

The Living Museum: Notes for a History of the Francisco Prat Puig Art Collection in Santiago de Cuba

El Museo Viviente: Apuntes para una historia de la colección de arte de Francisco Prat Puig en Santiago de Cuba

O Museu Vivo: Apontamentos para uma história da coleção de arte de Francisco Prat Puig em Santiago de Cuba

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ABSTRACT

This article documents the relevant data for a historical reconstruction of the art collection of Francisco Prat Puig — the distinguished Spanish architect, professor, archaeologist, and art historian, naturalized Cuban citizen. Drawing on analytical bibliographical and documentary review, as well as the research experience generated by the Catalographic Management and 3D Digitization Project of the Francisco Prat Puig Ancient Art Collection, it provides information on the origin and composition of the collection, its heritage significance within the Cuban context, and its museological facilities, together with a summary of the principal scientific studies carried out on the collection to date. In this way, it seeks to contribute to the visibility and social interpretation of the cultural heritage preserved in Santiago de Cuba.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Art History, Collecting, Francisco Prat Puig, University of Oriente.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo documenta datos relevantes para la reconstrucción histórica de la colección de arte del arquitecto, profesor, arqueólogo e historiador del arte español, nacionalizado cubano, Francisco Prat Puig. Mediante una revisión bibliográfica y documental analítica, junto a las experiencias de investigación aportadas por el Proyecto de Gestión Catalográfica y Digitalización 3D de la Colección de Arte de la Antigüedad de Francisco Prat Puig, se ofrece información sobre el origen y conformación del conjunto, su relevancia patrimonial en el contexto cubano y sus instalaciones museológicas, así como un resumen de los principales estudios científicos realizados sobre la colección hasta la actualidad. De este modo, se pretende contribuir a la visibilización e interpretación social del patrimonio cultural conservado en Santiago de Cuba.

Palabras clave: Patrimonio Cultural, Historia del Arte, Coleccionismo, Francisco Prat Puig, University of Oriente.

RESUMO

O presente artigo documenta dados relevantes para a reconstrução histórica da coleção de arte do arquiteto, professor, arqueólogo e historiador da arte espanhol, naturalizado cubano, Francisco Prat Puig. Por meio de uma revisão bibliográfica e documental analítica, complementada pelas experiências de investigação geradas pelo Projeto de Gestão Catalográfica e Digitalização 3D da Coleção de Arte da Antigüidade de Francisco Prat Puig, oferece-se informação sobre a origem e conformação do conjunto, sua relevância patrimonial no contexto cubano e suas instalações museológicas, bem como um resumo dos principais estudos científicos realizados sobre a coleção até a atualidade. Desta forma, pretende-se contribuir para a visibilidade e interpretação social do patrimônio cultural conservado em Santiago de Cuba.

Palavras-chave: Patrimônio cultural, História da arte, Colecionismo, Francisco Prat Puig, Universidade do Oriente.

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Introduction

Francisco Prat Puig (Catalonia, 1906–1997) was a prominent Spanish architect, professor, archaeologist, and art historian, naturalized Cuban citizen. Due to his Republican militancy, he was forced into exile during the Spanish Civil War and interned in the refugee camp of Agde, France, where he excavated a Visigothic necropolis and discovered a pre-Roman settlement (Lamore, 2008), before moving to Cuba in 1939 as part of the broad wave of Spanish intellectuals who settled on the island attracted by its professional opportunities and a political climate largely sympathetic to the Republican cause, which characterized the country through the 1930s and 1940s (Cuadriello, 2012). Dr. Prat Puig subsequently developed an extensive academic career in Cuba as a founder and professor of the University of Oriente, directing several archaeological excavations in the eastern region of the country. In 1992, he was awarded the Royal Order of Isabella the Catholic. Among the most enduring legacies of his pedagogical work was the systematic assembly of a wide-ranging art collection, which he later donated to the University of Oriente with the aim of establishing a didactic museum. This article aims to document the relevant data for a historical reconstruction of the Prat Puig Collection — its origin and composition, its heritage significance within the Cuban context, and its museological facilities — as well as to offer a summary of the most important scientific studies carried out on the collection to date. In this way, it seeks to contribute to the visibility and social interpretation of the cultural heritage preserved in Santiago de Cuba.

