

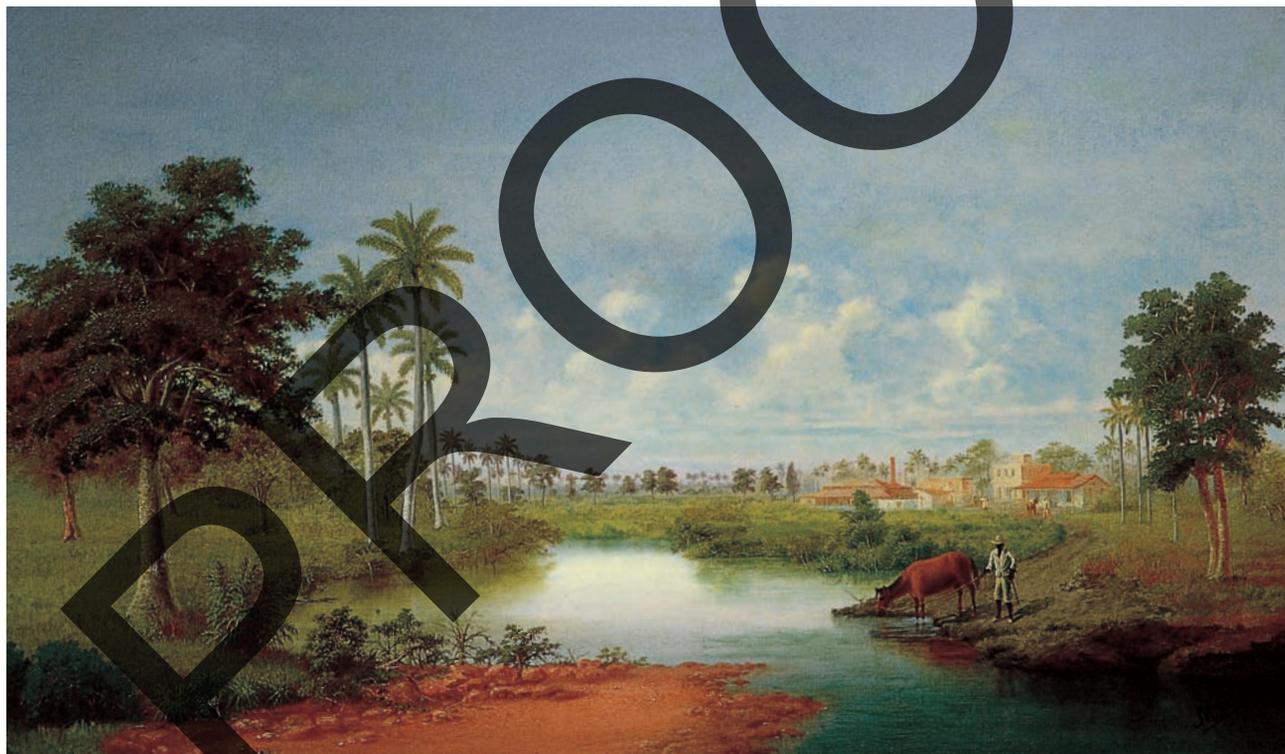
CUBA

A HISTORY IN ART

Revised edition

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Cuban Painting in the Republican Period, 1902–1959



Juan A. Martínez

The political and the cultural histories of Cuba have unfolded at different paces. The appearance and development of easel painting in Cuba with some indication of a specific sense of place and culture predate Cuban independence from Spain in 1898 and the formation of a republic in 1902. Painting was officially established in Cuba with the opening of a free national school of drawing and painting in 1818, known as the Academy of San Alejandro. This academy of art was instituted by the Spanish authorities (in a colony with a rapidly growing economy and strategic value) to elevate the practice of drawing and painting from a craft to a fine art, thus making it possible for whites to enter what up to then was considered a lowly trade done by blacks and mulattoes. Although San Alejandro fulfilled its purpose, it contributed little to the most important painting done in Cuba in the second half of the nineteenth century, Federico Martínez's portraits of the creole class, Esteban Chartrand's and Guillermo Collazo's "Cuban" landscapes, Armando Menocal's sketches of the war of independence, and the Spaniard Víctor Patricio Landaluze's vernacular scenes. These artists were among the first to use European artistic languages, such as naturalism and romanticism, to represent their natural environment, creole human types,

and the island's history. As in the rest of the Americas, the recontextualization of European painting in Cuba began with the subject matter.¹

