Joaquín Torres-García

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FOREWORD

The Museum of Modern Art has devoted major retrospectives to artists from Latin America throughout its history, from Diego Rivera in 1931–32—the second monographic exhibition the young institution attempted—through Cláudio Portinari in 1940 to León Ferrari, Mira Schendel, and Lygia Clark in just the last few years. These exhibitions have informed the universal imagination of modernity and some are considered landmarks in the public and scholarly understanding of these artists’ work. Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern enriches that institutional legacy by tracing the radical individuality of an artist who eluded classification: a man whose vision transcended the singularity of the work to become an appeal on behalf of a continent and a manifesto for a modernity of the South.

A central figure in the history of modernism in the Americas and a key protagonist in the transatlantic dialogue of cultural exchanges that has informed it, Torres-García has received continuous attention from the Museum, which has acquired his work since the early 1940s. He has fascinated generations of artists on both sides of the Atlantic, but most notably in the Americas—including, indeed, he counts among those artists a difference in both North and South American modernism as well as contemporary art. Major North American artists from Barnett Newman to Louise Bourgeois have absorbed his work, and countless artists in Latin America have been inspired by the legacy of this complex master. While assimilating and transforming the former’s inventions of modern art, Torres-García stayed true to his understanding of time as a col-lusion of different periods rather than a linear progression, a distinction that contemporary artists understand.

We are especially grateful to the heirs of Joaquín Torres-García who agreed to lend their works to this exhibition. The support of the Museo Torres-García and of the Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, Montevideo, has been central to this undertaking; all those who, within the family and abroad, have tended their life to the preservation of Torres’s legacy can consider this exhibition their own achievement. Such a complex project demands the collaboration of countless individuals and we are grateful to the writers, curators, and museum professionals who have contributed to this exhibition as well as to the excellence and creativity of The Museum of Modern Art’s own staff: Luis Pérez-Osorio, The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, and Karen Gitelson, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Drawings and Prints, who attended to every detail of the exhibition from inception to realization; in doing so they have depended on the support and counsel of Cecilia de Torres and Cecilia de Torres—indeed, she shared with us her archive, her knowledge, and her research. We have relied on her enormously, and on her colleagues Susana Temkin and Dan Pollock.

My profound gratitude goes to the lenders who have agreed to be part of this project, and who are listed on p. 223. It goes without saying that an exhibition of this kind would be impossible without the generosity of those willing to entrust the works in their collections to us for its duration. I am grateful to all those who facilitated loans in their roles within key institutions: Sergio Atchégua, Valencia; Francisco Arévalo, Miami; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas; Julio Adiego, Valencia; Francisco Arévalo, Miami; Manuel Borrás, Valencia; Jeannette van Campenhout; Martín Cerruti, Montevideo; Obén Sanchez; Diego Alarcón, Valencia; Francisco Arévalo, Miami; Manuel Borrás, Valencia; Jeannette van Campenhout; and on her colleagues Susanna Temkin and Dan Pollock. Cecilia de Torres has committed her life to the study of her father-in-law’s work. The author of his catalogue raisonné, she shared with us her archive, her knowledge, and her research. We have relied on her enormously, and on her colleagues Susana Temkin and Dan Pollock. Cecilia has committed her life to the study of her father-in-law’s work. The author of his catalogue raisonné, she shared with us her archive, her knowledge, and her research. We have relied on her enormously, and on her colleagues Susana Temkin and Dan Pollock. Cecilia de Torres has committed her life to the study of her father-in-law’s work. The author of his catalogue raisonné, she shared with us her archive, her knowledge, and her research. We have relied on her enormously, and on her colleagues Susana Temkin and Dan Pollock. Cecilia de Torres has committed her life to the study of her father-in-law’s work. The author of his catalogue raisonné, she shared with us her archive, her knowledge, and her research. We have relied on her enormously, and on her colleagues Susana Temkin and Dan Pollock. Cecilia de Torres has committed her life to the study of her father-in-law’s work. 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Senior Registrar Assistant; Shannon Darrough, Director, Maggie Lederer, Senior Producer, and Exhibition Planning and Administration; Stefanii Ruta-Atkins, Head Registrar, and Caitlin Kelly, Director, Jennifer Cohen, Assistant Director, and Jaclyn Verbitski, Department Assistant, Deputy General Counsel, whose guidance is invaluable. I am also grateful to Erik Patton, Associate who has excelled in managing the shipping of the works safely and carefully; and Nancy Adelson, Yepes, Associate Coordinator of Exhibition Planning and Administration, whose coordination of expertise is matched by her partnership; Betty Fisher, Senior Design Manager, and Peter Pérez, My deepest gratitude goes to Karen Grimson, Curatorial Assistant, and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães. I am also grateful to Heather Cleary, Jen Hofer, and John Pluecker for their translations of the texts in Spanish.

A challenging curatorial project like this one can only be achieved within the framework of an exceptionally encouraging and demanding institutional structure such as The Museum of Modern Art. My deepest gratitude goes to Karen Grimson, Curatorial Assistant, and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães, former Curatorial Assistant, my closest collaborators on the show. Before becoming Curatorial Assistant, Karen provided invaluable support as Research Assistant under a generous grant provided by Diego Gradowczyk and Isabella Huffman in honor of Mario Gradowczyk. I am deeply grateful for the time spent working closely with John Ahearn, Conservator, whose expertise is matched by her partnership; Betty Fisher, Senior Design Manager, and Peter Pérez, Shop Foreman, Exhibition Design and Production, whose aesthetic judgment is impeccable; Carlos Yepes, Associate Coordinator of Education, and Administration, whose coordination of the logistical aspects of the show is exemplary; Sacha Etson, Associate Registrar of Exhibitions, who has excelled in managing the shipping of the works safely and carefully; and Nancy Adeleon, Deputy General Counsel, whose guidance is invaluable. I am also grateful to Erik Patton, Associate Director, Jennifer Cohen, Assistant Director, and Jaylyn Vorhoffs, Department Assistant, Exhibition Planning and Administration; Stefanieta Bates-Aiken, Head Registrar, and Caitlin Kelly, Senior Registrar Assistant; Shannon Darrough, Director, Maggie Ledderer, Senior Producer, and Deanna Acerra, Producer in Digital Media; Erik Landesberg, Director, Robert Kuebler, Production Manager, and John Wronn, Collections Photographer, and Jennifer Sellar, Senior Digital Image Archivist in Imaging and Visual Resources; Kim Mitchell, Chief Communications Officer, Margaret Doyle, Director, and Sara Barth Walsh, Senior Publicist in Communications; the Collections and Exhibition Technology team of Ian Eckert, Manager, Allison LaSmitney and Leslie Davis, Assistants, who have attended patiently and graciously to our endless queries; Clare Corey, Production Manager, Jocelyn Meinhardt, Associate Writer, Tony Loo, Art Director, and In Hee Bae, Graphic Designer in the Department of Design, whose brilliant concepts beautifully herald the artist’s production. I owe special thanks to Cora Roseower, Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, and to Rob Jung, Manager, Tom Krueger, Assistant Manager, and the team of art handlers and preparators for their gracious accommodation of our many movements of works in storage and heartfelt dedication to the installation of the show. The standards of this team are an endless lesson in discipline and intellectual efficiency for any curator.

