

Africa in the Art of Latin America

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Africa's cultural presence in Latin America is different from that of the indigenous cultures. While both branches can be identified as dominated cultures that are part of the Latin American ethnogenetic soup cooked up by the West, there is an essential divergence: Africans were, to quote Alejandro Lipschütz, "imported aborigines."¹ In another of its paradoxes, capitalism developed on the American plantations a mode of production based on slavery that displaced millions of Africans from their original lands in one of the largest and most brutal human migrations in history. This *encontronazo*, or "clash" of cultures,² commemorated during 1992, implied not only the conquest of the peoples and spaces of America by a hegemonic group, but also the continuing bloodletting and chaos visited long distance on another continent. The resulting traumas extended to both sides of the Atlantic. Uprooted, reduced to slavery, their cultural and ethnic diversity homogenized under a racist construct (the appellation "Negro"), the Africans, who were employed as a means of production, were forced to occupy different geographical, social, and cultural environments. For Africans, unlike Indoamericans, acculturation meant the very loss of their communities, kinship structures, and social and cultural institutions, and an amalgamation that forced together men and women of diverse cultural backgrounds who had lived in Africa separated by thousands of kilometers.

In areas where they had considerable demographic weight, this uprooting resulted in the active participation of Africans and their descendants in the formative process of the new Latin American nationalities. Beyond expressing a will toward integration, it was a response conditioned by the impossibility of reconstituting African communities within the Americas, the only exception being that of the multiethnic "Bush Negroes" of the Guyanas—societies of Maroons that have survived until the present protected by the dense forest.³ Emancipation and racial mixing, which often occurred in the Iberian colonies of the Americas, facilitated the process.

Nevertheless, cultural *mestizaje* (mixture) does not necessarily signify a balanced and harmonious fusion. What developed in America instead were new western cultures with a small dosage of nonwestern components that resulted from the separation and dispersion of the original ethnic groups,

their *acriollamiento* (creolizing) and their *mestizaje*. This situation, however, was more marked in countries with a strong multiethnic indigenous presence in which diversity was disguised—and discriminated against—through the use of an integrative nationalist discourse. On the other hand, wherever a strong African presence existed, its cultural and idiosyncratic elements modified the national cultures of the western "*mestizo*" kind, by shaping, to a considerable extent, their particular accents.

Such is the case of the "Caribbean," a term that in practice goes beyond the purely geographic and refers to areas farther south and as far as the Pacific Ocean as a way of noting the internal presence in various cultures of distinctive features of African origin. In this sense, "Caribbean" becomes the reference to a general ethnoculture that includes several American groups: some constituted as nations (for example, Jamaica); others that are groups with their own specific characteristics within a nation (i.e., Barlovento in Venezuela); and still others, among them Martinique, which have nationalities without being nations.⁴ Anthropology has recently begun to use the adjective "Caribbean" to categorize an experience contrary to the monocultural narrative.⁵ The question of multinationalism, so masked by the integrationist designs of the Latin American creole bourgeoisie, is nonexistent in the case of the sub-Saharan presence in America simply because Africans were deprived of their nationalities when they were transplanted.

One can extend to all of the Caribbean Fernando Ortiz's famous metaphor defining Cuban culture as an *ajiaco*,⁶ a soup made with very diverse ingredients in which the broth that stays at the bottom represents an integrated nationality, the product of synthesis. We would then have to consider which ingredients were added by each group, and who got the biggest spoonful. In any case, the *ajiaco* is not an idyllic formula (as it is frequently considered today) removed from the original intentions of the Cuban anthropologist. And we would still have to point out that, beside the broth of synthesis, there are bones, gristle, and hard seeds that never fully dissolve, even after they have contributed their substance to the broth.

These undissolved ingredients are the survivals and recreations of African traditions within religious-cultural complexes, in addition to being the particular characteristics of

blacks as subgroups within the “*mestizo*” ethnos that created the Latin American nations. Certain of these features were determined more by the sociohistorical situation than by the ethnocultural one. The Frazier-Herskovitz debate during the 1940s was largely based on the polarization of these two aspects. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier considered the “Negro” a result of acculturation through slavery and social marginality.⁷ Anthropologist Melville Herskovitz attributed Negro resistance to the precepts of an ancient culture.⁸ And both were right.

While it is true that blacks were active and integrated into Latin American nationalities, it is equally the case that they were able to develop religious-cultural complexes with clearly African roots. Despite the tendency toward amalgamation and integration, some large ethnic groups maintained a certain cohesion, especially through the *cabildos de nación*: religious, cultural, and mutual-help associations created within every important ethnic group and founded under the advocacy of a Catholic saint or a Virgin. Sponsored by the Spanish colonial regime, the purpose of these institutions was to sow cultural division and make it more difficult for black people to unite. But far from promoting an affirmation of “ethnic minorities,” the *cabildos* eased the process of creolization by using to their own advantage a certain allowance of cultural unity.

In the *cabildos*, traditional religions were practiced under cover, adapted to the new circumstances. During the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Republican period, the *cabildos* slowly disappeared, but the religions—with their complex of music, dance, songs, oral literature, and visual expressions—continued to spread. They were the main vehicles for the preservation of ethnocultural elements that remained very close to their original sources. While these religions experienced creolization, changes, and borrowings from each other and from popular Catholicism and Spiritualism, their essence, philosophy, structure, and liturgy remain very close to certain of their African roots. More than a case of syncretism—an emphasis found in discourses centered on *mestizaje* as the balanced and comprehensive solution for nationality—they constituted a paradigm for a dynamic adaptation to a different historical, cultural, and social context, achieved under strict conditions of domination.

The stress on syncretism derives from the narrative of hybridization (considered as a just and happy sharing of the integrated Latin American nation), while at the same time social and ethnic contradictions, as well as the hierarchical structure of the hybridization process conditioned by the dominant groups, remain concealed. Thus the term “syncretic cults,” which has been officially imposed in Cuba, is both unacceptable and mistaken because it implies an unconscious discrimination. The term prioritizes the accessory syncretic elements to the detriment of the essence: the truly effective evolution of African religions in America. Cer-

tainly, changes and adaptations are not unusual in the history of religions, from Tantric Buddhism to the Christian schisms. In fact, Catholicism or evangelical churches would be best described by the “syncretic” label when one considers the ontological syncretism of Christianity and the later syncretisms experienced throughout its existence. Similarly, the word “cults” seems to imply a fear of accepting “the Negroes’ witchcraft” as religion. Five hundred years may have gone by, but the “encounter of cultures” continues to show signs of its ethnocentricity, even in the rhetoric of the Academy of Sciences of a socialist country like Cuba.

At the very least, the term “syncretic cults” is a post-colonial one disguised as erudition or ethnography. Outside the specialized group of scholars who study African culture or related topics in America, it is usual for researchers, critics, and essayists to place all of these diverse religions under one label, frequently attributed (with a shudder) to a Hollywoodesque exoticism known as “voodoo.” In fact, this all-encompassing term comes from a lack of interest in acknowledging the rich cultural variety of black peoples; it is the historical result of contempt. This vulgar mistake, equivalent to putting in the same bag Anglican, Methodist, and Russian Orthodox churches, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and even the Masons, can be found even in such erudite books as the 1984 catalogue published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York for its “Primitivism in 20th-Century Art” exhibition, when it refers to Wifredo Lam.

While preserving their popular character, Afro-American religions and religious practices have been open to all races for a long time. By the nineteenth century, for example, the Abakuá Secret Society had already become the “first popular integrationist society”⁹ in Cuba, and people from different social levels could participate in its activities. Cuban and Brazilian migrations are even making these activities international by spreading them in the Americas and in Spain.

It is pertinent to compile a brief and very simplified listing of the main Afro-American religions and religious practices: Palo Monte (Cuba) and Macumba (Brazil), of Kongo origin; Shango (Trinidad), Santería (Cuba), Candomblé, Batuque, and Xangô (Brazil), derived from the Yoruba Orisha beliefs; the Arará Rule (Cuba), the House of Minas (Brazil), and the House of Rada (Trinidad), of Ewe-Fon origin; the Abakuá Secret Society (Cuba), the only re-creation in the whole diaspora of a male secret society, that of the Leopard-Men of Ejagham, Efik, and Efut, and of others from Calabar; Voodoo (Haiti), an Afro-American syncretic system with Ewe-Fon and Kongo foundations; the religion of the “Bush Negroes” (Guyanas), which is also syncretic and has a stronger Fanti-Ashanti and Ewe-Fon influence; the Umbanda (Brazil) and the cult of María Lionza (Venezuela), which are new creole religions of African inspiration and structure despite their open syncretism. The degree of “Africanism” differs in each case.

The men and women who develop these traditions regard themselves as Brazilians, Dominicans, or Trinidadians, and they act accordingly. Nevertheless, they keep alive elements of the African heritage that did not disappear into the new "mestizo" culture, using them as a foundation for practices, beliefs, customs, and perceptions of reality. This is the cultural core called Afro-American in general, and specifically Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, etc., to differentiate it from the cultures I have outlined as "Caribbean." The term acknowledges the survival, with a certain degree of autonomy, of the African presence as a part the new American nationalities.

The cultural presence of Africa in America has three main manifestations. One is an internal, formative action synthesized in Caribbean ethnic or subethnic groups. Within these cultures, the western identity is modified by nonwestern elements of considerable weight in the shaping of idiosyncrasies, *cosmovisión* (or *Weltanschauung*), customs, and artistic practices, regardless of social class or skin color. A more evident manifestation lies in the sociocultural characteristics of the different black and mulatto classes within the social strata. Another, even more literal, is found in the features of African origin that have not disappeared and are still fully identifiable. Of course, there are overlappings and continuous exchanges between these three manifestations. Besides, it should be recalled that in the Caribbean, generally speaking, communication between social and cultural classes is relatively unobstructed.

The ideology of cultural *mestizaje* in America (used to conceal ethnic and social contradictions behind the facade of a supposedly synthesized nation that, in reality, functions in discriminatory ways) turns out to be more objective when it comes to the role of black people, as compared to that of Indians, owing to the original uprooting of the former and their greater and more active degree of integration.¹⁰ It also has a more popular orientation. The concept was first outlined in the Caribbean during the 1920s and 1930s with a sense different from the one it had in countries with a strong indigenous presence. Black people—who, after all, had not built pyramids—were considered worthless, and their artwork was seen as barbaric or nonexistent. To be black meant only to be backward. Black and white writers, artists, and anthropologists were the first ones to value the African contribution, as in the case of the 1930s "negritude" movement, which served as a necessary shift to assert a denied identity.¹¹ To recognize, on the other hand, that every Caribbean no matter how white could be considered a cultural "mulatto," and that the "civilizing" acculturation of black people had been more of a give-and-take than a one-way street,¹² was a radical stand aimed at the affirmation of those social classes who had suffered the most discrimination. But the discourse of *mestizaje* has already become a cliché, a joker to hide the real participation of black people in the *ajiacó*—to cook it and to eat it too.

