Washington and Lee University

No Strings Attached:

Fernando Botero's *Boy Playing Guitar* in Context

by

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this thesis.

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Abstract:

This thesis serves to expand upon our understanding of Fernando Botero's early career through the analysis of an undocumented work entitled *Boy Playing Guitar.* This painting is a crucial work in Botero's early stylistic development and gives insight into how the artist was influenced by Colombian politics at the height of *La Violencia* as well as Cold War tensions in the United States. The guitar, as an important instrument in Colombian music and identity, is a recurring character in Botero's oeuvre, but little has been written on the artist's refusal to paint guitar strings. Using the guitar and its lack of strings as a focal point, this thesis delves into how Botero's formal decisions in *Boy Playing Guitar* are rooted in the politics and violence of the artist's time period.

Introduction:

Those familiar with the work of world-renowned Colombian artist Fernando Botero (b. 1932) would recognize the figure in the center of *Boy Playing Guitar* (1960; fig. 1) for his voluminous features and rigid frontality. However, the execution of the painting lacks the smoothness associated with classic Boterismo and the boy's eyes are strangely glazed over, swimming in muddled greens and browns. There is also an uncharacteristically thick impasto in which Botero has evidently scratched outlines and other random marks with the back of his brush. Strangest of all is the lack of guitar strings for the boy to actually play. *Boy Playing Guitar* possesses an air of mystery not only on account of its strange formal qualities, but also for the fact that it hangs on the walls of a small university in rural Virginia, over 2,000 miles from the artist's homeland. Hidden from the public eye since October of 1960, *Boy Playing Guitar* was donated to Washington & Lee University by Richard Kramer in 2019. Very little information accompanied Mr. Kramer's donation aside from the fact that *Boy Playing Guitar* had been a gift

for his father from his mother, who purchased it for $350 in 1960 at one of Botero's first shows in the United States held at the Gres Gallery in Washington D.C.[1]

Outside of a few emails on the provenance of *Boy Playing Guitar*, there is nothing written on the object itself. The documents that W&L has from the Gres Gallery exhibition and the Kramer family are sparse, limited to a few clippings from *the Washington Post*.[2] There is no academic writing on the painting—it does not appear in any of Botero's biographies or catalogue raisonnés. In September of 2020, art historian Christian Padilla published a new book entitled *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963)*.[3] The book explores what had once been an overlooked period in Botero's career, mapping out the artist's life during the very moment in which *Boy Playing Guitar* was painted. Despite being a trove of information on Botero's early style, the book fails to mention W&L's painting. Padilla mentions such a gap in the study, acknowledging that many of the works exhibited in the Gres Gallery shows, such as the iconic *Camera degli Sposi (homage to Mantegna)* (1958; fig. 2), were sold to private collectors and not properly documented.[4] This was likely the case with *Boy Playing Guitar,* as Botero's 1960 show was not particularly popular and coverage was limited to a few cursory *Washington Post* reviews. Hirshhorn Museum curator Cynthia Jaffe McCabe noted that collectors were disenchanted by the subdued nature of the artist's work from the period.[5] Beatrice Perry, then director of the Gres Gallery, explained that "only a few Washington collectors came to understand and eventually purchase a *Niño*."[6]

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[1] Email correspondence between Richard Kramer and Patricia Hobbs of Washington & Lee University Collections, 2016.
[2] Leslie Judd Ahlander, *The Washington Post.*
[3]Christian Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963)* (Milan: Skira editore, 2020).
[4] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* 14.
[5] Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, *Fernando Botero* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979,) 15.
[6] Ibid.

McCabe suspects that collectors were confused by Botero's stylistic shift from the work of his previous Gres Gallery show in 1958, that the paintings from the show "reflect personal upheaval (the dissolution of Botero's marriage) and the unresolved impact of Abstract Expressionism."[7] Studying his early career, it is evident that the painterly language of Boterismo required years of development as the artist oscillated between different formal and philosophical beliefs while travelling between Bogotá, Europe, Mexico DF, and the United States. Botero was 28 when he painted *Boy Playing Guitar* and had only recently started exhibiting his work internationally. He was still trying to situate himself in the international art world, and developing a recognizable style was at the forefront of his artistic interests. As he himself put it, "a painter has no *raison d'être* if he does not create his own world."[8]

Form has always been at the center of Botero's work, particularly in this period of early development. While trying to develop a personal style, Botero was engaging with formalist theories and proclaimed an apolitical, purely formal rhetoric. He often spoke about art's sole purpose being "to give pleasure,"[9] embracing art-for-art's sake, a position more consistent with the formal explorations prevalent in NYC than the ideological assertions of the Mexican Muralists, one of his earliest influences. However, despite his push for pleasurable art, Botero maintained an interest in depicting violence throughout his career—including the period in which *Boy Playing Guitar* was painted. W&L's painting was conceived in the aftermath of *La Violencia,* a ten-year civil war between 1948 and 1958 in which the country set global records for violent deaths.[10] While other Colombian artists like Alejandro Obregón in his painting *The Dead*

[7] Ibid.
[8] Botero interviewed by Cristina de Albornoz, "The Perils of Popularity: An Interview with Fernando Botero, from *The Art Newspaper,* December 2001.
[9] David Elliot, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures" in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero, ed. John Sillevis* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), 36.
[10] John Charles Chasteen, "Born in Blood & Fire: A Concise History of Latin America" (New York City: Norton, 2006), 306.

Student/*The Vigil* (1956; fig 3) were explicitly depicting the state-sanctioned murders of thousands of Colombians, Botero professed to be only concerned with beauty:

> The history of art is the history of beauty and its creation. When have you seen an Impressionist painting that is angry or depressing? Or such paintings by Titian, Velazquez, Bonnard, or Vermeer? I have always adhered to Poussin's definition of the craft: 'Painting is an interpretation of Nature, with forms and colors, upon a plain surface to *give pleasure.*[11]

Critic Marta Traba and scholars including Werner Spies and Jaqueline Barnitz have portrayed Botero as an artist primarily interested in the sensuality of volume and other formal elements. There are very few existing scholarly explanations for why Botero promotes an "art for pleasure" stance or why he so frequently contradicts himself about his influences and philosophies. My thesis can hopefully fill this gap, as it probes the economic and political motivations for Botero's decision to embrace formal readings of his work during the late fifties and sixties. I build upon art historian Edward J. Sullivan's argument that Botero had, in fact, always been interested in politics and violence in his work; Botero painted understated and palatable depictions of violence for the entire duration of his career.[12] In this thesis, I situate *Boy Playing Guitar* as a crucial work in the development of Colombian artist Fernando Botero's signature style and demonstrate the ways in which Botero engaged with Cold War-era trends of formalism to devise a style that was exportable to an international audience.

My investigation of Botero's *Boy Playing Guitar* also illuminates the collecting practices of Latin American art in Washington D.C. and the United States during a moment of political tension. Art historian Delia Solomons explains that in the 1950s and early 60s "museums became privileged spaces where one could propagandize cohesion [in light of the Cuban Revolution and Cold War] in the face of actual rupture by displaying transnational cultural partnerships and

[11] Elliot, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," 36.
[12] Edward J. Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero* ed. John Sillevis (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 49-59.

parallel stylistic developments. Shared aesthetics became a useful metaphor for shared cultures, politics and fates."[13] Botero gained notoriety in the United States in this context after the Museum of Modern Art purchased *Mona Lisa, Age 12* (1959; fig. 4) in the museum's push for apolitical Latin American Art. Botero's international acclaim therefore hinges on the political conditions of the United States in the early 1960s.

Boy Playing Guitar appears to be in a state of disassociation. The figure's enormous eyes are hazy and unfocused — he seems to stare through the viewer, completely lost in thought. This disoriented look is aided by the asymmetrical blocks of bright pink and deep forest green behind him. As stringed instruments are very common in the work of Botero and guitars are crucial to Colombian folk music, the choice of a guitar player is significant. He is an everyday character from the artist's past. Like most of Botero's figures, the musician is completely still. Despite the title of the work, he is not *playing* his guitar. His hands appear to have stopped mid-strum. The boy, much like the man who painted him, seems to be caught between worlds, between reality and memory. *Boy Playing Guitar* thus exemplifies a period of tension for Botero, representing a formative moment in his career in which he straddled different nations, artistic styles, and philosophies. This painting at the center of my thesis serves to question Botero's declarations of an apolitical formal style during one of the most violent periods in Colombia's history, the determination to place Botero within an international Latin American avant garde, and sheds light on US collecting practices in Washington, D.C. that promoted shared culture, politics, and aesthetic beliefs during the Cold War era.

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[13] Delia Solomons, "Hot Styles and Cold War: Collecting Practices at MoMA and Other Museums in the 60s." in *The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Latin American Art in the United States*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), pg. 44.

Chapter One:
Memories of Medellín

"I prefer to observe my country from a distance, so that I can transform it better and dream about it with greater freedom. Reality can sometimes be overwhelming."[14] — Fernando Botero

The unfocused gaze of *Boy Playing Guitar* is not insignificant — Botero would maintain the motif of hazy eyes throughout his career. The eyes become more articulated in later paintings such as *Man with Guitar* (1982; fig. 5), but one eye may loll in the wrong direction making the figure appear unfocused. Art historian Edward J. Sullivan notes that "it is more common for Botero's figures to show an inwardly directed passivity in their demeanor" than any form of emotion.[15] *Boy Playing Guitar* is an example of one of the first and most blatant iterations of this motif. His hollow, fuzzy eyes evoke the sense of a hidden inner world. In the same period, Botero was also working on ecclesiastical figures with the similar gazes, such as *Nuncio* (1958; fig. 6), and jesters such as *Don Niño Bufón* (1957; fig. 7) and *Bufón* (1957; fig. 8). The clouded stare in each of these figures possess the illusion of being lost in thought, in memory. The concept of personal memory is central to understanding Botero, as he consistently returned to images of his past even in his early years in which he worked within a constant pressure to adapt to contemporary formalist trends.

Much of Botero's work hinges on remembrances of his hometown of Medellín. Born in the capital of the Antioquia district in 1932, Botero often speaks about how Medellín permeates his art. In an interview with critic Ana María Escallón, Botero explained his focus on memory:

> The artist's first twenty years have an enormous visual repercussion on the evolution of his work. It appears that nostalgia for certain moments of his life will come to the fore. One always paints what is best known, and it is rooted in childhood and adolescence.

[14] Werner Spies, *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings,* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), pg. 22.
[15] Edward J. Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero* ed. John Sillevis, (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 10.

> This is the world I paint. I have done nothing else. I have lived in the United States for many years and I have never painted a North American subject. I have also spent time in France and Italy, and it has not occurred to me to paint a European landscape or subject.[16]

Therefore it is very difficult to truly understand *Boy Playing Guitar* without exploring the artist's statements about nostalgia and his constructed identity as a Colombian. His development of a specific visual language is intertwined with his biography, particularly his youth in Medellín and his efforts to establish himself internationally.

In their book *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture,* Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik examine how memory, in itself, is creative work. To retrieve a memory and to speak it requires a dose of invention, as memories never come fully formed. Plate and Smelik explain that "whereas memory is embodied performance, it is fully mediated. Memory does not function in a vacuum but needs a medium to be trained, shared and transmitted."[17] For artists such as Botero, performing memory in painting is as much a personal act as it is a social or economic means. In Botero's case, memory also serves as an act of "identity formation" as described by Paul John Eakin in *Living Autobiographically.*[18] Paintings such as *Boy Playing Guitar* in which a young musician strums what could either be a guitar or *tiple*—the national instrument of Colombia—may be a memory from the artist's homeland and a means of "narrating and producing the self."[19] As a Colombian artist trying to establish himself on the global art market, Botero needed to construct a visual narrative of his origins as a means of setting himself apart while working within international dialogues. Botero's imagined past thus became intertwined with his imagined future.

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[16] Anna María Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997), pg. 10.
[17] *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, edited by Liedeke Plate, and Anneke Smelik, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, pg. 2.
[18] Plate and Smelik, *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, pg. 3.
[19] Ibid.

As a young boy, Botero gravitated towards the painting and sculpture adorning the baroque churches of Antioquia such as Iglesia de Candelaria in Medellín. The influence of the baroque would go on to find its way not only into his subject matter—taking on depictions of the crucifixions he saw in the cathedrals of his childhood in *Crucifix* (2000; fig. 9) or copying the works of Velazquez as early as 1959 in his *Niño de Vallecas* series (fig. 10)—but in the very execution of his iconic figuration. Sullivan explains that "even in works where there are no overt references to the themes or styles of the baroque period there are echoes of the color and vibrancy which characterise [sic] seventeenth and eighteenth century art in Latin America."[20] Botero takes on the drama of the baroque through volume and vibrant color. The predominance of Medellín's conservative Catholicism dominated Botero's childhood—especially his strictly religious education at the Antioquia Ateneo, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, and the San José College—and found its way into his artistic practice.

However, despite being influenced by the decadence of the art of colonial Latin America, Botero's earliest encounters with modernisms made him a radical in the eyes of most conservatives in Medillín. One of his most cited memories from childhood was the moment in which he was expelled from his high school, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, at sixteen for publishing an article on July 17, 1949 in the Medellín *El Colombiano* defending Picasso. Under the Catholic school's conservative views on art, to defend modern art was to defend communism and to defy God.[21] That very year Picasso had developed an image of a dove as the symbol of the international Communist Party.[22] Picasso and by proxy modern art had become synonymous with

[20] Edward J. Sullivan, *Fernando Botero: Drawings and Watercolors,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1993).
[21] Christian Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* (Milan: Skira editore, 2020), pg. 22.
[22] "During the late forties and early fifties, [Picasso's] active involvement in the communist-backed International Peace Movement, which included attendance at peace congresses in Poland, Italy, and England, as well as the design of numerous peace posters with

radical politics. The young Botero's article was ill-timed. Botero's biographer, Germán Arciniegas, supplied a dramatic account of the college principal's response to the column:

> I have just read, in a disreputable newspaper published in the city, a repulsive article inspired by diabolical, schismatic thoughts. It is full of abominable ideas — and was written by a boy in this school! A boy who, only yesterday, was our dearest pupil. He has fallen into the darkest shadows, deceived by the fallacy of a false art, an art whose goal is the distortion of the human form, the destruction of what God Himself has created…[23]

While it is doubtful that the principal made this exact statement to the student body and it is instead a dramatization on the part of Arciniegas, it does exemplify the sentiments under which Botero was expelled. To experiment with figuration was, in itself, a defiance of God.

