

The South was Their North: Artists of the Torres-García Workshop

September 2015 through February 2016



Related to the upcoming retrospective exhibition, *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art, Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. presents an aspect of the artist's endeavors that is inextricably associated with his personality and his career: the creation of a school of art that would realize "Constructive Universalism," his theory of a unified aesthetic based on the visual canon he developed.

Torres-García's ambition was to establish an autonomous artistic tradition based on Constructive Universalism that would eventually expand to all the Americas, "emulating the art of the highest ancient cultures."¹ This utopian undertaking occupied the last fifteen years of his life as an artist and teacher to new generations, leaving a considerable body of work and an indelible mark on South America's modern art.

Man and his universe are at the center of Torres-García's formulation of Constructive Universalism, characterized by the representation of ideas by means of graphic symbols. According to the artist, symbols are the only form of figuration compatible with a geometric structure.

Following his 1934 return to Uruguay after a 43 year absence, Torres-García first organized the Association of Constructive Art (AAC). He soon realized how culturally dependent his compatriots were on Europe. He challenged this attitude by claiming "Our North is the South" in his 1936 "School of the South" manifesto. Accompanying his declaration he drew the map of South America upside down, a masterpiece of conceptual art *avant la lettre*.



Torres-García and his students, 1947

From left to right, seated: unknown, Manuel Pailós, Joaquín Torres-García, Julio Alpuy, Rodolfo Visca. Standing: Horacio Torres, Augusto Torres, José Gurvich, Manuel Cuña, unknown, Guido Castillo, Jorge Visca, Francisco Matto and Gonzalo Fonseca.

In 1943, Torres-García created "The School of the South" in the form of a workshop - the Taller Torres-García (TTG). As students, he sought young women and men who were unspoiled by previous art training. Among the many who were attracted by his powerful message and charismatic personality, a handful were exceptionally talented: Julio Alpuy, Gonzalo Fonseca, José Gurvich, Francisco Matto, Manuel Pailós and the artist's two sons, Augusto and Horacio Torres.

The TTG could in many ways be compared to a guild where the mutual influences of the teacher and students influenced one another. Techniques were learned by working closely in an unstructured manner. Having attended Barcelona's art academies, Torres-García was against their standard ways of teaching: "I believe students shouldn't be taught how to paint a picture - that

¹ JTG, *Manifiesto Nº 3*, 1939

² C.S. *Hablando con Torres- García: la experiencia de la Asociación de Arte Constructivo*, Marcha, Montevideo, 1940

³ JTG *Guiones Nº 1*, Madrid July 1933

is an individual's task - all that has to be done is to explain art, its fundamental laws and appropriate mediums.”²

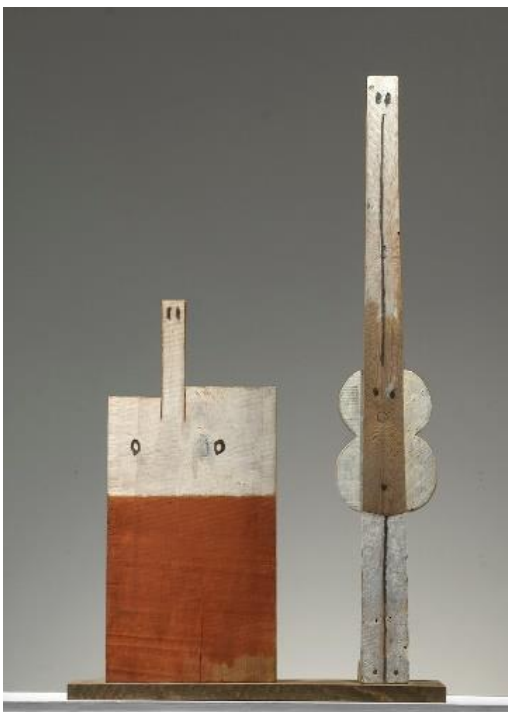
In the context of other modern art groups, like the earlier British Omega Group and the teachers at the Bauhaus and Black Mountain, Torres-García believed there is no difference between “an artist and an artificer, and that the same holds true for a vase, a painting, a textile and a sculpture.”³

He also believed it was crucial to explore the intrinsic nature of materials, for artists confronting diverse materials have to associate them to an idea and to bring to life an aesthetic form according to its nature. Because a true artist knows how to find harmony between form and material; his muse is the material itself.

