

## **Cultural heritage as an educational component in the work of Francisco Prat Puig**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present research responds to the need to study a relevant figure of the university teaching profession: Francisco Prat Puig; Catalan émigré who arrived in this country with recognized achievements as a pedagogue, researcher, archaeologist and restorer. Its purpose is to systematize the work of Dr. Prat Puig as a manager and researcher of the historical-cultural heritage of the eastern region of Cuba. For its development, theoretical and empirical methods were used that allowed the highlighted sources to be synthesized. The research provides a multidisciplinary study on the theoretical-practical work of Dr. Prat Puig in relation to his work linked to the conservation, enhancement and safeguarding of the historical-cultural heritage of the eastern region of our country.

**Keywords:** Educational component; Prat's Work; Tell the story of of Art.

### **Introduction**

The concept of Heritage is something dynamic that evolves continuously as a socio-cultural construction. The term Heritage, in its material or immaterial sense, has been

refined and adjectivized in a process of permanent revision, which makes it possible to express it as monumental, artistic, historical, cultural, architectural, traditional architecture, industrial, archaeological, movable, natural landscape, etc. The contemporary world runs the risk of destroying this legacy if it is not attentive to the safeguarding and rational enhancement of the cultural signs of the past in order to make them compatible with their unrenounceable use in the present and future.

The present research highlights the work carried out by a Catalan emigrant who settled down definitively in Cuba in 1939, accredited by his competences with several achievements in researches carried out both in his native country and in France. He refers to Dr. Francisco Prat Puig who, from his teaching and marked passion for the arts, archeology, restoration and architecture, was linked to the study, conservation, safeguarding and enhancement of the historical and cultural heritage of the eastern region. His daily work in the field of Cuban culture and history sealed his position as a theoretician of the Social Sciences, with research that established his social practice.

In 1942, Dr. Prat Puig visited Santiago de Cuba for the first time and quickly realized that he was in a city full of history and formidable cultural, architectural and patrimonial riches. Since then, one of his purposes was to rescue the historical and cultural heritage of the city of Santiago, but it was not until 1947, when he was invited by the Society of Superior Studies of the East (SESO) to be part of the faculty of the University of the East, that his dream began to materialize. Once this educational center was legitimized, he began to teach there and at the same time he did not lose sight of the task of rescuing the most valuable buildings of that locality. With remarkable courage and sincerity Dr. Prat denounced the irresponsible actions that damaged the safeguarding of heritage, and always advocated the conservation and enhancement of any work of cultural and historical significance, as was the case of: a painting, a lamp, a vase, a fan or a building; without being an invalidating component of its artistic connotation or the nature of its owner.

His persistent concern for the transfer of knowledge directed his interest towards university teaching and at the same time with his interventions, he deployed the organization of teaching processes that contributed to the integral formation of professionals committed to the social policy of the country. The intellectual work carried out by Dr. Prat Puig from the Universidad de Oriente, lead to recognize him within the Cuban culture as a personality capable of coexisting his teaching work with

research, which he exercised and preserved as an unavoidable obligation of the university teaching staff.

The aforementioned materializes the determination to continue systematizing notable elements of his work. His work has been studied by several researchers, some of them his disciples. On this occasion and taking into account the state of the historiographic situation, we propose to value the work developed by Francisco Prat Puig as manager and researcher of the historical-cultural heritage in the eastern region, assuming that the teaching, research, restoration, conservation and promotion work deployed by him in the field of buildings, has been of significant transcendence in the study, safeguard and enhancement of the historical-cultural heritage of the eastern region of Cuba.

The research is sustained under the principles of the historical-logical, analysis-synthesis and inductive-deductive methods, and the rigorous revision of documents and bibliography found in the: Archive of the Department of History of the University of Oriente, Provincial Historical Archive of Santiago de Cuba, Personal Archive of Dr. Francisco Prat Puig, Archive of the University of Barcelona and General Archive of the Spanish Civil War. Its contribution lies in a multidisciplinary study on the theoretical-practical work of Dr. Prat Puig in relation to his work linked to the study, valorization and safeguarding of the historical-cultural patrimony of the eastern zone of Cuba.

## **Development**

### **Transcendence of the activity and scientific work of Dr. Francisco Prat Puig**

Dr. Prat's work concerning the study of Cuban history and culture transcended the sphere of teaching-methodological work by extending to the formation of a human capital that with its work would contribute to the aforementioned study. Thus, nucleated around his figure, within the School of History, a group of professionals was formed who today exhibit long experience due to the intellectual and scientific training they have as research results of this important figure of the university teaching staff.