Botero was only 16 when he was introduced to the politicized nature of avant garde art through Picasso, but when he moved to Bogotá shortly thereafter he became surrounded by leftist ideologies in painting. Bogotá in the late 1930s and early 1940s saw a revolution erupt in art, a revolution springing from the international success of Mexican Muralism.[24] According to Jacqueline Barnitz the Muralism movement in Mexico began with Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) after the Mexican revolution, when he employed José Vasconcelos as his minister of education. Vasconcelos used Muralism as a "publicly visible art program as a complement to his new centralized national education policy."[25] Artists such as Dr. Atl (1875-1964), Diego Rivera

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the motif of the dove, had little effect on the official communist disdain for his art. Even the Lenin Peace Prize, awarded in 1950 for the dove posters, did not constitute the artistic recognition and acceptance from the party that he must have felt he deserved as an artist of international renown. Picasso undoubtedly resented this neglect, and, for a brief period in 1951 and 1952, he courted Party favour by including pro-communist elements in his work." Keen, Kirsten Hoving. "Picasso's Communist Interlude: The Murals of 'War' and 'Peace'." *The Burlington Magazine* 122, no. 928 (1980), pg. 464.

[23] Germán Arciniegas, *Fernando Botero,* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977). Anna María Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997), pg. 20.

[24] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 19.

[25] Jaqueline Barnitz, Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America by Jaqueline Barnitz & Patrick Frank, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), "Neofiguration, Pop, and Environments in the 1960s and 1970s," pg. 45.

(1886-1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) were funded by Vasconcelos to create legible, elaborate murals that celebrated Mexican identities in public spaces. In 1924, the movement took a more explicitly Marxist shift when Siquieros published a manifesto on Muralism in *El Machete.* Signed by Rivera, Orozco and five other artists, the manifesto denounced "bourgeois individualism" and "so-called easel painting and … all art of ultra-intellectual circles for being aristocratic, and [exalted] the manifestations of a monumental art for its public usefulness. We proclaim that all aesthetic manifestations devoid of, or contrary to, popular sentiment is bourgeois."[26] Many Colombian artists admired the "nationalist ideology" of the Mexican Muralists and their accessible styles which focused on themes such as Mexico's indigenous heritage and the proletarian struggle.[27] Following the state-sponsored success of Mexican Muralism, Colombian writer Jorge Zalamea helped to win the Liberal government's financial support for Bogotá artists to travel to Mexico. Padilla believes the movement was brought to Medellín and the young Botero by elder Antioquian artists Pedro Nel and Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo:

> Inspired by the ideas of muralism, both were interested in learning the techniques of fresco painting; they traveled to Mexico for that purpose and recognized that Mexican culture could represent a parallel … one which Colombian art might take advantage of its history and pre-Columbian civilizations.[28]

Teenage Botero watched as the most successful artists in Medellín and Bogotá made state-funded pilgrimages to Mexico. He was receptive to the new avant-garde art and artists entering Colombia and the influence they had on his early work is evident. His first watercolors deal with themes derived from the brand of Marxist art coming out of Mexico. Padilla identifies this in works such as *Untitled* (1948; fig 11) in which a group of barefoot *rancheros* appear to be

[26] SOTPE, "Manifesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores," *El Machete*, no. 7 (June 1924).
[27] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 20.
[28] Ibid.

placing bets on a dice game and *Untitled* (1948; fig. 12) in which a drunk man is carried on the shoulders of a guitarist and a muscular man, saying that they exhibit "themes recalling peasant life, vernacular landscapes and, overall, the vindication of the common man and Mestizo culture."[29] In these figures, Botero has begun elongating limbs, forcing his characters to fill the composition. An interest in monumentalizing working class figures is evident. The watercolor of the drunken man also features Botero's first known rendition of a guitar—an important motif in Botero's later work—falling out of the clutches of the faceless musician.

Botero's artistic production began in 1948, paralleling the beginning of the horrific period of state violence in Colombia known as *La Violencia*. While Botero was producing some of his earliest work, national unrest was erupting after the assassination of major Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.[30] Subsequent rioting broke out in Bogotá and the rest of the nation. Botero witnessed the bloody aftermath of Gaitán's death:

> It was very, very tough… 300,000 people killed in ten years. Even in Medellín it was dangerous. People would disappear; the police would take them, and you never knew about it. It was a state of undeclared war.[31]

Living through *La Violencia* sparked a fascination with violence that repeatedly appeared in Botero's oeuvre starting with some of his earliest known work. In these early watercolors he depicts reactions to suffering through withered hands and tear-filled eyes in compositions such as in *Prayer* (1949; fig. 13). In *Prayer* a procession of townspeople, one carrying a garden hoe likely to signify his working class status, clasp their hands in prayer or scream to the heavens in pain as they walk through the mountainous landscape of Antioquia.

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[29] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 22.
[30] Ibid*,* pg. 19.
[31] Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), pg. 12.

In 1951, at the age of eighteen, Botero left Medellín for the cafés and galleries of Bogotá. He would never live in Medellín again, though the city would haunt his work for decades to come. In Bogotá, at Café Automático, Botero was introduced to some of the country's most renowned artists and intellectuals who pulled the young painter into lively discussions about art and politics.[32] Within five years, his place within the Bogotá avant-garde would be established with his first solo exhibition at the Galerias de Arte Foto-Estudio Leo Matiz.[33] Printed on the cover of the catalogue was his 1949 watercolor *Woman Crying* (fig. 14). It features a nude figure contorted in pain and shielding her sobbing face in what could be interpreted as shame or sorrow. Botero claims the painting was inspired by Cesar Vallejo's *Poemas humanos* and that Vallejo was his greatest inspiration at the time.[34] Vallejo, a leftist Peruvian poet exiled to Paris, wrote a series of socialist poems before his death in 1938.[35] *Woman Crying* was also inspired by Botero's fondness for the work of Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) who was known for painting similarly contorted figures of suffering such as in *The Sob* (1939; fig. 15). Siqueiros depicted a woman who also completely shields her own face with strong, muscular hands whose exaggerated scale appears to have directly influenced *Woman Crying.* Pain and suffering is evident in her tight muscles that appear to almost tremble. Sullivan suggests that "the terror of the years of *La Violencia* played a key role in the development of Botero's visual imagination" and directly influenced *Woman Crying.*[36] Accompanying the nationalist artists in Café Automático during the earliest days of *La Violencia,* Botero learned to use the language of Muralism to depict the horrors surrounding him.

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[32] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 29.
[33] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 12.
[34] Spies, *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings,* pg. 16.
[35] Robert, Britton, *Poetic and Real Worlds of César Vallejo (1892–1938): A Struggle Between Art and Politics*, (Sussex Academic Press, 2015), pg. 212.
[36] Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero* pg. 55.

It was the Leo Matiz exhibition that allowed him to earn enough money to move to Tolú on Colombia's Caribbean coast. He had a dream of emulating Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) trip to Tahiti by venturing to a tropical village to paint local inhabitants. The works from this period, such as *Frente el Mar* (1952; fig. 16), do evoke the vibrant colors and elongated figures of Gauguin's *La Orana Maria (Hail Mary)* (1891; fig. 17). Padilla claims that Botero also retreated to Tolú as an opportunity to promote a nationalist art hinging on depictions of the common man—a similar goal to his Medellín forebears Nel and Jaramillo.[37] Botero's experimentation with figuration blossomed in this period. His focus on the gigantic that would later define his career reveals itself in elongated figures that completely fill the frame of the painting. This is evident in his most famous Tolú painting, *Frente el Mar* which depicts a group of elongated figures carrying a Black man bound to poles like an animal.[38] Botero was confronted by the fact that *La Violencia* has extended even to the remote fishing village he had sought as an artistic respite:

> At that time the government was a reactionary one of the far right, led by Laureano Gómez, who unleashed the violence from the presidential palace by using the famous *chulavitas* [a police force which, though irregular, was armed and organized by the government]. This scene in the painting *Facing the Sea* was one I saw in Tolú. I was swimming in the sea and two policemen passed by with a guy hanging from a pole, who was screaming. It made a strong impression on me. They carried him as though they had caught a wild beast in the jungle, something I once saw in the town of Sonsón, where they had hunted a tiger and brought him back on a pole, just like this man: hanging from a pole and screaming."[39]

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[37] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 31.

[38] Racism against Black people continues to be widespread in modern Colombia. Enslaved African peoples were first brought to Colombia in the sixteenth century under Spanish colonization. Much of the enslaved population was concentrated in coastal plantations in areas such as Tolú. The legacy of slavery in Colombia exists in many social and economic structures that perpetuate racism against the Black population. More on this legacy can be found in: Sascha Carolina Herrera, *A history of violence and exclusion: Afro-colombians from slavery to displacement* (2012), (Order No. 1530828), Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[39] Christian Padilla, *El Joven Maestro. Botero, obra temprana: 1948-1963*, (Bogota: Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2018), pg. 64.

Terror would be a significant theme for the rest of Botero's career, becoming more explicit over time. The politically charged *Frente el Mar* actually won Botero second place in the IX Annual Salon of Colombian artists and was featured in his second show at the Leo Matiz gallery.[40] Later, the artist would cultivate an apolitical façade, but his very career was rooted in a political awareness that would continue into the present day.

The prize money that Botero won for *Frente el Mar* helped to fund his first trip to Europe. In Colombia at the time it was popular for young artists to study in Europe in order to add legitimacy to their work. This culture was in part inspired by Mexican muralist Rivera who had spent fifteen years in Europe studying painting techniques before adapting them into a Mexican visual language.[41] Like Rivera, Botero went on a pilgrimage to Europe with the main goal of learning formal techniques. He began his studies in Spain where he enrolled in classes at the San Fernando Academy in Madrid.[42] Unsatisfied with the instruction at the Fine Arts School, Botero turned to copying the works at the Prado. The sale of these copies would continue to fund his time abroad. The artist also talks about how he lost interest in the contemporary avant-garde in Paris, instead turning to the reproductions of Piero della Francesca's *The Queen of Sheba's Visit to Solomon:*

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[40] Mario Vargas Llosa, "A Sumptuous Abundance," in *Fernando Botero* ed. David Elliot, (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2002), pg. 25.
[41] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 39.
[42] Jean-Marie Tasset, "Life and Work within the century," in *Botero: Monograph & Catalogue Raisonné: Paintings 1975-1990*, (Lausanne: Acatos, 2000), pg. 186.
Many Colombian painters at the time sought to establish themselves within the broader hispanic tradition and studying in Spain was a means of adding legitimacy to their work. Even under the facist regime of Francisco Franco, Colombian artists flocked to apply for government grants to copy masterworks in the Prado. Botero was self-funded by his prize from the National Salon and only spent a few months in Spain before moving to Florence. Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 38.

> By comparison, painting after [Piero della Francesca] is full of agitation and fever. The serenity, belonging to Classicism [sic] , represents painting in its totality. It contains nothing but perfection.[43]

He was inspired to visit Florence after discovering these reproductions of the Italian Renaissance. In Italy he found what he calls the "plastic essence of a painting."[44] Botero was very invested in the history of the quattrocento; he carried Max Dorerner's *The Materials of the Artist and their Use in Painting* like a bible and upheld Bernard Berenson's *The Italian painters of the Renaissance* as the most important lens through which art should be evaluated.[45] Most important to his development of Boterismo was Berenson's concept of "tactile value." Berenson saw painting's purpose in its ability to provide tactile pleasure, "to give the illusion of being able to touch a figure:"

> It follows that the essential in the art of painting — as distinguished from the art of coloring, I beg the reader to observe — is somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination… the painter must thus consciously do what we all do unconsciously — build his third dimension. And he can only care about that task as we do ourselves. His first concern, therefore, is to awaken his sense of touch.[46]

Berenson's words resonated with Botero's latent interest in volume, to exaggerate the third dimension, as central to the pleasure of art. The concept of tactile value began to take priority over all of Botero's formal concerns.

The Bogotá art scene that Botero returned to after his pilgrimage to Europe was drastically different from the city he had left two years earlier. The year before, in 1954, Argentinian art critic Marta Traba had moved to Colombia and had already established herself as

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[43] Tasset, "Life and Work within the century," in *Botero: Monograph & Catalogue Raisonné: Paintings 1975-1990*, pg. 187.
[44] Ibid, pg. 188.
[45] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 40.
[46] Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance,* (London: Oxford University Press,1930), pg. 65.

one of the most important avant-garde critics in Bogotá.[47] According to critic Gerardo Mosquera, Traba would be the first to approach "Latin American art" from a global manner, "attempting to give the subject some conceptual unity."[48] Her ideologies proved antithetical to those professed by earlier generations in Café Automático. In the mid-fifties when Traba began to dominate Colombian art criticism, she staunchly rejected the stranglehold that the Mexican Muralists had on contemporary art production, arguing:

> Mexican painting deviated the course of all Latin American art for more than twenty years and managed to disconnect the continent from the increasingly universal spirit of European and North American art. .. A strong current of American painting was seduced by this siren song… which turned art into an illustration and testimony of contemporary history, also focused under a clearly tendentious political angle, that did nothing but limit its scope and perspectives.[49]

She dismissed those works still grappling with the influence of Mexican Muralism and introduced an "international standard" for the plastic arts.[50] In the late 1950s she valued work that put form above politics, likely due to her interest in European modern art production and the rising influences of abstract expressionism internationally.[51] She saw Colombian art as too entrenched in the politics of the Muralists and thus ignorant of new global movements.

