

Mario Carreño from 1950 to 1957

Geometric abstraction and mural space in the publication of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura

By Juan Sarracino

The publication Carreño 1950–1957 makes it possible to examine a period in which Mario Carreño placed the organization of space at the center of his painting. The rectangles, diamonds, arcs and tapering forms recurring throughout its pages constitute a vocabulary of relationships: their meaning depends on position, relative scale and the ability to direct attention. The mural executed in a private residence in Havana in 1954 occupies a crucial place in this investigation. Its composition provides an especially expansive field for considering how a vocabulary developed within the picture could operate in an architectural setting. [1, digital pp. 5–19]

This essay argues that the significance of the period lies in the transformation of these relationships, beyond the replacement of recognizable figures with geometric shapes. The works dated between 1950 and 1957 reveal different ways of ordering, interrupting and reactivating the surface. The publication assembles these solutions and, through Sandu Darie's text, interprets them as an expression of a modernity with universal ambitions. Examining the paintings alongside that argument reveals both the work itself and the ways in which it was presented to a public.

The study is based on the twenty-three digitized pages of Binder1.pdf in the Sarracino Gallery Archives. Sixteen works are identifiable: fifteen paintings captioned as oils and one mural whose medium is unspecified. Page references follow the order of the digital file. Visual analysis concerns the historical reproductions; statements about materials, original color or condition require a different form of examination. External institutional sources are used to check specific contextual matters, while the historical publication remains the principal source.

I own the mural, which is currently part of my collection. Its inclusion in the 1957 publication places the work within the development of Carreño's geometric abstraction and provides the starting point for this study.

The publication as object and argument

Carreño 1950–1957 is a monographic publication of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura; its colophon describes it as a “cuaderno.” Its colophon places publication in Havana in February 1957, under the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, whose director general was Guillermo de Zendegui. It credits P. Fernández y Cía. with printing, Julio Berestein with photographs and Pedro Gutiérrez with photoengraving. The back cover connects the Institute with the Ministry of Education and the Palacio de Bellas Artes. These details locate the publication within a specific structure of cultural production and dissemination. [1, pp. 22–23]

Its design participates in the aesthetic argument. The cover arranges the artist’s name and the dates around a geometric figure; the page headed “el mundo nuevo de los cuadros de carreño” continues that language through planes and stripes. Image placement, text, generous unprinted areas and variations in reproduction size shape the reader’s experience. Geometry appears both as painting and as a visual principle of the booklet. This observation does not establish Carreño’s authorship of the editorial design, for which the consulted publication provides no credit. [1, pp. 1, 3]

The copy contains a handwritten dedication to María Teresa de la Campa, an expression of friendship, the signature “Carreño” and the date 1957. This inscription adds a personal dimension to the publication’s institutional circulation: alongside the critical text and reproductions, it preserves the trace of a dedicated copy. Its interest lies in the history of the printed object and the cultural relationships accompanying its dissemination. [1, p. 2]

The editorial sequence is not strictly chronological. A work dated 1957 precedes the mural of 1954, while other paintings from 1956 appear near the end. This order is best understood as a selection designed to establish coherence. The publication does not necessarily contain the artist’s complete output for these years. The sixteen identified works constitute the corpus of this publication, rather than a catalogue raisonné of the period 1950–1957.

From organic form to relational structure

Zoológico and Cielos del Sur, both dated 1950, provide two points of entry into Carreño's changing vocabulary. In Zoológico, line encloses curving forms that retain an organic appearance; their grouping may evoke beings or bodies without securing a stable identification. Yet the division of the field into larger areas introduces an organization that competes with those presences. The painting brings an imagination of living forms into contact with a surface beginning to assert its own logic. [1, p. 6]

In Cielos del Sur, lines, points and suspended elements encourage attention to relationships and distances. The title directs interpretation toward the celestial, without providing a key to particular stars. What the reproduction demonstrates is the distribution of signs within an articulated field. Evocation arises from the title and from the visual experience of intervals, suspension and balance. Abstraction enables these associations without making the painting an astronomical representation.

Sinfonía en Amarillo and Mediodía Lunar, dated 1952, show a stronger emphasis on vertical axes, bands, angular figures and arcs. The elements become more clearly differentiated from their surroundings while remaining dependent on them. A dark shape seems to advance where a light plane brings it forward; its independence weakens when another edge connects it with a neighboring area. The interest of these works resides in that perceptual mobility. Geometry supplies the means to produce it while retaining ambiguity. [1, p. 7]

The comparison does not require treating 1950 as an imperfect stage superseded in 1952. Each solution poses its own problems. Curves and organic contours do not disappear completely as rectilinear order becomes more pronounced. They persist as counterweights to the axes and as modulations of outlines. Reading the group in this way avoids turning the artist's history into an inevitable progression toward a supposedly pure geometry.

