Tango Lessons
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Published by Duke University Press

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Picturing Tango

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The voluminous story line of tango in visual culture stretches from its earliest appearances in sheet music and other ephemera through to a staggering variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century works that range from the abstract to the hyperrealist and from classical to kitsch. The representative artists from Argentina and Uruguay whose works I analyze in this chapter portray tango as a complex social drama of intense encounters between bodies, instruments, voices, movements, and styles. By following this trail of images, we discover that despite the proliferation of clichés and stereotypes that threaten to color our collective imagining of tango, such works offer us an extraordinarily rich and multifaceted set of tools with which to track aesthetic and social histories.

The relationship between tango and art has been a rocky one from the start. Representations of tango by renowned masters such as Pedro Figari, Carlos Torrallardona, Héctor Basaldúa, Carlos Alonso, Aldo Severi, Marcia Schwartz, Hermenegildo Sábat, Aldo Sessa, and many others hang in prestigious museums and private collections. In Buenos Aires, long known as Tango City, both the National Academy of Tango and the Academia Porteña de Lunfardo (a smaller institution devoted to the study of the city’s unique tango-related vocabulary) collect, house, and display artwork related to tango; the first dedicates space to four exhibits a year of works in this vein. Some of the same grand halls in which tango is danced, such as the famed Salón Canning in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, also display tango-themed art. At the same time, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of artists and artisans laboring in a myriad of media offer more serialized versions of tango to the throngs of consumers trolling the tourist markets of
Caminito, La Boca, San Telmo, Recoleta, Palermo Soho, Florida Street, and other zones of the Argentine capital and elsewhere.\(^5\)

Whether or not such works constitute art is a fraught question, especially given the long and colorful history of tango as a popular form created by and for immigrants, pimps, prostitutes, autodidacts, and anarchists. Even if local critics and theorists have long rejected rigid distinctions between so-called high and low art, visual depictions of tango are often judged a priori to be crude souvenirs rather than art. Its associations with gritty, grimy urban life and the visceral experiences of petty criminals and the working class in Buenos Aires and Montevideo—or simply with the mundane, the commonplace, and the unoriginal—have frequently condemned tango as a topic unworthy of serious aesthetic contemplation, whether in sound, kinetic, or visual culture.

In some cases the art establishment has rejected the very notion of tango art. In 2003 Jorge Glusberg, then director of Argentina’s Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, refused to mount an exhibit of tango-themed pieces, claiming that such material was not art (Horvath 27). Similarly, a tango mural painted in 2004 as an homage to the twentieth-century painter Carlos Torral唠 can was defaced with graffiti in 2008 that also declared “Esto no es arte” (This is not art) (figure 3.1).\(^6\) While the lines between art and kitsch, the authentic and the crass, and the artful and the merely useful are always subjective and inherently contentious, we can anticipate that on our journey through a century of tango art history we will encounter a veritable minefield around such distinctions.

This Is (Not) Art?

Admittedly, few of the images associated with the form in the earliest stages of tango’s history, from about 1880 to 1920, would have concerned art critics. Just as the lettered classes in Argentina and Uruguay eschewed tango itself before its triumph in Paris, so also did they dismiss the earliest expressions of it in visual culture. The illustrations that graced the sheet music that began to proliferate in the first decades of the twentieth century have only recently been collected in handsome, full-color volumes and exhibited in museum galleries.\(^7\)

Art connoisseurs of the early days of tango also looked askance at the filete, a decorating tradition that developed parallel to tango and often incorporated it thematically (figure 3.2). In her essay on the master fileteadores of Buenos Aires, María Estenssoro traces the uncertain origins of this painting style, which first appeared on horse-drawn wagons and grocers’ carts in
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Characterized by colorful arabesques, Gothic inscriptions, religious figures, floral and fruit themes, ribbons, banners, and references to national icons (gauchos, the flag, tango, Carlos Gardel, and so on), early filete paintings were almost always anonymous and designed for public consumption, if not entirely classifiable as “advertising.” Given the intellectual prejudices dividing arts from crafts until the last quarter of the twentieth century, porteños mostly dismissed filete as “only a bad copy of Sicilian cart paintings brought to Argentina by the Italians” (Estenssoro 157, 161).

Today, Argentines revere the form and consider it as fundamentally porteño as the city’s famous music and dance. Tango and filete complement each other in new ways as dancers—usually women—have master fileteadores paint their bodies in preparation for performances. Those who specialize in the form, including Jorge Muscia, to whom I will return, Luis Zors, Martiniano Arce, Elvio Gervasi, and Mariano Capiello, profess allegiance to the early masters and their themes, but they also apply those traditional styles to tennis shoes, cars, commercial vehicles, and even the covers of laptop

Figure 3.1. Street mural in homage to Carlos Torrallardona, 700 block of Paraná, Buenos Aires, with graffiti in lower right corner that reads “Esto no es arte” (This is not art). Author photo.
computers. Mirroring ongoing debates concerning the aesthetic value of tango itself, filete references a mythical past but also offers the artist or artisan space to express originality and innovation.

Tango and Social Realism

The “official” incorporation of tango in local art production dates to 1917, when the printmakers and other artists known as the Artistas del Pueblo (Artists of the people) initiated “the first sustained and organized movement of Social Realism” in Latin America (P. Frank, *Los Artistas del Pueblo* 18), including tango among their themes. Informed by currents of humanitarian anarchism, Adolfo Bellocq, José Arato, Guillermo Facio Hebequer, and Abraham Vigo honed a social realist aesthetic with which to expose the despicable working conditions and dire quotidian circumstances of the urban poor, many of them recent immigrants. With close ties to the writers of the leftist Boedo literary group, the Artistas del Pueblo presented tango as a Pandora’s box of release and recreation that could lead to personal ruin for those in its thrall. Their works express suspicion of tango as a panacea for social ills.
and a distraction from collective action for social change. The collaboration of the grabador (engraver) Adolfo Bellocq and the author Manuel Gálvez on the dark novel Historia de arrabal (Slum story), published in 1922, exemplifies this tendency.9

Historia de arrabal portrays in word and image the rapid industrialization and capitalist expansion of Buenos Aires in the first part of the twentieth century, as poor immigrants streamed into the port city and sought survival amid an underpaid labor market and overcrowded housing.10 Gálvez’s representation of the precarious situation of young women is especially poignant. His story charts the descent of his tragic protagonist Rosalinda into a life of prostitution and homicide, casting tango as the irresistible suitor of her downfall. In Bellocq’s zinc-relief illustration on page sixty-six of the novel, couples dance tango in the patio area of a cheap boarding house (figure 3.3). In the accompanying text the still unsullied Rosalinda is roughly pulled into the dance scene by the malevo or thug El Chino, who will progress from tango partner to jealous lover and finally sadistic pimp.11 In the tango embrace of El Chino, the transfixed Rosalinda dances and dances, with “no awareness of anything, except that this man had claimed her as his own and dominated her, and she could do nothing but obey him” (Gálvez 67; Y ya no tuvo consciencia de nada, sino de que ese hombre la había hecho suya y la dominaba y de que ella no podía sino obedecerle [translations are the author’s, unless otherwise noted]).

Bellocq’s illustration emphasizes the sensual, sinuous elements of the dance, and the closed or semi-closed eyes of all the figures (including the musicians) allude to tango’s power to enrapture its participants.12 A farol in the upper right sector of the print casts a virtual half-light on the scene, outlining the voluptuous curves of the women but allowing the male dancers to remain shadowed. The beams of a doorway or window in the center of the background suggest a cross and thus, by implication, Rosalinda and other women’s “sacrifice” of their bodies to the tango—a sacrifice that is ultimately doomed.

