

Constructing the Nation at the 1955 Ciudad Trujillo World's Fair

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On December 20, 1955, the year-long Free World's Fair of Peace and Confraternity was inaugurated in Ciudad Trujillo in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of dictator Rafael L. Trujillo's rise to power. The fair featured performances, parades, art exhibits, and trade shows highlighting the artistic, commercial, and military feats achieved during the regime (1930-1961). This essay explores how the fair constructed the idea of a Dominican nation by defining a cultural and spatial geography that was described by a solid partition in the geopolitical border with Haiti, and a fluid marine threshold for tourists along the coastline. The fair also shaped the idea of the nation by defining modernity in terms of a hierarchical relationship between the city and the colonial quarters, establishing viewing parameters and regimenting the gaze with a walking tour that took visitors on a trek from the old colonial ruins to the modern fairgrounds. Objects examined in this essay include José Vela Zanetti's mural *The Dominicanization of the Border* (1955), as well as photographs from the *Official Guidebook of the International Peace and Progress Fair* (1955) and the *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre* (1956, 1957).¹ The curatorial program for the Pavilion of Foreign Affairs and Religion is also examined and contextualized.

General Overview of the Fairgrounds

Built upon a north-south axis and against the backdrop of the Caribbean Sea, the fairgrounds (Figure 1) contained seventy-one buildings within an area of 8,000 cubic meters and were characterized by stark open spaces and functional structures designed by Dominican architect and Yale graduate Guillermo González. The architectural ensemble

This essay is an abbreviated version of a chapter from my MA thesis, entitled *Constructing the Nation at the 1955 Ciudad Trujillo World's Fair: Tours, Parades, and Exhibitions* (2013). I am deeply grateful to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Stacie G. Widdifield, art history professor at the University of Arizona, for the creative editing solutions she provided throughout the entire thesis-writing process. I am also indebted to Dr. Sarah J. Moore, art history professor at the University of Arizona, for ushering me into the world of international expositions and allowing me to nurture my thesis project within the framework of her courses on nineteenth-century European art and nineteenth-century American art.

¹ This mural is attributed to José Vela Zanetti in *Official Guidebook of the International Peace and Progress Fair* (1955), pages 9 and 19. Dominican State Publication, *Official Guidebook of the International Peace and Progress Fair* (New York: Amador A. Marin, 1955), 8. However, it is not listed among his works in *Vela Zanetti: La obra dominicana*

followed the postwar International Style that boasted anti-communist ideological underpinnings. Trujillo was a trooper trained by the U.S. Marines during their first occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-24), and he adopted the theme of freedom, peace, and anti-communism for the fair in a bid to align State ideology with the Cold War discourse. However, at the fair the rhetoric of democracy was belied by the overwhelming insertion of busts, statues, and plaques paying homage to the *Generalissimo* and his family. The rhetoric of democracy was further belied by the royalist semantics in place, where buildings were being called *palacios* (palaces). Choosing the theme of political freedom while commissioning grand manner portraiture and employing semantics for the built environment that was best suited for a monarchical regime was contradictory. This contradiction illustrated architect Omar Rancier's claim that the regime used a "double code"—architecturally and ideologically—in the transition to modernity.² In fact, throughout the city, classical buildings were being erected, such as the National Palace (1947) and the Palace of Fine Arts (1956), and Modernist urban planning projects like the fair, which attempted to make the city more efficient and motor vehicle ready, simultaneously rendered it "a medium to promote the dictatorship's power and presence."³

The Walking Tour: From Old to New

Speaking at the inauguration of the fair, Trujillo declared: "We have not built [only] for the present, but for the future as well."⁴ This concern with facing the future is reflected in the statue by Antonio Toribio entitled *The Era of Trujillo* (Figure 2). This statue is located at the base of the *Symbol of*

de Vela Zanetti 1939-1981 (1981), a catalogue of all the works he produced while in exile in the Dominican Republic. Jeanette Miller, *Vela Zanetti: La Obra Dominicana de Vela Zanetti: 1939-1981* (Santo Domingo: Galeria de Arte Moderno, 1981). I decided upon the Vela Zanetti attribution based on stylistic similarities in composition and rendition of figures shared with other paintings attributed to Vela Zanetti. A likely possibility is that Vela Zanetti designed the mural and someone else executed it.

