

# Antonio de Torres Guitars

by David Collett  
photos by Felix Salazar



Antonio de Torres, 1817-1892

The name of Antonio de Torres (1817-1892) is to guitarists what the name of Antonio Stradivari is to violinists. Taken as a whole, the corpus of instruments made by this legendary maker's hand are today regarded as the foundational basis of the modern guitar. The impact that these guitars have made on successive generations of luthiers is impossible to exaggerate – still to this day, most or nearly all of Torres' structural and tonal improvements are actively in use by all top contemporary builders. In Torres' own day, the leading players such as Julian Arcas and Francisco Tarrega were already performing on his masterpieces, and successive generations of players over the 20th century

continued to play them. Although increasing values on Torres over the past several decades has resulted in their placement largely within sphere of collectors, they are still highly desirable to leading professional players and occasionally make their way into the recording studio or even concert stage. Pepe Romero, Stefano Grondona, Wulfen Lieske, George Sakellariou and Marc Teicholz, among others, have brought them to life in recorded and live sound and we all hope this trend continues in the future, especially as more Torres instruments come to the public's attention.



David Collett-Guitar Salon International, Santa Monica, CA

22 Torres' career as a guitar maker is typically broken into two phases, or "epochs". Conveniently, they are separated several years apart and take place in different cities. In the "First Epoch" we find Torres working in Sevilla – his first known guitar having been built in 1854, and his last in 1868. His second epoch began 7 years later back in his hometown of Almeria in 1875 where he built guitars continuously until his death in 1892. As has been noted by others, the disruptive "gap" between his two eras coincides precisely with a major civil war that would have injured Torres' prospects of having any reasonable livelihood as a "guitarrero" in a time of social unrest. Aficionados, experts and scholars of Torres' work have tried to attribute stylistic differences in Torres' work to the two epochs, but this is an ongoing debate as to precisely what these are. It does appear that the basic "Torres plan" was achieved very early in his career, suddenly, and remained his basic blueprint for the duration of his career. Differences that appear on a guitar-by-guitar basis seem to be based on matters having to do with: materials available to Torres, the budget of the client for whom the guitar was built, curious experimentation and artistic inspiration, the age or "size" of the client for who Torres appears to have had concern for the ergonomic details of his guitars. Perhaps it would be best to provide a couple of examples from each epoch to illustrate some of the variety of Torres' work, yet at the same time demonstrating the underlying unity and consistency of his purpose and direction in his intended aim of producing instruments of maximum musical sensitivity and beauty.

## First Epoch

In 1862 he built a famously unique and unusual guitar – the back and sides being of paper mache (as opposed to the traditional woods normally used for guitars such as cypress, maple, rosewoods, etc). However his choice of unorthodox materials for use in a structural detail such as this seems to have made him curious to try some unusual materials for decorative purposes. Although Torres was known for using natural colors in the woods selected for his inlays, in this same year, he built another instrument using colored paper (bright blue and pink/red) for the inlay materials, instead of the traditional wood veneers found in his other guitars. This instrument is as unique in his output as the paper mache guitar.



1862-Antonio-de Torres-guitar

Torres was known for inserting a metal (usually brass) device called a "tornavoz" into the soundholes of some of his guitars. These appear more frequently in the First Epoch than in the second, as far as we know from his surviving guitars – some of the more famous examples being "La Leona" (FE04) of 1856, the richly decorated "Cumbre" (FE08)

of 1858, “FE13” of 1860 (previously owned by Miguel Llobet, 1878-1938 and Hermann Hauser, 1882-1952), and “FE17” of 1864 (famously owned by Francisco Tarrega and others), to name but just a few. More precisely, this curiosity called a “tornavoz” was a conical tube attached to the soundhole, which generally adds a sort of “sonic boom” to the lower frequencies in the bass registers, and gives the trebles a brilliant, sparkling clarity. Technically, this is achieved by the lowering of what guitar makers call the “body resonance” giving the overall sound a different character than guitars without a “tornavoz”. A great example of one Torres’ last known “First Epoch” guitars from 1868 features a tornavoz and can be seen here:



1868 Antonio de Torres SP/CSAR

## Second Epoch

As much as Torres seems to have built guitars individually, one at a time - each of them being a unique creation with no deference to what preceded them, or what was to follow, there is, in the second-epoch, a cluster of several instruments made in 1887-1888 that share many common features and have become regarded as a very exciting “group” of “like” or similarly-related guitars. Some of the common features include a “chain” motif found in the rosette patterns, as well as



