

WHISPERING CLOUDS, ECHOING MOUNTAINS: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF GONZALO ARIZA'S LYRICAL LANDSCAPES

Susurros de nubes, ecos de montañas. Un análisis intercultural de los paisajes líricos de Gonzalo Ariza

Sussurros de nuvens, ecos de montanhas. Uma análise intercultural das paisagens líricas de Gonzalo Ariza

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ABSTRACT:

This essay reevaluates the art of Gonzalo Ariza, a twentieth-century Colombian painter renowned for landscapes that merge Eastern and Western traditions. Challenging simplistic categorizations of his oeuvre as an "appropriated Japanese style," my research argues that Ariza's vision of landscape transformed into a contemplative attitude towards local Andean highlands after his return from Japan in 1938. It contextualizes the challenges Ariza faced when drawing inspiration from East Asian art amidst mid-twentieth-century modernist currents and political circumstances, shedding light on the critical narratives that marginalized his work and unraveling the complexities of Colombian modernism within a global art discourse. Building upon Warburg's concept of *dynamograms* to describe "pathos formula" in landscapes, this study argues that Ariza's work transcends cultural boundaries, which links both traditions through the subtle emotions evoked by cloud-shrouded mountains, eliciting a universal appreciation for nature's mystical splendor. Through cross-cultural comparison and an ecocritical lens, my essay delves into the interplay of transcultural exchange, nationalist identity, and representations of nature in Ariza's artworks, revealing

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his nostalgic proto-environmental consciousness. In doing so, it raises questions about the transformative power of landscape art to reflect and influence societal values and perspectives on nature within contemporary dialogues on environmental stewardship and the negotiation of cultural identity through art.

KEY WORDS:

Gonzalo Ariza, landscape painting, Colombia-Japan, emotive iconology, eco-critical

RESUMEN:

Este ensayo reevalúa el arte de Gonzalo Ariza, un pintor colombiano del siglo XX, reconocido por sus paisajes que fusionan tradiciones orientales y occidentales. Desafiando las categorizaciones simplistas de su obra como un "estilo japonés apropiado", mi investigación sostiene que la visión paisajística de Ariza se transformó en una actitud contemplativa hacia las montañas andinas locales después de su regreso de Japón en 1938. Se contextualizan los desafíos que enfrentó Ariza al inspirarse en el arte del Asia oriental en medio de las corrientes modernistas y circunstancias políticas de mediados del siglo XX, arrojando luz sobre las narrativas críticas que marginaron su trabajo y desentrañando así las complejidades del modernismo colombiano dentro de un discurso artístico global. Basándome en el concepto de "dinamogramas" de Warburg para describir las "fórmulas del pathos" en sus paisajes, mi investigación argumenta que el trabajo de Ariza trasciende fronteras culturales, lo que une ambas tradiciones a través de las emociones sutiles evocadas por las montañas cubiertas de nubes, suscitando una apreciación universal por el esplendor místico de la naturaleza. A través de comparaciones interculturales y una perspectiva ecocrítica, mi ensayo profundiza en la integración de intercambio transcultural, la identidad nacional, y las representaciones de la naturaleza en las obras de Ariza, revelando su nostálgica conciencia proto-ambiental. De esta forma, se plantean preguntas sobre el poder transformador del arte del paisaje para reflejar e influir en los valores sociales y perspectivas sobre la naturaleza dentro de los diálogos contemporáneos sobre la gestión medioambiental y la negociación de la identidad cultural a través del arte.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Gonzalo Ariza, pintura de paisajes, Colombia-Japón, iconología emotiva, ecocrítica

RESUMO:

Este ensaio reavalia a arte de Gonzalo Ariza, um pintor colombiano do século XX, reconhecido por suas paisagens que fundem tradições orientais e ocidentais. Desafiando as categorizações simplistas de sua obra como um "estilo japonês apropriado", minha pesquisa sustenta que a visão paisagística de Ariza se transformou em uma atitude contemplativa em relação às montanhas andinas locais após seu retorno do Japão em 1938. Os desafios enfrentados por Ariza ao se inspirar na arte do leste asiático são contextualizados em meio às correntes modernistas e circunstâncias políticas do século XX, lançando luz sobre as narrativas críticas que marginalizaram seu trabalho e desvendando as complexidades do modernismo colombiano dentro de um discurso artístico global. Com base no conceito de "dinamogramas" de Warburg para descrever as "fórmulas do pathos" em suas paisagens, minha pesquisa argumenta que o trabalho de Ariza transcende fronteiras culturais, unindo ambas as tradições através das emoções sutis evocadas pelas montanhas cobertas de nuvens, suscitando uma apreciação universal pelo esplendor místico da natureza. Por meio de comparações transculturais e uma perspectiva ecocrítica, meu ensaio aprofunda a integração do intercâmbio transcultural, a identidade nacional e as representações da natureza nas obras de Ariza, revelando sua nostálgica consciência protoambiental. Dessa forma, questões sobre o poder transformador da arte da paisagem para refletir e influenciar os valores sociais e perspectivas sobre a natureza são levantadas dentro dos diálogos contemporâneos sobre a gestão ambiental e a negociação da identidade cultural através da arte.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Gonzalo Ariza, pintura de paisagens, Colômbia-Japão, iconologia emotiva, eco crítica

INTRODUCTION¹

Amidst Colombia's diverse geography, Gonzalo Ariza (1912-1995), a prominent painter from Bogotá, emerges as an artist devoted to the captivating landscapes of the country's central highlands. This essay contends that Ariza's artistic expression underwent a significant transformation upon his return from Japan in 1938, setting his landscapes apart from prevailing mid-twentieth century modernist currents by highlighting his incorporation of Eastern and Western influences into his paintings. Contrary to simplistic interpretations in art historiography that often marginalize his works as mere "Japanese-style" renderings, my aim will be to unravel Ariza's unique artistic vision, surpassing the boundaries of stylistic categorization by employing an emotive iconology methodology for interpreting landscapes, and thereby opening the path for new discussions enriched by eco-critical, and cross-cultural perspectives.

In analyzing Ariza's landscapes, Aby Warburg's insights into the inseparability of content and form, and his concept of *Pathosformel*, or "pathos formula" (as enriched by Kerstin Schankweiler and Philipp Wüschner), provide a profound framework for understanding the emotional dynamics within his art. While Warburg's *Pathosformel* typically refers to expressive gestures encapsulating heightened affective intensity focused on the human figure, Schankweiler and Wüschner propose to extend the concept of *dynamograms*, which are pathos formulas detached from the body, to include abstract and non-figurative elements that create illusions of movement and convey emotional depth in static art forms.² Theorizing Warburg's *Nachleben*, or the "afterlife of images," their exploration of the storage and release of affect posits that dynamograms are able to transmit the affective intensity encoded in an artwork, and can be dynamically reenacted by viewers, creating a shared emotional experience that transcends time and space, arguing that "a painting or photograph of a dark sky, shrouded in clouds, above a turbulent sea, for example, could also be described as a formulaic movement generating affect, even as *pathos*."³ This perspective allows for the inclusion of landscape elements, such as light, shadow, and atmospheric effects, as carriers of affective intensity. Building on this, my account argues that Ariza's particular renderings of atmosphere and mood function as dynamograms that link Eastern and Western artistic traditions. By analyzing the subtler emotional nuances and slower movements in Ariza's works, my approach transcends stylistic interpretations to focus on the contemplative aspects evoked by his landscapes.

