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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO/VISUAL PROGRAM

The Art of Amelia Peláez - Set N°174

Amelia Peláez was one of Cuba's most beloved painters and one of the most important woman artist of Latin America. An earlier interpreter of the modern movement, Peláez brought together the new lessons of Cubism and the traditions of the past in her powerful work. Though she traveled and studied abroad, Peláez was inspired by her home, where she spent the last decade of her life. The artist was internationally recognized in Europe, South America, and in the United States.

Peláez was born in Yaguajay, a town in the province of Las Villas, Cuba, in 1887. Her father was a country doctor. Her mother was a sister of Julián del Casal, a poet and one of the forerunners of modern literature in Spanish America. Peláez showed her vocation for the arts at an early age. Already at fifteen, she had begun taking lessons with a friend of the family and an art teacher. In 1916, the Peláez family moved to Havana. The center of artistic learning was then the Academia San Alejandro, entirely devoted to the strict principles of Spanish academic painting of the 19th century. Peláez registered as a student and began classes in color study. She soon realized that new ideas in art were developing elsewhere in the world and she traveled to New York in 1924. There she attended classes at the Art Students League.

In 1927 Peláez obtained a scholarship from the Cuban Government to study in France. In Paris she attended drawing sessions at La Grande-Chamiere and at the Académie Moderne where she studied theater set designing and color dynamic under Russian artist, Alexandra Exter.

Various influences left their mark on Peláez's early work. The human form in those compositions are reminiscent of Modigliani with their elongated faces and necks. Sometimes forms are executed in flat planes of burnished colors, and at other times composed of thick layers of deep tones energetically spread with a spatula, in the style of Soutine. The still lives have some of these elements, although not yet entering into the cubist idiom.

Peláez was attracted to two great Spanish masters: Picasso and Gris. She experimented with pencil in small cubist drawings, adding pieces of paper and playing cards, creating interesting series of collages. Besides the classes of Madame Exter, Peláez attended sessions of drawing and art history at the Louvre. While in France, she traveled to Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Czechoslovakia. In the spring of 1933, she exhibited oils and gouaches at the Zek Gallery in Paris with great success.



Peláez returned to Havana in 1934. The country was facing an economic and political crisis. Throughout the island, modern art as a movement was in its embryonic phase. Victor Manuel, Antonio Gattorno, Eduardo Abela and Carlos Enríques, who had returned from Europe years before, all fought for greater understanding. Wilfredo Lam was still in Spain and Mario Carreño, also in Madrid, was taking his first step to free form. Other artists, later to be known as the sources of modern Cuban painting --René Portocarrero, Felipe Orlando, Luis Martínez Pedro and Cundo Bermúdez-- were just beginning to show their earliest expressions of a free art. In 1935, Peláez had a show at the First National Salon and received a prize for a magnificent oil that was purchased by the Cuban Government.

Between 1935 and 1936, Peláez devoted herself entirely to drawing producing an important series of works in pencil, among them "The Card Players", now at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. She also executed two frescoes in academic buildings in Havana and Santa Clara.

In 1940 Peláez began to modify her work and to construct her compositions more intricately. They also became more tropical. What appears at first through its elaboration an evasion of objective themes, is actually a careful transportation of domestic subjects to a universal language. The columns of her portico lent their image to many of her works, as did the iron gates, plants and fruits of her garden. Tables and fruits find continuity with the stained glass of colonial windows, embroidered cloth, woven rattan, fringes and tassels in an infinite pattern, described with an uninterrupted line that invaded the entire canvas to finish in a polychromatic mosaic of flat and brilliant color zones. Blue, always predominant, assumed all its possible values. Lines, wide or thin, gave colors an unexpected brightness. Some of the works resemble a patch of tropical vegetation seen through an intricately wrought gate.

Amelia Peláez, one of Cuba's greatest painters, continued to work and find inspiration in her home and surroundings until her death in 1968.

- A. The artist showing a decorated fruit bowl.
- B. Ceramic bowl with base. Abstract decoration shows strong influence of Picasso.
- C. A reclining pitcher of globular body and single handle acquires a very unusual shape when joined to a cone-like vase. Contrasting colors contribute to make a most interesting piece.
- D. Still life with soursop fruits called "guanábanas" in Spanish. Subtle colors and influence of early Cubism.
- E. Harmonic rhomboidal and circular shapes with bright colors in this beautiful gouache evoke rattan work.
- F. Still life with bird resembles a sketch made for ceramic work. Peláez's characteristic continuous line embraces the edge of the composition.
- G. "Two Sisters" - Strong figures painted in blues, yellows and terracotta colors. Black lines suggest the Baroque scheme of colonial Cuban balconies, columns and hibiscus flowers.
- H. Detail of hibiscus is a delicate arrangement of the tropical flower with intricate filigree design on brilliant blue with touches of black and red.
- I. "The Blue Boy" - Gouache on paper is a sophisticated interpretation of an angel whose head is shown in profile while his body is painted in the frontal position. The angel's wings have unusual holes.
- J. "Waiting Lady" - Profile of a lady that evokes the Queen of the Spanish cards. Oblique lines from interesting background.

Text and research by BERTA SHAEFER.