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Santos de palo as objects of cultural resistance

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Imagine making the handle of a hammer. It must be sturdy and conform to your needs. It'll take time to make, and you will be absorbed, even for an instance, in its confection. In objects like these, we place trust, effort, and, even unconsciously, our own beliefs. The utilization of objects to serve ones' own purposes is a common trait of human beings. This has been so ever since man crouched down and lifted a stone, wrote on the walls symbols and shapes to conjure memories or to leave them behind. Given the state of industrialization and consumption in the world at this moment, it is quite difficult for us to assign "true value" to most things. They are replaceable, and that is the point. The cellphone in our pocket will only be of value until the capacity of their technology is surpassed by its continuous updates, when they will need valueless disposal and replacing. Objects that endure, which are unique and made with time and effort, are seldom seen; mostly only in retrospective as objects of the past. Despite being seldom seen, the analyses of these objects can offer special perspectives.

The tradition of carving wooden saints, also known as imagery, has a long history on Puerto Rico that, according to Dr. Arturo Dávila (historian and professor) dates back to the 16th century, when there were already art and imagery workshops on the island, which were equipped with people skilled in the art of wood carving. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of pieces from this period have survived to our day. In many instances, the names of these *santeros* (which is the proper name for those in the trade of saint carving) have been lost to anonymity of time. This is seen in examples such as the carving of an "our Lady of Sorrows", circa c. XVII, of anonymous authorship found in the town of Yauco (Vidal, 2007). Among the oldest examples which have been recovered are by the Espada family, namely patriarch Felipe Neri Espada (1754-1818), of which many pieces survive both in private collections as in museums. Granted, the Espada family were highly influenced by European canons of art, but the true expression of the art of carving in Puerto Rico stems not from Europe, but from itself.



If we think of the times when the island was sparsely populated, and society was intrinsically pious, there was a fundamental problem: the places of worship (which were a crucial part of society) were far and between, sometimes needing many hour-long trips just to get there. The solution to this was found in the hands of the common folk. With rudimentary tools, which were largely self-made, they took on the task of making saints for home and community altars. The *santeros* used materials they had on hand, including broken and tattered objects, to make this saint, and in doing so, imbued the objects with special resonances of their immediate surroundings. They were painted and sealed in different manners, spanning from pigments extracted from natural sources, to powdered paints (which they would later mix with oil) bought at town shops. As with the iconography (which was often unprecise), many *santeros* would imprint their own view into the pieces. An example of this is a carving of a San Ciriaco commissioned to Norberto Cedeño, a local saint carver. He had never been commissioned or had seen the iconography of such a figure, and so, when the day of presenting the piece came, he proportioned a small carving of a man, over a horse, with a broom on one hand and a machete on the other. His reasoning behind such iconography was that San Ciriaco “felled and swooped the island” (Mediavilla, 2005), referring to the hurricane of the same name which, in 1899, hit the island. Thus, by way of the *santo de palo*, the home itself became the place of worship, and also adapted religious belief to their own, which were often unsanctioned and disapproved by the Church.

One example of this is the carving and devotion to the “Anima Sola” (or Lone Soul). To this soul in purgatory devotees pray and ask for holy intercession. She is the loneliest of souls, but belief stood that petitions and messages carried by her were “easier for God to hear”, in allusion to her relative spatial closeness. The iconography and representation of it can be, at times, an eerie subject. According to Lange, the Anima Sola in Puerto Rico is always a woman, with flowing hair, chest bare, with suppliant hands and a “skirt” of fire, in which she stands ablaze while condemned. Common petitions were “to bring absent people back to the house, to make a thief return stolen objects and to

provoke love in the desired person and subjugate him.” (Vidal, 2010). The *Anima Sola* stands as evidence of ways in which religious beliefs were adapted to the needs and wants of the people, even if they were not approved by Church authorities.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau proposes how objects and actions of everyday life can be, in themselves, instances of resistance against imposing forces. The force is exerted in two basic ways: through tactics and strategies. A strategy, De Certeau points, is “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment.”” (p.xix). In other words, a strategy is the way in which a focal point of power may be isolated and thus conceptualized. A tactic is “a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional location), nor thus on the borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality.” (p.xix). In operating like this, the “little victories” sum up quite fast; the oppressed and marginalized suddenly get a voice, and ordinary acts, like walking, talking, and making artifacts start becoming objects of resistance. The confection of traditional earthenware becomes more than a plate, the weaving of textiles are more than blankets. The *santos* not only are not the exception, but are a historical and contemporary example of an object of cultural resistance.

