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REVISTA DE CRÍTICA E HISTORIA DEL ARTE

Título: The Tibes Museum: A Close Encounter / **Title:** The Tibes Museum: A Close Encounter

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Resumen: La exposición permanente del Museo Arqueológico de Tibes tuvo una profunda transformación en 1989. De una muestra de carácter objetual se pasó a otra con un mayor énfasis conceptual, cuyos principales objetivos consistieron en ofrecer tanto un contexto adecuado a las piezas expuestas como una necesaria conexión entre pasado y presente. Con ello, se perseguía la identificación del puertorriqueño actual con sus antepasados indígenas a través de una serie de actividades y acciones cotidianas comunes, empleando diversos recursos museográficos que ayudaran a sus visitantes a comprender el verdadero alcance de esos nexos. Casi tres décadas después, su “metadiscurso” de afirmación nacional mantiene su vigencia.

Abstract: The permanent exhibition at the Tibes Archaeological Museum underwent a profound transformation in 1989. From an artifact-oriented display, it was given a far more conceptual emphasis, the main objectives of which were to provide an in-depth context for the exhibited objects and a necessary connection between past and present, thereby enabling contemporary Puerto Ricans to identify with their indigenous ancestors. This was further reinforced by focusing on the daily tasks of the indigenous peoples, using diverse museographic resources which can help visitors understand the true scope of our shared heritage. After nearly three decades, this “metadiscourse” constructed around national identity affirmation still maintains its validity.

Palabras clave: Aborígenes, Arqueología, Indieras, Manglares, Museo Arqueológico de Tibes, Museografía, Puerto Rico, taínos, Carlos Martínez Palmer / **Keywords:** Aborigine, Archeology, Prehispanic Art, Taino, Mangroves, Tibes Museum, Museography, Puerto Rico, Ceramic, Tainos, Carlos Martínez Palmer

Sección: English / **Section:** English

Publicación: 15 de enero de 2018

Cita recomendada:

Martínez Palmer, Carlos. “The Tibes Museum: A Close Encounter.” *Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte*, 15 de enero de 2018, humanidades.uprrp.edu/visiondoble

Visión Doble: Revista de Crítica e Historia del Arte

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Portraits of residents from Barrio Las Indieras

An archaeological museum where the artifacts from the collection are presented in a secondary way, and where other information about the daily lives of indigenous peoples is given priority, would be, in the mind of any exhibition designer, an exceptionally risky project. It might seem even riskier if the objective of this exhibition were to enable museum visitors to personally identify with and feel that they were an integral part of these indigenous cultures—in other words, an exhibition presenting a discourse of national affirmation, in a country where even mentioning

those words seems equally risky. That was the scenario we faced in 1989 when we embarked on the task of revamping the permanent exhibition at the Archaeological Museum of Tibes.

A premise that we had clearly in mind from the very outset of the project was that museums build their collections through a rigorous process of selection/ collection of objects, and that by doing so—by highlighting particular objects—they often produce an arbitrary interpretation of these collections. With these objects, museums then produce exhibitions that, in short, present distorted or opinionated selections from the collection itself, and that such selections become “metalanguages,” i.e., languages that are configured from and refer to other languages. With this in mind, the metalanguage of the new exhibition at Tibes would be a discourse of national affirmation achieved through archaeological objects. As this was a subjective exercise, we knew that we were



Distribution of showcases at the Tibes Museum

facing a possible clash of interests between the various components comprising the museum institution. Hence, the politician who subsidized the museum required that his ideology prevail in the exhibition; the museum director would try, by any means, to influence the way in which the pieces were presented; the archaeologists would demand that the exhibition address their own specific research topics, and not any others; and the designers would attempt to balance all of these demands equally, so that the ultimate message emerging from the exhibition was not transformed into an impenetrable Tower of Babel. We were confronted with all these difficulties

during the museum renovation project, and nearly three decades after the work was completed, the exhibition still maintains its validity.

The initial task was to reconceptualize an exhibition that had been inaugurated only nine years earlier, in 1980. That first exhibition in Tibes was more directed toward an aesthetic appreciation of various exotic and priceless objects from long-extinct indigenous cultures. It highlighted the archaeological artifacts which displayed more appealing designs or which seemed more exotic, while presenting them as if they were utterly disconnected from the present, and referring to the indigenous populations that made them, but without relating these peoples to subsequent generations of Puerto Ricans, beyond mere nostalgia. It presented a discourse

