

Montevideo

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 *America 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.



Joaquín Torres-García in the studio of the architect Antoni Gaudí at La Sagrada Família Basilica, Barcelona, c. 1903

OPENING HOURS

November-February: open daily 10 am to 6 pm
March-June: open daily 10 am to 7 pm
July-August: open daily 10 am to 8 pm
September-October: open daily 10 am to 7 pm

Easter: open daily 10 am to 8 pm
Christmas: 24th and 31st December, 5th January: 10 am to 3 pm
From 26th to 30th December and from 2nd to 4th January: 10 am to 7 pm. The Museum will be closed on 1st and 6th January and 25th December

Visitors will be asked to begin leaving the galleries 10 minutes before closing time. Tickets are on sale up to 30 minutes before

ADVANCED TICKET SALES

Access through control without waiting in the queue by showing your printed tickets upon your arrival at the Museum

Guided visits in Spanish to the exhibition *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*. Saturdays at 12 pm
For other guided visits: reservas@mpicassom.org

Audio guides available in Spanish and English

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Cover (detail):
Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)
Spiral abstract form modeled in white and black, 1938
Tempera on cardboard, 81 x 47 cm
Private collection

EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, IN COOPERATION WITH MUSEO PICASSO MÁLAGA AND FUNDACIÓN TELEFÓNICA AND CURATED BY LUIS PÉREZ-ORAMAS, CURATOR OF LATIN AMERICAN ART AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern

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The exhibition *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* emphasizes the radical individuality of a creator whose work resists reductionist classifications. A central figure in modern art history and a crucial one for the transatlantic cultural exchanges that have informed it, Torres-García has fascinated later generations of artists on both sides of the Atlantic, including a particularly large number in South America.

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



Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)
Canopy (The fair), 1917
Oil on canvas, 51 x 72.5 cm
Private collection



Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)
Construction in white and black, 1938
Oil on paper mounted on wood, 80.7 x 102 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros in honor of David Rockefeller

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, including the preliminary studies for the artist's first important commission: a group of monumental frescoes for the Saló de Sant Jordi in the Palau de la Generalitat [palace of the regional government] in Barcelona. Depicting scenes of industrial civilization alongside Mediterranean pastoral landscapes, these frescoes are the most important artistic manifestation of Catalan Noucentisme. In the last of them, entitled *The temporal is no more than symbol* (1916), a study of which is displayed in the exhibition, an immense faun looms with lofty indifference over a crowd. This depiction of

a classical figure in a modern style was fiercely criticized among the city's most conservative cultural circles. The resulting scandal and the death of Catalonia's political leader, Enric Prat de la Riba, led to the artist being removed from the project.

The confrontation between reality and the chaos of the modern city led Torres-García to a new form of representation involving the juxtaposition of planes. He repeated motifs such as clocks in order to indicate modern time, experimented with collage and combined a wide range of iconographic elements, which he arranged vertically on the pictorial surface, as in *City rhythm* (1918).

New York

In 1920, with political tension growing in Spain following World War I and fascinated by America as a land of modernity, Torres-García and his family moved to New York. There he embarked on producing "Aladdin Toys": wooden toys which he used to explore the potential of making transformable structures for educational purposes.

Torres-García depicted the chaos of the city in a series of striking collages in which advertising is juxtaposed with landscape and in which the aim of achieving a "total vision" is expressed in aerial views of the city. Although he exhibited in New York and eventually sold works, Torres-García gradually became disenchanted with the New World and eventually returned to Europe with his family in 1922, living in Italy and the South of France before settling in Paris in 1926.



Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)
America inverted, 1943
Ink on paper, 22 x 16 cm
Museo Torres-García, Montevideo



Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949)
Structure in five tones with two interspersed forms, 1948
Oil on cardboard, 50 x 52 cm
Private collection. Courtesy Galeria Sur, Montevideo

Paris

Paris in the 1920s was characterized by an eclectic 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 manifestoes 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 *Physics*, characterized by schematic figures drawn onto a grid in which the simple tonalities emphasize the geometrical fields.

Words, letters and abbreviations are inscribed next to schematic depictions of men and women, fish, snails, clocks, houses, anchors, 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* of 1931, his most productive year. He would later define this characteristic style as Constructive Universalism.