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TRIBECA

Joaquín Torres-García

Through March 12. Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, Manhattan; 212-257-0033; ortuzarprojects.com.



Joaquín Torres-García's "Perro (Dog)," circa 1930; painted wood (10 pieces) with original box. Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García, Montevideo and Ortuzar Projects

Ortuzar's show of dozens of wooden toys by Joaquín Torres-García, plus a few toy-inspired paintings and sculptures, is full of utterly delightful, playful objects. In their delight, however, they manage to raise important questions about the nature of art.

Torres-García, born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1874, is best known as an early adopter of modernist painting. The Ortuzar show, "Toys," explores the serious energy he also spent designing handmade toys, which paid his bills for a while in the 1920s.

His wooden dogs have interchangeable parts — long or short ears; cropped tail or curly — so the kids who got them could play at build-your-own breed. His "Funny People" series captures all the different "breeds" of human a child might come across in a big city. The simplicity of their modernist forms makes them perfect fare for budding brains. (Or did toys get simple before art ever did?) Someone should

reissue the playthings in this show: They'd bring joy to children and parents.

But how should a gallerygoer consider these toys? Are they lesser objects, because they were "mere" moneymakers? Or does their close contact with everyday functions make them that much more compelling?

By calling them "art," do we risk pulling a Duchamp on them, when we should be appreciating them for their simple play-value for kids?

In the end, does their playfulness make them better toys or better art?

I have a feeling Torres-García would have answered, "Yes."

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