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España inmortal

LORENZO HOMAR'S PRINTS

FOR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS IN PUERTO RICO

PRINTMAKING EMERGED AS PUERTO RICO'S MOST SIGNIFICANT ART FORM around the middle of the twentieth century. Silkscreen was the method of choice principally because it was cost effective and required no presses. Although Irene Delano had introduced the technique to the island as early as 1946, it was Lorenzo Homar, a virtuoso of the medium and a devoted teacher, who raised the standards of the medium to unprecedented levels. A significant body Homar's work draws on Spanish themes and iconography in order to visually express the shared cultural heritage of Puerto Rico and Spain. This characteristic of Lorenzo Homar's oeuvre may be explained in part as a reaction to the growing threat of American cultural imperialism, but the imagery of his prints also conveys a significant aspect of Puerto Rican national identity that predates the arrival of the United States in 1898.

The decade of the 1950s in Puerto Rico was a time of sweeping social revolution. Of the many newly formed government agencies and organizations, perhaps the most controversial was the *Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* (ICP). As described by its founding director, Ricardo Alegría, the mandate of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture was to dedicate its energies towards the study, preservation, enrichment and dissemination of the island's cultural heritage. From the beginning, the Institute was officially dedicated to a definition of Puerto Rican culture that was derived from the indigenous Taíno and Arawak peoples, African civilizations imported in the slave trade, and, in Alegría's words, "above all, Spain eternal."¹ Ultimately the ICP—and its subsidiary organizations—emerged as the leading force of hispanicism in the island. The ICP's inclination toward hispanicism, which may be defined as its commitment to the primacy of the Spanish origins of Puerto Rican culture and society, stemmed from ideas that had begun to take hold in the earlier part of the century. It has been proposed that the ultimate motivation for hispanophilia among writers, politicians and educators during the first half of the twentieth century was likely a direct response to the threat of imminent cultural invasion on the part of the United States.² It becomes increasingly clear, however, that the roots of Puerto Rican hispanicism lie not merely in the reactionary thought of the early twentieth century. The brand of cultural nationalism propounded by the ICP, for instance, reaches

back at least as far as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In her important recent study of Puerto Rican literature and thought, Malena Rodríguez Castro has convincingly proposed that Puerto Rican “cultural nationalism, which arose in the first decades of this century, postulates a main root—hispanicism—which branches into a secondary root—*criollismo*.”³ Hispanicism, according to Rodríguez Castro, is characterized furthermore by a conviction of a “fundamental unity of character” that helps to define and distinguish the Spanish and their descendants.⁴ The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, through figures like Ricardo Alegría and the artist Lorenzo Homar, sought to affirm rather than deny the island’s Spanish and *criollo* heritage, which was after all, a feature that distinguished Puerto Rico’s cultural identity. Essential to such a philosophy is a romanticized—hispanophile—notion of Spain as an exemplum of civilization freed from the shadow of the Black Legend of inquisition and bloody conquest. The events of 1898, during which Spain’s imperial pretensions were finally extinguished, provided an absolution of sorts that made this dramatic transformation of the image of Spain possible.⁵ Such a concept is clearly reflected in the designs for the official seal of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, executed in 1955 and 1962 by the island’s leading graphic artist, Lorenzo Homar. The emblems were modeled on commemorative medals that were produced in Puerto Rico during the early twentieth century, such as the Juan Ponce de Leon medal of 1908. Homar’s prints cast a personification of Spain in the central role not as *conquistador* but rather a benevolent man of letters. It was an enlightened hispanicism, therefore, on which the philosophy of the founders of the ICP was based. In forming the board of directors of the ICP, Governor Muñoz Marín selected leading representatives from different intellectual and artistic fields.⁶ The highly educated group of men was informed either directly or indirectly by the writings of José de Diego, president of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño and zealous defender of the integrity of the Castilian language, Luis Llorens Torres, founder of the satirical *Juan Bobo* periodical, and Antonio Pedreira, whose book *Insularismo* was published in 1934.⁷ Such authors were characterized by varying degrees of hispanophilia, with De Diego espousing a particularly fervent version through his writings. The presence of such an enlightened hispanicism, though ignored in previous scholarly literature regarding the artist, also defines the fundamental thrust behind an important aspect of Lorenzo Homar’s graphic *oeuvre*. In 1957, Homar accepted Ricardo Alegría’s invitation to direct the new Graphics Workshop at the *Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña*. Homar’s tenure in the position, which lasted until 1972, coincided almost exactly with that of Alegría.

