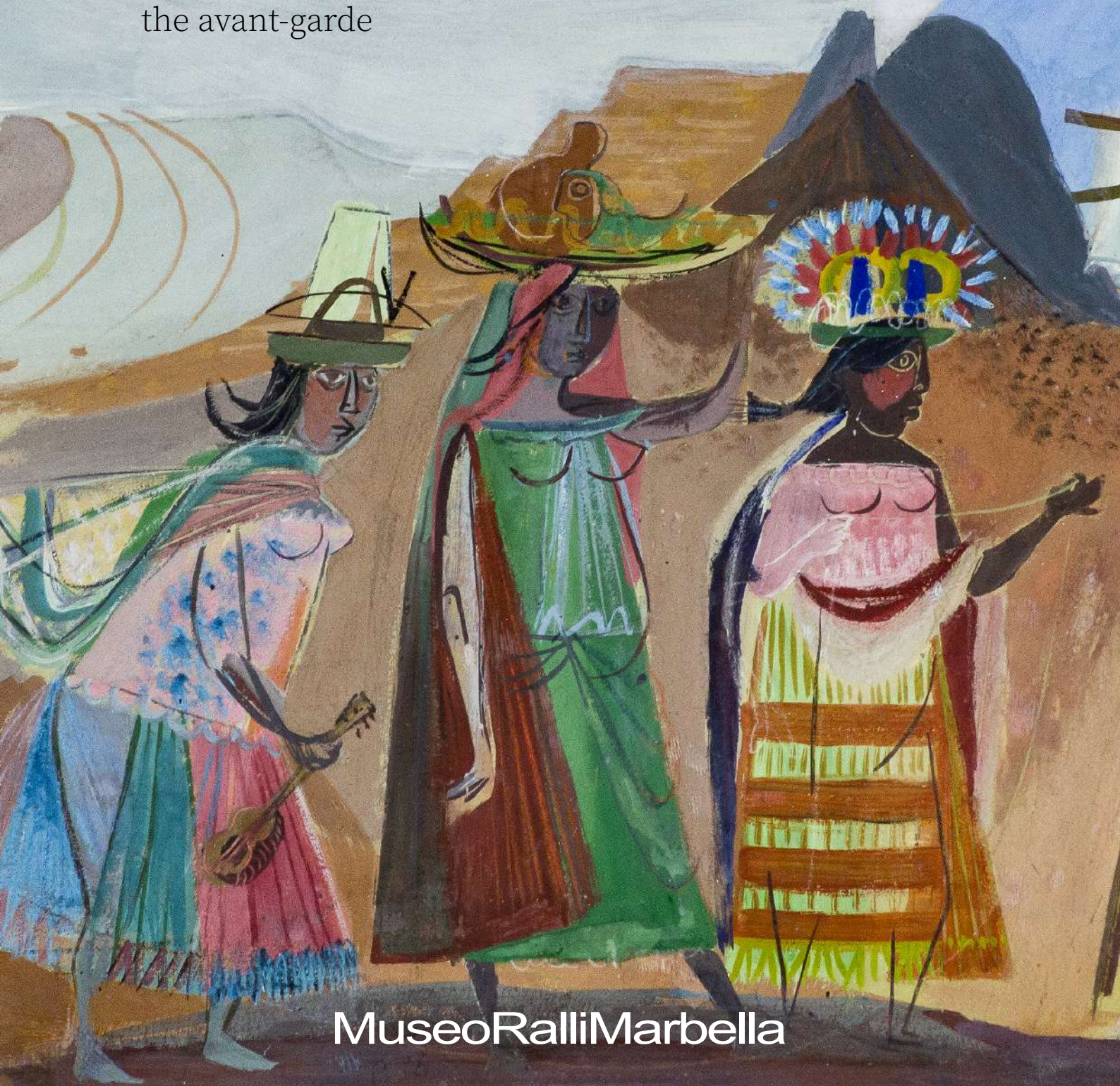


Destination Argentina

Borges and **Chale**, female artists in
the avant-garde



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DESTINATION ARGENTINA

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Presentation

Norah Borges and Gertrudis Chale, two women whose travels and fascination with the world strongly influenced their work, while leaving their mark on the avant-garde panorama of the different countries where they settled.

We can see Borges in both Argentine and Spanish art, forming an active part of the avant-gardes on both sides of the Pacific. Chale was welcomed as a painter of the Andean world and Argentine indigenous society, herself being of Viennese origin.

In spite of the visible differences between these artists in terms of their ways of producing art and their themes, many things unite Gertrudis Chale and Norah Borges. Their European training, time spent in the Balearic Islands and the influences on both from their inhabitants and landscapes, their constant travels and desire for knowledge, their synthetic language, their link with literature and, of course, their relevance within the art of the Argentine avant-garde.

In this exhibition we travel through the points they have in common, discovering what is unique about these two artists in each of them, with the aim of reflecting upon and shining a light on the role they played within Latin American and international contemporary art.



Gertrudis Chale, *Cholas* (1950)
Tempera on paper
27 x 31 cm



Norah Borges, *Angels eating apples* (1960)
Tempera on duraboard
70 x 80 cm

Introduction

Argentina in the 1920s

Starting in the 1920s, Argentina underwent major political, social, cultural and economic changes. Buenos Aires ended up positioning itself as a modern and cosmopolitan city, contrasting with the social and cultural reality of other regions of the same country.

