

## From Spain to Argentina: Reflections on the Influence of *Mudéjar* in Esteban Lisa's Art

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Spanish-Argentinian Esteban Lisa (1895–1983) was a polymath: teacher, writer, philosopher, and artist. Curiously, Lisa never exhibited his abstract paintings during his lifetime, yet these have gone on to enjoy unprecedented posthumous recognition. His work has been honored with retrospectives in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Madrid, Los Angeles, London, New York, and Beirut. This artist and teacher, who painted for his students' eyes only, is now receiving widespread international acclaim.

To understand his fame is to understand that it was made possible by a singular event. After his death, thieves entered a building in Buenos Aires and made off with household contents.<sup>1</sup> One cupboard was spared, and in that cupboard was stored Lisa's entire œuvre, produced in private over a forty-year period beginning in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> It was this remarkable discovery that provided the catalyst for Lisa's subsequent recognition and placement in the canon of European and American twentieth-century art, beginning with an exhibition in 1999 at Buenos Aires's National Museum of Fine Arts. As Elena Oliveras pointed out in its catalogue, "The watershed in the historical appraisal of Esteban Lisa's painting came with the publication in 1997 of a monograph in which Nelly Perazzo and Mario Gradowczyk examined the various stages in his career, charting parallels with European artists and defining his contribution to Argentine modernism."<sup>3</sup>

Along with Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García, Esteban Lisa is widely considered by art scholars as a pioneer of Latin American abstraction. Born in a village outside Toledo, Spain, Lisa immigrated to Buenos Aires at the age of fifteen (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Sullivan, "Esteban Lisa: From Margin to Mainstream," in *Esteban Lisa: The Abstract Cabinet*, ed. Manuel Fontán del Junco and María Toledo, exh. cat. (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2017), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Oral interview with Jorge Virgili, August 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Elena Oliveras, "El silencio del pintor," in *Esteban Lisa*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Buenos Aires, 1999), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Julio Sánchez Gil, "Esteban Lisa: Biographical Details," in *Esteban Lisa: Retornos; Toledo, 1895/Buenos Aires, 1983*, ed. José Cabañas Agrela, Carmen Virgili, and Jorge Virgili, exh. cat. (Madrid: Biblioteca Nacional de España, 2013), 280.



1. Esteban Lisa shortly after arriving in Buenos Aires, c. 1910.

He trained at the National School of the Arts and Crafts, which in 1925 certified him to teach painting and drawing. Working by day as a librarian at the postal office, he instructed intellectuals and artists in the evening. Relying on earnings from both jobs, Lisa brought over from Spain his mother, father, and three out of four siblings, Cristina, Natividad, and Aniano in 1924. Upon his father's illness shortly thereafter, Lisa became guardian to his brother, Aniano, who also exhibited artistic promise. Eventually Aniano would be recognized as an important Argentinian illustrator but, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, both Lisa brothers affiliated themselves with "modern painting." They pursued the aesthetic promoted by artists such as Argentinian Xul Solar, who developed what he termed the "Culture of the Surreal" in Buenos Aires.<sup>5</sup> Latin American art scholar Nelly Perazzo describes 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires as a "mixing culture" where strange fruits like Xul and Lisa might grow. She quotes Beatriz Sarlo:

Everything that Xul mixes in his paintings is also being mixed in the culture of the intellectuals: European modernity and [Río de La Plata] diversity; acceleration and anguish, traditionalism and renovating spirit, creolism and avant-garde. Buenos Aires is the great Latin American scenery of a mixing culture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sanchez Gil, 281.

<sup>6</sup> Nelly Perazzo, "A Recovered Artist," in *Esteban Lisa*, exh. cat. (Montevideo: Museo Torres-García, 1998), 7.

During this early period, Lisa produced a small series of figurative landscapes (fig. 2), still lifes, and flowers.



2. Lisa, *Paisaje urbano* [Urban landscape], c. 1930. Oil on cardboard, 30.1 x 23 cm, private collection.

We can observe in them the influence of cubism, championed by early European modernists such as Cézanne and Picasso.<sup>7</sup> Alongside those images, Lisa's particular vision of the urban landscape, strongly influenced by modernists Paul Klee (fig. 3) and Piet Mondrian, begins to take on more abstraction, as in this charcoal on paper (fig. 4).



