

CONSTRUCTIVE UNIVERSALISM

Joaquín Torres García is the creator of Universal Constructivism. With this movement he proposes to create an art that expresses the communion of man with the cosmos. Following this idea, he considers art as a bridge between man and nature, a bridge that is capable of contributing to the recovery of the spiritual sense — already lost — of archaic civilizations, where man was in harmony with the cosmos. Constructive Universalism pursues, therefore, the creation of a plastic language of universal scope, in which the use of lines, geometric figures, the golden ratio and symbols of all eras and civilizations are integrated. In this way, Torres García renounces the values acquired in art, abandoning imitation to achieve this language. His constructive painting admits a formal, plastic and semantic reading of a spiritual nature: in this sense, squares and rectangles are organized following a mystical idea of the cosmic order and various symbols from the universal heritage. It is a movement that tries to combine the ancient and the modern, the indigenous and the European, the avant-garde movements and the motifs of the pre-Columbian cultures. In conclusion, Constructive Universalism, according to Torres García, will allow us to return to the archaic situation in which art was mixed with rite and man, with nature.

The painting technique used by Joaquín Torres García is that of oil on cardboard. This technique consists of mixing the pigments with an oil-based binder (keep in mind that the word oleum comes from Latin and means oil). The success of oil painting lies in its two main advantages. Firstly, by staying wet for a long time, it allows the artist to work quietly, thus favoring the mixing of colors and working with gradients, fades and shading. Secondly, thanks to its oily base, once dry, the paint continues to have a vivid and persistent color over time.

Constructive Universalism is a way of seeing and making art with which the artist denotes man's communion with the cosmic order, expressing reality in simplified concepts and forms of that same reality.

Drawing and proportion. "Every invention is in the drawing, as well as every arrangement in the proportion. Thus, an ordered geometric graphism can subsist, without any other modality of art. It is the wise drawing of the primitives, of the Egyptians, of the Incas and the Aztecs, and also of the Greeks."

"In constructive art, the line is independent, because before serving the geometric scheme (the schematic representation of a thing) it serves the whole of the composition. Hence, the line retains its maximum expression, and at the same time it is preserved on the aesthetic plane. When contemplating a constructive work, first of all we will notice the rhythm of the composition and then the figures, which are not things or representations of things they only symbolically represent them and always within the rhythm of the work."

Graphism "We don't try to do painting here anymore, because in this one we already start thinking about color. Graphism is something else: it is a writing, it is to describe that architecture of the Universe, in a direct and symbolic way, the things, the World, the suns, the beings, the soul. Magic art, by sign. And that art must remain independent. Black and white, or the engraved stone, or the carved wood."

Painting and Constructive Art: "And I have said that Painting has its support in the personal, in the individual, while constructive art has it in the Universal."

"The Universal is not something at all; it is only entering into a perception and a determined rhythm of creation. And to reach such a depth, reason and intelligence can do little. That is why I think it is easier to penetrate into such a world by the education of the spirit in front of the works on such a high plane, and not by the philosophical study, although, the latter, I also think it indispensable."

Abstract and Concrete: "Painting is an abstract art; but this must be explained. We say that (painting) is abstract, because instead of imitating reality, it proceeds with absolute plastic elements. Because reality, then, only serves as a pretext for us to establish, on the canvas, a true orchestration of tones or values; in order to arrive at a poetry and a musicality of painting, which then, for us, constitutes its true background. That is to say, that the reason for being of painting, is for the painter, to "paint" and not to "imitate". The plastic elements, tones, colors and absolute forms, represent themselves, without reference to anything, or very much in the background, and for this reason they are very concrete. Painting, then, is abstract insofar as it is art that is conceived in the mind, without wanting to copy or imitate, and it is concrete insofar as the elements that we put on the canvas, which are absolute, such as a plane of red or black, an angle or a shape, which have a value in themselves."

"If the artist is a creator of symbols, it is because the symbolic form is not only something within the rational structure, but also of the soul and matter, and emerges formed as if from a piece, and hence the one that has, in a certain way, as a magical value, and acts on our spiritual sensitivity, directly, without the need for interpretation or reading, and for all these reasons, as for form it has a value in itself. This symbolic language, living and very real, is the most profound and concrete that art can express, and it was the language of the art of antiquity and of the so-called savages, more civilized in this as in other things of that order, than the prosaic modern, materialistic man. It seems to me that we should return to this art, moving from the intellectual symbol to the magical symbol. It should not be surprising if the symbol has fallen into disrepute, because today it is limited to being like a graphic translation or purely intellectual transposition (for this reason not direct), something soulless and for this very reason without aesthetic value. A symbol that can be translated into language, in idea, is not a symbol, as we understand it. Our symbol is the one that comes from intuition and is only interpreted by it. Something, then, unintelligible to thought, and that is how we see great art. Therefore, an artist will never have to be able to give a reason for why in such a way."