² Omar Rancier, "Santo Domingo: Modernity and Dictatorship," *Docomomo Journal* 33 (2005): 53.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Dominican State Publication, *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre* (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1956), 1:14.

the Fair at the south entrance to the fair. It is a monochrome sculpture made of cement and stone covered with a white bronze patina.⁵ The statue depicts a female walking forward, her long stride caught in mid-action while her undulating tunic reveals part of her chest.

The statue seems to move through space with a steady glide, suggesting a continuity of motion that evokes Umberto Boccioni's 1913 Italian Futurist *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (Figure 3). The Futurist Manifesto⁶ offers a qualified parallel to Trujillo regime ideology not only in its preoccupation with facing the future, but also in its glorification of war and war technologies, ultranationalist fervor, and the negation of history. Interestingly, Toribio's statue maintains its formal integrity instead of bearing signs of resistance to the elements it comes in contact with, as is the case with Boccioni's sculpture—which seems to have been molded by the wind. Indeed, *The Era of Trujillo* raced ahead unperturbed just as Trujillo's bureaucratic machine moved forward unfazed and unapologetically, crushing a long history of dissidence on its way to progress.

This preoccupation with depicting the future while contrasting it to a selective past is taken up again with the fair's sightseeing tour. As part of the activities related to the fair, visitors were encouraged to tour the town and take a walk from the colonial city to the fairgrounds. The *Official Guidebook of the Fair* provided photographs of landmarks with short captions. This guidebook included a recommendation for a route that began along the banks of the Ozama River in the eastern part of the city and concluded at the end of the ocean-lined George Washington Avenue on the western side, a peregrination that seemed to reinforce the importance of water in the history of the city.

From the ruins of Diego Columbus' Castle to the Tower of Homage, stopping for a while at Nicolas de Bari's Hospital, the oldest in the New World, you will admire the Cathedral, a magnificent sample of Spanish colonial architecture where Columbus' remains are buried. The Surprise in store for you is that while you enjoy your visit to those places you can also admire the modern part of the city based on correctly lined streets, tropical green vegetation and the blue waters of the Caribbean. This wonderful composition is climaxed by the beautiful buildings of the Free World Peace and Brotherhood Fair. Trujillo's monuments worth visiting are: Columbus' Castle; the Homage Tower; the First Col-

lege established in the Americas; the oldest Cathedral in the Americas; St Nicolas de Bari's Hospital; the Palace of the Captain General built during the early Spanish rule; the Convent of St Claire and the Church of Regina Angelorum. Now, in the modern section of the city, the foremost places of interest might well be the National Palace, the University City, the Palace of Fine Arts, the Palace of "La Voz Dominicana", the Communications Palace and the Dominican Party Palace. All this is just a prelude to what is in store for you at the end of that beautiful, almost endless George Washington Avenue which leads to the Free World Peace and Brotherhood Fair.⁷

Structuring a walk that started in the colonial quarters and ended at the fairgrounds emphasized contrasts and progression. Besides the fact that the walk itself took a visitor physically forward in time, the visual comparison between the broad uniform avenues that accommodated vehicles in the fairgrounds versus the narrower streets made originally for pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages in the colonial city promoted a binary opposition between progress/modernity and tradition/heritage.

Perhaps because of the walking tour and the projected number of international visitors, the colonial center and the western border of the city were refashioned. This refashioning was carried out not only through a program of physical construction, but through the written word and visual representation as well. In the colonial city, ruins were transformed into museums. By 1957, the *Alcázar de Colón* (Palace of Columbus), the oldest royal mansion in the Americas, built in 1510, was refitted and turned into the viceregal museum, and the former *Iglesia de San Ignacio de la Compañía de Jesús*, a Jesuit monastery, which by then served as a theater and tobacco warehouse, was restored and dedicated as the national pantheon.

