

ARTISTIC HISTORY

Blessing a Puerto Rican Tradition of Saintly Figures
The Museo de los Santos y Arte Nacional is helping to revive interest in santos, small wooden statues.

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI

SAN JUAN, P.R. — For years, travelers staying in Richard Holm’s guesthouse in the Santurce neighborhood of San Juan shared the common space with a display of wooden saints carved in the past by Puerto Rican artists. Some of the pint-size statues, called santos, were centuries old. Rural Roman Catholics who could not travel to the island’s city-based churches used them in home altars. Holm soon discovered their power to attract if not pilgrims, at least overnight guests.

“Staying in a museum proved to be very popular when I joined Airbnb in 2009,” he told me in an interview.

No one knows how many santos were created over the years by generations of wood carvers, known locally as santeros, or even the names of many of the artists. But one thing is certain: This distinctly Puerto Rican art form was at risk of being forgotten by an increasingly secular society and the island’s large diaspora.

That includes me. Puerto Rican by birth, a Protestant who never lived on the island, I knew nothing about the santos until my sister Mavis Negroni-Foosaner stayed at Holm’s Airbnb, and my brother Rafael Negroni Perez took me this summer to see the statues where they now reside, at the Museo de los Santos y Arte Nacional (MUSAN), or the Museum of Saints and National Art.

The saints in Holm’s guesthouse had been collected by José Guillermo Torres Melendez, known as Billy, a physician and historian and the author of a forthcoming book on santos. He and Holm had been business associates for years.

Torres’s interest in santos began when he was 10 and found a 1920s statue of Jesus in a trash can in the mountain town of Morovis, where he lived. He started accumulating them in earnest 20 years later, as home altars fell out of fashion. By then, Torres was practicing medicine, and some of his patients, knowing of his interest, gave their family santos to him.

People were moving from the countryside to the cities, he explained when I reached him by telephone. “Dishwashers arrived, all modern things,” Torres said. “There was an explosion of new and modern things, and the santos didn’t fit any longer.”

When the combined collections of Holm and Torres exceeded 400 santos, they opened the museum in a renovated print shop in 2022. The timing of the ribbon cut-



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ting was right, according to Victor Ramos Rosado, the principal culture and arts reporter for the island’s El Nuevo Dia newspaper.

“It has a lot to do with Puerto Rican artists, musical artists and actors, and gets back to Bad Bunny,” Ramos said, referring to Benito Antonio Martinez Ocasio, the phenomenally popular singer, songwriter and performer known by that name. This summer, Bad Bunny spent a month performing on the island. It was his only American stop on a worldwide tour for the debut of his new album, “DeBí TIRAR MÁS FOToS” (“I Should Have Taken More Photos”).

“Puerto Rican culture has been globalized,” Ramos said.

Bad Bunny met with Puerto Rican artists, including Joshua Nazario Lugo, 24, whose exhibition of paintings and carvings, “Todopoderoso” (“Almighty”), runs through Nov. 9 at the Museo de los Santos.

Nazario’s show includes 12 carved figures in a familiar santos style. Among them are the baseball star Roberto Clemente, the Puerto Rican nationalist Blanca Canales, the singer Hector Lavoe and the percussionist Ray Barretto.

“There is the saying ‘No one in life is a saint until they are dead,’” Nazario said in a phone conversation. He chose to carve people who were controversial or troubled because “it puts forward that they are human,” he explained.

Reimagining the santos tradition, as Nazario has, is as much a part of the museum’s mission as preserving the originals. The building’s top floor is dedicated to the expanding santos collection, while the first floor features work of emerging artists.

That the carvings are linked to Catholicism does not seem to interfere with the ability of secular museumgoers to appreciate them as Puerto Rican touchstones.



Top, Joshua Nazario Lugo, 24, whose exhibition of paintings and carvings, “Todopoderoso” (“Almighty”) is at Museo de los Santos y Arte Nacional through Nov. 9. Above, a santo of St. Sebastian sold for \$9,000.

“I’ve seen young people crying at some items,” said Marian Rodríguez Morales, the Museo de los Santos’s executive director. “Something connects with their feelings. Three times I’ve seen that, and two of them were the moments when I’m telling them that this is part of our art history that’s been neglected.”

This fall, the museum will host el Altar Puertorriqueno (the Puerto Rican Altar), its second island-wide gathering of santeros for a collective exhibition of Puerto Rico’s patron saints. Several well-known artists will be there, including Pedro Pablo Rinaldi; Antonio Avilés, known as Papo; and Jose Manuel Millán, whose work is intentionally spiritual.

“I’m not doing this to create a production line of similar pieces that can decorate your house,” said Millán, who is 29. “I am trying to create artwork that can connect with people.” A third-generation santero from the historic city of San Germán, he is an exacting sculptor of richly detailed santos who shares his artistic process on Instagram.

Outside of events like the Puerto Rican Altar, social media is the only place where the public can see Millán’s santos, as all 24 of them are in private collections.

The 12-inch St. Sebastian he showed at the first exhibition at the Museo de los Santos in 2024 sold to a private collector and businessman, Roberto González. “I really enjoy his work,” González said. “You can see action, the folds, the things that they hold are more precise. Everything is more exquisite.”

Fifty artists are expected to display at the Altar show. “Santos of different styles, aesthetics and techniques from all the contemporary wood carvers from Puerto Rico,” Rodríguez said.

When González bought the St. Sebastian santo last year, it was an impulse purchase, he told me, and he had second thoughts about spending so much. (In addition to the \$9,000 price, he paid a \$2,000 commission to the museum, making the saint the most expensive in his collection.) But he did not change his mind. He said he realized he was buying something beautiful and, beyond that, something with a higher purpose.

“I decided that would be a good cause,” González said of the museum. “The santos are part of our culture, and nobody has done it the way they have done it. I hope it continues.”

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