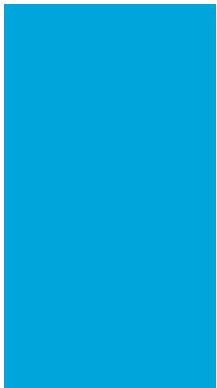


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The Art of
Fernando Botero

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THE SECRET OF HIS SUCCESS

When approaching the work of Fernando Botero, people often focus on the outward trappings of his success. They note, for example, that Botero has achieved worldwide fame; that there have been more exhibitions of his work and more books published about him than any other living artist; that his sculptures have been exhibited in more than twenty major cities on five continents; that his paintings have been shown in some of the most important museums in the world; and that his works of art frequently break records at the well-known auction houses.

These facts may confirm his popularity, but they do not explain his relevance, his significance, or his importance as an artist.

The question remains: How has this Colombian painter managed to climb so high in the fiercely competitive arena of international art, a landscape frequently dominated by artists from more powerful nations?

We can begin by saying that Fernando Botero is a uniquely talented, amazingly disciplined, hardworking, and prolific creator. Many artists today use the help of assistants—to the point that, in some cases, it's unclear who actually created the final work. Fernando Botero uses none. This self-reliance is all the more extraordinary when you consider the sheer quantity of Botero's artistic output: he has completed approximately 4,500 oil paintings, 2,500 drawings, and 350 original sculptures over the course of his career. At the same time, he has embarked on numerous philanthropic projects, some of gargantuan proportions, such as constructing one of Colombia's largest private homes for the elderly. He has also donated more than 600 works of art to various countries including Colombia, Venezuela, and the United States. And he has done all of this alone, without even a secretary to help him.

Fernando Botero has worked—and continues to work—practically every day of his life. He does not take vacations of any sort; he is focused and driven by the passion he feels for his craft. If the artist, who was born in 1932, attends a social event, he becomes tired after standing for an hour or two. Yet Botero can stay on his feet painting for eight or ten hours a day without

showing any sign of fatigue, calling to mind Pablo Picasso's famous quip, "That is why painters live so long. While I work, I leave my body outside the door, the way Muslims take off their shoes before entering the mosque." While he works, Botero literally seems to be mesmerized. To observe him is to witness a master dedicated to his craft, with a sense of enjoyment that one rarely encounters in modern art.

Hard work alone, however, is not enough to explain Botero's enduring relevance. Other artists may be just as tenacious, hardworking, and prolific, yet few achieve his level of prestige, popularity, or recognition.

One of the keys to Fernando Botero's significance is that he has created a unique, instantly recognizable style. As with all great masters, his style is composed of his convictions. "Truth in art is relative," he often says. "Because of this, what ultimately matters are the artist's convictions." In other words, every work of art is composed of countless aspects, and each one of these aspects requires a decision. Will the work be figurative or abstract? Which materials will be employed? Will the colors be subdued or luminous? Will its texture be rough or soft? Will the format be large or small? Will its content be symbolic, mysterious, or straightforward? More importantly, each one of these decisions is made in accordance with a conviction held by the artist, with his or her ideals regarding the key fundamental features of a work of art, such as line, composition, proportion, harmony, form, beauty, sensuality, color, subject-matter, etc.

This is why Botero declares, with his wry sense of humor, that the real test of an artist is the test of an orange. What does he mean by this? Perhaps the simplest form that exists in nature, he notes, is the spherical shape of an orange. However, when we see an orange painted by Mantegna, for example, we immediately distinguish it from an orange painted by Picasso, Cézanne, Bellini, or Van Gogh. Why? Because what we actually see on the canvas, more than a fruit, is a style, and we recognize it in an instant. In other words, what we observe in the painting—besides a particular fruit, of course—is the sum of the artist's beliefs, the totality of the ideas, intuitions, values, and opinions that go into his art, that differentiate it from the work

of other creators and that make him paint in such a way and not another. That is why Botero has often said: “Each one of my canvases is a manifest, each drawing a declaration of principles.”

When an artist is capable of painting the simplest form in nature and expressing in that image not only a fruit but also an instantly recognizable style, a collection of ideas that are the result of years of pondering and reflection condensed into that elemental form, then the artist has truly achieved something unique. As Fernando Botero has affirmed more than once, an artist’s style is the most important contribution that he or she can make to the history of art. That is the test of an orange: to be able to paint a basic form and communicate an entire aesthetic philosophy through it.

Ironically, Botero’s style has nothing to do with what it is usually associated with, which is fatness or obesity. To believe that Botero depicts fat people is just as mistaken as to say that of Rubens or to assert that Giacometti and El Greco created thin ones or that Picasso simply distorted people’s faces.

Fernando Botero has always said that when we observe a work of art, we should ask ourselves what aspect of it gives us aesthetic pleasure. For some that delight springs from the brilliance of the colors. For others, from the harmony of the lines and composition. For others still, from the force of the painter’s expression, or perhaps from the work’s content, from the story that is described in that particular image, or maybe the religious or historical episode that it represents. For Fernando Botero, the pleasure he experiences—and what he most admires and enjoys in the sublime, classical art of the great masters of the past—lies in the beauty of the forms, the sensuality of volume, the heroic and monumental quality that we appreciate in those magnificent works. He obviously tries to emulate that same idea in his own art but taken to a more radical extreme, one that is permitted through the freedom and audacity granted by modern art. That is why volume—as opposed to obesity—achieves such a crucial importance in his works.

The importance of form in Botero's art cannot be overstated. Volume communicates sensuality; it awakens the desire for touch; it generates aesthetic pleasure. It allows for the optical illusion of depth, of three dimensions painted upon a flat surface, and therefore it offers an almost magical way of recreating reality, a compelling and enticing mirror of our world. That's why volume reigned supreme throughout the history of painting, from Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and the entire Renaissance, to Rubens, Goya, and Ingres, to name just a few masters, right up until the twentieth century.

In Botero's art, everything is painted in that grand, voluminous style: the flies, the silverware, the people, the fruit and animals—even the skeletons. Certainly one of Botero's chief attributes is his stylistic coherence.

In his famous painting *The Mona Lisa* (1978), which today hangs in the Botero Museum in Bogotá, we can discern one of the artist's most brilliant insights: his understanding of the aesthetic benefits of visual contrast, not between fat and thin, but between small and grand. Thus, the contrast between the miniature volcanoes in the background, the tiny hands of the sitter, and the little details of her face—such as the mouth and nose—enlarge and expand the image, increasing the sense of monumentality to the point where her face almost resembles a moon and her figure a colossal mountain. The subject is clearly Leonardo da Vinci's, but the style is Botero's: the poetry of the volume and the beauty of the forms are his signature feature and creative priority.

Many have asked the question: Why doesn't Botero change styles like Picasso? Is he not repetitive? First, it must be said that Picasso is an exception in the history of art, and he probably "changed" styles less often than people imagine. More importantly, the vast majority of the great masters of Western art never changed styles: they strengthened their ideas and insisted on their beliefs, precisely because of the progressive maturity of their own convictions.

