

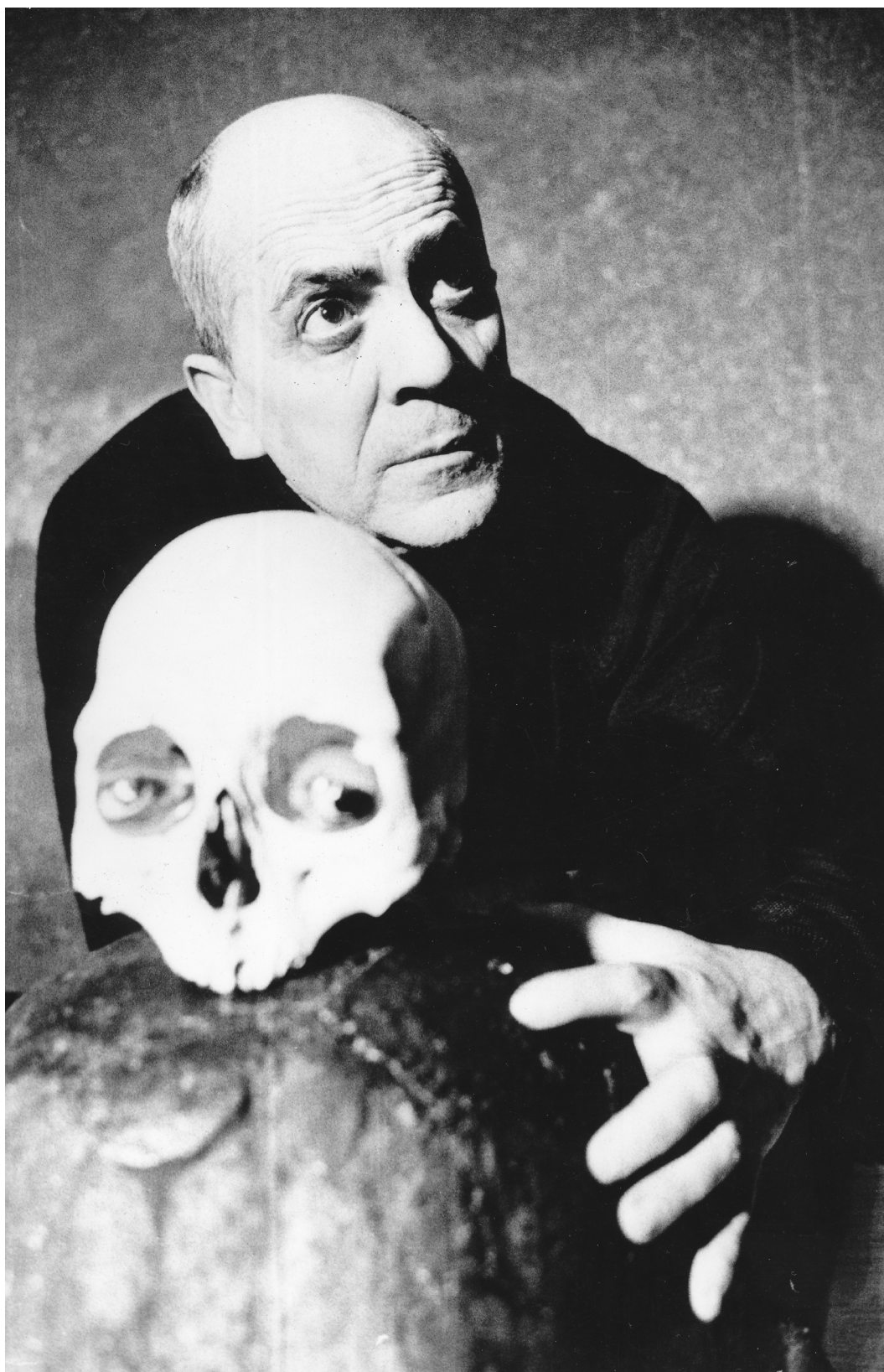
October 27, 2023 – February 9, 2024

Museo Reina Sofía, Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre, Space D

Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Text and image, a perfect symbiosis

José García Tella through his personal archive



Portrait of the artist with a skull, ca. 1962. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre

As I approach seventy, I think the time has come to take a look back at the past, with the aid of that fantastic computer we all have in our heads, without which the electro-mechanical limitations that now tyrannise half of humanity would not exist. [...] Thus, my brain simmers with doubts about the many, many sentiments that comprise a life, [...] I've been subjected to the waves of bloodshed men inflict on the universe; pointless battles, stifled revolutions, absurd dictatorships, concentration camps...

José García Tella, 'Silhouettes' [manuscript], ca. 1976

The cultural history of Republican exile has yet to afford José García Tella (Madrid, 1906 - Paris, 1983) sufficient attention. A multi-talented, self-taught artist, he rather blurred into the background as part of the Spanish diaspora in France. But he mastered an array of different skills and, whether working as a photographer, filmmaker, playwright, art critic or painter, proved adept at using social analysis and personal experience to construct his own narrative. The impact of the Spanish Civil War, and the distance, nostalgia and despondency of life in exile, awoke in him a strong sense of belonging for the country he'd left behind, a place he would constantly recall, as evidenced by his work.