Methodology

This review article is based on a translated, revised, expanded, and corrected version of the chapter “Historia de la Colección Prat Puig: procedencia, instalaciones y abordajes científicos” by Silveira Toledo, D. and Caveda de la Guardia, E., originally published in Caveda de la Guardia, E. (ed.), *Vivencia del Arte. La colección de arte de la Antigüedad de Francisco Prat Puig en Santiago de Cuba* (2023). Its methodological approach operates within the historical-hermeneutical paradigm, insofar as it seeks to reconstruct and interpret the historical trajectory of a cultural heritage collection through the systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources. The principal scientific methods employed are the analytical-synthetic method, applied to the processing and integration of heterogeneous documentary materials; the historical-logical method, used to reconstruct the chronological sequence of the collection's formation, institutionalization, and scholarly reception; and content analysis as the overarching technique for the systematic review of written sources. The procedure followed was organized in three successive stages: (1) identification and critical review of the existing bibliography; (2) direct examination of primary sources; and (3) integration of new empirical data generated by recent research projects.

The documentary corpus consulted comprises monographs and specialist studies on Cuban collecting and art history (Cuadriello, 2012; García, 2017); published and unpublished academic theses produced at the University of Oriente (Méndez and Ayala, 1998); articles in peer-reviewed journals (Caveda, 2022; Fernández and Sola, 2022); primary documentation including Prat's own publications (Prat, 1956; 1980; 1988) and contemporary press sources (*Diario de la Marina*, 1956); and the research outputs of the Catalographic Management and 3D Digitization Project of the Francisco Prat Puig Ancient Art Collection (2023–2024), which generated new empirical data through direct examination of specimens. The corpus is complemented by personal communications with specialists and former students of Dr. Prat. Given the historical nature of the subject matter, the documentary sources include a substantial proportion of foundational works that predate the five-year window recommended by the journal's style guidelines; this circumstance is consistent with the requirements of historical-documentary review and does not diminish the validity of the methodology employed.

Results and Discussion

General characteristics of the Collection

Dr. Francisco Prat Puig's interest in collecting antiquities appears to have taken root in his youth, when he gathered specimens from Iberian prehistoric lithic industries in his native region (Ayala, 2008) and discovered several prehistoric, Roman, and Visigothic archaeological sites (López, 1989). During his years of exile and academic work in Cuba, this interest was consolidated and materialized in the acquisition of a total of 478 pieces (Méndez and Ayala, 1998), spanning the fields of numismatics, archaeology, and art.

The bulk of the collection is numismatic in nature (300 pieces), while the archaeological and art objects constitute a modest but heterogeneous group of 139 pieces: a section of 39 pieces from the ancient world

(Near and Far East and classical antiquity), 26 pieces of pre-Columbian archaeology and art (Cuba, Central and South America), 25 pieces of applied arts (Byzantine art, European medieval art, among others), and 49 paintings — Cuban and foreign — ranging from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. The collection is completed by 25 manuscripts from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. The figure of 478 pieces is reported as such in the principal documentary sources consulted, which ultimately derive from Prat's own inventory register. However, the sum of the subcategories described in the same sources yields a total of 464 pieces, a discrepancy of 14 pieces with respect to the registered figure. The available documentation does not allow this difference to be resolved with certainty.

The collection was meticulously inventoried and classified by Professor Prat with a view to realizing his idea of creating a didactic museum at the University of Oriente (Ayala, 2008; García, 2017; Prat, 1988), intended to serve the students of this institution as a complementary resource for instruction in history and art history. Prat even came to make explicit the purpose that guided his collecting activity: “Mi colección la reuní con mucho sacrificio y esfuerzo; quiero que ahora pertenezca a mi pueblo, y que, si en ella encuentran un grano de conocimiento o emoción artística, entonces estaré satisfecho” (Méndez y Ayala, 1998) [“I assembled my collection through great sacrifice and effort; I want it now to belong to my people, and if they find in it a grain of knowledge or artistic emotion, then I shall be satisfied.” (Translation by the authors)]. It is worth noting that Prat brought considerable experience to this endeavor: in 1956, he had been called to Havana to oversee the installation of an exhibition of the celebrated Greek vase collection of Joaquín Gumá Herrera (Count of Lagunillas) and to prepare the catalogue of the first public exhibition of this collector's Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art objects at the former Palace of Fine Arts (Prat, 1956). The event was hailed in the contemporary press as “an event of universal relevance” (Diario de la Marina, 1956), which testifies to the standing Professor Prat had achieved in the field of art history in Cuba. The newspaper *El Mundo* covered the exhibition's opening, quoting the scholar Dietrich von Bothmer, who in his inaugural address described the Lagunillas group of Greek vases as “one of the richest in the Western Hemisphere” (Cardet, 1993; *El Mundo*, 1956). Regarding the initial classification of his private collection, it bears noting that numerous archaeological pieces were assigned to sections dedicated to art — the Sumerian cuneiform tablet, a purely archaeological and epigraphic document, heads the Ancient Art section, for instance. This arrangement is hardly exceptional: it is common practice in major institutions such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Louvre, or the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba itself (Caveda, 2023).

Provenance and uniqueness of the Collection with respect to other republican collections

In his monograph *Coleccionismo y museos en Cuba. Siglo XVI–primera mitad del XX*, García (2017) addressing the private collections of the republican period in Cuba, observes that:

“El gusto por coleccionar alcanzaría su momento cumbre después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, etapa en la que los coleccionistas privados se aprovecharon de la crisis europea, pues en las obras de arte bajaron ostensiblemente de valor. Esta coyuntura propiciatoria hizo que las colecciones privadas aumentaran no solo en cantidad, sino también en calidad” (p. 130). [“The taste for collecting would reach its peak after the Second World War, a period in which private collectors took advantage of the European crisis, as works of art declined markedly in value. This favorable conjuncture caused private collections to increase not only in quantity but also in quality” (Translation by the authors).]

The origins of Professor Prat Puig's collection must be situated within this historical framework. Unlike other Cuban collectors of art and antiquities, such as the aforementioned Count of Lagunillas or the sugar magnate Julio Lobo, Prat did not possess the personal wealth required to participate in the major New York or European auctions of the first half of the twentieth century. The origin of his collection must be sought in a patient and painstaking process of acquisition carried out within the island — through purchase, exchange, or direct transfer — from European emigrants (Prat's daughters recall the purchase of a piece classified as a ritual vase of apparent Roman origin from a Jewish refugee named Schnaider [sic] who had arrived in Cuba fleeing World War II) or from Cuban families who had imported antiquities from Europe (Méndez and Ayala, 1998; Prat, 1988). According to former students who were close to the collection and participated in its study as part of their academic formation, Prat's relationship with the Count of Lagunillas and his dealings with the Havana circle of antiquarians and scholars of ancient art may have favored the acquisition of his small group of Greek pieces. A concrete instance of how this relationship translated into a documented acquisition is the Greek funerary stele now belonging to the Ancient Art section: according to the art historian Dr. Lilia Martín Brito, a former student of Professor Prat, the Count of Lagunillas presented him with this piece as a personal token of gratitude for his work in mounting the inaugural installation of the Greek section of the Lagunillas Collection in 1956 (L. Martín Brito, personal communication, November 30, 2023). It is worth mentioning

that the only specimen of the Greek ensemble for which a specific archaeological provenance is documented is a theatrical mask, which, according to Prat's testimony in a 1994 interview, was purchased from a Havana antiquities dealer who had obtained it from an excavation in Sicily (Méndez and Ayala, 1998). It can be stated with greater certainty, however, that a substantial part of the collection — particularly the pieces in the Ancient Art section — was acquired with the earnings from the architecture and art history courses that Prat taught at the University of Havana during the 1940s. As a Spanish Republican émigré, he was not permitted to hold a full teaching position at the university, but was able to offer these specialized courses regularly through the summer school (Cuadriello, 2012) until the founding of the University of Oriente (1947), the project that anchored him permanently in Santiago de Cuba (Fernández and Sola, 2022) and to which he would devote the remainder of his life. The most revealing testimony regarding the origins of the collection and the difficulty of its assembly came from Prat himself: “Centavo a centavo que ganaba en los cursos de verano de la Universidad de La Habana eran estirados hasta lo último para adquirir un cuadro, una cerámica, una estatuilla (...)” (López, 1989) [“Penny by penny, what I earned in the summer courses at the University of Havana was stretched to the very limit to acquire a painting, a ceramic piece, a statuette (...)” (Translation by the authors).]

According to the testimony of his daughters, the pieces corresponding to European prehistory (Palaeolithic and Neolithic) appear to derive from an earlier collection assembled by Prat in Spain, a provenance reinforced by the notable connection of several specimens with finds from pre-Roman burials in the Iberian Peninsula. The pre-Columbian Cuban pieces were the result of Prat's extensive archaeological fieldwork in the eastern region of Cuba, particularly at the site of Ventas de Casanova (Dávila and Rodríguez, 2023).

