

JULIO ALPUY

1919-2009

[This is a shortened version of the chronology that appears in its entirety in the 2003 catalogue: *Julio Alpuy, 1960s-2003 – Works of Wood and Drawings.*]

1919 Julio Uruguay Alpuy was born on January 27 in Cerro Chato, near San Gregorio de Polanco in the Tacuarembó department in Uruguay. His father was Sixto Alpuy and his mother Virginia Bevans. His paternal grandmother and his aunts raised him because his mother died when he was only 18 months old.

Alpuy grew up in the countryside and often rode a horse to school. His relatives were farmers, and when at the end of winter they cultivated the earth with an oxen-pulled plow, young Alpuy followed behind sowing the seeds into the furrows. Later he would depict this period of his life in many paintings.



Rural Scene, ca.1950. ink on paper, 3 x 7½ in.

- 1935** When he was 16 his father sent him to Montevideo to continue his schooling. For four years he went to high school at night while working a full day in a shop.
- 1938** Alpuy moved to the old part of town, where he shared a room with friends from Tacuarembó. In school he met members of the anarchist group Juventudes Libertarias: "who," Alpuy says, "taught me the concepts of freedom, justice, respect and many other things I had never considered before." His loyalty to their utopian ideas was then unconditional: "During the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War we did everything we could to fight fascism. Those events helped us mature and become more conscious."
- 1939** He found a job as an accountant in a funeral parlor, and also worked in a bookstore. Up until then Alpuy had no direct contact with art, it was by pure chance that one day he walked into an exhibition of watercolors of Venice by the Uruguayan artist José Cúneo. He was so impressed that he spent the whole afternoon entranced; when he left he bought paper and colors and began to draw.

1940- 41 When his friend Víctor Bachetta, who was a member of the Association of Constructivist Art, discovered that Alpy was drawing, he invited him to meet Torres-García. Alpy recounts the first time he met the artist. "When we stepped into the entrance hall, before I even was introduced to Torres, just by seeing his paintings on the walls, I knew I had found what I had been searching for. I said to myself: 'this is what I want.' When we left Torres asked me: 'when do you start working with us?'" Alpy replied that he had no money to pay and Torres-García replied: "Bring paper, pencils and come back tomorrow."

At the Taller Torres-García, Alpy found a community of young artists and kindred spirits. Torres-García demanded total commitment to painting, for him art in practice and in theory were indistinguishable. His teaching was not only about abstract concepts; he also encouraged his students to fully participate in his ideas. Alpy explains that Torres-García "drew us inside his own world, he gave us everything. And as he gave of himself fully, he expected us to do the same. It was through his painting that he transmitted to us universal concepts, that is why at first we painted just like him."

1943 In May of 1943, Alpy participated in the eleventh exhibition of the Taller Torres-García. He was then working on a series titled *Chimneys*, which already demonstrate his own unique style. "I was after an idea, by simplifying each separate element in a cityscape, chimneys for example, and isolating them from the context of the cityscape, I found their intrinsic abstract shape."



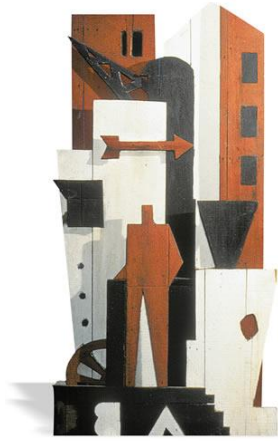
Mural, 1944. Hospital St. Bois, Montevideo.

1944 The artists of the Taller were invited to decorate the walls of the Saint Bois Hospital, a modern building for tuberculosis patients. Alpy painted two large constructivist murals: an urban landscape and a dynamic composition of large forms of roofs and chimneys. Altogether the artists painted 35 constructivist murals in primary colors throughout the three floors of the Hospital. The Argentine art critic Jorge Romero Brest wrote: "the murals in conjunction with the architecture created a space that was alive with the expression of the rhythmic vital force. Torres-García's students are accomplished artists." In spite of the support of art figures like Romero Brest, the murals created a controversy with some critics maintaining that the primary colors would adversely affect the patients' mental well being.

