



José Orta, The Three Kings



Héctor Orta, Three Kings (with drums).

PUERTO RICAN FOLK ART

Three Kings Festival and the Santos Tradition

It is “Arts Night” in Rincón, Puerto Rico, three days after Christmas. Hastily assembled tables and booths fill the town plaza with an array of handcrafted jewelry, fiber art, ceramics, wood carvings, paintings and uniquely fashioned objects from gourds and sea glass. There are many representations of the Three Kings in response to the celebrations already

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Christ. The Feast of the Three Kings or Three Kings Day is a national holiday in Puerto Rico.

The Kings are depicted here in a variety of formats: imaginative portraits drawn, painted or molded in terra cotta relief; carved wooden figures, 7–12 inches tall. Standing or on horseback (not the customary camels), the sculpted Kings are typically presented three-abreast in their royal attire bearing their attributes (gifts) for the Christ Child. Almost hidden within the crush of vendors, is the plaza’s elaborate light display of the Magi on their journey to the manger in Bethlehem.

Shops throughout the island also feature a variety of paraphernalia in homage to the holiday, hot commercial items for locals and tourists. A search through any gallery or high end crafts emporium will reveal a mix of popular craft items along with more diligently worked creations. In shops such as Puerto Rican Art and Crafts in Old San Juan, one encounters a variety of artful representations. Here statuettes of the Kings are displayed along with a variety of *santos*—small, hand crafted,

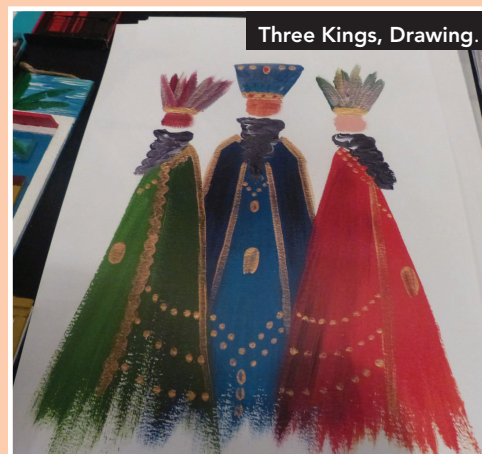
three-dimensional wooden sculptures depicting saints from the celestial hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

Introduced to the island by the Spanish *conquistadores* during the 16th century, *santos* played a vital role in local worship and were employed to aid in the religious conversion of the indigenous *Táino* population. *Santos* are reputed to possess spiritual energy, able to perform miracles and to intercede for the believer with higher powers. Limited ecclesiastic control in the rural countryside created a demand for local artisans to produce these venerated objects that have become a recognized art form over the years. Many carvers of saints, known as *santeros*, have acquired a mystical connection with the objects they create. Consequently, they have often provided spiritual guidance for their communities and helped to fashion home altars as alternative places of worship.



Three Kings, Gourd Sculptures mounted in sand and sea glass.

underway for the upcoming Epiphany holiday, January 6. The island venerates the Three Kings (or *Magi*, Wise Men) who, according to the Biblical narrative, visited the holy family 12 days after the birth of



Three Kings, Drawing.

The 20th century brought several disruptions to the santos tradition. With the annexation of the island to the United States in 1898, Protestantism challenged the use of santos (considered to be “idols”) as objects of veneration. Many were burned and destroyed. And the Catholic Church reasserted its control over Popular Catholicism. Santos were banned from churches. The belief in their ability to perform miracles was questioned, and offerings of gratitude such as *ex-votos* or *Milagos* (small metallic representations of parts of the body believed to be healed by the santo and hung on the sculpture) were disapproved of as well. The public education system, now under U.S. control, aggressively taught English and American history de-emphasizing local culture and traditions. In addition, plastic images of the saints began to replace the original wooden carvings, especially in the cities.

