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ART REVIEW | 'CONSTRUCTIVE SPIRIT'

## History Lesson in Abstraction, Cutting Across the Americas

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

NEWARK — Art museums are in the business of sorting out history. And it often falls to our smaller institutions to tackle the initial, broad-stroke cuts. Over the years the [Newark Museum](#) has taken on this path-clearing role with relish, particularly when the histories are transcultural in scope. It does so again in "Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s," the capstone exhibition of the museum's centennial.

In this case, a chunk of the history is in Newark's collection. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the museum assiduously bought, sometimes straight from artists' studios, a type of American painting and sculpture known as geometric abstraction. It's attractive stuff: intimate in scale and coolly design-savvy, but shot through with political and personal content.

For all its virtues, such art never found a wide audience. Dismissed as decorative and un-American in the isolationist 1930s, it was all but submerged in the flood tide of Abstract Expressionism. Newark was left with superlative holdings in an art no one knew or cared much about.

Appreciation has grown since and is bound to increase with this show. The inclusion of household names — [Alexander Calder](#), [Arshile Gorky](#), Ad Reinhardt — will help. But it's the presence of sparkling, less-noticed contemporaries like John Ferren, Raymond Jonson, Alice Trumbull Mason, John McLaughlin, George L. K. Morris and Charmion von Wiegand that turns a history lesson into an event, one that simultaneously broadens and sharpens the profile of American modernism.

That profile grows broader still, immeasurably so, with the show's inclusion of paintings and sculptures, all borrowed from other collections, by artists who were exploring similar abstract modes in South America during the same period. Several of them, and even a few specific works, were in "The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art From the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection," at the Grey Art Gallery at [New York University](#) in 2007.

But it's the equitable mixing of art from North and South America, and the influential exchanges such mixing implies, that makes the Newark show especially exciting.

It opens with the protean South American figure Joaquín Torres-García, who sets the basic

geographic and stylistic coordinates for much that follows. Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1874, he spent much of his early adulthood in France and Spain sampling European modernism, taking particular interest in the abstract geometric styles associated with utopian movements like Russian Constructivism and Dutch Neo-Plasticism.

Right in the middle of this decades-long European sojourn, though, he took an important break. In 1920 he moved to Manhattan and spent two years there soaking up New York's still raw globalist energy. This was just the stimulus he needed to create what he considered a new kind of New World Art. And it was in pursuit of that goal that he eventually returned to Uruguay for the second half of his productive career.

To get a vivid sense of Torres-García's Manhattan experience, I highly recommend a visit to a second show, "Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis" at El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan (through Feb. 28). But to understand his role as a pivotal link between the Americas, and between the Americas and Europe, two paintings by him in the Newark show may suffice.

In "New York Street Scene" (1920), the European-derived geometric model is firmly in place, but it has been packed with details of New York life: enclosing walls; shop signs; traffic jams; pedestrians, most of them dark-skinned, heading every which way. It's an image of chaos, but compartmentalized and contained.

The second painting, "Locomotive With Constructive House," dates from 1934, the year he returned to Montevideo. Here, geometry and abstraction predominate; you can take the blocks of primary colors as a cityscape, or not. And when Torres-García later fills them, it is with half-abstract, emblematic things: pictographs evoking the ancient and aboriginal cultures of South America.

Together the two pictures suggest some of the elements common to artists working in a geometric mode in North and South America: a blending of local and trans-Atlantic sources; a fundamentally urban sensibility; and an awareness of art's use as a vehicle for abstract ideas and muted feelings.

An urban vision is the theme of the show's first section. It's there in a 1934 painting of rainbow-hued machine parts by the New York artist Paul Kelpé and in Theodore Roszak's copper-and-steel "Airport Structure" (1932), which looks like a cross between a radio tower and a kitchen appliance. And we find it again in the striking 1936 painting "Constructivist Forms" by the Argentine artist Hector Ragni, with a single rectangular upright slab as assertively blank as an International-style modernist monument, and also in the interlocking units of Geraldo de Barros's "Movement Counter Movement," which suggests a floating space station.

The dynamic of nationalism versus internationalism was naturally a burning one. To varying personal degrees, artists in both North and South America wanted their work to be of its time and place, but also part of a larger world; to be culturally specific, but with universal reach.

The Uruguayan painter Rosa Acle, like Torres-García, filled her modernist grids with pre-Columbian symbols. The New Mexican artist Joe Hilario Herrera, who was an American Indian, embedded Pueblo references in his abstract paintings. Jonson, who was not an American Indian, did the same — for him the Southwest was transcendentalist terrain — while von Wiegand cooked up a distinctive strain of abstraction that was equal parts Mondrian and Tibetan Buddhist mandalas.

The Brazilian artist Lygia Clark insisted that her geometric painting was true abstraction, with no representational content; later, however, she developed untraditional forms of malleable, wearable sculpture and sometimes designed them to have therapeutic properties. And much of the most interesting material in the Newark show is art that directly engages its environment.

Like Clark, Calder and the Argentine artist Gyula Kosice made sculptures that physically moved. Jesús Rafael Soto, working in Caracas, Venezuela, and Irene Rice Pereira, in New York, created multilayered reliefs that turned optically kinetic as viewers moved in front of them. The “paintings” of Abraham Palatnik, a Brazilian, consisted of colored lights placed behind cloth to create a kind of Lava-lamp effect that eventually took on wraparound dimensions.

And Mary Ellen Bute, who came to art through courses in stage lighting at Yale and worked in New York from 1934 to 1953, produced a whole series of abstract film animations using geometric sculptures as subjects. Remarkably, her animations sometimes ran as shorts preceding Hollywood movies at [Radio City Music Hall](#).

Abstraction was a loaded genre for female artists, who were — still are — working in a man’s world. As the art historian Aliza Edelman points out in the catalog, geometric art could be tactically used to disguise gender, or to reveal it in innovative ways. Mason, a New York founder of the American Abstract Artists group, spent a career resisting stylistic or ideological grooves.

The spirit of her 1942 “Oil Composition” is characteristic: she breaks up what there is of a rectilinear grid by pushing a big, pale potato-shaped form straight through its center. Around the same time, Lidy Prati was making rigorously geometric paintings reflecting scientific and mathematical ideas current at the time in Buenos Aires. But she, too, was a subversive. She developed a vocabulary of linear forms so small that they feel like a secret language — as if geometric abstraction had been converted into some kind of private expressive code.

Mason and Prati are marvelous artists, though too different in styles, ideas and biographies to allow for more than superficial comparisons. And the Newark show, organized by Mary Kate O’Hare, associate curator of American art at the museum, doesn’t ask us to make them. It discourages facile thinking. One major purpose of the exhibition seems to be to eliminate old views of North and South American modernism as representing a qualitative face-off, a competition for importance that one team must, inevitably, lose.

This makes total sense. At the same time, I have to say that the South Americans in the

Newark show, playing so freely with movement, chance and light, take the prize for inventiveness. They really feel like artists of the future, and of a future that is still in the future. But that's just how the American story appears, at least to one set of eyes, here. It could be told very differently and surely will be in exhibitions to come, though it is thanks to big thinking on the part of an adventurous small museum that the possibility for retelling is even there at all.

*"Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s" continues through May 23 at the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street; (973) 596-6550.*

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