Francisco Tarrega, 1852-1909

similar proportions in body size and internal details to one another – almost as if they were

being built for the same client, with small differences for varieties sake but in the by and large, unusually similar to one another given Torres’ tendency for great variety from one guitar to the next. Contemporary players in particular have been very attracted to this group of guitars as they are seen to be entirely “modern” in build, strength and sturdiness as any instrument being built today. These instruments invite a style of playing unto themselves that modern players find very comfortable and easy, with little



need to “play gently” and with little concern for the instruments feeling “fragile” as some other Torres can (falsely it must be added) to many modern players. The most famous of these is “SE114”, which can be seen in a very famous photograph, being played by it’s original owner, the mighty Francisco Tarrega. Perhaps the most recorded instrument in this group is SE111 from 1887 – Italian guitarist Stefano Grondona has recorded many of his albums on this guitar. Two standouts that I have had the pleasure to broker include a favorite of Emilio Pujol, Domingo Prat and Miguel Llobet, which they

named “La Italica” – this is SE 116 from 1888. Grammy-Award winning guitarist Andrew York became a believer in Torres instruments after recording several of his compositions on it. The guitar built just prior to “La Italica” and numbered SE115 was played for many decades by concert artist Matilde Cuervas, (1888-1956) and after her untimely passing, by her husband, the great personality Emilio Pujol, (1886-1980.) This instrument, now nicknamed “La Novia” by its current owner, also attracted the attention (again!) of Andrew York who delivered a powerful performance of his composition “Home” on this very guitar.



Andrew York playing “Home” on an 1888 Torres guitar

In conclusion, it is simply astonishing to even look at the incredible variety of guitars being built in the centuries right up to and contemporary with the time of Antonio de Torres (this could be the basis for a completely different article!)

But the key point is that it seems that every guitar maker in these times had no proverbial “shoulders to stand on”, and had to envision his instrument personally, and from scratch – “re-invent the wheel” - in terms of aesthetic and structural considerations. And as much as many of these guitars have their own individual charm and historically rich backgrounds, it is only with Antonio de Torres, starting in 1854, that we finally have the basic foundational blueprint for what we in the year 2018 still consider to be a “modern” guitar. All the variety of this bygone “wild west” of the past suddenly vanished when Torres entered the scene – in his instruments we find the perfect blend of proportions, dimensions, thicknesses of materials, arching/doming/bending of woods, aesthetic considerations – that simply became the standard to be copied. In these instruments players can truly find a vehicle for expressivity, ease of play and artistic freedom that was unprecedented in prior times.

(See next page for ways Torres Guitars are identified.)

<https://www.guitarsalon.com/about.php>

**Torres guitars today are identified in a number of ways:**

There is a numbering system. In his second epoch, Torres himself started numbering his guitars. On these second-epoch labels, behind a printed "Secunda Epoca" or "Guitarra num" he would hand-write a number. Today we short-hand this to "S.E." or "SE". SE115 is therefore the 115th guitar built in the second epoch. In recent decades a similar system has been adopted to account for his first epoch guitars, using FE, followed by a number. Since we are doing this retroactively several new discoveries have popped up that need to be inserted between two already-taken numbers, so letters are used – for example, there is a guitar from 1867, numbered FE27. Since this numbering system has been in use, 3 others from the same year have appeared and are subsequently numbered FE27A, FE27B, and FE27C.

Some of the guitars have names. Torres himself only named one of his guitars – "La Leona" of 1856, also known as FE04. Others have been named over the past hundred or so years, such as FE19 "La Suprema", SE70 "La Invencible", SE72 "La Emperatriz", SE115 "La Novia" and SE116 "La Italica".

Some of the guitars are identified by their previous owners, aka their provenance. For example, if you see a reference to "1888 Torres, ex. Tarrega", this would be referring to SE114. Or "1864 Torres, ex. Tarrega" would be a reference to FE17.

All of the sounds of the guitars and artists and much more can be found on Youtube.com, a site of infinite resource and delight.


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Smith-Klein Gallery in Boulder, CO. is the only gallery I have visited in the last ten years in which I would love to own any or all of the art. It is fresh and exciting.

*Sally Schoch*

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