

THE ESSO SALON OF YOUNG ARTISTS: PUERTO RICO (1964)

Ana Hilda Figueroa de Jesús

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Master's Project Advisor: Dr. Miriam M. Basilio

Second Reader: Dr. Melissa M. Ramos Borges

Abstract

The Esso Salon of Young Artists in Puerto Rico held in 1964 was part of a larger series of competitions throughout Latin America. Sponsored by the Organization of American States, Esso Standard Oil, and the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, the Esso Salon aimed to promote Puerto Rican art within an international context and offered winning artworks a chance to compete in Washington D.C. in 1965. This thesis presents how the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico created local and international criticism towards abstraction as a political affinity towards the United States. By analyzing archival materials, archival silences and posterior criticism, this research reconstructs the Esso Salon's narrative and frames it within a broader cultural debate at the time on abstraction, nationalism, and U.S.-Puerto Rico colonial relations. It contends that the competition served as a mechanism for transculturation and cultural assimilation as a contact zone. Focusing on the Esso Salon's U.S.-based sponsors, which reflected and reinforced colonial power dynamics, and the winning paintings, the competition influenced critiques against abstraction within the local art scene. This study contributes to discussions in art history, cultural studies, and postcolonial scholarship by illuminating the intersections of power, identity, and representation in Puerto Rican art of the 1960s.

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Al Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte de la Universidad de Puerto Rico,
los que fueron, son y serán,
por cultivar la curiosidad, pasión y dedicación hacia nuestro tesoro cultural.

¡Por amor al arte!

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Para la niña tonta.

List of Abbreviations

AMA - Art Museum of the Americas

CAAM - Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas, now known as RUM

CAP - Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño

DIVEDCO - División de Educación para la Comunidad

Esso - Esso Standard Oil Company, New Jersey

Esso S. A. - Latin-American affiliate of the Esso Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)

Esso Salon - Esso Salon of Young Artists

ICP - Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña

IPC - International Petroleum Company

PAU - Pan American Union

MAMBO - Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá

MHAA - Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte

MoMA - Museum of Modern Art, New York City

OAS - Organization of American States

PPD - Partido Popular Democrático

RUM - Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez

UPRRP - Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras

Introduction

Held in 1964, the Esso Salon of Young Artists in Puerto Rico stands as a significant yet overlooked chapter in the archipelago's artistic history. The national painting and sculpture competition for artists of 40 years of age or under was sponsored by the Pan American Union (PAU), a section of the Organization of American States (OAS); the Esso Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) (Esso), and the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP). The Esso Salon in Puerto Rico was part of a larger series of competitions throughout Latin America in which winning artworks later competed in a major Salon that took place in Washington D.C. in 1965.

This thesis documents the role of the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico, its affiliation with PAU and Esso, and its lasting impact on Puerto Rican art. It is informed by a cultural-artistic polemic developed, starting in the 1960's, about abstract art which was linked to political affinity with the United States. I argue that U.S.-based key sponsors such as Esso and PAU, as well as the outcomes of Puerto Rico's painting competition, may have been one of the origins for the aforementioned debate.

My research methodology involves a thorough examination of archival sources and archival silences, defined as gaps or difficulties in finding primary sources' information in the archives. From the Centro de Documentación de Arte Puertorriqueño at the Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte (MHAA) of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus (UPRRP), I accessed 12 newspaper articles and four photographs and the official Salon catalogs. Articles from Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo* reconstruct the narrative around the competition and the public's response. Photographs of artworks, artists, exhibition spaces, and events provide insight regarding the visual presentation and reception of the Esso Salon. Catalogs provide selection criteria, jury members, artists, and artworks.

When visiting, during Summer 2024, the archives of the Art Museum of the Americas, OAS at Washington DC, I researched materials related to the Esso Salon in the “José Gómez Sicre” and the “Esso Salon in general” files, both in “Box 8,” including folders titled “Administrative,” “Press Releases,” “Press Clippings,” “Biographies,” “Puerto Rico (1964)” and “Correspondence (1972).” These internal documents explain the proposed competition’s narratives and purposes of the sponsors. An important secondary source is “Omisión o censura: Una revisión de la vanguardia artística en Puerto Rico, 1960-1970” (2019) by art historian and curator Melissa M. Ramos Borges.

Despite the historical importance of the Esso Salon, including the international aspect of the competition and then future trajectory of the winning artists, it has not been part of the Puerto Rican art historical canon. When researching this competition, I stumbled upon multiple archival silences. For example, I tried accessing the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, ICP and Esso archives but was not successful. However, information found in anonymous online blogs and additional literature aided to fill gaps. I found that in 1970, José Gómez Sicre, the then Director of the Museum of Contemporary Latin Art at OAS, assisted Esso Company to donate the 59 artworks, acquired through the Salons, to the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami.¹ In 1978, Gómez Sicre organized the first major exhibition of these works since their donation. *Contemporary Latin American Art: The Esso Collection of the Lowe Art Museum and Latin American Artists of the Southeastern U.S.* appeared at the Lowe Art Museum from September 14 to October 18, 1978. I was not able to find updates on the acquired Puerto Rican artworks since that year.

¹ Edward J. Sullivan highlights the Lowe Art Museum as an important university museum with distinguished collections of Latin American art that serve both their student communities and the general public. (Sullivan 2018, 23)

One of the reasons for these gaps is Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States. The Esso Salon reflected colonial legacies and dynamics inherent to the continuous colonization of Puerto Rico by the U.S. It goes against, and complicates, political and artistic proposals of the time-period. How did the U.S. foster a dominant cultural narrative and power structure that influenced the selection of artworks, the reception of artists' identities, and the shaping of artistic discourse in the Esso Salon? I investigate how the competition was influenced by or instrumentalized for political purposes, both domestically and internationally. I emphasize that even if abstract expressionist paintings were already circulating in the Puerto Rican art scene, this competition influenced future critiques against abstraction.

During the period of study, the U.S. received international condemnation for the colonial relationship towards Puerto Rico. By analyzing U.S. policies in Puerto Rico; social and cultural movements; possible roles of and benefits to PAU, Esso and ICP; criteria, themes, styles, and narratives of the winning artworks; media coverage including, but not limited to the public's critical response, and the mentioned archival materials as well as archival silences, I demonstrate how the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico was a mechanism of transculturation, using the definition by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in "Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar" (1940).² I also propose the Esso Salon as an example of cultural assimilation by the United States, as a contact zone defined by theorist Mary Louise Pratt in the revised "Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation" (2007).³

My interest in this competition began when I first encountered the official Esso Salon in Puerto Rico poster, *Concurso Esso Para Artistas Jóvenes* (1964) (**Fig. 1**), created by Lorenzo Homar. A photograph (**Fig. 2**) published in *El Mundo* newspaper shows the General Manager of

² (Arnedo Gómez 2022, 123-145)

³ (Pratt 2007)

Esso Company in Puerto Rico, A. W. Trowbridge (right), with archeologist and anthropologist and first director of ICP, Ricardo E. Alegría (center), placing the poster that announced the Salon for young artists sponsored by Esso. The creator of the poster, Lorenzo Homar, is seen at the far left. The poster's design features a cobalt blue background with a striking red calligraphic curved line at its center, filled with a black interior. The logo of the Esso Company occupies the upper loop of the line. Curator and critic Marianne de Tolentino, drawing from insights by art critic Norma Rosso Tridas, highlighted how Puerto Rican artists embraced traditional mediums as serigraphy as a “vehicle for promotion” and to enable the public to engage with abstract languages of works by, for example, Luis Hernández Cruz.⁴ In 2019, as a student assistant to the director and curator at the MHAA, I worked with the Digitization Project of the Puerto Rican Posters Collection. Director and curator Flavia Marichal Lugo introduced and explained to me the competition. Since then, I have taken Art History, Museum Studies, and Visual Culture courses on Latin America and specifically, Puerto Rico. Even in courses where artists shown in the exhibition were discussed, the Esso Salon was not mentioned.

This thesis reconstructs the timeline and narrative of the Esso Salon and contextualizes it as a process of commodification of art and transnational exchange. It analyzes how the competition reflected and challenged cultural hegemony, as recontextualized by the pioneer in Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, in “Culture, Media, Language” (1980), in conversation with Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci particularly in the context of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the U.S..⁵ Therefore, I approach the circulation of ideas, aesthetics, and artistic practices across national borders, as well as the ways in which the competition engaged with broader trends in international art movements. Furthermore, I seek to contribute to ongoing

⁴ (de Tolentino 1991, XIX)

⁵ (Hall 1997)

discussions in art history, cultural studies, and postcolonial scholarship by illuminating the intersecting dynamics of power, identity, and representation in the art world. It is imperative to situate the Esso Salon within its historical context, drawing upon historical scholarship to understand the broader social, economic, and cultural forces shaping Puerto Rican art during the 1960's. This research considers how the Esso Salon became a breakthrough in art criticism and art history around abstract art in front of political figurative art.

