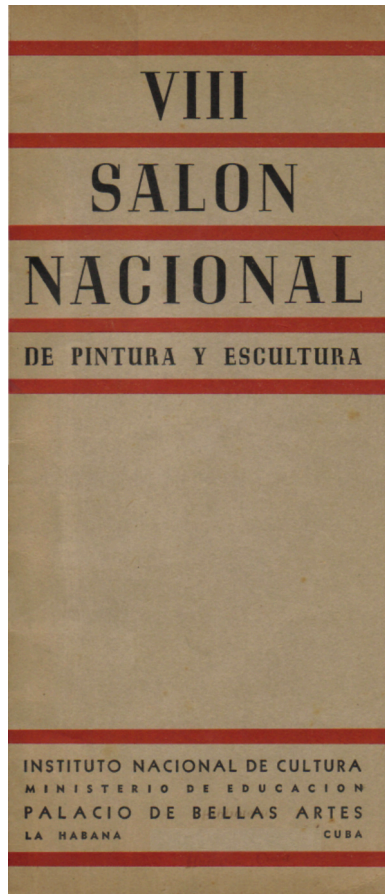


Havana, 1956: The VIII National Salon and the Construction of an Artistic Memory

By Juan Sarracino

Selection, experimentation, and collecting at the Palace of Fine Arts



Original catalogue cover. Palace of Fine Arts, Havana, 1956.
Reproduction from the consulted digital copy; original proportions preserved.

An exhibition can show what is being produced at a particular moment while also proposing what should be preserved for the future. The catalogue of the VIII National Salon of Painting and Sculpture allows us to examine this double operation. Its interest lies not only in the list of participants: it also preserves an institutional explanation of how the selection of contemporary works could help to form a museum's collections.

Presented by the National Institute of Culture, under the Ministry of Education, at Havana's Palace of Fine Arts, the salon is expressly identified as the 1956 edition in the text accompanying the Room of Honor. The copy consulted provides no opening and closing calendar. This absence does not prevent us from recognizing its structure: an extensive selection of painting, another of sculpture, and a group devoted to Eduardo Abela, designated Artist of Honor.^[1]

The document allows these three parts to be read as more than successive sections. It brings together the production an institution chooses to present, the recognition it confers on a career, and the memory it aspires to construct. The exhibition thus emerges as a place where the artistic present begins to become history.

From the salon to the museum collection

The introductory text, signed by Guillermo de Zendegui as director general of the National Institute of Culture, provides the key to this reading. It explains that a Permanent Gallery of Fine Arts had been established in the Palace of Fine Arts with prizewinning works from earlier salons, beginning with the first, held in 1935 according to the text. Resuming these events was intended to enrich the holdings of that gallery and, consequently, of the National Museum.^[2]

The temporary exhibition and the permanent collection are linked within a single purpose. The salon is presented not merely as an opportunity to see new work, but also as a means by which part of artistic production might enter a heritage preserved by the institution. This relationship allows selection and prizes to be understood as decisions whose consequences could extend beyond the exhibition's closing.

That purpose should not be converted into a list of acquisitions. The catalogue does not establish that every work recorded entered the museum, nor does it identify the final prize results here. It documents an institutional intention and the ensemble presented for consideration. The subsequent history of each piece must be established separately.

What matters is that the institution explicitly states its wish to intervene in artistic memory. Bringing together, distinguishing, and preserving are not equivalent actions, but the preface places them within a common horizon. The researcher encounters not only a list of objects, but also a statement about the future use of exhibitions.

Selection, prizes, and homage: three forms of recognition

The preface maintains that the salon was organized according to a selective criterion and that inclusion was, in itself, recognition of artistic standing. This formulation must be read as the organizing institution's assessment, not as an independent conclusion about the quality of every work. The catalogue allows us to study how the institution legitimized its selection; it does not require today's reader to accept that judgment.^[2]

The same text distinguishes responsibilities. It credits Mario Carreño, Juan José Sicre, and Lorenzo Romero Arciaga with organization, and thanks the judging panel of Rita Longa, Allan Mc Nabb, and Eduardo Abela. Carreño therefore appears in an explicit organizational role: a fact that broadens

questions about his involvement in exhibition activity without enabling us to reconstruct individual decisions that are not described.^[3]

The note accompanying the Room of Honor adds a further distinction. It explains that Abela's honor was awarded under the new regulations, considering his work as a whole and independently of the National Prizes. Being selected, winning a prize, and receiving recognition for an overall career are therefore different situations.^[4]

This distinction has documentary importance. An entry in the catalogue should not be turned into an unrecorded prize, nor should the title of Artist of Honor be confused with the competition's outcome. Precision does not diminish the value of participation: it allows us to understand exactly what kind of recognition is being documented.

