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‘Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern’ Review

How did the Constructivist build his career? Among his credentials: inventing a distinct visual language.

By **KAREN WILKIN**

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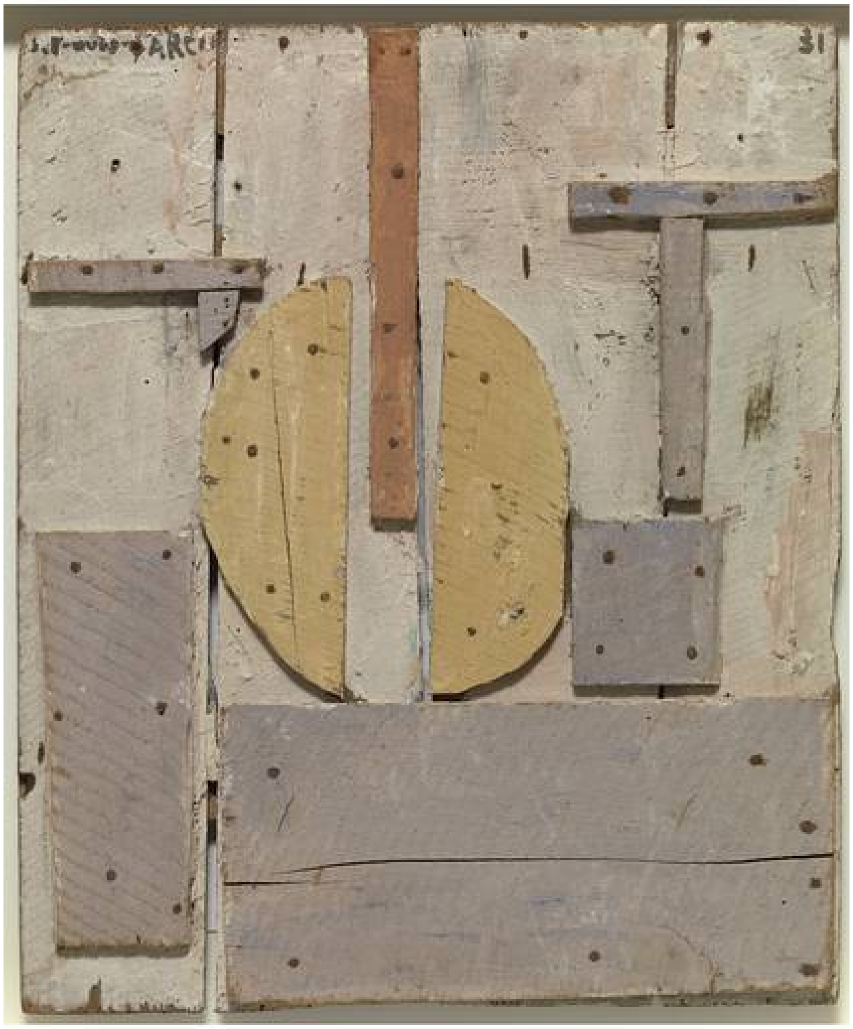
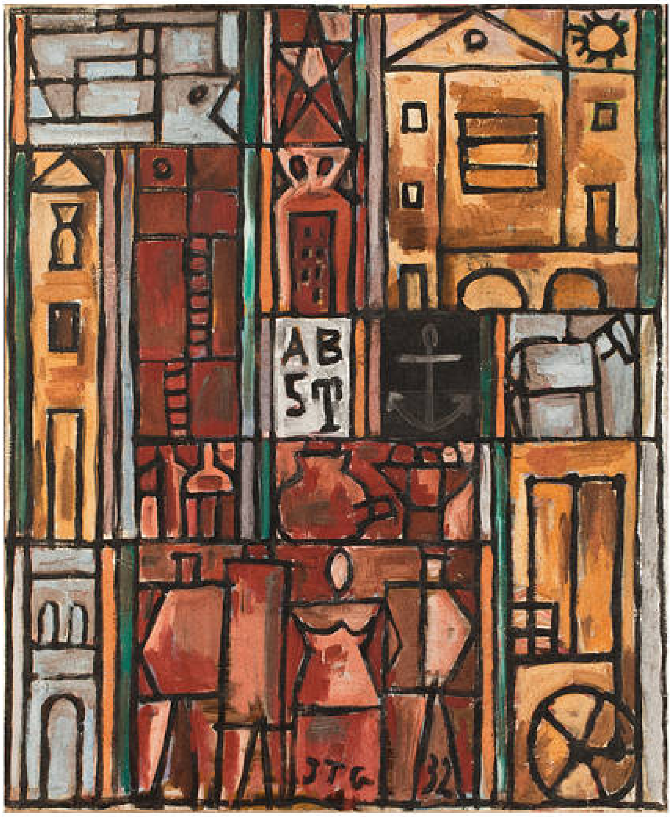
In 1934, the painter and theorist Joaquín Torres-García returned to his native Montevideo from Paris. He was 60 (born in 1874, he died in 1949) and had not lived in Uruguay since 1891, when he was 17 and his Catalan father decided to return to Spain with his New World family. During the peripatetic, aesthetically disjunctive four decades between his South American sojourns, Torres-Garcia received a traditional art education in Barcelona, joined a classicizing nationalist Catalonian art movement, embraced modernism, moved to New York, exhibited (with Stuart Davis) at the Whitney Studio Club, established a toy company, returned to Europe, helped found a constructivist movement, published writings on abstraction and structure, and invented a distinctive visual language. (That’s the short version.)