Padilla notes that Traba soon gained "a reputation as a fearful judge and consolidate[d] a group of professional critics" including Walter Engel, Clemente Airó, and Casimiro Eiger—all of whom were also immigrants to Colombia.[52] All of these critics utilized international standards in form to condemn the dated work of the nationalist movement in Colombia. Traba took to

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[47] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 43.
[48] Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America,* "Introduction," (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), pg. 10.
[49] Marta Traba,"Seis Artistas Contemporáneos Colombianos," (Bogotá: Golden, 1963).
[50] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),*pg. 43.
[51] Ibid, 42. She had studied under Jorge Romero Brest in Buenos Aires and later followed art historian Pierre Francastel while studying at the Sorbonne.
[52] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),*pg. 43.

bolstering painter Alejandro Obregón by calling him the "first modern artist in the country."[53] She believed that his work was far from being influenced by any ideologies and rather "the expression of a novel, geometrically fragmented figuratism."[54] Her first review of Botero, however, was scathing:

> I don't know how Botero could have left Italy, that is, a country which is not his own, and come back to settle in America…. The landscapes seem the wrong path to me; wavering between abstraction, scenography, and reality, and colored in a purely instinctive manner, making a painting look like it was executed by a child is not a merit.[55]

The paintings Botero brought back from Europe such as *Horses on the Beach* (1953; fig. 18) and *Urban Landscape of Florence* (1954; fig. 19) still maintained the influence of the older generation of Jaramillo and Gomez.[56] His focus on landscapes and monumentalizing working class figures harkened too closely back to the Colombian nationalist aesthetics for Traba's taste. From her perspective, the changing hierarchies in the Colombian art scene could no longer support Botero's work.

Botero was once again an outcast in Bogotá despite having made the once-revered trip abroad to study the European masters. He had to find a means of complicating his aesthetic attachments to the Mexican Muralists and the Italian quattrocento. Likely influenced by his critical decimation at the hands of Traba, Botero saw a need to reconnect with his home country and turned to the influence of Obregón. The borderline cubist abstractions of Obregón are evident in works by Botero in this period such as *Yellow* (1956; fig. 20) in which a composition of bright yellow pineapples appears to be constructed entirely of sharp triangular shapes. Botero was realizing that in order to gain recognition as an artist and to be commercially successful

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Marta Traba, "Columna de arte: Botero," *El Tiempo,* May 24, 1955, pg. 5.
[56] As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Botero would later claim that it had "not occurred to me to paint a European landscape or subject." This is merely another instance in which Botero contradicts himself. Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas*, pg. 10.

within the Bogotá art scene, he needed to have a distinct formal language like that of Obregón's fragmentation.

Despite turning his back on the Mexican Muralists, Botero moved to Mexico in April of 1956.[57] Back during his early days at Café Automático Botero had been introduced to Jorge Zalamea, a legendary Colombian intellectual known for bringing the Mexican government's view on state funding of the arts—ala Mexico's José Vasconcelos—to Colombia under the Liberal Party's rule. Zalamea was responsible for sponsoring the likes of Nel, Jaramillo, and others to study in Mexico.[58] Then it was common for painters to venture north and study the great public works of the Muralists, but trips to Mexico had waned after the domination of Traba's criticism. When Botero moved to Mexico, he ignored the work of the Muralists and sought inspiration from a new trend in Mexican modernism represented by artist Rufino Tamayo. Critics such as Fernán Torres León saw Tamayo's work as indicative of a necessary turn in Mexican art:

> A painter such as Tamayo is a case of true Americanism, of genuine popular roots and he has made an intellectual and universalized version of the effigies of Judas of Mexican popular art with a color range which recalls the arrangement of fruits in the Mexican marketplaces during his youth.[59]

The influence of Tamayo on Botero's work in the late fifties and early sixties is evident in his change of color palette from dull, muted tones to greater vibrancy.[60] This is evident in *Boy Playing Guitar* in its vibrant pinks and greens, but Tamayo's influence can also be seen in the way Botero carves into his paintings as well. Padilla speaks of Tamayo's use of this method:

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[57] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 55.
[58] Ibid*,* pg. 29.
[59] Fernán Torres León, "En América existe un americanismo epidérmico que es preciso suprimir." *El Tiempo,* May 31, 1959.
[60] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 57.

> [Tamayo was led] to invent a process of engraving on paper which gave an impression similar to that of his paintings which he called a "mixograph." The violent coloring and aggressive treatment on the canvas gave Tamayo's style a universal appeal and although it did not enclose a political message, as the work of the muralists did, neither did it fail to acknowledge its origins.[61]

Botero began working on pieces such as *Still life with guitar* (1957; fig. 21) which features a guitar rendered in a fragmented Obregónian style with a color palette reminiscent of Tamayo. But it was with a different stringed instrument that Botero found his singular defining formal quality. Botero continuously cites *Still Life with Mandolin* (1956; fig. 22) as the beginning of his "quest for the monumental:"

> Toward the end of 1956 I was in Mexico painting without letup. All at once I did "Mandolin," a still life. I felt in that picture I had come upon something I was looking for. At the time, my interest in volume was imbued with the Italian feeling. It was understandable -- there was ampleness in the contour and exuberance in its shape. But one day while drawing a generously proportioned mandolin, just as I was doing the sound hole I made it very tiny and the mandolin took.[62]

The instrument began to play a crucial role in Botero's stylistic development as mandolins and guitars started to dominate the still lifes he made in Mexico. Padilla mentions that their feature could have been a reference to Tamayo whose paintings had been populated with guitars and mandolins since the 1930s.[63] Botero saw the sound hole in these instruments as critical to developing the tactile experience he had longed for as well as a formal feature that would appease the likes of Traba and other international critics.[64]

Boy Playing Guitar is particularly emblematic of how Botero consistently used stringed instruments as motifs with which to experiment. "Any painting of a mandolin is of quintessential significance to Fernando Botero," Sillevis explains, as it is a reminder of Botero's discovery in

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[61] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),*pg. 55.
[62] Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* pg. 23.
[63] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 57.
[64] I will go on to explain Traba's influence on Botero in the second chapter.

volume.[65] His formulation of the Boterian language happened with the mandolin, but we can see a reference to the discovery in *Boy Playing Guitar* which features a similarly minuscule sound hole. Botero has latched onto these instruments as a reminder of his formal goals. How he depicts specific stringed instruments in his particular style is evident in *The Musicians* (1979; fig. 23). The mandolin player sits in the center — which tracks with the significance the mandolin holds in Botero's eyes. Compare the man in the lower right to the woman in the lower left; both have been shrunken to similar sizes but their instruments are distinct. The mustachioed musician carries a guitar that barely covers his chest. The woman's guitar, however, covers her chest and stomach. The man likely plays the *tiple,* which usually accompanies guitars in band shows. The rest of the painting is littered with other symbols of the nation such as *lulos*—an acidic citrus—and a bug-eyed parrot mid-squawk. As an artist so deeply concerned with memory, Botero found particular resonance in painting the scenes and symbols of his homeland:

> We have a great Platonic relationship. Latin America is one of the few places left in the world which can be transformed into myths. People have a cloudy idea of Latin America and that is a good thing for an artist.[66]

Boy Playing Guitar became a means by which Botero could continue to reflect on memories of his homeland and transform them into myth—despite his constantly shifting formal experimentations in this period.

Boy Playing Guitar is a particularly interesting use of volume because it is difficult to determine whether the instrument is a normal guitar or a *tiple.* The *tiple* is about three fourths the size of a classic guitar but retains many of the same characteristics. Because the instrument appears to be a shrunken guitar, it could be considered a *tiple,* making the musician gargantuan

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[65] John Sillevis, *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 118.
[66] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 11.

by comparison. Yet, because Botero's fundamental plastic goal is to warp size, it is impossible to ever tell. Curator David Elliot believes this confusion is Botero's greatest strength:

> Botero is an artist of contradiction. He warns us against confusing realism with reality in the parallel universes that he creates in which there is always an inconsistency, something not quite resolved.[67]

Like in a memory of a distant homeland, it is difficult to distinguish fiction from reality in the work of Botero. Every time one feels the need to gauge his subjects using traditional methods of evaluation, they come up short. *Tiple* or not, the instrument in *Boy Playing Guitar* is most importantly an aid in warping an already hazy memory.

[67] David Elliot, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero,* ed. John Sillevis, (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 35.

Chapter Two:
An International Aesthetic

"Generally when one is young,
influences are too present and one's appreciations
too disproportionate."[68]— Fernando Botero

Well before entering the international art market, Botero's work was already being widely interpreted as primarily an exploration of form. If his paintings happened to be depictions of political or religious figures such as *Nuncio* (1958; fig. 6), they were often read as unbiased and neutral in the Bogotá art world. Critics considered such works another plastic study of Renaissance material rather than a commentary on the religious institutions that were so intertwined with Botero's own upbringing. Critic Walter Engel, for the Bogotá journal *Plástica,* described *Camera degli Sposi (homage to Mantegna)* (1958; fig. 2) as nothing more than an experimentation in volume that combined the influence of Mantegna with the pre-Colombian statuary of San Agustín.[69] Botero himself often implied that there was a anti-ideological nature to his work:

> As a painter I don't concern myself with the human condition. The subjects of my paintings are plastic events — every element in the painting has the same value. Descriptions of various textures lose significance. All elements are given the same plastic preponderance: subject, skin, hat, tree, landscape.[70]

However, Botero's stance as an apolitical artist is a direct response to the dominant critics in his day. Sullivan cites Traba as the "the first critic to articulate what she believed to be the non-committed, non-ideological nature of Botero's art."[71] After her criticism, which was a driving force in elevating Botero's work in Bogotá and abroad, those in the art world saw the

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[68] Anna María Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997).
[69] Walter Engel, "XI Salón de Artistas Colombianos," Revista *Plástica,* número 12, Bogotá, julio-diciembre de 1958.
[70] Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* 47.
[71] Edward J. Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero* ed. John Sillevis, (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 51.

painter as a man interested in form alone. He applied his notorious volume across subjects, never discriminating, and therefore painted a massacre in the same light as a picnic scene. While Traba's writing and other later interpretations of his work ignored Botero's political and social background, paintings such as *Boy Playing Guitar* demonstrate an engagement with Colombian politics and existential questions on memory, beauty and national identity that contradict Botero's professed philosophies on art.

Traba had a very strong hand in the development of modern art criticism in South America. According to Mosquera, Traba was the first to approach "Latin American art" from a global vantage point, "attempting to give the subject some conceptual unity."[72] Traba was deeply opposed to any foreign influence on Latin American art and championed artists such as Obregón or the Peruvian Fernando de Szyslo (1925-2017) because she saw them as pure representations of their respective nations. Art historian Shifra Goldman saw this as a peculiar theoretical approach:

> Marta Traba became the most important critic promoting modern art in South America from the 1960s until her premature death in 1983. Traba lived for a long period of time in Colombia — where she was instrumental in establishing the Museum of Modern Art — as well as in Venezuela and Puerto Rico. She vehemently attacked social realism, and opted to support a uniquely Latin American art which would not mimic that of U.S. materialism and false values. On the whole, however, her criticism, while of high caliber and much respected in Latin America, was definitely idiosyncratic.[73]

Traba's strange stance on modern art was deeply ingrained in Cold War politics. Victor Manuel Rodriguez-Sarmiento explains that "Latin American art history took shape during the sixties and seventies in the bipolar context of the Cold War... its rhetoric was marked by the 'key concepts of

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[72] Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America,* "Introduction," (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), pg. 10..
[73] Shifra Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.11.

'resistance,' 'socialization,' 'anti-colonialism.'"[74] After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, most Latin American nations saw a new, virulent tide of political and social criticism. Goldman explains that "carried out in spite of a constant U.S. blockade, Cuba's support of arts of the Third World—particularly to its film festivals and visual arts biennials (1984, 1986, 1989, 1991)—caused a number of artists to consider Havana the "Paris" of Latin America."[75] It was in this atmosphere of radical change that Traba began theorizing on what constitutes 'Latin American Art.' Traba's criticism was a means of making sense of Latin America's complicated relationship with North America and Europe.

In December of 1956—the year that Botero moved to Mexico—there was fierce debate between Rivera and Tamayo over the future of Mexican modern art. Traba covered this dialogue in her essay "Two Theories of Contemporary Mexican Painting," in which she overtly sided with Tamayo.[76] She condemned Rivera's painting for it "comes not from aesthetics but from philosophy, economics, and politics … Thus he has put art at the service of things other than art."[77] Tamayo, on the other hand, claimed to strive "for universal value" in his work, the "transnational Modernism" that Traba had spent her career bolstering. He played with form, "the fantastic and the monstrous" features he saw in pre-contact art objects, and claimed to not get bogged down by politics. Of course, Traba would be a champion of Tamayo; she believed that he was the perfect antithesis of the Mexican Muralists who she despised:

> The artist who tries to make something politically desirable makes use of a cold calculation in his art that suppresses feeling. The true ideal of art remains excluded: that is the discovery and play of forms. Rivera deliberately ignores the Modern aesthetic

[74] Victor Manuel Rodriguez-Sarmiento, "Cold War Legacies Otherwise: Latin American Art and Art History in Colonial Times," (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2009), pg. 7.
[75] Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, p. 7.
[76] Marta Traba, "Two Theories of Contemporary Mexican Painting" in *Readings in Latin American Art*, ed. Patrick Frank, originally for *Prisma* (Bogota, Colombia), January 1957, pg. 86-90.
[77] Ibid, 88.

