

The Invention of Fine Art: Creating a Cultural Elite in a Marginal Community

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In Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, a small group of artists have established and maintain an aesthetic hierarchy, which distinguishes art from craft, artists from artisans, men from women, elite from philistine. Canvas art is part of a cycle of aesthetic invention, where Limonenses appropriate external resources to fit certain paradigms of legitimacy and permanence. This article explores the arbitrary nature of “fine art” as a category of aesthetic practice, and how the creation of a cultural elite legitimates the production and consumption of art objects.

INTRODUCTION

Art is never *intrinsically* so. As a meaningful category of experience, art is part of a socially constructed way of knowing the world and the objects it contains. Thus, the typical art historical contrast between fine art in Western state societies and tourist art in non-Western small-scale societies, or similar contrasts drawn between different rungs of social hierarchy in the same society, are the straw men of aesthetic philosophy. Pierre Bourdieu [1984] certainly makes much of the latter in *Distinction* and, even earlier, Thorstein Veblen [1994(1899)] described social distinction within capitalist state society as at least partially a product of aesthetic taste and the construction of an elite, leisure-class art-world.

More recently, cultural anthropologists have attempted to apply some of these insights to the problematic but enduring interest in the anthropology of art. In an admirable move away from the traditional preoccupation with meanings and definitions, the ethnographies in recent anthologies have turned their attention to the global political and economic implications of certain locally constructed art-worlds, and show how art often mediates class and ethnic conflict in various intersecting contexts. According to Marcus and Myers, their project is “not concerned to castigate the art-world processes as ethnocentric, but rather to understand them as one would a domain of value production in any society” [Marcus and Myers 1995: 10]. MacClancy’s anthology, focusing more specifically on art as a source of conflict, joins Marcus and Myers in their move away from a narrow view of art production as a closed semiotic system to a broader view of inter-ethnic and

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global markets, and in the spirit of reflexive critique, to “the discourses sustaining the Western art market” [MacClancy 1997: 5]. Phillips and Steiner [1999] round out the more recent comprehensive studies by revisiting a much earlier and groundbreaking study by Nelson Graburn [1976]. Their goal, as the title *Unpacking Culture* suggests, is to “‘unpack’ some of the mystifications of meaning and value that surround commoditized art forms in the contexts of the gallery and the marketplace, the museum and exposition, the private collection and the domestic interior” [Phillips and Steiner 1999: xiv].

These collections, along with earlier examples of a similar approach [Price 1989, and of course, Graburn 1976], overcome some of the misconceptions of local artworlds as isolated and closed systems, but continue to focus their analyses on groups with a long tradition of art production in an attempt to account for their evolving approach to an ever-widening art market. As such, the anthropology of art remains rooted in a reflexive attitude toward the invention of “primitivism” in Western art and social science discourse, problematizing the term’s origins and reconfiguring its current role in global art markets [Errington 1998; D’Azevedo 1991].

But what form do these same issues take in transnational, marginal communities, where art products have no traditional context? How do we apply these perspectives, for example, in a community where Twentieth Century migration established the first permanent settlements of a sustainable scale, and where the migrants themselves lost enough in the transition to make any traditional practices fragile and prone to transformation? Add the cultural hegemony of North America or Europe as well as access to the *matériel* of Western aesthetic practice (canvas, paint, etc.), and some of the larger issues that preoccupy the aforementioned ethnographies no longer apply. I am thinking specifically of questions of authenticity in the transition from “traditional objects” to “tourist art,” or art historical analyses of aesthetic practice throughout colonial periods.

This is particularly important in artworlds like that of Caribbean migrations to Latin America in the Nineteenth Century. In a migration some refer to as a “second Diaspora” [Purcell 1993, Dathorne 1981], a faint echo of the collision of culture and language in the original middle passage effectively destabilized any claims to traditional expressive forms. If any aesthetic practice emerged, it would have to do so without the benefit of tradition or allusions to an authentic-practice-cum-art-form so common in other contexts. Here artists, removed from any claim to tradition, must negotiate an art market with little or no frame of reference for their products.

In many portions of this Diaspora the circumstances of migration were such that certain aesthetic practices survived in the slow process of acculturation. Among the Black Carib from Nicaragua to Belize, cultural hybridity is marked by West African religious performance, music, and cuisine [cf. Gordon 1998, Jenkins 1998, Kerns 1983, Helms 1977]. And, of course, there are the well-known studies by Sally and Richard Price on “traditional” arts in the Black Diaspora of northern parts of South America [cf. Price 1993; Price and Price 1999, 1980]. But more recent migrations, particularly post-slavery migrations out of the insular Caribbean and into the mainland, are marked by a more destabilizing clash of culture.

Puerto Limón, on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, reflects this demographic phenomenon. Unlike other areas of post-slavery Caribbean migration, the Atlantic zone in Costa Rica was not even inhabited by a sizeable indigenous population. Scarcely populated for thousands of years, a port was carved out of the malarial marsh, not by entrepreneurial Spanish colonists nor Costa Rican nationals, but by a North American company toward the end of the Nineteenth Century. Built by the company and populated almost overnight by thousands of Jamaican wage laborers, Puerto Limón was from the beginning a kind of occupied territory within Costa Rica. Her people looked different, spoke differently, even worshipped the same God differently than did the rest of the nation.

By the time the company, known then as the United Fruit Company, pulled out of the Atlantic zone some 50 years later, the largely Afro-Caribbean population was well ensconced in their enclave. They had their own schools, their own Protestant denominations, played baseball, and even enjoyed management positions at the port and on the plantations where more and more migrant labor from the highlands of Costa Rica had come for work.