Expression of the above mentioned is Dr. Olga Portuondo Zúñiga, Historian of the City of Santiago de Cuba, who has a wide historiographic production in topics related mainly to the colonial period in Santiago de Cuba. Her works include: Santiago de Cuba from its foundation to the Ten Years War, A British Defeat in Santiago de Cuba and The Virgin of Charity. Symbol of Cuban citizenship

It is valid to mention in this nucleus of professionals in whose formation Dr. Prat had a strong incidence to the late professor Nelsa Coronado Delgado; with a meritorious work in the investigation of the history of the University of Oriente, she served as tutor of a dozen of diploma works directed to approach that subject, as well as to the direction of the scientific group that in the center of high studies intended towards the investigation of the referred subject. Among the works carried out we can find: "The reform of Higher Education in Cuba and its projection in the University of Oriente", "Notes for the History of the traditions of the University of Oriente (1947-1962)", and "University of Oriente: Notes for the History of its academic and governmental structure between 1947-1998".

In the task of training graduates of the History career for the exercise of the teaching activity, professors María Elena Orozco Melgar and María Caridad Morales Féminas stand out, who as a sample of the criterion defended by Dr. Prat to train a historian with a wide preparation in the sphere of art history, under his tutorship, deepened in the study of the architecture of Santiago, who together with the Master published the article: "The santiaguera architecture of traditional lineage with neoclassical contributions".

But the inconformity of not being able to reflect in a paragraph, the elements that particularized the teaching work of Dr. Prat Puig and the impact that this caused in the students remained latent, and then argues: "How many times we blushed or made us cry Prat, to enjoy his descriptions of art. What a lot of things this Spanish-Cuban taught us about our country.

Dr. Prat Puig, like other Spaniards settled in Santiago de Cuba who found a home in the accredited university institution of the eastern region and contributed their updated experiences in the heterogeneous orders of higher education, distinguishing it as a university different from the already existing in the Island, always opposed to the memoristic methods.

In the book: Three centuries of Santiago's historiography, the researcher Lidia Margarita Martínez, in an article entitled: "Francisco Prat Puig, maestro" which deals with the written work bequeathed by him comments: "[...] it is wide; novel for its contributions, deep and important daring for the criteria generally different from others that were known at the time, revealing a great talent and a vast culture" (Martínez, 2001, p.147).

The aforementioned indicates that when investigating Dr. Prat's work, it is necessary to refer to the role that his publications have played in the quality and development of university teaching, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The first years of his stay in Cuba were dedicated to the study of traditional Cuban architecture, from which he published, in 1947, the book: *the pre baroque in Cuba. A Creole school of Moorish architecture*, considered as his most significant work, which constitutes the starting point of a new approach much more explanatory of the way of being of our old mansions and churches, in which he uncovered the Moorish imprint of the architecture arrived through the influence of Seville and Andalusian immigrants.

In the study of the mentioned work, he shows the result of the investigations carried out in the whole country on the Cuban constructive system of the colonial stage and tries not to exclude any element that helped to concretize his hypothesis. Prat investigated both the most opulent and the humblest houses. Everything that fell within the scope of what he was looking for was studied and analyzed regardless of its monumentality.

Another element that stands out is the fight against the discrimination that existed at the time against everything then called the old. In his book he speaks of regional variants, studies architecture in stages and breaks with what had been the trend in architectural studies up to that time, where there was a historical-stylistic vision for centuries. This study was later extended to the study of Creole furniture, which was his second discovery in the study of Cuban material culture of the colonial period.

In 1972, as a result of a meticulous investigation and restoration of a 16th century structure, located on one side of the Céspedes Park -formerly Plaza de Armas-, which he considered to be the dwelling of the Adelantado Diego Velázquez de Cuellar, and later destined as Museum of Cuban Historical Environment.

He published the book: *The house of Diego Velázquez and the Cuban Historical Environment Museum*, which was considered a contribution to the Cuban historical and material culture and destined, among other things, as study material for students of History in the subject of History of Cuban Culture. Referring to the restored site and the museum established there, Francisco Prat Puig stated:

All these lessons and many others on the value of traditional Cuban furniture and architecture are adequately exemplified and exalted in our museum, which we believe thus satisfies a need of a cultural patriotic order, contributing to eliminate the inferiority complex with which, in general, the material culture of our colonial era, so Cuban, so rich, original and therefore valuable, is judged (1959, p.24).

