

FIELD IN BUENOS AIRES: Debates and Artistic Practices

By Maria Lúcia Bastos Kern

Maria Lúcia Bastos Kern is professor at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Rio Grande do Sul. She obtained her Doctorate at Université Paris I-Sorbonne, with the thesis *Les origines de la peinture moderniste au Rio Grande do Sul* (1981). She is the author of the book *Arte argentina: tradición e modernidade* (1996), together with articles and book chapters in specialized publications. She also coordinated the publication of the books *América Latina: territorialidade e práticas artísticas* (2002); *As questões do sagrado na arte contemporânea da América Latina* (1997), among others. She is a member and Vice President of the Brazilian Committee of Art History, the Brazilian Association of Art Critics and the National Association of Art Researchers. She is a I A Researcher of the CNPq (National Research Council) and a member of the Advisory Committee of Arts and of the Multidisciplinary Committee of the CNPq.

The first decades of the XXth century in Buenos Aires were marked by an intense intellectual debate over nationalism, cosmopolitanism and modern art, against modernity in Argentina and the fast transformations of its society and culture. This debate was reflected in old and new journals, which created a space to spread different concepts regarding the cultural activities in the country together with national and international leading movements. Many of these newspapers stood for the ideologies of different groups of intellectuals and political intervention strategies, while others established programs aiming at educating the public and structuring the modern art field, in opposition to the *status quo*. In this setting of multiple concepts and differences, Xul Solar played one of the leading roles in the Argentinean vanguard and consolidated modern art in the country, enduring resistance and criticism, while establishing nonetheless strategies in order to achieve this.

Based on the internal dynamics of the art field in Buenos Aires during the decade of 1920, this essay intends to discuss the proposals and counterproposals related to the construction of a modern nation and the resistance experienced by Xul Solar, to get his work legitimized by official bodies and also by alternate bodies of new artists¹.

In 1912, Xul Solar traveled to Europe, where he pursued his artistic studies and encountered the leading movements. In doing so, he temporarily lived in several cities, like Paris, Turin, Florence, Milan and Munich. Before leaving Buenos Aires, he already produced paintings whose formal experimentations differed from those of dominating art at the time and also from the concepts in force within the leading institutions. During this period, the artist intimated with symbolist poetry² and began his exploration of spirituality and the occult, working with shapes and symbols that were mystical in nature. This fact led him to encounter European mystics and to be initiated in Anthroposophy, Astrology and other beliefs, like many modern artists in Europe used to since the end of the XIXth century.

Xul differed from other Argentinean colleagues in that the artistic scene in Buenos Aires was chiefly dominated by works that were tied to national subjects, extolling the pampean landscapes and the gauchos in their rural activities, as one may observe in the paintings of Carlos Ripamonte, Cesáreo Quirós and Fernando Fader³. During the first two decades of the century, the official art institutions encouraged visual representations associated with national icons. In literature, some writers leaned toward the spiritualism and Modernism of Rubén Darío, whereas in arts remnants of the French Impressionism survived, also present in the works of few national artists.

Along with the Independence Centennial (1910) and social, economic and cultural changes resulting from the immigration and modernization processes in Argentina, Buenos Aires, the city at the center of the cultural expansion, became cosmopolitan and the nationalism increased. The optimism resulting from the expected progress did not last long, due to the migratory impact and social and political conflicts it fostered⁴. Meanwhile, through the arrival to the Argentinean capital of Spanish intellectuals like José Ortega y Gasset (1916) and Eugenio D'Ors (1921), the Hispanic culture regained prestige, after a period of intense opposition to the colonists. The notion of new sensitivity, spread in conferences by Ortega y Gasset, was largely discussed and applied in discourses by writers and artists in search of the aesthetic modernity. On the other hand, D'Ors, the writer who led the Novecentism in Barcelona, proved the necessity of building the modernism based on national cultural roots⁵. Somehow, those two orientations had an influence on the Argentinean art of the 20s.

Aside from the variety of visions of art supported by Spanish intellectuals, it must be stressed that the economic, social and numerical expansion of art scholars⁶ also generated an increase in the number of scholarship grantees abroad, who would head for France, Spain and Germany back in those years, and not only for Italy. The contact of artists with European plastic innovations allowed the absorption of different artistic concepts and practices, which consequently brought tensions inside the art field, shaped by relatively conservative institutions. During the 20s, as a rule the official institutions and art critics kept on preserving and upholding traditions and rural national subjects, using them to resist modernity.

Young artists sought new strategies to strengthen their positions, to legitimate them and communicate with big audiences. They created journals and private entities that subsequently contributed to the progressive process of professionalization and established specific guidelines to allow a relative autonomy of art and the art field. Meanwhile, that program meant for a change was followed by advances and recessions. For instance, in 1915, a Society of Aquarellists, Pastelists and Engravers was created, intending to promote an annual exhibition, to publish a journal (*The Engraving*, 1916) and to popularize art through engravings. Another important initiative was that of Jorge Luis Borges, who, after returning from Spain, created the journal *Prisma* (1921-22), designed like a poster and illustrated by his sister Norah, where he promulgated the Ultraism. The two siblings had taken part in the Spanish ultraist movement, exercising in an expressionist poetry and in a lyrical sense that Norah would cast in her drawings and paintings⁷. The different kinds of poetry from Ultraism rapidly spread between artists in

Buenos Aires, for they based, mainly, in dynamic and built structures. The group that formed around the movement presented itself as the “vanguard school” and was recognized as such by the journal *Nosotros*, which started publishing Borges texts and the Ultraism manifesto. The newspaper *Atlántida* (1923-24) published the articles of Julio de La Paz, where the author prepared the public and art critics, explaining literary Ultraism and Futurism⁸.