Painters such as Giotto, Caravaggio, Botticelli, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Leonardo traveled consistently along the road of their ideals. Their stylistic coherence was so powerful

and unswerving that a telling phenomenon occurs, one that Botero has pointed out on many occasions: the works of their youth are nearly indistinguishable from the paintings of their maturity. These artists painted in such a similar way, stylistically speaking, throughout their whole lives, that we are virtually incapable of discerning which paintings were done at the beginning of their careers and which were completed near the end. That's why Botero says: "If I were to change styles, first I would have to change my ideas and my convictions about art."

Maintaining a coherent style does not mean standing still as an artist. Botero—a creator quite literally obsessed with quality—has taken pains to master numerous techniques. Instead of being exclusively a painter, a sculptor, or a draftsman, as most artists are today, he is accomplished in all three mediums. Botero's knowledge of the technique of his craft is surprising, and he produces each work with amazing virtuosity. Indeed, Botero has completed oils, watercolors, pastels, charcoals, sanguine, pencil drawings, chalk, and ink works. He has finished pastels that resemble oil paintings, watercolors in large format, drawings on canvas, and even frescoes following the original technique of the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento masters.

The root of Botero's obsession with quality lies in his belief that, in the arts, excellence is the only thing that survives the test of time. In his view, we may witness a work of contemporary art and perhaps be surprised once or twice, but probably no more that. Instead, he asks, why do we always return to the grand museums of the world to admire the great masterpieces? Because of their quality, he replies. "Quality is the only thing that constantly surprises us." Therefore, every work of his, no matter the subject matter or the medium, must have a jewel-like quality. Some are better than others, of course. But the intention behind each one is something larger than just creating another piece. "One doesn't paint to produce more paintings," he says. "One paints to try to solve the problems of painting." His permanent desire is to break new ground, to make fresh discoveries in his craft. To do that, he applies not only the resources offered by modern art but also those suggested by the art of the Renaissance.

Botero is, and always has been, a student of art. Once, while reading the correspondence of the French neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, he unearthed a trove of information. In a letter to a friend, Ingres confided that he had discovered the secret of Velázquez's art. He then proceeded to describe the technique of the great seventeenth-century Spanish master. With that description at hand, Botero painted a beautiful version of *Las Meninas*, which today hangs in his studio in Paris. He has never signed the canvas and has declined to sell it, despite having been offered substantial sums for it on numerous occasions. The reason? "That work has more of Velázquez than Botero," he says only half joking. It is an exercise in style, one of the countless times he has taught himself the secrets of his craft.

Botero's exhibitions of sculpture have also contributed to his relevance as an artist. Instead of the public having to go to a museum, gallery, or park to enjoy a work of art, the art has gone to the public. Botero's sculptures have been presented on some of the world's most celebrated streets, and, in the process, they have demonstrated an additional virtue that should not be overlooked: the strength and quality to withstand magnificent surroundings without being diminished. Many of these settings are so famous and overwhelming that less powerful works would be dwarfed in juxtaposition. Even on magnificent avenues like the Champs-Élysées in Paris, in classical settings such as the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, at historical sites like the Grand Canal in Venice, and in modern surroundings like Park Avenue in New York City, Botero's works contain the inner strength to resist the grandeur of the architecture, the weight of history, and the beauty of the ambiance without seeming crushed in comparison. During his New York exhibition in 1993, for example, critics noted that the fourteen bronzes placed among the flowerbeds on Park Avenue and surrounded by intimidating skyscrapers held their own in such a familiar and natural way that they seemed to have been there forever.

Another characteristic that explains Botero's significance, one that critics usually underscore, is that his work is firmly rooted in the great artistic traditions of the past. There are two profound insights that Botero had at the very beginning of his career. The first was that being

part of an artistic tradition does not dilute or exclude an artist's own originality. The second was that a grand tradition offers solid pillars upon which to construct new works of art.

Botero admires many traditions and has studied them in depth. During his formative years as an artist, he copied dozens of the most important paintings of the great museums—not only to learn the craft but also to sell these works and make a living. Later, Botero studied Dutch and Flemish painting, French painting, Spanish and German art, Colonial art, Pre-Columbian art, and Popular art. But without a doubt, his work is chiefly influenced by the Renaissance, especially the art of fifteenth-century Florence. And his principal master is Piero della Francesca.

Indeed, many of this painter's salient characteristics spring from that incomparable tradition. The serenity of his characters. The luminous colors of his canvases. The stillness of his figures, even in the midst of movement, which seems to suggest a timeless, eternal dimension. The supreme importance of volume and the heroic monumentality of the forms. The geometric precision of the composition. The sensuality of the images. The formal elegance of the work. The atmosphere of calm and placidity. The expressionless features of the people—except in Botero's paintings of violence. And the fact that every object has its own color.

Another factor that may explain Botero's relevance is the fact that he has created an entire world, a unique universe filled with animals, objects, and people. It's an original cosmos, populated with, quite literally, hundreds of characters.

Finally, one of the most important reasons that may explain Fernando Botero's success is that fact that his work gives aesthetic pleasure. This is not a small thing. On the contrary, in today's artistic landscape, that virtue is one of his bravest. It's almost revolutionary. Let's not forget that during the twentieth century, numerous artists who wished to delight the spectator and communicate pictorial beauty, such as Chagall, Bonnard, or Matisse, were fiercely criticized for doing so. Botero, on the other hand, believes that communicating beauty has been art's main purpose since time immemorial. He agrees with that objective, and that's why he's fond of remembering Poussin's definition of painting, given in the seventeenth century: "Painting is an

expression done upon a flat surface, with forms and colors, to give *pleasure*.” And he also quotes Matisse’s famous phrase: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter—a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” This is one of Botero’s central purposes as an artist: to provide aesthetic pleasure, visual harmony, and sensual delight, just as the great masters of the past have always done.

THE MAJOR THEMES OF FERNANDO BOTERO

I. LATIN AMERICA

What then are the cardinal themes in Botero’s work?

First and foremost, this artist’s fundamental subject matter is Colombia in particular and Latin America in general. Selecting this topic was not an easy or evident choice. During the 1960s, most of Botero’s contemporaries were turning their backs on their own reality. The art that reigned supreme was Abstract Expressionism, a school that rejected figuration, representation, and volume, instead using form, line, and color to create a work of art independent from external references. Botero’s proposal distanced itself from this trend, convinced that for art to have authenticity and character, it should be rooted in the creator’s land and culture. In that respect, a painter like Edward Hopper, with his beautiful paintings of solitary streets at daybreak, lighthouses on a deserted beach, lonely houses with white walls—a unique and unforgettable whiteness—or of people eating supper in silence at the counter of a diner, reading a letter in a stark hotel room, or waiting for the film to end in the dark corridor of a cinema, constituted an exception in his time. Hopper strove to portray the new solitude of modern life, and in the process, he discovered the extraordinary poetry that lies in the silence of the first hours of morning, in the simple images of everyday life in his country. Another exception would be Fernando Botero.

