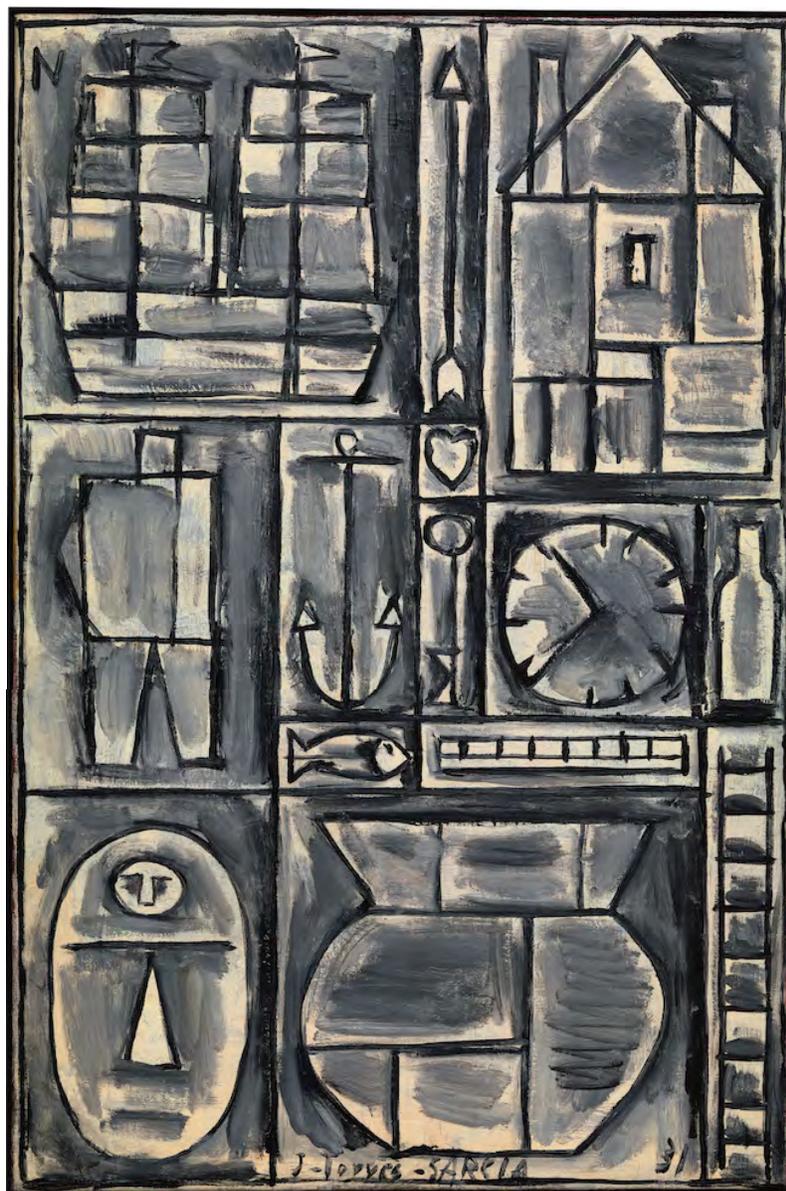


A MOMA RETROSPECTIVE REVEALS HOW URUGUAYAN-BORN JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA TURNED THE WESTERN ART WORLD ON ITS HEAD

BY CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNE

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Composition, from 1931 © Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015/Photo Thomas Griesel

In 1920, after a brief stop in Paris where he bickered with Picasso and harmonized with Miró, the Uruguayan-born artist Joaquín Torres-García traveled from Barcelona to New York for two doleful years. "This is New York," he wrote with laconic grammar a year after landing, "the city of seven million people – which crushes the artist."

An enduring sentiment expressed by millions of creative types who have dropped into the city's cultural fabric, floundered, and then fled, Torres-García's expression of frustration holds a peculiar place in the history of modern art. Consider, for instance, the current survey of his work at the Museum of Modern Art. The show of a pioneering modernist who effectively anticipated postmodern globalism, this long-overdue survey seals the posthumous victory of a canonical underdog. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, every complaint contains its own revenge.

