Contributor: Lisandra Estevez

**Portocarrero, René**

b. Havana, 24 February 1912 – d. Havana, 7 April 1985

Part of the Cuban *vanguardia* (or vanguard movement), René Portocarrero broke with the academic style of art that prevailed in Cuba in order to create a modern visual language that expressed his cultural identity. Born in Havana on 24 February 1912, René Portocarrero was one of the great second-generation artists of the Cuban avant-garde movement. Multi-talented, he was a painter of easel pictures, ceramicist, illustrator, muralist and set designer. Portocarrero’s early works were expressionist in style and explored a varied body of subject matter that was inspired by his native country. He, like his contemporary **Amelia Peláez,** painted many images of domestic interiors. Many of his compositions evoke the designs of the *medio-punto* (stained glass lunettes usually placed over doorways in Cuban homes) and the intricate iron work of nineteenth-century aristocratic houses of the Cerro neighbor in Havana where he lived. His interpretation of Cuba’s ornate interior design shaped a tropical Baroque sensibility that is suffused with bold and bright colour and dense, intricate patterning. The most significant part of his oeuvre was produced in 1943 with the following series: *Interiores del Cerro* [*El Cerro Interiors*], *Festines* [*Feasts]*, and *Figuras para una mitología imaginaria* [*Figures for an Imaginary Mythology*]. Portocarrero’s *Mythological Personage* (1945, Museum of Modern Art, New York) represents a fractured figure whose stylized and distorted features meld into the brightly coloured, jungle-like background that evokes the luminous intensity of the *medio-punto*.

Similar to his contemporaries like **Mario Carreño**, Portocarrero’s art is highly heterogeneous in subject, style and materials. Throughout his career, he formulated a number of distinct pictorial idioms that fused Cubism, Surrealism, Mexican Muralism, and geometric abstraction. In the 1950s, he started producing ceramics, making a ceramic mural for Havana’s Palacio de la Revolución in 1968. His quest for representing Cuban identity is illustrated in his depictions of rural landscapes and carnivals produced in serial format such as his *Máscaras* [*Masks*] and *Color de Cuba* [*The Colour of Cuba].* Like the principal artists of his time such as **Wifredo Lam**, Portocarrero was also influenced by Afro-Cuban traditions as evinced in his phantasmagorical *Little Devil No. 3* (1962, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana). His later series of works focused on popular celebrations, floral motifs and female figures such as his *Retratos de Flora* [*Portraits of Flora*], 1966; *Carnavales* [*Carnivals*], 1970-71; and *Madres eternas* [*Eternal Mothers*], 1982.



*Catedral (Cathedral)*

1942

18 x 14”

Watercolor on paper

The Farber Collection

http://www.thefarbercollection.com/artists/rene\_portocarrero

The trajectory of Portocarrero’s career was markedly unconventional. Though largely self-taught, he studied briefly both at the Villate Academy and the Academia de San Alejandro in Havana. His first one-person exhibition was held at the Havana Lyceum in 1934. In 1938, he began teaching at the Eduardo Abela School of Painting and Sculpture and thereafter was appointed art teacher at the Havana Prison in 1940. Portocarrero was also very involved with Cuba’s literary circles. He was among the artists who designed illustrations and contributed articles to *Espuela de Plata* (1939-41) and *Origenes* (1944-56), two major literary magazines edited by the celebrated poet José Lezama Lima. Later in his career, Portocarrero produced the illustrations for Lezama Lima’s *magnus opus*, *Paradiso* (1968, Mexico City). His art was recognized by major awards and prizes including Cuba’s National Painting Award of 1961 and the Sambra International Award at the 1964 São Paolo Biennial. He died in Havana on 7 April 1985.

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*Tribute to Trinidad*, 1951, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Cuba

*Landscape of Havana in Red*, 1972, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Cuba