

AFROPUERTORRIQUEÑO: ART AS RE-EXISTENCE

The Transatlantic Slave Trade **The First African Descendants in the Caribbean**

The year 1492 is remembered for the first voyage of Christopher Columbus. It was also the year that brought an end to the Spanish Reconquest, the period during which Christian Spaniards expelled the North African Muslims who had ruled over much of the Iberian Peninsula for more than 700 years. These Muslims, known in Spain as “Moros” (literally “Moors,” an outdated and generalizing term in English), influenced countless aspects of Iberian culture. It was thus quite common to find dark-complexioned people living among the Spaniards, especially if they had converted to Christianity.

The first African man about whom records have been found in Puerto Rico is Juan Garrido (c. 1480, Western Africa - c. 1550, Mexico), a free man who became Christian while in Portugal and then lived in Seville, Spain. Garrido participated in the colonization of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and possibly Guadeloupe and Hispaniola. He then joined the expedition for the Spanish conquest of Mexico, where he lived until his death.

The Triangular Slave Trade **A Crime Against Humanity**

The transatlantic slave trade was a lucrative enterprise on an international scale. It consisted of the brutally inhumane capture, trafficking, and racialization of the Africans who were taken by force to the Americas as enslaved laborers. The deterministic idea that certain physical traits were superior to others led to a racial division of labor and a dehumanization of the abductees, most of them Black youths and children, who were objectified and treated as commodities.

The Island of San Juan Bautista was founded in tandem with the arrival of the enslaved Black people, who were at a complete disadvantage vis-à-vis the Spanish colonizers. Upon their arrival, they were forced to work the land that was then christened as Puerto Rico. Their presence on the island led to categorizations and coined terms such as *Negro*, *Indio*, *Mulato*, *Zambo*, etc., which alluded to a range of racial mixtures. According to this hierarchical caste system, the darker the skin, the lower the social value ascribed to the person.

The struggle for freedom, however, began with the capture and trafficking of the first enslaved Africans. The Atlantic Ocean, where the dead bodies of perished travelers were thrown overboard, also welcomed those who dove into the sea, for many believed that a better existence than slavery awaited them in the watery depths.

José Campeche y Jordán: Afrodescendency in Puerto Rican Painting

Prior to the eighteenth century, the names and works of African and Afrodescendant artists were not known. Nevertheless, Afrodescendency permeates the European artistic tradition in Puerto Rico. The first renowned Puerto Rican painter, according to art historian Osiris Delgado, was Manuel García with his work *Adoración de los Reyes Magos* (Adoration of the Magi, 1700s).

The second artist of great importance in the Americas and the Caribbean was José Campeche y Jordán (1751 - 1809), an artist of mixed African and European descent. His mother, María Jordán, originated from the Canary Islands, and his father, Tomás Campeche, a freed slave, provided the young José with his first painting lessons. Campeche included Black people in his paintings, displaying the social difficulty that they experienced, and he also painted himself as part of this social group. In *Ex-Voto of the Holy Family* (c. 1778 - 1780), three African children appear next to their holder, a nun. Conversely, in the *Portrait of Governor Miguel Antonio de Ustáriz* (c. 1792), Campeche includes African workers in charge of paving the streets of San Juan. These figures highlight the fact that Campeche's time period was the largest commercial period of enslavement in Puerto Rican history. In the work *El miliciano moreno de Puerto Rico* (The Black Militiaman of Puerto Rico, c. 1785), he introduces a dark-complexioned individual who could have participated in the defense of the island against the English invasion of 1797. Service in the militia could have been an opportunity to raise his disadvantaged status in the eighteenth century, a condition that still occurs today. In Campeche's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1800), we can see that he clearly depicts his own mixed heritage. Thus, it could be said that Campeche introduces Afrodescendency as a theme that transcends slavery in Puerto Rican culture.

