

# LAYERED PAST

For collector José Darío Gutiérrez, Colombian art reveals a deep and complex history  
By Sara Roffino

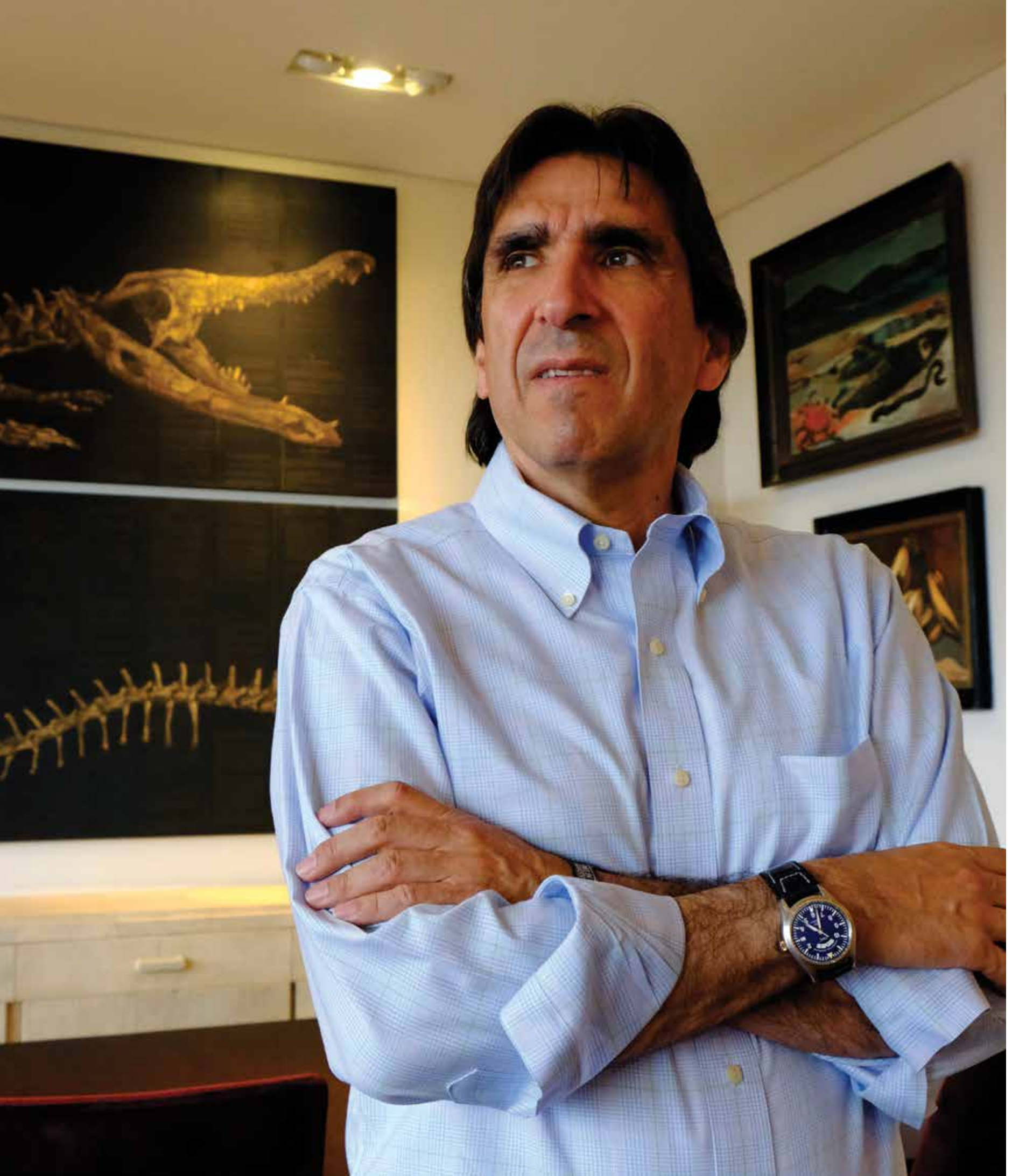
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José Darío Gutiérrez was 12 years old when his mother, a teacher of art and music at the local school in Medellín, brought him to the second-ever Coltejer Biennial, in 1970. “My mother was smiling and said, ‘Look, that’s the one I like the most,’ pointing to a pile of plastic bags filled with hay. It was *Hectárea de beno* by Bernardo Salcedo. I was shocked. My mother is crazy, I thought. It couldn’t be art, and I have spent my last 44 years trying to understand that,” recalls Gutiérrez.