The painting as a temporal field

Tiempo en el Espacio, dated 1952, names a question experienced in the other works: a painting is contemplated through successive movements of attention. Its vertical forms and transverse interruptions distribute accents across a horizontal format. The eye can recognize an element, encounter a variation and return to the first. This duration belongs to the act of looking; no particular physical theory needs to be assigned to the painting in order to describe it. [1, p. 8]

Encuentro Inesperado, also from 1952, places the problem of relationship in its title. Proximity matters because each form changes the reading of the others. In Tres Formas Negras, dated 1953, the reduced vocabulary makes this mechanism especially evident: dark silhouettes assert themselves against planes of different tonal values, while their contractions and expansions generate uneven rhythms. The number announced in the title focuses attention on the principal figures, but the composition also depends on the areas separating them. [1, p. 9]

Trópico de Cáncer, from 1953, arranges diamonds, arcs and linear patterns within a compartmentalized surface. Parallel bands introduce a visual measure that contrasts with figures of more concentrated outline. The title retains a geographical and astronomical reference, although the painting describes no location through recognizable landscape. In this vocabulary, an evocation of place can coexist with a nonfigurative structure. The relationship with the world is modified without necessarily being canceled. [1, pp. 4–5]

Atardecer en Rojo, dated 1954, extends across two consecutive pages. That editorial spread reinforces horizontal reading and requires attention to the continuity between its halves. It must be recorded as a single work rather than two paintings. The black-and-white reproduction allows examination of tonal distribution and compositional articulation; red belongs to the information supplied by the title rather than to direct chromatic observation on these pages. That distinction is fundamental to an analysis grounded in visible evidence. [1, pp. 10–11]

The Havana mural of 1954

The published caption reads: “Mural realizado en una residencia particular, La Habana, 1954.” In English: mural executed in a private residence, Havana, 1954. This records a domestic setting of execution, a city and a date. The work appears within the same editorial program as the easel paintings. Its inclusion permits examination as part of the artistic inquiry presented by the publication, without reducing it to an ornamental supplement to the group. [1, p. 14]

The composition unfolds across a horizontal field of rectangles and bands of different tonal values. Clearly edged dark figures occupy this structure: diamonds, triangular elements meeting at their tips and elongated shapes that expand and contract. A particularly tall axis to the left of center combines an upper diamond with a spindle-shaped body and a triangular termination. A smaller figure reprises part of this vocabulary toward the center right. Their difference in scale establishes a relationship without turning them into duplicates.

Pairs of triangles joined at a point produce an hourglass-like figure. They appear in different positions and proportions, so repetition generates recognition while variation prevents mechanical regularity. Arcs at the lower left and upper right introduce curving paths. Their separated placement encourages connections between distant areas of the surface. The mural thus sustains several directions of reading: vertical, transverse and those suggested by correspondences between motifs.

The thin lines perform a different function from the dark masses. They establish rectangular circuits, border planes and link areas that might otherwise appear isolated. In some places a figure seems to rest on one of these lines; elsewhere the line continues beyond it. This fluctuation between apparent support and graphic continuity prevents the signs from becoming objects arranged against a neutral background. The field actively participates in their connections and separations.

Density is unevenly distributed. The large left-hand axis concentrates visual weight; smaller groupings, light intervals and extended lines balance that concentration from other areas. The result can be described as asymmetrical equilibrium. No exact mathematical proportion need be postulated: the reading rests on observable relationships of size, position and contrast. The historical image supports this formal analysis while leaving the original colors beyond precise reconstruction.

From pictorial surface to inhabited space

Comparison with *Tres Formas Negras* and *Tiempo en el Espacio* reveals a specific continuity of vocabulary. In all three, tapering silhouettes and vertical figures relate to rectangular planes, while the distribution of light and dark activates the intervals. The mural expands the possibilities for these devices to coexist within a particularly articulated horizontal field. Its distinctiveness resides in the organization of the whole and in the architectural context declared by the caption. [1, pp. 8–9, 14]

Within a residence, the painting could enter into a relationship with the presence and movement of those inhabiting the place. This is an interpretive possibility arising from its mural status, rather than a reconstruction of its installation. The published photograph provides no dimensions, mounting height, lighting, access routes or furniture arrangement. It therefore cannot establish an actual viewer's itinerary or prove that particular lines extended specific architectural features. This distinction preserves the work's spatial potential without inventing its surroundings.

The horizontal format encourages attention to move between episodes, pause over a motif and then recover the entire field. This mode of observation relates to the optical journey Darie proposes for Carreño's painting. In the mural, however, the effective scale of the encounter cannot be inferred from the reproduction. The curatorial argument must rest on visible compositional breadth and reserve claims about bodily distance and dimensions for examination of the work itself. [1, pp. 12, 14]

It is particularly significant that the program is not organized around a recognizable narrative scene. The residence receives a structure of visual relationships activated by the act of looking. The mural can be interpreted as a proposal for incorporating abstraction into the everyday experience of space. This does not imply that the artist, commissioner or original owner formulated the idea in those terms. Nor does it permit assigning ritual meanings to the signs, identifying deities or establishing particular iconographic affiliations without further documentation.

