

Exhibition Review:

NUEVA YORK: 1613-1945,

EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO IN COLLABORATION
WITH THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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In the fall of 2009, el museo del barrio inaugurated its recently renovated galleries with the critically praised exhibition *Nexus New York*. A year later, the Manhattan museum plays host to *Nueva York: 1613-1945*, a show that in both its title and geographical focus recalls the earlier exhibition. Indeed, to a certain extent, the 2010 show might be considered a prequel of sorts, for whereas *Nexus New York* specifically focused on the significant dialog which took place in the city between Latin American and U.S. artists from 1900 to 1945, *Nueva York* steps back in time to examine the broader history that made such cultural interchanges possible.

Seeking to illuminate the city's deep roots with the Spanish-speaking world, *Nueva York: 1613-1945* considers an expansive date range in its exploration of the historical, political, economic, and cultural connections linking New York, Latin America, and Spain. Curated by New York Historical Society guest-curator Marci Reaven (managing director of the educationally-driven organization City Lore), along with chief historical consultant Mike Wallace [professor at City University of New York and author of the best-selling history book *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (1998)], the show is the result of a collaboration between el museo del barrio and its neighbor across Central Park, the New York Historical Society. Stretching from the city's colonial past until the end of World War II, *Nueva York* is organized both chronologically and thematically and addresses the lives and economic interests of the city's earliest colonists, trade networks with Spanish-America, cultural encounters during the nineteenth century, political interests in various Latin American and Caribbean independence movements, and artistic exchanges during the first half of the twentieth century. Although the galleries are somewhat crowded, filled as they are with paintings, manuscripts, numerous multimedia features, hands-on displays, and explanatory text, this at times overwhelming display is nevertheless successful in conveying New York's long-standing engagement with its

Spanish, Latin American, and Caribbean neighbors, visitors, business partners, and, of course, population.

Overturing the commonly held assumption that New York's growing community of Latin American immigrants is a recent, twentieth-century phenomenon, the exhibition officially "starts" in the year 1613. This seemingly peculiar date was selected to commemorate the arrival of the first documented nonnative Spanish-speaking immigrant, who, according to a manuscript on view in the show's first gallery, was an Afro-Caribbean man from Santo Domingo named Jan Rodrigues. Touted as the first Latino "New Yorker," such a title is somewhat inaccurate, since his arrival in fact preceded the establishment of New York. However, with his fate lost to history, whether or not Jan lived to see the transformation of the city from Dutch-controlled New Amsterdam to British New York in 1664 remains unknown. Nevertheless, what is certain is the fact that Jan's pioneering path was followed by scores of other Spanish-speaking individuals throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In fact, it is currently projected that New York's Hispanic residents will soon represent one-third of the city's total population.

While Jan Rodrigues' arrival marks the chronological start of *Nueva York*, visitors to the exhibition are first greeted by a portrait of a more famous historical personage—King Philip IV of Spain. The work of the Spanish master and court painter Diego Velázquez, this portrait of the Hapsburg king (on loan from the Meadows Museum in Dallas) hangs in a privileged position at the very entrance to the gallery (Plate 5). As the ruler in power during much of Spain's Thirty Years' War, Philip IV was hated by the Dutch who then brought their anti-Spanish bias to New Amsterdam. This stigma—commonly referred to as the "Black Legend"—continued in New York following the colony's acquisition by the British. In contrast to this regal, if somber, image of the king, just inside the gallery is a portrait of the Basque Don Diego Maria de Gardoquí, who lived in New York and assisted the colony on behalf of Spain during the War of Independence. Gardoquí subsequently became Spain's first minister to the newly established United States. Created by an unknown artist, the painting is at once striking and bizarre and presents a somewhat primitively rendered image of the Spanish official against a lurid, green background. Executed in entirely different

manners, the portraits of Philip IV and Gardoquí in the show's first gallery not only introduce New York's Spanish legacy, but also speak to the shifting attitudes toward the Spanish who were alternately vilified and romanticized at different moments throughout the history recounted in the exhibition. In fact, in the case of Philip IV, the monarch's presence throughout *Nueva York* is physically manifest through stickers affixed to the floor, symbols for the exhibition's extensive audio tour. Although somewhat oddly cued by the king's visage, this audio component enables visitors to listen to discussions, memories, and even songs related to the objects on view and often provides a contemporary perspective of the history presented in *Nueva York*.