We wanted to take art to the aesthetic plane because, in reality, it is the true plane of art. That is, to give nature for concrete and non-imitative plastic values. All this has been done here, in this Workshop, and it must be said that getting as close as possible to the normal image. As for what we have called Painting, the problem has been well solved and the result magnificent. But now we are dealing with Universal Art, and it is with respect to this that the problem I have mentioned arises, and against which all my efforts to solve it have proved useless. I will say in what sense: that we have not been able to solve our compositions without deforming or mutilating the Form that is, escaping from the normality of the image and realizing a structure.

Man has two legs so he is in balance — if you want, he has two bases — he rests on himself and on nature. (...) There is an art that has been based on the data of the subconscious — and it is immediately perceived that this art lacks balance — that looks only at one side of man. But those who censor this art sometimes do not realize that they fall into the opposite error. Indeed, wouldn't an art based also on pure thought be as unbalanced as the other?

The truth can never be said in such a way that it is understood without being believed. William Blake: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1790-93. Every man, then, without soul, without man, will have to be considered as a simple productive force, and the world will be like a huge machine of eating, digesting, and giving its performance, static life within its devilish mechanical dynamism moving uniformly and with admirable adjustment, endless purpose of a living just to live, without mystery, without hope, without poetry. Regression without suspecting it to an infra-vital state. Even if a civilized art does not fit this society, it must be done. Man cannot and should not die. And the artist, again, has to dictate art rules according to a balanced living.

"I have said School of the South, because in reality, our north is the South. There must be no North, for us, but in opposition to our South. That's why now we turn the map upside down, and then we already have a fair idea of our position, and not as they want in the rest of the world. The tip of America, from now on, extending insistently points to the South, our North."

For me, it is an undeniable truth, that, behind the appearance of the real, there is another reality that is the true one, and that is nothing other than

what we call spirit. I have been repeating this, through these lessons. Our reality, then, is the spirit. Well, that spirit is the one that, through matter and through the idea, the artist pursues. For this, apparently, he does something else, but, in reality, he seeks to capture that invisible. And if such a spirit is no longer a thing, nor a form, nor a colour (that is, being everything it is nothing), it means that it is outside of the temporal; or rather that it is eternal; and that is precisely what we feel when contemplating certain works that time has stopped, that the spirit is speaking, and that this transfigures us. What has just been said places us in the human, which is not the real human. Because by saying spirit, by this we mean the transcended human; that is, man emancipated from the real, being and living in the spirit: in his proper position. And if he then recognizes that the spirit is his reality, finally fixes it definitively, then he can already say that he is a man who has been reborn.

Therefore, it is not necessary to ask such a man (whether he is a painter, poet or musician) to make an art in the human, because his whole vision of the world and of art are in the highest human position. Nor will it be necessary to ask him to make a universal art, because he is in it. But (and here is what interests us) above all and at this moment, is that profound reality, which is beyond the appearance of the world, and which we have called spirit, the same with respect to art, as that which is defined and fixed in Greece, which we have called aesthetic? It must be said very clearly that no. The aesthetic comes later, and it is already something intellectualized in which the idea intervenes; that is, architecture, structure, not yet defined or applied to an object, but already in the power of doing so; it would be, then, the way, not even the thing. And such a concept, with respect to the spirit, would already be of a higher category. Early on, in Greece, one entered into this spirit: it was at the moment when the activity of art ceased to have a practical end in order to enter into beauty. And such a sense, which is slowly awakening and becoming fixed in such a way, is the one that we can see in the most archaic works: we could say almost prehistoric, from the time of Crete and Mœcenae: the primitive Greece.



One of the greatest successes, here, in our country, is to have founded the Faculty of Humanities. Because I think that's the fundamental thing. It represents, if I am not mistaken, the human position in perfect balance: soul, reason. The great human impulse in tight fusion with geometry. The feeling transfigured into category. Structure, but soul inside: life, light, will, intuition; everything that man is, but within a rhythm that makes him eternal and universal. Before the manifestations of plastic art, there must have been a great school of philosophers in primitive Greece. Who knew how to find this: to pass from the particular to the general. House, man, ship. And that, by putting it this way, they escaped from the real concrete to put themselves in the abstract. That is what we should do now. And then it should be understood that if we draw a house schematically, we are not going to put a color taken from reality, but, equalizing the scheme, which is geometry (that is, it is in the geometric order), we must put an abstract color (a tone within the order of the fundamental colors) because we are no longer trying to make a landscape, but a plastic ordering.

With such simplicity a new classical art should begin: perfectly objective, without accent or intention; impulsive. Such an art, which perhaps could be cold, when an artist takes it, would no longer be so, because he would put his soul to contribute to it: not an accent nor an intention, but the deepest intuitions. That simple structure and the spirit; the universal reason and the soul. Right or wrong, we have already done that in various ways: it is constructive art. Which is either based on the color plane or on purely geometric graphics. The lesson has been given and the works have also been carried out in this way, and among them the most important would be those of the Saint-Bas Sanatorium and the monument of the Rodó Park.



Although we have made these experiences of raising a universal art, the Renaissance tradition weighs above all, what we call painting, although already built. And I will not advise that this painting be left for the benefit of that great art; and for many reasons that I do not think it prudent to deal with at this time.