Its importance within the publication rests on this articulation of painting and place. Rather than using unknown dimensions as an argument for monumentality, attention should be directed toward the complexity of its connections and the reach of its composition. The work provides early evidence, dated 1954 in a publication of 1957, of the residential application of this vocabulary by Carreño. It does not independently establish absolute priority within his mural production.

The mural's historical reference and present ownership

The 1957 publication reproduces the mural with the caption “Mural realizado en una residencia particular, La Habana, 1954.” I preserve that reference verbatim because it locates the work in the city and in the residential setting for which it was executed. I own the mural, which currently belongs to my collection. Its present credit in the record and plate reads “Owned by Juan Sarracino. Juan Sarracino collection.” [1, p. 14]

The short interval between the work's execution and the publication provides particularly relevant contemporary testimony. By February 1957, the mural of 1954 was included in the selection presenting seven years of Carreño's work. Its reproduction alongside the paintings makes it possible to consider how mural practice entered the contemporary interpretation of his art. The reference to a Havana residence also preserves the connection between that pictorial investigation and a setting of private life.

The caption describes the work through its function and original setting. Titles such as *Tiempo en el Espacio* and *Encuentro Inesperado* suggest temporal and relational associations; here, the word “mural” brings architecture into the painting's identification. This difference helps explain why the work deserves particular attention within the group: the geometric vocabulary remains recognizable, while the conditions of its intended setting change. [1, pp. 8–9, 14]

From my collection, I return to this reference to examine the mural within its artistic and historical context. The 1957 reproduction and the surviving work belong to a single history connecting painting, architecture and collecting. Studying its figures, intervals and connections restores to the published image its presence as a work of art and reveals the continuity of Carreño's investigation of space.

The solutions of 1955 to 1957

Sobre fondo Azul, dated 1955, directs attention toward the relationship between a figure and the field named by the title. Equinoccio, Estío and Contraluz, all from 1956, continue to associate the abstract vocabulary with words relating to time, season and light. These names guide experience but should not be used to reconstruct colors absent from the monochrome reproductions. Interpretation can rest on expansion and tapering, distribution and tonal alternation. [1, pp. 15, 17–19]

Sonatina, from 1957, concentrates small modules in a way that makes repetition and interruption particularly perceptible. Larger dark figures stand out against the arrangement of smaller squares and disturb its regularity. The title's musical reference is relevant as an invitation to experience duration and recurrence. It does not demonstrate a literal correspondence to a musical score or a system equating colors with sounds. [1, p. 16]

Tensión Espacial, also from 1957, allows consideration of a different problem through its color reproduction. Two very dark vertical forms with pointed ends and curving profiles approach one another until they meet in a narrow area. A broad light diamond introduces a transverse direction. Red, orange and dark planes articulate the field and alter the perceptual relief of the figures. The encounter between horizontal expansion and vertical concentration provides a visible basis for the tension announced in the title. [1, pp. 12–13]

The reproduction shows how color can separate or connect planes, but it remains a digitized historical print. Its hues are not measurements of pigments or a calibrated photograph of the original work. The green area framing the plate belongs to the editorial presentation and must be distinguished from the painting's field. This prevents decisions arising from reproduction or page design from being attributed to Carreño's painting.

Sonatina and Tensión Espacial, executed in the same year, caution against reducing the period to a single formula. One organizes a fabric of modules; the other concentrates perception on large directional oppositions. The coherence of the group lies in its investigation of relationships, through solutions that retain substantial differences.

A critical reading of Darie's testimony

Darie characterizes the works of 1950–1957 as abstract in intellectual content and nonfigurative because they do not copy immediate reality. His argument associates emotion, rational control, design, space and universality. These terms define the horizon within which he wants Carreño to be judged. They constitute valuable contemporary testimony to the reception of the work, as well as an intervention seeking to place it within an avant-garde. The present essay examines that purpose rather than repeating its judgments as demonstrated findings. [1, pp. 4, 8, 12, 17]

A particularly clear example is his reference to an intuitive golden rule. The expression connects harmony and proportion without supplying measurements or a method of calculation. It would be inaccurate to turn it into evidence that the compositions mathematically obey the golden section. Observed regularity, asymmetrical balance and correspondences between motifs allow more precise discussion of pictorial order than an unverified formula. Similarly, analytical rigor belongs to Darie's critical conclusion rather than constituting technical certification. [1, pp. 12, 17]

