

Title: Bogotá ca.1958**Author: Ximena Gama**

In the 1950s, following the death of his teacher, Joaquín Torres-García—and a period of nearly ten years in Torres-García’s workshop—Julio Alpuy began a series of travels that was to set his work on a new course. He first went to Europe and various cities in Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, then returned to Uruguay—where he ceased to be a disciple in the workshop and became a teacher—and finally stayed in Bogotá and Venezuela from 1957 to 1961. All of these journeys initiated a new creative process that reached its peak when he decided to settle in New York City in 1961. Yet the decisive phase during all this time seems to have been the three years he spent in Bogotá; as Alpuy himself has indicated, his work should be viewed in terms of a “before” and an “after” his time there.

Alpuy arrived in Colombia in 1957, accompanied by the Colombian painter Omar Rayo, a native of Valle del Cauca whom he had met in Chile. After two months in Santiago, during which he gathered inspiration from ideas that he sketched or painted in his notebooks and also gave a series of lectures at the School of Fine Arts, Alpuy had decided to set off with Rayo on a Pacific voyage from Valparaíso to the Colombian port of Buenaventura. He wanted to subject his work to new critical tenets, and he knew that the cultural environment in Bogotá would be conducive to this. Gudula Weiler, an Uruguayan friend who had lived in Bogotá for some time and worked at the Alliance Française, had firsthand knowledge of what was happening there. She and her husband, Juan Weiler, a German man who worked for the communications firm Siemens in Colombia, were part of the city’s intellectual circle.

When Alpuy arrived in Bogotá that October, the political situation in Colombia had reached a critical point. After four years in power, General Rojas Pinilla had been overthrown in May, following intense protests that had erupted at the announcement of his decision to continue in office for a second term. Measures he had taken during his time in power, including the closing of such important newspapers as *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, as well as the censoring of cultural programs on television and national radio, had destabilized the country’s cultural environment but had not succeeded in robbing it of the energy it had acquired some years before. Beginning in the early 1950s, Colombia’s capital had become a center of artistic activity,

and, as the Austrian critic Casimiro Eiger said in a talk on Radiodifusora Nacional de Colombia on March 9, 1953, people by then thought of Bogotá as a capital city of art.¹

Despite its high rates of violence, Colombia was experiencing an economic and industrial boom. Rojas Pinilla had made a major commitment to modernizing the country; its large cities, including Bogotá, were becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and more open to the great cultural discussions that were taking place around the world.

On the other hand, the convulsive political situation helped accelerate this process to a considerable degree. In response to Rojas Pinilla's censorship and thanks to backing by private enterprise, alternative spaces were created where it was possible to express opinions that were not dictated by government policies. This was how the daily newspapers *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*, after they were closed, were transformed, respectively, into *Intermedio* and *El Independiente*. Starting in 1957, the radio station HJCK began transmitting some of the cultural programs that had been broadcast on Radiodifusora Nacional de Colombia. (This was what happened with Casimiro Eiger and Otto de Greiff, whose program "Comentarios Críticos" [Critical Commentaries], about cultural activity in Bogotá, had been shut down after a number of years on the air.) Similarly, by 1955 Colombia had two important independent publications: the magazines *Mito* and *Espiral*, founded by Jaime Gaitán Durán and Clemente Airó, which concentrated on literary criticism but gave some space to the visual arts in Colombia. Finally, in 1956 the Bogotá artist Judith Márquez founded *Plástica*, the country's first art magazine, to which Walter Ángel and Marta Traba contributed frequently. Traba had arrived in Colombia from Argentina two years earlier and was already considered one of the most influential voices in Bogotá's art scene. In 1957, together with her students at the Universidad de América, she founded the magazine *Prisma*, whose purpose, as stated in its first editorial, was "to create a group of people who will try to approach art with intelligence, and thus may . . . play an active role in the country's culture."² This was a mission to which she dedicated herself passionately during the nearly three decades that she lived in Colombia; both her critical

¹ Casimiro Eiger, "Nuestra escultura en la Bienal (3-X-1953)," in *Crónicas de arte colombiano, 1946–1963* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1995), 237.

² Marta Traba, "Una nueva revista" [*Prisma* 1 (January 1957)], in Emma Araújo, ed., *Marta Traba* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá and Editorial Planeta, 1984), 20.

reviews and the cultural programs she produced on national television in the early and late 1950s are proof of that.

