

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



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COVER

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (formerly 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items

X New Submission Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Rafael Ríos Rey, A Puerto Rican Muralist, 1911-1980.

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Rafael Ríos Rey, A Puerto Rican Muralist, 1911-1980.

C. Form Prepared by

name/title Juan Llanes Santos / Historian
organization Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office date April 17, 2012
street & number PO Box 9066581 telephone 787-721-3737
city or town San Juan state PR zip code 00906-6581
e-mail jllanes@prshpo.gobierno.com

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Carlos A. Rubio April 23, 2012
Signature and title of certifying official Carlos A. Rubio/SHPO Date
Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

[Signature] 6/4/2012
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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Date of Action

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Provide the following information on continuation sheets. Cite the letter and title before each section of the narrative. Assign page numbers according to the instructions for continuation sheets in National Register Bulletin *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (formerly 16B). Fill in page numbers for each section in the space below.

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NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

E. Rafael Ríos Rey, a Puerto Rican Muralist, 1911-1980.

Rafael Ríos Rey is considered by many the most significant Puerto Rican muralist (**Fig.1**). The artist produced his first mural in the 1930s and continued this art form well into the 1970s. The artist's period of production coincided with the life changing economic policies of *Manos a la Obra* (Operation Bootstrap) and the new political arrangement born out of the *Estado Libre Asociado*. Ríos Rey became deeply involved in the populist movement originated in the 1940s. His works, specially his murals, became a graphic portray that captured the social condition of the Puerto Rican common folk: the farmer, the sugar cane worker and the new industrial worker. He's murals captured long standing cultural traditions coexisting with the new industrial discourse, creating and facilitating the social harmony preconized by the new political order established during those crucial years. No other muralists captured the transitional cultural and social changes and the new economic discourse and its paradigms as Rafael Ríos Rey.

Rafael Ríos Rey is the artistic name assumed by Rafael Ríos Reyes (1911-1980)¹. Born in the southern city of Ponce, on July 28, 1911, Ríos Rey was in touch with the artistic production from an early age, as his father, uncle and grandfather were set designers, graphic artists, wood carvers, painters and cartographers with a standing reputation in the world of the plastic arts. Octavio Ríos de Jesús, Ríos Rey's father, worked three years as a set designer for the great Russian dancer Anna Pavlova. Juan Narciso Ríos, Rey's grandfather, received the medal *Cruz de Isabel la Católica* from the Kings of Spain for his artistic merits and contributions.

By the time Ríos Rey was ten years old, he was working at his father's workshop, painting signs and decorating floats for the city's annual carnival. By 1924, Ríos was studying drawing in his hometown with masters Horacio Castaing and Miguel Pou. For the next few years Ríos Rey make his living designing and painting signs for the Shell Company. In 1934, Rios putted together his first exhibitions

¹ The main sources for Rafael Ríos Rey's biographical notes and production chronology used in this section are Nestor Murray Irizarry, ed., *Rafael Ríos Rey y el muralismo en Puerto Rico*. Sociedad Amigos de Rafael Ríos Rey. Casa Paoli del Centro de Investigaciones Folklóricas de Puerto Rico, Inc. 2005; Luis Felipe López, *Rafael Ríos Rey, primer muralista puertorriqueño*. Tesis para la obtención del grado de Maestría. Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1999; and multiple newspapers articles. All sources are listed in the bibliography.

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of watercolors at *Walldrops Galleries* in San Juan. Ponce's industrialist, José A. Ferré, who became the artist's most important private sponsor, impressed by Ríos' work, acquired the entire collection. In 1935, Rey met his great mentor, the Catalan artist Ismael D'Alzina Guaras. Ríos Rey worked under D'Alzina direction on the decoration of three majestic properties: the *Castillo Serrallés*, the *Cabassa* mansion (both in Ponce) and *Casa de España*, in San Juan.²

In 1936, Ríos Rey moved to New York City, establishing his residence at the culturally dynamic neighborhood of Greenwich Village. The experiences in the Big Apple contributed greatly in Ríos Rey's artistic career. The hard years of the Depression forced the artist to earn his living as a house painter. Buy beyond the hardship, Ríos Rey found himself in the right place at the right time. The mural movement, particularly in NYC, was going through a great revival encouraged by different forces. One of these was the New Deal's Federal Art Project (FAP). Operated from 1935 to 1943, under the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Art Project primarily focused its efforts in the larger cities employing artists to paint murals and other decorative elements in federal, state and municipal buildings. In the first three years of the program, 2,566 murals were painted in schools, post offices and other public buildings. Forty five percent of the artists employed by the federal program resided in New York City, at the time of Ríos Rey staying.³