Actually, the case of the Colombian artist recalls that of William Faulkner. Not only did they both resist what was fashionable at the time and share a desire to recapture the past, but the two men also understood that their small speck of land was indeed valid subject matter. Faulkner's celebrated quote is undeniable: "Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it."¹

The same thing happened with Botero. He interpreted his own reality and used it as the material that would feed his work. In this sense, one cannot overstate the importance of Mexico on his career. Botero arrived there in the mid-1950s, and the time he spent in Mexico was crucial to his art. First, because it was there, in 1956, after numerous days of intense work preparing for an exhibition that would take place in Washington D.C., he discovered the seed of his own style. He painted a mandolin, as he had done many times before, but on this occasion he drew the hole in the middle of the instrument quite small, and immediately the entire image seemed to explode on the paper, increasing its volume and dimensions to a point of ecstasy. Second, because Mexico was the only country on the continent that had a truly important, independent artistic movement at the time. And third, and perhaps most importantly, because Mexican artists confirmed Botero's choice of subject matter. They were not afraid to tackle contemporary issues, to confront the country's past and portray social injustices and racial discrimination. And all this was done, especially in the cases of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Rufino Tamayo, without the content overshadowing the aesthetic merits of their works. Beauty, sensuality, and visual pleasure were their priority.

Without a doubt, in his obsessive search for his own identity, as a person and as an artist, the Mexican mural painters—with their deep roots in Colonial and Pre-Columbian art; with their strong ties to popular traditions, including their festive colors, humor, myths, and stories, the essence of a people—helped Fernando Botero a great deal. It is at this point that an explosion of color appears in the Colombian's work.

1. "Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel (1956)," in *Lion in the Garden (Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962)*, edited by James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1968, p. 255.

This combination of factors allowed Botero to create a personal interpretation of Latin America, one that has dominated his painting ever since. Even his still lifes are clearly Latin American, for there you do not find the foods that are usually seen in a European canvas, but the fruits and drinks of our continent, with their brilliant colors, and popular delicacies like a pig's head or a dangling chicken. Instead of oysters, you see beans. Instead of a champagne bottle, you will find a pot of coffee.

Now, in Botero's personal re-creation of Latin America, he has created a world filled with the characters and professions that we encounter in everyday life: lawyers, prostitutes, presidents, cardinals, servants, soldiers, policemen, men and women, boys and girls, young and old, rich and poor. Nevertheless, it seems that two main subjects tower over the rest: religion and politics.

Once again, the decision to focus on religion was brave, since very few artists in the twentieth century had tackled this subject. Artists like Chagall and George Rouault were some of the very few exceptions. Picasso painted only one crucifixion in his lifetime, and Francis Bacon did only a few popes and crucifixions.

However, religion had been the main subject of art in Latin America and Europe until the twentieth century. Just as volume had been the dominant aesthetic, religion had been the dominant subject—prior to the 1900s, more than 90 percent of art had religion as a central theme—until they both lost their predominance at the same historical moment with the arrival of Abstract art. Fernando Botero wished to reclaim both elements, since he understood that they had been crucial to the great traditions of Western art.

What led Botero to this conviction? The subject of religion served as a link, a bridge to antiquity, since the Catholic Church in the Italian Renaissance was just as important and powerful as in the Latin America of his time. The church was a mighty, omnipresent institution, active and influential in politics, society, and culture as well as in the private lives of people. It was a fundamental actor on our stage and a player in our world. The connection to antiquity is clear, in fact, the only people who still dress today as they did in the Middle Ages are priests,

nuns, and popes. Therefore, this inexhaustible subject matter served Botero in two ways. First, it allowed him to gain access to one of the richest artistic traditions in our history—and thus prolong it with his own contributions—nurtured with the works of the greatest painters since the Middle Ages. And second, it allowed him to paint and capture, many times with satirical intention, one of the most dominant institutions of his land and time.

The other theme that Botero discovered as an essential part of Latin America, and which also permitted him to join a vast artistic tradition as well as the reality of his own time, was politics.

In Botero's life, political power in Latin America had been held by civilians and, more famously, by the military.

Here again was a topic that served as a bridge and a link, with strong ties to the past, which offered a fine excuse to create, also many times with satire and humor, a feast of colors and forms.

Many of his favorite masters of all time had focused on this theme, not only during the Italian Renaissance but also in France and Spain, as we can see in a number of his paintings that serve as an homage to his precursors, like the famous Official Portrait of the Military Junta (1971). Here the composition closely resembles Goya's 1800 masterpiece *La familia de Carlos IV*, but Botero has added his biting satire and symbolism. Thus, we witness an entire social commentary in this grand canvas, with the Supreme Commander dressed in blood-stained red, occupying center stage and towering over the other characters just as he did over his fellow citizens. To his left, we find a representative of the cavalry, which had been so important in our past but is now reduced to an almost comical dimension. The wife, standing small by her husband, is pretty, quiet, and submissive, not much more than a decorative figure, almost like a doll. Through her we can feel the presence of the entire Machista culture that has been so destructive to our continent. We also suspect that the little boy on the opposite end, dressed as a soldier and held in the arms of his nanny or grandmother, is in the line of succession and will probably grow to become just as large and ruthless as his general-father. Finally, the whole military institution is—quite literally—backed by the Catholic Church, just as has

happened countless times, with deplorable consequences, in Latin America. It is ironic because the institution that is the theoretical guardian of our faith and morality has legitimized with their blessings the bloody leaders who, more often than not, have been simply butchers above anything else.

II. THE BULLFIGHT

In the mid-1980s, Fernando Botero began a new series of paintings, all related to the *fiesta brava* or bullfight.

It is somewhat paradoxical that it took him almost 40 years to return to this subject matter, when his first watercolors were of bulls. However, this long detour to return where one first began is not an uncommon occurrence in the arts. As T. S. Eliot wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.”

In any case, in 1984, Botero rediscovered the bullfight and immediately found an entire universe within his reach. The topic brought new challenges. The bullring’s space was different from anything he had done before. It is a closed, circular area, without the horizontal line that had characterized his previous works. The plaza is drastically divided between sun and shadow, *sol y sombra*, but in Botero’s works shadows are practically nonexistent, due to his conviction that a shadow “smudges” or “dirties” the color. On the contrary, what we most appreciate in his art is the fullness, vitality, and purity of his colors. Also, a bullfight is a constant dance, a permanent choreography of movement that only ends when the last bull buckles and falls to the ground, and the spectators leave their seats. But in Botero’s art there is no movement, and what predominates is a suggestive stillness, the calm figure and the frozen gesture preserved in time, as if for all eternity.

Along with the challenges, this new world also granted Botero many advantages.

First of all, the painter knows the material well. He is a true aficionado. Since childhood, the bullfight has been one of his greatest passions. Second, this world allowed him to join a noble tradition of art, one that had stood the test of time, glorified by the works of numerous masters such as Francisco de Goya, Pablo Picasso, Édouard Manet, Salvador Dalí, and Francis Bacon. It offered solid pillars on which to create his own art. Third, this subject matter helped him insist on his identity as a Latin American, to go even deeper into the roots of his world and increase his number of characters. These include not only the many people who participate directly in the bullfight, like the matador and his assistants, but also the dozens that gravitate toward this fascinating universe, such as the singers, musicians, flamenco dancers, dwarves, and various family members of the bullfighter.

