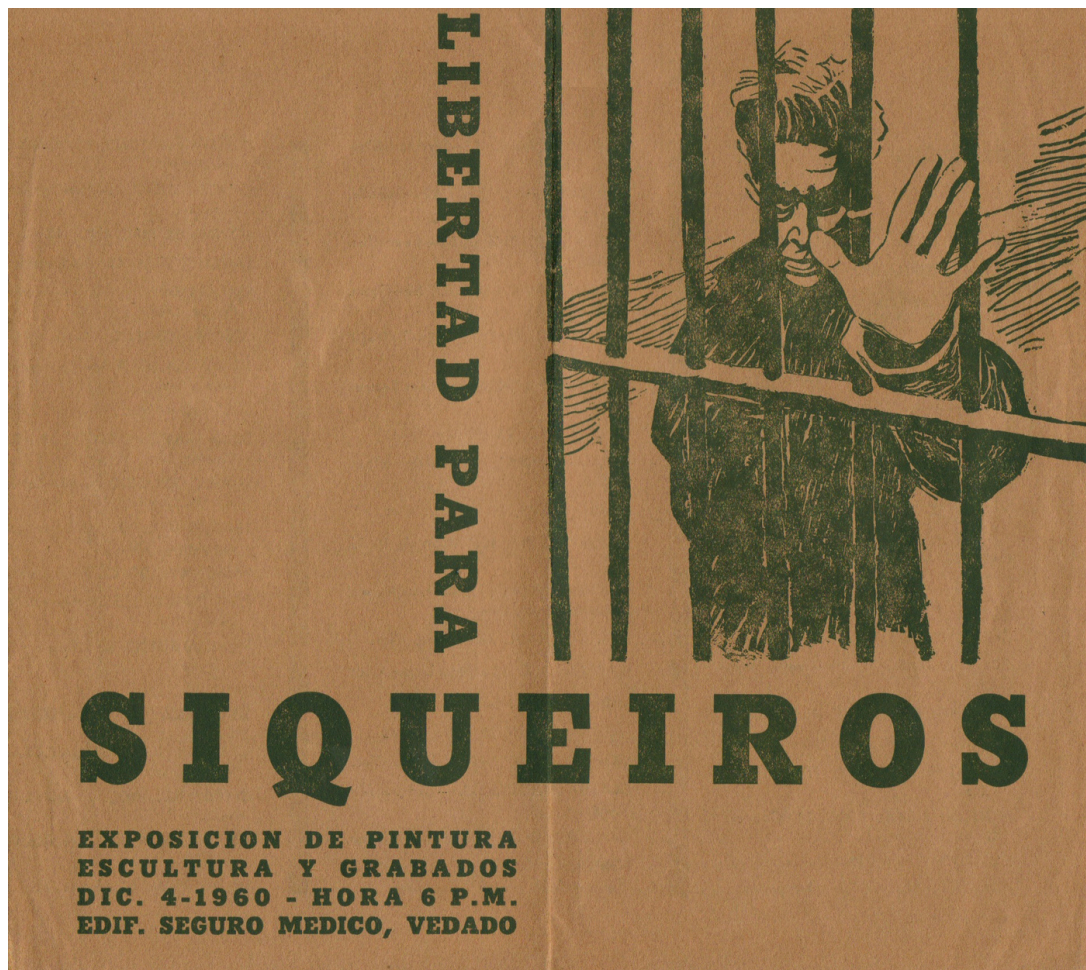


SARRACINO

Havana, 1960: Art and Solidarity in “Freedom for Siqueiros”

By Juan Sarracino

A collective statement, a diverse exhibition, and new leads on Loló Soldevilla



Cover of the 1960 program. Documentary reproduction. [1]

An exhibition can share a cause without requiring every work to depict the same subject. The printed program for “Freedom for Siqueiros,” announcing a display of painting, sculpture, and prints on December 4, 1960, at the Seguro Médico Building in Vedado, makes that distinction available for study. Its public appeal explicitly calls for the artist’s release; its checklist, however, brings together titles such as *Cafetera* (Coffee Maker), *Paisaje* (Landscape), *Pintura* (Painting), *Abstracción* (Abstraction), and *La espalda de la Luna* (The Moon’s Back), alongside others with overt social or political subjects. ^[1, 3, 4]

The document combines three distinct operations: articulating a protest, convening an exhibition, and recording the objects included in it. Reading them together allows us to examine how works acquire a public dimension through the context of their presentation, without that context entirely determining their iconography. Solidarity operates as the basis for a gathering, not as a technique or shared style.

