

VOCES Y VISIONES

HIGHLIGHTS FROM EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO'S
PERMANENT COLLECTION

EL MUSEO
DEL BARRIO
1969-2004

FOREWORD

Thirty-five years ago, a group of Puerto Rican artists, educators, community activists and civic leaders got together and decided that the time had come to have a cultural institution that the Latino community could call its own.

The rest is history.

By staying true to its mission and vision, El Museo del Barrio has become one of the most important heritage museums in the country. Its impressive and diverse holdings range from pre-Columbian to contemporary collections.

To celebrate its 35th anniversary, and to share its cultural treasures with a national audience, El Museo has organized a travelling exhibition entitled *Voces y Visiones: Highlights from El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection*. Featuring more than one hundred important works from noted artists and a variety of cultures, this unique ensemble marks the first national tour of the museum's finest holdings. *Voces y Visiones's* accompanying publications, which include this five-volume fully illustrated catalogue, promise to be a valuable contribution to scholarship and a very useful educational resource.

MetLife Foundation is proud to be the national sponsor of *Voces y Visiones*. We congratulate El Museo for its extraordinary achievements.

Sibyl Jacobson
President and Chief Executive Officer
MetLife Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Voces y Visiones: Highlights from El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection is both a nationally travelling exhibition and the title of this multi-volume publication. These closely entwined projects are timely accomplishments that auspiciously mark El Museo del Barrio's thirty-fifth anniversary year. Founded in 1969, the mission of El Museo del Barrio is to present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States. From the earliest years, collecting was a priority that depended on the generosity of artists and donors, to whom we remain indebted. The works collected by El Museo del Barrio have been consistently at the heart of its educational mission; these objects have always been understood as containers of meaning—frequently multivalent, always complex—that resulted from the maker's personal, cultural, historical, and geographical condition. As such, the art and artifacts accepted for the Permanent Collection carry meaning beyond their form and beauty. They serve as both chroniclers and signifiers of complex moments, places and times.

At over 6,500 pieces, El Museo's Permanent Collection is nationally recognized for both the diversity of its objects—spanning from pre-Columbian archaeological materials to surprising, mixed-media, contemporary works—as well as its particular areas of strength. The collection strongly reflects El Museo's history. Thus it is primarily comprised of works by Puerto Rican creators, and it will always proudly reflect this founding visionary community. As well, the collection includes objects by an array of Caribbean, Latino, and Latin American artists. These works serve to place the strong core of Puerto Rican art in art historical context, as well as reflect the ever-expanding community of El Barrio. A rich multiplicity of cultures, histories, and formal languages have met and cross-pollinated in New York, across the United States, in the Caribbean, and throughout Latin America. El Museo welcomes all that is often enveloped by the overarching category of "Latino." Through these objects entrusted to our care, we seek to educate a broader public to both

the parallels among our many constituencies—but also the fine nuances and diversities.

Voces y Visiones is organized in five volumes. The first presents the institutional history and exhibition chronology of El Museo del Barrio from 1969 to 2004. Following, four volumes are each dedicated to the highlights of the four major areas within the Permanent Collection: *Taino* pre-Columbian materials; *Popular Traditions* (including santos & devotional arts, masks, textiles, ceramics, and objects relating to Día de los Muertos); *Graphics*; and *Modern and Contemporary Art* of varied media.

The exhibition and publication are extremely important to us in that they disseminate information about the contents of our collection for the first time, thus making the wealth of materials more broadly accessible. As well, *Voces y Visiones* allows us to expand our walls. The constraints of our current facility—at the top of New York's fabled "Museum Mile" and at the western edge of

the thriving, vibrant, Latino neighborhood known as El Barrio—does not, unfortunately, allow us to share many of the jewels of our Permanent Collection on any kind of a continuing basis, as many other museums do. While this is the dream of our next facility, in the meanwhile, both the travelling exhibition, and this landmark publication, allows that dream to take shape.

It was under the leadership of my predecessor, Susana Torruella Leval, that the Curatorial Department initiated an orchestrated effort to create this publication. I would like to acknowledge Fatima Bercht, Chief Curator, and Deborah Cullen, Curator, for their dedication in the work required to undertake this major effort. It was through their skilful leadership that a large team of varied friends and specialists collaborated to make this a reality. I join the co-editors in thanking them. As well, I would like to acknowledge the outstanding devotion of the other members of the Curatorial staff: Margarita Aguilar, Assistant Curator, Noel Valentín, Registrar,

and Melisa Luján, Curatorial Assistant and Project Coordinator, who took care of the myriad details necessary to successfully bring *Voces y Visiones* to fruition.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees and the staff of El Museo del Barrio, I commend the strong sponsorship role taken up by the MetLife Foundation. The MetLife Foundation has most generously underwritten the entire national tour, an exhibition catalogue, and this scholarly, five-volume Permanent Collection highlights boxed publication. Without their commitment, this critical undertaking would not have been possible. Additional support was also provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, as well as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico - Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, which supported the volume dedicated to the institutional history.

El Museo del Barrio takes this opportunity to salute these governmental sources for their consistent support over the

decades. Special recognition must go to the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Collections Accessibility Initiative. El Museo del Barrio received a substantial five-year grant from this program in 1996, allowing the seminal research, conservation, photography, and preparation of our collection that formed the basis of *Voces y Visiones*. As well, the Reed Foundation provided essential and early support for work on Taíno materials.

Voces y Visiones is a tribute to the many people—founders, community members, artists, directors, Board members, staff, volunteers, scholars, educators, donors, sponsors, and visitors—who have helped in ways large and small, often over many years, to advance the work of our institution. We look forward to the continuation and expansion of these efforts. But at this moment, we invite you to pause with us to enjoy these highlights from the Permanent Collection of El Museo del Barrio.

Julián Zugazagoitia, Ph.D.
Director

THE ARTIST AND THE COMMUNITY

The community that I have felt loyalty to, and identity in, has been the Puerto Rican underclass. The reason is simple enough: I am from a typical, disfranchised, underclass Puerto Rican-American family. My father and mother were both blue-collar workers in New York City. My father was a factory elevator operator, until he became a factory superintendent. My mother worked in the sweatshops of Manhattan, making belts and handbags. However disenfranchised my mother might have been, I remember her repeating over and over to my sister: "You're not going to end up behind a sewing machine for all your working years, like I did. You're going to college, you're going to be a teacher . . ." I wondered why she never said that to me. I figured it out years later: my mother believed that we guys had no problems making our way in the world.

Of course I, too, wanted a good life. I spent many years being educated and with each degree, achieving more status and opportunity, and with that status

and opportunity came class mobility.¹ Education made it possible for my life to be better. I wanted the life of my mother and father to be better. My dad had dropped out of school when he was nine. During the Depression, he had to help the family survive. My father served in the Second World War. Upon his return from Europe, he did not take advantage of the G.I. Bill that would have paid his tuition, books, and a monthly housing and food allowance to all returning war veterans. He could have entered a technical training program or complete a high school equivalency, and go to college. He simply refused, tearing up the letter. I could not understand. I wanted the life of all my Puerto Rican relatives—cousins, aunts and uncles—to be better. I wanted them to all graduate from high school and go to college.

I believed that my mother's advice was the best advice that I, as an artist-educator, could give. And so I taught in the New York City Public School system, in elementary, junior high, and high

school. There were many underclass Puerto Ricans in my classes. They called me "mister finish high school—go to college." I insisted I would be more than the traditional savant-creator-artist, and that my high school, college, and university education both prepared me to be an artist and art educator, and also matured my intellect. My need to understand culture and art as processes of cognition, analyzing how those processes form and effect identity, had, in fact, become the focus of most of my research. There were setbacks on the way. It's not that easy to raise such challenges within the context of an underclass experience.

