

FERNANDO BOTERO
(1932-)

“It is important to recognize the source of the pleasure we get from a painting. For me, it is *joie de vivre* combined with the sensuousness of the forms. So for me the problem is how to create sensuousness through form.” – Fernando Botero

Summary

Fernando Botero is a Colombian figurative painter and sculptor best known for his voluminous, extravagantly rounded people and animals. He is greatly inspired by the great masters of the past (Botticelli, Velázquez, Van Gogh), but his work blends the themes of fine art with the style of folk art and is greatly influenced by life and history of his native Colombia.

He views exaggeration as a means of transforming reality into art. He attempts to create sensuousness through form and as a result his paintings and sculptures reflect inflated, voluminous proportions. His distinctive style is sometimes comical, sometimes satirical and instantly recognizable, making him one of the most celebrated contemporary Latin American artists.

Early Years

Fernando Botero was born in Medellín, Colombia, the second of three children to David Botero, a traveling salesman, and Flora Angulo, a seamstress. His father died when he was four. At age 14, his uncle sent him to school for bullfighters, but he preferred drawing the bulls on paper rather than practicing the art himself. At age 16 he began earning money by providing illustrations for the daily newspaper *El Colombiano*.

At 20, he moved to Europe and spent four years traveling through Madrid, Paris and Florence. While contemporary painters such as Picasso were gaining importance, Botero was more attracted to the great masters of the past – particularly Diego Velázquez (see “Self-Portrait in the Costume of Velázquez”, 1986, oil on canvas). He was here that he began to develop his own style that was based on the classics, but centered largely on figurative art.

In 1955 he returned to South America and spent some time in Mexico, which was the cultural hub at the time. While he was not at first not overly enthusiastic about their work, the influence of Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, particularly the “monumentality” of their pieces, would further contribute to develop Botero’s unique style. And it was in Mexico that Botero began to exhibit and sell his pieces, enough to begin providing him with a livelihood (unfortunately many of the pieces of these early years are untraceable).

It was at this time that he began experimenting with proportion and size. While working on “Still Life with Mandolin” (1957, oil on canvas), Botero deformed the object and painted the opening of the large and heavy instrument much too small. This was his first real use of volume and “disproportion”.

Later that year (1957) he had his first solo exhibit at the Pan American Union in Washington, DC (now the Organization of American States). While in DC he was introduced to the work of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. In 1960 he moved to New York, realizing that if he wanted to make headway as an artist he would need to stay in the United States. His painting “Mona Lisa at the Age of 12” (1959, oil and tempura on canvas) was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in 1963 and later displayed in its foyer. Botero was becoming famous, although art critics of the time were not particularly kind – possibly because his style could not --and still cannot-- be categorized into any one tendency or school. In fact, his work was considered a bit scandalous.

During the 1960s his style evolved from the use of heavy brushwork and texture to smooth inflated shapes. The form, content, manner and themes of his work would not undergo any fundamental alteration after this time, although his color palette would become brighter during the 1970s and 1980s.

Beginning in the late 1990s, as drug-fueled violence swept Colombia, his work became much darker in theme and color as he created paintings and drawings of the period's kidnappings, massacres, torture, and death. He has continued exploring these themes in paintings that depict the abuse of detainees at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

Themes

Most of Botero's paintings reflect the great themes of the classical painters:

- Clerics and church dignitaries (“Mother Superior”, 1980, oil on canvas)
- Rulers (“The Arnolfini”, 1997, oil on canvas)
- Female nudes -- Rubenesque, although a bit comical and not particularly erotic
- Still life (“Still Life with Mandolin”, 1998, oil on canvas) – prefers to paint fruits of Colombia
- Family unit (“The Widow”, 1997, oil on canvas) -- family is the basic unit of society
- Middle-class society, particularly in Latin America (“The Dancers”, 1987, oil on canvas)

Some say his paintings are satirical; others say he is paying homage to the great artists of the past (compare Vincent van Gogh's “Vase with Fourteen Sunflowers”, 1889 to “Sunflowers” 1977). Also, he has been known to alter and repeat many of his same subjects (compare “The Arnolfini Marriage” of 1978 to “The Arnolfini Marriage” of 1997).

Possible questions for the class:

“Color is fundamental because it gives light to painting. The picture achieves perfection only when the color question has been solved. You think about the composition, but in reality it is the color that determines the picture.” – Fernando Botero

- Color: Look at the colors in the painting. Do the colors imitate reality? If not, why? What do you think the artist is trying to tell us? Are the colors in harmony to each other? Are they dramatically opposite? What kind of mood does this create?
- Texture: Look for texture in the painting. How does the artist create a feeling of rough or smooth, hard or soft, the feel of wood, glass, textiles, etc.? Name some of the textures you see in this painting.
- Composition: How is the work arranged? Horizontal? Vertical? Are objects neatly arranged or scattered all over the place? Is it symmetrical, balanced and quiet, or asymmetrical and dramatic?

Sculpture

Botero started to make sculptures in 1973. He primarily uses bronze, but also sometimes uses marble. Botero spends many months of the year in Pietrasanta, Italy, which has a bronze foundry. He “sketches” his sculpture in clay and then determines the final choice of the size and color of the sculpture. Botero has made over 200 sculptures, all of which emphasize the same voluminous proportions of his paintings but in 3-D.

“My sculptures have no particular message – neither a social message, nor any other. I do not think that art can change the political situation. My sculptures have no symbolic significance of any kind. What I am interested in is form – gentle, round surfaces, which emphasize the sensuousness of my work.” – Fernando Botero

- “Bird” (1998, bronze) Donated to Medellín as a sign of peace, but a bomb was placed in the sculpture in 1995 and it exploded. Botero decided to leave the damaged sculpture in its place and donate a second one as a final message of peace to be placed next to the original one.
- “Cat” (2000, bronze) Humorous approach (look at tongue)
- “Man on Horseback” (2004, bronze) Perhaps inspired by his father who was a traveling salesman and did errands by horseback

Personal Life

Botero married Gloria Zea (who later became the Minister of Culture of Colombia) in 1956. Together they had three children --Fernando, Lina and Juan Carlos—but divorced in 1960. In 1964 he married Cecilia Zambrano. Their 4-year-old son, Pedro, died in a car accident in Spain in 1974 and they divorced a

year later. Botero is now married to the Greek artist, Sophia Vari and they divide their time among Paris, New York, Italy and Colombia.

Final Notes

Fernando Botero continues to paint on a daily basis. Working from memory (as opposed to using models) he generally sketches his ideas on paper and then transfers them onto canvas with oil paint – a process that can take several months. He does not use easels, but paints on loose canvases that he fastens to the wall. He tends to work on several pictures at the same time.

In 2000 he donated dozens of his own paintings and sculptures, as well as over 90 masterpieces from his private collection, including works by Monet, Renoir, Degas, Dalí, Miró and Calder, to two Colombia museums – The Museum of Antioquia in Medellín and the cultural wing of the Banco de la República in Bogotá in order to promote greater public access to art. The donation was valued at over \$200 million.

Key Words

Figurative, sensuous, voluminous, exaggeration, distortion/disproportion

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