During his first year as director of the ICP’s Graphics Workshop, Homar began designing a poster honoring the 450th anniversary of the Catholic evangelization of Puerto Rico.⁸ The commemorative year celebrated Juan Ponce de Leon’s arrival in San Juan and the subsequent missionizing of the island’s native population by Spanish clergy.⁹ It was also in 1958 that the artist had his first professional contact with the Casa del Libro. The museum, which had been founded two years earlier under the aegis of the ICP by a group of independent trustees, commissioned

Homar to design a poster for its *Exposición Colón* in commemoration of the explorer's arrival in 1508. The Casa del Libro, situated in an eighteenth-century townhouse in the Calle del Cristo in Old San Juan, continues to house an important collection of European manuscripts and *incunabula*, particularly those from Spain. Homar's early connection to the museum is significant not only because it established his lasting ties to the institution, but also because it was at this point that Homar began visiting the Casa del Libro regularly in order to study its collection and the typography of Spanish *incunabula*.¹⁰ Homar's poster for the Casa del Libro's 1964 exhibition *El León en los Libros* depicts a stylized heraldic lion holding a lavishly bound volume. The lion rampant is an immediate and powerful icon of the history of the Spanish monarchy and is based on the royal arms of Castile and León. Other exhibitions for which Lorenzo Homar designed silkscreen posters include *Colón y el Libro* (1958), *El libro Español en el siglo quince* (1960), and *Los Incunables Españoles* (1969). The subtitle in Homar's poster of the latter informs the viewer that the exhibition was intended to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the wedding of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. At the time the Casa del Libro opened, work was underway on the Museo de Arte de Ponce. The new museum, built by Luis A Ferré to house the collection he had amassed with the help of Julius Held, was officially opened to the public in 1959. Ferré commissioned two designs from Lorenzo Homar for silkscreen promotional posters. Homar chose to model his designs on two Spanish paintings from the collection. The first represents an homage to sixteenth-century master Alonso Sanchez Coello, whose portrait of a *Lady with a Pink* is a jewel of the collection in Ponce. The pendant poster is based on the *Portrait of Cardinal Gaspar de Borja*, which was attributed at the time to Diego Velázquez. In both images, the artist has achieved masterful painterly effects through transparencies and modeling, while at the same time maintaining the economy of color necessary to the silkscreen medium. It is no accident of chance that the artist decided to employ Spanish models for the silkscreen posters that would emerge nationwide as the museum's public image. In his account of the founding of the Museo de Ponce, Professor Julius Held has noted that "the slight bias in favor of Spanish art is understandable in a country where Spanish is the official language and the cultural links with Spain have been strong and enduring."¹¹ It should be remembered that both the Ponce Museum and the Casa del Libro emerged during a historic period that was marked by the ICP's official program of seeking, defining, and preserving a national cultural identity. In turn, Lorenzo Homar's poster designs situated the two institutions along particularly Hispanic cultural lines. In 1959, Homar had his first opportunity to work with the subject of José Campeche (1751-1809), the leading painter and portraitist to Puerto Rico's *criollo* aristocracy. Homar's poster for the exhibition "Pinturas de José Campeche y su Taller", which was held at the ICP from October through November of that year, featured an adaptation of the painter's self-portrait.¹² The historical figure of José Campeche was to provide inspiration throughout Homar's career. Thus, when in 1959 Homar was set with the task of designing a poster

