

INTERSECTING

MODERNITIES



LATIN AMERICAN ART FROM THE BRILLEMBOURG CAPRILES COLLECTION

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THE BRILLEMBOURG
CAPRILES COLLECTION

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FRANCISCO MATTO'S MAGICAL MODERNISM

FOR THE URUGUAYAN ARTIST Francisco Matto, the act of creating a work of art assumed magical possibilities because he believed that artistic expression originated in the ritualistic cave drawings of early civilization. Matto's mentor and teacher, Joaquín Torres-García, introduced him to the concept that many ancient cultures shared a similar aesthetic, in which elements from nature were reduced to their fundamental essence. The symbolic characters constituted a collective visual language that was originally used for ceremonial and religious purposes. Therefore, these pictographic symbols were understood to be connected with the universal human spirit and possessed communicative powers with the divine.¹

Striving to engage this universal human spirit, Matto consistently reworked and refined a repertoire of symbols in numerous paintings and wooden reliefs during the 1960s and 1970s, and finally liberated them from the pictorial plane with the creation of his totems (fig. 1), which are considered his most original contribution to the legacy of Uruguayan art. The work *Construcción* [Construction] (1967; plate 20) in the Brillembourg Capriles Collection of Latin American Art represents an important step in Matto's artistic development of the Totems series by establishing a dialogue with international currents of the post-World War II era and solidifying his belief in the magical properties of each individual symbol.

Among the most outstanding artists to have emerged from the Taller Torres-García (TTG), Matto extended the applicability of Torres-García's neo-platonic ideas of Constructive Universalism. In doing so, Matto asserted the magical origins of the symbol and freed it

from the Constructivist grid. At the same time, he initiated a unique aesthetic investigation of the "planar dimension," rejecting modeling as a necessary part of sculpture and disregarding the differences between media.² Indeed, Matto's deftness as an artist is exemplified by his nontraditional sculptures in which he explored flat planes as volumes within three-dimensional space. These works, which fall in between painting, sculpture, and relief, distinguish Matto from the other artists associated with the TTG, such as Gonzalo Fonseca, who focused on architectonic stone structures, and Julio Alpuy, who in his wood reliefs explored organic symbols related to nature. Although *Construcción* adheres to a compositional grid, the work simplifies Torres-García's lexicon of symbols and investigates the physical depth of the two-dimensional surface, thus heralding a shift in Matto's trajectory.

During the early 1960s, as the TTG disbanded, Matto continued the established modality of creating large works densely populated with a plethora of signs. Toward the latter part of that decade, however, the artist began to focus on a few key symbols to which he would consistently return. *Construcción* demonstrates Matto's process of reducing his imagery to create a more legible, and thus universal, pictorial surface, which he would then transform into singular, freestanding objects. *Constructivo con cinco formas* [Construction in Five Forms] (fig. 2), painted the same year as *Construcción*, reveals a similar process of compositional simplification; however, the work in the Brillembourg Capriles Collection presents clearer and more developed symbols. Indeed, the well-defined images featured in this

