

HUTCHINSON MODERN & CONTEMPORARY

JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA

Joaquín Torres-García (born 1874, Montevideo, Uruguay – died Montevideo, Uruguay 1949)

The internationally renowned Uruguayan painter, muralist, sculptor, teacher, writer, and theoretician, Joaquín Torres-García, is widely considered to be the father of Latin American modernism. Born in Montevideo to a Catalan father and a Uruguayan mother, when Torres-García was seventeen years old, his family left Uruguay to return to his father's homeland in Catalonia, Spain. Torres-García would not return to Montevideo for another forty-three years (in 1934), living abroad and traveling avidly within Spain, France, New York, and Italy.

Extremely prolific in his artwork, his writings, and his teachings, when Torres-García returned to his native Uruguay, he founded his art school and magazine of the same name, *La Escuela del Sur (The School of the South)* in 1935, publishing his renowned manifesto accompanied by the first version of his seminal *Inverted Map* drawing. Through both reversing geographic cartography and re-positioning a single and autonomous Latin America, by itself, at the top of the map, Torres-García's statement was: "Nuestro norte es el sur" ("Our North is the South"): an ardent message veiled in a sociopolitical statement to invert the traditional artistic hierarchy which at the time was dominated by European art. In 1943, he founded his renowned workshop, the "Taller Torres-García" (TTG), where he imparted his teachings onto the next generation of Southern Cone artists working in the field of Abstraction, and passing on the profound legacy of his theories on *Universal Constructivism*, one of the most impactful movements of abstraction in twentieth-century Latin American art.

Before his return to Uruguay from abroad, Torres-García's *oeuvre* underwent a trajectory where he experimented, evolved, conflated, and consolidated various artistic movements before arriving at his concept of *Universal Constructivism*. His earliest artistic style began when his family moved to Barcelona in 1892, where, inspired by the ancient Mediterranean culture, Torres-García created his own Mediterranean-inspired Classical style, working on murals and decorating churches. It was in Barcelona, at the dawn of the twentieth century, that Torres-García began meeting other artists, writers, and creative intellectuals, amongst them, Pablo Picasso, Antoni Gaudí, and Joan Miró.

After moving to New York in 1920, Torres-García was committed to designing manipulable, didactic, wooden toys that were briefly manufactured for sale. This was followed by another two-year stay in Italy, and then a brief stay in Villefranche-sur-Mer. By this point, Torres-García had experimented with other movements of the time such as Cubism and Fauvism. However, it was when the artist moved to Paris in 1926, while the Surrealist movement was at its peak in the City of Lights, that Torres-García first began experimenting with Constructivism.

Fundamental to this moment in Torres-García's life was his meeting Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, and Michel Seuphor. It was with Seuphor that he founded the group and journal, *Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square)* in 1930, whose principal intention was to promote Constructivist and Abstract art.

By the time Torres-García arrived back to his hometown of Montevideo in 1934, he had already devised his concept of *Universal Constructivism*. At its core, the movement was comprised of elements derived from, amongst others: Classicism, Symbolism, Constructivism, Cubism, Neo-Platonism, and Surrealism. In search of a "universal" art form, Torres-García incorporated formal elements from pre-Columbian cultures. In this way, he conflated an aesthetic of European Abstraction with signs and symbols derived from American indigenous art, along with his unique employment of the grid.

Behind his concept of *Universal Constructivism*, Torres-García wished to create an art form accessed through a mode of abstraction with a universal meaning, yet conveyed through a constructivist language native to the Americas.

One year after arriving in Montevideo, in 1935, Torres-García founded the “Asociación de Arte Constructivo” (AAC) (“The Association of Constructivist Art”) with the aim of exploring the relationship between pre-Columbian and modern art. He also founded his renowned workshop, the “Taller Torres-García” in 1943, where he passed on his legacy to the future generation of Southern Cone artists working within the field of Abstraction. Even after his death, Torres-García’s students continued to promote their teacher’s aspirations: the creation of an *avant-garde*, American, constructivist, geometrically abstract art form, rooted in indigenous cultures and civilizations, and conflated with the geometry of the modernist grid.