The other important force in reviving the muralist art form was the influence of the 1920s Mexican school.⁴ While in New York City, Ríos Rey exchanged friendship and artistic ideas with students of David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), the great communist Mexican muralist. Ríos Rey participated in the new research ideas that the Mexican muralist tried out in New York upon the founding in 1936 of the *Siqueiros Experimental Workshop*, a laboratory for modern muralist techniques. Ríos Rey was attracted to the Mexican vanguard not only for stylistic reasons, but also for its idealistic social commitment. The pictorial language underlying the Mexican school, called social realism, reached its ultimate expression in the 1930s. The Mexican school presented the art of murals as the most progressive way of reaching the masses. Murals are not a piece of private art, but a public art that establishes a dialogue between the artist and an indefinite and constantly changing number of observers.

² Castillo Serrallés was included in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on November 3, 1980. Casa de España was included on July 5, 1983.

³ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973.

⁴ Laurance P. Hurlburt. *The Mexican Muralist in the United States*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

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During his time in New York, Ríos Rey studied the techniques of others great contemporary muralist masters: the Spaniard José Maria Sert (1876-1945), the American Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) and the socialist Ecuadorian Camilo Egas (1899-1962), with whom Ríos Rey studied at the New School for Social Research. Egas, who arrived in New York in 1927, was by 1935, Director of the New School for Social Research's Art Department. The progressive school became the center of the international muralist movement.

Back in Puerto Rico by late 1937, Rafael Ríos Rey embarked in an extremely productive life. In 1938, his friend and sponsor, the businessman José A. Ferré, commissioned the services of the artist to produce several murals for his private residence in the upper class neighborhood of La Alhambra in the city of Ponce. Combining it with other projects, it took Ríos Rey ten years (1938-1948) to paint eight beautiful and outstanding murals, out of which, seven still adorn the private residence: *Pelea de gallos*, *Promesa a la Santa Cruz*, *Estampa del Carnaval de Ponce*, *Recogedora de café*, *Zafra y flamboyán*, *Fiesta campestre*, *El cultivo* and *Frutas tropicales*.⁵ The Ferré family would call again upon the artist to produced murals for specific properties. In 1953, the building *Empresas Ferré* was built in the Playa ward in Ponce to house the administrative offices of the family's industrial complex. The building's main lobby contains two impressive murals painted by Rey that very same year, related to the Ferré's multiple business: *La Fundición* and *La Represa (Fig.2)*. In 1955, the artist was designated again by the influential family to paint the mural *El Hombre*, as part of the opening of the Ponce Young Male's Christian Association (YMCA) Building.

Rafael Ríos Rey did very significant muralist work for the private business. On June 5, 1948, Ríos unveiled the mural *La Caña* at the vestibule of the impressive building *Banco de Crédito y Ahorro Ponceño* in Ponce. In 1956, it's shown to the public the mural *Alegoría a la india puertorriqueña* at the India Brewery Building in the city of Mayaguez. In 1963, the interior of the *Banco de Crédito y Ahorro Ponceño* was rejuvenated with new decoration, including two new Ríos Rey's murals: *El Comercio* and *La Agricultura (Fig. 3)*. At that time he redesigned his 1948 mural *La Caña* at the bank, removing one of the panels and adding a new mural, *La Industria (Fig. 4)*. In 1966, Ríos' mosaic mural *Génesis de la historia de Puerto Rico* was unveiled at the San Juan Hotel in Isla Verde.