A distinguishing feature of the Prat Puig Collection, setting it apart from other private collections of its period, was its deliberate assembly according to a criterion of representativeness rather than specialization: it was designed to encompass as many cultures as possible — even if represented by a single specimen — rather than to accumulate the greatest number of pieces from any one period. Paradoxically, this guiding principle has resulted in the collection holding the second largest number of classical art pieces preserved in Cuba, to the best of the authors' knowledge.

The Pedagogical Purpose of the Collection: The Living Museum

Several authors and former students of Dr. Prat have emphasized the explicitly pedagogical spirit in which he assembled his collection. The pieces served as an integral component of his art history courses at the University of Oriente, and a cornerstone of his teaching approach was the conviction that students should engage in direct, intuitive contact with works of art rather than encounter them solely through verbal instruction, texts, and images. To this end, he developed an idea that would occupy him intensely in his later years: the creation of an institution he called the Pedagogical Museum of Art (Prat, 1988), structured around his singular concept of the Living Museum — an immersive pedagogical model defined as “presentar de la forma más original posible el panorama histórico o cultural de una época o un siglo determinado, utilizando para su ambientación objetos o elementos que la hayan caracterizado” (Fernández y Sola, 2022) [“to present in the most original way possible the historical or cultural panorama of a given period or century, using objects or elements that have characterized it”. (Translation by the authors)]. According to Fernández and Sola (2022), Prat had conceived this concept and first attempted to put it into practice during his internment in Agde, on the basis of his archaeological work there, which earned him formal recognition from the French authorities (Lamore, 2008).

Museological Facilities of the Collection

For most of Professor Prat's life, the Collection remained in his house in the town of El Caney, on the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba. The pieces were kept in rather cramped conditions — a telling detail being Prat's own account of one of the most emblematic objects in the Ancient Art section, the Apolo Citáreo, which spent thirty-five years stored under his bed (Prat, 1988). Dr. Prat mentions that the reason for this incident was due to a certain contempt for the piece, “because it was considered a fake” (Prat, 1988). One of the present authors (D. Silveira Toledo), a former student of Professor Prat, suggests that security concerns may also have influenced this arrangement. The formal donation of most of the pieces took place on March 14, 1989, and approximately sixty specimens were subsequently transferred (1992) to the University of Oriente with the aim of establishing a didactic museum (Méndez and Ayala, 1998).

In 1997, the Office of the Curator of the City of Santiago de Cuba agreed to support the University of Oriente in the relocation of the collection. A bilateral cooperation agreement was signed, approving the transfer of the pieces to the premises of that institution on deposit. This relocation would prove providential: in 2012, Hurricane Sandy severely damaged the university building (Edificio Docente III) where the Collection had previously been housed. The aim was to make the collection more accessible to students, faculty, researchers, and the general public, while also taking advantage of its privileged location: adjacent to Céspedes Park and two

buildings representative of Prat's own architectural legacy, the Museum of the Cuban Historical Environment and the City Hall of Santiago de Cuba. A further symbolic resonance attached to the project: the museum was to be housed in the former Seminary of San Basilio Magno, historically the cradle of university education in Santiago de Cuba.

This proposal, which Dr. Prat endorsed with enthusiasm in the final years of his life, would enable the transfer of all the donated pieces to a space with adequate conditions for their exhibition and conservation. On August 1, 2003, in the presence of the principal political and civic authorities of Santiago de Cuba, the Francisco Prat Puig Cultural Center — where the collection is currently housed — was inaugurated.

Scientific studies of the Collection

Reflecting Dr. Prat's sustained concern for the pedagogical purpose of his collection, successive generations of history and art history students at the University of Oriente engaged in its systematic study as part of their academic formation — first in the professor's own home and later in the didactic museum installed in Teaching Building III of the university. A student research group formed for this purpose has worked on the collection continuously since 1993. Prat himself authored two publications addressing pieces from the collection: "La pintura de un abanico italiano del siglo XV" and "Significado de un conjunto cerámico hispano del siglo XVI en Santiago de Cuba" (Prat, 1980). It is nonetheless striking that, despite these efforts and the exceptional rarity and value of the collection within its context, only one piece from the Ancient Art section — the Apolo Citáreo — had been the subject of an academic publication prior to recent years (Prat, 1988), and no catalogue of the Prat Puig Collection has ever been produced, in contrast to other Republican collections with comparable holdings.

