Fernando Botero at his studio in Bogotá, 1959.
(Photo © Fernando Botero.)

Botero and Picasso:

An Imaginary Dialogue

By Cecilia Braschi

(translated by Anais Moutarlier)

"My dream, like that of all young artists, was to move to Paris and be like Picasso." Thus, Botero began his fascination as a young man with this brilliant, versatile figure who had been upsetting the canon of modern painting since the beginning of the 20th century. Botero discovered the European avant-garde at the age of 15, in Argentine Julio E. Payró's *Pintura Moderna* (1944), the incontrovertible reference for an entire generation of Latin American artists who sought to rethink painting outside of the traditional and regional schools. Picasso appeared as a global "phenomenon," who Botero admired, primarily, for his "non-conformism." In an enthusiastic and vehement text that resulted in his expulsion from a Jesuit school in 1948, the young Botero paid homage to a Picasso who "struggles, debates, attacks his former mentors," but whose "eloquence is found more in his work than his impassioned word."

A talented artist, exceptional colorist, great experimenter of style and technique, Picasso was, in Botero's eyes, the universal artist capable of expressing the gamut of all human emotion in his work — "the subtlest and the darkest," the most "aggressive" and the most "tender." He was also a useful point of reference for the Colombian painter who was at the beginning of his career and hoping to influence international modernity with his principle visual references, such as pre-Columbian art, popular folk art, and colonial-period Baroque. While he admired Picasso's paintings from the Blue and Rose Periods, Botero had already been seduced by the artistic revolution of the great Mexican muralists (Orozco, Siqueiros, Rivera) and was unsurprisingly particularly sensitive to Picasso's gigantomachies, which he described as "monumental and sensual," two words that in combination would come to be instrumental in his own career.

But upon his arrival in Paris in 1952, Botero's encounter with the actual works of Picasso in the Musée d'Art Moderne was a disappointment, no doubt due to the format, which was smaller than he had anticipated and tempered his "monumental" image of the master's work. However, less than a year later, he rediscovered Picasso with surprise and enthusiasm in an exposition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon. This time, it was the colors in the paintings that struck him, colors that he had been unable to appreciate from books. By then, his fascination was such that Botero decided to go in search of the man, who at the time had settled in Vallauris. However, Picasso was not in his studio. Nor was he in his usual café, where Botero waited for hours in vain. Nor was he to be found on

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Pablo Picasso at his studio in Paris, 1948.
(Photo © Herbert List/Magnum Photos.)

Pablo Picasso, "Portrait of a Young Girl, After Cranach the Younger II" (Cannes, July 4, 1958). Engraving, 64x53.5 cm.
(Museu Picasso Barcelona, Don de Jaume Sabartés, 1962. © 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Photo: Museu Picasso Barcelona / Gasull Fotografia.)

the beach of Juan-les-Pins, the scene of so many paintings of swimmers that Botero had admired in his youth. Disheartened, Botero resigned himself to the failure of his trip: he would never come face to face with Pablo Picasso.

The exposition "Botero: A Dialogue With Picasso," at the Hôtel de Caumont Centre d'Art in Aix-en-Provence, France, from November 24, 2017, to March 11, 2018, presented an opportunity to look back on this crossover, for even though these two men never met, one can decipher an imagined dialogue between their work, maintained by their shared mother tongue: painting. Despite their different origins, histories, and trajectories, these two great artists of the 20th century — both of them widely popular and immediately recognizable by their respective styles — share geographic references and cultural communities, as well as artistic perspectives and specific techniques. Both artists took guidance from a strong connection with Hispanic culture, imbued upon Botero's Colombia by the Spain of Picasso through a secular colonization that stretched from the iconography of bullfighting to the ex-voto to popular illustrations in the grand pictorial tradition of El Greco, Velázquez, or Goya. Indeed, in another commonality, the works of these two artists likewise include a perceptive combination of erudite and popular cultures, allowing them to attain the universal sensibility of a very large audience by superimposing multiple levels of meaning.

