

Colombian Visual Art and the Amerindian Universes

Álvaro Medina

In 1889, Paul Gauguin devoted himself to ceramics and shaped a self-portrait inspired by certain effigy urns from the area of modern-day Peru. With the appearance of a beer pitcher, the body of the vessel is in the form of a head tilted backwards in the style of the Mochicas. With this piece, Gauguin became a pioneer in the exploration of pre-Columbian sources. Then, in the words of Kirk Varnedoe, “the traditional way of representing the world changed.”¹ The change took place in Europe, to be precise. It was not in vain that Gauguin started saying that he was a “savage from Peru”,² a clear allusion to his childhood years living in Lima.

In the arts, the historical restoration of the native cultures of the American continent was beginning its ascent. Leading the way in Latin American circles was the Peruvian Francisco Laso with *El Habitante de la Cordillera* (The Inhabitant of the Peruvian Highlands), an oil painting that depicts a single native, proud and dignified, far removed from the allegorical natives of public monuments.³ In the years that followed, the academicists began to use paintings and sculptures to capture events related to indigenous historical milestones and the atrocities of the European invaders.

In close parallel, characteristic elements of some of the most notable architectural monuments of indigenous history were taken and used to decorate the pavilions of industrial and trade fairs. This trend started at the 1867 Paris Exposition, and reached its peak with the neo-indigenism of the Mexican, Peruvian, Guatemalan and

¹ Kirk Varnedoe, “Gauguin”, in William Rubin (dir.), *Le primitivisme dans l’art du 20e siècle*. Paris: Flammarion, 1991, vol. I, p. 179.

² Ibid.

³ Álvaro Medina, “El indio: de la alegoría a la realidad y la estética”. *Ensayos – Historia y teoría del arte*, Bogotá: vol. IX, no. 9, 2004, National University of Colombia, Faculty of Arts, Aesthetic Research Institute, pp. 83-116.



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Colombian pavilions at the Ibero-American Exposition in Seville in 1929. The gradual revival of the Amerindian arts, destroyed by diabolical minds during colonial times, found its rightful complement when indigenous people, understood as citizens, became the protagonists of works intended to elevate them socially, politically and humanly. The artists Saturnino Herrán (Mexico), José Sabogal (Peru), Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas (Bolivia) and Luis Alberto Acuña (Colombia) are among the most prominent creators of such works.

Finally, as the central theme of these pages, the period from the mid-1910s to the early 1920s saw the emergence of the leaders of the artistic current that appropriated the aesthetics of pre-Columbian art. In the order in which they came to be inspired by such a varied and rich source of inspiration - whose appeal in conceptual and visual terms can be compared to that held by Greek art among the artists of the Renaissance - we can mention the Guatemalan artist Carlos Mérida, the Mexicans Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the Brazilian Vicente do Rego Monteiro, the Argentinian Xul Solar, the Colombian Rómulo Rozo, the Mexico-based Frenchman Jean Charlot, the Englishman Henry Moore and the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres García, a plurality of nationalities that illustrates the current's transnational nature. By the second half of the century, Amerindian practices and art were decisive influences, from various perspectives, on important artists like Jackson Pollock of the United States, Britain's Richard Long and Robert Smithson (born and educated in Lima), and the French artist Orlan.

During his time in Paris and after studying in Bogotá and Madrid, Rómulo Rozo (Bogotá, 1899 - Mérida, 1964) cast in bronze his sculpture *Bachué, madre generatriz de los indios chibchas* (Bachué, Generative Mother of the Chibcha Indians, 1925), and went on to carve it in polished granite. The Chibcha or Muisca people figure in the



imagination of Colombians as the most advanced culture in their territory before the arrival of the Spanish, despite the Tairona people - who settled along the Caribbean coast and also spoke the Chibcha language - being much more advanced due to their construction of stone retaining walls that have endured the passing of centuries. Proud that Muisca blood ran through his veins, Rozo produced two further deities: *El dios Bochica* and *Tequendama* (both in 1927).