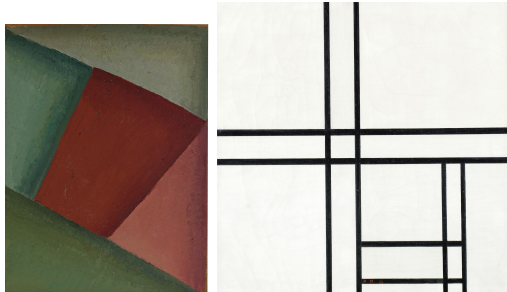
3. Paul Klee (1879–1940), *Conquest of the Mountain*, 1939. Oil on cotton, 95 x 70 cm, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, O01219.

4. Lisa, *Paisaje urbano* [Urban landscape], Sept. 10, 1938. Charcoal on paper, 13.9 x 20.8 cm, private collection.

In Lisa's more colorful compositions (fig. 5), swaths of bright color disperse and radiate light, creating dynamic, bold works more reminiscent of Klee's *May Picture*, 1925 or the structure of Mondrian's *Composition in Black and White, with Double Lines*, 1934 (fig. 6)

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<sup>7</sup> Artur Ramon, "El Greco and Lisa: Two Ways of Painting Life; Two Ways of Living Art," in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 259.



5. Lisa, *Composición* [*Composition*], c. 1935. Oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

6. Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Composition in Black and White, with Double Lines*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 59.3 x 60.3 cm, Sotheby's, New York, May 5, 2009, lot 10.

In turn-of-the-century Argentina, millions of Spanish and Italian immigrants brought with them the aesthetic movements and philosophical notions ardently debated in their home countries. The intermingling of life in immigrant barrios led Lisa to meet his future wife, Josefa Pierini, a schoolteacher who, by 1928, had already obtained a doctorate in philosophy (fig. 7).



7. Esteban Lisa and Josefa Pierini shortly after their marriage, 1938.

After a lengthy courtship, they married in 1938; she was thirty-nine and he was forty-three. They never had children. Some scholars consider that Pierini's influence on Lisa has not been duly credited nor deeply considered, particularly with respect to Lisa's philosophical vocation and his devotion to teaching.<sup>8</sup> According to art scholar Miguel Cereceda, Pierini may well have influenced Lisa's lifelong interest in, and concern for, education. Moreover, she may have sparked Lisa's interest in philosophy, specifically the mystical direction of his philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Committed to her work, Pierini

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<sup>8</sup> Miguel Cereceda, "The Painter, the Master, the Thinker," in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 271–72.

<sup>9</sup> Cereceda, 272.



promoted the creation of the *Escuelas de Adultos* (Adult Schools). These state institutions would come to be recognized as excellent centers that taught large numbers of young people from the city's working classes.

Pierini and Lisa taught together for more than two decades at the Adult School in the barrio Villa Crespo, largely inhabited by Italian and Spanish immigrants (fig. 8).



8. Lisa (right) with his students at the *Escuela de Adultos*, Buenos Aires, 1952.

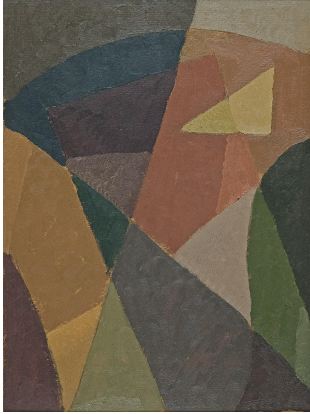
There was also a sizeable population of Jewish families from Central and Northern Europe, as well as a smaller number of Arabs.<sup>10</sup> This triumvirate, representing the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions, must have resonated deeply in Lisa's soul, given that his roots stretched back to Toledo, Spain, the emblematic city of cultural and religious tolerance and erudition. This heritage would become a leitmotif that would influence Lisa's life and, arguably, his work.

After 1934, the year of Picasso's exhibition in Buenos Aires and Torres-García's return to Latin America, Lisa's painting style changed; a new synthesis of geometry and symbolism reveals those artists' imprints. Lisa's work from 1935 on moved away from figuration and by 1938, the year of his marriage to Josefa Pierini, he was embracing abstraction (fig. 9).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sánchez Gil, "Biographical Details," 282.

<sup>11</sup> Sánchez Gil, 283.

