

# Afrocubans and National Identity: Modern Cuban Art, 1920s-1940s

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The history of the European colonization of Africa and that of its most important cultural by-product--Primitivism--has been studied in some depth. However, its consequences beyond the European continent, particularly in the Caribbean, beg further investigation. The slave trade imported millions of Africans into this region, where they became a major part of the islands' population and culture. In the twentieth century when blacks and mulattoes began to appear with greater frequency in Caribbean art, Europe also played a role in this development through the influence of the modernist concept of Primitivism as exemplified in the art of Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, and Emil Nolde, among others. This paper examines the representation of blacks and mulattoes in Cuban art concentrating on the works of the Modern artists Eduardo Abela (1889-1965), Carlos Enríquez (1900-1957), and Wifredo Lam (1902-1982). Images of Afrocubans are analyzed in the context of Cuban culture and European modernism, arguing that they are tied in with the search for a national ethos or identity.

The Spanish began introducing African slaves into Cuba not long after their discovery and occupation of the island. At first a limited number of slaves were brought in to replace the rapidly diminishing Indian labor force. The number increased dramatically in the eighteenth century with the emphasis on the development of the sugar industry. By 1865, when the Cuban plantation class organized the Partido Reformista including in its agenda the suppression of the slave trade, there were over 200,000 free blacks and nearly 400,000 slaves in Cuba, making up almost half of the total population.<sup>1</sup> They not only survived uprooting and transplantation, but were able to preserve many of their traditions. As a working force, fighters in the wars of independence, and carriers of a rich ancient culture, Africans and their descendants have made a sizable contribution to Cuban society in the last two hundred years. The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz summarized the situation thus:

The Negro contribution to *cubanidad* has not been meager. Besides their immense working force which made possible the integration of Cuba into the world economy, and beyond their striving for freedom which brought about Cuba's independence, their cultural influence can be detected in Cuban food, cooking, vocabulary, rhetoric, romantic love, maternalism... art and religion.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these factors, the integration of Afrocubans into mainstream society after emancipation (1886) and after the establishment of the Cuban Republic (1902) was slow. Helping to mediate between the white and black worlds in Cuba and making the white middle-class less fearful and intolerant of Afrocubans was the pioneering work of Ortiz and that of a younger generation of Cuban writers, musicians, and artists which emerged in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> They were the first to focus on the positive qualities of Afrocuban culture as an essential part of an emerging national identity. In the case of the visual arts, the expression of *afrocubanismo*, as this tendency became known, has hardly been studied even though there is a significant body of well-known modern Cuban paintings based on Afrocuban themes.<sup>4</sup>

The generation of painters which emerged in Havana in the late 1920s is known as *la vanguardia*, or the vanguard, because it introduced modernism, *i.e.*, European Modern art and concepts from Post-Impressionism through Surrealism, into Cuban art.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by European Primitivism and by a strong national reform movement at home, the *vanguardia* generation turned its attention to Afrocubans as a positive source of national identity.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the early approaches and choice of Afrocuban themes by artists such as Abela, Enríquez, Romero Arciaga, Antonio Gattorno, and Jaime Valls are seen in the illustrations of the avant-garde publication *Revista de Avance* (Havana: 1927-30). In it are interpretations of blacks as musicians, menial workers, or "noble savages." They are drawn in simplified or expressionistic styles that compliment the subject matter.<sup>7</sup> From this time on the search for the essential contributions of Afrocubans to Cuban culture concentrates on their religious traditions, music, and sensuality.

The first of the *vanguardia* artists to develop expressive images based on Afrocuban themes was Abela. In a series of drawings and paintings done in Paris between 1927 and 1929, such as *El triunfo de la rumba* (The Triumph of the Rumba), and *El gallo místico* (The Mystic Rooster), he evoked Afrocuban music/dance and religious ceremonies using a mildly expressionistic style. In *El triunfo de la rumba*, c. 1928 (Figure 1), the costumed figures playing hand drums and dancing against a backdrop of green banana leaves and a deep-blue sea suggest a carnival scene in a tropical setting. Moreover, the decoration surrounding the figures as well as their placement suggests a float, adding to the carnival atmosphere. Although Abela gives enough visual information to identify



the scene, his simplified image emphasizes—through the manipulation of lines, colors, and shapes—the expression of the rumba itself, its energetic rhythm.

