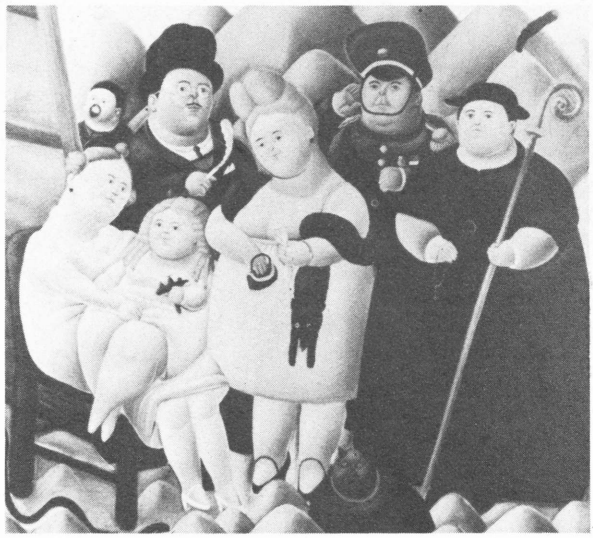
BOTERO

THE MAGIC of REALITY



The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., Gift of Warren D. Benedek, 1967

The Presidential Family, *oil on canvas, 1967, the ultimate portrait of civil authority*

ANNICK SANJURJO DE CASCIERO

In 1957 Fernando Botero held his first exhibit outside his native Colombia at the OAS headquarters in Washington, D.C. The exhibit helped launch an international career that has seen his work shown in sixteen major cities of North and South America and Europe.

In December Botero returns to Washington for his first major retrospective in the United States, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Spanning the years 1949 to 1979, the sixty-six paintings, works on paper, and sculptures are organized into six subjects, some of them notable favorites of his—religion, old masters, animate and still lifes, nudes and sexual mores, politics, and real and imaginary people. Many of the paintings in the retrospective are among those discussed in the following article.

It seems amusing, though not totally surprising, that a canvas by Fernando Botero, one of the best-known and best of the Latin American painters, could have been used to illustrate the causes and cures of obesity in modern life, and that such a torrent of epithets has been rained on his work in general. It has been said that his paintings are ugly, incongruous, wonderful and monstruous, infernal, magic . . . that they have the vileness of utter, spectacular idiocy . . . that "his creatures are the fetuses begotten by Mussolini on an idiot peasant woman."

Such opinions, and others still more impassioned, are evidence, precisely, of the marvelous and magical effect of the work of this artist. Beyond his recognized technical perfection, his superb use of color, and the extraordinary balance in his compositions despite their bloated corpulence, there are other elements no less important that go to make up the unmistakable world of this artist.

The art of Fernando Botero, born in Medellín, Colombia, in 1932, coincides perfectly with the generation of Latin American writers who have chosen to look at their land with "new" eyes and bring to light all that is impressive for the fact of being extraordinary yet without depriving it of its character of being real. The literary movement is known as "magic realism." The Argentine critic Enrique Anderson Imbert has explained that a magic realist narrator attempts to escape from nature and tell us about an event which, however explainable it may be, disturbs us because it is strange. . . . Instead of presenting magic as if it were real, it presents reality as if it were magic. In other words, magic realism copies from reality but blends it into a mixture of possible elements which, though far from being supernatural, seem strange because they are not entirely probable. And Fernando Botero, consciously or unconsciously, wanting to or not, re-creates for us a magic reality. He puts before our eyes a world that is totally his and yet at the same time is Colombia, America, or any other part of the world. For his language is universal.

Botero is Latin American. What is more, he is provincial by birth. Though trained in Europe, where he acquired his technique and his professional skill, he had his first life experiences in the Latin American world where institutions, rather than systems, still prevail. Institutions in the sense of traditional, fixed values.

Systems are created, they change, they adapt to emerging needs, and only in the worst of cases do they become inflexible. Institutions, on the other hand, are implanted; they are rigid masses that do not adapt but rather demand to be adapted to—like Botero's massed inert forms that take up almost the entire the canvas, or like the vast unpeopled expanses of the South American continent, be they mountain ranges, plains, jungles, or deserts. And it is these large, static masses that represent reality in Botero's painting.