The lack of academic interest in Ariza's work can be traced back to the Colombian artistic context of the 1950s and 60s. At that time, art critics like Eugenio Barney and Marta Traba were drawn to abstract, geometric, and

1. All translations from Spanish to English are by the author, the original quotes can be provided upon request.

2. Kerstin Schankweiler and Philipp Wüschner, "*Pathosformel* (Pathos Formula)," in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, edited by Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (London: Routledge, 2019), 228.

3. Schankweiler and Wüschner, "*Pathosformel*," 229.

expressive modernism, neglecting more naturalistic expressions.⁴ According to Verónica Uribe Hanabergh, Barney's *Reseña del arte en Colombia durante el siglo XIX* framed landscape painting as a mediocre, naive genre rooted in the positivism of the Republican era, which he believed "did not add much to Colombia's art history."⁵ During a Q&A session led by Jorge Moreno, Barney's progressive vision of modern art emphasized the pivotal role of abstraction, underscoring his disapproval of Ariza's figurative language and claiming that the latter's efforts to incorporate Eastern influences into a Western context was a "futile and naive endeavor."⁶ This narrow viewpoint, and an insufficient understanding of East Asian art among Colombian critics of that time, led to oversimplified, reductive interpretations of Ariza's oeuvre.

The major publication devoted to the painter's work, which featured contributions from Ana María Escallón and Lionel Landry, also succumbed to these limitations, offering contradictory perspectives on his artistic influences. On the one hand, Escallón acknowledges Ariza's rejection of modern art through his affirmation of the intrinsic value of nature via realistic depictions, aligning him with earlier nineteenth-century naturalist artists such as Edward Wallhouse Mark and Ramón Torres Méndez and dubbing him the "biographer of nature."⁷ In doing so, she suggests that Ariza's interest in the contemplation of landscape derives from his romantic artistic view, thereby muting the Japanese influence in his work. In contrast, Landry highlights Ariza's adoption of an "animistic perspective" towards nature and a style reminiscent of "*sumi-e* techniques."⁸ Nevertheless, Ariza's artworks do not adhere to traditional Japanese techniques characterized by minimalist compositions, and expressive-yet-restrained ink marks. Instead, his works, whether in oils or watercolors, tend towards a more descriptive rendering.

While this book intended to offer a comprehensive understanding of Ariza's artistic vision, it presented contradictory accounts of his influences and failed to scrutinize individual works comprehensively. This contributed to the ambiguity surrounding Ariza's synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions, failing to accomplish the purported goal of these essays. In fact, in a biting book review titled "Fraude tropical [Tropical Fraud]," Jorge Quintana further exacerbates this issue by accusing the authors of lacking scholarly depth and attempting to minimize the Japanese influence on Ariza's work. Quintana suggests that the book's portrayal of Ariza as deeply permeated by Eastern philosophies is misleading, labeling it a hoax, and criticizes his painting as lacking innovation, stressing that his work recalls nineteenth-century imagery and simply appropriates an "already invented Eastern style," rather than developing a philosophical approach, as the book suggests.⁹ This serves as a starting point for a more profound exploration of Ariza's landscapes, since Quintana's arguments direct the

4. In fact, Traba asserted that her favorite painter was Picasso. Marta Traba, "Fuyi-Yama y pintura," *El Tiempo* June 1, 1958.

5. Verónica Uribe Hanabergh, "Ingenuidad e ingenuísimo. La (im)posibilidad del paisaje en la *Reseña del arte en Colombia durante el siglo XIX* (1965) de Eugenio Barney Cabrera," paper presented at the XV Jornadas de Historia del Arte *La contemporaneidad del pasado. Historiografías para las Américas*, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, November 9, 2023.

6. Eugenio Barney as cited in Jorge Moreno Clavijo, "¿Realismo es decadencia? ¿Abstraccionismo es solo incapacidad?... Y el público... ¿qué prefiere?: Tres destacados pintores y un crítico plantean una polémica," *El Tiempo*, April 1, 1962.

7. Ana María Escallón, "El biógrafo de la naturaleza," in *Gonzalo Ariza* (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1989), 15-37.

8. Lionel Landry, "Gonzalo Ariza," in *Gonzalo Ariza*, 45.

9. Jorge Quintana, "Fraude tropical," *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico* 27, n.º. 24/25 (1990): 100.

discussion to the pictorial realm, underscoring the need for a deeper analysis of Ariza's work beyond superficial stylistic comparisons, one that considers both the pictorial and conceptual aspects of his synthesis of Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

After his passing in 1995, Ariza received posthumous honors with retrospective exhibitions at notable local institutions, including the National Museum of Colombia.¹⁰ However, despite these recognitions, his legacy has not attained the same level of acclaim as that of contemporaries like Alejandro Obregón. Furthermore, Ariza's identification as a modernist artist has been notably neglected by scholarly discourse, as exemplified by the exhibition *Poéticas del paisaje* [Landscape Poetics, 2012] at Bogotá's Museum of Modern Art, where curator María Elvira Ardila characterized Ariza's "Japanese Zen" influence as an anomalous feature for his time.¹¹ Ardila also mentions that Ariza's work was excluded from Traba's modernist purview, although the rationale behind this exclusion merits deeper investigation. In a 1982 interview with Escallón, after expressing his apathy for art-historical classifications of styles and trends, Ariza stated that "landscape painting should be exercised 'not as astronauts,' but within the small region that each individual manages to perceive."¹² Here Ariza claims that landscapes should capture the artist's personal, intimate connection with the natural world, rather than attempting to portray it from an elevated, detached perspective akin to how astronauts view Earth from space. This stance directly opposes the fundamental underpinnings of East Asian landscape traditions based on the "angle of totality," a doctrine that was incorporated from Chinese theories into Japanese art and aimed to eliminate the subjective human perspective. In these traditions, figures are proportionally depicted in accordance with neo-Confucian principles of *li*, representing a divine ordering of things wherein the mountain surpasses the trees and the trees tower over humans.¹³ Thus, Ariza reveals his Western understanding of subjective perspective.

Nicolás Gómez has argued that Ariza did use "some Far East compositional strategies, such as 'aerial perspective,' to project the horizon into the distance and expand the area of the sky," but his description fails to discuss specific East Asian techniques and does not align with the "angle of totality," nor does it illustrate Ariza's methodology.¹⁴ Gómez uses Ariza's *Aserriños del Chocó* [Sawmills of Chocó, 1956] (Img. 1) as the cover image for his book, which focuses on the history of Colombian landscapes, but in fact has very little to say about the painting itself, which under closer scrutiny reveals Ariza's Western compositional practices. The image is very much unlike Sesshu Toyo's *View of Amanohashidate* [1501-1506] (Img. 2), which offers an idealized perspective from an imagined bird's-eye viewpoint. Ariza's work, on the other hand, captures the elevated vantage point of a helicopter flight, as explained in an interview

10. "Ariza, pintor de los Andes," *Museo Nacional de Colombia*, 2017, <https://museonacional.gov.co/exposiciones/itinerantes/ariza/Paginas/Ariza.aspx>.

11. "Gonzalo Ariza, el poeta del paisaje colombiano," *El Nuevo Siglo*, December 17, 2012, <https://www.elnuevosiglo.com.co/cultura-y-sociedad/gonzalo-ariza-el-poeta-del-paisaje-colombiano>.

