

ISMAEL D'ALZINA

A posthumous exhibition

By FELIX BONILLA NORAT
Special to the STAR

Puerto Rico is a better place now because Ismael D'Alzina Guaras de Villalba came to us in 1934. Don Ismael left us books, art, and the University of Puerto Rico's Extension Division, the Taller de Bellos Oficios. The busy "taller" is his monument.

Now there is a posthumous exhibit of his work at the Institute of Culture's Dominican Convent. It is a poignantly didactic series of 51 paintings and drawings, 30 ceramic pieces and 6 designs including hand wrought furniture. The exhibition which opened Jan. 13 closes Tuesday. It is a "Canto a Puerto Rico" because he was appreciative of our land. He labored hard and with love to picture the image of Puerto Rico he held in his heart.

Most of the paintings were done, during his last three years. Their colors are happy and bright, the brushwork is brisk and expert, the compositions well tied together and explicit. He was no trickster at work and at times he was quite painterly, not an illustrator. Death came to him as he worked. His was a death for those without sin.

D'Alzina planned this show before

he died. Now his wife and his son, and the son's wife who is a painter too, have lovingly presented the show. Dona Ines Nin de D'Alzina writes in the catalog about him, "For 44 years he was among us. A foreigner he was not but a brother fighting for his 'patria,' my companion for 38 years... People may ask why D'Alzina didn't have a one-man show before today. It's simple: you can not officiate in the mass and ring the bell too. He always worked... to create free spirits such as could honor their 'patria.' He never thought of himself until 1975 when he retired from the UPR and devoted himself to painting."

"Yes, a patriot," said Antonio Gonzalez, the Independentista leader on opening night. I knew him and his work for 25 years. He wanted to do a long series, 'Tipos de Puerto Rico.' Here, in this show, you see some of them but the series is unfinished. There was another series, 'The Jibaro.' Some are here, the rest, unfinished. He wanted to design Puerto Rico's national dress; that too was unfinished. Then there was 'Historia grafica de Puerto Rico,' a beautiful series of drawings. The first volume covers our history to early 1800 and is now the property of the Education Department. It was published a long

time ago and will be re-published. But the second volume... is unfinished. As for the Puerto Rican seal, he knew more about it than any of us. His book 'Escudo (seal) de Puerto Rico' is the proof."

"As for this show," Gonzalez continued, "he had wanted a cuatro orchestra to play for the opening but since that could not be, in his name I asked Federico Cordero to play the guitar for us. His music once drew tears to D'Alzina's eyes."

After Cordero's excellent playing, Rafael Rivera Garcia, head of Puerto Rico's Cultural Affairs office, presented his respects to D'Alzina's widow in the name of Governor Romero Barcelo. Then everybody went to see the show on their own.

Rafael Rios Rey began to reminisce, "I attached myself to D'Alzina as an apprentice when he went to Ponce in 1935 to do the dining room in the Serralles' 'castle' and the dining and music rooms in Mansion Cabassa. He was quite versatile: knew of architecture, ceramics, drawing, graphic mediums, sculpture, painting, furniture and interiors. Then Ponce, he came back to San Juan in 1936. He restored the guard house next to the San Juan Gate, right by La Fortaleza, where he also did the hand-carved monumental north door. At the same time he was doing interior patios and furnished chapels for several private homes in the Condado as well as the Patio del Fauno in the Condado Beach Hotel.

"With so much work," Rio continued, "you would think he would have used stencils to paint some of the repeated decorative motives on such as ceiling beams, so I suggested it to him. He was incensed at such an unprincipled commercial idea. He was not out to economize on time; he said he had been hired to do original work and even repeated motives should always be painted as originals. The most he did was to allow the use of stencils for drawing repeated parts before they were hand painted."

