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Flirting with Futurism: Norah Borges and the Avant-Garde

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Abstract: The Argentine visual artist Norah Borges (1901-1998) travelled to Europe with her family and began her artistic career in Switzerland and Spain at just 17 years of age. She arrived in Europe at a time of war but also at a moment in which avant-garde movements were questioning the future direction of visual representation. Her development as an artist within this context would prove decisive and Norah developed a style of her own by drawing eclectically upon Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism. She also combined elements of these movements with influences from more traditional forms of painting, evading categorization by any particular Modernist school or *-ism*. This fusion of elements resulted in her work being hailed as the epitome of the Spanish avant-garde movement *ultraísmo*, and getting published in some of the most important avant-garde periodicals of the time. This essay seeks to explore the influences of Futurism in Norah's early prints and considers the longer-lasting effects the movement had on her style. It builds upon previous studies of Norah's early prints, which have provided detailed analyses of the influences of Expressionism and Cubism, and aims to draw out the elements of Futurism contained in her earliest works. Whilst the emphasis is on the influences of Futurism, the intention of the analysis is to underscore the artist's successful blending of diverse styles in images that resonated with the wider concerns of various avant-garde movements.

Introduction

In 1914, the Argentine visual artist Norah Borges (1901-1998) travelled with her brother Jorge Luis and their parents on a *grand tour* to Europe. In Switzerland, they became trapped by the First World War, at which point the fourteen-year old Norah interrupted her journey and took up training at the School of Fine Arts in Geneva.¹ Following the war, the family continued their voyage and travelled to Mallorca, Seville and Madrid (1918-21). It was here that Norah published her first prints and where her unique style was embraced by her contemporaries as the epitome of *ultraísmo*, the Spanish avant-garde movement. Norah returned to Argentina in 1921 and, alongside her brother, Jorge Luis Borges, helped to introduce avant-garde styles to her own country.

Norah's time in Europe was crucial for her artistic training, as her stay coincided with a period in which the whole purpose of art was being questioned and the various *-isms* were proposing new aesthetic directions for artists of all disciplines. She flirted stylistically with Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism at a time when she was only just beginning to work as an artist. The questions raised by these new movements overlapped with her search for her own style. Her avant-garde friends noted how she incorporated innovative stylistic devices into her works and helped her to disseminate her prints in a diverse range of cultural magazines of the time.²

¹ Born Leonor Fanny Borges Acevedo, she is known as Norah, and I shall refer to her in this essay by this name, as the surname Borges is nowadays almost exclusively linked to her older brother.

² In Spain Norah's work appeared in *Baleares*, *Grecia*, *Ultra*, *Alfar* and *Papel de Aleluyas*, among others. Her

Critics have noted the influence of various European avant-garde movements on Norah Borges's early works and it is clear that she was cognisant of and willing to experiment with a range of styles. In one of the first articles to examine her work, Plaza Chillón states that Norah "used an aesthetic that was completely modern but which was not defined by a specific style. Futurist, Cubist, and particularly Expressionist influences can be seen in her first prints".³ Chillón's focus on the influence of German Expressionism is echoed in the works of other critics, who have delineated the importance of the movement to her training.⁴ Expressionism was the first avant-garde movement that she encountered in Lugano. In a rare interview, she underscored the significance of her discovery of Expressionist poetry and woodcuts.⁵ There is no doubt that the German Expressionism had a dominant influence on Norah Borges's early prints. As María Elena Babino states, there is certainly a stylistic impact, albeit one which "is always characterized by a less angular and in some way more lyrical style than that of her German sources".⁶ The influences of Expressionism may also be seen at the level of content, with the focus on religion in prints such as *La Verónica* (1918) and the themes of *Der Blaue Reiter* emerging in works like *El pomar* (1920).⁷

The traces of Cubism are secondary to Expressionism; nonetheless, in one of the first studies dedicated exclusively to her works from the period 1920-1930, Patricia Artundo notes that "the references to Cubism would be an almost constant presence in her works".⁸ She further clarifies that Norah was not a Cubist artist *per se*, but identifies the lack of depth and careful geometric planning as evidence of a debt to the aesthetics of the movement. May Lorenzo Alcalá goes further than this in her monograph dedicated to Norah and notes the difficulties of labelling Norah's work Cubist or even applying the term to her early works at all, pointing instead the influence of Renaissance techniques:

This is a period in which the artist adopts certain techniques that do not propose showing the object from all perspectives, as Picasso and Braque did. Norah divides the surface of her pages into sections marked by straight lines – along the parallel and diagonal – in the same way as Renaissance masters, but instead of making these lines disappear in her subsequent image, she accentuated them, creating a network of clearly defined planes, which produce a destabilising effect, a sense of still movement.⁹

prints were also published in the French magazine *Manomètre* and in the Polish *Formisci*, as well as in a range of Latin American avant-garde publications, including *Amauta* in Peru.

³ "[...] utilizó una estética inmersa plenamente en la modernidad no definiéndose por un estilo concreto. En estos primeros grabados se pueden observar reminiscencias *futuristas*, *cubistas* pero sobre todo *expresionistas*." Plaza Chillón: "Entre el ultraísmo y el surrealismo", p. 307. Emphasis in the original.

⁴ Nelson: *Five Central Figures*, pp. 159-60; Artundo: *Norah Borges*, pp. 37-41; Alcalá: "Pretérita Norah", pp. 51-60; Babino: "Norah Borges en España", pp. 167-78; and Alcalá: "Norah Vanguardista", pp. 16-18. The most explicit reference to Norah's interest in Expressionism comes from Jorge Luis: "Una de sus primeras pasiones fueron los expresionistas alemanes; pintaba crucifixiones, flagelaciones, martirios y violentas contorsiones de mártires". *Borges: Norah*, pp. 11-12.

⁵ Bonet: "Hora y media con Norah Borges", p. 5. The most detailed studies of the influence of Expressionism in Jorge Luis Borges are Maier: *Borges and the European Avant-garde*, pp. 97-123, and Expósito: *Lecturas alemanas del Borges ultraísta*. For a study of Expressionism in the work of both siblings see Artundo: "Entre 'La Aventura y el Orden'."

⁶ "[...] siempre estará caracterizado por una manera menos angulosa y en cierta forma más lírica que el de los referentes alemanes." Babino: "Norah Borges en España", p. 170.

⁷ Alcalá: "Pretérita Norah", p. 55, and Artundo: *Norah Borges*, p. 39. *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) was a group of artists, founded in Munich in 1911, which had a fundamental importance for Expressionism.

⁸ "[...] las referencias a él [el cubismo] constituirían una presencia casi constante en su obra". Artundo: *Norah Borges*, p. 32.