Runaway Slaves, Uprisings, and Liberations

Slave labor encompassed almost all economic activities in the sixteenth century. Over the course of four centuries, distinct types of resistance also arose throughout the Caribbean. As early as 1503, the governor of Hispaniola reported that Africans had “escaped and corrupted” the Indigenous populations. These peoples sought every imaginable way to resist slavery, from buying their own freedom to implementing tactics such as sabotaging work and hiding tools, marronage (escaping and living in hiding), murder, and open uprisings.

Countless maroon communities known in Spanish as “palenques” emerged in the Caribbean, including, most notably, in Jamaica, where, beginning in 1655, hundreds of maroons managed to establish communities that were so concealed and protected that the British army was unable to destroy them. Similar refuges took hold along the

border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic around the same time. In this case, the Spanish authorities sent priests to Christianize the population and, toward the end of the eighteenth century, through faith, they were able to achieve what they could not through the use of arms. As for organized uprisings, one of the most memorable is that of the *Amistad*, a Spanish ship that in 1839 was transporting enslaved Africans from one port to another in Cuba when they rebelled, took control of the ship, and sailed to the United States, where two years later they would win back their freedom in court.

None of these struggles for freedom matched the ambition, success, or historic impact as the Haitian Revolution of 1791. The French colony of Saint-Domingue was the stage of the first rebellion carried out by enslaved people that managed to overthrow an imperial government and establish the first Black republic in the world, Haiti, a country that abolished slavery in 1804.

Puerto Rico was also a stage for marronage and other anti-slavery strategies of resistance. Conspiracies to rise up in arms began in 1790, with some maroons even escaping to the Dominican Republic, at the time governed by Haiti. This environment was pivotal in fomenting the abolitionist movements within the context of the century of anti-colonial rebellions. Following in the footsteps of Haiti, the nations in Latin America started their own wars of independence. It was in this context that the uprising that we know today as the *Grito de Lares* (Lares Uprising) was organized in 1868 in an attempt to liberate Puerto Rico from Spanish dominion.

Slave Registers

The Slave Registers contain the descriptions of the “human merchandise” that arrived in Puerto Rico from the African continent. Said descriptions racialized people by using dark skin color as a justification to dehumanize and treat people as mere objects; material to be exploited in the vilest conceivable ways. The treatment of human beings of African origin as property was maintained for the benefit of others and for the perpetuation of the ruthless European imperialist system.

Not all enslaved people were Black, and not all Black people were enslaved

Slave records reveal the construction of a racist system since the beginning of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The so-called “Moros,” or Muslims from North Africa, were enemies of the Spanish Crown for centuries, and by the sixteenth century, they were viewed as defeated enemies. In 1550, the Valladolid Debate was initiated, a dispute among clerics about whether Indigenous people were in fact human beings. Such ideological positions often became muddled in the European imagination; for example, Hernán Cortés referred to the temples of Tenochtitlan as “mosques.” These perspectives also led to the dehumanization of dark-complexioned people based on pseudo-scientific and religious notions allegedly drawn from the Old Testament, justifying the enslavement of these people who were considered more suited to hard labor under the sun. However, enslavement did not extend solely to Afrodescendants; the most prolonged and oldest documented cases of slavery involved enslaved white people. Nonetheless, the racialization of slavery began with the systematization of transatlantic human trafficking, with up to 20 million people from different ethnic groups and regions of the African continent being transported to the so-called “New World.”

Identity, Abolitionism, and Representation

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the embers of abolitionism were fanned by slave rebellions, marronage, inter-ethnic alliances among African people, escape attempts, sedition, murder, and other forms of resistance. In the *Grito de Lares* (Lares Uprising), enslaved and freed people played an essential role in fighting for Puerto Rico’s independence, and the abolition of slavery was integral to the agenda of liberation. Abolition is the first point in the *Diez Mandamientos de los Hombres Libres* (Ten Commandments of Free Men), a proclamation drafted by Ramón Emeterio Betances in 1867. The abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico was granted by the Spanish Courts in 1873, largely due to the efforts of the Spanish Abolitionist Society, of which Segundo Ruiz Belvis, José Julián Acosta, and Francisco Mariano Quiñones were members. Thus, justice for Afrodescendants is at the very core of Puerto Rico’s identity struggle as a nation.