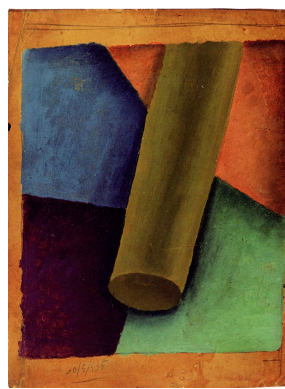


9. Lisa, *Composición* [*Composition*], c. 1935. Oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

His paintings evolve into geometric compositions, an interplay of muted color and blocks of thickly textured paint. By the mid-1930s, he introduces cylinders, circles, and spheres; his first portrayal of depth and use of three-dimensional imagery (figs. 10–11).



10. Lisa, *Composición* [*Composition*], c. 1935. Oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

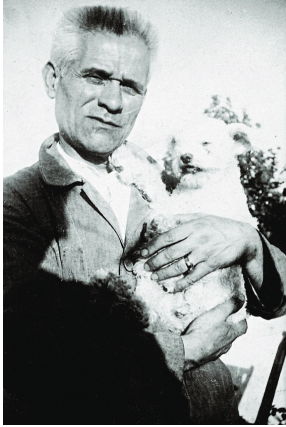


11. Lisa, *Composición* [*Composition*], May 10, 1935. Oil on cardboard, 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

These paintings are keys to understanding the development of Lisa's later intellectual, scientific theories and are harbingers of his aesthetic philosophy, in which he would delve into the relationship between the third dimension (space) and the fourth dimension (time).

Late 1944 or early 1945, the latter being the year that Lisa's father died, marks the date of a major crisis, causing a decisive break between Lisa and his family. We do not know why or what was at issue. Unfortunately, the rift never healed and Lisa was never able to reconcile with his mother

before her death in 1967.<sup>12</sup> As a symbol of this estrangement, Lisa would henceforth refuse to sign his paintings with his surname and instead began to sign using the pseudonym Lila,<sup>13</sup> which was the name of a small dog that belonged to him and Josefa Pierini (fig. 12).<sup>14</sup>



12. Lisa and his dog Lila.

Given her philosophical training it is perhaps not coincidental that, in Hindu philosophy and mythology, “Lila” refers to the creation of the world through God’s self-sacrifice.

Argentina, too, was experiencing growing pains and a political coup brought about the Revolution of 1943. Soon after, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón joined the government and became president from 1946 to 1955. Concurrent with the political turmoil was a deep interest in abstraction in Argentina, marking the first appearance of a type of geometric abstract art associated with an unprecedented cultural movement.<sup>15</sup> In 1946, abstract artists created two rival, although closely related, theoretical movements: *Arte Concreto-Invencción* and *Madí*. Both groups introduced socio-political concepts into

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<sup>12</sup> Julio Sánchez Gil, “Esteban Lisa y Pietro Spada: Dos vidas artísticas encontradas,” in *Esteban Lisa/Pietro Spada: Encuentro artístico*, exh. cat. (Toledo: Sociedad de Amigos de la Sierra de San Vicente, 2017), 10.

<sup>13</sup> In Hindu philosophy and mythology, “LILA refers to the creation of the world through God’s self-sacrifice (in its original sense of ‘making sacred’). Thus God is transformed into the world, which is itself ultimately transformed back into God. This creative activity of the Divine is known as LILA.” Fritjof Capra, *Tao de la Física*, quoted in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 293.

<sup>14</sup> Sánchez Gil, “Biographical Details,” 283.

<sup>15</sup> Sánchez Gil, 283–84.

their art, architecture, and urban plans. They would go on to influence geometric and utopian visions of abstraction in Argentina and throughout Latin America.

Lisa chose a different direction, exploring, in his own words, the “infinity of forms” (e.g., dots, lines, and stars) within planes (fig. 13).



13. Lisa, *Composición* [*Composition*], July 28, 1941. Oil on cardboard 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

His palette became more highly charged; his abstract *Compositions* less restrained and more playful. In these works, the synthesis of geometric and organic (which he saw as reason and emotion, respectively) foreshadows the European informalist and American abstract expressionist movements that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the mid-1950s, Lisa executed a series of minimalist pastels on paper (fig. 14).