Several national Salons had been held by the early 1950s, and the exhibition halls of Colombia's National Library and the National Museum were gaining importance as platforms that provided space for new ideas. The first national Salon for young artists was organized in 1950, as was the first Salon for modern art. Artists such as Ramírez Villamizar, Alejandro Obregón, Guillermo Wiedemann, and Marco Ospina began to establish the guiding principles for art in Colombia, and others with much less previous exposure—such as Carlos Rojas and Fernando Botero—began to position themselves on the national and international stage.

These artists initiated a trend toward abstraction that distanced Colombian art from the violent subject matter that had characterized it in earlier decades. Criticism in various media was key in accomplishing this transformation, but the small galleries that opened during those years also played a decisive role. After Rojas Pinilla took power, official efforts to promote and disseminate art dwindled, and despite the opening of the exhibition hall at the Luis Ángel Arango Library, the national Salons were closed down, while the many bureaucratic obstacles to constructing Colombia's already approved Museum of Modern Art multiplied; it was finally opened in 1963. The independent venues assumed the task of filling this vacuum, promoting new ideas and supporting new artists.³

How Alpy Was Received

The work developed by the School of the South, Joaquín Torres-García, and his students in Montevideo, was practically unknown in Colombia's intellectual circles. Marta Traba certainly must have heard of this movement in Argentina and during her long stay in France and Italy. However, Bogotá artists had not had any kind of direct contact with the school's theory or production, which made Alpy the first member and

³ The work of three galleries should be highlighted here. Galería Buchholz was opened by Franz Buchholz, a German who brought several international exhibitions to Colombia, among which was an exhibition of modern French art that included works by Picasso and Braque. In 1953, Casimiro Eiger and Hans Ungar, the owner of Librería Central, opened the Galería El Callejón, and three years later Cecilia de Gómez founded the Galería El Caballito. These last two galleries played a key role in publicizing and promoting new artists and trends.

representative exponent of Torres-García's workshop in Colombia, and therefore the only avenue for exploring it.

Despite this initial unfamiliarity, Bogotá—a city that was hungry for new ideas—opened its doors to Alpay. When he arrived in October, Marta Traba and Guillermo Wiedemann organized a dinner in his honor, where he had the opportunity to meet such artists as Ramírez Villamizar, who at that time already had a painting in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and Fernando Botero, who despite his youth was gaining international stature. Moreover, Alpay's house, in the historic Bogotá neighborhood of La Candelaria, became a frequent meeting place for students from the Academy of Fine Arts, as they shifted between gatherings at the Café Automático and the studios of artists who lived on the area's outskirts. This very bohemian atmosphere did not break down Alpay's discipline. He had decided that his stay in Bogotá was to be a journey focused on seeking a new artistic direction, and that it would therefore mark a turning point in his work. This was why, when he embarked on this trip, he did not bring along any of the works he had executed in Torres-García's workshop; all he brought was the notebook in which he sketched or painted his ideas and drawings for new projects. For this reason, and despite the hectic pace of life in Bogotá, all Alpay did was work. The city's particular landscape, surrounded by mountains, and the unusual light of the Bogotá savanna offered him a suitable location for the project he had initially set himself. That first year, Alpay executed at least twenty paintings, including *Vista de la calle 13 con Caracas* and *Bogotá Nocturna*, which were later exhibited in his first solo show at the Luis Ángel Arango Library in 1958.

Months before that first exhibition, Traba had offered him several pages in the magazine *Prisma* in order to explain the School of the South's system. Alpay wrote a densely worded article in which he outlined the central concept of the workshop's theory. "La escuela más interesante de Latinoamérica: El Taller Torres-García" [The Most Interesting School in Latin America: The Taller Torres-García] was published in issue 11/12 (the magazine's last issue for 1957), with one of his drawings on the cover. In addition, the exhibition catalogue featured an essay in which Alpay reaffirmed his active participation in the workshop, which he illustrated with an explanation of each of the works on display.

The exhibition drew little reaction. Lack of any prior knowledge of the School of the South—despite the two essays by Alpay—made it difficult for

critics to express a clear opinion about it. Although Walter Ángel praised Alpuý's values in his review column in the magazine *Plástica* and depicted him as a man with the necessary talent for creating visual art,⁴ he took no critical position regarding Alpuý's work. Instead, the column is devoted to citations from the essay in the catalogue, thereby confirming that if one was unfamiliar with Torres-García's theories, the best solution was to disseminate them.