But the vacuum created by the absence of North American control was quickly filled by the Costa Rican government. A civil war, the last in Costa Rica's history, in 1948 mandated sweeping social democratic reforms that nationalized all economic and government activity throughout the country, including Limón. The English schools closed, the management positions went to Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans, and even the local Protestant churches hemorrhaged parishioners to the Catholic cathedral.

The result of this short, eventful history was a geographically isolated community birthed by North American patronage but orphaned in its adolescence to a largely Catholic, Latin American nation that cared little, at least at first, for preserving its demographic and cultural uniqueness. The Afro-Costa Ricans who remained, now constituting slightly less than half the port city's population, maintained a psycho-cultural connection to their birthright as citizens of the First World, but had to confront their reality as a nationally marginalized community in a globally marginalized nation. As one Limonese artist explains: "Limón is imagined by the rest of the country to be thrown aside for a long time. At first because there were a lot of Blacks and racism was very strong, and now because of the reputation that has created."¹ Limón could be described as a postcolonial society with no colonial history. Its ties to British or Spanish colonization are tangential at best, and while the managerial presence of a few North Americans certainly left its mark, it was in a fashion quite unlike colonization in other areas of Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia.

Not surprisingly, creativity and aesthetic expression suffered the same ambiguity. The aesthetic material culture of Limón is as much the product of Western aesthetic philosophy as it is the product of dock workers in a Central American port city. Limonese literature, music, architecture, and even cuisine are marked by invention through appropriation and rapid legitimization. Literature in its current form is characterized by male prose novelists and female lyric poets, appropriating both traditional storytelling and Western literary aesthetics to achieve distinct, gendered goals [Sharman 2000]. Limonese *comparsas*, street bands having 100 members or more, grew out of an annual Carnaval, itself

appropriated from other Caribbean contexts in the 1940s by one local barber and activist [Sharman 1998]. Like the city itself, the aesthetic forms of Puerto Limón are often invented, seemingly overnight, by appropriating external resources to fit certain paradigms of legitimacy and permanence.

This is quite unlike the milieu to which much recent postcolonial scholarship on art attends, where North America and Europe are collectively accused of appropriating and commodifying non-Western forms [Root 1998]. In Limón, it seems the flow is reversed, with Limonenses appropriating the already commodified aesthetic forms of North America and Europe. Also unlike other studies of art outside North America and Europe [Niessen 1999, Dussart 1997, Hart 1995, Shelton 1992], Limonenses are not applying these new forms to older aesthetic practices. A diffused and somewhat ambiguous theme of Blackness permeates much of their work, but as an ideology of difference *vis-à-vis* the rest of Costa Rica rather than any direct link to African or Caribbean expressive forms. The peculiar history of migration and sublimated ethnic conflict in Limón produced a region with no collective traditions. Limonense aesthetic practices were and are born in a cycle of inventive appropriation, where new forms are legitimated quickly but are perennially vulnerable to deterioration or transformation.

This essay describes Limón's aesthetic cycle of inventive appropriation through one of the more curious, and recent, of these aesthetic inventions: canvas art. Rather than focus on its thematic content, which is worthy of a separate essay, in the following pages I will focus on a few pragmatic implications of canvas art as an aesthetic practice: how it fits the model of inventive appropriation described above; how canvas artists self-consciously assert their dominance of a local aesthetic hierarchy; and how that hierarchy is legitimated by a cultural elite that reproduces the same politics of marginalization that excludes Limón from the rest of Costa Rica, and Costa Rica from the rest of the so-called First World.

THE INVENTION OF CANVAS ART

Not unlike many sites around the Caribbean Sea, the plastic arts in Limón are assumed to have appeared only after some influence from across the sea, from the United States or perhaps Europe. Though ample evidence shows indigenous groups and slave populations carried on elaborate creative traditions throughout the Caribbean and its littoral, it wasn't until acrylic was applied to canvas that "art" was identified with the region by critics, museums, and collectors in the established art centers of the world. From Dominica to Jamaica, the colonial period was marked by the wanderings of European and American artists like Paul Gauguin, Winslow Homer, and Camille Pissarro, while local "Creole" painters copied the European masters for wealthy patrons [Poupeye 1998]. In Haiti, it was not until 1944 that the American DeWitt Peters and his Centre d'Art rectified what Melville Herskovits described as the loss of art after independence: "... not to be replaced by corresponding borrowings from European sources" [Herskovits 1937: 261; see also Christensen 1975 and Rodman 1974, 1988].

In Limón, one might assume that the appearance of canvas art was related in some way to the United Fruit Company, the multinational corporation that in many respects invented the city and the region that is so starkly different from the rest of

Costa Rica. But it would take almost a century for canvas art to appear in Limón after the arrival of the UFC, and it was not at the urging of an outsider like DeWitt Peters. Indeed, it was 20 years after Haiti's Renaissance that Ricardo Rodríguez-Córdoba, popularly known as Negrín, essentially invented canvas art in Limón.

Negrín was born in Limón in the tumultuous years of the 1930s. His parents had only recently migrated and must have found themselves in the midst of one of the largest labor disputes in Costa Rican history. The emergent Costa Rican Communist Party had organized a massive general strike that anticipated the watershed event of the civil war a decade later. Negrín's youth was colored by economic and political uncertainty, even after citizenship was extended to Caribbean migrants in 1948, and the UFC slowly resumed export operations at the port.

