

**ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF  
COLOMBIA, NOHRA PUYANA DE PASTRANA, AT THE  
INNAUGURATION OF THE ART EXHIBITION OF MAESTRO  
FERNANDO BOTERO AT THE MODERN MUSEUM OF  
STOCKHOLM**

Stockholm, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001

What is Antioquia? How can I best explain on this autumn day, in this beautiful and unrivaled city of Stockholm, what Antioquia is? And I must clarify that I am not talking about “Antakya” or “Antioch”, the Turkish city that was the capitol of an ancient empire. I am talking about the greenest and most dynamic department of my country.

Hence I wonder: How can I bring to you, from the Colombian tropics, the smell and color of these mountains ploughed with impossible crops? How can I best describe the force and determination of the muleteers that cleared roads with their machetes, founding towns and creating enterprise along their way, and building dreams in houses full of flowers and children?

It seems an impossible task, because, at first sight, our cultures are very different and far apart ... but only at first sight, because Sweden and Colombia or, better still, because Sweden and

Antioquia, that beautiful region of Colombia, have much in common.

Many Swedes have crossed the Atlantic and found life and fortune in our lands! I recall the story of Count Frederic Thomas Adlercreutz who fought side by side with the Libertador Simon Bolivar for the independence of Colombia.

I also recall Carl Ulrich von Hauswolff and Peter Nisser, who pioneered mining activities in the mountains of Antioquia in the early 19th century, among many other anthropologists, archeologists, linguists and men of industry who came over from Sweden, and whose work honors their Viking vocation to explore and absorb our culture.

Yet I am sure that the most remembered saga of all is that of the De Greiff family, started by Carl Sigmund Greiff, a man who held the highest positions in the province of Antioquia and who became the forefather of a family that has brought great literary, scientific and artistic glory to Colombia.

This family gave life to one of our best and most original poets, León De Greiff, who defined himself as: *“the ex-Viking, ex-*

*Cuirassier, ex-Captain dream of Vandal paladins, Goths and Swedes”.*

Now you know why it is not so difficult to tell Swedes what Antioquia is like. Because this Colombian department has, to a certain extent, become the second homeland for many of them, and today they are as “Antioqueño” and Colombian as were Swedes their ancestors.

And why do I speak of Antioquia? Because we have gathered here today to celebrate and rejoice with this art exhibition that brings together the paintings and sculptures of one of the greatest artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a universal man who has never stopped being an “Antioqueño”, the favorite son of Medellín, “the city of eternal springtime”.

Fernando Botero, a Colombian whose art can only be compared to his generosity, has locked in his eyes the mountains and towns of his homeland, with the smell of orchids and ferns engraved in his memory, and a heart that still hears the roaring rivers that run along the villages of his native land of Antioquia. In other words: his work portrays the best of Colombia, the best of a big and beautiful country that every day fights against

adversity to recover its right to happiness and to make real the dream of peace.

He has said this with words that fill his fellow countrymen with pride and emotion: *“I have never ceased being a Colombian. My country and my ‘Paisa’ origin have been my strength and spirit, the essence of my artistic creation. I see the years creep up on me and I feel great nostalgia for Colombia. My ‘Antioqueño’ accent will never leave me; my heart will always be in Colombia, even though I spend my life in Europe and the rest of the world”*.

Now you understand the joy I feel today, as my country’s representative at this Art Exhibition in Stockholm, where a man like Botero brings the color and essence of our Colombia to the Scandinavian peninsula!

His work has been seen in the most important museums of the world and the bulk of his work will now and forever hang in Medellín and Bogotá. His sculptures, those huge forms that are as heavy as bronze and as light as wings, have astonished and dazzled by-standers at the *Champs Elysée* in Paris, along Park Avenue in New York, at the *Paseo de La Castellana* in Madrid, and in Washington, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires,

Santiago de Chile, Mexico and the *Piazza della Signoria* in Florence.

It is indeed wonderful to see them in Stockholm today, in the beautiful Strandvägen, where they stand so naturally that they seem to have stood there for centuries, amidst legends and Gods, with Odin's permission and the complicity of the powerful Thor!

The Modern Museum of Stockholm has honored contemporary art for over four decades. Today it opens its doors to a new air that, nonetheless, smells of Renaissance; its walls are covered with the voluptuous and curious characters that will surely delight Swedes and all those visiting this art exhibition.

"What huge fruits!" they will think. Well, these are the fruits of Colombia.

"What a marvelous orchestra!" they will think. Well, this is the orchestra that plays the contagious music of Colombia.

"What graceful and joyful dancers!". They exemplify the healthy happiness we live in our parties back home.

Of course –and here I must be very clear and emphatic- the President and the First Lady of Colombia are fortunately not as round or formal as portrayed by maestro Botero with his habitual humor.

However, his paintings portray more than just festive partying; they also portray pain, because Botero is not alien to the reality that sometimes, unfortunately, invades us. In his case violence is no pretext, rather the moral obligation of a Colombian who witnesses the beauty of his country and is also with it in its most difficult times.

Colombia, you know, has been the victim of a mad violence nurtured and financed by the world drug problem, a problem we did not cause, but we have been forced to suffer its deadly consequences more than any other country in the world.

The paintings you will see reveal a situation that is not the image of a distant reality, rather a violence that concerns us all: producers, consumers, sellers of precursor chemicals, narcotics asset launderers, arms traffickers, and those who defend and justify acts of violence.

Today, when humanity is still overwhelmed by the barbarian acts of terrorism –a terrorism that Colombia has endured and still endures in its own flesh and blood, which results from causes beyond our control- Botero's paintings advocate and call us to solidary and responsible action at an international level.

Botero, in sorrow and in happiness, is and will be the painter of Colombia's soul!

Dear friends:

Starting today and until early next year you will enjoy the most representative work of our Colombian artist, and you can imagine his robust characters, full of life and inner light, walking proudly down the streets and bridges of this beautiful city located to the North of the world.

Lake Mälaren and its endless islands will witness a new Renaissance, guided by the unparalleled hand of Piero della Francesca, who comes back to life through his Colombian pupil. This region will soon be covered with colorful little houses, like the houses of the Antioquia of Botero and De Greiff. This

beautiful Swedish land will vibrate with the courage and spectacle of bullfights, and will feel, at last, the spirit of Colombia sweeping, as in a dream, this land of Vikings and legends.

Our great writer Gabriel García Márquez came here nineteen years ago, when he was awarded the highest literary prize. It is wonderful to see now our great artist, the magician of volume and color, receiving the admiration and love of the Nordic people!

Thank you, Maestro Botero, for spreading the message of Colombia through your art. Thank you to the Modern Museum of Stockholm and to all those who have made possible the miracle of bonding through art.

Hopefully, after this art exhibition, you will at last know what land I am talking about when I evoke the mountains of Antioquia, when I speak to you of my beloved Colombia.

You will understand -I am sure- why my heart bursts with love for my country when I look at Botero's art!

Thank you very much