

**Cite this article:** Cecilia de Torres and Susanna V. Temkin, "A Conversation on the Joaquín Torres-García Catalogue Raisonné," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.17350>.

## A Conversation on the Joaquín Torres-García Catalogue Raisonné

Cecilia de Torres and Susanna V. Temkin

*The Joaquín Torres-García catalogue raisonné (<http://torresgarcia.com>) is a digital resource that features all of the paintings, sculptures, and toys produced by the Uruguayan artist (1874–1949). With research ongoing, the catalogue raisonné is the result of decades of investigation under the direction of Cecilia de Torres (CDT). The following excerpted conversation between de Torres and Susanna V. Temkin (SVT), who assisted with research and the 2016 digital launch of the site, was held on March 14, 2023.*

**SVT:** I joined the project in 2011, after you had already been gathering research for decades, long before a digital catalogue raisonné was ever imagined. When did you start and why?

**CDT:** The one who started putting [in] order, organizing, photographing, and measuring the work was Torres-García's daughter, Ifigenia. I started working with her [in Uruguay] on this 1920s Kenwood typewriter that you had to push really hard. Then, when I came to New York, that's when all the fakes started appearing on the market, and I thought, we have to do something. You worry, what is going to happen? I have dedicated a long time to [Torres-García], and I thought, what happens after me? It was in my hands, and that's when I thought I had to start collecting photographs and other information, compiling them in albums . . .

**SVT:** What kind of hard-copy materials were you working with? There were what we called Ifigenia's *fichas* with the measurements, titles, and—were they drawings or photographs . . . ?

**CDT:** Black-and-white photographs, but not of great quality.

**SVT:** . . . and all of the newspaper clippings, there were the exhibition invitations . . .

**CDT:** But the invitations were so minimal. They would very rarely detail the paintings. If they did, they never added the measurements, and there were rarely any reproductions. All the Paris invitations were just announcements with dates and that's it.

**SVT:** Or maybe at best, a list of paintings, but they were always labeled as "Constructions."

**CDT:** In the Sidney Janis catalogue from 1950, they were all titled "Composition." Composition, composition, composition, composition.

**SVT:** We didn't know what the compositions were, but sometimes we found clippings that had images through your archival work in Barcelona, Paris, Uruguay . . . I remember looking at hard copies with a magnifying glass. But then we made discoveries that we could have only made using the computer. We started scanning and enlarging pixels . . .

**CDT:** Enlarging the images and comparing them. I remember looking at two paintings that we thought were the same, and when we enlarged them, we realized they were two different paintings.

**SVT:** It was really revealing, seeing how he would make different variations, sometimes looking back to an earlier period and reworking a composition. This is such an important aspect of the digital catalogue raisonné, that all these works are linked. Also, that we could upload very poor-quality images that provided a clue and that later, we could go back and fill in a gap. It was always striking to me, to go from a black-and-white to a color image.

**CDT:** It happens often that people write in saying, "I have this painting, it's not in the catalogue," and it actually is, but not in color. It's very difficult to go from the color to the black-and-white. That's a very good thing about the digital format, because when we find a good photograph, we change it.

Recently, we received information about an American woman from an old Boston family who went to Paris in the 1920s to study art, and she met an Italian aristocrat. Until 1933, they lived in Versailles. And I remembered a letter to Torres-García, asking about an invitation to Versailles. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but it turns out that this woman was inviting all the intellectuals and artists from the period, like [Fernand] Léger, like [the Uruguayan-French poet Jules] Supervielle, people who Torres-García knew. Now her estate, the Fondazione Caetano Caetani, just sent us two images of 1931 paintings, which we did not know about, we didn't know they existed.

**SVT:** That touches on networks.

**CDT:** To me, that is the most important. To show how art and artists move. Lately, art history has been completely the opposite. It has tried to fix artists in regions. The art world moves in a way that you cannot pin down.

