

Counter-colonial unfoldings of cubism in Latin America

The works of Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Francisco Matto

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Introduction

The exceptional cubist configuration is often thought of as a French movement. Nevertheless, beneath the geographical label lies a hidden fact: an art that arises in Paris but relies on the cooperation of artists, gallery owners, critics, and art historians of various nationalities and with their own specific views. Modern Latin American artists that in different moments had direct contact with cubism, art students and painters that attended the French academies and distinguished visitors related to but relied on the cooperation of artists, gallery owners, critics, and movement were the channels by which cubism established transatlantic dialogues and exchanges. As in other regions, works by cubist artists circulated in Latin America, catalyzing different approaches and practices that resulted in a manifold of proposals and plastic forms despite sharing the same origin¹.

However, the cubist influence was not strong enough to undermine local cultural traditions. Latin American artists followed the modern European proposal and, in a similar way to how Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque assimilated the lesson of African sculpture – the abolition of perspective as a way of representing space since the Renaissance; painting understood as plastic architecture; a polysemic use of plastic signs; a new vision of a space generated by new technical solutions; the removal of parts of the object; the establishment of relationships of equivalence between planes of color, counterpoints



¹ See **D. Wechsler**, *Cosmopolitismo, cubismo y arte nuevo. Itinerarios latinoamericanos*, [in:] *El cubismo y sus entornos en las colecciones de Telefonica* [exhibition cat.], Ed. **E. Carmona**, Madrid 2008.



² M. Traba, *Arte en América Latina 1900-1980*, Washington 1994, p. 8. In an interview with Alvaro de Medina, Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo distinguishes two poles of attraction: "Mexico City and Buenos Aires. Mexico exalts its own tradition, whereas Buenos Aires has wanted to become one with Europe. Pettoruti is a painter whose work is admirable, but his defect is that he has no roots. They have always been up to date in Buenos Aires, but they have had to pay the price of renouncing to the search of their own identity to do so" (A. Medina, *Fernando de Szyszlo*, "Art-Nexus" 1994, No. 11, <https://www.art-nexus.com/en/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/5ee9492bfa570d46cd615591/11/fernando-de-szyszlo> (access date: 10.05.2024).

³ See Y.-A. Bois, *Cubístico, cúbico e cubista*, "Revista Concinnitas" 2006, No. 9, <https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/concinnitas/article/view/55259> (access date: 10.05.2024).

⁴ A. Medina, *op. cit.*

and rhythms – they dialogued with the so-called primitive cultures of the region, processing their original symbolic and mythical value. Furthermore, their interest in these so-called primitive cultures supported the idea of a new understanding of the local identity in the ongoing modern societies.

Following Argentinian art critic Marta Traba, artists have mainly focused on the visual aspect of art by using recognizable forms within simple combinatorial systems². This can be seen, especially in the 1930s, in works of painters such as Venezuelans Armando Barrios, Alejandro Otero and Oswaldo Vigas, Cubans Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño and Amelia Peláez, Ecuadorians Oswaldo Guayasamín and Estuardo Maldonado, Chileans Luis Vargas Rosas, Roberto Matta and Ramón Vergara Grez, Uruguayans José Cuneo Perrinetti and Rafael Barradas, Brazilians Tarsila do Amaral, Anita Malfatti, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Cândido Portinari and Mexican Diego Rivera, among many others. Most of these artists arrived in Europe in the 1920s, concerned with entering European modernity and looking for plastic alternatives that would enable them to express their local reality in a universally understandable language. In order to do so, they assimilated selectively the European plastic values that best suited their view, disregarding their structural dimension. Beyond the contribution of these artists to modern Latin-American art, their works respond to a "cubification"³ in terms of distortion of the traditional visual canon and not necessarily challenging academic and social conventions and ideals. It can be argued that it is challenging to classify such a diverse group of artists under a single category or label. In addition, according to Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo:

The person who really promoted the idea of Latin American art was Pepe Gomez Sicre [...]. He was the first to speak of Latin American painting [...]. He proposed the idea and found an ally in Marta Traba, who was one of the initial promoters of the idea⁴.

However, the expression "Latin America" is a historically charged problem that raises many questions. What do we mean by Latin America? Is the Latin America of the 16th c., of the 1850s, the same as that of the 1920s, the 2nd post-war period, the 1970s, and the 21st century? Does the term Latin America include native populations? And are the objects that these native populations produced considered art? On the other hand, is there such a thing as Latin American art? If Latin American artists produce art, does that mean they produce Latin American art? In the supposed existence of a Latin American identity, can we isolate what is visually Latin American?

This said, and risking overlooking these issues, we detect different ways of processing cubism in Latin America. For example, artists such as Wifredo Lam (Cuba), Francisco Matto (Uruguay), Joaquín Torres García (Uruguay), Rufino Tamayo (México) and Fernando de

Szyszlo (Peru), among others, understood cubism as a way of thinking and assimilated its structural dimension⁵; their proposals can be read in terms of a “culture of resistance”, that is, as an art that reveals social dynamics ignored until then and enabling another understanding of their own realities⁶. This approach of cubism proposes a new epistemology, a locally rooted way of representing and knowing the local context⁷. Although it transforms and overlooks some of the most characteristic cubist values, this art uses the cubist spatial conception to cut loose the time’s cultural, social, moral, and aesthetic conventions. It is not a “precarious adoption”⁸ of cubism but rather a spontaneous and selective way of dialoguing with the ongoing modernization, exploring ancestral cultures, and re-signifying local realities.

With a discontinuous temporality and overcoming territorial and artistic boundaries, across a broad field of inquiry in order to expand the debate, we will focus on this last approach, specifically in the works of Fernando de Szyszlo (Peru, 1925–2017), Francisco Matto (Uruguay, 1911–1995) and Wifredo Lam (Cuba, 1902 – France, 1982). These artists had diverse experiences with cubism, in different moments, directly or indirectly, and adhering to cubism programmatically or not⁹.

We will privilege a structural bias, the way these artists deal with space, and their dialogue with local ancestral traditions in the context of modern societies. To do so, we will consider the writings of art critics Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, and Vincenc Kramář. Their theoretical works allow us to consider cubism beyond morphological formulations and consider it as a way of seeing and thinking, that is, an attitude towards art not circumscribed to a group of artists acting in a certain spatial-temporal configuration. This approach also enables us to discard a passive attitude towards cubism or consider those Latin American artists that were “influenced” by the cubist painters; we will therefore privilege artworks that understand, dialogue, and unfold the cubist premises.

Preliminary considerations for a theoretical frame

Parallel to the initiative undertaken by the four cubist artists in Paris at the turn of the 20th c. (Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, and Fernand Léger), Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Vincenc Kramář advanced theoretical works in an attempt to renew the plastic sign, involved the spectator as a participant in the production of reality and worked relentlessly in order to give birth to a new reality based in the notion of form¹⁰. They followed these cubist artists since their first findings in Paris, were among the first collectors of African art, and theorized in direct contact with the cubist artworks¹¹. Besides, they shared the references of an innovative unknown *Kunstwissenschaft* in the early years of the 20th c. and they



⁵ For morphological and structural approaches to cubism, see Y.-A. Bois, *Kahnweiler's Lesson*, [in:] *idem*, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1993.