However, I got what I have come to see as my historic opportunity in early 1969, while teaching at the High School of Music and Art. The Puerto Rican community east of Columbia University, in District 4, wanted Community Education Center funds to be used to organize an educational culture project for their constituency. I was called upon to present a proposal for such an endeavor. I had explored these issues in my

undergraduate and graduate studies in education and art. My proposal was titled "El Museo del Barrio" (The Neighborhood Museum): the solution rang like a bell in my head. The community needed a powerful cultural institution that would reveal its past; affirm and guide its present (critically, and with respect); and inspire its future, with integrity and intellectual authority. The community needed a museum that explored the natural history, anthropology, culture, and art of the Puerto Rican people, and that joined it to the world of Latino/a art, as well as the larger world of artists. The founding of El Museo was a mindful process. I had to take off my hybrid-shamanic, art-making hat, and put on my abstract-cognitive researcher's-teacher's hat. I had to engage the community and its cultural needs intelligently, and think about what would best serve the needs of a disenfranchised, underclass community. What culture and art is the community being exposed to? What are they being deprived of?

If you had the opportunity to design an institutional framework

that would support and affirm a culture, and art process, an esthetic framework, and experience in art and culture within which the community is enfranchised—if one had the opportunity to serve a community's evolution, its potential, its cognition—would you take the challenge? I took on that challenge when I founded El Museo del Barrio. It was my "social contract," my relationship as an artist to my Latino/Latina community. With all due respect, then, El Museo was not the "brain-child" of the-then Superintendent of District 4, as Grace Glueck reported in her *New York Times* article—it was my "brain-child." In early 1969, the principal of the High School of Music and Art invited me to his office. He had received a communiqué from District 4 Superintendent Martin W. Frey, who was searching for a Puerto Rican to initiate the culture project. I had a preliminary meeting with Superintendent Frey, in which I suggested a community museum. He raised his eyebrows, smiled, and said, "You are ambitious." I simply answered, "Yes, I am." I added, "If I were a mountain

climber, I would be the first Puerto Rican to climb Mount Everest." I told the Superintendent I was working on a more detailed proposal for the creation of the community museum which I insisted be named "El Museo del Barrio," and that the more detailed proposal would soon be on his desk. My proposal of a community museum, and the thoroughness with which I presented it, was possible only because I responded to my mother's advice to seek an education.

By mid-1969, I had founded El Museo del Barrio on paper. It became the community's institution the moment District Superintendent Frey accepted my proposal. He shook my hand, asking me how it feels to be the founder and first director of El Museo del Barrio. I pinched myself to make sure I was awake, and answered, "GREAT . . ." But there is more to this design of a proposal founding a community museum than meets the eye. As an art student, artist, and art educator I had already, for over twelve years, concerned myself with the

role of art and cultural identity. It was no accident that I would see a museum as a solution. After all, it was the solution of the economically and politically empowered upper and middle classes in affirmation of their cultural identity, when they founded the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, to mention only a few institutions in New York. The American Museum of Natural History can be understood as the exception, with its rich range of artifacts and objects from all ancient and aboriginal world cultures. This institution makes clear the diversity that culture, nature, and the evolution of our species (and all creation) are on this planet, from the micro- to the macro-cosmos, from the virus to the meteor and the distant galaxies one can view at their planetarium.

In fact, in 1970 the American Museum of Natural History's education department called upon me, in my role as Director of El Museo, to conceive and organize

an exhibition that would speak to the Puerto Rican community that El Museo served. I proposed a multi-media exhibition to be presented in their galleries, which would permit a visually exciting and informative framework. Entitled *Boricua: Aquí y Allá* (*Puerto Ricans: Here and There*), a detailed description of the exhibition appeared in the press:

Boricua: Aquí y Allá is a twenty-minute audio-visual show . . . composed of 486 color slides. . . The show takes the viewer from the tropical scenery of Puerto Rico to the tenements of New York City, and from the world of a Puerto Rican professional boxer to the political platform of New York City's first U.S. Congressman of Puerto Rican ancestry. Ancient artifacts, an evangelist meeting, a schoolyard filled with youngsters playing basketball, a political street rally, a baptism, a grocery store, foods, the life of a factory worker, artists and their work and many other aspects of life in El Barrio (Puerto Rican neighborhood) are explored in the hundreds of photos, many of which were taken by Puerto Rican photographers . . . Shown by means of six linked computer-programmed slide projectors . . . The sound track accompanying the slides is another element helping to provide authentic flavor. Hundreds of cameo-conversations with artists, shopkeepers, politicians, and the man in the street were recorded and edited. These were coupled with music and street sounds played from

overhead speakers in the exhibition . . . *Boricua* . . . is shown in a oval 20 X 30 foot room equipped with three 9 X 6 foot screens and five 10 X 6 foot mirrors. The viewer is thus completely surrounded by the images and sound of Puerto Rican life . . . Presented in a specially constructed, stand-up theater equipped with three screens and five mirrors to provide museum goers with a feeling of total immersion in the subject matter—the Puerto Rican community and culture . . . *Boricua: Aquí y Allá* opened in the Corner Gallery of the Museum of Natural History on Tuesday, March 2nd, 1971.²

Something important was left out of the description: the exhibition, which ran continuously, ended with a fluttering image of the flag of Puerto Rico on every screen, reflected in every mirror, with a recorded chorus of children singing, "Que bonita bandera, que bonita bandera, que bonita bandera, es la bandera puertorriqueña . . ." It was uplifting. The audience would always join in.

With the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the "minority peoples," or the "peoples-of-color," made their voices for equity heard, especially in the cities with the larger minority populations, within which museums with a euro-centrist, patriarchal, mainstream

focus were ignoring their history in culture and contributions to the evolving of culture within that history. The euro-centric cultural biases in the administrating, collecting and exhibiting of these major museums began to respond, slowly, attempting to correct the existing biases. But within all these biases, there are people of goodwill, and in the early 1970s, I met such people of goodwill at the Museum of Natural History.

In the mid-late 1960's nothing relevant was happening to change the eurocentric, mainstream focus of art museums in New York City, and the solution to the cultural needs of the Puerto Rican El Barrio community was clear to me. Just as every neighborhood had its library, I believed that every neighborhood should have its community museum that speaks to the culture and cultural history of that community: addressing the past, the present, and most importantly, the future developments of culture. Such ideas did not come out of thin air. My education and experience made it possible for me to design a larger solution to the

cultural needs of the Puerto Rican community than the less ambitious educational culture-project suggested by the Public School District Superintendent's office.

When my proposal to create a community museum was accepted by the District Superintendent, he explained that it might be a while before my request of space adequate to house El Museo would be realized, and that schoolroom spaces would be utilized until then. Thus, El Museo's first location was a large classroom connected to the offices of the District 4 Superintendent. Keep in mind, El Museo was still an extension of my mind, a conjured spirit: it had no "body" as of yet, other than the body I imagined in my proposal. There was no museum collection, no museum guards . . . But there was much research to accomplish, studying the past and present culture and art of the Puerto Rican here and in Puerto Rico, identifying the community's fine and folk artists, locating and organizing art works for exhibition.

The first stage was devoted entirely to research, to the gathering of information that speaks of the natural and cultural history of Boricua-Puerto Rico, and the Borinquen-Puerto Rican people. Dictionaries that detail the languages of the Arawak-Taínos had to be located and copied for El Museo's archives and library. Materials that spoke of the way of life, the ritual, music, artifacts, and art history of the Arawak-Taíno-Puerto Rican had to be located as well. Information was documented in film and slides, for educational purposes within El Museo and the public school system. El Museo's projected permanent collection of objects and art works was planned.