Tango in Black, White, and Color

Not all early twentieth-century artists considered tango’s influence to be quite so malevolent. The upbeat, festive nature of social dance dominates the representation of tango and its predecessor candombe in the works of the Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari (1861–1938). Perhaps the most recognizable and most copied practitioner of tango art of all time, Figari was also the first
to exhibit and sell such works in the context of fine art. The late-blooming Figari reportedly left over four thousand works to posterity, works so popular and valuable that his own descendants reportedly have been swindled into accepting carefully executed copies of his distinctive style. A prominent lawyer, journalist, philosopher, and poet in the first five decades of his life, Figari became a visual artist at age fifty-five, moving first to Buenos Aires and then to Paris. His three-volume primer *Arte, estética, ideal* (Art, aesthetics, ideals, 1912) preceded Figari’s first major show in Buenos Aires by a decade, revealing him to be an art theorist and administrator before his incursions in painting.

Critics deemed Figari’s exhibit at the Galería Müller in Buenos Aires in 1921 a flop, given that he sold only one painting. But Figari’s second Buenos Aires exhibit in 1923—the same year Borges published his groundbreaking book of poetry *Fervor de Buenos Aires*—made history. Manuel J. Güiraldes,
the father of Ricardo Güiraldes (author of the classic *Don Segundo Sombra*, 1926), endorsed Figari, and a group of influential writers and artists who would later create a literary stir with the cultural magazines *Prisma, Inicial, Proa, Valoraciones*, and, most importantly, *Martín Fierro* feted him in the press (Figari, *Figari* 9). The notable camaraderie enjoyed by the *martinfierrista* writers and artists would characterize the production of tango as an interdisciplinary form from that point forward.\(^{16}\) Observers commented on the criollo or localist tendencies in Figari’s work and celebrated its innovative use of color and humorous undertones (see Lacalle 10–11).\(^{17}\)

As both a visual artist and theorist, Figari urged a turn away from *wealth as culture*, in which culture was the exclusive domain of the upper classes, and toward *culture as wealth*, in which the middle and lower classes could also enjoy the “riches” of aesthetic production (Glusberg and Kalenberg 24). He dismissed as “arbitrary” the traditional distinctions between belles arts (music, literature, dance, sculpture, architecture, painting, and poetry) and the “useful” or applied arts of ceramics, furniture, ironwork, stained glass, and so on (Glusberg and Kalenberg 34). This rejection of the old, mutually exclusive definitions of high art and popular art endeared him to the members of the *Martín Fierro* group as well as to Alfonso Reyes, Ángel Rama, and Marta Traba, all of whom later wrote interdisciplinary studies of his work.

Figari and his son Juan Carlos moved to Paris in 1925. The visitors who passed through their studio there included James Joyce, Pablo Picasso, Le Corbusier, Pierre Bonnard, and Oswaldo de Andrade. In Paris the painter also met the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, who in 1928 wrote “Pedro Figari y el clasicismo latinoamericano” (*Pedro Figari and Latin American classicism*).\(^{18}\) Carpentier quotes the artist as saying, “in my paintings, I haven’t tried to solve this or that problem of métier, I have only wanted to leave on the canvas a series of past and present aspects of South American life, so that they will serve as a document for the great painter who will come later” (20; En mis cuadros no he intentado resolver tal o cual problema de métier. Sólo he querido fijar en el lienzo una serie de aspectos pasados o actuales de la vida suramericana, para que sirvan de documentos al gran pintor que vendrá después). The Cuban author calls particular attention to Figari’s focus on black subjects and notes parallels between the Uruguayan’s vision of Montevideo and his own experience of Havana.\(^{19}\)

The inclusion of Afro-Uruguayan subjects surprised many of Figari’s fans and critics, especially since earlier artists had ignored that sector of
This “new” subject matter provoked both curiosity and debate; Figari defended himself by stating: “I want to refer to man and in order to better do so, I take the Negro as my example, bearing in mind that we white men carry a black man, a very black man, within us—the same one who frequently suggests things that otherwise could not be suggested to a white man without incurring irreverence” (Figari, *Intimate Recollections* 14–15). Whatever the mixture of desire and fear at the base of these comments, they reflect a more explicit identification with Afro-Uruguayans than ever before. Angel Kalenberg writes that “Figari saw in the black all the force of the rhythm which in North America produced jazz and in South America, the candombe” (Glusberg and Kalenberg 51; Figari vio en el negro toda la fuerza del ritmo que, al norte de América produjo el jazz y, en América del Sur, el Candombe). The Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer counters that Figari should be understood as a contradictory figure, on the one hand espousing forward-thinking ideas on art and arts education and on the other failing to see how his own work was limited by European traditions and neocolonial ideas (139). If Figari “stereotyped black culture through a paternalistic caricature of innocence, vitality, and happiness” (Camnitzer 143), he nonetheless invested Afro-Uruguayan subjects with cultural value and, for the first time, deemed them worthy of inclusion in national and regional artistic endeavors.

While the subjects of Figari’s candombe series are always Afro-Uruguayans, his tangos feature both black and white subjects. Figari populated *El tango* (figure 3.4) with an entirely black cast and wrote on the reverse of the image, “El tango (echa a perder aún a los negros)” (The tango [spoils even black people]). The painting *En la calle* (figure 3.5) features a white or at least noticeably whiter cast of characters. Despite some differences in size and coloration, both works feature pairs of dancers in the standard tango embrace, seated bandoneonists who face the viewer, and a background doorway to help frame the “stage” of the dance scene. Both also correspond to Kalenberg’s description of Figari’s work as a “treatise on gestures” that emphasizes profiles and high-contrast color schemes designed to “excite the retina” (Glusberg and Kalenberg 54–55, 62). The dress of the female spectators, and the fan held by the figure situated in the doorway that repeats into the background of *En la calle*, suggest the entryway to a bordello; the woman sitting in the window of *El tango* may have the same function. While neither work may clarify Figari’s comment regarding the relationship between blackness and tango, both situate the dance in a context of familiarity and pleasure. Together, they
document tango’s appeal for a racially diverse population and situate Figari as a founding member of a growing field of tango art.

Tango Squared

While Figari’s winsome paintings on hardboard constitute efforts to mitigate the “loss” of a bygone cultural landscape, the works of the Argentine-born Emilio Pettoruti (1892–1971), Figari’s contemporary, represent the entrée of tango into abstract art. From virtually the same historical juncture, one artist looks back and the other forward. With such artists as Diego Rivera (Mexico), Amelia Peláez (Cuba), Joaquín Torres-García (Uruguay), and fellow Argentines Norah Borges and Xul Solar, Pettoruti helped constitute Latin American modern art, occasionally addressing the tango in that new field.23 Critics frequently associate his works with cubist and futurist vanguards, but Pettorutti resisted being rigidly categorized in either movement (Sullivan and Perazzo 52). Together, the works of Figari and Pettoruti exemplify the tug-of-war that characterizes the representation of tango in the Río de la Plata then and now, visual and otherwise: on the one hand it triggers nostalgia and provides a repository for the past, while on the other it negotiates the urgent needs of the present.

Pettoruti’s works contrast not only with Figari’s postimpressionist evocations but also with those of the Artistas del Pueblo, whose emphasis on Marxist social concerns he countered with an insistence on formal modernism and invention.24 Just three years after Figari’s first important exhibit in the Argentine capital, Pettoruti’s works were displayed at the city’s Witcomb Gallery, following the painter’s return from more than a decade in Italy. The conservative critics of the Argentine art establishment decried his bold, semi-abstract style. Pettorutti’s friend Xul Solar defended the work in the pages of the influential journal Martín Fierro, also initiated that year, contributing to a debate that soon converted the exhibit into an art event of “almost mythic proportions” (Sullivan and Perazzo 20, 90).

