

Historias del arte en Colombia

*Olga Isabel Acosta Luna, Natalia Lozada Mendieta,
and Juanita Solano Roa, editors*

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The allure of gold — golden objects, golden rivers, golden cities — has long loomed large in our collective imagination. For Colombia, the birthplace of the legend of El Dorado, gold has been a central part of its historical, cultural, and artistic legacy. Vasco Núñez de Balboa, leading an expedition along the Atrato River in northwestern Colombia in 1512, wrote of a local chief (the cacique Dabaibe) who commanded vast riches and oversaw a smelter worked continually by a hundred men, from which came many curious artifacts. Another golden legend emerged from the fertile basins of the Cordillera Oriental, near Bogotá, about a Muisca chief who, covered from head to toe in gold dust, was ferried to the center of Lake Guatavita on a golden raft. Gold, cast by pre-Hispanic cultures, gilded onto Spanish altarpieces, and alluded to in Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar's 1958 mural *El Dorado*, has been a constant element in the art produced within the borders of what is today Colombia. But, as the authors of *Historias del arte en Colombia* vividly illustrate, gold is just one of many media used by artists to engage with and respond to their diverse and dramatic environment.

In *Historias del arte en Colombia*, Olga Isabel Acosta Luna, Natalia Lozada Mendieta, Juanita Solano Roa, and their colleagues from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá (including Darío Velandia Onofre, Verónica Uribe Hanabergh, Patricia Zalamea Fajardo, Alexander Herrera Wassilowski, Ana María Franco, María Claudia Bernal Bermúdez, Mario Omar Fernández Reguera, David Cohen Daza, Betsy Stella Forero Montoya, and Andrea Lozano Vásquez) undertake a fresh and vivid exploration of Colombia's artistic legacy. The book examines twenty-one objects, considering how they are interpreted,

reimagined, and valued by later generations. Their carefully curated selection includes oil painting, watercolor, fresco, wood and ceramic sculpture, photography, performance art, video installations, acoustic artifacts, and, of course, gold, spanning Colombia's ancient past to its present.

Readers are introduced to Colombian art and the geographical, social, cultural, ideological, and political factors that have shaped it. These perspectives, provided by Colombian scholars, offer a corrective to centuries of accounts written by European outsiders. *Historias del arte en Colombia* stands out among volumes on Colombian art for its comprehensive coverage of over 3 000 years of history. Unlike traditional art history surveys, it takes a thematic rather than chronological approach, inviting readers to construct their own narratives of Colombian art history. Importantly, each essay stands alone and can be used as a short reading assignment or paired with others to explore the volume's numerous themes.

Historias del arte en Colombia is divided into four sections. The first, "Identidad" ("Identity"), uses art to explore questions of personhood, ethnicity, power, status, gender, presence, absence, and expressions of pain, anguish, and despair. Noteworthy images include Benjamín de la Calle's photograph *María Anselma Restrepo* (1897), which captures the dignified presence of an armed Afro-Colombian woman with a leather bandolier and pistol beside her. Another striking photo by de la Calle, *Mujer-hombre Rosa Emilia Restrepo o Roberto Duran* (1912), documents a historical anecdote about a young man who dressed as a woman to secure employment from a wealthy family, only to later rob them. These images continue to stimulate discussions about gender roles and the multifaceted identities individuals may adopt.

The second section, "Materialidades" ("Materialities"), explores media and materials to delve into pageantry, performance, technology, manufacturing, transformation, transmutation, artistic methods, dating, and questions of attribution. Technical studies conducted on *San Pacho* (Saint Francis of Assisi), a devotional sculpture from Quibdó, unveil untold stories about its fabrication, centuries of wear, and decades of restoration. Microanalysis of pigment layers confirms the statue's origin sometime between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An investigation into a watercolor, *Retrato de dos labriegos, Provincia de Medellín* (1852) by Henry Price, an English artist working for the Chorographic Commission (1850-1859), raises significant questions about the role of photography in an expedition traditionally associated with the use of pigments and paper. Bernardo Salcedo's *Hectárea de heno* (1970), featuring plastic bags of hay labeled with numbers, draws attention to ongoing issues of land tenure, inequitable land distribution, and failed agrarian reform attempts.