African presence in the popular culture of Latin Amer-

ica follows two general lines: the Caribbean and the Afro-American.¹³ With the first, it acts internally upon several manifestations of "mestizo" folklore. In visual arts it can be seen in a number of handicrafts, and perhaps has its paradigm in the delirious visuality of the carnival. It is not by chance that the most inventive and exuberant visual expression is closely bonded to music and dance, given that in those zones there was a strong and extremely fecund African presence which manifested itself very early, while visual creation had a lesser place. To a certain extent, the opposite is true in areas where the Indian presence is prevalent. There may be a number of reasons for this. African demography in America is concentrated on the coasts and is related to the plantations located in those regions. The use of imported goods has always been larger on the coasts, where people worked for the export trade and imported most of the basic and luxury goods. A more important reason is that Africans lived like prisoners in their quarters, where it was difficult for them to practice handicrafts. The mulattos and free blacks, once separated from their original communities, were quickly creolized and learned European crafts when white artisans left the field open. Because of the deformations of the slave system, any kind of manual work was considered improper for whites and was left to blacks as an inferior occupation. African traditions were destroyed not only by living and working conditions, but also by the imposition of European standards.

Afro-American development was also affected by colonial Catholicism, always ready to repress any creation of "idols." Ritual objects had to be disguised, and Catholic imagery was appropriated through syncretic representations of its saints and Virgins, who were then associated with the Yoruba and Ewe-Fon pantheons, a development coherent with the undercover polytheism of the devotion to Mary and the saints, a result of the expansion of primitive Christianity among the Old World "barbarians." It was obvious that if Saint Barbara was dressed in red, carried a weapon, and was associated with thunder, she must be Shangó, the virile Yoruba god of thunder. The sexual contradiction was explained by saying that Shangó was the "male Santa Barbara"—a formulation that would greatly please Jacques Derrida.¹⁴ Even today it is still common to find that in the shrine-houses of Cuban believers, the "Catholic" altar is placed in the living room, while the religious objects of African derivation are kept in inner rooms. In either case, the altar has been structured semantically and formally to correspond with the meanings of the African objects guarded inside these rooms.

African music, songs, and dances, on the other hand, were considered tolerable and even desirable entertainment, thus permitting the expansion of an activity that deeply affected both the ritual and the profane. In turn, this gave way to the strongest expression of African culture in America. In music and dance, the African presence manifested itself as

richly in Afro-American religious practices as in bars, dance halls, and spectacles—to such a degree, in fact, as to make it apparent that these hybrid rhythms have been known since the sixteenth century.

Afro-American visual art is poor if compared to that of Africa, but is extremely fertile in creole inventiveness.¹⁵ Its main character consists of adapting the original canons and re-creating them under new circumstances with new materials, at times displaying a baroque style. There exists, for instance, an entire and original graphic-emblematic tradition of Afro-American symbols that derives from Kongo graphemes, which incorporate western elements to create an elegant profusion of lines that changes depending on the specific manifestation. These include the *Vèvè* of Voodoo, the Palo Monte signatures, the *pontos riscados* of the Macumba and Umbanda, the Ereniyó system of the Abakuá (based on the Nsibidi ideographic writing of the Ejagham), and the drawings on the ground made by the Trinidad shouters. The numerous ritual objects constructed with clay, metal, wood, beads, fabric, and many other materials range from a quite strict formal relationship with their African ancestors to a reinvention that preserves only meanings and functions. Often they are also rearranged to serve new circumstances, and sometimes they are pure creole inventions, particularly in the syncretic religions. Many of these objects are part of the spectacular scenario of altars—perhaps the greatest expression of Afro-American aesthetics and ritual in the visual arts. Altars appear in diverse religious complexes and attain their finest display in Santería, Candomblé, and Umbanda. They are truly “postmodern” installations using a rich variety of objects. Some are custom-made; others are a kind of “ready-made,” in which meanings are freely rearranged to structure a very complex symbolic and aesthetic discourse—one where religious rules do not prevent a new vernacular creation that integrates the traditional and the contemporary.

Brazil is notable for the carnival fantasy of ritual outfits that have little or nothing to do with their possibly African models, except on a symbolic level that is fundamental for religious purposes. Also found here, as well as in Santería, are thrones for the initiated, a creole fantasy displaying the same scenographic character as a cabaret production. On the other hand, the Abakuá have preserved the outfits of their masked characters in an almost pure fashion. This is the only case in the whole diaspora in which the mask, as in Africa, has been maintained as the incarnation of a mystic entity that is part of strictly African “predramatic” ceremonies. Other objects made by the Abakuá, as well as in Candomblé, Santería, Palo Monte, Casa de Minas, the Arará Rule, and by “Bush Negroes,” are close to their original African typology, although it usually appears slightly rearranged. Embossed ceremonial drums (fig. 1) can be seen with paintings and carved figures or—depending on the case—adorned with feathers or cloths, or embroidered with beads. There are also wands, necklaces, fly whisks, and fans, all for ritual use; and



FIG. 1 Arará Drum (Cuba), possibly 19th century, wood and hide, relief with the double serpent of the Dan god. Museo de la Música, Havana.

objects that are depositories of mystic force in which aspects of extraordinarily original African figuration have been preserved. Some “Maroon gods” (*dioses cimarrones*) remain, who, in spite of syncretism, have managed to conserve images with which they are associated, such as that of Shangó’s cult in Candomblé. Syncretism must not be seen as a concession but as an action to affirm what is one’s own: the religious ideology imposed by colonialism is homologized with African thought as a form of appropriation. There is nothing more eloquent than some of the carved figures found in Alagoas, Brazil: Christian Virgins with emblems of an African god, certainly a reverse syncretism.