Todd Bishop, Senior Deputy Director, External Affairs, and Sylvia Benner, Senior Development Officer, Exhibition and Program Funding, have achieved funding for the project with great enthusiasm. The diplomatic skills and fine intelligence of Jay Laymon, Director of the International Program, and Carol Coffin, Executive Director of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, in whose galleries this show is displayed, are invaluable. I want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Education for their insightful collaboration: Wendy Woon, Deputy Director, Public Holguina, Director of Adult and Academic Education; Jose Van Nostrand, Assistant Director, Exhibition Program and Initiatives, Sarah Kennedy, Associate Curator in the Lab Programs, Sara Bodinson, Director, and Jenna Madison, Assistant Director of Interpretation and Research. Their work on the exhibition's public programs and educational initiatives has greatly expanded its reach. My special gratitude goes to Mihai Hugaton, Chief of Library and Archives, Michelle Eggott, Rona Roeh Senior Museum Archivist, and Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, for their tireless attention and for accommodating our access to the holdings of the Archives and Library, a number of which appear in the exhibition.

An essential partner in this endeavor has been, as it always is, the Department of Publications. I have been fortunate to work with the extraordinary team there led by Christopher Hudson, Publisher; David Prakash, Editorial Director; Debra Tull, Associate Publisher; Chul R. Kim, Associate Publisher, Marc Sapir, Production Director, and Hannah Kim, Production Coordinator, whose supervision and coordination have contributed invaluably to this publication; Amanda Wushburn, Senior Designer, who is responsible for the beautiful and elegant layout of this book; and Genevieve Allens, Rights Coordinator, who provided invaluable support. My deepest gratitude goes to the authors who have contributed to the book: Alexander Alzheimer, Sergio Betancourt, Ana María Gutiérrez-Guimarães, and Isabel Gutiérrez-Guimarães. I am also grateful to Heather Cleary, Jen Hofer, and John Pluecker for their translations of the texts in Spanish.

But last but not least, our colleagues in the Department of Drawings and Prints have enhanced this project in myriad ways: Josh Hauptman, Senior Editor; Francesca Stulman, Assistant Editor; the knowledgeable of Kathy Curry, Curator, is an invaluable asset to any project; John Fruscile, Department Manager, protected the project through his skilled managerial capacities and intellectual intuition; Emily Cushman, Collection Specialist, provided collegiality and unbeknowable good spirit; Jeff White and David Moreno, Preparators, worked to accommodate our use of the Paper Study Center; Alexandria Dicara, Assistant to the Chief Curator, and Li McKenzie and Yayla Barnes, Department Assistants, lent a hand at crucial moments; and finally, Sophia Marias Lucas, intern, made valuable contributions to the project. I am fortunate to have been blessed with colleagues of such extraordinarily collaborative spirit.

—Luis Pérez-Oramas

The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, The Museum of Modern Art
1. I refer to the last page—in fact the last page—of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, which includes a description of freedom as the ability to come to terms with the present, and of the need for a certain gift to be able to make something productive out of life’s choices. Merleau-Ponty writes, “It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, . . . that I can go farther.” Italics added. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945 (Eng. trans. New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 529.

2. Here I refer to the philosophical connection in Spanish between the strange (lo extraño) and the foreigner or stranger (lo extranjero), between what comes from outside and what is alien to us. See Pierre Fédida, *Le Site de l’étranger* (Paris: PUF, 1995), p. 156.


5. In 1893, as a young artist in Barcelona, Torres entered the Cercle Artístic de Sant Lluc, an artists’ group led by the Catholic bishop and philosopher Josep Torras i Bages (1846–1916), a founder of modern, Christian-inspired Catalan nationalism.

6. Joaquín Torres-García had reached maturity and was in Paris, resolutely coming to terms with what he had already become by chance—an foreigner, strange and a stranger, an artist who had traversed—as one might traverse rough terrain—the aspirations and delusions of the modern avant-gardes. It was 1930; Adolf Hitler would soon come to power in Germany; in France, the moderate conservative premier André Tardieu governed a country wracked by economic recession, the Wall Street Crash having dragged down economies throughout the West. Six years later Spain would enter a devastating civil war, drowning in a bitter sea of blood—prelude to a war that would be a watershed moment in European history, enshrining the twentieth century as one of humanity’s most violent.

The origins of modernity, and of modern art, date from the century’s sea of blood. No one exists outside of history, but the machine-loving cries of the Futurists, the epicurean cynicism of Dada, the production-oriented heroics of the Constructivists, the moral neutrality of devotees of pure form, the fetish or nostalgia for the Golden Age—all these prepared the ground for that tragic era, and all drew from the same well of anguish. Given the scale of the century’s tragedies, these artists’ aspirations to begin the world anew through new form can also, in hindsight, be read as delusions. This was the world in which Torres found himself on arriving in Paris in 1926, after brief stays in the modest rural towns of Fiesole and Livorno, Italy, and Villefranche-sur-Mer, France. On leaving New York for Europe two years earlier, at the age of fifty, he still had not yet found his “definitive language” as an artist. All the evidence suggests that as this tragic century was reaching the end of its first quarter, he had so far lived intensely as someone who had learned to resist it—perhaps because his intelligence had been shaped by his anachronistic training in medieval scholasticism, perhaps because he had an intuitive distrust of the new.

Torres had reached maturity, then, and amid the dying gasps of the modern avant-gardes, his age gave him a certain spiritual distance, allowed him certain liberties.
set him apart from the avant-garde passion for militant confrontation. This mood informed a sort of curiously theoretical manifesto he wrote in that year of 1930 on what he called “construction.” The manifesto, “Vouloir construire” (Will to construct), ran in the first issue of Cercle et Carré (the journal of the movement of the same name that he had helped to found but would soon leave), following a long text by Michel Seuphor, “Ball of twists and turns and uselessly lengthy,” according to its own author. Torres wrote, “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, Chinese, etc.—are great examples. This spirit of synthesis, I believe, is what leads to the construction of the whole painting, and to the determination 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?”

And he added: “This rule is an anonymous thing; it belongs to no one.”

In “Vouloir construire,” without denying the possibility of turning to “the pure ideas of understanding” in the search for order, Torres-García argued for intuition as the tool with which to define visual art. For him, the academic chapter of art that had begun in the Renaissance, with its mathematical system of perspective, was only a brief interruption in the primacy of that anonymous intuitive rule. It was this rule, belonging to no one in particular, that had allowed for the creation of the array of symbolic and artistic forms known up to that moment.

Without declaring itself as such, Vouloir construire was a participant in a trend toward the recovery of memory. It was a spiritual contemporary of the period’s complex projects of Missoumoyne, from Franz Boas to Aby Warburg, from Carl Einstein to Carl Jung, from Walter Benjamin to Ernst Cassirer, all working under the sign of a heterogeneous archaeology of historical forms and of their asynchronous recurrence. This was a quiet movement, running against the grain of a certain messianic modern devotion to progress—that is, against the grain of the avant-gardes. To understand the legacy of Torres-García—one of the essential, unenhanced elements of a concrete form—generated a taste for coarse, even crude resolutions: a rough texture, a dark palette, a less the same period as Torres: Pedro Figari (1861), Carlos Federico Sáez (1878), and three of South America’s most notable early-modern artists were born in Uruguay in more or less the same period as Torres: Pedro Figari (1861), Carlos Federico Sáez (1878), and Rafael Barradas (1890), whose friendship with Torres was central to what Juan Fló has called “an impulse—an impulse toward turning a given form into a primal representational matrix, a matrix conceived purely in the imagination rather than in the form’s iconographic history, yet implying a primeval version of it. 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 premodernism informed by the spirit
of geometry but not of refinement. Among these works, a few paintings and the highly plastic works in wood, often rustic in construction, foreshadowed what would come to be Torres’s definitive language, the “primitive” pictographic signature that would become a hallmark of his work after the immensely productive year of 1931 (fig. 1). It was Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life” in Esquisses d’Esthétique (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1986), esthétiques (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1986), that set the stage for Torres’s interest in the “primitive” tradition. Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life” set the stage for Torres’s interest in the “primitive” tradition.


