

The First Printmakers Salon and the Autonomy of Printmaking in Cuba

Por Juan Sarracino

Havana through the perspective of January 1938

In “El primer Salón de Grabadores,” signed by Armando Maribona and headed with the publication details of *Arquitectura* for January 1938, an exhibition becomes an argument: printmaking deserves recognition as an art with expressive resources of its own. Its significance extends beyond assembling works. The review shows how a practice gains visibility through teaching, exhibition organization and criticism. This is the interpretation I propose from the document preserved in the Sarracino Gallery Archives. [1]

The scope of the date must first be established. The heading identifies Havana, January 1938, year VI, number 54, and describes the monthly magazine as the official organ of the National Association of Architects. It provides neither an opening day nor the exhibition’s full dates. January 1938 is therefore the documented publication date; treating it automatically as the opening date would introduce a precision the source does not supply. [1, p. 1]

The context recoverable from the article is specific: a professional architectural journal discusses an artistic medium; San Alejandro provides instruction; the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* organizes; a university professor participates in the opening. This convergence can be read as a form of institutional recognition. It does not, by itself, demonstrate broad public acceptance or a cultural policy shared by all these institutions.

Autonomy as a critical argument

Maribona invokes the teaching of the fine arts in Paris to defend printmaking’s standing alongside painting, sculpture and architecture. He then recalls its role in circulating images of works that remained beyond many viewers’ reach. Reproduction emerges as a cultural service that had overcome distance and barriers to access. [1, p. 1]

His narrative attributes the displacement of that function to photography and photomechanical processes. Within this transformation he locates the creative, individual printmaker. We should read this as a critical position of its period, rather than proof that original creation began at that moment or that reproductive practices disappeared. The article itself acknowledges printmaking’s creative prestige before this change.

Nor does his explanation of Cuban taste through an allegedly exuberant temperament constitute a verified fact about a population. It is a rhetorical device contrasting the appeal of color with the reception of etching. The autonomy he claims is artistic: a print can express an individual vision. The article defines neither editions nor states nor present-day criteria of authenticity.

People and institutions that made a practice visible

Mariano Miguel comes first in Maribona's sequence: he had studied printmaking in Spain, brought a press to Cuba several years earlier and produced works that attracted admiration, including "La Comparsa." The text credits him with establishing the corresponding teaching chair at San Alejandro. It dates none of these events and does not reproduce that work; the reference therefore cannot become a technical record or proof that it appeared in the salon. [1, p. 4]

Andrés Nogueira follows in a brief statement of continuity. That sentence documents his place in the critic's narrative, but specifies neither a teacher–student relationship, succession to the teaching chair nor a particular collaboration. The limited scope of the notice must remain apparent in our reconstruction.

Enrique Caravia is associated with a different task: assembling existing production and giving it a public form. Maribona attributes the initiative to the Painting Section of the *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, which Caravia chaired. Significantly, printmaking's autonomy is defended through a section devoted to painting: the medium's differentiation develops within existing networks. The illustration of a Madrid square attributed to Caravia also places him among the illustrated artists, without supplying a complete list of his exhibited works. [1, pp. 3–4]

Luis de Soto, identified as the university's professor of Art History, read a lecture at the opening. According to Maribona's summary, it addressed the history of printmaking, its cultural influence and its development in Cuba from the eighteenth century. This is a report about the lecture, not its transcript. Maribona performs a different role: selecting precedents, assessing the salon and calling for continuity. His enthusiasm is evidence of critical reception, not a measure of attendance. [1, p. 4]

What the numbers tell us

The wording is specific: seventeen exhibitors with eighty-five original works, in different techniques and styles, plus contributions by ten students from San Alejandro's printmaking class. I retain these as three separate figures. The passage does not quantify the students' works, so it does not establish a grand total including their contribution. Nor does it name the seventeen exhibitors or the ten students. [1, p. 4]

Material and expressive diversity

The critic lists monotype (*monotipia*), lithography (*litografía*), burin engraving (*buril*), etching (*aguafuerte*), aquatint (*aguatinta*, written "agua tinta"), soft-ground etching (*barniz blando*), mezzotint (*manera negra*) and woodcut (*xilografía*). He does not distribute the eighty-five works among these processes. The captions add drypoint (*punta seca*). This breadth matters because the argument is tied to no single technique or style: Maribona appreciates spontaneity as well as patient labor and unexpected material responses. [1, pp. 3–4]

The salon's technical range must be distinguished from the list of reproductive processes on the first page. Mentioning offset or photolithography there does not establish that the exhibition included works made by those methods. Likewise, the printed illustrations allow compositions to be studied, but cannot directly verify matrices, papers, inks or printing quality.

