Francisco Matto
b. 1911, Montevideo, Uruguay - d. 1995, Montevideo, Uruguay

1911 Francisco Alberto Matto Vilaró was born in Montevideo on October 18th. His father Francisco Alejo Matto Vilaró, was musically inclined and his mother María Eulalia Vilaró wrote poetry. His brother Jorge, died at age 8 and his younger sister Graciela, died in 1945.

1922 Matto wrote his first poems and took painting lessons with the Uruguayan painter Carlos Rúfalo. He was privately tutored at home.

1926 Father died.

1932 Traveled to Tierra del Fuego in Southern Argentina and Chile where he purchased the first pieces of what would become an important collection of Pre-Colombian Amerindian art.
1935 Composed and painted surrealist poems and murals on the walls of his studio. Through his friend the French-Uruguayan poet Jules Supervielle, and Susana Socca, met Henri Michaux who spent the year 1936 in Uruguay.
1938 Painted large-size irregularly shaped wood panels such as “Woman and Rooster.”
1939 Met Torres-García and began to attend his lectures.
1941 Exhibited Cain and Abel at the II Municipal Salon and The Red Chair at the V National Salon.
1942 With Augusto & Horacio Torres and Alceu & Edgardo Ribeiro, Matto was a founding member of the Taller Torres-García. From then on until the TTG’s demise, he participated in all of the Taller Torres-García group exhibitions. Exhibited at Amigos del Arte with Augusto and Horacio Torres.
1943 He wrote Pictorial Letter, Geometry in Modern Art (unpublished) that foretold the important changes that his work would undergo. In spite of the title that refers to geometry, the text is illustrated with figures on a beach. The literary style is remarkably different from his previous writings that were filled with surrealist and symbolist metaphors.
1944 René D’Hamoncourt, traveling in South America for New York’s Museum of Modern Art, visited the Taller Torres-García and Matto’s studio. Returning to New York he wrote to the Director of the Interamerican Bureau of Information in Montevideo, expressing his interest in purchasing for MoMA Matto’s Three Spanish Ladies, an oil on wood panel dated 1941. Matto declined to sell the work. In June, the Argentine literary magazine Verde Memoria published an issue dedicated to Uruguayan poetry, which included Matto’s Ode to Lampeao and poems by Mario Benedetti.
1945 Matto wrote an essay (unpublished) in the third person about how his painting changed that year: “Towards 1945, Torres-García’s influence is more evident. The accent on the vertical and horizontal and the metaphysical component in his work caused great impact on Matto. Furthermore, studying the Pre-Columbian pieces from the Altiplano changed his perspective; both Torres-García and Amerindian art led him [Matto] to develop a markedly orthogonal order in his compositions and a synthetic and frontal style of painting.”
1946 In April, the VII National Salon awarded prizes to Torres-García, Manuel Rosé, Gonzalo Fonseca, Lincoln Presno, and Matto who submitted a painting titled Harbor Scene, which is now in the collection of the Blanes Museum. Torres-García suggested that Matto join the other Taller artists studying painting and constructivism. He painted abstracted geometric still lives in primary colors.
1947 Wrote and illustrated: Formal and Decorative Variants in Tiahuanaco Ceramics, a study of the pieces in his collection. Interpreted by a contemporary artist as art works rather than as anthropological examples. The original manuscript is in the Getty Foundation for Research.
1948 Matto made his first wood construction reliefs and drawings for large scale outdoor sculptures.
1949 He conceived a project that was never realized to build an artist's community in Belastiquí on the river Santa Lucía. A series of his drawings illustrate buildings and sculptures of brick that would be made and fired on site. Each artist would design his or her own studio and monuments, creating a unified architectural environment. On August 8, Torres-García died.

1950 First trip to Europe; in Paris he met Paul Rivet, Director of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro.

1952 Contributed a work for reproduction in Thirty Constructivist Drawings, published by the Taller Torres-García.

1953 Five paintings by Matto and other works by artists of the Taller Torres-García were part of the Uruguayan presentation at the II São Paulo Biennial.

1954 Married Ada Antuña Zumarán. They traveled to Europe and Egypt. The architect Mario Paysé Reyes commissioned a brick relief for his home in Santander Street in Carrasco, a suburb of Montevideo. Paul Rivet, Director of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (Musée de L'Homme), visited Matto’s collection of Pre-Columbian art.

1955 While Julio Alpuy traveled abroad, Matto took over the painting classes at the Taller Torres-García that Alpuy had led since 1945.