⁶ M. Traba, *Mirar en América*, Sel., Prol., Chron., Bibl. A. Pizarro, Pres. J. G. Cobo Borda, Caracas 2005, p. 34–54.

⁷ In this sense, it could be argued that Tarsila do Amaral, Amelia Peláez, and Diego Rivera proposed locally-rooted ways of representing and knowing the local context, which would displace them from one group to another.

⁸ M. Traba, *Mirar...*, p. 77.

⁹ Due to space limitations, we will not address these issues here.

¹⁰ E. O'Neill, *Visadas cubistas: Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler e Vincenc Kramář*, “Ars” 2017, No. 31.

¹¹ In addition to his interest in African art during his visit to Paris in May 1913, attested in his *Cahier nègre*, Kramář participated with five or six paintings by Picasso for the Neue Galerie exhibitions in Berlin, organized by Otto Feldmann, Kahnweiler’s associate (see Vincenc Kramář, *un théoricien et collectionneur du cubisme à Prague*, Ed. J. Claverie [et al.], Paris 2002). Einstein wrote the prefaces of the exhibition catalogs (October 1913 and April–May 1914). In November–December 1913, the “Picasso. Negerplastik” exhibition took place at the Neue Galerie and in January–February 1914 at the Kunstausstellung Emil Richter in Dresden. The cover of the two catalogues features a Baule figure from Joseph Brummer’s collection, an image also published in *Negerplastik* (1915), inserting Einstein’s theoretical work into an exhibition circuit on African sculpture and Picasso’s work.



¹² See C. Einstein, *Giorgio de Chirico*, "Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration" Vol. 61 (1927-1928), p. 260: "Tectonics is our most human condition, and from it grows autonomous art".

¹³ D.-H. Kahnweiler, *La montée du cubisme*, [in:] *idem*, *Confessions esthétiques*, Transl. D. Naville, Paris 1963, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

defended cubism's concrete character against a certain criticism that saw only abstraction and formalism. Moreover, they theorized from the artworks, not *a priori*, reformulating concepts and presenting new ones. They advanced theoretical works understanding that, by surpassing the Renaissance idea of a cyclopean and immobile observer and the reduction of reality to the prospective image, cubism provided art with solid foundations that paved the way for new freedoms. In this way, they defended an understanding of art as a transforming practice of man and constitutive of reality, a practice that concerns a change in the worldview shared by culture, tradition, or society, a reality on which artists act creatively.

In *Negerplastik* (1915), by means of a discontinuous temporality and defying territorial and artistic boundaries, theorist and art historian Carl Einstein compares cubist painting and African sculpture and their plastic solutions to the problem of the representation of space, which he considers as alternatives to a static view of the world where the observer contemplates a world created by God. In his view, the cubist apprehension of volume results from the act of seeing, of the psychic processes triggered by the intertwining of optical and spatial experiences on a two-dimensional plane. The "cubist revolt" against pre-established conventions and traditional representations of space gains a broader dimension, in which vision becomes constitutive of man's active participation in the creation of his future. Moreover, Einstein applies the term tectonics, a notion deeply rooted in architectural theory and the philosophy of space at the turn of the 20th c., as a non-rational principle, a guarantee of the autonomy of art as much as an expression of humanism¹².

In *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (1920), gallerist, editor, autodidact and a privileged interlocutor of the four cubist painters, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler understands cubism under a Kantian conception:

Instead of an analytical description, the painter can, if he prefers, also create a synthesis of the object in this way, or in the words of Kant, "put together the various conceptions and apprehend their variety in one perception"¹³.

In doing so, the artist conveys visual experiences that surpass illusionist imitations, transforming art into an operation where the spectator deals with signs and not with a reflection of nature. Cubism rejected an "easily agreeable" art, devoid of the drama and creative disorder experienced by the artist, and Kahnweiler had the ability to acknowledge the importance of substituting a pleasant composition with a rigorous structure. Moreover, according to Kahnweiler:

Contrary to what the current aesthetics proposes, the artist does not think of beauty when creating. We have seen what he is looking for: to fix an experienced emotion and transmit his *Erlebnis* to other men¹⁴.

So, he clearly distinguishes between practical and pure vision¹⁵.

Trained in Art History at the turn of the 20th c. in Vienna and among the first collectors of cubism before 1914, Vincenc Kramář's *Kubismus* (1921) is a critical reading of Kahnweiler's book. Kramář insists on the value of Kahnweiler's book for not abandoning the art world for the sake of erudition and for clarifying, using simple terms, the genesis of cubism and its attempts to solve the antagonism between the representation of the object and construction of the picture that prevailed since the Renaissance. Furthermore, he also endorses the authors who emphasized the importance of African art for artists¹⁶.

However, despite also considering Picasso's and Braque's cubism beyond a simple optical question, his approach is clearly distinct from that of Einstein and Kahnweiler. Like them, he conceives his concepts following the artworks and according to criteria of spatiality; he concludes that, with Picasso, we witness a true change in the values that govern our view of the world. Nevertheless, he also considers luminosity, the line, and the organization of color. Besides, because of the aversion to an infinite space, Kramář qualifies the revolution in Western thought at the beginning of the 20th c. as an equivalent of the one that took place in the High Middle Ages. In his analysis, he compares the cubist paintings to Rembrandt and establishes the parallelism between modern "deformation" and that which results from the subordination of the scale of medieval figures to a positive criterion. Moreover, he considers that "the poetic experience of sensible reality is the fundamental condition for creative art, whether realism or cubism"¹⁷.

Concerning the issue of art as a form of resistance, facing the resurgence of a "national" nostalgic art in Czechoslovakia in 1918, Kramář also expresses the potential dialogue between local tradition and the model offered by the cubists. Witness to a return to ethnic values and an overly subjective, anecdotal, and illusionist painting, his work is a manifesto in favor of a dynamic art rooted in contemporary life, with an openness beyond borders, an alternative to the rearmost conformist position, hostile to changes and political transformations.

Written in the heat of an emerging art that enables non-illusionist visual experiences, the three texts insist on the primacy of vision. Besides revealing the authors' engagement with the art and ideas they stood up for, these texts defend the artists' effort to create an external world according to their time, simultaneously committing themselves to creativity and confronting established opinions – aspects that enable us to understand cubism in Latin America beyond pseudo-formalisms and superficial similarities.

Their theoretical works allow us to approach cubism in terms of man's active participation in the creation of a new, more dynamic view of the world. With different approaches, the authors emphasize the



¹⁵ Following Kant, D.-H. Kahnweiler (*Forme et vision*, [in:] *idem*, *Confessions...*, p. 113) clearly distinguishes between practical vision and pure vision. Pure vision requires detachment – which he distinguishes from a lack of interest or exclusion of the will – from any practical activity; it demands a maximum "concentration of interest and the will to arouse that image". The power of the images results from this deepening of vision – not of the need for concepts and their possible effects that characterize the concerns of our practical daily life.