Chapter 1: Art, Industry, and Identity in Puerto Rico (1960's)

In order to understand the political discourses around Puerto Rican art in the mid 1960s, the colonial relationship between the U.S. and the archipelago, and the former's policies, must be discussed. Puerto Rican political and economic projects from the 1940's like Operación Manos a la Obra and Operación Serenidad as well as the connections between the ICP and Esso Company prove how the U.S. had created the grounds and efforts for establishing an hegemony in Puerto Rico. In Stuart Hall's terms, hegemony refers to already accepted interpretations of reality that keep society's haves in power over its have-nots, while Cultural Studies is closely related to critical theory and places more emphasis on resistance. While the mentioned political and economic projects enforce a cultural hegemony, the development of resistance to US colonialism during the 1960's and the critiques of the Esso Salon of Young Artists in Puerto Rico represent challenges to it.

Puerto Rico originally appeared in the United Nations archives in 1946, in Resolution 66 (1), described as a "non-self-governing territory."⁶ Governor Luis Muñoz Marín (1949-1965), from the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD), proposed a constitution identifying Puerto Rico as an Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State), or commonwealth of the United States in 1952. The next year, Resolution 748 (VII) approved Puerto Rico's commonwealth status, noting that the "Puerto Rican people had exercised their self-determination," the country had "achieved attributes of political sovereignty," and "the requirement of providing information to the General Assembly will end."⁷ In 1960, Resolution 1514 (XV) proclaimed "the need to remedy immediately and unconditionally the colonial situation in all its forms and manifestations" and that "steps must be taken to transfer all the power to all the peoples and all the territories which

⁶ (López and Reardon 2007)

⁷ (López and Reardon 2007)

have not gained their independence.”⁸ Operación Manos a la Obra was a series of economic development projects in Puerto Rico originating from the Industrial Incentives Act of 1948. The goal of the operation was to transform the archipelago’s economy from an agricultural base to an industrial one, and to make it a developed high-income territory. The program was a joint effort between the U.S. federal government and the Puerto Rican government led by Muñoz Marín. The operation transitioned the economic force from labor struggles in industries like sugar (1934) and ports (1938) to the establishment of U.S.-subsidiary manufacturing industries.⁹ Operación Manos a la Obra provided U.S. corporations with substantial financial incentives, including at least ten years of exemption from Puerto Rican income and property, excise, municipal, and government taxes and license fees. Additionally, Section 262 of the U.S. Tax Code allowed U.S. corporations to avoid federal taxes on profits earned in Puerto Rico as long as the profits were not repatriated to the U.S. mainland.

Parallel to these economic and political conditions, the state established institutions like ICP (1955), the División de Educación para la Comunidad (DIVEDCO) (1949), and public radio/TV stations as WIPR-TV (1958) to foster cultural and ideological identity aligned with industrialization and modernization.¹⁰ The artistic group known as *La Generación de los 50’s* was formed by young Puerto Rican visual artists that had studied in New York, California, México, and Europe and had now returned home. These artists, for example Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufiño, co-founded the print workshop Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño (CAP) (1950). They worked on themes such as the affirmation of identity or Puerto Rican iconography, the rescue and monumentalization of the autochthonous and the explicit condemnation of the U.S.

⁸ (López and Reardon 2007)

⁹ (Delgado Burgos 2024)

¹⁰ WIPR-TV (channel 6) is a non-commercial educational public television station in San Juan, Puerto Rico owned by the Corporación de Puerto Rico para la Difusión Pública.

regime. Their school clashed with the universalist dogma of abstraction emanating from New York, the prestige of the metropolis in unequal conflict with the affirmation of its own.¹¹

Homar collaborated at ICP and founded its Taller de Artes Gráficas (1958). ICP had been created through Law 89, on June 21, 1955, as a “public corporation dedicated to the study, conservation, dissemination and enrichment of our national culture,” according to Ricardo E. Alegría.¹² ICP was founded under Operación Serenidad, which, according to anthropologist and cultural scholar Arlene Dávila, was meant to fulfill the spiritual needs of people while the political and economic needs were being taken care of by the commonwealth and (Operación Manos a la Obra).¹³ She explains that the interpreted dichotomy of “pure, utopian past and folklore to the impure and immoral influences of modernity,” was sponsored, the first, by ICP, the PPD, and the Independence movement, and understood as the “official cultural nationalist project,” while the second, seen as a threat from the U.S.¹⁴ Dávila further adds:

Under these conditions, new agents such as transnational corporations are joining nationalist elites in constructing images of collective identity, and modes of identification often elude traditional definitions of space, territoriality, and the objectification of the nation through material bases of authenticity while still expressing and demarcating the existence of a cultural community.¹⁵

Of these transnational corporations, my research focuses on the company Standard Oil Company (New Jersey), known as Esso. Standard Oil (1882-1911) was a petroleum corporate trust originating from operations of the Standard Oil Company (Ohio) founded in 1870 by John D. Rockefeller. On March 21, 1892, the Trust was dissolved, and its holdings were reorganized into 20 independent companies. In 1899, the Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) (Esso)

¹¹ (Benítez 1998)

¹² (Alegría 1978, 7)

¹³ (Dávila 1997, 34)

¹⁴ (Dávila 1997, 5-7, 44)

¹⁵ (Dávila 1997, 17)

acquired the shares of the other 19 companies and became the holding company for the trust.¹⁶ The Standard Oil Company (New Jersey), was renamed Exxon in 1973 and ExxonMobil in 1999. Esso worked on developing a cultural-artistic relationship with public and private institutions in the U.S., other Latin American countries, and Puerto Rico. For example, “No sólo de pan: otro aspecto de la historia de Puerto Rico” is a documentary that chronicles the development of culture, arts, architecture, and music in Puerto Rico. It was produced by Esso Company in the 1960s as a public service and self-promotion.¹⁷

ICP had begun crafting an “official” version of Puerto Rican history, emphasizing folkloric elements to celebrate and validate its cultural heritage. It adopted discourses that excluded or minimized certain aspects of Puerto Rican history deemed “unacceptable” for the emerging national identity. This selective approach reflected a deliberate attempt to construct a cultural consciousness.

However, by 1964, the funding for cultural initiatives at ICP began declining. A photograph published in the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo* (**Fig. 3**) shows Ricardo E. Alegría, receiving a monetary donation from Esso represented by public relations advisor Carlos F. de Cardona.¹⁸ In the background of the photograph there are handcrafted *santos de palo* and a poster allusive to the Three Kings Day holiday announcing a competition for *Santeros*.¹⁹ This image constructs a narrative of shared interests between alliances of government entities and private institutions. It underscores Esso’s effort to position and legitimize itself as a *mecenas* of Puerto Rican arts and culture, intertwining corporate interests with cultural heritage. This

¹⁶ (Hidy and Hidy 1976, 305)

¹⁷ (Universidad de Puerto Rico 2022)

¹⁸ I have not been able to locate any information on Carlos F. de Cardona. (*[Ricardo Alegría recibiendo donativo de la compañía ESSO para la adquisición de obras de arte]*, n.d.)

¹⁹ Santos de palo are a folk art tradition of carving wooden figures of Roman Catholic saints. Santeros, or woodcarvers, are an integral part of Puerto Rican culture and have been involved in religious worship and national identity.

partnership raises questions about the role of private funding in shaping national identity. By aligning itself with the ICP's initiatives, Esso not only gained public goodwill but also reinforced its presence within Puerto Rico's socio-economic fabric, subtly asserting corporate power within the cultural sphere.

This chapter connects political, cultural, and economic developments in Puerto Rico with broader colonial dynamics and global capitalist interests. The intersection of art, culture, and politics in mid-1960s' Puerto Rico reveals a complex relationship shaped by colonial structures, resistance movements, and the strategic involvement of transnational corporations. While ICP aimed to affirm Puerto Rican identity, they were often constrained by the very colonial forces they sought to counteract. Critiques of U.S. and corporate influences represent the broader resistance to hegemony, echoing the dynamics Hall describes.

Chapter 2: The Esso Salon of Young Artists

Latin America (1964-65)

Another international organism that helped ICP was the Organization of American States (OAS) and one of its sections: the Pan American Union (PAU). Created in 1948, OAS is a regional agency within the United Nations developed “to achieve among its member states—as stipulated in Article 1 of the Charter—an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence.”²⁰ PAU’s program promoted the idea that the cultural heritage resources are an economic asset and have the potential to be instruments of progress.²¹ To this day, Puerto Rico participates in OAS through the United States.

As discussed before, the Esso Salon of Young Artists in Latin America was a series of competitions for painters and sculptors of 40 years of age or younger. It marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Inter-American system known as OAS.²² Between July 1964 and February 1965, PAU and the Esso Company sponsored the Esso Salon in 18 countries and Puerto Rico. The Esso Salon of Young Artists in D.C. and the national competitions, under the same name, were coordinated by José Gómez Sicre, Chief of Division of Visual Arts in the Department of Cultural Affairs of PAU.²³

Gómez Sicre was a prominent Cuban art critic, curator, and cultural promoter who played a significant role in the development and international visibility of Latin American modern art.

