

Beyond Stereotypes and Invisibility: Indigenous Contributions to the Construction of Memory, Heritage, and National Art

Sebastián Vargas Álvarez

The tearing down of statues of European conquistadors such as Sebastián de Belalcázar or Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada by indigenous protesters during the social movements of the national strike which took place in Colombia in 2021, can be considered a sign of a more complex problem: the absence and marginalization of indigenous peoples in the narratives of the Colombian nation. In this specific case, it can be seen in the monumental representations displayed in our public spaces, dominated by the Hispanic figures of the conquistadors, such as Columbus, or Queen Isabella the Catholic, and the Creole heroes (white and mixed-race) of Independence and the subsequent founding of the republic.

Since Colombia embarked on its path as an independent democratic country at the start of the 19th century, the place of the indigenous peoples in the creation of a national history, art, heritage, and visual culture has remained uncomfortable and ambiguous. It is a place that has oscillated between invisibility and stereotypes: either they do not appear at all and they are “invisible”, or they are shown from an external perspective, which generally represents the reality for the indigenous peoples; they are reduced to a “stereotype” or converted into an exotic symbol of difference, with different interests, which are often unrelated to those of the indigenous communities themselves.¹ Indigenous peoples have either been underrepresented in the images

¹ Here I use the concepts put forward by the anthropologist Nina S. de Friedemann. While she refers to invisibility and stereotypes regarding the Afro-descendant population, I believe her ideas can help guide the reflection that brings us together in this seminar. See Nina S. de Friedemann, “Estudios de negros en la antropología colombiana”, in *Un siglo de investigación social. Antropología en Colombia*, ed. by Jaime Arocha



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and narratives of the nation in general, or, at the other end of the spectrum, they have been overly and repeatedly portrayed in a stereotypical fashion. In both cases, a symbolic violence has been exerted which threatens their very existence.²

Of course, incorporating the indigenous into nation-building projects and their representations or discursive formations has evolved over the past two centuries, and it is always necessary to historicize and account for each specific context or process. Nevertheless, in the general reflection that I intend to present, I will argue that, at the beginning of the 21st century, it remains very difficult to escape the problem that is invisibility-stereotyping regarding the presence of indigenous peoples and other subaltern social groups in our everyday narratives. It is for this reason that these spaces for debate and exhibitions to which the Bank of the Republic invites us are so relevant.

For the purpose of this conference, it is impossible to fully address representations of indigenous peoples in the Colombian national memory. Nevertheless, I am interested in highlighting some general trends and key moments in this history, based on a reading that draws upon the art and documentary collections of the Bank of the Republic, consisting of images and objects, the majority of which will be featured in the exhibition that will take place in the Miguel Urrutia Art Museum (MAMU), in Bogotá.

and Nina S. de Friedemann (Bogotá: Etno, 1984), 507-572. With regards to stereotypes, it is worth highlighting that they are an image or representation that, while not entirely unrelated to reality, they simplify, exaggerate, or distort it. On this matter, see Peter Burke, "Estereotipos de los otros", in *Visto y no visto. El uso de la imagen como documento histórico* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2005), 155-175, and Stuart Hall, "El espectáculo del otro", *Sin garantías. Trayectorias y problemáticas en estudios culturales*, ed. by Eduardo Restrepo, Katherine Walsh, and Victor Vich (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana-Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar-Instituto de Estudios Peruanos-Envió), 419-445.

² Georges Didi Huberman, *Pueblos expuestos, pueblos figurantes* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2014), 14. With regards to the representation of "subaltern" subjects (individuals or groups) and epistemic violence, Gayatri Spivak's text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" continues to be fundamental. "¿Puede hablar el subalterno?", *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 39 (2003): 297-364.



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The conference is divided into two parts. Firstly, with the use of some specific examples, I will address how the indigenous has been appearing in the processes shaping Colombian art, heritage, and visual culture, which is closely linked to the emergence and evolution of various fields and spaces of practice and knowledge, such as art, archeology, anthropology, and museology. Then, in the second part, I will present some reflections on the recent tearing down of the statues of Spanish conquistadors by the Misak indigenous people in the context of the national strike, as both an act of political protest and creative strength that can invite us to contemplate, invent, and create new images and common narratives.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify that there are multiple indigenous groups in the Colombian territory, with their own particular worldviews, cultures, and forms of representation and aesthetic expression, that have tended to be simplified and homogenized in national narratives. When I refer to the indigenous, it is not my intention to disregard or simplify this pluralism and diversity; I only use this term for the purposes of analysis and presentation.

I feel honored by the invitation from the Bank of the Republic to be part of this seminar, an academic complement to the upcoming exhibition. I also recognize the relevance of public and private cultural institutions being self-critical of their own history, thus contributing to a broad discussion on the new ways of creating art, heritage, and history in the 21st century.

1

The first visual representations that make reference to the indigenous peoples in the modern nation-state date back to the years of Independence and the establishment of the republic at the start of the 19th century. These are allegories of the nation, freedom, or independence represented in the form of indigenous women, reproduced



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in paintings (for example, *Simón Bolívar, Libertador y padre de la patria*, by Pedro José de Figueroa, painted in 1818, or *La india de la libertad*, an anonymous work dating from 1819), and in the first coins minted in the territories that gained independence from Spain (such as the first patriotic coin, minted in 1812 in the Free State of Cartagena, or the one real coin, known as “la china”, minted in Cudínamarca).³

These representations mimic the iconography created during the Renaissance in Europe to symbolize and differentiate the continents (based on the canon of engravings by Cesare Ripa), and they retain some of the characteristics that have since been associated with America, such as feathered headdresses, nudity, quivers with arrows, and the presence of native fauna, generally an alligator or an armadillo. Based on these types of images, the independence-seeking Creoles aimed to identify as Americans in order to reclaim what they considered to be their just right to govern these territories and to distance themselves from the Spanish monarchy, thus legitimizing the war for independence and the establishment of a new republic.

As the 19th century progressed and a national history and symbolic repertoire of the emerging nation were being created - materializing in various formats and registers, such as iconography, monuments, commemorations, anthems, and flags - the reference to indigenous elements gained importance; however, they were relegated to the past. Intellectuals, politicians, and scientists became interested in the pre-Hispanic cultures of the territory, and much like what happened with the Incas in Peru

³ Yobenj Aucardo Chicangana-Bayona, “Tradiciones alegóricas en México y Colombia: imágenes de la libertad y de la patria”, *Estudios comparados de historia moderna y contemporánea: el caso de México y Colombia*, comp. by Renzo Ramírez Bacca (Medellín: National University of Colombia, 2011), 15-47; Hans-Joachim König, “La función de las imágenes en el proceso de construcción de las naciones latinoamericanas”, in *La nación expuesta. Cultura visual y procesos de formación de la nación en América Latina*, ed. by Sven Schuster (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2014), 1-28; Juan Ricardo Rey-Márquez, *India, santa, americana libertad. La transformación de una salvaje en un símbolo libertario* (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario-Universidad Nacional de San Martín, 2022).



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and the Aztecs in Mexico, they attempted to establish the Muisca civilization as the glorious origin of the modern nation.⁴

However, the appreciation of indigenous cultures predating the Conquest did not mean that contemporary indigenous peoples were recognized as citizens or compatriots with rights. Instead they were often considered to be degenerates of their ancestors, a hindrance to the progress of the modern nation, destined to disappear in a process of miscegenation (racial whitening), if not directly through annihilation. In most cases, the Colombian elite of the 19th century and much of the 20th century, whether conservatives or liberals, believed that they shared the same space - but not the same temporality - as the indigenous peoples (who had remained in their ways of the past, outside of modernity). They therefore thought that it was their responsibility to "educate", "civilize", and "evangelize" the indigenous population; in other words, to incorporate them into the modern way of life of the nation state that they represented.⁵

As for art, visual culture, and what we could now call "national heritage", this way of seeing and understanding indigenous culture had several consequences. The creation of museum collections (such as the National Museum of Colombia, founded in 1823), just like voyages and scientific expeditions (such as the Chorographic Commission in the mid-19th century), focused on what were previously called indigenous "treasures" or "antiques". They considered archaeological objects to be more important than the

⁴ Rebecca Earle, *The return of the native. Indians and myth-making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Óscar Guarín, "De bárbaros a civilizados: la invención de los muiscas en el siglo XIX", in *Muiscas: representaciones, cartografías y etnopolíticas de la memoria*, ed. by Ana María Gómez (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2005), 228-246; François Correa, "El Imperio muisca: invención de la historia y colonialidad del poder", in *Muiscas: representaciones, cartografías y etnopolíticas de la memoria*, ed. by Ana María Gómez (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2005), 200-226; Carl Henrik Langebaek, *Los herederos del pasado: indígenas y pensamiento criollo en Colombia y Venezuela*. Two volumes (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2009).