In other words, a whole new chapter could be added to his repertoire. And, as always happens when Botero discovers a new subject matter, it allowed him to increase his pictorial world, to conquer a new planet for his aesthetic cosmos. A new road appeared that allowed him to explore more deeply the terrain he had already crossed as well as to extend or prolong those discoveries with fresh possibilities. In other words: here was a new chance for both continuity and innovation.

We can find an irony, however, in many of these paintings, since they often depict what can only be described as bad bull-fighting technique—a trait that echoes Goya's treatment of the topic. Botero has declared more than once that in the famous Spaniard's paintings the passes are almost always poorly executed. He calls them, "*Trapazos infames*," but, on the other hand, the paintings are magnificent Goyas. This is not always so with Botero. In his 1991 drawing *Verónica*, we can see the perfect execution of the pass done with the capote, achieved with a mastery of the classical style of bull fighting. But in other cases, the passes are just as wrong as in a Goya. Why? Because for Botero what truly matters is not the perfect and faithful representation of reality but the creation of his own aesthetic. What matters is that these paintings be *magnificent Boteros*. This recalls the famous anecdote of Kenneth Clark who visited the

Museum of Copenhagen with the artistic director of the Royal Ballet of England, Ninette de Valois. While viewing the dancers of Edgar Degas, she would shake her head in disappointment, saying: “Line! Line! Position! Position!” Of course, from her perspective, Degas’ figures were dancing poorly. Yet this hardly matters. We may imagine Mr. Clark pointing out to Madame Valois that the works are *magnificent Degas*, which does not require that they be exact reproductions of the real world.

In any case, this new subject matter, which Botero first exhibited in Paris’ Grand Palais in November 1992, offered a feast of color and forms. By the end of this intense period, he had greatly expanded his own artistic universe.

III. VIOLENCE

A few years later, Fernando Botero experienced another major shift in his career.

Until then, as with most of the great masters of the past, the Colombian artist had sought to celebrate life, to create an alternate space of beauty and aesthetic pleasure in what was clearly a difficult and violent world. Art has usually portrayed pleasant themes, as Botero has pointed out many times, and this had always been his chief objective as an artist.

Painters had represented violence before, of course. Some famous examples are the works of Matthias Grünewald in the Altar de Isenheim, *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Brueghel, and the nightmarish visions of Heironymous Bosch, with his furious and sinister demons set against a backdrop of black towers and burning ruins, illuminated by the faint glow of distant fires. Yet the first artist to really capture the horror of war and to paint violence in all its brutality—with the deliberate intention of condemning those crimes and preventing them from passing into oblivion—was Francisco de Goya y Lucientes.

In Botero’s case, this material wasn’t completely new. He had painted numerous canvases and drawings over the span of his career depicting scenes inspired by the violence of his time, such as *Crying Woman* (1949). Additionally, during the 1960s and 1970s, he painted a number

of *predellas*, just like his precursors of the Renaissance, where, on a horizontal format, he would narrate an entire story with images. Many illustrated bloody episodes of Colombia's popular history, like *The Murder of Rosita Calderón* (1969), *Teresita la despedazada* (1963), and the painting *Untitled* (1979), which depicts a military coup, including the execution of the civilian president. In 1965 he had painted a group of dead bishops—*Obispos muertos*—and in 1973 he completed the large canvas titled *War*: a huge heap of dead bodies surrounded by the debris of battle, yet painted with the same rigor of composition as Botero's signature fruit baskets or still lifes.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the artist's intention has never been to change reality but simply to leave a personal testimony and, with luck, perhaps prevent these atrocities from slipping into oblivion, as Goya had also intended. Botero is a realist and knows that molding the social and political reality of the times is beyond the realm of the arts. As an example he points to Picasso's 1937 masterpiece *Guernica*—one of the most powerful paintings ever created—which clearly intended to denounce the massacre of innocent lives. Yet this work did not prevent Francisco Franco from remaining in power for almost forty more years.

In any case, we can note a shift in Botero's beliefs during the 1990s, and from this shift spring two important series of works. The first one was titled *La Violencia de Colombia*, and he donated almost all of it to the National Museum in Bogotá. This philosophical change is understandable. At that time, the violence in Colombia had reached unheard-of levels. Our country had become the murder capital of the world, with record-breaking numbers of kidnappings and violent deaths. In just one general election, four presidential candidates were assassinated and an entire political party, the Unión Patriótica, was literally eliminated by gunfire. This intensity affected Botero in a profound way, and he concluded that he could not continue to work as if these tragedies were not taking place. This is the origin of the nearly 100 paintings and drawings he made on the subject of Colombia's violence.

Fernando Botero has said in various interviews that the artist is the only one capable of making the invisible visible. In other words, while it is true that he was not physically present

to view these scenes firsthand, in the same way that Goya probably did not witness the famous executions that took place on the mountain of Príncipe Pío on the outskirts of Madrid, and which eventually lead to the creation of his masterpiece, *El tres de mayo de 1808*—by then he was completely deaf and already 62, which was old for his time—in both cases these artists, armed with what they have seen, heard, read, or dreamt, were capable of imagining the horrors that had actually occurred. “Something false may be essentially true,” Jorge Luis Borges once said. Thus, the real difficulty is not to create an image that captures a specific episode that actually took place, but to show the deeper, human truth that underlies it. This means that the artistic challenge is not only to select and paint a particular anecdote from the past, but to illuminate the deepest roots of the social conflict or tragedy that allowed that incident, and thousands more like it, to take place. So these creators have made the invisible, in fact, visible. Thanks to the magic of their art, that barbarous and atrocious act, which perhaps no one actually witnessed or at least no one who survived to tell, is the image that lasts in our collective memory.

The second series on the subject of violence created by Fernando Botero focuses on the atrocities that took place in Abu Ghraib prison, thirty-two kilometers from Baghdad, during the administration of George W. Bush.

In May 2004, news of what had happened in the infamous jail cells of Abu Ghraib became public. Fernando Botero read the article written by Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker*, which described in detail the tortures that Iraqi prisoners had suffered at the hands of their American guards. His indignation could not have been greater, and from that moment on, he read whatever he could about this case. A few months later, Botero boarded a plane to return to his home in Paris. Among the newspapers and magazines that he had brought for the flight was another article regarding the sinister prison in Iraq. Again he felt the anger boiling inside him. Unable to contain himself, he began to make his first sketches right then and there. After fourteen months of obsessive work, he completed one of his bravest and most controversial series of paintings, which he titled simply *Abu Ghraib*.

The reason for Botero's outrage, along with most people of the civilized world, was that this incident was apparently not an isolated case of a group of soldiers mistreating their Muslim prisoners without the knowledge of their commanding officers, but something more complex. The evidence seemed to indicate that the government of the world's superpower, which presented itself as a champion of human rights and a protector of human dignity, had orchestrated a system of abuses from the highest levels. Even though American troops had invaded the nation with the excuse of looking for weapons of mass destruction and the intention of liberating the country from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, the sad and terrible truth was that those same soldiers had ended up torturing Iraqi people, some to the point of death, in the same prison where Hussein had broken the spirit of his countrymen. This was intolerable in the eyes of Botero, and so he began to work.

