



ANTONIO MARTORELL

La Playa Negra I (Tar Beach I), 2010

© 2010, Antonio Martorell

ANTONIO MARTORELL (born 1939)

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woodcut on Japanese paper, 59 × 47 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase
through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

Background Information for Teachers

La Playa Negra I (Tar Beach I) portrays two images of the same woman: one elegantly dressed in high heels and a fur coat, and the other seated at a sewing machine, working long hours as a seamstress. The image is inspired by the artist's memories of growing up in Puerto Rico. Relatives of Antonio Martorell who had immigrated to New York City mailed portraits of themselves to family in Puerto Rico. Wrapped in luxurious wools and furs they smile happily from the photos, posing on rooftops overlooking New York City. A young Martorell was starstruck by the images of his glamorous and successful relatives, likening them to 1940s movie stars. Yet life for these immigrants was not as blissful as their portraits led their families to believe. The photographs were staged, masking the hard labor and low wages that had made the portraits possible. This realization inspired Martorell's *Tar Beach* print series, where he depicts a dual vision: the made-up figures of his fashionably dressed relatives juxtaposed with figures that depict their reality.

The title, *La Playa Negra*, is Spanish for "Tar Beach," an expression for the tar-covered New York City rooftops, the only outdoor "beach" available to workers in the summer. Martorell's print looks like an oversize postage stamp—a reference to how the photographs reached Puerto Rico, as well as Martorell's childhood interest in stamp collecting. Martorell credits the postal system for providing his earliest images of the American Dream: the portraits of his migrated relatives. During World War II, Puerto Rico's elite encouraged the mass exodus of working-class Puerto Ricans to the United States as a way to curb the island's unemployment rate. The island-based migrants traveled to the U.S. mainland by boat—alluded to by the cresting wave at the bottom of the artwork. They settled in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, working as laborers in garment factories and service and agricultural industries. Of his work, Martorell has said, "My mother was a seamstress... she remained at home sewing for us. But I relate to the laborers—to the working. Being an artist myself I work with my hands, so I feel a kindred spirit to anyone who works with their hands and makes or tries to make a living out of them."

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- The title of this artwork refers to the tarred rooftops of New York City tenement buildings. Why might this woman be sitting on the roof of her apartment building?
- Born and raised in Puerto Rico, the artist remembers exchanging letters and photographs with relatives who had emigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City. In *La Playa Negra I*, who is the sender? The recipient? What do you see that makes you say that? How has the artist emphasized the distance between them?
- How has the artist communicated the duality of immigrant life in New York?

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with a Federal Writers' Project interview in 1939 of a male immigrant from Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. During the Great Depression, unemployed writers were given work through a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) called the Federal Writers' Project. Some of the most compelling products of the project were the interviews with immigrants, many of Puerto Rican descent. The 1930s and 1940s saw mass immigration from Puerto Rico to the continental United States by those searching for better jobs and wages. In this interview, excerpted below, an unnamed Puerto Rican male discusses why he came to America and what his working conditions are like in the United States:

While in San Juan I had heard of the great shortage of labor help in New York. Many of my friends and acquaintances had come to this city. Some of them were employed at wages rating 2 or 3 times more than in Puerto Rico. Others weren't so fortunate, but still were making much better than at home. Therefore, I made up my mind not to waste this opportunity, considering that in Puerto Rico I'd never be able to progress as I wished to.

I arrived in New York during the summer season, and soon went after a job in my trade. I hadn't as yet considered the difficulties of the language, which I never had a chance to practice while at home or in Santo Domingo; the lack of experience even in my own trade; the great differences between the equipment and installation as compared to those at home; the exigencies of union and knowledge of this trade in New York, all which make me look very backward in the trade. At this time I realized that I had to look forward [to] something else to make a living....

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I have great respect and admiration toward American institutions. Am a good law-abiding citizen. Never have been in a court room. Have no plans for the future, but hope that I can live to see my children well educated. At my age, and handicapped with this broken wrist, I don't expect any further betterment regarding my economic condition.

Suggested Questions

- Why did this man leave Puerto Rico and come to the United States?
- Does he have hope for his future in America? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
- What difficulties did Puerto Rican immigrants encounter in their new homeland?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with an excerpt (below) from "La Carta" [The Letter] by José Luis González. Antonio Martorell's first woodcut was an illustration of this short story, a seminal work written in 1948. In it, a young man writes home to his family, assuring them that his move to San Juan has been a great success. The reader sees reality, however, when the youth is forced to beg for the cost of the stamp to mail his missive home. This parable illustrates the limited choices faced by Puerto Ricans seeking social and economic opportunity.

During the Great Depression, many Puerto Ricans farmed sugar in poverty, suffering as mainland U.S. farmers did. During World War II, industry seemed to offer a promising alternative to dependence on this one crop and to widespread unemployment. To attract U.S. capital to the island, in 1947 Puerto Rico's legislature offered tax incentives to American manufacturers. Urban factories soon sprang up, drawing laborers from the rural surrounds. The effects on the island's economy, however, were mixed, ultimately resulting in mass migrations of working-class Puerto Ricans to island cities and to the U.S. mainland in search of a better life.

San Juan, Puerto Rico March 8, 1947

Dear Mama,

As I was telling you before I came here, things are going well for me. As soon as I arrived I found work. They pay me 8 pesos a week and with this I live like an administrator at the central office over there....

I am going to see if I can have my picture taken one of these days and send it to you, mama.

The other day I saw Felo the son of Auntie Maria. He is also working but he makes less than I do, but I was lucky.

So, remember to write me and tell me everything that is going on over there.

*Your son who loves you and asks for your blessing,
Juan*

After signing the letter, he carefully folded the wrinkled paper full of smudges and put it away in his pants pocket. He walked over to the closest post office, and when he got there he pulled his thread bare cap down over his forehead and squatted in one of the doorways. He clenched his left hand out of sight, appearing to have only one hand, and extended his open right hand. When he collected the necessary five cents, he bought the envelope and the stamp and mailed the letter.

Suggested Questions

- How does the son's carefully worded letter navigate the fine line between truth and falsehood?
- Compare the letter writer in the story with the seamstress in the artwork. Are the portrayals presented to their families completely fictitious, or a facet of their true selves? What visual or textual evidence supports your position?

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