For research into Cuban art, the details are equally important: a title by Loló Soldevilla close to, but not identical with, one recorded in 1959; works called *Abstracción*; a separate section for printmakers from Santiago de Cuba; and numbering that requires distinctions between records, works, and individual impressions. ^[3, 4, 5]

Two dates and a context that must remain distinct

The cover prints “DIC. 4-1960 - HORA 6 P.M.” and “EDIF. SEGURO MEDICO, VEDADO”: December 4, 1960, at 6 p.m., at the Seguro Médico Building in Vedado. It provides no closing date, room, unit number, or full calendar. The statement inside ends “La Habana, Octubre de 1960” (Havana, October 1960). The month of the statement and the date announced for the exhibition belong to different moments: the program incorporates a declaration preceding the December event. These dates do not establish when preparations began. ^[1, 2]

The statement says David Alfaro Siqueiros had been detained since August 9. As separately verified external context, Mexico’s National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature dates his arrest to August 9, 1960, on the charge known as “disolución social” (social dissolution), and his release to July 13, 1964. This chronology places the announcement within a campaign during his imprisonment, rather than a posthumous tribute. The judicial file has not been examined here. ^[2, 6]

Nor is this a solo exhibition of the Mexican painter. His name dominates the cover as the focus of the campaign, while the lists inside attribute works to other artists. No entry for a work by Siqueiros appears in the four supplied images. Confusing an exhibition’s purpose with the authorship of its works would change the nature of the event. ^[1, 3, 4]

The statement: a collective voice and a strategy of address

The heading presents the text as a declaration by Cuban artists and writers. Its first-person plural identifies itself with Cuba’s “intellectual workers” and addresses an international public. It then turns to a specific recipient: Mexico’s president, Adolfo López Mateos, from whom it requests the release of Siqueiros and other prisoners whom it describes as political. ^[2]

The argument combines several registers. It invokes individual freedoms and constitutional guarantees; attributes to Mexico a tradition associated with Benito Juárez; and uses revolutionary and anti-imperialist vocabulary to explain the imprisonment. Allegations of mistreatment, assessments of the Mexican government, and claims about responsibility belong to the declaration. They are evidence of the speakers’ position, not independent findings of this essay. ^[2]

A particularly significant argumentative tension emerges. The text disclaims interference in the Mexican state's internal affairs, then asserts a right and duty to protest what it considers contrary to human justice. It thus distinguishes governmental intervention from public action by intellectuals. The exhibition can be read within the latter mode: making a demand visible through a cultural activity.

The closing passage invokes the Declaration of Havana and the right of intellectuals, artists, and scientists to act through their work. This explicitly connects the statement to a political outlook. Yet the pages contain no list of individual signatures and identify no writer. The exhibition checklist should not automatically become a roster of signatories, nor should the collective voice be taken as proof that every participant endorsed every formulation. ^[2-4]

The common cause and the subjects of the works

In painting, *Prisión de David* (David's Imprisonment), by Thelvia Marín, number 30, is the title that seems most directly connected to the exhibition's purpose. The connection is a contextual hypothesis: no image identifies the figure or reconstructs the scene. Other entries include *Combate* (Combat), by Servando Cabrera Moreno; *Obreros* (Workers), by Elena Fajardo; and *Bombardeos a campesinos* (Bombing of Peasants), by Gerardo Tejedor. ^[3]

Alongside them appear *Cafetera* (Coffee Maker), by Ángel Acosta León; *Interior*, by Julio Basora; *Desnudo* (Nude), by Carlos García Rivera; and several landscape or still-life titles. The list does not explain each selection, but it does establish that not every title describes the Mexican painter's imprisonment. ^[3]

This coexistence invites a distinction between represented content and a work's public use. A landscape can enter a campaign without becoming a protest scene. Its participation gains meaning from the gathering, the overall heading, and the declaration. That contextual meaning does not erase the work's other possible meanings.

