

Coronbia-ga: Gonzalo Ariza's Campaign for a Colombian National Art

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Abstract

Inspired by Japan's *nihonga* movement, Colombian painter Gonzalo Ariza set out to establish a nationalist, identity-driven painting style in his country. He was met, however, with resistance from a budding modern art scene spearheaded by critics like Marta Traba who promoted younger, Europe-educated artists dabbling with abstractionism and shunned Ariza's realistic landscapes. This led to a public dispute between Ariza and Traba that centered on nationalism, mercantilism, and modernity in Colombian art, and severely damaged Ariza's reputation. This paper examines how Ariza's artistic and ideological connections with Japan, which both inform and contradict his search for an "authentic" national style, make his artistic legacy difficult to assess but, at the same time, cement it as a unique development in 20th century Latin-American art.

Keywords

Gonzalo Ariza, Colombia, *nihonga*, nationalism, landscape

Introduction

In the early 1930s, in the Poblado neighborhood of Medellín, Colombia, a local businessman built a castle for his German wife. This castle now houses a museum, where the remnants of the former owner's formidable art collection are on display. There is Louis XV style furniture and shelves stacked with porcelain figurines, bohemia glassware, and a spoon collection; a grand piano, flanked by a bust of Beethoven, rests in a spacious hall on the ground floor. The art on the walls is strictly decorative. There are bucolic landscapes in the manner of Camille Corot; prairies, windmills, autumn leaves. In the dining room, however, something seems amiss. The only painting there shows layers of bluish mountains blanketed by fog. The stillness of the scene, the synthesis of light and color, and even the angle at which the painter tackled the composition, forces the visitors' imagination to wander around the ridges and stacks of an imposing mountain range in East Asia; the silver hints of paint depicting *yarumo* trees will bring them, however, straight back to South America. And then, after touring the castle, if they happen to look

beyond the garden walls as they leave, they will notice the same bluish mountains fading through the smog on the horizon. The author of the work hanging in the dining room is Gonzalo Ariza (1912-1995). The mountains are the Colombian Andes.

The castle of Medellín embodies the European aesthetic and ideological values that, as Mary Louise Pratt points out, Euro-American elites employed since colonial times to make sense of the territories they occupied (Pratt, 2008, p. 172). Ariza, on the other hand, sought to make sense of his surroundings by consciously (and at times vehemently) rejecting Western artistic tradition. Ariza sought to find an “authentic” style that could emancipate Colombian artists from European influence; his vision, however, relied on the ideological values of yet another external entity: that of *nihonga*, the state-sanctioned style of painting that appeared in Japan during the Meiji Period. In this paper I assert that, beyond the obvious stylistic overlaps between Gonzalo Ariza’s paintings and Japanese art of the early modern period, the political contradictions inherent to *nihonga* left an even deeper mark in Ariza’s ideological leanings and production.

1. *Nihonga*, or “Japanese Paintings”

At the end of the 19th century, the Colombian government started a scholarship program that supported young artists seeking training in European, primarily Parisian, art academies. This first cohort of “professional” artists, in turn, founded the first professional workshops, galleries and art schools in the country, and occupied administrative positions in government-run museums. As a result, there was a proliferation of distinctly European styles in the production of an entire generation of Colombian artists (Acuña, 1942, p. 229) and, as should be expected, an inordinate influence of those styles over the general public’s taste. By the time the next generation came of age in the 1930s, the Colombian art scene found itself devoid of technical and thematic innovation while other countries in the region, with Mexico being the most prominent example, were in the process of rediscovering historic or native-American motifs. As Orlando Fals Borda (1987) explains, these circumstances forced many young painters to turn their sights “to the landscape and rustic people”¹ around them, convinced that, in their own continent, “there was (...) a lot to learn from and be proud of” (p. 84). Mexico became, then, one of the preferred destinations for state-sponsored Colombian artists studying abroad during the first half of the 20th century.

