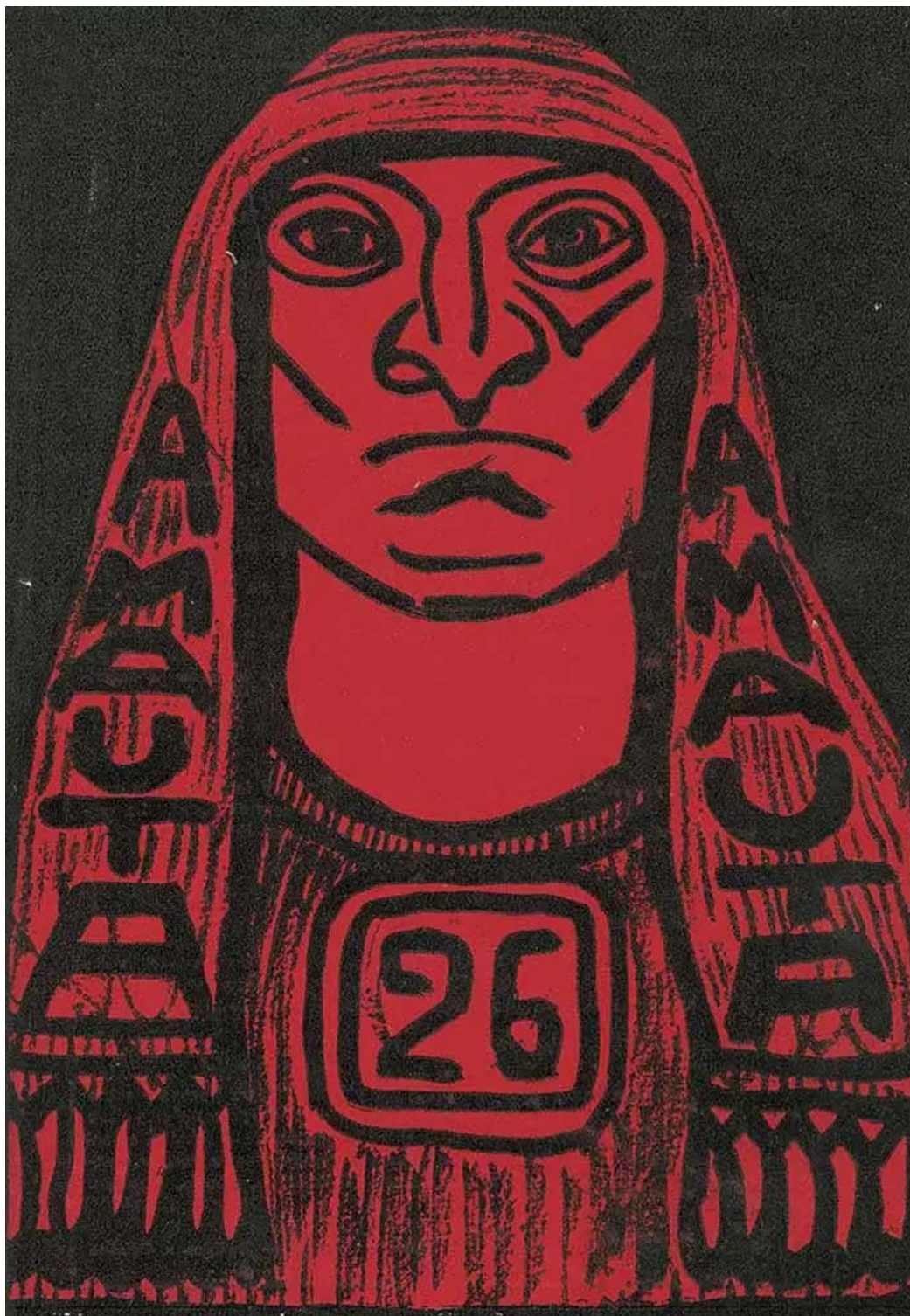


Visual Arts

The shortlived but brilliant Latin American journal Amauta

The story of José Carlos Mariátegui's magazine is told in an illuminating exhibition at Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia



Title page of Amauta by José Sabogal

Rachel Spence 17 MINUTES AGO

To build an exhibition around a magazine is a bold endeavour. It's even more challenging when the publication is not dedicated exclusively, or even primarily, to the visual arts. Yet the curators of a new show at Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia have risen to the occasion.