> world in which Tamayo moves. Everything in Rivera is beyond art: his intention, his creative process, his intended results.[78]

Traba's article was published by the Bogotá magazine *Prisma* in 1957, while Botero was living in Mexico. He undoubtedly would have been familiar with the output of one of his harshest critics who also happened to be the grande dame of the Colombian art scene. While Botero's interest in Tamayo did align with his own formal goals, he was also aware of Traba's critical philosophy and witnessed in real time how the Latin American art world was shifting.[79] The year Traba's article was published, Botero began painting his iconic figurative work. *Don Niño bufón* (1957; fig. 7) was one of the first works featuring an engorged, forward-facing figure. The work takes inspiration from Tamayo in that his frontality and large head is rooted in the indigenous art of Mexico. The monumental heads of the Olmec civilization in particular appealed to Botero's distinct interest in volume (1200-600 BCE BCE; fig. 24).[80] We can see the thread of this influence in *Boy Playing Guitar* in which the figure's head and enormous eyes dominate the composition. In his new figurative work, Botero appealed to Traba's quest for originality in form. Applauding his new approach, Traba wrote:

> ...As anti-baroque as it is anti-abstractionist and as anti-expressionist as it is anti-abstractionist… Botero gives life to a figurative form which, rendered unilaterally passionate by color, does not agree to sacrifice itself to it and, solidified, resists the impulses of lyrical and violent brush strokes.[81]

By emphasizing how Botero's style diverges from other artistic movements, Traba highlights Botero's formal ingenuity which was, in her opinion, crucial for a modernist painter.

However, Traba was not the only critic who was instrumental in the establishment of Botero as a purely formal artist. José Gómez Sicre, a Cuban-American curator and critic was the

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[78] Ibid, 89.
[79] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 57.
[80] Ibid*,* pg. 69.
[81] Traba quoted in Christian Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* (Milan: Skira editore, 2020), pg. 77.

first American art persona to bring Botero's work into the United States. Much like Traba, Gómez Sicre believed in promoting an international modern aesthetic in the art of Latin America. Mosquera postulates that they were both responsible for the creation of the concept of 'Latin American Art' that is still widely used:

> 'Latin American art' has not always existed as such. It was 'invented' in the 1950s and 1960s by the Argentine-Colombian writer and critic Marta Traba — especially through her critical discourse — and the Cuban-American curator José Gómez Sicre — particularly for his practical work as head of the visual arts unit of the Organization of American States, within a Pan-Americanist policy, updated as Inter-Americanism after WWII.[82]

Botero's first solo exhibition in the United States was curated by Gómez Sicre. In 1957, pieces such as *Still Life* (1957, fig. 25) were displayed at the Pan American Union in Washington D.C. The organizer of the exhibition and the head of the Visual Arts section of the Pan American Union, Gómez Sicre, described Botero as "the most intelligent copyist of [Mexican José Luis] Cuevas."[83] Botero was still being defined by the work of other artists. Gómez Sicre, however, did notice that despite similarities to the likes of Cuevas and Obregón, Botero's work displayed a unique "quest for the monumental. He magnifies the forms of his colossal still lifes to the point where they look like architecture."[84] His visual language was still developing, even after his eureka moment in Mexico, but critics were beginning to see this formulation of Boterian volume. Padilla explained the importance of the exhibition beyond its introduction of the artist to a global art market: "[the PAU exhibition] demonstrated the beginnings of a development that was producing good results and indicated a promising future for a language that would detach itself from socio-political influences and compete on even terms with the latest trends in modern Latin

[82] Gerardo Mosquera, "*Art from Latin America"* in *Modern Masters from Latin America, The Perez Simon Collection,* ed. Roxana Velasquez Martinez del Campo, (San Diego Museum of Art October 21, 2017), pg. 25.
[83] Jose Gomez Sicre quoted by Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), pg. 14.
[84] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 64.

American Art."[85] The exhibition, being filled with the still lifes Botero had produced in Mexico, was crucial to establishing Botero's distinct formal style in the eyes of the Washington D.C. public.

Gómez Sicre held an interesting political position at the nexus between both the United States and Latin American art markets. Latin American cultural theorist Claire F. Fox explains that as the visual arts director of the PAU, Gómez Sicre was intrinsically tied to the United States government's cultural initiatives in Latin America: "The energy of the PAU arts programs may be inversely related to U.S. policy makers' interest in them, for Gómez Sicre's early career at the PAU fell in the interregnum between two ambitious U.S. development initiatives for Latin America: the Good Neighbor Policy (circa 1933-45) and the Alliance for Progress (circa 1961-64)."[86] Fox notes that while Gómez Sicre had a history of dabbling in leftist and radical politics, by the time he was working for the PAU he began promoting art that placed "form over context." This was in part necessary for his career, for he was working in the midst of McCarthyism, when the PAU was screening employees for Marxism and homosexuality and was enforcing loyalty oaths. Like Traba, "Gómez Sicre insisted on a separation between art and politics, approximating the position of prominent U.S. formalist critics, such as Clement Greenberg and his MoMA mentor, Alfred Barr."[87] He praised the work of Cuevas, Tamayo, de

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[85] Ibid, 67.

[86] "...These were also the years of the early Cold War, marked by the Truman Doctrine of 1947, the National Security Council Report 68 (NCS-68) of 1950, and the CIA-organized coup in Guatemala in 1954. In terms of U.S. policy, this was a period of relative neglect of Latin American affairs per se in favor of a new global approach to containment. The PAU Visual Arts Section was one of the few U.S.-based institutions to carry on the type of inter-American cultural exchange that had been obtained during the Good Neighbor years through larger venues such as New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs. At the same time, it was ahead of the curve in experimenting with linkages between modernization theory and the arts, well before the Cuban Revolution (1959) once again pushed such projects to the fore of U.S. policy concerns." Fox, pg. 96

[87] Ibid, 96.

Szyszlo, and Botero because it was, in his own words, "exportable." While displaying enough individuality, works such as Botero's existed within U.S. and European dialogues on modernism without being overtly political. Fox does include that "in their native countries, however, the artists whom Gómez Sicre supported were rarely the alienated visionaries he made them out to be. They were active in generational debates about national identity and history…"[88] This speaks to how Cold War tensions in the Western Hemisphere led U.S. museums and galleries to promote a sense of cultural hegemony through the collecting of Latin American Art. As Delia Solomons so aptly described, "shared aesthetics became a useful metaphor for shared cultures, politics, and fates."[89] This formalist narrative pushed by Traba and Gómez Sicre allowed for works such as Botero's *Boy Playing Guitar* to be embraced by the U.S. art market.

The 1957 PAU show was well-reviewed, though largely overlooked. Most of his pieces were sold to OAS staff.[90] Botero was, however, introduced to Tana Gres whose new gallery would showcase Botero's work in the following year. Most importantly, Botero's first international exhibition in Washington D.C. forced the artist to confront trends in American modernism that proved difficult for him to fully embrace. He would spend the next several years trying to come to terms with the popularity of Abstract Expressionism. In her essay for the

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[88] Fox, "The PAU Visual Arts Section and the Hemispheric Circulation of Latin American Art during the Cold War," pg. 98.

[89] The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Latin American Art in the United States, ed. Edward J. Sullivan, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. "Hot Styles and Cold War: Collecting Practices at MoMA and Other Museums in the 6os" by Delia Solomons, pg. 44-55. Solomons examines MoMA specifically for its hand in promoting U.S. government policies on culture. "[MoMA]'s collecting practices during the 1960s are practically unknown. The scarcity of scholarship is surprising for several reasons, not the least of which is MoMA's position as arguably the US leader in the field of Latin American art in the 1930s and 40s and again since the 1990s… However, research into MoMA's engagement with LA during the Cold War has focused largely on the International Council's aggressive policy of sending US and European Art (particularly Abstract Expressionism) on extensive tours displaying US economic and cultural power across the Americas." pg. 46

[90] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 14.

catalogue of the exhibition *Fernando Botero* at the Hirshhorn Museum, Cynthia Jaffee McCabe explains that in Botero's first visit to Washington, he was benefited by a friendship with "Jose Bermudez, a painter from Bogota then working at the OAS, and his Argentine wife, Jenny, who was also an artist; 'they were fascinated by the American art, by Abstract Expressionism. We had long conversations, and I got to know more or less what it was all about.'"[91] This was his first in-person introduction to the Abstract Expressionist fads of the United States, inspiring him to take his first trip to New York City after the opening of the Pan American Union show.

In New York City, Botero visited several galleries displaying the work of Jackson Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists. It was at MoMA that he first encountered the work of Willem de Kooning whose paintings such as *Woman I* (1950-52; fig. 26) appealed directly to Botero's interest in figurative abstraction. The vibrant palette and violent gestural work of *Woman I* would resonate in Botero's paintings of the late fifties and early sixties. He returned to Bogotá with the goal of working through his own interests within the framework of this international aesthetic. Over the course of the next few years, his interest in the Italian Renaissance began to resurface but within Botero's continued plastic experimentation. He cites *Sleeping Bishop* (1957; fig. 27) as the first work to examine "the problem of portraying contemporary subject matter" through the use of clerical figures:

> I was completely involved and in love with the quattrocento. But of course I couldn't paint the personality of the quattrocento now. Priests were somehow contemporary but they were out of the middle ages.[92]

The work also demonstrates his engagement with contemporary form through the introduction of harsh brushwork, most noticeable on the bishop's face. He also allows bits of the canvas's texture to shine through on the bishop's slippers. This focus on dynamic gesture was directly

[91] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 14.
[92] Ibid.

adopted from the New York School, causing Traba and other critics to classify Botero as an Expressionist.[93] Traba praised his ability to make a name for himself abroad and to work within the visual dialogues of the Americans.

It was with these new violent and dynamic paintings that Botero re-entered the Washington D.C. art world with his second and third U.S. exhibitions at the Gres Gallery north of Dupont Circle. The Gres Gallery lived a short but surprisingly influential life between 1957 and 1962.[94] The Gallery was founded by John and Tana Gres and opened with a show on the Colombian artist Édgar Negret. Alongside Botero, it went on to introduce the work of Louise Nevelson, Grace Hartigan, Yayoi Kusama, and Antoni Tàpies. Tana Gres (neé de Gamaz) had immigrated from Cuba in 1936 and worked as an actress, journalist, and radio-broadcaster before opening the gallery with her husband. John Gres was also from Cuba, though they both met in New York City while working as Spanish translators for the radio program Voice of America during the second World War. Tana Gres was forced to retire in 1958 due to a heart condition, but the gallery maintained a focus on Latin American and global modern art. The Venezuela-born Olga Threadgill purchased the gallery alongside her husband and agreed to maintain a focus on contemporary art coming out of South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

The Gres Gallery's first exhibition of Fernando Botero, held in October of 1958, was a resounding success, almost selling out on its opening night.[95] McCabe claims *Boy with Mandolin* (the Hirshhorn's misnomer of *Boy Playing Guitar*[96]) was displayed in this first show, however

[93] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 82.
[94] Richard Kramer, "Gres Gallery, Pt.1," Rick on Theater, July 7, 2018.
[95] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 14
[96] In a letter to Mr. Euegene Kramer on April 23, 1979, Hirshhorn director Abram Lerner requested "Child with Mandolin" to be included in the museum's retrospective on Fernando Botero. A second request was sent by curator Cynthia Jaffee McCabe on August 28, 1979 in which she calls the painting "Boy with Mandolin"." Both of these titles are mistakes as the only Botero painting that was in the Kramer collection was of a boy playing an instrument with a distinct guitar shape, not a mandolin.

the Kramers bought the work in 1960 at the second Botero show at the Gres Gallery.[97] McCabe was correct in noting the painting's "bright and unusual" qualities that were similar to the works shown in 1958. *La Camera Degli Sposi (Homage to Mantegna)* was one of the pieces acquired in the 1958 show by an anonymous "USA businessman."[98] The work had previously won him first prize in the XI National Salón of Colombian Artists and the black and white photographs from the competition are all we have left of the painting.[99] However, the piece demonstrates how Botero utilized an Expressionist desecration of form through gestural brushwork while also appropriating Italian master works — a practice that he would soon become famous for. Washington D.C. columnists such as Leslie Judd Portner also took note of Botero's unique knack for volume:

> The love of the monumental is everywhere apparent. An apple or a guitar are painted as though they were mountains, full of dignity and size. Pots, lamps, and vases look like vessels fit for giants; a child's portrait has the look of a race of Gargantuas. It is perhaps in the religious works that this monumentality is most successfully expressed: in the "Homage to Mantegna," with its hierarchic figures, or in "The Archbishop," with his looming importance cloaked in shades of red and purple.[100]

However, critics in the United States did not acknowledge how Botero had incorporated his homeland into this work. "Direct reference to the culture of San Agustín in the painting of Botero was only detected by the Colombian critics," explains Padilla, "who began to comment on its relation to his totemic figures in *La Camera degli Sposi…"*[101] Botero would continue to make references to his homeland for the duration of his career. Colombia would be more overtly depicted in his 1959 Salón submission, *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* (1959, fig. 28) in which

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[97] The Kramers graciously provided me with an invoice showing that *Boy with a Guitar* was purchased on November 16, 1960 from the Gres Gallery for $350.00.
[98] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 14.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Leslie Judd Porter, "Good Shows at Jefferson and Gres," in *The Washington Post,* November 9, 1958.
[101] Padilla, 75.