⁹ "Ésta es una etapa donde la artista adopta ciertos efectos técnicos que no tienen la pretensión de mostrar el objeto desde todas sus perspectivas, como proponían Picasso y Bracque. Norah divide la superficie del

Alcalá coins the term *rombismo* (rhombohedronism, i.e. a deconstruction of an object and its representation in rhomboid shapes) to describe Norah's style at this time as a means of rejecting the label of Cubism while simultaneously emphasizing the blend of a deep understanding of art with stylistically innovative techniques. The need for such a term and Alcalá's careful assessment of Norah's accentuation of line, as well as Artundo's care to stress that "her loyalty to the Cubist movement would not be absolute", exemplifies the difficulties in classifying Norah's work according to avant-garde *-isms*.¹⁰ Indeed, the aesthetic imperatives which characterize Expressionism and Cubism may appear at times contradictory, but Norah successfully integrated aspects of both of them into her early works, and critics have been very careful to point to this mixture of styles without attempting to fit her neatly into any one category. However, while the presence of Expressionism and Cubism has been studied in some detail, the same cannot be said of the influences of Futurism. Of course, it is important to underscore that of the three avant-garde movements identified in her early works, the traces of Futurism are the least obvious. The lesser presence of Futurism in her works notwithstanding, I shall explore in this essay its impact on the artist's early works in order to appreciate more fully her engagement with the movements of the historical avant-garde. In addition to this, I shall briefly consider the more long-lasting influences of Futurism in Norah's works and explore some of the ways in which she engaged with the European avant-garde throughout the 1920s. The analysis of Futurism in her earliest works will address an understudied element of her avant-garde production but, crucially, I aim to show that it is almost impossible to isolate the influence of one movement from another and that Norah's flirtation with many movements contributed to what ultimately became her own style.

Norah, Futurism and the Spanish Avant-Garde

Within a couple of months of the publication of the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909, a translation into Spanish was published in *Prometeo* in Madrid.¹¹ This rapid diffusion of Futurist ideas was aided by F. T. Marinetti's subsequent publication of a manifesto written specifically for a Spanish readership, *Proclama futurista a los españoles* (Futurist Proclamation to the Spaniards, 1910¹²), did not, however, lead to a widespread engagement with its aesthetic principles in Spain.¹³ When the Spanish avant-garde movement, *ultraísmo*, was developing around 1918, just as the Borges family moved to Spain, "it defined itself as open to all modern influences, willing to absorb and

papel en sectores recortados por rectas – paralela y diagonales – como lo hacían los maestros del renacimiento, pero en vez de hacer desaparecer esas líneas con el trabajo posterior, las acentúa, generando una red de planos articulados que producen una ilusión desestabilizante, un vértigo estático." Alcalá: *Norah Borges*, pp. 38-39.

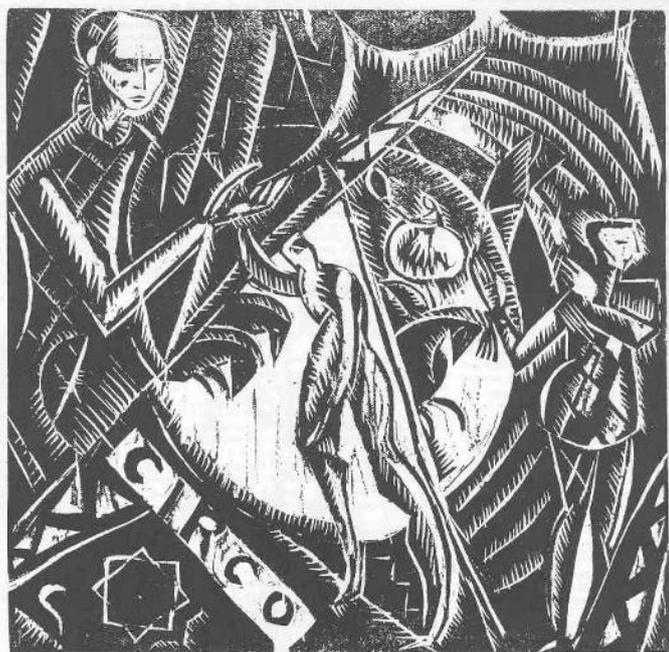
¹⁰ "[...] su adhesión a esta tendencia [el cubismo] no sería total". Artundo: *Norah Borges*, p. 32.

¹¹ Sbriziolo: "Futurist Texts in the Madrilenian Review 'Prometeo'", pp. 99-100.

¹² First published in *Prometeo* 3:20 (June [recte August] 1910): 517-518, and reprinted in F. T. Marinetti: *El futurismo*.

assimilate them eclectically".¹⁴ In an attempt to find a specifically Spanish avant-garde style, *ultraísmo* borrowed from many other European movements and defined itself against writers such as Unamuno and Valle-Inclán.¹⁵ Norah's brother, Jorge Luis, who was involved in writing the defining manifestoes of the *ultraísta* movement, noted the overlaps between European avant-garde styles within *ultraísmo* in a letter written in 1920 to his friend, Maurice Abramowicz, in which he states: "The entire *ultraísta* movement in Spain is closely connected to German Expressionism and Italian Futurism".¹⁶ In a manifesto published in 1921 in Mallorca, and signed by Jorge Luis Borges, the main goal of the movement was summed up as "to impose unexpected images upon the universe".¹⁷

This lack of prescription or self-definition and the focus on creation of new imagery allowed artists and poets to draw upon certain elements of other movements without having to theorize or explain how these reconciled themselves with each other in their works. The focus was squarely upon a general concept of the New. Derek Harris felt that this "coexistence of different and even contradictory attitudes" led to a "confusion, rather than a fusion, of the different elements, a hybrid creation, a squared circle".¹⁸ While the aesthetics of the Spanish avant-garde may have been confused, Norah's earliest works were successful "hybrid creation[s]", in which she fused Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism to create her own unique style. It is precisely the wide-ranging – or to put it more negatively, nebulous – aesthetics of *ultraísmo* that allowed Norah Borges to flirt stylistically with Futurism without having to embrace its principles in any sustained or systematic fashion.



¹⁴ Anderson: "Futurism and Spanish Literature", p. 157. Leticia Pérez Alonso analyses the links between *ultraísmo* and other avant-garde movements through visual poetry in her essay, "Futurism and Ultraism."

¹⁵ The rejection of previous literary models is clear in the first published manifesto for the movement. Vando Villar: "Manifiesto ultraísta", p. 9.

¹⁶ "Todo este movimiento ultraísta español es pariente cercano del expresionismo alemán y del futurismo italiano." Borges: *Cartas del fervor*, p. 75.

¹⁷ "[...] imponer facetas insospechadas al universo". Sureda: "Manifiesto del Ultra", p. 20.

¹⁸ Harris: "Squared Horizons", pp. 3-4.