1945 The jury of the IX National Salon rejected all the works submitted by the Taller artists. So the TTG members organized an exhibition across the street from the Salon, and distributed fliers inviting the public to see their work and to judge for themselves.

They opened a permanent exhibition space and so that the artists could devote their full time to painting, friends helped by selling their paintings. Thanks to this, Alpy was able to leave his job at the funeral parlor. Torres-García trained him to teach drawing and painting to the increasing number of new students. When Torres-García asked Alpy to create something that would reflect the Taller's character, he made *Construction with Red Man* in painted wood.

Encouraged by Torres-García to travel to the Andean region to see pre-Columbian art, Alpy, Gonzalo Fonseca, Jonio Montiel, and Sergio De Castro traveled to Bolivia and Peru in December.



Construction with Red Man,
1945. Oil on wood, 74 x 36 x 9 in.

- 1946** They went to Tiwanaku, to see the Gate of the Sun. On Lake Titicaca, they sailed to the Island of the Sun and the Island of the Moon. They visited Cuzco, and on the way to Machu Picchu, they stayed in Ollantaytambo. For Alpay the pre-Columbian sites and monuments were their first contact, “with real and concrete art. I think that helped us understand what Torres-García was trying to teach us.”



Monumento, 1946. watercolor, 9¼ x 13¼ in., Davis
Museum Collection, Wellesley College, Wellesley,
Mass.

- 1947** The lecture series, *The Abstract and Concrete in Art*, which Torres-García gave in the fall, marked that year's painting direction at the Taller. He proposed using the lines of perspective as the point of departure for structuring the canvas and to give a sensation of depth, even though he said that perspective is “visual deception.” Alpay painted many scenes of Montevideo where the lines of perspective are predominant. He added a new twist to this painting exercise by placing elements of reality that blocked the lines of perspective with frontal planes.



Still Life in Primary Colors, 1948. tempera on board,
17¼ x 27¼ in.

1948 Alpuy's production was then characterized by bright primary colors. In these works, horizontal and vertical rhythmic lines fragmented the objects into planes. Of these original and vibrant works Alpuy says, "limiting the palette to red, yellow, blue, black and white, results in a more synthetic and abstract work."

1949 Torres-García died on August 8th. For a time before Torres-García's death, a group of students gathered in his home, as he was already too weak to leave his room. He expounded on the theories developed in his last lectures *The Recuperation of the Object*. According to Alpuy, Torres was so sick that the tone of the lessons changed: "he was no longer teaching us, instead we became his instruments." For Alpuy, the concepts that Torres-García developed in *The Recuperation of the Object* were determinant.

Torres-García had told his students that he had taught them everything he could: "this is no longer an art school; you progressed from naturalism to total abstraction, now you are on your own, you have to find who you are, define your own artistic personality."

1950-51 Several architect friends helped the Taller artists sell their paintings and secure commissions for murals in the buildings they designed.

The exhibition, *Torres-García and his Workshop*, opened in February of 1950 at the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C.



Buenos Aires, 1951, album central pages, ink and watercolor, 6½ x 18½ in.

After Torres-García's death, Alpuy wanted to leave Montevideo; he often went to Buenos Aires where he painted and completed a sketchbook of vibrant Buenos Aires street scenes.



Genesis, ca.1955, watercolor and ink, 5¼ x 5 in.

Reading the Creation as told in Genesis, inspired Alpuy's first series of drawings and watercolors on a subject that he would repeatedly return to.

Alpuy sent two constructivist paintings of 1950 to the 1st Sao Paulo Biennial in October of 1951. In December 1951 he left for Europe, arriving in Athens. He eagerly visited museums and toured around Athens to view the classical ruins and Byzantine churches and monasteries.

