

# OUR TOWN

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## Fatcats and Bull

### Fernando Botero's Insouciant Sculptures Capture Park Avenue

By MARK HALLAMITIN

Señor Botero is all over town. Earlier this month, 14 of the Columbian-born sculptors' works were planted along Park Avenue's center mall from 54th to 61st Street. Another pair has been dropped outside Central Park on 60th Street and Fifth Avenue. Organized by the Public Art Fund, the *Botero in New York* exhibition stays on through November 14. There's also a concurrent exhibit of his most recent (1990-93) drawings and watercolors at the Marlborough Gallery.

Last winter Paris' Champs-Élysées was graced with these sculptures as well as 15 more. (We've been robbed!) and some five million people strolled by. You think New York's got problems with vandals? Someone removed most of the *Cat's* whiskers in Paris,

so you'll know what happened to Spot's moustache when you get to 55th Street.

The *raison d'être* of Fernando Botero's style is bloat in the extreme. He describes this approach as "deformation." Botero, who lived many years in New York, once explained his style by saying he is a masochist. Born in that famed city of cocaine, Medellín, in 1932, he had his first exhibition by age 16. In 1953 he ventured to Florence to study with master teacher Roberto Longhi. In 1957, Botero's work was first introduced to the U.S. at a one-man exhibition in Washington, D.C. Three years later he moved to New York, and in 1961 the Museum of Modern Art purchased its first Botero painting, *Mona Lisa Age 12* (1959).

His paintings, drawings and sculptures all reflect a bawdy humor and poke enormous fun at the bourgeoisie. They also pay homage to the European masters, especially Piero della Francesca of the 15th Century Florentine period. This, he says, is owed to the influence of works he saw in the Catholic church of his childhood. In the manner of Roy Lichtenstein's series of take-offs on other painters, Botero has

defined a school of work definitively out of tune with the expressionists of his time. But because his works are so significantly non-derivative, Botero stands alone among sculptors and is as carefree in his execution of brass as he is with paint and lead. All have in common a similar sense of monumentality, he says, gives the figures a "sensuality."

The aforementioned *Cat* (1984) has a face like a bulldog and sports a tail of stuffed sausage and two perfectly round testicles.

My favorite piece is *Hand*, on the northern side of 56th Street. Standing six-foot tall, it is an unpolished green cartoon out of The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*. His *Horse* (1992) on 57th Street north is more like a pony with legs twice the height of the rest of this beast, with a swirly tail, mane and a bull-like head. Facing the horse on the south side is *Torso* (1992), a man's armless and headless upper body with a muscled chest, back and no genitalia — only a five-pronged leaf pasted on front.

"I just don't get it," said an elderly gentleman who paused, shaking his head in obvious dismay. "Henry Moore, Epstein and Lipshitz, that's sculpture." To him, Botero is to sculpture what Neil Simon is to drama; the others being more like Ibsen, Chekhov and O'Neil. You need to see the humor.

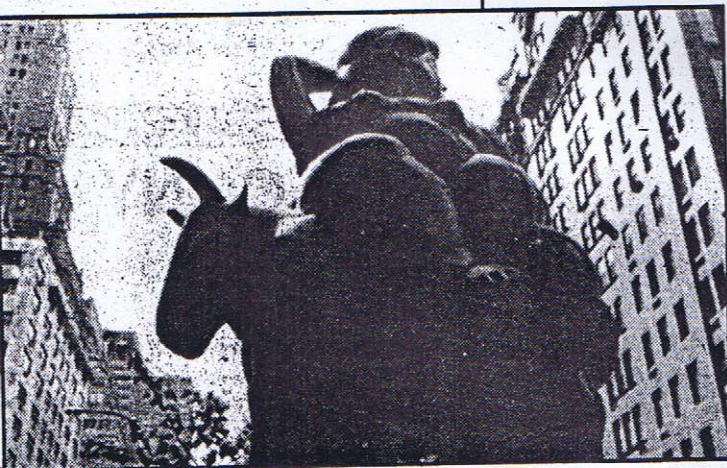
*The Rape of Europa* (1992), a naked woman astride a contented bull, sits comfort-



Hand on 56th Street

ably across the street from the Walt Disney Company on 59th Street. What would old Walt think, I wonder?

Many of the same features reappear in Botero's work. His *Roman Soldier* (1985) at 55th Street North and his *Man* (1990) at 58th Street North both have very round faces, little ears and a thin moustache. This face you will also see in many of his drawings and paintings at the Marlborough Gallery.



Rape of Europa, on 59th Street