His milieu is the middle class—which, though still provincial, is precisely the dominant class. It is made up of professionals, businessmen, the politicians of the moment. In this society there are no extravagant luxuries or tragic miseries, no violent extremes. There is time to play; to celebrate birthdays with mountains of cake, candy, and fruit punch; to enjoy nature; even to take a siesta after a heavy lunch, nodding over a table that has not yet been cleared. It is a calm and placid world, one that fully

embraces religious precepts and social conventions that no one would think of challenging. Protest may be seen, if you will, in his form of representation, but it certainly never lapses into clichés or the common and ordinary.

The family is the basic nucleus of the community structure. It is made up of the father, the mother, the children, the grandmother, and the nanny. In *The Pinzón Family,* for example, the father—dressed in a suit, hat, and tie with a cigarette in his hand—sits at the apex of a pyramid in which the wife is second in importance and their children are at the base. This view epitomizes the ideal Christian family.

In the official portraits the father continues in the privileged position, but now he is in full formal dress; the mother becomes the First Lady, having put aside her kitchen apron in favor of furs. The grandmother always appears with one of the grandchildren in her lap. The nanny, in her uniform, stands for social and economic status.

Collection of Julian Aberbach

In The Sisters, *oil on canvas, 1969, a cat chasing a fly in the background provides marvelous relief from the huge bloated figures*

Zea Museum, Medellin, Colombia

The elements in Pedro, *oil, 1974, are juxtaposed with humor and irony*

The children have a world of their own, even though they are always close to their parents. They seem not to have anything to do but play, for which purpose they are provided with everything imaginable: toys large and small, wooden horses, electric trains, dollhouses—all faithful copies from real life (or vice versa). In this child's world that of the adults is re-created, and the latter continues to be one great big playroom. The child of the dictator plays exactly as his father does in his world. The parents in *The Playroom* become children—or dolls—it's all the same. Here the line between the real and the unreal is not very clearly drawn.

In all these family portraits the order of a world that has been built on a solid rational foundation is persistently evident. Still, there is a relaxing escape—another "family"—that of the brothels. There nothing is in order and everything is allowed. It is populated with female nudes, dwarf and giant, which contrast with the propriety of the edematous unfaithful husband's suit, tie, and hat. His manners, however, have changed. He drinks straight from the bottle and falls asleep in the most unlikely places—under a bed or in a tiny chair—his size by now being reduced but not his obesity. The floor is cluttered with half-peeled and half-eaten fruit, cigarette butts, and domestic animals.

There are still more characters in this world of Botero's, some of them shown in family portraits (for example, *The Sisters*), others appearing alone *(The Collector).* Each epitomizes a prototype, which, though at first glance it seems cold and inert, in fact breathes the breath of daily life.

All these personages are governed by two, or rather three, authorities: the state, which has charge of their material life; the military, which defends the former; and the ecclesiastic authority, which rules their spiritual life. Those who represent these three powers are always vested in the trappings of their authority. And "vested," in this case, is the key word: like children, they play out their roles in "dress-up" clothes while their hands toy with the different symbols—parchments, rosaries, crosses, swords.

The Presidential Family is the ultimate portrait of civil authority. It is composed of two groups that nevertheless form a whole. The domestic family, like any other, makes a perfect triangle with the father at the apex, this time confidently attired in frock coat with hat and tie, the corners of a handkerchief protruding from his breast

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Nancy Sales Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art

The Pinzón Family, *oil, 1965, a classic Botero group portrait, epitomizes the ideal Christian family with the father at the apex of a pyramid in which the wife is second in importance and the children are at the base*

pocket, and a cigarette in his hand. The wife has an upswept chignon and wears a fur piece around her shoulders. The daughter, carefully coiffed in ringlets, sits on her grandmother's lap. On the right of the picture is the other family, with which the President shares his power. At the same level with the president is the representative of military authority, saluting, inflexible in his uniform, with big brassy epaulets and medals hanging from his swelled chest. At the side, in full view, is the representative of ecclesiastic authority, with his black habit, his rosary, his hat, and the staff showing that he is the shepherd of souls. Up to this point the portrait is pure reality; nevertheless, the totality is iconoclastic. The mountain peaks look like they came from a child's puzzle. A dog, a snake, and even the First Lady's fur piece pose with the same seriousness as do the people in the picture. And, like Velázquez with the maids of honor, Botero includes a view of himself painting the picture—although logically we cannot imagine that there is a mirror in front of him from which he is copying the scene.

