

TORRES-GARCIA
and his
LEGACY

Joaquín Torres-García
Julio Alpuy
Gonzalo Fonseca
José Gurvich
Francisco Matto
Augusto Torres
Horacio Torres

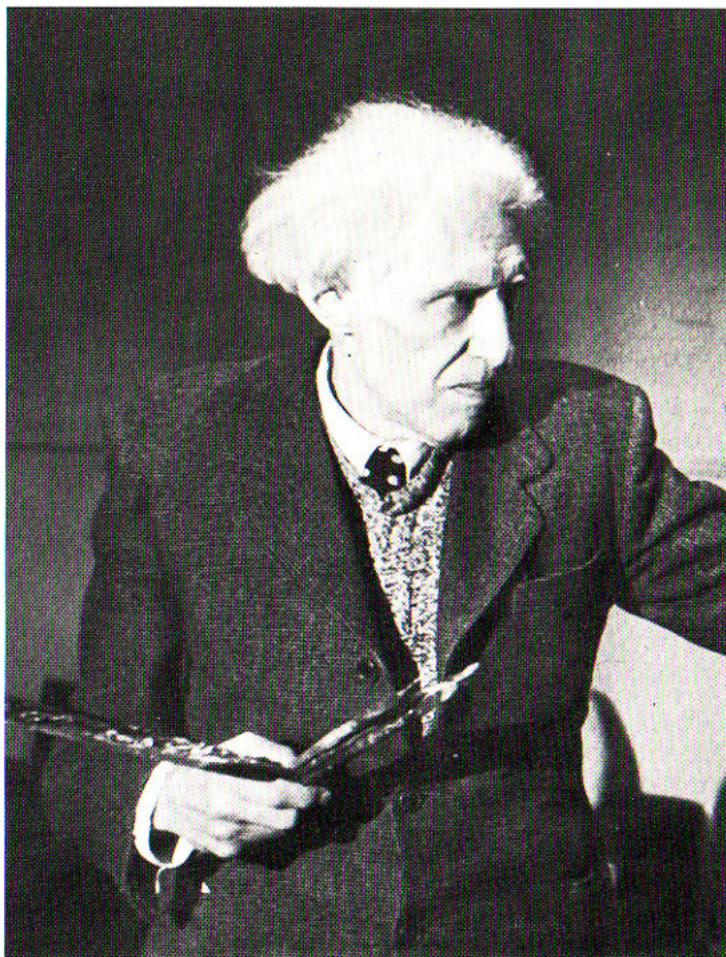
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TORRES-GARCIA

When Torres-García returned to his native Uruguay in 1934 after an absence of forty-three years, he was a mature and experienced artist. During those years abroad he had been involved with most of the major avant-garde movements in Europe, ultimately aligning himself with the more formalist schools of painting. Living in Paris in 1930, he co-founded with Michel Seuphor *Cercle et Carré*, an association of abstract artists including Arp, Kandinsky, Mondrian etc.; whose geometric vocabulary was a reaction against Surrealism.

With Torres-García's first constructivist painting of 1929, his work arrived at a point of transition expressive of the tension between nature and abstraction. His friendships with Van Doesburg and Mondrian had had a great impact. The purity and classicism in the abstract structures of both artists corresponded precisely to what Torres-García had always aspired in his own work, yet he was loathe to forfeit the legacy of tradition and image. In order to "fit" his images in a structure he had to either find a way to write the name of a concept or to draw a symbol of it. These elements had to reflect the same concept of abstraction as did the structure itself. Obeying an internal vision, he began to place symbols in the compartments of a structure: a house, a ship, a man, etc., whose whole became a microcosm. By adopting symbols in which idea and shape are one, he created a synthesis which united the opposed idioms of Surrealism and Neoplasticism.

Margit Rowell, in her essay to the exhibition she curated, *Torres-García: Grid-Pattern-Sign, Paris-Montevideo, 1924-1944*, defines this crystallization: "His concept of a Universal Constructivism encompassed rational structure, emotion or intuition, and symbolic references to the world of nature. What he sought was a broad humanism in a contemporary expressive form."

Torres-García believed that Universal Constructivism could be the foundation on which a monumental and universal art, linked

in spirit to the great civilizations, could be created. It was this idea that brought him back to Uruguay in 1934. Montevideo in the thirties was a small, modern city with a lively cultural activity imported from Europe. Painting and sculpture were inspired by European decorative, academic, and fashionable styles.