The *Guía de Ciudad Trujillo* (Ciudad Trujillo Guidebook) used language and images to restructure the relationship between the colonial quarters and the city center.⁸ The *Guía* was published in 1940 following a tradition that began as early as 1906 with the first guidebook published to attract foreign investors.⁹ The *Guía* divided the city into two sections: the *Ciudad Trujillo Antigua* (the colonial quarters) and *Ciudad Trujillo Moderna* (the newly built administrative center). According to the *Guía*, the beginnings of modernity dated back to 1930, the year Trujillo came to power and began reconstruction after Hurricane San Zenón had razed

⁵ Dominican State Publication, 8.

⁶ "Manifesto of Futurism," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed 8 December 2012, <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/bps/additionalcontent/8/435828/>.

⁷ Dominican State Publication, *Official Guidebook*, 41.

⁸ Dirección Nacional de Turismo, *Guía de Ciudad Trujillo, capital de la República Dominicana* (Ciudad Trujillo: Ucar, García y cía., 1940), 25.

⁹ Lauren Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 276n13.

the city to the ground, sparing the colonial core and the concrete buildings made by the Americans in the 1920s.¹⁰ Thus modernity was associated with the city and with overcoming the destructive power of nature. This man versus nature dialectic resonated with Taylorism, a theory of scientific management that was popularized during the early twentieth century. According to Taylorism, humans were a wild variable in the industrial production equation, and they had to be subdued by the standardizing power of the machine. The rationalizing mechanics of the Taylor method predicated control over unruly human behavioral patterns in the same way that Trujillo poised himself as the engineer who could fix the havoc caused by the unpredictability of weather patterns.

Photography and the guidebook played a major role in establishing the terms of the relationship between the modern city and the colonial core. Guidebook maps allowed the viewer to recognize that the colonial ruins were politically part of the city, while the photographs, in revealing contemporary clusters of modernity—such as a chain divider or a moving car—inform the viewer that the ruins are in essence surrounded and supported by modernity (Figure 4). These photographs also expose the new function of these ruins: they are an object of scientific study and observation, signaling that Dominican society at this point in time has the technological and intellectual tools to interpret the past with scientific rigor. Ciudad Trujillo laid claim to its colonial history by controlling the visualization of its ruins, emphasizing that Spanish colonial architecture constituted Dominican monuments which, in turn, stood on a territory that had fully entered into the age of modernity.

José Vela Zanetti's Dominicanization of the Border

Dominicanization of the Border was created by José Vela Zanetti (1913-1999) for the Pavilion of Foreign Relations and Religion, and, according to the *Album de Oro*, the painting symbolized Dominican progress throughout history.¹¹ The polychrome mural (Figure 5 and Figure 5a) measures approximately six by fourteen feet and follows a triptych format.¹² The center panel features a group of male peasants contemplating a muscular kneeling man as he brandishes the national emblem. His right leg is firmly grounded, and his pose is reminiscent of depictions of Columbus upon disembarkation at the islands that are now

