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Rafael Tufiño, artist, is dead at 85

By **Stuart Lavietes**

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Rafael Tufiño, a painter and printmaker considered one of Puerto Rico's most prominent cultural figures, died on Thursday in San Juan. He was 85 and lived in Old San Juan.

The cause was lung cancer, said Augusto Font, a friend.

An artist known as the "Painter of the People" for his canvases and posters depicting traditional aspects of life on the island, Tufiño will lie in state in the Galería Nacional del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña in San Juan before burial later this week. Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá, the governor of Puerto Rico, ordered flags to be flown at half-staff over the weekend in his honor.

Tufiño, who was born in New York and frequently returned to the city, was an important presence in New York, where he was a mentor to Puerto Rican artists and served as a bridge to Puerto Rico's traditions and aesthetics.

He was a founder of Taller Boricua, a workshop and art collective started in East Harlem in 1970, and was also influential in the establishment of El Museo del Barrio in that neighborhood. His work was the subject of a major retrospective at the museum in 2003.

Tufiño's art, which can be seen on posters throughout Old San Juan, presents scenes of daily life in Puerto Rico — work, dance, music and festivals — in bright, Fauvist colors. His paintings, including landscapes, interiors and portraits, are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Library of Congress and the Galería Nacional in Puerto Rico.

In 2003, he was given a lifetime achievement award by the National Arts Club in New York City.

Born Rafael Tufiño Figueroa in 1922, he became interested in Puerto Rican traditions as a child in New York, where he often heard stories of life on the island from his mother and father. When, at 10, he moved to San Juan to live with his grandmother, he drew pictures of nearly everything he saw.

After serving in the Army Signal Corps in Panama during World War II, he went to art school in Mexico under the GI Bill. Returning to Puerto Rico in the early 1950s, he became a member of Generación del Cincuenta, a group of young artists dedicated to forging an aesthetic identity for the island.

He created some of his best-known posters and prints during the '50s, many for government-sponsored literacy and hygiene campaigns. He also spent time in New York on a Guggenheim fellowship, and returned to the city in the 1960s, when he encountered a generation of Puerto Rican artists particularly intent on exploring and celebrating their cultural heritage.

Tufiño is survived by his daughter, Nitza Tufiño of South Orange, New Jersey; his sons, Rafael Tufiño Jr. of New York, Salvatore Tufiño of Miami and Pablo Tufiño of New York; and five grandchildren.

"I always think of him as an international populist," said Susana Torruella Leval, who was director of El Museo del Barrio at the time of the 2003 retrospective. "He was a man who knew art history and had an international perspective, but who worked in a figurative style because he thought that art should be accessible, that it should be for the people."

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