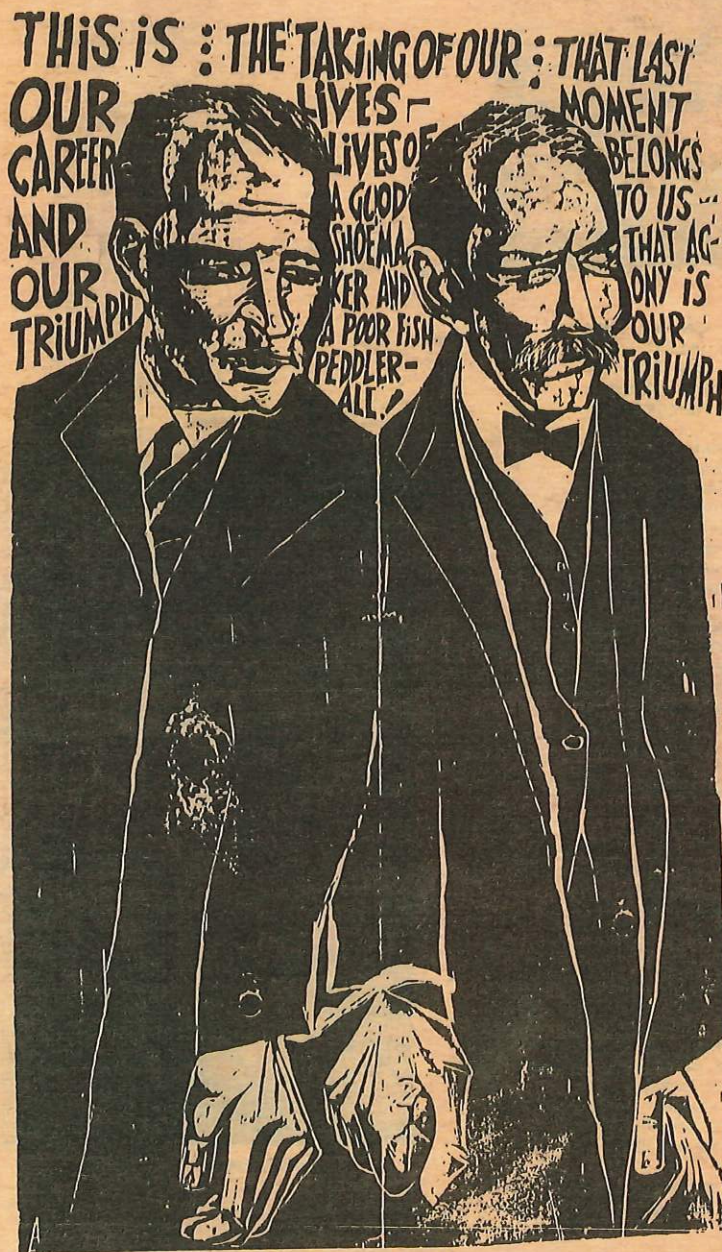


Pablo Neruda (1973) (Detail)



Woody Guthrie (1972) (detail)

ANTONIO FRASCONI



Sacco y Vanzetti (1941)

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also his 11-piece "Canto a Lorca," published in 1975, consisting of wood engravings, aquatints and intaglios, at the Museo del Grabado. As if in response to the metal, he produces decorative reliefs, quite brittle in quality. There was a certain brittle sheen or quality about Garcia Lorca's 1935-'36 poetry recitals in Madrid. But I don't see that Frasconi actually did probe psychologically into Lorca's inner sanctum; he probed metaphorically as poets do, anyway. On the sheeny surface.

Now let's compare the Lorca "Llanto" with the Berthold Brecht poem, "Das Lied Vom Sa Mann," both xylographed, and both shown at the Casa del Libro. It is admirable how Frasconi can produce two such absolutely different impacts with the same medium. The fluid thrust of the black mass of the bull; the expectant red-violet pink cloth-parry-and-riposte; the curved linear dashes of legs, tail and horns; the minute lyric text-like grass under rain.