In a letter that Betances wrote to his sister, he noted: “You are aware, as a knowledgeable person, of the preoccupation about color that runs in certain circles: And that, as I have seen it, is sufficient cause for us to be separated from others, since you and I are darker than those others... No members of the Betances family, who have any common sense, have ever denied their African race.”

Francisco Oller y Cestero: The Abolitionist with a Brush

Judging by his works alone, Francisco Oller y Cestero defended and gave visibility to the Afrodescendant population in Puerto Rico throughout his lifetime, as is evidenced in his paintings of haciendas and even his still lifes, or in *La Escuela del Maestro Rafael Cordero* (The School of Headmaster Rafael Cordero), *El Velorio* (The Wake), and the sketches dating from 1866 – 1867 titled *El boca-abajo I* (Face-Down I), *La nodriza negra* (The Black Wet Nurse) and *El negro flagelado* (The Black Man Being Beaten). Given the brutal injustice of slavery, Oller created art as social commentary that fully conveys the struggles against the abuse of the enslaved as if he had been an eyewitness to the brutality and the pain. In *Hacienda La Fortuna de Ponce* (1885), he depicts the working population of the plantation,

mostly of African descent, twelve years after the abolition of slavery in 1873. The same is reflected in other paintings, such as *La Ceiba de Ponce* (1887-1888) and *La Hacienda Aurora* (1899). Oller is, therefore, the consummate Puerto Rican painter of the nineteenth century to represent Afrodescendant subjects. He was followed by other painters seeking to pictorially represent Puerto Rican identity, as was the case with his former student Pío Casimiro Bacener.

Francisco Oller y Cestero.
El Velorio (The Wake), c. 1893
Oil on canvas

Oller painted *El Velorio* (The Wake) on a farm in Carolina that belonged to Manuel Elzaburu (1851-1892), who was the founder of the Puerto Rican Athenaeum. Oller depicted most of his subjects based on people he actually knew in life. The central figure of *The Wake* is an Afro-Puerto Rican man dressed in a dark brown jacket, who is seen paying his final respects to the deceased child. Among Puerto Rican art historians, this character is referred to simply as the “Black man” or as San Pablo, a freed slave.

From the perspective of reinterpretation through African spiritual heritage and Caribbean syncretism, the figure of Pablo may refer to the double of the Orisha Babalú Ayé, a non-Christian spiritual figure who underwent a process of hybridization and/or camouflage through which he became associated with the Christian Saint Lazarus and the parable of the rich man and the beggar. Moreover, the girl holding the maracas and standing in the doorway on the left side of the painting is the only figure looking out into the countryside, and she can thus be assumed to be the Orisha Eleguá, symbolizing pathways and light. Although there is no evidence that these associations were intended by the artist, the items hailing from various cultural traditions in the work—such as the *duho* (the low stool, a Taíno artifact), as well as the rosary, playing cards, lantern, and the uncovered lit candle—invite us to reconsider the established discussions that have revolved around this masterpiece.

The U.S. Invasion: A New Form of Racism

Although the United States Congress abolished slavery in 1865, it took years for enslaved people to benefit from that law, particularly those in the Southern states. The U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 occurred in the midst of the “Jim Crow” era (1870s - 1965), a time when racism was legally codified through laws that established racial segregation that limited the spaces that Black people could access. This segregation would have included Puerto Ricans, who qualified as “colored.” Although racism existed in Puerto Rico, by the end of the nineteenth century the island had various prominent Afrodescendant leaders, such as Ramón Emeterio Betances, José Celso Barbosa, Ernesto Ramos Antonini, Juan Morel Campos, Juana Colón, Eleuterio Derkes Martino, Luis Felipe Dessús. In contrast, in certain states of the United States, even interracial marriage—i.e., between Blacks and whites—was prohibited until the late 1960s.