Abela expressed a related aspect of the African presence in Cuba in *El gallo místico*, c. 1928 (Figure 2). In this painting he offered his version of one of the most recurrent Afro-Cuban themes: blacks engaged in primitive religious ceremonies. He approached the subject by barely representing a few characters and a setting, while relying on the visual elements as such to express the content of the scene. He exaggerated the poses of the black figures to suggest a wild ritualistic dance, emphasized the warm, bright color of the rooster to call attention to the element of sacrifice, and darkened the background to increase the mood of mystery associated with these ceremonies. As seen in these and other paintings from the Parisian period, Abela's image of Afro-Cubans and Cuba is of an exotic people and place given to ecstatic festivities. This vision was to a large degree influenced by European Primitivism in general and the work of Marc Chagall in particular. He found in Chagall's dreamy reminiscences of his native Russian Jewish folklore a successful model for his own imaginative recollections of Cuban folklore. Abela also found in the work of Chagall the inspiration for his own visual vocabulary, characterized by the simplification of the human figure, local color, and nature, with slight exaggerations to suggest the character of a memory or a dream. Abela's interest in the exploration of *afrocubanismo* as artistic subject and emblem of national identity was limited to this series of paintings.

Around 1930 other *vanguardia* artists began to incorporate Afro-Cuban themes into their paintings, most notably Carlos Enríquez. As in the case of Abela, Enríquez began to give artistic expression to the African presence in Cuba while living in Paris and in contact with the novelist and promoter of Afro-Cuban culture Alejo Carpentier.

One of Enríquez best known paintings of this time, *Virgen del Cobre* (The Virgin of Charity), 1933 (Figure 3), represents the syncretism of Yoruba and Catholic religious forms and deities, which is typical of the Cuban religion of *Santería*. This religion is based on the worship of a pantheon of African divinities, mostly of Nigerian origin, syncretized with Roman Catholic saints. The Yoruban deities, known as *orishas*, were linked to Christian figures and powers.<sup>8</sup> Enríquez' representation of the Virgin of Charity, Cuba's patron saint, is also a representation of the Yoruba deity Oshun, with whom the Virgin of Charity is syncretized in *Santería*.<sup>9</sup> Oshun is the goddess of rivers and beauty, a voluptuous and sensual woman who enjoys partying and dancing. Enríquez' *Virgen del Cobre* alludes to this syncretism by using the Virgin's Catholic name (actually a shorten version of it), but giving her the attributes of Oshun—negroid features, a voluptuous body, and Afro-Cubans dancing in her honor. This painting is one of the first in Cuban art to make a specific reference to *Santería* deities and myth. Not unlike Abela, his approach to the African element in Cuban culture was in part influenced by the European enthu-

siasm for exotic primitive people and their primordial religious practices. On his return to Cuba, Enríquez continued to find inspiration in Afro-Cuban subjects. In *Los tocadores* (The Music Players), 1935 (Figure 4), he concentrated on capturing the look of Afro-Cuban music and dance. The painting's subject is similar to Abela's *El triunfo de la rumba*, but he goes much further in suggesting the animated character of the music/dance by using bold curves and diagonals, and by distorting and blurring selected forms. Moreover, Enríquez' painting also captures telling details of the subject increasing the authentic look of the image. Some of those details are the ethnicity of the black musicians, the type of musical combo with instruments consisting of Spanish guitar, and hand drums, augmented by a female singer, and even the then fashionable two-toned shoes of the drummer. It should be noticed that the music and dance in *Los tocadores* is not necessarily about secular entertainment: the costumed figure in the background gives the scene a religious or ceremonial character. The cult of the Primitive influenced Enríquez' interest in the expression of Afro-Cubans in the context of mysterious religious rituals, energetic music and dance, and carnal sensuality.

The latter as embodied in the figure of the Afro-Cuban mulatto woman is the subject of Enríquez' best known painting, *El rapto de las mulatas* (The Abduction of the Mulatto Women), 1938 (Figure 5). This Cuban-Caribbean version of the Classical myths of abduction and rape shows two armed equestrians, either bandits and/or fighters in the War of Independence (1895-99), aggressively abducting two acquiescent and voluptuous mulatto women in a whirlpool of violent desire. In terms of the representation of the female figures, Enríquez follows a long line of Cuban high (Victor P. Landaluze, 1828-1889) and low (Tobacco stamps) art that viewed the mulatto woman as sexual and promiscuous.<sup>10</sup> Enríquez' interest in the expression of Afro-Cuban culture, although more sustained and wide ranging than most of his generation, was an on and off affair, as he concentrated more on the figure of the Cuban peasant and his environment.