In 1936, the government offered Gonzalo Ariza a scholarship and presented him with three potential locations: France, Spain, or Mexico. Uninterested in Western art and perhaps sensing the increasing risk of military confrontation in Europe, Ariza, with a rhetorical flourish, indicated his preference for Mexico by declaring that “he would rather study in Japan than in Europe” (M. Ariza, 2018). Either as a lesson in humility or a testament to the extreme literality of Colombian bureaucrats, the Ministry of Education sent Ariza to Tokyo.²

Nevertheless, this decision rather befitted the young painter. In Japan, Ariza found what he called “a living culture, where art is not restricted to museums but a part of everyday life, authentic art of the people” (Ariza & Carranza, 1978, p. 69), the very quality that informed his admiration for Mexican muralism. While examining traditional ceramics and pottery at an archaeological exhibition, he even speculated about a “remote common past” (*ibid.*) between Japan and the Americas. While not based on any evidence, this notion of a shared cultural connection would justify his pursuit of a new line of

representation: a style that, much like Mexican muralism, rejected Western tradition and, instead, took after “indigenous” tradition. Through his instructors in Japan, Ariza encountered such a project already in motion and fully articulated.

Amid the accelerated process of westernization during the Meiji period in Japan, different sectors from within the government, as well as prominent Japanese critics such as Okakura Kakuzō (1863-1913), called for a program of preservation of traditional Japanese painting which, from the 1880s onward, was referred to simply as *nihonga*, “Japanese paintings” (Foxwell, 2015a, pp. 32-33). These concerns were spurred by several Western scholars and art dealers who, paradoxically, worried about the influence that Europe exerted over Japanese art at the time. In 1882, Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), an American, delivered a lecture in Tokyo entitled “An Explanation of the Truth of Art”. Present were the members of the Ryūchikai (龍池会), an influential private society which counted several high-ranking officials among its members (Rimer, 2002, p. 98). After bracketing Hegelian aesthetics with *zen* Buddhism, and claiming that Japanese art was superior to its European counterpart, Fenollosa predicted a future in which Western artists would come to adopt Japanese techniques and chided his audience:

How foolish then are the Japanese! They have given up that very national painting which Philosophy proves to be the best, and which Europe will gladly take from her as a priceless treasure, and they are adopting a bad, worn out style of painting from Europe, which we ourselves are ashamed of and wish to improve. Could anything be more foolish than this, to throw away a jewel, in order to pick up a stone? (as cited in Murakata, 1983, p. 74).

While Fenollosa's interest in Japanese art may be discounted as purely academic,³ market interests in Europe were also at hand. The demand for “authentic” Japanese art was increasing, in accordance with its popularity amid modernist and impressionist circles (Foxwell 2015b, p. 9). *Japonism*, a concept pregnant with aesthetic, commercial and political connotations, was born as a result, and with it, an implicit contradiction. Artists working in the *nihonga* style had to employ traditional Japanese methods and, at the same time, attract a modern, sophisticated, Western audience; they also had to pretend they did not know contemporary European art, but accept that it was precisely through it that their audience became acquainted with Japan (Brown, 2001, p. 17). It also meant that, from then on, Japanese painting was forcibly divided into two fields: *nihonga* (日本画), “Japanese painting”, and *yōga* (洋画), “Western painting”.

There are several intersections between Ariza's artistic principles and *nihonga*'s ideological roots, which betray his acquaintance with artists trained within this school. As J. Thomas Rimer (1995) points out, the biggest burden that *nihonga* placed on Japanese painters was the obligation to determine which aspects of their work reflected Japanese “values” and should be kept, and which ones did not and should be rejected (p. 73). Thus, *nihonga* transformed a set of stylistic guidelines into an identarian enterprise that forced artists to decide both what was “essentially” Japanese to them, and what should be presented as “essentially” Japanese to the world. This echoes Ariza's own preoccupation with outlining a true “Colombian national style” that should be linked to a set of definite, albeit vague, principles: in a 1944 article, he calls for the country to claim back its role as “the leading nation of Hispanic American culture” and to return to its “authentic values” (1944, p. 3), an appeal that brings to mind Fenollosa's exhortation to “study the old Japanese and Chinese masters” and mine “the great field of national history” for new

ideas (as cited in Murakata, 1983, p. 74). Furthermore, Ariza insistence regarding the need to “learn how our mountains, our rivers, our plants, are” (1958b, p. 10) recalls Fenollosa’s infatuation with the “spiritual significance of trees and rocks; and mountains and water” (Takata, 1983, p. 125). To Ariza, Colombia’s “authenticity” resided in its geographical features and, accordingly, he favored nature and landscape painting throughout his career.