I had presented a detailed script of what the museum would be, giving an outline of the research materials (slides, films, audio recordings, and interviews with scholars and elders of the community) and music, books, artifacts, objects, folk, craft, and fine art works that El Museo would need to gather and share with the community and public schools. This inventory was

conceived to educate and inspire the larger Puerto Rican community and other Latino/a members of the community. Thus, the cultural and artistic history of Puerto Rico, produced in the indigenous past, the Spanish colonial past, and the American protectorate past and present, was to be shared with the entire community, so that they might be intelligently and authentically informed.

I imagined the natural-history component of El Museo as a multi-screened slide presentation set up in its own gallery, that would include pre-conquest natural history elements of Boricua-Puerto Rico, a rain forest environment, including its wild life, and a presentation of their religious practice, warrior culture and weapons, the batey or sport site, an Arawak-Taíno home, the food they harvested from the sea and the land, food preparation, their hygiene, use of herbs and other healing techniques, clothing, body ornaments, decoration-painting and tattooing, as well as examples of succeeding generations, from conquest to post-conquest conditions.

Of course, the art and culture of the present was to be one of the concerns of El Museo, and within that, folk art and art created by self-educated artists working outside the mainstream-international. But—and this was an important concern of mine—I wished El Museo to present these without compromising its affirmation of art historical, relevant, international problem-solving art. Education would be sensitively conveyed. It was my belief that evolving cognition is the outcome of education, and that it is evolved cognition within a formal education that drives the evolutionary progress of culture and art for all peoples.

The majority of El Barrio's underclass are linked to a history of disenfranchisement, denied the education that would have made possible the cognitive and intellectual development through which to gain societal empowerment. Denied development in abstraction in cognition, these groups have been denied the critical ingredient for economic and class mobility. Because El Museo is located in, and serves, an historically under-

class community—historically disenfranchised of cultural, economic and educational opportunity, generationally disfranchised of developments in abstraction in cognition—it is particularly important that El Museo contribute to the analysis of culture and art history and seek to clarify the relation between anthropological history and the continuous potential of cognition and development in culture and art. It is also essential that El Museo clarifies the ways developments in culture and art have served the progress (or the stasis), by promoting (or inhibiting) future developments.

It was, and is, my belief that a museum is more than a kind of high entertainment, more than a mortuary, more than a repository of objects, art, and cultural artifacts. I believe a museum must impart the intellectual tools and the cognitive science it must employ itself, while deciphering art and culture. Culture and art are part and parcel of this question and its answer. El Museo del Barrio must contribute to this discussion.

And so here we are over thirty years later. I thank all who made it possible for El Museo to remain El Museo del Barrio. As a cultural institution, it is more alive and well than ever, thanks to the efforts and perseverance of all the directors after me. Each director that followed my tenure at El Museo made their unique contribution to the Puerto Rican-Latino/a community. Each served El Museo del Barrio's mandate within the usual budgetary constraints, to the best of their abilities, keeping El Museo alive. I give special thanks to Isabel Nazario and Julio Nazario, and all who joined them from the community, helping in an hour of need. I give thanks to all the staff that have served the Museo through these years, to the many private and public funding institutions and foundations, and politicians, museum members, donors of art works, friends, and Board members. All have, in their way, contributed.

As a collection of art works, El Museo del Barrio's Permanent Collection represents the most important state-side collection

of the creative expression of Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latino/a peoples. Sharing these accomplishments in the history of Latino/a art and culture, through exhibitions and narrative explanations, El Museo educates and raises the cultural-art consciousness and appreciation of the larger community: both its diverse inhabitants and tourists who make this great city of New York the cultural kaleidoscope which it is.

Rafael Montañez Ortiz
Founding Director, 1969–1971

¹ Editor's note: An artist and educator, Rafael Montañez Ortiz earned both his Master degree in Education, and his Doctorate in Education, from Columbia University Teachers College (New York), as well as his Bachelor and Master of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute (Brooklyn). He is a Full Professor of Art at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ).

² Grace Glueck, "Barrio Museum: Hope Si, Home No," *The New York Times*, 30 July 1970: 38.

³ *The Commercial and Financial Chronicle*, New York, March 4, 1971.

A COLLECTIVE VISION

El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969, by activists to provide the children of School District 4 in El Barrio with the opportunity to learn about Puerto Rican heritage.¹ Several years later, the *Collectiva de Artistas Puertorriqueños*, in a document dated May 19, 1974, submitted to the Board of Directors a series of requests regarding El Museo's work and its priorities. Among the issues of great concern to the Puerto Rican artists were greater participation in the development of museum policy and programs. They recommended centralized artists' archives and an institutional commitment to establishing cultural alliances with organizations in Puerto Rico and in New York. Their involvement and interest in El Museo's work was a significant factor in the transformation of an educational program into a complex institution serving the artistic and cultural heritage of the Puerto Rican people.

The anti-poverty and anti-war movements, and the struggles for civil liberties, were all part of a rapidly changing society. Puerto Rican activism reflected the burning

issues affecting our community. The children of the 1950s migration had come of age. Most would never fulfill their parents' dreams of one day returning to their homeland. Like their parents, they remained isolated and on the periphery of mainstream society; a people whose origin, long history, and culture were basically unknown—or at best, marginalized.

By the 1960s, the largest political and economic migration from the Island resulted in close to one million Puerto Ricans living in New York City, categorized as underprivileged and at the bottom of the economic and social stratum. Activists organized and took on the issues of housing, education, health care, and legal representation. Radical organizations like the Young Lords, a group of young activists, took to the streets and challenged the system into establishing programs for the prevention of lead poisoning, breakfast programs for children, and garbage pickup in East Harlem.

By the 1970s, the boundaries between art and politics had

disappeared. Puerto Rican artists and activists challenged established cultural institutions regarding issues of inclusion and programming. But it was not yet the time for these mainstream institutions to develop and implement programs that would reflect the ethnic diversity of the City. Within the Puerto Rican community, it was necessary to create institutions like El Museo del Barrio, Taller Boricua, the Alternative Museum, En Foco, Friends of Puerto Rico, Cayman Gallery, Ballet Hispanico, and the Puerto Rican Travelling Theatre as alternative spaces. These institutions fulfilled the need for relevant cultural programs for the community and the need for venues for the presentation of visual and performing artists.

The issue of aesthetics was prevalent among a significant group of Puerto Rican artists whose primary concern was reflecting—in their own particular style—their national identity and unique history. El Museo was the only institution that sanctioned and validated their heritage.

By the 1980s, El Museo had expanded to include a Main Gallery, a Santos Gallery, the F-stop Photo Gallery, and the museum store. In 1982–1983, the Ricardo Alegría Gallery of pre-Columbian art, and the West Wing Gallery, were completed, and short- and long-term expansion plans included a children's museum, a theatre, additional offices, and collection storage spaces. El Museo's ongoing collaborative programs included *Música de Camara* (Eva de la O's classical music series), Teatro Cuatro (an experimental theatre group), and Lillian Jimenez's *Latino Film & Video Festival*.

As Chief Curator, those early years were full of challenges and I was committed to achieving a balance between artistic, historical, and collections-based interpretive exhibitions. A professional exhibition program provided artists with the opportunity to show their work, along with catalogues which served both as documentation of the event, as well as their overall accomplishments as artists.

Exhibitions featured artists from Puerto Rico, and Latin America, as well as collaborative programs with national and international cultural institutions. For master artists like Pedro Villarini and Eloy Blanco, El Museo del Barrio would be the most significant venue for the presentation of their work within an art historical context. Exhibitions like *Los Taínos: A Visual Tradition*, a multi-media group show, brought together artists who utilized indigenous motifs and imagery in their work. This project also celebrated the reprinting of Matilde de Silva's book on the industrial application of Taíno motifs, a publication which had not been available to the public since the 1940s.

