



The Flowering of Identity: Tracing the History of Cuba through the Visual Arts

Noel Smith

Teaching history through the visual arts is one way of bringing the past into the present. In Cuba, the visual arts and architecture have reflected the country’s “flowering of identity” through time, as a multi-ethnic population has grown to recognize its own distinct history, values and attributes, and Cuban artists have portrayed the island’s unique geography, flora and fauna. The arts have been a mirror reflecting Cuba’s history from earliest times to the present, and they now speak to its future.

Pre-Conquest Arts

In October 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on the eastern shores of Cuba with three caravellas. He found a land whose beauty astonished him, and a people and civilization that impressed him. On Christmas Day in 1492, Columbus noted in his day-to-day journal (kept in part as a record for his funders, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain): “I assure your highnesses that in all the world there is no better people nor better country. They love their neighbors as themselves, and have the sweetest talk in the world, and gentle, and always with a smile.”¹

Shortly thereafter, Columbus sailed back to Spain. When he came back the following year, he brought ships, colonists, priests, and soldiers with armor, weapons and cannons. They planned to convert souls, capture slaves, build fortifications, and search for gold. Within 50 years, the pre-Columbian population of Cuba would be decimated due to disease, slavery and war. In present day Cuba, there are no populations of indigenous

peoples. Because archaeology was not a developed discipline in Cuba until the twentieth century, and very little was known about the indigenous populations, their art has not had a great impact on the flowering of art in Cuba.

There were two different populations in Cuba at the time of conquest, the pre-ceramic Ciboney and the pottery-using Taíno. As prehistoric peoples, they left no writing behind to tell us about themselves and their histories. However, the artifacts they left behind tell a deeper story, connecting them to a larger South American and Caribbean culture. While the origin of the Ciboney is unknown, the Taíno are linked to the Arawaks, who originate from South America and who populated the Caribbean basin.

The earliest site of the Ciboney dates from around 5,000 BCE. Burials have revealed beautifully abraded and polished spheroliths, or balls, made of quartz and other hard rock—some found in children’s tombs—and ornaments and other objects that show no sign of use as tools.

The most arresting works left behind by the Ciboney peoples are pictographs, or cave paintings, found in caves all over Cuba. The shapes range from small very fine lines to circles, varied geometric figures forming unknown motifs, and stylized representations of vegetable elements, animals, and perhaps meteorological phenomena, such as hurricanes. Many of the rectilinear drawings of crosses and arrows are situated at places where solstices and equinoxes can be observed, and there are compass directions.

The Taínos were far more numerous than the Ciboneys at the time of conquest, and are thought to have reached Cuba around the third century CE. There were about 100,000-150,000 at the time of conquest, living in settlements in a largely sedentary life that was ruled by a system of chiefs—*caciques*—and religious leaders—*beziques*. There are many beautiful artifacts made of stone, wood, bone and ceramic left behind by the Taínos in Cuba, that share traits found in other areas populated by the Taínos in the Caribbean and South America. These include idols, or *zemis*, made of stone, figures that were used in community rituals to influence, dictate or recall community events through magic and religion. Many of these were destroyed by the Spanish. Also common are amulets, ornaments, pendants and other

jewelry, figurines, axes, stools, and ceramic vessels. Motifs of animals—bats, raptors, birds, turtles, monkeys and frogs—are common, as is a mixing of species: owl men, owl bats, and pelican men.

Colonialism

The process of colonization of Cuba by Spain began in the early 1500s. The colonizers brought art and architecture to Cuba whose styles reflect those in usage at that time in Spain. The conquering Spanish brought with them carpenters and workmen from Andalucía, in southern Spain, only very recently liberated from centuries of rule by the Moors. The earliest structures built by the Spanish show distinct *mozárabe*, or Moorish, influence, such as intricate ceilings and other details in finely carved wood, abstract and geometric decorative designs, colorful tiles, and enclosed patios.

Havana was founded in 1515 and became a very important port. It was vulnerable to pirates and invading foreign fleets, and its prosperity as a port had an underside in the growth of taverns, gambling dens, brothels and crime that afflicted the city as it prospered. The early architecture of Havana demonstrates fortress-like buildings facing the sea, with businesses and horses kept downstairs

and living quarters upstairs. As Havana became fortified, its Creole class grew in wealth and importance. They began cultivating sugar, cattle and tobacco, as well as trading in general merchandise, and acquired hundreds of thousands of slaves from Africa. The lifestyle of the wealthy Creole class was supported by the labor of the slaves, who worked not only in the fields but also as house servants and in industries such as ship building, architecture, and wood working. The distinctive architecture that grew up in the housing of the Creole class is built of native stone and features patios and galleries, and high ceilings, to combat the heat and humidity of the island. Stained glass windows provide beauty and protection from the sun. Heavy furniture in the European rococo style was carved from rare woods such as mahogany, and the furnishings, including lamps, tableware and carpets, emulate those of Spanish and French aristocracy. Elegant streets featured street level arcades, providing shelter from the heat, rain and mud of the thoroughfares.

