

Title: Alpuy's Mature Period

Author: H.R

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The corner of Park Avenue and 68th Street, in the heart of New York's elegant East Side, has recently become the port of entry—or at least an important stop—for an Uruguayan who has arrived after a long journey and has much to show us. Starting January 25 and continuing throughout the month of February, the three main exhibition halls of the magnificent mansion that houses the Center for Inter-American Relations were devoted to an extraordinary set of works by Julio Alpuy, who has made his home in New York for a decade. Characterized by an admirable unity of style, the exhibition represents the most recent stages of a steady, continuous evolution that began thirty years earlier in Montevideo: more than half of the thirty-two pieces were executed in the last four years, and none more than seven years ago.

A disciple of Joaquín Torres-García from the very beginning, and soon a teacher in the already legendary Taller Torres-García, Alpuy left his mark on the members of the Constructivist school through a series of prints and oil paintings. Perhaps the best evidence of this period in his career is his involvement, together with other members of the Taller, in creating the murals for the Martiniré Pavilion of the Saint Bois hospital in 1944. Naturally, he participated in many exhibitions, both in Uruguay and abroad; his work was included in the São Paulo Biennial in 1952 and 1954, and he later took part in shows in Buenos Aires, Quito, Washington, Paris, and The Hague.

Then came the moment when Alpuy—without ceasing to be faithful to Torres-García or the Taller, but seeking to define and develop his own personality—decided to go out and travel the world on his own. His itinerary was very personal. Of course, he spent a year in Europe, with the requisite pilgrimage to the sources of Western visual arts and a prestigious showing at the Salon des Surindépendents (1954), but he devoted most of his time to the American continent, spending more than a year in Venezuela and three and a half years in Colombia. Everywhere, as in his days in the Taller and now in his studio on Bond Street, he was working constantly, teaching, and, above all, learning. Clearly he needs no further teacher except experience, nor any stimulus but the pursuit of his own expressive ideal.

From painting he moved to crafting works of art from wood, first by drawing, cutting, or creating reliefs on wooden surfaces, and later by carving separate figures until they arrived at their own independent volumes—that is, until they became sculptures.

Still, we should note that Alpuy sees no sense in differentiating between one genre and another, since visual artists must be able to manage all the expressive resources within their reach and make use of those that suit them best. "Today this is something that

everyone accepts without question,” Alpuj says, “but it’s the way we always did things in the Taller.”

In his long journey in search of himself, Alpuj has changed not only the materials he uses in his work, but also—little by little—his subject matter. The city motifs and those involving man-made objects have gradually given way to natural forms, and the natural forms have in turn become simplified, stripped of all incidentals, to the point of acquiring the purity, clarity, and grace of what is most elemental: earth, water, the sun and the moon, flowers, fish, and especially man and woman—man and woman together in a world without time, an environment that suggests the lost Eden. Some elements of this repertoire appeared in Alpuj’s early works, and Torres-García praised them at a key moment. “Perhaps that is what drew me to him,” his then disciple reflects.

- What was the effect on you of seeing Torres-García’s work again at the Guggenheim exhibition last year?

It was like being reborn. I was able to appreciate him more as a great individual artist than as a teacher.

The pieces being exhibited by Alpuj in this one-man show—an honor that few artists receive in a city where competition for gallery space is fierce—are described as “wood relief,” although that is not actually a good description. Each and every work is the fruit of a lengthy production process. For example, *Caracol de la Vida*, one of the largest pieces in the exhibition, began with the figure that appears at the top of the spiral and grew incrementally, as a living thing grows in the natural world. By contrast, Alpuj sometimes takes a block of wood and carves it in search of the form hiding within it. He works alone, without assistants, almost exclusively by hand, and with the barest mechanical help (a saw and drill) essential for mastering the material. Alpuj occasionally uses paint or incorporates other materials, such as glass, tile, or a certain type of plaster, to strengthen a work. Or he may be content to cover the finished stone with a colorless patina. His most recent works—a magnificent *Torso* and a monumental *Figura de planta*—have no adornment whatsoever.

This is an exhibition by an artist of depth, who avoids the folkloric and shuns any concessions to the fads of the day: an artist who, above all, has succeeded in maintaining a line and style all his own through a lengthy process of perfecting his means of expression. From the small pieces in rich whites and blues, shut inside transparent boxes, to the large-scale paintings and sculptures, these artworks communicate a powerful feeling of elemental vitality, and celebrate the beauty of the world and the dignity of those who live in it. And they do this in work that is mature, the fruit of many years of work and experience, by an artist who is sure of himself.