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The *Banco de Crédito y Ahorro* also acquired Rey's mural *La Transportación* in 1969, to be displayed at the International Airport in San Juan. In 1970, the *Hotel Borinquen* in Miramar (San Juan) commissioned Rey to paint the mural *La flora puertorriqueña*. In 1973, the First Federal Savings and Loan Association donated Ríos Rey's mural *Elegía a Santiago Iglesias Pantín* to the Dockworkers Union building at Puerta de Tierra in San Juan (**Fig. 5**). In 1976, the artist produced the mural *El Progreso* for the First Federal Savings' offices in Old San Juan.⁶

Besides the numerous murals, paintings, watercolors, drawings, sketches and many types of graphic arts designed by the artist, the art of set decoration kept Ríos Rey in his childhood artistic line. Ríos Rey was responsible for the designing of many sets through his life. In 1940, Rey was entrusted to design the set for the first presentation of Manuel Méndez Ballester tragedy *Tiempo Muerto*. In 1943, Francisco Arriví chooses Rey to design the sets for Ballester's *Hilarión*. In 1947, Rey prepared the scenery for *Keynotes of Unity* by Bob Adler and George Bellak, under the direction of Elmer Bernstein in New York. In 1949, produces the sets for the operetta *Cofresi*, written by Gustavo Pales and music by the great Rafael Hernández. In 1952, designs the sets for the Festival del Caribe at the University of Puerto Rico. In 1956, Rios was responsible for the scenery of Puccini's opera *La bohème*. The following year, 1957, Rey designed the sets for the ballet *Giselle*, performed by the Russian Ballets of Monte Carlo and immediately prepared the set for Francisco Arriví's drama *Vejigantes*, presented as part of the First Puerto Rican Theater Festival in 1958. He also did the sets for Arriví's drama *Maria Soledad* in 1961; the ballet *La Fille mal gardee* in 1964; the ballet *Cinderella* in 1965; the opera *La traviata* and the vignette *Baquiné* in 1970; the musical comedy *I do, I do* and Eugene O'Neil's *Anna Christie* in 1972. In 1979, Rey produced his last set for the operetta *The Merry Widow*, just a few months before his death.

The works commissioned to Ríos Rey by the government represent not only an extremely significant contribution to the plastic arts, but also, to the social history of Puerto Rico. By the time Ríos Rey came back to Puerto Rico after his life changing experience in New York City during the late 1930s, the island was about to embark in a life changing process of its own. In the last years of the 1930s, a

⁵ The mural *Frutas tropicales* was lost during the 1980s due to damages.

⁶ The murals at the India Brewery, Borinquen Hotel, the San Juan Hotel and the International Airport were later destroyed. The mural at the Dockworkers Union Building was recently moved to another location, as the 1970s building is schedule to be demolished.

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new intelligentsia of young politicians were in the ascending road to political power. Many of these young leaders were part of the old socialist movement in Puerto Rico. Luis Muñoz Marín led the faction and became the guiding force that finally came to organize itself in a new political party formally incorporated in 1938, the *Partido Popular Democrático* (Popular Democratic Party, PDP). In 1940, the PDP swept the elections to the local legislatures and offices. The PDP had a mass appealing agenda involving land reform, political autonomy (with an initial independentist rhetoric) and social and economic justice. The PDP's populist discourse became a very effective formula to attract people from all walks of life: from the dispossessed to the new middle class, from the rural farmer to the urban worker. The leftist and nationalist rhetoric used by the PDP's leadership in the initial years of the social movement became an idealistic magnet that brought in the party's sphere of influence people from a wide political spectrum. Among these was most definitely the socially committed artist from Ponce.

By the late 1940s, *Manos a la Obra* (Operation Bootstrap) became the chosen political strategy for the island economic change. The government agency responsible for the direct implementation of *Manos a la Obra* was the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO). In a very significant way, Rafael Ríos Rey became the graphic voice of PRIDCO's development program (**Fig. 6**). Among the many drawings and works done for the agency, Ríos Rey created PRIDCO's most emblematic and persisting symbol, the cog-wheel pushed by an Herculean anonymous worker, still used to identify the government corporation, factory buildings and sites built by PRIDCO.

Rafael Ríos Rey's alliance with the government's economic and social agenda, took shape in many works. In 1948, Ríos decorated the PRIDCO float for that year Fourth of July parade, presenting for the first time as public art the symbolic cog-wheel (**Fig. 7**). In 1949, when Luis Muñoz Marín was sworn-in as the first governor ever elected by the Puerto Ricans, the artist decorated the platform used by the new governor (**Fig. 8**). That very same year, Ríos Rey was designated administrator of the Tapia Theater in Old San Juan by the city's PDP Major Felisa Rincón de Gautier. He remained in that position until 1968. In 1950, PRIDCO contracted Ríos to paint two murals to be exhibit at the International Fair in Port au Prince, Haiti, for which Rey won a gold medal. He also decorated the pavilion built by PRIDCO at the fair (**Fig. 9**). In 1954, the artist painted the mural *El agua* in Carolina for a building belonging to the Autoridad de Acueductos y Alcantarillados. In 1958, sponsored by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP), Rey spend some time in Mexico and Spain studying the mosaics techniques.

