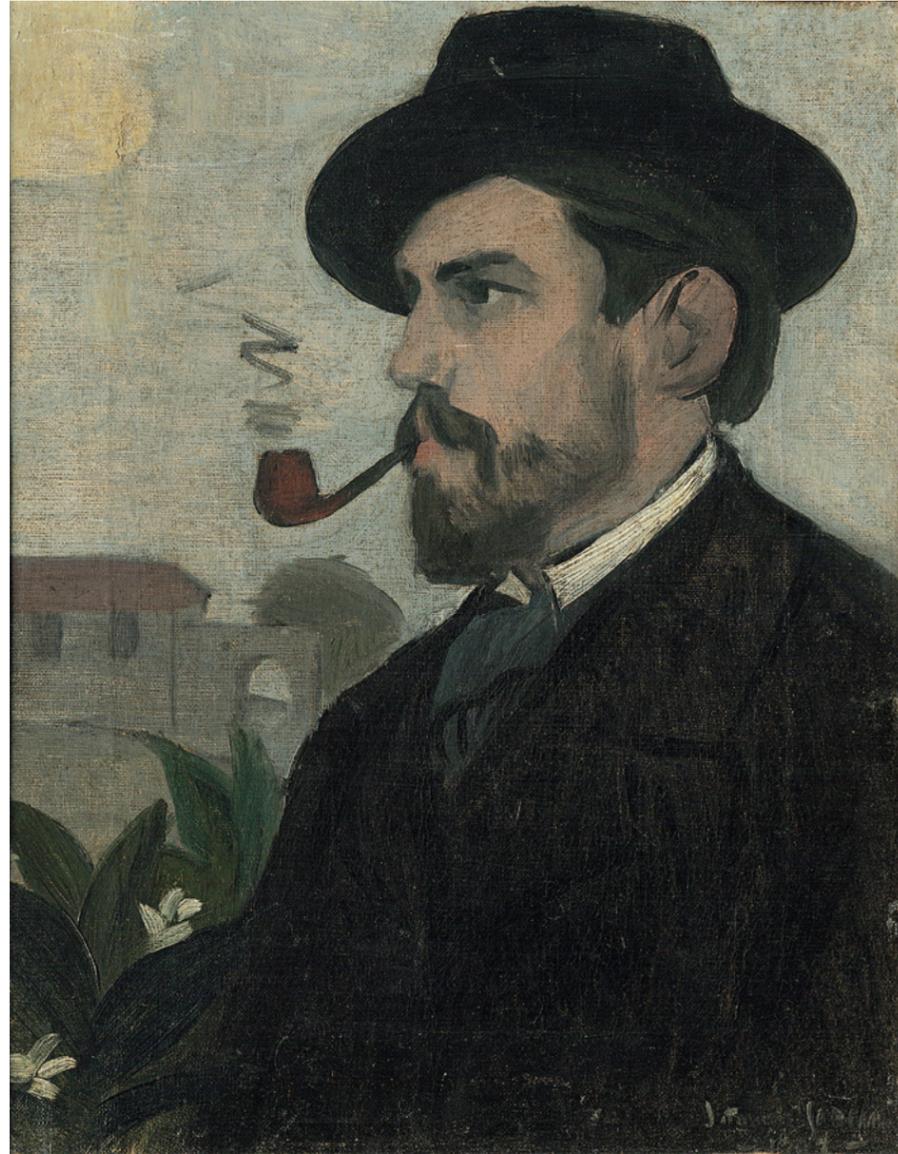


Joaquín Torres-García  
The Arcadian Modern





*Luis Pérez-Oramas*

# Joaquín Torres-García

## The Arcadian Modern

*Alexander Alberro*

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Back cover: **Estructura con formas trabadas** (Structure with stuck forms; detail). 1933. Tempera on board, 29 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 20 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (75 x 52.3 cm). Private collection. See p. 145

Frontispiece: **Autorretrato** (Self-portrait). c. 1902. Oil on canvas, 15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 12 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (40 x 31 cm). Colecció PPP

Endpapers: p. 42 from **La tradición del hombre abstracto**. 1933. Manuscript, ink on cardboard and paper, 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (41 x 30 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo. N-33-12

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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 Cândido Portinari in 1940 to Léon 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 stressing 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—indeed, he counts among those artists who have influenced 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 formal inventions of modern art, Torres-García stayed true to his understanding of time as a collision 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, have been central to this undertaking; all those who, within the family and abroad, have devoted 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 the exhibition as well as to the excellence and creativity of The Museum of Modern Art’s own staff. Luis Pérez-Oramas, The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, and Karen Grimson, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Drawings and Prints, have attended to every detail of the exhibition from inception to realization; in doing so they have depended on the support of their colleagues on the Museum’s staff. Equally fundamental has been the support of our trustees and donors: Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Gustavo Cisneros, whom we thank for their extraordinary personal engagement in our efforts to make this exhibition possible, as well as the Gradowczyk family, Estrellita and Daniel Brodsky, Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, Eduardo F. Costantini, Richard Roth, the Institut Ramon Llull, The Arango Collection, The Consulate General of Spain in New York, The Uruguayan Friends of *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* including Diana and Rafael Viñoly, Fundación Pablo Atchugarry, Fundación Francisco Matto, Fundación Julio Alpuy, and Martín Cerruti, and the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund. We are also grateful to The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art for its support of the publication. As another *Montevideano*, the poet Jules Supervielle, would have said: these truly are MoMA’s *friends with great depths*.

Glenn D. Lowry

Director, The Museum of Modern Art

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*Joaquín Torres-García, The Arcadian Modern* has been an elaborate undertaking and has drawn on the commitment of many individuals and institutions.

I would first of all like to thank Glenn D. Lowry, Director of The Museum of Modern Art, whose passion for Latin American art and for Torres-García’s work framed my conception of this show. His support of the project, and his help in securing critical loans, have been indispensable. Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Christophe Cherix, The Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings and Prints, were early supporters and their enthusiasm, interest, and trust have greatly facilitated my task. I am grateful to Ramona Bannayan, Senior Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Collections, for her brilliant guidance and tireless encouragement, and to Kathy Halbreich, Associate Director, and Peter Reed, Senior Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs, for their visionary leadership. Patricia Phelps de Cisneros’s unparalleled devotion to Latin American art and commitment to Torres’s legacy have been foundational in all the tasks that this exhibition has entailed. Her personal and tireless involvement in securing funding has truly made a difference in the exhibition’s success.

I am enormously grateful to the descendants of Torres-García on whose support and encouragement we have depended: Damián Díaz Torres, Leonardo Díaz Torres, Marcos Torres, Alejandro Díaz, Jimena Perera, Micaela Perera, and the Fundación Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo. The Museo Torres García in Montevideo is a major lender to the show and has contributed in countless other ways as well. I am grateful to this institution and its staff for the generous access they have granted us to their archives, an outstanding repository documenting early modernism in the Americas. This project could not have been accomplished without their support.

I am also deeply grateful to Cecilia Buzio de Torres for her advice, support, and expertise. 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 Susanna 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 Adiego, Valencia; Francisco Arévalo, Miami; Manuel Borrás, Valencia; Jeannette van Campenhout; Juan Castells, Montevideo; Edgar González and Haldar Flores, Fundación Museos Nacionales, Caracas; Virgilio Garza, Christie’s, New York; Laurence Kanter, Yale University Art Gallery; Yuri Liscano and Irene Guillen, Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas; Jorge Mara, Buenos Aires; Mercé Obón, Fundación Godia, Barcelona; Lila Pacheco and Zoila Ramírez, Fundación Museos Nacionales, Caracas; Júlia Roca Soler, Generalitat de Catalunya, Barcelona; Nancy Spector and Carol Stringari, Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Axel Stein, Sotheby’s, New York. I also thank those agencies that administered loans from anonymous lenders: Christie’s, New York; Cecilia de Torres, Ltd., New York; Galería Guillermo de Osma, Madrid; Galería Leandro Navarro, Madrid; Galería Sur, Montevideo; and Karim Hoss, Paris.

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I have counted on the insight of friends and specialists in the work of Torres-García. Back in 2005, the late Mario Gradowczyk popped into my office with his book on the artist, greatly advancing my interest in proposing a show at MoMA. Thanks to the generosity of his family, Mario remained a presence throughout. Ideas improve when confronted with dialogue, and I tested my insights with some very special interlocutors: Connie Butler, who supported the project as the Museum’s former Chief Curator of Drawings, and Alejandro Corujeira, Estrella de Diego, Juan Fló, Juan Iribarren, Toni Llana, Tomás Llorens, Sebastian López, Bartomeu Marí, José Antonio Navarrete, Mari Carmen Ramírez, André Severo, Rob Storr, Jorge Schwartz, Edward Sullivan and Rafael Viñoly. In addition to his always brilliant insights, Hugo Achugar was a major help in his capacity as National Director of Culture in Uruguay. I also had important conversations with Nicolás Arocena and Alejandra, Aurelio, and Claudio Torres, who oversee the Joaquín Torres-García Archive.

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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 Frankel, Editorial Director, MoMA’s gifted editor and most challenging reader, and Maria Marchenkova, Assistant Editor, who were central to the published presentation of Torres-García’s complex narrative; Chul R. Kim, Associate Publisher, Marc Sapir, Production Director, and Hannah Kim, Production Coordinator, whose supervision and coordination have contributed invaluable to this publication; Amanda Washburn, Senior Designer, who is responsible for the beautiful and elegant layout of the book; and Genevieve Allison, Rights Coordinator, who provided invaluable support. My deepest gratitude goes to the authors who have contributed to the book: Alexander Alberro, Sergio Chejfec, Estrella de Diego, and Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães. I am also grateful to Heather Cleary, Jen Hofer, and John Pluecker for their translations of the texts in Spanish.

