

Francisco Matto

Another Way of Seeing

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If we don't attain the elemental forms we will never be able to arrive at the mystery. ¹

Francisco Matto

These words, imbued with deep significance and expressed with characteristic candor and simplicity, are key to understanding Matto's art and his personality. Every artist develops a way of working that will best allow him to give concrete form to his vision. Matto would paint the same theme in order to gradually eliminate superfluous elements in the composition.

Concentrating on the most important lines and volumes, Matto would slowly and methodically isolate the "elemental forms" of reality. As in Brancusi's sculptures, which are the highest modern exponent of purist forms, Matto repeated the same theme over and over, each new version differing subtly from the previous one. Brancusi rejected the consideration of sculptures as multiples or copies of an original model, and asserted: "I didn't repeat them in order to change them, but to take them further."²

Going "further" meant to condense more meaning with the greatest expressive simplicity. First, the vast complexity of reality had to be resolved. With this end in mind, reworking a theme or a shape becomes a way of evolving. In Matto's hands, this minimalism never becomes cold, sterile or decorative. In the process of incorporating the most essential elements of the model and creating a harmony between them, he produced works in which reality manifests itself, not as an imitative copy, but as a group of abstract equivalents.

Matto's work has an impressive austerity, a result of his conviction that the artist's personality interferes with objectivity. Matto stated "the painter must die - his 'I' must disappear so painting can be born."³ Before the term was coined, Matto's work was an authentic *arte povera*. His choice of poor materials was not an intellectual veneer. His wood constructions are simply made; he was not interested in woodcraft and polished finishes. In his paintings, Matto's light, sensitive brushwork had no pretensions of virtuosity. Like the Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari (1861-1938), he preferred cardboard to canvas. The matte, opaque surface suited him. He barely mixed colors on his palette. Instead, he opted to apply them directly from the tube, which he did exclusively toward the end of his life, creating tonal values by controlling the areas of color. His palette always resounds with a fresh musicality, whether in somber dark earth hues and grays, or tender pinks, blues, and greens.



Constructivo rosa con caracol, 1967, oil on artist board, 33 x 33½ in. 84 x 85 cm.

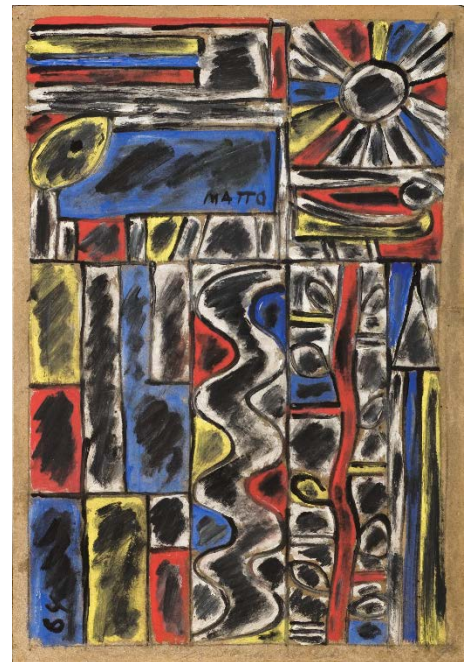
Matto longed for art's lost religious and ritual functions. At the risk of seeming superstitious and primitive, he ventured to say, "Magic is the most valuable element in the world."⁴ In the book, *Piedra Abstracta*, an important study of the influence of Amerindian art in the modern art of the Americas, the artist César Paternosto presents a clear picture of how art is considered in contemporary society. "Our culture developed by separating these functions, demarcating fields of knowledge and exaggerating the specific nature of each activity. The art of antiquity was part of a unique system of metaphors; the homogeneous unity of the religious, ethical and esthetic functions that that system represented in its time was indissoluble."⁵

The conflict facing an artist like Matto is how to retain that valuable legacy without resorting to anachronisms, and how to reconcile the contradiction between faith in the power of magic and contemporary definitions of reality. Objects from ancient civilizations, particularly the Amerindian art he collected, became a point of reference for his own art. "Working for almost fifty years surrounded by this art, was of great importance to me," Matto wrote in the introduction to a study of the pieces in his collection.⁶ He considered the objects as art works rather than as archeological artifacts.

Matto (no one called him Francisco), was tall, lean, and very expressive. He often interrupted a conversation with exclamations - Extraordinary! Fantastic! Colossal! - that revealed his spontaneous personality and his perpetual enthusiasm. With an extravagant gesture, his long arms would trace a cross in the air to emphasize a decision or an irrevocable judgment. When something annoyed him or seemed incomprehensible, he shrugged his shoulders in consternation and half turned as if to leave. When he listened to someone, he gave the speaker his entire attention: hands in his pockets or arms crossed, he stuck out his prominent chin, his mouth a straight, affirmative line. Although he lived to be over eighty, age didn't seem to affect his youthful spirit.

His elegance was not that of a dandy, it was innate, natural. He was one of those rare painters who could, and did, paint in a suit without staining it. He habitually observed a delicate balance between his social and private life. For him, discretion and good taste were an essential courtesy, while vulgarity and ostentation constituted an unpardonable offense.

Matto was an astute observer of the natural world. He loved the barren, windswept landscape of the River Plate coast, and valued the richness and fragility of the native fauna and flora. He could distinguish the songs of various bird species and would imitate them, whistling with the precision of a musician playing Mozart.