In an artistic sense, Botero and Picasso also share a steadfast, tacit understanding of painting, in the noblest sense of the word. Technical mastery is a *sine qua non* of their artistic engagement. Without ever being tempted by acrylics, Botero excelled in traditional techniques that withstood the test of the centuries (oil, pastel, pencil, charcoal, etc.). These are also techniques of which Picasso was a confirmed master. What is more, the resolutely figurative Botero, like Picasso, was never tempted by abstract art. During his 1958 residence in New York, he mingled with artists of abstract expressionism, while sharing neither their ideas nor their commercial success. Like the Spanish master, Botero clung with determination and bravery to classic genres in the figurative pictorial tradition: portraits, still lifes, and war scenes. Also like Picasso, Botero's use of figuration never corresponded to a preconceived or fixed notion of realism. As a close observer of Picasso, Botero knew that to be faithful to the act of painting, one must also be able to "risk" the freedom it offers, and that imagination, subjectivity, and poetry must take precedence over the constraints of verisimilitude. From there come a richness of color, a distortion of forms, and a judgment of proportions that, in response to purely aesthetic and pictorial demands, willingly bypass the rules of optics, composition, and perspective.

There is no better way to understand the relationship that Botero reached with the work of Picasso than to look at the way in which he contended with the other main protagonists of art history. Botero never responds by repeating clichéd or stylistic forms, but rather by defining, through comparison or contrast, his own language and his own contribution to the history of art. Among the modern artists, Picasso is probably the one who most frequently played the same game of appropriation and diversion with the history of art from every era. Some of his references are shared with Botero, such as Ingres, Cranach, and especially Velázquez, of whom the single Picasso museum in Barcelona contains more than 50 "versions" (as Botero would call them), 45 of which are from the "Las Meninas" series.

Moreover, it was in the tradition of Hispanic and European still life, which grew from the "bodegónes" of Luis Meléndez, Sánchez Cotán, or Zurbarán all the way to Cezanne, that both artists reached the most radical results of their artistic endeavors, revolutionizing this ancient, modest, and seemingly conventional genre from within. In the era of cubism, Picasso and Braque made the genre of still life into the fundamental point of reference for their theories. Bottles, newspapers, and musical instruments are decomposed into geometric forms that celebrate plasticity while multiplying points of view. As he sketched a mandolin in 1956, Botero, for his part, discovered the monumental beauty to be found

Fernando Botero, "Cranach" (2016). Oil on canvas, 172x140 cm.
(Private collection. © Fernando Botero.)

in exaggerating form, thus laying the keystone to his own inimitable style. While Picasso eliminates the unity of volume with an explosive, centrifugal force that breaks down forms, Botero, on the other hand, is guided by a centripetal force to call the object back to the values of mass and volume, which he intensifies through a disproportionate deformation of objects. Both artists exhibit a willingness to override the codes of composition and perspective established since the Renaissance.

Where Picasso abolished the vanishing point, Botero abolished proportions. Thus, for the first time in the pictorial genre, Botero's still lifes can reach monumental size, such as the big pear ("Pear," 1976) or the triptych of immense colored bouquets ("Flowers in Blue," "Flowers in Yellow," "Flowers in Red," 2006). Similarly, in the nudes, the disproportion of shapes in impossible spaces (a too-small bathroom or a too-small bedroom) further accentuates the abundance of bodies. These voluminous forms and planes also correspond to a desire to express the sensuality that Botero sees as one of the fundamental virtues of

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ABOVE: Pablo Picasso, "Family at the Seaside" (Dinard, Summer 1922). Oil on wood, 17.6x20.2 cm.
(Musée National Picasso – Paris Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP80. © 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée National Picasso–Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau.)

RIGHT AND FOLDOUT: Fernando Botero, "Woman at the Beach" (2002). Pastel on canvas, 69x104 cm.
(Private collection. © Fernando Botero.)

painting — the same virtue that he had always admired in the works of Picasso. Thus, Botero makes no distinction between a nude and a still life; a body, a face, and a fruit are all treated exactly the same way. The abundance, equanimity, and magical suspension adapt themselves to any object, but in contrast to Picasso, without their intrinsic sensuality overflowing into excess or eroticism.

Militant and revolutionary in his youth, a more mature Botero inscribed and channeled all of his engagement — including the political and social — into the act of painting. His pieces represent the injustice and drama of the modern age in scenes of violence and pain, born from a need for coherence, which demands that one "reflect life in all of its aspects, not only the pleasant, but also the tragic." From the South American dictatorships of the past century to torture in the Iraqi prisons of Abu Ghraib in 2003, from earthquakes to assassinations on the streets of Colombia, Botero has been an attentive spectator of the tragedies of his era, convinced of his responsibility as an artist to be a man of his time. Even here, Picasso