¹⁶ Kramář's interest in African art during his visit to Paris in May 1913 is attested in his unpublished work, *Cahier nègre*. Many of his sketches correspond to artworks later reproduced in Einstein's *Negerplastik*. See J.-L. Paudrat, *Le "Cahier nègre" (1913) de Vincenc Kramář*, [in:] Vincenc Kramář, *un théoricien...*

¹⁷ V. Kramář, quoted in: V. Lahoda, *Dans le miroir du cubisme*, [in:] Vincenc Kramář, *un théoricien...*, p. 25.

artists' power to create their own structural synthesis and, in doing so, to fix experienced emotions beyond mere analytical descriptions or ideals of beauty, as well as beyond dominant social and cultural conventions. Furthermore, the diverse plastic language invented by Picasso, Braque, Léger and Juan Gris, their distinctive solutions for the representation of space, together with the different approaches to cubism advanced by the three theorists, uphold our understanding of Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo and Francisco Matto as creative unfoldings of cubism in Latin America.

Wifredo Lam: mythic atmospheres, conjured appearances

When Wifredo Lam arrived in Madrid in 1923, he was already a talented Cuban painter of Chinese, Spanish, and Congolese-African ancestry. Initially aiming at achieving artistic training, he took part in ongoing political events: from the emerging Spanish Republic to the Civil War, from the German occupation in France to the exile of his friends in America. This odyssey enabled and encouraged him to establish fruitful intersections between European and non-European plastic worlds; in Madrid, he frequented the Prado and the Archaeological museums; arriving in Paris in 1938, he gave a marked turn towards cubism and became friends with Pablo Picasso, whose art he had known in Madrid and with whom he would exhibit later in New York.

Picasso's works incited him to discover and collect African sculptures and masks, assimilating their formal structure, and reinvigorating and reintroducing them in his paintings by means of transpositions and transfigurations. For the Cuban artist, however, Africa was not a revelation as it was for the European avant-gardists who "discovered" African masks and sculptures. For Lam, the African, Chinese, and Spanish cultures were an inherent part of his Cuban being and the context to which he belonged. Lam pushed the religious sense and the representational abstraction of the African culture to its uttermost consequences; he created original guidelines in the field of plastic expression, which was not a significant part of the heritage and discourse of the Cuban painting until then rooted in a European tradition. Hence, although familiar, his unexpected inventions were based on unexplored and underestimated matter, usually the subject of prejudices and superstitions.

This is notorious from 1941, when the war in Europe forced him to return to Cuba. Lam made first-hand contact with the ongoing debate about Cuban identity and the contribution of Afro-Cuban culture. Besides actively participating in the context of the School of Paris or the diaspora of the inter-war avant-garde, Lam is in close contact with intellectuals, such as writer Alejo Carpentier, poet Nicolás Guillen, anthropologists Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, who advocated for retrieving Afro-Cuban cultural roots in a local modern



1. Wilfredo Lam, *The Green Morning*, 1943, oil on linen paper, 186.5 × 124 cm; Malba - Costantini Collection. Photo from: *Wilfredo Lam* [exhibition cat.], Madrid 1992, p. 88



2. Wifredo Lam, *The Jungle*, 1943, gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 239.4 × 229.9 cm; Museum of Modern Art – MOMA, New York. Photo from: *Wifredo Lam. Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work, Volume II*, Lausanne 2002, fig. 28, p. 40

context that, unlike the European situation, overlooked and rejected the African culture¹⁸.

Lam's works are subversive: they incorporate Afro-Cuban traditions and metabolize cubism in an original way¹⁹. He integrates Antillean religious symbols; his figurative creations stimulate primitive visions that are expressions of – and have meaning for – the community. Such is the case of swords and sabres, which are simultaneously weapons, symbols of power, and ritualistic accessories, or the double-axe identified with Sàngó, the Ioruba royal ancestor embodying justice and lord of thunder and lightning. Lam endorses the rise of ancestral communitarian forces in open dialogue with and beyond cultures by irrupting into the comfort of what is known and familiar. By naming his paintings according to Santeria and Voodoo tutelary spirits, he questions a white-Creole culture of colonial origin from the understanding of Afro-Cuban mythology.

For example, works such as *The Green Morning* (1943) [Fig. 1] and *The Jungle* (1943) [Fig. 2] represent Lam's new perspective in which non-Western elements are no longer exotic formal inspirations but alternative forms of approaching reality from within. Afro-Cuban culture is integrated as a cognoscible reality through artistic facts, changing the way in which this culture and its representatives have been portrayed and considered so far. In this sense, Lam surpasses analytical cubism with a new decentered aesthetic approach that, although different from the discourse of the European avant-garde, allows him to create open metaphors according to the universalizing principles of modernism.

Multiple realities, such as those made manifest in *The Jungle* [Fig. 2], reflect, participate in, and resist a certain context. Martini-quan writer Edouard Glissant finds an awareness of Antillean aesthetics and ontology in Lam's paintings²⁰. According to Glissant, for the Antillean and Caribbean people, the local vegetation is both an inextricable ascent of roots and vegetation and a firmly established sugar cane extension. On the one hand, this intricate mesh of foliage sidesteps a perspectival representation of space and eschews an origin concealed by an infinite horizon, as established by the Italian Quattrocento. On the other, referring either to the rainforest or a sugar cane plantation as a sacred shelter or foreseeing the tragedy of the enslaved population, *The Jungle* [Fig. 2] reminds us of the frontier between two spaces: the one that presents itself in the foreground, and the mass of vegetation, knives, scissors, masks, and moons that denote the hardships of hand labor during the *zafra*²¹. This tension is evident in how feet and hands touch the bare ground, contrasting with the abundance and extravagance of the elements distributed in a vertical landscape.

