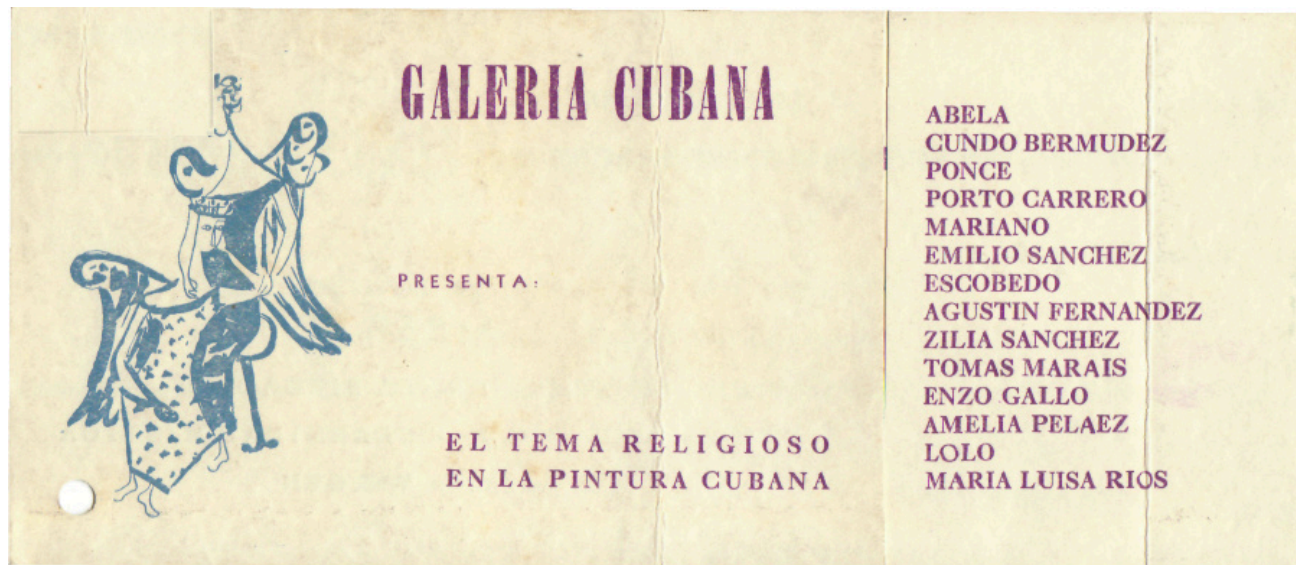


The Religious Theme in Cuban Painting: An Exhibition at Galería Cubana in 1956

By Juan Sarracino

Subject, pictorial language, and exhibition history through a period invitation



First side of the invitation: title, illustration, and announced artists. Galería Cubana, 1956. Reproduction of the supplied document; visible marks are retained.

An invitation from March 1956 brings fourteen names together around a shared subject. Reading it allows us to examine the relationship between religion, painting, and exhibition, without confusing an exhibition's theme with its artists' styles or beliefs.

The history of an exhibition survives not only in the works that were shown. It also remains in the documents that announced its existence: selected names, titles, dates, addresses, and printed images that prepared a particular way of looking. An invitation may contain little information yet preserve an important intellectual decision: to bring different artistic practices together around a shared question.

Such is the interest of *El tema religioso en la pintura cubana* (*The Religious Theme in Cuban Painting*), an exhibition announced by Galería Cubana for March 23–31, 1956, on the occasion of Holy Week. The document presents neither a manifesto nor an identified artistic school. Above all, it proposes a subject through which to consider painting.^[1]

The distinction is decisive. The religious may designate subject matter, a tradition of images, an experience, or a function of the work. None of these possibilities constitutes a style in itself. Reading this invitation requires us to keep those distinctions open, rather than automatically equating a religious subject with a traditional pictorial language.