The Avant-garde Networks of Amauta: Argentina, Mexico and Peru in the 1920s illuminates a brief chapter in Latin American culture that saw politics, art and literature come together in a burst of creativity and openness thanks to the obsessive passion of one man, José Carlos Mariátegui.

Born in 1894 in Moquegua, southern Peru, Mariátegui grew up in Lima. By the time he founded the journal *Amauta* in 1926, he was already an established writer and editor known for his Marxist politics. In 1918 he had founded a newspaper, *La Razón*, which championed university reform and workers' rights. Threatened with jail by Peru's authoritarian, capitalism-friendly government, which was headed by Augusto Leguía, he left for Europe in 1920.

He returned in 1923 with, he said, "the purpose of establishing a journal". This show begins with a whistle-stop tour through the art and literature that inspired him on his travels. Always a pluralist, Mariátegui was as attracted to the acerbic satire of German graphic supremo [George Grosz](#) — represented here by lithographs including one of a quartet of moustachioed soldiers marching down the street with buffoonish pomposity — as he was to the more earnest vision of Russian-born artist Alexander Archipenko, whose bronze, Cubist-style sculpture of a woman, "Egyptian Motif" (1917), dominates one gallery with angular hieratic grandeur.



'Egyptian Motif' by Alexander Archipenko

Mariátegui had a dreamy streak. In Milan, he made close friends with the Argentine painter Emilio Pettoruti. The latter's portrait of Mariátegui — in profile, eyes gazing intently at blank pages on his knee — captures his dauntless fervour while maintaining a metaphysical mood typical of figurative Italian art at that time. Yet at the same time Mariátegui found himself drawn to the Futurist flag-bearer Filippo Marinetti, who saw industrialisation as the road to a brave new fascist world.

Inclusivity was at the kernel of Mariátegui's publishing enterprise. "The journal . . . does not represent a group. Rather, it represents a movement, a spirit," he announced when presenting the

first issue of Amauta. The magazine, he said, would express Peru's "vigorous current of renewal . . . [whose] instigators . . . have been called avant-gardists, socialists, revolutionaries, etc."



'Protesta' by Juan Antonio Ballester

Another crucial seam running through Amauta was Indigenism — an ideology that championed a sense of connection to Latin America's indigenous communities, who were under threat of land grabs and exploitation of their labour. Mariátegui referred to the Inca as "the most advanced primitive communist organisation in recorded history". As the magazine's title he chose a Quechua word for "wise man". Meanwhile the first cover, designed by Peruvian painter and muralist José Sabogal, is stamped with a single portrait of an Inca sage in bold red and black, his almond-shaped eyes narrowed under a traditional headdress.

How much exchange genuinely occurred between Hispanic circles and their Inca counterparts is never entirely clear. But certainly the ancient culture proffered a wellspring of stimulation. A raft of works here, many of which were reproduced in Amauta, include "Allegory to the Workers", a 1926 oil painting of workers in the fields by Peruvian artist Carlos Quíñez Asín. Captured facing forward, clutching their hoes and pitchforks, one with a fist raised in solidarity, the figures are as timeless and stylised as icons.