14. Lisa, *Acto espacial* (*Spatial Act*), Jan. 1, 1955. Pastel on paper, 30 x 23 cm, private collection.

15. Joan Miró (1893–1983), *Femmes, oiseau au clair de lune* [*Women and Bird in the Moonlight*], 1944. Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 66 cm, Tate Modern, London, N06007.

*Spatial Acts* recall works by Spanish artist Joan Miró (fig. 15). Their design moves in free, unrestrained directions, as if reflecting the use of automatism (subconscious impulses that direct line, color, and structure). Each work is created with quick gestural strokes as though completed in a single sitting. During this same period, Lisa began his early *Playing with Lines and Colors* series (1950s–63). Here he unleashes a whirlwind of spontaneous, bold gestures (figs. 16–17).

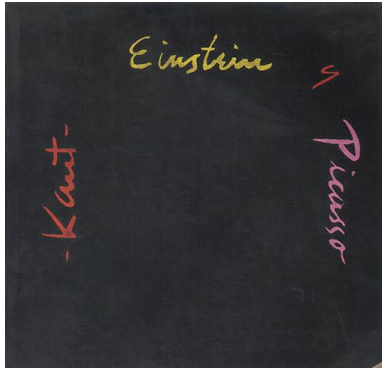


16. Lisa, *Juego con líneas y colores* [*Playing with Lines and Colors*], c. 1954. Oil on cardboard, 40 x 31.5 cm, private collection.

17. Lisa, *Juego con líneas y colores* [*Playing with Lines and Colors*], May 18, 1955. Oil on paper, 29 x 23 cm, private collection.

His reliance on white serves to both complement and contrast his muted hues, thereby lightening the compositions and infusing them with vitality. Spirals, swirls, curves, and arabesques are executed with freedom and a lively use of color.

Upon his retirement in 1955 at the age of sixty, Lisa founded “The Four Dimensions” School of Modern Art in Buenos Aires, where he taught until 1980. It was during that period that Lisa developed the philosophical underpinnings of his work, which provided the basis for his extensive writings. In 1956, he published his first of many books: *Kant, Einstein, and Picasso: Philosophy and “The Four Dimensions” in Modern Aesthetic Science* (fig. 18).



18. *Kant, Einstein y Picasso*, 1956.

In this loosely connected series of essays, Lisa explains how his abstract paintings are informed by philosophy, aesthetics, and science, especially by Einstein's theory of a four-dimensional space-time universe. Specifically, time is added as a fourth dimension to Euclidian geometry's two-dimensional plane and three-dimensional space. This is the basis of Lisa's theory of *cosmovisión*, which guided his endeavor to transcend perception of the real world in his abstract creations.

Yet herein lies a contradiction, one of many. A close examination of Lisa's work from that period, indeed, from all periods, reveals that Lisa's paintings are primarily planar (two-dimensional), rarely evoking the third (depth) or the fourth (time) dimensions.

More puzzling still is the lack of a visible "fourth dimension" in his abstractions—so vaunted in his writings. Miguel Cereceda avers that "his painting never escaped the limited structure of a page-sized sheet of cardboard or paper; nor did it evince any apparent interest in the third dimension: depth....Like a strict Greenbergian, he refused to stray beyond the two-dimensional representational plane, never breaking through or even tearing it. Not only was his painting made up of planes, and planes alone, but also for many years it was strictly flat."<sup>16</sup> Cereceda goes on to analyze the fourth dimension in Lisa's work: "if his work is lacking in depth, it is also wholly lacking in the fourth dimension: time."<sup>17</sup> Although arguably

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<sup>16</sup> Cereceda, "The Painter, the Master, the Thinker," 269–70.

<sup>17</sup> Cereceda, 270.

difficult to portray “time” in paintings, important examples of attempts to do so are Gustav Klimt’s 1905 rendering of *The Three Ages of Woman* or Mexican baroque Cristóbal de Villalpando’s allegorical depiction of the narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. How does an art teacher, fully devoted to publishing prized intellectual theories, not incorporate those theories into his compositions? And, conversely, why were his visual renderings not used as examples of his theories? Only in his first book, *Kant, Einstein, and Picasso*, does Lisa ever publish a few images of his own works.