The idea of a universal language needs historical placement. MoMA's 1944 press release for Modern Cuban Painters included Carreño within a presentation emphasizing national subjects, chromatic intensity and a vitalist image of Cuba. The 1957 booklet privileges a different formulation: spatial relationships, design and communication through forms. Comparing the documents reveals a change in institutional framing without implying that all Cuban painting followed a single trajectory. [2; 1, pp. 4–12]

Subsequent historiography also requires critical reading. In her review of Concrete Cuba, Adrian Anagnost questions overly direct identifications between geometry, modernization and the representation of an era, and points to difficulties in terminology. Her observation supports using “geometric abstraction” here to describe the examined vocabulary, while attending to the actual terms of 1957 rather than treating every work as evidence of a homogeneous collective program. [3]

The strength of Darie's testimony lies in its articulation of an expectation of reception. By describing looking as a journey and the picture's space as part of a broader realm, he proposes an active viewer. The mural allows that proposal to be explored through a specific work, without confusing the critic's ambition with facts about its installation.

The institution and the circulation of the work

The publication establishes visibility through several devices. It brings together reproductions, critical interpretation, a biography, exhibition histories and collection references. English and French versions of the essay are credited to Francis Donahue and Eva Frejaville. These translations expand its intended audience and present work produced in Havana within an international conversation. Their inclusion materially demonstrates this ambition to circulate, though it cannot measure the booklet's actual reception outside Cuba. [1, pp. 20–21]

The biography identifies Carreño as a visual arts adviser to the Instituto Nacional de Cultura and states that he was then living in Havana. The artist was therefore professionally connected to the publishing institution. That connection places the edition within the institution's work of promoting the visual arts. The biography's present tense belongs to 1957. The institutional biography of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Chile places his settlement in Chile in 1958 and his participation in founding the Universidad Católica's art school in 1959. [1, p. 21; 4]

The collection credits for *Tiempo en el Espacio* and *Tres Formas Negras* name Raúl Dubreuil and the architect Nicolás Quintana respectively, both in Havana. These are historical references in the publication and must retain that temporal anchoring. They neither assign other works to those collectors nor establish that the paintings remain in the same collections today. The general list of museums holding the artist's work likewise describes his career rather than supplying the provenance of every reproduced image. [1, pp. 8–9, 21]

An exhibition based on this booklet could reveal the transformation of the vocabulary through comparisons between 1950, 1952–1954 and 1956–1957, placing the mural alongside paintings that share its formal problems. Its label would preserve the 1957 caption and the credit "Owned by Juan Sarracino. Juan Sarracino collection." The publication and its reproductions would be shown as documents with their own materiality and history. In this way, the archive could recover relationships without presenting reproduction as direct experience of the original.

Technical examination would complement that reading. The Getty's Making Art Concrete project offers a methodological precedent by studying formal strategies and materials together in geometric works from Argentina and Brazil. It reminds us that a seemingly exact edge does not independently reveal how it was made. Applied to Carreño, this principle encourages research into the mural's actual execution without assigning techniques from elsewhere on the basis of visual resemblance. [5]

The mural's contribution to understanding the period

The group of works from 1950–1957 reveals a sustained investigation into how forms acquire presence through relationships. The vocabulary is recognizable from one work to another, but its effects change with the proportions of the field, the density of planes, the placement of figures and the continuity of lines. These variations provide a stronger basis for assessing the period than generic appeals to modernity or the influence of international schools. The proposed relationships can be checked and discussed against the plates themselves.

Within that group, the mural of 1954 supplies documentary reference to a residential setting, specific in function although unidentified by address or original owner. It makes visible a possibility of abstraction: organizing a surface intended to become part of the life of a place. Its horizontal breadth, uneven accents and linear connections produce a field of observation permitting partial itineraries and an apprehension of the whole. Its interest resides in the relationship between these operations and its documented architectural purpose.

The mural, now part of my collection, brings these questions together in a specific work. Reading its planes and axes reveals the continuity of Carreño's vocabulary; its horizontal composition and residential purpose clarify the possibilities that vocabulary acquired within architecture. The reference published in 1957 preserves the connection with Havana in 1954 and places the work at the earliest point of dissemination documented here.

The 1957 booklet preserves more than images: it shows how an artist, a critic and an institution proposed a way of looking. Recovering that encounter requires attention to formal achievement, editorial mediation and the limits of available knowledge. The contribution of this study is to bring those levels together around identifiable works, especially the Havana mural. Where documentation ends, research remains open through precisely formulated questions.