Interpretive exhibitions like *The Golden Age of Spain: Theatre and Period Dress*, which opened May 29, 1981, was one of my first assignments as Chief Curator. It was an event celebrating the 300th Anniversary of Calderón de La Barca, and it fulfilled another aspect of El Museo's work. Researching historically important materials that illustrated the primary

theme of the exhibition—theatre and customs of the period—resulted in the presentation of prints illustrating the dress of the different social classes of sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain. The exhibit included loans of art from museums throughout Europe and the United States. To illustrate the grandeur of the upper class during that period, the opening reception included actors dressed in elaborate court costumes. The actors included Puerto Ricans of African descent, which resulted in extensive discussion regarding the racial history of the Puerto Rican people and of El Museo's priorities. The debate and controversy mostly centered on the issue of slavery as part of our Puerto Rican heritage, traditionally ignored or all together negated. At the same time, it was asked why should Spanish history be presented within the context of a Puerto Rican museum? What about the Taínos and our African cultural roots? How could El Museo begin to satisfy the need to document, research, and interpret the totality and diversity of the Puerto Rican experience as a Nation, inclusive, and within the context of our colonial status?

Relevant questions of programming and content had to be addressed. As issues emerged, it was clear that the museum could redefine established paradigms that explain the effects of colonialism on the process of cultural reproduction, historical interpretation, and national identity. Our collective vision for El Museo was to someday facilitate consistent and on-going scholarly research that would deal with questions of migration, politics, and social re-organization within the context of cultural reproduction and the expression of art forms. El Museo had an important role to play in this area, not only for the Puerto Rican community, but as a model for the newly-emerging Latin American and Caribbean community.

But during those early years of my tenure as Chief Curator, the work and priorities of El Museo went beyond issues of program and content. As a developing museum, it was incumbent to implement systems for the proper care and presentation of its collections and other historical materials in storage or on view to the public. It was

also a time during which the American Association of Museums joined with the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cooper-Hewitt, and other major cultural institutions in an effort to establish standards and overall procedures for all museum administration and operation. Training and technical assistance was available to museum staff. It was a great opportunity for museum professionals like myself to develop a broad range of skills in all aspects of museum work. The Board of Directors and the Executive Director, Jack Agüeros, were committed to staff training and collections management; they recognized that through these efforts they would achieve institutional validation.

The 1980s was a great time for museums and their professionals, but it was also a time during which the funding environment was changing rapidly and creating a crisis for most small- to medium-sized organizations. A decade earlier, anti-poverty and social programs provided solid funding for community-based organizations

like El Museo. Ten years later, funding had diminished and the city was taking a hard look at cultural organizations within the context of the city's overall economic development plan, determining whether it was necessary to support small museums like El Museo del Barrio. The private funding establishments were demanding more for their contributions, and emerging organizations like El Museo were required to take on greater program responsibilities, while simultaneously serving the interests of a more diverse segment of the population. Dwindling resources, an overzealous program schedule, and administrative inefficiencies resulted in a serious crisis that cut short El Museo's progressive development. In 1986, the museum was forced by the Department of Cultural Affairs to temporarily close its doors to the public.

That year, while working in City Hall in the New York City Art Commission, I was asked by the Office of the Mayor to return to El Museo del Barrio on a six-month assignment as Interim Director. El

Museo was endangered, and my role was to open El Museo, implement programs, and assist the Board of Directors in establishing a sustainable infrastructure, one that would ensure El Museo's continued growth and development. It was a difficult period for the museum, its staff, and supporters. It was a defining period in El Museo's history and yet another transition, one that would entail many years of introspective review of programs, mission, and resources.

But once again, El Museo survived the challenge, but it had an impact on the museum's work and its future. This experience certainly illustrated the vulnerability of institutions like El Museo, which continue to be affected by economic, political and social realities.

The demographics and character of the Puerto Rican people are also constantly changing. The census of the new millennium indicate that there are three million Puerto Ricans dispersed throughout the United States with established communities from New York to Hawaii. The Puerto Rican diaspora

has made major contributions to all aspects of North American society. As a community, we continue to struggle with the same issues of identity, inclusion, political representation, culture, and history. El Museo is, more than ever, a source of inspiration, national pride, and—most importantly—a symbol of empowerment. It is the collective vision of many directors, curators, artists, and scholars that throughout the years have made many major contributions to its development. It represents the desire for a better life of all of our communities, new and old. El Museo del Barrio symbolizes the determination of activists who dared to take responsibility for a community, whose reach now extends beyond specificities, regional boundaries, and state lines.

Gladys Peña Acosta
Chief Curator 1979–1984
Interim Director 1986

1 Editors' note: In 1969, as a result of community petitioning, and due to the general cultural activism of the time which demanded more inclusive programming and representation, the Community Education Center of School of District 4 made funds available for an educational-cultural project to serve El Barrio. Superintendent Martin W. Frey looked for an appropriate educator, and the principal of the

High School of Music of Art recommended one of his teachers, the artist Rafael Montañez Ortiz. After meeting with Frey, Montañez Ortiz returned with a written proposal for a much more ambitious and visionary project: a full-scale museum to serve El Barrio, which he christened with the logical name, El Museo del Barrio. A combination of factors, including newspaper articles, the vicissitudes of history, and various personalities over the years, have contributed to blurring the history of the founding of El Museo into a legendary spontaneous group action. No doubt, Montañez Ortiz's initial and founding conception and undertaking was immediately complemented by the contributions and participations of many artists, educators, community members, and supporters, who have sustained El Museo over the years.

IMAGE IN THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

"To Puerto Ricans, my fellow countrymen and women, an invitation to name your new world through a Museo in *El Barrio*."¹

The insightful quote from educator Antonia Pantoja resonates with the force of a prediction. In my case it became true; El Museo del Barrio marked the way I see the world. After more than two decades of participation at different levels with various administrations, I served as Director of El Museo from 1986 to 1993. My timid approaches during the early years of Director Marta Moreno Vega, when I arrived in New York to study in 1973, led to my work as Curator with Director Jack Agüeros from 1977 to 1978. After my tenure as Director, I maintained a relationship as colleagues with Susana Torruella Leval, who I had recruited as Curator in 1990, and who directed El Museo from 1993 to 2002. I feel a rewarding obligation to a tradition that has influenced my professional choices and my personal convictions.

Preamble

El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969 under the auspices of Community School District 4 because of the outcry of parents, bilingual teachers, and cultural leaders. They denounced the absence of teaching resources and didactic materials relevant to the Puerto Rican student population that was overflowing the public schools in El Barrio. El Museo's first director, Rafael Montañez Ortiz, incorporated it as an independent, non-profit organization in 1971. Montañez Ortiz, a vanguard artist and teacher at the High School for Music and Art, oriented the institution toward museology: the presentation, study and interpretation of Puerto Rican artistic legacies, especially the indigenous and African contributions.

In 1973, under the vigorous leadership of Marta Moreno Vega, El Museo presented the benchmark exhibition, *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico: Pre-Columbian to the Present*, in collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The anthological presentation was shown in both museums. This

unprecedented event in the cultural history of New York City was a result of the political juncture from the massive wave of Puerto Rican migration in the 1960s. Different from other groups, *Boricuas*² were American citizens and enjoyed all the constitutional guaranties, in theory. This included the right to vote in spite of their language, Spanish, and their cultural make-up: Caribbean, of mixed ancestry.

In the midst of an era of political change in the United States, the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war protests, and feminist and gay activism, the time-honored cultural institutions that benefited from generous allocations of public funds were required to offer programs to the "communities" that had received very little in exchange for their growing contributions as city, state and federal taxpayers. Cultural activists organized protests and picket lines in front of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, demanding more presence of female, Afro-American, and Puerto Rican artists in their exhibitions and collections, as well

as representation of these groups in the boards of directors and the professional ranks of the museums' employees. They also called for the decentralization of the collections so that the other, more populous four boroughs in New York City would have the same access to the artistic treasures hoarded in Manhattan.