We know that the goddess Bachué emerged from the waters of a lake carrying a boy who would become her husband. Once they were of family-raising age, they begat many children. With the mission to populate the Earth complete, they returned together, converted into snakes, to the same lake.⁴ By representing both events in a single block, Rozo based the piece on symbolism with one foot in futurism. In his sculpture, Bachué rises out from the water from the waist up, carrying the baby on her head, his body hidden underneath cone-shaped attire that covers him completely, revealing only his face. From the waist down, the two deities return to the water in the form of snakes, female and male, identifiable by the graphism that covers the surface of each of the snake-legs. The base of the figure represents the waters from which they emerge, and to which they return years later.

The vision put forward by Rozo in tackling the myth is complex, and admirable in its originality. The element that encapsulates the pre-Columbian aesthetic is the mask of the goddess, crowned by a diadem of snails identical to those of the ceramic offering figures that the Muisca used in their ritual ceremonies. He gave himself the same freedom in *El dios Bochica* (The God Bochica), who created the Tequendama Falls when the Bogotá plain was flooded. The sculpture is carved in stone, with a geometrical structure whose silhouette evokes the shamanic flight of the gold pectorals of the Tolima culture. Rozo's Bochica holds high a sort of beam that

⁴ Juan de Castellanos, *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, vol. II. Part four, song one. Caracas: Editorial Sur-América, 1932, p. 350.



represents, as the myth says, the gold rod that he used to break through the mountain and send the waters crashing down.

The anthropomorphized figure in *Tequendama* also wears a mask in the style of the offering figures, and is as robust as a Buddha. With its beard transformed into water, it symbolizes the river that runs down and bathes its feet. As the Tequendama Falls are the most notable topographical accident in this high Andean plain, the sculptor can be concluded to have envisaged two deities lacking in iconography, while also taking a place sacred to the Muisca people into consideration.

Rozo decorated Colombia's pavilion at the aforementioned Seville Ibero-American Exposition and two years later, in 1931, he left the country to live in Mexico, where he would die. Based in Yucatán, he worked in the Neo-Mayan style that has been studied in detail by Marco Aurelio Díaz Güemez.⁵ In the city of Mérida, Rozo constructed the *Monumento a la Patria* (Monument to the Homeland, 1945-1956), created using iconographic elements from archaeological sites such as Chichén Itzá.

Rozo's Andean divinities made such an impression among the intellectual youth of the time that a group of writers and sculptors founded the Bachué group in Bogotá in 1930. Their manifestos, in an avant-garde tone, stressed the need to learn how to look at ourselves, and to "Colombianize" Colombia.⁶ There was great enthusiasm, but it resulted in few visual realizations due to there being no interest in exploring pre-Columbian aesthetics with the aim of forging languages.

⁵ Marco Aurelio Díaz Güemez, "El neomaya de Rómulo Rozo: la integración plástica en el *Monumento a la Patria* (1943-1956)", in Christian Padilla (ed.), *Rómulo Rozo - ¿Una vanguardia propia?* Bogotá: Fundación Proyecto Bachué, 2020, pp. 191-209.

⁶ Álvaro Medina, "El origen de los bachués", in *El arte colombiano de los años veinte y treinta*. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1995, pp. 45-59.



Luis Alberto Acuña (Bogotá, 1904 – Villa de Leyva, 1993) was the most active member of the Bachué group. He painted indigenous people in full-bodied and sensual ways of great merit who cannot be tied to any specific Amerindian culture; always idealizing them, which was the trait that differentiated him from many of the indigenists of the period. His *Bachué* is an enormous, naked, olive-skinned woman who is breastfeeding the boy who will become her husband. This interpretation suggests that the child is her son, a detail that does not align with the legend transcribed and propagated by chroniclers.

As far as the relationship of Colombian artists with indigenous themes is concerned, a barren period occurred that was interrupted by Carlos Correa (Medellín, 1912-1985) when he painted *Dios de la pesca*, *Tetramorfos*, *Maternidad americana*, *El paraíso*, *Nudo andino* and *Bachué* (all in 1943) following his visit to the archaeological site of San Agustín. Correa unleashed an imagination that was completely free and through which he demonstrated creativity and ambition, making use of the symbols and characteristics that he found in the monumental San Agustín statuary. His *Bachué* carries the boy on her shoulders, a free version of San Agustín's "Double Me", the main feature of the watchful guards that overlap vertically and are situated at the entrances of the shamans' tombs.

