

The XXI Fine Arts Salon and the criticism of José Rovira Soler

Por Juan Sarracino

Awards and standards of judgment in Arquitectura in February 1939

A medal records an institutional decision; a review reveals why that decision might be disputed. In “El XXI Salón de Bellas Artes,” José Rovira Soler praises works that received modest recognition and questions the achievement of a painting awarded gold. This contrast makes his article particularly valuable for studying how artistic merit was debated in Havana. The surviving reproductions allow us to follow that discussion. They also show that the author wrote from within the artistic community he examined: among the illustrated works is his Retrato de José Mendiola. [1, 2]

The heading of the assembled document identifies *Arquitectura*, the monthly journal and official organ of the Colegio Nacional de Arquitectos, February 1939, year VII, number 67. This date belongs to the document’s publication reference. The review gives neither the Salon’s opening and closing dates nor its venue. That distinction matters: the journal’s date should not be turned into an exhibition calendar that the text does not supply.

Rovira begins with the conditions of artistic life. He regrets the shortage of art critics in Havana’s major newspapers and the almost complete absence of intellectuals and official bodies from exhibition openings. His defense of the artist’s dignity gives painting and sculpture a public role. The demands he places on artists therefore have a counterpart: he also calls for attention from the press and institutions.

His observation that more than a hundred works were crowded together for lack of space adds a material dimension to the problem. The text cannot reconstruct the installation, but it does show that the critic considered the exhibition space inadequate. Making art, exhibiting it and securing an attentive reception were related difficulties. In these circumstances, the illustrated page extended the circulation of works, although it conveyed only a selection.

The value of this source lies in its situated viewpoint. Rovira supplies neither a complete inventory nor an alternative jury verdict. At the end, he acknowledges that his commentary is personal and necessarily abbreviated. Reading it today means attending both to the precision of his observations and to the limits he explicitly recognizes.

Awards and critical judgment

The clearest disagreement concerns Saneza. Its caption attributes the painting to Concha Ferrant and records a gold medal; the prose uses the variant Concha Ferrán. Rovira recognizes accomplished passages but finds its proximity to Sorolla excessive and questions the construction of the whole. His standard separates the quality of individual parts from the resolution of the complete painting. The distinction returns in his discussions of landscape and sculpture. [1, 2]

He then refers to gold medal paintings that, he reports, had been rejected by other admission juries, including the jury selecting the Cuban submission to an exhibition in New York. The passage's proximity to his criticism of Saneza invites a connection, but it cannot replace jury records or identify every painting with equal certainty. What the review establishes is the critic's challenge to the consistency of the awards.

The distinctions legible in the plates provide a concrete comparison. This table includes only the eight awards attached to reproduced works; it is not the full list of prizes at the XXI Salon. Spanish work titles are retained for identification.

Work	Artist as captioned	Award
Saneza	Concha Ferrant	Gold
Sculpture with no title given	Florencio Gelabert	Silver
Retrato de la Srta. Rita Longa	Armando Maribona	Silver
Retrato	José Rodríguez Radillo	Silver
Retrato del pintor Ricardo Marín	Enrique Caravia	Bronze
Batiente de luz	Roberto Vázquez	Gold
Retrato de la Srta. Doris Bacon	Armando Maribona	Honorable mention
Luz de Yara	Amelie Zell	Gold

The particular attention given to Caravia's bronze medal portrait, and the praise for Doris Bacon, which received an honorable mention, show that Rovira does not organize his review around the medals' hierarchy. This divergence does not itself prove the jury wrong: it documents the coexistence of different standards of judgment. Criticism preserves the reasoning that a list of prizes alone cannot convey.