Another work to highlight, published in 1980, also used by the students of the History career is: The meaning of a ceramic group of the XVI century found in Santiago de Cuba, result of years of archaeological work carried out in the remains found in the subsoil of the old City Hall of the province of Santiago de Cuba, today, Municipal Government. The ceramic set discovered, classified by him and in some cases restored, reveals a way of life in the dawn of the colonization in the city of Santiago de Cuba; this book, published thirty-three years after the Pre Barroco in Cuba.

A Creole School of Moorish Architecture corroborates Dr. Francisco Prat Puig's criterion of revaluing the exponents of the material culture, not only for their artistic value, but also because they constitute historical testimonies that allow understanding and analyzing the era to which they belonged.

As a researcher, I knew that the search for our identity, far from being a mere scientific entertainment, constitutes one more way of knowing, defending and reaffirming a present that has cost Cubans so much sacrifice. As proof that this process could not be seen or analyzed in isolation from history, and therefore from reality, Prat corroborates the following in his work with a language as poetic as it is scientific:

Through these pieces you will also reach the man who used them, his usual way of being and acting. You will see him chopping meat and viands in the trenches, tasting the aromatic pru, of aboriginal lineage, in the grealense basin, presenting the roasted males or goats in the abundant servers, serving in the jugs or pitchers the comforting wines or the refreshing waters, manipulating the botijas, frying or stewing in their pots or dipping in their mortars or in the aristocratic bacin exercising the noble hips (1959, p. 2).

Among the main books written by Dr. Francisco Prat Puig are also the Art History Lectures, published in two volumes, conceived for the students of the specialty of Art History, but also used by the students of the degree in History.

The didactic character of this work makes its contents, sometimes of great complexity; reach without difficulty those unfamiliar with the subject, for the simple fact that, because of his lineage as a teacher, he had a way of seeing art and writing about it, which at that time constituted a different approach to other works done.

This is what he refers to in the book's Prologue, where he considers art as a consequence of certain needs of the collectivities, which link it to the historical and cultural characteristics of the societies that propitiate it. He points out in his reflections

the fact that this work is written with a vision that will greatly help in the understanding of art as an aspect of Marxist historical dialectics.

Due to the transcendence of the aforementioned works, they are the best known and have been considered as the most relevant of Francisco Prat Puig's research work. However, we cannot fail to mention the different articles written for numerous magazines, mainly specialized and scientific, such as Cuban Hispanic Culture Magazine, Bohemia, Revolution and Culture, Santiago, Chile, National Archives Journal and UNESCO Journal. They were intended to broaden the cultural background of the reading public.

Among the articles published are: "The History of Cuban Culture and Architecture", "Characteristics of the city of Santiago de Cuba", "The furniture of the Santiago de Cuba house at the end of the 19th century", "Physiognomy of Santiago", "How to understand the Chinese culture", "The Morro Castle in Santiago de Cuba", "The Cathedral of Havana. Outline of a study on the interpretation of the monument", "Cuban furniture", "Art for the Orient" and "A Cytherean Apollo in an untamed land".

The relation art-history, history-art, present in these criteria defended by him with insistence and vehemence, when applied in the History career, was supported by a study plan where subjects such as the above-mentioned History of Culture, taught in the first eight semesters of the career, as well as Panorama of Cuban Culture, had a bibliography composed, in some opportunities exclusively, by the works and articles published by Prat, and previously related.

In 1965, the Provincial Commission of Monuments of the former Oriente province undertook the restoration of a house located next to the Céspedes Park, former Plaza de Armas, in the city of Santiago de Cuba. The objective was to present it in its original state to be used as a museum.

The process of restoration and preservation of this monument was not exempt of personal sacrifices and constant dedication on the part of Dr. Prat, as well as of some confrontations. He had to carry out a meticulous investigation for which he relied on the little or almost no documentation he found on the building, on the results of the archaeological investigations he carried out in the building, and on the knowledge, he had about the history and culture of Spain.

The reconstruction work carried out there in order to save the house was very difficult. Over the years, this residence had been used for several purposes: headquarters of the Hotel Venus; seat of a "cuartería", as well as several commercial establishments, textile

workshops, a Masonic lodge, the Spanish Republican Center, offices and other facilities.

In spite of the controversy that resulted from Dr. Prat's theory that this had been the dwelling of Diego Velázquez, no one had the necessary tools to undermine the credibility of his hypothesis.

After the restoration of the building, the Museum of Cuban Historical Environment was installed. The themes exhibited in this museum are aimed at highlighting the main stages of Cuba's historical material culture, in chronological order, represented mainly by architecture, furniture and decorative objects, with the purpose of offering an almost complete panorama of the history of Cuban furniture and the Cuban environment from the 16th century to the mid-19th century.

