



[Ad campaign for Alcoa],  
Boris Artzybasheff [Object 1990.240]



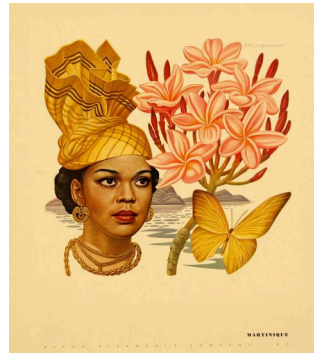
[Ad campaign for Alcoa],  
Boris Artzybasheff [Object 1990.241]



[Ad campaign for Alcoa],  
Boris Artzybasheff [Object 1990.238]



[Ad campaign for Alcoa],  
Boris Artzybasheff [Object 1990.239]



*Southseas Woman*,  
Boris Artzybasheff [Object 1965.0450]

Artist: Boris Artzybasheff

Date: circa 1948

Classification: Painting

Medium: Tempera

Credit Line: Gift of Aluminum Company of America

Objects: 1990.240, 1990.241, 1990.238, 1990.239

Reproduction

Credit Line: Gift of the artist

Object: 1965.0450

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Teaching guide by Jeanelle Cho '24 and Mike Goode

These five illustrations, published in *TIME* Magazine around 1948 as part of advertisements for Alcoa Caribbean cruises, are the work of the artist Boris Artzybasheff. Although the images promote travel to the Caribbean in a variety of ways, they have several elements in common: each highlights native plants, sightseeing sites, and human figures connected to specific cruise destinations. Designed to encourage tourism, each of the images were later coupled with advertising copy that offered historical information, pointed out landmarks, and touted connections between different Caribbean destinations' resources and American markets. By exoticizing Caribbean locales while also cultivating a sanitized view of their living, working, and environmental conditions, the advertisements deflect attention from exploitative and ecologically harmful aspects both of commercial cruises and of American resource extraction from the Caribbean.

# Context

Alcoa, short for the Aluminum Company of America, was founded in 1888 and became the leading producer of aluminum in the 20th century. When World War I prevented Alcoa from relying on third-party shipping to deliver bauxite ore, the mineral from which aluminum is derived, from northern South America to their manufacturing plants throughout the eastern United States, Alcoa developed its own fleet of replacement cargo ships. The company added to this fleet after World War II by purchasing surplus cargo ship hulls that the United States government had built as part of the war effort. Alcoa outfitted three of these hulls as luxury, air-conditioned cruise ships, each capable of hauling 96 first-class passengers, and devised sixteen-day cruises that left from the port of New Orleans and made stops in Jamaica, Trinidad, Venezuela, Curaçao, Barbados, and the Dominican Republic (several of which are locations featured in Artzybasheff's drawings).

One of Alcoa's goals was to profit from the reopening of oceans for tourism. Another was to infuse tourism dollars into key markets in an effort to solidify and expand international supply chains. Though Alcoa cruises only operated from 1948 until 1958, the company built significant enough financial ties with British colonial government officials during that decade that, in 1959, they were permitted to open a bauxite mine in Jamaica. The mine remains one of the primary suppliers of bauxite to Alcoa today. By 1958, Alcoa had also secured rights to build a dam in Suriname to generate hydroelectric power for an aluminum smelting operation near one of its bauxite mines. The gargantuan dam project would ultimately supply half the nation's power, build transportation infrastructure in the region, create jobs, and supply a giant reservoir. At the same time, the resulting reservoir has long had poor water quality, and its creation flooded half of the traditional Saramaka territory, displacing 6,000 residents and 43 villages.

Alcoa advertised its luxury Caribbean cruises to a predominantly White, American middle and upper-class clientele, whom it lured with

images of “exotic” flora, fauna, and racially mixed peoples. As sociologist Mimi Sheller observes, the company's promotional materials also portrayed its Caribbean destinations as “backwards” and “primitive,” in an effort to cultivate the idea that a cruise represented a romantic escape from stresses of modern, urban life (Sheller 171). From the comfort of first-class ships towering above the shorelines, travelers literally and figuratively “look[ed] down on people living in very traditional means (thatched roofs, dugout canoes, simple clothing), far removed from the purposes of this gigantic industrial conveyance” (Sheller 153). Yet, as noted above, the company was exploiting the natural resources of many of these very same destinations.

Artzybasheff's Alcoa paintings incorporate ecologically harmful and exploitative industries like sugarcane growing and oil drilling into pastoral compositions, portraying their workers as content and prosperous, and the industries themselves as ecologically responsible. The advertising copy written to accompany the images contributed to this interpretation. For example, the copy created to accompany Artzybasheff's drawing of workers harvesting sugarcane in the Dominican Republic [Object 1990.238] reads, “In the countryside, machetes of hardworking natives harvest the fourth greatest amount of sugar in all Latin America.” Likewise, his depiction of an oil worker and of offshore oil derricks was accompanied by advertising copy that celebrates Venezuela for having “picturesque forests of oil wells” and that openly invites American consumers to become the new “Conquistadors” of a market supposedly “hungry for American-made profits.” Artzybasheff's painting *Southseas Woman*, which he created to accompany an ad promoting Martinique as an Alcoa cruise destination, evokes the impression that the native population of the island is wealthy [Object 1965.0450].