References and documentary criteria

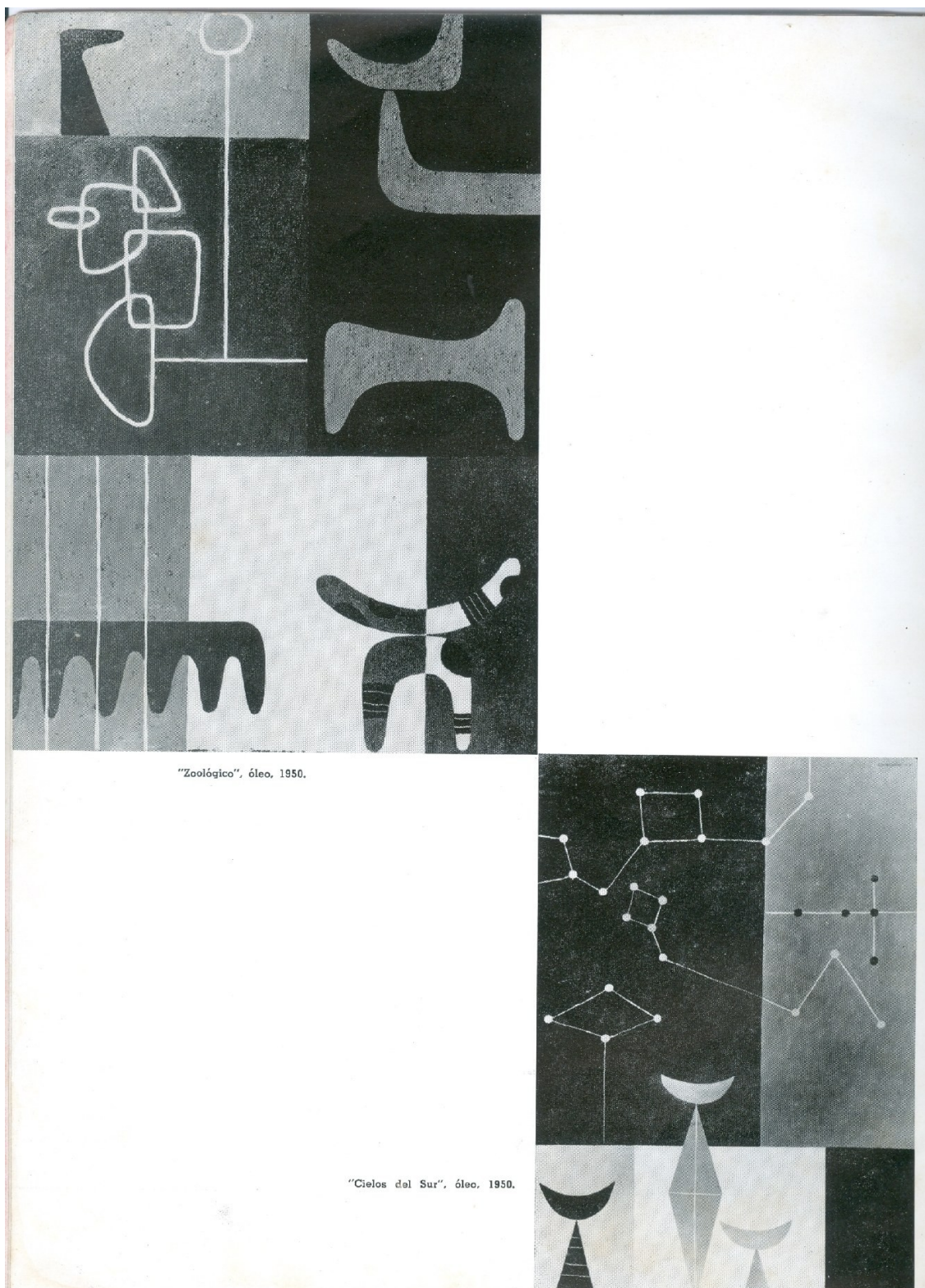
- [1] Instituto Nacional de Cultura. Carreño 1950–1957. Text by Sandu Darie, “El mundo nuevo de los cuadros de Carreño.” Havana, February 1957. Photographs credited to Julio Berestein; photoengraving, Pedro Gutiérrez; printing, P. Fernández y Cía. Digital copy: Binder1.pdf, 23 pages. Sarracino Gallery Archives. Locators in this essay refer to digital pages rather than reconstructed original pagination.
- [2] The Museum of Modern Art. “Exhibit of Cuban Painting,” March 1944 press release for Modern Cuban Painters. MoMA press archive. Accessed September 20, 2026. https://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/924/releases/MOMA_1944_0010_1944-03-15_44315-09.pdf
- [3] Adrian Anagnost. Review of Concrete Cuba: Cuban Geometric Abstraction from the 1950s and the exhibition Concrete Cuba. *caa.reviews*, January 9, 2018. DOI 10.3202/caa.reviews.2018.3. Accessed September 20, 2026. <https://caareviews.org/reviews/3123>
- [4] Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Chile. “Mario Carreño,” *Artistas Visuales Chilenos*, institutional biography. Accessed September 20, 2026. <https://www.artistasvisualeschilenos.cl/658/w3-printer-39912.html>
- [5] J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Conservation Institute and Getty Research Institute. Making Art Concrete: Works from Argentina and Brazil in the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, institutional presentation of the 2017–2018 exhibition. A methodological reference on the material study of geometric abstraction. Accessed September 20, 2026. <https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/cisneros/index.html>
- Compositional observations are the author’s interpretations of the reproductions in [1]. Dates, media and historical collection information are attributed to the captions. The accompanying dossier contains an inventory of the sixteen works, a mural record and the twenty-three source pages for reference. The preservation facsimile retains the received file intact and unmodified.

