

Stairways to the sun

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Americas; Jan 1994; 46, 1; Arts Premium Collection

pg. 6



Tú y yo (You and I), 1923, watercolor (detail)



In life and art, Argentine artist Xul Solar sought to transcend earthly dimensions

STAIRWAYS *to the* **SUN**

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CALEB BACH

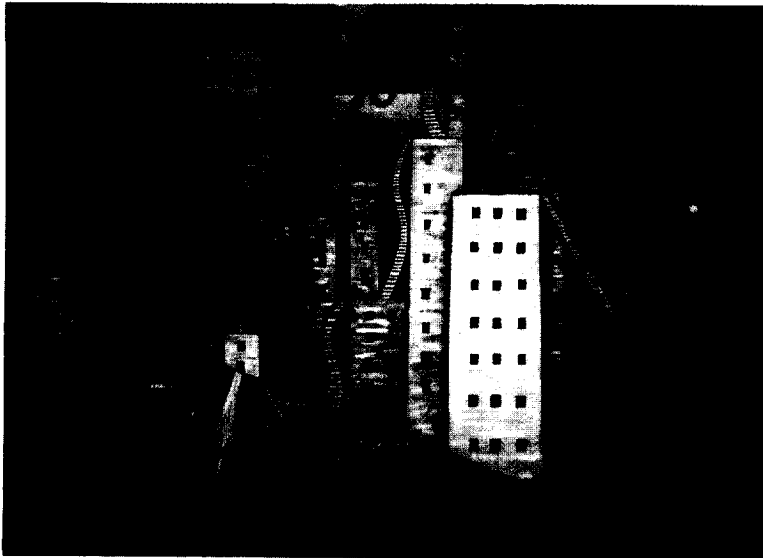
Stairs were important to Xul Solar. Perhaps he saw them as a means to transcend earthly dimensions, or maybe as a vehicle for mystical elevation from one level of consciousness to another. Whatever the case, stairs and ladders are common to many of his paintings: Stepped rampways lead over precipitous mountains, Jacob's ladders dangle from airshiplike mansions, with rungs by which to climb to a hovering sun.

Even his good friend Jorge Luis Borges focused on the motif in one of his several tributes: "I have climbed that stairway a secret number of times; there was Xul Solar waiting for me." That mysterious stairway still leads to the deceased artist's second-floor studio at 1214 Laprida Street in downtown Buenos Aires. The adjoining apartments and the ground level bodega—its four windows oriented toward the cardinal points—are gone, but in their place stands the new Xul Solar Museum, which opened less than a year ago. Visitors to the museum can strongly feel the artist's presence: Eighty-six paintings, several mixed-media constructions, and cases full of personal memorabilia. The handsome galleries, too, with their futuristic platforms, echo Solar's work. They float in space, united by many stairs.

Borges saw his friend as a near living extension

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His first name reflected light, or lux, spelled backwards; the last, his maternal surname without the "i," was the sun itself



Ciudad Lagui (City and Lake), 1939, watercolor

of his own metaphysical writings. "Maybe the only cosmopolitan 'citizen of the universe' that I have known is Xul Solar," he once said. If Solar was a cosmic man, a mystic, his exotic lineage must have played a role. His father, Emilio Schulz, was a Jew from Riga, Latvia; his Catholic mother, Agustina Solari, was born in the northern Italian coastal town of Zoagli, in Liguria. Their only child, born at 11:20 a.m. on December 14, 1887, in San Fernando, Argentina, was christened Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schulz Solari. Later, the artist would place great emphasis on his pan-cultural origins, as well as the astrological consequences of the precise day and hour when his mother "gave him light" (*le dió luz*).