The beginning of the new century and the formation of the Cuban republic in 1902 brought mainly institutional changes to the development of Cuban art. San Alejandro took the artistic lead in the first quarter of the century producing a score of professional artists, while academic painting in Cuba found its highest expression in the work of Armando Menocal, Leopoldo Romañach, and Domingo Ramos. Menocal is best remembered as the painter of the second war of independence, whose oil sketches done in the field are the most memorable images of that war in Cuban art. He was also a popular portraitist and an estimable landscape painter. Romañach was a prolific painter and a much loved professor, whose major contributions as an artist were his marines, done in the northern keys of Cuba from the 1920s on. These marines are the first body of paintings to acknowledge the insular nature of Cuba and to capture its light and atmosphere. Ramos's contribution was as a landscape painter with an eye for Cuba's tropical colors. He also discovered, artistically speaking, the Viñales valley in the province of Pinar del Rio. In general, the academic artists worked for Cuba's upper class and the state, fulfilling the



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Victor Manuel

usual demand for flattering portraits in the case of the former and inspirational patriotic paintings in the case of the latter.

The new status of Cuba as a republic led to the foundation of educational and cultural institutions, such as the National Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Museum of Art. The latter consisted of a historical section and a fine arts section; however, the museum was barely funded and for decades did little to make known Cuba's historical art and did even less to support its living artists. Much more consequential was the foundation in 1916 of the Association of Painters and Sculptors by the painter Federico Edelman Pintó. This

association, under the name of *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, sponsored collective and solo exhibitions of fine arts and caricature, music concerts, and conferences on art and culture. It also released public statements on major issues and events related to the fine arts. For over a decade this association was the main voice and exhibition venue for Cuban artists.

One important missing element was art criticism, which until the late 1930s was practiced by literary figures. The best of these, Julián del Casal and José Martí in the late nineteenth century and Bernardo G. Barros and Jorge Mañach in the early twentieth century, wrote insightful comments on the art of their time. Barros and Mañach published in 1924 and 1928 the first studies on the art of the republic, namely, academic painting up to 1925. By that time a new generation of artists had begun emerging in Havana, bent on challenging academic art.

Like in the rest of Latin America in the 1920s, Cuban artists and intellectuals, inspired by the ideals of European modernism (science, industry, democracy, universal literacy, artistic license, etc.), aimed to change their "backward" societies. At the top of their agenda was cultural renovation. Two related elite groups responsible for reforming Cuba's high culture in the 1920s were the Minority Group and the cultural magazine *Revista de Avance*.² The writers, caricaturists, painters, and composers associated with these groups broke with the respective norms in their arts, introducing the ideas and forms of European modernism, to better articulate a sense of self and place. *Revista de Avance* (1927-30) in particular played an important role in the emergence