16. Torres-García, Historia de mi vida, p. 120.

17. Ibid., p. 171 ff.

18. A sketch suggests that Torres may have studied the repertory in the style of Thomas Couture, nor can they be entirely attributed to the influence of Puvis de Chavannes, despite resemblances in iconography and Torres’s own recognition that Puvis had nourished him for a time. But the artist himself could not have been clearer in his autobiography: “Leaving behind more superficial ideas, after basing my work on Puvis de Chavannes, I had finally taken Greek art as my model,” a model coinciding with the anti-Castilian political ideals of Catalan thinkers such as Eugenio d’Ors, Enric Prat de la Riba, and Josep Torres i Bagues. This may have been the only time in Torres’s life when his aesthetic ideas corresponded to a political context, an accord that translated into the first and largest public commission of the artist’s career: frescoes for the Saló de Sant Jordi, the chapel in Barcelona’s Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya, the seat of Catalan political power since the Middle Ages.

The story of this commission, told in part by Torres himself in his autobiography, would become the story of his first disappointment in Europe, certainly a factor in his later move to New York. The frescoes demonstrate his interest in Mediterranean and Arcadian iconography. Before painting them he traveled to Italy to see Roman and Renaissance murals, identifying with those artists and particularly with Giotto. He spent six years planning the works, developing allegories on the themes of La Catalunya eterna (The eternal Catalonia, 1912, p. 52), the d’or de la humanitat (Humanity’s golden age, 1915), Les Arts (The arts, 1916), La temporal no és màs que símbol (The temporal is no more than symbol, 1916; pp. 18, 54), and La Catalunya industrial (The industrial Catalonia; unfinished; p. 53). The sketch for this last fresco suggests that Torres intended to establish an opposition between antiquity and the present, between an ideal and a modern imaginary, though it is impossible to confirm this without further evidence. What is clear is that the unveiling of the first fresco was accompanied by scandal: an important sector of the Catalan cultural world denounced its “overly systematic” composition—a charge made even by d’Ors, though he supported Torres anyway—and even a quality that “we would almost call moral.” Through the support of Prat de la Riba, first president of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya (Commonwealth of Catalonia), Torres was able to complete three more frescoes, but after that political leader’s death, in 1917, the contract was canceled. Even then, opposition to the murals continued, and in 1926—with the artist...
out of the country and the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera ruling Spain—his “Greek” images were censored and eventually covered over with other canvases. It remains surprising that the initial pretext for their rejection was their stripped-down appearance—

their antisensuality, as Fló puts it; their flatness, their “muted tonality.”

Torres’s interest in a Noucentista Arcadia—his first move against the grain of his times—can be seen as a first sign of an antimodern spirit. Tomás Llorens, for example, has argued that it marked the emergence of the Torres who understood “modernity as archaisms.” But a judgment based on the works’ iconography may mislead: a fin de siècle (modernist) appearance and an Arcadian (Noucentista) scene are not necessarily opposed. Nor do Torres’s iconographic choices settle the question of his approach to the art of his time. In fact his schematic, near-monumental treatment of some of the classical figures in the Sant Jordi frescoes, particularly in the last one he completed, Lo temporal no és més que símbol—a week to which we will return—is absolutely modern and can be linked to a number of artists involved in classical impulses at the time, from Picasso to Mario Sironi and Giorgio de Chirico, from Carlo Carrà to Georges Braque. Perhaps Torres’s Noucentista foray signaled only that he was, from the start, an antimodern modernist—a scholar modernist, as James Joyce was in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), from the same period, and as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Igor Stravinsky, Jacques Maritain, and Benedetto Croce would at some points be as well.

This antimodern modernity—this reserve of antimodernism that runs deep in some of the period’s best-known art and literature—was a crucial part of the modern project itself. Maturing within Torres in the early twentieth century were some of the same classical images, the same “Saturnian motifs,” that would emerge in the interwar period’s classical scenes that were censured and eventually covered over with other canvases. It remains surprising that the initial pretext for their rejection was their stripped-down appearance—and of the circumstantial and relative, a beauty embracing the circumstantial and relative, a beauty embracing

their antisensuality, as Fló puts it; their flatness, their “muted tonality.”

Perhaps Torres’s modernity was based on a concern with primary sources—sources of culture, certainly (hence his affiliation with Catalan Arcadianism), but also of creative intuition passed through his philosophical, classical, and scholastic education. But “classical” is too narrow a term: the coexistence of these sources, simultaneously spiritual and material, in Torres is what makes him a protean modern artist, a modern figure who was practicing the lessons of Baudelaire perhaps without having read them. I am thinking of the Spanish poet who wanted a beauty combined both of the unchanging and eternal—whose depths are hardly visible—and of the circumstantial and relative, a beauty embracing “period, style, spirit, passion” without forgetting Thomas Aquinas’s idea that art imitates nature in its manner of having read them. I am thinking of

The “Greek” chapter of early modernity, of which Torres’s version of Noucentisme was a part, may not have received the attention it deserves. The Torres who, in 1907, joined the faculty of Mont d’Or, a school inspired by the ideas of John Dewey, that practiced the Montessori method of “teaching through delight”; the Torres who took on the key public commission given to any Noucentista artist, for the frescoes in the Saló de Sant Jordi; the Torres who, in 1914, conceived and built Mon Reus, his house outside Barcelona—“half classical temple, half Catalan cottage,” as he described it—this Torres shared an aesthetic spirit that was visible, with local accents, from Moscow to Venice, from Berlin to London: a construction of community around a shared fascination for “Greekness.” As Guillermo de Osma writes, The nineteenth century sense of morality was ebbing and Greekness went beyond the fields of painting and art into social practices. Members of society threw Greek parties and dressed in Greek style, and not only was Greek love accepted—after the cruel punishment inflicted on Oscar Wilde—it was practiced by many intellectuals, artists, and patrons and leaders of fashion, both men and women. . . . Greece was an obligatory pilgrimage for artists and poets. [Lo temporal no és més que símbol]—a week to which we will return—is absolutely modern and can be linked to a number of artists involved in classical impulses at the time, from Picasso to Mario Sironi and Giorgio de Chirico, from Carlo Carrà to Georges Braque. Perhaps Torres’s Noucentista foray signaled only that he was, from the start, an antimodern modernist—a scholar modernist, as James Joyce was in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), from the same period, and as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Igor Stravinsky, Jacques Maritain, and Benedetto Croce would at some points be as well.

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who uses music to rule a universe of bodies jumbled together in struggles and embraces. The people at the feet of this musical monster evoke Lucretius’s lines on dreaming in De Rerum Natura: “the mists of mortals which perform/With mighty motions mighty enterprises/Often in sleep will do and dare the same . . . And after sleep, as if still mad in mind/They scarce come to, confounded as they are/By ferment of their frame.”

