

Open and closed forces

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Special to the STAR

If you are interested in seeing the beautiful-and-ugly results of life in an isolationistic collective society, or if you prefer to study the beautiful-and-ugly results of extreme individualistic free-enterprise at play against such a closed society, then you must see the present "Paraguayan Barroque" show at the UPR Art Museum now.

The exhibit is really without parallel in its genesis though not in the actual works on display, mostly religious sculptures of excellent workmanship in wood. A few compare with the best of the world, church art.

The forces at play in their genesis are ever parallel to the forces of the individual versus society, of free-enterprise capitalism versus collective socialism; of open commerce and trade versus autarchic isolationism; of a conscious, individualizing style in art as against a styleless internationalism practiced strategically by the Jesuit missionaries in their defense and expansion of the Catholic "World Church" concept. This church, a very open and paternalistic life-force itself, is seen here in Paraguay creating a very special collective or closed society of Guarani Indians, with monastic undertones. Rousseau's natural savage is here put to work in a manner which both Hobbes and Locke might both approve and disapprove. I wonder about Marx.

Philosophically, even Plato's Republic can be seen at work in the very middle of South America in the XVII and XVIIIth centuries. Another instructive sideline is a comparison of the colonizing techniques of Spain, with those of the Saxons in North America.

The "Paraguayan Barroque" exhibit was organized by Spain's Hispanic Culture Institute and was shown in Madrid, Salamanca, Valladolid and Barcelona. It was ready to be shipped back to Paraguay when Dr. Arturo Davila, the UPR Museum director, enterprisingly asked for its deviation to Puerto Rico. Air Iberia and several Puerto Rican banks —(Credito y Ahorro Ponceno, First Federal, and Santander-Puerto Rico)— offered financial help; Spain's ambassador to Paraguay, don Carlos M. Fernandez-Shaw in Asuncion Paraguay, and others in Spain settled details. Now you can enjoy. Do go see it.

But first, review your Paraguayan history to best understand the life-forces at play both good and evil in turn, as in any great drama. Dr. Davila intends to organize lectures, publications and TV programs this month to bring out the passionate sociological, political and economic import of almost two centuries of Guarani Indian collective town-farm-and-church-workshops which produced these 52 sample church works, mute testimony to the Jesuit "doctrinero" and vocational training efforts.

In the specific Paraguayan skirmish between the individualistic and the collective life-forces, the "doctrineros" or preachers of the Catholic doctrine were the King's or society's heroes. They organized from 1603 to 1767 about 200,000 Guarani Indians into 38 missions which they militaristically called "Reduccioness". The average "reduccion" or mission had about 4,000 Indians, under their own caciques or chiefs, organized by only 2 or 3 Jesuit preachers, one of the cheapest colonizing efforts ever devised. Jesus Christ was the king element: his church was ever the center of this universe.

Notice how beautifully those many Indians were so efficiently and humanely "reduced" —(I'd say seduced)—into living collectively under Jesus: each family was offered the same-sized "chacara": house and lot and same-sized piece of the collective farm. Each Guarani family or complete tribe came into the mission but it continued to be unde: its own leaders; these leaders (and their sons eventually) were members of the mission's ruling Cabildo.

The Indians spoke their own language, didn't have to speak Spanish at all. Even now, 65 per cent of Paraguayans speak Guarani to Spain's honor.

The few Jesuit preachers who were everywhere and nowhere in particular, preached, held confession and conducted all business in the Guarani language, which they learned to write down quickly. Grazing and land cultivation were done collectively, without salaries. So was harvesting of the fruits of all labors. Efficient vocational training methods were used. Jesus and religion entered into every act of the day, each act was announced by bells or drums and celebrated ritually to-



The "Paraguayan Barroque" exhibit, currently at the UPR Art Museum. (Photographed by Jose Feliciano)

gether in a most extensive and intensive ceremoniality which the Indians seemed to love.

The commune or "reduccion" was off limits to the rest of the population where mixed breeding and slavery occurred: the commune's population was maintained genetically pure and was not subject to slavery or to service to the "encomenderos".