Accordingly, in the eighth exhibition of the Association of Constructive Artists (AAC) in 1940, a variety of works of applied art in a variety of media were presented side by side with painting and sculpture. Horacio Torres' *Idol* in pink granite was in that show as was Torres-García's 1937 painting *Composición universal*, now in the Centre Pompidou. Later that painting was rendered as a tapestry in black wool on white cotton, by TG's widow Manolita, daughter and friends. From then on, many TTG exhibitions combined ceramics, furniture and textiles with paintings.



Horacio Torres, *Idol*, 1939
Pink granite
20 x 12 in. 51 x 30,5 cm.



Francisco Matto, *Dos venus*, 1976
Oil on wood
47 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. 116 x 121 x 25 cm.

Ceramics were taken up by many of the Taller artists as was metal: silver for jewelry, and iron for sculpture and window & door grilles. Stained glass windows, mosaics, painted and incised cabinets, tables and chairs, bedsteads and boxes were all produced and integrated into their creators' lives. They truly lived with their art.

In Uruguay, Torres-García's teaching and the Taller were controversial. The traditionalists depicted him as tyrannical, accusing him of demanding his students' total adherence to his principles and of developing a system devoid of any possibility to deviate. However, TG's students understood and respected the artist's commitment and felt compelled to reciprocate.

Francisco Matto refuted the notion that Torres-García was coercive, stating “on the contrary, he hated to be copied. He never taught us to paint a constructivist picture, never a class on symbols; he just taught us the concept of Constructive Universalism.” Similarly, according to Julio Alpuy, they “knew that TG demanded total dedication; for him, life and art theory were one and the same.” Constructive Universalism was a way of life with a set of moral and ethical values.

Constructive painting in conjunction with new architecture was considered by the TTG artists to form a perfect union. They encouraged architects to include art works in their design of buildings; they talked of “invading the walls of the city; to bring constructivist art to libraries, cinemas, banks and factories.”

The most ambitious TTG mural project was the collective decoration of the St. Bois hospital for tuberculosis patients in 1944. A total of 35 different size murals, 33 in primary colors and 2 in black and white were completed by 19 artists. With over a hundred other murals, indoors and out, the Uruguayan Constructivist muralist movement could be considered as important as the Mexican.

After Torres-García's death in 1949, many of the TTG artists traveled venturing to Europe and to the Middle East. From Egypt, Gonzalo Fonseca wrote to Montevideo confirming their teacher's exceptional vision of a constructive system based on geometry similar in spirit to what the Egyptians did centuries before.

The works in this exhibition date from 1936 to the 1980s, extending from the AAC to beyond the Taller years. For this small group of outstanding TTG artists our intent is to present work that is emblematic of their individuality, works of mature achievement as well as of their constructivist origins.

Julio Alpuy (1919-2009) was an original member of the TTG, he was instructed by Torres-García to teach drawing and painting at the Taller. He left Uruguay in 1957 for extended stays in Colombia and Venezuela before arriving in New York in December 1961 living here until his death. In this exhibition we show a 1945 *Montevideo Cityscape* and a 1950 sideboard with incised door panels.



José Gurvich, *Construction, Couple*, 1960
Mixed media on wood
20¾ x 11½ in. 53 x 29 cm.

Gonzalo Fonseca (1922-1997) abandoned his university architectural studies at age 20 and joined the Taller. To realize his interest in ancient sites and archeological digs, Fonseca travelled widely, beginning in 1946 to Peru and Bolivia, in the 1950s he spent 6 years between Rome, Paris, Madrid and the Middle East. In 1958 he moved to New York and beginning in 1970 he spent half the year in Carrara working with marble. Shown are two works from 1959: an oil painting and a mosaic table commissioned by an architect, it was made with the same glass tiles as his 18 foot-high mosaic mural at The New School in New York. *Situ*, a 1986 sculpture of Persian travertine is a fine example of his mature style.

José Gurvich (1927-1974) joined the Taller in 1945 where he later organized a ceramic studio and taught classes in drawing and painting. Gurvich's artworks are populated with figures and images that reflect his Jewish upbringing, his participation with the TTG, and his profound admiration for the Flemish masters Breughel and Bosch. He combined a unique personal style with technical mastery.

Exhibited are works in diverse materials: *Couple* a wood assemblage of 1960, and an incised white gesso relief from 1962.



