

Sculpture, image and heritage: Depiction of indigeneity in the public space

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Talking about depiction of indigeneity in art is as complex as talking about depiction of Colombianness. Colombia is a large, diverse territory shaped by man's cultural adaptation to ecological systems as varied as those found in the Amazon, the Caribbean, or the highest parts of the Andes. Human groups and their cultural manifestations in Colombian territory appear at various points in time, generating disputes around their age, but we know for certain that the oldest ceramics date back to 5,000 years B.P. (Puerto Chacho). The materials and techniques used by indigenous populations are many and varied, so in tackling this subject I will focus primarily on the issue of depiction of indigeneity through sculpture.

Upon their arrival to the continent, the Europeans found several examples of sculptural work. In the case of Colombia, a good example of this is the funerary monuments in southern Alto Magdalena which, despite having been studied extensively, still raise several unanswered questions that perhaps future generations will be able to resolve. In any case, these depictions of the world view of the so-called "sculpting people", with an immense iconographic richness of flora, fauna and the existence of mythological beings, all in vibrant colors, possess a characteristic plastic language that is top of mind for many sculptors today when depicting indigeneity in the public space in Colombia.

The first instance of sculpture in the public space in Colombia comes with the unveiling on July 20, 1846 of The Liberator, Simón Bolívar, commissioned from



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Italian sculptor Pietro Tenerani and cast in Ferdinand von Müller's workshop in Munich, Germany. From then on, sculpture as a genre was influenced by the classic academicism of Europe. The works were carried out according to the requests commissioned from important sculptors and workshops in France, Italy, Spain and Germany for the sculptural depictions in marble or bronze of local heroes that were placed in various public locations, a trend that reached its peak in 1910 with the celebration of the first Centennial of Independence. At this time, sculpture was seen as a monument that reflected and promoted the ruling power, with no acknowledgement of the totality of the local context, but rather as an imported style symbolizing gentility among certain elites that represented the public within such a limited scope that it could almost be considered private.

Other statues were gifts to the Colombian government, such as the one donated to Cartagena by immigrant Juan Mainero Trucco, which depicts Admiral Christopher Columbus and was installed in 1895. This marble sculpture is a replica of the sculpture found in the Piazza Acquaverde of Genoa, made by sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini, who died before finishing the piece. What makes this statue significant is the presence of an indigenous woman, with her head bowed and downcast, wearing a feather headdress and holding a horn of plenty filled with various fruits, including a pineapple, pomegranates and bananas.¹

While some historians believe that this is an allegory for America as it was widely depicted in different works of art of the time, I think it is Anacaona, the Taíno chieftess of Quisqueya, who ruled the Chiefdom of Jaragua after the death of her brother Bohechío. At first, Anacaona was very welcoming to the colonizers, but she met the same fate as several Taíno chiefs and was hanged in 1504.

¹ Osta Lefranc Salim, *Inventario y valoración del patrimonio mueble en espacio público en el Centro Histórico de Cartagena de Indias*, Grupo Conservar, 2017.



Another sculpture notable for the presence of indigeneity can be found on the front of the Church of the National Vow. The sculpture, made out of concrete in 1915, depicts Saint Toribio, represented with an indigenous child, with his right hand on his chest and his head crowned with a plume of feathers, who is looking gratefully at the Saint. This iconography is found in sculptures and paintings paying tribute to Saint Toribio, who dedicated most of his life to the protection and Catholic conversion of the indigenous communities of Peru.

In other Latin American countries, statues of the indigenous hero began to appear in the public space in the 19th century. A well-known example is the monument to Cuauhtémoc, erected in Mexico City in 1887, by sculptor Miguel Noreña. In addition to honoring the last of the Mexica rulers, the monument is also inspired by details of the pre-Hispanic architecture of various regions of Mexico.

Another significant example is found in Brazil, with the *Monumento ao Dois de Julho* [Monument to July 2] located in Salvador, Bahia in honor of the day of independence. This enormous sculpture, almost twenty-six meters tall, is topped by the figure of the “*Caboclo*” (a mestizo with copper-colored skin) with a spear, standing over a snake that represents Portuguese colonialism. This sculpture was cast in Pistoia, Italy by Pietro Lippi’s workshop a few years before and in the same foundry as Césaire Sighinolfi’s sculptures of Columbus and the Queen that came to Bogotá in 1896.

The July 2 sculpture is not the first to present this depiction of the *Caboclo*. As early as 1856, a fountain with the same iconography, but sculpted in white Carrara marble, had been unveiled in the same city.

Turning back to Colombia, the third decade of the 20th century brought new changes to Colombian society, related in part to economic changes such as the opening up of the coffee industry, the introduction of a new banking system and the



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modest industrial development that led to the growth of residential areas in the country's major cities. In the art world, one sees the influence of Mexican and Soviet artistic trends and the development of a Latin American sentiment in the region, giving rise to a nationalistic concept of art which produced the first examples of indigenist sculpture, such as those by Rómulo Rozo. While it did not manage to find a place in the public space, it set an important precedent for the inclusion of indigenism in public sculpture.

