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Exhibitions Celebrate Afro-Puerto Rican Heritage

Photo: "El Bombero, Dancing for Obatala," watercolor by Antonio Broccoli Porto.

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Like many Latin American countries, the island nation of Puerto Rico has long grappled with ambivalence over its African heritage. Growing up in New York City, Yakeima McAllister, a Harvard Divinity School student of Afro-Puerto Rican descent, says she "felt more connected with Dominicans. There were some Puerto Ricans who considered themselves white, so I felt disconnected."

But things may be getting better.

"I heard Ricky Martin on television praising his African roots," says McAllister. "He was like you know, the beats, at lot of these beats that you hear in our music, it comes from Africa, because we have African blood."

Now, three current museum exhibitions, one in New York and two in the Puerto Rican capital of San Juan, are showcasing and celebrating the island's African heritage.

At New York's Museo del Barrio, the "Santos" (saints) exhibition offers a fascinating array of paintings, ceramic figures and statuettes on the theme of sainthood in the Spanish Caribbean. The fusion of West African beliefs and Catholic doctrines – at the core of Afro-Atlantic religions like Santeria and Candomble – is evident in the veneration of San Antonio de Padua (St. Anthony of Padua). This saint's followers, often unwed and childless women, also venerate the orisha Elegua, a trickster figure in the Afro-Caribbean pantheon who is also seen as the protector of children.

The statuette of St. Anthony shows a robed figure holding a Christ child. According to Puerto Rican tradition, when St. Anthony's day is celebrated each June 13th, single women approach the Christ-child and ask the saint, "hands and feet, when shall I marry?"

The skin tones of the saints are particularly revealing of Puerto Rico's complex and mixed racial history. Our Lady of Monserrat ("Nuestra Senora de Monserrat") – also known as the Queen of Heaven – is portrayed as a bejeweled, extravagantly dressed black woman holding a light-skinned child, against a backdrop of the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain. Similarly, the exhibit's depiction of Los Tres Reyes (The Three Kings from the story of Christ's birth) shows a dark-skinned King Melchior, in the center on a white horse, flanked by the lighter-hued Kings Balthasar and Gaspar, both riding darker horses. In the folklore of Puerto Rico and much of the rest of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Melchior is believed to be the most generous of the three Wise Men, according to Earl Shorris in *Latinos: A Biography of the People*.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, the Museo de Nuestra Raiz Africana (Museum of Our African Roots) was established to "preserve, collect, document and reveal the history and culture of Puerto Rico from the experience of the black populations and its legacy." It is currently showcasing ceramic and wooden artifacts, masks and figurines in the first of a series of exhibitions that will also present samples of Puerto Rico's "distinct African traditions and modes of expression as manifested in music, dance, popular arts, cuisine, and the collective memory of oral history," as the museum's brochure states.

Likewise, since late June, an exhibition at San Juan's Museo de las Americas has celebrated Africa as "the cradle of humanity" ("la cuna de la humanidad"), and explicitly addressed the issues of slavery, slave rebellions, abolition and race mixing in Puerto Rico. The exhibition, which features artifacts, photographs, slide shows and sound recordings, is celebrated as "an objective, precise, and informative vision of the black and African heritage of our country," according to a museum newsletter.

"We are definitely aware of our [racial] make-up here," says Antonio Broccoli Porto, a Puerto Rican artist whose paintings are on display at the Museo de Nuestra Raiz Africana. "Our black history is different from that of the States. The Spanish ended slavery in 1873, and about 30,000 slaves were liberated," adds Porto. "Some of Puerto Rico's greatest historical figures are of African descent. Jose Campeche Jordan, the world-renowned painter of the 1700s, was the mulatto son of a freed slave. Blacks could not attend formal schools, but ironically our first true educator was Rafael Cordero Molina – El Maestro Rafael – he and his sister Celestina were the children of free slaves, and they founded a small school in Old San Juan which excluded no one."

"My work has a definite influence of African themes. My paintings have Yoruba and Ifa themes," says Porto, whose work is also currently being featured on www.ifafoundation.org. "One of my favorite works is "El

Cristo del Capaveral” [the Christ of the Sugarcane Fields] – it is adapted from a photo of a sugarcane cutter from the 30s or 40s. The expression on his face is quite Christ-like... one can see a divine spark.”

Race has historically been a sensitive issue in Puerto Rico, and the island's rich African history was all but denied until quite recently. As one of the contributors to *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (1995) notes, as recently as 1988 the governor of Puerto Rico “declared in an official visit to Madrid that ‘given our people's common Hispanic roots, African contributions to Puerto Rico's culture were a mere rhetorical identification’.” But, as the same essay points out, the entire Puerto Rican culture has “continued to bear the distinct historical emblems of African ways and meanings ... of Puerto Rican spoken Spanish developed by the overwhelming majority of the island's inhabitants, who, ironically, still perceived themselves as ‘white’ or ‘near white.’ Similarly emblematic yet contradictory examples may be found in the various musico-folkloric genres (such as bomba, plena, seis and danza) created and adopted by this very same population over the preceding four centuries.”

McAllister says she has noticed this denial of African heritage among Puerto Ricans, but says she can understand it somewhat, given the realities of racial prejudice. “It's not popular to be black anywhere,” she says.

Or, as Porto more simply put it: “We have a humorous saying here in Puerto Rico, which we use when someone tries to deny their African heritage... ‘y tu abuela, donde esta?’ – and your grandmother where is she? – meaning what does she look like? ...most likely black or Indian or both.”

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