
Eusebio Leal: "We must approach Marti without scissors"

26/01/2018



Havana's historian talks to CubaSi about the unveiling of the equestrian monument of our National Hero Jose Marti in front of the Museum of the Revolution, the tribute the International Book Fair Havana 2018 will pay to him, and the 500th anniversary of the city.

You never get tired of listening to Eusebio Leal Spengler. Havana's historian is experiencing intense days right now. The official unveiling of the Jose Marti's equestrian monument at the Misiones Avenue, true copy of the one located in the Central Park of New York, is scheduled for January 28th. And if it were not enough, the International Book Fair 2018 will be dedicated to him. Besides, the city of his life turns 500 years old in 2019...

—The unveiling of the equestrian sculpture of (Jose) Marti is a long-awaited dream of you. Why such statue? How did you make it happen?

"The statue is a fact. Twenty two years have passed since the very beginning of the paperwork. This process has taken so long due to different reasons; namely, political, communicational...etc. Moreover, the responsibility of deciding whether the sculpture came to Cuba or not went through the hands of several

administrations. But we finally did it.

"The sculpture is extraordinarily beautiful. It is a true copy, in details, of the original. It was made possible through the advance of technology. One of the requirements was that the statue could not be touched.

"And indeed, we could do all the documentary research at the Syracuse's Library, where the entire Huntington's legacy is, as well as the Hispanic Society in New York, its most important cultural legacy.

alt

Photo: Yuris Norido / CubaSi

"You could see the work of the artist, of Anna Hyatt Huntington, everything she thought about Marti, her motivations. The City Historian Office has today a solid documentation on that event.

"Amassing the necessary funds was another story. Finding them, taking advantage of the precise moment, nor sooner neither later. North American cultural institutions contributed, Cubans in the patriotic emigration, we had an important contribution from a Mexican lady who has always wanted to remain in anonymity, but that also links Mexico to the historical event of the founding of the statue.

"And certainly, it's important to remember a woman who exalted the genre who almost at age eighty faced the challenge of making a monumental work. She studied Jose Marti's life, she was even inspired by Marti's love and sacrifices, as apostle and also as Mayor General. In Marti comes together his political destiny as founder of a Party to lead the armed struggle for the freeing of a colonized nation and at the same time, his character as soldier that recalls that the best way of not fearing the soldier, is being done.

"He was a soldier from the same moment he gets involved in the war he had summoned, and in the moment in that Maximo Gomez, the most outstanding character of the war, next to Antonio Maceo, welcomed him as guide and top director of that project.

"The moment of his death is poetically remembered in this monument. The beauty in it is that generally monumental sculptures, when related to are about great heroes of history are almost always showing them in a triumphant role, but here he is shown in the moment of giving his life for the cause he had embraced.

"The location is much better than that of New York City, because it can be seen in a square, in a large promenade. It has been put there a nature that reminds the

trips of Marti: there are the olive trees of the Mediterranean, the araucarias from Central America, the palm trees of Cuba...

"The granite base is impressive. And as the sculpture has a large volume, when approached one becomes dazzled by its beauty.

It will be officially inaugurated on January 28th, coinciding with Jose Marti's anniversary, facing the Church of the Sacred Angel, the church where he was baptized (in the same church where Father Varela was also baptized), in Havana, the city where he was born, a city that will soon be 500 years old.

"What better way to commemorate Marti's birth than when his city is scarcely a few months away from turning five centuries?"

- How to approach José Marti in these times?

-Nor with scissors and glue. We cannot approach Marti clipping. We must see a global Marti. That it can be done is to approach through the dissimilar roads he bequeathed to us and proposes: his beautiful epistolary; his love verses, his free verses; the universe of his journalistic literature; he offers us his political action... all those roads lead suddenly to an absolute Marti, to a figure that requires everyone's personal interpretation.

alt

Photo: Yuris Nórido / CubaSí

"There's a vast bibliography of his political and moral dimension (Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, Gonzalo de Quezada); there's a Martí in the continental political vision (Mañach and so many others)... but the most important thing is to build our own Marti from the knowledge we have about him.

