

# A Time for Tribute and Hope. The Hall of Prominent Black Men and Women

Eleanor Calvo Martínez  
Member, Executive Board, Citizens' Committee  
for Racial Integration  
Havana, Cuba

The *Salón de Negras y Negros Ilustres de Cuba* [The Hall of Prominent Cuban Black Men and Women] project is now a reality. One of the *Cuban Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration's* (CIR) most ambitious programs was inaugurated and opened under a rainy, afternoon sky, on August 7<sup>th</sup>, exactly 101 years after the founding of the Independent Party of Color.

According to its organizers, the *Salón's* goal is to broaden knowledge and disseminate throughout Cuba, via traveling exhibits and a virtual gallery on the organization's web site, images and information about the life and accomplishments of black Cubans who have made the most significant contributions to forging the nation and enriching its culture. The *Salón* rejects subjective, prejudicial, and taboo criteria in its selection process, looking instead to merit and diversity as essential reference points. Thus, the figures we see in the CIR's inaugural exhibit are of people who through a variety of ideological or political positions have raised Cuba's profile throughout its history.

A visibly emotional Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas, the CIR's principal organizer, whose



Zulima Farber

work on this program was intense and enthusiastic, explained that this first exhibit has attempted to include exemplary, often unparalleled Cubans of significant importance, who deserve acknowledgment for their contributions to all the arts, politics, sports, or science, which have boosted Cuba's prestige.

Someone of the stature of Antonio Maceo might be one of the first figures one



*Antonio Maceo y Grajales*

might initially see in the exhibit. During our first War of Independence (1868-78), he rose from soldier to major general, and became an internationally renowned military leader, despite the racist rejection of many of his com-



*Jesús Menéndez Larrondo*



*Brindis de Salas*

rades in arms. Another figure is Matanzas patriot Juan Gualberto Gómez, who began life as the son of slaves and went on to become a prominent intellectual, a close friend to José Martí (the Apostle of Cuban independence). Ultimately, he went on to earn the right to publish a pro-independence newspaper in the colonial capital, through court victories in Havana. Two others are Jesús Menéndez, the undeniable leader of Cuban workers, who successfully defended his own economic ideas against the wealthiest and most powerful sugar interests on the island; and Zulima Farber, who arrived in the United States as a humble, adolescent immigrant, and went on to become a reputed jurist and Justice Secretary for the State of New Jersey, by dint of her talent.

The gallery honors the memory or careers of artists of the magnitude of Miguel Failde, creator of the *danzón*, Cuba's national dance; Claudio José Domingo Brindis de Salas, known as the black Paganini, who shared his genius throughout all of Europe, where he was quite famous; Chano Pozo, whose truncated but intense life did not prevent him from introducing Afro-Cuban percussion into contempo-



*Benny Moré*

rary jazz; Celia Cruz, the world's greatest Guaracha singer and a diva who reigned as queen extraordinaire of a music genre—tropical dance music—always dominated by men; the musical genius Benny Moré, who honed his natural artistic talent to perfection in every genre of Cuban music; or his friend, Bebo Valdés, who even in his seventies emerged as an exceptional virtuoso who went on to win five Grammys in less than a decade.

Among those who deserve special mention is Sara Gómez, who for many years was the first and only black, female film director in the country. Despite her short life, she produced a voluminous oeuvre that has yet to be discovered and evaluated in its rightful context. Another person in this category is the great principal ballet dancer Carlos Acosta, a leading figure in contemporary classical dance whose two-decade career has garnered him much success and many awards.

The exhibit also recognizes the careers of universally known athletes like Eligio Sardiñas



*Sara Gómez*



*Regla Torres*

(Kid Chocolate), one of world professional boxing's greatest talents; Martín Dihigo (El Immortal), who was finally inducted into the U.S. Baseball Hall of Fame despite the fact the racism of his time prevented him from playing in the major leagues; Chicago idol Orestes "Minnie" Miñoso, the only baseball player to play professionally in the U.S. through six different decades; or Regla Torres, who the *Fédération Internationale de Volleyball* named the best player of the twentieth century.

These examples, together with all the rest that comprise this first exhibit, and the many others that will be deservedly honored at future exhibits, demonstrate just how much black Cubans have contributed to the growth and universal prestige of Cuba, despite the historical and still existing disadvantages that for centuries have impacted this important segment of Cuban society.

During his opening remarks, Calvo Cárdenas reiterated that beyond the aforementioned physical and virtual galleries, the CIR foresees planning as many sociocultural venues as necessary to publicize and disseminate as much as possible the life, work, and achievements of the country's most distinguished blacks. The organization's leaders felt great satisfaction upon receiving at the opening José Idelfonso Vélez and Hildebrando Chaviano de Montes, leaders of the *Movimiento de Integración Racial Juan Gualberto Gómez* (MIR) [Juan Gualberto Gómez Racial Integration Movement]; and Norberto Mesa Carbonell, Leader of the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Fraternity of Blackness], all of whom articulated great pleasure upon seeing the realization of this initiative, and expressed their interest in collaborating towards the achievement of common goals.

In keeping with its founding goals and objectives, the CIR has once again demonstrated its constructive and inclusive vocation with



*Celia Cruz*

this project, an endeavor that should and can help us come to know ourselves and coexist more peacefully and, above all, bring about the solidly reaffirmed spirit of humane justice and commitment that prevailed on that warm and humid August 7<sup>th</sup> afternoon of tribute and hope.



*"Kid Chocolate"*