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The Arts of the Villa of San



"San Joaquín"

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Special to the STAR

The University of Puerto Rico Museum is being graced this month and until April 25 by an exhibition of church art from in and around San German. The exhibition, organized by Museum Director Arturo Davila, is part of the university's 75th anniversary celebration and was fraternally dedicated to San German's Inter American University's 65th anniversary celebration.

The exhibit, "The Arts of the Villa of San German, 17th to 19th Century," is a good report on three centuries of Puerto Rican art produced in the southwest, which has been our other spiritual and cultural half since 1513. That was the year when San German became the second ecclesiastical unit of the island, eight years before the Caparra settlers decided to move to San Juan in 1521.

San German, as Davila says, can still be called a small republic. This independence of spirit may go back as far as Taino times, when Guayanilla was the site of Agueybana's settlement, he who was chief of chiefs. The same spirit was inherited by Ponce which has been the real island capital for many things dear to our hearts and culture. San Juan was ever suspect as trod by the military and the governors from Spain.

In any case San German developed its own way of doing things. Its style is home-grown, frank, natural and not as sophisticated as San Juan's. As you view the present sculptures, compare them to the "Cristo de los Ponce" in the San Jose Church and even Lindsay Dean's "Rogativa" in Old San Juan; they have lean and hungry looks. Southwest sculpture is rounder of flesh, thick-ankled, small-mouthed and posed in jibaro poses, though a little self-consciously so, as if the jibaro stopped on his way to other jobs to be done. The eyes protrude in most of the sculptures and are not deep-set in the face. I wonder why.

The exhibit started out with the oldest painting on wood on the island, the "Virgen de Monserrate" from the Hormigueros church, done about 1600 by a Puerto Rican, but the painting has been returned to its own altar. It was lent for only a week.

The only other paintings in the exhibit are on the panels of the Immaculate Conception pulpit from San German, dating to about 1690. They depict four evangelists, all active, of protruding eye and thick ankles, and a stately "Immaculate Conception" without a halo. The virgin's head is placed instead against a strong light background and the effect is quite satisfactory. There are, or were, several similar pulpits in the southwest, I seem to remember from the late 20s when I went to school in San German.

But the treat of the exhibit is the chance to see the sculptures by the Espada family — and without having to make a tour of southern churches.

Very little is known about the Espadas themselves. There was the father, Felipe de la Espada, who died in 1818 and his two sons, Tiburcio who died in 1852 and the lesser known Vicente. Almost contemporaries of the Campeche family in San Juan, the Espadas stayed in the south with the possible exception of Vicente who was more of a painter though mostly a copyist. Actually, all the Espadas painted but they are best known as sculptors.

The father was the "documented" artist in the family, according to Davila in his introduction to the show, and Tiburcio a mere paternal follower. But I wonder: why is Tiburcio known to us whereas Felipe was only discovered recently?

The show contains a nice "academy" study of the nude in the "Cristo Resucitado" (Risen Christ) from the Porta Coelli Museum, dating to the end of the 18th Century. The statue has thick ankles, protruding eyes, veined hands and is in a straight-forward but jibaro pose, small mouthed and full bodied but not really fat. This is also a description of the body characteristics of "San Isidro Labrador" from the Sabana Grande Church, done about 1809, perhaps by Felipe Espada, although it is sometimes attributed to Tiburcio. "San Isidro Labrador, quita el agua y pon el sol" (Worker of the soil, take the water and bring the sun.), southern children chant when it rains and the round-footed but fine-faced statue here is jibaro enough to understand.

On her way to draw water with a real copper pot in her hand is a sister statue to San Isidro, "Santa Maria de la Cabeza," with a similar physical and pose characteristics. All three statues seems to have been inspired by an 18th Century print from Madrid which may be why the latter two seem overdressed for the tropics, but certainly life models were used. Unlike Greek sculptures, the backs of these sculptures are simplified as if the pragmatic sculptors knew very well that saints on altars never show their backs.

Similar face and body characteristics are seen in the Espada "Virgen de Belen" of about 1815 which is posed with a self-conscious yet self-assured "Let's get it over with" air; she has other things to do. Her face could be Lebanese but the model was probably a Corsican immigrant since many Corsicans and French were coming to Puerto Rico at that time.

But natural, spontaneous and pleasingly plump models are not an Es-

German

pada novelty. They go way back as can be seen in the delightfully plump "Santa Ana a Trois," the oldest sculpture in the show, done about 1600. It belongs to Teodoro Vidall. It follows early medieval examples but again, the poses are more earthy and familiar, as if neighbors had posed for them.

My own un-sacerdotal descriptions of these sculptural "saints" may have been brought on by the smallness of their scale in the present surroundings. We see most of them from above since they are displayed on low stands, the same stands used for the exhibit of the huge Paraguayan Baroque church sculptures not long ago. When I lay on the ground and looked up at the sculptures, they gained in elegance and scale. They were designed for higher altitudes.

Of course, for pedagogic reasons, the present height of exhibition is attractive, providing close study for art students and experts. And as can be clearly seen, many of the saints, at least 12 of them, have real glass eyes which very effectively reflect the light. Glass eyes were added to religious sculptures at the end of the 17th Century. It may have been a touch to impress Christians with the straight and narrow; the eyes seem to follow you as if they know.

To put the eyes in, the faces of the sculptures were sawed off, like masks and the masks them hollowed out for

the eyes, then glued back on and painted over. Sometimes, with age, the edges show. The roly-poly, round-faced "Santa Barbara," lent by the Ponce Museum, has both eyes missing. Its head was too hollowed-out. But the blank look is still very effective in the nostalgically alert Barbara, probably made by Felipe Espada before 1800.

I was surprised that quite a few sculptures were hollow in parts and that they used glued-on pieces. Real carvers frown on that. The hollowed-out parts make the pieces lighter when they are carried in processions. But why the glued-on pieces?

Osiris Delgado points out that it is very difficult in Puerto Rico to get wood trunks wide enough for five-foot solid sculptures. Besides, a solid piece would crack with time in our climate. Even contemporary sculptors Tomas Batista and "Compostela" have to glue pieces together to attain large size and for re-enforcement. Thus our wood carvers have always had to combine carving with assembly methods. This "constructed" work is noticeable in the "Santa Barbara" and in the four columns produced by the Espadas. The "carved" work in the capitals is really wood applique glued on a wooden core.

Teodoro Vidal lent 17 of the smaller 36 items here from his collection. You can not call them "santos;" they are carved sculptures with real cores.



"Cristo Resucitado"



"San Jose y El Nino"



"Santa Barbara"



"San Isidro Labrador"



"Virgin de Belen"



"San German"



"Santa Rosa de Lima"