Three ensembles and an extensive exhibition

The general painting section contains 234 numbered entries; sculpture has 75; and Eduardo Abela's Room of Honor has 41. Together they amount to 350 work records. This is a count of catalogue entries, not of distinct artists or an independent verification of the actual installation.^[5]

Each of the three sequences begins again at one. Any subsequent reference must therefore include the section. An isolated number is insufficient to identify a piece. This organization also distinguishes two ways of presenting artistic time: a collective panorama and the course of an individual career.

Sculpture cannot be regarded as a minor supplement. Its 75 entries represent approximately one quarter of the general ensemble's 309. Yet the salon's scale does not establish uniformity. The simultaneous presence of still lifes, portraits, landscapes, formal titles, and religious subjects reveals the diversity of naming practices, not a visual classification of works the publication does not reproduce.^[5]

Loló Soldevilla: painting, music, and metal

Loló Soldevilla's participation is one of the richest documentary clusters. Painting includes no. 201, *Sonata para piano y cello* [Sonata for Piano and Cello], and no. 202, *Sonata núm. 5* [Sonata No. 5], both recorded as oils. Sculpture includes no. 69, *Escultura B-dimensional* [B-dimensional Sculpture], and no. 70, *Escultura policromada* [Polychrome Sculpture], both in metal. The wording "B-dimensional" is retained as it appears in print, without expanding the abbreviation.^[6]

These are four entries distributed across two sections. That fact permits a precise statement: the salon presented her production through painting and sculpture simultaneously. This is not a retrospective reconstruction bringing together objects from different periods, but a documented concurrence within a single exhibition. The catalogue does not, however, date these four works individually.

The sonatas introduce a musical vocabulary. The first title names piano and cello; the second incorporates a number. This opens questions about sequence, relationship, and organization, but does not establish that the paintings depicted instruments or translated a particular musical composition. Nor does the number five, on its own, establish the existence of a complete surviving series.

In the sculptures, references to dimension and polychromy coexist with a shared material designation: metal. Thinking about relationships between plane, volume, and color is a line of inquiry suggested by these terms, not a description of objects we still need to locate.

The catalogue's decisive contribution is to place these questions within one public presentation. It would be excessive to identify the pieces with known reliefs or constructions without further evidence. Yet it

would also be limiting to treat the four entries as isolated names: together they offer a concrete basis for studying relationships between media in Soldevilla's work.

Darié, Mijares, and Oraa: what the titles support

Sandú Darié is recorded in painting under no. 53, *Ritmos espaciales* [Spatial Rhythms], oil. The wording connects rhythm and space, but the medium does not specify the support. Nothing in this entry allows the work to be automatically recast as a construction, a moving object, or a kinetic piece. What we possess is an individually traceable reference in the 1956 catalogue.^[7]

Entry 143 is *Forma y presencia* [Form and Presence], oil, under the heading "Mijares, José." This abbreviated form of the name remains visible, rather than altering the transcription as though the document printed a longer name. The title proposes a relationship between formal organization and presence, but reveals no figures, colors, orientation, or dimensions.^[8]

Pedro de Oraa appears under no. 151 with *Abstracción dúplex* [Duplex Abstraction], oil. Here, "abstraction" is not a label added by the commentator: it is part of the work's recorded title. Even so, the catalogue does not explain what "duplex" refers to or establish whether the solution was geometric, gestural, or of another kind.^[8]

Taken together, these entries offer a vocabulary of concerns: rhythm, space, form, presence, and abstraction. Their proximity in a present-day reading does not establish that the works hung together, that the artists shared a program, or that they influenced one another. The finding lies in the possibility of building verifiable comparisons when images and additional documents are located, not in anticipating their results.

How a painting is named

The question extends beyond those three artists. Wifredo Arcay appears with *Spartus 55*, *Pintura 55* [Painting 55], and *Etius núm. 2* [Etius No. 2]. Joaquín Ferrer Marquínez presents *Pintura núm. 4*, *Pintura núm. 5*, and *Pintura núm. 6* [Painting Nos. 4, 5, and 6]. Zilia Sánchez records *Composición 1*, *Composición 2*, and *Composición 3* [Composition 1, 2, and 3]. Rafael Soriano López has three entries titled *Pintura* [Painting].^[9]

The interest of these names does not lie in proving that all the works were abstract. It lies in observing that a title could place a represented subject in the background and emphasize the medium, composition, or a numerical identifier instead. Verbal economy is also information: it shows how a work was offered to public recognition.

