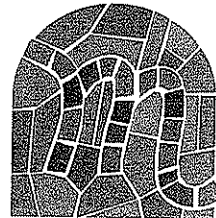


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1928-1950, 1957, linóleo,
36" x 24". Colección: Familia Homar.
Véase: Catálogo de obras, pieza 142.

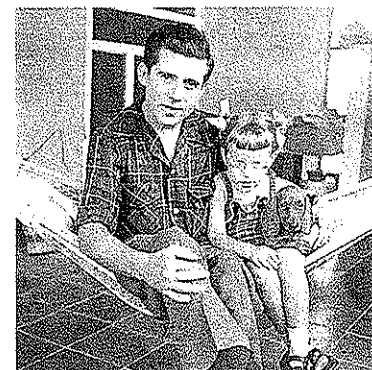
Lorenzo Homar: Lyric and Satire¹

The Homar who returned to San Juan from New York in 1950 was a changed man. He was thirty-seven at the time. He had been tempered in the cultural life of the metropolis, in the experience of war, and in the art and craft of drawing and painting. He returned with his family: he had married Dorothy Dämm, with whom he had worked at Cartier, and the couple had had their first daughter, Susan.

Why did he come back in 1950? Homar told the story several times, with no intimations of patriotism. One of his most interesting versions appears in an unpublished manuscript that can be found in the collection of Homar documents and works at Princeton University. It is there that Homar documented the mediating role played by the painter Robert Gwathmey, who had been invited to Puerto Rico in 1948 and had already done several posters. Gwathmey

advised Homar to try to get a job in the recently created Division of Community Education, DIVEDCO. This manuscript is significant, too, because it portrays the ambivalence we see in many returns: curiosity and interest but at the same time the alienation and distance that must be bridged. Thirty years afterward, he would recall his first impressions of that return to the small, provincial, yet warm and welcoming city, and the nostalgia he felt for the museums and art galleries of New York. The very structure of the recollection sets Homar in the space of *between*, and in a changing *outside*:

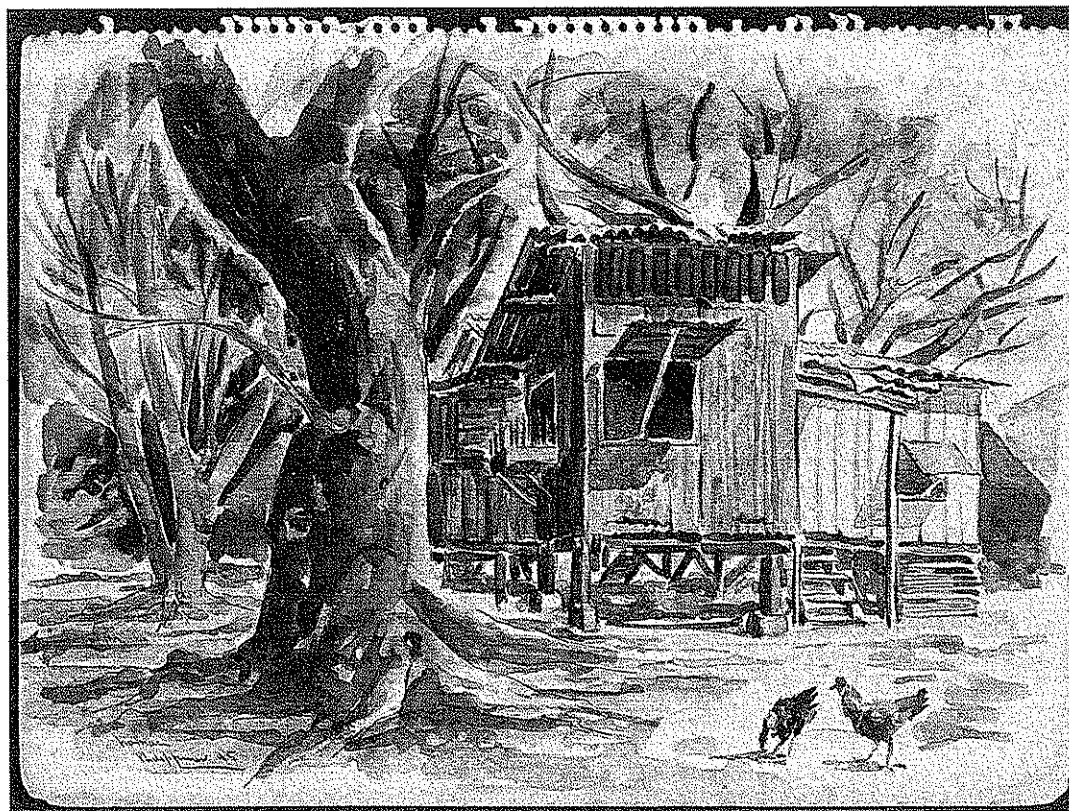
The painter Robert Gwathmey from New York had been to Puerto Rico invited by friends at the Division of Community Education. Gwathmey, a painter of great talent and printmaker (serigraphs), had advised me to look for work there, and by early 1951 I was working in the Division. After an absence of



Lorenzo Homar, Susan and Tita,
Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, 1952.
Foto: Colección: Familia Homar.

Lorenzo Homar, Susan y Tita,
Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, 1952.
Photo: Homar Family Collection.

¹ Fragment of the longer essay "Imágenes de Lorenzo Homar: entre Nueva York y San Juan", published in the book *El arte de bregar*, San Juan, Ediciones Callejón, 2000.



Untitled (Philippine house surrounded by trees, chickens, and yard),
1945, watercolor, 8 ¹⁵/₁₆" x 11 ¹⁵/₁₆".
Rare Books and Special Collections Collection*,
Harvey S. Firestone Library, Princeton University, NJ.
See: Catalog of Works, No. 39.

* From now on all works will be credited as Graphic Art Collection.

22 years Puerto Rico seemed a small and strange place at first. But beautiful and friendly. In fact, the public plazas in the towns and cities look just like those in the Philippine Islands. I missed enormously the Museum of Modern Art, only a block from Cartier, the Met, the Frick, the galleries in 57th St. But I got involved immediately with the local artists and even helped found the Puerto Rican Art Center.

The return was a rediscovery of the Island by a man shaped by the *other* Puerto Rican experience. Homar was willing to recognize the strangeness of the place, and to admit the need for a new learning experience. Determined to remain in Puerto Rico, he wanted to plant his feet firmly on the ground. He set himself the task of documenting in his drawings the people, the places, the objects of the place, creating his own archive of images. In the process he himself was gradually transformed, even as he put into practice his artistic knowledge. At the same time, he grew close to a group of young painters who had a great variety of interests and experiences, and who had acquired them outside Puerto Rico. His friendship with Rafael Tufiño, for example, was a source of inspiration for the definition of an aesthetic. In an interview with Mari Carmen Ramírez, Homar offered an image of that organic return:

(My first priority) was studying and constantly making notes wherever I went in Puerto Rico. The different types of people, the little houses in the barrios and the big mansions in the Condado, the kind of landscape and the color... so different from the United States! The way people dressed, the animals—I tried to capture all of that in my sketches. When I was commissioned to do posters, my greatest concern was to make sure that Puerto Ricans recognized themselves and their landscape and color... Tufiño, for example, made a great impression on me, because he painted and drew barrio types and houses like no one. That made me go back to a more naturalistic style than I was used to, but without sacrificing the level of quality of the work; that is, its

composition, color, etc. Those elements had to adapt to the aesthetic criteria I'd learned in my years of study and apprenticeship and work in New York, without banal sentimentalism of any kind.

