

Plein Air in Havana, Cuba

After a lapse of nearly 80 years, Oklahoma artist Julia Ayres returned to Cuba to paint the vestiges of the culture and the vital community.

By Julia Ayres

Editor's Note: Julia Ayres and her daughter, Gail Ayres, traveled with 12 other Americans to Cuba from April 6-16, 2013 as part of an interactive art delegation to Cuba on a People to People Tour. The tour was organized by author Jeff Greenwald, owner of Ethical Traveler, and Mahlia Everette of Altruvista made travel arrangements. Both are located in San Francisco. The group flew from Miami to Havana on a chartered flight. The two women report on their experiences and the artwork they created on location and back in their American studios.

We pass through Cuban security and are surrounded by a sea of exuberant faces waiting for our group. Our Cuban guide, Yoel Abreu, leads us through the crowd to board our Chinese-manufactured tour bus. Our itinerary will comply with State Department requirements within the boundaries of the still-existing U.S. embargo against Cuba.

My daughter, Gail Ayres, has a window seat on the bus and photographs our first impressions. As we travel toward the city, we see varied transportation. The American cars are pre-1959, often proudly kept in showroom condition. New cars are from other countries. There are motorcycles as well as animal-drawn carts. Worn billboards tout revolutionary slogans.

Time is set aside in our itinerary for making art. I have watercolors as well as pen-and-ink supplies in my backpack. Some in our group will write or take photographs. Our group includes journalists, a playwright, book authors, a sculptor, and watercolor painters.

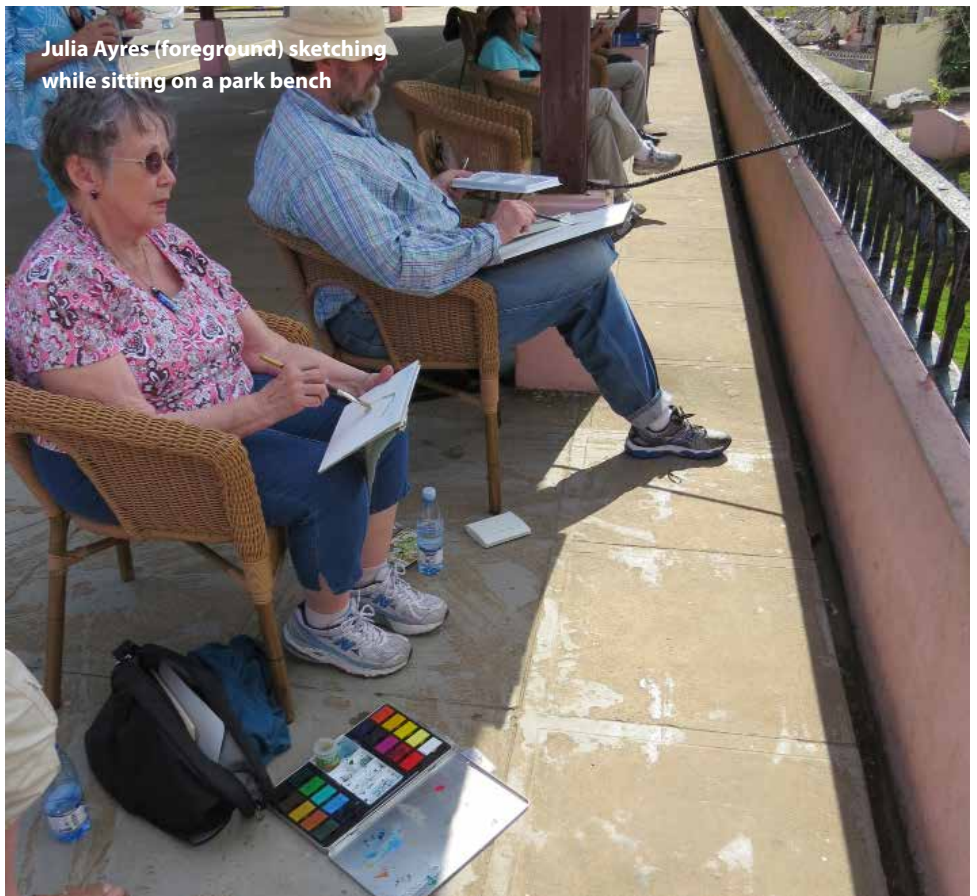
Our first stop is historic Old Havana. We stroll along worn cobbled streets, walking around spots being repaired as part of an ongoing restoration project. There is music coming from several directions. We take photographs recording the historic architecture and walk across open squares and along narrow passages.

Carnival-like dancers on stilts perform with colorfully costumed music makers. A grandmother

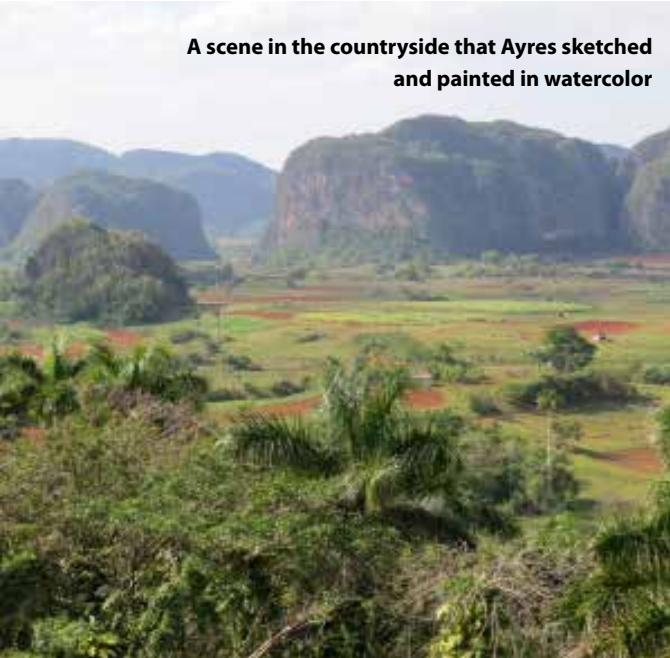
Julia and Gail Ayres riding a cart through Old Havana