The fact that Norah did not adhere to any Modernist school in an obvious way and that, instead, she pursued a highly eclectic style meant that her prints soon rose to a prominent position in Spanish avant-garde magazines. She published some of her first prints in the leading magazine *Grecia*, where she "graphically reformulated the magazine's association with the classical past" and signalled its openness to *ultraísmo*.¹⁹ It was in an article in that same magazine that its director, Isaac del Vando-Villar, declared: "This modern painter, with green eyes, which sparkle like gems, is already within the Parthenon of Ultraism"; and he rounds off his short piece with a direct address to his fellow *ultraísta* poets, stating: "Ultraist brothers: greet Norah Borges. She is our painter and she is also blessed with a sweet beauty, similar to that seen in Botticelli's divine angels".²⁰

Leaving aside the gendered approach to her work, it is clear that Norah is hailed as an *ultraísta* artist par excellence. In the light of these credentials, it is hardly surprising that the first cover illustration for the newly founded magazine *Ultra* would be one of her prints. Whereas *Grecia* became an outlet for *ultraísta* art and poetry, *Ultra* was established from its inception as the magazine of the Spanish avant-garde movement. Her works appeared on the covers of four of the periodical's twenty-four issues, and alongside the Uruguayan artist Rafael Barradas and the Polish Władysław Jahl she was a key contributor of visual art to the magazine. *El circo* (Fig. 1), her cover image for the first edition of *Ultra*, set the tone for the magazine and encapsulated her style at this time. Davidson notes the similarities between Picasso's harlequins and Norah's ringmasters in this print, who "beckon for the audience to join the fray".²¹ The figures, which "emulate the superimposed constructions of cubist collage", hold back the curtain and draw the viewer into the concentric circus ring, which is reminiscent of Robert Delaunay's and Sonia Delaunay-Terk's works.²² The repetition of the image of leaping horses at the centre perhaps alludes to the Futurist goal of capturing movement in images, and they add to the sense of vitality suggested in the print, while the ludic nature of the subject matter encapsulates the playfulness of the avant-garde.²³ The choice of this print for the first issue of the new *ultraísta* magazine clearly signals that her eclectic style was identified as modern by her contemporaries and that her ideas on aesthetics at this time chimed with the *ultraísta* vision of the Spanish avant-garde.

However, Norah was by no means fully integrated into the group. Her work as a woman artist in the masculine field of cultural production and the socially conservative values of her family mean that Norah occupied a difficult position in relation to the Spanish avant-garde.²⁴ She reflects this situation very neatly in an interview: "At that time, we young girls did not go

¹⁹ Davidson: "Norah Borges, the Graphic Voice of 'Ultraísmo'", p. 13.

²⁰ "El ultraísmo ya tiene en su templo a esta moderna pintora de los ojos verdes y refulgentes como gemas." "Hermanos del Ultra: Norah Borges es nuestra pintora: saludadla, porque además está nimbada de una dulce belleza, análoga a la de los ángeles del divino Sandro Botticelli." Vando Villar: "Una pintora ultraísta", p. 12

²¹ Davidson: "Norah Borges, the Graphic Voice of *Ultraísmo*", p. 18.

²² Robert Delaunay was a French artist who, with his Ukrainian wife Sonia Delaunay-Terk, co-founded the Orphist movement, noted for its expressive colours and geometric shapes. Around 1910, Sonia Delaunay developed the simultaneous contrast of light rainbow colours and called it 'simultaneism'. In 1914, they took refuge from the Great War in Spain and Portugal, where they functioned as a catalyst of Modernism.

²³ Horses were a prominent theme in Boccioni's oeuvre, and circus, cabaret and music-hall were exemplary models for Futurist theatre.

²⁴ For accounts of the social conservatism of the Borges family see Williamson: *Borges*, pp. 21, 33 and 95.

to the cafés".²⁵ Her words allude to a social code which kept her away from the *tertulias* (conversations held in cafés) where the principles of *ultraísmo* were discussed.²⁶ But rather than cast this exclusion as negative, we should consider the fact that it afforded her the freedom to experiment with a variety of avant-garde devices without having to justify her use of them or reconcile them with opinions of other *ultraístas*. Moreover, she was free to explore a variety of subjects and draw upon older styles in her works, including Renaissance and Baroque Spanish paintings, works by other women artists and religious subjects, which do not always sit easily within the framework of the historical avant-garde. Gambrell has labelled the position of "women intellectuals who were affiliated in this peculiarly ambiguous way with a range of metropolitan formations" as that of "insider-outsider".²⁷ This term precisely delineates Norah's relationship with the Spanish avant-garde and explains how her work was used as an example of *ultraísmo* without her becoming embroiled in defining exactly how it fitted within or reflected the goals of the movement. It is by being an outsider, whose work is inside the movement that she manages to fuse the aesthetics of European avant-garde movements and create a visual style which is identified as *ultraísta*.

Norah's rôle within the avant-garde went beyond that of an artist. According to Sergio Baur, she was also a woman who "inspired poets and writers, a type of muse for the avant-garde".²⁸ A number of writers dedicated poems to her, but it was her relationship with Spanish poet and critic Guillermo de Torre that would have the greatest impact upon her life work. The pair met in Madrid in March 1920, at which time Torre was a key figure in the Spanish avant-garde. He was, without doubt, a leading exponent of Futurism in Spain, largely through his only published collection of poetry, *Hélices* (1923), which was indebted to Marinetti's technique of *parole in libertà*.²⁹ It is impossible to determine exactly Torre's influence upon Norah's work, yet his critical writings provide an indication of how it was perceived and received by her contemporaries. Just three months after the two first met, Torre published an essay, "El arte candoroso y torturado de Norah Borges" (The Pure and Harrowing Art of Norah Borges), in which he emphasized the inventive style of this "painter, whose innovative work is like an emotional lyric poem".³⁰ He mentioned Norah's interest in German Expressionism, but did not refer to Futurism as one of the influences on her work. The most important feature of the article is the way he labelled her style:

Out of the anxiousness of her eager innovation, emerging from her innocently thrilling temperament, Norah Borges fulfils our great predictions of the appearance of a resplendent Renaissance-inspired painter. Due to her predilection for new planimetrics, she is elevated to an ultraist plane of a similarly tangential ideology.³¹

²⁵ "[...] en aquella época las chicas no íbamos a los cafés". Bonet: "Hora y media con Norah Borges", p. 6.

²⁶ Much valuable work has been done on the changing roles of women at this time, yet my argument here relates very particularly to Norah and her family. See for example Kirkpatrick: *Mujer, modernismo y vanguardia*. In relation to Norah's comments, it should be noted that this was not a universal phenomenon, as the example of Maruja Mallo attests. Yet Mallo is the exception rather than the rule. See Mangini: *Maruja Mallo*, pp. 45-46 and Ferris: *Maruja Mallo*, pp. 47-104, note particularly pp. 51-57.

²⁷ Gambrell: *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference*, p. 12.

²⁸ "[...] no solo la artista que le puso imagen a la literatura de renovación, sino la que inspiró a poetas y escritores, como una musa de la vanguardia". Baur: "Norah Borges", p. 87.

²⁹ Bohn: *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry*, p. 172. Also see Corsi: "Futurist Influences in the Work of Guillermo de Torre."

³⁰ "[...] pintora novísima y lírica adolescente emocionada". Torre: "El arte candoroso", p. 6.

³¹ "Por el ansia de su avidez innovadora, emergida de su vibrátil candorosidad temperamental, Norah Borges rima con nuestros auguralismos de lucíferos renacentistas. Por su apasionamiento de las planimetrías inéditas, asciende a un plano ultraísta de afin tangencialidad ideológica." Torre: "El arte candoroso", p. 6.