²⁰ (Organization of American States, n.d.)

²¹ (Negrón Menicucci 2000)

²² “Although some scholars trace the antecedents of the inter-American system back to the Congress of Panama convened by Simón Bolívar in 1826, the fact is that it was only in 1889 that the American States decided to meet periodically and to forge a shared system of norms and institutions.” (Organization of American States, n.d.)

²³ José Gómez Sicre (1916–1991) was born in Matanzas, Cuba, and studied law at the University of Havana while pursuing art studies. His dual interest in law and art criticism shaped his early career. Before joining OAS in 1948, he worked as a journalist and art critic in Cuba, where he became a leading voice in promoting modern art and artists who challenged traditional aesthetics. He established the Art Museum of the Americas (AMA) in Washington, D.C. in 1976.

As chief of the Visual Arts Section at PAU, he championed a modernist aesthetic aligned with international trends and rejected folkloric or politically charged styles like those associated with the Mexican muralist movement. According to art historian Alejandro Anreus, Gómez Sicre's advocacy aligned with Cold War-era ideologies, positioning modernism as a symbol of freedom and capitalist values in opposition to communism.²⁴

Gómez Sicre sought to elevate Latin American artists on the global stage by aligning them with the principles of international modernism. This approach drew heavily from his mentor's vision, Alfred H. Barr Jr. from the Museum of Modern Art, NYC, emphasizing abstraction, individual expression, and intellectual depth. Gómez Sicre was among the first to frame Latin American art as a cohesive yet diverse regional movement, moving beyond national categorizations like "Mexican" or "Argentine" art. His hemispheric approach recognized shared cultural threads while celebrating individual artistic achievements.

The national Esso Salons took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina (for Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay); Río de Janeiro, Brazil; Santiago, Chile; Bogotá, Colombia; Santo Domingo, República Dominicana; San Salvador, El Salvador (for all Central American countries and Panamá); Port au Prince, Haití; México D. F., México; Lima, Perú; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Caracas, Venezuela. The Esso Salons' archival sources include 18 countries, however Central America was not explicitly mentioned. This evidence shows that in the Latin Americanist perspectives of the time there was a clear hierarchy of South American over Central American countries. Puerto Rico's status as a country or something entirely different remains unclear within the exhibition's geographic schema.

²⁴ (Anreus 2005, 83-84)

The chosen locations represented major cultural and political centers across Latin America and the Caribbean. Cities like Buenos Aires and México D.F. were already recognized as hubs of modern and contemporary art, providing the Esso Company with cultural credibility. Also, Esso likely selected these cities to target key markets where it had a significant business presence. For example, Venezuela was a major oil producer and exporter, making it a natural center for Esso's activities. The company had a long history in Argentina, Perú, Colombia, República Dominicana and Puerto Rico, operating refineries and distributing petroleum products through a network of gas stations. By selecting countries where it had established operations, Esso effectively merged its corporate interests with cultural patronage. This ensured maximum visibility and goodwill in regions critical to its oil and energy business. Hosting events in these locations helped Esso reinforce its image as an integral part of Latin America's modernization and cultural development.

Each country's first and second winning artworks were acquired by Esso Company for their contemporary Latin American art collection and competed against each other in a larger contest in Washington D.C. According to the official catalog, the purpose was:

to present to the U.S. public the works of outstanding young painters and sculptors of 18 countries of the Americas" and to "continue to help build close cultural ties between the United States and its talented neighbors of this hemisphere.²⁵

The catalog included a letter from the First Lady, Mrs. Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson to José A. Mora, General Secretary of OAS, and an introduction by Gómez Sicre.²⁶ The March 29, 1965 letter underscores the Salon's role in fostering greater understanding and cultural exchange between the United States and Latin America. Mrs. Johnson uses the term "our neighbors to the South," rather than "Latin American neighbours." During the Cold War,

²⁵ (Gómez Sicre 1965, 3)

²⁶ (Gómez Sicre 1965)

language was carefully chosen to project an image of hemispheric cooperation against communist influence. “Neighbors to the South” aligns with the rhetoric of partnership and unity, key themes in inter-American diplomacy of the time. Continuing with Cold War-era rhetoric emphasizing cooperation and freedom as foundations for hemispheric unity, she commends the partnership between a governmental organization and a private corporation. The letter situates the festival as part of a broader strategy of cultural diplomacy, where art becomes a medium for advancing political and social cohesion within the inter-American system.

In his “Introduction,” Gómez Sicre offers main categories in the artistic Latin American scene. He divided them into the “movement of the nationalist type,” “occasional school,” “groups struggling feverishly and with tenacity against the ignorance or incomprehension of the milieu in which they find themselves,” and the “random visionary” or “artistic freeshooter”.²⁷ He acknowledges the importance of past artistic figures, of the lasting contribution of Latin American art to the history of art. His text states that the International Petroleum Company (IPC) initiated the conversation of creating the Esso Salon competition. IPC was a subsidiary of the Esso Company, based in Toronto, Canada, which began operating in Perú in 1914 and was active until 1969.²⁸

Gómez Sicre gives significance to the private industry or “the capitalistic initiative of a free world.”²⁹ Overall, he suggests that art in the Americas progresses with freedom of expression and the liberty to accept or reject direction. The proposal for utilizing art and culture as a

²⁷ (Gómez Sicre 1965, 3)

²⁸ IPC had a major scandal for refusing to pay its full tax obligations to the Peruvian State, securing favorable exceptions through pro-American governments. In August 1968, under President Fernando Belaúnde, the “Act of Talara” was signed, returning oil fields to the State while allowing the company to retain the Talara Refinery and fuel distribution network. Controversy erupted with the “Página 11,” involving allegations of a missing page in the crude oil sales contract, sparking accusations of covert favoritism toward the company. Following a military coup on October 3, 1968, which ousted Belaúnde, General Juan Velasco Alvarado ordered the military takeover of Talara's facilities. IPC ceased operations in Perú and its expropriated assets became Petróleos del Perú (Petroperú). Despite this, the company never settled its debts with the Peruvian State. (Obando 2023)

²⁹ (Gómez Sicre 1965, 5)

mechanism for connecting the Americas giving a favorable position to the U.S. is evident. It assumes that showcasing Latin American art to U.S. audiences implies those audiences possess both the knowledge and authority to determine what constitutes art worth appreciating. Conversely, it denies Latin American audiences the reciprocal opportunity to experience U.S. art, exposing an imbalance of cultural exchange. In this framework, there is no genuine need for mutual cultural ties. Furthermore, Canada and Caribbean nations are entirely excluded from this Pan-Americanist vision.

The imbalance in cultural exchange underscores broader questions of whose narratives are preserved and whose voices are silenced in the historical record. Most of the information about the Esso Salon relies on press releases, which frame the events in alignment with the sponsors' objectives. However, these documents assume the events unfolded as described, ignoring the complexities of archival silences—gaps that reveal systemic biases and the priorities of those in control of historical documentation.

With the aid of newspaper articles, I have been able to corroborate most of the sponsors' narrative, yet there are many archival silences. These refer to the absence or erasure of certain voices, events, perspectives, or communities in historical archives or records. They highlight the gaps or omissions in what has been documented, preserved, or deemed significant enough to be archived. These silences are not accidental; they often reflect systemic biases, power dynamics, and the priorities of the entities controlling the archives. The available resources for this research were curated by governments, institutions, or individuals in positions of authority. Decisions about what to preserve or exclude reflect their values, ideologies, and priorities. While I acknowledge that records might be lost due to natural decay and environmental factors, other aspects such as colonial erasure, external archival control, underfunded archives, political

instability, and administrative fragmentation complicate the preservation of records about and in Puerto Rico.

Key individuals for the distribution of these press releases at the time were Paul Morgan from Esso Company, Robert E. Kingsley from IPC and Vera Clay from Newmyer Associates.³⁰ Many of the official materials were translated to English and Spanish. The selection of these languages also supposes a hierarchy in relation to other Latin American languages as Crioulo de Cabo Verde, Dutch, French, Garifuna, Kreyol Ayisyen, Mapuche, Mixteco, Nahuatl, Papiamentu, Portuguese, Quechua and others.

The winning artworks by 59 artists from national salons were entered into a second round of competition at the prestigious Esso Salon in Washington, D.C., where additional prizes were awarded. The grand Esso Salon debuted with an invitation-only gala at the Gallery of PAU on April 21, 1965, attended by high-ranking government officials, diplomats, civic leaders, and members of the art and education communities. The exhibition opened to the public the following day and ran until May 15. A catalog accompanied the Salon featuring color reproductions of the artworks, artist biographies, and monochromatic portrait photographs. Judging took place on April 23 at 10:30 AM, with two grand prizes of \$2,000 awarded for Painting and Sculpture, along with gold medals. Additionally, six silver medals were awarded as honorable mentions at the jury's discretion. These medals featured an adaptation of Michelangelo's house mark. The motif aimed to legitimize the competition and integrate Western art histories into the broader Latin American cultural narrative. The same symbol appeared in the exhibition catalog (**Fig. 4**).