No terms of sale, prices, donation conditions, or allocation of funds appear here. "Solidarity" therefore describes the declared purpose; it does not establish a charitable auction or fundraising event. Likewise, participation does not prove an individual party affiliation or agreement with all of Siqueiros's artistic ideas. ^[1-4]

Abstraction within a political appeal

Zilia Sánchez appears with *Abstracción* (Abstraction), number 43, oil. In the "inks and watercolors" section, Antonia Eiriz has two entries titled *Abstracción*, numbers 4 and 5; Raúl Milián has another, number 6; and Osvaldo Sánchez Mestral has two more, numbers 7 and 8. In these instances the word is not a retrospective classification: it is printed in the program. ^[3, 4]

Also listed are works called *Pintura* (Painting), by Salvador Corratgé, José Mijares, Rafael Soriano, and Antonio Vidal, recorded as oils, and *Pintura* by Pedro de Oraá, recorded as casein. The generic term does not by itself demonstrate abstraction, although it preserves a way of presenting the work without specifying a narrative subject. ^[3]

The evidence supports a local conclusion: this exhibition includes entries explicitly named *Abstracción* under the heading of a political protest. It does not require us to imagine a uniform aesthetic program. Neither does it suffice to characterize all cultural policy in 1960 as tolerant or restrictive, or to demonstrate the absence of conflicts between artistic languages. One catalog informs us about this selection; it cannot replace the period's institutional history.

That is precisely the document's value: it requires the relationship between art and politics to be studied through recorded works and situations, rather than an automatic equation between public commitment and figurative representation.

Loló Soldevilla: from “Luna de Espalda” to “La espalda de la Luna”

Painting number 46 appears under “SOLDEVILLA LOLO”: *La espalda de la Luna* (The Moon's Back). Oil. The entry supplies a title and medium, but no support, dimensions, or date of execution. It does not authorize adding “on canvas” or automatically dating the work to 1960. ^[3]

The program for the Woman's Club of Havana exhibition, February 15–March 1, 1959, had included *Estrella Cuadrada* (Square Star) and *Luna de Espalda* (Moon with Its Back Turned), under “Loló, (Soldevilla),” without identifying their media. The relationship between *Luna de Espalda* and *La espalda de la Luna* provides a concrete nominal lead across two contemporary documents. ^[5]

The difference is more than capitalization. In the earlier title, “de espalda” seems to give the moon a bodily posture; in the later one, “la espalda” names a part belonging to it. This is an observation about verbal construction, not a description of the compositions. The formulations share a poetic core but are not identical transcriptions.

Several explanations remain possible: the same work recorded under a variant title; two different works using related vocabulary; or a change introduced while one of the programs was prepared. The available sources do not allow us to choose among them. Two related records should therefore be retained, rather than merged as though identity had been established.

The comparison has a further consequence. Even if the same object were eventually identified, “oil,” specified in 1960, should not be silently inserted into the transcription of 1959. Each datum should remain attached to the document supplying it. This allows exhibition history to be reconstructed without manufacturing a retrospective entry that no single source supported in full.

Within the 1960 exhibition, Loló's title retains an evocative quality that does not state the campaign's demand. That difference offers a precise example of this essay's argument: a work can participate in public action without its title becoming a slogan. ^[3]

Mijares and the limits of a generic title

José Mijares appears with *Pintura* (Painting), number 34, oil. The entry documents his presence under that title and medium but supplies fewer identifying points than *Formas sobre fondo verde* (Forms against a Green Background), recorded under his name in the 1959 program. There is no basis for treating these as the same work or attributing a particular intention to the generic title. ^[3, 5]

The list supplies other specific leads: José R. Fundora presents *Formas luminosas* (Luminous Forms); Julio Matilla, *Ritmo blanco* (White Rhythm); Raquel Lázaro, *Metamorfosis* (Metamorphosis); and the heading “MARTINEZ PEDRO” accompanies *Personajes del Cuarto Fambá* (Figures of the Fambá Room), number 31, oil. That form of the name is retained; the program does not print “Luis” here. ^[3]

These titles should not become invented descriptions of geometry, texture, or iconography. Their usefulness lies in guiding different searches. A relatively distinctive title may be traced in inventories, labels, or photographs; “Painting” requires other identifiers from the outset. A source's precision shapes the kind of investigation it supports.