The visual arts during the colonial time at first took all their cues from Spain. Religious imagery (17th–18th centuries), portraiture (late 18th–early 19th), landscape (mid-19th) and genre (mid to late 19th) were created by art-

ists either straight from Spain or trained in Spain; thus Cuba's art is based in the Baroque and moves slowly into Realism. However, as intellectuals like philosophy professor Friar Felix Varela and poet José María Heredia and others began to contemplate the idea of a Cuba independent from Spain in the first half of the 19th century, artists paid more attention to Cuba's people, history, and physical attributes. Artists painted Cuban landscapes, portraying the unique geography, flora and fauna. In genre paintings and lithographs, artists portrayed the trappings of the Creole class, with their great sugar factories, houses and slave labor; and they captured the boisterous life of Havana's working classes and free blacks. Artists documented the religions, culture and arts that the slaves brought from Africa and still practiced. Unlike in the United States, slaves in Cuba were allowed to stay together in ethnic groups. This gave birth to distinctly Afro-Cuban arts that had tremendous influence on future developments in Cuban culture and politics.

Independence

Cuba began to seek independence from Spain in the 1850s in a series of wars that culminated in Cuban independence in 1898. Spain had severely restricted



The Transportable City, pictured above, formed part of an exhibit on the grounds of the University of South Florida during April–July 2005. It is a collection of 10 canvas and pipe tents, which constitutes the minimum core needed to construct an emergency city in response to disaster. The designs are inspired by real, iconic structures in Cuba; the city speaks to the condition of exile and feelings of nostalgia experienced by Cubans in the diaspora. (Images courtesy of USF Institute for Research in Art.)

Wifredo Lam
(1902–1982) ©
ARS, NY
The Jungle,
1943. Gouache
on paper
mounted on
canvas, 7' 10"
× 7' 6½". Inter-
American Fund.
(140.1945)

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Cuba's access to the world. During Cuba's post-Independence domination by the United States, the restrictions were dropped and the country opened up. This was very liberating to Cuban students, intellectuals and artists. The 1920s were a period of great social and political upheaval, characterized by the birth of leftist and cultural movements which were concerned with the condition of the country under corrupt and illegitimate governments.

Members of the cultural movements known as the Minoristas and the Vanguard Painters began to appreciate the unique multicultural heritage that was the result of four centuries of bringing together Europeans, Africans and finally

Chinese (who were imported as laborers in the late 1800s). They saw how this heritage had helped to form a national identity, and were especially interested in the Afro-Cubans and in the *guajiros*, or Cuban peasants. The Vanguard Painters were the first generation of artists who were able to study in France and the United States, and they assimilated various modernist styles in their search to evolve a distinctive Cuban style.

Arguably the most successful of these artists, Wifredo Lam, was born in Sagua La Grande in 1902. Lam was of white, black and Asian descent; during his childhood he was exposed to the Afro-Cuban religion and culture common to his region, an important sugar producing

area. He was one of many Cuban artists who traveled to Europe in the 1920s in search of training and inspiration. In Paris, he became a part of the Surrealist movement, and a close friend of such luminaries as André Breton and Pablo Picasso. They were interested in African art as a way of revitalizing European art, and Lam painted in a Cubist style closely associated with Picasso. However, after he returned to Cuba in 1941 and rediscovered his Afro-Cuban heritage, Lam breathed new life into his paintings. He blended the European styles with magical realism to create a truly American art that drew upon the African religions and mythologies preserved in the Cuban countryside, suggesting a new conscious-

ness of life. The West African gods that Lam portrays in the cane fields and the jungles are not just startling formal elements; they are actors in a world in perpetual evolution and re-creation: "... the gods of the Yoruba pantheon are vital beings integrated to the flora and the fauna, forming a part of a whole ... the divine beings, humans and animals merge, suggesting the substantial unity of these living beings, and therefore, the unity of life."²

Lam died in Paris in 1982. However, he had maintained close ties with Cuba over the years. In 1981, Cuba's Council of State and Ministry of Culture granted him the Felix Varela Order (First Grade) for his contribution to Cuban and universal culture. Lam's ashes are interred in the Colón Cemetery in Havana.

Revolution

In 1959, Fidel Castro assumed power in the island as a result of the Cuban Revolution. The goals of the revolution included sovereignty and independence, equalizing income and fostering social justice. Campaigns against illiteracy, and the institution of free education and universal health care were important aspects of the revolution. The arts were one of the tools adopted by the government to reach these goals, and artists in all disciplines joined in.