The most consistent and less stereotypical expression of *afrocubanismo* in art appeared in the early 1940s in the paintings of Wilfredo Lam. On returning to Cuba in 1941, after twenty years of living in Europe, Lam (whose mother was black and father Chinese) was struck by his re-encounter with the luxurious landscape and the persistence of his ancestors' African myths and religious practices.<sup>11</sup> He immediately began to explore what he called "the negro spirit" in a style based on Cubist abstraction and Surrealist metamorphosis of forms. Lam's personal contact with Pablo Picasso, André Breton, and the Parisian avant-garde of the 1930s introduced him first hand to Cubism, Surrealism, African and Oceanic tribal objects. Out of these sources Lam developed by the early 1940s a distinctive style which focused on the artistic expression of his own and Cuba's African heritage and identity.

One of Lam's first paintings to express the full force of his new style has remained his best known work, *La jungla* (The Jungle), 1943 (Figure 6).<sup>12</sup> Its monumental and complex



image basically consists of four masked figures in a dense landscape. The painting's background shows, as described by the artist, "the Cuban landscape of the sugar cane field" that at this time became a primary motif in his works, providing an appropriate and symbolic environment for his figures.<sup>13</sup> A lush foliage, made up for the most part of sugar cane shoots and tropical leaves, represents the power, sacredness, and mystery of nature. The renowned Cuban writer and folklorist Lydia Cabrera explains in her seminal work, *El monte*, that to Afrocubans the thickets, like the jungles of Africa, are the home to ancestral divinities and powerful spirits and therefore places of prayers and offerings.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, *el cañaveral* or sugar cane field is also symbolic of a long and cruel colonial past, which involved the Spanish importation to Cuba of both this crop and African slaves to cultivate and harvest it. Even in the twentieth century, Afrocubans as well as Black migrant workers from Jamaica and Haiti represented the majority of the labor force in Cuba's sugar fields. Lam's tropical landscapes, a metamorphosis of untamed jungle and sugar cane field, reflect this dual aspect of Nature for Afroamericans in the New World—both labor camp, and home to ancestral spirits.

Lam's tropical landscape of the early 1940s served as environment for African myths and ritual. In *La Jungla* the four polymorphic figures allude to Afrocuban myth and ritual. The use of masks and hands holding plants in gestures of offerings evoke a scene of ritual to honor the African deities or *orishas*, who live in the thickets of the Cuban countryside. One such divinity was Oggún, the traditional Yoruba patron of warriors, hunters, farmers, and blacksmiths and the deity of iron and war. *Santería* practitioners believe Oggún is contained in the substance of iron itself and iron objects such as keys, chains, hammers, knives, scissors, and horseshoes.<sup>15</sup> The prominent pair of scissors that appear in *La Jungla* is a reference to Oggún, just as the many knives and horseshoes that Lam includes in his paintings of the 1940s: *Malembo*, 1943; *Canto de Osmosis* (Song of Osmosis), 1944; and most obviously *Oggún Arere*, 1945.

Although the symbolism in Lam's paintings is open-ended and he rarely spoke or wrote about it in specific terms, there is at least one important exception—the iconography of *Presencia Eterna* (Eternal Presence), 1945 (Figure 7). About the symbolism of this large and almost monochromatic painting, Lam commented:

The character to the left is an imbecile prostitute. She feels ridiculous with her two mouths. From her heart erupts the leg of an animal. Her heterogeneous nature evokes the mixture and degradation of the race. The character on the right holds a knife; it is the instrument of integration, but he does not use it, he does not fight. He suggest the indecision of the mulatto, who does not know where to go, or what to do. The vase to the right, which is full of rice and has a head

coming out of it, represents religion and the mysteries...On the upper right corner...I have put the symbol of Changó, the god of thunder, sustained by a hand.<sup>16</sup>