Sandú Darié has no identifiable entry in these four images. This absence concerns this particular list and does not establish why he was not included or what he was doing elsewhere. ^[3, 4]

Santiago de Cuba and the exhibition's visible geography

The section "printmakers from Santiago de Cuba" groups eight names: Nuria Ginesta Rivery, Antonio Ferrer Cabello, José Julián Aguilera Vicente, Julio Umberto Gutiérrez, Luis Díaz Maurisset, Pedro Arrate, Jaime Soteras, and René Valdés Cedeño, with accents normalized for readability. Unlike the other headings, this one introduces a geographic designation. ^[4]

The arrangement makes a regional contribution visible rather than dissolving it into the general print list. The program does not explain who coordinated the shipment or identify a shared workshop. No particular organizational structure can therefore be assigned to the group. What can be established is that geography became an editorial criterion for presentation.

Titles include *Adelante* (Forward); *Soberanía* (Sovereignty), *Avance* (Advance), and *Unidad* (Unity); *Víctimas de la guerra* (Victims of War); and two *Venceremos* (We Shall Overcome), attributed to different authors. *Cristo azotando a los mercaderes* (Christ Whipping the Merchants) also appears. The proximity of a religious title to others suggesting mobilization does not make their meanings identical, but reveals the verbal repertoires brought together by the exhibition. ^[4]

The general print section includes *Reforma Agraria* (Agrarian Reform), by Ana Rosa Gutiérrez; *Átomos para la Paz* (Atoms for Peace), by César Mazola; and *Desalojo campesino* (Peasant Eviction) and *Honor a nuestros muertos* (Honor to Our Dead), by Lesbia Vent Dumois. These references show that solidarity with Siqueiros coexists with other matters of public debate. They do not establish that every print was produced specifically for this exhibition. ^[4]

Counting the program: records, not a secure object total

Painting contains 53 numbered entries, and "inks and watercolors," 11. The general print section reaches number 25 but uses that number twice: for *Honor a nuestros muertos*, by Lesbia Vent Dumois, and for *Piedad* (Pietà), under "VENT DUMOIS ODENIA." It therefore contains 26 numbered records, not 25. Sculpture contains six. ^[3, 4]

The Santiago section has no work numbers. Separating the designations enumerated beside each author yields eleven: three under José Julián Aguilera Vicente and two under Luis Díaz Maurisset. This is an explicit counting convention, not numbering supplied by the program. ^[4]

The resulting sum is 107 records or designations under that convention. It does not equal 107 physical objects: *Nuestros padres* (Our Parents) is identified as a diptych, one Jorge Rigol entry reads *Grabados* (Prints), and edition quantities are unspecified. Neither is it a total of participants: some authors present several works and others appear in more than one section. ^[3, 4]

Painting numbers 7, 20, and 42 have no legible printed title beside the artist's name; number 20 does specify tempera. Unlike the 1959 program, this document includes no note explaining the blanks. The explanation from another document should not be imported here, nor should the gaps be replaced by the title *Untitled*. ^[3, 5]

The cover and the visual direction of attention

The cover offers a composition that can be analyzed directly, unlike the works that are not reproduced. “SIQUEIROS” occupies a large horizontal line, while “LIBERTAD PARA” (Freedom for) runs vertically. At right a human figure appears behind bars, an open hand projecting toward the viewer. Name, appeal, and image of confinement are articulated through changes in scale and direction. ^[1]

The brown-toned surface and dark green ink give the copy visual unity. Lines describing face, body, and bars focus attention on the represented situation. Neither the illustrator nor the reproduction process is identified. A graphic appearance alone is insufficient to attribute it to an artist, call it a woodcut, or assert that it reproduces an exhibited work.

Inside, vertical rules separate columns, while heavier headings distinguish media and geographic groupings. The rules can visually recall the cover’s bars, but there is no evidence that the correspondence was intended by the designer. The formal relationship is observable; its deliberate meaning is undocumented. ^[3, 4]

The archival label and folds belong to the material history of the reproduced copy and are retained in the facsimile. They do not establish ownership of the artworks, authorship of the design, or the number of readers reached by the program.

