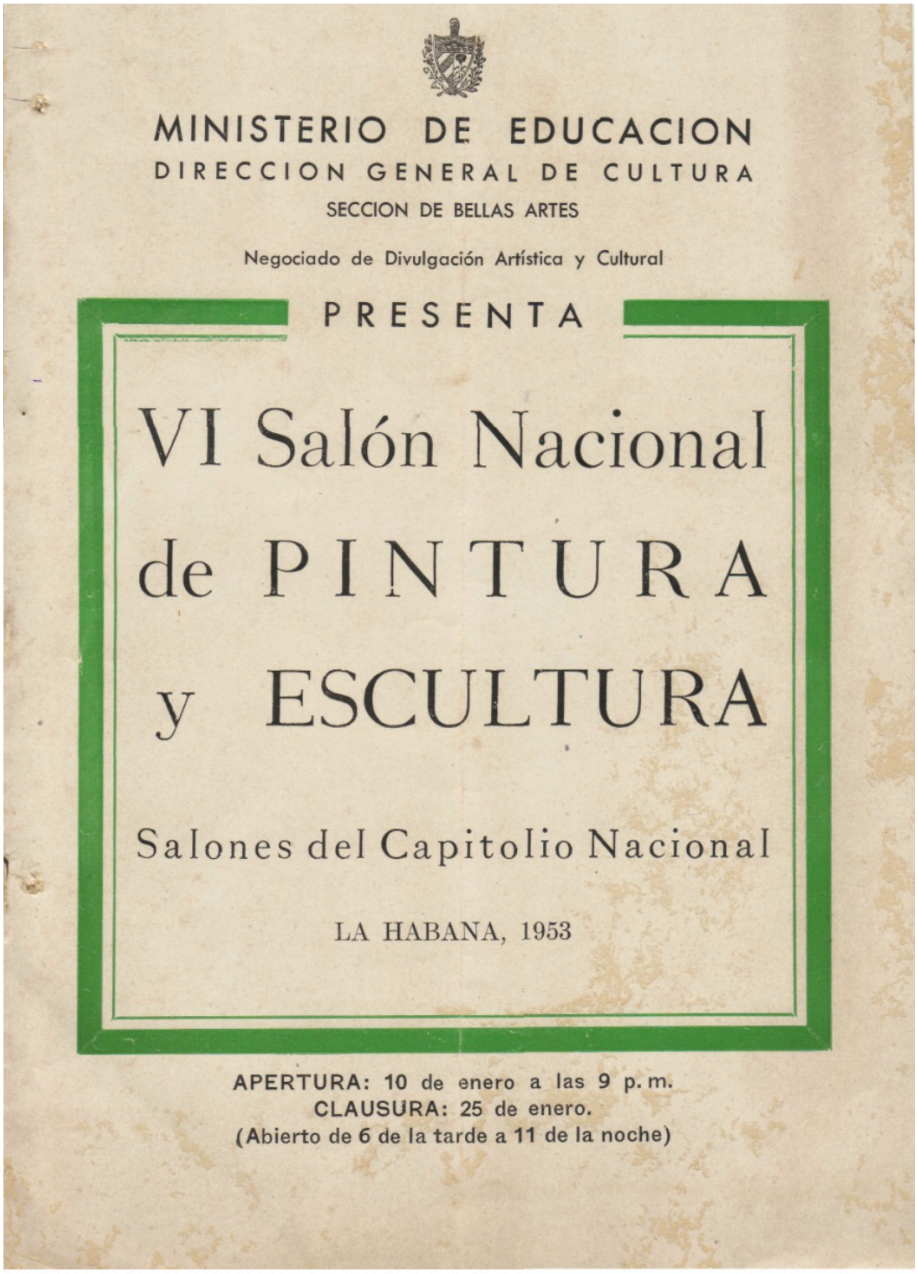
Havana, 1953: A National Salon Between Tradition, Modernity, and New Forms of Abstraction

By Juan Sarracino

VI National Salon of Painting and Sculpture, National Capitol, January 1953



Introduction

In January 1953, the halls of Havana's National Capitol hosted the VI National Salon of Painting and Sculpture, organized by the Ministry of Education through the General Directorate of Culture, the Fine Arts Section, and the Office of Artistic and Cultural Dissemination. The exhibition opened on January 10 and remained on view through January 25.