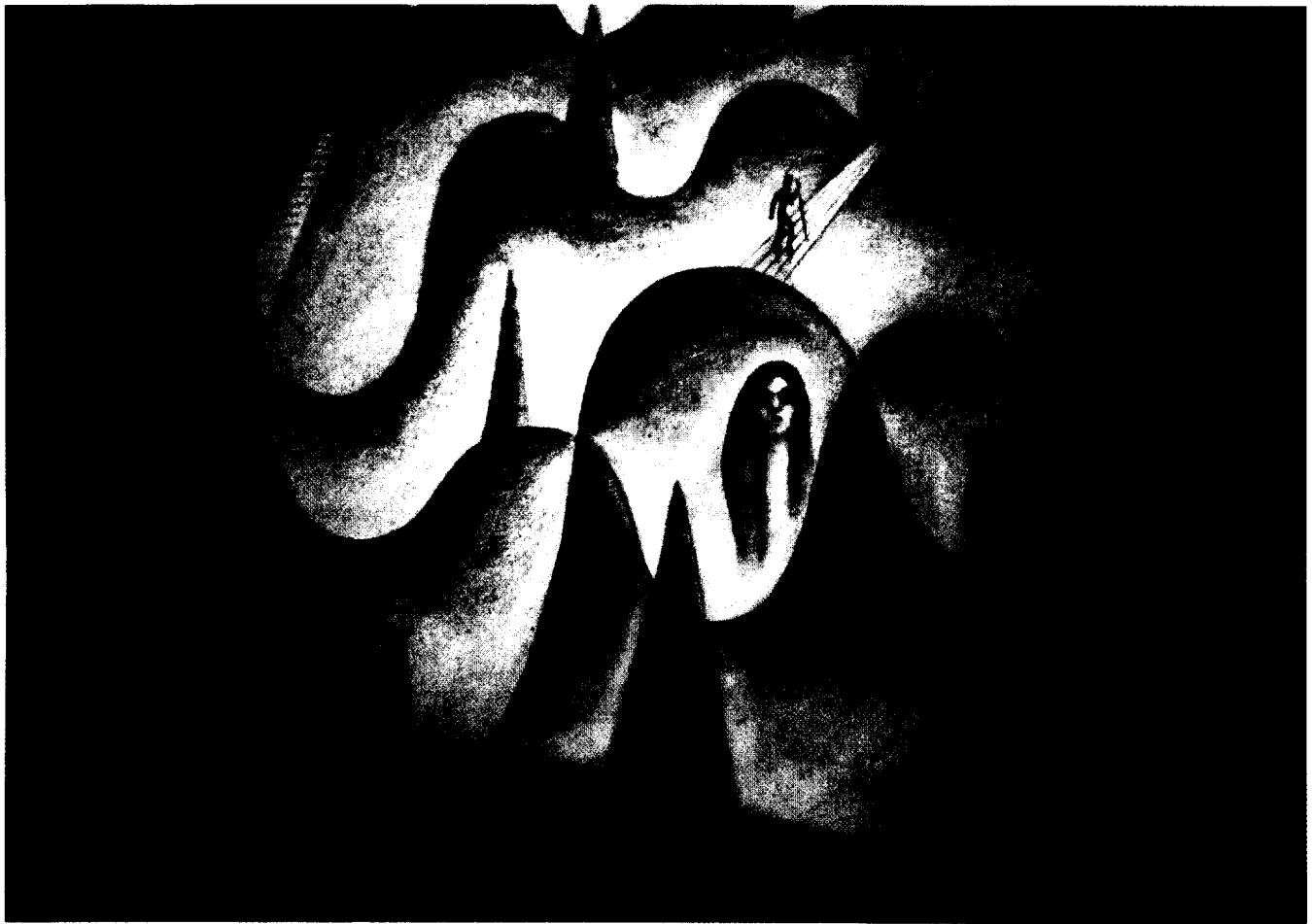
When he was twenty-five Solar worked his way aboard a merchant vessel bound for England. After traveling in Europe, he lived briefly in Paris, where he began painting watercolors that reflected his interest in theosophy. He finally settled in Milan, where he remained throughout the First World War. Influenced

by an Argentine artist friend, Emilio Pettoruti, he continued to paint, taking what he needed from the many art movements swirling about him: Cubism, Constructivism, Futurism, and early manifestations of Expressionism. During this time he gave himself an extraterrestrial identity by modifying his parents' surnames and becoming Xul Solar. The first name reflected light, or *lux*, spelled backwards; the last, his maternal surname without the "i," was the sun itself. Solar's bold act of reinvention coincided with his decision to become a professional artist. He began to show his work, and although the exhibitions were successful, the artist steadfastly refused to part with his paintings. Soon after Solar executed a watercolor with a large Argentine flag, entitled *I Miss My Fatherland*, he and Pettoruti returned to Buenos Aires.

The year was 1924, a time of strong nationalistic sentiment in Argentina. Solar, Pettoruti, and Norah Borges, the writer's sister, joined the Florida Group, which was closely associated with writers who called themselves the *Martinfierristas*. They took their name from Argentine poet José Hernández's mythic gaucho. Through Martín Fierro they extolled Argentine solitude, but, paradoxically, in their manifesto also laid claim to a status as international citizens "aboard a modern transatlantic liner." In many ways, the *Martinfierristas* represented a *Rioplatense* version of a much broader pan-national spirit of Latin American brotherhood espoused in the writings of the Cuban José Martí, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, and the Uruguayan social reformer José Enrique Rodó. Members of the Martín Fierro group also stressed pride and faith in a vision uniquely Latin American, a rejection of European ways in favor of traditions rooted in the great Andean and Mesoamerican pre-Columbian cultures. Solar's watercolor *Drago* (1927) typifies this disdain, if not hostility, toward Europe and the United States. A winged dragon, sporting the flags of the Latin American countries glides through the cosmos, unencumbered by Old World concerns.

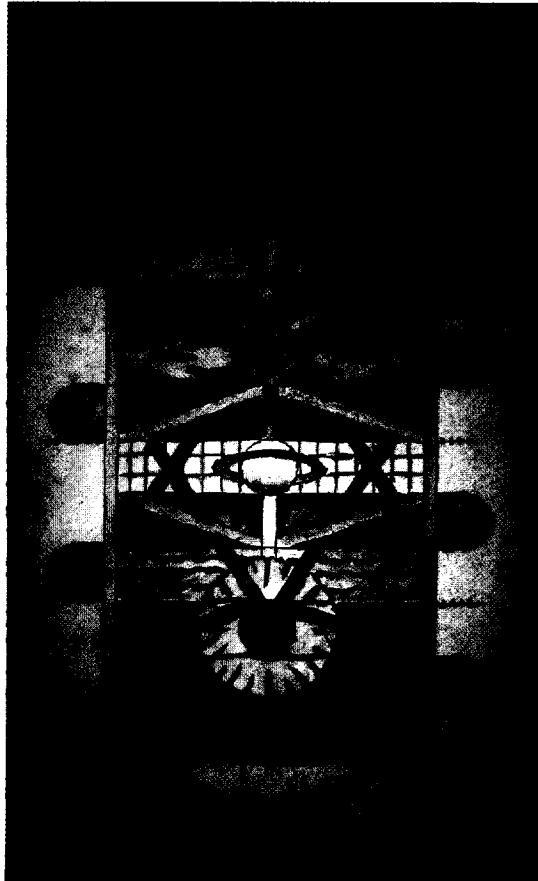
In the decades between the two world wars, universalism as an ideal would ebb and flow, but for Solar it would be a concept tenaciously embraced all his life. Not content merely being pan-American or pan-national, he insisted on expanding his self-definition to that of a living breathing *Homo novus*—new man—at one with the entire breadth of creation.

Some critics questioned the artist's emotional stability, others literally "panned" him, calling him the "pan-man." An unkind gibe, but it was also apt because Solar did give his "all" to a wide range of objects and concepts. His construction *pan altar mundi* (universal world altar) or the watercolor *pan árbol* (universal tree) are both full of occult symbols and mysterious writing. Members of Solar's *pan klub* (pan club) were likeminded friends who assembled at his home to discuss theoretical utopias or attend theater performances featuring the artist's puppets, masks, even an oversized articulated skeleton of wood (which still stands in his studio). Solar was passionate about chess; his ultimate diversion was *pan*



juego (pan chess), an expanded version of the standard game. His board, on view in the museum, measures thirteen by twelve squares and is covered with cryptic inscriptions that influence the moves of the totemlike pieces. The spaces represent the passage of time, while each player's thirty pieces represent zodiac signs and planets (except for a strange extra piece that Solar called the *azar*). Solar laid claim to mastery in his own realm by declaring himself "world champion of pan chess." Doubtless this was true; he was the only one who fully comprehended the subtleties of his ever-changing rules.

Borges said that for Solar, "as for divinity, there were no minor issues; every thing was worthy of being studied and being renewed." Once, when the famous writer visited the artist's apartment, Solar told him he hadn't been doing anything, but then he corrected himself: "O yes! I founded twelve religions after lunch." He repeated himself—"Doce religions *pos coming*"—to demonstrate one of the languages he'd also invented. A related dialect was his Portuguese-Spanish blend called *neocreole*, which he envisioned as a lingua franca for all Latin Americans. Solar published several *neocreole* works in local literary journals like *Martín Fierro* and *Azul* as well as the Paris-based *man*, but his hybrid tongue never caught on. Later he invested much effort in a universal global language, *pan lengua*, which he described as "monosyllabic, without grammar, on a numerical and astrological basis that could be combined at will."