Although *Nueva York* addresses the existence of both legal and pirated trade during the colonial period, issues related to commerce between the United States and the Spanish-speaking Americas are brought to the fore in the show's second gallery. Covering the period between 1825 and 1900, this space is dominated by a large-scale wooden replica of a boat owned by the Howland company that represents the primary mode for the transportation of goods during this period (elsewhere in the show, visitors learn that many of these boats originally used for shipping were later used to transport people between the continents, for both immigration and vacation purposes) (Plate 6). Perhaps the most economically significant product ferried by such boats was sugar, the product that led to the rise of a number of sugar baron families both in the United States as well as in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Yet, as *Nueva York* reveals, not all imports were so sweet, and among the other goods to enter the United States through the ports of Brooklyn was bird guano. A series of photographs on view in the gallery depicts workers before literal mountains of waste.

The introductory text to the exhibition's third gallery explains that, as business boomed in the second half of the nineteenth century, "commercial and political connections fostered cultural encounters as well." Inspired by the experience of Washington Irving, whose *Tales of the Alhambra* was published in 1832, a number of nineteenth-century artists followed the writer's footsteps through travel to Spain. Among these artists was the painter and art teacher William Merritt Chase, who outfitted his New York studio to reflect his passion for the Spanish Golden Age. In search of the exotic, others, including Frederick Edwin Church, travelled to Latin

America. Although Church's imagined landscapes of South America are familiar to those with knowledge of Latin American art, *Nueva York* features an enlightening miniature of his most famous work *Heart of the Andes* (1859), as originally presented to the U.S. public. Set in a grandiose wooden frame, the painting is presented as if looking at a view through a window, thereby heightening the supposed veracity of Church's depiction of the Latin American landscape. On view to a paying New York audience in 1859, Church's painting captured the imagination of the U.S. public and exemplifies the increasing commodification of the Latin American landscape. This vogue even impacted the high fashion industry, as illustrated in the exhibition's display of preserved beetle jewelry and a beautiful, if somewhat disturbing, hat made from the body of the quetzal, a vibrantly feathered bird native to Mexico.

These *couture* pieces are exhibited in a corner of *Nueva York's* third gallery that also presents the influence of Latino baseball players and architects. Nearby, still another section of this eclectic gallery is dedicated to the numerous Spanish and Latin American authors, publishers, and translators who worked in New York. Published in both Spanish and English, quotations from these authors' poems, historical accounts, and stories run along the length of the gallery's walls. Among these lines is an excerpt from the 1878 book *Viaje a los Estados Unidos* [Travel to the United States] by the Mexican travel writer Guillermo Prieto. Describing the author's experiences in New York, Prieto's words comically recall his surprise when he encountered a number of businesses with signs declaring "Spanish Spoken Here," thus referencing the overall theme of *Nueva York*. Yet, while excerpts like Prieto's are individually interesting, the density of the quotes in this section of the gallery is somewhat disorienting. Indeed, presented alongside a folder containing the biographies of the authors as well as a slide show that is strangely projected onto a tabletop near the middle of the gallery, the quotes create a dizzying effect and it seems that the text-heavy display would benefit from a certain amount of editing.

Among the authors presented in *Nueva York* is the revered Cuban hero José Martí, who had an office at 120 Front Street where he provided translation services. However, better known for his role in promoting Cuban independence, Martí's history, as well as the history of other Latin American

political activists, is the focus of the exhibition's fourth gallery. Specifically, the independence movements in Cuba and Puerto Rico are addressed, as rising violence on these islands led increasing numbers of Latin Americans to seek exile in New York. From this safe base, activists, many of whom were women, were able to funnel arms and financial resources to those who remained on the islands fighting the Spanish. These activists also used their location in New York to muster U.S. support for Cuban and Puerto Rican independence. Since these independence movements date back to the 1840s and 1850s and thus predate the American Civil War, *Nueva York* addresses how racial issues formed an intriguing component of the rhetoric used to appeal to the U.S. public. Indeed, both pro- and antislavery advocates cited independence from Spain as important to their individual causes. However, although the Spanish were ultimately overthrown from the islands in 1898, both Cuba and Puerto Rico found themselves subject to a new government—the United States. Ephemeral materials ranging from board games to political cartoons reveal the contrasting attitudes toward this new development from both U.S. and Caribbean perspectives. For example, a drawing from a cigar box in which the U.S. eagle is shown hovering over her chicks labeled Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam (all of which came under U.S. control following the Spanish-American War) presents the tensions brought about by this shift in imperial power.

