Contributor: Lisandra Estevez

**Carreño, Mario**

b. Havana, 24 May 1913- d. Santiago, Chile 20 December 1999

Mario Carreño was one of Cuba’s leading modern artists. Born on 24 May 1913 in Havana, he was part of a generation of young artists working in Cuba in the late 1930s and early 1940s that rejected the conservative style and thinking of the Academia de San Alejandro, the country’s dominant art institution and embraced new modernist idiom that synthesized Cubism, Surrealism, Mexican Muralism and Classicism. Prolific and versatile, he worked as a painter, illustrator and sculptor. His early designs integrated the pictorial language of Cubism and embraced a socialist view in their heterodox subject matter. In 1936, he travelled to Mexico where the monumental forms and nationalist themes of Mexican muralism had a powerful impact on his development as a painter. During this time, he was also mentored by the Dominican painter **Jaime Colson** (1901-1975). A formative trip with Colson to Paris in 1938 introduced Carreño to the Louvre’s encyclopaedic collection of classical art. Carreño created a visual language that framed issues of Cuban national identity. Active in Cuba’s *vanguardia* (or vanguard movement), he sought to re-define the visual aesthetics of Cuban modernism. Carreño constantly experimented with both materials and subject matter. His ever-changing and dynamic styles helped to redefine the aesthetics of Cuban art in the 1940s.

Carreño began his career as an illustrator in the early 1930s. He studied at the Academia de San Alejandro in Havana from 1925 to 1930, the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid from 1932 to 1935, and the Ecole des Arts Appliqués in Paris from 1937 to 1939. In expressing his own ideas about being Cuban, he developed a hybrid style of painting that transformed elements from the diverse traditions of the Italian Renaissance, Neo-classicism, and Mexican muralism as illustrated in two of his large-scale allegories, *The Birth of the American Nations* (1940, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana) and *The* *Discovery of the Caribbean* (1940, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana)*.*

As early as 1937, Carreño started to experiment with Duco, a quick-drying lacquer primarily used by automobile industry. As an emerging artist, he participated in the ground-breaking Second National Salon of 1938 in Havana. The Mexican muralist **David Alfaro Siqueiros**’s visit to Havana in 1943 introduced Carreño to the monumental forms and nationalist themes of the mural movement. Painted in that same year, his trilogy of paintings, *Fire in the Farm*, *The Sugar-Cane Cutters*, and *Afro-Cuban Dance* (all in private collections), explored evocative themes of family, agrarian life, and cultural belonging using this industrial material. With his wife, María Luisa Gómez Mena, he founded the Galería del Prado that was dedicated to the exhibition of modern art in Cuba.



*Fruit Bowls with Guitars*

1947

17 x 16”

Gouache on heavy paper

The Farber Collection

<http://www.thefarbercollection.com/artists/mario_carreno>

Widely travelled, he resided in New York from 1944 to 1950. His work was represented in the landmark 1944 exhibition, “Modern Cuban Painters,” at the Museum of Modern Art that was curated by the museum’s first director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. He visited Chile for the first time in 1949 and his works on paper were exhibited there. During that initial residency in Chile, he also produced and published an album of illustrations entitled *Antillañas (West Indian Women)* that was largely inspired by the artist’s nostalgia for Cuba. At the urging of his friend, the poet Pablo Neruda, Carreño immigrated to Chile in 1957.

Throughout his career, he cultivated a complex painterly idiom that drew from wide-ranging and divergent styles such as Neo-classicism, Cubism, Surrealism, Mexican Muralism, and geometric abstraction. The works Carreño produced in the 1950s were marked by a varied abstract style that drew inspiration from the vast spectrum of modern art, but, in particular, Picasso’s cubist language, as seen in his *Fruit Bowls with a Guitar* (1947, The Farber Collection). Concerned by the threat of nuclear proliferation, the artist produced a series entitled *The Petrified World* (1960s-1970s) that, according to him, expressed his “protest against war, against human suffering.” (*Outside Cuba / Fuera de Cuba*, Artist’s interview, 99) In 1982, he was awarded the National Prize for Art in Santiago, Chile and died in there in 1999.

**References and further reading:**

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**List of Works:**

*The Birth of the American Nations*, 1940, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Cuba

*The Discovery of the Caribbean*, 1940, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Cuba

*Cyclone*, or *Tornado*, 1941, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

*Sugar-Cane Cutters,* 1943, Carmita and Isaac Lif and Family Collection

*Interior*, 1943, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana. Cuba