Xul Solar’s defense of his friend hinted at his own vanguard tendencies, in which tango played a minor role as well. Pettoruti wrote that his painting Bailarines (Dancers), completed in 1920, was in fact conceived “while Xul Solar danced a tango in one of those New Empire-style mansions that we used to frequent in Florence” (cited in Sullivan and Perazzo 170). Painted in oil on canvas, Bailarines conceptualizes a dancing couple in highly abstract terms, setting the pair against a diamond-patterned floor, illuminated by a
Figure 3.4. Pedro Figari, *El tango*, oil on hardboard. Used by permission of Fernando Saavedra Faget.

Figure 3.5. Pedro Figari, *En la calle* (On the street). Used by permission of Fernando Saavedra Faget.
light source that casts an angular shadow and creates additional triangular and rectangular shapes as it is refracted from the tile floor. As Sullivan notes, *Bailarines* was “among the first examples in which Pettoruti refers directly to a specifically Argentine form of music and dance.” It was also the first of Pettoruti’s paintings to hang in a museum (Sullivan and Perazzo 78, 170).

As tango’s fame was spreading rapidly throughout Europe and the Southern Cone through music and dance, Pettoruti was translating its musicality and movement into the geometric and chromatic intensity of modernism. The emphasis on musical and theatrical themes that typified much of his work from the 1920s finds one of its maximum expressions in the painting *La canción del pueblo* (The song of the people), completed in 1927 (figure 3.6).25 Skyscrapers flank a trio of musicians anchored from behind by a building and skyline centrally divided between light and dark. Susan Verdi Webster has noticed that the bandoneon most explicitly references tango in *La canción del pueblo*. But the piece’s title and visual portrayal of the people’s “song” (with the motif of balance between light and dark repeated in the vocalists’ open mouths) also reference tango, this time within a diurnal futurist plane entirely void of the patina of the past.26

Staging Tango

The young Argentine painter Héctor Basaldúa was deeply impressed with Pedro Figari’s exhibit of 1921, but decades would pass before he would create his own tango-themed works. Like Figari and Pettoruti, Basaldúa spent many years in Europe, hoping to establish himself as a painter. He progressively took on other projects such as book illustration and stage design that didn’t necessarily earn him fame as a painter but did make him “one of the most complete, profound and sensitive artists of his generation” (Whitelow 11). An illustrator of works by well-known authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, Manuel Mujica Láinez, and Ricardo Güiraldes, Basaldúa also worked for some thirty years in stage direction at Buenos Aires’ opulent Teatro Colón. He first designed opera sets there in 1921, returned in 1931 after spending several years in Paris, and then functioned as the hall’s head designer from 1933 to 1952 (Basaldúa 40–41).

Fellow artist Horacio Butler considered it a mistake for Basaldúa to work in these other exhausting labors, rather than in front of an easel in a quiet studio (Whitelow 11). But the worlds of the stage spectacle and painter’s studio ultimately were mutually enriching for Basaldúa. His sketches for stage productions at the Colón exhibit an atypical attention to detail and painterly
depth, and many of his paintings capture the drama of the theater.²⁷ We find a
good example of Basaldúa’s stage designer penchant for lighting, actor place-
ment, and choreography in his painting of 1956 Salón de tango (Tango hall)
(figure 3.7).²⁸ Basaldúa orients the couple at the center of the work so that
the spectator sees both their faces, as on a stage. The other figures frame
the couple, directing the viewer’s gaze toward their intimacy in the midst of
the visually “noisy” social gathering. Salón de tango portrays the milonga as
a space not just for making, hearing, or dancing to music but also as a place
to see and be seen, to watch and judge other dancers, and to experience and
provoke curiosity and desire. The use of deep orange hues in both the fore-
ground and background unify and warm the scene, and diffuse lighting and
gradations of detail in the figures’ features and postures add to the nocturnal,
stage-lit atmosphere.

Carlos Torrallardon’a’s grand columns, balconies, spotlights, and heavy
curtains also connect tango on the theater stage to its practice in more inti-
mate spaces. His oil painting on hardboard El espíritu del tango (The spirit of
the tango) (figure 3.8), completed in 1978, steers us back to the bordello as a
historical staging ground of tango. A semi-naked woman in the foreground

Figure 3.7. Emilio Pettoruti,
La canción del pueblo (The
song of the people), 1927,
 oil on wood, 76 × 64 cm.
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com. Used by permission
of Colección Malba,
Fundación Pettoruti.
Figure 3.7. Héctor Basaldúa, *Salón de tango*, 1956. Used by permission of Fundación Kónex.

Figure 3.8. Carlos Torralardona, *El espíritu del tango* (The spirit of the tango), 1978. Used by permission of Fundación Kónex.
of the painting seems to return and challenge the viewer’s gaze, suggesting both an invitation and a provocation. Couples dancing close together on a “hot” floor of intense reds hint at tango’s continuing connections to the arrabal and the brothel, despite its increasing identification with the glamour and grandeur of the stage. Also known for his portrayals of Buenos Aires’s boliches and pool halls, Torrallardona’s paintings capture or recapture tango’s nocturnal sensuality in a period when the social practice of the milonga was on the wane.

Fourteen Painters, Writers, and Poets with the Tango

Both Basaldúa and Torrallardona contributed to the impressive assemblage of writers, musicians, and artists that Ben Molar brought together for his multimedia phenomenon 14 con el tango (14 with the tango) in 1966. As noted in the introduction to this edited volume, those who purchased the LP could listen to tangos composed by eminent musicians, read lyrics written by recognized poets, and view a portable gallery of fourteen works painted by Basaldúa, Torrallardona, and a dozen others reproduced on paper and included in the record jacket. According to Molar, when the record was released, the original paintings were also displayed in a series of store windows along Avenida Santa Fe, one of Buenos Aires’s famous pedestrian boulevards.

While some of the artists of 14 con el tango addressed the tango and the city of Buenos Aires explicitly in their compositions, others interpreted their commission in more abstract terms. Basaldúa’s portrait of a compadrito references early tango lyrics that portray these urban players but not the dance or music directly. The only explicit mention of tango in Torrallardona’s contribution is a tiny image of a dancing couple that adorns one wall of the pool hall he depicted. Works by these two artists and the dozen other collaborators make it clear that by the mid-1960s one could “be with” the tango in a variety of ways and visibly evoke it using a wide range of styles and media. They also demonstrated the ever-deeper cross-pollination and enrichment of music, poetry, and image, despite growing fears of the encroachments of rock and pop in contributing to tango’s demise.

Of the fourteen who contributed to Molar’s multi-genre effort, Carlos Cañás and Carlos Alonso were the only two artists still living as this chapter was completed. Molar chose Cañás to illustrate “Milonga de Albornoz” written by Jorge Luis Borges. Its protagonist is the sauntering, milonga-whistling Alejo Albornoz, a dupe who doesn’t know that three knives await him on a street in the gritty south side of town. The text begins by invoking
the past and the compadrito’s dark fate: “Alguien ya contó los días” (Someone already counted the days). Albornoz, and by extension the tango, are victims of time’s march, even as they are retrieved and remembered in Borges’s self-reflexive song-poem, which ends with this stanza:

Pienso que le gustaría
saber que hoy anda su historia
en una milonga. El tiempo
es olvido y es memoria.

[I think that he would like
to know that his story
continues today in a milonga. Time
is oblivion and memory.]31

Cañás’s accompanying painting also displays temporal ambiguity. Dominated chromatically by grays and blues and composed almost entirely of straight edges, Milonga de Albornoz (figure 3.9) situates the emblematic figure of the compadrito or urban tough within a semi-abstract, coolish frame. The single two-story building of the background suggests a conventillo, rather than Pettorutti’s skyscrapers. The piece evokes milonga, and by extension tango, as suspended somewhere between the archaic and the contemporary.

