Miradas
Journal for the Arts and Culture of the Américas and the Iberian Peninsula

MIRADAS 06 (2022)
Special Issue: Bodies/Fashions in the Américas 2

eISSN: 2363-8087
https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/miradas

Edited by: Franziska Neff; Miriam Oesterreich;
Institut für Europäische Kunstgeschichte, Heidelberg University

Hosted by: University Library Heidelberg

Joaquín Torres-García's Urban Fabrics: Fashioning the Body in New York, 1920-1922

Receipt date: 12.07.2021
Acceptance date: 07.09.2021
DOI: doi.org/10.11588/mira.2022.2.85775

Author: Francesca Ferrari, PhD Candidate The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University
Mail: fif204@nyu.edu

Citation:
Ferrari, Francesca. "Joaquín Torres-García's Urban Fabrics: Fashioning the Body in New York, 1920-1922." Special issue *Bodies/Fashions in the Américas 2*, edited by Franziska Neff and Miriam Oesterreich. *MIRADAS – Journal for the Arts and Culture of the Américas and the Iberian Peninsula* 6 (2022): 48–64, DOI: doi.org/10.11588/mira.2022.2.85775

Joaquín Torres-García's Urban Fabrics: Fashioning the Body in New York, 1920–1922

Francesca Ferrari

Abstract

In 1919, the Uruguayan artist Torres-García moved from Barcelona to New York. In the experimental works that he produced during his two-year stay in the city, the artist presented New York and the bodies inhabiting it as inextricable from one another and mutually defining, enmeshed within the same urban fabric. He did so especially through references to fashion, depicting the articles of clothing worn by New Yorkers as extensions of the city's morphology. By drawing upon the social functions of actual fabrics, Torres-García connected bodily and architectural surfaces to negotiate his ambivalence towards the demands of New York's capitalist society. This article investigates the artist's constant oscillation between adhering to and undermining the conformity and mechanization that he attributed to New York' denizens. I argue that, through his interventions into the realm of fashion, Torres-García negotiated the urban individual's potential to either submit to the rhythms and lifestyles imposed by the city or resist them by playing with socio-economic signs and multiple identities. I show that this unresolved tension echoes with Torres-García's writings from this period, illuminating the artist's conflicted relationship with the city.

Keywords: avant-garde art • New York • fashion • architecture • papier collé • artist toys • costume design

In March 1921, the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García, who then resided in New York, participated in the annual ball of the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf Astoria. For the occasion, Torres-García wore a costume known as *New York Suit* that consisted of a pair of white overalls usually worn by house painters and a shirt that he decorated with various New York landmarks (fig. 1). Using the costume's cloth as a canvas to paint a cityscape complete with iconic structures such as the Brooklyn Bridge and the Woolworth Building and topological markers such as 5th Avenue and the Bowery, Torres-García wrapped his body with an article of clothing that mimicked the city's morphology, enmeshing his figure and the metropolis in the same urban fabric. Popularized by the sociologist Gaston Bardet in 1951, the concept of urban fabric conveys "the weaving together of ways of living within a town" (Bardet 1951, 237).[1] *New York Suit* literalizes this notion, as the actual, painted fabric of which it is made renders the subject wearing the costume (in this case the artist) and New York inseparable from one another and mutually defining. If the signs of the city's architecture and urban plan envelop and partially mask the body, their position and shape change according to the subject's movements and gestures. I propose that the relationship between bodily and urban surfaces that the costume establishes is central to Torres-García's artistic production during his stay in New York between 1920 and 1922. Over the course of these two years, Torres-García created a number of works that illuminate his ambivalence about the "ways of living" that he observed in the city. I argue that the paintings, drawings, collages, artist toys, and costume design that the artist made in this period encapsulate his constant oscillation between adhering to the demands of New York's capitalist society and his desire to undermine them. He recurrently negotiated this oscillation with references to fashion, which he presented both as a vehicle for conformity and a means to play with multiple identities. Through articles of clothing (actual or represented), Torres-García mediated his conflicting feelings about the embo-

