

## Joaquín Torres-García: A Global Modernist Before His Time

by [John Yau](#) on January 10, 2016

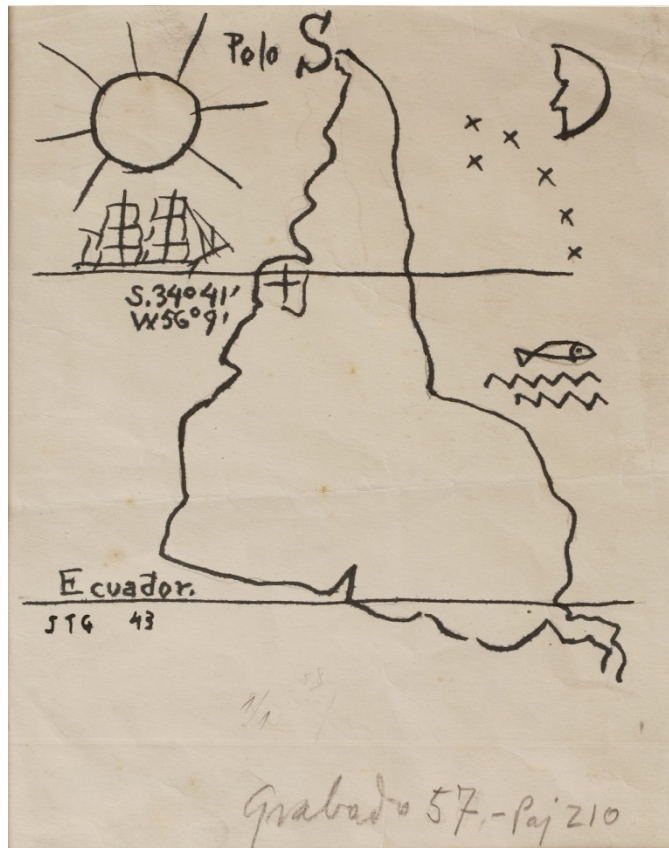


Installation view of “Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern” at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Photo by Jonathan Muzikar. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York) ([click to enlarge](#))

Progress is one of the key myths to the reception, assessment, assimilation, and display of modernist art. The Museum of Modern Art has played a central role in originating as well as perpetuating the belief that the history of modern art is a story of progress, ascending from representation to pure abstraction. It is difficult to extricate yourself from this narrative and its multitude of conventions, but it is important to keep trying. Otherwise, you are very likely to become just another lemming in what Harold Rosenberg characterized as “the herd of independent minds,” praising those that you are supposed to, while ignoring those deemed unworthy of attention.

So before I write about [Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern](#) at the Museum of Modern Art, the first time his work has been seen in depth in New York since it was shown in the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1992-93, and his first major retrospective in America in more than forty years, I want to point out that Torres-García is already a familiar figure to serious museum-goers, while dozens of other 20th century artists working in Latin America remain unknown or, in some cases, misrepresented. On this front, the Museum of Modern Art remains a persistent

disappointment. One reason I bring this up is because a fellow Uruguayan, Rafael Barradas (1890-1929), is cited as an important influence on Torres-García, but I have little idea what his actual work looks like. In fact, I don't remember ever seeing an example of Barradas' work in a New York museum. Am I supposed to accommodate myself to this state of invisibility, just as years ago I was supposed to accept what William S. Rubin, who was [curator](#) and director of the painting and sculpture department at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) (1968–1988), wrote about the Chinese and Afro-Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam: “Wifredo Lam was the first Surrealist to make primitive and ethnic sources central to his art.”