However, what is at stake is not the representation of depth as the third dimension of space but the dim frontier and coexistence of multiple realities in an indivisible totality – symbols and myths



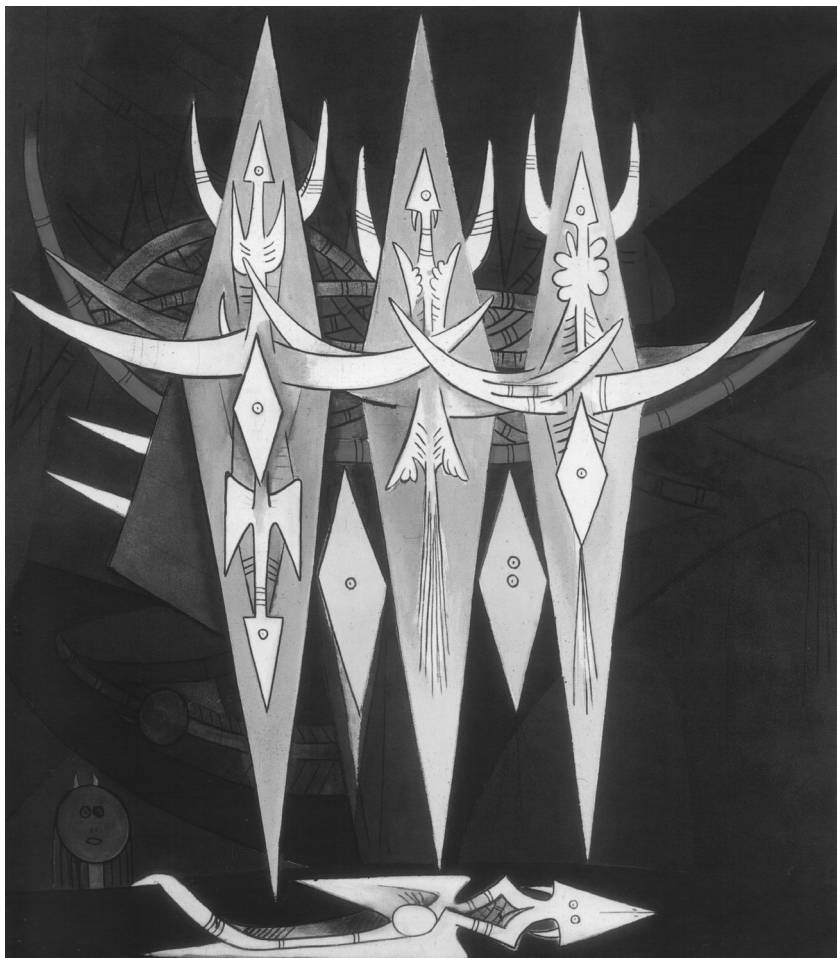
¹⁸ G. Ramos Cruz, *Lam y Mendive, arte Afrocubano*, Barcelona 2009, p. 78.

¹⁹ However, Lam's Chinese heritage should also be taken into account since each graphic sign is not always immediately legible and can be subject of misinterpretations and each ideogram can be read in different languages even if spoken communication is impossible. Although the meaning of each sign is not necessarily available for the average population, it is possible to trace metaphorical connections and the underlying origins of each pictogram. Following the parallelism established by F. Ortiz (*Wifredo Lam y su obra vista a través de significados críticos*, La Habana 1950, p. 8) between Chinese symbols and Lam's painting, "forms say nothing but what archaically and mentally was and still is behind them, unseen or unsaid but known and understood, with that intelligible but ineffable expression, which music also has". Such is the case of the diversity of signs, which become familiar because of the recurrent appearance, metamorphoses and connections established between them; evoking statues, masques, reliquaries and totems, the echoes of plastic and semantic signs convey magical and mythic aspects, creating a transcultural intimacy with the observer.

²⁰ E. Glissant, *Iguanes, busards et totems fous. L'art primordial de Wifredo Lam*, [in:] *Lam métis. Exposition: Musée Dapper, Paris, 26 sept. 2001 – 20 janv. 2002*, Ed. C. Falgayrettes-Leveau [et al.], Paris 2001.

²¹ The word "zafra" is a Spanish term for "harvest".

3. Wifredo Lam, *Umbral*, 1950, oil on canvas, 185 × 170 cm; Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo from: *Lam Métis* [exhibition cat.], Paris 2002, fig. 72, p. 153



²² C. Einstein, *Georges Braque* [1934], Brussels 2003, p. 164.

²³ A. Césaire, *Wifredo Lam et les Antilles*, "Cahiers d'Art" Vol. 20/21 (1945/1946), p. 357.

²⁴ This aspect demands acknowledging his art beyond the Surrealist dogma to which Lam is usually affiliated. It is rather a process in which the attribution of qualities of animated beings confers expression to the unreal; it goes beyond what is visible and tangible, penetrating the realm of introspection and consequently activating basic psychic layers of the mind.

articulated with the experience of space. Lam's art is related to Einstein's understanding of painting as a means of dissolving a subservient tautology that hinders human freedom. By constructing tectonically and connecting elements of diverse origins, Lam destroys and transcends the dominant worldview of his time. In Einstein's words: "This reorganization of the act of seeing and the power of the activated psychic layers will be the source of a completely modified selection of history"²². Martiniquan poet and politician Aimé Césaire said about Lam's painting: "Painting is one of the few weapons we have today against the sordidness of history"²³.

Lam aims to transform reality. In his art, abstract, primitive forms retrieve rudimentary ideas lost in the layers of the human mind, a process in tune with Carl Einstein's statement that each figuration is an enlargement of reality, or at least aims at a new reality²⁴. This also aligns with Kramář's understanding of cubism as a dynamic art, open beyond frontiers and an alternative to conformist positions. Lam's painting deals with unveiling the power of mysteries

that coexist with human beings; using plastic elements, he turns visible what was invisible to many, inside and outside of his native Cuba [Fig. 3]. The result is an incursion into a so-called primitive, multi-cultural Cuba with a contemporary plastic expression. And primitive here refers to the original way Lam circumvents standardization and reaches unfathomable, collective archaic layers.

Fernando de Szyszlo, a tectonically sensed otherness

Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo entered the Academia de Artes Plásticas in 1944, studied under Austrian painter Adolf Winternitz, and traveled to Europe in 1949, where he met Wifredo Lam, Rufino Tamayo, Octavio Paz, and André Breton. He moved to Italy in 1954 and returned to Lima in 1955, where he developed what would be his proposal to participate in international art without losing the Latin American historical and spiritual condition.

Indeed, his early childhood spent on the Peruvian coast a few miles north of Lima, his encounter with the pre-Incan Chancay civilization at a time when archaeologists were looking mainly towards the Altiplano cultures, and his collecting Chancay textiles at the end of the 1940s set the grounds for his work. A key element in his first tributes to the pre-Columbian artistic tradition is the poem by Mexican Octavio Paz *Mariposa de obsidiana*, as well as the 18th c. poem *Apu Inca Atawallpaman*, a text that responds both to the Indigenous and Hispanic traditions. This last poem, translated by poet and ethnologist José María Arguedas in 1955, enabled Szyszlo to open the door to “otherness” and to question and review conventions on Peruvian identity, as shown in his exhibition also entitled “Apu Inca Atawallpaman” (1964)²⁵. In this sense, it could be said that Szyszlo’s interest in Argueda’s translation of the poem challenges the ancient pre-Columbian artworks. And here is where his linking freely Quechua myths and poems to title his works with somewhat dream-like images that evoke archaic forces approaches Einstein’s understanding of tectonics.