Juan Sarracino

Fuentes consultadas: Archivos Sarracino Gallery.

Plate 1 The works of 1950

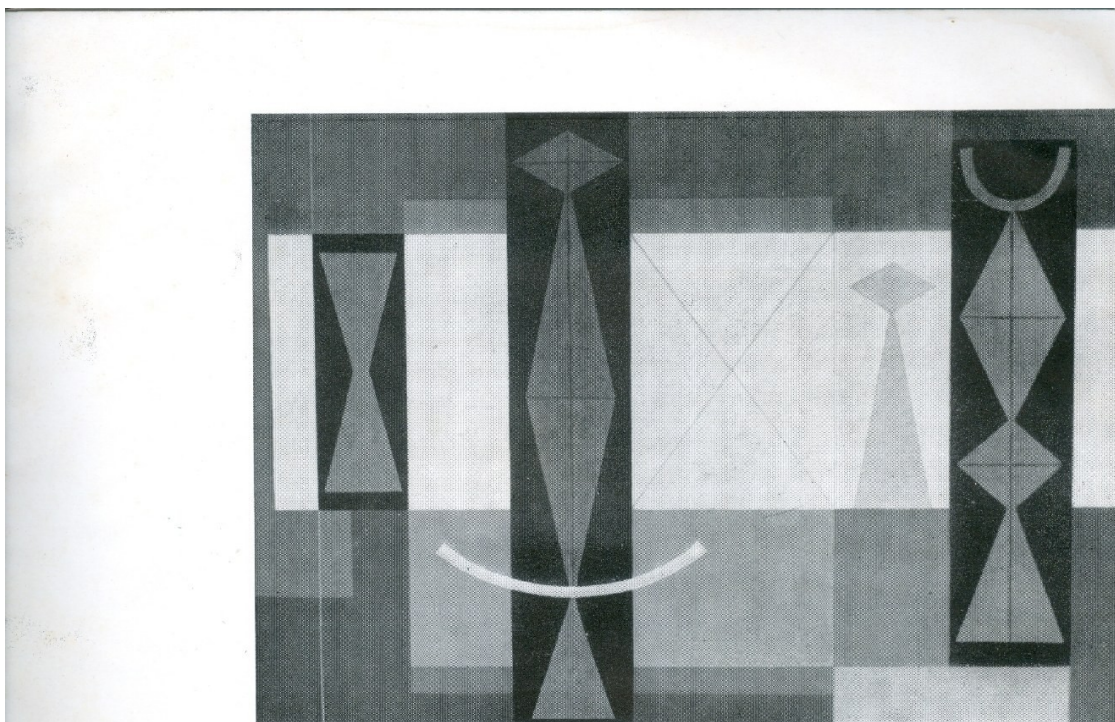
Zoológico and Cielos del Sur, 1950. Oils according to the original captions.



Source: Carreño 1950–1957, digital page 6. Sarracino Gallery Archives.