In reality, the living conditions in most Caribbean countries in the late 1940s were poor, and local industries harmonized neither

## Background cont.

with ecosystems nor with human populations. Sugarcane, for example, is a non-native plant that was introduced to the Caribbean in the seventeenth century as a colonial cash crop. The widespread deforestation of the region for sugarcane plantations (operated until the 1830s using enslaved laborers), and two centuries of farming the region's lands as a monoculture, made many Caribbean islands more susceptible to droughts and hurricane damage. In the mid-twentieth century, sugarcane harvests also produced health hazards for the industry's low-wage workers, taxed water supplies, and badly polluted the air, since harvesting entailed burning the leaves off of sugarcane stalks while also flooding the fields to ensure that the crop did not catch on fire (for a photograph of what sugarcane harvesting looks like today, see Ed Kashi's photograph *Chichigalpa, Nicaragua* | 2014 [Object 2022.0023]).

Venezuela's oil industry, to cite another example, has been prone since its inception to oil spills and pipeline leaks, and Venezuelan oil refineries have never been subject to flaring regulations. The consequences for the region's air quality, and for marine and terrestrial ecosystems, has been disastrous. Over the past seventy years, Venezuela's coasts have become progressively less fishable, with the highest price being paid by local communities that historically relied on fishing for subsistence.

Artzybasheff's images helped Alcoa deflect attention from such ecological and humanitarian realities by marketing the company's cruises as ways to appreciate and honor nature and by downplaying the legacies of colonialism for the Caribbean. Some of the ads highlight the opportunity to see species of flowers that would have seemed "exotic" to middle and upper-class American consumers while also singling out striking geographic formations. The text to accompany one of these images [Object 1990.241], for example, highlights Jamaica's "night-blooming Cereus, its tall Blue Mountains and golden beaches" as among the many "treat[s]" awaiting the cruise

visitor. The text for another image [*Southseas Woman*; Object 1965.0450] minimizes the region's colonial traumas as "former quarrelsome days" and then opines that these are now "friendly, good-neighbor lands" whose pasts have become "hidden by flowering frangipani trees, and lovely tropical plants." Collectively, the ads and their images participated in the greenwashing and whitewashing of many political, humanitarian, and ecological realities.

### Artist Background

Born in Kharkov, Ukraine in 1899, Boris Artzybasheff was an illustrator, author, poster designer, and portraitist. Artzybasheff started his artistic education at Prince Tenishev School in St. Petersburg. In 1920, during the Russian Revolution, he moved to America and later became a naturalized U.S. citizen. During his lifetime, Artzybasheff illustrated, designed, and wrote over fifty books. In 1934, he started at *TIME* Magazine creating illustrations for advertisements. When *TIME* Magazine covers changed from photographs to illustrations in 1941, Artzybasheff became one of the magazine's first cover artists, ultimately creating over 200 covers. He also often worked as a commercial illustrator for advertising campaigns.

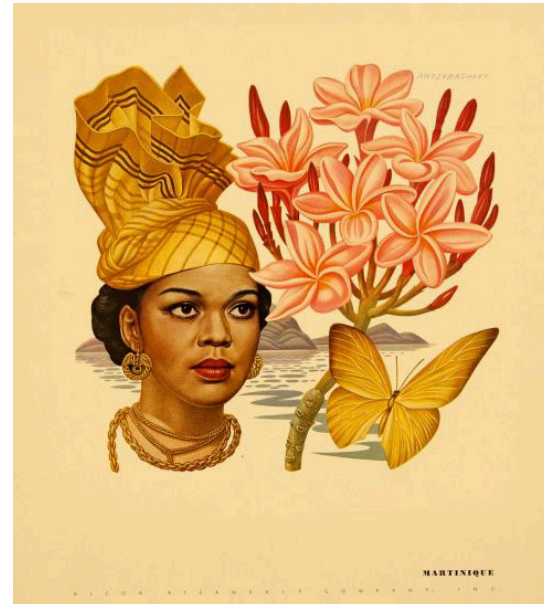
# Discussion Questions

- In his artworks for Alcoa cruise ads, Artzybasheff chose to depict primarily the workers and citizens of the Caribbean, coupled with landscapes and plants native to the area. Why do you think these portraits of workers and citizens would have appealed to consumers in the United States? To which consumers, specifically? How would the ads have been different if, instead, Artzybasheff chose to depict white tourists enjoying these cruises?
- Artzybasheff is mainly known for his surreal illustrations of the machine age, and many of his TIME Magazine covers and advertisements exemplify his style; however, the Alcoa ads are more realistic and less whimsical, showing different figures, architecture, nature, and landscapes in the Caribbean. What are reasons why Artzybasheff may have chosen a more realistic style for this project?
- These cruises, which catered primarily to White businessmen and families capable of affording first-class travel, have been critiqued for exploiting and romanticizing the Caribbean. What are some of the components of these advertising images that might be accused of the same? Do any of their components resist or challenge such an interpretation?
- Nearly all of these ads include human subjects in addition to flora and, in many cases, structures. What relationships do any of the images imply between these different things? What are the implications, for example, of interlacing flowering hibiscus blooms with images of offshore oil wells and an oilfield worker?



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