



An Underrated Modern Master *Gallery-Going*

By LANCE ESPLUND
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The Uruguayan Constructivist Joaquin Torres-Garcia (1874-1949) remains one of the most underrated masters of the 20th century. He is up there with Leger, Klee, and Mondrian, yet his name is not the household word it deserves to be. His last New York museum exhibition was at the Guggenheim in 1970. Despite this oversight, he has gained an increasingly strong following in the United States, especially abstract painters, since his first oneperson U.S. show was mounted in New York by Sidney Janis in 1949.

For decades, the Jan Krugier Gallery has been mounting stellar shows of Torres-Garcia's work. I urge everyone to see the beautiful exhibition of roughly 60 of the artist's works currently on view at the gallery.

The show comprises mostly small drawings. But it also includes key works, such as mural studies in pencil and watercolor for his first public commission, "The Golden Age of Humanity" (1915), a fresco for the Salon de San Jorge in the Palacio de Deputacion, in Barcelona. Here, too, are photographs of the artist; pages from a Barcelona sketchbook he made during his 1917 transition from representation to abstraction; two sketchbooks made during his stay in New York; and spectacular drawings, wooden toys, and paintings that span his entire career. Many of these works are masterpieces and are being exhibited to the public for the first time.

Born in Uruguay, Torres-Garcia moved with his family to Barcelona when he was 16. There, he befriended the sculptor Julio Gonzalez and was commissioned by architect Antonio Gaudi to make stained-glass windows which, like his paintings, were heavily influenced by the French Neoclassical painter Puvis de Chavannes. Around 1900, Torres-Garcia came under the spell of Modernism. He traveled throughout Europe and, in 1920, came to New York, where he met Joseph Stella and Stuart Davis. In the late 1920s, he befriended the Neoplastic painters van Doesburg and Mondrian.

Torres-Garcia, though rough around the edges, remained, like Mondrian, a Neoclassical artist. He was in many ways a purist: He often worked in primaries and composed his pictures and constructions out of simple geometric shapes within gridlike configurations. But, unlike Mondrian, he worked with archetypal symbols, to which he assigned universal meanings.

His pictures and constructions always have the quality of the ancient, the folk, and the handmade. Some of Torres-Garcia's shapes - the locomotive and steamship, for example - come straight out of the industrial age, though most - man and woman, sun, vase, serpent, temple, and moon - have their roots in the beginnings of civilization.

In paring down his forms to a language of flat, childlike building blocks and shapes (the circle, square, and triangle), and through his embedding of everything - as if it had been carved out of the flat plane - Torres-Garcia pares down the construction of the world and the picture to interchangeable parts. He creates a universal language in which image, sign, and picture are all made of the same base material. By doing so, he allows for free association between thing, shape, and meaning. We are encouraged to compare a clock face, a mask, a sun, and a heart; a fish and a knife; a key, a star, an arrow, and an anchor; water and a serpent; steps, fingers, a ruler, and a ladder; a man, a temple, and a cart. Liberated from their usual meanings, the forms push us into a metaphoric realm of absolute relations where nothing is merely what it is and everything is free to move about and to take on numerous and layered incarnations simultaneously.

In the oil on canvas "Constructivist Composition" (1931), red dominates the shimmering grid of layered primary colors. Torres-Garcia keeps subdividing the rectangles in which the forms reside, as well as the forms themselves, so that everything pulses on the surface. We feel each object - a house, a sailboat, a clock, a bell, a mandorla, and a man - shifting back and forth and side to side in the plane, as if the whole painting (or the world) were coming into being.

The weathered "Two Figures" (c. 1930) is a painted relief sculpture of a man and woman made of handcarved geometric pieces of wood. It looks like a primitive artifact that had floated up on the beach, demanding comparison to Durer's print of Adam and Eve.

The nude man and woman, standing on a ledge, face front. As in Durer's print, they interact with each other in starts and stops that suggest multiple, conflicted meanings. Their bodies, made of crude forms, carved and wellworn, are disjointed as if they were puppets bouncing on their strings. Their Brancusiesque heads, beautiful egg shapes with long noses and eyes made of nails, appear to wobble on their necks; they have fallen outward, as if the figures are shy kids at a school dance. Their limbs look like clubs, and their hands, which look like birds' beaks and wrenches, are wonderfully awkward. Hers are fidgety and withdrawn; his swing like pendulums and reach clumsily toward her.

"Two Figures," like most of the works on view at Jan Krugier, gives us the complete world expressed through opposites. And like other masterpieces in the show, such as "Constructif en Puzzoli" (1932), "Forms With Structure" (1933), and "Arte Universal" (1949), it gets at universal relationships. In Torres-Garcia's art, we get at the root of basic human associations through an infinite expansion born of reduction.