

ART

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TOMORROW THE CARIBBEAN

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

1977 was a reasonably productive year artistically, enhanced by collective shows here including the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture's "Muestra Nacional" exhibition and the Chase Manhattan Bank's "25 Years of Graphics" and the imported shows from Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The massive Haitian export art exhibitions told us of the shape of things to come if we want to assert ourselves as producers of art in the Caribbean. Man, the historical animal, cannot exist without New Year rituals. To project ourselves into the future, we must look hard at what holds us in the past and we must face our stream in history.

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It is hard work to face ourselves as a people if we allow our excessively partisan politics to dominate the picture. It is our production of art and other goods which are at issue. How many productive workshops for export do we have in Puerto Rico compared to Haiti's or the Dominican Republic's? That's what counts when we receive a two month invasion of Haiti's art or a token show of Dominican paintings and poetry such as that held in Casa Blanca recently for only three days. They were tokens in the cultural-production relationships.

We artists are faced with a friendly production battle in the Caribbean. The Haitian invasion alerted us this year. Haitian artists produce several million dollars yearly for Haiti, in art exports. How much do we produce for Puerto Rico? How much do the Cubans? The Jamaicans? The Mexicans?

Cuba and Puerto Rico are handicapped in one way: centralized government. The socialist state in Cuba takes the children away for their education, the welfare state in Puerto

Rico does the same in many ways, from the centralized school system to the numerous social services and social workers "serving" them and the family. Thus the most powerful production unit the Latins and mankind ever developed, the extended family—which in military terms would be counted as a company of 100 to 200 men with one single production will power—this extended family is dying. We are going nuclear: Pop, Mom and the kids, mere squad size.

But even a squad-sized family can produce wonders. Study the Ferre's and others in Puerto Rico and the many family painting workshops in Haiti: the five Obins, the three Josephs, two Hippolytes, three Vitals, two Louisjustes, two Bottexes, three Benois, two Bazilles and many others I am told, including the many cases of adopted apprentices who become part of the extended family and are treated as such. Without food stamps or social security, about 700 artists

and artisans in humble Haitian workshops produce those millions yearly, independent of political structures, statuses, codes or other legal inventions.

The Haitian government is centralized like Cuba's and ours but it can't afford to become a welfare state yet, so the family is more important as a production unit than here. Remember that Haiti finished its agrarian revolution by the middle of last century. The land is parcelled out to family units and no big landowners exist.

Puerto Rico was competitive in the painting and art and craft fields once in the Caribbean. Many Espada family and Campeche and Andino workshop products were sold into the Caribbean and Venezuela in late 18th and early 19th Centuries. They did not depend on political structures. They depended on producing an attractive competitive product within their family and peer group workshops. Such production units could also join larger cooperative marketing ventures nowadays for larger markets or operations.

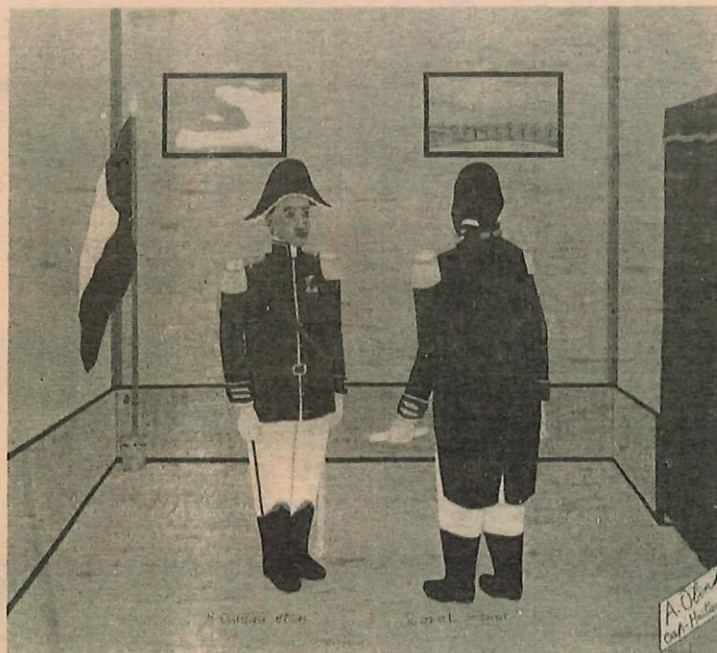
The fountainhead of the so-called "Haitian Art Revolution," Port-au-Prince's "Centre d'Art" is a marketing venture founded in 1944, of which designer Laurence Peabody is now a consultant. Peabody is also the designer for Rattan Specialties of Puerto Rico and Rattan's partner in a new wicker factory in Haiti.

Why is a Puerto Rican branch factory opening in Haiti and not here?

Rattan's president, Rene Lopez Duprey, answered my loaded question directly, "Wicker work, if produced here, would price itself out of the market which is saturated with goods from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Honduras and now Haiti. Only Italy can compete with such low wage countries because of its quality work."

Quality work implies a tradition which centers on the production personnel and facilities.

I remember many of the extended-family workshops which function in



Antoine Obin, son of the famous Philomin Obin, painted the historical primitive above in the Obin family workshop in Cap-Haitien. Much of Haiti's art is still produced in family units.



This facsimile of the Three Kings went on a national tour of the U.S. with Teodoro Vidal's collection of Puerto Rican ex-votos. An antique, the original may be the result of a family workshop such as the Caban's. Many santeros worked in family groups.

Italian small towns and villages. It is customary there to have at least one member of the large patriarchal Italian craft-family study art. It seems to pay.

Since our extended family died, we may be designing ourselves into economic obsolescence unless we develop peer group families instead. We can't expect the government to solve "family" situations which can be solved by members of the "family." Our fixation on the apparatus of political status need not make us forget the family's or peer group's possible importance for the real geo-politics and geo-economics of these Balkan-like Caribbean crossroads. Status politics do not unite the Puerto Rican family, to the contrary. So the welfare state may creep in even more, with dinosaurian results. Dinosaurian too may be the huge creeping industrial complexes with too many eggs in one basket built on a non-native resource. So we have to hasten the collective and cooperative production enterprises, or Puerto Rico is lost.

Puerto Rican artists may resent the implication that art can be a mere "export product" or family-workshop enterprise. We cling to the romantic notion of art as an intimate expression of our egotistic creative self. Even after the Medieval artists guilds which lasted until the middle of the Renaissance and even later in some cases, art was work, nice, but work, not just self-titillating self expression—which it is also but should not be completely especially when it is necessary to earn a living with it. Earn your living collectively. What's wrong with that? You can then freely paint individual masterpieces.

Happily, many artists have banded together in Puerto Rico to form production units or workshops but only in graphics. Such workshops were one of the reasons for our "graphics revolution," even before the 50's. Incidentally, no graphics were shown in the Haitian art exhibits.

I hope the new "Frente" group and others like it continue functioning as production units, not just as exhibiting enterprises. In graphics they do function collectively but as mural painters they tend to function piece-meal as yet, though they claim they will integrate shapes in their semi-collective mural works coming up.

Borinquen 12 and other exhibiting groups died because they were not actual production groups. We just

talked and exhibited together. That's not enough to unify artists.

Working together as a family does unite. The old Centro de Arte of the early 1950's had the right idea but not enough collective "production" was sustained in the center itself for many reasons. So it died.

Many workshops go on now to follow the tradition: "Otoqui" with Lizette Rosado and Analida Burgos, "La Cocora" with Carmelo Sobrino and helpers; Lorenzo Homar and

helpers; Manuel Hernandez Acevedo with his sons; "Cubui" with Martorell and helpers; "Bija" with Antonio Maldonado, Rene Pietri, Angel Casiano, Rafael Rivera Rosa, Nelson Sambolin Bonilla, Isabel Bernal, Rafael Tifuno and others including printers Norberto Oliviere and Piero Pena; "Quinque" with Juan O'Neill in Bayamon; Myrna Baez, Rafael Tufino II; John Balossi at times; Edwin Reyes, Eliazim Cruz and Wilfredo Chiesa at times; an Omar and a de Esteban in Cupey—the off-hand list is endless. I would appreciate getting notes from any concerned persons about other workshops for another article. We have mentioned the Guaraguao, Gualibiri, Coabey and Oller galleries which do some productions too.

Rafael Tufino is optimistic about our future in all the arts. "Notice all the picture framing shops, all the art galleries, the many artist agents with or without gallery walls," he says, "Listen to the people and the artists talk. Notice the many poets, the many theater groups, the many folklore dancers, the scenographers. All of them are very dedicated people and they are not brutos at all. Why, even the humble campesino 'cuatro' has gone intellectual. More is going on now than ever before, and in many towns of the island and for the elites and the humble people too!"

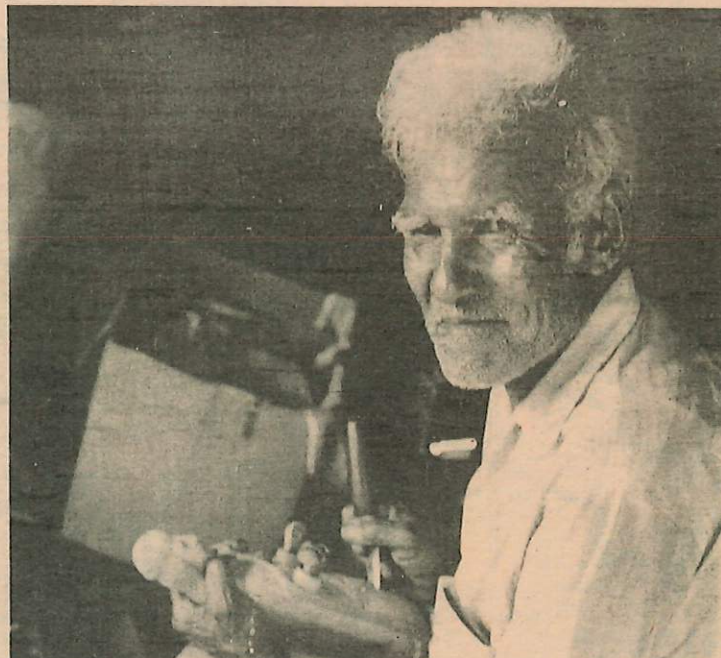
God bless us all in these Caribbean crossroads. Let's work together for export as Haiti does.

I have a word of caution, an answer to my art students when they questioned Haiti's presence among us:

Let all invaders come to our Caribbean crossroads from east and west, south and north, of all politics and policies, the more the merrier. It is our insurance.

For our future lies in such games of commerce and communication. Our destiny is to build our crossroads civilization.

Right here in the Caribbean.



One of Puerto Rico's last santeros, Norberto Cedeno, is shown in a photo taken some 10 years ago. Today Don Norberto is in a hospital recuperating from an eye operation. He may work again but his craft will soon be lost forever as a result of the end of the workshop system.