Portraiture as a field of observation

Enrique Caravia's *Retrato del pintor Ricardo Marín* occupies a central place in the review. Rovira emphasizes its fresh handling and balance of masses and volumes, interpreting these qualities as a release from academic restrictions. The reproduction shows the sitter seated, his torso slightly inclined, one hand resting on his leg and his expression animated. That arrangement can be related to the liveliness identified by the critic without claiming to recover the oil painting's color or surface from its printed image. [1, 2]

His assessment of Armando Maribona shows that modern and classical are not mutually exclusive categories in his account. After celebrating Caravia's renewal, he places the portraits of Doris Bacon and Rita Longa among the best works at the Salon, recognizing their classical style. In the former, the breadth of the dress and the hands resting on either side steady the figure. In the latter, crossed arms and the delineation of folds focus the composition. The caption identifies this second work as crayon and pastel, a precision lost if it is recorded simply as a painting.

The three illustrated works by Maribona should remain distinct. Olga Ruiz appears in an oil painting with no award indicated in its caption; Doris Bacon, also in oil, received an honorable mention; Rita Longa received silver for a work in a different medium. The prose reads Rita Loga, while the caption gives Longa. Recording that variant avoids creating two different sitters from a discrepancy in spelling.

Female portraiture also includes the oil painting by Antonio Sánchez Araujo and the *Retrato* by José Rodríguez Radillo. Rovira praises the latter's handling of grays and presents its author as a studious young artist; the caption records a silver medal. *Edelma*, by Luisa Fernández Morell, introduces a seated child. The critic recognizes the continuity of her accomplished execution while asking for further development. His racialized way of referring to the girl belongs to the language of the historical document; the published title, *Edelma*, provides the more precise identification of the work.

The presence of Ferrant, Fernández Morell and Zell in the plates, together with references to Victoria Nanson, Beatriz Villamayor and María Luisa Valentino in the text, makes women's participation as artists visible. Rovira himself identifies Rita Longa as a sculptor, although here she appears as Maribona's sitter. Distinguishing the maker from the person represented prevents women's presence from being reduced to portrait iconography. The selection, however, cannot establish their proportion in the exhibition as a whole.

Two portraits further clarify the position from which the review was written. The caption describes J. E. Hernández Giro's *El Padre Varela* as an oil painting. When Rovira calls this artist's portraits "photographic," the word should therefore be read as an assessment of their effect of likeness, not as a technical identification of photographs. *Retrato de José Mendiola* is attributed in print to Rovira Soler. This overlap between critic and exhibitor establishes a participating voice; it does not by itself justify an accusation of bias.

Landscape and sculpture in the review

In discussing landscape, Rovira employs standards of luminosity, construction and atmosphere. He singles out Domingo Ramos's *Alrededores de Cabañas*, while finding insufficient atmosphere in its distant planes. This work is absent from the sixteen identified in the plates. Its prominence in the prose shows that the illustrated selection and the critic's selection are not equivalent: the absence of an image does not establish a secondary role in the exhibition. [1, 2]

Batiente de luz, Roberto Vázquez's gold medal oil painting, is reproduced. Dark trunks organize the foreground and open passages toward a brighter area. This visible relationship between masses and depth provides a basis for reading Rovira's praise of a studious landscape painter who, he says, had advanced since his previous exhibition. The work's award coexists with an assessment still directed toward its maker's future development.

Rovira credits Antonio Rodríguez Morey with a particular ability to express human feeling and Cuban identity. The surviving image shows a dwelling with a thatched roof, nearby figures, palms and a passage leading into the landscape. The caption says only that it is an oil painting by the artist: describing the scene does not recover a title. In the critic's reading, rural life provides a setting for national identification; the figures and architecture help explain how his idea of landscape included a human experience of the land.

Vicente Pérez García's *Atardecer en el puerto* introduces vessels, rigging and a perspective dominated by the bow in the foreground. Its presence broadens the visual record beyond the countryside emphasized in the landscape section. References to Rivero Merlín, Universo Picazo and María Luisa Fernández belong to the review but have no individually identified images in this group. The color ranges Rovira attributes to certain painters are testimony to his observation, not colors that the surviving reproduction can verify.