Joaquín Torres-García, “América invertida (Inverted America)” (1943), ink on paper, 8 11/16 × 6 5/16 inches.  
Museo Torres García, Montevideo (© Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015) ([click to enlarge](#))

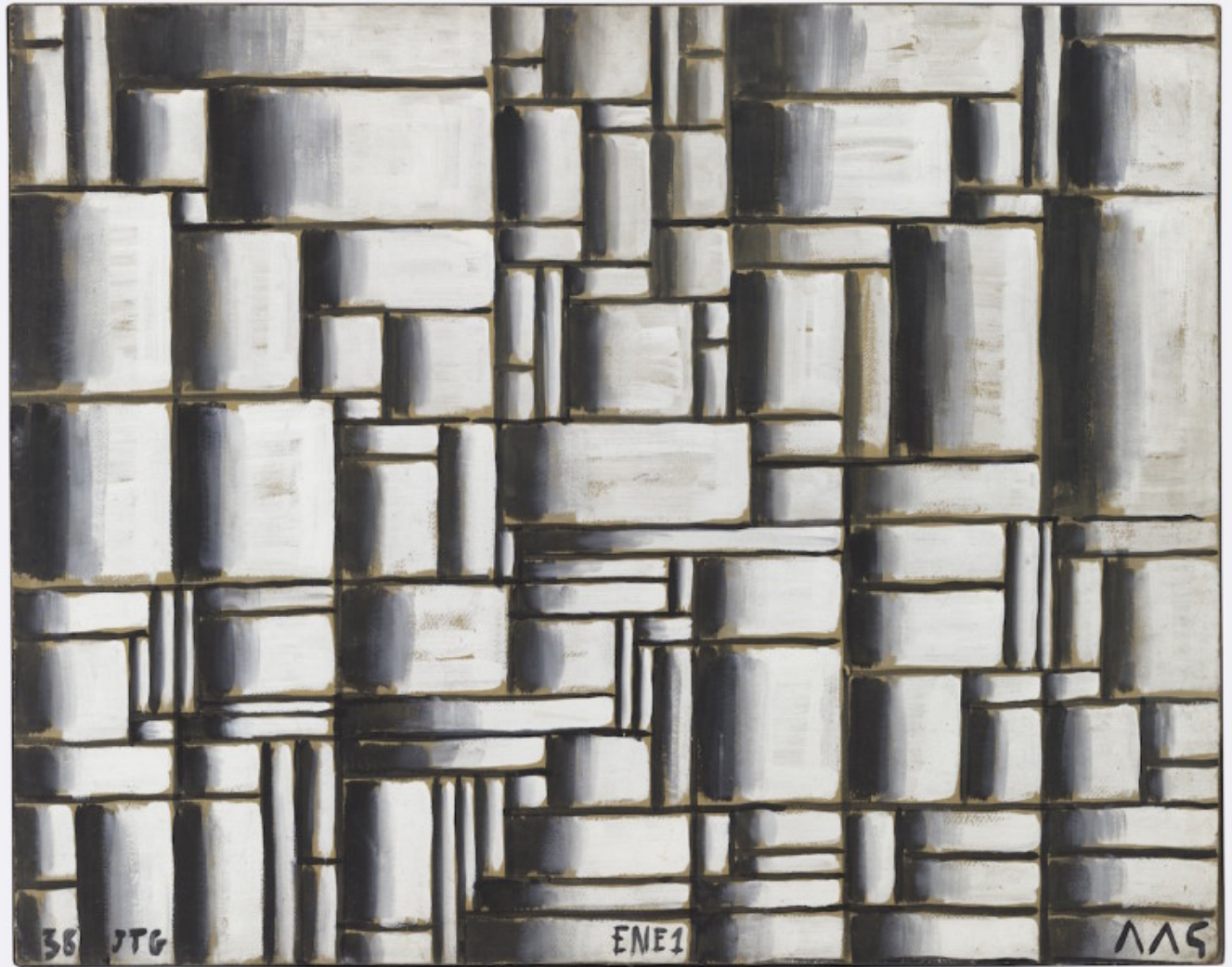
On the wall outside the exhibition is a logo, “America Invertida” that Torres-García first designed for “La Escuela del Sur” (“The School of the South”), a school of modern art – think Bauhaus or Black Mountain College – that he started when he returned to his hometown, Montevideo, from Paris in 1934. He has inverted a silhouette of South America and transposed it to North America’s usual location on the map. Two longitudinal lines underscore the move. Torres- García believed that South America did not need to be beholden to either North America or Europe, that it was equal to both. That was the message he wanted those who attended “La Escuela del Sur” to get above all else. Even though Torres- García is one of the best known Latin American modernists, his claim of equality has never been taken seriously by the Museum of Modern Art, and so you can imagine my delight at seeing his logo blown-up and on the wall, if only for the life of this exhibition.

*Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* was organized by Luis Pérez-Oramas, MoMA’s curator of Latin American art, and Karen Grimson, a curatorial assistant. Edited by Pérez-Oramas, the accompanying catalog contains essays by Alexander Alberro, Sergio Chejfec, Estrella de Diego

and Geannine Gutiérrez-Guimaraes. (Can you imagine such ethnically named writers reviewing art for the *New York Times* or *New York* magazine?) In his essay, "THE ANONYMOUS RULE: Joaquín Torres-García, the Schematic Impulse, and Arcadian Modernity," Pérez-Oramas advances that Torres-García's career did not follow modernism's narrative of progress but one of compression. This seems right, up to a point. For all the revisiting of earlier motifs and preoccupations, which Torres-García did throughout his career, especially after he committed himself to being a modern artist around 1919, there is something unruly about his work.

When Torres-García (1874-1949) was seventeen, his family moved from Montevideo to his father's native Barcelona. In 1903, he worked with Antoni Gaudí on the stained glass windows of the Sagrada Família and the Palma Cathedral. In 1912, he was commissioned to paint a cycle of frescos to be installed in the chapel of the Palau de la Generalitat, the seat of the Catalan government. The frescos were not well received and the commission was cancelled, prompting Torres-García to move, along with his wife and three young children, to New York, where he started a company, Aladdin Toys, which produced wooden figures, and began making small sculptures whose parts could be reconfigured.

While living in New York, Torres-García met Stuart Davis, Joseph Stella and Walter Pach, among others. With Stuart Davis and Stanisław Szukalski, he was part of a three-person exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club. Katherine Dreier bought his work for The Société Anonyme, but it was not exhibited until after he died. Increasingly disenchanted with New York – which he loved and despised – after two years he and his family moved back to Europe, and lived mostly in small towns in Italy and France before moving to Paris in 1926. In 1929, he and Michel Seuphor started Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square), a group of artists engaged with abstraction.



Joaquín Torres-García, “Construcción en blanco y negro (Construction in white and black)” (1938), oil on paper mounted on wood, 31 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in honor of David Rockefeller (© Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015. Photograph by Thomas Griesel)

At various points, Piet Mondrian, Theo Van Doesburg and Jean Helion were involved with Cercle et Carré. The group published a journal and organized an exhibition of work by more than one hundred artists. As all this was going on, Torres-García wrote a telling letter to Van Doesburg: “You know that I can’t stick strictly to a completely abstract, pure art.” This is what makes Torres-García so necessary and elusive. He is full of contradictions that never get resolved, reminding us that trying to make everything all fit together is contrary to life. Ultimately, Torres-García proves the inadequacy of Pérez-Oramas’ term, “compression.” Yes, he brought together the so-called primitive and the modern, but that hardly covers everything else he brought into play: architecture, children’s toys, numerology, religious symbols, rough and weathered surfaces, illusionism, geometry, mechanical forms, Symbolism, Futurism and Cubism. He was a tireless and eloquent writer, but most of his work has not been translated.

In 1934, amidst the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism, with Europe sliding toward devastation, Torres-García and his family returned to Montevideo, where he published *Círculo y Cuadrado* with the same logo used for the journal connected to Cercle et Carré. He started “La Escuela del Sur” and became a public figure who sounded the clarion call that a Uruguayan artist could be modern without following in the well-trod footsteps of European masters. And he would



know, because that is exactly what he had achieved.

This is also something for which he has never received full credit, especially in America, because much of the art world still believes that all modernists owe something to Picasso, or Henri Matisse, or Marcel Duchamp. This comprehensive exhibition dispels that view and, in doing so, begins to unravel a narrative MoMA has long propagated.