⁵ Regarding the hierarchization and temporal divide, and the non-simultaneous history inherent in Western modern thought, refer to the insightful arguments of Johannes Fabian, *El tiempo y el otro. Cómo construye su objeto la antropología* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes-Universidad del Cauca, 2019).



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cultural practices and material culture of living indigenous groups, who were generally considered savages and backward, incapable of producing culture or art. At most, they were seen as creators of crafts or bearers of exotic or quaint traditions.⁶

An interesting example which can be used to analyze this indigenous presence in the narrative configuration of the nation, from an external and simplifying perspective, is the illustrated travel account of José María Gutiérrez de Alba titled *Impresiones de un viaje a América* (1870-1884), which is part of the documentary collections of the Luis Ángel Arango Library and which also has a digital version on the Bank of the Republic's website.⁷

Moreover, it is essential to consider the fact that this establishment of the pre-Hispanic past as an integral part of the national identity - but which is disconnected from the present living indigenous peoples, as I already argued - was not only shaped internally within the country, but was also projected abroad. In this way, significant archaeological findings, pre-Hispanic artifacts, and narratives about a glorious past before the colonial and republican eras, were showcased in some of the exhibition halls in important museums in Germany, Great Britain, and France.⁸ They became emblems of the Colombian nation in universal showings, such as the Historical

⁶ Clara Isabel Botero, *El redescubrimiento del pasado prehispánico de Colombia: viajeros, arqueólogos y coleccionistas, 1820-1945* (Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History-Universidad de los Andes, 2006), 47-100; Carlo Emilio Piazzini, "Guaqueros, anticuarios y letrados: la circulación de artefactos arqueológicos en Antioquia (1850-1959)", in *Arqueología y etnología en Colombia: la creación de una tradición científica*, comp. by Carol Henrik Langebaek and Clara Isabel Botero (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic-Universidad de los Andes, 2009), 49-78; Amada Carolina Pérez, *Nosotros y los otros: las representaciones de la nación y sus habitantes. Colombia, 1880-1910* (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2015), 103-184; Nancy Appelbaum, *Dibujar la nación. La Comisión Corográfica en la Colombia del siglo XIX* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2018); María Elena Bedoya, *Antigüedades y nación: coleccionismo de objetos precolombinos y musealización en los Andes, 1892-1915* (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana-Universidad Santo Tomás-Universidad del Rosario, 2021); Héctor García Botero, *Una historia de nuestros otros. Indígenas, letrados y antropólogos en el estudio de la diferencia cultural en Colombia (1880-1960)* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2010).

⁷ José María Gutiérrez de Alba, *Impresiones de un viaje a América (1870-1884)*, October 26 2022, <https://babel.banrepcultural.org/digital/collection/p17054coll16>.

⁸ Botero, *El redescubrimiento*, 139-192.



American Exhibition in Madrid (1892) and the Universal Exhibition in Chicago (1893).⁹

Historical and archaeological studies about pre-Hispanic cultures would gain new momentum during the first decades of the 20th century, especially following the creation of the Colombian Academy of History (ACH) in 1902.¹⁰ Indeed, the logo of the ACH is made up of three historical figures in profile, representing three periods of the country's history: an indigenous figure (pre-Hispanic period), a Spanish conquistador (colonial period), and an allegory of the republic with a Phrygian cap (republican period). In recent years, it has been redesigned to include a man of African descent. The figures represent a linear and chronological succession, in a sequence that continues to relegate the indigenous world to the past. Within the work of academics which precedes the emergence and professionalization of the disciplines of history and anthropology, the work of Juan Friede stands out.¹¹

With the subsequent creation of the National Ethnological Institute and the National Archaeological Museum in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the dichotomy between the valued pre-Hispanic indigenous peoples and the marginalized contemporary indigenous peoples began to gradually break down. Here, the emergence of the discipline of anthropology would be vital in shaping a new way of understanding the indigenous and comprehending their contributions to Colombian art, culture, and memory. Nevertheless, the stories produced by the emerging anthropology are

⁹ Sven Schuster and María Alejandra Buenaventura, "Imaginando la 'tercera civilización de América': Colombia en las exposiciones internacionales del IV Centenario (1892-1893)", *Historia Crítica*, 75 (2020): 25-47.

¹⁰ Jorge Orlando Melo, *Historiografía colombiana. Realidades y perspectivas* (Medellín: Biblioteca de Autores Antioqueños, 1996), 85-103; Alexander Betancourt, *Historia y nación. Tentativas de la escritura de la historia en Colombia* (Medellín: La Carreta-Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, 2007), 45-123; Sandra Rodríguez Ávila, *Memoria y olvido: usos públicos del pasado en Colombia (1930-1960)* (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2017).

¹¹ José Eduardo Rueda Enciso, "Juan Friede y el desarrollo de la antropología histórica y el indigenismo", *Arqueología y etnología en Colombia: la creación de una tradición científica*, comp. by Carl Henrik Langebaek and Clara Isabel Botero (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic-Universidad de los Andes, 2009), 241-267.



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marginal and do not align with the official stories of the nation, in addition to the fact that they are still too anchored in the paradigm of cultural relativism.¹² From this period there is a historical, ethnographic, and artistic work of special value which serves as inspiration for thinking about new ways to incorporate the indigenous into other current worldviews and knowledge: *Namuy Misag. Nuestra gente: tierra, costumbres y creencias de los indios guambianos*, co-produced by Gregorio Hernández de Alba and Francisco Tumiña Pillimúé.¹³

In the artistic field, which at the start of the 20th century was still mostly restricted to pictures of landscapes, national historical landmarks, or the domain of religion,¹⁴ it is necessary to mention the avant-garde Bachué movement from the 1920s and 1930s, which takes its name from the famous sculpture *Bachué, diosa generatriz de los muisca* (*Bachué, Generator Goddess of the Muisca People*) (1926), by Rómulo Rozo, its main exponent.¹⁵ This consisted of a group of artists, most of whom were dedicated to sculpting, concerned with the body, abstraction, and local themes with a mythic and indigenous style: Rómulo Rozo, Ramón Barba, Luis Alberto Acuña,¹⁶ Hena Rodríguez,

¹² Roberto Pineda Camacho, “La reivindicación del indio en el pensamiento social colombiano” in *Un siglo de investigación social. Antropología en Colombia*, ed. by Jaime Arocha and Ninca S. de Friedemann (Bogotá: Etno, 1984), 197-251; Marcela Echeverri, “La fundación del Instituto Etnológico Nacional y la construcción genérica del rol de antropólogo”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, 25 (1998): 216-247, and “El Museo Arqueológico y Etnográfico de Colombia (1939-1948): la puesta en escena de la nacionalidad a través de la construcción del pasado indígena”, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 3 (1999): 104-109; Clara Isabel Botero, “El surgimiento de los museos arqueológicos y etnográficos: laboratorios de investigación y espacios para la visibilidad, divulgación y exhibición del patrimonio arqueológico y de las sociedades indígenas”, in *Arqueología y etnología en Colombia: la creación de una tradición científica*, comp. by Carl Henrik Langebaek and Clara Isabel Botero (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic-Universidad de los Andes, 2009), 197-215; García Botero, *Una historia de nuestros otros*.

¹³ Gregorio Hernández de Alba and Francisco Tumiña Pillimúé, *Nuestra gente [Namuy Misag]: tierra, costumbres y creencias de los indios guambianos* (Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History-Universidad del Cauca, 2019) [1949].

¹⁴ Alejandro Garay Celeita, “El campo artístico colombiano en el Salón de Arte de 1910”, *Historia Crítica*, 32 (2006): 303-333.

¹⁵ Christian Padilla, *La Bachué de Rómulo Rozo: un ícono del arte moderno colombiano* (Bogotá: Editorial La Bachué, 2013).

¹⁶ Acuña wrote the book *El arte de los indios colombianos* in 1935, one of the first studies conducted in the country on the topic that brings us together in this seminar. Luis Alberto Acuña, *el arte de los indios*



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María Teresa Zerda, etc.¹⁷ The appearance of Bachué artists in Colombian art has its equivalent in other aesthetic and literary movements with strong indigenous influences, motivated by the “search for one’s own”, the native origins of each territory, such as Mexican Muralism.¹⁸

The recognition of Bachué artists and both their aesthetic and political importance in terms of what they represent for the history of art and culture in Colombia is important. It is also crucial for making the indigenous aspects of society visible within the national imagination, especially at a time when eugenics and debates about the “degeneration of the race” were prevalent.¹⁹ Nevertheless, for a long time, art historiography ignored contributions from this group, and their memory has only been revived in recent decades. Although the national government commissioned Rozo to design the façade and ornamentation of the Colombian Pavilion for the International Exhibition in Seville (1929), the sculptor was better known in Mexico, where he spent most of his life and created most of his work.²⁰

Furthermore, the artists who took part in this movement were mostly white or mixed race, not indigenous, therefore their works remain within the orbit of the external gaze. Finally, their insistence on the mythical, the earthly, and the pre-Columbian contributed to reinforcing the association between the indigenous and the past.

