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## Larger than life

by: JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer  
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# Botero's works use outsized imagery for big impact

One day in 1956, Fernando Botero drew a picture of a mandolin.

He endeavored to capture the image of this instrument realistically -- until he drew the sound hole in the center of the mandolin's body.

"Botero drew the sound hole much smaller in proportion to the rest of the instrument, which made the mandolin suddenly appear to be much larger," said Alison Amick, associate curator of the Oklahoma City Museum of Art. "It was one of those 'light bulb going on' moments for him, where he discovered what would become the Botero style."

Today, Botero's paintings and sculptures of seemingly inflated figures -- depicting memories of life in his native Colombia, mimicking the work of Renaissance and baroque artists, or casting a cold and clear-sighted eye on the world around him -- are internationally recognized.

Botero is one of those rare artists who has created a world of his own, instantly identifiable and capable of containing a wealth of imagery and emotion. His art has the accessibility of a cartoon, and the profound emotion depths -- both humorous and tragic -- of a great novel.

The Oklahoma City Museum of Art is one of nine North American museums that will present "The Baroque World of Fernando Botero," a retrospective exhibit of the artist's work. The massive show, made up of more than 100 paintings, drawings and sculptures, opens Thursday at the museum and remains on display through Dec. 2.

"It's big in every way," Amick said, laughing. "We had thought at one point of having some of the sculptures on display outside the museum, but that could not be worked out. So this show pretty much fills up our temporary exhibit space.

"Some of the works are truly monumental," she said. "There's a painting of a pear, for example, that's 8 feet tall. A lot of the canvases are 5, 6 feet wide and 6 or 7 feet tall. Everything about his art is oversized."

Botero was born in 1932 in the Colombian city of Medellin. He was sent to a matador training school as the age of 8, but Botero preferred drawing faces to facing down bulls.

His talent for art would soon earn him prizes that allowed him to leave Colombia and study abroad. His travels through Europe, seeing the works of great masters, would provide him

with endless inspiration.

It was about this time that Botero made that fateful drawing of a mandolin, and his style began to develop.

"The exhibit isn't arranged chronologically," Amick said, "but it's easy to see how Botero's vision developed, and how consistently he has held to it. Some artists change the way they paint or treat a subject throughout their careers. In Botero's case, the style he's developed has allowed him to explore all sorts of interesting themes. There's nothing he won't touch."

"The Baroque World of Fernando Botero" is divided thematically, beginning with "Citing Precedents: Evoking Tradition," which includes a number of images in which Botero reimagines paintings by Velazquez.

This is continued through "Emblems of Faith" and "The Mind's Eye," which feature many paintings that apply Botero's style to classic imagery, such as depicting the Crucifixion, and even compositions by such artists as Ingres, Van Gogh, della Francesca and Titian.

Botero's still-lives make up the next section, "Symbols of Transience." His paintings of flowers and fruit often have a disquieting air to them, with subtle touches that evoke loss and decay.

This leads to "Images of Power: Aspects of Violence," juxtaposing courtly paintings of presidents and their ladies with depictions of casual and calculated brutality. Botero has long been an advocate against violence, using his stylized paintings to better emphasize the inhumanity of those who inflict violence, and the horror of their victims.

That brutality also appears in "Vivid Reflections: The South American Way," as Botero's memories of life in Colombia are shown in ways that can be comical and sad, touching and horrific.

"Botero's work engages people on a number of different levels," Amick said. "On a purely visual level, his paintings have fantastic color -- it can be almost overwhelming -- and even at his most stylized, his subject matter is always recognizable.

"And his subject matter is so diverse," she said. "About every human emotion you can imagine is in this show."

Amick said the exhibit includes some of Botero's most recent paintings. But some of the artist's most notorious work is not part of this retrospective.

In 2004, Botero began a series of paintings inspired by newspaper accounts of the torture of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Botero said he avoided seeing any of the photographs that were published world wide, which makes the details of these often-difficult-to-look-at paintings even more remarkable.

"We've been asked if these paintings were part of the show and then removed, but the truth is the Abu Ghraib paintings were never a part of this exhibit," Amick said. "I remember Botero saying that he didn't want to make money from these paintings, but he

did have them exhibited, and there's talk of him donating the entire series to a museum or university."

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## "The Baroque World of Fernando Botero"

### **When**

Thursday through Dec. 2

### **Where**

Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 415 Couch Drive, Oklahoma City

### **Admission**

\$9 adults, \$7 seniors and students

Associate Images:



"Still Life with Mandolin," 1998, is an oil on canvas.



"The Widow," a 1997 oil on canvas.



"Hand," a 1985 bronze is part of the massive show opening Thursday at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art.