



# Cubano Libre

When Fidel Castro declared in 1961, “Within the revolution, everything; without it, nothing” a Cuban propaganda machine was already well in place. Among the many artists that worked to spread the island’s revolution globally, Alfredo Rostgaard’s graphic designs remain the most striking and powerful. We spoke with him on the crackling phone line he shares with his neighbors. Even after more than 40 years and over a bad connection, his conviction to the Communist cause remained forcefully present.

## What was your background in design?

ALFREDO ROSTGAARD: I studied fine arts in the Arts Academy in Havana. I was 20 years old when I began working on propaganda, but I had been involved with revolutionary organizations for maybe four years before that, through youth movements, so they already knew me.

## How were the silk screening studios set up after the revolution?

AR: Cuba had a long history and tradition in silk screening. Even before the revolution, silk screens were already widely used, mostly for electoral campaign (posters).

## How is it that you personally began producing propaganda?

AR: I think I have posters beginning from 1966, maybe 1965. I was working with the Young Communists, a youth organization that contributed time and labor to the revolutionary movement. Later on I worked with ‘D.O.R.’ — the Department of Revolutionary Orientation. I was a freelance designer for both (groups). Most of us young men were working freelance.

## How, then, did the creative process develop?

AR: We were all already members of the different organizations. For example, Casa America — a youth labor organization — was already using street placards to expand membership. We members also needed work — paid work — and the organizations were looking for kids within the organization who had already done silk screening or who were wanting to learn the skill.

## How were the workshops and studios set up?

AR: There were institutes that had studio space, though there were also many independent workshops in operation, too. After the themes for the designs were set out, most of us worked independently. Once an image was selected, it was either printed on site or sent out to autonomous printing shops. We were paid per job — only the (designer) that was selected was paid.

## How was the design selected? Was it through competition?

AR: Mostly the jobs were by commission. They knew our work, and a few of us would be selected to come up with proposals. Sometimes there were competitions, but mostly we were contacted separately, then design teams were formed.

## Who made these selections?

AR: For example, the ICAIC (*Cuban Institute of Cinematic Art*) was founded with rules requiring that all the advertising for films be made in Cuba. Even films coming from abroad required a national advertisement campaign that was strictly Cuban. The necessity wasn’t merely commercial: the advertising medium had a significant role within the revolutionary atmosphere. They wanted the advertisement to portray how the films were seen through Cuban eyes. Marketing departments within the organizations then recruited us according to the style they demanded for the specific poster.

I was working in an advertising agency when the ICAIC first contacted me. I had done some work with other organizations before then, but my designs had never been chosen. The head of marketing (for ICAIC), Mister Saul Kelin, was personally in charge of recruiting artists. I was a member of various youth groups who they looked to first for the development of new campaigns. We came up with proposals in nine-inch square prototypes, discussed the possibilities, reworked our ideas and then a final image was selected and put into print.



I worked steadily for the ICAIC but was contacted by different agencies and gave my time working for them. Again, I was paid only for the printed job. We all needed extra work, and we believed in the causes, so we put in a great effort to come up with the winning image.

**How was it different doing advertising and propaganda?**

AR: Within the ICAIC... There were different films being brought to Cuba, different topics. We learned to be versatile. There were many documentaries, like those of Santiago Alvarez, which dealt with political causes. The films themselves were propaganda, and the posters needed to become more than just advertisements. They had to convey the political topic itself. It was a great creative effort and we all participated enthusiastically. We felt like we were part of the revolutionary movement — like we were translating the message into another medium.

**How did you begin doing work for international campaigns?**

AR: The more I became involved with the different factions of the (Cuban revolutionary) movement, the more we grew interested in communicating with peoples and causes beyond our own country. We didn't know how to do it at first — it was just an idea that motivated us. OSPAAAL (*the Organization in Solidarity with People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America*) aided us in putting it together, since they were interested in expanding the propaganda campaign to be one of international awareness.

OSPAAAL had a bulletin and a magazine, and we thought we could contribute. It began by showing solidarity with different revolutionary movements and finding new ways of making it clear that we understood where they were coming from. For example, we did posters on the Congo or the Black Panther movement in the US. We had never been to those places, but we knew what their cause was. We communicated through the images — it was a language we all understood.

**How did your knowledge of international movements grow?**

AR: Each nation that was participating in OSPAAAL had representatives that vouched for different issues. A committee would find the causes we had in common. They also established causes that were shared in spirit, like many campaigns from Africa. The emphasis was always on showing allegiance.

**How were the posters distributed**

AR: In Cuba there were specific points of distribution, mostly in public spaces,

like the cinema, where people would congregate. People would be waiting in line to be entertained, but they were getting education as well. As for international distribution, we relied heavily on OSPAAAL. They would include posters within their *Tri-Continental* magazine. Others were sent in bulk through the mail. What the specific institutions overseas did with the prints then, I don't really know.

**How were these campaigns received by the public?**

AR: We thought — we *hoped* — that they were well received. As I said before, it was meant to entertain while educate. I think people saw them as a social service: they liked the subjects and the way they were represented. We hope that they were received like that, but I can't say with absolute certainty...

**What other type of publications were you involved with?**

AR: We designers had our own bulletin and a smaller magazine, too. We used it to promote new ways of supporting the movement. There are still many similar publications. OSPAAAL still has its own magazine, but it's not the same anymore — the graphic weight the publication had before is not the same. The mediums have changed.

**What prompted those changes?**

AR: I think television has a lot more weight. Print has become somewhat supplemental — it's not as effective anymore.

**Are you nostalgic for those times?**

AR: Of course. Naturally. It was a collective movement. We shared the labor, the ideas... We were very eager to work together, to express our affiliation to the Communist movement. The time was very exciting. We were all very enthusiastic... It just isn't the same anymore.

**What are you working on these days?**

AR: Now I'm concentrating on my own work. I make sculptures dealing with the same themes. The style is similar, just a further expression of my political ideas. As an artist I lay a lot of emphasis on communication, on communicating the cause of the Cuban Revolution.

**So your conviction is unchanged?**

AR: Yes, of course it is unchanged. I have the obligation, as a Cuban, as an artist, to reflect my environment. I'm a contemporary, and there are many things to say about what I'm living through... I'm aware of my surroundings, and I'm also aware of universal problems that haven't been resolved. There is still much to say. ☞