the famous cyclist carries the Colombian flag as he plows through a pile of adversaries. It is a surprisingly violent scene for a moment regarded as a major victory in Colombian history. Juan Carlos Botero notes that *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* was unique in the context of his father's oeuvre, as it was the only event Fernando Botero depicted contemporaneously. If he did depict a historic event, it was most always done from memory.[102] Even more strange is a young girl in the pile of "contestants" carrying a bundle of flowers, who I will further expand upon in Chapter 3. Critic Casimiro Eiger was the first to note that she would become a motif in Botero's work of the period.[103]

A similar expressionist mess of flowers appears in the hands of *Mona Lisa Age 12* (1959, fig. 4), the most famous of the works completed between the two Gres Gallery shows. The painting would be singled out by curator Dorothy Miller for MoMA's collection, ultimately launching Botero into the international notoriety he possesses to this day.[104] Through Miller Botero became famous for his appropriations of Western art history, be it from Mantegna, Leonardo da Vinci, or Diego Velázquez in his *Niño de Vallecas* series. Botero claims that these pieces were his first foray towards something resembling an apolitical form of Pop Art. "Marta Traba likewise regarded it as an important contribution," explains Padilla, "insofar as it presaged a Colombian version of pop art and thus helped the younger generation attain an international position that was in step with the avant gardes of that time."[105] Younger Colombian Pop Artist Beatriz Gónzalez (b. 1938) cites Botero as the painter who paved the way for her own Pop

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[102] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," (Madrid: Ediciones el Viso, 2013), pg. 82.
[103] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 88. The third chapter will expand upon *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos.*
[104] The fact that MoMA purchased a figurative work that appropriated Leonardo da Vinci sent the art world into a tizzy, provoking even Donald Judd to write an attack in *Arts Magazine*. Sillevis, John. *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero.* Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006, pg. 22.
[105] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 88.

exploration saying that in these *Mona Lisas* "he had captured the whole of European culture and made it Colombian."[106]

In this period before the 1960 Gres Gallery show, Botero often transformed these canonical pieces of art history into chubby-faced children. Despite their rosy cheeks and rotund bodies, there's something unsettling about the ways in which they are rendered. *Boy Playing Guitar* is a perfect example of a Boterian child with his fuzzy eyes and slack face. Sullivan argued that the blank expressions are strikingly similar to the work of Venezuelan-American Marisol Escobar, and that in this Botero "adapts some of the formal qualities of international pop."[107] Yet he also continues to play with the trends of the New York School. The expressionist brushwork of this period is evident in *Niño de Vallecas (según Velázquez)* (1959, fig. 10) whose face and limbs appear to have been shredded into hundreds of strokes of vibrant color. In *Mona Lisa Age 12* the lower half of her body is almost entirely obscured by spatters of paint. McCabe claims that the *Niños* "reflect personal upheaval (the dissolution of Botero's marriage [to curator Gloria Zea]) and the unresolved impact of Abstract Expressionism,"[108] but I think such a statement is reductive. The *Niños* were also done in a single tumultuous month in Bogotá in 1959 as Botero tried to come to terms with many artistic influences and trends that seemed to go against his own impulses as an artist.

Working within American modernist trends had not been easy terrain for Botero to cover, despite the praise it earned him from Traba, Gómez Sicre, and other critics. His second Gres Gallery show introduced one of the most difficult periods in Botero's artistic career. While *Mona Lisa Age 12* had ushered him towards fame, his *Niños* series was met with contempt. Beatrice Perry, curator of the show, said that "only a few Washington collectors came to understand and

[106] Ibid.
[107] Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," pg. 53.
[108] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 15.

purchase a Niño."[109] The works were quite unsettling and Traba created a new term for works such as *Niño de Vallecas* and *Boy Playing Guitar* — feísmo or "uglyism." Padilla presumes that Traba did this in order to keep other critics from calling his figures "caricatures" which had been a common response to *La Camera degli Sposi.*[110] While gesturally violent and somewhat monstrous, the figures attempted a sense of humor and tenderness that didn't entirely translate to audiences in Washington, especially with the depictions of a disabled boy in *Niño de Vallecas.* Botero hated the term "uglyism:"

> I think all my paintings are monsters, but they are likeable monsters… When I deform a thing, I am solidly deforming it out of a painterly concern. I do not deform for the sake of deforming, to turn them into monsters, but because I am searching for tactile values, for the sensuality of form.[111]

Botero would continue to return to this interest in "sensuality of form" whenever criticized, though he later noted that there was a tension of irony, caricature, and politics in his work from the 1960s.[112] He would also later claim that he was never associated with Abstract Expressionism as a way of emphasizing his own originality, though evidence suggests otherwise. This "uglyism" was popular with Colombian critics nevertheless. Jorge Zalamea called his *Niños* "monstrous unborn children" that were rendered by an "excellent painter, truly original in his craftsmanship, concept of art and attitude toward living beings and things."[113]

In the United States, despite being welcomed by Gómez Sicre and the Gres Gallery, Botero faced some of the harshest criticism of his artistic career. While Traba considered him an Expressionist, those in New York did not:

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[109] Ibid, 14.
[110] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 83.
[111] Ibid, 83.
[112] Miriam Basilio, "Marisol's *LBJ* and Fernando Botero's *The Presidential Family*," in Latin American & Caribbean Art: MoMA at El Museo, ed. Fatima Bercht and Deborah Cullen, (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2004), pg. 125.
[113] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 90.

> At that moment, the School of New York was very heavy on you. If you weren't an Abstract Expressionist, you were not a painter and you didn't exist. Everyone was against me. I didn't have any friends, the whole atmosphere was hostile. And, of course, when you are struggling so hard against the whole thing, you don't have any strength to do your own work. The more you feel an audience behind you, the more you feel reassured, the more you do things that are bold. When you have everyone against you, you are working in empty space.

Grace Hartigan, also represented by the Gres Gallery, said that she defended Botero and Francis Bacon to the abstract artists while working in New York. She claimed that she "thought he had a unique vision, and that he was quite brave in preserving it and being solitary … This showed great strength."[114] In a letter to Perry and the Gres Gallery in 1958, Botero drew a cartoon of himself being literally shoved out of the United States (1958, fig. 29). His feeling unwelcome in the American art world was evident. Werner Spies and Mario Vargas Losa claimed the hostility in the United States was based in a fundamental aesthetic difference from Latin America:

> Botero advanced a visual polemic, in the form of 'grandiose fullness,' against the prudish denigration of the human body that is prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon protestant world: 'Seeking beauty in thinness is Western and modern, probably an Anglo-Saxon Protestant prejudice which certainly derives from Protestantism." Vargas Losa refers to this association, still common in Spanish-speaking countries, of hermosa with the roundness of a handsome, well-nourished person.[115]

Yet de Kooning was able to produce similar rotund figurative work within the Expressionist framework. It was more likely a bias against Spanish-speaking persons that prevented the New York School from accepting Botero. McCabe quoted Botero in her catalogue saying that he "knew many of the artists from South and Central America who faced, as he did, special discrimination in a city that dismissed anyone with a Spanish accent."[116] Xenophobia was rampant in the United States in the 1950s, especially towards Latin Americans. The mass

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[114] Grace Hartigan quoted in McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 15.
[115] Werner Spies, *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings,* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), pg. 22.
[116] McCabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 15.

migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States in the "Great Migration" between 1950 and 1960 caused a general anxiety in New York towards any Hispanic person. Anthropologist Bianca Gonzales-Sobrino saw that "in the pre-Commonwealth 1950s Puerto Ricans were overtly constructed as threats through common threat narratives like "stealing jobs", being a "governmental burden", and a "public health risk."[117] Botero himself claimed that many New Yorkers thought he was Puerto Rican and it proved to be "a handicap to be Latin American in New York."[118] Cold War tensions following the Cuban Revolution of 1959 merely exacerbated an animosity towards Latin Americans living in the United States.

An emphasis on form was therefore a survival tactic in a period in which United States collectors, curators, and critics were trying to emphasize American cultural hegemony through art. Solomons explains that galleries and "museums became privileged spaces where one could propagandize cohesion [in light of the Cuban Revolution and Cold War] in the face of actual rupture by displaying transnational cultural partnerships and parallel stylistic developments."[119] In order for his work to be commercially viable in what was then the center of the modern art world, Botero needed to emphasize how his work demonstrated a "parallel stylistic development" to those in the United States. Delving into expressionism appeared to be the answer.

The legacies of 1950s and 1960s Latin American art criticism has continued to impact the perception of Fernando Botero's work. Sullivan claims this is in part due to Marta Traba's early criticism of the artist, but the New York School and a landscape dominated by Greenbergian art

[117] Bianca Gonzalez-Sobrino, "Who's in conflict? Racialization of Puerto Ricans in relation to other Latinxs in the New York Times, 2010–2015," *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 2019.
[118] Botero quoted in Mcabe, *Fernando Botero,* pg. 15.
[119] Delia Solomons, "Hot Styles and Cold War: Collecting Practices at MoMA and Other Museums in the 6os" in *The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Latin American Art in the United States*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), pg. 44.

theory are also to blame. Sullivan was right in claiming that Botero's sense of humor was sacrificed by such criticism, especially his political and religious satire:

> This perception of Botero as an artist whose art simply records events in society without demonstrating any particularly critical attitude toward them appears to have been quickly absorbed into the common rhetoric concerning the artist's works as well as his *persona.* This implication of benign cynicism has become mixed, it seems to me, with the bemusement that many people feel over the artist's extraordinary commercial success to produce an attitude whereby any possibility of the communicative power of Botero's art beyond its formal qualities or potential for amusement is denied.[120]

In 1993 Jacqueline Barnitz published an essay calling Botero apolitical, explaining that while he might depict things such as *War* (1973; Fig. 30), he only explores aesthetic problems.[121] The period in which *Boy Playing Guitar* was painted has had a continued effect on how Botero's work is viewed. However, Botero was indeed interested in problems outside form. Even his work from the 1950s and 1960s such as *Boy Playing Guitar* represent an investment in interiority and politics beyond simple brushwork.

[120] Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," pg. 51
[121] Jacqueline Barnitz,"Neofiguration, Pop, and Environments in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, ed. Jaqueline Barnitz & Patrick Frank, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), pg. 255-283.

Chapter Three:
A Silent Song

"In the Andes, the music is so melancholy, so romantic and sad.
The guitars and the voices are filled with sadness,
and so are the subjects they sing about — lost love, death."[122]
— Fernando Botero

In an interview with Ana María Escallón for the book *Botero: New Works on Canvas* (1997), the artist emphasized that his guitars are not functional: "In my paintings, the musical instruments don't even have strings. How could they make a sound? Noise disturbs me when I am painting and I don't need background music."[123] As early as *Boy Playing Guitar,* Botero refused to include strings in his instruments. This aided in the stillness he sought to achieve in his work, as described by his son Juan Carlos Botero: "[Fernando Botero's] world is one without haste or travails, frozen in time, where the gestures or people do not express the speed of their actions, but instead, repose and tranquility, the charm of stillness and the instant magically detained for all eternity, just like the masterworks of the Renaissance."[124] Despite the title, to imagine the boy actually *playing* his guitar is an impossibility. The instrument appears to be merely a prop. Botero utilizes stillness and silence to leave room for plastic evaluation — without distraction. However, there are significant counterexamples to *Boy Playing Guitar* in which Botero chose to include guitar strings. *Masacre De Mejor Esquina* (1988; fig. 31) not only shows two guitars with strings, but bullets, in motion, passing through falling bodies. Botero chose to depict noise—something that "disturbs" him—in a notorious massacre at the height of one of Colombia's most violent periods. Guitars with or without strings, like all aspects of

[122] Botero quoted by David Elliot, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero,* ed. John Sillevis, (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 41.
[123] Anna María Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997), pg. 44
[124] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," (Madrid: Ediciones el Viso, 2013), pg. 172.

Botero's paintings, are not merely a site for formal exploration but carefully chosen elements by which Botero is able to communicate an investment in politics, violence, and memory.