Craft in the Studio

San Juan in the 1950s was home to a group of young writers, musicians, painters, and modern choreographers who bonded together in the friendship—and the tensions—that emerge from teamwork. Homar had brought with him the rich experience of the cultural and political debates of New York City, and the model of teachers and apprentices he had known in school and at work as a jewelry designer for Cartier. He brought the “studio” experience, in which art is a craft with rules and demands, with transmittable, teachable techniques. Very soon, his name became associated with the new production of artists that were making a name for themselves through the Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño (CAP). His watchful teaching played a fundamental role in the Graphics Workshop at DIVEDCO. He continued this work, with renewed energy, from 1957 to 1973 in the Graphics Workshop of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.

The workshops, or studios, were a space in which enriching dialogue took place. In them, many artists found a dialogue that surely included the ability to pronounce sharp rejections of other aesthetic or political positions. Being an apprentice was not simply being initiated in the craft; it was also a way of life and thought. Years later, Antonio Martorell, who founded his own Taller Alacrán (Scorpion Studio) in 1967

and eventually established other artistic practices, remembered his apprenticeship and the habits created in the workshop of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, in its space next to the former Casino de Puerto Rico. I take this text by Martorell from *Pintura y gráfica de los años 50*:

The Graphics Workshop at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture was at that time a pleasant, stimulating meeting place for plastic artists, writers, choreographers, musicians, political leaders... a space open to work and to the free discussion of ideas and national and international events, a forum that generated art and thinking in which practice and the demands of the craft were balanced by a constant flow, and questioning, of the most diverse theoretical ideas.

Artists and Artisans

Martorell's words confirm that in the fifties and sixties the utopia of a new order was operating. Old traditions were being renewed; the dream of a unified community was considered possible in the little city. It is no coincidence that Homar paid graphic homage to William Morris in 1983, and in 1990 to Puerto Rican calligrapher Guillermo Rodríguez Benítez. The portrait of Morris, the utopian socialist whom Homar admired so greatly, is a celebration of the many crafts practiced by the calligrapher and designer. Morris was the key figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement in England in the late nineteenth century. Among many other things, Morris studied medieval and Renaissance lettering and the art of book illustration, and his interest in these fields culminated in the celebrated publications of the Kelmscott Press. It is significant that Gropius and the

avant-garde Bauhaus group in Weimar are considered to continue the ideals and practices of Morris's movement. One sentence from the first Bauhaus Manifesto, in 1919, is often quoted, and Homar might well have subscribed to it: "There is no essential difference between the artist and the artisan... We believe in a guild of artisans, without distinction of class." It was possible, that is, to create, collectively, an art that might serve as a force to unite society. In the poster that Homar did in 1965 for the tenth anniversary of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, the areas of dance, music, museum, and printmakers are intertwined. It is, in a word, the Puerto Rican version of the Bauhaus. In 1960, in the note that Homar himself wrote for the brief catalogue of the exhibition of his work sponsored by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, he defined his place and his vision of the meaning of his "handicraft" with lucid conviction:

Earning my living as an artist, an artisan, I try to honor my craft with my very best efforts regardless of the type of work involved. A stamp, an illustration, or an idea to engrave or paint. Everything that happens around us is worth looking at. These are our times. We live in a society in which commercialism and dehumanization are rampant, creating a confusion of values and a mediocrity. And yet, as Eric Gill said, "The artist is the only responsible worker left, the only worker whose power of selection is effective in the work made by his hands."

A Great Wall of Posters

In that line, the first thing to be stressed is the recovery of ancient graphics traditions that Homar spearheaded. Curiously, that craftsmanlike "anachronism" produced an effect of modernity that

was seized upon by the members of the avant-garde in order to renew communication through a number of printed forms. In the workshop Homar headed at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, he began to work on a kind of huge wall of posters which required a great deal of art in the design and perfection of the printing process. Each of his beautiful engravings, each portrait contributed to a visual and polyphonic memory, to an archive composed of intense fragments linked and reinscribed in a new order. The result ranges from the majestic architecture of the letters in the posters for the Casa del Libro to the lightness and fluidity of the letters announcing the performances of the Ballets de San Juan.