In 1924, the Association Amigos del Arte was created, gathering artists and writers, with the aim of promoting conferences, concerts and exhibitions, together with reflections over the aesthetic of modernism. This association, that promoted at the same time presentations of Filippo Marinetti, Le Corbusier, Guillermo de Torre and Argentinean intellectuals, and exhibitions of modern artists, whether French, German or locals, also presented in its halls the works of nationalist official artists, like Fernando Fader’s paintings. Amigos del Arte made it possible for European intellectuals to transmit the directing ideas of contemporary arts, from Futurism/Novecento, Purism/Rational Architecture, to Ultraism.

That same year, the bimonthly publication *Martín Fierro* (1924-1927) appeared, whose name evoked Hernández book. Its objective was to establish a project of aesthetic renovation and integration of the scattered activities of new writers, artists and architects, in order to provide some unity to the modern movement that was to be implemented. The contributors, originally coming from Ultraism, assumed the function of actively supporting the new artistic practices and transmitting them to the public⁹. Already by the fourth issue of the journal, writers and artists reacted in a manifesto “against the ridiculous necessity of backing our intellectual nationalism, blowing up false values (...)” and highlighted the fact that they faced a “New Sensitivity”¹⁰.

In order to support this renovation project, *Martín Fierro* relied on the revision of national tradition and cosmopolitanism, thus attempting to build a new national identity restricted to the urban environment. Their mentors tried to promote union against the ethnic and cultural diversity that characterized the Argentinean society, hoping to solve that way the social conflicts generated by the strong wave of European immigrants. The Argentinean identity defended by Evar Méndez was defined in the city, for it “synthesized the country”, that is, the national culture and modernity.

Xul Solar, who was an active member of the group and contributor to the journal *Martín Fierro*, also conceived the city as the *locus* of modernity by representing the new ways of social life in his paintings, filled with skyscrapers, planes, imaginary machines, etc. His city consolidated by the presence of crowds and flags from different countries, revealing its cosmopolitanism, though always connected with his mystic imagination by the inclusion of symbols from different beliefs. The artist perceived new technologies and modern machines, the way he perceived the rational architecture of great urban centers. Generally, his cities had no past, only present and projections in the future; this conception differed from that of his friend, Jorge Luis Borges. Despite the great intellectual affinity between them, Borges’s vision of Buenos Aires and its slums was more nostalgic. The writer constructed a city stage that was bound to the old quarters, where the remains of the rural environment were well demarcated, so as to establish a program for a future urban space and avoid their degradation. Borges focused the city from a retrospective angle, limited by Hispano-Creole memories. He gave a new function to the past by reflecting over its meaning and projecting into the future¹¹. In parallel with Borges’s process of reinventing the past and his dialog with occidental literature, other modern Argentinean writers constructed new styles of poetry based on the city, though directed toward the scientific advances, the mechanization of the contemporary world and the future of Buenos Aires. For instance, these phenomenons fascinated Oliverio Girondo and Roberto Arlt. Based on

these different visions of the city, we may infer that the group of *Martín Fierro* did not share the same concepts regarding modernity.

The city was the driving force behind the aesthetic modernity for it was a space that constantly evolved in very accelerated pace, encouraging new artistic perceptions together with the need of reconsidering the artistic practices.

From this urban *locus*, the art critics inside *Martín Fierro* and other vanguard publications in the 20s exerted the function of presenting a new reality and communicating to the public the innovations that were emerging in Europe and their purpose. That way, while building an opinion, they prepared the reception of the new plastic arts in vogue locally. In doing so, city pictures were added to the texts: pictures of rational architecture, machines and new technologies, along with reproductions of modern European art, so that the public could become aware of the shiftings occurring in the modern world and arts. According to Evar Méndez, the lack of information was so serious that it led the journal publishers to reproduce the works of Seurat, André Lhote, Picasso, Rousseau, Chagall, Vlaminck, Marie Blanchard, Van Dongen, Max Ernst, Paul Gauguin, etc., together with those of the new Argentinean artists¹².

Along with their educational concern, the journal board planned a State intervention in order to encourage the artistic development in the country¹³, proposing a program to transform the traditional circuit of consecration for art professionals, aiming at the creation of other access strategies for young people, through contests and awards. *Martín Fierro* supported the artists who went to Europe in order to study, such as: Emilio Pettoruti, Hector Basaldúa, Aquiles Badi, Horacio Butler, Alfredo Bigatti, etc. These frequently absorbed the constructive aspects of the new art, drawing as a means of organizing and controlling subjectivity. The idea of constructing prevailed in post-war aesthetic and political discourses, as the basis for establishing order after the chaos. This constructive idea also prevailed in Ultraism.

The journal *Proa* reappeared in 1924, under the direction of Borges, Brandán Caraffa, Rojas Paz and Güiraldes; they outlined that its modern project wouldn’t differ, but rather adhere to the principle of construction sought by one of Ultraism trends. When Ortega y Gasset published his ideas in *La deshumanización del arte* [The Dehumanization of Art] (1925), where he challenged the variety of vanguard movements, all differing from each other, the abandon of apparent world representations and thus, their human sense, the leaders approved his ideas¹⁴.

Martín Fierro’s group also planned the assertion of Argentinean art abroad, by circulating the journal in the leading European and Latin American centers, and by inviting foreign writers, artists, architects and art critics to collaborate, sending texts and pictures of their works. Nonetheless, the international consecration had to be achieved taking into account the cultural specifications of art in Argentina at the same time, so as to create a distinction.

The Argentinean vanguard journals, such as *Martín Fierro*, *Prisma* and *Proa*, while spreading the new art, also played the role of making the young intellectual elite known, together with their ideas and projects for a modern nation. On the other hand, *Revista de América* (1924-1926), which was contemporary of *Martín Fierro*, tried to spread the intellectual and artistic production of young Americans, for they saw in them the future of the continent¹⁵. The intellectual elite did not limit their contribution to modernist journals; indeed, they even collaborated with those journals that were considered as more traditional, with the aim of spreading their aesthetic projects¹⁶.