The images on the second page

The second page contains four work captions. They are recorded here as the document's attributions, not as a complete exhibition catalogue. The reproduction is monochrome, and its printed screen limits the examination of detail. [1, p. 2; documentary plate 1]

"Atorrante," etching by Manuel Roig Lobo, is the reading of the first caption. The document puts the title in quotation marks, and its spelling is retained. The page leaves a large light area above it and places a horizontal urban landscape immediately below. The precise relationship between this caption and the image requires comparison with a complete copy of the magazine; I do not assign "Atorrante" a character, social narrative or scene that cannot be securely established. In the horizontal view, trees, architecture, paths and small figures are observable, organized through contrasts of light and shade.

"Estanque del Retiro," etching by Ramón Loy, accompanies the upper-right image. Water occupies the foreground; the steps and balustrade organize the transition toward vegetation and architecture. Reflections make the pond's surface an active compositional area. This formal reading establishes neither an execution date nor that the artist worked directly before the subject.

"Recordando," etching by Mirta Serra, appears beside the scene of two seated men. I retain "Serra," as it reads in the caption, without replacing it with a different surname on the basis of biographical familiarity. The figures bring their heads close together, focusing attention on faces, hands and walking sticks. The title suggests recollection; the image permits a discussion of proximity and conversation, but not knowledge of the models' identities or the content of their exchange. Confirmation of the name remains a documentary task.

"Atardecer en el puerto," etching by Margarita García Mendoza, accompanies the lower-right image. Masts and rigging create a vertical structure above the vessels' hulls, while reflections extend their forms into the water. The title proposes a time of day, but the reproduction cannot recover an assumed original color scheme or identify the harbor. Its visual interest lies in the balance between the density of the vessels and the surrounding atmosphere.

These captions connect works to two female names, a fact that deserves a place in the history of the practice. They do not allow us to calculate the proportion of women among the seventeen exhibitors, determine whether they were students or establish their careers. That investigation requires other sources, rather than an imaginative expansion of the captions.

The predominance of etching on this page also requires caution: four illustrations in one technique do not contradict the diversity described by the critic. They reveal a visual selection whose representativeness within the whole remains unknown. We do not know who selected the images or by what criteria.

The third page and the scope of memory

“Plaza de la Cruz Verde (Madrid),” etching by Enrique Caravia, presents an urban scene in which buildings, a tower, the square and vehicles establish successive planes. Architecture dominates without erasing street activity. This is a formal interpretation of the reproduction, compatible with the caption’s location; it is not proof of the artist’s residence, travel or execution date. [1, p. 3; documentary plate 2]

“Cardenal,” drypoint by Antonio Rodríguez Morey, concentrates on a head and torso. Marks describing the face and clothing contrast with sparsely worked areas, giving the portrait an expressive presence without describing the entire background. The technique is supplied by the caption; the reproduction cannot reveal the matrix’s burr. Nor does the title authorize identifying the sitter as a particular historical cardinal.

“Virgen de Covadonga,” burin engraving by Francisco Javier Baez, brings together a crowned Marian figure with the Child, winged beings, a rocky structure and buildings. I retain the caption’s spelling “Baez” here. Inscriptions belong to its character as a devotional image, although I do not transcribe small lines that cannot be read securely. The reproduction permits analysis of the symbolic arrangement, rather than verification through examination of the physical object.

This last image requires a distinction between illustration and contemporary participation. Archival research published by Domingo J. Buesa Conde associates Francisco Javier Báez with historical devotional prints and cites a lifespan of 1748–1828. That external context reinforces the need for caution: we do not list Báez as a living exhibitor in the salon. The hypothesis that the illustration represents printmaking’s historical antecedents is plausible, but the article explains neither its role nor whether the print was exhibited. [2, p. 245, n. 18]

What the salon changes

The document’s value lies in showing a relationship between working resources, instruction, exhibition initiative and critical discourse. Claiming printmaking as an autonomous art does not require every print to share a subject or abandon tradition. Landscape, portraiture and devotion coexist in the illustrations; different techniques appear together in the review. This coexistence allows autonomy to be understood as expressive capacity and recognition, without imposing a uniform aesthetic program on the whole.

The search remains open for the catalogue, the event’s dates, Soto’s lecture and a copy of *Arquitectura* against which text, captions and arrangement can be checked. Maribona’s closing praise of a select audience and desire for further exhibitions document an aspiration to continuity, not its fulfillment. Our archival task is to preserve that expectation together with its evidence and limits.