12. Escallón, "El biógrafo," 29.

13. Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 159.

14. Nicolás Gómez, "El camino moderno. El paisaje en el arte colombiano del siglo XX," in *Decir el lugar. Testimonios del paisaje colombiano* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2017), 157.



Image 1. Gonzalo Ariza, *Aserrios del Chocó* [Sawmills of Chocó], 1956. Oil on linen, 180 × 298 cm. Miguel Urrutia Art Museum.



Image 2. Sesshu Toyo, *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, ca. 1501-1506. Ink and light color on paper, 90 cm × 178.2 cm. Kyoto National Museum, Japan.

with his daughter María Paz, who stated that her father had taken quick notes during the flight and later composed the painting using his “remarkable visual memory.”¹⁵ Although the expansive view framed with sinuous clouds may evoke some aspects of Sesshu’s landscape, Ariza’s aerial point of view retains a personal perspective, in contrast to the Japanese master’s erudite approach. This highlights the superficial engagement with East Asian art history exemplified by authors like Gómez and overlooks Ariza’s deeper contributions to the field, beyond illustrative images.

Ariza’s alleged marked Japanese pictorial influence was reinforced in the traveling exhibition *Pintor de los Andes* [Painter of the Andes, 2017], organized by the National Museum of Colombia, whose curatorial text described his landscapes as “strongly influenced by Japanese technique, which allowed him to recreate the climate, atmosphere, and shape of the country’s interior, especially the Bogotá savannah.”¹⁶ Similarly, the catalogue for a later exhibition at El Museo Gallery describes his technique “more Japanese than to the European,” and notes that, after his return, he “began to adopt the brushwork of traditional Japanese art, the use of mist to represent the early morning atmosphere, and the inclusion of a foreground figure to provide context to the background landscape.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, Ariza’s paintings showcase a meticulous brushwork that sets them apart from Japanese techniques, exemplified in Sesshu’s expressive-yet-restrained *Haboku-Sansui*’s [Broken-ink landscape, 1495] (Img. 3), loose, suggestive ink marks. Instead, Ariza’s precious rendering in *Montaña de la Peña* [The Peña Mountain, 1960] (Img. 4), clearly informed by his training at Bogotá’s Escuela de Bellas Artes, which followed Spanish and French academic and impressionist methods and had no room for the simplicity of ink-wash painting.¹⁸ Moreover, the incorporation of foreground figures in landscape painting is not in fact a Japanese convention, but rather a Western compositional strategy observed in Colombia since the late eighteenth century, as studied by Uribe Hanabergh in her work on Alexander von Humboldt’s influence on the Chorographic Commission (1850-1859) and depictions of the territory by traveling artists, all of which align with an aesthetics of the sublime.¹⁹ As artist and art historian Beatriz González elucidates, Humboldt’s take on the sublime showcases the overwhelming experience of contemplating nature’s grandeur, where its vastness and beauty both intimidate and captivate the observer.²⁰ Furthermore, Ariza’s interest in mist contrasts with its use in East Asian painting, where according to Miranda Shaw it symbolizes the numinous dimension of landscapes—an overwhelming sense of fascination evoking a meditative state in the viewer, instead of illustrating atmospheric changes through a sensitive rendering of color, as Ariza does, a rather Impressionist interest.²¹

15. María Paz Ariza, email interview with the author. August 15, 2022.

16. Museo Nacional de Colombia, “Ariza Pintor de Los Andes,” exhibition text, 2017.

17. “Gonzalo Ariza. Intérprete de la naturaleza,” *Galería El Museo*, 2021, <https://www.galeriaelmuseo.com/archives/26977/>.

18. Halim Badawi, “La vida secreta del paisaje. Andrés de Santa María, la Hacienda El Vínculo, la propiedad de la tierra y los inicios de la pintura de paisaje en Colombia,” in *Decir el lugar. Testimonios del paisaje colombiano* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, 2017), 118.

19. Verónica Uribe Hanabergh, *Tarabitas y cabuyas. La representación del puente en el arte en Colombia durante el siglo XIX*, (Bogotá: Uniandes Ediciones, 2016), 17.

20. Beatriz González, *Manual del arte del siglo XIX en Colombia. Con aportes paralelos sobre el arte europeo de Verónica Uribe Hanabergh* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2013), 112.

21. In the context of Chinese landscape painting, the mystical qualities of fog were imbued with profound significance through the transmission of symbolism from the Buddha to the natural world. Miranda Shaw, “Buddhist and Taoist Influence on Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, n°. 2 (1988): 198.



Image 3. Sesshu Toyo, *Haboku-Sansui* [Broken-ink Landscape], 1495. Ink on paper, 111.5 × 75.8 cm. Tokyo National Museum, Japan.



Image 4. Gonzalo Ariza, *Montaña de la Peña* [La Peña Mountain], 1960. Watercolor on paper, 67 × 96 cm. National Museum of Colombia.

Building upon these contrasting views, I argue that Ariza's experiences as an immigrant in Japan fundamentally altered his relationship with the Colombian landscape after his return, and led to what I describe as a "landscape metanoia," a profound shift in his perception and representation of nature. Duncan Phillips, in his reinterpretation of Impressionism, presents it as a timeless, philosophical framework that transcends technical approaches, emphasizing emotional and atmospheric depth in paintings.²² This idea, resonating with East Asian painting theories, aligns with Ariza's landscapes, drawing viewers into a reflective contemplation through strokes that convey his deep connection to his homeland. Amir Lowell, in "A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853-1906," highlights the significant mutual exchange and adaptation of ideas between cultures, illustrating how *ukiyo-e* prints influenced European painters like Vincent van Gogh and Cezanne, and subsequently Picasso, thereby underscoring the cross-cultural essence of Modern art.²³ By integrating Phillips'

22. Duncan Phillips, "What Is Impressionism?," *Art and Progress* 3, n°. 11 (1912): 702-707.

23. Amir Lowell, "A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853-1906," *The History Teacher* 50, n°. 1 (2016): 58-62.

perspective on Impressionism and Lowell's views on transcultural interactions in modernism, I advocate for a reinterpretation of Ariza's engagement with nature as part of a continuum of influence and innovation. This assessment positions his landscapes as a modern synthesis of diverse artistic principles, moving beyond simplistic views of stylistic borrowings and prompting a reconsideration of his contributions to Colombian art that challenges existing narratives.

In this light, my essay underscores the importance of embracing a cross-cultural perspective in order to understand how Ariza merged these diverse artistic traditions into his art. In this context, James Elkins' innovative approach in *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*, helps us to understand the misguided interpretations of Ariza's work as mere appropriation. In her forward to that book, Jennifer Purtle addresses the case of contemporary Chinese-American artist Zhang Hongtu, whom revisits the works of masters like Fan Kuan using van Gogh's post-impressionist brush strokes.²⁴ Purtle problematizes the concept of style in comparative studies by explaining that viewers unfamiliar with Chinese landscape painting may misinterpret Zhang's creations solely through a Western lens, underscoring the challenges of examining East Asian art within Western perspectives.²⁵ Additionally, Elkins argues that, during the Ming Dynasty period, Dong Qichang's reinterpretations of previous landscape traditions parallel the way in which modernist artists, such as Picasso, questioned the artistic canon in the West.²⁶ Ariza's approach, blending Eastern and Western influences, echoes Zhang and Picasso's ethos of experimentation, cultural exchange, and innovation, challenging stylistic classifications. As such, this framework allows for an enriched analysis of Ariza's integration of Japanese elements from a modern art perspective, thus reframing the perception of his landscapes beyond imitation.