Attracted by the new economic and labour system resulting from industrialisation, many inhabitants of the rural world migrated to the capital and the coastal region, translating into profound changes in social structures. This new economic system generated a brief period of boom that resulted in a high standard of living and low wages, bringing social and labour unrest.

Social difficulties were not to stop the growth of the city, and the urban fabric and lifestyle of the people of Buenos Aires was transformed and modernised. The urban landscape was taken over by wide avenues, cars, trams, high-rise buildings, electrical cables and neon signs.

The artistic field was not immune to these changes and aesthetic movements soon emerged to embrace them. They included members of the Florida group (poets, writers and artists grouped around the magazine *Martín Fierro*), the painters of La Boca, Los Artistas del Pueblo, the Paris group and the Orión group.

The languages of the European avant-garde were introduced into the Argentine artistic scene thanks to the proposals of some of these groups, providing a starting point for these Argentine artists who developed their own language. As was typical, many of the young artists completed their training in Europe; upon their return, they used what they had learned to devise an artistic proposal adapted to local needs and problems.

Key factors in the birth of avant-garde movements in Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s were the emergence of magazines, the publication of manifestos, and the creation of new artistic institutions, thanks to which independent artists could disseminate and exhibit their art.

Despite differences in what they were offering, the avant-garde groups coincided in their approach of moving away from academic and official art, represented by works approved by the National Exhibition of Fine Arts. This art was about tradition, characterised by its representations of rural themes and costumbrista scenes. Based on nostalgic representations of the colonial past and traditions with a pre-Columbian heritage, its language falls between impressionism and symbolism. Themes range from academic portraits and exotic nudes to native landscapes, scenes and costumbrista characters.

Indigenous art is concerned with the visibility of marginal social classes as well as the representation of national identity, although the latter comes from a perspective that is far removed from academic proposals.

Concentrated in the northwest of the country at the start, in an area with the highest concentration of indigenous communities, these proposals gradually increased and spread throughout Argentina during the 1920s. Here, we see a kindly image of the Indian, extolling and dignifying him, representing him through innovative languages and themes that are not politically charged.

Norah Borges and Gertrudis Chale

Female artists in the avant-garde

First steps

Norah Borges (Argentina, 1901 – 1998)

Leonor Fanny Borges Acevedo was born in Buenos Aires in 1901. She was nicknamed Norah by her brother Jorge Luis, and she herself later adopted the name.

Norah and her entire family moved to Europe in 1914 due to her father's health. Here she continued enriching her artistic concerns that had already emerged from a very young age in her native country.

She lived in Switzerland from 1914 until 1918, where she began her studies at the Geneva Academy of Fine Arts with classical training. The academic sculptor Maurice Sarkisoff was her drawing teacher. This was also when she first came into contact with European avant-garde movements, in particular German expressionism, receiving training in engraving from Ernst L. Kirchner himself¹. Once in Lugano she received private classes with Arnaldo Bossi, with whom she explored the woodcut technique.

After this initial stage, Borges started making incursions into the art world with her own works.

Gertrudis Chale (Austria, 1898 – Argentina, 1954)

Born Gertrudis Schale in Vienna in 1898, her links with Argentina led her to change the phonetics and spelling of her surname, herself turning it into *Chale*.

Originally from Vienna, she studied at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts (currently the University of Applied Arts) and later perfected her skills at the Akademie Heimann in Munich (1920), and in Geneva, where she took classes in artistic anatomy.

She held her first exhibitions at this time, as well as starting work in design and decorative arts, which led her to great success in the advertising field. She therefore began a career as a publicist that was to take her to Paris in 1925, where she worked with several important companies.

1. The role of Ernst L. Kirchner (founder and main promoter of the German expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge)) as Norah Borges' engraving teacher is not supported by all sources. Mónica Vázquez Astorga affirms this relationship in the article "La presencia de las mujeres artistas en las tertulias de café: Norah Borges (1901-1998)", (p. 591). In "El viaje como generador del gusto. La respuesta de Norah Borges a la experiencia del viaje a Mallorca" (pp. 506-507), Francisca Lladó Pol refers to this direct influence of German expressionism due to the artistic environment and the magazines that were published upon the arrival in Switzerland of Ernst Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, another member of the group Die Brücke. However, she does not refer to him as a teacher at any point. For more information on these references, see the bibliography section.

Spain, between the rural and the artistic

Norah Borges

In 1919 the Borges family moved to Spain, first settling in Palma de Mallorca and, at the end of the year, in Seville, then moving to Madrid at the beginning of 1920.

Norah's artistic path is closely linked to the avant-garde literary publications that emerged in the cities in which she lived. Upon her arrival in Spain, she began collaborating with magazines like *Baleares*, *Reflector*, *Grecia*, *Ultra* and *Litoral*.

During her stays in the Balearic Islands, Borges developed her facet as an engraver and mural painter, predominantly the former. The theme of her works is based on depicting rural environments and peasant women, known as *payesas*. These iconographic motifs were to endure in her work long after her time on the island, based on her memories. Borges immersed herself in the real Mallorca, in direct contact with its inhabitants, their customs and their traditions, which she transfers to her paintings in a completely avant-garde language that falls halfway between expressionism and cubism.