What is known today as “colorism”—discrimination based on the tone of one’s skin—was also manifested in Puerto Rico. Linguistic expressions developed in previous centuries continue to be used even to this day, with terms such as “Mulato,” “Trigueño,” “Jabao” being employed as descriptors for people of African descent, despite the fact that such words are derived from the Spanish caste system. There have, however, never been any organizations that embodied U.S. genocidal racism, such as the Ku Klux Klan, in Puerto Rico. Lynchings in the United States were at one time so common that postcards were created depicting white families smiling as Black people were being hanged.

Although violence against Blacks certainly existed in Puerto, the influence of the island’s colonial relationship with the United States cannot be ignored. At the time of the invasion, the people on the island were introduced to the “one-drop rule,” which stipulated that a person with a single Black ancestor (i.e., “a single drop” of Black blood), was considered Black, regardless of how light their skin appeared.

Post-Invasion Photography

With the U.S. invasion in 1898, the photographic industry also began to develop further in Puerto Rico, becoming a primary source for visual and historical documentation. However, this documentation did not escape imperialist ideology, and it also reflected a significant racial bias. Following the Spanish-American War, many U.S. photographers traveled across the Caribbean, selecting aspects of the island societies to capture. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example, town squares, buildings, and monuments were photographed, however when rendering the population, impoverished women and laborers were often selected, as well as unwashed children, often without clothes or shoes. Most of the people depicted in such scenes were of darker skin. These images were used to create postcards that American visitors sent to family and friends in the United States with notes highlighting their own vacation experiences, which were sometimes contrasted with complaints about the living conditions of the Puerto Rican population.

The historian Libia M. González López has explained in detail how this construction of the colonized subject featured a strong racial component, citing racist comments from the photographers themselves, such as how the United States could easily buy up all of the West Indies, but only if the seller would agree to remove the population. Ironically, one of these photographers, Harry A. Franck, mentions that many of the inhabitants are of “pure Caucasian blood” and that most have only “...a tinge of African color.” However, the image of the colonized subject as Black, unclothed,

and impoverished was constructed with the aim of underscoring an alleged state of disorganization among the native population and thereby justifying military rule.

The Symbols of Liberating Education **Celestina Cordero Molina and Rafael Cordero Molina**

The educators Celestina Cordero and Rafael Cordero were the children of free Afro-Puerto Ricans, who learned how to read and write due to the instruction they received from their parents. Rafael, a tobacco tradesman, strove to lead his people out of ignorance by teaching them how to read and write. In his non-profit school, founded in 1810, he instructed all children regardless of their race or social position. Over the years, with the help of his sister, he maintained the school while struggling against poverty, a hostile slave-based society, and the whims of a long line of aristocratic and military Spanish governors. Many of his pupils went on to become lawyers, physicians, writers, and leaders of the Puerto Rican abolitionist movement, such as José Julián Acosta and Román Baldorioty de Castro. He is thus credited with laying the foundations of abolition in Puerto Rico.

Celestina Cordero fought for women's rights to education. She was formally recognized as a teacher on July 3, 1820. By that time, she had already taught thousands of young girls for over fifteen years during a time when only the daughters of wealthy families had access to education. Promoting education in the same way as her brother, Celestina founded a school for girls in 1820, thereby fostering not only racial equality but also gender equality.

The Builders of Puerto Rican Society

The motive behind the abduction and transport of thousands of enslaved Africans to Puerto Rico was due to a shortage of labor force to work for the Spanish industries and a new form of profit for the slaveholders. The labor of African descendants is usually recognized as brute force; however, their involvement was never limited to physical labor, as is evidenced by a legacy in a great variety of activities on the island that extends back to the sixteenth century, ranging from mining and sugarcane cultivation to domestic work, construction, education, and contributions in music and the visual and performing arts. Afrodescendants can be found everywhere in Puerto Rico, and our artists have also represented them, as can be seen in the artworks exhibited in this section. Despite the fact that Black people were historically denied access and opportunity to have leadership positions, and still find it difficult today, those who succeeded have helped to build our institutions and have been a crucial part of our social and cultural structure.