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As you regard D'Alzina's work notice how the paints are used — very assertively. He had a great heart but when he worked his heart and art were controlled by knowledge and will power. His is a consciously didactic art; it has no nervous expressionistic magic. Dionysus is banned from his realm like a drunken citizen. Notice his unfinished, almost painterly, "Los Indeseables." He frowned on the outcasts of society: the drunk-

ards, the transvestites, the whores, the stray dogs. That was D'Alzina's trouble in art. The life-force appears only in citizens who sin against society and "legitimate" order.

D'Alzina believed in codes of art and behavior. His was a truly patriarchal attitude. He never felt he had to kill "father" off. He continued father's job but without the preliminary symbolic killing and the subsequent transcendental awakening of his own role of fatherliness.

Maybe the unfinished "Indeseables" — if he had gone on with it to its ultimate conclusion — would have been his symbolic rite of passage into great painting. There is a certain anguished strain in it, an awareness, and bits of real painterliness. But the "Undesirable" title is as a fatherly chastisement which the dutiful son obeyed.

Father and "patria" codes do not help genesis, they are guides for society once it is created. D'Alzina was very social minded. Codes may help continuity of production, which is good, but they kill life-forces.

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Born in 1899 in Barcelona, D'Alzina studied painting and fine art crafts including interior and industrial design. He was marked by the Barcelona "exemplary style" of painting and design. It is an official sapient style with a willfully eclectic bent, proper for a cosmopolitan city busy since Phoenician times in the crossroads Mediterranean. Barcelona styles come and go and get mixed over the centuries, sometimes quite interestingly as in Gaudi's "art nouveau" buildings and decorations. Many jewelry, furniture and other D'Alzina designs in this show, are willfully eclectic and mixed with the "modern styles" of 1900.

But since the Catalans were forever nationalistic, their "exemplary art style" tried to really set the universal example, a dooming attitude in art because it dares to go into "exemplary" civic and moral attributes with somewhat academic results. Notice in this exhibit, "El bien y el mal," "El aborto" and "Pubertad" where prissy exemplary goodness is methodically against cartoon badness.

Anyway, D'Alzina left Barcelona for the Caribbean. After eight years in Cuba he was sent to help decorate the Cuban pavilion at the 1928 Seville World's Fair. The next year he travel-



Photographed by Eddie Crespo



led and studied in France, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Germany with some profit for his style. By 1933 he was doing murals in Santo Domingo's Casa de Espana; then in San Juan's Casa de Espana where he did decorations in 1934 for architect Pedro A. Castro.

Settled here he worked in Ponce and San Juan until 1940 when he founded a small school of design, drawing and painting in San Juan's La Marina section, now destroyed. In 1942 he established a small foundry for which he trained Luis Agapito Sanchez, who was his collaborator until D'Alzina died last year. In 1943, D'Alzina did the murals for the San Vicente de Paul church near Stop 24 in Santurce. His style is still the exemplary one.