Botero claimed to create guitars without strings and paintings without pathos: "Art is not psychoanalysis. For example, I admire Velazquez's painting, which makes its points without emotional commentary. I consider detachment admirable."[125] As discussed in the last chapter, Botero's attempts to detach himself from politics were, in part, a result of Latin American modern art criticism and Cold War trends in the United States art market. If he did depict violent scenes undeniably critical of the state of Colombian affairs as in *Apotheosis of Ramon Hoyos* (1959, fig. 28) or *Masacre de Mejor Esquina,* he would describe them as "detached" or emotionless. He claims to have achieved this by applying Boterismo indiscriminately across subjects, by finding visual pleasure in violence. "You start to paint the head of a dictator," he said of his process. "You begin to caress him, he appeals to you, and, touched, you give him a kiss."[126] While such a shocking statement appears to advocate for detached formalism, it also summarizes Botero's way of dealing with horror and displaying atrocities in the public sphere. Following Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject in *The Powers of Horror,* it is through beauty that spectators are better able to confront difficult subject matter without turning away in disgust.[127]

Botero's most frequently professed priority in art is to achieve beauty, sensuality, and pleasure. "The artist's function is to exalt life through sensuality," he explained, "to be communicated even if it is sometimes dull and devoid of interest. One way—not the only

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[125] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," pg. 27.
[126] Werner Spies, *Fernando Botero: Paintings and Drawings,* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992), pg. 9.
[127] Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," (New York: Columbia University, 1982).

one—of doing it is through the idea of volume."[128] Like sumptuous fruit, his rotund figures are rendered in delectably bright colors. This need to depict visual pleasure was a remnant of Botero's years studying Italian baroque and quattrocento painting techniques in Florence, when he focused on theoretical concepts promoted by Bernard Berenson and Roberto Longhi. Berenson condemned European modern art for what he saw as a refusal to strive towards beauty:

> "It is clear that if the highest good in the art of painting is the perfect rendering of form, movement, and space, painting could not decline while it still held to this good and never yielded ground… [Today] we care vastly more for the assertion of our individuality than perfection…. We prefer the new to the good and the beautiful."[129]

Botero took this challenge upon himself, seeking to emulate the success he saw in the Italian masters while working within visual dialogues of the mid-twentieth century. "I am a protest against modern painting," Botero claimed more than once, as if to further highlight that his preoccupations were all distinctly rooted in the theories of the old masters.[130]

However, Botero could not avoid the horror of contemporary life. In 1959—at the time that he painted *Boy Playing Guitar*—the artist made an overt statement about Colombian affairs in the painting *Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* (fig. 28). The famous cyclist had represented Colombia in the Olympics in 1956 and 1960, but Botero likely depicted this scene as a result of Hoyos' fifth win in the Vuelta a Colombia in 1958. Under Botero's brush, Hoyos rides over a mountain of corpses, some with the caps of other cyclists. The composition appears to have been inspired by *Dead Bishops* (1958; fig. 32), painted by Botero a year earlier. Art historian John Sillevis explains that *Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* evokes the battlefields of one of Botero's favorite Renaissance artists, Paolo Ucello, and that "it is clear that Botero began his commentary

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[128] Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* pg. 33.
[129] Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance,* (London: Oxford University Press,1930), pg. 330.
[130] *Fernando Botero: Celebración*, Fernando Botero, Lina Botero, and Mario Vargas Llosa, (Bilbao: La Fábrica, 2012).

on violence in modern society at an early stage of his artistic career."[131] In the *Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos,* Botero has taken a popular figure of Colombian nationhood and triumph and placed him atop a scene of death and destruction. The strange girl with a bouquet of flowers beneath Hoyos' outstretched hand likely represents the over 200,000 innocent civilian lives lost in *la Violencia.* 1958 was framed as a year of hope after a decade of violent conflict between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party.[132] Alberto Lleras Carmago took office in 1957, ushering in a period known as the "National Front" in which Conservative and Liberal parties agreed to rotate power after the military dictatorship of Gustavo Roja Pinilla. Historian Robert A. Karl describes the meaning of the truce of 1957-8:

> Amidst continued institution building, Colombians from all political stripes endeavored to cast violence out of the public realm, to fill Colombia's newly re-democratized political space with practices and cultures of peace. Provincial elites and backcountry leaders frequently made common ground on the question of regional and local progress, a confluence that defined the creole peace as not simply the absence of physical force, but also as a project for *convivencia* and an equitable prosperity. Over the past four decades, Colombian observers have come to see the closing years of the 1950s as merely a pause in an otherwise continuously bloody national story.[133]

Botero had begun painting in 1948, at the beginning of l*a Violencia*, and was now working from what appeared to be the other side of the civil war. *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* shows the aftermath of the battle that was the past decade, the horrors committed under Pinilla, with a sign of hope and national pride emerging triumphantly through it all, eyes straight ahead.

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[131] John Sillevis, *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero,* (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006),
pg. 66.
[132] At the start of 1958 there was an average of 550 monthly homicide rates attributed to partisan violence. By the end of the year that average had dropped to a little over 200 homicides a month. Robert A. Karl, "Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia," (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 99.
[133] Robert A. Karl, "Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia," (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 77.

Here we return to Botero's understanding of memory. He often spoke about painting as a personal act of memory, of recalling his childhood and the iconography of Medellín, but also he understood the importance of art in the context of broader cultural memory. "The best proof that art serves memory is Picasso's *Guernica*," Botero stated. "At that time, what happened to the Spanish people was atrocious, but it was just one of thousands of atrocities that occurred during that long and bloody civil war. And yet, we remember the tragedy of Guernica thanks to Picasso's canvas."[134] In this regard, Botero understands the role of performative memory in shaping future narratives. Mieke Bal, in her essay "Memories in the Museum: Preposterous Histories for Today," explores how artists are able to tap into cultural memory by entering the museum or gallery space.[135] Works of art have the potential to link history to the present, and the present to the future via memory formation through the understanding "that the actual museum situation in which we now view the works is also the institutional setting in which the history of art can be accessed and pressured to mean what the authorities who manage culture for us want it to mean."[136] Botero had always been a museum's artist—in his early twenties he chose to spend more time learning from the masters in the Prado than his professors at San Fernando Academy in Madrid.[137] He painted with the intention of being exhibited in museum spaces, of inserting himself within the canon of art history. This ambition accounts for many of his appropriation works and his investment in capturing the essence of old masters: "If I paint a picture that has the same theme as used by a famous painter, I am part of the same tradition."[138] Entering the museum with pieces directly in dialogue with European masters, Botero could strategically insert

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[134] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," pg. 88.
[135] *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Mieke Bal, Memories in the Museum
[136] Ibid, 173.
[137] Sillevis, John. *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero.* Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006. "Botero's Baroque" by John Sillevis, pg. 24
[138] Fernando Botero quoted in Sillevis, John. *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero,* pg. 18.

Colombian history and Colombian painters into larger narratives on the human condition. *La Violencia*, like Guernica, could be immortalized within the international public consciousness.

Botero found initial difficulty in immortalizing his more overtly political work. *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* was largely under-acknowledged at the 12th Colombian National Salon in 1959, taking on less attention than Botero's other submission, a simple charcoal sketch entitled *Woman with flower.*[139] The critic Casimiro Eiger said *Woman with flower* "not only deserved all the prizes but also a prominent place in any museum in the world" for its explosive formal qualities.[140] *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos* was only singled out by Traba for ushering in an era of Colombian Pop Art and nothing more.[141] The reception of *Apotheosis* demonstrates how Botero was still being viewed within an international modernist framework as discussed in Chapter 2. His success hinged upon Traba's approval, and her writings made it clear that any attempt at political commentary would be overlooked. Therefore, despite a longstanding interest in violence, his paintings that incorporated violent subject matter in the 1950s and 1960s—commentaries on contemporary Colombia society—were discussed by the artist and critics primarily within the dialogue of formal exploration. In 1969, Traba wrote that Botero "registers what is happening [in society] only in an anecdotal way and he is completely skeptical regarding his own ability to change it."[142] While Botero's belief that he cannot change history may be true, the decision to depict atrocities is inherently political. Despite Traba's convictions, Botero had a distinct purpose in choosing the subjects that he did.

Even in periods of economic struggle for the artist, such as the 1960s when Botero moved to New York, he was able to demonstrate political awareness as he did in *Apotheosis.* Sullivan, in

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[139] The drawing itself is now lost and there are no known photographs of the work.
[140] Eiger quoted in Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 86.
[141] Ibid, 88.
[142] Traba quoted in Sullivan, "Fernando Botero: Critical Strategies," pg. 51.

his essay outlining how Traba's early writings on Botero incorrectly framed the artist as non-ideological in the eyes of later critics, focused on the 1969 painting *The Butcher's Table* (1969; fig. 33):

> Deceptively benign at first glance, this picture provokes a tacit shock in the viewer whose gaze inevitably focuses on the sharp steel juxtaposed with vulnerable flesh of the exterior and interior of the already dismembered body. Painted when the artist was living in New York at the height of the Vietnam War, the news of which resonated with his experiences of the violence in his own country, *The Butcher's Table* makes a restrained but distinct reference to the uneasy sensation of living amidst constant danger and subtly underscores the ever-present potential of pain.[143]

There is something undeniably human about the pork head. His eyes make direct contact with the viewer and his grinning mouth appears to be within seconds of munching down on a shrunken apple. This human connection with the animal paired with the lingering threat of the knives nearby brings about an early instance of Botero attempting to make visual the horrors of the mid-20th century. According to Kristeva, abjection can be described as "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles," much like a pig's head grinning like a human being and swarming with flies.[144] Corpses like that of the pig in Botero's *The Butcher's Table* are especially important sites for abjection, as a memento mori that threatens to transgress the separation that exists between the self and the other. The viewer is forced to identify with the pig through his human-like qualities, but quickly becomes horrified by the glistening and dangerous knives next to the pork head that is also their own. "Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects."[145] It is difficult to look into the rolling eyes of a severed head and agree with Botero that his art is detached from any emotional commentary. Focusing on dismemberment also alludes to *La Violencia* as many of the victims from this period were quartered and beheaded. Political Science Professor Cristina Rojas and Anthropologist Daniel Tubb explained that paramilitary groups in

[143] Sullivan, Critical Strategies, pg. 54
[144] Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," pg. 4.
[145] Ibid, pg. 1.

La Violencia used mutilated corpses as a terror tactic: "death and mutilation were more than the physical act of ending biological life; processes of mutilation and dismembering were the language in which politics was conducted."[146] Dismemberment, this political tactic that became synonymous with the period, features heavily in Botero's work such as *The Butcher's Table* or *Teresita the Dismembered* (1963).[147]

Abjection, as a human reaction, is manifested in vomiting or looking away — removing oneself from a site of horror. Botero, as an artist wishing to immortalize atrocities, cannot always paint disgust. In most of his work he attempts to let beauty supersede horror, to prevent the viewers from averting their gaze. In a 1996 essay Jacqueline Barnitz accurately asserted that "Botero's figures were endowed with the Dionysiac sensuality that conveyed enjoyment and pleasure regardless of the subject, instead of the Baconesque, tortured appearance of living in some existential hell."[148] However, Barnitz overlooks key components of Botero's work in writing that "Botero is in no way a political artist… [he] utilizes such themes as points of departure for the investigation of aesthetic problems, or in order to play on the subject and style of an earlier master, and not for the purpose of condemning political occurrences."[149] Botero documented violence as it followed him from *La Violencia* in Colombia into the United States during the Vietnam War and eventually the Iraq War in the twenty-first century. Even as a roaming expatriate, Botero could not avoid the universal horrors of the human condition. Juan Carlos Botero summarized his father's philosophy: "In art, the subject matter or story can be offensive, but not the esthetic execution, because then, the work could not be appreciated and we

[146] Cristina Rojas and Daniel Tubb, "La Violencia in Colombia, through Stories of the Body," *Bulletin of Latin American research,* 32.s1 (2013), pg. 135.
[147] This painting is currently in a private collection and I could not obtain images of it.
[148] *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* by Jaqueline Barnitz & Patrick Frank, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), "Neofiguration, Pop, and Environments in the 1960s and 1970s," pg. 277.
[149] Ibid.

would simply discard it as a failure…"[150] The sensuality of Fernando Botero's figures was the very aspect of his work that allowed him to exhibit paintings of atrocities. Beauty was the means by which he could make images of violence simultaneously digestible and memorable.

Violence, like memory, became a thread throughout Botero's career from his earliest work such as *Woman Crying* (1949; fig. 14) to his famous series on the Abu Ghraib human rights atrocities executed by U.S. soldiers decades later. In 1997 when Escallón asked the artist "what difference is there between the young painter then and the painter now?" Botero replied:

> Basically we are the same, because I believe more in conviction and affirmation than in evolution. In the final analysis, the great painters of history, rather than trying to change, sought to become more profound… For example, looking at Caravaggio's work we are aware of his concept that painting should take its inspiration directly from reality, where light is the basic element. He always stressed that idea to its ultimate consequences.[151]

This quote is not only applicable to Botero's consistent use of volume, vibrant colors, and lack of shadow — the artist became bolder in depicting contemporary scenes of violence over the progression of his career. In the 1960s, he focused on what Juan Carlos Botero called "bloody episodes from Colombian mythology (some from the crime pages of that period's newspapers)" such as *Teresita the Dismembered* (1963) and *The Murder of Rosa Calderón* (1969).[152] In the seventies, after living in New York and Paris, he expanded his interest in violence to include international events. *War* (1973; fig. 30) exhibits the logical conclusion of Botero's fixation on compositions of piled bodies that was first displayed in *Dead Bishops* and *Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos.* The scene was inspired by headlines of the Yom Kippur War but, as David Ebony acknowledges, "the image also alludes to "La Violencia."[153] Figures from all walks of life,

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[150] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," pg. 100.
[151] Anna María Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997), 27.
[152] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," pg. 82.
[153] Ebony, pg. 84. "...a period of political turmoil in Colombia in the late 1940s — formative years for Botero — which left more than 300,000 persons dead or missing."

genders, and ages lay nude or clothed, dead or dying, on a mountain of flags and money. Botero felt a need to connect the Yom Kippur War to more personal scenes of violence in order to bring greater conviction into his work. "The artist who seeks to create a work of general and 'universal' art is committing an error," he explained to Escallón. "That is the problem of international art today. That art only touches a very small group. [Universality is achieved] only when he is honest with his own community."[154]

This theme of drawing upon the atrocities featured in international headlines continued into Botero's works of the early twenty-first century. Yet, perhaps due to Botero's reputation as an anti-political artist, his *Abu Ghraib* series garnered a lot of critical attention. A substantial amount of scholarly work has explored Botero's series on the human rights abuses committed by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. Photos of prisoners being subjected to physical and psychological torture circulated in the press causing an international outcry. Fernando Botero read Seymour Hersch's article "Torture at Abu Ghraib" in May of 2004, sending the artist into a subsequent spiral of obsession over the horror:

> Months later, while flying back to Paris, [Botero] looked over the newspapers and magazines he had purchased for the trip and found another article about the goings on at that sinister Iraqi prison. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. He was gripped with such volcanic fury that he grabbed a sketchbook and his pencils right there, he began the first sketches for what would become his obstinate and frenetic obsession for the next fourteen months: his most valiant and controversial series of paintings, to which he gave the straightforward title: *Abu Ghraib.* The cause of his rage — and he shared it with almost the entire civilized world — was that this was not simply an isolated group of perverse mischief under their bosses' noses. It was something much more complex.[155]