Elkins' insights thus function as the basis for a reevaluation of Ariza's landscapes as a sophisticated synthesis of Eastern and Western artistic traditions in his depiction of Colombian highlands. Following Wüschner and Schankweiler, I posit that Ariza's hazy, delicate brushstrokes capture the mood of foggy mountainscapes, conveying the ephemeral qualities and gentle movement of misty light in his works, and uniquely articulate atmospheric formalizations that merge the sublime and the numinous through what I term "landscape dynamograms." This synthesis is exemplified in Ariza's *Montaña de la Peña*, in which the meticulous rendering gives the illusion of vaporous movement around a foggy mount that resonates with the emotional depth found in Chinese landscapes like Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Rivers* (Img. 5). In spite of their visual correspondence, these two works, both with a mountain as the main theme, also present contrasting views. For example, Fan's monumental piece transcends any human perspective, as he has restructured multiple components of the landscape

24. Fan Kuan is considered the first hermit-artist and the father of Chinese monumental landscape painting; he was emulated by Japanese masters during the Muromachi period. James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17.

25. Jennifer Purtle, "Whose Hobbyhorse?," in James Elkins, *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 12.

26. Elkins, *Chinese Landscape Painting*, 5.



Image. 5. Fan Kuan, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, ca. 1000. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 206.3 × 103.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

within a single composition, expressing a cosmic vision of humankind's harmonious existence within a vast yet orderly universe by emphasizing the minuscule size of humans when compared to nature. Michael Sullivan explains that, for Chinese viewers who observed the scroll from below, the detailed rendering, coupled with the painting's looming monumentality, invited spectators to explore the image slowly in a leisurely gaze, as if immersing themselves in the landscape's spiritual essence.²⁷

Although in his painting Ariza heightens the mountain's visual impact and mystical appearance with enveloping haze, his watercolor departs from Fan's idealized representation. The foreshortening of the chapel discloses the painter's position as he beholds the peak from afar, capturing feelings of wonder and awe in the face of its immensity and thereby aligning his perspective with the sublime. Yet, at the same time, Ariza's delicate atmospheric effects evoke the mist's way of moving across the ethereal, cloud-covered mountain and summon an otherworldly ambiance. His interpretation of a mystical mood conveys tranquility, inviting viewers to regard nature's grandeur as a source of both amazement and transcendence. Ariza's work not only echoes a timeless experience but also personalizes the mountain's introspective dimension, bridging the gap between the contemplative sacredness of the numinous and the awe-inspiring expansiveness of the sublime within his landscapes.

Blending wonder with introspection, Ariza transcends the simple transcription of Eastern motifs into a Western context. His work initiates a cross-cultural dialogue, probing the spiritual resonance of nature's majesty beyond physical and cultural boundaries. Through the notion of emotive iconology as applied to landscapes, this essay aims to demonstrate how Ariza's representations of nature transcend visual appeal, engaging viewers on a deeper level. Additionally, by incorporating an ecocritical perspective, I aim to provide a fuller understanding of Ariza's proto-environmental awareness, urging a reevaluation of his work within the context of global ecological discourses, and highlighting the role of landscape art in shaping societal views on nature, cultural identity, and environmental stewardship.

LANDSCAPE METANOIA

Born in Bogotá in 1912, Ariza entered the Escuela de Bellas Artes in 1931, receiving formal training and exposure to avant-garde currents from Europe and Mexico. As his daughter recounts, when presented with the option of studying abroad in either Spain, Mexico, or France, Ariza replied that he "would prefer to go to China instead of Europe," a clear sign of his early rejection of a Eurocentric art education.²⁸ In 1936, as a result of his request, the Colombian government

27. Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 198.

28. Ariza, email interview with author.

awarded Ariza a travel scholarship to Japan, making him the first officially-sponsored Colombian painter to study beyond conventional options. However, in his 1982 interview with Escallón, after acknowledging his lack of Japanese proficiency during that trip, Ariza stated that “he did not absorb as much as he would have liked to.”²⁹ Nonetheless, this journey marked the beginning of Ariza’s transformation, placing him at the crossroads of cultural and artistic exchange.

In Tokyo, while studying printmaking and lithography at the Japanese School of Traditional Arts and Crafts, Ariza delved into diverse artistic expressions, such as the *ukiyo-e* prints by Hokusai, as well as Sesshu’s ink-wash landscapes. This tradition, with its roots in Chinese *shanshuihua* (mountain-water painting), profoundly influenced the Japanese art form of *suibokuga* (water-ink painting). As noted by James Cahill, Sesshu was instrumental in integrating the “lyric landscape” into Japanese paintings.³⁰ What Cahill describes as the introspective melancholic approach of Southern Song painters, which expressed their mourning for the lost northern territory, idealizing works like Fan’s mountainscapes, were then transferred to Japan. Characterized by serene, mist-enshrouded scenes that convey deep-seated longing, Sesshu’s works, for instance, are not representations of the physical landscape but austere expressions of the artist’s inner world. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries *nihonga* (Japanese painting) artists incorporated these introspective qualities into their works, an approach that significantly resonated with Ariza.³¹ During that time, he also received watercolor classes from the renowned modernist painter Leonard Foujita, trained in *yoga* (Western-style paintings), with whom he formed a lasting friendship. However, Ariza chose not to limit himself to the applied arts, and his monochromes did not follow minimalist techniques, indicating that his artistic vision was shaped in Japan beyond skill acquisition.

Ariza’s experiences as an immigrant align with Vilém Flusser’s concept of transformative dislocation—an ongoing state of flux that compels individuals to continually evolve. According to Flusser, this represents an existential condition that sparks significant changes in one’s perception and worldview, often leading to “heightened awareness and a deeper appreciation for familiar aspects of one’s homeland or past.”³² In a text from 1978 Ariza recalls his train journeys across the Japanese countryside, where he was surprised by the sight of mountains and realized that he “had never given the Colombian landscape the same level of attention.”³³ While the concept of exile does not apply to Ariza, his unfamiliarity with the language, culture, and surroundings stirred a longing for the landscapes he had previously overlooked. This realization triggered a “metanoia” in his artistic vision, a profound shift in how he perceived landscapes. Therefore, Ariza’s newfound reverence for nature was not just an artistic preference but an introspective transformation that fostered a deeper appreciation for the Colombian highlands

29. Escallón, “El biógrafo,” 28.

30. Cahill, *The Lyric Journey*, 18.

31. *Nihonga* adhered to traditional artistic conventions and materials, while *yoga*, employed oils and watercolors, influenced by Impressionism and Expressionism. Chelsea Foxwell, “The Painting of Sadness? Ends of *Nihonga*, Then and Now,” *ARTMargins* 4, n.º. 1 (2015): 27.

32. Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of The Migrant. Objections to Nationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 81.

33. Gonzalo Ariza, “Alrededor de mi pintura,” in *Gonzalo Ariza: pinturas*, edited by Eduardo Carranza (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1978), 18.

catalyzed by his encounter with the foreign. Even though the language barrier limited his comprehension of the theoretical underpinnings of East Asian landscapes, he seems to have experienced the “afterlife of images” and absorbed the meditative reverence for mountains and mist imbued in those artworks.