The "encomenderos" were the villains in this skirmish. They had royal permits or "encomiendas" to colonize new territory and "take care" of the Indians much as Comendadores in Spain's feudal times could take care of castles and territories: for the pickings. Kings used "encomiendas" or charters to get jobs done when they didn't have the money out-right: the pickings were ever attractive to the hunting minds of caballeros. Long before Marx, and Weber, Spanish and Saxon kings independently agreed on this piratical free-enterprise system for the Americas.

The "encomenderos" could not enter the territory of the Paraguayan Jesuitic misiones nor could they "take care" of those Indians. So they grew jealous of this special citizenship or statehoodness of the Guaranes, this special relationship to the King, who, believe me, was ever the official defender of all Indians everywhere in America, and he really tried, but from Madrid, a bit too faraway from the action and the lower passions of the individualistic encomenderos.

Imagine the rage and jealousy of these egotistical oligarchs, when the Indian missions were granted a royal permit in 1649 to organize militants amongst themselves and to carry arms against a third life-force at play, the expanding Portuguese empire in Brazil, next door. For more than a hundred years the Christian Indians very efficiently kept the Spanish Christian frontier up against the Portuguese' Brazilian Christmas.

Brazil had been under English economic domain since the 1703 Methuen treaty. Killing Christians was ever absurd amongst old Christians, even more so amongst convents. But they did it, though disenchantedly, under the understanding and embattled Jesuit preachers.

The encomenderos, by 1700 were established as Paraguay's profane and dominant oligarchy. Their resentment against the special privileges of the Jesuits and Indians grew into outright rebellion against the King's governors in Asuncion, the capital city. This "Comunero" movement kept up from 1717 to 1735 and ended with the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767. The all-loving King had become a French-culture-loving despot by them.

Thus were the Guaranes left without their special advocates. Somehow other Christians were not fit to preach or lead them, so in disenchantment most of them drifted back into the jungle, to their "gods of the mists" and their simpler 5-note flutes and drums. It had been brother Fred's flute, over a century and a half before, with its sophisticated and more complete range of notation and its structured chants, which had first attracted the first Indians, making them emerge from the jungle. They had always loved the structured ceremonial rituals to the gods; they had known itinerant simple hoe agriculture; for unknown reasons they had previously emigrated from the Amazon basin; they had found peace in Jesuitic "republics".

The "reduccioness" are in ruins now. Thus ended so many artistic, social and political efforts towards spe-



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cial "statehoods" or special relations for them, jibaro or guaranitic. Reconstruction of the missions for touristic and cultural reasons is envisaged in Paraguay now.

But Paraguay's sturdy national character seems to have been set by the doctrinero-encomendero manifestations acting as disenchanting pulses on the Guarani mind, 65 per cent of the population now, under the old oligarchs as usual, but ever in a suspicious search for a lost peace and a lost "republic" where time was used perfectly every day. They fought Spain and Argentina in 1811 to win independence ahead of all South American countries; only to fall into the English commercial sphere, just as Brazil had been when its "bandeirantes" sacked the reducciones. They fought Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil in an exterminating war from 1865 to 1870, only to remain as before but weaker. They tried autarchy as Mussolini would eventually try it in Italy, and isolationism only to see Shell Oil move deeply inside. They fought Bolivia and won but mostly for Shell's Chaco interests, which Bolivia's Standard Oil had wanted; but only to end with Standard Oil inside its own Chaco. At times all political parties have been abolished; in 1969 the country broke with the Catholic church, which was ever a defender of human rights and social justice. Disenchantment and emigration are rampant now.