During her time in Seville and Madrid, Borges moved away from the rural world and delved into the artistic and intellectual circuit of avant-garde movements, specifically forming part of ultraism. After this incursion into an avant-garde movement, Borges returned to Mallorca and continued to produce mainly graphic work, based on her own language that tends towards simplification and schematics, as well as collaborating in the publication of the aforementioned magazines.

The artist developed a style of art influenced by German expressionism and cubism, the result of which is a language characterised by the stylisation of human forms and figures and the presence of rhomboidal compositions which break up objects and surfaces, creating a fragmentary illusion of the plane.

Due to her role within ultraism, her aesthetics have come to be identified as the artistic language of this movement. However, the definition of artistic ultraism is more complex since there were no guidelines in this regard due to its mainly literary approach. We can therefore see many other isms associated with this new one that emerged in Spain in 1918: Rafael Barradas' vibrationism, Celso Lagar's planism, Sonia and Robert Delaunay's orphism, Norah Borges' expressionism and Vázquez Díaz's cubism, among others.

Gertrudis Chale

In around 1930, Chale and her husband moved to Spain, where Chale found the definitive inspiration for her painting, devoting more time to this facet of her art.

They settled in Madrid², where she worked for an important fashion house. They toured the city and got to know every corner of it during their time there, revelling in its architecture, its museums and academies, immersing themselves in the great works of Spanish and Flemish art by masters like Goya, Velázquez, Bruegel and Patinir. Chale also frequented the capital's suburbs and found herself being influenced by the daily reality of its inhabitants and its streets.

Finally, after over a year in the capital, they moved to the Balearic Islands, living in both Mallorca and Ibiza. She found the austere beauty of its landscapes and rural inhabitants highly appealing, in particular women dressed in typical clothing, known as *payesas*.

Her beginnings lay in cubism, a movement she discovered in Paris, but she soon honed her own language based on pastel colours contrasted with strong primary colours, scenes and landscapes with perspective, although without seeking realism, full of elements referring to the culture and place where they were painted.

She also felt awed and inspired by the landscape of the sweeping Castilian plains, as well as the mountainous landscape of Guadarrama and others that she came across on her travels around the peninsula.

2. Doubts have been raised on the timeline of Chale's arrival in Spain and the order of the places where she lived as there are some contradictions in the literature, although they all agree upon the same cities. Here we follow the timeline provided by her friend and art critic Mauricio Neuman.

Destination Argentina

Norah Borges

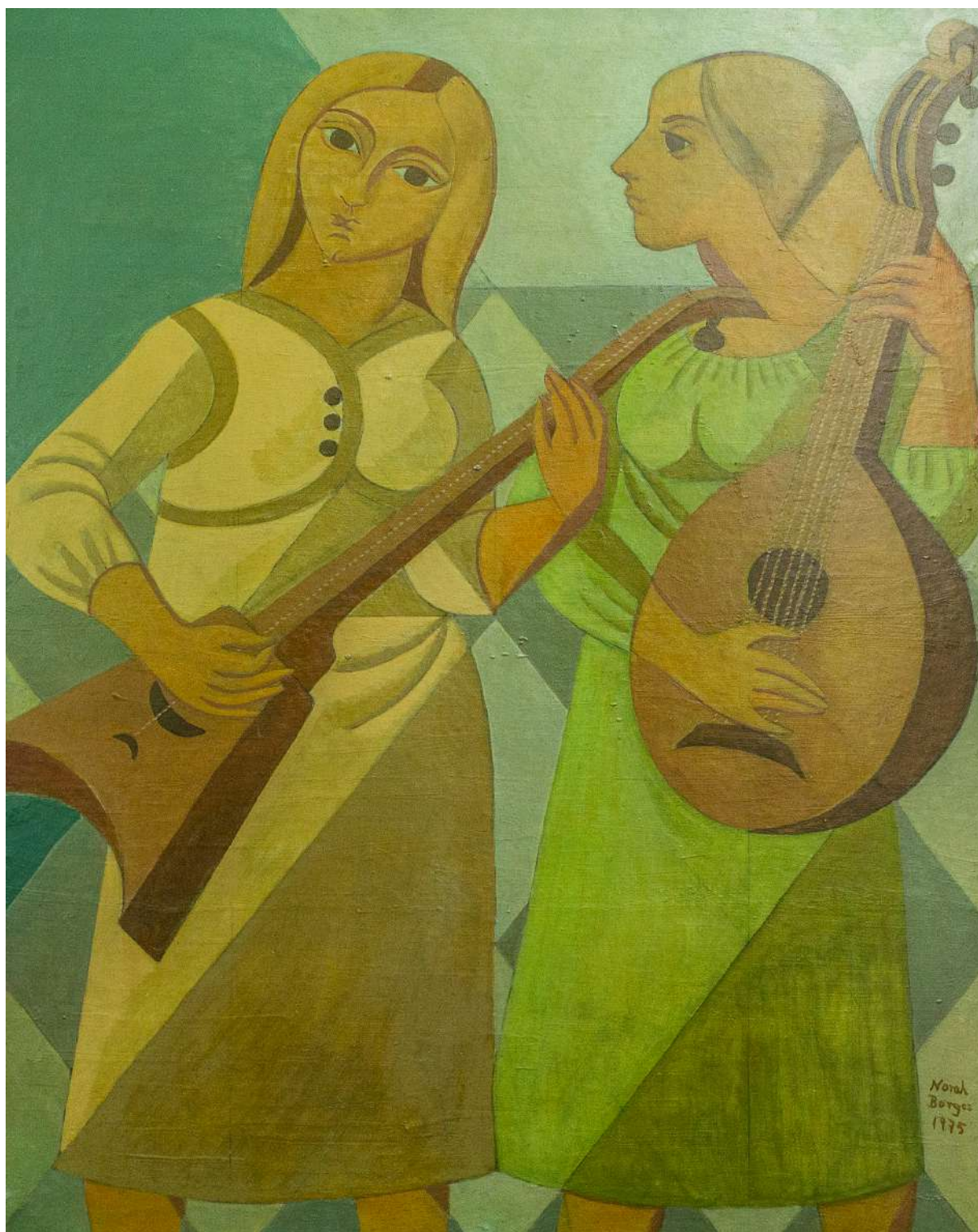
Norah Borges returned to her hometown with her family in 1921, and as such accompanied by her brother Jorge Luis Borges, a poet and writer of the ultraist movement.