An Invitation, Not an Inventory of Works

The two reproduced sides serve complementary purposes. The first presents the gallery's name, the exhibition title, an illustration, and the list of artists. The second invites the reader to the opening and gives the dates, opening hours, and address. The opening is announced for Friday, March 23, at seven in the evening; the exhibition runs through Saturday, March 31, with hours from three to seven-thirty in the afternoon, Monday through Saturday. The stated address is Calle 10, number 152, at the corner of Calzada.^[1–2]

The leaflet announces fourteen names, but it does not list fourteen paintings. It gives no titles of individual works, media, dimensions, execution dates, owners, or photographs of the paintings. Nor does the list establish that the artists personally attended the opening. It records the names under which the exhibition was announced, not all the circumstances of its realization.

This distinction changes the research that can be undertaken. We cannot reconstruct the group of paintings from the invitation, but we can study how the exhibition was presented to its public and what relationships it invited viewers to consider. The source says little about the objects and considerably more about the framework in which they were to be viewed.

The Gallery as a Place of Interpretation

The phrase “on the occasion of the celebration of Holy Week” explicitly connects the exhibition to an occasion in the Christian calendar. This is not a context added by a later interpretation: it belongs to the announcement itself. At the same time, the institution presenting the exhibition is Galería Cubana. The document thus places this religious subject within a space for exhibiting painting.^[1]

It is worth considering that contextual shift without assigning the works a provenance we do not know. An image exhibited in a gallery can be viewed as devotional subject matter, but also as a pictorial solution: how it organizes bodies, distributes space, or transforms a narrative into relationships of color and form. These are possibilities for interpretation, not descriptions of the unknown paintings in this exhibition.

Bringing artists together under a shared theme establishes a framework for comparison. It allows us to ask what changes from one interpretation to another and what remains recognizable. In this sense, it can

be read as a curatorial operation, although the leaflet neither identifies a person responsible for the selection nor explains its criteria. The invitation preserves the proposal for a collective reading, not the full explanation of whoever conceived it.

Fourteen Names Around a Shared Subject

The list includes Abela, Cundo Bermúdez, Ponce, Porto Carrero, Mariano, Emilio Sánchez, Escobedo, Agustín Fernández, Zilia Sánchez, Tomás Marais, Enzo Gallo, Amelia Peláez, Loló, and María Luisa Ríos. The forms printed in the document are retained here, with accents normalized and without expanding abbreviated names. ^[2]

The enumeration does not divide the artists by generation or classify them by artistic tendency. Nor does it establish how many works were assigned to each. Its visible unity comes from the thematic heading. The document records a gathering of names, not evidence of a common style, an enduring association, or a shared program.

That distinction is precisely what makes the exhibition interesting. A shared subject does not eliminate differences between artists: it creates an occasion for observing them. The productive question is not what pictorial doctrine they all professed, but how differently a common field of images could be approached. The invitation raises that possibility, although answering it requires us to locate the works.

The wording “in Cuban painting” also matters. The title places the theme within an artistic field; it neither describes a uniform national style nor, by itself, establishes the birthplace of everyone announced. As an exhibition proposal, it invites those works to be considered within a shared history. Its interest lies not in erasing differences, but in allowing them to appear within a common framework.

Religious Subject, Style, and Belief: Three Distinct Levels

The title refers to “the religious theme,” not to an exhibition of art intended for worship or to a confessional declaration by the participants. That choice of words deserves to be preserved. Depicting a religious subject, producing an image for a liturgical function, and expressing a personal conviction are different situations. The document identifies only the first as the principle bringing the works together; it provides no information about the other two. ^[1-2]

An artist’s presence in the list therefore does not establish that artist’s beliefs. Nor does the reference to Holy Week prove that every painting was a Crucifixion, a scene of the Passion, or an image connected to a particular devotion. Such subjects would be compatible with the announced occasion, but they are not identified in the leaflet.

The same care must be applied to pictorial language. An inherited subject can be organized through very different visual solutions. Automatically opposing religion and modernity confuses what a work represents with how it represents it. This document invites us to reconsider that opposition, but does not establish the particular solutions adopted by each participant.

It does not authorize us to extend the contents to religious traditions it never mentions, either. The associations certain names may evoke for a reader do not turn those associations into an inventory of the exhibition. The starting point must remain the formulation the announcement actually provides.

