

THE JUDY AND CHARLES TATE

Collection of Latin American Art

La línea continua



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BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

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an Imprint of the University of Texas Press

FRANCISCO MATTO

Montevideo, Uruguay, 1911–1995

by Beth Shook

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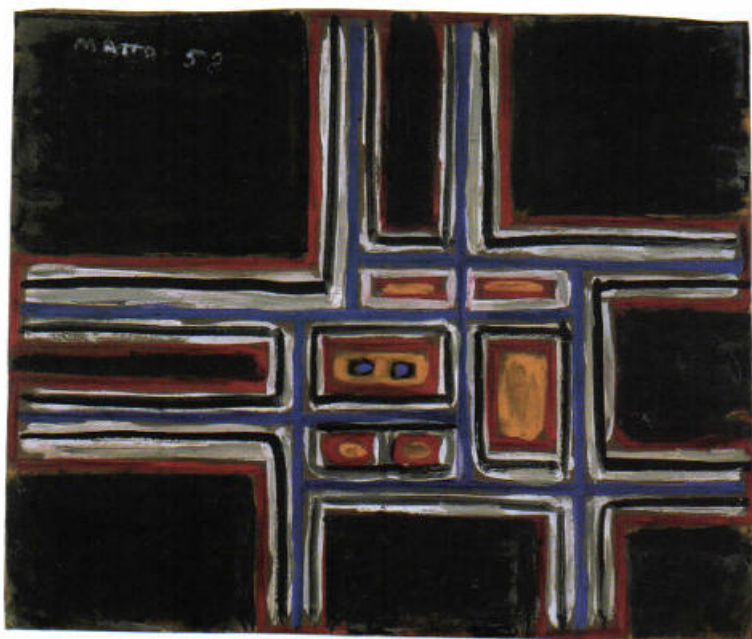
Naturaleza muerta: plano de color y linea [Still Life: Plane of Color and Line], 1945

Oil on board

21 1/4 x 32 3/4 in. (54 x 83.2 cm)

At a moment when many of the great trailblazers of Latin American modernism were gravitating to the cosmopolitan environments of New York and Paris, Francisco Matto remained committed to living and making art in his native Montevideo, Uruguay. There he became one of the first members of Taller Torres-García, the workshop of master artist and theorist Joaquín Torres-García. Matto went on to develop a distinctive style in painting and sculpture that, while inspired by Torres-García's Constructive Universalism, was remarkable in its adherence to a set thematic lexicon, which Matto explored and reworked exhaustively from the late 1940s into the 1990s.¹

In 1932 the young Matto traveled south to Tierra del Fuego. Along the way he purchased his first indigenous art objects in Buenos Aires and visited indigenous Mapuche territory in southern Chile.² The latter encounter fostered an interest in not only contemporary Amerindian cultures but also those of the past. In his lifetime Matto acquired an impressive collection of pre-Columbian art and ethnographic objects that ultimately constituted his Museo de Arte Precolombino (Museum of Pre-Columbian Art).³



Composición sobre fondo negro [Composition on Black Background], 1958
 Oil on cardboard
 15 x 18 in. (38.1 x 45.7 cm)
 Gift of Judy and Charles Tate, 2004; 2004.172

Matto's affinity for the ancient Americas made him a natural fit for the circle of Torres-García, whose writings and lectures had impressed Matto even before the two formally met. Torres-García had returned to Montevideo from Europe in 1934, having solidified his utopian theory of a timeless and "universal art not bound by local traditions" that fused geometric abstraction with the symbols and mystical associations of ancient art.⁴ In 1943 Torres-García established his workshop, of which Matto became an indispensable member. At the Taller Torres-García, Matto introduced his peers to his pre-Columbian collection and transformed his own expressive, Matisse-influenced style into one grounded in Constructive Universalist theory. *Naturaleza muerta: plano de color y línea* from 1945 is a response to Torres-García's first formal lesson on the basic elements of painting.⁵ Here the structure of Matto's still life is made up of loose black outlines, which seem to hover detached from the planes of color that underpin them. The composition is exemplary of Torres-García's emphasis on liberating the structure of objects from the viewer's subjective and ephemeral experience of them. Though Torres-García passed away in 1949, Matto continued contributing to the Taller in exhibitions and as a teacher until it officially disbanded in 1962.



Reticula turquesa [Turquoise Grid], 1963
Oil on board mounted on canvas
20 3/4 x 16 1/4 in. (52.7 x 41.3 cm)

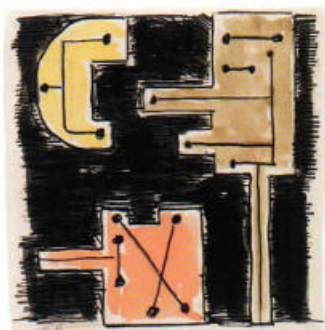
Composición sobre fondo negro was painted during the final years of the workshop. In the painting, orthogonal conduits of color traverse a field of black, creating compartments in which additional colors are embedded. The innermost level of the two central compartments contains eye-like markings in blue and yellow; otherwise, there is an uncharacteristic lack of representation. Critics have emphasized Matto's intensely meditative creative process, in which basic pictorial signs—a man, a sun, an arrow, a snail—are depicted repeatedly, in various media, and are increasingly pared down.⁶ Matto's more abstract grid structures reflect this process of simplification, which he would cycle through throughout his career. The grids also reveal an awareness of the geometric designs incised and painted on ancient Andean ceramics. While the title of the work references a black background, Matto allows glimpses of cardboard and colored ground to show through, a testament to his predilection for humble and rough-hewn materials.