Despite the pressures felt by Ben Molar and his fellow guardians in the face of the rapid growth of rock, their collective effort proved that tango still provided a wide open space for reflection and innovation, spacious enough to accommodate nostalgic treatments as well as new realisms, abstractions, expressionisms, caricature, and populisms. If for the Borges of “Milonga de Albornoz” tango’s primary appeal resided in its connection to the past, other artists simultaneously affirmed its relevance to the present.32 To make the case for tango’s continuing vitality in the period ahead, artists working in both of those schools would have to warily negotiate tango’s growing global success and ever more prevalent stereotyping.

Gains and Losses

The painter and illustrator Carlos Alonso (b. 1929) tells a story of running into fellow artist Felipe de la Fuente (1912–2000) on the street one day, disheveled and at wits’ end. De la Fuente had agreed to produce several hundred tango-themed canvases for a string of Japanese hotels, but after completing the first few dozen, he saw that this jackpot was in fact a road to creative
ruin and complained to Alonso that he would go mad if he had to fulfill the contract. For Alonso, de la Fuente’s cautionary tale reveals the dark side of tango’s success as a commodity in a global market. How does an artist avoid aesthetic debasement when tango images and objects are being reproduced cheaply the world over? Alonso answers that question in graphic, unsettling ways in his art, resolute and incorruptible in avoiding the trap of predictability and straitjacketing, especially as that trap concerns tango.

Art historians have mostly ignored the few references to tango in Alonso’s works, however, focusing instead on two major tendencies: the relationships his oeuvre establishes with those of other writers and artists and his attention to political concerns. Examples of the first of these characteristics include Alonso’s illustrations for the second half of Don Quixote, which converse with Cervantes’s text as well as with the drawings of Salvador Dalí, who illustrated the first part; his rendering of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s cadaver as a response to Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson”, and his portraits of Vincent Van Gogh and the Argentine artist Lino Spilimbergo, one of his teachers. Though tango doesn’t appear in those works, it constitutes

Figure 3.9. Carlos Cañás, Milonga de Albornoz. Used by permission of Carlos Cañás.
an important presence in other works in which Alonso addresses harsh topics such as political repression, censorship, and torture, especially as they relate to Argentine national history.

Defined as a social realist early on, Alonso participated in politically charged efforts such as the exhibit *El Che Vive* (The Che lives, 1968), which was closed down by the police, and *Malvenido Rockefeller* (Unwelcome Rockefeller), in which he and his counterparts decried the visit of the North American millionaire to Argentina in 1969. In 1976 Alonso’s show *El Ganado y lo Perdido* (The cattle and the lost) opened at the Art Gallery in Buenos Aires within a month of the start of the Process of National Reorganization that marked Argentina’s descent into military dictatorship. The title is a provocative play on words, as *el ganado* means cattle, but a change of the article converts the term to *lo ganado*, which means “what’s gained or earned.” In his tally of gains and losses, Alonso questions “the dehumanization of our society” (Carlos Alonso 14). *El Ganado y lo Perdido* drew a markedly different crowd from the usual gallery-hopping set, and the show received bomb threats from members of the political right (Carlos Alonso 13). That same year Alonso went into exile in Italy, and soon after, his daughter Paloma, who had remained in Argentina, was “disappeared” by the dictatorship.

While aesthetically impressive, tango-themed works by Alonso from that exile period and after are also important as a record of the artist’s negotiations of the injustice, personal loss, and displacement experienced by so many Argentines in the second half of the twentieth century. The paintings *Gran tango* (1975) and *Tango* (1978) portray tango in its intersections with political life and national history and in its figurative sense as an important happening or encounter. In *Gran tango*, rendered in mixed media on paper, he places several couples in the context of a butcher shop, where they dance among a string of sausages, a slab of ribs, organ meats, and several menacing empty hooks (figure 3.10). Dominant reds represent blood as visceral, eschatological. One woman’s hand pulls a hunk of meat into the embrace of her dance partner; one man’s hand digs into his partner’s bare back as if he were cutting flesh. The feet of the dancers float unanchored above the floor; Alonso enhances our sensation of ungroundedness by incorporating legs and feet on a slightly higher plane on both flanks of the work. The men in the picture are all fully dressed, while the women are naked except for shoes and skimpy or translucent underclothing. Rather than beauty or allure, the state of undress of the women suggests an obscene breach of privacy. The horrifying image of
Gran tango establishes irony with the piece’s title and strips away the veneer of tango as a picturesque, flirtatious dance.

Gran tango does more than associate the social dynamic of a milonga with a “meat market” in which flesh is displayed for purchase. The work belongs to Alonso’s large-scale project Hay que comer (One has to eat), certain pieces of which were banned by the Argentine government in the 1970s. In Hay que comer, exhibited in an expanded version in Buenos Aires in 2004, Alonso recounts the country’s historia carnívora, in which revenues from cattle and beef contributed to huge personal fortunes and Argentina’s emergence as the richest country in Latin America and one of the dozen richest in the world. The early twentieth century became known as the era of the vacas gordas or fatted calves (see Hora), and meat is perhaps more closely tied to Argentina’s capitalist development and expansion in export markets than any other product—unless that product is tango. By superimposing the two commodities, Alonso disturbs the viewer and his or her tidy versions of history. He blurs the lines between butcher and bailarín, between human and animal flesh, and between Argentine national identity as defined by its alluring music and dance or by the horrific actions of its authoritarian governments (see Viñas, untitled).
Alonso’s painting *Tango* from 1978 (reproduced in Alonso, *Carlos Alonso* 125) further upsets conventions, forcing us to once again move beyond the generalities and commonplaces around the term *tango*. On a very large canvas, an almost life-sized woman wearing only underclothing and a pair of red heels straddles a supine man, fully dressed—including his fedora—except for his shoes and socks, which are visible next to the mattress. A nightstand or cabinet in the upper right-hand corner reveals to us that the couple’s heads are pointing down toward the foot of the bed, their feet up. While the position of the couple and their state of undress evoke an encounter that is fleeting, maybe even clandestine, the skewed perspective positions both the illustrator and the implicit viewer as voyeurs of this intimate scene. Each partner clasps only his or her own hands, rather than the hand or body of the other, and their hidden faces appear turned away from each other. Alonso thus stands the tango on its head (almost literally), calling into question such sacred cows as the “tango embrace” and the “tango connection.” Also intriguing is what the painting might say about gender relations vis-à-vis the tango, as the woman’s position on top also defies a predictable rendering of her supposed role as a passive or pliable “follower.”