In all of this imagery deriving from Africa, the original rules have been loosened; diverse elements and techniques have been assimilated, and personal fantasy has played a role. The tendency has been in the direction of naïve sculpture, like that made by popular artists. The same tendency can be found in certain personal creations such as Voodoo or Palo Monte mural paintings, or Abakuá illustrations, which are separated from the original typology but not from the traditional religious concepts they are trying to convey. In the syncretic religions of Umbanda and the cult of María Lionza, the profuse use of plaster, plastics, and clay is an example of contemporary fantasy deriving from African and other

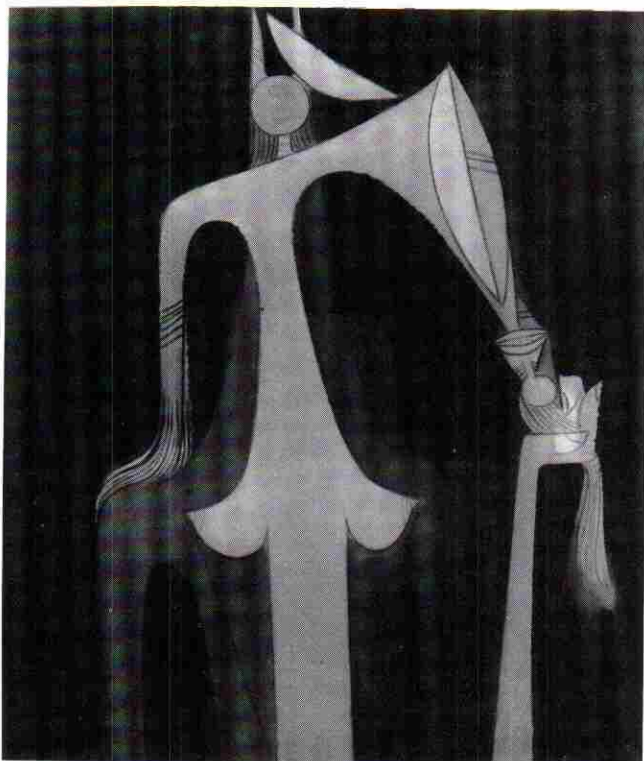


FIG. 2 Wifredo Lam, *Desnudo sobre fondo negro* (Nude on a black background), oil and charcoal on canvas, 41½ × 35½ inches. Private collection.

pantheons. Voodoo, a syncretic religion with pure African sources, also creates its own paraphernalia, such as embroidered flags, tin sculptures, and decorated bottles. Finally, circular houses with conical straw roofs and a floor plan similar to that of houses of the Mande of Mali are found in western Mexico's Costa Chica, a unique example of African architecture in America. With these houses, which traveled via memory from the Atlantic to the Pacific, I finish this rather incomplete list. The presence of Africa in popular Latin American visual art, unlike its presence in music, dance, mythology, and the religions of the diaspora, has still to be studied. Thus recognition is due to the erudite scholar Robert Farris Thompson for his important contribution to the history of art without a history.

Apparently, the "nonauthentic" character of this art, more than its humbleness, must have helped, along with other prejudices, to keep it undervalued. Nevertheless, its anti-monism, its antidogmatic response to the complexities of the circumstances with which it had to live, are what make it instructive and worthy of consideration at the end of the present millennium—in this "time of hybrids," to borrow the words of a Mexican rock singer.

If Africans participated in the integration of many Latin American cultures, many manifestations—even when not related to African traditions or themes or to popular groups in which black people and their ways are dominant—may still have an African "chromosome" that forms particular traits and tastes, shaping the special identity of the "Caribbean."

In the "fine" arts, we can observe certain recurring rhythms, colors, lines, accents, and structures in those works whose "Caribbean" character is most insistent. More than a stylistic element, however, one is aware of the substantial presence of African cultural components—world views, values, orientations, modes of thought, and customs—that play an important role in the ethnogenesis of the Caribbean and, consequently, in the ways by which the new culture identifies and recognizes itself.

Within the diverse panorama offered by modern art in Latin America are artists in whose works the African presence serves as a primary one, as the conclusive factor of expression. I am not referring only to the thematic presence but also to the attempt to establish an important definition. Adding a mask or the figure of a drummer to a painting does not make a piece whose creative core is African. Many Latin American artists have casually drawn upon African themes, using these as formal or anecdotal motifs without making them an internal part of the work's conception. Nor is the African source a definitive agent when it is used as an attractive facade for an exotic vision. When Africa is forced to appear on the surface of a work, it seldom has profound resonance.

In my opinion there are two major directions—often mixed in diverse streams—in which the African presence as a conclusive factor in Latin American fine arts can be isolated. The first has to do with the predominance of general features typical of the African consciousness: its religious philosophies, cosmovisions, mythological and ethnopsychological thinking. Traces of this African consciousness, internalized and dissolved, must participate in the formation of the "Caribbean" sensibility and imaginary vision, with its particular symbolic world. Along this line, what is African functions from very deep within, like a backbone of works that may have no direct reference to their sources. The discourse in the first direction ranges from Roger Bastides's *principe de coupure* to "magical realism."¹⁶ It is not a question of the survival of myths but of a natural inclination toward the creation of myths, similar to that of "primitive" peoples, but found, nonetheless, in the thinking of contemporary "educated" creators who are capable of focusing on the world by means of structures of mythological thought, and by reflecting a reality where magic and myth play a very active role within contemporary problems.¹⁷ In this group we find both figurative and abstract artists such as the Cubans Wifredo Lam (*fig. 2*), Roberto Diago, Agustín Cárdenas, and Mateo Torriente; René Louise and Louis Laouchez of Martinique; Paul Giudicelli of the Dominican Republic; and Aubrey Williams of Guyana.