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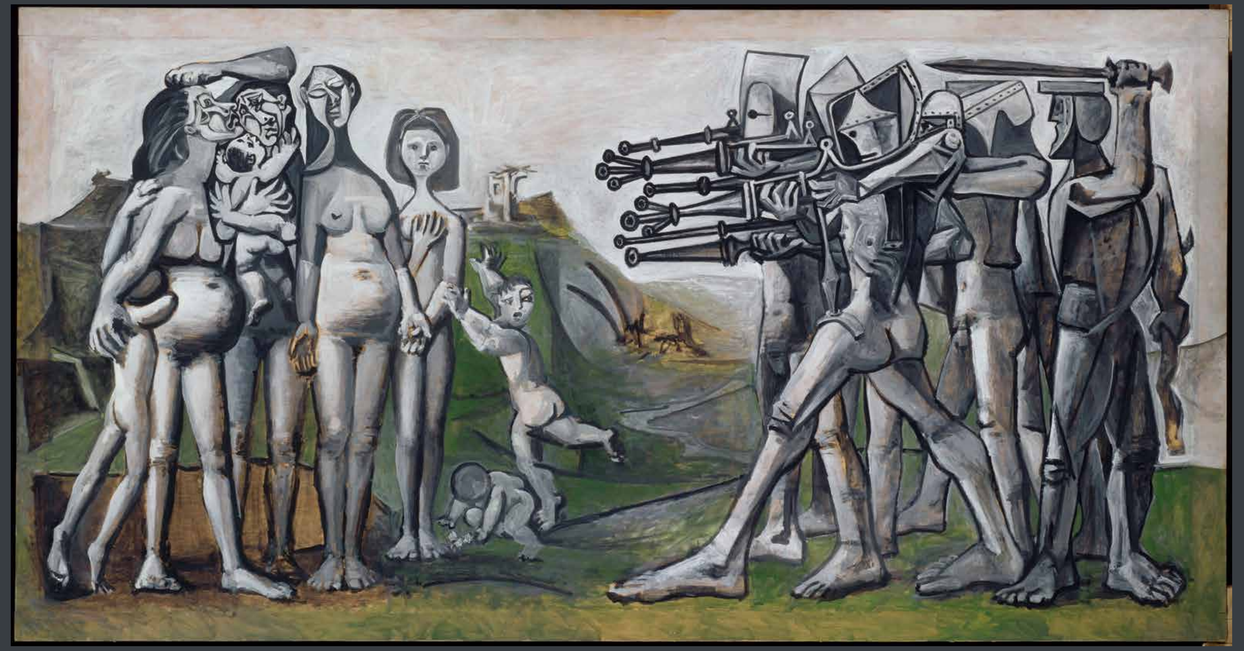
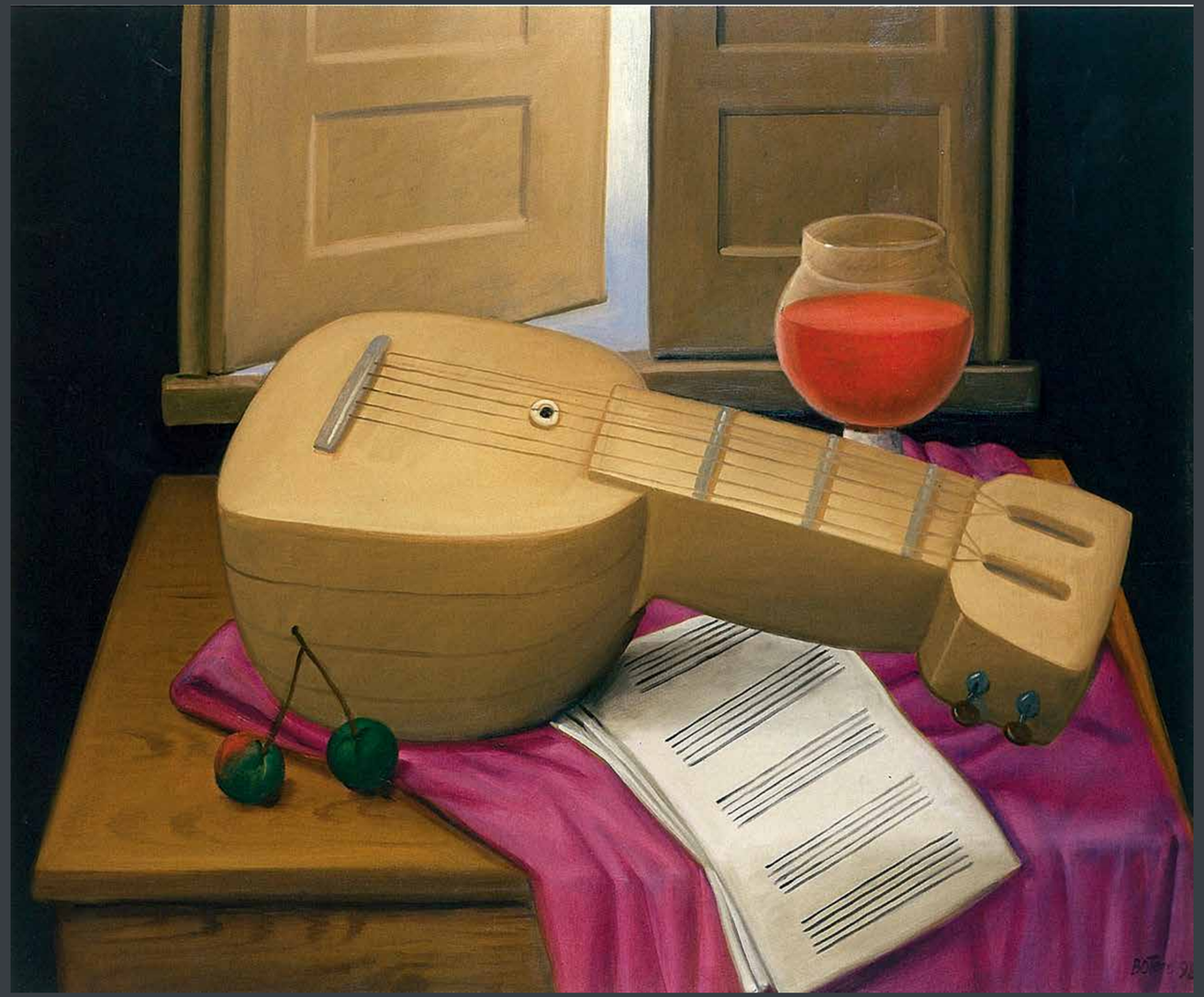
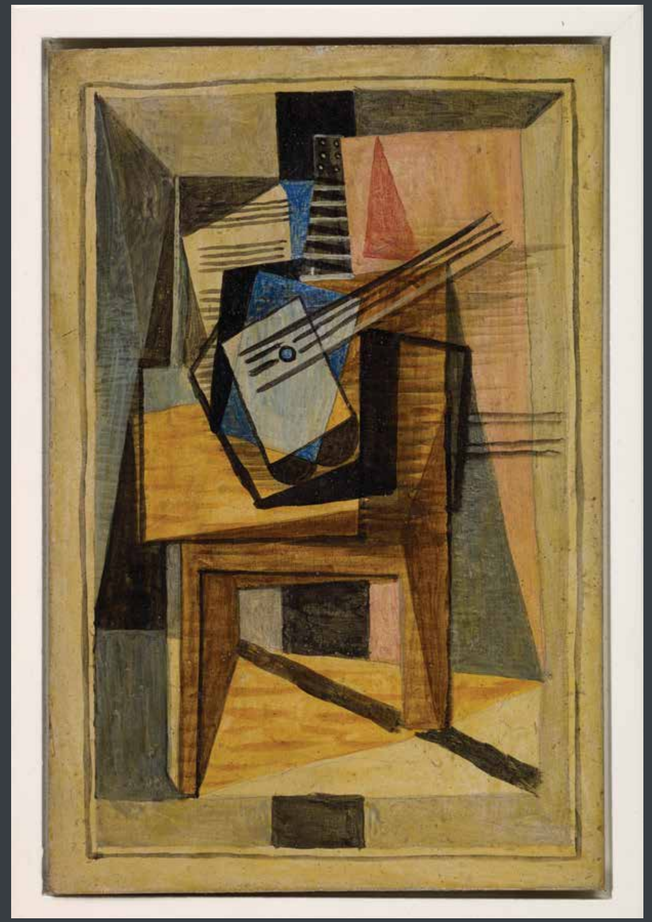