"We must approach him, dialogue with him. It is pretty good to extract quotes, to take out fragments from his work, thoughts... but the nice, the important thing is to insert those thoughts into the complete work".

—The 27th International Book Fair will be dedicated to your work. How did you take that news?

—I am deeply grateful to the Cuban Book Institute, the Ministry of Culture, the intelligentsia and the Cuban people. They have been very generous. Not because I come to make the representation of saying "I do not deserve this or that", because it would not only be imprudent, but also offensive for those who have made that decision.

"But I have always considered that I did little to build a work that would take me to the desk, to the necessary and patient consultation of papers. Life has led me to raise stones and lime, to preserve sources, to rescue books, to look for documents, to preserve collections. It took me to the cult of the word, not as a superficial exercise (the hallow word, the one that says nothing, the Manichean rhetoric), but as a vehicle to express such feelings as the love for the Homeland, the awareness that when we love her, we feel a love for the other, for what surrounds us, the American world, for those who suffer and cry, for those who endure...

alt

Photo: Jorge Luis Sánchez/ for CubaSí

"Also for Cuba as regards the accumulation of thought, ideas, the beauty that this country has contributed to the history of America and the world; for Cubans, those I have always felt inseparable part of, part of that people, with their virtues and faults, which are mine; with their lights and shadows, which are mine...

"When I look at all that, I consider that I have done something, I would have wished to do more; once and several times I said that I would need a loam of one life, another more, to be able to do what I want, with the same dedication, as when I climbed stairs in three steps together, as when I travelled long distances daily to reach places".

"I remember that once an old man approached to me, perhaps he arrived in a timely moment of my life and said: "Listen, I know a technique that perhaps you may remember from your childhood; mothers used to preserve the first year's little shoes turned into metal: I own that technique; but I am leaving and I do not have family or anyone to leave it with; I am not coming to give you the secret of my work; I am coming to ask you to give me your shoes, those which you have walked through Havana with".

I handed him the shoes. And when he returned them back to me (they were well kept), I realized that that stage of my life had finished, that I had to begin another.

"Suddenly, children, youngsters began to appear... Even, in a meeting among intellectuals, Fidel told me: "There's a boy here, son of a friend of ours, Katiuska Blanco, who has replied to me that he wants to be Eusebio Leal's successor, when I asked him what he wanted to be".

"It was one consolation that that boy, another or others, are already walking down the streets. I will no longer need another life.

"And if the Book Institute has decided to gather in pages what I once said or wrote, and what has been written and collected from me, and to dedicate this

Book Fair to me, I hope it is for good!"

—Havana will celebrate its 500th anniversary next year. How will the historic center of the city take on that festivity?

—Havana has many historic centers. I have already renounced to speak with absolute sense about the historic center. The historic center is perhaps a starting point. But, there are many starting points: in El Cerro, in Marianao, in Miramar, in La Vibora, in Diez de Octubre, in San Francisco de Paula.

"When we talk about the anniversary we not only talk about that past event of the ceiba tree: that is very nice, and we will remember it: El Templete is restored, as well as the paintings, the columns; and the 500th anniversary tree is planted. Two years ago, the other tree showed signs that its time was over and we had to plant another. This morning, I went there early and saw that the ceiba tree was full of green vine shoots.

"Yes, we will celebrate that: the town hall, the first mass, the birth of the city. But the most important thing is what that time means for a city.

alt

Photo: Annaly Sánchez/ CubaSí

"It is the time of a university that will soon have three centuries, it is the result of the tireless work of the Economic Society of Friends of the Country (Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País), of the history of Cuban pedagogy, which has an important part in Havana, of its architects and builders, who made a fantastic city.

