
Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre

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What is more Cuban than the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre?

Some years ago, on an international flight, a Bahamian passenger sat beside me and, after having discovered my nationality, reached into her purse and pulled out a small image of the Cuban Patron saint as we flew together... Full of joy, she told me it was given to her as a gift by a friend who have visited the Caribbean archipelago, and said to her: "She is a very miraculous saint..." She has never visited our country—although she is longing to doing so—but she always has it with her, as she is like a good inseparable friend who accompanies her.

In good and bad times, but mainly in bad times, the Virgin appeared in Cubans' minds. Who had not invoked her, at least once, or had asked her, prayed, looking for or trying to achieve something? That one who has not done it on Earth, shall cast the first stone.

On September 8, we celebrate the day of La Caridad del Cobre, or "Cachita" as she is known here—also known as Oshún, in the yoruba religion. She is the goddess of beauty and love... Her story is linked to ours since her appearance in early April, 1612 or 1613, at the Bay of Nipe, located on the northern coast of Eastern Cuba. As the story goes, she was seen by three people: a ten-year-old black boy named Juan Moreno, and two Indian brothers, Juan and Rodrigo de Hoyos, who worked as slaves in the copper mines of this region. The trio was baptized within the Cuban imagery as "the three Juanes". In the story, kept in the General Archives of the Indies in Seville (Spain) and done under ecclesiastical oath seventy-five years after this event, the black slave Juan Moreno told how the incident happened: The young boys

had gone to fetch some salt and, suddenly, they saw the image of the Virgin with baby Jesus in her arms—the same image that is venerated by Cubans today—who approached floating on a board, with the following phrase that reads like this: “I am the Virgen de la Caridad -Virgin of Charity”. She was appointed Patron Saint of Cuba by Pope Benedict XV in 1916. Decades later, in a trip done by Pope John Paul II to Cuba in 1998, the Virgin was crowned as Patron Saint of Cuba. On August 28, 2014, we heard that a copy of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, carrying baby Jesus in her arms and holding an Earth Globe in her hand, was placed in the Vatican gardens.

The Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is welcomed by Cubans and, also, by people from other nations who have made her their own. All along these years, she has lived with us and has been honored in a thousand ways. There are many stories around her. For instance, during the Cuban independence wars which started in 1868, the troops of the Liberation Army showed a great devotion for her and asked for her protection. Not by chance she is also known as the *Virgen Mambisa*.

Moreover, Nobel Prize in Literature Ernest Hemingway, a writer emotionally linked to our Archipelago, delivered the medal he received for this award, to the Patron Saint of Cuba. He said he did it as a recognition to the Cuban people, main inspiring theme of his masterpiece *The Old Man and the Sea*, for which he was granted the important Prize in Stockholm (Sweden). Many of the rebels who came down from the Sierra Maestra, carried with them the image of the Virgin, and she is also present in Cuban homes, at least in the form of a small printed picture. She is, without a doubt, an example of Cuban identity.

The image of La Caridad

A typical representation of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre: at the sea, while the weather improves, dressed in white and blue, baby Jesus is in red, and the three Juanes under her in the rowing boat... She emerges at every moment of life, and also in Cuban art and culture, as well as literature, performing arts, dance, music and cinema and, naturally, visual arts... They all have her tracks. From the primal image, over time, La Caridad takes many forms: some are copies of reality; others take more contemporary roads, but all have something in common: she is always respect, admiration, inspiration, sympathy, love... transformed into many feelings, she appears in different surfaces.

Sculptors, illustrators, painters, photographers, engravers and other artists... have reproduced her over time, with their brushes, crayons and gouges, giving us their visions of the Virgin. Each and every one of them approach her from the most diverse trends in art: -expressionism, pop, naif, conceptual, figurative, abstract, or minimalism art—a simple triangle and a crescent representing the boat to her feet may give her vision.

The artists, belonging to different generations, create from their feelings and establish a set of pictorial and sculptural images, awakening many evocations in the receiver, accumulated on the psyche from their own genesis. They all have a cordial relationship; they are like old friends that, together, explore the space of ideas, the spiritual values that coexist in an undetectable level in today's society. They all offer their vision from the visual arts, escorted of tones, built with forms that make up her figure in the distance. The drawings with pencil, engraving, photography, mixed technique, sculpture, paintings dotted to brush of careful levels, transparencies, posters.... are very well handled, in order to obtain the representation-interpretation of the Cuban Virgin, where new aspects of this symbol are discovered. They all highlight the art of

figure, which has left marks on its pilgrim walk.

Her image goes through different contexts, as a main constant symbol, evocating multiple concepts according to the situation and the secondary elements accompanying her: the palm, an urban or countryside landscape, the sea, the Cuban archipelago. What prevails is the interest to reflect a nationality, an idea, with authentic features and opposite to the usual manipulation of images. In order to put into practice this idea, the figure is revealed in its different aspects. They manipulate the images with noble purposes that demystify them. With this, they expect that each two or three dimensional surface illustrates a concept that may be closely related to her thoughts. Some get close to the domestic issue, which is understood in two ways: home, the intimacy of the human being, their daily life, and what identifies us. Other times, they turn into symbols, shapes which are juxtaposed... But, when its effigy magnifies or she is dressed with the Cuban flora; when she appears between letters, wood and marble, when she emerges as an intimate song, or it is recreated with the artist's look, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, is reborn and becomes pure Art, without failing to be what it represents for us all: a symbol of Cuban identity.

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