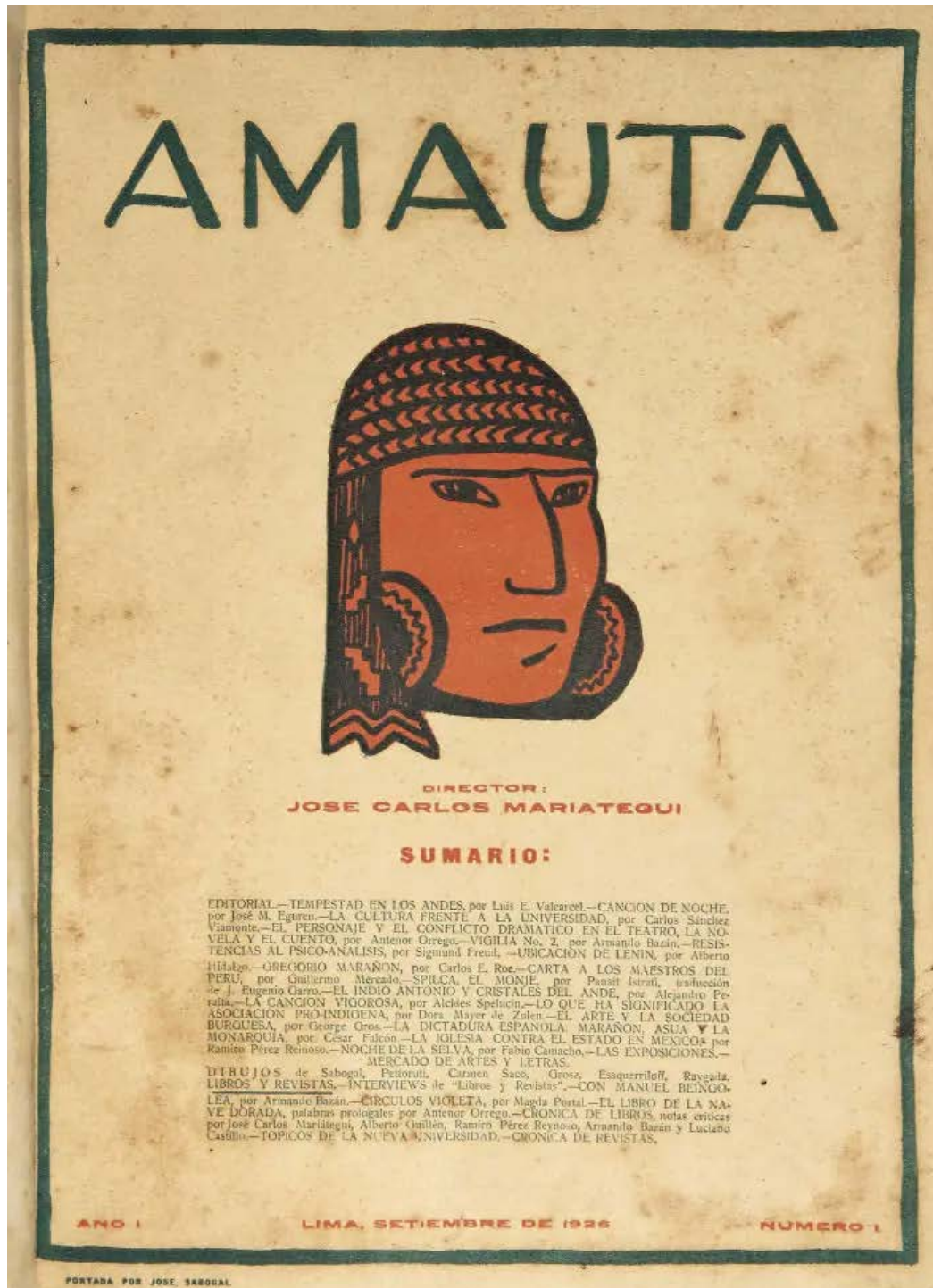
'Alegoría de los Labradores' by Carlos Quipez

More compelling are a clutch of small woodblock prints — two of impoverished Mexicans and one of the Virgin of Guadalupe — by Sabogal. Boasting the intimate immediacy that is the virtue of woodblock, which Sabogal adopted because it reminded him of traditional engraving on gourds in the Central Andes, one depicts a couple riding a donkey, the man staring back over his shoulder at the viewer as if remonstrating us for nosiness. Another shows a fierce-eyed face wedged between his neck-high serape and his sombrero.

