

## ***JOAQUÍN TORRES-GARCÍA: Constructing Abstraction with Wood***

On View at The Menil Collection September 25, 2009 – January 3, 2010

Exhibition Preview: September 24, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

**First major U.S. exhibition in nearly 40 years to focus exclusively on the artist**

**Companion exhibition at MFAH showcases Torres-García paintings from Houston collections**

Houston, June 23, 2009 – Joaquín Torres-García (1874-1949) is revered today as one of the most influential artists and theorists of the early twentieth century to have emerged from Latin America. A charismatic figure in the international art world, he exhibited with the most famous artists of his time, including Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Jacques Lipchitz, and Marcel Duchamp. Organized by The Menil Collection in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, ***Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*** will offer to North American audiences for the first time an exploration of the artist's wooden constructions known as *maderas*.



Curated by Mari Carmen Ramírez, the Wortham Curator of Latin American Art and Director of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in collaboration with Josef Helfenstein, Director of The Menil Collection, the exhibition will include more than 80 works. Most of these date from the 1920s to the 1940s, when Torres-García lived in Italy, France, Spain, and Uruguay, creating toys and developing the vocabulary for his wooden constructions. These three-dimensional works will be accompanied by a small selection of Torres-García's oil paintings and a few drawings, demonstrating the connections between his experiments in two- and three-dimensional forms.

“We are very proud to present this exhibition,” said Menil Director Josef Helfenstein. “Though Torres-García is not as widely known as some of his European peers, he was a crucial figure in the development of an international avant-garde. For many, this exhibition will be a revelation.” As Mari Carmen Ramírez writes in the exhibition catalogue, the art of Torres-García “still carries an aura of mystery – if not downright eccentricity – in the United States. Largely circumscribed to a devoted circle of initiated art historians and dealers, and a handful of daring collectors and institutions, his work – despite its noteworthiness – does not yet command in this country the level of either criticism or museological attention accorded to other modern art masters of his generation.”



Recognized as a modernist painter, teacher, and author, Torres-García also broke new ground in the realm of wooden constructions or *maderas*. These deceptively simple arrangements of three-dimensional grids and planes made of painted and natural wood are unconventional with regard to prevailing avant-garde trends that dominated the international arts scene in the 1920s and 1930s. The *maderas* functioned for the artist as a kind of research laboratory through which he synthesized a number of ideas encompassing geometric and constructive trends, leading to the development of his own idiosyncratic form of abstraction. The *maderas* include small-scale boxes, abstract male and female figures, masks, boxed reliefs, incised and painted wood panels, constructions with painted or superimposed grids, self-standing structures, and assemblages. Their prevalence in Torres-García’s work attests to the artist’s lifelong penchant for the aesthetic qualities of wood and brings attention to a host of formal and conceptual issues critical to the overall development of abstraction in Europe and Latin America. By isolating the *maderas*, the exhibition reveals the scope of this aspect of Torres-García’s work and also provides valuable insights into his oeuvre.

Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, one of the most intellectual and cultivated cities of the Americas, Torres-García found his artistic voice while studying at Barcelona's Academia Baixas and Cercle Artístic de Sant Lluç from 1893-1898. He delved into Catalan Modernism and collaborated with Antoni Gaudí in the workshops of the Sagrada Família (1904-1905).

In 1920 the artist moved to New York with plans to manufacture the wooden toys he had designed, and the following year exhibited at the Whitney Studio Club. He returned to Europe in 1922, settling first in Italy, which he hoped would be a better place to develop the toys, then, four years later, in Paris. He participated in the 1928 exhibition, *Cinq refusés par le jury du salon d'Automne* ("Five refused by the jury of the Autumn Salon"), which placed him in the company of prominent constructivist painters. Together with the writer and critic Michel Seuphor, he founded the short-lived but influential group, *Cercle et Carré* ("Circle and Square"), which included such prominent artists as Mondrian, Jean Arp, Georges Vantongerloo, and Kurt Schwitters. While in Paris, he also became interested in the African and pre-Columbian objects on display at the Musée du Trocadero (the artist's son, Augusto, worked at the museum, making drawings of Nazca pottery for inventory files). In 1934 Torres-García resettled in Montevideo, where he founded the Sociedad de las Artes del Uruguay and the Asociación de Arte Constructivo. Almost a decade later the artist established the Taller Torres-García, a workshop school that promoted avant-garde experimentation, influencing an entire generation of South American artists.

***Joaquín Torres-García: Constructing Abstraction with Wood*** will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring essays by Mari Carmen Ramírez, Cecilia de Torres, and Margit Rowell, as well as a chronology and newly translated texts by Joaquín Torres-García. The exhibition will travel to the San Diego Museum of Art, where it will be on view February 20–May 30, 2010.

In conjunction with the Menil presentation, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will present an installation of Torres-García paintings from private collections in Houston. The exhibition,

***Joaquín Torres-García: Paintings in Houston Collections***, will be on view September 6-  
November 29, 2009.

**Public Program: 7 p.m. Monday, October 12, The Menil Collection**

“Joaquín Torres-García,” an illustrated lecture by exhibition co-curator Mari Carmen Ramirez.  
Main foyer, The Menil Collection. Admission is free but seated is limited.

This exhibition is generously supported by Meredith and Cornelia Long, Sysco Corporation, Mike and Diane Cannon, Olive M. Jenney, National Endowment for the Arts, Bruce T. Halle Family Foundation, Clare Casademont and Michael Metz, Mary and Roy Cullen, William J. Hill, W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation, Hotel Granduca, The Wortham Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc., Fayez Sarofim, Sterling-Turner Foundation, and the City of Houston.

**Photo captions:** Joaquín Torres-García, *Two White Men* c. 1929, Oil and iron tacks on wood, Private Collection, New York

Joaquín Torres-García, *Estructura en Colores Puros* (Structure in Primary Colors) 1929  
Oil and nails on wood

**For further information and images,  
please contact the press office, 713.525.9469, or [press@menil.org](mailto:press@menil.org)  
The Menil Collection, located within Houston’s Museum District,  
is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.  
Admission and parking are always free.  
[www.menil.org](http://www.menil.org)**