By his early twenties, Negrín was working at the port loading and unloading cargo, a coveted position when compared to working the banana fields. After work, he would practice drawing, something he taught himself as a child. By his thirties, Negrín was working in the customs office and using his considerably increased leisure time to experiment in acrylic and canvas. Entirely self-taught, Negrín was invited to exhibit his work in a small showcase of Costa Rican artists. By the 1970s, this curious talent from the backwater province of Limón was able to quit his job and paint full-time. Working on commissions for patrons in San José and eventually overseas, Negrín quickly established himself as the master of Limonense canvas art.

Today, Negrín lives in the center of the port city, one block north of the busy central market, in a crumbling pink house he shares with his wife, Ophelia [Figure 1]. Close to 70 years old, Negrín has developed a loyal following of local artists all eager to model his success, despite the fact that interest in his work beyond the port city has largely disappeared. The waning of his celebrity is due in part to the repetition of his compositions; the consistent return to a nostalgic image of Afro-Caribbean life on the coast that all of his protégés dutifully copy. Many local collectors complain that he has lost the creative spark, though many of them also appreciate the attempt to "rescue culture," as Negrín describes it, by capturing an image of Limón's fading past.

That past is invariably characterized by rural scenes of Afro-Caribbean life in Limón before the days of the United Fruit Company. In fact, there is a bounded set of images that Negrín employs in his canvases: beach scenes, with fishermen and perhaps an eviscerated sea turtle; gossip scenes, with elderly Black women engaged in local banter; interior stilt house scenes, with an elderly woman grating coconut; and exterior stilt house scenes, with elderly men regaling the young [Figure 2]. Negrín chooses the orientation of the canvas according to the image, horizontal for beach scenes, vertical for stilt house scenes. The colors are vibrant, and attention to detail in the human figure is often subordinate to the overall nostalgia of the image. These parameters are rigidly maintained, such that Negrín often paints the same compositions repeatedly. And, as we will see, the work of other local artists must also conform to these characteristics.

The limited success that Negrín enjoyed early in his career inspired a few other locals to emulate his work. Soon there were a handful of disciples all painting the same themes in the same style. Unlike Negrín, some of these early students, like Mario Castro and Juan Kelly, went on to the capital city of San José where they



Figure 1 *Negrín at work in Puerto Limón.*



Figure 2 *Beach scene by Negrín.*

attended universities and developed their talent. Perhaps surprisingly, both Castro and Kelly remain exceptions.

While no nation in Latin America matches the economy of fine art found in the United States, the distinction is even more marked in marginalized communities like Limón. Long considered a forgotten province, Limón developed as an enclave society of borrowed traditions and *ad hoc* social institutions. Connected to the highland economy by a single, narrow highway (the local railroad having been destroyed by an earthquake in 1991), Limón continues to rely on its own resourcefulness and to reject highland sensibilities from which they are already excluded in any case. That includes the highland art market, which is relatively vibrant for Central America. Despite the opportunities that await talented artists in the capital city, most Limonese artists continue to paint in Limón.

Much of this regional loyalty is due to the charismatic figure of Negrín. Inasmuch as the lure of success outside Limón tempts local artists to leave, Negrín is the ever-present reminder that success can also be achieved locally. Leading by example, Negrín remains a part of the community, painting full-time and continuing to garner attention for his work. Due in large part to his influence, local artists continue to stake their livelihood on his style and the development of a fine art market for Limonese canvases.

In a proactive step toward that development, a group of canvas artists in Limón formed an association based on Negrín's growing reputation. Even the name of the association indicates his authority, "*Asociación Pintores Limonenses: PATrimonio CUltural NEgrín*" [The Association of Limonese Painters: The Cultural Heritage of Negrín]. The association, known as PACUNE, which officially formed in 1999, maintains close to a dozen members, with a dozen more in training to meet Negrín's standards. But, as we will discover below, many artists in Limón will never be allowed to join PACUNE, and not necessarily because their work falls short.

When asked directly, Negrín denies any control over other painters: "It's more like I am a friend. When one person has success at something, others will want to do the same thing. It's not my fault that others paint like me. I have no control over what others paint."

Despite this disavowal of creative control and his overt exclusion of some painters, the enthusiasm of other artists in Limón seems to indicate an implicit submission to his authority. William Duran comments:

Negrín is the authority. I think he is the best. I think he is one of the best painters in Costa Rica, maybe in all of Central America. I have known him for more than twenty years, and he was the source of inspiration to begin painting. He was the source of inspiration for all of us. Negrín has his style, and his is an authentic style that we follow. We are in the middle of his area, he is not in ours. We are in his style. It's like a tree with its branches. Its trunk remains, but the branches must grow. He is an eccentric, a strong character.

Negrín's "strong character" ensures that individuality is discouraged among the members of PACUNE. The aesthetic ideal, which is linked as much to the demands of the market and the gatekeeping role of Negrín as it is to any creative impulse, subsumes the individual artist under one homogeneous style. With Negrín as the master, other artists submit to an apprenticeship not only to

learn the technique of canvas art, but also to earn the credential of being a Negrín pupil.

