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## A model Latin American

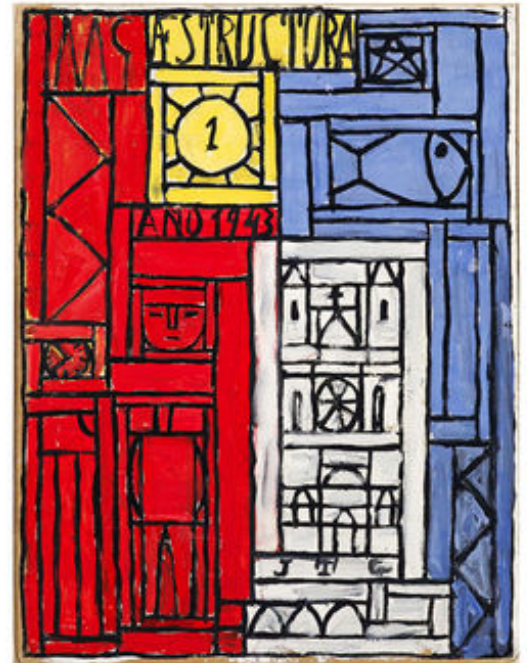
**The concrete message of an abstract artist**

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THIS has been a good year for Joaquín Torres-García, a Uruguayan artist who died in 1949 but whose reputation continues to wax. Last winter the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York staged a panoramic exhibition of his work; after summering in Madrid, the exhibition opened this month at the Picasso Museum in Malaga.

Last November one of his large “constructivist” panels, as he called them, sold for \$2.1m at auction, a record price

for his work. A more intimate exhibition at the Guillermo de Osma gallery in Madrid showcases both his sketches and his craftsmanship as a maker of wooden sculpture and toys.



This interest in Torres-García shows that an artist who sometimes seemed behind his times was, in many ways, ahead of them. He was a bridge between Latin America and the diverse vanguards of the School of Paris. More important, he gave birth to a radical tradition of abstract and geometric art in South America. To outsiders, Latin American art means the Mexican muralists, Frida Kahlo and “indigenism” (the highlighting of pre-Columbian roots). But the abstract tradition is coming into its own. This week Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, a collector, donated to MoMA 102 works of geometric abstraction from the region (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21708994-donation-moma-will-transform-study-latin-american-modernism-time-gifts) (<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21708994-donation-moma-will-transform-study-latin-american-modernism-time-gifts>)).

Torres-García was an unlikely artistic revolutionary, an “Arcadian Modern” as the MoMA exhibition puts it. Yet he spent his long life in an ultimately successful search for an artistic language that offered answers to the fundamental question that faces all Latin American artists—who are we? Europeans or Americans, colonisers, indigenous or *mestizos*?

The child of a Catalan émigré merchant and a Uruguayan mother, Torres-García moved with his family to Barcelona in 1892, when he was 18. There he was drawn to classical Greek art and a conservative, Catholic artistic circle, linked to Catalan nationalism. He worked with Antoni Gaudí, the architect, on stained-glass windows for the cathedral at Palma de Mallorca. Such was his success as a painter that he was awarded a commission to decorate a chapel at the Palace of the Generalitat, today

the seat of the Catalan government. But his bold symbolist frescoes offended traditionalists and were later covered up.

That rebuff and two years in New York propelled Torres-García to an art of the present. After dabbling in futurism and Cubism in vibrant street scenes, and moving to Paris, he arrived in the late 1920s at his artistic destination: what he called “architectural art” or “constructive universalism”. On a geometric grid he assembled pared-down symbolic pictograms. There is an esoteric quality to these recurring stylised objects: man, woman, fish, anchor, clock, bottle and so on. They drew on the orderly shelves of his father’s shop in Montevideo and his childhood memories of its great port. His constructivist panels were sometimes painted in black and white, or in the gently glowing primary colours of stained glass; sometimes they were scored onto wood.

In Paris Torres-García became friends with Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, two Dutch abstract painters. But he rejected their dogmatic divide between abstraction and figuration; his stance is taken by many artists today. Rather, he counterposed abstraction to what he called “the concrete”, while marrying the modern to the primitive. He sought a universal language, deep in the unconscious, of visual symbols. While indigenism imprisoned Latin American art in folklore, Torres-García incorporated pre-Columbian imagery, from Inca walls and Nazca ceramics, into that universal language.

In Paris he was at last able to make a living from painting. Then the Great Depression struck. In 1934, aged 60, Torres-García set out for Uruguay, more than 40 years after he had left it. There, in a tall house just off the main square in the colonial centre of Montevideo that is today his museum, he founded the School of the South to teach constructive universalism to a younger generation of artists. It was perhaps the most successful venture of his chequered life. Large posthumous exhibitions of his late work in Brazil in the 1950s testified to that.

Torres-García was the most original and thoughtful artist Latin America has produced. His claiming of its indigenous heritage as part of a universal human experience is a welcome antidote to those in the region who would turn their backs on the world. In a continent given to fragmentation, so is his insistence on synthesis and unity. In these senses, Torres-García, who became a cantankerous old man in a straggling white beard and a long overcoat, was a model Latin American.

From the print edition: *The Americas*