

Massif Archipelago

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Constructing divergent narratives on the nature of cultural, plastic, and visual production requires revisiting the terrains and landscapes where the history is written. When recalling art critic Marta Traba, who presented the television program *Historia del arte moderno contada desde Bogotá* (*History of Modern Art Told from Bogota*) in 1984, it seems necessary to invent alternative perspectives and seek fresh coordinates to establish a more complex and *equivocal* narrative, that is, one enriched by the radical diversity of Colombian and Latin American society.

Within these new possible horizons, the history of regional territories plays a key role, such as here in the case of Cauca, or more precisely, in the region of the Colombian Massif. This telluric node in the southwest of the country, the nucleus from which the three mountain ranges originate, serves as an epicenter in the north of the South American continent. It is here that the cultures of numerous indigenous peoples converge, and from where the Magdalena, Cauca, Patía, and Caquetá rivers flow into the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and the Amazonian landscape. The first maps from the Sovereign State of Cauca reflected this geographic complexity, extending from the Caribbean to the borders of what is now the Venezuelan Amazon.

It is in 1940s Popayán that this complexity of the territory is reflected, bringing together in less than a decade a set of complementary presences and events that allow for a new appreciation of the history of modern art in Colombia, extending beyond the Bachué movement and Marta Traba's later precepts. Through the School of Ceramics at the University of Cauca, under the direction of the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza; through the historical, poetic, and theoretical inclinations of Germán



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Arciniegas; and through the relationship of some Americanist artists with clay, or ethnographic developments with Francisco Tumiñá Pillimué and Gregorio Hernández de Alba at the Ethnological Institute of the University of Cauca (IEUC), a crucial link, albeit anecdotal, seems to have forged between the two sequences of artistic modernity in Colombia. A cluster of convergences unveiling a modern era, during which art, ethnology, and politics directed every cultural resource of a territory toward a unified modern consciousness in the Americas.

Reflections from this period and its actors still influence the practices of contemporary artists, even today. With the idea of an extended geography of the Colombian Massif, the prominent figure of Manuel Quintín Lame finally paved the way for the history of the indigenous political movement, the defense of coca, and the writing of the national memory. A historic and symbolic archipelago in which each islet—whether it be the modern megalith, avant-garde ceramics, the visual acuity of a young Misak, the fall of monuments, or basket philosophy—possesses its own autonomy and vitality, derived from its connections with the others.

1. Jorge Oteiza: Ceramics and Modern Megaliths

It would be useful to create a geographical representation of the different characteristics and possibilities of the country's ceramics, and to compare a map of archaeological sites with one showing present-day ceramic villages and sites. We would discover a diversity of styles and techniques, sometimes spanning thousands of years, and nearly all with a marvelous and hidden potential. However, at present, this potential barely manifests itself in the unchanging forms of impersonal work, with spiritual processes severely inhibited and elementary means technically impoverished.

JORGE OTEIZA, 1944



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It was towards the end of 1941 when the then Colombian Minister of Education, German Arciniegas, met the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza in Buenos Aires and invited him to create a national school of ceramics in Colombia. The initial project planned to open seven learning centers, located in the primary hubs of the country's ceramic tradition, including indigenous, rural, or industrial areas: Mompox, Ráquira, Popayán, El Carmen de Viboral, El Espinal, Pasto and Bogotá. However, the ambitious program created only one School of Ceramics, located on the premises of the University of Cauca, in Popayán, the city where Oteiza arrived at the end of 1943. Throughout most of 1944, the Basque teacher taught a workshop attended by students from the city's School of Fine Arts, including two young artists: Édgar Negret and Alberto Arboleda.

Oteiza's teaching and his solid theoretical and historical training would inspire new perspectives in the style of both artists, whether in the directions Negret's sculpture would take or in the preference for ceramics that Arboleda would retain in his work. The publication of *Carta a los artistas de América sobre el arte nuevo en la posguerra* (*Letter to the artists of America: on new post-war art*), Oteiza's theoretical manifesto published in 1944 in which he addresses the nationalist problems of Colombian art, would undoubtedly serve as a reference for the artistic inclinations that the two students would follow from then on.

Sculptures such as *Retrato de Luz Valencia* (*Portrait of Luz Valencia*), by Jorge Oteiza, or *Cabeza del Bautista* (*Head of the Baptist*) and *Cabeza de Pubén* (*Head of Pubén*), by Édgar Negret, reflect all the tension that existed at that time in the definition of a modern language, emancipated from the Americanist movements, yet always anchored in the cultural reality of the artist. The journey that these two artists undertook through the Colombian Massif in 1944, during which they visited the archaeological sites of San Agustín and San Andrés de Pisimbalá, would confirm this



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broad notion of territory in their artistic production, whether through the volumes, the execution, or the subject matter of the works from their Popyán period.

2. Germán Arciniegas: Avant-Garde Ceramics

With your forgiveness, we must go in search of the Giotto of these lands, [...]. And our Giottoes are the potters of Ráquira.

GERMÁN ARCINIEGAS, 1936

Before contacting Jorge Oteiza in Buenos Aires to offer him the opportunity to direct the School of Ceramics, Germán Arciniegas developed a unique relationship with this craft. His text *Los caballitos de Ráquira* (*The Little Horses of Ráquira*), published in 1936, affirms his appreciation for ceramic arts, a craft that had awakened "the call from the earth" among the artists of the Bachué movement in the early thirties. In this poetic sociological essay, Arciniegas constructs a subtle interpretation of the pottery of this town in Boyacá, where centuries-old indigenous traditions are still disguised in the forms of "those trinkets made from wet clay". The little horses and the potters of Ráquira embody, in this sense, primitive expressions of a cultural renaissance yearned for by this intellectual, a few years after taking up his post as Minister of Education and creating the School of Ceramics and the Ethnological Institute of the University of Cauca (IEUC) in Popayán.