This collection of paintings and drawings—most of which were donated to the University of California, Berkeley—are startling in their frank depiction of the brutality that occurred in Abu Ghraib. A suffocating atmosphere prevails in all the works. Bars and walls enclose the rooms where the most atrocious acts of violence took place. There is no trace of irony or satire here, just as in the paintings and drawings of *La violencia de Colombia*, because the artist believes that any kind of humor would have been a sign of disrespect to the suffering of the people who were beaten, tortured, humiliated, and kicked to death. Also, no flags, badges, or insignias are visible on the uniforms of the soldiers and prison guards, those who injure and abuse their victims with complete impunity. This is deliberate. Botero did not want to limit the scope of his accusation to a single, specific moment in history, but rather he wanted his works to allude to a grander, constant, tragic theme that has taken place so often in the course of human history: the mistreatment of the weak by the strong.

In spite of their subject matter, one of the most striking aspects of these works is their beauty and the aesthetic pleasure we derive from seeing them. Surely, concepts such as *beauty* and *pleasure* may sound disconcerting to many who contemplate these works for the first time.

Nevertheless, in Botero's view, each one of his paintings, drawings, or sculptures must be, above all else, great works of art. They must awaken a sense of aesthetic delight in the spectator regardless of their subject matter, be it a plate of fruit, a picnic scene, an Arab tortured to death, a Colombian riddled with bullets, or a tightrope walker. Moreover, it is precisely this aesthetic achievement that allows us to admire these works in the first place. Without the harmony of the figures, the audacity of the color, or the equilibrium of the forms imposed by the lines of the composition, these works would appear chaotic and disturbing to the point of being unacceptable to the viewer. Even more, it is precisely due to their extraordinary quality *as* paintings and drawings that these images capture our attention to the point that we feel riveted. As the director of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, Professor Harley Shaiken—who played such a key role in having these works exhibited in California—once said, “When you are confronted with these images, you cannot look away.”

In quite a few of these works we find a small white window in the background, perhaps representing a ray of hope that tries to break through the darkness of this inferno. Also, the color is deftly managed. The tones that dominate are blacks, grays, browns, and ochre. Yet, every now and then we encounter a singular stroke that stands out and shines with an intensity that seems to quench our eyes, thirsty for brilliance. And what a color it is. The yellow that appears in the arc of the soldier's urine, or the blue we glimpse in the blindfold of the man who is being tortured, or the red of the bra that he has been forced to wear, refresh our senses and seem to give life.

Additionally, there is a geometric balance in the figures and thus a fundamental sense of order. The scenes may be brutal and bloody, but they are not chaotic. The perspective of the floor tiles is traced with mathematical precision, and the jail bars in the background or the foreground bring a sense of symmetry and visual order that organizes the horror, without which the images would appear confusing, shocking, and indeed disturbing, but lacking in aesthetic value.

Other elements in these images are also noteworthy: the terrifying mastiffs that have been trained to snarl, bite, and torment these men who have been deprived of their fundamental rights;

the blindfolds that have been placed over their eyes; and the hoods that cover their heads in order to increase the sense of terror and suffocation—for the prisoner as well as in the viewer. In a number of works a hand enters the scene wearing a latex glove—beautifully painted in a greenish-blue hue—and this is perhaps the most disturbing detail of all. The irony, of course, is that this is an item that dentists and doctors use to heal their patients, yet here it is used to wound, damage, and hurt. However, a crueler message lies beneath the presence of this latex glove, one of prejudice and racism: the guard is free to mangle and torture his hapless victim without ever having to come in direct contact with the prisoner’s skin, as if the people being beaten to death are dirty, grotesque, nauseating—in a word, inhuman. All this is clearly communicated by the single detail of the latex glove.

One of the most powerful and painful images is one of the smallest: it is the drawing titled *Number 6*, in which a fierce and drooling hound, held back by a leash tightened to its breaking point, is snarling and barking just inches from the blindfolded face of a terror-stricken prisoner. The artist clearly understands that this proximity and the imminence of pain are even worse—and more unsettling for the viewer—than the pain itself. Also, it highlights something that we rarely see in modern art: violence and depravity done deliberately, in a calculated way, in order to have the greatest effect. The person is made to suffer in an almost scientific manner. It is a cruel and heartless method of interrogation that constitutes an insult to the body and an affront to the mind and to the soul.

These images are terrible in their frankness. We often hear euphemisms that try to explain these atrocities, such as “these unfortunate and regrettable excesses” are “the undesirable but inevitable costs of preserving a democracy.” No. In these works we see that the objective is not to torture with a practical purpose, such as the need to obtain vital or secret information for reasons of national security, but rather to abuse and humiliate, to inflict pain without any kind of justification whatsoever. This is torture, plain and simple, done for the twisted and sadistic pleasure of those who practice it.

Finally, there's another element in these works that is even more unnerving: in some of these paintings, the bars are placed in front of the prisoners, creating a sort of distance, a visual barrier between the viewer and the brutality of the scene. We can still see everything through the iron bars, of course, but it is a pictorial device that separates the space of the spectator from the space of the image. However, in other paintings that barrier is situated *behind* the person that is being beaten, and so the visual device that separates us from this terrible nightmare has disappeared. There is no space between us and the victim, since we share the same visual reality. In other words, we are not only direct witnesses to this barbarity, we are also included within it, whether we like it or not, and thus we participate in the horror.

Professor Shaiken was right: We cannot look away. These paintings and drawings force us to contemplate the beast, the demon that lurks, hidden and shrouded, in the darkest recesses of the human condition. When liberated from the bonds of law and reason and spurred on by fear, bigotry, greed, fanaticism, or hatred, it can unleash a holocaust.

Botero has said repeatedly that he experienced a true catharsis painting the *Abu Ghraib* series, a cleansing of the soul through art. Yet his accusation remains in these works and will remain forever.

IV. THE CIRCUS

A few years after completing the *Abu Ghraib* series, Botero discovered yet another subject. It was certainly understandable—and welcome—after completing the brutal prison scenes. He actually stumbled upon this new subject matter quite by chance, and it provided him with a new world to discover.

In December 2006, while spending a few weeks in Zihuatanejo, on Mexico's Pacific coast, Botero decided to go to town for dinner one night with his wife, the sculptor Sophia Vari. After their meal, they strolled through the streets and noticed the tent of a circus. They went in, enjoyed the show, and then returned to their hotel. However, the next day Botero went back,

truly fascinated. The modest spectacle reminded him of the circuses he had seen as a child in Medellín, and he immediately recognized another theme at his disposal with a clear Latin American flavor and filled with dozens of new forms and colors. Plus, this subject matter was not a stranger to art. On the contrary, it had been dignified by a noble tradition and painted by various modern masters, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Georges Seurat, Marc Chagall, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Fernand Léger.