"Everyone who arrives in Havana says "What a wonder! What a mystery! What city is this?" Even decadent, as Havana is, when you touch it, it revives. Wherever you touch it, except what falls beaten that will always be less than what has been lost in this continent; in the interests of a misinterpreted modernity it was savagely demolished ...

"Havana, for a series of events, has remained in its urbanism and splendor until today. We must touch it with love and prevent its "suburbanization". And above all: we must take care of those who live in it.

"Being a Havanan cannot be a sign of superiority, but to be so (as Alfredo Guevara rightfully said), you need certain refinement, which is born from culture.

"Fidel used to say (and I do not like to quote him very much, I prefer to follow what he taught me instead) that Revolutions were daughters of ideas and culture. Without culture there is no idea, without ideas there is no culture: this is a dialectical and harmonic relationship.

“It is necessary to see what Cuban culture does from this city. It is the 500th anniversary for a ballet, for all Cuban music, for poetry, for legal tradition... But this is also the city of the literacy teachers, the city of the sugar-cane cutters, the city of the glorious and unyielding militia, the city of students, the city of workers, where political movements sprung up...

“We are talking about something great. We need to break that silence on the 500th anniversary. Original Havana was founded in 1514, in San Cristobal, on the southern coast, in a spot that archaeologists haven’t found, but that appears in all cartography of that time. San Cristobal and Havana united in a timely moment.

“It already existed In 1514, but in 1519, according to tradition, Havana was founded in the year when Magallanes was travelling around the world, the year when Leonardo da Vinci (the greatest genius of the time) died, the moment when Hernan Cortes and emperor Moctezuma met in Mexico... At midst a changing world, there sprung up the capital of Cuba, the one that was going to the capital of Cuba, that of the Declarations of Havana, that of the glorious resistance...

“Then, Havana deserves not to be perennially vilified as if it were a sterile city. No, this city has given a lot. That is the city we will celebrate”.

Translated by Cubasi Translation Staff

Eusebio Leal: “We must approach Marti without scissors”

Yuris Norido / CubaSi

Havana's historian talks to CubaSi about the unveiling of the equestrian monument of our National Hero Jose Marti in front of the Museum of the

Revolution, the tribute the International Book Fair Havana 2018 will pay to him, and the 500th anniversary of the city.

You never get tired of listening to Eusebio Leal Spengler. Havana's historian is experiencing intense days right now. The official unveiling of the Jose Marti's equestrian monument at the Misiones Avenue, true copy of the one located in the Central Park of New York, is scheduled for January 28th. And if it were not enough, the International Book Fair 2018 will be dedicated to him. Besides, the city of his life turns 500 years old in 2019...

—The unveiling of the equestrian sculpture of (Jose) Marti is a long-awaited dream of you. Why such statue? How did you make it happen?

“The statue is a fact. Twenty two years have passed since the very beginning of the paperwork. This process has taken so long due to different reasons; namely, political, communicational...etc. Moreover, the responsibility of deciding whether the sculpture came to Cuba or not went through the hands of several administrations. But we finally did it.

"The sculpture is extraordinarily beautiful. It is a true copy, in details, of the original. It was made possible through the advance of technology. One of the requirements was that the statue could not be touched.

"And indeed, we could do all the documentary research at the Syracuse's Library, where the entire Huntington's legacy is, as well as the Hispanic

Society in New York, its most important cultural legacy.

alt

Photo: Yuris Norido / CubaSi

"You could see the work of the artist, of Anna Hyatt Huntington, everything she thought about Marti, her motivations. The City Historian Office has today a solid documentation on that event.

"Amassing the necessary funds was another story. Finding them, taking advantage of the precise moment, nor sooner

neither later. North American

cultural institutions contributed, Cubans in the patriotic emigration, we had an important contribution from a Mexican lady who has always wanted to

remain in anonymity, but that also links Mexico to the historical event of the founding of the statue.