Cinco melodías
(Five Melodies),
1949, watercolor,
above; pan árbol
(universal tree),
1954, watercolor, left

It too, attracted few adherents.

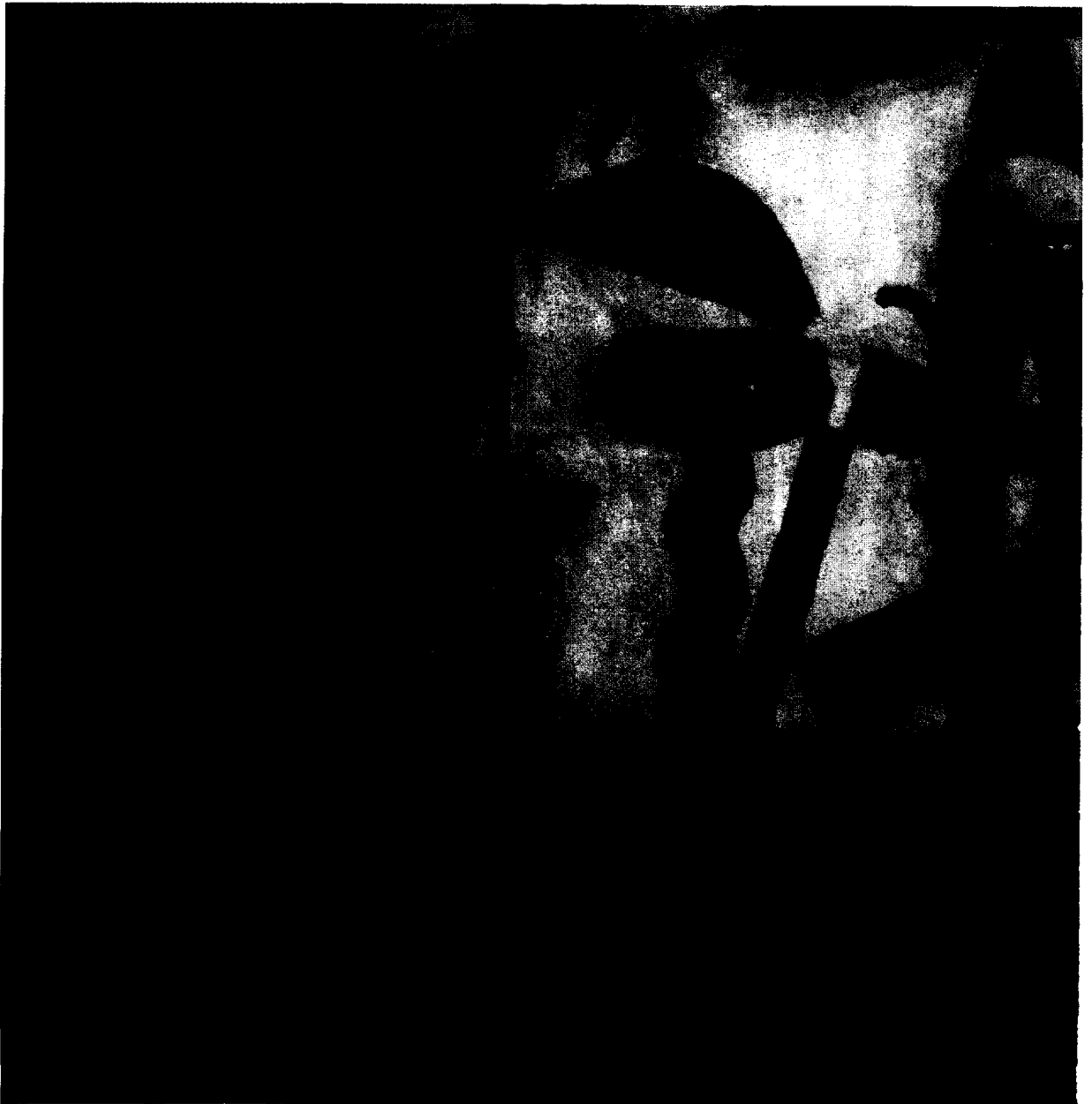
The artist's own efforts as a writer knew no bounds and reflected directly his love for things spiritual and otherworldly. Throughout the 1940s, having already subjected his own destiny to exhaustive astrological scrutiny, he honed his skills further through seminars and courses sponsored by the American Spiritual University, where he read his own papers on aspects of astrology. He also attended symposia on native languages and published translations of creation myths belonging to various Paraguayan and Bolivian tribes. His studies in Oriental religions also became the stuff of lectures, such as his 1949 talk entitled "North Buddhist Uses Adaptable to Our Mentality."