The confrontation with this limited artistic milieu excited a sense of mission in Torres-García. He launched a campaign to introduce his ideas, giving lectures, holding numerous exhibitions, publishing *Estructura* ("Structure," a book about the theory of constructivism) and organizing the Association of Constructivist Artists. The entrenched art establishment frowned on his efforts and resented the invasion by this evangelist who seemed only to be interested in converting them to Constructivism and abstraction.

By 1940 a number of young artists, unspoiled by previous art education, were beginning to gather around Torres-García. In 1944 they formed the Atelier Torres-García (TTG). Many were in awe of their master. Julio Alpuy recalls: "You immediately felt that this man was totally committed, and that in turn demanded total commitment from us. For him the theory of art was never separated from the practice of art, from life itself. He didn't teach us concepts—he took us into his world." The years with Torres-García marked each one indelibly, both artistically and morally, since for him the two were deeply related: "Each artist will have to fight within himself the great continuous battle between the universal man and the individual. Each one will have to become a primitive, not a prehistoric, but one who is at the beginning of an important art cycle."

For the members of the TTG, Constructivism touched all aspects of life. They sought an integrity of thought and esthetics in the art they made as well as in the lives they led. They designed, built and decorated furniture, ceramics, tapestries and jewelry. But, unlike the Bauhaus designs intended for industrial production, Constructivist applied arts had to be handmade of humble materials. "The humbler the

material, the more evident the idea inscribed upon it," said Torres-García.

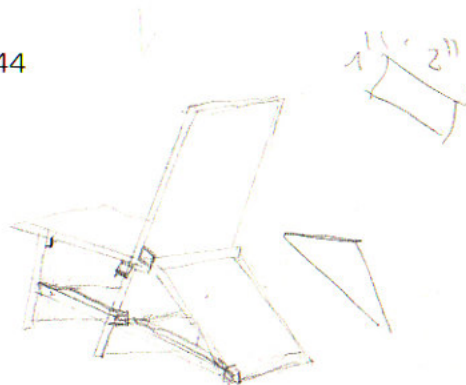
One of his ambitions was to collaborate with his students in a monumental work, wanting to revive the time when art was made collectively and anonymously. Easel painting, he felt, was not ideally suited to Constructivism; mural painting was by far more suitable, in that it complemented architecture, which he considered the highest form of art. In 1945 the Atelier was commissioned to decorate the walls of a newly built hospital for tubercular patients. The murals were painted directly on the walls in a palette restricted to primary colors. (When they were unveiled one critic wrote that they were "more dangerous than the Koch bacillus.")

The Atelier Torres-García was at odds with the entire art establishment of Montevideo. Since their work was rejected from the annual official salons, they rented space to hold their own exhibitions. In a defense against the consistently bad press they received, they published *Removedor* (paint remover), a newspaper in which they were free to demolish their adversaries. This isolation reinforced both their cohesion as a group and their determination to fight back. "Torres-García knew how to inspire the young with passion, which has to do with the spirit—not the passion of youth which is glandular," wrote Guido Castillo, editor of *Removedor* in 1944.

Torres-García's approach to teaching painting, unlike what he had learned at the Academy in Barcelona where "one could learn all the tricks of a bad painter; lots of things that had to be unlearned later," was guided by the same values as abstraction: what is represented is of the least importance. The fundamental lies in the life and harmony of the plastic values: color, rhythm and proportion. He introduced his students to varied techniques such as chiaroscuro, and to the impressionist palette, creating methods of turning concepts into painting. One of the exercises, for example, was to paint a landscape or a still life using only the five unmixed primary colors, in order to create a non-imitative equivalence of light



Atelier Torres-García, c. 1944

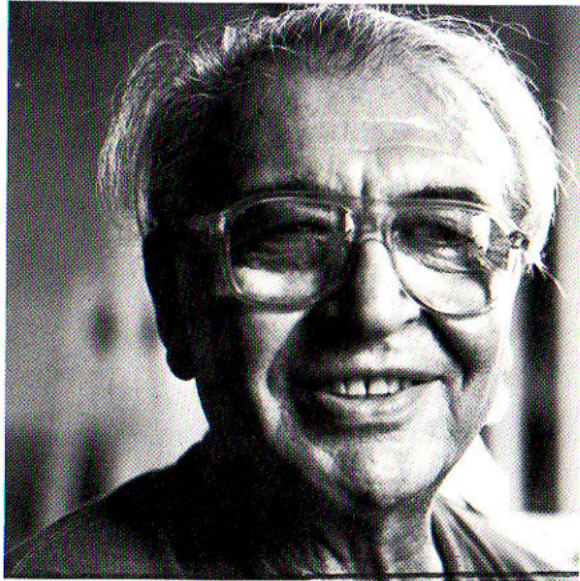


and color values on the canvas. "A red may represent a tomato, but (for the painter) it will first be a red. And it will be tone, light, form and emotion before being a tomato," he explained.

In 1948, the year before his death, Torres-García acknowledged that he had failed in establishing a popular and anonymous Constructivist art in Uruguay. He also recognized that Constructivism, with its rigid rules and symbolism, could be depersonalizing. "Real painters, who feel passionately for painting, have very strong personalities. Therefore a school (unless its rules are not too strict) makes them feel uneasy, because if painting cannot admit ties of any kind, neither can painters. Painting is a form of art based on personality, and it also requires absolute freedom. That's why I only teach my students what painting is and then let them go their own way. The students at this Atelier have practiced painting and Constructivist art alternatively. But on looking back at the exhibitions of the Atelier, if we ask which form is predominant, without doubt we can answer that it was painting." Torres-García was well aware that he had to reconcile his students' development as individuals with the anonymous, universal ideas of Constructivism.

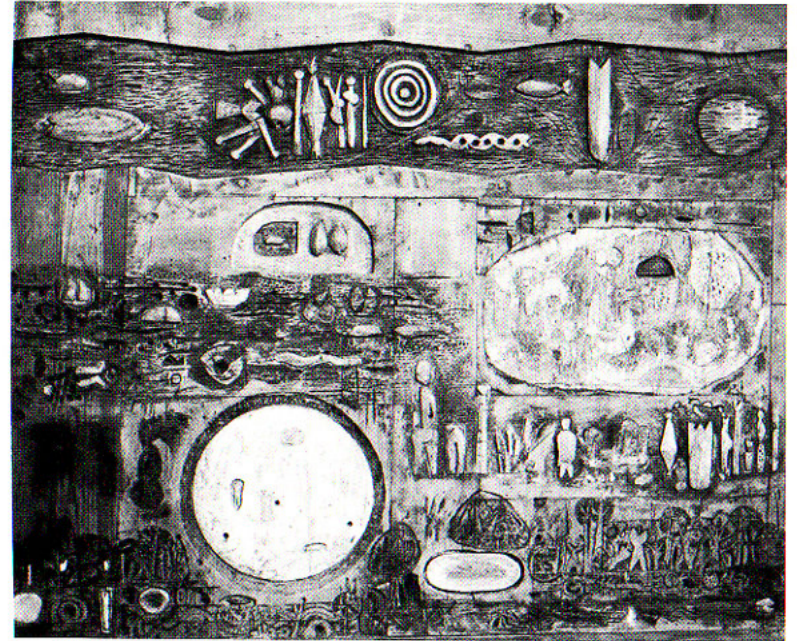
Although the Atelier remained active until 1963, after his death many of the students left Uruguay and its isolation in order to establish their own points of reference. Each of them began to explore his own particular inclinations. Today, thirty years later, (and for the first time in New York), the mature work of some of the original Atelier artists is shown with that of their teacher. Transcending fashions in art, it shows a long, sharp progression to individual artistic identities. While the sustaining influence of Torres-García is clearly in evidence, their work also transcends that influence. Torres-García had great faith in his own knowledge and transmitted it generously to his students, confident that they would flourish in their own rights and enrich the humanistic tradition.

Cecilia Buzio



JULIO ALPUY

Born in Tacuarembó, Uruguay in 1919, Alpuy moved to Montevideo in 1935. On meeting Torres-García in 1940, he became one of his students, later participating in all of TTG's exhibitions and projects. From 1945 to 1955 he taught at the Atelier. He moved to New York in 1961 (where he presently resides) and shortly thereafter was awarded a grant from the New School for Social Research. In 1983 he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has exhibited extensively in South America, Europe, and the United States, and his work is represented in the permanent collections of the University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, the Museo Nacional de Montevideo, the Museum of Tel Aviv, and the Museum of Trenton in New Jersey.



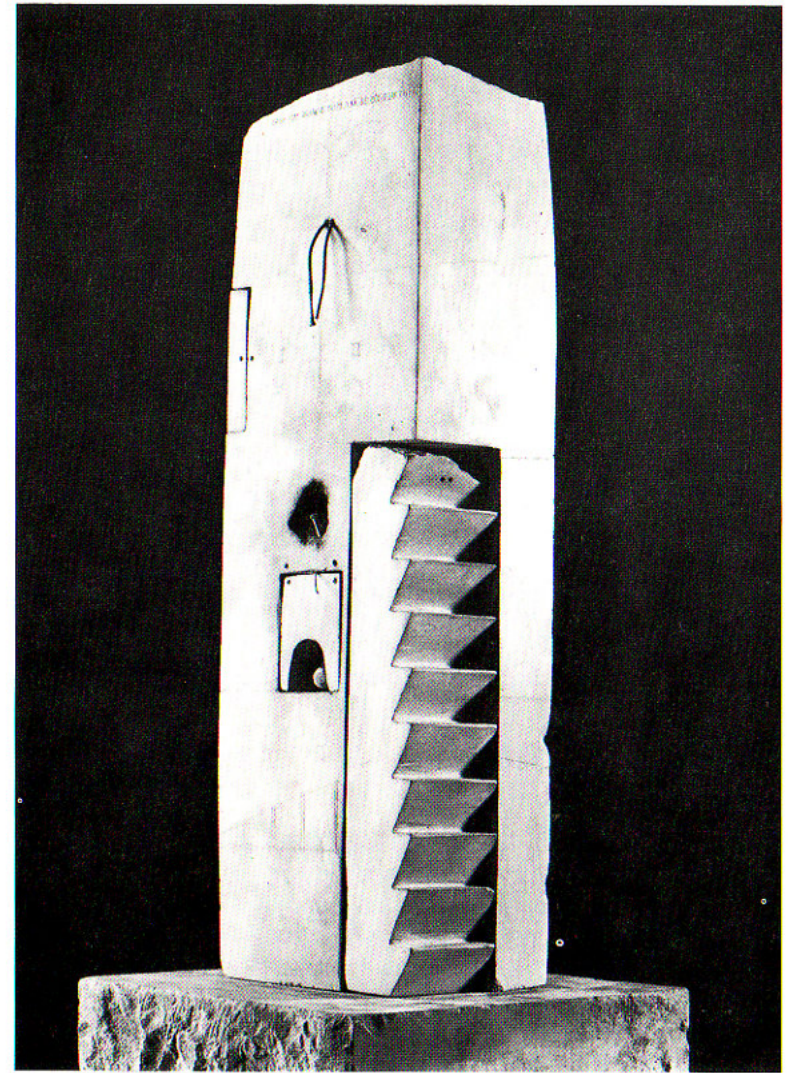
Genesis #1, 1964

wood, 63" × 75½"



GONZALO FONSECA

Born in Montevideo in 1922, as a child Fonseca traveled frequently to Europe with his family-trips which introduced him to art and ancient cultures. After meeting Torres-García in 1940, he became one of his students, remaining with him until his death. On leaving Uruguay definitively in 1950, he spent several years traveling through Europe and the Middle East before settling in New York in 1958. He currently lives in Italy and New York. In 1962 he had a one man show at the Portland Museum, and in 1971 at the Jewish Museum in New York. In 1985 he was invited as a special guest to the Volkesund, Denmark, exhibition of sculpture in stone. His work is included in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, New York, the University of Texas at Austin, the Museum of Fine Arts in Caracas, etc., and his public commissions, among many others, include The Alza Corporation in California and Fountains and Sculpture in Reston, Virginia.

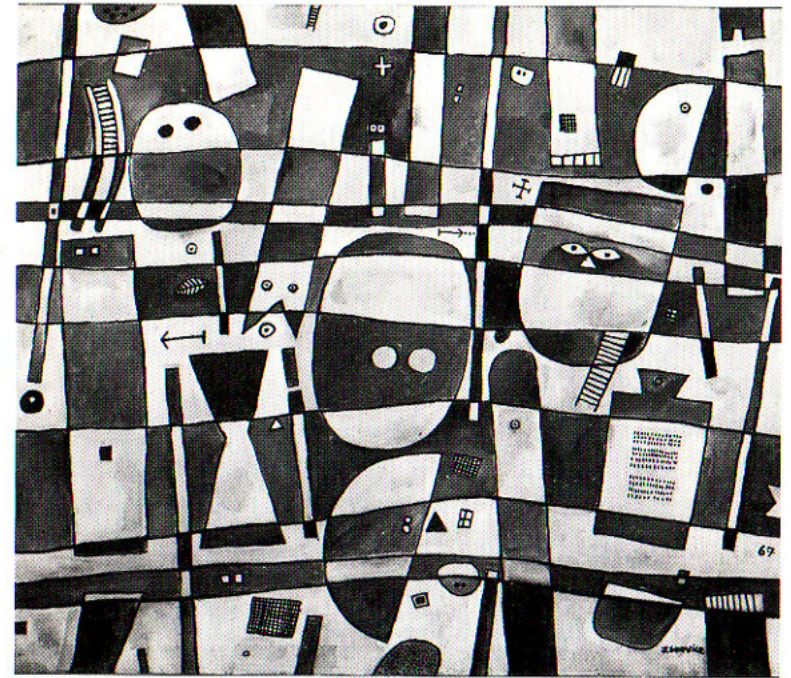


Tower of the New Born, 1980-86 limestone, 26" × 8½" × 5¼"



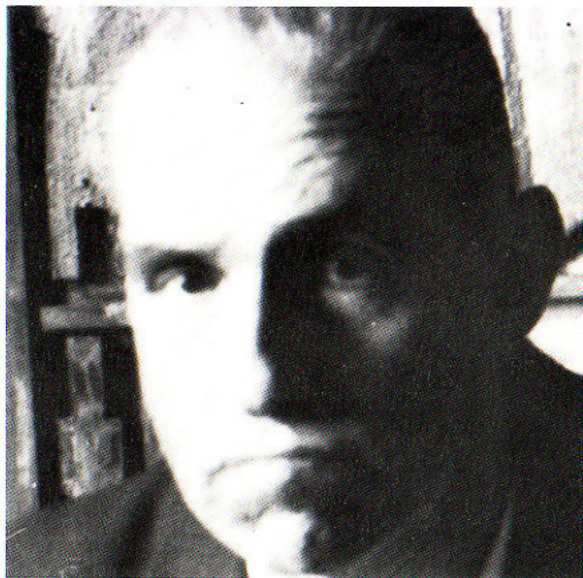
JOSE GURVICH

Born in Lithuania in 1927, the Gurvich family emigrated to Uruguay in 1933. Gurvich began studying with Torres-García in 1942 and subsequently formed part of TTG. In 1955, he spent the first several visits at the Kibutz Ramot Menasche before settling definitively in New York in 1970 (where he died in 1974). His work was frequently exhibited in Israel, Italy, Uruguay and Argentina as well as New York and Washington, D.C. In 1973, Aberbach Gallery commissioned him to paint a series of paintings on religious subjects which now hang in the Ramaz School, New York. In 1985, the Haifa Museum honored him with a retrospective exhibition.



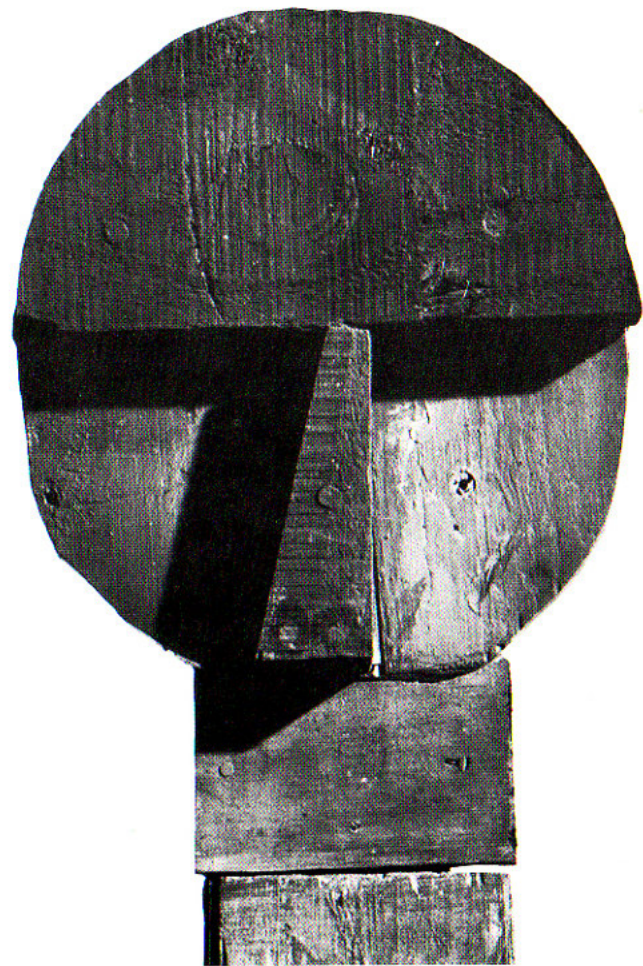
Untitled, 1967

oil on canvas, 23½" × 20"



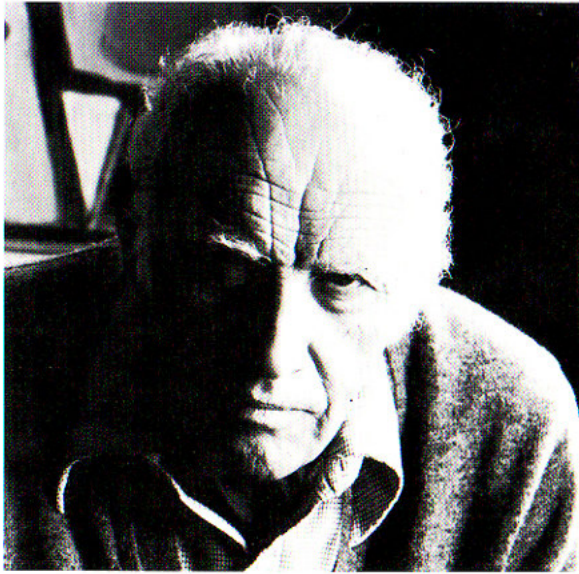
FRANCISCO MATTO

Born in Montevideo in 1911, Matto's preference for flat surfaces and light colors were apparent in his earliest paintings and drawings. When he visited Tierra del Fuego in 1932, he acquired several ethnographic pieces which were the beginning of an important collection (and since 1962 a museum housed in his former studio) of Pre-Colombian art. In 1939, Matto met Torres-García and later participated in all of the TTG's exhibitions in Montevideo and abroad. His work was exhibited at the Salón des Surindependents in Paris and at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam between 1950 and 1954. In 1960 he was commissioned to execute a mural for a high school in Las Piedras, Uruguay, and to design a commemorative coin for the Central Bank of Uruguay in 1969. He has exhibited in Europe and South America. He currently resides in Montevideo.



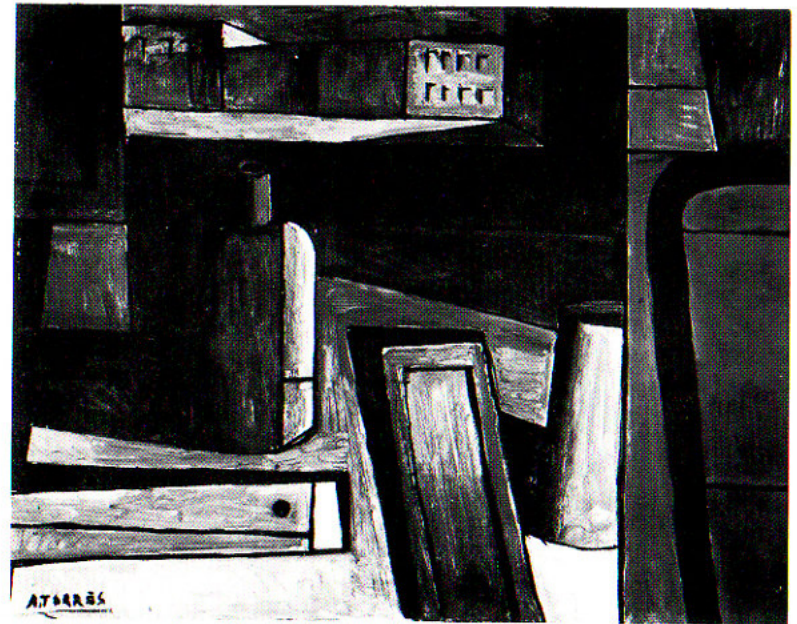
Head, 1982

painted wood, h.: 51"



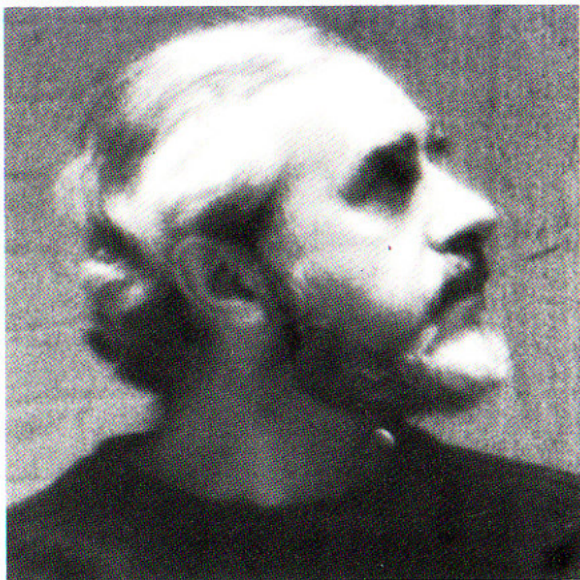
AUGUSTO TORRES

Born in Tarrasa, near Barcelona, Spain in 1913, Augusto Torres is the oldest son of Torres-García. When the Musée de l'Homme in Paris hired him to make a drawn documentation of their collection of Peruvian Inca vases he was able to study the art of ancient and primitive cultures, and this, as well as frequent trips to Paris' Marché aux Puces (where he found African art) had a profound impact on his future work. In 1930 he began working for Julio Gonzalez as a studio assistant while studying with Amadee Ozenfant. After his family moved to Montevideo, Torres, as well as studying painting with his father, also helped him in teaching the pupils of the TTG when that group was formed in 1944. In 1960, the New School for Social Research in New York awarded him a scholarship, and while in New York he and Gonzalo Fonseca organized an exhibition of work by the TTG artists for the School. He lived in Spain from 1974 to 1980 where he exhibited frequently and completed several mural commissions. He currently lives in Montevideo.



Still life with mirror, 1977

oil on canvas, 29½" × 37"

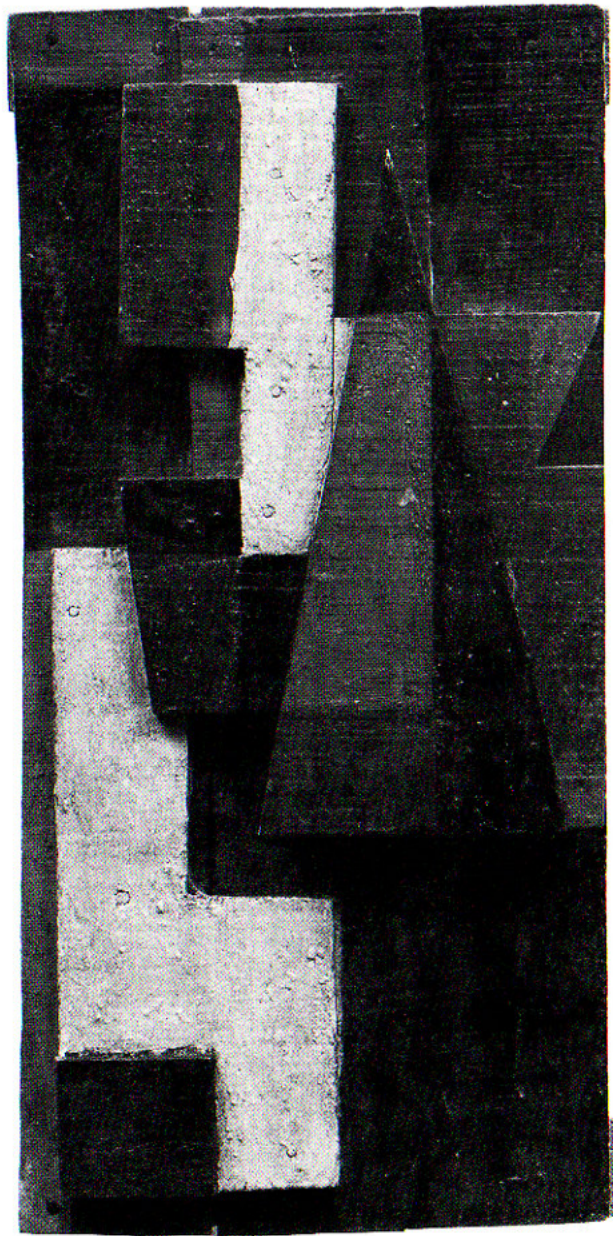


HORACIO TORRES

Born in Legorn, Italy in 1924, Horacio Torres, the youngest son of Torres-García, spent his early childhood in Paris. In 1934, after the family had moved to Montevideo, he began to work with his father, exhibiting for the first time in 1936. He was a member of the TTG from its inception, participating in all its exhibitions. He left Uruguay and settled in New York in 1969. For many years, Torres worked in both the figurative and constructivist style, frequently showing the two styles in the same exhibition. Eventually, finding the constructivist language too restricting, he started painting nudes directly from the model. His first one man show in New York was at the Noah Goldowsky Gallery in 1973, and his work was exhibited at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1974. His work is included in the public collections of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C., at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Horacio Torres died in 1976.