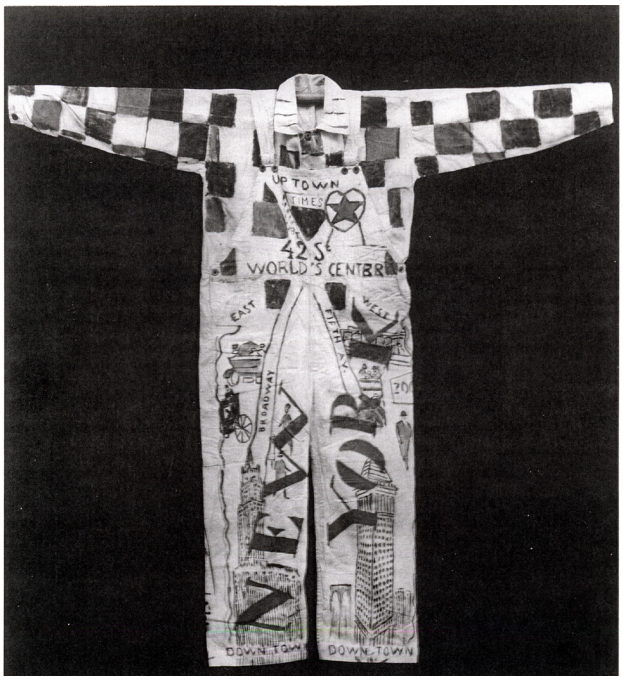

Fig.1: Joaquín Torres-García, *New York, Suit,* 1921, Oil on painter's suit (overalls and shirt), Estate of Joaquín Torres-García. Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

* I am thankful to Cecilia de Torres and Victoria Fedrigotti for their generous support with my research, to Edward J. Sullivan for his encouragement, and to Anna Linehan for her feedback on an earlier version of this article. All translations are my own.

1 Bardet appears to use the terms "urban texture" and "urban fabric" interchangeably.

died individual's place in the modern urban environment, intervening upon both the social fabric joining the lives of New Yorkers and the garments covering and defining their bodies. In this sense, Torres-García departed from the strategies of other Latin American artists active in New York in the late 1910s and 1920s, including Carlos Mérida (who spent a brief period in the metropolis in 1917) and Rufino Tamayo (who resided there from September 1926 to December 1928). During their sojourns in New York, these latter artists often engaged with exoticizing imagery loosely inspired by the cultural heritage and rural traditions of their native Guatemala and Mexico, respectively, rendering people of indigenous background wearing Mayan textiles or *campesino* straw hats, among other subjects. They partly did so in response to the growing demand in the United States for regionally-specific fantasies of a timeless realm divorced from industrial modernity (Delpar 2015). At the same time, this imagery allowed Mérida and Tamayo, who both had indigenous roots, to grapple with the complex processes of identity-formation triggered by the racist rhetoric of critics and dealers in the United States, who tended to herald their work as a reflection of their nationality and ethnicity (Montgomery 2017, 67-71; Ferrari 2019, 2-20). As a white Uruguayan who often passed as Spanish because of his extended stay in Barcelona (where he had lived since the age of eighteen), Torres-García was able to stray away from the *indigenista* connotations and nationalistic tropes that abound in Mérida's and Tamayo's work from this period. Instead, he made the metropolitan lifestyles and models of embodiment that informed his ambivalent experience of New York's industrial ethos the main subject of his artistic production in the United States.

"The Common Ideal: Dollars!"

Torres-García arrived with his family in New York by ship on June 16, 1920, hoping to find a fertile market for his activities as a fine artist as well as a commercial decorator (de Torres 2009, 106-125; Gutiérrez-Guimarães 2015, 38-89). Intrigued by New York's renown as a business capital, the artist left Barcelona with the expectation to make a living by selling his artworks but also by engaging in a variety of professional activities that could provide him with economic stability. In particular, the move was motivated by his aspiration to commercialize his artist's toys (which I analyze below) on a mass scale and to find opportunities as an illustrator, mural painter, and theatrical designer. Yet, even though Torres-García became involved with important projects for Saint Patrick's Cathedral, the J. P. Morgan family chapel, the jewelry Tiffany and Company, and the Broadway firm Beaumont Velvet Scenery, among others, he faced financial difficulties that forced him to leave New York for Italy only two years later (de Torres 2009, 108; Grimson 2015, 197-198). Nonetheless, his sojourn in the city was incredibly productive and played a formative role in the development

Fig. 2: Joaquín Torres-García, *Business Town*, 1920, Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas, 46.3 x 56.2 cm, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), Buenos Aires. Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