Nothing in Correa's previous or subsequent work connects with the subject and the compositional solutions of these six paintings, of which the boldest is *Nudo andino*. Stretched out in a marsh, three naked women (a symbol of the three ranges of the Andes that cross the territory of Colombia) blend into the uneven landscape amid anacondas and beings who are half snake, half fish and half snake, half caiman. The way in which the creatures are arranged creates a heavy atmosphere derived from fables and myths.



For the German botanist and entomologist Leopoldo Richter (Gross-Auheim, 1896 – Bogotá, 1984), who settled in Colombia in 1935, reaching the rainforest, penetrating it, studying it, living it and feeling it to the fullest enabled him to paint the Tropics and their inhabitants. His scientific education led him to study insects and live in indigenous communities. The need to notice the most minute details of the specimens that Richter placed under his magnifying glass to draw made it possible for him to create a pictorial language that was able to combine the micro (the isolated individual) and the macro (the majesty of nature), resizing elements and altering scales.

A master of the fine and vibrant line, he produced woodcut prints and oils but achieved mastery in painting with the enamel on ceramic technique with which he created numerous murals. Nature is the heartbeat of his work. Woman, man, flora and fauna populate several compositions with expressionist roots that, in the opinion of Walter Engel, “are absolutely personal and independent of the expressionists of Central Europe.”⁷ Why? Because his language was cut through by a geometry that was not derived from Amerindian languages, but with an awareness of what he discovered here and there on the continent.

El viejo habla (The Old Man Speaks, 1956) is a variation on da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, albeit located in a paradisiacal forest. The predominant figure, a shaman, is being listened to by birds, apes and humans. Around the central group, made up of apprentices, the community is at work on tasks and domestic chores without indulging in costumbrism, because the omnipresent vegetation neutralizes anecdotes.

⁷ Walter Engel, “Prologue”, in Óscar Collazos, *Richter*. Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1997, p. 10.



After abandoning organic abstraction and embracing concreteness, Edgar Negret (Popayán, 1920 – Bogotá, 2012) turned towards geometric figuration with pieces that connected him with the Amerindian tradition, such as *Cliff Dwellings* and *Aparatos mágicos* (Magic Machines). Both these series were produced in 1957 in New York, following the artist's extended stay the year before among the Pueblo people of the Southwestern United States. There, Negret visited the imposing architectural ruins of Mesa Verde, left behind by the Anasazi, and took part in shamanic ceremonies.

He told Samuel Vásquez that he lived together with the Navajo because "he had heard something about the magic sand paintings", which are created as part of healing rituals. "When the shaman finishes the painting, God is there. The sick person then enters the painting and is mixed together with God in order to gain an understanding with him. It is communion. That's magic", he explained.⁸ Impressed by the wonderful scale of a ceremony preceded by the consumption of natural medicines that attack the ailment being suffered, Negret made the sculpture *Kachina* (1957). Part of the Magic Machines series, it is a clear allusion to the ritual doll that accompanies the medicine man during the task of curing illness in its spiritual dimension.

Indigenous kachinas are near-cylindrical and made from round pieces of wood. By imagining one as a column with a square section, Negret positioned himself within the current of Constructivism. In essence, he cut and folded aluminum sheets assembled with visible nuts and bolts, which he then coated in industrial paint. He made use of primary colors, mainly black and white. From 1963, pieces with titles such as *Navegante* (Navigator), *Acoplamiento* (Docking) and *Cabo Kennedy* (Cape Kennedy), in reference to aerospace engineering, were produced by curving the metal sheeting. The sculptor selected the themes according to the effectiveness of the magic implicit in those devices that work with the flick of a switch, and do in seconds

⁸ Samuel Vásquez, *El abrazo de la mirada*. Medellín: Fondo Editorial Ateneo Porfirio Barba Jacob, 2007, pp. 29-30.



or minutes something that would demand hours or even days of human effort in primitive conditions. The poetics of transformation and change of a magical-religious nature in *Kachina* and a mechanical nature in *Acoplamiento* were made equal. Negret traveled to Peru in 1980 and visited the archaeological sites of Cuzco and its surrounding area, opening himself up to new horizons. The catalog for the 1982 retrospective exhibition of Negret in the Tamayo Museum states that in the same year He made *Machu Picchu*, the first artwork in his "Incan phase". From this moment onwards he tended towards a flattening of forms, gradually leaving behind the incurvations of the sheet metal, and began to produce works that were rather closed, flat and rectilinear, with a certain predominance of symmetry and an increasingly noticeable interest in polychromy, making use of all the colors of the rainbow as well as black and gray tones.⁹