known as the Bahamas. In this mural, however, the notorious conquistador is replaced by an anonymous dark skinned, loincloth-wearing figure, and the sword and the royal banner of Spain have been swapped with the Dominican *escudo* or national shield, which literally shields or conceals the figure's face. To the right, another group of male figures—peasants and engineers—actively work at building the nation, literally block by block. Next to this vignette, the family unit meets scientific progress and discards traditional healing practices by seeking medical care for their infant. The scene shows the mother handing the child over to the nurse while the doctor looks into a microscope. At the very left, a priest evangelizes a family, standing as a sentinel with his back to the border with Haiti; tall and thick fortress walls rise behind him effectively sealing off the territory; to the right of the priest and family a teacher gives a geography lesson to a group of attentive schoolchildren: on a blackboard he traces the map of the Dominican Republic, emphasizing the borderline. These figural groups inhabit a space encumbered by the rubble, false idols, and torn pieces of a desecrated society. The outline that encloses this space is shown from a three-dimensional bird's eye perspective, conveying the sense that the island is a chunk of earth that has broken off from a larger structure, and that the area it occupies—like a jigsaw puzzle piece—has been predetermined and pre-cut. The island nation depicted here is locked into a rigid structural grid sanctioned by geography, its confines patrolled since colonial times by the ever-vigilant Ozama fortress.

Vela Zanetti, a Spanish muralist whose Socialist father was murdered in Gen. Francisco Franco's Spain, went into exile in the Dominican Republic in 1939.¹³ Vela Zanetti was one of many Spaniards and Jews who fled persecution in Europe and found refuge in the Caribbean island. Trujillo's policy of granting asylum to European citizens came on the heels of the 1937 Parsley Massacre, when Trujillo ordered the slaying of any person suspected of being a Haitian national caught on the Dominican side of the border. Soldiers killed anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 people by machete if the suspect failed to pronounce the word *perejil* (parsley) with the Hispanicized rolling "r." The genocide provoked a global wave of indignation, and his agreement to receive refugees was seen as an appeasement of the international community, and an attempt to whiten the Dominican population by relocating many of the European communities in agricultural

¹⁰ San Zenón hurricane killed 2,000 to 3,000 people, destroyed 90% of the buildings in Ciudad Trujillo, and was hailed as an omen and signaled that Trujillo was a force to be reckoned with. For more, see Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction*, 66.

¹¹ Dominican State Publication, *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre* (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1957), 2: 129.

¹² The mural is described in *Official Guidebook*, page 19, as follows: "An interesting and significant mural by the famous painter Vela Zanetti holds first place. This mural represents the sense of national pride in our frontier regions, where the Dominican and his qualities used to

be hampered by poverty and superstition. In this work one may see a great figure, which raises aloft the National Escutcheon, lifting it through the efforts of Trujillo. Over the boundary line, which serves as base for the mural, are raised churches, hospitals, school and villages. On the side one sees a mask, and the spire of a Christian church, as symbols of the mental confusion in which our frontiersman formerly lived before he was rescued by the statesmanship of Trujillo."

¹³ For more on European artists exiled in the Dominican Republic in the 1940s, see Danilo de los Santos, *Memoria de la pintura dominicana* (Santo Domingo: Grupo León Jiménez, 2003), 2: 101-193.

colonies near or on the border.¹⁴ The immigrant scholars and artists such as Spanish painters Eugenio Granell and Josep Gausachs, and Jewish intellectuals such as archaeologist Erwin Walter Palm, made lasting contributions to the intellectual climate of the nation. For example, Palm, a student and friend of renowned art historian Erwin Panofsky, compiled a compendium of colonial architecture,¹⁵ while Vela Zanetti had his own teaching studio and later became the director of the Academy of Fine Arts.¹⁶

Vela Zanetti's work fits into the canon of Social Realism, an art movement that gained popularity during the early twentieth century through the work of the Mexican muralists. Social Realist works were characterized by the naturalized treatment of subjects and the humanist subject matter focusing mostly on the plight of the working classes, the oppressed, and the indigenous population. Vela Zanetti drew inspiration from Mexican muralism, traveling to Mexico City in 1953 to learn from the masters after finishing a mural he was commissioned to paint for the United Nations. *Mankind's Struggle for a Lasting Peace* (1953) was painted for the inauguration of the U.N. through the sponsorship of a Guggenheim Fellowship.¹⁷ The mural is Vela Zanetti's most highly acclaimed piece; its content and form firmly inscribing it within the category of Social Realism. The mural is a chilling depiction of torture, war, and destruction as experienced by the family unit in a space that vaguely evokes a Nazi concentration camp. The center features a four-armed figure placing the emblem of the U.N. on the head of a man who holds a pendulum, symbolizing a world that has finally found the path to balance and common sense.