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By 1960, the artist designed his first Venetian mosaics mural for the municipal government of Ponce, *Héroes de Ponce*, a masterpiece composed of 175,000 pieces of colored-glass, dedicated to the members of Ponce's Fire Department. In 1964, it was officially finished the decorations of the State Capitol Building's rotunda. Between the rotunda's vault ribs, four allegorical pictures depicting significant events in Puerto Rico's history cover the curves down to the main cornice. The northwest corner scene, representing the discovery of the island, was designed by Ríos Rey, as it was the north frieze that shows Pre-Columbian figures in a Council. In 1968, the ICP asked Ríos Rey to design in Venetian mosaics the theater façade for the República de Colombia School in Río Piedras. He also painted for the ICP, in 1975, the mural *Elegía a Ernesto Ramos Antonini* in the school of the same name in Barrio Obrero, Santurce.

Other works were done by Ríos Rey out of personal reasons. In 1972, the artist lost his son Rafael Octavio Ríos Torruella, age 37, when his body rejected a kidney transplant done to save his life. This painful moment was recorded by Ríos Rey in the mural *El transplante de riñon*, donated by the artist to the Arkansas School of Medicine.

Rafael Ríos Rey was also deeply involved in preparing the next generations of Puerto Rican artists. From 1965 until 1977, he taught mural painting, mosaics and set design at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture's School of Plastic Arts. He was also a founding member and treasurer of the Center for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean (1977-1980).

In 1979, Rey suffered a stroke that affected his speech. On April 29, 1980, Rafael Ríos Rey died in the city of San Juan. Besides his numerous drawings, sketches and paintings, Ríos Rey worked more than forty large murals in public and private buildings. In these murals the great artist presented the exuberance of the Puerto Rican flora as a dominating background where the human actions took place, mixing and transforming humans into plants and plants with human attributes. The cultural traditions of the common folks were a recurrent theme in his works. The artist represented on his characters faces and colors the complexity of the Puerto Rican ethnical history. Rey captured the hardships of the rural farmers, the sugarcane cutters and the new industrial workers. In 1948, Juan Luis Márquez wrote an article on Ríos Rey's works as part of the unveiling of *La Caña*. The critic's comment could apply to every mural done by the artist:

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"During six weeks he carries out his contract, bringing into the canvas the realization of a dream: to paint a mural where the people could take a look at themselves".⁷

The contradictions and struggles among the social classes were present in his works, but with a sense of social harmony. The artist was a witness, an active participant and a believer of the life changing process that took place in Puerto Rico during the 1930s through the 1970s. The industrial revolution that transformed the life in the little island in the Caribbean was a continuous character in Ríos Rey's murals. However, as new economic relations were established and new cultural discourses were developed, Ríos Rey kept close to those cultural elements that were disappearing as Puerto Rico made its entrance into that gray space called *Modernity*. In a way, his murals became a work of cultural rescue. In 1992, the writer Dr. Rosario Ferré rightly stated:

"Ríos Rey was the best muralist of his time, and probably, the best of all times...he presented in his works the social life of the Puerto Ricans, contributing to define our cultural identity."⁸

The populist movement found in Rey its greatest translator into the artistic language. Rafael Ríos Rey died the very same day that Luis Muñoz Marín passed away. It was the end of an era.

⁷ Juan Luis Márquez, *Rafael Ríos Rey: descubre una pintura mural en Ponce*. Puerto Rico Ilustrado. San Juan, 3 de Julio de 1948, 4-9. The translation is ours.

⁸ Cited in Luis Felipe López, *Rafael Ríos Rey, primer muralista puertorriqueño*. Tesis para la obtención del grado de Maestría. Centro de Estudios Avanzados, 1999, 23. The translation is ours.