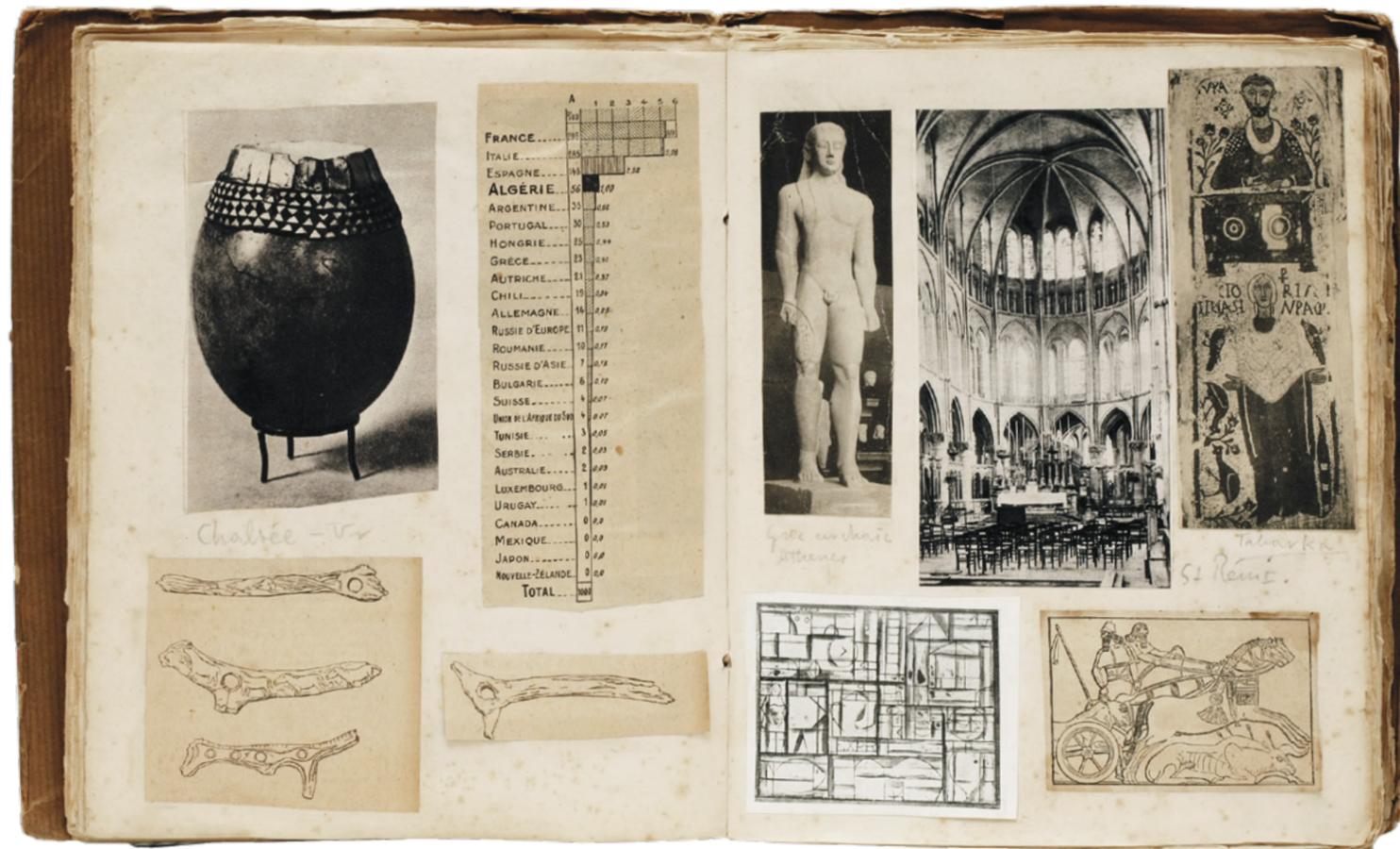
Last but not least, our colleagues in the Department of Drawings and Prints have enhanced this project in myriad ways: Jodi Hauptman, Senior Curator, supplied brilliant insight and advice; the knowledge of Kathy Curry, Assistant Curator, is an invaluable asset to any project; John Prochilo, Department Manager, protected the project through his skillful managerial capacities and intellectual intuition; Emily Cushman, Collection Specialist, provided collegiality and unbreakable good spirit; Jeff White and David Moreno, Preparators, worked to accommodate our use of the Paper Study Center; Alexandra Diczok, Assistant to the Chief Curator, and LJ McNerney and Tara Burns, Department Assistants, lent a hand at crucial moments; and finally, Sophia Marisa Lucas, intern, made flawless 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

Luis Pérez-Oramas

# THE ANONYMOUS RULE: Joaquín Torres-García, the Schematic Impulse, and Arcadian Modernity



1. I refer to the last pages—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 philological 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 Férida, *Le Site de l'étranger* (Paris: PUF, 1995), p. 156.

3. See José Bergamín, *El pozo de la angustia. Burla y pasión del hombre invisible* (Mexico: Editorial Séneca, 1941), p. 12.

4. For the Torres scholar Juan Fló, this would not come until around 1929. See Fló, "Torres García—Nueva York," in *J. Torres-García: New York* (Montevideo: Fundación Torres-García and Casa Editorial HUM, 2007), p. 23.

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 Torres i Bages (1846–1916), a founder of modern, Christian-inspired Catalan nationalism.

*In the last part of Faust, the great poet Goethe said that reality is only a symbol. And we well know that form is only a mask.*

—Joaquín Torres-García, *La Raison*, 1932

*L'equilibri ès possible/però la inquietud/semprè ès present . . .  
silenci i llum/cercle&carré/inesgotables constructions . . .  
(Equilibrium is possible/however unrest/is always present . . .  
Silence and light/cercle&carre/inexhaustible constructions . . .)*

—Albert Ràfols-Casamada, *Policromia o La galeria dels mirals*, 1999

JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA HAD REACHED MATURITY and was in Paris, *resolutely coming to terms with what he had already become by chance*:<sup>1</sup> a 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.<sup>2</sup> 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, drew 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 the 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*.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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,

Joaquín Torres-García. Pages from album *Structures*. 1932. Ink, tempera, and cut-and-pasted paper on paper and cardboard, 9 7/16 x 7 1/2 in. (24 x 19 cm) each. Museo Torres García, Montevideo. MD-32-1

6. Michel Seuphor, *Le Style et le cri. Quatorze essais sur l'art de ce siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 116.
7. Joaquín Torres-García, "Vouloir construire," *Cercle et Carré* no. 1 (March 15, 1930):2.
8. Ibid., p. 2.
9. Fló, J. *Torres-García: New York*, pp. 37–38.
10. Torres-García, "Vouloir construire," p. 3.

set him apart from the avant-garde passion for militant confrontation. This mood informed a sort of cursory 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, “full of twists and turns and uselessly lengthy,”<sup>6</sup> 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, 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?*

And he added: “This rule is an anonymous thing; it belongs to no one.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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 Mnemosyne, 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 anachronistic 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—“that right-minded and highly skilled artist who, like [Paul] Klee . . . was always untimely, whether behind the times or ahead of his time”<sup>9</sup>—we must look at the question at the end of his article in *Cercle et Carré*: “This rule is an anonymous thing; it belongs to no one. Everyone can use it in their own way; it should be the true road of any honest man. But if it has been used throughout the ages, how might it be used in a modern way?”<sup>10</sup>

As Torres reclaimed an age-old anonymous rule, then—a universal rule, since everyone could use it in their own way—he also interrogated its modern form, its contemporary texture, its place in the present. Unlike other modern Latin American artists, such as Armando Reverón, he made clear his will to be modern. Yet he worked against the

11. See the letters from Torres-García to José Enrique Rodó published in “De Maestro a maestro: las cartas de Torres a Rodó,” *El País* (Montevideo), August 26, 1974, p. 5.
12. Fló, J. *Torres-García: New York*, p. 23.

grain of modernity, always looking for schematic, primal images. That paradox is the subject of this essay, but for now, Torres’s question about the modern use of the anonymous rule will suffice to inscribe his name in the vast archives of the will to be modern and of the modern will.

Born in 1874 in Montevideo, Uruguay, Torres-García was five years younger than Henri Matisse, two years younger than Piet Mondrian. He was seven years older than Pablo Picasso, five years older than both Klee and Kazimir Malevich, seven years older than Theo van Doesburg, a decade older than Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. He was almost a contemporary of his fellow Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó (born in 1871), whose anti-utilitarian Pan-American ideals may be located in relation to his.<sup>11</sup> Torres-García’s thinking on the visual made as large a contribution to shaping the cultural thought of Latin America as did the writings of the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío (born 1867), the Mexicans José Vasconcelos (born 1882) and Alfonso Reyes (born 1889), and the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui (born 1894), all of them younger than he.

The son of a Catalan immigrant father and a Uruguayan mother, Torres was European in America and South American in Europe, participating simultaneously in two modernities that stopped communicating at the start of the twentieth century, owing perhaps to the same unease, the same tragedies, evoked at the beginning of this essay. One of these modernities was that of the great urban metropoli of the early century—cities like Barcelona, New York, and Paris, to name only those where Torres lived. The second arose out of an impulse to be modern in the societies of Hispanic America, societies lucky enough to be spared the carnage of World War I but for that reason marked by a double temporality, combining a will to be modern with foundational feudal anachronisms that in some Latin American nations persist to this day. And although the Eastern Republic of Uruguay is one of the smallest countries in South America, it produced great protagonists of that will to be modern, figures of continent-wide impact. In the visual arts alone, in addition to Rodó, 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 the latter artist’s “first conversion” to the modern, around 1917.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps Torres’s work as a painter was a response to the question posed by Torres the theorist in the 1930 article that initiated his brief tour through the modernity of Paris. By then, he had already produced a significant body of work showing signs of a schematic 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 *sprezzatura* informed by the spirit

13. “La pompe de la vie, telle qu’elle s’offre dans les grandes capitales du monde civilisé.” Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” 1863, in *Écrits esthétiques* (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1986), p. 385.

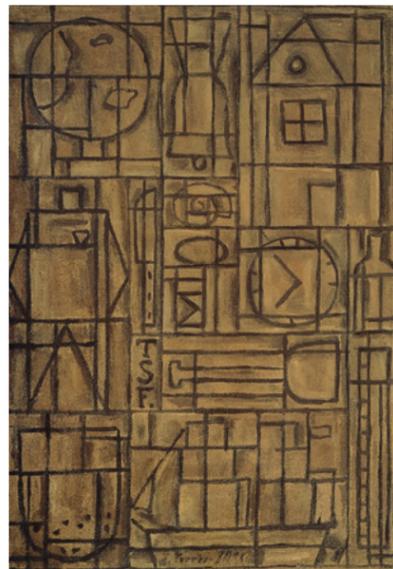
14. See Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1939), p. 108.

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 highlight of his work after the immensely productive year of 1931 (fig. 1).

The Torres who staked a claim on a universal intuition—who believed in an “anonymous rule,” a spirit of synthesis that he saw behind the symbolic creations of tribal peoples—was both Arcadian and modern, a modern artist who saw, or aspired to, a “primitive” modernity. To get there, and to reconcile that modern teleology with his personal archaeology of forms, Torres had to leave behind his academic baggage, the intricate symbolism that he had drawn on to emerge as an artist—and a central one—in early-twentieth-century Catalonia. He had to delve into and dismantle his own subject matter, finding beneath its more easily available representations a basso continuo simultaneously ancient and modern, Arcadian and futurist. This subject matter had nothing to do with narrative or with psychological characters; it related simply to the visual structures on which it was based and that it simultaneously highlighted.

