

ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH 2014- SURVEY SECTOR, BOOTH S10**TALLER TORRES-GARCÍA**
FINE AND APPLIED ARTS

For the debut of Art Basel Miami Beach's art historical Survey section, Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. presents a unified environment featuring furniture, ceramics, books, toys, paintings and sculpture created by members of the *Taller Torres-García* (TTG). Considered the most significant Latin American workshop of its time, the TTG was founded by the artist Joaquín Torres-García and was dedicated to the teaching and dissemination of his concept of *Universalismo Constructivo* (Constructive Universalism). Over the course of twenty years (1943 to 1962), the workshop produced numerous artworks in this idiosyncratic style, which bridged European modernism and ancient American artistic traditions. While paintings, sculptures, and drawings by TTG members are today included in museum and private collections across the world, less well known is the workshop's production of decorative and applied arts. Featuring rarely seen works, many of which were culled from the artists' personal homes and private commissions, *TALLER TORRES-GARCÍA: FINE AND APPLIED ARTS*, functions as a Constructive Universalist *gesamtkunstwerk* - a total work of art - providing a comprehensive view of this still little known and understood art movement from which artists of international stature emerged.

Torres-García and Universalismo Constructivo: An Introduction

Torres-García believed that Constructive Universalism, the name he gave to the signature style for which he is today known, could serve in modern times as the model for a unified aesthetic that would pervade all aspects of life. Born in Uruguay in 1874, the artist was trained in Barcelona's academies and later pursued his artistic career in New York (1920-1922), Tuscany (1922-1925), and the South of France before settling in Paris in 1926. There, he was in contact with such artists as Theo Van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, and Piet Mondrian, and co-founded the group, *Cercle et Carré* with Michel Seuphor in 1929. It was around this time that Torres-García developed Constructive Universalism, a theory and style characterized by the representation of ideas by means of graphic symbols embedded in a modernist grid.

According to Torres-García, symbols are the only form of figuration compatible with the geometric structure. Man and his universe are at the center of his theory, which like in Egyptian, Mayan, and Incan arts has a unique and distinctive visual vocabulary. As with these ancient cultures, Constructive Universalism was not limited to painting and sculpture, but could also be applied to architecture and objects of everyday use.

When the market crash hit Paris in 1932, Torres-García left for Madrid. Within a year, he once again embarked and returned to his native Uruguay after forty-three years abroad. It was only after arriving in Montevideo in 1934 that he was able to realize his vision of Constructive Universalism as a unified practice encompassing all of the arts: painting, sculptures, murals, decorative and applied arts.

The Taller Torres-García

In Uruguay, Torres-García attracted a cadre of followers who shared the artist's vision of developing an abstract, modern, and specifically American visual art. In 1935, Torres-García created his first artist's group in Uruguay, the *Asociación de Arte Constructivo* (the Association of Constructive Art; AAC); after several years of collective exhibitions and lectures the AAC disbanded in 1940. The Taller Torres-García was formed in 1943, but unlike the AAC whose members had included experienced and professional artists, the artists who joined the TTG were mostly young men and women who had received little prior artistic training. These artists were inspired by Torres-García's charismatic personality and the spirit of Constructive Universalism.

Torres-García, who had worked for the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí at the turn of the century, modeled his atelier after Medieval and Renaissance artistic guilds. According to this model, apprentices worked alongside the master in a collective creative environment. A similar practice had already been adopted by other 20th century avant-garde groups in both Europe and North America, including the Omega Workshops in England, the Bauhaus in Germany, and Black Mountain College in the United States.

Torres-García believed in the knowledge of the craft of painting, though demanded that it remain free of academic routine. To accomplish this goal, the artist created a unique method of teaching techniques that promoted abstraction in painting. In addition to art making, Torres-García and TTG members also worked toward the advancement of modern art in Uruguay through an active program of exhibitions, lectures, publications and the study of Indoamerican cultures.

Among the most talented of the artists to pass through the ranks of the TTG were Julio Alpuy, Gonzalo Fonseca, José Gurvich, Francisco Matto, Manuel Pailós, Héctor Ragni, and Torres-García's sons, Augusto and Horacio Torres. Many of these artists were not only students at the Taller, but also served as teachers at the workshop as well, carrying on Torres-García's vision after his death in 1949.