This monumental creature might remind us of some of Picassó’s 1920s paintings of enormous figures, whose size—but for their morning sunniness and lyricism—might in turn recall the famous Colosso (Colossus, 1808–12) attributed to Goya or a follower of the巨大。In De Rerum Natura, Lucretius described dreams as often leading to irrational actions.

31. See Sureda, Torres-García. Pasión clásica, p. 150 ff. It may be revealing that Torres often rearranged the phrase, repeating it as “There is nothing more than symbol.” See, e.g., his autobiography: Torres, Historia de mi vida, p. 116.


34. Joaquín Torres-García. Diseño para el fresco. El temporal no es más que símbolo [The temporal is no more than symbol]. (116 x 105 cm). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

THE PORTRAYAL OF THAT MODERN FRENZY began to appear in Torres’s work shortly before he met Barradas. According to Torres’s appointment book, this Uruguayan Vibrationist (Futurist) painter first visited him at Mon Repos on August 27, 1917. Yet a drawing showing an orthogonal network of scenes, a fully “Torresian” structure, accompanied one of his articles in the journal Un enemigo de la ciudad (An enemy of the people). In June of that year, while painting like Figure con paisaje de ciudad (Figure with...
urban landscape, 1917) is dated June 20. Later works such as Composición vibracionista (Vibrationist composition, 1918; p. 58), in which the verticality of the murals melds in a proto-Cubist conglomerate, seem to display the effects of the encounter between Torres and Barradas. In any event, in an article published in Montevideo in November 1917, Torres described Barradas as a painter “who is searching on his own for what is exciting about reality.” The description echoes his own declaration of purpose at the beginning of 1917: “To make our path on our own; each one of us to be a path.” Going beyond the attribution of any assessments or isms to Barradas’s work, Torres adds, “I would simply say that he is a painter of the present moment.”

A few months earlier, Torres himself had been the artist of an absent moment, an Arcadian illusion, a metaphysical and idealized morning time. Now he discovered the clamer of the present, which was actually already deafening. In Barcelona the political climate was tense; there had been a general strike throughout Spain in 1917, and conflicts would continue to simmer until they exploded in 1919. Ten difficulty years had passed since the Setmana Tràgica (Tragic week) of 1909, when violent revolt had led to fatalities and ultimately the fall of the Spanish government. Since then, the death rattle of World War I had sounded throughout Europe; Spain had been neutral in the war, but Torres, and the larger community saw its effects in the form of refugees and diaspora. With World War I had sounded throughout Europe; Spain had been neutral in the war, but Torres, Barradas, and the larger community saw its effects in the form of refugees and diaspora. In 1918, writing from Barcelona to Barradas in Madrid, Torres, always blunt, remarked, “Tell me about things there. From here, the void, there is nothing left to think anymore.”

In 1918, writing from Barcelona to Barradas in Madrid, Torres, always blunt, remarked, “Tell me about things there. From here, the void, there is nothing left to think anymore.” He would soon go into exile in New York. It was through Torres’s relationship with Barradas—a friendship prematurely interrupted by the younger artist’s death, at the age of thirty-nine, in 1929—and also through a epistolary friendship with the Spanish poet and critic Guillermo de Torre, leader of the Ultramont movement, that Torres saw a clear possibility for an art of the present moment. In the paintings he made in Barcelona just before leaving for New York, a series of signs and figures emerged that would persist in his art until the end of his career, and conflicts would continue to simmer until they exploded in 1919. Ten difficulty years had passed since the Setmana Tràgica (Tragic week) of 1909, when violent revolt had led to fatalities and ultimately the fall of the Spanish government. Since then, the death rattle of World War I had sounded throughout Europe; Spain had been neutral in the war, but Torres, Barradas, and the larger community saw its effects in the form of refugees and diaspora. In 1918, writing from Barcelona to Barradas in Madrid, Torres, always blunt, remarked, “Tell me about things there. From here, the void, there is nothing left to think anymore.”

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It was also during these years that Torres began to make toys, to critical acclaim and to universal Man,” in Mariaca de Torres-García: Constructing Abstract art with Wood (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2011), pp. 34-41.


42. See Cecilia de Torres, “Barradas, December 13, 1918, in ibid., p. 148.


44. See Setmana Tràgica (Tragic week) of 1909, when violent revolt had led to fatalities and ultimately the fall of the Spanish government. Since then, the death rattle of World War I had sounded throughout Europe; Spain had been neutral in the war, but Torres, Barradas, and the larger community saw its effects in the form of refugees and diaspora. In 1918, writing from Barcelona to Barradas in Madrid, Torres, always blunt, remarked, “Tell me about things there. From here, the void, there is nothing left to think anymore.” He would soon go into exile in New York. It was through Torres’s relationship with Barradas—a friendship prematurely interrupted by the younger artist’s death, at the age of thirty-nine, in 1929—and also through an epistolary friendship with the Spanish poet and critic Guillermo de Torre, leader of the Ultramont movement, that Torres saw a clear possibility for an art of the present moment. In the paintings he made in Barcelona just before leaving for New York, a series of signs and figures emerged that would persist in his art until the end of his career, independent of changes in style—indeed of the doctrine of the Taller Torres-García, of Constructivism, of the Escuela del Sur (School of the South), of his constant, surprising return to previous forms. These signs include the windowed facades that presage the structure of his constructive paintings, the carriages with axle wheels that recall primal signs, clocks marking time, bottles, streetcars, and words and numbers added to the visual field like palimpsests.

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New York—beyond it, eminent, the lofty skyscrapers of City Hall and Wall Street—the center of business, of shops, the soul of New York—and below, the countless ships plowing across the turbid river—and all around, the overwhelming, deafening rush of a thousand vehicles—cars, trucks, streetcars, carts. And further off, another gigantic bridge, even bigger—with another level on top of it—and another, bigger, even—and others. And, on the other side—under the river—imagine the subway tunnels—transporting millions of people. This is the descriptive, snowballing tone of Torres-García’s work in New York. He was an adult facing an infinite youthfulness whose message was clear: the modern century that he had portrayed in his early Catalan days was not the real modern century, the site of its true intensity; that was this great city, which disturbed and challenged him. But neither was New York the place where his definitive voice would be formed. In many works a fascination with the scene prevails over an interest in structure (fig. 9). In New York, Torres discovered what it is to look down from above; he was fascinated with the bird’s-eye view, from skyscrapers or from the sky (fig. 9). A series of collages he kept in his archive shows the variety of his approaches to life in New York, from Broadway scenes—for which he drew advertisement illustrations—to a totalizing aerial view of the city (fig. 10). Nor can we forget his equally ironic approach to the cultures of consumption and of the avant-garde, as when he juxtaposed fashion advertisements for women with Cubist clothes.

Torres’s absorption of the modern art he saw in New York is obvious in both the subject matter and the visual structure of his work: a late adoption of Cubist and Dadaist strategies leads to a juxtaposition of signs and planes of color, while an interest in the urban scene can be related to such artists as Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, John Marin, Max Weber, and others. The city and its facades as seen from the street—an interest of Torres’s early on, at the beginning of the century, when he witnessed part of the construction of Barcelona’s Eixample neighborhood—gave him some of his best works of these years (fig. 11): out of the chaotic disorder of the urban complex emerged structures of orthogonal lines within whose compartments appeared an array of urban figures—people, bridges, windows, advertisements, inscriptions, tanks, roofs, streetcars. Once symbols replaced real things in those compartments, once the painting became indifferent to local atmosphere, once structure moved from the urban background into an explicit organizing optic, Torres would have arrived at his method—but this would not happen until 1929.