“With my first paycheck, I decided to put half toward art, and since then I’ve always split my income—half for art and half to live. Even today,” he continues. That decision, made more than three decades ago, has yielded a vast collection of Colombian works, from 2,000-year-old Moskito funerary urns and San Agustín stone ceramics to installations and Conceptual pieces by some of the country’s youngest artists. The base of the collection, though, consists of modernist paintings. “I started as a collector looking for art related to the concept of modernity in Colombia, and I’ve looked at three key periods: the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century; the late 1920s and the ’30s, which were marked by nationalism and were one turning point of Colombian art; and the end of the ’50s to the beginning of the ’60s, when an influential critic from Argentina, Marta Traba, changed the



SANTIAGO ESCOBAR-JARAMILLO







COLLECTION OF JOSE DARIO GUTIERREZ

way Colombian art was viewed in the rest of the world.”

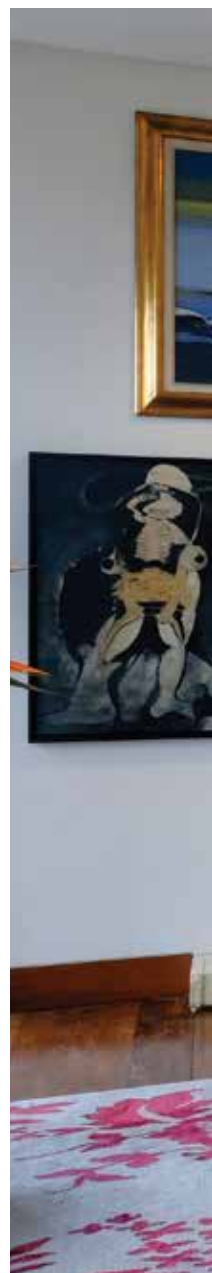
Every wall in the 10th-floor apartment Gutiérrez shares with his wife, Vicky, and their two college-age children is covered with paintings and drawings, while sculptures occupy significant floor and surface space. Yet there’s a feeling of expansiveness in the home, perched on a hill overlooking what seems like the entire city of Bogotá. The exterior cityscape is an ideal backdrop to the collection—the layers of the city set against the Andean peaks in the distance, the same ones depicted in several of the late 19th-century landscape paintings installed along a wide interior hallway opening onto a large patio. “I had to change the frames to modernize them so they don’t look so old,” Gutiérrez says laughingly of the works, pointing out a small painting by Roberto Páramo, a precursor to modernism in Colombia. “These walls show what was happening here at the turn of the century. The artists would paint outside like the Impressionists, with a focus on the light.”

More interested in lesser-known works than pieces that are easily identifiable, the normally reserved Gutiérrez gets excited as he points out a work above the fireplace, asking, “Do you recognize that as a Fernando Botero?” The Expressionist painting lacks the round, folkloric figures and bold colors of an obvious Botero, but as Gutiérrez notes, some of the elements are there—the line forming the jug forbears the shapes that are now immediately recognizable as Botero’s. “What I like in the work of the masters is when you can see the creative tension they suffered,” he says. “The artwork for me is not

a masterpiece. It’s something that happened one day, one moment, by one person. It’s like traces or clues—I consider myself a collector of traces, not a collector of artworks.”

The trace that ties it all together for Gutiérrez is one that has its own history, starting in Paris in 1925—a time when much of the discourse around art in Latin America had to do with ideas of nationalism and the desire to form a distinct cultural identity. The sculptor Rómulo Rozo had left Colombia in 1923 to study in Paris, where within a few years he had completed *Bachué*, *diosa generatriz de los indios Chibchas*, a sculpture increasingly recognized as the first truly modernist work of Colombian art. It is also the centerpiece of Gutiérrez’s collection. When photos of *Bachué* were seen in the Colombian newspapers in 1926, “it was like the code the local intellectuals received to rethink the nationality of the Colombian,” explains Gutiérrez. Carved in granite, the sculpture depicts the creation myth of the indigenous Chibcha people of the Andes: the figure of a woman with arms clasped above a crowned head and two intertwined snakes in place of legs is carved in an Art Deco style with touches of Eastern design likely inspired by works Rozo saw at the Louvre. *Bachué* was exhibited twice in Europe in the 1920s but was then essentially lost until the critic and art historian Alvaro Medina recovered the work from a private collection in Colombia in the late ’90s.

Before Traba, founder of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, brought artists like Botero and Alejandro Obregón—both of whom are included in Gutiérrez’s collection—into the international spotlight as Colombian modernists, there were





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Traditional landscape paintings are among the first works Gutiérrez collected, including, opposite, Giovanni Ferroni's *En la Sabana de Bogotá*, 1894. Above, Fernando Botero's 1959 *Girasoles con Tetera* predates the establishment of the artist's iconographic aesthetic, shedding light on his creative evolution. Pre-Columbian works, such as the two carved stone pieces from the San Agustín culture seen below, are installed throughout the home among postwar paintings, here including a blue landscape, *Flor de mangle*, ca. 1963, by Alejandro Obregón, the figurative *La Sonámbula*, 1955, by Enrique Grau, above the fireplace, and *Retrato de Nancy*, 1958, by Juan Antonio Roda, behind the sofa.

FROM TOP: COLLECTION OF JOSE DARIO GUTIERREZ, SANTIAGO ESCOBAR-JARAMILLO







the artists and intellectuals of Rozo's circle. Following the inclusion of *Bachué* in the Ibero-American Exposition in Seville, Spain, in 1929–30, these artists formed the Bachué Group, with the intention to “moderate the cultural dominance of other nations and cautiously accept ‘the call of the land.’” Though the group did not last long, Gutiérrez and others believe their influence on later artists was profound.

In 2008 Gutiérrez founded the nonprofit Proyecto Bachué as a platform dedicated to the study of Colombian art. The organization has a publishing imprint, underwrites research for some 15 art historians, and launched an exhibition space, El Dorado, in Bogotá's bohemian neighborhood, the Macarena, with an inaugural show of work by the midcareer artist Eduard Moreno. “Bachué is a way of thinking,” Gutiérrez says. “The research is what I miss when I'm studying a period of history because it's very difficult to find records of what was happening in Colombia.” Proyecto Bachué has already published three books: *Fernando Botero, The Search for the Style: 1949–1963*; *Rómulo Rozo's Bachué: A Colombian Modern Art Icon*; and *1929: The Colombian Pavilion at Seville's Ibero-American Fair*. Later this year, a fourth book, *A Self-Portrait Disguised*





Works by popular modernist painters like Obregón, whose *Ganado Ahogándose en el Magdalena*, 1955, is at left, constitute a relatively small part of the collection, while those such as 1962's *Mixta/Carón*, above, by the lesser-known Leonel Góngora, present an in-depth history of art in Colombia. Conceptual photography, the topic of a book Gutiérrez is publishing, is also prevalent, seen on the hall wall opposite, below, alongside examples of Pre-Columbian sculpture. At right, Rómulo Rozo's *Bachué, diosa generatriz de los indios Chibchas*, 1925, representative of the beginning of Colombian modernism, is the conceptual centerpiece of the collection.

as an Artist: Colombian Conceptual Art and Photography in the '70s, will be released. "When I looked back and saw that I had done something that maybe could be important, I thought about what I could do for the future and I decided to become a publisher."

Proyecto Bachué brings together Gutiérrez's commitment to the art history of Colombia and his current interest in collecting contemporary art. In the early 2000s, he was looking for a new challenge. He decided "it's enough dealing with dead artists," and started acquiring works by living ones. Having always viewed his collecting as a private hobby driven by scholarly interest rather than a means of public or social engagement, Gutiérrez avoided opening his holdings to the public or giving interviews until several years ago. He still remains quiet about many of the works in his contemporary collection, waiting until he feels he grasps a work's significance before he unveils it. There are, however, dozens of pieces installed throughout his two-floor home, which he constantly rearranges in order to elicit new relationships and connections among the works. According to Medina, who



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Political art, like *Agresión al imperialismo*, 1972, by [Diego Arango](#) and [Nirma Zárate](#), right, fills Gutiérrez’s home office. Just outside the office is a wall, below, dedicated to works concerning cartography: Antique maps hang alongside pieces by [Adrian Gaitán](#), including his black-and-white *Rosa de los vientos*, 2014, from the series “Oriente de Occidente.” Opposite, bottom: [Adriana Bustos](#)’s *Imago Mundi*, 2014, maps the collection, with an image of Rozo’s iconic *Bachué* in the center.



has published more than a dozen books on Colombian and Latin American art, Gutiérrez has assembled “the most complete collection of Colombian art outside a museum.”

Until three years ago, Gutiérrez avoided art fairs, but now that he has developed a greater interest in the ways his projects can further the discourse around Colombian art, he attends ARTBO, arteBA, ARCO, and Art Basel, though he still prefers discovering new artists by visiting exhibitions, talking with historians, and reading. Medina describes him as “the most sophisticated collector in Colombia,” explaining that “he studies closely and asks a lot of questions. He doesn’t buy according to price or what he likes. He buys what his collection needs.” Many of his recent acquisitions are historical in subject matter, such as *Imago Mundi* by Argentine artist Adriana Bustos, one of the few non-Colombians—along with Alfredo Jaar, Liliana Porter, and Leandro Katz—included in the collection. Bustos’s work, in acrylic on canvas with graphite and copper, maps the history and relationships among the works in Gutiérrez’s collection, with *Bachué* in the center, surrounded by thinkers, writers, and artists who have both influenced the collection and are a part of it. In the lower level of the apartment, an entire wall is dedicated to works related to cartography, another of Gutiérrez’s interests. Installed alongside antique maps is a folded-paper work by Johanna Arenas depicting the theorized location of El Dorado. “It’s a reflection about what is happening today: Contemporary artists are asking for truths that do not exist,” says Gutiérrez.

The collector’s home office is packed with books and memorabilia and art—it’s clearly a space where he spends a lot





of time, perhaps even more so since he began a sabbatical from his work as a commercial lawyer in the medical field last year. “I’m doing now what I’ve wanted to do for my whole life,” he says. The office is filled with political art of the 1960s and ’70s, with several pieces by Leonel Góngora, a Colombian artist who studied in the United States and lived in Mexico, where he formed an Expressionist painting group called Nueva Presencia. “People don’t know this period of his work,” says Gutiérrez, pointing out a Góngora painting made as an homage to Jean-Paul Sartre after he rejected the Nobel Prize. “He’s known as a painter of nude women, but he made many works about the violence in Colombia in the ’50s and was always engaged with art history, especially Rubens and Rembrandt.”

Some of the most interesting artifacts in Gutiérrez’s home aren’t technically part of the collection, but they do fill in a bit of background about the roots of his drive to collect. Living in the conservative Colombian city of Sonsón, Benigno A. Gutiérrez, José’s grandfather, wanted to live somewhere more liberal, so he moved to Medellín, where he became the head of the city’s publishing house and edited several collections of Antioqueño folklore. Gutiérrez pulled a few of these little books from a shelf along with a photograph of his grandparents published in a book about the history of Medellín. “I think the collector’s job is to see things that other people aren’t seeing and to follow those clues,” says Gutiérrez. “It’s the same with my interest in publishing—I want to leave traces for the ones who are coming next and to improve the possibility of having art that can be seen by anyone at any time in the future.”