This model of artistic production no doubt seems familiar, and not unlike the guild system of any commercialized art industry. While the imagery employed by Negrín and by PACUNE demonstrates an inventive appropriation of history, inscribing scenes of Limonense life as it may never have been, the system of production itself is an appropriation of similar systems organized around the homogenization and control of specific commodities. It is a system not unlike the commercialization of art in Haiti in the 1940s, when DeWitt Peters established his Centre d'Art and cultivated the talents of singular, charismatic figures like Hector Hyppolite and Philomé Obin [Rodman 1988]. By the time Negrín began painting professionally, Hyppolite (who died not long after being "discovered") and Obin had generated a vast coterie of faithful imitators who saturated the Haitian art market with a highly stylized and instantly recognizable product. The comparison diverges at key points—Haiti was a self-governing state with a long history of interaction with the United States, while Limón was a little-known region in a largely isolationist Central American nation—both however, demonstrate the power of this inventive appropriation of style and production to establish a controlled and predictable commodity. The challenge for Limonense artists, specifically those associated with PACUNE, is to shore up the boundaries of their creation with an aesthetic philosophy that obscures the Fordism of production by employing the same binary opposition of art and craft found elsewhere.

ART AND CRAFT

Canvas art should be viewed in the context of a long history of creative production in Limón. Literature, cuisine, and music have long established an aesthetic distinction between Limón and the rest of Costa Rica. And despite the aesthetic revolution of canvas art in Limón, Limonenses have long engaged in various plastic art forms. Today, with cruise ships arriving with increasing frequency, souvenir stands and local shops cluster around the entrance to the port selling the coconut carvings, textiles and bead work that local artisans have been producing for generations. Importantly, none of them carry the canvases of PACUNE artists.

The formation of PACUNE not only enabled a strict control over production, it also helped to establish an aesthetic hierarchy in the local art market, confirming canvas art as an important and elite Limonense aesthetic form. The medium's association with European and North American fine art adds to its value as a legitimate art form and helps to distinguish it from the more mundane world of tourist art that has always occupied a small but growing portion of the population. But with that legitimacy comes the burden of maintaining a certain aesthetic ideal associated with so-called fine art. This inevitably involves constant vigilance over the boundary between the canvases of artists and the souvenirs of artisans.

Negrín has worked diligently to maintain that boundary, controlling access to PACUNE as the only legitimate institution of fine art and refusing to market their products in association with other plastic art forms. Like the Institute of Jamaica, which Edna Manley strongly influenced in the 1940s, and the Centre d'Art in Haiti, PACUNE has successfully institutionalized fine art in Limón. According to Negrín,

those not in PACUNE produce “small things” that do not match the professionalism of his works and that of his students. This strategy obscures the similarities in production between the canvases of PACUNE artists and the souvenirs of local artisans, and creates a rather arbitrary distinction between art and craft in Limón.

The result is an almost hegemonic influence over Limonese aesthetics being wielded by Negrín and evident in the comments of artists and artisans alike. One local artisan, Glen, attempts to explain the difference between art and craft this way: “Negrín’s is art. There is a difference between craft and art. For me art is that technique. Some people they love whatsoever they do. For me that is the difference from craft. In art they really put their heart and so much love in whatever you see. It looks real.” When I suggested that he and other artisans also claim to put their heart into their work, and that many of their objects also “look real,” he responded simply, “Well Negrín’s is art. I mean, it’s art.”

Another response was from John Douglas Brown, a canvas artist whose abstract style keeps him out of PACUNE, though he remains respectful of their status: “Craft participates with art because they use the same elements. But craft is for ornament, things that you would have close to you, things that you would use in an everyday fashion, something that is decorative. And art has something that it can be decorative, but it has something else. That ‘something else’ is what gives it the quality of a work of art.”

In the end, that “something else” seems to always come back to Negrín and his technique. As a result, these distinctions between art and craft are largely a product of Negrín’s influence and the influence of his success in a port city with few avenues of economic self-improvement. Vera Beatriz, an artist who remains outside PACUNE, claims, “the artists in his group are afraid of him, of being shunned, so they just follow him. Negrín has the power to decide who is and is not an artist in Limón.”

Negrín’s authorial influence, in the process of delineating art from craft, has left a cultural vacuum filled by artisans eager to meet the demands of a tourist market neglected by the fine art of painters. After years of toiling as isolated artisans, selling their wares at the port, many of the artisans organized to form their own association, the *Asociación Limonense de Artesanos* [The Limonese Artisan Association, or ALA]. Presided over by Rosa Jácamo Hernández, the ALA formed several years before PACUNE as a cooperative of mostly women artisans. As Hernández describes it:

When I had my daughter, I could not work outside the house . . . So I started making little boxes out of coconut at home. And I would go to *pulperías* [neighborhood convenience stores] and leave them in quantity to sell. Sometimes I would work until three or four in the morning. It was a lot of hard work. Later, I started to paint, and then I invited other artisans to make things in my house.

Like Hernández, those other artisans were mostly single mothers with few employment options. From its inception, their association was intended to define an economic market for locally produced crafts, with little concern for protecting aesthetic ideals. The formula proved moderately successful, and eventually the ALA opened their own two-story souvenir store in the city center [Figure 3]. The ALA currently maintains about 23 members, 18 of whom are women.



Figure 3 Rosa Hernández at the ALA souvenir shop.



Figure 4 Olga at the ALA souvenir shop.

The ALA's focus on marketability rather than aesthetic legitimacy means that Negrín's elite claim to fine art is seldom challenged ideologically. In fact, many of the artisans maintain a modicum of deference for Negrín's status as an artist in Limón. Here is one example of a typical conversation with an artisan; in this case, Olga [Figure 4]:

"Are you an artist?"

Olga: "Yes."