Torres met more than a few significant players on the New York scene: Davis, Katherine Dreier and her sister Dorothea, Walter Pach, Joseph Stella, Alfred Stieglitz, Edgard Varèse, Max Weber, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Yet although he exhibited and to a lesser extent sold his works in New York, his time in the city would end with a hasty departure.
return to Europe. For all the grand galas he attended—for one of which he designed a famous suit, oversalla a la Rodchenko that made the city material on his body—the disappoint-ment, even the failure, of his time in America is clear in a photograph of him wearing this suit, and perched on his bed, disguised as a “human ad, a decoy” (fig. 12). Juan José Labastida writes of this image,

Contrary to those who imagine Torres García as a regular guest at the parties of millionaire New York collectors, we find this sad photo, taken in the narrow corner of a bedroom decorated with drab wallpaper, with a simple armoire, and finally (can’t you see it?) Torres appears perched on a bed atop whose mattress he has taken the extreme precaution of laying a plank. This strange pedestal speaks to us of the miseries of art, of the tremendous gap between his reality and his aspirations, his means and his ends, of his comic willfulness.46

Torres’s New York notebook—and probably also his experience in that human archipelago—ends in sadness and resignation:

I am the poor man—unsuspecting, long suffering, uncomplaining. —I am fine here in New York and everywhere. —I am not a pessimist—but I prefer to think that everything will go badly, that everything is fragile. —I prefer small houses to palaces—a clay pot—a pine table— Working, that’s my only pleasure in life—and I don’t think there is any other. —I live in peace with my wife and my children. —I live in peace with my neighbors—and I have nothing to say, neither good nor bad, about this great city of New York: —It would be the same to me to live elsewhere, among other people. —Because I look more inside myself than outside. —I have been lost for a long time, and this has made me suffer greatly, but now I have found the path. —The real world exists inside each one of us,—not outside.47

A PINE TABLE—A CLAY POT: when Torres left America, he moved not to a European city but to old rustic Europe, to Fiesole, Livorno, and Villefranche-sur-Mer. These smaller towns offered him a tranquil environment, as if he were looking to heal after the frenzy of New York:

I have been lost for a long time, and this has made me suffer greatly, but now I have found my path. —The real world exists inside each one of us,—not outside.47

Torres found his own voice and approach in the 1920s, and within these his unified sense of time, a compressed time that integrated many different temporalities. This would become the key to his process, as he passed through a stylized Cubism, was seduced by Dada (p. 59), returned to the dark, earthy palette of his first cityscapes, and approached the language of Constructivism (p. 65). Like Fernand Léger, he imagined a world of machines and processes in perpetual motion (p. 69), and he returned to earthly paradies and depictions of tribal life (p. 79), becoming African, Iberian, and Polynesian (p. 77), half Neo-Plasticist (fig. 14), half Neolithic (p. 89). His work of this period and later would continue to combine these opposites: he would return to Cubism (p. 78), and through that experience of temporal fusion, of time as symbol and convention, he would make his own path, or as he would put it, he would approach a way of being his own path (p. 85). By the 1930s, he would find his unique style of a gridded construction with symbolic and pictographic inscriptions, but his work would remain voraciously eclectic, being characterized by a desire to work through no particular lens, so specific convolvule aris-totelico (Aristotelian telescope), no closed classificatory system. Fluid stylistic changes, a frequent revisiting of earlier forms that he seemed to have moved beyond: these practices would characterize his work until the end.

What might seem a narrative of progress was actually one of compression. A parti-son of nothing and no one, not even in the pivotal moment before the creation of Circles et Carri—amid “endless jousts,” according to Seuphor48—did Torres succumb to the tempta-tion of a group identity that would separate him from his individuality. In 1929, when Van Doesburg tried to enlist him in a campaign against Surrealism, he bluntly replied, “I do not want to join. . . . I must quickly tell you that for the moment I want to stay peacefully at home and not get involved in anything—after all, you all won’t lose much if I stay out, since my contribution is not exactly in your line: you know that I can’t stick strictly to a completely abstract, pure art.”49

12. ‘The artist in his painted overall inscribed “New York,” 1921
13. Joaquín Torres-García. Forma sobre fondo blanco (Form on white background). 1924. Painted wood, 12 ½ x 5 ⅞ x 2 ⅛ in. (31.5 x 14 x 5.3 cm). MACBA Collection, MACBA, Barcelona

17. Luis PÉREZ-OBAMAS
24 The Anonymous Rule
25 Luis PÉREZ-OBAMAS
When Torres wrote this, the modern avant-garde had already dismantled the apparatus of representation (though not representation itself—just its classic enunciative infrastructure). He would filter the approaches of these avant-garde through what I above called his “schematic impulse”: rather than trying to destroy representation, to annihilate it, transcend it, or even less to subsume it into something else, or into nothing, he found a schematic solution to it. He was compelled to touch the skeleton of things, the “thingsness” of things, what gives things their quality of being a thing (which is different from their ideal essence). He would eventually strip symbolisms of its “ism” and be left with the symbol alone, all in all, in all its schematic force.

This is clear in those paintings of the 1920s in which Torres resolves the composition through a ground organized into relatively geometric patches of color, chromatic fields whose abstract structure contains the ghost of a representational scene. Superimposed as a supplementary drawing against this ground is a network of thick black lines (fig. 15). The schematic approach here is clear, and equally clear is the apparently crude, jarring distribution of the color fields that support it. These paintings, which constitute an entire system within Torres’s art of the later 1920s, echo modalities of representation that he found a schematic solution to it. He was compelled to touch the skeleton of things, the “thingsness” of things, what gives things their quality of being a thing (which is different from their ideal essence). He would eventually strip symbolisms of its “ism” and be left with the symbol alone, all in all, in all its schematic force.

It is tempting to ask whether Torres-García’s schematic impulses and his modern avant-garde are the same thing, or whether the former is something more primordial, more primitive, layered over and imposed on the modern forms that moved him. But the idea of a binary opposition between the modern and the primal is on the wrong track. Rather, it is through African deities that Picasso and others discovered a path beyond classical representation. If this is so, why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why would the coexistence of the structural and the primal be problematic in Torres’s case? Why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why would the coexistence of the structural and the primal be problematic in Torres’s case?

Why insist on separating Torres-García’s address of this concern. The aesthetic court has heard and judged the case: modern art was possible only insofar as it “redeemed” the ends of tribal and early peoples. The issue is ethical and ideologically treacherous. The narrative of civilization weary modern artists returning to degree zero, to the sources of intuition, to what cannot be conceptualized, and so on, is simplistic and obscures surviving elements and energies that have existed in culture since antiquity. But the facts persist: behind the modernist glass house lies Adams’s house in paradise.35 Through African doctrine that Picasso and others discovered a path beyond classical representation. If this is so, why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why would the coexistence of the structural and the primal be problematic in Torres’s case?