Carolina Cárdenas and Luis Benito Ramos, artists within the Americanist constellation, became interested in ceramics as a modern and telluric expression of 20th-century Latin American reality. Their work diverges in a certain way from the often allegorical interpretations offered by artists such as Rómulo Rozo and Luis Alberto Acuña, as seen, for example, in their two interpretations of the Bachué divinity. Cárdenas' attentive sketches of the pottery pots from the Cundiboyacense



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highlands, studies prior to defining geometric patterns and a direct practice of ceramics, or the documental poetry in Ramos's photographs of pottery from Ráquira, anchor the artistic concerns of the 1930s more deeply in the social and cultural reality of the central region of the country.

3. Francisco Tumiñá Pillimué's Graphic Acuity

I cannot talk to you about theories of art, neither modern nor ancient. Some things have come to my hands, and therefore I draw the conclusion that free forms and color are a great language to express what we carry within. But we can, and we must, make art from the Americas, we must look into our spirit, into the interior of the man who wrestles with himself and falls in love amidst a magnificent and noble landscape, among grand footsteps, surrounded by a generous impulse and a warm spring of idealism.

FRANCISCO TUMIÑÁ PILLIMUÉ, 1950

During the 1940s, the work of Francisco Tumiñá Pillimué quietly stood out in the field of Caucan anthropology within the context of the creation of the Archaeological Museum of the University of Cauca (MAUC) in 1942 and the Ethnological Institute of the University of Cauca (IEUC) in 1946. Familiar at an early stage with the field work of the French anthropologist Henri Lehmann in the rural district of Pueblito, Tumiñá Pillimué joined the IEUC, likely in the middle of the decade, where he continued the work done with Lehmann on the language and culture of the Misak people.

The publication of the ethnography *Nuestra gente [namuy misag]: tierra, costumbres y creencias de los indios guambianos* (1949) (*Our people [namuy misag]: land, customs, and beliefs of the Guambiano Indians*) (1949), signed by Francisco Tumiñá Pillimué and Gregorio Hernández de Alba, remains in the annals of visual anthropology in Colombia. But beyond the academic context, the exhibition of Tumiñá Pillimué's



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drawings in an important modern art gallery in Bogotá exemplifies the divergence between the critical reception in the capital, which was astonished by a supposed artistic candor, and the cultural awareness of a young Misak in late 1940s Colombian society.

The activities developed by Henri Lehmann at the MAUC and by the director of the IEUC, Gregorio Hernández de Alba, also contributed to the evolution of modern art in Popayán at the time. The opening of the museum's collection and the exhibition of megalithic sculptures from the Moscopán site in the courtyard of the institution certainly did not go unnoticed by Jorge Oteiza and the students of the School of Ceramics. As a series of photographs of the works of Édgar Negret, signed and dedicated to Gregorio Hernández de Alba in 1946, reminds us, the ethnological and artistic activities carried out at the University of Cauca in the mid-1940s were porous, complementary and part of the same modern cultural project.

4. Monument Policies and Basket Thinking

The proportions of Manuel Quintín Lame's head as sculpted by Luis Alberto Acuña are not unremarkable. This unique piece that Gregorio Hernández de Alba kept all his life was not shaped on a human scale and thus acquired a monumental dimension, resonating with the previous political struggles that traversed the history of the Colombian Massif since the exploits of its indigenous leader in the early twentieth century.

This concern for the form of collective memory to which Acuña's work alludes, by suggesting a monumental indigenous figure, can be found again in the watercolor José Joaquín Paja, native of the Cuchas and governor of the Guambiano Indians, by



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Henry Price, or in the famous Homage to Manuel Quintín Lame, by Antonio Caro, presented for the first time in 1972. For their part, the most recent artistic practices of the collective MINGA Prácticas De-coloniales (MINGA De-Colonial Practices) and Iván Argote, between minga strategy for the former and monumental mirages for the latter, are articulated with the current events of the toppling of the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar in Popayán in 2020, followed by the toppling of the statue of the same conqueror in Cali and that of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada in Bogotá, both in 2021.

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The consolidation of an indigenous political movement in the 1970s, documented by photographer Viki Ospina during the demonstrations of the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC), encouraged numerous artists to transmit the voices and demands of Colombia's native peoples, particularly around the coca plant. In their works, the knowledge and uses of coca are conveyed as an acknowledgment of the plant's significance within the indigenous cultures of the Andes, the Amazon, and the Caribbean coast. The video installation *Jíbie* (2019), by Laura Huertas Millán, on the manufacture of mambe among the Muina Murui people; the diptych *Nombre científico y nombres indígenas de la planta de coca* (*Scientific Name and Indigenous Names of the Coca Plant*) (2014-2018), by Wilson Díaz, or the video *El cambio de turno* (*Shift Change*) (2020), by Julián Dupont and the Council of Elders of the Las Mercedes Indigenous Reserve, recall this other reality of coca: secular, divergent from the imaginaries and discourses of demonization that are still maintained about the bush.

One of the basket men exhibited here through three ceramics of the Calima culture refers, by the shape of his cheek, to the chewing of coca leaves, a sign that invites a more complex reading of the pieces. The figure of a man tilling, observable at first sight, immediately alludes, by his seated posture, to the use of coca in the collective



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practice of the word, as an ancestral vector of knowledge and wisdom. It is a symbolic representation of the basket, which is finally found in the works of Linda Pongutá and José Pablo Neikase, and of Aimema Uai or Jesús Eduardo Correo Nache, where this artifact and the tradition of weaving introduce the idea of a container landscape, a place of thought or a philosophical metaphor of the nexus.



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