Both Mariátegui and Amauta were comets destined to fly high and burn out early

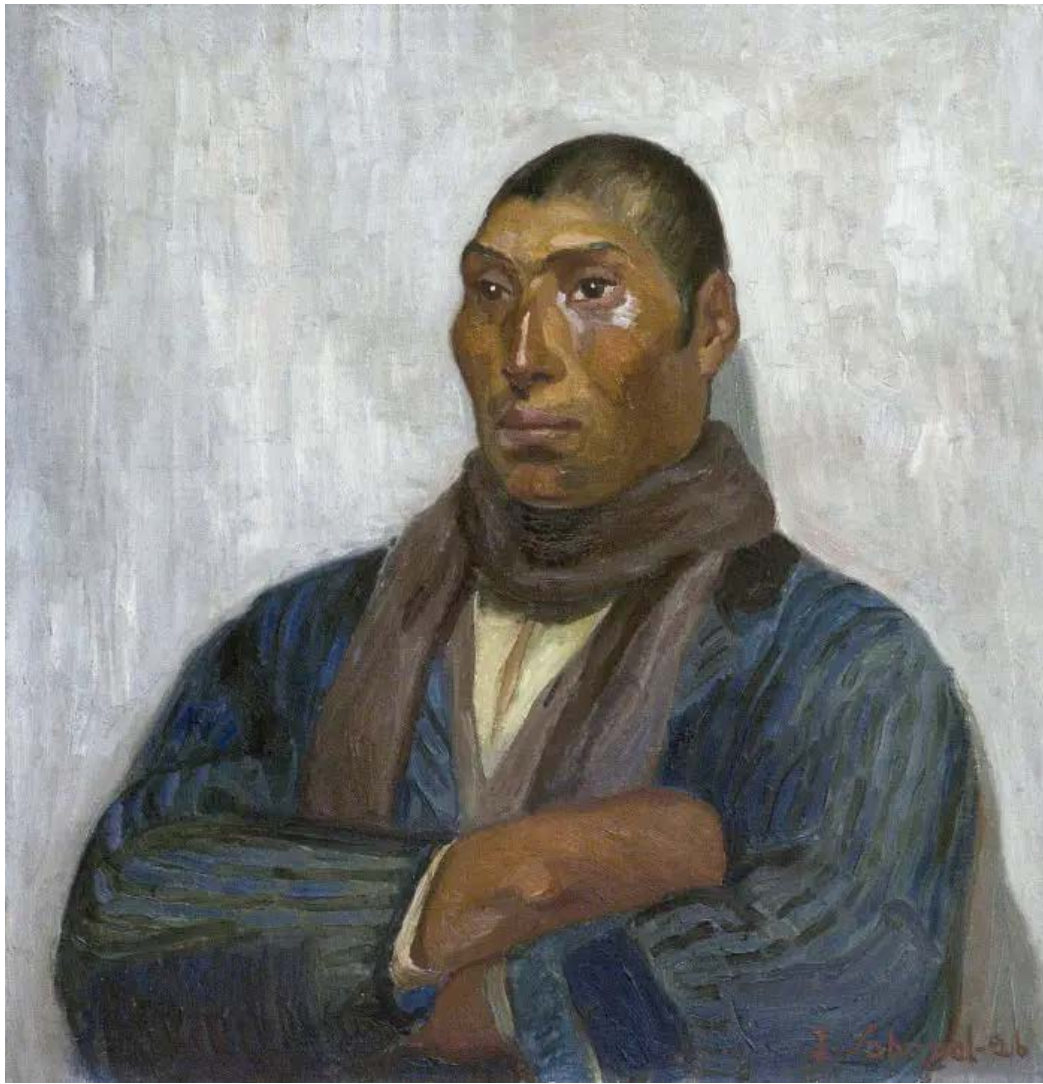
life and art, and Argentina, which was home to both a vital university reform movement and a vibrant, innovative literary scene.

That Sabogal, a Peruvian by birth, was making images of Mexicans is typical of the borderless nature of the Latin American avant-garde. As the exhibition's title suggests, Amauta sat at the crucible of a network of radical political and artistic exchanges across the region with special bonds to Mexico, where the revolution had wrought remarkable changes in