Negret assembled sculptures related to ancestral beliefs, such as *La casa de las serpientes* (House of the Snake, 1985) and *Templo solar* (Solar Temple, 1986), or to practical devices like those he titled *Reloj andino* (Andean Clock, 1985) and *Quipu* (1986). When he bolted together *Sol* (1985), *Luna amarilla* (Yellow Moon, 1985), *Titicaca, el lago mítico* (Titicaca, The Mythical Lake, 1986) and *Cóndor* (1987), the themes were not inspired by the natural world in and of itself, but rather the symbolic dimension that these manifestations have had in the worldview of Native American societies. While Negret turned in particular towards *Tahuantinsuyo*, the Incan empire, *Serpiente emplumada* (Feathered Serpent, 1991-1993) refers to Teotihuacán, as *Laguna – Dirección a Guatavita* does to the Muisca. Some references are implicit in the titles themselves: *Bosque paisaje agustiniano* (San Agustín Forest Landscape, 1989) and *Gran soporte Tierradentro* (1997) reveal his admiration for the material achievements and magical thought of other indigenous cultures.

⁹ José María Salvador, *1957-1991 – Edgar Negret: De la máquina al mito*. Mexico: Museum of Monterrey / Rufino Tamayo Museum, 1991, pp. 68-69.



The career of Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar (Pamplona, 1922 – Bogotá, 2004) ran in close parallel to that of Negret, as described by Ana M. Franco in an exhaustive study of both artists¹⁰. Between 1958 and 1959, Ramírez created a mural on the new headquarters of the Banco de Bogotá, entitled *El Dorado* in a clear reference to the legend that motivated the Spanish conquest in South America. It consists of a modular relief made up of four layers of wooden plates covered with a gold film, including the plate that acts as a base.

The choice of material and title connect us with the ceremony of the *zipa*, the ruler of the Muisca, who would cover his body with powdered gold and proceed to perform an ablution in Guatavita Lake, not far from the ancient settlement of Bacatá, now Bogotá. A relationship with this ancestral rite is confirmed by geometry that was not taken directly from the pre-Columbian goldsmithing of the territory of modern-day Colombia, but which does call to mind, due to its movements through space, the circular or semi-circular outlines used in Tolima pectorals, Nariño ear ornaments and nose rings from cultures such as the Calima and Quimbaya.

With the mural complete, Ramírez entered his period of white reliefs with the same constructive rigor, producing *Serpiente precolombina* (Pre-Columbian Serpent, 1961), a clear title that he would use again for works in 1964 and 1975. “Ramírez used the theme as a pretext and composed, made alterations, set rhythms and defined patterns that established still or silent areas and areas that are dynamic or interspersed with sounds. The pre-Columbian, therefore, resides in the spirit that inspires the composition and not just in the iconography”, I wrote in one of his catalogs.¹¹ The subtlety of his approach to the original Amerindia was diluted completely, until the

¹⁰ Ana M. Franco, *Neoclásicos – Edgar Negret y Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar entre París, Nueva York y Bogotá, 1944-1964*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2019.

¹¹ Álvaro Medina, “Dieciocho notas para comprender a un escultor”, in *Ramírez Villamizar*. Bogotá: Fondo Cultural Cafetero, n.d. [1992], p. 17.



reverse shift occurred in 1984 following a visit to Cuzco and its surrounding area that was spurred by Negret himself. The grandeur of the Incan architecture and engineering was reflected in *Recuerdo de Machu Picchu* (Memories of Machu Picchu, 1984).