Ariza’s notion of a style what was purely “Colombian” took a blow with the emergence of the European-avant-garde. Mexican influence declined sharply after the war and Colombian artists put aside *indigenista* and *popularista* inclinations in favor of contemporary European tendencies. In 1962, when asked about the future of Colombian art, Ariza called for a renewed search for “the authentic”, characterized modern Spanish art as “decadent” and warned about the dangers of “abstractions from the worst academy, modern art” (Moreno Clavijo, 1962, p. 7). His dismissiveness of Western art is particularly interesting when juxtaposed to the list of names he advances (1992) as examples of the country’s pictorial tradition: Epifanio Garay, the Paris-trained painter of Colombia’s presidential portraits; Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos, the Spanish baroque painter who represented 18th century Bogotá as a lively Tuscan city; the painters of the 19th century Comisión Corográfica, which were heavily influenced by British and German romanticism. What Ariza may have wanted to highlight (and what ended up becoming the distinctive feature of his idea of a “Colombian style”) was these artists’ penchant for realism and, by doing so, he dismissed, either by omission or convenience, their complicated ideological or political agendas. It was enough that they painted “real” things, and that they painted them in Colombia.

2. A Dispute

Ariza returned to Colombia in 1938 and was well received by the cultural and political circles of Bogotá. During Alfonso López Pumarejo’s two presidential terms (1934-1938 and 1942-1945), the newly funded Dirección Nacional de Bellas Artes (National Directory of Fine Arts) sought to “revolutionize” Colombian national arts program, from the understanding that state-funded artistic and cultural activity was a “contribution to world civilization” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 64), and the promotion of folklore and autochthonous cultural practices as a path towards an “authentic national culture” (p. 171). Both ideas, of course, resonate strongly with *nihonga*’s own objectives. Unsurprisingly, this environment favored artists like Ariza: individuals who aligned their work to the government and assumed the role of *artistas funcionarios*: “state artists”, creators acting as public servants. Ariza received commissions from several national institutions around that time, including the Banco de la República (Arciniegas, 1958, p. 226) and the Banco Cafetero (Ariza, 1989, pp. 146-147); the government also pushed hard for his paintings to be featured on international exhibits focused on Colombia (Arciniegas, 1958, p. 225). The public response to his paintings during this period was also favorable. On his obituary for Ariza, the historian Germán Arciniegas recounts the impact that the artist’s first exhibition in Bogotá had on the audience, recounts: “no one had seen the elusive charm of those forgotten mountains. Only he was able to enter their mysterious bowels, and return to Bogotá with memories of moss, lichens, ferns, and brambles” (1995, par. 2). This recollection highlights Ariza’s emphasis on the Andean region, which he held as a synecdoche of the country. Bogotá, the political and geographical center of Colombia was, to him, the logical fulcrum for the country’s cultural activities; after all, the capital

enjoyed “the [cool] climate favorable to the development of ingenuity”, a statement with surprising colonialist tinges. Colombia, he adds, should not be considered a tropical country, since people like him “do not feel that [we] live tropically”; it is foolish, then, for any Colombian painter to attempt “tropicalist painting” in the style of Paul Gauguin or Henri Rousseau (Escallón, 1989, p. 21). “Tropicalism”, to Ariza, is simply another European “ism” hindering the development of national painting, never mind the budding art scene in coastal, Caribbean cities like Barranquilla or Cartagena at the time, with its preference for regional themes.

The differences between Ariza and art critics were evident from early on. In 1941, while reviewing Ariza’s early work, Jorge Zalamea (1905-1969) celebrated his interest in Colombian nature but disapproved of his adherence to “foreign” and “exotic” techniques:

The spectator will be delighted with the exquisite execution; the richness of tone; in the fidelity of line; the equilibrium of the composition; but, deep down, he will not elude the dark and embarrassing feeling of having been mocked, mystified, by the sleight of hand of a conjurer that turns flowers and landscapes familiar to us into erudite Japanese prints (1941, p. 56).