Documentary note and references

[1] Armando Maribona, “El primer Salón de Grabadores,” heading of *Arquitectura*, Havana, January 1938, year VI, no. 54. Received PDF, four pages. Citations refer to its digital pagination, not verified original page numbers. Its text is reset and its images reproduced; the file is preserved intact as a facsimile of the received PDF, without certifying material fidelity to the 1938 printed issue.

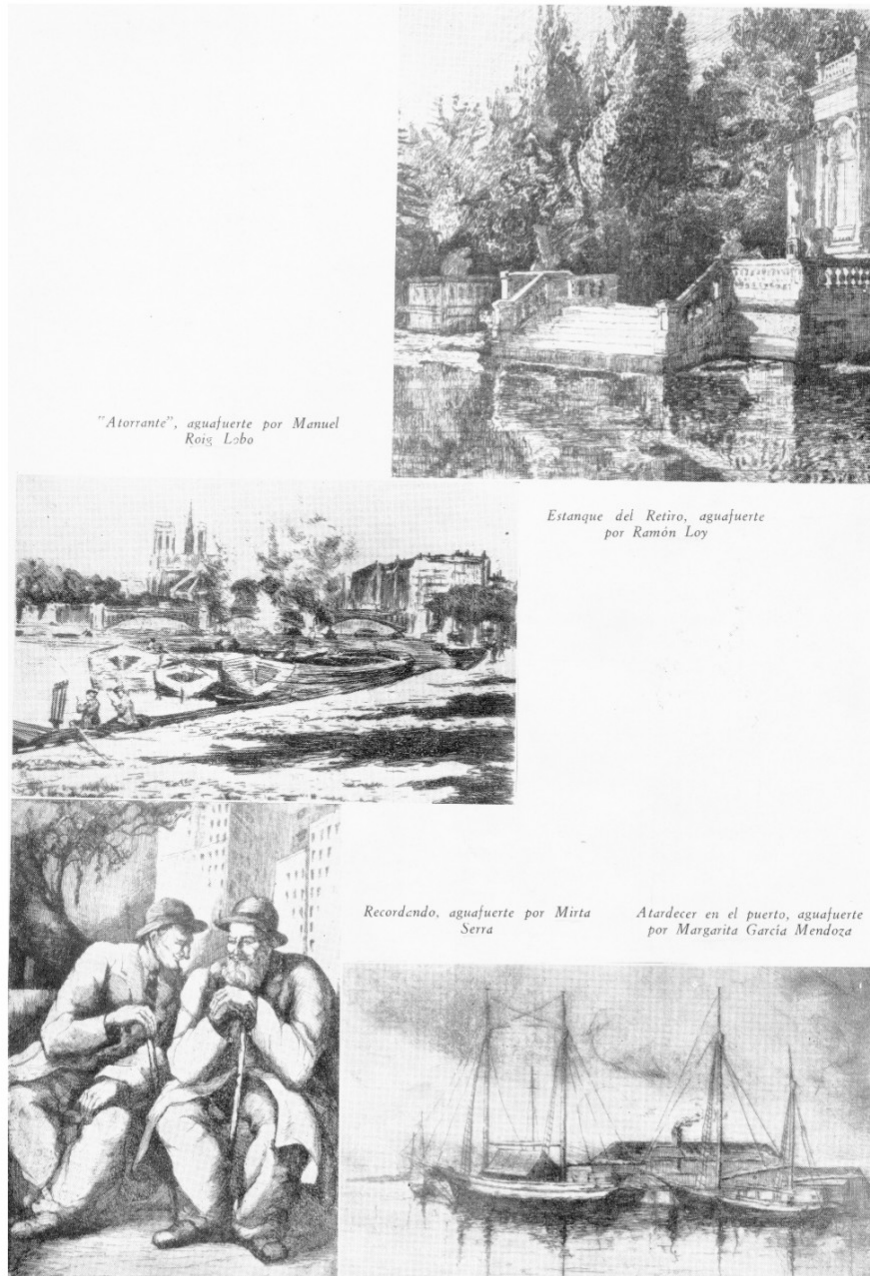
[2] External context: Domingo J. Buesa Conde, “Fondos documentales aragoneses para el estudio del mundo americano. El Archivo del obispo Bergosa,” *Artigrama* 24 (2009), pp. 239–260, especially p. 245 and note 18.
<https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/artigrama/article/download/7705/6421/27519>

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Fuentes consultadas: Archivos Sarracino Gallery.

Documentary plate 1

Page 2 of the received PDF. Full reproduction without reconstructed detail.



Documentary plate 2

Page 3 of the received PDF. Full reproduction without reconstructed detail.