"Do you feel there is a difference between your work and the paintings of someone like Negrín?"

Olga: "Oh, yes, he is very famous."

"But do you think his work is that different from yours?"

Olga: "Yes, because he is a much better painter than me."

"Do you think one day you would want to create paintings?"

Olga: "Yes, I create paintings on T-Shirts."

"Yes, but would you want to paint on canvas?"

Olga: "Maybe one day yes, with God's help, I could do something like that."

The image of canvas art as a "higher" aesthetic form is clearly in place, but not everyone is comfortable with that hierarchy. Rosa Hernández explains:

Between a painter and an artisan, there is not much difference. Because plenty of artisans, like painters, must go through a lot of difficult situations. A painter prepares their canvases, and sacrifices to display 20 or 30 works that took a lot of time just to see if they sell or don't sell. We are in the same situation. Because at least right now I don't know any painters in Limón that are millionaires.

This same attitude is reflected in the words of Vera Beatriz, a canvas artist who has not joined Hernández's association nor been admitted to PACUNE: "Negrín has lost his talent, he just paints the same paintings over and over now. I don't know what that is, but it is not art . . . Negrín is not concerned with the artistic process, with developing his creativity. He is happy with the success he has enjoyed and does not want to change."

Some of this resistance to the legitimacy that Negrín and his associates enjoy is certainly related to the perceived similarities between the work of artisans and the work of the canvas artists. By their own admission, the stylistic conformity indicative of the Limón style in canvas art at times makes it difficult to distinguish one artist from another. As William Duran, an artist in PACUNE, explains: "We all have the same style. Limón is very different from the rest of the country; maybe we are influenced by this, and we try to make our paintings different from the rest of the country, though we are all of almost the same style. Nobody knows who the painter is unless you look at the signature."

Not only is the style identical, many of the artists paint the same images repeatedly. One artist, Ricardo Rose, demonstrated the process of preparing canvases, which he builds himself from scrap lumber and store-bought canvas. He draws a pencil grid which corresponds to the grids marked on photographs depicting the local beaches, some of the remaining Caribbean stilt-houses, and even actual canvases of past work or other artists. When this is done, the application of paint to canvas is a matter of faithfully rendering the scene from the photograph and inserting a few small images of Afro-Caribbean laborers loading bananas or mending nets.

The result is not only a consistency in style, but a consistency in images. When he showed me some photographs of his paintings, I noticed the painting he was working on at the time was very similar to another he showed me in a photograph. Rose explained someone had seen the painting and wanted one, so he was repainting it. We looked through his small file of photographs as he discussed his approach to the vocation, and it became apparent that he repaints the same scenes based on their popularity with local collectors.

The redundancy of images and the stylistic conformity are the same qualities that mark painted T-shirts and coconut carvings as the work of artisans. In light of these similarities, the status of canvas paintings as *the* art form in Limón seems all the more arbitrary. Given the proper historical antecedents and charismatic figures, one could imagine that coconut carvings could have achieved the same artistic ascendancy.

Yet one cannot ignore the cultural hegemony of Europe and North America in establishing the parameters of aesthetic distinction, even in a region with no colonial past. In the words of John Douglas Brown:

The work of art stands apart because of the setting in which it was done. You have people [who] put a [scene] on a dish or a vase, and that would be craft. But once you put it aside on a canvas for a special purpose and it inspires people, and they can see that and through it recall the experience of the moment, the work of art speak to you in its own language to the psyche in an unconscious way and it strikes so many emotions that arise in you, and that's what differentiates it from craft. Because an ordinary cup that is decorated, it could have been a work of art, but one is not concentrated. [Sharman 2001: 13].

Brown, who studied art at the University of Florida, is obviously familiar with the established critical perspective on Western interpretations of art. One can hear echoes of Kant and his emphasis on disinterested appreciation and a stress on the materiality of canvas as a medium of few distractions. It is worth pointing out again that Brown is not part of PACUNE precisely because he is too free with his themes and style [Figure 5]. Those artists who remain allied to Negrín, most of whom were not trained outside Limón, seem to have a less theoretically developed sense of what makes their work different from coconut carvings, and resort to an emphasis on the materials used. Their work is art because it is in the perceived classical fine art form, canvas and oil-based paint. These materials are indexes of “fine art” derived from Europe and North America, regardless, at least to some extent, of what one actually does with them. As Deborah Root observes: “A certain luster surrounds the art object and those who create, market and collect high art, and this luster draws attention away from the extent to which art must conform to market forces” [Root 1998: 139].

Consequently, canvas painting remains the aesthetic form *par excellence* in Limón despite its technical similarities to other forms more commonly referred to as the craftwork of artisans. This fact is evident even in the words of Rosa Hernández, who confided her dream to one-day paint on canvas. She may harbor misgivings about the second-class status of artisans in Limón, but she also understands the aesthetic legitimacy of canvas art in the art world of Limón:



Figure 5 Paintings by John Douglas Brown.

"I have lots of pieces of canvas that I am working on, with drawings sketched out, and I work on them when I have time . . . I feel that if I went to Negrín right now I could not be in their group. I am not at their level yet. Who knows how many are more or less at his level, because Negrín is a very special painter?"