1958 Matto again traveled to Europe, this time he visited Sicily.
1960  Designed an adobe mural relief and a stained glass window for the high school building in Las Piedras a town near Montevido. The building also features murals by other members of the Taller Torres-Garcia. Made his first wood totems.

1962  Matto opened his collection of Amerindian art to the public. The Museum of Pre-Columbian Art housed ceramics, textiles and sculpture from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. The architect Ernesto Leborgne designed the installation and Raúl Campá Soler did the archeological research. The photographs for the collection catalogue were by Alfredo Testoni, and the text by Esther de Cáceres. In it she explained, "The works themselves (without any archeological or ethnographic information) tell of what is essential and transcendental about them. This is a Museum created by an artist, who knows that looking at art is a direct, silent and personal experience that will shape the inner self beyond the cultural or intellectual effect." Marcha, a weekly newspaper, quoted Matto's comment on the works in his collection. "These art works have a continuity that reaches from their origin to the present. Modernism is unavoidably linked to these great pieces from America's past."

1965  For the garden of his friend the architect Ernesto Leborgne, Matto designed three works, a mural in gray stone and marble, Homage to Lautreamont, the French poet born in Montevideo, a constructivist cut-brick relief and a constructivist carving in limestone.
1965, marble and flagstone, 106 x 90 in. 269 x 230 cm. House of architect Ernesto Leborgne, Montevideo

1966 Carlos Gradín of La Prensa in Buenos Aires published a February 27 review of Matto’s museum.

1967 In Hamburg, the magazine Humboldt, No 29, reproduced several Pre-Columbian pieces from Matto’s collection.

1968 Matto’s Museum of Pre-Columbian Art presented an exhibition of 88 objects of diverse Amerindian origin titled The Figure of the American Man, organized by Ernesto Leborgne and Matto. They published an illustrated catalogue with a text by José María Montero Pérez. The Museum also organized an exhibition of African Art, with 82 pieces from the collections of the Taller Torres-García artists and their friends.

1969 The Central Bank of Uruguay commissioned Matto to design a silver coin for the FAO (United Nations Organization for Agriculture and Food). Ernesto Leborgne made the plaster cast and the Casa de la Moneda in Chile minted the coin. In Uruguay it was put in general circulation and was worth 1000 pesos.


1971 The international numismatic association “Gesellschaft Fur Internationale Geldgeschichte” with headquarters in Germany awarded that year’s first prize to Matto’s coin.
1974 To celebrate Torres-García’s Centenary, Matto’s Museum of Pre-Columbian Art organized an exhibition and published an illustrated catalogue of Torres-García’s Wood Constructions and Toys.
1978 The Municipal Government withdrew their modest support of Matto’s Museum of Pre-Columbian Art and he was forced to close it. It has remained closed ever since. In 1998, Matto’s widow donated the collection to the city of Montevideo. Painted first of a series of simplified faces inspired by early Christian painting.
1979 Matto designed a wrought iron window grill for the house of the architect Rafael Lorente Escudero in Carrasco, a suburb of Montevideo.

1979  
Matto with Dos Formas, c. 1980

Formas en azul, 1979, Oil on wood, 88 x 14 x 84 in. 225 x 35 x 215 cm. Shown at the Torres-García and Its Legacy exhibition at the Kouros Gallery, 1985

Matto preparing the model for the U sculpture, c. 1982

Matto with U sculpture, Punta del Este, Uruguay, 1982

1982 Matto was invited to participate in the First International Meeting for Modern Sculpture in Punta del Este; a project of sculptures for public spaces. The participants were: from Argentina, Gyula Kosice, Ennio Iommi, and Jacques Bedel; Brazil, Waltercio Caldas; Colombia, Edgar Negret; Chile, Mario Irarrazabal; Paraguay, Herman Guggiari; and from Uruguay, Nelson Ramos and Matto. He designed a 4-meter high U shaped form in cement that still stands on the shoreline.

1985 Traveled to New York for the opening of the exhibition Torres-García and Its Legacy at the Kouros Gallery. This was his last trip abroad.
1991 Involved himself in the production and design of the catalogue Matto, Painting and Sculpture with text by Anhelo Hernández, photos by Alfredo Testoni and Daniela Chappard.
Matto died on September 15, nearly 84. Anhelo Hernández wrote, "Matto wasn't fond of theorizing, when someone did, he started to whistle an air by Bach or to praise Stravinsky. But that didn't prevent him from elaborating the clear and concise thoughts that guided him. Matto wrote, 'If we succeed in creating elemental forms, we will achieve the understanding of mystery.'"