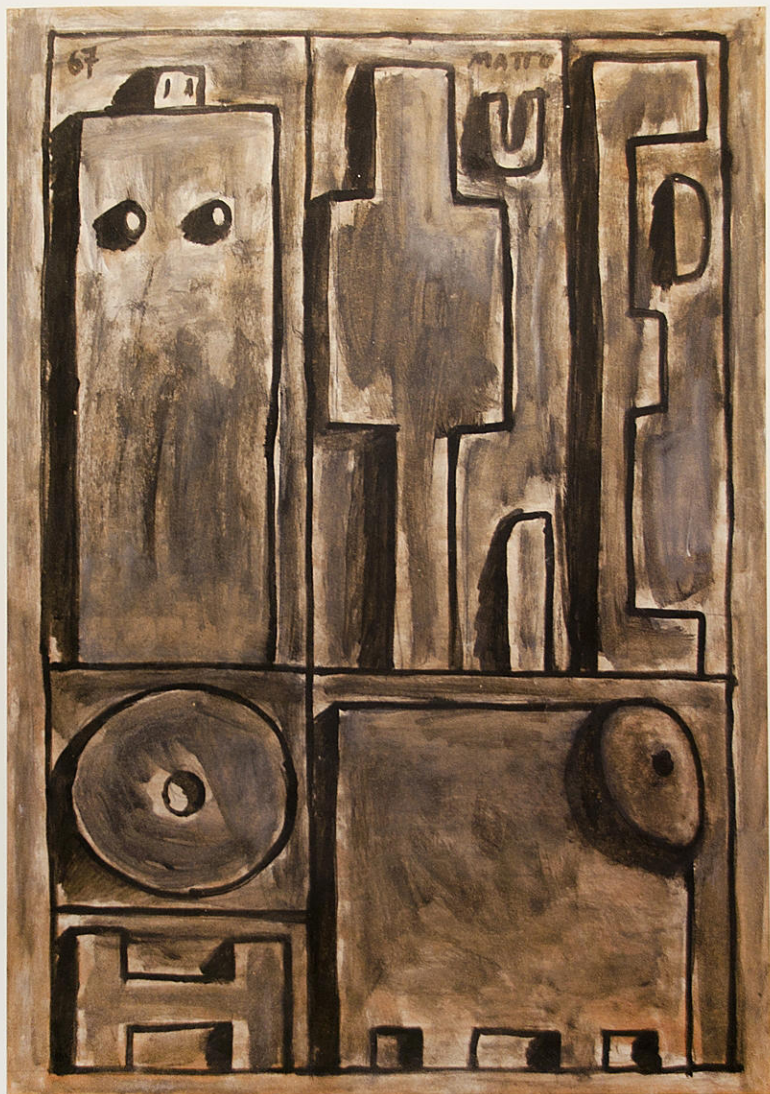


PLATE 20

Francisco Matto • *Construcción* [Construction], 1967

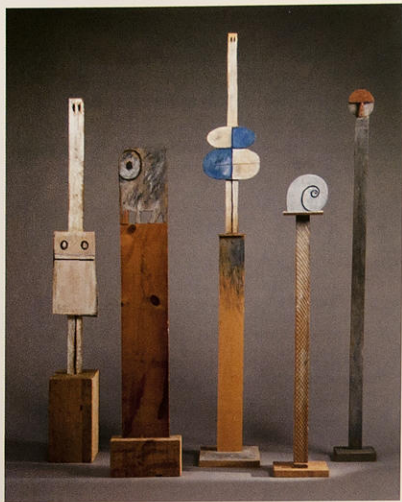


FIG. 1

work—a woman, a lamb, a “U,” and a circular structure—become the basis of Matto’s later totems of the late 1970s.

Construcción also presents a unique relationship with Matto’s reliefs produced during this decade (fig. 3). Although these wooden works were intended to hang on a wall, the artist imbued them with a sculptural quality by rhythmically and proportionally arranging flat, volumetric planes on the pictorial surface. In *Construcción*, Matto instilled the painting with a similar, planar three-dimensionality. The artist diluted the oil paints with water so that the pigments seeped into the artist’s board, causing the support to be visible. On one hand, this technique allowed the artist to embrace the intrinsic nature of his support, a technique that he learned from Torres-García and is exemplified by the *maderas* in the Brillembourg Capriles Collection. On the other hand, the texture of the board gives the painting its three-dimensional, stonelike quality, which is enhanced by Matto’s strong use of shadows. With this work, the artist tried to create in

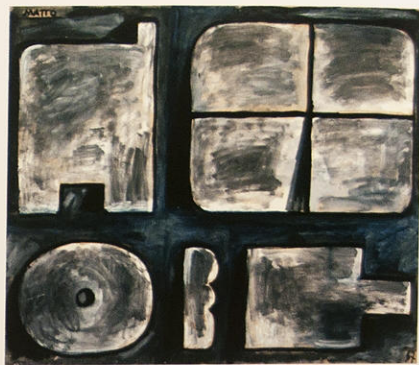


FIG. 2

painting the similar visual effect that he had achieved in his reliefs, thereby obscuring the traditional categories of painting and sculpture. His disregard for convention was part of a larger twentieth-century movement of questioning the standard hierarchies of art history. Specifically, in the case of sculpture, artists such as Louise Nevelson (fig. 4) and David Smith eliminated the necessity to model and sculpt by assembling flat forms to produce planar sculptures. Matto’s attempt to give *Construcción* a sculptural quality directly relates to these broader modern practices.

With the creation of his totems, Matto injected an intensely ritualistic aspect into the key symbols identified in *Construcción*. These freestanding objects remain as flat as the wooden board that the artist used, eloquently fusing his focus on the mystical properties of signs with his modern tendencies in planar sculpture. Indeed, the works present Matto’s most innovative play with flat volumes in space, and the painting in the Brillembourg Capriles Collection provides an early experiment in the development of this magical modernism.



FIG. 3

ILLUSTRATIONS IN TEXT

FIGURE 1

Francisco Matto
Totems (*Venus, Cordero, Venus blanquiazul, Caracol grande, Mascara*), 1979–85
 Oil on wood

Various dimensions
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, III and Marli Andrade, Mary and Roy Cullen, Marjorie H. Wortham, Joanna and Richard W. Wortham III, the Wortham Foundation, and the Caroline Wiess Law Foundation, and gift of Ada Antuñeda de Matto

FIGURE 2

Francisco Matto
Constructivo con cinco formas
 [Construction with Five Forms], 1967
 Oil on canvas
 Private collection, New York

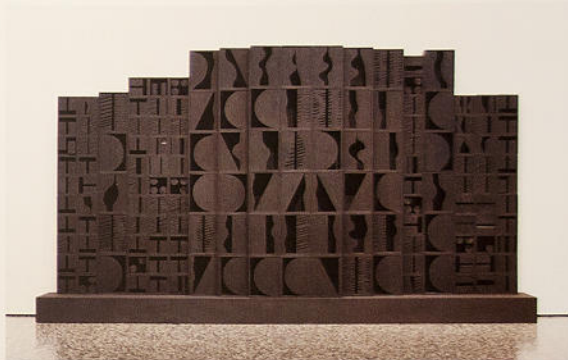


FIG. 4

FIGURE 3

Francisco Matto
Ten Forms, 1966
 Oil on wood
 28 x 12 7/8 inches
 Cecilia de Torres, Ltd.

FIGURE 4

Louise Nevelson
Mirror Image I, 1969
 Painted wood
 117 3/4 x 210 7/8 x 21 inches
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
 Gift of The Brown Foundation, Inc.

NOTES

1

Joaquín Torres-García, who established Constructive Universalism, posited the belief that artists should reclaim the non-naturalistic aesthetic of a distant past. Matto absorbed this idea of the myth of origins and made it the foundation of his later work.

2

This approach to sculpture was first investigated by Margit Rowell in her 1979 publication *The Planar Dimension: Europe, 1912–1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979).