The tradition has survived, however, with the aid of a cultural revival in the 1950s and ‘60s that appreciated the carvings as a significant representation of Puerto Rico’s unique folk heritage. Art museums and galleries, such as the Museo de Arte de Ponce, Galeria Botello, and the Museum of the Americas, now collect and exhibit traditional as well as contemporary santos. In 2003-04, the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art (University of Florida) featured an exhibition, *Santos: Contemporary Devotional Folk Art in Puerto Rico*, that included the work of several of the artisans currently represented by Puerto Rican Art and Crafts and other commercial venues in Old San Juan, such as the Siena Art Gallery.

Cultural recognition has brought about some secularization of the art form, which is no longer exclusively Catholic. Many of today’s carvers prefer to be called *talladores de santos* (carvers of saints), as opposed to the traditional *santero*. These

artisans want to disengage the making of santos from any mystical association. Interestingly, the word *santero* can refer as well to one who practices *Santería*, a syncretic Caribbean religion. Collectors now play an important role in the support of the craft. The santo has become an artifact with an investment value. Even devotionally committed *santeros* create for the crafts market, as well as provide specially commissioned santos for art aficionados.

A close look at some of the gallery shelves on Fortaleza and San Francisco Streets reveals the strength and variety of the santos folk art tradition. The work of *santero* Carmelo Marrero from Corozal is on display at both the Puerto



Carmelo Marrero, St. Clara and St. Anthony.

Rican Art and Crafts shop and the Siena Art Gallery. According to Juan Amador of Art and Crafts, “Marrero is characterized for the sullen/sad expressions on the faces of his carvings.” His renditions of Santa Clara and Saint Anthony are done in a “more rustic style” reminiscent of earlier santos rendered in a rough cut, simplified manner. St. Anthony is a favorite subject for many carvers. His popularity is based on the saint’s purported ability to locate lost objects. When rendered standing on his head by Julia Rivera de Orta, he is even able to obtain a bride for his devotee.

The Hand of God or *Mano Poderosa* (Powerful Hand) is also a featured object in many shops and galleries. According to María Torres, curator of Puerto

Rican Folk Art at the Museum of the Americas, “*The Holy Hand* is not part of the established pantheon of Catholic saints but is a theme developed at the church margins.” The upward pointing Powerful Hand, which dates from late Roman times, and the Catholic Hand of God represent magical protection and benediction. In this version by Wilfredo Orta we see, right to left, the infant Jesus on the thumb—since much of the hand’s functioning depends on the thumb—the Virgin Mary on the index finger, then St. Joseph, St. Anne and her husband, St. Joachim (parents of the Virgin). The red marks on the palm represent Christ’s wounds on the cross. Torres concludes: “This symbolic image is considered a

syncretism, meaning a mix of beliefs rooted in Catholic and *espiritismo*, the Latin American and Caribbean belief that good and evil spirits affect health, luck and other elements of human life. The inclusion of the extended family reflects the Latin American and Spanish regard for the family above the individual.” Combining local tradition and cultural variations, Puerto Rican santos incorporate uniqueness and originality.

The work of Antonio Avilés Burgos of Orocovis is also well represented

at the high end venues. Son of the renowned Don Celestino Avilés Meléndez, Antonio not only carries on an ancestral *bulto* tradition (also, his great grandfather, Francisco Rivera Avilés, was an important 19th century carver) but oversees the Museo Orocoveño Familia Avilés (the family museum in Orocovis) where he teaches wood carving as well as classes to promote and preserve the culture of Puerto Rico.

Antonio and other *santeros* whose roots go back to the earlier carving tradition still have a profound spiritual as well as cultural relationship with the craft. Antonio considers carving almost meditative and has said that he “can get so immersed in a piece that he forgets everything around him.” For María

Torres, who wears two hats—museum curator and santera—“Becoming a wood artisan is something mystical, mysterious, sacred. . . Wood calls you like a mother calls a child. You just answer.”

