

Al Sprague-Retrospective of 55 years in art

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Translation by

The so-called Canal Zone and its inhabitants were subjects of history of love and hate by Panamanians. Its people, born and raised in that territory, were as if from another planet. Neither “gringos” nor Panamanians. Not from there, not from here. They were “zonians.” They represented what the majority of Panamanians envied most, and what they rejected at the time. They were the symbol of colonial domination.

Al Sprague is one of those individuals. He was born and raised in that territory filled with privilege, that territory loved and misses immensely, for it was his native soil. It was there where he spent his childhood, adolescence and adulthood and where he developed his profession as an artist. More-over, he was a professor of art until the day they closed the doors of the Canal educational centers where he was teaching. What was called the Canal Zone was extinguished and with it was extinguished the phenomenon of the “zonians”.

His initial muse was the environment that surrounded him. He was inspired by the Canal, the vegetation of the humid tropics, the sky and the sea. In addition, Al Sprague had the good fortune that his father would enjoy travelling with him since childhood through Panama, City and interior, where other “zonians” rarely went, captivated by the customs, the people and the traditions.

He was the first to paint scenes of the Panama Canal, one of the few artists who have focused on this theme. He was also inspired by themes of daily life, fishing scenes, seascapes, in Panamanian folklore tradition, being a pioneer and for years he was the painter par excellence of polleras women dancing. His success is so notable, that there isn't a collector in Panama that does not have a work by Al Sprague.

The life and work of this valued person of the plastic arts are an essential part of the history of our country's art, for which we are convinced that he deserved a lifetime retrospective. The study and investigation of historians Monica Rupfer, presented in this catalogue is an intent to make known his work and to leave a written history.

It is for all the above that when we approach the idea of realizing this retrospective exposition of his 55 years in art, we insist that it be carried out in the Museo del Canal Interoceanico de Panama, No other site would have been better to show to the nation the legacy of this Panamanian gringo.

Arlene Lachman

This retrospective exposition means much to me because it is my entire life, painting Panama. I was born and grew up here; I married and raised my children here.

I have not seen the majority of these works in years, but they represent the major part of my life. Having my retrospective in the Canal museum is especially important because it was the Panama Canal that brought my family and my wife's family to this beautiful country.

I was so fortunate to have inaugurated this museum with an exposition of my paintings since I drew and painted almost all aspects of the operation of the Canal.

Al Sprague

Al Sprague: Retrospective of 55 years in Art. Monica E. Kupfer, Ph.D.

For more than half a century Al Sprague has painted Panamanian images. He's seems of sea or forest and those of the Panama Canal as well as women wearing polleras, fisher men in boats and soldiers in military operations are visions of a country with a very special culture and history. For several decades Sprague had created in a timeless way not only paintings but also drawings, engravings and sculptures whose common theme is a continual interest to recreate situations and traditions related to Panama the country where he was born and lived most of his life. Sprague, who is defined as a North American-Panamanian artist, is a living example of a unique culture that was developed in the Republic of Panama, specifically in the Canal Zone territory that existed from 1903 to 1999. Although determined by its physical spaces, the zone was not only geographical but also human, It was a community of English speaking people who lived together in that fringe which crossed the Isthmus, where they developed their own style of life and a fondness for their home that still is perceived in the nostalgia that those who consider themselves zonians feel. Sprague was born in 1938 in the city of Colón, on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, as place where his family had emigrated to from the United States a year before. He spent a part of his childhood there but later the family moved to the area of Balboa in the Canal Zone

where his father was working as an auditor in the Canal Administration. As for his scholarly career he attended the primary school of Balboa where in art classes he frequently found himself in trouble for wanting to paint outside the lines. As an adolescent he studied in Balboa High School, but he was not a dedicated student, and often instead of going to school, he chose to go fishing with some of his friends, an activity which seemed much more entertaining. He had the opportunity of taking art classes in secondary school but he was ejected for being rebellious, after which on the recommendation of the school director young Sprague chose to replace art class with two physical education classes. How ironic that some ten years later he would return to that school—precisely to that drawing room as professor of plastic arts.