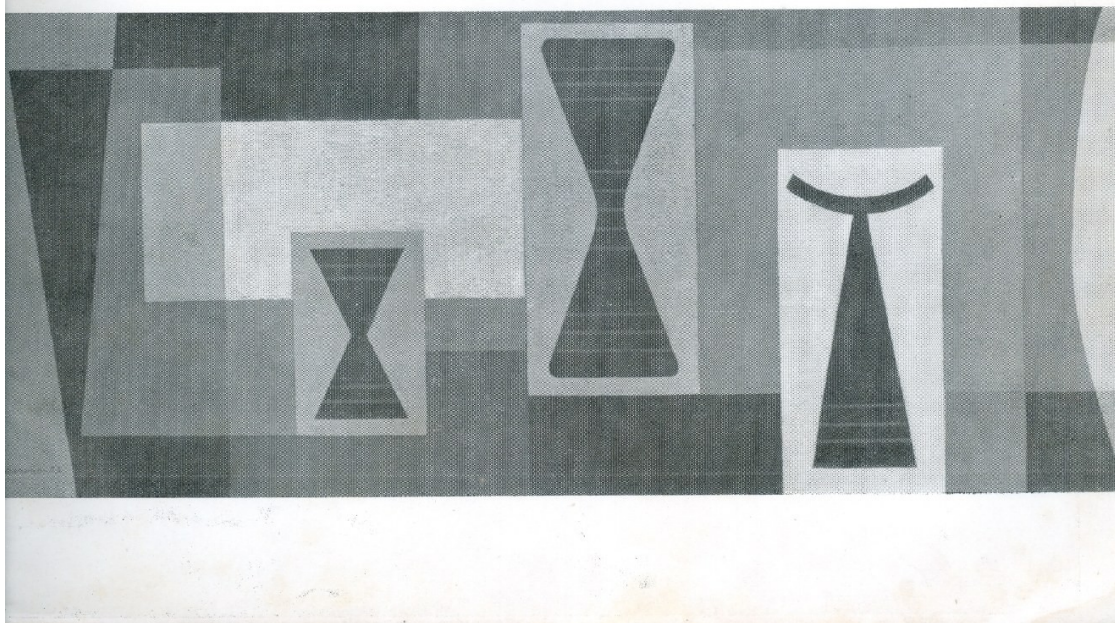
Plate 2 Relationships between forms

Encuentro Inesperado, 1952, and Tres Formas Negras, 1953. Oils. The historical Nicolás Quintana credit is preserved.



"Encuentro Inesperado", óleo, 1952.

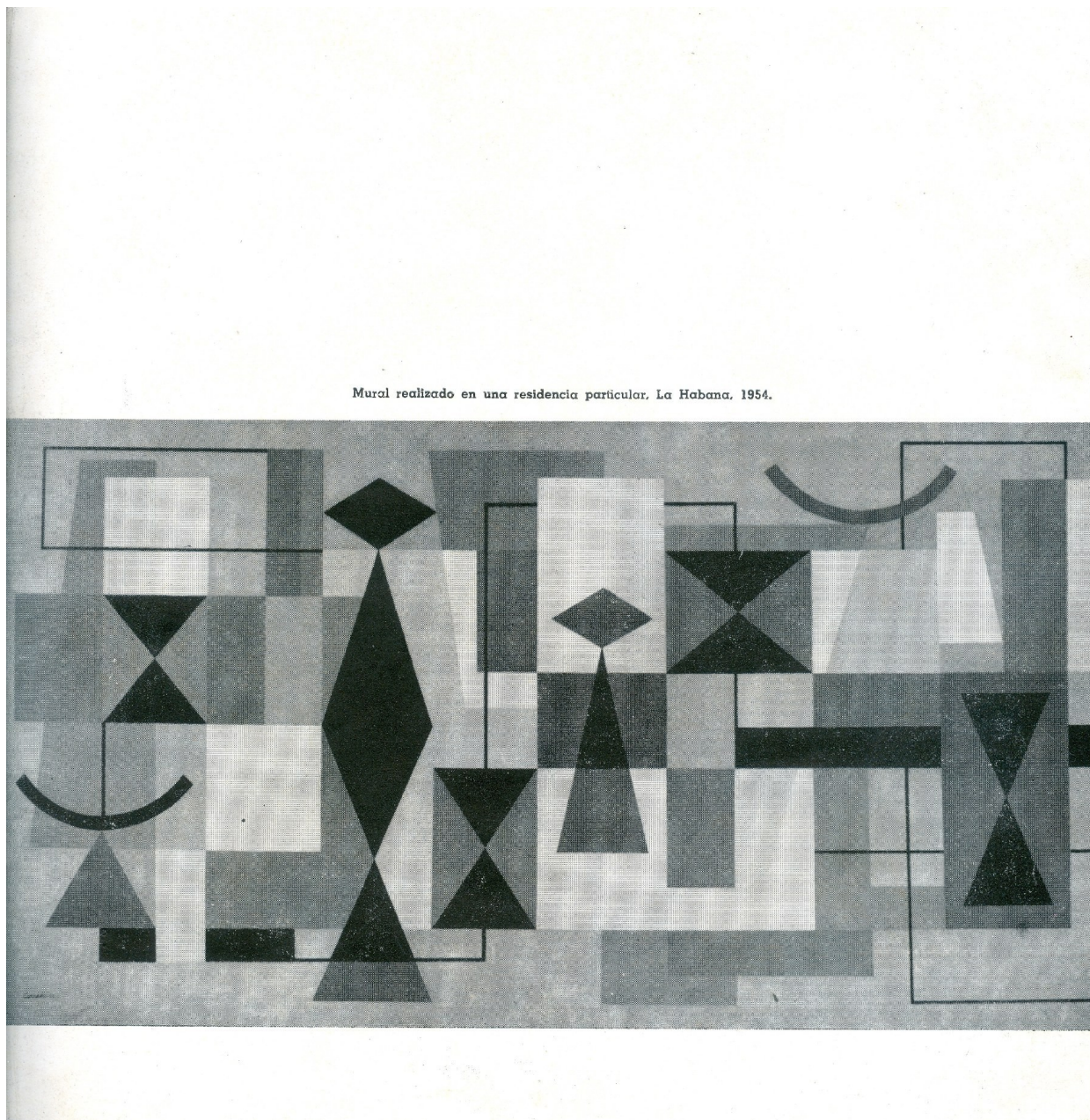
"Tres Formas Negras", óleo, 1953. (Colección del Arquitecto Nicolás Quintana, La Habana).



