

VOCES Y VISIONES

HIGHLIGHTS FROM EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO'S
PERMANENT COLLECTION

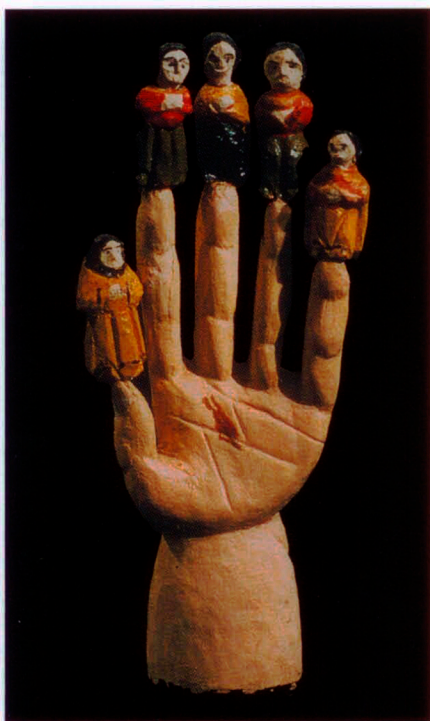
JANUARY 24–MAY 13, 2005

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Norberto Cedeño,
Born 1897 Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, died 1984 Puerto Rico
La Mano Poderosa (The All Powerful Hand of God), 1950
Painted wood, 11.5 x 5 x 3.5 in. F91.754.
Photo: Karl Peterson

Treasures from El Museo del Barrio has been organized by El Museo del Barrio: Fatima Bercht, Chief Curator; Deborah Cullen, Curator; Margarita Aguilar, Assistant Curator; and Noel Valentin, Registrar.

Texts on the permanent collection were adapted by Fatima Bercht (Chief Curator), Deborah Cullen (Curator), and Kaity Trinidad (Arts Intern 2002) from texts written on Permanent Collection works for El Museo del Barrio by: Diogenes Ballester, Bill Brooks, Arlene Davila, Nellie Escalante, Henry Estrada, Rosa Fernández, Dr. Julia P. Herzberg, Sandra Kulik, Ruth D. Lechuga, Susana Torruella Leval, Hope Mohler, Gladys Peña, Carolina Ponce de León, Yasmin Ramírez, Kristine Stiles, and Dr. Dicey Taylor.

On the Cover:

Juan Sánchez, Born 1954 Brooklyn, New York
El Padre, El Hijo, El Espíritu Santo
(*The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*), 1995
Lithograph with affixed color Xerox, 22 x 30 in.
Gift of Robert Blackburn,
Director of The Printmaking Workshop, New York,
W2001.16.60 Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

TREASURES FROM EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO

Treasures from El Museo del Barrio, an exhibition featuring selections from the Permanent Collection of the country's premier museum of Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin American art and culture, is a pilot project for *Voices from Our Communities: Highlights from El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection*, a nationally-traveling exhibition sponsored by MetLife Foundation which premieres in Summer 2003. This project, focusing on Permanent Collection highlights, is extremely important to El Museo del Barrio. The Permanent Collection, which was initiated with the founding of El Museo, has always been central to our educational mission. However, this is the first time that we organize a national tour, honoring the artistic achievements of Puerto Ricans, Caribbean peoples, and all Latin Americans, including those flourishing within the United States.

El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969 in Manhattan's Upper East Side neighborhood known as "El Barrio" (or, "Neighborhood," in Spanish). Having evolved from a small, vibrant cultural center for the Puerto Rican residents of East Harlem, El Museo today is dedicated to preserving, exhibiting and interpreting the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States.

The permanent collection of El Museo del Barrio spans a variety of media and cultures, from pre-Columbian artifacts to contemporary Latino art. Highlights of our holdings are outstanding Taíno works, prints from renowned Puerto Rican artists, Mexican masks, textiles and devotional objects crafted by Andean and Caribbean artisans, and painting and photography, created by some of the most talented Latino and Latin American artists of the present day.