1952 In January, Alpuy met up with fellow Taller artist Gonzalo Fonseca in Beirut. They visited Syria and Egypt reaching Karnak and Thebes. By April Alpuy was in Italy. In September he wrote from Venice: "For the last 15 days I've lived among paintings by Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese. One could go crazy here, because even if you are interested in something else, these marvels trap you." In Paris at the Louvre, Alpuy studied Egyptian mythology; in a sketchbook he wrote notes and drew diagrams of Egyptian history, he was particularly interested in the life cycle as depicted in The Book of the Dead, which he later developed in the murals he painted in Montevideo. In Madrid he went to the Prado almost daily. At the beginning of 1953 he embarked from Vigo for the return to Montevideo.

1953-56 Alpuy resumed teaching at the Taller Torres-García. In the weekly, *Marcha*, Daniel Heide wrote how: "All of us, who studied drawing with Alpuy at the Taller Torres-García in the 1950s, remember him with unconditional gratitude and emotion, for his masterful teaching." Heide mentioned the stern discipline and seriousness that Alpuy implemented in his classes. Among his students were the artists: Walter Deliotti, Mario Lorigo, Juan Storm, José Montes, José Collell, Manuel Otero, Linda Olivetti, Norma Calvete, China Cantú, Guillermo Fernández.

The Uruguayan architects: Rafael Lorente, Mario Payssé Reyes, Ernesto Leborgne began to integrate Constructivist art to their buildings. They commissioned the Taller artists to create tapestries, ceramics, and murals using diverse techniques; Alpuy painted a large fresco (4 x 4 m.) for Mario Payssé Reyes' new house.

He also painted murals in other private homes, for a furniture and design store, in the Liceo Larrañaga a large mural of figures practicing different crafts and professions, and, for the YMCA in 1956, he painted a large mural illustrating various sports.



Oficios (Crafts), 1955. oil on canvas, 39¼ x 62¾ in.

Alpuy's mural paintings, his last works in Uruguay, were based on his "personal obsession with human activities and nature." Instead of placing a single symbol within each compartment of a structure, Alpuy painted whole scenes relative to a given subject: the four seasons, the Genesis or figures practicing traditional crafts and occupations associated with civilizations throughout the ages; pottery, carpentry, astronomy, music, etc.

His colleagues in the Taller considered Alpuy's reformulation of Constructivism with reserve, their resistance to this new development made him consider leaving Montevideo. "I left," Alpuy told a reporter in 1971, "because my head was full of ideas and I wanted to find a way to express them."



Bogotá, 1958. Oil on canvas, 25 x 29½ in.

1957 Alpuy decided to travel to Colombia by ship sailing up the Pacific coast from Valparaíso, Chile. In Bogotá, he immediately felt at home, "I started to work with great energy, the landscape, and the soft light of the Sabana captivated me. For somebody like myself, who came from such a flat land, I loved that the city is surrounded by mountains." In this new environment he felt "he had nothing to loose and much to gain."

The Argentine critic Marta Traba, (1930-1983) introduced Alpuy to Colombian artists and intellectuals, among them; the painters Guillermo Wiedemann , Fernando Botero, and the sculptor Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar. For the 12th issue of the magazine Prisma, edited by Marta Traba, Alpuy designed the cover and wrote an essay about the Taller Torres-García.

1958 Alpuy showed at the Luis Angel Arango Library, the most prestigious exhibition space in Bogotá. In spite of living in Colombia, he presented his exhibition as the "Nº 112 of the Taller Torres-García of Montevideo." He explained that he was showing applied arts: hand embroidered tapestries and furniture, next to his paintings, because for him they were all of the same value.

1959-61 Alpuy traveled for several months in Europe with his friends Gúdula and Juan Weiler. They stayed in Dortmund, where Alpuy painted several canvases. "The Ruhr and Germany's heavy industry, provided me with interesting themes in term of forms and color."