Another strategy under the command of artists after art renovation was the foundation of the Salón de Artistas Independientes [Salon of Independent Artists] (1925), free of dogmatisms and rigid criteria, for it had the purpose of overcoming the traditional limitations of the Salón

Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Salon of Fine Arts] and the art field. Thus, it contributed to the legitimization of the new generation of artists and to the diffusion of modern aesthetic concepts¹⁷.

Many artists who studied in Europe during the 20s, when back in Buenos Aires, intended to make the European aesthetic innovations known, thus creating a public and other legitimization resorts. In 1929, for example, Alfredo Guttero created the Nuevo Salón [New Salon], an institution that was committed to the exhibition of modern art. This event occurred during three consecutive years. Aside from that initiative, the artists founded the Taller Libre de Arte Contemporáneo [Contemporary Art Free Workshop] in order to spread the new aesthetic concepts through education¹⁸.

In parallel with the cultural politics applied to the establishment of aesthetic modernity, implemented by certain groups of artists, the official institutions upheld their resistance during the 20s to the new artistic structures and kept on acclaiming the style of paintings descending from Impressionism, bound to rural traditions. The established art critics defended the preservation of national representations and accused young artists of "imitating the Europeans", who were "in vogue", and sharing "the foreign recipe" as their chief concern¹⁹.

In "Eurindia, Aesthetic essay based on the historical experience of American cultures" (1924), Ricardo Rojas proposed that the aesthetics be governed by laws allowing the continuity of tradition, for the preservation of collective memory and national identity in Argentina, since these, in his opinion, would make possible that the autonomy of spirit and union be kept²⁰. This essay had a great repercussion in the country during the following two decades, becoming a reference for artists and architects. The official art critics also relied on this doctrinaire vision to consecrate art, which adjusted at that time to representations of national landscapes and traditional rural scenes. Thus, the critics associated with nationalism assumed a position that opposed the vanguard movements, mainly criticizing the works of Xul Solar, Raquel Forner, Horacio Butler, Victor Pissarro e Juan Del Prete. These were considered a menace to the established order, for they infringed the aesthetic assumptions in force.

Rojas discourse did not merely result from a resistance to modernity, but rather from his uneasiness toward plurality plus social and cultural tensions created by the immigration²¹. The writer feared that the introduction of foreign ideas, values and habits could lead to the dissolution of the nation's ideals, together with Argentinean traditions and social cohesion²². Rojas defended the solution of integrating the immigrants with native communities (gauchos and *creoles* of Spanish and indigenous origin).

In "Eurindia", he tried to formulate the American aesthetic ideal according to the conciliation of the "indigenous emotion" and the "European technique". Rojas believed this was the mission of art at that time. Since the "nationalist restoration" (1909)²³, he recurrently pointed the need of providing a "historical awareness to population", in order to homogenize the education and reduce the differences in origin. Still in that publication, Rojas observed there was no point in attacking the progress; rather, the foreign contribution had to be integrated into the national development. At that time, the writers Leopoldo Lugones and Manuel Gálvez were afraid of the menacing cultural idiosyncrasy due to the linguistic, cultural and ideological pressure of immigrants. Because of this, they became radical by casting the myth of an undisturbed race, so as to avoid cultural degradation.

To counter cultural tensions, new editions of José Hernández' *Martín Fierro* (1926) and Leopoldo Lugones' *El payador* were published, with the aim of reaffirming the collective memory and preserving the cultural union. The nationalist discourses of Lugones were largely criticized by writers from the journal *Martín Fierro*, who wouldn't accept that curtailing vision.

Tensions were constant in the intellectual and artistic fields, mainly in the erudite literary field, whose writers produced critical texts related to serials, newspapers, journals and popular books, where stories were conceived as sentimental discourses in a language that was unnatural. In spite of that critical attitude, many of these erudite Argentinean writers also published their texts in left-wing newspapers, for the great mass of the population. Among them, some vanguard intellectuals stood out like Jorge Luis Borges, who participated in great newspapers such as: *Crítica* (1913) and *El Mundo* (1928). The social reform planned by intellectuals and artists had to emanate from mass education, which justified their interest in transmitting their texts and images through left-wing newspapers²⁴. The strategies conceived by different groups in connection with the education of the great mass of population, adding to the significant increase of publications and editorials, allowed the consolidation of a reading circuit and a cultural democratization²⁵.

The expansion of nationalism deeply affected the popular cultural field as well, through the *creolism*, which rescued the ancient rural habits and gave them value in opposition to city habits and new social behaviors²⁶. Gradually, the serials branded the urban space as chaotic and condemned the cosmopolitanism because of the instability it generated in society. Subsequently, countless popular traditional centers appeared, where gauchos were rescued and acclaimed as heroes, and this aggravated the tensions with the intellectuals who were trying to recover the symbolic representations of the country and to recreate a collective memory, with the city as their scenery²⁷.

The spreading of nationalism by conservative elites revealed in the erudite field, as evidenced in Diana Weschler's study: "Salón de Bellas Artes, promotor de vocaciones nacionalistas (1920-1930)" [Salón de Bellas Artes, Promoter of Nationalist Vocations]. In this study, the author quantified genres and themes considered as opportune for national representations and awards, allowing the perception of a policy aiming at the encouragement of patriotism²⁸.

The Gallery, like the Academy, the National Commission of Fine Arts and the established art critics, encouraged national art, making it official and well represented in numbers. The journal *Nosotros* consecrated national art too, in spite of the fact that some of their contributors' discourses and works adjusted to the new styles of poetry.

Though artists spread the art concepts of the European modernity, criticized the official institutions for their conservatism and had new resources created for the diffusion of their works, they continued taking part in national exhibitions, with the aim of providing more visibility to their art and legitimize it.