Music as Expression, Identity and Resistance

One of the most significant cultural contributions of African peoples can be found in our music. Our popular rhythms, such as danza and danzón, bomba and plena, salsa and *bugalú*, and even reggaetón, are mostly percussion-based. From the plena we have received stories of other times; through bomba, we receive fragments of religious beliefs that have not disappeared despite having been banned or censored. Interestingly enough, an account found in the *Boletín de la Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia* (Bulletin of the Puerto Rican Academy of History) informs us that in the eighteenth century, "blacks and mixed people monopolized, to a certain extent, the positions of musicians both at the religious and military level." Given this situation, some white musicians sued (unsuccessfully) to impede the success of their colleagues.

Like the rest of the Caribbean nations, Puerto Rico has a mixed population with strong African roots that endure in all forms of creative expression. Although Ramón Emeterio Betances's dream of forming an Antillean Federation was never achieved at the political level, our sounds did blend on their own when maracas, congas, and bass joined together in salsa, merengue, son, bachata, and reggae.

INTRODUCTION

Today, we near the culmination of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015 - 2024), proclaimed by the United Nations under the theme "People of African descent: recognition, justice and development." This resolution aims to celebrate the invaluable contributions of people of African descent around the world, promote social justice and inclusive policies, eradicate racism and intolerance, promote human rights, and help create better and more prosperous communities.

In addition, the United Nations manifesto establishes that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights. Therefore, any doctrine proclaiming the racial superiority of any group is scientifically false, morally reprehensible, socially unjust, and dangerous, and must therefore be rejected along with any theories that attempt to justify the existence of separate human races.

This year we also commemorate the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, originally decreed in 1873. In the academic year 2015-2016, the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, as a socially aware and committed institution, pledged to sponsor initiatives with the goal of strengthening measures toward achieving equality in all areas of society. Moreover, it aimed to promote better understanding and respect for the heritage, culture, and contributions of people of African descent in Puerto Rico, as demonstrated by UPR Certification #77 in adherence with the United Nations proclamation.

The University's Museum of History, Anthropology and Art joins the celebration of this decade with the groundbreaking exhibition *Afropuertorriqueño: Art as Re-Existence*. Through a meticulously curated selection of significant works of Puerto Rican art, we celebrate the island's rich African heritage, from the tragic beginnings with the transatlantic slave journey, the horrors of enslavement, and the struggle for liberation and eventual abolition. People of African descent are depicted as liberators and educators, as builders of society, and their music and religious customs are celebrated through art.

The exhibition *Afropuertorriqueño: Art as Re-Existence* makes use of Puerto Rican art to foster recognition and appreciation of the heritage, culture, and contributions of Afrodescendant people and their crucial role in the progress and prosperity of our society.

Afro-Puerto Rican Intangible Culture: Spirituality and Religion

The argument that the Spanish colonization and conquest of the Americas was a Christianizing and civilizing endeavor implies that Christianization did not seek to eradicate other religious beliefs, and that the only legitimate civilization was the European. However, it is common knowledge that not a single pre-Hispanic civilization in the hemisphere remained intact following the Spanish conquest, and that any non-Christian religion was branded as blasphemous and referred to the Spanish Inquisition.

After a hundred years of Spanish presence in Puerto Rico, enslaved people continued meeting in secret to carry out their religious practices, for which they were persecuted. However, following centuries of colonization, these practices evolved and merged with others, creating a religious syncretism that gave birth to new forms of spirituality that have endured to the present.

Cuban and Puerto Rican Santería, Haitian Vodou, and the Orishas of the Yoruba tradition from West Africa coexist with the saints of the Catholic tradition in one form or another, although they do not share the same functions, nor are they venerated in the same way as in their native religions. In fact, on islands colonized by other non-Catholic powers, Christianity merged with other traditions, as is the case in Jamaica, where the Rastafari religion evolved, with its own links to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

These examples provide evidence that people always find ways to keep their ancient traditions and beliefs alive even in the face of opposition, hostility, and suppression. It is worth mentioning that, with the proliferation of Protestant churches following the U.S. invasion, Afro-Caribbean religions are still being demonized by many in Puerto Rico to this day.