When Alonso returned to Argentina after the restoration of democracy in the early 1980s, he found Buenos Aires to be a city scarred by the dictatorship in which he “had the sensation that there were too many assassins and too many torturers running loose, too much worry and sadness, too much crisis” (Alonso, *Carlos Alonso* 14). Soon after, he went to live in the province of Córdoba, where he concentrated on painting landscapes, explaining that his experiences had caused a “rupture with the image” provoked by his disillusion with humankind. Still, Alonso never lost his faith in art itself. In the frontispiece to his autobiography in images, published in 2003, he declared: “I still believe in art, and above all, in its incorruptible memory, not sentimental but capable of fixing the wounds that reality leaves in us; I don’t believe that art can resolve any of the problems of the world, a maxim that is used when ambiguity invades figurative art and banality is consecrated by public utility; world states try to sterilize misery and terror for us, but it’s with this terrorized love that that we can begin to build our paintings.” Ever wary of the temptations of “public utility” and the banal sentimentality that so frequently results when artists succumb to such temptations, Alonso implicitly urges artists, art viewers, and even *tangueros* to reject facile representations built on nostalgia and instead engage fully with the political verities of our times, however painful.
The Idea of the Tango

Following the end of dictatorship and the restoration of democracy in Argentina and Uruguay in the 1980s, the role of tango and tango art began to shift to reflect new levels of economic and cultural flow at the global level. Many of the region’s most revered artists chose not to return from exile in Europe and elsewhere, instead creating rioplatense art from outside the region’s borders. Films such as *Tangos: El exilio de Gardel* (treated elsewhere in this edited volume), released in 1985, demonstrate how creative energies related to the tango both flourished and were subject to pigeonholing in the contexts of such exiles and displacements. In 1986 Claudio Segovia brought dozens of top dancers and musicians from Buenos Aires to Paris, where he was then living, to stage the hugely popular *Tango Argentino* (see the introduction to this edited volume). For the playbill and other promotional materials for the show, he chose an upscale image from a vintage German dance poster that, though it took liberties with traditional tango form (by reversing the embrace), recalled the glamour and grandeur of the tango of yesteryear (figure 3.11).\(^{38}\) Mixing antique elements such as this one with new choreography and production values, *Tango Argentino* jumpstarted a renaissance that attracted new generations to tango dance, music, and art in the international market. As had happened nearly a century earlier, tango practice would be energized and expanded by this international exposure, and by the end of the twentieth century, its significance in all these venues once again began to rise dramatically.

In 2002, a German gallery displayed sixty paintings, drawings, sculptures, and works in mixed media under the title *Die Tango-Idee* (The idea of the tango), giving an international audience access to some of the latest works in visual culture representing tango. The Montevidean painter Virginia Patrone and her daughter Laura Spagnuolo conceived the project with a foreign public in mind. The twelve artists’ base of Montevideo, rather than Buenos Aires, allied them geographically and culturally with tango but also suggested a certain distance from the ever-more pervasive stereotyping that characterized the form in Buenos Aires. “Everyone knows what the tango is, just like everyone thinks it is Argentine,” explains Patrone. “The exhibit didn’t have to do with the tango, but with the idea of the tango.”\(^{39}\) The show catalog described the resurgence that occurred in Uruguayan art circles following the end of that country’s military dictatorship (1973–1985) (39). Dubbed the “Generation of the '80s,” the young artists working in the postdictatorship...
period became known for their dialogue with such European forms as German neoexpressionism and the Italian transavant-garde, their interrogation of the events of the recent past, and their often violent use of color. Now, they were applying those tendencies to fresh representations of the tango rioplatense and its history in both Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

Like the artists of 14 con el tango, the twelve contributors to Die Tango-Idee—most of them infants or children when Molar’s project had debuted almost four decades earlier—chose to interpret tango freely, providing predominantly abstract pieces for the exhibit. Painting, drawing, and sculpture were taken “not as dogmas but as porous elements that allow for the reunion of multiple vectors with which contemporary art harbors and responds to the experience of the present” (39). After its debut in Munich, Die Tango-Idee traveled back to Montevideo and then to Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Madrid, and Barcelona during a two-year period.

Like so many other Uruguayans and Argentines far from their home countries, Patrone recounts how she had a chance reencounter with the tango well into her artistic trajectory that struck a deep emotional chord, despite earlier indifference to it. One day, in a rented car in the outskirts of Paris, her eyes filled with tears as she listened to a fragment of tango on the radio. That emotion ultimately triggered a renewed interest in the classic tangos of
Carlos Gardel and his era, and Patrone began to reconsider what the tango represented for her immigrant grandparents and the history of her birthplace: “And I found many images in the lyrics of those tangos heard over and over again. More than in the lyrics themselves, I found poetry in what remains when you join lyrics, music, and voice. That evocation has poetic resonances.” Patrone was interested in tango’s masculinist tendencies, its discourse of machismo, and the schematic representations of women contained in its lyrics. “There is a disadvantage, a lack of features in the woman of tango lyrics; she doesn’t have a voice,” she explains. Thus, in her own work, Patrone determined to use tango as a place to search for “a representation of the feminine from the feminine.” In the Uruguayan painter’s intensely colored works, curvy female figures cease to be solely danceable objects, partners, or followers of their male counterparts: in one canvas, they dance together, embracing each other; in others they stand alone in a self-embrace. In a piece she reworked after its original inclusion in Die Tango-Idee, Patrone expands her focus by incorporating allusions to Japanese literature, Zen Buddhism, and the art of kabuki, noting that Japan has had a privileged relationship with the tango. The title of Sumo tango is playfully polyvalent, since sumo is both a Spanish adjective for “maximum” and a style of Japanese wrestling in which the idea is to topple the opponent (figure 3.12). A face with Asian features, implicitly that of a female wrestler, is suspended on the back of the woman dancer who looks out at the viewer from the tango embrace. Besides contesting another stereotype of the sumo wrestler as invariably male, she suggests exceptional physical and metaphysical strength. Sumo tango thus redefines the tanguera as equal or superior to her male counterpart.

Other contemporary artists also acknowledge the power of old lyrics in their new works. The Argentine artist Marcia Schvartz’s project El alma que pinta (The soul that paints) reinterprets classic tango texts by placing women at the center of the situations those lyrics dramatize. Like Alonso, Schvartz avoids benign sentimentality and directly addresses personal and collective pain and loss. Not only do Schvartz’s works in El alma que pinta revisit well-known tango lyrics but also the project as a whole recalls El alma que canta (The soul that sings), an early twentieth-century publication dedicated to tango lyrics and news. The catalog of El alma que pinta imitates aspects of the early journal, including an antique typeface and sepia-toned paper, the latter of which mimics Schvartz’s predilection for using charcoal on burlap. Each of the images is accompanied by a title or other fragment from an emblematic tango such as Tinta roja (Red ink), Arrabalera (Low-class woman), María, Mi
noche triste (My sad night), and Volver (Return). Along with vintage elements, Schwartz includes modern or even postmodern elements such as distortion, intense contrasts, a sordid or macabre quality, and comic book-like splashes of red or shocking pink.

Because Schwartz worked with a model who closely resembles her, many have assumed that the female figures in the canvases of El alma que pinta are autobiographical. She stresses that they came out of a collective effort: “I can’t listen to tangos alone because I cry and they are very connected to having lived outside the country” (qtd. in Isola). As Schwartz and her model worked together chatting and listening to tangos, the painter honed in on the specific problems of women. “I really liked working on stereotypes, but that wasn’t the only thing,” Schwartz clarifies, “I think that once I go back and look at these paintings, they are speaking to me about more than just the tango. They are women who suffer, who get drunk, who bleed” (qtd. in Isola).

Schwartz’s Tabernero (figure 3.13) treats the historic associations of tango with alcohol and the effects of its abuse on body and soul, but it substitutes a female protagonist for the masculine voice of the original lyrics. The pathos-driven words in the composition of the same title, written by Raúl Costa Oliveri in 1927 and popularized by Carlos Gardel, include the following stanza:
Todos los que son borrachos
no es por el gusto de serlo,
sólo Dios conoce el alma
que palpita en cada ebrio.
¿No ves mi copa vacía?
¡Echa vino, tabernero!,
que tengo el alma contenta,
con tu maldito veneno . . .

[Not all who are drunks
are that way because they like it,
only God knows the soul
that beats in every drunkard.
Don’t you see my empty glass?
Give me some wine, barman!
My soul is content
with your accursed venom.]