CREATING A CULTURAL ELITE

The invention of fine art over which Negrín has presided for the past few decades has precipitated the creation of a cultural elite that strictly controls the ideological boundaries of legitimacy in the local art market. As one artist contends, "The people who appreciate art in Costa Rica are elite . . . [they] are the ones who buy mostly, so that's the truth." In fact, among some artists, tourists are viewed with disdain as potential buyers: "When the tourists come to Limón from the ships, they get on buses for San José. They don't go into the city and see our art or buy our art. I don't paint for tourists. If someone wants to buy a painting, that's okay, but I don't paint for tourists." Indeed, most of the canvases remain in Costa Rica, and many of them never leave the port city. Those that remain in Limón are purchased by a few of the wealthier professionals who collude in the creation of a cultural elite with canvas art at its center.

Fran Midas, a White Limonense, runs one of the largest appliance stores in Puerto Limón. During a conversation in his store, Midas commented, "Limón will always be based on the Black culture." This seemed only to feed Midas' enthusiasm for the province and the city where his family arrived generations ago from Belize. His store was started by his father years earlier, and he converted it into a gallery space, with the canvases of local artists hanging over dishwashers and imported refrigerators. Though none of the paintings are for sale, his store constitutes the largest collection of Limón art on display to the public. In discussing the works he has, Midas makes subtle distinctions between the artists, but overall appraises the collective work as a mark of cultural advancement, and, in the process, advances the establishment of a local cultural elite.

Elena Pardo, another local collector, shares much of Midas's enthusiasm for Limón. Like Midas, Pardo was born in Limón, though she claims her ancestors preceded the Black migrant laborers of the UFC. Her collection is private, filling the walls of an expansive home overlooking downtown Puerto Limón, and her discussion of the work is intimately connected to her interpretation of local history: "The Black people say that they built Limón, but not really. The Blacks were kept to the margins for a long time, primarily because of a great segregation like in the southern United States. Even the people of the [highlands] absorbed this segregation." Her admiration for individuals like Minor Keith, who founded the UFC, is plain, as is her exasperation with what she considers the arrogance of local Black Limonenses, but her recognition that Limón is indelibly a "Black region" in an otherwise "White nation" is equally apparent. In words almost identical to those invoked by PACUNE artists, Pardo explains, "So what I have been trying to do is to rescue the values of Limón." For artists, that process involves applying paint to canvas in a distinct and strictly controlled style. For collectors like Pardo, it involves reifying those values in a closed market of artist and patron.

Another collector, Erik Castro, runs a pharmaceutical laboratory across the street from Negrín in Limón's city center. The walls of his office are covered with the canvases of local artists, all members of PACUNE. Typical of non-Black Limonenses, Castro moved to Limón after the civil war of 1948 and quickly adopted the region as his home. Also typical, he remains disdainful of the influence of Black culture on the city: "The people here don't know what they have . . . These lazy Blacks neglect [their culinary traditions]. It's the same with their music, there was some that was good, very different from the rest of the country. When I came here I really liked the art, but everything is changing." The changes refer to some local artists who have moved to the capital city or to the United States where their style inevitably drifts away from that of Negrín and his association. This is certainly true of John Douglas Brown, who studied in Florida before returning to Limón, and whose painting I discovered in a closet in Castro's office. Brown's paintings, though thematically similar to other Limonense artists, are quite different stylistically. I asked why Brown's painting was not hanging on the wall with the others, and Castro responded: "That's not art. My kindergartner could paint better." The distinction helps to strengthen the position of PACUNE as the gatekeepers of aesthetic legitimacy.

Midas, Pardo, and Castro, for perhaps different reasons, have assimilated the local talent for inventive appropriation as they carve out a cultural space for themselves in Limón. As non-Black residents, they have had to examine their particular connection to a city and a region long considered a backwater by most highland Costa Ricans. The response is often to embrace, however disdainfully as with Castro, the very images of "Black culture" that repel so many in the highlands. As local artists have appropriated the external material of Western aesthetic elitism, collectors have appropriated the internal legitimacy of Black Limonense aesthetics.

This phenomenon is certainly nothing new, since it is clearly visible in the appropriation of Limón Carnaval by highland Costa Ricans [Sharman 1998], and discussed at length in other similar contexts [Guss 1998, Wade 1993]. It was central to the development of the Haitian Renaissance, as DeWitt Peters, a White North American, established the Centre d'Art for the expressed purpose of lending legitimacy to local Haitian artists, and perhaps by association, to himself. One crucial difference, however, is that Negrín organized and still controls PACUNE, the association that allows collectors like Midas, Pardo, and Castro to participate in the formation of a local cultural elite. As a result, these collectors must work alongside the artists to constantly shore up their respective positions.

This is perhaps best illustrated by Fran Midas, who went so far as to commission a portrait of his father from the local artist German Mora. What makes the portrait distinct is that it conforms precisely to the general Limonense style, in this case a beach scene, except for the rather jarring insertion of Midas's White father [Figure 6]. As Midas contends, "When we grew up we adopted that culture. We ate the rice and beans, we were a part of that." Placing the image of his father in the context of what is quintessentially Black art in Costa Rica serves as a permanent reminder of that adoption. For Midas, and others, becoming Limonense was parallel to eating their food and collecting their art, allowing aesthetic practice to mold collective and self-identification.



Figure 6 Portrait commissioned by Fran Midas and painted by German Mora.

Negrín himself, perhaps more cognizant than the collectors of the need for a distinct cultural elite to legitimize PACUNE and their work (not to mention promote a sustainable market), has continued to push an agenda of cultural institutions in Limón. PACUNE, which took several years and much effort to create on the part of Negrín, was only part of that agenda. Negrín is currently working to establish landmark status for his own home in the city center, based primarily on his reputation as an artist, and eventually to turn the landmark into a museum for local canvas artists. Unlike the members of the ALA, who worked toward and achieved a commercial space for their products, Negrín is clear about his desire for a museum and not a commercial gallery. The location of the museum in the space most closely associated with canvas art in Limón, Negrín's own home, would certainly solidify the form's domination of the local art-world.