of his later oeuvre, which gained him international acclaim in the late 1920s and the 1930s.[2] This brief but intense period of Torres-García's career built upon his engagement with the avant-garde style dubbed *Vibracionismo* (Vibrationism) that he had pioneered with his compatriot and friend Rafael Barradas three years before relocating to the United States (Faxedas Brujats 2016, n. p.). Through this visual idiom, he aimed at capturing the kinetic and sensorial confusion characteristic of large modern cities, employing vivid colors, stark contrasts, and dense compositions. If in Barcelona Torres-García was already interested in dizzying metropolitan scenes, his experience of New York drastically intensified his fascination with frenetic street views, mechanical modes of transportation, swarming crowds, and mass-produced goods. At the same time, this experience nuanced the artist's celebration of modernity and mechanization, alerting him to the human costs of industrialization and unbridled capitalism. To be sure, Torres-Garcia's first impression of the city was one of untethered enthusiasm. In the diaries that he wrote during his stay, he recalled spending his early days in New York wondering at the metropolis' vitality, remarking upon "its overflowing life, with its millions of forms – composing and decomposing itself" (Torres-García 2007, 90). Reveling in a seemingly infinite supply of multisensorial pleasures and sophisticated artifices, the artist embraced the city's materialism, claiming that "for this, spiritual enjoyment is not possible – and it is substituted with material pleasure: – baseball – regattas – luminous plays at the theater – mechanical musical sounds – picnics – ice cream – sports – dance – mechanical games for hobby – cinema… and the common ideal: dollars!" (Torres-García 2007, 71-72). Similarly, the paintings that he created during his stay convey the turmoil of New York through agglomerations of architectural details (such as rows of skyscrapers' windows and fire escape stairs), textual fragments evoking billboards, street signs, and commercial insignia, and traffic jams involving passersby, cars, and carriages. A 1920 work titled *Business Town* shows one such agglomeration (fig. 2). Here, Torres-García recreated the agitation that pervaded New York through his rough brushstrokes, conveying the speed and

2 Torres-García is best known for his development of the concept of Constructive Universalism, to which he gave concrete form through grid-like compositions populated with figurative pictograms that he thought distilled universal concepts shared by various civilizations across history (Fló 1991; Rommens 2016).

confusion that he experienced in a city that appeared in perpetual flux. Yet, the vitality that the artist celebrated in his writings appears to be inseparable from the rhythms of capitalist production. People and machines constantly moved, but they did so for the purpose of making business. Barely sketched human silhouettes emerge in the midst of this commercial buzz, riding tramways, descending cars, and entering buildings. Their faceless figures only differ in their clothes, which the artist loosely painted with stains of unmodulated color. As in most of the cityscapes that Torres-García created in this period, New Yorkers appear in the distance and from a downward angle, as if seen from a skyscraper's window. They look like tokens of a multitude, rather than particular individuals, and their bodies are partly dehumanized as they visually blend with the inorganic components of the metropolis. This depiction resonates with Torres-García's impression that the city's urban fabric did not allow much space for individual expression, functioning more as a tight net limiting New Yorkers to execute repetitive, machine-like behaviors for the sake of financial gain. If, on the one hand, the artist celebrated the sensorial overload and fast pace of the modern urban environment, he also recurrently communicated anxiety about the anonymity and homogeneity that he observed among New York's inhabitants. In his writings, Torres-García oscillated between exalting New York's exhilarating stimulation and bemoaning its obsession for efficiency and commercial success, often imbricating his arguments with reflections on the kind of bodies that these dynamics engendered. Namely, he often described typical New Yorkers as fundamentally different from himself by virtue of their coldness and quasi-mechanization:

> This civilization has already created new men – without old prejudices – tireless workers, calm too – without personality – vigilant – practical – strong – well-balanced … And these men – uniformly handsome – shaven – clean – cleanly dressed – satisfied to be as they are – proud of their country – won't ever allow anything in here that may debilitate them – that may trouble them – that may effeminate them (Torres-García 2007, 83).

These impervious, highly gendered "new men" did not necessarily carry positive connotations for Torres-García, who perceived the city's ethos of tireless productivity as foreign and almost inhuman. Through such generalizations, he conveyed his misgivings about human beings' functioning in an environment propelled by economic interest, expressing preoccupation for the predictability and repeatability of people's behaviors in the city: "Men and things, everything here is industrialized; everything responds to the practical sense" (Torres-García 2007, 89). He repeatedly drew connections between the city's capitalist demands and New Yorkers' affinity with machines, lamenting their attendant lack of inventiveness, initiative, and idiosyncrasy – all qualities that he considered essential for artists (Torres-García 2007, 63; 69). Even as

he praised New York's exceptional energy, he worried that it may not be a welcoming place for his creative endeavors, admitting that "This is New York – the city of seven million – that crushes the artist. – But New York is New York – unique" (Torres-García 2007, 75). Despite his enthusiasm for New York's hyperactivity, Torres-García remained suspicious of the conformity and deindividualization that he thought defined the city's denizens.