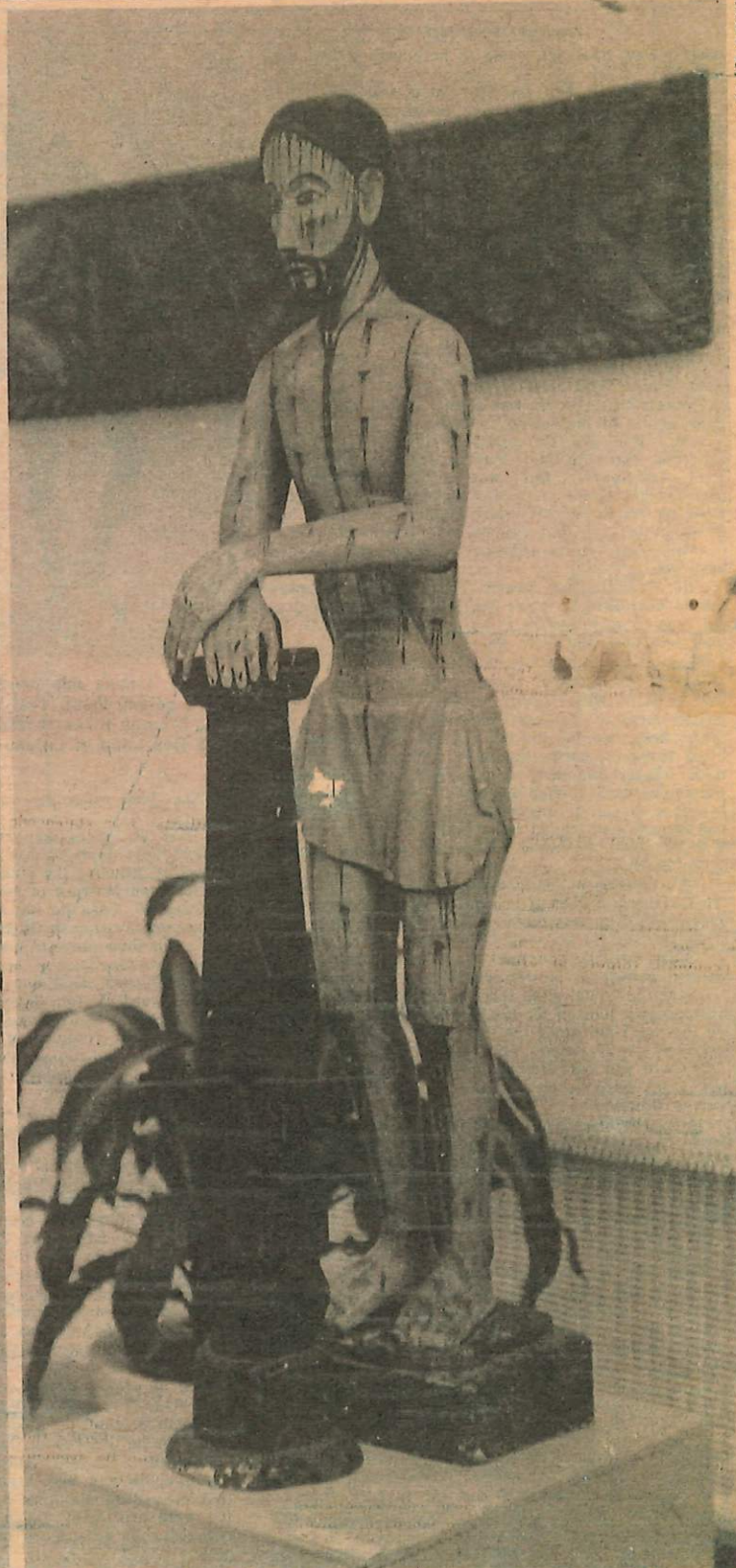
The sculptures in this exhibit are not disenchanting, nor are they disenchanting. But as with all collectively produced art including Russia's, China's and Germany's under socialism, they are styleless. "Personal" style is for chic individualization, therefore suspect to collectivists and internationalists.

The Company of Jesus, with a reasoned internationalistic tactic, brought artists and artisans from all over Bavaria, Austria, Flanders and Czechoslovakia to teach, its closed-in Guarani Indians. Besides, the reproductions used as models range from almost Protorenaissance to Cuatrocento to Barroque to flamboyant Gothic. Thus very open resources were used for closed-in purposes; as a result no open popular art, no open folkloric art was ever produced after the Jesuit Missions closed. Besides, the Jesuits were too paternalistic, thus curtailing originality or style.

But the present works, if not of art, remain as objects of great faith, though countless sculptures were used by the Brazilian "bandeirantes" as burning-wood for cooking; one of their expansive leaders boasted of having stolen "3,000 good horses, countless good bells and 80 'arrobas' of silver". An arroba is normally 25 pounds, could be more. That's a ton or 32,000 ounces of silver melted down in one expedition. The Indians had donated all the beautifully worked pieces to each church; it meant going hungry so that the Church could be dressed up.



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