Daily **Life**

Famous art scholar explores the development of modern Cuban art in the 1940s



Dr. Alejandro Anreus speaks about democracy and modern art in 1940s Cuba on Jan. 28 in the Homer Babbidge Library. Anreus has become an internationally recognized scholar, author and curator whose work focuses on the critical role that Latin American and Caribbean artists have played in the political, social and artistic development of modern art. PHOTO BY OLIVIA DICKSON/GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER.

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An internationally renowned art historian visited the University of Connecticut on Wednesday, Jan. 28 to discuss how modern Cuban art developed in the 1940s.

Dr. Alejandro Anreus, a Cuban-born art historian and curator, gave his lecture to the UConn community at Homer Babbidge Library. His talk stemmed from his most recent book, "Modern Art in 1940s Cuba," released in 2025.

Anreus started by providing a historical overview of Cuba leading to the 1940s, covering different events that these 1940s artists reacted to in their work. Anreus said the failure of the 1933 Cuban Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and the progressive constitution Cuba established in 1940 all impacted the arts in major ways.

From 1940 to 1952, Cuba was a progressive nation, with the government promoting and funding the arts, literature, schools and more. Anreus said that the government's interest in modern art, along with important venues like the Lyceum y Lawn Tennis Club and institutions like the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura made modern art accessible and relevant for Cuban artists. Artists and writers visiting Cuba from foreign nations only increased the array of influences that would drive Cuban art in the 1940s.

Anreus divided the modern Cuban artists from the 1940s into three distinct vanguards based on their inspirations and artistic styles.

Anreus said the artists of the first vanguard were heavily inspired by European realism and other artistic trends, with many artists learning in Paris. One such artist was Carlos Enriquez, whose artwork combined Cuban landscapes and the female body in a way Anreus described as "intense eroticism" and "a violent space," emulating what Enriquez believed was the "broken down soul of Cuba."

Amelia Palaez, the most famous female painter of the first vanguard, took to Fauvism and Cubism, painting subjects that Anreus said emulated "lusciousness and joy." Fidelio Ponce was another notable painter whose work manipulated light more than color because he only had access to black and white reproductions of European paintings.

While many artists of the first vanguard were painters, Anreus shined light on lesser-known sculptors and folk artists of this era whose work was important in their own right.

After discussing Wilfredo Lam, a unique painter who sits between the first two vanguards and evoked Afro-Cuban spirit, Anreus delved into artists of the second vanguard. He said these artists were more drawn to Mexican easel painters as an inspiration and took to Picasso's neoclassicism. This led to the development of a "tropical baroque" theme and style seen in the artwork from this generation, which Anreus described as being "drunk on color."

"They defined the baroque in Latin America specifically as different from anywhere else," Anreus said. "Dramatic, but not tragic. Life affirming."

Mario Carreño was one such painter whose work involved dramatic figure forms and vibrant colors before taking to Cubism towards the end of the 1940s. Anreus said that while Carreño's work had a much different style compared to the artists of the first vanguard, it depicted similar themes. He said that continuity between generations "gives us the essentiality about the Cuban culture."

Anreus said the third vanguard consisted of artists who were influenced by artwork and artists in New York City. They believed artists of the second vanguard were too colorful and lively for the time period.

The final portion of the lecture dived into the two art critics and curators who were essential to recognizing this Cuban art, Guy Pérez Cisneros and José Gómez-Sicre.

After the talk, Andreus received questions from the audience, which dove deeper into ideas of the tropical baroque style and how he obtained the abundance of information in his book. Since Anreus was exiled from Cuba, he said he held extensive interviews with artists and curators outside of the country, getting to speak with many of the artists of the second and third vanguard. He said these fading perspectives are the most important part of his book.

"If the book has anything that has real heart, it's the voices of those people," Anreus said.

Nadia Scott, a graduate student studying history at UConn, attended the talk to learn more about Latin American art, and walked away with new Cuban artists to look into. Her interest area is in Latin American art in the 1960s and 1970s, and she said Anreus' lecture provided helpful background information and ideas for how to approach her research.

"As a scholar, having a tighter grasp of the historiography, what other scholars are writing about and the broader trajectory of history is really good," Scott said.

Anreus' lecture was hosted by the Research Program on Arts and Human Rights and was part of the "Why Human Rights Matter" series. It was co-sponsored by El Instituto, the Department of Art & Art History and the John N. Plank Lecture Series.

The book Anreus wrote that inspired the lecture "Modern Art in 1940s Cuba" is currently available online through the UConn Library.



comic by alexa pappas, staff artist