

FIRST U.S. RETROSPECTIVE OF JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA IN NEARLY 50 YEARS SURVEYS THE URUGUAYAN MODERN MASTER'S OEUVRE

Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern

October 25, 2015–February 15, 2016

The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor

Press Preview: Tuesday, October 20, 9:30–11:30 a.m.

NEW YORK, September 15, 2015—With *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*, The Museum of Modern Art presents the first major U.S. retrospective devoted to the artist in 45 years. On view October 25, 2015, through February 15, 2016, the exhibition spans the first half of the 20th century, surveying Joaquín Torres-García's (Uruguay, 1874–1949) remarkable achievements in painting, sculpture, fresco, drawing, and collage through some 190 works. The exhibition is organized by Luis Pérez-Oramas, The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, with Karen Grimson, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, MoMA. Following MoMA's presentation, the exhibition will travel to Espacio Fundación Telefónica in Madrid (May 19–September 11, 2016) and Museo Picasso Málaga (October 10, 2016–February 5, 2017).

Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern stresses the radical individuality of an artist who eluded classification. A central figure in the history of modernism in the Americas and a key protagonist in the transatlantic cultural exchanges that have informed it, Torres-García has fascinated generations of artists on both sides of the Atlantic, but most notably in the Americas—including major North American artists from Barnett Newman to Louise Bourgeois, and countless Latin American artists. While assimilating and transforming the formal inventions of modern art, Torres-García stayed true to an understanding of time as a collision of different periods rather than a linear progression—a distinction that is particularly relevant to contemporary art.

The exhibition is a chronological display structured in a series of major chapters and embracing the artist's entire oeuvre, from his early works in Barcelona at the end of the 19th century to his final works, made in Montevideo in 1949. Two key moments are emphasized: the period from 1923 to 1933, when Torres-García participated in various European early-modern avant-garde movements while establishing his own signature pictographic-constructivist style; and 1935 to 1943, when, having returned to Uruguay, he produced one of the most striking repertoires of synthetic abstraction.

Barcelona

At age 17, Joaquín Torres-García left his birth city of Montevideo for Barcelona, where he received his training as an artist. A modern city and a capital of cultural renovation, Barcelona inspired Torres-García to become a Baudelaire-like "painter of modern life," and he was active within the group of intellectuals and artists that promoted *Noucentisme*, a Catalanian artistic movement that reacted against the decadent sophistication of Art Nouveau and embraced a connection to nature

and primeval history manifested in scenes of pastoral Mediterranean Golden Age. As a member of this influential group, Torres-García became one of the most renowned painters in Barcelona at the beginning of the 20th century.

The exhibition begins with his early works in Barcelona, including preparatory drawings for his first major commission, a series of monumental frescoes for the Saló de San Jordi in Barcelona's Palau de la Generalitat—the seat of Catalan sovereign power since the Middle Ages. Featuring scenes of industrial civilization alongside pastoral, Mediterranean settings, Torres-García's frescoes were the most important artistic manifesto of Catalan Noucentisme. Despite the arcadian nature of most of the Saló de San Jordi works, in the last fresco, *Lo Temporal no és més que símbol* (*The temporal is no more than symbol*, 1916), on view for the first time in the U.S., a colossal faun dominates a crowd with sovereign indifference. This early depiction of a classical figure in a modern style was harshly criticized by academic artists and conservative intellectuals at the time of its unveiling in 1916. The ensuing scandal and the death of the political leader of Catalonia, Enric Prat de la Riba, led to Torres-García's dismissal from the commission.

In Barcelona, Torres-García's confrontation with the reality and chaos of the modern city led him to a new form of depiction, juxtaposing planes and figures, condensing depth as density, and flattening his planes, as seen in such works as *Figura con paisaje de ciudad* (1917) and *Composició vibracionista* (1918). Repeating motifs such as clocks to signal modern time, Torres-García began experimenting in works where painting encounters collage, language collides with figures, and a multiplicity of elements is distributed vertically against the surface—qualities that are exemplified in *Hoy* (c. 1919).

New York

In 1920, faced with the intensifying political tension in Spain at the end of the First World War, and fascinated with America as a land of modernity, Torres-García moved with his family to New York. There he began the production of Aladdin Toys, a selection of which are included in the exhibition. These wooden toys explored the notion of a transformable structure, an idea that would inform a great deal of his art to come, both paintings and sculptures.

Torres-García was soon at the center of a community of artists in New York working in modern styles, including Joseph Stella, Walter Pach, and Max Weber. During his brief but formative time there, Torres-García depicted the chaotic city in a series of striking collages, most notably *New York Street Scene* (1920), in which advertising is juxtaposed with landscape, entertainment collides with art, and an aspiration to "total vision" is embodied by aerial views of the "furious" metropolis. Although he exhibited in New York and eventually sold works—notably to Katherine Dreier and The Société Anonyme—Torres-García became increasingly disenchanted and, facing economic distress, returned with his family to Europe in 1922, where they lived in Genoa, Fiesole, Livorno, and Villefranche-sur-mer before settling in Paris in 1926.

Paris

A notably complex milieu between the two World Wars, 1920s Paris was characterized by an eclectic artistic landscape in which early avant-garde practices were accompanied by a renewal of interest in the primitive, a return to classical representation coincided with the emergence of Surrealism, and a general air of melancholy led to a new form of figuration. An extremely productive writer, Torres-García produced several illustrated manuscripts, on view in the exhibition, stressing his own understanding of modern art grounded in principles that preceded modern civilization, allowing a radical experimental freedom. During this time he practiced abstraction while simultaneously delving into the primitive and producing his *Objets Plastiques*—small assemblages on painted wood—to test various compositional strategies on three-dimensional forms.