Artistic Trajectories Cannot Be Reduced to a Label

Among the names listed are Zilia Sánchez, Amelia Peláez, and María Luisa Ríos, as well as the entry “Loló,” without a surname. That last form should be preserved in a documentary transcription: its connection to a fully identified person must be established through additional documentation, rather than by adding information the leaflet does not contain. ^[2]

When studying an artistic trajectory, the value of such appearances lies in broadening the questions, not in imposing an evolutionary scheme. Announced participation in a thematic exhibition does not amount to an exclusive phase of production. An artist may select an earlier work, show an occasional line of inquiry, or be represented by a painting belonging to another collection. None of those circumstances is resolved here.

Consequently, it would be inappropriate to speak of a “return to figuration,” an “abandonment of abstraction,” or a “religious phase” on the basis of this list alone. Such conclusions would require identified works and a chronology. Exhibition history adds situations to an artistic biography; it should not reduce that biography to a succession of labels replacing one another.

The Printed Image Also Shapes the Exhibition

The first side of the document combines a blue illustration of winged figures with violet typography. Galería Cubana’s name occupies the upper area; the exhibition title is set apart from the column of artists. On the second side, horizontal violet bands organize the information. The landscape-format composition becomes clear when the two reproductions are viewed in their original proportions. ^[2-3]

The winged figures can be read as angelic and establish a visual affinity with the announced subject. Their schematic lines and moving silhouettes offer a graphic interpretation, not an identified reproduction of one of the paintings. The consulted images provide no legible credit that would allow the illustration to be securely attributed to a participant.

The invitation can therefore be studied as a visual object with decisions of its own. It does not replace the works, but participates in their public presentation. Before entering the gallery, the recipient already encountered a title, a set of names, and an image that shaped expectations. That initial mediation belongs to the history of the exhibition.

What It Offers Researchers and Collectors

Its first contribution is a precise documentary reference: an exhibition announced with a title, presenting institution, dates, and list of artists. Its second is a historical question: why and how were those works brought together around the religious theme? Its third is a research agenda through which the announcement might lead to knowledge of the objects.

An installation photograph might establish visual relationships; an inventory might identify titles and owners; a review might reveal how the proposal was received. These are sources to locate, not documents whose survival can be assumed here. Searching for them would make it possible to compare the announced project with the exhibition as actually realized.

For someone holding a painting related to one of these names, a thematic connection may justify research, but not an automatic identification. A religious subject and a compatible date would not be

sufficient to claim that a work was exhibited at Galería Cubana in March 1956. The connection between that object and this exhibition would have to be established. The invitation opens the inquiry; it does not conclude it.

A History That Begins Before Looking at the Paintings

The interest of this leaflet does not depend on making it prove more than it can support. Its specific contribution is to preserve a way of presenting Cuban painting: not through a single name or the declaration of a school, but through a subject capable of bringing several artists together.

Read from this perspective, *The Religious Theme in Cuban Painting* raises a question that remains useful: what happens when a shared subject becomes the meeting place for different pictorial practices? The document does not preserve the visual answer, but it preserves the act of proposing that encounter.

Investigating artistic modernity requires attention to such acts as well. Not only to the emergence of a new language, but also to the conditions in which images were brought together, presented, and interpreted. In this 1956 invitation, the title, names, and religious occasion allow us to begin that history. The next task is to recover the works without replacing them with our expectations.

Documentary Note

This essay is based exclusively on the digital reproduction of two sides of Galería Cubana's invitation. Exhibition details are presented as information announced by the leaflet; the discussion of subject, pictorial language, and presentation consists of the author's interpretations. The paintings have not been identified, and no biographies, attributions, or visual reconstructions from outside the document have been added. No city name is printed on the consulted sides. The dates and opening hours were checked visually because the extracted text contains recognition errors.

Document References

[1] Galería Cubana, *El tema religioso en la pintura cubana* (The Religious Theme in Cuban Painting), invitation, March 23–31, 1956. Second side, page 2 of the digital reproduction: invitation, Holy Week, dates, opening hours, and address.

[2] Ibid., first side, page 1 of the digital reproduction: gallery name, title, fourteen artists, and illustration.

[3] Ibid., both sides: graphic arrangement, typography, color, and proportions of the reproduced document.

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Sources consulted: Sarracino Gallery Archives.

Web edition: images cropped and retouched to remove unrelated marks. References in the text to stamps and annotations describe the archival originals.