This transformative experience, in turn, inspired Ariza to infuse his own works with poetic meaning. In 1938, he returned to Bogotá and taught engraving for two years to fulfill the terms of his scholarship, although he rarely produced prints after that. From 1940 onwards, Ariza shifted his attention to the Andean misty mountains. His newfound interest, ignited by his metanoia, aimed to bestow the importance of landscape as a genre in Eastern traditions to the Colombian landscape. Through his exposure to *nihonga*, Ariza came to conceive landscape painting as a symbolic expression of national pride. As Chelsea Foxwell points out, *nihonga* emerged in the late-nineteenth century out of the desire for a distinct Japanese style that could be recognized on a global stage, ensuring the stability of Japanese cultural identity, especially during the 1930s.³⁴ During a period that was pervaded by nationalist discourses, Ariza assimilated a concept of nationhood that was marked by the nostalgic perception of the past and rural lifestyles of *nihonga*. The conflicting relationship between honoring Japan's traditional heritage and embracing new artistic paradigms inherent in *nihonga* appears to also have influenced Ariza's understanding of landscape painting, imbuing it with a melancholic reverence for a landscape that he experienced as lost as he navigated between tradition and modernity.³⁵

Following his immersive experience, Ariza articulated an understanding of the landscape as an integral part of national identity: “Personally,” he stated, “I have been interested in the landscape as a means of expression, and because it is the most genuine and authentic aspect of what we have. Additionally, its beauty and diversity make it unique in the world. There is still so much of it to be painted.”³⁶

Ariza's vision for landscape painting unfolds as a multifaceted journey, blending *nihonga*'s thematic depth with a profound appreciation for Colombia's natural world, pivotal to his narrative of national identity. Embracing modernist principles of innovation and originality, influenced by the manifold traditions he encountered in Japan; his oeuvre and words exemplify the fruitful outcomes of transcultural exchange between East and West. Surpassing mere representation, Ariza seeks to capture the spirit of the Colombian landscape in a significant shift from the more literal, positivist approach of nineteenth-century depictions. Drawing parallels between the symbolic imagery found in traditional Japanese motifs—such as cherry blossoms or Mount Fuji—and the essence of Colombian identity, Ariza imbues his subjects with a deep cultural resonance. In particular, his paintings of native orchids and Andean mountains evoke a nostalgic sense of

34. Foxwell also clarifies that the ideology of nationhood that is associated with *nihonga* took root during the first decades of the twentieth century. Chelsea Foxwell, *Making Modern Japanese Style Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 41.

35. Foxwell, “The Painting of Sadness,” 55.

36. Ariza, “Alrededor de mi pintura,” 18.

nationhood. Ariza thus redefines the landscape genre as a dynamic channel for expressing an authentic connection with nature, imparting historical significance to his homeland.

Finding inspiration in *nihonga* wide screens, Ariza embraced the calmness of Japanese landscapes, that he ingeniously reinterpreted in polyptychs. His painting *Paisaje sabanero* [Savannah Landscape, 1970] (Img. 6) merges the serenity of East Asian art with the vivid resonance of the plains around Bogotá, mirroring Shunsō Hishida's *Fallen Leaves* [1909] (Img. 7). Nevertheless, unlike



Image 6. Gonzalo Ariza, *Paisaje sabanero* [Savannah Landscape], 1970. Oil on linen on wood, 110 × 421 cm. National Museum of Colombia.



Image 7. Shunsō Hishida, *Fallen Leaves*, 1909. Ink and color on paper, pair of six-panel folding screens. Eisei Bunko Museum, Tokyo.

the *nihonga* artist's evanescent trees that fade into the background, suggesting meditative austerity through a minimalist composition, *Paisaje sabanero* offers a detailed portrayal of the Cundinamarca plateau's ever-shifting climate, depicting its essence through the sensitive use of a naturalistic palette. By thoroughly describing gray rain clouds next to the blue sky, Ariza captures the windy plain's rapid meteorological changes, creating a palpable sense of place, and showcasing the landscape as a means to convey his personal impression of reality. However, despite their formal divergences, both works encourage unhurried contemplation of nature's ephemeral qualities. In this way, Ariza honors the meditative principles of *nihonga* while also encapsulating his profound engagement with

his homeland, crafting a visual dialogue that bridges Eastern tranquility with Western dynamism in his Andean lyric landscape.

His depiction, marked by the sway of eucalyptus and pine trees under ever-changing skies, functions as a dynamogram by mirroring the luminous shifts in the atmosphere of the windy Bogotá savannah environment. However, Ariza's inadvertent depiction of what are in fact non-native plants introduces a layer of ecological contradiction. Diego Molina has recently analyzed the complex history and ecological impact of these species, underscoring the unintended consequences of their introduction, such as water depletion.³⁷ Furthermore, eucalyptus in Bogotá threaten native species by increasing the vulnerability to wildfires, as their fire-dependent traits—like their ability to encourage flames through oil-rich leaves and quickly resprouting afterwards—enable them to thrive in the aftermath of conflagrations, altering the region's ecological dynamics in ways local flora are not adapted to withstand.³⁸ Considering the detrimental repercussions of wildfires to native species, exacerbated by climate change, an ecocritical analysis of this painting thus raises questions about Ariza's understanding of Colombia's natural heritage, and prompts an exploration of the implications of representing invasive species as national symbols in present-day environmental discussions. This calls for a focused study on the intersection of landscape painting with ecological concerns, paving the way for research into how art and the shaping of national narratives converge.

A MODERN PROBLEM OF EASTERN INFLUENCE?

The 1940s marked a significant time in Gonzalo Ariza's career, as his paintings gained recognition through national and international exhibitions. Nonetheless, this period also brought forth significant critique. In a 1941 essay, diplomat and critic Jorge Zalamea, one of the officials overseeing Ariza's scholarship, lamented his artistic direction:

This would all be admirable if Ariza's technique did not blindly follow the dictates and prejudices of an inflexible school; if his eyes were not distanced from the objects and colors of the world by a foreign and unchangeable concept of artistic reproduction [...]. [T]he viewer will not stop experiencing the dark and sad sensation of having been mocked, mystified by a dexterous [painter] who turns our familiar flowers and landscapes into erudite Japanese prints.³⁹

Zalamea's centers on what he perceives as an undue prevalence of Japanese influences in Ariza's work. However, the hallmark features of *ukiyo-e*

37. Diego Molina, "The Forced Retirement of a Hard Worker: The Rise and Fall of Eucalyptus in Bogotá," *Environmental History* 27, n°. 1 (2022): 58-85.

38. "Eucalypts and Fire," *National Forest Learning Centre*, 2013, www.forest-education.com.

39. Jorge Zalamea, *Nueve artistas colombianos* (Bogotá: Litografía Colombia, 1941), 56.

prints—such as visual synthesis, black outlines, and mass-production design—do not align with Ariza’s finicky oil and watercolor renderings, which elaborately depict texture and atmosphere without adhering to any specific Japanese method. In his essay, Zalamea also hints at a political motive behind the government’s decision to sponsor Ariza’s journey to Japan, aiming to “[establish] a bridge between Colombian artists and that eminently exotic culture,” then a major global military power.⁴⁰ Zalamea’s liberal political affiliations may have biased his perception of Ariza’s work, especially considering Japan’s role in World War II. By associating the figurative language shared by Ariza’s pieces and Japanese prints with conservative Eastern political stances, Zalamea reflects the period’s geopolitical divide. This interpretation suggests that Zalamea’s view of Ariza’s paintings as “too Japanese” aligns with the Colombian government’s commitment to prevent the spread of “Eastern ideologies” in the national territory throughout the ensuing Cold War.

