

Curated Nostalgia of Our Island

Amanda R. Luciano

Revolutionary Art and Culture Residency

The island of Puerto Rico (PR), after hundreds of years, remains a “Commonwealth” of the United States. In essence, this means that PR is occupied by the American government while the people of Puerto Rico are treated as second class citizens within its own borders and in the US. There are many ways the United States government has ensured that the elite wealthy are in power over the Boricua people. A more covert oppression manifests itself through the possession of art.

There are protections now in place for Native American sites, such as Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). However, this Act does not currently extend to indigenous Taíno lands in Puerto Rico (Rosado, 2020). Furthermore, it is a rare occurrence— if it has happened at all— that the United States has repatriated or given back artifacts originating from Puerto Rico. Doing so would require the US to actually give up control of the island and free its people. It would be a resounding admission that Puerto Rico is its own nation. The lack of acknowledgement is a slap in the face considering that the US [repatriated Taino artifacts to the Dominican Republic in 2022](#) along with several thousand other artifacts that belonged to other countries.

Those who do not align with and actively seek to fight against the colonizers' work of stripping away traditions, language, religious practices, hair styles, art, and other deeply ingrained markers of identity, know that these ways of being were violently torn away from those who had the misfortune to be in the colonizers' path. We also know, deeply, that our artifacts should and

must live with us, the people who originated them. It is unfortunate that colonialistic entities drag their feet when it is time to make amends and do what is right. Ultimately, only repatriating a fraction of the confiscated artifacts.

Recently, I visited the National Puerto Rican Museum in Chicago to see a new exhibition by Puerto Rican Artist, Raul Ortiz Bonilla. While I did enjoy Bonilla's exhibition, *Semillas*, I also visited another exhibition while at the Museum. I was intrigued by the exhibition in partnership with the Museo de Arte de Ponce titled *Nostalgia for my Island*. In this temporary exhibition, are about 20 historical works of art, dating as far back as the 1780s and is the first time the Museo de Arte de Ponce has loaned out pieces of their collections while they recover from damage to their facilities from recent earthquakes (2020) in PR. While I do not want to diminish such an exhibition curated entirely of Latinx people, there were no pieces within the collection that feature artifacts (art) from indigenous peoples.

While indigenous art was lacking in *Nostalgia for My Island*, there were several pieces that illustrated the life colonists created for themselves and forced upon the native peoples. One piece in particular caused a wash of anger over me, *Portrait of María Catalina de Urrutia* (1792) the oldest piece by artist José Campeche y Jordán, depicts a woman of European descent and child from a landowning family done up in expensive whitewashed fashion of the colonial elite of the time. These white washed portrayals put forth, glorify the exact same people who kept the indigenous people from remembering their ancestors as well as pushed ideologies of colorism, still prevalent within Puerto Rican society today.

In contrast, there were a couple pieces in the collection that brought me joy and nostalgia for the time I spent on the island as a child. One of these pieces was by artist Félix Rodríguez Báez, entitled, *The Shack* (1954). In this piece is an oil painting of a humble house in the city slums,

shown in bright greens and yellows. *The Shack* reminded me of my great grandmother Pola's home that I visited often during my time living on the island at age 12. In this piece, there are five young subjects who are said to have been representative of the diverse physical features of the Puerto Rican people. In a quote describing the meaning of this representation of diversity, Julian Haynes Steward states this was done to, "evoke a sense of peace and harmony amidst the poverty," which for me is ironic when placed in the vicinity of the work by José Campeche y Jordán previously mentioned (Steward, 1956).

While my critiques of the curation of this exhibition are not meant to devalue the art featured, I am highlighting and underlining the lack of value given to art and artifacts that help tell the story of my Puerto Rican ancestors. Prominent art institutions such as [The MET](#) in New York and the [Smithsonian](#) in Washington, DC have displayed and retained artifacts from pre-colonial Taino people and tout these displays as an honoring of the Taino culture (metmuseum.org, 2023) (National Museum of the American Indian, 2018). However, these displays are simply another example of how Indigenous people are curated by others rather than curating. These institutions continue to hoard and profit from Indigenous histories. Additionally, there are many archeological sites that have unearthed pre-colonial artifacts that are not respected as sacred or protected. Ultimately, companies aim to gentrify and profit from the island's natural beauty while also destroying it in the process (Rosado, 2020).

Advocacy and activism to end the occupation of Puerto Rico must continue. White profit gains from the island must end. The independence of Puerto Rico must be central and indigenous history protected.

¡Que viva Puerto Rico libre!

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