The sculpture section repeats his demand for unity. Rovira praises the spontaneity of a child's head carved in wood by Antonio Bachs and the strength of Fernando Boada's interpretation of Ángel Reyes in patinated plaster. He objects, however, to the lack of cohesion in some details of Corrieri's nude *Amanecer*. These are not the illustrated sculptures: Boada's caption accompanies a figure enclosed in a mantle and describes it as marble. Linking that image to the portrait of Ángel Reyes would create a false identification.

The plates add Florencio Gelabert's silver medal torso and *Luz de Yara*, a plaster work attributed in the caption to Amelie Zell and awarded gold. In the latter, a standing figure and a kneeling figure form an evidently narrative composition, but its title is insufficient to assign precise identities to both. The text mentions Emilia Zell alongside Armentero under a literary and Romantic characterization. Amelie/Emilia should remain a recorded documentary variant; a general assessment of an artist should not automatically become an exhaustive description of a particular work.

The journal as a record of the Salon

The images reveal a Salon in which portraiture, landscape and figurative sculpture coexist. This diversity produces no single rule of excellence. Rovira values Caravia's freedom of handling and Maribona's classical organization; he asks for coherence in a painting close to Sorolla and unity of mass in sculpture. His most persistent demand is that the execution of individual parts answer to the conception of the complete work. [1]

The article also preserves a form of public intervention. Asking more of artists after denouncing institutional indifference connects the quality of works to the conditions of their reception. An architectural journal provides a space for this exchange across disciplines. Its plates circulate works and awards; the review introduces disagreement, comparison and judgment. Together, these records allow an exhibition to be studied without confusing official recognition with critical assessment.

Preserving the group requires distinguishing its formats. The received PDF has seven pages: a recomposed cover, three pages of plates, two pages of text and a final blank page. The nineteen JPGs comprise three composite sheets and sixteen detail files, one of which includes two works. Sixteen different works can be identified in total. This count concerns the reproductions, not the more than one hundred works that Rovira says the Salon contained. [2, 3]

The exhibition's memory benefits from keeping criticism and images together, with their differences visible. Rovira's judgment can be disputed; its historical interest does not depend on our accepting it. It allows us to recover the specific question running through the review: what makes a work convincing, and who can recognize, explain or question that achievement?

Documentary note and references

[1] José Rovira Soler, "El XXI Salón de Bellas Artes," in the group attributed to Arquitectura, Havana, February 1939, year VII, no. 67. Text on pages 3–4 of the received PDF; these are reference page numbers, not the original journal pagination.

[2] Plates escanear0005.jpg–escanear0023.jpg, Archivos Sarracino Gallery. Composite sheets 0005, 0012 and 0018 correspond to pages 2, 5 and 6 of the PDF. Titles, media and awards cited here follow their captions.

[3] "EL XXI SALON DE BELLAS ARTES.pdf" and associated DOC and TXT files. The PDF declares digital creation from Word on January 22, 2010. It is preserved in full; its metadata does not certify the date of the historical printed source. The accompanying dossier details correspondences and name variants.

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Fuentes consultadas: Archivos Sarracino Gallery.

Plate 1 Portraits landscape and sculpture

Composite sheet escanear0005.jpg. Six works with their original captions. It brings together Saneza, Gelabert's torso and works by Maribona, Rodríguez Morey, Pérez García and Sánchez Araujo.