In contrast to Zalamea’s undermining remarks, Ariza’s inclusion in the exhibition *The Latin-American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (1943) merits further examination. As the leading institution promoting avant-garde languages, New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) played a pivotal role in showcasing Latin American art on the global stage, emphasizing abstraction and eschewing socialist-realist styles to advance a progressive image of the region.⁴¹ Curated by Lincoln Kirstein, a figure known for his broad perspective on Modernism and his advocacy of figurative art, this exhibition featured two landscapes by Ariza. However, Ariza’s works have not yet been duly analyzed within the broader context of modernist painting.

In the exhibition’s catalog, Kirstein emphasized a key point, acknowledging Colombia’s ongoing artistic debates: “By 1930 Parisian influence created a normal reaction against the previous naturalism. Jorge Zalamea, a journalist, led the new pictorial movement, affected somewhat by Mexico, but such influential artists as Ignacio Gomez Jaramillo and Pedro Nel Gomez are more academic. A younger generation is now in healthy opposition.”⁴² Kirstein takes note of the critical distance separating early twentieth-century Colombian painters from the Mexican muralists, and suggests that the former’s rejection of nineteenth-century descriptive forms is not a genuine expression of artistic liberation, casting doubt on the modernity of the artists favored by Zalamea. Kirstein, by remarking that a group of younger artists was genuinely exploring the Colombian landscape, detached from established international tendencies, positioned himself clearly against Zalamea’s take on artistic freedom. Consequently, the curator stresses his support and particular understanding of Ariza’s works by stating:

Gonzalo Ariza, who had a scholarship for work in Japan, shows small Japanese influence, but has in the company of Erwin Krauss made a conscious

40. Zalamea, *Nueve artistas colombianos*, 58.

41. Ivonne Pini and María Clara Bernal, “A Model of Latin American Art: José Gómez Sicre and the Visual Arts Unit of the OAS,” *Nierika - Revista de estudios de arte* 9 (2020): 82.

42. Lincoln Kirstein and Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr., *The Latin-American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 45-46.

re-discovery of the wonderful savannas around Bogota. [...] The Colombian landscape is so impressive that it is heartening to find young painters, separated from both Paris and Mexico, investigating it rather than imitating a bohemian academy or supporting neo-Indian exoticism.⁴³

Kirstein's commentary underscores individual expression beyond the confines of prevailing artistic conventions. His perspective on Modernism thus transcends the formal aspects of images, applauding artists who challenge trends and creatively reinterpret traditions. However, in his attempt to highlight Ariza's originality at the MoMA—by downplaying the Japanese influence on Ariza's work—Kirstein ironically overlooks the profound impact of Japanese art on the modernist movement. Thus, paradoxically mirroring Zalamea's oversight, Kirstein does not fully acknowledge the cross-cultural essence that is pivotal to Ariza's work, unintentionally marginalizing the distinctive qualities of his artistic expression.

In 1955, under the military dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Ariza traveled back to Japan with his newly-formed family, assuming the position of first secretary of cultural affairs at the Colombian Embassy. Upon his return to Colombia in 1957, conflicts flared in the press, notably instigated by Traba, whose article "Problemas del arte en Latinoamérica" served as the catalyst for an open confrontation with Ariza. Traba explicitly asserted that Latin American artists had to choose between being "patriotically wrong or imitating foreign models,"⁴⁴ a statement that Ariza vehemently opposed in his column response.⁴⁵

Ariza considered Traba's ideas "ridiculous," stating that, in a context of ongoing internationalization, culture was no longer the exclusive domain of Europe or a certain elite. Instead, he staunchly defended his newfound nationalist vision of landscape, dismissing modernist postulates of abstraction and geometrization as "easy painting" and persistently attacking the art critic, which ultimately backfired. In her scathing reply, Traba condemns Ariza's work as an "artistic fraud":

I have written this note [...] to underline in passing Mr. Ariza's amusing claim to replace "European colonialism" with "Fuyi-Yama colonialism," with a shoddy Japan painted on pillow silks (very different from the splendid works with which contemporary Japan appears in international exhibitions), and destined to populate canvases with savannah Fuyi-Yamas erected between Bogotá and Fusa, under the guise of their ritual curtains of mist.⁴⁶

Traba's characterization of Ariza's repetitive mountain motifs as "Fujiyama colonialism" disparages his landscapes as devoid of substance. By questioning

43. Kirstein and Barr, *The Latin American Collection*, 45-46.

44. Marta Traba, "Problemas del arte en Latinoamérica," *Mito* 18, (1958): 207.

45. Gonzalo Ariza, "Tango y pintura," *El Independiente*, May 28, 1958.

46. Traba, "Fuyi-Yama."

the depth of meaning in his paintings, Traba relegates Ariza to the conventional and uninteresting, which was detrimental to his recognition in scholarly circles, effectively sealing his marginalization in local art historiography. However, while dismissing the broader implications of Japanese art integrated into Ariza's paintings, Traba's failure to appreciate the innovative emotive depth within Ariza's work exemplifies her biased, western comprehension of modern art's intercultural dialogues.

It is noteworthy that as early as 1948 the National Museum of Colombia had integrated Ariza's works into its collection, following instructions from director Teresa Cuervo Borda, who called for the acquisition of pieces by artists "deemed important for understanding current Colombian art history."⁴⁷ However, in 1957 Traba voiced a contrasting opinion, celebrating the acquisition and display of Alejandro Obregón's *Mascaras* [Masks, 1952] as the official celebration of Modernism in Colombia.⁴⁸ Disregarding Ariza's work, Traba strengthened her stance against descriptive figuration and nationalism, aligning herself with the model of Latin American art promoted by MoMA in association with Cuban curator José Gomez Sicre.⁴⁹ Traba's considerable influence elevated artists like Obregón, whom she dubbed Colombia's first modernist painter, further cementing her negative appraisal of Ariza's work and perpetuating the belief that his descriptive pictorial language lacked modernity.⁵⁰

Conversely, Ariza enjoyed commercial success among the elites of Bogotá and Medellín, who valued his realistic depictions of Colombian nature, favoring them over modernist art.⁵¹ This preference was influenced by their perception of Traba's liberal views as linked with revolutionary ideas, exemplified by the failed attempt by Colombia's intelligence bureau, the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, to expel her from the country in 1967 after she opposed military intervention in a student protest at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia during a television appearance.⁵²

In 1995, Germán Arciniegas, mourning the painter's death, recalled that Ariza drew a parallel between his aspirations for landscape painting and the portrayal of revolutionary heroes by Mexican muralists.⁵³ Yet, contrary to indigenism or communism, Ariza's focus lay in imparting historical significance to the landscape, aiming to forge an authentic Colombian artistic identity and emphasizing the genre's potential to evoke a strong sense of national pride. While modernist painting was seen by Colombian elites as aligned with left-wing political perspectives, Ariza's artworks were perceived as politically neutral representations of Colombia's natural beauty, affirming the social prestige and economic status of their collectors.

