Fernando Botero

This paper was completed as an Honors Increment assignment for ART 217 Survey of World Art, part II (1450 to the present).

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Fernando Botero

Fernando Botero, the Colombian artist best known for his robust, inflated forms and exaggerated human figures, is both living history, and a living legend. The art of Botero can be seen in a variety of scenarios, from museum and exhibitions to the streets. His high visible profile has made his art both popular and commercial (Rodriguez 94). Botero’s work is widely known, revered, paraphrased, imitated and even copied. It is very easy to identify the works of this artist, due to the characteristic rounded and sensuous forms of his human figures, animals and even still life and landscapes. Botero is seen as one of the greatest Latin American artists alive, and is considered a cultural hero. In his native Colombia, Fernando Botero is often seen more as a figure of pop-culture than as an artist. The power of Botero’s images is what makes us change the perception of his work from repetitive fat figures, to paintings that deal with issues at the core of Latin America (Hodgson 6).

The art of Botero has become popular, and his name is normally used to describe a man, woman or other animate or inanimate thing that has large proportions. Since everything that Botero creates is considered fat, he has made this characteristic his trade mark. His huge sculptures can be admired in many prestigious streets all over the world and the price of his paintings are skyrocketing. It is curious how there are “Botero women” but also “Botero fruits”, all of them revealing their large voluptuousness and exaggeration of the form.
Botero is comfortable with a large range of personalities, from bullfighters to nuns and even contemporary famous people. There have been numerous exhibitions of Botero’s work all around the world. His monumental sculptures have become very well known due to the fact that they are exhibit in the street of large cities. For this reason, his art has become popular visual culture and it is tangible present to all types of people (Drury 58).

Botero was born in Medellin, in the department of Antioquia, Colombia, on April 19th, 1932. His father was a traveling salesman who suddenly passed away of a heart attack when the artist was only two years old. This tragic event left Fernando with a permanent emptiness that is reflected in some of his works. The city where Botero grew up is very different from the Medellin that we can relate to today. Before, it used to be a small provincial town, where the Catholic Church played an important role in people’s lives. During his childhood, Fernando Botero went to a very strict Jesuit school, and began to draw and paint as a hobby. Later, he became fanatic of bullfights; therefore he began to paint scenes of this sport at age 13, and sold them outside the arena for only five pesos. He spent nearly two years of his professional life, painting only bullfight scenes (Escallon 52).

The beginning of Botero’s career began with his first exhibition in Bogotá at age 19, where all of his pieces were sold. However, the artist became the biggest collector of his own work and it was hard for him to get rid of his paintings, even though he was offered great amounts for them. As many other artists, Botero studied art in Europe, at the Academy of San Fernando in Madrid,
where he adapted the style of Velazquez and Goya. Additionally, he learned the fresco techniques of Italian masters in Florence (Escallon 52).

However, the painting style that Botero is best known for emerged many years later. After the early 1960s, Botero developed a characteristic form of painting which he has remained faithful. This style is characterized by “inflated, rounded forms, painted with smooth, almost invisible brushstrokes, puffing up to an exaggerated size human figures, natural features, and objects of all kinds, celebrating the life within them while mocking their role in the world” (Escallon 52). The exhibition that established Fernando Botero’s reputation as a major painter worldwide was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he presented his work titled *Inflated Images* at an exhibition in 1969 (Rodriguez 94).

Generally, Fernando Botero’s works have strong colors, exaggerated forms, expressive faces, and the subjects of his paintings often appear to be posed for a photograph. His work is sensitive to both human feelings as well as the worldly pleasures. Botero’s figures are meant to be humorous, and they intent to comment on social and political factors as well. Some of the artist’s targets presented regularly through his works are symbols of power and authority by presidents, soldiers and members of the clergy (Escallon 52).

Additionally, sensuality is present in most of Fernando Botero’s compositions. The Colombian artist has employed the female model in several ways, and often portrays voluptuous female nudes that represent intimacy and carnal pleasure. This technique reveals his great ability to paint flesh. Botero links his images to human emotions in order to employ them to underline moral
issues with the use of irony (Drury 58).

Botero gave his art with a unique sense of humor and human empathy that was missing in others, using it as a way to comment on Colombia’s issues. The artist appropriated the humor and social commentary that was only used by cartoonists at that time. In numerous works, Botero underlines ideas of both of social awareness and criticism. When the artist engages in a topic, his pieces either suggest or show directly the connection with the matter that Botero is trying to communicate through his images. For example, Botero deals with aspects of the Colombian political life, as corruption, and his composition both contain a solemn and ridiculous atmosphere that gives the piece a sense of irony (Hodgson 6).