Dominicanization of the Border was displayed at the Pavilion of Foreign Affairs and Religion, a venue that showcased developments related to the consolidation of Christianity as well as a layout of the major foreign policy decisions pursued by the government. Items in the pavilion included: an exhibit of the coats of arms and emblems of the democratic countries of the West (Figure 6); the Trujillo-Hull Treaty that cancelled foreign debt; the Vatican Covenant that defined the diplomatic relationship between the Vatican and Dominican Republic; and the statistical data on federal cash donations to the Catholic Church.¹⁸ The juxtaposition of church and foreign policy, two seemingly disparate areas of national life, makes sense in terms of Trujillo's political strategy. The *Album de Oro* defines the purpose of the Pavilion as follows:

...the pavilion... is a *graphic synthesis of the current position that the Dominican Republic occupies in relation to the free world,*

in which she lives as *an equal*, working... in defense of its *democratic and Christian ideals*, which are the two greatest drivers of *western civilization*. [Author's translation and emphasis]

This statement demonstrates that uniting church and foreign policy in an exhibition was a strategic move. At a time when the Trujillo government was beginning to be isolated in the region, it was fitting to remind the world that its transgressions were committed under the watchful eye of the international community. The Parsley Massacre was being justified in the name of Western Christian civilization with the aim of stamping out voodoo and superstitious practices in the eastern part of the island. The list of lavish gifts the Church received from Trujillo is a public reminder of the deep ties that unite them. The international community was also singled out as a collaborator via the display of the coats of arms which identified each one of the participating States as being part of the Western Christian civilization in whose name the massacre had been executed. Likewise, the anti-communist stance was wielded enthusiastically to remind the U.S. that the Dominican Republic was a strong political ally in the region. Trujillo was thus able to challenge U.S. supremacy openly, declaring the small island to be on equal footing with these other great, free, and larger Western civilized countries.

The set of items exhibited in this pavilion attempted to justify Trujillo's genocide policy at home and abroad by suggesting that these measures were carried out in the name of preserving Christian values and eradicating communism, initiatives that the Church and the U.S.-led coalition of democratic countries had signed off on. Vela Zanetti's mural eloquently captures the genius of this ultranationalist campaign by not portraying the brutal means through which the goal of an ideal society would be achieved. Murder is omitted, the excluded are not represented, and a set of core values is emphasized in an effort to craft a national identity. These values include patriotism and loyalty to the nation, a strong work ethic, Christian morality, and confidence in orthodox medicine practices. It is also interesting that the man holding the emblem in the center of the mural is a shade darker than the rest, which reintroduces into the dialogue about nationhood the African heritage that the state's Hispanicizing policies sought to deny. The production context for the mural is also revealing considering that an artist who had fled from rightwing nationalist persecution was chosen to depict a glorified justification for a similar type of persecu-

¹⁴ Information on the 1937 Parsley Massacre was obtained from Carlos Julio Félix, *La frontera de la isla compartida* (Santo Domingo: CON-ADEX, 2008).

¹⁵ Erwin Walter Palm, "Introduction," in *Santo Domingo, Arte y Urbanismo Colonial*, ed. Miguel D. Mena (Santo Domingo: CieloNaranja, 2007), I-XIV.

¹⁶ De los Santos, *Memoria de la pintura*, 2:156.

¹⁷ "José Vela Zanetti Dies at 85; Painter of Mural at the U.N.," *New York Times*, accessed 8 December 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/06/arts/jose-vela-zanetti-dies-at-85-painter-of-mural-at-the-un.html>.