Architectural and Bodily Surfaces

Fashion played a central role in mediating Torres-García's views on New Yorkers. If in his paintings he reduced them to indistinct silhouettes and in his diaries he described them as semi-automata, the caricatural drawings that he made during his time in New York reduced them to a set of schematized attires. In these works, the artist zeroed in on the city's avenues to satirize the behaviors of the metropolitan crowd. In one drawing that features a stacked composition reminiscent of a comic strip, Torres-García juxtaposed three vignettes where male passersby interact to various degrees of chaos: at the top, they trample and collapse over one other; at the center, they obliviously walk by; and, at the bottom, they swarm each side of the road while waiting for a traffic policeman's signal to cross (fig. 3). Even if here Torres-García took a closer look at the crowd than in *Business Town*, depicting people with a certain degree of proximity as if he drew them from street level, he still partially dehumanized them. Not only did he deprive each individual of psychological features, presenting them instead as cartoonish characters; he also denied them anatomical plausibility by rendering their bodies inseparable from their clothes. The passersby appear to be made of boxy coats and rectangular trousers, rather than flesh, and mostly lack heads, faces, and hands. Torres-García subtly implied the presence of these body parts through floating hats, suspended briefcases, and levitating cigarettes, replacing their physical appendages with objects. These assemblages of rectangular shapes recall the machines and modern buildings that pervaded New York, more than they do human beings. Thus, Torres-García portrayed New York's inhabitants as embodiments of the city's industry and architecture. Merely distinguished by the proportions of their angular garments and their stock of accessories, New Yorkers seem mechanized and inanimate. However, the artist also employed this equation between clothing and the body (or lack thereof) to present New York as a playful space in which one

Fig. 3: Joaquín Torres-García, *Scenes of Daily Life III*, 1920-1922, Ink on paper, 28 x 21.6 cm, Collection Torres-García Family, Montevideo. Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

could experiment with social codes. Consider the watercolor album titled *New York City* that he executed in 1920. In this album, he gathered cityscapes comparable to *Business Town*, which at times immortalize recognizable areas such as Broadway and the New York Harbor, along with several close-up views of items like clocks, cigarettes, suits, and shoes floating against unmarked backgrounds and accompanied with price tags and brand names (fig. 4). He likely modelled the images after the advertisements that proliferated on the walls and in the shopwindows of New York, which he singled out as a defining feature of the city:

> The advertisement invades the wall – on the wide facades – high up on the tall buildings – on any wall – on any high or low surface – in a thousand forms – in a thousand dimensions… It occupies up to the smallest available space on the overground and underground trains – on the buses – on the ferry boats. It decorates all sorts of vehicles, fills the windows of the big department stores and the small shops… (Torres-García 2007, 81).

To Torres-García, commercial imagery was an integral part of the city, plastering its architectural surfaces much like the garments that it advertised promised to cover the bodies of potential buyers. As art historian Cecilia de Torres has acutely observed, Torres-García's depictions of advertisements in *New York City* anticipated of several decades the interventions of Pop Art, underscoring the pervasiveness of posters and flyers in the urban environment and engaging a mise-en-abyme of representations (for instance, his depiction of a woman's shoe strikingly recalls Andy Warhol's 1956 illustrations of golden footwear) (De Torres 2009, 114). The stenciled label "New York" that Torres-García applied to each watercolor intensifies these works' economic connotations, functioning as a trademark of sorts to highlight the images' specificity to the city. Thus, the album resembles a catalogue that records New York's appearance and reproduces its offer of items for sale, presenting the metropolis as a gigantic bazaar. In this bazaar, with the right financial means, one could choose among a vast array of attires and intervene upon one's appearance. This opened the possibility of a city-wide masquerade in which people could mimic and even appropriate the different identities associated with various fashion items. Torres-García almost completely evacuated the human figure from both his all-encompassing urban views and focused depictions of objects, leaving room for the viewer to project themselves in the dress-up game that the images evoke. At the same time, this absence reiterates the impersonality that emerges in

Fig. 4: Joaquín Torres-García, *New York City*, 125 1920, Watercolor on paper, 17 x 21 cm, Colección Fundación Torres-García, Montevideo. Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

Torres-García's diaries; when bodies do appear, they are either dwarfed by New York's architecture or evoke faceless mannequins. In the metropolis, these works suggest, commodities play a central role in mediating the appearance of the body in society.

Torres-García made this suggestion concrete in a series of papiers collés that appropriate and recontextualize commercial imagery (de Torres 2009, 114; Díaz and Perera 2011, 174-187; Ferrari 2021, n. p.). Bound together with twine to form another album, these works prominently feature scraps of society magazines and fashion advertisements alongside photographs of New York's buildings and monuments, often portraying elegantly clad people embodying the optimism of the so-called Roaring Twenties. In one of these works, Torres-García pasted a captivating illustration of two female models donning extravagant haute-couture hats. Their detailed, sumptuous ornaments are rendered naturalistically, conveying a sophisticated allure that betrays Torres-García's fascination for the glamorous lifestyles depicted in these publications, along with their attendant dreams of luxury, wealth, and freedom. The artist frequently remarked on New Yorkers' stylishness, going as far as describing them as "an overflowing, well-dressed multitude" (Torres-Garcia 2007, 64). However, this image contrasts with an adjacent cartoon that derisively depicts an awkward bourgeois couple clumsily rocking on a porch swing, and even more with an illustration of a worker looking for a job in a newspaper's want ads page. These unsettling juxtapositions parallel Torres-García's ironic description of the kind of happiness and sensorial pleasure that commercial imagery promised the viewer:

> In almost all of these advertisements (always) one sees a satisfied and smiling individual – who smokes, satisfied and smiling – who has breakfast, satisfied and smiling…Another drinks, satisfied and smiling – another shows an elegant suit – another … a thousand, all satisfied and smiling, show what happiness is about and how to obtain it" (Torres-García 2007, 81).

