

1898: Imag(in)ing the Caribbean in the Age of the Spanish-American War

Veranstalter: Laura Katzman, John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin/Terra Foundation for American Art

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This interdisciplinary conference investigated the visual and material culture produced in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Such cultural production helped negotiate the newly formed relationships between the United States, as a young imperial power, and Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines – islands that America seized from Spain in what historians have called the first episode in U.S. globalization. In order to understand the very different historical trajectories of these islands, particularly those of Puerto Rico and Cuba, the participants offered explorations from a diversity of disciplines, including art history, anthropology, museology, cultural studies, American studies, and Latin American and Caribbean studies¹.

An introduction by conference organizer LAURA KATZMAN (Berlin / Harrisonburg) situated the symposium's historical analyses in current academic and popular interest in Puerto Rico and Cuba. She unpacked how Puerto Rico's ambiguous legal status since the Spanish-American War, that is, belonging to but not part of the U.S., has often rendered the island invisible in Latin American studies and marginalized within traditional narratives of U.S. history. Cuba's brief period as a U.S. protectorate, followed by its independence, and the 1959 Communist revolution, prepared it for a relationship with the U.S. characterized by defiance and resistance towards the American capitalist power. Visual culture created before and after 1898 reveals American ambivalence towards its „new possessions.“ Katzman showed how films, photographic books, satirical cartoons, as well as the yellow press, documented, promoted, and/or criticized the United States' foray into its own particular kind of colonialism. She ex-

plained how the U.S. developed a vocabulary, codified in a series of Supreme Court cases, with which to distinguish its imperial project from that of Spain, France, the U.K., among other, older colonial empires.

In her keynote, JESSICA GIENOW-HECHT (Berlin) argued that in the era of the Spanish-American War notions of humanity emerged that marked a change in how imperial powers understood and defined themselves. Pointing to several novel historical reversals, Gienow-Hecht contended that the war signified a shift from imperial justification rooted in Christian ethics and a civilizing discourse to the supposedly more inclusive concept of humanity. Consequently, the United States was able to intervene in the conflict between Spain and Cuba on humanitarian grounds, calling out the brutality and uncivilized behavior of Spaniards (Europeans) and arousing sympathy for the non-European Cubans. As a result, „innocent civilians,“ rhetorically infantilized and gendered, emerged as the victims of uneven power relations, requiring that action be taken on their behalf. Gienow-Hecht concluded that while this concept of humanity did not abolish territorial expansion, it became the only legitimization for empire, upholding a logic in which moral action and the pursuit of private interest were mutually attainable.

Two subsequent talks presented research-in-progress for an upcoming exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in 2023, which will mark the 125th anniversary of the War of 1898 (also referred to as the Spanish-American War). The curators proceeded on the assumption that while the 1898 war launched the United States into its role as a hemispheric and then a world power, it nonetheless remains a chapter of American history that is little known to the wider public.

TAÍNA CARAGOL (Washington, D.C.) focused on Puerto Rico and Cuba, and insisted on the multiplicity of contemporary perspectives on 1898. At their origin are the different political contexts and implications that the War of 1898 had on each island. For

¹ Conference website: <https://www.jfki.fu-berlin.de/en/faculty/culture/terra/Conferences/2019-Terra-Katzman1/index.html> (15.01.2020).

Cuba, the U.S. military invasion was the last chapter of the island's prolonged struggle for independence from Spain since the 1860s, when the U.S. decided to intervene to help oust the European colonial power. In Puerto Rico, the U.S. invasion did not aim to free the island but rather to take possession of it from Spain, abruptly truncating the autonomy Puerto Rico had recently achieved from Spain in late 1897. This contrast of historical contexts in the advent of 1898 is reflected in the different ways in which artists visualized this moment. For example, depictions from a Cuban perspective concentrate more on the Cuban insurgency against the Spaniards than on the arrival of American forces, as seen in Armando García Menocal's paintings. On the other hand, Puerto Rican paintings, such as Francisco Oller y Cestero's portrait of President William McKinley holding a partly rolled map of Puerto Rico, speak precisely to the U.S. seizure and dominance of the island.

KATE CLARKE LEMAY (Washington, D.C.) spoke about the Philippines, though her research for the NPG exhibition also examines the case of Hawaii. Lemay, like Caragol, insisted on the multiplicity of perspectives; in her case, she focused on the Pacific arena of the War of 1898. Lemay showed works depicting the Battle of Manila Bay from the Spanish point of view, as well as depictions of the same subject by popular Japanese artists and printers of the period. Lemay emphasized the problem of the archive for the curatorial process. The Smithsonian Institution collected objects made accessible through U.S. colonialism. Many works and records held in Manila were either lost or destroyed during World War II, meaning that the archival narrative is driven by a U.S. mainland perspective. Lemay related how, as curator, it is problematic to rely exclusively on American archives, because of both the colonial connections with private collectors and the related difficulties surrounding provenance. She suggested that one possible solution to these problems is to include in the exhibition contemporary Filipino art that reflects on the Philippines' colonial past.