¹⁸ Dominican State Publication, *Album de Oro*, 1:365-368.

tion. In fact, the Dominican government maintained strong diplomatic ties with the Franco regime.¹⁹

This emphasis on the border with Haiti came in contrast to the emphasis being placed on the country's other border, its coastline. The *Album de Oro* features photographs of beaches (Figures 7 and 8) that seek to promote international tourism. Popular landscape conventions constructed the image of the beach as a place that was at once different and familiar: the explorer scene with the voyeuristic framing device of exotic palm trees; the man-coexisting-in-nature convention; and now the modern-hotel-amenities convention that turned nature into natural resources by framing the beach within the utilitarian lens of commercial activity. This conceptualization of the coastline as a fluid and welcoming border stood out against the rigidity of the borderline in the western frontier.

Trujillo had in fact encouraged international tourism from the beginning of his time in office. In 1937, the first major luxury tourist vessel had arrived from Canada with hundreds of tourists eager to explore the city.²⁰ The *Guía de Ciudad Trujillo*, published by the National Bureau of Tourism as early as 1940, offered practical advice to visitors: everything from where to eat and what to visit, to bus schedules and a comprehensive list of one-way streets in the city.²¹ And then in the early 1950s, Pan-American Airlines began direct bargain flights from New York as lavish state-

built and American-managed hotels set up shop along the coast.²² *Hotel Hamaca* (1951), for example, was a seaside state-built hotel that catered to a growing number of international (and also domestic) tourists seeking leisure at the beach. The road to the fetishization of the beach as a place reserved for people who can afford leisure begins with the construction of commercial oceanfront hotels, and it also traces back to the dissemination of tourist maps in which beaches are marked with a logo of umbrellas or women in bikinis, a utilitarian emblem that defined the beach's function and the identity of its users.

The Ciudad Trujillo World's Fair set out to define a cultural and spatial geography with a perimeter that was variable at the coastline but permanent at the border with Haiti. Modernity was an important part of the discourse that fashioned the body of the nation to face away from Haiti, square up to the United States, and stare directly into the eyes of Spain. The walking tour, the beach tourism campaign, and Vela Zanetti's mural shaped the contours of national territory by providing a framework from which to see this new central-periphery relationship, and a vantage point from which to explore discursive notions of race, landscape, geography, and social relations.

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¹⁹ Dominican State Publication, *Album de Oro*, 1:371-372.

²⁰ Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction*, 123-124.

²¹ Dirección Nacional de Turismo, *Guía de Ciudad Trujillo, capital de la República Dominicana* (Ciudad Trujillo: Ucar, García y cía., 1940), 25.

²² *Ibid.*



Figure 1. Guillermo González, Ciudad Trujillo fairgrounds, 1955, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1956), page 21.



Figure 2. Antonio Toribio, *The Era of Trujillo*, 1955, cement and stone, from *Official Guidebook of the International Peace and Progress Fair* (New York: Amador A. Marin, 1955), page 26.



Figure 3. Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, bronze, h. 48, w. 151/2, d. 36 inches (121.9 x 39.4 x 91.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989 (1990. 38.3). Available from: ARTstor, <http://artstor.org> (accessed 16 April 2013).



Figure 4. Santa María de la Encarnación Cathedral, c.1521-1541, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, 2 (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1957), page 94.