Joaquín Torres-García, “Estructura a cinco tonos con dos formas intercaladas (Structure in five tones with two interspersed forms)” (1948), oil on cardboard, 19 11/16 x 20 1/2 inches. Private collection (courtesy Galería Sur, Montevideo. © Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015. Photo credit: Eduardo Baldizan)

The exhibition includes work from every phase of Torres-García career, done across many mediums, including paintings, drawings, relief-like constructions, freestanding objects, one-of-a-kind books, collages, toys, and what can only be called hybrids — combinations of painting and sculpture which in some cases are simultaneously figurative and abstract, rendering the distinction moot.

By including works done in various mediums — particularly the collages, toys, books in which he collected images from disparate sources, making an archive, and reconfigurable constructions — the exhibition underscores that being single-minded doesn't necessarily mean following one path and paring away your options, like Mondrian. About the collages, some of which are in albums, I just want to say that any large survey of works done in this medium ought to now include Torres-García. There is something endearing about the toys — the profiles of painted wooden dogs, for example — which extends to the paintings done in what the artist called his “cathedral-style” and “Universal Constructivism.” They were Torres-García's response to Mondrian's “Neo-Plasticism.” Started around 1929 and lasting until he returned to Uruguay in 1934, after which they intermittently recur, these are the works for which Torres-García is best known. They influenced American artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Louise Nevelson, as well as anticipate the work of A.R. Penck and Matt Mullican.

Vertical in format, the surface is divided by an irregular grid filled with symbols — clocks, fish, male and female figures, numbers and letters, sailing ships, anchors, houses, bottles, ladders — schematically drawn in a simple, linear style falling somewhere between children's art and graphic symbols. Many of these works are done in a limited palette of light and dark grays or creamy beige. While they are Torres-García's most identifiable works, they are hardly all that he did. After returning to Montevideo in 1934, he worked on a series of challenging and mysterious paintings in which he dissolved the border between abstraction and representation. In these geometric, structural paintings, he eliminates all pictographic signs, as well as employs the illusion of relief and even shadow to evoke a shallow façade, “a stone wall”, as he called it. These largely black, white and gray paintings are mute, but not necessarily silent. In them, Pre-Columbian stonework has been transformed into something modern, but not mechanical. There is a roughness to the way they are painted, a refusal to refine the edges or forms. They are a singular achievement that cements his unique place in art history. Stylistically speaking, they also anticipate the overly refined paintings of Toma Abt and the luminous, shallow spaces of some of Juan Uslé's paintings.







Joaquín Torres García, "Composition" (1931), oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 24 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Larry Aldrich, 1956 (© Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015. Photo Thomas Griesel)

Starting in the 1920s, when he was in New York, and continuing through the rest of his career, he made painted, wooden wall reliefs and sculptures, often done on rough, seemingly found pieces of wood. They are, as Pérez-Oramas points out in his essay, "poorly painted" and "poorly constructed." They share something with the "Cathedral-style" and the structural paintings, but often in only the most tenuous ways. The lack of finish infuses them with a tactile presence while asserting that sophistication can be achieved while hewing to the handmade and, more importantly, homemade. Long before making something that looks slipshod became fashionable, Torres-García recognized that making something that looks sophisticated was also a convention.

Starting with the large figurative fresco and related drawings from 1916, to the cacophonous street scenes he did while living in New York, to his toys and small notched, abstract figures with rearrangeable parts, to his collages and one-of-kind books, to the painted wooden constructions he did from the 1920s until the end of his life, and the eclectic works of his last decade, the viewer realizes that Torres- García was a protean artist who conflated his religious beliefs with the idea that art was a universal language understandable to anyone. He was a global modernist long before the term became fashionable and in that regard he was a true visionary. Even after Torres-García

achieved a unique body of work, as he did with the structural abstractions, he refused to refine the style. Recognizing that he would never fit in — which I suspect happened when his fresco commission was rejected — Torres-García refused to assimilate and for that he paid a price both in Europe and America. This exhibition might suggest that things have changed, but I am not sure they have changed all that much. Meanwhile, this exhibition should be on everyone's must-do list.

**Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern** continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through February 15.

**Featured Joaquín Torres-García MoMA Museum of Modern Art**