Curiously, his students relate that they never or only rarely saw his artistic renderings. Yet they were all familiar with his philosophies, the breadth and depth of his intellectual influences, his pedagogical rigor. Which only begs more questions: was he ashamed of his paintings? Was he modest? Mario Gradowczyk, who wrote the first monograph on Lisa, suggests that this could have reflected his humility regarding his own pictorial work.<sup>18</sup> If so, how do we explain the decidedly un-humble image of an autodidact scientist sending his writings to leading scientific and intellectual international institutions such as NASA and the National Library in Spain? Perhaps he was humble in one identity, yet more than self-confident in another.

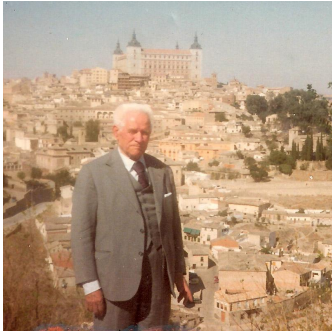
Could this explain Lisa’s own refusal to self-identify as an artist? Toward the end of his life in 1980, Lisa visited Madrid, journeying on to Brussels to participate in the Ninth International Cybernetics Conference. Rather than continue on to Argentina, he returned to Spain, this

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara J. Bloemink, “Playing with Lines and Colors: The Art of Esteban Lisa,” in *The Art of Esteban Lisa* (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 2000), 21.



time to Toledo and his birthplace, Hinojosa de San Vicente (fig. 19).<sup>19</sup>



19. Lisa in Toledo, 1981.

There, Lisa met with Spanish relatives, introducing himself as a teacher and writer and never mentioned he was a painter. In hindsight, Lisa never sought recognition as an artist. Was he ultimately uninterested in his abstractions and his artistic endeavors? Or had he moved beyond his abstractions to consider himself now solely a writer and teacher? How do we account for these anomalies and how do we ultimately evaluate this man and his art?

Perhaps the key to understanding Lisa and his work lies in a more inclusive approach, one less concerned with an exclusively modern or even postmodern perspective of analysis. In considering his work, perhaps we would do well to extend a medieval gaze and consider, along with modern influences, the impact of biographical imprints in those first fifteen years in his village close to Toledo.

Toledo's intellectual and artistic tradition gained renown first during the ancient Visigoth period, then during the Muslim occupation and the Christian reconquest of 1085.<sup>20</sup> The influence of Muslim Spain from the eighth to the eleventh century and the subsequent Christian occupation of Toledo from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, in which Muslims and Arabized Jews now found themselves living in Christian cities, gave rise to a fusion of techniques known as *mudéjar*. The *mudéjar* style intertwined these heritages and cultures,

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<sup>19</sup> Sánchez Gil, "Biographical Details," 281.

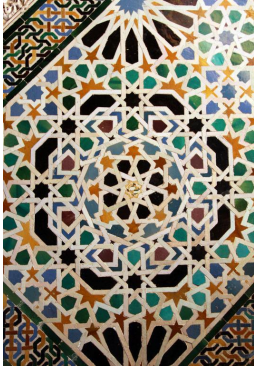
<sup>20</sup> Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 130.

giving rise to an unparalleled creative expression in literature, art and architecture, exemplified in the concept of *convivencia* or co-existence (fig. 20).



20. Iglesia de Santo Tomé, Toledo.

Christian, Jewish, and Muslim iconography fused together to create a unique aesthetic vocabulary, full of vegetal and ornamental motifs, geometrics, and arabesques (fig. 21).



21. Wall mosaic from the Mexuar, Alhambra, Granada.

Above all, learning was championed and the three cultures contributed to an environment that produced remarkable intellectuals, among them twelfth-century native sons Sephardic Jewish Maimonides and Muslim Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Indeed, Esteban Lisa highlighted the importance of Arabic cultural, artistic, and philosophical traditions, particularly Averroes's legacy, in a lecture delivered in 1962 on traditional and contemporary Lebanese culture.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Marcial Marín Hellín in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 255.

In the sixteenth century, Toledo also became the adopted home of another immigrant, El Greco (The Greek), who left a lasting legacy on the city. Art scholar Artur Ramon has speculated on the likelihood that Lisa spent time in Toledo and observed El Greco's works (fig. 22). This assumption is based on geography (Lisa's small village was only an hour's drive from Toledo) and turn-of-the-century modernists' renewed interest in El Greco's work. Ramon likened Lisa's compositions to this early baroque artist's work, depicting the same organic, ascending world (fig. 23).<sup>22</sup> In this late *Playing with Lines and Colors* series, for instance, Lisa reduces color and form economically with thinly applied areas of paint and light strokes.