In the visual arts, this active presence of elements of African consciousness becomes evident in a diversity of shapes and contents: from languages and current preoccupations to ancient traditions. For example, it can be found in the fabulous view by Cuban artist Angel Acosta León of objects



FIG. 3 Manuel Mendive, *Obbatalá*, 1968, mixed media. Private collection.

of daily life from marginal neighborhoods, where nothing comes directly from Africa but a great deal derives from the life of black people in big cities, though highly internalized by the artist. At times it is found in the details of an irreproachable “white” work, like the witty exchanges between objects made by Hervé Télémaque of Haiti, which remind one of the actual debates with kitchen utensils witnessed among black maids by Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera.¹⁸ It could also be germinally present in the paintings of Tarsila do Amaral and Antônio Henrique Amaral of Brazil and possibly in the violent fantasizing of Jean-Michel Basquiat (U.S.A.), studied by Robert Farris Thompson from the perspective of his discovery that New York is a “secretly African city.”¹⁹

On the side of tradition, the inner presence of African consciousness determines content, language, and direction in the work of very diverse artists, ranging from Lam (Cuba) to Mario Abreu (Venezuela). At its extreme, it is consubstantial with work entirely based on Afro-American tradition, as in the case of Manuel Mendive of Cuba (*fig. 3*). Both streams, with all their variations, are related because they share a common inner vision, not because of external myths or magic used as laboratory tools for an artistic search.

A number of Caribbean artists may use African forms taken from “outside,” forms that do not specifically exist in their culture, and appropriate them naturally, without exoticism. An African mask, even if in a showcase in Paris, will be assimilated by someone who carries within something from Africa. But it will be reconstructed in terms of the artist’s own originality, will be hybridized and “westernized”

as it is transformed into an independent artistic sign for a museum or a gallery. At the same time, though, the artist will slightly “de-westernize” western culture—understood as the international culture of the contemporary world—by molding it according to nonwestern views, sensitivities, and contents. The multiple-edged contradictions of this postcolonial process became evident to me a long time ago during an interview with Lam. When he was showing me a reproduction of one of his works with an evident African appearance, he exclaimed: “You need to see a lot of Poussin to make this!”

If along the first line I have tried to construct, the African presence comes from deep within, the second direction manifests itself on what we may call the phenomenal level. Works thus defined are based on the Afro-American tradition that makes an organic use of African shapes, themes, myths, practices, and conventions. This may range from formal elements that support the meanings to be translated, such as the recurrence of the god Eleggúa in Lam’s work, to creations centered around Afro-American tradition, such as those in Mendive’s early work and (partially) in the work of Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal (Cuba) (*fig. 4*). The spectrum of possibilities can be very wide. Within this paradigm are artists such as Helio de Souza Oliveira and