Architecture and the Decorative Arts

Art historian and curator at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Mari Carmen Ramírez, asserts that the TTG served as a catalyst for the consolidation of Torres-García's aesthetic philosophy, as well as for the elaboration of his theories concerning the role and function of modern art in Latin America.¹ As a testing ground for ideas regarding the

role of constructivism and abstraction in the production of an American art, the TTG functioned as a laboratory for experimenting with new and traditional materials and techniques.

One aspect of this production was the creation of painting in conjunction with architecture. In 1944, Torres-García and the TTG artists were invited to decorate the walls of the Hospital Saint Bois in Montevideo. These murals were the culmination of Torres-García's experience as a painter, theoretician and teacher. A total of 35 murals were painted in bright primary colors depicting Montevideo's streets and harbor with ships, docks, cranes, locomotives and streetcars. The project reflected Torres-García's call that painting be "strongly linked to the city: commenting on it and singing its life, emphasizing it, displaying it, and in a way even guiding it."² After the completion of the Saint Bois commission, TTG artists proposed to "flood" Montevideo with murals. During the 1950s and 1960s, murals were executed in a wide variety of mediums for homes, offices, restaurants, a church, and even a gas station.

In addition to large-scale public commissions, TTG artists also created smaller works for private collectors, many of whom were architects. For example, the large wood construction by Francisco Matto was originally made for an architect's dining room in Montevideo. After moving to New York in 1958, Gonzalo Fonseca was commissioned to make a table for an architect's Manhattan apartment. At the time, Fonseca was working on a mosaic mural for the New School on 12th Street in New York, and he used the same glass mosaic tesserae imported from Italy for the table. The Fonseca's mosaic table is signed TTG instead of his name, reflecting a common custom among TTG artists who frequently opted for anonymity to underscore their unique collective style.

Another example of this practice is the tapestry signed MAOTIMA, an acronym for Manolita, Otila, Ifigenia, and María Angélica. Led by Manolita and Ifigenia, Torres-García's wife and daughter, these women formed a group associated with the TTG who embroidered and wove tapestries based on the workshop's production; the tapestry on view is based on a 1937 painting by Torres-García that is now in the collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Perhaps it is also for reasons of anonymity that the original creator of the "TTG chair" remains unknown. Featured in a photograph of the workshop which shows Pailós seated on it, the chair was reconstructed from drawings and measurements found among papers at the home of Gurvich in 1990.

TTG artists also created objects for their own enjoyment and personal use, such as Alpy's cabinet and table. Characteristic of Alpy's tendency to use found or humble materials, the incised decorations of this table are made from polished soup bones crafted to imitate ivory. Horacio Torres made many of the details for his home in the

suburbs of Montevideo, including the Constructive Universalist design for the iron grills which adorned his front doors. Working in a purely abstract mode, Horacio also created a design for a lamp that originally hung above his dining room table.

The engraved wooden painter's box was created by the architect Luis San Vicente, an honorary member of the TTG who helped secure commissions for the group. This functional object is engraved with buildings illustrating architecture's great styles, from a Greek temple to a Gothic cathedral. Providing a lesson on the history of architecture on its exterior, the painter's box opens to reveal compartments arranged according to a Constructivist grid.

Surviving as original artworks, replicas recreated from extant plans and drawings, and ephemera, the objects created by the TTG reflect the ideals of Constructive Universalism as championed by Torres-García. Brought to the realm of everyday life, these works reflect the artist's conviction expressed in his book, *La recuperación del objeto*: "Let us decorate our objects or a piece of furniture in order to keep constantly before our eyes, and in our hands, the mystery in which we believe."³

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1. *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and its Legacy*. Ed. by Mari Carmen Ramírez (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1992).
 2. J. Torres-García, "Lección XXX: La Escuela del Sur", in *Universalismo Constructivo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidón, 1944), p. 217.
 3. Joaquín Torres-García, "Lección XIII," in *La recuperación del objeto* (Montevideo: Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de Montevideo, 1952), 1:153.