Gonzalo Fonseca, *Situ*, 1986
Persian travertine
10½ x 15 x 9 in. 26 x 38 x 23 cm.

Francisco Matto (1911-1995) sailed from Montevideo down the South Atlantic coast and around Tierra del Fuego to Chile when he was 21. There he acquired his first ethnographic pieces for what would become an important collection of pre-Columbian art that was a source of inspiration for him. In 1939, Matto met TG who encouraged him to continue painting even though it wasn't until 1943, when he joined the TTG, that Matto began working as a Constructivist.

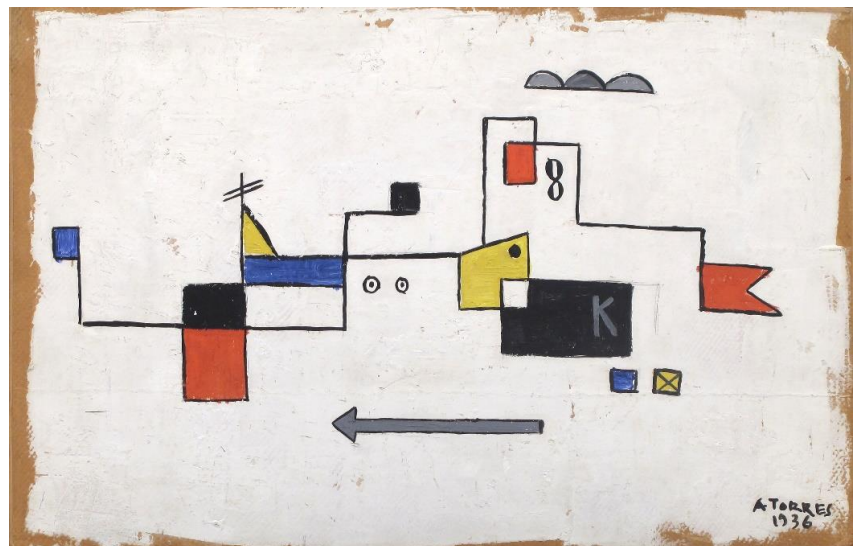
Matto's 1946 *Pintura Constructiva*, is a rendering in primary colors of a classic still life with a twist, each element of the composition is flattened and divided into color planes that integrate them into the underlying structure. A roughly hewed wood relief titled *Removedor*, which translates as *Paint Remover* celebrates the TTG's news magazine of record. Also in wood, *Dos Venus*, a diptych totem sculpture was inspired by the Mapuche Indian cemetery totems Matto saw in his youth.

Manuel Pailós (1918-2004) studied painting at the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Montevideo before joining the Taller Torres-García in 1943. Profoundly influenced by Torres-García's theories, Pailós was an important member of the Taller. In addition to his drawing and painting, Pailós made sculptures in wood, granite, and other materials, and many of his reliefs and free-standing works are now in public spaces in his native Spain and in Montevideo. Due to their fondness for working with wood, the TTG artists were called "Torres-García's carpenters." Two wood assemblages from the 1960s *Caras* and *Ship Sur* are fine examples of the genre.

Augusto Torres (1913-1992) was the first son of Torres-García. He began his lifelong collecting and interest in the American Plains Indians and African tribal art when in Paris at age 14. He also worked at the Musée de l'Homme cataloguing pre-Columbian vessels and as a studio assistant to the sculptor Julio González. We present two geometric abstractions from 1936 & 1937 and two still lifes from the 1970s.

For Augusto Torres, poetry and metaphysics is what his still life paintings bring to art - for they exist when the artist assumes the real world within his spiritual world, and as he expresses and structures the real world pictorially, he also expresses the real soul of objects.

Horacio Torres (1924-1976) the youngest child of Torres-García was 10 when the family arrived in Montevideo. After the Taller years, Horacio traveled abroad, living in Paris before returning to Uruguay. In 1969, he brought his family to New York where his extraordinary paintings of nudes were purchased by major museums (The Metropolitan, Museums of Fine Art in Boston and Houston, etc.) and important collectors. In this exhibition a 1959 monochrome abstraction, features a free-floating spiral anchored in an invisible structure. A pink granite figure recalls Amerindian sculpture, evidence of the deep attachment of the TTG artists to the art of ancient civilizations.



Augusto Torres, *Formas con fondo blanco*, 1936
Oil on artist board,
11 x 16 in. 28 x 41 cm.