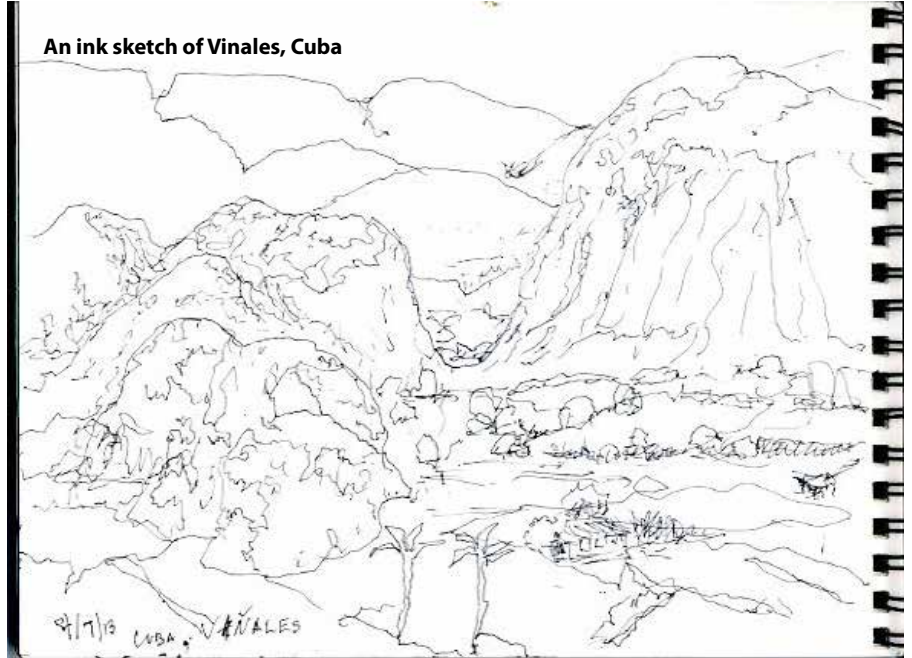
Julia Ayres (foreground) sketching while sitting on a park bench



A scene in the countryside that Ayres sketched and painted in watercolor



An ink sketch of Vinales, Cuba



A watercolor sketch of the same location



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in white silk smokes a huge cigar and will pose with you. A figure sits, fully bronzed as a statue. All performing to earn pesos from tourists.

Tropical offshore breezes occasionally erase the sun's heat and heavy humidity. This is not a place to hurry, but to pause and take in the rich colors, shapes, and sounds. I wonder how I'll translate this imagery onto paper. Both Gail and I continue to take a lot of pictures.

Our room at the Hotel Mundos is directly below the Ernest Hemingway room. We open the shutters to our balcony and understand why he would have chosen such a location. Sounds of revelry drift up from the cross streets below, and our corner location catches breezes from several directions. I do a watercolor sketch of the balcony directly across from us.

The next morning, we leave Havana to experience the countryside. This day's art time is looking out over Vinales Valley. We see plowed red earth fields next to rich green crops with mountains beyond. The occasional buildings are rustic and sometimes painted an intense color.

I've brought Greta watercolor blocks that come in a flat metal paint box — I like the immediate full color they produce. The blocks may also be picked up and used as drawing sticks. I work quickly to record my impressions, and I take time to do a pen-and-ink sketch.

We return to Havana. We have time to draw at the Convento Belén, a restored centuries-old building that is now a cultural center for senior citizens. We are asked not to take pictures, but it is OK to sketch. There is a large fountain in the center patio. Live music emanates from the corner stage. There are chairs set in rows, as well as more casual seating elsewhere. I have a small sketch pad and pens with me and begin to fill pages of figures visiting or moving. Nothing sits still long enough for me to correct lines or record details.

We have time to paint in an old square. We continue to take lots of photographs. We visit projects where there is costumed dancing and expressive music. I know some of what we are experiencing will translate into monotypes and relief prints back in our studio.

We fly to Santiago, Cuba, for the last half of our 10-day trip. In Santiago I take the watercolors to the hotel roof and paint quick gesture sketches of the musicians as they sing and play.



A quick watercolor sketch Ayres made of a band performing on the street

I also do quick cityscape watercolor sketches on postcard-size paper.

Why would an 82-year-old make such a trip? I was born in Havana in 1931. My father, Robert Spencer, was an American citizen working for Swift and Company. My mother, Ruth Spencer, was from Illinois and an accomplished plein air painter who studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. We left Cuba in the summer of 1934 as the Machado revolution escalated. Returning to explore these roots has been my lifelong desire.

In Santiago, I met José Aguilera, a world-recognized artist and wood engraver-printmaker who also was born in Havana in the early 1930s. This similarity made me wonder how my art and life would have developed if my family had not left Cuba.

I would love to see a trip to Cuba designed for plein air painters. It would be wonderful to move about freely, as European and Canadian tourists are allowed to travel. However, as long as we have a U.S.-Cuba embargo in effect, such a trip must be organized under the permit of someone who is licensed and who knows how to work within the U.S. travel code to Cuba. 📍



Gail Ayres pulling a print off of an etched plate; the image is based on those she sketched while traveling through Cuba.



Julia and Gail Ayres visit Jose Aguilera, a noted artist and wood engraver.