

Introductory words by Eli Barreto Talavera  
Exhibit Opening of “Opón Ifá” at Taller Boricua Gallery,  
Julia de Burgos Latino Arts Center.

Good evening everybody.

In matters of art, I tend to be a man of few words. Tonight, though, I will make an exception to the rule, and read this bunch of papers and let you know about the importance this exhibit has for me. *Opón-ifá*, among other things, is the synthesis of my two vocations in life. The first as painter, with five decades of dedication, and the second as babalawo, which I have cultivated for 35 years. Although each vocation, separately, has provided great satisfaction, it is not until today that within the pieces exhibited here, that I have forged and unified them both. At my age I can say without apologizing: when art and wisdom shake hands, one has to share and celebrate them. I also want to take this opportunity and share with you my path toward *opón ifá*.

## I

Before *opón ifá*, even before painting, my first attraction to art came about while I was in my high school geometry class. During the session a drawing of circles that were separated by colors captivated me. That geometry session was the first step into my future journey in art, first through sculpture and then through painting. In sculpture and utilizing the mix-media of the time, I created *Limite de masa atómica 145* that won the Puerto Rican Athenaeum’s first prize in 1965, a year before I entered the University of Puerto Rico. At the UPR I devote myself to painting: to work the surface and color into abstract landscapes. I experimented with surfaces divided in colored squares and clean textures, void of any perspective or relief.

During another period my work was characterized by the use of the figure of the square. By repeating transparencies and by taking advantage of my knowledge in sculpture, I created patterns of superimposed squares that I called 'sculptures' but today we can call 'totemic paintings.' My objective was to detach that coldness associated with the figure of the square in two ways: (1) by exploring with the wide range of the color palette, and (2) by impregnating it with a three-dimensional kinetic, through the superimposition of transparencies (layers) and rhythmic figures.

Then I continued exploring other patterns, until, first unconsciously, to the circle enclosed within squares. Among the paintings of that period we can observe square patterns coexisting within circular patterns. By this kinetic quality, and as perceived by some art critics, the circles suggested spinning flowers and mandalas. This slowly emerging kinetic circularity suggested in me the spirituality of the *opón ifá*.

## II

The inevitable question: what is the *opón ifá*? We enter, now to my second vocation: that of the babalawo, that is to say, the supreme priest of the Oracle of Ifá. The *opón ifá* is the instrument used by the babalawo to harmonize nature with the consultant through the Orunmila, the Guide to the Path of Life. In general, the babalawo consults Orunmila about the *osogbo* (or the problem) brought in by the petitioner and recommends what to do or not in order to turn him into an *iré* (into something constructive and productive). There are two-hundred and fifty-six *odduns* or letters that comprise the wisdom of the Ifá, and its scriptures are realized in the *opón ifá*. (I should add, that this scripture has been utilizing a binary system for centuries, previous to the computer binary language). Each *oddun* or letter represents one of the behaviors of human beings, and that in the register; the

babalawo takes care of cleansing the path of the consultant in order to return to his/her true identity in harmony within nature.

In relation to this harmony within nature, it is worthwhile mentioning that because it constitutes one foundation of the materialization of the Ifá and, symbolically, it is represented in the paintings from this exhibit. The Oracle of Ifá assumes that the power of human beings is premeditated, while the power of the rest of nature is primarily spontaneous. Human beings, as misfortune to its species, tend to destroy nature, even his very own nature. Ironically what distinguishes her/him from the rest of the species, that is mental faculties, make the specie forget that the specie itself is part of that nature. Moved by miserable purposes, by mean economic, religious and political principles, human beings divorce themselves from nature, by destroying, and by building their own chamber of tortures. Forgets that the Sun that greets him every day is inside the warmth of his own body, that the water that contaminates runs in his own blood, that the rivers he does not respect is the blood that animates his organism, that the Sea that he treats like a garbage dump is the mother that begets life, cleansed by the rain and allows his own survival. Returning the human being to its primal connections, with those energies that surround him and that live within him, is the physical and spiritual objective we babawalos are served by the *opón ifá*.

In physical terms, the *opón ifá* is a flat wooden tablet, with a circular contour, that represents the world. Within, all nature, time and wisdom converge. From its centre, like a mapa-mundi, the four cardinal points are extended: east, west, north and south, and its subdivisions. In Ifá each of these sixteen cardinal points correspond to one of the primal letters, called *mejís*, from which compound letters are born. There are a total of two-hundred and forty compound letters called *omoluos*.

With this brief background about the spirituality and physicality of the *opón ifá* I hope that you now can appreciate this exhibit in another manner. Now you know that the *opón ifá of the Oracle of Orunmila* is the matrix where these paintings are conceived. Each one of them, according to its dominant color, is a representation of the forces of nature (blue represents the sea; red, life and warmth; yellow, the river and minerals; green, flora; and thus subsequently).

Only one thing remains to be mentioned, that the focal point of each of these paintings is potentially you, the spectator. The expanding lines from the center are the fans of your potential paths. Also as a babawalo painter, I say that you have before you the product of fifteen years of the synthesis of my two lifetime vocations.

Take advantage of the crossroads. These *opón ifá* paintings are here to show you something. Observe them in concentration, feel and you'll *see*.

Thank You.