The nationalist concept of art critic, of the Salon Nacional, teaching institutions and artists, conditioned the preservation by official entities of more conservative artistic practices. Consequently, the conflict settled inside the art field between renovation projects and those bound to tradition, between the former and left-wing groups of artists, such as Amigos del Pueblo and Boedo²⁹. These groups acted with the purpose of using art as a mechanism of political affiliation, identifying with national proletariat and refusing formal experiences, originated in European vanguards and directed, in their opinion, toward plastic aspects only. Boedo and Amigos Del Pueblo works were easy to seize, considered social causes and frequently used engravings. Therefore, another conflict pole emerged, giving rise to disputes and debates over art *per se* and art with a social purpose. However, it is worth noting that the ultimate purpose of these artists with different beliefs was national art, proceeding from different projects and ideological trends.

The political activity of artists evidenced the absence of autonomy of artistic practices and at the same time, the concept of art for social transformation forced them to keep certain representation structures associated to the apparent world, because the public would rapidly un-

derstand them. However, the diversity of projects in the art field allowed debates and aesthetic plurality.

This was the art field Xul Solar found in 1924 when he returned from Europe with Pettoruti, where different groups of artists, institutions and ideological tensions were emerging. Xul and the members of *Martín Fierro's* group struggled for the artistic renovation, spreading their ideas through manifestos, works and texts in journals and exhibitions. Soon after his arrival to Buenos Aires, Xul wrote a text for *Martín Fierro*³⁰, about Emilio Pettoruti's exhibition at Galería Witcomb (1868-1971), highlighting the modernity of his colleague's works and his spiritual independence³¹. He also highlighted the modernist action of the *creole* vanguard, proving in doing so his awareness of the project aiming at the reformulation of Argentinean art and the role artists should play in it. Subsequently, Xul exhibited his watercolors at the I Salón Libre de Buenos Aires [First Free Salon in Buenos Aires] (1924), which were scarcely understood nor accepted by the public and art critics³². Back then, people in Argentina were frequently unaware of European vanguard artistic practices and resisted to plastic innovations.

In spite of the lack of interest in his paintings, Xul was considered by art critic Alfredo Chiabra Acosta as the genius of *Martín Fierro*. He attempted to interpret his works on the occasion of the I Salón Libre [First Free Salon]³³, by affirming that in order to understand them one should trace in time the sacred streams of antique civilizations, "so as to invent something so elaborate yet so naively childish. We should remember our dreams and nightmares to decipher the enigma behind these paintings, or else recall our childhood"³⁴. This reflection may have provoked among readers some uneasiness by supposing that, according to the author, Xul's paintings could only be interpreted through opium consumption, which rendered even more difficult their acceptance and legitimization. In the same article, Acosta tried to grasp the reasons that led the artist to penetrate in the domains of the occult, justifying him at last by the necessity of returning to the origins of art among savages and "primitive races"; this phenomenon was largely present in European modern art. Thus, Xul's explorations weren't considered as an isolate case.

In 1929, the critic reviewed his former text and verified that during the new individual exhibition of the artist the praises to his works were numerous. "With an ideology of symbols, images and sounds, (...) imagination and fine ironical intelligence; (...) a wisely colored poetry (...). His fantasy nurtures a bit on himself, a bit on mythology". It's "the universal cosmic mysticism of all times that shows in those watercolors (...)"³⁵.

In those days, Acosta was not affiliated to newspapers and modern aesthetic trends, despite being the art critic that showed more interest in Xul's works and the one who identified his artistic independence³⁶.

Notwithstanding the fact that Xul Solar was an active member of *Martín Fierro's* group, he partially stepped out of the predominant trend by combining the aesthetic modernity with mystical questions. In his paintings, he used archaic pre-Columbian symbols, whether national or American, and flags, that were distributed side by side with the signs of European modernity. This aesthetic conciliation between national and universal autochthonous and modern signs evidenced his concerns in connection with the necessity of combining different cultures and planning a Latin American union; these questions were discussed by intellectuals during the first two decades of the century, even by those of *Martín Fierro's* group. In searching a linguistic solution to the problem of union, Xul created a Neo-Creole language that combined Portuguese and Spanish. His watercolors showed a different conception of the modern works that predominated in Argentina, since they resulted from his lyrical imagination and his mystical vision of the world. It is worth noting that his style avoided conventional representations, by penetrating in the domain of the absolute, aiming at elucidating the cosmos and

illuminating the characteristics of a secret and dark world, so that he could make possible people's access into the unknown. Xul attempted to provide visibility of this world when he understood that the science couldn't. In order to do so, he recovered antique beliefs and myths and remodeled them for the modern art field, with the purpose of revealing the cosmos in full³⁷. His mystical aspirations led him to an artistic practice rich in ascendant symbols, evidencing the dualism of his thoughts and the recurrent search of the divine. The artist shifted from a symbolist practice, before his studies abroad, to a practice that approached the mystical trend of the German Expressionist group *Blaue Reiter*³⁸.

During the 20s, Xul's works generated so much rejection as apathy from the public and critics, thus proving they didn't admire them nor understand them in deep. Also, the absence of writings about his paintings by members of *Martín Fierro's* group and other journals was almost complete.

The fact that Ernesto Vautier and Alberto Prebisch, architects and art critics inside *Martín Fierro*, used to cast in their articles art conceptions differing from those of Xul, can partly explain this phenomenon. In their opinion, the admiration of the new beauty of machines provoked among artists a dynamic perception of objects, together with the desire of borrowing their plastic qualities, for the elaboration of an aesthetic that was conditioned by modern technicalities³⁹. They were trying to defend the conciliation between the creative, intellectual and scientific domains, seeking the integration and control of individuality, in order to build a modern society and symbolic systems to represent it, which would chiefly materialize in the city, its architecture and the relations between men and new technologies.

With such perspective, Prebisch and Vautier defended the notion that "beauty has always been the result of an analogical architectural process of shapes created by the spirit"⁴⁰. For them, "the classical Parthenon and the contemporary car intimately responded to the same creative process"⁴¹. The relation between art and the construction of geometrical shapes was also present in *Martín Fierro's* poetry: "we build, according to the architectural needs of a poem"⁴². Both in the journal's manifesto and art critic texts, we can observe the great exaltation of machines and technology as signs of modernity, which best revealed the progress and anachronism of the official Argentinean art.