Made from cut and welded sheets of rusted steel, this leitmotif of the series evokes the agricultural terraces that reshape the hill of the Incan city. The rhombus and its counterpart, the flat form folded into obtuse angles combined with flat, straight-lined metal strips, wrap around several dynamic volumes, open to the space that comes and goes from the inside to the outside. In the same spirit is *Templo Tikal* (Tikal Temple, 1992), a homage to the Mayan civilization, and *Alfiler Tairona* (Tairona Pin, 1994), a slender, upright construction made from rusted iron that pairs unmissably elaborate symbolic tops. *Barca muisca* (Muisca Boat, 2004) is a simplified large-scale variation of the famous piece in the Gold Museum in Bogotá. Ramírez had shifted from geometric concreteness to a figuration that was decidedly abstractionist, and at which he arrived fueled by the excitement that pre-Columbian themes stirred in him.

Moving away from the dominant trend of the era, Pedro Alcántara (Cali, 1942) did not want to be a painter but rather a sketcher, initially limiting his artistic activities to black Indian ink and a bamboo stick. Human beings in the theater of social vicissitudes would be his main subject from 1963 onwards. His expressionism, with its tortuous lines and seemingly clumsy spots, captured what Marta Traba would describe favorably as “deformed and strange figures.”¹² His characters, flat at first, grew in volume and became filled with bulges akin to hypertrophied tendons, snaking under the skin amid lumps with a monstrous appearance. Alcantará shaped a figuration

¹² Marta Traba, “Vida cultural – XVI Salón Nacional = XVI Panteón Nacional”, *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, October 25, 1964; compiled in Camilo Calderón Schrader, *50 años – Salón de Artistas Nacionales*. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1990, p. 130.



constructed from “excrescences and organic pieces”, in the accurate definition of Germán Rubiano Caballero.¹³

The figures in *Qué muerte duermes, levántate* (What a Death You Sleep In, Get Up; 1968) and other similar works from the same year have an unshakeable yet tortured appearance. To this, Rubiano Caballero would add that, “despite the storms and vexations”, each character “maintains a steadfast vitality”. Alcantará’s lacerations were derived from the ceramics of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture that settled on both sides of the Mataje river, the boundary between Ecuador and Colombia.¹⁴ La Tolita-Tumaco ceramists conceived figures that are a catalogue of the endemic morbidity in a torrid, humid region, and which were modeled in order to exorcise it. On this subject, in *Arte del chamanismo, la salud y la vida* (The Art of Shamanism, Health and Life) it is stated that importance was placed on the representation of “unusual illnesses and genetic states.”¹⁵ In this book, sculptures with specific pathologies are illustrated and discussed, such as cleft lips, skin ulcers, tumors, carcinomas, facial asymmetries and other conditions and diseases.

Originally from the Peruvian province of Áncash and a Quechua speaker, Armando Villegas (Pomabamba, 1926 – Bogotá, 2013) grew up in a region that boasts the sanctuary of Chavín de Huántar, which was active between 1,500 and 300 BC. On the site, a complex of buildings and center of worship was constructed, with a square plaza erected over an underground labyrinth. At the center of this labyrinth the

¹³ Germán Rubiano Caballero, “La figuración política”, in Eugenio Barney Cabrera (dir.), *Historia del arte colombiano*, vol. 5. Barcelona: Salvat, 1975, p. 1577.

¹⁴ In Ecuador, this culture is known by the name La Tolita, with the name Tumaco used in Colombia. Due to the fact that they are peoples that share the same culture, I have adopted the term La Tolita-Tumaco.

¹⁵ Jaime Bernal Villegas, Ignacio Briceño Balcázar and Ronald Duncan, *Arte del chamanismo, la salud y la vida – Tumaco-La Tolita*. Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Culture, 1993, p. 29-30.



Lanzón can be found, one of most extraordinary and enigmatic lithic sculptures of our remote past. An awareness of possessing a legacy of global importance always stayed with Villegas, whose professional career took place in Bogotá after arriving there in 1950. In 1957, Marta Traba commented on the “subject of the indigenous figures that carry such weight in his paintings”, transformed “into burning visual material, into colors and (...) into a bombastic rhythm mixed together with the forms.”¹⁶

With the passage of time, Villegas came to be more well-known for his paintings of “exotic and unreal” characters - in the words of Gabriel García Márquez¹⁷ - that define pictorial magic realism: characters from a time with no name. The fantastical nature of their outfits evokes the fear of the void that can be seen in the *Lanzón*, but also in two other sculptures from the Chavín culture: The Tello Obelisk and the Raimondi Stele. Broadly speaking, the profuse style of the artists of the ancient American continent oscillated, depending on the case, between the geometric and the organic, and it is present in the architecture, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, mural paintings and codices of Mesoamerica and South America.