Szyszlo’s disposition towards “otherness” is made explicit in the opening phrase of his last book, “I am a painter. Those simple words have given meaning to my existence”²⁶, a statement that reveals both his commitment to painting and his effort to create a plastic language capable of expressing human solidarity. His works, and the titles of his works, express newly acquired perspectives and values endorsing an indigenous cosmovision that goes beyond the thematic indigenism prevailing at the time. Instead of contemplating and describing reality, Szyszlo entered an indigenous psychic matrix, establishing a creative dialogue between modernity and ancestry. Szyszlo’s works have the double function of dealing with and opening himself to a lived, non-conceptualized experience (*Erlebnis*). In a spatial-temporal configuration that is simultaneously a millenary



²⁵ According to F. de Szyszlo, in the catalogue of this exhibition (*Szyszlo: Serie sobre el poema Apu Inca Atawallpaman* [exhibition cat.], Lima 1963, p. unnn., <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/1292718#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xy-wh=-526%2C26%2C2560%2C1433> [access date: 8.04.2024]), “if someday we will be able to conquer our identity, as painters as well as humans, beings, it has to be done with our commitment not only with our destiny, individual and collective, but with our heritage and present reality as well”.

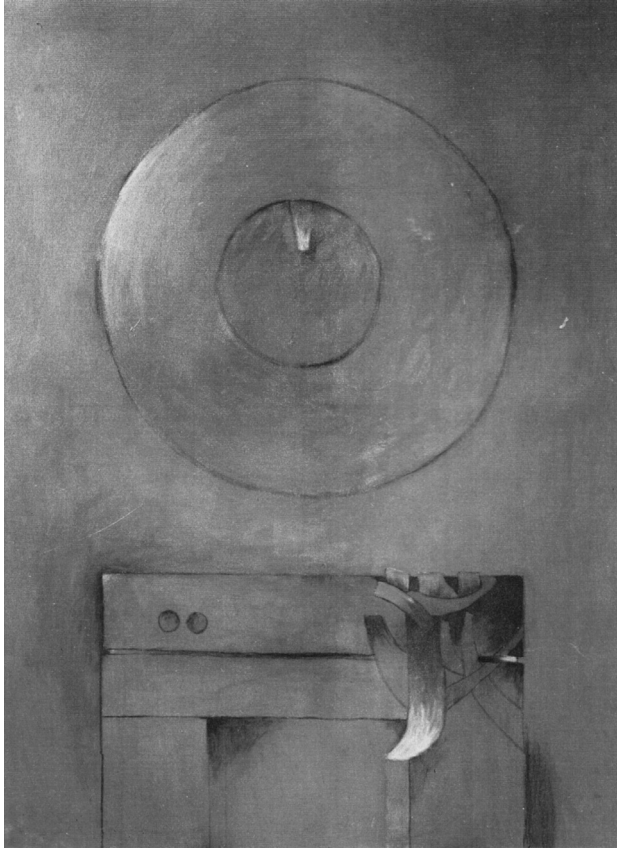
²⁶ F. de Szyszlo, *La Vida sin dueño. Memorias*, Lima 2016, p. 13.



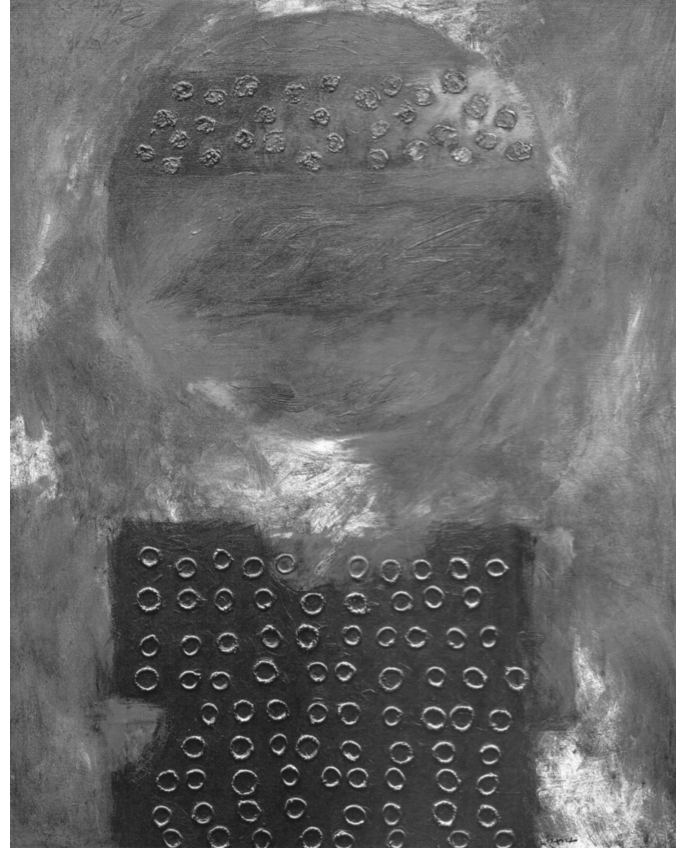
4. Fernando de Szyszlo, *Inkarri*, 1968, acrylic on wood, 150.5 × 150.5 cm; Blanton Museum, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of John and Barbara Duncan, G1971.3.48. Photo: Blanton Museum of Art

past that coexists with a living present, he guides us into a mythic past which somehow we acknowledge as ours; by establishing new openings for art, he confronts us with a visual, symbolic, and spiritual challenge. His works dwell somewhere between present-day Peru and an underground flow of pre-Columbian references.

Szyszlo's figures operate as tectonic agents, obeying mythic and poetic needs. One way or another, we follow the tectonic nature of the painter's visions, staring at them in solitude; visions that, in past cultures, had a common meaning accepted by the community. Through these constructions, Szyszlo walks the way back to a lost connection with Latin America's origin; by projecting the present into the past, he strives to re-write a significant reality beyond dualisms, destruction, and desolation. Works such as *Inkarri* (1968) [Fig. 4], named after an Incan myth on the Spanish conquest, plunge us into an experience of loneliness, into a sense of otherness that is inherent to human experience; they are the result of striving relentlessly to transform a European plastic vocabulary into means of expressing a local re-




5. Fernando de Szyszlo, *Sol negro II*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 207 × 158 cm; private collection. Photo from: D. Ashton, *Szyszlo*, Barcelona 2003, p. 74



6. Fernando de Szyszlo, *Puka Wamani*, 1966, oil on canvas, 162 × 130 cm; Collection Lima Tours. Photo from: D. Ashton, *Szyszlo*, Barcelona 2003, p. 139

ality, where an unsolved colonial past transforms itself into a continuous present. He conquers modernity by exploring and making visible a psychic substrate, discarding descriptions and anecdotes, and being conscious of another cultural source. In a similar way, his series *Dos: Camino a Mendieta*, *Sol negro II* [Fig. 5] and *Mar de Lurin* deal with the irruption of an “otherness” that, instead of coming from afar, as was the case of cubist painters discovering the plastic values of African sculpture, came from within. Instead of articulating, alternating, or juxtaposing signs, Szyszlo articulates, alternates, and juxtaposes modern plastic means with ancient myths, as in *Puka Wamani*²⁷ [Fig. 6]; instead of the cubist operation of deconstructing an object and its reconstruction by the observer, Szyszlo confronts us with an indigenous cultural source through cracks, breaches, and splits between forms. Dark, nocturnal colors characterize Szyszlo’s “voice”; his brushstrokes remind us of the feathered cloaks from ancient Paracas civilization; forms evoke stone monuments and confined spaces, such as the Lanzón in the sacred archaeological site of

 ²⁷ The words “*puka wamani*” are Quechua expressions for red hawk.