Although Torre drew attention to the effects produced by the lines and angles – an effect that was, at least in part, indebted to Futurism – he abstained from tracing the influences of any one particular movement or artist on her work. However, he did align her with a series of other women artists by suggesting that she coordinates "her work with works by other similar modern female figures".³² Alongside his praise, his careful identification of her style as somehow 'feminine' reveals the distinctly unsubtle ways in which he sought to ensure that Norah was not seen as a daring feminist, while still extolling the innovative nature of her works. May Lorenzo Alcalá has noted that during the time when he was wooing Norah, Torre was particularly effusive in his writings about her works, while in the revised version of his seminal study, *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia*, "he wanted to draw a veil over his wife's ultraist works".³³

As well as praising Norah in his critical writings, Torre dedicated two poems to her. These were written during their period of courtship and in them he encapsulated, albeit obliquely, her unique style, including the debt to Futurism.³⁴ Of course, Torre's poems cannot be read as critical studies of Norah's works but they do capture to varying degrees some of the ways in which her works coincided with wider aesthetic questions, including the lack of hierarchical distinction between image and text.³⁵ Crucially, they point towards the eclectic styles and images she employed. In my analysis of Futurist traces in her early works I hope to reflect the blend of "the isomorphic city / Conscious aeroplanes / Changing perspectives" that Torre saw in her prints.³⁶

³² "[...] su obra con la de otras simpáticas figuras femeninas de avanzada". Torre: "El arte candoroso", p. 7.

³³ "[...] quiso echar un manto de olvido sobre aquella etapa [ultraísta] de su mujer". Alcalá: *Norah Borges*, p. 81.

³⁴ Torre dedicated two poems to Norah. The first, "Resol" appeared in *Grecia* 3:50 (1 November 1920), p. 6 and was included, with two minor changes, in *Hélices*. "Amiga", Torre's second poem dedicated to Norah, first appeared in *Ultra* 1:16 (20 October 1921), p. 2, without a dedication and was published with some significant changes in *Hélices*.

³⁵ Torre: "Amiga", *Hélices*, p. 148.

³⁶ "[...] la ciudad isomorfa / Aviones conscientes / Perspectivas cambiantes" (ll. 3-5). Torre: "Resol", *Hélices*, p. 126.

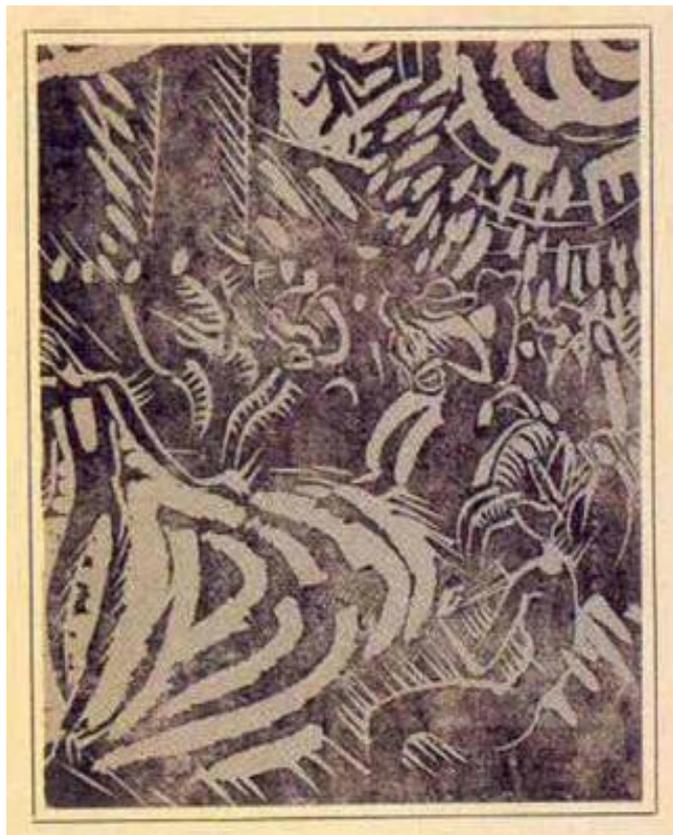


Futurism in Norah's Early Works

Norah Borges's earliest works are certainly stylistically close to German Expressionism, yet the representation of motion imbues these works with a sense of dynamism characteristic of Futurism. Of course, these two movements are not mutually exclusive and, as an analysis of some of her early prints will show, it is not possible to separate out their influences. In the 1918 print, *Cristo apaciguando las aguas* (Jesus Calming the Storm; Fig. 2), for example, the thrusting forward of the boat through the undulating waves brings a kinetic energy to the image. The angle at which the two figures behind Christ hold the oars and the depiction of these cutting through the water intensifies the focus on movement. This print was made while the Borges family was still living in Switzerland and the sense of dynamism seen in it may be drawn from Expressionism, particularly the tendency to carve small jagged lines into woodcuts in order to make them more expressive. Similar depictions of the sea can be found in Karl Schmidt-Rottluff's *Petri Fischzug* (The Miraculous Draught of Fishes, 1918), which resembles Norah's image, particularly around the oar on the left. Whilst dynamic movement within an image may be linked to both Expressionism and Futurism, the focus on religion, with attention drawn to the centrally located figure of a radiant Christ, is certainly more in keeping with an Expressionist aesthetic, which did not shun religious imagery in the way Futurism did.³⁷

As this example shows, it is difficult to associate particular styles used by Norah with any one avant-garde movement, as many of them shared certain key features. But what is clear is the fact that Norah Borges selected certain aspects and stylistic devices from a range of Modernist schools, mixed and mingled them in her works in a truly experimental manner, and generally avoided copying any particular aesthetic tradition.

³⁷ In the "Proclama Futurista a los españoles", Marinetti is unequivocal about the need to dismiss religion and religious subjects from art as young Spanish avant-gardists are followed by "una extensa retraguardia ["retraguardia" is the spelling given by the Real Academia Española; double-check quote] de mujeres y de frailes". Marinetti: "Proclama futurista a los españoles", p. 520.



The print *Juerga flamenco* (A Flamenco Gathering; Fig. 3) is another example of the ways Norah blended Futurism with Expressionism in her early works. In a recent article, Carlos García clarified the subject and possible date of this print, which were obscured by Norah in her scrapbook.³⁸ She labelled the print *La fiesta de la Santa Patrona de Valldemosa* and noted that it was made in Mallorca in 1919-20; however, Santa Catalina Thomàs, the patron saint of Valldemosa, was not canonized until 1930. García notes that the title *Juerga flamenca* was in fact used when the print was reproduced in the magazine *Ronsel* in 1924, and suggests that the print was probably made in Seville in late 1919 or early 1920. Of course, the influence of Flamenco in Seville is the most compelling argument for disregarding the title given in Norah's scrapbook. If attention is turned to the techniques used in the print, it certainly seems to be contemporaneous with other prints made in Seville in 1919-1920.³⁹ As well as the use of small jagged lines to intensify the internal dynamism of the piece, it is again the subject matter which reveals a debt to Expressionism. The folk themes of Expressionist art, evident in the *Blaue Reiter Almanach*,⁴⁰ are adapted here through Norah's focus on dance.