Source: Carreño 1950–1957, digital page 9. Sarracino Gallery Archives.

Plate 3 The Havana mural

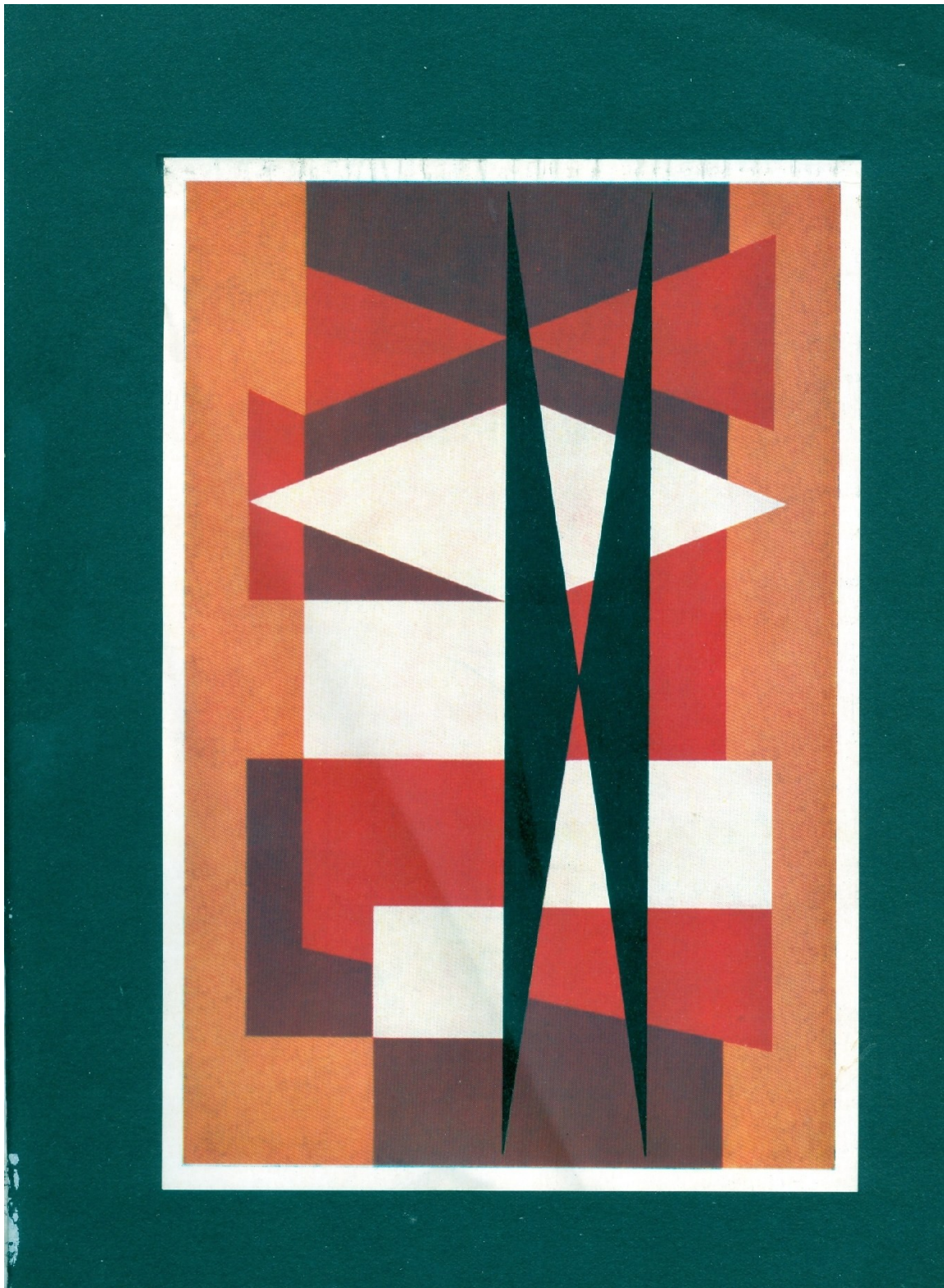
Original caption: Mural realizado en una residencia particular, La Habana, 1954. Owned by Juan Sarracino. Juan Sarracino collection.



Source: Carreño 1950–1957, digital page 14. Sarracino Gallery Archives.

Plate 4 Tensión Espacial

Tensión Espacial, oil, 1957. The caption is on digital page 12; the color reproduction occupies page 13.



Source: Carreño 1950–1957, digital page 13. Sarracino Gallery Archives.