³⁰ (Esso Salon of Young Artists 1964, 5)

Another key legitimizing factor was the institutional affiliations of the jury members. These jurors—Alfred H. Barr Jr., first Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City; Thomas M. Messer, Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City; and Gustave von Groschwitz, Director of the Museum of Art of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh—represented some of the most prominent U.S.-based museums. Their participation brought not only the prestige of these institutions but also their specific perspectives on aesthetics, mediums, and narratives surrounding modern art. Significantly, each museum had already cultivated connections with Latin American art through their exhibition programming and acquisitions.

For example, in 1939, MoMA demonstrated its commitment to Latin American art by establishing an advisory committee, spearheaded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, to foster relationships with artists and institutions in the region.³¹ That same year, MoMA organized the *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition for the New York World's Fair and, in 1942, Alfred H. Barr Jr. embarked on an acquisition trip to Latin America funded by the Rockefeller Fund.³² Similarly, during the 1940s, Guggenheim aligned its acquisitions and exhibitions with Pan-American cultural diplomacy efforts under the leadership of Hilla Rebay. Later, during his tenure from 1961 to 1988, Thomas M. Messer expanded this engagement, traveling to Latin America in 1964 to acquire artworks. These culminated in the 1966's exhibition *The Emergent Decade: Latin American Painters and Painting in the 1960s*. The Carnegie Institute, however, had been engaging with Latin American art even earlier. Through its Carnegie International

³¹ Philanthropist Abby Greene Aldrich Rockefeller co-founded The Museum of Modern Art in 1929 with Lillie P. Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan. Her husband John D. Rockefeller Jr. was the son of Esso Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)'s co-founder John D. Rockefeller.

³² The Rockefeller Fund was initiated by MoMA's trustee Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, which aimed to collect modernist works from Latin America. Son of Abby and John Rockefeller Jr., Nelson later became 41st vice president of the United States, serving from 1974 to 1977 under President Gerald Ford.

exhibitions, which date back to 1896, the museum provided one of the first platforms for Latin American artists in the United States. By the 1920s and 1930s, these exhibitions had included works by artists such as Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, positioning Latin American art within a global modernist narrative long before it became a central focus of U.S. museums.

Building on this foundation, the Esso Salon continued this Pan-American narrative by hosting its award ceremony in Washington D.C., a symbolic hub for international diplomacy. First prize winners from the national Esso Salons were flown to D.C. for an awards banquet offered on April 29 at the International Club. Invitees included ambassadors of some of the countries involved, State Department and Pan American Union officials, the jury, art critics and Esso executives.³³

From May 24 to June 18, the Esso Salon was presented at IBM Gallery, New York.³⁴ The collection was to be toured in other cities of the United States and in Europe, yet research conducted for this thesis did not extend to the details and reality of this proposal.³⁵ Under the Esso Inter-American Festival, additional activities were contemplated to give the Festival a greater scope and impact, such as the Inter-American Music Festival, Esso Film Festival, Graphic Arts Exhibit, and Roundtable on the Arts.³⁶

³³ Folder 8.4 “Press Clippings” from Esso Salon in general archive’s Box 8 includes a clip from an unknown newspaper article titled “VIPs See Hemisphere Art” by Dolores Philips. The article states that the President of Standard Oil Company (N.J.); Mrs. J. K. Jamieson; Secretary General of OAS, Dr. José A. Mora; and U.S. First Lady Bird Johnson were among attendees. Ambassadors included Sevilla-Sacassa of Nicaragua; Gutierrez-Olivos of Chile; Plate of Paraguay; Theard of Haiti; Uribe of Colombia; Yriat of Uruguay; Magalhaes of Brasil; and Barrenchea of Argentina and his wife. Representative of Uruguay to OAS, Henry Hoyt, and of the Argentine Republic to OAS, Colombo, and his wife as well as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, Thomas Mann, and Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, Robert Sayre, also attended.

³⁴ IBM collection, one of the earliest corporate art initiatives, dates back to 1939 when then IBM's president, Thomas Watson, organized an exhibition for the New York World's Fair. This exhibition included significant examples of Latin American art, showcasing its importance alongside groundbreaking technological innovations at the IBM Pavilion. (Sullivan 2018, 25)

³⁵ (Pan American Union - Esso Art Festival and Clay 1965, 1-4)

³⁶ Esso commissioned ten original works of music, most by young Latin American composers, including Hector Campos Parsi from Puerto Rico. These premiered at the Third Inter-American Music Festival on May 7-10, 1965, at the Cramton Auditorium of Howard University. The festival was under the general direction of Dr. Guillermo

A loose sheet numbered as page 2, I found in OAS' "Esso Salon in general" archive, Folder 8.2 "Press Releases," compiles several quotes from press articles about the Esso Salon. Among these quotes there is one published in *Art in America* by art critic and curator Leslie Judd Ahlander, who worked on PAU's Visual Arts program.³⁷ In this text, she argued that private entities, with their financial resources and global networks, have the ability to take action quickly and freely, often surpassing the more bureaucratic and constrained efforts of government programs. Despite pursuing their own interests or profits, these private entities, like Esso and IPC, could create initiatives that benefit broader cultural exchange and foster international relations according to Ahlander. Similarly, press releases indicated that Esso pioneered in "corporate citizenship."³⁸ Another article, this one published in the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Mundo*, comments on the diversity of artistic practices recognized and critiqued within the competition and the critical discourse surrounding abstract art and popular trends like pop art.³⁹

The First Place in Painting in the Esso Salon in Washington D.C. was awarded to Argentinian Rogelio Polesello for his work *Faz A* (**Fig. 5**). The aforementioned *El Mundo*'s article, written anonymously, categorized Polesello's artwork as typical for pop-art.⁴⁰ This painting juxtaposes geometric shapes and patterns, layered against a soft, ethereal background. Dominated by a striking orange rectangle intersected by a black diagonal line, the composition features a mix of grids, dots, and translucent forms in shades of purple, yellow, and red. A round black form sits atop the design, giving a sense of balance and focus to the otherwise fragmented elements. The layering of textures and patterns creates depth, with some areas appearing almost

Espinosa, chief of the Music Division of the Pan American Union. ("Esso Inter-American Festival", n.d., 1-2) (*El Mundo* 1966)

³⁷ (Ahlander c.1965, 2)

³⁸ (Pan American Union - Esso Art Festival and Clay 1965, 1)

³⁹ (*El Mundo* 1965, 22)

⁴⁰ (*El Mundo* 1965, 22)

digital or pixelated. The painting feels modern and conceptual, blending abstraction with a sense of architectural precision.

Kennedy (**Fig. 6**), the winning sculpture, by Paraguayan Hermann Guggiari, was an abstract work that symbolized late President John F. Kennedy.⁴¹ This sculpture features an intricate interplay of metal elements, reflecting his mastery of modernist industrial aesthetics. The work seems to encapsulate movement and energy, with sharp, angular lines and curved metallic forms radiating outward like an explosion of ideas or vitality. The polished surface of the metal gleams, catching and refracting light to emphasize its dynamic structure. Despite its abstract design, the composition evokes a sense of strength and resilience, perhaps symbolizing the ideals and impact of Kennedy.

Author Claire F. Fox has delved into the role of Gómez Sicre's in the Esso Salon and PAU.⁴² She highlights how Gómez Sicre navigated the privatization of cultural sectors, using corporate involvement to reshape the cultural landscape across the Americas. Critics viewed this as neocolonialism that compromised artistic autonomy and national institutions, but Gómez Sicre leveraged exhibitions to foster Latin American cultural agency and counter U.S. and European dominance. Projects like *32 Artists of the Americas* and the Esso Salons established corporate-sponsored exhibitions, influencing regional artistic networks and funding models. According to Fox, during the Alliance for Progress, the Esso Salons exemplified art's role in U.S. cultural diplomacy, aligning modernist aesthetics with Western ideals and positioning Latin American modernism as a "luxury commodity."

Gómez Sicre's preference for geometric abstraction and biomorphic surrealism often provoked regional pushback, especially in México, where abstraction clashed with nationalist

⁴¹ U.S. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. The winning artwork's relation with a U.S. political figure is also imperative to analyze.

⁴² (Fox 2021, 264-280)

traditions. Conversely, in Colombia, the salons supported institutions like the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO) and elevated figures like Argentinian art critic Marta Traba. The exhibitions standardized branding and sponsorship practices still central to art institutions but commodified art and reinforced U.S. economic dominance. Gómez Sicre's vision for a self-sustaining regional art market was at odds with Cold War-era economic dependencies shaped by U.S. policies. While his influence waned after the mid-1960s, the frameworks he established continued to shape hemispheric art worlds, balancing contradictions between corporate agendas and Latin American cultural autonomy. Fox concludes that Gómez Sicre's work created platforms for regional solidarity, while also reflecting tensions between local movements and global geopolitical agendas.