³⁸ Carlos García: "Norah Borges en México".

³⁹ I am thinking specifically of the similarities evident in two untitled works reproduced in Artundo: *Artistas modernos rioplatenses*, p. 29.

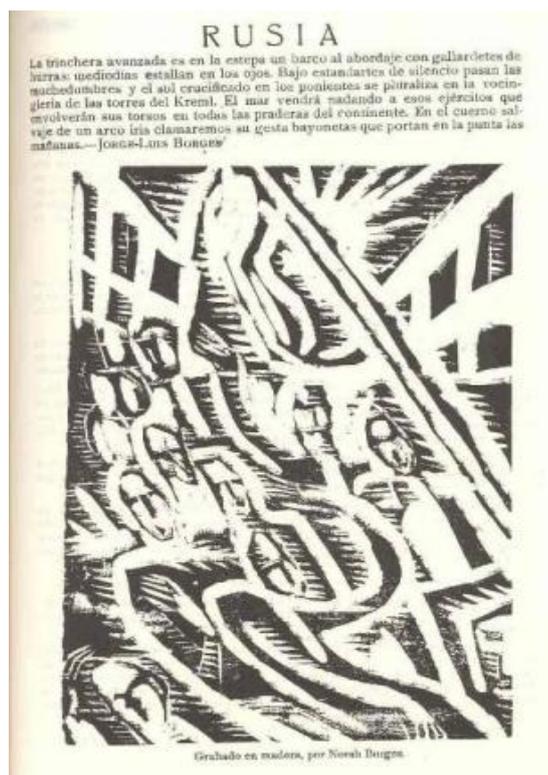
⁴⁰ The Blue Rider group wanted to overcome traditionalist art by taking recourse to more fundamental forms of expression, which they discovered in 'primitive' Bavarian folk art, Russian icons and German medieval art. Some of this they reproduced in the *Blue Rider Almanac* of 1912.

Despite the obvious debts to Expressionism in *Juerga flamenca*, it is once again evident that Norah drew upon Futurist aesthetic in her depiction of the dancers. García's dating of this print as 'Seville, 1919/20' strengthens the case for the more conscious use of Futurist aesthetics. While no specific documentation proves that either of the Borges was familiar with Futurist manifestos, the references to Marinetti's movement in Spanish magazines means that by the time they reached Seville, the siblings would have been aware of Futurism's key concerns.

The print emphasizes the circularity of movement in dancing. The carving of the contrasting black and white arcs on the dance floor suggests that the figure on the left is circling the space. This sense of the movement of the figure is reinforced by the curve at which the viewer sees the orchestra and audience, and by replication of the shapes created by the dance steps in what appears to be the sun in the top right. The use of semicircles in this way may also point to knowledge of the work of Delaunay and Delaunay-Terk. Although this link is difficult to substantiate through documentation, it is not entirely implausible, as their work was well known in Spain.⁴¹ Besides the expression of movement within Futurism, the effect of light on an object was a key theme in paintings such as Carlo Carrá's painting *Il movimento del chiaro di luna* (The Movement of the Moonlight, 1910-11) and Balla's *Mercurio passa davanti al sole* (Mercury Passes Before the Sun, 1914). The same concern is evident in Norah's depiction of the sun here, which seemingly drips over the scene, highlighting the figures and other positive areas within the print. The rendering of light in this way underscores the vibrancy of the movement depicted, and Norah managed to convey the way in which the rays of light bounce off the moving dancers and orchestra, thus intensifying the sense of vitality within the image.

⁴¹ Sonia Delaunay opened a shop in Madrid in 1919; see Quance: "Love and the Woman Artist", pp. 77-78.

Robert Delaunay provided illustrations for some of Huidobro's poetry in 1917 and one of his paintings was reproduced on the cover of *Grecia* 3:48 (1 September 1920).



The same circular arc of movement was used again in an illustration for her brother's poem 'Rusia', which was published along with the poem in the magazine *Grecia*.⁴² Norah's woodcut, only given the title *Rusia* (Fig. 4) because of the poem, is full of energy, with figures marching towards the spectator.⁴³ This advancing crowd and the sun can easily be identified with the corresponding lines from Jorge Luis's poem and are depicted along a sweeping, circular arc that alludes to the dynamic movement of the multitude.

The depiction of individuals in this way is particularly reminiscent of Umberto Boccioni's *La città che sale* (The City Rises, 1910) and again draws upon Delaunay's use of lines, emphasizing the many points of comparison between the styles upon which Norah drew. The composition of the mass of people, and the flag forming a diagonal line across the woodcut inextricably link these people with the cause for which they march as they are unified under its canopy. The allusion to the shape of the sickle in the composition further ties the image and the crowd depicted in it to the Russian Revolution. The throbbing multitude represents the soldiers thrusting forward in Jorge Luis's poem. The military theme and strong perspective created by parallel lines in the background are in keeping with both early Futurist and Expressionist aesthetics. The composition along the diagonal, the grid-like structure and use of curved lines are all typical of Norah's peculiar/particular style at this time, yet the subject matter is far removed from her usual choices. The close relationship between woodcut and poem and the atypical subject matter for Norah indicate that in this particular piece, her

⁴² Norah Borges: *Rusia*, and Jorge Luis Borges: "Rusia", *Grecia* 3:48 (1 September 1920), p. 7.

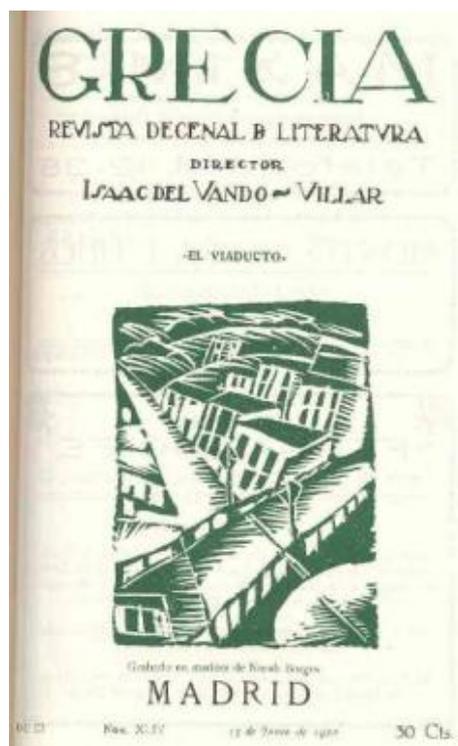
⁴³ Artundo notes that it was unlike Norah not to provide titles for her woodcuts in *Grecia*, and so the intention must have been that this particular piece would accompany Jorge Luis's poem and work with the same title. See Artundo: "Entre 'La Aventura y el orden'", p. 67.

work is close to using the same aesthetic as her brother's poem. This is most unusual, because "the art she produced for the little magazines did not defer to or normally even make reference to any of the texts published alongside it".⁴⁴ Yet, even as part of this unique collaboration on an unusual subject, Norah still maintained her distinctly eclectic style.