Chavin de Huantar. In his paintings, he pursues poetic expressions for fleeting visions, chasing plastic forms that convey updated archetypes of past cultures. His formal selections and expressive concerns can be synthesized as a discreet presence, and the graphic strokes full of expressive force are the plastic formulation of a new understanding of space. For the Peruvian artist, as for many others, the world is not given as an object; he encodes and plastically synthesizes forces, tensions, densities, and psychic layers. His original approach is enkindled by the desire to investigate in what way plastic facts are concerned with the physical existence of men between men.

Averse to quick readings and easy assimilations, his art rejects a priori meanings; inciting an intentional activity, not a mere unreflective experience but a challenge requiring a visual commitment, he questions the depletion of perception nowadays. Szyszlo's work demands an active vision in order to grasp its vitality, encouraging us to abandon a practical vision that characterizes what is believed to be a "true" expression of the real. He creates a visual language in resonance with imagination, never with a predetermined, finished form.

The core of cubism – the invention of new representations of space – and Einstein's effort to widen the field of art history through plastic relations, questioning colonial biases, Eurocentric approaches, as well as the boundaries of an aesthetic discourse of art, are a valid and even timely proposal. Moreover, Kramář's attention to luminosity, the line and the organization of color, spatiality as an essential component of painting during the last five hundred years, and his critique of an overly subjective, anecdotal, illusionist painting in favor of a dynamic art, rooted in contemporary life, apply to Szyszlo's work.

Indeed, it is possible to see in Szyszlo and cubism analogous operations concerning an active vision. The reality of the work of art, its artistic truth beyond preferences, is what matters. If we consider art as the creation of new ways of seeing, it is important to distinguish vision from perception. Vision is made out of choices and reactions to works from other periods and involves imagination, figuration, and composition. But to make sense, it must be rooted in experience. Because space is the experience of space, vision is also space's indivisible pair. In Szyszlo, the center of such conscientious action is found in tectonic forms, *chiaroscuro* in terms of density, and a palette that creates an ambiance of furtive tensions. Mastering these means enables the creation of objects with the power to support other dimensions.

Szyszlo was a member of the Peruvian elite and did not speak Quechua, although he used Quechua terms to title some of his paintings. Therefore, appropriation, translation, and invention are crucial operations in his painting. This said, we should also acknowledge that Szyszlo's paintings reformulate and reintroduce an understanding of form in terms of a psychic function, similar to the one operated by symbols or magical objects; they connect man with a larger reality

than the one of reason, with a forgotten mythical era, oral traditions, and an eternal present. The real yields to those capable of immersing in it, and Szyszlo's plastic poems are witness to his metamorphosis into a tectonically sensed otherness.

The myths of Francisco Matto

Uruguayan artist Francisco Matto was one of the few Latin American artists who toured the American continent and understood the pre-Columbian plastic tradition in the 1930s. Undoubtedly, this experience influenced the way Matto organized his pre-Columbian art collection, organized from an artistic perspective that made it possible to assimilate the teachings of Joaquín Torres García and the Indo-American past from within²⁸.

His direct experience with American Indian artifacts allowed him to understand what is usually called “ornament” or “decoration” – a central element in the art of those cultures; a crucial assimilation for his creative process and the dialogue he established between these artifacts and his work²⁹. Proof of this is the *Totem* series [Fig. 7], a group of flat, wooden vertical sculptures produced since the 1960s. Of diverse dimensions, these wooden objects display a constructivist composition and a simple execution with explicit reference to ancestral cosmic elements – references that the artist finds both in the funeral poles of the Mapuches, whom he met in the 1930s when traveling in the south of Argentina and in the patios in Pompeii that he photographed in 1954. An attentive look at these *Totems* reveals an imbricated relationship between art, religion, and aesthetics, and a revitalized vision of the world, in which the religious reveals integration with the magical-mythical dimensions of life. For Matto, the laws of art were not a set of norms to be fulfilled; he observed the past to discover the bases to reinvent the signs of the present. The result was a personal vocabulary constituted by universal and his personal subjective symbols. The way in which he re-works and articulates these symbols throughout his career produces a free visual thought about space in art that simultaneously dissolves the old categories of painting and sculpture.

Besides, by making a synthesis between abstract construction and Amerindian symbols, Matto restores a ritual and cosmological dimension to art and brings the forgotten heritage of pre-Columbian abstraction to life, a heritage for which perception is not limited to empirical reality, where the dichotomous pair of art/ornamentation makes no sense. On the other hand, Matto creates a structure that condenses the compositional order of Constructive art and a cosmic symbolism endowed with magical, mythical, and religious references. By conveying subjective elements to reality, he creates a world that would not exist had it not been conceived by art. At the same time, he creates a geometry that does not deny emotion but affirms

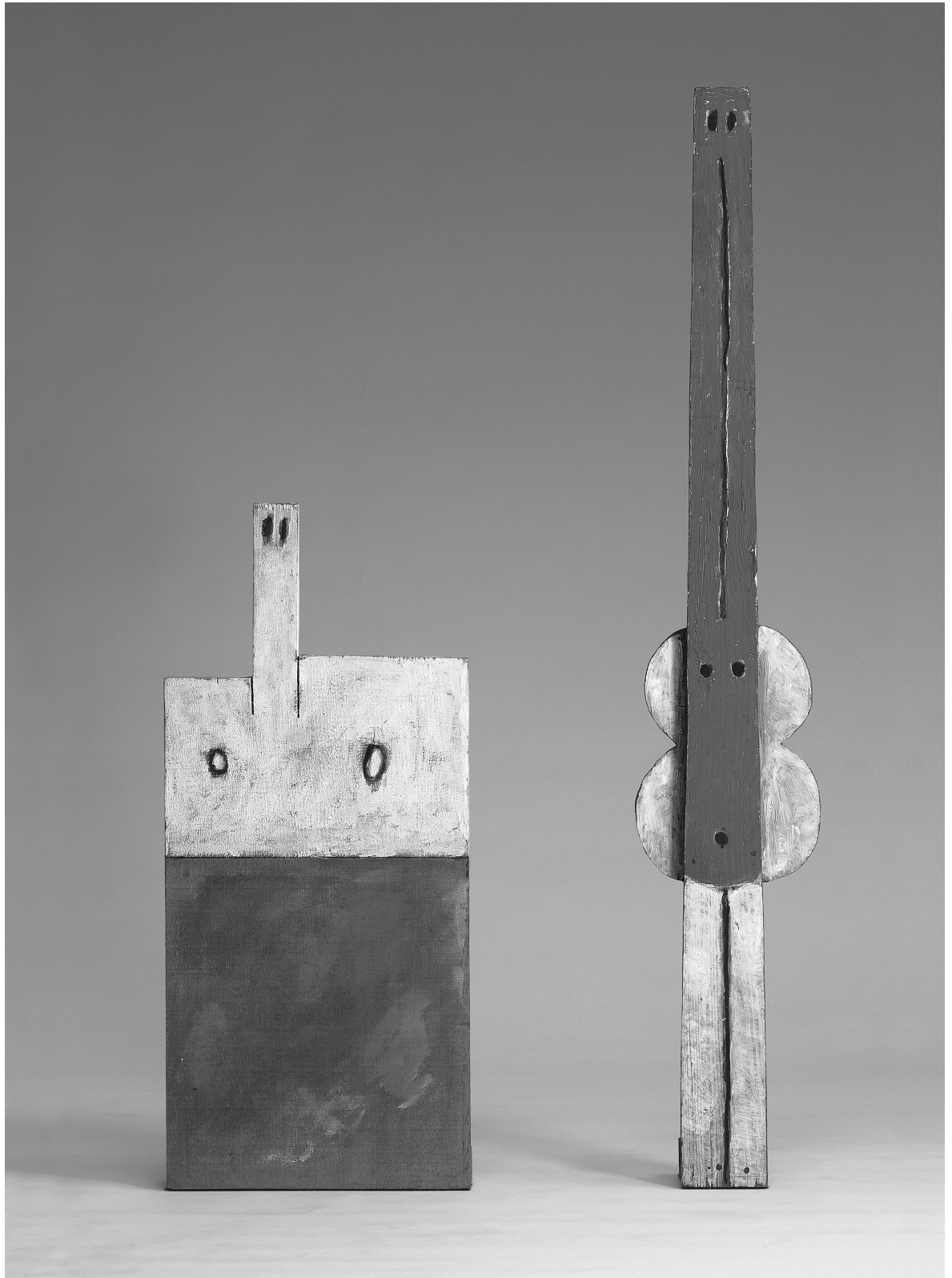


²⁸ Matto assisted Torres García's conferences in 1937 and 1938, met him in 1939 and soon after become his student.

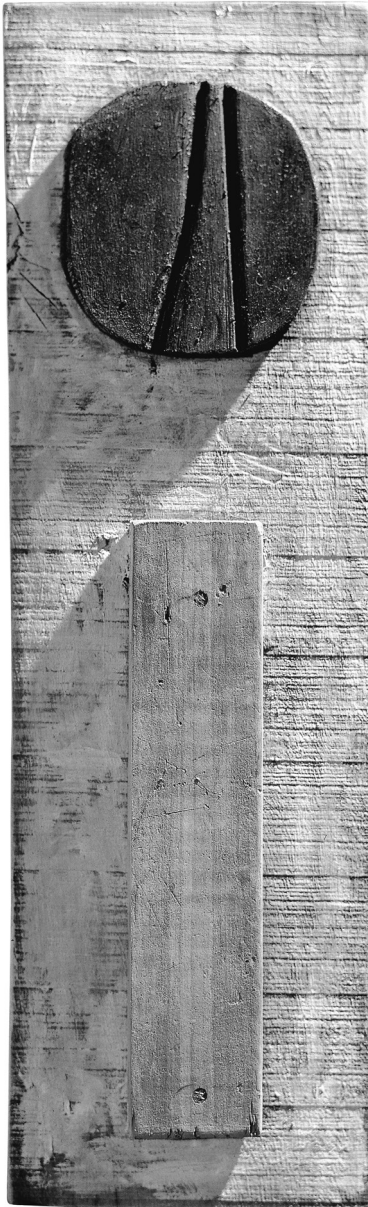
²⁹ E. O'Neill, *Francisco Matto e Carl Einstein: visão e linguagem nos rituais da arte*, [in:] *Anais do 36º Colóquio do Comitê Brasileiro da História da Arte*, Campinas 2016, <http://www.cbha.art.br/colóquios/2016/anais/s2.html> (access date: 8.04.2024).



7. Francisco Matto, *Totems*, 1970–1988, oil and wood, 169–230 cm; private collection, Montevideo. Photo: Francisco Matto Foundation



8. Francisco Matto, *Pareja*, ca. 1976, oil and wood, 69 × 30.5, 111 × 18.5 cm; private collection. Photo: Francisco Matto Foundation



9. Francisco Matto, *Figura abstracta*, 1976, oil and wood, 50.5 × 15 cm; Collection Fundación Francisco Matto, Montevideo. Photo: Francisco Matto Foundation

it with intelligence. These aspects of Matto's work and the religious elements he takes from the archaic cultures [Fig. 8], at their most significant levels, are means for recovering the magical power, creating concrete realities, and affirming the functional dimension of art³⁰. These figures reintroduce the notion of form in terms of psychic function, similar to symbols and magical objects that connect man with a reality beyond reason [Fig. 9]. Furthermore: through a clear reference to the geometric designs of Amerindian art, his works challenge us to reformulate our understanding of ornaments and consider them a structuring element of Amerindian art. His work is not a simple abstraction but an expression of a non-verbal thought.

The temporal dimension in Matto's work, the synthesis between present and past, authorizes us to place him alongside Carl Einstein and the artists he includes in the continuous process of man's transformation and recreation of the world. Einstein allows us to understand – not explain – what Matto calls Universal art. In this art, the structure of objects, free from the ephemeral and subjective experience of the spectator, induces Matto to express that “he who knows how to see will soon discover that a Greek Korus, for example, or a Mayan stucco, or a sculpture of ‘negro art’, rests on the same rules, the unshakeable rules of art”³¹. In turn, Matto's work updates Einstein's proposals. The German theorist affirms that artists must create and determine a Real that is neither interpretation nor academic preconception but a plastic fact, a reality with its own conditions so that art may restore man's creative capacity. But Einstein also seeks to restore the interpenetration of vision and psychism and to revitalize the magical forces and the plastic power of the artworks. For him, art and language are ways to make the world's poetic dimension visible.

Between 1915 and 1931 Einstein published several texts on African art, presenting myths and legends of different African peoples and establishing connections between the formal rigor of the objects and the set of cultural activities of that group. Einstein highlights the multiple possibilities of combinations and juxtapositions of figures for creating volume and the diversity of elements and rhythms; he emphasizes the use of tectonic forms that correspond to elements of the human body, associated with the formal experiences of collective history and with the myths and rituals of these societies. For Einstein, tectonic art responds to the new vision established by cubism and invokes an ancestral symbolism at the same time. His understanding of tectonics is a challenge to think about the value of artistic activity as an indispensable manifestation of life.

Einstein's phrase “myth was returned into the real, and poetry becomes the original element of reality” is an invitation to ponder some issues³². For Einstein, the myth is neither the transformation of history into a fabulous legend nor the acceptance of a fable as history: when considering cubist inventions as the creation of myths, he

conceives myth as conditioned and negotiated by language. Secondly, by qualifying poetry as a verb, he abandons the criterion of confirmation of reality. Finally, by rejecting conventional associations and the dichotomy poetry/concept, he regains a creative approach, where creation and knowledge are intimately intertwined and the mythical force of works is able to create new realities.

On the other hand, Matto disregards the effect produced by his works; he reminds us that art is language, bringing us closer to its true content, dealing with the instability of the visible world, where permanent and stable forms are simply one of the possible manifestations of the Real. In dialogue with an Amerindian artistic heritage and with a great economy of forms, Matto shapes an idea; he takes an element to its extreme simplicity and turns it into a concrete, plastic element.

Bearing in mind that linguistic expression constitutes thought, and visual arts constitute visuality, the task of artists and intellectuals is to provide content to the era to which they belong. In its double function of expressive elements and the configuration of the world, language is not only a means of communication or representation of the real. And since these issues also concern art as language, it is reasonable to think that art should be approached from another angle, setting aside the Western ontological tradition based on the continuous and homogeneous unity of the Being. Following the path established by the cubist artists in a free and original way, Matto proposes an ontological multiplicity that synthesizes traditional and modern worldviews.

Final considerations

The paths of an inappropriately named Latin American art often collide, overlap, or intersect with the European approaches, generating points of coincidence that, although ephemeral, are decisive for regional modern art. In the complex network of transatlantic personal contacts, dialogues, and exchanges concerning cubism, we aimed at the artistic developments that went beyond the influence or assimilation of the cubist plastic formulations. Turning a blind eye to the artificialities of a so-called cultural evolution, avoiding comparisons and penetrating psychic layers with no preconceptions, we considered three very different artists who, having an artistic background before traveling to Europe, understood that cubism was about inventing new representations of space rather than morphological and formal stratagems.

Picasso's assimilation of the sculptural syntax of African art is inextricable from his articulation of cubism as language. But a contemporary rereading of cubism requires mentioning, even if obliquely, the subject matter of art: the configuration of vision and how different inventions model imagination throughout the centuries. To do so, we should understand cubism in its widest conception as a way



³⁰ Functional understood in the mathematical sense.

³¹ A. Haber, *Matto: La búsqueda de la esencia*, [in:] *Matto. El misterio de la forma*, Ed. O. Prato, G. Serra, Montevideo 2007, p. 21.

³² C. Einstein, *Georges...*, p. 164.

of making visible the poetic dimension of the world and its concern with form, understood as the fixation of the emotional power of experience. The plastic image is rooted in experience and gains existence as an object inserted in the world. That image is by no means a copy of a mental image: it is the transformation of a diffuse and fluctuant mental image into a materially visible one on a flat surface of given dimensions. In terms of vision, cubism can be considered as an articulated structure that creates new plastic values and new ways of placing things in space.

On this side of the Atlantic, the works of Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Francisco Matto intuitively understood the artistry in the Afro-Indo-American objects: instead of seeing the geometric decoration as deprived of sense and symbolism, they understood the lesson concerning abstraction. The grid and syntax invented by the cubist artists that resulted from the irruption of the “other”, i.e., African artifacts, could be seen as analogous to the textile grid that imbued non-Western art for centuries.

Hence, these artists and their synthesis of Modern and pre-Columbian art and Afro-Cuban religious practices reveal a deep understanding of cubism as an operation beyond pseudo-morphologies and superficial stylistic similarities; they circumvent linear evolutive narratives, geographical influences, dialectic processes, and hegemonic optical structures. Their plastic operations are a challenge to re-invigorate the writing of art history in an increasingly massified and homogeneous Western culture, where art history is being drained of historical imagination and plastic facts in favor of a passive consumption of already processed meanings. Furthermore, their artworks inspire us to think of new plastic facts by means of historical imagination, questioning concepts that have been deprived of their original dynamic dimension.

On the one hand, the unfolding, assimilation, and reformulation of cubism in Latin America requires thinking in terms of synthesis instead of appropriation or exploitation, avoiding the dominant trend of relegating non-European arts to the field of anthropology. On the other, it demands considering pre-Columbian and Afro-Cuban artifacts and religious and spiritual practices, and their specific geometrical compositions and understandings, for they are signifiers of mythic content and, therefore, expression of ideas. These geometric images transcend the art/ornament opposition and convey mythological content; their counterpart is the demand for an intuitive ability to know by seeing instead of using rational processes. In that sense, and with entirely different approaches to local ancestral cultures, Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Francisco Matto are examples of a tectonic response that enables us to approach mythopoetic contents again. They unfold and reformulate cubism in an original way.

Słowa kluczowe

kubizm, przestrzeń, wizja, Ameryka łacińska, tradycje afro-kubańskie, kultury prekolumbijskie

Keywords

cubism, space, vision, Latin America, Afro-Cuban traditions, pre-Columbian cultures

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Summary

ELENA O'NEILL (Universidad Católica del Uruguay), MARIA FRICK (National Institute of Visual Arts at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Uruguay) / Counter-colonial unfoldings of cubism in Latin America. The works of Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Francisco Matto

The exceptional cubist configuration is often thought of as a French movement. Nevertheless, beneath the geographical label lies a hidden truth: an art that arises in Paris but relies on the cooperation of artists, critics, and art historians of various nationalities. On the one hand, the channels by which cubism established transatlantic dialogues and exchanges in different moments were diverse and in other periods. For example, by direct contact of Modern Latin American artists with the movement, art students and painters that attended the French academies, and distinguished visitors related to the movement. On the other, as in other regions, cubism circulated in Latin America, catalyzing different artistic approaches and practices that, despite sharing the same origin, resulted in a manifold of proposals and plastic forms.

The cubist influence in Latin America was not strong enough to break with previous cultural traditions. In a similar way to how Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque assimilated the lesson of African sculpture, Latin American artists also dialogued with the so-called primitive cultures of their regions, maintaining and resizing their original symbolic and mythical value.

Artists such as Tarsila de Amaral (Brazil), Cândido Portinari (Brazil), José Cúneo (Uruguay), Emilio Petorutti (Argentina), Diego Rivera (Mexico), among many others, assimilated its morphological aspect. But other artists understood cubism as a way of thinking. They assimilated its structural dimension, such as Wifredo Lam (Cuba), Francisco Matto (Uruguay), Joaquín Torres García (Uruguay), and Fernando de Szyszlo (Peru), among others.

With a theoretical frame following the considerations of Carl Einstein, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, and Vincenc Kramář, three art theorists who tackled cubism from different angles and in terms of man's active participation in the creation of a new, more dynamic view of the world, this paper approaches the works of Wifredo Lam, Fernando de Szyszlo and Francisco Matto, privileging the way they deal with space and their dialogue with local ancestral traditions in the context of modern societies.