Numbers should not automatically be read as dates or as proof of a complete sequence. Nor are three works called *Pintura* one piece repeated: they have different catalogue numbers. Subsequent research must preserve each individual entry even when a title recurs.

Other naming practices remain present at the same time. Amelia Peláez brings together *Composición* [Composition] and *Naturaleza muerta* [Still Life]; René Portocarrero appears with *Catedral* [Cathedral]; Mariano Rodríguez with two works titled *Gallo* [Rooster] and *Hombre con bumerang* [Man with a Boomerang]. The salon makes several ways of naming coexist without explaining that one had replaced another. This simultaneity is more revealing than a linear reading in which form progressively erases all subject matter.^[10]

Sculpture and the specificity of matter

The sculpture section includes information that should not be reduced to the generic word “sculpture.” Roberto Estopiñán presents three figures in woods identified by the catalogue as jocuma and cedar. Florencio Gelabert records *Figura* [Figure], directly carved in sabicú, and *Ritmo osteológico* [Osteological Rhythm], directly carved in palo de rosa. The specificity of the material forms part of these works’ documentary identity.^[11]

Rolando López Dirube appears in painting with a work titled *Figura* [Figure] and in sculpture with another *Figura*, carved in sabicú, and *El arquero* [The Archer], in iron. Like Loló’s participation, his presence across two sections reminds us that the salon’s classification organizes objects without necessarily dividing artists into mutually exclusive practices.^[11]

Neither metal nor wood warrants an automatic equivalence between material and style. The iron works include *Forma* [Form], by Domingo Ravenet, and *Piedad* [Compassion], by Orestes Silvera Ramos. A shared material does not erase the differences in meaning suggested by the titles. Research must distinguish what an object is made of, what it is called, and the visual solution through which it is organized; the catalogue tells us much more about the first two than the third.^[12]

Eduardo Abela: forty years in a Room of Honor

The Eduardo Abela section changes the document’s temporal scale. Its first entry is *Mango*, placed in Havana in 1916. Its last, *El ángel expectante* [The Expectant Angel], is dated Havana, 1956. Between these points, 41 entries construct a four-decade itinerary without thereby constituting a complete catalogue of his production.^[13]

Recorded locations include Havana, Madrid, Granada, Paris, and Guatemala. *Matinal* [Morning] appears in Madrid in 1923; *Gitanilla* [Young Gypsy Woman] in Granada the same year; and *El caos genésico* [The Chaos of Genesis], recorded as gouache, in Guatemala in 1950. These are data attached to specific works. They do not by themselves reconstruct all the artist’s movements, but they allow a more precise chronology than the date of the homage alone.^[13]

The selection also brings together titles such as *Guajiros* [Country People], *Ritmo* [Rhythm], *Movimiento* [Movement], *La sirena encantada* [The Enchanted Mermaid], *Insecto mágico* [Magic Insect], *Fantasmas diurnos* [Daytime Phantoms], and *El rapto de Europa* [The Abduction of Europa]. We cannot deduce a complete visual development from these names. We can observe that the homage presents a career through rural, formal, fantastic, and mythological titles rather than reducing it to a single subject.^[13]

Within the broader ensemble, this room has a particular interpretive function: it invites a career to be viewed in perspective. The salon relates the short timeframe of a contemporary selection to the longer span of an accumulated body of work. This coexistence is one of the keys to its project of memory.

Private collections and public memory

The Room of Honor records information absent from much of the general list: alongside dates and places, it identifies collections associated with several paintings. *Guajiros*, placed in Havana in 1938, appears in the collection of the National Institute of Culture. *Cuadrúpedo* [Quadruped], dated 1954, is associated with José Rodríguez Feo. *Retorno* [Return], from 1956, is associated with Humberto Medrano.^[14]

These details allow a relationship between private custody and institutional presentation to be studied. Works associated with different collections appear within a single homage. The catalogue makes this

distribution of ownership visible, although it does not include loan agreements or describe all the arrangements that enabled the works to come together.

For provenance, the scope is specific. A collection reference is a documented point at the time of the catalogue, not a complete ownership chain. It does not automatically tell us when a work was acquired, how it left that collection, or where it is today. Nor does an entry without an owner's name establish that the piece belonged to the artist.

The disparity in information between sections is instructive in itself. Some Abela works have several identifying points; for many pieces in the general ensemble we have little beyond artist, title, and medium. The method must adapt to that unevenness without treating a lack of data as permission to fill the gaps intuitively.