As Director, Moreno Vega, a teacher in the public school system and a cultural leader of exceptional qualities, projected this political dimension in the catalogue for *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* exhibition. She wrote, "Puertorriqueños must design educational solutions for the continuity and progress of our communities. We can no longer permit the utilization of ineffective teaching methods and programs to destroy the inherent creativity and desire to learn that our communities possess. The strengths of our past and present will certainly determine our future strengths."³

The young museum's growing pains began to surface by 1973; the organizational and fiscal

structure of El Museo had not developed at par with its programmatic strength. In 1974, Moreno Vega resigned amidst a struggle between factions.⁴ Hiram Maristany, photographer of El Museo who had been a militant in the political organization the Young Lords,⁵ eventually assumed El Museo's direction during the transitional period that lasted until 1976 with the installation of a new Board of Directors. After a search for a new director, Jack Agüeros was recruited in 1977; he had been working as Director of the Caymán Gallery in Soho.⁶

For nearly a decade, Agüeros's vision projected El Museo beyond El Barrio, but from El Barrio, in both a literal and metaphoric sense. Firmly instilled with El Museo's original mission, he maintained the institution's well-known tradition of presenting the artistic contributions of Boricuas and added other Latinos and Latinas who had also been ignored by the dominant cultural current, that is, the mainstream. Agüeros strengthened El Museo's multi-disciplinary programming,

expanded its presence in New York City, promoted the organization as a national institution in the United States, and as a international producer with true presence in Latin America.⁷

The disparity between El Museo's maturity in programming and the vulnerability of its organizational structure reached a crisis level for the second time in the museum's history in November of 1985. Bess Myerson, commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York, suspended the disbursement of El Museo's assigned funds until an audit and investigation of the institution's fiscal affairs had concluded. It was a painful waiting period during which the Director presented his resignation.

Artist Rafael Colón Morales, who, at the time was Curator of El Museo, assumed the position of Interim Director without a salary; a small group of employees followed his example and kept El Museo's doors open to the public. In April 1986, Deputy Mayor Robert Esnard appointed Gladys Peña as

Interim Director of El Museo. Peña, who had successfully acted as El Museo's Curator in the past, took a paid leave of absence from her position as Director of New York City's Public Art Program. The Board of Directors, presided over with determination and affability by Carmen P. Nelson, had the arduous task of stabilizing the institution without adequate resources.⁸ Nonetheless, the Board remained steadfast in its projection of a strong Museo, and announced the recruitment of an Executive Director in mid-1986.

Return to El Barrio

I sought the position with the certainty that the institution would endure because El Museo's mission was relevant and because it was important to many sectors of the Puerto Rican community. El Museo didn't depend on a specific leader; four directors, all Puerto Rican New Yorkers or Nuyoricans, had guided it since its foundation in 1969.⁹ Likewise, it had surpassed fifteen years of existence: a generation, and the typical longevity of many Puerto Rican community organizations in the United States.¹⁰

Nearly a decade had transpired since my initiation as Curator of El Museo del Barrio in 1977. During this time, I worked for two years at the Community Education Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, serving as the museum's Bilingual Educator, a position that Puerto Rican and Afro-American cultural activists had fought for in the 1970s. In 1986, I was in my sixth year at the New York State Council on the Arts, working as a Program Analyst in the Visual Arts Program, where I had been recruited thanks to affirmative action policies aimed at including groups who had little or no representation in the personnel roster of this state agency.

Challenges of the Time

I began working as Executive Director in October 1986, while the investigation into El Museo's financial affairs was still in process. One year later, the inquiry concluded without any charges ever being brought. Nevertheless, the process had undermined the prestige and leadership of one of the most visible institutions in the Puerto Rican community.

Other aspects of the institution had equally suffered. There was a basic inventory of the collection, which had grown significantly in the early 1980s, but it had been neither catalogued nor studied. There were few public events or educational programs scheduled on a regular basis. Whereas the offices were undergoing renovations, the rest of the facilities had deteriorated due to the lack of funds for upkeep. The security and environmental control systems were non-existent and various legal actions by former employees and suppliers were pending. The security and administrative employees were anxiously waiting to negotiate their first collective bargaining agreement as part of the municipal employees union, District 37.

El Museo's only source of funds at that time was an allocation of about four hundred thousand dollars from the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York. This grant did not allow for programming costs; it covered, in part, salaries, equipment, facility maintenance and rent. The latter consumed nearly half of the funds

and was reverted to the City's coffers via its Buildings Department. Furthermore, El Museo was on probation with the government's cultural agencies; it could receive funds from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) under the condition that the institution use a reimbursement system. This required El Museo to incur expenses and request restitution afterwards, a difficult situation for a financially-poor institution.

Shared Accomplishments

The new Finance Director, Larry Turner (who was African American), and I shut ourselves up in the offices of the City's Department of Investigations, until we unearthed the documents necessary to request reimbursement of nearly seventy thousand dollars in expenses for exhibitions and programs that had been subsidized by the NEA and NYSCA. In this way, we gradually began to reestablish our credibility with the government agencies. When Turner left, Anita Leach (also African American, and a vivacious

personality from the South), replaced him. She earned the confidence of the Board of Director's Finance Committee, which included two formidable professionals: a brilliant accountant, Michael Janicki, and a superb lawyer and accountant, Héctor Willems. Leach implemented a computerized system and wisely managed the financial reins during a period when El Museo's annual budget quickly increased from \$400,000 to \$1,400,000 through donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals that complemented the municipal funds.

El Museo's Curator, Rafael Colón Morales, a respected artist and scholar, along with four office and security employees, had survived the transition, but they were demoralized. With the unyielding hope that we immigrants nurture, coupled with a generous dose of irony, I thought, "Since the situation can't get worse, it's bound to get better."

I remembered my trajectory as a privileged "minority." Thanks to the political struggles of the past

decades, I had access to opportunities that had been denied to millions of people due to their lack of economic means, their educational limitations, their sex or sexual preferences, their color or appearance, their origins, religion, speech, accent, or language. I had the encouragement of Irvine Mac Manus, a Nuyorican who had recommended me for employment on several occasions in the field of arts and museums in New York. El Museo del Barrio had offered me my first job and I intended to create opportunities for Puerto Ricans and other people from "marginal" groups who were interested in working in the area of culture, which had systematically excluded them.

I recruited an outstanding colleague, sculptor Federico Ruíz, as Operations Manager. With an outpouring of energy and generosity, he offered the institution the depth and variety of his talents, exceptional leadership qualities, and an unwavering commitment to the community. Without salaried personnel, Ruíz successfully put together a team comprised of welfare recipients who were

required to work in order to receive their modest monthly checks. To this day El Museo depends on this system for its support staff. The appearance of the galleries and administrative offices improved immediately. Museological security and environmental control systems were installed for the safety and preservation of the collection. With sensitivity and good sense, Ruíz supervised the installation of all kinds of artwork, both conventional and experimental. Over six years, with his collaboration, we negotiated a forty-percent increase in administrative space, and El Museo's public space was expanded as we took management of a 650-seat theatre in the building. Likewise, municipal funds were committed to renovate the galleries according to a master plan designed by architect Jonathan Marvel.

We enrolled artist and writer Brenda Alejandro as Education Curator. At the time, she was a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University; today she is a faculty member of the Fine Arts Department

of the University of Puerto Rico. Alejandro restructured the education program and it grew rapidly, given her professional and systematic approach to children's inventive qualities and the careful study of the works of art on exhibit. El Museo's Artist-in-Residence, Pepón Osorio, also became part of the education program. An exceptional creator and recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1999, Osorio is also a talented educator. Together with Alejandro, he developed the Caring Workshops,¹¹ a program of hands-on collective creating for children, which was recognized as a model in education and mental health publications.