If, with these words, the artist seemingly longed to identify with the characters in these images, he again caricaturized them as generic types whose psychological states barely vary, fossilizing their expression in an eternal smile of satisfaction. Torres-García recognized that the idyllic representations disseminated by advertisements erased the complex experiences that people like himself had in New York. Evoking his own situation as a struggling artist, he admitted that "There are always unhappy people! Some artists; some idealists; some gringos; some European with philosophical pretenses; some ruined aristocrats… some individuals with their own initiative… Which is to say, individuals who did not know how to adapt" (Torres-García 2007, 81). The happiness and comfort publicized by the same magazines that Torres-García turned into art supplies were far from reflecting the reality of his life in New York, which

oppressed those who could not or would not conform to its demands for constant productivity. The papiers collés expose the constructedness of the fantasies of glamour and leisure through their composite surfaces and clearly handmade facture. Their fractured materiality mirrors the social and economic fissures that divided New York's population – fissures that Torres-García directly experienced as an immigrant struggling to make a living. His financial problems were so impactful that he pasted at the center of his 1920 painting *New York Street Scene* a letter from the publisher Harcourt, Brace & Howe, in which they rejected his job application (Guimarães 2016, 39; Sullivan 2018, 76; Ferrari, 2022). Moreover, besides rhetorically deconstructing the captivating illusions fostered by marketing, he exposed the mechanisms whereby fashion transformed the body into a vehicle for economic signs. Consider another papier collé, where an announcement for a 50% sale reduction on suits featuring an excited crowd of well-dressed men emerges alongside two separate ads for women's clothes, in which two young female models don a stylish sweater and dress, respectively. The clothes' prices float around the men and women much like they accompany the disembodied objects in *New York City*'s watercolors, giving the impression that the people in the images are themselves items for sale. In an environment driven by commercial interest, Torres-García implied, human beings risk becoming commodified – a risk that went hand in hand with the general deindividualization and dehumanization that the artist projected on New Yorkers in his writings and works. However, two other papiers collés suggest that Torres-García did not simply conceive of fashion as a vehicle for delusions and objectification. In fact, he also recognized its potential to serve as an antidote to the conformity that he thought stifled New Yorkers' individuality. Here, the artist juxtaposed depictions of generic metropolitan types with the Russian artist Mikhail Larionov's mechanical-looking costume designs for the theater, which were reproduced in the portfolio *L'Art décoratif théâtral modern* that he compiled with Natalia Goncharova in 1919. In one work, Larionov's black-and-white sketch for a Kingfisher character appears alongside two trendy women that a red headline identifies as "flappers" (fig. 5), while in the other, a colorful figure that Larionov captioned "character in a funeral march for an aunt with an inheritance" flanks a photograph of men leaning on the banks of the Harlem River Speedway under the Washington Bridge (Goncharova and Larionov 1919, n. p.). In both images, To-

Fig. 5: Joaquín Torres-García, *Collage* 1921-1922, Collage of newspaper clippings, 21 x 28 cm, Colección Fundación Torres-García, Montevideo. Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

rres-García did not depict specific individuals. Rather, he matched Larionov's theatrical figures with personifications of trendiness and a crowd seen from behind. Ironically, even if Larionov's geometric designs approximate the mechanical automata to which Torres-García compared the people of New York, they appear more varied and idiosyncratic than the flappers and the men on the river bank. The costumes show the degree of transformation that clothing could afford the body, providing an exciting alternative to the conformist attires illustrated in the papiers collés. Moreover, Torres-García's reference to theater suggests that one's dress should not encapsulate one's identity and social status, with the risk of turning one into a mere type; on the contrary, it might generate the possibility to control and temporarily modify one's body, as if the city were an enormous stage on which to perform multiple roles.