During this period of experimentation, Torres-García found his artistic voice and crystallized his style. By 1929 he had arrived at his definitive, signature style, exemplified by four major works made that year: *Fresque constructif au grand pain*; *Physique*; *Composition*; and *Untitled composition*. These paintings and assemblages are characterized by schematic figures simply delineated against a dense grid, where earthy tonalities emphasize geometric fields. Words, letters, and abbreviations are inscribed alongside specific figures: schematic depictions of women and men, fish, snails, clocks, houses, anchors, hearts, swords, ships, temples, and crosses. Distributed vertically and against the paintings' flatness, they stress both the surface plan and the materiality of painting. Torres-García produced countless variations of this scheme—which he would never abandon—as seen in works such as *Construcción en blanco* (from his most productive year, 1931). This signature style would later be defined as "Constructive universalism." However, he never stopped experimenting, continuing to produce strikingly abstract sculptures and paintings that did not conform to this characteristic style.

Montevideo

In 1934, as the Great Depression added to the tense political climate in Europe—the Spanish Civil War, the rise of totalitarianism, and, eventually, the Second World War—Torres-García returned to his native Uruguay. In Montevideo, where he lived until his death in 1949, Torres-García became a central cultural figure—giving talks, broadcasting lectures, teaching, and writing—leaving a long-lasting influence on Uruguay's art scene.

By 1935 he founded the Constructive Art Association, and between 1935 and 1943 he established one of the most striking repertoires of concrete, synthetic abstraction in the Americas. These architectural paintings are, mostly, chromatically reduced to black-and-white contrast. Light and shadows form the surface's plan, while tubular elements and the suggestion of mysterious depth create an organic force within reticular and ordered structures. The exhibition includes a number of these crucial works, such as *Composición abstracta tubular* (1937), *Forma abstracta en espiral modelada en blanco y negro* (1938), and *Construcción en blanco y negro* (1938).

The legacy of his personal workshop, Taller Torres-García, has contributed to the claim for Latin American art as a genuine, non-derivative regional movement, free from European dominance. It was in this spirit that he created one of the most iconic images of Latin American modernism, an inverted map of South America that proclaimed the South as its own North. An early drawing of this concept is shown in *Curso para formación de la consciencia artística (La Escuela del Sur)* (c. 1934) and culminates in his famous *América invertida* (1943).

The final decade of Torres-García's work is characterized by eclecticism, as he revisited his entire repertoire of signature styles, abstract and concrete, from Constructive Universalism to schematic figuration. A notable return to color—especially primary colors—is manifested during this period, as he renewed his interest in monumental public works. With the Taller Torres-García, he created a series of landmark murals, frescoes, and projects for stone and wood monuments, furniture, and decorative objects. Some of his abstract works from this period incorporate pictograms in his signature style, recalling ancient stone walls (*Arte universal*, 1943) or referring to contemporary events like the discovery of atomic energy and the Cold War (*Energía atómica*, 1946). The exhibition concludes with his later works, which bring his oeuvre full-circle and sum up his contributions to modernism: the abstract *Estructura a cinco tonos con dos formas intercaladas* (1948), and his final work, *Figuras con palomas* (1949), a moving depiction of a maternity scene in Arcadia, similar to his earliest works, but in concrete, schematic terms.

SPONSORSHIP:

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PUBLICATION:

The exhibition's richly illustrated catalogue presents Torres-García's paintings, drawings, sculptures, and manuscripts, offering a full overview of his long and wide-ranging career. Essays by Luis Pérez-Oramas, Alexander Alberro, Sergio Chejfec, Estrella de Diego, and Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães examine the artist's entire oeuvre, and are accompanied by an illustrated chronology and an extensive bibliography. Hardcover, \$55. ISBN 978-0-87070-975-3. Published by The Museum of Modern Art and available at MoMA stores and online at momastore.org. Distributed to the trade by ARTBOOK | D.A.P. in the United States and Canada, and by Thames & Hudson outside the United States and Canada.

AUDIO TOUR:

The audio tour accompanying this exhibition features commentary by exhibition curator Luis Pérez-Oramas and curatorial assistant Karen Grimson. MoMA Audio+ is available for streaming and download on MoMA's free app on iTunes, MoMA.org/m, and MoMA.org and is also available free of charge at the Museum. MoMA Audio+ is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

SYMPOSIUM:

January 28, 2016, 1:00–5:00 p.m.

Titus Theater 3 (The Celeste Bartos Theater)

Organized in conjunction with the exhibition *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*, this symposium brings together artists and scholars to explore central works and key themes in the exhibition, including Torres-García's compelling appeal for a specifically Latin American form of modernity, and his influence on contemporary practice.

Tickets for this program will be available beginning December 28. Visit moma.org to purchase tickets. Tickets (\$20; \$15 members and corporate members; \$8 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased online or at the information desk, at the Film desk after 4:00 p.m., or at the Education and Research Building reception desk on the day of the program.

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at moma.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, MoMA.org.

Hours: Saturday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m.

Museum Admission: \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00–8:00 p.m.

MoMA.org: No service charge for tickets ordered on MoMA.org. Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs).