

ART

TREASURE
at the UPR Museum

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

University of Puerto Rico Museum Director Arturo Davila has fetched part of the ceremonial treasures belonging to Catholic Churches from Arecibo to San Juan for an exhibition to celebrate the UPR's 74th anniversary. The exhibition, "Four Centuries of Puerto Rican Silver and Gold Work," was mounted with the help of Mela Pons de Alegria.

"Furthermore," Davila said, "next year we shall show similar treasures from the south, from churches centered around San German. It is time to get to know the child and the childhood of Puerto Rico the better to design our adulthood in the present and the future. We have to affirm the continuity of our people's history as it can be seen in its remaining concrete artistic manifestations."

Thus here in our UPR Museum you can see now until mid-April four centuries of our soul as shaped within fine shimmering metal, "Cuatro Siglos de Orfebreria Puertorriquena."

"Four centuries of Puerto Rican colonialism!" a proud, very macho, student interrupts.

But he is right. Culturally speaking all of America was a colony of Europe until the first third and middle of this very century, when American artists, South and North, began to strike out "manfully" on their own. Political freedom doesn't mean automatic macho self-determination in the arts or even in politics unless accompanied by economic freedom in the production of goods and art works such as these you see now, at the museum.

The student's impatience could be due to the stylistic eclecticism rampant in this exhibit. Is eclecticism due to colonialism? Both Puerto Rico and eclecticism, in their so-called lack of decisive "style," have been independently called sexless. So we combine double doses of sexlessness. But, in defense, let's say that sato or mongrel dogs are very eclectic in taste, appearance and origin yet they are very sexy and sometimes immune to diseases fashionable to stylish dogs. So what archetype is more productive for our country? Let's investigate before we inform Fomento.

Of the 53 items in this show only some 17 exhibit some recognizable definiteness of style, but only in some touches. The rest is florid, quite handsome and lively as it freely recalls baroque, rococo, neo-classic and even romantic styles the glistening works in the hall.

In most of them, however, there's a common horror of empty spaces. Profuseness of decoration is added to spatial fragmentations. This is not true of

our humbler santero's works, but it is very common in silver and gold workshops. Jewelers are more international and uppity people than santeros. They copy works from books, they dress better, use more expensive materials and they never outgrow or overcome the profuseness of the courtly silver cords of visi-gothic and moorish designs of yore. Also they are willing to go back in time stylistically to satisfy some customer's need, as happens often, such as in crown in this exhibition made in Puerto Rico in the last century but following an 18th Century design. A santero never goes back to other styles.

Tops in mongrelism in this show are the handsome consecration jars made in Barcelona. They are neo-classic in style but what romantic touches in the neogothic arches. The Puerto Rican pieces are more discreet and personal in their eclecticism. I remember my aunts used to copy their dresses from models published in Paris, but they always insisted on adding a "personal" touch.

So, in answer to the macho student's question, since we are satos as a race, as befits the natives of a cross-roads island, long live our eclectic sato style provided it carries some affirmed personal touches and provided we produce enough for export so that it gets to be known as the Puerto Rican style. It's a matter of production. We are colonialists if we import, we start colonizing and stylizing others if we export. Let's start our empire.

Affirmative acts such as the present solidification of our soul-and-our past as manifested in the shimmering metals, are very necessary since our past and our present could become obsolete quickly if not affirmed constantly in view of the constant stream of imports from Spain and now the states. This so-called "Metropolitan obsolescence of facts" which need not be planned in a Machiavellian way, since it depends on volume, and which can be manipulated by educators and public relations practitioners in the interest of specific ideologies, empires, commercial products, statuses and even sexes, can not be counteracted by inertia. It is inertia which is sexless or nonproductive, not eclecticism or colonialism which are very relative.

Here my macho student could take Davila to task. Like the metropolis, has he "obsolesced" the cultural manifestations of our Taino Indians? The Indians worked in gold here, six or more centuries ago, to produce "guanines" for their chiefs. Where are they in this exhibit? Besides, didn't the Negroes produce fine silver-and-gold pieces? And what about our modern manifestations in those arts? The works in this exhibit end, at about the middle of last century when

the craft became industrialized, mechanized and wholesale. The creative jewelers became humble "plateros-soldadores" (silver solders) in humble towns, and died out. Now we have automobile body solders — but also a new Renaissance in the crafts, decidedly more profane than the sacramental works in this display.

Patience is necessary, Davila might say, I cannot create myths. I wish I could get some Taino guanines for exhibit. I can affirm only what I can gather in these walls. I had to start somewhere. At least with this show I have started to push our art-past way beyond the 19th Century Criollismo and the 18th Century Campeche land-and-time-marks current in our books.

UPR has a job to do if Puerto Rico can be called sexless by one of its lovers, lawyer Graciani Miranda Marchand, president of the very macho Colegio de Abogados.

What can sexlessness mean to macho lawyers? Are their macho archetypes tempered by the feminine "persona," not necessarily feminist archetypes? The productive societies are those which function as male and female both. Viva la diferencial. The necessary and very productive differences. And the distribution of responsibilities and image-building between Mom and Pop. Without a definite Mom and a definite Pop in the family, children worry about their sex.

Our lawyers should study the present exhibit in our museum, to see how for four centuries our great matriarch and educator the Catholic Church has been trying to use its silver cords to teach them the above sexfull facts of life. The church has to use chaste symbols, of course, unlike our other educator, the more earthy matriarch, the UPR who can use, beside her silver cords, very realistic audiovisual movies and examples in her classrooms.