Again in the case of the military president, portrayed in *Official Portrait of the Military Junta,* the composition sums up the regime. The head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces poses in his red uniform, all powerful, in the center of the picture, flanked by the commanders of the cavalry and the artillery. Behind,

giving the benediction, is the commander of the Christian flock. At the door a soldier stands guard. This is the first family of the President, his official family. The paternalism of the civilian president is now gone; his domestic family is in the middle distance, no longer part of a unity. At his feet is the First Lady, diminutive but standing erect in tiny red shoes, a fur boa around her neck. In the arms of the nanny, or the grandmother, is the son of the Chief of the Military Junta, dressed in a military uniform, naturally, with a sword, a presidential sash, and the tricolor flag in his hand.

There is another portrait of the *Military Junta.* In this one there is more disorder within what is still the perfect military order. This is because there has just been a successful takeover of the government. The capes billow, wafted by the brisk motions of those who wear them with impenetrable countenances. At the apex of the pyramid is the new chief of state; at his sides are the division chiefs of the victorious army. Below, much smaller, the other members of the army stand stiffly at attention, saluting, like lead soldiers. Behind the group the tricolor banner waves in the breeze. Here also there does not seem to be a clearly drawn line between the real world and make-believe. Indeed, the columns in the background seem to be less substantial than the torsos and legs of the personages that are the subject of the composition.

The other authority, no less important than the previous ones, is the Church. As in the other cases, there is absolute demythification: Christ looks like any other man who is resigned to his lot. The bishops bucolically bathe in the river; the mother superior poses with a rosary in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. The madonnas and the virgins are also simply normal people in this community. They are all dressed plainly, without jewelry or furs (the latter being reserved for the First Lady); there is no more than a garland of flowers, a black wimple, or a kind of crown that looks much like the upturned bottom of a gourd. One of them holds out a piece of fruit to a child, like any simple village mother would do.

This is the real world that comes through in Botero's work—at least that part of it that dates from the end of the fifties to the mid-seventies. In creating this world Botero at no point fails to be a serious, academic, classic artist. His painting is not caricature; it is not irony; it is not sarcasm. It is pure reality dissolved in the magic prism of the recollections of an adult who grew up in a small valley in the vast rolling terrain of Latin America. It is the image seen with the perspective of time and distance given by the years spent away from his native land. And in Botero these recollections are free of resentment and bitterness. Rather, there is a deep affection in them. Hence his work cannot be sarcastic or cutting or grotesque. Although there is unquestionably a critical sense and a recognition of many negative elements, these do not seem to be the moving force behind his creation. On the contrary, Botero seems to be saying to us, with a smile on his lips: "This is the way I look at reality. It is my reality. Come and play with it."

And, as any good magic realist writer would do, Botero dilutes this reality with the enchantment of an ingenuous and simplistic view of things, like a child when he first discovers with wonderment the world around him, and yet he sees it all with absolute naturalness. In Botero no one is outstandingly pretty or intelligent or foolish. They are all simply human beings, with their weaknesses and shortcomings, and even with their congenital defects: some are tall, others short, some are near-sighted, some are cross-eyed.

Even death takes on very special tones. *Dead Bishops* is a colorful basket of fruit, a delicious still life in which everyone "rests in peace," some still giving the benediction. In *War,* on the other hand, the placid population which in life was so Christian looks like a basket of fruit again, but this time it is much larger, tightly stuffed, and the fruit is somewhat bruised, in the midst of stained and tattered flags. Each of the seven deadly sins is represented, chastized by the seven plagues of Egypt. Not even here, however, does anyone seem to be bowed down by suffering.

Like any magic realist artist, Botero also dissolves reality in the magic of highly realistic details that are marvelously conceived. The first thing that meets the eye is the conversion of classic full forms into gigantic turgid masses. Botero regards this deformation of reality as a mere formal solution—"the exaltation of life communicated by the sensuality of forms."