This trip was in the opposite direction to the journey undertaken by young Argentine artists at that time, which more specifically was to travel to Europe to live, learn and become exposed to the bohemian and avant-garde atmosphere that existed there. The Borges distanced themselves from all of these influences, but they had already assimilated them internally, although at first it was a disappointment for them both. To their surprise, they found a modern Buenos Aires that would be the cradle of new intellectual movements, although in terms of artistic activity it would still take a few years for Argentine and international contemporary artists to find their space.

Ultraism also accompanied the Borges family to Buenos Aires, and they continued developing the movement, in particular thanks to the role of Jorge Luis who imported it to Argentina and promoted it there, where it took on an even more predominantly literary approach. Even so, Norah Borges continued to collaborate with and appear in magazines such as *Prisma*, *Proa*, *Martín Fierro* and *Sur*. Her presence in these magazines makes her a benchmark for avant-garde art in 1920s Argentina.

In developing artistic ultraism in Argentina, she was accompanied by artists who were already part of the movement in Spain, such as the Uruguayan Rafael Barradas, and others like Francisco Miguel, Luis Huici and Francisco Bores.

In addition to collaborating with artworks and illustrations, Norah Borges played a role as an intellectual from the shadows, which can be seen in her collaboration on *Martín Fierro*. Here, Borges provides artistic advice for the magazine's content, as well as reviews and publications of texts that, without exception, were published under a pseudonym or in anonymous texts. During her stay in Buenos Aires between 1924 and 1932, Borges finally participated in collective exhibitions in salons and galleries. During this period, she was also asked to take part in exhibitions in Spain, being considered a part of the artistic panorama of this country in which they all had so much mutual influence.



Norah Borges, *Two figures* (1975)

Oil on duraboard

80 x 107 cm

Inflection point

In 1926 Borges published, also unsigned, what she called “a synoptic table of painting” in issue 29 of the magazine *Martín Fierro*. In this manifesto she establishes the theoretical principles of plastic arts according to her, and she states that painting should be a tool to escape, with the requirement that it should be beautiful and kind.

Borges therefore adheres to the principles of the *return to order*, which was taking place in Europe and Latin America alike after the First World War. It is committed to a return to figurative languages in favour of strengthening humanism against the horror of destruction and the struggle of man against man.



Norah Borges, *Anunciación* (1955),
Oil on cardboard
70 x 70 cm

Norah Borges, *The mansions* (1956),
Oil on duraboard
100 x 100 cm



Nevertheless, this new approach did not mean a complete break from what she had been creating before, but rather decades of her work that is more closely linked to avant-garde languages coexisting with that of her more personal production. Likewise, after her own personal *return to order*, we continue to see elements in Borges' work that are reminiscent of her avant-garde language, such as compositions based on geometric shapes, in particular rhomboids.

In this new language we see Borges' inclination towards and taste for the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, 13th-century Flemish painting, archaic Greek art and Romanesque art, and the paintings of Filippo Lippi, Fra Angelico, Giotto and Sandro Botticelli, as well as those by Giorgio de Chirico and El Greco.

The cost of Borges' commitment to art that pursues beauty was having her work described as "feminine painting", "sensitive", "sentimental" and even "naive". Therefore, Borges was forced to pay the price of being pushed aside from the centre of the avant-garde by critics, more for being a woman than for her commitment to art, which was no different to commitments made by other contemporary artists, as has already been pointed out.

