

pages about the pros and cons of using torture, about whether simulated drowning is torture at all. But torture art is worth debating for the simple reason that so much of Western art—with its crucifixions and inquisitions—is drawn from human pain inflicted by others. Italy is studded with such art. All over the country, saints are shot full of arrows, men writhe in agony on crosses—centuries of butchery and blood and gore. It is difficult to escape visual references to the violation of the flesh; almost every woman you see wears a cross dangling from her neck.

But, of course, no one was trying to get Christ to give up his secrets—his suffering, as the story goes, was meant to link human fate to the divine realm, and so it was celebrated. In our modern world, torture is not like the passion of Christ; the physical pain it causes goes toward less spiritual ends. Modern torture is always about breaking a person, about destroying the mind and will, about stealing—not purifying—the soul.

There was a time when such degradations were widely cited as one of the reasons Saddam Hussein must be overthrown. In those olden times, I sat with Iraqi refugees in Indonesia and listened to them tell of their time in Saddam's prisons. Some of



• • • Botero's classic style: *Man on a Horse* (1984), left, and *Dancers* (1993).

the tales were about nails being driven into a man's head. None of the men could proceed very far into their stories before they would begin to shudder and then fall silent for long moments.

The humiliations of torture often remain unspoken, but they are never fully hidden. I have sat in John McCain's Senate office as he talked me through his five and a half years in the Hanoi Hilton—the beatings and the screams. I have waited in the office of a *comandante* in a Mexican police station while next door a man screamed at the top of his lungs. We sat. The *comandante* spoke calmly as if nothing were happening. And I spoke calmly as if nothing were happening.

In a way, that is how modern torture operates. We do not remember it, make art from it. We go on with our lives as if it had never happened.

**IN 1956**, Botero is living in Mexico City and painting a picture of a mandolin. One day he makes the sound hole in the instrument tiny, and in doing so, he realizes that the volume of the instrument has been expanded to a giant size. He feels a change, and years later he says that “painting that tiny hole was like walking through a door.” He is suddenly on the other side. And on that side is the world we now call Botero, where people are gigantic and fill the frame of a painting, where flowers are huge and beautiful, where the countryside is beckoning and safe.

After the mandolin, Botero paints priests; he has a cardinal in a bathtub, he has huge men and women dancing, there are circuses and valleys lush with green and still lifes of huge fruits and flowers. He moves to New York and struggles in Greenwich Village, selling his art for food and rent. He is the man out of step with his times. The art world is deep into abstract painting, and Botero is playing with huge people populating a lush countryside. Willem de Kooning, a giant of abstract painting, has a Colombian

girlfriend. The two artists hang out together, and from him Botero learns a vital trick: Always clean your brushes with Mr. Clean, something he has done ever since.

In 1961, there is a knock at the door and it is Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art. She was visiting someone else in his building who had told her she should take a look at the stuff done by this strange Colombian. Botero has a painting on the floor he'd done in Colombia of a young girl with a trademark giant head. When he'd first painted her, a cleaning lady was in his room and she'd said it looked like *Mona Lisa*, so he took note and reworked the smile and titled it *Mona Lisa, Age 12*. The painting has an unintended whiff of irony—the closest Botero has ever come to Pop Art. The next day, MoMA sends someone to box it and then it is displayed in the museum. They even interview Botero and hang some of his comments on the wall next to the painting.

For Botero it was that close. He thinks, What if I had been out at the store when Dorothy Miller knocked? What if I had a different painting out than *Mona Lisa, Age 12*? He pauses as he remembers that moment and sighs, because no matter how hard you work at art, you must face the terror of being lucky or unlucky.

By 1964 or '65, Botero is lucky enough to never worry about money. He is hosted by Latin American presidents; he meets Che Guevara. He buys a tiny house on Long Island and spends four months a year there, painting without distractions. He simply lives as he always has lived: painting eight hours a day, seven days a week. In the early '70s, he teaches himself sculpture. And by the early '90s, he is everywhere, instantly recognizable, and maintains homes on three continents.

**TODAY BOTERO IS** beloved—a cultured, calm man. He wears the round black glasses that are a uniform among European intellectuals. He reads widely and is immersed in the

GQ @ 50

THE BEST  
**CHEF** OF THE  
PAST 50 YEARS

by **DREW NIEPONENT**,  
restaurateur



**JEAN-LOUIS PALLADIN**

Jean-Louis Palladin, the chef in Washington at the Watergate, had a tremendous influence on the state of American cuisine. He came to this country and sourced local products. Up until that moment in the early '80s, French chefs here would say: The butter's better in France. The fish is better in France. They'd import. Even use foie gras from a can. Palladin was really the first to use what's grown here: Hudson Valley Foie Gras, Belon oysters from Maine, local ingredients from around the United States. He set the pattern for how everybody cooks now. And he gave people like Ducasse, Le Coze, and Ripert the courage to cook in America. Everything he did was revolutionary, right down to soup.—AS TOLD TO HOWIE KAHN