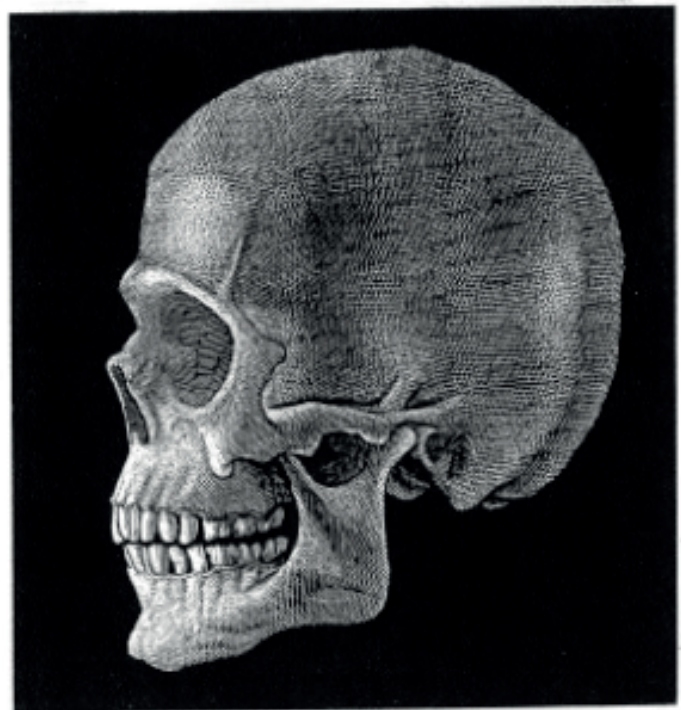
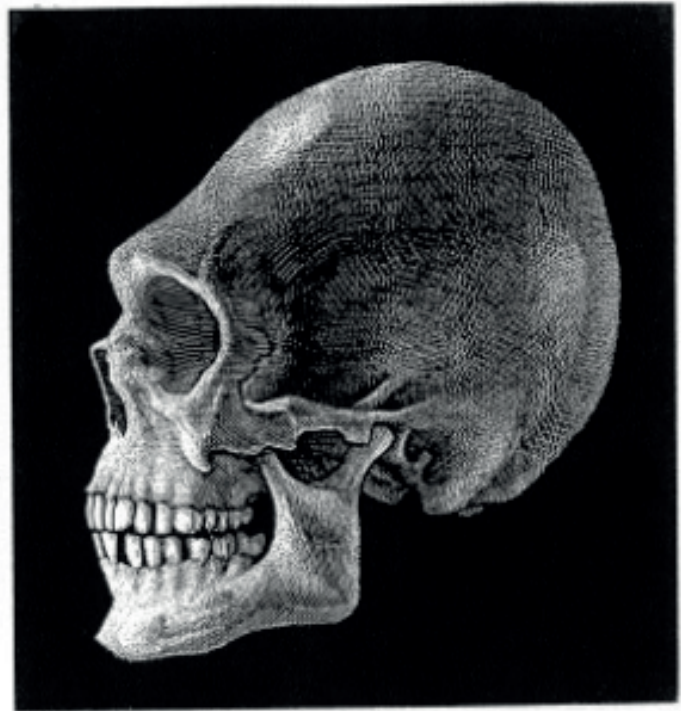


Detail of an illustration depicting an indigenous family

that was nothing more than a mystification of the past and a misunderstanding of the connections which that past could have with the present. The exhibition that we proposed contemplated a shift in focus: presenting the same artifacts already on display, but in a subordinate and less dramatic way, thus giving priority to another type of contextualizing information, the aim of which would be to achieve a transformation of pre-Columbian reality to a reality that we could share with the present.

In Puerto Rico, identification with our indigenous ancestors has always been based on a constructed imaginary or on mystically imbued representations. The management of cultural

heritage by the powerful groups who control museums is clearly evidenced in those archaeological exhibitions where pre-Columbian populations are presented as strange or exotic, in an attempt to create an illusory and reassuring boundary between our present and our past. To carry out this ideological manipulation, museums have used two strategies: the ritualization of heritage achieved by disconnecting pre-Columbian cultures from contemporary cultures and hiding any trace of an interconnection with current times; and the aesthetic spiritualization of heritage, achieved by reducing a pre-Columbian artifact to a mere “work of art” for aesthetic contemplation, separated from the social contexts for which it was produced, and hiding, in turn, any relationship it might have with the contemporary world. To counteract these strategies, it is recommended that museums give greater importance to the processes involved in creating the object and its transformation between the past and the present, paying attention to the new values and meanings that these objects can present to us, which would imply understanding history as a relationship between a present and its past, this past being a well of conclusions from which we can extract and act. The fear of the present is what has led humanity to mystify its past, causing a double loss: by mystifying ancient objects, they become



Detail of an illustration depicting an indigenous family

unnecessarily remote, and this remote past then offers us few conclusions to correspondingly react. To paraphrase a renowned French anthropologist: prehistory has no other significance than that of fixing man in his present and in his furthest past; otherwise it would be nothing but a substitution for a myth.