Zalamea’s aggravation with Ariza’s pictorial “sleight of hand” signals, on a superficial level, the visual puzzlement of an audience that, as Arciniegas recounted, had never seen their own nature represented in this manner. On a deeper level, it points at the discursive incongruity of a painter that called for a “national style of painting” while relying on the techniques of a foreign school of art: one that, ironically, was promoted by Western scholars and the West-controlled global art market.

An example of Ariza’s growing distrust of foreigners involved with the Colombian art scene was his impasse with Austrian critic and art dealer Walter Engel (1908-2005). After running into Engel at the V Salon of Colombian Art, Ariza published an article where he complained about “foreigners that on temporary or permanent basis have made their home among us” and who, in his view, were conducting a sabotage campaign aimed at the dissolution of “the most precious principles of our nationality” (1944, p. 3). Ariza’s emphasis was placed on not granting European citizens the authority to criticize Colombian art, but by doing so he inadvertently opened himself to a well-deserved riposte. Although understated and respectful in tone, Engel (1944) published a public response a week later that openly questioned the grounds for Ariza’s own position of authority regarding Japanese art: was not Ariza, too, “a foreigner in that country?” (par. 3). For better or worse, the public argument between Ariza and Engel did not go beyond this point. In hindsight, their rift was just the calisthenics for an episode that, thanks to Marta Traba (1923-1983), elevated art-gallery gossip and pettiness to a far-reaching intellectual dispute.

Traba, an Argentinian, Sorbonne-educated art historian, arrived in Colombia in 1954. Until then, art criticism in the country was conducted by journalists or painters rather than scholars specialized in the matter. “Only in our Latin American universe”, she lamented, “those who should be painting, write, and those who should be writing, paint, with obvious and predictable results” (1958b). Traba’s cosmopolitanism, academic background, and youth (she was only 24 when she arrived in the country), made her an instant sensation in both artistic circles and Colombia’s mainstream media.⁴ As an expatriate, she was close to Engel and other foreigners with art dealings in Colombia; as an eminently

modern thinker, she rejected the tradition of devotional and botanical painting that Ariza held in great esteem (*ibid.*) and instead promoted the work of young, provincial artists like Fernando Botero (born in Medellín), Alejandro Obregón (born in Barranquilla) and Enrique Grau (born in Cartagena), who studied in the United States or Europe and flirted with nonrepresentational painting. It was inevitable that Traba and Ariza would end up despising each other.

Their dispute began in earnest after Traba published her essay “Problemas del Arte en Latinoamérica” in *Mito*, a widely circulated cultural and literary magazine. In it, she offered a general diagnosis of Latin-American art and discouraged essentialist pursuits: nationalism was, to her, the “common ancestor” of all the problems in the region (1958a, p. 205). Rather, she opined, it would be more productive for artists to be in sync with Europe’s creative dynamics, to admit their backwardness and prepare to “learn how to listen, learn how to see, learn how to read, and learn how to be a disciple” of European art (p. 209), a discursive position that was diametrically distinct from Ariza’s, as well as from the one Fenollosa conveyed to Japanese painters.

Ariza’s retort came in the shape of an opinion piece entitled “*Tango y pintura*”, an obvious and unnecessary allusion to Traba’s nationality. Beside a few jabs directed to art critics (“criticizing is easy”) and the art market (“the European *isms* [are] a cultural plague created by capitalistic speculation”), Ariza defends nationalism by defining it as “a most precious fruit that, thanks to the internationalization of culture in the 20th century, is starting to ripen” and condemns European colonialism as the underlying ideological agenda of modern art. Despite his previous extolment of cultural internationalization, he goes out of his way to cite *tango*, the musical genre, as an example of the inevitable degeneration that European culture suffers when it is forcibly introduced in Latin America (Ariza, 1958a). Traba was, under this light, both a victim and enabler of colonial oppression.

The Argentinian critic, however, had a better understanding of the role that Japanese art played in the international art market of the time. She titled her response (1958b) to Ariza’s column “*Fuyi-Yama (sic) y Pintura*”, countering Ariza’s attack and highlighting the contradictory position he assumed regarding external influence on Colombian art. In the article, Traba swiftly dismisses Ariza’s anti-colonial stance by, for the first time, linking Japanese art to Western capitalism and mass consumption. She prefaces her article by explaining that the purpose of a direct response to Ariza was, chiefly,

To underline (...) the humorous pretention of Mr. Ariza to replace “European colonialism” with “Fuyi-Yama (sic) colonialism”, that of a tacky Japan painted on silk cushions (and very different from the splendid work that represents the country at international exhibitions).