Transformative Garments

Larionov's costumes remarkably resemble the composite geometric toys (in Spanish *juguetes*) that Torres-García conceived in Barcelona in 1917 but began producing on a large scale after his arrival in New York. The *juguetes*' production spans Torres-García's stays in Barcelona, New York, Fiesole, and various parts of France between 1917 and 1925, and was interrupted after a fire destroyed the artist's full inventory and frustrated his aspiration to broadly market them. This production gained traction in New York through the help of various collaborators, such as the U.S. curator Juliana Force, who provided an important marketing opportunity when she exhibited prototypes of the *juguetes* at the Whitney Studio Club in May 1921 and February 1923, and the Spaniard John Agell, with whom Torres-García founded the Aladdin Toys Company through which they distributed the toys to department stores across Europe, such as Metz & Co. in the Netherlands and Selfridges in the United Kingdom. Torres-García understood these hand-painted wooden objects as both playthings for children and elaborate curiosities for art collectors. Although the *juguetes* represented a variety of subjects, including animals, means of transportation, and buildings, they predominantly consisted of human characters, which Torres-García modelled after the people that he observed in the streets of New York. [3]Even if he occasionally designed uniformed figures recognizable as soldiers, railway men, hotel porters, and Harlequins, he mostly presented the human *juguetes* as generic tokens of the upper-middle class. Like Larionov, Torres-García envisioned these geometric bodies as kinetic. If the costumes would become animated by the actors who wore them, the *juguetes* propelled the viewer's interaction and handling. In fact, the toys' distinctive feature is that they are composed of separate squarish blocks screwed into one another that are susceptible to manipulation, movement, and reconfiguration – all properties that are most evident in the human characters. Considered

3 Torres-García's human *juguetes* are exlored in more detail in the second chapter of my doctoral dissertation (Ferrari, forthcoming, n.p.)

alongside their animal counterparts, the human *juguetes* stand out for the diversity and abundance of their configurations. The animals tend to contain less pieces than the anthropomorphic toys, and their components are in some cases hinged, thus limiting the figures' range of motion. The viewer can modify these figure's anatomies by choosing legs, torsos, and heads among a number of possible options, so that the characters can don limbs of different proportions, shuffle their garments, and vary in height, build, position (standing or seated), clothing, and facial expression. This simple technology allows for the creation of a small crowd of homologous figures from a few elements. Much like in Torres-García's caricatures described above, the human body appears to be inseparable from clothing, as the characters' anatomies coincide with what they wear. With the exception of their faces, fashion items convey the shape and structure of all their body parts: their hats serve as craniums, their jackets as torsos comprehensive of arms and hands, and their trousers as legs. Torres-García spared individualizing features and markers of difference, rendering the figures almost interchangeable, as well as reminiscent of New York's blocky architecture. Take the c.1922 set *Four Human Figures* (fig. 6): The four characters have analogous body frames and, although one of the faces is inscribed with a goatee, the other three are all deprived of facial hair. Despite donning a squarish skirt, the only female member of the group appears quite androgynous, for her short hair (reflecting the bob cut popular at the time) does not differ much from that of her male counterparts. Still, Torres-García did not simply create equivalences between clothing and the body, he also utilized fashion as a vehicle to distinguish among his toys, fixing their transformability within a set of possible looks. To this end, he rendered their clothes quite accurately, reproducing various textures and designs and going to great lengths to render the squarish suits, plaid jackets and trousers, newsboy caps, fedoras, and top hats that were all the rage at the time. These formal resonances test the viewer's fluency with the social connotations of clothing, as if the toys were educational tools that could solidify their ability to read socio-economic signs and match particular articles of clothing with particular bodies. Indeed, these wooden playthings engender a tension between heterogeneity and homogeneity, transformability and uniformity. Torres-García highlighted this tension in a black-and-white catalogue that he circulated in English-language to potential buyers, illustrating the many possible options of each group of toys (Díaz and Perera 2005, 66-79). To the right of each page, Torres-García drew the figures broken up into pieces and arranged inside a facsimile of the box in which

Fig. 6: Joaquín Torres-García, *Four Human Figures*, c. 1922, Oil on wood, ca. 14.5 cm high, Private collection, Montevideo, Courtesy Estate of Joaquín Torres-García