Constructivo con serpiente y rama, 1964, Oil on artist board, 15¼ x 10¼ in. 39 x 26 cm.



Totems left to right: *Serpiente*, 1960, oil on wood, 84 x 12¼ x 8 in. 213 x 32 x 20 cm.; *Venus*, 1969, oil on wood, 95 x 13 x 9 in. 243 x 34 x 23 cm.; *Caracol Totem*, 1985, oil on wood, 75½ x 12 x 5 in. 192 x 30,5 x 13 cm.; *Universal Man*, 1988, oil on wood, 83 x 14 x 11 in. 211 x 36 x 28 cm.; *U*, 1970, oil on wood, 93 x 14 x 13¼ in. 236 x 36 x 34 cm.; *Mascara*, 1988, oil on wood, 87 x 12 x 12½ in. 221 x 30,5 x 32 cm.

Like all the artists who worked with Joaquín Torres-García, Matto was not concerned with self-promotion. Still, a reading of his chronology demonstrates that he was a true precursor. Instead of going to Europe as was customary in the Americas of the time, he was one of the few artists to travel within his own continent. In 1932, he took his first trip by boat all the way down the Argentine coast to Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego. He later went to Chile, and even reached the Atacama Desert. During this trip he visited the native Mapuche Indian cemeteries, where he saw funerary posts that would later become an inspiration for his totems and reliefs.

Matto began attending Torres-García's lectures in 1939. It was natural for him to be attracted to Torres' ideas, such as his call for artists to create a "renaissance in the arts" and "to exhume [referring to the indigenous past] that buried America."⁷ In an interview, Matto spoke of his relationship to Torres-García, refuting the widely disseminated idea that the master ruined his pupils because he implanted certain rigid ideas. "It's absolutely the other way around," Matto affirmed, "Torres hated to be copied."⁸

In the Taller Torres-García, Constructive Universalism was never taught as a system. There was never a class on symbols. What was taught was the concept, the idea of Constructive Universalism: a visual vocabulary in which certain symbols are universally recognizable, while others have a subjective meaning for each artist. They are not to be read in sequence like Mayan or Egyptian hieroglyphs. In the Taller Torres-García, each individual artist had a singular way of representing and distributing the symbols. Matto said, "When I place an element in a Constructive grid, I do it because it suits me; it is not a language. It is a work that is constructed metaphysically. No matter whether one draws a hammer, a cup, or a serpent, the important thing is that when combined, they fit together."⁹

Matto's vocabulary of symbols juxtapose sources as diverse as Classical Greek culture (the Cycladic Venuses), Biblical religious traditions (the Tables of the Law), tribal art (the mask), pre-Columbian art (the snail), and Constructive Universalism (the Universal Man). An example of personal meaning is his depiction of the lamb. Besides being the emblem of Christ, on the pampas it is the lamb that yields sustenance in the form of food and warm clothing, just as the llama, a sacred animal in Incan art and culture, does on the Altiplano.

In 1969, when the Central Bank of Uruguay asked Matto to design a commemorative coin for The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (F.A.O.), no one expected that it would become a popular success. However, after its initial release in silver sold out, numerous clandestine copies were produced. Without resorting to an easy folkloric appeal, the coin found an echo in the Uruguayan soul because Matto had expressed in a symbolic way something that genuinely touched his compatriots.

Matto visualized his sculptures in natural settings, proportionately scaled to their surroundings. One spring morning in 1987, he had the pleasure of seeing his constructions by the sea, exactly as he had imagined them. The beach in front of his house was populated by totems and wood sculptures. It was a marvelous sight that photographer Alfredo Testoni was fortunately able to capture in a series of black and white photographs, one of which is reproduced here. The event lasted a few hours; by afternoon the works were transported back across the Rambla to Matto's studio.



Silver coin designed for F.A.O. in 1969.

That had been a magical moment. Matto's sculpture left us with the memory of their strong presence, so classic and yet so expressive, so completely right. One wonders how, with sensitive line, precise proportion, and subtle touch of color, Matto redeemed the most common, used, and discarded wood and imprinted on them the clarity and power of his spiritual self.

Cecilia de Torres



Veleta, 1974, oil on canvas, 57¼ x 44¾ in.
155 x 136 cm.

- 1 Francisco Matto, "Variantes formales en el arte Tihuanaco" (unpublished manuscript, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute Collection).
- 2 Letter from Brancusi to John Quinn, *Constantin Brancusi 1875-1957* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), p. 48.
- 3 Francisco Matto (unpublished manuscript).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 César Paternosto, *Piedra Abstracta, la cultura Inca, una visión contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p. 42.
- 6 In *Piedra Abstracta*, Paternosto points out that in the Wari-Tihuanaco weavings created between the 8th and the 12th century, the sequences of geometric reductions, anticipate a process Occidental art failed to arrive at until the present century, and then only after a laborious struggle.
- 7 J. Torres-García, "El nuevo arte de América," in *Universalismo Constructivo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984), p. 696.
- 8 Carlos Cipriani López, "Francisco Matto, Las Fuentes de lo mágico," *El País* (Montevideo), March 12, 1993.
- 9 Ibid.