**SVT:** Torres-García was always moving. So one aspect of the catalogue raisonné is that you can look by decade, but you can also look by location. Italy, New York, Barcelona, Uruguay . . . and you can isolate places but also look at transitions. This fluidity is challenged when you flip through a physical book, which is much more static than a digital resource, which allows you to jump from place to place or painting to painting. I am also interested in how geography is tied to the chronology. I always think of 1934 because there are so few paintings since he was transitioning, moving from Europe back to Uruguay.

**CDT:** Yes, there are years where there are almost no paintings. Also, when he was painting frescoes in Barcelona, there was very little easel painting, more drawings and preparatory sketches.

**SVT:** Geography is also interesting in how it is reflected in the languages of the titles. We spoke earlier about the Sidney Janis exhibition, where the paintings are all labeled

"Composition." But that is not necessarily their title. Sometimes a work has accumulated many titles over the years, and with the digital catalogue raisonné, we are able to give preference to what we think is the original, but the titles are all searchable and equally accessible.

**CDT:** I think he only titled his work when he exhibited. One clear example is a painting that he showed at the Pennsylvania Academy [of the Fine Arts] that is called *Business Town*. That is one where we know for sure that he gave it that title.



Fig. 1. Joaquín Torres-García. Untitled, 1931. Oil on wood panel. Collection Fondazione Camilo Caetani, Rome. Courtesy of the Estate of Joaquín Torres-García.

**SVT:** There are all the links to the exhibitions, literature, all the conventional data you would find. But sometimes we would add mini essays or make a note and that, I don't believe, would appear in a traditional publication. We include source material; like for his portraits of the Heroes and the Monsters, we found the photographs that we know he was using as models.

**CDT:** We were interested in adding anecdotes and facts that would help to place each painting in its context—its origins and how it came to be.

**SVT:** Like the example of *Hoy* (1918–19). We had to explain that he made this piece as a functional calendar, otherwise it would be read in a completely inaccurate context.

**CDT:** That is a case where we included family photographs of his home and saw where *Hoy* was hanging. We realized that he was still using it in Paris, even though he had made it earlier in Barcelona—it was utilitarian.

**SVT:** Yes, while a catalogue raisonné is an extremely scholarly resource—the bible of an artist—by being able to add all of this information, it contributes so much more; it fills it out; it humanizes the artist and their production. In fact, something tragic that happened to Torres-García was that many of his works were destroyed, especially in the 1978 fire that took place during his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio; works were also lost during World War II and in his transnational moves. There are even canvases he destroyed because he was painting over them. Online, we can see them all in one place—in a traditional catalogue raisonné, they would be scattered throughout the pages by year. And for better or worse, with the digital, we can recall all those pieces, and you can see tangibly what has been lost.

**CDT:** It brings a lot of things together.

**SVT:** It is interesting because a catalogue raisonné is something dedicated to a singular artist. But I feel that by bringing together all these source materials, photographs, a 1908 clipping from Barcelona, or an exhibition invitation from New York, it goes back to the network. It is very multivocal. It is not just Torres-García who is present but his peers, his family, critics . . . a catalogue raisonné can be a very dry tome, but by gathering all this information, it is all the more rich and powerful.

**CDT:** And access is free and available to anyone. Of course, the concern is what is going to happen.

**SVT:** What is going to happen? We launched in 2016. You are still researching. You had people assisting you before I came on board; now Victoria Fedrigotti is working with you. But what is the maintenance? Because that is the other thing about not printing a physical catalogue: it can be continually expanded. We launched with the paintings and sculptures, but you've since done the toys, and now you are working on the drawings.

**CDT:** My concern is the future; ideally a museum or an institution should continue to make the catalogue available online. I believe that Torres-García is an important artist and that new scholarly research is still to be done. That is why the catalogue is invaluable tool.

*Susanna V. Temkin is Curator at El Museo del Barrio. Cecilia de Torres specializes on Joaquín Torres-García and the artists of his workshop. In May 2015, Cecilia de Torres published the online catalogue raisonné of Joaquín Torres-García in collaboration with Susanna V. Temkin, Madeline Murphy Turner, and Victoria L. Fedrigotti.*