The "Llanto" is all flow and "cante jondo" refrain while the Brecht poem is the harsh grish, the jagged march, the stern brown and black, the cheap, gross, stencil letter and the sundered crag. It is a marvellous counterpoint.

Now glance at another nearby masterpiece of colorful book illustration: the "19 Poems of Hispano-America," of 1968. The epic hand has now turned to scattering bright touchable gaiety for chattering children. Even the texts are in color. Quite a labor of love.

As if that were not a sufficiently extensive repertoire, notice the charmingly veiled, evanescent "Views of Venice," with moist far-away-walls sinking in the lagoon. Then compare the old beauty of the 11 "Tuscany" views, rendered with the nostalgic joy of the returned descendant of native sons. (Frasconi the man is here paying homage to his ancestors. Togetherness and human completeness is in the man. He was 44 years old when he had to visit Italy. He was 48 when as representative of Uruguay, he showed at the 1967 Venice Biennial).

Now, after the far away nostalgia, let yourself be hit smack in the face by the harsh immediacy of the black-silver-and-red news images of "The Slain Collegians," poems by Herman Melville or by the powerful "Vietnam!" works.

It isn't necessary to insist. The student should simply go and discover the joy of work done freely, as Frasconi's is, both at the Casa del Libro and the Museo del Grabado.

There is freedom and swing in his work, including a certain carelessness from which I hope we can learn. Most of our insular graphic artists won't permit themselves to deviate from the dutiful perfectionist finish of their work. It's something I admire in our artists provided they eventually take controlled liberties in their best works as Frasconi does.

There are some limitations in Frasconi's art as it can be applied to our crossroads island. We are a cross-

roads breed with, a cross-roads style, from the Caribbean Basin of the island. Frasconi's land is in the heartlands: Tuscany, Uruguay, Connecticut across from Long Island. So, excuse us, Frasconi, we have to look at you twice. Each day in our basin the tide flows twice in and out of the island...Island, island...

You do not probe enough, Frasconi when you portray the well known members of your very satisfactory liberal pantheon. Sean O'Casey, Dylan Thomas, Bertolt Brecht, George Jackson and Pablo Neruda and many others are news images to which you have allowed to happen the "accidentally-on-purpose-accident" of the grain or fiber of your wood or your printing. That's fine. That's flux. But is it history and sure-enlightenment?

There is human completeness in you, Frasconi, when you visit Tuscany and when you portray yourself with your two sons Pablo and Miguel in great togetherness.

You speak warmly of your children, Frasconi, of Miguel's musical ear and Pablo's cinema eye. Pablo's short documentary on your working procedures was shown twice Sunday night in the Museo del Grabado courtyard under the stars. The film is an adequate summing up of your ideas on art though it stressed an inventory of your works plus the acts of engraving and printing. Beautiful was a "dissolve" from a close-up view of a grained-wood plate to a Long Island Channel marine-landscape which was going to be engraved on it. How naturally the forms were decided by the woody fibers!

"I am a man of few words," you say "few tools and simple processes. I've had few influences: Picasso, Gross, la Kollwitz." (I noticed you forgot to mention Ben Shahn, of the Sacco-Vanzetti-series and speech patterns and art ideas similar to yours. Why did you forget, Frasconi? Can old warriors be forgotten?)

"Why do we do art?" "To decorate?...Better, to say something. Guernica and Goya says things, make good propaganda. I try to publish my message, my propaganda — on reality as I see it, on my duty to my work, on man's triumphs and defeats." (I have been quoting from Pablo's film of you)

Now: I wonder: Is there a duty to one's work, Frasconi? Does not that make us slaves? How about a commitment to man, himself, his life, his flux and death? Ultimately, it's your work which stays — but did it free you? Did you fly as high as you could have every day, or did some little unimportant job to be done hold you down?

Thank you, Frasconi, for one of the beautiful graphic shows ever held on an island where graphics are understood. With your work you have demonstrated that simple wood can celebrate man complete: life and death, anguish and ire. Everything else is irrelevant next to that celebrant fire.