This summarizes Japanese art’s own philosophical conundrum: *nihonga* was a “national” style shaped by and reliant of market dynamics (“silk cushions”), and *yōga* a “foreign” style pursuing more ambitious aesthetic ends (“international exhibitions”). She also understands how much the shared cultural and colonial history of Europe and the Americas complicates the search for origins, essence, or purity in Colombian art. The ancestors of someone like Ariza, she surmises, may very well have been master artisans in the pre-Columbian world; the continuity of that world was violently fractured by Europe and now, as a result, his attitude or that of any other Latin-American painter towards autochthonous American art would not differ significantly from that of a French or German archeologist (1958a, p. 208). Traba thus demonstrated that, despite his essentialist

bravado, Ariza's conception of a "national art" is as much a product of globalism as the "capitalistic" artistic tendencies he rejects. This is the same contradiction that exists, of course, within *nihonga* itself.

The dispute with Traba dealt considerable damage to Ariza's reputation in the Colombian art scene. María de la Paz Ariza, his daughter, speaks of a 15-year veto enforced by major art galleries; this situation forced him to sell most of his works to, ironically, foreign patrons (Moreno Hoffmann, 2017, par. 8). Whatever the case, and despite Ariza's stature in governmental circles, it is extremely difficult to find his paintings on public display or come across studies of his work. His name, predictably, is also absent from the most authoritative work on Colombian art history: Traba's *Historia Abierta del Arte Colombiano*.

3. Painting the invisible

Ariza's misty mountains, not unlike William Turner's maritime turbulences, offer the spectator a glimpse of a landscape that no longer exists; both artists excel at representing the evanescence of nature. The brevity of the scenes is, of course, paramount; however, it is hard for a contemporary spectator to ignore the myriad of transformations that reshaped Ariza's Andes in recent years. The poet Eduardo Carranza described Ariza's paintings as "anthem and elegy" (Ariza & Carranza, 1978, "Realismo Mágico y Compromiso Histórico" section, par. 2) of Colombia's nature; deforestation, impoverishment and violence in the region make this assessment ominously prescient. The small towns featured in Ariza's early works either disappeared or expanded dramatically; Ferrocarriles de Colombia, the state-owned company that controlled the trains that run through some of his paintings, was liquidated in the early 1990s; global warming has made his trademark mists less ubiquitous. Ironically, in a section of her essay in *Mito*, Traba (1958a) remarks that one of the main goals of art criticism is to extract the spectator from the comfortable confines of their own surroundings and making them "dizzy, to intoxicate [them] with images from all over the world; images that span lost civilizations and modified geographies; images that escaped from mankind's heart and coursed the uneasy road from their creator's brain to the active hand" (p. 208). "Intoxicated" or not, the spectator will now find, indeed, traces in Ariza's art of those "lost civilizations" and "modified geographies" that Traba demanded. In Ariza's Andean landscapes, South American ferns, as well as bromelias and lasiandras place the spectator in Colombia; the peaks, craggy and sharp, suggest the mountain ranges of East Asia or, rather, Chinese landscape models painstakingly copied by students at a Japanese art academy. While Traba would certainly call this an imposture, is it problematic that Ariza brings the Hida mountains to Cundinamarca, when Fernando Botero was conversing with Da Vinci's, Velasquez's, and Goya's most famous paintings in his work? And then, is it problematic that Ariza employs Yokoyama Taikan's *mōrōtai* ("blurred style") technique to envelop his mountains, when Alejandro Obregón was fracturing his subjects in the cubist manner?