he would sell them. To the left, he depicted the compositional permutations that could derive from the set, picturing all potential bodily configurations lined up next to each other. For example, the catalogue's opening illustration showcases three dandy figures consisting of two differently-clad pairs of legs; two torsos wearing distinct jackets; one compact unit merging the top and bottom parts of a suited body; three heads (of which one is shown in profile and wearing glasses, one in three-quarter view, and one frontally); and three hats of diverging styles (Díaz and Perera 2005, 75). Alongside these fragmented anatomies, Torres-García presented ten heterogeneous male figures derivable from the eleven discrete pieces available in the set. Much like in the caricatures, the figures bear striking family resemblances to each other and mimic the metropolis' architecture – especially the slenderest character, whose tall stature and checkered suit evoke a skyscraper and a façade punctuated with windows. Thus, Torres-García exposed the uniformity of New York dandies through the recurrent presence of fashionable patterns and hat styles, but at the same time he underscored the idiosyncrasies that make each individual figure unique. Thanks to their openness to manipulation, the *juguetes* present the human figure as a loose structure vulnerable to dislocation and reorganization according to a finite number of permutations, casting the people in the metropolis as homogeneous types but also as parts of an ever-changing whole. Much like Larionov's costumes, the *juguetes* foreground fashion's transformative and interactive potential. In this way, their mobile configurations embody the dynamism that Torres-García cherished about New York without necessarily evoking the repetitive automatism that he dreaded. Their capacity for spontaneous motion contrasts with the industrial echoes of their geometric makeup and modular structures. Further, the option of selecting and matching the toys' garments would have appeared as an invitation for New Yorkers to mobilize their own bodies, gaining agency over the characters' appearance in the face of commercial attempts to commodify it. Despite their finite anatomical and sartorial options, the fragmented figures activate the viewer's body and creativity, requiring haptic interaction, imaginative input, and knowledge of New York's dress-codes to even form meaningful units. The *juguetes*' exhortation to employ the sense of touch to play with the characters' clothes mirrors Torres-García's own intimate handling of the toys, which is revealed by the wooden blocks' unevenness and rough brushstrokes. These qualities testify to the handmade quality of these objects, contrasting the mechanical connotations of their schematic forms. By envisioning the toys as subject to manipulation and transformation, Torres-García imagined a body whose potential for reinvention and variation resisted what he thought were the homogenizing and depersonalizing demands of New York. The *juguetes* foster an alternative model of embodiment for New Yorkers – one that entails physical interaction and openness to constant change. With these apparently trivial objects, Torres-García simultaneously reiterated and resisted the constricting dynamics that he believed the modern urban environment imposed on its inhabitants.

Conclusion: Wearing the Metropolis

With *New York Suit* (fig. 1), Torres-García embraced this tension by reversing the relationship whereby New York's capitalist society dictated the appearance of its subjects. Much like the works discussed above, the costume turned the body into a literal image of the city. However, here it was the city that conformed to the contours of the subject's body, rather than the other way around. If the toys, like the caricatures, rendered New Yorkers formally similar to the city's distinctive architecture, *New York Suit* modelled New York after the wearer. On the front of the suit, Torres-García inscribed cartographic details such as the names of important streets, including Broadway, Fifth Avenue, and 42nd Street, as well as more general markers necessary to orient in the metropolis, for example "East," "West," "Uptown," and "Downtown." These markers mirror the wearer's anatomical structure, respectively labelling the right and left sides of their torso, the overalls' top edge resting on their chest, and the bottom of their pant legs. Torres-García also drew a number of New York landmarks, such as the Woolworth building, which extends below the right knee, and the Bankers Trust Equitable Building, which rises alongside the Brooklyn Bridge on the left shin. He depicted these buildings naturalistically, as if he copied them from photographs of the metropolis' skyline similar to those that he incorporated in his papiers collés, and made their geographic location unmistakable by painting in red the large words "New" and "York" on each leg much like he applied the stencils in the *New York City* album. The back of the suit is more stylized, as Torres-García graced it with another, closer view of the *Brooklyn Bridge* and a detail of an American flag flying over a steamboat. This landmark recalls the famous painting of the same subject by the U.S. artist Joseph Stella (Brooklyn Bridge, 1919-1920; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven), whom Torres-García befriended in February of 1921 and whom might have been responsible for getting the Uruguayan artist an invite to the ball where he donned the costume. In addition to this image, *New York Suit* also features simple rectangular frames in which Torres-García wrote the names of places like Bronx Park and Central Park. He also comically situated a large circular clock, a rounded area identified as the Bowery, and Wall Street on his rear-end, deliberately echoing the shape of his buttocks. The interstitial spaces between these images are covered in a checkered pattern of black, red, and green squares, as is the shirt that Torres-García wore underneath the overalls. This motif recalls the checkerboard and plaid suits in vogue at the time and donned by many of the *juguetes*, as well as the structure of New York's gridiron urban plan, further enmeshing the city's fashion and architecture within the same urban fabric. The suit fused Torres-García's body with the city, intimately joining the artist with the recurrent object of his work. A *New York Times* article chronicling the evening stressed the organic equivalences that the artist drew between the metropolis and his anatomy: "He sat on the Bowery, the Times building was on his chest just above Forty-Second Street, and the Bronx ran uptown