An exhibition within a wider circulation

As a limited external comparison, the documentary archive of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston catalogs *A Siqueiros, al partir* (To Siqueiros, on Departing), a poster of January 1961 incorporating a poem by Pablo Neruda and the painter’s response extending the tribute to fellow prisoners. It is a different object, later than the Havana announcement. It does not establish that its image, authors, or distribution played a part in the December exhibition. ^[7]

The comparison shows how a campaign could take the form of a statement, exhibition, poem, or poster. In the Cuban document, the intervention centers on a gathering of works; in the later poster, on printed words and image. The relationship concerns context and declared purpose, not identity between documents.

To move beyond the program, one would need organizational correspondence, installation photographs, delivery lists, and press accounts. These sources could establish what was installed and for how long. This study has not located documentation demonstrating that this particular exhibition affected Siqueiros’s subsequent release.

Common participation does not erase individual works

The interest of “Freedom for Siqueiros” lies in the relationship, never entirely coincident, between statement and checklist. The first formulates a political demand and its arguments; the second retains subjects, materials, and ways of naming that cannot be reduced to that demand. The exhibition gives a shared use to works whose interpretation is not exhausted by it. ^[2-4]

For Loló, the record opens a precise comparison between two lunar titles. For Mijares, it preserves a participation with limited but identifiable data. For the Santiago printmakers, it documents a geographically differentiated presentation. In each instance, historical value increases when the document’s assertions are separated from what remains to be investigated. ^[3-5]

The catalog does not force a choice between studying works and studying the conditions of their public appearance. It invites both: recognizing the language of an appeal and the diversity preserved by the list accompanying it. A cause can gather works without turning them into a single voice.

Documentary note

Principal source: four reproductions of the printed program “Freedom for Siqueiros,” retained in consultation order: cover; statement; painting and the opening of inks and watercolors; continuation and remaining sections. Image numbers in the references are not represented as original pagination.

Printed facts, the author’s inferences, and external context are distinguished. Significant variations in names are retained; accents and capitalization are normalized for readability. Neither the artworks nor the judicial file has been examined. Individual opinions are not attributed to participants solely because they appear in the checklist. English renderings of Spanish work titles are descriptive translations, not replacements for the historical titles.

Documentary references

1. “Libertad para Siqueiros” (Freedom for Siqueiros). Program cover. Announcement: December 4, 1960, 6 p.m., Seguro Médico Building, Vedado. Supplied digital file: Cub-1960-91.jpg. Facsimile image 1.
2. “Declaración de los artistas y escritores cubanos por la libertad del pintor mexicano David Alfaro Siqueiros” (Declaration by Cuban Artists and Writers for the Freedom of Mexican Painter David Alfaro Siqueiros). Havana, October 1960. Cub-1960-92.jpg. Facsimile image 2.
3. Painting checklist and opening of “inks and watercolors.” Cub-1960-93.jpg. Facsimile image 3; especially painting nos. 30, 34, 38, 43, and 46.
4. Continuation of “inks and watercolors”; “prints”; “printmakers from Santiago de Cuba”; “sculptures.” Cub-1960-94.jpg. Facsimile image 4. The double use of no. 25 is retained in the analysis.
5. Woman’s Club of Havana exhibition program, February 15–March 1, 1959. Cub-1959-2.jpg, Cub-1959-2 2.jpg, and Cub-1959-2 3.jpg. Cover; Loló’s entry under “Painters”; Mijares’s entry and final note on titles not yet received. Sarracino Gallery Archives.
6. National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature, Mexico. “La exposición Cristos en prisión continúa en la Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros” (The Exhibition Christs in Prison Continues at the Siqueiros Public Art Room), bulletin 441, April 18, 2025. Arrest and release context, kept separate from the program’s data. [View institutional source](#)
7. ICAA / Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Record for “A Siqueiros, al partir” (To Siqueiros, on Departing), Mexico City, January 9, 1961, record 864589. The descriptive record was consulted, not a downloaded poster. [View institutional source](#)

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.