From a record to the identification of a work

The catalogue consulted contains no reproductions of the works and supplies no dimensions. The word “oil” does not authorize the addition of “on canvas” when a support is not stated. This distinction matters particularly because other entries, such as José Ramón Fundora's, do specify “oil on wood”: the document shows that it sometimes records the support and sometimes does not.^[15]

The salon's year should not be transferred to the execution date of every piece either. The Room of Honor demonstrates unequivocally that a 1956 exhibition could include works from decades earlier. For undated works, the catalogue provides a point of documentation, not an exact production date.

Identification requires connecting the record to a specific object. A photograph, historical label, verifiable match in dimensions, or provenance sequence may supply that link. Until then, it is preferable to say “the catalogue records a work titled...” rather than assign the exhibition history to any piece sharing an artist, subject, or approximate date.

The exhibition as the beginning of a history

The VIII National Salon cannot be reduced to an exhibition of a single tendency. Its catalogue makes different titles, materials, and forms of recognition coexist. The preface explains an aspiration to permanence; the collective selection presents a field of production; the Room of Honor places a career in perspective.

Within that structure, Loló's four entries, Darié's *Ritmos espaciales*, Mijares's *Forma y presencia*, and Oraa's *Abstracción dúplex* acquire a value that does not depend on overstating what we know about them. They are precise starting points for reconstructing works, relationships, and contexts of presentation.

The document's principal contribution is to allow us to study how an institution sought to connect the creation of its present with the heritage of its future. The catalogue preserves that aspiration and its visible decisions. Research must follow what happened next: which works received prizes, which were preserved, and how their interpretation changed. Artistic memory does not begin only when a work enters a museum; it also begins when a decision is made about how to show it.

Documentary note

This essay is based on the original catalogue of the VIII National Salon of Painting and Sculpture, National Institute of Culture, Ministry of Education, Palace of Fine Arts, Havana, 1956. The 14-page digital reproduction supplied for this study was consulted; several digital pages reproduce double-page spreads. References follow that digital pagination. Capitalization and accents are normalized for readability; spellings requiring attention are identified, and missing data are not supplied. The year is confirmed in the Room of Honor note. The catalogue contains no images of the works, opening and closing calendar, or final prize list. Interpretations are distinguished from recorded data; no outside context has been added. English glosses of Spanish work titles are descriptive translations for this essay, not documented alternative titles. Spanish wood names are retained without assigning botanical identities.

Catalogue references

1. Cover, digital p. 1; Room of Honor note, digital p. 12.
2. Introductory text by Guillermo de Zendegui, digital p. 2: Permanent Gallery, the salon's purpose, and the selective criterion.
3. Introductory text, digital p. 2: organizers and jury; names checked against the image.
4. Room of Honor note, digital p. 12: Artist of Honor distinction and reference to regulations.
5. Painting, digital pp. 3–8, nos. 1–234; Sculpture, digital pp. 9–10, nos. 1–75; Room of Honor, digital pp. 12–13, nos. 1–41. Author's count.
6. Loló Soldevilla: Painting, digital p. 7, nos. 201–202; Sculpture, digital p. 10, nos. 69–70.
7. Sandú Darié: Painting, digital p. 4, no. 53; medium checked against the image.
8. Mijares and Pedro de Oraa: Painting, digital p. 6, nos. 143 and 151.
9. Wifredo Arcay, digital p. 3, nos. 9–11; Joaquín Ferrer Marquínez, digital p. 5, nos. 77–79; Zilia Sánchez, digital p. 7, nos. 184–186; Rafael Soriano López, digital p. 8, nos. 204–206.
10. Painting, digital p. 7: Amelia Peláez, nos. 159–160; René Portocarrero, no. 163; Mariano Rodríguez, nos. 176–178.
11. Sculpture, digital p. 9: Roberto Estopiñán, nos. 14–16; Florencio Gelabert, nos. 26–27; Rolando López Dirube, nos. 34–35. The latter also appears in Painting, digital p. 6, no. 125.
12. Sculpture, digital p. 10: Domingo Ravenet, no. 51; Orestes Silvera Ramos, no. 64.
13. Eduardo Abela's Room of Honor, digital pp. 12–13, nos. 1–41.
14. Room of Honor: Guajiros, digital p. 12, no. 13; Cuadrúpedo, digital p. 12, no. 18; Retorno, digital p. 13, no. 37.
15. Painting, digital p. 5, José Ramón Fundora, nos. 82–83.

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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.