When he finished school, Al went to the U.S to begin his university study, a project for which he counted on his mother's help, Josephine Sprague, who was also a painter and believed strongly in her son's talent. First, he attended Mississippi Southern College for a time where he studied the painter, Charles Ambrose, whom he considered inspiring. He returned to Panama and continued in the Canal Zone College from where he later transferred to American College in Washington. There he finished his studies, first receiving a Bachelor of Arts in 1962 and after his Master of Fine Arts in 1965 with a thesis about the relation between the figure and the background in painting titled "Representative painting organized on the basis of the principle of shared emphasis between figure and environment. Although he considers basic abstract values as foundation in painting, Sprague was and has remained above all a realist artist. In art classes in Washington this was not the preference among his fellow students. These were the 60's and North American artists were focused on the Abstract Expressionism Movement. According to his wife Marsha Sprague, in that era everyone "hated figurative painting. They always mocked Al because he liked to go outside and paint everything that was around him."

After graduation, Sprague would have a long career as professor of plastic arts, training many students in drawing, painting, engraving and sculpture. He began as an art professor in the state of Virginia and in 1966 he returned in Panama teaching art classes in the intermediate school of Cuvundu Junior High. Many remember him as professor of plastic arts from 1969 to 1980 at the secondary school of Balboa and from 1980 to 1984 at Panama Canal College, from where he retired in order to dedicate himself to his own artistic work.

In his first works, young Sprague was painting what surrounded him: "the isthmus landscapes, the beaches, the city, the homes, the people and the palm trees." In the landscape "Ancon Hill" from 1958 (the year he finished secondary school) he reproduced the natural environment and the historic

Ancon Hill with free strokes of the brush and contrasting colors. He painted a stormy sky above the hill below which are seen the red roofs of several homes and on the first plane a man working in a field of herbs. The colors and distribution of the planes (or levels) as well as the brush strokes and the solitary man remind us of the landscapes of some impressionist painters and past impressionists, with whom Sprague's work would maintain a certain relationship throughout his career. For example, in his oil painting "From the Causeway" from 1956, painted when he was only 18 years old, he already showed his interest to paint outdoors, recreating a landscape with a far away horizon that allowed him to explore the drama of clouds in a spacious blue sky. In the background, from that causeway that the Panamanians call the "the causeway", one sees the city of Panama. In front of the observer, Sprague painted a palm tree, a tropical plant that would continue occupying a prominent place in his work. Through the years, Sprague has painted scenes of the Canal Zone that constitute for him personal memories, but that now-a-days serve as historic documents of a place that is disappearing. In some works he painted houses with tile roofs that characterizes the zone's urban style like that in which he was raised, and in others like "Diablo Club House" he recreates spaces that the North Americans shared. Less usual as a theme and moreover interesting as composition is his water color titled "Casino Aucon Inn" from 1981, a bar just above the Avenue of the Martyrs (formerly known as July 4th Avenue) on the border of Panama with the old Canal Zone. With dynamic strokes, the water color represents a place that for many soldiers and civilians of the Zone symbolizes the night life and available diversions in the city of Panama.

The most emblematic views, however, of the Canal area are surely the many landscapes of the Panama Canal that Al Sprague has painted through several decades. He began in the 60's: in 1968, for example, he painted the locks when they were empty during repair. In the 70's he produced works of ships crossing different points of the waterway, or in the locks in which stand out details of the machinery, the floodgates and the control booths. In the 80's Sprague was commissioned by the Panama Canal commission to paint commemorative works of important anniversaries of historic value. His paintings of the Panama Canal make an impact not only because they document the operation of the great work of Maritime engineering but also because they remind us of man's role in it. Oils like "Boat in the Lock of Pedro Miguel" from 1998 and "G Locks" from 1984, show enormous ships entering the locks in counter position with the small figures of human beings who contribute to the operation of the Canal from small boats or managing electric mules or the tug boats. Sprague has spent a great part of his life near of in the sea, which he has painted on hundreds of canvases, under all conditions, with bright or cloudy skies, on sunny days or in these dark moments just before a storm. A great lover of fishing,

Sprague tells that as a child he would go to the pier of the ferry of the Canal to fish with a Jamaican friend whom he called "the old man" and learned to enjoy this activity. No coincidence is it that fishing scenes have been a persistent theme in his work since the 60's, and although he also paints scenes of the sport of fishing in motorboats, without a doubt his specialty has been pictures of humble Panamanian fisherman who go out daily in their wooden boats. "Fishermen" from 1975 is a representative work for the way in which the sun defines the forms of the 2 men, one seated in the boat and the other throwing into the sea the net that appears in the air on its way toward the sea. Although the composition describes an instant in time, it has a timeless quality that characterizes many of the paintings of this artist.