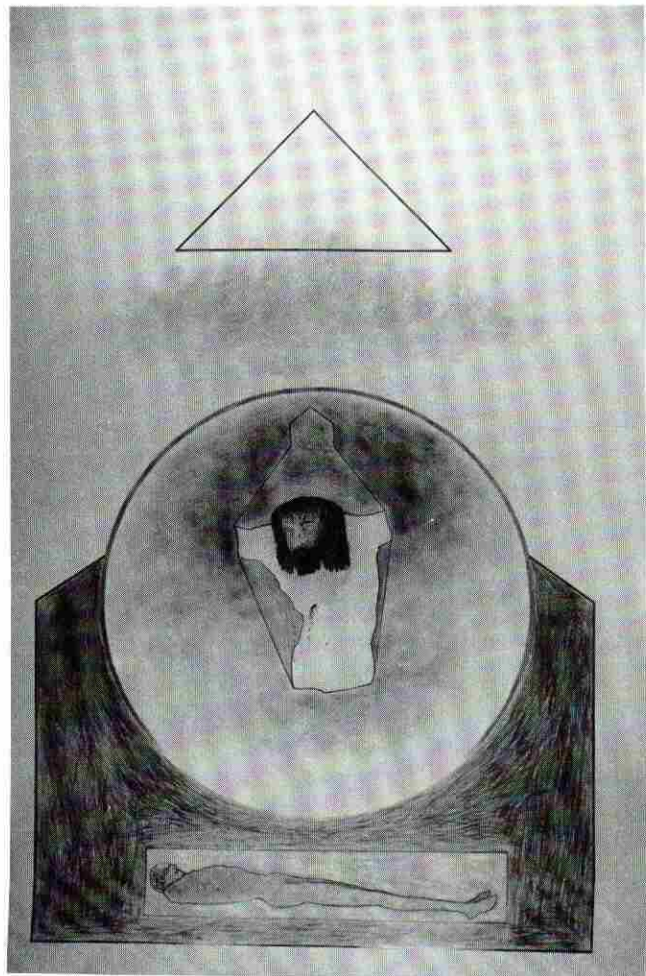
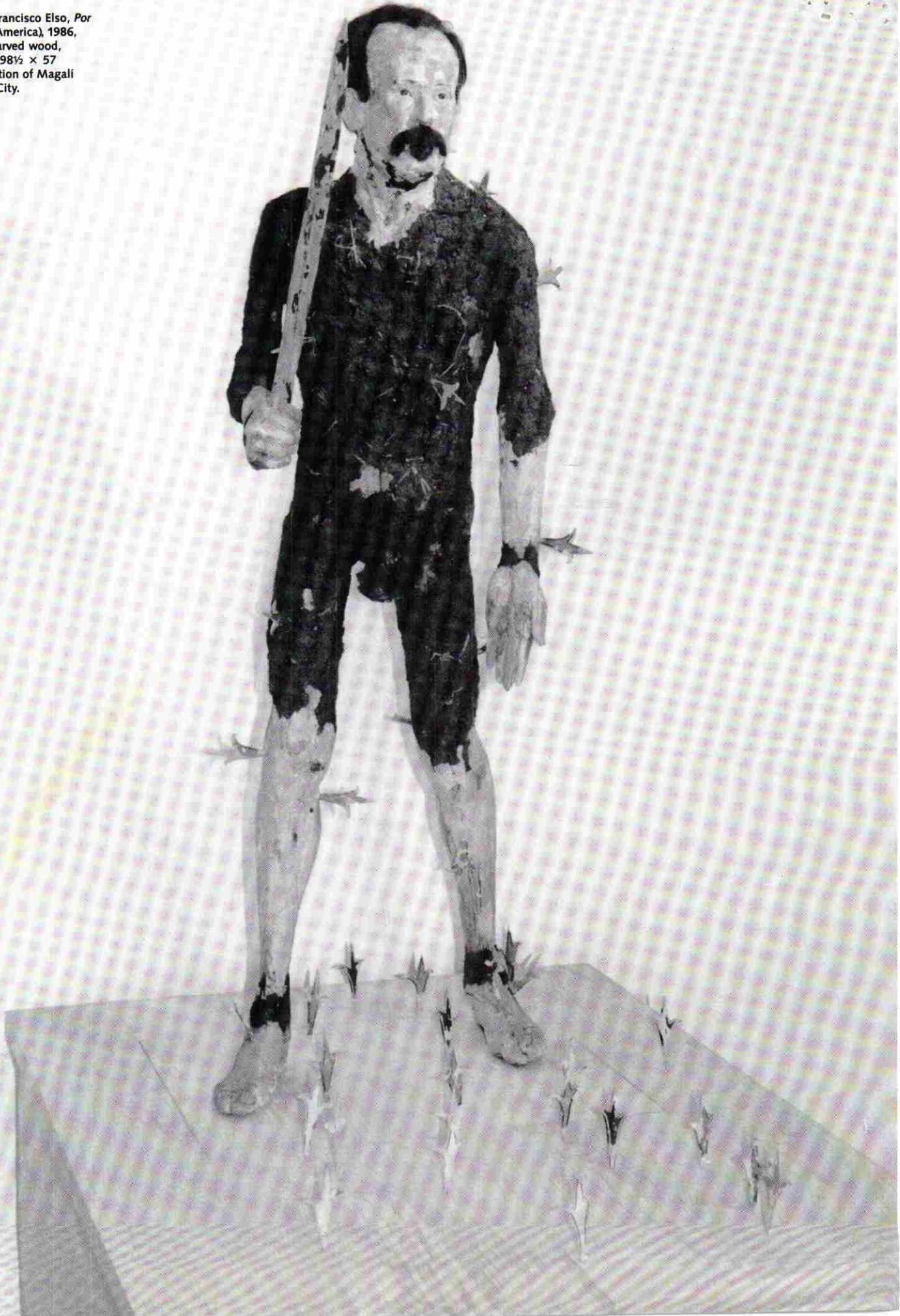


FIG. 4 Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal, *Untitled*, 1984, mixed media. Collection of the artist, Havana.

FIG. 5 Juan Francisco Elso, *Por América (For America)*, 1986, installation, carved wood, plaster, earth, 98½ × 57 inches. Collection of Magali Lara, Mexico City.



Rubem Valentim (Brazil), Jorge Severino Contreras (Dominican Republic), Bertin Nivor (Martinique), Leandro Soto and Juan Francisco Elso (Cuba), whose work is integrated within a code that alludes to a general world vision (fig. 5); Carlos Zerpa (Venezuela), who makes collages that are usufructuary reconstructions in various techniques and from various sources taken directly from popular religions (fig. 6); and José Luis Rodríguez (Puerto Rico).

The “primitive” painters of Haiti and the intuitive Jamaican artists are spontaneous exponents of the two broad streams that I have tried to describe. Whether or not it is a case of works inspired directly by the Afro-American essence—as often happens in creations by the Afro-American priests such as Hector Hyppolite and André Pierre of Haiti, and Kapo or Everaldo and Clinton Brown of Jamaica—there will always be, in general, a spirit of myth, a natural exuberance of fabulation. Such fabulation is not so much nourished by the magical real and the popular elements as *born* of them, giving this art a particular personality. One can observe a clear African stamp that, nevertheless, does not spring from the reuse of African forms or from the allusion to them, but from an original internal elaboration, fruit of a different reality.