While it would be difficult to call Ariza's work "modern", it does represent a radical departure from the way nature was traditionally portrayed in Colombia, starting with the strict scientific standards of the Expedición Botánica, the indigenist works of Pedro Nel Gómez and Luis Alberto Acuña, and the avant-garde tendencies of Obregón and Enrique Grau. However, and however realistic Ariza's landscapes can be (or at least aspire to be), they may sit much closer to poetry than to narrative, an aspect he also shares with

the artists that have been traditionally grouped under the *nihonga* banner. Beyond some picturesque motifs, his paintings depict the Andes as a mystical, atemporal territory blanketed under a canopy of fog and trees. Ariza defines this style, which he calls a “realism from a different lineage” (“*realismo de otra raíz*”), as one that seeks “a fusion of man and nature that erases the distinctions between subject and object” (Moreno Clavijo, 1962, p. 7). Years after Ariza’s death, his daughter María de la Paz, also a painter, explained her father’s creative vision in the following manner:

My dad always told me that the most important thing one can paint is not what is in between the sketch book and the object one is looking at, but the air in between. That is what creates a different atmosphere and maybe that is what branches out from realism (...) since it is something ethereal, less quantifiable, less rigid, less still (as cited in Moreno Hoffman, 2017, par. 2).

Emptiness is, then, an active compositional element for Ariza. The effect that this extra, almost imperceptible layer has on the viewers is, according to the poet Eduardo Caballero Calderón,

[To make them] feel not in front of [the painting], but inside of it, touched by the morning cold they inspire, enveloped by the milky fog they depict, bathed in the light of the sun rays that caress the petals of a wildflower that sits close to the edge of the frame but [Ariza] doesn’t want to cut down (in Ariza, 1989).

The lyrical aspects of Ariza’s work meshed well with private collectors and public institutions who, beyond any discursive or technical particularities, appreciated the decorative possibilities of his large-scale polyptychs filled with recognizable plants and flowers from the landscapes surrounding the country’s major cities, all flanked by the Andes.

That does not mean that Ariza’s breakup with the western tradition was clean or even complete. In the same breath, he can praise Japanese printmakers like Munakata Shikō and Yokoyama Misao and extoll the artistic merit of Ignacio Zuloaga, the Spanish painter who was later associated with the Nationalist side during the Spanish Civil War (Ariza, 1958b); he can denounce the exaggerated influence that Spanish *costumbrismo* had in Colombian art and commend the *Comisión Corográfica* (Moreno Clavijo, 1962, p. 1), an essentially *costumbrista* enterprise, which depicted the landscapes and inhabitants of Colombia in the manner of European picturesque painting. Indeed, the influence of the *Comisión* and, more importantly, of the more than 150 years of “public”, governmental art in Colombian art since colonial times, reach a topical and ideological conclusion in Ariza’s art: works that can be hung at ministries and embassies; works that typify the country’s economy (lush coffee plantations) and its people (hard-working, mestizo peasants). Despite this inherent contradiction and Ariza’s disdain for European “isms”, there is something surprisingly modern about his art, which may stem from *nihonga* itself.

Well into the 20th century, the Mexican critic Jorge Alberto Manrique (1974) identified the binary of modernity and identity as the prevalent creative issue of the time:

The common denominator [of artistic movements in the region] consists in, simultaneously, opening their eyes to the revolutionary things that were taking place in Europe during the

first two decades of the century and opening their arms to receive the infinity of forms that they offered; and, at the same time, a similar opening of their collective artistic eyes towards a consciousness of personal social realities, the search for something that could define our region and identify our region as different from Europe (pp. 41-42).

This sounds eerily similar to how Kendall Brown (2001) describes the relationship between Japanese artists, tradition and modernity through the Taishō era, the period that shaped Ariza's Japanese teachers' careers and when much of *nihonga* was formed: essentially, a time where the "perceived need to buttress native cultural forms in the face of imported practices and values" (p. 92). Ariza's defiant nationalistic, anti-modern agenda did not achieve its most ambitious goal: to delimit a strictly Colombian way of representation. However, the elegiac undertones of his work end up validating two of his most ambitious technical and topical pursuits: on one hand, that even at the heyday of modern art in the Americas, realism was a feasible avenue for the depiction of Colombian nature. On the other, that Colombian art could develop towards a different, non-western brand of "modernity".

4. Colombia is hard to see

In 2015, as the inaugural event for its new building, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented *America is Hard to See*, an exhibition that placed iconic pieces from its collection alongside lesser-known works, seeking to "unsettle assumptions about the American art canon". The title of the exhibit, the curating team explains, "underscores the difficulty of neatly defining the country's ethos and inhabitants" (*America is Hard to See*). In one of the rooms, next to Edward Hopper's *Railroad Sunset*, hung a woodblock print depicting a waterfall and a lone pine: *Evening Glow of Yosemite Fall*, by Japanese American artist Chiura Obata.⁵ The resemblance between this portrayal of Yosemite and Ariza's depictions of Colombia's Tequendama Falls is uncanny; it comes as no surprise that Obata studied *nihonga* at the *Nihon Bijutsuin*, an art academy founded by the aforementioned Okakura Kakuzō, who was in turn a former student and close collaborator of Fenollosa.⁶ Obata's work proves that the problem with Ariza's art is not the art itself; indeed, the introduction of *nihonga* as a stylistic alternative to European painting, especially in a genre that was nearly extinct, enriches the visual discourse of ethnically and geographically diverse countries like the United States or Colombia. The issue at hand may be, instead, Ariza's conviction that his country could actually "be seen" from a single aesthetic perspective.

Chelsea Foxwell (2015b) suggests that the most prominent artworks created under the umbrella of *nihonga* were those that better "served the functions, or ends, of visualizing the nation-state and guaranteeing the stability of Japanese cultural identity and ethnic particularity" (p. 41). It is under these parameters that we should ultimately assess Ariza's work and determine its relevance to Colombian art. He managed to articulate his unique artistic style with the state's cultural agenda, was backed by politicians and public institutions, and complied with the national archetype that the government was set on promoting abroad: that of an Andean paradise draped with coffee plantations, orchids and mountains, a perfect backdrop for banks, embassies, and the dining room of a Colombian castle. In that sense, Ariza fits nicely within the lineage of *artistas funcionarios* in the

country, which can be traced all the way back to the bureau of José Celestino Mutis' Expedición Botánica: all the way back to Colombia's colonial past.

There are very few examples of landscape painting in Colombia's art history, and Ariza's work is, even today, the main reference of the genre in the country. Frederic Edwin Church, Johann Moritz Rugendas, Joseph Brown and François Roulin, painters of romantic pedigree, came to Colombia in the early 19th century and created the first representations of Colombia's topography; they saw the country as a natural world of prehistoric scale, a land lost in time. A second group of painters, this time comprised of expatriates from countries like the United States and Venezuela who had little to no painting expertise, imitated their work. Beyond the few surviving works of Manuel Dositeo Carvajal (1818-1872) and Manuel María Paz (1820-1902), also heavily influenced by European art, no formal examples of landscape painting by a Colombian existed before Ariza's time; "landscape [painting] has not been attempted here yet", he boldly declared in one of his final interviews (Ariza, 1992). It is fair to say that he took advantage of this opportunity and created something unique, at least within the limited range of the genre. While Obata's work is being reassessed and receiving exposition by curators and museums, Ariza's seems to have been largely neglected by scholars and artistic institutions since the time of his polemic with Marta Traba.

Ariza's ideologic stance is what complicates our reception of his paintings, and even challenges chronological notions of their place in Colombian art history. J. Thomas Rimer identifies this conundrum as *nihonga's* biggest limitation: its economic relationship with the government, as well as its political obligations, forced artists to exist outside of their times (as cited in Conant, 1995, p. 73). What, precisely, were Ariza's times? The second half of the 20th century saw Colombian culture reach new highs owing to the work of writers, musicians, and artists that hailed from outside of Bogotá, and sook to represent and disseminate their provincial idiosyncrasy. The definition of "Colombian art" broadened accordingly, and, paradoxically, some of the young painters that Traba nurtured took over Ariza's search for identity through the country's landscape; the best example of this may be Enrique Grau's *El Pequeño Viaje del Barón von Humboldt*, an artist's book that explores the different regions of Colombia under a magical-realist lens that betrays his friendship with García Marquez. A crucial aspect of Grau's work is that, unlike Ariza, he is not preoccupied with exploring a primordial, static, and all-encompassing landscape; rather, he wants to portray the dynamic exchange between an outside world made up of the country's imponent, but also unpredictable, natural features, and the inner world of a subjective observer.