Despite the journal's pluralist vision, the presence of texts from several Argentinean and European art critics, and articles on European art, these focused more on the works of modern Italian and French artists, yet predominantly on the great synthesis of that time. German art was practically ignored, except by the Italian art critic Sandro Piantanida, who believed that it had suffered a regression, because artists were "naturally inspired by mysticism and their imagination", which led them to extoll the "fantastic" and the "religious grotesque". The same critic also highlighted that this artistic expression was distant from the Latin spirit⁴³. When he analyzed the situation of contemporary Italian art, he noted that "Amidst the chaos (...) Italy rescued the traditional classical spirit (...) inherent to the nature of artists", their vision of the world and "balance between sensitivity and the faculty of (...) expressing"⁴⁴. Thus, we may verify that his train of thought was based on the contemporary concepts of modern art, bound to classical traditions and subjectivity control. In his opinion, the new formal construction was the solution that young artists found in order to organize post-war European societies, after a period of crisis and anarchy⁴⁵.

Regarding the Argentinean artist Xul Solar, he was mentioned several times as a contributor and participant of *Martín Fierro's* activities, but the art critic didn't get to the point of making a deeper analysis of his works, even though his paintings were shown in exhibitions and galleries many times⁴⁶. For instance, when Alberto Prebisch commented on the exhibition at Amigos del Arte on the occasion of Marinetti's visit to

Buenos Aires in 1926, he mentioned Xul Solar, stating that his "art was mysterious and symbolic"⁴⁷. In the same issue, one of his paintings was shown on cover: this was *Milicia* [Militia], whose geometrical shapes, constructed in motion, dominated the masterpiece. Another two of his paintings appeared inside this issue: *Angel* and *Escenario* [Scenery], which followed the planimetry of the cover piece, though lacking the geometrical rigor defended by the aforementioned art critics. His paintings had a very personal character and resulted from his fantasies and intense research. The poetic features of his works transcended the unitary trend ideals; therefore, they didn't adjust to the concepts of critics, or raise their interest.

By the time Pedro Blake published in *Martín Fierro* an article commenting on Xul's paintings exhibited at La Peña, he already stressed that Xul was the most personal and strange artist in Buenos Aires. "The extravagance of his fantasies (...) hide obscure metaphysical harmonies, constituting the most innocent and pure language of this great spirit living under the circle of stars"⁴⁸.

Oliverio Gironde, the journal's director, wrote on a subsequent occasion that even though there were multiple literary expressions in *Martín Fierro*, on the other hand, in plastic arts and architecture there was a "clearly steady (...) direction", following Le Corbusier ideas spread through *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920-1925)⁴⁹. This resulted from the presence during the 20s of several Argentinean artists and architects in Europe, including Prebisch and Vautier, who came into contact with rationalist notions of architecture partly based on classical tradition, machines, primary geometric volumes and personal expression control.

Xul solar himself, when analyzing Pettoruti's paintings in 1924, declared that modern art, in spite of its marked individualism, showed at that time "a well-defined trend based on the simplicity of resources, a clear and solid architecture, (...) a pure plastic nature which preserves and stresses the abstract meaning of lines, mass and color (...)"⁵⁰. As we can see, he too highlighted some questions related to that period of vanguard retraction.

In spite of strategies developed toward renovation, both the new art critic as the artistic practices of the new generation revealed notions of a moderate modernity, which didn't differ much from what was happening in Europe, where artists had abandoned the revolutionary style that preceded the World War I. During the conflict and afterwards, when liberal ideals began to be questioned, modern artists tried to exert a more effective social function and controlled the shifting process, assuming a community role to the detriment of individualism, originality and the hermetic character of the vanguard art. While abandoning their discourses and expressions of breaking-off with tradition, many European artists tried to recover the figurative style and appealed to national symbolic representations, with the aim of regaining contact with the public and exerting control over modernity. Those strategies toward homogenization were established with the purpose of organizing the *chaos* generated by war, since intellectuals and artists believed that the plurality of new concepts and edification movements, hand by hand with the destruction of cultural traditions, would have contributed to the settlement of disorder.

Several art critics collaborating with local journals also spread the concept of modern art less radically. For instance, Julio Payró, an Argentinean art critic who lived in Brussels, used to send articles to *La Nación* newspaper (1924-27) and the journal *Nosotros* (1927-28), with the aim of instructing the public and transmitting concepts on the new European art. In 1928, he wrote an "Essay on Modern Plastic Art Trends", where he stated that "today's artists don't reject the art from the past nor feel compelled to create something new". However, Payró highlighted that the "modern school was violently opposed to the Impressionism" and that it sought "pure shapes", moving away from the visible reality and

exploring the plasticity. Once he verified that modernity was bound to tradition, he proposed the preservation of Cubism, as an innovating movement destined to last by force of its plastic purity, harmony and vicinity to classical values of art⁵¹. This proposal resulted from the synthesis produced by certain artists combining the classical tradition and Cézanne's explorations, known in France as *Le Retour à l'Ordre*⁵². Through drawings, pure geometric shapes and the recovery of the *beau métier*, French artists tried to reestablish order and reflect on the future of art and its social functions, after World War I and the crisis settled by Dadaism, which questioned the statute of art. At that time, when exacerbated nationalisms dominated the society, the aesthetic discourses in France, Germany and Italy were no more in opposition with the past; on the contrary, they aimed at recovering it and controlling modernity and subjective expressions.