"And certainly, it's important to remember a woman who exalted the genre who almost at age eighty faced the challenge of making a monumental work.

She studied Jose Marti's life, she was even inspired by Marti's love and sacrifices, as apostle and also as Mayor General. In Marti comes together his political destiny as founder of a Party to lead the armed struggled for the freeing of a colonized nation and at the same time, his character as soldier that recalls that the best way of not fearing the soldier, is being done.

"He was a soldier from the same moment he gets involved in the war he had summoned, and in the moment in that Maximo Gomez, the most outstanding character of the war, next to Antonio Maceo, welcomed him as guide and top director of that project.

"The moment of his death is poetically remembered in this monument. The beauty in it is that generally monumental sculptures, when related to are

about great heroes of history are almost always showing them in a triumphant role, but here he is shown in the moment of giving his life for the cause he had embraced.

"The location is much better than that of New York City, because it can be seen in a square, in a large promenade. It has been put there a nature that

reminds the trips of Marti: there are the olive trees of the Mediterranean, the araucarias from Central America, the palm trees of Cuba...

"The granite base is impressive. And as the sculpture has a large volume, when approached one becomes dazzled by its beauty.

It will be officially inaugurated on January 28th, coinciding with Jose Marti's anniversary, facing the Church of the Sacred Angel, the church where he was baptized (in the same church where Father Varela was also baptized), in Havana, the city where he was born, a city that will soon be

500 years old.

"What better way to commemorate Marti's birth than when his city is scarcely a few months away from turning five centuries?"

- How to approach José Marti in these times?

-Nor with scissors and glue. We cannot approach Marti clipping. We must see a global Marti. That it can be done is to approach through the dissimilar

roads he bequeathed to us and proposes: his beautiful epistolary; his love verses, his free verses; the universe of his journalistic literature; he offers us his political action... all those roads lead suddenly to an absolute Marti, to a figure that requires everyone's personal interpretation.

alt

“There’s a vast bibliography of his political and moral dimension (Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, Gonzalo de Quezada); there’s a Martí in the continental political vision (Mañach and so many others)... but the most important thing is to build our own Marti from the knowledge we have about him.

“We must approach him, dialogue with him. It is pretty good to extract quotes, to take out fragments from his work, thoughts... but the nice, the important thing is to insert those thoughts into the complete work”.

—The 27th International Book Fair will be dedicated to your work. How did you take that news?

—I am deeply grateful to the Cuban Book Institute, the Ministry of Culture, the intelligentsia and the Cuban people. They have been very generous. Not because I come to make the representation of saying “I do not deserve this or that”, because it would not only be imprudent, but also offensive for those who have made that decision.

“But I have always considered that I did little to build a work that would take me to the desk, to the necessary and patient consultation of papers. Life

has led me to raise stones and lime, to preserve sources, to rescue books, to look for documents, to preserve collections. It took me to the cult of the word, not as a superficial exercise (the hallow word, the one that says nothing, the Manichean rhetoric), but as a vehicle to express such feelings as the love for the Homeland, the awareness that when we love her, we feel a love for the other, for what surrounds us, the American world, for those who suffer and cry, for those who endure...

alt

Photo: Jorge Luis Sánchez/ for CubaSí

"Also for Cuba as regards the accumulation of thought, ideas, the beauty that this country has contributed to the history of America and the world; for Cubans, those I have always felt inseparable part of, part of that people, with their virtues and faults, which are mine; with their lights and shadows, which are mine...

"When I look at all that, I consider that I have done something, I would have wished to do more; once and several times I said that I would need a loam of one life, another more, to be able to do what I want, with the same dedication, as when I climbed stairs in three steps together, as when I travelled long distances daily to reach places".

"I remember that once an old man approached to me, perhaps he arrived in a timely moment of my life and said: "Listen, I know a technique that perhaps you may remember from your childhood; mothers used to preserve the first year's little shoes turned into metal: I own that technique; but I am leaving and I do not have family or anyone to leave it with; I am not coming to give you the secret of my work; I am coming to ask you to give me your shoes, those which you have walked through Havana with".

I handed him the shoes. And when he returned them back to me (they were well kept), I realized that that stage of my life had finished, that I had to begin another.

"Suddenly, children, youngsters began to appear... Even, in a meeting among intellectuals, Fidel told me: "There's a boy here, son of a friend of ours, Katiuska Blanco, who has replied to me that he wants to be Eusebio Leal's successor, when I asked him what he wanted to be".

"It was one consolation that that boy, another or others, are already walking down the streets. I will no longer need another life.

"And if the Book Institute has decided to gather in pages what I once said or wrote, and what has been

written and collected from me, and to dedicate this Book Fair to me, I hope it is for good!"

—Havana will celebrate its 500th anniversary next year. How will the historic center of the city take on that festivity?

—Havana has many historic centers. I have already renounced to speak with absolute sense about the historic center. The historic center is perhaps a starting point. But, there are many starting points: in El Cerro, in Marianao, in Miramar, in La Vibora, in Diez de Octubre, in San Francisco de Paula.

"When we talk about the anniversary we not only talk about that past event of the ceiba tree: that is very nice, and we will remember it: El Templete is restored, as well as the paintings, the columns; and the 500th anniversary tree is planted. Two years ago, the other tree showed signs that its time was over and we had to plant another. This morning, I went there early and saw that the ceiba tree was full of green vine shoots.

"Yes, we will celebrate that: the town hall, the first mass, the birth of the city. But the most important thing is what that time means for a city.

alt

Photo: Annaly Sánchez/ CubaSí

"It is the time of a university that will soon have three centuries, it is the result of the tireless work of the Economic Society of Friends of the Country (*Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*), of the history of Cuban pedagogy, which has an important part in Havana, of its architects and builders, who made a fantastic city.

"Everyone who arrives in Havana says "What a wonder! What a mystery! What city is this?" Even decadent, as Havana is, when you touch it, it revives. Wherever you touch it, except what falls beaten that will always be less than what has been lost in this continent; in the interests of a misinterpreted modernity it was savagely demolished ...

"Havana, for a series of events, has remained in its urbanism and splendor until today. We must touch it with love and prevent its "suburbanization". And above all: we must take care of those who live in it.

"Being a Havanan cannot be a sign of superiority, but to be so (as Alfredo Guevara rightfully said), you need certain refinement, which is born from culture.

"Fidel used to say (and I do not like to quote him very much, I prefer to follow what he taught me instead) that Revolutions were daughters of ideas and culture. Without culture there is no idea, without ideas there is no culture: this is a dialectical and harmonic relationship.

"It is necessary to see what Cuban culture does from this city.

It is the 500th anniversary for a ballet, for all Cuban music, for poetry, for legal tradition... But this is also the city of the literacy teachers, the city of the sugar-cane cutters, the city of the glorious and unyielding militia, the city of students, the city of workers, where political movements sprung up...

"We are talking about something great. We need to break that silence on the 500th anniversary. Original Havana was founded in 1514, in San Cristobal, on the southern coast, in a spot that archaeologists haven't found, but that appears in all cartography of that time. San Cristobal and Havana united in a timely moment.

"It already existed In 1514, but in 1519, according to tradition, Havana was founded in the year when

Magallanes was travelling around the world, the year when Leonardo da Vinci (the greatest genius of the time) died, the moment when Hernan Cortes and emperor Moctezuma met in Mexico ... At midst a changing world, there sprung up the capital of Cuba, the one that was going to the capital of Cuba, that of the Declarations of Havana, that of the glorious resistance...

"Then, Havana deserves not to be perennially vilified as if it were a sterile city. No, this city has given a lot. That is the city we will celebrate".

Translated by Cubasi Translation Staff