We see several examples of sculptures with indigenous themes, of which I consider the sculpture *The Goddess Chía* by sculptors Martín Jiménez, Alonso Neira, and Luis Alberto Sánchez to be an important one. Sculpted in a single block of sandstone, the sculpture bears the goddess Bachué, mother of the Muisca people, atop a triangular pedestal with her son in her arms. On each side of the pedestal are sculpted figures that depict a woman with a piece of wood, a man with a corn plant and an eagle with a snake, symbols of the lunar deity. The sculpture was unveiled on October 12, 1935.

In Bogotá, a noteworthy statue is the *Monument to Sía*, the Muisca goddess of water, sculpted in sandstone by sculptor María Teresa Zerda and unveiled in 1948 for the ninth Pan-American Conference. The piece had to be altered due to construction of the Transmilenio, replacing the original basin with a small, tiled square. It is now subject to both vandalism and neglect by the public.

Other sculptures of great importance are those created by Antioquian sculptor José Horacio Betancur. The most notable of these is *Bachué*, unveiled in 1954. This depiction of the goddess generated discomfort among the ladies of the conservative, Catholic society of Antioquia, and the sculpture's nudity caused such a stir that it was even covered with a strip of oilcloth. It caused such a scandal that the sculpture was removed from its first location twenty days after its unveiling and was



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only reinstalled twenty years later in front of the Pablo Tobón Uribe Theater in Medellín. Another notable sculpture by this artist is *Chief Nutibara*, unveiled in 1954 and currently located on Nutibara Hill, also in Medellín.

In the 1950s, we have the sculpture *The Guardian Angel*. This piece, which has been widely embraced in Arcabuco, Boyacá, was made by sculptor Julio Abril Mayorga. With a strong environmentalist sentiment, the piece depicts a winged angel with indigenous features and conveys disapproval of the indiscriminate logging of the oak forests to sell their wood.

There are also sculptures of this time made out of concrete, based on pieces of the Muisca culture and located in various villages in Cundinamarca such as Fusagasugá, Guatavita, Zipacón, and Facatativá.

At this point in the mid-20th century, there was a notable increase in sculptures depicting indigeneity; noteworthy among these are *El Boga* by Julio Fajardo, unveiled in 1963 in the city of Ibagué, and the Indigenous Race Monument by master sculptor Miguel Alfonso Sopó Duque in 1964, in Tunja.

Images of indigeneity and pre-Columbian culture inspired the work of Colombia's greatest sculptors during the second half of the 20th century as well. The monument to *La Gaitana* by Antioquian sculptor Rodrigo Arenas Betancourt depicts the struggle and courage of the indigenous peoples and their reaction to the abuse and violent attack of the Spanish conquistadors. This monumental work, unveiled in Neiva in 1974, depicts the vengeance and death of conquistador Pedro Añasco, who killed Gaitana's son in front of her. The monument is striking, with a great amount of drama and heavily laden with symbolism.



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Sculptors Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar and Edgar Negret, the ultimate champions of abstract art, left an extensive sculptural repertoire. Through the properties of materials and geometry, both artists established an important connection with pre-Columbian objects, involving them in modern art. Good examples of this are two of the last pieces by these two great sculptors, located in Bogotá: *Muisca Tribute* by Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, located in the Virgilio Barco Library, and *Butterfly* by Edgar Negret, placed in the Plaza San Victorino in 2000. There are several other pieces by these artists with this theme in different regions of the country, but they do not receive the recognition and care they deserve.

Between the late 20th century and the present day, there was a boom in the creation of sculptures in the public space depicting indigeneity. Not all of the sculptors making these pieces were accepted under the esthetic norms imposed by the public sphere of art during these times.

One of the most prolific sculptors of this time was Santa Marta native Héctor Lombana, creator of the famous sculptures *Old Shoes* (1994) and *Pegasus* (1992), both erected in the city of Cartagena de Indias, which have been widely accepted by the public and have become symbols of the walled city. Lombana also created the monument *Mountains of Carare Opón*, located in Cimitarra, Santander, in 1998 as well as the monuments that make up *Tribute to the Tayrona Ethnicity*, which was begun in 1993 and which is currently in the process of being restored in order to be relocated to significant places in Santa Marta.

Another sculptor that has worked with the theme of indigeneity is Boyacá native Delfín Ibáñez, whose significant works include the *Monument to U'wa Freedom* in Guaicán, Boyacá (2017). The sculpture memorializes the mass suicide of the Tunebo (now called U'wa) community that took place in the 16th century in response to the persecution of the Spanish invaders. There is another piece by this sculptor in the



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park in Arcabuco, Boyacá, *The Oak Tree* and its allegory for life, made in 2000 and remodeled in 2021.