Left: Fernando Botero, "The 20:15 Massacre" (2004). Oil on canvas, 146x209 cm.
(Private collection. © Fernando Botero.)

Above: Pablo Picasso, "Massacre in Korea" (Vallauris, January 18, 1951). Oil on wood panel, 110x210 cm.
(Musée National Picasso – Paris Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP203. © 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée National Picasso–Paris) / Jean-Gilles Berizzi.)





LEFT: Fernando Botero, "Still Life With Mandolin" (1998). Oil on canvas, 98x118 cm.
(Private collection. © Fernando Botero.)

ABOVE: Pablo Picasso, "Musical Instruments on a Table" (Paris, 1922). Oil on wood, 15x9.9 cm.
(Musée National Picasso – Paris Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. © 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée National Picasso-Paris) / Sylvie Chan-Liat.)

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remains an incontrovertible reference for Botero's work: he fervently opposed the barbarism of the Spanish Civil War and the conflict in Korea in paintings that have since become icons of the modern genre, respectively "Guernica (1937) and "Massacre in Korea" (1951).

However, the violence that Picasso causes to explode on the canvas with deformed bodies and faces ravaged by pain and rage, Botero contains and sublimates into the round, polished shapes that are typical of his style. The faces painted by Botero, like those in the funerary steles of Egypt and the magnificent battle scenes painted by Piero della Francesca in the Arezzo cycle, maintain the equanimity of all his figures, even in the most troubled and agitated contexts. It is a calm and a balance that denies all sentimental excess. Thus, even while the initial framework expresses the hatred and repulsion that are at the source of the piece, the act of painting, as the supreme comfort, also serves to recompose our state of mind. Treating each motif with the same benevolence reserved for still lifes and nudes, which caters to the aesthetic balance of colors and composition, Botero applies the same grace to dictators, victims, and bystanders. In the end, for Botero, painting is a "caress," capable of sublimating hate and rage with the tenderness of color and form: "When one paints, one must caress, one must make oneself useful through color […] through painting, hate is transformed into an act of love."

All dialogue, even the imagined one between Picasso and Botero, is a confrontation that sometimes veers into disagreement, insomuch as every artist is also a "critique" of those who precede him, as Botero repeats incessantly. It is useless to try to paint with preconceived notions or codes. When Botero tried to imitate the colors of Picasso — "this marvelous blue: the deep outer sea with a bare breath of white" — by searching for the same exact pigments, he inevitably exposed himself to failure. It remains to each artist, then, to find his own sources. Botero often insists that in art, personal style prevails; although they may deal with the same themes, every artist who thinks and has something to say will achieve very different stylistic results. This notion is present in each of the themes selected for this exposition, which Picasso as well as Botero confronted: from the portrait to the copies of other artists, from still life to nude, through circuses, festivals, bullfights, and scenes of violence.

In fact, from a stylistic and formal perspective, the proposals of the two artists reveal themselves very differently. Against Picasso's exuberance, Botero juxtaposes the equilibrium and equanimity of his round figures; compared to the fragmentation and multiplication of points of view in Picasso's work, Botero constructs a world that is solid and compact, polished and sublimated by the painting itself.

In theme after theme, the dialogue Botero has with Picasso also ends up encouraging the liberty and originality of the former with regard to the latter, these being, definitively, the most authentic and long-lasting heritage of all great artists for the generations that follow. Botero knows this well, having established a rich and dialectic confrontation with a great number of past artists throughout his life. Thus, even in his relationship with the works of Picasso, the dialogue is a "curious combination of admiration and critical judgment," which confirms the autonomy of the artist and the need to follow one's own path and invent one's own style.

Just as he had hoped since his days in Medellín at the end of the 1940s, Botero arrived in Paris a few years later. He continued his artistic journey on to many other cities that enriched his visual and cultural inheritance. Far from "being like Picasso," he instead "became Botero." While he nourished himself with similar ideas and comparable artistic ambitions, the "non-conformism" of his painting expresses itself in terms quite different from those that he had found at the age of 16 in the works of Picasso. For Botero, this consisted more of "turning away from conventions […] and frenetic experimentation (the conformism of our era) to look among the masters who founded the modern plastic sensibility, the formal and artisanal resources to undertake, for our days, a work that has the solidity, ambition, novelty, and permanence that they attained in theirs."

Cecilia Braschi is an art historian specializing in 20th-century Latin American and European art. She was the curator for the "Botero: A Dialogue With Picasso" exposition at the Hôtel de Caumont Centre d'Art in Aix-en-Provence, France, from November 24, 2017, to March 11, 2018.

References for this article are available at clas.berkeley.edu.

RIGHT: Fernando Botero, "Portrait of Picasso" (1998). Oil on canvas, 187x128 cm.
(Private collection. © Fernando Botero / Photo: Christian Moutarde.)