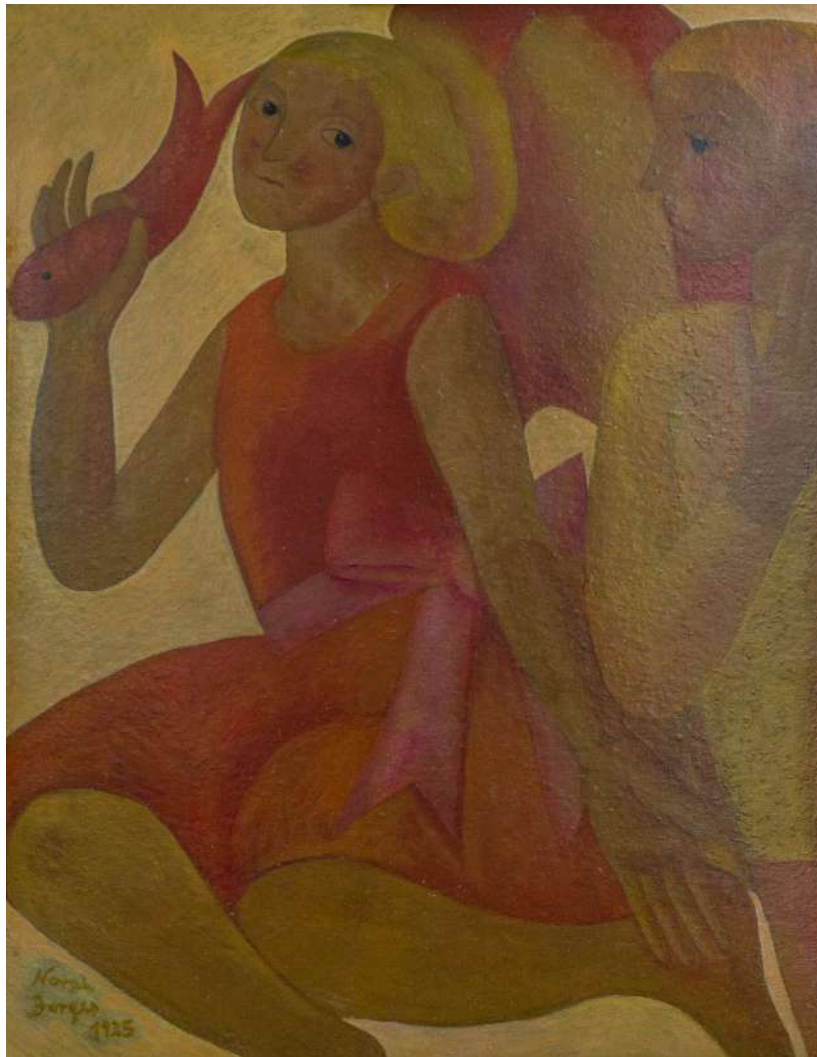
Despite criticism, Borges continued to take part in exhibitions that displayed avant-garde art of the time, both in Buenos Aires and in Spain, as well as later in France. Key works from her second period such as "Tobias and the Angel" (pag. 13) and "Urbano and Simona" (pag. 13) were exhibited to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the magazine *Martín Fierro* in 1949 along with works by Xul Solar, Emilio Pettoruti, Lino Enea Spilimbergo and other artists connected to the magazine.



Norah Borges,
Figure with guitar (1940)
Watercolour on paper
13,5 x 36,5 cm



Norah Borges,
Two figures (1940)
Watercolour on paper
13,5 x 36,5 cm



Norah Borges,
*Tobias and the
angel*
(1925)
Oil on
cardboard
55 x 70 cm



Norah Borges,
*Urbano y
Simona*
(1930)
Oil on
duraboard
54 x 60 cm

Gertrudis Chale

Due to the worrying political situation with the rise of Nazism in Germany and fascism in Spain, Gertrudis Chale decided to emigrate to Argentina in 1934, reaching the country via Bolivia. Her attraction to this particular destination was influenced by her husband's South American origins and the devotion that her father always felt for the landscape of the pampas. Chale felt deeply attracted to the rural and suburban world inhabited by indigenous people, just as she was to the rural world in Spain. Once there, she divorced her husband and settled in Quilmes, an area that bordered both the rural and the urban, always seeking out environments that allowed her to immerse herself in and get to know the mostly indigenous culture and society that inhabits them.

To understand this attraction and connection to communities of indigenous peoples, it is important to point out the feelings of being displaced, discriminated against and persecuted³ that Chale herself had experienced because of her Austro-Hungarian origins. Events in Europe forced her to travel from one place to another, and her need for her identity and homeland was resolved by connecting with these same feelings in indigenous communities.



Gertrudis Chale, *Figures and ranches* (1950). Tempera on cardboard
52 x 42.4 cm

3. Neuman talks about Chale's "sense of not belonging and her feelings of isolation" in: NEUMAN, Mauricio *Op. cit.*, p. 29.



Gertrudis Chale, *A corner in La Boca* (1940). Tempera on cardboard
40.5 x 28 cm

She also drew near to and got to know artistic and intellectual circles in Buenos Aires, spending time with artists like Héctor Basaldúa, Horacio Butler, Aquiles Badi, Emilio Centurión, Conrado Nalé Roxlo, Oliverio Gironde, Raquel Forner, Ramón Gómez Cornet, the writer, poet and essayist Jorge Luis Borges and other exiled intellectuals like Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, and the German photographer Grete Stern and her husband, the filmmaker Horacio Coppola.

The art critic Romualdo Brughetti included her within the Generation of 1938-49, alongside artists like Carlos Castagnino, Juan Batlle Planas, Luis Seoane and Miguel Diomede. According to the critic, out of all of them Chale was the one who most pursued the representation of the reality of “man”⁴ and the South American landscape. Chale shared the idea of her Latin American contemporaries that they should stop looking towards Europe and create an artistic and intellectual discourse based on autochthonous and indigenous culture, and she also tried to bring this into her work.