Fernando Botero is also one of the most well-known and respected still life painters. His representations of fruits, flowers, vegetables or sweets display individuality and personality, since every element in the painting is given attention as if they were portrait subjects. Also, Botero often paints musical elements in his still lifes. Even in still life, Botero portrays the elements with voluptuous shapes that are out of proportion to reality. Additionally, the Colombian artist concentrates on one of the objects of his painting, and makes it monumentally big in order to fill the space of the canvas. One great example of his still life works is the 1989 *Still Life with 'Le Journal'* (Fig.1), in which there is a French newspaper with a tiny self portrait of Botero. Other examples of still life are tight to Colombia’s daily life, including sweets and fruits that are characteristic of that region (Rodriguez 94).
As a representative of Colombia, Botero manages to include subtle national characteristics in his work. Botero identifies himself as both a man and an artist from Colombia, which becomes the most outstanding characteristic of his art. His work shows his love for his native region, constantly referring to and portraying Colombia. Most of his paintings portray people within settings and backgrounds typical of Colombian scenery, and some of his images even contain the Colombian flag and other references to the country. Actually, you can analyze almost every one of his works according to the Colombian elements present in them (Hodgson 6).

Botero uses the national flag to give national identity to the characters in his compositions. Moreover, the artist often includes the national colors—yellow, blue, and red—as a subtle background in many of his works. For example, in the 1989 *Man with a Dog* (Fig.2), the national flags make its appearance, and there are and the national colors are introduced. In his work, the sitter stands in the courtyard of a colonial house that is very typical of any Colombian town, and his clothes imitate the colors of the flag. In addition, he includes references of Colombia even in portraits of important historical characters. For example, in the 1990 canvas of *Louis XVI* (Fig.3), the eighteenth-century French monarch stands outside a house on a typical Colombian village street. In this painting, a Colombian flag can be identified framing the scene. Nonetheless, Botero also includes worldwide themes from all over art history, ranging from the Middle Ages, Italian Baroque, and Latin American Colonial art to modern art (Seaman 50).
Botero was strongly influenced by Peter Paul Rubens, and they are often compared due to the relation of their works to baroque influences. Their relation rests in their fleshy and erotized figures that seem both sacred and profane. Like Ruben's, Botero explores the world around him in both material and spiritual nature. Both artists try to understand human values and emotions through their works. Additionally, the study of the works by Italian artists Raphael and Michelangelo were crucial to the formation of Botero's art, marking his works with the characteristic rounded and sensuous forms that we currently see (Escallon 52).

Western artists have employed borrowings and appropriations in both subtle and obvious ways. The notion of giving new life to older compositions has been the base where artists develop their own techniques and characteristics. However, Fernando Botero has brought the art of appropriation to new heights. Appropriation and reinvention are key elements in Fernando Botero’s career. The interest and attraction of Botero to other artists, gave him the inspiration to develop his own technique, as well as reinvent some of the famous works of these artists. At the beginning, Fernando Botero engaged on the appropriations of works based on paintings by Leonardo and Velázquez. One of the most significant paintings is known as *Mona Lisa Aged 12* (Fig.4). In this piece we can easily recognize the features of the original work regardless of the zigzagging brushstrokes. Botero painted another version of *Mona Lisa* (Fig.5) that is better known in 1977, where Botero transforms the original Italian landscape into a South American view that includes a smoking volcano (Seaman 50).
Another great example of the employment of appropriation by Botero, is his version of Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding* (Fig.6). This shows us that the Colombian artist not only explored the Italian renaissance, but the northern renaissance as well. Botero’s version is actually considered an "anti-Botero" image given its diminutive size. Moreover, Botero explored the works of Peter Paul Rubens, specially the voluptuous women that Rubens painted. An example of this is the numerous versions of *Mrs. Rubens* (Fig.7) of the 1960s that show us a fancy woman wearing a feathered hat and gazing sensually. Botero also examined Hyacinthe Rigaud’s works, and made a self portrait in his 1973 version of Rigaud’s *Louis XIV* (Fig.3). The Colombian artist's dressed himself as the French monarch, and created a humorous and self-conscious appropriation of Rigaud’s work (Seaman 50).

But of all the Renaissance and Baroque artists who have had Botero’s interest, none has been as much of a magnet for his creativity as Diego Velázquez, who served both inspiration and challenge for the Colombian artist. Velázquez painted his images with a sense of humanity and insight into their individuality; this was the characteristic that drove Fernando Botero to concentrate on this artist. Velázquez’s greatest achievement, the 1656 *Las Meninas*, was the most challenging image for Botero. This painting is both a group portrait and a self portrait as well. However, Botero didn’t use the entire composition for this version, but extracted figures from it. One of Botero’s versions of *Infanta Margarita* (Fig.8) is based on the figure of the little princess Margarita, who is very voluminous and inflated in the Colombian version.
Additionally, Botero extracted the figure of Velazquez himself and used it. In the 1985 *Self Portrait as Velázquez* (Fig.9), Botero dresses himself as the Spanish artist (Seaman 50).

