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**Peláez, Amelia**

Born: 1886— Yaguajay, Cuba; Died: 1968—Havana

Amelia Peláez is one of Latin America’s leading artists of the twentieth century. After Peláez return to Cuba from Europe in 1934, Peláez began to apply the modern artistic practices learned in the Old World to local forms looking to formulate a modern expression of *lo cubano* (that which is Cuban). Her work reached maturity in the early 1940s with the artist’s formulation of *barroquismo* in a Cuban context. During this period, Peláez painted still lifes, architectural arrangements, and female figures often presented amid intellectual pursuits. Peláez’s notion of Cuba was that of a white, urban, catholic, middle class whose nineteenth century homes were adorned with stain glass windows, intrinsic iron work, tropical flowers and fruits. Her intimate interiors often represent abstract expressions of architecture and complex arabesque of lines resembling iron work. The architectural interiors are also present in the colours with which she illustrated objects bathed in the harsh tropical sunlight filtering through colonial stain glass. Such treatment of architecture not only looked to create modern Cuban identity during the 1940s but also elevated the *criollo* home as the national expression of *Cubanidad*, making this reference in Peláez work symptomatic to her commitment to this notion of Cuban identity.

Amelia Peláez began her academic training at the age of twenty at the San Alejandro Academy of Art. Under the direction of romantic painter Leopoldo Romañach, Peláez excelled in areas of drawing, colour and landscape painting. Her training at San Alejandro is reflected in an early series of romantic landscapes which she exhibited at the Association of Painters and Sculptors right after her graduation in 1924. In the summer of the same year, Peláez travelled to New York where she studied at the League of Arts in NY. Aiming to advance her art education and artistic practice, the painter travelled to Paris in 1927, where she lived until 1933. In Europe, Peláez attended drawing and art history classes at La Grande Chaudière, the Ecole Nationale Supèriure de Beaux Arts, and the Ecole de Louvre. In addition, she was influenced by the art and teachings of painters such as Alexandra Exter, Matisse, Léger, Picasso and Braque**.** Following her return to the island in 1934, the painter turned to the depiction of her surroundings using a personal style derived from the synthetic Cubism she had encountered in Paris. Although she lived and worked in relative isolation, Peláez was an active participant of the Vanguard generation. Born at the turn of the century, like Peláez, most of the Vanguard painters studied modern art in Europe, rejected the academy, and established a new vocabulary where modernism merged with local forms. Hence, the *guajiro* (countryside peasant), and the African became central themes defining modern Cuba. Peláez, however, separated herself from the Vanguard by creating a new vision of the island based on a creole colonial past. She painted a Cuba based on architecture, decoration, flora, and fruits surrounding her home.

The pictorial vocabulary formulated by Peláez was also explored by artists René Portocarrero, Cundo Bermúdez, Mariano, and Mario Carreño. Together with Peláez, these artists developed a style based on an eclectic mixture of motifs, overly ornate spaces, harsh colors, and saturated canvases known today as *barroquismo*. Following the prolific decade of the 1940s, Peláez shifted her attention to ceramics and murals. During the 1950s she worked on two major commissions; a ceramic mural at the Tribunal de Cuentas in 1953, and a tessera mural (now destroyed) at for the Hotel Habana Hilton in 1958. During the last decade of her life, Peláez went back to oil painting and continued working or her signature style. The first retrospective of her work was held at the Museo Nacional in Havana in 1968, followed by a second one at the Cuban Museum of Art and Culture in 1988. Today, Peláez’s work is highly regarded and collected through the United States and Latin America. In the United States, her work can be found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington D.C, and various private collections in Miami.



Amelia Peláez, *Pescados (Fishes)*, 1943, oil on canvas, Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Inter-American Fund. http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\_id=78714

**References and further reading:**

*Amelia Peláez, 1896-1968: A Retrospective = Una Retrospectiva.* Miami, FL: Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture, 1988.

Martínez, Juan A. *Cuban Art and National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950*. Gainesville: University of Florida, 1994.

Museo Nacional de la Habana. *Amelia Peláez: Óleos, Témperas Y Dibujos, [1929-1964].* Salamanca: Caja Duero, 1998.

Museo Nacional de la Habana. *Amelia Peláez: Una Mirada En Retrospectiva, 1928-1966.* A Coruña: Fundación Caixa Galicia, 2011.

**List of works:**

*Hibiscus*, (1936), oil on canvas, private collection.

*Hibiscus,* ( 1943), gouache on paper mounted on canvas, collection of Jorge and Elvira Pupo.

*Pescados (Fishes)*, (1943), oil on canvas, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Inter-American Fund.

*The Reading Sisters* ( 1944), gouache on paper, private collection.

*Still Life*, (1949), oil on paper laid down on canvas, collection of Sergio and Christine Delgado.