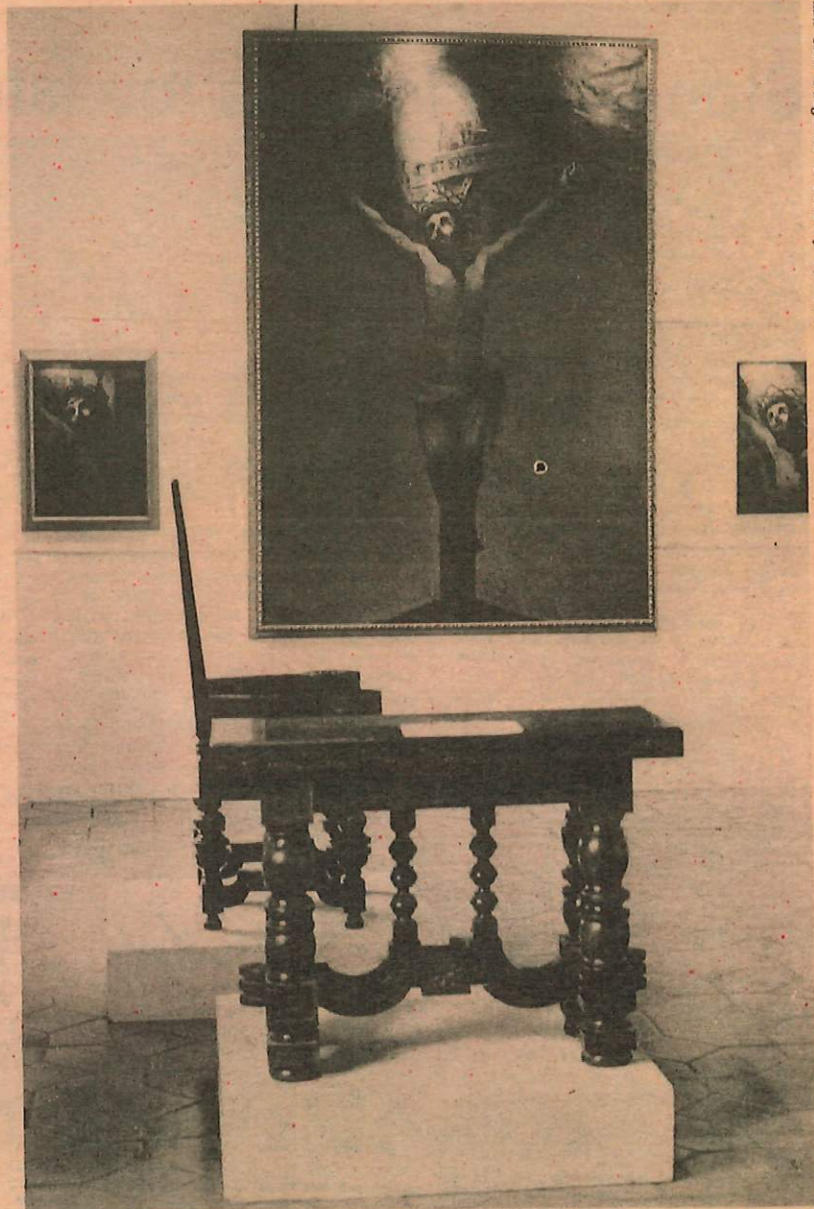
But by 1943 he must have been subjected to American art influences. Social realism was rampant in the states. This style is recognizable in the important and strong "La Gallera" (1949) with its animated figures of simplified modelling and muscularity a la John Stewart Curry and Reginald Marsh, but with a simpler flatter brush technique, not the linear technique of the American painters. Similar influences can be seen in "La Borrasca," (1976) so nicely dramatic in ways which suggest readings of George Bellows handling of landscape and animals. It is not strange that an exemplary-style Catalan painter would

be delighted by the American socially-minded "Ash Can" and "Social Realist" schools.

Sculptor Jose Buscaglia Guillermety's contacts with D'Alzina began in 1947 and continued for almost a decade. D'Alzina had quite an influence on Buscaglia which was later affixed in Buscaglia's patriarchal Barcelona studies. Buscaglia is now happily marrying those influences to matriarchal garden archetypes from Puerto Rico.

Now we come to the bulk of D'Alzina's show: the many still lifes and land-scapes and the paintings done for the "Canto a Puerto Rico." His "Pueblo de Orocovis" is a masterful landscape with very good color and composition. The still lifes are nice but academic and too many of the genre paintings are anecdotal and seem to have been drawn from memory, not life. But "La Trulla," like the "Orocovis" landscape, is full of the exuberance of life, a happy combination of the tapestry of our mountain landscapes and the joyful eruption of our people. Willfulness and reason are classically united to the emotions.

Had D'Alzina lived longer, the angst felt in "Los Indeseables" and the life force in "La Trulla" eventually produced the masterpieces D'Alzina and all of us wanted, masterpieces to ring the bells. But during his life, the office of the mass held first place.



At top of page: the artist in 1938 and his "Cristo crucificado" in a setting that includes some of the fine furniture he crafted. At bottom of the page, from left: "Borrasca," "Los Indeseables," "El pueblo" and (directly above) "La Trulla".