Another key aspect in the history of the relationship between the indigenous and the shaping of Colombian art, heritage, and national memory is the establishment and

colombianos: estudio crítico e histórico compuesto por Luis Alberto Acuña como aportación a la historia de las bellas artes en Colombia. 2nd Edition. (Mexico: Ediciones Samper y Ortega, 1942).

¹⁷ Germán Rubiano Caballero, *Escultura colombiana del siglo XX* (Bogotá: Ediciones del Fondo Cultural Cafetero, 1983), 29-51.

¹⁸ Ivonne Pini, *En busca de lo propio. Inicios de la modernidad en Cuba, México, Uruguay y Colombia. 1920-1930* (Bogotá: National University of Colombia, 2000).

¹⁹ María Fernanda Vásquez, “Degeneración y mejoramiento de la raza: ¿higiene social o eugenesia? Colombia, 1920-1930”, *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, 25.1 (2018): 145-158.

²⁰ Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Rómulo Rozo. Tallando la patria*. Two volumes (Bogotá: La Silueta, 2015).



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development of the Bank of the Republic's Gold Museum. Its collection of around 60,000 pieces of goldwork and pottery from various pre-Columbian cultures (Quimbaya, Calima, Tairona, Zenú, Muisca, Tolima, Tumaco, etc.), began with the acquisition of the famous Poporo Quimbaya (lime container) in 1939. The ways in which the Gold Museum's collections are narrated and exhibited have emphasized the technical and aesthetic value of the goldwork of the pre-Hispanic indigenous peoples. This has strengthened 19th-century stories about the glorious origins of the Colombian nation in the 20th century, which are disconnected from the historical experience and artistic and cultural expressions of contemporary indigenous peoples.²¹ These types of connections have only begun to be implemented in recent years through new museological, museographic, and educational mediation proposals, which have transformed not only the Gold Museum in Bogotá, but also the Gold Museum Network on a regional level, in cities such as Leticia, Santa Marta, Cartagena and Pasto.²²

Throughout the 20th century, social movements and land struggles led by peasants and indigenous peoples in various regions of the country would also permeate Colombian arts and visual culture. In Vikis Ospina's photography (*Movimientos sociales* series, 1973-2018), the documentary film by Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva (*Nuestra voz de tierra, memoria y futuro*, 1981-1982, in collaboration with the Regional

²¹ Sandra Camelo, "Representaciones en el Museo del Oro de la ciudad de Bogotá", *Nómadas*, 35 (2011): 217-227; Daniel García Roldán, *La invención de El Dorado: museos arqueológicos, imágenes cartográficas y redes de conocimiento en Colombia (1935-1955)* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes-Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2022).

²² Bank of the Republic, Gold Museum, "Renovación de los Museos del Oro regionales", *Boletín Museo del Oro* 56 (2017): 316-325; Eduardo Londoño, "Método a dos voces: la construcción de múltiples miradas en la educación en el Museo del Oro", *Boletín Museo del Oro*, 52 (2004): 123-138, and "Hacia el visitante interactivo: un periodo de transformación en los Servicios Educativos del Museo del Oro", *Boletín Museo del Oro*, 55 (2011): 1-24; Juliana Campuzano, "Tres estrategias para la participación de públicos y no públicos en el proceso de renovación del Museo del Oro Zenú en Cartagena", *Boletín Museo del Oro*, 56 (2017): 118-153. Similar transformations have also taken place in the National Museum of Colombia. For example, the setup of the Ser Territorio (Being Territory) room, in which inter-curatorial bets have been made (mixing pieces from the history, art, and ethnology collections) and which has involved contemporary indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. See Victoria Portela, "Diálogos y tensiones de la representación indígena en el espacio museal. Tres experiencias: Colombia, Panamá y Perú" (masters thesis in Museology and Heritage Management, National University of Colombia, 2022), 7-127.



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Indigenous Council of Cauca [CRIC]), the posters by Taller 4 Rojo (*Afiche de difusión del libro de Manuel Quintín Lame*, 1973; *Encuentro Indígena Nabusímake*, 1975), or Caro's plastic art (*Maíz*, 1981; *Homenaje a Manuel Quintín Lame*, 1992), indigenous people are portrayed as political subjects with historical agency, as active participants in the creation of the country's present and future.²³

These types of movements, struggles, and the growing visibility of indigenous (and Afro-descendant) communities in the national consciousness, among other factors, motivated the establishment of the National Constituent Assembly, which led to the enactment of the Political Constitution of 1991. For the first time, the Colombian nation was officially accepted and recognized as diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural. The political and legal recognition of reserves and territories, autonomy, and self-governance were just as important as the appreciation of the worldviews and ways of life of ethnic communities. However, as various authors have pointed out, multiculturalism as a state discourse serves the interests of neoliberal capitalism, consequently reproducing social and economic inequalities, which continue to mainly affect racialized populations. The reduction of indigenous cultural material to "crafts", through a process of folklorization, exoticization, and commercialization, deepens the longstanding process of stereotyping. And the now institutionalized multicultural rhetoric tends to erase the distinct struggles, political identities, histories, and contexts of each particular "indigenous nationality."²⁴

²³ Carolina Cerón and Juanita Solano, *Viki Ospina, 1970-1990* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2018); Isabel Restrepo, "El cine de Marta Rodríguez y Jorge Silva: ¡contra la historia oficial!", *Narrativas de la historia en el audiovisual colombiano. Controversias sobre el pasado en cuatro estudios de caso comparados* (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 2019); history of art criticism workshop, *Arte y disidencia política: memorias del Taller 4 Rojo* (Bogotá: Editorial La Bachué, 2016); José Ignacio Roca and Alejandro Martín, *Antonio Caro: símbolo nacional* (Bogotá: Seguros Bolívar, 2014).

²⁴ Luis Guillermo Vasco, "Nacionalidades indígenas y Estado en Colombia", *Entre selva y páramo. Viviendo y pensando la lucha india* (Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History, 2000); Diana Bocarejo and Eduardo Restrepo, "Introducción. Hacia una crítica del multiculturalismo en Colombia" (*dossier*), *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 47.2 (2011): 7-13; Mauricio Montenegro, Margarita Chaves and Marta Zambrano, eds., *El valor del patrimonio: mercado, políticas culturales y agenciamientos sociales* (Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History, 2014).



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Despite these problems and complexities, the opportunities provided by the Constitution of 1991 have allowed an increasing number of indigenous artists and artworks to be recognized as an integral part of Colombian art, heritage, memory, and visual culture. We can cite well-known examples, such as Carlos Jacanamijoy Tisoy's oil paintings (Inga, Putumayo), or Abel Rodríguez Muinane's paintings and drawings (Nonuya, Amazon), among many other artists.²⁵ The group of artists accompanying us in this seminar are proof of the richness and vitality of indigenous art in the early 21st century.

One of the most interesting questions raised at this occasion, which will undoubtedly be a subject of debate during these days of knowledge exchange, is the existing tension between the artist's individual creation (so characteristic of Western artistic canons) and the collective aesthetic and cultural production, typical of communities. Another question is the extent to which the conditions have been cemented for the visual self-representation of indigenous peoples, which allows them to transcend a long history of the indigenous peoples being represented from an outside perspective, as well as for joint aesthetic co-productions between indigenous communities and other social groups.

II

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, in various parts of the world people started to tear down or tamper with statues and public monuments, as part of social movements and protests. This new wave of anti-monument iconoclasm was triggered by the murder of the African-American citizen George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police in the United States on May 25 of that year. It was followed by Black Lives Matter protests and other social movements against racism, colonialism,

²⁵ *Exclama*, "Arte y tradición ancestral. 10 artistas indígenas colombianos", *Revista Exclama*, October 26 2022, <https://revistaexclama.com/arte-y-tradicion-ancestral-10-artistas-indigenas-colombianos/>.