on the back of his neck" (*New York Times* 1921, 11). To the author, Torres-García did not merely wear the metropolis, he had become one with it. Covered with the city's iconic signs, the artist turned himself into a personification of New York. Significantly, Torres-García hijacked *New Yok Suit* from the realm of work, and specifically the kind of activities with which he tried to make a living during his time there. The overalls and shirt that make up the costume were commonly worn by carpenters and painters and, to him, they functioned as a uniform for business-driven New York artisans and artists ("you have to wear overalls like everyone else," he complained in his writings) (Torres-García 2007, 83). Overalls emblematized the ways in which the capitalist system imposed itself on artists' working bodies, homogenizing them and blurring their individual identities At the same time, however, the costume facilitated visual, tactile, and kinetic experiences that are unique to the wearer, underscoring the subjectiveness of embodied actions. The artist's free motion at the ball would have resisted the repetitiveness and predictability of mechanical work, endlessly expanding upon the *juguetes*' potential for variation and further extricating fashion from the dehumanizing connotations that Torres-García contrived in other works. Accordingly, the city that Torres-García figured forth in the costume was susceptible to his gestures, relocations, and dance moves. Every slide, stride, turn, and twirl rearranged and transformed New York, displacing its streets and parks, mismatching its blocks, and collapsing its landmarks. With *New York Suit*, Torres-García enacted the perpetual compromise between adherence and resistance to the city's social and economic constraints, presenting both the body and New York as entities continuously oscillating between these conflicting positions.

During the two years that Torres-García spent in New York, he produced several works in which, like in his diaries, he brought together two contrasting models of embodiment that he thought defined the experience of living in a modern metropolis. On the one hand, these works criticized the city's dehumanizing effects on its inhabitants by parodying New Yorker's perceived conformity, impersonality, and attunement to industrial rhythms. Torres-García's paintings, drawings, papiers collés, and wooden toys, as well as his writings, convey these qualities by presenting New Yorkers as partially disembodied types and by equating them with the city's architecture, industrial structures, and commercial commodities. On the other hand, Torres-García understood the city as a site where to expand one's sensorial experiences, casting it as an unstable conglomerate of ever-changing stimuli in which things perpetually transform. Although he feared that New York propelled its inhabitants to obsessively do business and earn money, he also cherished its ability to awaken the body through a variety of sensations, allowing one to bask in the here and now of intense perceptual events. He conjured the dynamism and physical activation that he thought was peculiar to New York through the kinetic potential of works like the *juguetes* and *New York Suit*. Through this approach, he reclaimed the

centrality of bodily experiences in the metropolis, countering the impersonality that he feared could take over its inhabitants. Torres-García employed fashion to mediate his ambivalent position on the role of the human body in a modern urban center like New York. If, at times, he utilized clothes to underscore New Yorkers' homogeneity, deindividualization, and mechanization, he also exploited their potential to express difference and reconfigure the body through a transformative play that exploited the fluidity of fashion's social markers. It is especially through sartorial designs that the artist orchestrated the formal resonances that connected the city and the body in his New York works, presenting the metropolis and the people populating it as inextricable from one another, woven together in the same urban fabric.

Bibliography

Bardet, Gaston. “Social Topography: An Analytico-Synthetic Understanding of the Urban Texture.” *The Town Planning Review* 22:3 (1951): 237-260.

De Torres, Cecilia. “Torres-García’s New York: The City as Icon of Modern Art.” In *Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis*, edited by Deborah Cullen, 106-125. Exhibition catalogue. New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2009.

De Torres, Cecilia, et al. “Chronology: New York, 1920-22.” In *Joaquín Torres-García Catalogue Raisonné*. http://torresgarcia.com/chronology/?name=New%20York (accessed March 12, 2021).

Díaz, Alejandro, and Jimena Perera. *Aladdin: Juguetes Transformables*. Exhibition catalogue. Montevideo, Uruguay: Museo Torres García, 2005.

——. *Trazos de New York*. Exhibition catalogue. Montevideo: Museo Torres-García, 2011.

Faxedas Brujats, M. Lluïsa. “Barradas’ Vibrationism and its Catalan Context” *RIHA* 135 (2016). www.rihajournal.org/articles/2016/0131-0140-special-issue-southernmodernisms/0135-faxedas-brujats (accessed March 12, 2021).

Ferrari, Francesca. “Eroding ‘Material Perfection’: Layered Surfaces and Composite Constructions in Joaquín Torres-García’s New York Work, 1920-22.” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*. Forthcoming 2022.

——. “Animated Geometries: Abstraction and the Body in the Work of Alexandra Exter, Paul Klee, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Joaquín Torres-García. PhD dissertation. Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Forthcoming.

Fló, Juan José. *Torres-García en (y desde) Montevideo*. Montevideo, Uruguay: Arca, 1991.

Goncharova, Natalia, and Mikhail Larionov. *L’Art décoratif théâtral moderne*. Paris: La Cible, 1919.

“Greenwich Village Tops Artists’ Ball.” *New York Times* (1921): 11.

Pérez-Oramas, Luis, ed. *Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern*. Exhibition

catalogue. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015.

Rommens, Aarnoud. *The Art of Joaquín Torres-García: Constructive Universalism and the Inversion of Abstraction*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Sullivan, Edward J. *Making the Americas Modern: Hemispheric Art, 1910–1960*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2018.

Torres-García, Joaquín. *New York*, edited by Juan Fló. Montevideo, Uruguay: Fundación Torres-García, 2007.