As well as the portrayal of movement in her early works, her depictions of the city also reveal the influences of Italian Futurism. The invocation of the city as a symbolic representative of modernity is by no means limited to the Futurist movement and it is certainly an enduring image within a range of avant-garde *-isms*. According to John J. White:

Works like Boccioni's *La Strada entra nella casa*, *La città che sale*, and *Le forze di una strada*, or Carrà's *Ciò che mi ha ditto il tram* and *La strada dei balconi* seem by and large consonant with the mythicised city images of Georg Heym or the way the modern metropolis is presented in poetry of Kurt Hiller, Ernst Stadler, and Ludwig Rubiner, and in the paintings of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.⁴⁵

These points of contact between German Expressionism and Italian Futurism indicate some of the key concerns of the period, and it is these shared interests that allow an artist like Norah to borrow eclectically from the styles of a variety of the *-isms* circulating at the time.



The print, *El viaducto* (The Viaduct; Fig. 5), published on the cover of *Grecia* in June 1920, is one of her first cityscapes. Juan Manuel Bonet notes that the structure depicted here "ought to be considered the most representative symbol of Ultraist Madrid, something similar, in its own way, to what the Eiffel Tower meant for the Parisian avant-gardists".⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Quance: "The Practice of Book Illustration", p. 73.

⁴⁵ White: "Futurism and German Expressionism", p. 47.

⁴⁶ "[...] debe ser considerado como el símbolo más representativo del Madrid *ultraísta* algo así como una

Norah Borges's rendering of this iconic structure again blends the three avant-garde styles evident in her early works. Vanessa Davidson has discussed the significance of this image, noting that the print "exhibits [Norah's] partial assimilation of layered, cubist space".⁴⁷ Davidson is clearly thinking of images such as Braque's paintings of the viaduct at L'Estaque and the Cubist influence of these paintings on Norah's image is clear to see. However, the use of Cubism does not preclude the influence of Futurist cityscapes, particularly in relation to the creation of odd angles, which lend a sense of dynamism as well as an odd perspective to the work.

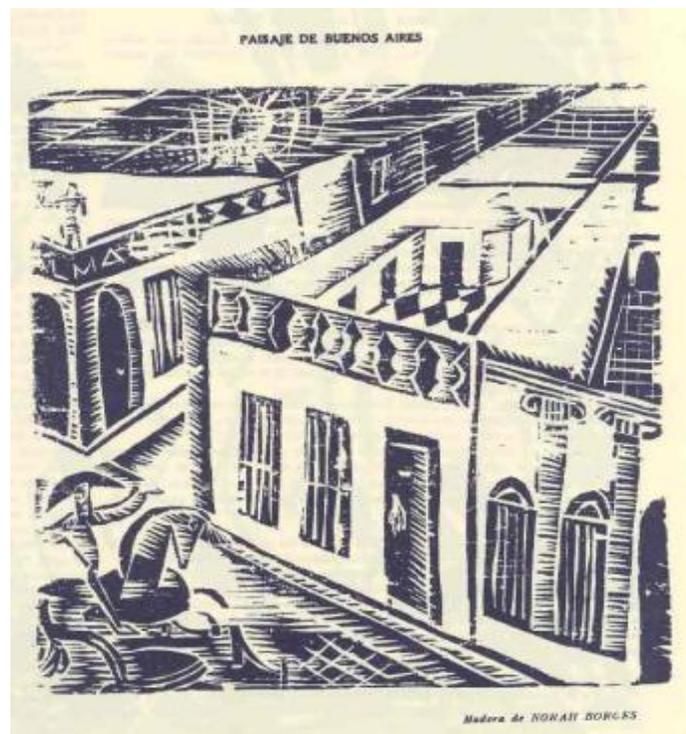
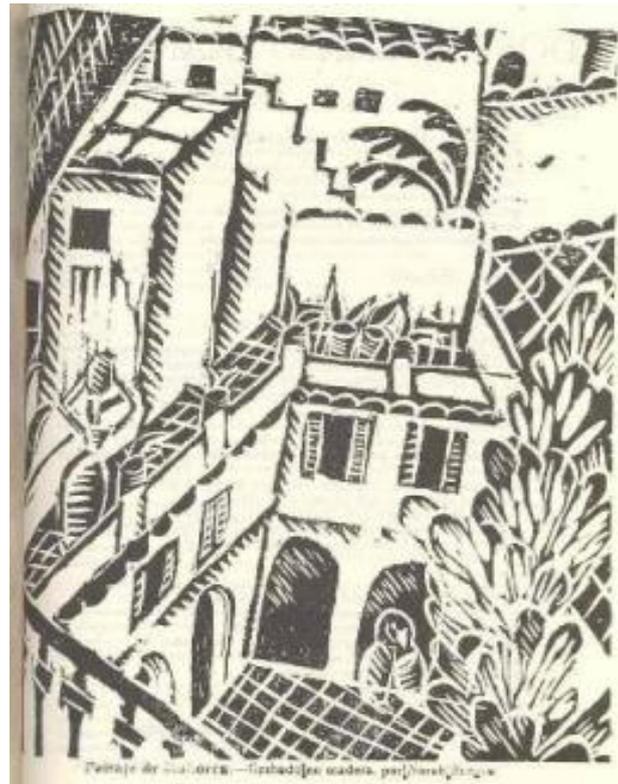
Boccioni's *Officine a Porta Romana* (Workshops at Porta Romana, 1909) in which he seeks to "liberate the maximum quantities of light and pictorial dynamism", and his 1911 painting *Le forze di una strada* (The Forces of a Street), which depicts the movement of a tram through the dark city streets at night-time, show that one of the ways in which he captures the dynamism of the city is by altering perspective to highlight the angles created by crossing streets and by capturing the multiple layers of buildings and features that make up the cityscape.⁴⁸ Norah's print, *El viaducto*, is constructed in the same fashion, with the viaduct itself cutting across the front of the image, intersecting with a street at right angles. Furthermore, the links between Futurism and Expressionism might again be employed to point to the truly hybrid nature of Norah's works. As John J. White notes, Kirchner's *Nollendorfplatz* (Street Scene near Nollendorf Square, 1912) is "technically influenced by Futurist modes of 'Dynamisierung' without displaying that debt so explicitly" and contains the same striking use of angles that is evident in the works of Boccioni and Norah Borges.⁴⁹ The use of multiple styles means that, in *El viaducto*, Norah captured a symbolic space for the Spanish avant-garde by using an eclectic blend of the aesthetics of the wider European avant-garde, which in return reflects the spirit of *ultraísmo* as an open-minded movement.

versión humilde, de andar por casa, de lo que para los vanguardistas de París representaba la Torre Eiffel." Bonet: *El ultraísmo*, p. 334.

⁴⁷ Davidson: "Norah Borges, the Graphic Voice of 'Ultraísmo'", p. 15.

⁴⁸ Coen: "Umberto Boccioni", p. 90.

⁴⁹ White: "Futurism and German Expressionism", p. 54.