The exhibition is organized around these groupings. *The Taíno* includes centuries-old ceramic vessels and stone tools from this indigenous

culture that flourished in the Greater Antilles around 1200 AD. *Santos de palo* explores the rich religious and artistic traditions embodied in santos, carved and painted wooden figures of saints used for worship in the home. Similarly, *Vodun and Orisha Worship* explores the convergence of Christian and African symbolisms presented in Haitian banners and prints from Brazil devoted to various *orishas* (deities). *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) focuses on the centuries-old Mexican tradition of honoring lost relatives and friends on November 1 and 2 by constructing altars with devotional objects that include sugar skulls, flowers, favorite foods, candles and photographs. *Masks, Animals and Transformation* includes folk arts, masks, posters and prints from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala where animals and human-animal combinations are central to the object's iconography and their cultural meaning. *Art and Politics* focuses on the graphic traditions that have helped shape the communities' identities and depict the ongoing political and civil struggles of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) and Nuyoricans (people of Puerto Rican ancestry born in New York). *Abstraction and Process, Patterning and Worldview* is a selection of utopian, non-objective trends in abstract and process-based art that have developed in the 20th century. It encompasses works by contemporary and conceptual artists, as well as those created by traditional societies like the Peruvian Shipibo and the Kuna of Panama, which feature abstract labyrinths and patterns that convey complex cosmological concepts.

El Museo del Barrio is pleased to have this opportunity to present works selected from its Permanent Collection to a broader public. We hope it is enjoyed for the wealth of insights it offers into Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin American artistic accomplishments and cultural traditions.

THE TAÍNO

The Taíno—whom Columbus encountered when he arrived in the Caribbean in 1492—evolved about A.D. 1200 from an intermingling of peoples who had migrated into the Caribbean centuries earlier, primarily from the Orinoco-Amazonian basin of South America. They became the dominant culture on the large islands of the Greater Antilles: the Bahamas, Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica and Puerto Rico.

The islands were dotted with Taíno communities, some with populations in the thousands. This New World society was one of tremendous creativity and energy. Sophisticated social hierarchies and political systems were ruled by powerful caciques (chiefs), who consolidated lesser chiefdoms through marriage and warfare. One of the caciques' most important responsibilities was the organization of *areitos*, festivals that involved entire communities which were held in the central plaza around which the villages were organized.

The concept of “center” as sacred space pervades every aspect of Taíno art and culture. Artist adorned figures with circular motifs, often concentrating on the naval area, where the soul

connected to the cosmos. Chiefs wore belts with linear motifs, which encircled the body and sheltered the soul.

Like most pre-Columbian societies, the Taíno perceived the earth as a flat disc, pierced at the center by a supernatural hole, or conduit. An imaginary ceiba (silk cotton) tree filled this space and connected the heavens to the watery depths of the underworld. Each day, the setting sun flipped the underworld upward to become the night sky, but the earthly plane and its sacred center remained stationary.

The Taíno's secular and sacred objects include an extraordinary assortment of expressive forms: stone and wood, sculpture, ceramics, shell and bone jewelry, weaving and feather work, as well as traditions of dance, music, and poetry. Their legacy endures today not only in the ethnic heritage of the Caribbean people, but also in Arawak words, such as barbecue, canoe, hammock, maize, yuca, cacique, maraca and hurricane; in customs related to ancient traditions of weaving, hunting, and fishing, music and dance; and in cuisine based on yuca, beans, soups, and barbecued meats and fish.



Taíno culture, Dominican Republic, ca. 1200-1500 A.D. *Vessel (Vasija)*
Fired clay, 7.75 x 10 x 9.25 in.
Gift of Brian and Florence Mahony, PC92.1.46. Photo: Bruce Schwartz

SANTOS DE PALO



Ramon Cabán, Puerto Rico, 1882 - 1958
Virgen de Monserrate, Milagro de Hormigüeros (Our Lady of Monserrat, Miracle in Hormigüeros), ca. 1950
Carved and painted wood
9.5 x 5.75 x 8 in.
Gift of Ricardo E. Alegria, F2000.1.1
Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

The devotion to saints, and the art of painting and sculpting them, was introduced to large areas of South, Central and North America, the Caribbean and the Philippines by Spanish colonizers. In the 16th century, the Spanish clergy used polychrome sculpture and paintings as tools to convert the native people to Catholicism, while maintaining the faith of the European colonists.

El Museo del Barrio's collection of *santos de palo*, second only to the Vidal Collection of The Smithsonian Institution, is composed primarily of examples from Puerto Rico, created by traditional carvers, or *santeros*, who worked in rural, pre-industrial areas between 1850 and 1940. (After this, wooden sculptures were frequently substituted for plastic and plaster mass-produced figures.) Many folk artists remain anonymous, while others come from renowned families of carvers. The austere, straightforward aesthetic and modest size of the sculptures resonate

resonate with the humble means of the Caribbean artisans.