Marta Traba's two articles for the newspaper *El Tiempo* seem to have been written with the same purpose in mind. The first, published a day before the exhibition opened, concentrates mainly on Torres-García's work and on the school he founded. Entitled "Preámbulo Informal a la Exposición de Alpuý" [Informal Introduction to the Alpuý Exhibition], this review is a strong, polemical critique of Torres-García's theory, in which she says that Constructivism—contrary to what people think—is not an established system but a style developed by a particular artist and then elevated to the status of a system by his own students. The School's system, Traba said, was unlike abstraction in that it was hemmed in by a group of principles and rules that gave individual genius no freedom to act. All works from the movement thus resemble one another—something from which Alpuý does not escape either.

The second review, "Alpuý en la Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango" [Alpuý at the Luis Ángel Arango Library], published two weeks later, takes a somewhat less negative position than the first one. Although Traba says once again that Torres-García's system has prevented Alpuý from achieving success in his work, she points out that it distances itself considerably not only from the modernist movement in Colombia, but from all work being executed in Latin America. Alpuý, she writes, is an artist who "is free of all false Americanism"; his unconditional membership in Torres-García's workshop has caused his search to stray considerably from the very common influence of Picasso on the artists of his era, as well as from the desire to reaffirm a unique Latin American identity.

⁴ "In making a specific reference at this point to Alpuý's exhibition, it is most instructive to observe the results of strict discipline and orientation in an artist of evident talent. . . . His sense of security comes through to the viewer: the security of seeing a man who knows exactly what he wants and has the means to realize it." Cited in Walter Engel, "Exposiciones en Bogotá," in *Plástica* 11 (April–June 1958).

This exhibition concluded Alpy's first and perhaps most important period in Bogotá. Months later, following the advice of his friend Gudula, he decided to leave with her on a trip that lasted just over a year. He spent four months in the German city of Dortmund, where he executed an important series of paintings inspired by the city itself. Then, when he returned to South America, he spent nine months in Caracas, at the home of his friends Adolfo and Renata Domínguez, where he improvised a small studio. There, thanks to the initiative of the Venezuelan painter Alejandro Otero, he mounted an exhibition at the prestigious Sala Mendoza. However, despite the welcome accorded him in Caracas, Alpy decided to return to Bogotá—a city that, as he put it, offered a much more favorable climate for continuing his search for the artistic direction that took him so far from Montevideo.

When he arrived in Bogotá in late 1960, the Luis Ángel Arango Library offered to organize a second exhibition of his work. Even though it did not receive as much media coverage as the first one, it was important because the Arango Library was consolidating its position as one of the key venues for exhibiting the avant-garde artists of the day. The library acquired Alpy's 1959 work *Naturaleza Muerta y Botellón*, which that year became part of the Banco de la República's permanent collection.

This brought Alpy's transition process to a close. Thanks to the strong, ongoing feedback he received in Bogotá, he had achieved his initial desire upon leaving Uruguay: to subject his work to new critical tenets and to embark on an individual exploration and find his own voice. Now the dilemma he faced was whether to live in Paris or New York. His friend Gonzalo Fonseca, an artist who had lived in New York for some time, wrote to him about the vast opportunities he could find there. Without hesitation, Alpy headed to New York once and for all in 1961.

Bibliography

Alpuy, Julio. "La escuela más interesante de Latinoamérica: El Taller Torres García." *Prisma* 11/12 (December 1957).

Araújo, Emma, ed. *Marta Traba*. Bogotá: Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá and Editorial Planeta, 1984.

Engel, Walter. "Exposiciones en Bogotá." *Plástica* 11 (1958).

Gómez Echeverry, Nicolás. *En Blanco y Negro, Marta Traba y la Televisión Colombiana, 1954–1958*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2008.

Jursich Durán, Mario. *Casimiro Eiger, crónicas de arte colombiano 1946–1963*. Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1995.

Londoño Vélez, Santiago. *Arte colombiano, 3500 años de historia*. Bogotá: Villegas Editores and Banco de la República, 2001.

Medina, Álvaro. *Procesos de arte en Colombia*. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1978.

Traba, Marta. *Historia abierta del arte colombiano*. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1984.

_____. "Preámbulo Informal a la Exposición de Alpuy," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), May 25, 1958.

_____. "Alpuy en la Luis Ángel Arango," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), June 8, 1958.

de Torres, Cecilia, and José Roca. *Alpuy*. New York: Cecilia de Torres Ltd., 2003.

de Torres, Cecilia, and Alicia Haber. *Julio Alpuy Retrospective*. New York: Cecilia de Torres Ltd., 1999, and Montevideo: Club de Arte Contemporáneo and Intendencia Municipal de Montevideo, 1999.