JOSEPH HARTMAN (Kansas City) examined the role of Neoclassical civil architec-

ture in the post-Spanish-American War era. He made special use of the notion of simulacra, defined not as a mere copy of the real, but as the hyper-real, and employed this concept to analyze symbolic reproductions of the visual correspondence between the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. and the capitol buildings in San Juan, Havana, and Manila. Hartman read these latter buildings both as examples of the double consciousness of coloniality within modernity as well as spaces of fantasy and emerging national identities. Hartman concluded that these buildings do not represent mere mimicry, but rather „dreams of dreams,“ as the architects and designers simultaneously identified their works with universal symbols of democracy and with specific Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Filipino contexts.

AMANDA GUZMÁN (Berkeley) examined the unequal power dynamics between makers and collectors of ethnographic objects in early 20th century Puerto Rico. She used a collections-based research method that drew on the Puerto Rican collection donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History by the American officer-wife, activist, and civil servant, Helen Hamilton Gardener (born Alice Chenoweth). Analyzing various objects in the collection, Guzmán interrogated the ways in which object definitions shape how we know Puerto Rico. At first glance, these objects seem to contribute to an image of Puerto Rico as a static agricultural society. In turn, this image, satisfying American nostalgia for rural life, becomes established institutional knowledge. However, Guzmán argued, when we examine these objects in more detail, we find that they were produced through collector-maker collaborations and as commodities for the nascent U.S. tourist market. She thus concluded that the narratives, actors, and agendas involved in the making and collecting of these objects must be reassembled in connection to the U.S. institutions that house them, which become sites of ongoing knowledge production.

In the final talk, KRISTINE JUNCKER (Washington, D.C.) tackled the notion of a „visual economy“ in post Spanish-American War Cuba. She argued that one key to understanding this economy is to examine the

technical and visual aspects of reproductions. The postcard is one example of this, which was inexpensive to photo-mechanically print and easy to collect and/or send through the mail. These postcards often reveal nostalgia for a colonial past, one that upheld older gender and racial stereotypes. They include the trope of Afro-Cuban men engaged in precarious itinerant labor, Carnival scenes, and sugar processing, in essence, representations of slavery. Such images of a bygone era attracted audiences who held a diversity of perspectives. Juncker concluded that these rich visual documents became a means for both Cuban and U.S. citizens to process Cuba's colonial past as well as the island's transformation after the Spanish-American War.

The conference ended with commentary on the talks by JORGE DUANY (Miami). Duany pointed to the imprecision of the term Spanish-American War, suggesting that the events of 1898 should be referred to as the Spanish-Cuban-American War. He also addressed the looming issue of race, noting that U.S. colonial agents were not entirely able to sympathize with Puerto Ricans and Cubans, despite the use of new humanitarian discourses. He asserted that U.S. visual representations tended to show the new „overseas possessions“ as backward, primitive, and exotic, and its inhabitants as immature, childlike, effeminate, and incapable of self-government. Duany then turned his attention to the various visual media explored in the second part of the conference. He pointed to the fact that the material culture created by local Puerto Rican and Cuban makers, who constituted a class of skilled workers, challenges stereotypical conceptions of the Caribbean islands as „underdeveloped.“ Nonetheless, the question remained for Duany how such objects produced by local makers differed from and even subverted those produced by foreigners or outsiders.

Conference overview:

Laura Katzman (Berlin / Harrisonburg): Opening Remarks and Introduction: Contemporary Aesthetic Reflections on 1898

Keynote

Jessica Gienow-Hecht (Berlin): Gender, Empire, and Humanity in the Spanish-American

War, 1898

Taína Caragol (Washington, D.C.): Curating 1898, The American Imperium: The Case of Cuba and Puerto Rico

Kate Clarke Lemay (Washington, D.C.): Curating 1898, The American Imperium: The Case of the Philippines and Hawaii

Joseph Hartman (Kansas City): Give me Liberty or Give me Marti!: Neoclassicism, Simulacra, and the Limits of the American Empire in 1898

Amanda Guzmán (Berkeley): Collecting the Puerto Rican Colony: Spanish-American War Material Encounters Between Officer-Wives and Puerto Ricans

Kristine Juncker (Washington, D.C.): Addressing Stereotypes: Gender and Race in Early 20th-Century Postcards Sent from Cuba

Jorge Duany (Miami): Discussion and Closing Remarks: 1898: Then and Now

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