Looking into some details and characteristics of early *santos de palo* will shed light on how these tendencies were performed in Puerto Rico. As Ivonne Lange notes in her 1975 thesis *Santos*: The household wooden saints of Puerto Rico, the gaze of the carvings is not (as in most European, and later American versions) looking up in reverence or pain upwards, but looks directly at the spectator, and is also quite serene, and at times even happy. The disposition of the local carvers was not to bring more pain and suffering, but happiness. This would have been frowned upon by the hegemonic pressures of the Church, but represented a force of resistance. Even a smile can be an act of resistance.

Also, the strategy presented by de Certeau is useful to consider here in relation to the use of isolated spaces. In the case of household saints, this place was called the *nicho* (the word niche doesn't really adhere to the traditional meaning). The *nicho* was usually a small box with a gable roof which housed the wooden saint, usually hung on a bedroom wall. There, many petitions and votive offerings were laid and presented, and the worshipping was done in such isolated space, "spaces of darkness and trickery- in the universe of technocratic transparency" (de Certeau, 1980). In such, this links to de Certeau's concepts of the ways of how using imposed systems, through popular culture, manifest in ways in which they claim spaces for their maneuvers against imposing forces. The redistribution of spaces in silent battles of power. As it did the Spanish colonial period, in the contemporary political and social climate in Puerto Rican society, including (and most importantly) the colonization and heavy assimilation processes in place by the United States since its invasion of the island in 1898, the tradition of carving wooden saints has served the function of providing a contention wall against cultural assimilation. With the arrival of the United States, the imperial directives brought two key elements which greatly affected the carving of saints: Protestantism and plaster saints. With the arrival of Protestantism, Puerto Ricans were urged to burn and destroy their santos, which at the time may have been family heirlooms spanning hundreds of years. But more importantly, the arrival of cheap, mass produced, "pretty" saints from the United States meant that the market shifted, and the more expensive and rustic santos fell in disfavor. But by the 1950s, the tradition took on a new breath of air with the efforts of Ricardo Alegría and the ICP (Institute of Culture of Puerto Rico). Many "old santeros" were still around, and many more started carving. Through the years, the practice and representations of these local images became deeply ingrained in Puerto Rican culture; to illustrate this, we can look at the different posters and art pieces made by artists, in which carved saints are a recurring motif (ex: The portfolio of "Las Plenas" by Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufiño illustrates, in Santa Maria, a carved saint at the bottom used by a woman as a weapon against a beast). After talking and interviewing multiple renowned local carvers (such as Alexandra Ruiz Pesante and Pedro

Pablo Rinaldi Jovet), taken together, they express how they practice carving saints for the cultural significance it implies.

Colonial mandates attempt to shape everyday life through the bombardment of cultural assimilation. The underlying structures, such as social, educational, political or economic, respond to its ideologies, imparting sets of values which are to be substituted and internalized by the masses. No longer shall you believe in the value of your culture when faced with its force; but the santos, as objects, are a method to push back. They are a manifestation of resistance. They resist, even when the costs are higher, and they don't (at least contingently) follow the European and western canons of art. We can admire this chosen adherence to a native canon in the Cabán family (who were from the town of Camuy, PR, late 19th century to mid-20th century) in which the common, usual pieces follow a certain style and canon of their own. Meanwhile, their more elaborate pieces show a level of skill that few can achieve. This very resistance to adhere to these canons is, in turn, a force of resistance. "A ("popular") use of religion modifies its function. A way of speaking this received language transforms it into a song of resistance..." (p.18) says De Certau. In doing so, and in the mere practice of carving, it becomes an action which transforms a received language into a strategy which vindicates the culture it symbolizes.

In this way, the carving of saints, and the mere presence of them in households are, as de Certau would agree, objects in which culture vindicates and resists assimilation. Objects that have the power to hold back imposition, using everyday practice as a source of force, while ostensibly complying with the colonial mandates from outside. Thus, the decolonial power of these rituals, like many other contemporary cultural rites in Puerto Rico, are imbued with multifold layers of significance, that appear simple and quotidian, but reach deep into the human process of resistance.

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