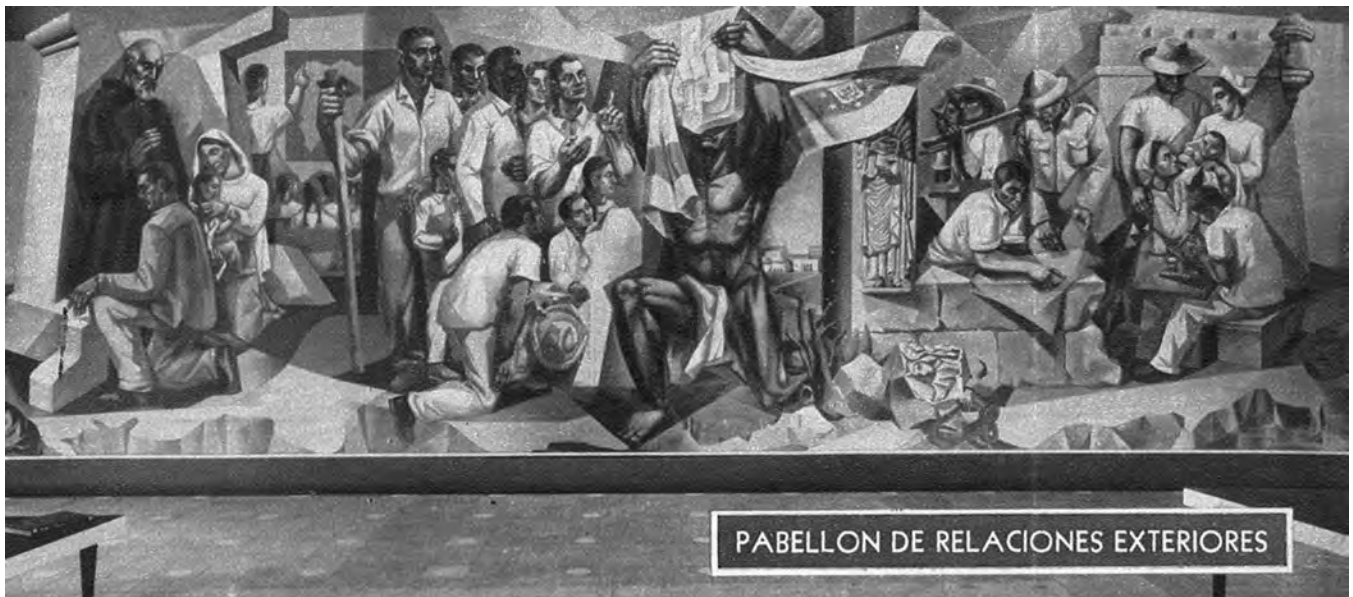


Figure 5. José Vela Zanetti, *Dominicanization of the Border*, c. 1955, mural, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1956), page 367.



Figure 5a. A recreation of the *Dominicanization* mural by the author, 2013.

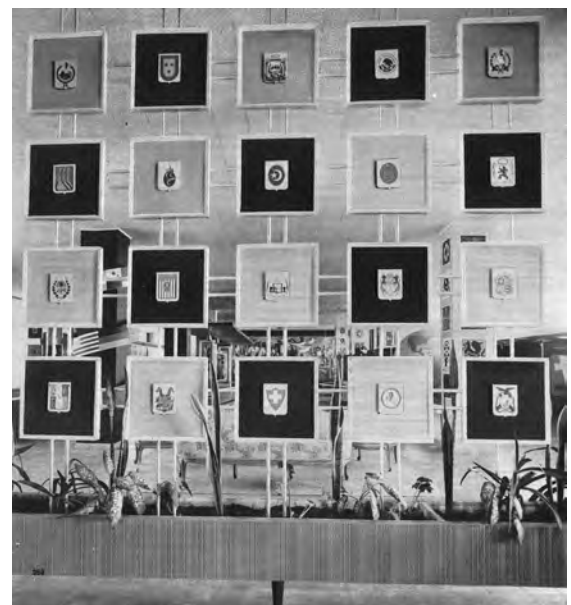


Figure 6. Coats of Arms exhibit at the Ciudad Trujillo world's fair, 1955, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, 1 (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1956), page 368.



PLAYA DE BOCA CHICA

El mar Caribe acaricia la playa de Boca Chica, uno de los lugares predilectos del turismo internacional.

Figure 7. Boca Chica beach, c.1955, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre*, 2 (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1957), page 159.