Uruguayan friends of Alpuy's who lived in Caracas invited him to their home in Los Palos Grandes. There he met the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, the artists Alejandro Otero (thanks to his generous introduction Alpuy showed in the prestigious Sala Mendoza), Oswaldo Vigas and Alirio Oramas. In an essay about Alpuy for Venezuela Gráfica, the art critic and future Dominican president Juan Bosch, wrote: "Julio Alpuy knows the craft of painting. Nothing in his work is improvised. Inch by inch, he consciously works his paintings. He is extraordinarily in control of his medium, how to handle it and the message he proposes." In the same interview Alpuy reiterated that the Taller endorsed an art form that encompassed all aspects of life. "The artists goal is that his work be integrated to life, that it be part of it daily."



Dortmund, 1959, oil on canvas,
48½ x 34½ in.

Alpuy had abandoned the orthogonal structure in his painting; in its place he introduced diagonal lines that heightened a sense of space without recurring to perspective. Assessing this period in his art, Alpuy said: "So important was my stay in Bogotá, that I consider my career in terms of before and after Bogotá."

1962-63 In December 1961, Alpuy arrived in New York, he joined Augusto Torres and Gonzalo Fonseca, colleagues from the Taller Torres-García. At that moment he was struggling to find a way to express the ideas unfolding inside him; he had developed a set of forms that he found "didn't fit the traditional right-angle structure."

Up to then, his painting reflected the world around him: structured New York City views; buildings with their characteristic fire escapes and water tanks, still lifes, and the human figure. In the winter of 1962, he was "in the studio all by myself attempting to bring forth all that was inside me. Instead of looking outwards, to the city, I turned introspective. But painting always led me to what I had already done," so he decided that the solution was to change medium. Fonseca let him use his studio in East Hampton, where Alpuy found lots of leftover wood; "I hadn't worked with wood in a long time, I asked myself, what could I do with a piece of wood panel? I cut out a form, made a hole, pasted another, and a new world emerged. I followed what the medium demanded, and in that chaos I found what I was looking for."



Marina Norte, 1962. oil on
carved wood, 46 x 23 in.

A wood panel in relief, *Marina Norte*, is where the transitional elements from the external to his inner search first become apparent. Although there are some references to a landscape, as the title suggests, they are very succinct: one half, the sky, is luminous and the other, the sea, is dark. Next to a building and a boat, Alpuj placed a coffin and a shape that could either be a phallus or a mooring post. According to the dictionary of symbols, a coffin is associated to femininity and to the earth, the beginning and the end of life. The phallus is the perpetuation of life, active power, and the force of cosmic expansion.

The titles that Alpuj chose for his wood reliefs correspond to symbols of transition and inner-change: *Transmutation*, *Metamorphosis*, and *Cult to Dionysus*. It is no coincidence that Dionysus personifies unchained desire, liberation from inhibitions, the unconscious freed.

The correlation of the references to the earth and the subconscious – the telluric as connected to fertility and death in Alpuj's watercolors and wood carvings – anticipated other artist's work in this direction, notably Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), who in 1982 declared that for the past twelve years she had been: "exploring the relationship between myself, the earth and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me..."

Alpuj wished to represent in a new and symbolic manner nature's vital force. A recurring image is of a tree emerging from a rock, Alpuj saw such a tree in the Syrian Desert: growing against all odds from the crevice of a rock. It struck him how strong the will to live is. A tree felled by a storm and left with its roots in the air impressed him deeply; "This image became a very personal form, it is a rhombus but it is a tree as well – the idea of a tree." According to Alpuj, images don't originate in fantasy but from personal experience. He believes that the general idea that abstraction is total absence of representation is misunderstood, for him it means to extract the essential, and he remarks that the dictionary's definition is: "A summary or epitome containing the substance. An artistic composition intended to suggest an idea or emotion without imitating recognizable objects."

From this period of introspection, Alpuj produced works of great vigor and originality, they are rough, suggesting sexual instinct as a vital force in his symbolic and schematized representation of male and feminine sexual organs.

Alpuj rented a long and narrow studio on 13th Street between Avenues A and B. The Argentine critic Rafael Squirru described it very perceptively as "a deep cave. It was like being in Altamira or Lascaux instead of New York."

Alpuj befriended Alfred Jensen and Mary Frank.