"[Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern](#)" continues MoMA's newfound tradition of filling gaps in the collection and righting historical wrongs. Yet Torres-García is not exactly an unknown quantity. Over the years, the reputation of this foundational South American artist has endured – flourished, even – thanks to Latin-centric institutions like Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. Still, this is the Uruguayan's first major retrospective in the U.S. in more than forty years. As such, it is both smart and cluttered, as befits the achievements of an artist who hoarded influences like old Christmas catalogs before reverse-engineering his own original synthesis.

Assembled by Luis Pérez-Oramas, MoMA's curator of Latin American art; and Karen Grimson, curatorial assistant in the Department of Drawings and Prints, the exhibition includes drawings, collages, canvases, assemblages, large-scale sculptures, and publications the artist produced over five decades. For a modern artist, Torres-García was typically

the artist produced over five decades. For a modern artist, Torres-García was typically peripatetic, except his travels took him farther afield than most – South America, Europe, North America, then back again. A frequent career handicap, his wanderlust also taught him something crucial: Modernity did not manifest itself the same way in New York and Paris as it did in less industrialized cities like Buenos Aires and Barcelona.



Entoldado (La Feria), from 1917

© Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2015

Born in Montevideo in 1874 to a Spanish father and a Uruguayan mother, Torres-García moved to Barcelona when he was seventeen. He attended art school there and eventually worked designing church windows for Antoni Gaudí. In 1912 he received a prestigious commission to paint a fresco cycle for the Palau de la Generalitat, the seat of the Catalan government. The result, on view at MoMA, was a nineteen-foot-tall fiasco that combined Goethe-inspired romance with clumsy Greek figures. Today the mural is most notable for its colossal central character, which resembles a naked Ricky Gervais. In his own time, the overwhelmingly negative reception to the work led the artist to quit Europe with his young family in tow.

As the Great Depression and fascism overran Europe, a sixty-year-old Torres-García launched his most memorable act.

But if rejection drove Torres-García out of Barcelona to New York (where he met luminaries like Stuart Davis, Joseph Stella, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney) and then, eventually, back to Italy and France, the artist parlayed a playbook of silver linings from what others would consider crucial career mishaps. Unconvinced by

would consider crucial career mishaps. Unconvinced by the jihad-like mutual contempt between proponents of pure abstraction and Surrealist figuration, he opted for a third way: hieroglyph-like, grid-based pictures drawn from earlier work with stained-glass windows that he baptized "cathedral style." In 1934 he took the formula back to his native Montevideo. As the Great Depression and fascism overran Europe, a sixty-year-old Torres-García launched his most memorable act.

The effect of the artist's return to South America is easily summed up in his most famous image: *America Invertida*, a 1943 sketch of the map of South America turned on its head. At MoMA the outline has been traced directly onto the wall near the show's entrance, with the continent neatly tucked above the equator where North America normally sits. In a nutshell, this drawing is all symbol – like a Yankees logo or an upside-down cross, minus the Satanism. Torres-García's greatest achievement was to propose, in planetary cultural terms, that orange is the new black; an act he later buttressed with the founding of a radical new school of art, *La Escuela del Sur*, the School of the South.

Preceded and followed by paintings loaded with typically concrete icons – anchors, fish, moons, stars, hearts, ladders, and columns – and, later, the volumes and shadows of Incan stonework, Torres-García's work crystallized a growing desire, as yet unfulfilled, to redraw the global map of cultural influence. It wasn't enough to be a "European in America and South American in Europe," as Pérez-Oramas writes about the artist in the exhibition catalog. Torres-García wanted to proclaim Latin America, and by extension the Global South, to be the new north for advanced art.

'Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern'

Museum of Modern Art

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Through February 15