

# Art in America

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## BETWEEN WORLDS

by Stephen Westfall

Joaquín Torres-García:  
*Today*, ca. 1919,  
collage and tempera  
on cardboard, 20¼ by  
14¼ inches. Institut  
Valencià d'Art  
Modern, Generalitat.

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© Sucesión Joaquín  
Torres-García,  
Montevideo.



Pioneering modernist Joaquín Torres-García brought avant-garde boldness to his native Uruguay and a new awareness of Latin American art to the U.S. and Europe.

Teardrop-shaped Uruguay is tucked between Brazil and Argentina, its southwest border perched just north of Buenos Aires. The tiny country—encompassing only 68,000 square miles and 3.4 million people—looks east to the source of its 17th-century Portuguese and Spanish colonialization, and inward to its largely diffused and dispersed population of Charrúa natives, who inhabited the region for at least 3,500 years before the Europeans arrived. Accordingly, Joaquín Torres-García, Uruguay's most famous modern artist, eagerly embraced the international avant-garde but also remained mindful of his continent's pre-Columbian past.



Torres-García left Uruguay at age 16 bound for Europe. When he returned to his homeland in 1934, at age 59, he found it transformed from a largely agrarian country to one with a modern, though troubled, economy and governmental structure. “Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern,” a formally diverse survey curated by Luis Pérez-Oramas, now on view at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, presents an artist who made his own complex transition into modernity.

Torres-García was born in Montevideo in 1874 to a Spanish immigrant father and Uruguayan mother. Under financial pressure, his father sold his general store and returned with his family to his

native Spain in 1891, settling briefly in his hometown of Mataró, 25 miles north of Barcelona. There Torres-García studied the traditional genres of portraiture, still life and landscape under painter Josep Vinardell and at the Escola Municipal d'Arts i Oficis. When the family moved to Barcelona the following year, he enrolled in night classes at the Escola de Nobles Arts “La Llotja” and also attended the less classically inclined Academia Baixas.

Travelling back and forth between Barcelona and Madrid during the ensuing years, Torres-García studied philosophy, literature and fresco painting; worked as an illustrator; befriended the sculptor Julio González; hung out with the Catalan avant-garde at Barcelona's café Els Quatre Gats; scrutinized the Spanish masters at the Prado in Madrid; and, in 1903, became an assistant to Antoni Gaudí, who had him design four stained-glass windows for the cathedral in Palma, Majorca.

Up to this point, Torres-García's painting consisted largely of traditional close-up observational portraits. When his lens widened, placing his figures in a setting, the work became a little more experimental—a fusion of Symbolism and Puvis de Chavannes's Arcadian classicism. Torres-García was forging a pan-Mediterranean style based on connecting the Catalanian cultural heritage with a pastoral vision of human labor and familial relations in nature. This effort was closely related to Noucentisme, a Catalanian movement that was opposed to Art Nouveau. Yet traces of that style are still found, along with Symbolist elements filtered through Puvis, in such Torres-García paintings from the period as *Manolita en su jardín* (Manolita in Her Garden), 1902.

Elsewhere in Europe, evocations of barely clothed figures in a pastoral setting were about to erupt in the vivid color and vigorous *alla prima* painting of the Fauves and Expressionists. But Torres-García remained more reserved in color and dogged in technique. In discussing the artist's maturing modernist abstractions and near abstractions from the mid-1920s onward, Pérez-Oramas describes the technique as “rustic”:

A concern for the synthetic—for adhering to the essential, unenhanced elements of a concrete form—generated a taste for coarse, even crude resolutions: a rough texture, a dark palette, a *sprezzatura* informed by the spirit of geometry but not of refinement.<sup>1</sup>

Even prior to his conversion to the structural schemas of Cubism and Neoplasticism in the 1920s, Torres-García showed interest in organizing (and generalizing) structures over virtuosic gesture and finish. Thus the impressively scaled but ultimately awkward fresco *Lo temporal no és més que símbol* (The Temporal Is No More Than Symbol, 1916), depicting a giant Pan-like figure playing the flute works. Instead, that distinction goes to paintings that mix archaically flattened figures and landscapes with architectural bas- amid a throng of dancers (some nude, some classically robed) who barely come to his knees, is not the strongest and most prescient of his early relief at a much more compact, cabinet scale. The bricolage-like *Arquitectura con figuras clásicas* (Architecture with Classical Figures, 1914) and *Construcción arquitectónica con figuras* (Architectonic Construction with Figures, 1915), for example, are contemporaneous with Picasso's sculptural *Guitar* (1914) and his ventures into collage. Yet Torres-García's works retain their traditional pictorial wholeness, perhaps the last time the artist would move so hesitantly into an avant-garde style. They anticipate the present-day painter Merlin James's similarly scaled depictions of facades of a more humble nature. They also inaugurate Torres-García's career-long engagement with wood as a painting ground and sculptural material.