The first test Torres faced, in Barcelona at the dawn of the twentieth century, entailed a choice between modernism and the wild, edenic *Noucentisme*, an early-twentieth-century Catalan art movement that opposed the then fashionable trend of Art Nouveau with a call for Arcadian simplicity, expressed through visions of a rustic Mediterranean Golden Age. It should be said that “modernism” is understood here not only as it manifested in Catalonia but in the Latin American sense that embraced the neo-Parnassian poetry of Darío or of the Uruguayan Julio Herrera y Reissig. In the visual arts, “modernism” also entailed a decadent fin de siècle aesthetic in which various figures stand out: the Baudelairean “man of the crowd” or flâneur, devoted to “the outward show of life as it appears in the capitals of the civilized world”;<sup>13</sup> Constantin Guys, subject of Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life”; Théophile Steinlen, an acknowledged influence on Torres; even the young Pablo Picasso—not to mention Edouard Manet or Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.<sup>14</sup> In Barcelona at the turn of the century, the young Torres was certainly a painter of modern life (fig. 2). He equally certainly abandoned this commitment to the comedy of the world quite early on, anticlimactically changing direction in favor of a *Noucentista* siren song and working for a time on visualizing the Mediterranean Arcadia imagined by the political and cultural leaders of Catalonia’s nascent nationalism. His pictures became scenes of maternity, an eternal nature, the landscape of the Levante—the morning of a serene ideal world of fruits, fountains, and luminous calm, accompanied by the ages of man (fig. 3).<sup>15</sup>

There is still some confusion about Torres’s influences and affinities at this early moment. As he adopted Arcadian imagery, he cast off the baggage of Symbolism. His ideal gardens do not belong to the *pompier* repertoire in the style of Thomas Couture, nor can



1. Joaquín Torres-García. **Constructivismo** (Constructivism). 1931. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 21 7/16 in. (80 x 54.5 cm). Private collection, New York

15. See Narcís Comadira, “Torres-García en la configuración del *Noucentisme*,” in Emmanuel Guigon et al., *Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)* (Barcelona: Museu Picasso, Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, 2003), p. 35, and Tomás Llorens, “Torres-García: a les seves cruïlles,” in *Torres-García: a les seves cruïlles* (Barcelona: Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, 2011), p. 12.

16. Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 135.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 173 ff.

18. A sketch suggests that Torres may have initially

planned to show three levels of content in each fresco: symbolic in the foreground, allegorical in the framing figures, and historical in the central scene. Yet given the differences between this plan and the completed frescoes, he clearly made substantial modifications. See Torres-García, *Mapa iconográfico Sant Jordi*, unpublished, accession no. 960087, box 1, folder 1, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

19. See Joan Sureda, *Torres-García. Pasión clásica* (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1998), p. 168.

2. Joaquín Torres-García. **Untitled**. c. 1900. Charcoal, pencil, and watercolor on paper, 9 13/16 x 14 in. (25.5 x 35 cm). Collection Leopoldo Pomés

3. Joaquín Torres-García. **La llegada (Mural de la casa del Barón de Rialp)** (The arrival [Mural from the residence of Baron Rialp]). 1905–6. Oil on canvas and board, 40 3/16 x 53 3/8 in. (102 x 135.5 cm). Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid



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 Eugeni d’Ors, Enric Prat de la Riba, and Josep Torras i Bagès.<sup>16</sup> 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 his 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.<sup>17</sup> 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), *L’edat d’or de la humanitat* (Humanity’s golden age, 1915), *Les Arts* (The arts, 1916), *Lo temporal no és més 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 infantile.”<sup>19</sup> 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



20. See Fló, “Los frescos del Salón de San Jordi,” in *Exposición de los Bocetos y Dibujos de los Frescos del Salón de San Jorge en la Diputación de Barcelona* (Montevideo: Fundación Torres-García, 1974), p. 4.

21. Llorens, “Torres-García: a les seves cruïlles,” p. 22.

22. See Jean Clair, *Malinconia. Motifs saturniens dans l’art de l’entre-deux-*

*guerres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 59 ff.

23. Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” p. 362.

24. “Ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione.” See Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 165.

out of the country and the dictator Miguel Primo de Ribera 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.”<sup>20</sup>

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 archaism.”<sup>21</sup> 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 work 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 *scholastic* 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 return to classicism, where they were charged with a “disturbing strangeness.”<sup>22</sup> 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 Baudelaire 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”<sup>23</sup> without forgetting Thomas Aquinas’s idea that art imitates nature in its manner of operation, not in its appearance.<sup>24</sup>

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

25. Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 163.

26. Guillermo de Osma, *Fortuny, proust y los Ballets Rusos* (Barcelona: Elba, 2010), pp. 47–48.

27. Torres attended the production of *Parade* at the Liceu de Barcelona in 1917, and published an article defending it in November of that year. See Torres-García, “Un ballet rus de picasso: Parade,” *La Revista* (Barcelona) no. 53 (December 1, 1917):428.

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 Repòs, his house outside Barcelona—“half classical temple, half Catalan cottage,”<sup>25</sup> 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. [Léon] Bakst was profoundly impressed when he toured there around 1905, and his designs for the Greek ballets he produced for the Ballets Russes are permeated with those memories. Isadora Duncan’s new dance revived the emotional and Dionysian meaning of classical dance.*<sup>26</sup>

Catalan *Noucentisme* was one manifestation of this passion for “Greek style” in the modern century. To suggest the extent of that passion, not to mention its quite innovative modernity, we might cite figures ranging from Mariano Fortuny—whose “Knossos” veil and “Delphos” gown, which revealed the natural form of the female body, were probably worn by Torres’s wife, Manolita, during what may have been her husband’s single moment of public success—to the Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, and Picasso of *Parade*.<sup>27</sup> Warburg’s essays “Dürer and Italian Antiquity” (1905), “The Gods of Antiquity and the Early Renaissance in Southern and Northern Europe” (1908), and “The Emergence of the Antique as a Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting” (1914) are further, radical iterations of this impulse toward antiquity in modern thinking. Torres-García followed the same impulse during these years, in serene, sunny images that left the nineteenth century behind and began the laborious process of entering twentieth-century modernity.

TORRES’S FIRST MODERN SCENES shed light on his last years in Barcelona (fig. 4). They were nearly contemporaneous with *Lo temporal no és més que símbol*, the last Sant Jordi fresco that he was able to complete (fig. 5, p. 54). This painting of a giant Pan or satyr, rising with his flute above a dancing crowd, is one of the most enigmatic in Torres’s entire corpus.

The first three frescoes had conformed to a rational allegorical order, following a Raphaellesque model in which well-proportioned figures framed an Arcadian landscape. Displacing this Parnassian golden mean, a giant faun now fills the entire visual field. Surpassing the rational, this sublime flute player is a pure figure of the imagination,



4. Joaquín Torres-García. **Escena de una calle de Barcelona** (Barcelona street scene). 1917. Oil on board, 24 7/16 x 28 3/8 in. (62 x 72 cm). Guillermo de Osma, Madrid

28. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, first century B.C., trans. William Ellery Leonard, 1916, available online at [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0131%3A-book%3D4%3Acard%3D962](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0131%3A-book%3D4%3Acard%3D962) (accessed May 25, 2015).

29. See Sureda, Torres-García. *Pasión clásica*, p. 148.

30. Goethe's German reads, "Alles Vergängliche/Ist nur ein Gleichnis." The *Chorus Mysticus* is this book-length poem's eight-line conclusion.

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 minds 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."<sup>28</sup>

This monumental creature might remind us of some of Picasso's 1920s paintings of enormous figures, whose size—but for their morning sunniness and lyricism—might in turn recall the famous *Coloso* (Colossus, 1808–12) attributed to Goya or a follower (fig. 6).<sup>29</sup> In that image as in Torres's fresco, a giant dominates a crowd with sovereign indifference: there a monstrous beast, here a cosmic musician who sets the melody and rhythm of human experience and labor. As in *El Coloso*, the monster is an animal in human shape—a faun, an archaic Arcadian creature, barely emerged from its animal origins. Indeed Torres's preparatory drawings for the fresco include a quick sketch in which he replaced the faun with an ape playing the double bass (fig. 7).

The ape, the faun: primary beings, animals that intimate and prefigure the human. Curiously, the ape also appears on the cover of one of Torres's most important manuscripts of the period, *Hechos* (Facts, 1922), the text in which he underwent his "modern conversion." The faun for its part is a protective figure of pastoral Arcadia, attuned to the rhythms of nature and offering up the fruits and promises of a golden age. It is also an oracle, a Dionysian bearer of prophecies—a bearer of the future—in the form of revelations and dreams, as in Lucretius's poem. At the bottom of Torres's strange scene, between two figures personifying Melancholia, is an inscription excerpted from the *Chorus Mysticus* of Goethe's *Faust*: "Lo temporal no és més que símbol," the temporal is no more than symbol.<sup>30</sup> Torres probably first encountered this verse indirectly: the priest Torras i Bagès had done a "Thomist" Christian exegesis of it, and d'Ors had cited it in several *Noucentista* publications.<sup>31</sup> Considered heretical by some Catholics, the phrase would produce the first controversies around the murals, but it is interesting to us because it indexes a foundational gesture of Torres's aesthetic: a nonprogressive temporality. Time, as symbol, would for this artist be no more than a convention.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Linguists . . . say that since there is strictly no means of marking the date in history when, for example, Latin ends and French begins,

31. See Sureda, Torres-García. *Pasión clásica*, p. 150 ff. It may be revealing that Torres often misremembered the phrase, repeating it as "Reality is nothing more than symbol." See, e.g., his autobiography: Torres, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 176.

32. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 87, Eng. trans. as *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 70.

33. Torres-García, *Anotaciones sobre arte masónico y esotérico. Mapa sintáctico*. N.p. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accession no. 960087.

34. See Pilar García-Sedas, Joaquín Torres-García y Rafael Barradas. *Un diálogo escrito: 1918–1928* (Barcelona: Parsifal Ediciones, 2001), p. 61.

there is only one single language and almost only one single tongue unceasingly at work. Let us say more generally that the continued attempt at expression finds one single history, as the hold our body has upon every possible object finds one single space."<sup>32</sup> Torres similarly sought to compress all the temporal and stylistic fractures, the superficial and formal aspirations, the different languages, styles, obsessions, automatisms, and "truisms" apparent in the work of the historical avant-gardes, into a single stylistic temporality. He intuited a single history and a single language, its unity, uniqueness, and singularity grounded by that anonymous rule. He would confront these fractures with his stoic resistance to the new, his schematic impulse, his pre-historic, Arcadian knowledge.

"The temporal is no more than symbol": the temporal, the panoply of styles that signify within the fractures of language, is just a glaze of convention and symbol over a single, always incomplete body whose modern form Torres examines. This body constitutes "one single tongue unceasingly at work," a group of symbolic forms in continual operation, in continual historical action. The unity of incessant, inexhaustible, always unfinished expression grounds the possibility of a universal history, and therefore the possibility of a community within that history, just as the projection of the human body—or of the huge body of Pan in Torres's fresco—grounds one single space.

That gigantic body—perhaps damaged or ill formed—rises above the various other, smaller bodies in the painting and makes its own organic bodily breath the source of an unexpected music. Perhaps, as temporal symbol, Torres-García's musical Gulliver prefigures a utopia of stylistic unity, or, rather, the utopian project of a schematic and eventually totalizing compression—a project in which the vast variety of styles that constantly divide us, the various and multiple temporalities of the symbol, will one day be united. As Torres wrote in an undated note, "The law of unity is: what is many ends up as one . . . the many colors end up as one through their tonality. Being within the tone, they are in unity. Forms—within the geometric plane—end up as one thing."<sup>33</sup>

This giant, then, this monster singing its silent truths, this temporal symbol, this oracle of the future, is an initiatory figure in Torres-García's work. For the moment, though, it will be sufficient to listen hard enough to hear behind his music, clashing with the serene *Noucentista* Arcadia, the sounds of the city outside, about to wake up to its modern frenzy.

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 Repòs on August 27, 1917.<sup>34</sup> Yet a drawing showing an orthogonal network of scenes, a fully "Torresian" structure, accompanied one of his articles in the journal *Un enemic del poble* (An enemy of the people) in June of that year, while a painting like *Figura con paisaje de ciudad* (Figure with



5. Joaquín Torres-García. Design for the fresco *Lo temporal no és més que símbol* (The temporal is no more than symbol), 1918. Pencil on paper, 53 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 23 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (136 x 60 cm). Generalitat de Catalunya Fons d'Art

6. Follower of Francisco de Goya y Lucientes. *El coloso* (The colossus), 1818–25. Oil on canvas, 45 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 41 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (116 x 105 cm). Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

7. Joaquín Torres-García. *El Fauno (boceto para "Lo temporal no és més que símbol")* (The faun [sketch for "The temporal is no more than symbol"]). 1916. Ink and pencil on paper, 8 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 6 in. (22 x 15.8 cm). Private collection, Barcelona

35. On these beginnings see Mario Gradowczyk, *Torres-García: utopía y transgresión* (Montevideo: Museo Torres García, 2007), p. 52 ff.

36. On the “intertwining” of “Greek” and “Vibrationist” styles in Torres’s work of these years see Llorens, “Torres-García: a les seves cruïlles,” p. 25.

37. See García-Sedas, *Joaquín Torres-García y Rafael Barradas*, p. 77.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

39. See Sureda, *Torres-García. Pasión clásica*, p. 154.

40. Torres-García, letter to Rafael Barradas, August 28, 1918, in García-Sedas, *Joaquín Torres-García y Rafael Barradas*, p. 133.

urban landscape, 1917) is dated June 20.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup>

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 clamor 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.<sup>39</sup> Ten difficult 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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 Ultraist 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—independent of the doctrine of the Taller Torres-García, of Constructivism, of the Escuela del Sur (School of the South), of his constant, surprising returns 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.

It was also during these years that Torres began to make toys, to critical acclaim and with the promise of commercial profit. He told Barradas, “I am excited to be working again, after such a long time of not painting anything. The toys are leading me to this. Because the one is the same as the other. In the end, I think I will have found something that, despite making money—if it actually does—will make me happy to do it. It’s all toys and painting!”<sup>41</sup>

41. Torres-García, letter to Barradas, December 13, 1918, in *ibid.*, p. 148.

42. See Cecilia de Torres, “From Man in the Street to Universal Man,” in Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2011), pp. 84–91.

43. See Torres-García, “L’art en relació amb l’home etern i l’home que passa,” in *Joaquim Torres-García. Escrits sobre art* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1980), pp. 206–23.

44. See Fló, “Torres García— Nueva York,” p. 22.

“Because the one is the same as the other”: this unequivocal declaration, made even before Torres established a New York toy business under the brand name “Aladdin,” clarifies his artistic impulse. Besides being a source of pleasure in those times of tragedy and war, poverty and hardship, toys were “the same as the other”: that is to say, they responded to the same artistic impulse, the same kind of formal investigation, as painting. And might we not then wonder about the tropes of infancy in Torres’s art as he was moving beyond his Arcadian portrayals of the world’s infancy? Might not these schematic, understated, transformable toys be a modern form of that infancy—vibrating and vibrant like the city, with its noise, its crowds, its multiple overlaid traces—recently awoken from dream in the aftermath of the music of the giant faun in the Sant Jordi fresco?

Torres’s love of toys is an early sign of his destiny—or vocation—as an object-maker, of his work in sculpture, friezes, steles, and furniture. His toys were figures of infancy made by an artist fascinated by the infancy of forms. They also marked the infancy of his sculptural practice, and as such would lead to a number of similarly anthropomorphic works. We will return to these works, since they reveal, more clearly than many others, the primal schematic representation that came to form his language and constructive style.<sup>42</sup>

A work meaningfully titled *Hoy* (Today, c. 1919; p. 59)—itself an object, a modern stele at the same time that it is a collage—suggests a farewell to Europe on Torres’s part and presages his New York adventure. The many interweaving cables of that city on the Atlantic are already visible, and a compass appears through a marking of the cardinal points. Prefiguring what is to come, a small inscription attached to a tiny American flag reads “NY.” Collage elements—fragments of newspaper and mail, tickets for trains and ships, all evoking displacement and travel—mix English, Spanish, and Catalan. Made just as Torres’s voyage to America marked the close of the first stage of his life, *Hoy* is his quintessential work of the present moment, of which it forms a repeating image—an image both of the day slipping by and of what Torres called the “man who passes by.”<sup>43</sup> The clock marks the hours, and the calendar under the work’s inscribed title indicates the date of that “today”: Tuesday, August 5, 1919.

After a stop in Paris in May of 1920, where he visited Joan Miró and had a brief, disappointing encounter with Picasso, Torres disembarked in New York, where he would live for the next two years.<sup>44</sup> In his book *New York. Impresiones de un artista* (New York: Impressions of an artist, 1921), a kind of instinctive and contradictory conversation with himself, his disillusionment is already apparent:

*This is New York—the city of seven million people—which crushes the artist. —But New York is New York—one of a kind. —When viewed from the Brooklyn Bridge, through the thousand cables that hold up the immense bridge over the East [River]—beneath it, primitive 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.*<sup>45</sup>

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. 8). 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 shows—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



8. Joaquín Torres-García. *Street Scene*. 1920–22. Oil on canvas, 39 1/8 x 32 in. (99.4 x 81.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Morton G. Neumann

9. Joaquín Torres-García. *New York Street Scene*. 1923. Oil on board, 12 3/16 x 19 11/16 in. (31 x 50 cm). Private collection



10. Joaquín Torres-García. *Collage*. 1921–22. Cut-and-pasted paper on paper, 10 1/4 x 19 9/16 in. (26 x 42 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo

11. Joaquín Torres-García. *New York*. 1921. Oil on canvas, 32 1/16 x 25 1/2 in. (81.5 x 65 cm). Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid



46. Juan José Lahuerta, "Disfraz, madera," in Guignon et al., *Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)*, pp. 184–86.

47. Torres-García, *New York*, p. 151.

return to Europe. For all the grand galas he attended—for one of which he designed a famous suit, overalls à la Rodchenko that made the city material on his body—the disappointment, 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 Lahuerta 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.*<sup>46</sup>

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

*I am the poor man—unassuming, 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.*<sup>47</sup>

**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 gave him a tranquil environment, as if he were looking to heal after the frenzy of New York: to heal by returning to interiority, as opposed to the inescapable and absolute exteriority of the modern rush of life in the big city, that mirage of the future hidden in the present.

Indeed, Torres's paintings from the period of his return to Europe are strikingly internal: but for occasional landscapes of these small towns, they are still lifes of unremarkable objects, their Cubist style now fairly stereotypical and familiar. Along with these paintings, though, Torres began to produce his *objetos plásticos*: highly sculptural assemblages of rustic painted wood, surprising for their radically schematic quality (fig. 13). With these objects Torres cast aside the academic call for realistic representation,



12. The artist in his painted overalls inscribed “New York,” 1921

48. Seuphor, *Le style et le cri*, p. 112. On this period of Torres's work see Pedro da Cruz, *Torres-García and Cercle et Carré: The Creation of Constructive Universalism*. Paris

1927–1932 (Ystad: Hansson & Kotte Tryckeri AB, 1994) and Marie-Aline Prat, *Cercle et Carré. Peinture et avant-garde au seuil des années 30* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1984).

moving closer to the ancient forms—the stele, the bas-relief—that would make up his own approach. He would continue to filter his experience of the 1920s avant-gardes, one after another, through this rustic quality, just as the pine table and clay pot were figures of a metonymy through which the modern city located its opposite.

Torres found his own voice and approach in the 1920s, and within those 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 paradises 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 typical model 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, no specific *cannochiale aristotelico* (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 partisan of nothing and no one, not even in the pivotal moment before the creation of *Cercle et Carré*—amid “endless jousts,” according to Seuphor<sup>48</sup>—did Torres succumb to the temptation 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.”<sup>49</sup>



13. Joaquín Torres-García. **Forma sobre fondo blanco** (Form on white background). 1924. Painted wood, 12 3/16 x 5 5/8 x 2 3/8 in. (31 x 14.3 x 6 cm). MACBA Collection, MACBA Foundation, Barcelona

14. Joaquín Torres-García. **Formas abstractas** (Abstract forms). 1929. Oil on canvas, 24 x 19 11/16 in. (61 x 50 cm). Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, Montevideo



49. Torres-García, letter to Theo van Doesburg, December 3, 1929, in Eduardo Lipschutz-Villa, ed., *The Antagonistic Link* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art Amsterdam, 1991), p. 35.

50. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Fragments posthumes sur l'éternel retour* (Paris: Allia, 2006), p. 31.

When Torres wrote this, the modern avant-gardes had already dismantled the apparatus of representation (though not representation itself—just its classic enunciat-ive infrastructure). He would filter the approaches of these avant-gardes 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 “thingness” of things, what gives things their quality of being a thing (which is different from their ideal essence). He would eventually strip symbolism of its “ism” and be left with the symbol alone, 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 like 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 appar-ently 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 sight at work elsewhere in those years, notably in photography—in the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko, for example, or of László Moholy-Nagy, Umbo (Otto Umbehrr; fig. 16), and other artists of or around the Bauhaus. One needs no especially sharp eye to understand that the device of setting thickly drawn organizing lines against dark backgrounds gave Torres the principal source for most of his work, and one that he would continue to draw on until the end of his life.

It is tempting to ask whether Torres-García’s schematic impulse and his mod-ern impulse are the same thing, or whether the former is something more primal, 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, the structural drive in Torres’s work always involves a search for primal forms, primal schema—the “anonymous rule,” or to put it in Nietzschean terms, “the thinking of some-thing that rehappens.”<sup>50</sup> Many have tried to settle the debate by turning from the obvious contradictions in Torres’s work, and the sense of that work as unpredictable, as magma in motion, to the coherence of his written ideas, the scholarliness of his dogma and doc-trine. But what artists write—and Torres was one of the most prolific writers among the artists of his time—shows only what they are able to conceptualize consciously at a given moment. (This is especially true in the case of a teacher, as Torres was.) Meanwhile, what an artist’s consciousness intuits—and, further, the part of their functioning that is not part of their conscious awareness—can never be written.

What cannot be written, or what can eventually be only badly written, can never-theless be shown: embodied in a visible object, turned into a thing, constructed.<sup>51</sup> Torres’s

15. *Pintura constructiva* (Constructive painting). 1928  
Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 28 3/4 in. (60 x 73 cm)

16. Umbo (Otto Umbehrr; German, 1902–1980). *Blick auf das Berliner Kaufhaus Karstadt* (View of Berlin’s Department Store Karstadt). 1929. Gelatin silver print, 9 5/16 x 6 1/8 in. (23.7 x 15.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange

51. I am grateful to André Severo for the notion of the “badly written,” important in his work as both artist and theorist, which I have trans-posed to this discussion of Torres-García. See Severo, “Notas sobre o (i)mémore,” unpublished ms. On Severo’s thinking more gen-erally see his book *Deriva de sentidos*, Documento Areal 9 (Rio de Janeiro: Confraria do Vento, 2012), and his Website [www.andresevero.com/#!constelaes/c1khf](http://www.andresevero.com/#!constelaes/c1khf).

52. The idea of the “badly assembled” appears often in descriptions of Torres’s constructions, as in Llorens’s mention of his “impatience with finishes” (in “Raque de la Atlántida,” *Torres-García*, Valencia: Instituto Valen-ciano de Arte Moderno, 1991, p. 31) and Ramírez’s of his “constructed precarious-ness” (in “A Constructed Precariousness: Abstraction against the Grain,” *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, p. 39).

53. See Margit Rowell, “Torres-García and ‘Primitivism’ in Paris,” in Ramírez, *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, p. 119; Marc Domènech Tomás, “Torres-García: Tras la máscara constructiva,” in *Torres-García: Tras la máscara constructiva* (Murcia: Centro Cultural Las Claras Cajamurcia, 2008), pp. 7–17; and Llorens, “Raque de la Atlántida.”

54. Foundational texts here include Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (1927), Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (1915), and many others.

55. See Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam’s House in Paradise* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962).

56. Boas for example wrote, “The theory has been advanced that geometric ornament developed through the degeneration of per-spective designs. . . . It is assumed that the symbol, or the object represented, was misunderstood and that in course of time through a process of slurring, by care-less and inaccurate repre-sentation the forms became fragmentary and finally lost all semblance to the original. It is not possible to accept this theory, because the conditions under which the supposed slurring occurs are seldom realized. . . . When the purely decorative tendency prevails we have essentially geometrical, highly conventionalized forms; when the idea of representation prevails, we have, on the contrary, more realistic forms. In every case, however, the formal element that characterizes the style is older than the particular type of represen-tation.” Boas, *Primitive Art*, 1927 (Eng. trans. New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 352–54.

57. For a recent example of this “binary” understanding of Torres, privileging the abstract—in this case the *maderas* (woods)—over other elements of his work, see Ramírez, “A Constructed Precariousness: Abstraction against the Grain,” in *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, pp. 34, 41.

works contain much more than can be written, because one of the things in them, silently manifesting, 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 elo-quence, the artwork itself, insofar as it is a manifestation of that anonymous rule, is per-haps precisely the badly written: the call to the rustic truth of being—the pine table, the clay pot—that Torres was responding to when he returned from America, and that mani-fested 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 primal graphic gestural-ity.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> The aesthetic court has heard and judged the case: modern art was possible only insofar as it “rediscovered” the arts of tribal and early peoples.<sup>54</sup> The issue is ethically and ideologically thorny. The narrative of civiliza-tion-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 Adam’s house in paradise;<sup>55</sup> it was through African deities that Picasso and others discovered a path beyond classical representation. If this is so, 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 opposed, or as if the “structural” could only be “modern” rather than primal? Why the effort to assert a hierarchy in which structure dominates the “primitive”? Why privilege the “abstract” over the “symbolic”? Why continue to be boxed in by a teleology according to which the “symbolic” existed first and the “abstract” and nonrepresentational only later, a view repeatedly questioned by the anthropological sciences?<sup>56</sup> Why insist on sep-arating—as if they were oil and water—the awe-inspiring mask and the Neo-Plasticist grid that Torres so often fused in a single work (p. 81)?<sup>57</sup>

Two potentially confusing terms persist in readings of Torres’s work: abstraction and constructivism. On the one hand, constructivism as a style was exhausted by the historical circumstances of the mid-1920s, when Torres established the foundations of his constructive language. If historical constructivism was to have an afterlife, it would have to wait until the early 1940s, when a “pure” abstraction would emerge in Argentina, in opposition to Torres’s legacy.<sup>58</sup> In the 1960s, Brazilian Neo-Concretism and North



58. See Alexander Alberro, “To Find, to Create, to Reveal: Torres-García and the Models of Invention in Mid-1940s Río de la Plata,” in the present volume. See also, e.g., Tomás Maldonado, “Torres-García contra el arte moderno,” *Boletín de la Asociación de Arte Concreto Invención* (Buenos Aires) no. 2 (December 1946); Carmelo Arden Quin, letters to Torres-García, November 15, 1946, and March 30, 1947, C-46-35, C-47-30, Archivo Museo Torres García, Montevideo; Guido Castillo, “En defensa de la pintura, de un artista y del arte moderno,” *Removedor* no. 16 (January–February 1947):2; and Torres-García, “No sean majaderos! . . .” *Removedor* no. 18 (July–August 1947):2, and “No hubo remedio . . .” *Removedor* no. 19 (September 1947):2–3.

59. For an analysis of the notion of abstraction from a contemporary perspective, see Hubert Damisch, “Remarks on Abstraction,”

trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 127 (Winter 2009): 133–54.

60. In other words, there is no progression such as that implied in phrases like “. . . the evolution of Torres-García’s *maderas*—from figure-based constructions to plastic objects that are, nevertheless, imbued with meaning.” Ramírez, *Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*, p. 46.

61. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discurso, figura* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1979), p. 219 ff. (first published in French as *Discours, figure*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1974).

62. In *ibid.*, p. 223, Lyotard argues that “what is legible is that which does not stop the eye in its course.” This suggests that everything that stops the eye is figural, independently of whether or not it has a mimetic dimension.

American Minimalism were similar phenomena. Even when Torres established the principles of his *Universalismo Constructivo* (Constructive universalism), in the 1940s, he made no suggestion of a connection with constructivism; rather, this was a program of symbolic universalism grounded in his certainty that the basic elements of visual art, either concrete or abstract, were universal and therefore based on the *idea* of construction. What interested Torres, both as artist and as theorist 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 in 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 a kind of superstition, a belief in something that does not and cannot exist.<sup>59</sup> 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 his *maderas*, the works in wood that he produced from the 1920s to the end of his life.<sup>60</sup> 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 1974, does much to clarify Torres-García’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.”<sup>61</sup> The idea that figuration is a manifestation of *the figural as the opposite of the textual* gives us a better understanding of Torres’s work of the 1920s, collections of lines and letters (or symbols and pictograms) in which the spaces of “figure” and “text” are mutually imbricated: one stops our eye, then the other suggests a reading, a decoding.<sup>62</sup> Like a frieze or stele, the work operates in a dynamic between-place combining reading and visual stasis in the context of a structure. 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

17. (opposite right) Joaquín Torres-García. Pages from notebook *Dibujo escritura* (Drawing scripture). c. 1933. Ink and watercolor on paper, 5 7/8 x 16 1/8 in. (15 x 41 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo. MD-Sd-5

18. (opposite left) Joaquín Torres-García. **Hombre abstracto sentado** (Seated abstract man). 1929. Painted wood, 7 1/16 x 1 15/16 x 1 15/16 in. (18 x 5 x 5 cm). Private collection. Courtesy Karim Hoss

63. The notion of the *species expressa* comes from the repertoire of scholastic philosophy, which makes distinctions among *esse naturae*, *esse intentionale*, and *esse cognitum*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1260–64, book IV, chapter XI; Aquinas, *Opusculum XIV, Sur la nature du verbe de l’intellect*, thirteenth century (Paris: Vrin, 1984), p. 147; Jean de Saint Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus Thomisticus*, 1637, I, question 12; and Jacques Maritain, *Les Degrés du savoir* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), pp. 136–263, esp. pp. 200, 221 ff., and 238, as well as the Anexo I (“A propos du concept”), pp. 769–819. For nonscholasticist uses around the notion of mental intention or “intentionality,” see Edmund Husserl, *Recherches Logiques*,

Book V, Chapter II (Paris: PUF, 1982), p. 165 ff., esp. p. 168; Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanisme de l’autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972, pp. 11–16, 70 n. 4; and Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), pp. 4, 24, 30–31, 57–60, 91–95. For an analytical philosophical framework see John Searle, *L’Intentionnalité* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), pp. 15–55, 141–71, 194–274; Hilary Putnam, *Représentation et réalité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 21 ff., n. 1 (first published in English as *Representation and Reality*, Boston: The MIT Press, 1988); Wilfrid Sellars, *Intentionality and the Mental*, in: *Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem*, Vol II, Feigl/Schriber/Maxwell, Minnesota, 1958.

