



## 52 Fernando Botero

1932 – Colombian

### Girl Reading Her Diary

pastel and graphite on paper, signed and dated 1975  
and on verso titled and dated on the Russeck Gallery label  
51 3/8 x 71 3/8 in, 130.5 x 181.9 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Marlborough Gallery, New York  
Sold sale of *Latin American Art*, Sotheby's New York,  
November 20, 2003, lot 132  
Russeck Gallery, Florida, 2005  
Property of an Important Estate, British Columbia

#### LITERATURE

Sam Hunter, *Fernando Botero*, Marlborough Gallery, 1975,  
listed page 10 and reproduced page 37  
Germán Arciniegas, *Fernando Botero*, 1977, pages 51 and 53  
Carter Ratcliff, *Botero*, 1980, reproduced page 242  
Marie-Pierre Colle, "Fernando Botero," *Latin American Artists  
in Their Studios*, 1994, pages 40 – 42  
Carlos Fuentes, *Botero Women*, 2003, reproduced page 40

#### EXHIBITED

Marlborough Gallery, New York, *Fernando Botero*,  
November 7 – 29, 1975, catalogue #21

"MY IDEAS ABOUT art transform the reality that is my subject matter," Fernando Botero reflected in the late 1970s. "I create my subjects somehow visualizing them in my style. I start as a poet, put the colours and composition down on canvas as a painter, but finish my work as a sculptor taking delight in caressing the forms." These inspired incarnations—"Boteromorphs," colloquially—have encompassed military generals and bourgeois gentlemen, brave bullfighters and plucky circus performers. But Botero has long lavished his women with special endearment, describing their shapely figures with charming felicity and indulgence. From ingenue and courtesan to matriarch and madonna, these women radiate warmth and languor, their bodies benevolently and ostentatiously oversized. "The problem is to establish where the pleasure comes from when you look at a painting," Botero explained. "For me, it is the exaltation of life communicated by the sensuality of forms. Then, my formal problem is to create sensuality through forms."

Botero's profuse, *sui generis* style gained cohesion by the mid-1960s as he assimilated various influences and refined the lush, exalted proportions of his eponymous figures. Scraping by in New York, in the shadow of Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field painting, he cycled back to the old masters he had earlier encountered in Europe—Titian and Tintoretto; Domenico Veneziano and Piero della Francesca—and their extraordinary handling of colour and tone. He found similar delight with nineteenth-century French painters, whose iconic subjects—Édouard Manet's picnickers, Pierre Bonnard's bathers—he recast in Boteromorphic terms. *Girl Reading Her Diary* pays subtle homage to Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting *Girl Reading* (circa 1890, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)—on view in New York in 1970—in its luminous palette and in the studied spontaneity of its adolescent subject. Botero's choice of pastel, a medium at which Renoir excelled and which he favoured for informal portraits of women and children, suggests additional affinities with Impressionism's lively, shimmering colour. Botero moved to Paris

in 1973, following more than a decade in New York, and his return to Europe doubtless brought its venerable painterly traditions—virtuoso colour, tactile values—back to the fore.

"Color forced me to be imaginative," Botero has acknowledged, delighting in the challenge of chromatic "exigencies" and the ways in which "a texture begins to be created" as pigments interact and evolve. "Color is one of those key elements," he continued. "It illuminates the picture. It intensifies the vision of life. I find the solution for the painting by looking for the solution of the color. When the color finds equilibrium, at that moment a tranquility is produced in the painting, and the work is finished." This happy consummation is magnified by scale—"ample forms permit me to create large fields of color," Botero allows—and by the integrity of the pigments themselves: "The painter has to maintain very close to himself the idea that each thing has its real color, and this is its natural matrix, the color that it has before the arrival of shade and light." The blurry bottom of a framed painting, centred at the top of *Girl Reading Her Diary*, hints at an impressionistic colour chart, perhaps an allusion to the artist's careful calibrations of light and shadow.

Botero achieves a serendipitous resolution of colour in *Girl Reading Her Diary*, harmonizing amiably reddish pigments—from burnt-carmine wall to apricot Chippendale-style sofa—within a softly sumptuous environment. Cocooned by tufted cushions, the *jeune fille* lies casually with head on hand, the curve in her arm balanced by her opposite leg, tilted upward to show off a dainty pink shoe that matches the bow in her hair. Light ochre accents, from the sinuous frame of the sofa and the trim of her curve-clinging dress to the yellowing pages of an open book, relieve the all-over saturation of red. Botero has perfected this refined, monochromatic sophistication, showing his dexterity with the tonal values and satiny textures of red in monumental pastels, such as the present work, as well as in sanguine (red chalk) drawings. A number of oil paintings from this period, among them *Melancholic Transvestite* (1970) and *Lovers on a French Sofa* (1972), bear resemblance to *Girl Reading Her Diary* in their rubicund palette and composition. "With fewer colors, you maintain the impression that the painting has a lot of color," Botero once remarked. "I love simple colors that have light modulations, subtle... Colors experience friendship, and they produce an atmosphere. And, when there is atmosphere, there is poetry."

Sam Hunter, on the occasion of Botero's exhibition at New York's Marlborough Gallery, at which *Girl Reading Her Diary* was first shown, wrote, "Close in spirit to Goya, he similarly evokes the magical textures of worldly luxury and sensuous surface, whether of depicted fabric, opulent flesh or pigment itself." Hunter continued, "With a matching irreverence worthy of his model, he delineates the brutish physiognomy of a dissolute and vicious society." Botero reserved his sharpest satire for Latin America's strongmen, approaching provincial society subjects and sundry everywomen with comparatively mild endearment, relishing their foibles and bourgeois affectations. Studiously precocious, the winsome subject of *Girl Reading Her Diary* basks in a genteel, rose-tinted world, her pillowy figure a throwback to a Rubenesque amplitude and femininity. "The function of the artist is to exalt this sensuality in life," Botero has long insisted. "Nature is, in general, arid and brittle. The artist gives it voluptuousness."

We thank Abigail McEwen, Associate Professor, Latin American Art at the University of Maryland, for contributing the above essay.

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