In other words, here, once again, with this formidable new material, Fernando Botero could insist on his artistic proposal, recapture previous scenes and figures, and plunge deeper still within the roots of his original style. At the same time, he could conquer new territory, increase the gallery of his characters, and discover fresh answers and solutions to the never-ending problems of art.

In 1994, Botero had painted a canvas of a young lady in an unusual position: hanging upside down. *Woman Falling From a Balcony* is a sensual image of a woman, perhaps a suicide, captured in mid-air and preserved in the suggestive stillness of his voluminous style. The artist had done very few paintings of a person in this posture before because it is a pose that is not usually found in real life, and Botero's work, though often touched by humor and fantasy, does not succumb to the impossible. Nevertheless, with the new theme of the circus, almost any twist of the body and any posture, no matter how comical or absurd, was valid and enchanting.

At the same time, these paintings suggest a return to the humor and tenderness of Botero's previous works, which marks a sharp contrast with the preceding series *La violencia* and *Abu Ghraib*. Yet, there is an ambiguous feeling that prevails in the spectator: while some of these images are humorous, they aren't funny. We may smile, but in an equivocal way, for these characters have evidently tasted hardship and defeat, and the artist is not depicting them from a superior position. There is fondness and sympathy, consideration and empathy, but not snobbery or mockery, and we are touched and moved by the artist's humanity.

This new world allowed Botero to revisit a number of solutions he had used before and try them again in a different way. He could recreate the circular space of the bullring, the jail bars of Abu Ghraib, and the many animals of the past. Even dwarves made a reappearance. He had painted them in the 1950s series *The Boy of Vallecas*, which was inspired by the famous painting by Velázquez, and also in the bullfighting series, in paintings like *Cuadrilla de toreros enanos* (1988).

At the same time, the circus presented the artist with a new world of possibilities. There were new people and figures to paint. New animals. New images. He could add a fresh chapter to his aesthetic proposal and repopulate his world with dozens of novel characters.

One of the most surprising of these characters is one that he had never painted before: the fat woman. There is a striking contrast between this figure and the rest of Botero's people. The others are all voluminous and beautiful, lacking any trace of excess skin or flesh. They do not communicate a sense of fatness. Indeed, many of his characters are truly Herculean, with taut bodies and visible muscles. This woman is simply obese, her skin riddled with cellulite. The fact that the artist had never painted such a figure before, and that she is so different from anything he has created since 1956, is yet another demonstration that Botero's style has everything to do with volume and nothing whatsoever to do with fatness.

In any case, the theme of the circus, which is based in such a noble tradition in the history of art, provided Botero with a grand feast of colors and forms. He happily joined that tradition and prolonged it with his own creations.

V. PORTRAITS

In addition to the four main themes that have defined Botero's work, there are two more subjects that deserve discussion since he has worked on them from the beginning of his career. The first is the portrait.

With portraiture, the artist faces a different challenge, for he is not free to dream and invent but is confronted with real people, a fact which imposes certain aesthetic limitations. He must create a likeness, a resemblance, often of people who are famous, but without betraying the fundamental principles of his own style. For example, he has painted the drug lord Pablo Escobar and the guerrilla leader Manuel Marulanda, known as “Tirofijo.” In his Pietrasanta frescoes, we find Mother Teresa of Calcutta praying in Paradise, while, in the burning furnace of Hell, we spot an image of Hitler, and—in an example of Botero’s delightful sense of humor—of his wife, Sophia Vari; of Mario, the gardener who helped him prepare the walls of the chapel; and even of himself, up to his neck in the fires of damnation.

Botero also painted *Francisco Franco* in 1986, a work he donated to Spain in 2003. He recreated Caravaggio’s *Alof de Vignacourt* in 1974, and he has completed various self-portraits, in which we usually find the artist armed with the tools of his trade to underscore his vocation and his profession.

Botero has also painted a number of members of his family, including his children, his mother, his father, and his older brother. Of these works, the series that the artist completed of his youngest son, Pedrito, is perhaps one of the most moving and beautiful that he has done in his entire career. Indeed, in 1974, after the tragic automobile accident that cost the life of my younger brother, Pedrito Botero, who was only four years old at the time, my father tried to come to terms with his grief through his art. Fueled by his pain, he finished a series of marvelous paintings and drawings of Pedrito. Two years later, in 1976, Botero made his first donation to Colombia, sixteen oil paintings to create the Hall of Pedrito Botero in the Museum of Antioquia. Here we find many works that are truly wonderful, poetic, and moving. Among these, I would spotlight *Pedrito on a Horse*, where we can see my father and the mother of the child through the open windows of a dollhouse, dressed in mourning. The artist’s gesture is not accidental, for he appears with open arms, as if crucified by his grief, or as if he were about to embrace his son but is instead forced to confront the empty space that follows such a loss.

Another group of portraits that the Colombian master has completed are those of other artists. In these images it appears that Botero wishes to express his gratitude and admiration. Among them are portraits of Velázquez, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Rubens, Delacroix, Giacometti, and Courbet. They are all tributes to his precursors. Perhaps the most important of these is the 1972 charcoal on canvas, *Dinner with Ingres and Piero della Francesca*.

The technique of this work is truly amazing, and its meaning has intrigued people for decades. What is Botero saying in this image? That he believes he belongs in their artistic league or wishes to belong to it, though perhaps not in the same scale of importance? Is this why Botero appears somewhat smaller than the other two towering figures? Or does he simply wish to overcome the barriers of time and space so that he may converse with these masters as among equals, to be able to chat with his favorite teachers after dinner over coffee about art and the secrets of their trade? The meaning is once again ambiguous, and it is up to each viewer to decide on his or her own interpretation.

VI. EUROPE

Finally, there is an additional subject matter that appears in Botero's work from time to time: Europe.

Botero's image of Europe is not that of a native European. It is a personal interpretation of the continent, and in particular of its art, seen through the prism of a Latin American painter who has the capacity to express his admiration for its aesthetic achievements, while, at the same time, distancing himself in order to introduce a certain degree of humor and satire in his vision. It is a unique interpretation of Europe, a Europe *à la Botero*, if you will.

This theme has appeared numerous times in his works and throughout his entire career. During the 60s and 70s, for example, he rendered a special tribute to Albrecht Dürer: a beautiful series of charcoal drawings that he even signed *Durerobotero*, adding his name to that of the Renaissance master.

But this was not his only homage. He completed a number of sculptures inspired by Matisse's *Backs* series and also a number of paintings that evoke Cézanne's famous card players. In many picnic scenes, where a nude woman sits beside a dressed man, we can see how the composition mirrors the famous painting by Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass* (originally titled *Le Bain*), which in turn was inspired by the Giorgione painting *Country Concert* as well as by other classical sources, such as Rafael's 1518 drawing *The Judgment of Paris*, later reproduced in an etching by his disciple, Marcantonio Raimondi (1480-1534).