The third section, “Migraciones” (“Migrations”), employs art to examine the movement of people and objects across space, as well as the transmission of knowledge and technologies temporally and geographically. Bordered by the Caribbean and Pacific oceans, Colombia serves as a conduit through which people, things, and ideas enter and exit from Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and beyond. Art and artifacts explored in this section reflect themes of migration, immigration, exile, pilgrimage, and exchange. Contemporary reflections on displacement are captured in works such as Beatriz González’s *Zulia, Zulia, Zulia* (2015), which references the mass migration from Venezuela following its 2014 social and economic crisis. Johanna Calle’s *Efluvios* (2002-2004) underscores the isolation and despair experienced by migrants moving from rural to urban areas. In situ works like the sixteenth-century mural paintings on the ceiling of Casa de Escribano in Tunja document ideological, cultural, and material exchanges from Europe to the New World through prints. Evidence of long-distance trade, adaptation, and absorption is also seen in the Spanish colonial *Camarín de la Virgen del Rosario* in the church of Santo Domingo in Tunja (1687-1689). This ornate retablo incorporates twenty-three Chinese porcelain plates from the Ming and Qing dynasties, positioned to evoke a coffered ceiling. Through these compelling works, the authors of *Historias del Arte en Colombia* highlight Colombia as a nexus for global trade, where goods from distant continents were refashioned, reconfigured, and reimagined.

The migration and exchange of Colombia’s natural resources — particularly gold and emeralds — as well as the involvement of foreign actors in their exploitation and extraction are evident in the *Coclé Jaguar pendant*. Excavated in 1940 by J. Alden Mason from a tomb at Sitio Conte in present-day Panama, this cast gold pendant likely carried a large emerald sourced from the mines of Muzo in Colombia’s Cordillera Oriental. As part of a sharing agreement, the object later found its way to the University of Pennsylvania’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia, where it remains today. This artifact sparks discussions about cultural heritage, colonialism, and the role of the pre-Hispanic past in contemporary contexts.

The fourth and final section, “Geografías” (“Geographies”), explores the varied landscapes that have shaped Colombian art, engaging the reader in dialogues about nature, geographical features, contested land, cartography, borders, itineraries, and one’s relationship with the environment. In the Serranía La Lindosa in South-Central Colombia, tens of thousands of rock paintings spread across approximately eight miles. These images of humans and megafauna, dating back more than 10000 years, document human presence mapped onto the terrain.

Other works reflect the landscape and forced relocations imprinted on human bodies. In *Signos Cardinales* (2008), Libia Posada and female victims of Colombia's armed conflict chart the grueling itineraries of their forced displacement on their shins, using the instruments of their movement as markers of memory.

A sub-theme running through *Historias del Arte en Colombia* is the country's discovery and exploration, and the art that resulted from these ventures. Centuries after the first Spaniards plundered the country's gold, emeralds, and pearls, the crown-sponsored Royal Botanical Expedition (1783-1810), led by Spanish botanist José Celestino Mutis, fanned out across Colombia in search of commercially viable natural resources. The legacy of this scientific undertaking is a large natural history collection and thousands of breathtakingly beautiful drawings and watercolors, which provided the rationale for founding the Museo Nacional in 1823, today one of the oldest museums in the Americas. Alexander von Humboldt's travels through Colombia in 1801 inspired English, French, and North American adventurers to follow suit, resulting in richly illustrated travel accounts by the likes of Gaspard-Théodore Mollien (1823), Charles Stuart Cochrane (1823-1824), Charles Empson (1836), Edward Walhouse Mark (1843-1856), Charles Saffray (1869), and Édouard André (1884). *Historias del Arte en Colombia* fittingly provides a pathway for continued exploration and discovery.

The value in *Historias del Arte en Colombia* lies in its contemporaneity and commitment to problematizing and engaging with issues of central and pressing concern to humanistic studies in the twenty-first century. Through its timely themes of identity, materiality, migration, and geography, *Historias del Arte en Colombia* gives voice to women and LGBTI artists, indigenous and African communities, and addresses questions of how objects were made as well as why they were made. It is a testimony to Colombia's rich ethnic diversity and to works that have been inspired by, forged from, and inscribed upon the country's diverse topography.

This lavishly illustrated volume, containing 260 works — many of which will be unfamiliar to the general reader and revelatory to the art historian — is available as a physical book and an ebook. A translated English edition would be a welcome addition and would bring the histories of Colombia's art to an even wider audience.