The full story is told by “Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern,” at the Museum of Modern Art, his first major U.S. retrospective in 45 years. We begin with broadly handled figurative works from 1900 to 1906, including an elegant portrait of his dark-haired, solemn future wife, and continue with preparations for his first important commission—frescoes for Barcelona’s government seat, made between 1912 and 1916. Chosen as a leading exponent of Noucentisme, the Catalan aesthetic movement that stressed a return to nature and classical Mediterranean ideals, Torres-García was, nonetheless, dismissed from the project, apparently for not meeting expectations; the strange, hulking faun in the completed fresco on view suggests why.



Joaquín Torres García’s 1931 ‘Construction With Curved Forms.’
PHOTO: THOMAS GRIESEL

Torres-García soon abandoned Noucentisme’s pastoral ideal for the realities of contemporary urban life, inflected by an awareness of Cubism, producing energetic cityscapes packed with images evocative of such emblems of modernity as speedy transportation, crowds and advertising. These syncopated, fractured images—made first in Barcelona and later during a stay in New York in 1920-1922—suggest that he was finding justification for Cubist fragmentation in his surroundings, but dislocated signage, clock faces, wheels, wagons, and the like, along with a subdued palette of earth tones and dulled primaries, also point ahead to Torres-García’s future work. Similarly, the delightful wooden toys, some with interchangeable parts, that he designed about this time seem to anticipate his later abstract wooden constructions.



Joaquín Torres García’s 1932 ‘Constructive With Four Figures.’
PHOTO: PABLO ALMANSA

By 1926, when he settled in Paris with his growing family, after returning to Europe and spending some years wandering in Italy and the South of France, Torres-García had wholly committed to modernism. First, he explored Cubist notions of translating perception into overlapping planes hovering within a shallow, indeterminate space, and then, tested Purist ideas of revealing the ideal geometry believed to underlie all forms. Yet there’s something robust and playful about even his most Cubist-influenced paintings and most economical constructions of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Line breaks free of edges, so that a work such as “Constructive Painting” (1929) is animated by the tension between an underlying grid of red, blue, yellow and white planes and floating, independent black lines that suggest the urban landscape and its stylized inhabitants. Some works verge on pure geometric abstraction, while others are unabashedly about loosely drawn, geometricized figures or mask-like heads.

Torres-García was close to the most rigorous practitioners of Constructivist and Purist abstraction during his Paris years. He founded the important publication Cercle et Carré—circle and square—and his children studied with Amédée Ozenfant, the advocate of what he called “significant form.” Yet there’s always something handmade and “impure” about Torres-García’s most pared-down, four-square works. Perhaps this reflects his profound belief in the seamless connection between all art, sophisticated and “primitive,” from the archaic to the most modern. A tantalizing selection of Torres-García’s notebooks and scrapbooks, with clippings that juxtapose images from all cultures and periods, drives home the point. At the heart of the exhibition are some of Torres-García’s best known works, the “Cathedrals” of the early 1930s: confrontational, near-monochrome grids packed with private symbols, some embodiments of modernity, some signs of the universal and timeless.

The Cathedrals’ refined density and insistent frontality are emphasized by the nearby presence of blunt, deliberately crude wooden constructions from the same period, such as “Construction With Curved Forms” (1931). Deadened primaries and earth tones return to the paintings, but some of the most surprising works are radically abstract monochromes: undulating walls of blocks that seem to press toward us, like Fernand Léger’s “Tubist” images clarified and rationalized.

At the Bauhaus-like Taller Torres-García, founded soon after his return to Uruguay, Torres-García turned his hard-won convictions into an influential program that taught aspiring artists to find the essential geometric relationships that underlay the randomness and irregularity of the world without losing the vitality or unpredictability of actuality. “Joaquin Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern” dissects the thinking behind the program at the Taller, but seeing the results requires a visit to the informative show of important Taller graduates’ work, along with that of their master, in many media, at Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., SoHo. Don’t miss Gonzalo Fonseca’s mysterious stone house/shrine.

Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.