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F. Associated Property Types

I. Name of Property Type

Buildings with Rafael Ríos Rey's murals.

II. Description

Rafael Ríos Rey is one of the greatest Puerto Rican muralist of all times. Rey captured in his murals the social conditions and cultural traditions of the common folks. The artist also represented in his artwork the new economic trends that transformed the living conditions of all Puerto Ricans. Rey brought into the canvas the paradigmatic encounter between the old-ways and the new Modernity's discourse.

During his productive life, the artist produced over forty murals, many of them lost or destroyed at present time. Ríos Rey worked his murals under two specific techniques: paint and mosaics. The painted murals were mostly based in casein, acrylic and oil. His mosaics murals were done using Venetian and Byzantine mosaics. While these last ones were always adhere directly into the wall, the painted murals done in cloth, were either mounted with adhesive to the designated wall, or mounted in wooden streches and then attached to the designated wall. The murals mounted in wooden streches have had a longer life-expectancy as they can be disassemble by panels and moved to another location when demanded by the circumstances.

The property types identified in this Multiple Property Submission cover document are public and private buildings which constructions dates range from early 1930s to early 1970s. All these resources are depository and custodians of one or more murals done by Rafael Ríos Rey. These art pieces were thought-out and designed by the artist specifically for those particular buildings and have become the most significant defining features of such resources. The properties have kept the associative attributes that tied them to the muralist production of Rafael Ríos Rey and retain their ability to convey that association.

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III. Statement of Significance

The statewide significance of the properties listed under this Multiple Property Submission cover document derive chiefly from their integral and historic association to Rafael Ríos Rey's mural production. Criterion C is the principal National Register Criterion applied in this Multiple Property Submission cover document

IV. Registration Requirement

To qualify for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under this Multiple Property Submission cover document (Criterion C), the building must still contain one or more of the Rafael Ríos Rey's murals. The mural must have been done by the artist specifically for the resource that serves as its recipient and it must be located on the original building for which it was designed. The property must have also sufficient integrity to convey the historic relationship between the resource and the art piece.

G. Geographical Data

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

The information on Rafael Ríos Rey was extracted from several secondary sources. These included newspapers articles, art history books, thesis and biographys written about Rafael Ríos Rey.

A preliminary survey of extant buildings associated to Ríos Rey's muralist production was conducted to identify and document the resources. The preliminary research was done through actual visitis to the properties and archival research. The survey was not conducted to meet the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*, nor was there an evaluation of properties referencing the National Register Criteria for Evaluation

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The preliminary survey verified the existence and location of four properties with high interpretative potential, not certified as historic properties. The extant properties are recipients of specifically designed Ríos Rey's murals and are capable of transmit the associative attributes of the historic relation between the art piece and the building. These four resources are:

- a) Residencia José A. Ferré Aguayo. A 1930, two story, Spanish Revival building, located in the municipality of Ponce. The resource contains seven (7) murals painted by Ríos Rey between 1938-1948, commissioned by businessman Jose A. Ferré for his private residence.
- b) Empresas Ferré Building. A 1953, five-story, International style building, located in the municipality of Ponce. The resource has two 1953, Ríos Rey's murals, specifically designed for the building.
- c) Ponce YMCA Building. A 1955, one story, Modern style building, located in the municipality of Ponce. The resource has one mural, painted by Ríos Rey in 1955, as part on the building's inauguration.
- d) Fire House Building. A 1960, two story, Modern style building, located in the municipality of Ponce. The resource has a 1960, Venetian mosaics mural, designed and assembled by Rafael Ríos Rey.

This selection does not preclude the registration of any remaining properties identified in future efforts.

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Figures

Figure 1. Rafael Ríos Rey, 1911-1980.



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Figure 2. Detail of the 1953 mural *La Fundición* (The Iron Foundry) at the Empresas Ferré Building, 2011.



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Figure 3. Detail of the mural *El Comercio*, at the Banco de Crédito y Ahorro Ponceño (Banco Santander), 2011.



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Figure 4. Detail of the mural *La Industria*, at the Banco de Crédito y Ahorro Ponceño (Banco Santander), 2011.



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Figure 5. Ríos Rey working on the mural for the Dockworkers Union Building, 1973.



