

# *THE MEDELLIN ART-EL*

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Five painters from Medellín, Colombia

**Rodrigo Isaza**

**Germán Londoño**

**Jorge Botero Luján**

**Carlos Guerra**

**Luis Alfonso Ramírez**

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An exhibition organized by the IDB Cultural Center  
Art Gallery of the IDB Staff Association  
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## INTRODUCTION

The city of Medellín is located in a narrow valley of the Colombian Andes 4,800 feet above sea level. The seat of government of the Department of Antioquia, it is frequently referred to as Colombia's industrial capital. Its population of two million is second only to that of Santafé de Bogotá, and the wealthy region of which it is the center accounts for a fourth of the nation's income. Its textile factories, for example, are the most advanced in South America. Thanks to the skill and enterprising spirit of the Medellinenses cotton from the low-lying Magdalena and Cauca river valleys is transformed into fabrics whose sophistication is admired worldwide.

Throughout the 320 years of its history, the gigantic walls of the Andes have ensured Medellín's relative isolation from Santafé de Bogotá, the national capital, and other urban centers of the country. Self-sufficiency and a unique regional character have marked the city's development since the very beginning. In this regard, the population resembles the aboriginal Indian tribe of the area—the Quimbayas—whose social, religious, and artistic orders were peculiar to them alone. So fiercely independent were the natives of the Aburra valley, led by their proud chief Nutibara, that they preferred death to surrender to the Spanish conquistador Jorge Robledo.

Initially established as Villa de la Candelaria de Medellín, and boasting a coat of arms granted by Mariana de Austria, queen regent of Spain during the minority of Charles the Bewitched, the city lies high in the Andes but low with respect to its surrounding mountains. At twilight the skyline formed by the jagged ridges of the cordillera creates an almost frightening effect of imprisonment. It is hardly surprising then that the Medellinenses feel themselves a little different from other Colombians, and that they have come to live life in their own terms. They are reputed to be hard-working, pragmatic, and amiable. If they are also thought to be a bit cynical, this may derive from their consciousness of engagement in a never-ending struggle against forces of nature which ensure their lasting isolation.

Above all, however, the Medellinenses are distinguished by their aesthetic sensibility. From casual browsing through the history of Colombia one can discover that the Department of Antioquia has one of the richest cultural heritages in the country, its intellectuals having been leaders in fields ranging from literature, music, philosophy, and the visual arts to economics and politics.

In the area of painting, for example, Antioquia produced Pedro Nel Gómez, the leader of a mural movement second only to that of Mexico in the history of Latin American art. As regards literature, it was the birthplace of the Modernist poets Porfirio Barba Jacob and León de Greiff, the novelist Mario Vargas Vila, and the travel writer Fernando González; it was also the cradle of the literary movement known as Nadaism, founded in the 1950's by Gonzalo Arango. Medellín was not only home to the pioneer artist-photographer Melitón Rodríguez: he never went anywhere else! Among more recent painters to be born in Medellín are the visionary Expressionist Débora Arango and the world-famous Fernando Botero.

Medellín is also the city where Rodrigo Isaza, Germán Londoño, Jorge Botero, Carlos Guerra, and Luis Alfonso Ramírez—the five painters selected for this exhibit—first saw the light of day. All belong to the artistic generation of the 1980's, a decade notably troublesome in the economic history of Latin America and the history of Medellín in particular.

All five artists have experienced the political and social upheavals of the epoch, the uncertainty that has marked every aspect of daily living, and the ban that has been extended to the city by the international community. Each has had to work under circumstances over which he had no control, yet none has made any concessions thereto, any more than a professional actor would slacken the emotional charge of his performance when faced with an all-but-empty house. Each has created skillfully crafted, powerful compositions which bespeak his personal vision of universal concerns.

The quintet represent quite different—at times even antagonistic—approaches to art, unaffected by the changing tastes of our times. In a period of general confusion few would be so foolish as to take fleeting public favor for a goal. The richness of these artists' individual vocabularies derives from their gifts of imagination, their resourcefulness, and the inner strength on which they draw to confront a reality which they inwardly hate but which provides a stimulating challenge to their creative talent.

*Félix Angel*



**JORGE BOTERO LUJAN**  
**May 16, 1957**

The world of Jorge Botero Luján is people with figures one encounters every day in the *Comunas*—the low-income neighborhoods of Medellín in which many lives were lost in the 1980's. His compositions exude a lingering sense of danger, reflecting the many contradictions certain segments of the population have had to face on a daily basis and the lack of rules for elementary survival in an environment difficult of comprehension. The massive physical appearance of his subjects constitutes a metaphor of man's endless capacity to confront an unpredictable, hostile reality. While he made several visits to New York in the 1980's, Botero Luján spent most of the decade in Medellín. He moved to Santafé de Bogotá in 1991. This is the first showing of his work in Washington.

- 10 - "El Negocio" (The Bussiness), 1992, Acrylic on canvas, 47 1/4 x 63 inches.
- 11 - "Nostalgia" (Nostalgia), 1990, Acrylic on canvas, 47 1/4 x 67 inches.
- 12 - "Sobreviviente de la Ciudad y la Furia" (Survivor of the City and the Fury), 1991, Acrylic on canvas, 39 7/8 x 39 7/8 inches.

**CARLOS GUERRA**  
**September 28, 1964**

At first glance, thanks to the meticulousness of Guerra's technique and the clarity of the atmosphere surrounding familiar objects from which life has suspiciously vanished, one has the impression of a faithful reproduction of reality. Quickly, however, the viewer realizes that the calm surface veils a strong rejection of a world completely out of order. Some might term the passiveness of the mask visual escapism, but Guerra's work is not so easily dismissed. It constitutes a reminder, authoritatively stated, albeit in allegorical terms, of the joy the human being has sacrificed by underestimating what is simple in life. Guerra lives in Medellín. This is the first time his work has been seen in Washington, D.C.