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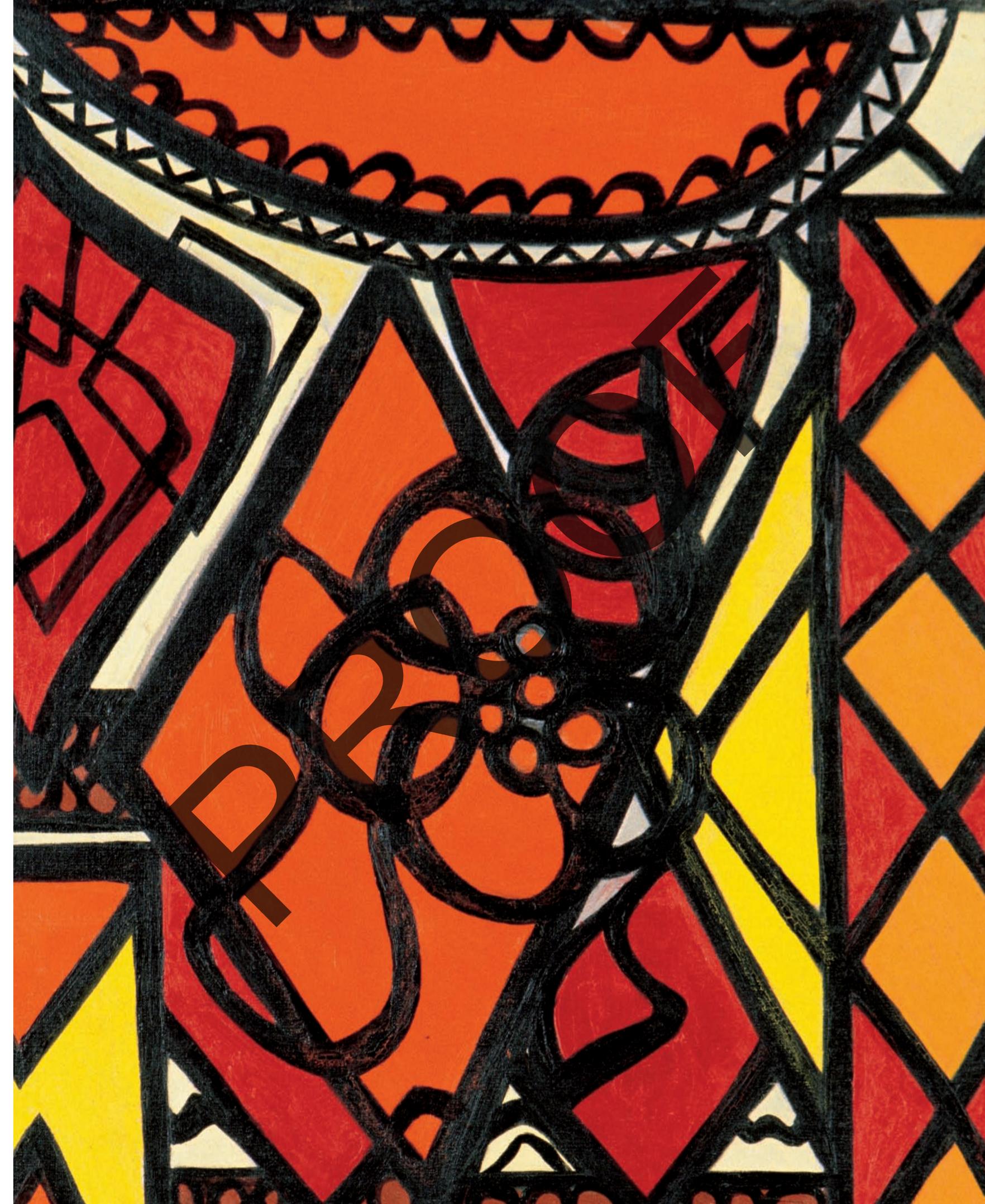
Amelia Peláez

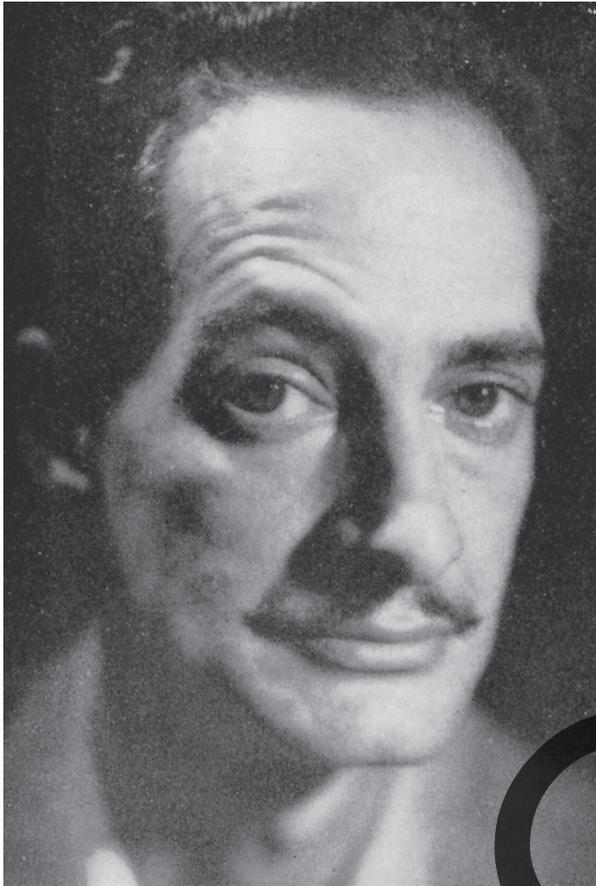
of modern Cuban painting. This magazine sponsored the landmark *Exhibition of New Art* in 1927, where the majority of the emerging modernist artists first exhibited together. Moreover it published discourses on the nascent modernist movement in Havana and reproductions of drawings and paintings by the pioneer modernist artists. In fact, the major themes of Cuban modernist painting in the 1930s—the peasant, the Afro-Cuban, and social protest—first appeared in the form of drawings in the pages of *Revista de Avance*.