Retrato de la Srta. Olga Ruiz. Oleo de Armando Maribona

Saneza. Oleo de Concha Ferrant. Medalla de oro



Escultura. Florencio Gelabert. Medalla de plata



Oleo de Antonio Rodríguez Morey

Atardecer en el puerto. Oleo de Vicente Pérez García

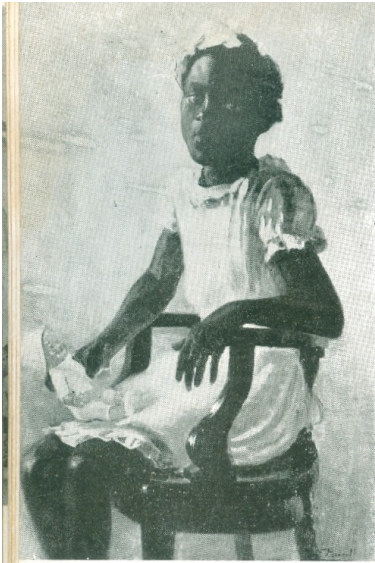


Retrato. Oleo de Antonio Sánchez Araujo



Plate 2 Media and attributions

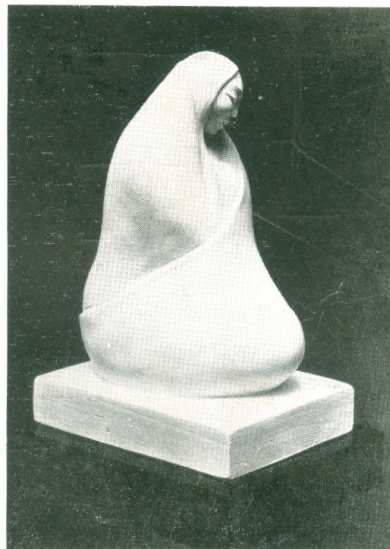
Composite sheet escanear0012.jpg. Five works. The captions identify the portrait of Rita Longa as crayon and pastel, Boada's sculpture as marble and El Padre Varela as an oil painting.



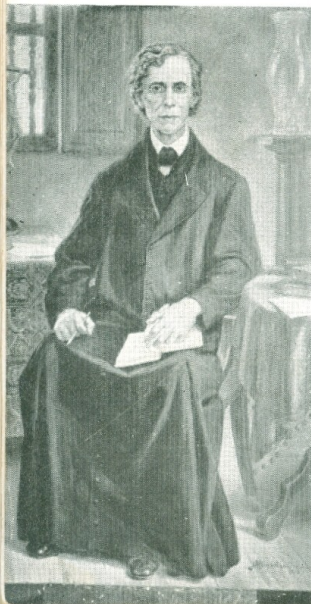
Edelmá. Oleo de Luisa Fernández Morell



*Retrato de la Srta. Rita Longa—
creyones y pastel—. Armando Ma-
ribona. Medalla de plata*



*Mármol, escultura de Fernando
Boada*



*El Padre Varela. Oleo de J. E.
Hernández Giro*



*Retrato. Oleo por José Rodríguez
Radillo. Medalla de plata*

Plate 3 The critic among the artists

Composite sheet escanear0018.jpg. Five works, including Retrato de José Mendiola, attributed to José Rovira Soler. Awards in the other captions can be compared with the judgments in his review.



*Retrato de José Mendiola. Oleo de José
Rovira Soler*



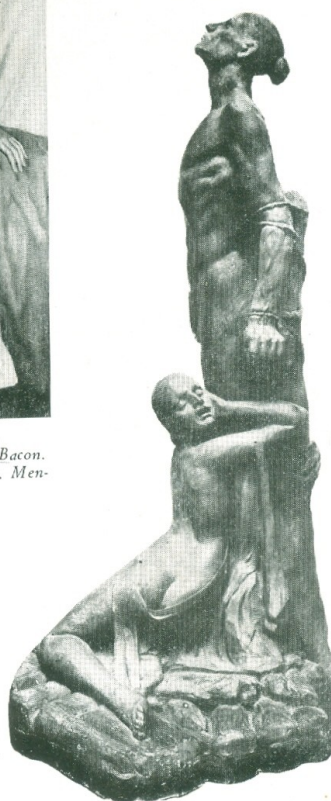
Batiente de luz. Oleo de Roberto Vázquez. Medalla de oro



*Retrato de la Srita. Doris Bacon.
Oleo de Armando Maribona. Men-
ción honorífica*



*Retrato del pintor Ricardo Marín. Oleo de Enrique
Caravia. Medalla de bronce*



*Luz de Yara. Yeso. Amelie
Zell. Medalla de oro*