*La temporal no és més que símbol* makes a grand entrance to the MoMA exhibition, but the painting was to prove a motivating disappointment for Torres-García. It was part of a five-fresco cycle commissioned for the Saló de Sant Jordi chapel in Barcelona's Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya, the headquarters for Catalan political power. However, a significant Catalan faction denounced the first mural, *La Catalunya eterna* (Eternal Catalonia, 1913, as too schematic, or “systematic,” and by 1917, with four frescos in place, the project was cancelled. In *La Catalunya eterna*, Torres-García sought to incorporate a vision of emancipatory industrial labor with his Arcadian imagery. Yet while he worked on the fresco designs, he was already moving to integrate Cubist and Futurist innovations into a contemporary style.

Torres-García had met a younger, fellow Uruguayan painter, Rafael Barradas, who was already painting figures and cityscapes in a Futurist-influenced style he termed Vibrationism. Barradas inspired the elder artist to pursue contemporaneity in his own work, which ultimately prompted Torres-García to pack up his wife and three children for a move to New York in 1920. They stopped in Paris on the way, where Torres-García met with Catalan peers Picasso (whom he already knew from Els Quatre Gats) and Miró. He didn't get along at all with Picasso, but opened a friendship with Miró.

Once in New York, Torres-García started a business to manufacture and distribute the painted wood toys he had been fashioning in the preceding few years. Several examples are included in the show—delightful little human and animal figures that verge on blocky abstraction. Designed for child's play, they nevertheless exhibit a strange votive quality.

The urban energy of New York was just what Torres-García needed to push him into a post-Cubist language, a web of signs like those in Marsden Hartley's semi-abstract *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914) or in contemporary paintings by Stuart Davis and John Marin. He met a number of artists, both European expats and Americans, and the collector Katherine Dreier bought three of his paintings for the Société Anonyme. He also established connections with the Society of Independent Artists, whose members included Dreier and fellow collector Walter Arensberg in addition to artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Albert Gleizes, Marin, William Glackens, John Sloan and Joseph Stella, several of whom also belonged to the Société Anonyme. In 1921, Torres-García's work was included in shows at the Whitney Studio Club, the famous "Paintings and Drawings by American Artists Showing the Later Tendencies in Art" at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the well-regarded fifth annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf Astoria.

But sales were few, and, despite social successes such as appearing at the society's costume ball in overalls painted in a checkered pattern with the city's landmarks either drawn or named in text (the words "New" and "York" were emblazoned on separate pant legs), Torres-García felt alienated by the commercial hurly-burly of the city. After a series of financial setbacks, he sailed with his family to Italy, where he hoped cheaper carpentry costs would keep his toy company alive.

In 1924, lured by the possibility of mural work, Torres-García moved to Villefranche-sur-mer on the French Riviera. The work didn't pan out, and in 1925 the New York warehouse of his Aladdin Toy Company burned down, putting an end to his fledgling business. A further blow came in 1926, when his surviving frescos in the Saló de Sant Jordi were declared heretical by the new dictatorial Spanish government and painted over. That same year, he relocated the family yet again, this time to a large Paris apartment shared with painter Jean Hélion and his wife.

In Paris, Torres-García's fortunes finally turned, when he was taken up by the dealer Georges Bine. The artist, at 53, was then able to live from his work for the first time in his life. His art had matured into a personalized vocabulary of form and texture, a vigorous synthesis of Constructivism and Synthetic Cubism, mostly abstract but here and there retaining allusions to cityscapes and the figure. Much of this work, some of which takes the form of small boxy constructions or vertical forms assembled from blocks, is painted on wood in black, white and the primary colors.

In 1928, Torres-García met Theo van Doesburg and a number of the other De Stijl artists, including Mondrian and Georges Vantongerloo. With these and other abstractionists, including Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, he formed the group Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square) in order to promote the aesthetic values of abstract art in the face of the decadent threat mounted by the Surrealists. This tumult of movements may look somewhat slapstick from our postmodernist vantage point, but at the time artists truly felt they were fighting to control the future of art.

In 1930, Torres-García organized an exhibition of Latin American artists in Paris for Galerie Zak and, perhaps more importantly, published his essay, "Vouloir construire" (Will to Construct) in the first issue of Cercle et Carré's eponymous journal. The essay lays out a view of pan-cultural and anachronic aesthetics that melded his interest in antiquity with the schematic tendency in his abstraction:

The more the person drawing has a spirit of synthesis, the more of a constructed image he will give us. The drawings of all primitive peoples—black, Aztec, etc., as well as Egyptian, Chaldean, etc.—are great examples. This spirit of synthesis, I believe, is what leads to the construction of the whole painting, and of sculpture, and to the determining of the proportions of architecture. This spirit alone allows the work to be seen in its totality as a single order, a unity. What wonders this rule has created across the ages! Why has it been overlooked?

Torres-García seemed to be outlining a Tao of aesthetics: timeless, contentless, universal. Despite his now outdated use of the term "primitive," this paragraph theorizes the artist's own rustic constructivism, emphasizing wholeness over anecdotal specificity.

The first great phase of Torres-García's mature art developed during this period in a series of pictographic grids that he termed "cathedral-style." Some of the first of these paintings are horizontal, and some, like *Physique* (Physics, 1929) and *Constructivo con varillas superpuestas* (Constructive with Superimposed Bars, 1930), are painted with backgrounds of earthy primary colors, white and black. By 1931, the paintings invoke a cathedral's verticality and the imagery is inscribed on monochrome light gray or taupe backgrounds.