The Image of the *Plena*

Homar gave new visibility to both classic figures and figures on the margins of culture and history. Piece by piece he created a visual history composed of fragments. The "national" was a way of seeing and reading specificities; that is, a way of constructing difference through a constellation of graphic signs. It was also a way of hearing voices and rhythms, as is shown in one of his first works, the *Plenas Portfolio*, which he did with Rafael Tufiño in 1954. This portfolio is now a classic of Puerto Rican culture. The collaboration between the two printmakers, their reciprocal stimulation, created a zone of letters and images in which the meaning of the lyrics and their translation to image is expanded and enriched. The twelve linoleum engravings celebrate the musical genre of the *plena* in a complex effort to open the visual arts to the sung language and to lyrics in the popular idiom. The *Plenas*

Portfolio, which also included an essay by Tomás Blanco, is a scaffolding on which others have continued to build. This graphic depiction of musical motifs is analogous to the verbal hybridization achieved by Luis Palés Matos in the texts that culminated in his book *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937). In a study titled "Lorenzo Homar y el arte contemporáneo de Puerto Rico," Marimar Benítez ably summarizes its significance: "This *Portfolio* is the most authentic expression of the foundations of the Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño: collective work, identification with the situation of our people, and the use of graphics to reach a wider audience." Antonio Martorell, in the essay cited earlier, sums up the aesthetics and the historical significance of the *Portfolio* while at the same time underscoring its dionysiac nature: "The *plenas* of Homar and Tufiño are music, gossip, fun, a bit of irreverence, satire, condemnation, and celebration made rhythms and lines, incision and high spirits. Engraved in linoleum with a line as sinuous as the rhythms they portray, the black and white profiles of these graphics began a road that José Rosa would later widen in his drawings and silk screens of masked dancers and irreverent saints' days."

Everything Made by Hand

In more than one sense, we might say that Homar has been the most literary of Puerto Rican graphic artists. And he communicated that passion for the written word to his students. The poetic language might be the letter transformed into visual art, and into the illustration of books. In a country with a very limited typographical and publishing tradition, Homar



Members of the Graphic Arts Workshop at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. Left to right: José R. Alicea, Rafael Tufiño, José M. Figueroa, Avilio Cajigas, Lorenzo Homar, and Carlos Raquel Rivera, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1960.

Miembros del Taller de Artes Gráficas del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. De izquierda a derecha, José R. Alicea, Rafael Tufiño, José M. Figueroa, Avilio Cajigas, Lorenzo Homar y Carlos Raquel Rivera, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1960.

dedicated himself with a goldsmith's passion to rewriting the quotations he had chosen and giving them an aura, fixing their beauty and value. In 1956, he illustrated Pedro Juan Soto's book *Spiks*. In 1959 he did an engraving in memory of the death of the poet Luis Palés Matos; the work was published first, like many of his works, in the magazine of the Institute of Puerto Rican



Culture. In 1960, the Institute itself published the Poetry Notebooks of Luis Lloréns Torres, beautifully illustrated by Homar. He did portraits of writers: René Marqués, César Andreu Iglesias, Juan Ramón Jiménez. His constant work with literature culminated in three classics of poetry and art: the painstaking movement of the woodcut *El unicornio en la isla* (The Unicorn on the Island); the large portrait of beloved poet Julia de Burgos in 1969; and *Tres estrofas de amor para soprano* (Three Stanzas of Love for Soprano), the very beautiful portfolio published by Galería Colibrí in 1971, with texts by Tomás Blanco and music by Pablo Casals.

Over and over, Homar sought inspiration in literary fragments, and he gave shine and sparkle to quotations from Julia de Burgos, José de Diego, Pablo Neruda, Franz Kafka, and José Hernández' *Martin Fierro*. For Homar, poetry was the printed letter, the beautiful "scripture" of a line, produced by craft, by hand: a bridge toward the images that nourish the poem. With his skill at the ancient arts of engraving, typography, and printing, he canonized, in a unique way, the texts and images of Luis Lloréns Torres, Tomás Blanco, Ramón Emeterio Betances, Eugenio María de Hostos, and, above all, Pedro Albizu Campos. In 1962, he did one of his characteristic prints, in which the letters themselves shape the image; the quotation was from the "Amades text." The letters come together to shape an image with a quotation in Catalán from typographer Joan

Plebiscite, 1960, pen and graphite, 13" x 10".
 Published in *Claridad*, Year II, no. 22, June, 1960.
 [San Juan, Puerto Rico.]. Dr. Georg H. Fromm Collection.
 See: Catalog of Works, No. 90.