to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Puerto Rico's first native-born Bishop, Doctor Don Juan Alejo de Arizmendi de la Torre, the printmaker chose to employ Campeche's 1803 portrait of the prelate as his model for the poster. The resulting poster is a tour-de-force of silkscreen technique and a masterpiece of the medium. Bishop Juan Alejo distinguished himself both as an active patron of the arts and as a philanthropist who worked tirelessly for the benefit of the poor. At the top left of the silkscreen portrait, balancing the depiction of the wicker basket, is an escutcheon bearing the arms of the episcopate: the lions and tower of Castile and León underneath a cardinal's hat. The placement of the episcopal emblem mirrors a Spanish artistic practice found in portraits such as Luis Tristan's *Cardinal Sandoval y Rojas* of 1619, which is in the Cathedral of Toledo. The figure of Bishop Alejo de Arizmendi represents, according to Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, "the first *criollo* elite," and a "germinal manifestation of *criollo* politics."¹³ In other words, he might be seen as a cultural bridge between Spain and Puerto Rico. In 1970, the fourth major exhibition since 1948 of Campeche's paintings was being mounted by the ICP; Homar was again commissioned to design the promotional poster for the show. Homar's silkscreen is an imaginary depiction of the interior of Campeche's studio, complete with canvases by the master. Two of the paintings may be identified as Campeche's portraits of María de los Dolores Martínez de Carvajal and José Más Ferrer.¹⁴ The third and largest of the paintings in Homar's poster is an adaptation of Campeche's half-length self-portrait, at present known only through a copy by Francisco Oller. In its composition, Homar's poster makes reference to—and pays homage to—the great European masters Vermeer and Velázquez. According to Rodríguez Castro, commemorative events in Puerto Rico, such as the anniversary of Bishop Alejo's birth and the exhibitions of Campeche's paintings, were designed by the government (through organizations like the ICP) to create a sense of shared *hispanidad* among the island's citizens.¹⁵ Homar's posters undeniably reflect part of the ICP's tacit political mandate, which was to protect the island from the invasion of Anglo-American culture, language and religion by emphasizing the history of Puerto Rico's Hispanic origins. However, Homar does not make visual reference to the United States or its cultural imperialism through his work. Through his numerous commemorative posters, his ICP logo designs, and his posters honoring *criollo* society and its painter, José Campeche, Homar has promoted a view of the colonial history of the island characterized by benevolence, refinement and pride. During the colonial era, it cannot be denied that Puerto Rico's population was forced to face evangelization, enslavement and extinction at the hands of the Spanish. In Homar's imagery, however, the Spaniard is freed from the associations of Empire and Inquisition that came to define the so-called "Black Legend." Furthermore, the body of work that Homar created for the ICP—and other cultural institutions such as the Museo de Arte de Ponce and the Casa del Libro—sought to embrace the significance of Puerto Rico's Spanish heritage. Indeed, although Homar emphasizes the importance of the island's links to Spain, his work does not reflect a right-wing call for what José Luis González has

described as “a return to the Spanish era.”¹⁶ Instead, through their idealization of the undeniable Hispanic heritage of the island, Homar’s posters come to declare the cultural independence of the nation of Puerto Rico.



■ N O T E S : ■

1. Ricardo E. Alegría, *Dieciocho años del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña 1955-1973*, (San Juan, P.R.: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1978), 11. Reprint anniversary edition 1996.
2. Arlene M. Davila, *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 26.
3. Malena Rodríguez Castro, “Asedios centenarios: La hispanofilia en la cultura puertorriqueña,” in *Hispanofilia: arquitectura y vida en Puerto Rico, 1900-1950*, (Río Piedras: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998), 287.
4. *Ibid.*, 289.
5. *Ibid.*, 288.
6. The *junta* consisted of Enrique A. Laguerre, Teodoro Vidal, Eugenio Fernández Méndez, Salvador Tió, Arturo Morales Carrión, José A. Buitrago, José Trias Monge, and Ricardo E. Alegría. Please see Alegría, *El Instituto de Cultura*, 4-5; see also Davila, *Sponsored Identities*, 61.
7. Rodríguez Castro, “Asedios centenarios,” 296.
8. The poster’s original text reads: “450to aniversario de la colonización cristiana de Puerto Rico.”
9. Henry Wells, *The Modernization of Puerto Rico: A Political Study of Changing Values and Institutions*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 37.
10. María Elena Somoza, “Graphic Arts in Puerto Rico from 1949 to 1970: A Historical Perspective and Aesthetic Analysis of Selected Prints,” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1983), 148, n. 39. See also David J. Cupeles, *Lorenzo Homar: artista ejemplar de la gráfica contemporánea de Puerto Rico*, (Mexico City, 1986) 34.
11. Julius S. Held, “A New Museum in Ponce,” *Burlington Magazine* 103 (1961), 317.
12. Teresa Tió, “Content and Context of the Puerto Rican Poster,” in *El cartel en Puerto Rico: 1946-1985*, | (Río Piedras: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1985), 16-17.
13. Rodríguez Juliá, *Campeche, o los diablitos de la melancolía*, (San Juan, P.R.: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1986), 141.
14. For the artist’s own identification of the works, see “Notas sobre la serigrafía: Entrevista a Lorenzo Homar,” in *Exposición Retrospectiva de la obra de Lorenzo Homar*, (Ponce: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1978), 49.
15. Rodríguez Castro, “Asedios,” 281.
16. José Luis González, *Puerto Rico: The Four-Storeyed Country and Other Essays*, (Princeton and New York: Markus Wiener, 1993), 24.