Considering the broader political and artistic dynamics during the second half of the twentieth century, Ariza's merging of Eastern themes with his

47. Alexandra Mesa Mendieta, "Arte moderno en el Museo Nacional de Colombia (1948-1963)," *H-Art 4* (2019): 26.

48. Mesa Mendieta, "Arte moderno," 34.

49. Through the influential collaboration between José Gomez Sicre and Alfred H. Barr Jr., championed abstract painting and downplayed nationalist and communist themes. Pini and Bernal, "A Model of Latin American Art," 93.

50. Marta Traba, *Historia abierta del arte en Colombia* (Bogotá, Colcultura, 1974), 130.

51. Juan Felipe Arroyave, "De las montañas al corazón de las montañas. Colombia en la pintura de lo natural" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2019), 103-104.

52. After a lengthy controversy and public debate in the media, Traba's marriage to journalist Alberto Zalamea (Jorge Zalamea's son) and her status as a Colombian citizen prevented her expulsion. Patricia Zalamea and María Juliana Vargas, "El legado vivo de Marta Traba," *Revista Credencial*, October 25, 2023, <https://www.revistacredencial.com/noticia/actualidad/el-legado-vivo-de-marta-traba>.

53. German Arciniegas, "Ariza," *El Tiempo*, June 15, 1995.

nationalistic view of landscape, as well as his preference for naturalistic figuration, could explain the scarce scholarship on his work. In spite of Kirstein's support, Traba's advocacy for an international artistic language, coupled with the negative assessments by Zalamea, segregated the landscape painter from scholarly discussions around modern art up to the present time, since Traba remains a towering figure in Colombian modern art history. However, she failed to recognize the nuanced interplay between cultural exchange, artistic innovation, and a profound appreciation for nature that characterize Ariza's particularly eclectic modern approach. This oversight complicates the historiographical placement of Ariza's contributions to Colombian art, highlighting the need to reassess the criteria for modernity in shaping the art historical canon.

MISTY MOUNTAIN MIRAGES

In 1963, Ariza made a significant decision to withdraw from national salons and exhibition halls, retreating to his studio in La Candelaria, located in downtown Bogotá. Additionally, he sought secluded solace in La Mesa, Cundinamarca, an adjacent mountainous lower region with a warmer climate, shrouded in cloud forests. Home to coffee plantations introduced to Colombia in the eighteenth century by Jesuit priests, this inspiring sanctuary offered Ariza a tranquil environment for uninterrupted creativity.⁵⁴

In this serene setting, Ariza honed his artistic vision. In writing, he explained his acute practice of observation as follows:

It involves a long study of meteorology, geological structure, vegetation, fauna, and a thousand other aspects that come before the artist in an overwhelming and instantaneous way. Perhaps this is one of the factors that limits my work to a part of the *páramo*, the savannah, the coffee zone, and maybe as far as the Magdalena River, but that small and vast setting has always been full of mystery for me.⁵⁵

Ariza's profound exploration and appreciation of cloud forests, underscores his romantic approach, aiming to capture the dynamic details of the environment, revealing its complexity. The conjunction "small and vast" illustrates Ariza's encounter of a paradox in nature—simultaneously intimate and majestic—when confronted with these landscapes. His way of describing the intricacies of the natural world and the overpowering emotions he experienced while watching these misty mountains recalls the sublime experience of immersing oneself in the landscape's formidable presence. Subsequently, Ariza conveys a numinous perception of these cloud forests, using terms like "misty, mystic,

54. Charles W. Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 7.

55. Ariza, "Alrededor de mi pintura," 20.

mysterious” to describe the fantastic and unusual views that he encountered at La Mesa.⁵⁶

This attentive observation of and profound communion with nature is then transferred to his canvases, as Ariza materialized the ethereal with his consciously-laid brushstrokes, aiming to encapsulate nature’s immensity within each piece. In an untitled work from 1960 (Img. 8), Ariza presents an elongated vertical view of La Mesa’s forest-covered mountains, a composition that embodies the fusion of emotive depth and meditative contemplation. Devoid of a clear horizon line, this landscape immerses the viewer in an atmosphere of ambiguity, as the interplay of fog and forest creates a sense of mystery and introspection. Tropical tree canopies emerge from the mist bank that unifies the painting, evoking the captivating allure of the spectral as they gradually fade into white-grayish tones. Blending the visible with the invisible in his works, Ariza’s depiction of foggy formations, as interpreted through the lens of Schankweiler and Wüschner’s theorization of the afterlife of images, forge an affective link between Eastern and Western misty mountainscapes, echoing the shapes of both geographies, and whispering about a timeless reverence for nature’s mystical splendor. This broader discourse on art’s emotional and mnemonic power allows to frame the universal qualities of Ariza’s work within a continuum of landscape painting that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, thereby connecting his oeuvre to ecological themes.

In this painting, Ariza effectively portrays the humid air of this lush scenery with subdued blue-greens visible through the haze, manifesting La Mesa’s unique climate. In Colombia, where weather conditions depend on altitude rather than time of the year, these cloud forests biomes thrive on frequent rain and mist. Therefore, the verdant peaks become symbols of the ecosystem’s fragility and interdependence, reflecting the painter’s sensitive vision of landscapes after his metanoia. The barely visible coffee farms amid the greenery reflect his melancholic response to the effects of modernization on rural life, reverberating the nostalgic sentiments of *nihonga* and the Southern Song painters. However, when this seemingly harmonious portrayal is seen through an ecocritical lens, we also find a comment on the tensions of development and conservation, bearing in mind that coffee, regardless of its economic and cultural value to Colombia, is an imported species whose environmental impact is understudied.⁵⁷ While Ariza’s art celebrates the beauty of these landscapes, it also promotes coffee culture, raising questions about the role of his art in perpetuating certain ecological disruptions, such as land parceling and habitat division. This perspective invites a reevaluation of the environmental implications of the portrayal of introduced species in landscape painting, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between art, culture, identity, and nature.

56. Ariza, “Alrededor de mi pintura,” 23.

57. Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia*, 8.



Image 8. Gonzalo Ariza, Sin título [Untitled], 1960. Oil on linen, 150 cm × 70.5 cm. National Museum of Colombia.

A PRELUDE TO PROTO-ENVIRONMENTALISM

Ariza's pioneering use of painting as a medium to illuminate the threats posed by human expansion to nature merits meticulous examination. These concerns are expressed in his 1954 oil painting *Catleya* [Cattleya] (Img. 9), a clear sign of his early engagement with the intersection of art and environmental issues in Colombia. Notably, it features Colombia's national flower, the *cattleya trianae*, hinting at his deep-rooted nationalist pride, while simultaneously underscoring the orchid's fragility and its reliance on its native habitat. In contrast to earlier depictions of endemic flora, such as those from the Botanical Expedition of New Granada (1783-1816), which presented isolated species devoid of contextual elements (Img. 10), Ariza's painting alludes to an intricate and interdependent



Image 9. Gonzalo Ariza, *Catleya* [Cattleya], 1954. Oil on linen, 94 × 120 cm. In *Gonzalo Ariza*. Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1989. Reproduction courtesy of Benjamín Villegas.