Fernando Botero, who is today a world famous painter and sculptor, is unique in his kind. Botero once said, “In art, as long as you have ideas and think, you are bound to deform nature. Art is deformation” (Heartney 129). His approach to both color and the size of the figures is unique, and represent his view of the world. His art can be analyzed on a variety of levels, like his historical development and the intentions of the messages that his paintings, drawings, and sculptures convey. It is important to understand that Botero’s career developed among a lack of historical art tradition, for this reason his art is based on what he considers important, which is volume and exaggeration of the form (Escallon 52). In conclusion, Fernando Botero has proved to be successful as an artist, and a representative of his country. His work appeals to the public more and more every day, and is worth of contemplation, admiration and acquisition.
Images

Fig.1 *Still Life with 'Le Journal'*


Fernando Botero  
*Still Life with 'Le Journal'*  
1989  
Oil on canvas  
http://www.candeli.com/blog/botero-fernando-still-life.jpg

Fig.2 *Man with a Dog*

![Image of Man with a Dog](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/b/botero/botero_man_with_dog.jpg)

Fernando Botero  
*Man with a Dog*  
1989  
104.1 x 129.5 cm  
Oil on canvas  
http://www.artchive.com/artchive/b/botero/botero_man_with_dog.jpg
Fig. 3 *Louis XVI*

Fernando Botero  
*Louis XVI*  
1973  
Oil on canvas  
http://www.ifalsidiautore.it/opere.asp/soggetto_novecento/falsi-d-autore.html

Fig. 4 *Mona Lisa Aged 12*

Fernando Botero  
*Mona Lisa Aged 12*  
Oil on canvas  
http://www.topofart.com/images/artists/Fernando_Botero/paintings/botero059.jpg
**Fig. 5** *Mona Lisa*

Fernando Botero
*Mona Lisa*
1977
65 x 72 inch (166 x 183 cm)
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

http://www.artsheaven.com/monalisa.html

**Fig. 6** *Arnolfini Wedding*

Fernando Botero
*Arnolfini Wedding*
1978
Oil on canvas

http://www.globalgallery.com/enlarge/005-13788/
Fig.7 Mrs. Rubens

Fernando Botero
Mrs. Rubens
1960
Oil on canvas

http://www.comfenalcoantioquia.com/SIL/Anexos/Personaldades/Obras/FernandoBotero/MrsRubens.jpg

Fig.8 Infanta Margarita

Fernando Botero
"Infanta Margarita"
Oil on canvas
66 by 63 1/2 inches
1977
Private Collection

http://www.thecityreview.com/s02slat12.gif
Fig. 9 *Self Portrait as Velázquez*

Fernando Botero
*Self Portrait as Velázquez*
1985
Oil on canvas

http://www.webpan.com/emanuel/art/fernando_botero/portrait_of_velazquez.jpe

Fig. 10 *La Gorda*

Fernando Botero
*La Gorda*
Iglesia de Santo Domingo
Cartagena
Sculpture in Bronze
1999

http://www.discapnet.es/Discapnet/Castellano/Postales/postales?cat=Nuestro+Mundo&sbcart=Cartagena
Hyacinthe Rigaud
*Portrait of Louis XIV*
1701
Oil on canvas, 279 x 190 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris


Leonardo da Vinci
*Mona Lisa*
1479-1528
Oil on wood, 77 x 53 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/vinci/joconde/
Jan van Eyck  
*The betrothal of the Arnolfini*  
1434  
Oil on wood  
81.8 x 59.7 cm (32 1/4 x 23 1/2 in.)  
National Gallery, London  
http://www.artchive.com/viewer/z.html

Peter Paul Rubens  
*Mrs. Rubens*  
1622-25  
Oil on panel  
National Gallery, London.  
http://www.batguano.com/rubens.jpg
Diego Velazquez
Infanta Margarita
1656
Oil on canvas
105 x 88 cm
Kunsthistorisches Museum
Viena

http://www.artchive.com/.../velazquez_infanta.jpg

Diego Velazquez
Detail of Las Meninas
Self-portrait
1656
Oil on canvas.
Museo del Prado
Madrid, Spain.

http://putnam.k12.il.us/Vela_z.jpg
Works Cited