The majority of Sprague's sea paintings show people who make a living from the sea, busy with work that has not changed with time or progress, scenes that could be from today but also from a century ago. In his engraving print of a solitary man in "Waiting for the Tide" from 1979, as well as in "Boat with two Fishermen" from ten years later, the feeling of waiting is surprising, as are the atmospheric effects of the sun and the humidity that he succeeds in representing with his brush. The theme of the humble fisherman is one that Sprague has also represented in his works of bronze sculpture as in the piece titled "The Fishing Boat" created around 2000.

In the 70's Sprague became interested in sculpting and in 1976 he made his first bronze piece under the direction of sculptor Jack Witt in Virginia. Later, Sprague established his own forge in Panama, and he traveled to Italy to study the technique of casting in bronze with Harry Jackson, North American sculptor known for his realistic works of cowboys and Indians. He also brought sculptor Frank Colson to Panama to give a workshop about other techniques of casting in bronze. Sprague says: "I have made more than 30 different sculptures in bronze, but each one requires a great deal of time... I not only like the part of creating each original piece in wax but also I myself make the work of cast iron." Upon creating sculptures, Sprague imposes the challenge of technical requirements, and as for the aesthetics, without a doubt, the tridimensionality and the absence of color translate into greater challenge for the artist. Clearly, the challenge continues to interest him, for even now other 70 years old, he keeps on working in this medium.

While sculptures, by their tridimensional nature have an important relationships with the space that surrounds them, in Sprague's paintings that space acquires its own character. In some aquatic scenes, for example, the national world, the immensity of the sky and the sea appear to envelop the persons. In "Fisherman in Storm" from 199, the imminent rain has erased the defining surfaces of sea

and sky, and the artist has intensified the abstract values creating a beautiful rectangular space of a green heavy and water.

La Panga on which a fisherman goes on foot absenting the horizon and the other, seated, steering crosses the sea swiftly, cutting the composition in a horizontal way. Sprague has explored the subject of the boat that crosses the composition in innumerable works. However, in paintings like his recent "Take Bayano" notable changes are perceived in comparison with his works of 10 or 20 years ago. The solitude of the fishermen has been replaced in this work by a boat panga full of passengers that is moving upon gentle water, surrounded by jungle foliage that Sprague never tires of observing. The artist paints with care the reflection of colors that the people's clothing create on the water, between the furrows and the rush of waves that the boat leaves on its crossing.

Those variations that Sprague presents in his works related to the sea that fluctuate from absolute stillness to dynamic movement, are also seen in his many paintings of Panamanian women dressed in polleras participating in our typical dances. Sprague painted a pollera for the first time in 1974 because a friend asked him to do it. Apparently, it didn't interest him very much at first "but then he became impressed with the dress, the beauty and elegance projected in their dances." At that time it wasn't a popular theme in Panamanian painting and there is no doubt that Sprague has been one of the artists that has created the most works around our polleras and typical dances. His interest in producing what he considers "the most beautiful dresses in the world" and the Panamanian women who display them, whom he describes as "pretty, with mystic and mysterious faces" found renounce among collectors and the public, national as well as foreign, who through the years have shown eagerness to acquire his works. Sprague has explored the pollera and Panamanian dances in thousands of variations and techniques. Although color is generally a dominant element, the theme also appears in one of his countless wooden engravings entitled "Pollera" from 1974 in which we see a couple doing a typical dance in which the woman is the protagonist and her partner a shadow in the background. The desire to capture the movement of the dances characterizes many of Sprague's paintings in which the rich color and adornments of some empolleradas superpose those of others, in sequences of lights, shadows, colors and whites creating planes of lesser to greater depth. They transmit the feeling of dance, from the groups that moves in unison and from the joy of these dances. On other occasions, as in the works "pensive" from 1984 or "Polleras" from 1986, the artist concentrates on a single woman stopped among the multitude, absorbed in her thoughts, revealing one of the many personalities that live together within the profusion of fabric, embroidery, combs and necklaces that characterize this