In a single year Botero produced fifty different paintings and drawings of the Abu Ghraib photographs and transcribed accounts of specific torture. The series constituted some of the most graphic work of his career as the Boterian figures endure physical, psychological, and sexual

[154] Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* pg. 42.
[155] Juan Carlos Botero, "The Art of Fernando Botero," pg. 89.

abuse. He was very blatant about the works serving a political function, that they were "both a broad statement about cruelty and at the same time an accusation of U.S. policies."[156] Yet Botero still maintains his interest in beauty throughout the series. He focuses on pleasing compositions and his characteristically bright color scheme as in *Abu Ghraib* (2005; fig. 34). The painting shows a male prisoner beaten by US soldiers and humiliated in bright pink lingerie. He is tied to the prison bars in a position reminiscent of the crucifixion. Critic David Ebony reminds us that "the majority of prison inmates certainly did not possess the beefy bodies that Botero depicts. The bulky forms, however, suggest a psychological and moral weightiness that commands, if it does not overwhelm, their confined spaces."[157] Returning an iota of dignity to the prisoners while not overwriting the horror of the event, Botero attempts to keep his viewers' attention. He confronts abjection by balancing terror with beauty. One of the ways he achieves this is through a conscious separation between the self and the other, the viewer and the prisoners. Eugenio di Stephano links this to Michael Fried's concept of absorption, which is useful to quote at length here:

> What these prisoners—who are utterly absorbed in their own reality—reveal, and what these visual barriers reconfirm, is less a physical or emotional distance than a conceptual distance that functions to reinforce a space for the work of art. Indeed, these figures, who turn figuratively from the photos and literally from the beholders, serve to better delineate and define the aesthetic proper. As such, we might say that Botero's Abu Ghraib finds its theoretical equivalent in what Michael Fried has called absorption. In his 1980 book Absorption and Theatricality, Fried examines a period of French painting that centers on the work of Diderot, and how this shift away from the beholder came to be a primary concern for painters of this period. Fried describes absorption as paintings that "treated the beholder as if he were not there." [158]

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[156] Botero quoted in *Botero Abu Ghraib,* essay by David Ebony, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 2006, pg. 12.
[157] David Ebony, *Botero Abu Ghraib,* pg. 10
[158] Di Stefano, Eugenio. "What Can a Painting Do?: Absorption and Aesthetic Form in Fernando Botero's "Abu Ghraib" as a Response to Affect Theory and the Moral Utopia of Human Rights." *MLN* 129, no. 2 (2014): 417.

The figures of Botero's Abu Ghraib series are nearly all blindfolded and never engage with the viewer. They are completely isolated in their own horrific reality. This, coupled with Botero's interest in sensuality, creates a non-confrontational space. Absorption therefore counteracts the abject nature of these human rights atrocities, forcing viewers to continue looking.

The *Abu Ghraib* series was certainly not the first of Botero's attempts to represent victims of atrocities. Ebony recognized Botero's history of painting what he called "the downtrodden, the underdog, and the Everyman."[159] His interest in highlighting common civilians in scenes of violence is evident in *Masacre de Mejor Esquina* (1988; fig. 31) in which an innocent party of musicians and party goers are murdered by paramilitary forces with machine guns.[160] Twenty-seven people were killed that Easter Sunday in 1988. Botero paints machine gun rounds in quick succession as they slice through dancing bodies and bottles of liquor. A guitar's neck is snapped; whatever joyous song that had filled the room moments before has now been silenced. *Masacre de Mejor Esquina* exemplifies how Botero includes guitars in his compositions as a focal point for emotion as it draws upon a common, everyday scene of Andean music. Figures such as *Boy Playing Guitar* represent the national music of Colombia, but in *Mejor Esquina* this symbol of the people has been rendered voiceless. Botero chose to specifically depict the guitar players and dancers who had been massacred in *Mejor Esquina* in order to highlight how the Colombia of Botero's childhood had been destroyed by rampant paramilitary violence following *La Violencia*.

Art historian David Elliott emphasized this theme that "many of Botero's works may be regarded as an elegy for a way of life that has vanished — a time of relative innocence when

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[159] David Ebony, *Botero Abu Ghraib,* pg. 10.
[160] Jaqueline Barnitz, "Neofiguration, Pop, and Environments in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* by Jaqueline Barnitz & Patrick Frank, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

conflicts were fewer and families from the town, within the space of a few minutes, could picnic on the grass of the Andean foothills and look back over the rooftops of the village they had just left. But within this idyllic, half-remembered landscape — within the ripe fruit of memory, the worms of anger and melancholy are gorged."[161] *Boy Playing Guitar* plays into this theme of a beautiful memory of an innocent scene with dark undertones. The young musician stares straight ahead, pretending to stroke strings that never existed. He appears to be re-enacting the motions of a guitar player—he's stuck with useless muscle memory. The absence of strings emphasizes a disconnect between reality and memory. "I never use models," he explained. "I only use my imagination. I am a Latin American and my paintings demonstrate this."[162] Nostalgia is central to Botero, whether it is nostalgia for European old masters or scenes from the Colombia of his youth. Botero often felt discontent with the contemporary world, whether it was the formal trends of the day or the political turmoil that threatened to decimate his homeland. As early as 1960, Botero was painting musicians and clergy as figures that could exist out of time: "The reason I painted priests is very clear. I was completely involved and in love with the quattrocento. But of course I couldn't paint the personality of the quattrocento now. Priests were somehow contemporary but they were out of the middle ages."[163] Priests, bishops, guitarists, little girls with bouquets—these figures served as images of continuity in an era of turmoil.

It is important to emphasize that even these simple paintings such as *Boy Playing Guitar* are not merely the beautiful scenes upon which Botero could experiment with new formal influences gleaned from Tamayo or de Kooning. The choice of subject matter is of equal importance. Botero found value in the composition of *Boy Playing Guitar* as he continued with

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[161] David Elliott, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," in *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero,* ed. John Sillevis, (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 2006), pg. 41.
[162] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 120.
[163] Botero quoted in McCabe, pg. 14

different iterations of the same scene as seen in *Man with a Guitar* (fig. 5; 1982). Both paintings depict a seated figure with a guitar in his lap and a fedora on his head. The figures stare straight ahead while plucking at invisible strings. They also both have two eyebrows of different colors, a solution Botero found to not depict the hat's shadow, as avoiding shadow was a major formal concern for him.[164] However, *Man with a Guitar* appears to be an expansion upon *Boy*. Botero was not confined by Expressionism in the later work and was better able to articulate the man's clothing and surroundings. The guitarist is framed by cigarette butts, green apples, a parrot, and what could either be a plantain or a banana. These elements are all to underscore how *colombiano* the scene is, that it comes directly from Botero's past.

The folk songs of Antioquia were something Botero looked back on fondly and took great interest in: "the music is so melancholy, so romantic and sad. The guitars and the voices are filled with sadness, and so are the subjects they sing about—lost love, death."[165] In contrast his paintings of guitarists are mostly unemotional, their facial muscles completely slack. The *Boy Playing Guitar* has no song, no melancholy tune. His eyes are equally hollow and devoid of emotion. Botero is able to achieve some sense of detachment in *Boy*, perhaps as a reminder that he is forever distanced from the Colombia of his youth when he spent his days painting the lively musicians, partygoers, and prostitutes of the red-light district of Medellín. "It was an easy-going place; class lines blurred in a sort of never-ending carnival, a permanent street party. I sometimes [painted the bordellos and parties] and felt like I was the local Toulouse-Lautrec."[166] It is possible

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[164] In an interview with Escallon he said "There is a method that Roberto Longhi calls 'prospective form-color synthesis,' which was used by painters in the quattrocento. It is a way of drawing the outline that accentuates the perspective and produces a sensation of volume. Volumes scarcely require shadow. There are very flat colors in Piero della Francesca, for example — a quality that makes him quite an up-to-date colorist and one of much importance in contemporary art." 29

[165] Elliott, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," pg. 41.

[166] Escallón, *Botero: New Works on Canvas,* pg. 13.

that Botero paints memory because he is not only physically distant from his past as an expatriate, but because, through his interest in violence, he is keenly aware of how fragile certain ways of life can be. According to Botero, "art continues a common remembrance or testimony [or leaves a permanent] accusation."[167] His works on personal memory serve to immortalize the day-to-day scenes of Antioquia but also serve as a permanent accusation against the rampant violence he saw in Colombia and on the global scale. Botero believed that in order to be an ethical artistic, one had an obligation to depict the atrocities of life:

> Painters have no other reason to paint than to create a world. Goya created one. But painters capable of doing so are rare. Because such a world must be terribly severe and coherent. And, at the same time as a painter must be uncompromising as to what constitutes this world, the world must make you feel welcome through its poetry. In order to meet this challenge you have to be radical, sectarian. Which I am. And which I have to be when it comes to painting.[168]

Botero believed the artist should be willing to paint horror and beauty simultaneously. Only then could his work, and his values by proxy, enter the museum and the annals of history. It is difficult to call any Botero painting truly joyous as he always includes elements of melancholy; flies linger on fruit, wallpaper begins to peel, and boys play guitars without strings.

[167] Elliott, "A Painter of Lost and Angry Pictures," pg. 35.
[168] Edward J. Sullivan and Jean-Marie Tasset, *Fernando Botero: Monograph & Catalogue Raisonné, Paintings 1975-1990,* (Lausanne: Acatos Publisher, 2000), pg. 60.

Conclusion

As a painting left undocumented and out of the public eye for sixty years, *Boy Playing Guitar* is a crucial addition to our understanding of the prolific artist Fernando Botero. It was painted in a period of uncertainty for Botero, as he tried to establish himself globally while trying to navigate modern art trends within his own personal style. A thorough examination of *Boy Playing Guitar* reveals the ambitions of a young artist beginning to articulate beliefs he would maintain for the duration of his career, and how global politics can impact a specific period in an artist's life.

Chapter One argues that Botero's work directly hinges on his biography, influencing both his style and subject matter. The chapter contextualizes *Boy Playing Guitar* stylistically by walking the reader through the many influences that lead to the artist's 1960 painting. It highlights how the painting is a prime example of one of Botero's earliest experiments in his iconic voluminous figuration. The painting therefore gives insight into how Botero began to merge diverse influences in order to form his own visual language. Chapter One also demonstrates how Botero's identity as a Colombian was central to his subject matter. Images of his past appear throughout his oeuvre as an act of performative memory, as evidenced by the common Andean scene of the guitar player.

Chapter Two acknowledges the afterlife of *Boy Playing Guitar,* examining how the work was able to enter the Washington D.C. art market to be eventually purchased by the Kramer family. I also elaborated on Edward J. Sullivan's argument that current criticism of Botero's work as anti-ideological stems from Marta Traba's influence more so than the artist's own intentions. The style and presentation of *Boy Playing Guitar* is just as much a product of the

political climate in Colombia and the United States during the late fifties and early sixties as it is a product of Botero's own beliefs.

Chapter Three places *Boy Playing Guitar* within the artist's entire oeuvre, comparing it to works completed decades later. Many elements of the work align with Botero's lifelong philosophies on art — both his plastic beliefs and his conception of art's role in society. In this chapter, I explore the question of *why* Botero chooses strange, sometimes violent subject matter and how he navigates justifying his iconic volume when dealing with horrific subjects. I am unaware of any scholars who have explored Botero's relationship with abjection specifically. I conclude that the artist is aware of the human reaction to horror and thus uses his style to make his art palatable enough to be considered in the public sphere.

This thesis is only one step in challenging the notion that Botero's work is somehow frozen, only focused on mimicking the past rather than truly engaging with contemporary issues. The painting *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos,* for example, has been understudied and I believe it holds rich insight into Botero's relationship with violence and nationhood. I was only able to briefly mention the work, but I believe further study is necessary. Because *Apotheosis*, like *Boy Playing Guitar,* comes from a formative period for Botero, it has been sidelined in many studies of the artist. Christian Padilla's book *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963)* was the first in-depth analysis of Botero's earliest artistic output, yet he acknowledges that "many sources which would be very important for a better understanding of this period are still lost."[169] *Boy Playing Guitar* is only one of many early Botero paintings to have been hidden in a private collection. Botero's first *Camera degli Sposi* painting, for example, was sold to an unknown businessman and is only represented by a black and white photograph in the artist's catalogue

[169] Padilla, *Botero: The Search for a Style (1948-1963),* pg. 159.

raisonné. I hope my thesis is not the only addition to our understanding of Botero's early career, but merely one of many more to come.

Fig. 1. Fernando Botero, *Boy Playing Guitar,* 1960.

Fig 2. Fernando Botero with *Camera degli Sposi (Homage to Mantegna) I,* 1958.

Fig. 3. Alejandro Obregón, *The Dead Student (The Vigil),* 1956.

Fig. 4. Fernando Botero, *Mona Lisa Age 12,* 1959.

Fig. 5 Fernando Botero, *Man with Guitar,* 1982.

Fig. 6. Fernando Botero, *Nuncio,* 1958.

Fig. 7. Fernando Botero, *Don Niño Bufón,* 1957.

Fig. 8. Fernando Botero, *Bufón,* 1957.

Fig. 9. Fernando Botero, *Crucifix,* 2000.

Fig. 10. Fernando Botero, *El Niño de Vallecas (after Velázquez),* 1959.

Fig. 11. Fernando Botero, *Untitled,* 1948.

Fig. 12. Fernando Botero, *Untitled,* 1948.