Such a new classical art would be perfectly affirmed aesthetically: pure, clean, balanced, serene. Art in the concrete and not in the apparent; and it is already difficult to do something else knowing about it. How much patina would we get rid of! And of worries of little schools. To be already at the dawn of a world that is being born, and no longer in an outdated world that is falling apart!

Once on this path, we would no longer have teachers to teach us nor those whom consciously or unconsciously, we plagiarize. Then we would be facing that to be created. This should be given a lot of thought.

All this is very well, but there is one issue that should be clarified (and no more than that) because I don't think I can solve it.

We wanted to take art to the aesthetic plane because, in reality, it is the true plane of art. That is, to give (to express) nature by concrete and non-imitative plastic values. All this has been done here, in this Workshop, and it must be said that we have to stick to the normal image as much as possible. As for what we have called Painting, the problem has been well solved and the result magnificent. But now we are dealing with Universal Art, and it is with respect to this that the problem I have mentioned arises, and against which all my efforts to solve it have proved useless. I will say in what sense: that we have not been able to solve our compositions without deforming or mutilating the Form that is, escaping from the normality of the image and realizing a structure.

...I do not recognize other fathers or other teachers than the Greeks. Neither for our art do I admit another tradition nor other precursors of the current movement. Academic and classical are often confused. This comes from the fact that academics have imitated the classics. But in doing so they have not returned to the living, to the reality that is the source of all inspiration. There must necessarily be a difference between one and the other that goes from the living to the dead.

(...) mural — or decorative — painting, because it is associated with architecture, has a very particular character: first of all, it requires stylization. And it also demands in terms of themes, because it must frequently go to public places of significance, and because the architecture that accompanies it must lead it to express the idea of something that must resist the centuries, something that responds to this idea of time, that is, something universal, human and eternal. I find in decora-

tive painting the starting point for very big things. In addition, architecture demands a procedure that harmonizes with it and a certain sobriety, a certain severity without which painting would be a stridency, as we unfortunately often see.

For the moment, a division can be established between intellectual sensitivity, soul sensitivity and material or sensual sensitivity. (...) But we must point out something extremely important and that can lead to confusion in this classification. There is the type of man, for example, who discerns both things well, has mental acuity, and... even noble impulses and desires for improvement: all this of an intellectual order and then because this is not in relation to the other part of the soul (sensitivity of the spirit) everything else is spoiled.

Or vice versa that sensitivity without the support of the intellect so that there is due harmony.

In every subject, both the first and the second, there is a lack of balance. (...) And it is remarkable as in every individual, whatever he does and whatever kind of thing it is will always be as if impregnated with a modality of his own, and about that (in my opinion) there is nothing to be done: they will remain one and the other, always being what they are. (...) If knowing oneself is the most difficult, knowledge is also the most important and the most useful. So let each one take care to know himself and not to deny what he finds in himself, but to affirm it, and then do not look at what somebody else does, do not try to do what he does, because he falsifies himself, he would not only do someone else's insufficiently, but that which is more serious, that he will stop doing his own thing and thus lose everything. From there it can be deduced that everyone will have their own quality and that is very important to see.

They are usually the individuals of intellectual tendency (and it is understood) dissolving critical spirits, nihilists, for this reason, that where they pose the view they plant the arrow, they see the ridiculous and in addition because intelligence is proud or is frequently so, disdain usually accompanies judgment. Nothing satisfies these individuals, and it should be said that their greatest pleasure is to expose every flaw they can see. To say that its opposite is the other temperament would be saying almost everything, but this one is inflamed in another sense: it is more intransigent as more passionate, he would like to convert everyone to his truth. (...) Needless to say that these two men can't look at each other, the world is narrow for them that the one would be the type of the scientist, and the other that of the creator also goes without saying. But I must warn, both types in state of purity would be defective, incomplete. Intuition is necessary for the scientist and reason and understanding for the artist if he wants to produce something with balance. The first one, if he lacked intuition, would be a very limited man, and the other one would be a fool.

Not all men who are engaged in activities like ours have the same composition. Now, according to this diversity of compositions the whole of his being determines a corresponding work. A particular intellectual or emotional development can determine a different activity. (...) Now, if the plastic, relying on pure ideas, can build, then the artist also does relying on his intuitions. Whether the basis of the construction is emotion or reasoning, this does not matter to us. We must repeat here that our only commitment is construction.

"I realized then that although it is true that what constitutes the essence of Greek art: that is, structure and not imitation, intuition and not sensation, because it is also the essential of all great art, it cannot and should not vary over time, and that is why we could call it the fixed element; is not so what the artist takes from the living reality, which has to go according to time. For this reason, then, I changed my course and instead of heading towards archaeology I turned my back to observe what there was in the reality in which I lived. And then I entered fully into a new, inexhaustible world. Everything seemed interesting to me, whatever it was — and it is — but in living things I discovered another harmony, another music, another rhythm and that was when for the first time I thought about this great city of New York, the most urban city, in which the present time is most intensely felt. (...) And now I no longer have to tell you why I came to New York. I have come to realize that idea of new art, that modern classicism in the most modern city."