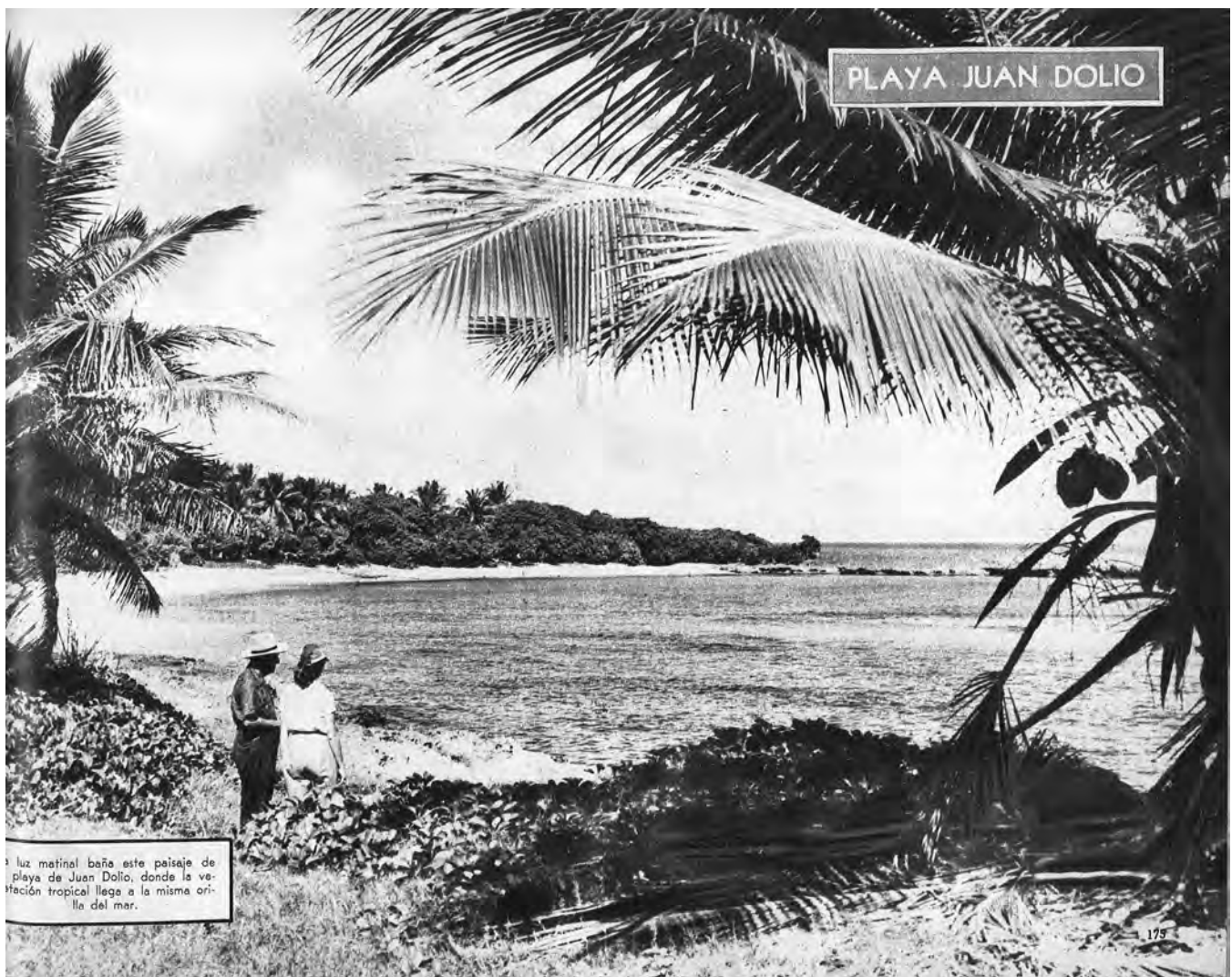


Figure 8. Juan Dolio beach, c. 1955, Archivo General de la Nación, from *Album de Oro de la Feria de la Paz y Confraternidad del Mundo Libre, 2* (Ciudad Trujillo: n.p., 1957), page 175.