The worn appearance of the *santos* attest to their use: in their former-lives, they resided in household altars, usually consisting of a shelf perched in a corner of a room, a small niche, or a lace-covered side table. They intermingled with other *santos* and colorful prints of religious subjects, miscellaneous photographs and family mementos. In such domestic altars, *santos* were bestowed with countless prayers and surrounded by candles and flowers.

For believers, *santos de palo* are objects imbedded with the saint's spirit, which can be invoked through devotion and prayer. For practitioners of popular Catholicism, saints are understood as intermediaries between heaven and earth, who can communicate with God on behalf of their devotees. Believers may ask a saint to help cure an illness, bring consolation, avert a disaster, or otherwise provide for the physical and psychological well-being of themselves and their loved ones. A saint's power, in turn, arises from his or her ability to perform requested favors or miracles. Devotees are responsible for keeping the saint satisfied through acts of devotion and by acknowledging publicly any favor received.

The devotion to *santos* also became popular among practitioners of Spiritism, a religion emerging in the mid nineteenth century France that came to Puerto Rico soon afterwards through Spain and France. They also became popular among practitioners of Orisha Worship or Santería, a religion of African Yoruba roots.

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS DAY OF THE DEAD

Around the Christian world, November 2nd marks the Day of All Souls. In many parts of Mexico, however, this holiday is celebrated from the 1st and the 2nd of November, with elaborate festivities. The exuberance and vitality of these celebrations contrasts radically from the somber tone that permeates the ways in which Western cultures observe the same holiday. Indigenous cultures of Mexico believe that the dead join their loved ones during the holiday, hence the desire to offer them a wonderful welcome. Offerings (*ofrendas*) are placed on elaborate altars in homes, at cemeteries, or in other communal spaces. Parade-like processions to the cemetery are filled with costumed participants and accompanied by musicians. These celebrations reveal how beliefs about death from the ancient cultures of Mexico transformed under Spanish colonization.

Throughout centuries of conver-

gence, the age-old traditions endured, although they were modified by the values and costumes brought by the Catholic Church.

Ofrendas at the altars consist of food, drink, and other supplies to aid the dead in their journey back into the realm of the living. Prayers are offered, and reminiscences about the deceased both hearten and appease them as the family shares a meal at the grave. Altars are decorated abundantly with both ephemeral and more permanent *ofrendas*. Traditional offerings include marigolds and flower arrangements, candles, incense, fruit (limes, avocados, chayotes), special bread (*pan de muerto*), marzipan skulls (*calaveras de dulce*), chocolate bones, roasted corn cobs, photographs, family mementos, hand-crafted papier mâché objects with skeletons motifs, delicately cut tissue paper patterns (*papel picado*), and

music played on drum and flute. Water, money, liquor, and cigarettes are often also left at the altars.



Unknown artist from Metepec, Mexico

Tree of Life Candelabra (Candelabro del Arbol de la vida), ca. 1980s
Painted ceramic, 31 x 23 x 6.5 in.

Gift of Margery Nathanson, F96.26.17. Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

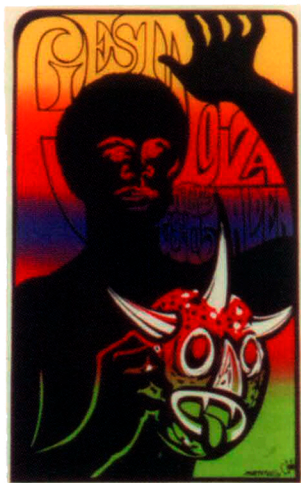
MASKS, ANIMALS AND TRANSFORMATION

Mexico and Guatemala, like other Caribbean and Latin American countries, have strong native traditions of mask-making. This reaches back to the formative years of the Olmec culture (1200 BC), when masks were worn by effigies presented to the gods, victims sacrificed to them, priests in their sacred duties, dancers who performed during these rituals, and warriors on the warpath. Masks were laid on the dead's face before burial or on the funerary bundle prior to cremation, and were left with votive objects inside the walls of the pyramids as offerings. Ancient shamanistic beliefs underlie some practices, with an emphasis on ritualistic transformation and a wish to communicate with and control animals or natural forces.

Under colonial rule, such long-standing indigenous traditions were blended with those of the Spanish. In sixteenth-century Spain, masks were also used in entertainments, dances and processions. In their colonies, the Spanish used masks as a means of teaching the Catholic faith. Although many native traditions were prohibited, others continued, thus leading to the formation of a diverse heritage that survives today, where a powerful mix of old and new belief systems are at work.