Among the most interesting events to have happened are those that occurred in the 1980s, when several protagonists of the new Cuban art both brought together and transcended the two directions derived from the African presence, thus opening up fresh possibilities and perspectives for contemporary art in the Third World.²⁰ A tuition-free system of art education allows any child or teenager with artistic talents to receive a complete education, whatever his or her social or geographical origin. Consequently, most of the new artists come from, and remain part of, the popular classes and the living folklore that surrounds them. They are generalizing “cultivated” work whose make-up, from within, partakes of the vernacular culture. Several are practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions; others belong to families with old religious traditions, or grew up in areas where these religions had considerable influence. On a formal and methodological level, they make today’s art, but their work is consciously part of a *Weltanschauung* based on traditional values and views, guided toward an interpretation of the current world. They are much less interested in forms than in viewpoints and philosophical foundations, and as a result, the African influence works from the inside to the outside as an active presence within contemporary art: something like a “postmodern” African visual art, sometimes without a trace of “primitivism.” It is the opposite of the fashionable “otherness” that causes so much Latin American art to become “other” in order to satisfy the new occidental need for exoticism. Artists such as José Bédia (fig. 7), Juan Francisco Elso, Luis

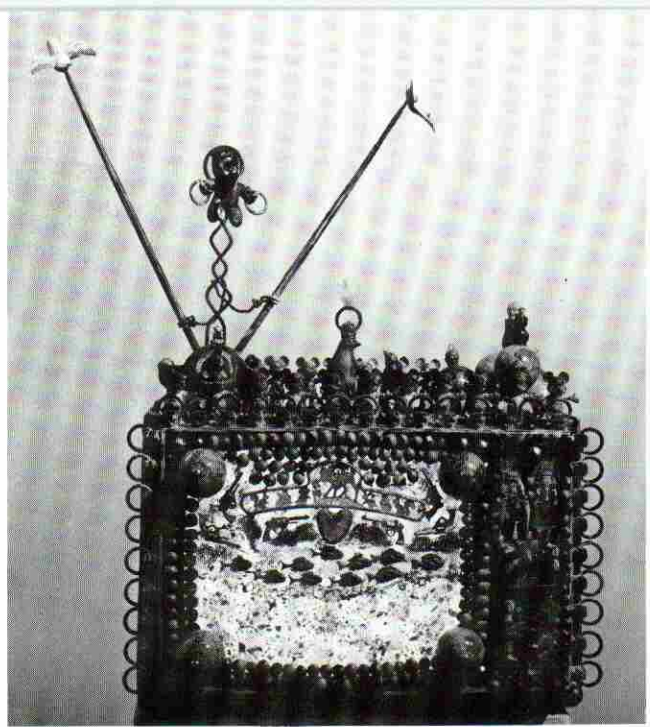


FIG. 6 Carlos Zerpa, *Festival infantil* (Children's festival), 1987, television with assemblage, 15¼ × 19¾ × 15¾ inches. Collection of Andrea Radonsky.

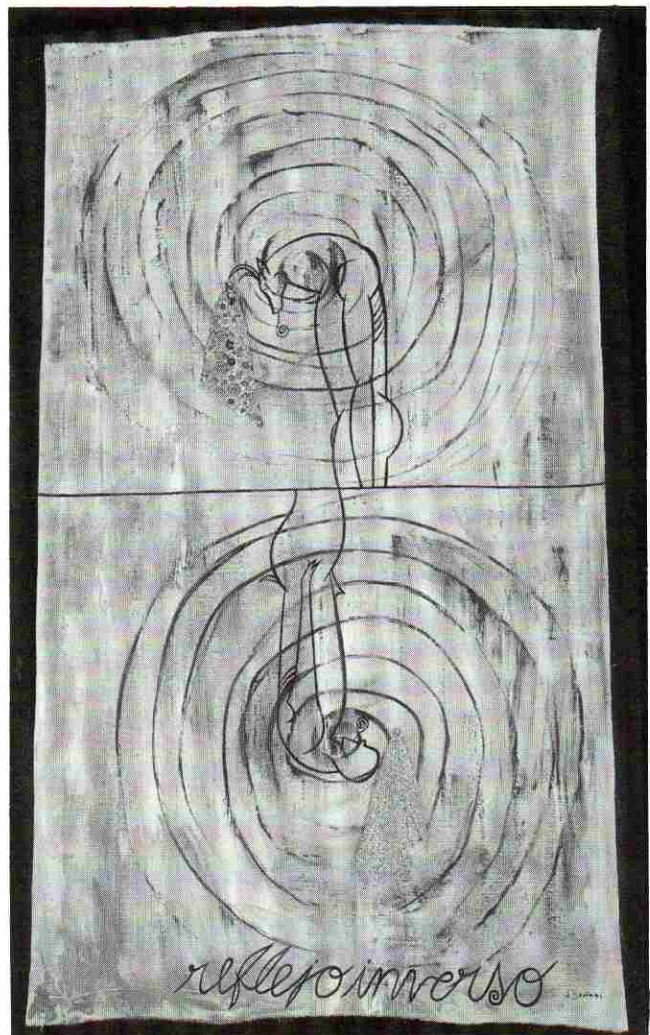


FIG. 7 José Bédia, *Reflejo inverso* (Inverted reflection), 1991, acrylic on canvas, 82¾ × 50¾ inches. Courtesy Ninart Centro de Cultura, Mexico City.