Torres-García's imagery is enigmatic: fish, clock, anchor, schematic figures (that have been described as pre-Columbian), Classical architectural elements (columns, pilasters), bottles, glasses, letters, numbers, flywheels, boats; the inventory never seems to run out, though certain motifs are repeated. While not involved with automatism, these paintings anticipate the structure of Adolph Gottlieb's pictographs by at least a decade.

In some works, the forms are shaded, invoking bas-relief. Inevitably, Torres-García came into conflict with the purer abstractionists in Cercle et Carré, which dissolved at the end of 1930. He wrote van Doesburg a letter saying that he could never be a purely abstract artist. He was much more interested in his idea of the “anonymous rule,” fostering a tendency to the abstract while uniting significant forms from all art across all epochs and cultures.

A prolific writer and bookmaker, Torres-García also compiled volumes of images linked by form, irrespective of cultural context or chronology. These include his illustrated manuscript *Raison et nature: Théorie* (Reason and Nature: Theory, 1932) and *Structures* (1932), a scrapbook atlas, without text, that suggests formal affinities between certain objects and structures: vessels, temples, skyscrapers, paintings, friezes, busts, etc. *Structures* is a marvelous album, more homespun than Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-29) or André Malraux’s *Musée Imaginaire* (1947-76). Such undertakings are never really finished, because they are essentially maps of the creator’s own noticing mind, and they tend to induce in readers a similar penchant for indexing typologies.

By 1934, after more than 40 years abroad, Torres-García had finally had enough of a Depression-ridden Europe that was sliding back into armed conflict. The family boarded a ship (the boats in the “cathedral” paintings probably reference, in part, the artist’s own peregrinations) to Uruguay’s capital, Montevideo, where he was welcomed home as an international cultural hero.

Almost immediately, he founded Estudio 1037, a space to study, exhibit and promote a type of Pan-American modern art that’s also grounded in the ancient art of the Americas. In addition, he started the Asociación de Arte Constructivo, the journal *Círculo y cuadrado* (Circle and Square) and the Taller Torres-García, a workshop of devoted followers that included his sons Horacio and Augusto as well as figures such as Julio Alpuy and Gonzalo Fonseca.

Energized by these activities, Torres-García embarked on the last great body of work of his career, a richly conceived sequence of black-and-white abstractions. Mostly grids, occasionally a rosette swirl, these paintings break down Mondrian’s even lines and optical flatness into eroded borders and shaded intervals recalling Incan stonework and, once again, bas-relief. The works combine architectonic grandeur with the funky tactility of the artist’s painterly touch, and they make for a grand salon in the penultimate gallery of the MoMA exhibition.

The last room gives considerable vitrine space to the artist’s marvelous books, including a sketchbook that playfully uses the same simple visual elements to “construct” (always a key verb for the artist) an abstract image and a representational image on facing pages. Also featured is the final painting of his life, from 1949—a small wood panel of a family in Arcadian nudity with doves in the air above. The figures look like they could have been assembled from the block units of his black-and-white grids from the previous decade.

This idealized family scene makes a touching end to an exhibition that begins with a wall-sized blowup of Torres-García’s famous drawing *América invertida* (America Inverted, 1943 version), an earlier form of which appears in the 1934 manuscript for his lecture “La Escuela del Sur: Curso para formación de la conciencia artística” (The School of the South: Study for the Formation of Artistic Consciousness), delivered in 1935. The work depicts an upside-down South America—or, more accurately, an ascendant South America, as it would look if world maps were reoriented with the South at the top.

Torres-García enhanced his reputation as one of the fathers of South American modernism through numerous publications and over 500 lectures and radio broadcasts. In addition, he mentored artists like Juan Mele and Carmelo Arden Quin, who later rejected the embrace of antiquity in favor of a purer geometric abstraction, catalyzed by the effect that Swiss architect and designer Max Bill had on the 1959 São Paulo Bienal. Among the artists electrified by the biennial, in which Torres-García’s work was also posthumously exhibited, were Lygia Pape, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.

Torres-García’s own oeuvre looks as fresh today as the work of any of his progeny. In his intrepid manner, through career disappointments and endless uprootings, the artist kept his eye on the big picture and small, and made a major contribution to overturning the established cultural order. He not only helped foster modern art in South America but paved the way for the global acceptance today of artists like Beatriz Milhazes and Adriana Varejão. The depth of his work and the stories behind it are handsomely represented in this exhibition and the five essays in the indispensable catalogue.

*“Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern,” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through Feb. 15. The show will travel to the Espacio Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, May 19-Sept. 11, 2016, and the Museo Picasso, Málaga, Oct. 10, 2016–Jan. 29, 2017.*

1. Quoted in Luis Pérez-Oramas, “The Anonymous Rule: Joaquín Torres-García, the Schematic Impulse, and Arcadian Modernity,” Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2015, p. 13-14.
2. Ibid., p. 12.