4. The noun *man* is used here as used by Brughetti, although this does not refer to the “singular masculine noun that refers to the male sex” but to the concept of humanity, or in this case, of Argentine society. This reference can be found in: GILLAND, Julianne, “Gertrudis Chale. Perspectiva sobre su vida y obra”, in NEUMAN, Mauricio y GILLAND, Julianne, *Op. cit.*, p. 43.



Gertrudis Chale, *Figure* (1943)
Tempera on paper, 47 x 64 cm

In addition to this cultural environment, Chale became linked to intellectual and artistic movements in the northwest of the country, where magazines parallel to the capital started to be produced. These sought to provide visibility to and unite all the country's literary and artistic tendencies, attempting to decentralise the focus of Argentina's capital city. Chale and her painting fit perfectly within these demands for Argentine identity as one that is also found on the peripheries, in rural areas or in discriminated ethnic groups.

Chale collaborated with illustrations in magazines like *Ángulo*, founded and published in the city of Salta between 1945 and 1947. She related to other artists who were also regular collaborators on this and other magazines, such as Héctor Bernabó (better known as Carybé), Raúl Brié, Carlos Luis García Bes, Luis Preti and Ramiro Dávalos. She was also linked with poets and writers, of which it is worth highlighting her close relationship with the poet Manuel J. Castilla, with whom she shared a way of understanding and representing today's American Indian society.

In her letters and writings, Chale made clear her point of view and concern for American societies. For her, *what is Argentine, what is American*, is about autochthonous roots, hence the more original, the more American. She thereby defended indigenous people and their lifestyle as the most authentically Argentine, above modern and city societies. To do this, she uses a figurative language in panoramic works usually painted in oils and temperas. We see elements of expressionism and surrealism in her work that tell us about the timelessness and immensity of the Andean world.

Chale's work also pays significant attention to indigenous women as the figure upon whom the weight of work and family survival falls, above men.

Mauricio Neuman,⁵ art critic and a friend of the artist, distinguishes several periods within Chale's painting after her arrival in Argentina. The first, linked to its suburban beginnings, is more rationalist in nature and has more colour, with a palette that includes the use of ochres, blues, reds, light blues, blacks, oranges and whites. The artist's second period corresponds to her encounter with the Andean world.

Inflection point

Due to her wanderlust and her desire for knowledge, Chale was to visit Argentina and other Latin American countries on several occasions.

After her first trip through Argentina's altiplano region, Chale's painting was transformed, with a less varied colour palette that contributed to the surreal and timeless atmosphere that characterises her painting. Her representations are syncretic, eliminating increasing amounts of decorative and anecdotal elements.

5. NEUMAN, Mauricio *Op. cit.*, p. 24.



◀ Gertrudis Chale,
Figure (1945)
Tempera on paper
44 x 66 cm

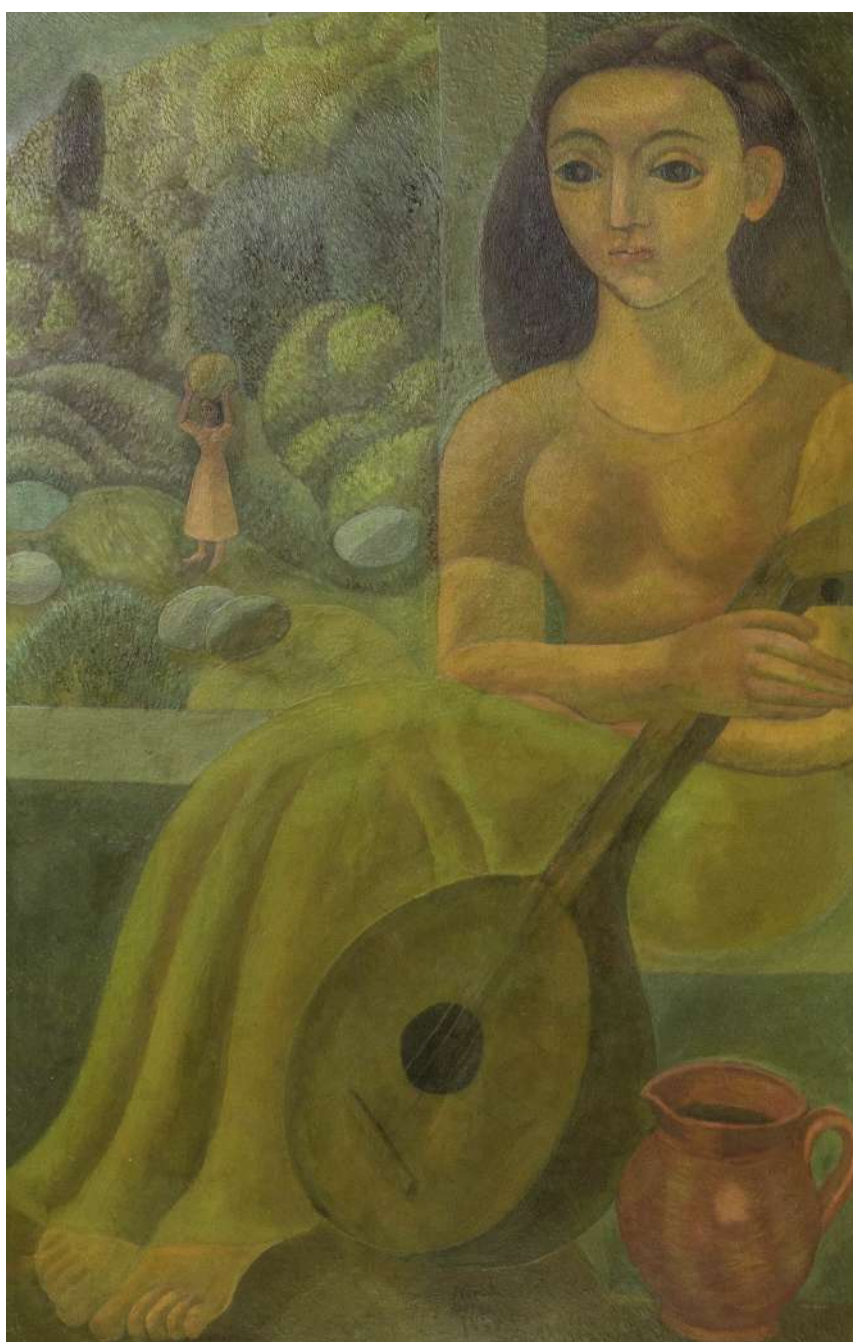
▼ Gertrudis Chale,
Landscape with figures (1946)
Oil on duraboard
55 x 40 cm