Prat developed his own research on the collection (Prat, 1988) with a view to elaborating an appropriate museography for the projected university institution. Scattered but valuable references to the historical contextualization of individual pieces survive in interviews and student theses that preserve the results of this personal inquiry. Noteworthy in this regard is the correspondence Prat maintained with European scholars, among them the Spanish art historian Diego Angulo Íñiguez (Ayala, 2008).

In 1998, the Santiago researchers Yaquelín Méndez Gutiérrez and Idania Ayala Lafargue produced a thesis entitled *El museo de arte Francisco Prat Puig: propuesta inicial museológica*, at a time when the collection remained divided between specimens displayed in the museum annexed to the Art History Department of the University of Oriente and those still housed in the recently deceased professor's home. As part of their proposal, Méndez and Ayala undertook a systematic examination of an extensive sample of the collection's specimens — the first such documented effort, to the present authors' knowledge. Although the work contains typological and historiographical inaccuracies, attributable in part to the perpetuation of some of Prat's own mistaken assessments of certain pieces, it remains the most exhaustive exercise in historical and catalogographic research on the collection carried out to date, not least because its authors had exceptional access to first-hand sources: Prat's unpublished notes and the direct testimony of his daughters.

The most recent and systematic phase of scholarly engagement with the collection originated in an initiative to translate and contextualize the Sumerian cuneiform tablet with a view to academic publication. This initiative led, in January 2023, to the launch of the "Catalographic Management and 3D Digitization Project of the Francisco Prat Puig Ancient Art Collection," designed to coordinate an international and interdisciplinary team of researchers in a rigorous scientific study of the collection's holdings. Promoted by the Cultural Counselor's Office of the Spanish Embassy in Cuba through the AECID "Science, Technology and Innovation Diplomacy" programme and facilitated by the Spanish Educational Center of Havana (CEEH), the project was welcomed by the Department of History and Cultural Heritage, the Department of International Relations, and the Rector's Office of the University of Oriente, as well as by the Office of the Curator of the City of Santiago de Cuba and the specialists of the Francisco Prat Puig Cultural Center.

Following several months of direct and indirect research on specimens from Prehistory, the Ancient Near East, and Classical Antiquity, the project produced a series of significant results. These include the transcription, transliteration, and translation of two inscribed pieces: the Sumerian tablet, by Professor Armando Bramanti (Complutense University of Madrid), and the ushabti of Padineith, by researchers Iván Rodríguez López (University of Holguín) and Josué Santos Saavedra (Autonomous University of Barcelona). The project also yielded typological revisions and improved datings for several Greco-Latin pieces, among them the reclassification of a Greek ceramic vessel — catalogued for several decades as a "crátera" (krater) — as a kantharos of the Saint-Valentin type, together with the identification of two pieces previously considered originals as contemporary replicas (Caveda, 2023). Complementing this analytical work, Professor Alexander González Medina (National University of Río Cuarto) produced scaled three-dimensional photogrammetric

models of three specimens, subsequently deposited in an open-access virtual repository. These research efforts converged in two publication milestones that substantially raised the international profile of the collection. In November 2023, the volume *Vivencia del Arte: La colección de arte de la Antigüedad de Francisco Prat Puig en Santiago de Cuba* (Caveda, 2023) was published by the Centro Educativo Español de La Habana — the first comprehensive scholarly study of the ancient art section of the collection, and the fruit of the collaborative work of more than a dozen researchers from Cuba, Spain, and France. The following year brought a further distinction: with the publication of “The Prat Puig Tablet: A Neosumerian Administrative Account in Santiago de Cuba” in the volume *nîĝ-ba dub-sar maḥ: Studies on Ebla and the Ancient Near East Presented to Amalia Catagnoti* (Bramanti & Caveda, 2024), the Sumerian tablet became the first cuneiform document preserved in Cuba to receive full academic publication.

Conclusions

The collection of Dr. Prat Puig — exceptional in its scope and deeply cherished by the University of Oriente and the broader Cuban cultural community — demands sustained efforts to improve its conservation conditions and to enhance its visibility within the international academic community and its public reach. It equally calls for new approaches capable of developing its didactic potential, enabling the surrounding educational community to draw on it as a resource for wider cultural and social development. Long constrained by adverse circumstances, and at times literally obscured by them, the collection has yet to receive the recognition that its place within Cuban cultural heritage deserves. Recent scholarship has confirmed the unquestionable value of its most representative pieces while attesting, at the same time, to the enduring achievement of its creator's lifelong effort to bequeath to his people an authentic Living Museum.

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