However, in other paintings by the Colombian artist, the presence of Europe is clearer still. The theme may be French, Spanish, or Italian, but the style is definitely Botero's. For example, the dramatic *Louis XVI with His Family in Prison* (1968) depicts the soon-to-be guillotined French king in the Temple tower, surrounded by his grieving family. Other paintings with a clear debt to European culture are *Marie Antoinette* (1968), which echoes the portraits of the queen done by court painter Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun; *Self-portrait with Madame Pompadour* (1969) of the legendary marquis and lover of Louis XV; *Self-portrait with Louis XIV, seen by Rigaud* (1973); and *Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette Visiting Medellín, Colombia* (1990), among many others.

Yet perhaps one of his most important works, in which he pays special reverence to his chief European master, is *According to Piero della Francesca* (1998).

This work is made up of two gigantic paintings: the portraits of Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, and of his wife, the Duchess Battista Sforza. Federico was a classic *Uomo universale* of the Renaissance. A warrior and mercenary who offered his soldiers and services to the highest bidder, his unmistakable face (with the bridge of his nose broken by a blow from a sword) appears in numerous paintings of the time. His family had ruled the region of Urbino since the thirteenth century, and Federico was in charge of the city for almost forty years, the last eight of them as Duke. Incidentally, as has been recently established, he was in charge of the assassination attempt against the Medici family on April 26, 1478 (known as the Pazzi

Conspiracy), while they attended mass in the church of Santa Maria del Fiore, in Florence, under the bloody orders of Pope Sixtus IV, which resulted in the death of Giuliano de Medici while his brother, Lorenzo, barely escaped with his life. In any case, Federico was also a cultured man, a patron of the arts and the owner of one of the most magnificent libraries of his age, filled with manuscripts of great value. Indeed, one of his *studiolos*—from his palace in the city of Gubbio—was moved to the Metropolitan Museum of New York in 1996. It is a true jewel of Renaissance art, the walls decorated in fine inlaid tablets that create beautiful three-dimensional images of the Duke's favorite objects, such as musical instruments, birds in their cages, books of philosophy, and weapons of war.

Fernando Botero has reversed the works of the maestro of Borgo San Sepolcro, done between 1465 and 1470. And while the paintings by Piero measure forty-seven by thirty-three centimeters, the versions of Botero reach an impressive 204 by 177 centimeters. It is evident that the Colombian's intention is to use the audacity permitted by modern art to stretch the discoveries of the Italian master to the extremes of his own original style.

Additionally, both profiles appear as clearly executed as images on a coin. There is truthfulness in these portraits, with their lack of sentimentality or excessive emotions. The figures are painted in all their earthy reality, including, as has been famously noted, the Duke's warts. The rulers appear to be standing by an open window with a low horizon and a small world visible beneath. Their heads tower over the viewer, just as they did over the people they governed. They seem monumental and heroic in scale, and they demonstrate what Botero learned from one of his first teachers in Medellín: what is beautiful in art is not necessarily the same as what is beautiful in life.

Clearly, it takes a great deal of maturity for an artist to paint the exact same work as one of the great masters of the past, and, instead of producing a work that is secondary or derivative, a mere copy or imitation, to be able to produce an entirely new result, an original work. Thus, as happens in all the works in which Europe appears as a significant presence in this Colombian's art, the subject matter may indeed be European, but the language is clearly Botero's.

AESTHETIC CONVICTIONS

Parallel to the subject matter that characterizes Botero's art, we can see that his works are based on certain cardinal convictions.

The artist's career is comprised of two main periods: first, a time of inquiry and investigation, when the young man questions himself in search of his own identity as a creator and as a Colombian; when he wishes to utilize everything that he finds along the way and attempts to add it to his own paintings. During this period, Botero worked with passion and tenacity but not very clear criteria, as usually happens during a creator's formative years. His next period begins during the second half of the 1950s, when Botero clearly envisions his direction as an artist and initiates the journey that will lead him to where he now stands in the panorama of world art. The difference between one period and the other is the presence and the maturity of his convictions as an artist.

Let's take one painting in particular to illustrate these beliefs, *The House of Mari Duque* (1970). Here, we find a typical Latin American brothel, captured in a moment of enjoyment. There is a transvestite who holds one of the four prostitutes in his arms. There is a man sleeping in the background and a small grandmother who does her chores, sweeping cigarette butts from the wooden floor. The air is peppered with flies, and a seemingly robust and content cat poses next to a green parrot that has stopped on its way to a half-eaten banana. Here, as with practically all works by Botero, we perceive the existence of a world. It is the original cosmos of this Colombian painter, drawn with his amazing imagination, his sense of humor, and his prodigious fantasy. Every item—the objects and the people—is voluminous, and the smallest figures collaborate, by contrast, in highlighting the immensity of the other forms that surround them. It is a world where people seem to delight in everyday life, where the clocks have stopped to grant a parenthesis of peace, pleasure, or leisure, as if for all eternity. The climate is pleasant. The food is abundant. It is an atmosphere filled with sensuality, not eroticism. It is a world similar to ours, for we easily recognize its point of origin, which is the reality of Latin America, but at the same time

we discern that it is different and poetic, enlivened by a classical, sublime air of immortality, almost of paradise. This is an imaginary and alternate world, one that softly seduces spectators and invites them to smile and dream and maybe, for a few minutes at least, abandon their own tumultuous existence and inhabit this calm, pleasant universe and be happy as well—perhaps not laughing in euphoria but filled with a certain kind of happiness. A serene happiness.

To be able to paint such a work requires a specific attitude towards life. In Botero's art you will not find the existential anguish of an Edvard Munch or the ferocity and torment of Francis Bacon. Botero's mentality is not dominated by pain, suffering, resentment, or bitterness. On the contrary, it seems overwhelmed by the celebration of that fleeting and wonderful miracle that is life. From whence does this philosophical position come? From two of Botero's most important convictions: that life is worth living and that the principal function of art is to honor and extol our existence and not to discredit, ridicule, or condemn it. This is not a frivolous idea, much less *naïf* or hedonistic, as some critics have opined. It is the result of a profound and dedicated study of the history of art and an understanding that the vast majority of paintings, drawings, frescos, and sculptures done by the greatest artists of all time were about pleasant themes, agreeable images, and gentle motifs. Despite their many differences, the masters of the past had this in common: they all aspired to create beauty, to ennoble our existence through their paintings, and to create an aesthetic harmony that only exists in the world of art. Indeed, they all knew, on some deep level, that beauty, as Nietzsche pointed out, feeds our minds, enriches our souls, and justifies our existence.

Perhaps just as important is the fact that Botero enjoys creating his art. His daily work is not a source of torment and frustration, as we often find in other artists. Quite the opposite: nothing gives Fernando Botero more pleasure than to enter his studio and begin to work. This does not mean, of course, that his life has been without difficulties. Very much the contrary. However, just like the artists of the Renaissance who did not vent their personal sufferings in public or spew their frustrations out onto the viewer, despite the many hardships of life in those times, Botero

believes that art is a dignified and noble endeavor and not something like a sewer where people can dispose of their pains and resentments. This artist respects his craft and his vocation far too much to do that.