Travels through the old and new world

Norah Borges

In 1932 Borges returned to Spain and settled in an apartment in Madrid's Salamanca neighbourhood along with her husband, Guillermo de Torre, leaving behind a country whose official institutions still rejected manifestations of contemporary art, considering them "exotic". Therefore, once again in the opposite direction to her compatriots, as the artists of the Paris group returned to Argentina and were received by a discouraging panorama in terms of institutional support, Borges travelled to Europe where she was to find recognition and a new environment for her personal, intellectual and artistic development.



Norah Borges, *Window* (1947). Oil on duraboard
60 x 90 cm

This is how Borges was to hold her first solo exhibition in an official institution, in Madrid's Museum of Modern Art, in 1934. Two years later, in 1936, she took part in the exhibition "L'Art Espagnol Contemporain" in Paris, along with artists like Picasso, Miró, Gris and Dalí; she was the only artist who had not been born in Spain.

Borges established new social relationships based mainly on correspondence during her stay in Madrid, this time with female writers and artists. They included Gabriela Mistral, Carmen Conde and Silvina Ocampo. She thereby continued her self-taught training, in which her passion for literature was still of great importance, and developing her own artistic career.

On the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Borges travelled to Marseille and later to Paris, finally returning to Buenos Aires in 1938.

Back in the city of her birth, in 1940 Norah Borges held a major monographic exhibition at Amigos del Arte, in which she combined all the different techniques and themes she had developed throughout her body of work. With this exhibition, she finally positioned herself as an artist with a rich and diverse trajectory and influences, becoming another of the artists to break with the previous generation and an essential part of avant-garde art in Argentina, far from being labelled as a feminine and naive painter that others had previously sought to reduce her to.



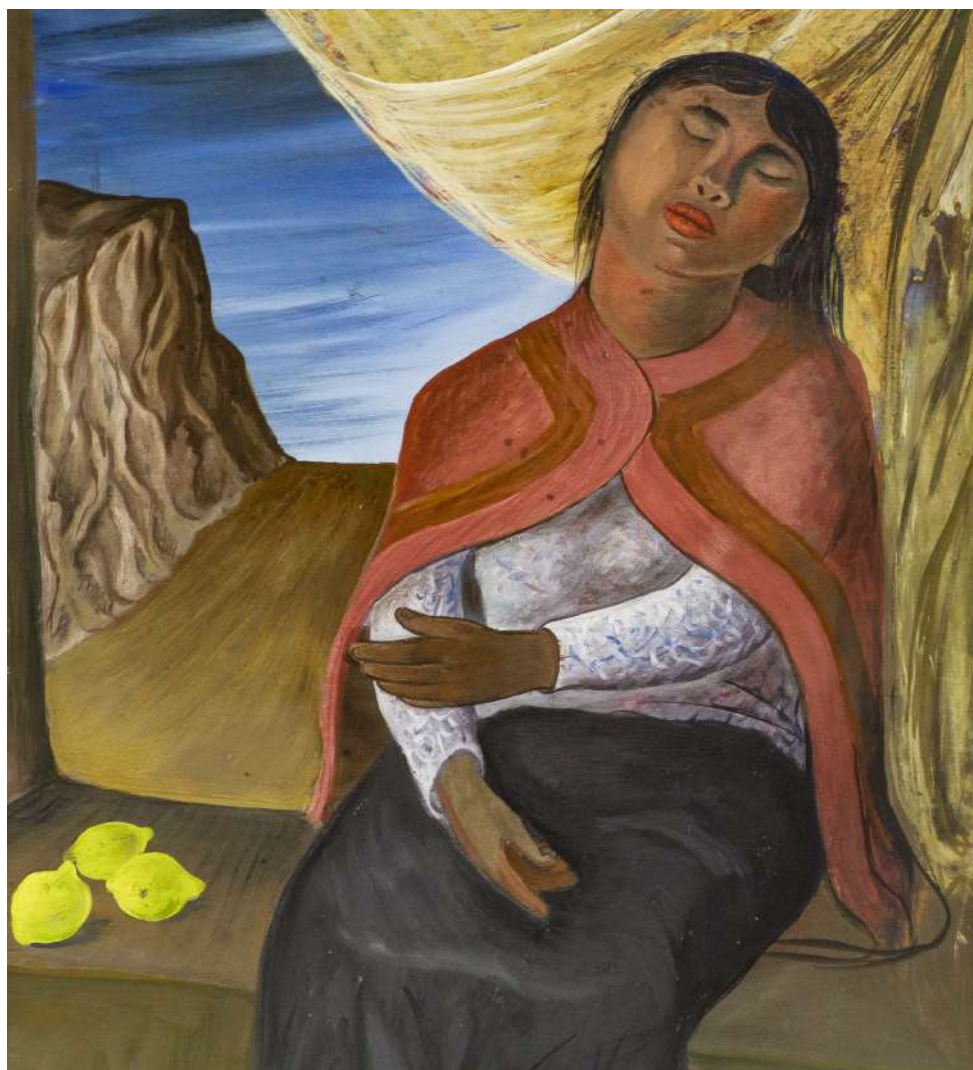
Norah Borges, *The mandolin* (1950)
Tempera on cardboard
32 x 42.5 cm