1964-65 Alpuj returned to Montevideo. He showed his recent work at the Centro de Artes y Letras, El País. Critics welcomed his "emancipation" from Torres-García and constructivism. Although Alpuj remarked that it hadn't been something he consciously sought, it was the result of a natural development in his work.

Concerning the issue of the TTG artists' emancipation from their teacher, in January of 1965 while visiting Montevideo, Gonzalo Fonseca's remarks on the recent Alpuj exhibition, were published in the weekly *Marcha*: "If Torres-García formed us, it doesn't mean that we have to keep painting as he did. If Alpuj's new work is strong it means that it [the Taller Torres-García] was a good school. One thing is the school's group instruction, and another is each artist's own evolution, we take and then we transform. If today, Torres-García were still alive he wouldn't be painting as in the last year of his life."

Alpuj's wood panels display an array of different techniques; delicate incised graphisms, ink drawings on the raw wood or on white painted areas, carvings, intarsia of colored glass and mosaics. Alpuj was excited with the new possibilities that working with wood opened up to him: "a new, more concrete spatial element was born, I had to reconsider problems that arose as I worked in a medium that wasn't painting."



Universo, 1964. wood relief, 61 x 39 in., Rockefeller Family Collection, Kykuit, New York

Nelson Rockefeller purchased *Universo*, for his collection. Today it hangs in Kykuit, the family residence in Pocantico Hills, north of New York City. In the summer of 1965, his friend Juan Weiler invited him to the South of France. Alpyu visited the Picasso Museum in Antibes where he saw an exhibition of recently excavated erotic Roman ceramics and stone reliefs. He completed his own series of erotic works on paper.

1966 – 69 Alpyu's wood compositions were evolving from frontal works to more sculpturally spatial, something new for him and quite a challenge. In *Fertilidad*, the full, convex womb shape recalls prehistoric bone figures symbolizing fertility; their representation reduced to a headless torso with breasts and a slash as the female sex.

In the summer of 1968 he traveled in Europe. Upon his return he rented a studio on Bond Street in Manhattan.



Alpyu next to *Fertilidad*, 1969

1970 – 72 In December of 1971 the Guggenheim Museum presented a Torres-García retrospective exhibition. Most of the original Taller Torres-García artists were reunited after many years for the occasion. Francisco Matto, José Gurvich, Horacio and Augusto Torres, traveled to New York meeting Alpuy and Fonseca.



Arquetipos No 1, 1978. engraving, 5½ x 5 in., 14,4 x 12,5 cm.

The Uruguayan painter Luis Solarí (1918-1997) invited Alpuy to his printing workshop in Morristown, New Jersey. Alpuy was so taken with the process that he bought a press. In September of 1971, he showed 17 prints in Montevideo. The art critic Nelson Di Maggio wrote: "We can disagree with Alpuy's intimate message, or the subtle character of his refined technique: but you can't ignore the persuasive eloquence of his poetic images. By distancing himself from Uruguay, Alpuy affirmed his artistic personality... his vision is now more intimate and profound, he achieved a style of his own and found a plastic balance that, while at the dawn of a new expressive stance, recaptures without any sentimentality, a fruitful past." Today, Alpuy concludes that while he worked for several years in printmaking, and thoroughly enjoyed it, he actually prefers to draw. Indefatigable draftsman, he can't understand how little some artists draw today. For him, "it is by drawing that issues in art are resolved. To draw is to think."



José Gurvich, looking at Snail of Life (Caracol de la Vida), at the Alpuy exhibition at the America's Society, New York, 1972

His exhibition of works in wood at the Center for Inter-American Relations [today, the Americas Society] was accompanied by a catalog with text by Ronald Christ. The New York Times art critic, John Canaday, remembered today for his lack of vision, in a brief review of the exhibition noted: "these compositions assembled from wood-carvings usually rather roughly or even crudely executed, suffer from a basic disharmony between their apparently naive conception and execution and the sophistication of the sources from which the bits and pieces are derived. Braque and Picasso are conspicuous in some details... yet, eventually a spirit of cheerful innocence prevails." His remarks are typical of the simplistic and paternalistic view of Latin American art in the United States, when 'naïve' or 'innocent' were inescapable adjectives.