Read today, the catalogue of that exhibition has a value that extends far beyond a simple list of artists and works. It allows us to observe, almost in raw form, a transitional moment in Cuban art: portraiture, landscape, religious scenes, still life, and costumbrista subjects remain present, while languages increasingly distant from traditional representation begin to gain visibility.

This was not a programmatically abstract exhibition, nor was it the manifesto of a particular group. That is precisely what makes the document so revealing. It allows us to see the Cuban artistic field of the early 1950s before later genealogies—geometric abstraction, concrete art, Los Once, or the international consolidation of specific artists—retrospectively organized our understanding of the period.

A Broad and Heterogeneous Salon

The catalogue includes both painting and sculpture and presents an extensive roster of artists. Among the painters are Jorge Arche, Mario Carreño, Servando Cabrera Moreno, Mirta Cerra, Hugo Consuegra, Roberto Diago, Julio Girona, Guido Llinás, José María Mijares, René Portocarrero, Raúl Martínez, Rafael Soriano, Zilia Sánchez, and Antonio Vidal, among many others.

The document's importance lies precisely in this coexistence. The same catalogue that records portraits, landscapes, and religious scenes also includes titles such as Composition, Form, Variation No. 3, Oil No. I, Oil No. II, and Composition of Forms.

This does not mean that every work with a formal title should automatically be classified as abstract. The catalogue reproduces no images and offers no formal descriptions. It does, however, show that some artists were beginning to use a vocabulary that moved progressively away from conventional descriptive titles.

That linguistic shift is one of the document's most revealing signals.

Mario Carreño: Three Works and a Vocabulary in Transformation

Mario Carreño participated with three oils: Unexpected Encounter, Under the Moon and the Sun, and Space in Time.

The third work is especially suggestive from a historical perspective. Space in Time is a title that evokes questions of structure, spatial organization, and temporality—concepts that were becoming increasingly important within modern artistic languages of the period.

Yet the document demands interpretive discipline. A title cannot reconstruct a composition. We do not know what forms Carreño used, what the works' dimensions were, or how the three paintings related to one another.

What we can establish is more important: in January 1953 Carreño was showing three distinctly titled works within a broad national exhibition. That documentary fact is more valuable than any attempt to fill the gaps through conjecture.

José María Mijares and a Work Titled Vertical Light

José María Mijares appears with a single work: 65. Vertical Light. Oil.

The entry is brief, but highly significant. The catalogue does not identify the support, dimensions, or exact date of execution. We therefore cannot state whether it was oil on canvas, panel, or another support, nor can 1953 automatically be treated as the date of the painting.

What we do know is that a work titled Vertical Light formed part of the salon.

The title is significant because it introduces two concepts—light and verticality—that may point toward a less narrative and more structural visual organization. Yet caution is essential: without an image, any formal reconstruction would be speculative.

For the researcher, this reference opens a concrete line of inquiry: locating photographs of the exhibition, press archives, later catalogues, inventories, or provenance documentation that might eventually identify the work.

That is precisely the value of a document of this kind: it does not complete the research, but it allows us to ask far more precise questions.

Loló Soldevilla: Three Sculptures Before the Image We Now Associate with Her

One of the catalogue's most intriguing presences appears in the sculpture section.

Loló Soldevilla is represented by three works: Mask, in bronze; Figure, also in bronze; and Leda and the Swan, in stone.

This participation is especially important because it broadens the view often held of Soldevilla. Historiography and the market tend to concentrate on her later abstract and concrete production. Documents such as this one remind us that her trajectory was more complex and that sculpture played a significant role in her formation and development.

The catalogue does not allow us to state what these works looked like formally. Leda and the Swan refers to a mythological subject, while Mask and Figure retain titles connected to the body and face.

But the material information—two bronzes and one stone work—introduces another dimension of Soldevilla's practice: volume, matter, mass, and three-dimensional construction.

It is precisely this complexity that is lost when an artist is reduced to the phase for which she later became best known.

Sculpture as a Central Part of the Salon

Sculpture was not marginal to the exhibition. Alongside Loló, the catalogue includes, among others, Agustín Cárdenas, Roberto Estopiñán, Florencio Gelabert, and Teodoro Ramos Blanco.

The registered materials are particularly varied: ácana wood, marble, stainless steel, terracotta, artificial stone, direct cement, reinforced concrete, granite, iron, and stone.

