

An Avant-Gardist Who Bridged the Archaic and the New

By **HOLLAND COTTER** OCT. 29, 2015

Few artists can claim to have captured a revolution in thinking in a single image, but Joaquín Torres-García did. In 1934, he returned to his birthplace, Montevideo, Uruguay, after more than four decades abroad. He was 60 years old and determined to bring his hard-won knowledge of modernist art, learned in places considered authentic sources, like Paris and New York, back home.

But there it would be modernism with a difference. He gave it a name: “La Escuela del Sur,” “The School of the South.” He designed for it a now-famous logo: the silhouette of the South American continent turned upside down and placed above the Tropic of Cancer, where North America was on conventional maps. And he explained the meaning: The South, as a font of creative energy and fresh ideas, was the new North, or at least its equal.

Both the original sketch of the image and a later ink drawing called “America Invertida” are in “Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art, the artist’s first major United States retrospective in more than four decades. During that time, his vision of flipped power has to some degree been realized. There have been market booms in Latin American art and an increased museum presence. Yet much remains unchanged: The same few names sell; museums recycle canonical figures.

Torres-García is one of them. If his current survey, organized by Luis Perez-Oramas, MoMA’s curator of Latin American art, and Karen Grimson, a curatorial assistant, has been a long time coming, he regularly turns up in exhibitions devoted to the now-popular theme of global modernism. He’s a modernist classic, but an elusive one.

On the one hand, he's readily graspable, even lovable, the way Paul Klee can be. His sculpture is on a miniaturist scale. His compartmented paintings look like a cross between stained-glass windows and toy chests filled with concrete but symbolic things: suns, moons, stars, ships, hearts.

At the same time, he's a thinker of unpredictable depths and directions. He was an avant-gardist who was as interested in the archaic as in the new and believed they formed a continuum. Unlike contemporaries who identified with Dada or Surrealism, he saw himself as a builder rather than as a breaker-down of tradition. At a time when abstract and figurative art were locked in a standoff, he practiced both. By temperament and studied conviction, he was global artist and a universal citizen, "European in America and South American in Europe," as Mr. Perez-Oramas puts it in the catalog.

Torres-García's career certainly took a peripatetic route, and the show follows it. He was born in Montevideo in 1874, to an émigré Spanish father and an Uruguayan mother. When he was 17, the family moved to Spain, settling in Barcelona. He attended art school, then worked designing church windows under the supervision of Antoni Gaudí and began writing theoretical essays. In 1907, he took a job teaching art to children in an experimental school. Two years later, he married and started a family. In 1912, he received a commission to paint a fresco cycle in the chapel of the Palau de la Generalitat, the seat of the Catalan government in Barcelona.

Problems soon arose. The frescos came under critical fire. You can see why. Torres-García was working in a then-popular pastoral vein, meant to evoke a Mediterranean golden age. But his largest fresco, which opens the MoMA show, looks far from Arcadian. Awkwardly painted, it's an image of the god Pan as a kind of immense, nude, brown-skinned, flute-playing yeti who seems to be trampling a crowd of smaller figures. Some members of the City Council found it blasphemous; others were just puzzled. The artist was removed from the project.

At that point, as he often did when faced with a crisis, Torres-García made a major geographical move. In 1920, he packed up his wife and three children and moved to Manhattan, where he hoped to reboot his career as an artist and to start a second one as a toy manufacturer. For years in Europe he had been making toys by hand; in New York he started a toy business called the Aladdin Company, which survived for years. Some of its products are in the show: delightful, Cubistic items, and not far removed from his semiabstract sculptures to come.

His career as a painter, however, did not go well, though he produced some good pictures: blurry, jittery, gravity-free cityscapes of chock-a-block facades spattered with figures, carriages, clock faces and advertisements. He met plenty of artists, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney gave him a show (with Stuart Davis) at her Studio Club. But money was tight; he was apartment hopping. New York was both too much and too little. He headed back to Europe, at first to Italy, then to Paris, where he settled in 1926.

He had already met Picasso there, but they didn't get along, which isn't surprising. Torres-García was a sort of un-Picasso: a ponderer, not a strutter; a theoretician, not a tactician. But with other artists, including Piet Mondrian and Georges Vantongerloo, he founded a group called Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square), geared to promoting geometrically constructed abstraction. He organized an exhibition of Latin American artists living in Paris. And in the years around 1930, he came into his own as a painter with a series of grid-based vertical pictures — he called them “cathedral-style” — filled with images suggesting popular cartoons, hieroglyphs, Christian symbols, fairy tale illustrations, and pre-Columbian pictographs.

Again, there were disruptions, personal and circumstantial. His refusal to subscribe to “pure” abstraction, or pure anything, led to a break with his programmatically minded Cercle et Carré colleagues. More drastically, the effects of the Great Depression were hitting Europe, and fascism was on the rise. In 1934, Torres-García moved back to Montevideo. And there, far from sinking into a remote retirement, he was busier than ever.

An eager audience awaited him, and he soon established a widely influential workshop of student collaborators. In an ongoing campaign of predigital desktop publishing, he continued to handwrite and illustrate books on theory, along with an autobiography. In the late 1930s, in one of the great late-career flowerings, he produced a group of astonishing abstract pictures that seem to have been inspired, at least in part, by Incan stonework.

“America Invertida” comes from these years. And on the day he died in 1949, at 75, he painted an image of a family, Edenically nude, protected by doves, that echoes his early Arcadian frescoes, but with their overlay of ambivalence absent. Or is it? These final figures aren’t quite human; they look pieced together from chunks of stone. And behind the male stands a huge ax or club propped against the wall.

So, to the end, an appealing but deceptively complex figure, and one whose transnational consciousness has never been more of the moment. He is also one of the very few “School of the South” artists, old or new, who have been considered in some depth. When the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston mounted its mammoth survey “Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America” in 2004, it threw open a treasure chest of work by dozens of exciting, mind-altering, history-changing artists, some 90 percent of whom were unknown outside of their countries of origin. Torres-García was among the few familiar ones, so no surprise we’re seeing him here. A majority remain, more than a decade later, barely studied, never being awarded solo shows. It’s long past time to flip that balance. He would have approved.

“Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern” runs through Feb. 15 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400; moma.org.

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