In masks, animal motifs figure as a single element, or in combination with human forms. Many animals, such as the jaguar, are ambivalent beings, capable of being simultaneously good and evil. Many other animals common to Mexican iconography, including bats, lizards, serpents and snakes also feature dual aspects, much as in the Taino's cosmic view.

In Puerto Rico, *vejigante* masks and costumes also play on duality. These horned creatures represent both animal and demonic characteristics, whose actions are impish and free of socially-restrictive customs. These figures come



Antonio Martorell

Born 1939 Santurce, Puerto Rico
Fiesta Loiza Aldea (Loiza Aldea Festival)
1970

Silk screen, 33.13 x 20.25 in.

Gift of Anheuser-Busch Companies,
W92.136.21

Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

from the tradition of Carnival, originally a Catholic festival, which thrives throughout the Caribbean, Brazil, and other places. On the eve of Lent, revelers don costumes that allegorically refer to the triumph of good over evil. Such costuming allows momentary social equality through the confusion created by disguise, where the wealthy and the plebeian can inhabit different roles. In Ponce, Puerto Rico, *vejigantes* chase and scare onlookers, performing opposite the *caballeros* (Spanish conquistadors), who represent goodness and morality.

VODUN AND ORISHA WORSHIP

Western African cultures came to the New World as slaves in the first decades of the 1500s. They were forcibly baptized into Catholicism, however many were able to maintain their belief systems that, in time, intermingled with those of Christianity.

In the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, especially Cuba, Santería emerged; today, it is also known as Orisha Worship. In Haiti, Vodun has been the prevalent religion and in Brazil, Candomblé is practiced by millions of people. These three major religions, as well as many variations, share a common Western African origin.

Followers of Santería and Candomblé honor a pantheon of divine beings, called Orishas. In Vodun (an African word for “spirit”) practitioners honor a pantheon of spirits, called *Loa*—which means “mystery” in the Yoruba language. These resemble the Christian saints in that they were people who led exceptional lives, and are usually given a single responsibility or special attribute. Each divinity has a related Christian holy figure or saint, character principals, numbers, colors, emblems, foods

and postures associated with them. For example, Elegba (Elegua, or Legba) is associated with Niño de Atocha or St. Anthony of Padua. He is considered a messenger or trickster, his number is three, his colors are red and black, and his emblem is a hooked staff. Thus, modern practitioners have incorporated certain elements of the Christian belief systems thrust upon them centuries ago, as a strategy to avoid conflict while maintaining the integrity of their own spirituality.

In Santería, Candomblé and Vodun, domestic altars—like those made to the Santos—are elaborately decorated with candles, incense, pictures of the Orishas/Christian saints, symbolic items related to the *Loa*, special plants, offerings of food, etc.

In Vodun, beaded and sequined flags, *drapeau*, are important objects that are lovingly made. These herald the coming of the spirits, and are intermediaries between two states of being, opening the door to the other world. The *veve*, a drawing or pattern unique to the *Loa*, is the basis of the flag. This is a traditional symbol, combined with nationalistic images, Christian iconography, and even Masonic elements. Thus the religion’s traditions allow for personal and specific interpretations and contributions over time.

Today, everywhere the African Diaspora has settled, including large cities in North America—such as New York, Miami, and New Orleans—practitioners of these religions can be found.



Antoine Oleyant, Born 1955 Plaisance de Sud, Haiti – died 1992 Haiti
Vodun banner depicting Bossou
(*Bandera de vudú con Bossou*)
ca. 1981-1991
Beads and sequins on nylon cloth, 45.5 x 36 in.
Gift of Margery Nathanson, T96.26.4
Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

ART AND POLITICS

Historically, art has long carried political messages. This is especially clear in El Museo del Barrio's print collection, where the linkage between Mexican and Puerto Rican print movements of the 1940s, and the later Nuyorican and Chicano graphic output which emerged in the late 1960s, can be traced. Believing that art must be socially relevant, these printmakers produced graphic portfolios that addressed social, political, and economic conditions.

The original model for these movements was the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), founded in Mexico City in 1937, that flourished through the 1940s. TGP pioneered the use of the linoleum-block print, which facilitated the production of large editions at affordable prices. Members of TGP considered printmaking the ideal tool to combat illiteracy and increase awareness of issues such as agrarian reform and workers' rights. Prints served as visual manifestos and graphic protests. In post-revolution Mexico, the celebration of native culture merged a visual vocabulary derived from pre-Columbian icons with techniques of modern art. This movement, known as *Indigenismo*, glorified the oppressed native cultures in Mexico and celebrated *mestizaje* (mixed ancestry).