Conclusion

Ariza's bid for an Andean, state-centric, national style of painting represented a hindrance to the development of this individuals and their regions; it also marks the epitome of republican painting in Colombia, in so far it sought to unify the country around a cohesive visual narrative that emphasized nature's symbolic value. As such, we must take Gonzalo Ariza's landscapes as the point of inflection between two rivaling ways of seeing Colombia: the all-encompassing, generalist approach to a singular national identity championed since colonial times, and the increasing attention to individual and regional identities that has characterized the country's cultural, economic, and political discourse since the advent of the 21st century.

Notes

¹ All translations in this text are by the author, otherwise explicitly noted.

² Jorge Zalamea suggests a political rationale behind this decision: Ariza's posting in Japan was part of an effort to "[establish] a bridge between Colombian artists and that eminently exotic culture", which coincides with Japan's increasing diplomatic and military prominence in the international sphere (1941, p. 58).

³ Rimer (2002, p. 103) also addresses the fact that Fenollosa's opinions probably resembled those of his Japanese mentors and collaborators, who held strong ties with the Emperor.

⁴ In 1955, only a year after her arrival, the most popular entertainment magazine in the country identified her as "the biggest star in Colombian television" (Rincón, 2014).

⁵ As an American citizen who worked almost exclusively in the United States, Obata's name is here represented following Western conventions (First name, Last name).

⁶ It must be noted that Obata's ideological stance was far less rigid than Ariza's. After emigrating to the United States in 1903, Obata took up residence in San Francisco where he championed pluralistic aesthetic views: in 1921, he conceived the "East West Art Society", an initiative that sought to stimulate cross-cultural artistic practices in the city.

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Author biography

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Título

Coronbia-ga: Gonzalo Ariza y la búsqueda por un arte nacional

Resumen

Inspirado por el movimiento de *nihonga* japonés, el pintor colombiano Gonzalo Ariza dedicó la mayor parte de su carrera a desarrollar un estilo pictórico nacionalista e identitario. Sin embargo, este proyecto encontró la resistencia de una naciente escena de arte moderno en Colombia que, dominada por críticos como Marta Traba, promovía a una generación de jóvenes artistas de línea abstraccionista educados en Europa e ignoraba los paisajes realistas de Ariza. Esto condujo a una controversia entre Ariza y Traba en la que se discutieron conceptos como nacionalismo, mercantilismo, y modernidad, y de la que la imagen pública de Ariza nunca se recuperó. Este artículo examina la manera en que las conexiones artísticas e ideológicas de Ariza con Japón,

que simultáneamente informan y contradicen su búsqueda por un estilo artístico nacional y «auténtico», dificultan nuestra estimación de su obra pero, a la vez, la distinguen como una singularidad dentro del arte latinoamericano del siglo XX.

Palabras clave

Gonzalo Ariza, Colombia, *nihonga*, nacionalismo, paisaje

タイトル

「コロンビアーガ」をめぐる様式分析。アリサのコロンビアのナショナルアート主義の探求を中心に

要旨

日本画にインスピレーションを受けたコロンビアの画家ゴンサロ・アリサは、自国にナショナリズムとアイデンティティを重視した絵画様式を確立しようと試みた。しかし、新生現代アートの芸術家たちが彼の作品群に抵抗を示したのである。抽象主義に傾倒するヨーロッパ教育を受けた若手作家を推進していたマルタ・トラバのような批評家たちがアリサの写実的な風景画を敬遠したのだ。このため、コロンビア芸術におけるナショナリズム、商業主義、近代性などの概念をめぐるアリサとトラバの間で公然と論争が起こり、論争の結果、アリサの名声は大きく傷つけられることとなった。本稿では、アリサによる「本物」志向の絵画様式の探求に焦点をあてながら、彼の芸術的・イデオロギー的な日本との繋がりが、どのような影響を与え、またどういった矛盾をはらんでいるのかを考察することを目的としている。具体的には、芸術的観点からアリサの諸作品が過小評価される結果となった諸要因を分析し、同時に、彼の作品群が20世紀ラテンアメリカ芸術の独自の進化にどのように寄与してきたかを洞察する。

キーワード

ゴンサロ・アリサ、コロンビア、日本画、ナショナリズム、風景