The badly written—or, in Torres’s work, the badly painted, the badly assembled—is the “anonymous rule,” which belongs to no one in particular and at the same time to everyone who seeks it. In its purely ostensible and ostensibly visible eloquence, the artwork itself, insofar as it is a manifestation of that anonymous rule, is perhaps precisely the badly written: the call to the rustical truth of being—the pine table, the clay pot—that Torres was responding to when he returned from America, and that manifested in his resistance to modern seductions, his effort to translate them into a language whose universality would be grounded in a crude schematic representation.

The badly written—or, in Torres’s work, the badly painted, the badly assembled—must be articulated alongside his schematic approach and his prismatic gestural. These devices allowed him to stick to his attachment to the symbolic at a time when the avant-garde movements—the languages of modernity—were abandoning it, or at least proposing it be abandoned. Even more radically, they allowed Torres to fuse the primal and the modern, making them, if not synonyms, then at least accomplices.

Much has been said about the modernist fascination with the “primitive,” and about Torres-García’s address of this concern.36 The aesthetic court has heard and judged the case: modern art was possible only insofar as it “redeemed” the ends of tribal and early peoples. The issue is ethical and ideologically treacherous. The narrative of civilization weary modern artists returning to degree zero, to the sources of intuition, to what cannot be conceptualized, and so on, is simplistic and obscures surviving elements and energies that have existed in culture since antiquity. But the facts persist: behind the modernist glass house lies Adams’s house in paradise. Through African doctrine that Picasso and others discovered a path beyond classical representation. If this is so, why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why insist on seeing them from a binary perspective, as if they were different or separate? Why would the coexistence of the structural and the primal be problematic in Torres’s case?

Yet it is not possible to accept this theory, because the conditions under which the superseded norm are seldom discarded. When the purely decorative tendency prevails we have essentially geometrical, highly symmetrical, ornamentalized forms, when the idea of reality we have, on the contrary, more realistic forms. In every case, however, the formal element that characterizes the “purely decorative” is less, or the particular type of representation—Boas, Primitive Art, 1927 (Eng. trans. New Y ork: Dover, 1955), pp. 352–54. For a recent example of this “binary” understanding of Torres, privileging the abstract—in this case the modernist ideology—in favor of other elements of his work, see Ramirez, “A Constructed Precariousness: Restriction against the Grain,” in Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood, pp. 44–41.

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American Minimalism were similar phenomena. Even when Torres established the principles of his Universalism Constructivo (constructive universalism), in the 1940s, he made no suggestion of a connection with constructivism; rather, this was a program of symbolic universalism ground in his certainty that the basic elements of visual art, either concrete or abstract, were universal and derived from the idea of construction. That interested Torres, both as artist and as theoretician of his art, was construction.

As far as “abstraction” goes, we already know Torres’s opinion from his letter to Van Doesburg in 1929: “you know that I can’t stick strictly to a completely abstract, pure art.” In any case, the term has served time and time again to refer to an art free of mimetic representations of reality. Torres knew that this kind of art was no way limited to the twentieth century, as his approach to premodern symbolic forms confirms. But the issue is that the concept of abstraction—when addressed by art historians without solid epistemological protocols—ends up kind of superstition, a belief in something that does not and cannot exist.29 It becomes an almost cultic constituent of a teleology in which modernity is the aspiration of all humanity and, in art, the “abstract” is a supreme value. There is no progression from representation to abstraction in Torres’s art, and even less so in his construction of highly plastic art objects like woodcuts, the works in wood that he produced from the 1920s to the end of his life.28 His work is neither imitative nor abstract, nor does it progress from imitation to abstraction. What stands out in them is their schematic power, and thus their “figural” dimension.

The notion of the “figural” developed by Jean-François Lyotard, in a landmark essay of 1979, does much to clarify Torres’s approach to representation: from the very beginning the artist seems to have understood and acted out the principle that the real distinction at the heart of representation is not between the “abstract” and the “figurative” but, as Lyotard writes, “between the space of the text and the space of the figure: a difference not of style or genre but of ‘ontological separation.’”28 The idea that figuration is a manifestation of a belief in something that does not and cannot exist is no progression such as the evolution of Torres—Garcia’s “. . . the evolution of Torres—Garcia’s concretion (mimetic). This is how Torres was able, without apparent contradiction, to contribute to the Neo-Plastic thought of Van Doesburg and Mondrian while continuing to seek primal forms (fig. 18). It was in the secret complicity between these two impulses that his definitive language would emerge.

This language crystallized, so to speak, in 1929. It is clear in a coherent series of four paintings in which the same grid of lines—the structure—used to establish the distributive conditions. Its figures work as symbolic magnets, cohesive between each other and condensing rather than representing meaning.

Torres knew from the time of his youthful studies in scholasticism that abstraction is not an escape from representation but one of its multiple manifestations. We are not speaking here of indexical abstraction, present in many nonimitative approaches and styles in modernist visual art. We refer, rather, to abstraction as the capacity of intelligence to forsake the opacity of the perceptible and to analyze reality under a more optimal formal light, commensurate with the concept and the sign. Torres knew, his writings show, that images can be interpreted—found through sensory perception—or expressed, produced through a purely intellectual faculty. It is on this latter form of image—the “mental verb” that late scholasticism would call “species expressa”—that intensionality depends or, at least, as we have understood it, in order to have real conditions.30 Thus we find the impressively clear body of work with which the late master Joaquín Torres-García made this ontological truth apparent to his students and followers in the Taller Torres-García, against the abstraction and not the figurative but the constructive (fig. 17), in order to emphasize two distinct forms of structural organization, the two possible options for arranging the same elements in the visual field figurally. In other words, by using the same formal elements differently one can achieve abstraction (nonmimetic) or concretion (mimetic). This is how Torres was able, without apparent contradiction, to contribute to the Neo-Plastic thought of Van Doesburg and Mondrian while continuing to seek primal forms (fig. 18). It was in the secret complicity between these two impulses that his definitive language would emerge.

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itself becomes a figure (fig. 19). In this light the anthropomorphic objects that seem to have emerged from Torres’s experience of toy-making become still more significant: these small, mutable modern totems—whose parts seem related to the quadrants in the grids of Torres’s paintings, as if liberated from the plane to become the limbs of an infinitely reconfigurable body—eclipse any effort to oppose figuration to abstraction, for these are anthropomorphic abstractions, abstract figures. What is crucial to understand here, though, is that Torres’s immersion in Neo-Plasticism coincided with his immersion in primitivism—they were simultaneous. To understand these phenomena as following each other in succession leads nowhere: what is involved is a compression of time, a temporality comprised of various contradictory time periods, condensing the archaic and the modern (fig. 20).