Although artworks are integrated throughout *Nueva York*, the exhibition's early galleries reveal the imprint of the New York Historical Society, reading more like historical displays than typical art museum fare. Featuring a selection of paintings, prints, and graphic artworks by twentieth-century Spanish and Latin American artists, the show's final gallery is more akin to the kind of show usually presented at el museo (Plate 7). In fact, a number of the Latin American artists whose work had been featured in the 2009 show *Nexus New York*, are again represented in *Nueva York*, including Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, and Rufino Tamayo. While the presence of these artists in New York is well known by Latin American art historians, perhaps less familiar is the New York sojourn of Cuban artist Amelia Peláez, who briefly studied at the Art Students League in 1924. Although documentation about this experience was included in the *Nexus New York* show, Peláez had not been represented by any actual works. However, executed in rich shades of reds and oranges, her 1938 *Still Life in Red* is

included in the *Nueva York* exhibition. Notably, this work does not date to the artist's New York period, but is instead a stunning example of her later developed style of depicting tropical fruit in fragmented, interior spaces. Nevertheless, *Still Life in Red* is an appropriate painting for the current exhibition, because it represents one of the works that was exhibited and later acquired by the Museum of Modern Art as part of its 1943 *Modern Cuban Painters* show, which introduced modern Cuban art to the United States public.

Works by Spanish artists are also on view in this final gallery, including a striking gouache by the Spaniard Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida. Entitled *Grand Army Plaza, New York, Seen from a Window of the Savoy Hotel* (1911) and executed in a quasi-Impressionist style, the piece depicts the hustle and bustle of the streets of early twentieth-century New York as viewed from the artist's hotel room. Although Sorolla only visited New York twice, in 1909 and 1911, the artist was closely linked to the city through the Hispanic Society, which held a major retrospective of Sorolla's works. Organized in 1909, this show proved to be the most attended exhibition in New York at this time. Intriguing, more contemporary works by Spanish artists living in New York during the Spanish Civil War and General Franco's subsequent dictatorship are also featured, including Julio de Diego's haunting painting *They Rushed Heading into the Sea* (c. 1941). In addition to such impressive examples of visual art, this gallery also features a "juke-box"-like machine, where visitors can listen to the musical contributions of Spanish and Latin American artists in *Nueva York*.

The exhibition concludes with a site-specific installation by the Puerto Rican artist Antonio Martorell. Entitled *De aquí pa'llá (From Here to There)*, the piece was inspired by Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez's book *La guagua aerea* and takes the form of an airplane, whose walls are decorated to resemble the postcards and letters sent by Latino immigrants to their families back home (Plate 8). Commissioned specifically for *Nueva York*, the work serves as a screening room for a documentary film by Ric Burns, which was also created for the exhibition. Propelling the show past 1945, Burns' film reflects on the changing demographics of New York's Latin American populations from the early twentieth century to today. In particular, the piece addresses the history of New York's Puerto Rican population, in

homage to el museo's history as a cultural exhibition established by Puerto Rican activists and cultural promoters in 1969.

Accompanying the presentation of *Nueva York* is an exhibition catalog edited by the distinguished Latin American art historian Edward Sullivan (professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University). The catalog features eleven contributions by New York area scholars on topics ranging from baseball to music in Nueva York which expand on much of what is presented in the museum display. Many of these diverse and intriguing texts point to possibilities for further research and are thus valuable resources for scholars interested in the historical and cultural convergences between the United States, Spain, and Latin America. In addition to its texts, the exhibition catalog also features a large number of color illustrations, many of which supplement the works on view at the show. One drawback to the catalog is the lack of Spanish translations, a typical hallmark of el museo publications, although, admittedly, the catalog seems to have been published by the New York Historical Society alone. Since Spanish translations are provided on both the exhibition's signage and in the show's accompanying audio tour, it is unfortunate that the exhibition catalog may not be able to reach a segment of the *Nueva York* audience.

Interestingly, *Nueva York* is not the first time that el museo has opened its doors to partner with another cultural organization. In 2004, el museo hosted the show *MoMA at el museo*, which featured the Museum of Modern Art's vast, but largely unexhibited holdings of Latin American art. Organized in collaboration with the New York Historical Society, *Nueva York* exhibits equally unfamiliar material, but contextualizes it within a historical framework. Indeed, a number of the artworks included in the show's final gallery are on loan from the Museum of Modern Art's collection. Although scheduled during times when the New York Historical Society and the Museum of Modern Art were under renovation, the presentation of shows like *Nueva York* and *MoMA at el museo* outside of their home institutions raises questions about whether such exhibitions would ever have been shown if the galleries had been opened. For example, what does the tendency to display Latin American art and cultural exhibitions in small, "niche" institutions like el museo imply? While such issues merit continued debate, for now, el museo should be recognized for its willingness to collaborate

with institutional peers in order to fulfill its mission of “present[ing] and preserv[ing] the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States.” Indeed, it is precisely this willingness which makes el museo perhaps the ideal location for a show like *Nueva York*, which aims to divulge the myriad relationships, collaborations, and networks shared by the intermingled histories of New York, Latin America, and Spain.

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