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The Battle Over Botero

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Special to The Herald

Colombian artist Fernando Botero, according to biographer Ana María Escallón, is one of the most widely exhibited artists alive. But Botero could borrow Rodney Dangerfield's phrase when it comes to his homeland: he can't get no respect. Two events -- one of them with a South Florida link -- in the past few months have cooled the artist's love-hate relationship with the country of his birth, at least for now.

The local incident involves unauthorized reproductions from Botero's paintings for sale in South Florida and elsewhere in the United States. The reproductions are of works in the Museum of Antioquia in his hometown of Medellín, part of a donation the artist made to Colombia in 2000 that is worth an estimated \$200 million.

When news of their sale by a Boca Raton-based firm reached Botero at his home in France, he was furious. His subsequent angry phone calls to the museum and an interview with a Miami-based reporter working for a Colombian newsweekly have stirred a tempest even in Bogotá's Congress.

"Colombia hasn't treated me very well," Botero deadpans in Spanish over the phone from Paris in his signature sing-song accent.

"But when it's your country, it's your country," he continues. "You know, I walk the streets of Paris, and I admire them. But when I come to a street in Colombia, it's ugly and all, but I love it."

Still, the reproductions popping up from Florida to New York raised his ire, he says. "You can't imagine the damage caused by the cheapening of an artist's work."

As for the museum, he holds it responsible. Says Botero: "I gave them my hand and they took an arm."

IMPORTANT DECISION

A tribunal of three attorneys appointed Nov. 18 by Medellín's Chamber of Commerce will decide in the next three to six months which of three parties violated a contract originally made by the museum itself -- and on which side of the ocean.

The museum's director says a local publicist pulled the wool over her eyes, and Boca Raton-based Art Brokers USA, which represents artists and sells their art, says the museum led it to believe that everything was legitimate, including Botero's stamp of approval. Botero says he never gave consent for his work to become such an object of commerce, "like a piece of candy."

Art Brokers USA was put in touch with the museum a year ago through Colombian publicist, Alvaro Vargas, says Marlene Moonjian, owner of Art Brokers USA. Vargas had been contracted by the museum to establish commercial ventures involving works from the museum's collection. Vargas asked her if she would be interested in researching the market for reproductions of Botero, based on works from the generous donation that made world headlines two years ago.

"I said I didn't know if there was a market since there are already so many unauthorized reproductions of Botero in South Florida," says Moonjian, a Brazilian native who has done marketing in the United States for 12 years.

But the relationship among Vargas -- under his firm, named Publix Bates -- Art Brokers USA and the museum, primarily through its marketing chief, Guillermo Gil, continued, including meetings in Medellín and Miami, for the next five months.

By April, Moonjian was producing a line of reproductions with a method called giclee, a technique that uses high-resolution, large format ink jet printers. They were sold on the Internet and by a small crew of people under commission for prices ranging from \$80 to \$2,000.

All along, Moonjian said, she thought the museum, and Botero, backed the project. "Everything was in black and white, there were documents and documents," she says. One document signed by the museum's director appears on the website offering the reproductions for sale. It appears to authorize Publix Bates to }
negotiate and merchandise, on our behalf, all the products which... have a direct or indirect relationship with the copyrights of which we are the owners."

But Pilar Velilla, the Museum of Antioquia's director, says that Vargas was given only the right to "explore markets," not the rights over Botero's name, and could close a deal only with the signing of a contract. Furthermore, she says, the English translation of the document authorizing Publix Bates to explore markets changed the meaning of the original."

Attempts to reach Vargas in Medellín were unsuccessful.

OUTRAGED CONGRESS

Meanwhile, in Colombia, Miami-based journalist Adriana Herrera's story on the fiasco in the newsweekly, *Semana*, led members of Congress from Botero's hometown to send the artist a letter promising they would investigate the matter -- "to take the stain from our city's name."

"Frankly, I have no idea what that means," Botero says.

And Art Brokers USA has stopped selling the reproductions, except for those orders made before Oct. 1, Moonjian says -- despite investing more than \$200,000 in the project, selling only about \$30,000, and piling up what she estimates is about \$100,000 worth of merchandise. The website still exists, though the Fort Lauderdale phone number listed on it appears to be disconnected.

She says she decided to shut down after discovering that Botero hadn't authorized the project.

"Never in my whole life have I been involved in something like this," Moonjian explains.

Moonjian says she and Vargas are "victims" of the museum. Velilla says she is a "victim" of Vargas. Botero, charitably and somewhat cryptically summing up the situation, says that Colombia is "a victim of centuries of bad education."

On top of that, while the reproduction scandal was unfolding in September, two of Botero's paintings were stolen from the same museum. The paintings were abandoned in a park in Bogotá a month later, and five people are now doing time for the crime, Velilla says. It was, she explains, "an insider's job."

These types of incidents have been an ongoing theme for decades, with the artist withstanding kidnapping threats outside the country's capital, Bogotá, and the bombing of a sculpture of a dove he donated to Medellín.

Still, at the end of the day, Botero says that "one forgives endlessly. . .[and] has to be patient."

He also says he has been painting using a theme he had not touched until recent years -- Colombia's violence, framed in the Western hemisphere's longest-running civil war, now in its fifth decade. He has done five large-format paintings on the subject in the past year.

One involved a massacre in a church on the Pacific coast. "A year ago, I heard on the news in Paris that the guerrillas had bombed a church and killed 100 people. . .I imagined a cathedral. . .[and] painted a church with death flying overhead."

Excited by the series, he says, "these should be seen in Colombia."

He was thinking of calling a museum -- in the capital city of Bogotá, not Medellín -- to suggest an exhibition of the series for 2004.

Sums up Botero: "This would be a testimony to the absurdity of what we are living through in Colombia in this moment."

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