Puerto Rico (1964)

Claire F. Fox's article, aforementioned in the last sub-chapter, begins with an excerpt of an interview by Alejandro Anreus to Gómez Sicre.⁴³ In it, Gómez Sicre highlights his dedication to representing Puerto Rican art at OAS. He portrays Puerto Rico as an integral part of Latin America despite opposition from U.S. ambassadors. He also reveals a personal and cultural commitment that went beyond political or corporate pressures.

Gómez Sicre's comments are relevant for arguing that the colonialism and U.S. imperialism structures expand to Puerto Rico's cultural and artistic aspects. As discussed before, the official narrative of the Esso Salon of Young Artists of Latin America mentions the selection of 18 countries and Puerto Rico. Even though Gómez Sicre later expressed an interest and commitment in including and representing Puerto Rico in the Esso Salons and other PAU and OAS initiatives, the narrative from official Esso Salon documents do not position Puerto Rico as a country, but as something totally different and particular.

Puerto Rico was not only fundamental for the Esso Salon for its national contest. According to a memorandum by Rodolfo Ledgard, then Manager of Esso's Public Relations Department at Lima, Perú, the Esso Salon was conceived at a Public Relations Conference held at the end of 1963 in Puerto Rico.⁴⁴ Confirming Gómez Sicre's "Introduction" in the Esso Salon's catalogue, this memorandum explains that IPC and the Esso S.A., (the Latin-American affiliate of the Esso Company) were to organize a series of Latin American art contests. The Pan American Union was later included.

In Puerto Rico, the Esso Salon was supported by PAU and Esso, and locally by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP) (**Fig. 7, 8, 9**). The deadline for artists to apply for the

⁴³ (Fox 2021, 264)

⁴⁴ (Ledgard, n.d., 1)

national edition was November 14, 1964. U.S. art critic from the *Washington Post* Mary Sayre Haverstock, Puerto Rican figurative painter and art historian Osiris Delgado, and Puerto Rican painter, known for his abstract expressionist works, Julio Rosado Del Valle made up the jury. Winning artworks were decided on November 16, 1964 and made public on the 20th. An anonymous article discussing the selection of the judges provided biographies of each judge.⁴⁵ While not explicit, it offered insights into the juries' potential influences on judgment and shed light on their backgrounds, expertise, potential biases and implications for the evaluation of artworks.

The jury's profile hints that Haverstock might have championed pieces reflecting international modernist trends, Delgado might have sought works that engaged with Puerto Rican identity or broader historical narratives since he was a member of *La Generación de los 50's*, and Rosado del Valle could have leaned toward innovative uses of abstraction. These implicit biases underscore the subjectivity inherent in art evaluation. They also reflect the broader socio-political and cultural dynamics of the 1960s, where art served as a site of negotiation between local identity and global trends, a matter that was debated all over America particularly by Marta Traba. While their expertise lends credibility, it also frames the decisions within specific ideological and cultural parameters.

First places consisted of \$1,000, while second places, of \$750. A newspaper clip with a photograph (**Fig. 10**) by Eddie Figueroa taken moments after the award was given to the winning artist, sculptor Rafael Ferrer features Puerto Rican artist Marcos Yrrizary; Ricardo E. Alegría; Jennie de Ferrer, Ferrer's wife; winner Rafael Ferrer; artist Suzanne de Ferrer, Miguel A. Ferrer, and Carlos F. de Cardona public relations advisor for Esso.⁴⁶ Winning artists for Painting

⁴⁵ (*El Mundo* 1964)

⁴⁶ Suzi Ferrer (born Susan Nudelman) was an American-born artist who moved to Puerto Rico in 1965, where she became an active figure in the local art scene. Initially influenced by "art brut," her work evolved in the 1970s to

included Luis Hernández Cruz for the First Prize with *Subsuelo* (1964) (**Fig. 11**), Olga Albizu for the Second Prize with *Crecimiento* (c. 1960) (**Fig. 12**) and Luis Sánchez Ortiz for an Honorific Mention with *Abstracto en piedra* (n.d.).

The painting *Crecimiento* features a luminous yellow background, evoking warmth and energy. Scattered across the canvas are bold abstract forms in black, orange, and various shades of yellow, appearing as though they are floating or loosely connected. The shapes are angular and irregular, with textured brushstrokes suggesting a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. The composition feels vibrant and celebratory, with the darker black patches grounding the otherwise bright palette. The overall effect is one of playful abstraction, where color and form seem to engage in an organic dance.

On the other hand, *Subsuelo* has a complex composition dominated by earthy reds, browns, and yellows, interspersed with small pops of blue and purple. The painting is densely packed, creating an almost mosaic-like effect, with overlapping rectangles and irregular forms that suggest an urban or architectural landscape. A darker section at the top contrasts with the vibrant, fiery hues below, offering a sense of depth and weight. The textures are rich and layered, with visible brushstrokes that give the painting a tactile quality.

In Sculpture, the winning artists were Rafael Ferrer for the First Prize with *Cabeza-máscara grande* (n.d.) (**Fig. 13**), Tomás Batista for Second Prize with *Caracol* (n.d.), and Elvira Coya de Pons for Honorific Mention with *Retorno* (n.d.). Sculptor Ferrer presented a steel metal sculpture, while Batista created a sculpture in Barranquitas' fossil stone.⁴⁷ The OAS archive at the Art Museum of the Americas included a biographical document for winning

include formal and conceptual elements, with a focus on immersive, multisensory installations that addressed gender roles and the female experience. She was married to, also shown in the photograph, Miguel A. Ferrer. This last was the President of UBS Financial Services Incorporated of Puerto Rico since 1965 and the cousin of winning artist Rafael Ferrer. Read more on Suzi Ferrer in (Ramos Borges 2024, 57-74)

⁴⁷ Barranquitas is a town in the central region of Puerto Rico.

artists. It's intriguing that the sculptures are abstract, yet their titles evoke tangible concepts such as landscapes, telluric elements, or symbols like the mask or the snail. In the latter two cases, it raises the question of whether the artists intended to reference Puerto Rican culture—perhaps alluding to the Taino heritage with the mask or the snail as cultural symbols.

Sculptor Rafael Ferrer (1933) is a pioneer in abstract art with surrealist influences. Having studied in Syracuse, New York, Ferrer began a career as a jazz musician. He later entered the Universidad de Puerto Rico, recinto de Río Piedras (UPRRP) and met Spanish artist Eugenio Fernández Granell. On a trip to Paris in 1954, Fernández Granell introduced him to writers and artists in the Surrealist orbit like André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Wifredo Lam. Ferrer continued his music career under the salsa orchestra *Cortijo y su Combo*. Between 1955 and 1966, he lived between San Juan and New York, until finally moving permanently to Philadelphia.

Ramos Borges notes that Ferrer was a pioneer in breaking with traditional social realism and explored other modalities of contemporary art.⁴⁸ For example, *Ferrer Esculturas*, his first solo show at the Museo (MHAA) showcased 12 large-format welded metal sculptures and an installation. Inaugurated on January 22, 1964, the public again had a negative reaction towards his work, this time because of the use of scrap metal. Interestingly, Ferrer's winning sculpture for the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico later that year was a similar welded metal.

The only female winner of the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico, Olga Albizu (1924-2005), was a distinguished abstract artist in the studied time-period. Similarly to Ferrer, her career was intertwined with the music industry. Graphic designer and printmaker, Robert M. "Bob" Jones (1913-1993) was music label RCA Victor's art director. Jones used Albizu's paintings as covers

⁴⁸ (Ramos Borges 2019, 57)

for a number of classic nova bossa recordings between 1961 and 1964.⁴⁹ Graduating from UPRRP in 1946, Albizu studied with Spanish professor artist Esteban Vicente. After winning a four-year, postgraduate fellowship to study abroad, she relocated to NYC in 1948. There, she studied at Hans Hoffmann School of Fine Arts and the Art Students League. Her first solo show took place in December 1956 at Panorás Gallery in midtown Manhattan. She also spent time in Paris and Florence.

In 1958, Albizu's art was showcased with U.S. artist Gigi Ford at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño. It is considered that this was the first completely abstract painting exhibition in Puerto Rico.⁵⁰ The Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP) acquired *Tema Invernal II*, one of Albizu's showcased works. By the early 1950's, Albizu's paintings took a "gestural, color-driven geometries," while at the same time, abstraction "was received with measures of skepticism and patronizing curiosity" in Puerto Rico according to Abigail McEwen, art historian and current professor at University of Maryland.⁵¹

Albizu was supported by Gómez Sicre, curator and chief of the Visual Arts Section in the Pan American Union (PAU). In the article "Olga Albizu and the Borders of Abstraction," Abigail McEwen connects Gómez Sicre and Albizu to abstraction, modern art in Latin America and "el nuevo arte nuestro."⁵² The art historian argues that Puerto Rican art had been exhibited "in only two exhibitions at the Pan American Union between 1941 and 1964 - *Fine Arts of the Caribbean* (1957) and *Artists of Puerto Rico* (1957). There is no mention of the Esso Salon, putting in perspective how there are still gaps in the history of Puerto Rico in this exhibition series.