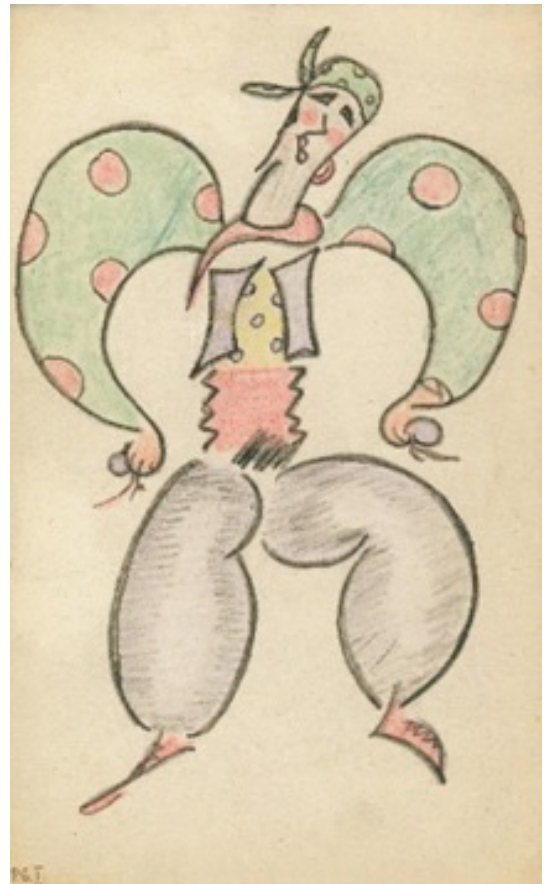
José García Álvarez, Pepe García, Perico G.T., José García Tella or just Tella —as well as Maese Pedro, if we're to include pseudonyms — were the various ways in which he identified himself. By accepting that diversity was a fundamental part of who he was, he allowed his name to change along with his identity as events forced him to adapt and reinvent himself, with his artistic side following suit.

This documentary display restores Tella's standing by making use of his own personal archive, memorabilia that he collected throughout his life and described, in 1976, as his 'computer' — a reference that makes him something of a clairvoyant given the social role the apparatus would assume in later decades. His stature transcends the limitations that life imposed on him; he was an outlier, described by the collector Henri-Pierre Roché, his first dealer, as 'the new Picasso'.

Images of war through photography

Text and image marry together perfectly in García Tella's work. He made use of both to transmit a message that was as direct as it was sincere, devoid of all decorum. He had a knack for capturing the reality of the moment, as he showed in the Spanish Civil War when serving as a photojournalist for the Culture Militia, forming part of the so-called Durruti Column and then the Free Spain Column of the CNT-FAI (National Confederation of Workers-Iberian Anarchist Federation). Several photos survive that show him as a soldier, as does his National Defence Ministry ID card and his military accreditation certificate, documents that bear witness to his political commitment.

He created a considerable graphic record, on a par with Robert Capa's and Agustí Centelles' military reporting, published in



José García Tella, *Flamenco*, from the series *Conjunto España* [Spain Combined], 1939. Reina Sofía Museum



Tella during his spell with the so-called Durruti Column. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre

the 'On these fronts' section of the CNT newspaper, accompanied by articles penned by himself. He also wrote poems during the conflict, a number of which have been preserved, including one dedicated to Buenaventura Durruti, the anarchist and trade unionist, and others dealing with the drama of the war, such as *El Esquirol* [*The Scab*] and *Chavolera* (both from 1938). Tella never stopped remembering the past; indeed decades later he drew pictures of

places he'd passed through that had ended up destroyed, a clear demonstration that the trauma of memory is not extinguished by time and physical distance.

The short-lived, committed filmmaker

The Spanish Civil War broke out just as José García Tella's cinematographic career was starting to take off. During the conflict, he made a series of documentaries for the Republican Government about disadvantaged coal mining communities in Badajoz, as well as a number of films for the Ministry of Public Instruction in Barcelona. The contracts he signed with Ediciones Antifascistas Films and his employment certificate as a cinematographic technician for Cifesa Films attest to these engagements, but some footage also survives. *España vieja* [Old Spain, 1937] stands out in this sense, the only film preserved in its entirety. A work of reportage, the film is also a call to arms in the fight against illiteracy and a critique of a state of inequality whereby two Spains existed simultaneously: one of splendour, opulence and dazzle, belonging to the bourgeoisie; the other starving, a victim of the ruling classes' appetite for pleasure, luxury and vice. Such social concerns then converged in his work as a film critic, writing for the newspapers *Solidaridad Obrera*, *CNT* and *Umbral*. A cinematic project written in exile is known to exist, but he never got the opportunity to work as a director once in France.