The list of sculptures with depictions of indigeneity is quite extensive. The use of new materials such as glass fiber, concrete, and different mixed techniques pose a major problem with regard to the conservation of these monuments. Perhaps this should urge us to reconsider the necessity of their permanence over time and to understand that these are works with a limited lifespan.

When talking about present-day depictions of indigeneity in the public space, one cannot ignore the toppling of the sculpture of Sebastián de Belalcázar by members of the Misak community in the city of Popayán on September 16, 2020. It is quite significant that, in the place where there is now an empty pedestal in Morro de Tulcán, there should have been a statue of chief Pubén sculpted in stone by master sculptor Rómulo Roza, according to the records of the Civic Board of Popayán, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the city's founding. The image of the toppling was seen around the world and marked the beginning of a trend of iconoclasm that spread throughout the country during the National Strike of 2021, resulting in damage to approximately fifty sculptures throughout Colombia.

Without a doubt, of these actions, the ones that sparked most debate and were responsible for putting a spotlight on all of the forgotten monuments were the toppling of the sculptures of Sebastián de Belalcázar in Cali and Jiménez de Quesada in Bogotá and the attempt to topple the statues of Queen Isabel and Christopher Columbus on avenida El Dorado, also in Bogotá. This last action led both sculptures (Columbus and the Queen) to be dismantled and relocated for conservation and restoration, and their possible return to the public sphere remains unclear.



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The images of the Misak with flags, on top of the pedestals that were previously occupied by colonizers, are so powerful that they sparked controversy and debate about worth, significance, and what monuments in the public space represent today. The empty pedestals of the colonizers' monuments were graffitied with indigenous motifs that represented short-term artistic actions and were promptly erased by the institutions responsible for cultural heritage, which declined to take a clear position on these kinds of practices and demonstrations. The ambiguity of the institutions responsible for protecting Colombian cultural heritage became noticeably clear during this time. While the Ministry of Culture stayed silent and distanced itself from these incidents, the District Institute of Cultural Heritage (IDPC, as per its Spanish acronym) in Bogotá took an activist position in favor of toppling the monuments, especially the aforementioned sculpture of Jiménez de Quesada.

Monuments in Colombian public space have continued to increase exponentially in the last few years; the use of inexpensive materials and more accessible techniques has allowed for the proliferation of sculptures of other heroes, artists, athletes, literary and musical figures, foods, animals, and fantastical beings of myth and legend, which contradicts the opinion of some academics who consider the era of monuments to have come to its end.

In this context, it is worth asking ourselves how these expressions are being validated in terms of cultural heritage, what the criteria are and who gets to decide which cases are considered cultural heritage. This is where we must consider Colombian legislation when it comes to cultural heritage.

The Ministry of Culture understands cultural heritage in an inclusive, diverse, and participatory way, as a body of assets and manifestations that comprises a broad scope of social life and is made up of a complex set of cultural (material and immaterial) social assets that give a human group meaning, identity, and belonging. It also



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understands it as a factor of well-being and development and is conscious of the fact that Colombians have the obligation and the responsibility to ensure its management, protection, and safekeeping.²

It is important to acknowledge that not all sculptures found in public space are Assets of Cultural Interest, or what we all consider to be cultural heritage. Colombian legislation, and specifically Decree 763 of 2009, which partially regulates Laws 814 of 2003 and 397 of 1997 amended by Law 1185 of 2008, with regard to the material Cultural Heritage of the Nation, defines the criteria of appraisal for declaring Assets of Cultural Interest at the national level.

The list of Assets of Cultural Interest (BIC, as per its Spanish acronym) published by the Ministry of Culture on October 11, 2022 includes just five monuments in the public space; the monument to *Heroes of the Homeland* (1880), the *Commemorative Monument of the Battle of Ayacucho* (1930), and the monument to Columbus and the Queen (1906), as well as the demolished *Monument to the Heroes* (1963), which is still listed. All of these are located in Bogotá. The list also includes the *Monument to the Lancers of the Vargas Swamp* (1969) in Boyacá.

It is clear that the list is incomplete because resolution number 0395 of March 22, 2006,

"by which certain categories of movable assets located in Colombian territory are declared Assets of Cultural Interest", takes into account that the Ministry of Culture's Dirección de Patrimonio (Office of Cultural Heritage) promotes the declaration of National Assets of Cultural Interest for pieces that would have been made before December 31, 1920, including monuments in the public space among the categories

² <https://www.mincultura.gov.co/areas/patrimonio/patrimonio-cultural-en-Colombia/Paginas/default.aspx>



to be declared. This shows that monuments in the public space are still up for debate when it comes to Colombian cultural heritage.

On the other hand, if we study the current legislation for declaring a monument as an asset of cultural interest, we find that the proposed values—esthetic, historical, and symbolic—are already completely outdated for a multiethnic and multicultural country with several cosmogonies, many of which are still not widely known. The issue is wide-ranging and complex; I would just like to conclude with a question: What monuments do we want to pass down to the Colombians of future generations?

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