The Retour à l'Ordre, in the context of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, corresponded to the rediscovery of the cultural inheritance refused by vanguards, to the classicism, when considering its sense of order and asceticism, which combined with the antiliberal thinking and the search of more stable values in Europe after the war⁵³. *Martín Fierro's* architects and art critics who were in Paris when the aforementioned publication was released assimilated that conception. Likewise, the notions of order, rationality, the modern city and new technologies, in a society where industrialization was still incipient, supported the persuasive discourses of Argentinean critics in defense of aesthetic modernity. As for Xul Solar, his vision of urban modernity had also a futurist projection, though unconnected with rigid aesthetic rules.

Julio Payró's convictions identified with the aesthetic ideals of moderate Cubism and the discourses of Argentinean artists who studied in France during the 20s and were trying to introduce the new vision of art in the country, though not abandoning national traditions completely. Those artists wanted to create a new national identity free of nationalist radicalisms. This kind of thought was also followed by the art critic Elef Teriade, who wrote for the French journals *L'Intransigent* and *Cahiers d'Art*, and for the newspaper *La Nación*. We may observe in the texts he would send from the second half of the 20s similar conceptions⁵⁴.

During that decade, both left-wing artists as more conservative fellows battled for nationalist objectives, resisting the new plastic offers. The pure structure and the autonomous art vindicated by intellectuals associated to *Martín Fierro* showed little results, due to the fact that they were partly bound to tradition and the edification of a new national identity.

In spite of the efforts and anticipation of aesthetic modernity partisans, the public's acceptance of Emilio Pettoruti's and Xul Solar's paintings, for instance, was poor. In Pettoruti's case, it is believed it may have been due to the fact that his works dealt with formal subjects, which the public ignored by the time of his first exhibitions in Buenos Aires. As for Xul's paintings, they were created through the combination of universal symbols with national and Latin American signs, and they were boosted by his mystical visions and the notion of sacred in art⁵⁵, which separated him from the members of *Martín Fierro's* group, and which may have rendered their interpretation difficult. Still, Xul's concept of sacred didn't differ much from those of national artists and partisans, for they all pretended to create through their works new ways of world organization. His ideas fitted in the plastic field while basing on religions, antique oriental philosophies and esoteric beliefs, combined with his personal fantasies and linguistic research; they were to move away from the artistic practices and predominant contemporary concepts, partly based on modern rationalism and the ideals of a controlled modernity.

In the 20s, Argentinean artists exhibited at the same time visual representation structures aiming at social denunciation, produced by

left-wing partisans; others aiming at rural and urban national traditions, which were more conservative or modern; and finally those relating to internal questions, which were plastic in nature.

This plurality generated intense debates, where ideological and aesthetic questions combined, evidencing the almost null existence of the autonomy of art.

The discussion between intellectuals and artists over nationalism, cosmopolitanism and the purposes of art, led Argentinean modernity into the second half of the XXth century; recurrent, abounding in ideological intentions, it interfered with the art field. More independent artists, like Xul Solar, faced difficulties in order to be accepted by the public, official entities and art critics. During his life, Xul didn't participate in the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Salon of Fine Arts]; he didn't receive any award or any kind of distinction for consecration.

The art critics, conditioned to restricted opinions on the aesthetic modernity, wouldn't look for a better approach of Xul's works, either. May be this was due to a lack of sensitiveness toward questions related to language, the individual, his fantasies, the archaism and mysticism; or maybe they weren't prepared to penetrate Xul's works. Probably they couldn't observe or accept his projects for a modern nation and for Latin America: the former were based on symbolic representations result-

ing from cultural hybridism and the preservation of primitive, archaic traditions, side by side with modernity; the latter were to materialize through linguistic unity. After all, in order to interpret art, the critic must be interested and engaged in the task, since it becomes an extension of it and a new creation too.

Jorge Luis Borges, with whom Xul shared a close intellectual identification, was apparently the best interpreter of his paintings and of his multiple creations. The writer once affirmed that he contributed to "the accomplishment of his (Xul's) unavoidable destiny"⁵⁶. This revelation seems to prove, on the one hand, that Borges had understood Xul's works better than art critics and the public at the time, by writing about them in greater extent, and on the other hand, that he used Xul's inventions and myths in his literary texts. Borges poetry was inspired in his internal world, where he explored language, fantasies and archaic myths the way Xul did. Also, there was a very strong intellectual bond between the writer and the painter, together with a certain degree of complicity, which let Borges penetrate the essence of Xul's works. Without that complicity, he wouldn't have produced during the 30s and onwards countless articles and texts regarding Xul's creations, nor understood them so well.

1. During his life, Xul Solar carried out only five individual exhibitions in Buenos Aires and participated in exhibits and collective presentations. However, after his death, his works were exhibited in countless presentations and retrospectives in his country and abroad. The huge number of posthumous events surrounding his paintings and creations partly evidences the resistance that the artist had to cope with in life, together with the institutional restrictions of the art field to his works. Furthermore, Xul did not receive any awards in life; moreover, a great deal of the monographs about his works were published after his death.

2. In connection with Symbolism, cf. Laura Malosetti Costa, *Los primeros modernos*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 2001.

3. The nationalism in arts and among intellectuals resulted from the fear of social disintegration as a consequence of the modernization process, the massive arrival of European migrants from 1891 to 1914 and the logical dramatic increase of population and urban space. Foreigners, in searching equality and social insertion, made political claims and strikes that frequently led to social conflicts. These tensions translated into the art field as well.

4. The fear of social disintegration amplified with social conflicts led by labor unions, chiefly made up by immigrants, anarchists and socialists, who demanded greater political participation in national decisions and better working conditions.

5. From 1906 onwards, D'Ors led in Barcelona the modernization project known as *Novecentism*. This project was based on the return to Mediterranean Greco-Roman roots. He believed that the great redeeming exploit of Cataluña would be the "discovery of the Mediterranean", so as to "discover our Mediterranean traits" and assert them worldwide. Through the column he published in the newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* since 1906, the "Glosari", and his books *Almanac dels noucentistes* and *La Ben Plantada* (1911), D'Ors spread the theoretical contributions of the "new" aesthetic. He considered that art, by assuming the collective expression, could exert an ethical, civic and constructive role, and prepare the future of the Catalan society. The modernization project, by identifying with the Catalan trend, aimed at edifying a new social order, as opposed to the decadent manifestations of Modernism. The artistic practices of Modernism and Symbolism were rejected due to their ornamental excesses, because of the individualism and internationalism they provoked in Catalan culture, and also because they were linked to the spiritual values of the Middle Ages.