This first phase of Cuban modernist painting goes into high gear in the early 1930s, when many of the painters of this generation returned

to Cuba from their artistic pilgrimage to Paris. In Europe they acquired the conceptual and formal tools to develop their personal artistic languages and visions. The painters of this movement—Eduardo Abela, Jorge Arche, Carlos Enríquez, Arístides Fernández, Antonio Gattorno, Víctor Manuel García, Amelia Peláez, and Fidelio Ponce, among others—adapted European modernist ideas and styles to symbolize a sense of personal identity and a collective sense of place.³ Using a combination of narrative and symbolism, these painters tried to give voice in Cuban high culture to the most humble and exploited sectors of society—the peasant and the Afro-Cuban. Víctor Manuel, Gattorno, and Romero Arciaga approached their subject from a primitivist point of view, strongly influenced by the work of Paul Gauguin. They symbolized the *guajiro* or peasant as simple, languid, and sensual, living in a timeless, uncomplicated, and tropical paradise. In contrast, painters like Enríquez and Fernández took a critical look at the Cuban countryside showing the dire economic and social situation of the *guajiro*. These artists also discovered in the figure of the Afro-Cuban a potent symbol of Cuban identity. For the most part they represented Afro-Cubans as energetic, sensuous, and inclined to magic and ritual. Primitivist stereotypes aside, their representations of Afro-Cubans and their popular culture affirmed a long ignored and integral part of that which is Cuban.

This initial stage of modernism in Cuban art received a measure of support by new institutions. In 1929 a group of civic-minded women founded the Lyceum, a non-profit organization meant to enhance Havana's high culture through art exhibitions, concerts, recitals, conferences, and a circulating library.⁴





Reproduced from *Pintura Cubana de Hoy*, photograph by Berestein.

Carlos Enríquez

The Lyceum immediately became the main exhibition venue for modernist painting in the 1930s. Modernist painting also benefited from the government's creation of the Directory of Culture as a branch of the Ministry of Education. This office funded for a brief period of time in 1937 a free studio of art, directed and taught by modernist artists with a student body made up of Havana's working class. More lasting in its consequences was the Directory's organization of the First and Second National Salons of Painting and Sculpture in 1935 and 1938, respectively. These salons not only convened a large number of academic and modernist artists, but they also provided purchase awards for works of art which

are considered today among the most important paintings in the collection of Cuba's National Museum.⁵ While exhibitions of art increased in Havana during the 1930s, art criticism continued to lag behind. By the end of the decade, however, Guy Pérez Cisneros, the first bona fide art historian and critic of Cuban art, made his appearance with publications in various magazines, like *Verbum*, *Selecta*, and *Grafos*.

The political turbulence and depressed economy of the 1930s gave way to a more hopeful decade, which began with a new constitution and free elections. While World War II was ravaging large parts of the globe, Cuba was enjoying a period of relative political stability and economic prosperity. Contrary to the previous decade when modernist painting came into its own against all odds, the visual arts in the 1940s thrived with the help of increased institutional support and the benefit of a decade of modernist painting in the island. The 1940s generation of modernist painters—Wifredo Lam, Mario Carreño, Rene Portocarrero, Mariano Rodríguez, Cundo Bermudez, Mirta Cerra, and Roberto Diago, among others—built on the art of their immediate predecessors, while developing a more mundane, dionysian, and symbolic vision of self and nation.⁶

Visually, they developed a monumental and volumetric approach to form, and they also brightened their palette considerably. Monumentality of form gave a certain transcendental quality to their mundane subject matter, while their bright palette aimed to parallel the intensity of tropical colors. Whereas most of the artists of the first modernist wave visited Paris in their formative years and gravitated to a varied gamut of movements and