This painting makes specific references, as others of this time did, to Afrocuban deities, such as Changó (Shango), who is symbolized by the hand holding a staff, and coming out of a palm leaf. Afrocubans believe that this deity dwells in the palm leaf from whence he discharges his arrows to earth. The symbol of another African deity is seen in the vase full of rice spouting a spherical head, which is the traditional representation of Eleggúa (the *Santería* name for Eshu-Elegba). Cabrera refers to the essential characteristics of Eleggúa as "guardian of the crossroads, jungles, and savannas," and "the one who possesses the key to destiny."<sup>17</sup> He is a mischievous trickster, the messenger of the gods, and the arbiter of human destiny. As pointed out by Suzanne Garrigues Daniel in her dissertation *The Early Works of Lam 1941-45*, the artist, by using these well-known Afrocuban symbols, was paying tribute to the religion of his people and at the same time evoking the powers of those *orichas* associated with aggression, war, and destiny.<sup>18</sup> This aspect of Lam's iconography expresses a violent and defiant side of Afrocubans rarely noted in *afrocubanismo*.

Also rare in Cuban art is the critical expression of the mulatto woman's sexual exploitation, and the mulattoes' lack of social identity, which according to Lam is what the two side figures are about. He implies that the left figure, whom he identifies as a prostitute, is a *mulata*. Her sexuality is apparent in the erotic cadence of the hips, sculpturesque round buttocks, and exposed breasts, while her role as prostitute is suggested by the fancy high heels and hat, and by her provocative pose and gaze. By exaggerating the mulatto woman's sensuality, and even inserting a note of bestiality (the animal leg projecting from the figure's chest), Lam makes a strong critical statement on the purely sexual role the *mulata* played in Cuban life and art.

The imagery of Lam's paintings are highly complex in their surrealist metamorphoses of human, animal, and plant motifs, and in their cubist abstraction and faceting of forms and space. This approach lends richness and density to his symbolism and contributes to the aggressive mood of his paintings. In these respects Lam's *afrocubanismo* is unique in Modern Cuban art.

In conclusion, although Afrocubans have been subjects in Cuban art since at least the eighteenth century, they did not receive widespread artistic attention until the 1920s. At that time a new generation of writers, musicians, and artists began to discover the African heritage and its contribution to the national identity. They did not have to look far to find that ancient African myths and religious forms, musical rhythms, and dances had survived relatively intact in popular culture.

In painting, Abela, Enríquez, and Lam developed an Afrocuban image influenced by European modernism and African traditions as they survived in Cuba. This imagery centered on a limited number of themes: scenes of primitive



myth and ritual derived mostly from the religion of *Santería*, scenes of music and dance in the context of religious ceremonies and popular entertainment, and sensuality as embodied in the figure of the mulatto woman. These subjects were expressed in a variety of styles adapted from various European artistic sources such as the paintings of Chagall, and Picasso, and from the general European interest in Primitivism. The choice of themes, if not the approach, are already found in Cuban nineteenth century art such as that of the paintings of Landaluze and the genre of tobacco stamps. In the case of the artists discussed above the approaches ranged from the mildly expressionistic and generalized scenes of Abela, to the more assertive and detailed visions of Enríquez, to the mythical and aggressive world of Lam's imagery. What the work of these individuals have in common is their aim to surpass the mere illustration of types and events, and their overall positive view of Afro Cubans and their heritage.

In perspective one of the most significant aspects of *afrocubanismo* is not so much the variety of images and viewpoints of Afro Cubans it generated, but its recognition of the subject itself. The contribution of Abela, Enríquez, and Lam goes beyond specific images and facts and lies in concentrating on a neglected part of the Cuban cultural heritage and promoting it as a legitimate aspect of the national identity. The creative work of these individuals acted as a bridge between the black world of Afro Cuban popular culture and the white middle-class world of intellectuals and professionals. They pioneered the awareness and acceptance of Afro Cuban culture opening the way for its incorporation into mainstream Cuban society.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis A. Perez, Jr., *Cuba between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 86.

<sup>2</sup> Ortiz, "La Cubanidad y los Negros," *Estudios Afrocubanos* III (La Habana, 1939) 12.

<sup>3</sup> The most significant poets associated with *afrocubanismo* at this time were Nicolas Guillén, José Z. Tallet, and Ramón Guirao, the most important novelist, Alejo Carpentier, and the most outstanding composers, Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturfa.