The planned museum is meant to coordinate with another cultural institution in Limón already operational, the Escuela de Arte [School of Art] recently opened by PACUNE and operated by Negrín's student and partner, Honorio Cabraca. The school teaches basic drawing skills and some painting to children for a few hours on Saturdays. The volume of students certainly does not indicate a new

commitment to arts education so much as it promotes the existence and authority of the association of canvas artists in Limón.

Interestingly, there is already an art school in place in Limón. Established by Marta Gamboa, the *Centro de Arte y Cultura Limonenses* [Limonense Art and Culture Center] offers classes on the premises as well as throughout the public school system in Limón. Like Rosa Hernández, Gamboa has mixed feelings about PACUNE, even as she acknowledges their talent and authority in the art community. For Gamboa, the goal is to promote the arts in education, not to establish a competing association of artists or institution of fine art. To the extent that PACUNE's school compliments her commitment to education, Gamboa applauds their work: "Their association is very strong, and very good for Limón." When asked about their exclusivity, Gamboa defends their position: "It's just that they have to be able to produce the same quality, to Negrín at least. When they have an exhibition, they want paintings that will look similar, very figurative, like theirs."

One aspect of PACUNE's exclusivity does, however, give Gamboa pause. Of the dozen or so members of Negrín's association, none are women. Still, she explains this glaring omission from the new cultural elite of Limón in structural terms without casting blame on Negrín or PACUNE: "There are women who are very good writers and artists, but after all of their work at home, they have no time to write or paint. They put all of their energy into raising the children and taking care of the house . . . We just don't have enough time." Rosa Hernández offers a similar theory:

Women, as always, from the time they are children are taught that if there is a hole, they have to fix it. So most women have a sewing machine in their house. So what are we going to do? When I started, I had a machine in my house, so I took my machine and I bought fabric and made curtains and bedspreads and tablecloths, whatever I needed. And I think the biggest difference is that men have more time than women. We take care of the children, take care of the house, take care of the accounts, the debts because the husband only comes and puts down a little bit of money and the wife has to figure out how to pay for everything. So women have less time to do things like paint. Because of course they can paint well, but you have to have free time for that.

Another female artist, Vera Beatriz, more clearly articulates her exclusion from PACUNE as an insidious result of patriarchy and an endemic *machismo* that confines women to certain social roles. Gamboa, though reluctant to cast blame specifically, seems to agree: "There is a mentality that you must take care of the children and that is your job. You have all of these responsibilities, more even than the men. You know there is a little *machismo* too, well, maybe a lot of *machismo*." Their claims are not easily discredited, especially in light of interviews with other male canvas artists in Limón. When asked why more women were not painters, one male artist responded, "I have no idea. Maybe it's genetic."

Another male artist, John Douglas Brown, has a more subtle explanation for the dearth of female artists:

In San José you have some women who paint, but they are from the upper-middle class, and they don't have to worry about the basic things of life. Here the average people are mostly working people. There are very few people who have the economic status to not worry about those things. So they look for immediate things that they can sell and have a recompense in their pocket. Art is more slow.

Of course this implies that the male artists do not “worry about the basic things of life.” While this is plainly not the case, it is also not the case that the craftwork of the Limón artisans is always “immediate.” According to Rosa Hernández, carving coconut husks or weaving tablecloths can take just as much intensive effort as painting a canvas in the style of Negrín’s association.

It seems the distinction between artist and artisan in Limón is as much a gender distinction as an aesthetic one. The fault line that divides art from craft and men from women in Limón is part of the self-conscious creation of a cultural elite. Using cultural institutions to legitimate their position, the exclusively male association of canvas artists retains enough cultural capital to impose distinctions arbitrarily that are collectively reified and extend beyond objects to Limonenses themselves. The result is a hegemonic power wielded by a cultural elite using an arbitrarily defined category of experience, “fine art,” to rationalize their position, a phenomenon certainly not restricted to Limón.

In fact, the provincial quality of their institutionalization of fine art is thrown in sharp relief when contrasted with the work of Limonense artists who have left the confines of PACUNE and have found success in the highlands and beyond. Mario Castro and Juan Kelly remain icons of success for Limonense canvas artists. Interestingly, their stylistic adherence to the caricatured realism of Negrín did not last long outside Limón. For instance, Mario Castro still paints nostalgic, Afro-Caribbean themes, but he uses a collage approach that breaks the canvas up into different sections. Castro then inserts stylized old wooden houses and dark-skinned figures into scenes washed in bright yellows, greens and blues. It is an approach that has proven quite successful in expositions and galleries throughout the highland valley of Costa Rica, but Limonense canvas artists remain unwilling to veer from the accepted Limón style at least while they remain under the direct influence of Negrín.

