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## JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA'S CREATIVE PARADOX\*

**Karen Grimson**

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

When Joaquín Torres-García returned to his native Uruguay in 1934, he was almost 60 years old and had lived abroad for more than 40 years. During the first years of his American relocation, before he became the referential Master at Taller Torres-García, he founded and directed the Asociación de Arte Constructivo, the acronym for which—AAC—appears signed on most of his paintings from 1935 to 1938. During these years Torres-García created a series of black-and-white abstract paintings that constitute one of the most striking repertoires of synthetic abstraction ever produced in the Americas (Fig 1). Recently on view in MoMA's sixth-floor galleries as part of the retrospective *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*, a group of 10 paintings from this corpus were anchored by the monumental *Estructura abstracta tubular* (*Abstract tubular structure*) (1937), a remarkable loan from Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas, Venezuela. (Fig. 2)

\*Originally published on MoMA's Inside/Out blog on January 16, 2016: [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2016/01/13/joaquin-torres-garcias-creative-paradox](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/01/13/joaquin-torres-garcias-creative-paradox)



Fig. 1

Installation view of *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (October 25, 2015–February 15, 2016). Photo by Jonathan Muzikar. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 2

Installation view of *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (October 25, 2015–February 15, 2016). Photo by Jonathan Muzikar. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

This startling work, arguably the largest abstract painting ever made by Torres-García, has the dimensions and visual texture characteristic of a mural painting. Closer examination, however, reveals that the large canvas' sandy surface is not due to the technique of fresco painting (which Torres-García mastered since his early years as official painter of Catalonia's Commonwealth), but rather to the use of mixed pictorial media that includes pigments, binder, and gesso. In collaboration with Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, and Fundación Museos Nacionales in Venezuela, MoMA's painting conservator Anny Aviram organized a workshop focusing on the condition and restoration of this work. What they discovered made curators and collection specialists reconsider what was first deemed a fragile condition. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3

Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguayan. 1874–1949). *Estructura abstracta tubular* (*Abstract tubular structure*). 1937. Mixed media on canvas, 46 1/4 x 78 3/4" (117.5 x 200 cm). Colección Fundación Museos Nacionales – Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas. © Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo 2016

When Torres-García painted this work in 1937, he prepared his materials by mixing in the pigment and binder with gesso. The sandy texture of the latter wasn't thoroughly mixed in before it was applied to the surface of the canvas, allowing for lumps to settle on the canvas as this was painted over. Shortly thereafter, as the painting dried, the air in these lumps popped and produced fractures on the pictorial surface. Conservation specialists refer to these incisions as "drying-cracks,"

meaning that the rupture is not a consequence of possible degeneration in the condition of the painting, but rather a mark that is present since the work's early stages.

Understanding these drying-cracks as built-in, constitutional marks sheds significant insight on the artist's intention. An experimented painter, Torres-García was well aware of the consequences of mixing in gesso and applying lumpy media onto a canvas. In doing so and expecting cracks to emerge, he was intentionally giving the painting an aged appearance. An absolutely modern work in its abstract form and grid-based construction, *Estructura abstracta tubular* is at the same time a matured ruin, subjected to the patina of time. Oblivious to the modern messianic fascination with progress typical of early 20th-century artists, Torres-García's modernizing visions were instead heavily rooted in antiquity and the ancestral. This fascination with an unreachable past found expression, not only in his subject matter—telluric deities, pre-Columbian America—but also in his preference for rough finishes and precarious constructions. This dichotomic interest in the modern and the ancient, both the time of the avant-garde and the erosion of temporality, is a central narrative of the current exhibition.

To think of Torres-García as an arcadian modern master is an idea that finds scientific grounds in the close study and analysis of works such as *Estructura abstracta tubular* (Fig. 4). The close collaboration and reciprocal influences between curatorial and conservation agents—between the artwork's exegesis and its scientific observations—underlie an exhibition's motivations and enables new scholarship. Interdisciplinary efforts such as this one are the backbone of healthy collecting and exhibiting institutions. The ability to exhibit this work at MoMA, alongside related works from the same period, owes much to this interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration.



Fig. 4

Installation view of *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (October 25, 2015–February 15, 2016). Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © 2016 The Museum of Modern Art, New York