- 13 - "Azucenas" (Lillies), 1992, pastel on paper, 39 3/4 x 59 1/8 inches.
- 14 - "Melones" (Watermelons), 1993, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 52 3/4 inches.
- 15 - "Rosas" (Roses), 1993, pastel on paper, 39 3/4 x 59 1/16 inches.

**LUIS ALFONSO RAMIREZ**  
**October 25, 1950**

The dramatic character of Ramirez's images at once recalls Caravaggio, Sánchez Cotán, José de Ribera, and above all Francisco de Zurbarán. The delicate watercolor technique which Ramirez employs in evoking reminiscences of past creations serves but to heighten the tragedy lurking behind a serenely austere facade. Ramirez's depictions of scenes of torment and punishment bespeak the lack of dignity to which people are condemned when forced to live amid random violence. Faced with its protean manifestations, creative talent must seek to achieve through art a divine extasy transcending terrestrial pain and human loss. The result may be illusory—but in art all is illusion. Ramirez was one of the few artists to enjoy success during the 1980's in Medellín. The city remains his home, though he traveled to Italy in 1991. This marks his second group presentation in Washington, D.C.

- 16 - "Descendimiento" (Descent), 1990, watercolor on paper, 36 3/16 x 24 7/16 inches.
- 17 - "Acertijo" (Riddle), 1990, watercolor on paper, 36 6/16 x 24 7/16 inches.

**RODRIGO ISAZA**  
**December 24, 1961**

The crisis of values characteristic of the 80's is clearly reflected in the works of Rodrigo Isaza. Upon returning home from Paris, where he had studied for three years at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, he did a series of studies of brides and grooms, but more recently he has sought inspiration in places to which the common folk resort to dance and make love. While for centuries Medellín had traditionally been an ultraconservative Catholic city, in the 1980's it was overnight transformed into a center of illegal and immoral activities controlled by the underworld, much like Chicago in the 1930's. Faced with growing insecurity, a consequent drop-off in tourism, and decreasing accessibility to sophisticated forms of entertainment, the city turned inward, seeking for distraction at the popular level. "Private clubs", many without proper license, sprang up to cater to, and profit from, a "new", upwardly mobile, uneducated class. The coarseness of this environment is suggested by the roughly textured surfaces on which Isaza traces his figures. The artist has won a high measure of respect in Colombia and is now enjoying his third group presentation in the Washington area.

- 1 - "Bailarines" (Dancers Series), 1993, oil on cloth attached to canvas, 70 x 46 inches.
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- 4 - "Bailarines" (Dancers Series), 1993, oil on cloth attached to canvas, 70 x 46 inches.

**GERMAN LONDOÑO**  
**October 12, 1961**

The work of Germán Londoño possesses an irresistible international appeal. The whimsically expressionistic character of his powerful figurative imagery has a fashionably postmodern air, seemingly a belated development from the Italian ultravanguard of the 1980's. His work's strength, however, derives from a rigorously exercised, highly original capacity for structuring composition, a refined sense of color, and a controlled gestural brush-stroke. Londoño is a relative newcomer on the Colombian art scene. In 1983 and 1984 he studied engraving at the art school known as Il Bisonte in Florence, Italy, initiating his professional career upon his return home to Medellín. His 1991 one-man shows in Santafé de Bogotá and Cali met with all-but-unanimous praise from the art critics of those cities. This is the first presentation of his work in the Washington area.

- 5 - "Elogio de la Antártida" (Tribute to Antarctica), 1993, oil on canvas, 54 x 56 inches.
- 6 - "Mujer escribiendo en una Isla" (Woman writing in an Island), 1993, oil on canvas, 52 x 64 inches.
- 7 - "Composición con dos Jarrones Verdes" (Composition with Two Green Vases), 1993, oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches.
- 8 - "Composición con Carne de Mar y Dibujo" (Composition with Seafood and Drawing), 1993, oil on canvas, 50 x 58 inches.
- 9 - "Composición con Mujer Reclinada y Jarrón Rojo" (Composition with Reclined Woman and Red Vase), 1993, oil on canvas, 48 x 62 inches.



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## PRESENTATION

The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank takes pleasure in presenting, in collaboration with the art gallery of the Bank's Staff Association, an exhibition of young artists working in the city of Medellín, Colombia.

Having managed the Staff Association art gallery for more than a decade, I can say with assurance that it was the series of exhibitions sponsored by the Staff Association which made clear the need for the establishment of a cultural program representative of the Bank at the official level. Formal response to the need came in 1992, with the inauguration of the Cultural Center—a symbol of the Bank's commitment to increased understanding of the role cultural expression plays in the economic and social development of its member countries.

Since its creation, the Cultural Center has striven to call attention to outstanding cultural achievements of the peoples of America—some of them quite unknown to dwellers in the Washington area—thereby contributing to increased public appreciation of past and contemporary creative talent in the Western Hemisphere.

The Cultural Center and the Staff Association gallery were moved to sponsor this exhibition of painters from Medellín as evidence of the fashion in which gifted spirits can rise above unfortunate circumstances which from time to time may affect the life of a city or of a nation.

We welcome these five young artists and voice our hope that presentation in this world capital will mark the beginning of international recognition of their originality and inventive and technical skill.

***Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez***

Director of the Cultural Center

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