58. The expedition led by José Celestino Mutis identified over 20,000 new species depicted in detailed illustrations, created using the plants' own pigments through innovative compositional techniques. Uribe Hanabergh, *Tarabitas y cabuyas*, 17.

ecosystem, revealing more than a flowering plant suspended in space and thereby transcending botanical illustration.⁵⁸

In *Catleya*, Ariza captures the scene from an elevated position, offering a detailed view of La Mesa that reveals the resilience and symbiotic relationships of these orchids. Underscoring their profound reliance on the broader environment, this painting offers an intimate glimpse of a complex living-network, surpassing sterile description. By including an odontoglossum with yellow blossoms thriving on the same tree, Ariza encapsulates the nuances of this biome's coexistence



Image 10. Anonymous, *Cattleya trianae*, 1783-1816. Jardín Botánico de Madrid. Part of the digitalization project of the drawings from the Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada led by José Celestino Mutis: www.rjb.csic.es/icones/mutis.

and equilibrium, marked by both endurance and vulnerability. His depiction of the orchid's entwined roots amidst a tapestry of lichen and moss, set in front of a cloudy forest, exemplify ecological synergy, unveiling the painter's intuitive understanding of the interconnectedness of all of the elements that constitute the landscape. Situating these orchids against the vast vista, Ariza's landscape thus evokes the sacred interconnectedness of life and climate. As his daughter María Paz explained, her father aspired to "paint the air" so as to translate the ethereal space that exists between painter and subject into a tangible atmosphere. In *Catleya*, blending meticulous detail with atmospheric perspective, Ariza conveys the moist ventilation required for the survival of these epiphytes, depicting the invisible balance of the broader ecosystem and the specific conditions that propitiated his casual, magical encounter with these plants.

Embracing an ecocritical approach, as advocated by Timothy Demos in his book *Radical Nature*, enables a nuanced interpretation of Ariza's artwork. Demos' analysis of artistic representations of nature underscores a shift away from idealized portrayals, acknowledging the intricate dynamics of ecological systems and their entanglement with human activities.⁵⁹ Unlike the nineteenth-century works of North American artist Martin Johnson Heade, who relied on formulaic arrangements of orchids, hummingbirds, and verdant landscapes that idealized tropical scenery in composite paintings, Ariza's artistic methodology emerges from genuine interactions with the environment, translating his emotive experience into his works.⁶⁰ The delicate petals in *Catleya* serve as a reminder of the transience of life, while Ariza subtly calls attention to human encroachment by suggesting farmhouses, plantations, and barren patches in the background. These elements guide the viewer's gaze back to the blooms, creating a poignant contrast between nature's enduring resilience and its fragility. Through Demos' ecocritical lens, *Catleya* is not just a painting but a visual, emotional narrative that intertwines the landscape's complexity with its tenuousness, reflecting on the interlaced relationship between human expansion, ecological systems, and artistic expression.

The deliberate placement of these elements in the painting also serves as a forewarning of the impact of deforestation on native species. In 1978, Ariza embraced a viewpoint that predates contemporary notions of biodiversity conservation. He championed the local cultivation of orchids, emphasizing that they "were our mountain flowers before ornamental plants were imported for urban gardens."⁶¹ Ariza also expressed concern about the significant decline in the populations of odontoglossums and cattleyas, reminiscing about a time when they were abundant near Bogotá and lamenting their increasing rarity. By articulating the historical and natural significance of orchids in Colombia's ecosystem, Ariza not only celebrates them as symbols of nationhood but also issues a call to

59. Timothy Demos, *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 20.

60. Maggie Cao, "Heade's Hummingbirds and the Ungrounding of Landscape," *American Art* 25, n°. 3 (2011): 59.

61. Ariza, "Alrededor de mi pintura," 24.

action against potential ecological imbalances caused by the introduction of foreign species into local environments. In *Catleya*, the delicate appearance of the national flower amidst this misty vista evokes a melancholy reminiscent of cherry blossoms in *nihonga*, both eliciting a universal meditation on life's fugacity and the enduring majesty of the natural world. This perspective echoes Timothy Morton's notion of "ecology without nature," which challenges traditional environmental discourses that cast humans as parasites. Arguing against the division of humans and nature, Morton urges us to see the interconnectedness of all entities, coining the term "ecomimesis" to describe an approach that portrays an integrated ecosystem where every element is crucial.⁶² This integrated, multifaceted view, suggests that art can play a critical role in shifting perceptions of human-environment interactions, moving towards a model where we are seen as integral parts of the world, capable of stewardship rather than mere destruction. A philosophy that mirrors Ariza's work, which dismantles this traditional divide through his sensitive depiction of humans interconnected with nature.

Thus, Ariza's painting not only commemorates Colombian identity but also anticipates the pressing environmental challenges faced by these orchids. Eduardo Calderón-Sáenz's work on endangered native plants underscores the threats of extinction faced by *cattleya trianae*, in particular citing deforestation, habitat loss, and poaching of specimens as its main causes.⁶³ Furthermore, as Charles Jarvis points out, due to worsening conditions in cloud forests resulting from global warming, this is expected to become a greater problem.⁶⁴ In a world where these botanic crown jewels may soon only exist in pictorial mirages, Ariza's piece transcends the representation of fading beauty, expressing the orchids' steadfast resistance in the face of adversity. In this way, *Catleya* subtly underscores the fundamental role of landscape painting in illustrating the interdependence of all life, and exemplifies Ariza's foresight and conservation efforts, which I frame as a form of "proto-environmental awareness." However, considering that, for contemporary audiences, this painting evokes sentiments of melancholy and powerlessness, transcending the depicted image, while *Catleya* conveys a potent message of national identity and conservation, spotlighting the endangered status of Colombia's emblematic flower, Ariza's other works—depicting foreign flora like pine trees and eucalyptus in Bogotá, and coffee plantations in La Mesa—deserve scrutiny through an ecocritical lens.

CONCLUSION

Gonzalo Ariza's artistic journey transcends mere aesthetic contemplation, embedding within it a rich tapestry of cultural, emotional, and ecological nuances that challenges and redefines the modernist understanding of landscape as a genre.

62. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 12-13.

63. Eduardo Calderón-Sáenz, *Libro rojo de plantas de Colombia, Vol. 3: orquídeas* (Bogotá: Instituto Alexander von Humboldt, 2006), 828.

64. Charles Jarvis, "Orchids Disappearing from Their Natural Habitat," in *Orchid Conservation*, edited by S. Bachman, J. Fernández, and J. Ochoa. (Gland: IUCN, 2009), 130.

Deeply rooted in his transformative experiences in Japan and his profound connection to the Colombian highlands, his work is a vibrant testament to the fusion of Eastern and Western artistic traditions, framed within a narrative that speaks to universal themes of human existence. This cross-cultural synthesis, coupled with Ariza's pioneering proto-environmental consciousness, elevates his landscapes beyond scientific representation, positioning them as dynamic visual expressions of national identity, cultural pride, and a poignant commentary on humanity's relationship with nature. However, considering his attention to foreign species, such as coffee plants, eucalyptus and pine trees, urges us to engage in a deeper exploration of the ecological concerns and colonial legacies inherent in landscape painting. By expanding the scope of future studies on Ariza, my approach in this essay situates his work within a wider discourse, probing the influence of art in both preserving and destroying nature, and on shaping and reflecting our understanding of the dynamic interplay between humanity and the world.



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