Solar's mysticism is particularly pronounced in a long series of mountain paintings executed during this period. In several scenes, strange ramps, ladders, and stairways connect regimental peaks marching into mist. In *Cinco melodías* (Five Melodies) (1949) the mountains become fluid and wavelike, as if at the moment of formation a specific sound frequency set their shape for all time. Many paintings depict unusu-

al formations of volcanic rock with little cave dwellings or hermetic communities. These images have fueled speculation that the artist knew of Cappadocia in eastern Turkey and its Christian rock churches carved deep into the formations of tufa, a porous rock.

In the 1950s Solar became preoccupied by the potential for human anatomical improvement. This interest led to his "Proposal for More Future Life," published in the magazine *Lyra*, and a piece on automatons for the journal *Mirador*. This indefatigable searcher also kept diaries, with entries rich in visual imagery and his impressionist, stream-of-conscious musings. One entry, labeled "October 1910, Buenos Aires, night time" read:

I feel oppressed by vagrant and asphyxiating desires like deadly hostile mists; in the midst of my uneasiness, my spirit floating through spaces searches for help to allow my escape, through I don't know where. I hear a thrashing of waves through the sea's pedal and feel refreshing breeze, but when-

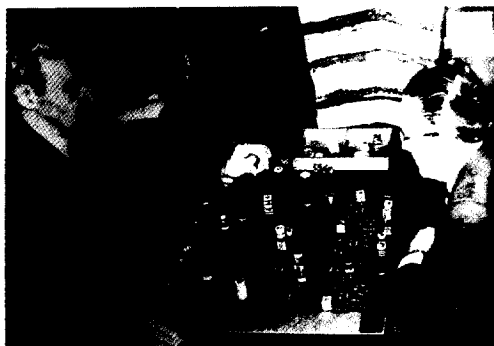


ever I call the nocturnal fleets of migratory ships, they faint; cavalcades of sullen giants are walking silently through faraway deserts of the air, hiding the color-girded moon, but their inferior soul doesn't understand me.

Although rambling, these passages evoke the sometimes fanciful, oftentimes haunting visual imagery in Solar's watercolors. Painting was his core enterprise. Despite devoted work in many other disciplines, Solar's artistic reputation grew out of his several hundred watercolors and tempera paintings. Much of his oeuvre revealed his principal concerns: religion, astrology, ethnology, utopian societies, futuristic inventions, and architecture. The seer in Solar, for example, produced many paintings that refer to signs of the zodiac, *I Ching*, and the vices and virtues portrayed on tarot cards (he also designed his own set). His universalist views dictated a highly figurative style devoid of specific ethnicity, one that was pan-cultural—Oriental, Egyptian, and pre-Columbian.

San danza (Holy Dance), several versions of which Solar produced in 1925, resembles Hopi sand

Not content merely being pan-American or pan-national, he insisted on expanding his self-definition to that of a living, breathing Homo novus



XULI SOLAR MUSEUM ARCHIVE



Gaili mui wile, 1962, watercolor, far left; Solar plays pan chess, above, with an unidentified associate; the artist's library, left, is part of his private quarters now managed by the Pan Club Foundation

The Xul Solar Museum

Today, the Xul Solar Museum stands not only as a monument to one man's highly idiosyncratic vision, but also to the devoted friendship of a small group of associates who believed in him. After the artist's death in 1963, Natalio Jorge Povarché, Solar's principal gallery representative for over thirty years, and the artist's widow formed the Pan Club Foundation. When Micaela Cadena de Schulz Solari died in the late 1980s she willed to the foundation the Laprida Street property, Solar's personal effects, and works of art still in her possession. Pablo Tomás Beitía, an architect and himself a member of the Pan Club Foundation, took on the task of converting the century-old complex into a spacious, well-lighted gallery. For Solar, who believed that "*su labor plástica se iba a comprender en el año 2000*" (his plastic work was going to be understood by the year 2000), it is timely that the museum bearing his name opened just seven years before the millennium.