Gertrudis Chale

In 1936 Chale embarked on a new journey that would take her back to the European continent. She visited Spain, France, Germany, Italy and Austria over a period of almost two years.

Back in Latin America, she went on her travels again in 1945, travelling through Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, and also Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay at a later date. As always, Chale sought to capture the daily reality of the inhabitants and the original cultures of these countries, although some of these trips were soon to take on a more transcendental dimension in the evolution of Latin American art.

On her trip to Peru, her friend and cultural attaché at the Bolivian embassy in Buenos Aires, Óscar Cerruto, convinced her to show her work at an exhibition in La Plata, an idea that Chale would turn into a collective exhibition of contemporary Argentine art to introduce people to “her neighbours”, as she herself would call them.



Gertrudis Chale, *The blind girl* (1945). Tempera on paper
41 x 50 cm

. The exhibition featured work by the Argentines Juan Carlos Castagnino, Clément Moreau and Chale herself. Soon, this single exhibition turned into a multi-country tour in which Chale exhibited her work and met important cultural figures as well as artists from the countries she visited. Among the latter, it is worth highlighting the Peruvian indigenist José Sabogal, with whom she forged a great friendship and who linked her with the peoples and traditions of the Peruvian Andes, and Julia Codesio, a disciple of Sabogal, with whom she shared the same interests and ties as with her maestro.



Gertrudis Chale, *Landscape* (1943). Tempera on paper
53 x 40 cm

According to Chale herself, in her portraits and landscapes alike she attempted to shy away from folklore and the picturesque, keeping far removed from representations of the pampas, costumbrista scenes and narrative elements.

Her work corresponds to the position of indigenous art, with which she shared ideals and scenarios throughout her career in Argentina. However, on occasions she has been specifically accused of exercising a Europeanising viewpoint in her works, interpreting a biased vision of Latin American reality in the way she represents immensity and timelessness in her scenes, precisely due to the absence of references in her work to the social and political situations that played out over those years.⁶

6. This critique is made by Nancy Sartelli and Diana Mejillones in an article dedicated to the G. Chale exhibition at the MUNTREF Museum of Visual Arts in 2007, under the title "Gertrudis Chale. El "estar" de América". (See bibliography section for the reference of the exhibition and article.) This is an accusation made against the artist after she was deceased, despite the fact that she herself declared during her life that her intention was not to make social or political art, rather art that would reflect the inner world of the people in it (as reflected in NEUMAN, Mauricio *Op. cit.*, p. 16).

We could deduce that Chale, like any artist, subjectively represented her vision of the character and identity of the towns and villages she got to know, transmitting in her paintings the same sensation that she perceived with the people she met and lived among, seeking to evoke and not narrate.

Within her artistic production, it is also worth highlighting Chale's participation in the growing muralist movement that emerged in Buenos Aires between 1940 and 1950, led by Lino Spilimbergo and Castagnino, who founded the Mural Art Workshop. One of the last works painted by the artist was a mural, made in 1954. Together with other artists such as Luis Seoane, Raúl Soldi, Leopoldo Presas, Noemí Gerstein, Juan Batlle Planas and Leopoldo Torres Agüero, Chale made a mural at the Santa Fe Gallery in Buenos Aires entitled "Market and festivity". There are a whole host of illustrations of this work and different versions of preparatory drawings, one of which can be seen in this exhibition (pag. 23).

Finally, Chale died at a young age in a plane crash on 23 April 1954, as she was flying from Mendoza to Buenos Aires. And it is precisely in this way that the Andes become the definitive resting place for the artist, as declared by Julianne Gilland.⁷



Gertrudis Chale, *Figures* (1945). Tempera on cardboard
62 x 40 cm

7. GILLAND, Julianne, *Ob.cit.*, p. 51.



Gertrudis Chale,
Figures (1945).
Tempera on cardboard
62 x 40 cm
Details of the work.



Market and festivity,
mural at the
Santa Fe Gallery
in Buenos Aires.



Bibliography

Note:

This catalogue has been produced including the lowest possible number of notes for ease of reading, appearing exclusively in cases where it is essential or to enrich the content. Readers are invited to consult the bibliography section for further study of the different themes found in the catalogue, where they will find the bibliographical references divided into three parts: introduction, biography of Norah Borges, and biography of Gertrudis Chale.

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