As if born out of the same impulse, created out of the same mold, the archaic and the modern were condensed in order to make something possible: a brutal clarity of expression, despite the darkness of the material or the form. The essential years in which this expressive clarity came together were the late 1920s and early 1930s, a period in which he pursued his impulse toward schematic representation and exchanged the symbolism of his early years for a symbolic toolbox he was more sure of. He also, as in an ancient disputation, directly addressed an assortment of modern avant-gardes that would become canonical in the late twentieth century: Ultraism, Cubism, Dadaism, Neo-Plasticism, and others. These were the years of paintings and murals simultaneously structural and prismatic, and of a handful of works in which he was able to find solutions at once structural and compositional, foundational and rhetorical. He learned to maintain a structure while varying his compositions, and established a foundation, a discursive platform: a solid yet irregular grid structure, sometimes three-dimensional, in whose interstices he inscribed signs and icons free of supplementary artifice—his schematic/symbolic arsenal’s toolset, limited yet enough. Interstices he inscribed signs and icons free of supplementary artifice—his schematic/symbolic arsenal’s toolset, limited yet enough. "Cathedral style": the painting as facade or archaic stele, as carved rock or bas-relief—opaque and aniconic, its frontality allowing an unfolding of schematic icons. This is what Torres developed in 1931–32, two years of plentiful production in which he left behind the byzantine labyrinth of the modern disputatio, with its militancies and movements, its ideological aspirations and isms. Often in the center and at the base of the paintings there was indeed a facade, something like a building or a classical temple, on which Torres spun many variations. Particularly emblematic signs reappear: key, keyhole, clock, fish, anchor, sailboat, steambread, ladder, ax, sun, abstract figure with heart or star, and certain powerful words: universus, montevideo, europa, abstracto, concrete, aur (atmosphère).

The fascination with the esoteric in these works was shared, of course, by a good number of artists of the time. The narratives of modernism have long tried to subordinate this dimension to the secular religion of formal autonomy, but it is a foundational part of artistic modernity, from Hilma af Klint to Vasily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich to, in South America, Torres and Xuil Solar. Torres’s interest in numenology, astrology, and hermetic traditions has been much studied.34 He was attracted to freemasonry and more generally to secrets and codes, as some of his writing explicitly states, for example when he remarked, in 1932, that the ultimate objectives of his artistic project—already on its way to becoming a school and an academy—coincided with those of freemasonry.35 This spiritual interest, though, had one basic motive: the need to understand what structure—upon which all potential for construction lies—can embody as symbol.

In 1932, then, toward the end of his stay in Paris, Torres-García created a book of collages, an important work that has received too little attention. More than a study of the meanings of symbols, in fact something other than a book—since it contains not a single mark made or word written by Torres—it is an atlas of images comparable in some respects to Warburg’s unfinished Atlas Mnemosyne, which, though, Torres could not have known. Like Warburg’s project, Torres’s atlas, simply titled Structures, is a purely visual “text,” an art history without words, idiomatic and deeply personal. Following an analogical syntax, it juxtaposes figures (collages of printed reproductions) that are temporarily remote yet structurally similar: archaic forms, steles, stone inscriptions, totems, alphabets for the blind, Romanesque paintings, and so on.

This atlas is impossible to decode. Indeed, perhaps its most significant quality is the variety of visual concomitances and dissonances among its images, all brought together under the generic name “structures.” What might an Expulsion from Paradise painted by a Renaissance master have to do with a map of Greenland? What is the relation between a Cambodian temple and an alphabet for the blind? Between cave-art figures and a diagram of emissions from telegraph antennas? Between an African mask and an electrical circuit? As an imaginary portable museum, the album is more than a catalogue of symbols; it is a little diary of fascinations. Structures once again poises modernity as a compressed temporality, as one more of the times that beset us and constitute us—just one more, and in no way the last, of our many avatars (fig. 21).
IN 1932, TORRES LEFT PARIS, with the idea of moving to Madrid. What he found there was that Europe—sink in the effects of the Great Depression in those years before World War II, the second great human bloodbath of the twentieth century—had little more to offer him. In 1934 he returned to Uruguay, the unsanctioning country he had left at the age of seven. Back in his land of origin, he would continue to develop variations on his pictorial approach, his universal pictographism, his iconic constructivism. It was as if the man who had worked with Antoni Gaudí on the stained glass windows for the Majorca cathedral were still making stained-glass windows but making them with paint, opaque and blind, or as if he were sculpting primal steles hiding the secret of a primitive civilization yet to come into being. He also returned to the landscapes of his youth, sculptural objects, toys, and strange digressions into portraiture whose subjects may reflect the anxiety of the conflict beginning to take shape in 1939.

The work became marked textually, as in the carved-madras and the paintings on wood, which were mostly white and monochromatic. As Torres alternated back and forth between the figural and the textual, his pictograms operated as “pictorial texts”: on the one hand his works were primarily structures, and on the other, in structural terms they were writing. On the one hand the structure created a space for the writing of signs, and on the other, that writing manifested as structure. Images and symbols written—sometimes literally carved, even with fire—into the pictorial or sculptural texture permitted a contemplation of the value of delineation, and of the diaphragmatic dimension of Torres’s aesthetic:

This chiasma between the structure of symbolic writing and the writing of pictorial structure would largely steer the direction of Torres’s work until his death, in 1949. He seems to have cultivated a boundless spirit of contradiction, however, and there are notable exceptions to the rule. Between 1935 and 1938, he dedicated himself to paintings without pictograms, signs, symbols, or writing-related elements, compositions that were almost purely structural. These works constitute one of South America’s most influential and consistent catalogues of late-modern pictorial abstraction. At first glance, they would seem a temporary concession to pure abstraction on Torres’s part, but there is something in them that surprises, and makes them protokinetic.

To “move” the plane, to create dynamic motion in the visual field, Torres evokes the illusion of relief and shadow—elements he had left behind quite early on.44 The paintings suggest architectural fragments, and some have been linked to Torres’s interest in pre-Columbian cultures, notably those of the Peruvian altiplano.45 The dark line that in other works found form in pictograms and signs, the incisions in the wooden works that here mark the confluence of gray and sepia planes or shadows, delineate pure structure. They are identified only as structure; even when writing, they are purely structural. Did Torres imagine them as solid, physical foundations for his Americanist ideology? Had he arrived at an abstraction that was finally, uniquely his own, having lost all trace of the tentative and polemical ventures of his Paris years? These cries say nothing beyond their mere presence, containing no figures, functioning to communicate no message or code. Some see their solidity and gravitas—“a stone wall,” he said—as one of the most inspired achievements of Torres’s career.46 As Merleau-Ponty put it, these works—depictions of timeless structures—already contained the future of painting. They are anomarchic in that they could belong not only to the 1930s, when they were made, but to any other point in the history of modern painting. They have, in the end, achieved timeless ness.

Indeed, in Torres’s last decade, which he dedicated to establishing his legacy through the founding of a school (in both the specific and the general sense), he worked ecstatically through his own stylistic history. He returned and regressed in every possible way, to the point where on the day he died, he painted a touching little Arcadian scene, a maternity with birds in flight, in the schematic style of the 1920s (p. 193)—as if his last day were also his first, and he had allowed himself the unusual liberty of finishing where he began.

Some of these last works remain striking for their expressive clarity, and for their emphasis on the badly written, the badly painted, the badly constructed. Their making shows an antimonial precariousness. Even when Torres revisited conventional forms or methods he had used earlier but then had surpassed, he excelled at a kind of diagrammatic nakedness, as if there were no need for rhetorical or pictorial additions in order to get to what he needed to express. There is a brutal clarity in the late sculptures in which the chaotic deities of an American civilization combine with the ideational germinality of Western culture. That clarity reappears in a drawing for his book Constructivo (fig. 22), with its stelae inscribed with words and ideograms for concepts and ideas; here “form” appears at the top, like a perpetual north star, and is the link between the “abstract” and the “concrete.” Equally clear is the emblematic drawing América invertida (America inverted, 1943; fig. 23), in which the utopia of the North is embodied in the geographic South, claiming a destiny for Torres’s continent and prefiguring political and poetic voices that would prevail after his death: “and more than South/isn’t she our North/and her far end/pinnacle/revolved to those/who first climbed it?” (fig. 24).