Schvartz inscribes some of those lyrics directly into the work, using a deep
red tint and wet, splotchy writing that suggests a text written in blood. “There
is a lot of alcohol in my paintings because there was a lot in my life. When
we were in exile in Barcelona, we drank a lot and I have friends who died
alcoholics. I can also relate blood with wine, and by putting them together,
the rather neglected zone of menopause also jumps out,” Schvartz explains
(qtd. in Isola).

The text of the incorporated lyric frames a woman clad in a black slip and
hose, stretched out across an orange-red swath on the floor, who pours a
stream that repeats the same bloodlike “font” of the script as it travels from
bottle to wine glass. An old telephone, several LPS, and a pair of spiky heels
anchor the lower left sector of the painting, the records perhaps symbolizing
the auditory pleasures of the tango and the shoes its kinetic appeal. Schvartz
notably modifies the original lyrics (included in full alongside the reproduc-
tion of the work in the exhibit catalog) by changing the speaker’s request to
the barman to keep refilling his glass with “bloody venom” (“Sigue llenando
mi copa con tu maldito veneno”) to the first-person confession “I keep filling
my glass with your accursed venom” (“Sigo llenando mi copa con tu maldito
veneno”). The switch in subject adds a foreboding overlay, suggesting an ad-
diction on the part of the female protagonist that goes beyond mere alcohol,
perhaps to a relationship that is itself both pleasurable and poisonous. Once
again, tango’s elasticity in expressing pain or pleasure, rhapsody or ruin, is on display.

What Remains

Contemporary artists face more pressures than ever before from international consumers keen on purchasing visual representations of tango that follow the picturesque formulas of the tourist guidebooks. Artists today must negotiate the allure and pitfalls of tango art for export and participate in the polemics regarding origins, originality, authenticity, historic relevance, and aesthetic quality. Much of contemporary tango art exploits these debates, treating the icons and emblems of tango with irony or parody. Five recent examples of tango art exemplify these ongoing engagements. Works by the fileteador Jorge Muscia, the abstract painter Cristian Mac Entyre, the postrealist painter Daniel Kaplan, the photographer Marcos López, and the caricaturist Hermenegildo Sábat make it abundantly clear that like tango music and dance, the field of tango art continues to expand and diversify.

In San Pugliese (figure 3.14) Jorge Muscia uses the “vintage” filete style discussed at the beginning of this chapter to create a postmodern, hagiographic invocation of the composer and pianist Oswaldo Pugliese, a venerated “saint” of the tango pantheon whose arrangements and recordings remain popular.
with today’s tangueros. The blue and white of the Argentine flag are imposed over Pugliese’s keyboard, and a legend across the top of the image, flanked by two large ears, implores, “Protect us from whoever doesn’t listen.” In a nod to the popular tradition of repeating “Pugliese, Pugliese, Pugliese” to ward off bad luck, readers of Tangauta magazine, where the image was published, were encouraged to cut out their San Pugliese and affix it to a votive candle or use it as a talisman. This popular or pop appropriation of the filete might seem trite to art critics and disrespectful to music purists, but Muscia’s San Pugliese does pay homage to both the decorative tradition of the filete and to Pugliese, who, as a dedicated communist, is the historical figure that most closely aligns tango music and performance to socialist aims.

Cristian Mac Entyre’s painting Dinámica de baile 2 (Dance dynamic 2) (Figure 3.15) recalls the highly geometric work of Emilio Pettoruti, but it displays a more pronounced interest in movement. The monochromatic intensity of the couple, the absence of facial features, the repeating lines of the foreground image, and the overall diagonality of the work all intensify the dynamism referred to in the title. Mac Entyre acknowledges the influence of the early twentieth-century surrealist and Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp: “His
manner of capturing an entire movement sequence and transmitting it on the canvas always attracted me,” Mac Entyre explained. The work from 2003 resembles Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* from 1912 and references other early twentieth-century futurists Mac Entyre was studying when he painted *Dinámica*: “The superimposition of images helps me to conceptualize rhythm. It also enables one to freeze the action in its point of greatest expressive tension.” Despite this attention to *vanguardista* traditions from decades earlier, Mac Entyre’s interest in tango is informed by local, lived elements, beginning with the Barracas neighborhood where he grew up and still lives. His influences range from Kandinsky and Jimi Hendrix to Eduardo Mac Entyre, the artist’s father, famous for his own participation in Argentina’s pop, abstract, and cubist art movements.

Although he studied with Carlos Cañas (*of 14 con el tango*) at age seventeen, Daniel Kaplan’s interest in tango developed much later when he began to frequent milongas in Buenos Aires and New York. Many of his works
re-create panoramic views of specific dance halls and the ambience of specific milongas. His piece *After Hopper* from 2007 (figure 3.16) was painted after Kaplan received a Fulbright scholarship in 2005 that helped him deepen his knowledge and further perfect his technique. The nearly square oil painting recalls many characteristics of Edward Hopper’s works, particularly the emphasis on architecture, the careful use of lighting, and the placement of the human subjects in their everyday urban environment. Kaplan chose as his setting the yellowing Confitería Ideal, a revered classic dance hall in the center of Buenos Aires with soaring ceilings, aging grandeur, and a floor danced on by thousands of local and international milongueros. His waist-up focus on a single couple that occupies only a small portion of the canvas frames the tango as ordinary—even mundane (no dramatic fishnet-clad legs flying here)—but the work also conveys the entrega (surrender) of a specific, unrepeatable dance moment. The light reflected on the dancers’ heads illuminates their age and creates an effect of divine inspiration or heightened reverie. The other couples in the painting, reflected in the glass panes in the background, literally fade into the background in the face of the main couple’s concentration on each other. The loudspeaker situated in the convergence of columns in the upper center of the painting reveals the interplay of technology with the patina of the past and functions as a mouth or voice for the music as well as a second eye that looks down at the dancers and back at the artist or viewer. Kaplan’s naturalist vision of contemporary tango shows it to reside in the same fundamental experience of connection and communion that characterized it a century earlier, despite the physical decline of its venues or the changes instituted by new technologies.

The pronounced dialogic quality of much contemporary tango art reaches new levels in the highly parodic work of the Argentine photographer Marcos López. His photo *Il piccolo vapore* (figure 3.17), from 2007, has a postmodern, baroque style that parodies the marketing of the tango, Carlos Gardel, and other icons of Argentine identity. Destined, like other works in his Subrealismo criollo (Creole subrealism) series, to critique “the kitschy detritus of globalised daily life,” *Il piccolo vapore* is a layered, even palimpsestic work that references a cantina in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of La Boca where a variety of stock elements are enlisted to create an “authentic” Argentine experience for the locals or tourists who visit. A “live” impersonator of Carlos Gardel and a painting of Carlitos perform tango stereotypes, as do a live musician and a tacky image of a bandoneonist that adorns a side wall. Both the two-dimensional emblems (copies) and three-dimensional (real)
Figure 3.16. Daniel Kaplan, *After Hopper*, 2007, oil on canvas. Used by permission of Daniel Kaplan.

figures appear equally “posed” or framed, but the haggard or bored demeanor of the “live” performers defies the carefree attitude of the tango couple that adorns the back wall of the cantina. A knife-wielding butcher stands in the doorway of the kitchen next to strings of chorizos and morcillas (blood sausages), suggesting camp horror elements, and a disheveled ingénue, draped in a red boa, dips into a viscera-like bowl of pasta in a nod to La Boca’s famed Italian immigrant population and influences.