There was, however, always another Villegas: the abstractionist, who took a firm step forward with his creation of a relief mural in the foyer of the Nacional de Seguros building in Bogotá in 1972, made up of four-sided white modules of varying sizes and proportions, each with its own ideography in the form of a system of lines and dots of different sizes, with no two alike. These modules were inspired by the *tocapu* symbols that adorned the *uncu* tunics and clothing of the Incas and leaders that governed the Tahuantinsuyo.¹⁸

¹⁶ Marta Traba, “*Crítica de arte – Exposición en la Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País*”, *El Tiempo*. Bogotá: March 27, 1957.

¹⁷ Gabriel García Márquez, “*25 años después, Armando Villegas*”, in *Armando Villegas*. Bogotá: Graphos, 1982, n.d. [p. 7].

¹⁸ Guamán Poma de Ayala, *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, three volumes. Mexico: Economic Culture Fund, 2008).



Later on, Villegas made use of industrially-produced wooden boxes and briefcases with internal compartments designed to hold and exhibit small commercial products. The compartments form a grid like that of the *uncu*, which he filled with symbols that he created by cutting up “printed fabrics, colored ribbons and patches” and by “employing transparency, thick oil and blobs.”¹⁹ The noteworthy pieces include *Tótem de la luna con mensaje* and *Tótem del sol con mensaje*, a 2004 diptych with identical partitioning. At the top of both, Villegas painted the celestial bodies named in the titles. Underneath, arranged in four rows of 17 due to the variety of the forms, there are prints and colors used imaginatively with no two squares the same.

With a light sense of humor, Nadín Ospina (Bogotá, 1960) has allowed himself to play with dozens of pre-Columbian motifs, representations and styles, as one alone is insufficient for his purposes. By making use of ancestral works that he resignifies, Ospina has created a large and varied body of work that astonishes in the abundance of conceptual approaches contained within it. If Van Gogh copied paintings by Millet with his own textures and color, and Picasso introduced variations into Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* with the geometry that characterized his art, Ospina has made pre-Columbian art his own with his own ideas, which do not disregard the contributions of Duchamp, the conceptualists, the minimalists and the transvanguardistas. Of all his work, something stands out in *Bizarros y críticos* (Bizarre and Critical, 1993), a vast and complex installation comprising 45 pieces that allude to the authentic and the fake, the center and the periphery, the personal and the alien.

I will start by highlighting the singularities of the “critical” mentioned in the installation’s title. They are five hieratic figures in rustic concrete that represent the

¹⁹ Álvaro Medina, *Armando Villegas – Yarpanakunapa. Para que siempre esté en mi memoria*, catalogue. Lima: CCPUCP Gallery, June 22 to July 26, 2006, p. 21.



Simpson family from the TV series of the same name, modeled in the style of the stone shamans of San Agustín. Ospina arranged them in such a way that they seem to be looking at several bizarre (read: fake) pre-Columbian artefacts, with a material finish so perfect that they could pass for genuine. The irony is clear to see in the zoomorphic vessels made from black ceramic with smooth, semi-gloss surfaces that imitate the Tairona but do not depict examples of the native fauna of the American continent, but instead hippos with wide spouts on their backs.

I have written an entire chapter of a book on *Bizarros y críticos*.²⁰ Here, it should also be mentioned that the application of pre-Columbian styles to completely modern themes or issues gained momentum in Mexico in 1995, when the artist was invited to participate in the show *Por mi raza hablará el espíritu* (Through My Race Shall the Spirit Speak). For the occasion, Ospina brought with him only the preparatory sketches for the pieces he planned to exhibit. Once he was there, he employed highly-skilled imitators of pre-Hispanic artefacts to create his sculptures, a solution that had been trialed successfully in *Bizarros y críticos*.

By refiguring characters from film, TV and comics, from then on he achieved fusions like those in *Pensador* (1998), a cross between Rodin's iconic sculpture and a *macehual*, a person of low status from the Mexica culture, and in *Huaco* (1998), a couple having sex in the Mochican style. In both cases, the figures have the ears of Disney's Mickey Mouse. The use of well-known characters makes it easier for the spectator to grasp the meaning of the works, which are based on discordances that leap to the attention.