⁴⁹ (McEwen 2015, 87)

⁵⁰ (Ramos Borges 2022, 39)

⁵¹ (McEwen 2015, 91, 97)

⁵² (McEwen 2015, 97-103)

As mentioned before, the first prize for Painting in the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico was awarded to Luis Hernández Cruz (1936). He completed a BA from UPRRP in 1959 and an MA from American University in Washington DC in 1961. *Luis Hernández Cruz: dibujos, grabados, pinturas*, his first abstract exhibition in Puerto Rico inaugurated at ICP on January 13, 1961. Lorenzo Homar, mentioned before in this thesis, created the poster which showcased a reproduction of one of Hernández Cruz' abstract artworks. In 1964, Hernández Cruz published an article on the importance of abstract art as an aesthetic language in the biweekly university newspaper *Foro Libre*.⁵³ His positions as Director's Assistant at ICP between 1964 and 1968 and Chair of the Plastic Arts department at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño between 1966 and 1971 provided a space for promoting abstract/avant-garde narratives in the archipelago. Hernández Cruz has been historicized as the connector between New York and Puerto Rico's art scenes and as an advocate for abstract/avant-garde work in group exhibitions.⁵⁴

One of the most important Puerto Rican sculptors and creators of public monuments has been Tomás Batista Encarnación (1935). He was the second prize winner of the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico for Sculpture. His most famous works include *Monumento al Jíbaro Puertorriqueño* (1976) in Cayey, and *Monumento a Eugenio María de Hostos* (1967) in Mayagüez.⁵⁵ Batista's career began with Spanish artist Angel Botello Barros' (1913-1986). Later, ICP awarded him two scholarships to study in their Sculpture workshop with Spanish artist Francisco Vázquez Díaz "Compostela" in 1958 and in Escuela La Esmeralda, México in 1960. With the sponsorships of the Guggenheim Foundation he studied in New York City in 1962 and of the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica he traveled to Spain in 1965. The next year he began directing ICP's *Taller de*

⁵³ (Ramos Borges 2022, 41-43)

⁵⁴ (Ramos Borges 2019, 96)

⁵⁵ Eugenio María de Hostos y Bonilla (1893-1903) was a Puerto Rican educator, sociologist and writer from Mayagüez. A revolutionary defender of the Antillean Confederation, he also advocated for Puerto Rican independence. See (Hernández and Rosado 2022)

Escultura y Restauración and offered sculpture classes at the recently founded Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico (EAP).

On Luis Sánchez Ortiz, Honorific Mention in Painting for the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico, I could not find additional information. At the time, many emerging visual artists decided to pursue other careers and therefore, have become art historical *ghosts*. These *ghosts* influenced and had substantial achievements in the Puerto Rican art scenes. Their work should not be belittled by decisions around, but not limited to financial stabilization, time and resources management or simply desiring another type of lifestyle.

Chapter 3: About Abstraction

The polemic related to abstraction versus figurative art, or more specifically realism, refers to abstract expressionism. This art movement emerged in the United States after World War II, between 1940's and 1950's. Artworks are characterized by conveying ideas through a non-representational imagery, an all-over composition and evoking the movement of the artist while creating the work. Key representors of the New York School, center of this movement, are Helen Frankenthaler, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko.

The debates about abstraction versus figurative and realism art did not originate in Puerto Rico, rather, they were part of polemics taking place in broader international artistic scenes. Art critic Clement Greenberg's essay, originally titled "New York Painting Only Yesterday" (1957) and later republished as "The Late Thirties in New York" (1961), is often cited as the emblematic of Abstract Expressionism's perceived complicity with U.S. imperialism.⁵⁶ Greenberg's essay was written in response to *The '30s: New York Paintings* exhibition at the Poindexter Gallery, NY in 1957 and serves as one of his retrospective surveys of abstract expressionism. Critics, such as Daniel Neofetou, suggest that abstract expressionism's evolution and its later critical framing by figures like Greenberg were entwined with U.S. ideological agendas, reflecting broader geopolitical strategies during the Cold War. Neofetou writes, "abstract expressionism rejected social realism not because it was politically radical but because it wasn't radical enough in confronting modernity's challenges."⁵⁷

Modern abstraction was not confined to Europe and the United States but was also actively produced throughout Latin America. It developed between the 1930s and the late 1970s in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela, later extending to Colombia,

⁵⁶ (Greenberg 1961, 230-235)

⁵⁷ (Neofetou 2021, 1-10)

Cuba, and Mexico. British-Venezuelan art historian and curator Celia Fajardo-Hill explains Latin American modern abstraction as:

characterized by its experimentalism, plurality, the challenging of canonical ideas related to art, and particular ways of dialoguing, coexisting in tension or participation within the complex process of modernity—and modernization—in the context of the political regimes of the time.⁵⁸

Among the most influential figures in the movement were Uruguayan Joaquín Torres García and Italian Argentinian Juan del Prete.

In 1959, Gómez Sicre wrote the influential article “Trends - Latin America” for *Art in America*, in which he highlighted the paradoxical perception of Latin American art as both familiar and misunderstood in the United States and Europe. He argued that Latin American art had been presented as merely picturesque or folkloric, catered to tourist expectations, and undermining the broader recognition of modern and experimental art. Gómez Sicre called on artists to establish their own standards and engage in a self-sustaining cultural dialogue within the region while fostering hemispheric exchange. He suggested that Latin America should employ the “international language of art” in much the same way as the U.S., a leader in cultivating hemispheric cultural connections.⁵⁹ Urging reciprocal and unifying exchanges of contemporary art between the Americas, he mentioned artists like Roberto Matta, Rufino Tamayo, Wifredo Lam, Alexander Calder, and Jackson Pollock as evidence of existing cross-cultural inspiration.

In Puerto Rico, abstract art is typically associated with abstract expressionism, while avant-garde art means op art, kinetic, pop, conceptual, hard-edge, happenings, junk art, neo-dada and installations. These genres began emerging in the archipelago around the late 1940’s.⁶⁰ On

⁵⁸ (Fajardo-Hill, n.d.)

⁵⁹ (Gómez Sicre 1959, 23)

⁶⁰ (Ramos Borges 2022, 37-38)

the west coast, the Colegio de Agricultura y Artes Mecánicas (CAAM), now known as Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez (RUM) became a key site for abstract and avant-garde art. Meanwhile, in the metropolitan area, Galería Colibrí, founded in 1962 by Roman gallerist Luigi Marrozzini and later re-established in Old San Juan in 1973, played a critical role in promoting abstraction.⁶¹

The first polemic on abstract/avant-garde art in Puerto Rico arose from the *2 Pintores* exhibition which inaugurated on May 23, 1961 at the Museo de la UPRRP, now MHAA. The collaboration included Rafael Ferrer and Rafael “Chafo” Villamil, a Puerto Rican self-taught painter with a background in architecture from Georgia Institute of Technology. Villamil transformed the gallery room into a labyrinth using construction forms which connected the space with the works on display by both artists. As art historian Melissa M. Ramos Borges explains, the origin of the criticism was “the mixture of erotic images, discarded materials and their rawness” and resulted in labeling it an “anti-academic and anti-bourgeois aesthetic.” Therefore, neither of the artists were included in the following group exhibitions at the Museo (MHAA) until 1966.

In 1967, U.S. critic Jay Jacobs wrote “Art in Puerto Rico” for *The Art Gallery Magazine*, later reprinted in *The San Juan Star*, a newspaper based in Puerto Rico.⁶² In this controversial article, Jacobs positioned Puerto Rican contemporary art as backward, claiming that it was stuck in styles popular in the 1940s. He focused on four promising artists—Carlos Irizarry, Domingo López de Victoria, Luis Hernández Cruz, and Domingo García—grouping them as part of the “way-out group,” whose avant-garde traits and departure from provincialism set them apart.

⁶¹ (Ramos Borges 2019, 16, 29)

⁶² (Jacobs 1967)

Hernández Cruz, a winner of the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico, was particularly celebrated, though this recognition may have complicated his reception within the local Puerto Rican art scene.

Although abstract art had already circulated in Puerto Rico before the Esso Salon, as discussed in previous chapters, the competition sparked a polemical debate. Put into context, the fact that all the winning paintings were abstract was no coincidence. The jury, both local and international, favored a certain art narrative and style, leaning towards what at the time constituted a representation of modernism and progress as well as of growing popularity: abstraction. While it is crucial to acknowledge that abstraction was also being created in non-Western contexts—and one could argue that indigenous motifs often intersect with abstract styles—the colonial, political, social, and cultural dynamics between Puerto Rico and the United States point to a distinctive approach.

The two winning painters discussed, Hernández Cruz and Albizu, had traveled and been trained in the U.S. and Europe, rather than Latin America. Their artistic training outside Latin America reflected broader efforts to integrate Puerto Rican art into Western narratives of modernism, sidelining potential connections to Latin American or indigenous traditions. The use of abstraction in Puerto Rico during this period carried dual connotations: it represented universal expression and simultaneously aligned with Western ideals of “progress,” imposed through colonial relations. Jacobs’ critique, along with the Esso Salon’s promotion of abstraction, illustrate how cultural production in Puerto Rico was embedded in broader ideological battles. The embrace of abstraction as a progressive narrative was not just an aesthetic choice; it was deeply tied to cultural values associated with colonial power dynamics.