Other elements, such as the cleaning supplies on the floor next to the bandoneon player, and a hose that snakes around the butcher’s feet, make us wonder whether the photographer has posed the figures himself or just happened upon this scene after the exhausted performers have finished for the night. *Il piccolo vapore* thus documents the tedium of performing “authentic” tango for consumers ingesting both food and national identity in Buenos Aires’s kitschy tourist havens, and it reveals how the symbols and icons enlisted in these simulacra are worn-out, sordid, superficial, and exhausted. “The photograph is an excuse for exorcising pain . . . for transforming in poetry the hangover from a second-class tequila,” López has written. 46 Focusing on detritus or remains in the visual evocation of tango, López performs the ironic and contradictory maneuver of “outing” tango as formulaic, melodramatic, and gaudy, while also framing it in the context of camp taste. The latter style, developed in the wake of postmodernism, highlights an aesthetic of artifice rather than nature to comment on the truth of contemporary experience.

Undoubtedly, Hermenegildo Sábat (born in Montevideo in 1933) is the rioplatense artist who has sustained the longest and most varied engagement with tango in visual culture throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Best known perhaps as a cartoonist for the Buenos Aires daily newspaper *Clarín*, “Menchi” Sábat’s love affair with the tango and its creators has flourished for more than five decades and shows no signs of waning. Enormous versions of his drawings of musical greats such as Aníbal Troilo and Astor Piazzolla grace the walls of Buenos Aires’s subway stations, and his winged portraits of an angelic Gardel attest to the public’s reverence for the singer (and his foremost caricaturist) all over the city. But these beloved images of a beloved icon constitute only a fraction of Sábat’s extensive collection. *Tango mio* (1981) and many other catalogs and exhibits testify to his long-term relationship with the tango, not only in homages to legendary figures such as Gardel, Troilo, and Piazzolla but also as a recurring “trace” element in works dedicated to other topics. 47
Informed by his work in journalism and political caricature, Sábat’s art conflates the lyrical, felicitous aspects of tango music and dance with grimmer sociopolitical realities. His large work *Lo que nos queda* (What remains) (figure 3.18), completed in 1997, takes on a special resonance in the wake of these lingering absences. In it Maestro Sábat resurrects iconic figures of tango history and suspends them between high art and caricature, between official and popular versions of that history. The dominant figure in the painting is the malevo or thug who incorporates his naked or nearly-naked dance partner in an embrace sharpened and hardened by the daggers he holds in both hands, one of them dripping blood. The malevo and his female partner, the figures behind them, and the repeating face that streams across the top of the piece all appear in profile, contrasting with the face of Jorge Luis Borges, who gazes at the viewer from the bottom right center of the piece, his head supported on a blood-red cane. At Borges’s side we find the great bandoneonist Aníbal Troilo, but Pichuco’s hands are empty here, perhaps signifying the irretrievable loss of tango’s inimitable interpreters.

Figure 3.18. Hermenegildo Sábat, *Lo que nos queda*, 1997, oil. Used by permission of Hermenegildo Sábat and Walter Santoro.
Lo que nos queda is the simultaneous experience of what is lost and what is retained through memory.

There is also a hidden or submerged element in Lo que nos queda, a phantom face that looks up between the woman dancer’s open legs on the left side of the painting. Perhaps it is a face of one of the disappeared, but it might just as well be one of the authoritarian represores or torturers of the dictatorship who has here receded into the “woodwork” of public memory, where he constitutes a horrific, menacing presence. This singular hidden face is juxtaposed with the feminine face repeated, chorus girl style, along the top edge of the work, a repetition that suggests both mass reproduction of tango-related images as well as a sustained rhythm.

Lo que nos queda, like the works of Sábat’s four artist contemporaries profiled here, confirms tango’s continuing power at the cusp of the twenty-first century. It references the potent mixture of pleasure and pain that constitutes the experience of tango, past and present, and it reveals how tango serves as a tool or lens with which to read and reread local, national, and international histories. We find that what remains and what’s still to come in future depictions of tango is the paradoxical past in the present, “a memory incapable of dying,” born and sustained in “a region in which Yesterday / Can be the Today, the Still and the Not Yet” (Borges and Bullrich 168–70).

Notes

1. Due to space restrictions, I do not consider performance art or conceptual art in this chapter.

2. Despite its proliferation in painting, drawing, engravings, album and CD covers, sheet music, sculpture, and so on, to my knowledge the prominent role of tango in art and visual culture has not been studied systematically. Ferrer takes up tango-themed art in El Siglo de Oro del tango and marks the 1970s as the moment of most intense proliferation (165). In terms of a field or genre of “tango art,” my interest here is directed at works that explicitly incorporate tango topically, thematically, or in referential terms or that incorporate tango in a collective project such as an exhibit, catalogue, or single or multiauthor work identified with tango. The brief nature of this chapter prevents me from engaging in a more in-depth study; this is work that I hope art historians will take on in the future.

3. Space limitations, and in one case the refusal of the late painter’s family members to authorize reproductions of his work, make it impossible to include many other artists who have worked on tango, including Horacio Butler, Juan Battle Planas, Juan Carlos Liberti, Aldo Severi, Juan Carlos Castagnino, Ricardo Carpani, Carlos Gorriarena, and Sigfredo Pastor.

4. Horacio Ferrer has served as the president of the Academy of Tango since the founding of the institution in 1990. See http://www.anacdeltango.org.ar/.
5. Visitors will find similar offerings in Montevideo, a secondary mecca for tango tourists.

6. The mural is located in the 700 block of Paraná Street in Buenos Aires.

7. In most cases the visual elements of early sheet music were textual rather than figurative, including the name of the composer, the title of the piece, and perhaps a dedication. In the majority of early scores, aesthetic considerations were limited to the font choice and perhaps the addition of a flourish or a small drawing of a music staff, bandoneon, or streetlamp. Nonetheless, many examples of early tango sheet music feature noteworthy illustrations, sometimes by well-known artists and, in a few cases, by the composers themselves. The aesthetic value of these documents has been acknowledged in museum exhibits of early sheet music, such as one held at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires in 2010, and in handsome volumes, such as Gustavo Varela’s *Tango: Una pasión ilustrada*, which reproduces art from dozens of partituras and includes essays by Varela and other tango historians on their significance.

8. When the artists Nicolás Rubió, a Catalan painter, and his Argentine wife Esther Barugel, a sculptor, realized that no research on the topic existed, they conducted their own investigation in the late 1960s, taking photos of every example they came across. They concluded that despite its dismissal by the so-called experts of the art world, the *filete porteño* “was a living art” in which new images constantly appeared to seduce the attentive observer (Estenssoro 161).

9. Tango appears in the work of future generations of artists specializing in the grabado as well, most notably in the work of Víctor Rebuffo. See Gené and Dolinko 100–102.

10. Iconic images include the emblematic transbordador bridge across the Riachuelo from the La Boca neighborhood to Maciel Island, the meatpacking plants that lined the Riachuelo, the ships and railroads that transported this commerce, and the undernourished and poorly paid workers who serviced these lucrative industries.

11. “El Chino” is not necessarily a reference to a person of Chinese or Asian descent in porteño Spanish but more generally refers to someone with features associated with indigenous populations (see Conde, *Diccionario etimológico del lunfardo*, 101).

12. Robert Farris Thompson analyzes Bellocq’s illustration as showing “traits of the canyengue colloquial: dancers cheek to cheek, arms on high, and a woman falling on a man’s chest as she danced” (163).

13. In a short section on tango in art and film in *El Siglo de Oro del tango* (1996), Horacio Ferrer names Figari as the first artist related to the tango (165–67). He also mentions the works of Alberto Ross, Valentin Thibon de Livian, Emilio Centurión, and Guillermo Facio Hébecquer.

14. These details were furnished by Fernando Saavedra Faget, great-grandson of Figari and administrator of a large collection of his works, in a personal interview conducted in his home in Montevideo on June 24, 2010.