Another work belonging to the historical and cultural heritage of Santiago de Cuba, whose construction and decoration were based on a project exhibited by him, is the building destined for the City Hall of the City of Santiago de Cuba -today the Municipal Government-. Founded by the Adelantado Diego Velázquez in 1516, seat of the city council that elected Hernán Cortés as its first mayor, in 1522, when the town was granted the title of city, the first expansion of the building was carried out.

In the middle of the XIX century, Governor Carlos de Vargas Machuca proceeded to the reconstruction of the building and in 1950, given the serious state of deterioration, it was decided to build a new building that was inaugurated on October 18, 1954.

This work has a great importance in the history of the city, not only because of what it meant for Santiago de Cuba since its inauguration and its social function, but also because its central balcony was selected to serve as a tribune for the Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz in his first speech to the people of Santiago de Cuba, on January 1st, 1959 and twenty-five years later from the same place the City of Santiago de Cuba was granted the Honorary Title of Hero City of the Republic of Cuba and the Order Antonio Maceo Grajales.

The Castle of San Pedro de la Roca (El Morro) constitutes one of the material wealth contained in the province of Santiago de Cuba. It is considered by experts in the field as an architectural jewel of unquestionable esthetic and historical value. This military fortification that holds the title of World Heritage with a Renaissance style was built in 1638 with the purpose of protecting the city of Santiago de Cuba against a naval attack. The Morro de Santiago has been rebuilt on numerous occasions. .



The house where the poet José María Heredia y Heredia was born, declared a National Monument in 1979, is another of the works rescued by Dr. Prat who restored it in 1969. The same one constitutes a relic of the Cuban colonial time for its architectural and cultural values, which recovered its splendor through a capital restoration.

The building, which dates from the end of the 18th century and is one of the oldest built in Santiago de Cuba, functions as a museum and preserves the authorial and patriotic legacy of the "Niagara Singer", considered the first romantic poet of America.

It was of great importance for the people of Santiago de Cuba to be able to rescue the home of the poet Heredia. Once reopened the institution, in its three exhibition rooms you can access a walk through the time when the Heredia family lived, settled in what was an urban farm in 1801, according to historiographical studies. Also on display are the poet's belongings, a collection of his works and translations and an exhibition of portraits by Santiago painters that reflect his figure.

It is from the triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959, when a process of rescue of art collections, historical documents, and other manifestations of culture began, not only for its aesthetic and historical value, but also for its educational function with the aim of making it available to the entire population and thus contribute to the patriotic, political, ideological and cultural preparation of the people, especially the new generations.

As part of the rescue of the National Patrimony, the conservation of the ancient monuments, precise testimonies of the history of a nation, is an elementary duty that must be attended by the governmental institutions. In that context, the work of research and conservation carried out by the doctor and university professor Francisco Prat was focused on the study of the diverse aspects of the Cuban material historical culture, especially in Santiago.

With this he fulfilled the two objectives clearly defined by him, which were: to do science and to put it at the service of the urgent needs of the Cuban society, particularly of the students, since the restoration of the monuments was not only directed to the enjoyment and knowledge of the population, but they were used as theoretical foundation in a considerable number of conferences given by him and by other professors to their students.

Some of the monuments restored by Dr. Prat in the city of Santiago de Cuba became an extension of the university classrooms. In many of them there are institutions declared

teaching units that make of them true laboratories for the students of the career of History.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning the Museum of Cuban Historical Environment or Diego Velázquez's House; the Castle of San Pedro de la Roca and the house where the poet José María Heredia y Heredia was born; where students of History and Art History are systematically inserted to develop research work practices, or make visits that are contemplated in their respective educational strategies.

## **Conclusions**

Since its foundation in 1947, the Universidad de Oriente assumed within its staff a group of intellectuals from Santiago and progressive Spaniards, who emigrated to the city after 1939 and who, from their knowledge, favored the formation of a revolutionary and integral professional whose occupation was in tune with the social, political, economic and cultural needs of the region. Dr. Francisco Prat Puig was one of them.

The intellectual activity of Dr. Prat Puig was tinged by the teaching work around which he deployed those of research, archeology and restoration that comforted each of the episodes of his life. Always a teacher, he lived moved by an attachment for the testimonies of Cuban culture and history, which he considered as his own.

The teaching and research work carried out by Dr. Francisco Prat Puig from the Universidad de Oriente, linked to the enhancement and safeguarding of the historical-cultural heritage, constitute aspects of his professional work that make him transcend in Cuban history and culture.