²⁰ Álvaro Medina, *Nadín Ospina – Refiguraciones*. Bogotá: Bogotá Museum of Modern Art, 2000, pp. 17-25).



With Miguel Ángel Rojas (Bogotá, 1946), the Andean reference point is reduced to an icon that acts as a witness to events of modern history, which he selects and works on as an artist through the intimism inherent to personal experience.

Rojas has formed an emotional bond with the indigenous world, consolidated by the fact that he knows himself and recognizes himself as mestizo. On a walk through the countryside one day, he came across a small, pre-Columbian ceramic head in which he recognized his own features. He called it *Autorretrato encontrado* (Found Self-Portrait), an obvious hint at Marcel Duchamp's *objet trouvé*, with an ancestral seal in the case of Rojas. It is for this reason that he has photographed and introduced this head and other similar ones into two-dimensional images, or assembled them in installations in two ways: by using the original ceramic piece or a reproduction made with his own hands, using edible materials in some cases in the traditional way of the Mexica.

The cycle of historical complaints initially dealt with the customary abuses of the indigenous population. Presented at the 2nd Havana Biennial, the piece that was most emblematic of this attitude is *El gran jaguar y sus lesiones* (The Great Jaguar and Its Wounds, 1986), which consisted of "a series of portraits of indigenous people - cut out and stuck to the wall - who form a jaguar."²¹ There converged two significant presences: the Amerindian, discriminated against when not being massacred, and the jaguar, a sacred animal. In this mixture of collage and ink drawings, the indigenous people portrayed blend in with the spots on the fur and the bleeding wounds of the feline, shining a light on the violence that the Amerindian population has suffered for more than 500 years.

In subsequent years he worked on photosensitive paper and on large leaves, combining traditional photographic printing, beams of light emitted by flashlights, surface lines created using chemicals, and partial developments. From this

²¹ Natalia Gutiérrez, *Miguel Ángel Rojas esencial*. Bogotá: Planeta, 2010, p. 209.



combination emerged a mass of fluid and elastic forms, with sharp edges and diffuse edges, areas of deep black and areas of brilliant white, smooth grays and grainy grays with singular visual strength.

The technique proved to be suitable for evoking archaeological middens, places where scientific excavations reveal what lies beneath layers and layers of sand, stone and sedimented organic remains. It reached a high level of significance in *Felicidad perdida* (Happiness Lost, 1989), a reference to the doomed occupation of the Palace of Justice by the M-19 guerrilla group on November 6, 1987, and to the disastrous retaking of the building by the Colombian military the following day. Besieged and under attack from cannon fire by the so-called forces of order, the building burned for days. The destroyed palace enclosure imagined by Rojas is a chaotic, somber space into which he introduced photos of faded and undefined ceramic heads from the La Tolita-Tumaco culture, present as silent witnesses of a political, moral and social crisis. The artist did not base his work on the indigenism of the 20th century, nor did he fall back on aesthetics from our remote antiquity. With neo-expressionist language of a contemporary tone, in *Felicidad perdida* Rojas draws a parallel between modern-day violence and that of the Amerindian trampled on by the Spanish conquistadors and the republican elites, through which he suggests that time goes round in a circle and is repeated, tragically, *ad infinitum*.

Germán Botero (Fresno, 1946) has never hidden his fascination for the expressions of the past. An architect and industrial designer, his early sculpture work aimed to evoke the machinery of the pre-industrial age. He rebuilt looms, wheels and mills that had been manufactured centuries prior, approaching them in such a way that the original form is still recognizable, but is divested of practical function. Of the original mechanics, only the memories remain. The new object is for contemplating and not



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for using, as a result of it lacking movement. Its poetical efficacy is due to the act of changing materials and assembly procedures.

In 1985, as part of the project that he called "Industrial Archaeology", Botero started to form the wooden molds that were used in the manufacture of straw hats, joining them together as if they were kettledrums and gilding the surface of what would be the equivalent of the leather membrane, a clear reference to pre-Columbian objects made from gold. *Crisol* (1992) is an example of this first connection with ancient America.

He made a significant stride forward in *Guerreros y tumbas I* (Warriors and Tombs, 1990), a large-scale installation made from ceramic whose concept was explored further in *Tumba* (Tomb, 1991) and *Acueducto precolombino* (Pre-Columbian Aqueduct, 1992), both constructed in agglomerated granite. All three pieces feature a "ritual atmosphere", an architectural articulation with the "air of a ceremonial platform"²² and a "transcendent austerity", according to Luis Fernando Valencia.²³ The idea of situating himself in the realm of rite and ceremony came to him after visiting the archaeological site of San Agustín, the most important grouping of stone statues in pre-Columbian America. Added to this is a spatial particularity that we can associate with the *Baño de la Ñusta*, near Cuzco, and the Temple of the Moon opposite Machu Picchu. It involved giving visual and material weight to the base of his installations, using stone blocks or ceramic tiles that are an exploration of colors, textures and layers. In doing so, he broke away from the neutrality of the exhibition space, just as the stones that were worked and attached to the living rock in the aforementioned examples of Incan architecture break up the natural environment. A rectangular depression opens up in *Tumba* in order to evoke the grave earmarked for

²² Luis Fernando Valencia, *Germán Botero: Espacio, memoria y materia* Bogotá: Ediciones Jaime Vargas / Bogotá Museum of Modern Art, 2002, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.



the deceased, a change in height that in *Guerreros y tumbas* is protagonized by the column that rises up with the imposingness of a menhir.

Botero went on to sculpt, in rustic wood, the topography that he admired in the dwelling platforms built by the people who inhabited the steep foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta upon the arrival of the Spanish. This formed a series that he entitled *Terrazas taironas* (Tairona Terraces, 2006), a notable example of landscape transformed into sculpture. Among the ruins of the so-called *Ciudad Perdida* (Lost City), the flattened hilltops were reinforced with stone walls to avoid landslides. Botero hints at these hilltops in his sculptures through the terracing that separates and surrounds the platforms. The natural (the mountains) and the artificial (the geometry of the indigenous engineer) intersect to create dynamic visual contrasts tinged by an emotion that is colored by nostalgia.

Maquiamelo is the artistic name of Rafael Melo (Bogotá, 1972), a sculptor and portrait painter who has been inspired by the *tsantsas*, or shrunken heads of the Shuar people of Ecuador. From a very young age, he lived and studied in the country as his mother is Ecuadorian. This gave him the opportunity to live with the Shuar community for half a year. While there, he met an indigenous man who wore a shrunken head around his neck, a practice that had been abandoned several generations before. Due to it being an amulet, the "wearer of a *tsantsa*, as well as their [own] courage and bravery, also acquires the courage and bravery of the rival they faced off against and were able to defeat."²⁴

Once his art career was on track, Maquiamelo dedicated himself to replicating the shrunken heads. He began by buying and retouching the crude heads that the Shuar

²⁴ Álvaro Medina, *El arte extremo de Maquiamelo – The Extreme Art of Maquiamelo*. Bogotá: Grijalbo, 2014, p. 12.



themselves make for tourists. During his efforts, he first corrected the features that he was not satisfied with, combined with the latent expressionism of the original pieces. The next step led him to imitate the technique used by manufacturers of fake heads, which consisted of shaping goat skin over wooden molds, something he learned during his second visit to the Shuar ten years after the first.

Maquiamelo graduated high school in the United States. A fan of Bob Marley, he identified himself with the punk movement. This explains the theme of his first successful series, entitled *Tribus urbanas* (Urban Tribes, 2008-2010), using putty made from wet paper. Then, he covered the surface with tanned or thinned leather with a skin-like quality. The use of human hair and color rounded off the process. Working with a paintbrush made it easier to capture the textures and spots of a stiff face. From them on, he created portraits of famous bullfighters, Hollywood stars and heads of state in the form of shrunken heads.

These twelve Colombian artists are the most significant members of a current inspired by the philosophical, sociological and cultural principles put forward a little over a century ago by Latin American writers such as José Enrique Rodó, Manuel Gamio, José Vasconcelos, Ricardo Rojas, José Carlos Mariátegui, Franz Tamayo, Mario de Andrade and Juan Marinello. With a diverse range of approaches, these thinkers called out for the cultural emancipation of America based on its own realities.

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