Leading Puerto Rican artists of the 1950s studied with Mexican artists, often traveling to Mexico. Puerto Rico's strong printmaking movements also had roots in a public education campaign, the División de Educación de la Comunidad (DIVEDCO, 1946-1985). Artists working on the Island were hired to produce films, silkscreen posters, and illustrate books that served in massive health and literacy campaigns. Two important printmaking workshops in Puerto Rico were the Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño (CAP, 1950-1952) and the Taller del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP, 1957-1985). The collective efforts of these

workshops nurtured a self-definition of Puerto Rican culture by historicizing folk traditions and by elevating depictions of the working class, as the Mexicans had done.

The models provided by the Mexican TGP and the Puerto Rican DIVEDCO, CAP, and ICP, inspired both the Mexican-American/Chicano movements, as well as the Puerto Rican/Nuyorican movements in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, Chicano artists in California and the southwest, and Nuyoricans in the northeast, were engaged in an effort



Rafael Tufiño, Born 1922 Brooklyn, New York
Cortador de caña (Sugarcane cutter).

From the portfolio *La estampa Puertorriqueña*.
Published by Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño, S.
Linoleum block print 14 x 10 in. - sheet; 11.5
Gift of Susan Sollins in Memory of Sonya Per
Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

of cultural affirmation, employing strategies that appropriated images and symbols from the histories of their communities, advertising and the media, and from both popular and elite culture. Both groups reworked Pop art into a highly politicized critique of United States's foreign policy, consumer culture, the media, and art itself.

While the Chicanos created many workshops, including Self-Help Graphics in Los Angeles and Mission Gráfica in San Francisco one important Nuyorican workshop was created close to El Museo del

Barrio in New York. El Taller Alma Boricua/The Puerto Rican Workshop was also established in 1969. The founding artists were active in the Art Worker's Coalition, an arts advocacy group. As artist-activists, Taller Boricua members aspired to "take art to the people." In addition to creating posters for everything from protest rallies to poetry readings, members made murals and participated in "traveling exhibitions" that took place on the streets of El Barrio and other neighborhoods. The early members were known for their innovative use of neo-Taino symbols. Taino-inspired art served as a potent sign of Puerto Rican resilience. Taller Boricua continues to contribute to the cultural vibrancy of El Barrio under the leadership of Fernando Salicrup and Marcos Dimas.

While El Museo del Barrio's holdings are particularly strong in political prints from these groups, it also includes contemporary works in other media by Caribbean and Latin American artists who continue to explore such social and political themes.



The Puerto Rican Print
Juan Series of 8 prints, edition of 200, 1951
8.25 in. – image
Sollins and Irving V. Sollins, W92.246

ABSTRACTION AND PROCESS, PATTERNING AND WORLDVIEW



Unknown Kuna artist from San Blas Islands, Panama

Mola, ca. 1970s

Cotton 15.75 x 19.75 in.

Gift of Mark S. Rapoport, M.D., T98.8.2. Photo: Eddie Bartolomei

Humans have created visual representations that reduce elements in nature to its essential forms, or create abstracted patterns, since our earliest record. Such ways of interpreting the world are widespread in both western and non-western societies, to this day. These processes bespeak a desire to create an aesthetic of order, or, to make concrete concepts of cosmological patterns.

El Museo del Barrio's collection includes many instances in which abstraction is an important, if not the prevalent, form of language. This includes works created by artists within traditional societies, such as the Taíno, Kuna, and Shipibo. In addition, numerous works created by artists trained in urban industrial centers also demonstrate the vitality of abstract languages. In El Museo del Barrio's collection, a spectrum of approaches that emerged in the late 1950s is represented. These include geometric and perceptual explorations of color and shape, such as in the works of Myrna Baez and Carmen Herrera. In

other process-oriented works, such as those by Rafael Montañez-Ortiz and Ana Maria Maiolino, expressionistic modes of abstract language allow for intensely personal and psychological responses.

By the late 1960s, a generation of artists challenged the representational quality of art itself. At the core of their concerns were the very processes of "abstracting" and "representation." Conceptual works by Leandro Katz, León Ferrari, and Liliana Porter attest to this important trend.

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