6. At the beginning of the century, the art field in Argentina was structured in institutions created by the State, such as the Museum (1895), the Academy (1905) and the National Gallery of Fine Arts (1911). During the first two decades of the century, the Academy and the Gallery of Fine Arts proved to be committed to the fostering of national art. The Gallery of Fine Arts was the official institution where artists could be legitimated and acclaimed.

7. The Ultraism rose as the first literary and artistic vanguard

movement in Spain to oppose nationalism and regionalisms. It was created in Seville in 1919 and it spread to Madrid, following different visions: one of them was based on the German postwar Expressionism, others were based on the Italian Futurism and on the Creationism and Constructivism of French poetry. "Ultra" stood for the dynamic sense this new art ought to be identified with. The publication *Ultra* gave room to artists seeking renovation, with no individual purposes, to produce their experiences. Schematic constructed bodies were molded out through poetry and visual arts, with the aim of reaching their primitive purity. After their stay in Switzerland (1914-1918), Jorge and Norah Borges introduced the expressionist poetry in Spain and in Buenos Aires afterwards. María Lúcia Bastos Kern, *Arte argentino. Tradição e modernidade*, Porto Alegre, Edipucrs, 1996, pp. 125-139.

8. *Nosotros* was the leading publication of the Centennial generation, which published in December 1921 the aforementioned manifesto. The newspaper *La Nación* announced Alberto Candiotti's book, where he dealt with practically all European vanguard movements since the beginning of the century. Cf. Patricia Artundo, "Alfredo Gutero en Buenos Aires 1927-1932", in *Arte argentino del siglo XX*, Buenos Aires, Fundación para la Investigación del Arte Argentino, 1997, p.16

9. Francine Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología*, Buenos Aires, Hachette, 1986, pp. 62-71.

10. *Martín Fierro* 4, 15 May 1924.

11. Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, Buenos Aires, Seix Barral, 2003, pp. 34-38.

12. M. Alcalá y J. Schwartz, *Vanguardas argentinas años 20*, São Paulo, Iluminuras, 1992, p. 193.

13. B. Sarlo, "Vanguardia y criollismo: la aventura de Martín Fierro", in C. Altamiro and B. Sarlo, *Ensayos argentinos*, Buenos Aires, CEDEAL, 1983, p. 141.

14. José Ortega y Gasset, "La deshumanización del arte", *Revista Occidente*, Madrid, 1970, p. 52. Norah Borges and André Lhote were distinguished in *Proa*, among others, as exemplary.

15. Publication under the direction of Carlos Alberto Erro, limited to six issues, that counted with the collaboration of illustrators such as: Xul Solar, Norah Borges, Raquel Forner and Leónidas de Vedia.

16. Other publications circulated in Buenos Aires, such as: *Inicial*, *Valoraciones*, *Babel*, *Noticias Literarias*, *El Dorado*, *Los Pensadores*, etc.

17. The following were promoted: the Salón de Artistas Modernos [Salon of Modern Artists], in 1926, when Marinetti visited Buenos Aires; the Salón de Artistas Argentinos [Salon of Argentinean Artists], in La Peña, in 1928; and the Nuevo Salón [New Salon], from 1929 to 1932.

18. The following artists participated in the Workshop: A. Gutero, Raquel Forner, Domingos Neira, A. Bigatti.

19. Diana Wechsler, "Algunas consideraciones acerca de la vanguardia en el campo de Buenos Aires", in *Estudios de Investigaciones*, Buenos Aires, Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte "Julio E. Payró" 2, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UBA,

1989, p. 43.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-99.

21. Between 1891 and 1914, Argentina absorbed 17% of European migration, chiefly made up of Italians and Spanish, who rather headed for urban centers, while French, English and Belgians would generally establish in rural villages. The population, estimated to consist of 2.492.000 inhabitants in 1800, had climbed to 7.885.000 by 1914. Luis A. Romero, *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994, p. 27.

22. He would label immigrants as poorly educated and miserly, because their only purpose was to individually enrich, instead of sharing collective interests.

23. There, Rojas condemned the cosmopolitanism of foreigners, together with their individualism and indifference toward public affairs. Cf. M. I. Barbero and F. Devoto, *Los nacionalistas*, Buenos Aires, Cedeal, 1983, pp. 18-21.

24. Cf. Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

25. Beatriz Sarlo, *Imaginary landscapes*, op. cit., p. 206.

26. The notions of modernity and cosmopolitanism, in Buenos Aires, were initially stressed by the intellectuals who supported Ultraism, and subsequently, by *Martín Fierro* writers.

27. Marta Penhos, "Nativos en el salón. Antes plásticas e identidad en la primera mitad del siglo XX", in Penhos and Wechsler (coord.), *Tras los pasos de la norma*, Buenos Aires, Jilguero, 1999, p. 113.

28. D. Wechsler, op. cit., pp. 101. 1921-112 paintings: 52 landscapes, 9 portraits, 3 nudes, 3 animals and others (28), 1924 -117 paintings: 54 landscapes, 11 portraits, 6 nudes, 2 animals, 4 still lifes and others (30). 1928-254 paintings: 83 landscapes, 24 portraits, 12 nudes, 17 still lifes and others (54). The first awards between 1920 and 1930 were distributed as follows: 4 landscapes, 2 portraits, 1 animal, 2 nudes and 1 working dinner. Data evidences the increase in the number of exposed paintings and the mastering of landscapes. Still lifes appear in 1924 and the number of nudes rises; both subjects were opportune for plastic exploration and release from the narrative purpose of painting. The landscapes could also represent a means for new explorations, if they weren't marked by certain nationalism.