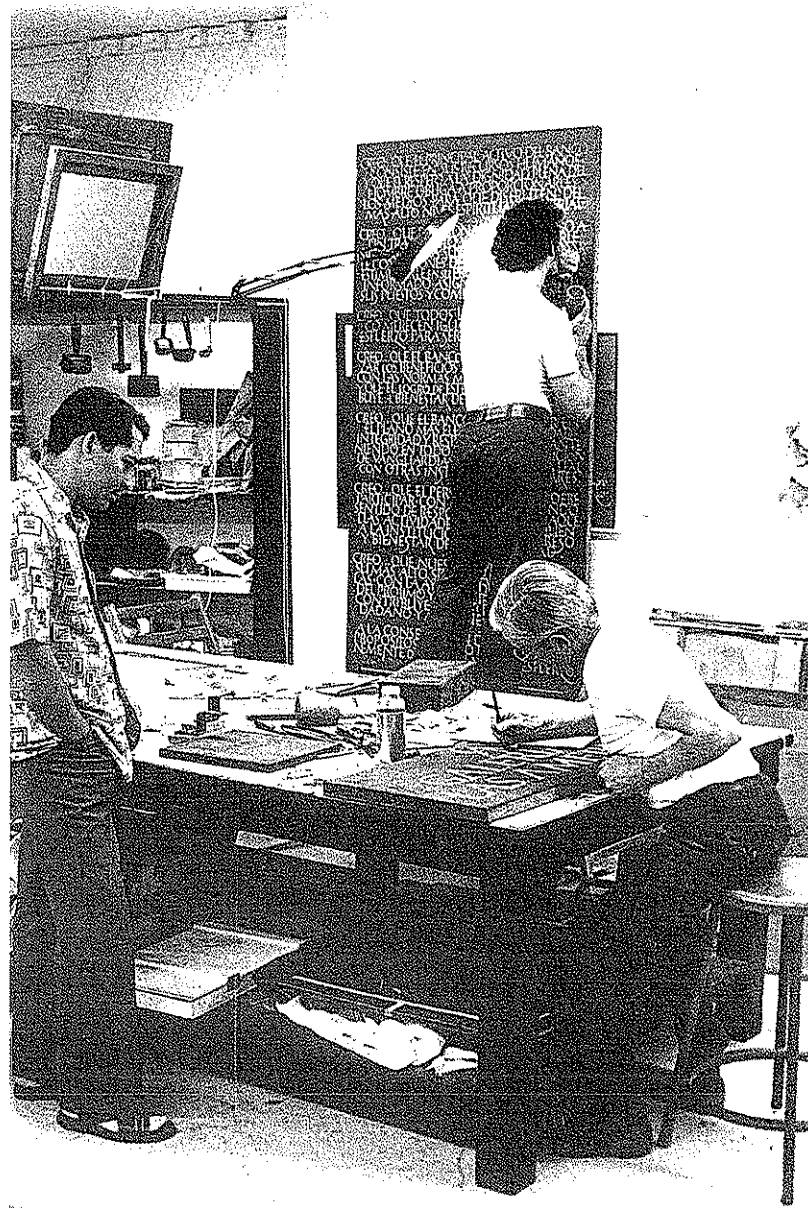
Amades —words that condense Homar's own concept of the tradition:

Hom considera la xilografia com la protohistòria de la impremta, i potser, per dir-ho millor, la impremta constitueix un perfeccionament de la xilografia.

I consider woodcuts to be the protohistory of printing, and vice versa —to say it even better, printing is a perfecting of the woodcut.

