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Review/Art; Founding Inspiration Of Latin Modernism

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Joaquin Torres-Garcia may not have been a great artist, but he was an extremely interesting participant in a great moment in art history. Born in Uruguay in 1874, he moved to Spain when he was 17 years old and studied painting. His career coincided with the advent of European modernism, and for the next 40 years, in Madrid, Paris and New York, he was a member of a brilliant international group of artists.

As a painter he was like a sponge, soaking up the influences of Cubism, Constructivism and finally Neo-Plasticism, whose austere geometries he rendered as tight grids filled with forms that resemble pictographs or children's drawings. His real gifts, though, lay in his role as theoretician and teacher. Erudite, passionate, enthralled with the art of all cultures, especially those of the pre-Columbian Americas, he was dedicated to the concept of an avant-garde in which social, spiritual and formalist ideals meshed.

Most English-language accounts of Torres-Garcia's career trail off around 1930, when he helped found the Cercle et Carre artists' group in Paris. But as revealed by "The School of the South: El Taller Torres-Garcia and Its Legacy," an exhibition organized by the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery in Austin, Tex., and now on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the most challenging chapter of his career lay ahead of him. In 1934, finding little employment amid the turmoil as Spain headed for civil war, the 60-year-old artist returned to Uruguay. He took the principles of European modernism with him and set about changing the face of Latin American art, eventually establishing his workshop, or taller.

At the time, most of Uruguay's vanguard artists were working in a figurative style borrowed from Mexican mural painting. Under Torres-Garcia's leadership, several of them organized themselves as the Asociacion de Arte Constructivo and put into practice the exacting program he called constructive universalism. Ambitious to the point of self-contradiction, it infused the utopianism of Constructivism with a mystical fervor and sought to join pre-Columbian and modernist styles in a new esthetic, international in appeal but uniquely Latin American in character.

The first section of the Bronx exhibition is devoted to the work of this organization, and it's a lively if uneven gathering. Although Torres-Garcia's own paintings, which carefully blend geometry and

symbol, are textbook demonstrations of what he was after, some of his followers, including Hector Ragni, Amalia Nieto, and Torres-Garcia's two sons, Augusto and Horacio, ended up taking stylistic wild shots. Others, like Rosa Acle, developed a cogent response to the movement's multi-cultural demands fairly quickly; still others, like Augusto Torres, who produced Klee-like abstractions, Cubist still lifes and realistic figuration almost in the same breath, took years to find their bearings.

Internal discord fueled by a hostile critical reception led to the group's breakup in 1939. Torres-Garcia felt his idealism had been misplaced, but four years later he opened a school for young, untrained artists whom he could mold to his principles and whose enthusiasm matched his own. He called his new group the School of the South, though it was better known as El Taller Torres-Garcia. It remained in operation until 1962, 13 years after its founder's death.

It must have been an amazing place to study. The pages from Torres-Garcia's notebooks, with their collages of Egyptian, Greek, Indian, pre-Columbian and European art, indicate the invigorating breadth of his interests, and his call for a Latin American art to be "created from the bottom to the top" surely quickened the pulse of the young people who came to him.

Not everything the school produced was wonderful. Some of the work at the Bronx Museum, like the reiterated paintings of cityscapes in quasi-Cubist style, are student exercises, nothing more. But as the 40's progressed, Torres-Garcia's vision of a Latin American identity built on constructivist principles that united all art, fine and applied, from anonymous Inca sculpture to Mondrian, took hold. The result at El Taller was a strikingly original design movement in which painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture, stained glass and ceramics played equal roles.

And from the workshop's cooperative format, exceptional talents emerged. Horacio Torres was one of them. His stone sculptures, decorative metal grillwork and late figurative paintings (he died in 1976) all share a lithe, imaginative touch. Julio Alpuy and Jose Gurvich also proved to be far-ranging artists. But the outstanding figure is Gonzalo Fonseca. From his miniature buildings carved of stone to his fantastically shaped ceramics, his inventiveness is still singular and consistent today. It is in his work that the vitality of Torres-Garcia's vision is most persuasively embodied.

Mr. Fonseca also appears in the show's third section in the company of several younger Latin American painters, Miguel Angel Rios and Cesar Paternosto notable among them, who still draw inspiration from the lessons El Taller taught. And that inspiration is what "The School of the South: El Taller Torres-Garcia and Its Legacy" is really about.

The exhibition suggests the moral zeal and joy in art making that Torres-Garcia inculcated in his students, and it gives evidence of what a vibrant creation Latin American modernism was. It was technically at least as accomplished as its counterpart in the pre-Abstract Expressionist New York of the 30's and 40's, but improved upon it in one crucial respect: it transformed a borrowed European style into one deeply expressive of a New World culture. By Torres-Garcia's standards,

the work produced by El Taller was the genuine utopian article, and for anyone interested in modernism today, it is certainly an art to be reckoned with.

"The School of the South: El Taller Torres-Garcia and Its Legacy" remains at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania, the Bronx, through Jan. 10.

Photo: Joaquin Torres-Garcia's "Three Primitive Constructive Figures" (1937), part of an exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. (Courtesy Bronx Museum/James Dee)