15. Figari’s show notably coincided with the young writer Jorge Luis Borges’s return from Europe. Borges wrote a prologue to Samuel Oliver’s study of Figari in which he describes the Uruguayan painter’s style as lyric and credits him with a criollo sensibility (9). For Figari and others in his cohort, lo criollo refers to the selection of archetypical subjects in a concentrated effort to construct national identities, an effort engaged in by
both Argentines and Uruguayans in the early twentieth century. The criollo project is typically nostalgic, utopian, and linked to local landscapes.

16. Figari’s success was further cemented at an exhibit in Paris later that same year in which he reportedly sold forty-six of the sixty works exhibited and was the subject of some twenty articles in the French press (Figari, Figari 26).

17. Figari’s ideas have since been linked to Cuban revolutionary figure José Martí, whose writings in the late 1880s and early 1890s on the Nuestra América (pan-Latin American) theme were published in the Buenos Aires newspaper La Nación, where Figari probably read them (see Sanguinetti and Casasbellas 14–26).

18. Borges published an essay on Figari in Criterio that same year (Figari, 30).

19. “Pedro Figari y el clasicismo latinoamericano” advanced some of the same ideas Carpentier would later develop as the “marvelous real” in his prologue to The Kingdom of This World (1949). Other critics have also noticed the connections between writing and painting in Figari’s work. In 1927 Samuel Oliver wrote that “there are writers who carry diaries, others write their memoirs, generally when they have lived out their years and many experiences. Figari painted his memories daily” (11).

20. Figari’s inclusion of black subjects in his work contrasts with their exclusion by his most important predecessor in Uruguay, Juan Manuel Blanes (Figari’s Montevideo 8).

21. Figari and turn-of-the-twentieth-century Uruguayan society in general recognized other categories as well as “black” and “white”; in his painting Los mulatos, the dancers execute a slightly more genteel version of what appears to be tango, with a violinist, bandoneonist, and pianist accompanying them in a salon setting (Oliver 29). Figari painted relatively few tangos, although social dance was a recurrent theme, and included representations of pericones, saraos, bailes criollos, as well as works with such titles as Paso de baile (Dance step), Bailando (Dancing), Camino al baile (On the way to the dance), and Baile en la Estancia (Dance at the country estate).

22. The second of these scenes also makes use of a curb or bank that bisects the image horizontally, dividing the social space between a background of spectators who gaze both at the dancers and implicitly at the viewer from an elevated plane, and a “street-level” foreground of active dancers.

23. For a more comprehensive analysis of modernismo, see Malosetti Costa.

24. According to Antonio Berni and other contemporaries, Pettoruti and his modernist cohort were guilty of creating “a world of forms so abstract . . . that they are transformed into frivolous and sentimental decoration” (Sullivan and Perazzo 296).

25. The creation of La canción del pueblo coincides with the rise of tango’s popularity both at home and abroad, where it was being disseminated through musical and dance performances by famous personalities such as José Ovidio Bianquet, immortalized as “El Cachafaz,” and through the relatively “new media” of sound recordings and films.

26. Mario Gradowczyk situates Pettoruti alongside Cézanne, Kandinsky, Klee, and Mondrian, as well as the Latin American artist and writer Torres-García (Sullivan and Perazzo 197). All, he points out, grappled with the paradox that what the image or work of art transmits is inexpressible, yet it is language that we must use to articulate the experience of contemplating or meditating on an image. The cubists and futurists addressed this conundrum directly by incorporating language in their pictorial works in the form
of texts, letters, numbers, words, and typographic styles (Sullivan and Perazzo 198). Besides creating a diverse body of paintings, drawings, collages, and mosaics, Pettoruti wrote on the role of the artist as critic, teacher, and administrator. In 1930 he began a career as an arts administrator, later becoming the director of the Provincial Museum of Fine Arts in the city of La Plata, where he was born. In that capacity Pettoruti made extensive visits to the United States, where he had shows and sold paintings in such cities as San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, St. Louis, and Kansas City, thus contributing to the vanguard of cultural circulation between North and Latin America.

27. Emilio Basaldúa’s essay in the Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts on his father’s tenure at the Teatro Colón includes outstanding illustrations of his gouache on hardboard designs for the sets of Bolero, Le nozze de Figaro, and La Traviata, among others.

28. The sainete porteño was a humorous theatrical work inserted between acts of a longer drama and usually focused on the experience of the immigrant population (see Pellarolo). The grotesco criollo similarly addressed the conflicts and ambivalence of daily life for the immigrant working class, obliged to “laugh and cry in a single gesture” (Ordaz).

29. Basaldúa’s “pictoric interpretation” accompanied the tango “Como nadie,” written by Manuel Mujica Láinez with music by Lucio Demare, while Torrallardona interpreted the tango “Sabor de Buenos Aires,” written by Carlos Mastronardi with music by Miguel Caló.


31. The same verses by Borges also figure in some editions of his collection of milonga poems titled Para las seis cuerdas, published a year prior to the release of 14 con el tango, and illustrated by Héctor Basaldúa.

32. Paradoxically, Borges would also participate in some of these “new tango” ventures, including El tango (1965), in which he recorded together with Piazzolla and his quintet and the singers Edmundo Rivera and Luis Medina Castro. The LP included musical versions of several of his milongas and tangos from Para las seis cuerdas.

33. For an analysis of Alonso’s six works depicting the cadaver of Guevara, see Anreus.

34. Alonso illustrated some forty works of literature, including such formidable and wide-ranging assignments as Dante’s La divina comedia, four volumes of Pablo Neruda’s poetry, and the great Argentine classic Martín Fierro.

35. In several paintings from the Manos anónimas y dirección obligatoria series, painted in the early 1980s, Alonso himself is a victim of this torture and silencing (Alonso, Carlos Alonso 158–59).

36. A wrinkled sheet, cast aside in favor of the male figure’s overcoat as the only protection against the bare mattress, adds to a sense of transitory encounter or disconnection to the “love” scene.

37. “Sigo creyendo en el arte y, sobre todo, en su memoria insobornable, no sentimental pero que es capaz de fijar las heridas que la realidad deja en nosotros; no creo que el arte pueda resolver ninguno de los problemas del mundo, máxime cuando la
ambiguity invade el arte figurativo y la banalidad es consagrada de utilidad pública; los Estados del mundo intentan esterilizarnos con la miseria y el terror, pero es con ese amor aterrorizado con el que podemos construir nuestros cuadros” (n.p.).

39. Email from Virginia Patrone, November 2, 2010.
41. The Spanish lyrics can be found at todotango.com. The translation is mine.
42. Email document, November 9, 2010.
43. In 2010 father and son exhibited their works together in shows in La Plata and Buenos Aires, providing yet another intergenerational visual dialogue.
44. Personal interview with Daniel Kaplan, June 3, 2010. Kaplan also commented on his work in an email on May 31, 2010.
47. In Sábat’s Paisajes (Landscapes) series, painted in the late 1980s, a dancing couple sometimes hides in highly detailed “wallpaper” dominated by repeating organic forms. We see the same technique in his Pareja (Couple) series from the early 1990s. Tango dancers show up again—more predictably, perhaps—in the Danzas peligrosas (Dangerous dances) series.
48. In the 1980s Sábat created Desaparecidos (The disappeared ones), a series of portraits painted in the wake of the military dictatorship’s “removal” of many artists, writers, labor activists, and others deemed subversive or threatening. Madres, another of Sábat’s portraits from this period, pays tribute to the white scarf–wearing mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who since the dictatorship have marched every Thursday in Buenos Aires’s central public square to protest those disappearances—a practice that still continues with the grandmothers and other family members of these victims.
49. The malevo’s exposed penis might signal fear, were it not for its diminutive size: perhaps his bark is stronger than his bite. The element is typical of Sábat’s incorporation of humor, even in his works of dark matter.