In 1987, a magnificent touring exhibition, *Puerto Rican Painting: Between Past and Present*,¹² announced the beginning of a new chapter in the history of El Museo. The opening gathered some seven hundred Boricuas and non-Boricuas from all walks of life. They attended to celebrate not only more than one hundred years of pictorial expression on the Island, but also the endurance and

continuity of El Museo, and the patrimony of El Barrio.

Puerto Rican artists worked virtually without support in New York. As Director, it became a priority to give these artists exposure and resources to continue their work. They lacked opportunities to exhibit in mainstream museums or in the alternative spaces that had sprung up in Soho, Tribeca and the Lower East Side. The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Arts, operative until 1989, was an excellent forum, although mainly through collective exhibitions, for the growing number of Latin American artists who had settled in New York in the 1980s and other Latinos and Latinas residing throughout the United States, including Chicanos and Boricuas.

El Museo's curators had established an excellent trajectory of well-documented retrospective exhibitions that examined the mature production of contemporary artists, mainly Puerto Ricans. These shows alternated with less frequent exhibitions of historical interest or projects that presented a broader

cultural context, similar to those organized at the beginning of the 1970s under the direction of Marta Moreno Vega. Following that tradition, El Museo continued to organize retrospective exhibitions of artists who had reached maturity in their work including Rafael Montañez Ortiz (the first director of El Museo),¹³ Edgar Franceschi (painter and set designer), and the artists' collective, Taller Boricua.¹⁴ A variety of media was showcased: photographs by Sophie Rivera, three dimensional pieces in wood by Antonio Navia and Melquíades Rosario, and ceramic sculptures by Jaime Suárez.¹⁵

There were opportunities for more experimental work such as the video installation by Catalonian Eugenia Balcells and the performances and site-specific installations of *Up Tiempo! Performing & Visual Artists of the Americas*. The latter was an ambitious collaboration with Creative Time, one of the influential alternative presenting organizations located in Lower Manhattan. The historical focus was not left behind; *Emblems of*

His City: José Campeche & San Juan, organized by Susana Torruella Leval, recreated the milieu of José Campeche, eighteenth-century Puerto Rican painter, through documents, paintings, furniture, and other objects of daily life.

Media coverage of El Museo del Barrio improved considerably, both in quantity and quality. The exhibitions received highly coveted positive reviews from *The New York Times*, as well as write-ups in all the other city newspapers. The Spanish-speaking radio stations and news programs on both English and Spanish television covered the Three Kings Day Parade every year. A Public Relations office was created to promote this positive image, to increase the number of visitors, and to reorganize the membership program. This initiative also reinforced El Museo's fundraising and resource development plan.

A successful proposal to the Ford Foundation in 1989 provided El Museo with generous funding over a three-year period to establish a Curatorial Department for the care

and study of the collection. These funds were used to update the security and environmental control systems and in 1990, to recruit Susana Torruella Leval, the highly respected Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, which had closed its doors in 1989.

Torruella Leval immediately designed a system for the reference archive for Latino artists, one of the most important of its category. She also supervised a curatorial team who developed a manual for managing the collection and who began studying and cataloguing the museum's holdings. These exceeded five thousand pieces that covered from the pre-Columbian period through the 1980s, in a great variety of media and styles. Puerto Rican artists produced eighty-five percent of the artwork; it clearly reflected the intentions of El Museo's administrations to collect in this area.

I was concerned that the works created by Puerto Rican artists since the 1970s were not being collected in a systematic way by public institutions, either in Puerto

Rico or in the United States. The problem was more severe in the case of artistic production by Nuyoricans, which continued to improve in quality and quantity. To address this imbalance, we identified obvious gaps in the collection and garnered an acquisitions fund. Important pieces were purchased from Marina Gutiérrez, Pepón Osorio, Juan Sánchez, Antonio Martorell, Edgar Franceschi, and Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, among others, helping to establish a market value for the work by some of these artists in New York.

A Vision of Life and Death in *El Velorio (The Wake)*

My effort to support Puerto Rican artists in New York resulted in unforeseen benefits in the case of Pepón Osorio. To conclude Osorio's tenure as El Museo's Artist-in-Residence in 1991, Susana Torruella Leval proposed an exhibition that would include his previous installations and objects/sculptures. It was to be titled *Con to' los hierros*, which could be translated as "equipped to the max." An adequate budget for this project allowed us to commission

the artist with a new installation, which he entitled, *El Velorio*, inspired by the masterpiece of nineteenth-century Puerto Rican painter, Francisco Oller.

Osorio's *El Velorio* obliged us to rethink the relationship of the museum with its visitors. Osorio recreated the setting of a funeral home with a sofa, very low room temperature, soft lighting, and a thick carpet to muffle sounds. Nine coffins surrounded by floral arrangements were distributed throughout the room, not unlike sculptures in a gallery. The stories of Boricuas who had died prematurely—by murder, the AIDS epidemic, and the Persian Gulf War—were written on the walls and on transparent laminates printed with photographs and texts. These were positioned in place of a body in each coffin. When the visitor entered *El Velorio*, this house of mourning, it was like attending a play that required the audience's participation. It had enormous emotional impact.

We made sure to prepare the visitors, both young people and

adults. Before entering the installation, a guide spoke to school groups and their teachers could decide whether or not to visit this part of the exhibition. A notice at the entrance of the gallery forewarned visitors about the intensity of this visual presentation on the theme of death and a notebook was provided so that people could express their views. The result was surprising. The notebook filled with positive comments and memories of loved ones who had passed away; it had to be replaced weekly. Visitors would often spend long periods of time sitting on the sofa in prayer or in a manner of mourning, at times crying. I have never again seen such a deeply-felt response to a work of art with such tragic content.

Con to' los hierros was successful with El Museo's public as well as with the art critics. John Handhart, then Curator of Video and Film at the Whitney Museum of American Art, visited the exhibition and invited Osorio to participate in the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art's 1993 Biennial. His

installation would occupy ample space and have outstanding visibility in the galleries. Osorio's career finally took off and today, his work has earned international recognition.

Pure Administration, Change in Administration

By the mid-1980s, the winds were changing in local politics. It appeared that the difficult struggles for equality in the previous decades were beginning to pay off. The first African American mayor of New York City, David Dinkins, appointed Dr. Mary Schmidt-Campbell, then-Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, as Commissioner of Cultural Affairs in 1989. Given her experience at an institution with a similar path to El Museo, Dr. Schmidt-Campbell was sympathetic to the needs of community-based cultural organizations.

El Museo had reached an organizational maturity that allowed its Board of Directors and personnel to make long-term projections. By 1991, the process of developing El Museo's first

strategic plan was initiated; in addition, a personnel manual was drafted. The National Arts Stabilization Fund selected El Museo to participate in a program that fostered financial stability of various cultural institutions based in under-developed communities.

Toward the end of the 1980s, nonetheless, New York City suffered a serious crisis in its financial markets. This was reflected at the beginning of the 1990s in a significant decline in private sector funding of cultural organizations. Small non-profits like El Museo had little margin to absorb budget cuts. We had to redouble our efforts to secure new sponsors with whom we had to negotiate carefully so as not to turn into a display case for their products. The job of the Executive Director transformed into pure administration and fundraising, increasingly distanced from the study of art, dialogue with the artists, and contact with the constituents of El Barrio.