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police brutality, and sexual and gender-based violence, which took place both in the United States and in Europe and Latin America. The protesters mainly attacked monuments associated with the history of slavery and colonialism, such as statues of confederate generals, Christopher Columbus, and some Spanish conquistadors, as well as statues of politicians and merchants who were involved in the transatlantic slave trade.²⁶

In Colombia, indigenous peoples from the Misak, Pijao, and Nasa ethnic groups, united in the movement called Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest (AISO), tore down the equestrian statue of the Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar on the Morro de Tulcán (an indigenous pyramid) in Popayán, the capital of the department of Cauca. The toppling, which took place on September 16 2020, happened within the context of a historical trial against Belalcázar, the founder of the cities of Quito, Cali, and Popayán. He was accused of genocide, rape, and land usurpation.²⁷ During the social movements of the national strike which took place between April and June 2021, many other monuments and statues would subsequently be destroyed or reappropriated and transformed by the protesters, especially in cities such as Cali, Bogotá, Pasto, Ibagué, and Barranquilla. Reactions to these events, as happened before in other places around the world, ranged from stigmatizing them as vandalism to recognizing them as symbolic acts of political assertion.²⁸

²⁶ Karen Cox, *No common ground: confederate monuments and the ongoing fight for racial justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Enzo Traverso, “Tearing down statues doesn’t erase history, it makes us see it more clearly”, *Jacobin, Voice of the American Left*, June 24 2020. <https://jacobin.com/2020/06/statues-removal-antiracism-columbus>; Sebastián Vargas Álvarez, *Atacar las estatuas. Vandalismo y protesta social en América Latina* (Bogotá: Publicaciones La Sorda, 2021).

²⁷ Vargas Álvarez, *Atacar las estatuas*, 83-102.

²⁸ Carolina Vanegas Carrasco, “Apuntes sobre la iconoclasia monumental contemporánea en Colombia”, *Cuadernu. Revista Internacional de Patrimonio, Museología Social, Memoria y Patrimonio*, 9 (2021): 122-137; Sebastián Vargas Álvarez, “Desmonte de la historia y apropiación del espacio público. Derribo e intervención de monumentos durante el Paro Nacional en Colombia (2021)”, *Crisol*, 21 (2022): 1-32.



To understand this phenomenon in all its complexity, it is necessary, firstly, to understand that monuments are territorial markers of memory and identity. They evoke the past whilst at the same time legitimizing certain sociopolitical and cultural orders in the present, as well as giving a glimpse into the future. Secondly, despite their purpose of remaining unchanged in time and space, monuments are the result of historic and contingent events. They are vulnerable to transformation, reappropriation, and redefinition by various social actors in different presents. There is no guarantee that the meaning or social function which is initially attributed to a monument will remain unchanged over time.²⁹ On the other hand, it is essential to take into account that constructing monuments as well as iconoclasm (the destruction of visual images and representations, including monuments) are not recent phenomena from our modern contemporary societies. They have been present in different cultures and geographies since ancient times and are dialectically related; just as memory consists of remembrance and forgetting, art/heritage involves both creation and destruction.³⁰

I believe that the destruction or redefinition of monuments in the context of the national strike was linked to a broader process of protesters appropriating public spaces and challenging the systems of representation of history and national culture, particularly indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, as well as young people.

The strike had a noticeable generational aspect. It was a moment in which historical, symbolic, and cultural aspects were battlefields for political transformation. It was just as important to the protesters to tear down monuments or appropriate monumental spaces (such as Los Héroes in Bogotá) and build new memorial sites (such as the

²⁹Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland, comps., *Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2003).

³⁰David Freedberg, *Iconoclasia. Historia y psicología de la violencia contra las imágenes* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Sans Soleil, 2017); Dario Gamboni, *La destrucción del arte. Iconoclasia y vandalismo desde la Revolución francesa* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2014).



Resistance Monument in Cali), as it was to create large murals, produce posters to display in the streets or to share on social media, and to *go live* or issue statements through alternative media to communicate the movement's demands and to denounce state repression.³¹

It is no coincidence that most statues and monuments that were destroyed during the national strike were figures related to the Conquest: Sebastián de Belalcázar, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, Diego Ospina and Medinilla, and Christopher Columbus. This is a response to symbolic violence in monumental representation that, since the 19th century, has glorified Spanish conquistadors and heroes of independence with marble and bronze statues (male conquistadors and heroes to be specific), marginalizing most social groups that live in Colombian territory, as well as their contributions to the country's history. On the few occasions when official monuments have been created in honor of the indigenous peoples, this has been done within the framework of stereotypes, such as in the case of the statue of India Catalina of Cartagena, or the case of the *monumento a la raza y el mestizaje* (Monument to Race and Miscegenation) in Neiva.

Having said that, and this is the most relevant aspect, the attacks are not referring to the past (or to the representation of the past), but to all the links between the past and the present. They are denunciations of the persistent long-standing violence, exclusion, and inequalities, which currently manifest as daily racial discrimination, constant land dispossession, and the murder of indigenous leaders.³² Marginalization and stereotypes, recreated through visual art and representations, are forms of symbolic violence that have allowed the physical and structural violence that

³¹ Vargas Álvarez, "Desmonte"; Freya Liv Quintana and Juan Sebastián Rojas, comp., *Voces en primera línea* (Cali, El Silencio Ediciones, 2021).

³² Carlos Páramo Bonilla, "¡Ya les caigo!: Estatuas y 'gentes de bien'", *Patrimonios en plural*, May 21 2021, <https://patrimoniosenplural.medium.com-ya-les-caigo-estatuas-y-gentes-de-bien-1d67dbd3cffb>.



indigenous peoples have endured for decades, and even centuries, to be normalized and concealed.

Many have wanted to view this type of iconoclastic actions as mere displays of “vandalism”, acts of ignorance and violence against “memory” or “heritage”. Personally, I think they must prompt us to reflect on the ways in which the history, art, and heritage of the nation, or rather, of the nations that share the Colombian territory, have been shaped, and on how we can continue collectively shaping these in the future. And in that reflection, in that debate, public space and the idea of the common are paramount.³³

Concluding Words

Throughout this conference, my focus has been on demonstrating how the place of the indigenous in the processes of creating Colombian art, heritage, and visual culture, since the 19th century up until the current day, has primarily been presented from an external non-indigenous perspective. As a result, this has caused their constant oscillation between invisibility and stereotyping. The recent toppling of Spanish conquistador statues during indigenous movements is an act which denounces this symbolic violence, through which they reclaim spaces for indigenous peoples to move from being represented objects to subjects who represent themselves and who represent their environment.

Transcending invisibility and stereotypes means recognizing and appreciating the plurality of aesthetics, worldviews, identities, subjectivity, and the ways of

³³ Marta Saade Granados, “Cuando caen las estatuas: acciones públicas para hacer historia”, *Las Dos Orillas*, May 25 2021, <https://www.las2orillas.co-cuando-caen-las-estatuas-acciones-publicaspara-hacer-historia/>; Paolo Vignolo, “¿Sueñan las estatuas con ovejas de bronce?”, *Corpus Archivos Virtuales de la Alteridad Americana*, 1.11 (2021): 1-8.



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experiencing the temporality and history of the social groups that live in Colombia.³⁴ A recognition and appreciation that must be careful not to reduce cultural diversity to a commodity, to avoid falling into the trap of exoticization and folklorization. By decolonizing knowledge and establishing epistemic justice, it will be possible to incorporate the heterogeneous and hybrid on equal terms, which will allow for the creation of a society with less violence and exclusion; that is, a dignified present.³⁵

Imagining and working *toward* and *from* this plurality is the responsibility of the State, which is in charge of designing and implementing public policies and managing budgets, as well as the responsibility of official and private entities responsible for culture, heritage, and education. But it also requires the commitment (above all) of all citizens. We must promote exhibitions, curation, dialogues, collaborative research, and co-productions of multiple narratives that tell of what we are³⁶.

I am sure that this *Knowledge Exchange*, and the Bank of the Republic's future exhibition, which is not only about indigenous art or the indigenous peoples, but *with* them, will stimulate this reflection and will bring multiple tools for thought, debate, and action, enabling the emergence of new images, narratives, and emotions of the common which are more plural and inclusive.

³⁴ François Hartog, *Regímenes de historicidad. Presentismo y experiencias del tiempo* (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007); Joanne Rappaport, *Política de la memoria: interpretación indígena de la historia en los Andes colombianos* (Popayán: Universidad del Cauca, 2000).

³⁵ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el saber, reinventar el poder* (Montevideo: Trilce-Universidad de la República, 2010); Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible. Ensayos desde un presente en crisis* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2018).

³⁶ In recent years, the concept of “public history” has been taking this approach within academia, particularly within the field of history. See Amada Carolina Pérez and Sebastián Vargas Álvarez, “Historia pública e investigación colaborativa: perspectivas y experiencias para la coyuntura actual colombiana”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, 42.1 (2019): 297-329.



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