22. El Greco (1541–1614), *Asunción de la Virgen* [*Assumption of the Virgin*], 1608–13. Oil on canvas, 347 x 174 cm, Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, DO1277.

23. Lisa, *Juego con líneas y colores* [*Playing with Lines and Colors*], Mar. 28, 1965. Oil on paper, 35 x 21.8 cm, private collection.

Nonetheless, however congruent these pairings, their connections are still speculative. What we do know for certain is that Lisa considered himself Toledan and Spanish, though he spent most of his life in Argentina. And we know that, on his final journey to Spain, Lisa spent time before El Greco's great masterpiece, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (fig. 24), recognized for its Assumption imagery.<sup>23</sup> Given the importance of this painting, it is safe to assume that Lisa's fascination with the painting was rooted in a deep appreciation born in

<sup>22</sup> Ramon, "El Greco and Lisa," 260.

<sup>23</sup> Sánchez Gil, "Biographical Details," 285.

earlier visits. Indeed, while Lisa's later works exhibit a profound influence of *mudéjar*, it is also evidenced in earlier works such as his similarly Marian themed *Annunciation* (fig. 25).



24. El Greco, *El entierro del Conde Orgaz* [The Burial of the Count of Orgaz] 1586. Oil on canvas, 480 x 360 cm, Iglesia de Santo Tomé, Toledo.

25. Lisa, *La Anunciación* [The Annunciation], c. 1935. Oil on cardboard, 30.2 x 23 cm, private collection.

The theme of *convivencia* was echoed even in Lisa's posthumous legacy. The Fundación Esteban Lisa, committed to disseminating his ideas on the aesthetic education of humanity, was set up by three of his followers. Curiously, "one was of Jewish ancestry (Isaac Zylberberg), another of Arab extraction (Horacio Boustany al-Khoury) and the third (Francisco Pelegrín), like Lisa, hailed from a country steeped in the Christian tradition."<sup>24</sup>

Latin American art historian Julia Herzberg suggests ways in which the artist's formal language and metaphysical thinking summarize his final narrative.<sup>25</sup> Yet, we cannot view Lisa exclusively through the lens of *either* the metaphysical *or* the physical, the modern *or* the medieval, the American *or* the European, the writer *or* the artist. His is a world of both/and. His is a prism of influences deep and rich.

It is perhaps the Latin American and Caribbean art historian Edward Sullivan who best mines the depths of Lisa's soul when he writes:

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<sup>24</sup> Marín Hellín in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Herzberg, "Esteban Lisa: In Search of the Transcendent," in Cabañas Agrela, Virgili, and Virgili, *Esteban Lisa: Retornos*, 276.

Lisa fashioned himself as a truly cosmic intellectual. He felt more at home among his students than with the denizens of the museum or gallery milieu. His school was the stage for his ideas and his philosophies; his atelier was a refuge of the deepest form of intimacy. Lisa's participation in the larger art world would only have served as an unwanted disturbance of his deeply personal inner trajectory. Lisa was a singular star within a firmament that must have felt to him both familiar and threatening. We should consider Esteban Lisa as an integral component of the complex story of creativity in the Americas but at the same time he stood as an oasis to himself.<sup>26</sup>

To that I would add that "the complex story of creativity in the Americas," grounded in the Spanish tradition of *convivencia*, functioned as a wellspring for Lisa's imagination. The Latin American version of *convivencia* transformed *mudéjar* into *mestizaje*. Lisa's experience growing up in Toledo in the midst of these three cultures would have made him receptive to the analogous, intercultural, and interracial environment that he experienced in his new land. Easily embracing this notion in Argentina, Lisa found himself at the crossroads of this intercultural reality. As so often happens, this fusion of cultural horizons sparked tremendous creativity. Much as viewing the world through two eyes makes possible a perception of depth unavailable to a single eye, viewing the world through multiple perspectives allows one to perceive dimensions of reality unavailable to any single perspective. The legacy of Lisa, whether in art or writing, reflects the creativity of the *mudéjar*. Today his star shines a bit brighter in the firmament as a beacon of coexistence and human unity.

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<sup>26</sup> Sullivan, "From Margin to Mainstream," 19.