In other words, his art communicates the joy of living, what the Mexican poet Octavio Paz called in one of his most powerful poems, “the forgotten wonder of being alive.” And that sensation is not only the result of his intellectual convictions, it also derives from his creative experience, from the physical pleasure he feels as he works. That pleasure is ultimately communicated in the final work.

While in many of Botero’s canvases we find a critical attitude, his works are hardly insulting. You can sense the satire, understand the social commentary, even perceive the force of a direct accusation, but his images lack the edge of bitterness or resentment that you often find in the works of other artists. Many times these other creators have granted more importance to the political message than to the aesthetic quality of their work, and their art has often suffered as a result. Botero’s works may be critical, even mocking and sarcastic, but not offensive, since his unshakeable direction is, above anything else, one determined by the desire to create and communicate aesthetic pleasure. His priority is the art.²

Thus, a strange phenomenon happens in his exhibitions, where you can observe among the viewers the very people whom he is supposedly criticizing in his paintings. Members of the Catholic Church, the military, or the oligarchy contemplate his pictures, in which they are clearly and undeniably mocked, but they smile and don’t seem insulted. Perhaps they see themselves painted in the same beautiful style as that bouquet of flowers, or that still life on the opposite wall, or even the artist himself in that whimsical self-portrait, and thus they don’t perceive an attitude of anger or hatred, but rather one of humor and aesthetic enjoyment.

2. Obviously, this is truer in relation to his works in general, and excluding to a certain extent the *Violence of Colombia* and the *Abu Ghraib* series.

How does Botero do this? His explanation: love for his profession. He may be rationally motivated to denounce, accuse, or criticize, but the pleasure he experiences while drawing the lines of the work, applying the colors, or composing the forms is reflected in the end result, so that initial feeling of fury or indignation is tempered and mitigated. The overall message, in the end, may be sarcastic or ironic, but it is not corrosive or offensive. It is subtle and therefore more efficient and acceptable, since satire lasts longer and more elegantly passes through the test of time.

This creates a situation in which the work is often ambiguous. While some believe that he is making fun of a specific person or social group, others conclude that he is glorifying them. This ambivalence is clearly felt in his portraits of the drug lord Pablo Escobar Gaviria and the guerrilla leader Manuel Marulanda. Is the artist deriding or praising these individuals? It's hard to say for certain, and this contradictory sensation explains the controversy that surrounded these paintings when they were first made public. That either reading or interpretation is feasible and able to coexist in the same work of art is what allows us to declare that his work is satirical but his satire is wrapped in love, enveloped in the love and respect he feels for his profession. That is why his works are sometimes intriguing and puzzling.

This is one of the great paradoxes that surrounds Fernando Botero. Many presidents in Latin America have honored him, which would not have occurred if he were considered to be their bitterest foe. Yet, when people ask which painter has been most critical, poignant, and unforgivable with regard to the politicians and dictators of Latin America, the first name that comes to mind is Fernando Botero. The same occurs with his religious paintings, which are usually taunting and ironic. Yet, one of his most famous works residing in Colombia—*Mother Superior* (1980), also known as *Botero's Nun*—hangs in the Casa de Nariño, the presidential palace in Bogotá, where the clergy attend their meetings with the president. Furthermore, the most important Catholic magazine, *Inside the Vatican*—which is published from Saint Peter's Basilica, the very heart of the Catholic Church—chose Fernando Botero as one of the world's most important people in 2006. Another of his better-known paintings, *On the Way to the Eucharistic Council* (1972), is also found in Italy—in the Vatican Museum.

Clearly, no matter the affinity of Botero for the Renaissance, the creative attitude of this artist could not be identical to the one that pervaded throughout that magnificent period of Western Art. Botero, like any painter or sculptor, is a person of his time. He is a figurative artist who has also availed himself of the resources of modern art, beginning with a wider space for fantasy and freedom. And since his work was done after the birth of Abstract art, his figurative style, as he says, can actually be defined as *post*-abstract. Indeed, Botero is closer to Abstract painting than people realize, and it is precisely in that fertile mixture of what is most traditional with what is most modern that we admire the original traits of this Colombian master.

Surely, Botero's priorities as an artist depend less on the theme or the subject matter than on the forms, lines, and colors. For him, this formal dimension is so definitive that to finish a painting he often turns it around and literally hangs it upside down, so the images do not appear as figures but as forms and colors, displayed in their basic essence. At that moment, the painter steps back and examines the canvas with fresh eyes, as if it were an abstract painting. He can then proceed to make the changes required, according to its formal value, so the work can exist as an independent aesthetic object without being subordinated to its external references or the outside world. Thus, for Botero, a painting is only finished and complete when every color has finally found its place, when the geometrical lines of the composition generate the stillness and the sense of calmness that he's looking for, and when every form occupies its position in the canvas, often with another that seems to act as a counterbalance. Only then does the works inspire peace and serenity, harmony and equilibrium, and at that moment the artist knows that his painting is done.

On some occasions, one specific color may achieve a cardinal importance in a painting, almost to the point of exclusiveness, clearly resembling an abstract work, as in the 1980 oil *The Street*. However, this overwhelming presence of a particular color is not the norm in Botero's art. His works usually contain a visual rhythm. This means that a color that is placed in one part of the canvas is also found in another, and therefore the eye of the viewer detects that resonance

of tones and experiences the harmony that is offered by that visual cadence. Maybe the green of an apple echoes upon the bottle that rests on a table, or the whiteness of a light bulb reverberates in the cigarette butts that lie on the floor, or the blue of a man's shirt doubles among the petals of a flower arrangement, or the red in a pair of earrings resounds in a woman's painted nails. This reiteration of color is what allows the art of Fernando Botero to provide a visual effect of fullness, of chromatic harmony. It is that sense of balance that gives aesthetic delight. This aspect is essential to generate the poetry and fluidity of the pigments that translates into a feeling of serenity that, as we have seen, is one of his main objectives as an artist. This creative will, that gives the utmost importance to color and form, is possibly the most significant attribute that Fernando Botero shares with abstract painters.

Finally, one of Botero's most important convictions is that art should be direct in its meaning: anyone should be able to understand it. This is one of his strongest principles as an artist. People "get" his paintings, drawings, and sculptures because his art is straightforward. There's no need for a complementary explanation by a third party to help decipher, admire, appreciate, or simply enjoy the work, as often happens in contemporary art. As Matisse said: "A work of art must carry within itself its complete significance."

The work of this Colombian master reaches the spectator without intermediaries. In fact, many of his most celebrated exhibitions have taken place outdoors, in plazas and on avenues frequented by hundreds of pedestrians, where people have the chance to view his figures while they go to and from work or take a stroll through the city. Out on the streets it is practically impossible for a critic, a philosopher, or an expert to act as an interpreter describing what these pieces are about or explaining why Botero's art has these characteristics. It doesn't matter if the public is familiar with many of the concepts we have discussed in these pages, such as "serene happiness," "satire wrapped in love," or "post-abstract painting." None of that matters. What matters is that Botero's art speaks directly to the people, and therefore it is able, by itself, to communicate the aesthetic pleasure that the artist intended.

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