In all of these works, the schema functions to allow the projection of a type of space onto the potential categories of understanding.47 Torres has reached the bones of the matter—that which makes things universal—without stopping them from being things, without transforming them into pure ideas. His work seems less concerned with offering repre sentations of space than with using the tools of stripped-down diagrammatic writings and inscriptions to project the form of space—whatever it might be, in whatever medium—onto certain figurative structures. The figure in his art is not embodied but inscribed in space; there is no atmosphere in these categorically frontal constructed works. And the figure is always maintained on the surface, which it skims like a hieroglyph.

67. I thank my friend Alejandro Cuqueira for his observation and for his excellent painting analysis.

68. Torres remembered dreams in which “the shadow of objects pursued [him]” in typical archaic form. Torres-García, Historia de mi vida, p. 31.


70. Torres-García, Historia de mi vida, p. 299.

Returning to Loytard’s distinction between the textual and the figural, the question may be how Torres’s figures—his signs, his patches of color, his “schematic approach combining atmospheric logic and geological memory”—preserves or attains a figural dimension. Why does our eye rest on the figure as if it were not simply a set of codes to be decoded? The answer may be its structural precariousness, and the ostensions display of that precariousness: we see a crude writing, a ruinous architecture, a thickly sketched painting, basic, transitory-looking constructions in which the transparency of the sign flounders in the density of the material. This kind of precariousness was already present in the rough forms Torres produced in his youth, as well as in countless examples of construction through assemblage in the work of other artists of the modern avant-garde: from Picasso to Kurt Schwitters, from Miró to Jean Arp, poetry of means was an enduring part of modern Edonism. I think, though, that Torres’s schematic impulse actually has more to do with the diagrammatic dimension of painting. It was the through-the-practice of the diagram that he embraced his ideas, even when they were purely visual. The diagram is key in Torres’s work, throughout the abyssal and ver- tiginous multiplicity of time periods condensed in that anonymous rule. The diagram is the key to Torres’s commitment to an abstraction within representation and to a form of logic that functions as a representation that can be called abstraction: “To the abstract there should always correspond an ‘image without likeness’ . . . I would ask: isn’t that what we call an ‘icon’? In effect, the icon is not representation, it is presence. And nonetheless it is image. It is the ‘image as it is presence, the presence of the image. The icon, the iconic, is the weight of the unmake similarity in order to produce the image presence.”

Since everything can—and often does—end up where it began, I would like to recall a letter that Torres-García wrote to Prat de La Riba in April 1912, describing things he had seen on a trip to Italy: Michelangelo’s Last Judgment and ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, Raphael’s stanzas in the Vatican, works by Giotto, Masaccio, Taddeo Gaddi, Fra Angelico, Ghirlandaio. He added, “As I have said, my preferences don’t tend toward all this. I’ve been more interested—thousands of times more interested—in the small paintings in the catacombs, the Pompeian and Roman mosaics. . . . I felt great joy as I saw all that, because, though it may not good for me to say it, many of those paintings share a great deal with my own work—in both their process and their style—or, if you prefer, my paintings share a great deal with them.”

Torres-García was certainly always fascinated by what is chaotic, in terms of form, and what is germinal, in terms of sign or cypher. He never relented in his quest to reach that utopia in which likeness would be unmade, in which a distance, however minimal, would be marked between representation and likeness. His is an abstraction that is not concrete yet is rooted in reality—an abstraction that is an instrument of representation, providing an account of reality, yet does not depend on its mundane circumstances: its moment, its fashions, its moralities, its passions.


Design for the fresco: *La Catalunya eterna*  
(The eternal Catalonia). 1912  
Gouache on paper, 59 3/16 x 37 3/8 in. (150 x 95 cm)

Design for the fresco: *La Catalunya industrial*  
(The industrial Catalonia). 1917  
Gouache on paper, 47 3/4 x 31 1/2 in. (120 x 79 cm)
Arquitectura con figuras clásicas
(Architecture with classical figures) 1914
Oil and tempera on wood panel, 23 9/16 x 24 1/4 in. (55 x 62 cm)

Lo temporal no és més que símbol
(The temporal is no more than symbol) 1916
Fresco transferred to canvas mounted on strainer, 18 ft. 10 3/8 in. x 10 ft. 10 5/16 in. (575 x 331 cm)
Construcción arquitectónica con figuras
(Architectonic construction with figures). 1915
Tempera on wood, 19 11/16 x 20 1/16 x 1 15/16 in. (50 x 52 x 5 cm)

Entoldado (La Feria) (Canopy [The fair]). 1917
Oil on canvas, 20 11/16 x 28 9/16 in. (52 x 72.5 cm)
Composición vibracionista (Vibrationist composition), 1918
Oil on canvas, 19 11/16 x 13 3/4 in. (50 x 35 cm)

Hoy (Today), c. 1919
Collage and tempera on cardboard, 20 11/16 x 14 3/4 in. (52.5 x 37.5 cm)
Bodegón con máscaras (Still life with masks). 1919.
Oil on board: 20 1/4 x 28 1/4 in. (51.5 x 72 cm)

Los juguetes (Toys). 1920
Oil on cardboard, 11 5/8 x 17 7/8 in. (29.8 x 44.5 cm)
Abstracción con maderas superpuestas (Abstraction with superimposed wood pieces). 1924
Painted wood, 10 ¼ x 5 ½ in. (26 x 14 cm)

Ritmos oblicuos con objetos fragmentados (Oblique rhythms with fragmented objects). 1925
Oil on cardboard, 8 ¼ x 13 ¼ in. (20.9 x 33.4 cm)
Construction en bois polychrome
(Construction in polychrome wood), 1927
Oil and nails on wood, 5 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 1 1/8 (15 x 24 x 3 cm)
**Tabac.** 1928
Oil on canvas, 18 1/4 x 15 3/16 in. (46 x 38.5 cm)

**Repisa con taza (Shelf with cup).** 1928
Oil on wood, 18 7/8 x 9 1/2 x 3 3/16 in. (48 x 23 x 8.5 cm)

**Bouteille et verre (Bottle and glass).** 1927
Tempera on wood, 14 15/16 x 12 1/2 x 3 3/4 in. (38 x 32 x 9.7 cm)

**Composición (Composition).** 1928
Oil on canvas, 14 15/16 x 18 1/4 in. (38 x 46 cm)

**Repisa con taza (Shelf with cup).** 1928
Oil on wood, 18 7/8 x 9 1/2 x 3 3/16 in. (48 x 23 x 8.5 cm)
**Pintura constructiva** (Constructive painting). 1929
Oil on wood, 31 ⅞ x 39 ⅘ in. (80 x 100 cm)

**Forma 140** (Form 140). 1929
Oil, nails, and wood, 11 5⁄16 x 16 9⁄16 x 3 11⁄16 in. (28.7 x 47.5 x 9.3 cm)
Constructif locomotive nord (Constructive locomotive north). 1929
Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 25 3/8 in. (54 x 64.5 cm)

Planos de color con dos maderas superpuestas
(Color planes with two superimposed woods). 1928
Painted wood, 11 7/16 x 9 5/8 x 1 3/8 in. (29 x 24.4 x 3.5 cm)
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