

Santos

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Santos is the name in Spanish given to the wood carved figures representing the martyrs that gave their life for the Catholic faith, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ.

After the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus came the colonization, where the adventurous Spaniards brought various members of the Catholic clergy to convert the natives to Catholicism. A Papal decree issued in the late 1490s designated the King and Queen of Spain as heads of the Catholic faith in Spain and in all of its new discoveries.

As part of communicating the teachings of the Catholic faith, the priests brought with them wood carvings representing the saints of the Catholic faith. Since the natives didn't know how to read or write the Spanish language, the priests used the images to assist them in teaching the faith.

Due to the limited number of images that had been brought to America by the priests and the settlers, the priests, who had some artistic knowledge, started carving them. They also taught the natives how to carve in wood the images in order to satisfy the demand of the population.

In Puerto Rico, similar to the other countries settled by the Spaniards and Portuguese (i.e. Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Guam, Brazil, etc.), the tradition of carving the *santos* developed and has been kept vibrant since the 16th century.

The style of the Puerto Rican *santos* developed through the years from the classical Spanish style (baroque) to an autochthonous style (rigid, simple lines, frontal) mainly in the 19th century since the *santeros* (wood carvers) had no formal training or education in this craft. The *santos* proliferated in the mountain regions of the island and became the icons of household devotion since the devout residents needed to practice their faith, but the chapels and churches were located in towns that were too distant from their homes.

After the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Protestant missionaries came to Puerto Rico, and slowly many residents converted from Catholicism to other religious denominations.

Since the Protestant religion denominated the *santos* as idolatry, the former devotees started giving them away, selling and even burning or burying their *santos*. In the 1930s several persons (mainly from the main towns in the island), worried about the possible disappearance of the *santos*, started collecting them as representations of the tradition of more than four centuries and as symbols of their Catholic faith.

It has been estimated that throughout the last five centuries, close to 20,000 *santos* have been carved in Puerto Rico. Although there have been periods of stagnation, the tradition continues up to the present time where close to three hundred *santeros* (both sexes and of all ages) are carving the *santos* as representations of their cultural and religious heritage.

In the late 1950s, several residents started selling them in their art and souvenir galleries as representations of Puerto Rican folk art.

The small collection of *santos* at the Brauer Museum at Valparaiso University has various examples from the Caban Family. Through three generations (1818-1962), the Cabans carved their *santos*. The collection also features a couple of pieces from Benigno Soto (1898-1965).

Not until the mid-20th century did the *santeros* start signing their work. The earlier *santos* had to be identified through their provenance as reported by the various generations of the owners. Many are

classified as anonymous since the santero couldn't be identified. Nowadays the community is divided as to whether the *santos* are art or folk art.