Juan Kelly’s style also changed while studying in San José, but unlike Castro, he went on to show in Europe, the U.S.A. and Japan, his style varying with each exposition. In Germany he turned to expressionism, and in the United States he turned to hyper-realistic oil paintings of anthropomorphic animals. Now Kelly’s connection to Limón and the artists who are trying to make a living from their art is a tenuous one from his perspective. As he explains:

I was never a student of Negrín. Yes, I was influenced, I must have been inspired by his success, but not in the sense of sitting there and being instructed. I saw him doing his thing, and I probably wanted to do that. When I started having the exhibitions, and started getting written up in the newspapers, everybody started talking about how Juan Kelly is better than Negrín. There was all this talk about who was better, how this young guy is coming up and he’s better than Negrín. But I didn’t even think about that. I didn’t care about being better than Negrín. Why would I care about being better than that guy in that little place? I wanted to be better than the guys out there, the best guys out there in the world!

Early on, Kelly cultivated a sense of individualism in his work that allowed him to shake the ties to Limón and its provincialism. Since his departure, Kelly’s fame has increased and his success has been exaggerated. When he returns to Limón, he is mobbed by admirers and aspiring painters. When asked if there is any common

trait about those who buy his paintings, he answers: "No. Well, there is one thing they have in common. They all have a lot of money."

No doubt inspired by the success of an artist like Juan Kelly, some of the artists who remain in Limón express a longing to escape the stylistic constraints of the local milieu. Rommel Spence, a young painter with impressive talent, complains: "But it's not only this style that I can paint, I can paint other styles. This is something because the people here like this style very much. I paint this style because the people like it, and I can sell more. Maybe if I go to the U.S., [or to] San José, I could use other styles maybe." Another local artist, German Mora, who by all accounts rivals Negrín in regard to technique, explains, "[Castro and Kelly] started just like all of us, painting the same. But they kept studying and learning and all of that. I would like do that as well. Maybe go to the U.S. and study close to Juan Kelly."² But at least one local artist, William Duran, speaks with some disdain of the way artists change their style when they leave Limón: "[Mario Castro] uses very brilliant colors and abstract designs, but for me his style is very academic. Good painters left here and went into universities and immediately became academic about their art. Like Juan Kelly and Mario Castro, all of them immediately changed their painting." Not surprisingly, William Duran is one of Negrín's closest followers and most ardent supporters.

CONCLUSIONS

Spilling over the crest of a hill on the outskirts of the city center is the Edificio Cariari, a rambling, multilevel complex built somewhat ironically in a Spanish Colonial style [Figure 7]. Built by the national government, the development, easily one of the largest in the city, was meant to house a commercial venue for artisans' crafts. Yet the place remains empty (a few social service agencies have squatted in a couple of the outbuildings) because of disagreements over what qualifies as the work of artisans. It seems the hard work of Rosa Hernández and the ALA to bring the development to Limón will be rewarded by their marginalization to make room for the tourist art industry of the capital city, San José. Negrín has little to say on the subject; Edificio Cariari was never part of his marketing plan.

The development of Edificio Cariari illustrates much of what has preceded in this essay. It certainly demonstrates the cultural marginalization of Limón in regard to the rest of Costa Rica, but more than that, it etches a deeper division between tourist art and "fine art" in Limón. As the work of canvas artists is more clearly defined as a discrete aesthetic practice by institutions such as their association, their school, and the planned museum, the work of artisans is also more clearly defined by institutions such as their association, their store, and Edificio Cariari. Even as local artisans are snubbed by the tourist art industry of the capital city, the institutionalization of artisans' work serves to further dichotomize their practice from that of canvas artists.

The last few decades witnessed the invention of fine art as an aesthetic category in Limón through the appropriation of external conceptual and material resources to fit their own burgeoning paradigms of legitimacy and permanence. Unlike the well-known aesthetic practice of contemporary Australian Aborigines [Dussart



Figure 7 Edificio Cariari.

1997, Myers 1995, Morphy 1991] or the recent works of Tibetan painters [Harris 1999], canvas art in Limón has no artistic antecedent. Limonenses had no bark paintings or other more “traditional” practices that could be reinterpreted in this new, Western aesthetic form of canvas and oil paints. The more common sites of ethnographic analysis, like Aboriginal Australia or Tibet, benefit at least conceptually from a neatly dichotomous relationship between the artists and “the West.” Limón itself was invented by North Americans, and Limonenses established themselves in that ambiguous excluded middle of the typical global dichotomies. Without historical precedent, the work of Limonense artists does not challenge notions of authenticity so common in regions like West Africa [Svasek 1997, Steiner 1995, Silver 1979] or Native North America [Jonaitis 1999, Jacobs 1998].

Limonense canvas art, like so many other aesthetic practices in Limón, like Limonenses themselves, resists analysis on the basis of traditional practices or colonial experience. Over the course of a century, Limón has struggled through the inventive process of identity formation, as much through their aesthetic practices as through anything else. In just the past several decades, Limón has witnessed the invention of fine art as a discrete institution, and with it, the creation of a cultural elite to reify its own internal distinction between canvas paintings and the craft work of artisans. This is made all the more worthy of study in regard to its social position *vis-à-vis* the rest of Costa Rica and the Americas in general. Limón remains a marginal community in a marginalized nation with a very mainstream aesthetic philosophy of distinction that divides both objects and the people who produce and consume them.

NOTES

1. All quotations not followed by a parenthetical reference are the words of local informants based mostly on taped interviews. Many of these were translated from Spanish by myself.
2. The bulk of the research in Limón and Costa Rica took place in 1997 and 1998. When I returned to Limón in 2001, these two statements turned out to be prophetic. Both Rommel Spence and Herman Mora had left Limón. Mora now lives in the capital city of San José, trying to find new ways to paint new themes. Spence lives in New York City, where he has much less time to paint, but feels closer to that elusive idea of artistic success, at least geographically.

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