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Installation of Works by Influential Cuban Graphic Artist Conrado W. Massaguer Opens at The Wolfsonian–FIU in June 2019

Cuban Caricature and Culture: The Art of Massaguer (June 8, 2019–February 2, 2020)
*showcases Massaguer’s magazine and advertising illustrations, celebrity caricatures,
and Cuban tourism material dating from the 1910s to the 1950s*

Display largely culled from recent gifts to the museum by collector Vicki Gold Levi

MIAMI BEACH (April 2, 2019) — In a focused installation, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University will highlight the transnational legacy of Cuban graphic designer, illustrator, publisher, and caricaturist Conrado Walter Massaguer—a leading voice in shaping early 20th-century Cuban culture who is often credited for bringing modernism to the island nation. *Cuban Caricature and Culture: The Art of Massaguer*, on view June 8, 2019 through February 2, 2020, presents selections from a new gift of Massaguer material from collector Vicki Gold Levi in addition to loans and other Wolfsonian collection objects. Featuring magazine covers, advertisements, original paintings, rare sketches and personal letters, and caricatures of famous figures from Hollywood stars to royalty and presidents, the nearly 100 works on view call attention to Massaguer’s profound influence on design in both Cuba and the U.S. over his 40-year career.

“Conrado Massaguer’s art left an indelible mark on Cuba, helping to define not only what Cubans considered ‘in vogue,’ but also informing day-to-day culture and politics,” said Frank Luca, Wolfsonian chief librarian and the installation’s curator. “Though he won his international acclaim a century ago, his style remains fresh and imaginative in a way that still feels incredibly modern to us today.”

Added Gold Levi, “I first discovered Massaguer through his magazine *Social* when I began research for *Cuba Style*, a book I wrote with Steve Heller—I was immediately captivated! As I continued studying, collecting, and traveling to Cuba over the years, I only fell deeper in love with Massaguer’s witty graphics and simple, pure, evocative lines. I’m honored to collaborate with The Wolfsonian on raising awareness about such a versatile, talented artist.”

Born in the Cuban city of Cárdenas, Massaguer (1889–1965) was educated in both Cuba and America and frequently traveled back and forth, simultaneously building his reputation as a premier artist and art director in Havana and New York City. Over the course of four decades—and particularly during a brief exile in the U.S. during Gerardo Machado’s dictatorship—Massaguer became a prominent trendsetter in America by designing covers and illustrations for many of the leading magazines of the time, including *Vanity Fair*, *Collier’s*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Literary Digest*. While he took many cues from American publications and artists for these commissions, Massaguer put a distinctly Cuban stamp on a 1931 exhibition of his work at Delphic Studios, a New York gallery. There, Massaguer’s impressions of his native country were placed front and center, with a uniquely Cuban flavor evident in the style and themes.

Back in his homeland, Massaguer likewise cemented his role in publishing by founding and art directing his own lifestyle magazine, *Social*, in which he nurtured the careers of numerous Cuban illustrators and caricaturists. From the 1920s into the 1950s, *Social* set the tone for Cuban values and taste, heavily publicizing the idea of the liberated and sexualized “new woman” (or flapper) and incorporating a bold Art Deco aesthetic. Massaguer was also central to Cuba’s tourism campaigns, creating striking advertising art that packaged Cuba as a product and sought to lure Americans south through vibrant visions of a tropical playground. His status in Cuban society brought him in close proximity to foreign dignitaries, politicians, and visiting celebrities, many of whom he parodied in his signature, *New Yorker*-esque caricatures.

Key works in *Cuban Caricature and Culture* are:

- A humorous self-caricature used by Massaguer to announce his arrival in New York in the 1920s and introduce himself to the American art scene;
- A sketch of Walt Disney paired with a photograph of Massaguer and Disney;
- Several illustrations of the artist’s “Massa-girl” types, fashionable women with bobbed hairstyles that popularized the “new woman” ideal in Cuba;
- *Come to Cuba*, a vibrant, early-1950s brochure produced for the Cuban Tourism Commission that touts the various attractions (dancing, beach-going, gambling, and horse racing) of “the loveliest land that human eyes have ever seen”;
- A *Social* cover showing a Deco-style evolution of the “new woman”; and
- A Christmas holiday advertisement for Esso made in the aftermath of the Allies’ victory in the Second World War, with caricatures of Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles de Gaulle, Chiang Kai-shek, and Santa Claus.