The Xul Solar Museum is open Tuesday through Saturday; hours are limited. Persons wishing to visit the museum should call in advance (821-5378). The foundation has published a full-color catalog of the collection in both English and Spanish (US \$50). Also by appointment, those wishing to do research may visit Solar's private quarters or work in the foundation's archives, which are managed by Martha Rastrelli de Capriotti.



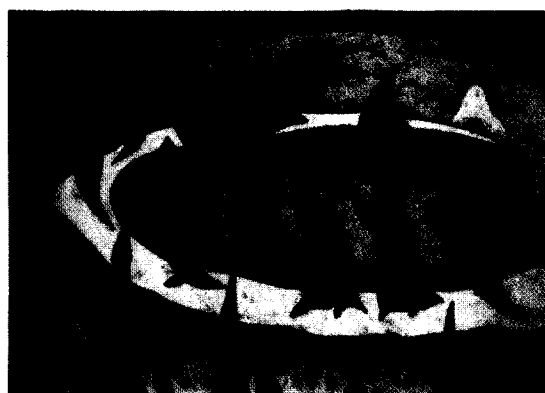
paintings or Anasazi pictographs of the southwestern United States. In *Jefa honra* (Honorable Chief) and *Jefe de serpientes* (Serpent Chief) (both 1923) he pays overt homage to Native American shamans and *curanderos*. The latter two employ a unique see-through system Solar developed to show internal organs, even private thoughts and ideas flowing outward as indicated by arrows. He exploited fully the transparent potential of watercolors by superimposing forms and figures upon one another, often creating a sense of unity or interdependence as in *Tú y yo* (You and I) (1923) and *Dos parejas* (Two Birds) (1924).

Solar executed dozens of architectonic paintings during the 1940s and 1950s. Some were of ruins, pocked by bombardment and defaced by anti-Semitic symbols (for Solar, rare examples of political statements); others were more optimistic and whimsical—enclaves on stilts in riverine deltas, flying villas, mazelike cities—perhaps the artist's imagined solutions to problems of global crowding. Some of the childlike structures and clustered towns made of superimposed planes may have been borrowed from Bauhaus masters Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger, but these works still contained a sense of the eternal unique to Solar.

Solar was a builder and hands-on artisan in his own right. He carved and painted furnishings for his house in Buenos Aires and for a country retreat built in 1954 at Tigre, a delta town to the east. His interest in



Mui wile con yo,
1962, tempera, left;
Entierro (*Funeral*),
1915, watercolor,
below



ethnology inspired him to carve his own masks and a set of puppets with articulated mouths representing the twelve signs of the zodiac. Once, having perceived an equation between tonality in color and that of music, he made over an upright piano so that its keyboard consisted of three ranks of rainbow octaves. Whether the instrument could be played remains a subject for debate, but it did give concrete substance to Wassily Kandinsky's notion that painting is like playing on a spectral keyboard. This restless tinkerer also created his own method of music notation, the *neomúsica* system. His three-colored format retained the treble and bass clefs; as notes he used circles, dots, and x's, as well as a variety of numbers, letters, and symbols. Solar may have been entranced more by the appearance of the score than its ability

to convey true musical ideas.

Related to his sheet music were several systems of *grafías*, or pictorial writing, which occupied him the last three years of his life. He developed a kind of artistic shorthand that mixed ideograms and writing—part glyph, part rebus. *Kon mil per prayn to yu* and *Gaili mui wile* (both 1962) are typical in their use of bright tones of tempera paint and titles made up of words from several languages.

On July 17, 1968—five years after Solar's death—Borges spoke at the opening of a major retrospective exhibition of the artist's work at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires. Paying homage to his friend he concluded:

I don't know what death means. I think that Xul didn't give it too much importance either. Xul believed, not as a curiosity but as a truth, in reincarnation. I'd like to think that Xul is with us here. It doesn't seem to me incredible; so strange is death that it seems less incredible to believe in someone's return due to desperation. However, Xul is here, in his work. Xul is alive in my memory and sometimes, when I'm inventing something, I realize Xul is doing it through me, or maybe even in spite of me. Now I invite you to forget what I've said. I invite you to live together, to *panvivir* as Xul would say, here in his world of visions, joys, lines, and color purity. ■