If *Composición* represents the logical conclusion of a reductive process, *Construcción en cinco colores* can perhaps be considered a midway point. Though the compartmentalized grid in this example is populated primarily by embedded geometric forms such as zigzags and rectangles, some of the artist's trademark pictograms are also discernible, namely the sun at top right, inspired by the Incan sun god; the vertical stripe of small, dotted ellipses to its left, likely a reference to leaves; and the figure eight and "H"-shaped forms at bottom left, reminiscent of Matto's male and female figures. The composition demonstrates Matto's commitment to formal unity: "No matter whether one draws a hammer, a cup or a serpent, the important thing is that they should all combine with each other, that things should click together."⁷ This density of forms links *Construcción* to some pre-Columbian textile traditions, while the palette of primary colors, black, and white is a hallmark of Torres-García.



Construcción en cinco colores
 [Construction in Five Colors], 1963
 Oil and graphite on cloth
 44 x 25 3/4 in. (111.75 x 65.41 cm)
 Gift of Judy and Charles Tate, 2010; 2010.82

Torres-García had conceived of the Taller as an arts and crafts workshop tailored to the South American context, and as a result his pupils experimented extensively with designing functional objects in different media—an activity that only accelerated following the master's death.⁸ Matto was particularly drawn to wood for its rough and organic quality as well as its primitive associations.⁹ In works like *Dintel*, the artist created wood constructions through an additive process in order to isolate symbols from his repertoire, including the male figure, the bird, and the snake or eel—the latter evoked by the thick, sinuous line at center. The loosely painted surface of *Dintel* may have been inspired by the application of paint in indigenous ceremonial art.¹⁰ The composition also closely resembles the upper register of the commemorative coin that Matto was commissioned to design for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in 1969. The relationship is evident in the grouping *Estudio para Dintel*.



Tres formas [Three Forms], 1956
Ink and watercolor on paper
5 3/8 x 5 1/4 in. (17.3 x 13.3 cm)

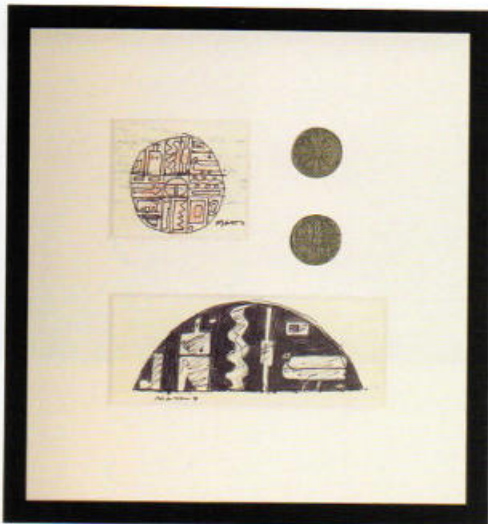
Tres formas [Three Forms], 1957
Oil on board
20 3/8 x 17 1/8 in. (51.8 x 43.5 cm)

Matto's wood reliefs and sculptures from the 1960s through the 1980s are some of his most celebrated works, from smaller constructions like *Dintel* to his large-scale *Monumento* and *Tótem* series, which were inspired in part by Mapuche funeral posts he had viewed as a youth in southern Chile. In this medium the artist most effectively imbued contemporary abstraction with the spiritual impulse he had sensed in ancient cultures decades earlier.

1. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, "Introduction," in *Francisco Matto: The Modern and the Mythic*, ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, exh. cat. (Austin, TX: Blanton Museum of Art, 2009), 12.
2. Cecilia de Torres, "Cronología," in Marie Noël Behrens et al., *Matto: El misterio de la forma*, exh. cat. (Montevideo: Galería Oscar Prato, 2007), 175–176.
3. The museum, located in Montevideo, was opened in 1962 and housed textiles, ceramics, and sculpture from across Latin America. Matto was forced to close it in 1978 due to the withdrawal of municipal government funding.
4. Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 128. See also Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Re-positioning the South: The Legacy of El Taller Torres-García in Contemporary Latin American Art," in *El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez, exh. cat. (Austin, TX: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, 1992), 255–260.
5. Cecilia Buzio de Torres, "The School of the South: El Taller Torres-García, 1943–1962," in *El Taller Torres-García*, 112.
6. Cecilia de Torres, "Francisco Matto," in Alfredo Testoni et al., *Francisco Matto: Elemental Forms 1946–1993*, exh. cat. (New York: Galería Ramis Barquet, 2005), 7.
7. Cecilia de Torres, in Bernard Chappard and Cecilia de Torres, *Francisco Matto*, exh. cat., (Buenos Aires: Palatina, 1999), 15.
8. Jacqueline Barnitz, "An Arts and Crafts Movement in Uruguay: El Taller Torres-García," in *El Taller Torres-García*, 139, 147.
9. Alicia Haber, "Matto: La búsqueda de la esencia," in *Matto: El misterio de la forma*, 25–31.
10. Ramírez, "Re-positioning the South," in *El Taller Torres-García*, 286.



Dintel [Lintel], 1988
Tempera on wood construction
21 5/8 x 33 1/2 in. (54.9 x 85 cm)



Estudio para Dintel, estudio para moneda de la FAO, monedas de la FAO (anverso y reverso)
[Study for Lintel, Study for FAO Coin, FAO Coins (obverse and reverse)], 1969-1988
Ink on paper and silver coins
14 1/4 x 13 1/2 in. (36.2 x 34.3 cm), framed