29. The Boedo group rose with the journal *Pensadores*, created in 1922, for many of its members were also affiliated to the Communist Party and defended the Socialist Realism.

30. *Martín Fierro* 10/11, set-oct. 1924, n./p. The text was well illustrated by paintings of Pettoruti and the author emphasized that these would give rise to the art of the future.

31. Xul Solar, "Pettoruti", *Martín Fierro* 10/11, set-oct. 1924, n./p. The works of Pettoruti shown in that exhibit (1924) were extremely criticized, inducing Xul to write a very didactic text on modern painting.

32. Xul developed an extremely personal style of painting, which led him to stand aside from the groups of artists who studied in France and Italy, whose works were rather linked to modernity control trends in those countries, such as *Retour à l'Ordre* and *Novecento*. Success came faster for these art-

ists, for they reconciled modern signs with tradition, and in doing so they didn't break up with national representations. On the contrary, Xul managed to build up a new art out of that reconciliation.

33. Performed at Galería Witcomb (1924), casting official and modern art works. That critic's pen name was "Atalaya" and he worked as a writer for several journals, such as: *Acción de Arte*, *Claridad* and *La Protesta*.

34. Alfredo Chiabra Acosta, *Críticas de arte argentino, 1920-1932*, Buenos Aires, Gleizer, 1934, pp. 83-84. In 1929, Xul's works were analyzed in "Reflexiones sobre una exposición en los Amigos del Arte", in *La Razón*, May 22nd 1929, p. 1.

35. Chiabra Acosta, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

36. Even before returning from Europe to Buenos Aires, Xul was conscious of the difficulties he would have to face in the city's art field and he also knew that his works had been considered unbalanced in the article "Decadencia del arte en la época actual", in *La Razón*, 1921. Mario Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, Buenos Aires, Alba / Fundación Bunge y Born, 1994, p. 106.

37. In Europe, Xul came into contact with the German Expressionism and esoteric beliefs, thus accentuating his interest in the occult. He sought philosophical and religious ground through Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, a dissident branch of theosophy; through Emanuel Swedenborg and also through astrology.

38. As Jorge Luis Borges phrased it so well, Xul didn't imitate, but rather showed an essential and deep affinity with the German Jewish Expressionism. In J.L. Borges, *Homenaje a Xul Solar*, Buenos Aires, MNBA, July 17th 1968, p.2.

39. A. Prebisch, *Marinetti en los Amigos del Arte*, in *Martín Fierro*, July 8, 1926, n./p. Both art critics were the first to spread in Argentina the ideas of Le Corbusier, exposed in the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*, and those of the Bauhaus.

40. A. Prebisch and E. Vautier, "Fantasia y Cálculo", in *Martín Fierro*, no. 20, August 5, 1925, n./p.

41. *Ibid.*

42. J. L. Borges *et al.*, *Boedo y Florida*, Buenos Aires, CEAL, 1980, p. 19.

43. S. Piantanida, "Descubrimiento del Cubismo II", in *Martín Fierro*, January 24, 1925, n./p.

44. *Ibid.* Pettoruti also extolled the new Italian art, linked to the national classical tradition, in the journal *Crítica*.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Exhibitions performed in Buenos Aires and participation in them, during the 20s: 1924, I Salón Libre [First Free Salon]; 1925, Salón de los Independientes [Salon of the Independent]; 1926, Exposición de Pintores Modernos en Amigos del Arte, Salón de los Independientes [Exhibition of Modern Painters in Amigos del Arte, Salon of the Independent], Exhibition in La Peña; 1927, Salón Florida [Florida Salon]; 1929, Exposición Xul Solar [Xul Solar's Salon], in Amigos del Arte; 1930, Salón de Pintores y Escultores Modernos [Salon of Painters and Modern Sculptors]. As we can see, Xul did not participate in the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes [National Salon of Fine Arts], which was the highest recognition event in Buenos Aires.

47. A. Prebisch, "Marinetti en los Amigos del Arte", in *Martín Fierro*, July 8, 1926, n./p.

48. P. Blake, "Exposición de pintura y escultura en "La Peña", in *Martín Fierro*, 8 de julio de 1926, n./p.

49. *Martín Fierro*, Buenos Aires, 1949, pp. 47, 50. As a rule, the texts on art and architecture were written by Prebisch and Vautier.

50. Xul Solar, "Pettoruti", *loc. cit.*

51. Diana Weschsler, "Crítica de arte en la década del veinte. Los textos críticos de Julio E. Payró (1924-1930)", in *Estudios de Investigaciones, ob.cit.*, n°4, 1991, pp. 41-42.

52. André Lhote, a nationalist artist and art critic, used to refer to this pictorial practice as French Cubism, as opposed to the Cubism of Juan Gris and Picasso, who were considered as *métèques*, and the Neocubism of other artists.

53. Françoise Ducros, "Le purisme et les compromis d'une peinture moderne", in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, Centre Culturel Suisse, 1987, p. 68. The publication *L'Esprit Nouveau* was created by Ozenfant and Le Corbusier.

54. At this time, the art critic Camille Mauclair used to send texts for publication in the same journal, reinforcing though the official conservative concepts.

55. In art "sacred" means "that which is separate, put aside", differing from "secular", standing above it and allowing artists to try and reach the absolute, and reorganize the cosmos, out of their works.

56. J. L. Borges, *Obras completas*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, vol. 3, 1989, p. 444. In M. Gradowczyk, *Xul e Borges. A linguagem de dois gumes*, São Paulo, Fund. Memorial da América Latina, 2001, p.

Text reproduced in:

Xul Solar. Visiones y Revelaciones. MALBA Colección Costantini, Buenos Aires del 17 de junio al 15 de agosto de 2005. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo del 17 de septiembre al 6 de noviembre de 2005.