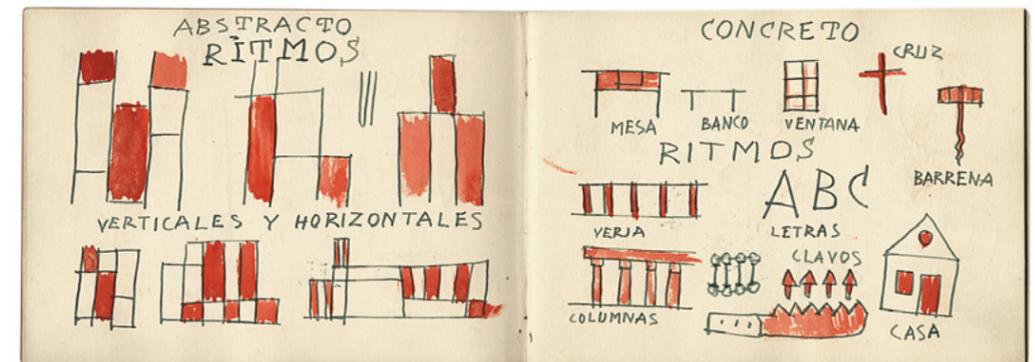
optimal formal light, commensurate with the concept and the sign. Torres knew, his writings show, that images can be *imprinted*—found through sensory perception—or expressed, produced through a purely intellectual faculty. It is on this latter form of image—the “mental verb” that late scholasticism would call “*species expressa*”—that *intentionality* depends: that is to say, the capacity to represent ourselves to the world in ideal conditions.<sup>63</sup> 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, opposing the abstract and not the figurative but the concrete (fig. 17), in order to emphasize two distinct forms of structural organization, 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.

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 scheme of the visual field forms a space for individually framed pictographic digressions (pp. 82–84). The chronological coincidence of these works with Torres’s participation in Cercle et Carré, a period of exchanges with Seuphor, Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and others, may have led critics to overemphasize the importance of the Neo-Plastic grid in this compositional model. The linear rhythms of Torres’s work would perhaps become more defined after his assimilation of Neo-Plasticism, but they actually preceded this moment by many years, appearing in works in which he demonstrated his fascination with facades, made not only during his New York period but at the turn of the century.

The idea of the facade, however, may be still more significant. In a letter to de Torre of 1931, Torres provided a surprising description of his pictorial style at the time:

*Someday when I’m able, I will let you know what I’ve been working on recently, through photographs or some other means. It’s a matter of a style that I might call cathedral. Something quite strong, quite mature (a synthesis of all my work), quite proper, in a constructive sense, and even better, it’s something new because, as [Jacques] Liptchitz [sic] says, it is the most ancient prehistory.”*<sup>64</sup>

The terms of Torres’s project could not be more clearly expressed: both his figures and his grids are fed by the archaic and the ancient, to the point where the Neo-Plastic grid



64. Torres-García, letter to Guillermo de Torre, November 8, 1931. Mario

Gradowczyk Archive, Buenos Aires.

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 rearrangeable body—erase 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 *disputatio*, 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 *maderas* simultaneously structural and primal, 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.

“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



19. Joaquín Torres-García. **Untitled**. 1929. Oil paint on wood, 9 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 1 in. (24.4 x 8.3 x 2.5 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn

20. Joaquín Torres-García. **Forma de mujer abstracta** (Shape of abstract woman) and **Figura con cabeza inclinada** (Figure with leaning head). 1931. Oil on wood, 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 5 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (41 x 13 cm), 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 4 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 1 in. (41 x 12.5 x 2.5 cm). Maslach Family



65. See, e.g., Mario Gradowczyk, *Torres-García: utopía y transgresión*, p. 234 ff., and da Cruz, *Torres-García and Cercle et Carré*, p. 36.

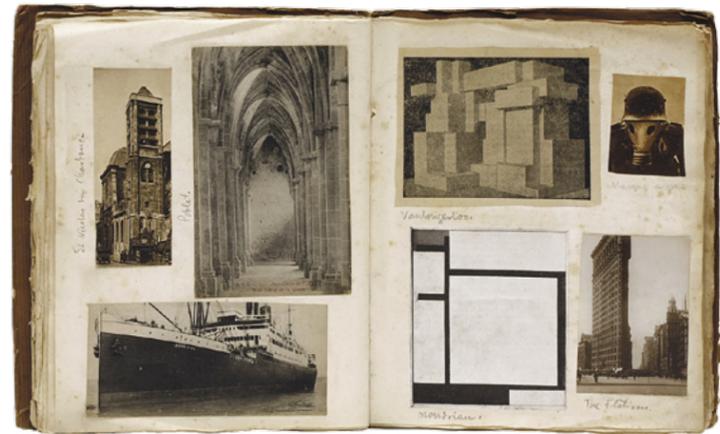
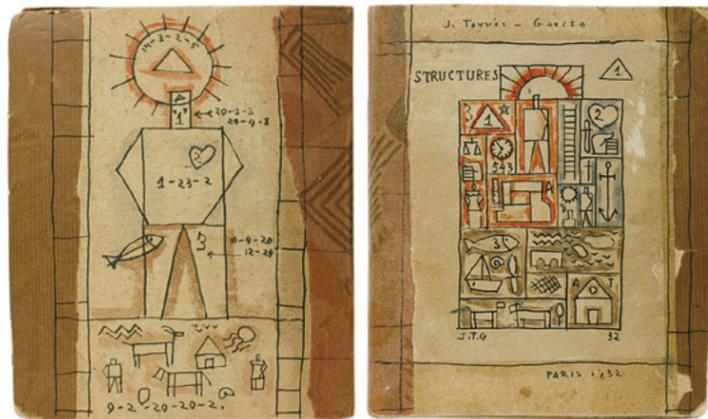
66. “For us, there can be just one tradition: that of esoteric philosophy, which unifies everything.” Torres-García, *Raison*, 1932, unpublished ms., N-32-4, Archivo Museo Torres García.

which Torres spun many variations. Particularly emblematic signs reappear: key, key-hole, clock, fish, anchor, sailboat, steamboat, ladder, snail, sun, abstract figure with heart or star, and certain powerful words: *universus*, *montevideo*, *europa*, *abstracto*, *concreto*, *sur* (south).

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 esoteric 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 Xul Solar. Torres's interest in numerology, astrology, and hermetic traditions has been much studied.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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, idiolectic and deeply personal. Following an analogical syntax, it juxtaposes figures (collages of printed reproductions) that are temporally remote yet structurally similar: archaic forms, steles, stone inscriptions, topographical descriptions, electrical circuits, modern buildings, African textiles, masks, numerical charts, old maps, diagrams for the making of musical instruments, boundary markers, signs or milestones with historical inscriptions, ocean liners, hieroglyphs, airplanes, 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 consonances 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 Gdańsk? 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 posits 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).



21. Joaquín Torres-García. Pages from album **Structures**. 1932. Ink, tempera, and cut-and-pasted paper on paper and cardboard, 9 7/16 x 7 1/2 in. (24 x 19 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo. MD-32-1



IN 1932, TORRES LEFT PARIS, with the idea of moving to Madrid. What he found there was that Europe—sunk 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 unassuming country he had left at the age of seventeen. 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 markedly textural, as in the carved *maderas* 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 diagrammatic 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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> The paintings suggest architectural fragments, and some have been linked to Torres’s interest in pre-Columbian cultures, notably those of the Peruvian altiplano.<sup>69</sup> The dark lines 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 as 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

67. I thank my friend Alejandro Corujeira for this observation and for his excellent painterly analysis.

68. Torres remembered dreams in which “the shadows of objects pursued him”—a typical childhood fear. Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 31.

69. See César Paternosto, *North and South Connected: An Abstraction of the Americas*, exh. cat.

(New York: Cecilia de Torres, 1998), p. 13.

70. Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 269.

71. See Merleau-Ponty, “L’Œil et l’esprit,” 1964, Eng. trans. as “Eye and Mind” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 149.

finally, uniquely his own, having lost all trace of the tentative and polemical ventures of his Paris years? These friezes say nothing beyond their mere presence, containing no figures, functioning to communicate no message or code. Some see their solidity and gravitas—“like a stone wall,” he said—as one of the most inspired achievements of Torres’s career.<sup>70</sup> As Merleau-Ponty put it, these works—depictions of timeless structures—already contained the future of painting.<sup>71</sup> They are anachronic 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 timelessness.

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 eclectically 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. 191)—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 antimonumental 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 *Universalismo constructivo* (fig. 22), with its steles 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/revealed/to those/who first climbed it?” (fig. 24).<sup>72</sup>

In all of these works, the schema functions to allow the projection of a type of space onto the potential categories of understanding.<sup>73</sup> 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 representations 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 figural 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.



22. Joaquín Torres-García. Drawing for *Universalismo Constructivo* (Constructive universalism). Ink on paper, 8 7/16 x 6 5/16 in. (21.5 x 16 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo

72. *Amereida* (Valparaíso: Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, 2011), p. 41. *Amereida*—a coinage combining “America” and “Aeneid”—is a long polyphonic poem originally conceived by Godofredo Iommi in 1968. Considered the founding text of the Ciudad Abierta-Comunidad Cultural Amereida in Ritoque, Valparaíso, it can be read as a poetic gloss of Torres’s map—and project—of America inverted to make the South the North. *Amereida* includes extensive commentary and variations on Torres’s image.

73. In his analysis of the complex articulation of the cycles of Piero della Francesca’s frescoes at Arezzo, Louis Marin provides an interpretation of the notion of the “scheme” that encompasses the idea

of a temporality that is not linear but stratified. In this sense “scheme” is more than a formal way to figure out an object; it is a spatial and intellectual category that functions as a representational matrix in which temporality is not anchored by a specific moment in history. See Marin, *Opacité de la peinture* (Paris: Usher, 1989), p. 104.

74. Pierre Fédida, “Le souffle indistinct de l’image,” in *Le Site de l’étranger. La situation psychanalytique* (Paris: PUF, 1995), p. 212.

75. “The more modest the material, the more visible the thinking inscribed within that modest material.” Torres-García, *Raison*, n.p.

76. On Torres’s precarity in the context of the historical avant-gardes, see Ramírez, *Joaquín Torres-García*, pp. 39–41.