El viaducto is not an isolated example of the use of this type of perspective. The two cityscapes of Mallorca (Fig. 6) and Buenos Aires (Fig. 7) are constructed in a similar way and again exhibit the same blending of styles. In *Paisaje de Mallorca*, a figure holding a jug on

her head is walking along an elevated path. This passageway runs from the left corner to the centre of the image and mimics the angle of the viaduct in the earlier print. The predominance of positive space within the print suggests the buildings are bathed in light, while the use of pattern (cross-hatching on the sky and patio and the leaves on the trees) increase the feeling of movement within the print itself. The same flattened layering of space identified with Cubism seen in *El viaducto* is evident here and is again used in the contemporaneous *Paisaje de Buenos Aires*.

The two cityscapes shared the same stylistic traits as the two earlier prints. The image of her native city shows a street corner viewed from above at an oblique angle. Some crosshatching and small jagged lines – characteristic of German Expressionism – add vivacity to the print. However, unlike the other two prints considered here, *Paisaje de Buenos Aires* occupies a special place in Norah's œuvre as it signals a re-engagement with her hometown, as well as forming a key link between Spanish *ultraísmo* and its Argentine counterpart.⁵⁰ Again, the blending of various European styles is evident, but what comes to the fore is the presence of a series of features that Norah would continue to incorporate into her cityscapes for the rest of her career. These include architectural features associated with *criollo* style buildings, such as the columns, balustrades, windows and tiled patios, as well as other elements that might be read as representative of the nation, such as the sun in the centre, the statue of the horse and rider and the obscured lettering of the shop front sign. This print shows that Norah's eclectic use of European avant-garde styles was not only representative of the Spanish movement but also embodied the first steps in the direction of an aesthetic renovation in Argentina. She may not have been present at their discussions, but her works came to be the visual representation of their goals. Norah's 'insider-outsider' position in relation to the male-dominated avant-garde groups in Spain and Argentina gave her the freedom to respond as she pleased to a variety of the aesthetic questions raised by diverse movements.⁵¹

Norah and Futurism in Buenos Aires

The Borges family returned to Buenos Aires in March 1921 and Norah sent *Paisaje de Buenos Aires* to Spain for publication. This practice was not unusual and both she and her brother continued to publish work in the same Spanish cultural magazines to which they contributed while living in Spain. After settling again in Argentina, Norah maintained her links with Spain by continuing to publish work in Spanish avant-garde magazines and, of course, through her relationship with Torre. The Borges family returned to Spain for a year (1923-24), and by that time, Norah had already begun to retreat somewhat from her avant-garde style. There are many reasons for this evolution of her style, not just the atmosphere of the more artistically conservative Buenos Aires. Norah, like many others of her generation, participated in what Jean Cocteau called a 'rappel à l'ordre'.⁵² By 1923-24, many artists had already begun retreating from the excesses of the first avant-gardes, and Norah, too, was

⁵⁰ Jorge Luis Borges was the leading figure in the attempt to introduce *ultraísmo* to Argentina, and he wrote manifestoes and produced magazines in order to increase awareness of the movement and its aims. He was involved in producing two issues of the mural magazine *Prisma*, to which Norah contributed two prints. The first run of the magazine *Proa* (with only three issues) was also edited by Jorge Luis, with significant contributions by Norah.

⁵¹ Gambrell: *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference*, p. 12.

⁵² *Le Rappel à l'ordre*. Paris: Stock, 1926.

responding to a general stylistic retreat.⁵³ Despite the changes in her style, her works were still considered 'modern' both in Spain and Argentina, and in her native Buenos Aires she contributed a large number of works to cultural magazines.

When Norah returned to Argentina in 1924 after her second trip to Europe, she became associated with Argentina's newly founded magazine *Martín Fierro*. The Argentine avant-garde, like its Spanish counterpart, was by no means prescriptive and *Martín Fierro* published articles on a variety of topics and reproduced paintings and other artworks from a variety of European and Latin American artists. Moreover, as Beatriz Sarlo notes, "for the avant-garde the inconclusive debate about national culture became another key issue to be resolved as part of a vast movement of aesthetic renovation".⁵⁴ Unlike the iconoclasm of the European avant-garde, Argentine Modernism was concerned with building a sense of national identity as well as renewing the arts. The discourse of destruction and overthrowing the past contained in Marinetti's *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* certainly seemed anathema to such a project. Nonetheless, in June 1926, Marinetti visited the city⁵⁵ and delivered a lecture organized by the Asociación "Amigos del Arte".⁵⁶

In order to mark Marinetti's visit, an exhibition of Argentina's modern artists was arranged, and Norah's work was shown alongside works by Emilio Pettoruti and Xul Solar, both of whom had also lived and worked in Europe. *Martín Fierro* published a number of articles related to the visit and included reproductions of some of the paintings exhibited. The double issue 29-30 of 18 June 1926 printed Marinetti's first Futurist manifesto, a section on Futurism from Torre's *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia* (1925), and an introduction to Marinetti by the Franco-Italian film critic Nino Frank, dated "Paris, mayo 1926". A brief unsigned "Homenaje a Marinetti" provided a biographical overview of Marinetti and served as his introduction to the reader. Nino Frank underscored the importance of Futurism within the European avant-garde and, very tellingly, showed how it became blended with Cubism and Expressionism:

But that is not all. Although in Europe Futurism has always been subordinate to other avant-garde movements, such as Cubism or Expressionism, in Italy it has had a marked influence and has managed to create a new air of lyricism, colour and mysticism. Without Marinetti, it would have taken much longer to restore health to Italian poetry and art.⁵⁷

This praise is followed by the observation that "we have all mocked his aspiration to carry on creating Futurists, although the war had put an end to all that".⁵⁸ Such a view, namely that Futurism has had its historical merits but had become outdated by now, permeated the rest of the *Martín Fierro* issue and also reflected Norah's position in her first prints.

⁵³ Nelson: "Norah Borges: (Self-)Criticism".

⁵⁴ Sarlo: *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 104.

⁵⁵ See Rabossi: "Les Visites de Marinetti en Argentine"; Rabossi: "Marinetti en Sudamérica: Crónica de sus viajes"; Saítta: "Marinetti en Buenos Aires."

⁵⁶ This organization was crucial in the introduction of avant-garde styles to Argentina, and Norah had individual exhibitions there in 1926 and 1940. See Artundo: *Amigos del Arte*, pp. 226-235 and Meo Laos: *Vanguardia y renovación estética*.

⁵⁷ "No es todo y hay mejor: si además en Europa el futurismo no ha hecho más que sumarse a los otros movimientos de vanguardia, tales como el cubismo o el expresionismo, en Italia, ha tenido una influencia real, logrando crear allí toda una atmósfera nueva de lirismo, de color, de misticismo, que, sin Marinetti, hubiera tardado mucho en salubificar la poesía y el arte italianos". Frank: "Marinetti", p. 3.

⁵⁸ "[...] todos nos hemos burlado de su pretensión de crear todavía futuristas, después de la Guerra que ha concluido con todo". Frank: "Marinetti", p. 3.