He certainly achieves his objective. The fruit, the uniforms of the military, the civilian dress, the draped cloths, the tabletop arrangements—all are imbued with a sensuality derived not only from the tumid proportions of his forms but also from sinuous lines and textures produced by delicate shadings of color. It is as if the painter had voluptuously caressed these smooth surfaces with his brush and in this way given them unexpected expressiveness. On the other hand, the blowzy people of Botero's world are not impossible fantastic deformations—although his exaggeration and his insistence make us want to smile. His figures are not overdrawn monsters, nor do they suffer from elephantiasis of one limb at the expense of the others. Everything is conceived within a scale of balanced proportion.

Although it is these sufflated masses that first catch the eye, after a longer look we become captivated by the marvelous details, by the enchanting miniatures of which Botero is such an accomplished master. The contrast is surprising, and all the more so when we realize that the huge distended figures are no more than statues representing reality, while it is the details, the miniatures, that correspond to life itself in all its splendor. It is here that we find the magic of reality. Naturally, Botero again has a formal explanation for the use of some of these elements. The flies, he tells us, "create space when they fly over a flat field of color." The cigarette butts "make little white spots on the floor. . . (which is) always the dullest part." "The little mountains in the foreground give sensuality to the floor."

His use of these elements as a plastic solution does not prevent them from being the salt and pepper of this world so systematically conceived on a large scale. A fly may startle us in the midst of a classically arranged composition. But of course they are not everywhere. The portraits of Louis XVI and Mme. de Pompadour do not have them. But then suddenly we see black spots flying over the heads of the officers in the *Military Junta;* at the pretty *Happy Birthday* table they gaily participate in the feast. In the tidy background of *The Sisters* a cat amuses himself chasing a fly that assiduously escapes him.

At other times in the most impeccable still lifes the tips of a pair of scissors, or the head of a mouse, or a piece of string may emerge from a half-opened drawer. Now it is a threaded needle that has been stuck into a tablecloth whose creases do not bespeak a most careful ironing. There it is a

The composition of the Official Portrait of the Military Junta, *1971,* **right,** *sums up the regime with perfect military order, while* The Spinster, **below,** *represents a Botero prototype*

Collection of Joachim Jean Aberbach, N.Y.

red snake that is testing the virtue of a saintly priest. Here, on the artistically and harmoniously set table, a chunk of half-eaten watermelon appears, or a piece of fruit that someone has taken a big bite from, or the seeds of an orange that someone else has eaten in haste. Admittedly, none of these elements is strange, nor are they really out of place; it is just that their unexpected presence is disconcerting. However, they are what give movement and vitality to the scene: someone has just passed by, or has just eaten, or has just used the scissors. In other words, the subject of the picture is an enormous inert mass, while the minute details virtually burst forth with life, movement, and local color.

Botero's floors are another magic poem. They are unexpectedly littered with cigarette butts, extinguished or still smoldering, a ball of yarn about to unwind, or a comb that has just fallen. Again, these elements have nothing supernatural about them; it is only that their unexpected presence in this place and at this precise moment surprises us and prompts us to laugh.

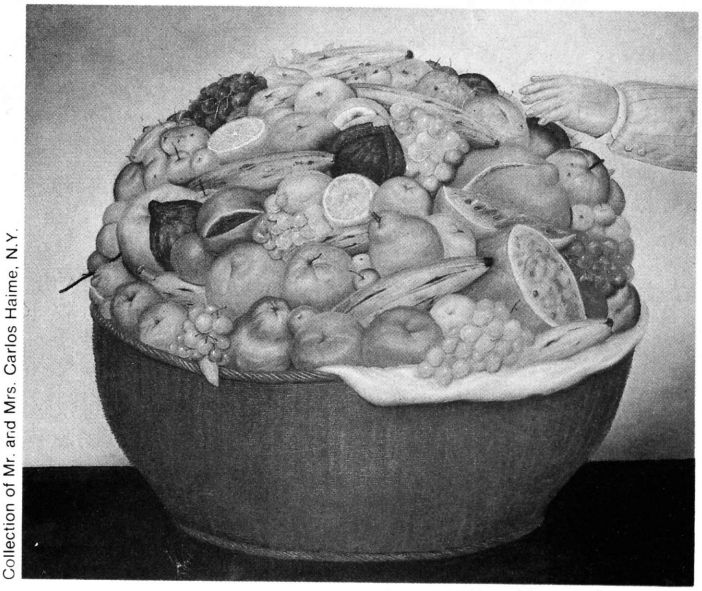
The same thing happens when an object is suddenly seen in an unexpected position. Sometimes it is a hand that is balancing in the air at the side of a picture; at other times a piece of fruit is falling from some unknown place. In *Political Prisoner,* for example, an orange or an apple is falling onto the table. The story does not tell us how or from where it could be falling, but it is undeniably there, suspended in mid-descent. In the center of the table a banana is redeemed from still life with its sensual forms, and at the left there is a half-peeled orange. The corners of the prisoner's handkerchief protrude from his pocket; they are embroidered in sinuous, caressing detail. Yet the prisoner himself, the subject of the picture, is an impenetrable lump.