The visual arts played a very important role from the beginning, primarily in the making of posters. Eye catching, inventive and inexpensive, posters were very effective tools for a small island, as they could be easily distributed and posted in gathering places such as union halls, schools, community centers and the like. Between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, around 12,000 posters were produced by various government agencies including the Cuban Film Institute, Editora Politica, and OSPAAAL (the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America).³

Training in visual arts, dance, music and theatre became an important part

of the free educational system in Cuba. In the 1960s, the government established the Superior Institute of Art (ISA) in the old Havana Country Club, the former playground of the Cuban and foreign elite located in the western part of Havana. Students admitted to ISA are the *crème de la crème* of a meritocratic system that begins with the identification of talented youngsters in elementary school in all areas of the island, and provides them with free rigorous technical training until the end of their high school years. They can then apply for one of very few spots at ISA or at other arts institutes in Cuba. "By the time we reached ISA, we were technically trained. ISA is all about conceptualization and reaching artistic maturity," commented one of the graduates, Marco Castillo, of the art collective Los Carpinteros.⁴

Despite restricted travel and access to foreign publications and mass media outlets, including television and the internet, artists and arts faculty have been very aware of what is happening in the art world beyond Cuba. And unlike the Soviet Union, Cuba never waged a war against abstraction in favor of realism, making all forms of art accepted. Cuban artists embrace realism and abstraction, as well as conceptualism, minimalism, performance, installation, and any other forms they feel are appropriate to their practices.

As a result of this system of arts training, Cuban artists of all disciplines are able to compete and excel on the international stage. Visual artists especially have been very successful since the 1990s, achieving representation in influential exhibitions and prestigious public and private collections. Successful visual artists are an elite group with something of the economic and recognition status of rock stars; they sell their work for high prices and are able to live in Cuba and abroad very comfortably.

However, there are restrictions on the freedom of Cuban visual artists. A problem of resources arose after

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INTERNET

www.fiu.edu/~fcf/history.html

This site from Florida International University offers a variety of articles on the history and current situation of Cuba.

www.miami.edu/iccas/iccas.htm

This is the official website of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami. It links to Cuban-related sites, including the Institute's own database, Cuba On-line (cuba.iccas.miami.edu/), the Cuba transition project, the interactive center Casa Bacardi, and the *Cuban Affairs Journal*.

www.school.za/PILAfrica/en/webs/18355/index.html

The Cuban Experience website has special sections for students, teachers, researchers and travelers, and hundreds of pages of information on many subjects in an accessible and brief format.

www.cubarte-english.cult.cu

This portal of Cuban culture offers information and news articles about Cuban music, film, radio and TV, visual arts, performing arts, literature and heritage.

www.cnap.cult.cu

This is the official site for the *Consejo Nacional de Artes Plásticas*. It offers information about Cuba's artistic scene and a detailed gallery of various Cuban artists.

the Soviet Union disintegrated and ended its subsidies of Cuba, ushering in what is called “the Special Period in times of peace.” This meant great material and economic sacrifices for Cubans and *inventando*, or inventing, became a way of life, as people found ways to procure the items they needed, often altering an existing object: for example, making drinking glasses out of rum bottles, or adapting an '80s Soviet Lada engine for a '50s Chevy. Artists made *inventando* a social and political comment as well as a source of materials. For example, Abel Barroso's installation “3rd World Internet Café” featured Mango brand “computers” made out of wood salvaged from old furniture.

A second restriction is censorship of content. Artists have been, and still are, expected to support the revolution and the government, and not to undermine it with criticism or unacceptable views and opinions. The National Council of the Visual Arts controls what is shown in museums, galleries and art fairs, and what is published as books, catalogues or magazines. Overt political art can be removed, or in extreme cases, its authors punished with jail. Artists have learned to speak in code, masking their true intentions in ways that are nonetheless understood within the context of their culture. In a society where there is no right of free association, free elections, or free press, the arts have the capacity to create a space for civil discourse.

The ability of Cuban artists to operate internationally, to achieve economic success and (however subtly) to challenge and question society and politics, signal changes in Cuba from the 1960s. Until the end of the 1980s, Cuban artists were restricted from traveling abroad, considered workers like any others, and received commensurate salaries from the state. They were expected to work within the tenets and goals of the revolution and further them. It is interesting that the very system of education and training provided by the state to preserve the state is now becoming a vehicle of change for the state. It is unlikely that, with the aging and illness of its charismatic leader and transition of government, Cuba will retain its isolation and revolutionary purity in a changing world. Far from fading, the visual arts are illuminating the future and nurturing Cuba's continuing “flowering of identity.”

Notes

1. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (The Heritage Press: New York, 1963), 136.
2. *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Colección de Arte Cubano* (La Habana, Cuba, 2001), 142.
3. One resource on poster art is Lincoln Cushing, *Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003).
4. Noel Smith, unpublished interview with Los Carpinteros, Graphicstudio/USF, 2004.

NOEL SMITH is curator of *Latin American and Caribbean Art at the Institute for Research in Art, University of South Florida*. She works extensively with Cuban artists, and has an M.A. in Art History from USF.