“Marta Traba: Propuesta polémica sobre arte puertorriqueño” (1971) responds to Jacob’s critique, particularly in its third chapter, “Arte en Puerto Rico: El abstracto que se salva.”⁶³ Traba defended abstract art as a “tabula rasa,” a complete rejection of reality in favor of imagination—a concept that aligns with the way Hernández Cruz’s work embraces freedom and independence. His compositions, marked by less rigid articulation and a more free-flowing relationship between chromatic zones and design elements, reflect Traba’s vision of abstraction as a space for liberation from external constraints. Traba celebrated Hernández Cruz’s ability to create art that transcends external impositions, particularly those tied to rhetorical discourse or imperial expectations, much as he rejects the “rules of the Empire” in his work and therefore, it is in those moments, he frees himself from the degrading “way out” that others try to impose on him. Her commentary positioned Hernández Cruz’s abstract art as both a creative and ideological act, reinforcing his place within the broader context of Latin American abstraction.

In 1973, Luigi Marrozini published a short article by the title “El arte de vanguardia en Puerto Rico” for *Avance*.⁶⁴ In two pages, with half of each being filled with photographs of artworks, the gallerist emphasized the importance of the Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez (RUM) in the sponsorship of the avant-garde movement through the opening of a gallery and the publication of the *Revista de Arte de Mayagüez*. Local artists mentioned include Domingo López, Rafael Ferrer, Joaquín Mercado, Arturo Bouraseau and Carlos Irizarry. According to Marrozini, these artists brought distinct perspectives and methodologies, ranging from performance and conceptual art, such as that by Ferrer, to socio-political critiques and experimental aesthetics by Irizarry, illustrating the vibrancy of the avant-garde community. The author insisted that the limited timeframe for writing in the magazine did not permit him to share

⁶³(Traba 1971, 79-90)

⁶⁴(Marrozini 1973, 51-52)

the profound exploration that the topic deserves or to be able to share the achievements of the artists included. I assume that the limited writing space was also a factor. This reflects a broader issue often faced in documenting emerging art movements: the challenge of providing thorough analysis within constrained formats.

Jacobs' critique of Puerto Rican art's supposed backwardness contrasts with Traba's defense of abstraction as a tool for liberation, while Marrozini highlights the importance of local, institutional support for these movements. All three writers engaged with the tension between local identity and international influence, illustrating how Puerto Rican artists navigated the complex intersection of modernism, colonial legacies, and global cultural exchange.

Conclusion

With a thorough analysis of the Esso Salon of Young Artists in Puerto Rico in 1964, this thesis emphasizes its historical, cultural, and political significance. Considering this event as a pivotal moment in Puerto Rican art history, I critique the dynamics of colonialism, transculturation, and cultural assimilation, highlighting the role of U.S. institutions and sponsors in shaping the artistic landscape. My research is significant to the history of Puerto Rican art by filling in gaps in the historical record, especially through the exploration of archival silences and the competition's overlooked legacy. It aimed to discuss the Esso Salon's historical and artistic significance, colonial and political dynamics, abstract art and political controversy, archival research and silences, and cultural hegemony and transnational exchange.

The first chapter, “Art, Industry, and Identity in Puerto Rico (1960’s),” analyzed colonial hegemony and U.S. influence on Puerto Rico, cultural institutions as tools for national identity, the role of transnational corporations in cultural production, resistance to cultural and economic colonialism and the intersection of art, politics, and global capitalism. The U.S. established economic, political, and cultural control over Puerto Rico through projects like Operación Manos a la Obra and Operación Serenidad, while asserting its hegemony in ways that shaped the island’s identity and socio-economic conditions. Institutions like ICP and DIVEDCO were instrumental in crafting an “official” Puerto Rican identity, emphasizing folkloric and nationalist elements. However, their efforts were shaped and constrained by colonial dynamics and U.S. modernizing agendas. Corporations like Esso intertwined their corporate interests with Puerto Rican arts and culture, funding cultural initiatives with ICP and documentaries, which subtly reinforced corporate power and colonial narratives while shaping national identity. Artists and movements, such as *La Generación de los 50’s* and critiques of the Esso Salon of Young Artists,

challenged U.S. colonial hegemony through art that critiqued imperialist practices, asserted Puerto Rican identity, and resisted cultural assimilation. The mid-1960s in Puerto Rico marked a critical juncture where art, culture, and politics intersected with broader colonial structures and capitalist interests, revealing the complex ways resistance and complicity shaped the development of Puerto Rican identity and cultural consciousness.

“Chapter 2: The Esso Salon of Young Artists, Latin America (1964-65)” discussed Cold War cultural diplomacy and modernism, corporate and cultural patronage, imbalance in cultural exchange, archival silences and historical biases and the legitimization of Latin American art. The Esso Salon of Young Artists aligned with Cold War ideologies, promoting modernism as a symbol of freedom and capitalist values in contrast to communism. José Gómez Sicre, a key organizer, championed modernist aesthetics and framed Latin American art within an international context, rejecting politically charged or folkloric styles. Sponsored by the Esso Company and PAU, the Esso Salon competition merged corporate interests with cultural diplomacy. By selecting host countries aligned with Esso’s business operations, the event not only promoted art but also reinforced the company’s image in key Latin American markets. The Salon emphasized showcasing Latin American art to U.S. audiences but lacked reciprocity, denying Latin American audiences exposure to U.S. art. This reflected broader power imbalances in inter-American cultural diplomacy, privileging U.S. narratives and authority in defining “valuable” art. The documentation of the Esso Salon relied heavily on press releases and official narratives, often overlooking complexities such as omitted voices, colonial erasures, and underrepresented communities. These gaps highlight systemic biases in how art history is recorded and preserved. The Salon also leveraged prestigious U.S.-based institutions like MoMA, Guggenheim, and the Carnegie Institute, whose jurors brought global recognition to

Latin American artists. This helped integrate Latin American art into international modernist narratives but also reflected U.S. strategic interests in cultural diplomacy.

The subsection “The Esso Salon of Young Artists, Puerto Rico (1964)” synthesizes José Gómez Sicre’s role, Puerto Rico’s complex status, gaps in documentation, “art historical ghosts” and described the national edition of the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico including the winning artists and artworks in an art historical context. Gómez Sicre’s dedication to representing Puerto Rican art within the OAS context underscores a commitment to cultural identity that transcends political pressures. However, the Esso Salon’s classification of Puerto Rico reveals the broader implications of colonial structures, emphasizing the tension between inclusion and differentiation. The competition, while providing a platform, also reinforced Puerto Rico’s ambiguous political and cultural identity. Organized by Esso, PAU, and ICP, the Esso Salon in Puerto Rico reflected both international influences and the specificity of the Puerto Rican art scene. The jury composition (Mary Sayre Haverstock, Osiris Delgado, and Julio Rosado Del Valle) showcased the intersection of global modernist trends and local identity, with inherent biases and ideological leanings shaping the selection process. Detailed descriptions of key artworks—such as Luis Hernández Cruz’s *Subsuelo* and Olga Albizu’s *Crecimiento*—illustrate Puerto Rican abstraction in paintings. The inclusion of tangible concepts in abstract sculptures (e.g., Rafael Ferrer’s *Cabeza-máscara grande* and Tomás Batista’s *Caracol*) points to a synthesis of local cultural symbols with international avant-garde trends. The omissions in historical records call for further research and reevaluation of Puerto Rico’s role in transnational art movements. Lastly, the acknowledgment of lesser-known artists like Luis Sánchez Ortiz addresses the invisibility of many contributors to Puerto Rican art, encouraging a more inclusive

narrative that accounts for the socio-economic challenges and personal choices influencing artistic trajectories.

The last chapter, “About Abstraction,” researched abstract expressionism and U.S. imperialism, Latin American modern abstraction, Puerto Rico’s abstract and avant-garde movements, cultural dynamics of abstraction in Puerto Rico and local and international critiques. Abstract Expressionism, a post-World War II art movement, became central to debates about abstraction versus figurative/realist art. Modern abstraction also flourished across Latin America (1930s–1970s) in countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. Art historian Celia Fajardo-Hill noted its experimentalism, plurality, and complex engagement with modernity within the region’s political regimes. Abstract and avant-garde art emerged in Puerto Rico in the late 1940s, with key sites like the CAAM (now RUM) and Galería Colibrí fostering these genres. Exhibitions such as *2 Pintores* (1961) ignited debates on abstraction’s role, criticized for their anti-academic and anti-bourgeois aesthetic, which sparked local polemics. The Esso Salon (1964-1965) problematized abstraction in Puerto Rico, aligning it with Western modernist ideals. This narrative sidelined connections to Latin American and indigenous traditions, illustrating how colonial power dynamics shaped cultural production. Lastly, critics like Jay Jacobs derided Puerto Rican art as backward, while Marta Traba defended abstraction as a rejection of imperial constraints. Luigi Marrozzini emphasized the role of local institutions and decentralizing art from the metropolitan area to the west coast of Puerto Rico.