In the aftermath of the civil war, Tella was interned in the concentration camp at Le Barcarès, in France. He was involved in the *Manifeste d'intellectuels espagnols réfugiés en France*, drafted and signed by Republicans exiled there in April 1939. He was later transferred to the Compagnies de travailleurs étrangers (CTE), set up for stateless foreigners, but managed to escape, fleeing to Bordeaux. From there he planned to set sail for the Americas and ultimately settle in Argentina, a similar scheme having prompted him to enrol with SERE (Evacuation Service for Spanish Refugees) previously. However, in 1941, with Germany occupying France, he was taken prisoner by the Nazis and deported to Bremen. He eventually managed to escape once more and returned to France.

And when the nightmare ended, there was a moment of calm, of peace. I wanted to get to know my adopted country. I wandered aimlessly around Paris at night, from one side to the other, soaking up the place. I watched people, became fascinated by the metro, the sewers, the army salute on July 14th. [...] What was I going to do? Without the wars I might have married, had children, some kind of set-up. But all that remained for me was to await my final journey. What was I going to do in Paris?

José García Tella, 'Autobiography' [manuscript], 1948

Tella, the misunderstood playwright

García Tella began writing plays during the Spanish Civil War. At the time he was linked to the anarcho-sindicalist alliance,



José García Tella's employment certificate as a film director for Antifascist Editions, 1938. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre



Poster for the show *Le prétexte* by Michel Louis Migraine, which paid homage to Tella's painting and poetry, 1987-1988. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre

established by the Organisation Committee for Theatre, and became interested in 'social theatre', which was influenced by Kautskian thinking and revolutionary in nature. He decided to make socially-committed theatre and to this end wrote his first play, *Tormenta* [Storm, 1937], inspired by moments he'd experienced during the war. He continued to write plays in exile and even penned some at the Le Barcarès concentration camp, including *Desintegración* [Disintegration], although it can be difficult to establish

precisely which works were written where, as all are dated 1946. Some of these plays went on to be staged, such as *Tigres Royaux*, thanks to El Candil, the company José de Zamora founded.

In the 1940s, Tella worked as a theatre critic and continued to do so after becoming a promotor of Spanish culture among the diaspora, founding magazines such as *Galería* and organising festivals that celebrated Spanish music, song and dance. He even composed lyrics for songs, including *Chacoli*, *A Sevilla* and *Luna Candelaria*.

A painter is born. Art as a safeguard

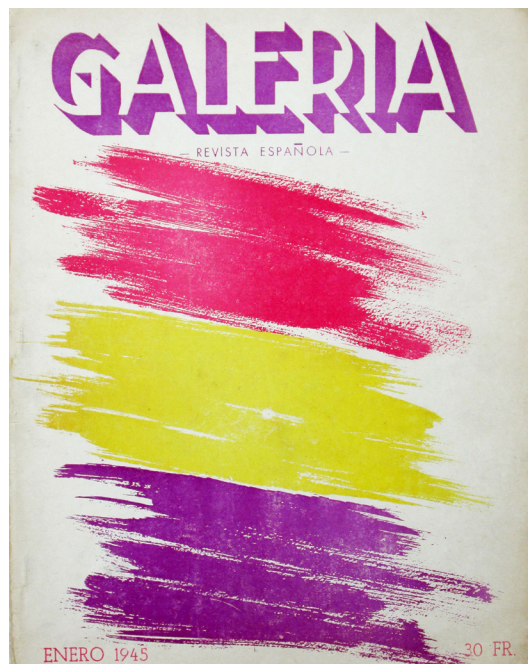
García Tella explored his painterly side from 1947, for as he himself explains, '[...] I was fed up of seeing everyone reject my plays and impatient to get the things I had to say out. Don't forget that by then I'd spent twelve years being dragged around by wars, living in labour camps, getting deported, dealing with lies and the cruelty of indifference, of intolerance'. The art dealer Henri Pierre-Roché came across Tella's work at the *Foyer de l'art brut* exhibition at the René Drouin gallery in Paris in 1948. He was immediately drawn to the variety of fine art techniques Tella employed, including collage, and to his uncompromising social message. Tella's artistic photographs, in which he himself appears in the midst of urban spaces or in compositions arranged like oil paintings, are especially striking.

Self-taught, Tella found painting to be a medium in which he could finally channel all his preoccupations and he was able to produce a powerful body of visual work. In the latter stage of his career, the symbiosis between text and image returned as he began working as an art critic for magazines such as *Galería* and *Solidaridad Obrera's* Literary Supplement. His knowledge of the Parisian cultural scene meant he was in his element and he thus became the first exile among the Spanish diaspora in France to perform the role of art critic.

Emigrating without knowing the language or having any money, art became my only means of expression for all the things I had inside me.

'Tella, a Spanish surrealist turns seventy
"in exile"', *ABC*, 12 December 1976

Text and image, perfect symbiosis seeks to show García Tella's value as an artist and highlight the multitalented nature of his work. Making use of photographs, drawings, newspaper cuttings and documents preserved in his own personal archive, the vicissitudes of Tella's life and the events he had to overcome soon emerge, along with the way his work evolved and spread into multiple mediums and disciplines.



Galería, n.º 1, January 1945. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre



A performance of *Tigres Royaux* in París (José García Tella appears in the centre of the image, dressed as a priest), 1947. José García Tella Archive. Reina Sofía Museum Library and Documentation Centre

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