'Amauta' by José Carlos Mariátegui

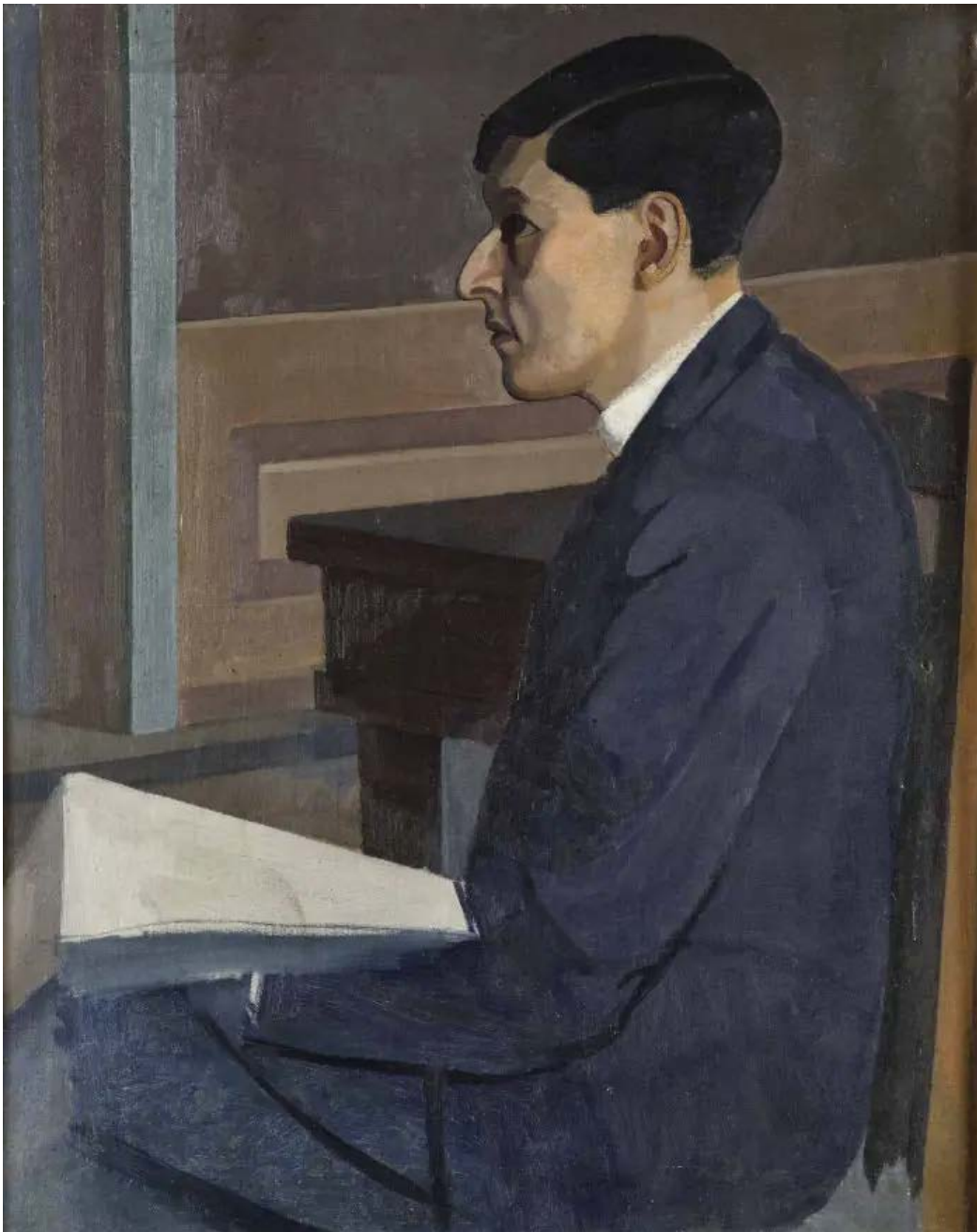
Over the course of its brief existence Amauta would feature or review the work of talents from Latin America and beyond including Jorge Luis Borges and his artist sister Norah, Sigmund Freud, José Ortega y Gasset and Diego Rivera. Among the myriad exhibits alluding to this constellation, welcome discoveries include a 1918 copy of *Hélices, Poems* (1918-1922) by Guillermo de Torre, with a cover designed by Norah Borges in an airy pattern that interlocks rainbows and tented dwellings. Also ravishing is a copy of *Five Metres of Poems* by Carlos Oquendo de Amat. Printed by Mariátegui's Minerva press in 1927, the poem unfurls over five metres of concertina-style pamphlet and evokes, through surreal, cinematic imagery and audacious textual layout, the Andean landscape where its author grew up.



'El Recluta' (1926), by José Sabogal

Both Mariátegui and Amauta were comets destined to fly high and burn out early. Aside from the risk of publishing a journal grounded in Marxist theory, Mariátegui was physically frail, having lost a leg to illness in 1924. In 1927, the year he also started the Peruvian Socialist party, he was arrested and Amauta temporarily closed under the suspicion of a “Communist plot”.

Although he later resumed activities, the office was again raided by police in November 1928 — this time on the grounds of a “Jewish plot” — and documents, journals and correspondence were confiscated. Aware that he was in danger, Mariátegui started to plan a trip to Argentina, but in March 1930 he fell ill again. He died on April 16 of that year.



'José Carlos Mariátegui' (1921), by Emilio Pettoruti

It is impossible for an exhibition to do more than touch on the scattered, sparkling galaxy of ideas and images that made Amauta so brief yet bright a moment in Latin American culture. Yet its legacy is assured due to the presence of a magnificent archive — vital to the creation of this show — much of which is now available online.

Today, with countless strands of culture available at our fingertips, it's difficult to imagine the effort required to put together such a cross-disciplinary, multinational publication. Fortunately, this show will travel on to Lima, Mexico and Texas. Its editor would surely approve of such nomadic spirit.

To May 27, museoreinasofia.es

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