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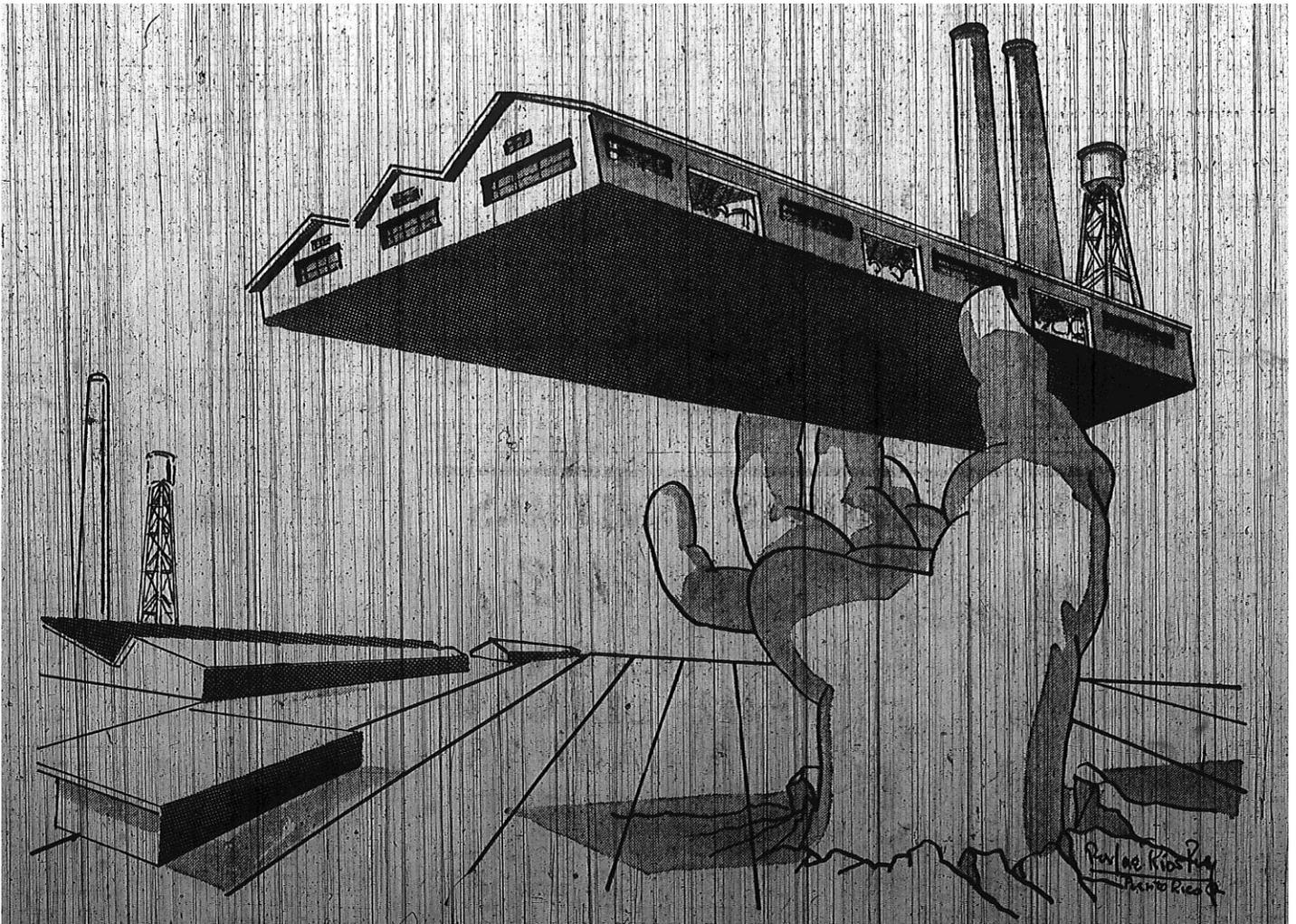
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Figure 6. Drawing done by Ríos Rey for PRIDCO, El Mundo 1953.



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Figure 7. PRIDCO's 1948 float with the famous cog-wheel, 1948.



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Figure 8. Luis Muñoz Marín at the 1949 platform decorated by Ríos Rey. (Photo courtesy of the Archivo General de Puerto Rico).



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Figure 9. Rey working at his award winning mural in Haiti (El Mundo, 2 de marzo de1950).