Historical and Artistic Representation of Afrodescendants: Portraits and Self-Portraits

Puerto Rican culture is predominantly mixed, with prominent Afro-Caribbean attributes. In the art of Puerto Rico, portraiture stems from the European tradition of painting with José Campeche, an Afrodescendant, as the first major practitioner in the eighteenth century. Campeche followed the tradition of immortalizing prominent figures of his time, who commissioned him for his work. He is also credited with founding the tradition of self-portraiture on the island, in which artists represent themselves, thus taking control of how they would be remembered for posterity. Thus, Campeche achieved the same social status as the ruling classes, a rare case in his time. Numerous Puerto Rican artists would continue this tradition, both for the history of Puerto Rican art and for the purpose of reclaiming and reasserting Afrodescendance.

During the twentieth century in Puerto Rico, greater relevance was given to Spanish roots, with Hispanic identity being embraced in reaction to the encroachments of U.S. culture, a theme that has been reflected, to varying degrees, in all the arts. The representation of Afrodescendants in Puerto Rican art has been somewhat limited. However, the fact that the works exhibited here come from different periods in our history reveals a continuity in the deliberate intention to affirm, rescue, and commemorate our African heritage.

Through the eyes of the artists, people of African descent have been made visible, thereby recovering their historical memory. This selection of works celebrates the diversity of expressions and demonstrates the richness of Afro-Puerto Rican culture. The faces depicted gaze intently at the viewer, expressing a range of emotions, feelings, and experiences, calling us to contemplate their lives and participate in their world.

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HORARIO:

Del 23 de enero al 27 de abril de 2024

Martes, miércoles y viernes: 10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Jueves: 10:00 am - 7:00 pm

Sábados: 11:00 am - 4:00 pm

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EL ARTE

Como **RE-EXISTENCIA:**



Lo AFRO

PUERTORRIQUEÑO



Gerardo Castro
Conjurando el pasado (2023)
Óleo sobre papel, técnica mixta
Colección del artista

El Museo de Arte (MUSA) del Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez (RUM) de la Universidad de Puerto Rico tiene el honor de unirse a los eventos del decenio Internacional para los Afrodescendientes (2015-2024), proclamado por la Organización de las Naciones Unidas, con la exposición **El arte como re-existencia: lo afropuertorriqueño**.

A través de una selección de 77 obras de arte puertorriqueño, entre pinturas, dibujos, carteles, grabados, esculturas, así como objetos y documentos históricos, se muestra la representación de los afrodescendientes al desarrollo económico, el patrimonio y la cultura del archipiélago de Puerto Rico.

El recorrido inicia por la travesía trasatlántica esclavista, el entorno de la esclavitud y del cimarronaje liberador. Continúa con abolición de la esclavitud en Puerto Rico donde el 2023 marca los 150 años de este significativo evento. El visitante continúa su travesía por los símbolos de la educación libertadora, los edificadores de la

sociedad, su música y su religiosidad. El guion curatorial culmina con una selección de retratos y autorretratos.

La exposición, organizada por el Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte (MHAA), de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras (UPR-RRP), estuvo disponible en ese recinto hasta julio del 2023 y se presenta hoy en MUSA como segunda sede.

A través de su Museo de Arte, esta exposición y la programación educativa alineada, el RUM busca hacer una aportación a favor de la justicia social y las políticas de inclusión, impulsar la erradicación del racismo y la intolerancia; promoviendo así los derechos humanos.

El arte como re-existencia: lo afropuertorriqueño impulsa, a través de la plástica puertorriqueña, conocimiento y respeto por el patrimonio y la cultura de las personas afrodescendientes y su contribución al desarrollo y bienestar de la sociedad.

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