To start with, look at those two magnificent, if clumsy, two-and-a-half-foot tall "Angeles Lampareros" in the exhibition wrought by Furiati in San Juan in 1850 including cast parts. With them, the Church tells us about the sexless society. Since angels have absolutely no sex, male-female-or-in-between, did Miranda's epithet imply Puerto Rico's is an angelic society? Hmm. I don't think Fomento can use the example.

Then look at the cuddly sleeping Christ Child wrapped up and covered with a tremendous wealth of jewelry. It's possibly in bad taste but it expresses what Puerto Rican parents normally want for their children: the best. Do you think those parents will ever allow our society to deteriorate beyond repair? We may act clumsily, eclectically, in honest doubt about what's best for our children, since we Puerto Ricans have always personified

the eternal human condition in flux, the humble existencial nothingness even, but we aren't defeated nor cynical like the existentialists. We even try lawyers as Puerto Rican governors in this structuralist world, believing that lawyers can defend our structures and codes against others, when deep within ourselves we know that philosopher-kings make better rulers and that "macho" heroes may make history for themselves but they create havoc and deaths in countless homes. Maybe countries which have no history are the only happy countries, their happy homes are complete with no heroes.

In this family-symbology see the various pelicans with their young, of eucharistic significance, such as the strong one on top of the 16th Century Renaissance torrecilla from our Cathedral.

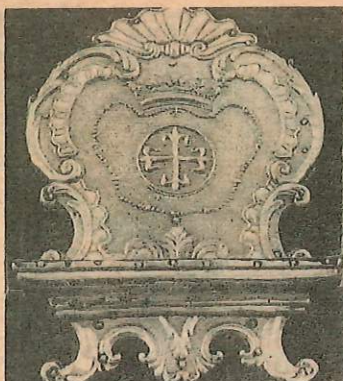
Macho symbols are all over the exhibit, as is proper for the patriarchal Christian religion during its beginning. There are quite a few crosses, candle sticks, lamps, San Jose staffs, and innumerable sun-bursts. The sun was always the father's symbol, as it was of our Taino Indian chiefs. Do you know of any guanin existing on this world? Let Arturo Davila know. (I wonder what Cacica Luisa used for a guanin.)

Feminine or matrix symbols are also present in this exhibit starting with a pyxt (a container of communion for the sick) possibly a gift from Emperor Carlos V. Besides the many pyxts, notice the lovely arched moon which used to be placed under the feet of the La Concepcion virgin in San Juan's Concepcion Hospital. The moon was used as a similar symbol by our Taino Indian priests and his women. With the Marian cult, the Catholic church had an efficient colonizing totem since in Indian matrilineal cosmogony, the female principle was both mother and wife of the male principle.

Of course the above sex-education course is too short. Trained in the adversary system of laws produced by the very primitive macho-paleolithic-hunting societies, our lawyers continue to be primitively macho-oriented and as legislators their laws follow suit except when our conscientious and consequent women voters exercise their potential power. I believe the UPR Law School should study more common law, civil and penal codes produced by different, not hunting, but agricultural matriarchies. Women as legislators never see "black or white" or "friend or foe," they see "Here's a man, a human, my husband-my-child-in-the-process-of-being." I'd vote for a feminine (not feminist) legislator anytime or at least until balance is won. Our sex education will have to continue.



A monstrance in gold plate over silver, probably made in San Juan about 1750. From the San Fernando Church in Toa Alta.



Missal holder originally from the Church of San Pedro y San Matias in Toa Baja, made in wood and silver in the 18th Century in San Juan where it is now part of the Cathedral treasure.



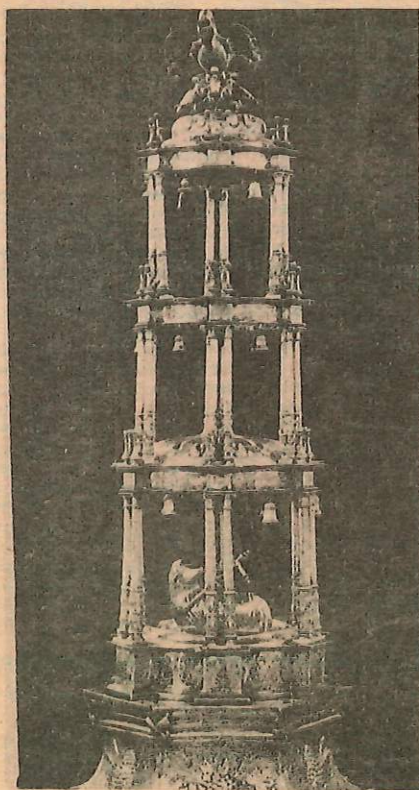
Christchild sleeping, in wood and silver, made in the last third of the 19th Century and now part of the Cathedral treasure.



An angel that originally held a light, made of silver in San Juan in the decade between 1850 and 1860 by a silversmith named Furiati from Napoli, for the Cathedral.



Chalice in gold plate, made in the last third of the 18th Century in Barcelona. Called the Passion Chalice, it is embellished with scenes from the passion of Christ. It originally belonged to the old San Jose monastery.



"La Torrecilla" used in church processions, made in the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th Century by San Juan silversmiths, probably including Manuel Muxica, probably for the San Juan Cathedral, where it is now part of the treasure.



Closeup of the pelican atop La Torrecilla.

Photographed by Jose Garcia