In 1934, within the context of both the Great Depression and the tense political climate in Europe (the Spanish Civil War and the rise of totalitarianism, leading to World War II), Torres-García returned to Uruguay. He became a key figure in the cultural life of Montevideo, where he spent the remainder of his life until his death in 1949: giving talks, radio lectures, teaching and writing. His influence on the Uruguayan art world would be a long-lasting one. By 1935 he had founded the Association of Constructive Art, while between 1935 and 1943 he produced one of the most striking bodies of synthetic abstract art in Latin America. In the majority of these architectural paintings the chromatic range is reduced to a contrast between black and white. Light and shadow construct the pictorial surface while tubular elements and the suggestion of depth create an organic force within ordered, grid-like structures.

The present exhibition features a number of these pared-down works, including Tubular abstract composition (1937), Spiral abstract form modeled in white and black (1938) and Construction in white and black (1938). The legacy of the artist’s studio, the Taller Torres-García, has contributed to the emergence of Latin American art as an authentic regional movement, free of European hegemonic domination. It was in this spirit that the artist created one of the most emblematic images of Latin American Modernism, an inverted map of the South American continent which locates the south of the continent as its north. This concept is to be seen in Course for the training of artistic awareness. The School of the South (c. 1934) and culminated in the famous América inverted of 1943.

The final decade of the artist’s career is characterized by eclecticism, from schematic figuration to Constructive Universalism. A return to colour, specifically primary colours, is evident at this point, while he also resumed his interest in monumental public projects. The Taller Torres-García produced murals, frescoes and projects for stone and wooden monuments, furniture and decorative objects. Some of the artist’s abstract works of this period include pictograms that recall ancient stone walls (Universal art, 1943) or refer to contemporary events such as the discovery of atomic energy and the Cold War (Atomic energy, 1946).

The exhibition concludes with late works that summarize Torres-García’s contribution to Modernism: the abstract Structure in five tones with two interspersed forms (1948) and his last work, Figures with doves (1949), a mother and child scene set in Arcadia.
The exhibition Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern emphasizes the radical individuality of a creator whose work resists reductionist classifications. Born in Montevideo (Uruguay, 1874–1949), Torres-García lived in various European capitals, including Barcelona, Paris and Madrid, as well as in New York. His restless, migrant nature helped him to understand and formulate theories on the essentially transnational nature of modern art. Torres-García’s concept of art allowed him to combine various styles that might at first sight seem contradictory. Seeing abstraction as a means rather than an end, he maintained that art could be abstract or concrete (a term he employed to mean “figurative”), given that its constituent elements are always the same, independent of whether they aim to represent perceptible reality or not. Aware of the temporary and circumstantial nature of artistic movements, Torres-García based the invention of his distinctive style, “Constructive Universalism”, on archaic forms that predated the era of the traditional conventions of Western art. His fascination with an unobtainable past was also expressed in his preference for using elemental materials, rough finishes and unstable structures. As a result, he consistently proposed an arcadian type of modernity, aspiring to be a modern artist in Arcadia.

This exhibition is organized chronologically into consecutive chapters corresponding to high points in Torres-García’s career, spanning his entire output from his earliest works produced in Barcelona in the late nineteenth century to his final ones created in Montevideo in 1949. Two moments are particularly important: the period from 1923 to 1933 when Torres-García was involved in a number of the early European avant-garde movements while also formulating his characteristic pictographic-constructivist style; and the years 1935 to 1943 when, following his return to Uruguay, he produced one of the most convincing bodies of synthetic abstract work in the entire history of Latin American art.

Barcelona
At the age of 17, Joaquín Torres-García left Montevideo for Barcelona, where he trained as an artist. There he allied himself with the group of intellectuals and artists who promoted “Noucentisme”, a Catalan art movement that reacted against the decadent sophistication of Art Nouveau and established a relationship with nature and archaic history expressed in pastoral scenes of the Golden Age of Mediterranean culture. The exhibition opens with early works executed in Barcelona in 1916, a study of which is displayed in the exhibition, an immense canvas showing figures and trees, hearts, swords, boats, churches and crosses. Distributed vertically on the canvas, these motifs emphasize the surface of the plane and the materiality of the paint. The artist produced numerous variations on this format, which he would continue to use from this date onwards, to be seen in works such as “Construction in white and black, 1923” exhibited here.

Paris
Paris in the 1920s was characterized by an ecletic artistic scene in which the early avant-garde practices were accompanied by an interest in the primitive, while the subsequent return to a classical type of representation coincided with the emergence of Surrealism, leading to a new type of figuration. A prolific writer, Torres-García produced manifestos and illustrated texts, placing the emphasis on his particular understanding of modern art, which gave him a radical experimental freedom. During this period he employed abstraction and investigated the application of essential forms while also producing his “objets plastiques”, small assemblages of painted wood, in order to experiment with different compositional strategies in a three-dimensional format.

It was during this period that Torres-García formulated his characteristic style, represented in the exhibition by two important works from 1929: “Fresque constructif au grand pain” and “Construction in white and black, 1923”. These works show the artist producing numerous variations on this format, which he would continue to use from this date onwards, to be seen in works such as “Construction in white of 1931, his most productive year. He would later define this characteristic style as Constructive Universalism.”