Returning to Lyotard’s distinction between the textural 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.<sup>74</sup> 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 ostentatious display of that precariousness: we so often 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.<sup>75</sup> 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-gardes: from Picasso to Kurt Schwitters, from Miró to Jean Arp, poverty of means was an enduring part of modern Edenism.<sup>76</sup> I think, though, that Torres’s schematic impulse actually has more to do with the diagrammatic dimension of painting. It was through the 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 vertiginous 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 representation that can be called abstraction: “To the abstract there should always correspond, like the idea of a thing, something also abstract. What might that be? To be represented graphically, it will either have to be the written name of the thing or a schematic image as far from the apparently real as possible: like a sign.”<sup>77</sup>

In his last lectures, Gilles Deleuze wondered what legacy painting had to offer to philosophy. His answer: the diagram, and specifically the diagram articulating two ideas, chaos and germ, a parallel to Torres’s obsession with the primal and the rough. And for Deleuze, the diagrammatic dimension of painting depended less on line and color than on strokes and patches of color. The only hand that could undertake these marks would be an “unchained” hand—a “*main déliée*,”<sup>78</sup> or perhaps the *mano desasida* (hand let go) in Martín Adán’s landmark poem about Machu Picchu, a hand about to suffer a kind of collapse, forever on the edge of an imbalance: “stone that represents me/stone that is being worn down.”<sup>79</sup> And Deleuze added: “in order to unmake likeness itself.” In a conveniently Torresian formulation, he went on,

77. Torres-García, *Historia de mi vida*, p. 269.

78. See Henri Focillon, “Eloge de la main,” in *Vie des formes* (Paris: PUF, 1984), p. 103.

79. Martín Adán, “La mano desasida, Canto a Machupicchu” (first version), 1964, in *Obra Poética* (Lima: Edubanco, 1980).

80. Gilles Deleuze, “Los cinco caracteres del

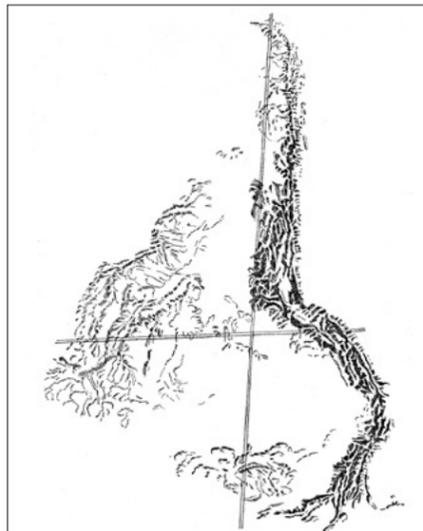
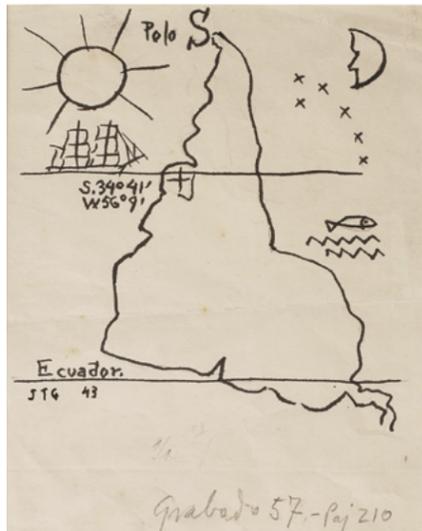
diagrama, lección del 28 de Abril de 1981,” in *Pintura. El concepto de diagrama* (Buenos Aires: Cactus, 2007), p. 101.

81. Emphasis added. Torres-García, letter to Enrique Prat de la Riba, May 12, 1912, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (photocopy), accession no. 960087. See also García-Sedas, *Joaquín Torres-García y Rafael Barradas*, p. 23.

*Painting provides us with this: the image without likeness. If we were to look for a word to designate 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 image as it is presence, the presence of the image. The icon, the iconic, is the weight of the presence of the image. I would say, then, that the diagram is the instance through which I unmake similarity in order to produce the image presence.<sup>80</sup>

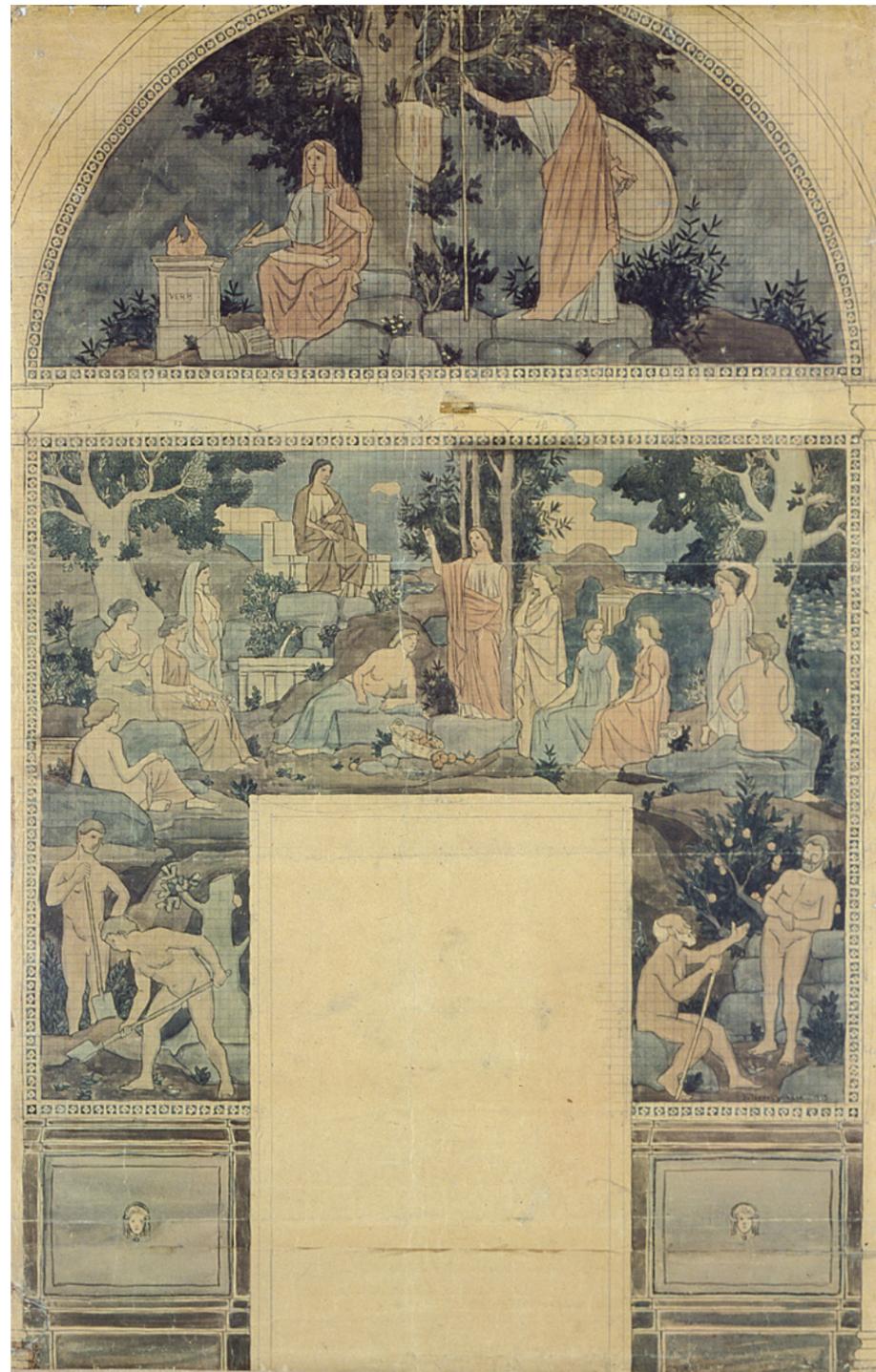
Since everything can—and often does—end up where it began, I would like to recall a letter that Torres-García wrote to Prat de La Riba in April 1912, describing things he had seen on a trip to Italy: Michelangelo’s Last Judgment and ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, Raphael’s *stanze* in the Vatican, works by Giotto, Masaccio, Taddeo Gaddi, Fra Angelico, Ghirlandaio. He added, “But 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.”<sup>81</sup>

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.



23. Joaquín Torres-García. *América invertida* (America inverted). 1943. Ink on paper, 7 11/16 x 6 1/8 in. (19.5 x 15.5 cm). Museo Torres García, Montevideo

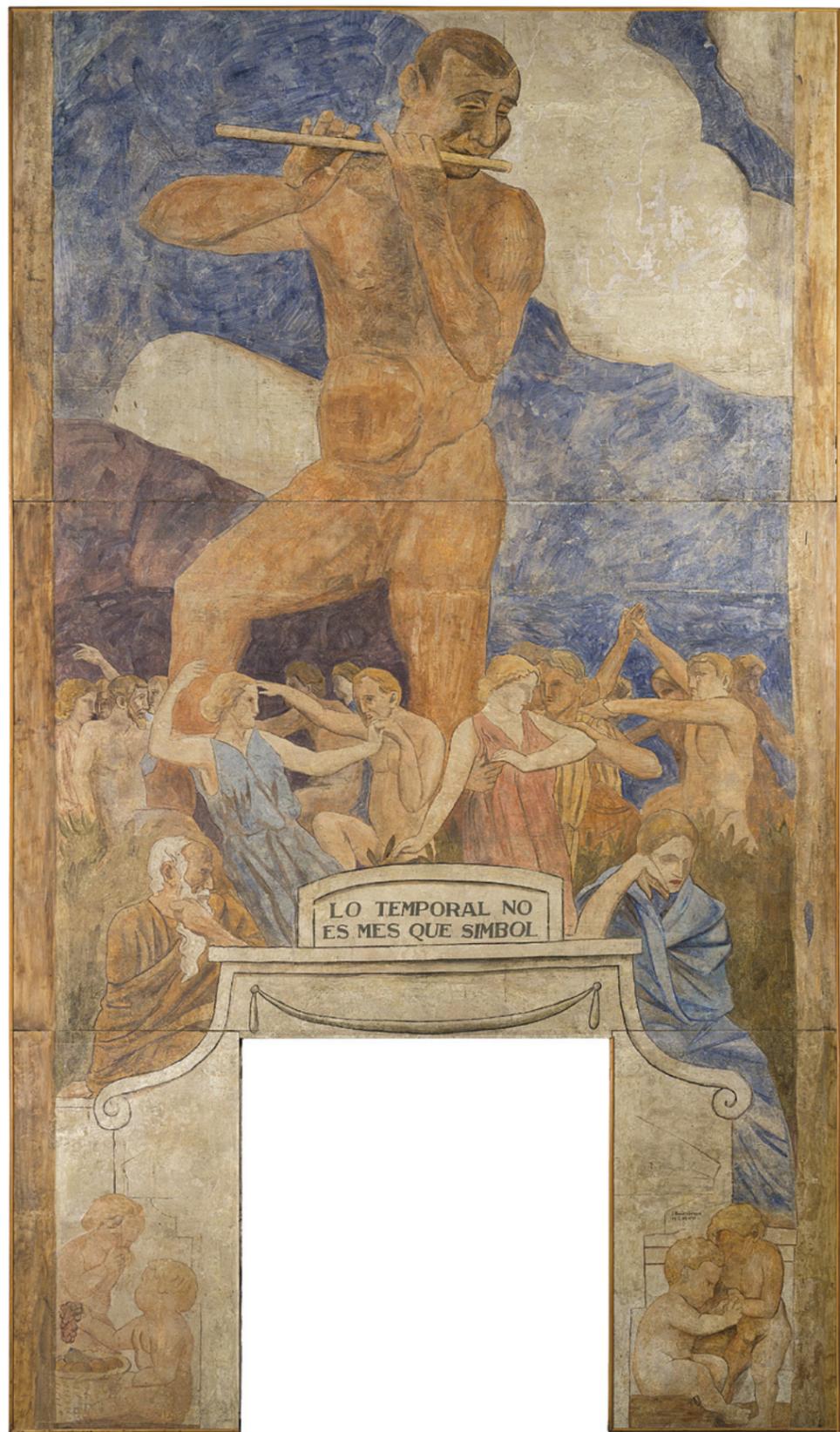
24. Ciudad Abierta-Comunidad Cultural Amereida. Image no. 6 from *Amereida*, 1967. Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso



Design for the fresco **La Catalunya eterna**  
 (The eternal Catalonia). 1912  
 Gouache on paper, 59 1/16 x 37 3/8 in. (150 x 95 cm)



Design for the fresco **La Catalunya industrial**  
 (The industrial Catalonia). 1917  
 Gouache on paper, 47 1/4 x 31 1/8 in. (120 x 79 cm)



**Lo temporal no es más que símbolo**  
 (The temporal is no more than symbol). 1916  
 Fresco transferred to canvas mounted on strainer,  
 18 ft. 10 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. x 10 ft. 10 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (575 x 331 cm)



**Arquitectura con figuras clásicas**  
 (Architecture with classical figures). 1914  
 Oil and tempera on wood panel, 21 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 24 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (55 x 62 cm)



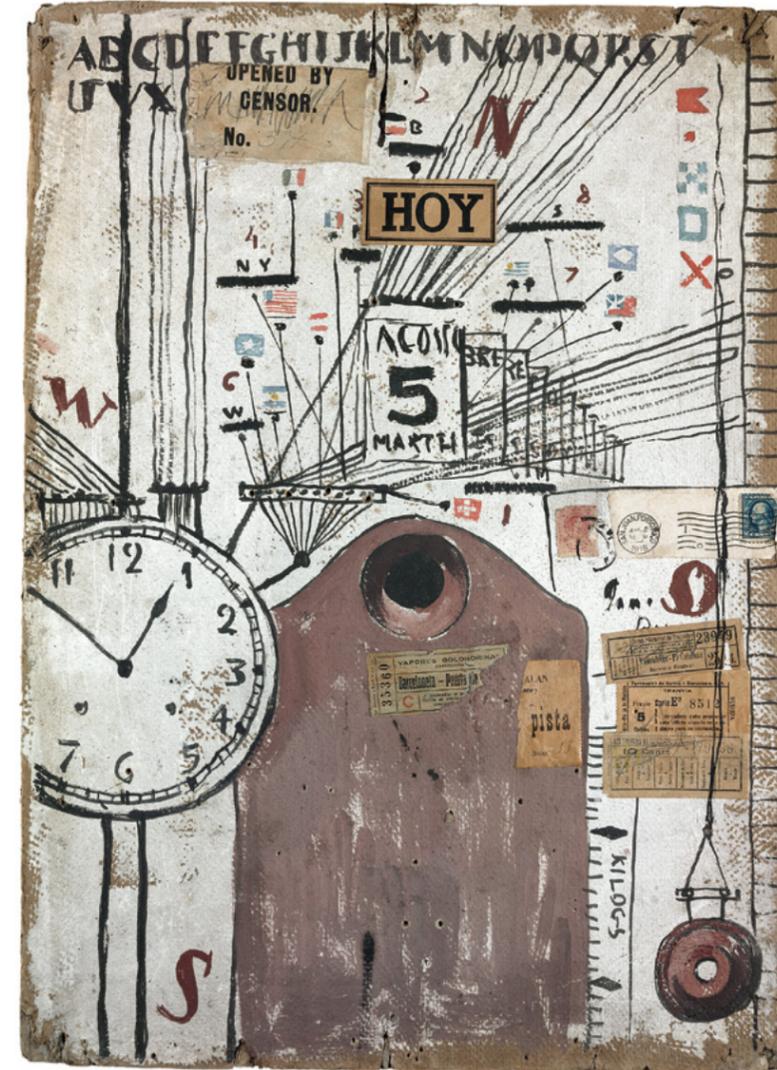
Construcción arquitectónica con figuras  
(Architectonic construction with figures). 1915  
Tempera on wood, 19 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 1 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (50 x 52 x 5 cm)



Entoldado (La Feria) (Canopy [The fair]). 1917  
Oil on canvas, 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 28 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (51 x 72.5 cm)



Composición vibracionista (Vibrationist composition). 1918  
Oil on canvas, 19 1/16 x 13 3/4 in. (50 x 35 cm)



Hoy (Today). c. 1919  
Collage and tempera on cardboard,  
20 1/16 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 3/8 in. (51.5 x 72 cm)



**Los juguetes** (Toys). 1920  
Oil on cardboard, 11 5/16 x 17 1/2 in. (28.8 x 44.5 cm)



**Guitarra (Guitar).** 1924  
Painted wood, 12 1/2 x 4 x 3 1/8 in. (37.7 x 10 x 7.7 cm)



**La giustizia (Justice).** 1924  
Oil on cardboard, 14 3/16 x 18 5/16 in. (36 x 46.5 cm)



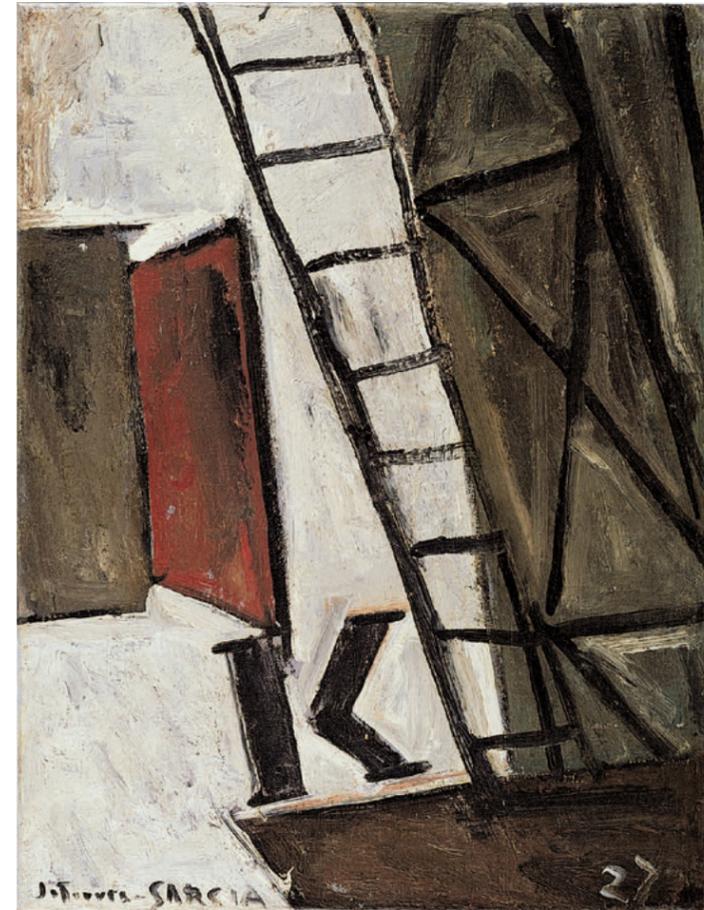
**Abstracción con maderas superpuestas**  
(Abstraction with superimposed wood pieces). 1924  
Painted wood, 10 1/4 x 5 1/2 in. (26 x 14 cm)



**Ritmos oblicuos con objetos fragmentados**  
(Oblique rhythms with fragmented objects). 1925  
Oil on cardboard, 8 1/4 x 12 3/4 in. (20.9 x 32.4 cm)



**Construction en bois polychrome**  
(Construction in polychrome wood). 1927  
Oil and nails on wood, 5 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 9 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 1 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> (15 x 24 x 3 cm)



**Interior.** 1927  
Oil on canvas, 18 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 13 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (46 x 35 cm)



**Tabac.** 1928  
Oil on canvas, 18 1/8 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 1/16 x 3 3/8 in. (48 x 23 x 8.6 cm)



**Bouteille et verre (Bottle and glass).** 1927  
Tempera on wood, 14 15/16 x 12 3/16 x 2 5/8 in. (38 x 31 x 6.7 cm)



**Composición (Composition).** 1928  
Oil on canvas, 14 15/16 x 18 1/8 in. (38 x 46 cm)



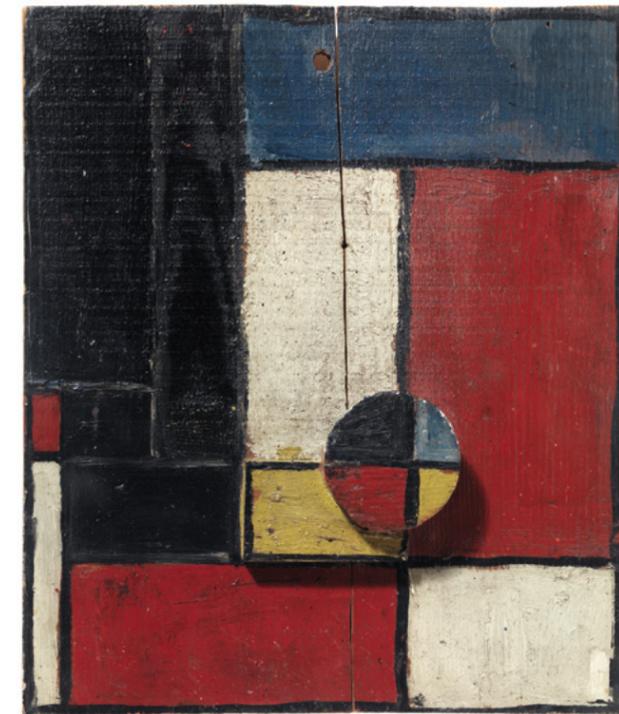
**Forma 140** (Form 140). 1929  
Oil, nails, and wood, 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 18 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 3 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
(28.7 x 47.5 x 9.3 cm)



**Pintura constructiva** (Constructive painting). 1929  
Oil on wood, 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 39 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (80 x 100 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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