Massaguer’s immense popularity is reflected in a robust market for fakes that *Cuban Caricature and Culture* will address through a counterfeit illustration of Albert Einstein. By displaying this fraudulent piece beside a genuine version, The Wolfsonian will reveal the forger’s tactics for, and missteps in, mimicking the designer’s trademark flair.

The installation coincides with the publication of *Promising Paradise: Cuban Allure, American Seduction*, a new companion book to a 2016 Wolfsonian exhibition of the same name also drawn from Vicki Gold Levi’s gifts. Touching upon many of Massaguer’s groundbreaking works, the book

is the culmination of twenty years of Gold Levi's interest in Cuban memorabilia and photography, and a capstone to almost two decades of Wolfsonian support and ongoing gifts.

"The Wolfsonian's collection is renowned for its examples of graphic design, yet until Vicki's gifts just a fraction demonstrated the mammoth impact of Cuban culture on its northern neighbor," said Wolfsonian director Tim Rodgers. "This new material marks an exciting addition that proves how our cultural exchange was indeed a two-way street paved in large part by Cuban artists and tastemakers. Sharing Massaguer's story right here in Miami—the gateway to Latin America—is remarkably fitting."

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About Collector Vicki Gold Levi

Vicki Gold Levi is a picture editor, photography curator, and historian. She co-authored both *Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness* and *Cuba Style: Graphics from the Golden Age of Design*, co-founded the Atlantic City Historical Museum, and was an historical consultant on HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*. A Wolfsonian Advisory Board member, Gold Levi is a longtime donor of Cuban ephemera and vintage photography to the museum and has also given works to the International Center of Photography and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

About The Wolfsonian–Florida International University

The Wolfsonian–FIU is a museum, library, and research center that uses objects to illustrate the persuasive power of art and design, to explore what it means to be modern, and to tell the story of social, historical, and technological changes that have transformed our world. The collection comprises approximately 180,000 objects dating from 1850 to 1950—the height of the Industrial Revolution through the aftermath of the Second World War—in a variety of media including furniture; industrial-design objects; works in glass, ceramics, and metal; rare books; periodicals; ephemera; works on paper; paintings; textiles; and medals.

The Wolfsonian is located at 1001 Washington Avenue, Miami Beach, FL. Admission is \$12 for adults; \$8 for seniors, students, and children ages 6–18; and free for Wolfsonian members, State University System of Florida staff and students with ID, and children under 6. The museum is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, 10am–6pm; Friday, 10am–9pm; Sunday, noon–6pm; and is closed on Wednesday. Contact us at 305.531.1001 or visit us online at wolfsonian.org for further information.

The Wolfsonian receives generous and ongoing support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture; and City of Miami Beach, Cultural Affairs Program, Cultural Arts Council.

About FIU

Florida International University, a public university located in Miami, has a passion for student success and community solutions. The university is classified by Carnegie as "R1." FIU is among the top 100 public universities in U.S. News and World Report's 2019 Best Colleges and 18 academic programs are individually ranked. FIU was recently ranked as the second best performing university in Florida and graduates are among the highest-paid in the state. FIU has multiple state-of-the-art research facilities including the Wall of Wind Research and Testing Facility and FIU's Medina Aquarius Program. FIU has awarded more than 330,000 degrees since 1972 and enrolls more than 57,000 students in two campuses and centers including FIU Downtown on Brickell, FIU@I-75, the Miami Beach Urban Studios, and sites in Qingdao and Tianjin, China. FIU also supports artistic and cultural engagement through its three museums: Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, The Wolfsonian–FIU, and the Jewish Museum of Florida–FIU. FIU is a member of Conference USA with more than 400 student-athletes participating in 18 sports. For more information about FIU, visit fiu.edu.