Looking forward, this thesis raises vital questions about the long-term impact of such competitions on artists’ careers, their role in shaping Latin American and Caribbean art movements, and their relationship with contemporary cultural dynamics. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of reexamining mid-20th-century Puerto Rican art within a

global framework, emphasizing its relevance to ongoing debates around colonialism, artistic practice, and the negotiation of cultural identity. Some questions that developed during this research and that require a future examination are: How did the competition affect the career trajectories of individual artists, particularly those whose works were showcased in Washington D.C.? To what extent did the Esso Salon influence the development of other national art competitions in Latin America, and how did these competitions interact with similar colonial or political dynamics?

Overall, I bridge several key academic areas—art history, cultural studies, postcolonial theory—while contributing to the ongoing reevaluation of Puerto Rican art in the mid-20th century. My research demonstrates how art competitions like the Esso Salon were not only cultural events but also sites of political contestation, where notions of identity, power, and cultural exchange were at stake. By examining the role of abstraction in this context, this thesis sheds light on the complexities of colonialism, artistic practice, and the negotiation of cultural and national identity during the 1960s.

Figures

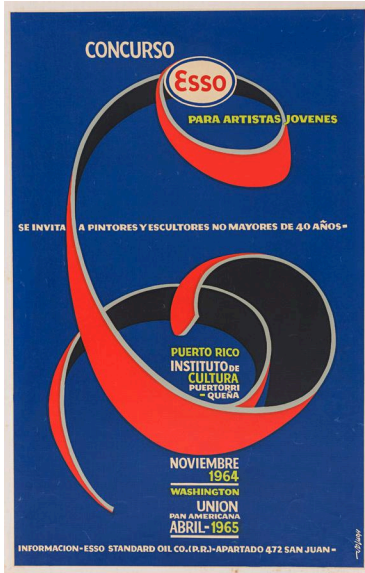


Fig. 1
Lorenzo Homar
Concurso Esso para artistas jóvenes
(1964)
Serigraphy
Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte, UPR



Fig. 2
Newspaper clip of ____ "ESSO Auspicia Concurso Para Artistas Jóvenes." *El Mundo*. Saturday, September 12, 1964. Image courtesy of Centro de Documentación de Arte Puertorriqueño, MHAA, UPRRP



Fig. 3
Colección de Fotos del Periódico *El Mundo*
[Ricardo Alegría recibiendo donativo de la compañía ESSO para la adquisición de obras de arte]
n/d.

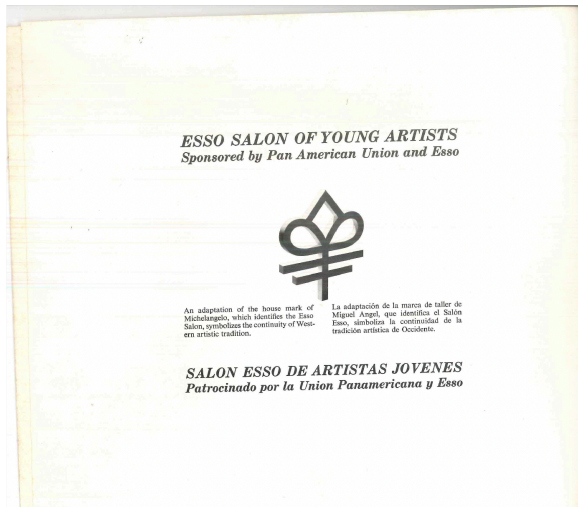


Fig. 4
 Catalog for *Esso Salon of Young Artist* (1965), p. 2.
 Image courtesy of Centro de Documentación de Arte
 Puertorriqueño, MHAA, UPRRP.



Fig. 5
 Rogelio Polesello
Faz A
 (1964)
 Oil on canvas
 Univ. of Miami, Lowe Art Museum



Fig. 6
 Del Ankerks Photographers.
 [Hernán Guggiari (derecha), , explica su obra *Kennedy*. De izquierda a
 derecha, Luis A. Escobar, Elías López Sobá y Héctor Campos Parsí.]
 (June 1965)
 Image courtesy of Colección de Fotos del Periódico El Mundo.

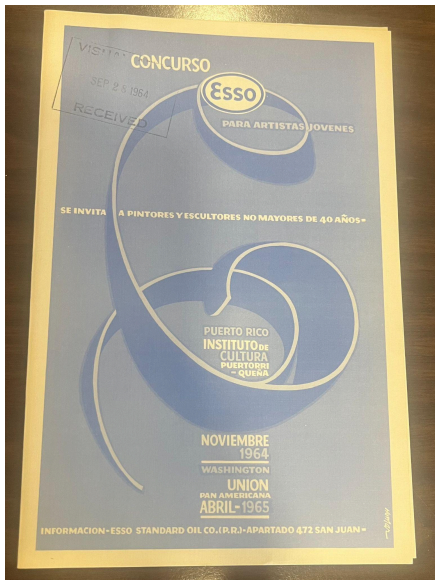


Fig. 7
 Catalogue for Esso Salon in Puerto Rico (1964)
 Image courtesy of Art Museum of the Americas.

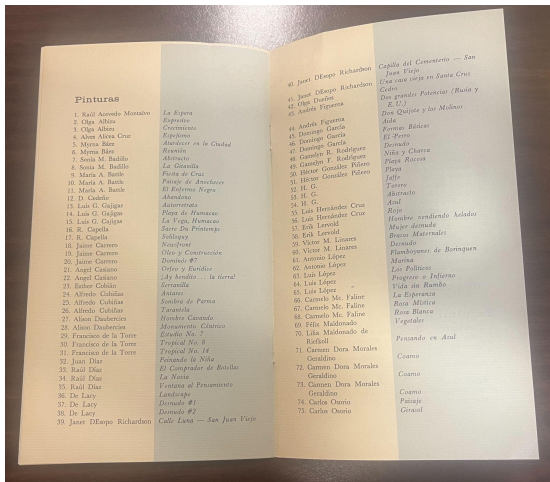


Fig. 8
 Competing painting artworks for Esso Salon in Puerto Rico (1964).
 Images courtesy of Art Museum of the Americas.

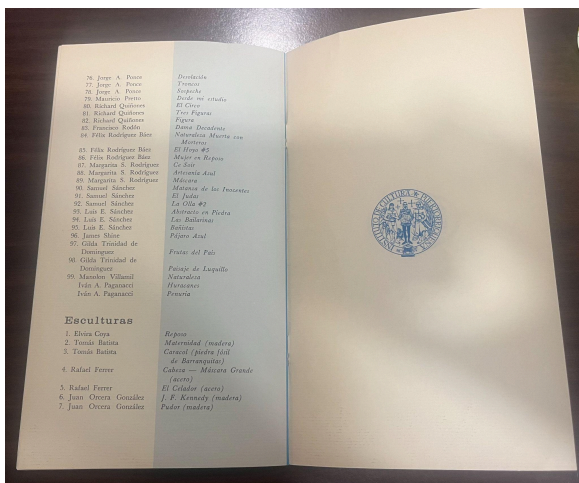


Fig. 9
 Competing painting and sculpture artworks for Esso Salon in Puerto Rico (1964). The last page shows the ICP's logo.
 Images courtesy of Art Museum of the Americas.



Fig. 10
 Newspaper clip of _____. "Recibe Primer Premio de Escultura en Concurso Esso." *El Mundo*. Thursday, November 26, 1964.
 Image courtesy of Centro de Documentación de Arte Puertorriqueño, MHAA, UPRRP



Fig. 11
 Luis Hernández Cruz
Subsuelo
 (1964)
 Oil and collage on canvas
 Univ. of Miami, Lowe Art Museum



Fig. 12
 Olga Albizu
Crecimiento
 (c. 1960)
 Oil on canvas
 Univ. of Miami, Lowe Art Museum



Fig. 13
Rafael Ferrer
Cabeza - Máscara Grande
(n.d.)
Iron
Univ. of Miami, Lowe Art Museum

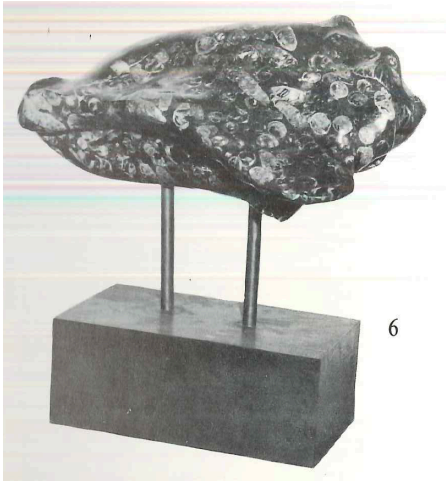


Fig. 14
Tomás Batista
Caracol
(n.d.)
Barranquitas' fossil stone
Univ. of Miami, Lowe Art Museum

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