The lack of enjoyment for the tasks that took up nearly all my time, and the stress of the position that

increased day by day, led me into depression. Fortunately, three magnificent colleagues, accustomed to the team work that we had cultivated at El Museo, assumed leadership when I had to resign at the beginning of 1993: Anita Leach, Fiscal Manager, Federico Ruíz, Operations Manager, and Susana Torruella Leval, Chief Curator. Torruella Leval was subsequently appointed Executive Director in November of 1993.

In Retrospect

My experience as Director of El Museo del Barrio was complex, but not void of enormous satisfaction. As Director, I had the opportunity to participate in the advancement of a patrimonial institution of the Puerto Rican community. It also belonged to a select group of organizations that had established new paradigms with respect to the "center-versus-periphery," in the developing field of museology in the United States in the 1960s. Our sister organization, the exceptional Mexican Museum and Fine Arts Center of Chicago, directed with resolve by Carlos Tortolero, is

another example of success in promoting this paradigm of museums rooted in urban communities of immigrants.

I began to see the results of focusing on the priorities that I had established for El Museo. Work and training opportunities were created in the field of museology for Boricuas in New York and for other groups who had similarly been absent from museums. As such, we would have professionals in the future to interpret and administer the artistic legacies that had been historically disparaged.

Many artists received direct institutional support from El Museo through the acquisition of their work and from the Artist-in-Residence program. Influential New York art critics consistently began to review El Museo's well-designed and documented exhibitions and catalogues on the work of Puerto Rican and other Latino artists. The contemporary art of Puerto Rico and the work created by Nuyoricans, significant for its quality and an essential part of our collective memory, was finally being preserved

and studied in a public collection, that of El Museo del Barrio.

In this era of franchise museums, it is difficult to imagine El Museo del Barrio. Anchored in a humble community, El Museo is a battlefield where the contradictory forces inherited by the institution constantly clash: the struggles for social justice and equality of the 1960s and 1970s, with the ingrained, elitist tradition of museums.

The issue of protecting the cultural heritage of the invaded, the refugees, the immigrants, and the most vulnerable groups—which are by no means the minority—has ramifications of unforeseen magnitude that affect all regions of the planet. The call for a place such as El Museo del Barrio, by a besieged community of Puerto Rican immigrants, their children, and grandchildren, was visionary. That moment of prophetic clarity never ceases to amaze me.

Petra Barreras del Río
Curator, 1977–1978
Director, 1986–1993

1 Antonia Pantoja, quoted in the exhibition catalogue, *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico: Pre-Columbian to Present* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and El Museo del Barrio, 1973), 106. Pantoja is an educator and outstanding leader who was honored by then-President William Jefferson Clinton with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1997.

2 Word used for Puerto Rican nationals. It is derived from *Bariquén*, the original name given to the Island by the Taino Indians and recorded by the Spanish in the fifteenth century.

3 Marta Moreno Vega, *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico*, 12. "Puertorriqueños" is written this way in the original English version of the catalogue.

4 Upon leaving El Museo, Moreno Vega created the Association for Hispanic Arts with the mission of serving Hispanic organizations in the United States. She later founded the Caribbean Cultural Center that has developed excellent programming relating to the African diaspora in the Americas.

5 The Young Lords was founded by Puerto Rican youth in Chicago in the early 1960s. The New York Chapter was established in 1969. The organization fought against racism, economic and social injustice, land speculation, and developers in poor communities until it was disbanded in 1972. Several of its leaders became public figures in the mass media: Juan González, Pablo (Yoruba) Guzmán, Felipe Luciano and Iris Morales. See www.palante.org for more information.

6 Caymán Gallery, a project of the non-profit organization, Friends of Puerto Rico, later became the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Arts under the direction of Nilda Peraza.

7 At the beginning of the 1980s, Agüeros organized two important events with the Public Theater, which was still directed by its founder, the legendary Joseph Papp. The Latino Film and Video Festival was coordinated by Lillian Jiménez and the Festival del Teatro Pobre de América and was coordinated by Argentinean Oscar Ciccone and Puerto Rican Cecilia Vega. The association with the Public Theater, a prestigious avantgarde institution in Lower Manhattan, was a brilliant strategic coup.

8 At this time the Board, was comprised of the following Puerto Ricans: Agustín Álamo (community leader), Angela Cabrera (feminist leader and political activist), John Carro (judge), Michael Janicki (accountant), Irvine Mac Manus (consultant for cultural organizations), Carlota Maduro (human resources specialist), José Moscoso (lawyer), Carmen P. Nelson (corporate human resources specialist), Josephine Nieves (educator and public administrator), Marianne Roig (art collector and businesswoman), Carmen Ada Rosaly (businesswoman in the music industry), and Héctor Willems (lawyer and accountant).

9 Rafael Montañez Ortiz (1969–1971), Marta Moreno Vega (1971–1974), Hiram Maristany (1974–1976), and Jack Agüeros (1977–1986).

- 10 A Interview with Amílcar Tirado Aviles on June 11, 2003. Professor Tirado Aviles is an historian and librarian at the Lázaro Library of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. He specializes in topics related to Puerto Rican immigration to the United States.
- 11 A collaboration between El Museo del Barrio, with Dr. Ian Canino and interns from Columbia University School of Physicians and Surgeons.
- 12 Organized by Dr. Mari Carmen Ramírez, then-Director of the Museum of Anthropology, History and Art of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras; today she is Curator of Latin American art at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas.
- 13 The exhibition was organized in collaboration with Rafael Colón Morales, El Museo's Curator.
- 14 Under the leadership of artists Marcos Dimas and Fernando Salicrup, El Taller Boricua, founded in 1969, successfully carries on its artistic and community work. Artist Diógenes Ballester coordinated the exhibition.
- 15 The exhibition of works by three contemporary sculptors was organized by Curator Nelson Rivera, Ph.D., professor at the University of Puerto Rico, Humacao Campus, and coordinated by Annie Santiago, then-Director of the Museum of Anthropology, History and Art of the University of Puerto Rico.

EL MUSEO DEL BARRIO'S PERMANENT COLLECTION: REVEALING A TREASURE

Nothing could have prepared me for the *piragua* cart. Not my traditional education as an art historian at the Institute of Fine Arts, nor my experience at the Museum of Modern Art, my first and best classroom in the care of art collections. My mind was still full of dichotomies regarding the comparative value of "fine" arts and folk arts, *beaux arts* and popular arts. And the traditional media I had dealt with by then simply did not include anything as complex as the *piragua* cart, a baby carriage converted into a cart to sell delicious snow cones on hot summer days on the streets of El Barrio. *Piraguas* (Puerto Rican for snow cones) cost five cents when the cart entered El Museo's collection.

My four years as Chief Curator of El Museo del Barrio (1990–1993), under Director Petra Barreras del Río, were a fascinating education in the rich complexity of art collections. They developed my understanding and conviction of the importance of collections to a museum's core functions. A collection is the most tangible form of a museum's cultural preservation

function, as well as of its highest responsibility and public trust. Collection objects are a museum's most powerful educational tools, as well as a museum's most compelling instruments to document and engage the life of its various constituencies.

What is most significant about El Museo's collection is that it embodies the cultural patrimony of the youngest and fastest growing populations—Puerto Rican, Latino, and Latin American—at a given moment of their history within U.S. society. During El Museo's early days, there was much debate about whether to take on the enormous responsibility of a collection. Artists, the group that advocated most strongly on its behalf, won the day. In 1990, when I became Chief Curator, the collection consisted of around 6,000 objects documenting the generosity of its founding artists, trustees, early constituents, and supporters.

At this time, the importance of El Museo's collection's was totally unrecognized. This only heightened

my sense of our awesome responsibility in caring for such an undiscovered treasure. Already, Director Petra Barreras del Río had taken major steps to ensure its care by securing a spectacularly generous, multi-year collections grant from the Ford Foundation, the largest of any kind El Museo had ever received. As she entrusted me with its implementation, I would finally learn the full meaning of the word "curator," from the Latin root *curare*, to care for. In addition to my responsibility for projecting a long-range exhibition program for El Museo, I had the collections work cut out for me for the next four years.