<sup>4</sup> *Afrocubanismo* is barely addressed in the work of the first art critics/historians to write on Modern Cuban art, namely Alejo Carpentier, Juan Marinello, Guy Pérez Cisneros, José Gomez Sicre, and Loló de la Torre.

<sup>5</sup> For basic information on this generation of Cuban artists and some reproductions of their work, see José Antonio Navarrete, Ramón Vázquez Díaz, *La Vanguardia, surgimiento del arte moderno en Cuba* (La Habana: Museo Nacional, 1988) (Catalogue of exhibition at Cuba's National Museum).

<sup>6</sup> In the 1920s there emerged in Cuba a strong reform movement made up of intellectuals and workers, who through public demonstrations, acts of protest, strikes, manifestos, newspaper and magazine articles demanded an end to political corruption, better education, more social justice, and

greater independence vis-a-vis the United States. They were also preoccupied with the creation of a cultural identity out of Cuba's diverse population and history that would put an end to its long colonial legacy.

<sup>7</sup> *Revista de Avance* no. 16, Nov. 1927, p. 103; no. 18, Jan. 1928, p. 12; no. 27, Oct. 1928, p. 275; no. 31, Dec. 1928, p. 19; no. 41, Dec. 1929, p. 363; no. 49, Aug. 1930, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to this New World religion, see Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> The Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre (or Virgin of Charity), was not only the patron saint of Cuba, but also of Havana Harbor, fishermen, and sailors, thus her association with the multifaceted Yoruba goddess of the river, Oshun.

<sup>10</sup> For basic information on Victor Patricio Landaluze and reproduction of his works, see Ministerio de Cultura, *Pintura española y cubana y litografías y grabados cubanos del siglo XIX* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1983). For information and reproductions of Cuban tobacco stamps, see Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Cuba en las marquillas cigarreras del siglo XIX* (La Habana, Ediciones Turísticas de Cuba, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Lam commented to Helena (Holzer) Benitez (a German chemist, who came with Lam to Havana, where they were married in 1944 and divorced in 1951), on their arrival in Havana about the exuberance of Cuba's flora; Helena Benitez letter to author, June 25, 1985. Lydia Cabrera took Lam to Afro Cuban religious rituals at various places in the Havana area (Pogolotti, Regla, and Marianao), which he said reminded him of similar ceremonies he had seen as a child in his native town of Sagua La Grande; same correspondence.

<sup>12</sup> For discussions on the style and iconography of this painting, see Fernando Ortiz, *Wifredo Lam y su obra* (La Habana: Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación, 1950), Michel Leiris, *Wifredo Lam* (Paris: Fratelli Fabbri, 1970), Alain Jouffroy, *Lam* (Paris: Ed. Georges Fall, 1972), Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafías, 1976), and the author's "Wifredo Lam's La Jungla," *Caribbean Review* XV (Spring 1986): 32-36.

<sup>13</sup> Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Wifredo Lam* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982) 174.

<sup>14</sup> Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (La Habana: 1954; reprint ed., Miami: Colección del Chicherekú, 1983) 13. This book is considered a definitive study of Afro Cuban folklore, religion, and ritual.

<sup>15</sup> Cabrera 137.

<sup>16</sup> Fouchet 204.

<sup>17</sup> Cabrera 76-77.

<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Garrigues Daniel, "The Early Works of Wifredo Lam, 1941-1945," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1983) 65.



Figure 1. Eduardo Abela, *The Triumph of the Rumba*, c. 1928, oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Figure 2. Eduardo Abela, *Mystic Rooster*, c. 1928, oil on canvas, 64 1/2 x 54 1/2 cm, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Figure 3. Carlos Enríquez, *The Virgin of Charity*, c. 1933, oil on canvas, 72 x 50 1/2 cm, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.





Figure 4. Carlos Enríquez, *The Music Players*, c. 1935, oil on canvas, 28" x 23 1/2", Private Collection, Miami.



Figure 5. Carlos Enríquez, *The Abduction of the Mulatto Women*, 1938, oil on canvas, 162.4 x 114 1/2 cm, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.



Figure 6. Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1943, gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 7' 10 1/4" x 7' 6 1/2", The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Inter-American Fund.



Figure 7. Wifredo Lam, *Eternal Presence*, 1944, mixed media on jute, 85" x 77 1/2", Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Nancy Sayles Day Fund.