Contributor: Joseph Hartman

**Abela, Eduardo**   
Born: 1889 – San Antonio de los Baños; Died: 1965 – Havana, Cuba

Cuban artist and cartoonist Eduardo Abela is considered an early progenitor of the Cuban *Vanguardia*, a twentieth-century avant-garde art movement that incorporated European Modernist techniques, such as Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism, into synthetic images of Cuba’s multifaceted culture. Like many of his colleagues, Abela explored Cuban themes in his art while living abroad in Spain and Paris in the 1920s. During his European residency, Abela created nostalgic and somewhat stereotypical images of Cuba’s rural landscape, peasantry, and Afro-Cuban populations. Abela’s Afro-Cuban themed works, in particular, came at the height of “negro fashion” in France. Unlike Cuban contemporary Wifredo Lam, who focused on affirming his own Afro-Cuban identity, Abela’s paintings from this period are most often associated with a Eurocentric view of primitivism; a vision of things African as earthy, sensual, and exotic. After his return to Cuba, Abela served as a cartoonist for the Cuban newspaper *El Diario del Marina* from 1930 until 1934. During this period in his career, Abela created acerbic editorial cartoons as a protest against the notorious President-cum-Dictator Gerardo Machado. Abela later founded a short-lived art studio called the Free Studio of Painting and Sculpture in 1937; and served as Cuba’s cultural *attaché* to Mexico from1941 to 1946 and to Guatemala from 1947 to 1952. He continued to paint until his death in 1965.

Many of Abela’s iconic paintings come from his studies in Paris during the late 1920s. Abela’s distance from home imbued these early works with a sense of exoticism, evident in the 1928 oil painting entitled *El Gallo Místico* *(The Mystic Rooster)*. This expressionistic work depicts a chicken being sacrificed by a circle of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners. Unlike the realists and romantics that prevailed in the academic art of Cuba during the nineteenth century, Abela aimed to reflect the energy of dance and sacrifice without burdening the viewer with any abundance of detail. His 1928 work is a blend of neutral greys, blacks, and browns in the background with vibrant reds, oranges, blues, and greens accentuating his figures in the foreground. Later, in Cuba, Abela worked prolifically as a professional cartoonist. He was most famous for his *criollo*, or creole, character “El Bobo” - a caricature that embodied a kind of Shakespearian fool. With a vacant gaze and naïve antics, “El Bobo” spoke truth to power during the bloody reign of Gerardo Machado, a period in which government censorship otherwise weakened the criticality of the Cuban press.

At the end of the 1930s, Abela returned to painting. He began using a naturalistic style inspired by early Italian Renaissance painting and the Mexican muralist movement. His works from this period again focused on an idealized view of the Cuban peasant and countryside, as seen in his famous painting of 1938 *Los Guajiros* , a scene that depicts white rural farmer workers with a measure of Classical sobriety blended with expressionism and social realism. Abela returned to these rural and Afro-Cuban themes throughout his career. In a broader national discourse, his work was part and parcel of an effort to define Cuban national identity in the mid-twentieth century; an effort taken on by poets, artists, architects, writers, and politicians with earnest in the decades following Cuba’s independence from Spain in 1902.



Eduardo Abela, *El Bobo (The Fool)*, 1953, ink on heavy paper laid down on cardboard, 8.75 x 6 inches, Cernuda Arte, http://www.cernudaarte.com/artists/eduardo-abela/

**References and further reading:**

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**List of Works:**

Eduardo Abela, *El Triunfo de la Rumba (The Triumph of the Rumba)*, ca. 1928, oil on canvas, 25.5 x 21.25 inches, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.

Eduardo Abela, *El gallo místico* *(The Mystic Rooster)*, ca. 1928, oil on canvas, 26 x 21.5 inches, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana  
  
Eduardo Abela, *Los Guajiros (Peasants)*, 1938, oil on canvas, 33 x 28 inches, Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana.