

Ana María Franco

anfranco@uniandes.edu.co

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Afiliación institucional

Profesora asistente
Departamento de Arte
Universidad de los Andes

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es examinar en detalle la formulación y el desarrollo del Universalismo Constructivo de Joaquín Torres-García. De este modo, presento y analizo la interpretación y apropiación de Torres-García del Cubismo, el Neoplasticismo y el Surrealismo, las principales fuentes de inspiración de su personal visión del arte. Concluyo con una definición del Universalismo Constructivo en la cual muestro las influencias que toma del contexto Europeo, pero también enfatizo la originalidad de este estilo. También presento brevemente el desarrollo de este programa artístico después de que el artista dejó París y se estableció en Uruguay, y su influencia para el arte latinoamericano.

Filósofa, Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Magister en Filosofía, Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Master of Letters en Historia del Arte, University of St. Andrews (Escocia, Reino Unido).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ana María Franco, arte moderno, Joaquín Torres-García, Universalismo Constructivo, Cubismo, *Cercle et Carré*.

TITLE

Joaquín Torres-García's Constructive Universalism

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine in detail the formulation and development of Joaquín Torres-García's Constructive Universalism. In order to do so I analyse Torres-García's interpretation and appropriation of Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism, the main sources from which he nurtured his personal vision of art. Thus, I conclude by providing a definition of Constructive Universalism, showing the influences it draws from the European context, but also emphasising the originality of the style. I also present briefly the development of this artistic programme after the artist left Paris and established in Uruguay, and its influence upon Latin American art.

KEY WORDS

Ana María Franco, modern art, Joaquín Torres-García, Constructive Universalism, Cubism, *Cercle et Carré*.

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Joaquín Torres García's Constructive Universalism*

Ana María Franco

Filósofa

Introduction

For that man [primitive man] (and he was correct), everything was spirit: fire, winds, and thunder, any animal or stone... everything, to his pantheistic and universal perception. And that is how the Constructive looks at things, for he is on the same plane.

TORRES-GARCÍA [1938]¹

Geometric art is true art ... Geometric art is universal ... Based on this principle, before Constructivist art there is a doctrine. Constructivist art is the aesthetic expression of this doctrine. This doctrine is based on the law of Unity. From this law a Rule is deduced.

TORRES-GARCÍA [1938]²

These two quotes reflect the intricate concept of Constructive art that was developed by one of the greatest Latin American artists of the twentieth century: Joaquín Torres-García (Montevideo 1874-1949). Indeed, Torres-García's most innovative and original works reveal a complex fusion of different styles and ideas about art. This is commonly

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¹ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1992a.

² Id.: 1986.

accepted by all the art historians and critics who have studied Torres-García in depth, and they have all pointed out this quality of his art. Marie-Aline Prat, for example, considers that Torres-García's output cannot be classified under any movement or school: "Torres-García had close relationships with many movements of the history of modern art – cubism, surrealism, abstract art."³ For her, this is precisely the reason why for many years Torres-García has been overlooked in the history of twentieth-century art. Magrit Rowell describes Torres-García's work in the same terms: "The uneasy marriage of a rational order and a primitive vision engendered an art form that does not fit into any neat category."⁴

The difficulty of precisely categorising him or his work seems to have accompanied Torres-García throughout his life. Not only his art but also his nationality partook of a hybrid or dual character: his father was Catalan, whereas his mother was Uruguayan. Moreover, although he was born in Uruguay, he lived most of his adult life in Europe (forty-three years). Throughout his artistic career he defended an art proper to the Catalan tradition, Nuocentisme, yet later he also proposed an art that would be distinctively Latin American, Constructive Universalism. In his own work he developed an art that was inspired by the tradition of Classical Greece and Rome, but he was also stimulated by modern life and the industrial city. In this way, he used both a traditional classical language and a modernist one. He advocated an art of calm and order, but he also favoured an art that expressed dynamism and movement. He claimed that art had to be universal, but he also defended the idea that each epoch has its own art and that it should be inscribed into its specific tradition. Finally, he created a type of art that was at one and the same time both abstract and figurative. To sum up, Torres-García struggled all his life between the old and the new world, between tradition and modernity, between the past and the present.

Many of his colleagues and friends interpreted this struggle as the manifestation of a lack of decision and confidence in Torres-García's creative approach: they thought that he could not make up his mind and define a precise concept of art to practise.⁵ Some critics and art historians even considered that this "eclecticism" undermined Torres-García's claim to originality and they argued, for example, that "this artist never quite adapted their styles [those of European avant-garde artists] and, indeed, never developed a deeply personal style for himself."⁶

³ PRAT, 1986-87: 65.

⁴ ROWELL: 9.

⁵ This was the reason why Van Doesburg and Hélión, Torres-García's close friends in Paris, did not participate in the group *Cercle et Carré*: they alleged that Torres-García's art was still figurative and that he did not commit to abstract art. This also caused Torres-García and Michel Seuphor (with whom Torres-García founded the aforementioned group) to fall out: Seuphor wanted a group dedicated exclusively to the promotion of non-objective art, whereas Torres-García always considered important to retain a figurative element in art.

⁶ HERSTAND, 1984.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this struggle and mixture of contrasting and even contradictory elements what makes Torres-García's art so original and interesting. The tension between these contrasting elements throughout his artistic career led him to the formulation of a unique artistic programme: Constructive Universalism. The traditional and the contemporary, the classical and the modern, the abstract and the figurative, the conscious and unconscious, the universal and particular are all present in Torres-García's art. The doctrine of Constructive Universalism promoted the idea that art should be *constructed* on the basis of a geometrical structure and that it should express universal and ideal values. In order to achieve this, Torres-García created a type of art built up on the basis of a neoplastic grid, based on the golden section, which divided the picture plane into various sections or compartments. In each one of these, Torres-García inserted schematised and geometrised figurative elements, which acted as symbols of universal values.

The ultimate purpose of my dissertation was to examine the genesis and formulation of this programme by presenting it as a result of Torres-García's contact with the French avant-garde of the 1930's. This article will reproduce the second chapter of the dissertation, in which I explain precisely how Torres-García conceived of and formulated the artistic programme of Constructive Universalism. It will also reproduce the conclusions in which I define this programme and analyse its impact upon Latin American art after the artist's return to Uruguay in 1943.

Torres-García in Paris: The Formulation of Constructive Universalism

Torres-García's first one-man exhibition took place in 1926 at the Galerie A. G. Fabre in Paris. It contained traditional works, realised in the neoclassical style of Nuocentisme, some still lifes and landscapes which Torres-García called "simple painting" (*pintura simple*), and some of the works he had painted in New York in the style of Vibrationism.⁷ The show did not make a great impact, as the artist himself acknowledged: "The exhibition was wonderful. But in Paris one does not earn a place with one single stroke. There they want the artist to acclimatise, to follow their ideas and not his own, but

⁷ *Nuocentisme* ("Nuocentismo") and *Vibrationism* ("Vibracionismo") are the two main styles in which Torres-García worked before conceiving his Constructive Universalism. In 1910 Torres-García joined Eugenio d'Ors in an artistic movement devoted to the revival of Catalan art and culture, which was known as *Nuocentisme*. As an artist of this group, Torres-García worked in a classical style inspired mainly by Classical Greek art and the work of the French symbolist Puvis de Chavannes. Although Torres-García did not completely abandon the classical style of painting until 1926, between 1916 and 1920 he turned to a more modern art and avant-garde style, Vibrationism, under the influence of another Uruguayan artist living in Barcelona at that time: Rafael Barradas. This style was a fusion of Cubism and Futurism, similar to what the English artists had done in Vorticism, and the Russians in Cubo-Futurism.

at the same time, and though it may seem paradoxical, they want the artist to do something new and striking.”⁸

Despite this, Torres-García decided to settle in Paris a few months after the show, on the advice of Pere Daura, the Catalan artist friend who had organised his solo exhibition. Torres-García arrived in September 1926. He was fifty-two years old and practically unknown in avant-garde circles. But this situation did not last long: he acclimatised himself, absorbed the best of the French avant-garde, and formulated a most original programme of his own, earning the recognition for which he had always yearned. Torres-García described his years in Paris as the best and happiest of his life, for he was able to dedicate himself exclusively to his art and could formulate his own artistic programme: Constructive Universalism.

Constructive Universalism was developed on already firm aesthetic grounds. Although Torres-García’s constructive works are very different from his “nuocentist” frescoes, and even from his more modernist vibrationist paintings, his ideas about art did not change abruptly or drastically with the new programme. Constructive Universalism represents the development and evolution of his previous ideas. It was the result of a long germination. Torres-García continued to believe that art is the expression of an ideal, spiritual, and universal reality, and not the imitation of natural appearances. At the same time, with Constructive Universalism he found a modernist, and more adequate, form of art to express this idea. The role played by Parisian avant-garde movements was vital to the formulation of his new artistic language.

In many of his writings Torres-García claimed that his programme was based on three avant-garde movements: Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism. He claimed: “Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism ... to conceive a complete art we have to base on these three movements, and that is what I have done; my actual art [Constructive Universalism] is precisely that.”⁹ Torres-García considered Constructive Universalism to be a fusion of these three languages. It is clear, however, that his art was much more than a simple adoption of these styles. Torres-García’s use of them is far from being orthodox. Instead, he interpreted each one according to his own vision and used only those elements from them that would be useful to his own approach. Another source for Constructive Universalism is primitive art, which Torres-García discovered in Paris. Stimulated by Cubism, he showed an interest in African art – or Negro art, as he called it –, incorporating it into his art both in terms of subject matter and style. In Paris, he also became interested in pre-Columbian art.

Torres-García’s development in Paris is linked with a group of artists who defended a kind of geometric and abstract art that was derived in general from Cubism and

⁸ TORRES-GARCÍA, 2000. (The English versions of excerpts from this text are mine.)

⁹ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1935: 82.

Neoplasticism and who constituted what came to be called “International Constructivism”¹⁰. The Uruguayan painter established close relationships with figures like Jean Hélion (1904-1987), Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), Michel Seuphor (1901-1999), Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Georges Vantongerloo, and many others, who influenced the new trend in his art. Torres-García played a key role in the organisation of the group *Cercle et Carré*, which, though ephemeral, was one of the most important forces in the promotion of abstract art during the 1930’s in Paris.

Torres-García’s connection with Surrealism is far less straightforward. The main motive for establishing *Cercle et Carré* was to create an opposition to this group. The artists who gathered under the banner of Abstract art felt that Surrealism was perverting art from its true path, because it was too literary and descriptive. Torres-García shared this conviction, but he also sympathised with the notion of the subconscious, explored by the surrealists, and he praised the movement for opening the door to the world of the unconscious mind.

In this article I will analyse in depth the formulation and development of Constructive Universalism and concentrate on those aspects of Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism that most influenced the development of Torres-García’s Constructive Universalism. It is hereinafter divided into four sections: the first provides an analysis of the impact that Cubism and primitive art had upon Torres-García’s first works in Paris and highlights those elements that became enduring features of his constructivist works. In the second section I concentrate on Torres-García’s connections with the neoplasticists Mondrian and Van Doesburg, and on his interpretation of the *De Stijl* principles. In the third section I analyse Torres-García’s participation in the formation of *Cercle et Carré* and the importance of this group for his artistic development. The fourth section is devoted to explaining Torres-García’s position with regard to Surrealism and the notion of the subconscious in art.

Torres-García and Cubism

Torres-García’s knowledge of Cubism dates from 1912, when he was in contact with cubist works through Dalmau’s exhibition of Cubism in Barcelona. That same year

¹⁰ The term ‘International Constructivism’ was coined by Stephen Bann in his book *The Tradition of Constructivism*. In this book, Bann uses the term to distinguish Russian Constructivism from other forms of Constructive art: “it is necessary to take account, from the very start, of the broad division between Russian and international constructivism” (BANN). In general terms, Bann defines International Constructivism as the artistic tendencies for which “it is important to recognise the unique position of the concept of ‘construction’ as a description of the creative process and a metaphorical representation of the order of the work of art” (ibid.: xxvii). In his book he collects the texts of those artists and groups that for him represent that concept of art. Torres-García is included in the collection with two texts from 1933: “The Constructive Art Group” and “Joint Collaborative Work”.

Torres-García wrote an article about Cubism in which he explained his understanding of the movement's principles.¹¹ By 1917 he had adopted Barradas's style of Vibrationism, which consisted of a fusion of Cubism and Futurism. For some years Torres-García practised this style, showing a particular inclination towards Cubism. He was especially interested in the cubists' idea of structure, since for him this was "the aim of art in every grand age"¹². Connected with this, Torres-García also showed an interest in the geometrisation of forms in cubist paintings.

It is no surprise then that, upon his arrival in Paris, Torres-García immediately turned his attention to Cubism. During 1926 and 1928 he worked under the influence of cubist painting. Raquel Pereda considers this to be the artist's cubist period, although Torres-García did not actually produce a conventional cubist painting during these years. Pereda adopts the term *cubist* to characterise this period only as a way of indicating the main influence that appears in Torres-García's work of the time.¹³ Actually, as Prat argues, Torres-García's use of Cubism was highly personal and unorthodox: "instead of using Cubism as an historically defined style, he will take up on his own account, some of the problems that had determined the history of that movement, taking only that which was useful for his own approach."¹⁴

Torres-García undertook on his own some of the pictorial investigations that had occupied the cubists, but he did not paint in a cubist style. In other words, his paintings cannot be classified as cubist. This could be the reason why some critics and art historians have overlooked the influence of Cubism on Torres-García's Constructive Universalism. In her article "Order and Symbol: The European and American Sources of Torres-García's Constructivism",¹⁵ Magrit Rowell analyses in detail the sources for Torres-García's Constructive Universalism, but completely omits Cubism, focusing mainly on Neoplasticism and primitive art. In her text "Torres García in Paris",¹⁶ Nicolette Gast also fails to observe the importance of Cubism: though she mentions Torres-García's initial connection with Cubism upon his arrival in Paris, she does not give full consideration to the influences this movement had on the formulation of Constructive Universalism. The truth is that Cubism was fundamental to the formulation of this programme, and its influence upon Torres-García's work is as strong as that of Neoplasticism. I would go further and claim

¹¹ TORRES-GARCÍA, "Del Cubismo al estructuralismo pictórico" [1912], quoted from P. GARCÍA, 2002.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ PEREDA: Chapter 5.

¹⁴ PRAT, 1986-87: 66.

¹⁵ ROWELL: 9.

¹⁶ GAST, 1992.

that Torres-García's constructivist works are even closer to Analytical Cubism than to Neoplasticism, since they attempt to establish a balance between figurative and abstract elements.

Like most twentieth-century artists, Torres-García considered Cubism to be the most important event in the history of modern art. Cubism had definitively broken with the tradition of "illusionistic" art inaugurated by the Renaissance and had abandoned the notion that art should imitate natural appearances and create an illusion of reality. Instead, Cubism considered that art was primarily a plastic creation, concerned with purely plastic elements and governed by its own laws: in the case of painting, by pictorial elements like line, form, colour, plane, etc. Hence, Cubism was, above all, concerned with the reappraisal and re-invention of pictorial procedures and values, which was carried out as an analysis of the structural problems of painting, especially those related to the connection between forms and picture plane, form, and space. As John Golding claims, "one of the major concerns of the cubists was to unite the subject with its surroundings in such a way that the whole pictorial complex could be constantly forced or related back to the flat canvas with which the artist had been originally confronted."¹⁷

Cubism – at least what has come to be called Analytical Cubism – was concerned with the problem of representing three-dimensional objects in a two-dimensional space, but without creating the illusion of three dimensions. The Cubist painter wanted to preserve the flat nature of his medium and so he treated background and foreground as elements with the same pictorial value. cubist painting created a purely pictorial space, completely detached from "real" space. For the same reason, cubist painting broke completely with the laws of perspective and, instead of showing objects from a single viewpoint, gave a simultaneous vision of them from various viewpoints. Hence, the cubist painter fragmented the unity of the object, dissected it, and reduced it to its elementary components, i.e. geometrical forms. Neil Cox explains:

Analytic Cubism (roughly 1908 to 1912) has come to refer to a process where three-dimensional objects are broken down into fragments – corresponding to their appearance from different viewpoints in space – which are then recombined in two-dimensions to produce a representation. Analytical Cubism supposedly proceeds from observed reality to art, and the near monochrome works by Braque and Picasso ... especially from around 1910-11, are usually treated as classic examples of the method.¹⁸

As Cox points out, "one of the most famous cubist paintings was made by Georges Braque in 1911, and is known as *Le Portugais*."¹⁹ Braque's painting is one of those typical examples of Analytical Cubism. In 1956 Braque claimed that this work represents a

¹⁷ GOLDING, 1995: 54.

¹⁸ COX: 145.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 43.

musician in Marseilles.²⁰ It is however difficult to recognise the musician in the painting, and even less easy to situate him in Marseilles. The subject has been broken and fragmented in such a way that the painting almost seems to be completely abstract. By looking at the picture carefully, however, it is possible to recognise the outlines of a hat, a guitar, some ropes, but the rest of the forms have been geometrised and disintegrated to the extent that it is difficult to determine precisely what they represent. Braque inserted some letters and numbers in the painting, but they do not help to decipher the subject-matter. The Portuguese (or the musician) has been almost transformed into lines and planes, loosing all connection with natural appearances.

Nevertheless, Cubism never attempted to create a non-objective or non-figurative art. On the contrary, cubist painting always had an objective referent, and in this respect it was still figurative: it was simultaneously representational and anti-naturalistic. As Golding explains, the example of African or Negro art was important for the realisation of this “anti-naturalistic kind of figuration”:

The principles underlying this so called “primitive” art ... were to condition the aesthetics of one of the more sophisticated and intellectually astringent styles of all times [Cubism]. To begin with, as opposed to the western artist, the Negro sculptor approaches his subject in a much more conceptual way; *ideas* about his subject are more important for him than a naturalistic depiction of it, with the result that he is led to forms that are at once more abstract and more stylised, and in a sense more symbolic ... This realisation was to encourage the cubists, in the years to come, to produce an art that was more purely abstract than anything which had preceded it, and which was at the same time a realistic art, dealing with the representation of the material world around them.²¹

In other words, it was through the example of Negro art that Cubism achieved a balance between figurative and abstract elements in painting, between the representation of the material world and the exploration of purely pictorial means.

As stated above, Torres-García’s interest in Cubism did not rely upon a strictly stylistically appropriation of its pictorial language, but rather on the exploration of some of the problems cubist painting approached. The most significant of these in determining the formulation of Constructive Universalism were, firstly, the organic connection between the figures and the picture plane, i.e. the problem of space and form; secondly, the anti-naturalistic representation of the material world, and, thirdly, the appropriation of primitive art.

Torres-García had always been preoccupied with the problem of the organic connection between figures. This is particularly evident in his mural works for Baron Rialp’s house (1905-06) and for the St. George’s Hall at the Provincial Government

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ GOLDING, 1995: 52-3.

Building in Barcelona (1912-17). In these works, however, Torres-García was still too close to naturalistic art, and the connection between background and figures was fairly traditional, i.e. the figures are situated in a “real” space. As a result of his closer contact with Cubism, Torres-García abandoned this kind of painting and gradually evolved towards a less naturalistic, more geometric and schematised work, in which background and figures have the same pictorial value as in cubist painting.

This can be seen in a work like *The Café* (1928). Here Torres-García depicted a group of eight people in a café: they have been schematised and abstracted to the point that they look like the articulated toys he had been producing since the 1920's. The graphic quality of Torres-García's vibrationist works can also be seen in this painting, especially in the delineation of the figures with a black line. The background consists of a scaffolding of vertical and horizontal lines which separate the planes of colour and anticipate the later orthogonal structure of his constructivist works. The composition is absolutely planar and flat, there is no sense of perspective at all, and, as in cubist paintings, the figures have been united with the surroundings in such a way that background and foreground are on the same pictorial level. In order to enhance this effect, Torres-García made use of the technique of *passage* introduced by Cézanne (whom Torres-García also studied during this period) and practised by the cubists. This is particularly evident in the figure of the standing man on the left and the sitting man on the right: they have been completely fused with the background so that there are no clear boundaries between foreground and background. With this, Torres-García reinforces the integrity of the painting.

In *Street with House and White Cloud* (1928), Torres-García adopted a different compositional method and thus he took a step towards liberating his painting from naturalism and figuration. The method consisted in covering the picture plane with irregular zones of colour, without any clear demarcation lines. These, in turn, were covered by the outlines of objects and figures, which appear to be impressed on the background. In these works, the figures are completely schematised, consisting only of a graphic indication, and are completely dissociated from the colours. In this way, Torres-García accentuated the flatness of the picture plane and the autonomy of the pictorial elements. For this reason, he considered that these paintings were more “architectonic” and “constructive”. In his autobiography, he explained this new compositional method and its implications:

By mid 1928 another matter begins: the architectural, constructive tendency of my painting. There occurs a dissociation between drawing and colour, that now appear as two separate things in tone, colour, and line, not in representation. These elements will now represent themselves; and the aesthetic value of the work will rest on their free play. And if the object is suggested (reality), it is in that [purely pictorial] level.²²

²² TORRES-GARCÍA, 2000: 142-3.

It is clear that Torres-García is taking a step towards abandoning all naturalistic elements in his painting and that he is aiming at a purely plastic creation, just as the cubists had done in the first decades of the century.

Another important element that Cubism provided Torres-García with was the discovery of primitive art. Prat argues that Torres-García discovered it through the way the cubists used it and that he even used their term for it, i.e. Negro art.²³ Torres-García was interested in primitive art for the same reason that cubists had been interested in it: the conceptual approach to the subject, which led the primitive “artist” to reduce and simplify the objects to their basic components, thereby giving them a strong geometrical sense. Torres-García valued primitive art for its intention to convey and express spiritual or idealist values and because of the way the images and figures created by the primitive “artist” acted as symbols of universal ideals. It is clear from Torres-García’s early works that the notion of art as the expression of an ideal was central to his theory of art, and now, through the example of primitive art, he further developed this idea and gave a plastic expression to it.

In Paris Torres-García also discovered pre-Columbian art, which was a vital force in his development during his last years in Uruguay. In 1928 the Musée des Art Décoratifs in Paris held a major exhibition of the “Ancient Art of the Americas”. Torres-García’s son Augusto also worked at the Musée du Trocadero (now Musée de l’Homme) making drawings of Nazca pottery for the records.²⁴ Torres-García saw a common element in all primitive cultures (African and pre-Columbian) – the expression of “the cosmic order” in art – and hence he considered that they were part of what he called the Great Tradition. Constructive Universalism was conceived as a continuation of this tradition.

In his first few years in Paris (1926-28), Torres-García expressed his interest in primitive art in a series of paintings and frescoes that used primitive figures as the main subject matter. *Two Negroes in Red* (1928) and *Four Figures with Landscape* (1929) consist basically of the schematic forms of nude Negroes. The figures are angular and geometrical with the graphic quality present in his other “cubist” paintings. The figures are very generalised and do not represent a single individual but, as in *Two Negroes in Red*, act almost as symbols representing all men and women. In *Four Figures with Landscape* Torres-García uses the technique of *passage* in the two figures on the right who share one arm. *Passage* is used here, in the same way that the cubists had used it, to reinforce the plastic integrity of the painting. For the same reason, the compositions are flat and planar, and are dominated by a strong geometrical structure.

In sum, through the example of Cubism, and with it of Negro art, Torres-García broke with traditional painting, immersed himself into the artistic world of the avant-

²³ PRAT, 1986-87: 66.

²⁴ ROWELL: 13.

garde and Modernism, and took a major step towards the formulation of Constructive Universalism. The notions of “structure” and “geometry” were fundamental to his approach. The way in which the cubists analysed the structural components of painting and geometrised both figures and background set an example for him to pursue the same procedure in his paintings. Torres-García was especially concerned with the cubist problems of the connection between figures and background, the anti-naturalistic representation of material world, and the adoption of primitive art. These features appear in the works that the artist produced during his early years in Paris (1926-28) and became central characteristics of Constructive Universalism.

Cubism, especially Analytical Cubism, provided Torres-García with an example of a way to synthesise abstract and figurative elements. Tomás Llorens explains:

[Cubism] inspired him [Torres-García] to set the two constitutive levels of his new pictorial constructivist language. I am thinking of Gleizes and Metzinger’s book, which Torres-García, without a doubt, had known during his years in Barcelona, and above all Gris and Ozenfant’s writings, with which he became familiar after his arrival in Paris. (In 1930 he sent his children to study at the academy of Ozenfant, whom he qualified in his autobiography as an “admirable master”.) For all these artists, the construction of pictorial space results from the synthesis of two levels: one abstract level, governed solely by the intrinsic relations of painting, which are geometric or quasi-geometric in nature, and a figurative level, through which painting refers to the world and “talks” about the world outside itself.²⁵

For Torres-García, Cubism constituted a pictorial model which had resolved the problem of the “artificial barriers between abstraction and representation”.²⁶ At the same time, it was concerned with purely pictorial elements, as well as with exploring ways to represent the external world. A painting like *Still Life with Oil Lamp* (1911-12) by Juan Gris (1887-1927) is typical of Analytical Cubism. It appears to be completely abstract, consisting only of pure forms and colours, but contains a figurative element (the oil lamp). Likewise, Torres-García’s constructivist paintings are both abstract (i.e. concerned with purely pictorial elements) and figurative (containing representative elements of external world), as in *Physics* (1929). In this respect, Constructive Universalism is closer to Cubism than to Neoplasticism, which produced an entirely abstract, non-objective kind of painting.

Torres-García and Neoplasticism

In September 1928 Torres-García sent one of his recent works to the Salon d’Automne, but it was rejected. Jean Hélion, who was also rejected, proposed to organise an exhibition

²⁵ LLORENS: 177.

²⁶ GOLDING, 1995: 77.

with other artists. Torres-García had met Hélión immediately after his arrival in Paris. Pere Daura introduced the artists, and they became close friends and lived and worked together for some time. Torres-García and his family lived in Hélión's apartment for a few weeks before moving to their own place in the same building. At the end of 1928, the two friends found themselves rejected from one of the most prestigious exhibitions of modern art in Paris, so they organised their own show as a protest. "Cinque Refusés par le jury du Salon d'Automne", their exhibition, inaugurated at the Galerie Mack on November 3rd, contained work by the two friends alongside works by Alfred Aberdam from Poland, Ernst Engel-Rosier from Belgium, and Pere Daura from Catalonia. It received great publicity and was visited by more than five-thousand people, according to Torres-García, and debated in the press. He would later recall the exhibition's impact:

Five artists grouped together and they opened such an exhibition the same day as the Official Salon [Salon d'Automne]. Hélión organised the thing admirably: the leaflets announcing the exhibition were handed out inside and outside the Salon with great scandal; and clearly great part of the public went to visit the exhibition of the five. In addition, despite the guards trying to prevent it, men with big signs walked around the principal entry. About five thousand people visited the exhibition; and all the foreign companies came to make graphic and written publicity ... But the best thing that happened was that the founder of the Salon, seeing that it was deviating from the path he had opened in a modern, though moderate, sense (and which was the *raison d'être* of the Salon), also criticised the jury in an article, thus joining the press.²⁷

This exhibition was important for Torres-García's career in Paris, because it gave him some prestige among Parisian avant-garde circles. Even more importantly, it gave him the opportunity to meet Theo van Doesburg, who became one of the key figures in Torres-García's assimilation into the French avant-garde: "It was on the same opportunity and in the same exhibition that Torres-García met the Dutch painter, founder of the *De Stijl* magazine, Theo van Doesburg ... Van Doesburg showed a real interest in Torres's painting, considering it to be a real novelty, and promised to take care of him, as he later did."²⁸ Van Doesburg introduced Torres-García to Neoplasticism. Torres-García was deeply impressed by the *De Stijl* aesthetics and engaged in a prolific interchange of ideas and concepts about art with the Dutch artist. They admired each other and they publicly praised each other's work. In May 1929 Van Doesburg wrote an article about Torres-García, entitled "Torres-García's Planism". Torres-García wrote two articles about Van Doesburg and Neoplasticism for the Catalan magazine *La Veu de Catalunya*, which were published in Barcelona between March and November 1929.

²⁷ TORRES-GARCÍA, 2000: 143-4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 144.

Shortly after his encounter with Van Doesburg, Torres-García met Michel Seuphor in the Galerie Povolozky while he was visiting the exhibition of the German neoplasticist painter Vordemberge-Gildewart. Seuphor “was a great support to many artists, often functioning as a kind of ‘arbitrator’. He helped in organising exhibitions and selling work. Among his circle of friends were Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber, and Paul Dermée.”²⁹ Torres-García and Seuphor shared a common interest in Neoplasticism, but, as Seuphor recalls, Torres-García had not yet heard about Mondrian: “Torres-García had visited Theo van Doesburg several times, but he knew nothing about Mondrian, and he did not know the name before I mentioned it to him.”³⁰ The two main figures of the *De Stijl* movement had fallen out around 1925, which explains Van Doesburg’s silence about Mondrian.³¹ This irritated Seuphor, so he considered almost a duty to introduce Torres-García to Mondrian: “my first task was to take my new companion to the studio at the Rue du Départ. This visit took place probably during the first days of April 1929.”³² Through Seuphor Torres-García also met Georges Vantongerloo. This contact with Neoplasticism had an impact on Torres-García’s work during 1929.

The *De Stijl* or neoplastic movement was founded in 1917 by Theo van Doesburg with the publication of a magazine of the same name. Kenneth Frampton claims that this “movement, which lasted barely fourteen years, from 1917 to 1931, may be essentially characterised in the work of three men, the painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and the architect Gerrit Rietveld.”³³ The main aim of Neoplasticism was to produce an abstract art that would express the absolute and universal harmony of the world. In order to do this, the neoplastic painters deliberately limited their pictorial vocabulary to the straight line and the right angle and to the three primary colours (red, blue, and yellow) and the non-colours (grey, black and white). Hans Jaffé explains:

In visual terms, the group [*De Stijl*] had a shared point of departure: the principle of absolute abstraction – that is to say, the complete elimination of any reference to objects in nature. Its means of visual expression were limited to the straight line and the right angle, to the horizontal and the vertical, to the three primary colours – red, yellow and blue – with the addition of black, white and grey.³⁴

²⁹ GAST: 92.

³⁰ SEUPHOR: 9.

³¹ Mondrian and Van Doesburg fell out because the latter began to introduce the diagonal into his paintings, modifying with it the basic principles of Neoplasticism: “When Mondrian definitively broke off relations with Van Doesburg in 1927, he did it because Van Doesburg’s Elementarism seriously questioned the fundamental principles of Neoplasticism” (FABRE, 1990: 402).

³² SEUPHOR: 9.

³³ FRAMPTON, 1995: 141.

³⁴ JAFFÉ: 11.

Neoplasticism advocated the total purity and autonomy of the artwork. The Manifesto I (1918), published in *De Stijl*, reads: “The founders of the new plastic art, therefore, call upon all who believe in the reformation of art and culture to eradicate these obstacles to development, as in the new plastic art (by excluding natural form) they have eradicated that which blocks pure plastic expression, the ultimate consequence of all concepts of art.”³⁵ Michael White explains:

If there was one single feature that distinguished *De Stijl* from any other competing versions of modernism in the Netherlands, it was the consistent promotion of geometric abstract art. The claim was repeatedly made in the journal by different contributors that painting was reaching a point of self purification ahead of all other practises and was the model to be followed, particularly by architecture. Emphasis on the flatness of the picture plane, autonomy of colour, banishment of literary subject matter – all of them, traits seen today as typical of modernism – were thought to herald a collective style.³⁶

This did not mean, however, that neoplastic art did not convey any meaning outside the limits of pure art. On the contrary, the neoplasticists aimed at expressing the ideal of universal harmony:

In rejecting perceptible subject matter, the artists of this movement did not abandon content or meaning in their work. The essential content of *De Stijl* works is harmony, a harmony that for these artists could only be rendered by abstract means, through compositions unhampered by associations in the external world ... Universal values, the absolute harmony, were the goals of *De Stijl*'s work. To this end an absolute purification of the vocabulary and grammar of the arts seemed necessary.³⁷

Neoplasticism was based on the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Dr. Shoenmaekers and Dutch puritan thinking.³⁸ Neoplastic artists believed that the external world was imperfect and confused and represented a mere shadow of an ideal, abstract, and universal world, i.e. the world of essences or Ideas in strictly platonic terms. The work of art should express this ideal world and universal values, so it must reject natural appearances and be absolutely abstract. Neoplasticists, and most particularly Mondrian, believed that the orthogonal system they created expressed the immutable equilibrium of the universe:

Logic demands that art be the *plastic expression of our whole being*; therefore, it must be equally the plastic appearance of the non-individual, the absolute and annihilating opposition of subjective sensations. That is, it must also be the *direct expression of the universal in us* – which is the *exact appearance of the universal outside us*. The universal thus understood is that which is and remains constant.³⁹

³⁵ VAN DOESBURG, 2002.

³⁶ WHITE, 2003.

³⁷ JAFFÉ: 11-4.

³⁸ Cf. JAFFÉ, 1982; FRAMPTON, 1995; FABRE, 1990.

³⁹ MONDRIAN, 2002.

Mondrian's *Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow, and Grey* (1921) is an example of this: the picture plane is divided by an irregular black grid which creates different rectangular zones of colour: yellow, red, blue, grey, black, and white. The surface is flat and the colours are pure. Mondrian proceeded on the basis of a rigorous rational structure, so that, as Jaffé has pointed out, "the conception of a work of art gains priority over its execution."⁴⁰ The concept of the *structure* of the work of art becomes the most important in its realisation, as is evident in Mondrian's work: the rational equilibrium of the horizontal and verticals reveals precisely this point. It is also the plastic expression of the universal harmony and of the ideal world he believed in: the abstract and geometrical shapes are best suited to achieve this, for they are themselves universal.

During 1929, Torres-García's work and theory reveal the increasing influence of *De Stijl*. Torres-García's concept of art had a clear idealist inclination from its early manifestations. He believed art to be the expression of an ideal reality, and not the imitation of natural appearances. It is no surprise then that he felt so attracted to *De Stijl* aesthetics: Torres-García shared with Van Doesburg, and especially with Mondrian, the Neo-Platonic belief that behind the external world there lies a universal and ideal reality. Like them, he thought art should express precisely that universal reality. *De Stijl* gave Torres-García examples of works of art that embodied those ideals he sought to express in his own work.

De Stijl also provided Torres-García with examples of works of art realised on the basis of a rigorous rational and geometrical structure. Torres-García had been preoccupied with the notions of structure and geometry long before meeting the neoplasticists. His interest in Cubism was stimulated precisely by these ideas. In 1912, in his article about Cubism, he had stated that "structuralism was the aim of art in every grand age".⁴¹ Upon his arrival in Paris, Torres-García had used Cubism to reinforce the geometrical structure of his own work. It is no surprise then that he was immediately influenced by *De Stijl*. As Pereda puts it, with *De Stijl* Torres-García "was confronted, for the first time, with ideas that he felt to be his own, because they are supported on a very similar base to his most intimate individuality."⁴²

The influence of *De Stijl* was particularly evident in a series of paintings of 1929, in which Torres-García practised the same type of abstraction as the Dutch artists. A painting like *Construction with Triangle* (1929) can be compared to Van Doesburg's *Counter Composition XIII* (1924), while *Coloured Structure* (1929) bears a strong resemblance to Mondrian's *Composition with Large Blue Plane, Red, Black, Yellow, and Grey* (1921). Torres-

⁴⁰ JAFFÉ: 12.

⁴¹ See note 11.

⁴² PEREDA: 136.

García treated the grid and the colour with the same purity and objectivity as the Dutch artists, but he did not subscribe rigorously to the *De Stijl* style. Just as he had done with Cubism, he adopted from *De Stijl* only what would be useful for his own objectives. *Painting* (1929) demonstrates this. Its structure corresponds to a typical neoplasticist painting: rectangles of flat colour determined by a black grid are coloured with the primary colours – red, yellow, and blue –, with the addition of white. In Torres-García's work, however, the colours are shaded and toned down, and there are letters forming the word *Nord*, numbers (56), and some round elements like wheels, indicating possibly a train. These features distinguish the Uruguayan's painting from those of the Dutch artists.

Torres-García's vibrationist and cubist works, like *The Café*, anticipated the orthogonal structure of these works. In the earlier paintings, as Prat argues, the orthogonal structure followed the object's lines of force (in the way of Cubism and Futurism) or the object's contours in the space.⁴³ Between 1929 and 1930 Torres-García explored the new relation between structure and objects generated by the use of the neoplastic grid. The orthogonal structure, based on this device, gave Torres-García more independence from reality, as the grid is completely independent from the objects. Torres-García was moving in the direction of a less naturalistic and imitative art, and the neoplastic grid was the final element that liberated his art from the conditions of external reality.

During 1929 Torres-García moved rapidly from paintings like *Street with House and White Cloud* to paintings like *The Cellar* (1929) or *Constructivist Landscape*, of the same year. The irregular zones of colour covered by graphic indications of objects and figures were replaced by a more structured and rational division of the picture plane, determined to a lesser or greater extent by the grid, with even more schematic figures. *The Cellar* is an evident continuation of the 1928 paintings. The background is composed of independent rectangular zones of colour in reds, blues, yellows, and whites (the colours of Neoplasticism), but again shaded and toned down. As in the 1928 paintings like *Street with House and White Cloud*, the zones of colour are covered by the outlines of objects and figures, which appear to be impressed on the background. In *The Cellar* we distinguish the outlines of a factory with smoky chimneys, a man and an animal (a horse perhaps). The figures are completely schematised, being only a universal indication of them and not an individual characterisation of particular objects. The whole scene could be seen as representing a cityscape. In this painting, however, the connection with reality is less clear than in his previous cubist paintings: the dissociation between the orthogonal structure, created by rectangular zones of colour, and the figures is now absolute. In the paintings of 1928 the zones of colour were used to determine at least some of the figures (in *Street with House and White Cloud* they determine the buildings), whereas in *The Cellar* they stand alone: their function is solely structural.

⁴³ PRAT, 1986-87: 70.

In *Constructivist Landscape* Torres-García applied another compositional method derived from *De Stijl*. In this painting the grid is clearly demarcated by thin black lines which divide the picture plane into rectangular zones of colour, with the exception of one area forming a triangle. The choice of colour is again close to the colours of *De Stijl*: red, yellow, black, grey, and white. The landscape is indicated by schematic figures, which, in this case, have been inscribed inside one of the rectangles generated by the grid. This kind of painting anticipates the typical works of Constructive Universalism, in which Torres-García inserts symbolic figures into the compartments generated by a grid (for example, *Construction with Compass* [1932]).

Another important element that Torres-García introduced during 1929 was the golden section, which he used to generate the grid and structure of the work. The use of the golden section was not directly derived from his contact with *De Stijl*. It is not true that Van Doesburg influenced Torres-García to use the golden section, though it is possible that the rational structure he saw in Neoplasticism stimulated him to apply it to his own works. According to Augusto, Torres-García's son, it was the Spanish painter Luis Fernández who introduced his father to the golden section.⁴⁴ Fernández had settled in Paris in 1924 and was interested in esoteric knowledge, including the golden section, magic numbers, medieval symbolism, and Freemasonry. As Augusto recalls, Fernández took his father to medieval churches in Paris, not only to decipher the iconography of the sculpted motifs, but also to reveal the hidden arithmetical laws which governed their placements and relationships.⁴⁵ This provided Torres-García with an example of how his work could be imbued with an even more rational structure, and so, from 1929 onwards, he applied the golden section as the base to measure the grid of his constructivist works. This constitutes one of the defining features of Constructive Universalism and distinguishes Torres-García's work from that of Van Doesburg and Mondrian, who never used a constant and geometrical measure in their works.

To sum up, Torres-García's contact with *De Stijl* reinforced the notion of structure in his work by the consistent use of the orthogonal structure measured by the golden section. This gave the artist even more independence from reality, because he dissociated completely the verticals and horizontals from the objects, using them only as structural components of the work. The figurative elements that continue to appear in Torres-García's work are now absolutely disconnected from external world and have lost all its naturalistic qualities. As mentioned several times, they represent the ideas of things and not particular things in themselves. They act as symbols of universal values that convey ideal harmony.

This is an elaboration of the ideas Torres-García promoted with Nuocentisme and the other legacy of Neoplasticism. What distinguishes him from the Dutch movement is

⁴⁴ ROWELL, 1986.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

that he believed that the sole geometrical forms were not enough to express this universal harmony. In this respect, he created an art that was both and at the same time abstract and figurative, and, as mentioned in the previous section, this makes his art more similar to Analytical Cubism.

Torres-García and *Cercle et Carré*

During the year 1929, through Van Doesburg, and especially Seuphor, Torres-García met the artists that constituted the Parisian avant-garde, particularly those associated with *constructivist*⁴⁶ tendencies. He joined Seuphor's circle of friends, who met every Sunday in Seuphor's apartment. As the host himself recalled,

from January [1929] I had been tenant of a small apartment on the sixth floor, just in front of the church Vanves. Mondrian, Vantergloo and Russolo came almost every Sunday to drink tea, and then have dinner with a salad. Torres-García was rapidly accepted between these friends, among whom Arp, Sophie Tauber, and the Van Rees were also present.⁴⁷

The contact with all these artists and the investigation and application of the principles of *De Stijl* deepened Torres-García's concern with purely plastic problems, i.e. the problems of the creation of an art governed solely by artistic laws, independently from the constraints of descriptive and imitative art. As previously discussed, Torres-García had always been preoccupied with creating an art independent from the representation of natural world, an art rigorously structured on a geometrical basis, which would express universal and ideal harmony. Cubism and *De Stijl* gave him examples of an art *constructed* and created according to a rational and geometrical structure. Torres-García felt that this was the right path for art to follow, so he believed in the need to create a group that would promote these ideas and present an effective opposition to those groups that defended a theory of art contrary to his, i.e. the surrealists.

In the 1930's, Surrealism dominated the Parisian art scene. Breton and his group were the most popular among the artistic circles in Paris. After visiting an exhibition of Dalí's work, Torres-García contacted Van Doesburg and proposed that they should organise a group of all artists with constructivist tendencies. Though he had some doubts, Van Doesburg agreed to help Torres-García to form the group. According to Nicolette Gast,⁴⁸ the need for some kind of group became urgently felt in November 1929. The group was to be called Groupe A.C. (for *Art Concret*), a term which Van Doesburg often used. Correspondence between the artists reveals that they had the idea

⁴⁶ See note 10.

⁴⁷ SEUPHOR: 11.

⁴⁸ GAST, 1992.

to form a group with two sections. Possibly one of them would represent artists whose work had a purely non-figurative character, and the other would represent artists whose work used elements related to figuration.⁴⁹ But Van Doesburg changed his mind, and the project was never carried out. The Dutch artist wanted a group composed solely of artists practising abstract art, with no reference whatsoever to nature. He urged Torres-García to accept a group without sections and to sign a manifesto written by him. Torres-García replied that under such conditions he preferred not to participate, for he considered that a totally abstract art was not complete. Thus two different groups were formed: Van Doesburg created the group *Art Concret* with Hélión, while Torres-García created *Cercle et Carré* with Michel Seuphor and his circle of friends.

Cercle et Carré was conceived in early 1930 and, according to Da Cruz, consisted of approximately eighty members.⁵⁰ In April of the same year Van Doesburg, after rejecting the invitation to join *Cercle et Carré*, attacked the group by publishing a leaflet announcing the formation of *Art Concret*.⁵¹ As Gladys Fabre argues, however, “this small group, made up of five or six artists, was in fact, incapable of competing with *Cercle et Carré* and even less capable of shifting the balance of interest away from Surrealism.”⁵²

The main activity of *Cercle et Carré* was the publication of a magazine under dual leadership: writing and publicity were carried out by Seuphor, and administrative duties by Torres-García. Three issues of the magazine were produced, with the first appearing on March 15, 1930. The group also organised a large painting exhibition and soirées with guest lectures, poetry readings, and musical performances by Russolo on a machine of his invention, the Russolophone.⁵³ The exhibition contained works of forty-six foreign artists and five Frenchmen, who represented such diverse tendencies as Dadaism (Jean Arp, Sophie Tauber), Neoplasticism (Mondrian, Vantongerloo), and the Bauhaus (Kandinsky) among others. Fabre claims that “the selection of the artistic tendencies presented a fairly complete panorama of the avant-garde, with Surrealism remaining the exception – as expected – and against which these tendencies were leagued.”⁵⁴

Despite this variety of tendencies, Seuphor and Torres-García agreed on a basic principle for the group. The mere opposition to Surrealism was not enough to give the

⁴⁹ DA CRUZ: Chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid. The artists that participated in the group’s meetings sum at least eighty, even though only around fifty exhibited in the show organised by the group.

⁵¹ The leaflet was the only publication and real indication of the formation of *Art Concret*. The group never published the magazine announced in the leaflet, and they did not organise any exhibition or show together.

⁵² FABRE: 382.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

association a solid foundation. The notions of *structure* and *abstraction* defined the kind of art the group promoted: "Around the central ideas of structure and abstraction a group was easily formed."⁵⁵ As stated above, the concept of structure was of fundamental importance in Torres-García's theory of art. Following the example of Cubism, and especially of *De Stijl*, he employed the concept of structure in his work by using linear and geometrical elements to form a pictorial construction. The notion of structure is thus intimately linked with the concept of *construction*. Da Cruz explains that "according to Torres-García the intimate relation between the concepts of structure and construction is due to the fact that the structure of a work is the result of an organising process, the very process being called construction."⁵⁶ For Torres-García, structure is the most important aspect of the work of art, whether it contains figurative elements or not.

Seuphor was more inclined towards the notion of abstraction. For him abstraction meant an art without any reference to reality or figuration. He accepted Torres-García's requirement to include artists whose work contained figurative elements (though not in a descriptive or literary way as the surrealists did), because that grouped together a greater number of members and implied a more cohesive force to achieve their goal. As Fabre explains, "he [Seuphor] was, however, forced to come to terms with Torres-García's wishes. The latter had a different outlook on the situation and Seuphor had to compromise in order to bring together a sufficient number of artists whose members included a few French ones."⁵⁷ Finally, this disagreement and divergence of opinions caused the demise of the group. Seuphor's inclinations towards pure geometrical abstraction made him change one of Torres-García's texts in which he claimed the right to use figuration. This, as expected, forced Torres-García to resign in July 1930. Soon after this, Seuphor became ill, and without its two main members the group fell apart.⁵⁸

Cercle et Carré was important for the development of Constructive Universalism. On one hand, it caused Torres-García to reinforce and strengthen the notion of structure that defines his programme and, on the other hand, it led him to defend the idea that completely abstract or non-figurative art is incomplete, which also constitutes a defining feature of Constructive Universalism. In his article for the first issue of *Cercle et Carré*, "Vouloir Construire", he put forward the central tenet of his theory:

If we thought we needed to form a group it was because disorientation and disorder reigned everywhere. It was to find a base, to have certitude. And our reason showed us that this base is *construction*... What is construction? – At the moment that man abandons the direct copy of nature and instead makes an image, without thinking about the visual deformation that perspective

⁵⁵ SEUPHOR: 12.

⁵⁶ DA CRUZ: 78.

⁵⁷ FABRE. 383.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

imposes. In other words, in the moment we draw the *idea* of a thing and not the thing inside a measured space, a certain construction begins.⁵⁹

Torres-García's insistence on the inclusion of figurative elements does not imply copying or imitating external reality. These figurative elements are not representations of particular things in the world but of the general idea of them. They have been simplified and schematised in such a way that they no longer belong to the world of natural appearance. Instead, they are, in Torres-García's own words, *created images*: they belong to the world of the painting itself, they are *constructed* and are signs of an ideal and universal reality. A painting like *Construction with Superimposed Sticks* (1930) demonstrates precisely this point. The picture is firmly based on an orthogonal structure which divides the plane into different sections. These bigger sections have been divided again by vertical and horizontal lines, and each one contains one element: a train, a clock, a house, a lighthouse, an anchor, a key, a man, a ship, a ladder, and a ruler. Each element represents the general idea of the object and conveys a certain spiritual or universal value.

Torres-García and Surrealism

Torres-García's main motive for proposing the foundation of a group of artists with constructivist tendencies was to combat the growing power of Surrealism. As Prat states, "Torres and his friend Van Doesburg wanted sincerely to fight against Surrealism. They considered that this movement constituted a real regression in art."⁶⁰ Torres-García, however, claimed that his art was based on Surrealism, as well as on Cubism and Neoplasticism, and "there is not the least contradiction in this attitude".⁶¹

Torres-García criticised Surrealism because it was too literary and descriptive, and their "oneiric visions were full of a pictorial language with characteristics of the Renaissance, and therefore very far from the artistic concepts promoted by Torres and his group."⁶² Prat explained Torres-García's attitude towards Surrealism: "Torres actually condemned Breton's Surrealism criticising, with great lucidity for the time, that he purely and simply applied the procedures of naturalistic and literary description to the images of the unconscious."⁶³

But, at the same time, Torres-García praised Surrealism for opening the door to the unconscious.⁶⁴ Though he disagreed with the way in which the surrealists expressed it,

⁵⁹ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1971: 45.

⁶⁰ PRAT, 1986-87: 71.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² GRADOWCZYK, 1998: 50.

⁶³ PRAT, 1986-87: 71.

⁶⁴ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1984: 238.

he believed that art should convey a complete vision of the universe and man's life, including the unconscious. Torres-García's art aimed at expressing the *universal harmony* of contrary elements, so conscious and unconscious were part of Constructive Universalism. As Gradowczyk states, "Torres does not ignore the central role played by the unconscious in the creative process and he expresses this in his inaugural lecture of the exhibition at the Galerie 23."⁶⁵ The artist expressed this idea more precisely some years later:

Supporting himself on the conscious and unconscious, as the contrasting threads of a fabric support themselves, the artist weaves the fabric of his art ... Some years ago, to talk about the unconscious was like talking about goblins and witches; something doubtful and improbable ... Particularly I can tell that, if long time ago I had read something about that, it was not until 1917 when I began to realise that certain states of the unconscious put me in a plane that, without a doubt, favoured the understanding of something that in my normal condition was not accessible to me. And from that moment onwards I became highly interested in those investigations, and more and more I supported myself on that, which is like saying that on this [the unconscious] I also supported my art.⁶⁶

From this quote, Gradowczyk infers that Torres-García used the unconscious as a creative mechanism and that it must be related to the symbolic meanings of the elements that constitute his constructive paintings. In other words, it was in an unconscious state that Torres-García grasped the hidden meanings of the universe he wished to express through his art. This is also linked to Torres-García's interest in primitive art – and with it in much of Picasso's Cubism.⁶⁷ The primitive "artist" entered a special state of mind or an unconscious condition in order to discover the hidden meaning of the universe, which in turn enabled him to create his art. Torres-García's figurative elements acted in the same way as the pictographs of primitive man, and in this respect the Uruguayan's works are close to the art of primitive cultures: the pictograph symbolises an occult force hidden behind the appearances of things and expresses universal harmony.

To summarise, Surrealism was important for Torres-García's art because it "opened the door to the unconscious" and therefore stimulated him to explore it and use it for his own art. But in the same way as he did with Cubism and Neoplasticism, he only used those aspects of Surrealism that were useful to his own approach. The influence of Surrealism upon Torres-García's work is only partial and clearly is not so strong as that of Cubism and Neoplasticism, at least in stylistic terms. The Uruguayan artist considered that much of the surrealists' work was too literal and descriptive (especially Dalí's work). He was interested only in the method applied by the French group (that of the unconscious).

⁶⁵ GRADOWCZYK, 1998: 50. The exhibition in the Galerie 23 is the one organised by the group *Cercle et Carré* in 1930.

⁶⁶ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1935: 93.

⁶⁷ Cf. COX: 81.

He was, however, deeply impressed by the work of some artists whom he considered surrealists: “he admired especially Miró and Klee, but also Picasso, whom he placed, very wisely for his own research, at the juncture of Cubism and Surrealism”.⁶⁸ It is easy to understand why Torres-García felt attracted to Miró’s work: the graphic quality of Miró’s figures, his schematisation of forms, the flatness of his paintings, and the overall non-naturalistic character of his work (see *The Kerosene Lamp* [1924]) were close to his own. In the case of Klee, the similarity is even more evident, and many art historians have pointed it out.⁶⁹ Klee’s painting *The Legend of the Nile* (1937) can be compared to Torres-García’s constructivist works. The background consists of flat areas of colour arranged in irregular rectangles and squares in different tones of blue. Klee covered the background (the Nile River) by painting golden signs similar to hieroglyphs, which can be interpreted as representing canoes, fish, plants, men, and other abstract forms. The schematic quality of these figures and the flatness of the picture plane recall paintings like *The Cellar* (1929) or later ones like *Structure in Ochre with White Signs* (1939). For both artists, the schematic forms acted as symbols of universal meaning: in the case of Klee, they bear resemblance with the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and in the case of Torres-García they are close to the pictographs of primitive and pre-Columbian men.

Conclusions

Torres-García’s Constructive Universalism: A Definition

By 1931, Constructive Universalism was fully formulated and developed. Torres-García had absorbed from Cubism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism essential elements for his own artistic language and programme. He had finally arrived at a form of art suited to the expression and embodiment of his ideas: an art that was, above all, a plastic construction based on a rigorous structure and that expressed universal values. The most typical of Torres-García’s constructive universalist works consisted of a structure of verticals and horizontals, based on the golden section, with the integration of schematic figures of universal character in the fields determined by the structures.

Constructive Primitive Graphic (1931) and *Construction with Compass* (1932) are perfect examples of the maturity of Constructive Universalism. In the first of these paintings the picture plane is divided by fairly thin black horizontal and vertical lines which determine the structure of the work. Torres-García integrated schematic figures

⁶⁸ PRAT, 1986-87: 71.

⁶⁹ Barbara Braun, for example, has argued that the similarity between Torres-García’s and Klee’s work lies in the use they both made of primitive and children’s art, as well as in their connection with constructivist tendencies and the metaphysical ideas they sought to express through their art. Cf. BRAUN: 273.

in black in the fields created by this structure, but the monochromatic quality of the painting makes it difficult to distinguish precisely between the grid and the figures (in this respect, this painting can be compared to analytical cubist paintings like *The Portuguese*). Fish, compass, hand, key, temple, horse, snail, plants, anchor, heart, vessel, hammer, mask, clock, insects, bottle, and star, among others, are the figurative elements that constitute the picture. All of them have a symbolic meaning. Gradowczyk analyses in detail the meaning of some of these figures: the anchor symbolises hope and salvation, the heart is the central organ of man and corresponds to the general notion of the centre of life, the five-pointed star symbolises light and perfection, the key represents the double meaning of opening and closing and symbolises the access to a superior spiritual state, the temple is a reflection of the divine world, the clock symbolises perpetual movement, the fish symbolises the spiritual and physical totality of the universe, and the man symbolises the universal.⁷⁰

In *Construction with Compass* Torres-García used another compositional method. The monochromatic colour of *Constructive Primitive Graphic* is replaced here by the colours of Neoplasticism: red, yellow, grey, black, and white, applied not with the purity of the *De Stijl* painters, but shaded and toned down. The canvas is divided by an irregular grid creating different zones of colour into which Torres-García inserted his symbolic figures: star, man, fish, compass, ship, anchor, ruler, temple. In this painting he also inserted some words and letters (*Europe, Nord, Com, Mes, H*), a technique derived from Cubism.

The French avant-garde ideas and developments that Torres-García encountered in Paris are evident in these paintings. The importance given to the notion of structure and plastic construction reflects the influence that Neoplasticism, Cubism, and the artists of *Cercle et Carré* had on Torres-García's work. The flatness of the paintings, the schematic and graphic quality of the drawing, and the geometrisation of the forms are derived from Cubism, primitive art, and the early paintings of Vibrationism. The harnessing of unconscious states and the use of symbols and signs comes from Surrealism. The universal and ideal expressed in the pictographs relates back to his neoclassical style, but also acknowledges the imprint left by the contact with Mondrian and Neoplasticism. Although Constructive Universalism is the sum of all these influences, it is also far more than that: it is a completely original and unique artistic language which rightfully deserves a place among the most important movements in the history of art.

Torres-García in Uruguay

This was the situation in which Torres-García found himself upon his arrival in Montevideo in 1934 after forty-three years of absence. The 1929 New York Stock Market crash affected the art market in Paris, so Torres-García, advised by his friends,

⁷⁰ GRADOWCZYK, 1998: 56-7.

left the city in which he had lived the happiest moments of his life. First, he settled in Madrid for less than two years, but, disappointed by the local art world, decided to return to his homeland. He arrived in Montevideo on May 1st, 1934. The city had changed drastically since he left it in 1891: now Montevideo had the features of a modern city, with buildings, avenues, and promenades that were far away from the colonial province he had lived in during his childhood and youth. The city, however, was still provincial in artistic terms: lacking a true and own artistic life, it looked towards Europe in search for inspiration.

Torres-García undertook the job of creating a national school which would create a proper Latin American art: he claimed that “a great School of Art ought to arise here in our country ... I have said School of the South, because in reality our North is the South”⁷¹, and he drew the map of South America upside down to illustrate this idea. As Jorge Castillo explains, “Torres-García felt – and did not hesitate to say so – that he had a mission to accomplish: to open up America to contemporary aesthetic ideas of all times and the Indo-American cultural past in order to give rise to a new art.”⁷² In other words, as Braun has explained, Torres-García wanted to establish a regional art tradition that would promote modernist and indigenous roots, linking this Constructivism with pre-Columbian art.⁷³

With this in mind, Torres-García developed an intense pedagogical activity during his last years in Montevideo, hoping to create the School of the South that would transform the art world not only in Uruguay but in all Latin American countries. In 1935 Torres-García founded the Constructive Art Association (Asociación de Arte Constructivo [AAC]), that was devoted to the promotion of his ideas about art. He gave lectures (almost one per week according to Gradowczyk),⁷⁴ organised conferences and wrote articles for various local and international newspapers and magazines, in which he explained the modern art movements in Europe and promoted his theory of art. At the end of that same year (1935), Torres-García published *Structure (Estructura)* – dedicated to Mondrian –, a book in which the artist aimed to introduce his students to the historical process of art and to establish the theoretical basis for the association’s activities, which was the doctrine of Constructive Universalism. He accompanied his book with a series of abstract paintings also entitled *Structure*. These paintings bear resemblance with the stone walls constructed by the Incas and were thought as illustrations of the idea that the notion of structure is the most important one in a work of art, whether pre-Columbian or modern.

⁷¹ TORRES-GARCÍA, 1992c: 75.

⁷² J. CASTILLO: 171.

⁷³ BRAUN: 274.

⁷⁴ GRADOWZCYK: 60.

In 1936 the association launched the magazine *Círculo y Cuadrado* (*Circle and Square*), as a continuation of the French magazine *Cercle et Carré*. It contained articles written by Torres-García and by the most respectable artists of the French avant-garde with whom he had had contact during his stay in Paris. Later, in 1944, after receiving the Great National Prize of Painting (Gran Premio Nacional de Pintura), Torres-García opened The Torres-García Workshop (El Taller Torres-García), which lasted until 1953 (four years after his death). The Torres-García Workshop was the most important school of modern art created in Uruguay and had a lasting influence on the plastic arts in Uruguay and in all Latin America. That same year (1944), a compilation of his lectures was published in Argentina under the title *Universalismo constructivo* (*Constructive Universalism*); this book constituted the most complete version of Torres-García's theory of art.

These activities are proof of Torres-García's commitment with the idea of creating a national school and of introducing modern art to South America. As a result, Torres-García deepened his interest in pre-Columbian art while being in Uruguay. As stated before, he had discovered pre-Columbian art in Paris, and his works of this period show an influence of it in the geometrisation and schematisation of forms, as well as in the notion of the pictograph. But it was in Uruguay where he studied with much more detail the art and culture of Indo-American people. He wrote a book about it – *Metaphysics of Indo-American Prehistory* (*Metafísica de la prehistoria indoamericana*) – and even transformed the association into a centre for the study of pre-Columbian cultures. Consequently, the development of Constructive Universalism during Torres-García's last years in Montevideo showed a closer connection with American "primitive" cultures.

Latin American artists of the time had already shown an interest in pre-Columbian and indigenous art, for example the Mexican muralists, especially David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) and Diego Rivera (1886-1957). But for Torres-García their incorporation of this kind of art responded either to mere decorative purposes or to political and sociological interests (the case of the Mexican muralists). For him, this was merely a superficial interest; he saw in pre-Columbian art what he considered vital in every true art. For Torres-García, the ancient American art was a constructive art in the sense that it was based on a geometric plan and conveyed spiritual, religious ideals. In this respect, Torres-García saw his programme of Constructive Universalism as a continuation of pre-Columbian art. As Alvaro Medina has pointed out, "Torres-García, rather than being merely influenced by Indo-American art, continued its tradition."⁷⁵

Torres-García's Constructive Universalism was thus conceived as the peculiarly Latin American art the artist was looking for. This style and programme, however, was definitively constituted when the artist left Paris. It is thus possible to ask whether this

⁷⁵ MEDINA: 57.

artistic concept constituted the true Latin American art Torres-García was hoping to create: if Constructive Universalism was a European and French creation, how could it be typically and originally Latin American? The works he executed in Montevideo between 1934 and 1949 do not show a considerable difference from the ones carried out while in Paris between 1930 and 1932. They show a denser structure and organisation of the picture plane, as in *Universal Composition* (1937): this painting appears to contain a larger number of figurative elements (or pictographs) than most of his previous paintings. While this is true to some extent, a painting like *Constructive Primitive Graphic* (1931) already presents a dense number of symbolic figures.

Furthermore, these do not vary considerably: there is perhaps a more consistent use of pre-Columbian motifs, but in general terms Torres-García used the same figures in his Parisian and Uruguayan paintings. In *Plane of Colour and Line* (1943), he employed the same compositional method of some of his Parisian works: the picture plane has been divided into different zones of colour (the colours of Neoplasticism: red, yellow, blue, and white). A black grid, measured by the golden section, covers the coloured surfaces and divides the picture into various compartments into which Torres-García inserted the symbolic figures of a fish, a ship, a clock, and so on – the same figures he had used in Paris. This seems to question the success of Torres-García's purpose to create, with his Constructive Universalism, a true and proper Latin American art. Constructive Universalism was a European creation, and in this respect it is difficult to affirm that it constituted a regionalist and Latin American art.

Torres-García's work and activities, however, did constitute an important *example* for Latin American artists and stimulated them to create a proper Latin American modern art. If Torres-García's Constructive Universalism did not *practically* constitute the Latin American art he was looking for, his theory and ideas did contribute to its germination. The intense pedagogical activity that he undertook during the last years of his life in Montevideo and the example of his work clearly shaped the course of modern art in Uruguay and Latin America.

Torres-García may have not created an entirely Latin American art with his Constructive Universalism, as he believed, but he certainly determined the development of modern art in Latin America. Artists from all the South American countries, and even from North America, found inspiration in Torres-García's work and were stimulated by his ideas to create a modernist Latin American art. The movements of geometric abstraction founded in Argentina in the 1940's – the Concrete-Invention Movement (Movimiento Concreto-Invención), created in 1945, and the Madí Movement, of 1946 – took Torres-García's work as a point of departure. Torres-García's impact upon Latin American art is also evident in the work of Rubem Valentin from Brazil, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar from Colombia, Carlos Mérida from México, and Roberto Ossaye from Guatemala, to name only a few. The work of the North American artists Adolf

Gottlieb and Louise Nevelson also draw influences from Torres-García's work. Thus, Constructive Universalism not only constitutes an entirely original and unique artistic programme, which rightfully deserves a place among the most important movements in the history of art, but also embodies one of the vital forces that helped Latin America to enter the course of Modern Art with its own artistic forms.

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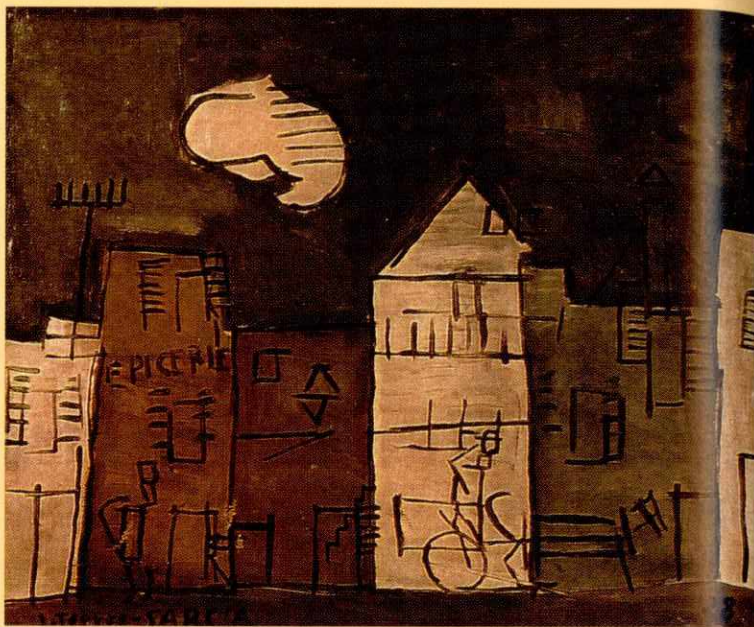
THE CAFÉ

Joaquín Torres-García, 1928.

Oil on cardboard, 45.7 x 58.4 cm,
Eduardo Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires.

**STREET WITH HOUSE
AND WHITE CLOUD**

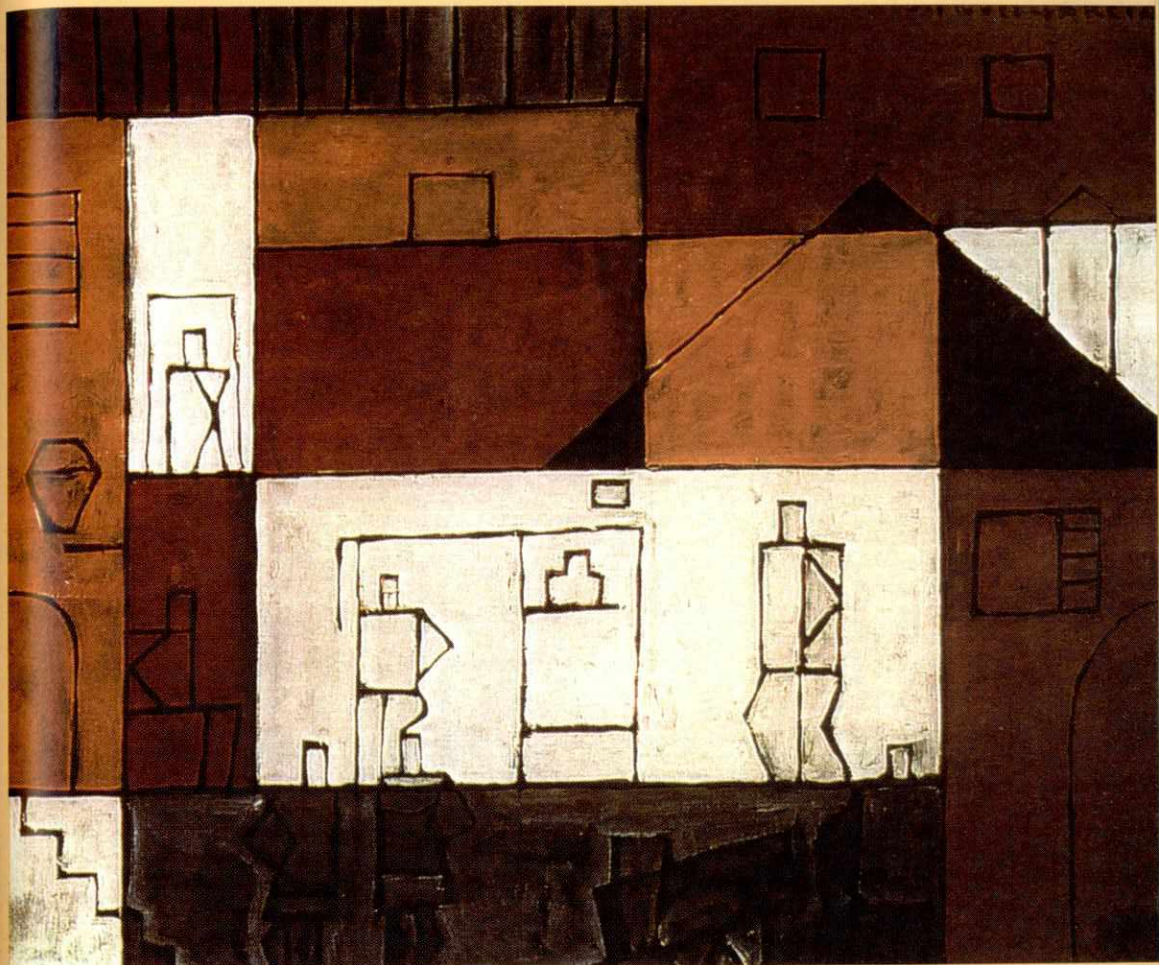
Joaquín Torres-García, 1928.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm,
Fundación Torres-García,
Montevideo.



PAINTING

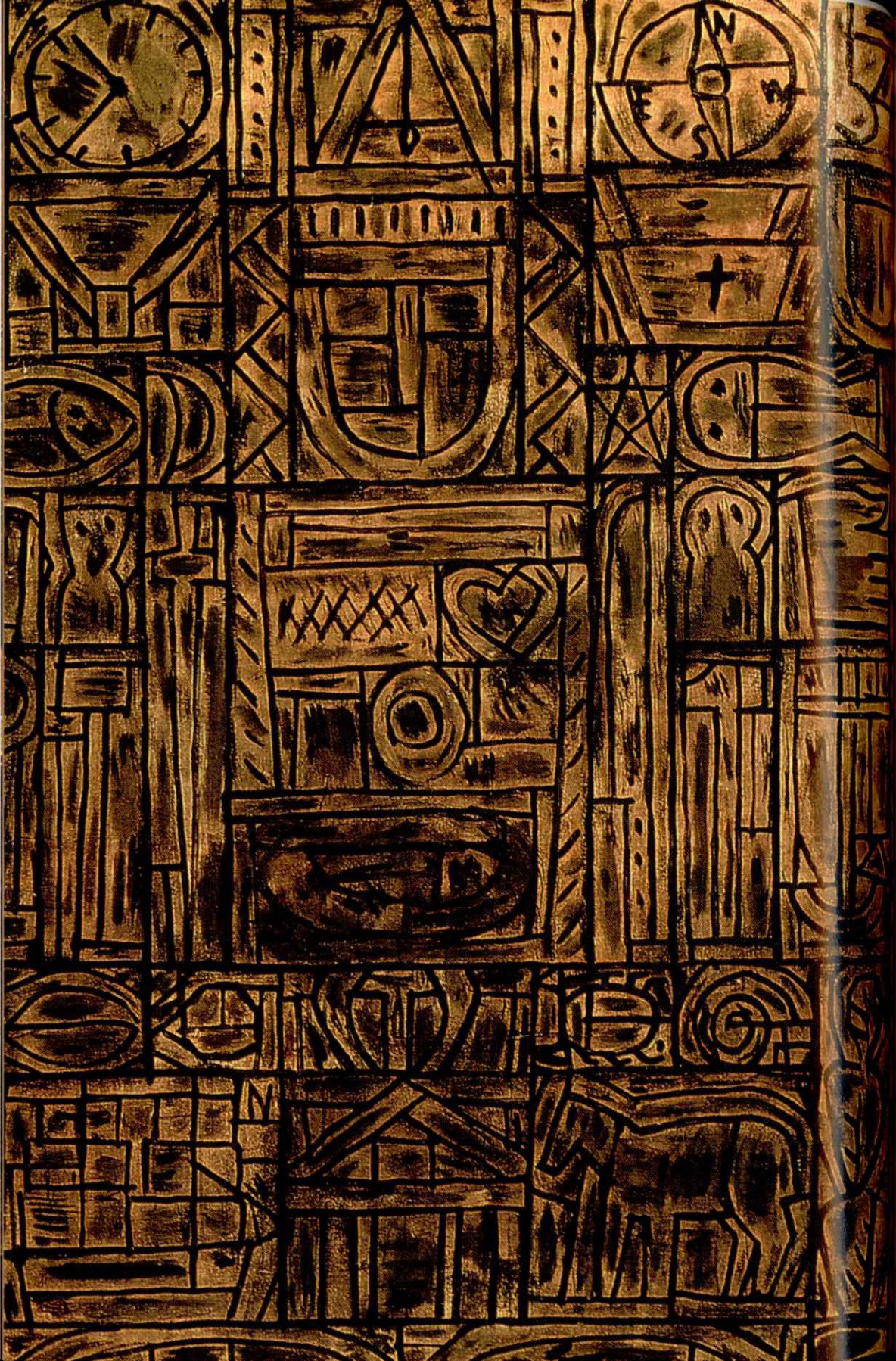
Joaquín Torres-García, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 54 x 64.5 cm,
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CONSTRUCTIVIST LANDSCAPE

Joaquín Torres-García, 1929. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92
cm, Private Collection, Buenos Aires.





▲ **CONSTRUCTIVE PRIMITIVE GRAPHIC**

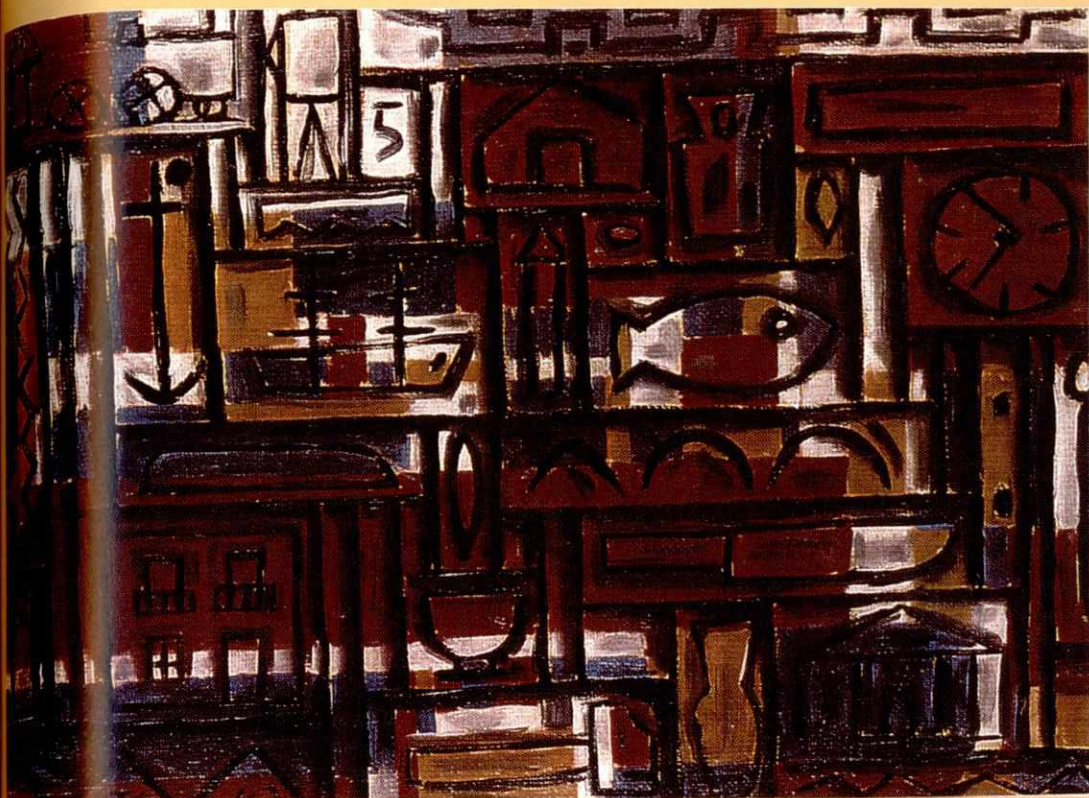
Joaquín Torres-García, 1931.

Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm, Fundación Torres-García,
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◀ **CONSTRUCTION WITH COMPASS**

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Oil on canvas, 65 x 54.5 cm, Centre Georges Pompidou,
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▲ **PLANE OF COLOUR AND LINE**

Fundación Torres-García, Montevideo, 1943.

Oil on cardboard, 51 x 70 cm, Alfredo y Graciela Iribarren Collection.

◀ **UNIVERSAL COMPOSITION**

Fundación Torres-García, Montevideo, 1937.

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