

Title: Alpuj at the Luis Angel Arango Library**Author: Marta Traba****Date: June 8, 1958, Bogotá**

Two Sundays ago I pointed out the general differences of a system that must perforce be understood before approaching that of Alpuj's painting: the system of ideas that comprises Joaquín Torres-García's Constructivism, upon which this exhibition of paintings is entirely based. The Constructivists who followed Torres have worked very hard to definitively transform a system of ideas into one that is pictorial; to do so they turn to subtle and—for them—appreciable differences that allow them . . . a rigid mental structuring. The originality of this type of painting is very difficult to appreciate on acquaintance with only a single exponent of the school, as is the case with Colombian viewers, because it slides almost surreptitiously between the grid Torres built with his concept of "structure" and, at times, the . . . placement of the structural pieces articulated in that fundamental square shape.

Yet neither the paintings themselves, nor their texture and color, nor their composition enjoy the personal freedom that the Constructivists condemn as a libertine quality of the contemporary era: Alpuj's work, like that of his fellow Constructivists, comprises the sacrifices and renunciations common to all of the school's members. In each section of the overall grid, the painting sometimes puts its freedom to the test, but the change is too limited; now and again it exhibits a more lyrical impasto, experiments with gradations of color, coordinates within itself tones and primary colors that often bear the living trace of the brush trying to ignore the grid. However, color and texture can never prevail or take on much importance, because the moment they soar upwards they reach the edge of their cell and fall back down, and then repeat the attempt in the adjoining cell. The result is a decrease in the overall power of color and in the very material of the painting, a continual muting of the palette; even when it is strident, it is subject to an enslaving unity.

Alpuj does not consider himself in the least imprisoned; rather, he feels liberated by Torres-García, with his own system elevated—as we were saying two Sundays ago—to the category of general system: otherwise, he would not be a disciple but a critic, and would confront the grand adventure of personal freedom. But Alpuj is an honest artist whose devotion to intellectually derived painting frees him from the frivolity of our essays, on the one hand, and from false Americanism on the other. Those who are not familiar with the precedent of the 111 variations on the same system exhibited publicly by the Taller Torres-García will be surprised to see a distinct kind of painting that on the international level does not derive from Picasso, and at home is not in the slightest related to Obregón or Ramírez Villamizar or Botero.

This is a kind of painting that places all of America within a grid, that takes control of the Pacific coast, the Primada cathedral, and the cafes of Bogotá, using them as simple

pretexts for building new structures that greedily hurl themselves over forms, such as Mount Monserrate, in order to reduce them to images that fit neatly into the grid-like structure of the painting. In a word, even though Alpuj from time to time emphatically maintains that America must have an art made for it alone, this art lacks all vindicating patriotism and views America as a repertoire of forms that must be converted into a succinct and expressive vocabulary. Alpuj, like the school and Torres-García himself, seeks to resolve a series of ideal notions that are utterly visual, and although those ideas—as we have already seen—often strangle the image, the circle of action is quite circumscribed: rather than being full of Americanist impurities that discover the Indian, it rides on the new forms invented by Europeans.

In Alpuj's favor, it would also be necessary to explain that Constructivism does not place a grid over reality and turn it into a facile puzzle. Instead, it remakes every figure or natural object in an attempt to reduce it to forms that are fundamental and, in a certain way, key to this language. The objects, the world containing them, the space that receives them, everything enters into those systematic reductions and gives the paintings the unity that obsesses the Taller's disciples, and which, moreover, is not difficult to achieve given the almost mathematical logic of Constructivist theory. As I review the positive aspects of Alpuj's painting, his efforts that award a formula the appearance of freedom, his loyalty to pictorial issues, his excellent skills as a painter, the only slightly distressed feeling that I cannot suppress is the recognition in Alpuj's landscapes of the man, the fish, the house, and the clock that—much as we try to see them differently—are absolutely the same as those arranged by Torres García on his own canvases thirty years ago. This is logical. Constructivism is a mental operation: a certain process leads to a certain result. The fatalism that weighs on the school seems to me its greatest mistake, and not even Alpuj's great faith has succeeded in convincing me otherwise.