The Illustrated Library

In this regard, we must stress Homar's friendship in San Juan with Elmer Adler, the eminent printer and publisher, founder and director of the Casa del Libro, old—and rare—book collector. In 1940 Adler had founded Princeton University's Graphic Arts Collection, and he had directed it until 1952. When he retired, he moved to Puerto Rico, where he continued the bibliophile habits he had developed in New York, where he had been the editor of a magazine titled *The Colophon* and run a small but prestigious press, the Pynson Printers, with offices in the *New York Times* building. Homar found in Adler a stimulating and vastly erudite conversational partner. Adler was an example and an object lesson for Puerto Rican graphics: the use of a library as a place for garnering experience. In the treasures that Adler very soon began adding to the Casa del Libro, which still stands on Calle del Cristo in Old San Juan, Homar was able to study Renaissance typography, which, in turn, had copied letters discovered on ancient monuments unearthed in Europe. In the catalogue of the exhibition in honor of Homar titled *A Puerto Rican Master of Calligraphy & the Graphic Arts*, which was shown at Princeton in 1983,



Homar's studio. Left to right: Teófilo Batista, framer and gilder; Luis Abraham Ortiz, cutting slate plate; and Homar, cleaning excess gold from a plaque, 1974.
Photo: Max Toro.

Taller de Lorenzo Homar. De izquierda a derecha: Teófilo Batista, enmarcador y dorador; Luis Abraham Ortiz, cortando sobre piedra pizarra y Homar limpiando el exceso de oro en una tarja, 1974. Foto: Max Toro.

Dale Roylance called viewers' attention to that influence —so welcomed by the artist— and to an apprenticeship in calligraphy that was never to be completed:

One of the most powerful influences on Homar's style was his discovery of the historically vital tradition of Spanish calligraphy and penmanship, which Homar was to assimilate into his own work after the artist began to frequent the Casa del Libro, then still led by Elmer Adler. The library of the Casa del Libro contained not only many examples of the work of such modern masters of calligraphy as Eric Gill, Jan Van Krimpen and Hermann Zapf, but also examples of the Spanish writing masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These early engraved Spanish examples of flourishing italics, arabesques and floriated monogram letters were a source of artistic fascination to Homar, and he found particular inspiration in the work of one of Spain's most important early calligraphers, Juan de Yciar.

Images of War

And indeed, Homar's letters are a constant exploration of forms: angular and sudden in some cases; in others, set within a mysterious penumbra. With them he rendered exquisite homage to figures such as José Campeche, Bertrand Russell, Pedro Albizu Campos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, and Segundo Ruiz Belvis, and to Puerto Rican abolitionist texts. Simultaneously, Homar broke the political rules with the virulence of his caricatures. As though in explosions, with a very

expressionistic style that sometimes recalls the cruel images of Max Beckmann or George Grosz, Homar gave free rein to his satirical potential, which could be fearsome. In 1970, *La Escalera* published a selection of these caricatures in a truly memorable book, *Aquí en la lucha* —a title that sums up the artistic and political struggle of the Island's artist class.¹ There, in its satirical views of the Island's leading political figures, one can see Homar's carnivalesque vision of colonial politics, his denunciation of the mind-boggling and perverse aspects of politicians and bankers, and his sense of the alienating aspects of mass culture. One extraordinary example is the 1969 drawing titled *Los coroneles* (The Colonels), which presents the fascist elements of Luis Ferré's administration (1968-1972).

In the introduction to the volume, artist José Antonio Torres Martinó wrote the following words: "The genre (caricature) is a perfect fit for his strength of characterization, his genius for the biting and grotesque, his artistic skills, and his lifelong humanistic concerns." Antonio Martorell, who shares this tendency toward satire, has shrewdly summarized the extreme lines of Homar's poetics: "Humor and satire served him as well as solemnity and sacralization."

Arcadio Díaz Quiñones

¹ "Aquí en la lucha" is a common phrase in Puerto Rico meaning "same old, same old," or "getting by," but here given a very literal twist by Homar: "Here in the Struggle."