Many carvers continue to work in an ecclesiastical context, both personally and visually. According to Dulce María Román, curator at the Samuel P. Harn museum, “For accuracy of representation, santeros still rely on locally printed illustrated prayers and popular devotional prints and holy cards exported from Europe, Mexico and the United States.” A number of artisans have family altars that feature their more cherished santos.

Along with devotion, community is very much in evidence among the more prominent carvers of saints. The Ponce-based Orta family carries on its own santos tradition. Patriarch Don Domingo Orta Pérez, whose reputation extends well beyond the island, has generated a family legacy of active carvers—his *santera* wife, Santia Rivera Martínez; four sons, Domingo Jr., Wilfredo, Héctor and José; and a daughter-in-law, Julia Rivera de Orta, to mention only a few. The traditional community is reinforced by yearly gatherings such as the Encuentro Nacional de Santeros, held in Orocovis, where artisans meet to share information and techniques. Participants attend

catalogue, p. 15). However, Héctor Puig, whose collection of more than 1,500 santos is a mainstay of many exhibitions, perceives the santeros’ craft as true folk art and a valued representation of Puerto Rico’s devotional and cultural heritage. He appreciates the spiritual dedication he finds in older santeros and younger carvers, along with their sense of community, mutual support and efforts to pass on the tradition.

Perhaps the most popular devotional carving, The Three Kings (*Los Tres Reyes*) or Wise Men (*Los Reyes Magos*) holds a unique place in the santos pantheon. Venerated as holy figures, the Kings are not saints, but embody an important religious holiday and symbolize Puerto Rican national identity. Variations in the carved figures reflect their indigenous connection to the country’s history. The usual grouping—three abreast, mounted or on foot—is given a native dimension by each of the Magi representing one of three ethnicities of the Puerto Rican people: Caucasian (Spanish), *Taino* (Native) and African (slaves originally and now part of the country’s social DNA).

An especially interesting variation provides the kings Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar with musical instruments instead of their customary gifts. A sitting royal threesome playing Latin style drums by Héctor Orta is especially compelling. Juan Amador explains:

“Drums are part of our typical/ traditional music. In Puerto Rico, there is a genre of music called ‘*Bomba y Plena*’, in which various types of instruments (such as the drums) are used. So in this way, the artist is ‘Puerto Ricanizing’ the traditional Magi.” He goes on to point out a touch of Nationalism: “The center drum is painted in the style of the Puerto

Rican flag.” Consider as well three large scale Magi on a second story balcony in Old San Juan’s de Armas Plaza bearing a set of local instruments—*maracas*, a *güiro* (serrated gourd played with a



Antonio Avilés Burgos, Santos Group.

stick) and a cuatro (stringed instrument similar to a guitar). It is said that the Kings with their overlay of Puerto Rican culture are often seen as an antidote to “Americanization.”

Unconstrained by the usual ecclesiastical conventions, carvings of the Kings also embrace indigenous legends about their journey. One of the more innovative portrayals is the *Virgin of the Kings*. This sculptural group springs from a popular story that tells of the Virgin guiding the Magi on their way to Bethlehem. In her right hand the Virgin mother carries the star of Bethlehem to light the path to the manger. In most representations we see the majestic Virgin, in full length and standing as if walking with the Three Kings appearing before her, equally in full length but in much smaller proportion. (*Santos*, Harn museum catalogue, pp. 44–48)

On the eve of the Festival, many communities throughout the island honor the Magi with *velorios*, *aguinaldos* (carols). Processions with song, *parrandas*, also celebrate the royal trilogy. Reaching into a lively folk tradition, Puerto Ricans on Three Kings Day combine devotion, culture and art into what might be considered a national affirmation. ❖

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Carmelo Marrero, Virgin of the Kings with Saint Gabriel and Saint Francis

workshops, where they may alternate roles of master and apprentice in the presence of their colleagues.

Even so, the secularization of the craft—especially its commercialization—has led critics to bemoan that many santos are “pathetic imitation(s) of external shapes lacking the expressive content of the original work.” (*Santos*, Harn