When I think back to those four years, and how much we accomplished, I don't know how we did it. There were around eight of us on the professional staff then, with no computers, working in very close quarters and with hardly any resources beyond the Ford grant. Nevertheless, the grant allowed me to hire El Museo's first full-time registrar, Marcela Clavijo, who was to be my able partner in all the collections work realized during my curatorial tenure.

At first, it was very much like detective work. We were not even sure of the full parameters of the collection. Because of previous moves, chronic understaffing, and underfunding, files and records either never existed, were lost, or were in fragmentary, poor condition. We found some good work previously done as sporadic special projects on aspects of the collection, such as Carlos Sueños's catalogue of a large portion of the print collection. Carlos, an artist, had served as El Museo's first part-time Registrar. Margaret Fay had accomplished a fine, preliminary cataloguing of the Taíno collection. But, mostly, we were on our own.

We started with the basics, looking at every object in the collection and giving it a number. This process is called *accessioning* in museological jargon. This numerical system, employed by museums, provides a running tally of acquisitions, and reveals both the year and the order in which works are accessioned into the collection. Within the next four years we accessioned all works in the collection; hired experts to do

overall conservation assessments of almost all parts of the collection (paintings, prints, photography, Taíno objects, and *santos*); performed stabilizing conservation for some works, which were to be exhibited, such as *santos* and Mexican masks; hired experts to authenticate portions of the Taíno collection; and began to install The Museum System, a computerized collection records program used by many institutions, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In addition, following the conservation experts' advice, the Registrar and interns began to sort and properly house works: prints and photographs, separated by glassine sheets, in acid free folders; paintings, on racks or compartmentalized sections; *santos*, in special museum storage cabinets; and traditional artworks, on spacious metal shelves.

During this time, I drafted El Museo's first Collections Maintenance Policy. I was able to hire a series of fine young assistant curators and interns who began to research works in the collection with the

objective of providing educational content for exhibitions. In this context, I note the excellent contributions of Karen Baji, Miriam Basilio, Arlene Dávila, and Nellie Escalante.

Finally—the icing on the cake—the Ford grant included a designated amount for our first Acquisitions fund. Although Petra Barreras del Río had previously determined all the artists whose work was to be acquired with this fund, she generously allowed me to choose the pieces, a Curator's dream. With the Ford fund, we purchased works from: Cándida Álvarez, Diógenes Ballester, Edgar Franceschi, Ismael Frigerio, Marina Gutiérrez, Alfredo Jaar, Pepón Osorio, Arnaldo Roche-Rabell, Juan Sánchez, and Nitza Tufiño.

As word got out about our work on the collection, other gifts began to come in from artists and private collectors. Notable group gifts from this early period were *santos* from the Walter and Lucille Fillin collection, a series of Taíno vessels from Brian and Florence Mahony, and a fine collection of Mexican masks from Guerrero by James Cobb.

During this time, we proudly held two exhibitions to show off the new gifts and the progress of the collections work: *Another Face: Mexican Masks in El Museo del Barrio's Collection* (November 1990–March 1991), and *Recent Acquisitions to the Permanent Collection* (Winter 1991–August 1992). Most of the works in these two exhibitions had been acquired, accessioned, cared for, and researched under the auspices of the Ford Foundation grant.

A few years later, in my desire to continue making the collection more accessible, I organized an ambitious year-round series of exhibitions to celebrate El Museo's 25th Anniversary. I felt the public would enjoy looking at the collection through the unique perspective of contemporary artists, and so I conceptualized the series as a dialogue, entitled *Artists Talk Back: Visual Conversations with El Museo*. Twenty-five to thirty artists were invited for each exhibition, and asked to choose a work from the collection, and create a dialogue between it and a work of their own, which

were to be exhibited side-by-side. The exhibitions' themes arose from my observation of trends during the previous decade; artists were invited to participate in the segment that best fit their work. The themes were: *I Reclaiming History* (May 6–August 14, 1994); *II Recovering Popular Culture* (September 9–October 30, 1994); *III Reaffirming Spirituality* (April 7–August 13, 1995).

In 1993, I became Director of El Museo, and by 1995, I passed the work of the collection into the capable hands of Curator Fatima Bercht. In 1997, Noel Valentin assumed the position of Registrar. Fatima's fine supervision and Noel's extraordinary work have continued and updated the collections care practices begun under the Ford Foundation grant, extending them to this day.

Happily, another multi-year collections grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Collections Accessibility Initiative in 1996 permitted us to continue work on El Museo's collections, with similarly ambitious parameters

as the Ford Foundation grant had allowed. The collections work achieved between then and now has completed the work begun during 1990–1994: continuing conservation for works to go on exhibition; updating and input of The Museums System database for the entire collection, including scanning of images; and the continuing cataloguing and research of the collection for scholarly publications.

In fact, the Lila Wallace Fund's twin goals of collections accessibility and audience diversification allowed us to go even further. In 1996, at the Fund's invitation, Fatima Bercht, Maria Domínguez, Anita Leach, Lili Santiago Silva, and I—along with the participation of the entire staff—conceptualized a five-year plan for a series of exhibitions, which would highlight different portions of the collection, designed to engage ever-larger portions of our Puerto Rican, Latino, and Latin American constituencies. Ambitious public programs and community and school outreach activities would contextualize and disseminate

each exhibition, highlighting the excellence and breadth of El Museo's collection holdings.

Between 1996 and 2001, these splendid exhibitions were organized and implemented under the supervision of Fatima Bercht, who became Chief Curator in 2000. The exhibitions focused on the strengths of El Museo's collections: santos and traditional arts; Taíno objects; graphics; and modern and contemporary works. These exhibitions were: *The Caribbean and Latin American Traditional Arts Series* (November 1996–January 14, 2001) including *Santos: Sculptures Between Heaven and Earth*; *Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean* (September 27, 1997–May 3, 1998); *Pressing the Point: Parallel Expressions in the Graphic Arts of the Chicano and Puerto Rican Movements* (September 24, 1999–January 9, 2000); and *Voices from Our Communities: Perspectives on a Decade of Collecting at El Museo del Barrio* (June 12–September 16, 2001). The final exhibition was the basis of this overall collection highlights

catalogue, completed to honor El Museo's 35th Anniversary with the help of additional and generous funders.¹

Of course, in addition to those mentioned above, I remain most thankful to several early donors, supporters and colleagues who have always had the best interests of El Museo's collection in mind, and have supported our collections work throughout. I also thank the Programs and Acquisitions Committee of the Board for their encouragement of our collections goals, and especially those who have personally contributed fine gifts to our collection. Complementary to El Museo's excellent program of contemporary art exhibitions, the major collections exhibitions over the years not only attracted new publics and disseminated information about our little-known collections, but they also functioned to bring in further gifts, as well as acquisitions funds to the museum.

I hope some day the collection can expand into new media, and grow its Latin American dimension

exponentially, as I had hoped to do. I wish El Museo huge collections grants and even bigger storage spaces, the continued generosity of artists and friends, and a sense of discovery and fun while developing and exhibiting the important Permanent Collection of El Museo del Barrio.

Susana Torruella Leval
Chief Curator, 1990–1993
Executive Director, 1993–2002
Director Emeritus, 2002–present

¹ The production of a series of Permanent Collection catalogues was a constant dream of mine since I came to El Museo in 1990. I am most thankful to Deborah Cullen, whose intelligence and invincible determination have made this publication possible. I offer my recollections in honor of, and gratitude for, her sense of history, her great love of books, and her equally great love for El Museo.