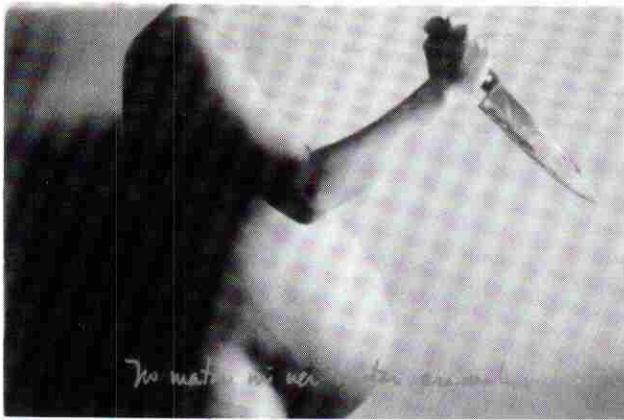


FIG. 8 Marta María Pérez, *No matar ni ver matar animales* (Don't kill or see animals killed), from the series *Para concebir* (To conceive), 1986–87, photograph, 7½ × 10½ inches. Collection of the artist.

Gómez, Marta María Pérez (fig. 8), Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal have lifted traditions from their usual settings to produce work in an “educated” mode, to move a step toward a western culture transformed by nonwestern values and interests coming from the South.

In summary, we may distinguish the African presence in Latin American art on several levels. As a genetic part of “Caribbean” culture, it accents every work expressing this culture’s specific identity. In folklore it has considerable weight in the composition of *mestizo* manifestations, and even more so in ceremonial visual art, less hybridized than that I have defined as Afro-American, where its structure of African origin will be conserved with greater purity. In “gallery” art, it appears as the defining agent in some creations. There is a constant process of changing communication and superimposition among the streams I have typologized, and they have been isolated only to clarify the strands of this cultural dynamic in art.

Five centuries after the *encontronazo* of cultures in America, it is useful to reflect that a number of the most important Latin American artists—and artistic manifestations—are those in whom African cultures have been a decisive agent for creation. And this is not a coincidence. Much of the richness and originality of Latin America derives from the nonoccidental, dominated, popular sides of our cultures. To make this possible, Africa has contributed its *ashé*, its power-to-make-things-happen.²¹

Notes

Translated by María Eraña and Cola Franzen; edited by Shifra M. Goldman.

1. Alejandro Lipschütz, *Perfil de Indoamérica de nuestro tiempo* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1972), 90–91.
2. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, “Un espacio más amplio para la democracia,” *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, supplement to *El Nacional* (Mexico) 336 (July 30, 1989): 3. [In regular Spanish, *encuentro* means “meeting” or “encounter.” *Encontronazo* signifies a resounding clash or a collision. Ed.]
3. [The Spanish term *cimarrones* used in the original text refers to runaway slaves whose settlements were located in the mountain areas of the Caribbean islands. “Maroon” derives from the French creole version of the term. The English “Bush Negroes,” applied to Afro-Americans of Suriname and the Guyanas, has been

replaced among scholars like Robert Farris Thompson and Sally and Richard Price by the term “Maroons.” Ed.]

4. [Martinique is officially a department of France. Ed.]

5. See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

6. Fernando Ortiz, “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad,” in *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1973), 154–57.

7. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

8. Melville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941).

9. Israel Moliner Castañeda, “Los ñañigos,” *Del Caribe* (Santiago de Cuba) 5, no. 12 (1988): 14.

10. The concept of *mestizaje* as a harmonious national integration has been criticized in, for example, Julio de Riverand, “Notas acerca de las culturas ibéricas en la unidad y la diversidad de la historia de América Latina,” *Santiago* (Santiago de Cuba) 40 (December 1980); and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, “Sobre la ideología del mestizaje,” paper presented at the colloquium “Garcilaso y las Civilizaciones de América,” Universidad de la Rábida, Huelva, Spain, 1990.

11. [“Negritude” was formulated in the 1930s by three francophone poets while they were students in Paris: Aimé Césaire of Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, and Léon Damas of French Guiana. They asserted the importance of their black African heritage. Ed.]

12. Fernando Ortiz, *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana* (Havana: Cárdenas y Cía, 1955), vol. 5, 198.

13. [The term “popular” as used here does not have the English connotation of “mass” or “consumer” art or culture. Rather its closest equivalent might be “grass-roots” or “community-based,” but generally without the political and/or parochial connotations often present in English. In precapitalist cultures, the popular can be pointed to as a set of lived practices, possibly a whole way of life. In a contemporary urban setting, it would describe the levels of culture that derive from the streets rather than the academy. Ed.]

14. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

15. The only general presentation of the subject is by Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

16. Roger Bastide, “Le Principe de coupure et le comportement afro-brésilien,” in *Anais do XXXI Congresso Internacional de Americanistas*, São Paulo, 1955.

17. See Gerardo Mosquera, “Introduction,” *New Art from Cuba*, exh. cat. (Old Westbury, N. Y.: S.U.N.Y. College, 1985), 1–3; and idem, “‘Primitivismo’ y ‘contemporaneidad’ en jóvenes artistas cubanos,” *La Revista del Sur* 2, no. 11 (1985): 52–55.

18. Lydia Cabrera, *Ayapá: Cuentos de Jicotea* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971), 16.

19. Robert Farris Thompson, *Activating Heaven: The Incantatory Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat*, exh. cat. (New York: Mary Boone/Michael Werner Gallery, 1985).

20. Gerardo Mosquera, “New Cuban Art: Identity and Popular Culture,” *Art Criticism* 6 (1989): 57–65; and idem, “The New Art of the Revolution,” in *The Nearest Edge of the World: Art and Cuba Now*, exh. cat. (Brookline, Mass.: Polarities, 1990), 8–11.

21. *Ashé* is the Yoruba term for a religious and philosophical concept, which is also used in Brazil and Cuba.

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