Figure on Yellow Draperies, 1974 oil on linen, 50" x 60"



Joaquín Torres-García
Formas Superpuestas, 1931, painted wood, 19" × 9½"

CHRONOLOGY

- 1874 28 July: Joaquín Torres-García is born in Montevideo, Uruguay, of a Catalan father and Uruguayan mother.
- 1891 The Torres-García family leaves for Catalonia, Spain, settling first in Mataró (home of Torres-García's father's family), then in Barcelona in 1892.
- 1893 Studies at the Academia de Belles Art and Academia Baixas. Joins Cercle Artistic de Sant Lluç, a conservative artistic group.
- 1904-05 Works on stained glass windows with Antonio Gaudí for the Cathedral in Palma de Mallorca, and for the Sagrada Família, in Barcelona.
- 1907 Visits exhibition of French art at the 'V Exposició Internacional de Belles Arts i Industries' in Barcelona. Is impressed by three cartoons by Puvis de Chavannes for the Paris Pantheon murals. Discovers Italian Primitives and Hellenistic art. Teaches at 'Mont d'Or,' a progressive children's school.
- 1908 Paints frescoes in the chapel of the Holy Sacrament, Church of San Agustí, Barcelona with Joan Gonzalez, and in the Church of the Divine Shepherdess in Sarria. Paints frescoes for the Council Chamber, Barcelona.
- 1909 20 August: marries Manolita Piña de Rubiés.
- 1910 Travels to Paris, where he sees the Puvis de Chavannes murals at the Pantheon, and Brussels, where he decorates the ceiling of the Uruguayan Pavilion at the World's Fair.
- 1912 Travels to Florence and Rome to study fresco painting.
- 1912-13 Commissioned by Enric Prat de la Riba, leader of the Barcelona Provincial Government, to decorate

- the Salón de Sant Jordi in Barcelona's Palace of the Generalitat.
- 1913 Writes and publishes his first book of artistic theory, *'Notes sobre art'*; in which he encourages a return to a Greco-Latin tradition.
- 1914 Leaves Barcelona to settle in Tarrasa (until 1919) at Villa 'Mon Repos'. Makes his first wooden toys for children.
- 1920 May: leaves Spain for New York, via Paris and Brussels.
- 1920-22 In New York, receives moral and financial support from Isabelle Whitney. Exhibits at the Whitney Studio Club along with Stuart Davies and Stanislaw Szukalski, April-May 1921.
- 1922 1 August: after an inconclusive stay in New York, returns to Europe. Settles in Italy.
- 1926 Shows at Galerie Fabre, Paris.
19 September: settles in Paris.
- 1928 Shows at Galerie Zak, Paris.
- 1929 Paints his first constructivist works.
- 1930 One man show at Galerie Jeanne Boucher, Paris. Founds 'Cercle et Carré' with Michel Seuphor. Organizes the first exhibition of Latin American Artists at Galerie Zak.
- 1931 The effects of the New York Stock Market crash hit Paris. One man shows at Galerie Percier and Galerie Jean Charpentier.
- 1932 15 December: moves family to Madrid. Tries without success to form a school and museum of Constructivist art. A. E. Gallatin buys his first Torres-García works for the Museum of Living Art, New York.
- 1934 April: returns with family to Montevideo. Writes his autobiography *'Historia de mi vida'* and *'Estructura'* (Structure), dedicated to Piet Mondrian.

- 1936 May: begins publication of *'Circulo y Cuadrado'* (ten issues, until December 1934), a magazine inspired by the earlier *'Cercle et Carré'* in Paris.
- 1938 Builds 'Cosmic monument' in Parque Rodó, Montevideo; a granite construction with carved symbols closely related to his paintings.
- 1939 Paints series of 'Portraits' of famous men; the proportions in the paintings are based on the Golden Section.
- 1944 Forms 'Taller Torres-García' (Atelier Torres-García), a studio for teaching, and for collective commissions and work. The 'Atelier' executes an important set of murals for the Hospital of Saint Bois. (In 1974, to restore and conserve them, the murals were removed from the walls and mounted on panels. In 1978, while on exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, they were destroyed in a fire at the Museu de Arte Moderna). Publishes *'Universal Constructivism'*—lectures from 1934 to 1944.
- 1945 January: begins publication of *'Removedor'* (Paint Remover); twenty-six issues, until August 1953—a periodical issued by the 'Atelier'.
- 1949 August 8: Torres-García dies in Montevideo.

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COVER PHOTO: JOAQUIN TORRES GARCIA, *CONSTRUCTIVO*, 1937.
OIL ON BOARD, 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