The following issue of *Martín Fierro* contained a report on the impact of Marinetti's visit and reproductions of works from the exhibition at the Asociación "Amigos del Arte" to mark his visit.⁵⁹ Alberto Prebisch's article frankly engaged with the fact that Marinetti's brand of Futurism "tastes of wine past its best, according to the palates of the best sommeliers".⁶⁰ It is clear that Prebisch favoured an eclectic engagement with avant-garde theories. He stated his position unequivocally, saying that the paintings in the exhibition "show us that a modern touch can be glimpsed in even the most contradictory of works, completed by artists with opposing styles".⁶¹ None of the paintings reproduced with his article reveal an overt engagement with Futurist art, yet they do represent a range of avant-garde styles. The decision to exhibit the most contemporary paintings by Argentina's avant-garde artists must have been deliberate, since the three artists included – Emilio Pettoruti, Xul Solar and Norah – worked in Europe, and Pettoruti even produced a series of Futurist paintings while living in Italy.⁶²

The three works by Norah reproduced with the article reveal the careful geometric planning typical of her canvases and reveal her use of strong lines to create a sense of internal dynamism within works that are otherwise tranquil.⁶³ The angles glimpsed in these works are directly related to those seen in *El viaducto* and show the comprehensive blend of Renaissance, Expressionist, Cubist and Futurist aesthetics that had emerged in Norah's work in the 1920s. By way of a conclusion, Prebisch noted that "the repetition of the design of abstract forms that are seen in Pettoruti's works, Xul Solar's mysteriously symbolic works, and the poetic and sweetly sentimental images in Norah Borges's drawings, cause us to be sceptical towards the principle that the limits and precise source of artistry can be uncovered".⁶⁴ His final words unify the works of these three artists and underscore the diverse nature of the Argentine avant-garde. It is hardly surprising that Norah and her fellow Argentine artists did not slavishly adhere to the norms of any one of the European movements, but rather drew upon a variety of approaches. Norah's involvement in the exhibition in the Asociación de Amigos del Arte shows that the Futurist movement was important to her and that it had a real impact upon her works. After her return to Argentina, Norah did not focus on the creation of a unified aesthetic, but instead engaged in a broader

⁵⁹ The *Exposición de pintores modernos* at the Friends of Art venue (17-19 June 1926) was dedicated to Marinetti, who was travelling in Argentina at the time, and included works by Emilio Pettoruti, Norah Borges, Xul Solar and Piero Illari, as well as designs of modernist architecture by Ernesto Vautier and Alberto Prebisch. On the eve of the exhibition, *Martín Fierro* had organized a dinner of intellectual and artistic fraternity, dedicated to the poet F. T. Marinetti; on the day of the opening, Marinetti gave a lecture about the Futurist art of Boccioni, Depero, Balla and Prampolini.

⁶⁰ "[...] sabe ya a vino pasado, según el paladar de los buenos catadores". Prebisch: "Marinetti en los "Amigos del Arte"", p. 3. I can only attribute the repetition of 30 in the issue number as an error as all other issues, double and single, follow in sequential order without repetition.

⁶¹ "[...] nos demuestran que el acento moderno puede manifestarse bajo apariencias contradictorias, en obras reveladoras de los más opuestos temperamentos". Prebisch: "Marinetti en los "Amigos del Arte"", p. 3.

⁶² Sullivan: "Emilio Pettoruti", pp. 31-57. See also Arestizabal: *Due pittori tra Argentina e Italia: Emilio Pettoruti ed Enzo Benedetto; Emilio Pettoruti*. Special issue of *Futurismo-oggi* 25:1 (January 1993); Iglesias: "Pettoruti en contexto"; Meazzi: "Entre el futurismo y la Argentina: Pettoruti y Bragaglia"; Nessi: *Pettoruti: Un clásico en la vanguardia*.

⁶³ The three paintings reproduced without dates or other details are: *El medallón*, *El niño rubio* and *Paisaje de Portugal*.

⁶⁴ "Los ensayos de arquitecturación de formas abstractas que preocupan a Pettoruti, el arte misterioso y simbólico de Xul Solar, la intención poética y dulcemente sentimental de los dibujos de Norah Borges, nos obligan a considerar con excepticismo [sic] los principios que pretenden fijar intransigentemente los límites y los fuentes precisas de la emoción artística". Prebisch: "Marinetti en los "Amigos del Arte"", p. 3.

process of thinking about the purpose of art. The homage that *Martín Fierro* paid to Marinetti reveals a respect for the principles of Futurism and points to the important rôle it played in the renewal of art, yet at the same time, the editors made it clear that Futurism could not provide an exclusive basis for the Argentine avant-garde.

The impact of Futurism on Norah Borges

The influences of the Futurist movement are evident in Norah's earliest works, which were produced in Spain at a time when the aesthetics closely associated with the movement were being discussed and used by artists from the Ultra circle. These influences also left a trace in her later works, particularly in the way she structured her images and emphasized the angles at which lines meet. Evidence of Norah's sustained interest in what she might take stylistically from avant-garde movements comes to the fore in her manifesto, *Un cuadro sinóptico de la pintura* (An Overview on Painting), published in *Martín Fierro* in 1927.⁶⁵

In the manifesto, Norah sets out her own style of painting under four broad headings – colour, form, tones and themes – which appear with lists of paintings and some reproductions acting as examples for the theories contained in the text. The examples she uses show the breadth of her knowledge, and the citation of Picasso and Marie Laurencin shows her ongoing engagement with avant-garde aesthetics. Futurism is not mentioned specifically, but Norah does refer to "Las decoraciones rusas: María Goncharova" as an example of works which reveal the "mystical colour of each object".⁶⁶ Confusion over her first name notwithstanding, she was clearly referring to the Russian Cubo-Futurist Natalia Goncharova, who, like Norah, successfully blended avant-garde styles in her works. However, it is not Goncharova's Futurist-inspired works that attract her attention, but her stage and costume designs for the Ballets Russes production of *Coq d'or* (The Golden Cockerel, staged in 1914 in London and Paris). Norah herself had produced a series of designs for this ballet, which were published in *Martín Fierro*, and this undoubtedly drew her attention to this aspect of Goncharova's work.⁶⁷

The diversity of artists included in the manifesto and Norah's ability to focus on how specific works might illuminate her theories of painting point to her high level of engagement with art as a discipline. It also shows her ability to draw widely upon painters and art movements and to apply this knowledge to her own work. This skill was already evident in her earliest works, where she adopted selected features of Futurism in a manner that resonated with other *ultraísta* artists in Spain and Argentina. Norah's openness to various styles and movements and her 'insider-outsider' position as a woman artist allowed her to flirt with whichever movements she pleased and to participate fully in the avant-garde. Norah used the freedom she had learnt at the beginning of her career to create a body of work that possessed a particular style of her own, undeniably enriched by her early stylistic flirtations with Expressionism, Cubism and Futurism.

⁶⁵ Borges: "Un cuadro sinóptico", pp. 2-3.

⁶⁶ "[...] color místico de cada cosa". Borges: "Un cuadro sinóptico", p. 3.

⁶⁷ Four drawings were published along with a review of the production in *Martín Fierro* 2:20 (August 1925), front cover and p. 5.

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