It seems that the animate has been exchanged for the inanimate, the real world for the make-believe one—or vice versa—and this apparent incoherence does not fail to have reality. The horses in *The Playroom* and in *Pedro* are presented exactly as is the one in the portrait of the military junta. They all pace restlessly on the floor, with electric trains sending out puffs of smoke behind them, now stalled by shoes, now by military boots.

On the other hand, in *The Presidential Family* the miniature mountains at the feet of the gigantic figures seem to be toys, as the roofs of the village do in other pictures when seen through a window or behind a large picnic table. It is as if in Botero's world the adult spends his life playing and the child spends his life living the reality of his make-believe. Unquestionably there is irony here, but mainly we are touched by the humor with which the elements are juxtaposed in the composition.

In the family portraits there are also domestic animals, their classification as animate or inanimate not always easy to determine. The most disparate representatives of the realm are included: in addition to a profusion of dogs and cats, there are birds, snakes, mice, and crocodiles. Like the rest of the family, they are plump, clean, and spruced up. They are all considered house pets, even though they may look like stuffed animals when they are in their own role—or human beings when they are only toys.

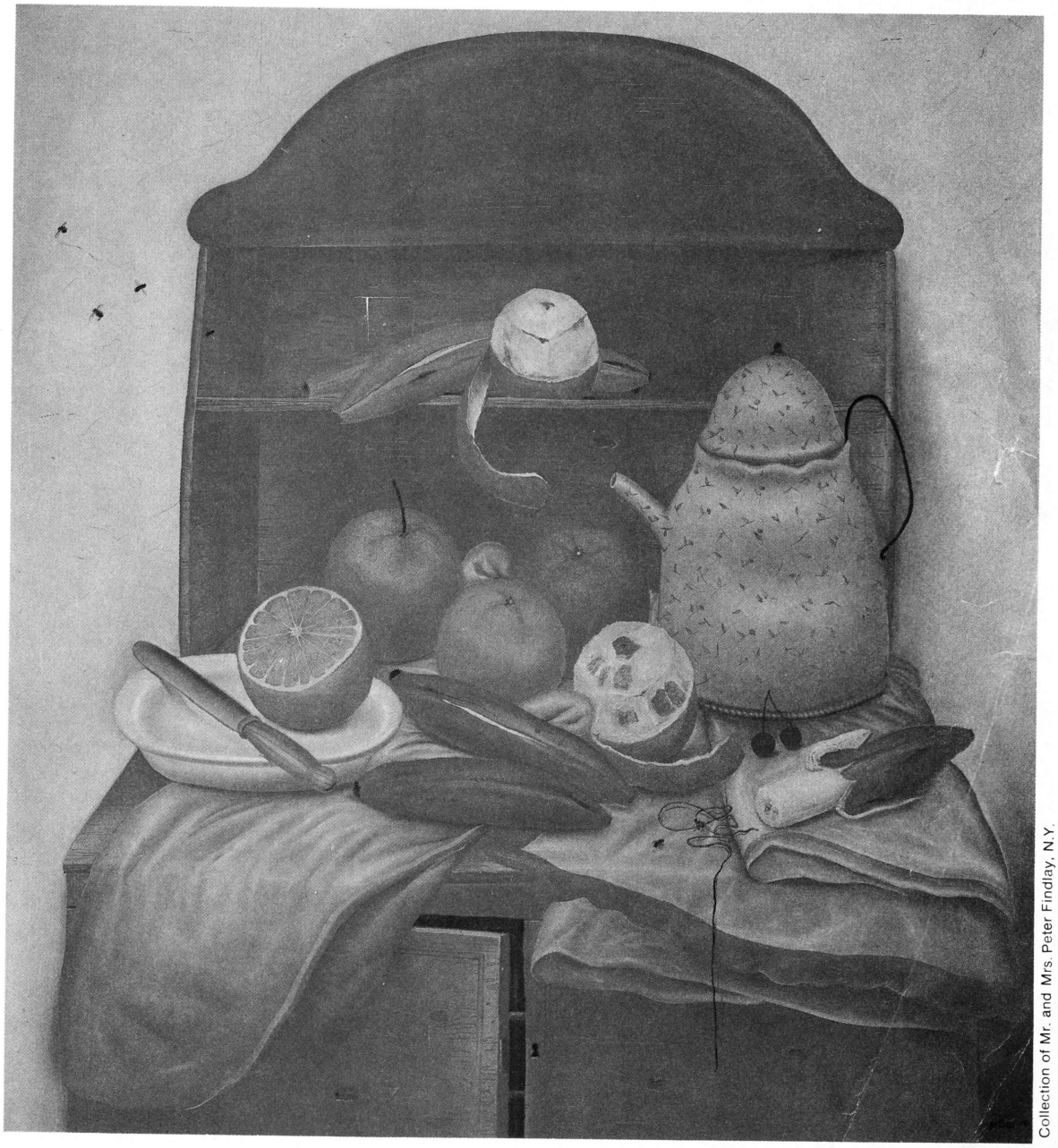
One is also conscious of a pervading anachronism in Botero's work. The world that he presents as current belongs, in fact, to a time several decades past. Everything has an air of time out of joint. Yet the world is a real one nevertheless. What little girl in those days did not have her hair in ringlets? What society lady did not wear lace and put her hair up in a chignon? What little boy did not take his first communion and go to parties in a sailor suit? What respectable gentleman did not use a hat, or smoke, or have the corners of his handkerchief showing from his coat pocket, or wear a mustache like Rudolph Valentino's? Even today there are people like this. Even today we see rococo interiors with heavy draperies and family portraits hung on the wall or enclosed in oval frames that rest on top of some musty piece of furniture. We regard these things as



Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Carlos Haime, N.Y.

Fruit Basket, *pastel, 1972,* **above,** *is a sensuous composition of lines and delicately colored textures. The viewer can almost savor the flavor and aroma of the fruit, while the outstretched hand adds a final touch of intimacy. And in a masterful expression of wit and irony,* Dead Bishops, **above right,** *becomes another colorful basket of fruit, in which everyone "rests in peace," some still giving the benediction*

The Cupboard, *oil on canvas, 1970, is a masterpiece of realistic details. The half-peeled fruit and the knife on the plate—suggesting that someone has left in haste—and the famous Botero flies, all add vitality and movement*



Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Findlay, N.Y.

Collection of Joachim Jean Aberbach, N.Y.

In Self-Portrait with Mme. Pompadour, *oil on canvas, 1969, minute details set off and enliven the enormous mass. Though seemingly cumbersome and inert, Mme. Pompadour is caught in action—she holds a minuscule flower to her breast, freshly plucked from the nearby tree, while a ribbon hangs loosely from her other hand, as if about to be tied. The interplay between the animate and the inanimate, the contrast between the colossal and the minute, are but some of many magical devices in Botero's very special world*

antiques, but in Botero's world they are current furnishings, as they still are in many homes, even though by now they are faded.

And so it is that Fernando Botero makes magic with reality. The constantly shifting relationship between make-believe and everyday truth, the interplay between animate and inanimate, the contrast between the colossal and the minute, the balance between the stable and the unstable, and many other apparent contradictions—they are all pure magic and cast wonderful grace over this very special world, which, perhaps because of this, is intrinsically more real.

With this world Fernando Botero has given Latin America a unique iconography which, while not resembling anyone in particular, manages to sum up everyone. "My fundamental interest," says Botero, "is to paint an oranger orange which is all oranges—the summary of all of them." And this he has achieved with true and solid plastic values. ■

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