

Eric Alvarez

# From Petroglyphs to Pride: The Visual Culture in Puerto Rico and Beyond



*Figure 1*

“¡Yo soy Boricua, pa’que tu lo sepas! (I am Puerto Rican, just so you know!)” These words were chanted by people parading the streets during the San Sebastián Street Festival as I took a picture of a vibrant, yellow building in Old San Juan, PR. When looking at this image (*see Figure 1*), one can see that the building’s door possesses the symbol of the Taino Sun god reimagined to include the design and colors of the Puerto Rican flag.

In their text, *Practices of Looking*, authors Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken analyze the societal impact of visuals, such as my own, especially the fact that visuals convey a meaning that demands context. Similarly, with a deeper understanding, one can observe how figure 1 shows the proud amalgamation of both Puerto Rico’s indigenous roots and their current, Latin American cultural identity. This concept of contextual meaning has only grown in the advent of

the digital age, where photo-sharing sites such as Instagram and VSCO have made sharing visuals, such as my own, an efficient and indispensable part of society. Authors such as Nicholas Mirzoeff in Chapter 1 of *The Visual Culture Reader*, attribute the proliferation of visual culture to our society's modern tendency to visualize what is not innately visual. Comparably, figure 1 and many other images on Instagram and VSCO use the Puerto Rican flag and Taino symbols to express the inherently abstract concept of national pride to the world. In this sense, with the growth of photo-sharing platforms, visuals have become a powerful source for understanding the once ineffable and contextually-restricted aspects of humanity, such as what it means to be 'Boricua.'

During the Pre-Columbian era, the indigenous people of the island known as the Taínos used the visual medium of petroglyphs to showcase aspects of their culture (e.g. the sun symbol that depicted the sun as their powerful god who provided heat and light). After the Spaniards invaded the island, however, the cultural landscape completely changed, with Catholicism and Spanish soon dominating the population. Despite years of colonization, the people of Puerto Rico latched onto their roots while also embracing their current Spanish and American influence, resulting in their unique cultural identity and the proliferation of Taíno symbols and the Puerto Rican flag's popular culture.

Regardless of what form a visual might take, whether it be a political cartoon aimed to poke fun at the Allies in WWII or the flag of a nation, it's always created with an intended purpose and/or meaning. In their book titled *Practices of Looking*, authors Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright state, "Over time, images have been used to represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent...abstract

concepts.” In the case of figure 1, which displays the flag of Puerto Rico inside the Taíno Sun symbol, there was a clear intent to represent the island’s unique mixture of Taíno and Latin American tendencies. The Taíno Sun symbol is a direct allusion to the indigenous people of Puerto Rico, since their influence is still felt in everyday life on the island. For example, some municipalities on the island are named after Taíno tribe leaders (also known as ‘caciques’), such as the municipality of Caguas being named after the ‘cacique,’ Caguax. Furthermore, the Taínos also influenced the culinary landscape of the island as they were some of the first to capitalize from local crops such as cassava, yautias, mamey, etc. which are main ingredients in many traditional Puerto Rican dishes, like mofongo, today. The other main component of figure 1 is its use of the Puerto Rican flag, which serves to represent an outward affirmation of the island’s Latin American cultural identity, especially in present day, where the issue of the island’s status as a Commonwealth of the United States has sparked a discussion of cultural sovereignty. The key factor in figure 1, however, is the fact that both of these components are merged together so as to represent the most historically expansive version of the Puerto Rican identity. This is where being ‘Boricua’ means acknowledging one’s ties to the Taíno culture, while also embracing one’s Hispanic and Latino identity.

A visual’s impact, however, will heavily depend on the preconceived notions of the viewer. Sturken and Cartwright declare in *Practices of Looking*, “The capacity of images to affect us as viewers...is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed.” Given the fact that my familial ties lie in Puerto Rico and I have lived on the island and been exposed to the island’s daily culture, my perception of figure 1 differs significantly from that of someone who has no connection to the

island. For example, after living on the island for multiple years, I have been exposed to the political climate of the island, where the discussion of political status is rampant. In this climate, there are three dominating political parties: the New Progressive Party, the Puerto Rican Independence Party, and the Popular Democratic Party. Each of these parties has an opinion regarding Puerto Rico's status, whether it be that statehood under the United States won't hinder its cultural identity, that the island should become an independent nation, or that it should remain a Commonwealth of the U.S. Due to my exposure to these conversations in my everyday life, figure 1's implementation of the Puerto Rican flag with a Taino symbol has a greater impact for me as it directly addresses the issue of political status against cultural identity. However, if someone was not given the same geopolitical context, they would just observe the picture and take notice of the composition, colors, and, perhaps, recognize the design of the Puerto Rican flag, but not grasp its cultural and political significance. However, this issue of cultural ignorance is diminishing in today's digital age, where images are constantly shared around the world through social media, making society more reliant on visual culture rather than written language to understand the world around them.

Due to this paradigm shift from a textual to a visual understanding of the world, people begin to rely on images and symbols, like the Puerto Rican or Taino symbols, in order to fully comprehend and express their cultural identity—a concept that is inherently abstract. In Chapter 1 of *The Visual Culture Reader*, author Nicholas Mirzoeff states, “One of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual... This visualizing makes the modern period radically different from the ancient and medieval world in which the world was understood as a book.” This reliance on visuals is only heightened

with the introduction of advanced smartphone cameras and photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram and VSCO which encourage user expression while also prioritizing visuals over text, demoting written language to captions. As a result of this new technology, creating visuals and sharing it to the rest of world is easier than ever before. Figure 1, which I took on my iPhone and posted on VSCO to share the beauty of Puerto Rico with others, is a prime example of this evolution in technology. With the advent of these photo-sharing platforms, not only have visuals been prioritized over written language, but images on a specific topic have been associated with hashtags. For example, the Taino symbol and the Puerto Rican flag in figure 1, which aim to assert the abstract concept of the island's independent cultural identity, are components that are present in millions of other images on Instagram and VSCO under the hashtags: #PuertoRico, #Boricua, #Taino, etc. This essentially provides the user with a curated glimpse into the Puerto Rican experience, visually highlighting the food, music, and locations of the island while fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural context. Consequently, not only are these popular platforms altering our perception of the societal and cultural value of visuals, but they are also making these visuals widely available around the world, which, as a result, exposes the world to the visuals' cultural contexts. With this understanding, the wide adoption of new photo-sharing platforms and advanced mobile cameras has significantly proliferated the modern tendency to visualize inherently abstract concepts of the human experience, and has allowed societies to better understand the world around them.

Given Sturken and Cartwright's claim that visuals are contextual and meaningful and Mirzoeff's stance that society has increasingly gravitated towards visuals for an understanding of the world, it's evident that visuals have drastically altered the way we communicate ideas and

emotions. This is especially present with my simple image of a mustard yellow building embellished with the Taino Sun symbol and the Puerto Rican flag. At first, it may just seem like any other tourist-like picture of a building in Old San Juan, PR. However, after considering its cultural context, the image's simple components effectively connect the initial petroglyphs of the Tainos to the island's current Latin American pride. Moreover, with the growth of photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram and VSCO and their curating system of hashtags, users all around the world are now also able to visually experience the pride of 'Boricuas' everywhere.

Works Cited

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "What Is Visual Culture?" *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nick

Mirzoeff, Routledge, 1998, pp. 6–7.

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*.

Oxford University Press, 2001.