This variety reveals another aspect of artistic modernization in Cuba: not only were forms changing, but also materials and ways of conceiving the sculptural object.

Without installation photographs we cannot reconstruct scale or spatial relationships. But the catalogue demonstrates that Cuban sculpture in 1953 was actively engaged in material and formal exploration that deserves deeper study.

From Representation to the Problem of Form

One of the catalogue's most revealing features is the coexistence of traditional titles with increasingly abstract or conceptual ones.

Guido Llinás presents Form and Interior. Salvador Corratgé appears with Composition and Composition of Forms. Antonio Vidal presents Composition, in gouache. Zilia Sánchez participates with Oil No. I and Oil No. II.

These titles do not, by themselves, prove adherence to geometric abstraction. But they do indicate a fundamental shift: the represented subject is no longer necessarily the principal element through which the work is identified.

In some cases, painting begins to present itself simply as painting, form, composition, or variation.

That semantic change matters because it reveals a transformation in the way the art object itself was being conceived.

A Moment Before Later Classifications

From our present perspective, it is tempting to read this catalogue retrospectively, searching for future protagonists of specific movements.

That operation requires caution.

The 1953 salon was not an exhibition of Cuban concrete art. Nor was it an exhibition of Los Once or any other specific group.

Its importance lies elsewhere: it documents numerous artists within the same institutional field before later histories separated them into clearly defined movements, generations, and tendencies.

Seen in this way, the salon offers a more complex image of Cuban art. An artist could work simultaneously with figurative and structural elements. Another could use an abstract title without having fully abandoned representation. A sculptor could alternate between the figure and material experimentation.

Actual history is usually less orderly than the classifications we later use to understand it.

Documents, Not Shortcuts

For collectors, researchers, and specialists, catalogues such as this one have extraordinary value, but they also require caution.

The fact that a work is recorded in a period catalogue does not mean that any present-day work with the same title can automatically be identified as that object.

A solid identification requires additional evidence: photographs, dimensions, provenance, inscriptions, archival documentation, historical certificates, or later references.

In the case of Vertical Light, for example, we know that Mijares presented a work with that title. We still do not know which specific surviving work—if it survives and has been identified—corresponds to that catalogue entry.

The same applies to Loló's bronzes.

An exhibition catalogue is one piece of a larger puzzle. Its importance lies precisely in allowing a more rigorous investigation to be built.

The Value of Returning to Primary Sources

One of the problems in the study of Cuban art is that many assertions are repeated for decades until they acquire the appearance of certainty.

Period catalogues allow us to return to the starting point. They allow us to verify who participated, what works were presented, how those works were titled, and what materials were recorded.

They also allow us to identify absences. Sandú Darié and Luis Martínez Pedro, for example, do not appear in this catalogue, although both would later play important roles within Cuban abstraction.

Absence should not be interpreted as lack of importance. It simply demonstrates that any single exhibition represents a particular moment, never the totality of an artistic scene.

A Documentary Photograph of Cuban Culture in 1953

The VI National Salon of Painting and Sculpture can be understood as a documentary photograph of an exceptionally fertile moment.

Many elements of pictorial and sculptural tradition remain present, but questions of form, space, structure, matter, and the autonomy of the art object are beginning to emerge with increasing clarity.

Carreño presents Space in Time. Mijares presents Vertical Light. Llinás presents Form. Corratgé presents Composition of Forms. Zilia Sánchez presents works titled simply Oil No. I and Oil No. II. And Loló Soldevilla appears still working visibly in bronze and stone.

None of these entries, taken alone, explains the development of Cuban art.

Taken together, however, they allow us to recognize something fundamental: the transformation was already underway.

Not uniformly, not within a single school, and not according to a perfectly linear sequence. It was occurring simultaneously across different artists, materials, and languages.

That is precisely why this small 1953 catalogue remains, more than seven decades later, a source of extraordinary interest for understanding how Cuban artistic modernity was constructed.

Research Note

This article is based on the original catalogue of the VI National Salon of Painting and Sculpture, held in the halls of Havana's National Capitol from January 10 to 25, 1953. The document records artists, titles, and media, but does not reproduce the works or provide dimensions, individual dates of execution, provenance, or award results. Any formal interpretation should therefore be understood as a line of inquiry rather than a substitute for original visual or archival documentation.

Juan Sarracino

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.