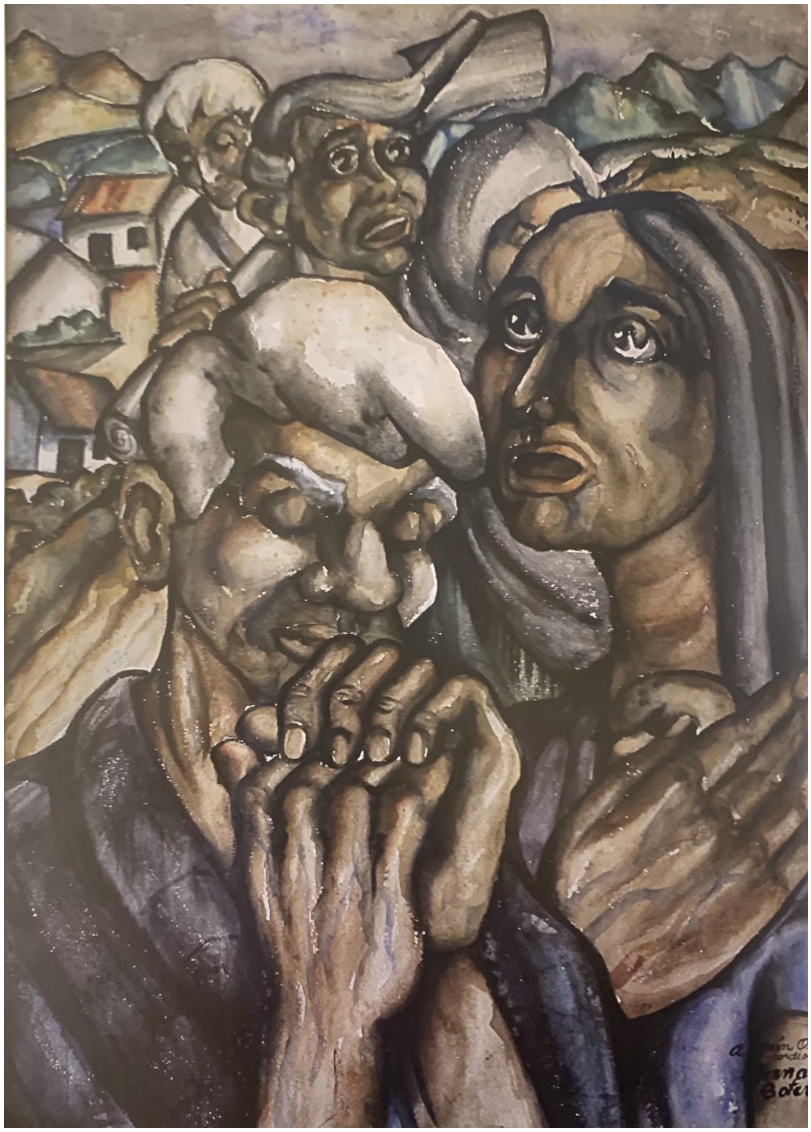

Fig. 13. Fernando Botero, *Prayer,* 1949.

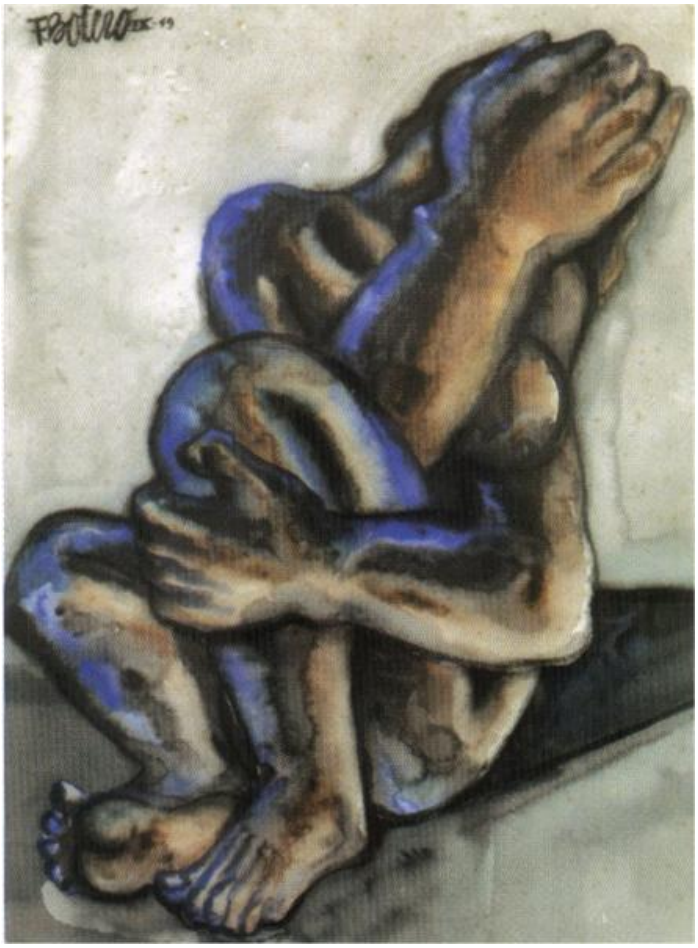

Fig. 14. Fernando Botero, *Woman Crying,* 1949.

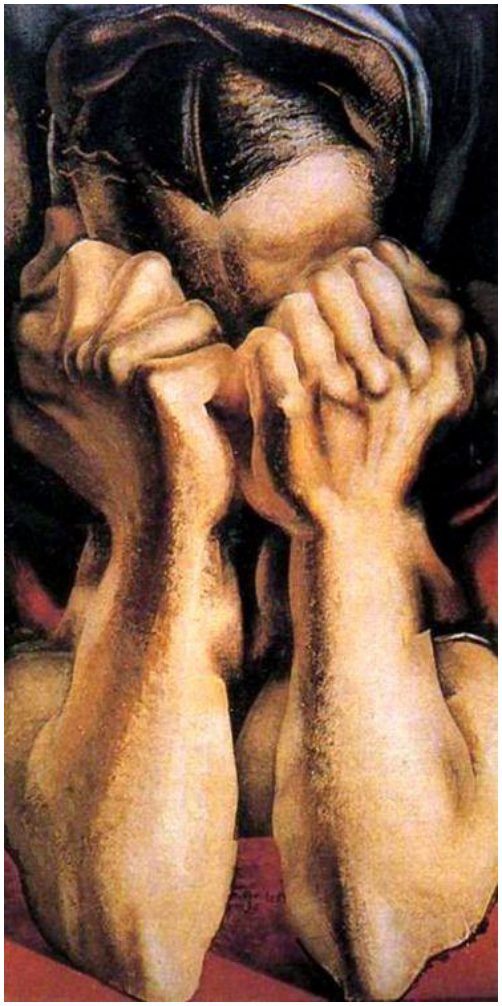

Fig. 15. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Sob,* 1939.

Fig. 16. Fernando Botero, *Frente al Mar,* 1952.

Fig. 17. Paul Gauguin, *La Orana Maria (Hail Mary),* 1891.

Fig. 18. Fernando Botero, *Horses on the beach,* 1953.

Fig. 19. Fernando Botero, *Urban Landscape of Florence,* 1954.

Fig. 20. Fernando Botero, *Yellow,* 1956.

Fig. 21. Fernando Botero, *Still life with guitar,* 1957.

Fig. 22. Fernando Botero, *Still Life with Mandolin,* 1956.

Fig. 23. Fernando Botero, *The Musicians,* 1979.

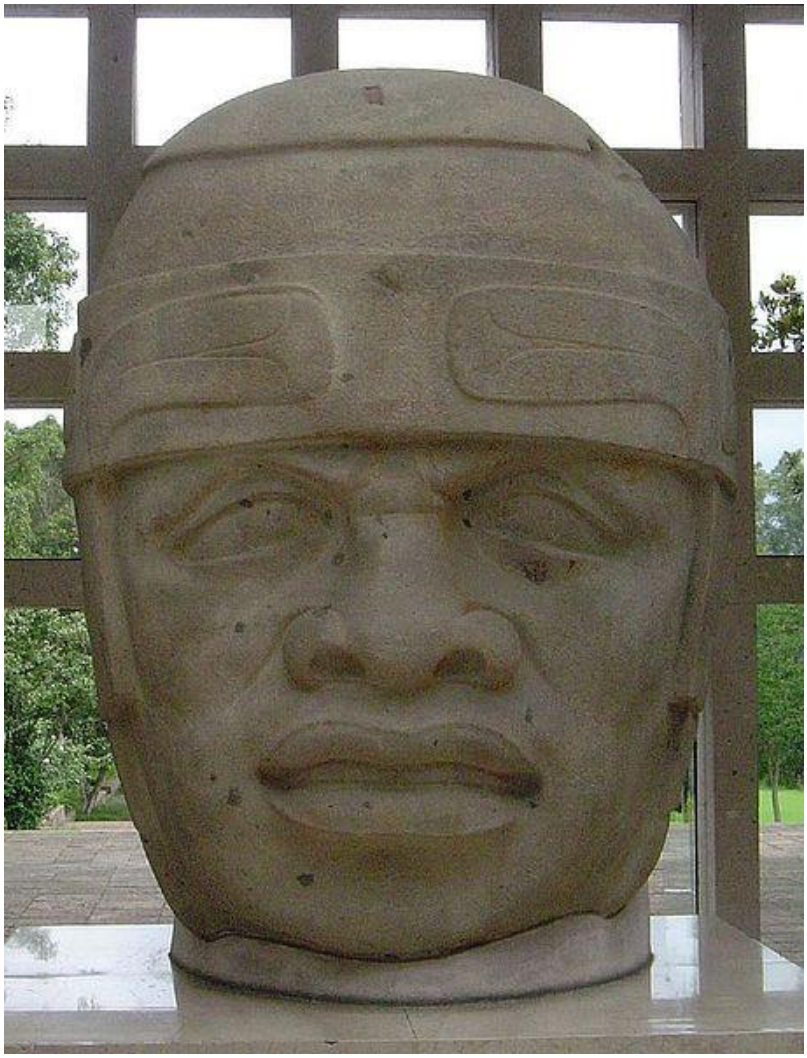

Fig. 24. Olmec, Colossal Head 8, San Lorenzo, 1200-600 BCE, Formative.

Fig. 25. Fernando Botero, *Still Life,* 1957.

Fig. 26. Willem de Kooning, *Woman I,* 1950-52.

Fig. 27. Fernando Botero, *Sleeping Bishop,* 1957.

Fig. 28. Fernando Botero, *The Apotheosis of Ramón Hoyos,* 1959.

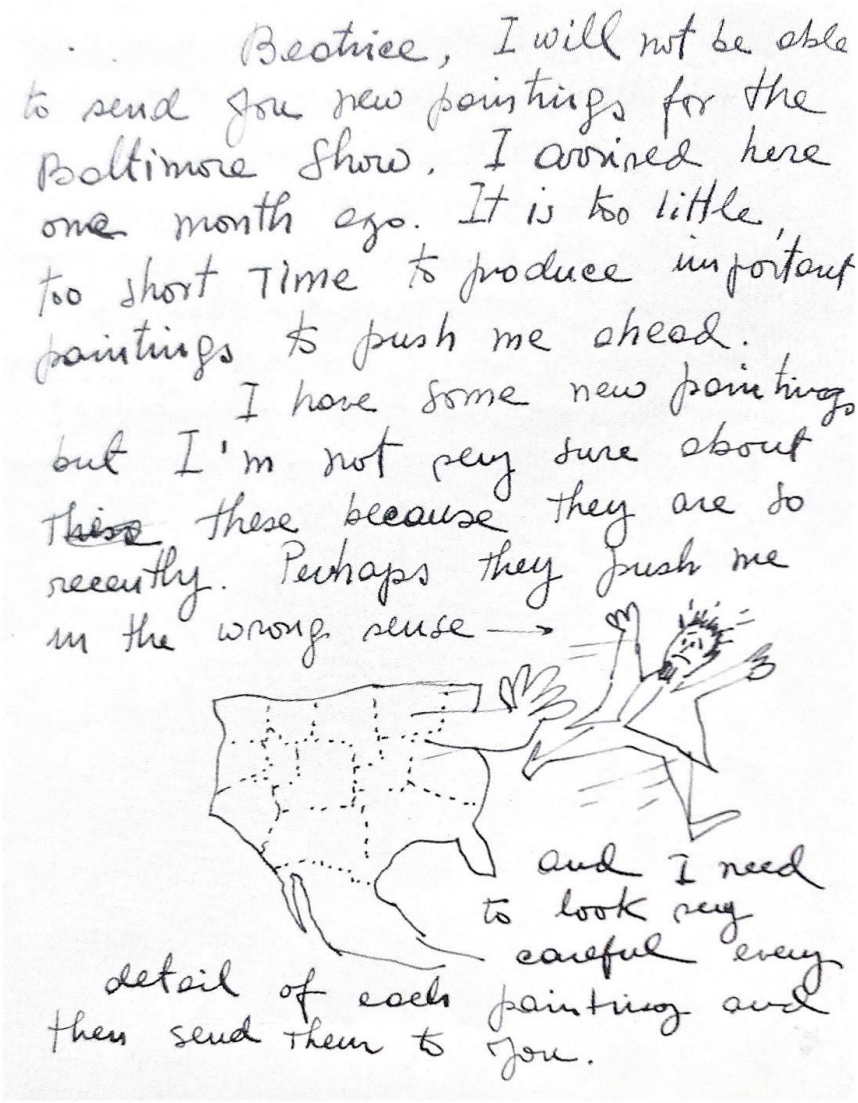

Fig. 29. Fernando Botero, Letter to Beatrice Perry of the Gres Gallery, 1958.

Fig. 30. Fernando Botero, *War*, 1973.

Fig. 31. Fernando Botero, *Masacre De Mejor Esquina*, 1988.

Fig. 32. Fernando Botero, *Dead Bishops,* 1958.

Fig. 33. Fernando Botero, *The Butcher's Table,* 1965.

Fig. 34. Fernando Botero, *Abu Ghraib,* 2004.

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