These reflections led us to consider the pre-Columbian artifacts exhibited in the Tibes Museum as a potential medium that we Puerto Ricans could leverage to define and situate ourselves within a culture over time, one that extends into the past and into the future. We convinced officials from the municipal government that the new exhibition should have large-format illustrations and photographs, presenting information on the daily lives of the island's early inhabitants and the uses that these people gave to the pieces on display, so that we could correct the mystified and distorted images that most Puerto Ricans have of their indigenous ancestors. In the textbooks and the officially promulgated history, the "Indian of Puerto Rico" is presented as a submissive and subdued being in loincloths. Such distortions often reach the extreme of representing them with attire and adornments grafted from North American indigenous cultures, an utter disfiguration that betrays the colonized mentality of those who sponsor such representations. Having underscored the need to correct these negative and misguided images of our ancestors, we coordinated the production of a series of life-size illustrations presenting proud and unembellished indigenous subjects, with the attributes that characterize the early natives of the Caribbean, that is, with a forehead artificially flattened by cranial deformation, with body paint, wearing stone, bone and shell ornaments, ceremonial belts, and equipped with weapons, etc. These illustrations of the first cultures that populated the country extend to two meters high each, becoming the main feature of the exhibition, thereby subordinating the archaeological artifacts and other graphic supports, which should be read as a radial system of associations around the four main illustrations. The illustrations would show the general appearance of these first settlers, together with the objects of personal use (ornaments, household and ritual objects) placed in very close proximity, in positions similar to those originally used. Thus, for example, the illustration of a Taíno family was inserted amidst objects produced by that culture: several ceremonial belts placed at the waist of the individual, and another indigenous woman displaying how belts and *naguas* (skirts) were worn. Other objects were also inserted, such as vessels, weapons, shell rattles, right next to or in a relation clearly indicating how they were used by these pre-Hispanic inhabitants. This immersive approach would put indigenous peoples within reach of the public, so close that one could almost speak with them, and enable viewers to recognize the traits and customs that we share

with them today. It would show how the ancient inhabitants of Puerto Rico really were and how these populations contributed to form what is now a distinct people, with a defined nationality. With the same intention we can interpret the use of large photos of sylvan landscapes in the exhibition; the strategic placement of photographic murals, as if they were “windows to the past,” thereby illustrating how the environment of the Taíno included the same scenery of tropical forests and coastal mangroves that have largely remained unchanged over time. The visitor recognizes the landscape and, in doing so, resuscitates the context of the experience, so that the photos begin to express what was and continues to be.

The ordering of archaeological objects was circumscribed within a specific chronology, with intervals of approximately 500 years, beginning with the most ancient populations, identified under the title “Archaic Indians: 4,500 years ago.” This reference to indigenous antiquity was directly related to the present time (the time of the exhibition), thereby implying that Boricuas (Puerto Ricans) already existed as a people during the period in question. This approach to identifying and dating indigenous settlements provoked a heated and pointless debate with the director of the museum, who preferred to identify the eras with the customary “BC” or “BCE,” and the aboriginal populations as “natives of an archaic culture,” phrases that clearly negated the connections that could exist between the past and the present.



Coastal mangrove

The exhibition was arranged in four main showcases, where all the elements of the museographic discourse were placed

Thematic texts were included along with the large-format illustrations, recreations of fabrics from

plant fibers, hammocks woven according to pre-Hispanic design, photos depicting the pottery production process, and illustrations demonstrating the use given to the main pieces of the collection. The thematic labels were written in the form of sentences with short phrases that expressed a simple idea, employing everyday language. It was decided to divide the information on the wall texts with the understanding that visitors are not generally accustomed to reading long texts in museums. The texts were written in a style that is easy to understand, so that even elementary-school Coastal mangrove students would not feel lost reading them, while also maintaining certain expressive criteria that would not put off adults who come to the museum with prior information. For this work, a trained journalist was hired as editor, someone who was skilled in the use of rhetoric and irony, and who identified



Coastal mangrove

with the positions of national affirmation proposed for the project. This person had previously collaborated in the “living” section of a Puerto Rican newspaper and provided valuable ideas for the treatment of the written information in the exhibition. For example, the information on the indigenous diet was written with the flair of a gastronomic column—“Delights of the Pre-Taíno Palate”—highlighting some aspects of their culinary art. Other information aimed at stirring interest among visitors included the “Indigenous Beauty Tips,” which lists some of the main aspects of pre-Columbian corporeal esthetics, some of which bear a resemblance to contemporary beauty rituals. Closing the exhibition, several portraits of Puerto Ricans with physical attributes similar to those of our indigenous ancestors were presented, all under a title that read “What Have We Inherited from the Indigenous Peoples?” The thematic text in this part of the exhibition closes with the following statement: “They left us an affable and kind character, yet they were proud, showing a stubborn resistance even when enslaved.”

The permanent exhibition that was presented in 1980 for the inauguration of the Tibes Museum showed a series of artifacts from various cultures without any other background information than culture and object designation, use, material, and place of origin. The difference between that artifact-oriented exhibition and the interpretive exhibition with which the museum was renovated is in the shift in discourse (both exhibitions featured more or less the same archaeological pieces). This difference has been defined in the following way: A factual exhibition usually consists of one or more objects with their respective labels or texts that identify them and indicate their place of origin. A conceptual exhibition implies a presentation of the Portrait of a resident of Barrio Las Indieras same objects but framed within a context that illustrates an idea, theory or principle. Therefore, the primary purpose of a conceptual exhibition is to demonstrate the way in which observable facts are interrelated.

Translated by the Museum Translation Class, Graduate Program in Translation, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus.