1973-75 Bought a loft on Lafayette Street that he renovated. In his new loft, Alpuj taught painting and drawing classes; the renewed contact with canvas and colors inspired him to return to painting. His canvases of this period were organized according to an underlying structure; the subject matter is man in a natural environment, surrounded by animals, plants, and the elements: clouds, fire, rocks, and rivers. Ronald Christ, very perceptively described Alpuj's Arcadia: "In this idealized world, people seldom work. Chiefly they recline, sit, and lie: they rest, often gathered around a fire in the warmth of their ruddy hues and friendly closeness. They require not shelter or clothes. This is a social and natural but *not* psychological world..."

1976-79 Alpuj went to Montevideo where he hadn't been in 12 years, bringing with him an exhibition of his new paintings. In 1977, he traveled to Bogotá for the opening of his exhibition at La Galerie. Planning to return to Montevideo for long periods, Alpuj bought a house there. In 1979, after extensive renovation he settled in, working in its studio. But he missed New York and after scarcely two years he returned.

1980 -84 Alpuj won the commission to paint four murals for the new Uruguayan embassy in Buenos Aires. It took Alpuj four months to paint them directly on the walls with acrylic. At Galería Sarmiento in Buenos Aires he showed paintings related to the murals. In a review for the exhibition, O. S. in La Opinión cultural de Buenos Aires, accurately described Alpuj's work of the 1980s: "Strong and archaic, this singular universe can't be compared or related to any tendency or school. It is difficult to convey these paintings' total dimension, their surprising richness, which paradoxically is based in an ascetic, even rough plastic language and its structural character which could be said is almost aggressive while also lyrical." In 1983, Alpuj was awarded a grant from National Endowment for the Arts.

1985-89 After years of teaching his students how to paint still-lives, they hired a model to draw nudes, Alpuj joined his students drawing and painting a number of figures where his natural mastery of color shines, he was realizing an old desire dating back to his trip to Italy where he first saw the splendid renaissance nudes. Although this was a short digression it favorably contributed to his work, in 1987, he returned to wood sculpture.



Composition in Primary Colors,
1996. Oil on canvas, 47½ x 35 in.,
121 x 89 cm.

1990 Alpuy started to condense and reorganize many ideas he had developed over half a century. He returned to painting in primary colors and to his repertory of figures, clouds, rocks, rivers, rhombus trees, etc., but now they are juxtaposed to the structure and subdivided in color planes. (Fig. 41)

The Chilean photographer Roberto Edwards invited Alpuy to participate in "Cuerpos pintados" (Painted Bodies), a project he developed where artists paint directly on a model's body that is then photographed by Edwards.

He denies having been influenced by the environment, as he is sure that when he arrived here, as an artist, he was fully formed and already knew what he wanted to do. This is corroborated by Mari Carmen Ramírez, who wrote, "The work of ... Alpuy, realized in the 1960s and 1970s, insofar as it represents a continuation of Torres-García's ideas, constituted an island in the context of the New York or international art world of this period.... none of the TTG (Taller Torres-García) artists seemed concerned with the developments in the art world surrounding them. Indeed, their art seems to have developed against the grain of contemporary trends."



Alpuy in his New York studio, 2002

Alpuy is aware of how the art world functions and that is why he always kept himself away from it: "Commerce defines who is 'in,' it keeps constantly changing and offering so that its existence is justified. I can't think how anybody who is serious can benefit – because novelty is not originality.

To defend his autonomy in earlier times, he preferred to make his living as a carpenter to avoid any imposition that would compromise the integrity of his work. Alpuy refuses to be considered on the margin of contemporary art, for him, the fact that he doesn't agree with most of it, doesn't make him less of today. "I belong to the present world as much as anybody, if I don't agree with much of what is done in art today it simply is because I have my ideas and they have theirs."

Julio Alpuy died in New York on April 5th, 2009 at the age of 90.