beautiful and very complicated typical dress. Sprague is not carried away nor frightened by such detail but with his disquiet brush strokes gives us the feeling that the light makes upon feminine faces, the colors, textures and the shining quality of the groups. Although the compositions describe places and activities that Sprague captured and analyzes in sketches and hundreds of preparatory photographs, his paintings are, above all, human stories and pictorial exercises in which he looks to capture the effects of light. His works are filled with people, but they never look at us for the artist puts us in the position of invisible observer. His people are concentrating on their tasks, whether it is work or pleasure, gathering nets or celebrating festivities. Although there are exceptions, Sprague generally shows us a traditional world, where women are pretty and the men are “machos” as in the case of the vendors in “The Macho Man” from 1998 and “Sale of Pixbae” from 1985. In spite of the difference of environment in which they unfold, these solitary men in the market recall the fishermen of Sprague, waiting for customers that alleviate the tedium of daily work. Their products and carts enrich the structure of the compositions and provide a physical space more or less deep that complements the figures. The street seller, so common in Panama, also appears in some bronze sculptures like “The Raspadero” whom we see at work, pouring sweet syrup on one of his ice cones behind one of those typical carts full of bottles. According to Sprague “I see the raspadero...with all the colors and I taste (savor) that vision as others taste the raspado”.

This kind of image in which men and women appear in daily activities places Sprague in the tradition of manners and customs art that is characterized by focus on activities of common people, an interest in the typical and the local, understood as something real and pictures without losing the obvious connection to pictorial realism. They reflect a romantic attitude that one sees especially in the compositions that compare the smallness of man and the immensity of nature or, in the specific case of Sprague, the greatness of the seam of the forest, or an engineering project as enormous as the Panama Canal. Sprague has also stood out for his interpretations of another human activity: the military, a rather common theme in the art of Panama. Through the years, he has painted North American soldiers in the Panamanian jungles, flying over the canal, including jumping from helicopters during the North American invasion. “Jungle Warrior”, for example, is part of a series in which he documented the military training of the soldiers in the jungle, for which he accompanied the troops on several practice missions. In his words; “I painted various images of the soldier visually fused with the jungle. As I like to paint the jungle, it was fascinating for me to see how the figures of the soldiers mixed with the colors and forms of the trees and plants. “Later, Sprague was officially designated as “combat artist” to document military operations of the U.S Army in the isthmus after the invasion of December 1989.

“Cruising the Canal” is a painting of two soldiers patrolling the Panama Canal from a helicopter, in which Sprague flew with them from the old Fort Albrook on the Pacific side to Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side. In a dramatic composition, Sprague frames the scene within an irregular quadrangle, placing the observer in the helicopter, and he paints the soldiers from behind, defining their forms on the basis of light and shadows that produce on their figures the rays of the sun. In the background the Panama Canal is cast in perspective like a highway of water that is lost in the horizon.

More than a description of individuals, Sprague paints feelings: the loneliness of the fisherman, the waiting of the peddler, the drama of the soldier, the light above the polleras, the happy movement of the women in typical dances. The artist seeks to transmit the essential and the visual, for his initial attraction is for what is seen and the enjoyed by the other senses. In his words: “I have never stopped enjoying what I see, therefore, in my painting and sculpture I try to show the literal: a visual world composed of patterns and abstract colors that stimulate our senses.”

The biographical details in this brochure come principally from interviews of the author with the artist and his wife Marsha Sprague by e-mail during October and November of 2010.

Darma Zambrana, “Sprague, painter of polleras, impulse of Gauguin.” The Panama star, June 6, 2010.

Those two works appear illustrated on the web site AL Sprague Edition whose address is www.panamaart.com

Manilina Vergara, “To the sound of POLLERA. Mosaic (supplement of La Prensa), March 28, 2010.

Commentary of Rassia Sprague Taylor, the artists’ daughter on the electronic page of “AL SpragueArt Lovers” on Facebook, October 24, 2010.

For more information about the three sculptors with whom Sprague trained, consult web sites: www.jackandjudywitt.com, www.harryjackson.com, and www.frank-colson.com

Mireya Monroy, “Exhibition: Art and beauty of the POLLERA.” La Prensa June 11, 2010.

Zambrana, op.cit. Commentaries of Al Sprague about his works of “military art” in an e-mail to the author, October 2010.